

1

New Beginning

Time: The day they left Hogwarts castle

Place: ???

The woods were sparse and pleasant, with soft yellow sunlight filtering down through an endless variety of leaves above. Along the branches of the trees which held these leaves sang just as endless a variety of birds, and small fuzzy creatures darted and played along the trunks as well. No creatures suffered here, and fear was unknown. Curiosity, however, was not, and as the doorway of light opened into the forest, birds and animals gathered around to see what would happen next. Unsurprisingly, a girl named Susan with green eyes, blond hair and a bit of a swagger stepped through and looked around. A cat named Sparkle quickly followed her. The cat was a normal, everyday, plain looking cat, but looked around as though it was intelligent. She was followed by a girl named Luna, who was gripping a wooden wand tightly. Luna had long, nearly white hair, and she was just a smidgen shorter than Susan. Both were dressed in traveling clothes, with good stout boots, sensible pants, and several layers on top that could be removed in warmer climates. Luna had a pouch hanging at her belt, which was bigger on the inside, and she carried all manner of things that might be useful on a journey such as this one. One particularly valuable book rested inside, so she might learn more magic along her journey. Susan, of course, carried nothing, having near instant access to her *Pocket Dimension* which held her own book of spells, along with various odds and ends she had picked up over the years. And of course she carried her own "paradise" around in the form of her *Personal Dimension*, in case they ran into a completely inhospitable environment.

Where they found themselves, however, was warm, with a pleasant breeze that rustled the leaves of the trees overhead. Both looked around with interest, but the trees, even spaced apart as they were, obstructed vision. Susan looked at Luna as if to ask "which way" but Luna just shrugged. Susan pointed, but Luna shook her head. She bent down and poked at the earth with her wand, and in seconds, a flower had grown there.

"Just so we don't start going in circles," she remarked. "I would hate to cut into a tree or anything here."

"Yes," replied Susan. "Let's not antagonize our host."

The two walked through the forest, with Luna making more flowers as they went to track their position, and they soon came back to what Susan recognized was the first flower Luna had made.

"But we've been going in a straight line!" she protested, looking at it.

"Then let's head this way."

Twice more they adjusted course, after returning to the spot they had arrived in, and came upon a cute looking cabin in a clearing.

"There she is," said Susan.

"If she's in."

"I don't think she can go anywhere..." Susan stepped up to the door and softly knocked.

"Come in," said a voice from within, and the door cracked open. Susan pushed it the rest of the way, and stepped into the room. It was a rustic looking living room, and she saw other rooms connected by doors, leading into a kitchen and possibly a bedroom.

"These flowers are lovely," said a small figure, coming from the kitchen. She held a vase full of the flowers Luna had been making, and set them down on a table.

"Lady Inari?" asked Susan, looking the girl over. She had fox ears, and wore a Japanese kimono. Her hair was fiery red, and she was about half as tall as Susan.

"Maybe I am, and maybe I'm not," she said. "Come in, close the door. Were you raised in a barn?" She giggled, walking through the other door, and the two girls looked at each other. Luna swung the door closed and they stepped after her. The room they entered was bare, but had a large circle drawn in chalk in the center. The girl was looking this way and that, obviously trying to decide what marble she wanted to go for. Colorful spheres littered the floor of the place, and Susan was careful where she was stepping as she saw them all. Sparkle batted one out of the way, and had to hold herself back from pouncing on it as it rolled. Human intelligence or not, she was still a cat.

"Look, my father told my mother, who warned me about your little games. I know who you are."

"Why did you ask, then?" She flicked a marble with her thumb, knocking one out of the circle.

"I felt it would be polite."

"Good. Politeness is important. What can I do for you, Susan? And aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Luna, this is the Lady Inari. Lady Inari, this is my friend Luna."

"Nice to meet you," said Luna, going to shake Inari's hand. There was a buzz and Luna jumped back.

Inari laughed, showing the buzzer she had. "Got you!" she said, grinning.

"Uh, yes you did. I must say, you're aren't what I expected."

"Didn't Susan tell you about me?"

"I thought she must be mistaken, or her father was having a little joke at our expense."

"While I would support the joke, no, this is how I am. So, you've come at last."

"It seems you know why I'm here. Saves me some explanation."

"You're here to track down your father," she said, knocking another marble. "I have to admit, even I'm a little worried. He hasn't checked in lately, and that's a problem."

"Do you know where he last was?"

Inari didn't answer for a moment. "No," she said at last. "I let them, and fate itself, guide the selection of worlds your father and his group went to." She held up a marble. "I sent them to the first world they went to, but after that, they had a choice of twelve."

"That isn't so bad. I feared it would be totally random, and I'd spend years searching. If I could even find them at all."

"It gets even better than that," said Inari, going over to a chest Susan hadn't realized was there. "I know I put it someplace..." She opened the lid and started rummaging through.

"These are worlds?" Luna asked Susan softly. She nodded. "I don't mean offense, but who are you, Lady Inari?"

She looked back over her shoulder. "I'm one of those higher order dimensional beings you've heard tell of. We're not all soul sucking monsters, you know." She went back to rummaging.

"Oh. Then how can we be... here?"

"Magic," said Inari.

"Right."

"Here it is!" Inari announced, pulling out an old, brass key. "That's the best way for you to proceed," she said, almost handing Susan the key. "Wait a minute, did I check you girls over?"

"Check us over?"

"Of course. I won't let you contaminate other worlds with disease from your own. Plus if you aren't fully healthy we'll have to do something about that before I let you go. World traveling isn't to be taken lightly, and you've got to be in top form if you want to do it. Don't worry, it won't hurt a bit."

Inari traced a weird symbol in the air, leaving behind a yellow trail where her finger had been. She completed it and slammed it into Luna, who was standing closest to her. The symbol vanished, and Inari closed her eyes and thought for a moment.

"Okay, you seem clean," she said. "No major diseases, and in good health. Next!"

She repeated the procedure for Susan and Sparkle, announcing they were also allowed to travel between worlds.

"I should hope so," said Susan, a little put off. "I don't recall being sick a day in my life."

"Probably because it wasn't important to the narrative," Sparkle muttered.

"But you could carry something that's harmless to you, but devastating to another world. You wouldn't want to be known as a plague carrier, would you?"

"I suppose not. I want to save worlds, not leave behind death wherever I go."

"Then what I did should be good piece of mind for you," Inari said, now handing over the key.

"It's magical," Susan said, taking it and doing a *Magic Sense* on it.

"That it is," giggled Inari. "I'll send you to the first world they landed on. It's up to you to track down what happened to them and where they went after that. This key will vibrate when you're near the place they left from. Stick it into the air like you were unlocking a door, and it'll open a gateway to the world they went to."

"I can follow them and figure out where they got stuck! Brilliant. Thanks a lot!"

"Sure thing. I wish I could do more, but this way seems the best way."

"It sounds good to me. I'm no more than 12 jumps behind them. I'll have found them in no time."

Inari smiled. "Be careful. Traveling between worlds is not to be taken lightly. Your father went with a group of three others, and he was much more powerful than you. But if you are dead set on going..."

"I am."

"Very well. I will issue you this warning. You seem to carry your magic with you, as a *Natural Magician*. Luna, your magic seems quite personal as well. I say this because you may visit worlds that are totally dominated by technology. This will leave little magical energies for you both to draw upon. Also, keep in mind that magic between worlds may work very differently. But I suppose you know that, given how different your magics are and the fact you came from the same world. Until you know the rules of each world, be especially cautious."

"We will," the girls chorused.

"Good. Now, see if you can find where your father left from, and use the key. The door will stay open for some time, so secure it before you go through. The trip can be a bit... tricky."

"We seemed to pass through some kind of intermediary space," said Luna. "Is that what you mean?"

Inari nodded. "It has weather and moods of its own. Even I do not like to linger between worlds. Strange things happen there. Prepare yourselves."

Susan nodded, then held up the key and started walking around. It wasn't hard to find, as right outside the door it started vibrating like mad. She held it out and was fascinated when it seemed to slide into a lock. She gave it a turn and twisted it, then pulled it out. A glowing rectangle appeared, and Susan handed the key to Luna.

"Keep this safe," she said.

"Of course," Luna replied, dropping it into her pouch and drawing the top closed again.

"Thank you, Inari," said Susan. "We'll have news for you soon, I hope."

"I'm sure you will. You know the spell to come back here, if you need my advice. I'll have to make a note to discuss that with your father when he gets here. Not that I don't like visitors, you understand, but I would rather that spell not get spread around. You do understand, I hope?"

Susan nodded.

"Good. I wish you luck."

Susan grabbed Luna's hand, and Sparkle jumped up to Susan's shoulder, and they stepped through. The door closed behind them.

"Did I forget to tell them something?" Inari asked herself. "I guess it wasn't important..." She went back to playing with her marbles. (Only some of which she had ever lost.)

On the other side of the door, a strange, colorful space swirled around the three, and there was a sense of motion though no landmarks existed to gauge their progress against. All around them, in the distance, were doors of light, openings to other worlds.

It was through one of these openings that a young boy tumbled, heading straight for the three of them.

"*Flight*," Susan cast in desperation, but nothing happened. "My magic-" she said as the boy crashed into her. This sent them spinning off course, and she felt Luna's hand slip out of hers.

"LUNA!" she called, as her friend spun off through this odd space and through a nearby door. Susan, the boy, and Sparkle sailed through another, and Susan hit the ground, getting the air knocked out of her.

"What has Zero Louise done this time?" she heard someone saying.

Susan opened her eyes, and all around her stood young kids, boys and girls. They seemed to be wearing some kind of uniform, and each had an animal of some kind at their side. They also held wands.

Didn't we just leave this party?

Underneath her, someone groaned. She remembered what happened and looked over at the boy that had crashed into her.

Are you going to let him get away with what he did? The Darkness inside whispered to her. *You know what going off course means for the both of you.*

"Shut up!" Susan yelled to herself, grabbing the boy by the collar and hauling him up to a sitting position. As much as she hated to admit it, The Darkness had a point, and she felt herself getting angry.

"What did you do?!" she screamed at him. "How could you have been so careless! Do you know what you've done? You've just stranded a friend of mine in some unknown world!"

He groaned and struggled to open his eyes. "What?" he managed.

"Answer me! Fix it!"

His eyes popped open. "What are you talking about? What's going on? Who are all you people?"

Susan jerked her head and looked around, the uniformed boys and girls had gathered around her, watching interestedly. Behind them all was an older man with a staff who exuded an air of responsibility and authority. "Never mind them, open that doorway, maybe I can still remember which one she went through."

"Which what she went through? Look, I'm in the dark about all this, you know?"

"What do you mean, in the dark?"

"I was heading home from getting my laptop repaired, okay? In the middle of the sidewalk I saw this glowing door. I couldn't resist going through it, like it was pulling me. I found myself here."

Susan blinked at him for a few seconds. "You're in the same boat as me? I- I apologize for shouting at you. I will now shout at the correct person." She looked around, marveling at the massed children and animals staring back at her. "Who is responsible for this debacle?" Susan shouted, releasing the boy and causing him to flop down again. Every kid there pointed to an embarrassed looking, pink haired girl that was looking down. Her hair was long, and she had reddish eyes, and was also probably the shortest person nearby. Susan stalked over to her.

"I have you to blame for all this?" she demanded.

"Blame?" said the girl, flushing. "I did the spell properly, I can't help it that a couple of plebeians... got in the way or something." She stepped over to Sparkle, and grabbed her up. "See everyone, I summoned my familiar, just like I said I would!"

"Please unhand me!" said Sparkle. The girl gave a yelp and dropped her, and Sparkle gracefully landed on all fours and smoothed down her fur with her tongue. "I am Susan's 'familiar' if you please, not yours. Now kindly explain what's going on! Believe me when I say you don't want to make Susan angry."

"You can talk?" the girl asked. "But I haven't completed the ceremony yet!" There was a general ripple of amazement through the ranks.

"Of course."

"What did you call me?" demanded Susan.

"Plebeian. You know, a commoner."

"You mean an NPC?" asked Sparkle.

"A what? I'm talking about someone who can't use magic."

"Can't use magic?" snorted Susan. "*Elemental Attack: (Fire)*," she cast, throwing flames into the air. Everyone there took a step back.

"Okay, you can use magic," said the girl, uncertainly. "Um..." she looked over at the tall guy.

He stepped up, pushing past the crowd. "Hello there, I'm Professor Colbert. I do apologize for all this, on behalf of the magic academy. May I ask your name?"

"I'm Susan Felton. This is Sparkle. Can you tell me what's going on?"

He chuckled. "I can certainly try. Here, young man, let me help you up." He extended a hand.

"Thanks," said the boy.

Professor Colbert looked at him funny, but shrugged. "This is the familiar ceremony, where second year students summon their familiars." He swept a hand around, showing all the animals accompanied by wizards. "Don't ask me how, but somehow Miss Le Blanc de La Valliere has somehow called you all here."

"No, if I'm understanding this correctly, she called him." Susan pointed at the boy. "I just happened to be in the way. Honestly, yanking things out of their home realities? That's routinely done around here, is it? Rather irresponsible, don't you think?"

"Usually it's just animals," Colbert admitted. "And you, young man? What's your name?"

The boy stared back at him blankly. Susan's eyes darted between the two.

"Dude," she whispered, "he asked your name. Don't just stand there. Did you hit your head or something?"

"Oh, sorry. Saito Hiraga. You can really understand them?"

"What did he say?" asked Colbert.

"What's he saying now?" asked Saito.

Susan sighed again, closing her eyes and dropping her head. "You aren't getting any of this, are you?"

"I can understand *you*, and your cat, which is sort of freaking me out to be honest, perfectly. Anyone else just sounds like gibberish. So I've only gotten the gist of this conversation from what you say."

"Terrific!" said Susan sarcastically. She turned to Colbert. "He can't understand a word you people are saying. Do you have a *Communication* spell you can use?"

"No, sorry, I don't know anything like that," Colbert admitted.

"Seriously?" *Why am I not surprised? Wanded magic is useless.* "Fine, I'll just use mine. Give me a second. *Pocket Dimension.*" Susan reached through what she expected would be a hole in the air, but nothing happened.

Okay, that's never happened before... She envisioned the symbols for the spell, and tried to once again make a *Pluto* check. Again, nothing happened. Her blood ran cold.

"I can't open my *Dimension*," she said to Sparkle.

"Don't panic. We know your magic works, you did it before. Let me try. *Phase.*" Nothing happened. "Okay, now you can panic."

"Is something wrong?" asked Colbert.

"Is something wrong?" parroted Susan. "Is something *wrong*? I'm knocked off course, I lose my friend to the multiverse, now I find out for some bizarre reason I can't do *Pluto* magic here. Do you know what that means?"

"No?"

"It means I'm stuck here, you idiot! All my stuff is in there! My book of magic, the spell to open the gateway back to Inari's world, my equipment, everything. I'm cut off!" She was shouting.

"Now, now, calm down. I'm sure something-

"Calm down?" Magical energy started sparking off Susan's body. "You know the worst thing to say to someone that's getting angry? Calm down, that's what! That only makes it worse. You!" She whirled on the pink haired girl. "You got me into this. Fix it!"

"I can't," she said quietly. "I'm... sorry."

Oh, she would have to be totally cute. A little of her anger drained away. *Focus, Susan!* "I need to see whoever is in charge around here- immediately."

"Yes, that might be best."

"But I haven't finished the ceremony!" complained the girl, giving a little pout.

"Oh, you're finished," said Susan.

Colbert sighed. "No, she should finish. It is a sacred ceremony that determines a mage's life. That this unfortunate thing happened, as serious as that is, doesn't change that. However, can you be sure she was summoning this boy and not the cat?"

"My name is Sparkle," said Sparkle. "And I am Susan's three point *Companion*. We were legitimately traveling between worlds to follow the trail of Susan's father. This boy, Saito, has already admitted to answering the call of this girl here. He's your man, not me."

"My name is Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Valliere," said Louise.

"Just call her Zero," someone called. Everyone laughed.

"This is all very irregular. Very well, you may complete the ceremony with the boy," Colbert said to Louise.

"Can he do magic?" she asked.

"She's asking if you can do magic," Susan told him.

"What? Magic? No, of course not. Is that why they're wearing the funny clothes? They're some kind of wizards?"

Susan rolled her eyes. "He can't." *Wait, what did he say he was doing before this? Right, getting a laptop repaired. Not exactly a wizard activity, that.*

"He's a plebeian? I can't make a plebeian my familiar!"

There's that word again. And I thought 'muggle' was bad. "Oh, you're complaining now? Really? Are you sure about that? Do you want the list again of how my life and the life of my friend Luna is totally screwed up now thanks to you?"

"Look, I'm sorry to involve you in this-"

"Finally, an apology!"

"But if I don't, I'll be expelled. My grades... uh..."

"She does have a little trouble with magic," whispered Colbert.

"No?!" said Susan, pretending to be shocked. "I would never have guessed. I am shocked and surprised." Susan stopped and took a deep breath, covering her eyes with her hands. "You're loving this, aren't you Darkness? Probably laughing it up this very minute. Okay, getting upset isn't going to help me. I'm going to be calm and rational. Calm. Rational. Nope, not helping."

"We'll figure something out," said Sparkle. "Obviously they have dimensional magic, it's just reworking the spell to open a door here rather than somewhere else and pull someone through."

"No, summoning is Venus, remember? It happened to pull someone from another world, but it's still a summoning spell, not a dimensional one."

"Okay, we'll work out what's blocking *Pluto* magic and take it out so we can get access to your Dimension again. Or you could research a variant of the spell to talk to someone in dreams and ask Inari for help. What I'm saying is, we have other options."

"Right, you're right. I shouldn't panic. Okay, let's see your headmaster or whatever and get this whole thing straightened out."

"But the ceremony-" said Louise.

"Fine, fine, hurry it up. She still has some kind of ceremony to do involving you," she said to Saito. "I hope you're prepared."

"Look, can you explain what's going on?"

"Basically these people irresponsibly use magic to tear creatures, usually animals, from their home realities, rather than just going to a pet store like sane people. You got caught up in it. Due to billion to one odds our paths crossed while you were moving from one world to another, and I got knocked off course, coming with you. Apparently, this makes you some kind of wizard pet, like that floating eyeball thing over there." She pointed. Saito looked over and shuffled away from it. "That's you. You're a floating eyeball now. Congratulations. Is it better than being a tin dog? I don't know. Anyway, this girl, Louise whatever whatever keeps going on about this sick ceremony she has to complete or get kicked out of school. Personally, we're in the same boat- you should be working out how to get home and back to your life, same as me. I have stuff, important stuff, to be about. Namely to track down my father, and now, my friend who you briefly saw, who is now alone on an alien world. That about covers it."

"What's this ceremony?"

"No idea. It's usually animals so it can't be too perverse, I hope."

"I should say not," said Colbert, shocked.

"Does he understand?" asked Louise.

"As much as anyone can who's just been ripped from their home world."

"Then I will complete the ceremony." Louise stepped closer to Saito and said some ritual phrases, then kissed him.

"Oh, wait, maybe I'm the familiar after all," said Susan.

"Down, girl," said Sparkle. "Remember Luna."

"What, a girl can't get any sugar on the side- What the?"

As the two broke apart, magical energy started gathering around Saito. He looked terrified.

"What did she do to me?"

Susan did a *Magic Sense*. "I don't know what's happening, but something powerfully magic is going on. Brace yourself!" she said to him.

He screamed and clutched his hand, and Susan watched, half in horror and half with great interest as a group of symbols appeared on the back of it.

Saito passed out.

2

Getting Some Answers

Time: Seconds later

Place: Courtyard inside the school

Susan rushed to Saito's side as he collapsed, the only one to do so. She looked him over, getting a 9 on her *first aid* check. As finding the "status of individual" was only a 5, while "assessing condition" was a 10, she knew he was still alive but not what was wrong. She tried another *Magic Sense*, getting even worse, an 8. Due to the strength of the magical field now surrounding Saito, this was still more than enough. She grabbed his hand and looked at the still glowing runes now seemingly burned onto it.

"Okay, some sort of Saturn magic is being burned into him. We need to get him to the infirmary where someone can watch and make sure he survives the process." She turned to the only adult who seemed to be there. "Mr. Colbert, right? Would you like to do the honors or should I?"

"Infirmary?" he asked, walking over and looking down at them both. "We don't actually have anything like that here. Maybe we should though, come to think of it."

"What?" Susan exploded, popping back up. "What if someone got really hurt? Isn't learning magic a bit dangerous?"

"Not especially," he replied. "If someone seriously took ill their parents would be informed and a healer would be brought."

"Fantastic," she muttered.

"In any case, he should be fine. I've never seen a familiar spirit be knocked out by the ritual, but then, it's not been done with a human before, either. He won't die, that would negate the point of the whole thing. For now, let's take him to Miss Valliere's room. She is responsible for him now, after all. Then we can take you to see the principal."

"Fine," spat Susan. "Maybe he'll know of some magic to get me out of here and back to what I'm supposed to be doing."

Mr. Colbert swished his staff around, and Hiraga rose gently into the air. He led the way through a set of doors at the far end of the courtyard and the students were excitedly whispering amongst themselves.

"For now, get to know your familiar a little better, I'll be back in a moment," he called to them.

The group walked down torch lit corridors, not unlike those of Hogwarts. She didn't see any moving paintings or stairs that rearranged themselves, so it seemed even though this place might superficially resemble the school she had known, many details were different. Louise unlocked her door and Hiraga floated inside, onto the bed.

"I'll have to put some straw down for him to sleep on," Louise remarked, looking around the room. It was pretty stark, with a small table, dresser, bed, and closet within view. The candle had lit itself as we had come in and-

"Wait, what did you say about straw?"

"He'll need some. I wouldn't want him to sleep on the bare floor. I'm not insensitive to his needs, after all."

“Straw? He’s not a horse, he’s a person! He’ll sleep in a bed just like you do. I don’t know how things are done around here, but you’ve seriously screwed up two different lives with your shenanigans, the least you can do is show a little respect.”

“Shenanigans?” shrieked Louise. “I did the ceremony properly and got my familiar spirit. This plebeian.”

“You are not going to treat him like an animal.”

“I’ll treat him any way I want. It’s none of your concern.”

“I think it is my concern. Someone has to make sure he’s doing all right, and you don’t speak his language!”

“If you do, I’ll make you regret it!” She brandished her wand.

“What are you going to do, fail to cast another spell at me?”

“Girls, please!” said Colbart, finally stepping between us. “Now is not the time.”

“Oh, but I think it is,” countered Susan. “Much better to set the expectation right at the start than to have to try and change her behavior later. She expected an animal, fine. She got a person, and she needs to change her attitudes accordingly.”

“I’m standing right here, and my name is Louise!” she growled.

“Something can be worked out, I’m sure,” Mr. Colbert said wearily. “For now, let’s bring you up to see Mr. Ottman.”

“Fine. Sparkle, you mind staying?”

“Not at all,” she said, jumping up on the bed and sitting down. “I’ll need to start seeing what magic I can and can’t use, anyway. Besides, I’m the one with the better healing magic, should I feel he needs it. Sun should work, I mean they have a sun, don’t they?”

“Yes, if we’re going to be stuck here we’ll need to know what, exactly, our limitation are.” She looked towards the ceiling. “You could have been a little more specific about this, Inari.”

“Who?” asked Mr. Colbert.

“The being that- never mind. Come on, which way?”

The group trooped up to the principal’s office, which Mr. Colbert knocked on and entered. Inside was... well... Dumbledore. Old guy, with a white, long, wispy beard, and wearing a pointy hat and gray robes. The only thing missing were the glasses.

“I’m not sure what I was expecting,” remarked Susan to no one in particular.

A gnarled staff sat behind him, making Susan wonder if somehow these people “graduated” from using wands as they got more powerful, as Mr. Colbert also walked with a staff rather than a wand. Or did people that used a staff as a focus just start out more powerful, or was it a personal choice?

Also in the room was a young looking woman with green hair, which Susan wondered about. *I’ll have to look and see if that’s common, I wasn’t really paying attention to that kind of thing earlier.* She looked over at Louise. *Though I suppose if pink isn’t remarked upon...*

“Well, well, what have we here?” asked the principal, leaning forward in his chair.

“Mr. Ottman, this is Miss, uh... I didn’t get your last name.”

“Susan Felton. Nice to meet you.”

“And nice to meet you,” the principal replied. “This is my aid, Miss Longbill.”

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“So, what can we do for you? I take it this is about the excitement I saw in the courtyard a moment ago?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Mr. Colbert.

“Ah, Miss Valliere, what have you done now? Wait, you haven’t summoned this girl as your Familiar Spirit, have you?”

She looked embarrassed.

“No,” Susan answered for her. “She summoned the boy currently recovering from the experience in her room. He went unconscious after she kissed him and magic started swirling around him. I just happened to be in the way at the time.”

“In the way? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Susan sighed. “Look, the short of it is, other worlds exist. I’m from one. He’s from another. I left my world to seek my father, who travels between them fighting a malignant entity I have termed “The Darkness.” It was just our bad luck to collide in the space between worlds, knocking a friend who was traveling with me into yet another world and stranding us both where we are now. She has the means to follow my father, I have the spell to return where I came from. Both of which are useless or out of reach at the moment.”

“Astonishing!” said Miss Longbill. “I never would have imagined it. How many worlds are there?”

Susan turned to her. “I passed through a space with countless doors of light. I couldn’t begin to give you a hard number.”

She looked impressed.

“That is certainly a unique tale. Please allow me to extend my official apology on behalf of the academy. Whatever we can do to assist you, just let me know.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. For the moment, I need information and some quiet. I need to know what kind of magic is still available to me. At least one kind, which would allow me to access my book of magic, is not. If others aren’t as well...”

“I’m not sure what that means, but as I said, whatever we can do. I would love to learn about magic from another world!”

Susan saw that he was looking at her somewhat excitedly, and decided he was probably telling the truth. *After all, how many times in your life do you meet someone from another reality?*

“But first things first. Louise here brought someone that seems to be Asian, and he doesn’t speak your language. Mr. Colbert says you don’t have translation magic?”

“Perhaps somewhere in the archives?” asked Miss Longbill, looking at Mr. Ottman. He shrugged. She explained, “We haven’t needed any magic of that sort in hundreds of years. Not since the language of the world was standardized.”

Huh, that’s the first intelligent thing these people have said to me so far.

“I could take care of the problem myself, if I had access to my spellbook. Sadly it wasn’t something I needed on a regular basis myself, so I would have to research the spell from scratch if you can’t help. That’ll take time. Meanwhile, it seems this sort of screw up is somewhat expected of Louise? Something about grades?”

Louise glowered at her. “My spells tend to explode, I admit. But I’m getting better?”

Susan could tell even she didn't believe it. "Wait, you backfire every spell you try to cast? How are you still alive?" She turned to Mr. Colbert. "Why wasn't this looked into before she started tearing people out of their home dimensions?"

"We have hundreds of students to teach here," he hedged. "We can't spare the attention for just one."

"Oh, I see. So you just let her continue failing, causing destruction and whatnot, rather than looking into what might have a simple solution. Completely reasonable, of course."

"What do you mean?" asked Louise. "What simple solution?"

"I don't know, I've been here less than an hour. But it seems to me that if your magical energies are that erratic, you either need a better focus than that wand, an additional focus apart from it, or just plain more practice in the basics. Or maybe you're trying to do a type of magic you shouldn't be attempting, like if I tried to do wand magic. I'm actually not even sure what would happen in that case, I never tried it."

"I... I don't want your help in any case."

"I wasn't offering my help, I was just wondering if anything like that had been explored. There's a reason your magic messes up. If you can't be bothered to research the reason, don't expect me to. Wait-" She turned back to the principal. "I take it you don't have character sheets here?"

"Have what?"

"Character sheets." Suddenly Susan was holding hers, and everyone strained to get a good look at it.

"Where did that come from?" asked Miss Longbill.

"I guess not." She put it "away" again. "Just a thought. To answer your question, I have no idea. It just comes when I want to look at it. Sparkle, that's my cat, she's the same way."

"Fascinating," said the principal. "You carried some of your physical law into our universe." He leaned back in his chair again. "Astonishing."

"Yes, well, it's normal for me. So just to be clear, you don't have any sort of magic to move between worlds, right? Just summon creatures from them? If I could just step through to a world where I could use Pluto magic for two minutes I would be far better off."

Everyone shook their heads.

"Super. Then I am stuck here, it seems. We both are." Her eyes narrowed. "By the way, you haven't had any trouble with beings trying to take over your world or anything, have you? Ancient evils? Magic energy disappearing and you can't figure out where it's going?" Again, they all shook their heads, somewhat more concerned. "Oh good. Maybe The Darkness hasn't noticed your world yet. I can tell you more about that later, so you can prepare if it ever does try sucking your dimension dry of energy. For the moment, I'm going to see what Planets I can cast from and take things from there."

"Miss Valliere, why don't you go see to your Familiar Spirit?" asked the Principal. "We'll also take a peek through the archives, see if there are any books that detail your condition from past students. Maybe there is something in our libraries that could help."

"Oh, thank you very much!" she said, surprised. She gave a small bow and left the room.

“Jean, if you could work with Matilda to check the archives for some translation magic? I think that would ease our other new guest into things here. And I’ll have to meet him, once he wakes up.”

“Of course, sir,” said Mr. Colbert. Both of them left as well.

“Odd that you seem to speak our language perfectly.”

“Hiraga said he heard me speaking his language perfectly. I think Lady Inari, that’s the being that gave me the ability to go between worlds, did something to me. And didn’t bother to tell me, of course.”

“I see.”

“Now, if you want I can get out of your hair to do some magical tests, or if you’re interested...”

“I am interested. You mentioned the planets- Are you talking about physical planets? I can tell you about our solar system, if that would help.”

“Maybe. I know you don’t have a Pluto, that’s for sure.”

“No, our six planets are Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. And of course we have two moons, but maybe I shouldn’t assume all worlds have two.”

“No way, we only had one! Interesting, I’d love to know how that happened. Anyway, it seems three whole branches of magic will be denied to me, but I better check just to make sure. Let’s see, I’ll try to make a little water, that would be a good test for Neptune. And I could manage a spark for Uranus without any trouble, normally. Let’s see how it goes.” Naturally, it went terribly, both grade-0 spells she tried to use didn’t even fizzle, as she found she couldn’t even make the check in those skills. “Great, so what can’t I cast?” she asked herself, getting out her character sheet again. “Eleven spells, including my favorite combo of Hypnotic Field and Energy Drain. Oh crap, I can’t use Spell Symbol either? AARG!”

“So your world actually has more planets than ours? I would have thought something like that would be somewhat constant.”

“Me too. And you say you have two moons? I wonder...” Susan looked thoughtful, looking at her character sheet again. “Would you mind if I cast a minor spell on you? I only know three Moon spells, and only one would actually show if what I’m thinking of works.”

“I suppose, if it’s not harmful.”

“Oh, no, it won’t hurt a bit. It just confuses opponents for a second.”

“You may proceed.”

“Thank you. *Dazzle!*” she cast, and where usually small motes of light would dazzle the senses of the target, in this world she got a huge flash that made him cry out. She got the sense that his Delay went up by 12, rather than 6, as it should have. This still was hardly noticeable, and the principal shook it off.

“Yup, moon spells have a double potency. To think my magic actually relies on the physical bodies that populate the solar system.” She shook her head. “That hardly seems worth it.”

“Interesting spell,” Mr. Ottman remarked. “What do your other ‘moon’ spells do?”

“Tell me the direction of north and let me see in the dark. Like I said, not very useful to have at double strength. Now if you had two suns...”

“Our planet would have been burnt to a crisp and life would have never evolved here.”

“There is that. All right. For the moment I’ll head back to Louise’s room, so Hiraga doesn’t wake up and freak out when he can’t talk to anyone. I’ll take stock and see what my next move is going to be. I can still *fabricate* and *imbue* things, if you think unbreakable swords or armor, or magical items might sell for a good price on this world I can at least earn a living that way.”

“Unbreakable you say? What about wands?”

“Oh sure, wands too. Staffs, anything.”

“I think we could work something out. Do you think you can find your way back okay?”

Susan barked a laugh. “I have *No Sense of Direction*. In a castle this big I would be lost in a minute.”

“Very well. Motsognir?” From Mr. Ottman’s shoulder a mouse perked up. “Can you lead her back to Miss Valliere’s room?” The mouse squeaked and ran down his robes to the door. “You don’t mind following a mouse, do you?”

“Oh, is he your Familiar Spirit? He’s so cute! I don’t mind following him.”

“Great. Come and see me whenever, my door is always open to you. Oh, before you go, would you mind terribly doing a guest lecture on your type of magic? I think some of our students would be quite interested, and in stories of other worlds! Plus if there are magical skills we could learn from other worlds, we’ll employ you to teach them!”

Susan shrugged. “Sure, only have a rating 2 in *Speaking*, and no rating in *Teaching* but I’d be glad to compare our magics sometime. I can put a few points in *Teaching* if there’s something I can really teach. We can talk about it sometime in the next few days.”

“I look forward to it.”

“I’ll see you later.”

As Susan walked behind the mouse, she thought about what being stranded here meant. *Would Inari even be able to tell I was here? She didn’t open a door to check on my father or anything, she sent me to do it. That suggests no. My father’s magic could open a door to her world, but that’s Pluto. Without that planet or something similar to draw upon, how will I ever get out of here? Strange that she didn’t warn me that I might find a place like this, only that magic might be different between worlds. Probably that key she gave me doesn’t depend on planets, given she’s the lady of magic or whatever my father said about her. Could I somehow contact her in a dream? How do I know she even sleeps? This is going to be a long journey.*

Having arrived at Louise’s door, she gently knocked and heard a faint “come in,” from the other side. Louise was sitting at her table, staring at Hiraga. “No change?” she asked Sparkle, who perked up from the bed. She shook her head. “I could cast *Awaken* on him, and I’ve been monitoring this magical change that’s he’s been going through. It’s concentrated in his hand now, so hopefully he’ll wake up on his own soon. If he doesn’t, I guess we’ll have to think about what might happen waking him up magically.”

“We can decide that when the time comes. You know what spells we can’t cast?”

“The last three planets, unless I’m missing something?”

Susan nodded. “Yup. No more energy stuff for me. That’s going to be a handicap.”

“Are you just going to ignore me, then?” asked Louise.

“Why no, would you like a scathing remark of some kind? I thought up several on the way back here.”

“No,” she pouted.

“You realize Inari played us?” asked Sparkle.

“What?”

“Yeah, thought about that while I was just sitting here. Remember that key she gave us?”

“That I stupidly gave to Luna? Yeah.”

“It wasn’t stupid. You were showing her that you trusted her with your dad’s future. I thought it was sweet. Anyway, we know your dad came to your world... because you were born there.”

The implication of that took a second to sink in. “I could have just gone home and gone on from there!” she shouted, eyes wide. “I might have only been one world behind him! Not to mention I would have wound up at home anyway! Oh, she’s so getting slapped when I see her next.”

“Uh, might I recommend not slapping the higher order dimensional being? She could probably crush you like a bug, despite what she looks like.”

“Mentally. A nice mental slap in the face.”

“Thank you for clarifying. So, what next?”

“Nothing much until the local magicians do some research. I offered my services *fabricating* and such, so we’ll have an income stream, at least. And I want to make sure my *imbued* items still work. Actually, should have tested that before offering, now that I think about it. Oh well.”

On her person Susan had her ring with *Legion* in it, and the knife of *Alleviation* which worked just fine. She was able to test it by bringing out her *Somatic* Beretta and put it back, damaging her hand by one point. The knife easily healed it, so at least she knew even without the outer planets, she had a lot of options should something try killing her. Of course she couldn’t reload the Beretta, all her ammo was in her now inaccessible *Pocket Dimension*. Of course all the food in her *Personal Dimension* was going to go bad, even refrigerated as it was. She had it stocked with long lasting items, but it looked like she might be here for a long, long time.

The rest of the afternoon was spent discussing (and discarding) various plans with Sparkle, and nearing sundown there was another knock on the door.

Louise opened it, and a younger student was standing there with a cart loaded with food.

“I was told to bring this to your room,” said the boy. Louise stepped back and let him in. “Will he be all right?” he asked.

“Hopefully,” said Susan. “Now that food has arrived we’ll try waking him up. I doubt he’ll want to miss this. Thank you.”

“I’ll be back in a little while to take the dishes back.”

“Thanks.”

Louise just gave a look which Susan took to mean “of course you will,” and the boy left again.

“He’s been stable, nothing magical has happened in a while,” remarked Sparkle. “Do you want me to wake him?”

Susan nodded. “Go ahead. Worst thing that could happen is he goes right back under again, and we leave him until he’s ready. He had quite a shock, after all.” She glared at Louise, who it seemed was waiting to be served, as she wasn’t getting any of the food off the tray. Susan turned back to watch Sparkle touch Hiraga and cast *Awaken* on him. Magical energy swirled, and he groaned and opened his eyes.

“Oh, so it wasn’t a dream.”

3

Communication

Time: Immediately after

Place: Louise's room

"Come and eat," said Susan to Hiraga, "you must be pretty hungry after all that's happened."

"Starving. How long was I asleep?"

"A couple of hours. Figured after the shock you got it would be better to let you sleep. How are you feeling?"

He sat up and swung his legs off the bed. "Okay. My hand feels weird, but I guess that's to be expected?" He looked at it, then rubbed it as though it might come off. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"I expect so. Think of it as a magical tattoo. I've made one for someone, it's not that far off. I feel some kind of Saturn or equivalent spell, so it'll be something to deal with learning, technology or time. I can narrow it down later, if you want."

"I'd like to know, if it's giving me some kind of magical ability, what that ability is. I mean, this is some kind of magical world, right?"

"Oh, I should give you the welcome to the multiverse speech. Looks like there's a bunch of food here, what do you want?" She shoved the table over, as there were only two chairs. One person was going to have to eat sitting on the bed, but that was fine.

"Oh, anything," he said, walking over to the cart and grabbing a plate off. "Though eating without chopsticks is going to be weird." He went to go sit back down, and Susan grabbed a plate as well. She picked up something meaty and put it on the ground for Sparkle, who nodded her thanks and jumped down to it.

"So are you from China?"

"Japan, actually."

"Ah, we have one of those! One day when I'm not jumping between worlds I'd love to explore my own. I haven't seen much of it, and I wish now I had. We could compare how your Japan and my Japan were-" She stopped as she realized Louise hadn't joined them, and they both looked over at her. "Come and sit down," Susan said, exasperated. "You don't need a ticket."

"My familiar should serve me!" she replied haughtily. "I shouldn't have to serve myself now."

Susan snorted. "You're serious?"

"What?" asked Hiraga.

"She wants you to serve her."

"Get out of here!"

"That's what she said. Look, Louise, we're all equal here. You want to sit and eat with us, fine. You want to stand there with a sour look on your face and watch us eat, that's fine with me too. But no one in this room is going to serve you. Get over it."

"He's just a plebeian, and my familiar! It's his duty to serve me!"

"Okay, couple of things, princess. First, he's a person and you expected an animal. Did you see me waiting for my familiar to serve me? No, she doesn't have hands, you see. So I don't know what, exactly, you expected when you did this so called summoning but odds are you would have gotten an animal. Just like everyone else."

That animal would not have served you. So neither is this person. Second, there's a word on my world; Muggle. I don't like it, and I never did. I'm beginning to not like this word I feel is similar, which my translation matrix is rendering as 'plebeian.' He is a person, not a thing to be given a derogatory label."

"It's not that derogatory, it just means a commoner. You know, someone who can't use magic."

"Can't use... wait a second. Are you telling me that you're some kind of noble? Because you can use magic?"

"My whole family can. Every family that can use magic has become ennobled at some point in history, and that's continued until today. I mean you don't think a person who could use magic would stay a peasant, do you?"

"So magic is passed through families here, too? That makes sense. And at some point in history they decided magic wouldn't be kept secret, and so they became a ruling class. Interesting."

"So I've changed your mind, then, now that you know I'm your better?"

"What? Better? Ahahaha. No, why would I have changed my mind? Look, just because he doesn't know if he can do magic that doesn't mean he can't. Maybe his world doesn't have a lot of magic but now that he's here in this one, he can pick up that skill. Or maybe he has some other weird ability from his world that he thinks is normal but turns out to be special on this one. There's still this weird rune to consider, who knows what that can do for him. It's obviously magical, I can feel it from here, so it's doing something to him. To say he can't use magic, at this point, is rather silly. And let's be honest, all your magic is explosions, which we could do with gunpowder, if you have that sort of thing on this world. So you're not all that great of a magic user, if that's all it takes to be a noble."

"Even with all that said, he's definitely not."

"Neither am I. But I'm not serving you either. So take that as you will."

She sighed and looked us over, finally deciding I wasn't going to budge, and Hiraga couldn't really understand what was going on anyway. She grabbed a plate of her own and sat down to eat with us.

"Wasn't so hard, was it?" I asked with a grin.

"You have no idea."

We ate in silence for a moment. "Right, so, welcome to the multiverse. Other worlds exist, and apparently they are more diverse than I first thought. I've only been to mine and this one, because I just started out. But my father went to a bunch to try and save them from this creature I call The Darkness. I call it that because that's what it looked like to me last I saw it. Basically it wants to break out of the dimension it lives in and go up, rather than down which I guess is much easier for it. So it needs the energy of our lower dimensions to do that. Dad got stuck someplace, I'm going after him. Or at least I was." She glared at the tiny pink haired girl.

"I already said I was sorry," said Louise.

"There was no way you could have known," I said. "And I'm sorry for losing my temper when I first got here. I should tell you, there's a piece of The Darkness inside me, it was put there before I was born. It wanted to try and corrupt me so I wouldn't take

up my father's work. Didn't work, but it talks to me sometimes now, tries to get me to do things I normally wouldn't."

"That must be terrible," said Hiraga.

"It's annoying, that's for sure. But it's really only when I could do something it considers 'evil' that it tries to influence me. It isn't just talking my ear off while we're sitting here."

Hiraga looked thoughtful for a moment. "I guess there's only two possibilities. You're telling the truth, and I'm stuck here for the duration along with you. Or I'm in some kind of coma and this is a hallucination that my brain is using to try and heal itself. And there's no way to tell the difference from where I'm sitting."

Susan held up the knife she was using to cut her meat. "I could cut you, see if you feel pain. Would that prove it for you one way or the other?" She grinned.

"That's okay," he said, holding up his hands. "I'll take your word for all this. What I want to know is, what now?"

"Good question. The teachers are looking for a spell to allow you to understand and speak the language. If they can't find you one, I'll research mine and make you an item with it so you won't have to worry about that. As far as she goes... Louise, he wants to know what to expect now? What happens after this ceremony in other words?"

"Usually we just get to know our Familiar Spirits and what they can do. Then we go on with our studies. I don't know what it will mean now that a plebei- a person has been summoned."

Susan repeated this.

"Great. While she's in class, what am I supposed to be doing?"

"You probably won't be able to go very far. And you're still in school yourself, right?" He nodded. "Not going to be much for you to learn here, either. I mean this place is lit by candles and torches. Unless you wanted to study blacksmithing or something?" They both chuckled. "One thing you might want to take up is some kind of weapon."

"What makes you say that?"

"If this is a magical world, and I saw some of the types of creatures that were floating around in that courtyard, it would stand to reason those sorts of creatures are also roaming around wild out there. If that's the case you're going to need to defend yourself. Even a farmer would have some skill at an ax or a bow if they got attacked on the road. Louise here has at least explosion magic to defend herself with, you've got nothing. Unless you're some kind of martial arts master?" He shook his head. "There you are. This is a world where the strength of your arms determines your fate, if you're a peasant. And despite what I said earlier, that's what you are. You should have some skill relating to your new 'position' of being a Familiar Spirit."

"I hear you. And really, if she can only do explosions it might be better to have someone around that knows how to fight. But how will I be able to learn? I won't be able to pay anyone, and this is a magic school, not a military academy."

"Leave that to me," Susan said confidently. "I do know the Augment Skill spell, and both Teaching and Sword: (Slashing) are untrained. I'll just put those two spells on myself and I can show you the basics, and spar with you!"

"That sounds good, but where are we going to get a couple of swords?"

Susan waved this off. "I'll make us some after we eat. It'll only take a couple of minutes."

He gave a short laugh. "Magic does come in handy, I guess."

"I guess."

"My laptop!" he suddenly said.

"Huh?"

"I must have dropped it when I entered that weird portal! You didn't pick it up or see it when I collided with you?" Susan shook her head. "Man, it's long gone now. I just paid to have it fixed, too. Darn it!"

"There's still some hope. Time runs differently between dimensions, apparently. What's weeks here might be just a few minutes where you're from. You might return to see it still just lying there."

"Or a minute here is weeks there and if I ever get back a thousand years will have passed. Still, I can hope."

"I have no way to tell you which is more likely. Sorry."

"That's okay. Having it would have been nice, though."

"Well, having access to my full complement of spells would be nice, but here we are. You wouldn't be able to recharge it anyway." She gestured to the walls, as if to say "no electrical sockets." *Though I could research a spell to do it, if it was really that useful around here.*

"There is that."

So the dishes were stacked back up on the cart and Susan sat down to do some *Creation* magic, and the two watched her, interested.

"What type would you like? Katana?"

"Sure." Hiraga shrugged. "It's as good as any, I suppose."

"I think I recall enough what they look like to get you something close," she said, getting a 16 on her KNOledge check. She began to cast.

Nine minutes later she had two gleaming katanas with wooden scabbards. She also used magic to create some leather, and Augment Skill to get the needed skill to wrap the hilt properly. Both had been pretty impressed, as Louise said magically creating objects like that wasn't usually done, because they tended to degrade rather quickly. Their magic could do it, though, and much more quickly according to her. She was also somewhat interested in those magical circles Susan's magic generated, but was trying to act like she wasn't. To save her some time, she had gotten some glue from somewhere, and they were just waiting for it to dry when there was another knock at the door.

Louise went to open it, and it was the same younger boy that brought the cart.

"I can take the dishes away if you'd like," he said. "And I've been told to show Susan and the Familiar Spirit to their rooms, if you're ready."

"Sounds good to me," said Susan, getting up and stretching. She grabbed the two swords and the others got up as well. "He's going to show you to your room," she told Hiraga. "I'll keep these until tomorrow, make sure they dry properly and don't need adjustment before we can use them."

"Sounds good," replied Hiraga. "See you tomorrow, Louise."

Susan translated, and said goodnight herself.

The next day, Susan was awoken by Sparkle and looked around. "There's some kind of gong sound going," she explained, "but I figured you wouldn't hear it."

"That's probably the case," Susan replied, getting out of bed. She had made herself a nightgown to sleep in the night before, and thanked her past self for memorizing that spell. *I think it's going to really come in handy around here.*

Sparkle cast *Hygiene* on her once she was dressed, cleaning her and her clothes without effort. She waited a moment, looking out the window at the beautiful day, then went across the hall and knocked on Hiriga's door.

"Morning," he said, sleepily. "Guess that's their alarm clock, huh?"

"Either that or it's a fire drill and we're all going to die, but given no one is running about in a panic, I think it's fine."

He grinned and slipped his shirt on. "I wonder where they keep the showers in this place?"

"Got that covered," said Sparkle, doing another *Hygiene*, this time on him.

"Thanks. I feel clean. Wow, I could get used to this magic stuff!"

"Yup, I'm great all right. Now, which way do you think breakfast is?"

"Let's just follow everyone else, it shouldn't be long."

"Good point. Oh, belt this on, you better get used to walking around with it."

Susan tossed him a sword, and showed she had already put hers on as well.

"Came out pretty good," he remarked, looking over the wrappings.

Susan buffed her fingernails on her shirt. "Given my rating in the skill is my rating in the planet, and I can make the rating in my planet far above human limit by spending energy, I should hope so."

"I think your translation spell is failing," he said, cocking his head. "I didn't get much of that."

She waved it off. "Never mind. Basically I'm awesome at magic, so go me."

They both laughed.

"Hey, there's someone! Let's go!" He belted the sword on, tying a knot in the leather strap she had left over from the Creation last night, and they closed the door and hurried after the person they had seen.

The banquet hall reminded Susan of Hogwarts, and she estimated across the three tables there were about 250 students in total. Not many, but then, maybe there are a ton of magical schools around here and not just one.

Pink hair wasn't too common, so Susan and Hiraga found her and sat down.

"Wow, at least we'll eat well here!" remarked Hiraga, looking over the feast that had been prepared.

Wonder if there's an elf equivalent that works here? Have to look into that.

She turned to say hello to Louise, but saw her eye was twitching. "What's wrong now?" she asked.

"He shouldn't even be here. He should be eating with the rest of the Familiar Spirits. Or at least on the floor."

She pointed to a plate on the floor, set with a single roll. Susan busted out laughing. "Don't start that again, princess. You might start annoying me, and you wouldn't like me to be annoyed with you, believe me. I know it's tough to wrap your head around, but he's a person, same as you. Start treating him accordingly or I'll break

your rune-” *Wait, crap, that’s Pluto magic and they don’t have a Pluto.* “Well, I’d figure something out to break your hold over him, and we’d just disappear into the night.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

Louise glowered but didn’t say anything.

People in uniforms were walking about the hall, setting things out, and Susan caught the eye of a pretty maid with a wave.

“Excuse me,” she said, “can I get something suitable for my cat? With all the familiar spirits around here, someone must provide for them, but I have no idea who.”

The woman looked her over, then brightened. “You’re that visiting wizard, aren’t you? I was told we had a visitor, apparently from another world?” Susan nodded. “Wow, and I’m talking to her. I’ll go see what I can find right away!”

“Thank you very much.”

She hurried off, and came back with something Sparkle said smelled delicious. Once everyone was seated they spoke some kind of weird ‘prayer’ and everyone dug in.

That done, Louise led them out to the courtyard again, where tables had been set up and everyone wearing a black cloak was out playing with their Familiar Spirits.

“Must be nice,” remarked Hiraga, looking around. “Kicking back, playing fetch with your dog or floating eyeball or... what in the heck is that thing?”

Susan looked, and it was a rather large, red, lizard looking thing with fire for a tail.

“Charmander?” she asked with a grin.

“Wait, you know about that?”

“Wait, what? You have-”

But they were interrupted by Colbert spotting them and jogging over. They greeted each other and he had a big smile on his face. “We found a spell we think will work,” he said, taking a book out from under his arm. “I’ve been looking for you so we can get you speaking our- he can’t understand a word I’m saying, can he?”

Susan translated, and Hiraga said “Great. Whatever he has to do, let’s do this!”

And so Colbert looked the spell over and cast it while swinging his staff around.

“Did it work?” he asked.

“If you can understand me, yes it did,” Hiraga replied.

“I can! Amazing, it did work.”

“I guess so! Thank you very much.”

“Oh, no trouble, none at all. Did you sleep well last night? How are you adjusting to life here?”

“Haven’t had much time to really think about it, I was asleep or unconscious most of the time. As long as there’s some hope of me eventually returning home, I’m sure this will be a nice enough place to visit.”

“I can’t make any promises there,” he said, his face falling. “Sorry.”

“It’s only been a day, I don’t expect instant results,” said Hiraga with forced cheerfulness. “With two different kinds of magics at my disposal, I’m sure something can be figured out.”

“We’ll try our best, at least give you the option of going or staying. You are a Familiar Spirit now, whatever you were before. That means something to us.”

“And what gives you the right to disrupt his entire life by stranding him, sorry, us, here?” asked Susan in a low voice.

“As I said, we are looking into ways of opening a door to another some other world, so you can at least use your magic to get back to where you were, Susan. That might be easier than trying to find your specific worlds, if what you said about the number of ‘doors’ you saw is accurate. Please give us a little time.”

“Of course, I understand. New magic just doesn’t grow on trees, and you have students to teach and whatnot. It’s fine.” *For the moment.*

“One problem at a time, right? At least now you can talk to us, so that’s a minor hurdle out of the way. I’m going to head back, enjoy your day off.”

We all said goodbye, and Hiraga introduced himself properly to Louise.

“Glad I can talk to you directly now,” she said. “Though I’m not sure how to handle our time. I can’t exactly pet you like a dog, can I?” Looking around, there were several dogs, and they were all excitedly being petted or played with.

“If it’s all the same to you, Louise,” Susan said, tilting her sword, “I think our time is best spent getting this guy trained up in this. You two can ‘bond’ or whatever when he takes a break.”

“Let’s do it,” said Hiraga with a grin.

4

Celebrity

Time: Moments later

Place: Corner of the courtyard, away from the others

Hiraga pulled the katana from the scabbard after untying it, and set that out of the way. Susan was busy casting *Augment Skill: (Sword: (Slashing))* and putting max energy into it. This got her a skill rating of sixteen, almost double what a normal human could achieve. She was about to do the same for *Teaching* when Hiraga yelled out to her.

“Come and see this!”

She went over to him and he held out his left hand so she could see the rune on the back of it.

It was merrily glowing now with an inner light.

“It’s active?” she postulated, doing a *Magic Sense* on him and getting maximum. Even with the penalty for holding onto *Augment Skill*, that was enough to tell he was radiating magic much more strongly now than before. “Oh yeah, it’s doing something. Do you feel different?”

He took a few swings with the sword. “Actually, I think I know what I’m doing with this now!”

“Care to test that theory?” she asked with a grin.

“I’d be delighted.”

Both brought their blades up into a guard position and started circling each other. Susan got the initiative, and slashed at him, quick as she could. She was confident that with a sixteen skill she could stop the blade if he didn’t manage to perry it.

It was a good thing she was so confident, he didn’t manage it. But then, she had rolled maximum, a twenty-two.

“Okay, still getting the hang of this...” remarked Hiraga, swinging at her and getting under her guard.

“Guess we’re even,” she said with a grin, blade an inch from her skin. *I rolled an 18 to parry that strike, what’s his skill rating?*

Both then went into a flurry of blows, all of which were blocked by the other. They sprang apart.

“Not bad,” said Susan.

“Thanks,” responded Hiraga.

“No, I was talking about myself.” Hiraga gave her a dirty look and she laughed.

“Just kidding. Ready to continue?”

“I was waiting for you.”

Again the clash of blades, but despite Susan’s rating, it was a stalemate. There were some close calls, but as people gathered around to watch, everyone could tell

neither had a clear advantage over the other. Finally they broke apart again and Susan held up a hand.

"This is getting us nowhere, obviously you don't need my help to master that weapon," she panted. "I think we're done here."

"Awwwww," said the crowd, which Susan looked to see surrounding them.

"Go back to your lives, citizens," Hiraga called. "Show's over." He picked up the scabbard and slid the sword back into it. As he let it go the glow subsided and vanished. "Huh. Not exactly worth leaving my entire world behind, but at least we know I'm not helpless."

"That's for sure," remarked Susan, also putting her blade away. "You're above human level, I can tell you that much for sure."

"That was amazing," said a voice, and a golden haired boy carrying a rose stepped up to Susan. "Magnificent," he went on. "Such strength, and form! I am "The Bronze" Guiche, may I have the honor of your name?"

"Susan Felton, nice to meet you."

Wait, so he comes in third all the time or what? asked The Darkness. *Who gives themselves the title of "the bronze," anyway?*

That's a good point actually.

"Susan? What a strange name, but a beautiful one," he hastened to add. "And your odd clothes... wait, you were the one that appeared alongside this boy when Zero called her Familiar. Little did I see of your beauty then, but now, in the sparkling daytime, how can I resist you?"

He leaned in for a kiss, and Susan stuck her sword in the way, partly drawing it. "Don't even think about it, buster. Anyway, I play for the other team."

"Other... what?" He said, opening his eyes again and looking confused. Then he saw the sword an inch from his neck.

"Guiche, what are you doing?" asked a girl with a red bow in her hair. It was done up in a complicated style, in ringlets, and two separate bangs covered a rather expressive forehead.

"Oh, Montmorency, you came to watch too. What am I doing? Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I think you know. Is he bothering you, miss?" she asked, looking at the bare blade.

"Not at all," answered Susan, sliding the blade back in. "He was just leaving."

"Yes, he was," spat Montmorency, grabbing his ear and stalking off with him.

"He's always getting into trouble," purred a fiery redhead, wearing a gold choker and a modified uniform that left a lot of her ample skin exposed. "Now me, on the other hand..." She grabbed his arm and pressed it to her body, making Hiaga drop the sword he was trying to tie on his waist.

"Leave my familiar alone, Kiche," shouted Louise, trying to yank him away. "He's not another conquest for you!"

"Whatever do you mean, Zero?" she asked, innocently.

"All you people need to go through sensitivity training!" shouted Susan. "Off with you! Go! Go on!"

"I'll be back for you," purred Kirche, blowing Hiraga a kiss and walking away with her salamander or whatever it was.

"Honestly, who does she think she is?" pouted Louise. "Grabbing other people's property like- I mean..." Susan's gaze now turned to her. "Grabbing my... familiar... You know what, forget it! What was all that about, anyway?"

Susan bent down to retrieve Hiraga's sword, and handed it to him. "Given the rune was glowing the whole time, I think it's something similar to the spell I used. He was able to use the sword with magically induced proficiency. Believe me, I doubt any regular swordsman on this planet could match him."

"You really think so?" asked Hiraga.

"I know so. I know my rating at the time. Even with the drag of maintaining my spell, we were even. That's pretty impressive for someone who probably never held a real sword before."

"Guess training is off," he remarked, looking around at the thinning crowd. "Now what?"

The group spent until lunch time testing Hiraga's ability with the (rather poorly maintained, if you wanted Susan's opinion) weapons found around the school. There was a small armory, and they carried out axes, bow and arrow, spears, shields, different types of swords, and even a rusty old mace. As Hiraga touched each one he said he felt he knew how to use it perfectly.

"So that's it," said Hiraga, putting the last arrow into the center of a target they found. "Near enough the center every time as far as I'm concerned."

"Seems that way," Susan replied.

"Excuse me," said someone behind them. They turned. "We're serving lunch, and I brought something for your cat, as well."

"You really did?" asked Susan with a big smile. "That's really thoughtful of you, thanks."

"Oh, it's okay."

"I'm Susan, I never did introduce myself this morning." She stuck out her hand. "Oh, or do you not have this tradition?"

"We shake hands," said the maid, returning the gesture. "I'm Siesta, nice to meet you all."

Louise just snorted like it was beneath her, but Hiraga shook hands with her too. Susan noticed he seemed a bit smitten, and she could understand why. *There's a person in an actual maid outfit right in front of me. That's a +2 modifier to LOOKs if I ever saw one. And of course she's super cute on her own.*

"Please, follow me," said Siesta, "and I'll lead you to your table."

"When you do get off of work?" asked Susan, walking next to her. She realized how that sounded and blushed a little.

"Oh, uh, not until late. Why?"

"Nothing bad," said Susan, waving her hands. "I mean, uh... What I mean to say is, I'd like to talk to you. Both of us are not from around here, so I'd really like your take on this world from your perspective. Louise is a noble, so," she lowered her voice, "I'm not sure she really knows how the world works or not. I'd be interested in what you had to say about life here."

“Is that all?” she said, giving a laugh. “I’d be happy to. Actually, you should go down and see the kitchens. After lunch they won’t be busy with dinner for a little while, they might be willing to answer some of your questions.”

“Good idea, I’ll see about finding my way there. Thanks for the suggestion.”

“Sure. Here we are. I’ll go get your main course now, while you start on this.”

Main course? Man, it’s good to be the king, I guess.

The two thanked her, and she gave a curtsey and a smile, then walked off with a little bounce in her step. Both caught the other looking as she retreated and pointed. They laughed at each other.

“What are you two doing now?” asked Louise, exasperated. “You’re not flirting with the servants, are you? Because that would really reflect poorly on me.”

“Good thing everything isn’t about you, then.”

“So I take it you’re, uh...” he pointed to the disappearing maid. Susan nodded.

“That girl I knocked away from you when we collided? Was she your...” He held up his pinky finger, and Susan had watched enough anime to know what that meant. She nodded again. “Man, that’s terrible. You must be worried sick. I’m really sorry about that.”

Susan shrugged and started to eat. “I’m not worried about her safety, Luna can take care of herself. She’s got strong magic, for what it is as it’s not as good as mine, and a good head. Whatever world she finds herself in won’t know what hit it. It’s just ever finding her again that I despair of. I don’t know. Maybe Inari has some kind of magic gizmo she can use to track people. She’s super powerful, being what she is, so I wouldn’t put it past her. I’m not going to panic until I have all the facts, and that means getting back to her and talking it over.”

“Still, I don’t think all worlds are as nice as this one. Man, I don’t know what I would have done in your place. If you ever feel like talking, I’m here.”

“Thanks.”

“Just keep, you know, quiet on that subject. You know how people in medieval times would react to learning about that.”

“I have to deal with so called modern people’s reactions sometimes. Still. So yeah, you don’t have to tell me.”

“What are you two talking about?” broke in Louise. “And what does it have to do with that maid?”

Both shook their heads. “It’s not important. Eat your... whatever this is... before it gets cold.”

“It was delicious,” said Sparkle, having wolfed it down and licked the plate clean. “I hope I get a main course too!”

That afternoon the group went down to the kitchens, as suggested by Siesta. They were quite honored to have the dimensional travelers around, and were more than willing to talk. It wasn’t until Louise got bored and wandered off, saying she would be back, that they got the real story though.

Susan was unsurprised to learn that conditions here were about as bad as she expected. The common people were seen as little better than slaves by those who knew magic, and had little opportunity to make their lives better. Laws were supposedly equal, but with no such thing as a court system or public defenders, they had little recourse

when accused by someone with money. Those with magic had magical, political, economic power over everyone else, and they didn't hesitate to use it.

That explains Louise's attitudes somewhat. It's just how she's been raised. Basically she has the weakness Prejudice: Commoner or something. All magic users... I shouldn't think that, there may be magic users hoping for change right now. It would be unfair to lump them all together. But getting through to that girl is going to be difficult.

They thanked the cooks and made their way back up to their rooms when they said they had to get dinner started. Cooking for three hundred people (and their animals) was no small task, so they basically finished serving one meal and then started on the next. And without the aid of modern appliances either.

I'm not sure if this is worse than having elves do it, thought Susan as she made her way through the castle. *At least they do get paid for their efforts.*

It seemed by that evening, word had spread about the pair, and at dinner that evening everyone wanted to sit near them. They were asked about the 'weird' swords they were wearing, and what their worlds were like. Susan was still wearing hers, after all she made the darn thing and couldn't put it into her *Pocket Dimension* at the moment. *It could be useful if that weird guy tries kissing me again, after all.*

She also demonstrated her magic, calling upon her *Magical Ally* and allowing people to hit her with the sword while she was *Invulnerable*.

I suppose this is as much excitement as they've seen in a while. After all, they don't have the Internet and youTube. Just going to classes, missing their parents, and worrying about grades. They crave the unfamiliar same as I do. Susan didn't mind, and it seemed Hiraga didn't either, but Louise seemed down because everyone called her Zero and spent more time fawning over the visitors than her. *Guess we'll have to see if something can be done about that Zero they keep calling her.*

That night, Susan made her way to Louise's room after several false starts to properly play her *No Sense of Direction* weakness. Knocking on the door Sparkle swiveled her ears and said she heard crying on the other side.

Ah, an opportunity for my Poor Sense weakness of hearing to make an appearance. "I don't hear anything," she said.

"Go away," she heard through the door. Louise's voice sounded strained.

"Louise, it's me, Susan. I want to talk to you. Please, can I come in?"

She waited a moment and the door opened a crack. "What do you want?" It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Susan thought her eyes were red and puffy, and her face was streaked with dried tears.

"Can I come in? I'm just here to talk," she said gently.

"Do what you like," she growled, throwing the door open and stomping back to her bed. She threw herself down and glared at Susan, who gently closed the door.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sitting down next to Louise.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "Just everyone exclaiming over how great Susan is. 'Oh, show me your sword, Susan. Show me your magic, Susan. Tell me about your world, Susan.' And my Familiar is just as bad. Everyone said I couldn't do it, but I did. I summoned a Familiar, and possibly the best one anyone has ever seen. You saw what

he did with all those weapons, I doubt stupid Kirche and her stupid lizard could do that. But does even one person come up to me and apologize for doubting me? No! It's all 'Zero sure screwed up didn't she?' and 'What will you blow up next, Zero!' My name is Louise!"

"I know. I don't even know why they call you that." *Something to do with screwing her magic up all the time? I wonder, does she have any actual friends here? No one really talked to her directly all day that I could see...*

"I don't want to talk about it."

They sat in silence for a moment. "There's a story on my world," Susan began at last. "It's told about a mother who has a young daughter. Every night the mother is exasperated because she feels the little girl has been naughty at some point during the day, and tells her about it. But one day the woman says goodnight to her daughter and is about to leave the room when her daughter sobs and starts to cry. The woman is concerned, is her daughter hurt? She turns back to the child, who says through her tears, 'wasn't I even a little bit good today?' Turns out the little girl did everything she could to try and live up to her mother's ideals, and her mother hardly even noticed. And even worse, didn't even think of praising her. That little girl is you, Louise. I can't say you did good, because you've trapped me here. My father and my friend are still out there, lost or trapped on some other world. But I'll still admit you did something extraordinary. You did summon a Familiar Spirit. Not only that, from another world, and just kissing him gave him a fantastic power. I don't know what that means, or why. Did you screw up or was it your destiny to be together? Only time will tell that. But you're not useless, and after a few days people will stop gushing over us because we'll be old news. Just have a little patience, okay?"

She put her arm around Louise's shoulder and hauled her up, giving her a squeeze and holding her tight.

"You mean all that stuff you said?"

"I sure do. And what I said to you yesterday. That's what I came to talk to you about, actually. Maybe with my help we can figure out what's going on with your magic and put it to rights. How does that sound? Hiraoka obviously doesn't need my help, so I need a new mission while I'm here. That mission is you!"

"I didn't think you even liked me. Why would you do that for me?"

Susan sighed. "Louise, you can't help the world you live in. I'm seeing you through the lens of my world, which is very different. For all I know, time runs slower here and you're actually in what my world would consider the 'middle ages.' Maybe you haven't had the chance to go through the social reforms my world did. I can't blame you for that. And I don't really know you, so I can't honestly say I dislike or like you. But the one thing I do, my world, this world, any world- that's help people that need it. That's what I'm all about. It's what my magic is all about, why I learned spells like *Repair* and *Alleviation*. Why I made a dozen *Suppress Curse* objects for a pack of werewolves and didn't expect to be paid. If you're willing to work with me and put the time in to figure your magic out, I'm willing to do what I can for you. Maybe with my senses and knowing how magic works and your own world's books about things, we can come up with an answer."

"No jokes? Someone didn't put you up to this?" Susan shook her head. Louise sighed and nodded hers. "Okay. I would be... very grateful for your help."

“Then you have it. I’ll sit through your classes tomorrow, get a sense of things, and then after dinner we’ll start figuring your magic out, okay?” Susan started to get up, but Louise grabbed her hand.

“Can you stay... just for a little while, I mean? You don’t even have to talk, I’m just...” she looked almost ready to cry again. “I’m just so lonely here. You’re the first to ever... to ever...”

“Come here,” Susan said, holding her close. “You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

Perhaps an hour later, Susan didn’t have *Timekeeper* and clocks weren’t in evidence anywhere she could see, Louise had cried herself to sleep. Susan had tucked her in, kissed her forehead, and slipped out.

It’s been really tough for you, hasn’t it, she thought on the way back to her room. Because of your backfiring magic, no one wants to be your friend and so you decided you didn’t need any. That made you even worse, as now you went out of your way to be nasty to everyone. But I think inside is just a confused little girl, struggling as best she can and not knowing where to turn. At least Neville had me looking out for him, and a physical condition I could easily cure. I don’t think it’s going to be so easy this time.

And why do you seem so excited about that prospect? asked The Darkness. Looks like just a lot of unnecessary work to me. It’s useless, forget it! Now I know I’m doing the right thing.

5

Learning

Time: The next day

Place: Classroom

“So if I’m understanding this,” continued Susan, after the teacher went over the basics of their type of magic. “A ‘line’ mage, using two elements, is basically casting two separate spells *simultaneously*. This creates one higher level spell than just using one element. Then a ‘triangle’ mage is casting three at once, and ‘square’ caps it off by casting four separate spells all at the same time? That’s nuts!”

“And hence why there are so few square mages in the world. You’ve understood it perfectly.”

I almost wish I hadn’t. Imagine casting a Mars and Jupiter spell at the same time and getting some weird combination of the two. “Thank you,” she said, sitting back down again. Hiraga had remarked upon “how Japanese” the class was, where if you got called on you stood up to answer the question. But from what Susan could tell, the textbooks were in French. She couldn’t read them, but she recognized French when she saw it. *So I’m speaking and understanding French right now?*

And so the day progressed as normal. Susan and Hiraga learned a little about the history of this world and how magic played part in that development. By the end of the day Louise raced through dinner and her “homework,” some of which was trying to cast certain spells so she didn’t bother. Finally she closed her book and spun in her seat, causing them both to look up from what they were looking at.

“I’m ready,” she announced.

“Good, because this book is giving me a headache,” replied Hiraga with a yawn.

“What do you mean?” asked Susan, closing her own. “You can’t possibly understand any part of it, can you?”

“That’s just it. I almost feel like I could, but it won’t come. It’s the oddest thing.”

“Who cares about that?” asked Louise. “Let’s find out about my magic!”

Susan laughed. “Okay, you’ve been busting at the seams all day, let’s head to the courtyard and see what we can find out.”

“We can’t, you know, do it here?” she asked, cheeks getting a little red.

“Not if you’re going to be exploding everything! Look, there’s no shame in this. You’ve been living with it more than a year, now you’re getting some help to control it. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Besides, I’ll need something to compare your magic to. Hopefully there will be someone willing to help we can snag and talk into casting some spells for me.”

So the four went down to the courtyard again, Sparkle to help feeling out the magic with her *Magic Sense* as well. Once there they saw the redheaded girl, standing next to a girl with blue hair and glasses, carrying a staff. She seemed to be talking to a huge dragon, and Susan muttered “perfect” and stalked over to them.

“Greetings!” she called to them, getting close. They all looked over, including the dragon. “That is a fine example of dragon kind you have there.”

“Her name is Sylphid,” said the blue haired girl quietly.

“Pleasure to meet you!” Susan bubbled. “And you as well. I don’t think we’ve been introduced. Susan Felton, dimensional traveler at your service.”

Susan held out a hand, but Tabitha shied behind Kirche.

“She’s sort of shy,” she explained. “But everyone knows who you are. Why are you still hanging out with Zero, anyway?”

Louise pouted and stomped her foot.

Susan chuckled. “Actually, I’d like your help for a little experiment. Possibly both of you, if you’re willing.”

The two looked at each other, and Tabitha gave a slight nod.

“Guess she’s okay with it. What do we have to do?”

“Nothing too difficult, I think. I just want to get a sense for ‘normal’ magic,” she made air quotes, “before I try to figure out what’s wrong with Louises’.”

“What did you do with your hands just then? Are you mocking me?” snipped Louise.

“What, you don’t have air quotes?”

“Air... quotes?” asked everyone but Hiraga.

“Never mind. So can you do it?”

“I think between the two of us we can handle that. What do you say, Tabitha?”

“Okay.”

“Move back a little, you two,” said Susan to the others. “I don’t need your rune thing messing up my senses. Oh, and I don’t know if this means anything to you guys, but please try to cast them as strongly as possible.”

“Fine with me,” said Kirche, getting her wand out. Tabitha just held up her staff.

“One at a time, if you don’t mind.” Susan closed her eyes and concentrated on her magical senses. Kirche said some gibberish and Susan made her check. She got an 8, her lowest possible, but Sparkle got a 15. “Crap, I didn’t get it!” complained Susan.

“I did,” said Sparkle. “It was a Mars spell, all right. Next.”

The girls repeated the process for all four elements, and Susan was satisfied. *Though it’s not fair they can use Uranus and Neptune elements when I can’t. Also it’s a good thing that blue haired girl... Tabitha? It’s a good thing she’s such a good caster, I got a 9 on one of her spells and still managed to tell what it was.* “Thank you girls, that verifies what I thought. I don’t suppose either of you is a line mage?” They both shook their heads. “Pity. It would have been nice to feel out a dual spell. Okay Louise, you’re up!”

“What do you want me to cast?” she asked nervously.

“On the one hand I want to feel it out, and the stronger it is the better. On the other if you’re going to backfire it I don’t want you to blow yourself up. Whatever you think is appropriate. Maybe start small and if I don’t get it, we can work up to a larger one.”

“Okay. Here goes.” The others got out of the way, and even the dragon took a couple of steps back. *Huh, even the dragon knows what’s up.*

Susan again closed her eyes as Louise spouted some gibberish and the spell exploded nearby. Susan got a 12 and Sparkle got a 10 on the check.

"I didn't get it, it was too weak," muttered Sparkle.

"I got it, and it was weird! Once more, please, if you can? Same intensity if you can."

"Okay." She exploded something else nearby, and this time Sparkle got a 15 and Susan got a 14.

"Oh yeah, I see what you mean," said Sparkle. "What the heck was that?"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Kirche. Tabitha looked interested and wasn't hiding behind her anymore.

"Okay, check this out," replied Susan. "My magic is quite different from yours, that's a given right?" Everyone nodded. "But on some level, magic is still magic. I can sort of taste the rainbow and compare your type of magic against mine. By casting purely elemental spells I could tell what planet they represented, if you had been casting like I did. Fire for Mars, that kind of thing. But what Louise did..." She turned to her. "It didn't feel like anything these two did. In fact, it didn't feel elemental *at all*. The closest I would fit it into my type of magic would be..." she paused.

"Moon," both she and Sparkle said together.

Susan nodded. "Thought so. And that's why her magic goes so wild, at least in terms of *Natural Magician*." She pointed up. "Two moons."

"Darkness?" asked Sparkle.

"I don't know, it doesn't really fit, that's just the closest I could come. I'm sorry, Louise, but I don't know what the heck your magic is doing. I had hoped doing this might... what?"

Both the other girls looked completely shocked at what Susan was saying, and had backed away from Louise a couple of steps.

"No, it's not possible," protested Kirche. "You must have it wrong. There's no way she's a-" She stopped as Tabitha tugged her cape.

"It fits," she said simply.

Kirche stared at Louise.

"Look, my senses don't lie. Her magic is totally different from yours. I'm surprised one of the teachers didn't recognize this, but whatever. If that explains why her spells go wrong, we have our answer. You're trying to do magic in an element you're not suited for." Even Louise looked spooked as Susan looked over at her. "What? I take it this is rare, but what's with this reaction?"

"Principal," said Tabitha, pointing back towards the building.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. Come on." Susan turned to go, but felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Wait, you said you sensed this? And you did have your eyes closed, I watched you. Can you teach us that technique?"

Tabitha perked up.

"I can try. I offered to teach my skills but I haven't heard anything from the principal about doing that yet. You're magical in nature, it stands to reason you can learn to sense magic like I can. Or *Imbue* or *Fabricate* for that matter." *Though Harry and the others couldn't, possibly because they have their own version, potion making and whatever the goblins do for imbuing. Huh, it might be S.T.F.U. all over again.* "I'll ask the principal about it, maybe I can start a new club or something. Or take a rotation in one of the magical classes."

"I'd like to learn," said Tabitha.

"Okay. Even if it's just us after school, I don't mind. We'll see what he says."

"Thanks. And Ze- Louise? Look, if it turns out you... you know... I'm sorry for the way I treated you. Before."

"You better be," she replied, taking off at a fast pace towards the door. Not wanting to be left behind, Susan gave a wave over her shoulder and followed.

The principal, initially happy to see Susan and inviting her in, stared at the group when she explained what she had felt.

"Who else knows about this?" he asked sternly.

Susan and the others traded glances. "Kirche and Tabitha I think their names were? Tall girl with red hair and short girl with blue hair."

"You got it right," stated Louise.

"Bring them, and get Colbert," he said to Miss Longbill, who bowed out of the room and went to fetch them. "I really hope they don't go spreading it around, but I guess what's done is done."

"What? I admit they reacted like Louise had just grown another head, but come on. What's all the fuss about?"

Mr. Ottman sighed. "I've suspected for some time, but the Familiar that Miss Valliere summoned, and that rune, made it all but certain." He pointed to Hiraga's hand, and he looked at it again.

"This? We figured out what it could do for me, is it something special?"

"You what?"

"Yeah, the very next day when I was going to start teaching him the sword. We were equal, and I sure didn't expect that."

"Wait, your skill rivaled that of the Gandalf?"

"The Gandalf?" both Susan and Hiraga snickered.

"Gandalf," Mr. Ottman corrected. "That rune is legendary. And you figured it out in less than a day? People work fast on your world, apparently, Miss Felton."

"And it seems people here keep secrets just like wise old wizards from my world. Honestly, letting her think she was useless? Allowing people to bully her and call her Zero because she was trying to channel magic incorrectly? What a Dumbledore thing to do. I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"I'm not sure what that is, but the appearance of a Void Mage is very serious business. There are those in the world that will want to destroy her before all four come together."

"What happens then?" asked Louise.

"According to legend? Disaster. Or a miracle, depending on who you ask. You have to keep in mind, the last Void mage existed six *thousand* years ago, so records from that time are spotty, at best."

"Great," put in Susan sarcastically, "that means there's no one to teach Louise here how to properly channel her magical energies! Or proper spells for her 'school' of magic."

"Sadly, that is the case. We'll try to find any records we can, but it will take time."

"I understand," said Louise. "It does mean I'm not a failure, though?"

He shook his head. "Yes. Your magic is different, and equal to ours in every way." Louise smiled. "But you can't go spreading it around. Like I said, your existence needs to remain a secret!" Her face fell.

"So I'm still Zero Louise, huh?"

"I better not teach anyone my *Magic Sense* technique, if what you say is true. They'll be able to tell the difference in her magic just like I did."

"That is a concern," allowed Mr. Ottman. "Of course, feel free to teach Louise here, if she can learn it."

"If you want. It's come in handy every so often."

Louise nodded, and the door opened, admitting the others again.

Mr. Ottman swore them all to secrecy, and looked quite relieved they hadn't told anyone else. He allowed them to learn *Magic Sense* as they already knew, as long as they didn't further teach anyone until they left the school. Both agreed.

"Good," finished Mr. Ottman. "I'm glad that's taken care of. You're both adjusting to life here?"

Susan and Hiraga nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that. We haven't found much, and what we have found is rather impractical at the moment. I'd rather get a more complete picture than raise your hopes unnecessarily. So I hope you'll forgive the lack of information for you thus far."

"It hasn't been that long," forgave Susan. "And you must have other things to do, too. As much as I would like an instant fix for this, realistically I know that's not possible. I mean if I can't do it because that branch of magic is denied me, and you've never explored the possibility of other worlds, there's nothing we can do."

"Quite. If there's nothing else, I will bid you good night."

They all looked at each other, and no one could come up with anything, so they said good night and went back out into the hall.

"I guess you really are one, huh?" asked Kirche, after making sure the coast was clear.

"Seems that way," Louise said haughtily. "So I better not hear one more Zero out of you, is that clear?"

"I guess, but then people might ask me why I stopped calling you that, which would be awkward. How about just in public? You'll know I don't mean it anymore."

She fumed, but accepted the necessity.

"Too late now, but come to Louie's room after dinner tomorrow and I'll start teaching you *Magic Sense*."

"Looking forward to it," said Tabitha.

With that, the group broke up and went their separate ways for the night.

Susan found Siesta hanging out in the hallway near her door, and she gave a shy smile and wave. "If you wanted, I have some time to talk."

"I'd like that. Come in!" *Maybe I'll make another friend tonight. Twilight Sparkle would be proud!*

They talked for some time, getting to know each other. Siesta seemed like a nice person, interested in Susan's adventures at her old school.

"So many things have happened to you. How did you ever get through them all?"

"It's both the blessing and the curse I shall carry with me all my days," Susan replied, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. "To gain the XP I need to improve my skills and learn my spells, one adventure after another must I face."

The girls laughed.

"Wait, gain what?"

All too soon Siesta had to leave, but hoped they could talk again soon.

"Yes, this was nice. Maybe one day I can meet your family. I'd love to see how people who aren't nobles live."

"When I get some time off, I wouldn't mind taking you to meet them."

"Really? Great. Thanks a lot."

The next day passed swiftly, Susan again sitting in on some of Louie's classes. The teachers were a little weirded out by having such an old student, but given that Susan actually wanted to learn about history and literature and spells of this world, they couldn't fault her enthusiasm. After all, she wasn't going to be actually *tested* on anything, she could just sit there and drink it up. Compare it to what she knew of history in her world, and see what differences and similarities existed. Siesta went out of her way to serve them at mealtime, which Susan felt a little weird about. But she seemed cheerful enough doing it, and both Kirche and Tabitha hung out, so it was actually pretty fun getting to know them, too. Susan caught Hiraga staring at Kirche several times, which just made her shake her head.

Boys.

With evening come, they gathered and Susan took off her ring. Having cast *Augment Skill: Teaching* on herself, she knew exactly how to train the others.

She also took off her knife and charm bracelet, setting them on the other side of the room.

"I just want you to focus on the ring for now," she explained, holding it up so they could see it. "The ring and the knife are actually equal in power, but this is easier to hide, which is going to be our first exorcise. I'm going to hide it, everyone has to feel out which hand it's in."

As they played the "game" Susan explained exactly how they should be feeling it out as best she should. She just made a "check" in the "skill" but with her rating in *Teaching* currently at a 15, she knew how to explain it to them so they could get it easily. As all three found the ring more times than chance would explain, she congratulated them on "getting a 1 in *Magic Sense*" with a smile.

"Everyone except me," complained Hiraga.

"That's to be expected," explained Susan. "You've gotten a bit of magic placed on you, but that doesn't make you a magic user, like us."

"Humph."

"Now for the rest of you, it's just a matter of practice. Just don't try sensing things when there's a ton of magic around. It doesn't seem too bad here, but the last castle I lived in was saturated with the stuff. Almost took my head off the first time I tried it. It took a lot of practice to narrow my focus down and get past the interference. You can

use it to find magical objects, tell what spells are going without looking, and more. So sense around, see what you can find.”

“Can I see that?” asked Tabitha. Susan handed it over with a shrug and she concentrated on it. “I feel fire,” she said at last. “Wind, for movement. The power of the Earth... metal? This is a powerful object, isn’t it? What does it do?”

Susan smiled. “Wow, Tabitha, you must be a pretty *Fast Learner* to have gotten all that. Yeah, it will generate a small squad of soldiers made of fire that follow my orders. So you really have gotten the hang of the skill already.” She reached back and handed her the knife from the bed. “Here, see what you make of this.”

Tabitha again closed her eyes and concentrated on the knife. “Mostly water. Washing away, healing. Maybe a touch of fire to burn out that which is unwanted.”

“Again, very close, probably as close as you can come relating my magic to yours. It’s the most powerful healing spell I know.”

“Wait, you put a healing spell into a knife?” asked Louise.

“It made sense at the time,” Susan replied with a smile. “On my world there used to be creatures called Dementors, that would suck out a person’s soul. They were immune to basically everything I threw at them except my most powerful healing spell. Basically I was healing a wound in the world, I guess. I don’t know exactly why, only that it worked. As it takes ten minutes normally, I weaponized it into a knife so I could just stick them with it. It’s a little inconvenient now, but it still works if you stick it into a person. The wound it causes just heals up as you pull it out, so it’s fine.”

“Used to be?” asked Tabitha.

“I destroyed them all. Hundreds fell to that blade, and I would do it again without hesitation.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Okay, on that note,” began Kirche, “we better get to bed. It’s getting late.”

“You go,” said Tabitha. “I’ll want to ask Susan something. Privately.”

Kirche looked confused, but agreed, and thanked Susan, saying she would see her tomorrow.

Lousie hung back after Hiraga left.

“I just wanted to say, thank you.”

Susan waved her off. “Sure thing, it’s no big deal. I didn’t have anything else important to do right now. Sparkle and I have talked about trying to research some kind of dream spell to tell Inari we’re in trouble but-”

“That’s not what I mean,” she broke in. “I mean for... everything. You found out I wasn’t useless at magic. Now you’ve given me a skill only two other people on this world have. Three, but I mean you’ll probably leave again someday. And you may have even helped me...” she looked over at Tabitha, still turning the knife over and over in her hands, “make some friends.”

“That part is up to you,” Susan said, wiggling her finger. “But Kirche and Tabitha seem nice, and you all share a secret now. That’s a powerful thing for bringing people together.”

“I guess so. Well, good night.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Susan sat down next to Tabitha on the bed, and waited for her to speak. Finally she looked up and said softly, “Just how good is this healing magic of yours?”

6

Healing

Place: Susan's room

"How good is my healing spell? Let's put it this way; I first used the spell to cure two people that had been tortured into madness by dark wizards. They were fine afterwards. As long as it isn't a curse it'll restore lost stats, heal diseases or poisons, even erase scars or tattoos."

Tabitha looked at Susan with something approaching hope. "If I ask you to come with me, right now, and cast this spell..."

"I would. Without hesitation. As long as it isn't someone eeeeeevil. Is it someone eeeeeevil?"

Tabitha shook her head. "We'll get back pretty late."

"We'll only have to make half the journey. It won't be that late."

She popped up off the bed. "Let's go!"

"Hey Sparkle, taking care of a thing. I'll send the *Teleportal* back if I need you."

"Got it."

Tabitha made sure the coast was clear, then quietly slipped into the hallway and motioned Susan to follow.

Probably against school rules to just run off. Wonder who I'm going to cure here?

They made it down to the gate without incident, as Susan had gotten a 12, her maximum, on her LUCk check.

What? Making me roll LUCk? What's that all about?

Susan figured Tabitha would head to the stables, but instead she just whistled and a moment later, her blue dragon whirled out of the sky and landed before them.

"Do you mind flying?" she asked.

"You actually ride him? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. It's fine, as long as you say it's okay."

"Down." The dragon hunkered down, and Susan made an untrained *Riding* check to get on. She only got a 7, even after spending 4 energy, but Tabitha helped her up.

"Hold on tight," she cautioned. Susan put her arms around Tabitha and tried to lock her knees around the beast's neck.

You don't have to tell me twice. I just wish it was Luna I had my arms around right now.

"Home," commanded Tabitha, and the dragon loped forward, powerful wings stroking, and the three took to the sky.

The landscape, mostly gently rolling hills and farmland, sped beneath them. Looking up, Susan was amazed at the brightness of the stars. *Of course, no light pollution here, and less pollution in general I'm betting. Smell that clean air!*

"Doing okay?" shouted Tabitha back to her.

"Great!" *Oh yeah, I could get used to this. I've never ridden a motorcycle, but I think it might be similar.*

They flew for some time, Susan trying to see what kind of infrastructure and houses were nearby the school, but it was pretty dark. The moons were both crescents, and looking up at them she was reminded that she did know a spell to see in the dark.

I could always fly out here myself, sometime. Hard to say, but this dragon is probably twice as fast as me, even putting max energy into Mercury. Still, they can't have classes all the time, I'll see it soon enough. Right now I think I'll just enjoy the moonlight.

Possibly an hour or so later, the dragon started descending, finally coming to a stop in front of a large house. Looking around the dark, she could tell that maybe it wasn't being kept up quite as it should, as the bushes and other landscaping didn't exactly fit the image of a place this huge. *But then, they don't have power tools, do they? Maybe this is as good as it gets?*

Tabitha and Susan slid off the dragon, Susan stretching her legs and shaking them out as her muscles protested.

"Sorry, should have warned you."

"No trouble. It's not damage, so I'll be fine in a minute."

"Wait," she told the dragon, and went over to the door. "Hopefully she's in bed. We'll have to be quiet."

"You got it."

Tabitha nodded, then turned to the door. She traced a symbol on it and said something, and was able to open it.

Some kind of password on the door, or just an unlock spell?

The two made their way through the house, Tabitha creating a small light for them to see by. She cautiously opened a bedroom door and looked inside. "She's a pretty sound sleeper, because of her condition. I'll put a silence spell on the room, just to be safe."

"Good idea."

She wiggled her staff again, then nodded and beckoned Susan inside. She saw a gaunt woman sleeping in a large bed, a small doll clutched in her hand.

Good, she's asleep. Wait, am I going to be able to say the words to the spell? If I had a Moon Silence spell going, I would have to cast as though not saying the words. Guess I'll just take the full time and not bother with the words one way or the other.

Susan went over to the woman and lightly touched her head, then began envisioning the magical symbols she would need to cast the spell. Circles spun and shimmered around the woman for fifteen minutes while Tabitha looked on impatiently. In the end she got an 18 on her *Sun* check, plus the five for the extra time, minus the two for casting without the incantation. More than was needed to successfully cast the spell, and both watched as the woman seemed to fill out again. Tabitha put her hands over her mouth as her mother's hair went from nattered and lank to shiny and full. Her face became beautiful, and where her hands used to be bone and sinew, they became normal again as well.

"Is... is she?" Tabitha whispered, as though not daring to hope.

"The spell obviously worked. Wake her up and find out."

Susan stepped back, somewhat out of the light created by Tabitha, who gently shook the woman's shoulder.

"Mom?" she asked, her voice sounding like she was about to cry. "Mom, wake up."

Her mother's eyes fluttered open, and then widened in shock. "Charlotte? What are you doing- Wait, what's going on? I feel so different, like I've just woken up from a nightmare that I felt would never end."

"Oh mom!" wailed Tabitha? as she threw her arms around her mother and started to sob. "You're really cured. She did it! She healed you!"

Susan silently slipped out of the room, allowing them their reunion in private.

Now, do I make a swift exit, as I did when I cured the Longbottoms? And what is with other forms of magic not managing a decent curative spell? I mean this is getting ridiculous. Their magic really couldn't have handled that? I mean she looked pretty far gone, and without knowing exactly what was wrong it's tough to say what had caused that. Some kind of disease, and they don't know about bacteria and such yet?

Susan wandered the house, carefully, after doing a quick grade 0 *Sun* spell for a candle flame sized light. She found a living room, *or maybe a sitting room given where I am*, and sat down. She didn't have long to wait until Tabitha/Charlotte and her mother came to find her.

"What are you doing sitting here in the dark?" chided Tabitha, ginning like she just won the lottery. "You healed my mother."

"This girl healed me?" asked the woman. "And what strange clothes she wears. But who cares about that, it seems I owe you a debt of gratitude."

Susan got up. "Please, you don't really owe me anything. It was just sheer chance I came here, and I'm just glad to be able to do what others couldn't for you. Oh, I'm Susan, by the way. Susan Felton."

"Susan, I am honored to meet such a powerful mage as yourself. And so young!" She walked over to Susan and threw her arms around her. "What is mine is yours," she said softly. "The kingdom of Gallia owes you a great debt, more so because of your humility." She released Susan, holding her at arm's length. "You must call me Esme."

"I would be honored."

"What is going on-" A man with a white mustache that seemed to wrap around his chin stormed into the room, holding a candle and what looked like a mace. The weighty steel dropped from his hand and clattered to the floor as he took in the scene. "My lady, you are restored, standing before me whole again? How can this be?"

"Faithful Percerin, have you been looking after me all this time? I'll have to give you a raise." She grinned as she said this, and the man went down on one knee before her. "Oh, stop that nonsense this instant. If what I seem to recall about my condition is any indication, you deserve a small holding of your own for what you put up with. But to answer your question, I'm not sure. Charlotte was not very clear about how my recovery was attained, just that a new friend of hers was the cause."

"Friend?" The man seemed a bit shocked, and looked over to Susan, who gave a little wave. "This truly *is* a night of miracles. I will get some tea and we can talk." He got

up, a *bit stiffly*, thought Susan, *this is no young man, especially for medieval times* and he picked up the mace and hurried out of the room.

"I've almost forgotten what tea tastes like. It'll be nice to not need to be forced to drink something. And somewhat of a relief to the staff, I'm sure." She gave a rising laugh, and Tabitha once again came over and hugged her. "Ah, my daughter. It's been the hardest on you, I'm sure. Come, we have a lot of catching up to do."

"Perhaps I should just come back later?" asked Susan.

"Nonsense. As far as I'm concerned you're part of the family now. Come on."

Sitting down at a table, Tabitha lit several of the candles in the room while the man busied himself serving tea.

"Shall I wake the others?" he asked. "Would you like something more than tea? I could make you something if you wanted it, my lady."

"Just tea for now, Percerin," Esme replied. "And I think we'll keep this recovery quiet, for the moment."

"My lady, surely this miracle should be told to all!"

She shook her head. "No, my position is even more insecure now, given how long I've been ill. It's been years, at least. My little girl is all grown up!"

"Mom!"

Position? thought Susan. *Now what I have done?*

Wow, that took far less time than I thought. Well done to get it out of the way, Susan.

What did?

For you to realize that even doing things with the best of intentions can lead to disaster. You don't even know who you healed, didn't even ask or care. Now we'll see what kind of damage has been, which should be delightful- for me, anyway.

Esme saw the thoughtful look Susan had. "How much did my daughter tell you about herself?"

"We've actually only known each other for a day," admitted Susan. "She found out a secret about one of her classmates, and because of that I was giving her some private lessons in sensing magic instead of teaching the technique to everybody. Long story. Apparently people here didn't know they could do that, so it'll give her a definite edge in the future. Anyway, she found out I knew a powerful healing spell and asked me to come with her. I didn't even know who you were when I healed you. She didn't say specifically and I didn't want to pry. When I get here you obviously needed it, and she said you weren't evil. That was good enough for me. I did notice the resemblance when I first saw you, of course." *Even here, it seems blue hair isn't that common.* "I didn't even know that name you keep calling her, I thought her name was Tabitha."

"You took the name of your doll?" Esme asked, laughing.

"You thought it was me," explained Charlotte.

"Did I? A thousand curses on the man that tried to get you to drink that potion!"

"I always wondered why you grabbed it and drank it instead. I mean you could have just thrown it and had him arrested."

She looked a bit embarrassed. "Who can say what was going through my mind at the time. In any case, what parent wouldn't sacrifice their life for their child? The point is, Susan, you didn't know about our family when you came to heal me?"

Susan shook her head. "Nope. Didn't matter to me. Someone requests my help, I give it. Their station is unimportant."

"To think such chivalry existed in this world." Esme seemed amazed. "If I could I would knight you immediately!"

"Why don't you, mom?"

Esme shook her head. "We've been left alone probably because of what happened. You still in line for the throne, after all."

"You're a princess?" asked Susan, in shock. She looked Tabitha over in a new light.

"You really didn't know. Extraordinary. My husband and his brother were both candidates for the throne, and my husband was the favorite. However, he was killed in a "hunting accident" and Joseph ascended instead. That poison I ended up drinking was meant for her, to remove her from the picture."

Charlotte looked down. "As my mother saved me, I was instead sent on impossible missions they thought I would get killed doing. Slaying dragons and such."

"No wonder you picked up *Magic Sense* so easily. You must have XP to spare after all that!"

"She must have what?"

"Oh, sorry. That's just my regional dialect. I mean you must have experienced a lot after all that."

She nodded. "I'm actually a triangle mage. Please don't tell anyone at the school, I don't want them to feel uncomfortable because of it."

"You really are growing up," exclaimed Esme. "I'm so proud of you, my daughter. But our position is far from secure. If the king learns I've recovered he might realize his hold over you is more tenuous. That could be troublesome. Until I'm sure I've fully recovered, and I learn what's been going on while I was... unaware... it's best if I keep a low profile for now."

"You may want to brush up on your magic, too," suggested Susan. "You may need it."

She nodded seriously. "My old wand should be around here somewhere."

"I can fetch it," put in Percerin.

"Tomorrow will be fine. I need a decent night's sleep, quite honestly." She yawned. "I remember waking up all the time during the night for so many years..." she shuddered. "Best if those memories are put behind me."

"I'll let you get some sleep," said Charlotte, getting up. "We need to be getting back ourselves."

"We can come visit anytime," said Susan with a wink. "Just let me know you'd like to come."

"You did say something about that before, what did you mean?"

"Come, I'll show you, if we're heading back. Esme, I'm glad to see you're up and about. It was very nice meeting you."

"And you," she replied. "I know you don't want anything, but I'll think of something to repay your kindness."

"The friendship of your daughter will be more than enough," she said. *Dear Princess Celestia, today I made a new friend, and she's a princess just like you! Well, maybe not exactly just like you...*

“Especially if she becomes queen one day, no?” Esme bumped Susan with an elbow.

“I don’t plan to stay, actually. As I said, my being here was an accident I need to rectify as soon as possible.”

“Then there is something I can do for you! Do you need money to travel?”

Susan shook her head. “It’s too complicated to explain now. Some other time, perhaps.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Come and visit any time. If I’m going to have to pretend to still be insane, I would love the company of someone who knows the truth.”

“I will.”

Esme and Charlotte embraced again. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she whispered.

“I’m glad you are,” Esme returned. “You must tell me all about your adventures. You’ve grown up to be a fine, strong young woman. I’m proud, so very proud of you my daughter.”

After their goodbyes, Susan and Charlotte went out to where the dragon was napping, and she raised her head.

“We won’t need you for the way back,” Susan said. “If you think the healing spell was good, hold onto your staff for when you see this. *Teleportal!*”

Both were suitably freaked out by the hole in the air she created, allowing them to simply step back through to the school.

Yeah, that never gets old.

The dragon took off again, and both silently made their way into the school and up the stone stairs. Charlotte walked Susan to her door.

“Good night, see you tomorrow,” Susan chirped.

“Wait. I don’t have the words to thank you.”

“Like I keep saying-”

“But I have this.” Susan was shocked to find Charlotte kissing her, and closed her eyes. It wasn’t a kiss of passion, but of thanks, and Susan could feel the warmth in it. It didn’t last long, as Charlotte, blushing furiously, broke the kiss off. “It was my first,” she muttered quietly, and turned down the corridor, head down. She nearly ran out of sight and turned the corner, disappearing.

“Huh,” remarked Susan, touching her lips. “I guess that’s acceptable.”

She went to bed that night with a grin.

The next day she wouldn’t meet Susan’s eyes, and Louise demanded to know what had happened after she had left.

“That’s her story to tell,” said Susan, grinning wickedly. “We all have our secrets.”

The day passed normally, but oddly, Siesta was nowhere to be seen. Someone else served them, and by dinner time Susan had a bad feeling about the whole thing. She made her way to the kitchens, only to find Hiraga already there.

“Are you looking for Siesta, too?” he asked.

“Yeah, is she around?”

“Apparently, if I’m understanding this correctly, she was ‘transferred.’”

“Transferred? What does that even mean?”

“From what I’ve been told,” he pointed to the head chief, who had eyebrows enough for two men, “some aristocrat saw her when he was here to discuss things with the principal. Count Mott, I guess. He requested her service and when an aristocrat wants something, they tend to get it.”

“She didn’t say anything about this! That’s weird.”

“We were kind of busy last night. Maybe she heard you practicing and decided she wouldn’t bother you?”

“I guess. Man, I was just getting to know her, too.”

The silently mounted the stairs back up to their rooms. “I have to admit, I’m a little worried about her,” Hiraga said at last.

“He’s a noble, not a child molester. Siesta is only seventeen, she told me that before. It might be a good opportunity for her.”

“Maybe you don’t have the same history, but people where I came from had weird ideas about that in the Middle Ages. Like, you’re an adult at maybe thirteen?”

“Oh. Yeah. Tell you what, Char- Tabitha and Kirche are coming for their daily lesson in a few minutes, we’ll ask them if we should be worried. After all, we don’t know the culture here and this may be perfectly normal.”

“That’s not normal,” explained Kirche. “For Mott to show up and then Siesta to disappear the next day? You’re right to be a little worried.”

“I knew it,” Hiraga said, smashing a fist against the wall. “What’s he planning?”

“Mistress,” said Charlotte, and Kirche nodded.

“He wouldn’t take her against her will, though, would he?” Susan asked, aghast.

“If he did, there isn’t much she could do about it,” replied Kirche.

“Rescue?” asked Charlotte.

“It would make sense this happened now,” explained Sparkle, perking up. “Given who we are. A rescue would be a nice opportunity.”

“Wait, are you saying we’re to blame for this?”

“Not blame, exactly.” Sparkle sat up. “It’s a *Paragon* thing. Without adventures we don’t get cards or XP. Without XP we can’t advance our skills. I noticed the same thing traveling with your dad. The world was doing fine, we show up, and suddenly in that area there came problems his group could solve? It happened more times than coincidence would allow. It seems it follows you, too.”

“I’m not one to turn down the call to adventure. How about it girls, up for a rescue mission?”

7

Rescue

Place: High in the air

Time: Twenty minutes later

Everyone there had enthusiastically signed up for the rescue, and Susan created some black outfits for everyone with *Creation*. She managed to do it in two castings, as black, stretchy cloth was not that heavy. One set of tops, one set of bottoms, so everyone could just pull them on. By joining the outfits at the sleeves and pant-leg, this made it “one object” that just had to be cut apart. Hiraga was shooed out of the room and took his own outfit across the hall while everyone changed. She also checked her cards, spending the *Rally* to get another card for herself and Sparkle, netting a *Took a Night Class* card.

“Too bad this won’t stick around very long,” said Sparkle looking wistfully at her character sheet. “This might get us a spell we couldn’t get any other way, and thus be much more useful than normal.”

“We’ll have to think about it,” said Susan. “Maybe something will come up on this mission. But if not, yeah, think about what we’re missing right now and use it before it’s gone.”

“So why are we doing this?” asked Louise, staring angrily at Kirche’s curvier body as she stripped.

“Because we can’t wear school uniforms while we are illegally breaking and entering a nobles’ house. Plus with the hoods up it’ll be harder to tell who we are.”

“Why not me?” asked Tabitha.

“You’re hanging back,” explained Susan. “If it got out, however that happened, that you were involved, I’m guessing it would get very tricky politically.” She nodded, conceding the point. “You can show us the way, and we’ll ‘drop in’ on Mott and make sure he’s behaving himself. If not...” She punched her hand. “He’ll regret it.”

So the group had *Flight* magic put on them, and Sylphid the dragon kept her speed down, and they approached the house from the air. The dragon was big, but not large enough to carry everyone, so they were pacing her to the side. Charlotte pointed. “That’s the house.”

“Then this is as far as you go. Want me to send you back, or are you okay with flying?”

“We’ll be fine. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The group watched her go, hanging in the air. Sparkle was in her fairy form, sitting on Susan’s shoulder so she didn’t tire herself out trying to flap her wings. They hovered over the house, watching as pinpricks of light, probably guards carrying torches, moved about the premises.

“What’s the plan?” asked Kirche. “You seem to have done this sort of thing before.”

“Oh, I dabble,” Susan replied with a smirk. “Okay, do we need to get a little closer? I’d like to be sure she’s actually here before we make any other plans.”

Sparkle looked down. “If we do, you can lower me while I maintain it. Just a second.”

She cast a spell, *Detect Friends*, and nodded. “There’s one person friendly to us in that house. This side.” She pointed.

“That’s our maid,” said Susan happily. “Okay, there’s a small something on the other side of the house, that’ll work perfectly. Kirche, you’re going to go set it on fire. Make sure there are no animals or anything living inside.”

“Right now?”

“No, it’s our distraction. Let’s see if she needs us first. If we need it, I’ll send you. Stay there and make sure someone doesn’t come put it out right away. We’ll come get you. We can’t go *Invisible*, but I doubt those guards will look up. Be quiet and try to stay out of sight. We’ll come up with the rest of the plan on the fly.”

Everyone nodded, and they all dropped towards the roof of the house. Hovering over it so they didn’t make a sound, Susan flipped over and peeked into the windows she saw. The third window was the winner.

Inside, dozens of candles were lit, illuminating the two figures within. One was a naked Siesta, crying and pressed up against the wall by the other person in the room. This was a half-naked man, turned away from the window as he struggled with Siesta.

“Kirche,” Susan growled, “distraction. Now.”

“On it.”

She flew off.

“Sparkle, on my signal, silence spell on this window. Louise, blow it open. Hiraga, he’ll be yelling for guards once we’re inside. Hopefully Kirche’s fire will draw most of them off in that direction. Try not to kill any of them. I’ll handle the count.”

“Got it.”

Susan tensely waited, growing more and more angry as the man lost more of his clothes and continued forcing himself on the protesting girl. Suddenly there was an explosion from the other side of the house, and cries of “fire!” rang through the air.

Huh, guess she doesn’t know how to hold back either.

“Now!” said Susan, and Sparkle cast *Silence* as she had been ordered.

“It’s in place, blow the window,” she said.

Louise dropped down and said something, and the window silently blew to pieces, spraying the inside of the room with fragments of glass and wood. The man whirled, and Susan could only imagine what was going through his mind as he tried pulling his pants back up again. Three figures, dressed all in black and with their faces covered hovered just outside.

“Stay here,” Susan said to Louise, and she and Hiraga darted forward into the room.

“Mott, I presume,” said Susan to the man, staring in shock at the new hole in his wall. “Let’s have a little talk about basic human decency.”

“Guards!” he shouted, lunging for a length of wood Susan saw was still in easy reach. *His focus? No, I don’t think so.*

“Combust,” she cast, and the dry wood instantly caught fire, causing him to yelp and flinch back. *I so love fighting magic users with that weakness.*

“Get dressed,” Susan commanded Siesta, who looked around for something to wear. Looking over there, Susan saw her maid outfit had been torn off her, and growled again. “Check the closet. He won’t miss some pants and a shirt.”

“Who are you?” demanded Mott. “Guards!”

The door rattled, and Hiraga calmly drew his sword. There was a pounding from outside, as it was obviously bolted shut and would take some time to get through.

“Thrust,” Susan cast, sending the man flying and knocking into the wall behind him. He cried out and went down, and Susan saw the back of his head was bleeding.

He’ll be fine, thought Darkness.

Yeah, probably, Susan thought back.

Wait, seriously? He sounded a bit hopeful. *There’s hope for you yet!*

I’m just getting started.

Susan strode over to him as the door started giving away as the people outside battered it down. She grabbed Mott’s throat and looked him in the eye. “Where I come from, doing that to a person is called rape. There, I would take the matter to the authorities, and let them deal with you.” *I wouldn’t expect much, even there. People still have funny ideas about ‘consent’ that only a lot more education and common sense are going to cure. But at least some effort is being made.* “It seems to be a little different here, as you people seem to make your own rules. Fine. Now I’m making the rules. I ever get wind that you’re even thinking about trying something like this again? I’ll be back, and I won’t stop at one measly window. Think about it.”

The door smashed open, and the guards were surprised to find a black dressed figure tearing into them like a master swordsman. Their weapons were smashed to pieces in seconds, and they groaning on the ground, bleeding from multiple shallow wounds. Susan turned back to Mott. “I’m being clear here, right? You’re getting all this?”

Mott hastily nodded, and Susan let him go, allowing him to slump to the floor. *Maybe he’s a little bit more hurt than I thought?*

She cast a quick *Healing* on him, and saw that Siesta was ready. She was holding the pants up, Mott being a much bigger (around the middle) person than she was. Hiraga sheathed his sword and grabbed her up.

“I think we’re done here.” He and Susan lifted off the ground again and started for the window.

Mott was weakly calling for more guards, but it seemed the fire had done the job of making them all run in the other direction to try and get it put out.

“I’ll be watching,” Susan couldn’t resist saying before she turned and flew out the window herself.

They met up with Kirche, who was having far too much fun shooting jets of fire at anyone trying to get close to the main blaze, and the six took off into the night. They set down a few miles away, as Hiraga couldn’t carry her anymore.

“Just as well, we weren’t flying all the way back anyway. Siesta, are you okay?”

The maid had her head burred in Hiraga’s shoulder, and was sobbing. Realizing she was on the ground she pushed away from him and tried to run, but got tripped up

by the pants coming loose and falling around her ankles. Susan tried to suppress a laugh as Siesta tried scrambling away. She lowered the hood from around her face.

"It's okay, Siesta, it's just us. It's Susan and Hiriaga and Louise." The others pulled down their hoods as well, and Siesta wilted with relief.

"That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier!?"

"If you were fooled, Mott won't know who we are, so that part of the plan worked. Sorry about that. Come on, let's get you home. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Siesta shook her head.

"Good. Apart from the fact I don't have an excuse to go back and set fire to more of that mansion of his. Ah well. We'll have you back to the school in no time, give me a second for a *Teleportal*." Susan cast and opened the portal back into her room, much to the amazement of the others.

"Yup, we'll probably beat Tabitha back," Susan chuckled. "Come on."

Once safely through the door closed, and the familiar stone of the castle surrounded them.

"You really are okay, right?" Susan asked, leading Siesta to the bed and making her sit down. "Physically, I mean." She nodded. "You guys better go," Susan said to the others. "She's just been through about the most traumatic thing someone can, and packing everyone in here isn't going to help. Thanks for the help, though."

Everyone wished her a good night, and hoped she was okay. Siesta managed a weak smile, and Sparkle, back in cat form, nuzzled her as the room emptied out. Susan locked the door and came back to sit down by Siesta. "They're gone," she said softly. "It's just you and me. Did he hurt you in any way?"

"I was so scared!" wailed Siesta, hugging Susan and starting to cry again. "If you hadn't come... or if you had been just a few minutes later..."

"Hey, the hero always arrives just in the nick of time, right?" Susan stroked her hair. "It's okay, you're safe now. No one will hurt you here."

They stayed like that for probably a half hour, Siesta slowly putting the experience behind her. "I'm sorry," she said, pulling away from Susan. "You probably think I'm just a big cry-baby right now."

"Not at all," said Susan. "He had total power over you, both as a noble and as a magic user. If I had my full power here I would have made sure he could never do magic again. Then he wouldn't be a noble either."

"I hate him!" Siesta spat powerfully. She tore off the shirt and pants, leaving her naked again and throwing them as far across the room as she could. "I would rather walk back to my room naked than touch something he wore for one more second!"

I'm not complaining.

"Shall I walk you back? I can understand if you don't want to be alone tonight. You're welcome to stay here."

"No, I better get back. But at the same time I don't think I want to walk around like this, despite what I said."

"Here," said Susan. "You can wear this. I'll get ready for bed anyway!" She pulled off her shirt and handed it over, and Siesta tugged it on.

"What is this material?"

“My magic made it. I just wanted something tight, stretchy, and black, and that’s what it gave me.”

“Amazing.”

Having put on the pants, Siesta hugged Susan again. “Thank you again. For caring.”

“Of course. And next time, come see me if something seems wrong. I might as well do all the good I can while I’m here.”

“I will,” she resolved, “and I’ll be sure to thank the others tomorrow, as well.” She slipped out the door and down the hall, bare feet hardly making a sound as she disappeared down the stairs.

Guess I haven’t lost my touch. Even used a bit of teamwork to get the job done. How about that, I can be taught!

--Meanwhile--

Somewhere, in a random weapon shop, inside a random barrel, a sword thinks to itself: *Yup, any day now, he’ll show up. I’ll be back with Gandalf again. Just you wait. It’ll be soon, I can feel it. Gonna be so great, slice up some baddies. See the world. Any day now.*

Oh, how disappointed that sword is going to be.

--Meanwhile--

A thief with green hair helps herself to some jewelry, using Earth based magic to bore a hole in the roof of a castle. There’s just no stopping a pro, right?

--Back with our heroes--

The next day at lunch, Kirche asked Louise what she and Saito were going to do for the exhibition, and Louise dropped her fork in surprise.

“I totally forgot about it. Or rather I purposefully didn’t think about it because of my peculiar Familiar.”

“What’s this?” asked Hiraga.

“Sort of a talent show for Familiar Spirits,” explained Kirche.

“I’ll win,” said Charlotte, not having any knowledge of the future and such. She was just confident.

“Yeah, you have a huge dragon,” admitted Susan with a laugh. “All you have to do is stand there, point to the dragon and say ‘I have a huge dragon.’ How can anyone hope to beat that?”

“What are we going to do?” asked Louise, staring at Hiraga.

He shrugged. “The only thing I can do, if you’re willing, Susan.”

“I’ve never been a straight man before,” Susan said, trying not to grin. “We could do the old ‘who’s on first’ routine if these guys know what baseball is.”

“What? Not comedy, I mean sword fighting!”

“Oh, that. Everyone saw that before, though. Still, will they allow me on stage? I’m not your familiar.”

“Ring,” Charlotte put in, pointing.

“Hey, that’s an idea, you could beat up my... no, wouldn’t work. They explode when they die, so cutting them up would leave a big flaming hole where the stage used to be.”

“Still, I bet if someone who can make Earth Elementals conjured up a few for you to fight, that would work,” admitted Louise.

“I think Guiche can do that,” said Kirche. “We could ask him later.”

“Uhg, that guy? I guess it can’t be helped.”

“Who is this?” Susan asked.

“You met him. He tried to...” she giggled, “kiss you, after your little match with Hiraga here. Uses a rose because a wand is just too mainstream?”

“Oh him. Don’t remind me.” The others nodded in sympathy, all of them having been the subject of his ‘attentions’ at least once. (Everyone but Louise anyway.) “At least he’s stayed away from me since then.”

“Guess you made an impression on him. I doubt anyone’s ever held a sword to his throat before!” Kirche said, laughing.

“Ah, it did him some good.”

That night, there was a knock on Susan’s door, interrupting her training session with the others. She opened it to see the principal standing there, staff in hand.

“Good evening,” he said, looking inside. “Hard at work, I see. Interesting. I wonder if I could borrow you for a moment, Susan.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Ottman. Be right back, everyone.”

She stepped out into the hall and started walking alongside the principal.

“How’ve you been?” he inquired.

“Oh, you know. An adventure here or there. Attending some classes. Teaching some stuff. The usual.”

“Good, good. I must apologize that no magic has yet been found to send you on your way.”

“It would surprise me if anything like that existed here. I mean, until you know other worlds exist, why try reaching them?”

He gave a little cough. “Yes, exactly. And how has Louise been?”

“Better, since she understands her magic a little better. Hard to study it when the only thing it seems she can produce is explosions, but it did come in handy recently. If I could still cast *Dead Magic* I would have her cast into that to improve her control, but no such luck. I’m not sure what I can do for her.”

“I do hope the knowledge serves to take away a little of the sting of being called ‘Zero’ all the time. Turn here.”

“Where are we going, actually?”

“All in good time, my dear.”

“And here we are.” Two stern looking guys in armor flanked the door, and nodded to Mr. Ottman as he stood before it.

“Now that’s a big door!”

“Quite. This is our vault, and I wonder what your sense of magic could tell me about it.”

“Let me see.” Susan slowly opened herself up to the nearby magical impressions, and was quite shocked (or not, he had called it a vault) that even with her 8 result (her lowest possible) she could feel quite a bit of magic sealing the door shut. “Quite an impressive number of spells you have going here,” she hedged. “Is there something in particular you wanted me to sense?”

“Well, my true purpose was twofold. First, to find out if your magic could add anything to the defenses here and secondly to ask for your help.”

Susan took out her character sheet and looked over her spell list. “Trouble is, I could think of a few things, if I had my book. How would you guys get past them later, though?”

“It’s only temporary, as I’ll explain in a moment.”

“Oh, okay. These walls are made of stone, I could technically use *Sculpt* to seal it off... or not, as it seems now that I think about it, I would have to ‘target each individual brick.’ So that’s out. I guess not.”

“Quite all right. The reason I ask is that there’s a thief operating nearby, and we think she is going to hit this vault sometime soon. Our normal number of guards is going to be busy escorting a royal visitor for the exhibition tomorrow, leaving us understaffed. I know you have no real reason to help us, but if there was something you could do, I would certainly appreciate it.”

Yup, the Paragon adventure train is rolling through town all right. Sounds like tomorrow I’m going to be fighting a thief. Sounds interesting.

“I think I can,” she replied, looking around the hallway to fix it in her mind. “I’ll have to watch the exhibition from the back, but that’s not a problem. I’ll catch this thief for you.”

“Ho ho! I’ll hold you to that!”

“Naturally. Now, if you can just lead me back to my room... I get lost in the corridors quite easily. It’s one of my cute little flaws, you see.”

“This way.”

Neither saw the green haired lady watching them from the shadows. Wonder what’s she’s thinking about? Probably something totally unrelated.

8

Thief

Place: Outside the school

Time: About 2:00 PM the next day

Several carriages pulled by magnificent stallions drew up in front of the school where the entire class had been gathered. Susan, having gotten some advice on what to wear, was standing in a somewhat formal dress made with *Creation*. She had made it a little closer to what someone from her world would wear, but either way she was out of place. The teachers all wore robes, while the students had their uniforms and capes on.

Don't they have, like, dress robes? Huh.

The princess, who Susan saw was quite young, probably about her age, talked with Mr. Ottman who was kneeling along with the other teachers. She had somewhat short red hair, falling about to her shoulders. She was wearing a rather poofy white dress that covered her completely, and had a weird sort of purple top which covered her upper arms and turned into a cape. Three opals decorated the front, and the simple "crown" that adorned her head.

That cannot be practical. Looking over the line of kneeling people, Susan was struck by another thought. *Why are the teachers wearing those long robes that cover everything, but the secretary, Miss Longbill, right? Why is she wearing a mini-skirt? She does have nice legs though, you have to admit.*

She was then hustled inside and probably put under guard.

Wait, she's a princess? But I thought Charlotte was the one in line for the throne? I'm so confused.

With that the students dispersed and the day ended normally. Susan wracked her brain for a spell to learn with the card before it disappeared. She figured as the next day was her next "adventure" she would get new cards, not that she needed them for the last one.

Yeah, I'm just that awesome.

"Actually, would you mind if I used it?" Sparkle asked.

"Hey, it's your card. Just because I got it for you with the Rally, doesn't mean you need to give it to me if you have something in mind."

"It's just I've lost all my attack spells. My two *Elemental Touch* were *Knockout* and *Magic*, and my *Elemental Line* was *Pluto!*"

"Go for it." She chuckled.

"What?"

"By taking away *Knockout* we actually become more dangerous. You'll have to damage something now, rather than just inflicting non-lethal."

"You're right." She got out her character sheet and took a look. "Actually, never mind. I'll just spend the *Wild* as the *Night Class* and you can have the other one."

"Ha! How did that happen?"

So Sparkle learned *Elemental Line* (Wind) but Susan went a little less mainstream. She concentrated on learning a Mercury spell to switch the position of two objects. The card activated and she learned the spell of *Transposition*. This was a grade

6 spell allowing “Two targets within range, of which you may be one, instantly switch positions via teleportation.”

Think of the fun I could have with this spell! Make enemies hit each other. Switch a pebble and a sword. Throw a pebble in the air, switch it with a person, and watch them splatter all over the ground. The fun could be endless!

Susan was not privy to the conversation had between the princess and Louise later that night, and the next day rolled around.

Don't these kids ever have classes? They've had their Familiar Spirits less than two weeks, right? How are they giving some kind of talent show already? Ah well.

She was stationed in back, wearing a modified version of her “infiltration suit.” This one was sleeveless, and featured shorts rather than pants. It was also white, rather than black. Under her chair, Sparkle was interestedly watching the proceedings, while Susan occasionally looked through the egg sized *Teleportal* she had created to spy upon the vault hallway. She had stuck the other end in a spot she hoped wouldn't be easily seen, but couldn't do much about the light shining in that it generated.

Seriously, when he said most of the guards would be out here, I didn't think that meant there would be no guards on the actual vault. What if I hadn't been here? The thief could have just walked up to the doors without any opposition at all. As it is... She looked over to the small tent that had been erected for the princess and the principal. There seemed a shortage of guards there, too, hardly five, and while they wore a bit of armor as basically shoulder pads, they didn't seem armored enough to be guarding a freaking princess. Also, were they wearing weapons of any kind?

I suppose the pads could be imbued, but then why have the pads at all? Put it into a necklace or something. I don't get it.

As Guiche was laying on a bed of roses with his Familiar, Susan caught movement in the hallway. As she watched, a cloaked figure stood before the doors and started doing something.

Show time!

“Come on,” she said to Sparkle, getting up. “Time to bag us a thief.”

“*Acceleration*,” Sparkle cast, as per the plan. Susan stopped maintaining *Teleportal* and cast *Light* instead, throwing the glowing ball into the air. Mr. Ottman saw it and nodded, getting up after saying something to the princess. He started making his way past the seats to where Susan was heading to. Basically an open area she could put the thief, out of the way of the princess and everyone there.

“For sacrifices made,” she said, holding her ring up. Only the words were necessary, of course, but she felt honoring Harry's sacrifice in that way didn't hurt. A ring of soldiers made of fire appeared, and looked to her for orders.

“In a moment someone will appear in the middle of the ring,” she told them. “Detain them, but do not attack unless you are attacked.”

They all nodded their understanding and readied their weapons.

“Impressive, but where is the thief?” asked Mr. Ottman, coming up behind her.

“Just waiting for you. Can't start the show without all the actors being present, now can I?”

Susan began casting again, taking the full time. *Yes, see that magical circle*

appearing around you? Nothing you can do about it, thief. And here we go.
“Telesummon!”

Susan felt her resist, and her eyes widened in shock. *What the heck is her RESolve, anyway? Maybe I should have put more energy into that. I'm spending an XP to make her reroll, take that!*

And with that, Fouquet stood in the center of a ring of steel. She was somewhat “disguised,” with a hood pulled low over her face. Two long green bundles of hair stuck out from underneath, reminding her of-

“Miss Longbill?” Mr. Ottman took a step back in shock.

“I was just checking to make sure the vault hadn't been disturbed when suddenly I found myself here!” she confessed, looking around. “Are these fire golems yours, then? I've never seen you make anything like them!”

Dang, should have had Detect Lies going. I hate not having Spell Symbol.

“Then why are you wearing those weird clothes, with your face covered like that?”

“Uh...”

She was wearing a sort of teal dress that ended in the front by her knees, but was longer in the back. Around her waist was a corset, and her sleeves were super long and flowing like a shrine maiden outfit. *And what's with these people and capes? No capes!*

“I think we had better go inside and sort this all out,” said Mr. Ottman, eyes narrowed. “Susan, if you could have your constructs conduct her inside, perhaps we can question her more thoroughly. I would be interested to know exactly why my secretary would be so concerned with security.”

“I'm afraid that won't be possible,” said Miss Longbill, bending down to touch her hand upon the Earth. There was a rumbling, and suddenly a huge construct made of rock rose out of the ground, with her at the head.

Susan and Sparkle rolled *Initiative*. Sparkle began casting *Destruction*, focused on one of the legs of the construct. Miss Longbill drew her wand, but was too high up for Susan to see it clearly enough to snatch with *Transposition*. (She wanted to use a Mercury spell, because of her bonus from *Acceleration* rather than the Venus spell of *Retrieval*.)

Is this thing a creature or an object? Susan wondered, as she cast *Lubricate* on it. In this case, it probably wouldn't matter, as all she really wanted to do was bring Miss Longbill back down to Earth. *The affect in this case will probably be the same.* At the same instant, Mr. Ottman brought his staff down and sent some kind of *Elemental Attack: (Wind)* at the creature's legs. This, sadly, hardly even scratched it. Above, Miss Longbill stumbled but caught herself, a spike rising out of the construct's head for her to grab onto. *Shoot.*

The construct now balled up a fist and struck out, stone fist descending on the group to smash them. “*Deflection!*” cast Susan. The fist smashed right through, but rather than spend an XP, Susan mentally declared the use of her card *Extra Action*, so that action took no time. She tried again, spending more energy this time. Ties go to the defender, so the fist smashed against her magical circle with a crash and stopped.

Susan saw spikes made of Earth crashing down on them, and dodged, her

Acceleration finally coming in handy. *Is she laughing up there?*

Sparkle's spell finally went off, cast strongly enough to destroy 65kg (or 143lbs) of rock.

[Here we pause so the Narrator can look up about how much rock that is.]

[Narrator finds a lot of pictures of fish tanks.]

[Okay, not enough to blow the thing's leg off but targeting the lower leg of the thing will at least sever it below the knee.]

The construct started to tip over. Sparkle made a LUCk check, and being a cat paid off, she got a 24. Meaning it's tipping away from the group so they won't be crushed. Above, Miss Longbill struggled to hold on to the spike as the thing tilted.

Whew.

Given her *Accelerated* status, she and Susan now went simultaneously, Susan targeting the construct, Sparkle targeting Miss Longbill. Sparkle tried *Immobilize*, which thanks to *Acceleration* went off perfectly, while Susan went for the only spell she had that could deal with larger stuff, *Shrink*. Both cast instantly, Susan spending her maximum energy to get it off quickly. Both succeeded, and the construct instantly shrank to be just a little bigger than Sparkle. Miss Longbill fell to the ground with a thump, bands of force wrapped around her so she was unable to move.

She could still move her wand, which she did, but Sparkle cut her off with an instant casting of *Elemental Line (Wind)*, again thanking her decision to go with that element and get the benefit from *Acceleration*. She threw max energy into it, because she was maintaining a few spells now, but still beat the difficulty easily.

Miss Longbill shrieked as the spell nearly cut her hand off with 13 damage, and she dropped the wand, rolling away from the line as best she could. The construct crumbled to dirt, and Mr Ottman blinked, not having done anything more than one attack that whole time.

"You guys don't mess around, do you?" he asked, bringing his staff back up. People were just turning to see what the commotion was about, and up on stage the princess looked over worriedly as her "guards" got in front of her, swords drawn.

"How did you do all that?" shrieked Miss Longbill, trying to inch away from them. "What are these bands?"

Susan took great pleasure in telling her; "Magic."

"Come on, let's get you somewhere secured," said Mr. Ottman, levitating her. "We can have the council pass sentence on you later. Oh, and congratulations, Susan. You single handily captured the most notorious thief in these parts. I'm sure your reward will be forthcoming." He sighed. "And now I need a new secretary. What a bother."

With that he walked off. Susan was going to call after him that she didn't need any sort of reward, but then remembered her *Resources: Money* background. *Wondered how this world was going to get me that. Maybe this is the way?* She dismissed her *Legion*, some of whom were still getting up after being tossed about when the construct appeared out of the ground.

With the threat and excitement over, the exhibition continued, and Charlotte

easily won, because dragon. Susan clapped along with everyone else for her new friend, troubled about the “thief” being someone she knew personally. *Can you imagine, the secretary of the principal being an outlaw? She was decent at magic, too, she could probably have made a better living guarding other people’s treasures and such rather than stealing them. Pity.*

The lives of the students finally went back to normal, with classes resuming, some of which Susan attended. Some, like their practical magic classes she didn’t bother with. She knew how their magic worked, and it wasn’t going to help her to learn the specifics. She was still interested in their history, so attended that class as she couldn’t just pick up a book and read about it herself.

Two days later she received a summons to appear before the princess, and got directions on how to get there. Then she had Sparkle listen to the directions and look the map over, because she wasn’t doing the navigating.

Pity they don’t have a network of computers and a company obsessed with mapping the planet. I could just step there. Oh well.

With that, Susan was flying towards the capital with Sparkle to receive her reward. The palace was easy to spot, it was easily as big as an entire section of neighborhood that surrounded it. Most of the place was forested, but along the river and bridges that crossed it some mansions had been built. *Rather close together, unless they’re all owned by one person?*

Susan dropped out of the sky in front of the gate and told the guard there who she was.

“You are expected,” he said, relaxing his grip on the sword. He gave her some directions and told her where to wait, then let her inside. Susan looked around as she walked through, and it was a palace all right. White marble statues, huge rooms, crystal chandeliers, the works. *How do they light those candles?* She thought, looking up at them. *It must be awfully dim around here at night.*

Magic, stupid!

Oh. Duh. How do I feel you shaking your head? Do you even have a head inside me?

She sat and waited, then was finally called in to see the princess. The guards allowed her in, then closed the door behind them, leaving Susan alone with the princess. *No guards? Strange.*

“Please,” said Anrietta, getting up from her throne. “Come closer.”

Susan came forward and dropped to one knee. “As you have summoned me, so have I come, your majesty.”

Anrietta giggled. “Please, we both know you’re not one of my subjects, so you really don’t have to do that.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Susan, relieved. “I don’t have *Etiquette*, so I wasn’t really sure how to react- wait, how do you-”

“Mr. Ottman told me. I know you came from another world, so it’s fine. Honestly, people bowing and scraping all the time gets old, can we just talk? And call me Anrietta.”

She sat down on the steps leading down and patted a space next to her. Susan sat down and held out a hand, which Anrietta shook.

“Nice to meet you, Anrietta, I’m Susan. And this is Sparkle.” A fairy flew around her head a couple of times, landed, and became a cat again.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“What a beautiful cat!” exclaimed Anrietta. “And I hear she can cast spells, as well?”

“That’s correct,” answered Sparkle. “You really did hear all about us, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “It’s why I’ve asked you here. I mean the main reason is this, of course.” She pulled a rolled up scroll from a pocket in her robe and handed it over. Susan unrolled it, then popped up with a gasp. “This is... Sparkle, come take a look! Oh my goodness!” She held it so Sparkle could see.

“Stop fooling around,” said Sparkle, rolling her eyes. She turned back to Anrietta. “We can’t read your writing.”

She laughed, clapping her hands together. “Oh yes, you two are going to be perfect. I mean nobody makes jokes in my presence. Nobody. I can’t remember the last time I genuinely laughed. My being a princess means absolutely nothing to you, does it?”

“Ah, I’m not sure how to answer that question,” Susan hedged, sitting again.

“Honestly. Please?”

“Quiet frankly, no. I have no idea the political situation here, or how you came to power. Are you admired by your subjects or detested? Are you fair in your dealings or tyrannical? Royalty is fine, but it’s too easy for it to become corrupt. Heck, it’s too easy for democracy to become corrupt, how does monarchy hope to avoid it?”

“I hope to,” she said quietly.

“I wish you luck.”

“I may need it. But back to this.” She touched the document. “It’s a royal order to allow you to withdraw coin as you see fit, up to 10,000 new gold. I wish the kingdom could give you more, but this is actually the bounty for catching the thief. It was put up by the nobles.”

“I have no idea how much that is, but I can see why you didn’t just hand me a sack full of coin. Nobody could lift it.”

She laughed again. “You’re right. If you wish, the royal treasury can handle it, and allow you to withdraw funds as needed.”

“How much interest am I getting?” she asked shrewdly. Anrietta just looked confused. “For letting the kingdom use *my* money, for other loans and such I mean. Shouldn’t I get some kind of... you don’t have that here, do you?” She shook her head no. “Ah, that figures. Sure,” she said, handing it back. “I can get back here easily enough. Just have someone show me the way to the treasury and introduce me.”

“I’ll take you myself,” said Anrietta. “But there is the main reason I asked you here.”

“Yes?”

“I can’t really pay you-”

Susan waved her off. “I was recently reminded by Sparkle that it is a *Paragon’s* duty to answer the call to adventure. To refuse is to deny my heritage and my father. The experience I shall gain along the way will be more than enough, I assure you.”

“The task is not difficult, but it is important. You saw the town on the way in? Across the river?”

“From above, but yes. It looked like a nice enough place.”

“Thank you. The nobles live on this side of the river, of course. I have been hearing rumors of nobles... overstepping their considerable liberties in the town. I want you to learn the truth of this matter, if you can. I know you’ll be honest in your report, because you have no reason to lie or deceive me.”

“Gee, I thought it was going to be something tough, like slaying a dragon that threatened the town, or rooting out bandits along the road. Or something really tough, like catching millions of bunnies before they eat up all the carrots in the fields. That kind of thing.”

She laughed again. “If any of those things come up, I’ll know who to call. So you’ll do it?”

“I would be glad to make sure the nobles are not causing too much trouble here. You can rely on me, your majesty.”

“Please, you don’t have to call me that.”

“I just said it because it rhymed- it didn’t actually rhyme in your language, did it?” Susan sighed. “Zecora would be very displeased.”

Neighborly

Place: The City

Time: One hour later

“Overstepping their liberties, what does that even mean?” Susan asked, walking down into the village.

“Darned if I know,” replied Sparkle, back in fairy form and perched on Susan’s shoulder. “We need a plan, boss.”

“You got that right. But first we need to blend in more.”

It was true. Susan was wearing the dress she had made when the princess first had visited the school, and it was earning her some odd looks. She wanted to see what sort of clothes the people in this town wore, and go from there. She had money now, a jangly pouch full of lesser currency, but magic was still cheaper. Besides, now that she had money, she was going to spend it on important stuff- magical supplies.

The treasurer at the castle had explained that most peasants never even saw gold in their lifetimes, so it turned out the 10,000 gold was actually worth a bit more than she had anticipated. At least here. Susan took most of it, as it wasn't, strictly speaking, coming out of the kingdom's coffers and she figured no matter what reality she ultimately ended up in (if and when she got out of this one) the stuff would be useful. As long as she didn't spend too much of it, her *Resources: Money* background could be satisfied while on the move, and there was a spell to turn one type of currency into another.

Still, it was a question of how much, exactly, her magic believed items bought with the currency were worth for the purposes of Fabrication. She recalled from her book that “Any form of *fabrication* has a monetary cost equal to ten times the EXP cost.” So was that in gold? It had worked out funny between dollars and Galleons, because of how exactly they counted up their coins. So she wasn’t sure how much stuff would be necessary in this world. And leaving it, what if gold was worthless somewhere but copper was really expensive? How would her translation magic handle that? And of course prices might not even be consistent across worlds...

I mean if a loaf of bread costs a penny on this world, but a dollar on another, how does the magic know? Plus it isn't a one to one correspondence, because these people haven't heard of the metric system either. It's more like Hogwarts, where so many coins equals so many others. Rather than just ten and a hundred. I'm just going to have to buy some stuff and see how much the process consumes. And I suppose I should get out of here before worrying about currency exchange rates across realities.

Susan’s plan was to improve Hiraga’s sword to be DTR/OTR 10, so it would be basically indestructible. If people were going to go around summoning creatures made of rock, he was going to need some way of dealing with that. For Louise, an attack spell, one of the two Sparkle and her had between them. Explosions were all well and good, but rather indiscriminate to throw around. One of the reasons Sparkle went with *Line* rather than *Burst*. Perhaps a new Imbued item or at least a spellcasting focus for her? She hadn’t thought that far ahead. *It has to be useful offworld as well as here. I don't plan to be stuck here without Spell Symbol forever. Or perhaps some magical*

research... With Sparkle's Photographic Memory we might have an easier time recreating some of the spells in my book if I need them.

Susan found her current target, a place that looked like an inn. As expected, the sign was pictorial, as it seemed many peasants didn't know how to read. *Most probably would in a town this size, but an inn has to cater to visitors from outside.* She stepped inside and looked around.

"Can I help you?" asked the man behind the counter.

"That depends. Do you have rooms available?"

"I do!" He named the price per night, and Susan shrugged mentally. *At least it's not thousands of dollars worth of gold for a single bottle of soda.*

She paid for a week in advance, and the man handed over a key. "You don't have any luggage?"

"I travel light," she admitted.

"Okay."

With that, she went up to her room and looked around.

"Homey," said Sparkle, flying down and turning back into a cat. "And I think I hear dinner."

"You would really eat mice?"

"Unless you would rather them running across you in the night."

"Enjoy!"

"Thank you."

Susan spent several minutes casting *Creation*, making herself some new clothes. These were more in the style of fashion here, and she wished for a mirror so she could see how she looked.

"You're lucky you get glass in the windows," Sparkle chided her. "Do you know how expensive an actual mirror would be here? We may take them for granted, but these people don't."

"I suppose you're right."

"Anyway, what's the plan now?"

"Phase two is a little bit more magic, and then seeing what the townsfolk have to say about life here. Hopefully something interesting will come up."

"How's magic going to help there?"

Susan winked. "Oh, they'll tell me anything I want, when I have a fifteen rating in *Information Gathering*."

Sparkle laughed. "This town won't know what hit it."

"You got that right."

Susan also stepped through a *Teleportal*, leaving it open, back to the school. She found Louise and told her not to worry, but she would probably be gone for a few days on a mission for the princess. Louise looked confused, and said that sounded so familiar, but shrugged and wished Susan good luck.

Some kind of echo? Even here? I suppose my presence does change events

here, doesn't it? I wonder if I should be more careful about that sort of thing. Oh well.

So Susan left Sparkle to start cleaning out the rats and other vermin from the hotel, and went looking for things to buy. She decided that small but somewhat “expensive” items was probably best, as she didn’t want to lug a bunch of crap around. As the cost of the item, rather than size or the composition was specified, this made the most sense. It was also at various shops she should get the information she needed about the behavior of nobles in the town.

On her third try she rolled high enough to succeed (a 22) and the shopkeeper looked around nervously.

“You seem like a nice girl, so I’ll tell you. Living here stinks.”

“What? Literally? Like the sewer system is backed up or something? I didn’t smell anything on the way here. I mean no one obviously cleans up after the horses, which is weird because that could be used as a composting agent and produce some really good dirt. You could just pick it right up, for free. That’s crazy, just letting a natural resource sit there to rot!”

“The who on the what now? No, I’m talking about taxes, not... oh, horse manure. Good one. Yeah, our tax collector is what you might call a ‘horse’s rear end’ if you know what I mean.”

“Tax collector, huh? What’s his story?”

“He got the bright idea that when he comes along to collect the taxes, he takes a casual look around and mentions how tragic it would be if maybe your place caught fire that night. Or if some gang of thugs tore the place up and took your daughter. To make sure this doesn’t happen he ‘suggests’ a small fee be paid, directly to him. Those that don’t pay up find their shops destroyed the next day.”

“And even if you all got together and protected the place all night, he’s a magic user. There’s no way you could beat him.”

“What, you think he does his own dirty work? He’s gotten a bunch of beggars together and they do whatever he tells them. Rumor is he keeps them in line with a combination of threats and just enough money to keep them happy.”

“So you could stand up to them.”

“Are you nuts? I would rather lose my business than be dragged off to the castle dungeon for not paying my taxes. He reports I haven’t paid, and it’ll be soldiers after me, rather than a bunch of drunks with torches.”

“How can the princess allow such a thing?” *Was her attitude towards me a cover?*

The man hesitated, looking around again. They were alone. “Don’t get me wrong, her highness is a wonderful girl, but I don’t think she’s told everything. I mean the laws are clear, and if you were the adviser to a seventeen year old, you would tell them about the poor sucker who can’t pay his taxes? The one currently rotting in a cell someplace? No, because she would feel sorry for the man and let him free. Once it got out, no one would pay taxes because the punishment went away.”

“Is that the only reason you do something?” she asked seriously. “Avoiding punishment? Not because it’s the right thing to do? I’m not talking about taxes, I mean if it wasn’t illegal to murder people, would you go out on a rampage? Of course not,

because it's still wrong to go kill people."

"As long as we're not talking about taxes- no. But you don't mess with nobles, even you should know that much."

"I'm beginning to see that. Thank you for the information."

"Sure. I don't mean to scare you off if you really are thinking of moving here. I just want you to be aware of what you're getting into." He looked her over. "I'm sure you could find a good man here, settle down and start raising a family."

Susan struggled to keep a straight face. *As if that's even remotely on my mind right now. I have my father and friend to find, and then his world to save. Start a family indeed. But I suppose that's what a peasant girl would be thinking about, moving to a town like this.*

"And I do appreciate it. Maybe someday I can repay you. Have a good day. By the way- this tax collector. What's his name?"

"Turenne."

Susan nodded her thanks and was on her way.

A moment later she was ducking into an alley which was clear and thinking about how best to use this information. *The thing is, he probably keeps a secret record of who has paid what, so if a shop starts getting more popular, he knows to shake them down for more 'protection' money later. Finding that book is going to be the key, but proving it exists is going to be my first step. I can't just barge/sneak into his place and start tearing it up without some idea what I'm looking for. Luckily, a man named Tom gave me the technique I am about to use.*

Susan dropped *Augment Skill* and instead started casting *Research*. Several minutes later she had an odd looking book, all about the man named Turenne. Having done that she put *Augment Skill* back on, this time for *Research*. Smiling, she went to go find a place to have some lunch and look through it. By the end of her meal, her *Research* check of 25-4 was enough to get his address, things he had ordered that showed receipts, and a listing of all the 'protection money' he had amassed thus far.

It's written somewhere, otherwise this spell wouldn't be able to show it to me. With that book handed over to the princess, it'll show evidence of corruption, exactly what she wanted. Even without it, his estate would show he's worth more than his job provides, and I'm sure someone at the palace would love to know where that extra money is coming from.

The book and her *Augment Skill* went away, and Susan thanked the person that had served her. She left a generous tip and headed for the address she had learned from the book.

*One problem, I can't read their street signs! Maybe researching that spell to understand written language wouldn't be so bad after all. I'm just glad the *Research* spell translated everything for me.*

Crap. How am I going to know the book when I see it? One thing at a time, Susan. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Once across the bridge, she asked the first noble she saw which way she should

go to get to the place.

“What, the tax collector’s place? Why? Gone to beg for your husband to be released from jail?”

“Yes, kind sir,” she tried to plead, getting a six on her untrained *Acting* check. “Please, if you know the way, can you tell me?”

“Find it yourself, filthy peasant.” He walked away, not sparing her a backwards glance.

Filthy? I’m cleaner than he is, given I get magically clean every morning thanks to the Hygiene spell. Stupid noble. I’m beginning to see the problem with this kind of society.

This presented Susan with a problem. Most nobles rode, not walked. Even going back for her fancier clothes, she would still be out of place going to see the tax collector on foot. *I suppose I could raise my Acting temporarily. Wait a second... Magic Users have Familiar Spirits, and we know Charlotte has a dragon, so why couldn’t I have one, too? I’m so smart.*

Susan headed back to the inn, getting lost several times because of her *No Sense of Direction*. She could have just used *Teleportal*, of course, but she was enjoying being outside after being cooped up in the school. Unlocking her door and looking around to see if Sparkle was back, she stepped into her room. She wasn’t, so she proceeded to change back into her fancier clothes. She also used *Sculpt* to reshape some of the stone on the wall and put the items she had bought into the hole, then closed it up again. *I miss my Pocket Dimension.*

That done she made her way back across the river, and conjured up her *Magical Ally (Major)*. She climbed aboard the horse sized creature and this time when she *demand*ed to know the location of the tax collector’s home, the man she stared down couldn’t tell her fast enough. Naturally she had to ask twice more, but she finally stood in front of the place, now needing to come up with the next stage of her plan.

Option one; Walk up to the door and knock.

Option one point one (he isn’t here.) Demand to wait inside. Take any forces inside with magic and ransack the house looking for the book.

Option one point two (he is here.) Threaten to expose him. Have immunity spells going so anything he tries bounces off. After he changes his pants, get him to hand over the book.

Option one point three (either.) Raise my Persuasion skill to a seventeen and just demand the book. Seriously, what chance would they have against me?

Option two; Sneak in using Shrink, Unlock, and Flight. Have a look around. Use Time Area to replay his movements in the house until you find whatever record books he keeps. Steal them all and leave.

Susan took a quick peek at her character sheet. *Yup, still have Overconfident. Option one it is then!*

She took extra time casting *Invulnerability* and *Barrier Against Spells*, because she wasn't an idiot, and walked over to the door to announce herself. She was now at a -9 to every check, and once again really, really missed *Spell Symbol*. She was going to drop the *Ally* once she went inside, which would help a little. *Still, a -9 is a little ridiculous. Maybe I should create the Invulnerability one as an item.*

She knocked, then waited.

Soon a man dressed as a butler opened the door and started to enquire what he could do to help. His eyes fell upon the *Ally* and his mouth dropped open.

"I demand to speak to Turenne the tax collector," Susan said, drawing herself up. "You will fetch him for me. I will wait inside while you do."

"Ah, ah, a thousand pardons, great mage, but the master is not in at the moment."

"I see. My patience is not unlimited, but I will remain until he arrives. You will show me to a suitable location."

"Yes, yes of course. Please, come right this way."

Susan turned back to her *Ally*. "You are dismissed," she told it, for the man's benefit. She waved a hand, ending the spell, and he melted away. "Lead on."

Susan was led into a sitting room, and found a well dressed woman lounging there, reading a book.

Okay, his wife doesn't exactly fit into one of the sub-plans. Now what?

"A visitor? How wonderful!" she said, setting the book down. She looked Susan over. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Anise, is there something I can do for you?"

"Perhaps," Susan replied, sitting down. "How much do you know about your husband's work?"

"Oh, nothing at all," she twittered. "I just make sure his money goes to where it needs to, as is proper with his station. I don't care how he makes it. He works directly for the princess, you know."

As a tax collector? An exaggeration if ever there was one. He may work for the kingdom, but that's like saying an IRS agent works for the president himself.

"I'm glad you brought her highness up. It's on her orders I've been tasked with getting to the bottom of certain... discrepancies... in your husband's bookkeeping."

"Discrepancies? Bookkeeping? What are you saying?" She glanced around nervously.

"Quite frankly? This lifestyle you have," she gestured around her, "isn't possible on his income. The princess wants to know where the extra money is coming from."

"Are you suggesting my husband is taking bribes?" she demanded angrily.

"I'm suggesting that something is amiss, and I'm to get to the bottom of it. You can either aid me in my task or stand aside and allow me to get to work."

"I can't just let you barge in here and say you're under the orders of her highness without some kind... of... what's that?"

Susan unrolled a royal decree, signed and stamped by Anrietta herself, which she was told basically gave her license to do exactly what she was doing. Root out corruption.

The woman stared it, silently reading it over. "It seems I have no choice but to comply," she said, her lips twisting into a grimace. "My husband keeps meticulous records, I'll allow you to examine them."

She turned and made her way through the house, Susan following behind. She was brought to a study, and Anise started piling books onto a desk. "I think there are some more somewhere. You can get started looking through them, I'll be right back."

Susan took the top one off the stack and sat down, then started slowly paging through it. Anise left the room.

Now, once she's found whatever it is she's looking for, I'll demand to be left in peace. Then I can use Time Area and figure out where he keeps the hidden one she obviously doesn't want me to find. Because this gibberish isn't going to get me anywhere.

The numbers were different, our modern numerical system having begun around the time the printing press was invented. Mages could write with magic, so didn't need any such system, and peasants didn't need to know how to read in most cases, so that was out. Susan stared at the gibberish, wondering how ethical it would be to begin a cultural revolution by leaving some plans somewhere on how to build certain things. Like a printing press and adding machines. She wasn't sure what this language was supposed to look like, but she felt this guy's handwriting was-

That's when she took a fireball to the back of the head.

"Oh dear," she said, shaking her head as the flames harmlessly dissipated. "I really did hope we were going to do this the easy way."

"Take her!" Anise shouted, and a burly man burst into the room. Susan looked at him with faint amusement as he dropped a thick wire over her head and started trying to choke her. She sighed. "Now I have to add assault charges to the list. And it seems you're in on it, despite what you said, and I know the princess is going to be most vexed when she hears about that."

"What are you doing, you fool?" Anise screamed. "Kill her!"

"I'm trying," said the man, straining to pull the garrote ever tighter. "This isn't working!"

"How perceptive," Susan praised him. "Want to try something else, or should I begin defending myself?"

He let go of the garrote and slugged her in the face with his meaty fist. Again, the impact did nothing.

"Step aside, fool!" she growled, and raised her wand. Susan crossed her arms over her chest. "Go ahead, knock yourself out."

"You... You!" She chanted, and a blast of air shot out, making her hair sway and knocking the desk over. Susan quite calmly remained sitting in the chair, then glanced behind.

"I guess I'll have to do something about this, if you're going to start destroying evidence."

She got up, and the man beside her started raining blows down upon her.

"How is this possible?"

The woman now shot spells at her with total disregard for the man standing next

to her, who jumped back out of the way.

Have to be something low level, stupid -6!

“Dazzle!” she cast, taking the full segment to cast it. The two staggered back, the flash of light that resulted breaking both their concentrations.

“And *Thrust*.” This she added an extra segment to, as why not? She only got a seven, having rolled one from minimum, but they were at a -12 to their STrength check to resist, and both went flying away from her.

Neither got up.

Not wanting to kill these people, Susan dropped her spells and did a quick *Healing* on both, targeting their bodies. She didn’t see any bruising on their heads, but wondered if she shouldn’t drop *Healing* and have Sparkle teach her *Regeneration*. It was only 3 more XP and far more convenient, healing everywhere at once.

That done, she used *Time Area* to rewind time in the area until she saw the secret hiding place for Turenne’s books, and grabbed them up. One quick *Teleportal* later and she was handing them over to the princess, who started going through them and looked more and more angry as she did so.

Anrietta said she would need time to fully read them over, and Susan took her leave. She was exhausted from throwing all that energy around (figuratively, she still had a little left and she wouldn’t start getting fatigue until it was all gone) so she went back to the inn and settled in for the night, her job well done.

10

Cleaning House

Place: The palace

Time: The next day

That morning, Susan presented herself at the palace as ordered. She was treated with a little more respect, but was asked to wait until her majesty finished her current business. Susan replied that would be fine, and was shown a place to wait and had tea brought.

“Wonder what kind of stir you’ve caused by fingering that tax collector,” mused Sparkle, her ears swiveling. “Seems this place is in kind of an uproar.”

“Really?” Susan hadn’t seen much more activity on the way in.

“You probably can’t hear it, but it’s buzzing around here. Quite the difference from the last time I was here.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Susan noticed a mirror over in the corner and went over to see how she looked. She was wearing a different dress, newly created just that morning, after having Sparkle teach her *Regeneration*.

“Why did you learn *Healing* in the first place?” she had asked.

“It probably seemed like a good idea, at the time.”

Wish my hair could be done up fancier, she thought wistfully to herself, turning this way and that in front of it. Seems kind of a waste to wear a dress this pretty and... have I ever had my hair cut? I’ve never even thought about that before. How weird is that?

The door banged open and Anrietta burst in, looking for Susan and smiling widely when she saw her. Guards rushed past her, obviously unhappy they had been left behind, but seeing no threat to the princess they bowed their way out. Anrietta sagged into Susan’s arms, hugging her.

“You really came through for me,” she said, smiling. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I hope the nobility starts to understand they just can’t walk all over the peasants without fear of reprisal now.”

Anrietta shook her head, stepping back. “Not after I’m through with that tax collector. He’s been stripped of his title, and his assets are being seized to pay back the money he extorted from the people. Plus those books you got? They were a treasure in disguise, because they noted down other noble’s behavior he had observed and was using for blackmail material. You’ve shaken up everything around here. And in a single day!”

Whoops.

“I wish I could stay and talk, hear how you went about it. But the place is on high alert now. You know that thief you caught?”

“Don’t tell me...” Susan’s eyes narrowed.

She nodded. “She escaped sometime last night.”

And here’s me without access to my Descry Creature spell.

“She blasted out a wall or something?”

“I wish it were that simple. Apparently someone opened her cell door and let her

walk right out. So somewhere in my kingdom is a traitor.”

“Would you like to know who that traitor is?” asked Susan, a dangerous glint in her eye.

In for a penny, in for a pound, is that is? Wonder what sort of repercussions this little ‘good deed’ will have?

Quiet, you.

“Oh, but I couldn’t ask you for another favor, so soon after-”

Susan put a finger over her lips. *Oh my gosh, I’m touching a princess’ lips. Of course, I kissed a princess earlier didn’t I? Huh.* “It’s a single spell. Bring me to where she was being held and I’ll have an image of the person responsible in under a minute.”

“Done,” she exclaimed, taking Susan’s hand and pulling her along. “I’ll have a coach readied immediately.”

Anrietta seemed to be having an argument with someone before she got on the coach with Susan, and they weren’t being subtle about it.

“I insist on accompanying you,” he was saying. “This girl, Susan, where did she even come from? You’ve been alone with her now on several occasions despite my recommendations. Now you’re just going to hop into a carriage and visit a prison with her?”

“I have it from a very trusted source that she’s of impeccable character,” Anrietta countered. “She is an unmatched mage and swiftly becoming a personal friend. Plus she is responsible for first catching ‘The Sandy’ thief and putting Turenne behind bars. If you will not take my word for it, as the crown princess, at least put your faith in her actions.”

“She could be lulling you into a false sense of security-”

“Please! If she wanted to, I’m sure she could steal me away or kill me right this instant. When we went to go take Turenne into custody, two people were found, out cold. One triangle mage and one burly man holding a garrote. She somehow overpowered both of them, but left them still alive, despite evidence they were attacking her with everything they had. The room there was a mess! Personally I feel safer with her around than with you. That is all I am saying on the matter. Now step aside.”

“Very well, your highness.”

“You may follow on horseback if you wish.”

The man’s reply was lost, and Susan made her way over to the carriage as Anrietta beckoned.

“I’m sorry about him,” she apologized. “I do understand his concern, but he won’t even listen to me.”

“He’s right,” admitted Susan. “I could have been a threat to you. Why did you see me by yourself that first time?”

Anrietta grinned. “Didn’t she tell you? Louise and I have been friends since childhood. I came to visit her when I was at the school, and she told me about you. Catching Fouquet was all well and good, and I watched your magic take down that golem. But I needed someone I could trust, and she said if it wasn’t her, it had to be you.”

“Wow. I’ll have to thank her when I get back.”

The carriage started moving. “So that’s why you get to hang out with a princess.”

She grinned and winked. "It's a great honor, you know."

"Oh, I know," said Susan, bringing up an imaginary fan and fanning herself with it. "All my friends at the academy would just simply *die* if they knew."

Both fell into laughter.

But they weren't laughing as they stepped into the prison.

"I wasn't told conditions here were quite as harsh as this," said Anrietta, looking around.

Susan thought back to what that man who had told her about the tax collector had said. "That's something you may have to get used to," she admitted. "Always try to see the situation for yourself, if you can. Less chance of misunderstandings that way. Not to worry though, even in my so called 'enlightened' society, prisons are not much better than this. Despite numerous studies that say the threat of punishment does nothing to deter crime."

"I would love to sit down for a week and hear all about where you come from."

"Maybe when things calm down a little. I'd be happy to."

She shook her head. "I wonder if they ever will. Show me the cell, please."

"Right this way," said the warden, leading them inside.

Susan cast *Time Area* into the cell, and rewound back from the current moment until she caught movement. The princess and warden stared as a figure with a neatly trimmed beard and wearing a mask over the top of his face came into view. She paused it again.

"This is how events played out last night?" the princess demanded, back in princess mode.

"Yes, your highness," said Susan, back in "loyal subject" mode. "I could show you us walking into this place if you would like more proof. I am magically replaying time in this vicinity, and the image is true. Do you know this man?"

A look of determination and rage started taking over Anrietta's face. "I would recognize that beard anywhere. This man is Jean-Jacques Francis, Viscount of Wardes, captain of my Griffin Knights. At least he was, until this moment. Come on, we have an arrest to make." She turned on her heel and stalked out, Susan ended the spell and mutely followed.

"Ride ahead to the palace," Anrietta was saying to the man that had followed her here. "Gather up some reliable men and mages. Do not tip Jean-Jacques off. I will be placing him under arrest *personally*."

"Are you certain that's wise-" he started to ask, but saw the look on her face. "I'll go at once, highness." He jumped on his horse and took off, leaving Anrietta and Susan to climb into the carriage.

"Actually, I could get us back immediately if you wanted," offered Susan.

She shook her head. "I want to see if Marquis is loyal to me. If he is, my orders will be followed and we will take Jean-Jacques by surprise. If he is not, we shall see how far this corruption goes."

"All right. I'll be there by your side as long as you need me."

She is a sucker for a pretty face, it seems, thought Sparkle. Of course, it does seem to be a worthy cause, rooting out corruption. But I think there's some in every

society, even ours, so where would it end?

Her face softened a little. "Thank you, Susan. What would I have done without you? But dragging you into all this, I feel bad."

"My magic is pointless unless it gets used. Don't worry, I follow in the proud tradition of my father. Making life miserable for those that would abuse their power or threaten the innocent."

"He must be very proud."

"I like to think so. I'll ask him once I've rescued him from whatever world he's stuck on."

Anrietta looked at her curiously, but lapsed back into silence.

She probably has a lot on her mind right now. If I had Spell Symbol I would be making her some. Actually, that reminds me. Susan checked her character sheet, and as she expected she had new cards. *Yup, it's going to be a fight.* Having no use for *Glad I Brought this Shotgun* she turned it in for 2 XP. *The only real weapon skill I have goes with the gun I already have and can't reload here. Getting another just like it isn't going to do me any good.*

But an *Extra Action* could always come in handy, so she held onto that and watched the countryside fly by on the way back to the palace.

"It may come to a fight," Anrietta said once they returned. "Some of his griffin knights may side with him, and he's an accomplished mage himself. Take him into custody but do not fatally wound him. I need to know if he's working for someone and what their goal is."

"Yes, your majesty!" everyone there shouted.

Looks like this Marquis guy is on the level. Until we run into the ambush, anyway.

Susan started to put *Barrier Against Spells* on herself, but then thought better of it.

These people seem to use just elemental attack magic, in other words, magically creating elements. They aren't hitting me with spells like I do, Shrink and the like. They just blast fire or air around. The magic is in the making, it's not magical fire. I think Invulnerability will serve. Sparkle put *Acceleration* on them both, of course. Then they marched through the halls of the palace to where she had been told Jean-Jacques was currently.

They found the man commanding some kind of drill in the field outside the castle.

"Good morning, princess," he said, sweeping off his floppy hat and bowing. "How can I be-"

"Jean-Jacques Francis, you are under arrest for treason against the kingdom. Surrender your weapon and come quietly." Anrietta's voice rang out strongly in the courtyard, and Jean-Jacques dropped his hat.

Treason? That's a death sentence, isn't it?

There was a shocked silence as the recruits stopped what they were doing and froze, unsure what they were hearing.

"A poor joke," said the man, snatching his hat up again.

"Not an hour ago, this girl's magic revealed to me an image of you, visiting the prison where The Sandy Fouquet was being held. I then watched as you called her

Matilda of South Water and opened her cell. You then handed back her wand and watched as she WALKED AWAY! I will have the truth of this matter and you will stand down. Throw down your weapon!”

“I’m unfamiliar with this magic, are you sure you aren’t being tricked in some way, your majesty?”

Several of the griffin riders landed. “Sir, what should we do?”

“The princess is obviously under some kind of compulsion. Quickly, grab her so we can bring her to a specialist and break her out of it. And that blond haired girl too! She’s behind all this, I wager!”

“Enough. Seize him!” Anrietta shouted, pointing her scepter. The guards with us charged forward, and the others looked to Jean-Jacques, who calmly drew his sword. They took their cue from that, and engaged the others.

Susan stepped in front of Anrietta, as the scene before them dissolved into more of a brawl than an orderly arrest. One man from the opposing side broke free, and Susan and Sparkle swatted him back with *Thrust*. He went flying back, crashing into another man. She also had a bit of fun with *Transposition*, switching soldiers fighting on the side of the princess with soldiers fighting against if they were going to be hit. With *Acceleration* going it looked like everyone else was moving in slow motion, so she was able to pick her targets.

Finally the opposition was down, and Jean-Jacques stood alone, ringed with steel.

“I say again, drop your weapon.”

“Odd magic that girl is using. I wonder how she’ll deal with this.” He pointed his sword and cast, and Susan heard an explosion behind her. Horrified, she watched as the castle wall exploded outward, sending huge chunks of stone towards the princess.

Even *Accelerated*, she didn’t have time to waste thinking if this counted as one attack, so *Deflection* would catch all of it or not. She simply grabbed the princess and spun her around, putting herself between the rocks. They impacted her, knocking both the ground, and from Jean-Jacques’ point of view, squishing them like bugs.

Susan heard voices shouting as the weight of a castle wall crushed her. It was difficult to breathe, but she was on top of something soft and warm.

“Anrietta,” she managed. “Are you-”

“Alive,” she gasped, then tried to cough. “Hard to get a breath.”

“Sorry, little tight here. Usually I date someone at least a few times before letting them this close. And it’s a princess to boot! At least it’s my lucky day if it isn’t yours.”

She tried to laugh, but groaned instead. “Stop that. Get us out of here. I think I’m hurt pretty bad.”

“As you command.”

But how, that’s the tricky part. If I had some kind of spell to be aware of things that were around me, that would be cool. I could Transposition us out of here.

Uh, how about instead of thinking about what you don’t have, chided Darkness, think about what spells you do have that could get us out of this.

Okay, fine. The trouble is, I have to see my target in order to cast something at it. Let me think. Mercury is out anyway, same goes for Mars, Uranus, and Moon. Great, so the one time I really need physical magic, I can’t move. This is just typical. Susan tried

to shift around so Anrietta would be more comfortable. *Okay, wait a second. I'm still Accelerated so I bet I could get Teleportal off pretty darn quick. What if I Shrank us both, then used the Extra Action? The Shrink would therefore have taken no time, so the rocks wouldn't shift yet. Spend the card, position a very tiny Teleportal right next to us. Scoop up the princess and sprint through it to safety.*

"Okay, have a plan. Need you to hold on tight, okay?"

"You want to be even closer? I thought that was part of the problem?"

Both tried not to laugh, and Susan gathered her thoughts. *Okay, card first, 0 delay, then Teleportal when my hands are free again.* "Here we go."

She made a Venus check and cast *Shrink*, taking the full time. After all, it was the delay after shrinking that was the problem. She put in 6 energy, making her rating in Venus a 10, meaning they could become -5 sized, or about the size of a spider. The extra +2 compensating for the fact she was casting on two people, not one. She got a 19, easily enough, and both shrank down to almost nothing. The princess became -5 sized, while Susan, carrying her, became -4, just in case her legs were injured and she couldn't walk.

With one hand now free, the other cradling the princess, Susan cast *Teleportal*, putting in max energy and trying to cast it instantly. She got an 11 plus the bonus from *Acceleration*, meaning she could put the other end at least 100km away. As she wasn't trying for anything nearly that far away, she got it, and sprinted through.

"Where are we?" asked Anrietta, looking around in wonder.

"Under the throne," Susan replied. "I thought I would give you the chance to play dead awhile if you wanted."

"Why would I want that?"

Susan shrugged. "I have no idea. Just thought I would give you the option. If there was some advantage to you being dead that you could think of, now is your only chance."

She giggled. "I would love to sneak away and see the world with you, but that might leave my kingdom in a bit of a quandary. I better make an appearance soon."

"Okay, you got it. By the way, you said you were injured?"

"Yes, actually. Please don't set me down, I don't think I can walk."

Susan lifted her dress, and one of her dainty feet was twisted at a weird angle. "That must be extremely painful!" she exclaimed. "How can you stand it?"

She grinned. "I'm not standing, you're carrying me."

"You know what I mean!"

"By not thinking about it too much."

Of course, I have Low Pain Tolerance, so my ideas of pain may be skewed. Maybe she has High Pain Tolerance, for all I know.

"I'll have you fixed up in a second, hang on."

Susan cast *Regeneration*, and soon Anrietta was back on her feet again, flexing them and showing off those great legs of hers. "That was amazing. You're amazing. In fact, you're the reason I'm alive right now. How can I ever repay you?" Susan found herself being hugged again.

Bet you could take her right here, right now, if you asked for it, thought Darkness. *Or at least get a kiss out of it.*

Shut up.

“Probably by sending me on even more dangerous missions. I mean that’s how these things go, right?”

“Sadly, you’re probably right,” she said, taking a step back. Her hands were still on Susan’s shoulders. “But you deserve a title or something. I mean you could have died trying to save me when those rocks hit you.”

“Full disclosure, I was utterly immune to any physical force when I grabbed you. Oh, I could have suffocated, true, but not be crushed. That’s why the rocks settled how they did.”

“Still...”

Susan waved her off. “Titles won’t mean anything once I leave this world. Though I suppose when I finally get home, being able to call myself a knight or something, legitimately, would be kind of fun.” She shook her head. “Come on, time to figure that out later. As you’re still alive, let’s make sure your subjects know before everyone starts having heart attacks trying to get you out from underneath the stone.”

Wait, if Arthur became king by pulling a sword out of a stone, what do I become by pulling a princess out of the stone?

She nodded, then looked up. “Gives me a different perspective, looking up at the throne from here. How do I fill such a huge chair?”

“Way too many slices of cake?”

Anrietta threw back her head and laughed, pounding Susan’s chest with her fists. “You... you... jerk! I was trying to be serious. Just for that I should appoint you my jester. Why don’t I have a jester?”

“Seriously? I don’t know. I’ve never been a queen. You have to do what you think is right, and hopefully it’s what is right for your people, as well.”

She stopped laughing and looked Susan in the eye. “I will. I see now that just ruling over people isn’t good enough. I have to give them reasons to believe in me. Like you’ve given me for believing in you. I have a lot to think about. Thank you.”

“Sure. All part of the service. Shall we?” She held out a hand, and Anrietta smiled, taking it.

“Let’s.”

Elemental

Place: Outside the place

Time: Moments later

“Your majesty!” everyone shouted as Anrietta came into view around the side of the palace. Magicians trying to carefully levitate rocks stopped and stared, some losing their concentration. The rock pile shifted and collapsed, sending up a plume of dust.

“Good thing I wasn’t still underneath all that,” Anrietta muttered. Susan snickered. Everyone ran over to her and went down on one knee.

“I was certain you were under there,” gasped the shocked Marquis. “How did you escape? The cat said you were probably still alive, but we rushed to get you out.”

“Be at ease,” she replied. “Susan’s magic was able to free me, but brought us inside the castle walls. I apologize for worrying you.” There was a shocked murmuring that a princess would ever need to apologize to anyone. “I don’t suppose Jean-Jacques was captured as I ordered?”

Everyone bent their heads. “I take full responsibility for his escape,” intoned Marquis. “Naturally I will accept any punishment your highness wishes to lay out for me.”

“You have nothing to say in your defense?”

“Only that I took the safety of your majesty to be of the greater importance. I immediately called for the mages to start moving the stone and free you. The scoundrel got away in the confusion.”

Anrietta looked sadly at the jagged scar now cut into her palace wall. “That’s going to be a problem. Very well. Begin restoration efforts immediately, and send the griffin riders out to look for Jean-Jacques. He can’t have gotten-” Susan was shaking her head. “You wish to council some other course of action, loyal mage?”

Yeah, she’s back in full princess mode. Pity she can’t really be herself most of the time.

“Yes, your majesty. If you give me a moment, I can make sure the rest of the griffin riders are loyal to you, rather than to him. It would be a grave loss to the kingdom if the griffins were stolen out from under you. I assume they are somewhat difficult to train? Whereas new riders can be trained fairly quickly.”

“What would you have them do?”

“Line up here. I’ll ask them a question and they can begin the search immediately after.”

“Very well. You heard the mage- line up!”

Susan put *Detect Lies* on herself, non-verbally so they wouldn’t get the RESolve check against it. After all, they just saw light and symbols swirling around her for an instant, they wouldn’t have a clue what that meant. But hearing her shout “Detect Lies” would pretty much give it away.

She went down the line, asking each soldier “are you more loyal to your old captain, who has been revealed to be a traitor to the crown, than you are to the princess?” Anyone who said “No” or “the princess” and wasn’t lying was allowed to leave. She had to have two of them arrested, and Anrietta shook her head sadly as they were lead away.

"I could get used to having magic like yours at my disposal," she remarked, once they were gone.

"If I had my full ability to cast spells and my spellbook, I could track Jean-Jacques down for you. Sadly, that's not possible, so I'm not sure what else I can offer."

"You have done enough, loyal mage. You rooted out corruption and found a traitor in my own ranks. More I cannot ask at this time. There is much here to be done, and you are no doubt weary from your efforts to free me. You may return to the academy and await my summons, which I shall make once I have decided how best to reward you."

Susan went down on one knee. "Your majesty, I hear and obey. It is my honor to serve."

Anrietta gave a little smile and a wink, which Susan returned.

"You are dismissed."

"You gave me quite a scare," said Sparkle on the way back to the inn. "But I was pretty sure you were still okay because *Acceleration* was still going."

"It was pretty *rocky* there for a minute. Wasn't sure I could *pin down* a solution being so *pressed* for time. But that princess, she sure does *rock* my world, but I think if I made a pass at her I would get *stonewalled*."

"Someone's feeling chipper all of a sudden."

"Hey, I saved the life of a princess today. How many people can say that?"

"I can think of a few. Mario. Link."

"I mean people who actually exist!"

"Like you're so 'real.'" *Who can say we won't meet them on this journey? That would really blow her mind.*

"I think I am, actually."

"Just keep telling yourself that. Anyway, what's the plan now, boss?"

"See if I can get some money back for not staying the whole week at the inn, head back to the school and see what trouble they've gotten in while I was gone. See about spending some XP, that sort of thing."

"It has been pretty non-stop here. Once the adventure train started rolling it's not slowing down."

"Yeah. But that's fine. Think of all the magic I can memorize once we leave here!"

"True."

So Susan went back, cast *Stone Sculpt* and got her stuff back, and checked out of the hotel. That done she walked around the back and opened a *Teleportal* back to her room, where she put her stuff away and went in search of the others. Hiraga, across the way, didn't answer when she knocked on his door, so she shrugged and headed to the stairs to go down.

Oddly, the school was rather quiet, and Susan wandered the empty halls wondering if some terrible thing had happened that wiped everyone out.

"They could have left a- forget I said that."

"Wondered if you would finish that sentence. There must still be someone here, want to check the kitchens?"

"Sure, someone there might be able to tell me where our favorite maid is."

"Wait, I'm the one that casts *Hygene* on you every morning. Doesn't that make me your favorite maid?"

"You're my personal servant, not a maid. There's a difference."

Sparkle rolled her eyes. "I see how it is."

"Summer vacation?" asked Susan once she had found Siesta. "Don't these people do any studying at all? What the heck? If they aren't lounging around drinking tea it's because they're away on vacation. Sheesh!"

"We have to take a pay cut, too," she replied, nodding. "Because there's less to do around here now. Many of us go visit our families at this time, rather than sticking around. I was just finishing up a few things... say, would you like to come visit my home?"

"I would like that," admitted Susan, but she shook her head. "Very much. On the other hand, I have some projects I wanted to take care of, and this actually works out perfectly. If they're going to be gone a little while I can probably get them done before everyone gets back! On the gripping hand, I could meet your family and come back here in the same day."

"The what?"

"It's from a book, three handed aliens... you had to be there."

"Oh, okay. It is three days away... by horse. Unavoidable, to only spend a day there and then have to start back. But what can I do? I want to see my brothers and sisters again."

"What can you do? You have but to ask, dear lady." Susan bowed. "I'll have you there before the sun goes down this very day."

"What?" She was shocked. "How?"

"You just leave that to me. Are you taking anything?"

"I had a small suitcase packed, I have to travel pretty light."

"I know what that's like. Show me where it is and when you're ready I'll meet you out by the front gate."

"Okay?"

So Susan got to see Siesta's room and then headed out to the front gate, where she saw Charlotte and Kirche getting into a coach.

"Hey!" shouted Kirche, waving her hand above her head. She turned to Tabitha and pulled her out. "Look, Susan's back!"

"No, this is Susan's front! This is my back." Susan turned around.

"Ignore her, she's in a weird mood," said Sparkle. "Leaving for vacation, then? Have you seen Louise and Hiraga around anywhere?"

Kirche shook her head. "Not lately. Don't know where they got to."

"Ah well. I'm sure they're fine, and have not gotten into any shenanigans while I was gone. See you girls in a week or so!"

"Invitation," said Charlotte quietly.

"Great idea, Tabitha! Why don't you two join us? Tabitha lives pretty far away but you don't want to hang out around here, do you?"

Susan laughed. "My, my, my. Aren't I just the popular one? And here's me wanting to get some work done while everyone is off playing. And usually I'm the one

lounging around while you're in class. Odd how that works. I do appreciate the offer, but I've already had an invitation to visit Siesta's house."

"Insistent. Gateway."

"I suppose I could hang with you girls the next day, and still have a few days here to work. And I've already seen your place, Cha- Tabitha. So yeah, I could get there easily enough. If you insist..." She nodded. "Guess that's settled. I'll see you later tonight."

"Looking forward to it."

"Yeah, see you then! Wait, want me to send you on? I can easily make a portal big enough to fit the carriage through. Save you some bouncing around." She looked over at the solid metal wheels and lack of suspension springs on the carriage.

"No trouble?"

"You kidding? Get in, I'll get to casting."

"Thanks!" exclaimed Kirche. "Confidentially, I kind of hate these things." She turned back to Charlotte. "No fair, you let her visit before me? When?"

"Explain later."

The coach door closed, and through the window Susan could see Charlotte already opening her ever present book.

How did those two ever get together? Kirche must have the patience of a saint. Or perhaps the Patient background.

Susan sent them on with *Teleportal*.

You know, it's too bad I don't get better at things by practicing them. That must be nice. With all the magic I do for people, you would think I would already be the greatest wizard in the world. Wait a second, why didn't they just fly on the dragon? People are so weird sometimes.

Probably twenty minutes later Siesta showed up, changed out of her maid uniform and into a simple blouse and skirt.

"Oh yeah," Susan said, looking her up and down critically. "I just had a thought. We need to get you out of those clothes immediately. Strip!"

"What?!" Siesta shrieked, putting her hands over her chest.

"That skirt, it's not going to be practical, I'm afraid. Come with me."

"What? I... that is? How?" Siesta sputtered as she was led by the hand back to Susan's room.

On the way Susan explained how Charlotte had also invited her over, so Susan was only going to get here there and visit a few hours before heading off.

"Not that I don't want to stay," she explained, "but I do really want to get started on these projects I have in mind. But I hate to refuse anyone..."

"You don't have to apologize, it was just a spur of the minute thing, anyway."

"Here, put this on," Susan said having reached her room. She handed over her "stealth suit," the only other streamlined clothes she had.

"I can't wear this!" Siesta protested. "These are..."

"Mine? Don't worry, I washed them with magic."

"No, no, I mean they're," her voice dropped, "men's clothes."

"By the energetic staff of my father, just put them on already. Men's clothes, do

you hear that, Sparkle?" Susan was laughing.

"The what?" Siesta's eyes were wide.

She stopped abruptly. "Huh. I guess that could be taken two ways, couldn't it? I mean my father had a wizard's staff that allowed him to manipulate energy in his environment. I've already said 'by the gaudy purple robe' and something about his pointy beard, so that was the next thing about him."

"Oh. And why do I have to wear these clothes?"

"What? Don't you trust me? Do you want to get there tonight, and have 6 days with your family, or not?"

"Very well."

Susan watched, with some interest, as Siesta pulled off her peasant clothes and hesitantly pulled on Susan's outfit. They stretched pleasantly, and Susan gave a small sigh. "Now, was that so hard?"

"I just hope none of the other staff sees me like this."

"Why? Don't want them knowing how fabulous you look in black? Come on."

"What about..." she gestured to the cast off clothing.

"Oh, go put it with your stuff and we'll get it when we arrive. I'll be waiting out front for you."

"Okay." She lass scampered off.

Nice abscond.

"You do realize she's grown up with a very different set of values than you, right? There was a pretty clear divide between what men and women could wear in this sort of time period. Heck, it would be like Harry walking around in Hermione's clothes. What sort of reaction do you think that would achieve? Even in 'modern' society, a man wearing a dress would get them some funny looks."

"You mean Ron? Because Harry is the boy who lived, he can't do wrong. I bet within a week it would become the new fashion."

"In that case I do mean Ron. Ron *before* he learned martial arts."

"Oh, now again, that's a totally different story."

Siesta was still blushing when she peaked out of the door to the school and hastily looked around.

"Just me. Come on, once we're in the air you'll forget all about it."

"Air?"

"Didn't I say? *Flight!*" Susan used maximum energy to get the most speed possible, casting on herself and Siesta.

"*Shape-shift,*" cast Sparkle at the same time, turning into her normal fairy form.

Susan started hovering.

"You mean I can do that? How?"

Susan smiled. "Just think a happy thought, and you'll find your wings. Come on." She held out a hand. "It's easy, hardly even have to think about it." Siesta tentatively reached out and began to rise, grasping Susan's hand. "That's it. Now, which way?"

"Follow the road for now. I only know that way to go, but we can cut across country later, when we get closer."

"Then come on!"

Susan shot forward, dragging Siesta behind her. "Oh my goodness!"

It didn't take long for Siesta to get over her trepidation, and soon the miles were zipping by under the pair. She even imitated Susan, pretending to swim when they passed a caravan, even playing tag and doing loops and swoops.

"How high can we go?" she asked.

"Until it starts becoming difficult to breathe, why?"

"I want to see the land like a bird. Come on!" She started to climb.

Hey, now there's an idea for the princess. Showing her the kingdom from above. But can't mages here already fly? I'm sure I've seen that...

That high up, Siesta said she saw her village, and stared at the world around her. She was breathing heavily, not from exertion but partially from excitement and partially from the thinner air.

"I'll remember this sight forever," she remarked, slowly spinning. "You've given me so much, and we've only just met. Thank you, Susan. Even if you do make me wear men's clothing."

"Are you still worried about that? I mean if it's still bothering you, I'll take it back and you can fly the rest of way naked."

"How do you always know what to say to make things worse?"

"It's a gift."

The two fell against each other laughing, and started in a straight line towards her home village.

As they got nearer, Susan slowed and stopped, hanging in mid-air. "Do you want to change again? We can walk the rest of the way if you don't want to show up like that."

Siesta shook her head. "I can see why you made me change. Trying to fly like that in a skirt just wasn't going to work. I'll wear it. I mean I've seen my great-grandfather's 'flight suit' but wait until my family sees me in this!" She did a twirl, and Susan was so shocked by her words she didn't even register it.

"Wait, say that again."

"My great-grandfather. I didn't meet him because he died before I was born. But others in my family still tell his stories about... the other... why are you looking at me like that?"

"Other what, Siesta? Other *world*? Is that what you were about to say?" She grabbed her wrist.

"Ow! Yes, what's the big deal?"

"Sorry, sorry." She released her grip and looked at Siesta as if for the first time. "You... black hair. You have black hair, Siesta. No one on this world has black hair. Pink hair, green hair, blue hair, blond hair, golden hair, red hair- Why didn't I see it before?"

"See what before? They're just stories, Susan. I mean other worlds- oh."

Realization finally dawned on Siesta's face. Susan could see it written there- *Oh yeah, I know two different people from two different worlds, and my great-grandfather wasn't just some raving lunatic. Whoops.*

"Yes, now you begin to see? Is there some kind of dimensional tear somewhere

around here? I mean if others have come through without being summoned by Louise, maybe these two worlds are linked more strongly than I thought. If I could find that tear, maybe I could make it through to your great-grandfather's world and get all my magic back! Then get after Luna!"

"I'm sorry, I never thought to tell you. I just didn't put the two things together. Honestly, I didn't even think about those stories until just now."

"It's fine," Susan tried not to let too much sarcasm through in her tone. "But this is vital information. I'll need to hear about how he arrived here, maybe that will be a clue as to where the tear is." She grabbed Siestas' hands. "I have hope again, and a lead to what I need to look for, Siesta! And you gave that to me! See, now we're even. Come on, let's go meet your family."

Turned out Siesta had seven siblings, and she was the eldest.

Eight kids, Catholic? But I guess these people have never heard of birth control.

She got to see what peasant life was like; noisy, messy, rowdy, and loud with all those kids around. She pitched in with making the meal, despite the families' insistence she was a guest. "Siesta serves me at the academy all the time. It's my turn to pay her back a little."

Of course, with only a 3 in *Cooking* she slipped a little *Augment Skill* in there, and managed to help make the best meal they ever had.

Almost immediately afterward the older kids started getting the younger kids ready for bed.

Right, lamp oil or candles are probably expensive. And it'll take some time to get this many people to bed before dark. And then get them up in the morning to start work. This is just practicality on their part. It's really no wonder things stayed the same for so long on my world, then accelerated. These two adults have their hands full providing for their families, they don't have time to invent a better washing machine or whatever. Plus they're kept down by the magic users, who have all the wealth. She shook her head. *I guess the 1% never changes.*

With the house quieting down, Susan and Siesta slipped out.

"Thanks for inviting me," Susan said genuinely. "You have a great family, and I can see they really love you. That's a great thing to have behind you."

"I know. I do my best, but I have to wonder what real future I have just working as a maid at the school. That's your fault, I think."

"I tend to do that. You do have one big advantage, if you have the dedication."

"What's that?"

"The library at the school. I bet if you were interested in something, you could learn more about it there. They must have books other than just tomes on magic, right? Even if it takes a few years, reading through books a little at a time, you could do it. Not many others have that kind of resource. Plus time, as you don't yet have a family to take care of. When you're done with work, your time is your own. Don't stop learning, and who knows where it might lead."

Siesta nodded. "I'll have to think about it. What I might be good at, and be able to learn. Sorry I didn't get to show you my great-grandfather's artifacts."

"Clever girl. It's just an excuse to get me to come back again."

“No, I really-”

Susan laughed. “I’m teasing you. Look, enjoy your visit here. I’ll come get you in six days, okay? You can show me then.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

They hugged, and one quick *Teleportal* later Susan was standing in front of Charlotte’s house, pulling the rope to ring their bell.

She was met with a bit less enthusiasm than she expected, and Charlotte looked more pensive than normal.

“I can come back later,” Susan started to say.

“Mission,” said Charlotte, handing her a rolled up scroll.

12

Spirit

Place: Charlotte's house

Time: The next day

Susan and Sparkle had spent a rather lonely night in a very plush bed, as Charlotte and Kirche weren't much in the mood to talk after they explained what the king wanted Charlotte to do next.

I mean it's a girl's sleepover. We're supposed to play truth or dare, and braid each other's hair and stuff, right? And I wanted to try on some of Charlotte's clothes, I bet she has some really frilly, girly stuff.

Susan, freshly cleaned with magic and full of delicious food laid out by servants sank into a plush chair and looked over at the others sitting opposite her.

"So let me see if I remember this correctly," she began. "There's this water spirit that's causing trouble nearby, yes? For some reason the spirit, that normally lives in the lake, has decided to expand her territory or whatnot and is flooding a village. Our task is to stop it."

"My task," corrected Charlotte.

"Yes," agreed Esme. "This is our families' problem, not yours. We can't drag a guest into it!"

"As if I would allow my best student to go off on some dangerous mission and get XP without me. Esme, please understand this is what I do. I solve problems for people. Usually with magic, because that's what I have. Anyway, didn't you call me family before?"

"I may have said something like that..."

"It's settled then. Let's come up with a plan of attack and then get this thing done. You only have a week of vacation, why waste it?"

"You really won't be denied?" asked Esme.

"Oh no. The creature I am destined to fight, that even now holds my father in its grip on some far away world, would love nothing more. But I have to fight, just as he does, because otherwise world after world will go dark and shrivel away to nothing. Every battle I face is another step on that journey."

"Then I shall wish you good luck."

There's a spell for that.

Susan and the others crested a hill overlooking the flooded town. Susan whistled.

"Now that is a flooding. Who does this spirit thing think it is, anyway? It has no idea what it's in for. So, what is it in for?"

The two girls shrugged. "Have to find it first," said Charlotte.

"What she means is, the spirit could be anywhere in the water around here. We have to somehow get the thing's attention, then somehow drive it off."

"Drive it off? Not destroy it? I mean it'll just come back, right?"

Kirche shook her head. "Be like trying to evaporate all the water on the Earth. It's an immortal representation of what water is. Not just a creature that happens to be made of water."

"Dangerous."

“Exactly. Because of the power it wields, one slip up and we’re drowned rats.”

“And yet we’re still out here,” commented Susan.

“King commands.”

“She was telling me last night that she’s done a lot of dangerous missions for the ‘king’ who hopes to bump her off that way. He’s been disappointed every time. Let’s make sure he says disappointed, right Charlotte?”

Oh, seems ‘Tabitha’ came clean about her name, at least to her best friend.

That’s good.

She nodded. “Still no plan.”

“I have a plan, if you want to get the thing’s attention,” said Susan. “Tell me, if I swam down there, what are the chances of me coming back up again?”

“I doubt it would attack you or anything. Spirits like this see us more as vermin, I think. It won’t want to expend the effort. Plus it’s weakened during the day.”

“Why?”

“Sunlight, maybe? Not sure, but water does evaporate more during the day, right?”

“I guess. Okay, I’m going to go down and check it out. After that we can get it up here. It’ll be up to you girls to take it out. My only attack magic is fire based, and I’m not sure that’s going to work on a water elemental.”

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” Susan started taking her clothes off.

“What are you doing!?”

“I’m not going to swim in my clothes. Besides, no one around here but you.”

Stripped down, Susan cast a quick *Augment Skill* on herself, for *Swimming*. She only had a three, enough to not panic and drown in water, but she thought being a better swimmer than that would be handy right about now. Also she put on *Darksight*, because where she planned to go was not likely to have much light.

With that she dove into the water with a splash and started making her way towards the center of the village. Once she figured she was pretty close she took a deep breath and dove, powerful strokes bringing her a few feet underwater. Houses here were hardly covered to the roof, so it wasn’t all that deep. Susan looked around, then saw what she was looking for.

A well.

She swam towards it, then grabbed the wooden roof that stuck out the top and looked up. *I know I can reasonably hold my breath for 10 seconds per ENDurance point, so that’s 80 seconds. I don’t need to go too deep, I guess. Plus my Overconfident weakness...*

She slipped inside, feet first, and used her hands to descend as far as she could. Her vision steadily became black and white, but she could still see the edges of the stone perfectly.

Really wish Breathe Water worked around here. Stupid missing planets. She let go a bubble of air and watched it float up. Okay, this is deeper than I thought. This is probably fine anyway.

Susan started back up, and popped up out of the water with a gasp. She made her way back to the others and climbed out, dripping.

“Did you get what you needed down there?” asked Kirche.

“Not as deep as I wanted to go, but acceptable. Now we just need someplace to put it all. Good thing I got a good view of the land yesterday with Siesta.”

“Put what someplace?”

“You’ll see,” she replied with a wink, then cast *Flight* on herself. *I figure I’ll dry in the air, then put my clothes back on.*

Susan sped towards a nearby but unconnected body of water and hovered over the center of it. *This looks like a good a place as any.* With that, she cast *Teleportal*, putting one end in the air here, pointed down, and the other underwater, inside the well. Predictably, water started gushing out the hole in the air, and Susan nodded, satisfied.

“And now we wait,” she said, returning to the flooded area where the others were still a bit confused as to what was going on. She started getting dressed and looked over the town. “Hopefully we won’t have long.”

And indeed, if the Narrator’s calculations are correct, a 1m hole placed 7m down inside a well will siphon off a large swimming pool sized amount of water every thirty seconds. Estimating the area underwater at about 40 x 40 swimming pools, (but three times as deep) gives us 512000 cubic meters of water. With a drain rate of 77.21 cubic meters per second, the water should take 110 minutes to totally drain from around the town. Of course, this doesn’t take into account the lesser amount of pressure that will result in a partial draining. It also assumes gravity and the atmospheric pressure in this area are constant with Earth normal, which we have no clue is correct or not. Also the Narrator could be totally wrong in how he did the calculations, because he sort of poked around on the Internet for formulas. *And he’s collage educated.* So ask him how much of that stuck around. Go ahead, ask him.

Excuse me, do you mind?

Oh, sorry. Back to the story. Wait, who said-
DO YOU MIND?

About an hour later, the water level around the houses had clearly diminished, and Susan had explained how she was using her *Teleportal* to syphon the water off and hopefully get the attention of the water spirit. They were tensely waiting on the shore when suddenly a gigantic waterspout shot up and seemed to angrily regard them.

“What are you doing to my water, you things?” it roared.

Susan got up.

She looked to Sparkle, who nodded, and cast *Acceleration* on them both. As she did, Susan cast *Invulnerability* on herself, after dropping the *Teleportal*. “Spirit of water, hear me!” she shouted at the thing. “I am Susan Felton, and I represent every living thing in that town you have seen fit to destroy. Every bug, every plant, every animal which could not escape cries out for justice. I will see that justice done.”

“You presume to lecture me, you thing? I will crush the life out of you and resume

my vengeance against all your kind that dirty the water!”

“Not. Likely.”

This seemed to enrage the spirit further, causing Susan and Sparkle to roll *Initiative*, because the fight was on. Sparkle went first, but held her action, as per the plan. She was going to run interference for the other two, protecting them with *Deflection* along with Susan. Who of course went second, and also held a segment, waiting for the inevitable attack.

It came the next segment, as water shot out of the spout and sped towards the group.

“*Deflection!*” both cast, wishing it was a *Mercury* spell rather than *Sun*.

Susan, putting in 8 energy and Sparkle, putting in 6, got one more than the effective attack roll, and the water harmlessly splashed off the magical circle that appeared in the air. They both went up by 1 delay, that being reactive for them. The waterspout, if such a thing can be possible, seemed taken aback.

“What was-”

It never got to finish the question as icicles and a gout of flame shot at the thing, forcing it to dodge twice, as the attacks were not simultaneous. Incredibly, for such a huge amount of water, (Susan estimated a +3 size modifier for the “creature”) it managed to dodge. Susan made a *Magic Combat* check, something she wasn’t actually very good at. She only managed to beat the spirit, a seven versus an eleven, and put her hands up again, ready to cast. “Again!”

“*Deflection!*” both cast, this time getting two less than was needed. Sparkle used her *I Don’t Think So* card, forcing the spirit to re-roll the attack.

It got one higher.

So she played her *Wild* as a *Lucky Break* and the water jerked and missed them, as Kirche and Charlotte’s magic both slammed into the creature as it attacked. (They went simultaneously.) The creature roared, but more in frustration than pain. Susan now saw the- perhaps- fatal flaw in her plan. She and Sparkle were reacting, keeping them all safe. But only the other two could actually hurt the creature.

“Quick, put *Acceleration* on the others and drop it on us!”

“Yeah, I get it. On it.”

Sparkle did just that, casting it instantly because that one was a *Mercury* spell, and so she got the bonus from her own *Acceleration*. With that done, she dropped the first casting, and the world sped up again.

Susan dropped *Invulnerability*. That -3 was really working against her, and she felt it was better to protect all of them than worry about herself. As this was a reactive action, she continued to hold. The water spirit was fast, it was no wonder the two mages were so hesitant to come out here, and it attacked again.

This time they got two more than the attack, and again the water harmlessly splashed away from them. *At least it seems like this thing doesn’t have an area effect technique. Just the equivalent of Elemental Bolt (Water).*

Charlotte got in a good hit, ice punching through the water, and seeming to

stagger the creature. Kirche followed it up with fire, but missed. Charlotte, now much faster than she had ever been in her life, followed it up with another attack, which was narrowly dodged.

At least it's on the defensive now.

Both girls attacked at once, and Charlotte showed how much better a mage she was by hitting a third time, while the fire went wide.

Okay, I'm getting bored just standing here. She decided that, while her magic couldn't make her own magic better, it might just be able to help make the girl's aim better. *It seems their magic just goes in a straight line wherever they're pointing. If they point better, they hit better. They seem to have no trouble actually casting. Seems to work just the same as it did with Harry and the others.*

With that in mind, Susan took the full 5 segments to cast *Augment Skill (Wand Aim)* on both girls.

They got to attack twice more as she did, and when she did, they started not missing anymore. This further enraged the creature, as with their greater speed and now greater accuracy, they didn't give it a chance to attack.

Finally it decided to throw a huge plume of water into the air, and Susan yelled "I can't block that!" in a panic. Charlotte had it under control, as she simply blasted air out of her staff and deflected the whole thing. She now went on the defensive as Susan watched, the creature getting blasted with Kirche's fire again and again.

Finally the waterspout shrank back. "Please, no more," it cried. "I submit! No more pain, please!"

The girls stopped, wary of a trick.

"You'll reduce the water level back to what it was?" demanded Susan.

"Yes, yes, my word on it. Stupid creatures, should not have been that fast. You cheated. Cheated me. Probably sent by him. You already have what you want, why do you further torment me so? I hate you all!"

It disappeared.

"Okay, what was that all about?" asked Susan.

The others shrugged.

"Thanks for the help," said Kirche. "I don't know how you slowed her down like that, but it was a big help."

Susan laughed. "She wasn't slowed down. You were sped up!"

They waited around the rest of the afternoon, watching the water level go down.

"Kept her word," remarked Charlotte.

"I do feel kind of bad though," said Susan. "What she said at the end, and it sounded like she was really hurting."

"She started it," Kirche said with finality, then barked a laugh. "Guess you've survived another impossible mission, eh, Charlotte?"

She nodded.

"What are you all doing here?" asked a familiar voice from behind them. They all turned, and up the hill rode Hiraga, Louise, Guiche, and a girl Susan wasn't all that

familiar with. The strangest thing was Louise, who was riding on the same horse as Hiraga, and was making moon eyes at him. Two moon eyes, even.

“Oh, you know,” dismissed Susan. “Saved a town. Drove off a water spirit. Well, these girls did all the work. I just helped a little that time. Given my situation, maybe learning some more attack magic would be the thing to do...”

“Water spirit?” The girl hopped off the horse and stalked over to the group. “What are you talking about?”

“Look, you can still see the water,” offered Kirche. “It was way higher this morning. We beat the water spirit that was causing it, and we’re just making sure she keeps her word.”

“You actually took an elemental spirit *in combat*? That can’t be possible!”

“Glad we didn’t know that beforehand,” she deadpanned. “Though honestly, I don’t think it would have been possible without Susan’s magic. It’s really something.”

“Oh, you!” Susan acted embarrassed.

“Who are you again? Oh, wait, you came with Hiraga, right?”

“Susan Felton, at your service, my lady,” Susan mocked with a bow. “What brings you all the way out here, so deep into the space sticks there isn’t even a space Radio Shack?”

“What?” The girl was clearly confused.

“Let’s just go back!” whined Louise, snuggling up to Hiraga more, if such a thing were possible. “I’m fine. The potion just opened my eyes a little, that’s all.”

“Are you saying we won’t be able to get the ingredients, then?” asked Hiraga, trying to push Louise away.

“Did I miss something?” Susan asked, looking the two of them over.

“Suffice to say, Louise accidentally drank a love potion I... may have made.”

“Still didn’t catch your name.” Susan managed after several minutes of howling laughter.

“She’s Montmorency,” said Guiche, “Shining star, most beautiful flower of the entire school.”

Eh, I suppose she’s decent looking enough.

“Nice to meet you. So, love potion, huh?”

“Never mind why, we need to talk to the spirit and get part of its body to make the antidote.”

“Didn’t ask why. Louise, could you come over here, please?”

“If it’s okay with my love?”

“It’s fine, Louise. I think Susan has something in mind.”

“That I do.”

She got down off the horse and stood very demurely in front of Susan. “Hi!” she said, almost looking embarrassed at such a bold choice of words. She giggled, looking down. “You’re pretty!”

“Okay, all in favor of just leaving her like this? Because she is ten times as cute this way.” Susan raised a hand. Everyone just stared at her. “No? No one but me?” She sighed. “Fine. *Magic Immunity*.” She tapped Louie’s forehead and magical circles appeared around her.

Louise blinked a few times.

Then her eyes widened, as though in terror.

Then she ran screaming away from the group, back the way they all had come.

"Louise!" called Hiraga, trying to turn the horse and failing miserably. He thudded to the ground trying to get off, then took off after her, calling her name.

"That's handled," Susan said, turning back to the others. Montmorency was edging away from her, looking terrified.

"What was that? What are you?" she stuttered.

"Oh, knock it off. You know I'm from another world, is it so hard to accept my magic is different, too? I just made her immune to magic for a second, which knocked the potion out of her system."

"I just met you a minute ago. I don't know anything about you!"

"You saw me arrive with Hiraga there, where did you think I came from?"

"I have no idea!"

Susan sighed. "Anyway, can we go now?"

"No! I have to make sure the spirit is all right."

"Are you nuts? That thing just insulted us by calling us 'you things' and then attacked us. You want to *talk* to it?"

"I've done it before," she maintained. "And I'll do it again. You have to deal with them properly, which you obviously didn't. They're not human, they don't see the world the same way we do. To them, we basically just crawled out of the swamp or wherever we came from. We're babies."

"It did say something about us already having what we wanted. I wouldn't mind figuring out what that was all about."

"Just stay back and let me do the talking this time."

"Sure, but I'll have my magic on standby in case it attacks again."

The group walked down to the water's edge, where Montmorency pricked her finger and rubbed the blood on her little frog Familiar. That done it plunked down into the water and the group waited. Some time later the frog came back, and a very tiny waterspout appeared before them.

"I'm lowering it. Please, no more pain. No more torment."

"I'm here to apologize for their behavior towards you earlier. They had no right to attack you like that."

"Yes, those things had no right to do that. When I am recovered I will seek them out and-"

"Be careful how you finish that sentence," threatened Susan.

The spout sank a little lower. "I will not seek out any vengeance. I will not be happy to reclaim the water inside them one day, when they are no more."

"Very well."

"Stop it, Susan. Can't you see she's scared?"

"Does this thing imply that I would be fearful of her? Because she can make the others too fast for me to hurt? That she can make their magic strike me without fail? Because I am not!"

"No, no, what I mean is... I'm trying to... I'm trying to explain things in the way

she'll understand.”

“That thing will never understand me. Why do you summon me, you thing? I am weary from combat, and raising the water and now having to lower it again. It goes against my nature. Speak and be gone.”

“I wanted to know why you came to do this thing. You must have a reason, tell me what that reason is. Perhaps she can use her magic to aid you, rather than hurt you.”

“She is now our sworn enemy. Why would that thing help us?”

“If I was in the wrong, I would do whatever I could to put that situation to rights,” insisted Susan.

“Ha. Words. They will not sway me.”

“Then perhaps my actions will. My magic helped hurt you, perhaps it can help heal you as well. If you give your word that you will not attack us again, I will try.”

“More tricks!”

“No tricks. I did not know this girl was known to you. If I had, things would have been different. I am sorry for that.”

The spout seemed to change shape, as though thinking it over. “Very well. What must I do?”

“Just allow me to touch you while I cast the spell.”

“It cannot be worse than what the thing has already done. I will allow this.”

That's what you think. If I knew Freeze, or Stasis or something else nasty...

Susan put that out of her mind and held out a finger. The water rose up to meet it, and she cast *Regeneration* on the spirit. It shrank back down and seemed to consider. “I am growing whole once again.”

“Does that help to convince you?”

“Slightly. You wish to know why?”

Montmorency nodded. “Please.”

“Very well. For many years I have guarded a great treasure. Andvari's Ring. It is too dangerous to be in the hands of you things. I must retrieve it. As I can only move within the water, then the water must cover the land so it can be reclaimed.”

“All this for a ring? That must be some magic inside it!”

“Indeed.”

Susan waited for the spirit to go on, but it didn't.

“Very well. It seems I did attack you without knowing the whole story, and I thought I was better than that. I do not have access to my scrying magic, but I do promise to track down where this ring has gone. Such a powerful treasure will make ripples in the world, I'm sure. When I find it I will keep it safe, and bring it to you when I can.”

Again the hesitation.

“It seems I have no choice but to believe you. If I seek the ring again, you will come with your strange magic and hurt me over and over. This I do not want. I have touched you and felt your water. If it joins with me again I will know you have failed, and I will start my search again.”

“Agreed.”

“Then allow me my rest.”

With that, the spout disappeared, and Montmorency breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m never going to get this *Fabrication* done, am I?” Susan asked no-one in particular.

13

Letter

Place: The School

Time: More than a week later

Without access to her spellbook and what few scrying spells she did have, Susan and Sparkle could do little more than *Research* the ring the water spirit was talking about. She had hoped someone might have written about it in their diary:

Dear Diary,

Today I stole this sweet ring from a water spirit! How did I even do that? I must be able to do breathing underwater magic or something. Crazy!

But that would be just silly, so while she now knew all about it, she was no closer to finding it than she was before. Things were calm at the school, and Susan got busy *Fabricating* Hiraga's sword when he and Louise got back to the castle. She explained why he needed to stick around, and for an unbreakable sword he was more than happy to do so and watch her work.

She also exploited a strange characteristic of her heritage as a *Paragon*. She worked a number of hours on the project, but didn't actually make the *Fabrication* check until the very end. When she was getting close, she put *Augment Skill (Fabrication)* on herself, raising her skill by nine. As the only thing *Augment Skill* couldn't increase was spellcasting checks, she shaved nine hours (an entire day of work) off the project. Of course, this was because *Augment Skill* raised the rating of the skill by the rating in the *Planet*, and a *Natural Magician's* rating was determined by the energy they put into the spell.

Once I get Energetic Accumulation back, I'm going to have to try putting all my energy in at once, raising my rating by seventy or so. With the total difficulty of this project being a 74, and my skill of 7, I should be able to make an unbreakable item in an hour. Sure, I'd be wiped out for the day, but making the check right before I went to bed, I could make one a day, rather than four a month.

Hiraga went to go chop some rocks or something, as Susan told him the blade would never dull, and he should get used to swinging it around.

"After all," she reasoned, "you may have an unnatural rating in the skill, but your body is still that of a high school student. An actual swordsman would just wear you down and chop you to bits when you can't parry anymore."

"Good point," admitted Hiraga. "I'm off to train."

She had some leftover materials, so she increased the DTR of Louise's wand as well, figuring even if it wasn't unbreakable, at least it would grow back if it ever did become broken.

She was finally ready to start thinking about what to do with the *massive* amount of XP she was carrying around (36) when out of the blue, the princess showed up at the school.

“Anrietta!” she cried, as the princess came into her room that night with Louise and Hiriga. She popped up off the bed and ran to hug her. Louise’s eyes were wide and she was sputtering something about using the princess’ name and actually hugging her.

“Oh, we’ve been closer than this,” Anrietta assured Louise when Susan let her go. “Haven’t we, Susan?” She narrowed her eyes and purred the last seductively.

“Any closer and we would have been one person,” she replied, tapping her nose. Both dissolved into giggles.

“This is outrageous!” Louise finally managed to get out.

“Oh, don’t be so uptight,” Susan admonished. “She’s obviously not in princess mode right now. Don’t make her feel uncomfortable by pretending she is.”

“Princess mode?”

“I like it,” remarked Hiraga.

“You don’t get a vote!”

“Anyway,” cut in Susan, “unless you somehow managed to duplicate my *Teleportal*, your being here means you flew here. That overprotective guy from before won’t be too happy when he finds out you snuck out. And you brought Louise and Hiriga, so you’re not here to confess your undying love for me. So what’s up? You took an awful risk coming here, so there must be a good reason for it.”

Anrietta turned serious and made sure the door was closed. “It is, actually. I’ve come to ask for your help again, I’m afraid.”

“Excellent, I wouldn’t mind forty XP at the end of the day. What can I do for you?”

“There’s a letter,” she began, walking to the window and looking out. “I sent it to the man I love, but now I fear the contents will serve to undermine me, politically.”

“How so?”

“He is a prince in another country. But I have decided to marry a prince in a stronger country, in order to protect my people.”

Susan was silent a moment, pondering. “That sounds like a terrible idea?”

Louise gasped and went to one knee. “Please forgive her, your majesty. She comes from another world and-”

“Be at ease,” assured Anrietta, gripping Louise by the shoulders and making her stand again. “I would value her insight and honesty in this matter.”

“It touches on what I said before. Your country is only as strong as your people’s belief in you. If you follow your heart, people are going to see you as a person of values. If you marry for political power, they will see you as nothing but a schemer. And what if something should happen to you, or to him? The other will immediately be suspect, and throw the kingdoms into disarray. If you marry for love, the people will know nothing like that happened. You have to think carefully about what image you want to project.”

“There is a lot of truth to your words. There’s one thing I haven’t told you.”

Anrietta seemed ashamed, and her head fell. “He’s my cousin.”

Louise gasped.

“So? Oh, right, the whole heir thing. That could be troublesome, but couldn’t magic be used to insure a healthy child? I wonder...”

“That’s not exactly the reaction I was expecting.”

“Yeah, I often try to think how people expect me to react, and then do the opposite. Okay, you’re related, so what? If you love him, there’s a reason for that. Don’t throw it away so easily.”

“Is that sort of thing normal on your world or something?”

“My world, or the world I come from? Because I live in my own little world.”

“She really does,” put in Sparkle.

“Hush, you. Yeah, people there have some funny ideas too, I’ll admit. There’s a saying I’ve always liked; ‘When you’re in the majority, think about the reason the people in the minority are there. What do they know that you don’t?’ So yes, the majority of people would have Louise’s reaction. So I have to ask myself, why? What do those people who wouldn’t have that reaction know that I don’t? Isn’t love- love? As long as you’re not using head games to try and manipulate someone into loving you, who cares? Okay, so maybe having kids is a little more dangerous, adopt! Or just don’t have kids. Like I said, you’re, uh, expected to produce heirs so I can see why it’s a problem.”

Anrietta nodded her head sadly. “In any case, the formal declaration has already gone out. I need to make sure that letter is never discovered. I think I can trust you to take care of it. I want Louise to go with you, first because she’s my friend and I trust her. Second, she can be your guide and show you where you need to go.” She slipped a ring off, and handed to Susan. “This will be your proof that you come from me.”

Susan gently took it, doing a *Magic Sense* on it in case it was special in some way she should know about. (It was an item worn by royalty, after all.) She felt a low level magical aura around it, but nothing spectacular. “Very well,” she said, slipping it on. “Where do we start?”

“You’ll take a ship to Albion. I’ve already told Louise where she needs to guide you from there.”

“Anything else I should know?” She shook her head. “In that case, how about we get you back? Not that I don’t think you’re safe with me, because you are. But if someone has found out you’re missing...”

Anrietta smiled. “What a good subject you are. Always thinking of the needs of your princess.”

“I live to serve.”

They both laughed again, but Anrietta only for a moment. “Thank you for agreeing to this.” She held up a hand. “I know, you say you get that weird XP out of it you keep mentioning, but I will find some way to reward you for all you have done for the kingdom.”

“What did you do, exactly?” asked Louise.

“She didn’t say?” Anrietta seemed surprised. “Why, she exposed some corrupt nobles, treason in my own ranks, and saved my life all in the span of a day! I can’t believe- no, I can believe it. You didn’t even mention it to them, did you?” She looked Susan over like she was some kind of zoo specimen or rare bug no one had ever seen before. “Can there really be a person, on any world, that does things like that and then tells no one about it?”

Susan shrugged. “When you’ve had as many adventures as I have, it stops being a big deal. I know I did good, that’s all that matters. Oh sure, if someone sees me doing something and thinks it’s cool, fine. But bragging about stuff isn’t my style.”

“Showing off, yes. Bragging, no,” confirmed Sparkle.

“They’re totally separate things.”

“Thank you anyway. It probably seems silly to you, worrying about a letter. But I will rest easier once it’s no longer out there to be found.”

If it wasn’t a letter, it would have been something else, thought Sparkle. The item may change, but the mission? The mission never does.

And so Susan got her back to the throne room as though she had never left, and made arrangements with Louise to leave the next day for the port town of La Nocher. Basically they would fly there, and Susan asked why they couldn’t just fly to the place directly. Louise said that was certainly possible, but it was pretty far away and she was not sleeping outside somewhere when she could be snug on a boat.

“Okay.”

With that, Susan and the others made their way to La Nocher and stayed the night, awaiting the next ship to leave in the morning. Susan was impressed with the boat, which she floated over and looked at while it was still light enough. It turned out not to be a sailing ship, but an airship... which looked exactly like a sailing ship.

I suppose so it could be used in the water? Because honestly that design is totally impractical for a ship that can float in the air. What if the magic failed? Or they went under attack or there was a fire onboard? They can’t land that thing without sustaining super heavy damage to the bottom. If they made it flat, and put some wheels on the bottom, they could land and not have a whole ship to rebuild. Makes no sense to me...

The next morning she had Sparkle wake her up early to go down into the town. She wasn’t worried about getting lost, all she had to do was *Flight* her way back up to the ship, as the inn was right underneath it.

In town she picked up some more little things she could use for *Imbuing* or *Fabrication*, now having a better idea about the cost ratio her magic considered normal. She still had no real plan in mind, but that XP was bothering her. Like money in a savings account that earned no interest, XP sitting there unspent did no one any good.

Oh sure, I could raise my Planet ratings, but with energy I’ve never really felt the need, and I’ve never run out in a fight. Day to day stuff doesn’t even matter, so that’s not a concern. Of course, this all hinges on the fact that I usually end fights within a round or two. What if I met up with someone like me? Remember trying to fight Tom? Fighting myself was terrible, because he could counter my magic with his own. There could be others like him out there, or worlds that don’t have even as many planets as this one! Perhaps I should train with the sword, and make it unbreakable as well. Putting Augment Skill on it, I could get a pretty high rating and depend less on my magic, should it prove unreliable or ineffective. Then if I lose my magic I would still have a weapon. It doesn’t need reloading, and if I have my own skill, the Augment Skill is more just a bonus than anything else.

What to do.

She spent a lot of time on the ship that day staring out and thinking about it. Sparkle sat with her, and Susan turned to her.

"We haven't really done much looking into how we're getting out of here," she remarked. "Does that bother you?"

"Why would it bother me? You're the *PC* here, I'm just the *Companion*. Besides, I think something will come up when it's time to leave."

"Awful big thing to leave up to chance!"

Well, I know a bit more about how the universe really works than you do. But you haven't traveled enough to pick up on it yet, and I swore not to reveal it until you did. Finding out what you really are... it can break some people, according to your father. Better that you figure it out for yourself and ask the question. "I don't think it's chance. I mean, think about it; Hiraga appearing as he did, just when you were traversing the worlds? The odds against that are so small, it just smacks of interference."

"By Darkness or Inari?"

"Who can say? We haven't really seen any evidence of Darkness here, but then, until he tipped his hand on our world we wouldn't have known. Either way, I don't think your being here is an accident. I mean your very attitude about leaving confirms it, in a way. Sure, we looked into a little, and they don't really have the magic we would need to leave, but that was the end of it. You just accepted it and we've been going on adventures ever since. That suggests *purpose*. Like there's something you need to do here."

"Our foe is unlike anything I've known. Perhaps I needed more XP, a lot more, before I faced him. Maybe that's why I'm here, and why Luna was taken away. Even if I make it to another world, and get back to Inari's place, I still have to look for her. That means more worlds and more adventures."

"True. It begs the question- can we really fight beings that view entire realities as just marbles?"

"We couldn't kill that water spirit, right? But we could cause it pain, and drive it back. Perhaps if enough people like my father and me step up, we can make him think twice about this invasion plan of his. Make the cost too high for him to continue."

"I hope so. Besides, you've gotten some clues that there is a way back. From Siesta, of all people. A random maid you happened to meet, thought was cute, and got to know. I mean of all the maids in that place, you pick the one that *happens* to have ancestry from beyond this world? I think that's to keep you looking and show you the path, when you need it and your purpose is done here."

"It all makes sense when you explain it. Glad to have you along my old friend!"

"Nowhere I would rather be."

In the end, she decided to hold off, and just keep accumulating XP for now. She wanted the full range of her abilities to draw from, so making a hasty decision here might cost her later. Sure, it seemed like she had a lot of XP, but making an item or two would make that disappear quite quickly.

And I'm not helpless. I can always call upon my soldiers to fight for me. With my new trick I can make an item really fast, so let's get back to Inari's place and see what she thinks is best. She knows the kinds of worlds out there, so she would be invaluable to figure out what was most useful across all of them.

In any event, it didn't matter because the journey only took a day, and Susan and the others headed to a church out in the countryside. They walked in, but Susan didn't see anyone about.

"Are you sure this is the place?" she asked.

Suddenly, a bunch of armored figures, with weird looking swords and helmets, jumped out from behind the pillars of the church and stood ready. The swords they were holding weren't even swords, they were rods with hand guards. The end wasn't even pointy, it was flat, meaning stabbing someone with one probably wasn't going to work very well.

I suppose they could be magic?

One in particular strode up to them.

"I am here by order of Princess Anrietta," she announced, holding the ring up. "State your intentions or suffer the consequences."

"We'll see about that," said the figure, bringing his own hand up. On his finger was a similar ring, in red. He held it near the other ring and a flash of light jumped between them.

"Is that what that spell is? How disappointing. I knew it was a weak spell but that's just silly."

"Really?" asked the figure, putting his arm down and taking his helmet off. "And who are you, to be so young but still so jaded?"

"Susan Felton. And you are?"

"Wales Tudor. You have the princess's ring. If you seek me, then you have found me."

Moments later, in the back of the church, Susan handed Wales a letter from the princess. *I just hope I'm not retrieving that one later, as well. But hopefully she didn't sign her name to this one.*

He briefly read it, then went over to a drawer where he pulled out a similar envelope. "This is the letter she speaks of," he said sadly.

"Excellent!" said Susan, looking around the room. The nearest candle was right there on the table, so she held it to the flame until it burned to ash.

"Hey!" said Louise as it caught fire. "You can't just-"

Susan silenced her with a look. "You heard the princess. This is total blackmail material. Why would I allow it to leave this room? She was very concerned about it falling into the wrong hands, I have now made sure that is an impossibility."

"I suppose that is for the best," admitted Wales.

"Anything I can do for you?" Susan asked. "Otherwise I'll just be heading back, I guess."

"No, I don't-" The ground shook, or maybe just the building, like something heavy just hit it. "What was that?"

"Prince," yelled a man, barging into the room. "We're under attack by a huge golem!"

First Shots

Place: Outside the Church

Time: Seconds later

Susan and Sparkle immediately began casting as Wales grabbed up his sword and Hiraga drew his.

“Time for a real test of what this sword can do!” he said, grinning.

Louise looked doubtful. “Want me to hang back?”

“Why? Always something that needs exploding in a fight,” replied Susan, after she finished *Invulnerability*. “You need the practice too, and in this case we want something blown up.”

“Okay.”

Susan and Sparkle were *Accelerated* as normal, and Susan grabbed up a candle with an evil grin. *I should wear an onion on my belt, which was the style at the time, so I always have something to switch things with. Ah well.*

The group ran out into the field in front of the church, where a huge construct made of rock was again pounding the side of the building. Standing in front of the door was the traitor, Jean-Jacques, and five soldiers in armor backed him.

“Ah, thought if we followed you it would lead somewhere interesting. Wales, I’ve found you at last!”

“Don’t know what good it’ll do you,” snarked Susan. “Look around. No castle to throw at me this time.”

Jean-Jacques raised his sword. “Ah, it is you. How did you escape from that, by the way?”

“I have a better question. How exactly do you intend to fight us?”

He barked a laugh. “Have you seen me fight?”

Louise, the shortest and slowest character, burst from the doors and stopped dead. “Jean-Jacques? What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Ah, our wayward Louise. Is our marriage still on?”

Susan looked over at her, and she was blushing up a storm. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Uh, that’s the treasonous fellow who threw part of a castle wall at me and nearly killed the princess. Of course you know him, why wouldn’t you?”

“That was you?” she screeched. “You’re a traitor to the crown?”

“Perhaps I don’t believe in that crown anymore. Perhaps I believe in something greater.”

“Like what?” Susan demanded.

“Beat me, and maybe I’ll tell you.”

“Fine.”

He laughed again. “With a candle?”

“Take a look at your sword. Now back to me. Now back to your sword.” Susan cast *Transposition* instantly, getting a sixteen, while Jean-Jacques got a 12 (despite spending 7 energy on *REsolve*, poor guy). He was now holding the candle and she was holding the sword. “Now back to me. What’s in your hand? I have it, it’s your sword, and you’re holding a candle. I’m on a horse!”

He looked down at the candle in his hand. "Attack!" he shouted, angrily throwing the candle down.

Susan and Sparkle rolled Initiative as the five soldiers in front of them charged. "*Elemental Line (Wind)*," Sparkle cast, weaving the line in front of the soldiers, then back on itself to strike out directly at Jean-Jacques. He had started forward, but somehow saw the line and jumped away from it, unharmed.

"*Thrust*," cast Susan, targeting him as he was off balance from the dodge. He leaned into it and that -3 worked against her again, he didn't go flying as she intended.

"Man, we're really striking out here, Sparkle."

"Tell me about it. This is so humiliating."

The construct took a step towards them, and Louise raised her wand. "Explosion!" she shouted, and the impact tore into the creature's chest, ripping part of it away.

"Nice!" said Susan, looking over there.

"I was aiming for the head!"

Sparke held, now maintaining the *Line* and *Acceleration*. She figured the first soldier over the thing would be in for a nasty shock, and she didn't want to deny him the experience.

The first soldier that was going to cross the line got a reprieve, as Wales raised his sword and shot a bolt of wind at him, striking his right arm and spinning him around.

Aw!

"*Lubricate*," cast Susan, targeting the ground under Jean-Jacques, who was still several meters away. She got a 15 total, knocking over half of the people currently over that way. Jean-Jacques stayed up.

Wind erupted from the line as one of the soldiers touched it, knocking him backwards in a spray of blood. He went down and didn't get back up.

Hiraga turned towards the construct, and dashed forward quickly, rune on his hand glowing.

Jean-Jacques, careful to avoid the line and falling down, made his way to the soldier that was down to grab his sword.

We can't have that, now can we? Susan asked herself, looking around. *Ah!* She cast Transposition against the sword and a boot from the only soldier still up and running. The soldier did not manage to resist losing his boot, and he found a sword in place of it. He went sprawling, and hit the line, which again triggered a massive blast of wind, killing him instantly. Jean-Jacques looked at the boot and back over to Susan. "Stop doing that!" he called over to her.

By this time, the construct and Hiraga had met, and Hiraga nicked the thing's leg. He did his maximum damage to it, an eight, but that was divided by three so it didn't amount to much.

Louise sent another "*Explosion*" its way, blowing another chunk off the body.

The prince shot wind at one of the soldiers on the ground, smashing into the guy's helmet and throwing him backwards. Three of the five soldiers were now unmoving, and Jean-Jacques realized that, in short order it might be five. He was still unarmed, and Susan was eyeing him, as if daring him to make a move towards another weapon.

"I'll get you yet, just you wait," he cried, pulling a vial of liquid from beneath his cloak. Susan had actually been holding for several segments, waiting for him to try something. She dropped *Invulnerability*, shrugged, and cast *Transposition* again, trying to give him the candle back and cause the vial to go off into the grass somewhere. She didn't beat his RESolve check this time, so he popped the cork and drank it down.

Shoot.

One of the soldiers was trying to see where the line was, to see if he could edge around it. Sparkle hadn't done anything since the line, so she went ahead and cast *Thrust* on him, knocking him off his feet and throwing him back nine meters. He barely missed a tree and slammed into the ground, snapping his right arm and causing him to scream in pain.

"So brutal," remarked Jean-Jacques, starting to fade away.

"As if you wouldn't have done the same to us!" Susan countered.

"Oh, bet on it. I'll repay you in kind, somehow."

The last soldier standing saw his boss fading away and decided he would get out of there the only way he knew how, and took off running.

With Jean-Jacques all but disappeared, the two native magic users turned their attention to the construct and started pelting it with wind and explosions. Sparkle recast the line, surrounding them all in case Jean-Jacques decided to sneak up on them from behind while invisible (or whatever he had done). She then joined in with *Destruction*, once again targeting the thing's legs while Susan almost lazily cast *Shrink* on it again.

Miss Longbill, or whatever her name was, saw she was once again going to lose and threw up a huge cloud of dust, converting what was left of her golem even as it shrank. This allowed her to get away while the others waited for the dust to settle.

"I can't believe they got away again!" groused Susan. "I should have slapped *Immobilize* on the guy right off, rather than showing off with *Transposition*."

"You were having a little too much fun with that spell," remarked Sparkle.

"At least I got his sword." She gave it an experimental wave. "If you can call this a sword, anyway."

"I can't believe it," said Louise with a shake of her head. "My fiancée was actually a traitor to the kingdom."

"Yes, let's talk about that," said Susan, rounding on her. "How did this happen?"

"It was something our parents set up," she insisted, waving her hands in front of her. "That's all. I haven't seen him for months! Honest."

"Arranged marriages? Great."

"I can't be out in the open like this," said Wales. "I need to gather my men and find a new place to hide."

"Sorry about this, I guess we brought them here, however unintentionally."

"And help drive them away again. For that, I thank you. It seems the situation in the kingdoms is deteriorating faster than I thought, if they are willing to attack a prince in broad daylight like this. Give my love to Anrietta."

With that, he turned and went back into the church.

"Guess that's our cue to leave as well," said Susan. "All aboard the Susan train."

"This sword still doesn't pack enough punch," complained Hiraga. "Is there

anything else you can do about it?"

"Using *Imbuing* on a *Fabricated* weapon is possible, of course. The difficulty just goes up, meaning more hours of work. Plus I'm not sure what I know that would help."

"Maybe *Augment STRength*?" asked Sparkle. "I know that one, but I still don't think it'll help against something like that."

"Yeah, it's a creature made of solid rock. You can't expect too much, even from the sharpest sword in existence."

"It's also partially held together by magic, that makes it harder to damage," added Louise.

"Oh. Still..."

"We can talk about this later. Come on."

"Wait, what about the injured?" asked Sparkle.

Susan blinked. "You're right, I didn't even think about them. I'm used to you using *Knockout*, not *Wind*. I expected them to get up again." She looked them over. "I think the ones that hit the line are pretty far gone. And they are technically enemies of the kingdom. Can we help them, ethically?"

"I've never really killed anything with my magic before," remarked Sparkle sadly.

"Yeah. I mean I shot Tom, I was prepared for that. This... this is different. But they would have killed us, right?"

"Yeah. They were just doing their job, they couldn't know what my *Line* would do to them. I kind of feel bad, now. But I didn't have any choice, right?"

"It's just, I don't know. It doesn't feel real, does it? Like they weren't people, just an obstacle for me to overcome. You think it's because of The Darkness inside me?"

"Maybe. I guess there isn't anything we can do. Someone will find them and take care of it, I guess."

"Yeah. Nothing we can do."

Susan opened her *Teleportal* and they went back to the school.

The next day, Susan brought all of them to the castle and reported to the princess that the letter had been destroyed. However, she noticed the princess seemed distracted, even distant.

"Is there something else I can help you with, Anrietta?"

"This hasn't been widely announced, so don't go spreading it around. But it seems the kingdom of Albion has been subjugated and renamed Reconquista. A man named Oliver Cromwell used a combination of magic, political power, and raw force to overthrow the royal family. It seems they are not waiting around, as reports place soldiers in that area moving to converge on this one. By tomorrow, it seems I must contend with my kingdom being at war."

"Wasn't that prince we saw yesterday from there?" asked Hiriga.

Anrietta nodded. "He was driven from the castle, that's why he was out hiding in the wilderness, where you found him. He's the only surviving member of the royal family."

"At least he's still alive, out there fighting," said Susan.

"I do take some comfort in that. When you first came in here, I feared the worst, that he had been killed. I had the most horrible premonition of that last night, but you say he was fine when you left him."

"That he was. And he had a squad of loyal men with him, so I'm sure he'll be fine. Princess, I can't fight a war for you, but you know my magic is at your command."

She gave a wan smile. "That means a lot to me."

Louise went down on one knee again. *She's always doing that.* "My magic as well, such as it is."

"What, explosions in a pitched battle? Yeah, that could never be useful."

"Will you stay here, in the place? At least for tonight. There will be a meeting tomorrow about what to do, and I'd like your input. I know you can just make it here, but you should at least get a little bit of a reward for all your hard work. Live like a princess for a day!"

Susan laughed. "You drive a hard bargain, Anrietta. We'll stay."

She seemed a bit relieved, and told them she would have rooms prepared. They took their leave and went to go back.

The next day, Susan and the others went to the meeting, and she saw an older version of Anrietta sitting next to her. *Oh, duh, of course she has a mother. I wonder what happened to her father?*

Also around the table were various nobles, and soldiers stood at attention in the four corners of the room.

"We're bringing children into this meeting? No wonder this country is going downhill," remarked a man with a wispy mustache, dressed in green. The man was dressed in green, not his mustache, just to be clear.

"These are my personal-" Anrietta started to say.

"Bodyguards," finished Susan. "And anyone who doesn't like it can fight any one of us, one on one, for that honor instead. Of course, you'll probably die, but..."

"Bodyguards?" he sneered.

Susan walked over to him, looking him straight in the eye. "Yes."

"Okay, okay, just checking. Can we get this meeting started already?"

The nobles were concerned that the attacking country seemed superior in terms numerical advantage. They counseled sending diplomats into Reconquista to try and negotiate some kind of neutrality agreement.

"What do you suggest?" Anrietta asked Susan.

"Do we know this Oliver's motive?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" asked a noble dressed in red.

"Just recently I attacked and drove off a water spirit, because I didn't understand why it was doing the thing it was doing. If I had found that out, the whole conflict could have been avoided. Until we know why this is happening, we won't be able to properly counter it. Perhaps he wants something that just happens to be on the other side of your country, and if we didn't fight him, he would be happy to leave us alone. Perhaps he wants to conquer the world, in which case if we take him out, the war is over. You see? Two different goals, two very different responses from us."

"Let's say he does want to conquer the world. How would you handle that?" asked a man in purple.

"If that's the case, you need friends, and fast. Travel to other kingdoms for soldiers and present a unified front. If that's not practical, you'll have to fight in a totally

different way than he does. You say he has the numbers, that's huge in war. Okay, turn that into a disadvantage. Don't strike at them, strike at the supply train. Deny them water. Have mages turn the land into a swamp, or too rocky for wagons to travel on. I've seen one mage raise a huge Earth Golem, hire mages that can do that to provide cover for your front lines. Get creative, because you're going to have to take out several of his guys for every one of your soldiers you lose just to stay in the running."

Several people nodded, it was true.

"Very well," said the princess. "Susan has often told me that the strength of the kingdom lies in the strength of the people's belief in its leaders. I will head the defense force personally, and inspire my people with my example. Meanwhile, do as Susan recommends. Send your diplomats to the new empire, see what they want from us. If that can be learned, perhaps this war can be cut short."

The meeting went on, deciding how best to supply their own soldiers and other mundane things Susan didn't care about. They also talked about how best to utilize magic, which Susan was glad to hear. *You have it, use it, that's my motto.*

Susan was contemplating making an item to maintain *Invulnerability* for her when there was a frantic pounding on her door. She hadn't yet returned to the school, Anrietta having insisted on her staying at least for dinner. Sparkle looked up as she opened it to see a soldier standing there.

"Urgent message from the princess," he told her. "An enemy ship has been sighted in the air over the kingdom! The princess demands your presence immediately."
I doubt she said it like that, but okay.

Susan and the others followed the man, and he led them out to the field behind the castle. There, rows of troops were getting ready to ride to meet this new threat.

"Only one ship?" asked Susan. "That doesn't seem like an invading army. More like a mercenary group that somehow got hold of a ship. Are you sure it's from this new kingdom?"

"We think so. Nevertheless, we have to check it out."

"I just hope it isn't part of a faint, designed to lure soldiers away from the where the real fight is going to take place."

"It's a good thing I have you then, isn't it?"

Susan smirked. "I guess I could open a hole in the air for you, if you asked nicely. But I've only been a couple of places around here. We may need to go in totally the opposite direction."

"It's the town of Talb, have you been there?"

"Okay, that's just stupid," replied Susan. She turned to Sparkle. "What are the odds that one ship, probably all that we could reasonably take down, would show up in the one place I happened to have visited? Does that make sense to you?"

"I suppose it does in the larger context."

"Larger... What does that mean?"

"Don't worry about it for now. Just accept it as a bizarre coincidence."

"I guess I have no choice but to do that very thing. Okay, I'll put us right outside the village, everyone get ready to ride through. *Teleportal!*" Susan made it as large as she could, and watched as soldiers on horseback poured through.

"This magic could change the nature of war," remarked Anrietta, watching her soldiers go through. "With this, even numerical superiority wouldn't mean much, as an entire country's worth of soldiers could be brought to wherever the action was. Fresh, because they didn't have to march there. Or insert strike teams behind enemy lines. Or just dump lava on a town from above."

"Yup, that's all true," agreed Susan. "Aren't you glad I'm on your side." She nodded vigorously.

Susan and the others watched the ship approach, and Susan waited for the other shoe to drop. It was just a standard sailing ship, converted however they did in into something that would float, and sailed here. It had some cannons on the side, true, but it was made of wood. *Couldn't one fire mage just blow the whole thing up? From here, even?*

"Guess we'll capture it," she said, shrugging.

"Capture? Are you crazy?" yelled Louise.

"Hey, if they're stupid enough to come here with no backup, no troops, no nothing, it's our duty to make them regret that mistake for a very long time. What better way than to capture a powerful military asset like this ship? They can't be that easy to make."

"Can you do it?" asked Anrietta.

"I don't see why not. The four of us-"

"Five. I'm coming too."

"If you're sure that's wise. Okay, the five of us, made *Invulnerable*, and possibly *Accelerated* if you think you can manage five, Sparkle? Plus all the soldiers I can whistle up in an instant. We'll be back for tea."

"Then cast your spells and let's go. We have a ship to take down."

15

Ship

Place: The air above the village of Talb

Time: Moments later

Susan and Sparkle put in maximum time and energy casting their two spells, and both went off perfectly. Susan then put *Flight* on the group and they took the sky.

“Follow us and take care of any aerial support they have aboard,” Anrietta commanded her forces. “Ground troops, stand by in case we fail to take the ship. Bring it down by any means necessary.”

They gave a cry and the five were off. They were now hovering above the ship, looking down. It seemed everyone there was in a panic, as they probably didn't understand where all these soldiers had come from. *Wanted to sneak in quietly, huh? Thought maybe you could take a few villages out, soften the kingdom up for a surrender? Not while I'm around. Wait, what is this ship still doing here? Or was it just coming this way and someone got back to the castle fast enough to report it, gather these forces here, and then we just happened to get here before it passed? These people don't have telephones, how long does a message take to get from one end of the kingdom to another? And these people would have had to ride out here. This ship would have been long gone.*

I don't get it. Of course they could have a magical communication network of some kind around here I just haven't seen.

“Wait here a second, I'll get things set up. Come on, Sparkle. No holding back now.”

“You got it. *Ally?*”

“*Ally*. Let them do the work, our penalty will be pretty high.”

“That's for sure.”

“Here we go.”

Susan slammed into the deck of the ship, going to one knee. Sparkle sat calmly on her shoulder. *Oh yeah, I look so cool right now.* She raised her head and called into the silence that followed. “I am here to accept your surrender! Fight me, and die.” The soldiers started laughing. *Okay, you had your chance.* “For sacrifices made.”

Suddenly, they weren't laughing anymore as twenty five soldiers made of fire appeared in a ring around Susan. “Sweep through the ship,” she called to them. “Kill anyone that fights against you.” It was poor orders to give, but Susan figured rather than try to micro-manage them, she would rely on a soldiers' instinct to attack things to make sure they engaged the right people. If someone got smart and just didn't attack, her *Legion* would pass them by. *Couldn't be helped. Any other orders might result in one of my team getting attacked, and I don't want that.*

They moved, driving the soldiers there back. The others landed in the space and joined the battle, as they were able. Hiraga darted forward and started cutting up soldiers. Anrietta started casting magic, and Louise sent *Explosions* into their midst, further confusing them. Susan dropped *Flight* and began to cast again, *Magical Ally*,

Major, putting in the extra 4 segments to counteract their penalties from already active magic. A dragon and a lion appeared, and stayed with their respective person to protect them. One of the enemy dragons landed nearby and Susan's tore it apart with hardly any effort.

As her forces were sweeping the ship, she moved about, looking for survivors. After someone could no longer fight one of her soldiers they lost interest and went looking for someone else. So very few were actually dead, but all were majorly wounded. Susan directed those that wanted to surrender or were badly hurt to the front of the ship, where Sparkle's lion could keep an eye on them. She felt confident (or *Overconfident*) enough to leave the dragon and go looking for survivors on lower decks, and she was marching them up with her sword drawn one at a time.

Of course she had no idea, at the moment, how to *use* a sword. But after being beaten up by a woman made of fire, if someone else comes along and points a sword at you, shouting "Move!" you listen to them. She had come back down and was rounding a corner when she ran into a clean shaven man wearing green, who had a very feminine hairstyle.

"You," he spat, raising a fist and showing her a ring. "You're the cause of all this, aren't you? You're the one with the strange magic, who called up those fire golems!"

"How perceptive."

"Now you're going to work for me!" The ring started to flash, and Susan made a RESolve check against some kind of *Dominate* effect. She spent ten energy on her RESolve check, getting a thirty one, easily enough to shrug off anything this world could throw at her.

"Shiny," she said, looking him in the eye.

"What?"

"I'ma take it."

"What?!"

With that she grabbed the ring out of her pocket that she was bought in case she wanted to *Imbue* it and cast *Transposition*, switching the ring for the ring. She missed it by one, and decided as she had gotten an *XP Bonus* card at the beginning of this adventure, she was still up even spending one for the +2. She spent it, and the rings switched, the one in her hand going out.

She put it in her pocket.

"Give that back!" shouted the man, going to grab her.

"Make me!" she said, skipping past him, her *Acceleration* making it easy to slip past him. She bolted back up the stairs, and he followed, running smack dab into her dragon, who had been told to wait. She spun back to him.

"Surrender, and go sit with the others," she demanded, pointing her sword at the man. "You have no chance to survive, otherwise. Make your time."

"This isn't over," he snarled, turning and following her command. "You may have captured me, but the war will go on."

"Oh, you're an important one, are you? That's good to know." They climbed onto the deck, and Susan looked for her *Companion*. "Sparkle, keep an extra close watch on this one, he thinks he's important."

"Will do."

Moments later, the rest of the group came back up from below and said the ship was under their command. They were going to fly it back to the castle where the prisoners could be put under guard, and see what else the newly establish kingdom wanted to give them as a present. There were going to pick up their forces, which apparently had been battling Miss Longbill and Louise's "buddy" on the ground, and had taken some losses. Both had, of course, once again escaped.

"This guy seems to have an inflated idea of his own importance, not unlike myself. Of course in my case it's deserved, but the point is, he was wearing this and tried to do something to me with it."

She pulled out the ring.

"That's Andvari's Ring, at least I think!" exclaimed Anrietta.

"Oh yeah?" Susan looked it over. "Actually, now that I look at it, this does seem to match the description. How about that, I can keep my promise to the Water Spirit earlier than I thought."

"That ring wouldn't have gone to anyone low ranking. Who are you?" demanded Anrietta.

"Oliver Cromwell," he said sadly.

Susan burst out laughing. "Wait, what? You were really stupid enough to come here, by yourself, with no backup, no soldiers, apart from what you could fit on one boat? How in the world did you think it was going to go? That you would just sail to the capital, announce who you were, and everyone would just welcome you? Honestly, you cannot be that dumb."

"It made sense at the time."

"I bet. Well, I guess we'll have to see if this really does end it or not. If someone was pulling his strings, and just wanted him out of the way now that they didn't need him anymore, that would explain why he's here. In that case the war isn't over, and we need to get back and continue preparations. If it was just him, which I doubt, this war is over before it began."

"You haven't won, if that's what you think."

"Really? We'll see. Meanwhile, there's a more important question here. One that needs to be answered before we go anywhere."

"What's that?" asked Anrietta, concerned.

"What am I going to call my new ship?"

They both laughed.

Sadly, the war continued, though Reconquista seemed in a bit more turmoil with the loss of a battleship and their "leader." Susan and the others remained at the palace, ready to be called upon again if it became necessary.

"How did the blade do against just regular troops?" asked Susan when they had a moment.

"Great!" Hiraga exclaimed. "I mostly went for their blades, which the sword smashed right through. They didn't have much fight in them after that. Plus they couldn't really hurt me, so they gave up pretty quickly."

"All right, so it was worth the effort. That's good to know. After fighting that stupid rock creature so much, it must have been nice to go against regular soldiers for a

change.”

“Especially when it looked like they were moving in slow motion compared to me.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve never had *Acceleration* on you, have you? I’m so used to it now, I take it for granted everyone moves slower than me in combat. Anyway, keep practicing, this situation might get worse before it gets better.”

With war fever in full swing, Susan had some down time at last, and started putting some points into *Sword: Slashing*. She also took a trip back to the lake, and stood there wondering how to get the ring back to the water spirit.

“How did that girl do it the first time?” asked Sparkle, looking around.

“I think she smeared some blood on her familiar, who went down into the water. I guess we could try that.”

“Wouldn’t hurt. Okay, just a second.”

Sparkle became a frog with *Shape-shift* and Susan used her knife to get some blood. She stabbed it into her leg and slowly drew it out. The wound healed behind it, but she was able to collect some blood off it and wipe it on Sparkle’s back. “I’ll be right back.”

Shortly, the waterspout was back, and Susan held up the ring.

“As promised, I return this to you.” *Don’t lose it next time.*

“You kept your promise? I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it. Should I just toss it in the water?”

“That would be acceptable.”

Susan gave it a toss, and it plunked into the lake. She watched it sink, and it vanished out of sight.

When she looked up, the waterspout was gone as well.

“You’re welcome,” she said sarcastically. “Come on, let’s go back.”

Several days had passed, and it seemed the country of Reconquista wasn’t taking the loss of its leader laying down. They continued to mobilize troops, and the princess was crowned as queen. The country officially declared war, and the boys in the school were getting ready to leave and become soldiers.

With the school empty of boys, Susan thought things might become less interesting, but Sparkle perked up her ears the next day and said something was going on. Susan looked up from the notes she was making about *Avatar of War*, the spell she was researching. It was grade eight, so one higher than *Invulnerability*, but seemed much more useful. She stood up and looked out the window.

Outside, in the courtyard, the girls were all standing in pairs and seemed to be trying to hit each other with a staff that had a cloth bag tied to the end, blunting it. “Oh, this should be good.”

Susan went down to see what the heck this was all about (she had *Curious*, after all) and walked over to Hiraga.

“What’s this all about?” she asked, jerking a thumb back at the girls.

“Training, I guess. Apparently the queen has sent some soldiers here to prepare the girls for any eventual attack.”

Susan looked over and saw several people in uniform- no, as she took a look she

saw it was several *women* in uniform. In fact it was only women here, and they carried both a gun and a sword.

Wait, a gun?

“They have gunpowder here?” she asked, surprised.

“Apparently.”

One of the girls came over to them. “Who are you?” she demanded of Susan.

“Susan Felton. You’re here to train these girls, huh? Wouldn’t teaching them how to shoot be better than teaching them how to poke someone with a stick?”

“Oh, you know about guns?” she asked, surprised. “They’re relatively new, too.”

“May I?” she asked, holding a hand out.

“I... suppose?” She unholstered the pistol and held it out.

“Look at this!” she squealed, showing it to Hiraga. “It’s muzzle loading! Can you imagine fighting with something like this?”

Hiraga looked it over with a grin. “That’s where it begins, though, isn’t it? How long until they have modern firearms? The balance of power might change big time, then.”

Susan nodded, looking the gun over. It was obviously a flintlock pistol, single shot, firing a lead ball none too accurately. Made of wood and steel, and probably hand made because the assembly line hadn’t been invented yet that she could see. To her, a museum piece, but to the owner, the latest in “you die now” technology.

“What do you mean, modern?” snapped the woman, taking the pistol back. “This is the latest design.”

“They’ve gone a bit further where we’re from,” Susan explained.

“Oh? Do tell.”

“Nope!” Susan answered brightly. “Not giving you technological advances hundreds of years early. You want a better gun, come up with it yourself. I won’t be the one responsible for throwing your world into chaos by letting peasants rise up and destroy magic users. And that’s exactly what I can see happening, once you have guns that don’t need thirty seconds to reload.”

“Fifteen!”

“Whatever.”

“I still don’t know who you are. You wear odd clothes, same as this girl here, and what are you doing here, anyway?” she asked Hiraga. “I thought all men were conscripted into the war effort.”

“I’m not a citizen of the country, so that doesn’t apply to me. Susan and I came from other worlds. I’m a Familiar Spirit, technically, while she just happened to come here by accident.”

“And can you fight?”

Both shrugged. “Sure,” they answered.

“I’ve even started to put points into my sword skill,” said Susan, “in case I run low on energy in a protracted battle. And I’m researching a spell you might like, Hiraga. I think it’ll serve better than what I gave you at the ship.”

“Looking forward to it! A better spell than that one must be pretty special!”

“If you can fight, show me,” said the woman, unconvinced. She walked over to grab some wooden swords that were laying out of the way.

“I need a real weapon,” protested Hiraga.

“Not for this, you don’t,” countered Susan. “You need to increase your stamina, remember? This is a good opportunity to do it.”

“What about you, then?”

Susan shook her head. “It doesn’t work that way for me. Besides, I already have an eight ENDurance. I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. I only have 38 XP and I would need 45. I suppose I could increase STrength, that would only take 20.”

“What are you two babbling about? Pick up those swords!”

“You’re not the boss ‘o me,” said Susan. “Totally pointless anyway. I don’t get better at things by repetition. And he doesn’t count as a teacher, so it wouldn’t even help me spend XP faster. He might get some benefit out of it, but I better make him something a little closer to what he normally uses.”

“Why?” Hiraga asked.

“You don’t want to train with a weapon of the wrong type. You’ll get used to the way that kind of sword feels in your hand, and then get confused when you go back to the katana. Better to have a wooden katana and practice with that.”

“Oh, that’s a fair point.”

“Hang on.” Susan took a minute and a half, and handed Hiraga a wooden replica of his sword. “There you go. I can *Repair* it when it gets too banged up. Just come see me.”

“I will, thanks.”

“A sword with a curved blade? Interesting.”

“It’s the style of my country. I guess as she was nice enough to make this for me, we’re doing this.”

Susan stepped back and the woman brought her practice blade up too. And then easily disarmed him.

“Maybe you should just run around the perimeter to get your stamina up,” Susan remarked.

“Maybe that is best,” he agreed from on the ground where he had fallen over after being disarmed.

“That won’t improve his sword arm, though,” she remarked, pulling her blade back and letting him up. “Swinging a blade around is hard work. How about I take you through some forms first, and you can do them over and over. Even a wooden blade will give you some sense of how long you can go in a fight.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She put Hiraga through his paces, then told him to continue repeating those motions until he couldn’t move anymore. Susan was watching the girls flail about uselessly on the field, and turned back to the woman.

“Never did get your name,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Agnes, captain of the squad.”

“Nice to meet you. I couldn’t help but notice you’re all girls here. Isn’t there a war on? I figured you would be at the front lines as well, or at least there would be some guys in your company.”

Her face darkened. “The princess- the queen is too soft. She believes war is no business for a woman and sends us to do... this sort of thing, instead.” She indicated

the mages.

“Yes, this is rather thankless work, isn’t it? In reality, shouldn’t they be training in battle magic, rather than sticks?”

Agnes snorted. “Do you know how easy it is to disarm a mage, and turn them into someone with no more magic than myself?”

Susan laughed out loud. “You sound like me. I said the exact same thing once, to a bunch of wand using wizards. How about that?”

“And were you preparing them for war?”

“I was, actually. I had them learn martial arts or swordsmanship in addition to their magic. Not that it would have helped, against the creatures they ultimately faced. But I think they were better fighters for it. Still, they should learned unarmed, rather than stick, I mean if you’re worried about them not being mages during an attack.”

“It’s more about training the mind than the body. Readyng them to defend themselves. One thing at a time.”

She nodded. “You’re probably right. There was one difference, between my students and yours.”

“What’s that?”

“My students came to me, and wanted to learn. Your students were forced into it. And no-one wants to be forced into anything. So they’ll only do this halfheartedly, and resent you the whole time.”

“Perhaps. Or are you suggesting something?”

“You have to motivate them. Either stage some kind of ‘attack’ that deprives them of their wands and hope no one gets hurt, or offer some kind of prize to the person that improves the most. That second one I might be able to help with.”

“You have something?”

“Not this second, but for the winner? Hey everyone!” she called. “Stop a minute!” Everyone turned to look at her.

“We’ve decided to make this a little competition! Every day you train like this, you get a chance to face the captain here in combat. First person to touch her with your weapon, oh, three times, I’ll make you a magical item. Any piece of jewelry you bring me, I’ll put a spell into it. That spell will allow you to tell, without fail, if someone is lying to you. Think that might be useful?”

There was a buzzing of chatter as the girls talked about it, and Susan would have heard the word “boys” and such if she didn’t have that *Poor Sense (Hearing)* weakness. In any case, they all nodded and accepted the deal, then went back to banging each other with the sticks. This time a bit more wholeheartedly.

“That might actually have worked,” remarked Agnes, as Susan walked back over to her. “You can really do it, right?”

“What, the item? Sure. I’m not a liar. It’s a pretty low level spell, but useful. Wait, you’re not going to actually lose to any of these girls, are you?”

“I should hope not,” she snorted.

“Okay. Hummm, maybe I should offer you some incentive, too? But you’re more a fighter, aren’t you? Okay, how about this? If you can go a whole week without getting hit once, I’ll make you an item that you can activate and stagger an opponent’s senses. That’ll keep them off balance and may even save your life one day. How does that sound?”

“You would do that for me?”

“Hey, I’m offering them a prize, it’s only fair if I offer you one, too. Maybe an earring,” she said, reaching up to touch Agnes’ ear. “I bet earrings would look pretty on you, and that way you would always have it with you.”

To her surprise, Agnes blushed and looked away. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. I have spell research to get back to, so come tell me how it goes. And no cheating, if you don’t get attacked that day doesn’t count. You have to do seven days of them trying before I’ll make it.”

“See you later.”

“Bye!”

She’s cute when she’s embarrassed. When I get back I’ll have to write a thank you note to Slughorn. I never took his potions class, but Hermione told me about his little “challenges” and how they motivated the class to succeed. Did she ever use that luck potion? She sighed. Wonder what you’re doing right now, Hermoine.

“Back to work!”

That morning, with only three days to go until Susan could see if she had gotten her magical symbology right for *Avatar of War*, she looked for the others at breakfast. She first looked for Siesta, but found neither her favorite maid nor her friends.

She started to get worried.

As no one she spoke to had seen them leave, she went to the principal's office. "Yes, apparently her family wanted her to come home," he admitted. "We can't exactly keep people here against their family's will, so she's gone. They left early this morning."

"And Siesta?"

"Who?"

"My friend, she works here as a maid! I can't find her either."

"Oh, I have no idea. For them to disappear at the same time, well, I'm sure they're together."

"I hope so. I guess no one would steal a maid..." *Except for that one guy, who did. But he did go through official channels. Unless he wanted to attack me indirectly, get some revenge? I hope you're okay, Siesta.*

As the principal wasn't worried, and Susan had no idea where Louise lived, there wasn't much she could do. She went back to magical research, having cut the number of days by three thanks to Sparkle's *Photographic Memory*. (She had rolled a KNOWledge check, and for every five rolled, the number of days decreased by one. Not exactly in the standard rules, but it makes sense, so this Narrator is going with it) So Susan was always asking her to look things over, and help with whatever it was she exactly did that used up "materials" while trying to work the spell out anew.

After her daily eight hours of work (with breaks of course) she decided to wander out to the field and see how the girls were doing with their training. They seemed somewhat improved, and while she watched, several of them challenged Agnes to try and win the *Detect Lies* item. Agnes was using a sword, making Susan wonder about exactly how fair that was, but she was a swordswoman, after all. *And I never specified they had to use the same weapon.*

Flushed and sweaty, Agnes dismissed them, and sheathed her sword. She noticed Susan standing there, and called her over.

"Pay up," she said triumphantly, smiling.

"Not even once, huh?"

"That's right. I'm actually glad you suggested this little exercise. I've been getting a good workout these last two days, so I hope it keeps up. These girls are still hopeless, of course, but at least they have a little bit of motivation now."

"Glad to hear it. A deal is a deal. Come to my room tomorrow morning and we'll go shopping for what you want me put the spell into."

She blushed. "I'll have to get them pierced, you know, if it's earrings."

Susan shook her head. "Doesn't have to be. Could be a ring. Necklace. Ankle bracelet, whatever. I was just saying I think you would look good... sorry, better with earrings. I noticed some of your fellow soldiers wearing them, so I know it's not prohibited."

"I'll... think about it."

That evening, Susan went back to the castle to get out some more money, again minor denominations. She hadn't even spent 10 gold of her bounty. *Stupid needing materials for this stuff is stupid.* She did take out two gold coins though, because what she had in mind would probably be expensive.

The next day, Susan was surprised to see someone she didn't recognize for a moment standing in front of her door, looking a bit embarrassed. "Agnes?"

"I didn't want to be clunking around in my armor, now did I?"

"Wow, you look great. Come on in, I'll open the portal back to town."

"Open the what?"

"You didn't think we were going to walk there, did you? Come on."

Susan pulled her inside, then went about casting *Teleportal*.

"This is magic I've never even heard of!" exclaimed Agnes, cautiously sticking her hand through. "How did you learn this?"

"From a book my father left me. I'll tell you all about it, come on."

Sparkle leapt through as well, and the portal closed behind them.

"Now, I think the jewelry store is that way."

"That way," corrected Sparkle. "See, this is why I have to come along. She's hopeless at directions."

"Talking cat. Don't see many of them, even around mages."

"Oh, I totally forgot to introduce you. Sparkle, this is Agnes. Agnes, Sparkle."

"Hello?"

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"You too. Wait, you didn't use a wand. You really are from another world, aren't you?"

"I really am."

"I asked some of the girls about it, they told me how you arrived with that human Familiar Spirit. I couldn't believe it."

"Yeah, I didn't want to believe it either, but here I am. Come on, time is wasting."

Walking to the shop that sold jewelry, Agnes asked about Susan's world, and she was happy to tell her about it, and about her friends there.

"I made them so much stuff," she said, grinning. "But of course I was gaming the system to buy the stuff I needed. I mean my *Resources: Money* would have seen me get that cash one way or the other, but beating the system seemed so satisfying. Oh well. Here we are!"

The person behind the counter, a 30ish year old woman greeted them.

"My friend here is looking for some jewelry," Susan said, when Agnes didn't step up.

"We have fine jewelry of all types," said the woman. "My husband makes it, I sell it. What were you looking for in particular?"

"Earrings," mumbled Agnes.

"Sorry, didn't catch that."

"Earrings!" she almost shouted.

"All right, no need to shout. I see you'll have to have your ears pierced then. Not to worry, I'm an old hand at that by now. We'll see you through it. Now, what sort of design would you like?"

"Something that fits pretty close to the ear, nothing dangling," said Susan. "And gold, if you can manage it." Agnes looked over at her curiously. "Less chance of an allergic reaction."

"A what?" asked the woman.

"Do you ever have people come back and say the piercing bother them? Itch more than they should? Break out?"

"Why yes, every so often. You know what causes that?"

Susan nodded. "The body is reacting to the metal. Usually nickel. For some reason, there are people who just can't tolerate it, and their bodies go nuts trying to get rid of it."

"Well I'll be. And you say recommending gold would solve their problem?"

"I've never heard of a gold allergy." *At least on my world.*

"I'll have to give that a try, next person that comes in with that problem. Well, we don't have much in gold but I can show you what we do have."

She took a case out from behind the counter and there were four pairs of earrings sitting there. One looked like rubies in a setting, one was probably amethyst. The other apparently didn't even rate because Agnes seemed to make up her mind immediately.

"The purple ones," she said with finality. "The red ones remind me too much of fire."

"Not to be indelicate, but they are rather expensive. Are you sure?"

Susan pinged a gold coin down on the counter. The woman's eyes got a little wider, and she studied the coin. "Seems real enough. How did you come by gold?"

"We both are employed by the queen," Susan answered honestly. "And not as maids. Please do not take our current appearance as our normal one. We're taking a day off and thought it would be nice to relax and blend in a bit."

"Oh!" the woman sat up straighter. "My ladies, please forgive any insult I may have inadvertently-"

Susan cut her off with a wave. "Please, just treat us like any other customer. That's all we are right now."

The gold disappeared. "I'll get the needles and such, wait right there." She put the others back behind the counter and disappeared through an open doorway into the back. Susan picked up one of them and held it against her ear, brushing her hair back out of the way. "I think they complement your eyes nicely."

"Stop it!" she replied playfully. "What are you doing?"

"What?"

The two stared at each other, and the woman returned with a tray. On it was a needle, a lump of what looked like wax, a bottle of ink, a brush and some cloths.

“Have a seat,” she said, pulling the chair out and offering it to Agnes. “Now, how high do you want them? About where mine are?” She turned her head and showed Agnes, who nodded. “Fine, fine.” She uncorked the ink and made a mark on her ear, then did the other. She looked back and forth. “That seem straight to you?”

Susan turned her head and looked. “Shouldn’t that one be a little higher?” (The woman had gotten a 13 on her check to place the first, but a 7 on her check to place the second)

“You think? Yeah, I do think maybe you’re right. Let’s see.” She made another mark. “How about that?” (She got a 14 that time)

“That’s much better.”

“Fine,” she said, picking up the needle and the wax. “Now, I’m going to hold this against the back, and push the needle in-”

“Hold it!” cried Susan, eyes wide. “What are you using to sterilize that thing?”

“Do what?” asked both.

“You know, kill the...” She facepalmed. “You have no idea what bacteria are, do you?”

“Now what are you talking about?” asked the woman.

Susan sighed and shook her head. “Just get me a candle, will you?”

“Okay.”

The woman lit a candle and set it in front of Susan, who took the needle and passed it through the flame a moment. She shook it in the air and blew it off, cooling it down.

Both ladies looked at her as if she was nuts. “Look, sometimes people come back here with infections, right? Pus? Pain? Swelling?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“And you’ve never stopped to consider why? Good news, now you know. Bacteria, or the tiniest life-form you can possibly imagine, are responsible. Passing it through the flame will, I hope, at least kill most of them. That should reduce the number of complications. Making sure to clean them with some kind of alcohol once a day will also help.”

“Okay, are you two just trying to trick me or something?” The woman put her hands on her hips.

“Look, you can prove it to yourself, that’s the great thing about *science*. The next ten people that come in here, do as I’ve recommended. Follow up with them. Did they experience more problems, fewer problems, or about the same number of problems? If more, which I highly doubt, ask yourself why *that* might be and go from there. If the same, the flame isn’t enough or there are other factors at work. I’m no expert. If less, I was right, and you’ve just advanced the understanding of disease by a hundred years. Congratulations. Figure out how to apply that empirical knowledge to other fields, like childbirth and on the job injuries.”

“Sounds reasonable enough,” she replied, not truly convinced.

“Anyway, it should be cool enough now. Please proceed.”

“Right, where was I? Pushing the needle in, right. Are you ready for this?”

“Exactly how much is this going to hurt?”

“Oh, come on,” said Susan. “You face down people with swords, and you’re

worried about this tiny little needle?” She took Agnes’ hand. “I mean, sure, it’s driving a sharp piece of metal completely through your body and out the other side. There will probably be blood *everywhere*.” Agnes eyed the needle suspiciously and started breathing a little faster. “I’m only teasing you. Come on, look at me. I’m right here. One little pinch for each side and it’ll be over.”

“I never should have let you talk me into this.”

And so, moments later Agnes and Susan walked out of the shop. They were still holding hands, and Agnes’ other hand kept jerking up like she wanted to feel the new earring. Each time she mastered the impulse.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I noticed you haven’t had it done. I was hoping... we would get it done together.”

Susan shook her head. “Wouldn’t stick. I get *Regeneration* magic cast on me all the time. They would just heal right up.”

“Healing magic? You get injured that much? What kind of dangerous life do you lead?”

Susan laughed. “No, no, it’s more like routine maintenance. By leaving *Regeneration* on once a week, my body gets a nice little refresh. Anything that might become a problem later on is taken care of. I don’t know if it extends my lifespan or anything, but it can’t hurt.”

“I see. So do they look okay?”

“Yeah! Hard to see them with your hair like that though. If you want to show them off, we can trim the hair there a bit.”

“Maybe I only want certain people to see them.” She mumbled, looking away.

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s go stimulate the local economy. I have a ton of gold to spend before I leave this world, and for some reason I’m feeling generous.”

“Stimulate the... Are we shopping? What are we shopping for?”

“I’ll need various things for the *Imbuing*, they get used up during the process. Plus I thought you might like a new outfit to go with your new earrings.”

And so the two girls went shopping. Agnes was still trying to not touch her new jewelry, and kept looking around for a mirror in the shops they went to. Finally they sat down for lunch at place with outside tables, and they ordered.

“So tell me why being reminded of fire is bad. Did you get burned as a little kid or something?”

Agnes’s face fell. “It’s not something I like to talk about.”

“No pressure!” assured Susan. “If you don’t, it’s fine. I thought maybe it was an embarrassing story or something like you almost burned down a barn when you were six.”

“No, I...” She took a deep breath. “My village was burned down when I was very young. I was the only survivor.”

“What?” Susan’s hands flew over her mouth. “Oh, Agnes, I had no idea. I’m so sorry to bring that up. I really screwed that up, didn’t I? I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. It’s what made me who I am today, so you might as well know. For some reason, when I was very young, a bunch of mages appeared in my village and without warning, burned it to the ground. A passing stranger found me,

and hid me, and we escaped. That's when I swore I would get really strong one day, and find the people who would do such a horrible thing. It's why I joined the Queen's army as soon as I was able, and have trained hard ever since."

"That's awful," Susan admitted. "To lose your entire family like that, I can't even imagine. You must really be a strong person, to have come so far."

"I guess. I just hate the fact that those murderers are still walking around, totally unpunished."

"That I can identify with. I've gone a little crazy myself, when one of my friends was almost killed by accident. If she had died because of *that woman*, I don't think there would have been a force on that world that could have prevented me from murdering her where she stood. If I'm still around when you find one of them, let me know. We'll take them together, for all those that were killed that day."

"Okay."

And so the subject moved on to life around the castle, and things Susan knew about from her world like planes and cars and magic, when suddenly a girl about their age stopped in her tracks and stared at them.

"Captain?"

"Oh no!" Agnes moaned. "Wait, what are you doing out here, Mallory?"

Mallory laughed. "You gave me today off, like two weeks ago, don't you remember?"

"I guess I did."

"Wow, I wondered why you of all people didn't come to practice today. I guess now I know."

"I'm not on a date or anything, Susan and I are just shopping for the stuff she needs to make my magical item. And... and then we stopped for lunch! That's all!"

"I didn't think you were," Mallory assured her. Susan didn't hear her mutter "But I certainly do now."

"What was that?"

"Nothing! I was just surprised to see you out of uniform, that's all. I never see you out of uniform and why do you keep trying to hide your ears with your hair oh my goodness you finally had your ears pierced! Do you know how long we've been trying to get her to do that?" she asked Susan. "But now she's done it for you. I guess you must be pretty special."

"It's just for the magic item! The earring is going to hold the spell, that's all!"

"She was always worried someone would tear them out in combat," Mallory continued, as if Agnes hadn't spoken. "We all said she was too good to let someone get that close, but she insisted. Well done."

"Thanks? I think?"

"I'll leave you two to it. Have fun!"

Agnes sputtered something while Mallory stepped a little closer to Susan.

"Oh, and *please* get her to lighten up a little? Do *whatever* you have to do." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "I've never seen someone as uptight as her." She turned towards Agnes again. "No offense, captain, but even you need to unwind a bit every now and then. I'm happy for you two. See ya!"

With that she bounced away.

Agnes sat with her hands covering her eyes. "This is going to be all my squad talks about for weeks, you know that, right?"

"She doesn't know you," protested Susan. "I doubt you told her what you told me. She doesn't know what drives you. We all have our own personal demons to contend with. Please don't judge her too harshly."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about this... date."

"Oh," said Susan, flashing a grin. "Is it a date now?" *And given what she was suggesting, or what I think she was suggesting, I think they already suspected your preferences.*

"No! I mean, unless you wanted it to... I mean... I should just go!"

Susan caught her arm as she got up. "Sit down, captain, that's an order. Let's at least finish lunch. I should tell you, I do already have a girlfriend, but she's a world away from me right now. If I don't find a way to leave I may never see her again. I wonder what she would say if she saw me sitting here with you. The point is we're just becoming friends, if that's what you want. Nothing more. Let them tease, we'll know the truth."

"Are you saying you... prefer girls?"

"I take it you do."

"I... I..."

"Unless I hear a no in the next five seconds, I'm taking that as a yes."

"I've never admitted that to anyone."

"Maybe not even yourself? It must be very hard, living in the time that you do."

Susan sighed. "Agnes, you have a hard road ahead of you, I'll tell you that straight out. In this time, in this place? I can see your wanting to keep that a secret. Many people even in my world wouldn't tell any but their closest friends, because of how they would be seen. I don't envy you."

"I always told myself I didn't have time for romance. That boys were just a distraction, and I didn't need them. But I finally realized while it wasn't boys I wanted to make time for, I did want to make time for girls. And you're the same way? I'm not... sick?"

"Sick? No, of course not! Don't even think that for a *second*. You just have a different preference. I mean what makes a boy want to chase a girl in the first place? What makes one person like mushrooms and another hate them? Brain chemistry or something, right? I don't even know if scientists on my world know for sure, and as you might have guessed from hanging out with me this morning, they know a *lot*. Are people with red hair broken? Do blue eyes signify evil? Of course not! Being attracted to someone is the same way, it's just a thing. It's not even a place on my character sheet, it just happened. Sick. Is that really what you've thought all these years?"

Agnes mutely nodded, eyes shining.

"You're not. You're a beautiful, skilled, capable woman, and any person you give your heart to is lucky indeed."

Agnes broke down and cried.

What we do for friends

Time: One week later

Place: Susan's room

Susan and Agnes headed back to the castle after lunch, though Susan would have liked to spend more time with her. Of course, she needed to hang around for the *Imbuing*, but they couldn't really talk while she worked. Susan left the earring in, as the skill didn't specify any actual location for the object while she worked. With her new trick of using *Augment Skill* it only took sixteen hours total to finish, and she watched as magic settled around the earring and sank inside.

"Okay, your trigger word is *Dazzle* and thinking about the person you want to stun. I made it energy based, so I'll tell you the same thing I told others I made energy based objects for. You can use it to death. It only saps a tiny portion of your energy, and as I've seen you jumping around practicing I'm pretty sure you have a high RESolve and ENDurance. But use it too often in a fight, and it'll work against you. It should stun someone at least two seconds, giving you plenty of time to put the hurt on them. It's a moon spell, so it should be double potent, whatever that means in this case."

"Even a second's hesitation on the battlefield can mean life and death. Thank you."

"Hey, you earned it, didn't you?" She lowered her voice. "Wonder what I should do if you go a whole month without taking a single strike?"

"They're getting better," she remarked, not rising to the bait. "Maybe in a year or two I could take them into battle. I just hope that doesn't have to happen."

"You and me both. It's been nice, having you here. I hope you'll still come talk to me, even though you got your item."

"You know where to find me. Don't let that sword rust in its sheath."

"I have researched the spell I wanted to learn, *Avatar of War*. Another 8 XP gone, so I'm down to seventeen after raising my *Sword* skill to a five. Man that stuff goes fast!"

"I still have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm sure the loss is keenly felt. I... hope you don't mind if I do come, just to talk, now and again. I have a lot of thinking to do, about things. Who I am, and what I'm doing with my life. Having someone to talk to that understands my position would be nice."

"My door is always open," Susan replied warmly, giving her a quick hug. "For anything."

"Now what?" asked Sparkle.

"Good question. Louise, Hiraga, and Siesta came back after a day. So them being "home" didn't last long."

"Is it just me, or are those two acting even more weird than usual lately?"

"Beats me. They've always had a bizarre relationship. At least she's starting to see him as more than just a beast, I think."

"You would have beaten that out of her if she hadn't."

"Got that right. 8XP, I wonder."

"Now what?"

"An item to hold this *Avatar* spell. I won't get it back, but I won't need it off this

planet. At least I hope. No, in fact I know. If I can't cast the spell, having *Spell Symbol* wouldn't do me any good."

"Why would you cast it on yourself anyway? Are you planning to rely on the sword more?"

"Since I learned different worlds can take my magic away, yes. I don't care who you are, a sword through the gut is bad news. I wonder how my father coped."

"He had the staff. That wasn't magic, and he could attack and defend with it. I think he said it was the soul of a *Spirit Energist* that had been placed into the thing. Whatever that was. And he had companions, three of them. Like Inari said, you're alone, and that makes it extra dangerous for you."

"I'm not alone, I have you!"

"While I appreciate the sentiment, I'm in the same boat as you. Without my magic, I'm just a cat. A smart cat, but in the end, a cat. I can't steal people's powers or become part dragon. I'm not sure what the dog did, I stayed away from her." She shuttered. (Sparkle had *Phobia: Dogs*) "Each person in his team had their strengths, and mostly they worked together well."

"I hear you. Well, leave it for now, until I can talk to Inari. I've been okay with *Invulnerability* going, the penalty isn't any higher for *Avatar*. Plus the intimidation factor, maybe no one will want to mess with a 3m tall giant in armor, carrying a flaming sword!"

The students were now doing battle magic, as it seemed Agnes had relented and admitted it could be useful. So they now split their time between "weapon" training and magic, which Susan approved of. She even sparred with Hiraga that day, both of them using practice weapons, and more for his benefit than hers. But it gave her something to do.

The day after that Susan went in search of Siesta, and offered to help with her duties around the castle in exchange for what she remembered of her great-grandfather.

"I'll come to your room tonight, you don't have to do maid stuff!" she insisted.

Come to my room tonight? Oh Siesta don't tease me so! "I'm at loose ends now," Susan protested. "I have the spell I wanted and I don't know what I would research next. Before something else happens I'd like to hear about how he got here, and maybe look into getting home. And won't the day pass a little quicker with some help?"

"Okay," she sighed, then gave a wicked grin. "But you have to look the part."

"Does this mean..." Susan's eyes were wide with hope.

"Come with me!"

Susan gave a squeal of delight and spun around, trying out various poses. "I'm in a maid's uniform! What do you think, Sparkle?"

"Oh, a +2 bonus to your LOOKs checks, at least." Sparkle rolled her eyes and wondered if facepawing was a thing.

"I know, right? Oh man, I wish I could take a picture, this is priceless. I'm going to have to work on a mirror for my room before I take this off." She swished her hips back and forth, making the bottom of the dress sway back and forth. "Shoot, why didn't I think of that before? I could easily make a mirror, it's a solid."

“Not all one piece though.”

“True, but I could make the front half of the frame, then the glass on top of that inside a bevel. Then *Create* a highly polished sheet of metal right on top of that. Put regular old glue on the wood part and a final piece of wood as the backing to keep everything from shifting around. It would be passable, if not the prettiest thing you had ever seen. And it could be pretty big, glass for mirrors is pretty thin, so that’s not a concern.”

“I guess it would work.”

“Sure. Now lead on, Siesta. I want to be the best darn maid I can be!”

So Siesta told her about the “dragon” her great-grandfather rode in on, and about the man he said he came with who returned almost immediately. It turned out he got stuck here, and lived out his life in the village Siesta was born in.

“And a good thing too,” remarked Susan. “Otherwise you might not exist!”

It had taken him some time to learn the language, and such, but apparently he had a good life, and Siesta was full of stories he had told. Mostly she didn’t have the technological background to really understand the things he had talked about, or the details had been blurred with time. (Or he just made crap up.) Nonetheless, she felt she was hearing about a world that someone with a really overactive imagination had made up, even though she had lived somewhere similar all her life.

In the end, Siesta got about 1.5x the work done she normally did (there was some inefficiency explaining things to Susan, and recalling the stories that accounted for .2. The other .3 was doing things in parallel, like serving the food, that couldn’t be accelerated) and she was very thankful for the help.

“I might even be able to stop early for the weekend!” she said, looking over the list of things she was assigned to do that week. “I hope my stories were worth it.”

“They were. And being a maid was worth it, too. A lot of people started ordering me around, then freaked out when they saw it was me. They couldn’t believe I would become a maid! Maybe it’ll help them start thinking of you as a person, not just a person to bark orders to.”

“Never happen.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m a dreamer. Thanks, Siesta. I’ll have Sparkle clean this before I give it back. I really want to try making a mirror before I take it off.”

“Can I come? It’s not often I get to see a real mirror! Or your magic at work.”

“Sure! If you can lead me to some decent glue that’ll hold wood together, anyway...”

So after some careful thought, mostly about how the wood might fit together, and some *Augment Skill* magic later, Susan had a rather functional full length mirror in her room. She posed, looking at herself, and Siesta did the same.

“This would sell for a lot of money,” she remarked. “And you made it look so easy!”

“Only trouble is, I’m not sure it’ll stick around after I leave. Objects I make this way only stick around as long as I’m alive, and I’m not sure being on another world would count as ‘alive’ here in terms of the spell. That’s why I’ve really only made things for myself, or that I could take with me, like the clothes.”

“You made that sword for Hiraga, didn’t you?”

“And then improved it. By *Fabricating* it, I’ve basically made it more real. Theory states it should stick around no matter what, because of the nature of *Fabrication*. That’s the hope, anyway.” *If not, that blade I made for Hogwarts is long gone by now...*

“Thanks for showing me this, and how you made it. I guess we traded a lot today.”

“Sure. Since you’re here, want to take this back with you now? I can change out of it.”

“Okay.”

So Susan stripped and Sparkle cast *Hygene* on it, making it cleaned and pressed. She got dressed for bed and said good night to Siesta, who returned the sentiment and went off down the corridor.

“Seems you’ve made some friends here after all,” remarked Sparkle. “They’ll be sad when you leave.”

“If I can leave.”

“That was a segue, by the way.”

“I noticed. Yeah, the news isn’t hopeful. I think two people came from Hiriga’s Earth, in planes. Probably world war two pilots, given the markings she said were on the ‘dragon.’ One went back immediately, the other couldn’t find the portal again.”

“Meaning it’s invisible, just a small crack some pilots found by really bad luck, or it opens and closes at random.”

“Either is troublesome. I mean if it’s in the sky someplace we’ll never find it! Especially if we look for it and it isn’t open.”

“The only way I can see is if we scanned the sky constantly, and observed a slice of weather that didn’t match up.”

“Right, their weather might be different, greenhouse gasses and whatever. It could be raining but sunny here. Still, how would we find even a plane sized hole in the sky? I was hoping it would be something they stumbled through on foot, and we could just go back there and poke around. No such luck.”

“Still, if one gateway existed, perhaps-”

There was a knock on the door.

“Coming,” trilled Susan, yanking it open. Agnus stood there, looking worried.

“Oh my. Please, come in!”

“No, I’m not here for that,” she said, blushing a little. “I need your help. If you’re still willing?”

Susan tenderly touched her earring. “For a friend, anything. Tell me what you need while I change.” Susan stripped off her nightgown and pulled out her “stealth suit.” “I don’t mind if you look,” she said with a grin, noticing Agnus looking away.

She cleared her throat. “The queen has gone missing. I’m going to get the authority of Sir Lishman to close the roads while we look for her.”

“Missing? Oh no, this is terrible! I really wish I had my scrying magic. No time for wishing though.” She pulled on her clothes and started to close the door, Sparkle at her side. “I can get us to town in a flash-” Agnus pushed her back into the room and shut the door behind her.

Oh, I thought we were in a hurry? I suppose there’s time for a little-

Agnes put her mouth near Susan's ear. "I have reason to believe Lishman was one of the people involved in burning my village. Are you still willing to go all the way with me?"

Shouldn't we get to first base before going all the- focus, Susan! "I don't go back on my word."

Agnes looked into her eyes a moment, but with a 10 RESolve, Susan didn't show any hesitation. "Okay. Thank you." She pulled the door open again and headed out.

What, not even a little one?

"We can leave from my room, you know," she said, hurrying to catch up. "We don't have to go anywhere."

"I left my rain cloak by the door, and we'll have to get you one."

"Rain?"

"It's raining, can't you hear it?"

Susan listened, but shook her head. "I'm slightly hard of hearing, I only got an 8 on that *Perception* check."

"You say weird things sometimes, you know that?"

"I thought that's why you liked me. Because I wasn't like other girls."

She just gave a slight shake of her head and headed down the stairs. After putting on the rain cloak, Agnes said they would head to the stables to get her horse.

"I'll just let us fly there. It'll be faster. Quieter, too. We won't have to bother with horses."

"You really do things differently, don't you? Okay, have it your way."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* and they stepped through to the city. Sparkle had already changed into her fairy form and was hiding in Susan's pocket. She cast *Flight* on them both, and Agnes sped towards the house on the noble's side of the river.

The rain was really coming down, and even with the cloak, Susan was soaked in minutes. *Why did the queen have to choose tonight to disappear?*

"Wait here," Agnes said when they got to the house. "Out of sight."

"You aren't taking him out?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. We need more evidence, and there's more than one element at play here. The queen wants that one. I want him."

"You got it. But if you're not out in five minutes, I'm coming in after you."

"Better make it ten, he'll probably make me wait out of spite, coming to see him like this."

"Got it."

Susan hid around the corner, and watched as Agnes went inside.

"Think she'll be okay?" asked Sparkle.

"She's got her pistol and her sword. Plus, it's been like twenty years. This guy probably doesn't even remember the incident. But listen for a gunshot away, I won't hear that sort of weapon, not in this downpour anyway."

"You got it."

Moments later she emerged, and hustled back over to Susan. "Now we wait. If I'm right, he's going to leave in a few minutes now that he knows the queen is missing."

The two hunkered down in the rain to wait. But rather than him leaving, another

man arrived. He knocked on the door, and spoke to the man inside for a moment. As he rode off, Agnes rose into the air and motioned Susan to follow.

“He won’t dirty his hands, or go out in this rain. That’s the man we’ll have to follow. Come on.”

Susan rose after her, and they kept him in sight, hovering about the road.

He crossed the river into town, and made sure no one was following him. At least, he looked around, but didn’t think to look up. Susan and Agnes clearly saw him enter a building from their vantage point on the roof of the place across the street.

“Let’s go,” she said, dropping down out of the sky. This startled someone in the street, who jumped back.

“Susan?” cried a familiar voice. “What are you doing out here?”

“Louise? How in the world did you get here?”

“No time for that, have you seen Hiraga?”

“He’s missing too?”

“Too?”

“No time for that, the man I’m trailing went inside. Wait here a minute. Come on, Susan.”

“Right!”

Despite Louise’s protests, Susan and Agnes barged into the place, which turned out to be an Inn. She briefly saw the man as he turned the corner, going upstairs, and Agnes wasted no time using *Flight* as a “jump” to make it up to the second floor silently. Susan followed.

The man knocked on a door at the end of the hall, and a man with a walrus like mustache answered. Susan couldn’t make out what they were saying, but she relied on Sparkle to, who was poking her head out of the cloak and looking that way.

Susan felt herself making a LUCk check, of all things, and got an eleven.

One from max, she thought to herself. *That’s got to be enough to avoid whatever-*

“Achoo!” Susan froze. *Have I ever sneezed before? And what does LUCk...*

Suddenly, she found herself being thoroughly kissed, pinned against the wall, as the man they were trailing walked past them. He smirked and nodded his head, probably thinking about heading back to his bunk.

So if I’d have gotten a fifteen would she have torn some of my clothes off, too?

With the man down the stairs, Agnes drew back again, with an odd expression on her face. She shook it off and hopped down the stairs again, bursting out the door and looking for the man.

“He went that way,” Louise said, pointing. “Now will one of you tell me what’s going on?”

“Can you give her the ability to fly as well?” Agnes asked.

“Sure. Give me a second.” Susan dropped *Flight* on them and recast it, getting all three of them.

“We’re following that man. I bet he’s headed to the theater, and that’s where we’re going. Come on.”

All three rose into the air and took off after him.

“Wait, so she’s not missing?” asked Susan, floating over the theater.

“Do you really think we would lose track of the queen?”

“So it’s all a plot to expose the people we’re tracking now?” asked Louise.

“Exactly. I’m sorry to have misled you, Susan. The queen said you would help when she explained her plan, even not knowing about it. Seems you’ve made an impression on her, as well.” She went on quickly. “But also said we couldn’t tell anyone, and that included you. I trusted you, and her highness did too, I want you to know that.”

“It’s okay, I understand. What’s our next move?”

“Come with me. Louise, here’s a ticket. It’s a little damp, but so is everything around here. Slip in and wait for our signal. You’ll know it when you hear it.”

“Got it. Hiraga is there too, right?”

“He better be.”

“Okay. I’ll see you when it’s all over.”

“Where are we going?” Susan asked as Louise dropped out of the sky and went inside.

“There’s a secret tunnel under the theater I know about for some reason. We’re going there. Just in case the bastard tries to escape, we’ll be waiting for him.”

And so Susan and Agnes waited in the semi-darkness and silence. Light was being cast by their swords, Susan’s that she had brought to her side with *Retrieval* and Agnes’ which of course she had with her at all times. Both were under *Avatar of War*, and stood roughly 3m tall with gleaming armor.

“And we’re immune to fire like this?” asked Agnes.

“Won’t even touch you,” replied Susan. “You should be a little faster in combat, too. Your sword does extra damage as well, fire damage I’m afraid to say. Sorry, it was meant for Hiriga, not you.”

“I’m satisfied to turn that man’s weapon against him.”

“Sounds fair to me.” They waited a few moments in silence. “So, was that your first?”

“First what?”

“Kiss, of course!”

“I am not talking about that now!”

“Oh, okay. I just thought you should know, it was very nice.”

“I’m really glad you can’t see my face right now.”

“Will you two cut it out?” snapped Sparkle. “Flirt later.”

“Sorry, mom!”

Both chuckled.

Some time later, they saw a flash of light descend from the tunnel above, and a magic user dropped lightly to the ground. He froze when he saw the two armored figures standing there.

“And so the rat scurries away,” said Agnes, bringing her blade up. “That means the queen’s plan worked. And now you’re mine. I can repay you for my village.”

“Village? Wait, is that Agnes? I wondered, since you asked about it earlier.” He seemed to take in the fact she was towering over him. “How in the world-”

“Never mind that. Any last words?”

“How about you spare me in exchange for information? You know that record you’re looking for? I know where it is.”

“Keep talking. Every second is another second you get to live.”

“It’s hidden in the vault under the magic academy. You can find out who did the deed, rather than just who gave the orders. You want them, right?”

“I want all those responsible dead. But I do thank you for the information. They will soon join you in death.”

“Not if I take you down first!”

A massive explosion rocked the tunnel, but Agnes just jumped right through it and stabbed the guy through the chest.

“No way!” he managed, as his clothes caught fire and he slumped to the ground. He didn’t even scream as the blade was drawn back and he started to burn.

With the threat gone, Susan’s magic receded and the armor around them vanished. Agnes sheathed her sword and walked away, not even looking back.

“Come on, drinks are on me.”

Susan didn’t think making any flippant comments was really appropriate, so she just walked by Agnes’ side, arms almost touching. Sparkle looked back at the dead man, then at Susan, deep in thought.

Concerns

Time: The next day

Place: Susan's room

"Before we go down to breakfast, can we talk for a bit?" asked Sparkle.

Susan froze, her hand on the doorknob. *Okay, this is new. Sparkle never wants to 'just talk.'*

"Sure," she replied, letting her hand fall and turning around. "What's on your mind?"

Sparkle stared at her for a moment from the desk where she was sitting.

"Honestly, I'm becoming a little concerned."

"About what?"

"Well..." Sparkle seemed very hesitant. "About your recent behavior."

"What do you mean?" Susan was nearly offended.

"I'm just not sure I like where you're heading right now. And I think, if you take a step back, you won't either."

"Oh, this should be good," said Susan, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Please, enlighten me."

"There's this new focus on combat, which I have to question."

"We've always been combat focused, I mean why do you think I made the ring?"

"Yes, you made the ring so you could stay *out* of combat. Same with the *Ally* spell. But now you're learning how to use a sword? I mean the gun kind of made sense. Tom wouldn't have expected that. But now you seem almost eager for personal combat."

"It's just being practical. I told you, if we find ourselves in a world where none of my magic works, I want to be ready."

"Is that all it is? You didn't bat an eye when those soldiers died during that attack on the church. You didn't even try to help them, or even feel bad afterwards. I thought maybe it was shock or something, but you just moved on."

"What else could I do? Feeling bad for them, who chose to follow a traitor like Wales, isn't going to help anything."

"What could you do? How about that knife you strap to your leg every morning? One quick plunge into each one and they might have lived! Run away with the others, gone back to being farmers or whatever."

"I-" Susan hesitated, face going pale. "I never even considered it. It's like I just sort of... forgot about it. You don't think The Darkness can actually make me forget things, do you?"

"If so, that's even scarier than I thought. But let's move to what happened last night. You just stood there, no in fact you encouraged Agnes to murder that man in cold blood. You gave her the *Avatar* spell, knowing she would just off the guy."

"That's on her. I can't control her actions."

"But you didn't even suggest another course of action! Shouldn't that man have gotten a trial? You were all about how the magical world didn't really bother with evidence gathering and such back home. But here, because a cute girl had her village burned twenty years ago, you're okay with it?"

“She needs closure to move on.”

“Closure? Is that what they’re calling it now? How do you know that village wasn’t infected with some kind of plague? That the people responsible don’t hate themselves for what they did, even today? She was just a child, she wouldn’t have understood what was going on.”

“But she must have looked into it since then.”

“I hope so. But she still chose to murder a man! Didn’t you always take a different path? Think back, like say when those bullies attacked you by the lake. What did you do to them?”

“Snapped their wands, gave them a good talking to.”

“Right, but you didn’t kill them. You gave them another chance. An out. Then later, when you learned *Dead Magic*, you dealt with people, evil people, by taking their magic away. Severe, but acceptable, because they were still alive at the end.”

“I don’t have that luxury here.”

“But you still have other options, lots of them! Okay, you lost three useful planets. Your response was to escalate to killing magic, rather than look into alternatives?”

“I haven’t had a lot of down time, you know. And you learned *Elemental Line (Wind)* didn’t you? It was you who killed those men, not me.”

“I’m your *Companion*. To a certain extent I’m an extension of your will. You want me to do something, I typically go along with it. Anyway, this isn’t about me, it’s about your behavior. I mean let’s go back to Agnes for a second. What are your intentions there? To string her along, seduce her, and then just leave again?”

“No. She just needs a friend, someone who understands her.”

“But you like her.”

“Sure, she’s a great person.”

“Is she? How do you know? You just met her, and most of her life has been training to track down these fire mages she talked about.”

“Okay, so she has the *Lost Loved Ones* or *Tragedy* background cards. Or maybe both! And maybe she has the *Obsessed* weakness. We don’t know.”

“Exactly! You don’t know. But there you are, making moon eyes at her, and flirting, and I didn’t see you struggling against her kissing you last night. Did Luna mean so little to you?”

“I might never see her again! This may be where I spend the rest of my life!”

“And that brings us to the main thrust of my argument. Who is our enemy?”

“The Darkness. You know that.”

“I wanted to make sure you remembered. Tell me, if you were The Darkness, how would you make sure a potential threat was out of the way?”

“Why don’t you tell me, if you’re so smart?”

“Exactly what’s happened. Bring you to a place you can’t easily escape from. Dangle some people in your way that need help, because he knows you can’t resist that. Sweeten the pot with a girl who could fall for you. The only girl around who might fall for you, as everyone else seems to be focused on Hiraga, if you hadn’t noticed. And don’t forget, that creature is inside you, too. He tried to corrupt you once. Luna seemed to act as a stabilizing force against it, which is when he started talking to you directly. You think he wouldn’t try again? Now that Luna is gone, I would certainly try again, if I were him. And here you are, getting more violent, forgetting about Luna and going after

another girl... there's more than one way to influence you. If he can get you to fall in love with this girl, you might not want to leave even if you find the opportunity."

Susan seemed to hesitate. "Don't be ridiculous, I still have to find my father, even if I did give up on Luna."

"Maybe it's hoping you'll decide your father isn't worth it. That your love for this girl is stronger than the bonds of family, especially as you've never met the man. If it can influence you enough to forget the *Alleviation* knife, what else can it do to you?"

"I... no. No, that's crazy. My father fell in love, and he still left. I was the result. To avoid feeling for the people I help is to deny myself. To deny him, and the sacrifice he made leaving my mother and me behind." She collapsed heavily to the floor, staring into space. "I can't not feel, can I? Can't I make friends? Is it my destiny to wander the worlds, alone, forever?"

Sparkle shook her head. "I know, it's not easy to consider all the angles. And I'm not Luna, I don't see things the way she does. But I see you changing, and I have a duty to point that out to you. No one knows you like I do, because I've been with you your whole life. I know you're trying to find yourself. To figure out the best magic, the best path to take to help people with the tremendous gifts you've been given. I'm just saying, *be careful*. The Darkness is in you, and with your power that makes you very dangerous if you should go bad."

Susan's face hardened. "I can't second guess every decision I make, I'd never do anything!"

"I know. But do you admit the danger is there?"

"I... guess I have no choice. After what I now know happened."

"Then I've said my piece. You're the one in charge. I'll follow what you say and do what you want. I just hope I'm not going to watch you become Tom in the process."

Susan closed her eyes. "Sparkle? If you do see me becoming Tom, I want your word that you will take me out. You're right, that my magic is dangerous. And if I keep going on adventures and getting XP, I'll only become more so. I'll try to rely on your judgment, but you have your orders if I get... out of hand."

Sparkle jumped down and padded silently over to her, bumping her head against her knee. "You have my word."

"Thank you," she said, picking Sparkle up and hugging her. "And thank you, for looking out for me. And if you see me forgetting things, don't hesitate to speak up."

"Of course. What are *Companions* for?"

Susan opened her eyes. "Okay, after breakfast I'll start researching a new spell. Something I can use like *Hypnotic Field*, that can take out a bunch of enemies without harming them."

"Good girl."

That afternoon, Agnes came and sat down next to Susan. She was eating with Louise and Hiraga, not doing much talking as she was thinking about what Sparkle had said earlier.

"It seems I need to call upon you again, Susan," said Agnes hesitantly. "Sorry if I'm a bother to you."

"Whatever I can do to help, of course."

"Thank you. It concerns the information we got last night."

“Oh, about the vault under the academy?”

“Exactly. As a reward for my help last night, the queen has given me permission to seek out the records of the event. However, the principal claims he never got any documentation about it, so he won’t release the seals on the door. I wondered if your magic could help me?”

Susan considered. “I do know *Unlock*, sadly that’s a Uranus spell, and I don’t have access to that branch of magic here. Nor can I *Phase* you through, because that’s Pluto. Huh, wonder if I could *Telesummon* a door off its hinges? Wait, no that only works on people. I mean *Retrieval*. I could try that, but it would mean rebuilding the whole door later.” *There’s an interesting idea for a Mercury spell. A short range teleport you don’t need to see the destination to go to. Of course Phase would work just as well, but Sparkle was just talking about alternate spells. And I wouldn’t have to learn it, just research it. I wouldn’t be using something like that in combat. I wonder.* “If there was a crack in the door I could probably *Shrink* us enough to fit through it, burn it down with *Combust* or just smash it down with *Avatar* going. But again, that means rebuilding the door.”

“Oh, I see. What about you, Louise?”

“I would be happy to blow it up for you!”

“Ah. Well, do you know anyone who would help us?”

She considered. “My sister might. She’s a pretty good mage, and not above breaking a rule now and then.”

“Would you mind asking her for me?”

“Not at all. I’ll let you know this afternoon.”

“Thanks. I do want you to come, though, Susan. In case she can’t we can discuss the other options.”

“Suits me.”

Later that day, the entire group met up in the girl’s bathroom, and opened the storage closet at the back. A fake wall was pushed out of the way, then replaced, and the pair went down a winding set of steps to a hallway.

That’s certainly an odd parallel to my world. What is it with things being hidden in girl’s bathrooms?

The air was stale and dusty, and the lantern Agnes was carrying cast a dim bubble of light around them. Oddly, no spider webs or tiny rodents were seen, making Susan wonder if this place had been magically proofed against such things somehow.

The hallway was blocked by a door made of heavy stone, and some odd designs on raised plates could be seen.

“Here it is,” said Agnes. “See what you can do.”

I just hope the queen actually did give her permission for this. I guess I should have asked...

Susan felt around with *Magic Sense*, getting a 16 on her first try. While she did that, Louise’s sister, Eleanor, looked at them through what seemed to be a pair of opera glasses. Having apparently deduced the “combination” she pointed her wand and basically demanded, in what appeared to be English, the locks be unlocked. To Susan’s surprise, they sprang open, and Eleanor looked pretty smug.

Okay, what was that? That was no incantation, I’ve heard them practicing battle

magic. They're like Harry, they say a bizarre phrase and magic happens. Those phrases aren't translated when I hear them, they seem to be gibberish. But she said something in her native language and that worked. Weird.

In any case, the door opened and the group continued. The hallway went for some distance, then opened up to a bridge over a chasm that the light couldn't reach the bottom of.

"Don't use magic, and don't try to take anything out," warned Eleanor, pointing to a warning written above the door. "Seems like something bad might happen if we do."

"No danger of that with me," remarked Agnes. "Come on. And put those wands away!"

And so the group entered what could only be called a library of forbidden knowledge, and the group set about searching for the record Agnes was looking for. Naturally, they found it after some time, and even more naturally, the page containing the name had been torn out of the book.

"Maybe the page is still around here somewhere." Agnes frantically started looking for loose papers. Susan put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on. Anyone who tore that page out wouldn't have just left it here for someone to find. It was probably removed before being placed here, as the magic would have kept it from working otherwise. I'm sorry, but it seems you'll have to look elsewhere for your answers."

Agnes looked about to argue, but then deflated. "You're right. I'm sorry to have dragged everyone down here. Let's go back."

I don't know if I should be relieved I didn't have to talk her out of killing someone else, like I should have before, or sad because now it seems she'll never get closure. Maybe if I'm really bored for a week or two I'll research the Question spell and get the name for her that way.

Two weeks passed.

Susan completed her research for the wide area sleep spell, under the *Moon* domain to make it extra effective. As *Moon* dealt mainly with poisons, darkness, and the senses, the spell created a volume of mist that when breathed in, dulled the senses and put people into darkness- in other words, sleep. She called it *Sleep Mist* for obvious reasons.

And just like that, it came in handy.

Susan came awake to see a scruffy looking man in her bedroom, holding a mace and looking down at her. He had apparently been shaking her, trying to get her to wake up.

"Took you long enough to wake up!" he complained. "Get up! Move!"

Susan blinked at him. "Huh?" she managed, blearily.

"Get up!" he shouted, tossing her sheet aside. He stared, and Susan knew what that LUCK check had been for the night before. She had gotten an eleven, one from max, and decided to sleep naked because it was so hot. The man was distracted, and Susan took advantage of it.

"*Thrust*," she cast, using six energy and taking the two segments. Magic swirled around the man, but he dug his heels in and didn't go anywhere. Susan even knew she

had new cards, and spent her *I don't think so* to make him reroll, but he got even higher. "What was that?" said the man, eyeing her suspiciously. "Oh, forget it. He won't mind just one."

He shot fire at her from his mace.

"*Deflection*," she cast, again using six energy. This succeeded, a seventeen versus a twelve, and the flame harmlessly bounced off the swirling light that appeared before Susan.

You know, she thought in the timeless space between one action and another, *I originally didn't want to learn something like Magic Reflection because I didn't know what sort of casting check other people might be capable of. But Deflection works just fine, so maybe I was worried for nothing. It would be nice to just have this guy's fire turn on him.* Susan succeeded on her *Magic Combat* check, because despite his higher "rating" in the skill, he wasn't that bright. She knew they would act simultaneously, and decided to try a variation on that very idea.

Not that this was supposed to be a combat spell, but that's what energy is for, right?

She cast *Teleportal*, putting one end in front of herself and the other to the side of the man. As the difficulty of this spell was the distance, and it was less than a meter away, that meant she had to roll a seven or better. Technically a six, but one energy went into the spell, so only nine would be used as extra power, leaving her a minus one to the ten segment spellcasting check. She got an 11, he got a twelve, so Susan spent 1XP for a bonus and the portal shimmered into existence before the flame could hit her. The flame then came out from behind him, where the other side of the *Teleportal* had been placed. It hit the man's body, catching him by surprise and setting him on fire. He failed both his LUCk check and his RESolve check, so not only did he take 10 points of fire damage to the body (randomly struck) he started taking additional damage and dropped his mace, freaking out as the flames climbed up his clothes.

Susan got a 16 on her RESolve check not to freak out, but was still unsure what to do. She couldn't put his flames out, *Elemental Conjure (Water)* was a Neptune spell, and she couldn't do that here. Nor did she know *Extinguish*.

Wait a second!

She took the full time this time, creating another *Teleportal*, this time above the lake she dumped the water into from the nature spirit. She rolled max, and a hole appeared, leading to water. She shoved him through and he splashed into the lake, dousing the fire. *Hopefully he has presence of mind enough to swim to safety, but he's really not my problem anymore. Sparkle would be pleased, I could have just let him burn. Where is Sparkle, anyway?*

Susan hurriedly pulled on her "stealth suit," grabbed her sword, and peaked out. The hallway was empty, and she wondered if this was some kind of attack directed only at her, or if others were woken up but had left already. *I do take longer to wake up, it's true.* She crept down to the next door and found it opened, with no one inside. She checked the other doors on her floor, and they were also empty.

Where's Hiraga? I would have thought he would be out here kicking butt and taking names. She checked his room, but didn't find any corpse, or even evidence he had been there that evening.

Troublesome.

Susan hurried outside, and met up with the other soldiers in the courtyard.

“Susan!” exclaimed Agnes, running to give her a hug. “I shouldn’t have been worried, but I was.”

“He did take me two whole actions to take out. Stupid spell resistance, but I suppose I’d be grateful for it if it was being cast on... are you crying?”

“No! I’m just grateful you’re all right.” Agnes wiped her eyes. “Anyway, we’ve been attacked, as you can probably guess. They’re moving the students into the great hall for some reason.”

“Not killing them?”

Agnes shook her head. “No, hostages.”

“Excellent. I have the perfect spell to use once everyone’s assembled. Come on.”

Susan and the other soldiers made their way to the window, where they peeked in. It seemed the attackers, which seemed to number only eight, had separated those they had found. Probably to make it easier to watch them. The maids and other staff were being guarded by two between the center and left tables. The principal, staff, and a few other adults were being covered by four men, one in a purple cape. They were between the center and right tables. To the far right two more covered the students.

“Three simultaneous castings? No problem! Just wish I knew where-”

“Want some help?” asked Sparkle, having made her LUCk check to be there on time. “Sorry, I was out prowling and these guys attacked. Took care of one, boy was he surprised to be fighting a cat! Not that I would call what we did fighting, exactly.”

Susan looked, and she was obviously *Accelerated*. “Did you kill him?”

“I *Thrust* him pretty hard, but I doubt that finished him off. I figured getting to you was more important.”

“Okay. You learned the new sleep spell, right?”

“Sure did. Figured it could come in handy, being able to make areas that much bigger.”

“Good call. This time though I want you to assist me. I don’t want these guys making their CONstitution check and breaking out of it. They might hurt the hostages. I want three bubbles of the stuff, by the center of the maids, centered on purple cloak, and centered on the students. That should get all of them in one shot.”

“Purple cloak? You mean the guy with the funny mace?”

“That’s the one. We’ll take the full time, they won’t know what my magic means, and it’s less than two seconds. They won’t reach the edge in time.”

“You got it. On three?”

Susan nodded. “One... Two... Three.”

Both started casting, getting a combined total of 34 on the spell. (hey, it was Moon, so it’s doubled) As the radius was “Moon rating in meters” and Susan’s effective Moon rating was currently twenty one, just one casting would have been enough to fill basically the whole room. Everyone inside slumped over, and Susan nodded, satisfied.

“That was easy.”

She waited a few minutes to make sure they were all deeply asleep, then ended the spell and told the others to quietly make their way inside and start tying the bad

guys up.

“But get their stupid focus away from them. Their staff or mace or whatever they do magic with!” She said when they looked at her funny.

“Oh, right.”

19

Sleep

Time: Several days later

Place: Susan's room

And so, the would be terrorists, who had planned to force the queen into something or other by holding the school hostage, fell without bloodshed. Having their wands returned, the staff quickly tied up the ruffians and floated them away to the dungeons without even waking them. Everyone went back to bed, but scout parties were sent to make sure no more forces were in wait in the area, just in case this first attempted failed.

None were found.

Susan spent several days researching *Relocation*, just in case something like that came in handy at some point in the future. She was woken up that morning by Sparkle, and there was a knocking on her door.

She blearily opened it, and Agnes was standing there.

"Come with me!" she said, without preamble.

"Can I get dressed first, at least?" asked Susan, rubbing her eye.

"No, I mean, I'm being sent to the front lines with her majesty. Today. This morning, in fact. Will you come?"

"This is a bit sudden!" Susan remarked, waking up a little more. "Why couldn't you have told me this, I don't know, last night? Or two days ago?"

Agnes shook her head. "I kept trying. I didn't know how to tell you. But I made up my mind. Please, I want you by my side. If not for me, then help me protect the queen. You know her and respect her, don't you? She's going to the front, she could be killed. You could prevent that."

"I suppose it's only temporary, not that I've gotten many answers here about getting back on my own mission."

"You'll come?" Agnes grinned widely.

Susan shook her head in mock resignation. "How can I say no to you? Let me get dressed and pack some stuff. Where should I meet you?"

"Out front. Thank you for agreeing. Thank you so much." She turned to go.

"You could stay and watch, if you wanted." *Shoot, there I go again. That is just the sort of thing I was always doing back at Hogwarts. Saying stuff before I thought it over. If I didn't know better, I would say I had some kind of weakness that makes me do that, but I don't, right?*

Agnes laughed. "Win this war for me, and I'll... I'll... be your love slave forever!"

"Promise!?"

"You have my word as a soldier."

"I'm holding you to that!"

Agnes just laughed harder and walked away.

Dressed, sword and bag at her side, Susan went to knock on Hiraga's door to tell him she was going away, "to the front" apparently. He didn't answer. *Does he have Deep Sleeper too?* She quickly made her way to Louise's room, but she also didn't

answer, making Susan a little worried. *They're probably just at breakfast. I'll swing by there on the way out.*

But breakfast wasn't being served yet, and Susan ran to the front of the castle to tell Agnes she couldn't leave without finding out what happened to the pair.

She needn't have bothered. Standing with the force getting ready to leave was a sleepy Hiraga and a Louise that looked pensive.

"So you are coming," she remarked, looking over at Susan.

"I'm just glad I was given the choice," she muttered, shooting a look at Agnes. "As this was a sort of last minute thing."

"Oh, I thought you would have been asked by the queen directly, that's why I didn't mention anything. If I had known-

Susan waved her off. "It's fine. I would have tracked you down regardless. Are you both sure about this, though? We're heading to a major battle zone here."

"I have to do my part to help the kingdom," Louise maintained. "While I may only have one spell... oh, that reminds me."

"All right, move out!" shouted Agnes, mounting her horse.

"Guess I'll show you in a second. Come on." Louise and Hiraga climbed onto nearby horses. "Oh, shoot, we didn't get a horse for you!"

"Where are we going? If it's someplace I've been..."

Louise shook her head. "I don't think so. It's near the capital, South Gotha."

"Ah well." She cast *Flight* on herself, and rose into the air. She kept her speed way down and paced the group, sighing with how slowly they were probably going to travel. "So what did you want to say?"

Louise got out a leather bound volume, and handed it over to Susan. She turned it this way and that, looking it over. "What's this?"

"Her majesty gave it to me the last time we saw each other. She said it was a book with void spell incantations in it, but so far it's been blank. I wondered what you could make of it."

"Tough to say now," replied Susan, flying backwards and opening the book to shield it from the wind. Indeed, the pages were all blank. "I'll take a look when we next stop." She handed it back.

"Okay."

They stopped for lunch, and Louise dug the book out again. Susan did a *Magic Sense* on it, getting a nine. Sparkle got an eleven, and between the two of them decided it did feel like the type of magic Louise did when she made things explode. She handed it back.

"I don't think she was mistaken. There is magic in there, connected to Void. The book I lost access to when I came here may be similar. I could ask it for spells and the next day it would have them inside. Maybe it's similar, you have to need a spell before one shows up. Trouble is I don't know what you would ask it for, because I don't know what 'element' Void is. Obviously destruction, blowing things up kinda destroys them. But there must be more you can do. I don't know, ask it for things mages around here can't do and see what it turns up."

"Okay, I'll think about what to ask. Thanks."

"Sure!"

After several rough days of travel the group arrived at the town. Susan had thought about going back to the school to sleep at night, but decided if the musket squad was going to be out here in the wilderness, so would she. Even Louise didn't seem to complain too much, and they neared the city.

Anrietta greeted everyone warmly.

"Thank you for coming, Susan. I didn't ask you to get involved because this isn't your fight. But I guess you came anyway."

"Agnes asked me. She wasn't sure if she could protect you as well as I could. Plus she said if I ended the war, she would do something nice for me."

"Oh? What's that?"

Both looked over at her, and she was pointedly not looking back at them. "Just a personal matter between the two of us. Nothing to worry about."

"Could you? End the war I mean?"

Susan considered. "Tricky. Given time I could research something like *Elemental Storm* and rout any size army. Short of that, with just what I know now? Hey Hiraga, how do you feel about taking on an entire army with just the two of us?"

"Would you have your fire soldiers going, and that *Avatar* spell of yours?"

"Naturally."

"We could take them."

Susan laughed. "You think? Well, anyway, I've recently been reminded that taking lives may not be the best habit to get into. I've been considering those words, and destroying lives is rather final. It's sort of the lazy solution, the easy way out. Any fool can kill, but to humiliate your opponent? Sap their will so they never want to fight again? That's the best way."

"I don't think that's what I said at all!" piped up Sparkle.

"Okay, I was paraphrasing. The point is, if I can't come up with a better solution for this war than just slaughtering thousands, what good am I?"

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Depends. What's the situation here?"

"Several days ago this town was occupied by enemy forces. They pulled back and allowed us to retake it. We think we know why, now. According to our scouts, tens of thousands of soldiers and mages will be descending upon this town once again in mere days. Possibly as early as tomorrow."

"Basically, they didn't want to be boxed in by the town, and retreated, waiting for their reinforcements?"

"We think so."

"How many troops do you have standing by here? Can I get more here with *Teleportal*?"

Anrietta shook her head. "Not enough, and probably not. We're spread pretty thin. But I don't want to abandon this town again, not after we just retook it. How would that make me look, as a queen? Going back and forth, not being able to hold onto territory I was able to take."

"But how would it look if you died here? What would happen to your kingdom?"

“Dying for my subjects? They would fight twice as hard in the future because of it.”

“I suppose that’s possible. Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen, so we don’t have to find out which of us is right.”

“Deal. What’s your idea?”

“Depends. How much rope do you have?”

Susan asked for a piece of paper, and started sketching out some circles. “The spell I used to put the men to sleep back at the academy can be made 24m across, using just my base energy. I can cast it 16m away, so putting it at the maximum range I’ll be 4m from the affected area. Taking the full time they should drop instantly, given it’s a Moon spell and I’m at twice potency for that planet. At just a little over a second per casting, taking the full time doesn’t concern me.

“However, it still costs me energy to cast. That means I can cast the spell about eighty times in a row before I go unconscious. As I’ll want *Avatar* going it’ll be a bit lower. In any case, Hiraga and I will be armored up and waiting for the first troops to arrive. I’ll put a 24m swath of them to sleep. At this point, as many people as possible will rush out and disarm them. Hopefully they can be tied up at the same time, depending on how quickly you can do that. I’ll want a steady stream of weapons flowing away from the battlefield, carried by anyone and everyone we can get to do the job. I’ll move up as the army marches forward and repeat the sleep spell so the first ones don’t get woken up. Repeat eighty times.

“Hiraga, it’s your job to protect me so I can keep casting the sleep spell. I’ll have my blade out, and I’ll defend myself, but I’m looking to you to keep anything off me. The more enemy soldiers I put to sleep, the less our side has to fight through.”

“I’ll be right at your side,” he promised.

“As we go, any forces you can muster, Anrietta, will be hitting them from the flanks. Mages and archers will probably tend to clump up, so I’ll be able to put large groups asleep and keep your forces safe. With the demoralizing tactic of huge areas of soldiers dropping at once, I think it’ll be a rout before long. With the enemy soldiers disarmed they won’t be able to fight, and will be forced to surrender. Strip them and march them back where they came from, in shame. Tell whoever sent them they can have their soldiers back, but if they try anything like this again, their soldiers will just disappear instead.

“If that doesn’t discourage war in your kingdom in the future, I don’t know what will. Then have your own mages start researching a similar sleep spell so you can do this in future yourself. Thoughts?”

“You would just stand out there, unprotected?” asked Anrietta. “You’ll be slaughtered by arrows or spells! A bow can shoot way further than 24m.”

“Sure, but an arrow pierce metal twice as tough as your best steel? I don’t think so. You haven’t seen the spell, but Agnes here has.”

“It’s pretty impressive. If she says not to worry, then don’t worry.”

“I guess you know your magic best. I’ll have this information told to the townspeople. If they want to help disarm the sleeping enemy, I will welcome them. Tell them I myself will be fighting at their side. Also have them bring any and all rope they can lay hands on. Susan, if you could open a portal to the towns you have been to, I will

have agents gathering rope there as well. Also more mages, possibly even from the school, as even an untrained mage can manage a simple rope trick.”

“They have been training, but to put those girls on the battlefield?” asked Agnes.

“Guess we can see how good a trainer you really are,” joked Susan.

“I’m sure they’ll do just fine.”

And so the town got ready. Stockpiles of rope were created, and many of the men from the village said they would be honored to fight beside the queen. Many of the women said that as well, but they were sent in the opposite direction with the children of the village, an equally important task.

About a third of the girls from the academy volunteered, including Kirche and Charlotte, who Susan greeted warmly. “No rushing off,” she told them. “Your dragon isn’t any more invincible than you, and I don’t want you getting killed out there. Disarm and enchant only!”

Charlotte nodded, but Kirche fumed.

And so it was the night before the battle. The current estimate of troop movements put them arriving in about twenty hours. In other words, just about sundown.

Great, we’ll have the sun in our eyes when they attack. Someone planned this well.

Susan, with her 10 RESolve and *Overconfidence*, had no trouble falling asleep. Pity her, for because of her *Deep Sleeper*, she didn’t feel when someone slipped into bed next to her. A person in search of a little closeness before the coming battle, who put her arms around her and wondered if this odd girl was going to her death despite her confidence in her magic. But she did snuggle closer, and dreamt nice dreams about worlds without war.

The next day, Susan refused most requests that involved magic, saying she wanted to have as much energy as she could for the coming fight. *If ever there was time I missed Energy Drain, this would be it. With the energy from even half the townspeople here, I could probably cover the entire land in sleep mist and end this war without a single death.*

Was my coming here no accident? Is Inari trying to tell me something? To be creative, like I’m doing now, and rely on others? Rather than just throwing energy at the problems in my way? I really wish you weren’t such a trickster, Inari. Maybe you could have just, I don’t know, given me a powerpoint presentation on the subject?

And so, with the enemy army in sight and the queens forces in place, Susan took a deep breath and stepped up to Hiraga and Louise.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready!” Hiraga confirmed.

“Good luck, you two,” said Louise sadly. “I wish I could be of more help.”

“In a war where we want to kill everyone, you would be. But killing that many people... I don’t know what it would do to you. If we do get overrun, though, it falls to

you and the others that are back at the hospital they've set up. Don't allow them a single step they don't pay for."

She nodded. "I won't."

She hustled off, and Susan turned back to Hiraga.

"Two castings of *Avatar of War*, coming up."

"Three, actually, if you don't mind," said Sparkle.

"Are you sure? I thought you might want to hang back, maybe do some healing at the hospital. I don't mind if you want to protect Louise."

Sparkle shook her head. "My place is at *your* side. Especially if something goes wrong and you need *Acceleration*. I don't have your energy, but I know the sleep spell. Even I could turn the tide of battle, you know."

"Okay, but stick close. Even being small and armored, it's still going to be dangerous for someone your size."

"Who said I was sticking with this size? *Shape-shift*." Sparkle became a small mountain lion, currently -1 size modifier, or about half as big as a person.

"Oh, as you grow another size modifier, you'll be human sized and armored. Good idea!"

"Thank you."

Susan cast, using the extra time and minimum energy to get a 10 rating for the spell, with three targets. She did lift a busted up sword and a burning torch, the enhancer for the spell. That gave them both an effective rating of 12, so hopefully if it worked the same for him, his difficulty to be hit went up by that amount. With Susan's *Passive Dodge* against arrows at a 9, an archer would have roll better than a 20 (she was +1 size) to bypass the armor and hit her. Possible, with energy, but what archer was putting energy into each arrow, when they had forty or fifty arrows to put downfield at a time? Not one, that's who.

She drew her now +1 sized katana and it was sheathed in flame, and she noticed Sparkle's claws were similarly alight. She laughed. "You're upping our intimidation checks, that's for sure," she remarked. "I feel powerful," Sparkle admitted. "I can see what you see in it."

They started forward.

The line of soldiers stretched back quite a ways. But they were marching, and in formation, at that.

"I was pretty nervous a minute ago, but now suddenly I'm not," Hiraga remarked.

"The spell makes you immune to 'moral effects.' Facing down an entire army would count."

"Oh."

The leading edge of the marching soldiers took in the three enormous figures before them. Two were human, but no human ever stood so tall. No armor ever flashed so brightly in the setting sun. No animal like the one that stood by their side, claws dribbling flame like water, had ever been known. They seemed confused. Did they

attack? No other forces could be seen, did these two believe they could fight the entire army?

Suddenly someone must have shouted orders from the back, and weapons were raised. A cry went up, and they began to run, bloodlust taking over, months of training and preparation bringing them to this moment. A moment they knew they could win, and add this kingdom to the glory of their-

They fell asleep, faceplanting into the ground and losing their grip on their weapons.

One down, seventy three more to go.

20

Victory

Time: The next day

Place: The palace

And in the end, Susan's plan came off perfectly. Because honestly, if one person (Hiraga) in the original timeline can break the enemy line and kill that number of soldiers, that same person can do it while revved up with Susan's magic. Both Hiraga and Sparkle focused not on killing their foes, but smashing their weapons so they could no longer fight. Seeing a giant moving about the battlefield, feeling the heat of the weapon it wielded as it tore the sword out of your hand? These were enough to demoralize the toughest of... peasant. Fire spells washing over them, leaving them unharmed frightened the mages, and Susan put a significant portion of the enemy army to sleep right there on the battlefield.

Plus Anrietta was there with her forces, driving those who did not get caught in the mists back with deadly magic and arrows and bullets. The death toll was high, but not on the side of good, and when the retreat sounded, the cheer that went up almost woke up those sleeping on the battlefield a hundred meters away.

Almost.

Susan's conscience was clear. She had enabled a great victory for the kingdom, and did it under her own terms. She hadn't just stood on a mountainside and called down fire or acid upon the advancing army, though that potential was in her. (She would have preferred to do that with *Knockout*, but even she can't have everything.) She had fought on the ground, her energy steadily ticking away, but taking out dozens of soldiers with each tick. The queen's forces from each side had done their job, keeping the enemy from spreading out and avoiding the worst of the spell. With her foes boxed in and tripping over each other in their rush to avoid her magic, they had nowhere to go.

And so the war came to an end. Susan was one of the first, having stayed at the castle with Agnes, to hear about the peace treaty being signed. If it could be called such a thing, as Wales was back in power. The Reconquista leaders having been taken out when the victory they had promised hadn't materialized. That, and actions by allied countries, ended the war quite nicely. That it was possible at all was because of Susan's planning and magic at the last battle, but the general populous was just being told battles had been won and that was that.

With the proper nobility once again in charge, the country changed its name back to Albion, and basically said "yeah, we aren't at war with you guys anymore. Here's some money for reparations." Of course, it wasn't Wales' fault, so Anrietta didn't want to accept it, but she did have a kingdom to run. Her marriage, put off because of war breaking out, was never mentioned again, probably because the person she actually wanted to marry was back in power. They were probably just trying to figure out the legal way of doing so. Without the looming threat of a more powerful kingdom swallowing them up, they now had the time.

The day after the peace treaty was signed, Agnes came to see Susan and become her "love slave." After an honest discussion that Susan did still plan to leave

and neither could get too attached to the other, they decided to spend the night together anyway. Both liked the other, had no other real opportunity for intimacy with another person on that world, and were rather flush with victory at the moment. They had a lot of nervous energy to work off.

A very good time was had by both. The morning after, Susan invited her back any time, and Agnes merely said "You have but to say the word, my master," and couldn't stop giggling for several minutes. Tickling may have been one of the causes, but this is unconfirmed.

And so the students went back to the magic academy. Susan refused all titles, honors, and ceremonies, saying it was her magic that won the day, not her, in the strictest sense of the word. So honoring her was like praising the plow that tilled the fields in the springtime. It was the horse doing all the work, while the farmer guided it. In this case, she was the plow, her magic was the horse, and destiny itself was the farmer. Susan managed to escape while Anrietta, eyes crossed and giving random minor twitches, tried to figure that metaphor out.

Several days passed peacefully. But one morning, Susan was awoken again by a stranger in her room. A well endowed stranger.

"Not again," she groaned. "What is it this time?"

"You sleep like the dead!" said the creepy lady looking down at her. "For a moment I thought you were dead. Now, you will come with me, void mage!"

"Will I?" Susan asked, interested. "Wait, what did you call me?" She got up on one elbow.

"Void mage! I watched as you used your magic during the last battle. Only a void mage could be so strong!"

"Oh, right, yup, that's me. Void mage. Been one all my life. How exactly do you intend to leave here with me?"

"Do not underestimate my power!"

"What about your muscles? Can I underestimate them?"

"What are you talking about? If this is some attempt to stall me-"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I just notice you don't look very strong, that's all."

"Enough of this! Get dressed immediately, and if you cry out I'll make you pay for it." She raised a wicked looking dagger.

"How about I do this, instead? *Immobilize*." She cast it instantly, so the woman wouldn't have time to react, and put in her maximum energy. Sadly, while Susan had gauged her STrength appropriately, she underestimated this woman's RESolve. As she spent seven energy on her STrength check, she threatened to break out with a twenty-one. Susan, thinking that might be a bad idea, spent two XP for a +4 and she went nowhere. "Right," she said, hopping out of bed.

"What is this? How? Release me immediately!"

"Oh, I think not. Tell you what. How about I just go get the principal or someone," she went over and closed the window, "and they can throw you down in the dungeon. How does that sound? I've seen them, very posh. You'll love it."

The woman struggled. "I will not be trifled with!"

"Wouldn't dream of it. I'll request the embassy suite for you. Now don't you go anywhere!"

Susan left her room, shaking her head. *Seriously, how did she get up here? Must have come in through the window.*

She managed to make it to the principal's office and almost all the way back before she felt her spell somehow be broken and knew, before she opened the door, that the woman was gone. Sparkle came padding up. "What's going on?"

"I can't believe I just did that," said Susan, shock written all over her face. "I just left someone totally unguarded, believing they couldn't escape. So naturally they did. I'm some kind of super villain!"

"Someone was in the room? Does that make them the good guy?"

"It was a girl, and I hope not. She was too creepy to be a good anything."

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning," said Mr. Ottman.

So Susan explained.

"And she called you the void mage? This is troublesome. If someone is moving against void mages, we need to discover why. Obviously they got it wrong this time, because Louise is not using her magic openly. But it is still a concern. Get dressed and come to my office later, with her. I'll need to speak to you both."

"Where were you, anyway?" asked Susan, as they headed to the office.

"Just wandering around. I do have *Short Attention Span* you know, and watching you sleep isn't the most exciting thing in the world to do. I have to play my weaknesses, same as you."

"As long as you have some excuse. Honestly, doesn't this place have wards or something to let people inside know someone evil just snuck inside?"

"Ah, you're here, good," said Mr. Ottman, when Louise and Susan had arrived. "Please, sit down and I'll explain a few things." Both did. "I've been looking into legends about the Void element, and about those that have used it in the past. It's hard to separate fact from fiction because the last time it surfaced was so long ago. One thing is clear, only four people can use Void at any one time. And the historical precedent is that'll appear in the world at about the same time. Legends differ. Some say that the four together will cause a great calamity, while others say the four arise in response to one, and defeat it.

"What does this mean for you two? Well, it seems clear someone wants to get you together. That's why this odd woman you say appeared in your room was insistent you come with her, rather than just stabbing you in your sleep."

"Comforting thought."

"It could have been worse. Plus, with attention focused on you, they do not know about Louise, and so we have the advantage. We knew some of their plan, plus they want the wrong person. Even if they manage to catch you, I am more confident in your ability to escape, Susan, than in Louise's ability to do so. No offense, Louise."

"None taken," she grumbled, obviously offended.

"Our task now is to find the other three."

"Why would they want us together, though?"

“Perhaps to cause this great tragedy that legends speak of? After all, there’s a fifty/fifty chance of that. Or, in the event that doesn’t happen, destroy you so you can’t combat whatever it is that caused you to be able to channel Void in the first place. And thus, again, bring about tragedy.”

“Have there been any indications of something stirring in the world that would require power like hers?” asked Susan.

Mr. Ottman shook his head. “Nothing like that. But we are forewarned, and I’ll alert the allied kingdoms to watch for any unusual activity in the world.”

“Sounds like just about all we can do. Looks like I better start researching the *Question* spell.”

“Anything you can do to help make our job easier would be appreciated.”

“I don’t suppose the academy could provide me materials and a place to work? That would be easier than me going back to the city to buy stuff, and be more comfortable than working in my room.”

“We have plenty of space for magical research! I wish you had said something earlier. Louise, can you show her? Use whatever you need from the labs!”

“Thank you.”

“You may also want to become roommates with someone, just in case this lady comes back.”

“I’ll ask Charlotte or Kirche, they might not mind.”

“You could ask me,” pouted Louise. “Or am I not good enough for you?”

“Uh, I don’t want to sleep in the same room as the Void mage. If she comes back and you use Void magic, she might recognize it and switch her focus to you!”

“As long as there’s a reason.”

And so, Susan researched *Question* for ten minus three days, Sparkle having rolled a 16 on her KNOledge check to remember the symbology of the spell. Susan had moved in with Charlotte, who very nearly almost somewhat showed a hint of excitement at the prospect. But she was honored to be asked, and Susan was able to talk about how her mother was doing since her recovery. She always became more animated then, but soon went back to reading. *If ever there was a person that exemplified the Bookworm background, it’s her. Say, how do I know about other backgrounds and weaknesses I don’t have? Must be a Paragon thing, just being able to recognize them in others.* She also insisted that another bed wasn’t necessary, and while nothing happened between the two, Susan would sometimes awaken to find them snuggled together, which suited her just fine.

The day Susan finished *Question*, she went to the principal’s office with the formula and Louise, and announced her intention to ask the universe where she should look for the nearest Void mage not in the room. Mr. Ottman said to proceed, and Susan took her time casting the fifteen turn spell. (Recalling that’s only a minute) The answer she got back was:

“The Fairy Woods”

“And so we have our answer,” said Susan.

Charlotte didn't mind flying them both out there to take a look around, and riding the powerful dragon it didn't take long to reach the wood. Looking down through the trees, neither saw any sign of habitation in the forest, just vegetation.

This place is pretty big, thought Susan as she peered down. *And why would someone be living out here rather than in a village or town? That doesn't make much sense.*

"There's a clearing, let's land because I'm going to try something!"

Charlotte just nodded, and set the dragon down.

Susan pulled out her notes for *Question* and set about casting it again, at least twice. As they were at the edge of the forest, and she could use *Compass* to know which way was north, she was going to ask the magic how far East and how far North or South they should go to reach the nearest Void Mage. *That Compass spell finally came in handy. I learned it because of my No Sense of Direction but just knowing which was North was never as handy as I thought. Oh well.*

The spell told her to go a certain number of steps East and South, so Susan and Charlotte made their way on foot in the indicated direction. They soon came to a cabin, highly camouflaged so it couldn't be seen from the air.

"This must be the place," remarked Susan, walking up to the door. She knocked. "Hello?" she called. "Anyone home?"

There was no answer.

"Look, we just need to talk to you for a moment. If you're there, please come out. We mean you no harm but you are in great danger!"

"I should say so," said a familiar voice behind them. "Thank you, Void mage, for leading me to the very place I needed to go."

Susan and Charlotte spun, and there stood the creepy lady Susan had seen earlier. She had weird marks under her eyes and very long hair. She was also wearing a tight outfit that may as well have been painted on for all that it concealed. Around her, a dozen wolves stepped out of the forest and growled menacingly.

"I won't lower my guard around you, this time. Surrender and come with me."

"I don't think so. You want the person inside this cottage, you'll have to go through me first. And as you want me alive, I don't really feel I'm in much danger."

"But what about this other one? Attack!" she commanded the wolves. Charlotte blew them away as they raced at her.

"Oh, you brought a sensible bodyguard after all," she sneered. "But there's more where they came from!" More wolves appeared out of the darkness of the forest.

"Okay," said Sparkle, stepping forward. "This is a clear case when *Line* is called for." She started casting.

"Odd, you have an animal Familiar? I thought all void mages got humanoid ones. Shows what I know."

The line appeared, snaking towards the woman, then encircling the house. As the wolves charged forward they got blasted with wind, and were none too smart as they kept running into it. Rather than explode into gore they just sort of melted away, leading Susan to believe they were just summoned constructs of some kind. Suddenly, flying

creatures also appeared, and Susan shouted to Charlotte that the line wouldn't handle them. So she blew them out of the sky without apparent effort.

"It appears you are quite well protected," said the woman. "But my master can wait, for a time. We know who the last void mage is now, so it's only a matter of time. Farewell!" She melted into the woods and was gone.

Sparkle waited a moment to make sure nothing else charged the house, and let the line go. As she did, the door cracked open and the person inside peeked out.

"Like I said, you're in danger. I guess I have to apologize, as I led them right here. You'll have to come with us, I'm afraid. At least until we learn who is trying to grab up Void mages. Can we come in?"

The figure glanced around nervously through the cracked open door. "You defended me," she said at last. "I guess you can come in." She opened the door and stepped back.

"Hello!" Susan said, getting a good look at the woman. She shook her head to clear it. "I mean, hello. I'm Susan, this is Charlotte, and my companion Sparkle. You are seriously going to have back problems when you're older. I mean, uh, little help here?"

"Jealous," was all Charlotte would say.

"Don't stand there gawking, she did invite you in," said Sparkle, moving past the pair. "You'll have to forgive them. Please, what's your name?"

The woman stared down at the cat like she had never seen one.

"Before that," said Susan, finally tearing her eyes away. "Let's make sure you really are the one we need to see. Charlotte, you know this skill, why don't you try as well?"

"Okay."

Both called upon *Magic Sense*, Susan rolling the check and Charlotte doing whatever she did to determine success or failure. Susan got a 14, enough to feel the power of Void in the woman, now that she knew what to look for. She had spent some time feeling out Louise before she left, just in case there was some question of who the actual Void mage was. Charlotte shook her head, getting a bad roll and not succeeding.

"Keep trying, I felt it," said Susan, entering the house. "You're a Void mage, all right." She stuck out her hand. "What should we call you, anyway?"

"Tiffania," said the woman, shaking it.

Tiffania joined the party!

The group was seated around a table, sipping tea, as Susan explained why they were there. She also took a good look at their host and the inside of the house, which were neat, spartan, and filled with natural tools and implements. The cups, for instance, were just sections of branch hollowed out and smoothed. The teapot was metal, but the stove was a stone block. There was only the one chair at the table, so the three were sitting on the floor, and it was clear Tiffania's dress was the only thing she was wearing.

As far as her appearance, she was golden haired, and her body was toned and tanned, probably from living alone in the forest for who knows how long. Her dress was simple, a sleeveless affair held up by a length of cord that went around her neck, which threatened to spill her out at any second. Tied around her waist was a thin piece of white cloth, and coming down barely to her thighs was the rest of the dress, slit completely up the side to her waist. She was also wearing a floppy hat, which she had jammed on her head and kept reaching up to smash further down onto her head.

Susan estimated her looks at least at a seven or eight, if you were into that sort of thing.

"So you live all alone out here?" she asked, having finished her rather lengthy introduction about why there were out here tramping around in the woods.

Tiffania nodded.

"I see. Seems you're going to become a rather important person very soon, especially now that creepy lady knows where you live."

"No, I'm not very important, and I can't do magic, you have to believe me."

"Maybe you think you can't, but I can feel it within you. Sorry, but your time of solitude is over. I won't force you to come, of course, but if we leave that woman who attacked us will return. She will force you to go with her, and I have no idea of her intentions. I guess in the end it comes down to you. Do you trust us, who defended you but also have unknown intentions towards you, or her, who was happy to use force to get what she wanted?"

"Right now I just don't think I can answer that question."

"Sadly, we'll have to stay here while you think it over. I don't want to lose you so soon after I found you. But if you say we should leave, we'll leave." She took another sip of tea and waited.

"Let me think for a moment," she pleaded, moving off and looking around. As though in a bit of a daze, Tiffania gathered a few things into a bag and set it down next to them. "I guess I'll have to trust you."

Susan smiled. "I'm glad. Come, finish your tea and we'll go back to the academy right away. I know it might be a bit of a shock to meet so many people at once, so we'll try to keep you away from the students until you're more comfortable. Okay?"

She nodded, and finished her tea. She cleaned up the dishes and finally it seemed she couldn't put it off any longer. She said she was ready to go.

"Don't be nervous, we can come back here as easily as we leave, you'll see. This isn't the last time you'll see this place. Now prepare yourself, people usually freak out a

bit when they see my *Teleportal!*”

And so, Tifannia came to the school and was introduced to Mr. Ottman. He stared a little too creepily at her, but finally shook it off.

“So what’s the plan now?” he asked.

“Finding number two was a snap, let’s go after number three tomorrow. I’ll use *Question* right now, if Louise is out of class, and we can get a fix on the next Void mage. We’ll have them together in no time.” She paused. “Of course, if the disaster happens... well, you’ve got me so it should be fine. Better to get them together under controlled circumstances, right?”

“I suppose.”

And so they got their answer. “Romalia”

“You’ll have to take a ship to get there,” Mr. Ottman informed them. “I can book you passage, you can get to the port town easily enough, right?”

“Not a problem.”

The next day, Susan and the others, that being Tiffania, Hiraga, Louise, and Sparkle stepped through a *Teleportal* to the town of La Nocher, to take a floatship to the town of Romalia. The trip took a few days, but no one bothered them. Tiffania obviously had not been out of the woods in some time, and kept asking about things they were passing over. Susan deferred to Louise about that sort of thing. She was quite excited to be traveling, though still painfully shy if any of the other passengers happened to speak to her.

Landing at Romalia, the group was impressed with the architecture here, and the huge structure in the distance. The main road seemed to run right towards it, and Susan eyed it suspiciously.

“Come on,” she said, looking around. “We’ll find a quiet place for me to cast *Question* a few times, and narrow down where this next void mage is.”

The spell indicated they should basically go straight, right up to the huge tower. *Figures.*

“Why didn’t I use this spell instead of all that *Descry Creature* and such before?” she asked Sparkle. “This seems way easier.”

“They aren’t just going to let us walk in,” said Susan, as the group walked closer to it. “Any ideas for how to get in and find this Void mage?”

Everyone shook their heads. “Something odd about that building,” remarked Hiraga, “but I can’t put my finger on it.”

Susan snapped her fingers. “It’s like the school! Look, there’s the five spokes of the wheel or whatever, that represent the five elements here. Man, you guys do take magic seriously.”

“Of course,” said Louise, simply.

Once nearer to the structure, Susan saw there were windows at the top, and some were open.

“What do you think?” she asked, pointing them out. “Fly up there and let ourselves in? The place is pretty big though, and it could be anyone inside.”

“If that’s the case,” put in Louise, “they could be in any one of the five side buildings. We could wander around the tower while they’re over there!” She pointed randomly.

“Why not just ask the *Question* spell for the name of the person?” asked Sparkle, somewhat annoyed.

“Oh yeah, this isn’t like the forest. I could just ask that, couldn’t I? A name is short enough. Give me a second.” She found another quiet place under some trees and bent over the spell again, reading it for the fourth time that day.

“Vittorio Serevare,” was the answer from the spell.

Louise gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

“You know that name?” asked Saito.

“That’s the pope!”

Susan groaned. “We aren’t going to get in to see him. Not without a lot of fast talking. I suppose I could increase my *Persuasion* rating with *Augment Skill*.”

“You know who he will see?” Susan shrugged. “The queen! Can your portal open into the castle? You know she would come if you asked her.”

“Good point. To have the queen randomly pop up though... I guess we can ask. I can always get back here, now that I’ve seen it.”

So Susan and the others went behind some buildings and went back to the castle where Anrietta was, and asked for an audience. As the queen’s orders stated nothing was to be denied these people, she was quickly summoned and told the situation.

“And this woman is a Void mage as well?” she asked, shocked. “And now you’ve found out the pope is the third? You don’t mess around!”

Where have I heard that phrase before?

“Do you mind getting us in to speak to him?” asked Susan.

“Not at all.” She clapped her hands, and ordered a carriage be readied immediately. “We’ll just head back through your portal, if that’s okay with you.”

“I like this plan, I’m proud to be a part of it.”

Within the hour the group was back in front of the building they had just left, and the queen caused quite a stir when she stepped out of the carriage.

“Forgive us,” said the guards. “We were not informed of your arrival!”

“Yes,” she replied, trying to hide her grin, “we decided to come rather suddenly.”

The group was brought into the building, and the pope was summoned. They were waiting in a large chamber, when they heard footsteps from the passage on the right. A man dressed in a white suit, who had two differently colored eyes, appeared and looked them over.

“Julio Chesare,” he said with a bow. “You all caused quite a stir coming here as you did.”

“We do apologize,” said Anrietta. “But the matter was quite urgent.”

“It must be. My master will be along in just a moment, I’m sure. I don’t recognize any of them,” he pointed to us, “and they don’t seem to be your bodyguards.”

"I will tell his holiness why we are here."

"As you wish, your majesty."

The group didn't have long to wait, as a guy with a funny purple hat and robes stepped in from the left.

"Your majesty," he said formally.

"Your holiness," she replied, just as formally.

Louise went down on one knee, Tifannia followed her, but Hiraga and Susan remained standing. The man was young, Susan saw, probably late teens, and had long hair like a girl's. He carried a staff topped with an inverted teardrop with wings, and wore the same symbol around his neck.

"You should kneel!" hissed Louise.

"I don't see any reason to," remarked Susan. She looked down at Louise, who was trying to tug her down. "I've met as near a thing to a god as any mortal ever will, and my enemy may as well be one itself. This," she pointed to him, "is just a man."

"A very curious man," said the pope. "Even more so now, with that kind of claim. May I ask your names?"

"Your holiness," replied Anrietta, "this is Lousie, a friend of mine since we were very young. Her Familiar, Hiraga, from another world. Susan, a most extraordinary mage that was brought here by accident, and her Familiar, Sparkle. Lastly, Tiffania, a girl I actually just met myself."

"Pleased to meet you all, I'm sure. But this cannot be a social call, your majesty. Please, speak freely in front of Juilo."

"Your holiness, Louise and Tiffania are both Void mages."

"Ah!" Vittorio's eyes widened and studied each person in turn. "And so the four can finally be brought together. I knew the other two must be out there, but I never thought they would just appear out of nowhere. How was this accomplished?"

"Yes, how was this accomplished?" Anrietta asked the others.

"Just a little spell. As no one told me there were four of you guys, I never thought to look. But when someone mistook me for one, and tried to abduct me not once, but twice, I thought maybe I should move on it. And here we are. By the way, if you're a Void mage, and I know you are, and you say to speak freely in front of this man... should I take it he's your Familiar?"

"I am," said Juilo, taking off one of his gloves. A rune similar to Hiraga's was seen.

Susan snickered.

"What?" snapped Louise.

"You know how contracts are made."

She thought for a second, then went really red.

"Yes, that aside," said the pope. "This will cause me to accelerate my plans quite a bit."

"What plans?" asked Susan, suspiciously.

"We must reach the heart of the forth void mage, King Joseph of Gallia."

"Wait a minute, I've heard that name before."

"That's Tabitha's uncle," explained Louise.

"Wait, the guy who had his brother killed so he could take the throne? Who tried to off Charlotte and got her mother instead? Who put her through all those trials to try

and bump her off after that? That King Josph?”

“Uh, yes?”

“He’s a void mage as well? That’s just great.”

“I admit, he’s a ruthless man, but his kingdom holds together.”

“Oh, I’m sure it does. Under his iron fist. So is he the one that’s trying to have me abducted? Why?”

“I cannot say. I can only hope he will change his mind once he sees we three together.”

“Highly doubtful,” mused Susan. “In any case, if someone can point out his rough location on a map and show me a recent portrait of the man, I could have him here within the hour.”

“We mustn’t rush,” cautioned the pope, putting up a hand. “Do you know why Void exists? Why it hasn’t been seen in the world for so long?” Susan shook her head. “It means that something terrible is coming. Something that only we Void mages might be able to stop. We’re going to need his power, and soon.”

Louise looked worried, and Susan could guess what she was thinking. Her explosions weren’t really all that powerful, and Tiffania just found out she was a Void mage. What could she do, against something so ‘terrible’ that the pope was willing to try and rehabilitate a man like Joseph, in order to get his power?

“What sort of terrible thing are we talking about here?”

“The texts say only ‘a calamity that burned the world.’ Please, accept rooms here as my guests while I figure out how best to use the knowledge you’ve given me. Julio can show you our guest quarters. I must go and pray for guidance.”

While I do something worthwhile, and actually get some answers.

She opened a *Teleportal* so the queen could go back to the castle, and the group waved her off as she rode through it. She seemed very pensive, and with good reason, if what the pope had said was true.

The group got rooms all next to each other, and once settled in, Susan got them together for another casting of *Question*. She asked her magic what was the nature of the “calamity that burned the world,” but got back “unknown.” She tried various other ways of phrasing the question, but even asking if there was some kind of looming threat to the world, all she got back was “unknown.”

“What does that mean?” asked Louise.

“Something is blocking my magic, and it would have to be pretty powerful in order to do that. The book you got, it hasn’t shown any spells yet?” She shook her head.

“Great. You two girls better figure something out, because if my magic isn’t going to work on this thing, it falls to you two and the pope. I don’t care what he does, someone like Josph isn’t going to just change his mind after doing all those terrible things to Charlotte. I mean he killed his own brother, or had him killed, anyway. He’s got the power, and he’s not going to give it up. We can’t count on him, so the three of you are going to have to be able to compensate for his not being around. I hope you’re up to it.”

And I hope this isn’t The Darkness taking a hand in things here. Burning the world sounds like something it would do, because then it could gobble up all the energy without resistance. And it could easily counter my magic, like it did before, showing Tom how to set up areas my summoning magic couldn’t reach. Just like now with my scrying

magic.

I'm worried.

"I have a confession to make," Tiffania said softly. "I do already know some magic."

"That's great news! What is it?" Susan began to get a little excited.

"I can erase memories from people."

"Oh." Susan began to get a little less excited. "I'm sure that'll come in handy. At the very least, you girls can trade spells, right? Better to know two spells than one, that's my motto."

Both girls looked at each other. "I don't think so," Louise said at last.

"What? Why? You both use the same element, right?"

"It's not that, it's just every spell I try to do causes an explosion. Wouldn't the spell to wipe minds also cause an explosion?"

"It's similar for me," explained Tiffania. "I just wind up erasing memories. It's like I can't control it."

"Then what good is that book, if any more spells ever show up inside it?" Neither had an answer for that. "Okay. Wait though, you did the Familiar summoning spell and it worked, right?"

"It still exploded," she said, looking down. "You probably couldn't tell because you were in the middle of it."

"Ah. We'll have to ask the pope what his special power is sometime. Maybe Void magic just works that much differently, and you each get access to only a part of it. That would be weird, but I suppose there could be some logic to it. Like it's so powerful you can each only use a tiny portion of it? I guess if we say there's only a finite amount of magic in the world, and all mages draw from it, that would make the magical 'well' pretty low. Thus each mage can be roughly the same power. But with you, and only four people drawing from that 'well' the potential is higher. I don't know!"

"Should we get people preparing for some kind of disaster?" asked Hiriga. "I wouldn't want to cause a panic, but it might be a good idea."

"That could work against us. People might see the Void mages as the cause of the event, and try to murder you. Then when and if it happens anyway, they'll have no way to stop it."

"Yeah, she's sort of a dower sometimes like that," remarked Sparkle.

"But only scholars know about things like Void mages," protested Louise. "And no one would connect some old legends with what's happening, right?"

"I don't know enough of your old stories to be able to answer that question."

"There is one consideration," said Sparkle. "What if this legend of something that can burn the world is true. Further, what if time runs at a similar speed between all our worlds. I mean Hiriga hasn't talked about any technology we don't have, right? So that's roughly equal. What if this civilization has actually arisen twice? Once the first time, then the world burned, and then the second time after that, when it got bored or defeated or whatever. Wouldn't that explain why they're still at this level of technology and we aren't? It's because they had to invent everything from scratch again!"

“Okay, now who’s being a downer?”

22

King

Place: Main hall of the vatican

Time: The next day

“Have you made a decision, your holiness?” asked Louise, bending down on one knee before the pope, like always.

“I have, and that is why I have called you here. I believe a direct approach should work best. We will all travel to the kingdom of Gallia where I will ask him to join forces with us against whatever comes.”

“Oh boy...” said Susan, not believing her ears.

“Do you foresee some problem with that plan?” he asked her.

“I just hope he doesn’t annoy me so much I just take care of him then and there. Do you know what he’s put his niece through? Plus, it will mean showing him the real Void mages. Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Some risks will have to be taken. Why would showing him the Void mages be an issue?”

“Because of that creepy lady that’s shown up twice and tried to abduct me. I don’t know who she works for, and she’s got the wrong idea that I’m the Void mage. To tell her she’s wrong will put Louise at risk.”

“I can’t hide forever,” protested Louise. “And I never asked you to pretend to be me in the first place.”

“Still, it worked out for us. I even gave some thought to letting myself be captured to see who was behind all this. But if we’re going to some other kingdom, there’s no time for that.”

“Her presence could be explained,” put in Hiraga. “Let’s say I’m your Familiar, and Louise is the Familiar of Tifannia.”

“Hey, that could work! Well done, Hiriga.”

“Thanks. Your magic does me the most good anyway, so I’d want to stick with you if things went bad.”

“There is that. Fine, but I want him off balance. Before we leave, or actually as I’ve never seen the place, just before we arrive I want to call up some other people to join us.”

“If you think it will be beneficial, please, call upon whoever you would wish,” replied the pope.

“Oh, you are okay with being named as a Void mage, right, Tifannia?”

“This is all moving so fast. I’m not sure what to think any more. As long as you all think it’s for the best, I’ll go along with it. I mean, if the pope is willing to reveal himself as a Void mage, can I do less?”

“Hey, wait a second!” interrupted Louise. “She’s right. I don’t want to hide behind anyone. Besides, if everyone finds out I’m the Void mage, they’ll finally stop calling me Zero! Let’s just tell him the truth.”

“I guess the risk is yours to take. My presence will be a little harder to explain, in that case, but I guess it’ll work out. I can always just be your bodyguard. It would fit, given I did stand in for you in the creepy lady’s mind. We could just say the time has come to reveal yourself and leave it at that.”

“Fine. It’s about time I got some credit for what I can actually do. Rather than just listen to people teasing me about what they think I can’t.”

“So we are decided?” asked the pope.

Susan shook her head. “It’s a crazy plan, but who knows, it might just work.”

And so the group headed to Gallia. True to her word, Susan *Teleported* back to the castle to collect Queen Anrietta and the school to collect Charlotte. She waited until she was between classes, then pulled her aside.

“Hi, Charlotte, got a question for you!”

“Okay?”

“We’re about to go confront your good old uncle. Turns out he’s a void mage. Who knew?”

“Shocked!”

“I know. How did the pope find out, anyway? Huh. Point is, how do you think he would react seeing your mom up and about?”

She shook her head. “Unsure. Quite surprised.”

“Do you think we could go ask her if she wants to tag along? We’ll be arriving in just a few minutes and I want to get as many high ranking people that have cause to hate him as possible. That will show him how serious it would be to refuse us.”

“Why go there?”

“The Void mages. The pope has this crazy idea that he can be reasoned with if we’re all in the same place.”

“Impossible.”

“That’s what I told him! But I figure if his way doesn’t work, my way will. How do you feel about becoming queen in his place?”

“Intrigued.”

“Good enough for me. Want to go see your mom?”

“Okay.”

So they stepped through to her house, and her mother was more than happy to finally see some action.

“I’ve been cooped up so long pretending to be crazy, I’m actually going a little crazy. It’s time for all the charades to fall away!”

“I’m ready,” said Susan, back with all her forces again. The pope looked between them all.

“You’ve made some influential friends,” he remarked.

“Yeah, all part of a day’s work. You go in there and do your thing. But just know that if it doesn’t work, I’m stepping up and we’ll do things my way.”

His face hardened. “I’m still not really sure who you are, that you think you can just take over this mission. The others seem to defer to you, so I’ve not said anything, but your attitude could wreck everything. This situation must be treated with care, we need his help.”

“Long story short? I’m a dimensional traveler from another reality, and we do things my way because I get results. And because I’m falling back into my old pattern of

just running people over. Darn it, why did I have to lose Luna!"

"Who?"

"The person I started traveling with. That's part of the long story. And no disrespect to your office, but we don't need the help of a psychopath like this so called king."

"Remember what you learned with Mz Umbrage," cautioned Sparkle.

"Hey, what I did worked, didn't it? This man doesn't deserve to be in power, just like her."

"He thinks he does. He'll see it as the result of the tragic sacrifice of his brother, who had to be eliminated so the 'right' man could take the throne. Him."

"Which is exactly why he shouldn't have it."

"I agree, I just want you to keep in mind his point of view."

"I'll try. Don't worry, I'm not just going to float him around. I don't know what Void spells he knows, for one. I'm not stupid."

The group stood just behind the door, waiting to be announced and enter the king's chamber.

"I suppose you won't be bowing to the king, either?" asked the pope.

"No chance," agreed Susan. "I'll bow to Anrietta, because she's earned my respect by being a good queen and fighting for her people. I mean she came to support her troops and fight alongside them knowing she could be killed at any moment. This man is the opposite of her, with what he's done."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"His holiness, the Shield of the Founder, St. Aegis the 32nd!" announced the guard. "His bodyguard, Julio Chesare."

"Her majesty, Queen Anrietta of Tristain!"

"The lady Esme d'Orleans, and her daughter, Charlotte Helene d'Orleans, Chevalier de Norfatul!"

"Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Valliere..." The man visibly paled. "Void mage! And her Familiar, Hiraga Saito from... Japan?"

"Tiffania Westwood Tudor of Albion. Uh, Void mage!"

"Susan Felton. Walker of worlds, slayer of dragons, Natural Magician, and seeker for the moon. Her familiar, Sparkle!"

"The moon?" remarked Sparkle.

"Luna."

"Ah. And what dragons have you slain?"

"I captured some. I could have killed them if I wanted. Same difference."

The king was not looking as startled as Susan had hoped, but he did look down at them, interestedly. The others were on one knee, but Susan swaggered up behind them and looked up at the man.

"Goodness," he said at last, "to what do I owe the company of such auspicious names? And I see you're up and about, Esme. I was not informed you were feeling better, I would have visited!"

Yeah, with a sharp knife.

"We have much to discuss, your majesty."

"I'm sure it's something serious, to bring the pope, a queen, two Void mages, and whatever it is that girl is, together." He pointed to Susan. She gave a little wave back. "Shall we retire to the banquet hall? I've had some refreshments brought, I'm sure you're all weary and thirsty from your travels."

"I would like that very much," said the pope. "There are urgent matters I must discuss with you. Best if we're sitting down for them."

"Very well. Please, rise. I will be along in a moment. Guard, see they are taken care of. Oh, why is that angry looking girl still armed in my presence?"

"I'm sorry, my king," said the guard that announced us. "We insisted she be disarmed, but as we were carrying the blade away, the sword returned to her, several times. She said she could keep this up all day, and could we get on with it? We thought it would be fine, after all, she was in the presence of His Holiness. And we did not insist on depriving Her Majesty of her magical focus, which we thought would be the greater overall threat..."

"Very well," he waved the man off. "I suppose a sword won't be of much threat to me in any case. Proceed."

The group was led to a large table, where Hiraga sat down and started filling a plate.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" he asked, as Susan just stood against the wall watching everything.

"You do know his penchant for using poison, right?"

"Oh yeah. Maybe it's best not to." He pushed the plate away again.

"He's not going to poison the pope!" Louise said, exasperated.

"Exactly. Because the pope isn't going to eat or drink anything in the stronghold of a potential enemy!"

"Is he my enemy?" asked the pope, filling a goblet. "I choose to trust, and have him as a potential ally instead." He drank it down.

Well, if he starts writhing and thrashing I'll hit him with the knife. Hey, I remembered it!

He didn't.

A moment later, the king entered with some of his guard, who took positions around the room. They eyed Susan suspiciously and she eyed them back, equally suspiciously. With him walked the creepy lady, who did seem surprised to see them all there. She kept looking back and forth between Susan and Louise.

"Please, don't be shy, make yourselves at home," he offered, sitting down.

"Why don't we get down to why I'm here?" suggested the pope. "Then we can put this mistrust that some have behind us."

"I agree. Please, speak openly."

"As you heard, two of our members are Void mages. That was not the complete story, as I did not announce that I too, am a Void mage. Julio here is actually my Familiar. And I see you have brought your Familiar, as well?"

"You may call her Sheffield."

"We've met," snarled Susan.

“Yes,” said the king, “it seems my intelligence was incorrect about a few things. But why now... ah, of course, you found the other two before I did, and so the four meet at last. Congratulations.”

“It’s not a matter of finding anything. The four Void mages are together, for the good of the world. I have traveled here to ask that you pledge yourself to our cause, whatever that may be, when the world is threatened.”

Wait a second, is the awakening of the creature or whatever is supposed to threaten the world the cause or the result of the four coming together? I mean, presumably the four Void mages have been around since the youngest was born. Why would the thing wait until they were old enough to threaten it? I guess that means the creature is about to wake up. But how does the world know to respond with the Void mages? Is magic that sentient to choose four people in the world after so long and go into them? I don’t get it.

“Is that why you’ve come here? For my help? Is the world being threatened, then?”

“Luckily, no, not at this time. However, it is only a matter of time now that the four have come together. At least, that is what I believe, according to prophecy.”

“Perhaps. You speak of the creature that destroyed the world long ago.”

“I do.”

“What sort of thing was it, I wonder? I’d be interested in seeing it myself.”

“You must be joking.”

“Oh no,” he replied seriously, shaking his head. “To look upon the devastation caused by such a creature of legend? To see cities destroyed, lands blighted... it might be quite moving. I have to wonder, would I shed tears for those who had lost their lives? To look upon the tens of thousands dead, would I feel pity? Helplessness? Or would I feel nothing at all? I’m almost eager to find out.”

“Eager? Now you must be joking!”

“I find little comfort in humor of late. No, if that is why you have come then I fear you will leave disappointed. You will not be getting my pledge of support, should this creature you fear appear somewhere in the world. If I did, you would expect me to rush to your aid should you wish to battle it. If you wish to battle it, you will mean to stop, or destroy it. If it is stopped, I will never be able to look upon the full devastation it causes, and never know if I might feel sorrow for those that were lost. So, as you can see, my support would be quite impossible. If there is nothing else?” He started to rise again out of his chair.

The pope seemed quite flummoxed. Susan had to admit, it wasn’t the reasoning even she had expected. She had believed maybe he would hold his support hostage for land, or wealth. Maybe demand yearly tributes to keep him on “standby” should the beast attack. She had hoped seeing his family and the queen and the three Void mages would at least give him pause, maybe say “Give me some time to consider your words” and such. But he apparently went off the deep end, and basically said, “Let the world burn, I want to watch and warm my hands on the flames. Oh, and maybe cook some sausages.”

“Shall I take over?” she asked, when the pope tried several times to frame his

thoughts and failed.

“Oh, you have a different proposal?” asked Joseph, sitting back down. “I wondered about your role in all this.”

“Quite different. The pope, or should I say ‘his holiness’ has given you option one. I will now give you option two.” She laid a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “You’ve been a real jerk to the rest of your family to secure that throne you’re warming. Personally, I don’t think your attitudes are good for the kingdom, and your being a Void mage just makes it that much worse. So here’s option two. You step down from the throne and my girl Charlotte here steps up. You apologize for all the wrongdoing you’ve participated in over the years, and accept exile from the kingdom. You can become a monk or something, and spend the remainder of your years in quiet contemplation of your sins. You can help them when this creature appears because that can be the start of your atonement. I’m not sure even that would be enough to remove the whole stain of your sins from your soul. But it might be a good start.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I personally will declare war upon you. My Familiar has reminded me that getting into the habit of killing the people that you disagree with is a bad one. I’m sure I could come up with something creative that still fits all the terrible things you’ve done. I’ve heard Charlotte’s stories of you, and I’m inclined to believe she’s leaving the worst parts out.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I think you’re probably smart enough to keep the worst parts secret.”

He seemed to take this as a complement, rather than laugh, which is what Susan was expecting. *What’s wrong with this guy?*

“Rather unconventional, declaring war on a person. Are you sure it shouldn’t be queen Anrietta threatening my kingdom with war? I assumed that’s why she was here.”

Susan shook her head. “I have no problem with your kingdom. My problem is just with you. I’m sure she would back me, but there’s really no need. I would be enough to take care of the problem, myself. She’s here because I hoped a display of how many would be against you if you didn’t cooperate would show you we were serious. I see that didn’t work, so now it falls to me. They’ve already been in one war, I don’t want to push them into another. You deal with me, as an independent agent, and leave Anrietta’s kingdom out of it.”

“How intriguing! You do know I’m a Void mage, correct? And I know you are not one, because the other three are right here in this room. I doubt the *pope* would lie to me, after all.”

“He hasn’t. The other three are in fact Void mages. I am not, but I’m confident in my skills, and my magic.”

“How confident?”

Susan regarded him suspiciously. “What did you have in mind?”

“A duel. Your magic and sword against my magic, and sword. If you win, I’ll step down.”

“Now I’m intrigued. You’re really that confident? You say I don’t know what you can do, but the same applies in reverse.”

“I am. It seems the most direct way to show my resolve in this matter. I fear if I don’t make my position clear from the start, his holiness will be hounding me the rest of

my life. No one has time for that.”

“And if I win, you’ll do as I said? Help the Void mages? Give Charlotte the throne?”

“Of course!”

Susan turned to the pope. “What do you say?”

“Oh, I do get a say in this. I was beginning to wonder. I wonder... perhaps a wager?”

“Wager? The pope wants to make a bet with me?” The guards seemed about ready to faint from shock, but Joseph seemed to taking it in stride.

“That’s correct. I’ll wager a substantial portion of wealth, we can decide the specifics later, that you’ll win. If you do, you’ll agree to help us when we need it, and your kingdom gets the gold.”

“But if I lose, I have to help anyway. I lose either way.”

“True. But perhaps the money will help ease the sting of not being able to watch the world burn.”

“Wait, are you betting against me?” Susan was shocked. *But of course, he doesn’t know what I can do either.*

“I’m betting with the world in mind. My wealth will be of no use to anyone if we are wiped out. This way I get what I want either way.”

“Perhaps you could,” said the king. “But it would have to be something else. I have no interest in money. Your life, perhaps, and lives of at least a dozen shrine maidens. Yes, I think that perhaps killing you with my bare hands might be the equal to seeing the world burn. Yes, snuffing out the life of some young women, watching them breathe their last, with my hands around their throats. Making you watch, again and again, as I go down the line. Until only you are left. That might be enough, as it would be more personal. Hummm.”

Okay, this guy is going down, I don’t care what I have to do.

Again, the pope seemed a bit out of his league. “It would have to be after the world destroyer was stopped, of course,” he sputtered.

“Naturally. It is one or the other I crave. Your life in my hands, or the fate of the entire world. And it all hinges on one overconfident little girl. It seems fitting.”

You mean Overconfident but that’s just my local dialect again. This guy is insane. But the pope... is he really confident enough in my skills, or just willing to throw his life away if it means the world got saved? I guess I don’t know enough to answer that question, but if it’s the second... dang. He just went up a couple of notches on the Susan Scale.

“Then it seems we have a deal?” The pope looked back at Susan.

“I want it in writing, and displayed prominently throughout the kingdom,” she insisted. “I don’t want the people thinking I’m just attacking you, or anything. It has to mean something, and for that, they have to know what’s at stake.”

“That I’m fighting you to avoid fighting for the sake of the world? Shrewd, they would turn against me in an instant.”

Crap, he picked up on that fast. He’s no dummy all right.

“You can word it however you wish. Even keep part of it secret. But your subjects

have to know that if you lose to me, your crown is broken and a new one is forged for your niece. Fight the duel for your honor, or something.”

“That much I will agree to.”

“Then it seems we have a deal.”

23

Duel

Place: Gallia castle

Time: Two days later

The morning of the second day dawned stormy, with flashes of lightning in the distance. King Joseph had stayed away from the group, but true to his word had spread the news about the duel far and wide throughout the kingdom. With no idea what Joseph's magic would be, there wasn't much they could plan, so Susan and the others that had remained basically hung out at the castle. The plan was for Susan to maintain *Augment Skill: Sword (Slashing)* while Sparkle maintained *Armor of Magic* and *Acceleration*.

"After all," she reasoned, "he did say my magic. Just because it doesn't come from me necessarily doesn't mean one *Natural Magician* is different from another. He didn't know Sparkle could cast spells, but that's no reason to assume she couldn't."

"There was every reason! Cats here don't use magic. Aren't you sort of cheating?" asked Louise.

"Hey, I either cheat or I do not cheat. None of this 'sort of' stuff. And no, I don't see it as cheating. If he wanted to have an arm wrestling contest or something, fine. But he's pitted my magic and sword against his, and Sparkle is my companion. That makes her magic my magic. I mean if she used a completely different type of spellcasting, maybe you would have an argument. But she doesn't, so there. Besides, you want me to win, don't you?"

"Winning with an underhanded trick isn't winning at all."

"Uh, I'm still going to be in the ring with him, you know. I could just as easily send in my dragon, or my twenty five soldiers made of fire fighting for me. That's my magic too. So be grateful I'm doing it this way at all."

"You're trying to humiliate him or something, aren't you?" observed Hiraga. "For what he did to Charlotte."

"That's part of it. A big part, probably. And I don't want him to cry foul later, either. He doesn't know what I can do, I don't know what he can do. He could have used yesterday to prepare all kinds of tricks. I'll have to deal with that just like he'll have to deal with what I can do. I have no idea if something I see him do is part of his magic as a Void mage or something else. I can't call him on anything he does, he can't call me on anything I do."

"Seems fair to me."

Louise harumphed. "I still don't like it."

Susan also worked out *parry or dodge, that is the question. With my Augment Skill going my range of rolls will be 20-27. With Acceleration going, my range for dodge will be 13-20. I guess parry it is, then. Mostly because I can put more energy into my Augment than Sparkle can with Acceleration and my dodge is terrible to begin with. Wait though, I'll have the Armor going, that will add +12 to my difficulty to be hit. So even if I rolled minimum, he would have to roll a 26 to get past the armor and hit me. So that range is actually 26-32. Glad we had this little talk.*

The duel was taking place near the castle, where an area was already set up for tournaments for things like jousting and magic proficiency. (And no weird hoop games, Susan was interested to note) There was a ring already marked off, and the stands were quite packed with people as the group made their way there.

Susan had swapped her sword for Hiraga's, just in case, and looked confidently up at the people who were yelling and cheering. *Do they even know who they're cheering for? But I suppose an event like this doesn't come along very often, so really any excitement is better than none. I have to remember these people don't have the Internet, or any real means of getting news from other places. This will be something they'll be telling travelers about for weeks. They saw the king fight, and that's probably pretty rare just by itself.*

Joseph appeared from the other side of the ring, looking regal in his oddly stylized armor these people seemed to favor. It left the legs free, so was mostly a Half-plate, and he didn't bother with a helmet. *Those things can save your life, you know. Wear your helmets, kids.*

He waved to the crowd, who cheered and booed him in equal measure. He stepped up to the ring and took his broadsword from a young boy, probably a squire. He stepped into the ring but looked up, as though unconcerned.

"Not a great day for it!" he called. "Are you sure you don't want to postpone this?"

"Worried all that metal will attract lightning?" Susan called back, drawing her own sword and handing the scabbard to Hiraga.

"I see you aren't wearing any. I guess you are confident!"

"I see you are, so I guess that means you aren't?"

He cocked his head to one side. "I suppose, given what I said, that would be the proper thing to say, wouldn't it? It is rather traditional, but then, given that the nature of this fight is rather untraditional, I could dispense with it. Make the sides more even, as it were."

"Do what you like. I don't mind." *My blade will cut it like tissue paper in any case.*

"Very well. Shall we begin?"

Susan raised her sword into a guard position and stepped over the line. "Ye-" She didn't even get the whole word out before she was throwing herself to the side, dodging his blade.

How did he-

And the fight was on.

Susan narrowly dodged, and the armor didn't activate though she swore his blade was millimeters from where it would have. She took her 1/10 movement, 2m as part of the dodge, and started thinking furiously.

He was across the whole freaking ring, can he control time or something? Let's feel him out.

She made her attack, not doing a called shot but just seeing where the dice would fall. (Figuratively, the Narrator has the dice) In this case, it landed on his left leg, which was unarmored, and she got first blood with six points of damage out of her possible eight. He tried to do whatever it was he had done to get over to her, which worked, but he staggered slightly as he appeared over on the other side of the ring.

He stared at his hand, which was now coated in blood as he had slapped his hand down over his wound reflexively. "You can't have seen through my technique already," he remarked, as though commenting on her hairstyle. "You must have just gotten lucky."

"Try me again and we'll see."

Susan held her action, as even with her increased speed, she knew there was no way she was crossing that distance. Joseph vanished again, appearing this time behind her, and she again threw herself to one side as he swung his blade. The ghostly form of her armor appeared around her, and the blade bounced off, causing him to snarl. Susan swung again, and he again tried to vanish and reappear elsewhere. Figuring she would keep her momentum going, she did a called shot to his leg and just nicked him as he vanished. Once again he appeared on the opposite side of the field, and both stared at the other.

"Seems you have some kind of armor after all," he remarked. "Seems it's gone invisible again, though. Or is it gone now that I've hit it? Care to tell me which it is?"

"Seems to me your leg wound isn't slowing you down any. Care to tell me why that is?"

"So you haven't figured out my ability. Or are you just feigning ignorance?"

"Stop bouncing around, come over here and fight me like a man, and find out for yourself. Or are you so afraid of a little girl you have to keep your distance?" Susan tried an untrained *Taunting* check, but only got a six. Joseph saw right through it.

"I fight the way I fight, girl! You won't get lucky a third time."

Susan by now had figured out that when Joseph disappeared from in front of you, it meant he was soon going to be near you, so she was ducking even as he faded out. But this time he didn't appear next to her, swinging, but rather off to the side where he threw a knife at her. She popped up, not technically having dodged yet, and swung her blade. She made a called shot to the knife, getting one more than his attack, and knocking it aside.

"Getting smarter, huh?" she asked. "How many of those do you have?"

"You're not human! No one could have deflected that blade out of the air. You're some kind of demon, sent here to topple my throne! I see it so clearly now!"

"Yes, a demon... who walked in with the pope."

"You even have the pope under your vile spell! Archers, destroy this abomination of Hell before it does more evil work here!"

Wait, archers?

Susan looked where Joseph was calling to, and saw people in the stands raising crossbows. Everyone else was starting to panic and push to get to the edge and get the heck out of there. The archers were trying to get a bead on her, but with all the pushing and shoving, they couldn't get a clear shot. *That won't last long, have to think of something.*

"You never intended our duel to be fair, this was your plan all along!" Susan accused, taking a step forward.

"Did you really think I would give up my crown, just like that? Don't take another step!" He pointed, and Susan looked over to the stands. The others, having been in the front row, were busy fighting the soldiers that had been concealed with the peasants in the rows behind them. The regular people were mostly getting in the way, so it was

confusion in the stands. Hiraga, of course, was doing just fine. He was protecting Louise, who didn't want to explode anyone but was holding her wand ready. Sparkle was on her shoulder, doing the occasional *Thrust* if someone got too near. Charlotte was also handling herself well, freezing people into place by sticking their lower bodies to the ground, or freezing their weapons in solid ice. The pope and Julio were nowhere to be seen. Esme was being held by soldiers at swordpoint, and the two were moving off to the side out of the way of the fight. Charlotte was too busy fighting to have noticed.

"And now you're taking people hostage? I don't believe this."

"Believe it. I can spin this little duel to my advantage in so many ways, even going so far as to say the pope has been tainted with evil. They all saw what you did. No human could have kept up with my speed, the plebeians will believe their eyes and my reputation will grow. I'll be the one that saved them all."

"You haven't taken me yet," snarled Susan.

"Would you sacrifice Esme to escape? The other seem to be holding their own, but how long until a stray arrow takes one out? You really are a demon!"

"Who said anything like that? *Transposition!*" Susan cast it instantly, hoping her bonus from *Acceleration* and some energy would be enough to switch Joseph for Esme. It wasn't, and Susan thought about possible options. She realized Sparkle was somehow giving her card 3, *I Don't Think So*, and forced Joseph to take another look at his RESolve check to stay where he was. This resulted in a much more favorable result for her. As Esme didn't exactly know what was going on, but knew she was in a bad situation, she allowed whatever was happening to happen. Suddenly, Joseph found himself being held by his own soldier, who was quite surprised by this turn of events.

He's right about the arrow thing. They won't pierce my Armor but they could hit someone else. Probably by accident. We need some cover and a hasty exit, both of which my magic can provide.

"*Magical Ally, Major!*" Susan cast, taking the full time. Her newest *Ally* appeared, as Susan remembered now that she had reworked it after learning *Avatar of War*, having forgotten how to cast the original that knew *Deflection* and *Elemental Bolt*. This one just knew *Thrust* and got all the benefits from having *Avatar of War* put on it. Its claws and teeth (when it opened its mouth to bite) were covered in flames, it was armored, and now a +2 size modifier rather than +1. *Portable cover, on demand.*

And if the peasantry thought a bunch of people pulling off loose clothes to reveal armor and crossbows was scary, the appearance of a fully armored, elephant sized dragon really made them lose it.

Do they have elephants here?

The soldiers let their arrows fly in the general direction of the thing, which of course bounced off the DTR 6 armor harmlessly. Joseph gave the soldier that was grabbing him a shove, and shouted to fire at the girl, the dragon must be a trick! Sadly, most didn't hear him over the mad scramble to get out of there, and any that did now had the rather lengthy process of reloading to look forward to.

Susan, having taken cover behind her dragon and now relying on it to take care of anything that got too close, dropped her *Augment Skill* and started working on *Teleportal*.

Thank goodness that's a Mercury spell, even if it's grade 10. Two and a half

seconds later she had a portal that could go more than ten million kilometers, more than enough to get back to where they had met the pope in Romalia.

“Get through,” she shouted to Esme, who was still staring at the dragon. She shook herself off and nodded, running towards it.

“You aren’t getting away,” said Joseph, appearing in front of it suddenly.

“Neither are you,” Susan remarked, “*dazzle.*”

She saw him shake it off (getting a 27 on his RESolve check).

“What are these spell you’re using?” he asked. “And where’s your wand? You aren’t using that sword as a focus, I see that now.”

“Bite-” She didn’t get to finish the thought as he suddenly disappeared again, reappearing next to her and swinging his sword. Ties go to the defender, as his blade bounced off her midsection. *Argh, this -7 I’m under is killing me. And swinging my sword at him now would be 1d8-2! That’s not going to hit.*

However, the dragon was not so encumbered, and lashed its tail at him, which being used as a weapon burst into flames. It got a 45 to hit, having a rating in *Unarmed* of 15 and a COORdination of 17. It really wasn’t Joseph’s day, as the dragon hit a 4 on the *Hit Location* table, that same left leg that was hit before. The dragon easily tore it off, not even counting the extra fire damage, even as Joseph disappeared and reappeared elsewhere.

As he only had one leg to stand on (too soon?) he toppled over, dropping his sword and screaming in agony. That is, until he passed out.

Oh great.

“Get through,” she called again, unstrapping her knife.

“You want me to do it?” Esme called, holding her hand out for the knife. “I hate to make a girl as young as yourself a cold blooded killer.”

“What? No, you don’t- just get through!”

“Okay.” Esme shrugged and dived through the hole in space. With her greater speed, Susan easily made her way to Joseph’s prone form before anyone else could, and raised her knife to plunge it into him.

Good thing the leg went with him. That means I “have the whole creature” though he is in “separate pieces.” Actually, why did the leg... never mind that now.

Are you sure you want to do that? asked The Darkness. I mean you know what he’s like. Toss the leg away and heal him if you must. That will save his life, which is what you want, right? But he’ll never be able to fight again, and will probably have to step down, which is also what you want.

As much as I would like him gone, after what he said I can’t leave things like this. You both really would turn me into a demon. My running now will prove him right, and make him a martyr. This way, anyone who heard him call me a demon will have to question why a demon would turn away from her escape and save his life.

I suppose you know best.

The knife came down, and magical energy swirled around him, and suddenly he was whole again.

“Come on, we have to get out of here!” she called to the others, who were, along with everyone else who had seen the king fall, staring at her.

"I healed him, rather than letting him die," she shouted over the noise and confusion. "You all saw it. I'm not your enemy, he is! I won the duel, call for him to honor his word!"

She and the others took off towards the portal and got through, leaving the confusion behind. Susan dropped it and the *Ally*, resheathing her knife.

"Are you all okay?" she asked.

"What did you do?" asked Esme. "I watched through that hole in the air. I thought you were going to slit his throat, but it put his leg back instead? What kind of magic is that?"

"Susan magic. His injury would have been a rallying point for any plans Joseph would have made after this. He could have declared war anywhere, citing demons and his injury, and the people would have gladly allowed it. This gives him two legs to stand on, so he has no case."

"You're fired," said Hiraga.

"Plus he could have died before any healers could get to him, or from infection later as I already know you don't know what bacteria are. Anyway, that could have gone better. Where's the pope, by the way?"

"We were all told he wasn't feeling well this morning. I guess we should have investigated further, or come told you about it," admitted Louise. "Sorry about that."

"Never mind. Which way is the place we just were?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean which way is it? If I wanted to walk there, which direction would I go? This actually works out better, because I need to know the "general distance and direction" which I know better now than I did before. While I was there, he could have been anywhere in that area. But now I know he's still somewhere in that area, but I'm here, so the entire kingdom is in one direction rather than half of it being behind me. Just point it out and let me worry about my magic."

"That way," said Charlotte, pointing.

"Thank you. *Telesummon*." Susan took the extra time, and as she was no longer maintaining anything, a surprised looking pope popped up out of nowhere.

"Goodness," he said, looking around. "I guess now I know how Familiars feel."

"Yes, how do they feel?" asked Susan, looking pointedly at Louise out of the corner of her eyes.

"What about Julio? He was in the cell with me."

"Cell?" asked Louise.

"Just a second. Explanations later. *Telesummon*."

Susan got the exact same result, and the Familiar of Vittorio appeared beside him.

"Hey! Help!" he was shouting, and he stumbled as though no longer holding onto anything, which he must have been doing before. "He- oh. Uh, what?"

"It's all right, my friend. We seem to be safe. What happened?"

"The king planned a little bit more ahead than I thought. The duel went south when he saw he couldn't win, and there was a sort of fight. We ran away."

"Not that you couldn't have taken his kingdom by force, should you have wanted it," remarked Esme. "I've never seen two people move like that. And he was at your mercy just then. I wouldn't have healed him like that."

“Yes, well, he was doing something, that’s for sure. I was sort of in the middle of it, Sparkle, did you get anything from what he was doing?”

“Near as I could tell, it was some kind of *Swiftstep* effect. I mean he disappeared from one place and reappeared in another. If he was actually crossing the distance his legs would have snapped from the strain of stopping. Plus his cape wasn’t fluttering everywhere, and if he was running that cape would have been in the way. So he was just sort of willing himself where we wanted to be and his magic did the rest.”

Susan nodded, that was the best explanation. After all, *Acceleration* made her faster, but not fast enough to vanish and reappear. Even to someone *Decelerated* she would still seem to move from place to place, not just appear somewhere instantly.

“Didn’t seem to help him much. I nicked him with my sword... sorry, your sword Hiraga, and you can have it back.” They traded again. “Anyway, I nicked him both times.”

“He would still need to do an *Active Dodge* I guess,” postulated Sparkle. “Your enhanced sword skill beat his evasion roll both times. He still *Swiftstepped*, you just cut him before he totally got it off.”

“Think I’ll stick to long range stuff unless absolutely necessary. Anyway, are you all right, Mr. Pope?”

“Mr. Pope?” mouthed Vittorio. He shook his head. “I’m fine. I was detained coming out of my room this morning and marched down to the dungeon ‘for my own safety’ and left there. They didn’t explain anything and went away again. Despite the rough treatment I am unharmed. What happened at the duel?”

Susan and the others began explaining what happened, when suddenly someone burst into the room.

“Your holiness, you have returned early! You must come quickly, something terrible has happened!”

The group traded glances, then followed the man out. Passing a window, Susan saw that it was stormy here as well, even this far away from where they had been.

No, that’s not ominous at all.

Here’s Johnny! said The Darkness.
Oh crap.

24

Beast

Time: Moments later

Place: Meeting room at the vatican

A haunted man sat, staring at nothing, as the group walked into the meeting room. He stared blankly at them for a moment, then seemed to come to his senses and register who he was looking at. He jumped up out of the seat and started to go to one knee.

“Don’t bother with that, I’ve been told something terrible has happened. What is it?”

“Your holiness, I saw it with my own eyes. Fire and devastation as far as I could see. I hurried here as soon as I realized the cause, but I doubt anyone can stop the beast.”

“Beast? What beast? Please start at the beginning, my son.”

“I’m sorry, your holiness. At the beginning, yes. I am a messenger that flies between several villages on a griffin. I was delivering a message to someone in the town near Dragon Fire Mountain. That town...” The man seemed distraught, but pulled himself together again. “That town doesn’t exist anymore. It was burned to the ground.”

“An entire town! This is worse than I feared. Go on,” urged Vittorio.

“Of course I looked for the cause, checked for survivors, but there were none to be found. I thought perhaps the mountain was actually a volcano that had gone unnoticed for hundreds of years, because it looked like part of the mountainside had exploded outward. But something crawled away from the village, leaving a burning track behind it. I didn’t need to get very close to see what it was. I still can’t tell you, but I can tell you what it looked like. A dragon, made of stone, and covered with a black fog. Other, lesser dragons, hovered nearby. Where it walked the land burned, and the sight of it terrified me beyond words.”

“But to burn an entire village, how big would you say it was?”

“I believe it would stand as tall as this building, your holiness, if not taller.”

Vittorio’s eyes widened and he sat down heavily. “To think it would come so soon. We aren’t ready, and one of the Void mages is now even more heavily against us. But we must try, and do everything we can. How long ago was this?”

“I flew straight here for hours. Yesterday, midday.”

“And could you tell where it was heading?”

“Gallia.”

“Where we were?” breathed Susan.

“It wants us. The Ancient Dragon wants to consume Void, the thing it most fears. Just as happened before, long ago in history. And there are only three, to stand together against it. I fear we may be outmatched. If it destroys us the world will have no hope at all.”

“Eh, you have something better. Two *Natural Magicians*. Wait a second, can it sense Void mages somehow? I guess we would have to believe it does, right? Given it was making a straight path towards where you all were. Will it turn aside and come here now? Or will it go for Gallia because it believes alone, that one Void mage is easier to destroy?”

“It matters little,” insisted the pope. “We must stop it before any more towns are burned. Do you know how many lives are between the mountains and Gallia? How many villages?”

“Even one is too many, I agree. I could get troops and such closer but I’ve never seen these places you’re talking about. Unless you want to return to Gallia and leave from there, but I don’t think we’ll be really welcome there. Especially when the king learns he no longer has you hostage. He’s not going to want armies pouring out of holes in the air into his kingdom.”

“My kingdom,” said Charlotte. “Stupid uncle.”

“Yes, well, sadly you haven’t been crowned yet, so you ordering the military to start marching might be met with skepticism.”

“There’s no time to waste,” said Vittorio, standing again. “We must send messengers to all nearby kingdoms. Susan, if you can take us to see queen Anrietta, at least we can get her troops mobilized quickly.” Susan nodded. “Thank you, brave messenger. Stay here as my guest, and when this situation is taken care of, you will be rewarded as is your due. Your early warning may have saved many lives. Come Julio, I have messages to write.”

He swept out of the room, leaving the others at a loose end.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” asked Louise.

Susan shook her head. “I could ask the *Question* spell where it might go next, but remember, I asked it if the creature existed and it couldn’t tell me. I don’t see why it would work now. I could let us fly somewhere, but you guys could do that on dragons or whatnot. Or take a ship there. I don’t think I can really help here, sorry.”

“Wait, the book!” she exclaimed, and ran out of the room.

“Book? What book?” The others looked confused, and a few minutes later Louise was back, holding the book of spells that was still blank. “Void magic is supposed to be geared towards fighting this very creature, right? Maybe this book will finally reveal the Void spells we need to combat the... what did his holiness call it? The Ancient Dragon?”

“If it’s going to, now would be the time.”

She held the book close, and closed her eyes. Everyone in the room waited, holding their breath until suddenly the book illuminated, filling the room with light. Louise gasped. “It worked!” The light cut off, and she opened her eyes excitedly, then started paging through. “There’s two spells here. An actual *Explosion* spell, which I have to believe is much more potent than me just casting other spells and having them blow up. And something called *World Door*. That sounds promising!”

“Try it and see what happens,” suggested Susan. “Try to focus on the creature. I know it wasn’t the greatest description but I have to believe you and this Ancient Dragon are linked somehow. That’s why it woke up when it did, because the Void mages came together. It stands to reason you should be able to track it down.”

She nodded, and got out her wand. Setting the book on the table, she pointed the wand to the side and started reading, causing the wand to glow with energy. It seemed like a long spell, *but of course she’s casting from writings, which for me would increase the time by fifty percent*. When she was finished, a small hole appeared in the air, just like Susan’s. They all crowded around it and looked through, and Susan could see a forest burning off in the distance. There was a dark shape that towered over the trees in the area, and it seemed to stop and look their way, as if sensing the magic of

Void being used.

"Can't... hold it!" Louise complained, and the portal winked out. "We'll never get through if I can't make it bigger or hold it longer than that. I'll try again!"

"Wait," said Susan, "I saw through it. I can take us there with my magic. If yours is anything like mine, the size will be relative to how practiced you are casting the spell. Don't tire yourself out though, we'll need you more for that *Explosion* than for anything else."

"Okay. Come on, let's find the pope."

"You actually saw the creature?" he asked, looking through the book. "At least we know he's not too near anywhere populated. Still, we'll need to move quickly before he gets too far away to be useful."

"I was thinking I could go through and scout the area," volunteered Susan. "Maybe I can find a good place to lure it to, though I can't imagine what that place would be."

"If you're willing, I won't stop you. Any intelligence we can gather about the creature is more than we know now, six thousand years later."

"Okay. I'll be back."

"You want us to come?" asked Hiraga.

"No, better not. You saw how it turned to look at us. It sensed Void magic. Let's not let it know someone is in the area until we have a plan of attack."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* and stepped through. Sparkle came with her, then jumped up on her shoulders.

"What, no fairy?" she asked, looking around at the fire that was spreading across the forest in the distance.

"I'm trying to save my energy, we might need it all before the day is out."

"Yeah, and I used a bunch fighting that useless duel. I should have specified chess or something. *Flight*."

High in the air, Susan looked the area over. The creature was just as the man had described it, and enormous.

"Do you think damage works the same way here?" she asked Sparkle.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that thing is a +6 size modifier, wouldn't you say? I mean it's hard to judge, but those dragons flying around it are +2 or +3. It's easily eight times as big as they are."

"Probably."

"So what's the most damage you can do with *Elemental Line: Wind*?"

"Here? My planet rating can be as high as 12, so 2d12."

"Now afterwards you divide that by 6. So the most damage you could do it would be 4. And that's on a maximum roll! How many times would you have to make it cross that line before damaging it, one at a time, would even make it notice?"

"I'm guessing a lot. It's made of rock, or at least it can smash through rock if it was sleeping in that mountain. That means it's pretty dense, and probably has a high DTR and thus, a lot of health."

“Exactly. I have one actual combat spell *that it’s immune to*. Even if I could hit it with something I would still have to get close enough. Those dragons flying around aren’t going to-”

“SUSAN!” cried a deep voice, reverberating over the landscape.

“Yes?” Susan said in a small voice.

“SUSAN!” the voice called again.

“Oh no, it knows you’re here. Wait, how is that possible?”

Why not go down and see what I want? Maybe I just want to introduce myself. I mean, I’ve not met you yet, in this guise.

“Darkness says that’s him down there. Wait a second, if you can take the form of a giant dragon, why didn’t you in my world? I’m not buying it.”

Don’t be stupid. Darkness sounded annoyed. I have to work with what I find on each world. To go there in my real form would totally unmake an entire reality. I can’t have that, I need its energy. So I have to choose a suitable vessel that will allow me to gather it. On your world it was that slightly crazy Tom Riddle. This world has an engine of destruction unlike any other. I mean, honestly, was your world even trying? I had to take your magic and his to even be a threat. Look at me down there, isn’t that a magnificent form?

“So that is you, down there?”

Part of me. Just like part of me is in you. And is attacking countless other world even as we speak. Parallelism for the win, in other words.

“Okay, we’re worse off than I thought. Imagine Tom taking the form of that thing down there, and you basically have what we’re facing. It won’t have his magic, because that magic doesn’t exist here. But it can do whatever this creature would normally do, and have at least a human level intelligence, rather than being just a beast.”

I think I’m being insulted.

“Uh, it’s looking at us.”

“And that’s our cue to leave. *Teleportal!*”

Susan stepped back through, snapping the portal shut behind her.

“Did you see it?” asked Louise.

“I saw it,” she replied sadly. “And learned a few things. I don’t even know if it’s possible to beat it. Not unless that other new spell of yours is orders of magnitude larger than anything we’ve seen you blow up so far. It’s just too big.” *And it can probably do things with Darkness’ power that the original creature couldn’t.*

“We can’t just give up! We have to try everything!”

“I know, I just want you to know what we’re up against.”

“Did you see anything in its path we could use?” asked Vittorio.

“Unless you can collapse a mountain on it, no. I mean if it could be lured to the middle of that valley it’s passing by, maybe that could be collapsed and slow it down. But to actually kill the thing? You couldn’t six thousand years ago, why do you think you would be able to do it now? We need to seal it back up again, or drop it into the ocean or something.”

“We don’t know how it was stopped all those years ago,” he replied sadly. “I doubt it ran out of things to burn, after all, we’re still here. We can only battle it as well as we are able.”

“I’ll help as I can, of course.”

“Thank you. Just being able to move troops around quickly will be of tremendous benefit. In fact, my forces here should be ready within the hour. Can you take them to meet up with Anrietta’s troops? As we are the only ones available, we shall be the first into battle.”

“Of course.”

“Then please open the door now, so we can go there and tell her what has happened. She’ll need that same amount of time to get her forces ready as well.”

“Very well.”

And so, Susan watched as a depressingly small number of troops filed past, through her *Teleportal* into Anrietta’s kingdom. She had left it open, going back and forth between the two places to deliver messages and such. Finally the last soldier was through, and Susan started opening a portal back to the place she saw the creature.

It was big, but not really all that quick. Hopefully it won’t be too far away. These people can’t ride dragons, they would risk the creatures turning on them if they got too close. And there aren’t that many griffins in the kingdom they can ride.

At Vittorio’s insistence, Susan placed the other end of the *Teleportal* near the valley she had seen, and both forces started marching through. Susan decided she should keep it open in case they needed a quick retreat.

“I’m hoping it will turn and come through this area when it senses we’re all nearby,” explained Vittorio. “Then, our Earth mages will collapse the area and pin it. That’s when Louise will hit it with *Explosion*. I will also be seeking to harm it with my Void magic of purification. It should harm a creature of evil, such as this monster. Tiffania, your job is to erase the memories of any dragons that should come near. Hopefully that will confuse them and make them wander off without attacking.”

“I’ll do my best!”

“So will I,” promised Louise.

If it does get pinned down, maybe I can get down close enough to cast Shrink, not that it would help much against something as huge as this thing.

“Are you sure using a dragon is wise?” asked Hiraga, as Juilo and the pope mounted the white dragon Juilo had brought through the *Teleportal*.

“My ability as a Familiar is to control beasts,” he explained. “I can keep control of it.”

I hope you’re right.

The Ancient Dragon did seem interested in what everyone was doing over there, and slowly turned to head towards them. It seemed the lure of the three Void mages was enough to make it turn, just as the pope had hoped. Earth mages were raising elementals, like the one that Miss Longbill had used, though they were not as big and impressive as hers had been. Others were weakening the structure of the nearby cliffs, making them more ready to collapse. Susan looked her character sheet over as everyone worked, trying to figure out a way she could help.

Makes you feel kind of helpless, doesn’t it?

I admit, it’s not a feeling I’m used to.

Relying on others when you’re so used to taking care of problems yourself. Must

be pretty grating on you.

Do you have a point?

Just making conversation.

Soon, the dragon came into range and looking around. Soldiers lined the walls, which Susan thought was a bit dangerous. Weren't they going to collapse those walls in a second? How far away could they reach with their magic? The pope was with Juilo, the rune on his hand shining with inner light, and both were on the dragon. Hiraga, Tiffania, and Louise were with the ground forces, ready to strike when the creature was buried. Susan and Sparkle were again in the air, hovering near the pope in case their magic could be useful in some way. Susan's *Legion* was also out, patrolling the area, with orders to attack any dragon in range. The air felt charged, and lightning struck nearby, setting more fires. The ground trembled with every step the Ancient Dragon took, and it seemed a cloud of dragons accompanied it now, ready to follow it into battle. Susan could see the shape of the creature through the cloud of darkness that shrouded it, and its glowing eyes swept the scene.

"What are you little people doing down there?" it asked, sounding amused. The creature's voice was low and projected like thunder. Everyone there seemed amazed it could speak. "Did you think to lure me down into that place where you weakened the rocks? And harass me with these little Earth elementals?" It crushed one, as if making the point. "I don't think so." It took in a mighty breath, then shot fire at the walls of the valley, making them tremble, melt, and start collapsing. "Go, my pretties," it intoned, and the dragons shot forward towards the knights.

Wait, if they can use magic, aren't they nobles? If they're nobles, why are they knights? Figure that out later!

"Now I must do my part," said Vittorio, standing. "That black mist will interfere with my spell, but it cannot be helped. We will need to move closer, Juilo."

"All right."

The dragon slowly moved forward as the pope started chanting, and his hand lit up with magic. The dragon roared at him, and for a wonder it seemed to actually start hurting the thing.

Oh, I see. The way you deal with huge things is to give them the opposite of Regeneration. That will tear anything down pretty quickly. That sort of thing wouldn't be divided by the size of the creature. Now why didn't I think of that?

Lower to the ground, Tiffania was wiping the memories of what dragons she could, and that actually seemed to be working. They would glow briefly, then give up the attack and fly away. Hiraga was protecting Louise, his OTR 10 sword able to slice dragon scale quite easily, while she harassed them with minor *Explosions*. It didn't do much more than give him an opening, but it was enough.

Gee, maybe they can take it out with only the three of them. My Legion would be the equal to stupid King Fancy Pants, as even he can't be in twenty five places at once. We can do it. We can win. We feel great!

The dragon knew it was the pope that was hurting it, and so through the pain of its degeneration it drew in another mighty breath.

Oh boy, I hope this works!

"Deflection!" both Susan and Sparkle cast, as the dragon breathed fire at the pair. Technically, even if it was huge, the stream of fire it shot out was a "single attack" and was not "area-effect." It was actually just a scaled up version of Susan's own *Elemental Attack: Fire* and could technically be blocked by a shield. A shield used by a giant, perhaps, but the rules didn't specify a shield held by a human hand.

The attack bounced off, and Julio nodded his thanks for keeping them from being cooked alive.

Used ten energy for that, can't do that too many more times, even with Energy Boost.

"Ah, Susan," said the dragon, its fire expended. "Causing trouble wherever you go. One of these days I'm going to really put some thought into paying you back for that. But today, I think I'll eat this guy."

"Eat?" Susan and Sparkle said together. As they watched, a third eye opened on the Ancient Dragon and the one the pope and Julio were riding started being drawn towards the mouth of the Ancient Dragon. Susan saw she had one chance. *"Augment STRength, now!"* she said to Sparkle, who was confused but complied. As she cast, Susan readied the spell she was going to use, and flew backwards away from the creature. Julio tried in vain to do whatever he did to control his dragon, but it was no use, and both were drawn ever closer to their doom.

Just as the teeth snapped shut, Susan cast.

25

Defeat

Time: Just then

Place: The air over the Ancient Dragon

As the jaws of the Ancient Dragon closed over the poor, defenseless minor dragon the pope and his Familiar were riding, Susan cast a spell. She cast the only spell she could think of that would get the two out of there in one piece and deprive the Ancient Dragon of its meal. She cast a spell, and she actually didn't bother to put much energy into it, as the difficulty was the distance and they were honestly right there. But it was being cast on two people, so she put a little energy into it. I mean she'd be a fool not to, right? She can put in four and be almost guaranteed to get two back with her rating in *Energy Boost*. Even as high as six and three in a pinch, though that isn't as sure a thing.

But what is a sure thing in life? I mean, there you are, being pope, right? Then this weird girl starts acting all high and mighty and these two other Void mages are found. The very next day you're staring down a dragon and thinking maybe being up where the thing's mouth was wasn't such a good idea. You can feel the heat of the flames as the dragon you're riding helplessly inches closer. Teeth as big as you are can be seen, and you can't help but wonder what this creature would need to eat in a day to actually support this amount of mass.

Oh right, the spell. Susan cast *Telesummon*, getting a 16 by taking the full time (it was only 1.6 seconds, and it took longer than that for the Ancient Dragon to open its mouth. She was at a minus two for casting it on both of them, but used four energy, so it worked out. As the jaws closed, both men found themselves in Susan's arms, and with her STStrength augmented by magic, for a total of eleven, she could easily lift 350kg. That's over 770 lbs for those that are more used to those measurements. Both men were strapping, healthy boys, but they didn't weigh nearly four hundred pounds apiece.

Susan continued flying away, fast as she could. It took a second for the dragon to realize it hadn't gotten the meal it wanted, and started inhaling for another blast of fire. Amazingly, the pope hadn't lost the spell, apparently willing to give his all even to the last second, and he went up another slight amount on the Susan Scale.

"We're getting too far away!" he said. "My magic won't be able to reach him."

"I can't defend us with both hands holding you guys. Sorry, I have to drop you, Julio!"

"NO!" cried the pope.

"I'm only teasing. Hope you've got this by yourself, Sparkle!"

"I'm at half energy, I can't promise to deflect too many more."

Susan changed direction, with the majority of the dragons having flown to follow his "attack" command, the sky was now much clearer. She figured if she could get behind him, he wouldn't be able to effectively shoot fire at her.

Sparkle *Deflected* another blast of fire, but had to spend her card 71, *Lucky Break* to not die.

"Okay, that's all my cards, unless you have something up your sleeve, the next one might hit us."

"Yeah, *Extra Cash* and... oh, a *Damage Add*," that she immediately played on the

pope. *Forgot about that one, wasn't thinking we could hurt this thing at all, so I didn't bother playing it.* The Ancient Dragon roared as it took more damage that turn, and decided it was not in the position it wanted to be at the moment. It took one more breath, this time directing fire away from Susan and towards the soldiers on the cliff. It was petty, and some of the dragons got roasted, but it didn't care about that. The humans there died, so it felt it had accomplished something, at least. It deliberately didn't roast the side with the Void mages, probably because it wanted to eat them too, but raw, not cooked. It then raised up on its hind paws and shouted "Enough of this!" Slamming into the ground it knocked people over for a mile (or so) and a shimmering energy barrier sprang up around it.

Susan could tell the barrier was blocking whatever Vittorio was doing, as the Dragon's flesh started to heal again rather than peel away. He stopped maintaining the spell and looked at that barrier.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Unless you want to *Teleportal* down below the barrier and be cut off totally from our support, I don't know. Watch it to see if it moves and start attacking it when it does? That spell of yours hurt it, but awfully slowly. We're going to need a good plan for our next attack."

"I agree. But we have hope now, we've shown it can be pressed, and even frustrated. To think it could talk! Come, set us down and let us take stock of who made it through the attack."

"We only made it through because of you," Julio put in. "Thank you for saving our lives like that."

"Not a problem. I once used that spell totally inappropriately so I like to think my using it today has made up for that, somewhat. Come on."

Susan flew down to the ground, where everyone was picking themselves back up after being knocked over by the Dragon's attack.

Was that a power, or just the raw STrength of that creature? she wondered.

It turned out, half the soldiers that had come had perished in the creature's last fire attack, and Vittorio made a point of asking the captain for the names of the men that had died when this was over.

"I'll have some kind of monument made in their honor," he promised.

Yeah, made of this thing's bones, I hope.

"So what's our next move?" asked Louise, as everyone gathered around to see what was next. Susan was busy plunging her knife into anyone who was wounded, or into their armor to repair that.

"We need to get more people attacking it directly, rather than just the pope," suggested Hiraga. "Did you see, when he was using his spell that mist or whatever started to clear. I bet some phosphorus grenades or rockets would put a dent in it. If only I could get something like a modern fighter jet, put some missiles into it while the pope weakened it. We really still have no clues as to how to move between worlds? Siesta's great-grandfather got here somehow, right? And Void magic is supposed to help us fight this creature, right? So now would be a great time for some kind of spell to appear in that book to get me home."

“Actually,” said Louise, getting out her book, “it may have already, and the clue might be in the name. This spell is called *World Door*. What if that means I can open doors to other worlds, too?”

“Hey, that would be amazing! You really think it would work?”

“I’m happy to try. If your weapons are really that much better than our magic, we could certainly use them.”

“How about it, Susan?” he asked. “We have all the planets, and you’re always saying how much more powerful you would be if you could only have access to all your magic. Could you help me clean out an army base or something, get some explosive weapons to use here?”

“Sure thing! It would let me get my book of magic out, at the very least. And if it works once it’ll work again, and once this situation is over I can go back, then have a little chat with Inari. That creature though, it knows I’m here. I should probably tell you, it probably now knows our plan, too. Sorry, my fault kinda, but can’t be helped. As soon as I’m gone it may resume the attack. We’ll probably want to get more people here, maybe fire or water mages, people who can deflect or neutralize that fire breath of his.”

“With some more time, we can get additional forces here. You dropped that *Teleportal*?”

“Yeah, when it started shooting fire at you and I needed all my concentration for that.”

“Then let us go back and start bringing more forces here. The call has gone out, and people should, I hope, be rushing to aid us. We’ll both stay here, Julio, you can go and organize things on the other side. That way all the Void mages and Susan will be here, and it’ll stay bottled up in that shell while it thinks of what to do next.”

“Got it.”

Susan opened the *Teleportal* again, hoping she might get some rest soon. Even her energy wasn’t limitless. People started coming through, in small groups at least, and all wearing different styles of armor. Some didn’t have armor at all, and claimed to be mercenaries.

“I put out the call for them, too. Not all magic users are nobles, of course. Some lose their titles, or have no use for them. Some just want to further their magical arts and can’t be bothered with the other things that come along with being a noble. But everyone has to eat. So they hire their services out, and I figured with a large enough bounty on the head of this creature, everyone who helps can take a share and make some money. Like I said before, I’d rather be poor and alive than rich while the world burns.”

“Sensible,” agreed Susan.

He started coordinating their positioning around the Ancient Dragon, based on what they said their specialties were, and while the force looked pathetically small in Susan’s eyes, she herself was a good example of not judging a book by its cover. Who knew what sort of magic these oddball characters knew, *I mean that little guy is carrying around some kind of tuba or something. What’s his deal?*

Night started creeping up on them, and Susan told Vittorio she would have to close the *Teleportal* to sleep. She needed to get her energy back, so when the creature started moving again, she would be ready. He said that was fine, and told Julio to just

have people wait there for the next morning, ready to fight at sunrise. He said he would, and Susan shut it down for the night.

It passed peacefully, the glow of the two moons and the energy shield around the creature lighting the place up enough so watchfires weren't needed. Susan got to sleep as early as she could, in case it picked midnight to start attacking again, but to an immortal creature like the Ancient Dragon, one night was hardly worth considering, so she woke refreshed the next morning.

"Ready to try this?" Louise asked, after a light breakfast brought through the portal.

"I better shrink us," Susan cautioned. "Remember, the one just between two places on this world was pretty small. To go between worlds might be even smaller."

"Good point."

Susan put *Flight* and *Shrink* on Hiraga, Sparkle, and herself, and hovered in front of Louise.

"Wait," said Hiraga, "how will we get back?"

"I can get us back," explained Susan. "My father left plenty of notes in my spellbook about moving across worlds. Four times he had to move these enormous towers between worlds, to put them back in their right positions. They had been moved to disrupt the energy they were keeping in check so The Darkness could take it for itself. So a variant spell of *Dimension Gate* can be used. It's just you have to see the dimension you want to go to, or have certain information he was able to gain from the towers themselves in order to do it. So normally most people can't. As I've been here some time, I can open a door back here."

"Guess I shouldn't have worried, you really are powerful!"

"Magic is powerful, I'm just the conduit."

"Whatever you say. Okay, we're ready! Good luck, Louise!"

She held out a hand, and Hiraga perched there. Louise raised her wand, and intoned the gibberish words to the spell she needed to open the World Door. To Susan's amazement, it worked, and a modern day Japan met her eyes.

"Let's go!" said Hiraga, flying up and pulling her. "That's home, let's get through before it closes."

"You better come back, Hiraga!" shouted Louise as both darted through. Susan felt Hiraga's hand leave hers, and suddenly she was full sized again, and standing in an odd room that some kind of energy barrier in front of and behind her. The one behind her vanished, and she heard a pleasant voice from out of nowhere.

Meanwhile, Hiraga looked back through the hole, looking for Susan. "Didn't she come through?" he asked.

"She isn't there?" Louise managed, before she couldn't hold the spell anymore and the door closed.

Both looked around, wondering what had happened, as Susan was on neither side of the door.

Back with Susan...

"Please remain calm. You have been redirected from your intended transit destination. Your transit is very important to us. An agent will be along shortly to assist you. Please remain in the holding area while your threat level is determined. Thank you for your patience."

"Uh, what?" asked Sparkle, looking around.

"Yeah, what?" asked Susan, also looking around. The cell she was in was stark, little more than a metal box with one side open. That side shimmered with energy, and probably not the 'oh that tickles' sort of energy, should you be stupid enough to poke it with some kind of appendage.

"If you would like the previous message repeated, please say 'repeat that.' Otherwise, remain in the holding area while you are scanned. The scan is non-invasive and completely harmless." There was a pause. "You have not said 'repeat that' so the scan will now commence." A beam of light swept over Susan, and she shielded her eyes. She needn't have bothered, it was gone again a second later. "Your results will now be computed, and an agent will be dispatched to assist or destroy you, as appropriate. We thank you again for your patience."

"Right. Sure," said Susan, wondering what in the blue blazes was going on. Heck, it might even be shifted up to Navy blue blazes. She didn't have long to wait as almost immediately a figure approached the cell from down the hall. It seemed her cell was directly opposite the hallway leading away, and the energy barrier vanished.

"Sorry about that," said the figure, which was roughly human shaped. It was covered, from head to toe, in a silvery liquid armor that reflected Susan's worried face back at her. Where a human would have eyes, a faintly glowing red visor was inset into the metal. Otherwise, there wasn't a seam or rivet on the entire figure. A staff, pointed at both ends, could be seen sticking out from behind one shoulder and the figure's leg. "You bear the mark of Inari, so you must be okay. Are you in some kind of trouble, or shall we just put you back at your intended destination?"

"You know Inari? Can you take me to see her? My friend got lost between worlds and I have no idea where she is!"

"I guess you are in trouble. Please, come out of there and we can see about finding your friend. And greetings to you as well," he said to Sparkle, giving a little bow.

"What is this place?" she asked, stepping out and looking down the hall. It seemed to be filled with a bunch of identical cubes, each with an energy barrier across it.

"Welcome to The Hub, I'm Silverstreak, and I'm sure you must have a lot of questions. Come, I'll offer you something to eat and we can sit down to get you squared away."

"I just ate, but some answers would be nice."

"Right this way!" He indicated the hallway where he had come from, and both started walking through the narrow corridors.

"Homey."

"Ah, yes, this area is rather stark, isn't it? Don't worry, it opens up further on. If something should come through that isn't as pleasant as yourself, we need to be able to contain it and this sort of layout helps. Here we are." They came to what looked like an elevator, and Silverstreak stepped inside. "Meeting room 453 is free, I believe. We'll

head there.”

“Fine with me.” The doors closed, and then a second later they opened again.

“And here we are. If you’ll just come this way?”

“People say I don’t mess around, they don’t even know.”

Silverstreak chuckled. “Yes, one of the advantages of having a complete understanding of how time and space work means no tedious waiting for elevators.”

Susan followed the being into a very rich looking meeting room, all ancient wood and plush chairs and though she couldn’t see any lighting devices, the space was still evenly lit. Silverstreak motioned her to sit, and she did, a cup with what looked like water materialized on her right. Silverstreak also sat, and she noticed the staff now standing straight up next to him, as though balanced on the point.

“Who are you? What is this place? How did I get here?” A million more questions fought their way to the forefront.

“Let me give you a little background, that should answer most of your questions. Any you have after that I’ll be glad to address. Sound fair?” Susan nodded. “Great. Let’s tackle the last one first. How did you get here? It’s actually a security system I created, triggered by a being leaving a world by a different means than they entered.”

“Wait, so then why didn’t the guy next to me come along? He got brought to that world by a different method than he left.”

“Did he? Then it should have. Wait, was it a different person?”

“No, the same person. Just a different spell.”

“Ah, that might explain it, the system may consider that to be same method if it’s the same person. I’ll look into it, make sure that isn’t an exploitable weakness or anything.”

“So how is this a security system?”

“Consider this situation- a nefarious type gains access to other worlds and starts to exploit them. He or she brings some magic or technology of a level unseen on the world he travels to. The beings there banish them using what means they can, either to just get rid of that person back to their own world, or to another so it’s not their problem anymore. Well, instead of doing things at random or inflicting someone like that on another unsuspecting world, they’re redirected here. If needed, we can take care of the situation or help the person if they need it.”

“I need help, there’s no doubt about that.”

“And it shall be freely given, if your story is what I think it will be. But now let’s go back to the second question; what is this place? This is the Hub. It’s where my agents and those I deem worthy to get my direct assistance meet. From here we watch the comings and goings between worlds, and defend those we can by keeping Darkvoid away from them. I take it you two have met, given you carry a piece of him inside yourself.”

“You’re talking about The Darkness?”

“It has many names, usually given by those that meet it. Is that why you’re traveling? But no, let me answer your questions first, after all, I am the host. Where was I, ah, who am I? Well, you’ve met my ‘cousin’ for lack of a better term, Inari.”

“You’re another higher order being?”

“Correct. There’s a few of us running around, and we each seem to have found our specialty for interacting with the, no offense, lower dimensional planes. Inari went

with magic, and being a trickster, usually. I focused on technology, and trying to be as straightforward as possible. In fact, I can probably wager, and win, that she really didn't tell you much of anything at all."

"You got that right! She didn't even mention about the language thing, or that I could understand all languages."

"It's actually far worse than that. If you don't find it too creepy, may I see your character sheet?"

"Finally! Someone who knows about them. I guess it's okay, I mean you scanned me, I have to think you already know about as much about me as you could learn from this." She handed the sheet over.

Silverstreak took it with reverence, something Susan didn't even think was possible for others to do. He looked at the front, then flipped it over to the skills section. "Yeah, I was afraid of that."

“Afraid of what?” Susan was concerned, looking over the page to see that maybe her skills had gone away or something. They seemed to be all there.

“Oh, it’s nothing bad!” Silverstreak hastened to assure her. “It’s just... Inari. She really didn’t tell you anything, as usual. ‘Let them work it out for themselves, Silverstreak, it’s more fun.’ My shiny metal butt it’s more fun. There’s a couple of skills here that you really need as a dimensional traveler, and she just expected you to figure them out on the fly while dodging whatever the world was throwing at you.” He shook his head, laying the paper down. “We can fix that in a moment. I was telling you about myself, and my kin. Like I said, I’m Inari’s counterpart, but for technology rather than magic. We both do similar things, and that’s to send people to various worlds to take care of problems there. We can’t go ourselves, for various reasons, but beings like you have no trouble passing between worlds. It’s like we watch the tree, you keep the branches free of parasites.”

“Tree?”

“Ah, yes, it’s best to think of the different realities as branches of a tree. Here, I’ll demonstrate.” He waved a hand, and a hologram of a tree sprang from the table. “The trunk is where the realities started. There was one reality, and the tree was small. But as time went on the tree grew, and branches appeared. This is why most places have humanoid type lifeforms and somewhat similar conventions. They all came from the trunk. Now as each reality grew, more branches and then leaves appeared. We’re concerned with the main branches, or how close to the original way the dimension is supposed to run. See, if Darkvoid, or The Darkness in your case, gets the original branch it gets all the sub branches too. So it doesn’t bother with individual leaves, out at the fringes of possibility. It’s why, when you travel, you see worlds that are so radically different. If you stepped only a little ways away you would end up with only minor differences. You see?”

“Sure. If you’re attacking a castle you start at the bottom, and pound the heck out of one wall. Not at the top and arrange your forces to attack the whole thing. Once one wall goes down, the castle is finished.”

“Exactly. So, have you been to many worlds?”

“Just the one. I was actually supposed to be tracking down my father, but literally ran into someone going from Inari’s place to where my father first went. That’s how I ended up where I did.”

“I see. Wait, that was your first dimensional hop? Has it been going okay?”

“Hardly. I got stuck there because they didn’t have all the planets, and I couldn’t get out my magic book so I had to rely on just spells I had memorized or could research myself. Now this huge dragon thing is on a rampage and burning everything in sight. It’s not going well. We were trying to get some weapons from another world to fight it.”

“Yeah, that’s a standard solution. Just a second.” Silverstreak turned to the side and drew a line through the air diagonally, which seemed to light up like a computer

display. On the other side was a woman sitting down at some kind of terminal, and Susan could see many other beings behind her, all busy with stuff. Talking, comparing what they saw on their screens, getting water, it was like an interdimensional office building.

“What can I do for you, boss?”

“Check up on the situation in 3874734 for me, would you? And what’s going on with 7543485?”

The woman shook her head. “Getting worse. Darkvoid clones keep popping up, and they’re getting closer to the key to destroying the whole place. The one clone is resisting, but I don’t think he can hold out much longer.”

“Keep me posted. I think I may have found someone who can help.” He pointed a thumb at Susan.

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” gushed the woman. “I’ll put it on my priority list. And you wanted 3874734, right? I’ll have that for you in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.” The window closed, and he turned back to Susan.

“Sorry about that, it doesn’t stop around here, I’m afraid. Where were we? Oh, right, you came here because you used a different type of magic to leave 3874734 in order to get weapons to fight this creature, right? I guess I better go over some of the rules, before you get caught in a really bad situation.”

“Rules?”

He nodded. “I didn’t make them, but they exist. It pays to keep them in mind, and it relates to the skills I talked about earlier. This is actually going to be much easier for me than most, as you’re a Paragon. I can just put the skills on your *character sheet* and not have to spend time explaining how to do them, and tediously teaching you the slow way. You just make the checks, you don’t have to understand the theory.”

“True. But you should give me some explanation, right?”

“Oh, of course! Now the first skill is something we call *Adaptive*. Basically, it lets you pick up the fringes of something unique to the worlds you visit. For instance, if you went to a world where everyone piloted some kind of mech, you could jump in one and start piloting it. Something like that is trained only, see, so you couldn’t use *Augment Skill*.”

“You still know about my kind of magic?”

“Sure. Just because I don’t specialize in it, that doesn’t mean I’m ignorant of it. Now, the great thing with *Adaptive* is that you can swap it out. You have a 5 rating in the skill, but you don’t have to throw that skill away in the next world and pick up another. It may use a different stat, but the skill roll remains constant. Secondly, it will let you bypass the need for certain backgrounds. Like using a different type of magic, if everyone on that world has that type of magic, you can use it too. The basics, anyway, like I said.”

“That would have been nice to know beforehand,” she remarked darkly.

“Inari, am I right? Now the next skill is *Dimensional Attunement*. With this skill you can... wait, you have *Magic Sense*. It’s that, for dimensional stuff. You can use it to sense out other travelers like yourself, or tell if an object doesn’t belong in a certain dimension.”

“That would be great for telling who was being influenced by Darkvoid.”

“That’s right. Now, about objects- be careful. Any object exclusive to a world will

stay there when you leave. Even if you put it in your *pocket dimension*, it'll stay behind and you won't find it when you ask for it."

"That's no fair!"

He shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's the way things are. It's a way to keep contamination to a minimum, I think. Technology will generally come along, because most worlds will eventually come up with most devices. And any that are too advanced won't be figured out because the people won't have the background information to construct duplicates. Maybe not power sources, so keep an eye on that. Super efficient power sources may come from material only found on one world, so you might find a gun but not the battery!

"Like back in the world you were just in there's a rock called Windstone, if I'm reading this report right. Makes an island float I guess?"

"Yeah, I visited that place!"

"Okay. That wouldn't come along because that stuff is native to one place. But if you brought a wand or one of their pistols it would be fine. You see where I'm going with this? You can pretty easily tell what will and what won't, because anything that won't you probably haven't seen before." Susan nodded, frowning. "Don't worry, there's a way around the restriction, for things you really, really want to bring along. The *sub-space pocket*. Items you put into that can be pulled out everywhere. Plus it's not magic, it's an act of will, so it'll work without casting any spells! I don't know exactly where it came from, but when people, long ago, started moving across dimensions and sometimes found they could summon up things they fell in love with on certain worlds, I looked into it. The technique was refined, and it's been in use ever since."

"What's the catch? There must be one, if it's breaking the 'rules' like that."

"The catch is, the size of the pocket directly relates to your skill. It rises pretty fast, but you won't be putting a car in with a one rating. You can fit... a book, at most, to start. I guess whoever set it up figures if you put the time or XP or practice into making the space bigger, you can probably be trusted with whatever you put in it.

"So that's three things to put XP into. Now, if you can think of two trained only skills I can make it a skill group and get you them for free. Otherwise, with your permission, I'll take 3 XP and put them on your sheet so you have access to them."

"Are there magical skills I don't know about? The people where I just was didn't know about *Magic Sense* but I could teach them about it, and they picked it up."

"Let's see..." He picked up the sheet again and scanned it over. "No, not really anything you don't already have." He looked her over, or at least the red in his visor seemed to shift a little bit. "Apart from your companion, you're traveling alone?"

"I wasn't. The person traveling with me, Luna, got knocked into when Hiraga hit us. She went spinning off somewhere."

"You did say something about a friend. I think you better tell me your story before we go any further."

"Sure." Susan proceeded to tell him about her father, and how he had left and left her the book. (She got it out of her *Pocket Dimension* with a sigh, and Silverstreak looked it over as he listened. While she was thinking about it she also got a few other things out, mostly spell formula she thought she might like, and set them aside to take) She told him about how Tom had been taken over by Darkvoid and how he had taken her magic as well. She talked about fighting him inside Harry and deciding to go after

her father. First to make sure he was all right and if not, take up his quest to save his world. She finished by talking about what she had gone through with Louise and the others, and finally coming here.

“That’s quite the task you’ve set for yourself!” Silverstreak seemed impressed. “I think I’ve heard of your father, actually. There are so few dimensional travelers around, I hear about them all sooner or later. Yes, quite the challenge.” He picked up her character sheet again. “Fifteen XP. It would be enough...”

“For what?”

Silverstreak considered his words carefully a moment. “I could give you a new background. If I’m thinking of the right person, your father effectively had it, given he carried a staff which gave those that touched it certain abilities. This would be a little different, but still pretty effective for you. It comes with about seven skills, most of which you probably wouldn’t need. But two you would really like, and that would make up the skill group. I’ll give you a rating of 0 in the others, just to say you’ve gotten the “training” in them, if you want to pick them up later. How does all that sound?”

“Like a once in a lifetime deal.”

He laughed. “It pretty much is. And if you don’t mind me keeping this book for a little while, while you finish up taking out that Dragon you were talking about, I can get you some new magic, as well. I’ve got some good spell casters around here, they can put some spells you’re missing into the book, and I can augment it with some sensors. That way it could analyze things from other worlds and come up with equivalents in your magical ‘language’ so to speak. You’re one of the lucky ones, more versatile than most.”

“I would need to at least get the *Dimension Gate* spell and my father’s notes so I can make it back to the place I was. Other than that, you’re welcome to it.”

“I can make you a copy, it’s no big deal.”

“And you’re really willing to do all this for me?”

“Ah, yes, remember what I was saying before about you being a possible solution to a problem somewhere?”

“Yes?”

“In return, I want you to give up your quest, temporarily,” he hastened to add, “to find Luna, and help these other people out. I think one of your spells in particular is going to solve their biggest problem quite nicely. I hope it doesn’t go that far, but if it does, I would like an agent on the scene and you have the spells for it. The one I’m thinking of is not even that high a grade! While you do that I’ll work out some possible vectors your friend took, and get you the data so you can check those worlds where there’s a high probability you’ll find her.”

“That would be such a big help. Wait, can Sparkle get the background too? She has XP to spend, and if it’ll help me it’ll help her.”

“Sure, if she’s willing to spend it on this. Trust me, it’s well worth it, for your particular situation.”

“I have been saving it for when we left that world. I suppose now is a good a time as any,” Sparkle remarked.

“Deal then. Let me see your character sheet, too.”

Sparkle jumped up on the table and her sheet appeared, and Silverstreak materialized a pen out of somewhere and started marking them up. “There you go!” he said brightly, handing them back.

Susan eagerly looked at the BACKGROUNDS section, and it seemed she was now a *Spirit Mage*. It also seemed she knew about *Spirit Energy* now, and how to tap into sources of power like *Ley Lines*. She was down to 3XP, but told herself it was worth it.

“You can check them all over mentally later,” he told them. “And I’ll add some notes about the skills I’ve put down in your book. Time passes quickly here in relation to most places, but it still passes. Let’s make sure we’ve gone over everything and get you on your way. The situation in 7543485 can’t wait too long.”

“And I always pay my debts. Thank you, for everything.”

He shrugged. “You paid for it. I just made it possible for you to access. It seemed only fair, given your situation. It doesn’t make up for losing your friend, but hopefully it makes it a little easier to find her.”

“I hope so.”

“Great. Now, let’s get you some equipment so you can get back here!” He stood up and the door opened, leading into the space she saw earlier.

Does this guy not like to walk, or just show off? Making a map of this place would probably prove to be impossible, if this guy can just rearrange the corridors at a whim.

Everyone looked up at Susan walked in with Silverstreak, and given her *Overconfidence* she looked them all right in the eye. They greeted her warmly, and went back to work.

“How much time do we have in 7543485?” he asked the woman he had spoken to earlier.

“Hours, at best. She’s about to leave her party and go off on her own. She’ll get slaughtered for sure!”

Silverstreak shook his head. “And that would be a waste. She’s the last of her kind on that planet, and there’s a lot the people there could learn from her. Okay, come on over here.”

He led Susan over to a shelf where there were sitting some watch looking devices. He picked up a smaller model, and handed it to her.

“Put it on, then make a code so if someone steals it, they can’t use it.” Susan did as she was asked, snapping it around her wrist. It lit up, and a five digit number appeared. “Turn the crown to move the numbers.” She did, then Silverstreak had her draw a shape over the numbers, which activated the display. “Normally it’ll show you local time, but the real power is in the press. Click the crown in.” She did, and the clock was replaced with a bunch of tiny icons, all circles, that probably meant various things. “See the one that looks like a Japanese archway? Scale it up with the crown, that’s the way. That’s the one you’ll use to get back here. It’ll make a portal big enough to step through, and the watch will also serve as your pass around the hub. When you get a moment, have a look around! After you do what I want you to do, that is.” Part of his visor went dark, meaning he must be winking.

“I know.”

“Just teasing. Now, click the button under the crown.” She did, and Silverstreak’s picture popped up. “If you want to talk to me without coming back, like if you have a question or something, feel free. You might get one of these fine people depending on how busy I am, but they can answer your questions too. I would ask you don’t do it around others, I like to keep my existence a secret, for the most part. Those that already

travel between worlds is fine, but if bunches of people start trying to get in here... well, it just adds to my workload.”

“I can see where that would be an issue. They would be wanting you to solve all their problems.”

“You got that right. You can play around with the other functionality later, but really it’s pretty mundane. You’ve probably used similar devices, just bigger. The nice thing about this is, it’s technology. So even if you run into a world with little to no magic, it’ll still work and get you back here.”

“That would have come in handy- I keep saying that.”

“Don’t get them started. They all have some story about her. Now, unless you have some other questions, let’s get you back to fighting that Ancient Dragon!”

“I haven’t had time to think of any more! Now I know how Tiffania felt, being whisked away by me into a war with a dragon! Oh, I do have one. Where is best to go in order to get the explosives we need to take out the Ancient Dragon?”

“Let’s take a look.” Silverstreak went over to an unused console and started tapping things in. “You’ll land in Japan, there’s the Yokota air base, bet you could get a pretty advanced plane there. You’re sure your friend can fly it?”

Susan nodded. “It’s a weapon.”

“So it is. Very well, is this picture good enough?” He showed her a view with a snowy mountain rising in the background, then there were some lower hills, then the base itself.

“It should be.”

“Great. If you think of more, I’m only a press away. Come on, your friend will be worried about you, though only a few minutes should have passed.” He brought her into a room with an archway and some equipment attached to it, and started punching things in. “Good luck. And thanks. Every agent I have blocking Darkvoid is another branch of the tree that stays safe. Drive him out of that world for good.”

“Is it for good? What prevents him from coming back?”

“That’s... technical. Believe me, we do something to branches he leaves so he can’t go there again. It works.”

“Okay. I’m ready.”

“Step through then, it’s all set, you’ll appear where you were going to, and it’s been about eight minutes.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back!”

“I know.”

Susan stepped through the archway of light, and looked around for Hiraga. Several people reacted to her suddenly appearing there by edging away and walking quickly, or just rubbing their eyes because they didn’t believe them.

“Now if I was Hiraga, where would I be?” Susan asked herself.

“Right over there?” said Sparkle, pointing with a paw. He was leaning against a wall somewhat out of sight, trying to hide the sword he was still carrying.

“Who has the best perception checks? You do, that’s who! Come on.”

“Susan, you’re here! I was getting worried,” he exclaimed as she walked up. “I hoped if I hung around here you might eventually show up. You’re the only way I have to get back, after all.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Little unscheduled detour on my part.”

“What happened?”

Susan grinned. “Something good, for a change. Come on, let’s find a place I can open a *Teleportal* from and we can get this show on the road. I know where we have to go to get the good stuff, so let’s get to it!”

Assault

Time: Several minutes later

Place: Outside the Yokota air base

"Well, it's too big to get in a *Hypnotic Field*, and I suppose that would be a bit over the top anyway," remarked Susan, looking the base over through the fence.

"So what is the plan?" asked Hiraga.

"Your main goal is a plane, right? We'll have to *Shrink* one down and just walk it out of there. I don't know what would happen if I stuck one that was *Shrunk* into a... wait, I wouldn't be able to get it out again when we got back. Forget that. Okay, we'll see if we can find an unwatched armory room with some explosives, grab them, and then get a plane."

"What, they're just going to let us walk in there? I don't think so."

"Who said they would even see us?" She put her hand on Hiraga's shoulder.

"We're going to be *Invisible*." Susan cast, taking the full time and targeting all three of them. They faded out.

"This must be one of those spells you lost access to on the other world."

"That's right. And Sparkle is going to give us another."

"That's right," she replied, "*phase*." The three were now invisible and could pass through normal matter, so Susan dragged Hiraga through the fence and towards the base.

"That was weird," he remarked, looking back. "Can anything touch us right now?"

"Not unless there's wizards on this world you don't know about."

"I highly doubt it."

"That's what someone from my world would say, just keep that in mind. You might want to look around if you ever get the chance."

Susan and Hiraga walked through the base, staying still when someone passed near just in case they noticed the odd distortion being caused from the *Invisibility* spell. It wasn't *Veil*, after all. Susan found she could sometimes tell when someone was coming down a hallway towards them, and once she stopped them as someone came out a door.

"How are you doing that?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's part of that new skill set I got while I went 'missing.' Do you know, I think it's *passive*. I'm actually sensing their energy, not unlike how I sense magic. Magic though, I have to actively try and feel out. This skill just seems to tell me things are around. I can't wait to play with the others!"

They stuck their heads through various rooms until they found some explosives and stepped through.

"Ah, now I have to start thinking about technology again," remarked Susan, looking around the room. "Cameras."

"True, stuff disappearing from this room might cause a few alarms to be raised."

"Don't forget about me," piped up Sparkle. "I have *Illusion* back again. I can just cover the whole room with an *Illusion* and let you scoop up everything. Once we're ready to leave I'll just drop it. They won't know what happened, as to the cameras

everything will have just disappeared at once!”

“Sounds good to me! You're not touching anything, are you, Hiraga? We'll have to drop *Phase* and I don't want you losing any limbs.”

“Go ahead.”

So Sparkle dropped *Phase* and cast *Illusion* in its place, making the room look totally normal as the two cleaned it out off all things that go boom. They made a big pile and Susan used *Creation* to create a large box to hold them.

“I can only put a single object in,” she explained, “so I'm going to put in the box rather than the individual guns. They'll come along for the ride in any case.”

“I can't see what you're doing anyway.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

She opened her *Pocket Dimension* so they didn't have to lug the box around, but Susan still needed *Augment STRength* put on her to shove it inside. “I'll need it to get the stuff out, too, so keep it on me until we get out of here.”

“Sure thing.”

“Aren't we being a little too wasteful with energy?” asked Sparkle, with the group now walking through the halls in search of the hanger. “We have a huge dragon to fight once we get back.”

“Oh, not to worry, there's plenty of energy around here, if you know where to look. I have a good spell to use now, and it'll even give those I steal from a nice nap. I'll find some people on the way out near the plane. We can't have anyone raising an alarm there, right?”

“Guess you've thought of everything.”

The three found a hanger full of planes and Susan had *Energetic Accumulation* put on her. She gathered energy until she could fill the entire hanger with *Somnolent Smog*, which she did. With the crew inside asleep, and *Magic Immunity* put on Sparkle, Hiraga, and herself, she went through and grabbed energy from everyone who was there. This gave her 160 energy so she was at 210 total. *More than enough, I hope?* She was almost as twitchy as if she was *Accelerated* because she was bursting with power, and Hiraga looked her over. (Both were visible again because they were immune to magic.)

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, I'm great. I really, really missed Pluto spells, you know that? Come on, you found a good plane? Let's *Shrink* it and get it out of here. This is really great, don't you all think it's really great? I haven't felt this pumped up since we got to Louise's world and I think I've really missed it-”

“Take a breath!” commanded Sparkle.

“Oh yeah sorry. Plane?”

“Yeah, it's fueled and armed. You think we can really just walk out with one?”

“Sure. Lead on.”

It was tough to see through the *Smog* but Hiraga led her to the fighter he had chosen, and Susan cast *Shrink* on it, allowing her to gently pick it up. She put *Invisibility* back on them after ending the *Smog*, which of course let people inside again. They started running around inside almost immediately to try and figure out what was

happening.

"I don't want to be the guy in charge who has to explain where a bunch of explosives and a whole plane went to!" said Hiraga, laughing, as they walked past people running in the other direction.

"I don't envy them. Still, we'll put this stuff to a much better use than they will, trust me. We'll save an entire world, rather than just blowing up people who happen to have a different opinion than they do."

"Isn't what they do and what you do basically the same thing?" asked Sparkle, aware of irony. "Just you use magic?"

"I'm a surgeon, this stuff is a blunt instrument."

"If you say so."

Now some distance away from the base, Susan got the box of weapons out again and read her notes about how to open dimensional doors to get back. It was a variant of the spell that opened the gate to Inari's dimension, but with some changes. Her dimension was actually protected somehow, so the magic had to punch through that too. This spell was simpler, and opened a hole back to the area they had left.

Susan set the plane down and let *Shrink* go after stepping far enough away that they didn't get knocked over when it grew again. They flew back to the area where the dome was still up around the Ancient Dragon. Hiraga landed and everyone crowded around the fighter, having never seen anything even remotely like it. Susan started passing out explosives, and Hiraga told people how to use them. Luckily most were point and shoot, expending their payload and then becoming useless, because these people couldn't make more ammo. She hoped one shot would be enough, as long as there were enough of them at one time.

"So how do we get it out from under that dome?" asked Louise, hefting a grenade she had been given. Susan had opened another *Teleportal* back to the kingdoms, moving more troops through for the final assault. There were now hundreds of mages in the area, griffins in the air, and a great number of different elemental forms stomping about.

"How about an *Explosion*?" suggested Susan. "If it's anything like my *Elemental Burst*, I can specify the point the explosion starts from. Can you place it just under the barrier and blow it to pieces from the inside? If it hurts the creature it may lose it that way, too."

"I'm willing to try."

"Okay. Vittorio, you and Julio are going to be under *Avatar of War*. I should have done that earlier, I keep forgetting it makes you immune to fire. I'll put it on the dragon you're riding too. Try and stay away from that third eye, and you should be all set."

"Wait, that implies you're not going to be there!" he protested.

"I'm not. I'm going to be using a spell I got out of my *Pocket Dimension* called *Elemental Devastation*. It's the only thing I can cast here that will even have a chance to take out a creature that big. In fact, I'll hit him in the face, that'll keep that third eye closed and hopefully discourage it from breathing flame at all. Along with your spell, Vittorio, a barrage from Hiraga's fighter, the elementals, and whatever else the mercenaries can do, I think we have a chance. Of course any *Explosions* you can do,

Louise, would also be helpful. All of you, try to avoid the big ball of wind energy that's going to tearing it up in the front. If you fire into that, the explosive will just be torn to bits rather than actually harming the beast.”

Everyone nodded, and turned to get into position to start the final assault.

Susan started reading over *Elemental Devastation* as Louise chanted her *Explosion* spell, trying to get it under the barrier that covered the Ancient Dragon. Hiraga was in the air, circling the beast in his new toy. Knights, mercenaries, arial troops on griffins, everyone was ready and hoping this would end the threat of the Ancient Dragon once and for all. They didn't know they were also saving other worlds, by keeping The Darkness (she figured she would go on calling it the pet name she had for it, maybe annoying it just that little bit extra) from sucking up the energy of this dimension. Saving their entire world was enough of an incentive for them.

The area lit up from Louise's *Explosion*, and even Susan was impressed by the devastation that would have resulted. She knew because her *Magic Sense* went off quite by itself, the spell was powerful enough to overwhelm her senses even when she wasn't concentrating on them. As it was, the Ancient Dragon roared again and the barrier went down.

“You worms think you can defeat me?” it bellowed. “Don't get above yourselves. I have burned worlds!”

“Burn this,” Susan muttered, letting go with *Elemental Devastation: Wind*, the only real element this world had that would do enough damage to this creature. She found she could spend eleven energy now, thanks to her new skill of *Spirit Manipulation*. That meant she could put ten energy into her spell with the one to activate it, giving her a rating of sixteen. That meant the intense elemental energy was that radius, and the creature felt it. With the pope above, shining with Void energy from his spell and rockets hitting it from all sides, the Ancient Dragon was in a bad way. It totally didn't expect Hiraga to scream out of the sky and fire at it from a fighter plane, or feel the blasts of modern grenades. Elementals of all kinds surged around it, pounding it as best they could, while other magic, some nearly as strong as Susan's spell, pelted it.

In reality, it didn't stand a chance.

It tried to get its barrier up again, but Louise was always there to blow it down again with minor *Explosions*. Susan noted that subsequent ones weren't as strong as the initial one, and wondered if she had played some local equivalent to a *Power Overwhelming* card for the first one. Susan had to move the area of *Devastation* as the creature tried to get away from it, but with energy to burn, she had no trouble casting it several times. Finally, some time later, the creature crashed to the ground and moved no more.

A cheer went up from the assembled forces, and Hiraga put the last few missiles the fighter carried into it for good measure. But the eyes were dark, and the black fog that had surrounded the creature was gone.

The Ancient Dragon was no more, and The Darkness had been driven off another reality.

Louise looked exhausted but was all smiles as Susan and Sparkle walked over to

her. "What were we worried about?" she chirped. "It just took two different kinds of magic, and technology this world has never seen. We could have handled it."

"Not to mention they still have a pope," said Hiraga. "So, I see you have a new watch, another gift from wherever you went?"

"That's right. It'll get me out of here and onto the next world that needs me. It's already been lined up, in fact, so I can't stay. Apparently the situation there is falling apart, and they can really use my help."

"Are you sure? I'm guessing we're going to have a huge party after this, you should at least stay for that!"

Susan shook her head. "I've never been one for the glory part, for whatever reason. Ask Hermione." She shook her head. "I'll just collect all the stuff I've made around here, and be on my way."

"You'll go say goodbye to Siesta, at least, I hope!" insisted Louise.

"Of course. I might leave her my stealth suit, and hope it sticks around when I leave. It looked good on her."

"I wish I could have seen it!" put in Hiraga, and Louise elbowed him.

"Look, in case Louise can't open larger doors, you want to go back to your world now?"

"I think we can come up with a potion to shrink him, if it becomes needed," said Louise. "And I'm pretty certain I can make them bigger. Unless, I mean, you don't want to stay?"

"No, I'll stay, at least for now. I mean we're all heroes now, right? I don't want to miss the party! And we can go back and forth, I'd like to show you my world. I'm not sure where my place is now. This Void stuff may be done but I'm still a Familiar, right?"

"Okay. Good luck you two, I mean that."

He started unbuckling his sword. "You want this back?"

She waved it off. "Keep it. It's yours, you paid the XP for it, whatever that means for you. Use it well."

"I will. Thanks."

"Sure. It's been interesting, Louise. I'm glad you found your place in this world. Keep studying Void magic, now that we know all your spells don't explode. I'm sure there's more to learn about it, and maybe one day in the future someone will read the book you write about what you find out about it. Save them from being called Zero."

"Yeah, I have a lot of school ahead of me, especially now that I can show everyone I'm a Void mage. Maybe even teach *Magic Sense* to people!"

"Sounds like a plan. Just be careful of King Joseph and his creepy Familiar. They'll probably still be after you."

"I will."

The pope landed nearby, and hopped off the dragon he was riding. "The Ancient Dragon does seem to have perished. We owe you a great debt, Susan. Thank you for everything. I wasn't sure about you when I first met you, you seemed quite overbearing. But your magic came through for us."

"Yeah, it's something I have to work on. Glad I could help. Don't waste that life you've been given."

"I won't."

Susan talked with some of the others, and then said her goodbyes. Queen Anrietta was also there, and spoke her gratitude. She also knighted Susan then and there, who laughed and said she would get everyone to call her "Lady Felton" from now on.

"I'm still calling you Susan," spoke up Sparkle.
"Spoilsport."

She went back to the school to say goodbye to Siesta, and gave her the clothes. "They'll be impractical to carry around anyway. I can always make more, if I need them."

"But you say they might disappear if you leave?"

"Yeah. Sorry to give you such a lame parting gift. But if they don't, as long as I'm alive they'll be around. So you know what's happened to me if they ever vanish."

"I'll keep them nearby. I hope I disappear long before they do."

They embraced. "Thanks for letting me be a maid for a day, I really did enjoy it. Bye."

"Bye, Susan. I'll never forget you."

That done she went back to her empty room and activated her new watch, opening a portal back to the Hub.

Goodbye, crazy world. I didn't ask to visit, but I'm glad I was able to help out everyone here. You cost me a friend, but I'll find her, I've already sworn that. And I learned a few things, like how to survive without all my magic, and that I should carry my book between worlds in case I can't get at it any other way. Though I suppose now I can put it in the sub-space pocket. I should always be able to get to it from there by what Silverstreak was saying.

"Ready?" she asked Sparkle.

"Ready."

Both stepped through, and found themselves back in the transit room they had left from. The room was empty, and Susan stepped through back to the "control" room. Silverstreak was nowhere to be seen, but everyone looked up to see who was arriving.

"Oh, you're back!" said the woman she and Silverstreak had been talking to. "You're just in time. The situation in 3874734 has deteriorated and we were afraid you wouldn't make it. Come on, I'll put you through. Do you need anything?"

"Where am I going? What's the magic situation there? What do I look for? Where's my-" The woman handed her the book of magic back, and it seemed to have several gems now inset in the cover. "That answers that one."

"These are the sensors," the woman explained, pointing them out. "Just put whatever you want analyzed on the book overnight, and if it can make a spell that's similar, it will. Also you'll find a bunch of new spells, as promised. As for the type of world it is, there's not a lot of time to explain it all. It's very different, but then I guess they all are, in a way. It has all the planets, I understand that was a concern in the last world you were at?" Susan nodded. "No worries then. But their magic works quite differently. Silverstreak said to tell you to keep your eyes open, you should be able to get some decent equipment there, and some good ideas for more magic. Come on, you have to save her, there's moments left!" The woman pulled Susan back into the transit room, and started punching in numbers.

“This is the girl we were talking about.” On the screen, a young looking woman in a pink dress and red half-jacket seemed to be praying atop an odd pillar stuck out of the water. She was quite pretty, and was lit from behind by a green light coming from a gem set in her bow, holding her braided brown hair. “Look up there.” Susan looked through, and a man with a blade that must have been taller than he was slowly descending upon her. “She'll get chopped to pieces. See the break in the wall? This place is ancient so it's falling apart. That's your way through. Don't engage the man in black, leave that to the others that are already there. He'll slaughter you because you won't understand how to fight him.”

“Hah. Don't be so sure.”

“Seriously, don't. That's the local version of Darkvoid!”

“Oh. Never mind then. Better learn how their magic works first, like you said.”

“As long as you understand. Just grab up the girl and jump off into the water. He shouldn't follow, he'll be too busy dealing with the others. You can call back here later to get more specifics, but they should be able to answer your questions. Get through, quick!”

Susan made a *Sub-space pocket* check, getting a 7, enough to stick in a book I guess (since I made the skill up), so her tome of magic disappeared from her hand.
Neat.

“*Augment STRength*,” Sparkle cast, figuring if she was going to be hauling someone around, it might come in handy.

“Thanks!” Susan said, moving back a few steps to get a running start. “This can get wet, right?” she asked, holding up the “watch.”

“Of course, it'll go anywhere!” replied the lady.

“Just checking. Okay, here we go, wish me luck!”

“Please keep her safe!” said the woman as Susan bolted past her, emerging into the next world. Both the girl, the guy with the thick sword standing in front of her, and the hot looking guy with the scraggily hair and long katana seemed quite shocked to see her appear out of nowhere. She took advantage and grabbed up the girl, jumping the break in the surrounding barrier that was probably to keep people from slipping and tumbling off.

“Hope you can swim!” she called as they fell.

“I can't!” managed the girl.

<Splash>

Oh, great.

Susan lands in Terra

Time: Just as she hits the water

Place: Underwater, the Forgotten City

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

I've got just the solution for that!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do what?"

"Summon Holy, of course!"

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

The girl shook her head emphatically. "You don't understand. Holy requires a

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

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

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

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

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

"Look, I think we both are going to have a lot of questions to ask the other. I know you don't know me, but look around. Where are you right now? Could your magic do that?"

"Well, no," she admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Would a ghost feel pain?"

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

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

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

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

"We can give it a try."

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

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

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

Rounding out the group were one more man and one more woman, the man was holding a lance and smoking a cigarette, looking bored. He looked the oldest, while the other girl looked the youngest, and was bouncing on the balls of her feet like she couldn't keep still. She had a huge throwing star in one hand, and a weird guard or something over one arm.

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

Quite the assortment.

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

"Happy to help," replied Susan.

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

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

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

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

"No, I was sent here to help you, and that's what I'll do, if you'll have me," Susan

replied. "Has anyone seen a black cat around here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't worry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks, made it myself."

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

How many what?

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

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

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

“Yuffie!”

“Okay, okay. Geese, he’s so uptight.”

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

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

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

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

“I only have seven at present, please don’t exaggerate.”

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

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

“I sure do!”

“Excellent. Could you teach some to me?”

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

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

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

The black guy grumbled something Susan didn’t catch.

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

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

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

“I heard that!”

“You are joining us, right?”

“That’s the plan. It’s the reason I came here.”

“Great. Looking forward to see what you can do!”

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

“What an odd structure!” she remarked.

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

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

They passed through a short area full of what looked like petrified remains of various plants, and stepped out into a wide open area with a path that led to a T going left and right. Susan closed her eyes as she felt the power of this place, and made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting an eight. It was enough to tell there was spiritual power here, but not pinpoint any kind of source for the stuff. She took a deep breath, ignoring her frozen clothes for a moment.

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

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

The others looked at her, awed.

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

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

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

No what? Add that to the list.

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, whatever,” said the black guy.

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

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

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

“But it would work I’m telling you. Right? Don’t you think?”

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

“Spoilsport. It would work.”

Susan hadn’t recommended any of her own magic, wanting to see what these people did. Now having a chance, she did a *Magic Sense* on them, and get some weird results. It was like they were carrying around a bunch of magical effects on their person, but they weren’t magical in the least. *So is this world like my father’s, with both magic*

and technology? I mean my world couldn't do that cyber arm! And I think Cloud's eyes have been augmented, because they were actually glowing. But if they do have magic, why not use it? Why suggest the radical step of hitting us with a fire attack just to dry us out? I'm going to need more information. And wouldn't it burn our clothes off rather than just drying us out?

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

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

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

"Is that short for anything? Tiffania maybe?"

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

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

"Yeah, you too. Sorry I'm not all with it right now, I'm just exhausted."

"No problem. If you all want to get my story in the morning, that's fine."

"Maybe we better," said someone from the other side. "I'm pretty beat myself."

"Sure, if you all think that's best. I guess I'll say goodnight, then." *I think that was*

Cloud.

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

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

Doing some Homework

Time: Late that night

Place: The shell house, outside the Forgotten City.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spirit Sense- She already had some sense of what this could do. Let her sense

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

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

Well, I'll probably work on getting Manipulation up to a ten in any case. Imagine spending twenty energy on a spell without having Energetic Accumulation going. It's not always feasible to have it up, and it does take an action to gather any extra. This would just let me spend more, all the time. Wait, could I use Augment Skill to make this better?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So she got a background on the world and sat watching the others sleep, which

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Red things? "Apples?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Line your pockets by killing the planet.”

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

“Sorry,” said Barret, rolling his eyes.

“The fact remains,” put in Vincent, “we should get a sense of what you can do, if we’re going to fight alongside you. I know roughly what everyone here can do, because I know how they fight and what *Materia* they’ve chosen. I can count on them to watch my back. Can I expect the same from you?”

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

“Ah, we can stick her in the back row and load her up with HP Plus if we need

to,” said Cid. “I mean you guys let the spy stay, and if this girl can use magic *without Materia* that’s pretty amazing in my book. I’m sure she’ll sing out if she sees something she can help us with, right missy?”

“I’ll do everything I can to help, you have my word.”

“Good enough for me. Sign her up and let’s get a move on!”

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

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

“Yeah, like fly about. Love to know how he’s managing that,” said Cid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And we’ll do the same!” promised Barret, smacking his gun arm.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“I’m bored!” whined Yuffie. “Can we go now?”

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

“She’s AVALANCH material in my book,” gruffed Barret. “Welcome to the team!”

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

Don’t get too comfortable, they’ll turn on you if it suits their needs. Look at them,

no military discipline at all. They'll get slaughtered by me, just you wait.

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

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

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

"And that happens a lot here?"

"How else do you get experience points?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They'll actually stand there until you take your turn?"

"Sure, doesn't that happen where you come from?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, I think the world is."

"What are you talking about?" asked Barret.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, but what does that mean?"

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

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

"It works, let's just go. We'll worry about her getting into fights with us later."

Cloud left the house, shaking his head.

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

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

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

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

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

listening to something.

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

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

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

He nodded.

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

"Knock it off!" shouted Cloud.

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

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

"Still, useful."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aw, you're no fun."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She got a 16 on her dodge, and knew the wolf had gotten a 20. She considered spending 2 XP to get a bonus, but this was only a few meters from the cave. If this was going to keep happening, she needed a better strategy, and besides, she knew these people had healing magic. *Let's see what they do if it hits me.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wolves?" ventured Susan.

"No, I don't think so."

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

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

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

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

"Wait, you know their name now?"

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

"I suppose I did. What now?"

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

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

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

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

Nothing happened.

"Well?"

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

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

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

"You really are from another world."

"What's energy?" asked Yuffie.

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

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

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

"Magic Points," offered Cloud.

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

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

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

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

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

She attacked the lead creature with her sword, doing twenty damage to it. *Okay, that means it would take, what? About forty hits for me to take down one of these*

things? There's got to be something I'm doing wrong here. Of course, I never really was a physical fighter. My STrength is too low. Almost beyond her control she found herself moving back into her position as well, just like the creature had.

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

"Yup."

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

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

"Yeah."

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

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

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

"That was surreal!" remarked Susan.

"What was?" asked Sparkle.

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

"Yeah, great, isn't it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Try your healing magic on me, see if I’m actually cured, then I’ll answer that question.”

They did, and she was.

“Okay, then I think I will. For one, my *Materia* did get their funny XP they seem to want in order to grow. Even if I can’t use Green, I can use the stuff you guys aren’t and raise it. And a little damage is better than none, right? I’d like to try my magic, too, though if that’s going to happen every couple of steps I’ll have to save it for emergencies. I don’t think I can take energy from you guys as you don’t have any. And your recovery items won’t work on me, because they restore MP not energy.”

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

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

“Probably,” put in everyone.

HAHA. Not so great here, are you?

Quiet, you.

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

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

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

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

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

“I know what works and what doesn’t. I might look into some more damaging spells, now that I know casting time isn’t an issue here either.” It seemed that no matter how long Susan cast for, enemies would just stand there and wait, allowing her to put

extra time, rather than effort, into casting. That didn't raise her effective planet rating like energy did, but for the higher level spells that might not be so much of an issue. She would let them take out the mobs they seemed to think it was normal to slaughter on their journey around the world, and she could take out the big things for them. It seemed a reasonable compromise.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll check over there," said Vincent, going into yet another house as Susan watched, fulling expecting cops or something to swarm out of nowhere. Or at least the sound of gunfire and people screaming about intruders.

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

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

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

Ifalna

Time: A moment later

Place: Icicle Lodge

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

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

“These people are so getting arrested,” Sparkle remarked.

“I know, right? What is wrong with them?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, so?”

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

“Don’t get me started on coal,” growled Barret.

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

“That’s right.”

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

“Yeah, coal, like you said.”

“No, no, I mean magic. I just saw Vincent call down lighting out of the clear sky. He even got more MP than he spent, so he could sit and do that all day as long as he was fighting something. And it seems monsters just show up as you walk around, because in the ten minutes we were out in the cold there didn’t seem to be any less of them.”

“What’s your point?”

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

“A lot?”

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

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

“Hey, you think that could work?” asked Barret.

“The Shinra cooperation thanks you for your excellent ideas,” said Cait Sith.

“Would you like a job with us? I think you would make an excellent researcher.”

“Stupid cat! I’ll kill you myself!” Barret’s gun arm started to spin up.

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

“Aggh!”

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

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

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

He stormed out.

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

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

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

“For what?”

“Nothing, if you don’t know. I do feel a little better though.”

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

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

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

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

“Friends.”

“Always,” agreed Tifa.

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, it’s a good thing they have us to look after them, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.”

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

“Thanks. But I’ve seen her now. Heard her voice. I’ll always remember.”

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

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

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

"The serpent wakes," muttered Susan.

"Oh no!" cried Aerith.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just curious."

"Don't even go there."

"Tree!"

"Yipes!" He dodged at the last second.

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

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

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

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

"Oh?"

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

"Tada!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I must go forward!" protested Cloud.

"Your funeral. You want something?"

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

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

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

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

"I suppose. So do you have it?"

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

"Name it."

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

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

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

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

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

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

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

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

“Oh? Why’s that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

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

“How should I know?”

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

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

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

"Lift you. I want to see how heavy you seem."

"I guess that's okay."

Cloud scooped her up. "Oh, she's not that heavy at all, really!"

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

"You got it. *Energetic Accumulation*."

"And now for my part. Come over here, I'll need to touch you."

"You won't find it, you know, if you just kill me."

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

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

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

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

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

"What, ever?"

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

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

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

She grabbed cloud and hugged him, holding him close.

"Uh..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lady laughed. "I guess you're right." She held up a hand and Susan and Cloud pulled her out of the water. "I owe you a *Materia*," she admitted, and held out a

red orb. "Take it with my thanks. I'm going to get out of here and see the world. Thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll take a look, thanks."

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

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

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

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

"Murasame."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It is a chopping weapon, I guess."

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan, still thinking about damage and *Materia* and slots and blade sharpness and exactly how much Yuffie liked her and they hadn't known each other for very long and was she just joking around because love at first sight was totally a myth right and finding someone who liked girls in this small a group was probably not realistic but how did she know what the percentage was on this world it could be double hers or even higher so- “Climb?” Every eye turned towards Susan. “We aren't climbing the dang thing. I'll go up first, just like before. By the time we meet Sephiroth I'll only be at about half energy, but it can't be helped. That's if there isn't too much more between us and him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It's not that far, go back and ask.”

“Good point.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sorry, that was me,” said Aerith. “After Susan rescued me, I just sort of forgot about it. I guess being ready to die will do that to you. Sorry everyone.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

you get there, anyway? We had to take the Tiny Bronco.”

“What was left of it,” complained Cid.

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

Cloud scowled at her, not liking that answer.

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

“Are there any of these near beds?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He flew away, but left in his place another one of those weird monster things, and Yuffie got a kick out of using her new Neo Bahamut to smack it around. Susan had to admit, watching the enormous dragon swoop down and shoot an energy blast at it was

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You too."

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

"Did we get teleported somehow?" asked Susan, coming up to both of them. "Or

is this some weird feature of your world I should know about?"

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

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

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

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

"Is that likely?" asked Tifa.

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

"I hope you're- Cloud, look!"

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

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

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

The blade sank into his chest.

Betrayal from an unexpected quarter

Time: Just then

Place: Nibelheim illusion

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

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

“Quite.”

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

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

He vanished, along with the others.

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

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

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

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

“Don’t look at me.”

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

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

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

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

“Never!” he shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If it will help me track you down."

He shook his head. "That's just it. Will it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should be in the picture," muttered Cloud, moving over to the man on the ground. "Why would he change just that one detail?"

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

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

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

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

"I know the truth. I came back to my hometown at sixteen, to help inspect the reactor. I wandered about the town, thinking about how little had changed in five years. We spent the night at the inn, and went up the reactor in the morning. I was excited,

because that was my first mission since becoming SOLDIER first class.” He paused, and Tifa looked almost in tears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We have to stop him somehow!”

“Too late!” As she said this, Cloud stuck the dark orb into the cocoon, and it started to glow with a blackness like the very heart of space. Energy swirled around the form, and the ground beneath their feet began to crack and buckle as creatures Susan had glimpsed through the oddly transparent wall began to move, cracking out of the

substance that held them. Rock began to fall from above, and Susan got to her feet and was almost knocked over again because of the shaking.

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

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

Not getting back in there any time soon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The magic is negated instantly.”

“Pretty much.”

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

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

“But it would take doing my kind of magic to negate my kind of magic. Did he learn that from his time inside Tom? And then once he figured out what my father was doing, did he use that knowledge to create the technique? I’m useless enough around

here as it is, if he can negate my magic like that... I can't hit him with a sword, he probably has ten thousand HP or something bizarre like that!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You okay?" she asked.

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

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

"No, *Toad* would wear off."

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

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

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

Aerith grinned. "Deal."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aerith looked relieved. "Oh, good."

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

"I'm not stupid, you know!"

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

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

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

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

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

The man(ish) himself answered.

"Susan, how goes the fight there?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm talking about *Sense*, mostly."

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

"Good point. I'll do that tonight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Glad to hear it. Anything else for the moment?"

"Can my book analyze a save point?"

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

Susan thought a moment. "I guess that's it."

"Good timing. I think you're about to have some visitors. Good luck!"

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

While Tifa Recovers

Time: Moments later

Place: Meeting room somewhere in Junon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now everyone was staring at her like she had lost her mind, and Susan could almost feel Rufus trying to make checks to pierce her 22 *Acting* check. *Good luck,*

suckers. She almost ruined the effort by giggling, but her 18 RESolve check kept that under wraps.

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

"Uh..."

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

So Barret and Aerith told him about how the planet was in peril, because Hojo had gone and put Jenova cells in people, turning them into Sephiroth clones. *Or as I like to call him, The Darkness.* They talked about his plans to basically become a god by absorbing all the energy of the *Lifestream*, by injuring the planet with a meteor strike. *Wait, a what strike? That's what the Black Materia does? Summons a space rock? I thought it would be something, I don't know, a little more immediate. And didn't they say that Materia was born from lifestream energy? Why would the planet create something... that could destroy the planet?* They spoke of the land dying, due to draining the Mako out and turning it into electricity, and what harm the reactors did. He used this to explain his actions of blowing them up, and Rufus asked if he thought that would somehow stop Shinra from building more.

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

"Quite. Go on."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whatever you say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wow, just like in a fancy hotel!? This trip is going to be soooo awesome, I can just tell that right now. I'm so glad I tagged along with these guys, you know? Though I would be kind of sad if you decided to, you know, kill them?"

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

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

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

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

Dinner came, and Susan found it to be excellent. She then popped the sword on

top of her book, told it to figure out *Materia Slots* and went to sleep for a few hours.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, so you hadn’t cracked under the strain. I did wonder.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Could you wake her up?” asked Aerith.

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

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

“Yeah, all right. I guess we’re all stuck here, then. I’m not leaving without her.”

“We could leave though, and just bring her along afterwards. I know a spell to grab someone and bring them to myself.”

“Cloud!?”

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

that place crumbled, and he was right in the center of it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

The other two shook their heads.

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

“What do you mean, bullets?”

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

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

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

The next day, she read a new chapter about *Slots* and her suspicions were confirmed. There was nothing keeping manufacturers from linking all the slots together,

it was just an increase in Difficulty. At least the way she made things, as it could be different for them. They had to be prepared, and each linked slot added 10 to the DIF of doing the *Fabrication*. In her terms, each slot also cost 5 XP, in addition to the XP cost of increasing the TR of the weapon, should she wish to do so. But it did inform her that even non-*Materia* things slotted in would act like *Materia* if properly prepared. It didn't take any more time or XP to *Imbue* the spheres that would fit, it was just a matter of preparing them properly. In this way, she could hook her own Elemental spells to something like *HP Absorb* and actually get some benefit. The spell would have to be cast from the *Imbued* object, so she wouldn't be able to put more energy into it, but conversely it wouldn't cost any energy to cast. (If done as 50 charges, as usual.) She could also hook up any number to that linkage, rather than needing a bunch of separate copies of *HP Absorb*, as in the example given. So unlike Vincent needing eight copies of *Lighting Materia* to do what he did, she could do it with only 2. (One in her weapon and one in her armor, if she had enough *Blue Materia* to make it worthwhile.)

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

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

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

Making Deals

Time: About ten minutes later

Place: Susan's room in Junon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Cait Sith."

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

"And here you are. Pretty brave."

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

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

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

"Really have to analyze what those things are and get me that spell," muttered Susan. "So, once a spy, always a spy told you all about me, huh? In that case, what do you want?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How can we contact you?"

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

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

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

"I'm talking about *Meteor*." He set another photo down on the table, this one a grainy image of a rock. "That's the one we think is heading towards the planet. The one that will destroy us."

"What, you want to *Teleportal* over to it, fit some explosives on it and blow it away?"

"Wait, is that possible?"

"Ah, maybe? I've gone to places I've only seen in pictures, of course. But this is a little different. Wait a second." Susan lapsed into silence. "Sparkle, come look at this."

Rufus didn't seem surprised when Sparkle jumped up to look at the picture. "Seems pretty small from this distance."

"Do you think this is what the people that sent me here were talking about? Is this the problem I can easily solve?"

"Sure, if these people had energy you could drain, getting you a high enough rating to reach it with magic."

"He said a simple spell. Do you think he wanted me to go back to the previous world, gather energy there like I did, and then come back? That's not really that simple though. Give me a few minutes, let me review the spells I know," she said to Rufus.

"Please, take your time," he replied, putting his hands behind his head and tipping back in his chair.

Susan started paging through her book, looking for something specific. "Interesting," she said after a few moments. "Do you know how many *Sight* based spells there are?"

"Not many."

"No, not many. Less than 25. Oddly, my *Legion* is sight based, so I could pop them into a news broadcast somewhere. They would just stand there, because they would have no orders, but still. No, get this- *Thrust* has a range of *Sight*."

"You're kidding!"

"No," said Susan, beginning to laugh. "Look for yourself. It's actually *Sight*." She fell into waves of laughter, and Rufus looked on, confused. "Oh, sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "Look, I'll demonstrate." She turned on the TV. "Is this live? Yes, I see it says it is. Now, what to pick... ah!" Susan picked something in the background, and cast *Thrust* on it before the camera panned away. She didn't put any extra energy in, the DIF was only 7, rather than being based on the distance. The trash can went flying, unnoticed by the news reporter but visible to anyone at home. She started laughing again. "Oh man, to see the looks on their faces!"

"What? What did you just do? What's so funny?"

Susan got control of herself back. "It's just so weird to have it be *Sight* based. Like I said, most spells aren't. You have to be pretty close to them in order to have it work. Not so much this one. Look, *Thrust* does one thing. You saw, it makes whatever I cast it on fly away from me violently. And I can do it on anything *I can see*. Now I could look through a telescope or something and cast the spell on this chunk of rock heading our way. The spell reads "The target is thrown away from you as many meters as your Mercury rating." And that's it. It doesn't specify what happens if the target is moving towards you, or away or anything. You cast, boom, it gets pushed away, seemingly without regards to the object's initial momentum or velocity or anything. Now, where is the object?"

“Space?”

“Space, exactly. So I cast it on the rock and the rock, having no other choice, is magically thrown from its original position to X meters away, directly opposite where I am. Where X is the rating in my skill, which can be as high as about 80. So it goes 80 meters away from me in less than a second, making its speed pretty high. In space, there’s nothing to stop it from going that way, and it continues away from the planet, forever.”

“And that would work?”

“As long as Sephiroth isn’t around anymore, sure. It would be his will against mine, and even if I won, he would just rope it in again and it would start getting closer. And by then I would be exhausted and unable to try again. So you get rid of Sephiroth, and I’ll get rid of your Meteor problem. The thing that threatens your entire world. *With a grade 2 spell.*” She started to giggle again.

“You’ll have to forgive her,” explained Sparkle.” She’s been worrying about that ever since we got here. It’s sort a relief to know we figured it out.”

“Yes, I can see that. Very well. It’s going to take weeks to get the canon moved from Junon to Midgar. Especially with that Weapon thing roaming around making life difficult. We’ll need to be sure it’s somewhere far away when we begin the transport process. Don’t want it destroying the thing, after all. Just the engineering work alone to figure out how to decouple the canon and transport it will take our experts days. We may have to do it in pieces... unless you can just snap your fingers and do it?”

Susan shook her head. “Anything on the scale you’re talking about? Way too much for my magic to deal with. Sorry. Though *technically*, I suppose if you could break it into pieces, I could *Shrink* them down. If I had seen Midgar before I could walk them through a *Teleportal* and then bring that back to full size.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I think it’s more detaching it and hooking it up to the reactors, rather than the transport process that is the issue. But I’ll see what my engineers say.” He stood up, and Susan got up as well. “I’ll give you details about the breakout when I can. Naturally you shouldn’t tell your friends, their reactions should be as genuine as possible.”

“But once this is over, the truth gets out, right?”

He sighed. “One way or the other, we at Shinra have some atoning to do.”

“Long as you realize it.”

“You’ll have to stay here, of course, much as I would like to involve you in this. Having you running around the town might raise some questions. At least among the staff here.”

“Just tell them I’m your new mistress.”

“Now I think it’s my turn to laugh. Good day.”

“One second.”

“Yes?”

“I want any cameras in this room removed.”

“Cameras, in these rooms?” He acted shocked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Trust has to come from somewhere, President. Let it begin with you.”

“I suppose your magic can tell you if I’ve done so or not?”

“Believe that it can. Believe how angry I’ll be if you say you will, and you don’t. I could find them, but it would be tedious. I would rather just know they were off.”

“As a matter of interest, what would you do if you decided you didn’t want to be here anymore?”

Susan shrugged. “Leave, of course. Even without my *Teleportal*, I could walk out that door at any time. Sparkle, a demonstration?” Susan held her arms out. “Please, touch me in the morning, and then just walk away.”

“*Phase.*”

He seemed confused, but passed his hand through her arm, then body and head. Satisfied, she nodded to Sparkle who dropped the spell again. “You really could have left at any time.”

Susan nodded.

“Thank you... for the chance to prove myself to you.” He left.

“And now,” Susan announced once he was gone, “we’re out of here.”

“Are you not helping them?”

“Oh sure, I didn’t say I wouldn’t be back. I just want to see this town, and once the cameras are off, we can slip out for a bit. We’ll wait until just after lunch, then go see the sights. We can just *Teleportal* back here before dinner, and they won’t be the wiser.”

“I suppose. How will you know when and if he keeps his word?”

“Good *Question* my faithful companion. Good *Question*. We’ll check every hour.”

It only took the first hour for the *Question* spell to report a “yes” to the question of “have the cameras in this room been disabled” so Susan, *Invisible* and *Phased*, passed out of the room and into the hall a little after lunchtime. She debated checking on her friends, but gave the president the benefit of the doubt. *After all, it’s the same for me either way. If he posts only a few guards and lets us go without too much of a fight, fine. If he doesn’t, well, sucks to be him. I’m still Susan Extraordinaire.*

But she did go check on Tifa, who was hooked to several monitors and fluids in a hospital bay on a different floor of the building they were in. She looked a bit gaunt, and Susan wondered about trying to get into her dreams with *Dream Link*.

But she’s obviously in some kind of coma. She’s not really asleep, as far as the spell goes. I don’t know. Maybe in a day or two, see what’s bouncing around in there. At least she is being treated. Wake up soon, Tifa.

And so Susan went exploring. Having no real destination in mind, she couldn’t get lost, so she just wandered the streets of Junon mostly at random. She found several shops, but the stuff they were selling didn’t seem as good as the stuff she already had. She did buy a few things she knew the party was low on, like *Potions* and some *Antidote*, but even paying for things herself she wasn’t quite sure how she managed it. *Gil* just seemed to transfer between inventories without really being visible. She debated buying another copy of *Sense* to stick in her sub-space pocket, but thought maybe this one would reproduce itself by the time she was done, and decided against it.

One thing she got excited about was the small inn she found, as there was a save point next to the counter. She had no idea how to use the thing herself, the others just seemed to touch it, but nothing really happened when she did so. *So am I saved or not? How could I tell? In either case, I have something better anyway, a way to take it with me.*

The bored looking man behind the counter looked at her like she had just landed in a spaceship when she asked about leaving her book there overnight. He guessed it was fine, though he couldn't imagine why she would want to do such a thing. She did another quick *Question* to make sure the book would be undisturbed, and got back a "yes."

"There's a thousand *Gil* in it for you if I come back and find this book undisturbed, got it?" asked Susan.

"Sure."

"Do you have a piece of paper?"

He got her one, and she chuckled as she put a *Spell Symbol* on it. She further put her spell of *Somnolent Smog* into it, and then set the paper at an angle atop the book. The gems on the book were already glowing, so the analyzing circuits were hard at work.

"See you tomorrow!" she said lightly, skipping out.

"How are you going to pick the book up?" Sparke asked.

"*Hygiene* will erase the writing, right?"

"I guess it will."

That done, it reminded her that she had been slacking off on making *Spell Symbol* papers, and went back to her room early to work on that. She had tons of paper in her *Pocket Dimension* so she found some scissors, cut it into appropriately sized pieces, and started making some.

She worked about two hours on that, *Spell Symbol* taking only a minute and a half (she took the extra time for all this) to cast and any other spell taking much less time. So she made 30 of them, and stuck them, in groups, into her *Dimension*.

The next day, Susan was pleased to see a new spell in her book, the grade 10 spell of *Time Anchor*. Basically you cast it, maintained it (of course, hello new *Spell Symbol*) and at any point before it went away you could return to the point in time you cast it from. Others could also recall what had happened, up to one per Saturn rating. Of course it took 10 minutes to cast, (20 from writings) but she didn't mind. She was just going to read the spell over, make a bunch into *Spell Symbols* and then replace them as they were used.

"I could see that coming in very handy," remarked Sparkle, reading the spell symbology over. "You basically create a short lived, parallel universe, and if you don't like how it turns out, you get to go back and change it."

"Exactly. Something these people take for granted, now available for me, and portable. I do so love my magic, and thank you Silverstreak for the sensors that made it possible."

So Susan got an eighteen on her *Magical Scripture* and an eleven on her *Magical Theory*, so she read it but didn't quite get it yet. She had breakfast, watched some TV, and tried again with a seventeen, and she knew she had it. She had time aplenty, so she made five of them over the course of the day, taking a full half an hour for each. (As she could extend the casting time by 50%, and 50% of 20 minutes was an additional 10 minutes.) That gave her a guaranteed sixteen, beating the difficulty by one.

I do not want to know what would happen if I backfired this spell!

Then she got bored again, took a nap to get some energy back, and wondered what other trouble she could get into around here. It had only been three days, and she needed six to raise her newest skill group, so that was out. So basically she puttered around, made *Symbol* papers, and watched some TV. The president didn't come see her again, and after a few more days she was starting to really worry about Tifa and wonder if she shouldn't go try waking her up.

I could do a 30 minute casting of Time Anchor the normal way. If she seems wrong somehow, just rewind time again. But how can I know she won't have complications later?

She shouldn't have worried. A full week after they had been pulled out of the crater, Tifa woke up to her new captivity.

And public execution.

Forecast: Cloudy days ahead?

Time: Seven days after the escape from the crater

Place: The march to the gas chamber for our heroes Tifa and Barret

The president had come one last time, after Tifa woke up, about their escape plan.

“Cait Sith will be going with you. He’ll take you to the airfield where the Highwind has been prepped for your departure. Follow him out and you’ll be fine.”

“You’re giving us that airship?”

“Like you said, trust has to come from somewhere. Cait Sith saw what you could do, and so did I. Plus I got reports of a girl that looked an awful lot like you wandering around town. Yet you always came back, so I think you really do want to do what’s best for the planet, despite our bad reputation.”

“Maybe the food’s better here.”

He smiled. “If what you say is true, and I have no reason to believe it isn’t, you may be the only hope for our world. Plus, you said you needed to see a place to go back to it, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Best way to do that is aboard that ship. Now these two are going to be marching to what they think is their doom. The guard will be light, so I don’t want a lot of soldiers getting killed here, okay?”

“As long as they aren’t random encounters, I’ll disable them before they can actually fight us. That spell should still work.” *I hope.*

“Fine.”

“What about Aerith and the others?”

“They’ve already been snuck aboard.”

“Excellent.” Susan had the foresight, before this meeting, to put *Detect Lies* on herself, so she knew Rufus was telling the truth. “Then let the show begin!”

Susan was walking, *Invisible* to anyone, alongside the two that had been tied up. They believed that they were walking to a gas chamber, where they would be killed while the public watched.

Would so gruesome a display have actually been planned if they were really going to be killed? I wonder. Susan was going to see what the situation was by the chamber, then possibly wait until one person had been led inside. She would then switch them with someone else, if the door had a window she could look through. If it didn’t, she would simply take out any guards that were there with *Immobilize*, before the door could be closed. She was *Accelerated* for this very purpose, to get the bonus to her *Mercury* check. Of course, if she could get them all with one casting of *Hypnotic Field*, so much the better. *But the less showy here the better, Susan. Remember that.*

Inside the gas chamber room there were only two guards, plus the woman in the red dress, who seemed to be wearing it again. *Odd, she has a good job, you would think she could afford at least one other dress. Or maybe she alternates? Did I catch her on ‘red dress day’ both times? Focus, Susan!*

Apart from that there was a man with a camera, a couple of people sitting on metal chairs, and that was it. Oh, and the very poorly disguised form of Cait Sith, holding a microphone and looking weird. *Kind of spread out.*

She quickly ran to the other door in the room, and yes, it was the chamber and yes, it had a window set in it. *Though I guess it doesn't matter, the spell doesn't specify I have to be looking at either target. Just that I have to be within M range of it. Huh.* The woman in red decided that Tifa would go first, and shoved her into the chamber. They sat her down and tied her arms to the chair, while the lady in red called Tifa some... less than polite things.

With that done, she and the guard left the room, closing the door behind them. She announced the execution was about to begin when suddenly alarms rang out through the complex that *Weapon* was attacking!

Hey, he doesn't mess around. I didn't think he was going to make it this easy for me.

She shrugged, and started casting. The woman was still very near the door as the people in the chairs jumped up, frightened by the sudden siren. Some soldiers all took off running, probably to their duty posts in a situation like this. The two holding Barret looked at each other, but didn't move.

"What's this?" asked the lady in red, looking at the swirling magic around her.

"Your death," Susan couldn't help but say, completing the spell. *"Transposition."*

Of course the universe chose that moment to make her check the worst possible, while Scarlet's check was almost the best possible. Susan couldn't have that, so she spent 1 XP to succeed, having gotten an *XP Bonus* card before this began. Tifa and Scarlet switched places.

Honestly, it was my own fault. I should have put extra energy in. Two more would have done it. Oh well.

"What?" exclaimed Tifa. The guards raised their guns, as Susan suddenly became visible.

Let it not be said I don't learn from my mistakes. "Immobilize!" she cast on the two of them, using 6 energy this time. Both failed their checks to break free, and Susan realized these people couldn't actually spend energy on stats like she could. Because you can't spend what you don't have! (Credit cards notwithstanding) *And that woman in red rolled that high regardless? Figures.*

"What's going on?" asked Barret, as the two struggled to escape their bonds they suddenly found wrapped around them.

"We're getting out of here, is what's going on," she replied, running over to him. She drew her *Alleviation* knife and cut his ropes, not having to worry about cutting him with it. Soon he was free and Cait Sith ran over to them.

"Come on, the Highwind is waiting!" he said, struggling out of his odd disguise.

"You all planned this?" asked Tifa, eyes wide.

"No time to talk, let's go!" Susan and the others made for the door, but Susan stopped as she got there. *"Somnolent Smog,"* she cast on the middle of the room, causing the two soldiers to fall asleep. She released their bonds.

"Now they won't remember what you guys said, and I don't have to maintain the *Immobilize*. Come on!" *At least, I hope it works for them like it does for me.* Suddenly she had a thought. *I hope that wasn't real poison gas they were using. I would hate to have just killed that woman by accident.*

Tifa saw her looking back at the room.

"The guard dropped the key, I was just reaching for it with my foot when I got switched for her. She'll get it and be fine."

"Oh, okay."

Even as they stepped out of the room, they all heard the sound of the cannon firing, and smaller guns opened up as well.

"Wait, *Weapon* is actually attacking?" Susan shrieked. "I thought it was just a trick to lure the soldiers away!"

"I guess not. Come on," said Cait Sith, "airfield is this way." He took off as best he could with those huge feet of his, and the others followed. They ran outside Junon, where Susan could see *Weapon* rising out of the sea. It smashed into the place, and Susan almost fell over, but was steadied by Barret.

"Are those guns even doing anything to it?" she asked, looking up at them. "Because they don't seem to be."

"Worry about that later," said Barret, pushing Susan forward. "Let's just go if we're going."

Suddenly a reporter ran up to them. "Can you comment on this whole situation happening right now?"

"Yeah, it's bad news. Out of the way!"

"Don't get so upset. It's me! Yuffie!"

"Where've you been all this time?" demanded Susan.

"Hiding out. Not going to see the number one ninja from Wutai get captured, no sir. Glad to see you escaped. I was beginning to get worried."

"Yeah, about time, huh Susan?" Barret growled. "So much for our magical girl."

"I'll explain later. Come on!"

They ran away from the scene of the battle, leaving *Weapon* to be shot point blank by the main cannon, and got away clean.

"Someone want to explain to me what's going on?" Barret demanded, once in the air and away from Junon.

"Sure," said Susan, looking around the ship. "This place have somewhere we can sit down?"

"War room over there," replied Cid, pointing.

"Let's go there. By the way, who's flying this thing?"

"Some people loyal to me, don't you worry."

"Okay."

They all sat, with Susan at the head of the table. "Basically, the president offered me a deal. *Someone* who shall remain nameless told them about me, so he knew what I can do. He wants to take the barrier down, and asked me to provide him a *Teleportal* to get the cannon blast a bit closer to the barrier for maximum effect. I told him fine, but my

friends walk. He held up his end of the bargain, and threw in the Highwind to boot. Clear?"

"You saying president Shinra himself let us go?"

"Why do you think there were so few guards? He didn't want his people being killed, and I agreed. Seems like enough are getting killed by *Weapon* already, they don't need our help."

"But why?" asked Tifa. "We're terrorists!"

"You were. Now you're the only people with the strength and knowledge of what's really going on that might have a chance to actually do something about it. He's not stupid, he sees the signs. Maybe it's only self-preservation, but you saw *Weapon*. You saw the news reports, right? Wherever that creature goes, Shinra is there to beat it back from populated areas. That's raising public opinion to an all-time high. People are scared. I mean look at that hunk of rock in the sky!" She pointed, but they were all inside and couldn't see it. "Every day it gets a little closer. People need hope right now."

"And you guys are capable," agreed Cait Sith. "I've seen that again and again in my travels. I mean you have Yuffie."

"What? Me? I mean, yeah, that's right."

Everyone laughed a bit.

"Okay, I guess it makes sense. So, do we technically work for Shinra now? Dang, that's not going down easy."

"Hey, technically we stole this airship. It's ours now. They won't be coming after it, at least until the planet is safe. We're still outlaws, just... outlaws they don't chase around any more. At least as long as you guys don't do anything dumb, like blow up more reactors."

"Nah, I can see that won't work, long term. Shinra has to change from the inside. Maybe this is the start. You believed the president?" he asked Susan.

She nodded. "Especially at the end, when I had anti-lying magic going. He told me the truth in what he was saying."

"Guess I'll put my trust in you."

"Thanks, Barret. The question now becomes, what's our next step?"

Everyone looked around.

"If Cloud were here, he would know."

"And there it is," said Susan, popping her book out. "Let's find out if Cloud is still alive, and if so, where he is."

"You can tell?"

"My magic might be able to. Only takes a few minutes, let's ask."

So Susan cast *Question* from writing, and got back a "yes" answer to the question "Does Cloud still live." Everyone seemed glad of that. She then asked a second question, which was a little bit more unclear. "Where is Cloud currently?"

"*Lifestream*."

"Oh great, he's physically in the *Lifestream*? What's that going to do to him?"

Everyone shook their heads. "I don't think tests have even been done, immersing someone in pure *Lifestream* energy," said Cid. "It's too hard to capture and control. It

goes into reactors, yes, but unless processed rapidly, it sort of evaporates when cut off from the main stream.”

“Sorry I can’t narrow it down a little more,” apologized Susan. “But he’s alive, and that’s the important thing. Perhaps he’ll wash up somewhere, and if we keep checking, we’ll snag his location soon.”

“I hope so. What do we do in the meantime?”

“Level up?” suggested Cid.

“*Materia* hunt!” suggested Yuffie.

“Hunt for Huge *Materia*?” suggested Cait Sith.

“Okay, that’s two votes for *Materia*,” said Susan. “And I’ll admit the stuff is useful, but can’t you just buy the stuff in shops? And what’s Huge *Materia*?”

“Ho, ho, ho!” said Yuffie. “You think the stuff in shops is the be all and end all of the *Materia* line? No, sir. When you’re a *Materia* hunter like me, you hear rumors. Like people going to remote locations and finding some special stuff that never gets out of their hands. I’m talking premium stuff, here, like you’ve never seen. But this Huge *Materia* interests me as well.”

“It should. It’s something Shinra has been working on making for some time. Given that you guys need all the help you can get, my boss has given me permission to let you know where they are. You’ll have to steal it, I guess, but that’s better than nothing?”

“We get made into the bad guys again? Why?” demanded Barret.

“Yeah, it doesn’t do them any good to look foolish as we steal stuff out from under them.”

“No, no, you don’t get it. It’s top secret stuff. Even those that transport it don’t know what they’re transporting. We would be stealing a black box, basically, and it wouldn’t be publicized that it was missing. It’s not supposed to exist, you see.”

“He really is giving us all the tools he can, isn’t he?” remarked Susan.

“Hey, it’s our world too. Just let us know when you want to make a move against it, and we’ll get it ready for transport. That’ll be your cue to get in there and swipe it. There’s four in total, so it’ll take a while to get them all under our control.”

“Okay. Any other suggestions?”

“When did this become a democracy? We need a leader!” said Barret.

“Whatever,” replied Susan. “If there’s something important someone needs to do, I’m giving them a chance to speak up. I want to explore this world more, so I can open *Teleportals* to more locations. If that coincides with hunting *Materia*, large or small, I’m up for it. Of course I want that training Yuffie promised me, and finding better weapons might not be amiss. Aerith, you’re pretty quiet, what do you want to do?”

“Find Cloud, but we can’t yet. Apart from that, *Materia* is power for us. With how powerful Sephiroth is just by himself, I don’t think we can ignore any avenue that helps us beat him. Getting stronger and finding *Materia*, that’s my vote.”

“Woo hoo, you’re the best, Aerith!” gushed Yuffie.

“Any other votes?”

“Weapons are good,” said Vincent. “Killing monsters to raise our *Limit Break* level. Getting stronger. I don’t see anything wrong with that. According to what I was told, we’re kind of on hold until that barrier is down, right? And the barrier won’t come down until the cannon is moved. I heard weeks, at best.”

“That’s what I heard. I just hope that meteor isn’t traveling very fast, and takes a few months to get here. Luckily space is pretty big, so that shouldn’t be too much of a concern.”

“From what I’ve observed,” spoke up Sparkle, “great events in the world tend to happen when dramatically appropriate. Consider our recent escape. That *Weapon* could have attacked that city at any time in the last week. But the day Tifa wakes up and the plan to get us out of there goes off, that’s when it decides is the best time? Really? And us arriving just in the nick of time to save Aerith? Us running into Hiraga in the last world, just as we both transited? I don’t think we have to worry. Meteor will fall, but only as fast as it needs to in order to give us time to prepare and take action against it. Mark my words. I even have a name for the phenomenon that I made up: *Narrative’s Imperative*.”

The others looked at her, then back at Susan.

“Catchy. Technically, she’s been traveling worlds longer than I have. If she’s noticed something like that, it’s probably true. I’ll have to keep an eye out for that.”

“Somehow that statement just seems so wrong on so many levels. Yet I find I can’t think of a good counter example. Anyway, is it possible to do all this stuff at once? Is there a place we can go to get stronger and search for *Materia*?”

“Why would we have to do all this as a group? We can drop some people off in a good area to slaughter monsters, while us *Materia* hunters scour the world.”

“What? Break up the party? Madness!” said Vincent.

“It won’t work?”

“No, it’s so crazy it just might work. Only three can participate in combat, and we have just about enough members for three groups. There must be a map around here someplace, let’s look for an area with some high XP creatures to kill, and anyone who wants to get stronger can come with me.”

“I’m going with Vincent!” said Aerith immediately.

“Really?” he said, a bit shocked. “I mean, of course! You’re welcome to. Who else?”

“I’ll go with you,” said Tifa. “I need to get stronger if I’m going to keep up with Cloud when we find him.”

“Vincent, you lucky dog!” said Susan, bumping him with an elbow. “Having two beautiful girls at your side as you roam the land, destroying all creatures in sight. How did you manage it?”

“Clean living,” he deadpanned.

“I’m with my living *Materia* detector, I mean good buddy Susan!” said Yuffie, linking arms.

“And I’ll need to stick around to help fly the Highwind,” said Cid.

“I’m no help finding *Materia*,” said Barret. “That leaves Cait Sith and Na with me. What to you guys want to do?”

“I suppose you’re not one much for research, either?” asked Na.

“Not especially.”

Na shook his head. “I guess Cosmo Canyon is out. There is a wealth of information there, but pouring through it to find what’s relevant, that’s the key.”

“Do it yourself!”

He tried to stand on his hind paws, holding his front paws up for inspection. “No thumbs.”

“Ah, always some excuse. Hey Cait Sith, where’s these Huge *Materia* you talked about?”

“Let’s see, there’s one in an underwater reactor off Junon. One in the Condor Fort reactor. The Corel Mountain reactor made one-”

“Corel? We’re heading there! That’s my hometown, I know it best.”

“Okay, I’ll give Shinra the word. It’ll be ready to move within the hour.”

“Drop us off a little ways away then, we’ll take the rest of the journey on foot, rack up some XP in the bargain. Like Cloud said, we did miss some with Susan moving us about before.”

“Sounds like we have our plan,” said Vincent. “Keep in touch.”

“Yeah, if you run into trouble, I can reach you guys pretty quickly, so keep that in mind.”

Everyone nodded, and Cid told the pilot where they wanted to go. With the groups dropped off, Yuffie could barely contain herself, bouncing in place.

“Where shall we start looking first?”

“You’re asking me? Most of this world I’ve never seen, you know.”

“Come on, I’ll get the maps,” said Cid, turning to head back to the operation room.

“Wait a second,” said Susan, putting up a hand. “When you’re looking for something, it’s best to start with the easiest place first.”

“What do you mean?” asked Yuffie.

“We’re going shopping!”

It's a *Material* world

Time: Ten minutes later

Place: Costa Del Sol

Susan stepped from the Highwind onto the sandy beach of Costa Del Sol and fell in love.

With all the scantily clad women splashing around in tiny bathing suits.

In reality, she did fall in love, with the place. They had chosen it because it was near to Corel, where they had dropped off Barret, and Yuffie said she knew the owner of the *Materia* shop. She had worked there some time ago, the first time they had come to the town. Figuring they might get a better answer from an acquaintance, Susan agreed, and Cid had parked the Highwind and told them to go ahead. He was going to stay with the ship and look it over, make sure everything was in place. Arm in arm, the two girls nearly ran to the beach, taking in the sights.

It was sunny, warm, sandy, kids were playing, people were having fun... "This is more like it!" she exclaimed. "Forget ice and snow, why can't Sephiroth come here so we can beat him and work on our tans at the same time?"

"Yeah, he's so inconsiderate," agreed Yuffie. "Come on, *Materia* shop is over there."

She pointed to a man standing behind a table, parked next to a yellow van. There was a blue and white striped awning keeping the sun off him, and he was totally not dressed for the weather. Of course, he was balding, pudgy, and sweating, and nobody wants to see any more of that than they have to.

"Good day, sir!" she said brightly, stepping up to the man.

"Hello, miss. How can I help you today?"

"I wish to purchase some *Materia*, and I'm looking to spend a bit of money."

Even as she spoke, the amount of *Gil* the party had available was going up. With two groups currently wandering the world in search of monsters to kill, and killing said monsters, their money and item totals were steadily being raised.

"Take a look at what I have," said the man, bringing out a long wooden case with a glass panel in the top. Inside she could see six Green *Materia* and each was labeled. "Fire, Ice, Lighting, Earth, Gravity, Poison." "You don't even have to spend a lot, they're current industry pricing for this type."

"Ah, yes, so I see." Each little card had the price next to it, from 600 to 8000 *Gil* for the Gravity one. "But I think you don't properly take my meaning. I'm looking to spend a bit more than even that." She pointed to the most expensive one and winked conspiratorially.

"Uh, I'm still not sure what you mean, I'm afraid."

"I mean I want your premium stuff. The stuff for the most discerning customers. The stuff in the back room. The hush-hush stuff. Stop me any time."

"This is my entire current stock, there is no more."

"That always bothered me," said Yuffie, stepping up. "Even when I was working here. He's telling the truth. He can sell you a hundred Fire *Materia* but not a single *Steal Materia*. Why is that?"

"I sell what I sell, there's no conspiracy behind it," he said with a forced laugh.

"Come now, you buy *Materia* as well, don't you?" asked Yuffie.

"You know we do."

"So where does it go? Are you telling me not a single person in the last month has sold you a *Materia* that's had some growth? You pay enough for them, I figure you would want to resell them and double your money. That is how the industry works, right? You buy at half cost, sell at full cost? We want to see those, so get them out! You must have *one!* Or other magic apart from this junk we already have tons of!" She waved a hand dismissively.

"I... only sell what you see before you! I guess it's just bad luck you've come when I don't have anything else." The man seemed clearly agitated now, eyes darting about and mopping his brow. "Yes, bad luck, nothing else."

"I don't buy it," said Yuffie, turning to Susan. "I've never thought about it before, but every store in every town we've ever visited only sells a couple of different *Materia*. And they always have exactly zero AP. You would think you would get them in all ranges, as people buy and sell them. I mean we're willing to pay more for one we don't have to raise as far, but apparently we can't buy anything like that? Even if we're willing to spend more. Because ones sold in shops always start at zero. Can you tell me why that is, Mr. Shopkeeper?"

The man gave a quick shake of his head and took a step backwards, almost seeming terrified now. "Please, I can't say more. If I don't have what you want I'm sorry, but that's the end of it. Now please go away!"

"Very well," said Susan, with a shake of her head. "We just want to give you money, but if you can't take it..."

Both girls turned and walked away, but Sparkle stayed a moment more, looking up at the man. When the two were a fair distance away he dashed into his van and started punching numbers into his phone, which he nearly dropped several times because his hands were shaking so badly.

Curious, thought Sparkle, turning and padding after Susan. *Very curious.*

The pair checked out the other shops (including the rather depressed looking fellow selling armor inside the bar, of all places) and went down the steps to check out the beach.

"We really should get going," said Susan. "We can enjoy this place when the planet is safe."

"I know," sighed Yuffie. "I didn't get to be the number one ninja by slacking off." Susan didn't need *Detect Lies* to tell that either part of that statement might not exactly be the truth. "When do I get to slack off?"

"When you're eighty?"

"How will I enjoy it then, I'll be too old to enjoy it!"

"I wish I knew, Yuffie. Come on."

They boarded the Highwind again, to find Cid examining the control panel.

"You weren't gone long!"

"Not for lack of trying. Hey, have you ever seen a shop that sold anything but zero AP *Materia*?" asked Susan.

Cid scratched his head. "Now that you mention it, probably not. Never thought about it before, really."

"No, and the man behind the counter seemed very upset that we did. Well, can we get in the air again?"

"Sure, we're already ready for takeoff. Where to now, ladies?"

"Yeah, we checked the easy one, now what about the less than easy one?" asked Yuffie.

Susan flashed a smile. "I can afford to be a bit wasteful with my energy, now that we're not getting into a million combats. I'm going up on deck, just fly to sites that are isolated and look like good spots for *Materia* to have grown. Hardened? Coalesced? Whatever it is that *Lifestream* does to make this stuff."

"That's easy enough, but what are you going to be doing?"

"Me?" Susan tried to look innocent. "Cheating, of course."

Susan had Sparkle put *Energetic Accumulation* on her, then gathered 30 energy. This left her with little more than half, but like she said, it wasn't too much of a concern. That done, she used the entire shot on *Augment Skill: Spirit Sense*, grating her a total rating of 38. This gave her a range on making *Spirit Sense* checks from thirty nine to forty eight. As a check of 30 was considered "nearly impossible" she felt she was in good shape. She requested the magic until their hunt for *Materia* was over for the day, and sat on the deck, feeling the energy of the world flow beneath her.

And so flew the Highwind. Cid checked his maps, hovering the ship over mountains, valleys, islands, and plains. With her energy senses far in excess of any human before her, she could feel even the black energy of the Northern Crater, thousands of miles away from it. She found she could point to it with her eyes closed no matter where they were. She could feel lines of energy encircling the world, and in those remote places where there was no life- a tiny spark. For one she had to slip into the water and do a bit of swimming, as the Highwind couldn't land directly near the island where she felt the spark. She climbed up on the beach and headed inside, pulling a Blue *Materia* out for her own.

For the second she had to fly, the cave where she felt the spark was inaccessible as it was surrounded by mountains and water. So as the Highwind hovered above, she dropped out of the sky and pulled a Yellow *Materia* from the ground.

And for the third she swam a small river, to another cave surrounded by desert on one side, and high mountains on the other. From there she pulled a Pink *Materia*, and fairly shoved it into the waiting hands of Yuffie to get rid of it.

"Careful, they can break you know!" she chided, looking it over.

"Sorry, but that one I must never, ever touch again."

"Why? Oh, it seems to switch your MP and your HP. That's... odd."

"You're telling me. I don't *have* MP, so I have no clue what it would do. Maybe kill me?"

"Oh my gosh, you're right. It just might. Okay, into inventory it goes. How do we decide who gets the other two?" She pulled them out and seemed to balance them between her hands.

"Yellow is best for me, actually, and that one seems particularly suited for me," said Susan, taking it. "If I'm understanding this correctly, whatever someone last did

near me, the user of this does that again? I could actually contribute a little more to combat, if I used it right after someone used your kind of magic.”

“True.” She sighed. “And I suppose Vincent will want this one. Imagine using his Lightning combo four times in row!”

“Imagine doing it eight times, if I *Mimic* it!”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. Nice.”

“Of course I think he would have to give up his linked All, because it won’t hit all enemies four times. I guess for bosses though, it can’t be beat.”

“You got that right.”

“So are we done for today, ladies?” asked Cid. “It’s been hours, the others will want to eat soon, and while we’ve been racing across the globe, we will need to rest soon. We can make the sun be in the sky wherever we want, but we still have to sleep.”

“True. Very well. Captain, let us away to find our companions, and hear the valiant tales of their bravery this day!”

Yuffie laughed. “And don’t forget, they will need to hear our story as well, faithful companion!”

“Indeed, faithful companion!”

“To wing!” she shouted, pointing.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

So the Highwind picked up both groups, Vincent’s group first. He was indeed quite pleased with the new acquisition. “In fact, I may use it all the time,” he said, seeming to weigh his options. “We don’t run into large groups very often, where *Enemy All* is best suited. If I can cast once, get MP, HP, and Attack four times per casting... no sorry, that would be one regular attack at the end. Still... having four chances to get MP/HP back? I’m sold. Thanks.” He slipped in into his armor and went to settle in while the Highwind traveled to Corel.

“Glad it can help. And Aerith seems quite pleased with herself. Did this little kitty catch a canary?”

“Even better. Vincent loaned me his shotgun. I might give up attacking with the staff and switch to guns.”

“Can’t beat a shotgun!” Vincent called behind him.

“What’s wrong with the staff?” asked Yuffie. “Bonk! I love that sound it makes when you hit something, Aerith. Bonk!”

“That’s just it. Take a look at the staff I’ve been using.”

“Okay?” She got it out and looked it over. “Good number of linked slots on this...”

“Sure, but the attack is hardly above fifty. Vincent’s Lariat does twelve more, and I have a better chance of hitting with it!”

“That’s true. Doesn’t the staff raise your Spirit and Vitality?”

“Like that matters.”

“Yeah, what do those stats even do, anyway?”

The others shrugged.

“In any case,” she said, taking the staff back. “I can also attack from the back row, keeping me safer. It’s just a smart move.”

“I approve,” said Susan. “If you can handle the shotgun, do it. Wait, different staves have different attack? Okay, Sparkle, explain that one. One staff can’t be sharper

then another, they're all blunt weapons!"

"Weights in the top? I don't know."

"Uh huh. Damage dealing is weird wherever you go, I guess. Shall we head to Corel?"

The group found a small celebration going, centered around Barret.

"Good day, Barret?" Susan asked, looking around the town. Booze seemed to feature predominately.

"Very good!" he exclaimed. "I got the you-know-what, and saved the whole dang town in the process. See that train over there?"

Susan looked, and there were the remains of a train, lying on its side, close to the tracks. "I see it."

"Didn't quite know how to slow it down, so I threw a bunch of grenades under it and blew it off the track. How about that?"

"Good thinking. Dangerous, but good thinking. Or do you people not take damage from falls? Anyway, we're here to pick you up, and we have news! Unless you want to stay the night?"

"Nah, too much celebrating isn't good for you. I'm leaving, everybody! Off to save some more towns, you know?" The people around cheered and toasted him, and the full group was back together.

Susan told them what she had been told by the shopkeeper, and everyone agreed it was probably worth looking into. Sometime, when things weren't so messed up with the world, of course.

With that done, they ate, and Susan finally got her lesson in beginners Ninjutsu from Yuffie. By having a teacher she could spend double on it, and as her REASON allowed her to spend a little more than one XP a day, double that was the two XP she needed to get a one rating in a martial art. She took the two from her *Disguise* skill, as she wasn't really doing makeup that often now. (And if she did need to do it, that's what *Augment Skill* was for, right?)

She also, that night, set the *Mimic Materia* on her book and told it to figure how to replicate it, which it did. In the morning she had a brand new spell of *Emulation*, from Saturn. It was grade 7, and had some limitations, but Susan hoped to raise this one and make it split, so she could have the "baby." *On second thought, I'll take the mastered one. If I leave them the baby, they can easily make another. If I take the one that's split, it won't split again and they'll be stuck.*

The next day, Susan spent the morning with the "leveling" group, getting some "fake" XP and putting some AP into *Mimic*. She had a double AP armor equipped, which her book didn't actually detail. (As only this world had that specific method of doing things) She still felt it was going to take a depressingly long time to raise, but she did have fun doing whatever it was the others were doing, and with Vincent's nearly unlimited MP, they cut a swath across the landscape such as never had been seen before. (Not that it mattered, monsters seemed to exist in unlimited numbers in each area.)

In the afternoon they flew about to various towns, letting Susan see them in case

she had to return to one in a hurry. They checked out the shops, bought some stuff with their new *Gil*, and Susan ignored the dirty looks she got from *Materia* shop owners and tried to see about getting more information. She tried both *Seduction* and *Persuasion* checks under *Augment Skill*, both higher than normal (but not near the 30s like before). And she *still* got nowhere. In fact she swore a shop owner she had never, ever seen before actually tell her he was completely out of stock when she asked.

She went back in, *Shape-shifted* into someone completely different, and he had plenty of stock to show that girl. *But none for Susan, the Inquisitive Girl. Why is that, do we think?*

She continued that evening getting some lessons from Yuffie, who seemed rather pleased to have someone to teach. The night before she had been rather show-offy, (Susan didn't care, she was show-offy too. It was just having a teacher that mattered so she could "officially" put the skill down on her sheet and give it the one rating.) She couldn't raise it to two (which cost four) until the next night, but she appreciated Yuffie's commitment to the team. She even showed Tifa some things, as it seemed she had learned a different martial art growing up and was eager to compare them.

Why the men of the group suddenly seemed interested in also being on deck as the three girls jumped around, getting all sweaty and putting each other in throws and such was a mystery. (Okay, that's a lie, it's no mystery at all.) Susan even invited Aerith to change and join them, but she said she would be sticking to guns from now on, thank you very much.

"And quite sensibly, too," said Vincent. "All that rushing about seems rather exhausting. Magic and guns- that's really all you need."

"You don't know what you're missing!" said Yuffie, who was positively beaming. "Come on, Susan, you can get that leg up a little higher on the kick! Come on, stretch!"

The next day Susan dutifully asked her *Question* of where Cloud was, and to her surprise, got a different answer than *Lifestream*.

"Anyone know where the town of Mideel is?" she asked.

"Sort of on an island, pretty far south. Why?"

"Let's go there, I have a good feeling."

Tifa bowled her over, running from nowhere. "Did you find him? Did you find him?" she was saying, grabbing Susan's shoulders.

"And what shall we have for breakfast today, do you think? Or would you like to wait and have it with Cloud?"

Tifa gave a whoop of joy, hugged Susan tight, and ran to the cockpit to watch the approach.

"I guess that's a yes?"

Work / Time

Time: About a half hour later

Place: Mideel "hospital"

"Please tell me you can cure him!" Tifa pleaded, as Susan and Aerith crowded around the catatonic form of Cloud. As her magic had told her, he had washed up that morning on the shores of Mideel, and brought into the ramshackle village. Apparently it was a "hot springs town" and many people of advanced age stayed there. Hence the need for a lot of medical staff in a world of cure potions and recovery magic. The town itself was pretty tropical, and the local architecture reflected that. Plain, wooden buildings seemed the norm here, worked into the greenery as though they had all grown up together.

"I'm not sure there is a cure," said the doctor from the other room. "Except time."

"Wasn't talking to you," Tifa muttered.

"Shove over," said Susan, and Tifa made room for her. Susan took Cloud's hands in hers, and he responded by drooling a bit and looking around with unfocused eyes. She made several *Sense* checks, from *Magic* to *Spirit*, and she didn't like what she discovered. She got an eleven on magic sense, but only a four on *Spirit*, her current rating of two not very helpful. Her nine was a bit more useful when she tried again, enough to know something weird was now going on with his biology.

"I'm surprised he isn't glowing, all the life energy he absorbed," she began. "Even with a nine I can feel it. It's like a million different *Materia* all tried to crowd inside his brain at once."

"Did someone mention *Materia*?" shouted a voice from outside.

"Not now, Yuffie!"

"Sorry!"

"As I was saying. He actually fell into the *Lifestream*. Imagine what that must be like- it's not air, so you can't breathe. But it's not really liquid, though it has some liquid like properties if it can well up out of the ground. It gets in your lungs and you think you're going to die... but you can't. It's literally life energy. It will not allow you to die. Even a man like this, a soldier, floating there, lungs burning, well, it didn't help the situation any, let's put it that way."

"You can feel that?"

"I feel a combination of the weird sort of magical energy that happens when you use *Materia*, and him being suffused with a weird sort of analog to what I call *Spirit Energy* now. First step in any sort of recovery for him is somehow purging that energy from his system. The magical energy is actually really easy. I drop *Dead Magic* on the whole place and it vanishes like it never was. The life energy, well, I don't want to kill him, so taking that out will be a little more tricky. Too much and I might grab his own soul. Too little and I might as well not bother at all."

"But possible?"

"I think so. I have a spell to transfer *Spirit Energy* from those that have it to myself. So I know it can transfer various energies around. Now, I don't want to directly take this energy into myself because it's not exactly *Spirit Energy* and it's not exactly whatever MP is. That's why it's hurting him. If I take it on, he might get a little better but I

would get a lot worse. And there's no one that can do the same for me. So I'm going to leave my book with him, and tell it to come up with a spell that can transfer that energy into a suitable vessel. One which I think we already have taken possession of."

"Huge *Materia!*"

"Did someone-"

"Not now, Yuffie!" both shouted.

"Sorry!"

"You're right though. It's the closest thing to this energy you've got. And being Big McLarge Huge *Materia* it should hold the energy just fine without blowing the crystal to bits."

"Maybe we should get the others, just in case," suggested Aerith. "I mean, is this why there's four of them? Are we going to need four? I mean why would there be four if we didn't need four, right? What did Sparkle call it?"

"Narrative Imperative. It is suspicious, us learning of the Big M word just before finding him. And needing a vessel to draw the energy away from him?"

"What if you weren't here, though?" asked Aerith. "How would he have cured him then?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have. After all, if I wasn't here, you wouldn't be here to ask the question of how they would have cured him if I wasn't here."

"Buh?" asked Cloud, staring past Susan at something only he could see.

"My thoughts exactly," agreed Aerith.

"This energy will probably drain away by itself, but I have no idea how long that could take. I mean maybe you could 'ground' him in some way, pull it off that way? You guys have more of an understanding of Mako than I do. At least, maybe Shnira scientists do. Maybe they could take that energy and turn it into electricity, with whatever process they have? Pulling it out of a living body must be different than sucking it directly out of the ground though."

"Months to years," said the doctor, poking his head through. "To drain off naturally, I mean. Mako poisoning is bad enough, this is an extreme case. Worst I've ever seen, or heard about."

Susan snorted. "If only it was poison. That we could deal with. It's this energy that's scrambling his brains, no doubt."

"Could you hit him with that knife of yours? Maybe it'll work!" suggested Tifa.

Susan shook her head. "I've always been cautious mixing different types of magic. I once prevented someone from talking about something, then someone else magically tried to force them to talk about that thing. She nearly died. That was a poison, to my magic, so the knife worked. Plus it's the magic component of this condition that's the easy part. Like I said, destroy all magic in this area for a few seconds and it's gone too."

"So why would using your magic to pull the energy out not have some complication?" asked Aerith.

"It could, but he really can't get worse. And once that energy is gone, I can heal him normally. The spell puts things back the way they were before being hurt or damaged. It wasn't meant to purge *Lifestream* energy out of somebody. They don't have that where we come from. That's why I need a new spell, the sensors in my book can hopefully provide something that won't interact badly with the energy, and just draw

it out.”

“Do whatever you have to do,” said Tifa. “Just get him back for me.”

“You really like him, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I always did, since we were little.”

“Aw!” Susan and Aerith both clasped their hands and tilted their heads. She gave them a dark look. Susan and Aerith looked at each other and laughed.

“Wha?” put in Cloud.

“You got it, Cloud. You’re one lucky fellow, you know that?” Susan stage whispered. “Her boobs are enormous!”

“Can we get on with this?” Tifa snapped.

“Sure thing!” said Susan, drawing her book out of the sub-space pocket.

Naturally the *Pocket Dimension* was just as easy to keep it in, there was no danger of it being locked out in this world. It just didn’t cost her any energy, and looked cooler to pull it out of nowhere. She stuck the book by his leg, shoving it to one side. The gems lit up. “Now, bring me the crystal!” She pressed her fingertips together rapidly. “The *Materia* crystal!”

She waited, her fingers stopped.

“The *Materia* crystal!” she said louder, her fingers moving even faster.

She waited.

She went to the door, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“THE MATERAIA CRYSTAL!!!!!!”

Several of the people nearby looked at her strangely.

“*What?*” shouted Yuffie, sticking her head out of a nearby building. “You have to see this baby Chocobo! He’s sooooo cute!”

Susan heaved a great sigh. “I’ll just get it myself, shall I?” She went to the Highwind and got the *Huge Materia* out, then brought it back. She stuck it next to the book, so it was touching both him and the crystal. “Find a way to draw the *Lifestream* energy out of this person and drain it into this or similar crystals,” she told it.

“And now we wait,” said Aerith.

“Wait, and go see a cute Chocobo chick apparently.”

“I’ll stay here,” said Tifa. “I’ll want to watch him.”

Susan put a hand on her shoulder. “I know. He would surely do the same, if the situation was reversed. I’ll come see if you need anything in a little while, okay?”

Probably best to have a strong fighter here watching the Materia in any case.

“Okay.”

Susan and Aerith left, heading into town to see what it had to offer them. She was getting more used to the party just barging into places but it still seemed kind of weird to her.

Just don’t get too used to it and start trying it on other worlds, I guess?

She picked up a Crystal Sword, just because it looked so cool, like it had been cut from some kind of huge crystal. It had two less *Materia* slots than the Enhance Sword the group had found at the Gaea area, and she wanted to keep raising stuff for them, so she wasn’t using it. She stuck it into her own *Pocket Dimension*, rather than the inventory.

She also picked up an “Amulet” which she considered a steal at 10,000 gill. It

raised her LUCk by 10! That might be nothing to people who had maximum stats of 255 (Yuffie's luck was a 30 right now, while her strength was a 50) but for her, that was the maximum LUCk she could have, and then some. *Plus it's an Amulet, not a ring. I could wear it under my clothes and no one would even know.*

She was going to buy a Wizard Bracelet, a low defense object that had eight linked slots, but she saw the group had one in inventory and figured she might just ask to have that one before she left. She didn't care about the "defense" value the thing had, but *Materia* slots, that was something useful.

The *Materia* shop owner eyed her suspiciously, but she let Aerith look the stock over and they only had five, nothing the group didn't already have in quantity.

They spent the night at the inn, and in the morning she went to see what the book had come up with.

"As expected," she told the others, having collected it and the *Huge Materia*. They were all sitting on the step outside the "hospital" building. "It's going to take all four to safely contain the energy currently in Cloud. The spell says each crystal can only hold a certain amount more, if the crystals are all similar. Given what I felt inside him, that's the safest route. I don't want to shove energy in there and then have it blow up in our faces.

"The grade 7 Pluto spell of *Lifestream Transfer* can move the infecting energy between any two targets. Get this, it can actually drain energy out of a standard *Materia*, in effect, transferring AP between two of them. It seems "AP" is actually a tiny amount of life force from the destroyed creature, captured upon killing them. Huh. That makes a tremendous amount of sense, actually. That's why it must be in your weapon or armor, to provide that channel. Just carrying it in your pocket isn't enough to level it." *Right, I should have guessed. Stuff like XP and MP are abstractions, even for me. I can't hold them, but something is behind it, it's not just a number. It's a way of representing something I've gained or lost. In this case, Materia is crystalized Lifestream, life energy, so it's probably attracted to itself. That "raises" the Materia and when it can't hold any more, it either explodes or fissions. Luckily this world took the fission route, and a new Materia is born. Neat. The "AP" is just a way of quantifying the level of energy inside the crystal, just like gas inside a gas tank. We could use numbers to represent it, but we usually use a gauge because that's easier to comprehend at a glance when driving.*

"We'll try that first, I want to get a feel for the spell before we try it on a person."

"Good call," said Tifa. "Though I trust your magic."

"So do I, but casting a spell for the first time on a living person? Especially something untried like this? No thank you. So, if you have some *Materia* you want brought back down to zero while another is raised, get it out. Maybe those *Earth* ones you don't use anymore, shove their AP into the *Lighting* ones you do?"

So Susan read the spell over, getting seventeen and fourteen on *Scripture* and *Theory*, respectively, both enough to understand the difficulty twelve spell. She then put the two in front of her (the range was (T)Special, meaning she had to be close enough to touch the subjects, but not actually touch them.) and spent a few minutes transferring "AP" out of the *Materia* they no longer used.

As that worked perfectly, Susan was confident that with the four *Huge Materia*,

Cloud could be purged of the *Lifestream* and his recovery could begin.

“The next one we should get is the Condor Reactor one,” suggested Barret. “Shinra has been hitting that place off and on since we got out of Midgar. Once we take the *Materia* out, there will be no more reason to attack it!”

“Not a problem,” said Cait Sith, “I’ll have the final attack force move in before noon. You can get there before then, right?”

“You better believe it, cat.”

“Wait, attack force? I don’t want to hurt any Shinra soldiers,” protested Susan.

“Nah, nothing like that,” said Cait Sith. “Shinra typically sends a bunch of monsters they’ve rounded up against the place.”

“The first time we went there, we didn’t have a lot of money,” explained Aerith. “We did it the way the people holed up there suggested, getting different mercenaries to fight for us.” She gave a great sigh. “They all got wiped out, and in the end, the boss monster rushed the place. We had to go ourselves and defeat it.”

“Then the next time we went over there, we didn’t bother with the mercenaries. Waste of money,” further explained Barret. “We just rushed them ourselves. Why let them get all the money, XP and AP?”

Susan had to admit, that was a little silly. “So we’ll just do the same now?”

“Darn right. Get them going, spy, we’ll take off in a little while.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’ll stay here,” said Tifa. “I want to make sure Cloud is all right.”

“If you’re staying, I’ll stay,” said Aerith.

Tifa didn’t look overjoyed at this proclamation, but recognized her claim to be there.

And who will he be happier to see, when he finally is lucid again?

The group ate a leisurely breakfast, and hopped in the Highwind to head to the reactor.

We just left the Highwind sitting there. Why don’t monsters attack it? I mean they’re roaming around, right? Even if we can’t see them... and I still haven’t figured out how that’s supposed to make sense. What keeps them out of towns, for that matter?

At the entrance to the resistance base carved into the rock, Susan looked at the thin rope the others wanted her to climb. *I don’t actually have... wait a second.* She got out her character sheet, and yes, there was *Climbing* in a skill group with *Catching* and *Bicycle* and *Gymnastics*. *Just found some more skills to cannibalize! I don’t think I’ve ever used Catching or Bicycle. What was I thinking? Gymnastics might be useful, if I combined it with my martial arts.*

She made her *Climbing* check with a four, because she rolled absolute minimum, and got nowhere on her first attempt.

“Not a word,” she said to her companions. She tried again, getting an eight but taking the -1 for retrying, but technically her difficulty was at a -1 for the rope, as she was technically climbing the rock face, not the rope itself. So it evened out in the end, and she scrambled up it.

Once inside, she looked around, even visiting the little rest area they had, with

the save point near the beds she had been told about some time ago.

“You guys should save,” she said, looking at it.

“You’re right! Aerith isn’t here, so I keep forgetting!” said Barret, going over to it. “Thanks!”

That done, the party was Barret, Na, and Vincent, as he still hadn’t forgiven Yuffie. (And he wasn’t going to use Cait Sith, are you crazy?) And Susan, of course.

She watched as the odd creatures walked or flew up the mountain, uncontested. Once they reached the shack they encircled it and the “boss,” a Cmd. Grandhorn, came out, and the group rushed it. Na threw some *Meteors* at it, with the Green *Materia* of the same name, and Susan went back and forth Mimicking that and Vincent’s lighting blasts. In between, Barret shot it a bunch of times that was that, they got a new armor, the Imperial Guard, and 800 XP, 80 AP.

“Done!” said Barret, examining the armor. “Why did Shinra even bother?”

“Are you guys, and I hate to say this because coming from me you have no idea the irony value, but are you guys, I don’t know, overleveled for all of this? To use your term, I mean.”

“Maybe,” said Barret, unconcerned. “Consider our opponent. We need to get stronger yet.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“It’s a good cycle,” explained Vincent. “Before we had the Highwind we walked everywhere. That gave us plenty of opportunity to fight things. That raised our level. It also gave us money, that we could use to buy better equipment. Also some monsters, like this one, drop or have better stuff we can *Steal*. That further increases our effectiveness. That lets us fight tougher stuff, getting us more money, letting us buy even better stuff.”

“I see what you’re saying. Man, the economy here must be really bizarre, if anyone can just walk around and make money beating up monsters that roam the countryside.”

“Any case, let’s grab the *Huge Materia* and get on the next one. Cait Sith, what have we got left?”

“Junon and the one loaded onto the rocket.”

“Rocket? What’s this about a rocket?” demanded Cid.

“Yeah, to keep up appearances Shinra is going slam the rocket into Meteor. For good measure they’ve got a *Huge Materia*, or to the press a “secret weapon” aboard. They calculated the mass of the thing, and there’s not enough explosive power in the rocket fuel that will be left, but they have to be seen trying everything.”

“We’re going there next!” he decided.

Barret shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

Getting the last two

Time: About an hour later

Place: Heading into Rocket Town

“Still can’t believe they had already taken the *Huge Materia* out of the reactor. Half an hour scouring the place, and he had it all along!” Barret was fuming, stomping along with the others.

“At least we got a new Red *Materia*,” said Yuffie, skipping along beside him. “And it seems super useful!”

“Yeah, yeah. I suppose if Shinra had taken it back, that would be the ultimate nose tweak. They get away with the prize and Shinra gets nothing.”

“What can we expect here?” Susan asked Cait Sith.

“Not much in the way of opposition, of course. I think one of the Turks is here overseeing things.”

“Oh, them?” said Na. “They always seem to flee after we beat them up a little.”

“Guess we don’t have to hold back, then,” said Barret, stroking his gun arm.

“That’s why he was chosen for this mission,” explained Cait Sith. “Don’t want any pointless heroics now, do we?”

“We are letting them launch the rocket, though, right?” asked Cid, concerned.

“Sure, let Shinra put on their little play. Get rid of this rusty old tin can anyway.”

“Hey, be careful how you talk about #26! It would have gone into space if it hadn’t been for that idiot scientist Shera.”

“Of all the words of voice and pen, the saddest are ‘it might have been,’” said Susan.

“Yeah, what do you know?”

She glared at him.

“Sorry, I’m just a little on edge right now. Ignore me.”

“Done! Now come on, the rocket awaits.”

Having climbed the rusting metal ladder to get into the rocket, the group had a fight with the Turk Rude, and Susan managed to steal a Ziedrich armor from him. He then got zapped a bunch of times and retreated.

“I don’t think he’s leveled up at all since we last fought,” remarked Vincent.

“Shame. The Turks had such promise in the beginning, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyone not going into space, better clear out of here. Go warn the townspeople this rocket’s going to be taking off in a little while.”

“Space is out of my radio range,” said Cait Sith, “I’m staying.”

“I’m keeping my paws on the ground,” said Na.

“Space?” said Barret, backing away a step. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“No *Materia* in space, but once Susan leaves, I can claim to be the only woman ever who went. No one will be able to say different. I’m going.”

“Are you sure this thing isn’t just going to blow up on the ground?” asked Vincent.

“You think I would go inside if it was?”

“For the chance to get to space, maybe. I better come, just in case.”

“That’s settled then. Come on.”

The group piled in, and the others went to warn everyone away from the platform.

From what I know about rocket launches, which isn't much, don't you need like millions of gallons of water to keep the platform from just being vaporized? They dump it as the rockets fire, right? Of course they won't be using this one again, I guess...

"Hey, captain!" said one of the men working in the control room. "About time you finally showed up."

"I wouldn't miss this, you know that. Gonna give that *Meteor* what for, right?"

"That's right! Hey, do you know what they've loaded into the nose? That Turk guy wouldn't even tell us!"

"Ah, who knows what they've cooked up, right? Look, how's the rocket? Will it fly?"

"We've checked it over, and while it won't make two trips, it should make one. Don't worry, it'll make it."

"That's all I wanted to hear."

"Wait, you are going yourself, are you? That's suicide!"

"Not to worry, I'll bail before we get anywhere near that piece of rock. If there's a problem you'll need someone to correct it, and who better than me?"

The others agreed that was true enough.

"But what about them?"

"What about them? You let me worry about who I'm taking and get this rocket ready to lift off!"

"Yes sir!" They saluted and ran out of the place.

"Where are you all going?"

"It's done. If you're going to pilot it, we can launch any time," said one, turning back. "We'll get everything checked on the ground and make sure everyone is clear."

"Oh. Fine, get out of here. See you when we get back!"

With that, the rocket soon launched, but not before Susan put *Invulnerability* on everyone so nobody blacked out during the ascent. (Or if the thing blew up, they would all live through it.) There were no complications, and the group went up to see about getting the *Huge Materia* before leaving.

"Looks like some kind of security system, but I don't know the code," said Cid. "Want to just try guessing it? There can't be more than thousands of combinations, given a four character PIN where each digit could be used independently of-"

While he had been talking, Susan cast *Retrieval* and was looking the crystal over.

"Or, we could just do that. Come on, escape pod is this way."

"Wait, how long until we hit the *Meteor*?"

"Days, I suppose. Turns out space is really big!" He gave a hearty laugh.

"Great. Sparkle, I may need your energy."

"You've got it, but why?" she answered.

"We're going to leave *Meteor* a little gift, since we're here. And make sure the impact is nice and spectacular for those on the ground."

Susan spent some time reading over *Solar Orb*, getting a fifteen on *Scripture* and eighteen on *Theory*. She then spent all the time she could casting *Spell Trigger* and *Solar Orb* into the room. She managed it about a dozen times, putting in a little extra energy each time and then taking some of Sparkle's to boot. Everywhere you looked the metal of the rocket's nose cone had brands on it, set to go off with the impact of the rocket against *Meteor*.

"That should give everyone a light show they won't soon forget. Just one of those burns like the sun, and I've got this room laced with a dozen."

"You think it'll take out *Meteor* by itself?" asked Cid.

"One can hope, but I guess we'll see."

While she had been working, a dull boom sounded beneath them, and the others ran down to see what it was. Apparently an oxygen tank had exploded, and it turned out Shera was aboard as well.

"You withstood those g-forces and didn't even have a padded chair or anything?" said Susan, when she was brought up. "You're one gutsy lady! Cid, marry her immediately."

"She's the only person who will be able to put with him," agreed Vincent.

"You are okay, right? I can heal you if you need it."

Shera shook her head. "I'm fine, but thanks for asking. Sorry I stowed away, but I had to make sure everything was perfect."

"Guess I owe you an apology," said Cid quietly. "That tank would have given us trouble all those years ago."

"Or not, it could have been the stress of age. We'll never know."

"Still... Aren't you done yet, Susan?"

"Just a couple more..."

And when it was done they all piled into the escape pod, Susan checked and yes, *Invulnerability* was still there just in case, and Cid pressed the release button. The sphere was ejected and everyone in the pod enjoyed their first look at the stars without atmosphere in the way. The rocket was on course, and several days later impacted, blowing it half to bits with at least twelve OTR/HDL[10] *Solar Orbs*. It lit up the sky, temporality giving the planet two suns, but afterwards the *Meteor* started piecing itself back together, as if by magic. Which it was. The Shinra corporation looked good, the group got the *Materia* they wanted, everyone was happy.

Susan rested the rest of the day, having no source of energy to replenish her supply, and in the morning they went after the last *Huge Materia*, kept in the underwater reactor off Junon.

Rather than fly back, Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to the harbor town, and Cait Sith led them down to where the reactor was.

"Is it just me, or is there a lot less activity here?" asked Susan.

"Every pair of hands that's able is up working on getting the cannon ready for transport," he explained. "There's a lot to be done, and not a lot of time to do it in."

"Glad you can pal around with us then," said Barret sarcastically.

"You think I'm not doing my part? The Shinra are totally cooperating with you now, you know that, right? You won... without firing a shot. You want *Huge Materia*, we're giving it to you. We're not trying to arrest you any more, despite knowing your every move. We gave you the Highwind. What more could you want?"

"Guess you're right. All it took was a crazy inter-dimensional threat and the looming extinction of the entire world."

"What's your point?"

"Never mind."

"Look, my job is to be the go between for you and the Shinra Corporation. That's what I'm doing, and it's important work. The sooner we get Cloud fixed up the sooner you guys can move on. Susan will provide us the means to get the barrier down, and hopefully by that time you'll be ready to assault the crater with us. We all win, Barret. We know the cost of using Mako now, and we'll phase it out and come up with something else. Promise."

"And don't be too hard on Shinra," said Susan. "Most of this is the fault of The Darkness. We don't know how long it's been manipulating events here. If it hadn't done what it did, it would have done something else similar. Believe me."

"I guess we did win. All right, so where's this last *Materia*?"

"The reactor is this way."

The group went down an elevator that went underwater, and took a very beautiful tunnel to the reactor building itself. Susan and Yuffie both exclaimed over the dolphins that were swimming about, seemingly without a care.

"We aren't just fighting for us," she said, looking up at them. "We're fighting for all life on this planet. The Darkness will take their life energy just as readily as ours."

Throughout the tunnels down to this place there were still random encounters, just nothing alive. Weird, automated machines, mostly weak to lighting, tried to wear them down.

"I'm of two minds about this," said Vincent, blasting another group of automated Missile Launchers with Lit 2. "On the one hand, we can use the XP. On the other, they really made us slog through all this?"

"Probably no one thought to turn off the automatic defenses down here," apologized Cait Sith. "Sorry about that."

And there it was. Shafts of light piercing the murky water, looming in front of them like a castle was the Underwater Reactor. The group stepped up the door, and went inside.

Through the door two submarines sat in some kind of bay, a gaudy red one and a sleek gray one, both painted with the Shinra logo. A mechanical arm was heading across the bay, and Susan could see tiny people far below them, waiting for something.

The group ran past them, hardly bothering to look, but Cid seemed interested. "Marvelous engineering," he remarked. "Not as good as flying, moving about underwater, but I wouldn't mind seeing the inside of one."

"We'll get you the tour later," grumped Barret. "Come on."

"Better save," said Susan, pointing to the save point they came upon past the

dock area. Everyone but Susan touched the glowing light, she had never gotten the hang of those things. *If they have to come back, they can just tell me what happened. It'll be fine.*

Past some empty guard stations they came to the reactor itself, glowing with inner heat, as red energy and haze spewed out the top of it. The mechanical arm came into the room, and slowly went down into the top of the metal holding container.

"Nice of them to get it out for us," remarked Susan.

"Odd, no one said anything to me about it being removed," said Cait Sith. "Oh well."

They watched as the glow disappeared, and the *Huge Materia* was lifted out, gears groaning. It started moving back off to the left.

"They'll probably give it to us at the docks," Cait Sith said, "let's head that way."

They did, and saw the arm being lowered into the red submarine.

"Are they giving us a sub too?" asked Vincent. "Hey, why is Reno here?"

Reno, one of the Turks, dressed rather sloppily with his shirt untucked, turned around.

"Thought you and the crew might show up. I don't know where you got the information on these, but I'm keeping this one from you."

"We need that!" protested Na. "Is Shinra betraying us now, at the very end?"

"What are you talking about, beast? I work for Shinra, you do not. I don't know what your game is, but I'm ending it here."

"No, no, we're working together now!" protested Cait Sith, pushing to the front. "Didn't you get the memo?"

"What memo? Working with these guys? I don't buy it. What's your game, showing them top secret stuff like this?"

"It's all been cleared with Rufus, you have to believe me!"

"I don't have to do anything of the sort. I'm taking this *Materia* with me, you people can play with our new toy instead." He snapped his fingers, and a lumbering, oddly shaped robot wobbled over them. It had three stubby legs, but shoulders that could raise to a great height, and very long arms.

It advanced on the group, and the fighting team went into combat mode.

Susan won the *Initiative*, despite not being *Accelerated*, and having nothing to *Mimic* yet, she went for *Sense*.

"Twenty Four Thousand HP?" she shrieked, "How can that be fair?"

"We'll take it down," said Barret, "stay calm." He then put words to actions summoning Ramu, who called down lightning and blasted it.

Sparkle was up, and cast "*Elemental Line: Wind*" in a straight line under the creature. As things they were battling didn't tend to go anywhere, even the minor damage it caused every round could add up. Normally she would have cast *Acceleration* but she knew Cid had that covered, and he was up next.

Cid used the *Enemy Skill Materia* to get them *Big Guard*, which basically was their version of the spell, and it provided them a measure of protection for a little while.

Last to go was Vincent, who was now in his element. He blasted the thing with Lighting four times, then shot it once. One of the bolts hit an arm, which it seemed had HP apart from the main body. *Odd, that most things don't. How do they do that,*

anyway?

Sadly it was now the armor's turn to go, and having nearly a half its HP blasted away put it in a sour mood. It plucked up Vincent from the field and started spinning with him, damaging him in the process. He was, for the moment, out of the fight.

"Mimic it," said Cid, holding. "It's the only other time we'll have that to cast!"

"Right." Susan did, and another four bolts of electricity slammed into the creature. She also dashed forward to smack it with her sword, but the damage from that was not even worth calculating.

Cid then went, choosing *Trine* from the *Enemy Skill*, electrifying all three parts of the robot.

Barret took the simple expediency of shooting it again, as he knew it was now down to about 5000 HP.

Now Sparkle went again, and carefully considered. She tried *Destruction* on the robot's hand, the one holding Vincent. She took the -3 for the "called shot" but the extra time knowing the robot wouldn't attack again until she finished her action. She got an eighteen, and in the *Combust* rules (of all things, it's an ESPer skill) it says "an object has an effective CON check of 5 + twice DTR" and as this robot's hand has a DTR of 5, she blew it into a fine powder, and Vincent was back on the field.

He shook his head. "Thanks!"

"No problem."

Cid hit it with *Trine* again, then Barret delayed an action to allow Susan to *Mimic* it, which finished it off.

"After that... oh." Susan pointed ahead as the world came back into focus, and the red sub was gone.

"Shoot! Now what?" asked Vincent, looking around.

"We go after them, of course. Sub can't be that hard to pilot, right? And there's one sitting right there. Let's go!"

The group ran for it, (stopping to pick up the Leviathan Scales they had laying around, and the Scimitar at the other end of the dock) where they boarded the sub. Cid jumped into the cockpit (or whatever it's called on a submarine like this) and started looking over the controls. The others took the Shinra soldiers inside hostage, and started tying them up.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," said Yuffie, already looking a little green. "Before we leave, can you put me back on the Highwind. At least it's grounded for the moment."

"Sure, I can't cure motion sickness," said Susan, opening up her *Teleportal*. "See you soon!"

"I better."

After a bit of a false start and some terrible scraping noises, Cid managed to get the sub underway. Susan slapped *Augment Skill (Pilot Sub?)* on him but she wasn't sure if it worked out or not. He wasn't exactly trained for this, just using his domain knowledge of piloting "stuff" and figuring it out. But he chased the red sub down with the help of the others watching the sonar, and shot it down with torpedoes, which the sub seemed to have an unlimited amount of.

Why not, guns cause damage without bullets, why would a sub run out of the thing it can do damage with?

Susan put on *Breathe Water* and swam in through the hole in the side of the ship, then ran into a sealed door in the flooded compartment.

She shrugged, swam so her feet were touching the deck, and cast *Phase* on herself. That done she walked through the door to where the unhappy looking crew of the sub were preparing to suffocate.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "Would you like me to save your lives?"

"Uh, yes?" said a man in red. "But how? For that matter, how did you get in here?"

"Never mind that, my lad! You want out of here? I want you all blindfolded, now. Come on, there must be something around here we can use."

"No, captain, it must be some kind of trick!" said one of the soldiers. "She's going to blindfold us and then kill us somehow!"

"Sure, sure, that's a possibility. But riddle me this, batman..."

"How did you know my name was Batman?" asked one in a gravelly voice.

"Shhh," said other.

"If I was confident enough to come in here, alone, do you think I would really need to rob you of sight for the one action it would take you to take it off if we went into combat?"

"I... guess not."

"Come on fellows, time is wasting and you're burning oxygen."

"All right, form up and everyone find something to tie around your eyes," shouted the captain. "I have no idea what's going on, maybe this is some kind of hallucination brought on by lack of air. But in case it's not, she's here so I'm inclined to believe her. We do what she says."

"Thank you, captain," said Susan sweetly.

"Look, you can do what you want to me. But spare my men."

"I intend to. Come on I don't have all day."

And so the crew put things over their eyes, which Susan inspected, then opened a *Teleportal* in front of them. "Now walk and keep walking until I tell you to stop!" she commanded. The other end was back in the sub bay, maybe facing toward the wall, maybe facing towards the water? Yeah, it was the water. They shuffled forward, and when the last man was through she closed the portal before she could hear the yelp and splash as the first one fell into the water. (And her giggling, no longer kept in)

With that done, she opened the door, let the chamber flood, and swam through the wreck looking for the *Materia*. Once in hand she swam back out to the other sub, showed them she had it through the window (porthole?) and pointed up. They nodded, and Susan held on the sub bore her up and out of the water.

It was time to go cure Cloud!

Conspiracy to commit... keeping the world safe?

Time: About an hour later

Place: Mideel Hospital

The four *Huge Materia* floated around Cloud as though attracted to the energy that was inside him, and Susan readied the new spell. She had already purged half of it, the magic half, using her gun's *Imbued* spell of *Dead Magic*. Naturally the *Materia* and anything else remotely magical was moved far away, but now everything was back to normal. Only Aerith and Tifa were in the room with her, quietly watching as she reviewed the spell in her mind.

"Okay," she announced, "let's do this."

She visualized the spell symbols and magic swirled around the four *Materia* and Cloud. With a successful casting, energy shot out of him and into the crystals, each color going to the one it was most attracted to. He jerked upright as the energy burst forth from his chest, then sank back down and seemed to have gone to sleep.

"It's done," said Susan, getting absolute garbage on her *Spirit Sense* check. (An eight) Still, enough to feel the energy around her, and by focusing her attention just on Cloud, ignoring the *Materia*, she could tell he didn't have any trace of *Spirit Energy* inside him. The doctor, not entirely approving this odd treatment, gave him a quick examination. Not having any gave her a bit of a panic for a moment, fearing he was dead, but she remembered these people didn't have energy, they had MP.

"Heart rate steady, it was quite erratic before. Good pulse. Blood pressure normal. I think he's just asleep. He hasn't been sleeping really, since he got here."

"Okay. I'll secure the *Huge Materia* aboard the Highwind, and we can stay the night here. If he doesn't wake up normally tomorrow, I'll hit him with some healing magic and see what that does for him. If that doesn't work..."

"It will, I'm sure of it!" exclaimed Tifa.

Susan nodded, and started sticking the *Materia* in her *Pocket Dimension* to carry back to the ship. She didn't want them floating through town, after all. Sadly, she didn't notice the pair of eyes watching her as she did so, through a small gap in the wood that the house was made of.

Having nothing else to do, the group split up and wandered about outside, getting some XP. They had dinner, and again took rooms at the inn, as Cloud had yet to awaken. Susan had actually stepped through back to Aerith's house, and left the *Huge Materia* in her basement for safekeeping. There was a safe down there she popped them into, having gotten the combination from *Question*, one number at a time. That done, she came back and helped the others get XP.

That night, she awoke abruptly to find three men in the room with her, hard to see in the darkness because they were dressed head to toe in black. Their faces were obscured, and all held wicked looking weapons.

"Where is the *Materia*?" demanded the closest one. "You said you were bringing it to your ship, and the ship did not leave. So they must be there!"

"Huh? What?" Susan wasn't quite awake yet, having to delay 2d10*3 segments

(or 48 in this case, amounting to nearly 10 seconds) “What’s this now?”

The men looked at each other, then back to her. “The *Materia*. Where?”

“I can tell you,” said Sparkle, jumping up on the bed. “But first, who are you people?”

“What trick is this?” asked one, pointing at her. “That cat spoke!”

“Some kind of robot, pay it no mind. Where is the *Materia*?”

“Are you *sure* you want to ignore me?” asked Sparkle. “Because if you do, you’ll be sucking down *Somnolent Smog*.” She took the full time to cast, a whole 1.2 seconds, and put in the maximum energy she could with *Spirit Manipulation*. She got a sixteen, usually more than enough to put down an NPC, who can at best roll a fifteen because you can’t put energy into CON. They had *Vitality* and *Spirit*, but not CONstitution.

After some thought, the Narrator decided they had a 6 CON, giving them a chance to overcome the spell. (After all, it would make the story more interesting if some succeeded, right?) Look at that, two did, leaving one to thud to the floor, asleep. Of course Susan with her 4 CON also couldn’t succeed, and fell back asleep.

Well, crap.

“It’s actually alive,” said the one man.

“Take it down, it must be using some strange *Materia* to make this fog!”

Double crap.

Sparkle found herself in battle, facing the two warriors. She also lost the *Initiative* somehow, the two men rolling higher than she did, leaving her third in the combat order. On the bright side, Susan was apparently there with her, weapon out. She still seemed to be asleep though.

Oh right, sleep is actually a status ailment in this world. And she is technically in my party...

The other nice thing about this world was that Sparkle didn’t take more damage from attacks here. Big or small, everything took damage based on the stats of the weapon and the person wielding it.

“Wind!” shouted the man, and she got knocked into by a wind attack, doing nine damage to her.

“Nine?” said the man next to him. “That can’t be right.”

“Who knows, just keep attacking!”

“Okay. Darkness!”

Again, she was slammed by an attack, this time for 6 damage.

Wait a second, what’s this magic they’re using? Our team doesn’t have wind Materia, or darkness. I suppose there’s holy damage, so the opposite of that would be dark? This is messed up. In any case, I need to wake up Susan to have any chance at all against these guys. Unless I want to play my Sacrifice card? No, I don’t think so. Would my Awaken spell work on her now? I suppose I could use an item, I’m part of the party so I get access to the inventory. How would I apply it without hands though?

“Make your move, creature! Let us be done with this!” said the man.

“Give me a second. Sheesh. You going somewhere, buddy?”

Wait, I know what knocks people out of Sleep in combat. Physical damage! She attacked Susan, doing one damage, enough to knock her out of her slumber.

“What, huh?” she said, the soul of wit.

"We're in combat now!"

"Uh, sure? What?"

"Explain later, attack now!"

"Right. Dang, this is going to take forever!"

"You're telling me. They've already done fifteen damage to me!"

"You okay?"

"For the moment. They're using weird magic though, be careful."

"All right you two, you can still walk away from all this! Escape from this combat, and I'll let you go."

"Never. We will have the location of the *Huge Materia*. If not that, we shall destroy an inquisitive girl and her strange talking cat. Either goal is worth our lives."

"Suit yourselves. *Avatar of War!*" Susan cast on both of them, Sparkle becoming a slightly larger, armored version of herself, while Susan become the armored monster she was familiar with. Not that the flame and such would help, but it did double their HP, in effect. It also made them slightly faster.

However, as the battle wore on, each side discovered it couldn't really hurt the other. The pair even tried some spell they called "Ultima" which hit both of them, but which still did only twenty damage or so apiece. Both had healing magic, and while the goons didn't know Susan was reliant on Energy, they figured she was like them and had access to items.

"This is pointless, we should flee!" said the one man.

"Our mission is everything," said the other. "We must find a way to prevail."

"We can't. They're doing something, they have some kind of barrier up that prevents most of our attacks from getting through."

"But it must cripple them in turn, for they cannot hurt us either. Cast *Reflect* upon them so they can't use curative magic on themselves and we shall see how tough they are."

"But they must have items! And how will we damage them?"

"So let them expend them. We do as well! We will damage them with our weapons, of course. I will not hear another word from you about running!"

"All right! But soon they'll be able to use a *Limit Break* against us!"

I could, if you damaged me more than a little each time. But I think I still have a long way to go before that happens.

The one cast *Reflect*, which covered Susan with a green barrier for a moment, and she knew any magic cast on herself would be bounced back to the others. The other one then attacked her physically with his weapon.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Susan, now furiously thinking when it was her turn.

"What do you suggest? We can't exactly call for help in this crazy place."

"I know. I'm just thinking we might have to resort to methods we don't usually like to."

"You mean actually kill them?"

"We might have to."

"Isn't there some other way?"

"I don't know, we can't leave this weird combat without one side winning. Let me

look at my book, maybe I can come up with something.”

She took her action getting her book out, which she was glad worked, and let the man hit her again. She didn't even look up, as she started paging through and thinking about what magic she could use. Finally she snapped her fingers, “Of course!” She read through the spell, taking all the time she needed as they weren't going anywhere. She got a twenty and a fourteen on her checks, which was more than enough, and finally ended up casting *Damage Absorption* on the one guy, using maximum energy. She snapped the book closed.

“You can still run,” she said, “because I don't advise hitting us anymore.”

“I have no idea what you just did,” said the one, “but our attack continues!” He swung at her, but his companion seemed to be wounded, not her. But even better, he seemed to take the full damage rather than the small amount she would have taken herself.

Undaunted, the man attacked as well, and wound up hurting himself.

“Now can we go?” he asked. “That obviously did something, and it seems we can't hurt her anymore.”

“We shall continue to try!”

Susan just skipped her turns, as the one man took potions and such while beating himself to a pulp. She was still reading her book, not even looking at what the two were doing at this point.

“Okay, this isn't getting us anywhere either,” said Sparkle, letting the guy hit her and get damaged instead. “Don't you have something else you could try?”

“Fine, we can keep doing this the hard way.” She made more checks, and did more reading. That done, she cast another new spell from writing, dropping the *Damage Absorption* for *Shattersteel*, on both of them. The next time they were hit the weapon bounced off and took damage, and a few rounds later, both their swords had been totally destroyed.

“This is impossible!” wailed the one. “What is that book of hers? What is she doing to us?”

“I do not know. But I know this, we must retreat-”

“Oh, now we must retreat?”

“Yes, now. For now we have an even greater mission to accomplish. We must take news of this book back to our brethren!”

‘Uh, I'm the only one that can-”

“Silence! We shall return!” With that, the man threw an item, some kind of *Smoke Bomb* and when it cleared, the two were gone. The third man was still sleeping peacefully on the floor of the place.

“Why didn't he join the combat like I did?” asked Susan, looking down at him.

“Maybe because I was on top of you when that guy brought us into combat? I don't know about the rules here. Fighting without something to *Mimic* is terrible!”

“Yeah, you're telling me. I really need a way to do more damage around here. Oh well, let's see what this guy has to say.”

She left for a moment, waking up Yuffie who presumably had taken rope tying classes, and gently levitated the guy so he could be tied up.

“Now what?” she asked.

Susan sighed. "More magic." She sat and read over the *Dominate* spell, making the usual checks to read and understand it. (Two 20s) She then cast it on the sleeping man, who couldn't make his RESolve check because he was asleep. She felt herself take control of him, and felt a bit dirty. *This is technically the Imperius Curse which if I was home, would be illegal. Of course mine wears off...*

"Wake up," she said, and the man did with a start.

"What I am?"

"Be silent unless you are answering a question."

The man went silent, his eyes bulging out of his head.

"Yes, you are now under my control. Now, answer all of my questions truthfully. Who are you?"

"I am brother Thaddeus," said the man.

"Good. Why did you come here?"

"I traveled here to kill you, because you asked too many questions about *Materia* that the brotherhood does not wish asked."

Yuffie gasped, putting her hands over her mouth.

Susan eyes hardened. "And the *Huge Materia*?"

"We have theorized its existence, but never created any. That takes a reactor, and even the Brotherhood cannot build a reactor without notice."

"Why steal mine? What's special about it?"

"Theory states that if many master *Materia* are brought near a *Materia* such as that one, they will be condensed into one and have all the functionality of the sacrificed *Materia*."

"And you learned I had some, and wanted it for yourselves. You were here to kill me, that was just a bonus for you."

"Yes."

"Imagine having all spells, or all Summons in one *Materia*. That would be fantastic!"

"Fangirl later, Yuffie. Working now. So you learned of me from the shopkeepers, right? That I was asking uncomfortable questions, and you wanted it stopped. So you came to silence me?"

"Yes."

"What is the brotherhood?" asked Yuffie.

"The Brotherhood..." Susan could almost see him trying to make a RESolve check to throw off the spell, but she had gotten a seventeen on it, and he couldn't spend energy. *Of course, if he has a 6 or higher, it's still possible.* "The Brotherhood of *Materia* controls all the *Materia* of the world, regulating the sale, raising, and use of *Materia* for all people."

"I knew it!" said Yuffie. "I knew it must be something. Here's the proof!"

"That's how your companions had things like *wind* magic, and *darkness*. You have *Materia* that aren't in general circulation."

"Yes."

"And why shopkeepers have only a few to choose from, but lots to sell. And where *Materia* that has been partially or fully raised goes when it's purchased."

"Yes. The shopkeepers are kept in line, but are not part of the Brotherhood. Only through a rigorous testing process can one be considered for membership."

"Well! That does explain a few things. Where-" *This will probably allow him to try and break out again, but cross your fingers.* "Where is your headquarters?"

He hesitated, but answered. "Hidden beneath the desert near the Gold Saucer. Only a few can cross it and survive. None have ever found the location."

"I can believe it."

"Can you get him to take us there?"

"Yuffie, I'm exhausted and low on energy. When I go to sleep the spell will be broken. I can't hold him that long."

"Come on, do you know how important this-"

"Stay here. Remain silent," she told the man.

He nodded, and Susan dragged Yuffie by the hand down the hall.

"It's in the middle of the desert," she said, "there's not going to be any sort of life around there."

Yuffie's eyes lit up. "You can feel it out! There must be a ton of *Materia* there!"

Susan nodded her head. "I'm sure I can find it without him, once we get a chance."

"Excellent. It'll be the raid of the century!"

"Something like that. Anything else we should ask him?"

"How it's guarded, maybe?"

"We would go in *Phased* until we found the main vault anyway. There must be one. Traps or guards wouldn't concern us."

"Oh, great. Then I can't think of anything else."

They walked back into the room, and Susan looked the man over. She took off his mask, studying his face. "Closest to the desert I've seen is Corel town. If I left you there would you be able to get back to your Brotherhood?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Fine. Tell your Brotherhood it's the end of the world. If there was any time to allow access to powerful *Materia*, it's now. If they wish to meet next time as civilized people, I will discuss terms for access to the *Huge Materia* in exchange for *Materia* we don't have. If they wish to attack me again, I will respond in kind. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Untie him," she said to Yuffie, who did so.

"When I tell you, walk forward twenty paces." She popped the mask on, but backwards, and also commanded him to keep his eyes closed for at least a count of 100. She opened a *Teleportal* to Corel and commanded him to walk, closing it behind him. She collapsed onto the bed, and was suddenly being hugged by Yuffie.

"I can't believe this!" she exclaimed, completely excited. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"I have some idea. Look, I'm going back to sleep. Being attacked in the middle of the night and having to read a bunch of spells over to use them because I can't damage anything here makes me sleepy. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'm too keyed up to sleep. I'm staying here, if you get attacked again you'll need me, right?"

"Suit yourself."

"Great! Tomorrow we'll- oh, well, see how Cloud is I guess, then go hunting *Materia!*"

“Yuffie,” she replied, yawning. “We have to wait until they get the message I gave that guy, then decide what to do. I won’t steal from them if they’re willing to help us. Maybe they shouldn’t hide *Materia* from the world, but maybe there are some that are really dangerous, like the *Black Materia*. We don’t know, and the system has worked until now.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m very fun. I’m also quite practical. And sleepy. Good night.”

“Night. See you... later today!”

“Ugh.”

Inside the dreams of a soldier

Time: The next day

Place: Mideel hospital

“All right, who had the party in the Highwind last night?” demanded Cid at breakfast the next day.

“Something wrong?” asked Barret.

“I’ll say, the inside’s trashed and my men got locked in a closet all night! That was closer together than any of them wanted to be to each other.”

“Sorry,” said Susan. “We had a slight altercation last night, some people were looking for the *Huge Materia*. I should have checked the Highwind, they did mention it, I think? I was sort of asleep at the time. Didn’t even think about it afterwards.”

“Where are they now, by the way?” asked Yuffie.

“I’ll tell you where they really are once we’re in the air again, too many ways someone could be watching us here.”

“Who even knows we have them?” said Aerith, “And what did they want with them?”

Susan explained about the *Materia* conspiracy and the Brotherhood, blowing all their minds. She went on about how they believed smaller *Materia* could be united using the power of their larger brethren. Their minds stayed sufficiently blown.

“And all this has been going on for hundreds of years?” cried Barret. “We could have used that power in the beginning, going up against Shinra.”

“Which is perhaps why they’ve kept it from the world,” countered Aerith. “Because they’re too dangerous.”

“You taking their side?”

“It’s not like they’re killing the land, like the Shinra did. And *Materia* are common enough, it’s not like they’re trying to horde them all. Just certain ones. And if people want to raise them, fine, but they can’t buy raised ones. I don’t like it, but I can see their point of view.”

“Bah, you would. When are going to bust them up?”

“Cloud first!” protested Tifa. “You said if he hadn’t woken up today you would try your healing magic on him!”

“And so I will,” promised Susan. “Right after I finish these delicious pancakes.”

And so she did.

And nothing changed.

She even had Sparkle try *Awaken*, which seemed to do nothing.

“That’s disappointing,” she said, looking down at his still sleeping form. “I can’t imagine what went wrong.”

“Maybe it’s mental,” suggested Aerith. “I mean your magic would take care of anything physical, right?”

“Yes, it would. You think he doesn’t want to wake up?”

“Keep in mind what he did just before he disappeared. In his mind, he may feel he betrayed us all by giving Sephiroth the *Black Materia*. He may not be ready to face us yet.”

“Then we have to somehow convince him he didn’t. He didn’t, did he?”

She looked back at the others, who seemed to be mulling it over.

“Nah,” said Barret. “Wasn’t his fault he got Jenova cells put inside him, right? He wasn’t acting under his own volition, so we can’t fault him for it.”

“I agree,” said Vincent. “I’ve done some things in my past I’m not proud of, but they were my choice. He didn’t have that luxury.”

“So the only question is, how to get in there.” Susan stood, tapping a finger aside her chin.

“Can you do it?” asked Tifa.

Susan shook her head. “Tricky. I have a spell, I developed it to put my soul in someone else’s body so I could basically expel another soul that had taken up residence there. It worked okay.”

“Then you can use it here!”

“Not so fast. I had a ghost friend who would ferry me around, as the soul just kind of floated there. I haven’t seen many ghosts in your world.”

“They do exist though,” said Aerith. “And we know where to find them, too.”

“What? They do? Where?”

“The train graveyard in the slums of Midgar. I wonder if one could be convinced to help...”

“You want to ask a monster to help us?” asked Barret. “That’s crazy.”

“What option do we have?” Tifa asked angrily. “If it means taking a risk or whatever, I’ll do it.”

“It’s no risk, those things are pretty weak. It’s getting one to talk and trust you that’s the problem. Normally they just attack.”

“I’m not worried about it trusting us, I’m worried about us trusting it. This is my soul we’re talking about here, people.”

“If you can cast the spell on two, I’ll share the risk with you,” said Tifa.

“You would have to come, I think. I wouldn’t be able to access what I was seeing. You know Cloud a lot better than I do, so you could make sense of his inner landscape.”

“Glad I volunteered then.”

“So we’re heading to Midgar?” asked Barret. “Great. Didn’t really want to see that place again, let me tell you.”

“You can stay and watch Cloud if you want, in fact as I can’t maybe you better.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll watch him. Won’t nobody mess with him while I’m around!”

“Okay. Everyone else, back to the Highwind. Doctor, we’ll return soon!”

“With a ghost?”

“That’s the hope.”

“I must say, I wouldn’t have followed this treatment plan. I hope it works out for you.”

“Me too, doctor, me too.”

And so the group stood before the gates of Midgar, locked against reentry.

“You can just *Teleportal* us through, because you can see it, right?”

“Why take all that time? *Unlock.*”

The doors creaked open.

“You’re just full of surprises,” remarked Vincent.

“Got that right. Hardly get to use that spell, too. Nice to get some use out of it.”

Probably because I’m not wandering uninvited into every house in sight. Still don’t know how they get away with that.

Aerith stopped by “her” church, and assured the kids that had taken over watching her flowers that she was okay, and would one day return. She thanked them for watching over the place, and gave them some *Gil*, as she was quite wealthy now, even split as many ways as the party would split their money. The group visited some of their old haunts, even getting a weapon for Tifa and visiting the shops there. Susan stopped to pay her respects to those that died in the pillar incident, and of course some parts were full of monsters so they had some fights, too. *Can’t go anywhere in this world without some fights!*

That done, Yuffie, Aerith, Tifa, and Susan made their way to the train station, where they entered the eerily lit “train graveyard.” As usual, there were some weird looking things wandering around there, like a horse looking machine with wheels, “ridden” by a figure in a white hood.

But then three ghosts appeared. They were the classic model of a ghost, looking like a sheet draped over a balloon. They had eyes and a mouth, and a long sort of tail that was as long as they were tall. They even had spindly little arms, and red hands at the end.

Okay, Myrtle they are not.

Tifa stepped up but did not attack. “Ghosts, please do not attack! We only wish to speak to you!”

A look seemed to pass between the three, and they vanished.

“Please, don’t go! I’m serious, we need your help.”

They reappeared, still looking confused.

“It’s true,” put in Aerith. “We will not attack you, please hear us out. This concerns something you can do for us, and maybe we can do you a favor in return.”

They vanished again.

“Aarg, what do we have to do to get you to listen? Please, it may be a matter of life and death. We can only turn to you in our hour of need.”

The reappeared. The lead one looked back at the other two, who sort of shrugged. “Death?” it croaked.

“Yes. We need you to move a soul into another body, so we can talk to him and wake him up. It’s complicated, I can show you much easier than tell you.”

“Reward?”

“Yes, anything we can grant you. I don’t know much about the wants of ghosts, but if we can help you with something...”

“Life!”

“You want to be alive again? Gee, I don’t know...”

"I do know a spell to put a soul into an object or a body," said Susan, also taking a step forward. "I suppose we could find someone recently dead, heal the body, and put your soul in. You are souls, right? I mean I thought people were supposed to return to the *Lifestream* around here."

The lead ghost gestured to the other two, and the three went into a sort of huddle. Finally the two drifted away from the battlefield, leaving only the one.

"This is all very irregular," it said.

"You can talk!" said Aerith, clapping her hands together.

"Of course. I'm a ghost, not a lamppost. It's just not done, you know? Never thought I would be talking to people like you, rather than fighting. So what's this about your needing my help?"

"Will you come with us? It really would be easier to show you."

"Wait, you want me to leave combat and show myself in the wider world? That's just not done, lady! Who are you to even suggest it?"

"I'm not your average girl. So you can do it? I always wondered where you guys all were until someone bumped into you."

"Yeah, well, same goes for us. Imagine, minding our own business and then someone smacks into you. Then the blades and the guns and the magic come out. I mean honestly, some of you people just run in a circle and take out dozens of poor, innocent creatures an hour. What's the point? Why do you bother us so? What did we ever do to you?"

"Wow, a ghost that wants to talk philosophy," said Aerith.

"We don't have much else to talk about. Not much interest in the stock market when you're *dead*."

"Anyway, can you help us or not?"

"Eh, beats hanging around here, I guess. Lead on."

The battle dissolved, and the ghost was standing with them in the train graveyard, looking expectant.

"So you could show yourself. If you monsters don't like being attacked, why not just reveal yourselves so people could walk around you?" asked Aerith.

"Because... um... Well I don't know. Ask the guy who made the rules!"

"Right. Susan?"

"Opening now."

Susan opened her *Teleportal* back to Mideel, where the airship was headed right after they got dropped off. They stepped through, and the ghost floated through after them.

"Hey, you actually found one?" asked Barret, looking the ghost over.

"He's not agreed to help us. Finding one was the easy part, they're all over that place," replied Tifa. "You know that."

"Sure, but getting one to help. Huh. Well, sure, why not? Susan likes turning our world upside down, a few more turns won't hurt. Maybe it'll start spinning in place and throw *Meteor* off on its own."

"We can only hope," said Aerith.

They took him to see Cloud, and explained what they wanted the ghost to do.

“Just stick your souls into this guy, and when they pop back out again, shove them back in the bodies? I guess I could do that.”

“No tricks?” asked Barret.

“No tricks. But like I said, I want a body myself. I want to be alive again.”

“Doctor, anyone died around here recently?”

The doctor was busy peering at the ghost, and it took a second before he realized he had been asked something. “What? Dead bodies? No, and you wouldn’t want any around here, they would have died of old age. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Spend some time like this, and you’ll see what you’re willing to accept.”

“What about a body like mine?” asked Cait Sith. “Does it have to be alive?”

Susan shook her head. “No, it can be an object. If that object happens to be a robot body, it would work.”

“That seems even better,” said the ghost, considering. “More sturdy. Very well.”

“Then I’ll get out the spell.”

“I’ll have a body put outside Midgar,” said Cait Sith. “You can just grab it with the *Teleportal*, right?”

“Sure.”

“Won’t even take that long, we’ve got a few sitting around. Just a second, I’ll go put in the request.” The doll went dead.

Sparkle stepped up. “Guess I’m going too, huh?”

“Actually, I’m leaving you the book, and would feel better if you stayed here. If this goes wrong, you’re the only one that can fix it. You can have the book make a spell to put us back, or use that *Soul Transfer* spell to get us out. I don’t know what would happen if more than one soul was in a body, but maybe you could target a specific one?”

“That might be for the best. Okay, I’ll keep an eye on you.”

“Thanks. We don’t even have to do *Freeze* like we did before, as the book says taking the soul out doesn’t kill the body. Hopefully this should be an in and out thing.”

“I’ll give you... two hours and then start looking into solutions.”

“Fair enough. Wish us luck.”

So Susan cast the spell, and the next thing she knew she was looking at a fragmented piece of pavement, rather than the blackness she was expecting. Three paths led off in different directions, each with a Cloud sitting at the end of it, while a large Cloud hovered overhead. Past that, planets, stars and even nebula were seen in the distance. Tifa stood next to her.

“Is this what you expected?” she asked in a hushed tone.

“Last time I had to think about various things, and they appeared. Everything stood for something else, like a chain meaning the bonds between friends. This is a bit different. Do you know these scenes?” She pointed.

Tifa nodded. “They’re memories of his past. We went to Nibelheim, remember?” She pointed off to the right, and it was true, that was the entrance to the village. “I guess it’s time to confront the truth. Seems the right venue for it. Come on.”

She headed off to the right, and Susan followed.

Tifa took Susan through Cloud's memories, finally admitting all those years ago that it was the man with the black hair, a man she called Zack, that had come to Nibelheim that day. They explored his childhood, and a scene at a well where Tifa and Cloud made a promise to each other. Cloud then recalled how it was he knew of events there, it was because he was one of the two regular soldiers that had come that day. He found the strength to throw Sephiroth into the reactor pit, and with that his memories of the events ended. Susan could fill in the blanks from there.

He had been found by Hojo and revived, but changed. He had Jenova cells put inside him, and possibly Zack cells as well, to make him stronger. That's when he started hearing the voice of the Darkness, and how it came to control him.

Susan then showed him parts of her struggle. How she lost control for a time, becoming ever more arrogant and running over everyone with her magic. She showed him how Luna had come into her life, and shown her a better way. Then came the voice, and the uncertainty that her will would ever fully be her own again.

"I understand," said Cloud at least, having reintegrated himself. "Seems we both have a ways to go before we'll really know ourselves."

"But we will, won't we?" asked Susan with a grin.

"That's right," he replied, brushing his hair like he did. "Thanks, for helping me to understand. Now, exactly where are we?"

"The bigger question is, how do we leave?" asked Tifa, but that was soon answered as the space around them started shrinking and getting darker.

"I think you're waking up. See you on the other side!"

And Susan opened her eyes.

She saw herself.

Then she was being hugged by Cloud. "Uh," the her over there said. "What?"

"Is something wrong?" asked the ghost.

"Why am I over there?" Susan? asked.

"Ah, I did wonder about that," remarked the ghost. "But you all didn't seem that concerned, so..."

"What's happened?" asked Barret, as Cloud pulled away, looking at Tifa? with concern.

"We got put in the wrong body," said Susan, looking around. "Is that what I look like from the outside? Huh."

"My boobs *are* enormous!" said Tifa. "No wonder people stare at them."

"Yeah, how do you cope?" Susan gave an experimental bounce.

"Uh, you can fix this, right?" asked Cloud, looking between the two girls.

Susan laughed. "Yea, just let me read over *Soul Swap* and we'll be back in a jiffy. Then I have a promise to keep."

So, once back in her body she opened a *Teleportal* to the gate of Midgar, and there was another stuffed toy body for the ghost. She used *Soul Transfer*, (for 15 minutes, mind you) and the ghost vanished. The body started to move.

"Hey, it really worked!" it said. "I have a body again!"

"Then it seems our business is completed!" said Susan. "Hey, if you ever run into a snow creature that can't melt, tell her I said hi."

"Sure thing. Think I'll head that way for a bit, see what I can see. See you later!"

The toy/ghost left Mideel, and the doctor stood rubbing his eyes, probably not believing he just saw all that.

"So much for medical school," he said bitterly. "I should just suggest any old thing, hey, find a ghost! Why not? La la la!" He went skipping off somewhere.

"Think he'll be okay?" asked Aerith.

"Ah, he'll be fine. Hey, we're back together! Cloud, how do you feel right now?"

"Hungry. When do we eat?"

So the group had a small "welcome back Cloud" party... which was interrupted by the arrival of *Ultimate Weapon*... who blew up the town.

"Dang it all!" Susan shouted at the wreckage of the town. The group had driven the creature away, but the town paid the price, and all the buildings were in pieces. "I was liking that place, you know."

"Hey, are you hurt? Legs broken? Walk on your hands!" said the doctor, running about checking everyone. "Are you hurt? Broken arm? Perhaps a dolphin could lend you a hand. Are you hurt? Oh, that's a nasty gash. Let me find A UNICORN to help you! Tra la la!"

"Are you *sure* he's going to be okay?" asked Aerith.

"Reasonably?" answered Susan.

"Anyway, nothing more we can do here," said Yuffie quickly. "Let's get going before someone starts blaming us for all this."

"I've told Shinra, they'll dispatch a cleanup crew, start rebuilding the town," said Cait Sith.

"More good publicity for the Shinra Corporation," grumped Barret. "Just what the world needs."

Cloud shook his head. "Anyway, you guys can catch me up on the way... elsewhere? Where are we going? I'll probably have to fight some battles too, looks like you've all gone up a level or two."

"We have an airship now!" said Cid. "We stole it! Sorta?"

"And don't forget we got the Brotherhood mad at us," put in Susan.

"And we got some *Huge Materia*," said Yuffie.

"And a submarine. Do we have to give that back?" asked Barret.

"You guys have been busy..."

Let's Make a Deal

Time: A few minutes later

Place: Highwind

So Susan and the group told Cloud what he had been missing. Going into space, going underwater, getting *Huge Materia*, all that sort of thing. Once in the air, Susan shooed the operations guy out and told Aerith the *Huge Materia* was currently in the safe at her house, and gave her the combination.

"Memorize this, and destroy it," she said, handing her a piece of paper.

Aerith started staring at it, and Cloud, having gotten caught up, wondered what to do next.

"Still some time before the cannon is moved. Though I can see now on the map here that Junon isn't actually all that far away from Midgar. They can just float it over there. Lifting it into place is going to be the big challenge, I expect."

"Anyone have any ideas about what to do next?"

"Clean out the Highwind," said Cid, dumping a bunch of trash in a bin. "Those Brotherhood goons really searched the place high and low."

The group gave a collective shrug and with the exception of Yuffie, who was feeling nauseous again, they straightened the place up. Susan had to do some *Repair* magic on panels and things that had been busted, but soon the place was nice and clean again.

That done, the group, rather predictably Susan thought, voted to keep raising their levels until the time came to assault the Northern Crater again. So they spent the afternoon traveling the world, looking for the place that had monsters which gave the most XP and AP. As they started to get worn down and hungry Yuffie insisted they head to the Gold Saucer to spend the night.

"You haven't seen the inside of that, have you?" she asked Susan.

"I suppose we might as well make use of that 30,000 *Gil* lifetime pass," grumbled Barret.

"How much?" asked Susan.

"Yeah, don't get me started. We wandered around killing monsters a fair time when we first needed to get in there. We had most of the money, and a day pass was only 3,000 *Gil*. But some argued the lifetime pass was cheaper in the long run, so a slaughtering we went."

No wonder these guys seem so strong, they've probably seen more combat than anyone in the world! And for weird reasons, I think, too.

So they parked the Highwind near North Corel, left the crew to guard the ship, and rode the skyway up to the Saucer.

Susan had to admit, the approach was pretty impressive. There were Chocobo races going on, what looked like tiny toy birds running on a track far below them. Lights, fireworks, music, the outside of the place lit up as they glided into the landing bay, and the guy in the Chocobo costume greeted them happily as she stepped out.

"Come on," said Yuffie, pulling her arm. "Let me show you around!"

"Guess we'll meet you at the hotel," said Barret, obviously not liking this place at all. "Don't forget we're getting an early start tomorrow!" he yelled as the two jumped down a tube and slid to another area.

We are? News to me.

Susan and Yuffie checked out the whole place. They watched a short play, visited the arcade, and even took in a Chocobo race. They also rode the gondola, which was basically an aerial tour of the place and suddenly Yuffie leaned over and kissed Susan on the cheek. She looked at her oddly, wondering what that was about.

"I just felt like doing that," Yuffie admitted. "Like I was meant to kiss someone in here. Weird, huh?"

"Hey, I'm not complaining."

With all this going on, Susan rolled minimum on her *perception* check to notice the man watching her, and Sparkle had already retired, figuring she was pretty safe here. Both fell into bed far too late, exhausted and happy with all they had seen.

The next morning, Susan and Yuffie stumbled out of their room to find the others had left, leaving a note for them. Susan couldn't read it, but Yuffie said they were heading back to Mideel (what was left of it) because the creatures there seemed to give a bit better XP, and when they were awake to come join them.

"There's also a note from another man," said the weird doll thing at the counter. "Here you are."

Susan unsealed the envelope, and unfolded the paper inside.

Mysterious Girl,

We wish to apologize for our earlier treatment of you. Come to the food court outside the Wonder Square. There you will be met by a woman with a gift and an offer.

T.B.O.M.

"Could be a trap!" Yuffie cautioned.

"In public? I highly doubt it. Even if it is, I have a number one ninja on my side, don't I?"

"That's right! Let's go!"

So the two ordered... well, lunch, and sat down. Within a few minutes they were joined by a woman wearing casual clothes, and bearing a small, thin, box. She had long, dark hair, and glowing eyes reminiscent of Cloud.

"Ah, the Mysterious Girl, thank you for coming," she said.

"Wait a minute," said Yuffie, "I thought it was a *Brotherhood*."

"It was, in the beginning. What a shock it was for them, to find that women were just as capable as men in using *Materia*. Perhaps more so? I'm sure I don't need to tell you. But the name has remained. Does that satisfy? I do come bearing proof..." She shook the box a little.

"And you wish to apologize?" asked Susan.

“Yes. Some of our more reactionary members, reacted, when they heard someone was traveling the world asking about *Materia*. They did not consider who that person was or what their goals were. We have since learned differently.”

“And you found out you couldn’t easily beat me. Those three person fights are tough, you can’t really gang up on someone.”

“Usually our *Materia*, plus high levels and stats see us through the majority of encounters. You have to go far to find the highest AP generating creatures, of course. Weaklings don’t need to apply. But you sort of ignored all that, didn’t you?”

“I work a little differently, it’s true. I’m not exactly compatible with this world. Be thankful the other visitor you’re hosting, a being locally called *Janova*, is equally incompatible. Otherwise we might not be sitting here having this conversation.”

“Yes, that is part of why I’m here. We intercepted some interesting orders from the Shinra company about you and your group. Apparently, you’re to help put a plan into action to save our world from Sephiroth and Meteor?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Splendid! It would be hard to use *Materia* if the planet has blown up. With that in mind, allow us to... assist each other, towards that goal.”

“You want the *Huge Materia*,” said Yuffie. “Too bad, it’s ours!”

“Yuffie! Be nice.”

The woman laughed. “You have good instincts, young lady. Perhaps I should recommend you in a few years, when your lust for *Materia* for its own sake dies down a little. No matter.” She waved a hand in the air. “We wish access to the *Huge* variety, yes. I would not expect you to give them up without something equally valuable in return, and quite frankly I can’t think of anything I would trade for even one! So no, I am not here to try and convince you, as some would, that they would be best kept in our possession.”

“Good. Carry on.”

“As my note said, first, I wish to apologize for the attack. To that end, and as words alone are rather empty, I have been authorized to give you this.”

She slid the box over, and Susan opened the lid. If you thought anything but *Materia* would be inside, you haven’t really been paying attention. Susan briefly touched each one, getting a sense for them in that way people here seemed to have.

A Speed Plus. A Luck Plus. A Slash All, seemingly damaged? And a couple of generic ones, 2 Elemental, a Long Range, a Magic Counter, and an Added Effect.

“And all mastered, as far as I can tell. Except the Slash All, something seems off about that one.”

“That one is rather curious. It seems to be unwilling to accept more AP. We’ve studied it for many years, and it is more a curiosity than anything at this point. A true Slash All would seem to evolve into *Flash Materia* over time, allowing one to dash forward and lightly strike all foes. Any that were hit instantly die.”

“That would be tremendously powerful!”

“Indeed. And you can see why we would be hesitant to allow you that one, despite our desire for the... forgive me, for access to the *Huge Materia*.”

“I can also see why they’re all mastered. They have already fissioned once, and won’t again.”

“Correct. We are, after all, offering this apology to you, not you and anyone who might raise them.”

“Of course, most of these are pretty common,” said Yuffie, running her hand along them.

“You could always sell them,” she suggested, “if you did not wish to use them. Some will fetch a high price.”

“True. No magic ones.”

“We observed her not using Green *Materia* in our earlier encounter. We thought perhaps she did not wish to, or was prevented from doing so because she used that other kind of magic, from her book.”

“Close enough. I accept this as your apology.” She stuck the box into her sub-space pocket, as it was only a couple of inches across. “Now I suspect you’ll want to ‘get down to business’ as it were.”

“Indeed. But first, the properties of the *Huge Materia* are only theory. If I could test the theory with a selection of Green *Materia* against the green *Huge Materia* I will know if that theory is correct. Then we may begin to bargain from a position of knowledge.”

“I bet it’s a trick!” Yuffie hissed, pulling Susan to the side. “Don’t let her near the *Huge Materia*.”

“We have to know, Yuffie. This may all be for nothing if she tries it and nothing happens. Plus, do you have enough mastered *Materia* to test it yourself? The end battle with Sephiroth is coming, if you can get some good *Materia* out of this it’ll be a big help, right?”

“I... guess.”

“And aren’t you curious? I mean I have to see if this works!”

“Yeah, and it would take me years to get enough *Materia* to master level myself, you’re right. I suppose if I switched over exclusively to double growth weapon and armor... Fine, but we better do it someplace else.”

“I’m not just going to whip it out right here, you know.” She turned back to the lady. “Sorry about that. We’ll head to... Wutai. Would that satisfy you, Yuffie? She would be in your home turf.”

“Oh yeah, forgot you could do that. Fine.”

“Great. We’ll finish eating and be on our way.”

“I’m happy to wait,” said the lady, and she did, quite patiently.

Susan found a quiet place and opened a *Teleportal*. The woman stared into it. “I would make a separate deal, and give much, to know how you did that!”

“And I could detail it to the smallest degree, wouldn’t help you in the least. It’s magic from another world. No one here but myself would be able to use it. Come on.”

Another World? She mouthed, but stepped through after Susan.

“All right, that’s your house there,” she asked, pointing. “Right?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, I’ll grab the green one and meet you there in a minute.”

“You got it.”

The two started off, and Susan looked for a good place. She chose the bar across town, and slipped inside. Of course, she had gone *Invisible* on the way over

there, and the person behind the counter looked up as the door opened. She looked harder, but Susan closed it again and was still, so the minor distortion left by the magic wasn't too visible. The woman shrugged and bent back over whatever she was doing.

Susan headed to the bathroom, retrieved the *Huge Materia* with *Retrieval*, and walked back to Yuffie's house.

Set up on a table in the basement were a variety of *Materia*, and Susan was pretty sure they were all master level by the way Yuffie's hands kept twitching towards them.

"It's like showing a man dying of thirst a pail of water, and then dumping it into a flower garden," she remarked. "Let's do this before Yuffie forgets herself."

"She's passed the first test, anyway," said the woman mysteriously, with a small grin.

Susan set the *Huge Materia* in the middle of them all, and waited for something to happen. It started floating on its own, and the smaller ones rattled and shook, finally starting to orbit the large one. Everyone's gaze was transfixed on the sight as the marble like *Materia* swirled faster and faster around the large one, and suddenly there was a bright flash, blinding them all.

When they could see again, a single *Materia* floated there next to the *Huge* one, and the woman took it cautiously, as though it might be hot. Her eyes widened. "It did work. All those minor ones have been compacted into this one. See for yourself!"

She handed it over to Yuffie, who seemed surprised to be trusted with it, and took it gently. She nodded. "Every Green I know of, and a few I don't. What's *Contain*?"

"Some very powerful attack magic," she answered, taking the sphere back. "Actually, no. This is part of my offer." She handed it back. "We have been raising *Materia* a very long time. We have no shortage of master level orbs, generally going into making the 0 AP *Materia* for sale. To condense a fraction of them down... Our offer is this- Every fifth condensing we do is yours to keep, in each color. In other words the fifth Green, the fifth Red, and so on. We wouldn't do four Red then give you a Yellow, for example. Consider this one a fifth, so we could do four more, then you keep the fifth again. Same for the Yellow and Red. We will give you the first of those, then every fifth as normal."

"Every third," countered Yuffie. The woman shook her head.

"On this I am compelled to be inflexible. These must stay rare in the world. But I know you cannot trust us, especially after what happened to you. Taking every fifth will keep a balance of power, of sorts. We will also pay 500,000 *Gil* for each session, with no more than three, of each color, condensed each session."

"That seems reasonable, but I want something else as well. I want a *Materia* shop here in Wutai, run by my family, that can exclusively sell *Materia* that are above 0 AP. I mean it's bizarre that no shop can do that. Let people pay through the nose for something if they want to. We run the shop, we buy and sell whatever comes along. You don't get involved."

"I suppose, given the buying prices we offer for master level *Materia*, most would be unable to purchase higher rated pieces in any case. Very well, as long as you do not undercut our prices, that is acceptable."

"I'm happy then."

“Do you want them placed here?” Susan asked. “Is there a secure enough location?”

“The Pagoda!” she answered immediately. “Someone coming in there would have to fight off all five masters, and that includes my father. If I can get an advance on that first 500,000 we can put in a good security system too.”

“We can have the security system installed,” said the woman. “Just show me where it is and I’ll put in the call. Shouldn’t we clear this with your father first, though?”

“Eh, I already beat the snot out of him, Pagoda is sort of mine now anyway. But sure, let’s do that.”

Yuffie’s father seemed quite pleased with the idea of storing and controlling the *Huge Materia*, and said the masters would fight with their lives to protect them. (They’d be paid well enough, he said part of each 500,000 *Gil* would go to them as the “security force.”) The woman seemed to believe him, and said she would have a company out in the next several days to install the system. Naturally, she would allow him to program any codes, so there was no trickery involved. He agreed.

“I’ll go put the *Materia* back then,” said Susan, “and get them to you in a few days when the system is in place. Then you can start condensing.”

The woman wrote up a contract, everyone signed it, and got copies. Susan put the woman back through to the Gold Saucer, and took Yuffie up on her invitation to check out the figures carved into the mountain.

They also saw the eternal fires in the cave, which got put out by the *Leviathan Scale* they had in inventory, surprising them both. They picked up an Oritsuru for Yuffie and an Added Steal *Materia*, which she knew Vincent would be pleased with. With this he could light something four times, try and steal four times, and then attack once.

Yuffie climbed to the top of a statue and started jumping and shouting into the wind, which Susan thought might be a little dangerous. Finally she hopped off.

“This has been the best day ever. We’ve put Wutai on the map again, do you realize that? People will come from all over to buy and sell our *Materia*, and we’ll get condensed *Materia* for nothing. I mean look at this orb! So shiny! And I can cast every spell from this sucker!”

“I know,” Susan said laughing, “I was there.”

“Come on, the others must be worried, let’s head to Mideel. Wonder if I should tell them...”

But she couldn’t contain herself, blabbing about the deal she had made, and getting rich in the process.

“Of course it’s all thanks to Susan,” said Vincent. “If she hadn’t voiced her concern about were all the *Materia* were, none of this would have happened. We would never even have known about the Brotherhood.”

“True. And you’ve all been a big part of my life recently. Don’t worry, I won’t forget you when the condensing happens. You’ll get rich too! In fact...” She popped the condensed *Materia* off her weapon and quite reluctantly handed it over to Aerith. “Here. You use more magic than I do, you deserve this.”

“What?” roared Barret. “Susan, did you put Yuffie under some kinda spell? Is this a Yuffie look alike? Did we come back from space with a shape-shifting alien that took

her place? Or did she catch space madness? Did I catch space madness? Who are any of you people?"

Everyone laughed.

"I know, it's not like me, but I'll take the next one. I'm sure they'll be coming there regularly."

"Thank you, Yuffie," said Aerith seriously. "I know how hard that must have been for you."

"No you don't, flower lady. No you don't."

They smiled and hugged, causing everyone to go "aww" and break into smiles again.

In the days that followed Susan put another four points into *Ninjutsu* and raised her new *Skill Group* to a three, all using XP from various other skills she possessed. (And were now at a two rating instead) They had tangled with *Ultimate Weapon* several times, searching him out with the Highwind to pay him back for smashing up Mideel. And of course to prevent him from smashing up anything else.

“For creatures created by the planet to help us, they don’t seem to be really helping us all that much,” remarked Susan as their weapons and spells cut into him for the forth time. But finally he fell, dropping an interesting sword for Cloud and teaching Yuffie the Shadow Flare enemy technique.

Susan and Cloud both looked over the sword he had dropped. Susan was pretty sure outside this world she would never be able to lift it, but it had a curious property she wasn’t sure made any sense. According to what she felt when she held it, the attack power of the weapon rose with Cloud’s current HP level.

“Which seems backwards,” she said. “You would want the attack power of a sword to increase when you were *low* on HP, if anything. I mean your sword gets weaker as you do? That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I agree,” said Cloud. “If I’m in danger of dying, I don’t need my sword doing less damage to opponents, I need it to do more. And as I can’t switch out during combat, I think I’ll go with something else for bosses. Maybe I’ll have some kind of really cool sword made, that like splits into eight different blades and I can pull them out of the main blade when I need more than one. Then I could technically switch in combat, because it was all the same sword!”

“Uh, yeah, you... just go and do that.”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Cloud was staring off into space, imagining the *Limit Break* he could do with such a sword. He envisioned himself just floating in air, somehow dashing back and forth between blades. He wouldn’t even use *Materia* anymore, I mean that stuff was cheating, right? No, at the end of this battle with Sephiroth he would just take his *Materia*, lock it in a case and leave it where it could be easily stolen by any bum that wondered in off the-

“Cloud? You okay, buddy?” Susan was waving her hand in front of his eyes.

“Huh? What? Sorry, got lost in thought there. What were we talking about?”

They also checked out the *Ancient Forest* that got opened up when *Ultimate Weapon* got blown up, Susan’s magic of *Flight* and *Retrieval* serving them well, and negating the need to use frogs and such to progress and grab *Materia* that happened to be sitting next to odd, carnivorous plants for some bizarre reason.

I thought these things crystalized after Lifestream welled up out of the ground? I don’t see any cracks here, though I suppose they could be covered by the plant life.

The group spent much of the time getting XP, and with the cannon hooked up and ready to fire, Susan got the call to fulfill her end of the bargain with Rufus. Naturally

they saved before they headed over there, just in case something should go wrong.

They were met outside the gates of Midgar by Shinra soldiers, and escorted to the office building where Rufus was waiting.

“Now keep your temper in check,” Tifa said to Barret. “He’s proven that the new Shinra isn’t the same as the old Shinra. We need him to bring that barrier down, so don’t start anything.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Susan put on some of the *Materia* she had been given by the Brotherhood, though at least the *Speed Plus* worked differently for her. From what she understood, the speed attribute for these guys determined when they could act in combat, not their own physical speed. So her speed was now a 10, where naturally it was only a 7. So she walked a little more briskly, but that was it. Not that great a change on a world where combatants mainly just stood around waiting for their turn, but if she needed to run somewhere, it could help. Naturally the *Luck Plus* worked the same way, their luck seemed to determine when they got a “critical hit” and did double damage. She used it for a lot of things, like noticing stuff and not getting hit by projectiles. *Still, we’ll need all the LUCk we can get right about now.* To that end she still had on the *Amulet* which was raising her LUCk by 10, so that was currently her best stat. (At a sixteen, the *Luck Plus* worked on her normal LUCk of 4, raising it to a 6, then the *Amulet* raised it by 10. The other way around would be too cheesy, even for this Narrator.)

She kept *Sense* and *Mimic* from before, but skipped *Slash All* for the moment. *After all, I can’t directly hurt anything anyway, so doing 1/3 of nothing... to more combatants, is still useless.* She had on the *Minerva Band* they had picked up from the forest, protecting her from fire, ice, “gravity” and holy. *If I’m getting hit by a holy attack... from a monster... something is seriously wrong.* And of course she had the regular smattering of *HP Plus* and such, so she felt ready for anything.

“Welcome,” said Rufus, after a seventy floor elevator ride to the top of the Shinra building. “It seems today is the day!”

“So it seems,” said Susan. “And you’re sure this’ll work? I don’t want this thing blowing up the city below.”

“The theory is sound. Of course I’ve locked my greatest scientist, Hojo, in the cells a few levels below us for his part in all this. We’ll figure out his punishment later. But the others assure me the gun will fire and if Susan does her part of delivering the blast directly to the barrier, that should knock it down. If it fails we have no other options and our world is forfeit. By the way...” he paused. “Did you do something to that rocket? The explosion that resulted when it hit *Meteor* was a bit more intense than we had predicted. We were watching it through telescopes and everyone who was looknig at it was nearly blinded in that eye! They just wanted to know the cause.”

“Yeah, I gave it some Susan Special Sauce while I was up there. Hoped it would take the thing out, but Sephiroth just put it back together and kept moving it towards us.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you for the attempt. That information will ease their hearts greatly, they thought maybe the rocket fuel had changed over time or something. I trust the *Huge Materia* have been helpful to you in some way?”

"They're more a long term thing, but yes."

"Very good. Well, this is no social call, shall we go over the operation?"

"I see no reason why not."

The plan, as Rufus outlined it, was that the group would head in while Shinra soldiers secured the passageways behind them. This was in case Sephiroth tried to escape. He could at least be slowed down until the party caught up with him.

"And why can't you guys go in first?" complained Barret.

"My good man, reports place you doing nothing but raising your levels for at least an entire week. What level are you now, 60? 70? My soldiers are nowhere near that good, plus I'm sure in your travels you've found some special equipment we wouldn't have access to. That reminds me." He called down to someone, and they brought up some weapons, dumping them on the table.

"Does any of this interest you? My weapons people called this one Missing Score, and I believe it would fit your prosthesis well, Barret. And for Vincent, the Death Penalty. I think you will find it to your-" He stopped as Aerith reached for a gun as well.

"What's this one?" she asked.

"Uh, that is the Outsider. Aerith, are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable with a staff? We might be able to find a good one around here somewhere. I assumed you would be more in a support role, not looking to directly attack."

"All things change," she said sadly, looking it over. "This one will be fine. The attack isn't quite as high as the Supershot ST, but it has two more slots and the magic raising is almost as good. I'll try it out and see which I like better."

"Oh, um, of course. You're welcome to it, of course."

Yuffie took a weird circular weapon called the Conformer, and Cait Sith got the HP Shout (another weapon that raised attack with current HP, so odd).

"Now, do you want to head there and then have us fire the cannon?"

"We think we'll just stick around here, just in case," said Barret, affixing his new gun and transferring the *Materia* over to it. "Then we can all go over together."

"Very well, I know you don't trust me so that's fine. We have troop transports ready to go once the barrier is down. Actually it may be safer here, who knows what kind of energy discharge will occur when the barrier drops."

"What's to stop him putting it up again?" asked Cid.

"Ah, good point. We will have to hope he is too focused on *Meteor* at the moment. If you like, consider this a test run. We can always fire again, and be closer to the target the second time. It would take him time to generate a new barrier. We can slip in before that."

"Fire again? Doesn't that thing use Mako? You're still killing the planet!"

"To save it!" counted Rufus. "Some sacrifice will have to be made, before we can start fixing things."

Barret started to retort, but Susan held up a hand.

"Why not just save before we fire?" asked Susan. "We'll have worked everything out before that and be in position. If it doesn't work we'll just try something else."

"An excellent idea. You're heading back outside Midgar anyway, before we begin the power up sequence, you can save one final time. If something happens, go back

and we'll abort the shot until we know what went wrong."

"Sounds good to me," said Cid.

So the others went back to the Highwind to wait, and Sparkle put *Flight* and *Acceleration* on Susan. She headed out the window to the end of the gun barrel, listening to the small radio transmitter Rufus had given her.

"Output at 70%, rising steadily!" she heard.

Okay, showtime.

She made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a 13, which wasn't bad. She then channeled that energy into her *Mercury* check along with her normal 10, so her rating in *Mercury* was 28. That allowed her to open a pretty big *Teleportal*, which she fitted over the end of the gun. The other side was open to the barrier, (not too close in case of backlash) which she had gone to see before they made their way to Midgar.

"80%"

Energy started to glow around the end of the barrel, and Susan, now safely flying out of range (straight up) couldn't resist making a power up noise in the back of her throat. "KAME!"

"90%"

"HAME!"

"100% Firing!"

"HA!"

The cannon blasted backwards with recoil, and a tremendous surge of energy shot from the barrel. She was in a position to see through the *Teleportal* and it struck the barrier with an unheard of force.

The barrier went down.

She was dancing in mid-air when she noticed (*thank you higher LUCK*) something coming out of the sea near Midgar.

Another Weapon! It must have sensed our use of Mako and come to put a stop to it. Crap!

The monster unleashed a blast of energy towards Midgar and Susan helplessly watched as it slammed into the city, destroying a portion of it, and the tower she had just been in.

"Go back! Go back!" she shouted. "We'll need to evacuate the city before we fire! Go-"

Sparkle put *Flight* and *Acceleration* on Susan. She was about to head out the window when the radio Rufus gave her crackled to life.

"Abort the firing, I repeat abort the firing!"

"What?" exclaimed Rufus, going over to his radio. "What happened?"

"*Weapon* is in the area," explained Barret. "When we turn that cannon on it'll come up out of the ocean and blast the city."

"Can you hold it off? Or even take it out?"

"Before it attacks? Maybe. We took out another one, but that was after chasing it down several times. I think you better just evacuate the city before we start this."

"I hate to lose the city, isn't there anything we can do?"

"Actually, maybe there is," said Susan, getting out her book of magic. "Give me a few minutes."

She read over the spell of *Bolstered Barricade*, which made huge walls appear within range. These walls were not made of any one substance, like stone or metal, but had a DTR equal to Sun, which Susan would of course have above a ten for the casting. She could get a bunch of them, and if cast at the right time... it could work. She made her regular checks, DIF fifteen and got a seventeen and a twelve. She spent an XP to reroll, as that was pretty low, and got an eighteen that time. *Much better.*

Given it was a grade ten spell she created a *Spell Paper* with it, so she didn't have to waste time trying to cast it in the field with energy bolts sizzling towards her.

That done, the party saved again, and repeated the steps from before. As they knew the *Weapon* was going to appear, they were standing right there and got it into a combat after the cannon fired. This only slowed it down, as after doing some damage to it the *Weapon* left the combat and turned towards the city again. It fired, and Susan let the spell go, creating twelve walls. Two deep, two high, three across. The attack blew the first ones away but the second one stopped it. *Man, that attack was OTR 10. No other way to bring those walls down apart from that.*

With the city safe, and *Weapon* seeming to hesitate because it couldn't figure out where those huge walls had just come from, they reengaged it and took it out. *Well, Shinra will have a lot of work ahead of them, figuring out just what that creature was and how it did what it did. Or at least just to get rid of the body. That thing is huge!*

That done, Susan made her way back to the Highwind and the group flew towards the crater, ready to descend and save their world. Several Shinra troop transport planes followed.

The first part of the approach was an unstable area, with only a series of highly spaced apart rocks to stand on. Susan put *Flight* on those, like herself, that couldn't make the jumps or didn't want to make the attempt. Having gotten past those, they came to a narrow series of broken down passageways where breaks in the floor were the only way down. The random encounters were thick here, somehow fitting dragons, gargoyles and weird flying things into the passageways. The group descended for some time, finally coming to a more open area that went left and right.

"Which way do we go?" asked Barret.

"You have to ask?" asked Cloud. "We take all roads here. Who knows what sort of creatures, treasure, and XP we can get down here? We'll need every scrap in our final battle."

"You want us to split up?"

"What? No. That would be the worst thing we could do. We stick together and see this through to the end."

"Should have known. Left or right first?"

"Right. Come on."

They followed a spiral path down a large column of rock, and then over top of what looked like the skeletal remains of some giant creature.

“Glad we didn’t run into this guy when it was alive,” remarked Yuffie, looking it over.

This path netted them nice armor and opened up to an area the group was sure the other paths also led to.

“Down or back up?” asked Barret.

“Like I said, we leave no stone unturned in this place.”

The group went back up, finding that the path split again, but probably looped around so they took the left one at random. Here they found some weird plant life, and some actual water they had to wade through to get to the other side. It was quite pretty, Susan thought, and netted them a *Counter* and *W-Magic Materia*. The *W-Magic* apparently allowed two spells to be cast at once, and giving that to Vincent meant he could cast *Lightning* eight times rather than just once every turn. *Counter* was another one Susan was pretty sure would only work on this world- it allowed you to counter attack after being hit.

“Rather late to be useful,” remarked Yuffie, handing it back to Cloud, who put it onto his armor. He was using double growth armor, but his zero growth sword to try it out.

And then they ran into the Magic Pots.

They didn’t seem to fight back, but neither did they take any damage no matter what the group did to them. All they did was cry for *Elixir*, a healing item the group didn’t have many of.

“Oh, just give them one so they shut up about it!” said Vincent, currently in the lead team with Yuffie, Cloud, and Susan. Susan threw one and Yuffie threw one on her turn, then they waited.

Nothing seemed to happen.

“Great, now what?” asked Cloud.

“I’m going to try lighting again!” decided Vincent.

“You’ve already hit them like sixteen tim- you know what, go for it.”

This time they took damage, and were destroyed. As the battle ended, Yuffie gave a yelp of surprise.

“Did you see how much AP they just gave us? A thousand! That’s two thousand AP for my double growth armor! How many *Elixir* do we have?”

“Only a few, and we can’t stay here too long. Tell you what, I’ve got that triple growth sword, and Susan can transfer AP, everyone put on double growth stuff and we’ll see if we can’t raise the really important ones, maybe get a second *Counter* or something.”

They spent an hour, by Susan’s watch, wandering around and looking for Movers. Magic pots were nice, but the Mover enemies, of which there were always three, gave far more AP than even the pots. They looked like rubber balls that kind of

bounced around, and as long as you killed one, they couldn't do their triangle attack thing and were generally harmless. The best part- they didn't need *Elixir* thrown at them to be damaged.

Susan had traded her mastered *Materia* for others, and the group was in good shape when they ran out of *Elixir*.

"I won't do it now, unless you want another *Mimic*," she said, "but after this is over, I'll transfer AP to this *Mimic*, get it to fission, so I can take the mastered one. I'll need my energy for further down, or more important ones to you if you think you can make them fission right now."

The three looked at each other. "I don't know, we're doing close to 9999 damage as it is. We're getting sixteen lightings every round with you *Mimicking* Vincent, how much more damage do we need to do per round?"

"Well, whatever you want."

"No, we'll each stick to what we're doing. This is working well so far. I mean we have an extra party member, so we're already ahead of the game. And we could always come back here with more *Elixir*, once we've defeated Sephiroth."

"I know I am," remarked Yuffie. "Okay, lead on."

They then went through a series of rocky ledges, beside a *Lifestream* fall, which Susan found to be quite pretty. Especially because of the contrast it provided the dark stone in this area.

That finally led back to the area they had entered from, leading further down into the planet. Looking down it was just a weird, greenish glow and a bunch of rocks that seemed to be suspended on nothing. Cloud used the *Save Crystal* they had picked up in the first treasure chest near the entrance, and the group saved.

"At least now we know how the things are made," said Cloud. "I always did wonder."

"Yeah, me too. I just hope that wasn't the last one in existence!" said Aerith.

The group chuckled, then got serious again.

"Everyone, last chance to check your equipment, *Materia* and items," said Cloud. "It's been an honor to know you all, and I want to thank you for coming with me on this journey. I know I've done some dumb things, and even turned against you a time or two, thanks to the Jenova inside me. But now it ends. We'll battle Sephiroth and make sure our planet stays safe!"

They all nodded, equipped the best armor and weapons they could, distributed the *Materia* they had so it was all used up and each group people wanted to be in had at least one *Summon*, a cure, some kind of barrier magic, *Haste*, the works.

With that, they jumped into the pit and the final battle began.

This Isn't Even my Final Form

Time: Several Minutes Later

Place: The Heart of the Lifestream

The journey down was short by tiring. With each suspended stone platform the group leapt upon, it seemed they had a chance to fight a really tough enemy. But even the piece of *Jenova* they found at the bottom was hardly a challenge, and they slaughtered it without any trouble.

"Come on, Sephiroth, or the Darkness, or whatever it is you call yourself!" Cloud yelled, waving his sword about. "End this!"

"Very well," said a voice, and the form of Sephiroth appeared before the group. "If you wish to foolishly combat me, I will allow it. Hello again, Susan."

"Good afternoon, Darkness. I won't make the same mistake as before, by the way. I'll make sure I'm in combat with you before I do anything. And I have to wonder if my father's skills can protect you against *Materia*?"

"Oh, can you use *Materia* now? How did you get MP? Never mind. My *Meteor* approaches the planet, and soon I shall absorb all the energy of this world. I won't even have to lift a finger to rid myself of the other Paragon thorn in my side. What a delight."

"Enough talk," growled Cloud. "Attack!"

The world changed.

When the battle began, Sephiroth was changed. He was no longer even remotely human looking, standing at least four times as tall as they did, with his lower half hidden behind some kind of draping. His arms were massive and ended in a kind of reverse wing, with the "feathers" on the inside rather than the outside. He had horns, and a funny person on his head, which quite frankly looked a little ridiculous.

"What did you do to yourself?" Susan asked, waiting her turn. "Do you have person growing out of your head now? How does that work?"

"Being here has changed me, true. Don't despair, little ones, your pain will be over soon."

"Oh please," said Susan, "We've beaten bigger things than you. That doesn't even mean anything in this world. Slice him up, would you Cloud?"

"With pleasure!"

The combat was fierce, with each person standing motionless until it was their turn to attack. And attack they did, with blade or Lightning, in the case of Vincent. The first form fell, and Susan thought it was over.

But no!

Even as he vanished after being defeated, he morphed and changed, becoming a second form! His legs become six wings, and his right arm became a wing, and it seemed he had a sort of halo sticking out the back of him.

What, does he think he's some kind of one winged angel? Hey, that would make a great song title. Well, seven winged angel, I guess. But he's no holy creation, that

much is clear.

“Oh, come on! Come down here and fight me like a man!” shouted Cloud, as the bizarre creature hovered over the battlefield.

“Perhaps one day, but not today,” said Sephiroth, looking down upon the group with contempt.

He cast *Shadow Flare*, doing 6280 HP damage to Cloud, who went down on one knee.

“That all you got?” he gasped, limit bar filling. He then counter attacked twice, and Vincent blasted him with Lighting again and again. Susan hastily *Mimicked* it, hitting him with Bolt 3 sixteen times total.

“You shouldn’t be able to do that,” Sephiroth complained.

“Take it up with my union rep.”

Yuffie summoned Neo Bahamut to smack him around, and Cloud healed himself.

“Easily enough countered,” he said, putting up *Reflect*.

“Crap, I’ll get it down on my next turn!” said Yuffie.

Cloud slashed into him, doing his maximum damage, and rather than wait Vincent simply shot him.

“Take this!” he said, swinging down upon Susan with his weird right... wing. It did eleven damage to her.

“What?”

“Don’t know everything, do you?”

“You’re only half compatible with this reality! I see how it is. That’s why you aren’t using your magic, you can’t hurt me either!”

“Okay, maybe you do know everything. But they can! And they will.”

“Clever girl. Very well, we’ll see what happens on my next action.”

Yuffie got the *Reflect* down with *DeSpell*, and Vincent got his Bolt 3 combo going again. Susan matched it.

“Now you’ll see!” said Sephiroth, concentrating. Susan felt power coming from him, but nothing happened.

“Uh?”

“Wait for it!”

“Okay?” They waited. Seconds ticked by, then nearly a minute.

“So...”

“Wait for it!!”

“Right.”

They waited another thirty seconds. “Ah, there it is. *Super Nova!*”

Somehow the sun exploded, but they were still all fine in the end, but badly wounded. The group was down to less than a thousand HP apiece, while Susan took thirty four damage.

“That was a 4d10 attack at least!” complained Sephiroth. “How much HP do you actually have? Are you using *HP Plus* or something?”

“Why not use *Sense* and find out?”

"You think I'm carrying something that useless around?"

"Would answer your question."

"Uh, banter later?" asked Cloud, waiting for his turn.

"Oh, sorry. Go ahead."

"Thank you. Limit Break! Meteorain!"

"No!!!!" shouted Sephiroth, light bursting through his body as the rocks cleared. He began to break up, pieces of himself falling away. "I'll return one day, just you wait!" he managed, as explosions of light around his body took him.

And then he was gone.

The group waited to see if they would have to fight another form, but nothing else happened.

"Let's get out of here and take care of *Meteor*," said Susan, casting *Teleportal* back to the surface.

Once there, Sparkle put *Energetic Accumulation* on her and she looked up. The pieces of *Meteor*, now once again fused into a solid mass, were close enough to see now. She contemptuously cast the grade 2 spell of *Thrust* with all the energy she could muster. Her magic swirled around the rock and she turned away from it. "That's it, folks. We won."

"Uh, it hasn't really moved?" asked Cid.

"Give it a few days. Remember, it took a week and a half to get this close. You expect it'll just zoom away? 60 meters per second is pretty fast, but it's peanuts to space. Don't worry, it's moving in the other direction now. I'll hang here a few days, take you back to that cavern with the Magic Pots if you want, just to be sure. But that's it. We won."

The group made their way to the Highwind, then radioed Rufus that the job was done.

"Glad to hear it," he said over the noise of crashing in the background. "This area just got pretty unstable so we're pulling out. Meet back up at Midgar later and we can talk about our next moves."

"So we really won?" asked Aerith, still looking up at the *Meteor* as if she could see any change at this distance with the naked eye.

"We really did," replied Susan. "Your world is safe. As soon as I leave, the group that sent me here locks it off from The Darkness, and it can never return."

"So all we have to deal with is the Shinra corporation," said Barret. "Keeping them in line is going to be a pleasure."

"Unless you guys get turned into wanted criminals again," said Yuffie, kicking at the dirt.

"He wouldn't dare! Plus, you're a part of our little group, missy!"

"Eh, the Brotherhood would protect me. Without me, there's no access to the *Huge Materia*. So I'm untouchable."

"You hope."

"Come on," said Susan with a laugh. "Let's go to Costa Del Sol and celebrate!"

The people at the resort town didn't quite understand why these weirdoes were celebrating, but they didn't know what Susan and the rest did. They partied and lay out on the beach, and Aerith kept looking over at *Meteor*.

"You think it's a little smaller?"

"Stop worrying! He's gone, forever. You guys beat him with your own strength. I didn't even do much to help, on this world. This crazy, mixed up world. I'll miss it, and all of you."

"We'll miss you too, and your crazy, mixed up magic!" said Yuffie.

"Oh, it's crazy and mixed up, huh? And here I was, going to leave you an item you could use to open *Teleportals* like I do, so you could go anywhere. Like down to see the Magic Pots whenever you wanted to raise *Materia* without having to slog through the cave every time. But if it's too crazy I suppose you don't want—"

Yuffie jumped up and kissed her properly this time, cutting off her little speech. She looked into Susan's eyes as they broke it off.

"Let me guess, you just felt like doing that?" she asked with a grin.

"I just couldn't think of another way to shut you up."

"I guess that's an acceptable way..."

So Susan hung out there for a little while. She transferred the *Huge Materia* to the new vault at the top of the pagoda in Wutai, and made an *Imbued* item for Yuffie to open *Teleportals*. It had to be permanent, due to them not having energy, but it worked just fine. She had the book analyze *Alexander* and figure out *holy* damage in case she ever needed it. And of course she transferred AP between *Materia* and made another *Mimic* for them, and Yuffie said she would probably start making more of them to sell pretty soon. As there was only the one she would have to sell the mastered one, leaving the fissioned one to level and sell. But it was probably worth it, given the rarity and effort of making them.

Susan transferred all of the *Materia* she was taking out of this world to her sub-space pocket so she could take it with her, but left the swords and armors in her *Pocket Dimension*. She was confident they would go though, as they were just regular stuff. She didn't know how *Magic Counter* or *Added Effect* would work, but the group had some of them so she kept them both.

Finally it came time for her to leave. Shinra scientists had confirmed that *Meteor* was moving off, not that any of them had an explanation for why. But news reports went out, and Shinra stock soared higher than ever, and Rufus promised them all a new beginning for the company.

"Perhaps even some electricity generating techniques I totally thought of myself, using fire or lighting *Materia*?"

"You rat!" she said to Cait Sith.

"Sorry, I'm a bureaucrat. Reports are what I do, and I'm very good at my job. So that got in there too! If you want to stay around and sue me, well, Shinra already patented the technique so good luck winning in court."

"Barret?"

"Yeah?"

“Kill.”

“You got it.”

“This body is just a toy!!!!!!”

And so, Susan was standing before the group, in the place it all started. She didn't think she had to be here, but it felt right, leaving from the ancient city she had saved Aerith in.

“Thank you for healing me, and helping me find myself,” said Cloud, shaking her hand. “That voice that was inside me seems to be gone, so my will is my own again.”

“Of course. Now I just have to find myself and we'll be even.”

“Keep working on that swordsmanship, and one day you might almost be somewhat near to half as good as I was a year ago.” They both laughed. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye,” said Aerith, hugging her. “I really hated you the first time we met. I didn't understand, and I'm still not sure I do. But I'm going to use the life you left me well. I may be the only Cetra but that doesn't mean I have to be the last. I'll have tons of kids, and maybe someday lots of people will be able to hear the planet!”

“I hope so, Aerith. I think if more people could, this never would have happened.”

“I hope you find your friend, and your father.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

“Bye.”

“I'm starting up the space program again!” said Cid, coming up next. “The Ancients came from space, so there must be a way to cross that distance. We know the rockets work, and soon we might even put things in orbit to watch the planet and bounce signals around. *Materia* won't work away from the planet, so it'll just be pure science once we get out there. I'm sure we can make it work though. I'd like to see some of the other planets the Cetra have visited.” He gave a laugh. “Maybe one day our race will be called Ancients, because we'll have visited other worlds and left seeds there.”

“You have the drive, so you're halfway there, Cid. I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” said Barret simply. “AVALANCH won't be the same without you.”

Susan nodded. “I'm glad your daughter lived through it all. Your work is done, go be the best dad you can be.”

“I will.” He looked away. “If my daughter is half the woman you are, I think I'll have done well. See you.”

“Here,” said Cait Sith, handing Susan a stuffed toy. It was a tiny replica of his robot body. “Don't forget us, okay?”

“I won't. Hope you get promoted and keep Rufus in line.”

“I will. He's already asking me various things, so I'm sure the future is a bright one.”

“Good. Bye!”

"I think some of my sins have been lifted," said Vincent, also shaking her hand. "It was good, traveling with you. You see things differently, and you've been to other worlds. Like me, you have a monster inside you have to temper, and I think in the end, it'll make you stronger. Remember our fight, when you confront the Darkness once and for all. Even if you stand alone, you're in our thoughts."

"As you will be mine. Thanks for your lightning. I'm going to miss mimicking it."

"Here, I know you can't use it, but at least keep one as a memento. I've got plenty of them now." He handed her a lightning *Materia*.

Susan grinned, shoving it into the pocket. "I will."

"Good journey."

"I've been inside you, but I really don't know you," said Tifa. "We found Cloud together, and for that I'll always be grateful. Without you he may yet have been trapped in his own mind to this day. I don't know what your magic is, but it works. I believe in it, and you. There is no doubt in my mind you will find your friend and rescue your father. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Tifa. When I do I'll tell them both all about my adventure here, and about all of you."

"It was an adventure, wasn't it. Stay well."

"You too."

"I feel there's much I could have learned from you," said Nanaki, padding over. "I know I mostly kept to myself, just watching the interactions of the group. I think I still have a lot to learn about people, and life. I'm only 48 you know. Maybe you can come back someday, see what this world has become? I'll be alive a long time, so I'll be keeping an eye out for you. You say time doesn't run the same between worlds, but don't hesitate to come back. Even if it's just me, this world will welcome you back."

"Thanks, Na."

And finally Yuffie stepped up. "I'm really going to miss you," she said, hugging Susan and crying.

"I'll miss you too, you crazy ninja. Thanks for the training, I'll keep my skills up."

"Traveling worlds like you do, I should think so! Here." She handed Susan her 4-Point Shuriken. "This is what my master gave me when I graduated. You haven't graduated, but maybe it'll come in handy sometime."

"Thanks. I'll keep it sharp. Maybe read over that spell to manipulate metal and add some more *Materia* slots, and think of you."

"I'd like that. Now get out of here."

"Goodbye, everyone."

"Goodbye!"

Susan found it a little hard to focus on the watch, her eyes were wet, but she opened the gateway back to the Hub and stepped through, turning one last time before

it closed. Her new friends were waving and smiling, even those with tears in their eyes, and with a pop, the wall was blank, and she knew she didn't have HP anymore, but her standard Health Level.

"You did good," said a voice behind her, and she whirled to see Silverstreak standing there.

"Is this how my father felt, leaving my mother and me?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know your father's mind, Susan. But I'm sure he loved your world and you as much as you came to love that one. (I mean I take it you did, given your current emotional state) But come, chin up! You saved a world, and Darkvoid is forever denied it. I'll guarantee you that. Their lives will go on, and maybe even be a little better for knowing you. Don't you think?"

"It wasn't all one way," she said, gripping the weapon tightly.

"Nor should it be. If you learned a thing or two there, it was time well spent. Now, would you like to be alone awhile? I can offer you a room."

Susan looked at Sparkle, and considered.

"No, we have work to do. Best to get to it. Their adventure is over, but mine has yet to actually even begin."

And so Susan looked over her *Character Sheet* and Silverstreak showed her to a lab where other magic users were working. She had 50 new XP to work with, and Sparkle had 30. They explained the procedure of *Imbuing* that would be needed to make her *Materia* work outside the world she had just left. She had spilled out of her sub-space pocket and *Pocket Dimension* all the things she had brought from the previous world.

"Basically," explained one, "you have to do the full *Imbuing*, but as if the item was a charged item that had run out of charges. Have you ever done a charged item?"

Susan shook her head. "No point. Given the cost, time, and money put into it, energy or permanent is the way to go. I mean try and keep track of the times you're going to use an item. I've used my *Legion* a bunch, I don't even know how many times. Miscalculate and it'll let you down, just when you're expecting it to be there for you. And something like *Armor of Magic* I would really want going all the time."

"Yes. I think that way of *Imbuing* was just so shopkeepers could sell items with a limited number of charges."

Great, another shopkeeper conspiracy. Why not just sell Spell Papers, with Spell Symbol put on them. Faster, no XP or monetary cost...

"Anyway, it boils down to this; if you want the effect permanently, like your *Speed Plus* here, that'll be 12 XP. If you want to activate with energy, like *Sense*, that would be 6 XP. Any new ones you want to make, say a fire one to use with that Elemental... it'll be the normal cost. Though, now that I think about it, you could create one with just one charge... and never use the charge. Think it over."

Susan opened her mouth to ask if they would link, but she was anticipated.

"Yes, they will link, so if you hit someone with an Elemental link weapon with a poison spell it'll poison them by touch. No wait, that's Added Effect, sorry. You get the idea."

"I get the idea. Wait a second, if I had *Sense* on all the time, I could instantly

know just by looking at someone how much health they had, and if they were weak to something?”

“Well, yes. For most things. *Sense* didn’t work on all creatures, did it?”

Susan sighed. “No, like the Weapons and bosses, and some regular enemies too. Okay. But what about the *Imbuing*? I would need a similar spell to *Imbue* into the object, right?”

The man nodded. “You may have to let your book analyze the *Materia*, it will have enough of that world’s energy about it to do that much. Some, like *Speed Plus* is just like *Augment Speed*.”

“I saw that one, it’s one of the new spells you guys put in, right?”

“That’s right. You’re familiar with *Augment Stat*, so that’s no trouble. *Long Range* would be a modified *Weapon Technique* spell, probably grade 2 because *Technique* is only grade four, and does more. *Magic Counter*, *Elemental*, those you would have to also have the book look into.”

“That’s fine. What about Slash All? I don’t relish doing 1/3 damage, even if now I’m back to normal amounts of health for people. But what’s the range on it? In the last world they dealt with small groups of enemies. If I was facing an army could I slash them all from a mountaintop?”

“You would have to see what the spell was, and it would probably be pretty high grade. It would be a better *Weapon Technique* spell, able to hit multiple targets. Can I see your book? Thank you. The range is M, and it says you can attack within M range. It would probably be the same for *Advanced Weapon Technique* or whatever the spell was called.”

“I guess. Do I take Long Range, so I can hit one person from far away, or Slash All so I can hit multiples?”

“If you were just facing one person, your magic could take them out more easily no?”

“Well, all of this is in preparation for worlds without magic, or without planets to draw from, like the first world I went to.”

“Ah. Well, one-on-one, your opponent will close on you anyway, so you would probably only get one shot to use it.”

“True, very true. I’ll think about it.”

“No rush!”

“Now, onto this other stuff. I notice my *Amulet* isn’t as nice now.”

He chuckled. “Yes, you may have noticed the extreme stats those people had. It looks like this is the only thing you brought back with a stat change? Basically anything like this, divide by 5. So you get a plus two while wearing it, that’s not so bad, right?”

“All things considered, no.”

“Now, the Crystal Sword is quite interesting, it’s actually OTR 8 having been brought here. The Enhance Sword is basically just a regular broadsword, so it’s OTR 5. You’ll have to decide which is better, given the *Materia* situation you want to use.”

“I think I’ll be able to put them all in the Wizard Bracelet anyway, so it won’t matter.”

“True. Now, about that. In the other world they had a *Magic Defense* stat. You’ll find this actually works similarly. It will shave a few points off if you get hit with a spell. Or make it a little easier to shake off. So keep that in mind. You can’t wear both the

Minerva Band and the Bracelet, by the way. You might think you could, one on each arm, but only the last one you put on will work. Sorry about that, but they'll interfere with each other."

"Oh well, can't have everything right?"

"You can only try. So, give some thought to how you want to spend your XP, and feel free to use the lab as much as you want. There's a map app on your watch, details the whole place, you'll find it. You can also just ask it to take you to your room and it'll do that space bending thing where you walk through a door to another room entirely. When you're here it's connected to the local network, and the local computer power. So it can control a lot of stuff while it's here. Just let someone know when you're ready to start looking for Luna. We have several promising candidate worlds based on where you said you came from and where you were going, so maybe you'll get lucky and find her in the first ten or so."

Susan paled. *Ten... or so? And that would be "lucky?"* "Yeah, I guess you're right. Thanks for everything!"

"Of course. Thank you for beating back Darkvoid. We all appreciate it. Saves us some work." He winked.

"Eh, I just pointed the way, the others did most of the work."

"You did the most important thing, way I hear it. Sent a big chunk of rock away before it could impact the planet. That's pretty important."

"Yeah, I suppose it was."

"See you!"

So Susan got to work. She decided having the extra senses would be nice, so that was going to be made permanent. She had already asked the Mimic be analyzed, she knew that was a grade 7 spell. That could be really handy, and 7 energy every time? She would pay the extra 6 for that one. She didn't need extra speed or being able to attack from a distance until she was in combat, and it was only 4 energy for the pair. The extra LUCk she could use all the time.

She got to work on the Mimic one while the book worked on Sense, having put a massive amount of energy into *Augment Skill: Imbuing*. Even with that, it took her some time to get all her XP spent, which she did. In the end she popped

Sense (Permanent)

Mimic (Permanent)

Slash All (Energy)

Speed Plus (Energy)

Luck Plus (Permanent)

into her *Wizard Bracelet*.

Man, 60 XP wiped out just like that. But I think it'll be worth it. With Mimic and my Adaptive skill, if I ever get to use it, I should be ready for worlds without all the planets. Or at least combats I don't have to throw energy around left and right to get through. And my LUCk is now a 9, can you believe that? A plus two thanks to the amulet I got, and now another fifty percent raise from the Materia. That'll be nice, not that I make that

many LUCk checks, come to think of it...

Sparkle put her points into the skills she wanted to raise, and learned a new spell or two on top of that.

Finally, Susan told someone at the Hub (and she had been getting to know the beings there, as she had been eating with them and such, they were all very nice) she was ready to go. They handed her a list of coordinates to punch into the machine and some notes on what to expect on each world. (They also showed her how to use the machine, duh)

The first one on the list had the following notes:

“Wait where you find yourself, someone will be along. Somewhat similar magic to your own, but with a twist. Not Paragons. Ask her middle name. Girl’s mother may soon die of cancer, leave an *Alleviation* spell with her.”

Huh. Okay, so they do similar magic to me, but don’t have character sheets? Guess that means it’s more like my world, but without wanded magic. That will be very nice, meeting some other people without that weakness. May as well see rather than speculate.

“You ready, Sparkle?”

“Ready!”

“Cross your fingers, Luna please be here!”

The two stepped through the light.

Your Magic is What?

Time: About an hour later

Place: ???

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know, I know. It's just the last world I swooped in, whoosh, saved someone right off the bat. This place... I hear shouting and see smoke but I'm supposed to wait here until someone comes?" She had, originally when she had arrived, decided to

ignore those orders to wait and started down the hill. Her “watch” had buzzed and vibrated somewhat angrily, and a message popped up on the face. “Wait,” it reminded her. So that plan was out. “What if people down that hill there need my help?”

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

“I guess I should get in the habit of doing that. Low key. Loki. Odd language thing there, Loki is anything but low key. Or is he, didn’t he usually do things by stealth?” Sparkle looked at her, tilting her head. “What? No, I don’t, you know that. I mean I’m trying to not be too much of a show off but how can I help it? When I can do things others can’t, it’s hard. Maybe if magic here is similar mine won’t be so out of place, and it won’t matter.”

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

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

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

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

“Silverstreak must know what he’s doing.”

“I expect- Hello?”

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

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

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

“I’m Nita, Nita Callahan. I’m on errantry, and I greet you.” They shook hands.

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

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

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

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

“Another talking cat! So you’re a wizard too?”

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

“But who are you? How did you get here?”

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

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

“Why did you come, then?”

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

“Back? I’m not sure I follow.”

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

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

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

“Naturally,” the kitten answered.

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

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

Dimension Step?

"This is going to take a while."

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

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

"Yeah, it's 1993. Why?"

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

"A what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Grade what?"

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

"Slow down, the Darkness? Worlds under attack? And who is him? My head is still spinning from seeing that weird version of Earth a second ago."

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

"What can? You aren't making much sense."

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

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

“No.”

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

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

“Want to trade?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Magic is speech. At the most basic, a spell is describing how you want the world to be, and it becomes that. Everything understands the *Speech* because the Powers That Be, those that made the world, used the *Speech* to speak everything into existence. We can use it to talk to animals, to cars, everything. Defining something

changes it. So if we want our pencil to be sharper, we describe it as being sharper. That's a spell. This," she hefted her book, "is the wizard manual. Every wizard has something like it, though wizards of the ocean, like dolphins, get their knowledge directly from the sea."

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

"The information in it changes based on our needs at the moment. Like back home, in the US, that section is expanded and the Ireland section is tiny. Now that I'm here that's reversed. Plus it lists all the wizards nearby so if I need help I can go ask them. It can do maps, help me figure out spells, all kinds of things."

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

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

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

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

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

"Compelled?"

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

"I hate my middle name!"

"Who doesn't? So what it is. Come on, you can tell me!"

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

"I won't, I promise."

She hesitated as Susan made puppy eyes at her. "Okay, okay. It's Louise."

Susan and Sparkle both looked at each other, stunned.

"Is it... possible?" asked Susan.

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

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

"Ah, you hate it anyway," replied Susan. "Don't worry about it."

"Come on!"

"Nope! Ask me later, maybe if you're really nice I'll tell you before I leave."

"Come ON!"

Settling in

Time: An hour and a half later

Place: Library

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see.”

There was a moment of silence.

“So you've not been here long?”

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

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

“How do you figure?”

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

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

“Don't look like a foreigner in the first place. Of course the language thing-”

Susan paid more attention to where Nita was looking. "There's someone right behind me, isn't there?" *Really should pay more attention to my Spirit Sense skill, an attack could come at any time after all.*

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

Thanks?

"Yes. Can we help you?"

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

The kids were wearing a lot of black, and pretty much everything was tight. Tight pants, tight skirts. *But at least they're pulled up. It'll be twenty years before kids decide having your pants halfway around your ankles is the new in thing. Heck, some of these kids might have kids by then! Babies, anyway.*

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

"Something funny?" asked the girl.

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

"Something like that," said the boy. "You are Yanks, aren't you?"

"You better field this one, Nita. I decline to answer on the grounds of making your heads explode." She snickered again.

"Ignore her," said Nita. "We're both American, yes."

"Cool. Vacationing or what?"

"Or what," said Susan as Nita said "Vacationing." They looked at each other.

"Vacationing," said Susan as Nita said "or what." They looked at each other again.

"Oh, you're a traveling comedy duo! I get it."

"I'm staying with relatives," clarified Nita. "I just met Susan here a little while ago. I'm not sure where she's staying at the moment."

"Probably a van down by the river," said Susan, feeling she was much too early for that reference. *I never did figure out how I can spout those little ditties. Huh.*

"How can you not know where you're staying? Did you just get in today?" asked the girl. "Are you backpacking across the country or something?"

"Look, you two want to sit down? Looming over me like that is giving me a crick in the neck."

"If you're going to be in the area awhile, come meet everyone," said the boy. Susan and Nita traded a look, but Nita shrugged and Susan said "okay."

They moved over to where the others were, Sparkle doing a quick spell of *Invisibility* so she could follow. The pair got introduced to Ronan and Majella, the boy and girl, respectively. Plus the others, and the pair introduced themselves. Ronan was

tall, with dark hair that looked like it needed a good combing, and a strong nose. The others would probably never be seen again, so they didn't rate a description. Susan swept her gaze over all of them, silently noting their health level, and one weakness to cold, oddly. *Is there some kind of Susceptible weakness? I know there's Resistant Cold so I suppose there must be.*

Susan was struck by a sudden inspiration. *If I know someone's health, and assume their DTR is 1, I can figure out their CON. If I know their CON I know their GONE. If I can get better at Spirit Sense I might be able to estimate someone's energy total, and get a feel for their RES and END. With that I could figure out Wound penalty rates, lethal and non-lethal. I could actually know what minuses someone was under for being wounded! Neat.*

Nita did most of the talking, Susan wasn't really dealing with the things they were (homework, school) and also didn't want to let anything slip about the "future." But they seemed nice enough kids, and she got to learn a little more about Nita without having to ask the questions herself. Finally they had to be on their way, and the pair said goodbye.

"So, boyfriend back home?" Susan asked, one of the topics of conversation. It seemed Nita had come here at her parent's insistence, so that her and a boy named Kit could 'cool off' for a little while.

"He's my partner, like I think Sparkle is yours. I told them about the you know what, but I don't really think they get it. Even took them to the moon once, but maybe that was too big to get their heads around. Maybe we should have gone smaller."

"The moon!" Susan nearly shouted, but caught herself. "The moon? How do you go to the moon? Don't tell me you have a more advanced space industry here than we did in the 90s?"

Nita looked confused. "No, wizardry of course. Can't your magic get you to the moon?"

Susan shook her head. "What, you just *describe* yourself as being on the moon and Bob's your uncle? Crazy. And no, my teleport magic can only take me to where I've seen. I suppose with a high enough powered telescope I could see details there well enough to make it. Couldn't use *Teleportal*, the vacuum would suck up the entire Earth's air if I let it. Would have to be *Teleport*. A bit of energy to cover the distance... but what about heat? And air? And radiation shielding? And air! I mean people can survive in a vacuum for a little while, as long as they're not trying to hold their breath so their lungs don't rupture. But I wouldn't want to stay too long and get distracted by, you know, not breathing, and then be unable to get the spell off to get home. Maybe I could do a timed *Spell Symbol* or..." she snapped her fingers. "What's that other one? *Spell Timer* or something, it activates automatically when something happens. Not breathing for twenty seconds could be it."

"You said air twice. It's all built into the spell. It works, believe me."

"Yes, I realize that, I thought it was such an important piece I would mention it again." Susan stared, a very bad feeling beginning to grow inside her. *Their magic can't actually be better than mine, can it? No, that's crazy talk.*

The two decided to walk back to where Nita was staying.

"They gave me a trailer out in back of the main house, you can probably hide

there if you don't want my family to see you. Or the help, there's actually a lot of people through that house at any one time, I think. It's a farm so it's pretty busy."

"Thanks. I could just go hide out in my *Personal Dimension* if it's a problem though. I don't want to inconvenience you after all."

"I guess we'll just have to see how it goes. Wait, you have your own dimension?"

"Yeah, it grew out of my *Pocket Dimension*. I wanted something I could actually enter myself and live in if I needed to. Plus we needed the space to train. Good times. Good times."

"Our magic certainly is different."

"I guess. It's only afternoon, what our next move?"

"I'm not really sure what the exact problem is, that's the problem," said Nita. "I know what I did, but not the cause. I'm not even sure it's a problem with the area. I would look pretty stupid if I went up to a Senior and it turned out to be some weird thing going on with me."

"You mean like a new power you're developing? To cross into other worlds without doing spells? Okay, I can buy that. So you need to do more reading in that manual of yours, see if something like this had happened before, maybe?"

"Exactly. To someone or this place. Or other places for that matter. Then we can worry about how to fix it. The manual lists the Senior's address, but that he's only to be consulted 'in case of an emergency.' So it's something to do with me, or that I can do, specifically."

"No pressure." Susan thought about it. *Moving between worlds, no easy fix for that. Unless there's some object that's causing it that we can break, how would we even go about repairing such a thing. After all, my wrist unit... no, that's just signaling the Hub to open a doorway for me, isn't it? Could someone else have built a device like that? I never asked Silverstreak exactly how complex it was for tech to do what my magic does in that regard. Wait, moving between worlds?*

"Uh, if it isn't you, meaning it's the world itself, what keeps things in other worlds from moving into this one and causing trouble? You would not want the monsters from my last world to start pouring through to this one, believe me. Their HP alone... or would they gain health levels because now they're in our reality?" *But then, that's just an abstraction I have. Most people don't think in those terms because they aren't Paragons. So what would their capacity for damage be, anyway?*

Nita had stopped dead in the street, obviously not having considered this possibility. Susan looked back at her, and she took a couple of quick steps to catch up. "I'll try to read fast."

So Susan was introduced to Nita's aunt, Annie, and told her a mostly truthful version of why Susan was now there.

"Turns out she's just arrived her herself, and we just got to talking. We found we had a lot of things in common, and we've been hanging out all morning. She's nice."

"Welcome to Ireland," said Annie, "don't mind the ghosts."

"Oh, one of my best friends is a ghost. Name of Myrtle. She haunts a toilet."

Annie laughed. "None of that sort around here. You two enjoy yourselves, okay?" *Poor fools, they don't even believe me.*

And so Nita got to reading. Susan felt a little bad, making her do all the work while she just wandered around the farm (staying out of sight) and looking at the countryside. It was a pretty place, with a mountain in the distance that looked quite green from this distance.

"You could use the *Research* spell," said Sparkle. "Maybe cut down on the reading she'll have to do."

"Or we could just get things she's already read an hour ago. It's like her book is a permanent *Research* spell, from what I understand. She knows what to look for, I'm going to trust her to find it. Then we'll support her as best we can as she solves it, and be on our way."

"Oh, that simple, huh? I guess if we're maintaining the 'let the natives solve their own problems' gig, that's fine."

"That is exactly what we are doing. And we're looking for a place we can be undisturbed for a bit. I don't have any *Spell Papers* with *Alleviation* on them, and the note said her mother will develop cancer so I should leave her one. Odd, if she can go to the moon as casually as she suggests, that she can't cure that."

"Like she said, your magics maybe just do things differently. I mean can you describe someone with cancer well enough to change them into the same person but without it? I wouldn't want to attempt it, even with a language meant for doing just that."

"I guess. Still, I have *Regeneration* ones, because that's much shorter to make than the other. But I've got the time and the energy, so let's make a few."

"I'm going to go look for that kitten, I think. He seemed to know what was going on."

"Suit yourself. Don't get stepped by a horse!"

"Please."

So Susan sat for three hours putting *Alleviation* down in *Spell Symbol* form, each one taking seventeen minutes so she didn't blow it. *Pity it's two spells, if I could do the Symbol for each, then put the spell into it, I could use my Mimic Materia for the job. But no, I have to maintain the Symbol, then put in the next spell, then start again. Ah well.*

She also got the bright idea of putting *Avatar of War* onto the sword itself, which took nicely. She put the *Symbol* on the blade, near the guard, and it appeared without issue. The trigger event was her getting it out, something most assuredly "overtly observable." That way the next time she got it out, boom, she would be big, imposing, and attacking. She wouldn't have to waste an action getting the spell up, nor would she have to maintain it. *Win-win all around, if I say so myself. Love that spell. What am I saying? I love all my spells!*

Sparkle came back, saying she had found "the bard" but all she could get out of him was a bunch of poems and old stories that didn't make a lot of sense.

"Probably you don't have the background mythology of this place. The wizard mythology I mean."

"Yeah. But that's not even the worst part."

"What's the worst part?"

"First other talking cat I meet isn't even three months old!"

"There you are," said Nita, coming around the corner. Susan had been hiding out

behind a barn at the far edge of the field. "You okay?"

"Sure, just been working on some stuff. Find anything in that manual of yours?"

"I'm pretty sure the problem isn't with me. Apparently the Powers that made Ireland decided they liked their handiwork a little too much. They wanted to stay, but those higher up told them to leave so humans and bunnies and cats and things could move in. So they decided to go a bit sideways to a place that looked kind of liked it. That opened a sort of channel and now it's easier to do that sort of thing around here."

"Oh, so that's normal? How about that."

"No, it's not normal. Even that shouldn't allow the ease with which we moved between worlds. Something has happened around here."

"In my terms the DIF might be one or two less, is what you're saying? I get it."

"I guess so. So what can we do about it?"

"More importantly, how does this fit with The Darkness? I suppose if it opens the floodgates here this world could be overrun in short order. That should probably be our goal for now, finding the local avatar."

"How can we do that?"

"It's never really tried to hide what it was, to a certain extent. In my world it took over the most evil person there and put its own plans into action. In the next it possessed some Ancient Dragon and just started tearing the place up. Turns out it had actually come to the reality I was last on thousands of years ago, their time. The people there were already trying to stop it, after digging it up and injecting it into people. Smart, huh? We just need to find a person like that, someone with odd behavior now, and enough power to do this."

"Haven't heard about anyone like that. And this person must be close, right? I mean it's happening here, not elsewhere."

"Exactly. Someone around here is not what they seem. Our job now is to find them!"

"And then what? We're talking about the being that made death! You can't just walk up and fight them."

"HA! We did the other times. And I'm not sure your death maker is the thing I'm talking about. Just because you have someone powerful in your reality, doesn't mean that being would stand a chance against something from another. Don't worry, an extra dimensional being could obviously crush us like bugs. It chooses not to because then it would lose the world's energy. So it has to obey the rules of the local world for the most part, because it can only fit a part of itself into our world. Of course it would know things we don't, and be able to use other types of power if the body is suited for it. But we can work around that, don't worry. I hope. Here, let me test it right now."

Susan got her pistol from her *Pocket Dimension* and activated it with the word "*Nullification*" and eight energy.

"Okay," she said, "try and do magic. Like that light spell, try that."

Nita did, and nothing happened.

"See? I've cut off all magic in a sphere around me. So I just do the same near the person we discover is causing this, I slice them up with my sword, problem solved. I couldn't do this with Sephiroth, that's who it was before, because his magic was more a *Spirit Energy* effect than what we do. Plus it wouldn't have mattered much, he was bizarrely strong. He didn't use much magic, in combat. But it seems to work fine here!

As you guys don't have a genetically engineered SOLDIER program, I think we'll be okay."

"And what if the person it's taken over is innocent?"

"Is what? Oh." Susan considered. "Hasn't happened yet, but I suppose it could. Harder to control someone that doesn't want to be controlled, right? I guess I didn't consider that."

"You better. Even if someone is being controlled, I can't let you just murder them. It goes against everything wizards on this world stand for! Which is life, in case I wasn't clear."

"I know, I know. Fine, I will *threaten* the person I find and see what they have to say. If they try to escape or they can bypass my *Dead Magic* zone, choppity chop. If they want to be free, maybe my *Exorcise* spell will help. We can try various things once we find this person."

"That's at least somewhat more reasonable."

"I'll start looking tomorrow! I can ask the *Question* spell how far away the nearest otherworldly being is. That should help. If it can't tell me I'll come up with some others questions I can ask. For now though, I'm low on energy and hungry."

"Want to come up to the house and eat?"

Susan shook her head. "Just show me to the trailer. Eating with you would raise some uncomfortable questions. I'm hoping you can sneak me in, or Sparkle can put *Invisibility* on me. I've got energy for *Create Foodstuff* so I'll just eat whatever that gives me. Then go to sleep and get started early tomorrow."

"Create what?"

"*Create Foodstuff*. It's a low grade spell that creates a variety of simple foods. Bread, cheese, meat, fruits, that sort of thing. Unless I'm casting it for Sparkle, then it makes mostly fish and chicken."

"Yeah, chicken. Just keep telling yourself that," said Sparkle. "It's not rat or mouse or squirrel or bird or rabbit or anything like that."

"I don't want to know."

"Wait, you can't create food with magic! The universe doesn't allow you to create food or money with magic!"

"Maybe *your* magic doesn't, but mine can manage it just fine. Food, anyway. I can't create overly precious metals with *Creation* but I bet I could manage a lump of pure iron that I could sell for money."

Nita was shaking her head. "No, it's impossible. You... you can't."

"I can. Believe me. I'll show you. It disappears after twenty four hours, but as long as you eat it before then, it's fine. I mean it's just matter. Why would creating a sword, for example, out of nowhere be different than creating cake out of nowhere? It's exactly the same thing. I mean I could create wood, and I can't eat wood. But I could burn it, releasing the energy in the wood. Ergo energy can be created with magic and thus food can be created with magic. I mean if you ate plastic, would your magic stop you making a milk jug but you could make a loaf of bread? It's insane."

"How could you eat plastic?"

"I don't know, maybe a spell could allow you to eat plastic. That would actually be interesting, a spell that will allow you to eat anything. And microbes eat plastic, the biodegradable kind, right? So that's food for them. How far do you take it?"

“Come on, this I have to see.” Susan got pulled along by Nita in the direction of her little trailer.

“Don’t feel bad, the wizards in my world couldn’t create food out of nothing either, they could only change the properties of what they already had. Like refilling a glass or enlarging a cookie. Bizarre restriction, but there you are.” Susan shook her head. *She can stand on the moon but not make a snack for herself? And she can’t cure cancer? What exactly can her magic do?*

Trying to Prove It

Time: The next day

Place: Wandering the local area

Susan had spent the night on Nita's rather too-small couch but a bit of sleep fog had rendered her unconscious before she could grow too uncomfortable. After finishing off some of the food she had made with her magic the night before she was ready to start tracking down the host of Darkness in this world.

Nita, of course, still couldn't understand how such a thing was possible, and even showed her the sections in her book that detailed why. Susan was happy to show her the spell formula, even make her a copy so she could study it for herself.

"I do have to warn you, a very smart girl called Hermione from my world tried to convert my type of magic into hers. She didn't get very far, as I understand it."

But Nita took it, saying she would have some of her wizard friends back home look into it. With that, she and Susan took a bus into town and started walking about.

"And why are we just walking about?" asked Nita.

"You saw me use *Question* magic before we left. I asked 'Is there a being, apart from myself and Sparkle, that does not belong in this world and is somewhere nearby?' and I got a yes. Then I asked "Where should I go today to have the best chance of seeing the being that does not belong on this world?" and got "town" as the answer."

"That's all true, yes. But it's not much to go on."

"It was enough. Trust me, I have about four extra senses that you don't. One of them is going to reveal the culprit today. I just have to keep my eyes, and senses, open."

"Four? How can you have that many extra senses?"

"Easy, one's a spell I picked up in the last world. One came along from my having the *Spark of Magic*. One came from picking up *Spirit Mage* from the guy who brought me here. And one he told me about that I could learn because I had passed between dimensions. See, all explainable."

"Yeah, she just had to sacrifice her sense of moderation, irony, and propriety," said Sparkle.

"Uh, excuse me? I never had any sense of moderation."

"I stand corrected."

"But there is one thing I had to give up, and it was hard one."

"What's that?" asked Nita.

"Let's just say I'll never be able to do stand up comedy again."

"Why is-"

"Timing," Susan said over her.

Nita groaned.

"I don't know, you were doing pretty well yesterday at lunch with the whole 'vacation' thing," reminded Sparkle.

"Yeah, maybe we could get an act together. Comedy magicians!"

"No," both said.

"Aw!"

They poked around town all morning, but Susan hadn't come up with anything out of the ordinary.

"Want to get lunch at that same place again?" suggested Nita.

"What? You fly thousands of miles to visit another country, and already you're falling into a pattern? Come on, there must be twenty places to eat around here, why not sample them all? One per day, and then write a... oh, you don't have blogs yet do you?"

"I what? Anyway, the last place was fine, wasn't it?"

"Oh, I see."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's that *boy* you met there yesterday. That's who you want to see, you don't care about the food, do you?"

"His name was Ronan! And... no comment."

"Well, someone remembered his name, and I don't need to learn a wizard language to know what 'no comment' means."

"So what? You didn't think he was cute?"

"Ah, no. I don't find many boys cute. Sorry."

"Oh." Nita didn't press the issue. They continued walking in silence for a moment. "So where are we going?" she asked at last.

"We're following that truck!" Susan shouted as a pickup truck with a metal cube in the back roared by them. "*Speed Plus*, come on Sparkle!"

"*Acceleration!*" cast Sparkle on them both, magic swirling. No one paid much attention but Susan and her cat had no problem trailing the truck until it got to where it was going. Luckily, it didn't have far to go, and Susan peeked out from behind a building as she watched the lady in the truck get out. She was older than Susan by about 45-50 years and her hair was white. She wore glasses, wasn't very tall, and wore stout boots.

Susan caught her breath, studying the truck now that the woman driving had gone into the hardware store that she had parked in front of.

Separate. There are two separate energy sources. She could feel them, now that the box and the woman were not near each other anymore. *The box actually has a Spirit Energy signature, and that woman had far more energy than a normal person, that's for sure. The question is, what do we do about it? Is that box the source of our troubles?*

Nita ran up, panting. "Why did you take off like that? And how did you run so fast?"

"Magic. Don't you have magic to accelerate yourself?"

"Oh, yeah. I didn't even think about it."

Susan groaned. *Oh great, another magic user that doesn't reach for magic first.*

"Anyway, forget that. What did you see?"

"See? I felt it. That box has a *Spirit Energy*. And the lady that came out of that truck? She has a really weird energy herself, and way more than the average person around here."

Nita looked over at the truck, then where it was sitting. "I've seen that truck. That's the lady who was putting on horseshoes yesterday. The box in back is actually a small forge."

“She’s a weird one then. What normal woman puts on horseshoes? No wonder she wears those heavy boots, probably to hide the horseshoes. Wait, did she actually have horse legs?”

“She was putting them on horses at the farm, you boob!” Nita laughed and punched Susan in the arm.

“Oh! You know her, then? You’ve been here, what, this is your third day? And you met a person that set my *Spirit Sense* off just by driving by?”

“There are no accidents.”

“All the people that injure themselves in the kitchen would beg to differ. Come on, I want to get a better look at her.”

So the three walked into the hardware store, where Bidy was buying nails, and who spotted them right away.

“Hello!” she said cheerfully, “I’m sorry, I forgot your name!”

“I’m Nita, and this is Susan.”

“I think you two have a cat following you. What an interesting thing!” The two turned, and Sparkle had been trying to hide but apparently Bidy saw her anyway. “You here to buy a hammer? I’m here for nails myself! And I don’t mean a manicure.” She held up a plastic bag with nails in it, laughing as though she just told a wonderful joke.

Susan laughed too. “No, we saw your truck and I wanted to introduce you to Susan. She’s sort of visiting Ireland herself, but she hadn’t seen anything like your forge.”

“Indeed,” said Susan dryly. “It seems almost alive.”

Bidy looked at her curiously. “You don’t know how many people say that to me. Just a standard portable forge though. Must be the care and attention I give it, giving it a life of its own.”

That, or all the people she’s fed into it, thought The Darkness. Way I see it, best way to take her down would be to get the gun out, negate magic in the area, and put a couple of shots in her. You’ll be long gone before the cops get here. Or you could have Sparkle put up an Illusion around the place, cover what you’re doing until you walk out.

The trouble was, Darkness was right. She could wait until the woman turned to pay for her ‘not manicured nails’ and get the gun out. One action to negate magic in the area so even if this person was a wizard, they couldn’t do anything. Another to pull the trigger. She had the skill, she couldn’t miss at this range. Drop the *Dead Magic*, open a *Teleportal* and head back to the farm. Almost she started the magic to do it. *Almost.*

Wait, you’re advocating for shooting part of yourself in the back?

Hey, you found me, fair and square. It’s only a matter of time now, and honestly, you’re going to win on worlds you visit, I see that now. Better to cut my losses, take what energy I have gained, and put this little sliver of my consciousness someplace you’re not.

Right, you know where I am now, so can you be assured I’m not elsewhere, causing you more trouble.

Exactly. And really, this was the best I could come up with on this world. There are absolutely no huge dragons, feared wizards, nothing, on this world. I thought I could blend in and finally make some headway here but no, you had to show up. I mean why did you pick this world first anyway?

It was first on the list.

She's turning. Do it!

Susan was tempted. But she remembered the last time she had believed her "sure victory" using this method. It hadn't worked out then, why would it work out now?

This part of me won't have Free Magic going, there's no reason for it. What am I going to do?

No, you must recognize me. If you did, then you set something up to defend against that very strategy, because I've used it before. I mean you beat me the first time I used it, and you couldn't have seen it coming. No, you have something special in mind if I do that again.

You're so paranoid. But not really, most travelers like you get even worse, just like you will. Too bad, this would have been the perfect opportunity.

Don't worry, another will come.

So Susan exclaimed over the forge, which Bidy was all too happy to show her, and she wished them a good afternoon and drove away.

"Well? Still think she's the avatar of evil?" asked Nita.

"She's something. I couldn't see her health level, that's a sure tip off."

"Her what?"

"She's a boss type character?" asked Sparkle. "That explains the odd *Magic* and *Spirit Sense*, doesn't it?"

"A what?"

"I can see how healthy or damaged people are," explained Susan. "People. But I couldn't tell anything about her. That means she's something else."

"Then how come you felt that energy you said you felt?"

"Ha! Know what would happen if you boiled water and didn't let any steam escape?"

"Your pot would blow up."

"Exactly. I'm getting a sense of the energy that just naturally flows away from her. Nothing alive can help that, I think. Not if they don't like blowing themselves up, anyway. You know where she lives? I want answers, and I'm not going to get them in the middle of a hardware store."

Nita shook her head. "Like I said, I met her at my aunt's farm. Maybe we could look in the phone book though."

"Oh, right, those aren't useless at the moment because everyone uses a cell phone."

"A what?"

"You'll see."

"Fine. But can we get lunch now?"

"Sure! We can even go see if your new *crush* is around."

"Shut up!"

"Make me!"

But both were laughing.

So they asked the kids (hey how about that, they did come into play again) and one of them knew where she lived.

Thank you, LUCk of nine, for that sixteen LUCk check roll!

This time Nita was more adventurous, ordering something Ronan suggested, and Susan ordered the same. They stayed and talked for about an hour, but Susan was antsy to get a look at “Biddy’s” house before she went back there. So the two said their goodbyes and headed off.

They made their way to a house with a large barn in back, which Susan said was perfect. She used *Unlock* to open the door, and shoved it aside.

“She’s going to know we’re here!” protested Nita.

“I know, that’s the plan. We’re going to be *invisible*. When she comes in here to see why the door is open, you slam it shut. She’ll whirl around and I’ll cut off magic in this area. Then we’ll get some answers.”

“I don’t know, I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. There is no way that person is human. Not when so many things I sensed about her were so off. We do an afternoon’s waiting, confront her, and you get to enjoy the rest of your time here without going sideways.”

“I hope you’re right. There could be one other inhuman thing, and attacking it would be... bad form, at the very least.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll know if she attacks us, right? I won’t attack if she doesn’t!”

The area inside was an actual forge, and all three looked around without touching anything.

“I don’t feel anything magical around here,” cautioned Susan, “but that doesn’t mean there aren’t mechanical traps of some kind. Be careful.”

“Odd that the supposed avatar of evil you’re chasing would live in such a normal place.”

“I guess. But maybe after being chased off three worlds it’s becoming a little more subtle.”

“I hope not,” said Sparkle. “We don’t do subtle.”

Susan laughed. “That we do not!”

So the three waited. They discussed strategy, and what Nita’s magic could do, as she didn’t really have any weapons. Susan offered her a sword, but Nita said she’d probably just cut her own foot off, and would stick to magic. She reviewed some spells in her book as they waited, an activity Susan approved of. As night fell, Susan started to get worried someone at the farm would miss her, but suddenly a car drove up the driveway towards the house.

“Showtime,” said Susan, nodding to Sparkle. They got *Invisibility* put on them, and Nita got in position behind the door. Susan had her gun out, ready to activate.

“Hello?” called Biddy, walking into the room. She was looking around, and once past the midway point towards the forge, Nita slammed the door. She became visible again, and Biddy whirled. *Much faster than a woman her apparent age should be able to.* “Nita?”

“*Nullification!*” Susan intoned, making her own *Invisibility* drop, and bringing up the gun. Biddy whirled around again but froze as she looked at the gun.

“Darkness, how nice to see you again,” said Susan sarcastically. “Saw your handiwork when I first arrived. I have to say, usually you’re more... what’s the word... blatant, than that. But I suppose dozens of world’s worth of creatures coming through holes in the air and possibly tearing apart everything in sight, including each other, would be quite a spectacle, wouldn’t it?”

“What are you talking about? How did you get a gun? Am I being robbed? But you could have taken anything and just left-”

“Oh, bravo. I’d clap, but,” she gestured to the gun with her free hand. “The other two times you couldn’t wait to show off that you knew me. Taking a different tack this time? That’s fine.”

“I think you have the wrong person-”

“Save it! I felt your energy, and I can’t see your health level. Plus your magic is all screwed up, if what I compare to Nita is any indication. And even as you stand there my *Dimension Sense* (which Susan rolled max on, a thirteen) is telling me you’re not supposed to be here. So cut the crap, you’re The Darkness, and all I need to know is, should I shoot you before or after you leave that poor woman’s body? I’d like after, but whatever.”

“I’m not who you think. Nita, tell her, I’m... one of the Powers That Be!”

“Oh no!” said Nita, hands flying over her mouth. “We got it wrong, Susan. It’s okay, she’s one of the good guys! I was afraid of... Susan?”

The gun hadn’t wavered.

“Have any proof?” Susan asked. “Because that’s a convenient little story, I’ll admit. Fits the facts. Maybe a little too well, because my story fits the facts too. Don’t suppose there’s any way to prove it?”

“I’m... trying. What did you do?”

Susan barked a laugh. “Locked down magic in this room, as if you didn’t know. I wasn’t going to give you the chance to use my father’s power against me again, that’s for sure. So this time we decide this without magic. And I can’t believe I just said that.”

“Look, maybe I can bring someone back... my advisers,” pleaded Nita. “I’ll go and get them, and they’ll tell you! I mean you’ll believe me if I say they’re okay, right?”

“Them? There’s two of them?” Nita nodded. “Okay, I doubt that all three could be avatars at once, though I suppose there’s no reason they couldn’t. But even Darkness can’t cover that many angles at one time, right?” She shook her head. “Whatever. Just go and get back here. I’ll cover whatever this is.”

“If you really are... who you say, I’m really sorry about all this.”

“Wait, you can’t go! The-”

Susan took a half step towards her. “Don’t think of moving from that spot. Go, she might have another trick up her sleeve that isn’t magical. I can feel any buildup of *Spirit Energy*, if you’re going to try something with that. I’ll pull this trigger if I do. GO!”

Nita threw the door open again, speaking in that weird language of hers. Oddly enough, Susan’s *Adaptive Skill* kicked in, as if making a *Language* check to understand a foreign language. As she got 10% per point on the check, and she got an eleven, she understood 110% (rounded down to 100%) and realized she was asking the universe to please take her to such and such a place. Once outside the field (Susan had marked it out earlier, where it would reach to) she spoke a final word but instead of disappearing, she was knocked off her feet and spent sprawling with a cry of anguish.

Did she just backfire?

"I warned you!" said Bidy, taking a step. "We have to-"

"What did you do?" yelled Susan, squeezing the trigger three times and aiming center of mass. She spent energy on MANipulation, getting a 23 on her check, so even with a LUCk of ten, there was no way Bidy could get out of the way. She tried, spending 8 energy on REFlexes to try and dodge the bullets, and also trying something again with magic, which of course failed. The three bullets slammed into her chest, throwing her backwards.

"Crap! Nita!" She dismissed the *Dead Magic* field and ran over to her, unstrapping the knife from her leg after transferring the gun to the other hand. "Hang on, I'll save you!" She raised the blade high, about to stab it into the unmoving form of her new friend, when she was blown off her feet and had to make a *Gymnastics* check to roll out of it. She again spent energy, getting an eighteen and rolling to her feet as a reactive action.

"I don't know what you are," said Bidy, somehow holding her knife, "but you can be sure I won't let you try to murder her too."

"Lady," said Susan, fury in her eyes, "maybe you're Darkness and maybe you're not. Either way, you just stopped me saving a friend. That was a big mistake." She held out her hand, dropping the gun from the other as it seemed not to have done much good. There she was, not bleeding to death from bullet wounds at all. *Maybe a bit of magical fire and good old crystalline sword will do the trick.*

"Blade."

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Round 1- FIGHT!

Time: Just then

Place: Outside Bidy's barn

Susan had but one thought as the sword materialized from out of her hand and she grabbed it before it could fall.

Aerith, you didn't remind me to save before I started all this! Isn't that your job?

Suddenly she was looking down on Bidy, who hadn't been that tall to begin with, and was somewhat surprised to see that she looked surprised.

Is Darkness really just getting into the character or am I making a horrible mistake?

Bidy put out a hand and a hammer came crashing through the wall, which she caught with a practiced ease.

Like I'm going to get within striking distance. I hate to only do one third damage, and really do need to get Long Range up and running when I can. Oh well.

Sparkle tried to cast *Acceleration* instantly, but rolled two from minimum so it didn't go off. She considered spending the two XP but it wasn't like Susan could really be hurt in that armor of hers, so she figured she would just wait. There was only one opponent, after all.

How embarrassing, have I ever failed a spell? she thought.

Susan and Bidy went at the same time, so Bidy started towards her. Susan dropped back into the stance she always saw Cloud using when he had borrowed her *Slash All Materia* and swung, making a called shot to Bidy's body. Bidy threw herself to the side as the blade seem to materialize from out of nowhere. It passed harmlessly through the space she had been occupying and stopped her forward momentum.

Stupid defense checks, Cloud never had to worry about the monsters he was facing making a dodge when this was coming at them. They just took it. Isn't only doing a third the damage enough? Why do they get to see it coming as well?

"You are dangerous," said Bidy. "I've never seen any wizardry like you're using. Well then, try this!" She chucked the hammer, which sped towards Susan like a shot. Susan did a casting of *Defection* figuring that would be better than her dodge, which was at this point not yet *Accelerated*. She rolled max, an eighteen, and smugly believed that would stop just about anything.

Naturally the hammer smashed straight through, and impacted her armor. Being a thrown weapon, she depended on her *Passive Dodge* which was now an fourteen, for the calculation to see if it smashed through that as well. Her armor AR was currently ten, and ties go to the defender. Even as the hammer bounced away from her she failed her STrength check and flew backwards, teeth rattling from the force of the blow. Bidy put her hand out and the hammer came back.

Okay, who does this lady think she is, Thor? Also, better start using more energy because it seems she doesn't have average stats, or is spending lots of energy herself...

Sparkle began casting *Destruction* on the hammer, and magic glittered around it.

"You aren't doing that," remarked Bidy, looking over at her. Susan was waiting for a chance to do a reactive action and make her *Gymnastics* check to stand up. "But

who else has wizardry like-” She glanced around and saw Sparkle. “A cat? I don’t want to hurt you, cat, but if you don’t stop...”

She raised the hammer, then seemed to hesitate as if waiting to see what Sparkle would do.

Susan made her check to get up, managing it with a fourteen and rolling to her feet, sword out. She saw the magic take hold of the handle of the hammer, which disappeared in a puff of smoke. The head bounced down past her, and she stupidly looked down at it.

“Okay, this is all wrong,” she remarked, “but if that’s how you want it.” She transferred the knife to her other hand with a flip and chucked it at Sparkle, who didn’t bother dodging. It sliced into her, doing healing “damage” if that can even be a thing.

Wait a second, can I do a called shot to the back of someone? This Materia allows me to attack from a distance, and it doesn’t respect physical space... Rather than think about it, Susan swung again, and Bidy caught the motion out of the corner of her eye. Sadly she only got a ten on her check, so even with the penalty for being “flanked” Bidy just moved her head a little and the blade whistled by.

“You’re next!” she promised, looking around for something else to use as a weapon.

“Take another look,” said Susan.

“What?”

“Thanks for the knife back,” said Sparkle, putting it into her own sub-space pocket. As it was currently shoved inside her, it counted as her touching it, and vanished. “Susan put a lot of work into it, she wouldn’t want to lose it.”

“Okay, what?”

Susan couldn’t help laughing.

“Are you mocking me?”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Susan, “It’s just that look on your face that *Dazzle!*”

The magic hit but Bidy shook it off. “Don’t you mean Glitterdust?” she asked scornfully. “Your spells don’t seem to be working very well on me.”

True, what are this person’s stats? I’ve been holding back a little in case I’m wrong but she did just try and kill Sparkle. So I guess no more Mrs. Nice Girl.

“I didn’t want to use this,” she continued somewhat sadly, “but I guess I better stop playing around.”

Oh great, she wasn’t being totally serious either? Susan watched as Bidy pulled a sword from somewhere, and dropped back into a crouch. *And she has her own pocket dimension as well. This just gets better and better.*

“You and me both lady,” she replied.

“*Entangle!*” cast Sparkle, getting a seventeen. The nearby plants grew and twisted, reaching out to grab Bidy and hold her fast. She struggled, but was unable to break free.

“Nice one!” said Susan, beginning to cast again. She took the full time, figuring Bidy wasn’t going anywhere.

Bidy was helpless as Susan finished the five segments of *Elemental Burst: Knockout* and dazzling energy erupted around her body. With nowhere to go, the energy tore into her and she passed out, the sword falling from her hands and she went

limp. The plants around her were still holding her up, but Susan didn't think it was a trick.

"Quick, the knife," she shouted, running over to Nita. Sparkle was at her side a second later, and the knife clattered out, which Susan picked up and jabbed into her, making her gasp.

There was an explosion of wind nearby, and Susan's head jerked in that direction.

"Get away from her!" shouted a boy about Nita age. He looked hispanic, with a darkish complexion, black hair, and brown eyes. He was accompanied by two older men, both in their mid thirties, one with as fine a mustache as any man could ask for. Both had dark hair, and average looks, but both wore expressions of anger when they saw the blade sticking into Nita.

"Funny story-" Susan started to explain, hoping to defuse the tension with some humor. After all, hadn't this very thing happened back with Lockhart in the hospital? It had. And she was sure they would laugh about it sometime, maybe ten years or so from now.

"I said get away from her!" shouted the boy again. *Pretty brave, he just teleported in to find a huge girl in armor, apparently stabbing his friend. And he didn't back down.*

"This just keeps getting better," remarked Sparkle. "*Entangle!*" Susan noticed she dropped the initial one as she cast, any plants not real crumbling to dust, as the others relaxed their grip and Biddy fell over.

"Hey!" shouted the one older wizard, as plants again grabbed for everything in the area, holding it fast, or at least trying to. Susan saw that two of the three people in the area probably weren't going to be held.

Fine. "Hypnotic Field!" she cast, spending maximum energy on the spell. (This was now a thirteen for her) She got a twenty one, and those inside got eighteen or less.

"Now look," she said, finally grabbing the knife back out of Nita, who was stirring at last. She walked through the field towards them, but the plants were still in the way. "As you can see, you're helpless. Sparkle?" She waved a hand into the mass of plants.

"Right." They went away again.

"Thank you. I could easily chop you to bits while you're like this. But if you can let me explain, I'll let you go. Look, I'll even disarm myself, so you know I'm on the level." She decided she wasn't in danger anymore, ending the scene and making her armor go away. That done, she put the sword back inside her, stabbed her hand with the healing knife, and put that back in the holster tied to her leg. "See, no more weapons."

Nita groaned. "Oh, my head. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. But if you can tell the cavalry not to attack me, I'll let them go."

"Yeah, sure," she said, getting shakily to her feet. "What's that?"

"This? Just a bit of magic for keeping people from attacking me. I didn't want the situation to get any more out of hand than it already had."

"It's pretty." Nita walked towards it.

"No, wait, stay out of the-" She went into the circle of light and zoned out. "Oh, come on!" Susan went over to her and closed her eyes, breaking her out of it. "Back out, another step, okay you can open your eyes again."

"How come you can go in there?" she demanded.

"I cast the spell, of course! Now tell them!"

Nita shouted to the others. "It's okay, she's with me. This is the girl I was telling you about."

"Right," Susan said, glad that was taken care of. "I'm going to drop the spell. Someone needs to check on that woman there. She claims to be some "power that be" or whatever but I say she's a soul sucking monster I call The Darkness. If I could get someone's opinion on that before she wakes up, that would be great."

That said, she dropped the spell, and the others came back "awake" again.

"Nita," said the boy, edging away from Susan. "Are you okay?"

"I feel great, actually. Not sure what happened. I was trying to come get you, and then suddenly you were already here."

"I thought it was something she did," said Susan, walking back over to her gun. She picked it up and shoved it into her sub-space pocket rather than take the time to open her *Pocket Dimension* at the moment. "You ran out, cast, and suddenly were thrown off your feet."

"It's the area," said one of the older wizards. "Didn't your manual warn you? There's a lot of overlay in Ireland. Doing any wizardry without compensating for it can be very dangerous."

"Is that so? No wonder she was sticking to physical attacks."

"Look, who are you?" asked the other older wizard. "And did you just fight with one of the Powers that Be and *win*?"

"Long story... Short version? Me Susan. Me travel worlds, kick evil butt. Me find woman me think is evil. Me kick butt. End of story. Good story."

"Can... can I get a slightly longer version of that story?"

"Sure, once that creature is secure to my satisfaction."

"I think she really is a Power," said Nita.

"A good Power, or a bad one? Because until I get some evidence one way or the other, there's no way I'm trusting that woman."

"But how do you know?" Susan protested, moments later. The woman had been tied up, using some chain the group had found in the barn. The two older wizards were now trying to convince her this was all just some misunderstanding and she was one of the good ones.

"We can just feel it," Tom said, (and yes, the irony was not lost on Susan at all.)

"They would know better about their own reality," said Sparkle hesitantly. "Right?"

"I guess we'll just have to trust them. Fine, I'll wake up 'Biddy' here and see what she has to say for herself." She got out the knife, which the others jumped up at. "It's fine, it's my healing knife, don't worry about it. You saw it sticking out of Nita when you arrived, remember?"

"Who puts a healing spell into a knife?" asked Carl.

Maybe I should change it, if that's possible. It's just that the way I made it, the activation is sticking into someone. I would have to rework it to allow it to be cast or used like my other Materia now. Oh well, I can worry about that later.

"It was necessary at the time," she explained, sinking the blade into Biddy's chest. Her eyes fluttered and she woke up, as all she had was non-lethal damage, which instantly went away with *Alleviation*.

"What's going on?" she asked, struggling against the chains.

“Just a precaution,” answered Susan. “Now, if you can offer some proof as to your identity, we can clear this whole thing right up.”

“You want me to prove I’m not the Lone Power?”

“Or The Darkness, yes. That would be ideal!”

“How do you expect me to do that? I can’t just whip out my Bright Power Membership Card you know.”

“I don’t know, think of something. These people want to vouch for you, and if that’s the best I’m going to get... fine. I’ll accept their word for the moment. You can convince me with your actions later.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, who are you really?” asked Kit.

Biddy sighed. “I guess it’s all out in the open now, huh? I would really like to know how you found me out, and what that power was you were using. I’ve had many names over the years, the Smith of Falias, and Govan, Smith of the Gods.”

“This workshop... it fits,” said Nita. “The Lone Power wouldn’t strive to build, or create. That One only wants to tear down. Can we let her out please?”

Susan looked around at the others, who all nodded. “Very well, but if this comes back to bite us later, I reserve the right to hold it over your heads for at least twenty minutes. *Unlock.*” The lock that held the chain in place clicked open, and Biddy shrugged the chains off.

“Yes, that! What was that? You’re no wizard, that’s for sure.”

“No, I’m a *Natural Magician.*” Susan went on to explain her method of using magic.

“And it really is magic,” said Biddy when her story was done. “It’s not wizardry, that’s for sure.”

“I suppose there is a difference. Whatever you call it, my power is effective enough. Now, what can you tell me about what’s going on around here?”

“What do you mean, going on around here?”

“You haven’t noticed?” asked Nita. “I guess maybe I did just stumble into something, and there’s really no trouble here at all.”

“I’m here for a reason,” Susan reminded her. “If she isn’t the reason, we have to keep looking. The Darkness should be around here someplace, and I want to move on to the next world I have to check.”

“We need to get back,” said Tom, “if things are handled here?”

Susan glared at Biddy, but nodded. “I beat her once, I could do it again.”

“Thanks for coming to the rescue,” Nita said to Kit. “How did you know I was in trouble, anyway?”

“Are you kidding?” Kit laughed. “I felt it from where I was. How could I miss it?”

“Oh.”

“It was nice meeting you, Elder Sister,” said Carl. “I’m sorry it wasn’t under better circumstances.”

“The world turns us all,” she said with a sad smile.

The two figured out how to teleport back home without blowing themselves up, and Nita, Susan, Sparkle, and Biddy were left looking at each other.

“So,” Biddy said, probably wondering how to proceed. “You’re from another world, huh?”

"Which I don't get," protested Nita, "now that you mention it. I've been to other worlds. Wizardry was the same there as here."

"The way it was explained to me, it's like a tree. You live on one branch of the tree. Even if you go to another world, it's still just the same main branch. When you went sideways to that other place, you were traveling to a different leaf on a divergent branch. I go between branches."

"And that's where you're afraid this Darkness of yours is from?"

Susan shook her head. "No, he's from further *up* the tree, and he wants to climb higher still. But to do that he needs energy. Energy he's going to get by sucking it out of the branches where we all live."

"You thought that's who you were fighting?" asked Bidy. "Just how much were you holding back, anyway?"

Susan looked at her out of the corner of her eyes. "Do you really want to know? Suffice to say, it could have been a lot messier if I had been more confident. Besides, just like you, the universe The Darkness finds itself in limits the available power it can use. It could energy blast me, but I would get my normal checks against it. Of course in some worlds it can bring more of itself, so it might have more abilities than it otherwise could. I don't really know how it all works myself, I just do what I can with the magic I have. Bottom line, I knew I wasn't fighting the real thing, just an avatar, which I've managed to beat before."

"I see. Well, if I can help, let me know. It sounds a lot worse than my brother, He just wanted recognition for His work, that none of us in the beginning had considered. He's proud, so He couldn't back down afterwards and admit maybe entropy wasn't such a great idea. At least this universe will get billions of years to run and grow before it dies. This Darkness creature, it seems it would just suck the universe dry in a matter of days."

"It would seem that way, as it would operate outside the branch. And thus, outside your time flow."

"Why can't it just do it then?" asked Nita.

"You mean like a vampire? Just hold someone down and start sucking away? Do you have those?"

"Not real ones, that I know of. Thank goodness!"

"Okay, but you get the idea. As I understand it, because you're all using the power now, yourselves. It's bound up inside life everywhere. There's only so much to go around, and it's in use. It has to kill you all off before that power will be free and he can take it for himself. Plus, it tried to multitask and take them all at once. That spilt its attention, and power, so it kind of has to do things the hard way."

Bidy snorted. "So basically, we're the termites living inside the bark of the tree, and we're fighting off a lumberjack that wants to cut the branch off."

Susan seemed impressed with the analogy. "Exactly. We keep fouling up the blade on the chainsaw."

"And once you kick him out, another being like him puts a fence around the branch so it can't ever try again?"

"That's what he told me. I have no reason to doubt him."

"So... no hard feelings?" She held out a hand.

Susan took it. "If you really are who you say, I do apologize. You do understand, I was sent here for a reason and you looked a lot like the reason. I didn't consider other beings here might sort of fit the parameters I was searching for."

"Don't worry, I know all about need."

"You and me both," muttered Nita, causing them all to laugh.

What Hunts

Time: Early Afternoon

Place: The hills of Ireland

"It's there someplace," one of the Silverstreak agents said to Susan when she called in that morning to make sure. "I'm really sorry we can't be more specific than that."

"No, I get it, that's why we get sent. If you could pick The Darkness out from where you were, you could just laser him from there. **Pechu!**"

The agent laughed. "We might use something a little more effective than that, but yes, I recognize the sentiment. Sorry to make you do this, I know you just want to find your friend and your father."

"I can't walk away from an entire reality that could be in danger. And Luna can take care of herself, I wouldn't have considered bringing her if she couldn't. If you guys say part of The Darkness is here, I'll take your word for it. I just sort of screwed up and accused the wrong person, so I hoped there might be at least some clue to where it was hiding."

"The best intel we have generates the gates for you to go though. The rest is up to you."

"Okay, thanks." *For nothing.*

"Later."

"Bye."

Susan watched the tiny face of the agent disappear, then sighed.

"No luck huh?" asked Sparkle.

"Not a bit. And no one else we've sensed seems to fit the profile."

"Our rating in the skill is pretty low though."

"True. But it isn't like *Spirit Sense*, where you have *Ley Lines* and people's own energy and plants and everything else around to muddy the waters. The Darkness should stick out."

"It's only been a couple of days."

"I guess. The Ancient Dragon showed up way later, I was with Louise for some time. I really hope I'm not going to have to wait every time. Of course The Darkness must guess I'm looking for my dad, so naturally it would want to delay me as much as possible."

"That reminds me. Tom is a common enough name, but Louise? And it's Nita middle name... do you think it means anything?"

Susan shrugged. "These worlds are removed in time, space, and dimension. Take this world for example- it seems close to ours. If I figured out where Nita lived in this world and took a trip there in mine, would I find her? Would she be a witch or not have magic? The smallest thing could make a person's life change drastically."

"And talent for this wizardry wouldn't necessarily translate to wand-wielding wizardry back home."

She chuckled. "It's the cutie mark crusaders all over again- what do you do if your special talent is rocket design or some AI programming if the underlying technology isn't there?"

"You get a person like Leonardo, who put a lot of things down on paper but was hundreds of years ahead of a time his true genius could have actually have been most useful."

"That's for sure. But to answer your original question, I think it's just a coincidence at this point, but if more start to crop up I reserve the right to change my opinion. I mean we are all from the same trunk, right? So it's not unreasonable to assume some minor elements might be seen in more than one place. She's not a zero, that's for sure. I mean she was sent here by her Powers for some reason, right? They wouldn't send a zero, especially not after that Lone One she talks about. Wizards who are sloppy or lazy get killed around here! Not like back at home, where you just get poor grades."

"Right, after they take the Oath they get a sort of trail to see if they can handle the power. She said people here get the wizardry when there's a problem that crops up only they can handle, right?"

"Right. So?"

"So, what if The Darkness operates the same way? Presumably it was inside the Dragon for some time, or took it over just as it woke up. Why not wake it up earlier? It awoke in response to Void magic coming to the world. Or Void started because it was going to awaken, never did figure out which came first. The point is, maybe there's some kind of *Event* that the Darkness has to use, just like wearing a body when it comes to our lower dimensions."

"Energy saving. Yeah, that makes sense. Why use a bunch of energy just slaughtering everybody if some other thing is scheduled to come along and take a shot at it? Then you just swoop in afterwards and bingo, all you can eat energy buffet. So what you're saying is, let's look around for any major events that might take place in this area in the near future, and let The Darkness come to us."

"That might be easier than checking a whole town's worth of people."

"Okay, but if that mountain over there explodes and some dragon slithers out, these people are on their own."

Sparkle laughed. "Oh really? You wouldn't pull your sword, scream a battle cry and go charging at the thing?"

"Maybe. If I thought it would look cool, and there was someone around I wanted to impress."

"Yeah, that's the criteria to use." Sparkle's eyes rolled.

"All that aside, what now? We'll head back to see Nita I guess, see if she's come up with anything in the meantime."

"Sounds good."

"Now, which way to go to get back?"

Some time later, Susan's shadow covered Nita, who was laying on a towel, in the sun, in a bathing suit. Her eyes popped open.

“Hard at work I see,” she remarked sarcastically. *Though she does look good in that swim suit. Don’t stare at her legs, don’t stare at her... okay don’t stare at those either.*

“I’m taking a little break,” Nita protested. “Don’t you take breaks?”

Susan had to think for a moment. “Not usually. If I’m not *Fabricating* or *Imbuing* something for someone, I read my book of magic over to make sure I stay familiar with all the spells I have at my disposal. Or I’m picking up a new skill, or helping some old lady with who to give her inheritance to so I can get quest XP. Or scouring a town to see where The Darkness is hiding, which was totally worthless in this case by the way.”

“Even you need to relax sometime!”

“Sure, when I have tens in every skill, every spell memorized, with immortality going and my enemies driven before me. I’ll take a week off. Then I’ll start researching even better spells.”

“Good luck with that,” Nita muttered, closing her eyes again.

“Seriously? You’re just going to lay there?”

“Yes, seriously. I am on vacation at the moment, you know? And I only went sideways when I was wandering around looking at stuff. If I stay put, maybe it won’t happen.”

“You’re not on vacation according to that book you showed me, which said you were on assignment or whatever.”

“And I’m thinking very, very hard about what to do about that, too.”

“As long as you’re still on the job... any events coming up that you know about? Volcanoes overdue to erupt? Nearby rocks about to fall from space? Global disease outbreaks more widespread than they should be? Evil super villains about to break out of supposedly secure prisons? Anything like that, sort of global catastrophe stuff?”

Nita shook her head. “Most exciting thing happening around here is the fox hunt today. They should be by pretty soon actually.”

“Fox hunt? Little barbaric, even for the 90s don’t you think?”

“Oh sure, some company makes... what did you call them? iPads? And suddenly the world isn’t barbaric anymore. Don’t worry, I warned the foxes away days ago. They won’t find one within five miles of this place.”

Susan snorted. “You really did?”

“I really did,” she agreed.

“Fine, I guess you can take the afternoon off.”

“Thanks, *mom*.”

“Say that again?”

“Thanks mom?”

Susan considered. “Mom. Does have a nice ring to it. Ah well, maybe someday. Now about this hunt...”

But the hunt, when it went by, seemed perfectly normal. (If you’re into that sort of thing.) A lot of horses, and a guy trying to ride and blow some kind of brass instrument, and people going “hyaaa!” and such. Oh, and barking dogs. Lots of running, barking dogs.

“At least they seem to be enjoying themselves,” Sparkle noted.

"I guess, as they don't have Playstations yet. Do they? What video game system do you guys have?"

"Personally? We don't even have a Nintendo," answered Nita. "Too busy with wizardry, really. But a lot of boys at school talk about the Super Nintendo."

"Wow, I never even had one of those. I hear it had some good games though."

"I wouldn't know."

After watching the people on horseback go thundering by, Nita went back to lay down in the sun. Susan glared at her, and wondered if she should say something about sunblock.

Ah well, they know about that sort of thing in this time, right?

With only six XP (five gained from her last "adventure" the fight with Bidy) Susan was at a loose end. Especially because her one contact seemed totally indifferent to the problem. *Of course, I'm the one that has to find the thing, so really she's waiting on me!* She paced back and forth around the farm, mostly in the barn as it was now empty of horses.

"You could go back and lay in the sun with Nita," suggested Sparkle. "I've always been of the mind a good nap can't be bad for you."

"No, there must be something I can do. It'll be another few days before I can put XP into anything, if I don't want to save it to convert more of my *Materia*. I just hate the thought of sitting around here doing nothing!"

"You had plenty of that with Louise though."

"Yeah, because I was stuck on that world. Now it seems I'm stuck waiting for The Darkness to show himself."

"The world usually does provide you some adventure to go on, during the lull periods. Maybe something will come up later. Or you could ask *Question* what to do next."

"That works best with yes/no type questions though. Okay, here." Susan got out her book and looked *Question* over. Finally she cast from writings and asked "Is something significant, that leads to my finding The Darkness, going to happen within the next week?"

Yes

"Okay then! Guess I'll just wait."

And so she did. Though she did make some more *Spell Papers*, as she figured she could never really have enough. And of course she put *Avatar of War* back on her sword. That evening, it seemed this farm was the meeting point of the hunt, so riders, the farm hands, Nita, her aunt... everyone crowded into the place to talk and laugh about what had happened. Nita said Susan wouldn't be noticed so she might as well come in and "have tea" with the others, which she did. Her presence wasn't questioned, and Susan was able to feel out everybody in the room to make sure they were all on the up and up.

And apart from Nita's aunt being a wizard, they all are. Human level energy across the board, and no sign of any dimensional shenanigans. Funny, did Nita tell me

her aunt was a wizard? I didn't think so, but I suppose it runs in families just like at home. Have to ask her about it later.

It was after midnight when the group finally broke up and went their separate ways. Nita and Susan hadn't stayed the whole time, but Susan was glad to help out cleaning the place up.

"Now, you don't have to do that!" Annie said to her. "You're as much a guest as anyone, and as you're still around you and Nita must really have become friends. Sit!"

Susan laughed. "Nope, I'm happy to help out. I've actually been going a bit stir crazy, waiting for whatever it is that's going to happen around here."

"Odd way of putting things."

"Oh, I'm where I need to be, that much is clear. Just a little ahead of schedule, that's all. I suppose that's for the best, letting me get a feel for how things are done around here." Susan meant this as 'the local physical laws as they relate to this reality' but she didn't elaborate.

"Ah." Annie seemed to understand, probably taking it to mean 'Ireland.' "I remember thinking something similar when I first came to Ireland. 'This is where I belong, but what do I do with myself here?' So I understand where you're coming from."

"You seem to have done all right."

"Oh, the farm? Yes, not bad, I suppose."

With the kitchen cleaned up, Susan and Nita said their goodnights and went back out to Nita's trailer. At least, they started to.

"Want to go look at the stars?" Nita suggested. "They're really nice around here."

Susan couldn't think of any reason not to, in particular, so she said sure and the two made their way out to a field where they could get a good view. She had to admit, even with the light cloud cover, there must not be much light pollution in this time and place, as the stars were pretty visible. They stood there, just taking in the night, when Susan heard a wolf howling in the distance.

Or not that distant, come to think of it. Wait, what has her so spooked?

Nita was looking around, seeming somewhat surprised.

"What's up?"

"I'm not sure, but there's one thing I can tell you."

"Don't leave me in suspense!"

"There are no wolves in Ireland."

"How in the world do you-" She broke off as the howl sounded again, louder, and Sparkle's ears perked up.

"Hooves," she said. "There's a horse or something being chased around here."

What's this? Two days of combat in a row? Maybe this world won't short me on XP after all.

The three peered through the gloom, straining to see in the moonlight that had gone behind a cloud seconds earlier, and they all saw the dark form galloping as fast as it could past the field. The creature was tall, and had antlers, but it didn't look like anything Susan had ever seen. Not hanging around these parts, anyway. She turned to

ask Nita if she knew what it was, but saw she was muttering to herself. *Probably casting a spell?*

When she looked back, Susan realized why. The elk or whatever it was wasn't just running along for the heck of it. There were creatures after it. As Susan made her blade appear and held it up for the light, she saw the gray fur of wolves, but not wolves of this world.

They seem more like those wolf creatures from Cloud's world, that they insisted weren't called wolves at all. Those aren't monsters, they're creatures... and they're coming this way.

"Don't *attract* them! Put that fire out!"

"No can do," said Susan, shaking her head. "You might want to get out of here, with that overlay of your or whatever that prevents you from using your power." *Huh, maybe I should ask my book for a spell to stabilize an area so she can use here wizardry around here. The book should be able to analyze the area if I leave it out.*

"I'm not leaving you alone!" she protested.

Susan jerked her head back, looking at Nita. She seemed scared, but defiant. "Wow, you have *Overconfident* too? Okay, in that case, just stay inside the circle, okay?"

"What circle?"

"This one. *For Sacrifices Made.*" With those words, Susan's *Legion* activated, and ringed the three of them. The area brightened considerably, and Nita shaded her eyes against the sudden light.

"What in the world-"

"Attack any wolf creature that gets close!" Susan commanded. The soldiers nodded, and went to work.

The ratio of wolf creatures to Susan's soldiers was slightly in favor of the soldiers, and the wolves circled the group to try and find any weak spots. The men of fire attacked bravely, if a magical construct can be said to act with any emotion at all, and with Susan hitting every wolf there for $(1d10+1d12)/3 + (2d10 \text{ fire damage})/3$ (which worked out to be between 1 and 13 damage every swing) they went down pretty fast. Especially when Sparkle got *Acceleration* going. Nita basically just stood there as the wolves were torn apart, gaping at what was going on. Given how complex a combat with 48 or so individuals would be, we'll just assume they won rather than hashing it out in excruciating detail.

"I am loving *Slash All* for groups!" said Susan, "which I guess is why it was invented in the first place." *If invented is the right word. It seems that world provided something useful to the people that lived there, because they had to fight off groups of "monsters" all the time while walking about. I mean such a thing would be quite useless here most of the time. Wonder if there's something to that...* She lowered her blade, the wolf creatures burning away before her eyes. *I forgot that my STrength is raised by half my Mars rating when I do this spell. Going to have to put more energy into it next time, I only raised it to a ten, which is silly. With a sixteen rating I could have a STrength of 8, plus an effective 2 for being a +1 size modifier larger. And of course the sword gets bigger, and a higher rating makes the fire damage better too! Win-win.*

"Come on," said Nita, "you destroyed the pack, and that'll make whatever is driving them rather angry."

“So let’s face him here, rather than have him come looking for us at say... the house?”

“Oh.”

The elk stepped out of the darkness, breathing heavily.

“Oh no, he’s hurt. Can you use your knife?”

Susan looked down to see the armor had molded itself around the knife, allowing for ease of drawing. Now that she looked at it, the gauntlets she was wearing had five edges, at least on her right side, each with a symbol on them. *My charm bracelet. I bet all I need to do is touch one of those and say the trigger word. This spell rocks! Of course it better, being grade 8! Actually, I’m going to get rid of Invulnerability and Avatar from the bracelet, as my sword does that now for me automatically. Maybe Augment Skill: Sword and... something else?*

“Sure,” she replied, transferring the sword to her left hand and pulling the knife. The elk stepped back, warily.

Nita spoke to it, which Susan got 70% of through her *Adaptive* skill. Something about the knife and healing, anyway. The creature didn’t spook as Susan approached, which she took to mean “go ahead” and plunged the knife in its side. The wounds healed, and it bowed its head. Then it got the heck out of there.

“That’s some healing spell,” remarked Nita, looking around cautiously. “It would have taken me five minutes to work even a basic kitting of those wounds.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t go to the moon, so it’s a tradeoff.”

“Maybe I can take you when this is all over.”

“Hey, I’d really like that!”

Hardly two minutes passed when the figure on horseback appeared out of the mists. Susan had arrayed her soldiers in front of her, five on the outside, then four, then two, and she was in the middle. In this configuration she could have them swarm whatever was coming.

“Get back, let me handle this,” she said to Nita.

“Getting back!”

Susan was used to looking down at things with this spell going, but on the horse this thing was riding, she could look it in what would have been eyes if it took the helmet off. Unlike the wolves, she couldn’t tell the health level of this thing. *Boss type. Bingo!*

“The Darkness, I presume?” she asked. “Showing yourself at last. It’s about time, if I may say so.”

“What did you call me?” asked the figure, voice slightly amused.

“The Dark- oh come on. Don’t tell me you’re some other creature of darkness and evil. How many boss types are around here, anyway? I already fought one wrong being, are you going to waste my time as well?”

“Evil is only seen by those too weak to take what they desire. But I see you’re a winner, as my pack seems to have been destroyed.”

“Yeah, can’t say I’m sorry about that. I like wolves, but these were a little too much. I couldn’t have them wandering the countryside, you understand.”

“Perhaps. How shall I repay you for the loss, I wonder?”

“Somehow I don’t think honorable combat is in the cards.”

“Correct! I’ll try not to *waste your time!*”

He spurred his horse forward, charging the group and pulling a sword that radiated cold and darkness from somewhere. This was the perfect counterpoint to the sword of fire and light held by Susan. Her *Legion*, commanded to protect her before he even arrived, jumped in the way. Susan slashed upwards with the sword, called shot body, on both the horse and the rider. The horse took two damage while the rider took three. He wasn’t able to dodge as he was busy swinging his blade at the line of soldiers on the right side. His blade sheered through two of them, armor and all, in one stroke. This triggered what they were supposed to do in that sort of situation- explode. The man’s armor seemed to take the blast, but the horse screamed, taking an additional three damage to the body and 5 damage to a leg.

Okay, don’t let him hit you, their armor is almost as good as mine.

The horse reared back, and the man fought to get it under control again. “Did you just sacrifice your own troops to try and destroy me?” he asked, a touch of wonder in his voice. “How... me.”

“Yeah, and I’m real upset about their loss, as you can see. We doing this thing or what?”

The *Legion* waited, as the horse had danced back a bit, so they didn’t see him as attacking now.

“As you can see,” the figure continued, “I am quite unharmed by the blast, though I did feel a bit of a tingle as you swung that sword. What was that, exactly?”

“Come down here and you can get a more intimate look.”

“No doubt I will, after plucking it from your corpse. However I fear for my horse, should I approach again. As I said, you cannot hurt me with those odd soldiers, so why not dismiss them and let us settle this matter one on one?”

“Don’t do it!” hissed Nita. “You can’t beat him!”

Susan shrugged. “How do you know what I can and can’t do? Anyway, he has a point. You saw how easily he cut two down, and I don’t want the horse to get killed. It’s innocent, right?”

“I’ll miss you.”

The figure laughed. “For all your strange power, your friend Nita there seems to have a better grasp on the situation you’re in than you do.”

“Oh, don’t be so sure,” said Susan, dismissing the *Legion*. The night was now only illuminated by Susan’s flaming blade, and the stars peaking through the thin clouds above. As man slid down off the horse, which backed away, Susan cast *Augment Skill: Sword*, making a brief flash of magical light swirl around her. “What was that all about?” he asked as he raised his blade.

Susan mirrored the action, replying “You’ll find out in a moment,” and took a step forward.

“Very well, I’ll show you just how small you are!” he cried, leaning forward to begin running.

“You have no idea what you’re in for,” said both, and charged.

50

Clash with Evil

Time: 1 Segment later

Place: Field near the farmhouse

Susan, having covered twice the distance as her opponent which seemed to startle him a bit, thrust her sword towards his chest. She knew slashing would be foolish as the armor would just take it, and it would have a better chance of bouncing off.

Or no, wait, it doesn't matter which kind of strike I use, does it? It's the attack roll that determines if I get through the armor or not. Silly of me, what was I thinking?

The dark figure before her seemed ready for that, changing his strike into a block at the last second. Sparks flew from the clash, and Susan felt the STREngth of his arms as her strike was deflected.

I'm holding this sword in two hands, he deflected it with only one. Yeah, this might not be easy.

"Successful Strike," Sparkle cast on Susan, giving her an eleven bonus on her next swing.

Or maybe it will?

Susan attacked again, forcing the figure back a step, surprised at how fast she was moving. Of course she rolled minimum, which was still a twenty one, and ties go to the defender. Again, a great clash and sparks as the swords of cold and fire smashed into each other.

Susan delayed a segment, waiting for Sparkle, as she knew they were both under *Acceleration*. She needn't have worried, another "Successful Strike" came her way immediately. Getting a much better twenty seven, he still managed to block, again as ties go to the defender.

This time, however, Susan had put energy into STREngth, and at this point nearly sheered through her opponent's blade. With the fire and physical damage it had sustained from the repeated hits it was now mangled almost beyond recognition. (Technically the DC was now 7, down from 100. Susan was just that strong now, and even with the icy nature of the blade negating ½ the fire damage, it was pretty beat up.)

Sparkle cast again, as why change a winning strategy, and Susan didn't even have to delay this time as she was now already one segment behind. She swung, intending to shear through the sword and actually hit this guy finally, but her blade whistled through empty air. Her opponent was no longer in front of her, rather several meters back and throwing his now useless sword down.

"Give up?" Susan sneered.

"I don't know how you managed to keep up with me, let alone actually damage my blade, but you'll pay for it. And for the loss of my wolves."

He raised both his hands, speaking gibberish, and a ball of darkness appeared between them.

Susan smiled. *This is The Darkness, I've seen him use that attack before. Pity I don't have another Tom to sacrifice to drive him away this time. Still, I have something better.*

"Mimic," she cried, taking one hand off her blade and thrusting it out boldly before her. She felt something odd, and a sphere of darkness appeared before her.

“Impossible!” cried the figure, holding the orb in front of him, having completed his incantation. “You can’t possibly channel the same energy I do!”

“Guess it’s just me playing tricks on you then,” Susan remarked. “and you have nothing to fear.”

“Fear? Me!? I fear nothing!” From the ball a beam of dark energy shot out towards Susan, and her *Mimic Materia*, doing the job it was created for, mirrored the attack. The two beams met closer to Susan than to her opponent, as she was necessarily behind the timing of the attack. Still, when the two met there was a tremendous explosion of energy, throwing everything back and creating a crater in the ground where the forces had clashed.

Susan blinked, her ears ringing, and tried to clear her head. She was flat on her back, but seemed unharmed, the armor surrounding her having taken the blast. Her spell was still going, and she was still *Accelerated*, so she knew Sparkle was okay. *She was further from the blast and somewhat behind me anyway.*

Something fell on her with the thump, and she squinted up at the dark form of her opponent, now atop her and trying to strangle her with his hands.

“Impossible! Impossible!” he kept shouting. “What are you? How did you work that wizardry? Only I should have access to that power!”

Okay, so this guy isn’t The Darkness then? Because he’s certainly acting like he isn’t. Whatever.

“Oh, so the big bad doesn’t know everything? I guess you’re really not who I’ve been looking for. And that means my waiting for and fighting you has been a complete waste of my time after all. *Elemental Bolt: Fire!*”

Susan stopped trying to pry his hands away from her armored neck and instead drove them both against his armored body. Spells can be cast on more than one target, and in this case, the spell caused a magical attack to issue from a hand. She just cast it concentrating on both hands, and got two magical fire attacks for the price of one. The only downside was the -2 to the attack. Of course, it didn’t really matter, as she couldn’t miss, him being atop her and everything. She threw maximum energy into them, which for her was now twenty three, as she had made a *Spirit Manipulation* check while she was talking. This slammed him with a total of over fifty damage, and he staggered back off of her.

He looked down, two holes in his armor and dripping blood.

“Imposs-” He vanished.

Susan made a check to stand up in a single action, then grabbed for her sword and looked around. Sparkle and Nita were just getting up, and both the figure and horse were gone.

“That seems to be that,” Susan said, offering a hand to Nita. “You okay? Want the knife?”

“I’m fine, just winded. What happened?” She looked over at the hole in the ground, dimly lit from the fire along Susan’s blade. “Is He gone?”

“Yeah, I won. We better go though, that noise was sure to attract attention. And I don’t want to be the one explaining where it came from. You okay, Sparkle?”

“I’ll be fine,” came her voice as she padded up to the pair out of the darkness.

“Wait, you won? How is that... no, you’re right. Come on.”

Susan felt her spells end, the scene over, and reabsorbed her blade. The two made their way over to Nita's trailer, and she let them all inside.

She snapped on the light. "Okay, you're going to tell me who you are."

"What are you talking about?" Susan was genuinely confused. "I have told you."

"No way. You just drove off the Lone Power in physical combat! And I saw you use the same attack He did at the end. There's no way you could have done that, it was wizardry!"

"So? He wasn't even really that tough, if you want to put a fine point on it."

"*Not really*- He's death! What did you do to him?"

"I beat him. Look, I'm not sure he's The Darkness or not, but he seems close enough. He has to obey the rules while he's here, just like The Darkness does. Oh sure, he might have a little extra knowledge, a little extra power, but he's limited by the body he finds himself in. That's why Darkness has always gone for, to be honest, people like me, or huge dragons or whatever. So he can be as powerful as a dimension allows."

Nita shook her head. "No, you don't get it. I've seen Him at work. When I rescued my sister from Him, He was throwing around forces you can't believe. And in the end He was dark and terrible and hardly physical at all."

"Really? I have to wonder. I mean if that's true, why not just kill you? We're really quite fragile when it comes down to it."

"Believe me, he was trying."

"Well, he was trying with me, and we both survived. So why the surprise?"

"But I didn't drive him off. My sister did something, I'm still not sure what. She doesn't like to talk about it."

"Ah, okay, if you say so. Your much younger sister, who had wizardry what, a day, you said? She beat your guy but it's all shock and awe when I do? If he's so terrible and powerful, why not just, I don't know, drop a big rock on you from space? Do it while you're asleep and his problem is solved. There must be a million ways to kill wizards without getting near them, for someone as determined as he no doubt is. I mean you have sniper rifles around here, right?"

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe he's not all that. Maybe, like The Darkness, he's more limited than you want to believe, and he's used trickery to make you think he's not every time you've seen him."

"I can't see that being true."

"What's the alternative? That a couple of kids can really beat up the thing that invented death? Basically a god? I buy my explanation more than I buy yours. Sorry. I mean, hand me your manual."

Nita handed it over and Susan paged through it.

"Right here. Creation story- The main power of the universe wanted us all to exist, so that being created lesser beings and told them to get busy. They were each given a bit of power to do what they needed to do. Well, your guy took his power and created death. The others found out, but it was too late. That energy had been spent, so it was gone. What was left? A bunch of beings that had served their purpose, spent their energies, and now needed something else to do with their existence. Real great foresight there on the part of your big kahuna. Well, your guy now goes around making your life miserable, but what power does he have to back it up with? He spent his

creation energy making death. Now all he has is what you've got. Wizardry. There's nothing he can do that you couldn't do with study and dedication. Right?"

"But He's a power!" Nita protested.

"He was. But he wants to come here and he has to take a physical body to do it. That's what I was fighting. He took the body of a swordsman, I met him as a swordsman. He didn't expect my speed or skill, because they were magically enhanced. Then he threw wizardry at me, and I used my *Mimic Materia* to throw it back at him. At that point he lost it, got in close, and I threw fire at him point blank. I don't care who you are, that kind of damage is going to hurt."

"You're saying everything I've seen him do; dousing the sun, throwing around energy bolts, that was all a trick?"

"Possibly. He wants you to think he's all powerful so you don't seriously go after him. So you stay afraid to try and keep thinking you're nothing compared to him. And from what you just told me, that's exactly what's happened! So he's done his work well. This last time, according to this," she flipped the book to the back, where the record of her "adventures" was kept, "you put up a shield, let him bash at you a bit, then tried teleporting him home. It sort of worked, but he was back in seconds. Did you try any wizardry to cause him *actual harm*? Did your partner Kit? He's still only one being, three wizards working together could have slipped past his defenses, yes? While he's fending off a fireball from one quarter you smack him with a lightning bolt from another, while your sister throws saw blades at his legs. How could he counter all that? I mean the teleport thing worked, so wizardry can touch him. You should have been exploding his brains not just distracting him for a moment. But you didn't attack, none of you did. I mean your partner just stood there like a lump, why is he even a wizard in that case? You didn't even try from what I read here. What, exactly, did you think you were doing there? I mean you went there weaponless!"

"I thought I was there to rescue my sister."

"Yes, and a fat lot of good it did you. She saved you, with that thing she doesn't like to talk about. In fact even if you had never shown up, things would have worked out just fine. She didn't need you at all, so what was the point?"

"You weren't there, you don't know what it was like!"

"Yes, that's true. But I was here, and I fought, and I won. Because I tried. You didn't. So don't look so shocked and demand to know what I am when I do. I've told you. I'm Susan Felton, dimensional traveler and Natural Magician, and that's all there is to it."

"Uh, is this a bad time?" asked another voice from the door. Both girls froze and slowly turned their heads. They were standing close to each other, and Susan had been waving the "So You Want to Be a Wizard" book in the air while shouting at Nita. Nita's hands were clenched into fists, and it seemed she was trying to hold herself back from doing something she might come to regret. There in the doorway stood her aunt, eyes wide as she took in the scene. "I came to see if you girls were okay, and I heard shouting. Sorry for barging in like this." She started to close the door.

"Wait, we were just, uh, talking," said Nita, jumping away from Susan and yanking the door open again. "We're fine, why wouldn't we be?"

"Something exploded out in the field, and the place is all torn up. I just wanted to make sure you were both okay."

“Exploded? Any idea what?” asked Susan, tossing the book down. Annie’s eyes flicked to it, then back to Susan. She looked around the room, where it was quite obvious two girls were living.

“No. Are you... staying here?”

“Ah, for the moment?” Susan hedged, “We didn’t tell you because, uh, well there are... the thing is...”

Annie put her hands up. “It’s none of my business. But Nita, your folks sent you here because they thought you needed to get away from Kit for a while. Did you immediately jump into bed with... her? Should I tell them not to worry, or to be more worried than ever?”

Nita blushed furiously. “No I did not!” she protested. “Why is everyone always thinking that about me? Honestly, there’s just... stuff going on. It’s complicated, and it’s fine.”

“If you ever want to talk, I’m here.”

“Aarg, there’s nothing to talk about!”

“There really isn’t,” put in Susan, perhaps a little more wistfully than one would expect.

“And your being a, what did you call yourself? A natural magician?”

“I am.”

“Uh huh.” She glanced at Nita as if to ask “is this girl insane?”

“It’s fine, Aunt Annie. I know what she’s talking about. Thank you for coming to check on us.”

“Right. I’ll be up the house if you need anything.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

“Night.”

“Sorry if I got you in trouble,” Susan said a moment after she left. Nita put her book away again and flopped down on the bed.

“It’s fine,” Nita said, waving it away. “Sorry for shouting at you. I was just a bit shocked at what happened, that’s all.”

“That’s not an uncommon reaction when she’s around,” said Sparkle. “I think she delights in it.” Susan nodded quickly, a strange smile on her face. “Yeah, figured. Should we be worried that thing will come back tonight? Should we keep a watch?”

“He’s never attacked me in my bed before,” Nita said with a shrug. “Which, now that you mention it, would be the preferred strategy to get rid of us wizards. The fact He doesn’t must mean something, but I’m not sure what.”

“It’s something to think about, anyway,” said Susan.

“The other thing to think about is what just happened,” said Sparkle. “You say there aren’t wolves around here, but those things weren’t wolves. And what about that hoofed creature? You might have been busy so I did a reading on it. It wasn’t from around here either. So did the big bad make all that happen for some reason or did the hunt begin and just spilled over into our world?”

“That’s an excellent point,” admitted Nita. “I didn’t get a good look at the size of that hole, but it’s bound to cause some questions. How did you do that, anyway?”

Susan pulled her sleeve up and showed Nita her *Wizard Bracelet*. "This. A little something I collected the last place I visited." *Wizard Bracelet... now that I think about it, is this thing I'm wearing the very definition of irony on this world?*

She looked the slightly glowing spheres over, found the one she wanted, and popped the *Mimic Materia* off it so she should show Nita. "This. It'll let me do anything I see done, special power wise. Magic, spirit energy, any kind of supernatural power. I just threw an exact copy of his energy attack back at him. That's all."

"Far out." She handed it back.

"First time I was able to use it. I think it'll be worth the XP cost to convert over. So, what do we do?" She put the sphere back, winced as the sword went back into her hand, and healed the wound with the knife.

"Get some local help, I suppose. We'll need to thicken the walls around here somehow, keep things like that from happening again."

"Can you though? I mean this magic pollution you talked about..."

"If we get some wizards who focus on keeping things in check while the others work, it should be fine."

"Is that lone power to blame, then?" asked Sparkle. "I mean if he's causing this directly so he can have fun chasing stuff from other worlds into this one, he'll be resisting your efforts."

"Good thing we have someone here that can beat the snot out of him," she replied with a grin.

"Oh yeah, thanks for the assist by the way," said Susan. "You've never used *Successful Strike* like that, have you?"

"Never needed to, that was your first real sword fight. Aerith's world doesn't count."

"True. Worked pretty well."

"Good to know, I'll keep it up. As long as it's just one opponent, anyway. *Elemental Line* is better for groups."

"You hit those wolves with it a time or two, right?"

"I did."

"Thought they went down pretty fast. All right. I guess we'll get some sleep and in the morning, consult the wizard book about who to talk to that can help us out."

"You know," said Nita thoughtfully, "If it was Him directly maybe you driving him off like you did will have solved the problem already. I mean I doubt it, but we can hope, right?"

"Sure. It would solve your problem, anyway. I still have mine, where is The Darkness hiding? That battle didn't seem epic enough for my guy, based on past experience. He likes to put on a show, smash a mountain or two or grow a wing or six. You know, bad guy stuff. One deer or whatever that was? Nah, not his style. That attack was so similar though, I was sure it was him."

"You would know better than me," said Nita.

"He could still have been acting," said Sparkle. "Trying to throw us off, keep looking rather than focus on finding him now that we've seen him."

"Yeah. Well, he'll be back one way or the other I guess. I mean if I was him, I would want the body of the local embodiment of death, right? That's where the power would be."

“But maybe he’s smart enough to know you would guess that, and so stayed away from that body figuring that’s how you would think.”

“So it’s a game of cat and mouse, and I can’t be sure who the mouse is?”

“But I’m the cat,” said Sparkle, flexing her claws. “What does that make you?”

“The cat’s very, very good friend.”

Both laughed.

Oh the things she knows

Time: The next day

Place: Bidy's Farm

"So what are we doing out here again?" asked Nita, looking around. The two girls, having *Teleported* to the farmhouse Susan had battled Bidy, were now standing on her front step about to ring her doorbell.

"Seeing what she knows. She did say that we should ask her if we needed help. You want to go visit wizards in the area. Not sure what good that will do us, they will no doubt be as clueless as we are right now. All of you having the same information from that... where did you put your book anyway?"

"Otherspace. Carefully, because of the magical radiation around here."

"Ah, right. Anyway, if the book could tell us the answer, it would have already. It obviously can't or won't, so we'll go ask the next best thing- one of the people that helped make the world around here."

"Usually we go up the chain of command, so to speak. I should be talking with other local wizards, then if they think it's appropriate, to the area senior."

Susan laughed. "Area senior? You have a girl (and cat) from another world wandering around who has told you about a creature of malevolence that wants to cut your "branch" off from the "tree" and take the power of your dimension for itself. What do you think another wizard at your level is going to do about that? I need to find the Darkness or the "event" that The Darkness is going to use to trigger the extinction event here. That should hopefully solve your problem of going sideways."

"Why do you figure that?"

"Easy. With The Darkness gone, whatever event is getting set up around here goes away, and things go back to normal."

"I guess you could be right. Do you hear a banging?"

They stood and listened. There was a rhythmic banging coming from the direction of the forge, at least Sparkle's ears swiveled in that direction.

"No," said Susan, her *Poor Sense* weakness once again making a brief appearance.

"Come on, she's probably working at this hour."

Susan followed her into the back, where indeed, Bidy was working on something long, pointy, and probably sharp.

"Making something for our rematch?" asked Susan, looking it over. Bidy didn't turn, continuing her pounding on the glowing iron whatever it was she was making.

"Are we... having a... rematch?" she asked between swings.

"Only if you want to lose to me a second time."

"Please, we're here to ask for her help!" said Nita, glaring over at Susan. "Not bicker about past misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings, right," said Bidy.

"The truth is, if you can tell us what's going on, maybe we can fix it and all get back to our normal lives. I can move on, everyone's happy."

"Little busy right now," she said, shoving the object back into the forge fire.

"I'll wait," said Susan, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall. Bidy glanced over at her, sighed, and went back to work.

Some time later, Nita, who had been watching her quite closely, spoke up again. "What are you making, exactly? It looks like a weapon."

"I'm just getting back into practice," she explained. "I have a feeling I'm going to be making the real thing soon enough."

"What real thing? This one isn't real enough for you?" asked Susan.

"Not in the way you would understand it. Look, I can stop soon, just let me work here, okay?"

"Okay."

Finally she left the metal to cool and stripped off her heavy gloves. "All right, let's go up to the house for some tea and we can talk."

Ugh, more tea.

"So what do you want to know?" she asked, cup in hand. The girls were sitting at her kitchen table, which looked perfectly ordinary in every way. Susan looked around, considering.

"What?"

"You're some kind of other worldly being, right? One of the original creators of the world?"

"She doesn't mean any disrespect!" Nita hastened to put in.

"It's fine. Actually, meeting someone that doesn't go all weak at the knees on meeting me is kind of novel." Her eyes narrowed a bit over her cup. "Just don't take it too far."

"Right, wouldn't want to have to beat you up again," said Susan, taking a sip. "The point is, don't people notice?"

"Notice what? Is there something in here that shouldn't be?" She looked around.

"What, no, the place is incidental. I mean don't they notice you're not aging? I mean you've been around since the beginning, right? How do you do it? Shape-shifting? Magic to keep people from thinking about it too much? Illusion?"

"Is that really what you came here to talk about?"

"No, just a thought I had. Okay, to business then. What's going on around here that's allowing people to travel to other realities so easily?"

"And how do we put a stop to it?" continued Nita.

"More than likely it's about time for a reenactment around here. Probably the battle involving Balor that took place here some time ago."

"Another one?" groaned Nita. "The last one nearly got me killed, I only got off on a technicality." Susan looked at her questioningly. "'Read the fine print!' the bird tells me. HA! No more agreeing to stuff without knowing what I'm getting into for me, that's for sure."

"Okay, you two know what you're talking about, but I don't. Care to share?"

"Places that experience pivotal moments in history, and wizardry, tend to remember them," Bidy began. "This can cause them to repeat somewhat, and cause trouble for us now. Thus, the wizards of today have to go and fill the rolls that were

played by wizards in the past. This puts the events to rest for a time and everything goes back to normal.”

“And this Balor fellow?”

“Another name and form the Lone Power took.”

“Oh, that guy I made retreat last night, right. But if he was defeated before, what’s the danger of this ‘recording’ as you put it?”

“That’s just the thing, he’s a Power, like I am. He doesn’t exist in the same time as you do. If that ‘recording’ of him should be unopposed, or if the wizards of today lose... well, he would be free to continue doing whatever it was he was trying to do the first time.”

Susan looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “That which holds the image of the Weeping Angel becomes an Angel.” The others looked curiously at her. “Just something from my world. Maybe you’ll get it in twenty years or so. The point is, to make sure I’m understanding this correctly, we need to enact a kind of play to keep the image of Balor in check. Except if you die in the play, you actually die. And if everybody dies, things here get much, much, worse.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“And that’s why you’re forging a weapon?” Nita asked.

“That’s why I’m practicing forging a weapon. Like I said, the real one will have to be made of sterner stuff.”

“Not sure what that means but given a little time, my magic can make anything you forge practically indestructible.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Meanwhile, you’ll need to find the other ‘props’ so that the play goes on smoothly.”

“Ah, a fetch quest!” said Sparkle. “That’s good for XP all right.”

“Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem,” said Susan excitedly. “What are they?”

“The physical embodiments of the four elements. The spear, that’s what I’m working on, is fire. You need to find the others. At least, something that can serve to represent the elements. The old objects that held the power are still around here, I can get you the address of the museum you’ll find two of them in. The rock is just sitting out in a field someplace north of here. If you can rekindle their power, they can serve again. If not, find another object that’s similar and can hold the spirit of the element. Don’t worry about moving the rock or anything, it can stay right where it is. Just wake it up.”

“Hey, I’m not going to carry around... okay, I probably would show off by yanking it out and bringing it.”

“Wow, she knows you that well already?” asked Sparkle.

Susan stuck her tongue out at her.

“Does this all solve your problem though?” asked Nita.

“It sounds like it. If I know The Darkness, and I like to think I do, that’s where it’ll be. This ‘recording’ of yours sounds like a good place to camp out and gather power from. It’ll have taken the image over, augmented it with whatever skills or powers the body can support, and use it as a jumping off point. Plus the timing is right, this one event, just days before I arrived? That’s our guy.”

“Okay. Get us the address and we’ll go take a look at these objects. Should we bring them back here, or what?”

"I'm really not supposed to be helping even this much, you know," Biddy protested. "This all is what we made wizards for. Give the objects to them."

"Oh, right. The bunch of you let one of your own invent death, and now it's up to us to clean it up- until the end of time. Even though you're supposed to be like gods around here, you spend your time repairing horseshoes. Right."

"Don't push it, little traveler," Biddy growled. "I could take my real form and crush you. It would mean the end of this persona, but that might be a small price to pay."

"Oh, so your buddy the Lone Power doesn't have a monopoly on destroying things, huh? I'm just calling them like I see them, okay?"

"Girls, please, we're all on the same side," said Nita, standing up and pulling Susan up with her. "Can we get that address, please?"

"Sure." Biddy dashed off an address on some paper and thrust it at Nita. "Hopefully you won't need any more of my help after this."

"You've been a big help, thank you. We'll do our best."

"If you change your mind though, decide you want to protect this land you seem to love, you know where to find us," Susan called as Nita pulled her out the door. Sparkle followed.

"What's your problem?" Nita asked as the three walked away from the house.

"My problem is with people that have power and don't use it. My father got his amazing magic and abilities for a reason- to save his world and others from The Darkness. I inherited it and have taken up his fight. I have the magic, and I've always used it to help whomever I could. But her? She's one of the original beings but she may as well be powerless for all the good any knowledge of wizardry does her. Even doing things on the sly- how many stupid, pointless deaths have happened while she was putzing around with her silly forge? And if she's any indication, her fellow creators are just as bad, sitting around letting you wizards take the risks to fix their mistakes!"

"Oh," said Nita after a moment. "I'm starting to understand you a little, I think. That's why you can't just sit in the sun on a lazy afternoon, isn't it? You have to be doing something, anything, because you feel your power demands it. You have spider-man syndrome."

Susan snorted. "Spider-man syndrome? That's a new one. But sure, that's one way of putting it. That, and wasting time here means another day my father and Luna are out there, somewhere, lost or captured or whatever. My father knew the risks, and Luna did too, but we were supposed to face them together. I let her down, and I have to fix that. I can't move forward until this world is safe, because even I can't weigh one life against an entire dimension."

"Let's get started then."

"Finally."

The pair rode the bus to the address given to them by Biddy, which was a museum.

"What exactly are we looking for?" asked Susan, looking around.

"I guess something that embodies an element?" hedged Nita. "We know fire and earth aren't here, so something that represents water and air. You can feel things out, right?"

“Guess we’ll have to. Bidy could have mentioned exactly what we were looking for.”

“Maybe she would have, if you had been nicer.”

“I’ll choose to believe I was as nice as I could be, and she was the jerk. It would seem to fit my worldview better that way.”

Nita rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

The three poked around, looking at ancient art, artifacts, and stuff people of the time would have thrown out as trash. Nita was drawn back to a chalice; a two feet high metal cup, encrusted with jewels and seemingly made of gold. It wasn’t just sitting out for any fool to grab, however, it was locked in a case made of thick glass. A spotlight from above shone down on it, and Susan wandered over to her.

“You think this?” she asked, pointing to the cup.

“See those designs? Those are old binding spells, engraved into the metal. And if you feel it out, it feels like it’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping, huh?” Susan tried *Magic Sense*, (minimum, an 8) *Spirit Sense* (even worse, a 7), *Dimension Sense* (an 11) and felt nothing. She said as much.

“Can you even feel wizardry?”

“Not sure. I can tell if an active spell is on something, or if it has spiritual power, but if what Bidy said was true, this cup has neither. And it was made around here, so it wouldn’t show up to *Dimension Sense*. You getting anything, Sparkle?”

“Not a thing.”

“There you go. Still, a cup for water would fit. We just need to get it out of there and wake it up. I guess you’ll have to handle the second part. I can handle the first.”

“Are you crazy?” Nita hissed, eyes darting about. “You aren’t just going to swipe it are you?”

Susan barked a laugh. “I’m not dumb, you know. I’ll wait until we’re outside at least. Gosh, you think I want security guards after me? I might hurt them accidentally, that would be no good.”

“Thank goodness for- wait, how could you get it while you were outside?”

Susan touched her nose. “Magic.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Okay, so look for that funny writing, huh? Maybe we can find something for air too. She said both were here.”

Susan didn’t expect to find much, given her failure with the cup, but she could look for weird writing on stuff with the best of them. They both looked for about an hour, but apart from a really old sword Nita thought might have been suitable once, they didn’t find anything promising.

“Wouldn’t they decay at the same rate though?” asked Susan as they walked out of the building. “I mean they must have been used at the same time, whenever the last ‘reenactment’ was performed.”

“I think it depends on a lot of things,” explained Nita. “How skilled was the person that put the spirit of the element into the object? How much care was taken creating the vessel? How powerful is the spirit?”

“Wait, they must all be the same power level.”

“Not necessarily. Which is there more of in Ireland? Air or fire? Water or earth?”

“Only the Avatar can master all four- never mind. So does a stronger spirit decay faster or slower? The vessel might not contain a stronger spirit as long as a weaker one. But a weaker one would have less far to go to become useless. So again, wouldn't that balance out?”

“You got me. So can you really steal the cup?”

“Sure. You want it now or what?”

“We'll have to study it, see if we can wake it up. We had better do it someplace out of the way, though. I don't want someone coming by and seeing us staring intently at a cup made of a million dollars' worth of solid gold.”

“Wow, was gold that high in the 90s?”

“You know what I mean!”

“Okay. We could take it to my workshop, plenty of room there with all that potion making stuff gone.”

“Workshop? What workshop?”

“The one I keep in my pocket. You'll see. For now let's head back to your place. We'll step in and out from there, save us time later.”

“Okay. I hate to just steal it though.”

“We can give it back later. Again, it's about using the power properly. What good is the cup doing the world just sitting in that case there? And we aren't melting it down or anything, the cup will still exist. It'll just be doing the job it was created to do, rather than gathering dust in that case.”

“Can it gather dust in that case?” asked Sparkle. “It looked pretty solid to me.”

“Dust finds a way.”

“I thought that was life?”

“Works for a lot of things. Love, mustard stains, getting senpai to notice me...”

“Getting what?” asked Nita.

“Look it up in fifteen years or so.”

“Yeah, I- I'll do that. That aside, shouldn't we, I don't know, hand it over to some better wizards?”

Susan gave her a “don't you trust me?” look. “Believe me, I can become better than any wizards you have around here. I can make you better, too. With the three of us working on it, I'm sure we'll have the cup cracked in no time. And by cracked, I mean fixed.”

“The three of us? Who's the third?”

“Me,” said Sparkle indigently. “I have the *Adaptive* skill, same as she does. And I think I know what she has in mind, too.”

“Do tell.”

“Cheating.”

“It's only cheating if you get caught. Come on.”

So the three made their way back to the trailer, and slipped around behind it. Susan had gotten out her notes on *Personal Dimension*, a spell she still needed to cast from writings. She did a quick *Retrieval* and handed the cup over to Nita, who stared it at.

“I'm really holding it.”

“Yeah, did you think we came all the way back here so I could say ‘whoops, I can’t magically magic it into my hand after all. How stupid am I?’ and giggle? No, we came to study it, and that’s what we’re going to do. Besides, you could have done it with wizardry, right? I mean if you can go to the moon (as you claim) then you must be able to talk an object into your hand.” *Though, as usual, I’m the only one doing any magic around here.*

“I suppose normally, yes. I wouldn’t want to try it around here without some precautions though.”

And that’s the other reason for suggesting my Personal Dimension. This will require wizardry, and thus far apart from a small light spell and knocking herself out, I haven’t seen my new friend here do much of that stuff. I’d like to see what she can do, before I go to do some kind of highly dangerous reenactment with her. I’d like to know what she’s capable of.

“Fair enough,” she said. “Now it’ll take some time to open this, don’t disturb me, please.”

With that, Susan started casting the nine minute spell (double that because of doing it from writings) but cutting it down some with energy. *Higher grade spells are so weird. The higher grade spell of Dimension Gate only takes two seconds, while Legion would normally take twenty minutes. I guess magic really is unfathomable.*

The spell completed, Susan beckoned Nita inside, and both stepped in. Nita took in the gently sloping hillside that ended in Susan’s cottage by the lake.

“Are those solar panels on your little house down there?” she asked, squinting into the distance.

“Yeah, they keep my refrigerator running. Had to get rid of most of the food, I couldn’t access this place for a bit. I should put a permanent spell of ‘food not spoiling’ on it somehow. Anyway, come see, and we can get work.”

Susan started down the hill, Sparkle and a somewhat impressed Nita trailing along behind them.

Nita continued to be impressed as she looked about the workshop and the surrounding area. The lake, pond, trees, grass, and clouds were all as Susan remembered them.

And if they weren't, what exactly would that mean?

"Where are we, exactly?" asked Nita, having poked around the place.

"Good question," Susan answered. "I never stopped to consider the physical locality of my *Personal* and *Pocket Dimensions*. They come along with me when I transit to other realities, so they aren't tied to that. But yet the objects inside exist, and if I died they would all come tumbling out on top of my corpse. And it was explained to me that any object unique to a world would get left there, even inside here, hence the need for the sub-space pocket."

"Even the house?" she asked, shocked.

"No, no, the house was part of the *Dimension*. I envisioned it the first time I cast the spell, along with the lake, the mountains, the caves under the mountains, the trees, all of it. Take any part of the original envisioning out of here, and it would just vanish. No, only the stuff I brought in here afterwards would appear. Humm, how does that work?" Susan made a *Topics: Dimension* check, getting a twelve. "Maybe the objects are rooted to me, but out of phase with local reality? Then the magic is simply reorienting them when it's cast."

"I don't suppose it matters. I just wondered if I could come up with something similar."

"Why not? Your magic is about describing things, right? And you obviously have a similar 'spell' to my *Pocket Dimension* that you keep stuff in. Just describe yourself a little hideaway."

"Just describe it, she says. Do you know how complex that would be? You would have to name each and every blade of grass, every rock, every piece of timber in a house-

"So just make the ground and build everything else yourself."

Nita considered. "That would actually be easier. It's so weird, all this." She spread her hands to indicate everything she saw outside. "I'm usually pretty good with life, and this stuff *looks* alive, like that's a tree over there. But it doesn't *feel* alive. It's kind of freaky."

"Well, yeah, it's just magic in a certain shape. It wouldn't grow or change, or die. I mean I wouldn't want to have to come in here and cut the grass every week, now would I?" She laughed.

"I don't suppose you would. It's not fair, you getting to just cast one spell and get all this."

"Yeah, well, it's not fair that I had to leave home and track down my father, either. Or come here to save your reality from being gobbled up. But what can you do?"

"I see what you mean. Well," she hefted the cup, "shall we get to work?"

Susan smiled broadly. "Oh yeah, cheating time!"

“You said that before, what did you mean?”

“Set it down over here and I’ll show you.”

The two went into the workshop part of the cabin, and Nita put the cup down on the potion stained table.

“This area’s seen a lot of activity,” she remarked.

“Yup, good times, good times. Now, for a bit more magic!”

Susan grabbed some paper out of a nearby notebook, and for several minutes created three new *Spell Papers*. When she was done she handed one to Nita. “Now, to activate it, just put your hand over it, think about getting better at wizardry, and say ‘activate.’”

“And it’ll make me better at wizardry?” she asked, unconvinced.

“That’s the hope. If not you, then at least Sparkle and myself. See, the description for *Augment Skill* specifically says ‘This does not provide a bonus to any Planet skills.’ Like somehow the magic knows one skill is different than another. But whatever. This isn’t a planet skill. Now as I see it, your skill at wizardry is broken up into at least two parts. Reading the language in your book and your pronunciation of the words. I remember a story from my world about these robots, right? Only one person in the world could control them perfectly because you had to tell them what you wanted them to do, and only she could get the pronunciation of the words right. Now maybe you have a third skill, some ‘magic doing’ skill? I don’t know. Point is, my magic should figure out what you need to get better if you ask it. Now me, I’m not your type of magic user. But I have a single skill, granted to me by nature of me moving between realities. That of *Adaptive Skill*. This takes the place of whatever you do in order to do wizardry, that lets me do wizardry. On another world, it might let me use the Force or whatever.”

“Wasn’t that from a movie?”

“You get the idea. Upshot is, that isn’t a Planet skill either. So I can *Augment* it, far beyond the levels of whatever normal humans can do in this world.”

“In other words, cheating.”

“Isn’t it great!?” Susan was excited.

“I guess if it gets the job done. But why this? You do magic without this, I’ve seen you.” She held up the *Paper*.

“It’s about how I cast magic. I could cast it on all three of us at once, maintain it once, but take a -3 penalty. Or cast it three times, take no penalty to the casting, but have to maintain it three times! That would mean a -6 to everything I did, making me useless for this effort. These,” she indicated the *Papers*, “work around that.”

“More cheating?”

“If you like. The symbol on the paper holds the spell rather than myself. It’s like a one time use *Imbuing* without all the time, effort, XP or monetary cost. This gives us the best of both worlds, I don’t have to maintain it even once, and there’s no penalty to me, despite my benefiting from the whole deal.”

“Guess we’ll see what happens.” She put her hand on it and magic swirled around her as she spoke the trigger word. Susan and Sparkle followed suit, and checked their character sheets. Their ratings were now rather obscenely high in *Adaptive Skill*, given the energy Susan had put into the spell, and the three got to work.

With a now greater understanding of Wizardry than ever before, the three worked off Nita's copy of 'So you Want to be a Wizard' and created a new spell to put the soul of water back into the cup. Susan found she could read and understand the language of the book perfectly now, and while her understanding of the forces needed to bring the 'spirit' of water back to the cup were incomplete, both her and Sparkle were able to make assist checks in writing the actual spell.

"I have to say, creating spells in Wizardry is much easier than creating them in magic," remarked Susan when they were done. "It takes me days, and I have to 'consume materials' which I still don't quite understand the purpose of. We just kind of dashed that off."

"It's usually not this easy though," countered Nita. "Your spell must really be working."

"Naturally, as Simon the Chipmunk would say at Christmas time."

"Don't let her fool you. She used more than half her considerable amount of energy to create those spell papers," said Sparkle. "You really do like throwing energy around, don't you?"

"It was important. And it's not like we can get attacked here. I've gotten 8 back already, sitting here is 'light activity' after all."

"Who cares how she did it, the important thing is I think we can wake this cup up, and we're a quarter of the way to what we need. I really thought we should be talking to other wizards, but you've come through, Susan. I'm... sorry I doubted you."

"Eh, everyone does. They come around in the end. Now, what's next? Just reading it aloud? I mean do I have to make checks to understand it or anything? Casting from writings for me is kind of involved."

"Nope, we just read it. Though I'm not really sure what 'make checks' means."

"And I doubt I could explain it to you. Okay, can you see all right, Sparkle?"

She put her front paws up on the table and stretched up. The other two tilted the paper and she nodded.

"Oh, just a second!" said Susan, and wrote "And now we begin the spell." in English at the top. (Luckily these people seemed to speak and read English just fine) "We'll read that first, as we'll all have to be in sync, right? That way if we're off right away we'll know it."

Nita seemed vaguely impressed, and the three began to read.

The *Dimension* was quiet, as there was not any such thing as wind to rustle leaves, or scores of birds chirping. No cars, no sirens, just a faint babble of water as it flowed past the cottage. Nevertheless, something odd started happening as the three read the spell. Somehow it seemed to grow even quieter, the voices of the three blending together and calling forth power. Almost if the magic that made up the objects in this *Dimension* were listening to the spell that was building up around them.

It feels different than magic, Susan thought, about halfway through the spell. *How about that.*

As their voices died away, the three looked eagerly to the cup, which sat unchanged upon the table.

Susan tapped the side of it. "Uh, did it work?"

"I don't- I don't think so. That's odd. A spell always works."

"Wait, what? No it doesn't, you backfired your *Teleport* spell when I was fighting Biddy!"

"Let me clarify- a spell always does something. Not always what you expect, but we used wizardry, I felt that much. But this cup doesn't seem any more awake than it was before."

"Should we try again?" asked Sparkle.

Nita shook her head. "We read the spell perfectly, with my abilities augmented I could tell that. Reading it again won't have any different outcome."

"Maybe it's too far gone," suggested Susan. "Maybe we'll have to start with a new cup, do the binding from scratch."

"That would be... less than ideal."

"I agree, but what other option do we have? It didn't work."

"I'm not sure. Let me think a minute."

"Sure."

Susan got out some drinks from her fridge and sat sipping hers as Nita paced around. She looked at the cup, silently read the spell over again, and scowled at nothing. "As much as it pains me, I think I'll try to reach my sister, Dairine. She might have some ideas." Nita closed her eyes, standing still a moment.

Is she doing a spell, or what? I thought they had to speak them?

"That's odd," Nita said at last, opening her eyes. "It's always been easier with Kit, but I should at least be able to... I'll try it the other way." She went over to her book and tried sending a message through it, but was surprised when it threw some kind of error message back at her.

"It must be because we're in here," she said at last, closing the book. "I've never seen a message like that before."

"What do you want to do? The spell will expire if we leave here, it'll be the end of the 'scene.' I don't mind casting it again, but one more round of those at that level is all I have in me for today."

"No, it's all right. Scene..." she chuckled. "Your magic sure is weird. Now can we go to another wizard in the area? Get a second opinion?"

"Sure. I'm not against working with others or anything, but didn't you yourself say, when we met, that the wizardry put the wizard who could solve the problem on the case? It picked you, and you came to Ireland. Doesn't that mean you have to work it out yourself?"

"It's not a cut and dried thing. Yes, it can mean the wizard has to take care of it, but that's usually just when we're starting out. Otherwise it can mean I'm just the one to get the ball rolling."

"Oh, I get it. Come along then." She shoved the cup into her sub-space pocket and reached for the writings to open the door and get them back to the real world again.

The girls (and cat) got some lunch, and Nita honestly told her Aunt they had been poking around museums that morning, and were going to go look at some old castles in the area that afternoon.

"Heaven knows we have enough of them around here!" said Annie. "I'm glad to see you enjoying yourself."

"Did anything come up about that explosion?" asked Susan.

Annie shook her head. "No gas pipes or anything in that area. No charred remains from a conventional explosion either. I guess it's just one of those Irish mysteries."

"Oh, okay." *Good. Come to think of it, why doesn't Nita just ask her Aunt about the spell? Actually, has she ever said anything about knowing she's a wizard? But she must, they're family. But I suppose she would have to be sure a non-wizard wasn't around, and there's always people coming and going around here.*

The girls took the bus to the address her book said the castle was to be found, and Susan asked about something she had been wondering about.

"You were quite truthful back there," she remarked. "You don't happen to have *Compulsive Honestly* do you?"

"You mean could I lie if I needed to? Sure. Before I told my parents I was a wizard I had to sneak out and do things on the sly. Why?"

"Wait, your parents aren't wizards? Huh, another blow for the Slytherin 'pure blood' agenda."

"It just worked out that way. For whatever reason my father didn't have what the Powers needed, and so he wasn't offered wizardry."

"Weird. Anyway, I just wondered. It's the *Paragon* in me, trying to work out people's *Backgrounds* and *Weaknesses*. I just thought, if you did, and there came a time we needed to, say, stretch the truth, that I should do the talking."

"Are you sure it isn't just your *Curious*," asked Sparkle softly from the seat beside them. Of course, normally a cat wouldn't be allowed on a bus, but a cat with human level intelligence didn't let a little thing like that stop her. "Making you want to poke your nose into everything?"

"Could be, that one hasn't come up in a while..."

"That won't be necessary," continued Nita. "It's just not a good habit to get into, when you're a wizard. The easier time you have of lying, the more chance it might get into a spell. And in wizardry, what you put into the spell becomes real. So you have to watch it."

"Got it."

"That would be an interesting spell, actually. You cast it on a person and get a look at their character sheet."

"What Planet would that fall under?"

"Good question."

Having arrived, the girls walked up to the enormous castle, and Susan looked around interestedly. "Yup, it's a castle all right." Stone walls, somewhat overgrown with vines, towered over them. "Ah, there's a door!"

"Wait, are we just going to knock?" asked Nita nervously.

"Why not?" asked Susan.

"Hello," Sparkle said to a cat looking at them from underneath a nearby bush. It hissed and ran off. "How rude."

The three made their way to the door and Susan used the heavy iron knocker to announce her presence. They waited.

"Maybe no one's home?" suggested Nita.

Susan, having rolled only an eight on *Spirit Sense* couldn't say one way or the other. There was a lot of life around there, and *Ley Lines* aplenty to mess up her senses. "Then I guess we-" she started to say when the door opened a crack.

A man in a suit stared down at them.

"Yes?" he enquired.

"Is the master of the castle in?" asked Susan. "We must speak to him about a most urgent matter."

"Are you expected?" asked the man.

"Ah, probably not, but you never know, right?"

The man didn't so much as think about cracking a smile. "And who shall I say is calling, and what shall I say it's about?"

"Just give him this," said Nita, handing the rolled up pieces of paper that held the spell the three had made. "And tell him Nita Callahan needs his help with it."

"Very well," he said, taking it. However, he didn't disappear inside but rather stood looking it over. "Is this some sort of joke?"

The pages were written in the *Speech*, the local equivalent to Susan's magical symbology that she envisioned when doing her magic. Not any kind of human language, the writing would have just resembled scribbblings to anyone not also a wizard.

"He'll understand, believe me," she answered.

"Wait here," said the man, closing the door on them again.

"I guess everyone is a little rude around here," remarked Sparkle.

"They probably get people wanting tours of the castle or something all the time," suggested Nita. "But I didn't expect a butler."

"Hey, if you've got money enough to buy a whole castle in Ireland, you can afford a manservant or two. Wonder if there'll be maids?"

"Didn't you get enough of maids back with Louise?"

"Like one can ever get enough maids."

The three waited, Susan bouncing around on her heels or wondering if anyone would see her if she flew up to the top of the castle and had a look around.

"Give them a few minutes," said Nita when she raised her hand to grab the knocker again. "Look at the size of this place. It probably takes them two minutes just to go from one end to the other."

Wonder if she has Timekeeper?

Moments later, the door opened again and a rather short man was standing there, holding the papers with the spell on it. He had a somewhat fine mustache, but it might really be something when it grew up, and he had a serious look about him. He looked evenly at the two, then to the sides and behind them. "Where are the rest of you?" he asked, "and why did they send such young people to deliver this? What's going on, what's this all about?" He shook the paper at them.

"Perhaps if we could explain..." started Nita.

"Oh, of course, where are my manners? Shaun O'Driscoll, Senior for Europe." He threw the door open and stuck out his hand. "But I suppose you already knew that."

"Susan Felton, dimensional traveler," said Susan, shaking it.

"That's nice," said Shaun, reaching for Nita.

"I'm Nita Callahan, from New York."

"Nice to-" he looked back at Susan, freezing in mid-shake. "What did you say?"

“Dimensional traveler. Look, can we come inside? This is going to take a little while.”

He looked down at the spell again. “I guess you better. I’ll have Niall make some tea.” He threw the door open and was only slightly surprised to see Sparkle following them in.

“She’s with me,” Susan explained.

“Ah, right. I guess some cream as well.”

“Actually, as with most cats my age, I’m lactose intolerant,” said Sparkle, looking up at him. “But if you happen to have some tuna water, that would be just lovely.”

“I’ll... see what I can do?”

“Appreciate it.”

“I think they both enjoy it,” Nita muttered to herself. “Shocking people, that is.”

No Help There

Time: Half an hour later

Place: Sitting room inside Castle Matrix

“And that’s the whole story!” concluded Susan, telling her story (again). “Which brings us to now. We tried to wake the cup up, but we must have done something wrong. But given the three of us were about as good in wizardry as any three people can be, I can’t imagine what.”

“So right now the museum no doubt believes the cup has been stolen somehow, out of a locked case?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said Susan, not sounding very sorry at all. “I have a *Creation* spell but it can’t make gold for some bizarre reason. So I couldn’t make a replacement. Plus I would have had to cast the spell multiple times, once for each gemstone... Then try to glue them in place, it would have been a huge hassle.”

“We thought it better to start work right away,” Nita put in. “As long as we return the cup back where it belongs when we’re done, everything will be fine, right?”

“For certain values of fine,” Shaun replied, rubbing his eyes. “So you found a Power, and she’s making a spear. You found the cup, and tried to wake it up yourselves. You did this because she told you about a reenactment that’s going to have to be performed soon, which will stop people going sideways like they’ve been doing.”

“That’s about right,” agreed Susan.

“She said the sword was there too, but I think it’s too far gone,” said Nita.

“Pity, we’ll need all four treasures if it’s the event I’m thinking about. Still, I’m glad you brought it to my attention, even though I’ve been handling reports for a week now about this very thing and was going to call a meeting soon to get everyone’s opinion on what we should be doing about it. If you can just hand the cup over, you can consider your part in this finished.”

“Uh, did you not hear my story?” asked Susan, looking between him and Sparkle. “Whatever you think this event is, forget it. The Darkness is here someplace, I have that on good authority. If I don’t help you stop it, the energy of your reality is going to become a meal for him.”

“Yes, we’ll keep that in mind when I meet with everyone. Now, the cup, please, I’m a busy man.”

Susan wondered if this guy was a bit dense, or just plain evil, and did a *Dimension Sense* on him, getting a 4, her minimum. *Great*. Sparkle also tried, getting a little better, a six. *Never thought I would need INSight for skill checks, otherwise I might have made that a little better. I have to get that skill raised! It is average though, and two above my STrength. Stupid poor rolls!* She looked to Nita, who nodded, and Susan shrugged. *I guess she knows best.*

She pulled the cup from her sub-space pocket and held it up for the man to see.

“Yes, that’s the one. I’ll just-”

As he reached for it, the cup suddenly blazed up, and Susan’s *Spirit Sense* went wild. Bright light lit the room, causing everyone to look away, and Susan felt the cup go red hot in her hands, burning them. She cried out.

“Put it back again! Put it back again!” Shaun was shouting at her.

She tried, but found her fingers wouldn't obey her commands for some reason and realized she was at a significant penalty to MANipulation at the moment. Making a tremendous effort (i.e. she put ten energy into it) she got a 17, enough to basically tear the pocket open and drop the cup inside.

Everyone in the room blinked afterimages away, Susan trying to get a good look at her hands in the process.

"Well, crap," she finally said, as she got a good look. Her hands were badly burned, the skin charred and even bone showing through.

"Oh my God, your hands!" said Nita.

"Yeah, no wonder I was at such a high penalty." She giggled.

"Are you okay?"

"Can't even feel it!" she chirped.

Huh, she should be at pain penalties regardless, thought Sparkle. There's nothing in the rules about burn damage short circuiting the pain response, even though with burns that bad, it would happen to non-Paragons. Not even under the "Catching on Fire" section, where you think it would be. And she has Low Pain Tolerance too.

"Shock," said Shaun, coming over to look at them. "And the damage probably burnt out her nerves. That's going to take some time to fix, even with wizardry, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, your use of them may never recover."

"Oh, never mind that." She held her leg out to Nita. "If you would be so kind?"

"Will that work?" Nita asked, trying not to look at those ruined hands as she slid Susan's pant leg up and grabbed the knife out.

"Of course, silly!"

"Wait, what are you-" Shaun didn't get much further as Nita drove the knife (with possibly a bit more force than was strictly required) through Susan's right hand. Both healed immediately and Susan flexed them.

"That's better, thanks," she said, as Nita drew the knife out.

"Do you need *Regeneration*?" asked Sparkle.

"Nah, 2d10 healing? It did a twelve, I could tell that much. That would be enough to nearly blow off my whole arm. I couldn't exactly check to see what my *character sheet* said about the damage, but it must have been less than that. It's fine. Thanks." She took the knife back from Nita and strapped it to her leg again. "Okay, heavy gloves when we take it out next time. Wonder if that will give me a penalty to MANipulation?"

"Your hands!" exclaimed Shaun, looking them over. "Not a mark on them. How?"

"Ain't magic grand? Now, where should we put that cup so it doesn't burn through whatever it's sitting on? I honestly didn't expect it to blaze up light that. For one thing it's the symbol of *water* isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the spirit of water, I'm at somewhat of a loss myself." His eyes kept darting to her hands, as if he couldn't believe what he had been seeing.

"I'm not," grumped Nita. "In fact I know exactly what happened. I should have realized when I couldn't reach my sister. We were in your *Dimension*, not here. There's no connection to the waters of Ireland in your *Personal Dimension*."

"Oh course!" exclaimed Susan, snapping her newly regenerated fingers. "You're right. So when we took it out, the soul suddenly came back to it, because the spell we wrote did actually work. That caused the physical changes we saw and made it get really hot. That would explain it."

“Wait, you girls actually succeeded and didn’t realize it? Who are you two? Where exactly were you at the time?”

“Dude, I just spent the last half an hour explaining that. Do people say ‘dude’ here?”

“Not typically, I think,” answered Susan.

“Look, I don’t think that will happen again. But let me put some bindings somewhere and we can bring it out again. Oh, and the reaction was greater here because the water table under the castle is fairly high. Anywhere else and it probably would have been more gradual. Wait here.”

He got up and left the room, leaving the three to sit down again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Nita with concern.

“Never better. That spell doesn’t bring back energy, but I’m totally refreshed again, don’t worry.”

“If you say so. I guess this means we can go wake up the rock, huh?”

“Yeah, it should work. Though I would have to use *Augment Skill* again, to read the spell. I only have a three otherwise, that’s below average. I wouldn’t want to mess it up.”

“There should be plenty of wizards around here anyway, they can probably take care of it.”

“True. We should be out looking for the vessel of air. I bet my *Question* spell could help. We can’t use *Descry Object* because we don’t know exactly what we’re looking for. But I could ask the world ‘where should we look for a vessel to house the spirit of air,’ and I bet we would get a place name, at least. That’s only one or two words.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

Now there’s a phrase that’s music to my ears.

Moments later Shaun came back and led them through the house, to a “small” closet he had a table set up.

“Okay, I’ve put a spell on the room, it should hold. Plunk it down on the table there.”

“Sure thing.”

She did so, and this time the cup behaved, merrily throwing a light show like sunlight reflecting off water about the room.

“Pretty!” said Susan, looking around.

“Yeah, that’s awake,” he remarked. “Well done, girls. You don’t mind if I keep this spell, look it over more carefully?”

“Not at all,” said Nita. “I hope it can help with the spirit of earth.”

“If it did this good a job on the cup, I’m sure it’ll suffice. I’ll show you back to the door, you two can head home now.”

“Head home?” asked Susan. “I wish. I need to find The Darkness before I can move on.”

“Right, right, we’ll keep an eye out for that too.”

“But we want to help!” protested Nita. “I mainly wrote that spell, Susan and Sparkle just helped. Okay, I was augmented with her magic at the time, but still. I think that shows what I’m capable of.”

"Oh, no doubt. Magic, of course! Yes, when we need you, we'll be in touch. You're in the book, right? Yes, not to worry. Here's the door. Good bye now!"

The door slammed behind them.

"Now what was all that about?" asked Sparkle, smoothing her fur out and checking to make sure she still had a whole tail.

"I think I rather unnerved that gentleman," said Susan. "I can't imagine how."

"Maybe he just didn't know how to deal with a magic user?" wondered Nita, looking back up at the castle. "Because he must deal with all kinds of different wizards all the time."

"I don't know, I almost got the sense he didn't really believe me."

"Your story is kind of unbelievable. I mean, I had no choice because you were right there in the other world I went into by accident. And what you've said and done fits. But he can't see you're telling the truth."

"I suppose. But in that case, giving me the means to show I'm legit, or at least the benefit of the doubt would have been better than just tossing me out."

"You did say we would have to go this alone."

"True. And I know where the cup is, he won't dare move it until the time of the 'play' that Bidy was talking about. I can take it back easily enough if I need to."

"You don't think we should do the reenactment ourselves, do you?"

"Why not? It's not going to be a standard one anyway, remember? We can bring the so called treasures along, but I'll rely on my own power to put this to rights, thank you very much."

"Remember, you're supposed to be helping these people solve their own problems, not solving it for them," cautioned Sparkle. "You deal with the additional element, they deal with the original situation."

"Yeah, I hear you. Come on, I still have energy left, let's look for the air vessel."

So the trio went into the surrounding forest where they figured they wouldn't be disturbed, and Susan tried her *Question* magic. She wasn't expecting the answer she got though.

Unknown

"What does that mean?" asked Nita.

"Good question," replied Susan. "Could someone have moved the vessel to one of these side worlds?"

"Someone from the other side, you mean? The Lone Power?"

"Seems if he's here, now, like in that hunt, he would want to help see himself win. No better way to do that than to keep what we need from us. Hiding a vessel seems an easy thing to do."

"That's how you beat Him so easily!" Nita suddenly exclaimed, jumping up from the log she was sitting on. She laughed and stomped her feet, as if some tension was going out of her. "I should have guessed before."

"Now what are you going on about?"

“That thing you fought. It wasn’t Him, that was a small reenactment! Must have been. That’s why He faded out at the end, rather than just blowing you away. He didn’t have the power He normally would, as that ‘recording’ of Him normally just rode around on that horse after that elk creature. When the recording couldn’t beat you, it just sort of fizzled out. Like a... cassette tape being cut. That makes so much sense now.”

Oh man, cassette tapes. If these people even knew what was coming to replace them! “I’m happy you think so. The vessel?”

“Oh, right. Gee, I don’t know, is there another question we can ask your magic to find out?”

“Why not just ask that directly? It’s a yes or no question.”

So she did.

Yes

“Ah hah! So it was here and it’s been moved.”

“We’ll never find it!” despaired Nita.

“Maybe. Let me keep asking.” She asked “What is the first step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

Defeat drow in two days

“What is the second step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

Impress the Sidhe

“What is the third step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

There is no step three

“Nice,” said Sparkle, nodding. “A good fight is always a quick way to get XP.”

“And I still have a bunch of *Materia* to convert, and spells to learn. Seems like the vessel is in the bag, if all we have to do is beat up some drow, whatever they are on this world. And hopefully that will impress these Sidhe, whatever they are. But what to do in the meantime?”

“Fire?”

“I don’t know, burning the town down might be a little extreme just because I might get bored...”

“I mean the vessel!”

“Oh, why didn’t you say? Yeah, let’s ask about that!” So Susan asked “What is the first step in retrieving the vessel of fire back to our world?” figuring that worked the last time.

Reforge it

“Ah. Time to talk to Bidy again!”

And so the group made their way back to the farmhouse, where Bidy was still pounding away, seeming to have made several practice spears in the meantime.

"You three again?" she said, tossing her hammer down in disgust. "I've already told you-"

"Yeah, yeah, that's old news!" Susan verbally ran over her, waving that away with a hand. "We woke up the cup, the spell is in the hands of those that can wake up the stone, and the vessel of air should be in hand within three days. All that's left is fire, and that's your department."

"Wait, you did all that just today?"

"I admit, technicality Nita is on vacation so I've been taking it easy for her sake. But yes, we have."

"Oh, you have not," said Nita, rolling her eyes.

"Shows what you know. Well?"

"Look, I can't just... deal with you," she said.

"Why not? We took care of our end, and it seems like you're about ready to take care of yours."

"What, these? These will never do. They would be ripped apart in an instant if the soul of fire were to be placed in them."

"So let me at one, and I'll make it unbreakable. I've done it before, and with *Energetic Accumulation* and *Augment Skill: Fabrication* I bet I could do it in an hour or so. I would be wiped out the rest of the day, but I could do it."

"I don't know what any of that means. The point is, there's just no way. You need to get me metal that doesn't exist anymore in this universe, and you need to raise an army for the reenactment."

"My magic makes me an army," Susan said coldly, staring Bidy in the face.

She shook her head. "Believe me, no matter how powerful you think you are, it won't be enough. You can't use the spear, only one person on Earth can do that now, and you still have to find him or her. I'll do what's required, you don't have to worry about that. But you need to bring me the answers, not the other way around."

Susan glared at her. "Even though, if we get it wrong, everything you built here turns to ashes."

She sighed sadly. "Even so."

"Great. What a fantastic system. Fine. If you change your mind, maybe want to help us instead of just standing around, you know where to find us. We are capable, you know, what we did today should prove that."

"That isn't the issue. I am surprised, and I certainly believe you are what you say you are. But even I have to follow the rules."

Susan snorted. "Rules are..." She froze. Was that the voice of The Darkness in the back of her mind, saying "Rules are for the weak" along with her, or just her own fears? "Never mind. Come on, Nita, it's a long ride back to the house."

"So now what?" Nita asked as the two sat side by side on the bus back to the farm.

Susan shook her head sadly. "I really don't know. Wait until the day after tomorrow, I guess. The one other wizard I've met here seemed to just want to get rid of me rather than allow me to help."

"See it from his point of view," pointed out Sparkle. "You show up at his door, telling some wild story, then pull the cup out of nowhere? A cup which then flares to life, showing him no matter what else you might be, that you're powerful. But it's a power he doesn't understand, it doesn't fit into his worldview. A couple of kids, in his mind, shouldn't have been able to pull off the theft of the cup and put the soul of water back into it. Not with the wizardry he knows, especially given how reluctant Nita here is to use it around here. He's confused, but he sees the knife, usually which causes wounds, heal your hands, now he's a little afraid. You don't make it any easier with your attitudes."

Susan thought a moment. "Maybe my *Poor Sense* weakness shouldn't refer to my hearing." She grinned and winked.

"Har har."

"I get what you're saying though. Man, guess I'm my own worst enemy. Maybe it switched over since Severus isn't trying to kill me anymore. I figured it would be The Darkness, but..."

"How do you know it isn't? Has it spoken to you lately?"

"No, not much, now that I think about it."

"That's the way to tell, I think. When it's talking, it's not able to influence you. When it can, it doesn't need to taunt you, so why bother. You're already going along with what it wants."

Susan took a deep breath. "You could be right, and that does fit, I guess. I wonder if losing Luna was a worse blow than I thought? It's been proven I can't rely on my own judgment sometimes... Can I rely on you to take her place? You don't speak up about the stuff she did. And asking people I meet along the way? That just seems unfair because they aren't used to my wacky nature. Or what plans I might come up with, that seem insane on the surface but are actually reasonable for me. I can't have outsiders second guessing me every second. No offense, Nita."

"None taken."

"I'm just your *Companion*, not my place to do that. But... I'll try."

"Thanks."

It seems I still have a long way to go.

Prepare for battle

Time- The next day, early morning

Place- Nita's trailer

"Nita," said Sparkle the next morning after breakfast, "I have a request." The two girls were leaning on a fence, watching the goings on around the farm, and Sparkle had looked around to make sure no one was nearby to hear her talking.

"What can I do for you?" she replied.

"Can your book tell us what we should expect from this 'reenactment' that's going to take place soon?"

"Hey, good call." Susan's eyes lit up. "We should probably put some spells together now, while we have the chance. No sense just standing around, we have a whole day until we get the vessel for the air spirit. Let's get to work."

"As it's happened many times, I'm sure there are some reports of what other wizards have gone through. Might as well take a look." Nita concentrated, glanced around, then said a word, making her book of wizardry drop into her hand. She sat down by the fence and started paging through it, and Susan got a curious look on her face.

"Actually, I might take a look myself. It's written down, obviously." Nita looked up at her, but she had already started casting *Research*, and five minutes later, her conjured mystical book appeared.

Between the two of them, and Nita was quite impressed with her *Research* spell, they learned the shape of Balor was one of a grotesque, misshapen human with an eye that could launch energy attacks (as Susan put it) against whatever got in front of him. He wasn't great on turning, apparently, his bulk was mostly fat, and it originally took several creatures with metal instruments to even raise his eyelid to begin the attack.

So as soon as you see him, open a Teleportal and lead everyone behind him. That should neutralize his only weapon in that form. Odd that The Darkness would choose something like that to inhabit, but then again, it's probably the first thing it found available that suited his needs. It doesn't want to hang around these other realities any more than I do, probably. But before it's been something impressive, like that dragon. Guess it has to take what it can get.

As well as the main threat of Balor himself, he commanded an army of creatures that would be throwing themselves at the group when they arrived in the parallel world these troubles were coming from.

"So a couple of casting of *Magical Ally: Major* to start, can't have too many of them running around when there's an army baring down on, right, Sparkle?"

She nodded. "True, with *Spell Symbol* there's nothing that says you can't have a dozen of them active at a time. They're just a spell. I wonder though." She put a paw out and her character sheet appeared on the ground. "I have enough XP, barely, for an *Imbuing*. I wonder if making a permanent *Elemental Line* would be worth it?"

“Nineteen XP,” mused Susan. “That’s a lot of spells, or... flip it over, will you? Yeah, threes, just like me. You could raise that skill group of the new skills, and have some left over for a new spell or two.”

“But keep in mind, my energy isn’t nearly as high as yours. I can’t do more than thirty spells or so at once, and in a combat type situation like this one, it’s a major concern.”

“I agree, that’s why I’m sticking with my sword lately. Plus my mass take down spells haven’t been as useful lately. Like those wolves were right on us. Though I have to admit, I wanted to see how well *Slash All* would work out.”

“You used to use *Hypnotic Field* all the time, too. It was your signature move, almost.”

“Yeah, because I didn’t want things dead at the time. I suppose I could still use it, but damaging someone knocks them out of it, and with my *Slash All* going that would be pointless to zone them out only to wake them up again.”

“We need a spell to store up energy over time. Like stuff some into a crystal or something, that we can pull out later.”

Susan laughed. “That would be so cheesy! Man, a month or two and I would have hundreds of energy to play with. I don’t need any help becoming more dangerous you know. Still, you do come up with nice ideas.” Her eyes sparkled with possibility.

“So back to my quandary here.”

She shook herself. “Right. Up to you, but there are some things to consider.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re going to be in a war zone, and that means armoring you up as well as I’m armored.”

“True.” She shivered. “I’m a minus three, something hits me and it’s goodbye companion.”

“So let’s keep that from happening. You’ll be *Accelerated* of course, but I’m going to make you your own *Symbol* with *Avatar of War* on it. And as a bonus you can be a minus two!”

Sparkle considered. “I can actually *Shape-shift* up two sizes, so that would get me up to human size. Throw *Avatar* on top of that, and my claws are considered weapons, that could actually work.”

“Yeah. Plus with the STRength bonus from the spell you could do some decent damage just swatting things with your claws plus fire.”

“I do have combat skills. Not at a very high rating of course, but enough to hunt with as a cat. No sense not having *Augment Skill* going as well, I guess.”

“Yeah! In fact...” She looked Sparkle’s collar over, removing it from around her neck. It presently had only a small tag that held her *Ally Spell Symbol*. “We could get a few more of these tags, heck I could make some in a pinch. And I have another idea. Wait here.” She ran over to the trailer and looked around, finding what she wanted and heading back. She had a piece of paper and some scissors in hand, and cut a small strip of paper. “Imagine the *Spell Symbol* going in the center here, then we just fold it over like this, and wrap it around the collar like this. A dab of glue, and it’ll stay, and you can fire off a bunch of symbols when you need to. Just make the trigger word end in a

number, like 'line 1' and 'line 2' and remember which number you're on. You could have a dozen or more wrapped around here."

"That's almost as good as what I wanted, isn't it?"

"Sure thing. Now, it still isn't an unlimited number, but it only takes a couple of spells to pull off, rather than using up XP that's better spent elsewhere."

"If my *Photographic Memory* serves, and it does, the spell description doesn't list any actual size the *Symbol* has to be, right? So really it could be even smaller than this paper."

"I guess. What were you thinking of using?"

"Pins. Put the symbol on the head of a pin."

"Huh. Hard to tell which you used up in that case. I suppose if you always started using them from the center where the tag is--"

"No, no, I'm talking about you using something like that. Make a bunch of pins, then just stick them to your pant leg. You can make them all the same trigger, just grab one, expend it, toss it, grab the next one."

"I could probably do that in a single action. Maybe grab with the left, 'off hand' action with the right, if I made them *Elemental Blast*. Yeah, that could work. I'm glad I came with you!"

Sparkle snorted. "We have the day, I suggest we get started. Pull Nita's energy, and find some *Ley Lines* to hook into, if there's some we can use and be undisturbed. Make all the stuff you can, wait while your energy comes back, and repeat. Your father's staff could actually drain energy out of *Ley Lines* and recharge him. We don't have that luxury so we'll just have to make do."

"There's one thing we do have around here, though. Animals. I bet I could swipe ten or fifteen energy from each horse and such when no one is looking. And they can't tell on me."

Sparkle nodded. "Good idea. It's for a good cause, so I'll allow it. The better we prepare now, the less danger we'll be in later."

"Not to worry, I'll be sure and write myself a note to save before we leave." She chuckled. "We really will be pulling out all the stops huh?"

"Saving, yeah. That would really come in handy if things go badly. What else can we think of that might help?"

"I have a bunch of *Avatar Papers* made, I can make some more. Others will be coming, after all, and the more armored we are, the better I'll- Wait, my pant leg becomes armor, that might not work for your pin idea."

"Your bracelet is incorporated, right? Why would the pins work any differently?"

"I guess you're right. Huh, I could stick them straight in, they might hold just enough when I'm armored that I can grab them, but not knock them out when I'm swinging my sword around. I'll see, but I do think something small, easily grabbed, would work best."

"Let's have the book, see there's something really useful I should learn in the meantime. And I can make you some *Elemental Line* if you want them."

"Better to have it all. I'll want *Acceleration* as well. Let's go in fully buffed, but not under any penalties."

“Sounds like a plan.”

And so the group went to go find a good spot to work, and Susan made her *Spirit Sense* checks to find some *Ley Lines*. She then got a twenty one on her LUCk check to see how far away the nearest ones were, and then a twelve to see how many there were. “Score!” she said, moving off. Sparkle did a *Spirit Sense*, getting an eight, which was enough to tell there was a bunch of energy in the area, at least. Susan got an eleven.

“This is perfect!” chortled Susan, rubbing her hands together.

“Uh, what makes this spot any better than another?” asked Nita, looking around confused.

“Energy, by dear, energy. For one thing, this is a farm so there’s lot of life around here. That means lots of *Ley Lines*, in other words, spiritual conduits for the life energy of the planet. Right here there’s a bunch of them, so we can sit here and get some nice benefits from hooking into them. For example, let’s say I spend six energy on whatever it is I’m doing while connected to the *line*. I can then put six free energy into that, which comes from the *Line* itself. Then I roll my *Energy Boost* skill (best skill ever) and get back up to half, in other words three. So I’ve spent a total of three energy to make a *Spell Paper* but I’ve gotten an effective eleven boost to my rating, making it at least a fifteen, if not more. The other one energy goes into casting the spell, in case you were keeping count? Anyway, that’s why we were looking around, and what we’ve been talking about.”

“Do you think you could teach me to sense and hook into this energy?” Nita asked, trying to hide her excitement.

“Don’t know. I had to take a special background, *Spirit Mage*, in order to do it. But non-*Paragon* people don’t even have *Backgrounds* that I can tell. I mean you must, but you didn’t spend points for them or anything. So I have no idea how you guys balance out. Even with these *Lines* and taking your energy and the animal's, I’m going to be wiped out by lunch time. At that point I’ll talk you through what I think someone who is not a *Paragon* would do and see if you can feel anything. I mean I just make checks in the skill, but that still sort of means something outside being who I am. It’s tough to explain.”

To someone who isn’t genre savvy... finished Sparkle silently.

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

And so the two started work. Susan changed her charm bracelet to include these spells:

Acceleration

Flight

Magical Ally: Major

Augment Skill: Sword

Augment Stat: STR

She had Nita scrounge up some suitably flat pieces of metal which she attached to Sparkle's collar, giving her *Acceleration* and *Avatar of War* in addition to her normal *Ally: Major*. Also some glue, to stick the new *Spell Papers* onto Sparkle's collar. She then worked with her to make some *Spell Papers* with *Elemental Line* for her and *Elemental Blast* for herself. When Sparkle was out of energy she started looking through the book for something to learn as Susan continued working.

"Hey, remember that green haired lady in Louise's world?" she asked, looking up from the book when Susan was between castings.

"She worked for the principal but turned out to be a thief?"

"Right. Well, you remember her 'weapon' right? That huge construct made of stone?"

"Yeah, that thing was annoying."

"It's in here."

"What?" Susan scrambled over to look at the book. "That must be one of the ones... uh, that guy gave us." She looked over at Nita, not sure if Silverstreak wanted his identity branded about. "*Colossus*, huh? Grade ten, hardly worth it for the use you would get out of it. Very specific circumstances it can be used under, I mean you would have to be outside, and have a lot of space for it to maneuver."

"Which is exactly what we'll have, right? And an opponent that's huge for it to fight, to boot. Perfect in this situation."

"True. We would lose our own actions to control it, you want it?"

"Probably best. You'll be swinging that blade around when we get close to him, keeping his forces off us. Yeah, see if you can-"

"Wait a second, I just had a thought!"

"What's that?"

"Why only use one? My *Materia* is all in my armor slots, rather than my weapon slots, at the moment. That would make it apply to any weapon I held. I have two swords, and two hands. I'll have *Augment Skill* going so the off hand penalty will be laughable. And I can make up an *Augment Skill* of *Off Hand* so my delay for that drops, so why not use both? Imagine two attacks, against all opponents in range, with my augmented STrength and fire damage factored in... for a total of three delay." She was almost drooling.

"You'd have to drop one to cast a spell."

"Eh, that's a free action. Don't plan on doing much of that anyway. Especially not with all the long range damage I'll be doing with two blades, both on fire. Plus if I do, my one sword will come back to me just by holding my hand out, I don't even have to bend over to pick it up."

"What about all those pins you're making?"

"I'll give them to Nita! Hey Nita, you want to shoot streams of fire out of your hands... with magic?"

"Do I?" she answered with a grin.

"Problem solved."

They all laughed. "As I was saying, see if you can understand this and make me one."

"You got it."

Susan looked the spell over, getting a nineteen on *Magic Theory* and a twenty two on *Magic Scripture*, both more than enough to understand the difficult fifteen spell. Twenty minutes later Susan wrapped another paper around Sparkle's collar, this one with the spell of *Colossus* in it.

A bit later, Susan relaxed, leaning back on her elbows in the grass. She kept giggling, imagining having all her spell bracelet spells going at once, with no penalty, and wading across the battlefield, swords slashing up everything.

"Did doing that much magic break her brain?" asked Nita to Sparkle, somewhat concerned.

"I suppose it's possible," she admitted.

"Oh, come on, you're just as excited as I am to see what our magic can *really* do. Don't tell me the prospect of being a lion sized creature of fire and death isn't appealing. We can go all out- because whatever we're fighting doesn't actually exist! We won't be killing anything real, it's just a recording that we have to put down. We'll have several lions, dragons, my twenty five *Legion solders*, and when it comes to the boss, a huge construct made of stone rips out of the earth and starts pounding it. Can't you just see it now?" She stared dreamily off into space. "The Darkness isn't going to know what hit it in this world."

"Just don't get too used to it. You start to like it too much, and maybe the next time we face something alive you might want to take this same approach."

"Oh, don't worry. It's just because we have this time to prepare we can do this at all. Normally it would be whatever spells we knew and being clever. This situation just requires us to smash through to the boss as quickly as possible, take him out, and keep everyone that comes with us safe in the process."

"And here I was thinking we were going with them, not the other way around."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Fine, we keep everyone we go with safe. Happy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Now, I haven't used all my *energy*, I need some to cast my draining spell on the animals later. So let me put on *Augment Skill: Teaching* and I can see what I can teach you. After all, Louise and her friends learned *Magic Sense*, I can probably at least teach you that, and give you the basics for *Imbuing* and *Fabrication*, as they're also quasi-magic skills and you should be able to pick them up. Then we can try the more advanced stuff."

"Anything you can show me would be great. Imagine, skills from other realities! Now I'm getting excited!"

So Susan made some *Teaching* checks and told Nita about other things she could do that weren't strictly her magic, then the girls went to get lunch. Afterwards

Susan drained the farm animals she could, then headed back to the secluded spot and once again burned through her energy making *Spell Symbol* stuff. She had several *Magical Ally: Major* that Nita could activate, along with extra copies of *Avatar*, *Acceleration*, and anything else Nita thought might be handy in their upcoming fight. They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to get Nita to sense energy, magic, and even gave her some instruction in *Ninjutsu*.

“Don’t let my sister near *Ninjutsu* though,” she said, practicing a move. “We both took Ju-Jitsu lessons, and she really picked it up fast. A ninja wizard.” She shuddered. “The world wouldn’t survive.”

Susan also explained what she thought *Energy Boost* was about, so she could teach that skill, and Nita made sure to copy all this information down into her wizard manual for later review.

Susan went to bed that night feeling a real sense of accomplishment. She felt she couldn’t be more ready to attack The Darkness this time, and even had a couple more days, in case she thought of something else she wanted to add.

And all thanks to Spell Symbol. Best... Spell... Ever.

The next day Susan, Nita, and Annie were sitting around the table, eating breakfast. The paper was open beside her, and while Susan didn't care much for local goings on, the headline caught her eye. She flipped it open, and skimmed the paper over, finding many stories with a similar theme inside. It seemed the problems in this area were getting worse, as everything from dinosaurs to ghosts, ancient heroes and villains, were being seen in the area. The paper dismissed them all, and Susan was out and out laughing by the time she got to the sixth story that the writers just reported on, and then called the person who got his sheep stolen by some figure from Irish folklore an attention seeker.

"Look at all this," she said, passing the paper to Nita. "Honestly, wizards around here take a very lax attitude to things, let me tell you. Where I'm from, those in charge of making sure knowledge of magic doesn't get out to the general populous would be running themselves ragged doing memory charms to people. What's wrong with you?"

Nita had been glancing at her aunt in terror and trying to get Susan to stop by making a slashing motion across her neck where she hoped her aunt couldn't see. "Wizards?" she asked, trying to fake a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

Susan looked between the two, and Annie had a weird expression on her face as well. "What is the matter with you two? No one else is around, it's fine."

"Did, uh, did you say something about Wizards?" Annie asked.

"Yeah, wizards. You know, that weird *speech* stuff, describing things? Seems useless around here?" A mental light bulb went off above her head. "Oh, come on. Please tell me this situation isn't what I think it is."

The other two looked at each other for a moment, then blurted out "You're a wizard?"

Susan banged her head on the table several times, then stayed there with her arms over her head. "It is. It's exactly what I thought. Ow. What is wrong with you people?"

"You really are one?" asked Annie.

"You too?" replied Nita.

Both women seemed to be seeing the other for the first time, and actually got up to hug, like they had just reunited after many years.

"I can't believe this!" gushed Annie. "You got picked, that's great!"

"Dairine too, little snot read the oath out of my book and got a computer version of the manual the next day! I had no idea you were though!" She smacked her head. "And Tom even said something like that to my dad, that it was his side of the family. I completely forgot until just now!"

"Wow, it's great to know there are more wizards in the family. Wait, Tom? Isn't he an advisor from your area?"

"Yeah, oh, right, I told them. Had to, really. They took it... well, oddly, but at least they accept it."

"He better have. Man, am I going to have to have words with him next time I see

him. Two wizard kids, how does he cope?"

"Hey, we aren't that bad. Even if the computer does follow my sister around while she does her chores."

"And you!" said Annie, finally looking at Susan again. "How did you know?"

"Uh, I could feel it with *Magic Sense*?" she replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I knew right away, having checked everyone out when I first arrived here. I couldn't be sure The Darkness wasn't hiding out here, so I made sure everyone here was who they claimed to be. I guess you wizards really don't have a skill like that, huh?"

"Don't mind her, she talks like that most of the time," said Nita.

"So you're a wizard too?"

"Not exactly. I do magic, not wizardry. I *could* do your kind, but I would need to take Nita's book to do it, and I'm not great at *Adaptive Skill* yet. So it's better if I stick to what I know."

Anne's eyes narrowed. "You're the funny girl that brought Johnny the cup," she accused. "And I thought his description of the other girl sounded familiar. It was you!"

"Funny girl? I hardly did a single joke when I was there! Did you hear the one about the vampire that goes to the bar? It's a monster only bar but he's leading a human on a chain by the neck. The bartender says to him 'we don't serve his kind here' and the vampire says 'I know, that's why I brought my own.' and sinks his fangs into the guy." Both stared at her. "What? That is comedy gold right there, people."

There was silence for a moment.

"Maybe it's your timing," said Sparkle, licking a paw and beginning to wash her face.

This time both burst laughing.

"Hey!"

"Seriously, what's going on with you two?" asked Annie. "And how did you wake the cup up so easily?"

"Forget that," said Susan. "How come you two didn't know the other was a wizard? I mean you're family. Wizardry here isn't all as secretive as you made it out to be, Nita, because no one could read that paper and not think 'hey, magic would explain all those things. Maybe there is magic in the world.' I mean how much bizarre stuff can a town accept and not start asking for better answers?"

"You would be surprised," answered Annie, sitting down again. "Okay, so from the top, who are you, and why can that cat talk?"

"What's wrong with talking cats?" asked the kitten that walked in. "You have something against talking cats? We should be seen and not heard? I do poetry you know."

"I'm sure it's wonderful stuff too."

"Hi Tualha," said Nita to the cat. "Annie, have you met Tualha?"

"We've met, and I have nothing against talking cats, I just don't see that many. Tualha is a bard, that's why she can talk. I wondered if your cat was something similar?"

"How do you know?" asked Susan. "Maybe most just choose not to talk. You could see lots of them, it's hearing you need to be concerned with."

"Anyway, can I get an answer to my question? Johnny was very concerned last night with the story you told him, and none of the other wizards in the area recognized

your description. One person even said maybe you were a Bright Power yourself!"

"Don't give her any ideas," said Sparkle sarcastically.

"Obviously you're not, and now that I know it's you, and you're hanging around with my niece, I would like a few assurances."

"What, that I'm not a danger to her? Why would have I handed over the cup, after working so hard to give it a spirit, if I meant you all harm? I'm here to save your world, not cause trouble."

"Yes," admitted Sparkle. "Any trouble she causes is totally inadvertent. Believe me."

Susan was going to tell her story again, but Nita beat her to the first word.

"It all started when I went sideways and found Susan waiting for me in the parallel world I found myself in," she began, going on to tell the rest of the story of what she had seen Susan doing while she was here.

Annie digested the story for a few moments after Nita finished telling it. "I guess it does explain a few things, like why she suddenly appeared right after you got here. And why you both disappear as you do. I figured it was just you hanging out in town, but that didn't feel right to me. And I could have sworn you had just fallen out of the world, that must have been when you were working with the cup. But you came back and seemed normal so I passed it off as just one of those weird feelings. Guess I should have paid more attention."

"I was perfectly safe," insisted Nita. "I wouldn't have hung out with her if I didn't."

"Someone who can beat up a Bright Power is *safe*? And did you really defeat a reenactment of the Lone One who was hunting?"

"Easily," insisted Susan.

"I was hoping she was just exaggerating. No such luck. So, what do we do now?"

"We'll get the vessel of air today, if what my spell told me holds. After that, Bidy can forge the proper spear she's whining about needing and we can get this thing done."

"Oh, simple as that, is it?"

"I find most things are, if you apply yourself to them. Applying a bit of magic here and there doesn't hurt either."

"Wait, there was a wizard meeting last night? Great, what was it about?" asked Nita.

"Mainly the current situation and what we're going to do about it. Probably a quarter of the time spent discussing if we should use that spell I guess you two came up with."

"Three," corrected Sparkle.

"Yes, you three, sorry. In the end everyone looked it over and said there weren't any hidden meanings or traps in it, and they decided to. So they were going to wake the stone up with it early this morning. That meant we were only two treasures away from being ready. And you say the vessel for air will be in hand soon?"

"After we fight off some things called Drow, yes. Maybe one of them has it?"

"I hope not! No, it couldn't be used by something like that, unless it was really corrupted or something. And we would feel it in the very air of Ireland if something like that had happened."

“So there you are.”

“I guess we owe you some thanks and an apology. You were doing all this work for us, and we distrusted you. I’ll speak to Johnny about you, tell him you’re on the level. Even if I can hardly believe it. Other realities, outside our own parallel worlds. Amazing.”

“Don’t worry, she brings it on herself. So she really has no cause to complain,” explained Sparkle.

“Still, thank you. Both of you.”

“Of course.”

Annie went to make some phone calls, and the three slipped out the front door and sat down in a swing on the front porch.

“What now?” asked Sparkle. “We should probably head away from the farm for the moment.”

“Just a second,” said Nita, looking at Susan. “Why didn’t you tell me my aunt was a wizard?”

“Uh, excuse me, but she’s your aunt. I didn’t think I would have to tell you something so obvious about your own family. Even you admitted you should have known.”

“Maybe, but now I’m more determined than ever to learn this *Magic Sense* of yours.”

“Why *didn’t* you know, anyway? I mean you have that book that lists all wizards everywhere, right? You never thought to yourself ‘hey, wonder if I have any relatives that are wizards, that would be great!’ I mean there must be wizard stuff you might want to talk to a family member about, rather than a stranger. Maybe something they’ve been through you’re having trouble with?”

“I don’t know why she wasn’t listed. She should have been. It seems rather stupid that she wasn’t, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure your book of wizardry had its reasons... even if we can’t figure out what they might be.”

“Sure, let’s leave it at that. So why should we leave the farm?”

“If trouble is going to find us, and it will, best to be away from this place when it does. I would hate to turn this farm into a battleground.”

“Why would it come here just because you’re here?” asked Nita. “Conceited much?”

“It’s just the reality of the situation,” explained Sparkle. “Trouble is drawn to us so that we can solve it and get XP. Same with fights. Remember that little girl that hunted you down in the street? Or that lady with the three grandsons?”

Susan nodded. “I am a magnet for that sort of thing it seems.”

“The point is, no matter where we go, something will happen because that’s how a *Paragon’s* reality works. We bring a little of that reality wherever we go, so that same thing will happen here.”

“We can hang out outside of town, I guess,” said Nita. “There’s a lot of empty land around here, that would be fine for a battle.”

“Not too empty, they’ll have to come from somewhere.”

“We’ll figure that out when we get there. Come on.”

The three hung out within sight of the town, but far enough way that the townspeople wouldn't have to get involved. That was the plan, anyway. About one o'clock a group of police cars came screaming down the road, sirens blaring, and roared past them.

"They seemed in a pretty big hurry," observed Nita.

"You don't think..." trailed off Susan.

"Come on, we've got to get over there!" said Nita, about to take off running.

"Wait!" shouted Susan. "We'll fly there, it'll be faster."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Magic."

"You forgot. Honestly. *Flight.*"

Susan and Nita stayed low to the ground, skimming the road on the way into the city. What met their eyes was a scene from a motion picture, but not a camera was in sight.

Right, no cell phones, thought Susan, as she calmly looked the scene over. *I guess there is some advantage to living in a less developed age. But what happens when they invariably develop them? Stuff like this uploaded to youtube, or their equivalent, will start getting harder and harder to explain away.* Police officers were putting shot after shot into human sized creatures seemingly made of some kind of rock or stone. They had smooth heads, no features to speak off, and were basically rampaging about destroying everything in sight. Punching through walls of buildings, scattering bystanders, even flipping over a car or two.

"Great, no eyes, or nose apparently," remarked Susan. "This is The Darkness for sure. Wonder if it's here someplace?"

"Why would it be that?" asked Nita.

"It knows how I fight. Look at them. I could dazzle the whole lot of them if they had eyes. Or put them all to sleep if they breathed. It looks like they don't do either, at least not in the way we understand. Tricky, very tricky."

One thing that worked to their advantage was they didn't seem to move very quickly, as anyone running away seemed to completely outpace them. A steady stream of people was moving away from the area, as cops who were not shooting tried to maintain order. As far as the gunfire went, they didn't seem to notice, and were carrying on as though not under heavy fire from half a dozen uniformed men.

And where are the uniformed woman? Susan *tisk*ed under her breath. *We can be cops too, you know.*

"They're really here," breathed Nita. "And there's no way we can... no way I can fight them. Not with wizardry, at least not here anyway. And the guns aren't doing anything! What are we going to do?"

"No, probably too high a *DTR.*" *Or maybe some kind of amazing LUCk, to just make the cops miss?* "Leave them to me. You can use some of the pins if you want. Distract any that are going for a person until I can-"

"I... don't have them. You think I'm going to just carry something that dangerous around?"

"You- What? Aarg! They aren't dangerous. Just... just go hide or something then."

"Sorry." She moved off.

“Uh, wizards,” said Susan, getting her *Enhance Sword* from her *Pocket Dimension* with the spell. While she did, Sparkle put *Acceleration* on her, as normal. *Here I was, coming into this world, thinking that as they didn't have wands, they might be worth a bit more. But no... it's all 'overlay' this and 'we don't carry weapons' that. Aren't they supposed to be fighting this Lone Power guy? How do they expect to do that when they don't have anything to actually fight with but wizardry, which it seems can "saturate" an area and make itself useless? Wait, if no one can do wizardry because of this "overlay" then wouldn't that "overlay" go away in time? Why would it hang around? Does magic have some kind of half-life? And why couldn't wizardry be used outside it to sweep that "radiation" away and make the area safe-*

“Oh crap!” Susan's thoughts were broken as she looked back to the scene in front of her.

Several meters away one of the Drow had gotten tired of being shot at, and was currently ripping the door off the car that the cop was hiding behind. As the world was moving in slow motion she saw him lift the door to pound it into the guy, and as she had seen them flipping cars over, she knew how strong these suckers were.

Don't have time to get my armor on and get over there! she thought, panicked. *I hope I'm close enough!*

“*Transposition!*” she cast, putting energy in to increase her range. She wanted to swap the position of the officer with one of the Drow that was further away, and with the energy she dropped, plus the bonus to *Mercury* spells she got from having *Acceleration* up it worked, even casting instantly. The Drow smashed the door through the head of what was now another Drow, confusing them both. The officer whirled around, wondering what the heck had just happened. Susan didn't have time to explain it, she just waited two segments and said her trigger word, “blade.”

She became an *Avatar of War*.

Both weapons burst into flames, and her armored form drew every eye nearby. About to now enter combat, her nature as a *Paragon* allowed her to survey the battlefield instantly. As though someone, in a higher dimension, was looking down upon it like an RTS game. Just like that, she knew where everyone was and what the current combat situation was. There were seven cops in the area, apart from the one she had just *Transposed*, hiding behind their cars. There were seven “civilians” milling about, having come out of shops to see what the confusion was or just being caught up in the action when the drow attacked. It looked like at least three were in close quarters “combat” with drow, a mother trying to defend her child, a woman alone, and a man, all about five meters away from each other about three shops down. That put them at the far edge of the battlefield, meaning Susan would have to get past the cop cars, and fight past at least four drow to get to them. Two drow were punching holes in a nearby shop, where terrified people were screaming inside, and two were beating up cars parked outside of the shops for some reason.

Susan gripped her swords tightly. *Slash All has a range of M, easily enough to hit all of them I can see, but the problem is those attacking people won't know it's me hitting them. They'll just go on attacking what's in front of them, and being pummeled by one of these things means death for a normal person. I need to get those people to*

safety!

“Our priority is keeping those people safe,” she shouted to Sparkle, pointing down the street to the terrified figures scrambling around trying to avoid blows by the nearby drow.

“You got it,” Sparkle replied, mentally reviewing her known spells. *Good, she isn't just going to recklessly attack? She must be seeing their health levels and knows one or two blows won't cut it. Get those people out of here first, then concentrate on taking down the drow. That seems reasonable.*

Both rolled *Initiative* and shifted into combat time, it was time to take out some bad guys!

Drow Combat

Time: Just then

Place: Some random street in Ireland

Sparkle, by nature of being a cat and thus, having a superior REFlexes to her “owner” the “mere human,” got the highest *Initiative* and went first. She took her free 1/10 movement (that being a two meter sprint to under the nearest police car), and cast *Elemental Line: Wind* with zero *deferred delay*. She was getting a plus ten to the casting check from *Acceleration*, while she “lost” six because that’s how long the spell normally took to cast. This gave her a net bonus of four, meaning she got a seventeen total on her check. She managed a line fourteen meters long, just enough to stretch across the battlefield and hit five of the drow, including the one harassing the mother and daughter. It also lit up the battlefield, as a huge magical circle spread out from underneath her, alerting everyone that something strange was going on. Technically something strange was already going on, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say “something even stranger.” The drow thus got their chance to dodge, though only one managed to beat the seventeen that Sparkle had gotten.

Susan also instantly cast something, *Transposition*, this time taking a further penalty for having a sword in her hand as she made the required gestures. She made up the difference with energy, getting a nineteen total on the check. The man she was trying to switch with, freaked out by being attacked by this creature and now seeing magic swirling around himself, actually spent some energy on RESolve to resist because he didn’t know what the heck was going on. He got two less than he needed, and he and Susan swapped positions.

“Hey little one!” she called down to the drow, who now looked up in seeming surprise that the man it was trying to beat the crap out of suddenly turned into an armored figure with two flaming swords.

Sparkle, a police officer, and drow “four” now went, the one with a car door smashed over the top of it. It busted out of the door with a roar, intelligent enough to realize something magical had happened to it. The officer uselessly shot at the nearest drow, which of course pinged off his stony hide. Sparkle felt changing a winning strategy was a silly idea and moved up again, now underneath the lead police car. She again cast *Elemental Line: Wind* at her four bonus, and got an eighteen this time. (She had spent an additional energy, remembering her *Energy Boost* skill and thus, got that extra energy back) This gave her a line 1m longer than before, and she was able to hit six this time. The drow again tried to dodge, but even spending four energy, none managed it. Howls of anguish were heard, as most of the drow now took a second hit, but none dropped.

These things are pretty tough, Sparkle thought to herself. I can see why Susan throws so much energy into stuff she does. When you want something to go down, you want it to go down NOW. Taking two Elemental Line spells in a row is pretty harsh. Though my rating isn’t so great, and I haven’t put extra energy in to raise my damage

potential. Ah well, at least they're moving in slow motion compared to us. We'll make it through.

Susan looked to her left, where the woman was backing away from a drow about to swing at her. She made a free action *Magic Combat* but as she only had a two rating, her result of seven was pretty low. Oddly, she realized the drow over there would strike at delay ten, where she was at delay four. She wasn't sure about the drow right in front of her. *Okay, my original plan was to hold my action until this one here was about to hit me, then release Transposition and make him hit his buddy. But couldn't I do it the other way around? It's not like this thing can get through my armor or anything.*

Chuckling, she took her free movement to run around the drow she was facing so that she was in the same relative position to the drow attacking the woman was. She started casting, taking four segments and insuring her spell would go off so that the other drow wouldn't be able to react in time once it started swinging.

And yes, Susan's desire to show off trumped her desire to take these drow out as quickly as possible. To be fair, as long as no one died she could heal them with the *Alleviation* knife when it was over, and six segments was only 1.2 seconds. The only other *Paragon* in the area able to appreciate a time interval that small was used to that sort of behavior from her by now. That didn't mean she approved or anything, but gave a slight shake of the head and waited for her turn again, realizing she was going to do most of the damage dealing for the next few segments.

At the same time, two officers got off another shot and one civilian that was in the clear turned and headed north, catching the attention of drow "ten" who decided running down this terrified person might be a whole lot of fun. As a point of interest, the one officer got a headshot, and rolled max damage, which at least gave the drow standing there beating the hood of the car a single penalty point. (The damage was non-lethal.)

Sparkle, wondering if Susan was for some bizarre reason ignoring the woman and child that were in peril or just trusting her to take care of it, fired off another *Elemental Line: Wind* with extra energy. She put in four this time, getting back two from her *Energy Boost* and stretching across the battlefield twice. This hit the three in front of her, the one harassing the woman, one standing out in the open, and the one about to take off after the fleeing person. She got a twenty six total, and there was no way anything within miles of here could dodge that. They tried, and failed. Amazingly, even given the higher damage potential, none dropped.

At the same time, four drow got an action. One swung against Susan, getting a twelve and clanging off her armor harmlessly. One smashed in a car window that was right next to it. One started moving towards Nita, who was still staring straight ahead as she hadn't moved in the last second. It went barreling towards her, having to cover about six meters before it could be within striking distance. Lucky for her, an officer was right there and grabbed her, pulling her to the left behind the car where he was crouched. The last one that could go this segment took a step forward, brandishing

what was left of the car door and swinging against officer “two.” The officer tried to dodge, missed it by one, and got smashed for twelve damage, going down with a broken left leg. He screamed.

Sparkle was up again, and looked over, over the cars, to where the scream was coming from. The officer was on the ground, clutching at his now shattered leg, and she had to decide between putting *Regeneration* on him or just getting that drow with the piece of door in his hand away from the guy. She choose the later, as she was in a good spot for a “*Thrust*”, which she cast instantly. She got a twenty six to activate it, but underestimated the STRength of these things, as her target got a twenty eight to resist.

“I declare the use of card 22, *failure*,” she said, and time jumped back a split second, making the resistance check fail. This slammed the drow into the one right behind him, flipped them both over the hood of the car behind them, and down the street. The TR wasn’t enough to hurt them, but at least it bought the poor guy with the broken leg some time to crawl behind the cars.

Officer “one” ran to his friend, shaking off the sight of the drow somehow magically being blown off their feet. He started dragging the guy with the broken leg south, behind the cars and the other officers. Nita ran to help him, and together the two of them got him up on their shoulders so he could be dragged away.

Drow “fourteen” by this time had seen the commotion and magic being thrown against his comrades, and started making his way towards the position of the officers. Sparkle noticed, throwing up an *Elemental Line: Wind* which shot around the cars, in front of the officer, and then back around, hitting the now battered but still up drow in front of her. The two running drow couldn’t exactly stop and again, they couldn’t beat a twenty seven result anyway. (Sparkle was now at nineteen energy) Finally, two of them dropped, having taken massive amounts of damage to the body. They were still alive, but at least there were two less to worry about now. Four officers shot, two missed because their targets were taken down, the other two did superficial damage.

It was finally segment ten, so Susan’s spell went off, and she switched places with the drow about to attack the woman. It attacked the drow that had punched Susan instead, but the other drow got a lucky dodge roll in and avoided the blow.

Blast, all that and it missed? Forget this.

Susan used her *Off Hand* action to slice the blade through the air, doing a called shot to the bodies of all the drow. With ten energy put into COOrdination she still managed an 18, hitting ten and only missing one in range. This dropped another one, luckily, the one trying to pummel the mother and daughter. One drow leapt over the police car and sprang upon an officer, who tried to get a shaky shot off at it at close range, rather than dodging. It didn’t even slow the thing, and it smashed the officer to the ground, doing eleven damage to his chest. Nita, being right next to all this, screamed, which was probably not the best thing to do given that would probably attract attention.

With the drow down, the mother and daughter scrambled back towards the two shops behind them, intending to run around to the back and hide. Drow “nine,” having dodged the blow from the teleporting drow looked left where Susan had gone. The woman now in front of Susan chose this moment to faint dead away, as the rock creature she had been trying to fend off now became an enormous armored thing, which was not very reassuring. More drow broke off their assault of various inanimate objects and ran towards the police officers. Luckily Sparkle was also going on this segment, but she wasn’t sure of the best course of action to take. The drow that had landed on the officer couldn’t be targeted, not without hitting the unfortunate guy beneath him. Her only other attack spells were touch based, and not lethal enough to take out creatures who could survive *Line* after *Line*. She reluctantly targeted the other four that were nearby, hoping maybe to take them out and afterwards get off a *Destruction* with the last of her energy. This took out three, leaving two standing near the officers.

The drow that had been thrown by *Thrust* was now back and racing towards the officers again, but Sparkle went before him, spinning in a circle and sending an *Elemental Line: Wind* all the way around the cars, hitting the two lone drow, but bringing down neither.

Nita said some words, concentrating on the man who was about to be pounded by a drow, but Susan was too far away to hear them and Sparkle wasn’t paying enough attention to worry about it. The guy that was down acted, trying to roll the drow off himself, but could hardly do more than thrash weakly, given the chest wound he had received. Civilian “one” made it into the nearest store, and getting a fifteen on a PERsonality check, held the door open for the mother carrying her child and motioned them to get inside.

Sparkle was up again, and with only twelve energy left, again sent a *Line* out, intercepting the two nearest drow. One kept coming, one actually died. With thirty six damage to the head, it was two over *gone* and it dropped to the ground as its head exploded. Still, Sparkle sighed to see that drow “three” was still on the move. Drow “nine” crashed into Susan, trying to bring her down. She didn’t dodge, as that would only increase her delay, but she did make an opposed STRength check with the creature to stay standing. It being somewhat wounded, Susan went nowhere, and the drow scabbled at her armor trying to knock her over.

It was finally Susan’s turn again, so she looked down at the drow. “Quit it,” she said, swinging her primary blade, and again making a called shot to the body of all the drow she could see. That was a nineteen, while the highest dodge by a drow was a seventeen, so she hit all of them. One near her went down, so she swung with her left as well, doing further damage and increasing her delay again by eight. This dropped a pathetic two, leaving one chasing a civilian, the one nearest her, the one still raising a fist to pound into the police officer, and one that had been *Thrust* and was nearing the battlefield again.

About time, Sparkle thought to herself, as she scampered under the cars to the final drow. She didn't have Magic Combat so she just threw her remaining nine energy into Destruction, casting instantly and targeting the drow's head. As expected, this only gave her a plus one bonus because the spell normally took seven segments to cast. With the insanely high DTR of these creatures she missed it by three, and declared the use of card seven, a success. The drow's head exploded into powder, and Sparkle got three energy back from her Energy Boost, leaving her with three.

Okay, maybe I should have made that activatable item after all. There's still time, I'll look through the book again, now that I know more what we're up against. There must be something that could have helped in this situation.

Drow "nine" got in another hit against Susan, but which bounced off her armor with a clang. She double swung, again going up by eight, and dropping all but one of the drow, the furthest one away from her.

Seriously? I mean I realize these guys have forty two health to lose before they die but this is getting ridiculous. I saw how many times Sparkle cast that Elemental spell. I suppose I shouldn't complain, I am hitting all of them so in reality I'm doing a lot of damage per eight delay, it's just spread out over a bunch of targets. I wonder, if I put my Elemental Materia on the blade, could I do three types of damage to them at once? The physical damage, the fire damage from Avatar, and the Materia damage. Ah, no, that would only make the sword cut count as elemental damage, not actually do elemental damage. I would need a different spell for that.

With only one left, Susan sprinted over to it and sliced it in half. She could see it only needed two more points of damage to drop, which she did.

"There's wounded people here!" shouted Nita, waving her over. Susan sighed, putting the Enhance Sword back in her Pocket Dimension with a spell and swapping her main sword over. She pulled the knife out and advanced on the officers. As she did she glanced at the knife, which had not burst into flames like the sword had. *Huh, the magic is smart enough to know this isn't a weapon. Neat!*

"Stay- stay back!" one of them shouted. "I'll shoot!"

"Yeah? And what good is that going to do you?" Susan retorted.

"It's okay, she's going to help," insisted Nita.

"How do you know? That thing is enormous! Where did all these monsters come from?"

"Just trust me."

"Trust you? Not another step, or I swear..."

"Oh, go ahead. Just try not to bounce it into someone else I'll have to heal."

He pulled the trigger.

Sadly, he was so shaky that even with her +1 size modifier, her passive dodge of fourteen beat his roll of nine easily, so the bullet went wide, shattering a window behind them.

“Are you crazy?” yelled an officer, grabbing the gun and pulling it down. “There’s innocent people around here!”

“But... that thing...”

“If it attacks us, fine. Until then, I’ll treat it as a friendly. Those creatures aren’t dead, aren’t they? And we weren’t hurting them at all.”

“Yeah, what was that light show?” asked another, gun down but still tense.

“Trust me,” said Susan, getting close to the first injured man. “You don’t want to know. Now this may seem a bit unorthodox, but it will heal you,” she said to the guy.

“Keep that thing away from me!” he shouted, trying to inch his way away from the blade.

“Yeah, really need to change the shape of this thing. Oh, hold still, it won’t even hurt. Well, not as much as a broken leg will, anyway.” She plunged it in. The officer’s guns came up again.

“No, please, it’s okay!” insisted Nita. “Just watch.”

“Hey, I do feel better,” said the officer, as Susan pulled the knife out. “How about that?”

“How about that. Now for the other.” She went over and healed him as well. “Anyone else?”

The officers shook their heads, so Susan put the knife away again.

“Now will someone explain to me what’s going on?” asked the one who had shot at her. “What are those creatures? Who or what in the world are you?”

“Ah, yes, how to explain...” stalled Susan. “Would you believe me if I told you they were just a bad dream?”

“A what?”

Susan took a deep breath and cast *Somnolent Smog* without words, taking the maximum time and throwing in some energy to compensate for the penalty. She got a sixteen, more than an average person could roll on a CON check, and they all slumped to the ground, asleep. She held it a second, making sure they wouldn’t wake up when they hit the ground, and let it go.

Nita was also sleeping peacefully.

Whoops.

“Now what?” asked Sparkle, who had known what was coming and also not breathed the mist.

“Somehow destroy the evidence, I guess? How are you doing on energy? Can you use *Destruction* on them?”

“I have three left. I’m thinking no.”

“Ah. Wow, you really did go all out. Sorry I wasn’t more help, seems you did most of the work there. That called shot and off hand action really killed me. I can see it’ll work, but I’ll need that *Augment Skill: Off Hand* to really take advantage of it. It sucks

Acceleration can't make that faster too, but 'No other skills, Backgrounds or other abilities modify off-hand *Delay*.' as they say."

"Who says that? To be fair, the entire combat still only took about five seconds."

"True, very true. I'm going to drain energy from any that are alive, they should sleep for a little while."

"Drain energy? Are you out too?"

"No, but just in case more show up, I figure I better be prepared. It'll give me a minute to think of what to do with all these bodies too. If we have to do what I think we're going to have to do, I'll need all the energy I can get."

In the end, she found she could lift them physically, instead of relying on the *Telekinesis* spell as she had feared. So she simply opened a *Teleportal* out in the middle of a field she had seen while riding around the bus through Ireland. She then picked them up, one at a time, and tossed them through. By this time, people were getting curious again as to what was happening, but Susan staring them down seemed to cure that pretty quickly. When the bodies were gone she hefted Nita, stepped through the portal herself, let Sparkle jump through, and was about to close it when an elf on horseback rode up and held up a hand in greeting.

Susan stared. *A real elf! Now how about... oh right, is that the guy I had to impress to get the sword? Let's hope so.*

"How's it going?" she asked, trying to be casual.

The elf stared at her. "Really?" it finally asked, quite sternly.

Oh crap, I just doomed us all?

Talking to Elves

Place: The field side of the portal back to town

Time: Seconds after Susan greeted the elf

The figure on horseback and Susan stared at each other for long seconds. The elf had black hair, pointed ears, (*So I suppose he could be Vulcan, rather than an elf?*) regal clothes, and a slightly odd look about him in terms of how reality was perceived in these parts. His horse was similar, in that it looked more regal than “simple” Earth horses. It was pure white, stood stock still, and also seemed to look at her with some intelligence. Susan was sure most would call the elf handsome, if they were into that sort of thing, but she wasn’t impressed or intimidated. It was a pretty nice horse, though.

Still under *Acceleration* because technically as she was still on the battlefield it was the same *scene*, she did a couple of quick sensings of him. She got an eleven on *Magic Sense*, ten on *Spirit*, and eight on *Dimension*. Sparkle assisted her with a twelve on that one, giving her plus two, enough to succeed on all of them. He was magical, had a bunch of energy, and wasn’t from around here.

As if I couldn’t tell just by looking at him. But it is nice to have confirmation. Wait, if he’s not from around here and has all that energy...

“Declare yourself,” she said, putting a hand out and willing her sword to come back into her hand from where she had stabbed it into the ground to pick up drow bodies. She could feel where it was, and didn’t need to look as the *Material Link* now worked into the sword guided it into her hand. It burst into flames again, and she held it up.

“Impressive,” said the elf, “but then I’ve already seen your abilities in combat. That many opponents, in so short a time? Even our warriors would be hard pressed to match such a feat.”

Okay, not exactly answering my question... The trouble with this world is, it seems like nobody actually lives here! Is this guy The Darkness, or will starting a fight with him be another Biddy situation? I need to ask Silverstreak if there’s some way of detecting just that presence, as Dimension Sense isn’t cutting it around here. Of course, hopefully most worlds don’t have this much “pollution.”

“Thank you. To be fair, most of the work done that time was accomplished by my cat. I’m saving my good stuff for our assault on Balor or whatever his name his.”

“That seems a wise choice. Wait, did you say cat?”

“Hello!” said Sparkle, looking up at the figure.

The elf shook his head. “It is no wonder the queen has sent her fool to pick up this lot. It seems fitting all around. Have you finished your work here, then?”

Susan looked past him, to where the battle had taken place. She had counted, and she had all the drow bits on this side of the *Teleportal*. Those not dead she had killed by draining their energy until they perished, so she was back to her maximum and then some. She had wanted to spend some of it on *Repair*, like for the windows and such that had been broken.

Too many witnesses, though. Even if I repaired the damage, a lot of people saw that attack happen. Too many to just pass off as some kind of shared hallucination. And with the attack over, people will be gathering to see what happened, and Nita won't like me throwing magic around where people can see. Oh well.

"On that side, yes," she replied. "I still have to bury these guys on this side. You want to come through and wait?"

The elf seemed puzzled. "You would show such compassion, even to monsters like these?"

"What compassion?" she asked, annoyed. "Even out here in the country I can't just leave a bunch of drow bodies laying about. If someone stumbled into them, think of the repercussions. They would think them aliens or something, and call in the government, and seal off the area, and generally freak out. I'm hiding them, not performing last rites."

"Yes, I see the difference now. If you will allow me through your marvelous gateway here, I shall 'hold my horse' as you humans say, while you perform this task. I hope it will not take long, the queen should not be kept waiting."

"Then she should have come to see me," Susan muttered, stepping back. The horse carefully stepped through the *Teleportal*, and after Sparkle hopped through (Nita had been carried through first thing) she closed it. With that, the *scene* ended, and Susan's magic dropped away, leaving her struggling to heft the now too heavy blade. The world also sped up as *Acceleration* dropped away too. "You can wait over there," she said, pointing. "That tree should be far enough away."

The elf looked over at it. "Do you fear the secret of your magics being given away if I watch? You need not, I have no interest in them." Susan glared at him. "Yes, I noticed they were not wizardry, but you used them against our enemies, and so I will not question them."

I'm glaring at you because that means were you standing around watching somewhere, and didn't bother to lift a finger to actually help me. Thanks a lot. She did not say this out loud, rather; "No, you're not from this dimension. I can't tell you from another dimensional traveler I'm here to drive from this world. No offense, but I've already beaten up one wrong person in my time here, I would not want to beat up another. As you have yet to declare yourself or your intentions as I requested, I am forced to treat you as a potential enemy. Now please *go over there*."

The elf shook his head. "It seems arrogance is not limited to only the Sidhe. Very well, if it will reassure you." He wheeled his horse around and trotted over to the trees some distance away that Susan had pointed out.

No, what would reassure me is knowing who the freak you are. Had I not been expecting someone to bring me the vessel of air, I would have already torn you apart given how suspicious you're acting. As it is, you can go be butthurt over there where I can keep an eye on you. You don't seem the type The Darkness would possess either, you're not really impressive or evil looking enough. But that doesn't mean you aren't.

"So how exactly are we going to bury these guys?" asked Sparkle, as Susan reabsorbed her sword.

"I can think of a spell or two that might work. Worst case, we stick them in my *Personal Dimension* for a bit, and Silverstreak can have them when we get back to the Hub. Let's see now..." She got her book out and started paging through it. "Uranus spells deal with the earth, there must be something. Shoot! *Passageway* deals exclusively with stone, rather than just the ground. Same with *Sculpt...* wait, here it is. *Excavate!* That will dig up the earth around here. Now, can I pick it up in a couple of minutes..."

Sparkle indicated she wanted to look too, so Susan showed the book to her.

"It's going to deposit the dirt in a big pile," she read, "and look disturbed."

"Ah, true. I figure I can shove the dirt back with *Telekinesis*, but you're right, it'll still look like a recently dug hole. Someone could get curious and start digging. Wait!" She paged through some more. "How about *Foliage*? That'll make grass grow if I only maintain it for a turn. That should cover up any sign of work here."

Sparkle looked it over as well. "Sounds good to me."

So the two got to work understanding the spells enough to cast them from writings. Susan got a twelve and a seventeen while reading *Foliage*, which was enough. She then went back to *Excavate* and read it over.

"Wait a second. *Foliage*, which can basically restore an entire forest to life in under five minutes, is grade five, right?"

"Yeah."

"But a spell to simply dig a hole in the ground is grade seven? And it's *I* duration, meaning you can't concentrate on making the hole bigger, one shot is all I get. I don't get it."

"Maybe because targeting a creature made of earth destroys it? I mean you could have used this on that golem that gave us some trouble back with Louise, right?"

She tilted the book this way and that, thinking it over. "I guess. Still, maybe I should ask the book for a lesser grade version of the spell that just digs up a bit of ground while I concentrate. I wonder." She flipped through to the Mercury section. "Do you think *Telekinesis* would work on the ground before we dug it up? I mean, once it's a pile of dirt, it's a single object- one, one pile of dirt, ah ha ha. Could we basically yank a portion of ground up here with that spell?"

Sparkle considered. "Probably not. You would have to target each grain of dirt with the spell, as however heavy a chunk you could lift with your check result would still count as the *entire* Earth at that point. And if you started shoving the entire planet around, well, let me off first."

"I'll give you plenty of warning." Susan grinned. *Huh, so I could lift a whole car, even if it's made of pieces because all the pieces make up a single object, a car. But targeting the ground to make a hole doesn't work even if they weigh the same. Magic is so weird.* "Okay, let's hope I get enough on my checks." She went back to *Excavate* and started reading it over. This time her checks were a twenty three and a fifteen, enough to understand the spell well enough to cast it. "Great!" she said, magic swirling around the area as she envisioned the symbols on the ground nearby. "And away we go."

Fourteen segments later, the ground vanished from under the drow and they fell into a good sized hole. Susan then shoved the dirt as she had planned, and created a *Temporary Tool*, a hoe, to smooth the dirt out. One final casting, *Foliate*, and the area was so passably green again that unless someone was specially looking for this spot, no one would ever know what had happened there.

"Time itself will make the area look more natural," she mused, looking around. "I think we're done here."

"Our elven friend seems anxious to be on his way," remarked Sparkle. "And remember, they really have no incentive to help up, so do try to be polite."

"Oh, I always try," allowed Susan. "It just hardly ever comes out that way. Let's go wake up Nita before he bursts a blood vessel or something."

She gently shook the wizard, who fluttered her eyelids and then sat bolt upright. "What's... where? Susan? What's going on?"

"Sorry about that," Susan apologized. "You got caught in my sleep spell from before. The police were asking some uncomfortable questions, so I did the expedient thing of making them take a little nap."

"You put them to sleep? What about the drow?"

"All taken care of." She stomped her foot. "Maybe not six feet under, but good enough for government work."

"But all that damage! You should have woken me up, now it's too late."

"Too late? For what? I thought about repairing the windows and stuff but that would have just meant more magic, and I figured you wouldn't approve. By that point the area was starting to get crowded with people."

"No, no, we could have... I don't know, patched it or something."

"Patched... it?"

"Yeah. Just copied a part of reality from a parallel dimension where that attack didn't happen there. It would have set everything to rights."

"Uh, Nita, don't know if you remember this, but you couldn't do a simple *Teleport* spell without backfiring it. Now you want to copy space from another dimension? Something tells me that's a little more complex, and that overlay is still there, right? You can't just ignore it for the little stuff, then hope you can pull off some crap I couldn't even do."

"Yeah, even I think your sense of scale is a bit skewed," admitted Sparkle. "Plus, what if you missed? Got the reality where the attack was still going on, or in fact was worse than it was here? You wouldn't want to bring something like that over to this world, right? Is your wizardry that selective? And what happens to the reality you're pulling all this from? Could you accidentally switch them? That wouldn't be polite. No, I think we really did all we could do, given the constraints of the area."

"Who is that?" Nita had just caught sight of the figure coming towards them.

"Oh, him? Good question, he won't tell me. Hopefully he's here to deliver the vessel of air, but he hasn't said one way or the other. All he's done is mention a queen."

"The queen," said the elf, riding over to them. "Are you well, wizard?"

"Yes, thank you," said Nita, staring up at him.

"Then perhaps we can finally be about this."

“Not until I get a little bit more explanation.” Susan crossed her arms over her chest. “You’ve told me nothing. For all I know, you are The Darkness about to lead us into a trap. We expect someone to come deliver the vessel, and so it shows up after taking you over. Pretty convenient.”

The elf sighed. “The queen holds summer court. I do not know how you knew it was her intention to hand over Fragarach, the sword of air, but that is her desire.” He looked a bit troubled.

“Fraggle Rock?”

“Fragarach.”

“Eh, close enough. Very well, lead on, good sir!” Susan gave a start and almost pulled her blade out again as two horses appeared out of nowhere. “Nice trick,” she admitted. *Okay, where they invisible, or just summoned here? And I thought magic around here took words? He didn’t seem to do anything, but he could have some kind of Spell Symbol same as me. That would impress the uninitiated, just like I use it.*

“You can ride, I hope?” the elf asked.

“I’m a bit rusty, but I have the skill,” answered Susan. “Nita?”

“Not so much,” she admitted.

“No problem, I’ve got energy to burn before it naturally dissipates. *Augment Skill: Riding.*”

With that, the two managed to get onto their horses with ease (Susan had cast the spell both on herself and Nita) and they followed the elf into a parallel world where a very beautiful elf with really, really long hair lounged in a simple seat under a pavilion. She was dressed in white, surrounded by attendants, and had a sword shaped bundle on her lap that was also covered in white silk.

“The greetings of gods and man to you, wizards,” she said, and her voice was pure and strong.

“And to you, majesty,” said Susan, trying for an untrained *Etiquette* check and getting a seven. Her curtsy was not very well accomplished. “So you have summoned us, so have we come before you.”

“If not without some prodding,” grumped the elf who had brought them.

“Now, now,” chided the queen, “They know little of queens or of us, any longer. And you did interrupt their battle, after all.”

“We did not mean any disrespect with our tardiness,” said Nita.

“I know,” she answered, with a hint of a smile. “But now let us attend to the business that has brought you here.”

“I take it the vessel of air is in that bundle there?” asked Susan, stepping forward with an outstretched hand. “Great, with this there’s only the vessel of fire left to-” She stopped as the queen’s eyes widened and her attendants gasped. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the elf partially draw his blade. “What?” she snapped at him, glaring. “Oh, you saw the sword being drawn into my hand. Don’t worry, I’ll be good.”

“Please forgive her!” spoke up a panicked Nita, grabbing Susan and trying to pull her back. “She doesn’t- She’s not from- Just, please, we’re honored to be chosen, I mean if it’s your intention...”

“What’s wrong with you?” Susan asked her, batting her hands away.

“What’s wrong with you?” Nita hissed back. “Do you have any idea how offensive you’re being towards them?”

Susan shook her head. “No, should I? I don’t have the *Etiquette* skill, so I figured being direct was best. We’re all here for the same reason. Why waste time?”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I’m always serious. She may be a queen here but that means nothing to me.” She turned back to the queen. “Give it to me and we’ll be on our way. I’m sure you have better things to be doing anyway.”

Some of the attendants looked ready to faint at such behavior.

“Such boldness,” said the queen. “Or is it arrogance? I thought our kind was arrogant compared to yours, but perhaps I have been away too long.”

“Yeah, I’m not really from around here, so please don’t take my behavior as typical. I have a war to prepare for, and the sooner I can acquire what I need to win that war, the sooner I can beat Balor, save your entire reality, and be on my way. So you’ll have to forgive me if I skip a few of the pleasantries.”

“Who’s talking right now?” asked Sparkle suddenly from behind Susan. All eyes snapped to her, and even the queen seemed interested in the talking cat. Susan also spun around, meeting her eyes. A look of understanding passed between them, and Susan took a deep breath. “It is, no doubt.” She closed her eyes and tried to relax. She hadn’t noticed, but there had been a tension building up inside her as she had gotten closer to this place. For some reason she wanted to lash out at these people, and she couldn’t imagine why.

Oh, and you were doing so well for a while there, chortled The Darkness inside her. *Pity, that cat seems to be on the ball this time. Much like that accursed Luna. Oh well.*

The tension drained out of her, leaving Susan facing the assembled elves. “Your majesty, I must offer an apology for my recent behavior. It’s not an excuse, but there is a dark presence inside me that can sometimes influence me. It also seems able to make me forget about it, so I’m not on guard against that influence as I should be. Thank you, Sparkle, for reminding me. Perhaps you would be better to just deal with Nita before I make things worse.”

The queen sat back in her chair. “I do feel a conflict of some kind within you. Perhaps you are simply the living proof that we all carry our demons with us. But what you said was true. You are here for the sword, and I am here to bestow it upon you. Approach then, Nita, and receive it.”

Nita came forward as the queen unwrapped a sword and presented it to her. Susan didn’t need *Magic Sense* to feel the power coming off it, and even visually the air around the blade seemed to tremble. Nita reached out a hand, but drew it back as if shocked.

“It pushed me away!”

The queen nodded. “The reason it was taken out of the world was because there was no hand strong enough to wield it. Also I think the nature of the person is taken into account, and there is more of the water than of the air about you, wizard. Perhaps your confused companion would like to take a turn?”

Susan looked over at their original guide, who still hadn't taken his hand off his sword hilt. He seemed to struggle with himself, then shoved it back and gestured for her to go ahead. She too reached for the blade, and felt herself being shoved back, the air growing uncomfortably hot around the sword. She bet she could force the issue, make some STrength or RESolve checks to touch the blade, but she backed off for the moment. "I'll have to force it," she remarked.

"As I thought," said the queen. "There is too much of the fire nature in you, and I worry, for what does air do to fire?"

"Spread it," she answered simply.

"Correct. Your power is strange to me, but I can feel it within you. To add the power of this sword to your already considerable power... I must admit the idea worries me."

"Perhaps I could try it," said Sparkle, stepping up.

"Ah, forgive me, friend feline, but how would you carry such a blade?" asked the queen.

"Not physically, I admit. I'll put it in my sub-space pocket. I have the same rating as you, Susan, and I don't have anything in mine at the moment. It should be big enough."

The queen laughed. "An unconventional approach, for an unconventional day. Not that I'm even sure what you mean, exactly, but I know enough of magic to reason your meaning. Very well." She held the blade out to Sparkle, who put a paw on it and made a *Pocket* check, putting in her last three energy as her MANipulation was so low. She got a seven, not enough, but quickly declared the use of card 5, *Bonus*, for a nine that was. The sword disappeared.

"Guess I'm air enough," she said.

"Extraordinary," said the queen. "If we had more time, I'm sure your stories would be quite astonishing."

"Perhaps," admitted Sparkle. "But not yet done. Not by a long way, I think."

"Indeed. The Amadaun will see you back to your home. Good luck in your coming battle."

"Thank you, majesty," all three said.

And so the elf brought them back to the farm, and wheeled and rode away without so much as a parting word.

Maybe I should tattoo 'The Darkness' on my hand, so I can see it all the time and get reminded of it. That way maybe things like that wouldn't happen.

"So now what?" asked Nita.

"Now we see about fire," Susan answered, heading to the door. "And our real battle begins."

Susan put her hand on the doorknob to go back into the house and tell Nita's aunt that they had the sword, and where would she like it? However, she paused and looked around, certain that something was wrong.

"What time is it?" asked Nita, looking up at the sun. It was low in the sky, and shadows stretched across the nearby fields.

"Ah, four thirty," said Susan, looking at the watch Silverstreak had given her. The watch that automatically synchronized to whatever the local time was. "Wait, that can't be right."

"We just had lunch, how can it be almost dinnertime?" asked Nita. "Wait, I've got one thirty... what is that?"

"What is what?"

"That watch! I've never seen anything like it. Is that... some kind of shrunken down computer monitor or something? It's lit up like it is!"

Susan chuckled. "Oh, this old thing? Don't worry about this, it was given to me by the being that sent me here. I'm sure you won't have technology like this for a long time."

"I should think not. Anyway, that's really weird. I guess time ran differently between where we talked to the queen and here."

"Must be. Weird, we hadn't stayed all that long. Well, we'll just have to have a late dinner then, huh?"

"Yeah."

The three went inside, and found Annie in the kitchen looking somewhat worried.

"What's up, Aunt Annie?" asked Nita. "We got the sword, no worries. Sorry we were gone so long, we didn't realize time was different when we went to see the queen."

"Queen?"

"Of the Sidhe."

"Sidhe? I thought they were elves!" broke in Susan. "But no, wait, that is what my magic called them before, isn't it?"

"Thank goodness you didn't actually call them that. We really wouldn't have walked out of there alive!"

Susan shrugged. "Oh, we would have." She looked around. "A lot of people in this house," she remarked, her *Spirit Sense* telling her there were a lot more energy signatures in nearby rooms than was normal. She didn't have to make checks in that, it was like telling a room was hot or cold when you walked in. She could feel the energy around her, and making checks was just to tell where exactly *ley lines* were or the approximate energy of someone she was near to. "Are they wizards, come to figure out a plan for the spirit of fire?"

Annie seemed to get a little paler. "You can tell that... yes, of course you would. Nita, dear, can you just come over here?" She edged around the table and pulled Nita with her, placing the table between them and her.

"So much for the element of surprise," said a voice, and Johnny aka Shaun O'Driscoll, the highest ranking wizard in these parts walked in, followed by several other people. Each group came into the room from separate doors, so Susan couldn't help but think they were somehow trying to box her in. *But that would be a dumb thing to do.* "Fairest and fallen, greetings and defiance."

"The... what now?" asked Susan, confused.

"She can't be!" protested Nita. "There's no-"

"Are you sure?" he barked, cutting her off. "Because there's no way a couple of kids could write the spell that woke up the cup, and then the stone, on the first try. We got the reports of the drow attack in town, and cleaning up that mess was a real pain, let me tell you. I spoke to several people who said a girl matching your description turned into a giant, armor wearing, flaming sword wielding, combat machine. A dozen drow, taken down in seconds! The police officers I spoke to said they had never seen anything like it. And then you all vanished!"

"Funny way of saying thank you for saving hundreds of lives today. You're welcome, by the way. Anyway, you know how I can do all that stuff, I told you earlier. I can do *magic*. Don't complain to me that you all got stuck with mere *wizardry*."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't buy it. The simplest solution is usually the right one. Ergo, you're the Lone One, trying to disrupt our plans somehow."

"Right, by waking up the treasures for you, and then handing them over. Wait, are you calling me, is he calling me the thing that invented death in this universe?"

Nita tightly nodded her head, eyes huge.

"Oh, come on. Most of that fight wasn't even me, it was Sparkle! Tell them!"

"It was me, actually," admitted Sparkle. "I spent all my energy to do it, as those things were pretty tough to take down, let me tell you."

"Oh sure, your *cat* can do magic. Sure. Tell us another one!"

"She can, believe me if you don't believe her. What you're saying doesn't make sense," protested Nita. "Yeah, she's got some weird magic, but she's been helping us. I mean she's a little rude-"

Sparkle snorted. "You can be honest."

"Okay, she's really brusque, and uncaring of our situation, and the hardest worker I've ever seen, and terrifying in battle. But that doesn't mean... and she's possessed by some evil force, she admitted that to me." She took a step back, fearful.

"I'm not *possessed*," countered Susan. "The Darkness put some of himself into my soul before I was born, yes. If I was possessed his will would totally dominate mine, rather than just getting me to be 'brusque' as you call it. Plus I could pull him out with *Exorcise* like I did with Tom and Professor Quirrell that one time. But that's a totally different guy than your guy. I've been living with him for years, way before I set foot on this world. Man, you guys don't have truth telling spells, do you? Running right now, I mean?"

"We can't do anything like that," said Johnny.

“Typical,” she snorted in reply. “I could put one up, but getting you to believe it, that’s the trouble. Fine. So say I am this one or whatever you call him. If you try something, I’ll just wipe you out, right? I mean the one is basically a god compared to you all, right? Though he somehow doesn’t just crush you in your sleep and be done with it for some bizarre reason. That aside, if you’re right I could just gesture and kill you all. So coming here like this was a stupid idea, if you’re right. Now say you’re wrong—and you are, F.Y.I. You attack and kill me. Now you just murdered an innocent girl and doomed your world to extinction at the hands of The Darkness. He sucks your entire reality dry of energy and moves on the next. Stupid idea. Plus you have this overlay garbage that Nita keeps saying prevents her from using wizardry around here. You attack me and get it wrong, we all go up together. Stupid idea. You don’t have any real argument for this ‘confrontation’ because it goes badly for you no matter what you do. If you really were worried you should have just watched me and let me prove myself.”

Johnny shook his head. “This was our only chance. If you carried out your plans to help your image win this time it would be too late. We can hardly fight one of you, much less two. And we knew you would be here, so this is where it had to happen.”

“I won’t fight you, but you won’t win. I hope you realize that.”

“Fight you? No, if we’re right, and I think we are, there’s not much we can do. Annie?”

“I don’t know. I spoke to the Lone Power on my ordeal, we all did in one form or another. And I trust my niece. She doesn’t feel the same.”

“It’s your house, so it’s your call. But wizardry can’t explain what she’s done, and her wild story about being from another world doesn’t sit right with me. Can we really risk it? If her story is true, she’ll probably break out sooner or later. I just hope it gives us enough time to take care of Balor.”

Annie took a deep breath, pulling Nita with her, towards the door behind them.

“Wait, what are you doing?” she said, struggling to get free. “You don’t understand, what do you plan to do?”

“What we must,” said Johnny sadly. As he did, everyone backed out of the room carefully.

Great, I would have gone and replaced my spell symbols with physical combat ones rather than magical, like at home. I need a second charm bracelet. Oh well, I can cast what I want quickly enough, I’ve still got plenty of energy.

“*Magic Immunity*,” she cast, taking the full 1.8 seconds to cast it. She figured they couldn’t possibly speak a spell against her in that time.

She was right.

Once out of the room, the assembled wizards started speaking in the wizard language they used, and Susan made her *Adaptive Skill* check to see what they were doing. She got a fourteen, modified by minus three for the grade nine spell she was now maintaining. Still more than a ten, meaning she understood what they were saying. She didn’t exactly know what it all meant, as it was a pretty complex spell. Her *Adaptive Skill* allowed her to read the *Speech*, and even use wizardry if she was fed it. But actually

understanding the workings of the spell, so different from her own, was something else entirely. *I really didn't want to hurt these people, so let them bounce a spell or two off me and then perhaps we can talk.*

She figured it was going to be something pretty spectacular, given the number of people arrayed against her. She crossed her arms over her chest and put on a bored look, wondering how long this was going to take. *Something about space, and folding? Whatever, it'll just bounce off and perhaps they'll see how futile-*

"You can't use that HERE!" screamed Nita, figuring out what they were doing. "Susan, get out!"

With a **snap** the spell went off, and Susan and Sparkle found themselves seemingly cut off from light and sound.

"Huh. That's different," Susan remarked, squinting to try and pierce the darkness.

"I'll say. What did they do?"

"Not sure. Hey, can you see?"

"Not a thing. You?"

"No. It can't be magical, I was immune to magic." She put her hand out, and as expected, there was the table. "Table is still there. They couldn't have needed all those wizards to cast a simple darkness spell, and we're not being leapt upon and beaten to the ground, so I'll assume something else is going on. Just a second, I'll drop *Immunity* and get a *Light* going."

She did.

The two looked around. The room was intact, but out the doors and windows there seemed to be a dark nothingness, like the room had been torn out of reality and shoved into a *Pocket Dimension*.

"Did they shunt space?" she asked, walking over to the door and doing a *Dimension Sense* outside. She rolled maximum, a thirteen, but didn't get any information from the check. "We're not in another dimension, that's for sure." She made a *Topic: Dimensions* check but got minimum (as there must always be balance in the universe) a four, so it wasn't anything she had read about in the past.

"You're pretty calm about the whole situation," remarked Sparkle.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Plus, you just reminded me of my passenger, so I'm trying to play it cool for the moment." She tapped her head.

"Ah. Well, that aside, how are we getting out of here? The air in here won't last forever, though I suppose we could use *Pure Air*."

"I got a twenty on *Magical Theory*, but only a nine (minus one) on *Magic Sense*. See what you come up with for that, because I have an idea."

"Lower, an eight."

"Okay, assist me then."

"You got it."

Both made a second check, this time at a minus one penalty. Susan again got minimum, (minus one for retrying, minus one for the *Light* spell) and Sparkle got a ten (minus one).

“Even worse now?” she shrieked. “Fine, you know what, I’m just going with my gut.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Susan got her pistol out of the *Pocket Dimension* and activated the *Imbuing* on it, *Dead Magic*. As the space she was in was being magically twisted to basically cut it off from the rest of the universe, *Dead Magic* stopped that twisting.

The room reappeared back where it was, sound and light returning to the area.

“-had the sword of Air with them, that’s why!” Nita was shouting, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I didn’t see it,” said Annie.

“Sparkle had it, she put it into-” She gasped and pointed, and everyone spun.

“Now then,” said Susan, leveling the pistol at Johnny, “if you’re all through being hysterical, and can show a little trust for *one darn minute*, maybe we can sort this all out.”

“Oh crap! How in the-” Annie started to say. Johnny interrupted her, trying more wizardry, but Susan just stood there, finger off the trigger but considering it. Whatever he was trying to do fizzled totally, and he blinked in surprise.

“I’ve seen that gun before,” volunteered Nita. “She’s telling the truth.”

“Yeah, as long as this gun is out, nobody does any magic. Handy, huh? Now, you want the sword? How about you stop treating me like an enemy? Send away your little posse and we’ll talk.”

“What do we do?” whispered one of the men that was standing behind Johnny. “She got out, and she’s right, I can’t do any wizardry.”

“What’s that?” asked Susan. “Speak up, I’m a little hard of hearing actually, so I missed that.” Rather than answer they turned away and started urgently whispering amongst themselves. “Okay, fine, sure, take your time. I’m just standing here with a *loaded gun*.” She shook it at them. “Hakuna matata, I guess.”

“What?” asked Nita.

“It means no worries, for the rest of your days,” she singsonged, getting a three on her untrained *Singing* check. Nita looked confused. “What, don’t wizards go to movies?”

“I go to movies all the time. What’s that from?”

“Uh, The Lion King?” Nita looked at Annie, who shook her head. “You guys don’t have The Lion King yet either?” She shook her head sadly. “I pity you. I really do.”

“Doesn’t that come out next year?” asked one of the wizards from the other door.

There was a general acknowledgement from the others nearby.

“Next year? Really? Huh, how about that. You should really go see it. Simba’s dad dies. I still cry every time I see that stampede into the-”

“Susan! Spoilers!” chided Sparkle.

“Hey, I’m going to start spoiling every movie, book, and TV show I can think of that comes out in the next twenty years unless you people come to your senses. Then we’ll start in on Game of Thrones- who lives and who dies.”

Sparkle gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“Oh, you have no idea. Let’s start with The Mask, that was around this time, right? Now the basic plot goes like this-”

“Okay, okay!” said Johnny, raising his hands in surrender. “What do you want?”

“I want you to stop attacking me so I can give you this freaking sword and then go down to see Biddy and get the vessel for the spirit of fire so we can beat up The Face of Balor and I can move on to the next reality before my father or girlfriend bite the dust on some random world because you were too slow to trust!” She sucked in a huge breath. “And a pony.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Biddy? The farrier?”

“She really has the sword?”

“Did she really write the spell to wake up the cup?”

“Girlfriend?”

“It’s really Balor? We have to do the reenactment?”

“ONE AT A TIME!” shouted Susan over the sudden din. “You!” she said, pointing. “And anyone that says ‘girlfriend’ gets shot in the leg. I’m from the future, it works out.” She hesitated. “Sorta. Maybe? Kinda? In another generation? Anyway, speak!”

“Uh... pass?”

Susan mulled that over. “Acceptable. Next!” She pointed again.

“You really got the sword?”

“Ah, a useful question. Thank you. Yes, we have retrieved the sword from a bunch of elves, or whatever Nita called them earlier. They were holding it because there wasn’t anyone around here strong enough or whatever. Sparkle has it.” She indicated her *companion* who gave a little wave with her paw. “Next!”

“Where is it?”

“Safe, and out of reach for the moment. You’ll get it when I’m satisfied you won’t attack me again. You.”

“Uh, me? Oh, you’re not the Lone Power? You really are helping us?”

“I really am helping you. Maybe I should have gotten you all together to start with, that was my bad. It might have helped, but I wasn’t sure how much you could, given how you can’t actually use wizardry very easily around here. Plus...” *I think The Darkness wanted me to try and go it alone, and made me think I could. I would be easier to take out in that case.* “Anyway, I’ll do that next world, promise. Sparkle, take a memo, make sure I do that.”

“Got it, boss.”

“Next question. You.”

“You can really do magic? Real, honest to goodness magic? Not wizardry?”

“Also correct. I’d demonstrate but, gun. Well, actually I guess I *am* doing magic, technically. You can see that because you can’t do any wizardry. Proof by... absence?”

Anyway, I broke out of your little... whatever that was, so that should be proof enough of my power. What exactly was that, anyway?"

"A space twist," answered Nita. "We used it on a dragon once, that's what led me to almost be eaten by a shark later." Susan tried to figure out how those things were related. "It was the energy cost for sealing off his treasure hoard. I did it alone, rather than a group like they did. So it probably won't hit them as hard."

"You killed a dragon? Thought wizardry was all about protecting life, you said that to me once."

Nita looked shocked. "No, no, we just sealed him up. He was senile, couldn't remember how much treasure he had. In exchange for the "Naming of Lights" we traded "The Book Which is Not Named" and sealing the area off."

"Uh huh." *Wait, 'book' which is not named? Another parallel to my world?* "Is the book actually named Tom... or Voldemort?"

"What?" Nita looked totally thrown by the randomness of that question.

"Never mind. So, where would the dragon get air from? You sealed him off, that means nothing could get inside right? But dragons still have to breathe and the only air he would have had was in the space with him. That would have lasted, what, a few minutes? I don't know how much oxygen a dragon uses." Nita looked horrified, putting her hands over her mouth. "Okay, you obviously never thought of that. Great. Moving right along, you."

That woman sputtered, obviously failing to keep up with the conversation. "Johnny mentioned you saying something about a worse threat than the Lone One?"

Susan explained about The Darkness, or Darkvoid as he was called by others. This is not recorded here because you, reading this, already know all about it.

"I think she's telling the truth," said one wizard. "She's not the Lone Power, not by a long way. I have to get back, my kids will be home from school in a few minutes. Let me know when the next meeting is."

Many others agreed they had places to be, and that Susan was fine in their book if Nita vouched for her. They had seemed impressed when they heard her mention that book, and many had sort of stared off into the distance as if reading something only they could see. After that they had nodded and relaxed.

"All right," Johnny sighed, "put it away. You have my word as a wizard that we will not attack you further."

"And?" prompted Susan.

"And?"

"And you're..."

"And we're... sorry?"

"There it is. Fine." She cut the spell, bringing magic back to the area, and popped the gun into her *Pocket Dimension* again. Those that were left watched interestedly, so she took the full time so they could see the magical circle her powers produced. They seemed impressed.

"Hey, the overlay is gone," remarked one woman, looking around. "Feel that?"

The others looked about, casting wizardries of their own, and found that to be the case.

“Like I said,” explained Susan, “*Dead Magic* will suppress all magic in an area. That includes decades old magic too. Now, will this ‘overlay’ of yours seep back into this space? I have no clue. But for the moment, this room, and anything about ten meters from where I was standing should be clean.”

“Could the area be widened?” asked a man.

“Sure. It’s dependent on the energy I throw into the spell. How wide is Ireland?” There was some discussion, leading to a figure of about 85,000km. “Okay, divide that by 25...” she grabbed a nearby calculator. “That’s 3,400 people I would have to drain of energy to get the whole country. All magic everywhere would fail for a minute, and then your overlay problem will be gone.”

“We’ll think about it,” said Johnny, in a tone that covered shock, revulsion, and “we won’t be thinking about it.” “As for now, you said the person to see is Bidy, right?”

“She’s one of your ‘bright powers’ I think you call them. She’s also been practicing making spears. I think she knows what’s coming and what we need to do to get an envelope for the spirit of fire.”

“Let’s go talk to her then.”

Susan, for once thinking ahead, decided not to antagonize the wizards that remained further and did not offer *Teleportal* to get to Bidy's house more quickly. Instead she meekly followed them to a bus stop and rode like everybody else. Halfway there she regretted her decision, as the bus slowly made its way through the town. Susan looked out the window, as the wizards didn't seem to want to talk on the way, and noticed people seemed more jumpy than usual. They walked a bit quicker, eyes darting about, not greeting others they saw on the streets as they usually did.

No, these people have noticed, and they think nothing can be done. They are fearful because they don't know what's happening or that we are trying to protect them. Is keeping them ignorant of wizardry really serving in their best interest? I have to wonder.

Having finally arrived, the group made their way to the back, where Bidy was found still making spears in her forging area.

"Oh, you girls again," she muttered, turning from her work and spying them. "Wait, what's all this?"

"Elder sister," said Johnny, "in the One's name, honor and greeting."

"You had to go and tell them, didn't you?" she snapped at Susan and Nita. She glared at them, taking in the group with a somewhat resolved expression on her face.

"Yes, we did," replied Susan. "We have all the treasures but fire, so it's time for you to take the stage. I mean, I'm perfectly happy to go beat up this Balor fellow with my strength and power alone, but these people might not trust that. So let's reassure them as we're able, huh?"

"You have no idea what you're asking."

"What is she asking?" asked Johnny, stepping up. "Obviously I'm a little behind the times here, you three have obviously spoken before this."

Bidy barked a laugh. "Spoken? Yes, I suppose what happened between us could be considered a kind of dialog." Johnny looked confused, but Bidy waved it away. "Never mind. What you're all asking for is impossible anyway. The original spear of fire is gone, and matter now is too fragile to use to make another."

"And I'm telling you, I can make the matter as indestructible as you need," countered Susan. "I wish I had an example, but- wait a second, I did *Fabricate* something of my own. The dagger!" She pulled the dagger from her leg sheath and handed it over. "I made this knife one TR sharper than a normal knife because I had no idea how tough Dementors were. It can't be dulled past that point, and even snapping the blade will make it regrow to this configuration. Go ahead, try it!"

Bidy looked skeptical, but brought the knife over to her belt sander, where normally an edge would be put on something. This time though she held it wrong, trying to blunt the edge. A few moments later, she pulled it away and was surprised to see the edge was just as sharp as it had been. She peered at it, as if doing some kind of *Magic*

Sense or whatever she could do with her own powers. "I see."

"This was made sharper, but it could easily have been made tougher, instead. Combine them, and I can make you the sharpest thing in existence, that also happens to be indestructible."

"I appreciate the offer," she said, handing the knife back, "but you don't understand. Look, you said you got the sword of air, right? Can you bring it here?"

"Sparkle? Bring out the Fraggie Rock!"

"You got it boss." Sparkle made her check, not needing to worry about the energy cost at the moment, and got out the sword.

"The cat really was carrying it!" exclaimed one of the wizards.

"Look at it," said Bidy, picking it up.

Susan had to admit, the sword seemed to glow with an inner light, and even the sword she had left with the school, or the weapons she had heard Aerith's friends calling "ultimate" didn't look as solidly "there" as this sword did. She got out her secondary blade, the *Enhance Sword* and put them side by side. It hadn't been *fabricated* but Susan felt it hadn't been necessary. The thing had a wicked edge, just like her *Crystal Sword* and both felt sturdy as anything. Still, even the metal from another world seemed pale and weak next to the sword of air.

"All right, I admit there is some difference between the two materials," Susan grudgingly allowed.

"Thank you," Bidy replied smugly. "So get me some metal like that, and we can talk about forging."

Gee, can Creation make something like that? That metal seems almost supernatural, and any iron I make with the spell will just be normal, everyday, iron.

Johnny was looking over her shoulder, comparing the two blades. "It could be done, but finding someone powerful enough to make the spell work... that's the tricky part."

"What are you thinking?" asked another wizard.

"Timeslide. Pull some matter from a protostar, a couple of billion years ago. That's probably closest to what the original spear would have been made from."

"Could be dangerous, it gets out of control and you can kiss the Earth goodbye."

"I'm aware of the risks. Who do we know that's powerful enough?"

"My-" Nita started.

"Hold it!" Susan said at the same time. "What's this plan? You're seriously standing there, and with a straight face discussing opening a hole in time and space to billions of years ago, and then casually grabbing up some plasma from the interior of a freaking star? Just for a bit of metal that will be hammered into a spear shape?"

"Yes, exactly!" said Johnny brightly. "You can clear the overlay wherever we do it, right? That would be a big help."

"The overlay isn't the point. There's got to be a simpler solution, one that doesn't risk the entire planet being blown to smithereens. I mean, what is with wizardry around here? You can go to the moon, but in that battle with the wolf creatures, I had to do all the work. Nita just stood there like a lump. No offense, Nita."

"None taken?"

"You can't strengthen metal, but you can time travel back to just after the big

bang? Your sense of scale is all wrong!”

Johnny looked thoughtful for a moment. “Okay, I think I can explain this. You’re used to doing magic, just waving your hands around and something happens, right? You learn ‘spells’ to produce a result.”

“That’s correct.”

“We come up with what we need, basically on the fly. We don’t learn spells, we learn the *Speech*, through which we can ask reality to be a certain way. If we’ve asked in the right way, it happens. Even a wizard at my level probably only has memorized a dozen or so ‘spells’ that we use all the time. Anything else we need, we just ask for. But the asking has a cost. We can’t make something from nothing, that energy has to come from somewhere. You looked at the oath?” Susan shook her head. “Then you know. Wizards are here to preserve and safeguard, at the core, energy. That means not squandering it in any form. Even if it’s as simple as turning lights off when we leave the room, every bit of energy saved means the universe’s death is put off that much more.” *Boy, are you guys going to love compact florescent and LED lighting.* “So no, we don’t do wizardry except for the big stuff that comes along, because solving problems the other way is more energy efficient. We basically are saying ‘I’ll solve this problem without wizardry and bank that energy I would have used otherwise against a future need.’ And here we are, one of those times we need a lot of power to do what’s needed, so let’s make that ‘withdrawal’ now. You see where I’m coming from?”

“I guess I do. That’s why you guys can’t make food with wizardry, the energy cost would be greater than the energy gained from eating the food.”

“Among other reasons, sure, that’s part of it.”

Susan took a deep breath, defeated. “Apart from clearing the overlay, let me know what else I can do to help.”

“Well said,” spoke up Sparkle. “I think you’re finally getting the hang of it.”

Susan chuckled. “Quiet, you. Sorry I’ve been a little... more like myself than usual. I’m not sure what’s gotten into me.”

“Never mind,” said Johnny. “Nita, you were about to say something?”

“I was about to say my sister could probably do it. She can shove planets around, so a simple timeslide should be within her reach.”

Susan’s head whipped around to look at Nita, who for some reason looked back at her rather smugly. *Man, and I was joking about shoving the planet. What kind of rating would a person need to do something like that?*

“Let’s get her here, then.”

So Nita sent a message through her book of wizardry, and moments later a young slip of a girl, no more than thirteen by Susan’s eyes, appeared with a bang outside the building. Her health level wasn’t great, and neither was her *Spirit Energy*, both about normal for a girl her age, from what Susan could sense with *Spirit Sense*. She had a shock of red hair and was skinny, with tons of freckles, and carrying what Susan would consider an antique of a laptop. She set it down, and it unfolded legs and scurried after her. “Hey, everyone,” she called, coming inside. “What’s shaking?” Susan stared. “Watch out, you’ll catch fish like that,” the girl said to her. Susan realized she was a bit slack jawed, she expected an *older* sister, not a *younger* one.

“Susan, everyone, may I introduce my sister, Dairine?”

“Wait, what?” asked Susan. “This is who we’re entrusting the fate of the planet to? How can she have the ratings needed to even consider what you guys are planning? I thought maybe a team of all the wizards in the area working together, not one young girl!”

“I’m right here, you know.”

“Younger wizards are always more powerful,” explained Johnny.

“More powerful than a whole group of you?”

Johnny moved his head back and forth. “Trouble is, the more people reading a spell, the more chance there is someone flubs it up. Misspeaks a word, or skips a line, or sneezes or something.”

“Yeah, but with one person, there’s no one to take up the slack if someone reading the spell starts having a heart attack or something. She screws it up, and it’s all over!”

“Still right here.”

“She can do it,” Nita said, as though the words had to fight their way out of her. “If anyone can, my sister can.”

“Wow, sis, that was a ringing endorsement if I ever heard one. You should write advertising jingles for Pepsi.”

“And you’re back to your old self,” put in Sparkle. Dairine went over to pet her, saying what a pretty kitty she was. “Umm, thank you?”

“Fine,” relented Susan. “I guess if you blow the place up, The Darkness can’t take its energy, right? If you say she can do it, I’ll believe you.”

“Course I can do it,” Dairine said confidently. She paused. “What exactly am I doing?”

The group explained what they wanted of her, and she nodded seriously. “Shouldn’t be a problem. Could be a bit of a strain, but I’ll try my best not to blow the planet up.” She winked at Susan. “When do you want to make this all go down?”

“May as well get started,” said Johnny. “Honored Power, can you bring what you’ll need up to Castle Matrix? I have the cup there, we’ll need water if things get out of hand.”

“Call me Bidy, please, none of this power stuff. And yes, I guess I’ll have to, won’t I? Let me get my things together.”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic,” remarked Dairine. “Don’t like making weapons or something?”

“It’s not that,” she explained. “As I’ve told Susan here, when I came to live here I had to give up most of my power. To forge something like this, well, I’ll have to take that power back. That will, sadly, destroy me.”

“Wait, destroy-destroy or just destroy-release?” asked Susan. “I mean it’ll just be your body that goes, not your consciousness, right? You can just take a new body.”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I’ve never done something like this in this form before. It’s all right, whatever happens. I’ve lived here a long time. If the One now requires me back, at least it’ll be for the right reasons.”

“Your sacrifice, if that’s what it becomes, will not be unremembered by us,” said Johnny seriously.

Susan shook her head, not really understanding but unwilling to press the issue

any further. *What is wrong with these people? How can banging a bit of metal into shape destroy this being? Why does a little kid have the power to open a gateway in time and space greater than anything I can do? Time Door only allows one week per Saturn rating. I don't even want to calculate the energy I would have to throw into my rating to get even a hundred years back in time, to say nothing of billions. And she struts around like... well, me, I guess if you want to put a fine point on it. Is that how others see me? No wonder Johnny didn't trust me at first, if I was acting like that. I'll have to be more careful. If these treasures are so important, why were they allowed to decay like this, or be lost like the spear was lost? I mean obviously this reenactment of theirs has been done many times since the first time, right? Or do these treasures lose their spirits just that quickly? If that's the case, what are they going to use the next time, if this 'power' dies because she forges a simple spear? Too many questions.*

"It'll take a day to move everything to the castle, and get the place prepared for the whole thing," Johnny was saying to the others. "We'll need to put bindings on the place, so the treasures can all be there at once. Meet there in twenty four hours?"

Nods went around the group, and it started breaking up.

"Guess I'll head home then," said Dairine. "Make sure I have the spell I'm going to use right in my head. See you all tomorrow. Oh, you want me to bring Kit along when I come?" she asked Nita.

"Sure, he wouldn't want to miss it. I'll send him a message tonight, too. Thanks."

"No problem. See everybody then!" She concentrated and vanished.

She doesn't seem concerned about 'overlay,' didn't blow herself up, either.

Maybe Nita is just a really bad wizard?

Annie came over to where they were standing.

"Look, Johnny probably won't apologize, but I want to. Sorry for trying to seal you up before. I just got scared because I didn't know what you were." *Huh, the very thing I was thinking about on the way here.* "And thanks... for my kitchen back. Trying to replace that would have raised some questions. I'm glad we didn't have to, in the end."

"No harm done," she replied. "It seems to have worked out here." She gestured to Biddy, looking over to tools and starting to make a pile of things. "And I'm serious about helping." She called over to Biddy. "If you want to take that stuff directly to the castle, I can open a *Teleportal* and you can just step it through."

"That won't be necessary," Biddy replied. "Getting it there is the easy part."

"Okay. If you change your mind, let me know."

"Will do."

"In any case, if you think of anything I can do," she said to Nita and Annie, "you know I can do a lot, so don't hesitate to ask. Otherwise, since we have another day, I'll just continue my own preparations."

"That might be best. I think people are a little nervous about the whole thing. Best not to introduce otherworldly magic into the mix as well. Let them rely on what they know."

"I guess you're right. Want to head back? We don't have to take the bus."

When they were ready, Susan stepped them over to the farm again, behind the trailer she and Nita were staying in, because there probably wouldn't be anyone around there.

"Do you want to stay up at the house?" asked Annie. "That trailer was only meant for one."

"I don't mind. What do you say, want to get rid of me?" Susan asked Nita.

She shrugged. "It's fine."

"Thanks, but I'll stay out here."

"Okay. Come in for dinner in about an hour."

"I'll help!" insisted Susan, but Annie pushed her away. "Relax. You're my guest, especially now that I know exactly who you are. Save your strength for the reenactment."

"Thanks."

She departed with a nod.

"Now what?" asked Nita.

"We have some time, I'm going to look into further increasing my damage. If we're going up against those drow things again, I'm going to have to hit way, way harder if I want to take them down. How many times did you hit them with *Line*, *Sparkle*?"

"I wasn't exactly counting."

"But a lot, right?"

"Yeah."

"And I only do a third of damage with *Slash All*. She was doing full damage, and to multiple locations to each of them. And they *still* took a pounding. I need to figure out the best way to clear them out."

"If you're going to be looking through your own book of magic, I'd love to watch. Maybe it'll give me some ideas for things I can do with wizardry."

"You're welcome to. Come on, we'll see what I can come up with."

The three went inside, and Susan started paging through and making some notes.

Susan paused, looking at the "B" section of her spells, on *Blind*. "Hey Sparkle, you think if I converted my *Added Effect Materia* and paired it with *Blind*, anything I hit with the sword would get the 'status effect' of being blind?"

"Seems reasonable to me. When the gang used it with *Chocobo Summon Materia* it sometimes gave them the *Stop* condition. And *Poison* would poison them. Why not *Blind*?"

"Why not blind, indeed."

"I did have a concern though."

"Oh?"

"You once said you might be able to make a charged object, with only one charge, and have it hooked to a *Materia* to do something, right?"

"No, I think our... benefactor said that."

"Oh, maybe he doesn't know our type of magic as well as he claims, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't that just expend that one change when it went off?"

"Oh." Susan's face fell. "That's a fair point, actually. I guess it would have to be permanent, then, wouldn't it?"

"That's my thinking. Still, not that much difference, right?"

"No, you're right. Let's keep looking, I don't think these drow things even have eyes to blind. I didn't see any."

She stopped again in the "E" section, looking at *Elemental Enchantment*. "That's pretty nice. I could do wind, fire, and physical damage at once. Even taking a third of each, having three would mean it would average out to be about the same, right?"

"Seems reasonable."

"Yes, note that as a possible." She made a note on some paper and kept looking.

She landed in the "G" spells, and looked at one of the ones Silverstreak had provided for her recently. She looked it over this way and that. She made some notes. She started to chuckle. Her eyes got wide, and she made more notes. Then she burst into laughter and started pounding the table, tears in her eyes.

"Uh, is she broken?" asked Nita, concerned. "Again."

"Yeah, what's going on with you now?" asked Sparkle.

Susan took a moment to compose herself, wiping her eyes. "It's this *Giant's Soul* spell. Take a look, make sure I've done this all right."

"*Giant's Soul?*" asked Nita.

"Basically, magically increases your effective size, making you like a giant. But the best part is, it doesn't actually make you bigger."

"What's so great about that?"

"Oh, for me, everything! Let me show you these calculations I've made here. Now, as I've said before, a spell is powered by my own internal energy, right?"

"You probably said something like that along the way."

"Okay. But Sparkle here knows a spell to allow me to 'charge' energy and throw more than I usually can into a spell. With me so far?" Nita nodded. "Okay, let's say I throw, oh, 33 energy into this one spell as I cast it as part of the *Imbuing* process. That makes my total rating a 39."

"Rating?"

"How good I am at the skill. It's numeric for me, don't worry about it. Anyway, this spell gives me a size increase of one third my rating, meaning I would be target size thirteen, effectively. As a note, dragons are size three. Each plus one doubles your size, so that puts me at an effective..." She turned her watch on, and as she thought, there was a small calculator function built into it. She multiplied 1.2 by 2 thirteen times. "9,830 meters tall. So, basically I would divide damage by fourteen, meaning a bomb dropped directly atop me might take me out, but not much else could. Oh, I can take fourteen damage before dying, normally, by the way. I would get a twenty six bonus to my STLength, which is a three right now by the way. A plus thirteen to my CONstitution checks, a four right now by the way. I could lift more than 600 Kg just from that alone, to say nothing of the bonus you get per size to your *lift*. With *Avatar of War* going, again

providing bonuses to size and STrength, I would be doing between seven and *seventy four* damage. Twice, if I swing two swords. Dividing that by three- who even cares at that point?" She started to laugh again.

Nita and Sparkle looked at each other.

"Is she serious?"

Sparkle nodded gravely. "I'm afraid she is."

"But how can that be possible?" asked Nita, looking over Susan's calculations. "To increase your strength by that much..."

"I admit, it depends on how strict a reading of the *Imbuing* skill you want to take. Here, take a look." She turned to the chapter on how to actually perform *Imbuing*. "See, right here. In terms of how strong an item you can make, the: 'effective Planet rating can be any value up to your present skill rating in the given Planet.' Now, some might argue that means I can't go above a six, because that's my Venus rating. But others, such as myself, would argue that as my skill rating in the planet is the energy I put into it, why shouldn't I be able to artificially raise it in this manner? After all, I'm casting the spell to do the *Imbuing*, so logically it follows that my rating would be the same if I am *Imbuing* or making a *Spell Paper* or just casting the spell as normal. I paid the extra *Background Points* to become a *Natural Magician* rather than a *Scholar of Magic*, after all, in order to do things like this. Plus it takes more XP the higher the rating, and I have to use several other spells, *Energetic Accumulation* and *Augment Skill* to do it. I learned the spells, came up with this method, why shouldn't I be able to take advantage of my naturally high energy total this way? I'm paying the XP cost for the item just like anyone else would. Make a lesser item, spend less XP. It's a trade off, and I have no problem with that. Plus the fact of the matter is it works, so the universe must agree with me, right?" She smiled widely.

Nita looked back at Sparkle. "Yes," the cat admitted. "She's broken. One might even say she was cheat character, if this were some kind of game." *I can't tell them what Silverstreak told me, privately, while she was working on stuff at the Hub. There are two things she doesn't consider in this sort of situation: The first being that the rules are slightly relaxed in her case, because she's traveling without the aid of a party. Her father, as cheaty as he was, had companions to rely on and so the rules were more closely enforced for him. "Whatever or whoever is enforcing the rules across realities will be a bit more relaxed in her case," he said. He didn't know exactly "who" was doing this enforcing, only that he could tell, somehow, being a higher order being than her. I guess maybe that's who The Darkness is trying to reach? Have to think about that some more. So if she wants to spend the XP and do the work to get an item like this, her efforts will be rewarded. I didn't think even she would think to take things this far- I should have known better.*

The second thing is that The Darkness is within her. It knows what she's done. When she shows up on other worlds, it's going to have already thought of a plan to neutralize her as best it can. It'll take things like this item into consideration, just like it studied her father to find out how to shut down her magic as she's casting it. I have to wonder what it has in store for us here...

That's why I don't think those drow from before were sent by The Darkness at all. It would have known about her Slash All because it would have seen her working on it. Why send a group of enemies, even ones as sturdy as they proved to be, against someone that could hit all of them at once? No, I think we have yet to see The

Darkness' working on this world. And that worries me most of all.

Susan got out her calculations to see just how much XP and time she would need for all this. Nita watched as she plugged in variables and hit keys on the calculator. "Okay, I'll need 25 XP, which I exactly have, how about that? And if I want to do it tonight, I'll need a sixty five rating in *Imbuing* to not flub it. Ugh. Let's see, I have eighty energy, I can go negative my eight endurance, that's eighty eight. I have a seven rating in *Imbuing*, so I'll need a fifty eight total. That will leave me with 30 energy to work with. My rating in Venus is a six... hey Sparkle, can I borrow three energy? Wait, maybe a little more, I'll have to cast *Augment Skill* and *Giant's Soul* so that's another two."

"I'm not worried about one or two. You can have my energy," Sparkle sighed.

"What's all this?" Nita asked, not following it at all.

"She's cheating again," said Sparkle. "Normally creating an item with magic bound up into it takes weeks. You've felt her *Augment* magic, you used it to make the spell to wake up the vessels. She's just using it to an extreme, making sure that no matter how she rushes making this thing, she can't fail. It's one of the perks of being a *Paragon*. We get to know exactly how good we are at something, and sometimes how difficult things are to do. So we can plan out how to achieve them with a bit more precision than others can."

"Oh. But what are all these calculations she's doing?"

"Oh, this?" Susan said with scorn. "Yeah, tell me about it. Because the XP cost depends on so many variables, you almost need a spreadsheet just to figure out how much it'll cost you. Don't worry about it, this part makes sense, though if you can learn to do this, I have no idea how to explain what your rating are or whatnot. As you don't have ratings or XP or any of that sort of thing, maybe you can't learn to do this? I don't know, you can't spend XP, but items I made for my friends worked, so they were losing something. Didn't seem to hold them back, so I don't know. Anyway come on, I need to find some stuff if I'm going to do this tonight!"

And so, Susan collected various things from Annie before dinner, adding up to seventy dollars worth of stuff that she didn't mind losing. After they ate, Susan threw around vast quantities of energy and magic to shove *Giant's Soul*, (which she got a fifteen on *Scripture* and nineteen on *Theory* to read and understand so she could cast it from writings) into one of the "empty" steel balls Silverstreak had given her if she wanted to make custom "*Materia*." As the lights died away in the kitchen where she was working (Annie had wanted to observe the process, so she was working there) she had a new *Imbued* item. It was now ten PM, and Susan was grinning like an idiot. She had zero XP, close to zero energy, but still felt on top of the world.

"What a fascinating procedure," remarked Annie, who had been taking notes. Susan had said she would be glad to make a copy of her book explanation of the process, and Annie said she would want that too. But that she wanted notes on actual *Imbuing* as an example.

"Just don't rush it like she did," cautioned Sparkle. "You don't have her magic to cheat the system." She shook her head. "Bad things can happen if you mess it up. From just explosions to making a cursed item that you can't get rid of, and has the opposite working to the one you wanted."

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Let’s go test it!” Susan was bouncing a little in her chair as she popped the ball into her *Wizard Bracelet*, feeling a new lightness coming to her body.

“How?” asked Nita.

“Have any old stumps you want ripped up?” asked Susan. “Heavy plants moved? Old cars dragged away? Pranks pulled by putting old tractors up in the loft of your barn? Carrying heavy stuff down from the loft? Stop me at any time here...”

“There is actually an old stump I’ve never gotten around to winching out of the ground,” Annie admitted thoughtfully. “And it’s dark enough, no one would see you tearing it up.”

“Let’s go!” Susan popped up out of her chair.

Out in the field, Susan took a look at the tree stump, deciding where she would grip it. *Eh, even if I’m at a penalty for not having the best grip, I think my new STREngth will compensate for it. Let’s just see what I can do.*

She planted her feet and grabbed the stump. Not even straining, she got a thirty three on her STREngth check to rip it out of the ground, and barely felt any resistance as she lifted it over her head. “Oh yeah, that’s the stuff!” she cried, pumping it up and down like it was a twig rather than a stump.

“Uh, you can just put it over there,” Annie said, pointing.

“You got it!” Susan went whistling over to the side of the barn, stump held high. She flipped it down, then turned back to the others. “Oh, wait!” She backed off a few steps, then shot forward, jumping straight up against the wall of the barn. She flew up four meters, with the help of her *Jumping* check of 23. “Shoryuken!” she yelled, punching the air above her. This wasn’t quite enough to get to the roof, but still was quite respectable. She landed with a thud. “I love spells that do more than one thing at a time!” she exclaimed. “And hey, this isn’t even as good as I’ll be when we fight Balor. I’ve got *Augment STREngth* in one of my charms. Oh man, I can’t wait now.”

“Glad to hear it?” Annie didn’t sound convinced. “I’m going to bed, see you girls in the morning.”

“Good night!”

“I’m turning in too, you coming?” asked Nita.

“Yeah, just one or two more things. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay.”

Susan looked the stump over, deciding if she wanted to spend a little more energy and get one of her swords out. *Wait, even if I punch the thing, the worst it can do is one damage to me. I divide all damage by fourteen now, remember?* She got into a martial arts stance and punched the wood, putting one energy into STREngth to get an even 30 so her *OTR* was high enough. (Plus taking a couple of segments to aim as her skill at hitting was only a two at the moment.) She did thirty nine damage to the stump, an object with a *DC (damage capacity)* of 6*3, 18. (Not accounting for thickness. But even doubling that it would still have been more than enough.)

It exploded into kindling.

She shook her hand out a little. "Huh. Stung a bit." She threatened to laugh again. *Oh man, I'm going to totally ROCK Mars spells now, aren't I? And Fabrication? Forget about it!*

"Are you quite finished?" asked Sparkle.

"Quite," admitted Susan. "Though I may have to put some points into *Wrestling* now. I don't have many other STrength based skills apart from jumping."

"I suppose one wouldn't hurt, what with your insane stat now. I just hope it was worth twenty five XP. That's all you've gotten here, and we're coming up to the boss battle."

"Oh, I think it was. I'm just about at the level of a whole party. I mean I'm a total tank now, and a magic user, and a healer, and with *Ally* and my *Legion*, a summoner as well. And let's not forget my companion, who has spells of her own!"

"I'm glad I factored in there somewhere."

"I do appreciate you, you know." Susan dropped to one knee and scratched behind Sparkle's ears. "We're partners, and you know this wouldn't have been possible tonight without you."

"Just so long as you remember. Now come on, we both have energy to get back."

"Yup, let's go."

The next morning, Susan woke up to find nine hours had passed, and with energy 98% returned. *An hour or so of light activity, and I'll be full again. Of course, if I'm throwing around spells to make more Papers that won't happen.*

"What's up?" she asked, looking at Nita, who was staring intently out the window.

"Oh, good morning," she replied. "There's some guy out there I've never seen before. He's just been standing there, staring at the trailer, since I got up."

"Odd. What's he-" She sprang up, not yet used to her new STrength, and stood beside Nita to take a look. He was dressed in extremely outdated clothing, and looked rather out of sorts standing there. He had on a dark green jacket with wide lapels, with two rows of three buttons going up the front. It was cut just above the belt, which was a wide leather. White pants rounded out the outfit, but they had a funny cuff at the bottom, like the man had grown overnight, and sewn a different fabric onto the ends of his pant legs rather than buy a new pair. "I see. Seems a bit old for cosplay. Some kind of historical reenactment? But that means something different around here... Want me to go chase him off?"

"Maybe you had better let me handle this," she replied. "You get dressed and we'll go up to the house for breakfast."

"Sounds good! Sparkle?"

"Here, oh master."

As Susan got dressed and had Sparkle cast *Hygiene* on her, Nita went out to see what the guy wanted. She stepped back up to the window and saw her beckoning to come out, so she locked the door and went over to him.

"Help," he muttered, almost too softly for Susan to hear him.

"What can I do for you?" she replied cheerfully. "Not to worry, my rates are low, and satisfaction is guaranteed."

"Help," he repeated again after a moment of the girls staring at him expectantly.

"Right-o. Mental then?"

"Be nice," said Nita. "That's all I could get out of him too. I don't get it."

"Morning girls!" said one of the farmhands, walking by. "Nice day, isn't it? Though I felt a bit of a chill just now. Must be a ghost around! Be careful!" He kept walking, laughing. The two stared after him, then looked back at the man.

"Help," continued to plead the man.

"It is colder here," noticed Susan, taking some steps away from the figure and then moving closer again. "You don't really think..."

"One way to find out." She passed a hand through the figure, and nodded. "Yup, he's a ghost all right. But what's he doing standing here? I thought ghosts were just recordings of things, this guy seems to have a purpose in coming here."

"Probably all the weirdness with Balor, who knows? As for why he's here now? That one I can answer for sure," said Susan with confidence. "The universe has decided to allow me one more chance at XP before the big battle. Nice of it, really, given that having none is pretty dangerous, even for me."

"Say that again?"

"I used up my XP to make this last night, you saw that," she explained, showing the *Wizard Bracelet* with the new *Imbuing*. "If I were to take a fatal blow somehow, I couldn't spend an XP to stabilize and remain alive. Or get a bonus if I need it, or retry something in combat."

"Help."

"Yes, yes, one minute there Mr. Ghost."

"O'Neill."

"Mr. O'Neill, then. So now, it has given me this ghost to help so I can get some more- Wait, is that your name?" Both girls were now focused on the ghost again.

"Help."

Susan sighed. "This is going to take forever!"

"Come on, let's go up to the house. Maybe my aunt will know something."

"Suits me. Come on Mr. Gh- Mr. O'Neill. Come on." She tried to get him to follow, but he just kind of stood there. "Oh for gosh sakes, you got here somehow, didn't you? Come on." She put *Phase* on herself and was able to pull the ghost along by the arm. "My goodness, it's a good thing the ghosts back home aren't like you. Come on, up the steps now, that's a good ghost."

They finally made it inside and Nita went looking for her aunt, who was on the phone and talking wizardry with someone. Susan poured some cereal for them both while they waited, and a little while later she came back into the room. It was now much colder, and the battery operated clocks had stopped working. The clock on the stove was barely readable, but oddly, the ghost seemed a bit more perky. He was now looking around, and Susan made a REASON check, getting a twenty two in order to figure out what was going on. That was pretty high, so she decided to try something. She turned on the lights in the room, and the toaster, and everything else electrical she could find, all which sluggishly performed if it went on at all.

The ghost, however, perked up considerably.

"Better, thank you," it said, seeming even more aware now. "Hard to think out

there. Better here. Please, help me.”

“Must be the energy he can draw from his environment,” suggested Susan.

“Anyway, how can we help you, Mr. O’Neill?”

“You must stop her. She’ll kill again. All my fault. Please, find them and stop her. I think you’re the only one who can.”

“I’m going to need a little bit more than that.”

He shook his head. “No more. Dead so long. Wandering. Have to stop her killing. They were found, I felt it. Managed to come through. Please stop her. All my fault.”

“You can’t give us a little more?”

The ghost pondered a moment. “Horses?”

“You want to see the horses?” asked Annie.

“No. Horses. Races. She’ll kill them. Please, help.”

“Horses... O’Neill... a ghost... this all sounds somehow familiar. Susan, can you get me to the library? I’d like to look something up.”

“Sure...” *Hermione*. *But I guess they don’t have the Internet*. “I’ve been there. Let’s just hope someone isn’t in the rest room this early.”

“Stay here, Mr. O’Neill. We’ll help you.”

“Help me!”

“Yes, she just said we would,” said Susan.

“I just have to see if you are who I think you are. I’ll be back, okay?”

The ghost seemed to consider this, as if the concept of going away and coming back here was a bit tricky to grasp. “I understand. I’ll wait here.”

“Good. Susan?”

She opened a *Teleportal*, making a LUCk check (a twenty) to see if there was anyone around. There wasn’t, so they stepped through and went looking in books about Ireland. Susan didn’t have *Research* so she rolled it untrained, getting a nine. This at least helped Annie a little, and with Nita (who seemed better at it) also helping, they came across a local legend of an unfortunate man named Charles O’Neill, from the 18th century.

The story fit; horses, tragedy, and a woman giving a gift that turned out later to be not exactly what it seemed.

“He’s right,” Annie said after reading the tale over. “If it’s the same man, there is a danger, so we better hurry.”

“So what are we waiting for?” asked Susan. “Let’s go!”

To Save a Horse and Possibly a Man's Soul

Place: Annie's Kitchen

Time: About 10:00 in the morning

"If you girls want to help this... ghost, or whatever he is, that's fine with me," said Annie when they got back to the house. "But I have things to prepare for this evening when we get the metal here. So you're on your own."

"That's fine," replied Susan. "Just don't go without me, I would hate to miss the world blowing up, and all."

She chuckled. "It's a deal."

"So, what did you find out?" asked Sparkle.

"Turns out there is a legend of a Charles O'Neill locally. Mr. O'Neill, I'll tell you what we found out at the library, maybe it'll jog your memory, okay?" The ghost nodded. "So apparently, he was a wealthy guy a couple hundred years ago. He acquired a horse that he named Broughshane Swallow, because he owned the Broughshane Estate. Now this was as fine a horse as had ever been seen in the area, so there was a lot of excitement surrounding local races that were coming up. Now Charles here, may I call you Charles? Charles here wanted his horse to win, duh, and before the first race an old woman handed him a rosary and told him that as long as the horse wore it, boom, guaranteed win! Who would say no to that?"

"Certainly not unbelieving horse owners in the 1760s," remarked Nita.

"Precisely. Also note the false sense of security offered by a supposed holy object, a rosary. Very tricky, this odd woman, who drops out of the story immediately after. Who was she, and what was her game? Anyway, horse carried it in the race, won, Charles is overjoyed. He then repeats this success in other races. What he didn't realize was that all this winning was killing his horse! At the end of one race, having been compelled by the beads to win, poor Swallow fell over dead. The rosary disappears at the end of the story, but that's probably what Charles was talking about finding again."

The ghost nodded. "I died soon after the horse. Just couldn't live, knowing I had killed that magnificent animal."

"So you've been wondering the Earth for over two hundred years after that?" asked Nita.

Charles shook his head. "Don't know. Don't remember. Just know the beads are being used again. Have to get them, keep any more horses from dying. Seems my... duty."

"That's something I can get behind!" exclaimed Susan. She looked over to Nita.

"Eh," she grunted with a shrug. "Not a huge horse fan. But I agree, we should look into it. I'm more interested about this woman, your questions are only the tip of the iceberg. Where did she get the beads? How did she know they would cause the horse to win? What *did* cause the horse to win? Are they wizardry? Because wizardry wouldn't do something like that, normally."

"Do you have cursed objects in this world? That's what it sounds like to me. Charles, is that story right? Did you make a deal with someone for the rosary?"

“Don’t remember. I do remember the woman, that much is true.”

“It’s not much to go on. I guess I can do some *Question* magic, maybe narrow it down a bit.”

Nita laughed. “You need practice in not using magic. We don’t need spells, just the newspaper from the past few days. Come on.”

Susan, somewhat miffed, (and disbelieving that magic wasn’t the answer to everything) followed Nita out to where they put the old newspaper. Nita pawed through it, looking for the sports section, and dragged out as many as she could find. They went back to the kitchen and smoothed them out, looking for anything relevant.

“Here you go,” said Nita, reading one from the day before. “See, I figured one horse winning a lot of races would make the paper, at least a minor article. And I was right, the horse Clara McCloud, owned by Mr. Brogan, has won his last four races.”

“And that’s newsworthy around here, is it? Must have been a slow news day.”
Wait, McCloud? Another coincidence?

Nita glared at her levelly. “It is when the horse is coming in first by thirty seconds or more. Most races the first and second place winner are within seconds of each other. According to this, anyway. I don’t know anything about horse races. Plus, they’re apparently going to be testing the animal for steroids or other means of winning races. Including bribes to the other jockeys to throw the race.”

“So the horse won’t be racing for a while, that’s good. Maybe we can still save her.”

“If he doesn’t just choose another horse to put the rosary on.”

“Good point. If the owner was smart he would have verified the rosary worked, then switched it between horses so no one horse stood out. He would have made just as much money, betting on the horse he knew would win.”

“Maybe he only has the one horse?”

“Possible. Okay, we need to find this fellow, that’s where the rosary will be.”

“Can your magic do that?”

“Pfff, can my magic do that? It’s simply a question of which method will produce the best result. I can’t use *Descry*, either on the horse, the man, or the object, because I’ve never seen their likeness. A weakness in the series, to be sure. I guess I’ll just ask *Question* what the address is, maybe we can go from there?”

“An address shouldn’t be too many words,” agreed Sparkle. “Just don’t go overboard. We’ll need power later if you want to do any more prep work for after the spear is forged.”

“I can steal some from the horses, but I get what you’re saying. I’ll take the extra time.” Susan put the question to her magic, and got back an address. She had to ask again, for the town, which Annie said was two thousand kilometers away.

“What? We’ll never make it there! How did the ghost find us, anyway?” Susan asked herself. “I mean apart from needing to be here to let me do this mission or whatever. Still...”

“I can get us there,” said Nita, now a bit smug herself. “The overlay hasn’t come back to the kitchen, so I can just teleport us there!”

“Woah, isn’t that dangerous? What if you teleport us into a wall or something? Or right in front of someone?”

Nita shook her head with a smile. “See, that’s where our methods differ. I can ask

the wizardry itself to make sure it's an open space, where no one is nearby."

"Interesting. Must be nice. Okay, go to it."

Nita consulted her book, then asked Susan all kinds of weird questions about herself and Sparkle so their names could be written in the *Speech*. "I have to put you into the spell, so your name has to be right. If it's not, the spell might change you, because it thinks you're asking to be that thing rather than telling it you are already this thing."

Great! And this fiddly kind of power is being used by a twelve year old sometime tonight to drag star matter here from the distant past? "So I guess there's advantages and disadvantages to our individual way of doing things."

"Seems that way. You ready?"

"Would you mind writing that name down for me in my book of magic? It sort of looks cool, all curves and things. I wouldn't mind having it to look at later."

"Sure." She did. "Ready?"

"Wait, what about our friend? Can you follow us?" she asked the ghost.

He shook his head. "Unless I could possess you?"

"Ah, no, don't think I'll be letting you do that. Sparkle? Nita?" Both quickly indicated that would not be their first choice of things. "Sorry. We'll be back to report on how we did."

"I'll know," said the ghost.

So the wizardry took them where Nita had asked for, and they set out to the stable they saw in the distance. "That must be the place," said Nita. "How do you want to do this? You're the expert in 'adventures' after all, right?"

Susan rubbed her hands together in glee, eyes shining. *Nice to see wizardry doing something around here. But now it's the Susan show again! Just you wait-*

"How about I just go check things out first, before you go down there and smash the place up," suggested Sparkle. "They won't pay attention to another cat wandering around."

Susan's face went through a range of emotions. Finally she put a finger up. "Good plan. We'll just wait here, okay?"

"Super. Be back in a bit." She took off down the hill, leaving the two girls to look the whole place over. It was a fairly standard stable, with a long driveway coming off the road, and houses could be seen on either side. There was the main building where the horses were probably kept, and a fenced in area with beaten down grass, where it looked like a class was going on. A bunch of young kids were all crowded around a horse being held by an older man, who seemed to be pointing things out to them. Moments passed.

"Would the rosary be here, though?" mused Nita, looking the place over.

"This is where my magic said we would find Brogan."

"That's the trouble. Would he carry it around with him? I mean, why? He's just the owner of the horse, right? This is where he stables the horse, but that doesn't mean his office or whatever is here. Or perhaps the horse thing is just a hobby of his, and he's off somewhere else. He would keep it somewhere secure so someone didn't find out about it and steal it, only bringing it out when it was time for a race."

"I see what you're saying. You think I should have asked where we would find the rosary directly? I figured just jump the guy and grab it, but maybe that's not the best tactic."

Nita looked a bit shocked, but only for a moment. She knew Susan well enough by now, after all. "I should say not! We don't even know what he looks like. You asked your magic where we could find him, meaning right that second, right? He might have been leaving just then for all we know."

"Yeah. I guess you're right. Maybe we... / should have thought things through a little more before leaving. You might not have noticed this about me, but I tend to just try and power through things..."

"I didn't notice that at all!" Nita exclaimed, pretending to be shocked.

About twenty minutes passed when Sparkle came back up the hill to where the girls were waiting.

"So what's the news?" Susan inquired.

"I saw our target," she reported. "He was there shouting at the help. Apparently McCould isn't doing so well, and he thinks it's their fault. They kept trying to tell him she should be allowed to rest at least a week before her next race, he insists she race as soon as the tests are done. He left in a huff."

"Ah, so he'll be driving for at least a little while?"

"Unless he lives just up the street. I had an idea. Since I've seen him, I can use *Descry Creature* to get his location. Nita can bring us there when he stops moving around."

Susan shook her head. "Nita was asking about that while you were gone. She said we should target the rosary, not the man. He won't be carrying the thing around, right?"

"That depends on his personality, and how paranoid he is, I guess. That's a good thought though."

"I guess I'll just ask again, and I if I get 'it's in a car' or something, we'll know he has it with him. If it's another address, boom, we'll go there!"

Susan got out her book of magic from the sub-space pocket (to save energy, she had been keeping it in there) and recast the *Question* spell. She also performed a quick *Dead Magic* on the area, to keep Nita from having to worry about overlay. They vanished from the hilltop and reappeared in a much busier part of the country. Both peeked around the back of the building they had appeared behind, and Susan was struck by how much this place looked like the wizard village, Hogsmeade. The buildings were close together, the streets were narrow, and there was just a sense of "old world charm" that permeated the place.

"Oh, for a really good GPS," muttered Susan, already realizing she would never be able to navigate these streets alone.

"Come on, it can't be too far away. And what's a GPS?"

The girls walked back and forth, looking at side streets and hoping to come across the road they wanted, but it wasn't until a man washing windows in front of a store called out to them that they actually got directions.

"You lost, lass?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Clontarf Rd, I think it's around here?" ventured Nita.

"Ach, you've passed it! Back the way you came, cross the intersection of Convent Rd, and it'll be on your left."

"Thank you."

"Not at all, lass. Slán!"

What the? I heard that as Irish, but understood it to mean "safety." I guess that's their goodbye? How does my weird communication ability account for cultural stuff like that? Louise didn't say anything I took as weird, and her friends never questioned what I was saying. But their phrases would have had cultural meaning to them, like what he just said. Weird.

"Slán!" she tried to say back.

Now standing before the address they discovered it was just a normal house, squeezed in between two others.

"I repeat my earlier question," said Nita. "Now what?"

"There's the home invasion way, where we sneak around and see if we can't find the thing while *Invisible* or on the astral plane. Some might prefer the ring the doorbell way and see if we can't talk our way through it."

"And which is your preferred method?" She left the *as if I didn't know* unspoken.

"Magic, of course!" she replied brightly.

"Then the best way is probably the doorbell," she said, leaning over to ring the bell. "And I'll take point on this one, if you don't mind?"

"Hey!"

Ugh, this one is starting to get on the ball too. What a bother, said The Darkness. Between Luna, that stupid cat that follows you around, and now her, I'm not going to have any more fun in your head.

"It seems I must reluctantly agree with you. And Sparkle, it's praising you for what that's-"

"Hello?" said a woman as the door opened. She peeked out, almost as if she was expecting trouble, and opened the door more fully when she was it was just the two girls. "Can I help you?"

Nita seemed to get an odd look on her face, then concentrated and said, "Actually, we were hoping we could help you. Did your husband recently come into possession of a rosary? And then started winning horse races?"

Oh right, she's probably speaking Irish. But Nita mentioned she can understand and "speak" all languages somehow through the wizard language. Neat to 'see' it in action so to speak.

"Horse- That bastard!" She slammed a fist into the door. "He told me he wasn't going to gamble anymore, and that he was looking for a buyer for that horse!"

"You mean McCloud? No, he still owns her."

"I knew he was lying! But how do you two know all this?"

"That's a bit of a long story. Do you mind if we come in?"

The woman looked both ways down the street, thinking about it. "Oh, very well. Come in." She threw the door open and both went inside. Susan looked back at Sparkle, who made a circle motion with a paw, which she took to mean "I'll be around"

and nodded. They went into the living room and sat down.

"I'm Andraste."

"I'm Nita, this is Susan."

"Hello," said Susan.

"Ah, you aren't from around here either, are you?"

"No, we're both just visiting," admitted Susan.

"But we're coming to love Ireland, both of us!" insisted Nita, elbowing her.

The woman grunted, probably thinking something about "blow-ins" but who can know her mind? "So what's this about a rosary?"

"You probably won't believe us, but this morning, a ghost came to us and said the rosary he used to win some horse races in the past had resurfaced. He asked for our help in making sure it wasn't used as he used it, resulting in the death of his prized horse. We tracked it here."

"A ghost?"

"Right."

"Asked you two, specifically?"

"Yes."

"Well, you knew about McCloud. I can't see how you would be trying to scam me, but why in the world would a ghost come to you?"

"Would you believe we both have some experience in this sort of thing?" ventured Susan.

"No, I wouldn't."

She shrugged. "It's true, though."

"The point is, your husband has been winning races with McCloud, right?"

"He's been getting money from somewhere, yes. But if you're trying to get some of it, get in line. It's already spoken for."

"We don't want your money," insisted Nita. "We just want to make sure he doesn't kill horses with that cursed rosary."

"Is it cursed then?"

"What else would you call something that brings about someone's desire, at the cost of the life of the thing bringing that desire about? When a horse carries that rosary they win a few races, sure, but then die from the exertion. The stable already knows McCloud isn't doing too well, not half an hour ago they were insisting she not be placed in any more races until she's recovered from the ones she's already won."

"Ah, now there's something I can actually verify!" Andraste grabbed the phone and a book that was next to it, looked up a number and dialed it. She then got into a spirited "discussion" with someone on the other end, who finally admitted that yes, the horse was racing and yes, she wasn't doing so hot right now.

"It seems you're telling the truth, at least about that," she snarled, slamming the phone down. "But how did you get here so fast? They said my husband just left there a few minutes ago!"

"We move fast," said Susan. "You have to, in our line of work. We knew he wouldn't give it up, so we decided to talk to you about it, instead."

"What exactly is 'your line of work?'"

"Exactly what we're doing," cut in Nita. "Making sure things that should stay out of people's hands do. Making sure the world keeps going around. Protecting people who

might come up against something they wouldn't know what to do with."

Andraste regarded them. "You're just kids."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"I guess I'll believe you. He bought the safe specifically to hold the thing, if it was directly valuable he would have just sold it. And he did get the money right after he found it. But two kids worrying about this sort of thing?"

"Oh, there's people like us all over," Nita assured her. "We just take things as we find them. I mean not much danger in retrieving an item like this, is there?"

"What will happen to it?"

"We'll destroy it, probably?" Nita looked at Susan, who nodded.

"As quickly as we can. Some cursed objects are hard to destroy, but we'll find a way." *Hey, I do still have that cask of basilisk venom in my Dimension. I bet that would do the job.* "Don't worry, it won't be used again, if that's what you're worried about."

"Wish my son was a little more proactive, like you. All right. He'll be livid, but he did lie to me about racing the horse. Even if he has only paid some of the money back, I don't want McCloud to die. You can have the rosary, but you'll have to get it out of the safe. He didn't give me the combination."

Susan smiled. "Not to worry Mrs. Brogan. As if a simple thing like a *safe* could keep us out. Like I said, we're professionals."

"If you say so. Come on, it's up in the bedroom."

"Why was it so urgent he win races, if you don't mind my asking?" asked Nita on the way up to the second floor.

"Ugh, my stupid husband and his stupid schemes. His family owned several horses while he was growing up, so he grew up watching them race. When he was old enough he started betting on races, but never any serious amounts. Not until recently, anyway. Convinced he could make a fortune, he started betting all our savings... and lost it all.

"Just recently his mother died and left him their last horse. She had sold the others when she started going downhill, but couldn't bear to part with McCloud. That's about all she left him, most of her money went to her other kids. I thought he was going to sell her, we didn't have the money to take care of a horse, but I guess he thought she could race. But I guess he didn't make much that way, either. Not until this cursed thing showed up. Figures, he would find something like that." *Must be a low LUCK.* "Now we're broke, owe back taxes, and I find out he's still gambling even though he said he had stopped. He's going to get it when he gets home. Anyway, here's the safe."

The safe was a pretty sturdy thing, and looked like it had taken a couple of people to get up the stairs. It stood upright, about as tall as Susan herself, and had a standard combination and lever on the front.

"How did they get that thing up here?" Nita exclaimed. "It must weigh tons."

"It wasn't easy," she admitted, turning away from Susan. "I thought he must have bought some gold or something, but I caught a glimpse of a rosary one time. He wouldn't even tell me what it was for, and it's smack in the middle of our bedroom!"

Clever girl. With Andraste's attention focused on Nita as her ranting continued, Susan quickly cast *Unlock* on the safe, then twisted the handle.

“What was that flash?” asked Andraste, turning back around.
“Flash? What flash?” asked Susan.
“You’ve already got it open? How in the world-”

The three stared.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” grumped Susan.

The interior of the safe was perfectly normal. The walls were rather thick, and looking at the thickness of the door Susan thought it was truly a wonder that people without a STLength near 30 could even get something like this up a flight of stairs. She had resisted the urge to pick it up while Andraste was distracted, just to see if she could. As she peered into the darkness inside, the two woman looking over her shoulders, she knew her troubles were just beginning.

"There must be fifty rosaries in there!" exclaimed Nita, grabbing some and holding them up to the light. "How in the world are we going to tell which is the right one?"

"Just have to destroy them all, I guess," grumped Susan, pulling more out. They were of all different materials, ages, and colors, though mostly wood. *The thing is supposed to be hundreds of years old. A plastic one wouldn't even be a consideration.*

"He spent money on these?" Andraste nearly shrieked. "What's the point?"

"That's easy," answered Susan. "Keep people from finding the real one. Camouflage, as it were. If someone were to find out about the thing making his horse win the races, they might come after him for it. This makes their job harder."

"And ours," agreed Nita. "Just how far do these things need to be destroyed, anyway?"

"I guess we could just light them all on fire?" ventured Susan. "That would- is it getting colder in here?"

The three looked around, and the two girls caught sight of the ghost that was materializing near them.

"That isn't O'Neill," said Nita, taking a step back. "What's going on?"

"Burn my rosary will you?" snarled the ghost, now fully visible to the girls. "I don't think so."

"What isn't?" asked Andraste, looking wildly around, trying to see what the girls were seeing.

Oh great, can only people with magic see it?

The ghost was female, dressed in earlier period clothing as O'Neill but wearing a thick veil that obscured the face completely. She looked trampled, her chest caved in by hoof prints, and deep tears and damage to her clothes and "flesh." As she stared, Susan could swear she caught a glimpse of a rearing horse and perhaps a horse's scream. It was obvious how this woman had died- trampled by a horse. The ghost's hair was dark and long, and it was waving about like a thing alive, or as if blown by a strong wind from below. All in all, the figure before them radiated cold, malice, and hatred, and after appearing it turned to Andraste.

"So, you can't see me, can you darling? Guess that makes you a decent candidate."

"For what?" demanded Susan, wondering if she should just rush this thing and see if she could slam it through the wall. But it seemed insubstantial, so she wasn't sure if she could put *Phase* on or not.

The ghost cackled. "You'll see girls, you'll see." Her hair suddenly shot out, elongating like rubber, and wrapped around Andraste's arms, pinning them.

"What's going on?" she yelled, shocked to feel something happening to her but unable to tell exactly what.

"It's a ghost, we'll deal with it," Nita assured her.

"Oh, you will, will you?" The ghost laughed some more. "Good luck with that."

She vanished.

Andraste winced as if something had struck her, but then blinked and looked around. "Is she still there?"

"No, she's gone!" exclaimed Susan, looking around the room. "I don't know what just happened. Stay on your guard- hey, I didn't say the ghost was a woman." She glanced over at Nita.

"Neither did I."

Both looked back at Andraste.

"Sloppy," she remarked, shaking her head. "My being near people has made me sloppy. But there's really not much you can do, anyway."

"Possession!" remarked Susan, eyes narrowing.

"Oh, know about that, do you?"

"And I can drive you out!" Susan proclaimed confidently. She raised her hands, about to do an unarmed attack (with *Martial Arts*) and then cast *Exorcise*.

"Not another step, girl," said the ghost, putting her hands on Andraste's head and chin. "Or I'll snap her neck, see that I don't."

"You wouldn't!" said Nita, shocked.

"Oh, but I would! Now, let's see what we can do, shall we?"

The ghost then did something rather odd. She placed a hand on her own chest, and seemed to concentrate. As Nita and Susan watched, she seemed to pull something out of Andraste's body- a glowing, swirling ball of light.

"Is that- did you just-"

"Pulled out her soul, I did!" cackled the ghost. "Now you two are really in trouble, aren't you? Let's see what I get, shall we?"

"Do something!" shouted Nita.

"I have to touch her," Susan said back. "And with my STrength, if she fights back I might hurt her body accidentally!" *I'm not used to holding back my three STrength, but if I turn my Giant's Soul off, I'll have no chance of holding her long enough to do the spell!*

"Yes, try explaining that one to the cops!" The ghost looked like she was enjoying this, and squeezed the soul that was in her hand.

"No!" shouted Nita, but rather than explode or fade, the soul *changed*, becoming a large shield, that the ghost put into her left hand.

"Typical," she remarked, looking it over. "A mother would be a protector, wouldn't she? Ah well."

"What did she do?" screamed Nita, looking panicked.

"How should I know, this is your world!" Susan shot back.

"I've never seen anything like that."

“Not surprised,” put in the ghost, hefting the shield. “I’ve had hundreds of years of hanging about, waiting for that rosary to be found. You think I spent it idle? No, I pushed my limits. Saw what was possible, and learned about the very nature of the soul. Now, are you going to back off and let me keep killing horses, or do we do this the hard way?”

“Of course!” The puzzle pieces clicked for Susan. “You possess the horses, make them win by exhausting themselves.”

“What of it? Filthy creatures. I used to love them, of course, until that one spooked and killed me. Now I’ve sworn to kill them all!”

“And you’re doing that one horse at a time, through races?”

“What’s time to me? You think I have anything better to do? Plus I get to make people believe in the power of the rosary, causing even more chaos in the world!” She laughed.

“Uh...”

“That’s what I thought. Now...” She raised her right hand, pointing it at Nita.

“What’s your answer? Are you leaving or what?”

“Sorry, but we can’t just leave things like this, especially with you possessing that woman.”

“Thought so. Have it your way, then.”

And a beam of energy shot out of her hand, about to strike Nita.

“No!” cried Susan, jumping in front of it to shield Nita with her body. She felt something odd as the beam passed through her, and realized while it didn’t exactly damage her body, it had done six damage to her energy.

She didn’t just absorb that, did she?

The beam also hit Nita, as Susan hadn’t been fast enough, and cried out as beam hit her in the side and caused a large red spot to appear. She had started bleeding immediately.

Even as she felt herself rolling *Initiative*, she made a *Magic Theory* check as well, getting a fifteen. *Wait, Pluto damage would do the same thing, I bet it’s like that. Crap, my armor is going to be ignored, even if I got out Avatar.*

Nita put her hands over her wound, a natural reaction for someone not used to physical combat.

“What do I do?” she pleaded, face going pale.

“Something to do with wizardry, maybe? I don’t know. Get out of here if you don’t think you can do anything.”

Susan sprang at the ghost, hoping she could pin her down without hurting her too much, before a lucky shot killed Nita. She got a fifteen on her *Martial Arts* check, having spent four energy on COOrdination to touch the ghost. Rather than getting out of the way, the ghost raised the shield and Susan felt a pulse of power directed at her. Instead of touching the ghost as she expected, she went flying backwards, crashing into the safe that was behind her. She fell to the floor, more confused than stunned.

“Oh, what a nice power!” exclaimed the ghost. “I’ll call it Bounceback.”

Before Susan could rise, the ghost again shot weird energy at Nita, and so she threw up a hand and cast *Deflection*, as there was no way she should stand and move to block the attack before it hit. She spent eight energy, trying to counteract the five

penalty she was at for being prone. Didn't help, she only got an eleven. Silently cursing, she spent her *Retry* card, number 55, and this time put max energy in. She got a twenty two, which beat the twenty the ghost had gotten.

What she had failed to realize, in her haste, was that *Deflection* "works on any attack that would allow a parry or block with a shield." As she had just reminded herself, *Spirit* attacks "ignore armor and shields." So the attack passed straight through, hitting Nita again in the chest, and her eyes widened in shock as she was blasted backwards. Her shirt blossomed with blood, and she fell to the ground, dying.

"NO!" shouted Susan, reaching for her. *She can't spend XP to stabilize!*

The ghost was laughing in triumph. "Now for you!"

Susan made her *Gymnastics* check to stand in a single action, getting a sixteen. She spent another four energy to reduce her *Reactive Delay* by two, as she didn't have XP to spend for an extra action.

Have to get the knife into her! she thought quickly. *Then think of some way to take this ghost out without hurting the woman!*

Or, put in The Darkness, you could spend your Mutiny card to not do that. I mean if she's not dead, she'll be fine for the few seconds it'll take you to finish off this woman, right? That's four XP, nearly a whole adventure's worth. I mean think it through.

Susan was tempted.

For a split second, not even measurable with the precision of a *Paragon* counting time in segments, she thought The Darkness might be right. *I mean, with more XP I get better, right? Isn't it almost my duty to get as strong as I can to fight The Darkness off of other worlds? What's one life compared to-*

What am I thinking? No!

Susan made a RESolve check, getting a twenty two to fight off the temptation to give in to what The Darkness had suggested. She drew her knife.

Pity.

"Going to fight me with that tiny knife?" the ghost said, laughing. "Bring it on!" She raised the shield again, but blasted Susan for good measure in the meantime. Susan took the hit, wincing more at the loss of nine energy than the minor damage she had taken. She didn't want to delay knifing Nita even a single segment if she could help it.

At least the house isn't getting torn up from those energy blasts. It's pure spiritual energy.

She and the ghost went at the same time, but again Susan ignored the damage and lunged for Nita, thinking she was about to get blasted again. But before she could move, the door opened and a young boy was standing there, looking confused. He started to say "Mom, what's going on?" but didn't get past "Mom" as he saw Nita lying there in a pool of her own blood.

He screamed.

“Ah, another soul!” chortled the ghost, making a grab for him instead of energy blasting Susan again. “Wonderful!”

The boy didn't even dodge as his mother, even holding a weird shield, stuck her hand out and made a grabbing motion. Perhaps he thought she was trying to grab him up to protect him from the young woman holding the knife? Who had just stabbed the other girl in the room? After all, that was the only weapon he saw, energy blasts being in the realm of stories and movies for the unlucky child. He might have even rushed to his “mothers” defense, and thought it “so cool” that she could throw energy blasts of her own. What son wouldn't?

But we can't know his mind, which went blank as his soul was ripped out of his body and he collapsed in a heap onto the floor.

Susan missed all of this, she was busy stabbing her friend in the leg. This was partially because of the twenty one she rolled on LUCk to not kill her friend, who was two away from *Gone* in the body. As Susan hadn't bothered to “hold back,” her entire STRength of 29 was going to be used to calculate damage, as it was a knife first and foremost. It had to do some damage to enter the body and only *then* did the healing effect trigger. If Susan had accidentally killed her friend before that healing took place, well, her face would have been red, let me tell you. Usually this isn't a concern, because Susan's STRength was so low in the past, all she could do is one or two damage with the thing.

Not so much anymore.

As it was, she did thirty seven damage to the leg, which seems a bit absurd for such a tiny blade to do, and basically tore through it. *Whoops*. However, the healing properties of the knife immediately kicked in, and Susan left the knife in her leg so it could heal her continuously.

“Okay, didn't expect that,” remarked the ghost. “You secretly wanted her dead or something and saw your chance?”

“Shut. Up.” Susan angrily growled. “I will take you down.”

“Not doing so great so far.” The ghost concentrated, and the boy's soul turned into a sai in her hand, which she glanced disdainfully at. “Guess I shouldn't have expected very much.”

All right, I didn't want Nita to get hit with this, but as she's already down I guess I'll just use it. Should have done it from the beginning and just apologized after. But I wanted to give her the chance to contribute something rather than just doing what I always do and just taking care of stuff. Learned my lesson there.

Susan cast *Hypnotic Field* using her maximum energy, taking the minus seven for casting it instantly. She got a twenty three, and delayed seven segments after the spell went off. She figured it was over, as the ghost was looking around at the lights now darting about the room, and went to go touch her and do an *Exorcise*.

“Pretty,” said the ghost, swinging the Sai and forcing her to jump back out of the way.

“What? How?” Susan managed, dropping the spell which wasn't doing her any

good at the moment.

“Did you think they would distract me, or something?”

“Fine, you may have a decent RESolve but I bet you don’t have a decent STRength. *Immobilize!*”

However, even throwing eight energy into it, the ghost busted out quite easily.

“Don’t be so sure.”

“Oh come on!”

The ghost laughed again, and tried to trigger the special power within the knife. That failed with a very low result, and she “tisked.”

She tried again as Susan decided to just take whatever the ghost threw at her, and put the full time into casting this time. *She isn’t going after Nita, anyway, or the kid, so they should be safe.*

This time the sai’s blade shot forward, as the ghost activated the power associated with it. This poked Susan in the leg, as the ghost wasn’t exactly aiming the thing, not knowing what it was going to do.

“I guess that could be useful.”

It retracted as Susan finished casting, getting a twenty this time on *Immobilize*. The ghost struggled to get free, but this time couldn’t manage it.

“Ah ha! Got you!” said Susan, though the ghost didn’t seem concerned.

“Oh really?” It went *Insubstantial*. The spell, having nothing to hold onto, dropped automatically.

“Oh, you’re really starting to get on my nerves,” muttered Susan.

“But you can’t do anything to me because you’ll hurt my host,” taunted the ghost. “Ha ha!”

“Oh, it may come to that.” *Didn’t realize how much I depended on Sparkle’s Acceleration during my fights. Or just having her around, I know it’s only been fifteen seconds but where are you Sparkle? Come and help your master! All right, I’ll try Field again, but this time, a little differently.*

Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a 12. That meant on her next action she could spend 22, which she planned on doing. *That’ll leave me with 24 energy, enough to try something else if even that doesn’t work.*

At the same time, the ghost became solid again, knowing it couldn’t hurt Susan as it was. Susan started casting.

“Again?” the ghost whined. “Can’t you do anything else but that? How boring.” The ghost made a called shot to her body, trying to run her through with the extending sai, but of course her *Gaint’s Soul* took that without a scratch.

“Something funny here,” she remarked. “You seemed a lot more afraid of my *Spirit Attack*. I wonder.” She looked down at the sai.

“*Hypnotic Field*,” cast Susan, getting a thirty nine this time on the check.

The ghost finally got caught in it, going slack.

“Man,” breathed Susan, relieved. “That was some bullcrap. What the heck let her pull *souls* out like that?” She went over to examine the knife and shield, now held slack on the ghost’s hands. “I wonder if that shiny ball of light is what my soul looked like, when I used that spell to go into Tom. Imagine, turning them into weapons! Wild!”

Nita started stirring, but as soon as she opened her eyes she got caught by the *Field* and went comatose again. Susan pulled the knife out and put it back in the sheath. She felt around Nita's chest to make sure all her wounds were gone, and they seemed to be.

And is that the only reason? asked The Darkness.

Yes.

Ah, just checking. Interesting, you had a bit of trouble with that person that was possessed, didn't you? Guess you didn't want to hurt the host, huh?

No, I didn't. Wonder if the ghosts back home could learn to possess and work with the soul and shoot energy blasts like that? I suppose none have ever tried.

I don't know, that ghost seemed different somehow, don't you think? Like it was turning into a demon, or something?

Maybe, I don't have much experience with demons.

Still, think I'll keep this in mind.

What do you mean, keep it in mind?

Hello?

Hey, I'm talking to- oh forget it, I have a job to do.

Susan went down to their garage and found some gas, then looked around for a metal bucket or basket. She found one, tossed the rosaries inside, and doused them from the can. She also found Sparkle, and told her she missed a great combat.

"Combat? With who?"

"A ghost. Go see for yourself, but don't go in the room, it's locked down. She had some energy to spend, too, I had to try several times to get something to stick. Usually I have your buffs going, seems I've relied on them maybe a bit too much."

"Oh, so you won't want them anymore, so you can start relying on your own strength?"

"Don't be hasty, I didn't say that!"

Now, to burn first or to Exorcise first, that is the question. I don't know what the spirit vanishing from her will do, if this object is really what ties her to this plane. I guess Exorcise it is.

Susan easily got the ghost out of Andraste, as neither could make resistance checks at the moment, and the instant she was out Susan did a *Combust* on the whole pile of rosaries. It went up quickly. The two souls zipped back inside the bodies the instant the ghost was forced out, and Susan watched as it burned away along with the wooden beads.

"Now what do I do with you two?" she asked herself, staring at the two family members. "Really don't want to answer any... uncomfortable questions. Guess I'll just let the spell drop after I leave." Susan considered the safe moment, then made a decision. She found the guy's checkbook in a drawer in the room and looked it over. "Ugh, six hundred bucks? Oh well, I haven't spent any of my thousand this 'month' anyway. She reached into her *Pocket Dimension* for some cash, cast a quick *Precious*

Conversion on it from writings to make sure it was the same kind of money as was used around here, and hefted the safe easily onto one shoulder.

"Look, tell your husband what you learned, not that he'll believe you," she said to the zoned out Andraste. "I wish I could leave you some proof, but honestly the less physical evidence about this kind of thing, the better, I think. His safe will be gone, that should be proof enough. Good luck, I hope you get out of debt. Maybe you could write a story about, I don't know, two brothers or something. They ride around the country, hunting ghosts and stuff, and everybody wants to ship them. Oh, you don't know what that means... never mind. Call it... Supernatural, or something. Whatever. Don't make it two girls, too close to reality. See you!"

She then waved a hand, picked up Nita with *Telekinesis*, marched the safe downstairs, opened a *Teleportal* back to the farm, and gratefully stepped through. *So much for having energy to spend on getting more stuff ready today!*

With no one around and Nita still somewhat out of it, Susan put the safe down and tapped the watch to call Silverstreak. She was connected to the Hub.

"What can I do for you, Susan?" asked the agent.

"Just a quick question. Can this watch be set to give me reminders?"

"Why sure! Just go into the calendar function, there's all sorts of triggers. You can set one there and it'll vibrate and tell you any message you want when the trigger goes off."

"That's fantastic! Thanks a lot!"

"Sure thing! If you'd like a manual, we can give you one when you come back next."

"That would help. Thanks."

"What do you want to remember? I do have a photographic memory," said Sparkle.

"Saving," Susan said with disgust, fiddling with the watch. "A friend almost died, and I *once again* forgot to save! What am I making all these *Spell Papers* for anyway? I suppose once it's a habit I can turn the reminder off. But for now, once an hour, maybe? Or maybe there's a trigger for 'heading into danger' or something. I mean yes, I didn't expect ghosts to pop up and attack, but really I should have, given who I am and what it means to be me."

"Ah. I see why the group had a designated saver. Of course, their save points were physical things, you could see them."

"E-yup."

That done, Susan had one more thing to take care of. "Hey, you want a safe?" she asked Annie, coming back into the kitchen and plopping it down. "I have my *Dimension* so..."

"Where did you get that?"

"Funny story!"

Time is All in the Past

Place: Anne's kitchen

Time: Just after lunch

So Susan told the story of how the ghost had been defeated, and why Annie now had a safe in her entryway, awaiting a decision as to what to do with it.

"And what extreme feat will you be performing this afternoon, then?" Annie asked, when the dishes were cleared away.

"Hopefully resting," pleaded Susan. "I used nearly all of my energy trying various things to take that ghost down. I've got my XP, I'm satisfied to let you guys forge the spear so I can take the stage again tomorrow against Balor, i.e. The Darkness."

"Yes," agreed Nita. "Nearly getting killed once today is one more time than I wanted to be nearly killed today. Or any day, to be quite honest about the whole almost dying situation."

"I still don't understand what that ghost was," said Annie, shaking her head. "No ghost I've ever heard of does anything remotely like that."

"What you have to understand," said Sparkle, "is the *Paragon* nature. We rise to a certain challenge, so our next challenge must be that much greater. So it goes, even here. If he hadn't been here, I doubt any of that would have happened."

"But then that haunted rosary would have continued circulating!"

"Maybe, maybe not. We needed some McGuffin for our quest, after all. Seems doubly appropriate, being in Ireland now."

"Okay, am I understanding this?" put in Nita. "You're saying that the world just sort of came up with something for you to do out of the blue? If you hadn't been here, the rosary might not even have existed?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Nita looked between the two travelers. "And you accept this?"

"Do you 'accept' gravity?" asked Susan. "It's how I work, I can't help but to accept it. Unless I want to give up developing in any meaningful way."

"Huh. What a way to live."

"I'll take it. Anyway, you want this safe or not?"

"You really didn't steal it?"

"No! I'm not going to steal something from people that badly off. They needed the money more than they needed this safe. With the rosary gone, I mean."

"I'll ask the help, see if any of them need a safe." She went to open the door to the outside.

"Okay. I suppose if they wanted to leave a truck somewhere I could pop it in when they weren't looking."

"I'll get whoever wants it to move it. Please don't go lifting that thing where someone can see you."

"Spoilsport," she muttered.

"We've got about five hours until we leave for castle matrix," said Nita. "Do you think we could go over those skills, like *Magic Sense* again? And with my partner as well? I think Kit would love to hear about them."

"I think that would count as light activity!" Susan replied brightly. "But I have to ask- are you sure there isn't some weapon you should be working on? Or reviewing spells or something? I know that Johnny guy said you didn't really work from spells, but tomorrow we go into battle. Or are you not coming?"

"I have wizardry, it'll be fine. Won't be overlay where we're going."
Susan shrugged. "Whatever you want, then."

So the two *Paragon* people went over the skills Susan had picked up, from *Magic Sense* to *Spirit Sense*. That took the bulk of the afternoon, with Kit nodding a lot and referring to his wizard manual during the whole thing.

"What you've been learning has made the book update itself," he explained to Nita. "These techniques are under the 'provisional tasks' section. Other wizards have already been trying them out and making more notes. Getting as much information as we can about these techniques from other worlds, while you're here, is going to be a big help. Maybe someday all wizards will be able to make use of them."

"Glad to do it." *And if my skills can help wizards here be safe, that's like me standing by their side, even after I'm gone. Neat.*

Finally the time was right, and Annie drove them over to the castle.

"Thanks for the lift," said Susan gratefully. "I only recovered half my energy this afternoon, so while I could have opened a *Teleportal*, I'd rather save it for later."

"You could have taken some from the horses again," said Nita.

"True, but it should be fine." She held up her watch. "This time I'll remember to save, so anything goes wrong, I can just come back to before we went inside and do things differently."

"Ah."

The castle was as the girls remembered it, and Johnny led them inside and into the main hall, which had been cleared for the occasion. In the center of the floor was something that looked suspiciously like the sort of circle that showed up when Susan did magic. She stared at it.

"What do you think?" asked Johnny, picking up a brush and going back to work.

"I think your wizardry doesn't make any sense," Susan said after a moment. "You're speaking the spell, right? All your magic is talking reality into being a certain way. Not writing it."

Johnny smiled up at her. "What, you never played on the beach, made a channel for water for fill up and flow around?"

Oh.

"Anyway, this is what I'll be reading. Don't want to fumble with any paper or anything in the middle of all this."

Okay, that much at least makes sense.

He turned back to work, seeming to energize parts of the circle he was creating with a wand, that glowed and flashed when he pressed it down into the wet paint.

Or maybe he's just flash drying the paint?

Nita's sister came in, and looked the diagram over.

"Look, would you like to be made better at wizardry for the duration?" Susan asked her. "I can spare some energy for that, if it means this all works out."

Her eyes widened, and she scoffed. "Me? *Better* at wizardry? You don't even know who you're talking to. Come on, Spot." Her computer followed after her as she went over to talk to someone.

The nerve of that girl!

"Reminds me of someone," said Sparkle, looking over at her.

"Don't you dare say me. I'm nothing like that girl!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much. She's about to do something no other wizard, or even us, would be able to do. She knows it, just like most of the time you can do stuff no one else can do. How is she not like you?"

"I- She- There's- I'm much taller, for a start!" Susan sputtered.

"Yes. Taller." *But I think, back to back, your egos might be not an inch different.*

"We'll need the sword," said Johnny, coming over to her after Bidy came in with the block of metal she was going to have the molten matter poured into. He looked down at Sparkle. "And, uh, your name, if you're going to be part of the spell working."

"Not so sure that's a good idea," said Sparkle. "I can do wizardry of your type, yes, even be temporarily better at it than even you. But if something gets out of hand, I wouldn't know enough to do something on the fly." She got the sword out of her sub-space pocket. "If someone else wants to try picking it up, they're welcome to it."

Kit seemed entranced by it, and as he was nearest he bent down to pick it up. Unlike with Susan or Nita he managed it easily, and volunteered to look after it for the duration.

"Fine with me," said Johnny. "Come put your name down. And if you can wipe out the overlay in this area?" he asked Susan.

"Sure thing."

After that, there was some last minute shuffling, checking of work, and getting into position. The three treasures were there, ready to lend power to the effort. There were some wizards Susan had seen before, at the "lynching," and it seemed even the boy they had seen at the chicken place was there, too. He had been quite surprised to see them as well, and Nita had blushed quite furiously when he stopped over to talk. When Susan asked her what was up though, she found she couldn't explain why.

"I just got the image in my head of kissing him, that's all."

"Oh, is that all?" Susan asked.

"I haven't though," she continued, a challenge in her voice. "We've not talked since we saw him that second time."

"I know, you've been running around with me this whole time. Guess I have to apologize, if I took you away from *that*."

"I don't even know why I thought- can we just drop it?"

"Sure, sure. Consider your kissing dark and mysterious local boys dropped."

Wait a second. I'm changing these people's history by being here, aren't I? So that would mean they got "echoes" too, right? Dang, I hope hanging out with me hasn't cost her a future husband or something. Back home we only noticed after years, but that doesn't mean my actions here haven't changed the events here majorly enough to be

noticed. I mean them kissing might be huge, if I really did mess that up...

Susan watched, conscious of her *Time Anchor* outside and thinking about the balance between not changing people's destinies but still getting the job done on each world. *But would I even be able to trigger it? If this goes wrong, I doubt even Acceleration would let me act quickly enough. I suppose if I hold my action, technically I could act at any time. Or spend an XP for an extra action, that technically goes a split second before the mess up, retroactively. But if I get blown up by a sun from a billion years ago... oh well, they seem confident. Dairine does anyway.*

Those inside the circle began their work. First Johnny spoke a bunch of protections into existence, making sure the energies they were about to call didn't get out of hand. Susan's senses were buzzing as he spoke walls of force into being. She watched Nita place a hand out and go no further, and she nodded satisfied.

Then Dairine started to speak. She spoke for some time, and Susan gave a start as the inside of the spell circle suddenly lit from within, and seemed to be a proto-universe inside. While most looked stressed, tense, or just plain terrified, Dairine went swiftly to work, seemingly unconcerned. She went about the task of zooming into and rejecting many of the stars that were nearby. When she found one she wanted, though they all looked the same to her so she didn't know how Dairine could tell, the entire thing blazed as they seemed to move inside it. Nita and the others flinched as the flames erupted around them, but seemed to realize their foolishness. Then they seemed to jump again, though it was hard for Susan to follow the action with all the light being thrown around in there.

In fact, forget about "don't look directly at the sun," they're actually inside one right now. Or some kind of simulation, at least. They must have somehow damped the light waaaay down or something. Otherwise they couldn't see anything at all, ever again. In fact even me seeing them clearly is a wonder.

Whatever was happening inside seemed to be resolved, and Dairine sort of pointed at the mold Bidy had brought in, and seemed satisfied with what was happening. She held it a few seconds more, then seemed to make no movement at all, despite the light of the star going away and staggering to the side.

Did she do it? Should I trigger the-

But even as she looked, the mold was full of *something* molten, throwing a greater light, if that was even possible, across the tired faces of the people around the circle. Susan shook her head. *All that effort for a bit of metal, even if it was from billions of years ago. They really need to take better care of these so called 'treasures' if that's what is required to make new ones. I mean these reenactment things, this is the second one Nita's been in, right? And she's not even eighteen. They must happen all the freaking time. So how do wizards here let the things they need to do reenactments with get lost or busted?*

Susan let the *Time Anchor* go as Nita rushed to her sister's side. She mumbled something, then passed out in her arms.

"Is she okay?" she asked, tapping her pant leg where the knife was strapped.

Nita nodded. "Just wiped out. Good thing it wasn't a month from now, she might not have been able to do it."

Okay, then who would have? Would the world have burned for lack of one little

girl's strength?

Now, now, chided The Darkness. Aren't you one little girl? Aren't you trying to save this world from burning?

What's that? Sentimentality?

Humph. If you watched an ant wrestle a bit of food across a driveway alone, wouldn't you acknowledge the ant's determination and success? Even I can recognize an outstanding achievement from one of you little beings. Despite the relative ease I could have done the same.

I see.

"I see," she echoed to Nita. "Then I guess she did her part well."

"That she did," said Bidy sadly, looking at the metal. Susan had to admit, it did seem different than what she would have expected a puddle of hot metal to look like. Almost as if the mold it was resting in was insufficient to the task of containing such a prize. The metal inside nearly shined right through it, if such a thing were possible.

Probably just a trick of the light.

Bidy went on. "Now it seems my part in all this begins..."

Johnny offered rooms to anyone that wanted to stay the night, and several of the wizards there accepted. Most that were in the circle could hardly stay on their feet, and went to find places to sleep before they too fell over. Dairine was gently laid somewhere, but Susan wanted to see how Bidy went about forging this spear and offered her services.

"You could wash off the spell diagram for me," Johnny said to her, pointing to a nearby sponge and bucket.

"You got it," she said with a wink, snapping her fingers at Sparkle.

"Right boss," said Sparkle, casting *Hygiene* on the floor and cleaning it instantly.

"Oh. Huh. Okay... Uh, what else could you do..." He looked around.

"The forge area is actually a little ways away from here," said Bidy. "If you go down there, can you open one of those holes in the air so we could just pass it through? I would hate to spill any of this, or get anyone burned."

"Sure thing!"

So she did. Taking extra time and opening a *Teleportal*, then using *Telekinesis* to lift the mold and gently float it over to the other side.

"Safer this way," she explained. "Where do you want it?"

Bidy told her where to set it down, and Susan closed both spells down. She thought for a moment, then slid her *Wizard Bracelet* down her arm and held it up. Bidy blinked at it.

"You're really some bright power?" Susan asked, eyes narrowed. "I can trust you with this, that I'll get it back?"

"Yeah?"

"She really is?" she asked Johnny.

"She could be nothing else," he agreed.

Susan sighed with resignation. "Fine. Here, put it on."

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

“Okay, but seriously, why?” She reached for it, but Susan didn’t let it go.

“If you make off with this, it doesn’t matter where on this planet or any other you go. I will hunt you down and I will end you. Are we clear? I’ve beaten you once, you know I can do it. I will be far, far scarier if this is not returned to my hand at the end of your work.”

“What is this?”

“Just take it before I change my mind.”

Biddy slipped it on. “Okay, I feel a little different I guess.”

“Pick up something heavy. That anvil there. No, use one hand. Wait, you’re right handed? Use your left.”

“I can’t pick up this heavy thing with just my-” Biddy easily hefted the anvil that was sitting there. “Oh kay.”

“Forging requires great STREngth, right? Well, maybe that will help.”

“Thanks,” she said, waving the anvil about as if it was paper instead of iron. “I can see why you want it back.”

Not just that, you could Mimic, hit us all, you’re luckier-

Biddy was looking at her cross eyed. “What does your having ten *Lethal* and four *Gone* mean?”

“Just get to work! I’m renting you that by the hour!”

“Okay, just asking.”

Wow, this world really is turning you soft!

Quiet, you. If you saw an ant about to struggle with some heavy thing across an entire driveway, wouldn’t you want to help by putting the thing it was about to carry nearer the anthill?

Touché. You can’t do this for them, so you’re offering the next best thing?

Yup. In any case, Susan eyes gleamed. Wouldn’t you say giving up my bracelet, full of so much XP-y goodness, especially when we could be attacked any time, was somewhat of a Sacrifice? I mean she could run off with it, despite my warnings.

Oh, you beast! Are you going to-

I declare the use of card 26, Sacrifice.

The card disappeared from Susan’s character sheet, and five XP were added to her total. She got the sheet out. “Tada!”

That actually worked? Honestly, you’re such a cheat.

Somebody liked it, for it to work even that much.

Susan got the distinct impression that if The Darkness had a head, it would be shaking in disgust as his presence faded from her awareness. It also seemed... amused? *Weird.*

Biddy worked as well as if she had *Augment Skill* on herself, which Susan silently congratulated herself on not offering. *Yes, fillies and gentle-colts. She can be taught! I can see where being offered magic to make you better at something might be construed as me having no confidence in the skills of the person I’m making the offer to. I just see my magic as a natural extension of my will, something there to be used. If you can*

make yourself better, why not do it? If you can use magic to clean a floor, why not do it? Same thing, right? Perhaps a symptom of living in that castle for all those years, where everything was done by magic. But just as likely it's my personality, and being insensitive.

I think, just maybe, I have to start putting my faith in others a little bit, and let them do what they can. It's a lesson I learned years ago with my friends, but all that seems so long ago now, I could use the reminder.

But still, Susan was worried. She could feel the *Spirit Energy* being given off by everyone in that room, thanks to *Spirit Sense*. And Bidy's was steadily being drained.

No, not drained. If it was gone, I could give it back with Energy Gift or having her eat some cake and take a nap. No, it's more like her maximum energy is being lowered... and if it's seeping into the spear to give it power, there's nothing I can do to stop it, or help her afterwards.

"Nothing more I can do around here, I guess." Susan proclaimed. "I have my own energy to get back, I'm going up to find somewhere to sleep. Don't let her run off or anything!"

Johnny nodded, and both travelers went to find a bed.

The forging continued.

Susan came awake, the familiar shimmer of Sparkle's *Awaken* spell lingering around her, then vanishing.

"There's a lot of activity," she said, concerned. "And something's wrong, I feel it."

"Better have a look, then," Susan remarked as she climbed out of bed and threw her clothes on. A quick *Hygene* spell later and she went to look for something to eat, and to see what the commotion was about.

It was late morning, and it seemed the troops were being gathered for battle, as wizards of every description were lounging around in various rooms of the castle. She nodded politely to them, in search of Johnny or Bidy, who she hoped was still alive. She found Johnny.

He was carrying the completed spear, which like the sword seemed more solidly "real" than the surroundings. She had to admit, it looked like a formidable weapon, and she asked to hold it. Johnny looked at her for a second, seeming to weigh the request, but handed it over. Susan made a few untrained swings, feeling the balance of it in her hands, then stared at the blade which seemed to be looking at her.

I could make use of you, there is much fire within, she heard, not unlike hearing the voice of The Darkness inside her. *I could even burn out that evil within you, though it would change you to do it.*

Don't let it, cautioned The Darkness.

Oh, scared?

No, get the full story first. She's not from around here, and she's leaving. That last was not addressed to her, but the spear. It responded.

That is regrettable. I suppose the boy will have to do. Hand me back.

Susan obeyed, not putting up a fuss for once.

What was that all about?

Once you accepted it, you and the spear would be bonded forever. You would have been stuck here, as taking all the fire of Ireland away... might have been a bad idea.

Are you looking out for my best interests? Susan was shocked.

No, I'm looking out for mine. I want to corrupt you, remember? Can't do that if you're not on the move, making choices and screwing up everything, everywhere you go.

Hey, I've done pretty good so far I think.

Oh really? Where's your bracelet? You know, sweet bit of magic you Sacrificed for the duration?

"Where is my bracelet?" she asked Johnny sternly.

"Right. Here you go." He dug it out of a pocket and handed it over. "I hope you don't mind, I tried it out. Didn't seem to work for me."

"What do you-" Susan's blood ran cold. Looking the *Wizard Bracelet* over, two of the *Materia* were missing. "Why are there *Materia* missing?" she nearly screamed, just

barely holding back her temper.

The Darkness was too busy laughing hysterically to make any sense or taunt her, which was just infuriating her more.

And a small voice in her head started kicking the rest of her, if this was because of that cleverness with the *Sacrifice* card, she was really going to be pissed.

It is, isn't it? I was too clever for my own good.

The laughter continued.

"What's missing?" he looked at it.

"These! The tiny bits of power I worked hard at making and poured my XP into. The bracelet is worthless, it's just to carry these around. Two are gone! Where are they?!"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't know, after the ensoulment Bidy collapsed. I took it off her after she was carried inside. No one would have known to steal them, they wouldn't have known it was the beads, not the bracelet, that was valuable."

"Where is she? I'll kill her!"

Johnny sighed. "No need. She's already dead."

"I- what? She really died?"

"She really did. Come on, maybe they just fell out, we'll go look."

"Show me the body first," Susan demanded.

"This way."

The two walked through the castle to a small room, where he got out a key and unlocked the door. "We were going to have a ceremony and bury her ourselves before we left," he explained. "Didn't want any kids wandering in here by accident."

He pushed the door open and flipped a light on as they came into the room.

The bed was empty.

"That's funny," he remarked. "I have the only key, and it was still locked."

"Are you *sure* she was dead?" Susan asked, ice in her voice.

"We had a doctor check her over. She was dead, I swear!"

"Do dead bodies get up out of bed around here?" Susan indicated the covers, which had been thrown back. They made a triangle as if someone had tossed just enough of them off to swing their legs to the floor, something most people wouldn't even be conscious of. *If she had just vanished, the covers would be undisturbed. If she was taken, the covers would be totally messed up. This looks like someone got up from here, meaning she's still alive.*

"I really don't understand," Johnny insisted, checking the closet that was in the room uselessly. He looked under the bed as well, looking helpless.

"Oh, she's a bright power, you said. Oh, she's a good guy, you said. Now she's stolen my two most valuable *Materia* and cut my fighting power back down to near zero!" She got her book out, slamming it down on the bed and turning to the *Question* spell. "I'll just track her down myself. You go see if she's around here someplace. Maybe this is all just a big misunderstanding."

But even she didn't believe it.

Susan asked her magic "Where is my *Giant's Soul Imbued* object?" and screamed in frustration when the answer came back.

Unknown.

Nita ran into the room. "What's going on? Are you hurt? What?"

"She took it somewhere," growled Susan. "She stole my *Giant's Soul* and *Slash-All*, though for the life of me I can't imagine why the latter, and left. She *faked her own death* and then stole my stuff, to be completely accurate."

"No need to yell about it."

"No need to yell? That's our whole strategy! Mine, at least. I made that item specifically to protect you all in the upcoming battle. And your supposed 'bright power' went and stole it! That doesn't seem a bit fishy to you?"

"There must be some explanation..."

"Yeah, she decided the opportunity was too good to pass up, and made her move. See if I ever trust again."

"But she made the spear, she couldn't be bad! She wanted us to fight Balor. I don't get it. One of the Powers wouldn't act like this, they wouldn't!"

"So you say. So where's the body, huh? Two of my *Materia* just happened to fall off, and for some bizarre reason someone stole her dead body? Forget it for now, I need to go back to the farm, get more energy. I can make a temporary replacement for both, I know the spells after all, but I'll want extra energy for it. I'll deal with this so called 'power' after the battle."

So Susan *Teleported* back to the farm, and gathered energy from the animals that would let her touch them. She then got out two "empty" *Materia* and used *Spell Symbol* to burn the replacement spells into them. No substitute for having the real thing, but good enough for a single use. She then stepped back through, having not closed the *Teleportal* behind her.

"I don't suppose she's been found in the meantime?" she asked, when she found the others again.

They all shook their heads.

"Wonderful. Just wonderful."

There were five hundred wizards, give or take, in the main hall by eight o'clock that night. Susan hadn't been idle. To those carrying actual weapons, swords and the like, she gave a *Spell Paper of Avatar*. The woman with the enormous ax seemed especially pleased when she heard what it would do. She also remarked her Russian was excellent. Susan let that go, she didn't have a half hour. *Seems they're coming from all over, guess that's good, right?*

To those with no weapons she handed *Alleviation*. "But save them, if I'm nearby. Just grab the knife and plunge it in, that'll do the same job." Most were skeptical at the beginning, but after several demonstrations and word getting around, they accepted it. She also handed out *Regeneration*, *Invulnerability*, *Invisibility*, basically all she had that

might come in handy in the coming combat. She was feeling better by that time, but her rage still simmered in the back of her mind. *I'll burn it off cutting down imaginary enemies once the combat starts.*

Finally it was time to go.

Johnny stood before the mass of people, giving a not very heartening speech which amounted to 'don't die, I need your business' and turned the floor over to Susan.

"You've all seen me wandering about, and I know some of you were there when I reversed that little trap you tried on me a few day ago. I'm now going to tell you the real reason you're all here. You're defending not just your homes, or this planet, or even this reality. You're defending all realities even remotely like this one, because if the creature that's come to this plane, Darkvoid, has his way, it's all over for everyone. So expect Balor to have a few tricks up his sleeves, because he's not the same guy. He'll be possessed by something far more powerful than even he is alone. But don't worry, you have me, and here's how it's going to go down.

"Those of us with *Avatar*, we're the front line. You're going to see some lions, some dragons, and some soldiers made of fire once we go through. They're mine, and friendly. One warning; the soldiers explode when killed. Don't get too near them or you might get caught up in it if one goes. Leave the bulk of the physical fighting to me, I can hit every enemy in sight, so even you front line people, don't go too far. Let them come to us. Everyone without a physical weapon, sling whatever you can from the back, keep barriers up if you can. That'll be a big help. If you need healing, come see me. I'll be swinging my blade around, don't let that bother you. Just grab the knife you'll see sticking out of my armor, stab anyone wounded with it, and put it back. They'll be fine, trust me.

"Let's do this."

With that, the assembled wizards went out the field behind the castle, and holding the sword of air in her hands, Annie commanded the group be transported to the battlefield.

They were swept up in the magic, as it seemed reality morphed about them as though a line was being drawn. This line swept over the local area and passed them, leaving them in a world slightly changed, and more heavily wooded.

Susan started activating her stored *Symbols*, feeling strength and speed come back to her. Then she activated her *Legion* and *Magical Allies*, while Sparkle did the same. She issued them orders, and they formed up in front of the wizards. She had only one last thing to do, bringing out a *Spell Paper* and activating it. A glowing circle appeared under her, and she felt a new *Time Anchor* in the back of her mind. *Now we're ready for anything.*

With her two blazing swords in hand, standing next to a number of wizards who also had flaming weapons, she looked back to see if everyone was ready. They seemed expectant, and she turned to give the order to move out.

A great shadow passed overhead, and Susan brought up her blades.

"Wait," said the person next to her. "That might be a friendly, or at least someone who doesn't mean us any direct harm."

It was a crow, but twice the size of a man if not bigger. Johnny went over to speak to it, Susan watched for possible ambush. It wasn't long after the bird left that the first wave of enemies burst from the forest, shouting, and Susan grimly smiled.

Finally.

She noted with interest that there were many types, not just the rock type they had such trouble with before. *Good, the fleshy ones will go down easily.* As the *Sense Materia* hadn't been taken, she had matched the radius of that spell with her newly cast *Slash-All*, so she knew when the enemies were in range. When the bulk of them were, she swung both her swords, doing a called shot the body. With *Augment Skill: Sword* going, and the charging creatures basically packed in too tightly to dodge she couldn't possibly miss.

The entire line of forty, horse like beasts included, went down instantly. (Susan's average roll per swing being $(([\text{random \# between 7 and 82}] + [\text{fire damage}]) / 3) * 2$) See kids, maths are important! The average damage, just looking over the numbers was about a 100 all told, or 33 damage on each creature. That'll even take one of those rock guys down, maybe not dead, but into incap.)

Come on, that's hardly enough to make me feel even a little better. You can do better than that!

Spells in the beginning stages of being cast went uncast. Those raising weapons blinked and brought them down again. "Well, come on," she said to those nearest her, and started moving again.

Twice more they were attacked, by larger and larger groups. Both times Susan hardly had to swing her blades for more than two actions before getting them all and bringing them down. Something was nagging her. Sparkle felt it too.

"It doesn't make sense," Sparkle said, concerned, as the latest wave was slaughtered and fell, still meters from their position.

"I know. The Darkness should have made plans taking my *Slash-All* into account. Even if it sent some agent to steal Bidy's body and some of my *Materia*, I know those spells, and it would know that. It would also know I love *Spell Symbol* and would have temporary replacements for them within the hour. WHY is it sending waves of expendable troops at us?"

"Maybe this reenactment can't do anything else?" she ventured. "The Darkness can only control the body it's taken, not the troops it commands?"

"It's making me nervous," she admitted. "We've taken no damage, heck they've not even gotten close! But it doesn't sit right with me."

They went on. Again and again the Fomori came, and died. Susan's face,

unseen under her helmet, was grim. She *had* to get that *Materia* back, this battle was proving how useful it could be in combat. Yes, her STRength was being augmented still further by *Augment STR*, but the usefulness of it and *Slash-All* couldn't be denied. But the actions of her enemies, and they must be able to see they couldn't get close without dying, troubled her.

They made good time. With only seconds passing between Susan seeing a group about to charge, and that group being obliterated, they passed over the land quickly. Susan could, with *Acceleration* and *Augment Skill: Off Hand*, get six separate attacks in while they chewed through the ten *Deferred Delay* that would have put any of them close enough to strike. They had no wounded to treat, no dead to mourn. After Susan broke another line of them, Nita came over to her.

"I guess you weren't kidding," she said, looking over the mangled corpses of the Fomori.

"Hm?"

"You told Bidy once that your magic made you an army. I guess you were right."

Susan gave a grim laugh. "And I didn't even have *Giant's Soul* at the time I said that. Think about that for a second. Anyway, you need something? I don't like you being up front here..."

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine. I'm not using any energy, with all the spells I have going there's no need for that." *And if another Paragon should use Magic Sense on me right now, they would be justified for turning tail and running as far away as they could. To magical senses, I'm lit up like a Christmas tree.* "I'm not even getting any *Fatigue* because of my high ENDurance and the fact they go down so easily. Each combat doesn't last long enough."

"Oh, okay. Carry on I guess."

"Not to worry, I intend to."

As the party went on, a darkness seemed to descend upon them, and Susan was shocked to lose an energy just walking along, eyes straining for a hint of movement that signaled another attack.

She felt around with *Magic Sense*, but she was so hyped up on magic at the moment, all she felt was herself, even with a fifteen result in the check. A moment later it happened again.

"Pass the word back," she yelled behind her. "This area is draining our energy, so let's pick up the pace a little before even I'm too tired to fight!" She started walking a little more briskly, conscious of *Acceleration* making her faster than normal, and made sure the others could keep pace.

Not that I've really needed them, thus far.

The last line of Fomori stretched and stretched, but Susan cut them down as well. By the time those behind the first ones to get hit got in range, the first ones had all but gone down, so Susan could just lazily swing her swords. The group was so small and so tightly together, and the Fomori all attacked from one direction, that Susan was almost bored by the time the last one fell.

Come on, where are you? She thought angrily. *It's not working, so get out here*

and face me!

And suddenly, there he was. Down in the darkness, with the flaming solders and weapons and the odd wizard light, Balor himself squatted before them. Flabby and putrid, the figure had its eyes closed, but seemed to know the group was there.

“It’s about freaking time!” said Susan, stepping up before the ugly form. She wanted to vent, and here was a convenient target for it! “And what is that body you’ve chosen? Is that seriously the best you could get around here, Darkness? Or Darkvoid, more properly. Wouldn’t want my pet name for you to confuse you, oh mountain of flab. Honestly, what do you expect to do, looking like that? Oh, your size is impressive, a plus five, right? Without *Giant’s Soul* going it might have even given me pause, you dividing damage by six. Honestly, the dragon form a couple of worlds ago was far scarier, and seemingly more impenetrable. I mean the group of us could easily outrun you, if nothing else. Being *Obese* reduces your speed, after all. And hiding here, what’s that all about? Usually you throw yourself at me, almost eager for the chance to do me in. But this time, no, I had to come to you. Plus slaughtering waves of troops? Little reminder, unlike on Aerith’s world, I don’t get XP and Gil for each one here. Did you really think that would work? You must have known it wouldn’t, given my magic.” She paused. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Susan waited.

The figure cracked the smaller of its two eyes open, the one that didn’t have an energy attack built into it, and looked around. It peered down at her, taking in her flaming swords, gleaming armor, and aura of magic almost tangible around her.

“I’m sorry,” it said, voice like thunder. “Do I know you?”

“OH GIVE ME A BREAK!”

Balor Beaten and What Comes After

Time: About 9:00 PM

Place: The battlefield

Yeah, that's not me, said The Darkness, after his howl of laughter died away. *You really think I would climb inside that sluggish thing? Yuck, no thank you.*

"You're not The Darkness?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"I am Balor!" roared the figure. "But The Darkness does have a nice ring to it," he admitted. "Can we get on with it?"

"Oh, what, you have a hot date? Fine. Sparkle?"

"You got it boss. *Colossus.*"

From the ground under Balor a glowing shape started to form, knocking him off balance. He gave a surprised yelp and toppled over as a stone golem, easily as big as he was, ripped free from the earth and threw him to one side as it emerged. "Destroy them!" he shouted, and more Fomori poured out from all sides from the trees.

"I'll need to get closer," shouted Susan to those nearest to her. "It's up to you now, defend everyone not wearing armor. I'll take out Balor."

They started to shout something, about the spear or that she was crazy or both, but she took off running. She had a speed of thirty now, and shot forward in a *charge* against the massive form before her. As she ran, she took the reactive action of ending *Slash-All. He'll divide damage enough, I don't need a further reduction.*

Sparkle and Balor went at the same time, so Balor tried to get up, but Sparkle wasn't having any of that. She made a *Mars* check, (as that is how the *Colossus* is controlled) a thirteen, enough to hit him and drive him down to the ground again. (It also did four damage) Susan felt the tremor and tried to imagine a regular person being hit by that amount of stone.

"What is this?" Balor roared, turning his head to look at the thing.

It punched him again, with a sixteen, this time doing three to the body. Sparkle's delay again went up by two, but allowing her to go yet again before Balor could do more than stare at the thing.

Wouldn't think a creature that big could move that fast, she thought. *But it's using my delay, which is augmented by Acceleration. Guess I'm a little bit of a cheat too.*

Again the stony fist of the *Colossus* slammed into Balor, but he shifted position a little and it only caught his arm that time.

"Fine," he said, "I will destroy you first then, whatever you are!" His larger eye began to open, and sickly red light shot out, striking the stone creature and driving it back a little. It took six damage to the body, as it also divided everything by six.

Can't let him destroy this, he'll turn that attack of his on us. I wonder... The *Colossus* did whatever Sparkle wanted, and Balor was still technically prone. This time, Sparkle made a called shot to the eye, difficulty plus five, so it evened out. She got a fourteen, he got a nineteen on a dodge, but his size subtracted five and his wound subtracted one so she hit! That did another three damage to him, but right in the eye. It snapped closed again and he howled in pain.

This time, Sparkle had to delay by seven segments, because of the called shot, but Balor delayed because he had tried to get away from the stony fist that was flying

towards him. This put the delay at 12, and Susan slammed into him from the side.

She got a plus six to her already massive STRength for the *charge*, and slashed upwards, cutting as deep as she could with both swords. This did eight damage, ten damage, and another five fire damage, putting him just over his lethal capacity.

As before, he didn't really have a *Gone* because this was supposed to be a reenactment of events. He wasn't really there, he had been defeated ages ago. In other words, he was supposed to open his eye and the spear was supposed to crash through it, as had happened countless times before. With Susan around, though, nothing goes the way it's supposed to, and the image of Balor burned away before her very eyes. To the wizard's surprise, so did the Fomori.

"Show yourself, Darkness!" cried Susan, smashing the sword into the ground and causing it to crack. "I've had just about enough of your slinking around in the shadows. You want this world? Fine, come and take it from me, right here and now!"

"If you insist," said Bidy, stepping out of nowhere from behind her. Susan whirled. Behind Bidy, a line of elves also appeared to step from nothingness, and all were riding those magnificent horses. They were armed for battle, and their weapons and armor gleamed as the darkness of the area started to lift.

"What are you talking about?" asked Susan, looking them all over. "Give me my *Materia* back! If you insist, what does that even-" She froze.

"Figuring it out, are we? I must say, it's been fun watching you squirm, never knowing who I was in this world."

"No way. You helped us!" insisted Susan.

"Not exactly. Bidy helped you, yes. But she's gone now, so I get to fully take over. She couldn't have beaten me in a contest of wills, but I've been riding around in her head for some time now. Why waste the effort, I asked myself. I knew what was coming, I knew I could get her body without a fight. So only the barest sliver of myself was needed for this world, and now, with her consciousness gone, that sliver has grown enough to take you on. She didn't even know I was there."

"So you're telling me," Susan growled, "that when I first accused you of being The Darkness, I was actually *right*?"

Bidy laughed. "Yes, isn't it fantastic? Oh, I was howling inside after you left, just howling you were so funny. Thanks for taking out the big guy, that's a significant chunk of power freed up for me to use." She did something, reached into the air where Balor had been, and seemed to pull. She smiled as energy poured into her, Balor's body seeming to return, ghostlike, and get sucked into her. "Very nice," she purred. With that, she gestured, and the spear was in her hand. "Now, shall we have that fight you so desperately wanted?"

Susan raised her blades. "With pleasure."

"Wait," commanded the queen. "Will our assistance be needed?"

"If she starts to win, shoot her," suggested Bidy.

"We do have archers," the queen said hesitantly.

"Wait a second, you guys are on her side? Since when?" demanded Susan, looking over at the queen.

"Oh, yeah, I may have gone this morning and convinced them you were evil. Whoops!"

“And then stood there and proved yourself wrong,” Susan countered.

“You think they’re hearing our actual conversation? No, no, silly girl. They’re hearing you go on and on about taking this world over, and reducing everything to ashes. See, they just saw *you* take Balor’s power for yourself.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Illusion magic, even this wizardry kind, can be handy sometimes. What can I say?”

“Fine, I’ll deal with them later.”

“Suit yourself.” She lunged.

Susan got a 24 to deflect the attack, which proved inadequate despite it being her maximum roll at the moment. Her armor took it, and she used her off hand action to swing at Bidy, hoping she wouldn’t be quick enough to parry. She underestimated the speed of a spear, and the attack was batted away in a blur. Bidy kept the spear spinning, handling it like a pro.

Susan darted in, trying to get inside that spinning blade, but not making a called shot given how she was handling it. She failed to knock it away, and took a minor scratch to the head, specifically the ear. She followed up with her off hand attack, and again beat her by one to scratch her right leg for two damage.

“I really must thank you for this *Soul*,” said Bidy. “That attack might have taken my head off, otherwise!” She came in close with the spear again, which Susan knocked away and again brought her other blade up to try and get a shot in. This too was knocked away.

Okay, not sure if this is going to get us anywhere. “Dazzle!”

But even as she cast, Bidy sneered at her and the magic fizzled.

“Did you forget I could shut down your magic?”

“No, I just wanted to test if you could do that here.”

“Like the world makes any difference. I know how your father does it, that will never change.”

“Worth a try.” She swung again, trying desperately to think of something else she could do to take Bidy down. Her first attacked nicked her body, the second was deflected. Susan couldn’t help but notice that even with *Acceleration* going, Bidy was nearly as fast as she was. *Come on, think. There must be something else I can do.*

Suddenly, one of Sparkle’s *Magical Ally* lions barreled past and leapt into Bidy, taking both of them by surprise.

Bidy managed to bring the spear up and shoved the lion past her, making it go wide and have to spin to face her again.

Thank you, Sparkle.

Out of the corner of her eye, Susan saw another lion a step away, and swung low as the lion jumped, forcing Bidy to decide what attack she wanted to try defending against. It didn’t seem to work out that way, as Bidy went back to swinging the spear in a tight arc around her body, and managed to knock both attacks away with ease. Then a third lion joined them, the last one Sparkle had created, and two went to try wrestling her to the ground. Even coming from different directions, the blows were knocked away, the spear hardly seeming to skip a beat.

Susan now saw her chance.

“*Dazzle!*” she cast again, as the second lion now was up again, and making a grab for her. Bidy couldn’t defend against both, but seemed to shake off the spell without effort. Her concentration slipped just enough to let the lion get through that whirling defense, and the other lions moved in from either side, trying a slash this time with their claws rather than a *wrestling* action. Both were knocked away.

Now the lion that had touched her made a *Wrestling* check, but with Bidy’s immense STRength, she didn’t go anywhere. She did have to stop swinging the spear around, however, and that was Susan’s opening to make a called shot to the body with both blades, driving them in as hard as she could.

Bidy cried out, but stayed up. “Cheater!” she cried. “Couldn’t take me yourself?” “I’m the cheater?” Susan protested. “You stole the only thing keeping you alive from me!”

Bidy started to retort, but now all three lions went, “three” and “one” now leaping up to try and help their companion drive Bidy to the ground. Both made *Unarmed* checks, and Bidy now tried dodging them, but with her wounds and the other lion still holding onto her, she couldn’t. Now all three were atop her, trying to drag her down.

“Fine!” she said, closing her eyes and then opening them again. A wave of energy engulfed them all, forcing them back. Susan couldn’t even make a STRength check to not be blown back, and Bidy was now standing alone, leaning on the spear.

“Oh, now who’s the cheater?” taunted Susan. “Couldn’t win without bringing Balor’s powers into it, huh? Fight with your own STRength, I allowed you the weapon you forged, didn’t I?”

“Ah, curse this world for not having a decent fighter to take over. Or dragons.”

“Your loss,” said Susan, as she and all three lions now went at the same time. Susan again drove the blades into Bidy as the lions jumped towards her. They all bounced off with a **clang**, as an energy shield Susan had seen before came into being.

Crap, that’s the same technique the dragon used! She’ll start healing in there, I know it. Does The Darkness have a healing technique or did the dragon just have some kind of regeneration thing going? If she has to heal herself with wizardry, we have a little time.

“What are you going to do?” asked Sparkle, who had now come over because the danger had, for the moment, passed.

“We know an explosion directed inside the shield can break it, want to try your *Elemental Line?*”

“No, look there at the ground.” Susan did, and it seemed the barrier extended there as well. Neither one of them knew a similar spell to the *Explosion* magic that Louise could do, so that was out. “Couldn’t you hit her with *Slash-All?*”

“Maybe. Have to cast it again, though, I took it off to hit Balor earlier.”

“Not much for it then, I guess.”

“I wonder... how tough do you think those *Materia* are, anyway?”

“Don’t know, never needed to worry about it before. The real one was like a sap that had hardened, right? The other was plain metal, so probably not all that great. Why?”

Susan shook her head. “Any area effect attack would have a chance of damaging them, and with the *Giant’s Soul* going she wouldn’t take much damage except from something with a lot of energy thrown in.”

“Ah, true. Hey, think you could get the two away from her?”

“You mean- worth a shot. I don’t know *exactly* where they are, like in which pocket. But I do know they must be with her, that should be good enough.”

And it was.

Susan walked away from the domed figure, who was concentrating on healing anyway, and probably wasn’t going to notice. With two quick *Retrieval* spells in a row, Susan gratefully popped the two real *Materia* back in place, and now knew it didn’t matter if Bidy healed herself. Her next attack would finish the job. But she had something to do first.

“You all have been very quiet,” she said the elves, still just sitting there on the horses.

“We were told not to attack you,” said the queen. “But what is that darkness? I have never seen such a thing, and it is not wizardry.”

“That’s the power of The Darkness. It’s an energy from higher dimensions, so it’s tough to get through. I’m going to try in a moment, and I wanted to know if I would have you as enemies when she was defeated.”

The queen looked troubled. “I know she convinced me you were evil, but now I am having trouble recalling exactly what she said to make me believe that.”

Good, her hold must be slipping as she’s concentrating on other stuff at the moment.

“You just keep thinking about,” suggested Susan. “I’ll take care of- woah!”

Inside the shield, something new was happening. Bidy had given up trying to heal herself, probably feeling the loss of the *Materia* she had been carrying. She was now powering up that ball of darkness Susan had seen inside Tom’s soul. However, she figured this version might be a little bit more destructive, as it was out here in the real world.

“She’s going to blow herself up!” she shouted, pointing to the ball. “Get everyone out of here. Run, take them back to the main world.”

The queen considered, then gave a single nod. “Very well, but what of you?”

“I’ll think of something, go!”

The elves spurred their horses and raced towards the wizards who still weren’t exactly sure what was going on. The battle with Balor hadn’t taken more than a few seconds, and had not gone how any of them envisioned. Then Ronan started yelling about the spear being gone, Bidy seemed to be alive, they were fighting... who could blame them? Now they had beings they thought would be allies charging down upon them. It didn’t take much to get them moving away from the area and back to a place they could cross over from.

“Any ideas, boss?” asked Sparkle.

She shook her head. “Not many. It’s not magic, I checked, it’s more like a dimensional energy, so *Dead Magic* won’t work.” She glanced upwards. “You still have the golem, we could hide behind that.”

“I could collapse it, that might shield us.”

“Maybe. But she could gather enough energy to blow away this whole world for

all we know!”

“So get her out of there early. Try *Telesummon*.”

“And get that ball in the face? You crazy? I don’t know how much damage it’ll do, it could kill me.”

“Better figure out something fast.”

“I know that. What spells do you know that could help?”

“Let me think.”

Both mentally reviewed the spells they knew.

“I could blow off her head.”

“We need to do something that gives us a chance to get away. Something that forces her to not charge it as much as she could, but also delays her from triggering it immediately. She has to think she can hold out at least a few seconds while we get- Wait, I think I have it. Get ready to put every defensive spell we have on, and have the *Colossus* pick us up and run away. For now give me *Energetic Accumulation*.”

“Okay.”

That done, Susan sprinted over to the barrier, that she could vaguely see inside of, where the ball of darkness was growing. She quickly put her one sword in the *Pocket Dimension*, the other she absorbed back into herself, praying that as the scene wasn’t over, the spell would keep going. It did.

Hope this works.

Susan gathered energy, putting most of what she had left into this effort. With her one hand she cast a quick *Thrust*, making Bidy rattle around in her little prison but not seriously hurting her. That wasn’t the point. The point was to knock the breath out of her lungs as she used her off hand action to cast *Elemental Conjure: Water* with all the energy she could put into it. As it was the same “action” she could do the *Thrust* without losing the gathered energy, and sixty liters of water suddenly appeared inside the barrier. That amounted to 3661 cubic inches, or eight cubic meters. The barrier was not eight meter across, and the surprised Bidy suddenly found herself without air to breathe.

Take that, thought Susan. The Darkness might not have to breathe, but that body I think does. You just hold out while I get away now..

Susan took off running, scooping up Sparkle who started casting *Armor of Magic* on them both. That done, they were near the *Colossus* who she then had scoop them up. Susan then was able to cast *Invulnerability* on them both, then followed it up with *Regeneration*. She threw maximum energy and spent a minimum of time on both, figuring it was better to be out of energy and alive then have some left and be dead.

The explosion tore through the *Colossus*, sending huge chunks of rock, and the two small *Paragons*, soaring through the air...

“...like a child’s imagination.” --Deadlift

Off to the Next World

Time: Thirty seconds later

Place: Balor's dimension

After about thirty seconds the rumbling and shaking stopped, and Susan found she was still alive, just pinned by some rubble from the exploding *Colossus*. She had been protected by all the defensive magic she had put on earlier, and breathed a sigh of relief. *Now to get out of here and see what sort of damage that explosion did.*

The trouble was she couldn't do any physical magic, because of being pinned under tons of rock. That didn't mean she was helpless, as Pluto spells were INSight based, meaning they didn't need physical movement. One quick *Phase* later, and she was walking through the stone and out to a scene of devastation that gave her an appreciation for just how thankful she was not to have been hit by that energy ball point blank.

Now, where has my companion gone?

She didn't see Sparkle anywhere, so figured she was also buried in the rubble somewhere. That was good enough for the *Telesummon* spell, and a few seconds later Sparkle was in her arms again.

"Thank you," she breathed, blinking against the light. "Don't know how much longer I could have lasted."

"Couldn't you have used *Dimension Step*?"

"Tried. Didn't work here, probably because this is some weird sub-dimension already."

"Ah, I guess so." *Wait a second, light?*

Susan and Sparkle looked around. Apart from the chunks of rock that had made up the *Colossus*, there was a huge crater in the ground centered on Bidy's last location. But the light- that was new. The oppressive darkness that had been draining Susan's energy was gone, and the world seemed to be on the way towards becoming more like the sword and spear. More real, in other words.

"What happened to the spear?" Susan asked, glancing around. Both made *perception* checks, Susan getting an eleven and Sparkle getting an eighteen. "There," she said, pointing with a paw. It was stuck, point first, into the side of the crater wall, and Susan did one last spell, *Retrieval*, getting it back in hand.

With that, the *scene* ended, and Susan's magic splintered away from her. She was normal sized, unarmored, and low on energy. *But I think it's over.* "Now, how do we get back? I would just leave, but we really should return the spear."

"Need a lift?"

Susan turned around, and there was the elf on the white horse, staring down at her.

"My mother told me not to get into the cars of strange men," she joked.

"I'm not a man."

Dang it, you were supposed to say the horse wasn't a car! Oh well. "True enough." She held out a hand, and the man helped her climb up. Nearby, the queen and the others were appearing.

"I will bring this one back and then return, your majesty," he said to the queen.

“That is well,” she replied. “But first, allow me to offer my apology. We were somehow deceived, and while we did not attack you, we did ride against you.”

Susan shook her head. “It was never the intention of The Darkness to have you fight me. It wanted to destroy me, then all the wizards that were left. With you in the same place, there would be a good chance you would be destroyed too. That would have been a lot of energy freed up at once, and removing a lot of opposition to its plans. That’s what I think, anyway.”

“Perhaps you are right. What did happen here?” The queen looked out over the hole in the ground.

Susan chuckled. “Seems to have brightened up considerably. I think... because I didn’t actually follow the script, the recording got broke. Plus Bidy grabbed up the energy that powered the Balor recording, so that’s been released now that she’s dead.” *I wonder if The Darkness took that energy with it? Oh well, on the whole it can’t amount to much when weighed against an entire dimension.* “I don’t think the image of Balor will rise here again.”

The queen nodded. “I too believe that. Go well, traveler.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

With that, the elves spurred their horses and galloped off to see what this land held for them.

Susan returned to the other side and hugged Nita and Annie, who were happy to see she was still alive.

“Thanks to every defensive magic I could think of!” she assured them.

“It’s gone then, this darkness you spoke of?” asked Johnny.

“Blew itself up trying to take me out. Soon as I leave, the being that sent me here will drop defensive barriers around this reality and you’ll just have your own, local, evils to worry about.”

“As it should be. Thank you, for helping us. I know that you’re the reason all of us came back here, and unharmed.” He looked a little embarrassed. “I see why you’re a bit... vain. You weren’t kidding about being powerful, so I guess it’s deserved.”

“I guess. Anyway, who wants the spear? Can’t exactly take it with me, now can I?”

“I’ll take it,” said Ronan, walking up. “I felt something from it, and I could carry it easily.”

Susan looked to Johnny, who nodded. She handed the spear over and looked over the departing wizards. “Sure you don’t want me to gather energy and clear this overlay? I could stay.”

“No!” he said, a little too quickly. “I mean, no, it’s our problem to deal with. We’ll live with it.”

“Okay. I guess this is-”

“You can’t leave yet!” insisted Nita. “I promised you a trip to the moon, didn’t I?”

Three days later, having left from Nita’s house, Susan, Sparkle, and Kit stood on the moon and looked down at the Earth. Nita had gotten to go home early, given her task in Ireland was done, so her parents no longer felt the compulsion to have her there and let her come back. As the TSA hadn’t been invented yet, Susan and Sparkle rode in

her pocket, *shrunk* down, and got through security with ease.

She had made copies of some of her spells, so wizards there could look them over. As well as copies of the pages detailing the skills she had started to teach them, so they could have the complete reference.

"Thank you," Susan said at last, having slipped a piece of moon rock into her sub-space pocket. Not that she thought it might disappear, but rather it was just less flashy than using her magic, and she didn't want to call attention to it.

Not sure what I'll do with a piece of the moon, but hey, you never know. And it's a nice reminder of this place. She also had gotten her camera out, and snapped some pictures. *Harry and the others won't believe me, otherwise.*

"Sure," said Nita and Kit together, smiling. "Least we could do," finished Nita.

"Guess it's time for me to move on," Susan said, facing them. "You've shown me something cool, guess I'll return the favor. Oh, there is one more thing, though." She got out a stack of *Alleviation spell papers* and handed them to Nita. "My healing magic seems a bit better than yours, so use these as you see fit, okay."

"Thanks."

"This one, however," she said, taking one out of the stack, "is for a special purpose. Hold onto it. You'll know when the time is right to use it."

"Is it different?" Nita asked, comparing that one to the top one on the stack.

"Oh, no, I just picked one at random. All I mean is, keep one handy, if you start using them up really fast. The guy who sent me here said you might need it. Remember, it can cure disease as well as heal."

"Got it." Nita made them disappear into her own otherspace pocket.

"Good luck, you two," she said, hugging them both. "Now get some weapons made, honestly!"

They all laughed, and Susan stepped back. She brought her watch up, tapping it to call back to the Hub.

"Yes?" asked the agent.

"Ready for transport."

"From... the moon? I suppose it doesn't matter. Very well, doorway opening, welcome back."

A doorway of light opened next to her, and both wizards seemed suitably impressed.

"Go well," both said.

"Bye," she said, slipping into it with Sparkle next to her.

She found herself back at the Hub, and stepped out of the transport room into the main area where the agents worked.

"Well done!" said Silverstreak, coming over to her. "Another branch saved, another group of people suitably awed by your power."

"Thanks. You don't mind if I stay, do you? We both have some XP to spend."

"You know I don't. Remember your way there?"

"Uh."

"Come on," said Sparkle. "At least one of us doesn't have *no sense of direction*."

And so Susan and Sparkle spent their XP, Sparking having just enough to raise her *Spirit Mage* skill group from a three to a five, while Susan raised it to a four. She then asked the wizards there about her *Imbued* items, and what she could do about them. The gun was first.

"If you don't mind sacrificing a little of the XP you put into it," said the agent that was helping her, "it can be transferred in a variety of ways. You could simply move the spell to a *Materia* like ball, and fit it inside your bracelet. Or, you can use the stored energies inside it to power a different spell, and just use it up in the process. You get back three quarters of the XP, so you only have to make up one quarter."

"It would destroy the gun?"

"Afraid so. Pulling magic out of something, in this way, isn't pretty."

Susan considered. *Would the more useful spell of Magic Domination be worth the loss of the gun? I'll never find more ammo for it, and really, bullets? I can hit someone way harder now. It's just the principal of the thing... for worlds that would even recognize it.*

"Okay, show me how, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all, I'm at your disposal. Which type would you like..."

So Susan transferred the spell energies from the gun to a *Materia* orb, getting nine XP out of the gun, and putting in four of her own to create an energy based *Magic Domination* item. With it active, the only type of magic that would work in an eighteen meter radius around her... was hers. (And Sparkle's, as they sort of counted as the same "person," Sparkle being her *companion* and all. They learned from the same book of magic, after all.)

That left her with four XP, so she took three from astronomy, three of her own, and raised her *Martial Arts* to a three. With the last point she bought *wrestling*, because why not?

As for the knife, that was trickier.

"Are you sure you don't want to leave it like this?" asked the agent, looking it over.

"It's caused some problems, people who don't know what it is walking in on me with it stuck into someone."

The agent smiled. "The universe does like to play its little jokes, don't it?"

"Is that what you call them?"

He chuckled. "We could easily turn it into a rod of some kind, but you would have to do the transfer and rework the spell to turn it into a *Materia* like form. It's a touch based spell, and the way you've set it up is to go off when you touch someone with it. To use it in *Materia* form you would have to physically touch the person you wanted to heal with the sphere. You could rework the spell to activate with a word and a touch, just like you reworked the gun's spell. What most concerns me is you running into creatures like those on your home world, that you can only defeat with a spell like this. Then you'll be back here wanting to put it back this way."

"Oh, never thought of that. Okay, better leave it as is, then. Thanks for taking a look. Wait a second- wouldn't a rod be just as effective? I mean if the spell is touch..."

"Wouldn't just touching someone with the knife be as effective?" the agent

countered. "You don't actually have to stab the person you want to heal, right? That just insures it doesn't deflect off. If the thing isn't struggling against you, just hold the knife up to them. Don't touch their clothes, obviously, that will trigger the spell against the cloth. Just hold it against their skin." The agent paused, eyes narrowed. "You really haven't been stabbing people with this, have you?"

"Ah?"

Sparkle just shook her head, sighing.

They then chose the next world to visit, which had the following notes:

Many, many types of magic here. There are also many gods and demons that can be called upon. Be careful, you may be powerful but you're no deity! One type of magic is quite new; Warlocky. I would start with investigating this, its recent appearance is too coincidental not to be related to Darkvoid. Try not to get too off track, you'll have some time but remember why you're there.

Fully rested, fed, and ready for action, Susan stepped through and looked around the new world she found herself in.

She found herself on a rather busy road in what seemed to be a fair size city. At least, what a fair sized city would be before automobiles, modern roads, material techniques to build more than two or three stories, and modern sewer systems. The houses were packed tightly together, and there wasn't much vegetation to be seen, mostly dirt roads with some flat stones used for walkways to people's doors. People in rough, home spun style clothing milled about doing various things, and Susan was impressed with the variety of people she saw. Old, young, light skinned, dark skinned, people in robes that others gave a wide berth to- she saw a little bit of everything.

She also smelled a little bit of everything, and wrinkled her nose.

"Weird smell," she remarked, looking about.

"You should come down here, and my nose is better," complained Sparkle.

As far as the buildings were concerned, a lot of stone was in evidence, but there were a fair number made of timber. Thatching seemed to be the material of choice for the roofs, but the larger places had tile. All very "medieval" and not in the good way (if there was a good way at that time). All in all it looked poor, like maybe this world's people had given up a little, like it was too much effort to do some painting at the very least.

Back with Louise, there was at least some semblance of order and pride in one's environment. And aren't these people supposed to have "all kinds" of magic? Where is it all? These are not the homes of magic users, unless they're some kind of ruling class and live elsewhere. Seen that before.

The people, some of them having witnessed Susan stepping out of nowhere, quickly lost interest when she did little but stand there and stare back at them. Soon the street went back to normal, though more than one person, mostly young people darting about playing, stared at her openly. It took a moment to allow her to work out why.

Her clothes.

Universally the woman wore long skirts and the men wore pants, *though I suppose the more proper term is breeches*. The youngest kids wore a sort of loose T-shirt that hung down to their thigh, while everyone in their teen years or so wore more adult clothing. Susan, dressed in jeans and a neutral colored T-shirt stuck out because not only were her clothes obviously “otherworldly” she was not wearing a skirt.

And even on my world, a boy running around in women’s clothes would get some odd looks. I know how they would feel, right now, because of my obvious “men’s clothes” getting those same looks. I suppose I could Creation up some more suitable garments. Hey, wonder if Silverstreak would mind me turning the portal on, glancing through, getting a feel for the style, and turning it off while I made something up? Oh well, guess I have more important things to worry about.

“So where to, boss?” asked Sparkle. “The smell isn’t getting any better the longer we stand here.”

“Not sure,” she replied. “Usually we get met by someone, right? *Something* happens to lead us to where we need to be, at least something always has thus far.”

“Which is not to say it always will,” cautioned Sparkle. “Your father sometimes had to travel quite a distance to get to the bottom of things. And it’s eighty/twenty meeting someone, sometimes he never did.”

“Humm, I see. Shall we wander a bit, see what this fine town has on offer?”

“Fine with me.”

So Susan turned and started walking, not caring to try and remember all the turns she made on the haphazardly laid out streets. She passed an open air marketplace, streets where the houses looked better constructed, and the occasional man or woman on horseback, sneering down at the peasantry that was obviously beneath them.

“Do you hear something?” she asked Sparkle, looking around.

“Lots of things, did you mean something in particular?”

“Something’s muttering, like. But I can’t make out what it’s trying to say. I figured you would hear it, if I hear a whisper it should be a shout for a cat.”

Sparkle stopped a moment and swiveled her ears. “Just people. Maybe you’re hearing them?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t sound like distant crowd noises, more like... Actually if I had to put a name on it, I would say it was The Darkness muttering something. Hey, big guy, you in there?”

Indeed, Susan. You noticed right away, well done. It broke into a very disturbing laugh. Which was weird, hearing the odd muttering while the same voice seemed to be whooping it up like they just won the lottery. Finally the laughing died down, but the muttering continued, an undertone the voice of The Darkness cut across. *Coming here, and so soon after you had all that trouble with the possessed woman? It’s like you’re begging me to kill you! This world is really going to be a treat for me, I mean is it Christmas already? Because you didn’t have to get me a present, honest.*

What are you talking about? What’s this noise I’m hearing? It has something to

do with your avatar here?

Oh no, I don't want to ruin the surprise. Don't worry, it won't be long.

What won't be?

Not telling! Ha ha ha!

"Uh, Susan?"

"Yeah, sorry. He's practically skipping about upstairs," she pointed to her head.

"This world, something really major is going to go down here. I need a better look, see what we're dealing with."

The city seemed huge, especially after Susan ducked down a quiet alley and did a *Flight* spell to get a better look. At first she wanted to stay out of sight, but someone caught sight of her floating about, gave a sort of bow, and moved on.

So they don't freak out when seeing magic, so it must be well known. Where is it all? It's common enough they see someone doing magic as 'oh, someone doing magic' rather than the more extreme reactions the wizards at home are so worried about. Rightly so, I mean. This place... what's that?

Susan had gotten a nineteen on her *Perception* check, and peered over the row of houses in the direction of the sound. There, sitting in the dirt and crying, was a young girl. She was probably not yet a teenager, the cut off for wearing adult clothes, as she just had on a filthy and torn tunic. She was bare legged and had bare feet, unruly hair, and looked utterly rejected by the world. She was in front of a run down house and had left the door open, which Susan thought might be somewhat dangerous in a place like this. She hadn't seen any 'city guard' or anything resembling law enforcement, and a city this size must have its share of thieves.

People passing saw her, but looked away, hurrying past.

That can't be right.

"Hey Sparkle, we're going one street over."

"Okay!"

Susan looked around for the best way to the other side of this particular alley, and made her way over to the crying girl.

"Hey, do you need some help?" she asked, crouching down beside the girl.

She looked up at Susan with some astonishment, as though this offer of help was somehow unbelievable, and hadn't been previously considered. She choked back a sob.

"I think my mom is dead."

What a World

Time: Just then

Place: Outside the little girl's house

"Show me," demanded Susan, holding a hand out. She was rather angry with all the people she had seen walk by, who had not stopped to see what this little girl's problem might be. And with Silverstreak, who had not sent her here early enough to save this little girl's mother, should she really be dead. If he had mentioned something, she wouldn't have bothered raising her one skill set. That could be done later, after all. It wasn't worth a life.

It's not their problem, The Darkness explained.

Of course it is, don't you know the phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child.'

Eh, never had offspring myself. Susan, Susan, Susan. This world is a pretty harsh place, as you'll learn. Why would they stick their necks out for a crying little girl? Maybe she just got a spanking or something, how would they know? Best to keep to yourself, after all, these people have their own problems. They don't need somebody else's, as well.

Good thing I'm not most people.

Keep telling yourself that. As far as your chrome plated friend, even he can't see every little life in these worlds. He's strictly big picture, you know?

The girl took Susan's hand and led her inside, into the back where there was a small bedroom. The whole house was small, cramped, dirty, and none too pleasant smelling.

"Ugh, worse in here," remarked Sparkle.

"Yeah. Oh no." Susan looked at the bed, where the body of the girl's mother lay, lifeless.

"I don't know what to do," the girl said, looking up at her.

"At the moment, I'm not sure what to do either. I'm probably too late to save her..." *But I do have time travel magic in the book. With lots of warnings next to it.* "I'm sorry for your loss, but your mother is dead."

The girl took a deep breath. "I know. What's going to happen to me?"

Susan shook her head. "I don't know, but I'll figure something out. Come on, let me think for a moment." She pulled the girl out into the front room and looked around. "First of all, what happened?"

"She got sick, I think? It started a few days ago, but she told me not to worry. Yesterday when I woke up she didn't get out of bed."

"Yest-" *What the? This girl's mother has been dead more than a day?* "Didn't you have *anyone* to talk to about this?" The girl shook her head. "It's just me and my mom here."

"There must be someone!"

Again, a shake of the head.

I suppose they don't have 9-1-1 here. Man, this is a problem all right. I hope she's not still contagious. Might want to hit this girl with the knife later, maybe when she's asleep and not prone to ask questions. What does a society like this one do with dead bodies anyway? Is this sort of thing common? But they have magic!

"I'm hungry."

"What?" Susan looked around the room, then realized how foolish that was. *No refrigerators in evidence. These people probably buy their food daily, otherwise it would spoil.* "I'll get you something to eat while I think about things, okay?"

"Okay."

Susan cast *Create Foodstuff*, and the girl's eyes lit up. "Magic!" she breathed. "You're a wizard!"

"Something like that, take whatever you want. If you show me where you have a knife I'll cut some of that bread for you, and an apple as well. I can make you a sandwich."

"A what?"

"Seriously? Here." With the knife the girl got out, Susan cut up the bread, cheese, and meat, assembling them for the child, who tore into them. While she ate, Susan jerked her head to Sparkle and the pair went back into the mother's room.

"Think I should go back in time, it's only two days. The knife could save her."

"What, you're asking me now? Usually you just run off and do stuff." Susan eyed her. "As you've asked, I can see a few problems with that. First, you didn't exist here two days ago, so will that magic even work?"

"Uh..."

"Second, if you do, it'll cause a paradox. That little girl won't be outside crying when we arrive now. So we'll never know to come back in time and heal this woman."

"There are warnings about that."

"Yeah, a lot of them. Plus, there's Silverstreak's note to consider."

"What?"

"Playing God? Get it out again, it specially warns against that, and making it so this woman doesn't die, in essence bringing her back from the dead- that sounds like playing God to me."

"And maybe the actual gods that are around here might take exception to that."

"Who can say? But I find it rather striking that the first person we meet is a little girl and you start talking about time travel. You never suggested that at home."

"No, the warnings kept me away. But in this case I know of nothing else to save this woman."

"No, even you can't bring back the dead. And with good reason. Be very sure this isn't going to go wrong somehow before you attempt it."

And so she did. It broke her heart, but she was going to have to go back out there and tell that little girl there was nothing she could do.

Is there nothing you could do? I mean you could make her a zombie. That's something.

Gross! Don't even suggest that! But you're right, we have to do something.

She marched back out.

"This is good, what is it?" asked the little girl, half her sandwich eaten.

"Uh... meat?" hedged Susan. "It's made of magic, so I don't think it's anything really specific."

"Tastes like chicken."

"Could be chicken. Listen, a town this size, they must have someone in charge of

something like this. You know your home better than I do, you can't think of anyone?"

Her face screwed up in concentration, still chewing. "The city guard?"

Susan snapped her fingers. "Now you see, we're getting somewhere. You could have gone to them any time."

Her face fell. "They wouldn't listen to a kid."

"Oh. Maybe not. Well, they'll listen to me. Finish your food... oh." Susan looked around, finally deciding upon a cook pot, which she cast a quick *Elemental Conjunction* for some water. She found a cup and dipped some out for her. Sparkle had walked to the doorway, and looked like she wanted to talk some more. "I'll be waiting outside. What's your name, by the way?"

"I'm Illina the Quick."

"I'm Susan, nice to meet you."

"That's a weird name!" She giggled.

"I'm not from around here. Besides, wizards always have weird names, right?"

"I guess." She didn't sound convinced. Susan turned to go. "Susan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For stopping to help me."

"Don't mention it kid, it's what I do. Eat your sandwich."

"What are we going to do with this kid?" Sparkle asked. "We can't drag her around with us, fighting The Darkness."

"I can't just leave her here alone with her dead mother, either!"

"I know, it's just... don't get too carried away, the note said. Plus we're not sticking around, so don't get too attached."

"I know that. We'll find a place for her, it shouldn't take long. We only just got here, and we need to find out more about how this world works. We can do that while we figure something out for her."

"Good point, we don't know how this world works. If she's an orphan, we have no idea what the policy is."

"So we'll ask!"

"I guess you can easily pass for a foreigner, wearing those clothes."

"You noticed that too, huh?"

"Those strange looks you were getting? Yeah, I noticed. Just keep the bigger picture in mind, is all I'm saying."

"I will."

A few minutes later Illina came outside and closed the door. "Don't suppose you know where we can find one of the city guard?" She shrugged helplessly. "Okay then. We'll head back to the market, there must be someone in authority there if there's a dispute." She held out a hand, and Illina took it. Sparkle led the way.

"Uh, are we following your cat?"

"Her name is Sparkle, and yes, I am. Believe me, I can't find my way anywhere, so I'm glad to have her." Sparkle glanced back over her shoulder. "And for more than just that, too!" she hastened to add. Sparkle found this only somewhat acceptable, but

let the matter drop.

“Oh, okay. Is she a real cat?”

“Real? Of course she’s real. Why wouldn’t she be?”

“Never heard any stories about a wizard that kept a cat. I thought she might be animated by magic.”

“Totally real cat. And you obviously need some better stories.”

At the marketplace Susan looked around for someone in at least some semblance of a uniform and looking bored. She didn’t have to look long.

“Good day, sir,” she said, marching up to him.

“Hello. Can I help... you...?” The guard looked her up and down as if not believing his eyes. Susan decided to ignore that.

“I hope so. This girl’s mother has died recently. I’m actually a stranger to this, uh, area of the world. I need to know what should be done about it.”

“I see. Murdered?”

“No, seems to have gotten sick.”

“Ah. Well, there’s two choices of course. The first is the cheap way. We can take the body and bury it somewhere. The second is the not so cheap way. Nearest temple is not far from here. You can pay for a proper burial, with proper prayers to help lead the soul to the afterlife.”

Susan looked down at Illina, who was threatening to cry again. “I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure gold is the same everywhere.” *Good thing I’ve picked some up along the way, seems like this is a precious metal economy.*

“Indeed it is!” agreed the guard. “Would you like directions, then?”

“Please.”

With Sparkle again leading the way, the trio found the temple, which was actually somewhat hard to miss. Various depictions of what could only be gods adorned the front, and the place had a certain atmosphere about it that fairly shouted holy ground. The two humans walked inside, with Sparkle hanging out front, watching people go by.

“How can I help you, my... child?” The man that approached them seemed startled by Susan’s clothes. *Really have to do something about that.*

She explained the situation, and the man expressed his sympathies to Illina. She seemed shy and hid behind Susan.

“And what is your relation to the child?” asked the man.

“I’m just a passerby, saw her crying and investigated.”

“Truly? To think such compassion still existed! Except... what exactly are your intentions towards her?”

“Not sure yet. Why? Is there a place to take orphans in the city?”

“No, that’s why I ask. You don’t look like a slaver, but-”

“Slaver? Of course not! How could you even say such a thing?”

The man held his palm up, which Susan thought was probably a cultural thing. “It’s usually what happens to those who become homeless. They’re picked up by slavers.”

“Seriously?”

Keeps them off the streets, explained The Darkness. It's a good system, really. Rather than clutter up the town and disrupt the regular folks, begging at whatnot, they get sold into slavery. Gives them a purpose, keeps them honest.

“I’m afraid so,” the man went on.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find her a home somewhere, and not as a slave either.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Now, if you would like to come with me?”

The pair was led into the building, and to the back of the place, where the caskets were. Only, they all seemed to be metal, not wood, which Susan thought would have been cheaper. The man was suddenly all business. “Now, our most basic package is one silver, which includes a fairly basic casket,” he indicated the no frills box, “and an apprentice will perform the necessary prayers for the poor woman’s soul. For fifteen silver the casket is quite a bit nicer,” again, the indication of the model, “and a journeyman will perform the needed prayers.”

“And for gold?” prompted Susan.

“Ah, yes, for gold. Two rounds of gold, and a master Theurgist will be employed to make sure the soul of the deceased will reach the afterlife safely.”

Rounds? Does he mean coins? Two gold coins? “I only have coins of my homeland,” Susan admitted honestly. “Can you weigh them out or is there a money changer in the city I could speak to?”

The man looked Susan over again, somewhat shocked. “You’re really going to pay gold? For an orphan girl’s mother you never met? You did say you were just passing by, right? I heard that correctly?”

Susan nodded.

“You don’t have to,” insisted Illina, tugging her hand. “I only just met you!”

And this is crazy, but my mother’s dead, so funeral, maybe?

Shut it, Darkness.

What? That was gold right there. Comedy gold. Too bad you can’t spend that, you could make a fortune.

“Yes, I think I can afford two lousy ‘rounds.’ Unless there’s some huge weight difference, anyway.”

“We can weigh them, it will be no trouble at all!”

“Fine. Now where did I put that pouch?” She asked no one in particular. Taking the entire 1.2 seconds, she reached into her *Pocket Dimension* which of course caused a flash of magic to be seen.

“What was that?” asked the man, looking at the pouch.

“What was what?” Susan asked back, innocently. “Now, two you said, right?” She opened the pouch and took out two coins she had gotten from Anrietta’s kingdom, handing them over.

“Strange design, but they do seem to be gold. Let me go and get a scale, I’ll be right back.”

Susan, not wanting to trek through the streets with a body, caused a minor stir when she opened a *Teleportal* and walked back to the house.

“Never seen magic like this,” said the man, sticking his head through. “The god

Asham the Gate-Keeper can make a doorway such as this, but I never heard of a wizard doing so. And you didn't even use any components. Did you have it already prepared?" He didn't give Susan a chance to answer. "Of course you did. Silly of me. Sorry, it's not every day a foreign wizard walks into town, decides to help an orphan girl, and pays in *gold*."

"Too bad. The world might be a very different place if they did."

"As you say, as you say."

Susan wrapped the body up in the blanket on the bed and easily picked her up.

"You're stronger than you look."

"Oh, I'm just full of surprises."

The funeral was short and to the point, with the Theurgist being summoned immediately. Susan got a sense that something quite magical was going on as the man prayed over the burning body, and she felt a powerful presence with *Spirit Sense* that faded away as the ceremony ended. It seemed the soul of these people was not released without burning the body, which Susan thought was a bit odd.

What if someone is lost at sea? Or gets lost and dies in the desert? Will their souls never find rest?

But these people knew their craft, and after Illina said a few words over what was left of the body the lid was closed up, the casket lowered, the hole was filled in, and that was that.

"Thank you, for taking care of my mother," Illina said on the way back to the house.

"It's okay. This world failed you a little, I'm just glad I could make it right."

"But what am I going to do?" she asked, pleadingly. "I'm too young to be apprenticed to anyone, and it would be unfair to ask you for more money."

Apprenticing? Is that what they do around here? No schools, huh? Interesting.

"You must have other family. What about your father, or maybe some grandparents?"

She sadly shook her head. "I never knew my father. Mom wouldn't talk about him. And my grandparents live a long ways away from here. I don't know exactly where."

"I'm sure I could find out. Okay, we'll head back to your place, gather up anything you want, find out where your grandparents live, and see what we can do to find them."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why do this for me? Who are you?"

"I'm the person that's going to save the world. But I believe in starting small." She winked.

"Do you have something in your eye?"

"What, people don't wink around here? Barbarians!"

While Illina gathered up what few belongings she owned, Susan did some casting of the *Question* spell, seeking her grandparents. To the question "where do the grandparents of Illina the Quick live?" she got back

Tintallion

When she asked where in Tintallion they lived she got back

The village of Dawn

“Do you know where Tintallion is?” she asked Illina.

“Up the coast? My mom said she came south when she was a girl.”

“So we’ll have to go by boat, then?”

She nodded.

“Then I guess we need to find the coast.”

“I think it’s... that way?” she pointed.

“Humm. They didn’t before, but no one is going to freak out if I fly up and take a look, are they?”

“I’ve watched wizards in the sky before, it’s no big deal.”

“Then we can know for sure soon.”

After Illina grabbed what she wanted, Susan basically looted the place, figuring as soon as it was known the house was empty, it would be looted anyway.

“You’re probably right,” agreed Illina. “My mom was renting this place, and with her... gone... it’ll need to be rented again.”

Susan could only mutely nod, thinking about the bum deal this poor girl got, in a world where gods and magic could be summoned just by walking up the street and paying for them.

As far as the possessions, she could dump the stuff out of her *Dimension* when Illina got to her new home. *At least I know they’re still alive. I just hope they agree to take her in. She’s family, I can’t see why they wouldn’t.*

“You use a lot of magic,” Illina remarked, after Susan made a wooden crate with *Creation* to hold everything. She then hefted it and shoved it into her *Dimension*. Illina’s eyes got wide. “And you’re really, really strong!”

“I guess. Is that a problem?”

“My mom always said wizardry was pretty dangerous, that’s why it’s so expensive. Was she wrong? You don’t seem worried.”

“Tell you the truth, I have no idea. Look,” she spread her arms wide. “You can tell just by looking at me I’m not from around here, right?”

“Yeah, but here in Ethshar of the Rocks we get a lot of travelers. It’s a coastal town.”

“But I’m guessing never anyone like me. I mean even my hair is different, right?”

She nodded.

“I thought it might be rude to say anything.”

Susan snorted. “Well, anyway, I’m from a lot further away than you might guess. That makes my magic different too. Is that okay with you?”

“As long as you don’t turn us into frogs or something by messing up a spell, sure.”

“I’ll try my best. Come on, look one last time, we won’t be back here.”

She looked sad again. "I know." But she went to look.

After flying up and verifying that yes, this was a coastal town and a ship heading north should be easy to find, the three made their way to the docks. Susan couldn't tell one type of ship from another, but even she could see the difference between a ship loading cargo and a ship loading people.

This place was called "of the rocks" for a reason, the docks were built into the side of the town, which was pretty rocky and high up. Thus, the decks of some of the boats were almost level with the docks, so you could walk straight across rather than up to get to the deck. It was a busy place, and really ships sailing from here only went north or south, so it didn't take long for Susan to find a passenger craft. (With her LUCK check of 23)

"Where ya headed?" asked the man at the top of the gangplank.

"North," replied Susan. "Looking for a place called the Village of Dawn?"

"Yeah, I know it. Pretty far inland, but we can show you the major road leading into Tintallion."

Great. How much?"

"Depends on what level of comfort you want while aboard ship. Five coppers a person gets you a hammock in the hold and some basic food. For a silver piece you get a cabin to yourself and the food's a lot better."

"Humm... what if I wanted the cabin but could take care of my own food?"

"You don't seem to be carrying anything eatable, don't think you can sneak into the galley or anything."

"She's a wizard!" insisted Illina. "She can make food with magic!"

"That so? A wizard, huh?" The man looked her up and down. "Doesn't look like any wizard I've ever seen. Where's the stuff for your spells, then?"

"You let me worry about that."

"Hey, whatever. You want to call yourself a wizard, no skin off my back. You aren't and the guild gets word of it, they'll probably just kill you. Say, ten coppers then?"

"So that's twenty for the both of us? Fine. I only have gold at the moment, can you make change?" She hadn't put the bag of coins away, and got out another to give the man.

"Sure, odd coin though."

"I travel a lot."

"Yeah, so do I. Never seen a coin like this." He seemed to weigh it in his hand, then compared it to one he had in his money pouch. "Seems pretty close, so I guess it's fine." He handed her some silver and a few copper coins back. "You can have cabin seven, but I'll be watching you at mealtimes."

"Fine." Susan waved him away, and he stepped out of the way to let her pass. Illina and Sparkle followed.

"Hey wait, this cat yours?" he protested.

"Yeah, what's the problem?"

He stared down at her. "You're really taking a cat to sea with you?"

"I really am. That's not a problem, is it?"

"Whatever. We won't be held responsible if it jumps overboard though."

"She won't."

"Good ratter?"

"You won't find a better." *Given she has human level intelligence and more magic than you've ever seen in your life at her command.*

"Fine. Go on then."

The three went aboard, and Susan asked if Illina wanted to go to the cabin right away or watch the ship pull out of the dock.

"Can we wait? I've never been on a boat before!"

"Sure. Uh, by the way, do you know your numbers?"

"Sure, my mother was teaching me." She looked a bit sad again.

"Okay, because I can't read your language. You'll have to point out which cabin is ours. Seven, right?"

She nodded. "You speak really good though."

"Thank you." She got down close. "Don't tell anyone, but that's actually more magic."

She grinned back, happy to be let in on the secret, and the three milled about on deck until preparations to leave were done. And by preparations, it was mainly getting enough people to have a full load, and they finally furled the sail and started pulling away from the docks.

Illina was happily waving to the people on the docks as the ship went past, and some waved back with a smile.

"Now what in the world?" Susan was watching as a young woman, traveling bag in hand, was racing down the dock waving her arms and shouting as if that would cause the ship to stop.

"Crazy fool!" remarked the man next to Susan. "Does she think this ship can just-by the gods!"

The woman had gathered herself and *leapt*, and Susan could see she was going to fall far short of the deck and plunge into the sea. She was about to cast *Telekinesis* when the woman's face screwed up in concentration, and she simply floated the rest of the way, collapsing in a heap and breathing heavily, upon the deck.

Who does that girl think she is, Princess Peach? asked The Darkness. *That was dangerous, she's no warlock.*

The man who had taken Susan's money at the dock went over to see what was up, but the woman waved him away, struggling to rise. Susan headed over there to see if there was something she could help with, but stopped when she got in range to hear what the woman was saying.

"Never mind that, there's something powerfully magic on this ship, I tracked it all over town. It could be extremely dangerous, I have to find it!"

I can't take you anywhere, complained The Darkness.

Sky of Blue, Sea of Green

Time: A moment later

Place: The Laughing Gull, headed north

Wonder if she's looking for us? The Darkness asked, somewhat amused. *You're pretty magical and dangerous, right? A real magical girl, that's our Susan.*

Hey, why are you being so chatty all of a sudden?

I'm in a good mood for once, that's all. Don't spoil it by getting all... witchy on me. Witchy, get it?

No.

Ah, you will.

The girl, only somewhat recovered from her exertions getting here, was now stalking about the deck glaring at people. Susan wasn't sure if she should edge out of sight down to the cabins, though she had no idea where the ladder or stairs were. Also there was the possibility that would make her look guilty, moving off so suddenly.

After all, what would a totally innocent person do right now? Oh, I know, lose interest and go back to watching the boats in the harbor, right?

"Well, that was some excitement, wasn't it?" Susan said to Illina, turning back to the railing on the boat.

"Do you think our journey will qualify as an adventure? I've always wanted one."

Susan laughed. "Stick with me, kid, and you'll have all the adventure you could ever want."

"Neat! Hello!"

Hello?

Susan turned to see the woman, having made her way over to them, now staring at them.

"Odd clothes," remarked the woman.

She herself was dressed in the sort of standard fare most woman around here seemed to wear, though of a slightly better quality than most. Both her top and skirt were black, but she had splashes of color little adornments like a brooch and a red cloth tied around her waist so it made a triangle to one side. Then she raised her eyes.

And Susan found herself staring into the biggest, most beautiful pair of sparkling green eyes she had ever seen. Susan had naughty thoughts about taking the owner of these eyes, finding their cabin, and after many, many hours, making sure the person attached to them would be too worn out to move so she could stare into them all she wanted.

The woman suddenly blushed furiously and looked away, but then seemed to think better of it and grabbed her arm. Susan, of course, could have knocked her away easily with her STrength as high as it currently was, but she let the woman lift her arm up and pull up her sleeve. The *Wizard Bracelet* sat there, high on her arm.

"No, that can't be right!" insisted the woman.

"Can I help you?" asked Susan.

The woman ignored her, grabbing the other arm and looking at her charm

bracelet. She then stared at Susan's empty palm, where her *Somatic Sword* came out of when she summoned it.

"No, no, impossible!" she woman breathed, dropping her hand and taking a step back.

"What's impossible?" asked Susan with a grin. "You're not making much sense you know."

"And you can't be on this ship!" insisted the man, who had been following her around.

"I'll pay her fare," Susan told him. "That's not a problem."

"The problem is we cast off because we were full! That's what I've been trying to tell her. You know her?"

Susan shook her head. "Never saw her in my life." She didn't add, *and I've only been in this world like an hour or two.*

"Well, if you're paying her fare then she's going to be in your cabin. That means you're sharing a bed."

"Oh, that's no trouble," Susan assured him, thinking about how beautiful the color green was, and how she had never really noticed that before.

"Whatever." He held his hand out, and Susan reached for her coin bag.

"Wait, I can pay my own way!" said the woman, finally reacting to the man. "You're really full?"

"We're really full."

"I caught that thought earlier, am I going to be safe, sharing a room with you?" she teased.

"Safe? Wait, what do you mean caught that thought? Is that why you blushed like that?"

"I'm a witch," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Ahem?"

"Insistent, aren't you? What's the fare?"

"Depends. Is your new friend here going to provide your food, too?" Susan nodded her head. "Fine. I'll say eight, as you're going to be sharing a room, and you've already got the kid in with you."

"Kid?"

"Hi," Illina said hesitantly, where she had been hiding behind Susan when the woman came over.

"Hello. Is this your daughter?"

"No, I'm just seeing her safely to her grandparent's house."

"I feel a lot of pain from her, is she okay?"

"Her mother just died, that'll take some time."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"I am rather busy," reminded the man.

"And with a rather one track mind as well. It isn't like I can go anywhere, man, now is it? I'm on a boat!"

This seemed to give the man pause. "I suppose that's true."

"But as you're so eager for it..." She got out a coin pouch and counted the eight copper pieces into his hand.

"Thank you. Enjoy the voyage." He walked away muttering about crazy witches.

"Now that he's finally gone," said the woman, "what exactly are you?"

"Susan Fel- what did you say?"

"What are you? And don't try telling me you're human, because I wouldn't buy that. I feel the most magical thing *ever* appear in town out of nowhere and start wandering around. Then suddenly it's back where it was, then it's moved instantly again. Then it walks back. Then it heads for a ship and I find out it's you?"

Susan was looking pleased. "I'm really the most magical thing you've ever felt?"

"Yes," she replied suspiciously. "I mean your strength of will and physical strength seem unmatched. That bracelet is unlike any talisman I've ever seen. It's got magic all over it, so does that other weird bracelet you have on, plus there's something in your hand I've never felt before... there's no way you're human."

"I'm actually a little insulted," said Susan. "I don't look human enough for you?" She flipped her hair and batted her eyelashes.

"You leave her alone!" shouted Illina. "She helped me when no one else would, and paid for my mom's funeral, and showed me all sorts of neat magic, and now she's taking me to the only family I have left. So I don't care what you say, she's... she's..." Illina started to cry again, hugging Susan tight from behind.

"There, there," said Susan, holding her. "This has all happened rather quickly, hasn't it? I forget my whirlwind way of doing things is rather hard on most people. Let's get you to the cabin and my new friend and I can talk, okay? You probably didn't sleep much last night, did you?"

"She didn't," answered the witch. "And... I'm sorry too, little one. I was just surprised, I didn't realize how special she was to you." Illina just glared at her. "Oh my, I seem to have made a mess of things." She shook her head. "My master would speak to me quite harshly if she saw this."

"Come on." Susan easily hefted Illina and went in search of cabin number seven.

With Illina tucked in and Sparkle at the foot of the bed to watch over her, Susan and the witch went in search of a quiet place to talk.

"So before I answer any of your questions, let's get a few of mine answered," she insisted. "Like who you are, and how you can read my mind." *Without giving me a chance at a RESolve check to keep you out.*

"I'm Sativola of the Sparkling Eyes, which you noticed earlier." She blushed again.

"Yes, rather up close, not that I'm complaining."

"And you really would have, um, taken me to your cabin and, uh, you know?"

"You really can read minds." *And she must have a Magic Sense skill I like do. Nice to finally meet someone I don't have to teach that to.* "I mean, uh, I have someone I'm involved with right now, you just came upon me rather suddenly, so I couldn't help myself. Are you offering? The rest of you is as pretty as your eyes, if I may say so."

She waved her hands. "No, no, I was just, well, I've never thought about being with- can we- I shouldn't have asked..." She trailed off, not sure how to proceed.

"We can just drop it, if you'd rather."

"Oh thank the gods. Not that I think wrongly of that sort of thing, I just never saw

myself as-

“Already dropped.”

“Right, okay?”

The pair stood in silence for a moment. “So you’re a witch then?”

“An apprentice, actually. I’m on a journey to prove I’m ready be called a journeyman now. That’s why I ran after that source of- you. That’s why I ran after you.”

“I hope it goes well for you. Why did you run after me though, I could have been dangerous, like you said!”

“Thank you. My master said I had to do something that elevated the art of witchcraft, or otherwise do something worthy of a story while traveling the world. I thought if I could find the source of that magic...”

“It would qualify. Got it. Hope you’re not too disappointed?”

“Oh, I think it might work out. I feel good things around you. Uh, what was your name again? You started to say it...”

“Oh yes. I’m Susan Felton. Nice to meet you.”

Sativola looked confused. “Susan... of Felton? I’ve never heard of that town.”

“What, no, that’s my-” Susan paused. “Names don’t work that way here, do they? Illina was the same way, she said she was ‘Illina the Quick.’ I was too worried about her mother and her to pay much attention to that. You don’t have last names, do you? Just a first name and some kind of descriptor. What an odd custom!”

“Where are you from that you think that’s odd?”

“Further away than you can possibly imagine.”

“I’m getting a sense of it from your mind, but I can scarcely believe it.”

“Don’t go too deep, that’s a rabbit hole you’ll never escape from. Anyway, I guess around here you can call me Susan the Wanderer. I think that’ll fit me best.”

“You don’t mind if I tag along, do you? At least for a little while? A person with as much magic as you do must have some great stories to tell. I bet traveling with you will get me one, too!”

“I suppose it would. I should warn you, being around me will be dangerous. I’m hunting something, and if you think my magic is impressive, well, I’ve come out on top thus far but this world has me a bit worried.”

“This... world?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Good thing it’s a long voyage.”

Susan laughed. “I guess so.”

And so Susan took a few hours and explained things to her new companion, the almost-but-not-quite witch. She talked about how she was traveling not the world, but between worlds, which Sativola accepted without too much fuss.

“After all,” she reasoned, “if wizards can create or travel to other worlds, what’s to stop the people on those worlds traveling here?”

How logical. I’m really starting to like this girl.

She talked about The Darkness, which did concern her, and about her magic, which was similar/different to magic that might be found around here.

“Let me see if I understand this,” Susan said after getting a short explanation. “Wizardry is the most flexible, but the most immediately dangerous. Spells require a

host of weird ingredients, like baking a magical cake, but the cake can do anything?"

"That's right."

Sounds the most like my magic, but way less convenient. "Then there's your type, witchcraft, which is more emotions, moving things without touching them, limited spells, mind reading, seeing the future, that sort of thing? And of course sensing magic, lies, even auras to an extent."

"Exactly."

So like ESPers, and the elves back home, but either more limited or they just haven't figured out what all they can do yet. Though maybe teleporting is a witch secret they don't share? But the elves fought in defense of the castle, right? If what she says is true, just lifting something with witchcraft is as strain. "Then there's warlocks, who appeared suddenly on this Night of Madness. They can do some of the same things you can, just better, but other things you can do they can't do at all?"

"Right. They can lift more, and heal more, but they can't find missing things or tell the future."

"And they get stronger the more magic they use?"

"From what I hear."

That's the opposite of me. Imagine doing a spell and having more energy when you- Vincent and his lightning Materia combo! Is it something like that? Are they drawing energy out of the air, like a Spirit Mage? They just happen to get more than they use? "But it's the most dangerous, long term, because they can hear this *Calling* and head north?"

She nodded. "Where they disappear, forever."

I don't like the sound of that. I've been hearing a voice, and I think The Darkness is talking so much to try and distract me from it.

Like I said, I'm just in a good mood. Can't I be in a good mood once in a while? Why does it have to be this major production that I want to talk a little?

No, you can't! Something important there, but I don't yet know what. "Then sorcery can make talismans? Why couldn't you do something like that? You have magic."

"I probably could, if I wanted to study how. But the wizard's rules are absolute. One type of magic to a person. If you have magic you can't be in government, because that's equivalent to magic in their eyes."

"I suppose." *Natural Magician is four points, I suppose being a ruler of a small city would be worth that, at least.* "And the various others like praying to gods, summoning demons, and people who are just faking it."

"That about covers it!"

I hope the wizard's guild doesn't have a problem with me. I can do just about anything these people can do, and she didn't mention Fabrication. It's almost like my magic got smeared across the whole range of magic using types, so as to keep any one person from... well, becoming me, if I want to be totally honest with myself. I guess I could see the wizard's point. They aren't traveling worlds, what would they need with different types of magic? Plus, they don't have XP like I do, they have to actually practice. Learning just what they learn takes years, if they learned both Wizardry and

making talismans, each would suffer, they wouldn't be as good at either. They can't make up the difference with energy like I can, I bet.

"So, that's the story. If you're willing to help me on this world, keep me from making a fool of myself maybe, you're welcome to tag along."

"Oh yeah," she said emphatically. "If I can't make or discover some elevation of witchcraft, or live a good story following you around I *never* will."

"Elevation of witchcraft, huh?" Susan did a quick *Augment Skill* and then *Dimension Sense*, getting a twelve (one from minimum). Still, enough to determine she felt like she belonged here. "Give this a shot." She handed over her bracelet, and Sativola took it hesitantly.

"What am I supposed to do with... what's a health level? And why do you have ten of it?"

"Never mind that. Just try levitating that box over there."

"Okay?" She stared at it and it rose a little, but not enough to attract attention.

"Hey, it seems easier than ever! What is this, exactly?"

"Thought so." She held her hand out and got it back, shoving it back up her arm. "Witchcraft really is tied to your body, isn't it? In that case, I can elevate your art here and now with some simple advice."

"Really? What is it?"

"Exercise."

"Do what now? I don't know that word, I don't even recognize the sound of the language it comes from. I can see in your mind what you mean but I can't be seeing that right."

"I think you are. Ditch the skirt and run a couple of miles every day. Lift weights. Do sit ups. The more you build up your body, the easier witchcraft is going to be, right? And of two equally trained witches, which will be able to do more magic, easier? The one with poor diet, who just sits around, or the one that eats right and has strengthened their body?"

"But I can't wear men's... clothes..." She looked Susan up and down again. "Oh."

"Starting to understand, huh? You can't fight the monsters of the world dressed up for going to a ball. If you're serious about your craft you'll practice it, right? But there's only so much practice can do if your body can't keep up. I proved that with my bracelet. When you got super strong, your witchcraft got super easy."

"Witches are trained to recognize the truth, I suppose I have to recognize it within your words, as well."

"That's the spirit."

"But to wear breeches, like a man!?" The very idea seemed scandalous to her.

"Oh, it's worse than that. Come with me."

Back in the cabin, Susan ordered her to stip.

"What are you going to do?"

"Make you some exercise clothes. Don't worry, I'm not going to ravish you or anything."

She reluctantly started getting undressed, (which didn't take long, she wasn't wearing a heck of a lot. Cloth was expensive, and it seemed bras hadn't been invented here, or weren't the style or whatever) while Susan focused on *Creation*. Two castings

later, and she had a pair of stretchy garments, not unlike the outfit she had made to sneak around in on Louise's world. Just... less.

"Okay, put these on."

"I can't wear that, especially not in public! There's more of me left uncovered than covered!"

Susan sighed. "Yes, that's the point. Look, when you're running around you get hot, right?"

"Yes," she slowly admitted.

"This will help keep you cool. Running about in anything but this will get you overheated, it's not good for you. Now this is just a pattern, basically, because I can only make one kind of material per casting of the spell, and you don't have this kind of stretchy fabric I'm guessing?" Sativola shook her head. "So have something like this made, only with buttons and things, that fits you. But for now, try them on, see how they feel."

"Scandalous!" she squealed, after slipping them on. "You want me to get up, put something like this on, and then run about the city? Are you mad?"

No, but I am jelly, she is looking fine. "Ahem. No, I'm not. Look, you must know other witches your age, right?"

"Some, I guess?"

"Get together and all run at the same time. In a group it won't seem so odd, and no one person will stand out. After a while, people will stop caring. 'Oh, it's the witches out for their morning jog.' People will understand why you're doing it, and soon no one will look at you twice."

"I suppose that could happen..."

"Trust me, the odd becomes normal for people pretty quickly."

"I'm changing back."

"Oh, no you're not. This is a great start."

"What?" she squeaked.

"There's not that many people around, it's isolated, perfect for you to get used to wearing it. I'll make you some pants so you can get used to wearing them, too. But for now, I'll make myself a set and we'll go up on deck and I can show you some exercises to start practicing."

"What? Now?"

"Of course now. Why not now? You have something better to do?"

"Can I come too?" asked Illina, smiling at them. "It sounds like fun!"

"Fun?" squealed Sativola.

"Yeah!"

"Okay then, two more sets. I'll get to work."

"Yay!" shouted Illina, throwing off her top. "I get new clothes too!"

"This'll end in disaster..." Sativola predicted.

But it didn't.

The sailors stared openly, and many people came up from below to see what the commotion was about, but the three did various exercises so Sativola could get used to

them and see which she liked best. Many of the kids (being bored to tears by that time) also joined in, working out some of their energy, much to the relief of their parents. Susan showed them some games like hopscotch and double dutch and made them some bouncy balls, jacks, simple wooden tops or other toys, and anything else she could think of like hoops and chalk with magic, and they played until it got too dark. She then made “fairies” dance, which was just the *light* spell, cast in several places at once and with a different color light for each, and then made to flit about. The kids loved her, and they all wanted to play again the next day, and Susan said they could, she would like that too.

Many parents came up and thanked her, or made sure she didn't mind watching them. They were quite grateful for the break, and curious about the strange clothes the three were wearing. She explained they were all witches trying a new training exercise, and they all nodded appreciably.

“Oh, magic,” said most. “Nice to know there's some magic users on board if something happens.”

Susan got the impression that they knew magic existed, but weren't sure exactly what it could do or how it worked. She figured she could get away with running around naked if she told them it was for some vague “magical” reason.

That evening, the three recovered in the cabin, munching food created by Susan's magic. *Never got this low on energy just from making simple toys for kids, before. It's always been either a fight for my life or making Spell Papers. Somehow this seems more satisfying.*

She also gave Sativola's abilities a complete run down. Like she could ignite something, could she do the opposite and freeze something? She could hear thoughts, could she project them? She could lift something, could she tear it apart? Most of what Susan suggested witches had never even considered doing, and Sativola was surprised to find she could do several of the things that were suggested. She was shocked at just what could be possible, and knew just this information, brought back to her master, would qualify her to be a full witch. She sat, stunned, and wondered what other surprises traveling with this strange, otherworldly girl might bring.

She wasn't even thinking about her bare legs and midriff anymore, having forgotten to change back after they returned. (Just as Susan intended. Not only for herself, but so that Sativola got enough courage to wear it in the city too.)

By the time they fell into bed together, all three were somewhat exhausted. Susan had made an extension out of wood so the bed was bigger, and a memory foam mattress so it was nice and soft. The three fell asleep with something they hadn't expected to find only hours ago.

Friends.

Yo Ho Ho!

Time: Two days later

Place: Aboard ship

And so, Susan and her new friend Sativola, and her new charge Illina, sailed the open seas. In fact they didn't get that far away from the coast, but stopped at various towns along the way to drop off and pick people up. Susan spent time watching over the kids with the help of the available parents, making replacement *Alleviation Spell Papers* to replace the ones she gave Nita, and working with Sativola to expand her set of abilities. Finally having a free moment she also asked *Question* to see if Luna was around anywhere, and got a no answer as she feared.

"I didn't expect to," she told Sparkle. "After all, it's only been a couple of worlds, and even with my better LUCK, it's a complete long shot where she ended up."

Plus the story would be over if you completed your objectives... "You're not going to give up, right?"

"Give up? I don't even know the meaning of the words."

Both her new friends knew about Sparkle talking by this time, and the captain found half a dozen dead rodent heads in front of his door, so he wasn't about to complain about her presence. Everyone was amazed by how "tame" she was, getting petted, everyone remarking "it's almost like she understands me!"

Illina was looking and feeling better, having been hit with the knife and getting something resembling a proper diet for the first time in her life. She was having a grand time, just playing with the other kids and running about the ship, though she still seemed sad sometimes. She wasn't the only one, and both Susan and Sativola worked their way through the ship's population, providing what cures and advice they could, as a "wizard" and a witch, respectively. It was actually somewhat easier here, as people expected a wizard to be waving a knife about, and few had seen enough wizardry to think it strange she wasn't flinging bat's blood and the scales of a fish to work her "healing magic." She just did some mumbo-jumbo, cast a grade zero spell to provide some flashy lights for effect, and stuck them with the tip of the knife.

Worked every time.

Illina was very interested in magic, but Susan was hesitant to tell her about her own, seeing as she could never learn any of it. She suggested keeping a close eye on Sativola, being as she could easily apprentice to a witch. She had the *spark of magic*, in fact at least a third of the people on the ship did, which astonished her.

Oh sure, my mother said every other person on my father's world was a wizard, a cyborg, an ESPer, or some kind of martial arts master. But given how many people here could work magic, it's astonishing to me they don't.

"Not everyone can afford it," Sativola explained when she asked about it. "Being apprenticed to a master is expensive, magic doubly so. You can't just pick up some magical tricks or anything, either. You get taken in by a group, like the wizard's guild or the council of warlocks (or my own sisterhood) or nothing. The wizard's guild accepts nothing less, (despite it being none of their business, really.) It's almost impossible to do

wizardry without learning from a master, and while a really good witch might work a few things out, what's the point? It tires you out same as doing whatever you're trying to do manually, so you might just as well do that. Plus there's only so many people in the world willing to train young people, despite the basically free labor they provide. So it's not that hard to understand."

Sure, from a certain point of view. But it's magic! I can't believe even wizards wouldn't want there to be all the wizards there could possibly be in the world, given how useful magic is. It can't be all that dangerous, right?

It was the afternoon of the second day when the other ship was sighted and the crew started running about frantically. Susan wasn't sure what this ship being nearby was all about, they had passed ships and been passed by ships for two days now. But it was worrisome, this ship seemed to be heading straight for them.

"Pirates," spat Sativola, standing with her by the ship's railing. "This isn't good."

"No, it's excellent, I need the XP." Susan was rubbing her hands together in anticipation. *I figured I wouldn't get any until I got to where we were going, so bandits could attack me or something. I should have realized the world wouldn't wait.*

"Are you crazy? Those men over there are killers! They won't think twice about... what's XP?"

"Never mind. The better question is; most of these people are poor, what do they expect to get out of attacking us?"

"They don't know that. We could be carrying something good."

"True. Tell me, how are you in a fight? Any experience?"

"Who, me? None at all! Witches don't get into fights, we can feel the pain of our opponents!"

"Ah, pity. I could think of some uses for telekinesis in fight, like animating swords. You get to stay out of harm's way but they still have to fend off a blade. Much easier than trying to throw them. Or using your ability to read thought to anticipate someone and throw them off."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Look, take the kids and go below. If any slip by me, I'm counting on you to delay them until I can... actually, Sparkle?"

"Yeah?"

"She might need your help more than me. Would you mind going with her?"

"I'm your *companion*, but I don't think a bunch of pirates will be any threat to you at all."

"I'm thinking no. They don't even have gunpowder here that I can tell. Not that bullets would even really hurt me. The hardest part will be not just killing them all instantly."

"You aren't thinking of taking an entire ship full of pirates *by yourself* are you?" she nearly screamed.

"Of course. Sativola, please understand, this is what I do. Now, would this ship have been attacked if I wasn't here? I have no idea. But it is, and it's my responsibility to make sure this ship stays safe. Now go, take Illina and-."

"I want to watch!" insisted Illina.

"No, go below with Sativola."

“Please!”

“No.”

“Please!!”

Susan looked into her pleading eyes. “Oh very well.” She looked around the deck, and her eyes fell upon the boxes that Sativola had been practicing her magic on. They were pretty heavy, and stacked up. “Come on.” She shifted them and let Illina get behind them, then closed the gap up again. “Can you see?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Stay there. You get traumatized by seeing someone’s head get lopped off and I’m not to blame, you hear me?”

“What’s tamurt- what’s trawert- what’s that word you said?”

“Bad dreams. If you have bad dreams because of this I’ll only say I told you so.”

“Okay.”

Oh well, it’s not like I planned to kill any of them anyway...

“You have to kill them!” insisted Sativola, picking up on that thought. “They’re pirates!”

“They’re still people. I would have thought a witch would understand that much. Anyway, get those kids below, and try to calm everyone down. Tell them a wizard is defending the ship, they’ve seen me use magic, that should put their minds at ease.”

“I’ll try. Come along kids!” she shouted. “Clear this deck!”

Sparkle cast *Acceleration* on Susan and walked down with Sativola, herding frightened children down to the lower deck.

“You will stand with us, wizard?” asked the captain, walking up with sword in hand. “I must say, I’m surprised.”

“Actually, if you could take your men below decks, they won’t get in my way.”

“Bold words,” he said at last. “You are a strange one, with your leaping about and wearing strange clothes. You befriend children, you help the crew and display unheard of strength, you entertain with magic. Can you fight as well as all that?”

Susan giggled. “I think you’ll find that I can.”

The man glanced at her, not willing to take his eyes off the pirate ship for long, which was almost upon them. “If you say so. I have seen your magic, but not any of the usual paraphernalia of wizardry. You haven’t even drawn your knife. Are you so confident in your magic, then?”

“I am.”

“So be it. Far be it from me to send away a wizard, even one as young and female as yourself. I will be in your debt if you can save my craft and my passengers.”

“No worries, captain, you will sail unhindered before long.”

After all, these people don’t have cannons. They can’t exactly sink this ship, they’ll just swing over here and harass the place. Do a bit of strutting around, look menacing, and maybe haul off some ‘booty.’ At least that’s what they would have done- they won’t be expecting me.

The ships collided with a crash, and Susan was sure that if her hearing was better, she would be able to hear the panicked cries of the people below.

Here we go. “Augment Skill,” she said, activating the *Spell Symbol* on her

bracelet for *Martial Arts*. After all, if I use the sword I might actually kill them by accident, swinging it around. Let's drive these guys off this ship without killing any of them. They should be able to swim, if I throw them overboard, right?

It would be faster just to Slash-All them though, right? asked The Darkness. *These guys aren't made of stone. One punch and it's all over for them. I mean, someone on their side could get a lucky hit in and kill someone over here. How would you feel about that, an honest man, a sailor, dying because you couldn't kill a pirate?*

I'm going to be fighting flashy enough that I hope they try taking me out first. I'm right near the other ship, they have to come this direction anyway. It's something to consider though, how do I weigh one life against another?

And then there was no time for more debate. Three pirates jumped from the other ship, landing before her, and Susan gave them a quick bow. Then she burst forward, taking her two meters of free movement and doing a *Pushback maneuver*, striking the one in front of her with an open hand- not for damage, but simply to push them back over the edge of the railing. She got a seventeen to hit, he got a sixteen to dodge, so she hit him. They made opposed STrength checks, thirty two (her maximum) to eighteen, and the pirate went flying back fourteen meters off the ship.

The two pirates to either side gaped at her, unbelieving.

"Next?" Susan chirped happily. *Still, guess that rule breaks down for someone like me. How can I shove someone fourteen meters back and not have them take damage? I guess he'll take some from the fall...*

Both raised their swords and shouted a battle cry.

Pirate "three" was .2 seconds faster than his companion pirate "two" so he brought his sword down to slash Susan to ribbons. He didn't expect Susan to make a called shot to the blade as a parry and try catching the thing in her bare hand. But that's what she did.

Her nineteen beat his fourteen, and the blade slammed into her hand, doing one damage to her. The pirate just had time to think *this girl must be nuts*, before her off hand action of nineteen swept him off the deck just as easily as his fellow pirate before him. He went tumbling twenty meters (or so) before plunking into the watery depths.

Pirate "two" was already committed to his action, and Susan took another reactive "parry" to catch the sword, which missed by five, astonishing her. The blade slashed across her face, catching her right in the jaw.

"Ow!" she said, as a faint scratch appeared. "Not the face!"

The pirate grinned, but Susan again used her left hand to grab his clothes and haul him overboard. She got minimum on that check, and the pirate danced back out of her way as he got maximum. "You won't get me that way, girly!" said the pirate, coming in for another slash.

Then I'll get you another. "Thrust!" she cast reactively, throwing some energy in and relying on her bonus from the *Acceleration* spell. She shouldn't have bothered, he couldn't make the STrength check to resist because he was hitting her, one damage to the body. He also flew overboard, leaving her with no one to fight at the moment. Two pirates jumped down from the forecandle, eying her warily.

Can't use Thrust on them until I get to the other side there. They'd smash into the wall behind them if I used it from here.

"I don't know what you did, but you'll pay for it!" shouted one, as both ran towards her.

Susan stayed put, letting them come to her. That brought it back to her action just as they got near enough, letting her do a *Martial Arts* attack to touch the closest one. She grabbed him a thirty one, beating his dodge by eight. She got ready to make a *Wrestling* check to toss him to her right and off the boat.

From behind, a pirate that she hadn't seen swung his blade with all his might, making a called shot to the neck. This did another one damage, and stopped the blade cold.

"One second, guy," she said, turning her head just enough to spot him. "Let me throw this trash over first."

"What are you?" he asked, staring at her in disbelief.

"I'm the wizard protecting this boat."

"Wizard!?"

Pirate "five" and her now went, and her action was to make her check to throw him off. He was assisted by "five" who rather than slashing, tried to break her grip on his friend.

It was still twenty eight to twenty two, and pirate "four" went sailing overboard as she spun and tossed.

"Now then," said Susan, grabbing for the one that tried to decapitate her. Ties go to the defender, so "six" dodged out of the way. "My goodness you guys are squirmy!"

"We need some help over here!" shouted the one that was now behind her.

Excellent, exactly as I intended. You guys focus on me and not the people that can actually get killed by those puny "swords" of yours.

Another two pirates dropped from the forecastle, swords at the ready.

Susan stepped right, getting to the side of pirate "six" so she could make a straight line *pushback* again, and got in close to shove him. She got minimum again, and the pirate dodged out of the way. She felt another blow hit her body as the pirate now behind her tried to stab her in the back.

Dang it, one more and I'm at a penalty. Even moving this fast, they can wear me down I guess. Time to start throwing energy into my attacks? I wanted to try it without, but even with a fifteen skill rating, these guys are still dodging me. Susan lunged at him again, this time throwing energy into COOrdination, getting a twenty four and missing by two. Oh come on! That was a COOrdination of at least ten plus a skill of fifteen. They can't even spend that much energy, how are they getting away from me? Ugh, those other two guys will be over here in a second, I have to take this guy out!

Wait a second, I'm dumb. This place has two moons, just like that world Louise lived on! What's with primarily magic worlds having two moons anyway?

"*Dazzle!*" she cast, putting in maximum energy and targeting all four of the men.

All four failed to resist, and magical light staggered all of them. Blinking and trying to figure out what had just happened, pirate "six" had no chance to avoid Susan's strike and went flying.

He was swiftly followed by the other three, and Susan hoped the *Dazzle* wore off

before they hit the water. *Still, swimming checks are an active action, so I'm sure they'll be fine.*

By this time the crew members had joined Susan's side, but realized they were totally unnecessary, as there were currently no pirates to drive off.

"Uhm-" started the captain.

He was interrupted by someone hopping up on the railing and looking down at them all. He was dressed better, with cleaner clothes and real leather boots. His pants were black, and he had on a white top with puffy sleeves and a red vest. Golden chains hung from his neck, and rings glittered from his fingers. *All the spoils of his piracy, no doubt.* He had a mighty beard, and a fine blade hung at his side.

"It is a girl!" he said astonished, doffing his hat in Susan's direction. "I saw my men being scattered like tenpins, but I never could have dreamed such a beauty could be responsible."

As if. My LOOKs are only a five, so don't give me any of that crap. I know for a fact I'm only average looking.

"You're the captain?" she shouted up at him.

"Galvyn the Bold," he introduced himself with a bow. "Captain of the Raccoon's Hand, at your service."

"Great. Retrieve your men, leave us in peace, and I won't do to you what I did to them."

"I beg your pardon, is it not customary to return a name for a name?"

"Susan the Wanderer. Happy? Now get out of here. You will take no plunder from aboard this ship, not while I stand upon her deck."

"Her manners are as blunt as her fists, I see. Very well, I shall take the ship myself, after I show you how a real man handles a sword!"

Oh, come on! Seriously? Where is he getting these lines from?

And down he jumped, lightly rolling out of the fall and drawing his sword.

"Are you sure you won't take a sword?" asked the captain, holding his out.

"Shouldn't the two captains of the ships have it out?" Susan asked.

"Normally, I guess we would? But you did offer to defend the ship..."

Susan sighed. "I suppose so. Come on then, Galvyn the Empty Headed, and I'll toss you overboard as I did your fellows."

"I highly doubt it. Have at you!" He charged, and Susan rolled her eyes, intending to catch his sword hand as he swung, saving herself the one point of damage. It didn't go so well as when she went to make the check against him, both were violently shoved away from each other as a sheet of flame erupted between them. This flame wrapped around the man protectively, and the captain ran screaming from the scene, yelling about abandoning the craft which he logically believed was in serious danger of burning to ashes. His crew also reacted rather poorly, one of them shouting about wizard's spells going out of control, but Susan knew this had nothing to do with her. She watched.

The fire gathered in front of the man and began to coalesce into the shape of a man holding a large, curved blade. When the fire and energy was gone the giant beast like man looked down at Susan with contempt.

"Who dares threaten my master?" it demanded.

Fight Fire with Fire

Place: Deck of the Laughing Gull

Time: Just then

After bellowing his demand to know who threatened his master, the giant figure looked around puzzled. Susan took a moment to look it over, and assess the situation as only a *Paragon* can.

The creature was easily a +1 size modifier larger than she herself was, and she could feel heat and energy radiating out from it unchecked. Her *Spirit Sense* was buzzing, *this thing has several times the amount of energy I do!* It stood, confident, the sword held loosely in its right hand. Horns poked out of the top of the turban it wore, and she could see it had twenty six lethal health to lose and ten more before it would be dead.

Not a boss type then, but still it could be a problem. I have no idea what it can do or how well it can fight.

Nearby rope and canvas burst into flames, causing the crew to freak out even more.

"I see my arrival has scattered most, are you simply rooted to the spot in fear, little one?" he asked Susan. "If you retreat now, I'll spare- wait a moment." The creature bent forward, looking her over, and his eyes widened.

"Master!" he shouted, turning. "You must retreat! Never before have I felt such-eh?" The pirate, all bluster and swagger gone, was now trying to scramble backwards away from the figure, but couldn't because his back was already pressed into the side of the ship. "You are not my master, where am I?" asked the figure, looking around again. "A ship? Why am I on a ship? Where is my master, what have you done with him?" he demanded.

"Don't hurt me!" pleaded the pirate. "I'll do anything, give you whatever you want! Please don't hurt me!"

"Bah, spineless. But you-" He turned back to Susan. "You seem quite composed. What transpires here?"

Susan shrugged. "Don't look at me. That man over there was going to show me 'how a real man uses a sword' and plunder this vessel. When I went to smack him, you came out."

"He does wear my master's talisman, that much is plain. But where is my master, Hefeydd the Sorcerer?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know that name." *Not that someone else might, I've only just gotten here.*

"He was a rather minor sorcerer, I admit, but with enough contacts to have a demonologist summon me, and with skill enough to bind me into the talisman." He sighed. "Looks like the fool either died or took it off long enough for it to be stolen. Pity."

"So I guess you're free now, right?"

The demon looked down at her incredulously for a moment, then began to laugh.

“Oh, if only that were so! No, I am bound to protect the holder of the talisman, curse my luck.”

“Kill- kill her!” Screamed the pirate, pointing at Susan. “I... I... I command it!”

“Quiet, little man!” chastised the demon. “I am to protect you, true, but thus far this girl is not threatening you at all. Allow us our moment to converse.”

“You really have to protect me?” asked the pirate, calming down.

The demon’s eye twitched with displeasure. “Despite my feelings on the matter, yes. Were it up to me I would simply wave a hand, reduce this ship to ashes and... be stuck out in the water here possibly miles from-” It raised up a bit, obviously able to fly under its own power, and looked around. “Ah, I see land. I would make for the nearest town and all would know my power and splendor!” He touched down on the deck again.

The pirate seemed to have lost most of his fear by now. “Which one is it?” he asked excitedly, holding up his many necklaces.

“Which do you think, fool!” he roared, and Susan had to admit, the one with the big, glowing blue stone in the middle was pretty much a dead giveaway.

“Oh, right. Imagine, I had something like this at my command, and never- wait a second, I’ve had this one for years! Why haven’t you come out before now?”

“You think to chastise me?” As he roared this, he lifted his sword and flames blazed from it. The man flinched back, cowed for the moment.

“It is an interesting question,” admitted Susan, “I mean I can see why you came out against me...”

“And the longer I stand here, the less I wish to face you,” admitted the demon. “But the truth of the matter is, I never felt he was in danger before now, and so I was not released from my prison.”

“Ah.”

“We’ll leave!” said the pirate instantly. “You said we could go, right? I could collect my men and depart? You said that!”

“That was before I knew you were carrying this fire demon or... whatever- no disrespect intended, you are a fire demon, yes?”

“I am.”

“Ah, thank you. As I was saying, carrying a fire demon around with you. That seems a little too dangerous to leave in the hands of a pirate.”

“You can’t take it, he’ll stop you!” He gripped the talisman tightly now, fingers going white about it.

Susan glanced over to the demon, then back. “No offense again, but he couldn’t take me.”

“None taken,” growled the demon.

“What? You’re insane! His sword alone is as big as you are!”

“What difference does that make?” She turned back to the demon. “Look, how you would feel about passing into my service instead, Mr. Fire Demon?”

“My name is Fearghus the Ifrit, and mind your manners, human! You may radiate power and magic above most other humans but *so do I*. Your victory in combat would not be assured.”

“Fearghus then. What do you say to my offer?”

The demon went from angry to considering again. “Hummm, you seem strong, I would never see the light of day again. Galling as this service is, at least I do see some

sort of action now and again.”

“What if I offered you your freedom?”

“Free- a demon?” Both the pirate and Fearghus said this, then glanced at the other, surprised to be mirroring each other.

Susan raised a hand, palm up, having caught the gesture from the others aboard ship the last few days. “You seem a decent enough sort. Don’t you want to go home?”

“To Hell? Huh, that’s a tough one.” He stuck the point of his sword down into the deck and leaned on it, pondering for a moment. “Continued servitude to a human or returning in disgrace to my home, after what can only be hundreds of years, freed by a mere girl. No offense.”

“I deserved that one, none taken.”

By this time, the crew had realized their ship wasn’t going to burn down, and were edging closer to see what was going on. Some were beating on fires that stubbornly refused to go out.

“Has it been so long?” she asked.

“I don’t really feel the passage of time while in the talisman, so it is difficult to be sure. When did the war end?”

“The Great War? Two or three hundred years ago.” ventured one of the sailors.

“There you are then.”

Note to self, look into ‘Great War’ sometime. “I see. Well, my offer stands.”

The Ifrit shook his head. “I’m not even sure I can be freed, now. Defeating me simply means I return to the talisman to heal. Breaking it... might destroy me completely. Even I do not crave non-existence.”

“What about summoning you out, then breaking it? You wouldn’t be able to return at that point.”

“I do not know. My essence is within, you would have to ask a sorcerer.”

“I guess I will, once I get it away from... what did you say your name was, again?”

Both looked over at the pirate. “She plans to... to hurt me and take the talisman,” he said, getting up but with it still gripped tightly in one hand. “Defend me, demon!”

The demon sighed, yanking his sword back out of the deck. “I suppose I must.”

“And I must defeat you, and take that talisman before it falls into even worse hands than his. You’re sure you won’t die if slain?”

“You think it shall be so easy?” he asked, blade igniting again. “I feel your power but mine is also not to be trifled with. Do not get above yourself, little human!”

“Fair enough,” remarked Susan, raising a hand. “Blade.”

Her *Crystal Sword* appeared, the one damage to her hand hardly seeming to matter now, as she grew in size to match the Ifrit as *Avatar of War* once again took hold of her.

The crew members scattered again, terrified. Even the pirate looked about ready to faint away, slumping down again and trying to escape notice by the two towering figures that now began slowly circling each other.

“I knew I felt fire in you,” said the Ifrit. “We are almost kin, you and I, did you not feel it? Both, I think, called into a service we didn’t ask for, but are now powerless to escape.”

Susan had to admit he had a point. *All I wanted to do was find my father. But now*

I have to travel all these worlds and look for Luna, fighting The Darkness every step of the way. It's fine, but what if I never find her? When do I give up? When do I put my own needs above hers?

Now you're thinking like you should, remarked The Darkness. *I certainly won't berate you if you decide to give up.*

Now I know I'm making the right choice. Now be quiet, I have an Ifrit to beat up. Fine, fine.

The two continued to circle, Susan holding her action to see what the demon would do. She had her back to the boxes when Illina suddenly screamed, and Susan whirled. One of the boxes she was hiding behind was barreling straight towards her! She made a *Martial Arts* check with her left hand, getting maximum. However, she knew that was not enough and the box was going to slam into her.

I declare the use of card four, I Don't Think So! she hastily thought, realizing suddenly she had two cards to work with. This forced reality into a new configuration, making the demon make his *Telekinesis* check again. This time he got less, and Susan's mauled fist slammed into the box, doing twenty one damage to the crate. As the crate had a *DC* of only 18, it smashed to pieces, and Illina flinched away from the debris. This also caused the contents of the crate, various bits of cloth and bottles of perfume, to go spilling out and smash against her armor. This didn't hurt, but getting herself untangled from it all cost her precious *segments*.

It seemed she was still going next, and took a swing at the demon with her blade, fully realizing this thing was probably immune to the fire. But it wasn't immune to being chopped to bits, if she could hit him.

She didn't.

He sailed over her strike, flipping over and landing amid the boxes that still partially hid Illina. She screamed again.

"What's this little morsel?" the demon asked, reaching for her. With nowhere to go, he easily plucked her up and grabbed her in a beefy arm, holding his blade to her throat. Illina went stiff, terrified.

"Don't you dare," growled Susan, wishing now she had saved before the pirates had come over. *But you didn't expect anything but pirates, did you, Susan?* she berated herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

In the timeless space between actions, Susan considered her options. The demon had just acted, seemingly twice, dodging and then scooping up Illina. As she was *Accelerated* this demon was either very quick, or spending XP for extra actions. So she should get the next action, because he had just gone. *I could use Transposition, but he'd just grab her up again. Immobilize is out, I don't want him holding onto her tighter. Fire magic won't work, I hate to knock her out too with Elemental Burst: Knockout, and even Dazzled the slightest movement of his hand will chop her head off! Don't know how smart he is, trying Hypnotic Pattern might spook him too, that's seven segments, or a pretty hefty penalty. I have no ideas...*

"This is between you and me," she said to him. "Don't lower yourself by taking hostages." She held her action to see what he would do, hoping he might take the bait.

"It's a fight, anything goes if you want to win. Now, the morsel and I are going to take a little trip, okay? Servants of fire, I summon thee!" As he said the last, he rose into

the air again, taking his free movement as part of another action.

What?

Beside Susan, two creatures, seemingly made of fire, appeared, and made a grab for her. They were as big as she was, and grinned in a most distressing manner as they lunged for her. She wasn't sure what capabilities these new creatures had, so she dodged out of the way, away from both of them. Thanks to *Acceleration* she managed it, and the two closed around nothing but empty air. Susan raised her sword as they turned their heads towards her.

She swung, not doing a called shot, and getting an eighteen (her maximum for that roll). The one she swung against deftly dodged, so she swung again. Again her opponent deftly weaved out of the way, letting her hit nothing but air.

She also got pounded on from above, the Ifrit was shooting fire at her out of his sword. This of course didn't hurt her in the slightest, but did do sixteen damage to the deck beneath her feet in a circle around her. This was just enough, (and Susan was pretty heavy at the moment, being +1 size herself) that she went crashing into the deck below.

The Ifrit laughed uproariously at this.

Susan, meanwhile, made her *Martial Arts* check to stand in one action, and then made a *Jumping* check to get back up on deck. She easily cleared the hole and brought her sword up again.

Against a dozen or more of the creatures.

Oh come on! She was about to activate her *Slash-All Materia* with energy, but then realized the demon would be hit too. *And if I accidentally take him out, Illina will fall from wherever she is right now, and even with Acceleration, do I want to take the chance I can't catch her? She probably wouldn't die instantly even if she hit her head, but how can I risk it? I don't have any skill at Catching.*

She raised her sword, about to swing at the nearest fire creature when she suddenly made a *Perception Check*, getting a seventeen. She noticed that only two of the creatures had health information above their heads.

So either they called a bunch of boss level monsters, or this is some kind of trick to throw me off. Well, two can play at that game, right?

"Dazzle!" she cast instead of swinging, targeting the two "real" ones she saw.

One staggered, one did not. She made a *LUCK Check*, getting a twenty five, and sure enough the one controlling the *Illusions* was the one that failed to resist. It went slack, and the other monsters vanished.

Score one for the good guys.

Susan darted forward, knowing this was her best chance to take it out, and did a called shot to the body of the thing. She plunged her sword into it, but somehow, impossibly, it managed to dodge. (Even without the called shot, ties go to the defender!)

With a yell of frustration, Susan used her *Off Hand* to punch the thing, not caring it did slightly less damage.

You would think a sword would do massive amounts of damage, but no, hitting this thing with my fist is 96% the same as hitting it with the sword. I guess it's a TR

thing, the sword still has a higher OTR than my fist.

She connected and did twenty three... non-lethal damage to it. It looked at her as if to say "is that all you've got?"

She could have screamed in frustration. *Right, that's why the sword. The OTR increase.*

The other creature now moved, trying to get behind her in some kind of grab.

Susan, realizing this is what the thing was going for, let it. It touched her.

This brought her back to her action, and the two made opposed *Wrestling* checks to see who would be controlling who.

It was thirty two to forty two, and Susan was down to less than half energy. As Susan got to decide what she wanted to do with the creature, she chose throwing him overboard, figuring that would give her some breathing room.

The creature went sailing over the side of the ship, and a few seconds later, plunked into the water below.

At least it can't fly as well.

"And now for you," she said, somewhat mollified. She did another called shot to the body, swinging two handed and putting energy into COOrdination. This did twenty six damage to the creature, biting in and sticking, even as the thing tried to pull away. Susan could see the thing had thirty two health to lose before dropping, and figured she could easily do another six damage on her next action.

If she hadn't needed to blast fire up at the demon, who was again trying to at least drop her down to the lower deck by shooting fire with his sword. She didn't even bother putting extra energy in, just knocked his fire aside with her own, while careful to avoid hitting him and put Illina in danger. (She got an eleven on *Magic Combat* to perform this maneuver.)

With that she turned her attention back to the creature. Not even bothering to put her other hand back on the blade, she ripped it through the creature, tearing it in half and making it disappear.

"I still have your little friend!" the demon called down to her as she looked around for him. Oddly, Illina wasn't struggling anymore, and seemed frozen in his arm. The blade was once again against her neck.

"Not for long," Susan muttered, and prepared to cast. She knew magical energy would surround Illina, making the already jumpy demon probably slice her head off, so she cast *Transposition* instantly, figuring her bonus from *Acceleration* and energy would make up any difference. She got a twenty one, and found herself in the position Illina had been in, with her safely on the ground. She made a STRength check to burst free, getting a thirty four and turning in mid-air to chop into the demon. The surprised demon tried to parry, but the blades just touched, and Susan drew a deep slash across the Ifrit's body.

Of course, this meant she was now falling, but that was easily taken care of; she cast *Flight* as her next action, catching herself in mid-air, and spinning back to the demon. It was badly hurt, sword up in a guard position.

"He's getting away you know," it said, pointing down with a finger.

Probably a trick, but can he really hurt me? She glanced over, then did a double take- the pirate ship was in fact pulling away from the Laughing Gull! *He must have turned tail and ran while I was distracted fighting the creatures!* "You've got to be kidding

me!” she screamed to no one in particular, and tried to estimate how far away it was with another *Magic Combat* check. She was off by eight meters, even if she didn’t know it, but that was still enough to tell her she was out of range of M distance spells at this point. At least, if she didn’t spend most of her remaining energy to pump up her rating in the skill, at least.

“Stay here,” she growled, figuring she was fast enough to get there and back before he could really go anywhere. He looked pretty badly hurt, after all.

She swooped down with a speed of seventy, taking six segments to get there and wonder how she could stop a freaking ship that size from going anywhere.

It came to her fairly easily. *Take out the thing that makes it go.*

“*Combust!*” she cast, figuring that without putting any energy in, she could get 3 meters across on the sail per casting. With her bonus to STRength checks (which is what Mars is, after all) she cast it simultaneously twice each on the smaller sails, three times on the larger, for a total penalty of eight. She rolled maximum, working out to be a thirty seven, and the sails burst into flames in multiple places. A few sword slashes later, and the burning, tattered remains of the sails fluttered to the deck.

Now to get back and finish off my demon buddy.

Susan sped back, then hung in front of the creature, stunned. It was completely healed.

“Ready for the next go around?” it asked, bringing its sword up. “Nice work on the sails, by the way. Burning them like that? I approve.”

“Just- Just shut up! You think I wanted to do that?”

It looked Susan over. “Hard to say under all that armor, but you seemed to be having a good time doing it, yes.”

I agree, you were doing a lot of shouting and carrying on while you were slashing those ropes that held them up.

“Both of you shut up!” Susan yelled, lunging for the demon.

Their swords clashed together, both pushing against each other in the air. “Uh, there’s only us two here, are you feeling all right?”

I am rattled. Calm down, Susan, you can still take him.

“*Dazzle!*”

The demon flinched, but the spell bounced off his RESolve check.

How much energy does this demon have to spend? Wait, energy? She made an off hand attack, grabbing his arm.

“*Energy Drain!*”

Unfortunately, that didn’t work either, as the demon shrugged it off as well. Susan now had only fifteen energy left, and was getting somewhat desperate.

“Now you will see why we ifrit are so feared!” he cried, and was suddenly one size larger.

Susan held on, crying “*Mimic,*” the trigger word for her *Emulate Materia*. She also got one size bigger, keeping them even.

“And now I see why I feared you so much,” he remarked, throwing her off. “How in Hell did you do that? It felt exactly like what I just did, not magic.” In reality, Susan

allowed herself to let go, not even making a check to hang on. She floated back, knowing that, as he had just done something actively it would be several segments before he would act again.

Have to end it quickly, before I'm out of energy and helpless!

She started casting, putting maximum energy into her spell, leaving her with five that she got back from *Energy Boost*.

"What are you up to?" asked the demon, as a magical circle appeared underneath them. "Whatever it is, I'll stop you!" He swung, aiming to decapitate her, and she simply stood her ground, casting.

He did a raw thirty seven damage to her, divided by fourteen for her *Giant's Soul*, then again by three for being a plus two size modifier at the moment. That left him doing one damage... to her armor.

Susan finished casting, getting a twenty nine against his REASON check of nineteen. He went slack, floating in mid air, with the sword held loosely by his side.

Should have just done that first. Can't spend energy on REASON checks!

Yeah, why didn't you just do that first?

Didn't I tell you to be quiet?

High in the air, Susan breathed a sigh of relief as the demon was held fast by her spell of *Hypnotic Pattern*. She made a mental note to look into spells that were resisted by things that enemies couldn't put energy into, especially if this world was going to throw things like this at her. She could still feel heat and power coming from this thing, and it had no doubt been throwing energy around like crazy, just as she had, to avoid her attacks and spells. Plus there was that whole healing itself thing, *that must have taken some energy, right?*

She debated for a second if she should drain the demon dry of energy or just go after the talisman held by the pirate captain below. She had only five energy left, after all, and with the loss of the sails the ship wasn't exactly going anywhere. But there was the demon's feelings to consider, it might be more agreeable if it passed into her service without the memory of being destroyed in that manner. It seemed bound by the talisman to serve, but how hard it actually had to fight was probably not magically enforced, and she would rather have it somewhat willing than completely resentful of her.

And so she left the *Pattern* going and flew back to the pirate ship, where they were trying to put out the flames from where the burning sail had fallen. The captain wasn't immediately visible, but she did notice several people in the water trying to catch up to the ship and with a sigh went to go pick them up. With her increased STLength she was easily able to ferry them to the deck, where one by one she unceremoniously dumped them, then went back to fetch another. When she finally had them all out of the water she hovered above them, fiery blade in hand.

"Where's the captain?" she boomed, singling one man out with her sword. "I've just saved the lives of most of his crew. Bring me the talisman or I'll start putting you back out there. Well? Which is more important to you? That talisman or your worthless lives?"

Oddly, they seemed to be discussing it. There were many furtive glances over to the ball of flickering light that held the demon immobile, and finally they went off in search of their superior. He was hauled, protesting the entire way, up to the deck where he was shoved and fell over.

"The talisman," Susan demanded, holding out her left hand. "As you can see, I've bested your little pet, and by rights you did try plundering the vessel I was protecting." *I got to say the word 'plundering!' It's a good day after all.* "I think I can reasonably demand the talisman in recompense. It's a better deal than you would get in front of a..." *what would they use here?* "Magistrate?"

"Get her, get her!" screamed the captain, trying to back away on all fours.

"Are you nuts?" was the general sentiment shared by his crew, and they made a grab for him to try and get the talisman away from him.

I suppose I could use Retrieval and just grab it, but I would really like to hold onto that five energy I have left.

Susan watched in frustration as the men fell all over themselves to try and get

the Talisman away from the captain, and finally decided she'd had enough. Hand still outstretched, she began to envision the mystical symbols that would make up the *Retrieval* spell. She had in mind the talisman, that she could see being tugged back and forth by the captain and two of his men. What she really wanted to do was go down there, start swinging, and if a couple died, who cared? Or something more dramatic and showy than it just vanishing. If only she could just make it leap out of their hands and fly towards her! Her ears were ringing, and that muttering voice in her head suddenly swelled as the amulet *really* was ripped out of their hands and flew towards her!

She made a *Catching* check untrained, getting a 7 (one from max) and the golden necklace almost seemed to magnetically guide itself into her waiting hand. She was so surprised at what had happened she nearly dropped it. She could *feel* it, somehow, not with *Spirit Sense* or *Dimension Sense* or anything like that, but through the muttering that had offered her power. Ironically, she also was surprised to find she now had six energy, not five, and looked down at the astonished faces of those below her.

"I think that will be enough of that," she tried to say, but it came out rather more shaky and surprised than she had intended. She cleared her throat, putting her arm down at her side. "Do you have enough spare material to make new sails? I would not becalm even a vessel such as this one." *Becalm now, it's like a nautical paradise around here, verbally.*

Her brain started singing a messed up fusion of *Amish Paradise* and nautical terms, but she shushed it.*

The men below her now fell over themselves assuring her they would be fine, and to please leave them alone, and go far, far away. The captain was sobbing and demanding his talisman back, and Susan figured unless he got his act together, there might be the *Mutiny* card played on this boat before the night was through, and a new captain would rise.

This wasn't her concern, and she nodded a farewell to the men and went back to see about her new demonic 'ally.'

Hanging in midair, she looked the demon over, wondering what to do now. *I should now be the demon's master, right? I hold the talisman, though it might be a safety feature that once he's out, he regards the person that had it when he came out as his master even if the talisman changes hands. Of course, couldn't I order him back into the crystal? He wouldn't have to make a check for that, right? I'll try that, then if it doesn't work I'll drain some energy in case he gets uppity, then release him and see what he says.*

"Demon... no, Fearghus the Ifrit, by this talisman I command you! Return to the crystal at once! Pleasant dreams?"

The demon shimmered and seemed to break apart into energy sparkles that were sucked into the stone, which finally stopped glowing.

Ah, excellent. Susan stopped maintaining the *Pattern* and touched down on the deck of the Laughing Gull, putting her sword away and having all her spells vanish. What she saw concerned her- The crew was clustered around Illina, looking worried.

"She won't move!" insisted the captain when she got close. "We didn't dare touch her, for fear of becoming like her ourselves. But we tried to wake her up, honestly we

did!"

"You did the right thing, captain," she soothed. "Let me take a look."

He seemed quite relieved and shouted for everyone to make way. Susan looked her over, then walked around her.

"Susan," said Illina, making her jump.

"Illina! You scared me. Are you okay? Why can't you move?"

"I don't know," she said pitifully, "is that demon gone?"

"Safely sealed," she said, holding the talisman up. "And it knows I can beat it, so it won't cause trouble. What happened to you?"

"He picked me up, then I was trying to get away and he said 'stop squirming' and touched me. I couldn't move after that. I was afraid to speak to the crew..." Tears were freely flowing down her face now.

"Oh, don't cry, we'll have you moving again in just a moment," she soothed, wiping Illina's face with a bit of cloth she found flapping in the breeze from the box attack earlier. "I'm just going to feel out a few things, see what I can tell about this. If needed, I'll try commanding the demon to tell me what he did. I would, of course, rather not have to resort to such things. Maybe our friend Sativola can help, too. Could someone go get her?" She looked behind her, but most seemed confused. "The witch, can someone bring the witch here?"

They all nodded, understanding, and someone rushed off to bring her.

Susan, meanwhile, tried sensing her out. *Magic Sense* at a ten gave her nothing, and *Spirit Sense* at a thirteen also just told her Illina's energy was far lower than hers, (higher at the moment of course) but that nothing was amiss. She scratched her head. *Some kind of paralyzation that will wear off? Some kind of technique to relax her muscles that doesn't leave a signature after it activates? I suppose I could use Liberty, but that's grade ten! Actually, I wonder...*

Susan got the knife out and held it up to Illina, but that didn't help either.

Magic, magic... what magic can I use to get this girl moving again?

It didn't help that Susan was somewhat distracted by the murmuring of the voice in her head, that seemed to have gotten stronger, and the odd sensations she was getting of "seeing the space between things" that she couldn't have explained to someone if she tried.

Is that you? she demanded of The Darkness. *Because it sounds like you, and if this is some new trick you're trying...*

Who, me? I don't need tricks, Susan, you know that. I only need you to be yourself. Proud. Angry. Vengeful, and powerful. Those are the moments I slip in and make you mine, just a little bit more. All this holding back you're doing, sticking to physical attacks of all things, do you really think they'll save you from me? We'll always be together, you and I, and I'll never get tired of corrupting you.

Better watch out though, maybe I'll be the one corrupting you someday.

The Darkness chuckled at that, but said no more.

By that time Sativola and Sparkle arrived, demanding to know what was happening. Susan filled them in, and both took a look over Illina.

"But I'm no Demonologist," cautioned Sativola. "I don't know what they can and can't do. Heck, you've proven to me in just the last two days I don't even know all that I

can do!”

“Please try,” asked Susan, putting a hand on her arm. “You know this world better than I do, and you have senses I don’t.”

Sativola nodded, then looked back at Illina. “You’re terrified, aren’t you? Don’t worry, we’re all doing the best we can to make you better, okay? Be brave for Susan and me, okay?”

“Okay,” Illina said pitifully.

“Between you and me,” Susan whispered to Sparkle as Sativola looked her over, “I’m pretty tapped out, energy wise. I might have one more strong spell in me, but without draining some energy from the crew, or resting, I’m out.”

“That’s not like you! That demon really pushed you, didn’t it?” Susan nodded sadly. “Well, my ratings are nearly as good in *Theory* and *Scripture*, so with you assisting, I bet I could read over whatever and try it.”

“And I do still have a *Lucky Break* card, I could use it and hope something happens to negate this.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They looked through the book as Sativola sat cross legged in front of Illina, eyes closed. The two discussed various spells, and Susan got excited while reading over a Uranus spell referenced by the Mercury spell of *Paralysis*.

“Maybe we don’t need the grade ten spell after all!” announced Susan. “The spell of *Mobility* will cancel out any and all forms of Paralysis, both physical and magical. And she seems paralyzed to you, right? Let’s read it over!”

As they did, Sativola’s eyes suddenly snapped open, and she reached for Illina, making a grabbing motion on her chest. “Ah ha!” she announced, pulling something invisible off, and Illina collapsed into a heap.

“You did it!” exclaimed Susan, getting up and going over to them both. “Illina, are you all right?”

“I’ll be okay. What was it?” She was flexing her fingers experimentally.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Sativola. “I felt something there, and I grabbed it off of you, but whatever it was it’s gone now. I couldn’t hold onto it.”

“She’ll be okay?” asked one of the sailors, who had been watching them intently.

Susan helped her up, and Illina did some stretches. “I’m okay!”

“Hey everyone, she’s going to be okay!” he shouted, and the cry was taken up by everyone along the ship.

“Seems you’ve made some friends here,” Susan said with a sly smile, bumping her with an elbow.

At this point, the passengers started making their way on deck, and asking what happened. The sailors told an only slightly exaggerated story of Susan’s heroineism, and she was thanked many times for driving the pirates off. The kids went back to playing, and the pirate ship slowly slipped out of sight as the Laughing Gull’s sails were furled and once again caught the wind.

The captain was the last to approach Susan.

"I have to thank you for saving my vessel," he said. "I've never seen a wizard fight like that, I mean I've heard stories of what magic can do, but never- anyway. Here." He handed Susan a jingling pouch, and she hesitantly took it. "Please," he said, pushing it on her. "It's the least I can do, I would have lost far more if that gang had their way. Possibly even my life, trying to defend my ship. But you, dying never even crossed your mind, did it?"

"Not really," admitted Susan.

"Well, you do things strangely, I won't say you don't. But if those are the results, I say you keep on doing them." He looked embarrassed. "I don't suppose you'd consider sticking around, getting to know an old sea dog, would you? I've always wanted to sail other places than just the coast, and with you by my side, think of the places we could go! We could even become pirate hunters, make the sea safe for all honest tradesman! You and me, sailing together, the entire world our port of call." He lowered his voice, and shuffled closer. "I wouldn't begrudge you another kind of reward, in my bed tonight. Be better than sharing with that witch and the girl, am I right?" He didn't even have the decency to look even somewhat bashful when saying this last, but instead gave her a wide grin and a wink. Susan barely avoided rolling her eyes.

No, captain, I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong.

But instead she said, "A fine offer, but I'm not called Susan the Wanderer for nothing, captain. And my wandering isn't done on any one ship. Besides, she was taken by the demon, she may yet have nightmares. Best I stay with Illina, make sure she sleeps well."

"Oh, yes, that's most likely for the best. Well, if you change your mind... That is to say, the offer's open... I'll just be about my duties then." He turned and shouted something meaningless to the men, and Susan wondered if she had just gotten her first marriage proposal.

Should I be relieved to know that men, even those in other dimensions, are consistent in wanting only one thing?

Oh, like you wouldn't want that thing from Miss Sparkling Eyes over there, chided The Darkness. If there was even the slightest chance she would give it to you.

That's different.

Oh? How so?

It... it just is, that's all.

That night, Susan demonstrated floating things around for Sativola, who said she was definitely using Warlocky. She seemed very concerned about it, too. Sparkle did, as well.

"You get an energy every *turn* you use that power?" she asked. "I'm sure that doesn't have any sort of drawbacks."

"Can you use it?" Susan asked her. "Listen for some kind of voice, or mutter in the back of your head. That seems to be where this energy is coming from."

"You mentioned that before, when we first arrived. I still don't hear anything."

"So it's not the *Adaptive Skill*, letting us use that kind of magic that's here?"

"I don't know what *Adaptive Skill* gives us yet. Your father always had to sort of figure it out by trial and error, if it wasn't obvious because people were doing something he'd never seen done before."

“Super.”

“I’d suggest not using that power at all, if you can help it,” cautioned Sativola. “Warlocks come to a bad end on this world, and even if you’re here for only a short time, using it a lot could trigger the Calling.”

“I can see why they call it that. If this voice in my head gets worse, I could see it driving me mad and making me do something I wouldn’t normally. Are you sure warlocks are drawn *to* this place and not directly *away* from it? I mean if I was a warlock I would try to make the voice as quiet as possible. That would mean running away from it.”

“I only know what any non-warlock knows. Using too much power leads to using the power unconsciously, which makes them want to use even more power. It isn’t long after that they go flying off towards Aldagmor, and are never heard from again.”

Susan grimaced. “Great, and that’s the very place I need to go in order to investigate warlocks as you-know-who suggested. Does that mean as I get closer, this voice in my head is going to get worse?”

Sativola nodded gravely. “Anyone that goes too close becomes a warlock and is never heard from again. Whole towns disappeared on the night of madness, and that area became a wasteland, ruled by dragons and such.”

“Wonderful. So why me? Why can I hear it and Sparkle can’t? That doesn’t make sense, unless he changed me without telling me before I came here, so I could hear it. That would make investigating it easier, but he’s not Inari, to just smack someone with magic and not tell them about it, right?”

“I couldn’t say,” Sparkle replied. “I don’t know enough about him or his motives. Remember what he is, even you’re an ant from his perspective, as nice as he seems. It could be just an act, and he’ll use you for his own ends- heck, he *is* using you for his own ends! Having you clean these worlds out, instead of doing it himself. He could have done anything to you, and you would never know it.”

“I guess you’re right. Still, I have a ten RESolve, so I should be able to resist using this new ability to any extent. I’ve only used it twice now, that shouldn’t be enough to cause me problems, right?”

Sativola shook her head. “A warlock can expect twenty years of using that power, from the time they’re an apprentice to the time they are as powerful as they can be. If they don’t flaunt it too much, that is.”

“And Susan isn’t one for flaunting, let me tell you!” said Sparkle seriously.

“Not when it can kill me!” she protested. “To look cool, then naturally.”

“Cool?” asked Sativola.

“Never mind.”

Still, it deserves thinking about. What is offering this power, that I can hear it and Sparkle can’t? Why do only some people on this world hear it? Why does getting to be a powerful warlock take negative effort, if using it gives the warlock energy rather than taking it? And why, after a certain amount of time using the power, do warlocks get drawn off and captured, or killed, by whatever is offering the power?

And why does this voice remind me so much of The Darkness?

**Been spending most our lives living in a Nautical Paradise.
Manned the oars once or twice, living in a Nautical Paradise.*

To Grandmother's House We Go

Time: Three Days Later

Place: Port

The next three days passed uneventfully, with Susan and the others going about their business. Susan's main task was to look through her book of magic and find spells that used a stat different than RESolve to resist. She found... fifteen. Of course, some couldn't be resisted because they were cast on oneself or weren't cast on humans, like the spell to allow stone to talk, but nine spells in her original book were resisted by STRength and only six by REASON.

False Image

False Sound

Hypnotic Field

Illusion

Nightmare Vision

False Invocation

And that's it. Come to think about it, the fact that people can just will my magic away seems odd. I mean, here I am, calling upon one of the very forces of nature, akin to calling lightning down out of the sky. If you get hit by lightning, you can't think really hard about how you would rather not be hit by lightning, and the lightning says 'okay, sorry about that' and gets sucked back up into the clouds. But I cast Shrink on someone, and if my 'result' is less than the 'result' they get by wishing really hard not to shrink, they don't. A person who doesn't even know what magic is would spontaneously get the ability to resist the second I cast the spell on them.

Am I, in essence, making them a Paragon for that split second they need to resist? And if so, what does that mean? Anything? I mean I carry my need for XP around with me, and the world provides me opportunity to increase my skills via that XP. Nita remarked on that as well, that I couldn't sit still and had to be doing something, like making spell papers or researching stuff. I thought that was just how I was, but could it be a function of my being a Paragon? I can't use Sparkle as another data point, she's a cat, despite what she says, and is usually napping. She's clearly a Paragon, I've seen her character sheet. But she admitted to being found by my father, and left as my Companion when he left this world. Did she become a Paragon by being put on my character sheet, or was she always one? Where did she really come from? If she was always one, are there other Paragons worlds? Would other Paragons be like me? Or would they lounge around like Nita did, despite the clear danger she was in?

And what about my own Character Sheet? Susan got it out and stared at it. My father could summon his, that much is clear. And Aerith and her friends seemed to know their stats without consulting anything. I mean they went on about "attack values" and "raising their level" and "I got five STRength from that last level," right? Is the world my father came from so very different, that we can use things like this? This separates me from others, rather than letting me get to understand them better. Is that worth how powerful I've become, and how much more powerful I'll get in the future? I couldn't have

been born just for this, right?

Well, anyway. I was thinking about magic, and what I could do if someone gets grabbed like that again. Guess Hypnotic Pattern is about it, and throw lots of energy into it. Most things won't have a REASON above eight, right? Even demons from the lower plains can't be that smart, or they would figure out a way to escape Hell.

Susan got her book of magic out and stared at it. "I want a spell to look at someone else's character sheet, or equivalent!"

"OW!" Susan dropped the book in surprise, it had actually shocked her and fell open onto the deck. "What in the world?" She looked at the page that had been opened to, and her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

This spell cannot be researched because no planet you can cast from deals with the stated request. Sorry, my daughter.

"Dad... you really are inside my book, aren't you?" She gently closed it and hugged it to her chest, thinking about her life and what her fate was going to be if she ever completed this journey she was on.

She didn't even think to wonder what planet *would* deal with the stated request, and what that would mean.

"You'll want to disembark here," said the captain at the end of the third day after the attack. "Follow the road inland, the one going north-east, and you'll reach the town you're headed for in about five days. Maybe more, as you're traveling with the ki- with Illina. There should be places to stop along the way, but you might have to spend a night or two out in the wilderness. Good luck."

"Thank you captain, I'm sure it'll work out just fine."

He snorted. "With the magic at your command, somehow I believe you. I'll be sorry to see you go, both you and your cat. Are you sure I couldn't persuade you to stay?"

Not with a maxed out PERSONALITY and a ten in Persuasion. "Sorry captain, I don't see myself becoming Susan the Captain's Wife anytime soon."

"Does have a nice ring to it, though right?"

Susan laughed and stuck out her hand. "Goodbye, Captain. It was nice sailing with you."

"And you. Thanks again for driving off those pirates. Any time you want to sail, you do it for free aboard the Laughing Gull."

"I'll keep that in mind. You ready, Illina?"

"Yup!" She waved goodbye to all her new friends, made aboard ship, and the group went down the gangplank to the dock.

"Is this where we part?" asked Susan of Sativola.

"Are you nuts? I can bring back what you're shown me so far, it's true. But I have a feeling traveling with you is the opportunity of a lifetime. Until you have to leave this world, I'm with you."

“Very well. Come on, we’ll head through town before we pick up speed, don’t want to upset the locals after all. Though if five days is right, maybe we should stay here the night.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard him, it’s a five day journey right? Not looking forward to it, tell you the truth.” She glanced at Illina.

“Don’t worry so much. We’ll be there tomorrow night at the latest.”

“Huh?”

Susan giggled. “You’ll see.”

Susan asked around, but this town was too small to support a full time Sorcerer, so the group stopped into a local Inn, which didn’t gouge them too much, according to Sativola. Of course everyone in town stared at Susan’s strange clothes, and no one believed she was a wizard. Sativola, of course, looked the part of a witch and lent some air of authenticity to the claim.

“It’s just wizards and witches never travel around together,” she explained at dinner. “Wizards are... how to put this? They think they’re a bit above everybody else?”

“If you meet some you should get on famously,” remarked Sparkle.

“Or they’ll immediately try to kill each other,” giggled Illina.

“Why would we do that?” Susan asked. But she just shrugged.

Sativola went on. “And they don’t consider what we do to be real magic.”

“Of course it is. Anyone with eyes and a bit of *Magic Sense* can tell that.”

“Ah, but wizards don’t sense magic like that. Only we can do that.”

“Weird. But then, from what you said no wizard would stoop to asking a witch for advice about magic.”

“There’s that, and the guild wouldn’t allow it. They consider that skill witchcraft.”

“And kill the wizard practicing two ‘types’ of magic, even though magic is magic.”

She nodded.

Maybe Illina is right, maybe we would immediately try killing each other.

The next morning the group awoke and had breakfast, then made ready to leave the town and make the journey. It wasn’t far outside the town’s borders that Illina was already complaining about having to walk.

“Good thing we’re not walking the whole way then,” Susan said to her with a grin.

“But you didn’t buy any horses...”

“Horses? No, no, they’re good for speed and short distances, but honestly they have to spend a lot of time eating, and they have to stand around to do it. You won’t get much further on a horse than your own two feet. Not if you want the horse to be alive at the end of it, anyway.”

“So will you do something with your magic?”

“Exactly,” she said, beeping her nose. “How would you like to fly?”

“Fly?”

“Yup. It won’t tire you out like walking, and it’s way faster. What do you say?”

“Okay!”

“You got it then. *Flight.*” Susan pushed as much energy into the spell as she

could, as their speed depended on her REFlexes and the rating she had in the skill, and as the magical energy dispersed, she rose into the air. “Just think about it, and you’ll do it,” she explained. *Who needs pixie dust and a happy thought?*

“OH!” Both her new friends tentatively rose into the air, then moved about. “It’s easy!” exclaimed Illina, doing a flip.

“It sure is. Now come on, I’d like to be there before dark, unless you want to sleep out under a bush.”

“No thank you!”

They flew.

With Susan’s magic, their speed was now a 160 vs the 7 it would have been, had she been walking. (Further slowed by Illina’s low stats and short legs, though Susan could have easily carried her. And Sativola, for that matter) The landscape flew by beneath them, though they stayed pretty low to the ground because the ‘road’ was more a worn path than anything constructed by people. Susan didn’t want to lose it, despite causing some concern to people already on the road when they flew by.

“Now I know how warlocks feel,” remarked Sativola. “Flying like this. I couldn’t do it on my own, that’s for sure.”

“I feel sorry for them,” said Illina.

“What, warlocks?” asked Susan.

“No, the people that have to walk.”

“Oh. It is odd, you think wizards could make a permanent teleport point between cities, and just charge per use. Even if the ingredients were hard to find or expensive, they would beat ships and have a constant income.”

Sativola shook her head. “But what if soldiers wanted to use them? That comes too close to using magic for political purposes. So even if they could, I bet they wouldn’t, just on the off chance that happens.”

“Man, so many rules, no wonder...” *these places look so run down, despite a general availability of magic.*

Not long later, the trio and one cat set down in the Village of Dawn. It, like the port town, featured neglected buildings, dirt roads, and lots of farmland at the outskirts.

“Now we just have to find your grandparents,” Susan remarked, looking around.

“Yeah,” said Illina sadly.

“Guess we’ll just ask around. Want to split up?”

“Probably best,” answered Sativola. “Who should I ask for, anyway?”

“What?” Susan stared at her, but then realized she couldn’t exactly ask for Illina the Quick’s grandparents and be understood. “Oh, no, I get it. I never did ask you their names, did I?”

“No, you didn’t,” answered Illina, somewhat more sadly.

Susan waited.

“Oh dear,” remarked Sativola, picking up on it more easily.

“What? Don’t tell me...”

“I don’t know their names!” wailed Illina, starting to cry. “Mom might have told me, but I don’t remember. I thought I would remember before we got here but I didn’t and

now you'll all hate me and leave me here to be homeless and-

"You told me," she sighed, taking Illina into a hug. "Come on now, don't cry. My magic has gotten us this far, right? I can just ask it what their name are, or who is best to ask. We know they're here, and the town isn't that big, right? It'll be fine."

"Okay," she sniffled.

One quick *Question* later and the group knew the person they were looking for was named Yseult the Closed Minded which Susan thought might be a bad omen. "Now we just have to find the right person to ask." *Though in a town this small, wouldn't everyone know everyone else?*

"Let's ask at the well, that's a common enough meeting point in a town like this."
Well?

But Susan followed Sativola to near the center of town, and sure enough there were a few ladies standing about talking, supposedly drawing water out of the well they were all leaning on. They looked shocked when Susan came up to them, and looked her up and down.

Ugh, keep forgetting about that. "Good morning!" she said cheerfully, resolved to ignore it. "I wonder if any of you can direct me to the house of Yseult the Closed Minded. This is her granddaughter, and I've just gotten into town, so we need to find her."

"Yseult? Wife of the carpenter? Sure, I can tell you where to go," said one of the women.

"You can? Thanks, that would be great."

So Susan got directions, which she hoped Sparkle was listening to, and went off in the direction the woman pointed to get started.

Sparkle took the lead again, and Susan followed.

"How did you do that?" asked Illina, "More magic?"

"Do what? I just asked where to find her."

"No, understand their funny language."

Susan stopped dead in her tracks. "Wait, they speak a different language here? We didn't travel that far!"

Sativola nodded. "People that travel need to know a bunch of different languages, at least the basics. They're all corruptions of some more common languages from way back when, so people can learn them pretty quickly. But yeah, even I was impressed with how you understood them."

Susan sighed. "Great. She's not even going to be able to talk to them until she learns the local language. It's never easy."

The houses didn't have something sane like numbers, but Susan was sure this was the place because of all the wooden things strewn about. Wood flower boxes, wood gutters going into a wooden rain barrel, that kind of thing.

"You ready for this?" asked Susan.

Illina nodded.

The group went up to the door and knocked.

They waited.

“Must be out,” remarked Sativola.

Susan made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting an eleven. That was enough to tell someone was in the house, or at least not far in that direction, anyway.

“Someone’s in there. Maybe they’re in the middle of something. We’ll wait a few minutes and knock again.”

So the group stood around, feeling a bit silly, and a neighbor came out and headed for them.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“We’re hoping to see Yseult,” Susan explained, pointing to the house with her thumb. “This is her granddaughter, who we’re hoping she’ll take in.”

“Oh dear, that might be a problem. Anyway, she’s gone deaf so you’ll have to go round the back and hope she sees you.” The woman paused. “Uh, she never mentioned a granddaughter.”

“I see. I don’t know anything about that, but hopefully it’ll work out somehow. Thank you for letting us know.”

“Of course dear.” She went back, but glanced at them suspiciously.

So not only does she speak a different language, she was never told her daughter had a daughter, and she’s gone deaf? This should work out really, really, well.

“Can you do anything about deafness?” she asked Sativola.

“That depends on why she went deaf,” she explained. “Some forms I can cure, others I can’t. I can practice that way of *sending* my thoughts, but that might really freak her out.”

“I suppose. Guess we’ll see what happens...”

The three went around the back of the house and waved into the windows to get the woman’s attention. She opened the door, looking confused.

She looked worn, like most people, and Susan couldn’t help but think she looked older than her years. *Is she forty or sixty? People probably have kids early here, so two generations might not be as far apart as they would back on my world.* Her hair was gray, and her face lined, but she got up quickly enough from the sewing she was doing to answer the door.

“Can you hear me?” shouted Susan. The woman continued looking confused. “Of course not.”

The woman pointed, and Susan looked behind her to a large shed looking structure sitting in the back yard.

“I think she wants us to go back there,” ventured Sativola.

“Maybe her husband is back there?”

“Can’t hurt to check it out.”

Susan nodded, and the woman seemed satisfied, and closed the door again. The trio went over to the barn and looked inside. There was a man who, like the woman, was worn before his time. Beard, calloused hands, smelled of wood. He was holding a plane in his hand, and Susan realized she had never actually seen such a thing in person before.

Illina was hiding behind her again.

"Yes?" said the man.

"Sorry to disturb your work, but I believe you had a daughter that moved to Ethshar of the Rocks some time ago?"

"My daughter lives there, yes. What's this about?"

"Just to be clear, that's Rhiannon of Ethshar?"

"Her name is Rhiannon, yes. Really, what is this... no, it can't be." The man dropped his plane, looking at Illina for the first time. "You... are you... you look so like her when she was small!"

"This is your granddaughter," Susan said sadly, knowing Illina wouldn't understand his question. "I have some sad news regarding your daughter."

"She had a child? You're really my daughter's daughter? She never said, never wrote to us even once. Wait, if you're here that can only mean..."

Susan nodded. "I'm afraid she died several days ago. Disease, she died in her sleep. I'm sorry."

"My daughter, is dead? How do you, no, she couldn't be dead. Who are you? Can't be dead." The man seemed a bit dazed, and sat down heavily in a nearby chair.

"My name is Susan. Susan the Wanderer. I found Illina here outside her house crying, and had the body buried. It turned out you were her closest relatives, so we came to see if you would take your granddaughter in. I know this is going to be hard, but we'll need to speak to your wife and decide what we're going to do with Illina."

"Making her understand her daughter is dead... I can't believe it myself. How did you even find us? She was so adamant about never coming back here again, or wanting to see us again. I didn't think she kept any record of where we were, and we came to this village some time ago, after she left home!"

"I found out with magic," she answered simply.

"You hired a wizard, or a Theurgist? I suppose you would have-"

"No. I'm a wizard."

"You?" He looked doubtfully at Susan.

"How about I prove it by curing your wife's deafness, and we can discuss things with her?"

"You can do that?" He seemed impressed, but sobered again "This is all so sudden. Can you even prove anything that you're saying? How do I know this isn't your daughter, and you're trying to get rid of her?"

"I could take you back to Ethshar, you could talk to the Theurgist that prayed for her soul to find the afterlife. Or the city guard, have them show you her now empty house."

"That would take weeks?"

Susan shook her head. "I could have you there in less than a minute."

"What's a 'minute?'"

Do You Believe In Magic?

Place: Inside Illina's Grandparent's house

Time: Moments later

Susan wasn't sure if *Alleviation* would work in this case, because if Yseult's deafness was age related, that spell wouldn't work on it. The much easier to cast and far lower level *Cure Deafness* would though, so Susan quickly read it over (with eighteen and fifteen checks) and cast it.

"Can you hear me now?" she asked, aware that the phrase most often said over cell phones (in desperation because we can communicate with rovers on Mars but can't get a signal across a neighborhood with any kind of real reliability) had a totally different meaning here.

"I can hear you perfectly fine," replied Yseult. "I don't believe it."

"What, that magic could cure deafness?"

"No, that any wizard would work for free. What do you want?"

"As I explained to your husband, I want nothing. Your granddaughter, on the other hand, needs a place to live until she's old enough to be apprenticed to someone, as I understand it."

"Who? Start at the beginning, won't you?"

So Susan and Glifieu (The Handy) explained to the woman that her daughter was dead, and she reacted a bit differently than her husband.

"I don't believe it."

Wow, if there was a person that took Skeptic to an extreme, it would be her.

"As I said to your husband, I can take you back to the very room your daughter died in, and show you my arrival and the removal of her body. We can also talk to the priest- sorry the Theurgist who performed the burial."

"Go on then, let's see this wonder!"

"Very well. *Teleportal.*"

Susan had no trouble opening the hole back to Ethshar of the Rocks, and Yseult grunted and stepped through.

"This could be anywhere!"

Susan sighed. "And I suppose if you stopped any random person on the street and asked where you were, they would probably lie to you."

"They probably would."

"I'm sorry about her," apologized Glifieu. "I believe you. That was magic if I ever saw it."

"Not like I ever saw," muttered Sativola, poking her head out the door. "We're really here, just like that."

"Now for the second part," said Susan, readying *Time Area*. She specified the time just before she and Illina could be seen collecting the body, and the ghostly image of the dead woman appeared in the bed.

"That is our daughter," remarked Glifieu sadly. "Even you can't deny that, Yseult."

"I... well..."

They all watched as a ghostly vision of Susan was seen through the older

Teleportal, walking back into the room and easily picking the body up. She then walked back and the *Teleportal* winked out, so Susan dropped *Time Area* as well. "Satisfied?"

"I am."

"I suppose."

"Shall we go back, or would you like to speak to the Theurgist?" Susan indicated the floating hole in space.

"She really is gone?" asked Yseult.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, she didn't want anything to do with us, I don't see why we should have anything to do with her brat." She turned and walked back through.

Hey, think there was a reason for that? asked the Darkness. *Like maybe these weren't the best parents, and maybe leaving Illina with them will only lead her to turning bitter and hating them too?*

You know, you're probably trying to stir up trouble, but that's actually a good point. "Why did your daughter leave, if I may ask?" she asked Glifieu, who was still looking around.

"What? Oh, can't you guess?" He nodded in the direction of Yseult, who was back sewing like there wasn't the most powerful magic user two meters from her.

"No, I can. That's why I'm asking. I have to do what's best for Illina, and I'm beginning to question if leaving her with you two, no offense, is the best I can do."

He sighed. "I can see your point. Come on, let's talk to her, I'm sure we can work something out."

"They don't want me?" pipped up Illina. "Is that what they're saying?"

"Your grandmother is being a bit difficult," explained Susan. "We're going to see what arrangement can be made."

"I'm sorry!"

"It's not your fault. Come on, let's head back."

"A week's journey, back and forth, in just a step," remarked Sativola as she stepped through again. "I can't get over it."

"I thought I made my position clear," grumped Yseult, once all were back through and the *Teleportal* was shut down again.

"Sadly," Susan said sarcastically, "you only get one half the vote. Your husband seems more inclined than you to take in *his own relative* so you either have to convince him otherwise or allow her to stay. Simple as that."

"I don't change my mind easily, girl."

"Neither do I," Susan said angrily, leaning closer. "And I can just as easily put your deafness back if you turn her away. The cure is part of the deal."

"You wouldn't!" gasped Sativola.

Sparkle nodded, but only the party saw it, the other two weren't paying attention to 'the cat.'

"Now, now," calmed Glifieu, "let's not let our emotions get the better of us. This has all been a bit of a shock, and I know you're grieving for your daughter in your own way. Perhaps we should all just take the day and think about things?"

Hey, what do you think this guy's rating in Persuasion is, living with a woman like

that?

Susan snorted. *Good question.*

Hey, think you'll end up like her when you're ancient? You're both unreasonable women, right?

That brought her up short.

He was staring at the group as if expecting an answer.

"Oh, he wants to maybe revisit the topic tomorrow, when the shock has worn off a bit," Susan translated for the others. Sativola now seemed to understand, and Illina just looked more pitiful.

"That sounds like a good idea," said Sativola. "There's an inn here, right?"

"Yeah, you must have passed it on the way in."

"Why doesn't Illina at least spend the night here, get to know her grandparents? Perhaps when Yseult sees what a nice, polite girl you are, Illina, she'll be more inclined to allow you stay?" Yseult snorted. "We'll stay at the inn, and come this time tomorrow to finalize everything. What do you say?"

"Okay," Illina said pitifully. "But I can't talk to them!"

"So listen. If you really want to be a witch, listening is one of the best skills you can learn. Maybe you can watch your grandfather working, and he can tell you what he's doing. Languages aren't that different, once you get used to them."

"Okay."

Susan turned to the man. "Is it all right if she stays here the night? You should get to know her before you make any final decisions, right?"

"Just keep her out of my way," injected Yseult, to no one's surprise.

"It sounds fine to me. She can have the spare room, we'll get it ready together, how does that sound?" He knelt down and put a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at Susan. "He's asking if you'd like to help him get your room ready?"

"Okay!"

Susan considered a moment, then pulled off the talisman and slipped it over Illina's head. "You protect her for the moment, understand?" It glowed slightly.

"Is that necessary?" asked Sativola.

"Probably not," Susan admitted. "But she's the only one of us without magic of her own yet, so it makes me feel better knowing she has it. Just in case." Her eyes darted to Yseult, who was trying to look past her to see what Illina had been given.

The two went off, and Susan turned back to Yseult. "Do you want your daughter's things?"

"Things? What things? Her house was empty! Probably whoring in the streets, that's where her brat came from."

"It was empty," Susan continued somewhat angrily, "because I already collected everything in it, with magic. If you want her stuff I'll dump it someplace and you can go through it."

"Probably just junk anyway. Sure, go put it somewhere, I don't care."

"Wonderful person," remarked Susan as Sparkle and Sativola left the house.

"We don't know her situation though," cautioned Sativola. "Everyone has a

reason for why they are the way they are.”

“I suppose.”

“Would you really have made her deaf again?”

“I’d like to say no, but knowing me, yes, probably. Her not taking in Illina would have infuriated me, and burning their house down wouldn’t be fair to her grandfather.”

“I... I see.”

“She wouldn’t burn the house down,” chided Sparkle. “Not even you’re that far gone, Susan.”

Yet, put in The Darkness. Pity, really. I always did love that traditional outdoor meat roasting ceremony you people are so fond of. What do you call it? Barbecue?

“So what do two young girls looking for a good time do in a town like this?” asked Susan, walking back towards the inn.

“Try and keep as low a profile as possible?” replied Sativola, holding a palm up.

“What?”

“Not a lot of law enforcement around here, and travelers are easy marks,” she explained.

“Not these three travelers,” scoffed Susan.

“Ah, but they don’t know that. Did you have something in mind?”

“Hard to say, I guess I want to learn more about the place we’re leaving Illina. What kind of people live here? Will she be accepted into the community? Are all these people werewolves or ghouls in disguise? These are all important questions, you know.”

“What are either of those things?”

“Guess not. Hey, what’s this all about?” In front of the inn there was a large board with papers tacked up on it.

“Seems to be some kind of announcement board. News, requests for help, that sort of thing.”

Ah, no newspapers in this time. Wonder if I should help someone invent the printing press? “Wait, requests for help!? Now that’s right up my alley! What have we got, I’ll have this board cleared by dinner time!”

“Is she serious?” she asked Sparkle.

“Usually. She gets a kick out of showing off her magic, so why should being here be any different? I’m going to find a place to nap, you girls have fun.”

The first notice was from a farmer on the outskirts of town that wanted several men to help him dig a new well. After he figured out where to put the new well, that is. Susan figured she could do both, and with Sativola’s help found the right place and wandered around until she found the owner.

“Still looking to have that well dug?” she called over to him.

“Your brothers looking to do some work?” he called back.

“I tell ya,” she remarked to Sativola, “sexism in the workplace. It never ends. Actually I’m a wizard!” she called. “I’ll have you a new well dug before you know it.”

“Wizard?” The man looked her up and down. “I can’t pay a wizard’s prices.”

“I’m only asking what you would pay the men who came to dig. I’ll find the spot for free.”

“You serious?”

“I sure am.”

“Go to it then. Old well is out that way.” He vaguely pointed, and Susan ducked her head in thanks and headed in the direction he pointed.

“What’s the plan?” asked Sativola.

“Don’t suppose you can find water?”

“Water doesn’t have thoughts. But with what you’ve been showing me, who can say? Let’s put it this way, I’ve never tried to before so I have no idea.”

Hey, she’s learning to at least question if something is possible instead of just dismissing that it is. That’s a big step. “Ah well. There’s a spell called *Elemental Discovery*, perfect for finding the largest nearby source of an element. In this case, I’ll cast it for water, and see what I get. In all likelihood the water is just shifted over underground, so we’ll find it and I use my digging spell to get down to it.”

“Oh.”

So she did.

There was another source of water not far from the old well, so Susan cast *Excavate* a few times, not going for width but rather depth. The spell didn’t care what direction the ‘1-cubic meter per Uranus rating’ was, so straight down she went. She cast it twice and went to get the bucket and rope from the old well. The farmer saw her and came over, curious.

“You really did this?” he asked, looking at the neatly placed stack of dirt beside the new hole on his property.

“I really did,” she said, lowering the bucket.

“You going to be okay? That bucket’s pretty large, and it’s heavy when it’s full.”

“Not to worry.”

She brought up a bucket full of water.

“Well I’ll be! And you really don’t want any more than I would have paid a couple of men to do that?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. Last wizard who passed through here wanted way more than I could afford, but as long as you’re happy...” He handed her some coins.

“I’m not done yet,” she protested.

“What, it’s water, isn’t it?”

“What about the wall?”

“What *about* the wall? You aren’t going to move that too, are you?”

“I can’t just leave it a hole in the ground. That’s not a well, that’s an accident waiting to happen. There are kids running all over town, what if some of them came back here?”

She walked back over to the old well. “It’s just bricks stacked up around the hole, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Super.” One casting of *Telekenisis* later, and the whole thing floated over to its new home. *Luckily, this counts as one object as it’s been all fused together. I don’t have to target each individual brick.* Then she targeted the pile of dirt with *Elemental*

Sculpting (a grade two spell to control an element) and made it slither itself into the old hole, closing it up at least part way.

“You’re a warlock!”

“Who says I am? And would it be a problem if I was?”

“But... No, I mean... Ah, who cares? Long as the job’s done, I don’t care what kind of magic you’re using. You’ve saved me a lot of work, I’ll add a bit more copper. Here you go.”

“Thank you kindly.”

The next job found Susan, as she heard a crash on the way back to the job board, followed by some choice swear words. She jogged over to find a cart laden with flat stones that had a rather obviously broken rear wheel. A man with a younger boy were standing there, and the man was obviously in some distress. The younger man looked resigned, probably thinking how they were going to have to unload all the stones, prop up the wagon, repair the wheel, and then put all the stone back. Others in the town were gathering to see what the commotion was.

“Seems you have a busted wheel,” remarked Susan.

“No, you think so?” groused the man, throwing his hat down. “And I have to get this stone in by tonight, too!”

Susan looked the cart over, the stone was pretty well packed so it didn’t seem any had broken. At least, not on the top.

“What say I fix it for you?”

“You the town fool, in those clothes? Get away from here!”

“You don’t seem all that polite,” she remarked, easily hefting the corner of the wagon into the right position. “Especially to a person offering to help you out. Why is that?”

“By the gods!” shouted the man, taking a step back.

“Yes, yes. Bow down and all that. *Repair!*” The wheel was fine again, and Susan gently set it down, making sure it would hold. “There, see? Not worth carrying on about, now was it?”

“A warlock! Well, I’m not paying you for it. For all I know you caused the wheel to break in the first place! You’re looking to scam me out of the job fixing the wheel, yeah, that’s it!”

“That’s fine, I wasn’t going to charge you in the first place! I just thought doing a good deed would be appreciated. Guess I was wrong.”

“Master, you said yourself if that wheel made it all the way, it would be a miracle.”

“You shut your mouth boy!”

“I just don’t think it’s wise to upset a warlock. Especially not one that can lift that much weight, she could explode your head from there.”

The man stiffened, looking over at Susan who was lifting four or five of the stones at once, checking to see if any lower down were cracked. She smiled at him, looking out the corner of his eyes. The man reached for his pouch. “How much?”

“Let’s get this delivered first,” she said, waving him off. “I think some of the lower ones *are* cracked, or at least chipped. If you want them repaired too I’ll come along. And don’t worry, my rates are fair, especially when you consider the cost of hauling new stones around to replace the busted ones if I don’t come with. Figure in the replacement

cost, unsatisfied client, another day of work... Need I go on?"

The man's eye twitched, but he said that was fine, and climbed up into the seat again.

In the end, Susan had to cast *Repair* a couple of times, and in addition to a silver coin, paid by the wealthy man having the stones set into his back yard as a kind of patio, she took some energy from everyone there to replenish her supply. They were quite hesitant to have it done, but after Sativola offered while they watched, they agreed.

In the end Susan spent the day going about town and cleaning off the job board. It seemed there was no shortage of work to do, at least dirty jobs that no one in their right mind would actually want to do for the amount of coin the people with the jobs were offering to pay. But Susan didn't care, she used her magic to do most of the work, and her STRENGTH took care of the rest. From each person she took some coin and some energy, so even after hours of work she still had a reasonable amount. And a bulging pouch of copper and silver, even a few gold pieces too.

"You really do like showing off," Sativola said as they came back to the inn after the last job.

"I like helping people," Susan corrected. "If that means I get to show off a little, so be it. I have an amazing amount of magic at my command, and I'm good at it. Well, slightly above average anyway. And these people look like they need all the help they can get. Plus I have the coin of the realm now, which can't be a bad thing. Would you have preferred to just sit around, bored all day? This way I got to meet the townsfolk, did some good, made some money, and used my magic to help people. It's win-win-win."

"I guess you're right about that. Hey, do you feel that?"

"Feel what- Earthquake!"

In fact the ground was shaking, and nearby kids were scrambling back to their houses in terror.

"What's an earthquake?"

"What's an- this! Don't you have earthquakes, either? You know, tectonic plate movements?"

"The what? This is magic, the earth never shakes like this!"

"Magic? That's crazy, why would someone-" Susan did a *Magic Sense* as she said this, getting an eleven, and both girls looked in the same direction. "You're right. We better get over there!"

Susan and Sativola skidded to a halt in front of a growing hill, and Sparkle ran up behind them.

"You're not doing this for some bizarre reason, are you?" she queried.

"No!"

"Oh. Then you better be ready for trouble!"

"I'll make it double!"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

“Quiet!” She laughed as she said it though.

“Do you hear music? Like a flute playing or something?”

“No, just rumbling.”

“Wait, it’s opening!” yelled Sativola, and she was right. From the mound an opening started to form, and several figures stepped from the very earth. Each wore a fine robe and carried a staff. One carried two, probably for the one currently playing the flute. Another carried no staff, but instead a fine golden goblet, and she had a knife poised ready to dip into it. In fact all had knives out, and Susan immediately knew that these eight people were wizards.

The woman in front stopped playing and the ground stopped shaking, the small hill also melting back into the ground without a trace. She shoved the flute into her sleeve, grabbed her knife and staff from the man next to her and shouted to the assembled crowd now gaping at the assemblage of wizards.

“What’s going on around here!?”

Wizard Battle- Not so Much

Place: About the center of town

Time: Just then

I'll tell you what's going on, said The Darkness. A bunch of wizards just popped out the earth and started demanding to know what was going on!

Susan giggled, but didn't shout this out despite her desire to.

Too bad, it would have been hilarious. Anyway, these people seem a bit perturbed for some reason. You don't think it has anything to do with you, do you?

I don't see why it would...

No? You think the wizard's guild, most powerful group of magic users in the entire world, wouldn't take issue to some young thing like yourself flinging the gods only know what sort of magic about all over the place?

They aren't witches, how would they know?

You think they can't employ witches? Or that they don't have scrying spells going to make sure another Night of Madness isn't happening under their noses?

Night of- oh, you mean when warlocks came into the world and everybody went nuts overnight.

Yeah, that one. They take a dim view of competing magic here, Sativola told you as much. Wonder if you'll have to fight them! That would be a nice change of pace from all this goody-goody stuff you've been doing all day.

Good point. Not that any magical battle wouldn't be rather one sided, even with that many 'wizards' on their side. But I've not gotten to use this yet, and I paid enough for it, so why not? "Negation," Susan said, touching her Wizard Bracelet. The spell of Magic Domination took hold, and now Susan's magic was the only magic that could work anywhere around her.

An elderly man hobbled up to the assembled group and started bowing and scraping before the assembled wizards.

"Mighty wizards!" he began. "So honored to have you in our humble village. I'm the mayor, we certainly don't want any trouble here. You asked what was going on? I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean. Please, come to my house and we can discuss things as you desire."

Wow, he's really afraid of them. The wizard's guild really does throw its weight around, doesn't it? Even in a podunk down like this, the mayer is falling all over himself to try and placate them.

"No, we must discover the source of what we have come to find before it gets away. All of you, stay where you are!" shouted the woman in front. "Line up. We're looking for someone in foreign clothes..." She trailed away as her eyes met Susan's. "You!" she shouted, pointing with her dagger. "Come forward!" The crowd parted.

Odd thing to wave about, a tiny dagger like that. Wonder if it's the local equivalent to a wand?

"Me?" Susan said, trying to act innocent. "What would the great and powerful Trixie, I mean, wizard's guild, want with little old me?"

"Don't play stupid!" snapped the woman. "Our magics told us about the incredibly

powerful source of magic that appeared in Ethshar of the Rocks several days ago. It then moved about the city, sailed up the coast, then made it here in an hour. We traced it to a young girl in strange clothes, and you fit the bill. Who are you?"

"Susan The Wanderer, at your service, of course, mighty wizard." She made a mocking bow.

"I know of no Susan the Wanderer. Your magic is not wizardry, or warlocky, or witchcraft. There was some sorcery near you, but that seems to have vanished. Yet your magic resembles all three of these, something expressly forbidden by the guild! Explain yourself!"

"I don't see why I should," countered Susan. "Who are you, to demand explanations from me? You want to know me? Fine, speak to the people my magic has helped in this town. They'll tell you I used my magic responsibly, and charged a fair price for it. You have no claim to demand any more about me than that."

"The wizard's guild holds dominion over all magic, that gives me the right to demand your answer!"

"It's true," someone from the back shouted.

"Thank you, but I don't need your help."

"No," said a man coming from the back. "I mean it's true what she said. She came to me about a job I posted a week back, and she worked quickly and well. Never saw anything like it, to be honest, but what do I know of magic?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, Susan had met a lot of the townspeople on her 'do good' binge that day.

"That's not the point!" insisted the wizard. "Her magic is too strong, and too dangerous. If she will not cooperate with us, then the law is clear. She must be put to death for practicing more than one kind of magic."

There was a cry of protest from the crowd, but the wizard remained unmoved. Susan stood there, arms folded. "You can prove that, can you?" she challenged.

"What?"

"Prove it. Prove I'm using 'more than' one kind of magic, instead of just my own personal magic, which happens to be a bit better than yours. You say my magic isn't wizardry, or warlocky, or the rest. And you're right, it's my magic, one type of magic, which you would have learned if you had come here and asked me, rather than make demands of me."

"The law is clear, and your magic, as unknown as it is, must be stopped before great tragedy befalls the world. All our divinations have pointed to this one undeniable fact, that you are at the center of a great upheaval in our world. To avoid this fate you will be painlessly put to death unless you submit to our demands immediately!"

"I'm here to *save you* from this great upheaval you speak of! So of course I'm in the center of it. But if you think you can take me, then go ahead, try it," she growled. "See how far it gets you."

"Very well, you leave us little choice. By the power vested in me by the wizard's guild-

I pronounce you all jerks together, The Darkness snuck in there. Susan struggled not to giggle.

"-I sentence you to death!" She nodded to the wizard holding the cup, and that wizard plunged the knife she was holding into the liquid in the cup.

The crowd waited.

Susan stared at them.

“Well?” she said at last. “That doesn’t seem to have done much. What else have you got?”

The wizard’s eyes were wide now, apparently they hadn’t considered whatever they were doing to be fallible, but before anything else could happen, a small figure shot forward and stood in front of Susan, arms spread.

“Don’t you dare hurt her!” cried Illina, “Stupid wizards, with your rules, and your greed. Where you were when my mother lay dying? Where were you afterwards, when I was crying and alone and scared? You didn’t do anything! Susan did! She took me in, and fed me, and made me clothes, and paid for my mother’s funeral, and for passage here, and fought off pirates, and introduced me to my grandparents. She’s my friend and if... if... you hurt... you’ll have to go through me first!”

By this time, everyone was gaping at her, unsure where this little fireball of a girl had come from. Susan, on the other hand, was moved. She crouched down and hugged Illina from behind.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “That was probably the bravest thing I’ve ever seen anybody do. Yelling at wizards, who taught you that? When I have a daughter, I hope she’s just exactly like you.”

“You mean it?”

Susan couldn’t even answer, she just nodded her head and wondered if she could make a RESolve check not to tear up or burst with pride at the girl she had only known a few days.

There are some extraordinary people here, she figured. If only they could really be given the chance I was. What happened to this world, anyway? How did the people here get so beaten down?

Magical wars, answered The Darkness. Terrible, joyous, magical wars.

Meanwhile, the lady with the knife was plunging it into the liquid over and over, as if trying to start a car with a dead battery.

“Oh, knock it off,” Susan shouted to her, making a twenty three RESolve check to not use warlocky. Instead she did a quick *Retrieval*, and the knife was in her hand instead. She stood up, Illina by her side and one hand protectively around her shoulder. The wizards gasped. “That’s right, I’ve locked down magic in this area. Mine, and mine alone, will function.”

“Give that back!” demanded the woman, struggling against the man now holding her back from charging at Susan.

“Is it really that-” Susan held it up to look at it, and caught something odd with *Spirit Sense* now that she was touching the thing. She made a check, getting a seven, but even that was enough to tell the thing had *spirit energy* inside it. And the only way that was possible was... “Oh, tell me you didn’t. Seriously?” She also did a *Magic Sense*, getting a nine, but again the knife was very charged magically (taking 24 hours

to create, not that she knew that) so she could feel both kinds of power in it. The only things that had *spirit energy* were alive things like animals, or planets in the form of *ley lines*. That left only one conclusion for this item. "You put a piece of your soul in here, didn't you?"

There was a collective gasp as the wizards recoiled, fury bubbling to the surface.

"Kill her! Any way you can!" shouted the lead wizard, and the staves were thrown down. Powders and other weird things were produced from pockets and pouches as the wizards as a group shouted, gestured, and waved their little knives about while Susan watched.

"Are we going to die?" asked Illina.

Susan scoffed. "No, we're perfectly safe, my magic is protecting us."

"Oh, okay." She smiled.

After a moment the wizards figured out they couldn't work any magic at the moment, and the one with the flute brought out another and tried playing it. Sound came out, but nothing else happened.

She lowered it, looking over at Susan as the blood drained from her face.

"What... what are you going to do to us?" she asked, plainly fearful. "If you kill us, other wizards will know-"

"Do? What do you mean? Oh, right, you attacked me. How about I just break this?" She held up the knife, and the wizard finally tore out of the man's grasp and lunged for Susan with a yell.

"Enough!" shouted Sparkle, putting herself in between the two. "She won't do that, trust me. Susan, give her the knife back, it obviously holds her soul so stop teasing her. She's obviously terrified, just look at her."

"Fine." Susan rolled her eyes but flipped the knife in her hand, holding it out to the woman who gratefully snatched it back.

"Now look," Sparkle continued. "If you all would stop posturing and threatening each other, maybe you would find out you were all on the same side and could work together. Remember that, Susan? Working together with the local people to drive back The Darkness? You're going to need their help, and you know it. As far as you all, I am very disappointed that the very first thing you did was try and kill her. You could have sent someone to check the situation out. You could have extended a hand of friendship. But no, you threatened her, and that won't work with Susan, believe me. She won't kill you, but maybe you'll wish she had in the end. She could easily take your magic away and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it. Now start getting along, already!"

The wizards stared at the cat.

"Did... that cat just talk?" asked one of them.

Susan sighed. "Yes, she did. And as usual, she's talking sense, if a little late. Look, I'm sorry about the whole knife thing, I don't really know what it means that you did what you did with it. But the fact remains you did try to kill me just then, so at least part of the blame is yours."

"Maybe I could mediate or something," spoke up Sativola. "I'm not in the guild, but Susan trusts me, I think, and the guild could check up on me. I wouldn't mind that."

"Who are you?" asked the woman with a sigh of resignation.

"Sativola of the Sparkling Eyes, guildmaster," she replied. "And once I speak to

my master again and tell her the amazing story of my adventures with Susan, and what she's taught me about magic, it'll be Sativola The Witch."

"A witch. I see. I suppose she could be counted on to tell us if the girl was lying."

"My name is Susan."

"That has yet to be determined."

"It is!" agreed Illina, who was ignored.

"If you will lift this 'restriction' of yours, we can be on our way." She lifted the flute again.

"Very well, once I do a few things here. First..." She stalked over to the man now holding the cup, and roughly grabbed it away from him. Dumping the liquid out and crushing the cup in her hand with a thirty two STLength check, her eyes never left the man's. She let it fall, then walked back to Illina. He stared down at the crushed lump of a cup and gave it a quick tap with his toe to make sure it was real. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise," she said to her. "You be good for your grandparents, and here..." She handed her the pouch of coins she had made that day. "You'll need money to be apprenticed, right?" Illina nodded. "This money is yours now. I don't know if it'll be enough, but it should be a start."

"It will be for me," said Sativola. "I'll be a real witch soon, you can apprentice to me when you're old enough. I'll come back when you are, that's my promise to you. But I'll still see you again tomorrow, in any case."

"Yay! Thank you!" She ran over to hug Sativola.

Perhaps someone else has noticed her potential as well?

"And I guess you could come live with me, if your grandparents refuse you. But I think your grandfather will talk your grandmother around, so give them a chance, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Now can we go?" asked the wizard.

"Awfully impatient," remarked Susan. "For a bunch of people that just showed up out of nowhere and started demanding things. In any case, I'm not going anywhere with you. You're going somewhere with me."

"Outrageous!" said one of the male wizards.

"Hey, I have business in this town still, and while it would be easy enough for me to get back here, I want you someplace I can keep an eye on you all. I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, and that's pretty far, come to think of it. You want to know who I am? What I'm doing here? Why I have the power I do? I'll be happy to tell you- on my terms. I'm not crazy about people trying to kill me, but Sparkle is right. I may need you before this is over, so I'll put your reaction down to fear and hope you're wise enough to see I can be of great help to you. If you'll let me."

"It's a question of security," said the head wizard. "We aren't going to your room at the inn or whatever."

"I haven't even been there," replied Susan, brushing that off. "No, you're going to my world."

The wizards looked a bit uncomfortable, but Susan didn't care.

"Clear a space here, move along! Show's over!" she shouted, getting out a *Spell Paper of Personal Dimension*.

Good thing I made some of these, standing around for twenty minutes with a bunch of trigger happy wizards, even ones that are declawed at the moment, isn't on my

to do list.

What kind of mixed metaphor was that? asked The Darkness.

I don't think I need to explain myself... to myself.

Whatever.

Susan activated the paper, and a dimensional tear appeared before her. "All wizards who want to talk, come with me. Once I'm inside wizardry will start working here again, and anyone not coming can go back."

There was a quick council as the wizards decided who was going, and in the end, six of the eight decided to go while the wizard in charge handed over the flute to those going back. She stepped through, followed by the others.

Sparkle and Sativola followed, and Illina peaked in, then waved and ran off again. The portal closed, and the wizards looked around.

"You didn't even use a tapestry, you just tore open a hole to this place!" remarked one.

"Indeed. Come on, it's not a long walk to the cabin, I can offer you some refreshments and we can talk. I'll be happy to answer all of your questions about me, this place, my magic, the whole bit. Oh, and don't bother trying to kill me here. I'm sure you can work out for yourselves... if you do, you'll never leave."

At least, in theory. If I die outside my dimension, everything in it comes tumbling out. But what happens if I die inside it? My father's notes don't say, probably because no one was foolish enough to ever try it.

Or else if they did, their bodies were lost to the space between dimensions, put in The Darkness, sounding pleased with the notion.

So Susan played the hostess, and offered her "guests" some food and drink from other worlds. (Basically prepackaged food and soda, which they all exclaimed over) Two even started a discussion about what kind of spell could duplicate the effect of carbonation, as well as the refrigerator that was keeping them cold.

Finally they got down to business. Susan explained she was a dimensional traveler, which they actually took in stride pretty well.

"Have you met a spriggen yet?" one asked. "They came to this world from a magic mirror, so there's precedent. Wizards have long known other worlds existed, we can reach them with tapestry magic. It stands to reason someone from one of those other worlds might come here one day."

She also told them about her magic, and how it was applied, and what the limitations were. They were very curious about her limits, and just how much magic she could do at any one time. It seemed wizardry was very time consuming here, on the order of hours for many spells, which limited what one person could do in a day. Basically for them, wizardry was *Imbuing*.

That's it! Their magic is somehow imbuing everything, for a single use. They need ingredients, imbuing needs them. Their spells take hours, imbuing takes at least hours, for a single use item. And each imbuing is different, because they use gestures and chants and waving the knife around. In a different sequence for each spell. I didn't know how good I had it! Imagine being a wizard, studying for ten years and diligently learning spells, only to be useless because your house burns down or something. Or

*needing to lug around a trunk full of crap just to do a little magic!
Now you know why they're all so grumpy.*

They seemed to accept her explanation of 'energy,' and how it was consumed for her to do every bit of magic. The point was especially driven home when she demonstrated *Spirit Sense* and told them that's how she knew about the guild secret of the anthame.

"But seriously," she protested. "You wave those little knives of yours around for every spell, and you think someone isn't going to put two and two together? You can't be serious."

They just looked uncomfortable at that.

She put the spell of *Group Literacy* on them, a spell two grades higher than basic *Literacy*. That one was cast upon the self, and could allow her to understand a different written language. This one allowed the entire group to read her book at the same time, so they could look it over and see what kind of spells she could cast.

"You can cast all these?" The wizards were impressed, they explained that even a master wizard's book might only have a hundred spells in it.

"With a little time looking them over. I've read and understood a good portion of them, but I've only memorized fifty or so, meaning I can cast them without the book, and most in less than five seconds."

"Fifty?!" They went back to muttering over the book. Susan caught "five seconds?" and "energy" and "This is like one of our spells! It's Fendel's Assassin I tell you!"

Finally they handed the book back and seemed dazed. They explained that no wizard worked any but the most basic spell *from memory*, it was just too dangerous. They always had their books open and consulted them for any spell taking more than a minute or two.

"So what are you doing here? Why has such a powerful person come to our world?" the head wizard demanded. Susan still hadn't gotten any names out of the bunch, and wondered if they were hesitant to offer even fake names to a 'wizard' of her power. She had caught them talking about True Names when looking over her *Descry* spells, and wondered if names had power on this world, like stories sometimes did on hers.

"I think," she finally ventured, "that I'm here to save your world from warlocks."

One of the wizards smashed his fist into the table. "I knew we should have killed those people when we had the chance!"

"Quiet!" snapped the lady in charge. "Let's not rush off into another situation like this. We scrambled around without realizing the implications of coming here, and see where it got us? Humiliated in front of a whole town. Let's not charge after warlocks in the same way."

The man grumbled something Susan didn't catch, but relaxed back into his chair.

"Now let me make sure I have all this straight in my mind. You're some kind of warrior wizard from a world that uses wands primarily, but only ingredients for potions. You were born differently because one of your parents, your father, was from a different world that used magic differently. Your father left that world, because it wasn't his, to continue to fight this darkness being you're currently hunting down. This 'Darkvoid' creature. Which according to you is a being from beyond our reality and wants all the energy we currently enjoy for itself. It will accomplish this by taking something over, using that thing's native powers and supplementing them with power and knowledge it has gained from other worlds. If it wins the day, our reality falls and every possible version of everyone alive dies." Susan nodded. "So you have no interest in taking over, or disrupting our way of life, or anything like that?"

"Correct."

"Because you're leaving to look for your friend as soon as 'The Darkness' is dealt with. That much I get. So a little more than thirty years ago, something fell to our world and warlocks were created. You're concerned this 'The Darkness' and warlocks are somehow related?"

"I'm not. The being that sent me here, a being like The Darkness itself, mentioned that it was rather coincidental and I should look into it. Plus, coming in here has, perhaps inadvertently, given me a clearer picture of what just warlocky is."

"What is it?" demanded the man.

"First you have to have a bit more background. The reality is, The Darkness put a little piece of himself inside me when I was conceived, as a way to spy on me and exert a subtle form of control over me."

Hello!

"Not that subtle sometimes," muttered Sparkle.

"Hey, I can't say where it begins, but I have to believe my soul carries far more weight than it does in determining my personality. I don't know who I would be without it around, but I can't say I wish I was different. I am what I am, and I like being me. Now is that it talking? Who knows. Anyway, it talks to me, and it's been a blabbermouth ever since I got here."

You take that back you big meanie! Mom, Suzzy called me blabbermouth! Make her stop!

"It's never spoken as much as it has since I got here, and it expressed absolute joy that I was here, like some plan it had was going to work out better here than

elsewhere.”

Oh, it is. I'm still stoked about it.

“Shut up! Ahem, sorry. It's never done anything like that before. I later learned from Sativola that warlocks hear a kind of voice in their heads, and that's what they draw power from. Well, I hear that same voice, and I can draw power from it as well.”

“You're a warlock as well?” asked the man. “You didn't say that before!”

“But I'm not. Look, I've been granted a skill because of my traversal of other realities, the *Adaptive Skill*. Basically I can intuitively pick up and use things unique to the reality I'm in without the bother of having grown up with it or whatever. So be it a different type of magic, or a language they use, anything that's unique to a world, I can use. And I can get better at picking up those unique skills by practicing, in general, with what is unique in that world. For example if it's a language and I practice that language, but the next reality has a weird swimming game everybody plays, it would translate over. Are you getting any of this?”

The wizards seemed to understand, and there was a general nodding.

Man, explaining things to non-Paragons is hard. All that to avoid saying 'I put XP into a special skill and I can use it on every world.' Sheesh.

“Okay. I first thought the voice and power were related to that skill, because warlock power was unique to this world. But here's the twist- Sparkle has the same skill, heck she's better at it than I am at the moment. *And she doesn't hear the voice.*”

Everyone looked over at Sparkle.

“It's true. I can't move things with my mind like she can. We still don't know exactly what the skill will allow us to do around here. Maybe your kind of wizardry?”

Susan put a palm up. “Doesn't seem to be needed, anyway, all my magic works so I don't need anything else in such a primitive world. The point is, as soon as I got into my *Dimension* here, the voice cut off. I don't hear it anymore. And I can't use warlocky either, I've been trying. Without that voice, the connection to whatever it is that gives warlocks power in this world, I'm just me. The reason this is all so important is because that voice sounds an awful lot like the voice of The Darkness. If the thing that fell all those years ago is offering your people power in this world... it's not for your benefit. Because it's been taken over by The Darkness, and who knows what it's planning to do here?”

“So am I a warlock? No. But at the same time, Sparkle can't use warlock power so it's not *Adaptive Skill*. So I don't know what it is, or why I can draw off that power as though I was a warlock. She's the same type of magic user I am, and a *Spirit Mage*, so none of those things are a factor. The only difference- I have The Darkness in me, she doesn't. What does that suggest to you?”

The wizards pondered this new information.

“She's telling the truth?” the head wizard asked Sativola.

She nodded. “As she knows it. I've never felt a more confident person, I truly believe she thinks we are all in grave danger, and she is the only one that can save us.”

“Say this is all true,” said another woman. “What do we do about it? We can't get close to the source, it would turn us and we would be caught by it.”

“Make warlocky illegal!” suggested the man. “At least slow the flow of warlocks to the north so we can make other plans.”

“You know as well as I do how that edict would go over,” the head wizard scornfully replied. “Besides, warlocky is a drug, they can’t stop using it. Especially those close to being called, they use it unconsciously, for everything. You know that.”

“At least if it was illegal, we could take action against anyone practicing it.”

“I wouldn’t want to fight a city full of warlocks,” said another man. “We didn’t when they first appeared, and I sure as heck don’t now! You must see that’s what it would turn into. It’s been thirty years, they’re established. They do good works. If I hadn’t seen her resist being turned to stone and blocking all our other magic, I wouldn’t believe her. I’m still not certain I do! How can we make warlocks believe it and give up their only way of life?”

The head wizard considered. “True, with preparation, we could probably pull off anything Susan could do, or at least fake it well enough they could legitimately say it was a trick to deceive them. They can’t sense magic like witches.” She nodded to Sativola. “It would be a hard sell, just putting her forward and saying ‘this is how things are.’”

“But a necessary one,” he argued. “There have been many theories why warlocks get called, what if this ‘Darkness’ of hers is creating an army of them?”

“Why wait thirty years?” she reasoned back. “The first people Called would be in their declining years or even dead by now. Even this darkness can’t control dead warlocks, right?”

Susan shrugged. “I don’t know what it can do, here. It depends on what it’s taken over. You say it came from space, is it some kind of alien? A non-human life form that actually calls the void of space its home? That would be pretty crazy, actually.”

“We don’t know that either, our magic can’t see it, and believe me we’ve tried. It still doesn’t make sense, waiting. Why not fly about, convert half the population, and make them slaughter the other half? It obviously can’t control their actions except for the desire to go north. Not a very effective army.”

“What then?”

“Food? I mean it’s pointless to speculate, isn’t it? Even if it was eating them... the time is still the issue. It can’t be absorbing their magic, it’s sending their magic.” She shuddered. “Imagine trying to fight the creature that powers every warlock in the world!”

“Maybe it doesn’t have that power itself? Maybe it’s some interaction between us and it that creates warlocky. That could be why the Calling exists.”

“It’s been my observation that The Darkness waits for some event the world was going to experience anyway for the assault to begin. That’s ranged from an ancient dragon busting loose from a mountainside to a reenactment of events that happened hundreds of years ago. I think it waits as a form of energy conservation. The native people get stirred up, but The Darkness itself doesn’t have to lift a finger it doesn’t need to, thereby saving energy. Have your divinations given any indication that something big is about to happen on this world?”

The wizards all looked around, but everyone was shaking their heads.

“So we probably have some time. Maybe I can talk to some warlocks and get their input. Until they go through this Calling, as it’s called, they’re still themselves, right? I’d be interested to see if any recognize me, or what they might have to say about the whole situation.”

“We’re going to have to debate this, and see what our next steps are. Can we

speak privately?"

"You mean you want me to go away for a bit. Fine, I'll head down to the pond for a swim. Just follow the water down and you'll see it, it's not too far."

"Why don't you go with her, Sativola?"

"I'm not a very great swimmer... Oh, I see. Very well."

The two got up and Sparkle curled up in a corner, which the wizards didn't seem to even notice.

They probably haven't yet adjusted to the fact she's a person, and are ignoring her as though she was a cat. Their mistake.

The two girls followed the water downstream a ways until where the water collected into a small pond, where Susan shed her clothes and dived in. "Come on," she called, "the water is the perfect temperature, of course. I mean why wouldn't it be, here? And there's some neat caves I could show you under here."

"Actually, I can't swim at all," the other girl admitted.

"You don't have to, I'll let you breathe underwater with magic. And then we can practice, if you want to learn."

You just want to see her naked, remarked The Darkness.

Course I do, what's wrong with that?

"Oh, all right."

Yes!

Some time later, the head wizard came to get them, and both shook themselves off got dressed again.

"Thanks... for the lesson."

"Any time."

Back at the cabin, Susan sat down again and regarded the assembled wizards. They didn't seem particularly grim, so she was hopeful some agreement had been reached between them.

"We're going to give you a chance-" said the head wizard.

"Thank you."

"-to prove yourself."

"What?"

"The fact is, your appearance in this world breaks several guild laws. The first against more than one form of magic, as you admit to being able to use what seems to be wizardry, warlocky, sorcery, and have some of a witch's senses. The second about using what can only be wizardry, but not being a part of the guild. The third, using Ellran's Dissipation..." She paused as Susan looked puzzled. "You have spells in your book to destroy magic, that's illegal."

"Oh, so I do. But I haven't used it!" *Not around here, anyway. A courtroom back in my reality doesn't count. And besides, that was with government approval. Mostly.*

"Yes you did, after we arrived!"

"No, no, that was temporary. Magic worked there, just not your type of magic. Besides, wizardry works there again now, so nothing was destroyed."

"That's... well, but the fact remains you do break our first two laws. But you are

here, and you can obviously turn aside any wizardry we can throw at you so we would rather just find out if this so called threat to our world is real, fix it, and have you go on your way.”

“That is my goal as well!”

“Fine. You want us to trust you, it’ll be on our terms. Our laws are typically absolute but given that you obviously come from outside our world...” She paused and glanced around again, looking at the modern kitchen appliances that took up part of the room. “We’ll relax them, as long as you don’t go flouting any more of them. We’ll get you a copy at some point. Basically, don’t kill anybody or use magical compulsion on them. And don’t heal anyone that’s involved in government either.”

“I really can’t promise that if some mayor falls and takes a blow to the head I won’t immediately spring up and heal them. And who will really have the moral high ground if you start trying to kill me again for healing someone?” She gazed steadily at the wizard.

“We’ll put that aside for now. For now, anyone that asks should be told you’re a member of the guild, that’ll satisfy our second law, even if you haven’t been through our initiations. You do know some of our secrets, after all.” She unconsciously stroked her knife. “Meanwhile, we’ll assign you a series of tasks, and appoint a guild representative to, uh, smooth over any mistakes you make, not being a part of our culture.”

To spy on you, clarified The Darkness.

“A witch and a wizard following me around? Maybe they’ll even learn something about working together.”

The wizard glared at her. “You said you had further business in this town?”

“Yes. The grandparents of the little girl you saw need to decide if they’re taking her in. I’m giving them until tomorrow to work it out, and if they decide not to, I’ll need to make other arrangements for her. Sativola here has said she’ll take the girl in, if it comes to that. But I can’t drag her around while I fight The Darkness so I’ll have to find someplace she can stay.”

“The guild could probably look after her for a time, in that case,” the wizard grudgingly admitted. “She looks nearly twelve. Very well. Can you get to Ethshar of the Spices tomorrow?”

Susan shook her head. “Not sure where that is. I came in at Ethshar of the Rocks, and I can only go to a place I’ve seen before. I could fly there if you could provide a map. But depending on how far away it is, could take me more than a day”

“I see. It’s some distance away, south west along the coast. In that case, go back there and head to Wizard Street. Ask for Telthalon the Wizard, he’ll put you through a tapestry to the Spices. From there we can give you your tasks.”

“Very well. And who should I ask for once I’m there?”

The wizard looked uncomfortable, but finally answered “Ask for Ithinia the Wizard.”

“Thank you, I will. Now, if there’s nothing else?” *Get out!*

“Not at the moment, no.” The wizards all rose and pushed back their chairs.

“Then I will see you tomorrow.”

Susan let the wizards out, then watched them disappear back into the mound of earth that rose up as Ithinia played that flute of hers. Soon it was gone again, and she

headed back to the cabin. The wizards were *probably* gone, but she wanted to talk to Sparkle without any danger of being overheard. Going to the inn now would make her easy to eavesdrop on.

“So what’s the real scoop?” she asked Sparkle.

“Basically they’re going to throw you at the worst problems of the world and see if they can kill you off that way. If you survive, they figure nothing they can do will kill you, and they’ll try working with you because your story, by means of process of elimination, must be true.”

“Shouldn’t be too bad then.”

“Not too bad?” Sativola countered. “Are you crazy? Things wizards can’t deal with... I mean I’ve seen what you can do but how are you not upset about all this?”

They’re basically trying to assassinate you by proxy!”

“That’s what they think they’re doing. In reality, they’re just giving me a chance to gain XP. I know, you don’t know what that is. Never mind that, for me going on adventures like this is standard fare, so I’m not worried. You want to stay in here the night? I have some beds in the cabin we can use, that I guarantee are nicer than what you would find at an inn. Cheaper, too. I won’t charge you!”

“We might as well.”

“Great!” She closed off the portal back to the ‘real’ world, and got out some paper. “I’m going to replace my *Spell Papers* for *Personal Dimension*, you can wander around outside, there’s no dangerous creatures out there. At least, there better not be!” She laughed.

“I think I’ll just turn in.”

“Suit yourself. The beds are downstairs, because the sun never sets here and I wanted it dark. You can make a light, right?” She nodded. “See you tomorrow then!”

With her gone, Susan worked awhile on *Spell Papers*, not that she could make very many given the spell took eighteen minutes to cast from writings. But at the very least she could make three, two that replaced the two opening it for the wizards, and one to get out of it herself in the ‘morning.’ That done she tidied up from the wizards and went down to bed.

Her bedchamber had rows and rows of every sort of bed conceivable, as neither space nor material considerations were an issue here. She found one near where Sativola was laying and stripped off her clothes again to go to sleep.

She mentally reviewed what she needed to do the next day, *take care of Illina’s situation, get the talisman back? Find Wizard Street, get XP.*

Should be simple, right?

The next day, Susan enlisted the help of Sativola, a local seamstress, and some *Creation* magic to make herself some clothes more resembling what the wizards were wearing the day before. Her *Alleviation* knife she now hung at her side. As everyone would be expecting to see a wizard with a knife, there was no reason to hide it.

This complete, she was finally able to walk around the town and get bows of deference rather than outright stares of bewilderment. So that was somewhat of an improvement. With that done, she went to go see Illina's family. She heard that weird muttering the instant she stepped out of the *Dimension*, and was somewhat revolted at how pleased she was to be hearing it again. She resisted the urge to levitate something, just to make sure that she still could, and asked Sativola to lead on to the house of the carpenter.

"We'll take the girl in," Yseult admitted when she arrived, without preamble.

"Oh? That's great, what caused this sudden reversal?" Susan asked.

"Never you mind. I said we'd take her in, didn't I? That should be good enough for you. Say your goodbyes and get out of here."

"It was the money," Glifieu put in. Yseult scowled at him. "Once she saw that pouch of coins her attitude changed sharply."

"You don't have to say it like that!"

"It's true though, and they did ask. Also knowing she had an apprenticeship lined up helped. Illina couldn't stop talking about it yesterday when she got back."

"And you didn't have anything to do with it?" Susan grinned at him.

"Oh no, I never get my way around here." He grinned back. "In any case, we'll look after the girl until she's old enough and Sativola comes for her. You, uh, do plan to do that, right?"

"Witches don't lie," she answered.

"True, but Illina could have misunderstood or something. Hearing it from you eases my heart."

"No, I think she shows great promise, I'll be back for her, I promise."

"Yay!" said Illina.

"Very well. I guess we'll leave you two to say goodbye, then. Thanks for looking out for her, I know you didn't have to. Having her here might make the death of our daughter a little easier to bear."

"Just... try to keep your wife from driving this one away, okay?"

He sighed. "I'll try."

"Here's the talisman back," said Illina, handing it over. "Thanks for everything."

"Of course," replied Susan, sweeping her up in a hug. "I'll come visit you before I leave, okay? You can hear all about what other adventures I've had, how would that be?"

"I'll be waiting."

With their goodbyes said, the two young women and Sparkle stepped through a *Teleportal* back to Ethshar of the Rocks, and started to look for Wizard Street.

"Talisman first, then we'll find this wizard," Susan said, looking about. "You can read these weird signs, right?"

"Of course. It's against the law to be illiterate. Parents are punished quite harshly for not teaching their kids to read."

"Is that right? Interesting. Guess I don't just break wizard laws by my very presence here. Good luck punishing my father for it though, I don't even know where he is currently."

They found a shop that claimed to be run by a sorcerer, and stepped inside to be met by an apprentice. The place was simply and starkly furnished, brightened by a glowing, milky white globe that stood on a small table in the center of the room. The boy was studying something at a desk, and jumped up when they walked into the room.

"Oh, a wizard!" He exclaimed. "And a witch. I, uh, I'll go and get my master then, shall I?"

"Do that," replied Susan, seating herself on the small couch at the other end of the room. The boy scampered off, through a door next to the desk. Moments later, a middle aged man came back into the room, smiling widely. He was dressed rather plainly, nothing so grand as the wizards were wearing the day before, and without a cohesive theme like Sativola seemed to be trying for. He did wear a vest with plenty of pockets, and some of them even bulged with something inside.

"Ladies, welcome to my establishment," he boomed, seemingly pleased to see them. Susan rose and took his hand, then Sativola did the same. "Not often you see a wizard and a witch traveling together. Please, sit! What can I do for you?"

He pulled the chair out from the desk, leaving his apprentice to stand there awkwardly, and sat facing the two girls.

"We were hoping to get more information about this," Susan replied, grabbing the talisman from her sub-space pocket and handing it over.

"Interesting tri- is that-" The man instantly forgot about the relatively minor matter of having objects pulled from nowhere as he took the talisman with trembling hands. "It is. It's a Fil Demisnicis. Where in the world did you come across such a thing? Does it still function? Are you looking to sell it? What sort of creature does it contain? Have you summoned the-"

"Whoa, one question at a time, please!" begged Susan, holding a hand up. "I take it this device is somewhat rare?"

"Rare? I've only heard stories, and even then they should have all been destroyed after the war ended. To find one intact... it is intact, isn't it?"

"If by that you mean a fire demon jumping out of it if the wearer is in danger, yes. Taking it down and getting it back inside the talisman proved to be quite troublesome, let me tell you."

The man goggled at her. "You fought it?" he finally managed. "And you're still alive?"

"Oh, I suppose I see where you might be skeptical. Believe me, I could have

taken it out a lot faster if it hadn't been threatening a little girl at the time. I had to keep her safe, as I honestly believed if I didn't one shot the creature it would slice her throat without a second thought."

"No doubt it would. A fire demon, in my hands. Astonishing! So, you know what it does, you didn't need me to tell you that. Why are you here?"

"I want it destroyed, but in such a way that—"

"Destroyed?" the man interrupted. "Are you mad? I mean, no offense." He seemed to realize again that he was talking to someone most likely representing the guild. "No one in the guild wants it? I assure you, the the stories all say the demon can not act against the holder's wishes."

"You misunderstand me," Susan explained patiently. "The fact that it is so desirous is why must be destroyed. It was owned previously by a pirate, and if he had realized what he had at the time, he might not have been content to stay a mere pirate."

"Yes, I can see that. But now it's back in the hands of the guild... ah, yes, the prohibition on using two different kinds of magic, I see. Well, you aren't really using the talisman, it just activates, right? I mean I don't know how strict the guild is about this sort of thing..."

The two girls looked at each other, wondering how much to tell the man.

"In any case, can it be safely destroyed? And what happens if we do?"

"I suppose you could set it down and smash the crystal to pieces with a hammer. Then melt down the metal, that would destroy it completely. I assume you would want no part to remain, to provide even partial clues at to how it was constructed?"

"That would be best, yes, but my main concern is the demon inside."

"Would probably perish, but I don't really know. As I've said, I have nothing to compare it to."

"So it could let the thing out to rampage?"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose it could, now that I think about it. I would say there was an equal chance of that happening. I don't know how they were all dealt with after the war. Are you sure I couldn't buy this from you? I know my house wouldn't be enough, but perhaps my house, all my wealth, and we could set up a sort of payment plan at regular intervals until I've given you enough?"

"It's worth that much?"

Sativola put a hand on her arm, and Susan heard her voice inside her head.

You have to realize, and a wizard would know this, that a lot of knowledge was lost after the war. Some was forcibly erased, by the guild, some just because things were discovered during the war, not written down lest they fall into enemy hands, and the people that knew them died. This might be one of those, so the potential for learning how to make them again makes this far more valuable than the object would imply.

Can you hear me, too?

Yes.

Nicely done! Why can't they just work it out again on their own? They did once...

It's not that simple. Average lifespan of a wartime researcher was less than thirty days. Many people died trying to research things. And something like this, that combines sorcery and demonology? The guild would certainly frown on something like that in peacetime. They couldn't stop it while the war was on, but...

Oh. Got it.

The man was looking between them, wondering what was going on.

"Never mind, I see what you mean," Susan said to him. "Are you sure you want to own an object that combines sorcery and demonology though?"

The man twitched in his chair. "Hadn't considered that. Though again, the sorcerer wouldn't be using demonology depending on your interpretation of the law..." he trailed off.

"Yes, tell me how wizards interpret their own laws."

"Perhaps you should just have this back." He handed it over again.

"So the control is absolute? If the demon comes out it must obey and protect the person that wears it?"

"From what I've heard of them, yes. But of course it was war time, and demons would have reveled in combat anyway. There would have been no need to disobey an order to fight, they would gladly do so, to kill humans."

"I see. Is there anything else you can tell us about it?"

"Not without a lot of study."

"Very well," said Susan, getting up. He got up too, putting the chair back over by the desk. While he did this, Susan got out a gold piece and tossed it to him. "The information was very valuable, thank you for your time."

"Oh, certainly!" he said, glancing at the coin and making it disappear into one of his many pocket. "And if you change your mind about selling it..."

"You'll be the first to know. Good day."

"Good day!"

Once out in the street, the two walked some ways away with Susan staring at the thing and thinking about it.

"You could take it down again," Sativola remarked. "If you wanted it smashed up. Just take it to your world and release it there. You can fight all you want there, no one in the way, right?"

Susan shook her head. "It would fight all the harder, there. It would have nothing to lose." *And way more energy than I have, and did I even see all that it could do? Somehow I doubt it.*

"So what will you do with it? Just take it out of the world when you leave?"

"I could." Susan considered. "And having a demon at my side for my battles would be useful, if what the guy said was true. For all we know the hold a person has over the thing weakens every time it comes out, and that's how it got away from the original owner. He was killed by it. There's just a lot of things to consider."

"I guess you're right."

"Is it for us to decide?" asked Sparkle. "It really has nothing to do with our mission, right?"

"I suppose you're right. Here, stop a minute." Susan spread the chain and dropped the necklace over Sativola's head, then gently gathered her hair out of the way so the chain touched her neck.

"You're giving it to me?" she squeaked, holding it away from herself.

"For safekeeping. The only people that really know about it are the people on the two boats. Hopefully none of them will come after at, knowing what that would mean for

them. And you can see them coming, right?”

“I suppose. And hopefully it wouldn’t need to come out that often, no one attacks a witch. Word would get around and witches would never care for a person they knew had hurt one of their own if they came asking. So generally we’re left alone.”

“And it can’t come out otherwise, sitting around in a chest, and being carried by the pirate who knows how long proved that.”

“You have a point. All right, I’ll take care of it.” She tucked it under her shirt.

“Great! And if you decide it should be destroyed, perhaps a demonologist could assist you, as they would know how to deal with unruly demons. Until your world is safe, though, keep it handy. The Darkness doesn’t care that you’re a witch, after all.

“Now that we have that settled, let’s find this Telthalon the Wizard.”

As the shops all had the name of the practitioner (and some indication what they knew how to do) he wasn’t difficult to find. And as he had been told to expect them, he brought them up to his second floor and set his knife against the door. He spoke a few words, then brought out a large iron key which he turned in the lock. Then more passwords (or something) were muttered, and he threw the door open. Inside was a bare room with a large tapestry hung on the wall.

And nothing else.

The tapestry hardly looked like cloth, Susan would have said it had come from a high resolution printer from her world, it was so detailed. Of course, the scene itself wasn’t that interesting, just a blank wall somewhere.

“Go on through,” said Telthalon.

“Go... through?” asked Susan, confused. “You mean step through? It’s not really big enough.”

“Have you never- but of course you probably haven’t, not many do. Just touch it, that’s all that’s required.”

Susan shrugged and reached for it, but her fingers never seemed to brush against it, as suddenly the “picture” expanded and she was staring at the full wall that had been shown in the hanging.”

Now what?

She reached a hand out and felt the wall in front of her, but it seemed perfectly ordinary. Someone cleared their throat behind her, and she whirled, startled. There was an older man, in wizard’s robes, sitting at a desk and surrounded by what Susan could only imagine was wizardly stuff. There were vials holding different colored liquids, and dried insects, and leaves, and other random bits and bobs scattered about the desk.

“Susan?” asked the man.

“That’s me,” she replied.

“Come forward then. Your friend can’t come through until you move.”

Seems like a rather bizarre restriction, but then, I wouldn’t want her to teleport into the same space I was occupying.

Once she moved, Sparkle and Sativola appeared, and the wizard sent a small dragon looking thing flying down the hall to let someone know she had arrived.

“Why the wall?” asked Susan as they waited. “And this tiny space?”

“If someone ever got ahold of that tapestry, they would come here. This place is easy to defend or change or block off should that happen. Depending on what I thought

was needed," he indicated the ingredients on the table, "I could do all three with the wizardries I know."

"Sensible." *Though why they just don't have a public service, that opens to a public area...*

Because the image in the tapestry has to match the image at the other end, explained Sativola mentally. *That's why it was pointed at the wall. The wall won't change, so the magic always works.*

"Oh. Like how I had to move out of the way! They couldn't just put it in the town square, because that shifts second by second, and the effort put into the thing would be wasted!"

She nodded.

"What?" asked the wizard, looking between them.

The two girls grinned at each other, Sativola because she knew a type of magic no wizard even knew could be done, which was turning out to be quite useful. Susan because she realized Sativola realized it too.

"So wait, I could paint an X on the wall and the tapestry would be ruined until it could be cleaned off? Or the X put into the tapestry somehow?"

The wizard nodded cautiously.

Every day, in every way, my magic looks better, and better.

A few minutes later, another wizard joined them and said he would take them to see Ithinia, who was expecting them. They walked through an underground tunnel to some stairs, then up into the main meeting hall of this particular building, where Ithinia and another wizard were waiting, already seated. They had passed many rooms, some with people working inside, some giving instruction to young kids, some doing paperwork. All in all, a pretty busy place.

"Glad you could make it," Ithinia said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Sorry, I had stuff to do this morning," countered Susan. "You knew that, I told you yesterday."

She waved it off. "Never mind, you're here now."

Wizards probably aren't used to waiting, thought Sativola. *She figured you would come straight here because that's what any other person working with the guild would do.*

Then she doesn't know me very well yet, Susan thought back with a grin.

"I'm here now," she said aloud. "And ready to see what you've come up with for my tasks."

"Great. They are two fold. The first, though you can do them in either order, is to make some lasting contribution to wizardry. I've seen your book, I know your spells are powerful and you can do most anything. If you really want to help us, prove it by finding some way of making our wizardry better. I realize you don't do true wizardry yourself, but there must be something, and an outsider would probably have a better chance of seeing something obvious than we would. I believe you mentioned something to that end for witchcraft, and Sativola here?" Susan nodded, it was true after all. "Then you can do no less for us. Plus you claim to have visited other worlds, perhaps something from another world could be useful to us as well."

"I'll see what I can do."

“Fine. The second, and more dangerous, is to travel to the kingdom of Reldamon, which lies on the eastern border of the small kingdoms. We’ve been getting odd reports from that corner of the world, rumor has it that an actual demon took over the kingdom some years ago. We’ve never had any way of proving it, as we’ve not tested our magic on demons all that much. And our scrying efforts just show the same old king walking around. But twice now while we were spying on him, late at night, he got up and went to the castle basement where our spells lost him. Hours later he came back and they picked him up again.

“Prove his being a demon one way or another, and find out what he’s doing in that castle of his.”

Given Sparkle said they were going to throw me at the most dangerous thing they could, they probably already know he’s a demon and just don’t want to confront him directly. Still, if he’s anything like the last one, I can take him. I just have to make sure he doesn’t take any hostages.

“How do we get there?” asked Sativola. “Even the western edge of the small kingdoms is pretty far from here.”

“We can send you to Ethshar of the Spices, where you can take a boat across the gulf of the east. From there, you’ll just have to fly. The guild doesn’t have a lot of presence in the small kingdoms, and certainly no tapestries to waste to make the journey.”

And they don’t want to take the effort to do that flute thing?

Hey, you’re the one who claims to be so powerful, said The Darkness. You don’t need their ‘lesser’ magic, now do you?

Susan ignored him. “But hopefully some sort of map can be provided, so we don’t sneak into the wrong kingdom?” asked Susan. Ithina handed them a rolled up parchment, which Susan took a look at and saw it was a map of the area. “Ah. Thank you.”

“Certainly. Will you leave now? I’ll instruct everyone here to cooperate with your questions when you’re ready to see what you can do for wizardry.”

“This seems more urgent, and I’ll have to think about what I can do for wizardry. You did say you were assigning me someone, right? I can question them during our journey, maybe start work on something during the trip down there..”

“That seems reasonable. He’s been sent for... oh, here he is now.”

“Here I am,” said the boy who came down the stairs with a traveling bag. “I’m Kelder the Apprentice. You must be Susan, nice to meet you.”

A short journey to Reldamon

Place: An inn halfway through the Small Kingdoms

Time: That evening.

The group had made good time on their way to Reldamon, Susan simply flying them over the gulf despite Kelder's insistence he wouldn't dare try such a thing. Susan simply left him behind and he was forced to catch up, and made it over the water without further incident. Once into the Small Kingdoms, he insisted on crossing the borders properly, rather than just flying over them all, to Susan's annoyance. But they didn't call them "small kingdoms" for nothing, and walking through them didn't take long.

They were now seated at the inn, waiting for their food to arrive, and Susan figured now was a great time to get to know her new "keeper."

"So, did you volunteer for this mission, or what?" she asked.

"No, I was assigned it. And while I appreciate your wanting to get there quickly, don't rush on my account."

"You'll want to get back to your studies, won't you?"

"Oh." He colored. "I'm not really that great a wizard. I think that's why they made me come with you."

"Because they know I didn't need magical backup?"

"Uh, no, because I wouldn't be missed."

"I see. What's the trouble, exactly? I've helped people figure out why they're bad at magic in the past. Well, once, anyway. It wasn't what everybody thought, I'll tell you that."

"It's not so much that I'm bad at casting spells, exactly. I can get through most all right. It's just my master didn't know all that many to begin with. It seems like a recurring problem, actually. When I'm considered ready to train someone the only spells I'll have to hand down are the ones my master gave me. I don't want to deny someone the craft if they want to learn, but it almost doesn't seem worth it."

"And the guild won't give you more, round out your book?" He shook his head.

"That's nuts. I suppose you'll tell me there's some reason behind it," she said to Sativola.

"Hey, I'm with you on this one," she replied. "I'm going to tell as many witches as I can about what you've taught me, and keep looking for ways to use my magic. But then, none of what I'll show them is all that dangerous."

"But wizardry is, right. Still, a wizard with a bunch of grade 1 spells is still better than a wizard with spells that are all over the place in grade. They can't be that dangerous, and still more useful than not having them."

"You mean first order? You never can tell what a wizardry will do if you mess it up. Even very basic magic can go wrong fast. Remind me to tell you about the pillars of flame sometime."

"Okay. Well, if you can do magic, just not a lot of it, I'm not sure I can help."

"Actually," put in Sparkle, "maybe you can."

She looked down at her. "You think?"

"Sure. Remember, wizard's spells are written down. They don't memorize them like we do, they get them out of the book every single time. While you can't exactly steal

a better wizard's book, you have something much more convenient."

"The *Research* spell," she breathed, realizing her intent. "Just like Tom reading Hermione's diary long distance. Of course!" Susan put her hands under the table to hide the light, and spent four minutes gathering the magical energies. She got a thirteen on the check and handed Kelder the new, ghostly book of wizardry she had just conjured out of the air. As she had asked the magic for research relating to "currently practiced wizard's spells," she was confident it would contain actual magic rather than just topics about researching spells. She saw that she was right as Kelder looked it over. (She had cast it for him specifically, so the language was his. She wouldn't have been able to read it without casting it again for herself.)

"Where did you get this?" Kelder asked, excitedly paging through it. "These are spells, with the ingredients and words and everything. I don't believe this!"

"You watched me. It's a spell of mine, I made it just now. It'll vanish when you're done though, it won't stick around forever. Probably when we get up, in fact." *Yeah, this dinner would be a 'scene' wouldn't it?*

"You can just bring knowledge out of nothing?"

"No. I can bring together writings relating to a certain subject. I couldn't ask the book for wizardry that didn't exist, though it could show me notes made by wizards in pursuit of spells. That could help guide someone through the spell creation process."

He closed it and shoved it back. "No thank you."

"What?" All three exclaimed, not believing their ears.

"You're trying to bribe me with this, but I won't fall for it. I'm going to report exactly what you do and how you do it. Because that's my job. I may not be a great wizard, but the guild is relying on me so you can't tempt me, even with this."

"You sure about that? I'm not worried about what you're going to tell them. Even if they don't like it, there's nothing they can do about it. But I'll do what they ask to the best of my ability, don't you worry."

"So you say. Take it back."

"Very well." Susan ended the spell, and the book vanished. "If you change your mind-

"I won't. I'm going up to my room." He pushed his chair back.

"Very well," replied Susan, leaning back in her chair. "Hope I don't slip out the door the minute your back is turned, now that I know I can't buy your loyalty."

He froze, half out of his chair, then sat back down again. "Maybe after another mug of ale..."

"Oh, don't tease the poor guy," admonished Sparkle. "She won't leave without you, don't worry."

"And I'm supposed to believe some talking cat?"

"I thought I had a pretty honest face," she remarked, fluffing her whiskers out.

"What about me tells you I might lie to you?"

"Of course you're going to say what she wants you to. You're traveling together."

"And what about me?" asked Sativola. "If I told you she had no intention of leaving without you, would you believe me? I'm from around here, unlike Sparkle, so there's no reason for me to mislead you."

"I..." He looked her over, and she was smiling slightly. He looked away. "Fine, I guess I'll believe you. See you in the morning."

"She really didn't want to bribe you," she said as he got up. "She just wanted to help. Believe me, I followed her around a whole day as she helped people out, back in the Village of Dawn."

"It's fine, I said." And he was gone.

"Guess I messed that one up," Susan remarked, feeling a bit bad.

"You did just want to help," countered Sativola. "I could feel that."

"But he couldn't. And all because the *guild* won't let people study magic properly. It must be nice, being a witch, telling if people are being truthful or not."

"Sometimes, I guess. Other times I would rather not know. Like when either of you looks at me..." She broke off. "Anyway, guess I'll get to bed, too."

Susan reached for her arm as she got up, but then pulled back again. "I'm sorry, for that. I guess it must be pretty distracting."

"I'm kind of used to it. From men, anyway. It's okay."

But both girls knew, without witchcraft, that she was lying.

"You didn't pick up *Lecherous* at some point without me realizing, did you?" asked Sparkle when she had gone.

"What? No, that would be way worse. I just think she's cute, that's all. I can't help it if she picks on up that, now can I? Usually I would get RESolve checks against her picking up that sort of thing, but it seems to work differently here, so, she'll just have to live with it."

"I guess you're right. Someone with *Lecherous* would throw themselves at anyone they found attractive, I guess. But you do seem to do that, a bit. Yuffie. That general back in Louise's world."

"Uh, yeah, I'm seventeen. Not forty seven. And when I find Luna... well, okay, she wouldn't mind me looking I'm sure. I don't have to explain myself to you!"

"You do when I think it might be The Darkness making you act a certain way."

"What, this? Come on!"

"No, don't just 'come on' me. What if she does find out you've been trekking across worlds and getting a little on the side? Would she really be okay with it or would she be jealous? If she leaves for you it, your big anchor against The Darkness disappears, right? And maybe that's what it's hoping for."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," she said testily, even while knowing Sparkle could be right. *Do I really know Luna well enough to say how she would react, one way or the other? She couldn't be jealous of people that don't even exist in our reality though, could she? And I'm just looking, darn it, Sativola isn't interested. I'm not jumping into bed with every pretty girl I see on this journey.*

"I hope you do, for her sake as well as yours."

Susan had to think a second, and remember Sparkle couldn't read her mind. *She was saying that about keeping it in mind, not about... yeah.*

The next day the group, not speaking very much to each other, passed through Okkoa and continued east. The trouble was just as they reached their destination they ran into a brick wall... literally. They couldn't go any farther, as the kingdom had a

defensive wall stretching as far as they could see in either direction.

"I suppose you would be against me just *Phasing* through the wall and entering Reldamon that way?" Susan asked Kelder.

"I'm not sure what that means, but if you wish to enter the kingdom illegally, go right ahead. Just know that I will be putting that in my report."

"Ugh, fine. We'll find the actual road in. It must be close. Excuse me!" she called to a passerby. "Which way do we go to get over this wall?"

"Wall?" The man looked over at it. "Oh, that. Oh, can't get there from here. You'll have to go north, through Neya and Ptelaya. That's where the only road leading into or out of Reldamon is."

"What? Why?"

The man shrugged. "Wall just went up some time ago. Who knows what other kingdoms are thinking? Wall is a stupid idea, sure, troops would find it hard to get in if they wanted to invade, but they can't get out either if they wanted to invade us. So it helps us just as much as it does them."

"Why this Ptelaya or wherever?"

"Because Ptelaya is smaller than Reldamon, and every other kingdom on their border is larger, I guess?"

"Oh. Well, thanks."

"Sure."

"What did he say?" asked Kelder.

"We have to go around," replied Susan, sighing. "There's only one road in or out, and that's through this other kingdom. Come on."

So the group skirted the wall and headed into Ptelaya, where the gate was leading into Reldamon. Approaching it, she saw the break in the wall was covered by a thick iron grating which presumably would be moved aside to let people in or out. At the top, set in the center, was an ornate orb which seemed to be glowing brighter as they approached. The people on the other side had been mostly just standing around, but after one noticed the glow and pointed it out, they all leapt up and got their weapons out.

"What's all the commotion about?" yelled Susan through the bars.

"You're magic users?" demanded the man with the bare sword that walked up to them.

"Yeah. Two wizards and a witch. What's that got to do with anything?"

"What, just the three of you?" He looked back up at the sphere, which was now too bright to look at directly. "We don't allow magic users in our country. Go away."

"You... what? Look, I'm Susan the Wanderer, I go around helping people with my magic. We mean no harm."

"I don't care if you're the supreme wizard of the wizard's guild. We don't allow magic here, as is our right. Turn around and go away!"

Sativola touched her shoulder and pointed, and Susan saw soldiers manning the walls, bows drawn and ready to fire down at them.

"So that's how it is," she remarked.

"You understand now? Can your magic save you from that? We don't want you in

our kingdom, so scram!”

Susan didn't bother replying that yes, yes it could. She didn't want to antagonize them. Yet. “Guess we'll be on our way, then,” she said instead. “Nice talking to you.”

“Just move along. And don't try sneaking in any other way, this is the only portal through the protection spells around our kingdom.”

“Well, now you've just piqued my interest. Maybe I'll just fly over the wall someplace, how would you like that?”

The soldier smirked at her. “I invite you to try it,” he said smugly.

“As long as I've gotten permission then.” Susan spun on her heel and walked away, followed by laughter as the soldier passed the word she was going to try flying over.

Something odd here, what do they know that I don't?

The group moved a little ways away, and Susan did a *Magic Sense* on the wall, getting a ten on that and a twelve on *Magical Theory*. The *Sense* check was one above what she needed, so she worked out the spell was some kind of analog to Sun magic dealing with protecting the town.

“That glowing ball must be a talisman of some kind,” remarked Kelder. “Letting them know when people that can do magic approach.”

“And they got pretty worked up,” added Sativola. “I doubt they had ever seen it glow that brightly before.”

“Come on, I want to try something.” Susan and the others walked some distance away from the gate and she found a stone and picked it up. With her augmented STRength she was easily able to arc it over the wall, where it slammed into a magical barrier and bounced back at her. “Oh, that's what he meant.”

“So now what?” asked Kelder. “This seems to lend credence to the theory something is going on inside the kingdom they don't want people to find out about.”

“We go inside,” replied Susan, matter-of-factly. “We didn't come all this way to get stopped by a wall.”

“You aren't going to just smash your way through, are you?” asked Sparkle.

“Please, give me some credit. There's so many ways through this wall I can't even begin to count them all. It's just a question of how much effort to put in, and how noisy we want to be. Given your two natures though...” she looked between her companions. One didn't want to fight because she couldn't do so without feeling her opponent's pain. The other probably didn't have any combat training, and carried little in the way of supplies anyway. *Unless these people can make bottomless bags like they can back home?* “I think as quiet as possible is the watchword.” Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to where they first had encountered the wall. “Come on, we'll head back to where we first saw it. They won't get word all the way back there for some time, so we can attack it at our leisure.”

The group stepped through, and Susan regarded the structure. “I think the easiest way is just *Phase*,” she decided. “Everyone join hands, sorry Sativola, and we'll make our way through that way.”

Kelder gave her a funny look, like “why sorry?” but did as instructed. Sparkle jumped up on her shoulders and Susan cast *Phase*, sticking her hand through through the wall to walk through it.

It didn't push through.

Susan had to admit she was impressed, they had even thought of that? "Okay, never mind, we'll try something else." She dropped the spell and considered. "I'll just fly up, take a quick peek, and *Teleportal* us over there." She did, but *Teleportal* fizzled when she tried to open it past the wall. "Now that's funny."

"You don't think it's a form of *Fortification*, do you?" asked Sparkle, getting ten on *Magic Theory*.

"Fortification we're going to Miami!" Susan joked. The two humans stared at her, uncomprehending. "Never mind. It's possible, I just hope it doesn't stop us from entering with hostile intent. Because we have that, if the king here really is a demon. Let's see what else I can come up with..." *I could try Transposition, I didn't see any boxes or anything on the other side. But that's still a Mercury spell, and lower grade than Teleportal. Relocation would work, the way is clear, but again, if it blocks one kind of teleport it will block them all. Susan tried Sculpt, but opening a hole just showed the same effect as trying to go over the wall did. A vague magical barrier that wouldn't let her put a hand through. And I would have to target each brick, anyway. I thought maybe Magic Immunity would work, but making a hole big enough, that's the problem. Can't shrink us down, we'll be immune to magic at that point. It has to be big enough to crawl through, and that's not going to happen trying to move each brick out of the way.*

What about Elemental Travel? Wait, could I have gotten through the spell I put on Ron's house just by walking through the wood or the glass? Probably not. Nor could I have stepped through from the astral, so that's out.

"Okay," Susan decided at last. "We'll wait until it starts getting dark. I'll need to read up on a spell, and this will seem totally out of character, but we're sneaking in."

"That is out of character," admitted Sparkle. "You think there's no way to get in through the wall, huh?"

Susan shook her head. "Not that I can think of. I thought maybe I could cancel out magic at the gate, but it can't be *Domination*, that specifically says spells, not all magic. The orb would still light up. So it would have to be *Dead Magic*, and then I couldn't unlock the gate if they recognized me. Nope, it's going to be up to you, Sparkle, to do the first part of our plan."

"Wow, sneaking and having a plan which involves me? I approve."

"Oh, quiet, you. Come on, let's find a place to sit down so I can read something over. Tonight we enter the kingdom of Reldamon."

Remembering to Save

Time: That evening, just after dark

Place: Outside the wall

“Ready, Sparkle?” Susan asked.

“Ready.”

“Then let’s go.” She pulled two *Spell Papers* from her pocket and activated the first, “*Save*” and the second while the others were touching her. “*Unseen*.” Magic swirled around them all, with the *Time Anchor* staying there on the ground and shimmering with magical energy. To her companions, everything but that seemed unchanged, but they were all now completely invisible to those without some supernatural power. Normal people would walk right by them, though they were fully visible to each other.

“*Somnolent Smog*,” Sparkle cast, taking all the time she could and putting in extra energy. She got a dome forty eight meters across, due to the eleven *Spirit Manipulation* check and presence of two moons in this world. With her thirty nine check there wasn’t a thing anyone could do about it, and every person on the other side of the barrier fell over, asleep. The four waited a moment, making sure no one would stir when the spell was lifted, and Sparkle nodded that that the area was clear.

“*Unlock*.” With that, the iron barrier was no trouble to lift and quietly move out of the way. Of course, the crystal at the top was blazing away, but no one was out at the border this time of night to notice it. (Susan hoped) With the group inside, Susan set the barrier back into place and looked around. It seemed that, not unlike most places she had seen in this world, this place might once have been fortified and grand, but now was rather run down and falling apart. The courtyard beyond the gate was mostly open space, but with high barricades at regular intervals in a half circle facing inward. They had slits in them, probably for shooting arrows out of, and Susan could also see the platforms the archers had been standing on when they threatened her earlier. The “kingdom” proper began somewhat off in the distance, difficult to judge in the near darkness.

“They’re going to know something happened,” remarked Kelder. “All of them falling asleep at once is pretty obvious.”

“But when they do, we’ll be long gone.”

“Where?”

“What do you mean, where?”

“Getting into this town obviously isn’t easy. Anyone coming in is going to be noticed. We’re strangers here, and any inn we try to stay at is going to ask some uncomfortable questions as to how we got here. Everyone in this town probably knows everybody else, because there’s next to no traffic in or out.” He explained this like he was explaining something to a two year old, and Susan had to admit he was right. She probably should have thought a little more ahead.

“Hey, my plans are always one step a time, okay? We’re in, now we figure out what to do next.”

“Isn’t that just another way of saying you have no clue what you’re doing most of the time?”

“Guys!” hissed Sativola. “Someone’s coming!”

“Probably someone outside the spell, coming to see what’s up. If it’s a soldier they’ll raise the alarm,” moaned Kelder. “Now what?”

“They can’t see us, remember?” chided Susan. “Just don’t go stealing his helmet or whatever and they’ll walk right by us. Come on, let’s look around for a place to stay, unless you want to try sneaking into the castle tonight? It’s not that late, we probably should do that anyway, to not waste the spell.” She started walking, and the others followed.

“Do you think we can make it to the castle soon?” asked Sativola. “We don’t know where it is, after all.”

“Probably the middle? That’s where I’d put a castle. True, it’s not like we can just ask someone. But we’re in, we could just fly about and find it. Actually, don’t you know where it is, Kelder? The wizard’s guild should know, they sent me here after all!”

“Excuse me,” said the man behind them.

“No, they didn’t give me a complete map of the kingdom, it’s not that large. And don’t I recall you saying something about not needing any magical assistance from me?”

“A map isn’t magical! Though they didn’t tell me about the gate either, so maybe they’re not big on small details?”

“Excuse me,” the man repeated. “You’re trying to get to the castle?”

“No, the guild worries about major threats, and big picture stuff. Keeping a bunch of magic users from killing each other isn’t all that easy, you know? Especially with warlocks and demonologists running around. Plus making sure that old wizards aren’t getting too senile to cast-”

“*Excuse me!*” shouted the man, and the group whirled to look back at him, then froze. It was a soldier, but awful large for just a man. He wore the standard breastplate and helmet, sized up for him, that the unconscious soldiers they had passed wore. His eyes seemed to softly glowing red, and a large blade, much thicker and wider than normal hung at his side. Both sides stared at each other a moment, the night silent.

“Oh great, so much for your mighty magic,” complained Kelder at last. “Look, he’s looking right at us!”

“That... shouldn’t be possible,” protested Susan. “I know the spell is still working, I can feel it. That guy’s a magic user!” She pointed dramatically. “In a kingdom that doesn’t allow magic users! You’re going to so get it when we tell the king on you, buster. You want to buy my silence, I require fine pastries, and lots of them.”

“Something’s wrong,” Sativola said nervously, taking a step back. “He feels off.”

The man looked over at her. “Oh, a witch, is it? And what about the other two, are you witches as well?”

“I represent the wizard’s guild!” Kelder said haughtily. “You’ll turn around and leave us in peace if you know what’s good for you.”

The man laughed, unconcerned. “I have no fear of wizards, especially here. And what about you, little one?” he asked Susan.

“You’d better do as he says,” Susan replied, “Or you’re gonna have a bad time.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. The witch first, she’s the biggest danger, if she can be called even that,” said the man, drawing his blade. A small sphere at the top of the hilt, just below the guard, began to glow. “You wizards will need to draw your knives at a minimum to cast any spells, I’ll have her killed by then. I think I’ll keep the other girl alive

for questioning. Though the boy would probably break easier, he's not looking too good just from the sight of me. He's no warrior."

"Oh dear," said Susan, turning away from him. "He's gone and underestimated me. Plus he thinks a warlock needs to draw a knife to cast a spell!"

"The girl is touched in the head, she's no warlock," said the man, zipping his sword through the air as though taking practice swings with a bat. "I can see her knife from here, and no self-respecting warlock would dress to look like a wizard."

"We have to get away!" insisted Sativola. "Something is really, really, wrong here!"

"Believe me, I can take him. Just step back a little—"

"*We can all understand him, but what language is he speaking?*"

Susan paused. There was something odd about his words, they didn't sound right, but Susan was used to hearing odd languages and knowing what they meant thanks to Inari. But this guy...

"Very good, little witch," said the man, giving a mocking bow. "Did you know, demons have their own language, which can be understood by all mortals? I managed to hang onto it when I fused with this man here. Not all can, you know. What we hold onto seems almost random, at times. Maybe one day we'll understand why."

"Shatra!" squeaked Sativola, nearly stumbling as she backpedaled.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Kelder, sounding as if he was trying to convince himself more than anything. "They were all killed hundreds of years ago. He's just trying to scare us."

"Know that for a fact, do you?" asked the man, grinning a wide grin at him. "And of course no more could be made, right? Lost art, and all that?"

"Is that what the so-called king here is doing?" asked Susan, watching the sword. "Making some kind of half-demon creature?"

"So-called!?" the man said, clearly offended. "He took over this place fair and square. If you really want to know, I can introduce you to him and he can tell you himself."

"That would be ideal, thank you!"

"Certainly. Just let me kill your friends here, and, oh, of course you'll have to be in chains. I'd better blind you too, just to be sure. Won't take a second."

"I'd like to see you try. You two, get out of here. I'll meet up with you somewhere, after I've taken him out."

"No, you mustn't! It's a Shatra, you can't win!"

"I took down that fire demon, didn't I? In fact, shouldn't he be coming out about now?"

"He hasn't directly threatened me yet?"

"I guess. Look, just go. I'd rather he not take you hostage."

Sativola seemed torn between trying to make Susan understand, and running away as quickly as possible. Kelder took off, hardly bothering to notice where he was going, and as Sativola turned the man lunged at her with a speed Susan wouldn't have thought possible. She tried to get in his way, and Sparkle called out "*Deflection!*" but neither was good enough and Sativola didn't even get a chance to cry out as the man's sword did eighteen damage to her body. This cut her in half quite effectively, and Kelder screamed in horror as he turned around after hearing the pieces of her hit the ground.

The man smiled. "Next?"

Susan, having failed her CONstitution check with a six to not vomit as her friend's entrails and viscera splashed everywhere did the only thing she could do.

She mentally triggered the *Time Anchor*, and suddenly everything was as it had been moments before. Both her friends were alive, she was holding the *Spell Paper of Unseen* about to be triggered, and the night was silent. She didn't want to vomit anymore, and forced the memory of seeing her friend chopped up to the back of her head before she grossed herself out enough to have to make another check. *It never even happened. They're both right there, healthy and whole.*

Healthy, whole, and screaming, that is. Sativola started to scream like she was being murdered (she just had been, after all) and Susan clamped a hand down over her mouth.

"Quiet!" she hissed. "You want to make things worse?" Her breath came rapidly, and her eyes were wide as they darted from place to place, trying to understand what was going on. "That was just a... dream. A practice run. We know now what not to do, that's all!"

Note to self, do not include companions in spell when saving. Alternatively, explain what spell is going to do beforehand. To do otherwise just makes things more complicated.

"What just happened?" asked Kelder, also looking around. "Where's that Shata? Did she just die? How did we get back out here again?"

"Not helping!" Susan hissed at him. "Calm down and I'll explain, all right?"

Eventually Sativola started breathing normally again, and Susan took her hand away. "It's called *Time Anchor*, or saving on some worlds. Basically you choose a point in time and can go back to it if something bad happens. Some friends of mine showed me that their world had these points in space you could anchor yourself to, and my book analyzed them for me. Now I can do the same thing, but anywhere. Luckily I remembered this time, you looked pretty far gone when that thing hit you."

"Pretty far gone!" Sativola was still a bit hysterical. "I died, in case you didn't notice! I was dead. How can I have been dead, and now I'm not? No magic can bring back the dead!"

"I didn't, it's time, I just reset time. Look, you want to do this tomorrow? I can see it's shaken you up a bit-"

"Shaken me- Do this tomorrow- Are you stupid? There's a Shatra beyond those gates. If there's one, there are probably more. Didn't you see what happened?"

"I'm not just going to do the same thing as before, that would be dumb. Get a grip. I'll go in expecting a fight, and you guys hang back here until it's over."

"It killed me in one blow!"

"That wouldn't even scratch me, believe me."

"Wait a second," demanded Kelder. "You seriously have magic powerful enough to perform a bunch of actions, then decide if you got the best result or not, and if you didn't you just snap your fingers, *reset the entire universe* and try again?"

"Pretty much. Don't you?"

"NO! By the gods, no wonder you're so unconcerned with the wizard's guild. What other spells do you- no, don't tell me, I don't want to know. But I'm with Sativola,

we should just report back that there are Shata and let the guild handle it. Only one man has ever faced one and lived, according to stories. Kelder of the Enchanted Sword. No relation.”

“Well, soon it’s going to be one man and one woman. Me. They gave me a job, and I mean to see it through.”

“You’re nuts.”

“I’ve been saying that for years,” put in Sparkle. “But have a little faith, she does know what she’s doing.”

“Thank you. Now, you keep saying Shatra, Shatra, which honestly translates a little dirty in my mind. What is it? It just looked like a big guy to me.”

“It’s partly demon, partly man,” Kelder explained.

Partly metal, partly real? asked The Darkness.

What?

Eh, never mind. Before your time I guess, and they didn’t remake that one. Odd, that, they remade everything else...

Whatever you say.

“And somehow, better than both,” continued Sativola. “You saw the size of the sword he was swinging, and how fast he moved. *When he killed me!*”

“You seem fine now, you don’t have to harp on about it.”

“Harp on about it? You mean that dying I did? When he chopped me up and it really hurt and stuff was flying out of me and then there was darkness and-”

“What’s the big deal? It never happened, I tell you. If I hadn’t included you in the magic you would never have known. I would have just reset things and explained we needed a new plan. Or just armored up and had you hang back from the start.”

“Oh, that’s even worse! Is my soul still in my body? Are the gods going to strike you down for messing with forces no mortal should consider?”

Susan shrugged. “They haven’t yet. You wanted a story, and I did warn you about traveling with me. If you want out, I won’t blame you.” *I’ll miss you, but I won’t blame you. Ugh, traveling with just a guy? That doesn’t sound very fun...*

They stared at each other, but Sativola let her breath out slowly and slumped her shoulders. “No. I have to see this through, I promised myself that. Just... warn me next time, okay? Time magic. Gods!”

“Deal. So can we get on with this?”

“You’re really going back in there?” asked Kelder. “If ‘back’ is even the right word, as technically we haven’t gone in once... this magic is confusing.”

“I really am. With tons of magic activated this time, but still, I’m going all the same. We’ll do the same plan, put everyone to sleep, get inside. You two follow the inside of the wall to the... left. I’ll stand there with my big ‘ol flaming sword and attract this half-demon’s attention. When he’s dead we’ll move on. Simple as that.”

“What happens if he kills you? Can you still trigger this time magic of yours?”

“Probably. If you want to be on the safe side, I’ll give the *Paper* to Sparkle, and she can trigger it. The thing won’t go after a cat, after all.”

They all looked down at her. “Fine with me,” she said.

“Then let’s begin part two,” Susan said, getting out another *Spell Paper* and setting it on the ground for Sparkle to step on. “I’ve got a half-demon to take out.”

Susan watched as the pair disappeared into the darkness under the platform past the gate, and turned to walk boldly in the direction she figured the half-demon had come from. She was *Accelerated*, had on *Augment Skill: Sword* and of course with the sword out she was her usual *Avatar of War*. Sparkle waited several paces behind her, just in case it should go bad again, and Susan resisted the urge to shout a challenge to the creature no doubt lurking around nearby.

After all, I don't want to wake anyone from their nappy time. They would just get in the way here.

She waited.

How long until that guy found us last time, anyway? It was right past the gate, right?

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Sparkle, looking around.

"Here, Shatra, Shatra, Shatra! Come out and play... you monkey. Come on, I dare you. Where are you anyway? Hello?" She lowered her sword. "This stinks. You don't think he bravely ran away, away, do you?"

"Maybe to get some more of his half-demon buddies, or warn the king something that looked like you was strolling in past the front... what's that?"

Something came bouncing out of the darkness towards Susan, and thunked against her legs. She almost jumped away from it, but she was sure this kingdom hadn't developed gunpowder or anything like that without anyone noticing. She looked down at it...

It was Sativola's head.

"Oh, come on!" she shouted to the figure that stepped into her line of sight. He was holding another head, Kelder's, and had his sword drawn and ready. She gestured with a free hand, like she couldn't believe he had done that. "Seriously?"

"What?" said the Shatra. "You didn't expect me to just charge at you first, did you? Not even I'm that dumb. You should be thankful, you get to get ahead in life... twice in one night!" He started to laugh like he had told the best "that's what she said" joke ever.

Susan screamed in frustration as the magic took hold of her again, and once more her friends were standing there with her.

"I died again?!" shrieked Sativola.

"I got killed that time?!" shrieked Kelder right next to her. *"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"*

Susan sighed. *This is going to be a long night.*

Man, The Darkness said, wistful, never have I so wished for hands as I have tonight. I can't figure out if I should do a slow clap or get some popcorn for the show.

Shut up!

If at First you Don't Succeed...

Place: Still in front of the gate

Time: Still just about sunset

"Wait a second," reasoned Susan, looking at Sativola. "You got killed?"

"Yeah, we've been over this," replied Sativola.

"Hey demon, yeah, you in the talisman! Get out here!"

The stone in the talisman glowed, and Sativola lifted the chain so it was not under her blouse anymore.

"You called?" it asked, suddenly before them.

"Yeah, why didn't you protect her? She's your master, right, and protecting her is the whole point of your existence now. I'm getting that right, aren't I?"

"Protect her from what?" he asked honestly, looking around. "She hasn't been attacked. You've just been standing around here gibbering on about getting killed, but it never happened."

"You- But that's-"

"He wasn't included in the spell," remarked Sparkle. "He's technically just a piece of jewelry when he's not out."

"I guess you're right. Fine, go back again."

"What? I just got out! Isn't there something I can beat up before then? I'm bored!"

"You want to take the Shatra?"

"Shatra? There's one of those freaks still wandering around? I'll see you later."

He was gone.

"Coward."

"Even true demons flee before them?" asked Kelder. "And I will be reporting a witch has a *sorcerous* talisman that houses a *demonologists'* workings."

"You won't, if you know what's good for you... apprentice."

"Are you threatening me?"

Susan slowly leaned over, eyes narrowed. He leaned back, a little scared. "Yes." He swallowed. "Oh, right, I kind of thought so, just- just making sure. Uh, yes, carry on then. Man, having someone around that doesn't fear the guild is *hard*."

"Tough it out, big guy. Anyway, what happened? Think he just killed you too fast for the demon to react?"

"I don't know," insisted Sativola. "One minute I remember walking, the next I was dead, and then I was back here."

"Super. Well, you two are staying as far back as you can when that gate opens again. Getting you killed three times in one night would truly border on the excessive."

"Just the once was more than I cared to experience," she muttered.

Susan turned back to regard the gate. "We need a new plan. I may just have to bust in there as per my usual MO. Draw the thing out so he doesn't go looking for you two. Not that he knows you exist at the moment, of course. But he could have some weird senses, and that's why he knew you were around." She absentmindedly fingered her *Wizard Bracelet*. "I just wish there was some way I could be sure and not kill any of them!"

"Why not *Knockout?*" suggested Sparkle.

"Yeah, I could do a *Burst* or five, but that takes energy. It's bright, noisy, and if it doesn't hit them just right they could take multiple hits and still sound an alarm. I figure I better save my energy for these half-demon things running around."

"Please don't say you think there's more than one," Sativola breathed, aghast.

"Me, I'm the kind that plans for the worst," Susan explained. "I mean, it would be quite silly to think otherwise, am I right?"

"I guess."

"There is still one way," ventured Sparkle, looking thoughtful. "It's somewhat of a risk, but maybe we want an alarm raised in any case. Get as many soldiers here as they have, take them all out, and finish this quickly. Then you won't have to fight your way through the castle, or the streets. All the soldiers will have fallen here, at the gate."

"Go on, oh faithful *companion*," prompted Susan.

"*Elemental Weapon*. Wouldn't that be perfect for you? You can swing as hard as you want, use *Slash-All*, and after you cast it you just have a weapon in your hand, so it's not bright or loud."

"And it can't carry over into lethal damage!" Susan exclaimed, having gotten her book out and opened to the spell. "That is perfect. I take out everyone near the border, then when Mr. Halfsy shows up, I drop that spell, pull out my blade 'o fire and doom and cut him to shreds. I like it."

"And it does double damage," Sparkle reminded her. "Yes, you lose one third in the end, but with your *Giant's Soul* don't you do insane amounts even taking that into consideration?"

"That I do. Okay, give me a minute guys, I want to look something over, see if I'm spending 5 XP for a new spell right now (*she has six currently*) or just losing some spells I don't use anymore."

She happily got out her character sheet and started looking her spells over, leaving the other two pondering where she pulled that from. (And indeed, what she was actually talking about anyway)

She was about to turn it over when she noticed something new in the "Notes" section on the front. Apparently, she had gained six "warlock energy" and the Calling would take place when she failed a RESolve check, difficulty 5 + 1/1000 of this energy total. *Hey, that makes sense. If a normal human became a warlock, they could easily fight off the compulsion at the ten level, and that's five thousand energy collected from warlocky. Even someone with a normal RESolve and a little energy can hit fifteen rather often, right? No wonder it takes twenty years for a warlock to be Called, they would have high RESolves because they don't want to be called, and thus raising that stat despite the expense. If it even works that way for them, but I suppose there must be some way to do. Anyway, guess I don't have to worry about not using it, it'll take a long time to fail my 2d10 + 10 check!*

She flipped it over, now looking at the notes section on the "back page" where her spells were recorded.

Thinking about it now, my spell list is a little out of date. I've been focusing too much on physical combat, I guess. Like Alleviation. I have the knife for that, what would I possibly spend ten minutes casting that for? Do I need both Light and Darksight?

Sparkle knows Regeneration, why would I need to know it? And then there's Autonomous Assistant. I remember using that way back, to do chores around the house for me. Because magic! Would I need that spell on the road?

I guess now that I think about it, having a person sized "ghost" I can call up from nowhere could be fun. Like I could send it to wreak havoc in the area beyond the gate, moving things around and making the soldiers believe the place was haunted. They couldn't attack it, after all. What to do...

I only used Path Tracer once, thought it would come in more handy. That I could do from the book, it's only grade three! And Scribe, that's grade two and not useful now that I don't need to take notes anymore in class.

Susan quickly looked over her skill section. *Have to get rid of my pistol skill, I don't have that gun anymore! Wonder what else I can... anyway, first things first.*

She willed *Scribe* and *Path Tracer* off her character sheet, effectively "forgetting" how to cast them, and now had 5 XP to learn another spell with. She spent a few minutes going over *Elemental Weapon*, cast as a Neptune spell so it would be made of "solid" *Knockout*. That done, she cast the spell, boosting her skill to a ten so it could cut anything. *Not that I expect to run into anything it can't cut around here.* It took the form of an enormous sword, like the ones she saw Cloud swinging around. *After all, I've got the STrength to lift it, may as well go as gaudy and flashy as possible.*

Not to mention ludicrous, put in The Darkness.

You're right, there was no need to mention it.

"All right. You two, hang back someplace way over there until I signal you."

Susan waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the town. "Sparkle, you can handle the *Anchor* again, but don't bother with *Smog*. This time these guys are going to *know* they are under attack."

"Your call. I'll back you up if something tries to sneak up on you though. Even you aren't invincible. Oh, but I will put on *Acceleration*. Wait, let me activate this first, just in case something else goes wrong, we'll return to this point before we activated stuff. Save us the energy."

"Good point." Susan waited while she did, then said "*Augment Skill, Invulnerability,*" as she activated two of her charms. "*Slash-All, Speed Up!*" she also cried, activating her *Materia*. "That should do it."

Susan once again *Unlocked* the gate, and this time met with cries of alarm as soldiers scrambled to keep it closed.

I don't think so, boys, she thought, getting a 32 on her STrength check and sending them all flying back. *Actually, now that I think about it, there were a lot of people put to sleep around here before. Is the border usually this well guarded, or did they increase the number of people around here because I tested the gate earlier and lit up their little detection sphere up there? Oh well, who cares now?*

Susan stepped past the gate, where the waiting soldiers squinted at her, unable to believe their eyes.

"What's the meaning of this!" demanded someone with a fancier breastplate, walking up to her.

"I'm declaring war on your kingdom," she told him. "Surrender or bring me to the person who can."

He stared at her a moment, then burst out laughing. "Okay, who put her up to this?" he called, turning around. "Kelder, was that you? Get out here you guys, I want to know who did this!"

Kelder again?

He was still laughing and looking around when Susan flipped the grip on her sword so she was holding it overhanded rather than under. With it held up she made a called shot to his body and slammed the blade through his back. Her attack easily bypassed the +8 bonus the armor provided to keep him from being hit, sliding cleanly through his entire body. (The blade was huge, after all, no joke.) This did forty eight damage to him, and he didn't even whimper as the blade knocked him out. He crumpled, and every soldier there fully believed the somewhat cute girl everyone thought was a joke had somehow, impossibly, killed their captain. From behind, like a coward. In one attack, like a monster. Without remorse, also like a monster.

Reason went out the window.

They charged. (Well, most of them, he wasn't universally liked, of course. In fact he wasn't very well liked at all, but he was the captain so he should be avenged, right?)

Susan smiled, dropping into a crouch, as she again shifted her grip on the blade. As the soldiers got near she rolled *Initiative*, and struck.

As with the wolves in the world with Nita, she did a called shot to the body of each man, rolling an eighteen for the action. Of the six currently rushing her, two managed a complete dodge, which Susan had to admit was rather impressive. *Not that they should get one at all, given they've never seen anything like me, or this attack, before.* The others seemed to have a ghostly sword impact their armor, which hardly slowed them down. Of the six, only one went down, with just enough damage to render him unconscious.

Great, as it impacted their armor, and it's technically trying to target the spirit, they don't even have to make STRength checks to remain standing. As much damage as I would have done to the armor, had this been anything but Knockout, probably would have blown it off. As this only damages people, they're all unhurt. And it didn't even feel like they were attacked, I bet. She sighed. *And I really wanted to conserve energy...*

Ugh, I'm so stupid! I can pluck energy from their comatose bodies later, I don't need to conserve it.

Those still running got another step forward before Susan swung again, this time putting energy into COOrdination in order to hit better. A more pleasing twenty six was achieved this time, and again they tried to dodge. None managed it, and this time all but one man went sprawling, to his great surprise. He pulled up short and regarded her.

"So, is it your great speed that gives you the confidence to believe you can take over our entire kingdom?" he asked, keeping his sword up in a guard position.

"Speed? Oh, you think- not just that, no. Though I am pretty proud of my speed, why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if you could dodge arrows?"

"Arrows?"

That's when the rain of arrows hit her from behind, as the soldiers on the platforms above her opened fire.

Of course, with *Invulnerability* going they bounced harmlessly off, leaving the swordsman's mouth hanging open.

"Why would I need to?" she asked, swinging her blade as she swung in a circle. As she did she noted the positions of the archers on the walls so the swing could target them, which it did. Another ten energy used, and she got a thirty two to hit them all in the body. (There were seven in range) Their maximum roll was a thirty three, and again only one was left standing, an archer at the limit of her range.

He gave a shriek of terror, flung his bow into the air, and did a runner out of sight along the platform.

More arrows struck her from the slits in the walls before her, and she wondered if just knowing someone was there was enough to target them with *Slash-All*. She shrugged, decided not to experiment at the moment, and sent a sixteen meter radius "*Elemental Burst: Knockout*" starting at what she considered the middle of the barricade lines. (She got a fifteen *Magic Combat* to get the distance right.)

No more arrows were sent her way, so she casually strolled over to the nearest fallen man and cast *Energy Drain* on him. She got three actions worth of energy before the Shata casually stepped into her field of view again.

"They were right to station me here tonight, it seems," he remarked, looking the bodies over. "Odd though, they don't seem dead." He tossed the man he had been holding by the neck roughly to the ground, where he sprawled like bad rag doll physics in a first person shooter game. "What's the matter, can't handle a little blood?"

"Oh, I was saving the bloodletting for you," she replied, letting go of the sword and causing it to vanish.

"You're going to fight me with your bare hands?" it asked, amused.

"As much as I owe you a beating, no, I was just getting out my other sword."

"Do I know you? And what other sword, I see you carry no other. Though where did the one you dropped go?"

"Aren't you just a Curious George? I'll make you deal- I'll tell you if you win. *Blade.*"

With that, her *Crystal Sword* came into her waiting hand, and she charged the creature before it could register much surprise. With her current speed of twenty four it was going to take her one segment to reach him, which gave a being as fast as he was plenty of time to bring his blade up. This, again, had taken on an odd glow from the sphere set by the guard. (Her reach was greater, now being a plus one size modifier, so while he was five meters away, she only needed to be within two meters to hit him.) Her only real concern was that glowing orb.

Just a smaller version of the one on the gate, or does that give his sword special properties?

She didn't want to take the time to do *Magic Sense*, figuring she would just take whatever he dished out, and strike him back without bothering to dodge. That should cut him down, making the point moot.

They struck each other at the same time, both hitting as neither bothered to dodge. Susan felt his blade bite through her armor but didn't do more than nick her body, while her blade easily sliced through his left leg by doing fifty one damage. (This was only four more than the attack needed, so it was actually quite close) Amazingly, he remained conscious even as he screamed and went down.

"I'll kill you!" he promised.

"You don't even have a leg to stand... oh wait, you do. Shall I fix that for you?" She raised her sword again.

"I won't give you the satisfaction," he snarled, and plunged his sword into his own chest. "Die," he managed, ripping the blade through his body.

Susan stepped back, surprised.

"How am I going die when you've killed yourself?" she asked his corpse. She looked at him from both sides, wondering if he had another form he was going to take, but no, he was quite dead. She reached for his sword, wondering if it was better than her own, when she noticed a whine in the air, and the body started to glow.

Okay, that can't be-

The world disappeared in fire, and Susan stumbled and fell as the ground beneath her feet slagged with an astonishing ninety one damage. In fact, everything up to seven meters out, including people, the walls, the ground, even the air took this much damage. Susan couldn't even make a *Gymnastics* check as she fell 3.5 meters as the ground simply disappeared underneath her, the flame too intense to see through. It cleared in seconds, leaving her staring up at the sky and thankful she was immune to fire in this form.

"Susan!" came several voices a moment later, and she saw the heads of her friends peaking over the new hole in the ground. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she shouted back, getting up. "What's it look like up there?"

"You better see for yourself!"

Climbing back out, Susan did just that. The glowing sword was gone, she figured at least several people were dead, that one the Shatra had thrown down at the very least. *And after all those pains to keep them all alive.* "We'll have to reset, try something else," she said sadly. "Those people don't deserve to die just because I beat up a Shatra."

"You better do it fast," said Kelder, "I hear people coming to see what that explosion was."

"You sure?" asked Sparkle. "You'll have to do that all again."

Susan nodded. "We'll find some other way. Maybe I can just *Knockout* him, too?"

"You got it, boss."

Without another word the night was as it had been a second after Sparkle had activated the spell.

"So what happened?" asked Kelder.

"I wish I knew. I sliced his leg off, he fell over, stabbed himself in the chest, and foom, fireball city."

"Never heard of Shata exploding like that. They were supposed to be expert

fighters, and much faster than a man, but that's all they had going for them."

"We could ask a demonologist, I suppose," said Sativola. "Do you think it was the sword that made him do that?"

"He hit me with it, and I didn't burst into flames. Of course, I'm immune to fire so maybe that's it?"

The three looked at each other, none having any answers.

"Was he immune to fire though, that's the real question," posed Sparkle. "If it was the blade, and if hitting someone makes them explode like that, you have to imagine he would be."

"Right, it would be too dangerous to use otherwise. But man, he couldn't use it except when he was fighting alone, he would roast any allies!"

"He's a demon, you think he cares about allies?" asked Kelder.

"Oh, you've got a point. Look, let's call it a night. We can attack tomorrow or something, this just isn't working and we need to think of a new strategy."

"I'm sure we can find an inn somewhere," said Sativola. "Come on."

That night, Susan worked on remaking the few *Spell Papers* she had used, and asked *Question* if the sword of the Shatra she had fought hitting something caused it to burst into flames. She got back a "no" answer, and wondered exactly what *had* caused the man to expire in such a dramatic fashion. With that done she stripped off her clothes and fell into bed.

"How goes it?" asked the wizard in her dream.

Not Expecting Her

Time: About an hour after Susan fell asleep

Place: Susan's Dream

Susan looked around, not understanding how she had come here. The room was unfurnished, uniformly lit without torches or lights, and didn't seem to be quite real. In a flash, she realized why.

"Dream magic," she said, looking over at the wizard. It was a man she had seen before, but of course she didn't know his name. He had been there during the talks in her *Dimension*, which made sense. *He would need to have seen me to use the magic to get into my dreams, of course.*

"Ah, you're familiar. Good, that saves some time. So, is everything all right?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Our wardings indicated some rather odd magic going on in your vicinity, but we couldn't trace it afterwards. So we figured we would ask, make sure nothing too serious was going on."

"Do you call Shata serious?"

"Shatra? What, there? Impossible!"

"Tell that to him. My two companions seem terrified of him, and whatever he is, he isn't human. Looks it though, so what else could he be?"

"Perhaps you better start at the beginning."

So Susan told him about the wall around the kingdom, and the barrier it was generating. Also how she had attacked the gate several times that night and lastly how he had killed himself rather than allow Susan to kill him, and exploded afterwards.

"I've never heard of a Shatra exploding in flame, especially one that burned hot enough to melt the ground that far out. Troubling, very troubling. Of course there's a lot we don't know about them, and why should we? They were all killed a long time ago and we thought the method for creating them had been lost."

"Apparently not. Unless this one has just been alive ever since then?"

"Possible, I suppose. We don't know how long they would have lived, either. Well, as far as him exploding upon death, did it happen immediately?"

Susan considered. "No, I would say there was maybe a two second delay? I was *Accelerated* with magic at the time and I was out of combat time so it's tough to say."

"Combat... time? Anyway, the solution seems clear to me. Just fling the body skyward with your warlockly. You do have a warlock's magic, don't you?"

"I do, but I've been hesitant to use it. For obvious reasons."

"Still, using it for this won't be harmful to you."

"I guess. I'll have to try it beforehand, see if I can actually lift a man sized object with it. If not I can use my magic, I know a similar spell. Anyway, that's for me to plan."

"If you even wish to continue," he said, holding a palm up.

"Why wouldn't I? You guys did give me a mission, and I plan to see it through. I've not gotten anywhere close to the castle yet."

"But you've proven something is going on there, which is what we wanted. This

barrier and a Shatra running around... both add up to one thing.”

“But they won’t let you into the kingdom, and they’ll know you’re coming because of that jewel thing at the gate. Sure, you could force the issue, but not as well as I can. And they obviously have wizards on their side, even if they aren’t allowed inside, to maintain the wall.”

“True. Well, if you’re determined to see it through I won’t stop you. Just stay safe.”

“Of course.”

“Let us know if the guild can help at all, you can get back to us easier than we can get back to you.”

“True. I’ll let you know.”

“Good night.”

In the morning, Susan and Sparkle talked strategy for what they wanted to try that day.

“Why not just use your favorite, the *Hypnotic Pattern*?” asked Sparkle. “It seems to me that he probably exploded with a force equal to his energy total. If you just drained his energy, that explosion might not even happen!”

“True. I thought about it, but honestly, that feels cheap.”

“Cheap? Whatever keeps you alive in combat, that’s what you do, right?”

“Normally, yes. But the thing is, remember our goal- rescue my father. He’s supposedly more powerful than me, right? I mean you traveled with him...”

“True. He had the staff, and other backgrounds you don’t. He probably had roughly the same number of spells memorized, and he copied the book before he left it with you. So we can assume he’s more powerful now than when I left him.”

“So I need to be *better*, rather than just more powerful, is my thinking. That means learning how to fight, and probably without magic. Given that if my father wasn’t trapped in some dead magic zone, he would have already busted out.”

“I can accept that. But doesn’t that just mean raising your *Sword: Slashing* skill?”

Susan shook her head. “That’s how I *attack*, not how I *fight*. I need to be in many different kinds of battles, so I have experience fighting, not the XP kind. Being in different situations, working through problems, that’s what I need most right now. On my world I just powered through people because my magic was so superior to theirs. They didn’t use weapons, and I could become immune to anything they threw at me. Out here there are more weird powers and different ways to attack me, I can’t possibly anticipate them all. I mean exploding when you die- where did *that* come from?”

Pokémon? asked The Darkness.

She scowled and ignored him. “Anyway, I didn’t consider it and look what happened? I should have thrown him into the air just to be safe. But I didn’t, I stood there with a dumb look on my face wondering what was going on. If I hadn’t been immune to fire, or if he exploded with ice or something, that would have been the end of me. I need to get better at acting in the moment, and anticipating powers I’ve never encountered before.”

Sparkle nodded. “You do well on the planning stuff, at least when you know what you’re up against.”

“And now I know. Let’s think of a way to get rid of that guy and not have him

explode a bunch of innocent townspeople.”

“Is just throwing him in the air the solution?”

“There’s no spell to seal him off, like a reverse *Shell*. That just makes a barrier centered on the caster. I need one with range M rather than range P. Probably grade seven though, forget it. Though a grade 2 version that can move, and be enough to keep off rain or snow...” She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “The point is, what do we know and have now, without learning anything new, that can work? Do I just hit him with *Knockout*?”

“We can’t assume he won’t explode just from going unconscious though, think of *Spell Trigger*. If he set something like that up, to explode his enemy when he couldn’t fight anymore... heck, he could be immune to fire too, and never planned on dying in a one on one fight. That was just a precaution in case he got knocked out, and he just happened to use it that way!”

“Shoot, that actually makes a lot of sense. Oh, what if I *Phased* him after he died?! I’m immune to fire, it would pass through everything without hurting it.”

“That could work. I could also be flying overhead and you could just *Transpose* me with him when he died.”

“I’d get a better bonus doing it that way, from having *Acceleration* up. I could cast it faster. Yeah, that’s certainly an option.”

“Here’s another- *Elemental Line: Pluto (Ether)*. He can’t succeed on a RESolve check if he’s dead. So he’s guaranteed to get shoved into insubstantiality when hit.”

“That stuff ignores armor, too, doesn’t it?”

Sparkle nodded. “Yup. It’s only useful in a handful of situations, and I forget exactly why I picked that spell up in particular.”

“Some sort of crowd control maybe? Cutting down on the number of enemies we might have to fight? It must have been before I got *Slash-All*.”

“Yeah. Maybe when we go back to the Hub I’ll take a good look at my spells, maybe rearrange them a bit.”

“I was thinking that exact thing last night! Weird. Okay, do that. I’d rather not be next to him if I can help it, even if I am immune to fire. Seeing blast coming towards me was not fun. It went fast, so even *Accelerated* it wasn’t in slow motion or anything, but I knew it was going to hit me.”

“Got it. So how are we getting in? Waiting until nightfall again?”

“No, let’s just do this.”

“*Overconfident*, huh?”

Susan winked. “You know it.”

So Susan used another *Time Anchor* and the group went out to “sneak” into the kingdom again. This time, Susan had her flaming sword in her left hand, the sword of *Knockout* in her right. She still had all the spells from the night before going, like *Invulnerability*, and again there was a commotion at the gate.

“I am declaring war upon your kingdom,” Susan repeated, having really liked the sound of it the night before. “Open this gate and defend it.”

“But if we don’t open it,” called the captain from the other side, “we don’t have to defend it. That’s the whole point.” The other soldiers nearby, and at the top of the wall, shouted their appreciation for this logic. They believed that even this giant of a creature

couldn't breach their walls, and in security was confidence.

Susan had to admit that *was* a good point. She couldn't batter the gate down, it was no doubt as resistant to attack as the stones in the wall. And her hands were full of swords, and it would look bad to drop one to open something as simple as an iron gate. But she hadn't used her warlock abilities in a while, so she looked the gate over.

Wait, is it really worth it? she asked herself. *Eh, it can't hurt, right?*

She could see, in a way she didn't really understand, the inner locking mechanism that secured the gate. *I wouldn't be able to do this with Telekinesis magic,* she thought, *twisting it with warlocky. I couldn't see it that way. But when I draw on this power, I can. How weird is that?*

With the lock twisted (and broken so it couldn't be relocked) the spikes that drove the gate into the ground retracted and Susan was able to shove it aside before the surprised guards could react. That was two uses of the power, and she was now up by two energy and feeling good. *But I can't start to rely on it in combat, as I'll only have it on this world.*

Not necessarily, countered The Darkness.

What do you mean- no, never mind, I have these soldiers to take care of at the moment.

Suit yourself, just remember to ask me about it later.

Sure, sure.

Susan again easily tore through the regular soldiers, keeping an eye out for the big guy, but standing there draining energy from the downed men, he didn't appear.

Not on duty? she wondered.

"What's that?" asked Sparkle, and Susan looked to find her pointing with a paw. She looked down that way, and floating towards her was a curious looking woman. She was tiny and unarmored, in fact she wasn't wearing much of anything apart from rags. These rags didn't seem tied around her or secured in any way, but they clung to her body as though glued there. The only ornamentation she carried were two bracelets and a choker, the bracelets set with blue stones, the choker with green. Her eyes were also covered with a cloth, so Susan figured she was blind or saw through some other, magical means. Her long, white hair billowed out behind her, and she seemed to bob almost lazily towards where Susan had been fighting. She was almost the size of a child, as close to being a -1 size modifier as the big guy she had fought the night before was to being a +1. The area around her seemed to fall a bit quieter at her approach, and she stopped, hovering, a few meters from where Susan was standing.

She put her hand out and the sword came back into her grasp, becoming sheathed in fire again. "I expected the big guy," she said, "don't tell me they made woman Shatra as well?"

The figure put a finger to her lips as though inside a library, and said nothing.

"You are a Shata, right? Not just some weird, floating woman?"

Again, there was no reply.

"ANSWER ME!" Susan shouted, and was shocked to find the woman darting towards her much faster than she would have thought possible, hands catching her two hands so she couldn't easily swing her swords. Her legs went around her waist, locking together and the woman smiled, looking quite beautiful.

Susan tried to take a breath to say “Oh, you want to fight, huh?” but found to her amazement she couldn’t breathe, and that was going to be a problem.

As she didn’t have much air in her lungs, she was treated as suffocating immediately, meaning every five segments she took a nonlethal point of damage to the head. Not much concern in the short term, given her ENDurance of eight, but somewhat embarrassing if she needed to reset again because of it.

She rolled *Initiative* and started her counterattack.

She couldn’t exactly slam this woman into the ground with *Wrestling*, she was still floating, Susan couldn’t feel any weight on her despite the woman grabbing her. But she could rip her way free and dodge back again, get her breath back. *I’ll just shove her like I did the pirates, that will break her hold on me and give me some ‘breathing’ room.* She contemptuously made a STRength check to tear away from the woman’s hands, but was astonished when the gems in the woman’s bracelets glowed brightly, and she failed to pull away.

I just failed a STRength check? Impossible!

But it was possible, and Susan’s delay went up by two for the action. *Fine*, she thought, *I’ll just do magic.* The woman did nothing but stare at her, that grin on her face which now seemed a little creepier.

“...” Susan said, trying to cast *Phase* to get away. But no words came out, and as she hadn’t tried to cast non-verbally the spell didn’t even go off.

Fine, have it your way.

Sparkle, meanwhile, was waiting for her to do something, having a Paragon’s awareness of the two actions she had taken. *I think something might seriously be wrong! Can’t use Line it might hit her, but there is something I can do.*

She took to the sky, having cast *Flight* on herself earlier as part of the “get the exploding guy away from the town” plan earlier. She came down on the woman’s head, and she couldn’t exactly dodge as she held onto Susan. “Elemental Touch: Kn-” Just as she went to touch the woman her voice got cut off, and the spell fizzled.

Oh, that’s why! Crap!

Susan took her first non-lethal to the head, an unpleasant experience, and decided to just throw energy into something, as usual. *After all, I have plenty of downed soldiers to pick from to get it back. In fact, that gives me an idea.*

She wordlessly cast *Transposition*, aiming at a nearby soldier, and putting in maximum energy. Even taking no time, her penalty of -2 for not saying the words still put her minimum result at a twelve, and her difficulty was an eleven. She was rather surprised when that didn’t work either.

Now what? Oh, right, I need to gesture to do magic, too. It’s so automatic I don’t even think about it most of the time, I’ve never really done a physical spell while having both hands pinned. Expect for that one time I was pinned under those slabs of rock back with Nita. And I used Phase for that. Guess it’s Phase after all.

Sparkle went at the same time, rising above the woman and shouting down “*Thrust*,” intending to break her hold by driving her into the ground. The magic hit her with a twenty two result, but the gems simply glowed again and she held on doggedly.

Okay, what?

Her next action, Susan got an eighteen on *Phase*, and the woman dropped away from her. She took in a relieved breath, then shouted “Don’t let her touch you!” up to Sparkle.

Sparkle cocked her head, it looked like Susan was saying something, but certainly she remembered that after using the *Phase* spell, which she had obviously just used, no one else not *Phased* could hear her.

In any case, the woman tried again and again to grab onto Susan, but simply passed through. She seemed to be silently screaming in rage.

Sparkle could now cast *Line* without fear of hitting Susan, so she did. “*Elemental Line: Wind*,” she cast, doing it instantly and relying on her bonus from *Acceleration* to make up the difference.

The woman easily dodged it, flying up to grab Sparkle who had just screamed something at her.

Sparkle saw her coming, and outdistanced her, flying across the line again, hoping the woman would be stupid enough to follow her. The woman got a twenty one on her *perception* check to see the line, and a seventeen to reason out it might not be a good idea to touch it, and started heading around.

(In her haste, Sparkle had completely forgotten that flying creatures were immune to the *Line* anyway. Whoops!)

Susan dropped out of *Phase*, nearly swung with her left hand to cut the woman down with her real sword, but made a REASON check of twenty to realize that might be The Darkness trying to influence her. She switched to the other, not wanting to kill this woman who, for all she knew, had been implanted with this demon against her will.

Really rather have Long Range going for this, rather than Slash-All. Oh well, it’ll work out.

Except it didn’t, she got a thirteen to hit while this was one from the woman’s minimum to dodge, and she got a sixteen which was still a terrible result given her stats. *Shoot, she’s a slippery one, isn’t she? Putting more energy into COOrdination then? Check.*

She went again, doing just that and getting a twenty seven. This time she connected, belatedly realizing she should have done a called shot, as usual. It didn’t matter, in the end, as she hit the body for twenty six damage and the woman fell out of the sky without a sound. She didn’t even thump as she impacted the dirt below, and Susan hastily called to Sparkle. “Get higher up!”

“Right!”

Susan waited a few segments, somewhat ironically holding her breath, then cast *Transposition* again, switching the two.

She shaded her eyes, expecting an explosion. What she got was the poor woman’s body going **splat** on the ground, again making no noise.

“Oh,” said Susan, “I guess that’s just when they die?”
“Don’t look at me. What are we going to do with her now?”
Susan thought a moment. “Actually... I have an idea.”

Blending In

Place: Just inside the gate

Time: Just then

"We have to move fast. You still have energy, right?" asked Susan.

"Yeah, some. What do you have in mind?"

"You'll see. Come on." Susan dragged the unconscious woman with her using *Telekinesis* as she backed out of the area. She had to get out of the kingdom so her *Teleportal* magic would work again, which she did.

"I'll be right back," she said to Kelder and Sativola. "Stay out of sight but keep close, I think I can get us all inside when I get back!"

She opened a hole in the air, and stepped through. "Can I get a little help here?" she called, after dropping the transport spell. She dumped the body on the table and stuck her head into the hallway, where she told the young boy that was walking through with a book she needed to see Ithinia the Wizard, and that he would bring her here, no arguments!

The boy, conditioned to obey, hurried off to see what he could do, and moments later she appeared through the door.

"Who is that?" she asked, taking in the scene.

"A Shatra, I think," Susan replied.

"And you brought her here?" shrieked Ithinia, grabbing her knife out of its sheath. "Wait, her? There's no such thing as a... Who is this?" She lowered the knife, walking forward and looking the woman over.

"Well, she could float around, silence with a touch, and when she was holding onto me I couldn't breathe or get free. You know anything but one of your half-demon friends that can do all that?"

"But that's not a Shatra! A Shatra is a combat demon, a man!"

"Really?" asked Susan icily. "A woman can't be a fighter?"

She sputtered. "Maybe it's different where you come from-"

Susan waved that away. "Never mind that. Do you have any sort of holding cells for dangerous people? We need to stick her in one."

"What in the name of all the gods for?"

"A bunch of reasons, actually. First, I'm not just going to kill her in cold blood, I learned a non-lethal spell to not seriously hurt anyone there. Second, I'm taking her place, so she'll need to be gone from the area. Third, I thought perhaps you might like to, I don't know, see if the demon inside her can be removed and she can go back to being just a person again?"

The wizard shook her head. "As far as I know the process is irreversible."

"But you've not really studied it?"

"That's true. I suppose we should make some attempt. And you say you're going to replace her?"

"Yup. You want to hide in the ocean, you have to look like a fish!"

"I suppose. Come along then."

Susan hefted her with magic (just touching her, she had discovered, caused her

to be unable to breathe) and followed. She floated her into the waiting cell, and gently lowered her to the ground. "Actually, she took a pretty nasty fall so she may need medical treatment. I didn't want to do any healing on her, because that would wake her up. Now, let's see here..." She did a *Magic Sense*, getting a sixteen, enough to sense the magic in the choker and two bracelets. She took them off, carrying them with her out of the cell.

"You want to heal her now?" asked Ithinia. "I'd feel more comfortable with you around, if she gets out of hand. Plus, don't you want to ask her some questions about the place?"

Susan shook her head. "No time. Don't want to be gone too long, the soldiers will start waking up. Plus, she didn't make a single sound the whole time I was fighting her. I don't think we'll get much out of her. No, use whatever healing magic you have, and have a bunch of wizards with materials ready in case she tries to escape. I *think* these bracelets had something to do with her STREngth before, it felt like my own STREngth was being reflected back at me. Without them, she shouldn't be nearly as strong." *I hope.*

"Sorcery," said Ithinia with a grimace. "Who can say what sort of power they have? We'll get an expert in right away to take a look at them."

"Great. I'll be back as soon as I can, but I doubt she'll give you much trouble. I'm heading back, see you later."

One casting later, and Susan was again at the border of the kingdom of Reldamon.

"There's some commotion over there," said Sativola. "Whatever you're doing, you better do it quick."

"Don't worry." Susan put *Invisibility* on herself, then dragged two soldiers out when no one was looking. She brought them back to the other's hiding spot, then drained their energy. "That's better," she sighed. "Now, you two, strip!" She started taking her clothes off as well.

"You like to get people's clothes off, don't you?" Sativola asked suspiciously. Kelder was tightly closing his eyes.

"You better believe it. Now, if you want to come with me, you'll do as I say. You two are going to be *Shape-shifted* into these two guards. You'll put on their clothes, and we'll march back in there. This way, no one should attack us anymore and we can get to the castle."

"Oh," said Sativola. "But, they're guys."

"So? Never been a guy before? It'll be a good experience for you. Now hurry up, we've been gone too long already!"

"Who are you going to be?"

"I'm going to be the Shatra, of course. Come on, come on!"

Reluctantly, the two stripped down and figured out how to take the armor off the two unconscious soldiers. While they did that, Susan reloaded the *Spell Symbols* she had used, making sure the most useful spells for what she figured she would be facing next were loaded into her bracelet. That done, she had Sparkle cast *Shape-Shift* on all of them, while they all held the image of what they wanted to turn into in their minds.

Quickly donning the armor, Kelder and Sativola were now the spitting image of the two soldiers they had looted.

“Wait a minute, how come you get those rags but we had to put on these clothes?” protested Kelder, looking her over. “Couldn’t we have just looked like them in armor?”

“I’m still technically naked,” she explained. “I’m just in the shape of that woman, in rags. I figured you two would not want to walk about the kingdom naked, even if it looked like you were wearing something. And besides, the armor could come in handy. I’m not exactly happy with it myself-”

Liar.

“But no one should look twice at a Shatra, if they know what’s good for them. Right?”

“Can we just get this over with?” asked Sativola.

“Okay.” Susan shoved the whole ball of clothes into her *Pocket Dimension*, then took to the sky with *Flight*.

“I’ll be nearby,” said Sparkle, “just act natural, okay?”

“I don’t know what’s natural for a soldier in this kingdom!”

“Just look like you belong. And don’t talk to me, I won’t be able to make any nosies if I’m to stay in character. Ready? Come on.”

The three went back through the gate, where fresh soldiers were trying to wake up the ones that had been taken out just moments ago by Susan. The two tried to walk with purpose, like they were looking for something, and gripped their weapons tightly. Susan floated along and tried to look uninterested.

The “kingdom” was the most run down place she had yet seen in this world, with hardly any green to be seen. There were a lot of run down looking places, people, and things, and no one gave her a second glance. *Meaning she’s been floating around here long enough to not be a curiosity any more. That, or they know not to make trouble when there are “soldiers” around.* She saw many people that she assumed were living on the streets, they were dirty and basically wearing rags. *This kingdom hasn’t done them any favors, and if the king is a demon, it’s not hard to guess why.*

She led them around in circles for some time, given her *No Sense of Direction* weakness, but finally the castle came into view. She paused, found a place behind some houses that seemed deserted, and made her way over there. The others followed.

“I’m heading for the castle, and they’ll probably let me in,” she explained. “I’ll see how far I can get before I get stopped, and see if I can’t find out what’s in the dungeon or wherever the king goes. I can make you *Unseen* again, or you can stay here.”

“What did we come this far for if not to go inside?” asked... whoever that was. Susan had lost track.

“I’m just making you the offer,” she explained. “The Shatra can see you, and if he starts asking why you’re there and others start saying he’s talking to thin air...”

“That could cause an issue,” the other agreed. “You can save right here, right?”

“Oh yeah, good point, we’ve made it this far, it’s a great time to!” Susan did so.

“So you’re in?”

The two looked at each other and nodded. “We’re in,” they said.

“Just make sure not to bump into anyone,” said Sparkle, coming up behind them. “It’ll be hallways inside, not big open spaces like this. Don’t forget and crash into somebody.”

They both nodded, and Susan got out her book, putting *Unseen* on all three. That done she put it away again and floated into the castle.

Why didn’t you just go in Unseen? asked The Darkness.

I want to see how people in the castle react to me. Plus I may have to open guarded doors, and that would break the spell. Well, if they were standing right in front of it, anyway.

Upon entering the castle Susan received a great deal of deference, with soldiers, noblemen, girls that were probably princess, pretty much everyone stepping to the side when they saw her floating past. Conversations stopped, and began again much lower after she passed. *So they know what I- what she is. And apparently she’s seen around the castle enough to not cause any undo comment.*

Susan went down any set of stairs she come to, but worried that she would walk right past any door to the basement. *After all, you wouldn’t guard this side of the door, would you? No, you would just lock this side, so as not to advertise to anyone walking past that there was something to be guarded just beyond.*

She need not have worried, as one of the “guards” whispered “here!” to her, looking at a door like any other. She slowly turned, but no one was in this particular hallway.

“There’s a strong magic on this door!”

Must be nice to sense magic like I currently do Spirit Energy. I have to make checks in Magic Sense, it seems she just kind of picks up on stuff.

Susan tried the handle, but it was locked, so glancing to make sure she was still “alone” she cast *Unlock* and pushed it open. There was a set of stairs heading down, and torchlight beyond, so Susan didn’t bother with *Light* or *Darksight*. She slowly floated down, and the others followed, softly closing the door.

Wish I knew the Lock spell now, but hopefully no one will try the door anytime soon. I don’t have a LUCk of nine for nothing, after all.

The group went down.

They found a simple hallway, lit by torches, and Susan heard voices up ahead. Looking down the hall there were several doors, only one of which had soldiers in front of it. The others were unguarded, so she went forward and started opening them. The two soldiers perked up at this, but apart from looking at each other confused, didn’t move.

The door on the left was abuzz with activity, it looked like people doing *Imbuing*, or at least this world’s version of it. Crystals, diagrams, charts, workbenches, all manner of things were being studied, looked at, worked on, or created by men in dark clothes.

“Talismans,” said one of her friends, looking past her.

“Quiet, they can probably see and hear you,” whispered Susan. “They have

magic!”

She nodded her head, and crept past.

The next room was just storage, and the room past that was a barracks looking place, plain with rows of beds. That just left the room at the end, and as Susan approached she could hear screams coming from within. *Yeah, this must be the place.*

The guards, still uncertain, blocked her path with their weapons.

“No one is allowed in... how did you get down here, anyway?” asked the one on the right.

Susan pointed to the door, knowing if she spoke it was probably all over.

“She got down here, the king must have let her, right?” the one on the left asked the one on the right.

“But what about our orders? He would have sent written orders down with her, right?”

“You want to try stopping her if she wants to go through this door? We’re expendable!”

“I guess. Heh, it’s not like she’s going to go tell the king on us anyway!” snorted the man. “Are you?”

She stared at him, wondering how much her original interacted. She had a brilliant idea, and put a finger to her lips like she saw the original doing.

“Yeah, yeah. Go through then.” The two stepped out of the way, and Susan tried the knob.

It was locked as well.

She looked between the men, who shrugged. “We can’t open the door, you crazy?” asked the one on the left. “You hear all that screaming, don’t you? I don’t *want* to know what’s on the other side.”

She looked to the other, who raised a palm, no help there.

Susan touched the door and silently cast *Unlock* again, making the door glow with magic.

“Hey now, what are you doing?” asked the right guy, starting to bring his weapon up again.

Susan grabbed the knob again, easily twisting it and shoving the door open. The screaming noises got louder.

“Oh, uh, okay?” He seemed torn between wanting to see what was in the room and knowing he would probably be killed if he actually did, so he faced directly away from it again. “Didn’t know you could do that.”

Susan ignored him, shoving the door fully open so her friends could step inside.

What she saw horrified her beyond anything she had ever witnessed.

People, all kinds of people, strapped down and thrashing. Young people. Old people. Men. Women. Some looked to be totally maniac, at the sight of the door opening they went wild, straining against their bonds. Others didn’t even notice, just kept screaming in agony. All were filthy, and the smell was beyond foul. Any clothes they had been wearing were torn off long ago, and some were deformed, as if demons had been implanted into them and started to physically change their bodies. But the

changes weren't complete, and those changed had no sanity left in their eyes, if eyes they had. One had scales over one half his body, another woman had four extra arms and her head looked like a spider's. Those not in agony were looking at her like they wanted nothing more than to tear her apart, and were straining against chains, ropes, and other bonds to do so. At least one person had hope in their eyes, seeming to shout "kill me, please kill me!" above the din.

In one corner of the room there was a cleared section, where a symbol was painted on the floor. Black candles, burnt almost to stubs, encircled the symbol, and parts were covered with what could only be dried blood. Knives, gems, crystals, and even more odds and ends overflowed from a shelf nearby, possibly components for whatever demon needed to be summoned for the sick experiments carried out here.

Susan's anger at the scene flared white hot in an instant.

The rejects, unless I miss my guess, remarked The Darkness. And listen to that choir! You even hear anything like that? Astonishing what you tiny beings can accomplish if you try, isn't it? It's like a human scientist trying to make a winged pig by splicing together-

Shut. Up.

Just making convers-

QUIET!

Okay, okay.

Susan turned, looking back at her friends. One "guard" had his hands at his temples, as if trying to block out psychic pain on a scale he had never experienced. The other just looked sick. Even through her anger, Susan had to sympathize. She couldn't begin to imagine the psychic pressure her witch friend was under right now. But she knew she still had a job to do.

"Get back," she said to them, shoving them towards the door. "Sparkle, shut them up."

"Right," said Sparkle, starting to cast.

"You can talk?" asked the guard on the right, having heard her. Susan's anger flared again, and she used maximum energy to cast *Elemental Weapon* twice, once for each hand. The surprised guards didn't stand a chance as she spent an XP for an extra action and stabbed both of them in the chest at the same time. She still had *Augment Skill* going, and easily pierced both, doing forty four and sixty two damage, dropping them both. She let go of the blades again, and they slumped over.

"Uh..." said one of her friends.

"Not now," she replied tightly.

The screaming cut off, and the two looked over to see the room blanketed in fog. Susan knew what was happening, she just bent down and started casting *Energy Drain* on the two soldiers. She held it probably a little longer than was probably healthy on each, but at the moment she hardly cared.

That done, the fog cleared and the room was still.

"You two," she said, looking at her friends, "stay here. See what you can learn from them, I suggest you don't wake them up, though. If you think they can be saved,

fine. I do know magic to expel one being possessing another. If you think it's not a form of possession, or they are too far gone, I'll put them out of their misery later. Unless you think you're up to it."

"You'll kill them?"

Susan gazed at him, eyes hard. "Would you want to exist like that? Or let them out into the world? Or try to care for them? Huh?"

"No, but... there must be another way!"

"Then figure it out. That's your job at the moment. Sparkle, same spell, that door." She pointed down the hall where the sorcerers were working. It was far enough away not to have heard the screams or the screams ending.

"Got it. I won't be of much use to you, I'm getting pretty low."

"Stay here with them. Safer that way. Just buff me. I'll have everything I'll need before I get up those stairs."

Sparkle looked to the energy drained soldiers now lying in a heap by the door.

"Don't go overboard. Remember Professor Umbrage."

"Even she wouldn't do something like this. The king here has."

"And killing him is the answer?"

"What, you want to put him on trail? He's making abominations! Look at them!"

Sparkle was silent a moment. "I saw. Okay, just don't lose yourself up there."

"I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so."

Sparkle went to put the sorcerers down the hall to sleep, and Susan stole their energy as well, draining them dry so they didn't wake up any time soon and provide magical support with whatever talismans they had working on down here. Susan wished she could identify, maybe use some against the king, but figured it was better to stick to her own magic anyway. There were six of them, and so Susan now had three hundred energy*, and Sparkle winced when she got near.

"Feels weird," she remarked, putting *Acceleration* on Susan.

"Feels good," countered Susan. "Bet this is how experienced warlocks around here feel."

"Just remember what happens to them."

"Ha! I could take it. See you in a few minutes."

"Good luck."

"I've got all the luck I need, right here. *Blade*."

*as a note, using the rule that only one stat can be a ten, the maximum energy a normal human can have in the Demongate High setting with the *Spirit Well* background is 360.

Fight in the castle

Time: A moment later

Place: The top of the stairs, leading into the castle proper.

As Susan mounted the stairs her anger grew again. *How can the king have sanctioned such a thing? Does he really think he can control these shatra? Or is he the victim, somehow? Did a shatra walk into his kingdom, demand access to resources... and then go on guard duty? But there could be more going on here. I need to learn the truth about what's going on here, and to do that I need the boss to come out.*

And I can think of no better way of doing that than doing what I do best. Mayhem extrodinare.

She reached the door and smashed it down with the sword in her left hand, again holding both so she could attack both with lethal force and with non-lethal when the situation called for it. She did thirty three damage to the door, plus another seventeen fire damage, and smashed it to pieces without issue. A maid down the hall screamed and dropped her load of sheets she had been carrying as the hulking form of Susan, gleaming armor and swords ablaze, shouldered her way past the tattered remains of the door and stared at her.

"Where's the king?" she demanded.

The maid took off running and screaming down the hallway.

How rude! exclaimed The Darkness.

I know, I asked so nicely too. Well, if she ran that way, the king must be this way.

Susan moved through the castle, allowing arrows to bounce her off and sticking her sword into people that got too close. She wasn't too sure, but given the fact they didn't burn to a crisp despite both her swords technically being on fire, she believed the fire was simply doing extra non-lethal damage to anyone she hit with it.

After all, magic, at least my kind, does seem to have a mind of its own. I mean it's quick enough to go away after the "scene" is over, how could it know that without having some connection to me? It can see I'm using a weapon designed not to kill anyone, so it modifies the effect a little. Nice of it, really.

The castle wasn't that large, but of course all the corridors confused her, as she no longer had even Sparkle to guide her. But she knew not to go down hallways where unconscious soldiers slumped, so finally she came upon a large door guarded by ranks of soldiers.

"Ah, the throne room at last!" she sighed, relieved. "Step aside and you won't be hurt!"

"Defend the king!" cried someone in back, and at least one person in the front looked back with an "are you crazy?" look and no one moved.

Susan gripped her blades and prepared to rush them, but to her surprise the doors behind her opened. Towering over the helmets was the first shatra she had seen, Mr. Exploder.

Crap. I kill him in here, and I could kill the king by accident. Better keep Phase on standby, no Sparkle to switch with him now.

"You obviously won't be able to stop her," he said. "So move. We'll protect the king."

The soldiers seemed all too happy to follow those orders, and the shatra bowed her into the room. "Welcome. I see you found your way here. Took your time slaughtering people inside the castle though. Was it good for you?"

"They'll recover. Move." She pointed her *Crystal Blade* at him.

"Of course, right this way." He moved off to the side, and Susan cautiously stepped past him, into the room. It was the throne room, and the king sat upon his throne back against the far wall. Keeping an "eye" on the shatra at the door with *Spirit Sense*, so she would know if he moved, she strode over to him. Beside his chair was a man in a colorful, patchwork outfit, currently balancing on one hand. He had a very lean look to him, and he started doing one handed pushups, straight up into the air. He didn't seem that strong, but he was probably just as tall as the shatra she had left behind, who was moving around to the other side of the chair. Susan's seventeen *perception* check also allowed her to notice the large sickle nearby, within grabbing distance of the "jester." The king seemed to be a middle aged man, dark hair and beard, golden crown, the whole works. There was something off about him, but Susan couldn't be sure of what it was. Maybe the eyes?

Oh yeah, the fact he has no health level above his head. Just sort of taking that for granted now, aren't I? The other two, twenty two and thirty four- what is that guy's DTR anyway? Never mind, I took his leg off once I can do it to his head. But for the king to not have health I can see? That's got to be bad news... for me.

"You've been causing quite a stir in my kingdom," he said as she approached. "You could have just made an appointment like any other supplicant. What do you want, anyway? We're a poor kingdom, as you can see. If you're looking to ransom me or my family, or raid our treasury-"

"Who is in charge here?" Susan asked over him. "I take it that's you," she said to the shatra who was now standing by the king. His hand was on his sword, but he hadn't drawn it yet. He looked surprised, not sure why she was addressing him.

The king looked over at him. "Uh, hello? King? Right here?"

"Oh, so you're going to take responsibility for what I found in your basement?"

"What do you mean, what you found in my basement? You come here, attack my kingdom, and you want to know what's in my wine cellar?"

Wait, does he not- but the wizards said they saw him going there with scrying magic, right?

"I'm talking about where the shatra come from!" she said, getting annoyed. "You know, that guy there?" She pointed with her blade. "And all the tortured, screaming people in your basement that have been experimented on. Turned partly into demons... ringing any bells?"

"Who, my bodyguard? Nonsense! Shatra, indeed. They've been extinct hundreds of years. Why, I'd claim you were one before I accused anyone here, have you looked at yourself lately? And there are certainly no dungeons as you describe them in *this* castle."

"Fine. You want to do this the hard way, we'll take a little trip down there. You can

see it for yourself.”

“I’m not leaving this room, much less going anywhere with you.”

“Oh really? I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist.”

“Do you know what she’s talking about?” he asked the man at his side.

“Personally she sounds a bit deranged. Do you want me to escort her out?”

“Escort her out? Kill her! You’ve heard the reports of what she’s been doing in my kingdom!”

“I’ll try, but you must feel the amount of inner energy she has. There’s no way she’s human, and those swords of hers-” He cut off, and both he and the king froze, eyes glued to Susan.

“You just slipped up,” she said to the shatra. “Wait, why would the king be able to...” She made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting a twelve. That was enough to tell the king had quite a bit more energy than she did, while the shatra she had been impressed with before seemed mundane in comparison. “What are you?” she demanded of the king. “You aren’t human either, with that level of energy.”

“Are you just guessing, or do you know?” asked the king, leaning forward.

“I know my energy total is between yours and his. I’m not used to having this much, or I would have noticed it immediately when I came in. I stole most of this from your sorcerers, below.”

“Are they dead?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t killed anyone. And I would prefer not to, but once I saw those things you had done-”

“Oh, honestly. Do you have no appreciation for science?”

“One plus one equals two!” said the jester, now juggling some balls.

“Exactly!” said the king, nodding. “That’s all I’m doing here. Making something that’s better than either being was before. How is that so wrong?”

“So wrong? You don’t find anything amiss in all those screaming people down there?”

“I admit, the procedure has only created a few successes. The old way of creating shatra worked well enough, I admit. But it was so boring! I mean they chose the simplest, least powerful demon to fuse with a man because even that was more than a match for regular soldiers at the time. But there are many types of demon, and I’m working to find a way to implant them all! I’m closer in some cases.”

“You can seriously just sit there and calmly tell me you’re experimenting with summoning *demons*, and then shoving them inside people and claiming it’s for *science*? You’re a monster! Wait, is that what you are? Is that why your *Spirit Energy* is greater than mine? You did something to yourself, didn’t you?”

“Me? No. I’m the way I’ve always been. I suppose you’re going to die anyway, I might as well show you.” The king stood up, and the jester started laughing and clapping his hands. “Give us a show, I don’t need to be the one that does for once. Make her bleed, my lord. Crack open that shell, show us the meat inside.”

Is it going to be two on one or three on one? The jester didn’t seem to have much energy, hopefully I can safely ignore him, even if he does know what’s going on.

“It’s been too long since I had a worthy prey,” the king admitted, taking his crown off and setting it behind him on the throne. “Let me introduce myself.” In the blink of an eye the king was gone, but in his place was a large fox, as big as she was, with nine

tails swishing the air in anticipation. "I'm the demon Yspaddaden. You've invaded my kingdom. Prepare to die."

With a cackle of laughter the jester grabbed up the sickle and the other guy drew his sword.

"Wait!" shouted Susan as the fox took a step forward.

"Oh, did I scare you?" asked the fox, now sounding female and sexy. "Don't worry, it'll be over in a flash."

"Actually, I just wanted to show you something," she replied. "You mentioned my sword before, I thought I might get rid of one of them." She held it out to the side and let it go, and the blade shimmered and disappeared.

"Are you mocking us?" the fox hissed, clearly displeased with the notion.

"Not at all. That sword would only knock you out, like I did to your soldiers outside. I want to see you *bleed*. *Pocket Dimension, Enhance Sword*."

Susan put max energy into the spell and pulled out her second blade, which grew to match the first and lit on fire.

"Fire doesn't scare us," the fox scoffed.

"It scares me a little," admitted the jester.

"Attack!" The fox and the big guy rushed forward, far faster than any human would have, and were upon her almost before she could blink, even *Accelerated* as she was. The jester, surprisingly, vanished, and Susan wondered if he had teleported or what? But they were in her world now, and *initiative order* was *initiative order*. She changed her stance to meet them.

So it's going to be three on one after all. Super. Oh well, at least it's easy to keep them from attacking all at once.

"*Dazzle!*" she cast, targeting both that she could see, and getting a twenty six total, accounting for the one segment penalty, two penalty for casting it twice, and thirteen energy thrown in. Both threw off the sudden dazzling light with sheer will, and kept coming.

Oh right, forgot that any spell that allows my opponents to will the magic away... will will the magic away. Will will? Good thing thinking about stuff is a free action. Maybe I should have mimicked that jester going invisible after all, or whatever he did.

The fox didn't move from the front of the throne, just raised two tails and shot fire across the intervening space. Susan didn't bother dodging, and they washed over her without causing any damage.

"Oh," it said, "I'm going to have to get creative to get you out of that armor, is that it? Wonderful! It's been too long since I was really challenged."

Susan responded by shooting a weak *Elemental Bolt: Fire* back, and as expected, the fox also didn't dodge.

"Stalemate!" said the fox, somehow managing to grin. "You're a quick one though, aren't you?"

She was about to make a pithy comment back when she suddenly found the jester in her face, swinging his sickle at her, forcing her to parry it. The jester knew his stuff, and slipped in under the blade, heading for her chest. It clanged off her armor, and she took a swing with her off hand hoping to catch the man by surprise. She was the

one that was surprised, the man disappeared when her blade was an inch from hitting him, reappearing several meters away to her left. With him that close, she realized he had just used a technique she had yet to learn- *Spirit Step*. Or at least some kind of local equivalent.

He used his spirit energy to propel himself away from me. But he didn't do that to reach me, I would have felt it. So he covered that distance from the throne to here as a free action? He's freaking fast!

The soldier lowered his blade and gave a mighty bellow, charging at Susan much faster than a normal man could have. In fact he reached her just as it was her action, and she had to knock his sword away to avoid being skewered. She didn't want to dodge, as she wanted to try the same thing, attacking reactively. She underestimated the man's strength though, and had to make a STrength check instead to not go flying backwards with the impact. She had put energy into COOrdination to fend off the blow, so she couldn't put any into STrength and was shoved back, stumbling. She managed to remain standing though.

"You're strong, girl!" said the soldier, impressed.

So are you, apparently. Does that mean stuff like Immobilize won't work? Wait, here's something he might not expect. "Lubricate," she cast, targeting the blade in his hand.

"Huh?"

The blade squirted out of his hand.

"Ha ha! Just another man that can't handle his blade."

"I'll kill you!"

"Not by impalement!"

The jester took off running around, blurring past her and coming up low from the side, but instead of dodging, she reactively cast *Lubricate* again, because why change a winning strategy? Because casting it on a creature allows them a RESolve check, of course, which he beat by two and shrugged the spell off as he swung his blade. She had to make an off hand action to parry, and Susan couldn't even roll as high as he did. However, her armor saved her yet again, and the jester went "tisk" and jumped back a step.

"Thought you were getting her out of that?!" he yelled back to the fox.

"I'm not as fast as you two, give me a minute here!" The fox suddenly became a huge scorpion, front pincers clicking, though it still had nine tails.

That's a plus two size scorpion! Susan had to admit, she was a little impressed. Not intimidated, exactly, but a little impressed. (She was immune to fear effects due to the *Avatar* spell going, after all) *Do I pull out my Legion? I hate to make them do the fighting for me, I'm not learning anything that way. Well, it seems despite how fast these guys are, they still haven't pierced my armor. I'll give it a few more segments to decide. In fact, let's do the smart thing here...*

She had dropped *Lubricate* immediately after the sword flew out of the soldier's hands, and now she targeted it, rather than him. "*Thrust!*" It couldn't make resistance checks, so she didn't bother throwing extra energy in, just relied on her bonus from *Acceleration*. It sailed away, scraping and bumping along the floor until it impacted the wall several meters away.

"Hey!" The soldier looked torn between just trying to punch Susan through her

armor or run after his sword. This would have been quite undignified, so he wasn't really prepared to do so.

The jester shook his head, then vanished, reappearing near the blade.

"Oh, thanks!"

"Who said I was getting it for you?"

"You won't use it, why did you go over there, then?"

"You really have no sense of humor, do you?"

"Humor this," said Susan, swinging at him. He tried to dodge, but even with the called shot penalty, she beat his result and cut a deep fissure across his body.

Amazingly, even doing thirty four damage he stayed up.

Needed to do one more, she thought, glancing at the numbers above his head. One! Must be the fire did nothing to him.

Looking at him, the cut wasn't bleeding, and in fact as she pulled the blade away his insides looked more like rock than guts.

"I'll get you for that," he said, taking a step back.

The jester appeared behind him, touched his back, and somehow was away again in what seemed like a single action.

Can these things spend XP for extra actions?

The two wound up behind the enormous bug barreling down on Susan, but Susan wasn't having any of that. She cast *Transposition* reactively, targeting the soldier and throwing in as much energy as she could. With that, the bonus from *Acceleration*, and the wound penalty the guy was now under he had no chance to survive, and Susan switched places with him as the claw came down to crush the life out of her.

She now had the jester touching her back, and was satisfied to hear the two claws crunching into the soldier.

"Wha?" the jester jerked his hand back, dropping the blade.

"I don't know how you did that, girl," said the fox/scorpion/king. "But you'll pay for it. You know how much effort a shatra takes to create?"

"Don't know, don't care." She swung at the jester, knowing he was much faster than then the scorpion. He dodged, twisting his lean and long body away from her blade at the last instant again, then vanished again. Susan was now at 216 energy.

Oh, I get it. If he gets killed by the demon, you don't have to feel guilty about killing him yourself. You're a piece of work, you know that?

Haven't I told you to be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate here!

You're doing fine.

Susan spun, noticing the jester was beside the scorpion now, who jumped and spun in the air, coming down to face her again.

"She can keep up with me," complained the jester.

"Maybe this will slow her down," the scorpion replied, hefting the body of the soldier.

"Speed up," intoned Susan, activating her *Speed Plus Materia*. She hadn't figured on needing it, and hadn't activated it on the way up here. *But if the jester can just blink around the room, I'm going to need the boost.* Her speed was now a twenty four, so she figured she could probably close the distance between them on her next

action in two segments or so.

But as the scorpion brought the claw up with the soldier's body still in it, she knew what he was going to do.

And I guess you're right, she sent to The Darkness. Rather than moving, she made a quick *Spirit Manipulation* check, increasing her next expenditure of energy by fourteen rather than four.

"Uh, you want to throw that, boss?" the jester asked, edging away from the now glowing and flashing body of the soldier.

"I know what I'm doing!" Her claw reached back to throw.

Susan cast *Hypnotic Field* as strongly as she could, and their ten and fourteen results were far from the twenty nine she rolled because of it. The soldier exploded a segment later and the jester, the floor, part of the wall, and the floor under the scorpion were vaporized. This of course caused the scorpion to fall, knocking it out of the *Field*, but her opponents had dropped to one.

"You've ruined everything!" shouted the king from below. "I don't care if I destroy this whole castle, I'm taking you out!" Screams of panic rose from below, and there was a curious buzzing sound coming from down there too.

Don't know if I like the sound of that.

Susan held her action, having no sort of "trap" spells or any way to cover the hole. Not that she would, that would just have increased the king's circle of destruction as it tried to get back here. What she saw crawl from the hole was even bigger than it had been, but still vaguely scorpion like. This creature, however, had wings. Once through the hole it took to the air, then almost drunkenly smashed headlong into one of the pillars, which it started smashing to pieces. It took only two blows against it to smash through, and stone and mortar rained down below. The king felt around with one huge claw, and satisfied it was in two pieces buzzed off in the direction of the next one.

Why is it acting like it's- oh.

As Susan looked, she saw the creature's eyes were closed. (It had gotten a twenty three on a REASON check to figure out the lights of the previous spell Susan had cast were what made them both freeze. So it was taking no chances now.)

I can't use Slash-All, even with my STRENGTH it'll divide by three, then by... four? But I have to think of something! Even Burst will hardly slow it down, is that all I've got? Wait, I know.

"Flight," she said, activating the corresponding charm on her bracelet. She then started casting *Teleportal*, taking the full two seconds, as even throwing energy into it taking a ten penalty wasn't something she had in mind to do.

As she cast, the bug smashed into the second pillar, and it started swinging away. Two blows were not enough, and the bug brought her claw back for a third strike. This cracked the pillar down the center, and the king again went into the air to find the third.

"What's the matter?" it called down to her. "Where's all that speed you had before? Can't fly, can you?"

Actually, I can, we're just moving the battlefield.

As the bug darted for the next pillar, Susan let her *Teleportal* go, and put the one

end directly in front of the unseeing bug. It zipped through, and Susan took off after it, flying herself. The second she was through she let it go, and the two combatants were now high above the ocean, thousands of leagues away from the small kingdom they had left.

How did you know the king exempted his castle from the barrier against that kind of thing? The Darkness asked.

What? Oh, uh, because he was bringing demons in. Couldn't do that without dimension stuff working, right?

You totally forgot, didn't you? Honestly, you should be glad that worked, you did try that spell to get into the kingdom, remember?

I can't keep track of everything here!

Uh huh. Nice job.

"What just happened?" demanded the king, spinning to face her. "You disappeared for a second, but there you are again."

"Open your eyes and find out."

"Oh no, I don't need my eyes to take you out. I should have hit the next pillar by now, too. Fine, I'll just attack you directly then."

But Susan acted first, flying under the king and trying to strike at the body. The king tried to dodge, but Susan's sword cut in as she put all the energy she could into her STREngth.

After all, it can't see to dodge, right? Why put it into COOrdination?

The two were evenly matched in speed, but the king figured if Susan was attacking, she wasn't casting spells, and risked a glance at her as she came up again. She caught the blade in one of her claws, twisting down and grabbing it as Susan struck.

"Opened your eyes, huh?"

"Yes. How did we get here?"

"Magic. Now let go of my sword!"

"No!"

Susan made a STREngth check to tear it free, beat the king by six, and flew back out of her reach. But Susan was now of the defensive, as that was an action for her but not the king. A claw, the size of her whole body, shot straight for her and Susan didn't dare parry it, she shot straight up, trying to get out of reach. The claw closed on empty air, and Susan brought her sword down on it even as the king came at her again.

Susan won that one, the sword slicing across the king's claw for nine damage.

"Argh! What's it going to take to kill you!?"

More than you've got.

Susan still had the initiative thanks to her being just slightly faster, so she feinted towards the king's midsection again. But even as the king tried to block, she didn't strike, instead casting "*Hypnotic Field*" again. It was twenty six to twenty one and the king went slack again, unable to complete the block... for the attack that never came.

Susan got ready to cast *Telekinesis* in case the king started falling, but luckily the figure hung in the air unable to even stop its wings.

Finally. I suppose people caught in it don't fall over, they still keep their balance

and hold onto things. It makes sense the king keeps beating his wings.

She hovered in the king's face and said "Now, let's have a little chat."

Putting things where they belong

Time: Just then

Place: Somewhere out above the ocean

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Susan said to the entranced demon, still hovering where we left them last chapter, somewhere over the ocean. “I’m going to steal all that nice energy of yours, enough to knock you unconscious. Then I’ll shrink you down and bring you to the wizard’s guild where they can decide what to do with you. Won’t that be fun? Of course it will. *Energy Drain*.”

So Susan gathered the energy she had left, all four hundred and fifteen of it, giving her with a total of five hundred and eighty six. Of course, she went past her “zero” point, until she was knocked out and then went a bit further so she wouldn’t wake up any time soon. Once knocked out, the enormous bug was suddenly a nine tailed fox again, and Susan had to grab her before she fell.

Guess that’s your normal form?

That done, she did a *Shrink* and got her down to a more manageable size, then went back to the wizard’s guild building.

“Oh, what a cute little baby fox!” said the first wizard she met. “Where did you ever find such a thing!”

“It’s a demon,” said Susan crossly. “If it was awake it would rip your face off without hesitation. Go find me someone in charge so I can figure out what to do with it.”

“That’s a...” He noticed the nine tails hanging limply from behind the fox. “I’ll go right away.”

And so a demonologist was summoned, and the demon was placed into a pentagram the man inscribed on the floor, which he said would hold it. He also said it would keep her honest, while not forcing her to tell the truth, if she answered it would be a true answer.

“Can you wake it up?” Ithinia asked.

“Wake it up? No, I’ve never seen a demon sleep before, how would I do that?”

“I can do it, just a second,” said Susan, reading over and casting *Awaken*. The demon’s eyes popped open.

And she tried to spring to her feet, but was too exhausted and sore, and slumped down again.

“Going to gloat?” she asked wearily. “Look, wizard. You think I’m dangerous? But that girl beat me, so should I really be the one inside this circle?”

“Never mind that! We want to know what you were doing in that kingdom!” demanded Ithinia.

“Ask her,” said the fox, pointing with a tail tip. “She knows all my dirty little secrets.”

“Making shatra. I destroyed two, and the one I brought before makes three. There are about a dozen incomplete ones though, back in the kingdom that we’ll have to deal with.”

“A dozen? Things were worse there than we thought. Was that all you made?”

Three complete ones?"

"Yes."

"Fine. But how did you remain undetected for so long?"

The fox looked at Susan.

"Never mind that, how do we fix those poor souls in your dungeon? Get the demon out of them?"

"Fix them? Their souls are one now. Unless you can climb inside their soul and drive the demon out, good luck."

I can do that, I did it with Harry and Tom. But is there a ghost around here that I can trust to put me inside and then take me back out again?

"Fine, we'll do that then. As to your question, these foxes can change their shape. I assume you killed the real king some time ago and took his place?"

"That's right. He was quite... delicious."

"Did you have any kids?" the demonologist asked, fearful.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"We can deal with that later," said Ithinia. "For now we need to get there and bring order to that kingdom. I assume you didn't do things quietly?"

"He turned into a huge bug thing!" insisted Susan. "And there were two other shatra I had to take care of at the same time. You try it and see how quiet your battle is."

The demonologist's eyes were bugging out of his head, and his jaw was hanging loose as he heard Susan say this.

"She," said the demon.

"What?"

"I'm female. Don't let what I turn into fool you. Most of my kind are female, oddly."

"Fascinating," said Ithinia, not sounding interested in the least. "Can you send it back?"

"Of cour-

"Do I have to go back?" whined the demon. "Do you know what it's like, living there? I could help you, use my power don't just throw me away!"

"How are you here in the first place?" asked the demonologist.

"Oh, uh, I broke out of a summoning circle and made a run for it. Should have seen the look on the little runt's face when I did."

"Ah, an apprentice. Still, you admitted to killing the king."

"Like he was worth the title."

"Still, I think sending you back rather than just killing you outright is the best we can do."

"Why not just kill it?" asked Ithinia.

"My good woman!" said the Demonologist. "I have to work with these creatures you know. If it get around that I killed one that was helpless like this, why, I'd lose my livelihood at the best, my life at the worst. The other nine tails would find out somehow, believe me. Demons may not share information with us readily, but among themselves, you can count on it. Or a demon would kill me to get a favor from them, or refuse to work with me, or raise their prices-"

"I get the idea. Fine. Be done with it, we have work to do."

The demon banished back to the underworld, Susan took the wizard's guild to

Reldamon, through a *Teleportal* into the castle's lower level.

"You're back!" her friends exclaimed, glad she was all right.

"Where did you get all that energy from?" Sparkle asked, wincing away from her. "You're buzzing like you drank an entire coffee crop."

"It's the demon's. I'll tell you the whole story of my twelve second combat later. For now, we need to get these poor souls out of here, secured, and figure out how to get my soul into theirs so we can cure them."

"Wait, you were serious?" asked Ithinia.

"Of course. I don't make a habit of leaving a job half done. Or not helping those I can. You can't detach your soul and float it over to do battle with some kind of demon, right?"

"Uh, no. You're saying you can?"

"I've done it before. But I think I'll have to modify the spell... anyway, I can secure them, can anyone float them?" The wizards showed their empty hands... no ingredients. "I am really coming to hate so called wizards. Fine, I'll do *everything*. As usual."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* to where the shatra was, who was up and about and silently looking over the proceedings. They filled up the cells, and wizards were sent for ingredients so they could cast sleep spells themselves, and keep them all quiet for the night.

Susan stayed out of the guild explaining things to the royal family, about how the queen's husband had, for several years, been a female shape shifting fox demon. She fainted dead away at the news, but her youngest son just said "wicked" like it was the coolest thing he had ever heard.

She, meanwhile, was making *Spell Papers*, and replacing the *Spell Symbol* on her sword and bracelet charms.

After all, why just let this energy ebb away from me? I'll put it to a much better use than that demon did! Imagine having this much energy all the time!

She even made a few new ones, from writings, like *Alternate Dimension* in case she started fighting in a place she didn't want wrecked up.

That night, Susan and the others stayed in the guild building, and Susan talked over the battle with Sparkle.

"I realized something in my combat with the demon," she said.

"Okay."

"Trying to do damage to something is the least efficient means of ending a battle. On the one hand I need to learn to fight without magic for when I rescue my father. And the non-lethal sword I have is totally great. But I need to learn one spell, resisted by different stats, that can instantly end a fight. If you look at what I have, *Shrink* is RES, *Immobilize* is STR, *Hypnotic Field* is REA. I need something resisted by CON. Is there something resisted by ENDurance?"

"Not that I recall. I think CON is about all you're going to get."

"We'll have to look. I need to cover all my bases, those things shrugged off my RESolve spells like *Dazzle*, even here where there are two moons!"

“Wow. I can see why you would be concerned about that.”

“I know, right? Good news is, I got ten XP for all that running about in the kingdom, so I’m ready for the next adventure.”

The next day, Susan was pleased to see her book of spells had modified, as she had asked, the spell of *Soul Sever* to be *Soul Projection*. A touch based spell, it could accomplish what it took Myrtle to do the last time just by casting it and touching someone. Their “inner soul” would be entered and explored as a sort of *Personal Dimension*. Susan tried it out on the first of the unconscious shatra rejects, and found with a little luck, the combined soul wasn’t exactly hard to find. Basically because any soulscape that existed before had been destroyed by the botched fusing attempt. Most of what she found was withered trees, run down buildings, and two souls, totally out of it and only somewhat stuck together.

Basically Siamese twins, thought Susan, looking over the first pair. *But how do I separate them?*

The souls were too busy locked in combat with each other to notice Susan reading her book over, and she tried *Dismiss*, which seemed to work immediately.

Wait, how can I read my book in here?

It’s part of you, isn’t it? The Darkness answered. *It’s on your character sheet, and that’s basically who you are. Why wouldn’t you be able to see the soul of the book just as you see the physical part of it out there?*

Oh.

Susan repeated this procedure several times, and each time the demon vanished as though it had never been. All of them complete she hit one with the *Alleviation* knife and woke it up. The person was very confused and seemed barely coherent, but Sativola pronounced her thoughts free from the taint of demons. She suggested they be woken, one at a time, and a witch assigned to each one to help them come to terms with what they had experienced. Susan said that was an excellent idea, as her spell could give back lost stats, but not help them cope with the reality of having a demon inside their souls for any length of time.

“And who is going to pay all these witches?” asked Ithinia.

“The guild,” she answered simply. “After all, the *wizard’s* guild is supposed to be keeping this very thing from happening, right? And let’s be honest- three shatra and a full demon in one kingdom? With that wall and who knows what else set up there specifically to keep you wizards out? You wouldn’t have managed it yourself, not without wizard casualties. Especially if that demon figured out how to reliably make shatra. By the time you learned about it, it would have been too late. This can be part of your... penance.”

“Awfully smug for a mere witch,” she grumbled, but sent someone to open the treasury and go hire some witches.

Sativola just smiled like a child that has just gotten their way.

“And now for you,” Susan said at last, as the only one left in the holding cells was the full shatra. “Somehow I don’t think we can separate you quite as easily as the

others. For one thing, my body will suffocate if I touch you, and I doubt your inner landscape will be as pleasant.”

Oddly, the shatra hadn't really tried to escape during all this, just sort of floated there, looking only mildly interested in the proceedings.

“If only I could talk- Sativola, can you read her mind?”

She shook her head. “She thinks in demon language. I tried but there's no way I'm doing it again. Sorry.”

“Ah well. Can you write?” The demon shook her head. “Ah, but you can answer! That's a start. If I were to let you out of here, would you just attack me again?” Shake of the head. “Would you attack anyone?” The demon nodded, sadly. “Why? Oh, wait, you can't exactly answer that. Uh, this is frustrating. Would you attack someone in particular?” Shake. “But you would attack someone, for some reason?” Nod. “You didn't like me shouting at you earlier, did you?” Shake. “Would you attack anyone who shouted at you?” Nod. “Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Is there something you might like to do, if we let you go free?” Shake. “Really? Then why did you hang around that kingdom? Did the demon promise you something?” Shake. “Did it threaten you?” Shake. “Did it have something you needed?” Shake. “Did you want to be there?” Blank look. “You didn't care one way or the other?” Nod. “Huh. Okay. What am I missing here? Can you get that demonologist back? Maybe he can figure out what kind of demon she was fused with and tell me what it wants.”

“Oh, that seems like a silence demon,” said the Demonologist, looking the woman over.

“A silence demon? I guess if I fought fire demons and speed demons, why not? So what does it want?”

“Who knows! They're useful because they don't try to rip your face off if you summon one, but they usually take the form of a piece of cloth. So they aren't good for much, so we don't typically summon them.”

“What would you do if you *did* summon one?”

“Uh, give it an order, I guess? They do what they're told. One of the only demons *to* do as they're told, actually. Probably because they can't talk back, but maybe just for something to do. I mean what does a demon in the shape of a bed sheet do with its time?”

Susan had to admit, that was a good question. “That's what I'm missing,” said Susan, snapping her fingers. “You were *ordered* to stay there, weren't you.” Nod. “So if someone ordered you to do something, you would do it?” Nod. “Right, that's why you didn't care about where you were. Okay,” she turned back to the man. “In your professional opinion, what do we do with this poor woman? Is it safe to let her out?”

“Safe?” The Demonologist looked at the wizards around the room. “As long as no one shouts at her, she's harmless. But she would kill someone in that case, it's really the only warning we have when dealing with them. Stay calm and speak to them quietly.”

“Would you take her off our hands?” Ithinia asked.

“A servant that won't talk back, and just wants to follow orders? I'm sure I could find a use for her. Having someone that can fly, and choke any unruly demon that happens to shout at me? Certainly!”

"If she kills someone, you'll be held responsible!" she cautioned.

"I realize that."

"Very well. Let's open the door, everybody get back."

"If you make trouble I'll just put you back there," Susan said to her as the door was unlocked. "You understand that, right?" Nod. "Okay. Go with this man, he's your master now." Nod.

The door opened, she floated over to him and waited for orders. "We'll take our leave," said the Demonologist, and Ithinia waved him away.

"Seems your first task is complete," she said to Susan. "Well done."

Yeah, you failed to kill me, so you know you're stuck with me. HAHA.

"Thanks. I've got an idea for the second, I saw it paging through my book last night. I made a few copies of the spell, we can try it out."

"But it has to be a *permanent* benefit to wizardry!" she reminded Susan.

"Don't worry, this is just to know if it works. Let's go visit those fellows doing spell research."

On one of the upper floors, Susan was introduced to an old looking wizard with a variety of odd looking things in front of him.

"What spell I'm trying to create?" he asked, surprised. "You're really interested?"

"I sure am. What have you got for me?"

"Are you familiar with Galger's Singing Spell?"

"I can't say that I am. What's it do?"

"Basically, you enchant an object to sing a song. You tap it, and it turns on, and you tap it again and it turns off."

"Okay?" Susan wasn't sure what the point was, but maybe to record a famous performance? They didn't have any other means, she supposed.

"I was wondering if the same thing could be done for images as for sounds. In other words, prepare an object and cast the wizardry into it. When it's done, the object can play back everything that happened around it. What do you think?"

I think you want to invent film, it would be way easier. "Sounds interesting. How far have you gotten?"

"Oh, I've been thinking about the problem for, oh, about a year now it has to be. I'm sure in another month or so I'll be ready for a trail or two."

Susan stared at him. *He's been working on this one spell for a year? I didn't know how good I had it with my book. Four background points or not!*

"A month? But you could try it now, you have the ingredients you need here?"

"Well, yes," hedged the wizard. "But it could be quite dangerous..."

She waved that away. "Not with me around. That's the whole point, using one of my already known spells to help you guys find previously unknown spells. Good deal, right? Now, this is a spell my book calls *Simulation*. Basically upon casting you explain to the spell what you want to accomplish and how you are going to accomplish it. The magic then shows you exactly what would happen should you attempt that action in real life. To avoid having to cast it now I've put it in into this piece of paper, so if you have all the needed ingredients before you, I'll activate it and we can see if it'll work with your wizardry."

The wizard blinked. "Can you say that again?"

Susan carefully explained what she wanted the wizard to do, and he got assurances from Ithinia that this was all legitimate. After learning no harm could possibly come to him, as the spell wouldn't actually be cast, he didn't have to even touch his knife, he said he was game. Susan cast, he spoke the procedure for the spell while standing in the area lit by her magical circle, and the circle went out when he was done describing what he wanted.

"Oh dear," he said, rather concerned. "I died rather spectacularly, didn't I? I wonder what could have possibly gone wrong?"

What the Warlocks Have To Say

Place: Wizard Guild building

Time: Just after the first test of *Simulation*

“Do you have any more of them?” asked Ithinia, indicating Susan’s *Spell Paper*.

“Sure, I made a bunch last night when I had all that energy. Thought they might come in handy. Why?”

“Do you mind if I used one?”

“Not at all,” Susan replied, wondering what she had in mind. Ithinia pulled the other wizard off to the side and had a whispered conversation with him. He pulled some things from the nearby shelves and set them on the table in front of her. She activated the *Spell Paper* and started describing what she wanted to do. Evidently she was satisfied, as the spell dissipated and she nodded.

“We weren’t tricking you, you know,” said Sparkle disapprovingly.

“The thought didn’t even cross my mind. I have no idea what you even mean.”

“Sure.”

And so Susan got to work making the spell into an object for each branch of the guild, found in the major cities in Ethshar. She placed the spell into a mirror, which seemed appropriate, and of course the wizards had no shortage of expensive components she could use up to make each one. She made them energy based, as it was only four energy to activate, figuring that would be a good limitation on someone just trying it hundreds of times a day. (Also it took less time, of course.) This way they just physically couldn’t, and it would be more likely to be shared among research wizards rather than just hoarded by the people at the top. She also gave it a minor *Fabrication*, just so it would last longer and not be destroyed in case some clumsy fool dropped it. Given her ability to raise her *Imbuing* skill to superhuman levels, it didn’t take long at all to make all three, and in the end, Ithinia had to admit she had more than fulfilled her part of the bargain.

“I’ve been watching you carefully, making those things,” she said when Susan handed the last one over to be tested. “I feel like I could almost make one myself! It doesn’t seem as complex as our most complex spells, though the fact you grabbed stuff almost at random is worrisome.”

“Making your own is certainly possible,” allowed Susan. “But keep in mind I make it look easy because my magic is artificially increasing my skill at doing this. Nonetheless, I’ll leave you the formula for the spell, as well as some minor formula for spells common to both our types of magic. A friend of mine tried to work out how to translate wanded magic and mine, but as smart as she is, she was still in school. Someone with fifty or more years of working with magic might have a better chance at it. Plus, you’ll have the mirrors themselves to study, perhaps you can work out a method of making your own version.”

“I hope so. I think they could really make our lives better, because no longer would a wizard have to risk their life or sanity trying to make new spells.”

“I wish you luck. You can even use the mirrors to help you make more mirrors, because you can test out making one before you do it. But all that aside, you will now

agree to help me save your world?"

She sighed. "Yes. I'm sorry for doubting you before, and making you go through all of this—"

Susan shrugged that off. "I'm used to it, and I helped that kingdom out a lot. I got directly rewarded in my own way, so don't worry about it. What's our next step?"

"Our *first* step," she clarified, "is to go talk to someone on the warlock's council. That's found here, in Ethshar of the Spices."

"I wondered why you wanted the mirror for this place made last. I assume it's close by?"

"Quite. They should be waiting for us, so let's head over there."

Susan said her goodbyes to the wizards now excitedly exclaiming over the mirror, and to Kelder who was now free to go back to his studies. Sativola of course was nearby, and fell into step with the group along with Sparkle.

The chairman's house was rather large, and well maintained, which Susan thought was only natural for a bunch of magic users that only had to think about something and have it happen. There was a thick iron fence around the place, which Susan had to believe was there just for ornamentation given no one in their right mind would attack a place a dozen or more warlocks were bound to be hanging out in. As she neared the place a man looked up from the front step where he had been sitting, and waved to them to wait a moment as they got up to the gate. He stood up oddly, and Susan had to go back over what he had done in his mind before she realized he had actually used his magic to push himself up and off the stairs rather than his legs.

Which I would think was rather dangerous, given this Calling I've heard about.

"I've been expecting you," said the man, and Susan felt him using warlocky on the gate to unlock it. "Please, come in. I'll take you to the chairman."

The group was ushered inside and offered refreshments while the chairman was summoned, and it wasn't more than a moment before he was descending the stairs.

"Ah, Ithinia, how nice to see you again," he said. He was dressed in black, and a gold trimmed cape trailed behind him. He was fairly young looking, probably about twice Susan's age, which Susan figured was probably about right.

Warlocks don't last long, after all.

"Hello, Gorsedd," Ithinia said, cordially enough. "This is Susan, the girl I was telling you about."

"Ah yes, the girl that uses warlocky without being a warlock. And who says she's come to save the world from us!" He laughed. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." He held out a hand, and Susan shook it. "So," he said, sitting down. "What gives you the impression warlocky is so dangerous? I mean obviously it is, we get called. But Ithinia was saying something about you thinking there was more to it than that?"

"That's right. The voice I seem to hear that allows me to use the warlock power is the same voice I hear when a being I call The Darkness talks to me." She explained the bare minimum about what exactly that was.

"I see, I see. Forgive me, but would you mind demonstrating your use of warlocky? It's in poor taste I know, but one can never be too careful."

So I've observed. "Not at all." Susan exerted her will on a small end table, gained

an energy, and it rose into the air.

“Ah, that is indeed our magic!” Gorsedd exclaimed. “Now, one further test, won’t take a second. I’m just going to peek inside your head for a moment, if that’s okay with you?”

“Whatever you feel is needed.”

“Very good. And let’s see now...” He appeared to be looking through Susan, and she knew what he was doing. Using that odd “sense” she could access through that weird whisper in her head. “Nope, I don’t see the brain structure that would allow you to access warlock magic. How extraordinary.”

“So you believe me then?”

He hesitated. “I believe there’s something odd about you...”

Sparkle looked over with as much of a “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you” expression as a cat can muster.

“...but does that mean your voice and ours is the same? Or what it even means if that is the case? Do you even know?”

“Only that if it is The Darkness giving you this power, it’s temporary and only furthers its own goals, not yours. We need to somehow determine where it’s coming from and find what The Darkness has taken over. Then we have to put a stop to it before your world gets devoured.”

“Forgive me if I’m wrong, but are you talking about ending warlocky?” He seemed a bit upset at the thought.

“Presumably whatever is making you warlocks would remain, it just wouldn’t be under the control of a multi-dimensional being that sees you all as ants.”

“I see,” he answered slowly, not convinced. “What do you want from us?”

“Information, I suppose, to start. Maybe do a few spells of my own on you, or sense you out. Then figure out where the power is coming from.”

“We know where it’s coming from, we all end up flying there once we use too much power.”

“Technically,” corrected Susan, “after you fail a RESolve check, difficulty five plus one one-thousandth of the total warlock energy you’ve accumulated.”

Everyone stared at her. “Uh, what?” asked Ithinia.

“That’s what’s been recorded on my character sheet,” she said, having it appear and showing it to them. They crowded around to read it. “See, I was at eight before, now I’m at nine warlock energy gained because I lifted that table. Each time I activate the power, and every four seconds after that I get another. I would assume it’s the same for you?”

“I have no idea how to... to... quantify the amount of energy I receive from using magic.”

“Pity. Anyway, those that use the power more slowly, or have a stronger willpower will be able to hold out longer. But eventually even I would fail that check, and that would be it for me. Whatever gets you guys would get me, too.”

“You can actually think in absolute terms like this?” asked Ithinia.

“I’m not the only one,” she explained. “I met people on one other world that were similar. Different, but with a similar knowing of how injured they were, or how much magic power they had, or their exact strength. I miss those guys. Plus everyone on my father’s world was this way.”

“Naturally. Well, it seems we’ve all learned something about warlocks today. You can actually mathematically predict when a warlock will be called! Just based on the number of hours they’ve spent using their magic.”

“So it seems,” managed Gorsedd. “But that seems... just a moment.” He glanced over at a desk, and a paper and pen floated over to him. He started writing some things down, asking Susan how much energy per hour she would gain, and about various other points. He shook his head. “It’s too fast. If what you say is true, warlocks wouldn’t last a day using their powers, much less a month. I’ve been chairman thirteen years, after all.”

“It could be different for me. Tell you what, would you mind performing a little experiment?”

“Not at all, if it can help solve this mystery. And I did ask you to do things for me, after all.”

“Exactly. Could you three go over there?” She pointed to the corner of the room. “I’m going to focus my senses on Gorsedd here. I want to see how quickly he gets energy when he uses warlocky. Your being nearby will muddle the waters, so to speak.”

“You can tell?” asked Sativola.

“I hope so. If I tune out everything else, I think it’ll work. I can at least try. Oh, and *Augment Skill: Spirit Sense.*”

With the spell going, Susan had absolute mastery of her sense of spirit energy, and was able to determine that this warlock, at least, gained energy at a rate closer to one per minute than fifteen in that span. (She rolled a twenty six to tell this.)

“That’s somewhat reassuring,” said Gorsedd, coming back to the floor again from where he had been hovering. “But why do you get it so quickly?”

She shrugged. “Are there some warlocks that get powerful more quickly than others? It may be that you all gain energy at your own pace. Without sensing out many more warlocks and coming up with testable theories, anyway.”

“Some warlocks were called before others, on the first night,” he admitted. “And we discourage those that seem to gain strength too quickly from using their power freely.”

“That’s smart. Doesn’t help at the moment, but I can see why you would do that. Okay. I want to keep sensing things out with you guys, is there a warlock I can watch work? I don’t want to increase your own chances of being called, even if you gather this energy slower than I do.”

“Ah, we can check. I don’t follow the normal day to day work that warlocks perform. I’m just here so that warlocks have representation among magic users.” His eyes flicked to the wizard.

“Tell me about it,” muttered Sativola.

“Humm... You wizards do run things with an iron fist, don’t you?” Susan remarked.

“By necessity,” Ithinia answered.

“No doubt you think so. Anyway, let’s find a warlock and see what’s on the schedule for today!”

So the group traveled down “Wizard” street, looking for a warlock, and they found a girl several years older than Susan leaving her shop.

“Chairman!” she exclaimed. “How nice to see you.”

“You too, Sloanne. You wouldn’t be headed to a job now would you?” he asked hopefully.

“Why, yes, I am. Finnobarr son of Calder is sick, so they wanted me to see what I could do for him.”

“Kelder?” asked Susan.

She laughed. “No, Calder. Apparently his parents wanted him to be unique, but not *that* unique.”

Susan laughed with her. “I guess so!”

“Good timing. Sloanne, this is Susan. Susan, Sloanne the Warlock. And this is Ithinia the wizard.”

“Sativola the Witch... apprentice,” Sativola introduced herself.

“A witch and a wizard? Is the world coming to an end?” She forced a laugh, but stopped when no one laughed with her. “Have I done something wrong?”

“What? No, no, nothing like that! No, Susan just wants to observe you as you work. She’s also a war- a wizard?” Susan nodded. “Yes, a wizard. Of course. Some questions have been raised about our magic and she’s an expert that’s been called in to help. You just happened to be passing, it’s nothing against you personally.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s okay. As long as Calder agrees.”

“Would he refuse two wizards?” Ithinia asked icily.

“Uh, no, probably not.”

“Then lead on.”

Hey, she’s like you, remarked The Darkness. Using thinly veiled threats of violence to get her way.

Excuse me!? My threats of violence are made very, very plain, thank you very much.

I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, but if you insist.

Wait, did I just... never mind.

And so with more than a little puzzlement, Calder allowed a bunch of random people in off the street who claimed to be wizards, the chairman of the warlock council, a witch, and a cat. (Actually anyone could see Sparkle was a cat. That wasn’t really in question.)

Susan then watched Sloanne work, destroying viruses inside the child’s body to make him well again. She had to switch over to “warlock sight” to see it, and gained another energy in the process. But that’s exactly what she saw Sloanne doing, and mentioned the method to Sativola.

“Could you do that?” she asked.

She shook her head. “I can’t work on that level. I can heal a break by forcing the body to accelerate the healing process. And if what you’ve said is true I could even take it further and regenerate limbs lost to fire and such. But healing like this is beyond my abilities.”

“Huh.”

She was actually rather torn. On the one hand, she could set this child to rights in

one second, just by touching him with the knife. On the other, she needed to watch this lady work so she could figure out a little bit more about warlock power. Even if that led to her being called that much sooner.

Susan sighed and got down to work. She felt around with *Spirit Sense* again, and timed out how quickly she felt Sloanne was getting energy. It was probably a little bit slower than the chairman, but that could be because of the work she was doing. Many more tests would be needed, but she filed it away.

Her next check was *Magic Sense*, which gave her a very odd result indeed. If what Sloanne was doing was magic, it wasn't any she had sensed before. And really, she had been surprised how little magic was involved in witchcraft, while working with Sativola during the boat ride. But she did have the *Spark*, while this woman before her clearly did not. *So how the heck can she be doing 'magic' without it? Unless they just call it magic, because they call anything without any immediate cause magic?*

Finally she took a look with *Dimension Sense*, and this was even more interesting. She felt not that Sloanne was extra dimensional, but that her head was. Also the *power* she was using felt like it didn't belong here, as she went about zapping viruses out of the boy. The boy had just the faintest sense of not belonging, which faded quickly as Sloanne moved to a new area of his body. Susan took another few warlock energy looking inside her head, and trying to narrow down what she was sensing.

"Must you?" asked Sloanne. "I'm trying to work here!"

"What? You can feel that? Sorry!"

"That's fine." she sighed, as it clearly wasn't. "I thought you were a wizard, anyway."

"It's complicated?"

"Right. Just let me work, please."

Susan went back to just her own skills, and realized there was a difference between the chairman and the warlock before her. Both should feel the same, but one was using the "magic" and one wasn't. The chairman didn't feel like he didn't belong here, but Sloanne almost did. Sort of like an echo or being very far away from the thing that didn't belong.

Which makes sense, if they really are drawing a power you're somehow giving them. This is the best proof you're behind this.

Me? I'm just along for the ride you know?

Don't get cute. I know one of you is the same as any other of you.

Oh, you're an expert on multi-dimensional life forms now, are you?

Are you denying it?

What's the information worth to you?

What could you possibly want from me that you could charge me for?

You really have to ask?

...

...

Are you playing 'questions only' with me or something?

What if I am? It's boring, just watching you try and figure stuff out I already know. But I can't just tell you, we're enemies. His tone changed to be more thoughtful. But at the same time I'm a part of you, so am I really just fighting myself? The larger

philosophical considerations-
Oh, forget it!

Susan looked over the *Reveal* series of spells, but didn't find anything pertinent to cast. Having done everything she could think of she left the warlock and the family in peace and went back out into the street.

"This much I can tell you. The Darkness is responsible, I felt it in the power she was using. We have to find this source, protect me somehow from being called while I look it over, and figure out how to deal with it once and for all."

"Good luck with that," both the wizard and warlock said, then glared at each other.

Yeah, this one's going to be tough.

The End of the World

Place: Wizard's guild building

Time: About a half hour later, say 2:30 in the afternoon.

"But there must be some way of going about it!" protested Susan, speaking to the group of wizards that had been called to discuss their next steps.

"We lost half a dozen wizards trying to get close enough to see it when it first arrived," protested one. "You want to get near it, you're on your own."

Susan looked around the room, and everyone was nodding.

"Certainly *your* magic, as superior as it is, would be better suited to this task anyway," suggested Ithinia smugly.

"It's not that easy. If it was magic, yes, I could put *Magic Immunity* on and be set. But he's doing something physical to people that get to near- changing their brains. I don't think *Invulnerability* would even protect me, because it's not damage. And any sort of scrying spell I use is useless because I haven't seen the place, or know even remotely what I'm looking for."

"What about that out of body stuff you were talking to me about?" asked Sativola. "Do you have a spell like that?"

"Sort of. There's *Clairvoyance*, that can let me see things at a remote location. But I must 'know something of the location' and just knowing there's an object laying in some field someplace is not good enough. I can't ask to see "the place the object fell on the night of madness," only specific locations, like "beyond this door" or "The house of Illina the Quick." As far as leaving my body like an ESPer, there's *Projection*, but that only works to places I can see, and I can't 'leave the general target location.' An ESPer would be able to just think themselves there, and look around as if with their own eyeballs."

"So your magic is not all powerful," remarked Ithinia.

"No," grumped Susan. "This sort of thing especially seems tailor made to annoy me. I mean it's magic, I should be able to just point to a map and ask my magic to show me that location in real time. But nooooo."

"Actually, why wouldn't that work?" asked Sparkle. "Do you really think that's not enough of knowing 'something' of the location?"

Susan pondered a moment. "I guess 'behind this door' and 'this spot on the map' would be equivalent, right?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"The problem is we can't point to an area and conclusively say 'that's where the object is.' Our scrying magic doesn't work in that whole region," put in another wizard.

"Probably something The Darkness came up with," mused Susan.

"You don't suppose you're immune, do you?" asked a third wizard. "Being from another world, and all?"

"Wouldn't want to chance it."

"True."

"Why do you ask though? Is there a way you could get me to the general area?"

"That spell we used to get to that town where we first met," said Ithinia. "The transporting flute would work just fine. A warlock would go by every so often, you could

just follow them. You can fly just as fast as they can, right?”

“Yes. Actually there is a spell to see through another’s eyes. I could cast it on them as it went by, and be in no danger as the already called warlock got closer. I would go blind though, so that’s a down side.”

“And a further delay, while you waited for one. I would rather this whole thing was cleared up quickly.”

You and me both.

Actually, said The Darkness, I wouldn’t mind guiding you there directly, if it’ll help speed things along.

Really?

Sure!

You would help me out?

It’s more like helping myself out, honestly. Oh man, I wish I could see your face when you realize how hopeless your situation is. I guess I’ll just have to enjoy it from in here.

“I don’t like it,” Susan said.

“Why shouldn’t you like taking care of this quickly and moving on with your journey?”

“What? Oh, no, The Darkness was talking to me. I think I should stay away from that whole area, he’s just about drooling with anticipation of me going there. Or something. It’s... up to something, for lack of a better term. The piece I carry said it would lead me to the piece that’s here, just to get things rolling. I get the idea it has some crazy spectacle in mind and is getting bored with waiting for me. I really don’t want it coming to me across the whole of Ethshar though, so maybe I should get out there. I remember it burning villages when it took over the dragon. I don’t want to see that again.”

“Then we had best move quickly. You really have no ideas?”

“Do you have telescopes in this world? Binoculars at least?” She got blank looks. “I guess not.”

“What about that spell you used to harass Professor Umbrage that one time?” asked Sparkle.

“Which one? I used quite a few, as you’ll recall.”

“Yes, I do. I was thinking about making a copy of yourself from mud. Go to the area with the flute spell as we’ve not seen it. Then let the thing lead you to itself. You’ll be perfectly safe because your body will be back here.”

“*Plastic Proxy!* Hey, that could work,” Susan admitted. “And if I leave off the spell that lets me cast spells through it, the link will be even more tenuous. No way it could reach through and get me from where it is. Okay, let’s give it a shot!”

“It will take several hours to prepare flutes for the way there and back. What do you need from us?”

“The same volume of mud as my body.” More blank stares. “Enough mud that a person my size could conceivably rise from it,” she amended.

The wizards got to work.

About five that evening, Susan’s mud avatar with *Flight* cast on it by Sparkle

stepped from the tunnel created by wizardry.

"And you're sure about this?" asked Ithinia.

"There is no other precaution I can take. I'll see you back at in Ethhar when I've seen what I need to see here."

"Okay. Good luck."

Another moment, and Ithinia was gone.

So which direction?

..

Hello?

..

Oh, for the love of-

What's that? Oh, you're there. Sorry, I was in the bathroom. Yeah, let's go.

In the- She sighed. *And I suppose you've put a pool table in there somewhere, what with you being bored and whatnot?*

Susan heard the sounds of pool balls being bounced around.

What? I was concentrating on my shot.

Which way, darn it?

Oh, right. Stick your finger out.

You mean this one? She held a specific finger up in front of her face.

Very funny. But meaningless to a being like myself. No, out in front of you, that's it. Now slowly turn to the right. Keep turning. Keep turning. Little more. Stop. Okay, that's not the direction you want to go in.

I thought you wanted to get on with this?

Oh, but teasing you is so fun. Fine, it actually is that way.

I swear, if you are lying to me, I will find a way to crawl inside my own soul and choke the life out of you.

You really should see someone about all that anger you've got pent up in here.

Oh wait, maybe that's my fault? Eh, who can tell anymore. Pip pip!

I'll pip pip you...

Susan Clone rose into the air and started flying in the direction The Darkness said to go.

She passed many a ruined house, broken down roads, and finally a forest. According to the wizards, whole villages had been emptied when this first happened, and the whole area had been deserted since. In thirty years, that meant a lot of plant life had opportunity to thrive, and thriving it was.

The sun was setting at her left, causing long shadows to form that made the silence and emptiness of the area that much more creepy.

Close now. So close! You should just be able to see it.

What? Where?

There! You can't miss it!

What? That dark spot?

Just keep going.

From her vantage point high above it was difficult to tell what that dark spot on

the landscape was, but judging from the shadow it was casting along the ground it was pretty tall. Flying as fast as she did, it didn't take long to get close and she landed at the edge of the mound, then walked around it to get a better look without the sun in her eyes. As she came around the side, she realized the mound wasn't earth, or stone, but rather people.

People as still as the grave.

"Warlocks," she breathed, trying to estimate how many were here.

That's right. Every called warlock in the world. They've all gathered here, at my insistence.

But why? Did you kill them?

Kill them? My loyal soldiers? Perish the thought, Susan. No, I need them to destroy this world for me, only then will they die and relinquish the energy I have... loaned. Would you like to see me now?

Not especially.

Too bad.

Susan wasn't sure how, but she knew The Darkness was happy. Every eye suddenly opened, and the mass of bodies started to rise and expand, and Susan took a nervous step back. Then another. Then another, until she rose into the air again and skimmed backwards, as more and more warlocks silently floated from the pit. They didn't look around. They didn't speak. All they did was stare at her. And still more emerged.

The warlocks had arranged themselves in a kind of grid, extending in three dimensions with about a meter and a half between them. In the setting sun the faces of only those that were closest were visible, and they all seemed happy. Suddenly, something bright was rising from the pit, and the warlocks flowed around the thing. It seemed to be a drop of food coloring moving through clear water, but up rather than down. As it passed, the warlocks that had moved out of the way went back, all silently, never out of place. The object was vaguely round, with what looked like tentacles and other odd protuberances sticking out all over it. It floated to the center of the mass of warlocks, and suddenly each said a single word.

"Susan."

Susan had never really felt that much fear in her life up to that point. Oh, she was somewhat concerned about certain things, certainly. And anger over various happenings was only natural, but this? Susan hung in the air, confronted by warlocks in numbers she couldn't begin to estimate, and knew there was no way even her considerable magic could take that many.

"Susan," they repeated again. The voices, molded together and speaking with perfect timing reverberated across the landscape.

"Yes?" she squeaked.

"How nice to see you. Tell me, does this form please you more than mighty dragons or those who would be gods? Is this more fitting than one winged angels or a simple darkness inside a soul? Here, I am legion. Tell me, do you see your death in my army of warlocks? I cultivated them quite carefully, in case a so called hero or two came to this world, seeking to save it from me. How delightful it was you, my newest thorn,

that I now get to snap off. We shall see just how powerless you are against me. Quake and fear, for there is nowhere on this world you can run that will be safe!"

In the back of her mind, even through all the fear, Susan noticed that even this part of him liked to talk.

"I do not seek safety," she threw back at him. "Only a world free of you."

The mass of people laughed, chilling her further. "Bold. Always so bold. Well, things will not go so well for you this time, I fear." Every arm came up, pointing behind her. "Behold the merest fraction of my power!"

Susan risked a quick look behind her, and saw the reason for that shadow that had been coming up behind her this whole time. An enormous block of stone, pulled out of the ground so silently she hadn't even noticed, and now moving faster than a jet plane, slammed into her.

Cra-

Her mud form burst and she gasped, sitting up in the bed she had been laying in back at the wizard's guild building.

"What happened?" demanded Sparkle. "Are you all right?"

"Warlocks!" Susan gasped, the shock of being dispersed not doing her any favors.

"What? What did you see?" asked Ithinia.

"Warlocks," she repeated. "All of them. All the called warlocks are still alive. They've gone under the control of The Darkness." She grabbed Ithinia's robes. "You have to spread the word! No one can use warlock power any more. To do so just makes the army grow." She felt something happening to her, *everything at once!* and grabbed out her *character sheet*. She stared in horror as the description of the calling was now ten times easier to succumb to, being now divided by only a hundred, rather than a thousand.

Yes, I was hoping you would use it a bit more. Play with it like a new toy, but you were not obliging in the least. I would have loved to have added your magic to my abilities, traveled worlds with you helping me take them over, rather than fighting me. As it was intended! Ah well, you're dead, which is my second choice.

"They're all going to be called!"

"Slow down!" demanded the wizard. "What are you babbling about?"

"Warlocks!" she shrieked. "What do you think? They didn't die, they've just been waiting. For someone like me to show up. The Darkness took over that thing that fell from the sky, some kind of space faring creature. Now *it's* taken over all the warlocks in the world, or at least most of them. We have to get ready!"

"Do you... do you even know what this means?" Ithinia was pale.

"War," Susan replied simply. "And one that can-"

"Susan!" The voice came from outside, and the roof of the place started to collapse, then be blown outward to show a man hovering in the air above the place.

Sparkle reacted. "Accelerate *Magic!*" she cast, getting it instantly.

Susan realized what she wanted her to do. "*Hypnotic Field!*" she cast, now able to cut the time to nothing without suffering as much of a penalty. She also threw in maximum energy, getting a nineteen, more than the warlock could hope for on a REASON check. The attack stopped- at least the man's attack, anyway. Susan wasted no time getting out her *Elemental Weapon* and Sparkle put *Flight* on her, allowing her to

slam the warlock through the chest with the blade, knocking him out with sixty two non-lethal damage. She looked around, and it looked like other black clothed forms were flying towards her, as specks could be seen in the distance.

"What is going on?" asked Ithina as Susan tossed the limp warlock to the bed. She took a moment to steal his energy so hers would be replenished, but didn't know exactly how much to take because of how they got energy from The Darkness. *How soon will he wake up from all this? It could be life or death for the people here if I'm not around.* She took forty to be on the safe side, then debated casting *Repair* on the roof. It was pretty much gone, so the difficulty would be pretty high, and The Darkness knew where she was anyway. She left it.

"I have to get out of here, or at least prepare. You need to prepare too. Put every warlock in the city to sleep, then start putting up barrier spells so the rest can't get in. I don't know how long it'll take them to fly here, but they will. Maybe they'll stop to destroy towns on the way in, maybe not. I can't say. I may be their first target, so if you can hold them off-

"Stop! Hold on here. You're leaving? You give me some raving explanation about warlocks, get attacked, kill this man, and now you're talking about leaving?"

"I don't have time. Why didn't I *save* before I went over there? Not that it would have mattered, he could have emerged at any time."

"Time!" shouted Sparkle. "Use *Time Suspension!*"

"Good idea!" Susan hastily got out her book of magic and started paging through.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Buying us some time to explain. Good thing I've read this book over a million times. Ah, here."

Susan cast, taking the extra 4 segments, which negated the plus four difficulty from casting from writings. She put in some energy, but not max, and got enough to cast the spell. That done she breathed a sigh of relief and snapped the book shut. She set it down in midair but before taking her hand off it, thought better of it and put it back in her sub-space pocket.

If I let it go, I won't be able to pick it back up again, it'll go outside time just like everything else is now.

"Okay, we can talk now. Can't believe I never put *that* one into a *Spell Paper*. Maybe I'll do that... when I get the *time*."

"Is now really the-" Sparkle didn't finish her thought. Susan gave her a little grin like "go on, say it!"

"Can you please explain what is going on?" asked Ithina.

"Now I can," replied Susan. She told her what she had seen, and about how warlocks were now being controlled against their will. "And for the record, I didn't kill this guy. That sword is specifically made for knocking people out."

"But if you're right, he'll stop at nothing to kill you! Every warlock will."

"And that means I should just kill them? Like I said, they aren't doing this on their own. They wouldn't do this on their own. Take out The Darkness, and they'll all return to normal. Without powers, even. It's win-win, right?"

"But The Darkness is now protected by thousands of warlocks, and all of them are as strong as warlocks can possibly be because they were all called."

"I didn't say it would be easy!"

"It isn't even hard, it's impossible!"

"I admit, the thought of battling through that line I saw, even with *Slash-All*, seems a bit daunting. But I can guarantee you, The Darkness is already on the move. We have no time to prepare anything if we're to protect your world. You need to get every magic user possible together and to the edge of Ethshar. Put up what barriers you can, and somehow support me while I... kill that innocent space creature... Dang."

"Seems he's set this up pretty well," remarked Sparkle.

"You have no idea. It's not magic, so I can't just use *Dead Magic* or *Destroy Magic* and turn people like this guy into non-warlocks again. My book could probably come up with a spell if I could somehow put a warlock on top of it for hours, but good luck with that. Plus if I was around the creature, he could probably shut my magic down like he did before. Oh dad, why did you have to get caught?!"

"Lament things later. Right now we need to think of first steps, and how to contain this magical war that's coming. We've already had one great war, we didn't need a second. That one set every discipline, from magic to candle making, back hundreds of years. And there were no warlocks then, so I can't imagine what this war is going to be like."

Brief, smugly put in The Darkness.

This is why you were so excited to be here. You knew what I was facing here.

Correct. I'll make you deal. Leave. Go back to Silverstreak or whatever he's calling himself now and stop your journey. I'll give you the coordinates for the world Luna landed on, and heck, I'll even throw in your father, if he agrees to settle down. Go get Luna, head back to your world, and stay there. That's what you want, isn't it? You don't care about these people, why should you die for them?

You... know where Luna is?

Susan, Susan, Susan. I'm spread across the multi-verse right now, remember? Time may run differently between worlds but what is time to me? Of course I know where she is. Duh. She's around a lot of people that like to wave swords about at this very moment. Hope she doesn't get cut to ribbons, some of them look pretty deranged. And what's with all those black kimonos those guys are wearing? And check out the boobs on that one, even I'm impressed! And I don't have human physiology!

Shu- Shut up! You're lying!

Am I?

"Susan?"

"Just a second!"

Look, I "appreciate" it at all, but take your deal and shove it. My father started journeying to stop you. Now I'm doing the same. I won't just turn my back on these people. Even if that means... sacrificing Luna. Though I doubt you're even telling the truth, you just want to rattle me, keep me from thinking clearly.

Believe what you want. I figured you wouldn't, but I had to ask. The offer stays open, if you get scared when three thousand warlocks start tearing you to pieces. I'll call them off, all you have to do is say 'yes' to me. Make me believe it, of course. Give up, in other words. I'll know, you can't fool yourself.

Never.

You always were a stubborn one.

“Sorry, The Darkness was trying to bribe me into leaving. I turned him down.”

“Which means there’s a chance?” Sparkle asked.

“There must be. He wouldn’t bother to try taking me away from here if I was totally useless. No, there must be something I can do.”

“But what?” asked Sativola.

Susan shook her head sadly. “At the moment, I really have no idea.”

Slice... to Wound

Time: Subjectively, twenty minutes later

Place: Bubble of stopped time, wizard guild building

“Why not this spell?” asked Ithinia, making a general “around here” gesture. She and Susan had been looking through her book to see what spells might help in this situation, as well as making plans for what to do when *Time Suspension* ended.

“Stopping time like this seems pretty convenient. Why not just go back there, stop time, and set something up to happen when it starts again?”

“Like I said, The Darkness, the main body not just one of these warlocks it’s controlling, can negate my magic. It’s something it learned how to do from my father, who also had that gift.”

“So if it sees you cast any spell it just sends specific magical energies at you, which negate it?”

“Yes.”

“Harsh. But you could protect this city with it?”

“I suppose. But honestly it’s just faster to beat up whatever comes looking for me. Those warlocks I saw in the distance will be here shortly, and I can’t be inside this spell when I face them. I mean I could put up *Hypnotic Field* inside here, but they would get the same resistance check against it as they normally would once time starts again. Better just to cast it from the start.”

“Even if they throw, say, a house at you?”

“Just how much weight can warlocks lift?”

“A lot. Especially if they work together. Now, these local ones won’t be as strong as ones who have been called, but they’re dangerous all the same.”

“Which is why you better think of ways to deal with them, because I can’t be everywhere at once. Anyplace I’m not is going to be under attack, and that means all across Ethshar at the least, everyone is in danger.”

“We do have a high concentration of warlocks here, it’s only natural. The money is here. But getting the word out...”

“Yes, I still can’t believe you have no magic for quickly spreading information. Even just among wizards, to think you’ll have to send people to knock on doors and such. I just can’t believe you didn’t plan for something like this.”

“That warlocks would go insane and start attacking us? No, didn’t really cross our minds once they started getting called. I mean it was always a possibility, but no one ever really took any responsibility to plan for such an event.”

“I can see that. Not every world gets an Albus Dumbledore, I guess. And even he missed a lot. Okay, let’s figure out the next... hour or so. This spell drops and time resumes. What happens?”

“I’ll go start spreading the word about warlocks being controlled. I’ll get all the wizards together and see what spells might be useful in this situation. Don’t get your hopes up, there probably won’t be many.”

“But what about this magical war everyone’s always talking about?”

“That was still fought mostly with soldiers. Sure, wizards contributed, and spells

had terrible effects on the land. But a lot of those sorts of spells were lost, or they targeted too wide an area. Those wizards had hours, days even, to prepare storms or curses or earthquakes against enemy *territory*. We need to take down just a few individuals and in a very short time, while leaving everything else standing. Plus, that was a war- we were trying to kill the enemy. You want these warlocks taken alive so hopefully they can be released when you get rid of this darkness thing.”

“I’m glad you’ve not fighting me on that one.”

“For now. If the situation becomes desperate, I can’t tell other wizards not to defend themselves.”

“I know. Sativola?”

“I’ll go down Wizard Street and gather any magic user I think will be helpful. Tell them to come here. Any warlocks not far enough gone to still be themselves I’ll tell to not do any more magic, and maybe to come here too?” She looked over at Ithinia, who nodded.

“Better safe than sorry. We’ll have to keep an eye on them.”

“I just hope I can convince them.”

“If their fellow warlocks start tearing the place up, I think they’ll be convinced pretty quickly,” said Susan.

“Is there a danger of that?”

“Sure. The Darkness would want to eliminate the people that can best resist first. That means magic users.”

“Oh.”

“Problem is,” said Sparkle, “even with all the magic users in the world at our side, we’re still basically alone. None of them have what we call battle magic. Wizardry takes too long. Witchcraft can’t really compare to warlocks. Demons would be useful, but they would want to kill, so that’s probably out. I don’t know much about what gods you have around here, if they might help.”

Ithinia shook her head. “They don’t even see warlocks anymore. Probably a side effect of being changed by the darkness. It’s from outside the world, so they have no way of perceiving it.”

“That raises a good point, what would have happened if The Darkness hadn’t come here? I mean that dragon would have busted out and Louise and her friends might have been able to deal with it. That’s what void magic was for. Aerith would have died, but Cloud and the rest could have taken Sephiroth, heck, they basically did, I couldn’t damage him directly. And Balor of the Ugly Face wasn’t even a part of it, so that would have been handled just fine. If I wasn’t here, if The Darkness hadn’t taken over all warlocks, what would have happened instead?” The witch and wizard shared a confused look. “I mean we know what it is now, a big space monster creature thing. Maybe it wouldn’t even have even come here?”

“We may never know,” remarked Sativola.

“It is odd, if it really is a thinking creature, why it would have landed here in the first place,” agreed Ithinia. “But speculation is pointless. We have work to do. How far can we get before we leave this bubble of stopped time?”

“Not far. Get as far as you can and when you see things moving again, assume I am too. I’ll head to the three Ethshar cities I’ve been to and see if I can’t knock down any warlocks making trouble. That done I’ll drain them, bring them back here, and you

guys can hopefully lock them up somewhere.”

“I’ll see what I can come up with,” promised Ithinia.

“By then I should be brimming with energy again, maybe I can just *Phase* my way close to The Darkness and... do something to him. Maybe *knockout* would work? I hate to kill the alien.”

“First things first,” cautioned Sparkle. “We have to protect the city. We can stop time again if we have to before taking him on. And we’ll have more magic by then, wizard magic, that we can throw at it too. Just because you can’t effect the world, doesn’t mean they couldn’t prepare a bunch of spells in the no-time zone. They could do wizardry of hours in a subjective second!”

“True. And maybe you can use your *Colossus* again, distract him? Yeah, no.”

“Good luck to us all, then.”

The four nodded, and the two women scampered out of the room about their tasks.

And now for mine.

Susan began activating her *Spell Papers* and *Materia*, but left *Slash-All* off for the moment. The Darkness knew about that, so they would probably stay out of range. She would have to hit them with *Elemental Burst* and hope for the best. That didn’t stop her getting out her *Knockout* sword though. She used one of her *Spell Papers* for *Avatar*, rather than getting out her *Crystal Blade*.

I don’t want to kill one, even by accident. Not if I don’t have to. Even if it’s just for the selfish reason of taking their energy when they’re down.

Sparkle took one with *Invulnerability* on it, figuring up to that point no one had attacked a “mere” cat. But The Darkness knew what she could do, so it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared. “I won’t be much help though,” she reminded Susan. “Most of what I know is *Line*, or *Touch*, so that’s pretty useless. Plus I’ll be maintaining your stuff, like *Flight* and *Acceleration*.”

“You could stay here, you don’t have to risk it, *companion* or not.”

“I’ll stick close. I’ll be maintaining *Accelerate Magic*, just to give you that much more of an edge.”

“I appreciate it.” Susan looked up through the hole. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Let’s get going then. *Save*.” Susan dropped the last *Spell Paper* to the ground and the two took to the sky. As they passed beyond the initial radius of the *Time Suspension* spell it broke, and events went into motion again.

From what she could tell, several warlocks were causing havoc in the streets, hovering above and just telekinetically smashing everything they saw. Susan couldn’t hear any screams yet, but she was sure there were people down there dying. Another group was heading towards her, and she met them halfway, desperate to take them down quickly and stop those others. They spread out, as The Darkness knew she wanted to use *Burst* on them even as she had thought it. So these warlocks knew, too.

Susan wanted to shout to them, “you’re being controlled, fight it!” but she knew that she was too far away, and that it would do little good. The Darkness had invaded these people’s brains, and changed them in some way to leave them totally under its

control. She was sure nothing less would do for the creature.

Correct, said The Darkness. *I am all of them now, and I wonder what your Invulnerability will make of this?*

Each warlock snapped open a hand which started to arc with electricity, a strange red power that lit up their faces like being awash in blood.

You've got to be kiddi-

Susan didn't even get to finish the thought as the warlocks didn't even gesture, didn't give any sign of attacking whatsoever, but the lighting in their hands struck forth with a fury. Susan was concerned for an instant that he had somehow granted them some magical power, and only her *Giant's Soul* would save her now, but she found there was no pain. She was stunned, having the equivalent of several bolts of lightning stabbing into your eyes at once will do that, magical resistance to physical damage or not.

The warlocks were fast. They could be, because The Darkness didn't mind sending them energy to cut their *delay*, and Susan found herself being hurled out of the sky at a frightening speed. She crashed through a roof as the house she had struck imploded around her, pinning her inside. She felt the pressure continue, and realized line of sight meant nothing to these people- *warlocky can see inside things*.

And even if it couldn't, put in The Darkness, *I know where you are*.

You know, you're really starting to annoy me.

Then you know how I feel about you. Anyway, what'cha gonna do about it?

"This. *Phase*." She didn't have to move for that one, and could take the full time because she really couldn't go anywhere anyway. Sparkle was too far away to help with the *Magic Acceleration*, but that didn't matter in this case. The pressure fell away, and Susan went straight up, passing through the house on her way to the nearest warlock.

Dropping a spell was a reactive action, meaning it could be done at any time just by not concentrating on the spell anymore. Honestly, doing what Susan was about to do was probably against a strict reading of the rules, but with *Acceleration* having a one delay was hardly noticeable. (Besides, delay "happens" after you take the action, so this could work either way.) As Susan swung at the warlock she didn't drop *Phase*, not until the blade was already inside the guy. That was the plan, anyway. It worked, she got a twenty six (with eight energy expended and accounting for penalties for *Phase*) while her opponent got a twenty four (with five energy expended) to dodge. As the blade passed through Susan dropped the spell, doing more than forty damage to him as the blade tore out the other side of him. It also spat the sword out of his body, doing eight lethal damage to him as the two objects tried to occupy the same space. He started dropping.

Oh, crap, he'll die if he hits the ground from this high up. I declare the use of card 23, my Personal Stake in this is making sure none of them die.

She dove after him, but the second and third warlocks cared little for her concern, and sent a piece of rubble at her despite knowing it couldn't actually hurt her.

They're just trying to keep me from reaching him. They can't go for physical pain so they go for emotional?

Hey, I take what I can get.

Susan smashed through the debris with the sword hilt, figuring that no amount on

non-lethal damage would chop through it. As clocking someone in the temple with the hilt would probably still be considered using the *Sword* skill, the narrator allowed her to roll that, at least smashing it out of the way. With her off hand she grabbed for the guy, this time using unarmed and putting energy into it. She got an eight, exactly enough to grab his hand and arrest his fall. She was still falling, trying to get out of range, when number four shot lighting at her again. She was going to try grabbing the guy up and protecting him with her body but Sparkle had been holding for just such an occurrence.

"Deflection," she cast, missing it by one. She hesitated- she had card twenty, *Missed Me*, but the bolt was aimed at Susan, so it would be fine, right?

The bolt struck, and the electricity surged through them both, causing the warlock to open his eyes and scream in agony before dropping unconscious again.

Looking down at him, Susan saw that he was now two into *gone*, his life hanging by a thread. He could take four more damage before he died, and he was bleeding from the sword wound so it wouldn't take long to lose that much.

"Heal him!" she shouted to Sparkle, who flew up, beginning to apologize.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Just regenerate him enough that he doesn't die."

"Okay."

She set him down as gently as she could, and Sparkle started casting *Regeneration*.

Susan turned, catching another two lightning bolts as she tried to cover the man, and now that she wasn't touching him they dissipated harmlessly. She tried to rise again, and had to make a STrength check to bust through the force that was trying to keep her rooted to the spot. This she did easily, bursting forth from the ground towards the nearest one that had just thrown lighting, figuring he would be unable to act by the time she got there.

She wasn't *Phased* at the moment, but figured that would be fine. She swung, but this time rather than dodging, the blade was deflected by a burst of force she couldn't get through, and she had to make a STrength check just to hold onto the weapon. All three smiled at her.

Oh great, they worked together for that one. But at least they all took the reactive delay for it.

Susan was still up, and decided to "*Phase*," spending just enough energy to guarantee success on her check as she did it instantly.

Sparkle's spell went off, and the wounded warlock started to heal. In another ten segments he would heal one damage, so it was going to take a few turns to see him safe.

Susan took another swing, and the warlocks, taking no chances, yanked their companion back even as she dodged in the air. She stayed with her, timing her attack to just impact her body when she dropped *Phase* so she wouldn't be as wounded as the first guy was. She did forty one damage to her body, and this time used her off hand action to grab her *before* she started falling. That worked, and Susan hoped she would get to act again before they did. (She was pretty sure she would, even with them just reacting defensively.)

Now she had a new problem, though. She had a sword in one hand, and the woman in the other. This would be fine if she could lower her gently to the ground, but

Susan was in a bit of a hurry given she knew the other two would start shooting again. She reluctantly dropped the blade, making it vanish, and selected some debris she could cast *Transposition* on. Having a sword in your hand doesn't make for the quick movements Mercury spells required, though she could probably have taken a penalty or put more energy in.

The woman suddenly jerked, and Susan almost lost her grip in surprise, but realized it wasn't the warlock herself moving about, the ones she was facing were trying to yank her away. Rather than make a STRENGTH check to pull her back and potentially break her arm, (or at the very least, dislocate her shoulder) Susan let herself be dragged along. Unfortunately, the direction they were headed was down.

I can't just let her impact off of me, I'm armored up, that would probably be worse than the ground. How can I cushion her fall? Oh, I don't have to.

"Phase!" she cast, again putting energy in. They slipped through the ground, contact cut off now that they could no longer be touched physically. Susan could take her movement as part of the action, and popped up again, looking for a safe place to drop the warlock off.

With her twenty five LUCK check she found an overturned wagon and slipped behind it, out of sight.

Of course, they know right where I am because of that warlock sense they have. Still, it should keep this one out of the line of fire.

It burst apart, pieces flying everywhere, and Susan was exposed again, ducking down under the dirt in the street again.

You just have to be difficult, don't you?

How can I be otherwise? I can't hurt you with these guys, it seems. I'll have to think about that. You could have taken them easily if you didn't care about them splattering to the ground when they fell unconscious. And the longer this takes you, the more time the others have to wreak havoc over there.

The Darkness was right. *I need to finish this quickly. There's only two now, so they aren't as spread apart. I'll have to try getting them both.*

Susan, having no other place to put the body at this point, opened up her *Pocket Dimension* and shoved the lady through. "Don't touch any of my stuff," she joked, and poked her head out again to see where the two were. They were still drifting some meters from each other, but Susan was pretty sure she could get it between them and catch them both. *But I'll have to be within planet + stat meters, and I'm probably like ten away at this point. Good thing Neptune spells are REASON, which for me is an eight.*

Susan still didn't to let them know something was up, though they probably already did, and rather than casting for longer she made a *Spirit Manipulation* check. That gave her twenty one extra energy to spend, in addition to her normal ten, so she popped up, dropped *Phase*, cast instantly, and threw thirty energy into the spell. This made the radius thirty six meters, and her check result a forty two.

The warlocks seemed unimpressed, and in fact the one was merrily throwing more lighting around, probably just to show he could. The other was staring off into space with a purpose, but not slack jawed as people normally are when hit with that amount of hypnotic force.

Okay, what?

You do know that I know that's one of your favorite spells, right?

So? They couldn't have reacted fast enough, and they didn't go dodging out of that area, I can see they're still in it.

Why would they need to. Oh Susan, you just don't get it, do you? Anyone with their eyes closed is immune to the spell!

... They've been fighting me with their eyes closed.

That's right! Give that girl a... well, not a cigar, smoking is bad for you. Maybe a bubblegum one? Ah, live a little, have one. Maybe a glass of whisky as well. Might mellow you out a little.

So they're using the warlock sight to see me, in anticipation of that spell. Bravo.

Thanks. And you can't just knock them out with Burst, because then they would fall and splat. I suppose you could try and catch both at the same time...

Or I could just do this.

Susan strode over to a piece of wood, a beam from a house that had been smashed to pieces. Part of it was on fire, but that didn't matter to her. She smacked it into the ground so it stood up and let *Field* go, making the warlock shooting lightning turn his attention back onto her. The other was still doing his own thing.

Now what?

Watch and learn, fool.

Susan first got her *Knockout* blade back, then took extra time, casting *Transposition* on the beam and on the warlock. She didn't release it yet, as a spell can be held and released later just fine. Instead she aimed for where she figured the warlock's body would be with the sword, bringing it up like a bat. The warlock, meanwhile, was dodging this way and that, trying to get the magical circle under his feet to go away, but the magic paced him. When everything was ready she let the spell go, and the beam became a surprised warlock.

A surprised warlock still trying to dodge the magic by flying at high speed. In her haste, Susan had forgotten that momentum was preserved with teleport style spells, and this one was no exception.

Susan made another LUCk check, a twelve, and yes, he was flying right towards her. She got a thirteen on her REFlexes check to see if she could get out of the way, but even with *Acceleration* going the two collided. Susan made a STRength check out of shear reflex to not be knocked over, getting a thirty five. In hindsight, this was a pretty terrible idea. The warlock, made of meat and bone like any other creature crashed into the pillar of magical metal that surrounded Susan, *Giant's Soul* and all. His head and body shattered against her, splattering her with blood as he almost died instantly. He too was hanging by a thread, and Susan, horrified, dropped her sword for the second time.

Oh, fabulously done. Imagine the damage you could be doing if you were actually trying to kill these guys. As it is you've near killed half of them and that's without even trying. The Darkness dissolved into giggles.

Instead of replying she grabbed up her knife, hesitated a moment because this

would possibly wake him up, and touched it to him. Now usually she just held it there until everything was fine again, but this time she pulled it away immediately. It healed “as much Lethal damage as twice her Sun rating” as it was designed to do. This turned out to be eight, so while still covered in blood and possibly some brain matter, he was no longer in any danger of dying.

Susan noticed a dark shadow passing over her, and risked a glance up. From somewhere, possibly a nearby well, a ball of water was hovering over her.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Well, it worked with me last time, didn’t it? I’m just giving you a taste of how it was back then. You can’t be damaged, true enough, but you still have to breathe.

As the ball descended Susan spent her *Extra Action* card, number 9, to throw this warlock into her *Pocket Dimension* as well, then put on *Breathe Water*.

It crashed into her and the surroundings with lethal force, crushing the nearby structures and hammering into her.

I really hope Sparkle wasn’t in range of that.

“*Elemental Weapon*,” she cast, realizing it might be best to make that into some sort of *Imbuing* if she was going to keep turning it on and off like a light bulb.

“*Telesummon*” was her next spell, cast with the extra time and extra energy, though she only had thirty left now. (She had used *Transposition* before because of the bonus from *Acceleration*, she didn’t have to put as much energy in to still have it work.) It was twenty four to twenty three, winner Susan, and she cleaved through the man as he tried to not drown, figure out why he was now inside the ball of water, push the water away, and dodge all at the same time. The water released its shape and splashed down around her, washing away some of the blood from her armor, at least.

“That’s over,” she sighed.

You aren’t forgetting those warlocks over there, are you?

Susan wearily raised her eyes to the warlocks in the distance, heading straight for her.

Going to be one of those days.

Defending the Town

Time: Moments later

Place: Ethshar of the Spices

Susan wasted no time. She hastily drew forty energy from the waterlogged warlock before her, then tumbled the other two from her *Pocket Dimension*. She stole forty from each of them, raising her total from thirty two up to a hundred and fifty two. Then she stopped dead as a thought struck her.

Draining energy causes non-lethal damage, right? Each point a person loses past negative their ENDurance becomes a point of non-lethal damage to the body. But here, she touched her knife, I have a knife that heals all non-lethal damage with a touch. Can I shove this knife into someone, leave it there, and then drain unlimited energies from them? Huh.

She was somewhat tempted to try it, but that could have some kind of lasting, detrimental effect on whoever she did it to. *Besides, I have more important things to be doing. Like finding Sparkle.*

That, sadly, was going to be a problem, as Susan had no idea really which way she had gone after leaving her side. The force of the ball of water had washed away any markers she might have used, and with the nearby houses and such blasted to pieces there was no way for her to know which way to go. *I could have used that extra energy, too. Oh well. Stay safe, Sparkle.*

As she looked around, she now noticed a fair number of dead, and shook her head at the waste. *But really this is only the beginning. One opponent at a time, Susan.*

She rose into the air, daring the next group of warlocks to come to her. She figured this area was already wrecked up, and anyone there would have fled by now. So why put some other street in danger as well?

Susan regarded the five warlocks that she could now see *clearly* coming towards her. This time it was three women and two men, and she wondered if that was significant somehow. One of them was the chairman she had seen earlier, but he showed no signs of recognizing her. In fact, his eyes were also now closed, so Susan's best spell for ending this quickly was again denied her.

Cheaters.

Tell that to all the people you've beaten up over the years. You think Severus didn't feel exactly the way you do when you were smashing up his lab after Luna had been given that truth serum?

He had it coming.

So do you.

The warlocks broke formation and encircled her, staying out of easy reach as they did so. She estimated they were about four meters from her. Looking them over she noticed each carried a knife for some reason, gripped tightly and ready to strike.

Susan called out her *Elemental Weapon*, not worried at the moment about the energy loss. She had plenty to spare for *this* combat, at least. She slowly spun in the air,

wondering which one would be the first to strike. Obviously she would have the highest *Initiative*, right?

Warlock “four” surprised her, acting first and ripping her cloak off, then tossing it in her direction. Susan easily dodged it, wondering what they were up to. Then warlock “one” did the same thing, but off to the side so she was at a flanking penalty for trying to avoid it. This didn’t matter, Susan figured her *Acceleration* would be more than equal to the task of getting out of the way of a *cloak*, and put no energy into her dodge. She rolled quite low in comparison, and was surprised to find the cloak wrapping itself around her head.

I can still tell where they are with Spirit Sense, blinding me doesn’t make sense. They’re getting desperate now, or are they really up to something? I’ll just tear this off next action.

But Susan’s dodges, even at one segment delay, caused warlock “two” the opportunity to strike first, which he did. Susan felt him coming, but had no training in *Blind Fighting*, so just swung her sword and hoped her *Augmented Skill* would compensate. She underestimated her opponent. The Darkness didn’t care about these people, it had thousands more just days away. This... was about payback.

The woman didn’t dodge, and Susan’s blade smashed into her left leg for one hundred damage. Of course it could only take twenty one non-lethal, and had she been standing on the ground she might have been concerned. As it was she was flying, and being controlled by The Darkness in any case. She couldn’t have been concerned if she tried.

What she did instead of dodging was drive the dagger into Susan’s head, doing an astonishing fifteen damage to her “no unusual effect.” Susan couldn’t see it, but the woman smirked as she sped past, and Susan was now at a minus five to everything. Normally this would have been enough to kill her instantly, and four more besides. Only having *Avatar* up saved her, as she had twenty extra health.

Susan was in shock. And because of her *Low Pain Tolerance*, in quite a bit of pain. She couldn’t ever remember being wounded like this- *never!*

How did they penetrate my armor so easily? Why didn’t my Giant’s Soul divide the damage? And how does a simple dagger bypass my Invulnerability? This is nuts!

Hey, looks like they found a weapon that can hurt you, gloated The Darkness. Guess their next attack will end it.

Susan felt them move with *Spirit Sense*, two at once this time from the front. She had to do something drastic, but what?

With only an instant to choose between *Burst* and *Phase*, she decided. *If this doesn’t work, I can always “reload” from my “save.”*

She spent an XP for an extra action, making a *Spirit Manipulation* check, and got a fifteen after accounting for her penalties. Then she made her real action.

“Elemental Burst: Knockout!”

The burst was centered on her, and she knew it would probably hurt, but was the only way to get all of them at once. With twenty four energy thrown in, the radius was thirty meters across and everyone took 5d12 damage fifteen times. In essence, damage was rolled fifteen times and wherever a body location took the most damage, that was kept. Of course, being *Knockout* whatever damage done was doubled.

The warlocks fell out of the sky.

This damage was superficial to Susan, who did divide that all by fourteen, but her entire body was very sore when she hovered near the ground to check on the warlocks. It looked like they were all still alive, but some just barely.

“Susan,” someone called, and she sagged a little more. *Am I going to get attacked again?*

But it was just Sparkle, flying over to her. “What happened to you? That blast reached *past* me, it’s a good thing I was still *Phased* from that water attack or I would have been hit too! Who knows who else you hit with it?”

“Sorry,” she said wearily. “Had to, might have died otherwise.”

“Died? You? Impos- Your face! They got through your armor? Stand still, I’ll put *Regeneration* on you.”

“Thanks.”

Susan waited, the seconds ticking by as her body healed itself with magic, and finally she could pull herself straight and stand on the ground again. She was fearful that this was the best time for an ambush, so if there were any more warlocks in the area she was pretty much helpless if they sprang out now. But none did. Healed enough to move without falling over, Susan drained energy from these warlocks and touched them with the knife to make sure they wouldn’t die.

“I still have two more cities to clean out, too,” she complained. “Forget getting experience in how to fight though, I’m taking them out from hiding, as quickly as I can. If they can actually hurt me through *Invulnerability...*” She bent to pick up one of the knives that had fallen and did a *Magic Sense* on it. “Oh, I should have known.”

“What?”

“It’s one of those knives the wizards swish around instead of wands. Probably the only magical weapon produced in quantity in the world. I should have realized. They weren’t just destroying things for the fun of it, they were looking for wizards so they could steal their knives. Let me see if I can find them all, then we’ll take these people in.”

Susan spent a moment looking around, gathering up all the knives where they had fallen near the knocked out warlocks. That done, she piled their unconscious bodies up and opened a *Teleportal* back to the wizard’s building. “Secure these warlocks,” she shouted to the first person she saw, who called for help and started hauling them through.

“They’ve really gone mad?” asked one young wizard, waiting for a turn to go through the portal and help.

“I’m afraid so. Hope you’ve been studying hard, because today is a surprise quiz.”

The boy looked confused. “I’m not even sure what those words mean.”

“I mean today your skills will really be tested, and you didn’t expect it.”

“Oh.”

With the prisoners secure, Susan opened a portal to the next large town in

Ethshar, and stepped through with Sparkle. She hadn't seen very much of it, just the wizard's street really, which was quite thoroughly on fire.

"Tore this place up pretty good," Sparkle remarked. "Do you hear that?"

"What?"

Sparkle raced off, but didn't go far when she stopped in front of a ruined house that had been demolished. "I think there's someone inside!"

"Great." Susan tossed wood and stone aside, wading into what was left of the structure until she found a trapped boy calling for help. She cracked the beam just by smacking it, then lifted the rest off of him. The boy looked up at her in awe.

"Let me guess, the warlocks went nuts."

He shook himself. "Yeah, my master just got up, blew the place apart, and flew off. From what I could tell other warlocks were fighting them-"

"Fighting them? Oh no!" Susan took to the air, scanning the skies around the town and there still seemed to be a warlock or two fighting against others. She came back down. "They did," she said to Sparkle. "You know what that means!"

She nodded. "They got taken all the faster, and then stopped putting up any resistance."

"Are you a warlock?" asked the kid.

"Are you?" Susan shot back.

"I'm an apprentice."

"Oh." She regretted her sharp tone. "Well, find a new line of work."

"I can't! I'm too old!"

"Too- what? Look, warlocky is over. It's done. You keep using it today and you'll wind up like your master. Freaking insane. With a little luck I'll destroy the source by tonight before they kill every living thing on this world. Either way, you'll need to find a new vocation."

"What's vocation?"

"Just don't do any more warlocky, okay? You have a family?"

"Yeah?"

"That didn't sound promising. If you can get back to them, fine, do it. Protect them using *minimal* magic. If you can't, just hide out someplace until this all blows over."

"I can't get to them, not without using my magic. Have you seen what's going on around here? I should help!"

"Help?" Susan stopped short. "At least that I can understand. All right." She tried to think of something he could actually *do*. "Uh, okay, round up all the magic users that are still alive around here, and have them grab any unsmashed wizardry stuff. We're going to need it before this is over. Find someplace fortified and get up whatever defenses they can. We're only going to win against warlocks if we combine our magics and everyone does their part. The wizard's guild will be along shortly to more directly take charge, so keep that in mind. Got all that?" He nodded. "Then get going, and stay safe."

"I'll be fine!" He started to rise off the ground.

"And no magic! You want to go mad?"

"It's just so easy now," he complained. "Fine." He stopped and ran out, heading down the street.

"Come on," she said to Sparkle. "There's about a dozen warlocks over there, and

we need to somehow take care of them.”

“Any idea as to how?”

“No. It would be so much easier if they weren’t flying about. But knock them out and there’s every chance they’ll crack their heads open when they fall.”

“Too bad you don’t have *Elemental Creation: Pudding Pit*.”

Susan laughed softly. “Yeah, I should have my book work on that one. Or like, *Bouncy Castle*, turns the area up to M range into the humorously inflated version of itself.”

“Seriously, what are we going to do?”

“I really don’t know. Against that many, and we have to move fast... maybe *Mass Domination*? It’s kind of like the *imperius curse* though, not that the laws at home really apply to this situation.”

“Aren’t they already being controlled? You go up and throw that at them, you might have to beat whatever The Darkness has done. You think you can do that... with a spell you’ll be casting from writings?”

“Ah, yes, there is that. And if it doesn’t work, I’m up there with a bunch of warlocks who want me dead. But we have to do something!”

“*Grounding*?”

“Only works on one person. But yeah, a spell to make an area where people can’t fly, that would have been a nice one to have.”

“*Telesummon* from miles away? Do it in the air and they won’t crash into anything, and you can take them one at a time.”

“Trouble is I don’t actually ‘know’ any of those people. I can’t uniquely identify them, and asking for a signed, group photo, probably isn’t going to work.”

“Then I’ve got nothing.”

“Yeah, me too. The Darkness will throw them at me without regard for their safety, and destroy any that I knock out just to spite me. But I can’t just leave and let them destroy this whole town.”

“You don’t have to convince me. Just think of something!”

So she did, as the seconds ticked by even with her *Acceleration* going. Suddenly she got out her book and excitedly started paging through it.

“Okay, I think I’ve got a way. It’s going to take a few spells, but see what you think of this. You can drop *Flight* and even *Acceleration* from us. Instead give me *Energetic Accumulation*. I’m going to drop enough energy into *Alternate Dimension* that they can’t resist even with putting energy into it.”

“But that’s no-”

“Hear me out. Yes, it says they return to their exact positions, that’s true. But what if they couldn’t? What if they were all in my *Pocket Dimension*?”

“I guess that would work. But what about them not dying when they hit the ground?”

“That’s the best part. The *Dimension* is as I will it. So I just make the ground be a nice, soft, cushiony substance. Your *Pudding Pit* spell gave me the idea. The ground doesn’t have to be dirt, after all, just be the same position relative to the ground here. I’ll be *Invisible* so they don’t spot me. I’ll grab them up, then gather energy again for another *Burst*. Drain them after they fall, shove them in the *Pocket*, and end the spell. Easy!”

“Yeah, easy. It just takes, what, five spells?”

“It’s better than trying to take them all down individually. What do you think?”

“I guess it could work.”

“Of course, now come on, let’s get it ready.”

So Susan got out a *Spell Paper* with *Invisibility* on it, ready to activate with her *off hand* when casting *Alternate Dimension*. She couldn’t use one of those *spell papers*, because she wanted to pump extra energy into it. Which she did. From her current three hundred and forty seven energy she put in forty, making the range enormous and keeping them from resisting. All the warlocks were surprised to find themselves in a well lit, endless plain of what amounted to the softest mattress ever created. They knew she must be around, but even their warlock sight couldn’t penetrate her *Invisibility*, as that needed a *perception check* no matter how you were looking for the person.

Plus she only needed four actions to put in more than fifty energy, which for her worked out to be about six seconds. She released *Elemental Burst* and all eleven of the warlocks dropped.

Of course, they were dropping already. If she hadn’t been so hasty, she might have noticed the warlocks being more confused than anything else. The reason they didn’t even bother looking for her was that being shoved into the *Alternate Dimension* cut off the influence of The Darkness, so they would have been quite lucid, had she actually spoken to them. But she didn’t. She did wonder why there all so low to the ground when her spell went off, but figured they were just coming down to see where she was. She didn’t realize that with the warlock energy from The Darkness cut off, they weren’t actually warlocks anymore. But none of them died, and that’s something, right?

Susan ended the spell after taking their energy and buttoning them up, then reappeared in the city. She didn’t stick around, but went to the third major area she had seen in this world and took out the warlocks there using a combination of whacking them, *Alternate Dimension*, and stealth. As the disappearance of a dozen warlocks from one city alerted The Darkness to that tactic, they were more spread out when she reached the next one, forcing her to be similarly creative. It didn’t bother her, she was *thrilling* with energy, (or possibly brimming or even fit to bursting) so she had it to throw around.

When she got back to Ethshar of the Spices she went directly to the dungeon area and was horrified to find it empty.

Oh no, they broke out! But wait, the place isn’t smashed up...

She ran up the stairs and found someone, and was hastily assured they were now someplace more secure, and Susan followed the wizard she saw into a room where a large tapestry hung.

The scene was of a similar bent to her own *Personal Dimension*, just with more farmhouses rather than just a single cabin. There was a shining sun, a stream, hills in the distance, it was all very nice.

“They’re in there,” explained the wizard. “Of course, a wizard had to go there to drag their unconscious bodies out of the frame so each one could be passed through,

but he volunteered so that was that.”

“Where is that? Just moving them won’t help. Once they’re awake they’ll just fly back here!”

The wizard laughed. “No, no, they can’t escape from there. This scene isn’t in this world at all. The tapestry that’s inside leads back to the warlock house, and a chair has been placed in the room it empties out in. Until that chair is moved, they’re effectively stuck there, forever. It was made some time ago by a warlock, thinking they could avoid the calling if they went in there. We just dug it out of storage because it didn’t work. He came out and immediately flew off. But for our purposes now, it’s ideal.”

“Oh. Well, I have a bunch to ‘deposit,’ so I hope they’re standing by!”

Susan dumped out two dozen or so warlocks, (she hoped she remembered everybody) (that was a joke) and spent the next few minutes carefully touching them to the tapestry while avoiding touching it herself. She thought she might be able to free herself with something like *Dimension Gate* or at the very least calling Silverstreak and asking to be put back, but why make the effort if she didn’t need it?

Finally they were all through, and she went to meet with Ithinia when she returned.

“I think we’re safe for the moment,” she said. “How goes the preparation for Ethshar’s defense?”

“It’s been, what, a half an hour? We’ve hardly reached half the people we’ll need to.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, being *Accelerated*, especially for as long as I was, really messes with your sense of time.”

“It’ll take some time. Glad to hear you could take care of the warlocks in other places. We’ve been bringing any here that weren’t yet called, just to be safe. They went through the tapestry too, though most weren’t exactly happy about it.”

“I can imagine they wouldn’t be.”

“What’s your next move?”

“Not sure, do you have something in mind?”

“I do!” shouted a voice, and Sativola came running up the stairs. “After I started getting practitioners together, I did a quick reading of the future, just in case. You need to look upon the resting place of The Darkness, something important is happening there you need to see. I came back to tell you!”

“Well,” said Susan, not one to ignore vague warnings of the future from the nearest thing this world had to ESPers. “Let’s see what old sourpuss is up to.”

Who says sourpuss anymore?

Don’t you sass me, boy, I’ve got more energy than Pinkie Pie and I will use it.

On the being inside your own soul. Good luck with that.

Grrr.

“Teleportal!”

End of the road in sight?

Place: Wizard's Guild building

Time: A moment later

"Now isn't that interesting?" Susan was looking through the fist sized hole she had created with *Teleportal*, in order to "scry" on the location she last saw The Darkness. She believed she would see a bunch of warlocks and that blobby thing heading away at high speed, or perhaps an empty field they had already left.

Did you just call me "blobby?"

She wasn't sure how fast it could move in atmosphere, or how fast warlocks could fly using their power. It hadn't been all *that* long, so she figured she could at least catch a glimpse of them as she had positioned the gateway high enough, and there were enough of them, so she could easily pick them out. I mean you couldn't mistake thousands of warlocks and a rotund space critter for anything else, could you?

You just did it again! Do you know how cold space is? I have a layer of blubber to keep my body warm in the vacuum.

What she actually saw was quite different.

About fifty warlocks had remained behind and were busy floating huge chunks of rock around to make a sort of fortress that covered the hole she had seen Mr. Too Many Hamburgers floating out of.

That's SIR Too Many Hamburgers to you, missy.

"What do you see?" asked Sparkle. "And don't tell me it's a big empty field and you're going to play it up for dramatic effect and when someone looks through it and says 'it's a big empty field' and you're all like 'I know, who would have thought' or some nonsense like that."

"Please, Sparkle, this is no time for jokes. I just don't know what's gotten into her," she said to Ithinia.

"Just tell us what you see already," she sighed.

"Oh, right. A bunch of them are still there, and they're building a big stone box around the impact site." She watched as another set of walls was being dropped into place around the walls that were already there. "Okay, a big stone box inside a big stone box. Which for all I know is inside an even smaller big stone box. And they're doing something, can't quite see from this angle." She ended that *Teleportal* and made another one lower down. Squinting through the hole she found she still couldn't get a good look at what they were doing, so used *Temporary Tool* to make an old fashioned spyglass and looked through that. "They're carving something on the stone, and it's glowing. Say, did like, witches and wizards and such get turned into warlocks? Or... demonologists, maybe?"

"They did, why?"

"That's just super. Because I see things that are clearly not warlocks patrolling the area and I bet whatever those symbols are is some kind of warding."

"Let me see," said Sativola, and Susan handed over the tool.

"This is amazing, what sort of magic is this?" she asked, looking through it. "It's like I'm standing right next to them!"

"That's not magic, just lenses."

"Lenses?"

"Ground down glass, one at each end in a certain shape. You have glass, I've seen it."

"Of course we have *glass*," scoffed Ithinia. "Who doesn't know what glass is? Grinding it into shapes though, that sounds like something you should talk to scientists about."

Susan looked over at her incredulously. "You have scientists?"

"Of course. A minor branch of magic, I admit, but perhaps one day it could be useful."

"Hardly!" scoffed Sativola.

Susan shook her head. "You people have no idea what you're talking about. Yes, when this is over, remind me to advance your civilization a thousand years or more by giving some scientists some ideas. Honestly."

"The runes?" asked Ithinia, trying to get the conversation back on topic.

"Oh, right. Yes, they're for protection and readiness. Basically they would alert someone if something got too near, and make the stone harder to destroy."

"Wonderful. I get to worry about all branches of magic, and getting fried by demons, when I go there to face The Darkness. Trying to take just warlocks out without killing them was bad enough. These can throw other spells at me? And if they're witches, they probably knew when I'd arrive before I've even decided I wanted to go!"

"Probably," agreed Sativola. "What are you going to do?"

"Plan and scheme like I have never before. I have to assault them before this wonderful, wonderful energy goes away... in about twenty seven hours."

"And before they erect even more defenses against you, I would think," Ithinia said dryly.

"Sure, that too."

"It doesn't make sense though," protested Sativola, still looking through the hole at various angles. "The creature can make anyone that gets near it into a warlock right? That's why people that investigated on foot never came back."

"Actually," said Ithinia, "that's only speculation. They may not have come back because the thing killed anyone that got too close. But it must have made warlocks in the beginning, how else did we get them? So I guess you're right?"

"So wouldn't the logical course of action to be to sweep over the countryside, gathering up new forces? I mean if he can really control people through the warlock power, and I can't believe he's at any sort of limit for the number of people he can control given what you've said he is, Susan, why isn't he? Wouldn't that be easier than destroying us one at a time, even with thirty years of called warlocks to fight for him? We have days before his main force arrives, who knows what defenses wizardry could put up in that time? Why chance it?"

"She has a good point," agreed Sparkle. "I can't believe the creature is unable to move, especially if it normally flies around space. It could have warlocks just carry it around. Why is it there?"

"You make a better point than you know," Susan agreed after a moment. "Why land all the way out in the sticks like that? If The Darkness had smashed into a population center like this one all those years ago, there would be warlocks aplenty right

now. The fight would have been over before it even began.”

“That would have been a disaster.” Ithinia’s eyes were wide.

“So we have two choices. Either The Darkness came later, after the creature was here, or there is something about that spot it needs. What’s in that area, exactly? Metals? Minerals? What does a space creature eat exactly?”

“Not much mining done in that part of the world, even before the fall. I couldn’t really tell you, though.”

“The hole wasn’t that deep, and it wasn’t eating the people that I know of. A creature that size must need something substantial.”

Again with the jabs at my size! Maybe I’ll find a petite princess somewhere, possess her awhile. Would that satisfy you?

It would, actually. There must be some around here someplace.

Oh, no, I meant on other worlds. This one is mine. Sorry, didn’t mean to get your hopes up there.

Jerk.

“What about sunlight?” asked Sparkle. “Is it more like a plant, and it just needs photons hitting it?”

“What are photons?” asked the natives.

“Wait a second,” said Susan, holding up a hand. “When I used that power I got *spirit energy*. That energy must have come from somewhere.”

“Yeah, the creature.”

“Yes, the creature,” Susan said, looking down at Sparkle. “But where did it get the energy from? If I’m tuning in to WRLK FM he’s acting as a transmitter. The thing in warlock’s brains is acting as a receiver. He’s transmitting energy along with telekinetic force and instructions I bet. I even have an idea as to how.”

Susan closed the *Teleportal* again and opened a new one, to the area her *Plastic Proxy* duplicate had been left by Ithinia. She looked through, making sure no warlocks were in evidence, and stepped through. She shooed the others back and opened up her senses, her *Spirit Senses*. With no other real animal life for miles her fourteen (maximum) result told her all she needed to know. The area here was rich in ley line energy. She nodded her head and stepped back though, closing the hole behind her.

“I bet there’s a huge convergence there,” she said to Sparkle, who nodded.

“That would stand to reason. And maybe something we can exploit?”

“Like even it only has so much energy to send to warlocks? So it can only effectively control a small group of them?”

“What are you two talking about?” demanded Ithinia.

“Lines of energy that cross the planet,” explained Susan. “I can tap into them, but usually I’m on the move and honestly I have so much energy naturally it hardly seems worth it. But I probably should, it would make my magic- anyway. The Darkness landed there to latch onto those energy conduits, and that may be what it’s eating. But it’s definitely what’s providing the warlocks with power. Maybe they’re hooking onto lines without even knowing it, and that’s why the energy rate between us was so different? The closer to a line you are, the more energy you get? Again, I’d have to do more experiments and that’s too risky at this point.”

“Wait,” said Sativola. “You mean there’s energy just flowing about like a river that

I could have tapped into at any time? You do remember that witchcraft depends on my body's own energy, right?"

Susan raised her hands in defense. "Like I said, I've got a lot to think about, even I can't consider all things all the time. Plus, they're densest in forested areas, or places with a lot of plant life and life energy in general. Farms, where lots of things are born and grow, that sort of thing. That's why it landed out there, way more plant life, so better *ley lines*. And in thirty years the plant life there must be even greater because there were no humans to cut it, pull weeds, chop wood, etc. Here in a city... well, how many trees do you see walking about?"

"I don't think I've ever seen a walking tree."

"I mean *while* walking about. How many trees, while walking about, have you seen?"

"Oh. Still, it might have been nice to know about."

"Another thing to consider when this crisis is over. If you can even learn to sense and tap them. I got this knowledge and ability from the being that sent me here. If it was possible here, I'm sure you would have already figured it out. The Darkness knows because it's also from outside the world, and it wants all things energy. Because it's a glutton."

I'm not even going to respond anymore. See how you like that. Yup, silent treatment for the win. Starting now. Not going to say another word. Not. One. Word. More.

You mean now?

That's right. Right now.

Except for then?

Right. Starting... now.

"Like we figured out what you showed me?"

"What exactly *did* you show her?" Ithinia asked suspiciously.

"Just witchcraft stuff, nothing for wizards to concern themselves with," sniffed Sativola. "I see your point, but if there are witchcraft things we can do that we don't know about, why not this energy stuff? Of course if your theory is correct, that makes the warlocks there even more of a danger, because they are so close to these lines."

"You had to go and make it worse, didn't you?"

"I think it already was, I just want to make sure you're prepared."

"I'll never be prepared. Okay, let me see what I can come up with this time, I'll save and storm the castle."

"You don't want any of our support?" asked Ithinia. "Wizards and other magic users should be coming along at any moment."

"I've never been comfortable mixing magic. Any spells you cast on me might interfere with ones I have going. Best to stick with what I know. Unless you know of a spell that can make the ground softer, so if I was to knock warlocks out of the sky they wouldn't get as hurt when they fell."

"I can ask about that."

"Please do. What I'm most concerned with is those demons though, I had a hard enough time taking just one down. And who knows what they can do!"

"We could ask a demonologist."

"We'll have to. If you think you can stand being on a battlefield, or there are some

witches with skill in battle magic, I'll welcome them as backup."

Sativola shook her head. "I'm not unique in that regard, no witch would want to fight directly."

"That figures. Wizardry is too slow, witches can't fight, Theurgy is no help, I wouldn't trust demons to fight demons anyway... am I missing anything?"

"Sorcery," replied Ithinia. "There could be talismans that would be useful in a fight. But finding any Sorcerers to go with you and fight warlocks? That's the tricky part."

"And you're still willing to go fight those warlocks?" asked Sativola.

"Who else is there to go? I'll have to think of something else though, I'm not sure if The Darkness can shut down my magic from where it is, but for all I know it could. I'm going to have to rely on magic cast before I even arrive there."

"Just *Phase* through the place and run to the center," suggested Sparkle.

"Oh, that reminds me. What exactly am I going to do once I get there? Am I going to have to kill that space creature?"

"Not necessarily. Remember how you beat Tom. This must be a similar situation, if you enter the soul of that thing maybe you can fight off The Darkness from within."

"You remember what happened in there! I'm not going to have any understanding of that alien's mind. I was able to piece Harry back together because I knew him. How am I going to piece back together something that won't even think like I do?"

"What other choice do you have?"

Susan shook her head. "They'll both be alien to me. Tom, at least, was human, so I could separate him from The Darkness pretty easily. But yeah, you're right, I have no other choice. I'll make a *Spell Paper* with *Soul Projection* in it, and put tons of this energy in."

"And get out the book, let's see what we can put on you in case this all goes bad."

So Susan prepared. She got some parchment from the wizards and made *Spell Papers* with Sparkle's help. As there was really no limit to the number of *Spell Symbols* one could have active at once, Susan created some for *Acceleration*, *Accelerate Magic* and *Energetic Accumulation*. She also got *Augment STRength*, because why the heck not? This way Sparkle would not have to carry the penalty for all that, and be freed up to fight. Susan also read over *Energy Gift* and pumped her full of energy too.

"I feel all tingly," she complained at two hundred energy.

"Don't worry, you'll be burning it off soon enough."

She also made several *Magical Ally: Major Spell Papers*, ready to activate as a distraction and to fight demons. Her *Legion* she would call up on site. She debated *Barrier Against Weapons* but figured there couldn't have been that many wizards there, she could handle a knife or two now that she knew they could hurt her. Sparkle got *Elemental Body: Knockout* so Susan could use her *Burst* without worrying about hitting her, with the added benefit that she was now basically impossible to kill. Susan didn't get the same because her damage was *far* higher as she was, and that was going to be key if they had to actually fight their way through.

Susan also attached a *Colossus Paper* to Sparkle's collar, just in case.

During this time, Ithinia looked into a ground softening spell, and the promised

other types of magic users started arriving. Susan had a brief chat with the demonologists, who said there were many types of demons, and each basically had a specialty.

“Like energy demons, they can drain your energy and leave you helpless.”

“Or wind demons, that are almost too fast to even catch a glimpse of.”

“Or corruption demons, that can make you sick with a touch.”

“Or demons of darkness, that can steal the very light from wherever they are.”

“Or cleanliness demons, that can clean anything with one swipe of their tongues.”

Everyone looked over at him.

“What? They keep my shop clean.”

“But I don’t think that’s really relevant here, do you? Of all types of dangerous demons, I think the ones that eat dirt are pretty low on the list, yes?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“In other words, expect the worst?” asked Susan. “Because basically, they could probably do just about anything between them.”

“Pretty much,” they agreed.

She sighed.

And finally there were no more checks to make, no more prep to do. Susan had more STLength, magic, and energy than she ever dreamed possible, and she was still very worried about going into battle against these warlocks. She didn’t want to kill any of them, while the demons she didn’t mind sending back where they came from. (Which is what the demonologists said would happen, if they were killed.)

Is it really possible to fight off all of them myself? And I’m going to have to, if that area isn’t secure how can I possibly engage The Darkness in spiritual combat? My body would be totally vulnerable. With luck, I can Phase through the walls and reach it before anyone realizes I’m even there. Ha, maybe I should have gone with Augment Stat: LUCK rather than STLength. Oh well, I can take them!

Wondered where that Overconfident weakness was lately.

Oh, are you back talking to me again? Your so called silent treatment didn’t last long. I’m not stupid you know, and I played a card to keep them alive at the end of the fight.

Still, thinking about creeping around, wondering if you’ll get through. Did that knife to the head shake your confidence, perhaps?

The only thing shaking around here should be you. I’m coming for you, and make no mistake. I’ll kick you off this world just like I did the others.

If you say so. You do realize how much it’s going to suck, being up against a whole army of warlocks?

I once said my powers made me an army. It’s time to see if that statement really was true or not.

And of course you can try again and again if you flub it, thanks to that time spell of yours.

True. Are you going to let me get on with this, or what?

Oh, sorry, are these last few minutes of life really so unimportant you can spend them jiving with me? No words of comfort to your companion, about to follow you into

battle? No encouraging word for Sparkle, who is going to try watching your back through all of this?

She's unkillable now, this planet doesn't have Knockout magic. And even if it did, I'll have Magic Domination going, so no other magic but mine will work.

Okay. I hope you're right.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

"Then once again into the breach. *Teleportal.*"

The Ninja Uses His Environment

Time: Seconds later

Place: Near the resting point of The Darkness' body

Susan barreled through the opening she had made in space towards the stone boxes, hoping she had judged the distance correctly. She wanted to be far enough away to activate what she needed to, but not be so far away that the shock of seeing her wore off and the demons and such reacted. Of course, The Darkness would react instantly, but as she cleared the portal she shouted "*Phase*" so nothing the warlocks could do would touch her.

"For Sacrifices Made!" she called, as Sparkle started activating her *Magical Ally: Major* spells contained in *Spell Symbol*. Susan's *Legion* appeared, and Susan ran past them shouting and pointing. "Attack anything that doesn't look human around here!" she called, and they looked over at the surprised demons. Not being human they didn't shrug or call into question these orders, simply readied their blades and charged off. Sparkle shouted similar orders to her *Allies*.

Susan's speed was tremendous thanks her to greater STrength, longer stride, and *Acceleration*, but she managed to get her *Allies* going as well, and they leapt into battle with whatever came close.

They'll not serve as much more than a distraction, given what they're up against. But hopefully that's all that will be needed.

At full speed, Susan gave a little wave as she passed a group of warlocks that tried to grab her, and gathered herself for a mighty leap, sure to clear most if not all of the "solid" stone barricades in front of her. Up she went, Sparkle following as best she was able, getting closer and closer to the wall...

That she smashed headlong into with a mighty clatter of metal upon stone, and thwomped into the ground in shock with a mighty crash.

You do know, I know that you know that spell, right?

But... but... Phase!

But... but... greater understanding of magic and energy than you will ever have.

The magic here might be minor compared to yours, but used correctly even something as simple as a minor ward can keep you out of where I don't want you. They might not have known such a thing was possible, but I did. A witches' magic did the rest.

So I'll just smash it down!

You'll have to drop Phase to do that.

What? Why? If I can touch a wall, I can smash a wall.

Except the wards strengthen the walls too, and you can't hit them while phased. You would just pass through them and hit the wall behind it. And good luck getting through these walls now.

Fine, I can take it down, smash the ward off, and put it back up again, no problem.

Really? You've got that kind of time? Better watch out.

Better not cry! Better not pout- wait a second... "Ack!"

Susan saw the shadow of the huge block of stone that was coming towards her

and whirled. If it had the same rune on it that the walls did, and she had to assume it would, that much stone would crush her like a grape. And if it counted as a “magic weapon” it would do so even through her *Invulnerability*. She *could* use *Transposition* to stick a warlock where she was, but she wanted to keep them all alive. With a sigh she dropped *Phase* and shouted “I punch it!” while she punched it.

What kind of attack name is that?

Susan, with every conceivable bonus to her STRength that could possibly be placed on her by magic now rolled a value off the table in the rules. This left her rolling the maximum she could, then a lesser amount to make up the difference. She ended up doing sixty seven damage to the stone block, a “normal” stone block having the capacity to take thirty damage before it was destroyed. As there are no rules for accounting for the thickness of an object the damage shall be calculated as if this were a creature, so it divided that damage by three. This is twenty two damage, not enough to shatter it so the remains pushed her back and squashed her against the wall.

“This is another fine mess you’ve gotten us into,” remarked Sparkle, trying to shift around and shove the block a little bit before it pinned her too much to even breathe. Even being made of *Knockout*, and regenerating any damage instantly, she still had to do that.

“Hey, I’m working on it. Don’t see you doing anything.”

“I thought you had it!”

“I... thought I did too. Guess I should have put energy into it?”

“You didn’t?”

“Do you even know what kind of damage I do now? Honestly I thought it would be fine.”

“Just get it off!”

“Okay, okay!”

Susan couldn’t move because she was pinned against the wall, but she could move her arms about. Enough to cast “*Thrust*” on the block and get a seventeen. (Again, counting the block as four size 0 creatures, thus giving her a penalty of -4 to her planet rating) It went sliding away seven meters, giving her a good look at the demons who were now standing to the side of her.

“Uh, what happened to my fire soldiers?” she asked, looking them over.

One of the demons, a tallish looking man dressed in fine robes and seemingly riding a wave snapped his... snake at her. The many heads of the snake hissed and made biting motions.

“I took care of them,” he said disdainfully. “One sweep of water and they burst like so many soap bubbles.”

Great, there would have to be a water demon among them.

You do realize-

Oh, shut up, I realize that you know that I know a spell that causes flame soldiers to appear and that water can take them out. I know!

Just asking.

“The other creatures were also easily handled, it’s a wonder you bothered to call upon such weak forces at all. I hope you turn out to be more worthy of direct combat with me than your so called army.”

Susan looked over the demons arrayed before her. One was even bigger than

she was, twice as tall to be exact. It had three heads, six arms, and rather than legs it just had a mass of tentacles writhing beneath it.

The third was hovering, and looked like a giant badger. It seemed eager for combat. As did the four legged creature standing off to the side. The skin of the creature looked like metal, and it had a tail with a spiked ball at the end of it. Behind them were five floating warlocks, several meters back, but Susan thought they were still within range of her *Slash-All*. (Seventeen on *Magic Combat*)

“Consider the question back in Hell,” replied Susan. “*Blade*.”

As the sword dropped into Susan’s waiting hand the creature swung that odd tail and several spikes shot off, right towards her. They hit, but bounced harmlessly off her armor and Susan got the feeling it wasn’t by much, either.

“Pathetic,” snarled the badger, “let me show you how it’s done.” He raised a hand and a lightning bolt shot out, too fast for Susan to even dodge it. Her LUCk saved her, however, as she was still moving from dodging the spikes, her *Passive Dodge* came into play. The creature got a thirteen to hit, and Susan’s difficulty to be hit was exactly a thirteen. (Accounting for her current size, of course.) Ties go to the defender, and the wall behind her took ten damage. (Divided by the same three the chuck of rock did, so it was purely superficial.)

“Oh, really?” asked the metallic demon.

“Shut up, it’s hard to control *bolts of actual lightning coming out of your hands*. I’m just getting a feel for the angle...”

“Sure, sure, keep telling yourself that.”

At this point, a ton of stuff happened at once. Susan tried to strike at the demons with the sword in her right hand, for the moment not seeing the warlocks behind them as her enemies. Thus, *Slash-All* ignored them. The big thing started forward, three warlocks tried something, the guy standing on water waved his hands dramatically and sent a cascade of water at Susan, and Sparkle sent *Elemental Line: Wind* into the two demons she knew she could hit, those on the ground.

In order, then, Susan got a 36 to hit the demons in the body, more than enough even given that the warlocks were trying to get the sword away from her at the time. Even though three of them were pulling on it with their magic, the second their power touched Susan it began to work on her not as three separate attempts but rather one attempt, bolstered by one for every five added by the other two. This was a total of twenty one, versus her STREngth check of seventy seven. She hardly even noticed.

She did notice the wall of water slamming into her, but the result of sixteen on the part of the demon wasn’t enough to bypass her *passive dodge* and armor rating.

Sparkle, meanwhile, got a twenty nine to hit, and the two ground based demons were smashed with air for even more damage. Three of the four demons vanished, leaving only the huge one who was now clutching his chest and backing away.

Honestly, why do I even try? They didn’t even last one attack! Haven’t you heard of moderation?

Not really. I have to do massive amounts of damage and guarantee the hit, especially given how many things I’m trying to fight here at once. Damage for magic is usually my rating, which is limited even with the amount of energy I could pour into it. There seems to be no limit to how strong I can be though, so why not end the fight with the thing that has the highest chance? Plus I have to burn off this energy somehow so I

threw extra into COOrdination so they couldn't dodge it. I don't dare do too much magic this close to your other self, it'll start getting shut down. So I go with what else I've got, and that means swords.

The Darkness seemed to sigh. *I suppose they were little more than a distraction, just like your Legion. Anything you can mow though, you will, that's why I took warlocks over in the first place. I'll find something you can't just neutralize on one of these worlds, just you wait. Then you'll be mine!*

*You do what you gotta do, man. Can I get back to this now?
Whatever.*

Warlock "three" had a bright idea, *let's do something she can't negate with a check, or even dodge because it's invisible.* To that end, he simply created a vacuum around Susan by yanking all the air away from her. As with the shatra from before she started to suffocate, and wondered what was up with depriving her of air all of a sudden.

You do what works, I do what works.

The flame on her swords went out, not that the extra fire damage was really all that much. She and Sparkle now went, and Susan trusted her companion to take out the big guy, and flew sideways trying to get out of the vacuum. She was faster than his ability to move the air out of the way, and her flames were back. She still wasn't exactly sure what her next move was going to be, she had to get all of them into her "battle dimension" but only these five were near her. The others were carefully staying out of range at the other side of the cube.

Sparkle shot another *Line* at the arm guy, which he tried to dodge, but Sparkle had wrapped it around him, making that impossible. Even as he dodged he went over another part of it, and fell over unconscious. He vanished a second later.

And we come back to the original problem. How to take these guys out without killing them. I have one idea, but how does a grade four spell come to have a fifteen turn casting time? (That's a minute for those of you keeping score at home.) Here goes.

Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, throwing energy into RESolve to hopefully get a better result. She got a thirty four, so that was pretty good.

Sparkle held her action, wondering what Susan was going to do.

Four of the five warlocks seemed to be concentrating on something, so Susan took advantage of it and cast *Autonomous Assistant* instantly, throwing thirty three energy into the spell and casting it a total of six times at once. She couldn't fail, and felt six invisible helpers come into being in front of her. She dropped to below a thousand energy.

"Anything drops out of the sky," she shouted to them, "you catch it without fail and lower it to the ground."

She didn't know how, but the invisible forces she had conjured indicated they had understood these orders. Susan took a deep breath, she now had six man sized helpers the warlocks couldn't see to target, and couldn't really be struck in combat anyway. They had physical stats of forty, giving them a speed just above forty, so she was pretty sure they could catch up to six guys falling out of the sky at once. They couldn't fight, but they didn't need to.

Susan looked up to see the Warlocks still concentrating, but it had only been a fraction of a second so she wondered what the heck they were up to. She started to rise

into the air to give the helpers time to get under them, but felt something pushing her down.

“Behind!” shouted Sparkle, and Susan turned her head to see ten more warlocks concentrating on her.

Great, I can only attack six at once if I want them to be caught. “Phase!” she cast, throwing in the needed energy.

Not so fast, she felt in her mind, and her spell popped.

Oh, come on! You didn’t shut down my Assistants!

Because they aren’t going to help you escape, and they give you a penalty to actions as long as they’re around. You can have all the penalties you want.

Thank you so very much.

Susan tried an attack, making a STrength check she couldn’t possibly fail, but to her dismay all the warlocks were now exactly out of her range, and they all smiled down at her.

Hey, it’s ready!

What’s “ready?”

This.

Magma shot out of the ground in four gouts, slamming into Susan from different directions and leaving her no route of escape.

But I can’t be harmed by this, she protested, feeling the hot rock around her.

What’s the point?

If I can’t harm you, I’ll go for the next best thing, of course.

Warlock “4” had been holding for this very occurrence, and yanked the heat out of the stone, instantly solidifying it and locking Susan into place.

Oh.

If she hadn’t been immune to fear, she might have started feeling a little bit of it, as she was now totally encased in rock, unable to see or (and she was getting a little miffed about it) breathe.

I can still get out of this!

Good luck with that.

Phase! she cast without words, but again her spell was denied.

No fair, you can’t even see me in here!

But they can, and right now they are my eyes.

You’ll be sorry.

While she did this, Sparkle cast *Destruction*, and blew an eighty five kilogram chunk of the rock into powder. A good sized chunk to be sure, but not enough to free Susan.

Crap, I can’t shut both of you down when you cast at the same time.

Ha ha.

I’ll just have to keep her distracted otherwise then, won’t I?

Susan heard more rocks crashing about outside her stony prison, and winced knowing their delay was no longer in sync.

She strained, her magically enhanced STrength and size doing their job and cracking the stone, but she had almost no leverage. Also this stone divided her damage by three, so while it cracked, it didn’t crumble.

Sparkle tried *Destruction* again but this time it was negated, and she growled in frustration.

Wait, she did a reactive to dodge something, I heard that much. That means we're only one segment apart!

Susan waited one segment, and The Darkness had to choose between her and Sparkle for what spell to negate, and chose her.

Susan expected more of the stone to be blown off, perhaps even enough to free her with the damage she had done from inside. Sadly, Sparkle rolled minimum, an eleven, and needed a twelve to get the spell off. She considered using her "success" card but decided against it. Another .2 seconds wouldn't hurt anyone, right?

Both tried again, and this time she succeeded, blowing another eighty five kilograms of stone off Susan's body. She made an *off hand* action to twist and force more stone away from her, and succeeded in freeing her upper body. Rock exploded away from her, and she was now free to chop her legs free of the hardened stone. She took no chances.

"I declare the use of card eight, *extra action*," she said to no one, and card eight vanished from her character sheet. The stone wasn't going anywhere, so she swung with all her might using the real sword in her right hand. That was enough, the stone shattered around her.

"Oh yeah!" she shouted as the swords in her hand relit. "Who's the girl... who's the woman? Huh, that doesn't work quite as well as 'who's the man.' Odd."

"*Thrust!*" cast Sparkle, and Susan wondered for an instant who she was aiming at. She briefly saw the circle under her own feet before The Darkness canceled it out, and figured maybe Sparkle had a good reason for wanting her to move. Technically, even done by an ally it allowed her a chance for a reactive action, and she flew sideways as though she had been hit by the spell.

And a good thing she did, it gave her a bonus to dodging the second burst of lava that shot out of the ground under the direction of the four warlocks. It missed, splashing harmlessly against the already hardened rock Susan had left behind. She and Sparkle took to the air before the warlocks could get another lock on her with their power, and decided it was time to start whittling these forces down somehow.

Warlock "3" and the ones behind her now acted, pinning her in place in the air again. Sparkle touched her, knowing it would do some *Knockout* damage but figuring if she didn't make an "attack" it wouldn't get through the armor in any case.

We should be in sync, I don't need to move to do what I want to do next. Take this, warlocks!

Both cast.

Driving Away The Darkness?

Place: Mid air

Time: Mid battle

Having been given a critical piece of information by The Darkness, Susan and Sparkle now realized that for any spell to succeed, the other one must also cast a spell equally devastating. In this way, at least one would get through and progress would be made. Thus, as Susan and Sparkle took to the air together after breaking free of the hardened lava Susan cast "*Elemental Burst: Knockout!*" while Sparkle cast "*Phase!*" on Susan.

The Darkness figured Susan was more dangerous, and negated her spell, while Sparkle's went through and the physical force keeping Susan from flying vanished.

"Come on," she said, flying towards the Warlocks for her free 1/10 movement that action. With her speed of seventy five that was nearly eight meters, so she was now hovering directly in the middle of them. They tried to scatter, taking their 1/10 movement as they dodged her left handed strike with *Slash-All* going, but none could achieve a dodge of thirty three (she rolled a thirty five, but took one off for maintaining the spell and one for the called shot), so they all got hit in the body. She dropped *Phase* just as the attack "activated" and all of them went down.

They each now made personal LUCK checks not to splatter on the ground as they fell, and all but one was caught by the roving *Autonomous Assistant* spells going on. He took some damage to both arms, so he'll be fine, just fine.

Five down, how many more to go? Still, if we keep this up I don't know what The Darkness can do about it.

And apparently, it didn't know either. If it negated Sparkle's spell then *Phase* didn't go off, but the warlocks got hit with *Elemental Burst*. Susan even started delaying one action between castings to make *Spirit Manipulation* checks, further increasing her damage. That tended to take out whatever warlocks were trying to pin her, making *Phase* unnecessary anyway. She was careful to position the center of the blast so no more than six fell at a time, but shortly half the warlock forces were down and the other half had used her beating them down to get well out of range and spread out from each other.

Don't make me hunt each one down individually. I will you know.

I'll do what I like.

You can't win, you must see that.

"Enough!" shouted all the warlocks. "Do what you're going to do, then. These warlocks will not interfere."

"Oh, like I can trust that!" Susan called back.

"I will remove them, then."

The conscious warlocks suddenly shot into the air, heading straight up and disappearing out of sight. Susan looked around suspiciously, but nothing moved.

"Let's crack those walls before it changes its mind, at least," suggested Sparkle.

"Sounds like a plan. Tell you what though, I'm going to smash the wards first,

there's no telling what he's got them programmed to do."

"Wait, I'll take them out with *Destruction*. If any of them explode when they're disturbed, that could be counted as magical damage and go through *Invulnerability*."

"True, he would have figured I would use that spell. There could be ones on the other side, though."

"I can wiggle in and take a look."

"Sounds like a plan."

So Sparkle blew holes in the wall, and Susan put *Darksight* on her, letting her slip through into the space between them to take a look. She blew more holes in the "roof," then let Susan smash it down with her *Crystal Blade*. She then flipped the top off the outer one, which hadn't yet been melted together by the warlocks. They repeated this, smashing one stone barrier after another, until finally Susan stood before the odd looking creature laying in the hole it had caused by crashing into the ground.

"What kind of DTR does a creature have to have to not die, having fallen from *space*?" she asked, looking it over.

"For all we know, it's *Invulnerable* itself."

"Ah, true."

Susan got out the *Spell Paper* with the *Soul Projection* spell on it, and touched both herself and the creature. "Watch my back."

"Wait, it'll just negate it!"

"No, this spell has already been cast, right? I'm just activating it right now. It couldn't negate it any more than I can undigest a meal three hours later."

"Thank you for that lovely imagery. Good luck in there."

"Thanks. Just give me a shove if they come back, that should harmlessly break the spell."

"Got it."

"Here goes. *Soul Projection*."

Susan once again found herself standing in darkness, but to her surprise, a dark shape was before her. She went to cast *Elemental Bolt: Fire* but the figure held up its hands.

"Peace, you've won. As always. I was so sure I could work something out to stop you. Even if hurting you directly was impossible, given they weren't all that magical. I should have kept the rest of the warlocks around, fifty might have been no problem but even you wouldn't have the energy to take on a couple thousand of them. What wizards were called didn't have those knives, and I saw inside their minds the guild made them break them if they got warlock powers. You should really talk to them about that whole 'only one magic thing.' If only I had more of them, I bet this would have gone differently."

"Honestly it was the *Assistant* that let me beat them. If I thought they were going to die I don't know what I would have done. And you couldn't have gotten close with the knives, not after I knew what they were."

"Humm, maybe. Oh, yeah, that reminds me." The Darkness seemed to snap his fingers. "They're still going to die."

"What?!"

"Where do you think they are right now?"

Susan froze, she knew exactly where they were. She had seen them zoom straight into the air, and had no illusions that the other warlocks, even as far away as they now were, had done the same. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“They’re nothing to me. Besides, there’s countless more of them in nearby realities. Not as strongly, of course, probability waves being what they are. That’s why I attack only one reality in a branch. The one with the greatest potential falls, the rest fall in short order. So who cares about this lot?”

“I won’t let you destroy this world. Better a few thousand warlocks than the entire population here. I realize now why you let me in here so easily. If I take you out, it’s still my fault they fell so even though you didn’t ‘win’ you still caused me to set aside my morals to stop you.”

“And thus making the next time a little easier, and the time after that easier still. I can wait, Susan, there’s a lot of realities and I’m immortal. Little by little you’ll get worn down, and then one day, without you even realizing it, you’ll be mine. Or you’ll eventually see the futility of your task and give up. Either way is fine with me. Or you’ll die, that would be fine too, if you wanted to take that option. Anyway, that’s not what this particular situation is about. Oh, the other would be nice, I agree, but for now I’ll settle for your attention.”

“You want something from me?”

“In exchange for their lives, you’re going to do something for me.”

“This should be good. You’ve already lumped me into the ‘ant’ category, I just happen to know what’s going on and have access to powerful magic. What the heck can I do for you that you can’t do for yourself?”

The Darkness chuckled. “It’s a few steps, but nothing too difficult. The first is to go where I direct you for your next world. It’s not on your list, but Silverstreak will know it. My... alter ego there can give you the number to tell him. I’m waving to that part of you, by the way.”

He waved.

Tell him I said Hi.

Tell him yourself.

Hi!

Susan rolled her eyes. “One world is much like another. Silverstreak said these on the list may be ones Luna landed in, but I realize it’s not guaranteed. I’ll be happy to kick you off another world. After all, Aerith’s world wasn’t on the list, and that turned out fine, just fine. I love you, sweet *Materia*.” She started stroking her bracelet in a way that left even The Darkness a little uncomfortable. He pressed on.

“You can certainly try, of course. You might find it a bit more difficult than on this one, but again, that’s not the point.”

“There’s more?”

“As I said, there’s a few steps. Silverstreak will want to know why you chose this world, how you even knew about. Tell him nothing of your true purpose, only that I mentioned it in passing.”

“What is my true purpose?”

“A gemstone is mined there, a very unique gemstone indeed. Those that mine it don’t even know what it can do, lacking the supernatural awareness necessary to discover its properties. But I do. Basically, it can hold energy. A chunk of it the size of

your head can hold ten thousand energy or more, and you're going to fill one up for me."

"That would take forever!"

"Oh, hardly a year, let's not be melodramatic. I figure forty energy a night, average, before you go to bed, and it should be full in no time. You will then give it to me, and I will draw the energy out of it. Thus will our deal be completed."

"With that much energy you could probably conquer whatever world you were on easily."

"Perhaps. But there's always the chance you would still win afterwards, and it would all be lost. You could put twenty thousand in, draw off ten, and we would be equal again. It's what I would do."

"Yes..." Susan paused. She was still feeling the rush of having ten times her usual energy. To have *ten times that much again*?

"No, I would have to willingly leave that world to have it remain with me when I left, and Silverstreak would slam the door shut behind me. No, I wouldn't risk it, especially after all your hard work gathering all that energy for me."

"So, wait... I give you this chunk of crystal with ten thousand energy, and it's a 'get out of jail free card' for a world? You just leave, no questions asked?"

"Correct. These warlocks and an entire world- saved. Because of your selfless devotion to the task I have set. Of course, you could say no, try and get rid of me the old fashioned way. We could duel here, inside this soul, but good luck dropping *trains* on me like you did with *him*. This being doesn't know what a train is, you see. The most you could count on would be large rocks, I suppose."

"Bet he knows what a star is though." She left the threat hanging and started pacing back and forth, thinking. "See you shrug that off." It seemed a pretty good deal, which is why she was so suspicious of it. The energy would be hers, true, but there was no special link between herself and the energy that she knew of. And even if there was, would ten be any different than ten thousand? And she wouldn't have to hand it over right away, if she ran into a world she was really having trouble with... it could come in handy to have a bargaining chip. "What about this world? It's not, like, made of razors, and the razors are on fire, and they can fly, and all they do is quote Monty Python... badly."

It laughed. "Nothing like that. It would be a challenge for you, I don't dispute that. But doesn't each world have its own special challenge? Silverstreak can give you all the details, he loves hearing himself talk."

"I suppose I have no choice, given I don't want the blood of thousands of people on my hands. Is there any sort of time limit on this deal?"

"No. Like I said, I have time. As long as you present it to me before you retire, I'll be satisfied."

"What if I die in the meantime?"

"I'll have a little party and invite all my friends to join me."

"You have friends?"

"Susan, I'm hurt. Just because you perceive me as some monster of evil, that doesn't mean I don't have friends."

"Whatever. What happens if I change my mind later? Like I ask Silverstreak about it and he says 'oh, no, you don't want to do that for X Y Z reasons.'"

The Darkness shook its head. "Then I would reluctantly be forced to kill a number

of innocents, equal to the number of warlocks I now command, on some other world. Really Susan, I thought you were a woman of your word.”

“I haven’t given it yet! I’m just trying to think of every way this could go wrong.”

“But it’s so simple a task! Use your *Energy Gift* spell to give the crystal energy, and keep track of how much. Then give it to me. In exchange, many lives are spared. What’s even to think about?”

“Too many things to list. All right, I’ll get your stupid crystal.”

“Excellent! Then allow me to lower the warlocks to the ground and take my leave.”

“You’ll just leave here too?”

“Oh, I know when I’m beaten. You can have this creature back, though honestly the one it was originally calling for should be here shortly to pick it up. Let’s see now...” The Darkness gestured, and in the air hung various scenes that Susan looked over. One was obviously directly outside, as she could see the remains of the fort getting bigger. Others must have been various locations where warlocks had made it to since leaving here. She made sure to study them, they would probably be very confused once The Darkness let them go.

“And that’s all the groups of them? These scenes are from their eyes?”

It made a show of looking them over. “I think so, it’s hard to tell with all these tiny minds.” She glared at him. “Yes, yes, learn to take a joke, Susan. I wouldn’t not tell if I was going to kill a bunch of people you wanted alive. You wouldn’t suffer, and so there would be no point. Of course, it could still be hilarious, letting you think you saved them all...”

“I’m sure your friends would laugh and laugh and snort whatever beverages they drink right out of their multi-dimensional noses.”

“Oh, you’ve met them!? Or did I tell you the squirting story at some point? Really, I could tell you again if you wanted, it’s just the funniest... no?”

She continued glaring.

“And there we are!” it announced, and Susan saw that all the warlocks were now standing rigidly on the ground. “I suppose you’ll want to go collect them so they don’t starve and such out in the wilderness?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“Fine, fine. Probably be a big effort, moving so many people. Even with your magic, you’ll have to explain things, get them settled, involve the wizard’s guild...”

“What do you care? I thought you were immortal. This rock isn’t going anywhere, is it?”

“Just wanted to be sure you wanted to bother. I could just kill them off, save you the trouble. It’s no bother, really.”

“Just leave.”

“If you’re sure you won’t change your mind. I’ll see you later, then.”

The Darkness shimmered and was gone.

Susan felt the immense mind of the space creature now reasserting itself, and wondered if being here was really the best place to be. Augmented by The Darkness it might have been, it nevertheless had powered all the warlocks in the world, and who

knew what abilities it had by itself. Waking up like this, it was just as likely to lash out as be confused, or even apologetic, she had no idea the level of intelligence it possessed.

She tried to send it calming thoughts and what The Darkness said, about whatever it was waiting for being nearby, and broke the connection.

As she opened her eyes she truly knew the battle was over as all her magic vanished, and a bunch of confused looking warlocks were getting up and looking around.

“You won?” asked Sparkle.

“I’ll call it a tie. It left, but I had to agree to get some crystal for it on another world. I’ll explain later.”

“It might be best if we move, something is coming this way.”

“What sort of something?”

Sparkle indicated straight up with a paw, and Susan saw something streaking across the sky straight towards them. She had the warlocks get back as far as they could before it arrived, and to her dismay it was a larger version of the creature she was looking at. Without even trying to communicate with her or ask what was going on, the smaller one lifted out of the ground and both blasted into space, leaving the warlocks standing and gaping at what they had just seen.

The silence stretched, and no one moved or spoke. Susan was struck by how easy it had been to get rid of The Darkness here, and without blowing anything up, even. *There has to be a catch, something about the world it wants me to go or this crystal it wants me to find. Some other property or function, and I’ll have to study it quite closely before I put even a smidgen of energy into it. What’s that?*

Susan turned, and everyone else did to, toward the man who was screaming in terror and pointing at Susan. She looked around, confused, thinking maybe he was pointing at something directly behind her? She turned, but nothing was there.

“What’s his problem?” she asked Sparkle.

“Dunno.”

“It’s her!” the man shouted at last, trying something and almost falling over in the process. He backed away. “That’s the girl that was attacking us a minute ago. I remember that now!”

Others started moving away, also muttering that yes, she did look familiar somehow, maybe they shouldn’t just be standing here? Still others were trying to figure out what exactly they were doing standing around near this hole, and still others were looking over the unconscious warlocks or exclaiming they couldn’t do magic anymore.

Needless to say, it became a panic rather quickly. Those that remembered Susan’s attack tried to flee, but swiftly found they couldn’t fly anymore. They went tripping and stumbling behind what was left of the stone enclosure and Susan let them. She moved instead to the warlocks that had been knocked out and started pressing her knife to their bodies, healing them and waking them up. Then they got into the act and ran screaming from her to join the ones behind the wall.

Susan and Sparkle looked at each other, wondering what to do.

“I’d treat them like a stray cat,” suggested Sparkle. “And not just because I am

one.”

“I don’t think I can build a non-lethal trap using the available materials,” Susan remarked, looking around. “What would I use for bait? These people haven’t invented pizza yet, another thing I’m going to have to remedy before I leave.”

“What? No, I mean let them come to you. If you chase after them they’ll just be more scared and run away faster.”

“Oh.”

So Susan plopped down in the grass and waited, and Sparkle’s sensitive ears turned to hear what they were saying.

“She woke up the unconscious ones, she can’t be that bad.”

“Then go out and see what she wants. Maybe she can tell us what we’re all doing here?”

“You go.”

“You’re the one sticking up for her.”

“I’m not sticking up for her, I don’t even know her! I just think based on her actions-”

“She attacked us!”

“What are you people saying? Speak Sardironese would you?”

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did she attack us? I mean she was flying and she swung her sword, that much I recall. But how did we fall, I don’t recall her being close to us.”

“Why was she attacking us? We were building something, right? I just can’t remember what.”

Several people agreed, if the woman had wanted them dead, they probably would have been. But they had no idea how they were still alive.

This went on for a few minutes more until finally they decided she was just sitting there, not making any threatening moves, maybe someone should go out there and talk to her. A witch volunteered, and she was pushed to the front nervously, finally coming to a stop in front of Susan, who was currently pretending to be asleep.

“Um, hello?”

Sorting it All Out

Time: Five second later

Place: Still in the field

“And so I said to her, that’s not a fish, that’s my wife!” Susan suddenly said, pretending to wake up.

“What?” the woman gave a little jump and took a step back.

“Oh, sorry, fell asleep there. Someone finally decided to come see me, huh?”

“Yes... um, what’s going on?”

“Whew boy, where to start. How much do you remember?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I was called as a warlock, and then suddenly I had the desire to do the strangest things, like build walls and you were there, then all of a sudden I was standing here and those things went into the sky and now we’re not warlocks anymore.”

“Yup, that’s exactly what happened. What do you need me for?”

“Uh, what?”

“Look, can you just go tell those people I’m nice? I’ve got a lot of work to do today rescuing your fellow warlocks from various places, and I need to get started. The sun will be going down pretty soon and I’d like to be in a city somewhere, not out in the open for this. Also I’d like to explain this a maximum of one time, to everybody. Not piecemeal to all thousands of you.”

“There’s thousands of us? Where?”

“A day’s flight from here in various directions.”

“We’ll never catch up! Plus none of us can fly anymore...”

“Don’t worry about it, they can’t either. Just tell them I’m not going to attack you anymore now that the space creature is gone.”

“What’s a... you mean that thing we all saw?”

“Exactly. The sooner we get going, the sooner all this can be straightened out.”

“Get going where? I’m still not clear on what happened, even though you say what I vaguely recall is what happened. I can tell you’re telling the truth, and you’re anxious about something, and that your subconscious is trying to tell you something important but you’re too upset to listen to it.”

“Wait, you can tell that?”

“I’ve been a witch most of my life. I look younger than I am because warlocks could do that.”

“Oh. Makes sense. So what about my subconscious?”

“You’re thinking something someone said recently means one thing, but it really means another. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, tell your fellow warlocks there that I’m going to bring them to another group of them until you’re all together again, and then figure out what our next step is.”

“Okay.”

While she relayed this, and tried to get the ones that spoke other languages to understand, Susan opened a *Teleportal* to the first location she saw inside the space

creature's mental landscape. Peeking through she saw a couple hundred ex-warlocks milling about, totally confused.

Oh boy, it's going to be a long day. But at least seeing it through the eyes of the warlocks was good enough for the spell.

Susan could hardly disguise the fact that another fifty or so people suddenly poured out of thin air, but at least they were all in the same boat. Confused, keyed up, and looking for answers.

"Spread the word!" she called to the original group as they went past her, looking at the *Teleportal* in wonder. "I'm going to bring the other warlocks here, so just have everybody be patient and I'll explain everything when everyone's together. You got all that?"

They all indicated they did, which surprised several of the brighter ones who realized everyone understood her. That was a minor mystery compared to everything else, so they went through and started trying to calm everyone here down. Susan then used *Spell Papers* to open several more *Teleportals* to the other locations. It wasn't that she didn't have the energy, this was a grade ten spell, and so each one put her at a negative four to everything. Even she would be nervous casting a spell at that much of a penalty. She marched through, got the attention of the people on the other side, and herded them through the holes. It took two hours, and the sun was setting as the last few people trickled in, insisting they were the last. Susan took one quick look, scanning about for stragglers with some *Temporary Tool* binoculars and a quick casting of *Question* to ask "Is this all the ex-warlocks." To which she got a *yes* answer. She closed the portal, then used *Amplify* to great effect as it was a moon spell, so the power of it was doubled.

"I'm sure you're all wondering how you came to be here!" she called, the ones in the front wincing a little at the volume. "I'm going to tell you. After that, if you have questions come up to the front and I'll answer them. First off, you're not warlocks anymore. I figure you probably know that by now, I'm just making it plain. The thing that was calling you has left, so you are once again powerless. Unless you were a witch or something before. Sorry about that. Not about you being a witch before... you know what I mean! You were being controlled by that being, and made to do things against your will. Luckily, I happened along and stopped it before you did the horrible things you no doubt would have. If you can remember any of the horrible things you *wanted* to do, try not to focus on that, those were not your thoughts. I repeat, the creature is gone, never to return. You are safe. Now, from what I've heard many of you have been, ah, missing for almost thirty five years. This is because the creature knew I was coming and wanted to use you against me. So it did something to you, I guess. I don't even know, as it woke up and attacked me when I got near it. The creature wanted me dead, it tried, it failed, I won, end of story. Your homes and family... may be gone. There's nothing I can do about that. What I can do is take you, through one of the holes in the air you have already seen, to one of the major cities of Ethshar. With luck, we can be there and through in less than three hours. What you do after that... is really up to you. I'll be talking to my wizard guild contact in Ethshar of the Spices. She may have some ideas. If you want me to go through first and see what she says, fine.

"Yes, you're uncertain. This may be further in the future than you thought you

would ever see, and your old lives are gone. But there are many of you, and if you work together I'm sure you'll all get through this. Now, I'm going to open three holes in the air. The one to my right, this way," she gestured wildly to her right, "is going to go to Ethshar of the Sands. Sands, this way. Behind me will be Ethshar of the Rocks. Then to my left will be Ethshar of the Spices. Sands, Rocks, Spices. Got that? Pass it back if the ones in back can't hear you. Any questions?"

"Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Susan. Susan the Wanderer in your language. Your next question is probably how can I do all this? It's complicated. Just accept, for the moment, that I can do a lot of magic you may not have seen before."

"Can you get us our magic back?"

"Ah." Susan considered. She knew that warlocks had their brains modified to be able to do what they could do. Basically turning them into a kind of ESPer that specialized in *Telekinesis*. But they had been sent *Spirit Energy* from The Darkness to power that ability. If she could teach them to hook into *ley lines* themselves, could they do warlocky still without The Darkness being around? "I'll try my best. It may not be exactly the same, and you may be more limited because you will no longer have the creature sending you energy. I will have to test out certain things, and right now my priority is getting you back to civilization. I don't want to spend the night out here, do you?"

There was a general agreement, but many people still wanted to try getting their powers back, as that would let them survive out here.

"But if we take the time now, and I'm wrong, we'll be in worse shape than ever. It's going to take a lot of trial and error, and some training if what I think will bring your powers back even works. Get through now, experiment later."

They grumbled about it, but there really wasn't anything they could do.

"I don't want to go to any place in Ethshar, my home is far to the north of there!" protested a bunch of people, pushing to the front.

"Right now that's all I can offer you. Once there, seek out the wizard's guild, they know something's up, they've been notified. By tomorrow they should have the full story as well. Hopefully they can get you closer to where you want to be. At the very least they can give you some money to hire a ship or something. Just tell them the woman that made the mirror sent you."

There were more questions, but Susan held up a hand and created the three *Teleportals* to where she said she would. "If you don't have questions, start moving through. It's going to be a rough couple of days, I realize that, but keep calm, we'll figure this out, I promise."

It didn't take long for the guilds to realize ex-warlocks were pouring into each city, and Susan was pleased to see they had pulled together to start defending the place had she failed to repel the attack. This cooperation continued as they guided people at least to where they could spend the night, and money was pooled to basically buy out an inn or two for those that had nowhere to go. Sativola finally found Susan, giving her a big hug and saying she was so glad to see her again, and even Ithinia came through and seemed pleased.

"It might have been easier if they had been killed," she quietly remarked, after

being told the story of the battle and subsequent “defeat” of The Darkness. “What are we going to do with all these people?”

“Hopefully they can be warlocks again, if I can train a few. I don’t know if they’ll be as powerful, or if it’ll be as convenient, but it’s a start. They can train others, and the discipline of warlocky can continue.”

“You really think you can?”

“We’ll have to see. In theory it should work. Worst comes to worst, move them back out here, rebuild the villages that got destroyed when The Darkness fell, they can all be miserable together.”

“Miserable? We have to get the warlocks out of the tapestry! They won’t be a danger anymore. Excuse me.” She rushed back through, leaving Susan chuckling.

“Something tells me that’s going to be one busy lady for the next few days.”

Susan stayed several more hours, making sure the *Teleportals* stayed open, and answering what questions she could. Wizards went back and forth between the three cities relaying messages and such, and all exclaimed how convenient this magic was. Susan promised several the formula for the spell in case they could somehow translate it, and several witches also stood and felt around the edges of the magic too.

“You think my being here will spark a revolution of sorts, maybe rekindle an interest in magic?” she asked Sparkle.

“They have said they had better magic before the war. Maybe showing them those stories were probably true, what magic can do, will give them the passion to start really experiment again. And the mirrors will make it safer, so yeah, I could see it.”

“Cool.”

By the time everyone was through Susan had lost a fair chunk of her energy, and wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep for a while. As the refugees had taken anywhere nearby they could get, she was invited to the guild building for the night, and she accepted. A simple but filling meal later and she was happily asleep.

Until someone was shaking her awake.

“Huh? What? That’s not my wife, it’s a fish.”

“What?”

Susan opened her eyes.

“Oh, you’re not dead. Good. There’s a bunch of people at our door saying you thought they could be warlocks again. Sort it out.”

“Good morning to you too,” Susan testily replied as the wizard left again. “At least she brought me something to eat.”

Twenty minutes later Susan was wandering the halls trying to find the ex-warlocks, only taking two wrong turns and getting completely lost. She finally made it. Waiting for her were six people, four men and two woman, who introduced themselves. Gorsedd, the current chairman, was among them.

“I heard it said you might be able to restore our magic?” he asked hopefully.

“Let’s clear up a few things,” suggested Susan. “First, it’s not magic like wizardry is magic. It was an ability given a select few on the Night of Madness, and the thing that gave it to you allowed you to make more so his army grew. But it’s more supernatural

than magic. Maybe you don't appreciate the distinction, but I can sense both so believe me when I say it's not magical. It would have been way easier if it was, that battle would have taken all of one second.

"Second, you had the might of that space creature behind you before. I don't know how much of what you could do was taken from it directly, and how much was taken from the creature that took it over versus how much was yours alone. You may be disappointed with your abilities even if I can teach you how to use them again."

"Trading the calling for a lesser amount of magic... or whatever you want to call it? Sounds like a good trade to me."

"Fair enough. I can teach you, or at least get you all started. I can't teach every ex-warlock because I have to leave. If you can pass this technique along, I'll have your promise that you do. In fact, just a second." Susan got out her book of magic and looked for a spell in the newer section. "Ah yes, the verbal *Contract*, or *Binding Word*. A moment, if you please." Susan read over the spell and cast it, telling them what it was going to do. "I want you to promise, right now, that if successful you will do your best to teach anyone who asks who used to be a warlock, and take apprentices as normal for those that were not. I'm not teaching this to you just so you can hog it for yourselves. You will not hide the fact you have the power, and teach at least someone else this before... oh, say two weeks is up. That seems fair."

They swore, and Susan was satisfied that if warlocks could come back to the world, they would. "Very well. Let's head out and I'll see what I can do for you."

She opened a *Teleportal* back to the forest where she had felt all those *ley lines* before, and they all stepped through, confused. "The energy the creature was sending you came from invisible conduits of power that encircle the earth. They are strongest here, in places like this, with a lot of plant life. So for now I'll have you practice here where there are a bunch of them. I'm going to cast a few more spells, specifically, I have a spell that can give you the skill I have in doing something. That something is sensing and drawing power directly from these lines. With luck, that should power your abilities and let you do warlocky again."

"And if not?" the chairman asked.

"Then there's nothing else I can do. I'm not sure you'll even be able to learn these skills, but it's all I can do for you. It can't hurt, if you can't learn them, you can't learn them. But the power is there, and your body is used to receiving it from the creature, so chances are good you'll be able to do it."

"Then what are waiting for?"

"I have to warn you, I'm not great at it myself. Believe it or not, my cat is better at it than I am."

They all looked down at Sparkle, who waved at them.

"Did that cat-"

"Just wave? Yes. Anyway, I'm not terrible, I'm just saying if this works, you can practice the technique and get better. If you can sense energy better you can find weaker *Ley Lines*. If you can draw more power from them, your warlocky will be stronger. Clear?"

Everyone nodded.

"Great. Let's get started."

The spell of *Unlock Potential* took a minute and a half from writings, but there was really no hurry. It was only grade four, and the difficulty wasn't that much either, so Susan tried giving the chairman *Spirit Manipulation* and *Spirit Sense* at her rating of four. She hooked into a nearby *line* herself, figuring she may as well take advantage of being a *Spirit Mage* for once. With that done, he looked around, a strange smile on his face. He closed his eyes and peered around the forest, then opened them again. "I can feel you. Even with my eyes closed, I could point right at you."

"Oh, sorry. I've still got a ton of energy from before the battle, it hasn't all gone away yet. That's going to throw your senses way out of whack. Try it again after I move over there."

He did, and he said yes, he could feel the energy of the others there, and gave Susan a rough idea of who had more than the others.

"Seems it worked then. Now, you'll be able to draw upon more of your natural reserves, and from *Ley Lines*. My imparting of the skill should have given you this knowledge instinctively."

"I do feel something like that. And there's a line just here, isn't there? Where you were standing?"

"That's right. Try drawing power from it and lifting that branch over there."

"Seems like that shouldn't be too hard." He went over and stood where the *line* was, then took a second to try out his new skill of drawing from it.

Wonder what he does, as he can't just 'make a check' like I do. I would be fascinated to know exactly what's going on in his brain right now...

The branch rose into the air, to the startled gasps of the ex-warlocks nearby.

"I'm a warlock again," he exclaimed. "I can see again, using the warlock sight. Susan, you've done it!"

"I'm glad that worked."

"As I am. I'm really a warlock again. This is amazing." He turned to them, eyes wide. "And now the world is mine!" He threw back his head and laugh dramatically.

I just screwed up, didn't I?

Moving On To The Next World... Right?

Place: Out in the woods somewhere

Time: Seconds after

The group stared at the man, still dramatically laughing, which quickly changed into a more normal expression of hilarity.

“Wow, the looks on your faces,” he finally said, wiping away a tear. “That was worth it.”

“Are you finished then?” asked Susan dryly.

“Sorry about that. I was just rather pleased to find all was not lost in terms of our abilities.”

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s get you others trained up and I can see what next crisis comes up I need to deal with.”

So Susan repeated the procedure with the other four people, leaving the last man bitter and angry that sheer chance and Susan’s whimsy had denied him the chance to become a warlock again. In reality, the chairman requested it, and the other four tried coaching him through the procedure to make sure they could. Susan thought that was actually an excellent idea, and Sparkle added a few things she had observed, having a slightly higher rating and all. As he practiced, Susan put *Augment Skill* on the chairman and had him repeat the procedure with the stick, then went and dragged a large chunk of rock from the battlefield for him to try lifting. He said with greater skill at *Spirit Manipulation* he had an easier time lifting the branch, and could almost get the rock lifted by himself. All four working together easily lifted it.

“It looks like we’ll have to rediscover what we can and can’t do,” he said, watching the others experiment with setting the branch on fire and making ice and such. “And start mapping where the best *Ley Lines* are to be found.”

Susan agreed with a nod. “This actually brings the ability more in line with other schools of magic, if you look at it that way. It seems magic here, or more accurately now powers here have some tremendous down side to balance them out. Needing to be basically stationary while you perform warlocky seems about right, given what this power put you through before.”

“I agree. It’s not the most convenient thing, but it works.”

“Chairman,” one of the woman said, “do you think the overlord of the city would mind if we started planting trees and things all over?”

“Humm, you did say plant life helps *ley lines* to flourish, didn’t you?” Susan nodded. “I don’t see why not, it’s not like they’re high maintenance or expensive or anything. And increasing the number of *lines* in an area makes warlocks, which the city has somewhat come to depend on, more useful. I think he could be persuaded.”

“We’ll be pretty busy from now on, won’t we?”

“That we will. Training people back up, working out if we can do anything differently now that this power is exclusively our own. Mapping the world for *lines*. Planting and maintaining trees, plus whatever jobs we can do as warlocks so we can keep food on the table. And we owe it all to you, Susan. You’ve freed us from the calling, while giving warlocks a chance to really become respected members of the

magical community. Oh, don't look at me like that, Yseult, you know wizards resented us because our powers came from the calling rather than study. Well, now our powers will come from study as well. I think it'll make us more accepted in their eyes."

"You're probably right," she reluctantly agreed.

"I feel it! Look, look!" said the other woman. She was lifting a pebble, and everyone grinned at her. "I feel like an apprentice again, if this is all I can lift now!" She laughed.

"We all are," huffed Gorsedd. "But somehow I don't find I mind it as much as I otherwise might have. In fact I'm pretty excited about it, actually."

The others agreed.

That duty fulfilled, Susan took them back to the city so they could start calming down warlocks that came around, and they in fact requested to be sent to the other major areas of Ethshar so it didn't seem like only warlocks near The Spices were benefiting. Susan was happy to comply, and as further crowds of ex-warlocks were led off from the entrance to the wizard guild building by the chairman with promises of lessons for all, she explained what she had done to Ithinia.

"I better put up a sign," she said, thoughtful. "Then I won't have to explain where to go a million times. Wish you had asked first, though."

"Why? Warlocks are useful, and their powers are greatly reduced from what I saw. They won't be zipping around the city, sure, but mending bones? Repairing things? Heck just the act of planting trees will have positive impacts everywhere."

"I don't deny all that. The problem is, you say it's not magic. What if they get it into their heads that maybe a witch with the warlock ability to draw energy from the earth wouldn't be so bad? Or maybe a demonologist figures out some way to use warlock energy to help in summoning demons? If it's not really magic, can the guild really deny them?"

"Why would it? If it's not magic then wizards can just as easily pick it up too, right? Imagine a world where *everybody* was a warlock. No calling, so no danger of disappearing like they used to. And no danger of them taking over, all you have to do is knock somebody out of the *ley line* they're attached to and their power falls away from them. Plus it's more like witchcraft now, there's only so much power one person can pull from a *line* at once. Sure, they could find a convergence somewhere, like the one The Darkness was sitting on, but like it, they would be stuck on that spot!"

"Okay, okay, I get the point. I just would have liked the consideration, that's all."

"We're working on that," put in Sparkle. "Getting Susan to consider other viewpoints apart from her own, I mean."

Susan stuck her tongue out at her.

All that day Susan helped ex-warlocks out as best she could. She performed *Question* magic to find relatives for those displaced the longest in time, or to what they should do now that they were back. Many had been taken on the Night of Madness, so really had no idea they were warlocks, but their old shops and contacts were long gone. Susan suggested the wizard's guild loan them money to reopen places if they wanted, which Ithinia was initially dead set against. Then Susan took her aside and explained

the concept of “interest” to her, which changed her tune quite quickly.

Did I just invent the banking industry here?

She did mention they might want to see about becoming full warlocks, despite their protests about being “too old to be an apprentice again.”

“That seems to be more cultural than anything else,” countered Susan. “Really, you should never stop learning and improving your arts just because you reach a certain age. You have a whole new life waiting for you now, and even if you only study to become a passible warlock, I’m sure it can be of use for your old profession as well. If you give it a chance. Plus, can you really not train for a new profession? You become a baker, then twenty years of baking later you decide you want to be a painter. Are you telling me no painter will train you, for money, for a few hours a week? I mean that seems dumb to me.”

Most of the older people looked quite sullen, but again there was nothing else for them, because Susan was right. Standing around whining about it wasn’t going to help, and the wizard’s guild promised whatever aid they could lend in getting people back on their feet (for a small fee later, of course, Ithinia learned fast). At the end of the day Susan took her shopping down at the market, buying some ingredients and meeting the “scientists” in the city for dinner.

“Why are we here?” asked one of the scientists as Susan took over a bread shop, having them slice and chop and pound dough with the promise of a new dish they could sell to customers.

“I’m showing you that all these ingredients were right under your nose, but you never combined them in this way. After we eat I’m going to give you some ideas for more things that are under your nose that you never considered. I know wizards here, like Ithinia, consider science to be beneath them. I’m here to tell you entire worlds are built upon nothing but science. I’ll give you a nudge, show you the path. It’s up to you to do something with it.”

Finally the pizza came out of the baker’s oven, and Susan closed her eyes, enjoying the first bite. “Now that’s magic. Don’t be shy, come on, dig in!”

The others agreed this was a fine dish, and Susan gave the bakers some other ideas. Like bagels and offering sandwiches rather than just bread.

Did I just invent Brueggers?

The owners seemed unconvinced that people would want to pay them to make food they could make cheaper at home, but Susan assured them with a wink it would work out.

Wait, did I just invent the obesity epidemic?

That done, Susan went back to a “workshop” where the scientists all crowded around her as she sketched out various ideas for them.

Like using wizardry to create an intense, but controlled flame, and fill a bag with hot air to make it rise off the ground.

Or enchant a propeller with animation spells, allowing planes to take off using the wing design she sketched out.

Or magnets and copper to create electricity with water wheels, rather than just crushing grain or whatever they used them for.

She told them about the relationship between food and chemistry, gravity and physics. She explained about the benefits of the railroad, and the explosive power of gunpowder.

“For too long the disciplines have stood apart, each going their own way. If you really want to advance, to get your civilization back- no even better than before the war, you all have to work together. Share ideas. You have so much potential here because wizardry can replace a lot of the mistakes I know my world made. You don’t have to worry about pulling oil out of the ground to make a piston go up and down, you can do that with magic. You don’t need to send tons of smoke into the air to move a train from one end of the world to the other, build it along a *ley line* and have warlocks move it. This world has such potential- all you have to do is pick it up!”

Wait, did I just invent steam punk?

“This is all a radical departure from the way things have been done here. Have we really learned the lessons well enough from the last war to not have another?” mused Ithinia. “I wonder.”

“But the possibilities!” breathed one of the scientists. “We never dreamed!”

“I know. Well, I’ll talk to the guild, and see how far they’re willing to go. Some of what Susan has told us about doesn’t need wizardry, or at least that would only make it work a little better or easier. Start on that sort of thing if you must. Susan mentioned mistakes their culture made in acquiring this kind of power, let’s think carefully through any invention to make sure we don’t make similar ones. Too much change, too rapidly, may not be for the best.”

“You know your people better than I do,” Susan admitted. “I’m just telling you that many things are possible, and not to give up looking for them. I made you those mirrors, right? And I gave Sativola some ideas for witchcraft that she’s promised to share. Can I do less for science?”

She gave a low chuckle, shaking her head. “Given what I’ve seen of you, no, you couldn’t. Will you stay the night again? Do you have more miracles to dispense tomorrow?”

“I think that’s about all, but I’ll happily stay the night. See if there’s any clean up left to do in the morning, then be on my way to my next adventure.”

Which will be the crystal world, something I’m not looking forward to, given what The Darkness said.

“Very well.” She rose. “I bid you all good night.”

“Thank you, Susan,” said the scientists as she left. “We won’t squander what you’ve given us. I’m not talking about just this,” he pointed to the scattered pictures Susan had sketched up. “I’m talking about hope, that one day our science will be looked at on par with wizardry, rather than laughed at and scorned.”

“Good luck. And never stop dreaming.”

The next morning was much less hectic, word had gotten out and now pretty much everyone knew what had happened with warlocks. Susan even heard reports that many more people were interested in the “magic” now that the threat of being called was gone. Susan felt that was fine, just fine, giving an entire world a new kind of “magic”

seemed to fit with her quite well. She made her goodbyes to Sativola, Ithinia, and even went back to see how Illinia was doing, in the Village of Dawn. She was doing fine, and Susan spent half a day there telling stories and news of Ethshar.

Finally she was alone, and triggered her communication program with Silverstreak from the watch.

“Susan,” said an agent formally. “What can I do for you?”

“Ready to come back!” she replied, chipper. “Another world saved, another job well done.”

“Uh?”

“Hum?”

“Humm...”

“Ah?”

“Uhh, just a second.”

“What?”

The agent moved off, and Silverstreak took her place. “Susan?”

“Yeah? What’s going on?”

“You say you want to come back?”

“Yeah, The Darkness is gone. Saw it disappear with my own soul windows, why?”

He looked off to the side, then back again. “My instruments haven’t registered a withdraw event. Are you *sure* you took care of it?”

“Well, yeah. I went into the soul of the creature and... everything...”

“Maybe you better start at the beginning.”

So Susan told of her battle, and how it ended, mentioning she had found it suspicious The Darkness gave up so easily.

“It’s because it didn’t,” explained Silverstreak. “You didn’t kill the host, you let it slip out into someone else. It’s still there.”

“It can do that?” Susan’s blood turned to ice.

“Under certain circumstances, yes. You *must* kill the thing it’s taken over. I mean, yes, it *could* leave if it wanted to, but why would it? I thought you understood.”

Susan shook her head. “No, I’ve never killed it, not myself. The dragon and Sephiroth were group efforts. Others have blown themselves up. I really have to kill whatever it takes over? Why?”

“Killing it forces it out of the world. In order to come back it would have to select a new host and enter it from outside like it did the first time. That’s the only opportunity I have to put the protections in place so it can’t. Very few times have Wanderers actually convinced it to leave a world. I mean I could count them on one hand. If it seemed to give up, it’s because whatever it was doing wasn’t the real plan. It was a ruse, and whatever it’s been doing since then is the real plan.”

“Which we have no idea about, like location or who it even is now. I’ll have to start over.”

The Darkness inside Susan started laughing hysterically. *You really fell for it. My goodness, did you think I couldn’t crush even you with thousands of warlocks? Oh, setting that up was really the right thing to do, I’m so glad I thought of it. You walked*

right into it, and you've given me days of freedom. Oh Susan, you can be really dumb sometimes.

Shut it!

"Not necessarily. Think. There must be something there it wants. Something it can only do with a couple of days freedom, when you weren't actively pursuing it."

"I have no idea what that could be. I have to get back to see the wizards, maybe they'll know?"

"Whatever you have to do. Just be quick about it, The Darkness has a huge lead on you now."

"I know that!" she snapped, starting to cast. *"Teleportal! I'll be in touch."*

"Good luck." The image winked out.

Susan threw herself through the hole, then demanded to know where Ithinia was. Minutes ticked by as she was summoned, and finally came in the room looking concerned.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It tricked me! The Darkness is still here somewhere."

"What?"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. I thought it was gone. But when I went to leave, the being that sent me here said it was still around. We need to call another meeting, figure out what its actual goal was. There might not be much time!"

"I'll see who's here, but most everyone is gone with the warlock situation. Go to the conference room, I'll be there shortly."

Susan let Sparkle lead her there, and paced, unable to sit still and wait. The taunts of The Darkness rang in her mind, it was having fun gloating. Susan tried to ignore it.

By the way, how did you know it wasn't her?

What?

How did you know I wasn't in her, and you just let her leave?

I guess I didn't. You just want to make me paranoid and start checking everyone and everything, don't you?

It would slow you down a little, and be hilarious, so yeah.

Several wizards rushed in, followed by Ithinia. "This is everyone I could find. What do you need from us?"

"Information. You know this world, why would The Darkness go to all the trouble of taking over warlocks, making like it was going to attack the city, *pretend to leave*, but really stay. Is there something, left over from the war maybe, that can wipe out the world?"

"Seething Death?" asked one wizard.

"But only one wizard knows that spell that we know of," countered another.

"You!" Ithinia pointed to a young wizard that had come with the others. "Run and find where Tobas the Wizard was last seen. If he's acting strangely or doing wizardry, have him stopped at all costs! Detain him and have his athame removed. Not broken, just removed. He's not under arrest, this is just a precaution. You understand?"

"Yes, guildmaster!" said the student, running off.

“Okay, what else? Keep the ideas coming!” demanded Ithinia.

The others looked at each other helplessly.

“The Darkness had a connection to warlocks,” Sparkle put in. “And S. said it could only move in certain situations, right? What if it moved along that connection?”

“Maybe there was one warlock that didn’t lose their powers?” suggested Susan.

“It’s a possibility.”

“Vond!” spat Ithinia. “If it’s any warlock, it’s him.”

“Oh no!” The others seemed to recognize that name.

“Who?”

“A warlock, unique in the world. He figured out a different source of power for warlocky. He was ultimately called, so I didn’t think of him again. But yeah, that would make sense. I should have asked where he was, with everything else going on it totally slipped my mind!”

“Different source? You mean he figured out *ley lines* by himself or something? Drew power directly rather than being given it by The Darkness?”

“No, it’s... oh, why not, you know everything else. It’s the Towers of Lumeth. When most warlocks go near them they complain of headaches and getting sick. He did too, but then got the bright idea to draw power from the buzzing in his head like he used to from the whisper. In his case it worked. He united- no he conquered several of the small kingdoms and created the Empire of Vond. Alone. In like a week. He could have done it in a day, but by all reports he was sort of lazy. He was the most powerful warlock ever known, and now he’s the last one left. Of the old warlocks, anyway. It fits.”

“But these towers, what part do they play? How can they give him that kind of energy that’s compatible with his way of doing warlocky? Are they near where the creature crashed? I mean to draw power from any kind of distance...”

Ithinia put her head in her hands. “They’re Talismans. Old Talismans. The oldest, actually. They keep the air of the world pure and they were made by the gods. That’s why their power radiates so widely, it has to or our air would turn unbreathable.”

All those times suffocating me, you were actually hinting it, weren’t you?

Yup, a little taste, just for you. You didn’t know about the towers, and I couldn’t just tell you outright, of course. I figured no one would mention it, there was no reason to! It was fun dangling it in front of you the whole time, so it wasn’t a complete loss.

“He’s going to destroy them!” Susan exclaimed, eyes wide. “We have to get out there. NOW!”

Pushed to the Utmost

Time: A moment later

Place: Wizard's Guild building

The wizards looked at each other helplessly. They had two types of travel magic that could get somewhere in a hurry. The tapestry, that took a year to weave, or the flute, that took hours to prepare. A delay of even a moment could cost them everything, sending poisonous fumes rushing across the landscape, killing the world in moments. All had visions of the most powerful warlock crushing the Towers with massive pieces of stone, or flinging them high into space, or just willing it and bursting them apart. One wizard sat down heavily, muttering how it was all over.

"It's not all over!" insisted Susan. "Something made by the gods isn't easy to destroy, is it? And he had to travel there, right?"

"Why?" asked the wizard. "Maybe he's powerful enough now just to bend space and will himself there."

Susan shook her head emphatically. "I don't think so. We would already be dead if that was the case. No, he's on the move, yes, but maybe we can still get there in time. Where are the towers? Is it someplace I've been near?"

"The small kingdoms," said Ithinia quietly. "But you've only been north, and they're far to the south."

"I can get my flying speed up pretty high. If someone can come and point them out to me, keep me on track towards them, we'll leave now."

"Wait," commanded Sparkle. "Has there been anyone around here that's seen these towers?"

The wizards all looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Even if they did... oh, they could use a *Spell Paper* and open the *Teleportal* for us. That's great thinking, Sparkle. I forget other people can use my magic like that."

"Start asking around!" demanded Ithinia. "Go!" The wizards scattered.

Tense moments followed as Susan cursed her magic for not being able to take her someplace she hadn't seen with her own eyes. *I know I want to go to the Towers. There's only one Towers in the world. How hard could it be to magically take me there?*

Finally one of the wizards rushed back in, and said he found someone who should be along shortly. Sparkle put *Acceleration* on them, as usual, while they waited.

"We should make you a maintaining focus for that spell," remarked Susan. "You use it all the time, and it would only be six XP."

"It would save me the minus two, I'll think about it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ithinia.

"If he's there, he'll have to die," replied Susan. "I don't like the idea, so don't look at me like that, but apparently that's what must be done. If he's not, you all can come through and start setting up wizardry and anything else we can throw around the thing to protect it. So it depends on what I see when I get there."

An old man tottered up the stairs and came into the room, looking around. "What's all this fuss about? Can't you leave an old man in peace?"

"You've seen the Towers of Lumeth?" Susan demanded to know.

"Many years ago, yes. I toured the world taking in many sights-"

"Yes, that's just great. Look, hold this piece and imagine them in your mind, all right?"

"Paper? What's this? Ithinia, what is this all about?"

"Just do what she says, please."

"Oh very well. You young people, always leaping about, never explaining yourselves. Is showing your elders a little respect so difficult as all that?"

"You have no idea," muttered Susan.

"What was that?"

"I said now that you're holding it, say *Teleportal*, and focus on the Towers. Please, just do it."

"All right, I said I would already, didn't I? What is this world coming to, I don't know. What was that word again? Telenortal?"

"*Teleportal!*"

"No need to shout. *Teleportal*. My goodness!"

There in the air was a view of three towers, two whole, one broken. The unbroken ones were simple gray cylinders, while the broken one looked chopped off at the top. Further detail at this distance was impossible. "He's already broken one," moaned Susan. "Look!"

"No, that's been broken since before I was born. Maybe he isn't... there!" She pointed. In the air near the towers was a floating figure, next to a huge chunk of stone that picked up speed and smashed into the columns. Seconds later they heard the crash, but the stone was pulled back and the towers held.

"We're not too late. I'll let you know if I win. You'll know soon enough if I lose."

"Wait, save first!" reminded Sparkle as she went to step through.

"Oh yeah! Thanks." Susan pulled out a *Spell Paper* and activated it, then stepped through. Sparkle followed.

"Good luck," called Ithinia.

"Thanks. Close it."

"How?" asked the man, trying to find the edge of the thing.

"Just decide you don't need it any more. Get your head out of it first!"

"You mean like-"

The portal closed.

"Let's go, Sparkle. One more battle and this world is finished. He has nowhere to run."

"Just be careful, who knows what other tricks it has up this warlock's sleeves."

"I will. *Blade*."

Susan also activated her redone *Spell Symbols* on the bracelet, *Invulnerability*, *Augment Skill*, *Flight*. *Flight* she had originally cast to be on both herself and Sparkle, so as Susan left the ground, Sparkle followed, pacing her. Vond turned around as she got near and held up a hand.

"That's far enough," he boomed, voice augmented. "I know about your *Slash-All* range, so stay well back if you want this one to live."

This one?

He gestured, and high above several babies were lowered from above a cloud, screaming and crying.

“Hiding behind babies now? That’s a new low for you.”

“Just a bit of insurance. I didn’t know how long it would take you to figure out I wasn’t gone.”

“Guess you’re not getting that crystal full of energy, huh?”

“What do you mean? Did the warlocks die or something? Ex-warlocks, I mean. I lowered them to the ground, I was sure I did! I didn’t miss any, did I?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Then what’s the problem? My bargain was for their lives. Not me leaving the world, because I never said that. I was just leaving that body. I can’t help it if you misunderstood, now can I?”

“Guess I should have gotten some tips from demonologists on how to look for holes in contracts, huh?”

“I suppose.” Vond pulled out two knives, and gestured to the block of stone still floating in the air next to him. Two small chunks broke off and started floating towards him.

“I don’t think they’ll reach this far,” remarked Susan, pointing to the knives. “And those little pieces of rock won’t even pierce my armor. Unless I can come attack you now? Or are you planning on further showing your cowardly nature and just float them about?”

“You can attack all you want, but those babies are now scattered to random clouds. Can you kill me and still catch them, when they fall?”

Susan looked, and yes, the babies were gone. He had used the knives as a distraction, and who knew where they were now? “Better a few babies than the whole planet.”

“Good!” Vond seemed impressed. “That’s a big step for you. Are you finally ready to do more than knock people out? To kill, when needed? To sacrifice the few for the greater number?”

“I’m certain I’m fast enough to catch them before they fall.”

“Actually,” Sparkle said to her looking up at the clouds, “leave them to me.”

Susan nodded and she flew off, but Vond went on.

“*Overconfident* to the last. That’s fine. To answer your other question, I’m not going to float these about, I can’t.”

“No?”

“The same property that allows them to chop through your armor makes it impossible for me to manipulate them with warlocky. The wizards would tell you they reject magic, but we know warlocky isn’t magic, now don’t we? They don’t suspect the real reason why.”

“Which is?”

Vond looked at her as if to say “You really think I would tell you?” and jammed the two knives, hilt first, into the stones he had floating there. They stayed floating. “Luckily I can manipulate stone, and the knives can’t do anything about that.” The two floated to the side of him, and two more took their place in his hands.

“How many of those do you have?”

“Enough, I think. They were fairly rare on my journey up here, but a few wizards didn’t mind giving me theirs before I left the main group. Ah well.” He repeated the procedure, then pulled a firth which he held in his hand.

“There. All set for our final battle. Any last words?” Susan shook her head and brought her sword up. “Very well.”

The air around Susan erupted into flames, once again sucking her air away but more importantly in the short term obscuring her vision. She shot left, taking her free movement for this action and clearing the flame, but found as she emerged she no longer had a target, Vond was missing. She saw his floating blades, so she knew he couldn’t have gone far, and the floating chunk of rock was the only thing in range he had to hide behind.

Fine. “Shrink.” Being a rock it couldn’t really resist, and Susan threw enough energy in to get it instantly but rather than turning into a pebble, The Darkness negated the spell.

Aarg, it’s like it doesn’t even make checks against me, it just succeeds.

Frustrating, isn’t it?

Yeah, enough to make me do this.

Susan took her next action, flying through the burning air to just reach the rock with her free action and tried to smash it to pieces. She didn’t expect one of the knives to shoot towards her as she was connecting with the stone, and couldn’t dodge because her action was to attack the rock. Her speed and LUCK saved her, as she received a bonus of one per every five speed, meaning a fourteen, plus one, a fifteen. With her *passive dodge* of fourteen, his roll of twenty three (minus two for doing it as a reactive action) was not enough, and the knife whizzed past her.

She cracked the stone with her blade, doing about a third of the damage she would need to in order to split it apart.

Knew I should have taken more Augment Stat: STR. Oh well.

“Temper, temper!” shouted Vond from behind it. “What did that rock ever do to you?”

“Offended me on so many levels!” she shouted back, raising her sword for another blow. This, however, was a feint. She figured that knife, currently hovering nearby, would probably make another pass when she swung the sword. *And I don’t have my bonus from speed this time...*

So instead of chopping straight down she swung to the side, making a called shot to the rock surrounding the blade that allowed Vond to manipulate it. She didn’t want to smash the knife, some poor wizard was presumably even now lamenting its loss and would like it back. She didn’t figure Vond had killed the owner, that would have made the knife useless because the soul shard powering it would disappear.

Odd, that on my world Tom made Soul Shards to try and gain immortality. These people have to make one just to become wizards and it doesn’t protect them in that way at all. That I know of, anyway.

The blade, as expected, slashed towards her with a sixteen result, but Susan’s skill won out with a twenty eight. She did forty eight damage, base, to the rock, and as it was actually smaller than a size zero creature it took more damage than normal. So that rock was smashed apart and the knife fell harmlessly to the ground.

“I see how it is,” snarled Vond.

“Come out from behind there if you’re so upset about it.”

“Pass.”

“Okay.”

She raised the blade again, wondering if she should give up trying to get at him for the moment. She didn’t really want to be near those blades, but isn’t it better to disarm your opponent if you can? She decided that was probably the case, and flew towards them instead, aiming for the nearest one. She had to turn her attack into a parry at the last instant, as all three animated suddenly and flew towards her as well. She put energy into COOrdination and took a minus three penalty to knock them all away in one sweep of her sword. (It’s huge, remember, Cloud gave it to her, and it could basically be used as a shield in this instance)

She managed it.

“Hey, time out!” she called. “You’re already holding up the rock, all those babies, and yourself. How you can animate three knives as well?”

“I controlled thousands of warlocks at the same time,” Vond scoffed. “You think I can’t multitask to this extent?”

“Oh, right.”

Great, so if I try to take one out, the other two slam into me. Am I going to have to risk it?

The flames were gone, so Susan chose to speed back away from the rock, put a little distance between them and maybe spread the knives out a bit more. They followed, spreading out as she intended. She realized her mistake as soon as she completed her free movement. They were now in front and to either side, making it even harder to dodge or keep track of them because now she was being flanked by at least one. *I wonder if Slash-All will even work on nonliving targets? Maybe?* She didn’t want to take the time to activate it, she knew the knives would attack as she did. So she kept moving backwards, taking a few segments to move and sped away from the towers. The knives slowed and hung in the air, probably at the range of Vond’s power.

At that point, Sparkle (remember her) reached the first baby (remember them) and started casting *Phase* on herself while she touched the child. She knew this would break Vond’s hold and the tiny human would begin to fall. But she had a plan, and even figured it had a decent chance of working. *Because if it doesn’t, Susan is going to be pretty bummed out. She did save though, and we can go back to make another plan now that we know.*

Susan also cast *Phase*, on herself. *I’ll just speed through the rock, pop out swinging, and when I’m about to hit him I’ll release Phase and that will be that. Easy!*

She took the full time so she didn’t have to put as much energy in, and flew forwards again. Vond was now fifteen meters away, meaning it would take her two segments to get there. When she was half way there the knives moved to intercept, and she was torn between wanting to avoid them completely or take more caution in case they could negate *Phase* as well. She trusted her speed and LUCK, deciding to bust through and not worry about it.

This proved to be a mistake.

The random hit location table indicated head and seven damage, making Susan cry out as a knife once again raked across her “no unusual effect.” She shot to the side

away from the other knife and again, all three stopped and waited like angry humming birds.

Sparkle finished casting, and as predicted, the baby started plummeting to the ground. Sparkle was totally off on her estimate as to how high they were, but that didn't matter so much. She paced the child for one segment, then cast *Entangle* as the child neared the ground. As she hoped, plant life sprang from the ground and wrapped around the kid, cushioning the fall. *Now I just have to do that three more times*, she thought, looking upwards. *Fun.*

Susan moved out of range again, dropping *Phase* and wondering what went wrong.

Are Vond or The Darkness spending XP against me or something? I could have sworn my difficulty to be hit there was a twenty nine, and he can't be that good with a blade, especially from this distance. I have to take those daggers out. I wonder.

"Retrieval!"

Susan hoped that by casting the spell from this range, Vond couldn't negate it, but countering a spell can be performed on the target of the spell, and she felt her magical energies disrupted.

Oh, but wait, there's more!

Susan tried again, this time throwing maximum energy in and taking the five segments to cast. She was going to cast on all three blades, but a REASON check (at a minus two for being rushed) of ten total made her decide to cast on the *rocks* instead. *After all, if they negate magic or whatever, they'll resist my magic too.*

Vond could only counter one of the simultaneous spells she cast, and another two daggers dropped away. She was about to drop the two rocks that were now in her hand with a smirk, but then got another clever idea.

I can certainly handle one knife, Susan thought. *I think these might come in useful for saving those babies.*

Susan sped towards Vond, keeping the remaining dagger in sight as she did so. For this she needed to be closer, and was counting on him to protect that last line of defense rather than the kids. She tossed the rocks down as she got close, and saw the dagger wasn't fast enough to intercept her coming from the side as she was. It seemed Vond wanted to keep the last mobile weapon between the rock and herself so she couldn't smash it again, which was fine, that wasn't her target. She made a *Spirit Sense* check on the move, getting minimum because that's how the universe works. Sparkle somehow knew her plan despite no communication between them, and spent her card 7, *Success*, so that action succeeded. Susan now knew where all three babies were from the position of the weak energy signatures in the sky. She cast again, but *Transposition* this time, meaning to switch a baby with a rock, a baby with a rock, her sword with a baby, and Vond with the stone wrapped around the knife.

This one, of course, Vond negated, as she planned. But the others, with energy and Susan's bonus from *Acceleration*, all went flawlessly with a total check result of eighteen. Two babies appeared where the rocks were on the ground, while the rocks now started to fall. Her sword became the third child, which she grabbed and cradled in her arm. This left her sword hanging in midair, but she put her hand out and willed it to

her, trusting the *Material Link* spell to guide it back to her waiting hand.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” called Vond.

“Pretty much,” replied Susan.

“You think now you can attack me with impunity, because my hostages are gone. Fine. I’m through playing around with you. Know despair and weep, this is what I’m going to do to you the next time we meet.”

And Vond rose from behind the stone, and looked directly at the child in Susan’s arms.

With a cold certainty, Susan knew what he was going to do.

He was going to kill the child, knowing she was helpless to prevent it.

“I declare card forty two, *WTF!*” called Susan. *Please, let this work to allow me to save this kid!*

“I declare card thirty three, *Lucky Break!*” called Sparkle, again knowing the exact right thing to do despite being some distance away at the time.

Susan’s *Mimic Materia* started to glow, and Susan realized she had a chance. The cards had made this possible, and even as power lashed out to try and tear the child apart in her arms, Susan sent that same power back at him by shouting “*Mimic!*” Time slowed even further than Susan was used to under *Acceleration*, and she watched in horror as Vond’s features contorted as agony tore through him. The attack, with all Vond’s might now struck him a split second before it could fully impact the child, and there was nothing he could do about it.

A second later it was over. The child hardly felt anything, now looking up a Susan with wonder, as the pieces of Vond the warlock rained down upon the ground near the towers.

All was still, as if even the babies on the ground knew what had happened, and were silently judging Susan’s actions.

In the new stillness her watch beeped.

“Susan? Susan, are you there? I just registered a withdraw event and the barrier around that world is now *active*. Nicely done, you did it! Susan? Susan, are you hurt? I’m looking at your vitals here and you don’t seem to be. Do you need me to open the gateway for some other reason? I can have a medical team there in seconds.

...

...

Susan?”

Putting it Behind You

Time: Twenty minutes later

Place: Wizard's Guild building

Susan had finally answered Silverstreak, saying she was fine, and she would need some time yet before opening the portal back. He said to take all the time she needed, and she set about making sure the babies were all right.

"And you used *Entangle* to catch one?" she asked, amazed.

"It's all I could think of. I don't have *Telekinesis* and anything else is just attack related. This seemed the best bet, I saw how dense the plant life that spell makes."

"It worked, that's all that matters. Well done."

"Thanks."

With the babies safe, Susan went and picked up the knives, then made her way back to the wizards who were nervously pacing the room she had left.

"Where did you get all those babies?" Ithinia asked, startled.

"Didn't think I was gone that long, huh?" she tried to joke, but the shock of seeing Vond tear himself apart (as she insisted on categorizing the event) made her shaky and pale. "I always wanted a big family."

The other wizards rushed to help her, and she put down the knives as they were fussed over.

"But seriously, Vond had them hostage. One of them almost didn't make it."

"What do you mean?"

So Susan told how she had rescued the kids, and the wizards shared a look. "I knew Vond was dangerous," said one, "but not that dangerous."

"He wasn't in control," insisted Susan. "Baby killing is all The Darkness, I assure you."

"So he's dead, then?"

"Quite. Your world is safe."

"You're sure? This Darkness creature isn't still lurking around?"

Susan shook her head. "S. says he's gone, and I can leave at any time. I just needed to come back here and make sure these little angels were taken care of. And these, of course."

"Stolen from wizards?"

"Stolen from wizards. I can use *Question* to figure out where they all belong, babies and knives both."

Ithinia grabbed her hand as she started to make the MANipulation check needed to pull her book of spells from the sub-space pocket. "It's okay," she said gently. "I'll get a Theurgist to ask the gods, you've done more than enough for us. I give you my word, all these children will be back with their parents by the time the sun sets."

Susan drew a deep breath. "Thank you."

"I'm... sorry you had to see what you did. It's obviously shaken you."

"Shaken, not stirred."

"Uh?"

“Sorry, bad joke. It’s not just that, Vond united a bunch of the small kingdoms you said, I doubt that happened without bloodshed. So he probably wasn’t the nicest guy. It’s The Darkness. I think it’s getting a bit worried, or a bit angry, or both, to do something like that. I’m just worried about the next time I meet him. Will he just do something like that straight off? Just to spite me? I mean can a being like that even know about holding a grudge? There’s just so much I don’t know about my opponent, short of it wanting to destroy the world with the least amount of effort possible.”

“I can’t help you there.”

“I know. I’m just going to have to take it as it comes, I guess. Look, I should go. You have more important things to be doing right now.”

“I have people for that, stay as long as you like.” She gave a thin smile.

“Thanks, but I think leaving is probably the best thing now. Use what I’ve given you wisely, okay?”

“Okay. And thanks again, for everything.”

“It’s what I do. Come on, Sparkle, we’re heading back.”

“Right boss.”

And so Susan returned to the Hub, where Silverstreak didn’t ask why she wanted to be alone for a few hours. He just said to come find him whenever she was ready, and opened the door to the room she used when staying there. She flopped down on the bed, unsure what she should really be feeling. Pity? Despair? Revulsion? She knew she needed to kill Vond, and The Darkness knew she knew. Before it had killed itself in frustration, or somewhat by accident, but now it was going to avoid that because it knew how deeply it affected her.

Want to talk about it?

With you? Uh, no, I don’t think so. By the way, how did that warlock plan work out for you? Huh? Not so great in the end.

You don’t have to rub it in. Good thing you had those cards though, what would you have done if you hadn’t had those exact two?

Loaded the save and gone after the babies before Vond even knew I was there. Attached helium balloons to them or something.

I... would that even work?

I don’t know. I would have done something.

No doubt. Still, you know you can’t take me by surprise, right? As soon as I knew you were near the babies plan- anyway, all the past now. Don’t worry so much. Your next world will feature robots, predominantly. I’ve taken over an AI, and I’m building millions of killer robots to wipe out organic life on the planet.

Seriously?

Really! I figure that’s way easier than flesh beings, so I thought I would give it a try. Plus it saves me some energy, I can just program them to do whatever I want, and I don’t have to micromanage them. But enough about my problems. You can now truthfully tell Silverstreak I mentioned it to you. And it ties in nicely about wanting to beat up something not alive for a change. Sure, Luna is nowhere near there, but you deserve a break, right?

I was going anyway, you didn’t need to tell me that. I’ll keep my promise to you. If it’s even true about the robots.

Oh, but I did. You think he can't tell if you're lying? Ha! Silly Susan, you don't even have Deception at more than a one. This makes it nice and legit. I'm not saying thank you, or anything. Suit yourself.

Susan spent the rest of the day restless, then got a good night's rest and went looking for Silverstreak in the morning.

"Hey Susan, are you feeling better this morning?"

"A little, I guess. Do you want my report on the last world?"

"Sure thing, if you think it'll help you to talk about it."

So she repeated the story, adding in the beginning bits about helping the world out, which as she told him started to get the sense that maybe she shouldn't go around polluting worlds with knowledge from other worlds. He laughed it off when he sensed her hesitating and asked about it.

"Don't worry about it. You wouldn't believe the stuff that naturally falls through the cracks and ends up different places. And tech stuff, well, they would have thought of it eventually. As far as warlocks, hey, you were just giving them a little power back, nothing wrong with that. I mean sure, don't leave schematics for a nuke on a completely magical world, but improving quality of life? Telling them about *hot air balloons*?" He laughed again. "Don't even worry about that! After all, some version of that world parallel to that one already has them. I mean I presume, I don't know every minor reality by heart, but it stands to reason something that minor would show up near there sooner or later."

"Oh. Whew, thanks."

"As far as Vond, well, that's somewhat my fault. I should have made it more clear to you, given you a little more time to get used to the idea. So I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean for you to take it so hard."

"I think that's the first person I really killed, who stayed dead, anyway..." She remembered shooting Tom, but he was fine after that, so it really didn't count.

"What you do isn't easy, from the moment you step into a world to the moment you step out. You risk everything, because you never know what weird powers or tech you might run into. Plus with Darkvoid mucking the picture up, and needing to kill him... that's why I usually send groups. They can support each other. If you want someone else to look for Luna, and leave this behind, I'll understand. I'll assign another team-"

"No," Susan cut in. "I know the stakes, and running now would shame my father so much he would burn his gaudy purple robe and disown me. I didn't start this, but if killing the host is what needs to be done... I'm prepared to do that." *I hope.*

"Okay. If you change your mind..." He let that hang in the air a moment. "Now, I assume you'll want to spend your XP, so you know where the training room are, right?"

"Actually, if you have a minute, I'd like to talk to you about something, sort of related to all this."

"Oh?"

"The... Darkvoid mentioned to me a world where he's taken over a bunch of robots? I thought, maybe I should kind of ease into this whole 'killing the host' thing. I mean I doubt it'll get any easier, but if I could take a little break from killing people and

just smash up a bunch of machines, could be somewhat... cathartic.”

“It did, did it? What’s the number, there’s lots of worlds with robots running around.” Susan rattled off the number The Darkness told her to say. “I was afraid of that. You *really* don’t want to go there.”

“Oh?”

“Really. Come on, I’ll show you.” He took her back up to the control room and sat down, accessing the computers and bringing up an image of a patchwork world. “This is the world you want to go to.”

“Looks messed up. What happened to it?”

“We aren’t exactly sure,” he replied sadly. “What we do know is that multiple dimensions have clashed together there for some reason. To use my earlier tree analogy, it’s as if many leaves smashed together and made one leaf that had the characteristics of all of them. And the worst part? It’s still going on. One day you might visit an area that had a mountain, the next day, mountain gone- lake there instead. Or a small village just appears out of nowhere, or a section of city is replaced by lava, the missing people never to be seen again. It’s not pretty.”

“So you’re worried that could happen and carry off whoever you send?”

“Not exactly. There’s enough warning, usually, as lightning and other energies are released on the spot. No, the trouble is magic, and why I wouldn’t recommend you going there. You, especially and specifically.”

“Is magic messed up too?”

“To be honest, there isn’t much. That branch is mostly technology based, which wouldn’t be much of a problem for you normally, because you’re *Natural* not *Scholar*. The problem is, and I think you’ve experienced this, right, is dimensional warping. You may be in a section of the world that doesn’t have a ‘connection’ so to speak with any of the planets!”

Susan’s face fell. “And so my magic would be useless, I couldn’t cast anything. Like I couldn’t cast Pluto spells with Louise.”

“Exactly. There are only rare times when the dimensional energies that shroud the planet would open up enough to give you access to all your planets. Heck, planes can’t even fly very high it’s so bad. They get ripped apart by the stresses.”

“So you want a team to go there that doesn’t rely on magic at all, right?”

“That would be best. But most have one spell caster, of one type or another, just because I like diverse groups. You have diverse magic, so it works out.”

“And me,” reminded Sparkle.

“And you.”

“What about my *Imbued* items? I mean if there’s no magic, there’s none to use against me, right? Couldn’t I get along with just my items?”

“I suppose... You’re really dead set on going, aren’t you?”

“It sounds like a real challenge, and someone has to clean it out, right?” Susan was actually a little excited, it *would* be a challenge. First to find The Darkness, and get this crystal it wanted, all with very little magic.

“You don’t have to prove yourself, Susan. I know how good you are, and you saved that world even if you did have to kill Vond.”

“Maybe I don’t have to prove myself to you...”

“I see.” He tapped a finger on his chin thoughtfully. “There is a way. It’s not the

most convenient method, but it would work in a pinch. Come with me to the lab.”

She followed him through the door that again closed and opened immediately, and everyone greeted Silverstreak as he walked through. He started rummaging around and seemed pleased when he pulled a strange looking cube off a shelf full of weird looking devices.

“We’ll need two though,” he remarked, looking the shelf over. “There must be another one around here... Ah!” He found another, then went to a bench and started fiddling with them, popping open a panel on the top of each and fitting them together into one larger device. “Now, you have a backpack or something? You’ll have to carry it with you everywhere.”

“But what is it?”

“Dimensional stabilizer. This will punch a hole through any interference and allow you to use... one planet. Each.”

Susan and Sparkle traded a look. “I guess that’s more than nothing?”

“All I can offer you. Unless you want to lug twenty of these suckers around. No? Didn’t think so. And even then, it’s not the most reliable thing in the worlds. It’s like GPS, it takes a minute or two to lock on, and if you want to change it’ll take time to switch. If it even can, really high interference areas exist, and even this can only do so much. But if you’re dead set on going, I’ll lend it to you. Along with some advice.”

“I’ll take what I can get. I need to do this.” *For various reasons.*

“Okay. Do you have a backpack?”

“I think so, bumping around my *Dimensions* somewhere.”

“Fine. I’ll attune it to the watch before you go, so you can control it through there. Oh, and if you both use the same planet it’ll lock on twice as fast. I can give you the full manual later.”

“I’ll look it over. What’s the advice?”

“Focus on the *Spirit* part of *Spirit Mage* before you leave. Take points from your planets if you must, you can always put them back afterwards. In a world where you can’t rely on magic, you’re going to have to rely on the skills having a ten in *Spirit Manipulation* will get you. Oh, and keep your *pistol* skill, at least at some rating, it should come in handy.”

“That all sounds reasonable. Looks like I better hit the gym, rather than the wizard’s area.”

Silverstreak answered with a nod, and dropped the now completed device into her waiting hands. “Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

So by taking *Inscribing* down to a one from a three and spending all her XP, she was able to get her skill group that included *Spirit Manipulation* to a seven rating. Dropping all her school skills, like *Herbology* to a one got her enough to bring them to an eight. She forgot how to cast *Alleviation* as she planned, getting ten back, and also *Magic Immunity*, again, for nine. She transferred all of her stuff from her *Pocket Dimension* to her now expanded sub-space pocket, as her rating increased in that she was able to store larger things and it was faster, with no energy cost, so that gave her another six. Taking one magical skill group to a five from a six netted her quite a bit, and she pulled a little from *riding* to finally bring that up to a ten.

With that done she put some points into skills like *Spirit Step* and *Aura Reading*, but only a couple at that point so she didn't drain her magical skills too much. Most everything in that category of skills was based on RESolve anyway, so even a low rating was more than enough to get a good result. (With a little energy thrown in, of course) And she could easily raise them while she was there, if she got a bit of time.

Sparkle also shuffled a few things around, losing *Armor of Magic* and *Elemental Line: Ether*. She broke her *Spirit Mage Skill Group*, deciding that she probably didn't need to be better than average at things like *Dimension Sense* and *Spirit Sense* if Susan was going to have tens in them anyway. She got her *Spirit Manipulation* up to a ten which let her get a few of the spirit skills as well, specifically *Spirit Step*, *Aura Reading*, and *Spirit Aura*.

It doesn't really make sense, spending all that XP to get so few skills. Spirit Step just seems so useful, but Manipulation, for someone like me, just doesn't seem worth it. I don't have Susan's energy, after all. If I spent my maximum it would be gone in two actions!

While Susan was off doing things, she spoke to Silverstreak about it, who said if she saved up some XP, he could get her a background that increased her energy totals.

"It's expensive," he cautioned, "so make sure it's worth it before you decide. You can't exactly take a background back."

"Got it. Anything else useful I could start to learn now that it is a ten?"

He considered. "I suppose there is one thing. Never thought I would be teaching it to a cat though."

"What's that?"

"It's a martial art. It's called Ryūdō."

"A what? How can a cat learn a martial art?"

He laughed. "Like I said, it sounds weird but it's actually perfect for you. Purrfect? I kill me!"

Sparkle rolled her eyes.

"Sorry. Ahem, this one is different. Basically you shove energy into someone as you tap them, like so." He tapped her. "The more energy you put in, the greater your potential damage. So it doesn't depend on strength, and you do, what, 1d2 damage if you actually tried to scratch someone?"

"True, any more damage would be better than that. But like everything else we do, if we roll poorly our effort is wasted."

He shrugged. "Can't do anything about that."

"I get it. I suppose I could at least get it to a low rating, try it out. If it works out I could get that energy related background and make it worthwhile."

He nodded. "You would have to. Go down to the gym, ask someone to show it to you."

"I will. Thanks."

Silverstreak also took that opportunity to attach a small gizmo to her collar, in the shape of a sphere.

"What's this?"

"The targeting point for the dimensional stabilizer. Susan doesn't need one, the

watch can be used and she'll have it with her most of the time anyway. But you'll need one, so here it is."

"Oh. How does it work? Some kind of radio signal or something? I ask just to make sure I know what can block it."

"Block it? My technology? Ha! No, it's a micro-wormhole, basically a shortcut through space. You can't block it, short of her coming back here and leaving you behind."

"Got it. Thanks."

Finally she dropped the ratings on a few of the planets she hardly ever used and had Susan make her a *Maintaining Focus for Acceleration*, not that she believed she would use it on the next world. It was just a little clip that went around her collar, basically just a band of metal you would hardly notice if you didn't know to look for it.

Accomplishing all that took some time, but Susan didn't feel rushed given how slow time ran here in relation to pretty much everywhere else. She also got a tutorial on how to use the dimensional stabilizer, which amounted to tapping an icon on the watch and telling it what planet she wanted to use for herself and Sparkle. It could also display how long until it locked in, and if there was a stable channel for more than one planet where she currently was. When she was finally ready she told Silverstreak and he gave her one final warning.

"This gateway is going to be pretty unstable, because of all the dimensional warpage there," he explained. "So prepare yourself. Usually I can get it pretty close to where the action is going to be, but I can't say where you're going to end up. The world has a very diverse set of people, living the spectrum from horses and stone clubs to higher technology than your world enjoyed. Find out what caused this phenomenon if you can, but remember your goal is the AI. If Darkvoid is even telling you the truth. If we can fix the worlds, bring them apart again, that would be great. So keep that in mind as just a secondary objective.

"I should also mention a couple of others difficulties. Your skill in *Dimensional Sense* is going to be useless there, first of all. Mainly because nothing belongs in that mishmash of dimensions, so everything will set it off. Don't trust it. Rely more on the behavior of whatever you meet than your feelings of them. Though *Aura Reading* should be helpful, now that I think about it. Anyway, something is trying to destroy the world? That's probably your guy. Second, your link back here will be sketchy at best. We probably won't be able to talk, if you signal me I'll just figure you want the portal open. I'll monitor the place as best I can for Darkvoid leaving though. I'll figure you'll want it opened soon after. If you do come back here, don't figure you'll be returned to the same spot, either."

"Got it. Wish me luck."

"Or in your case, a good LUCK check, amiright?" Both chuckled, and Silverstreak activated the portal to step through. Susan put her hand through, but the portal resisted and the machinery started whining in protest.

"Just push through it," Silverstreak shouted. "This is the most stable portal I can get you!" Energy crackled around the edges, and Susan felt a tingle as she tried to get through it.

“Okay! Come on, Sparkle!”

Both pushed through, Susan closing her eyes and forcing her way through, where she was thrown through the other side and impacted something hard before thudding to the ground. Her head was spinning, ears ringing, and for several moments she just lay there, trying to clear her vision. Finally she decided she better sit up, and looked around.

She was in a forested area, seemingly alone, as Sparkle was nowhere to be found.

“Sparkle?” she called softly. “You make it through?”

Nothing answered.

“Sparkle!” she called, louder. “Where are you? Sparkle?” She got up, looking around and wondering if she should start the procedure for locking in a planet, and fire up *Question* to try and find her. *But she must be around here somewhere, right?*

“Sparkle!”

“Told you there was somebody out here!” a voice behind Susan said, and she whirled around.

“Guess you were right. It’s a girl.”

“I can see that, you idiot!”

“My sensors are still going crazy though.” Both slowly brought up pistols pointing in her direction, and no one moved. Susan took a good look at them, they were obviously soldiers. They had some kind of weird rank sticker on their foreheads, matching uniforms, and the one that was currently talking was holding up something on his wrist and pointing it at Susan. “Mind telling me who you are, miss?”

Oh, this is just great.

What Happened To Sparkle

Place: ???

Time: ???

Sparkle came to slowly, looking around and blinking the blurriness out of her eyes. Then she remembered she was a cat, and had the *Poor Sense: Vision* weakness. This meant the trees that were some distance away were going to be blurry for her no matter what.

Trees? We ended up in a forest? And my goodness, it's hot here! She looked around, but she was in the shade, and struggled to get up. Not exactly fur coat weather. Wonder if I can ask Susan to have the book whip me up a spell to shed some of my under fur out of season. Oh well. First order of business, get Susan up. Seems I got knocked out, and she's going to be down for the count without the Awaken spell... that I can't cast without Susan attuning the dimensional stabilizer. Great.

"Susan?" she called, looking around. "You around here?"

There was no response.

Forest is kind of thick here, too. Darn it, I really hope we didn't get that separated.

Looking around, she found a sturdy looking tree nearby that had some good branches, and made some *Climbing* checks to get a higher vantage point. She sniffed the air and swiveled her ears, making *Perception* checks to see if she could spot anything. Her seventeen (she got a plus four to hearing) revealed some faint noises off in *that* direction, but no young woman calling her name. She also didn't see any prone forms, and started to get a bit worried that Susan might be lost.

Giving her collar orb a bat, Sparkle wondered if there was any indication of the thing being active, and if so, how she could tell what planet Susan had selected for her. *That would at least tell me she was up and fiddling with it.* But she hadn't planned on being separated from her friend, so she had never asked. *Am I going to have to cast a bunch of grade zero spells to just see? And will they backfire or just not work? Will they still cost energy, or can I not put energy into a skill that technically doesn't work here?*

"Don't suppose you can tell me?" she asked hopefully, giving the sphere another bop.

The sphere either didn't know what she was talking about because it wasn't a mind reader and so kept quiet, or had no capability to answer her.

"Figures. Now what?"

The sphere rendered no opinion on this topic either.

"Susan!" she called, but a cat's lungs can only produce so much volume, and Susan was hard of hearing, besides. There wasn't much chance of her being heard, much less waking Susan up if she was still unconscious.

Well, she's the one with the fancy magic. Once she does wake up, she can come find me more easily than I can find her. I'll head towards that noise, I guess, see what sort of area I wound up in.

That decided, she basically rolled off the branch and twisted in midair, landing

lightly on her feet. She took one final look around and trudged off in the direction of the sounds she had heard, already wishing she had a more efficient cooling system or half the fur she currently did.

She came to a small village, with airy houses on what appeared to be stilts, all in a row.

Probably for better air flow. Ahead she heard some sort of a commotion, and peaked around a corner to see what was up. About six meters away was a green military jeep, driven by a blond haired guy wearing a vest. Standing next to the jeep was a dark haired man in some kind of one piece uniform, white, red boots, and a blue stripe going down the sides. He had long sleeves, which were black and red. Next to him was a more sensibly dressed young girl, in a cute pink dress, white boots to mid thigh, and light hair, which was probably blue or some variant thereof.

Obviously the men on this world are insane, does that guy really need that vest on? It must be close to million degrees out here... or at least in the nineties. Weird. And what are they arguing about, anyway?

As she stood and listened, the guy in the uniform was going on about where he got the truck from, and the man said he got it repaired by some people he called the "Emarns." As they were talking, two men wearing a different kind of uniform came around the house and looked startled, pressing themselves back against the wall to not be seen. These two had rifles over their shoulders, where the man by the truck was unarmed.

Interesting.

The man climbed into the jeep and demanded to be taken to "the market" and ordered the little girl to climb in back. She started to, and Sparkle had a decision to make. Stick with the gunmen, or see where the guy the gunmen were obviously concerned about went.

What would Susan do? Probably something violent. Grabbing them and demanding to know what they were doing walking around a village with guns. Who knows.

She didn't want to get involved with soldiers, so she did a quick *Spirit Step* and then hopped up into the back of the jeep, opposite the girl. It took off.

"Kitty!" said the girl, and the dark haired guy looked back at her.

"Your cat?" he asked.

"Never seen it before," said the light haired guy.

"Maybe it wants to go to the market too!" said the girl.

The two men laughed.

"Well, it could," she huffed, crossing her arms.

Sparkle looked back, and the soldiers had come out of hiding, and were watching the jeep pull away. *That can't be good.*

Turning back to the men, the child was trying to get Sparkle to come closer, and she allowed herself to be petted, to her delight. That's when Sparkle noticed something strange. She made a *Spirit Sense* check to be sure, but there was no doubt. The two men had totally normal energy as far as she could tell. The girl however did not. In fact Sparkle would have said she was dead, had she not been scratching under her chin. She started to purr quite against her will.

“What’s your name little kitty?” the girl asked. Sparkle wondered if she should answer, but for the moment chose the path of the orb and keep her silence. “I’ll call you Starburst!”

“Don’t go adopting any cats!” yelled the dark haired man. “Mimsy threw a big enough fit when I asked her to buy you. I don’t need her even more angry at me.”

Bought? What’s this? Sparkle’s eyes narrowed.

“But master, she’s so friendly!”

“He belongs here,” the man said firmly. “Look at that collar, he’s owned by someone. And he’s not starving, you can tell that.”

The girl assigns me her gender, the man, his. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Master!”

“No! And I told you to call me Kei.”

She put her hands over her mouth. “Sorry, my programming slipped back already.”

Programming? A robot, of course! Oh crap, is this a Darkness robot or something uninvolved? Sparkle took a quick *Dimension Sense* but like Silverstreak had said, basically everything around here radiated that it shouldn’t be there.

Everything but the jeep... and this loser. She studied the man more closely, but he seemed unremarkable. *Guess I know who I’m sticking close to. Susan will be along one way or the other, if soldiers and one of the original inhabitants are involved.*

The jeep didn’t travel for long before rolling into “the marketplace” which looked like a cross between a farmer’s market and an episode of Star Trek. Stuff was piled all over the place, and tons of people were wandering around, bartering for it. The man, Kei, shouted over to a woman named Mimsy, and a woman in a red??? dress tried to get out of doing so. He insisted, and she stomped over in a huff. She had the high boots on too, but white leggings, and her dress reached only halfway to her knee. Her hair was about shoulder length, and she had a wide belt on.

He went on about the jeep being from “his” Earth, so that must mean the planet was his. She said her people called the earth “Emar” while the Chirams called it “Chira.” She went on to explain the dimensional shifting that made all this possible, and Sparkle listened for any hint of what had actually caused all this. He asked, but by that time she was annoyed with the explanation and tried to walk away.

Darn it! That would have been perfect! And who is this guy, that’s obviously a native here but doesn’t know all this? Something odd here.

Kei tried to get her to make the guy an offer on the jeep, which Sparkle thought was a bit short sighted. If what she had heard was right, the driver had owned it for years and would certainly not sell it.

The girl noticed her watching all this.

“They sure do fight a lot, don’t they, Starburst? Even you could tell, couldn’t you? You’re such a smart kitty. I wonder why people have to fight all the time, anyway.”

You have no idea, kid.

“Hey, did you just call me junk again? I’m not a piece of junk!” she insisted to the woman.

See, there you go.

The woman stormed off, and both jumped off the jeep, which pulled away. Sparkle felt something... it was the two soldiers!

"Meow!" she yowled, hissing, and Kei whirled around to see what was going on. The soldier, looking ready to throw a punch, now hesitated and Kei jumped back. He put his hand down.

"You aren't an Emarn," said the soldier, while the other covered him with his rifle. "And you're not an Atlantian. Which unit did you desert from?"

They went back and forth, and from what Sparkle could tell, all people that looked like they did served some kind of military service. He was going to be taken back somewhere so they could find out who he was when a device at the guy's belt started beeping. He pointed it at Kei and exclaimed he was the one they had been "told about." This made them want to take him even more, and the one drew his pistol with the other hand.

The three went into a whirlwind of motion, and Sparkle had to admit Kei was a pretty good fighter. He knocked their guns away, and only took a few hits himself as he tossed the two soldiers around. Why one just didn't shoot him while the other one distracted him she didn't know, but there it was. She cursed her lack of magical power at the moment, though in front of all these people, a cat doing magic might cause even more of an uproar than two soldiers grabbing someone in broad daylight. Not that there was much uproar, people were just sort of standing around watching. Kei drove them off, sending them running, then started bragging about his training that made it possible.

"I guess that's that," he said. "Let's walk around a bit, cool off."

"Stay here, master," said the girl, "I'll be right back." She ran off.

"What's gotten into her?" asked Kei. "What are you still doing, hanging around? Shoo!"

Sparkle realized this was directed at her, and looked up at him coldly. *You're welcome for the warning, hero.*

She tagged after him, and he seemed to even forget the attack, making Sparkle think maybe this guy had a few screws loose, when the people around him shouted and pointed. Two red monstrosities were flying down out of the sky, and Kei started to panic. "It's them!" he cried uselessly, and everyone started scattering.

Wait, are they really going to attack this place with their equivalent of tanks? Just for this one guy? What the heck?

He started running around trying to get away from them, and the girl proved to have greater foresight as she flew up in some kind of hovering vehicle. *So that's what she was going to get. Nicely done, little girl!*

He jumped on, and Sparkle followed with another *Spirit Step* and leap. *Okay, maybe that skill is going to come in more handy than I first believed. I'm still bitter about the prereq though.* Her claws sunk into the seat as they took to the air, heading for some ship floating off in the distance.

"What the?" exclaimed Kei. "Get off, stupid cat!"

"I don't think so," she answered.

Kei gaped at her, but shook his head and turned around again. "No, couldn't be."

Sparkle chuckled.

As the ship came into view, Sparkle saw a humanoid shape hanging in the center of it, and Sparkle got the idea that around here, they were big on what Susan would probably call “mecha” from her watching of anime and such.

She did a double take, that ship looked a little familiar. She had *Photographic Memory*, and so recalled seeing that very ship very briefly somewhere.

Something Susan was looking at on the web, no doubt. But, we couldn't have gone... there, could we? Please don't tell me the first place we come to that I recognize, that I might actually have foreknowledge of that could help is a place Susan totally ignored because it was ancient. I mean that would just figure, wouldn't it? I really, really hope she doesn't remember anything about this place, because that would be awkward on so many levels to explain. Please, if the Narrator favors me at all, don't make this the world I have to tell Susan the truth about her existence on. Make it the next one, any one but this one. Please!

If her “prayer” was heard, Sparkle didn't know, but Kei jumped off the flyer and started warming up his mech.

“Don't take that out, it's not finished!” yelled an older guy as the girl parked the vehicle. Both jumped out, and the girl exclaimed over Starburst following them.

“You really like me, don't you?”

Something like that.

The ship blasted off, and the guy was screaming about it not even being loaded with ammunition yet.

Oh, what a surprise.

The girl looked at the mech speeding off, then jumped back aboard the vehicle and blasted off after it. Sparkle bid her a silent farewell, believing she would never be seen again. Without magic, there was nothing she could do, and so she watched helplessly as the two soldiers tried to disable the craft without destroying it.

Of course, they wanted the man, and killing him would probably be troublesome for them.

Somehow, the little girl robot made a difference, ditching the vehicle and doing something to the side of the mech. Suddenly it started moving better, and Kei was able to smash the other two out of the sky. They landed safely back in the city, and Sparkle thought she might take this opportunity to look around. The two men that had tried to stop Kei walked off, and Sparkle followed them into the main corridors of the ship.

The ship was spacious, with plenty of rooms, and seemed pretty luxurious for what it looked like. (Which was a floating battle station bristling with guns.) Most everyone, it seemed, was out. Either that or not many people lived here. It was walking around, keeping out of sight and looking the inhabitants over that Sparkle realized these beings had some kind of tentacle growing out the back of their heads; Two for women and one for men. *A literal third hand?*

Sparkle didn't have much time to look around, and was sure Susan would have loved the engine room as it seemed much higher tech than anything on her world. *After all, it works both ways. If she can bring the principles that keep this ship in the air back to our world, think of what that could mean Anything strictly science based should work anywhere, right?.* All too soon the ship felt like it was taking off, and Sparkle heard

voices, meaning the crew had returned and they were leaving.

Probably to avoid more trouble with those soldiers, unless I miss my guess. She stayed out of sight for some time, to make sure it wouldn't be convenient to "take her back home" and walked into the dining room while everyone was talking about what they should rename the "Bronco II" to. Every eye turned to stare at her, and she started washing her face unconcerned.

"Starburst!" said the little girl, jumping up from the table and sweeping her up into a hug. "You are still here! Yay!"

"Ah no, how did he get here?" groaned Kei. "Oh right, he was riding the flyer, I don't believe it."

"What's this?" asked Mimsy.

"It followed me here, honest. One second it wasn't there, the next it was. I've never seen anything move that fast."

"Can we keep her?" pleaded the girl.

"Looks like a snack to me," said the enormous *creature* sitting at the table. Sparkle froze, eyes going up and up. *That thing's a plus one at least, look at the size of it.*

"You scared her!" chided the girl. "Talking about eating her, she knows what you're saying. She's smart!"

"Just a little joke," assured the creature. "I would never eat you. My name is Jayviet, what's yours?"

"Sp-"

"Her name is Starburst, and she's the bestist kitty in the whole world. Can I keep her? Oh can I?"

I can talk for myself kid... but it could be fun to see how long I can make them think I'm a regular cat. Hummmm. Could come in handy in various ways, maybe?

"There are mice aboard, and they get into our food stocks. I suppose she could live in the cargo bay," said one lady.

Ugh, have you ever had mouse, lady? They don't taste like chicken, let me tell you. There's a reason there isn't mouse flavored cat food, no cat would eat it. Not when meowing plaintively will get you a new can opened that might have something better.

"But what about the owner," protested another. "Won't they be sad? You basically stole their cat!"

"Not a very good owner, if she followed us. She even flew with us, and rode in the jeep, and warned my master that the soldiers were behind him! She wanted to come with us, I could tell."

Of course, if this robot is part of the DarknessAI, it would want to keep me around so it could keep an eye on me. Maybe coming here wasn't the best plan, but on the other hand, I feel Kei is important somehow. Aarg!

"Is that true, Kei?" asked Mimsy.

He had the decency to look embarrassed. "Well, yeah, I guess so. I mean she meowed, but that could have been a coincidence."

"She'll be your responsibility," cautioned the lady that radiated "boss." "If she chews up wiring or something you'll have to repair it."

Ugh, you ever had wiring, lady? I'd rather have the mouse.

"Yay!" She turned Sparkle around and looked at her. "I'm Mome, let's go down to

the cargo hold and find you bed, Starburst!”

But I don't want to!

But Sparkle had no choice, as Mome skipped off with her in her arms, opening a door to the outside walkway that must lead into the cargo hold.

Mome froze.

They had just interrupted two men trying to steal the Bronco II.

Making a Good First Impression

Who: Susan

Place: ???

Time: Seconds after being asked

Susan had been asked who she was, and figured there were two way to play this.

The first, and my usual inclination, would be to rush these two creeps, disarm them, break their spirit because they got beat up by a girl, and make them answer my questions instead. Problem; I don't have any magic to back me up apart from, admittedly, my awesome Imbued items. No Acceleration, thanks to the missing Sparkle, how does one even lose their Companion anyway? Of course if I need magic to take these two out, I should just retire right now.

The second thing I could do is play up the damsel in distress trope, and see where that gets me. I have to find Sparkle, and that will mean magic. Magic will mean needing a quiet spot to adjust the equipment and read, and that means playing along until I can slip away. Actually, won't this be good practice for rescuing my father? Not relying on magic, that will probably be locked down wherever he is? Man, I totally should have thought of that earlier, Silverstreak would have eaten it up, right? Oh, they're staring at me.

"Oh, thank goodness you showed up," Susan gushed. "My name is Susan. I've been wandering around in these blasted woods for I don't know how long." *Could be thirty seconds, could be forty five. It's still true.* "I've lost my cat, and quite honestly I don't know how there came to be woods here in the first place! Where am I? What happened?"

"Probably some kind of dimension shift, it would explain these readings. I think?"

"Eh, I don't know," said the other. "I'm no expert, and they gave us like, what, ten minutes training with the things. They're just supposed to flash and beep and show numbers we show to smarter guys."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Look, your cart is probably lost-"

"Cat."

"Cat? Oh, right, cat, sorry. Your *cat* is probably lost so I'd just forget it if I were you. We can take you back to our base, get you sorted out."

"Oh, but my poor darling, Sparkle. She'll be so scared on her own. She won't be able to do a thing without me, poor dear. And what did you say, a dimension shift? What are you talking about?"

The soldiers put their guns back. "You've probably come here from another world, it's a bit difficult to explain. I doubt you'll be able to get back. I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, it happens around here a lot. You'll meet a lot of people in your same situation."

"Oh that's terrible! Another world, you say? I suppose I've never seen uniforms like those before, I thought maybe you were shooting a movie or something." She laughed, willing them to believe she was not as smart as she was.

"No, we're Chiram soldiers, on patrol. Our sensors picked up some dimensional disturbance, so we checked it out."

My goodness, these people actually have dimensional sensors? I suppose necessity is the fertile spawning ground of invention, but that seems extreme. I mean they might want warning if the area is going to fade into another reality, but to actually make progress in detecting it! Plus they could pick up Silverstreak's gateway that brought me here? That's... well, either astonishing or Silverstreak's stuff isn't as good as I thought.

"Wait a second," said the other, taking a step back. "You must have just arrived, because the dimensional shift just happened according to our instruments. But you said you had been wandering in the forest for some time."

Aw crap, they would have picked up on that. "Well, it felt like forever," Susan assured him. "And I may have exaggerated a little bit. You can't blame a girl for wanting to make her rescuers feel better about rescuing her, can you? I get rescued, you feel good, I want to thank you more... intimately, later on. You accept my gratitude..." She ran a finger down both of their chests and looked down shyly.

Both looked at the other and grinned, winking.

Oh, I hate myself right now. Is the bashing option still on the table?

Don't hold back on my account, answered The Darkness. *I can't believe they bought that. Did you even make a Seduction check?*

Against soldiers that probably haven't even seen a civilian woman in weeks? Ha! I guess. They could just as easily be seeing right through your transparent attempt at manipulating them, and just want you to come quietly.

Either way gets me out of this forest.

"Let's head back, we need to finish our patrol and get you back to base," said the one.

"You should ride with me," said the other, "I'm the better pilot."

"I outrank you, she's riding with me."

"We're the same rank!"

"I enlisted a week before you did."

"One week, you always have to bring that up!"

"Boys!" shouted Susan. "There's no need to argue. No matter which of you brings me back, I'm still equally grateful to the both of you." She poked them in the chest with a finger. "Not to worry, I'll be thanking you both later."

And so they shut up... and played rock-paper-scissors to find out who she would fly with.

This has got to be a bad dream. Please, tell me I'm still back at the Hub, dreaming all this.

Nope! You are seeing this, live and in color!

And so Susan climbed into the large red mech that the soldier called an Ishkick.

"What a fantastic machine!" gushed Susan, to the obvious pleasure of the soldier.

"I keep it in good condition," he bragged.

Whatever. I wonder if it would fit in my sub-space pocket. I mean, why do I have a ten if I'm not able to shove something like this in?

Susan then figured out why bringing her back was so hotly contested between the two, it was a single seat vehicle.

“Hop in,” said the soldier, patting his lap. “Oh, I’m Tony by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Tony,” she said, sliding into the cockpit (no pun intended) and tried to get comfortable.

“Hold on now!” Tony flipped switches and pressed buttons, and Susan was delighted to realize she knew without doubt what each control in the thing did.

I think I just found out what my Adaptive Skill is in this world. Interacting with futuristic technology.

Tony was a perfect gentleman on the way back, as the two soldiers finished their patrol of the area and flew their ships to an encampment on the edge of the woods. There were rows of Ishkicks standing there, the only vehicle she saw on the ground, and she wondered if they didn’t use any other form of transportation, even trucks.

“Pretty impressive, huh?” asked Tony.

“It sure is!” Susan agreed, though really, it wasn’t all *that* impressive.

They landed, and both soldiers escorted her to a tent, where a (presumably) higher in command person sat behind a desk. Soldiers were everywhere, cleaning guns, doing maintenance, carrying stuff around. Most were men, but Susan saw some women as well, and was relieved to know this race had women. Everybody stared as she went by, and she shyly waved at them all. Most smiled at her, or nodded, and Susan looked at an *aura* or two, just to see what she was dealing with. She got an eleven, a nine, and a thirteen, which was her maximum. It was only after getting that result she realized she couldn’t actually roll high enough to get the information she wanted, if they were “good” or “evil.” That required a fifteen. But at least their emotional state was more amusement than hostility, and the two above a ten were in good “spiritual health.”

“Reporting in, sir!” snapped Tony, as both men went to attention and saluted. The man saluted back, and looked Susan over.

“Report,” he demanded.

The two gave a report including handing over the hand held unit the man had been scanning with, to which the higher up remarked “astonishing!” when he looked it over. As they had been making their report, another person slipped in behind them, which Susan could tell because she felt their *spirit energy* enter the tent. She didn’t look, she wanted to see what they had in mind.

“That’s what we thought, sir.”

“But she’s a girl.”

“Exactly as we said, sir. Imagine our surprise.”

“I see. Well, Susan, was it?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“These readings here, they’re quite unique. Do you know what that means?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“That’s too bad, neither do I. But I bet we can find out.”

“Through the power of love and friend-”

That's when she got tasered in the back from behind. There was a taser noise and the guy at the desk grinned in triumph.

As if taking an unarmed girl from behind is really something you should be proud of. Is this a military organization or just a group of thugs in costume?

Whoever was holding it there really held it there, and Susan made the appropriate checks against it. As it only did 1d8 damage and she still divided damage by fourteen, and she got a plus thirteen to CONstitution checks, it couldn't actually hurt her at all. And they could drain the battery of the thing before it rendered her unconscious.

"Could you stop that please," she asked, half turning around to look at her attacker. "It sort of tickles."

He didn't.

"Fine," she said, whirling and making a *Pushback* check. He wasn't dodging because he was still trying to taser her, so her result of seven was enough, and there was no way he could succeed on a STrength check against her. He went flying out the tent flap, landing six meters away.

"Now perhaps we can have a civilized conversation?" Susan asked.

"What are you, some kind of robot?" demanded the guy behind the desk. The two soldiers fumbled their guns out again.

"No, I'm-

At that instant, sirens started going off and explosions could be heard outside the tent.

"Now what?" demanded the man.

"We're under attack!" shouted a man, running into the tent. "Mu forces advancing from the east!"

"Did you think you could catch us by surprise," the man sneered at Susan.

"Watch her. Scramble everyone." He ran out of the room with the other man.

Susan shook her head as the two backed away from her, covering her with their guns. "I'm disappointed, fellows. You could have had my generosity. Instead you have my animosity."

"We were just following orders!" protested Tony. "We don't know what you are-"

"And the decision of your superior was to try and knock me unconscious, probably to run some kind of tests on me without my consent. Correct?"

Both nodded.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Military is military, after all. Sadly, I'm compelled to help you, so I can't just stand around here."

"Don't move!" they said, bringing their guns up a little higher.

"You're both an embarrassment to your uniform." She *Spirit Stepped* out of the tent, from the perspective of the two men simply vanishing. She covered the distance, of course, which tore the flap off of the tent, and *technically* she was supposed to suffer damage from hitting an object. But in reality it was cloth, not a stone wall, so it sort of came along for the ride and Susan shrugged it off and looked around, taking in the situation. Soldiers were scrambling to get into their Ishkicks and several were firing from behind boxes into a line of robotic forms that were coming closer. They were firing back,

and Susan *Spirit Stepped* over the line as explosions from missiles went off all around her.

“These Mu things don’t mess around, do they?” she yelled to the man beside her, grabbing up two pistols that were lying there. She started putting shots into the robots.

“Use a rifle, pistols won’t be enough!” said the confused man, glancing at her and going back to firing.

“I’m only trained in pistol!” she protested, tossing one away. She squared her stance, then started aiming. *Called shot for damage, that little circle bit there on the chest. Minus four to hit, what cards do I have? Ah, Bonus, Love Interest, and Mutiny. So... what, I fall in love with a robot, leave these guys to their fate, and get six XP?*

Do it! shouted The Darkness to her. *That would be AMAZing.*

No. Just... no. Aiming. It’s a robot, so it has no LUCk, right? Easy-peasy.

Susan took her maximum bonus of five, threw maximum energy into COOrdination (now a total of twenty for those keeping score at home) and took a minus ten penalty for damage. She got a seventeen (total) to hit, and pulled the trigger four times. The robot exploded as her bullets slammed into it.

I love being a Paragon.

“How did you- Keep shooting!”

Of course there is that downside.

All that aiming and called shots and penalties for damage massively increased Susan’s delay, so she was stuck standing there gaping like a fish out of water until it cleared. Sadly, this allowed the robot next to the one she had exploded to reach their position. The soldier next to her “fell back” to use a military term, what most people might call “turning tail and running.” Susan made a check she couldn’t fail to get her *Enhance Sword* out. It was the same delay as activating her other blade, but turning into an armored battle monster *here* probably wasn’t the best idea. A sword that no one could find after the fact was possibly somewhat easier to explain. Plus, it was just the one.

“Ah, already?!” the robot asked her. “I didn’t expect to find you so soon.”

“Baby killer!” she shouted back. *I guess The Darkness wasn’t lying about taking over an AI. How about that?*

“Yes, you’ll pay for that one. I’ve already killed about a dozen people here, and you’ve killed... one robot? Well done. Don’t forget to find my crystal, now.”

“Two.”

“Two crystals? I suppose two with five thousand-”

“No, two robots. I’ve killed two robots.”

“You haven’t killed-”

Susan lunged forward, putting a bit of energy into COOrdination again and slashing the robot, hoping to chop it in half. It dodged, but didn’t manage it, and Susan chopped through it almost like it wasn’t even there. (She did forty damage and it could take thirty six.)

“Two,” she repeated. She looked around, and most of the ground robots were damaged or down, so she ran for Tony’s Ishkick and let herself inside. Of course, she slipped her sword back into her sub-space pocket as she did. The mecha didn’t need

any sort of password to fire up, which Susan “tisk”ed over, because that was just poor security any way you looked at it. She took to the air and discovered she was a far better pilot than anyone here, despite this being her first time controlling one of these machines. *Ten rating for the win.*

She easily blew several robots away, wondering if there was such a thing as *Mecha Combat* for delay reduction while in one of these things, and finally it seemed there were no more targets. She had protected a few of her “fellow” pilots, so she was feeling pretty good that-

You’ve shown yourself to be better than them? They try to electrocute you, you turn around and do them good deeds. You think that’ll make a difference? They’ll go right back to trying to knock you out and see what those readings mean.

Perhaps.

Susan landed her Ishkick and jumped out, then grinned and looked for the tent she had left behind. The grin faded as she realized the robots had done a significant amount of damage to the area, and wounded were being treated. Everyone she looked at had someone nearby, so she wasn’t sure if she could get the knife out without being noticed.

Oh, but don’t you have a moral obligation to help the wounded?

Maybe. But they are getting medical attention, and this is obviously a dangerous place and these are soldiers. They won’t be able to duplicate my knife, so trying to explain that it’s magic to them isn’t going to get me anywhere. Also healing someone now just means they get to see more action. If I healed someone that later died and they wouldn’t because they got sent home because of an injury here...

That’s a pretty philosophy. Repeat it to yourself endlessly and maybe you’ll sleep well tonight.

She didn’t see the tent, as most of the tents here were now missing, but she did see an overturned desk that she recognized. She made her way over there and hefted it right side up again, then started putting the pens and things back on top of it.

Who puts a desk like this in a tent, anyway?

After she got that done she found a chair and plopped down in it, planting her feet on the desk and leaning back. The two soldiers, Tony and X came running back, guns covering her.

“Oh, give it up,” she said to them, when they stopped on the other side of the desk. “What is it going to take to convince you people I can help you, and shouldn’t be on the wrong end of those things. They won’t even slow me down anyway, you must see that, at least.”

“We have our orders,” Tony rationalized.

“Fine, fine,” she said, waving him off. “We can wait until your SO gets back.”

Looking at the chaos around her, that was probably going to be a few minutes, so Susan thought about what planet to set her dimensional stabilizer to for her.

Pluto has Phase, but not much else useful for her, here. Sun? That has healing and Deflection. Mercury has a bunch of useful ones, but she’s not really going into combat, I hope. I guess it’s between that and Neptune, for Invisibility and Illusion. Still, two spells versus five for mercury? Still, she’ll want to do the same as me, right? Hide her magic, sneak around, gather information. Mercury is not the subtle planet... Neptune

it is! She touched her watch and opened up the interface for the dimensional stabilizer. "Please prepare Neptune for Sparkle, Sun for myself." *If The Darkness sends more robots now that it knows were I am, or the big-bad army guy doesn't want to play ball, I want Invulnerability, STAT.*

"Locking on," the watch replied. "Time estimation available in thirty seconds."

"Quite the watch," said the man, coming over to her. "And can you get your feet off my desk?"

"My desk at the moment," Susan replied. "I found it on a battlefield. Spoil of war, and all that."

"I don't think you can... Anyway, I saw you helping to defend our camp. May I ask why?"

"Because I didn't want to be blown away by robots today, simple as that. Your men were there to help, so I accepted their assistance."

"Really? I also saw you jump into an Ishkick and fly circles around my men. Where did you learn to fly like that? You're not just some random girl out wandering the forest. The reading we got off you show that much, so don't bother denying it."

"I won't deny it, it's true. And if you saw me fight, then you already know what I am. Your best hope against the robot army trying desperately to destroy you."

The man looked her over, then gestured to the two soldiers still covering her with guns. They saluted again and went to go find something to do, which wouldn't be hard at that point.

"Okay," he said, leaning on the desk. "You've got my attention. Who or what are you?"

A Daring Rescue

Who: Sparkle

Time: Just after dinner

Place: Walkway in the center of the Glomar

Mome, carrying Sparkle, and the two men currently trying to detach the Bronco II looked at each other, the scene frozen.

“Hey!” shouted Mome, pointing at the men. “You aren’t supposed to be there!”

The older man, sitting on top of the ship, hissed at the younger one in the cockpit to hurry up and get the thing released. Sparkle wiggled out of Mome’s grasp and estimated the distance between the walkway and the top of the Bronco II. It wasn’t that far, so with a resigned sigh, and a *Susan, this one’s for you*, Sparkle *Spirit Step Leapt* up to where the man was sitting on the ship. This reduced the delay for her movement from a seven to a five, and she spent four energy to drop it further to a three.

This was a slight savings as the jump itself would have been an active action with no hope of reducing the delay (except by more energy), but at the moment she was going more for shock value, as the old man was clearly not expecting to see a cat materialize in front of him. He drew back, then leaned forward. “What in the world?”

Sparkle tapped his face with her paw, and made her first “real” Ryūdō check, putting in five energy. (She got back two with *Energy Boost*.) This did eight points of damage to him in the “twelve” or eye, and caused a flash as it impacted. He screamed and let go of the metal launch beam the Bronco was connected to, clutching at it. This unbalanced him enough that he fell several meters to the ground below, landing with a thump on the soft earth below.

“You little...” the younger man exclaimed, going to grab her. She activated *Spirit Aura* reactively, and a barrier of light sprang up around her. This was done at a minus two penalty and had the delay of an active action, but the man sprang back as his hands were pushed away from her.

An aura of energy now crackled around Sparkle, and because of her poor roll she could now spend three less energy than before. *Like I care about spending fourteen energy in the next few seconds. At least this skill doesn’t have an absolute minimum to activate, so even someone as bad at it as myself can turn it on.* If she had rolled above her RESolve, she would have been able to spend *more* energy than normal with the aura active, but given her ten in *Spirit Manipulation*, she wasn’t worried.

This guy, however, took one look at the cat, glowing to make Goku himself proud, and decided maybe it wasn’t worth stealing this piece of machinery after all. But he really couldn’t scramble out of the cockpit fast enough when Sparkle turned and clearly said “Leave, or die.” and he too fell to the ground below. Both were rapidly left behind, and Sparkle turned off the aura and jumped back to the platform that allowed access to the cockpit.

She looked around, but the walkway was empty.

There was a clatter of running footsteps, and all the people she saw from the dining room tried to shove their way out of the doorway. Kei picked himself up and rapidly looked around the area.

"There's no one here," he remarked. "Are you sure you saw someone?"

"Of course I did, master!" insisted Mome. "Maybe they jumped off when they saw me running to get you?"

The leader woman pressed a control next to the door, and ordered the Glomar stopped, and the landscape stopped rolling beneath them. "If they did, they might be hurt. We better go see."

And put a freaking passkey or something on your equipment, thought Sparkle, shaking her head. Or put it away at least.

Several flyers were dispatched, and two shaky people brought back for questioning. (And medical treatment for an eye injury and bruising from the fall) They were raving about some spirit cat that drove them off, and Sparkle tried to look nonchalant as she bent over to lick some fur back into place.

"This cat?" said the leader, who had identified herself as Shaya, pointing to Sparkle.

"I guess," he replied, "it was dark and I didn't get a good look before almost being murdered."

"There is a bruise there," said Mome, who it seemed was programmed with medical knowledge. She was examining both, expertly cleaning any wounds and rubbing a salve on their bruises. "But it's not exactly what I would expect from an impact or a burn, though it seems to have characteristics of both."

"I'm telling you that cat tried to murder me! It batted my face and there was a flash and it knocked me backwards!"

"Murder?" asked Shaya. "I think maybe it was just dark, and you frightened her, and when she lashed out, that caused you to fall. Then you hit your head on the way down and made up some story to try and confuse us."

"I don't know," said Kei suspiciously. "That cat does seem to appear and disappear an awful lot."

"And what about the glow?" asked the younger man. "I saw a glow, and my hands were forced away from her when I went to grab her! And I swear it said something to me, I heard it plain as day."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been grabbing my cat," Mome said icily. "You're really going to tell me a cat beat you up? Really?!"

"She's right. I think you're just trying to distract from the fact you got caught trying to steal the 'Nebulard,'" said Kei. "Cat or no cat, that fact doesn't change. I want to know why."

"I thought we had decided on Gammon," said the bald guy with the chin hugging beard.

"Name aside," said Shaya, "answer the question. Why were you trying to steal our mecha?"

"We're trying to get our people back," the older one explained. "You know those soldiers that were giving you trouble earlier today? They've been grabbing people and imprisoning them for no reason, and everyone is scared of being next. That's why no one came to your aid today."

"So, for example, they weren't caught, to pick a random crime, stealing?" asked Kei sarcastically.

“No, it’s just an intimidation tactic! Chiram soldiers are the worst, I mean they just came blasting into our town with mecha, trying to catch you. So you can’t say that isn’t true.”

Kei looked over at Shaya, who nodded. “We try to avoid them whenever we can, they just make trouble for us. They need our trade, but at the same time they have little patience with us. Cowing a whole town by abdicating people... it doesn’t seem that farfetched.”

Kei turned back to the men. “So your plan was, what? Steal a piece of equipment you know nothing about and... get shot to pieces trying to get these people back? Or did you make a deal with them, and promise the Nebulard for the hostages?”

“We hoped it would work out, somehow.” He looked at the floor.

“Oh, well planned.”

“I have to do something! My granddaughter is one of those who was taken. Look!” He pulled a picture from beneath his tattered shirt and shoved it into Kei’s face. He grabbed it away from the man, and took a look.

“Well, well,” he said appreciatively. “This is your granddaughter?”

“That’s right. She’s eighteen, a beautiful flower in bloom.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help save her,” Kei announced.

Sparkle overbalanced and fell over with a cry, and heads turned to look at her. “Uh, meow,” she offered.

Stupid, Sparkle. But at least I have a good excuse. Who is this guy that just up and decides to help because a pretty girl happens to be there? Susan would have heard the words “get our people back” and that would have been that. Jerk. She paused. Though I suppose pretty girls would have made her that much more interested to go.

“Something odd about... anyway, Kei, are you sure about this? You’re already known to the Chiram, and attacking a military encampment is just going to fuel that particular fire.”

“I just wish I knew *why* they were after me,” he mused. “But I can’t just do nothing.”

“If you do, I’m afraid you’re on your own,” cautioned Shaya.

“Shaya!” exclaimed Mimsy. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m afraid I am. It’s called plausible deniability. Those soldiers in town, they saw you two talking, didn’t they? We know they have sensors to pick up his presence in an area. If he attacks that camp, win or lose, they’ll come looking for revenge on wherever he came from. And if that soldier remembers you, and decides to come asking around here...”

“Shaya, that is the most illogical chain of events I’ve ever heard from you! Are you just going to turn your back now that you know innocent people are being held in that camp?”

She grimaced. “How many Ishkicks do they have? You should know that if you’ve been studying the place.”

“Half a dozen.”

“All right then, let me think. We need to come up with a plan that doesn’t involve the yet unnamed ship.”

An hour later, Sparkle and Kei crept towards the enemy camp as quietly as

possible. Sparkle had, in desperation, left the room while Shaya was thinking and found a nearby spot she could still hear them from, but still be alone. She tried her planets in order, and discovered she couldn't summon so much as a magical glow from any planet but Neptune.

At least I know she's alive. But why hasn't she come looking for me yet? Was she captured or something? Or does the dimensional distortions here prevent things like Question from working? Because I can't see her sitting still in a cell someplace, and even being taken by surprise (not likely) someone would have to basically nuke her to take her out. It doesn't make sense. Were we thrown that far apart she can't fly to me in a day? That's a scary thought.

And what's she trying to tell me? I have only two Neptune spells, Invisibility and Illusion. Stay hidden? Be subtle? I guess I'm just going to have to make the best of it.

The plan was simple. Kei was going to sneak into the camp and steal an Ishkick. He was confident he could fly it, given they used the same anti-gravity controls as his Starburst. Sparkle was still embarrassed about that name, when Shaya decreed she was naming the newly rebuilt mecha after the Glomar's new "mascot," her.

"After all," she said, "the cat did something to defend it, even if we'll never know exactly what. I think she deserves to have it named after her."

Mome approved wholeheartedly.

Kei, having stolen one, would strafe the camp and get the others to follow him. This would create an opening for the others to break into the place in the confusion and rescue the prisoners. This way the townspeople could honestly they they didn't know who staged the breakout, and the Glomar would be in the clear because any mecha associated with it wouldn't be seen. The ship was parked nearby, about a half an hour away, and Sparkle made it clear she wanted to stay with Kei by following him down the ramp and into the forest. She kept her senses alert, both her excellent night vision, and *Spirit Sense*.

Kei seemed adept at sneaking around, or maybe the soldiers were just really lax. *He probably got a lot of practice sneaking into and out of girls' houses*, Sparkle thought disgustedly. He managed to get close to one and Sparkle jumped up on his shoulders so he could climb the ladder up to the cockpit.

"And how did you know that's what we were going to do?" asked Kei softly, looking over the controls.

Sparkle said nothing. Not that she would have, as making an *Adaptive Skill* check, (KNOledge based, eleven result) she discovered to her shock she could make sense of the controls in here. She couldn't fly it, as she had no thumbs, but as Kei was staring at the control panel wondering how to turn it on, she casually pressed the start button while making it look like she was just getting a better view out the cockpit window.

"Careful!" chided Kei. "Oh, wait, that was the on switch. How did- never mind, they heard it starting up!"

Kei roared out of there, swinging around and launching missiles at the stationary Ishkick. He left the targeting computer off, or didn't know how to activate it, which made

sense as he wanted them to follow. Couldn't do that with broken equipment, now could they? Plus it made more sense for the "non-expert managed to fly one" defense. He then strafed the camp, shooting boxes and barrels and setting fires with a few well placed missiles. "Time to go!" he said, noticing the other ships taking off.

Now, Sparkle decided she should get busy doing what she came along for, and spent the extra time creating an *Illusion* without gestures or words. The magical circle appeared beneath the Ishkick, so Kei didn't notice it, being too focused on getting out of there. What it did was rather clever. It covered the mecha with the illusion that the Ishkick was about six meters to the left side of where it actually was, effectively "cloaking" the real deal. She looked out the cockpit window, concentrating on keeping it going, but as Kei was taking all the actions in this combat, that worked out just fine. Missiles and projectile fire went wide, as none of the soldiers could pierce her check result of nineteen. She made it loop and spin and fire, just as Kei was doing to maintain the illusion, and soon the other mecha were down in flames.

"Am I even better than I expected, or were those guys terrible?" Kei asked no one.

Are you bragging to a cat? It's too bad though, Susan probably could have rescued them without bloodshed, even with reduced powers. Probably just smashed through the back and ran interference while they escaped. Kei ended more than one story tonight.

Kei then zipped the Ishkick back to the Glomar and stuck it under the ship so it couldn't be seen from the air. Both hopped out and ran for the control room, where Kei burst in on Shaya.

"Quick!" he said, panting. "Can you do a radio sweep around here? I want to make sure that mecha doesn't have some kind of homing signal coming from it!"

"Good idea," she replied, and bent over the controls. After several minutes of looking over the screens she announced it seemed to be clean, and Kei relaxed. "But why bring it back here? I thought you were going to dump it."

"I figured I would have to dump it, because it would be damaged. But it didn't so much as get scratched. Maybe Starburst is a lucky cat after all!" They both laughed. "But now we have a Chiram mecha to play with. I thought maybe you guys would like to study it, see if there are any exploitable weaknesses. Or if we need to move through enemy territory, now we can look like we belong there. At least we can get their military frequencies from the onboard computers. With a little luck, their encryption protocols as well."

"All good ideas. I'll have some people look into squishing it into one of our bays, hopefully it's flexible enough. We can't exactly fly around with it attached to the ship."

He shrugged. "That's your problem. I did my part by stealing the thing. Any news from Mimsy and the others?"

She shook her head, tentacles waving in distress. "Nothing yet."

"Maybe I should head back out."

She put her hand on his arm. "I trust my people. I hope you can learn to trust them, too."

"It's your call."

Less than an hour later, the crew of the Glomar returned, smiling and laughing.

"You really hit them hard!" Mimsy said, flushed with excitement. "We managed to slip the girls out, and a bunch of military hardware too!"

"Well done!" exclaimed Kei.

A man with long hair came up behind Mimsy and put his arm around her shoulder. "As if he was in any danger," he sneered. "We were the ones that did most of the work."

"Oh, stop it Srei, he was in just as much danger as we were."

"Was he? We didn't have mecha to ride in, we had to break in on foot. We- you could have been shot at any time."

"And if a missile had hit Kei, he would have exploded. Do you really think he-"

"Not the time!" shouted Shaya. "We have to get the stolen Ishkick aboard and get out of here before they put their camp back together and send out patrols. Where are the girls?"

Seems to be some friction there. Am I sensing that Mimsy likes the new guy better than she likes her old guy? That could cause some problems later on. Not my business, I guess.

"They went back to town, with some of the guns we picked up," said another man Sparkle didn't know the name of. "If the Chiram try any tricks like that again, they'll regret it."

Shaya looked concerned. "I hope we didn't just start a rebellion they can never win. Well, that's for them, not for us. I want to be on the move in ten minutes, get going!"

The ship became a flurry of activity, as sensors scanned for incoming reinforcements from the camp and guns were readied in case the worst happened. Several people swarmed over the Ishkick, which turned out could fold almost in half so they managed to get it inside a bay and took off. They headed away from the camp, as low as they possibly could over the trees, and breathed a sigh of relief an hour later when nothing was in pursuit.

"Good job, everyone," congratulated Shaya. "Get some sleep, we'll head to the next major population center and do more trading in the morning."

"With what?" asked Srei. "We had to give most of our merchandise away because of him." He pointed at Kei.

What's this? Did I miss something?

"It was the right thing to do," explained Shaya. "We did put the town in danger, so making reparations is only fair."

"He put the town in danger. *He* wants to go rescue people. Maybe *he* can find us some new trade goods we can use. Oh, wait, we have nothing to trade for them, so he'll have to conjure them out of thin air!"

"But I did," Kei said with a laugh. "The Chiram have enemies, don't they? How much would those enemies pay for the data we can strip out of that Ishkick?"

"That's... No one would... It's too dangerous..." he sputtered.

"That's enough, both of you. It's late, and we're all tired. Tomorrow things will look much better, I promise."

Srei grunted something and stalked off, but Kei grinned at her. "Thanks, Shaya."

"Don't get the wrong idea," she said, holding up a finger. "You did cost us a lot. I'm not sure the Ishkick will be useful enough to replace it, despite your good ideas for it."

It's nice to have, but those are more long term plans than short. Be more careful from now on. They can detect you from a distance, so keep that in mind if you want to go wandering around when we do our trading."

She too walked out of the room, leaving Kei confused.

I suppose he thought he would be hailed as a hero, especially for bringing in enemy hardware. Instead he got yelled at, poor guy.

"What do you think of all this?" Kei asked her. Sparkle tapped just the tip of her tail against the floor. "Just that much, huh? Guess I'll see you in the morning."

He walked out, leaving Sparkle alone with her thoughts. *You know, I kind of like that Shaya, she does seem to be a good leader. I'll be glad to get back to Susan, but maybe I've been holding myself back a little when she's around. This whole situation proves I can take care of myself, and even help out. All without them even knowing I'm doing it. Susan would never take that route. She chuckled. Well, I've got some naps to catch up on, I'm off to bed.*

And the Glomar flew on.

When You Meet a Brand New Friend

Who: Susan

Time: Just after the Mu attack

Place: Ruined camp

Susan wondered how much to tell this man, who had already once tried to have her stunned into unconsciousness and dragged off to a lab somewhere. She finally decided a version of the truth was best, because honestly she needed some help on this world and having an entire military organization on her side raised some interesting possibilities.

She stifled a giggle.

"My name is Susan, and unlike most people here, I came by choice. My objectives are three fold. First, to attain a quantity of crystal I've promised someone. Second to defeat the Mu. Third to do something that puts the world to rights and stops all this ridiculous dimension shifting."

"But what are you? A robot?"

"Robot? No, I'm as human as you are. Oh, the appearing and disappearing and throwing people around. I just have special training that lets me do those things. I mean the number of worlds you have jammed together here, there aren't some where the people can do weird stuff?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Well, believe me, that's why I'm here. I mean you and your organization no harm, if you don't try anything like you did again."

The man stood up, looking around. He dragged a chair over and sat down heavily. "What's this crystal you're after?"

...

Hey, dude, he asked us a question, and you've never told me the name.

What? Oh, right. It's called Hyperlarcovite. Around here, anyway.

"Hyperlarcovite," she repeated.

"That figures. Well, if you want any quantity of that, you'll have to fulfill your third objective first."

"Why's that?"

"Hyperlarcovite is what we use in our dimensional scanners." He indicated the hand held unit at his belt. "All that we've dug up goes into them."

"What, does it resonate with dimensional changes or something?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. Ask a scientist."

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I know my iPad has 'lithium-ion batteries,' but not exactly what that means. Still, I guess I hoped I could just buy some, or something. Getting some away from these people isn't going to be easy.

Keep in mind you'll need a piece the size of your head. Those units are small. Either they break the crystal up or it's like diamonds, only occurring naturally as small masses.

I can stitch a bunch together with magic later, so tiny ones is fine if I can get a thousand of them.

True.

"I see. Well, I better get started then. Any information about why this world ended up like this would be helpful. You already know I just got here."

"Who sent you here doesn't know what? I mean it's common knowledge."

"Not from where he is. Consider his world to be... next to yours. And yours shifting all the time is like loud music when you're trying to sleep. He doesn't know what kind of radio is playing the music, but he can hear it."

The man tried to make sense of this. "Whatever. Look, I've got cleanup to do and as far as I'm concerned, you helped blow up Mu so for the moment I'll take your word for it. I'll assign you a guard, for lack of a better term, but I think we both know he'll be there to keep an eye on you. She, actually, you'll have to sleep in the women's barracks. If we still have a barracks at the moment. So you'll be sticking with her until I can get word to my superiors and have them sort you out."

"That's fine. I'll go straight to the top if I have to."

"That's for people above me to decide. Can I see if something is still in my desk now?"

"Oh, sure!" Susan dropped her feet and stood up, and the man came around the desk to rummage around in the drawers.

"Here." He handed her a triangular patch, similar to the one he had on his forehead but a solid color. "This will at least show you're in the camp legitimately."

She took it and stared at it. The back was sticky, and Susan looked up from it.

"Here, stick it here," he said, pointing to his own forehead.

Susan gave him a dirty look and pressed it into the front of her shirt. He looked down at it, then at her. He touched his own forehead, then looked down at his shirt. He looked back at her.

"Lady, you just blew my mind."

"How about that escort?"

"Just a second." He pulled something akin to a mobile phone out of his pocket and spoke into it, and a moment later a woman hurried over.

"This is Susan," he said to her. "Susan, Jennifer. Jennifer, you'll be keeping an eye on our guest here until I get further orders regarding her. Which I'll warn you may be a while because the tent with our long range transmitter got hit in the attack. So it may need to be repaired."

"I suppose being robots they have scanners for that sort of thing," mused Susan. "Naturally they would target that first so you couldn't call for backup."

"Naturally," the man agreed. "Dismissed."

"Yes, sir," said Jennifer, obviously not happy with the idea. She turned to go, and Susan followed.

She looked Jennifer over, she was a bit taller than Susan, probably mid twenties. Hair nearly shaved off, though it seemed that wasn't a requirement around here. She had a hooked nose, looked vaguely asian, and annoyed. On her head perched a pair of aviation goggles, which Susan wondered about because the cockpits on the mecha were enclosed.

"Sorry about this," Susan told her. "I'll try not to get in the way."

"I'll do as I'm ordered."

"I'm not really part of your military. You don't have to act like I'm going to report

you or anything.”

“Look, I’m not-” Her face softened. “I lost a friend in the attack. So I’m a little pissed right now.”

“I’m sorry. He didn’t even ask, just ordered you around. What a jerk!”

“You mean the captain?” She gave a quick laugh. “I guess. But we are soldiers.”

“Sure, but I’ve lost people to enemy action, too. She wasn’t a friend, we had just recently met, but we shared the same name. I remember what I felt at that time. So I can sympathize.”

“What happened?”

Susan sighed. “Our school was attacked by... creatures. Possibly from another world, we never found out. We fought, and while I was at the front lines trying to keep the place from being demolished by the things, she was defending some younger kids on another floor. Apparently she and the creature took each other out... her body was never found. We only had the kid’s report of what happened, and her name got put on a monument outside the school later. But me? I never even got to say goodbye, and she seemed like a really great person, too.”

Jennifer had stopped, and looked at Susan, who was blinking back a tear or two, remembering how terrible she had felt after that attack. *How many were dead? Twenty? I still think I was more to blame than anything.*

“You have seen combat, haven’t you?” she asked seriously.

“More than you would possibly believe. Feels like I’ve been fighting my entire life.”

“I should think so, if your *school* was attacked. Did you go to some kind of military academy?”

“It wasn’t billed like that, but yeah, it sort of was. A lot of crazy things happened there.”

“What was the name of it?”

Susan considered, but figuring she was *literally* worlds away, telling her wouldn’t hurt. “Hogwarts.”

Jennifer’s mouth dropped open. “You mean like, *the* Hogwarts? The...” She glanced around. “The magic school?”

Now it was Susan’s turn to be stunned. “How could you *possibly* know that?” she managed.

“Come over here!” Jennifer dragged her by the hand away from the tents, looking to make sure she wasn’t seen leaving the camp, but everyone was busy with their tasks. Finally she was satisfied with how far out they were and came to a stop. She looked around, then closed her eyes. “Okay,” she nodded, “there’s no one else around. You really went to Hogwarts?”

“And I ask again, how could you possibly know that?”

“Prove it,” said Jennifer, eyes narrowing. “And I’ll tell you everything.”

“Fine.” She got out her watch. “Is my planet loaded yet?”

“Affirmative,” the watch replied. “Silence mode was activated when non-authorized personnel were in range of auditory alert.”

“So Jennifer is authorized?”

“You revealed the presence of out of world technology, thus she has been added to the authorized list through your actions.”

“Oh.”

“That’s some fancy tech!” exclaimed Jennifer. “But I asked about proving you went to Hogwarts.”

“I’m getting there, sheesh. Give me a second. *Light*.” Susan held a ball of light in her hand, and made it swirl around her.

“Okay, that’s magic if anything is. Oh my goodness, someone who can do *magic*. Someone from another dimension who *knows the score*. Someone I might actually be *able to talk to*. Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!” Susan found herself swept up a hug by a laughing, crying, nice smelling woman who was acting like she just won the lottery.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay.” Susan stroked her hair and returned her hug. “Not that this isn’t nice, but maybe a little bit of an explanation now?”

“Sorry!” said Jennifer, backing off a little. “I was just so excited-”

“I noticed that.”

“Sorry!” she said again, wiping her eyes. “Do you know how hard it is to find people that can even comprehend what I am? That I don’t have to be guarded with, like, ‘oh crap that’s right people here don’t know *spirit sense* or something.”

“Oh, that’s what you were doing. I did wonder.”

“You see!” she squeed. “You must be the best thing to happen to me in, well, ages!”

Jennifer was all smiles now, and her eyes were shining.

“I’m happy to hear it,” Susan said honestly. “So is your name really Jennifer?”

“Yup! But my friends call me Jenny. And that’s what you should call me,” she beeped Susan’s nose. “Jenny Everywhere- *The Shifter*.” She started patting her pockets. “I know I must have one. They always turn up, no matter what.”

“Have one what?”

“Ah, here we are!” She pulled out what looked like a business card, and handed it over. “I’m compelled to give this to you, don’t ask why until you read it.”

“Okay?” Susan took it, then gave it a glance. Then a longer look. Then she stared. She looked back at Jenny, who nodded, grinning widely. Susan looked back, and read the card again.

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“I’m not sure I understand,” she said, handing the card back.

“Oh. Look, how... aware are you, about stuff?”

“Stuff? I don’t-”

“Like how much ‘behind the scenes’ stuff are you in on?”

“I have a character sheet, is that what you mean?”

“Really?! One of those, huh?” She winked.

“One of what? I’m sorry, can you start from the beginning?”

Jenny crossed her arms. “Maybe you better start at the beginning. I promise, I’ll

tell you what I can," she put her hands up, "but some things are better if you find out about them on your own. Trust me."

"Okay. The short version is my father was a Paragon who left his world to fight The Darkness, or Darkvoid, if you know that name."

Jenny scowled, a low growl escaping from her lips. It seemed she did.

And she is really sexy.

Susan shook herself. "Anyway, that sort of makes me half Paragon, and after I defeated The Darkness on my world, I went after him. A girl called Luna came with me, but we got separated so now I'm on her trail, too."

"Half Paragon?" mused Jenny. "How about that? I've met Paragons, maybe I've even been to your father's world. Hard to remember all the places I've been, I've been *shifting* a long time."

"Are you an agent of Silverstreak? Or Inari?"

She shook her head. "I've heard the names, but I'm a special case. Basically I can move around worlds on my own. I call it *shifting*. I've been lots of places, and had lots of adventures, but the downside is I can't really remember where my home dimension is to get back to it!"

"That's awful!"

"I guess. To be totally honest, I'm not sure I ever had one. I don't know. The point is, I got stuck here, I couldn't *shift* out, so I joined this army in hopes of getting some answers. I'm still just a grunt though."

"The dimensional distortions. They gave me some trouble on the way in, so I hear you. I got separated from my *Companion*, so I need to find her and put this world to rights. I bet if I fix this world, you'll be able to leave, too."

"Is that why you're here? I thought maybe you just got trapped here too. Well, I'm glad to know something's being done. If I can help, at all, just say the word."

"Oh, you're sticking with me, that's for sure," Susan said happily, swinging around and taking her arm.

"Is that how it is?" Jenny asked with a smile. "Still, we better get back before we're missed. Are you really willing to help clean up the camp?"

"Of course. You can tell me some stories about the worlds you've seen, and I can tell you some of mine!"

"Deal!"

So the two swapped stories, and chatted, and felt like they had known each other forever. Susan did the heavy lifting, impressing everyone, and soon the camp was restored to some semblance of order. The girls went to eat, still chatting, and Susan got filled in on the events that led to the current situation.

"A bomb," Jenny said simply.

"Some kind of dimensional bomb? Who builds something like that?"

"A very desperate people. We don't know if it went off too soon, or they just got the calculations wrong, or what. But the point is, it went off and instead of shifting the space elevator they were trying to destroy into the next dimension, it shattered this one."

"But in reality didn't it shatter, like, the whole stack of them? I mean if a mountain gets switched with a lake, that mountain went someplace. It went where the lake was. So that world is experiencing something similar to this one."

"That makes sense."

"So how do we know this world is the original? It could just as easily be one of these side ones, and the bomb was never anywhere near here. Maybe the one the bomb went off on was totally destroyed, and we were just nearby. So it hit us hard. Or maybe the bomb went off and that world is even worse than this one!"

Jenny looked nervous. "That's a scary idea. I never thought of that."

"And how am I supposed to fix this? I can't go back that far in time and make the bomb not go off. The paradox that would create!" She shivered.

"There is some hope, according to our superiors. That's why we're all given these." She got out her scanner. "We're all supposed to look for something called Singularity. I guess it's a person."

"No wonder those guys were so intent on bringing me here. Maybe they thought I was this Singularity?"

Jenny activated her sensor and it went a bit nuts picking up Susan. "Something about you it doesn't like," she remarked, turning it off. "What this Singularity is supposed to do, I have no idea. But we're looking."

"I'll take that as a positive sign. I guess I'll just have to see, hopefully get bumped up the chain of command to someone that can give me those answers."

"I just hope it isn't some big distraction, that they really have no answers and they're just hoping something comes up. All these Mu attacks, the heat, they can't do anything about it but tough it out. What's this Singularity going to do about that?"

"Heat?"

"Yeah, it's getting worse. See those mountains in the distance?"

"With the tops cut off?"

"They're cut off with dimensional distortion. The planet is surrounded by it, and it's acting like a lens. Focusing the sun and keeping the heat in. We won't last many more years before we're cooked."

"That's a problem that goes away automatically though, once the distortion stops. One thing I can tell you is how to deal with the Mu. Attack their central AI, the one taken over by The Darkness. That should put them in a better mood."

"Can't put them in a worse one. Soon as we find it, I'm sure they'll let some civilian they've never heard of take care of it."

"I can be pretty persuasive. But I agree, that's for another day. For now, I better check on Sparkle. Is there a place I can do some magic that won't get these military types salivating even more to dissect me?"

"Sure, come on."

So Susan changed her planet to use *Question*, but was blocked by the answers she got all being "unknown."

"Probably the dimensional interface," she said glumly. She looked over at Jenny who was looking at her sympathetically. *Or did I just trade one Companion for another?*

"I'll see what I can do to add her to the watch list," promised Jenny. "There probably won't be any automatic flags raised about a cat."

"Don't get into any trouble because of me!"

"Trouble? Didn't I say, that's my middle name. Jenny Trouble Everywhere."

The girls laughed.

By this time the sun was going down, and as her new orders were to watch Susan, Jenny didn't have to do her normal soldier duties, and they sat up talking. As they were about to head to the tent with the cots, Susan got called to see the captain again.

"We're heading out in the morning," he explained. "Apparently I'm to take command of a platoon stationed several hours from here. Turns out whoever was in charge there was locking up townsfolk in order to pacify the place. The higher ups found out because an Ishkick was stolen and shot the place up. That must have been an interesting report to read. I wouldn't want to be that guy right now. With their losses and ours, we'll get the platoon back to the right number by combining both into one. Plus they now have no mecha support, and if the Mu attack... Anyway, Captain Robert will be here by then to escort you to see General Wright. He'll decide what to do with you."

Passed around like a slab of meat. I say you leave tonight, under cover of darkness.

No, I need to find out what's going on, and what their plan is. If I can find this Singularity for them-

You can't. You can't even find your own Companion.

Oh, true. Well, I still need to find out what their plan is. If they'll tell me. Just observing their operations might prove useful.

If you need to blow them up later.

Yeah, let's go with that one. And I can't just leave Jenny!

You could. You just choose not to. There's a difference.

"You got it, captain," Susan replied. "Good luck with the townspeople."

"Yeah, thanks. That's a mess and a half right there. Why someone thought it would be a good idea to lock up a bunch of girls... anyway, good night."

"Night."

Susan told Jenny what has happening, and warned her she could be hard to wake up.

"I'll keep that in mind!"

The girls went to bed, and Susan never suspected that Jenny had plans of her own.

Walking Into a Building Can be Hard to do

Who: Susan

Time: The Next Day

Place: Remains of the army encampment.

“Wake up, wake up!”

“Whatzat?”

“You really are hard to wake up.”

“Ugh?”

Finally, Susan came fully awake and squinted at Jenny, who had one hand on her hip and was looking down at her.

“Ah, finally with us,” she said.

“Told you,” said Susan, rubbing her eyes. “Just consider it one of my cute little flaws.”

“Oh, and how many cute little flaws do you have, anyway?”

“Eight,” she replied unthinkingly, stretching and yawning. “Of varying degree of severity.”

“I forgot, you can actually point to them.” Jenny shook her head. “Come on, let’s get you in the shower and dressed. I don’t know when Robert will arrive but you should be ready.”

“Shower?” Susan swung her legs off the side of the bed and stood up.

“Yes, shower. Are you sure you’re awake? You don’t have some spell to move your body around and make conversation while you actually stay asleep, do you?”

Susan’s face lit up. “What a fantastic idea for a spell!”

“Come on.” Jenny started dragging her away.

Showers, right. And, shoot, I’m going to have to start washing my clothes and whatnot. Usually Sparkle just wakes me up with Awaken, I get dressed and she hits us both with Hygiene, and we’re ready for the day. Ugh, I’ll have to start brushing my teeth as well. What a hassle.

But there was some compensation. These were hastily constructed military encampment facilities, so privacy wasn’t chief among the concerns. While there weren’t as many women as men, (they had separate facilities), Susan did get to peep at the mostly or fully naked women getting ready for the day along side her. She had the foresight to pack things like a toothbrush in case she went to a world without magic, so dug them out of her luggage when no one was looking. (At least, she hoped, and no one commented on where that suitcase had come from so she figured she was in the clear.) The water was cold, and Susan was unpracticed at such basics as brushing her hair, but she managed to get through it.

How do people manage this every day?

It’s only been a day and already you’re whining about not having your full magical

diversity?

Uh, yeah? Magic has been part of my life since as long as I can remember. It's like another limb that's now been cut off. And it has- losing a three point companion you've relied on all your life is basically just that. She knew useful spells. And getting out my spellbook would really call attention to me. Plus my magic is more limited here, and I have Sun loaded and I would need Venus. It's whine worthy, right?

Hardly. You need to toughen up, soldier, or you'll never defeat... me. Wait, where I was going with this?

You're asking me?

Susan joined the rest of the company for breakfast, and they were issued orders to pack up the camp and get ready to move out. An hour or so later several transport ships arrived, and gear was loaded onto them. Susan was called to a smaller one, and Jenny guided her to the bridge.

"I should be out chasing down the Singularity!" someone was shouting as she opened the door. "Not ferrying around some unimportant girl who appeared out of nowhere."

Susan grabbed her *Enhance Sword* out of sub-space and thrust it forward, missing his neck but ruffling his hair from the force of the wind the slash generated. "Hey," she said conversationally, "I'm Susan, that girl that appeared out of nowhere. If you think I'm unimportant I guess you consider your life worthless."

Immediately every soldier on the bridge went for their guns, drawing and pointing them at Susan. "Drop the... sword!" one of them shouted.

"Please," Susan said with a sneer. "You can't hurt me with those."

"Let's all just calm down!" insisted Jenny, grabbing Susan's arm and moving the sword away. "I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it, Susan."

The man turned to look at her, and he was past middle age. Clean shaven, military haircut, lined face, with a receding hairline.

"You're finally here, we can get on with this," he said, giving her not much more than a glance. "Then I can get back to what's important."

Jenny's muscles tightened against Susan, who really, really wanted to just sweep her sword up and take this guy's head off.

"What's important is following orders," said the captain. *Never did get his name, did I?* "And they are to take this girl- oh, for the love of- put that sword away, will you? And the rest of you, stand down."

Susan reluctantly slipped the blade back into sub-space, which made the other soldiers there rub their eyes and look questionably at each other. But they finally put their guns back as well. Robert hadn't seen, he had already turned away from her.

"Take this girl and see how much of her story we can verify, and have the general decide what to-" He paused. "How best to utilize her unique gifts."

Nice recovery.

"But it's the Singularity that will fix this world, not her. My men and I were closing in on that Emaan ship, we could have taken them!"

"That can wait a day or two. Look, you're probably right, but we have our orders."

"I know." The man lapsed into sudden silence.

“Very well. Jennifer, you’re relieved of watching her, and will accompany us to the new base.”

Jenny drew herself up. “With your permission, sir, I would like your leave to remain with Susan until she accomplishes her objectives here.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Several reasons sir, foremost what you’ve just witnessed. She whipped her sword out at the smallest slight, and that may be culturally appropriate where she comes from. She needs someone to watch over her, make sure she doesn’t commit a more serious offense as it relates to our culture.”

Dang it all! The voice of the Darkness rang in Susan’s head. *Why can’t I get you away from people bent on keeping me in check? I thought with Luna gone, and finally that annoying cat gone missing, I would have a decent shot on this world. But no... along comes some other flea. Is Silverstreak manipulating things even this closely? Aarg!*

That was you, that made me get the sword out and threaten the captain! I should have known. I let my guard down for one second and look what happens?

Not like it was hard.

“You may have a point there,” agreed the captain. “Though I would hate to lose you, you’re our best shot and pilot. Is there another reason?”

Jenny looked over at Susan, then back to him. She motioned him away from her on the bridge and spoke to him in a low voice. Susan thought she caught “trust” and “take her out” as she told him whatever he wanted to hear.

“Very well,” he allowed, “you may accompany her.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she said with a salute.

“I’ll notify command of your new orders... and your concerns. Captain.” He saluted the other man and left the bridge.

“Great, now there’s two of them,” remarked Robert. “Well, don’t just sit there,” he shouted to the bridge crew. “Get this ship moving!”

“Yes Sir!” they all shouted, and started punching stuff into consoles. Moments later they were on their way.

“So, you’re after the Singularity,” Susan said, stepping up beside him. He didn’t turn, just kept gazing out the front windows. “Must be tough, having all kinds of military assets at your disposal and being unable to catch one man.”

His lip quivered. “Private, why don’t you take our... guest down to the lounge area. That way you won’t be underfoot on *my bridge!*”

“Yes, Sir,” answered Jenny, and pulled Susan with her. “Come on.”

“Nice to have met you!” Susan called over her shoulder.

“Do you always try to antagonize every person you meet?” Jenny asked, plopping down on a couch sort of thing in the lounge.

Susan waited for Sparkle to say something like “you have no idea” or “she was actually being pleasant to the man,” but when she looked down, Sparkle wasn’t there.

Oh, right.

“Susan?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, that’s just when Sparkle would make some snarky comment. Sorry about that, I should have warned you I’m my own worst enemy.”

“I see that. I’m glad my CO let me come with you. Maybe I can get away from terrorizing people and such now, and with your help actually start making a difference here.”

“I thought you mainly blew up Mu units? What’s this about terrorizing people?”

She shook her head. “That incident with the abdicated girls you heard about yesterday? Let’s just say that’s about par for the course with these people.” She waved a finger about, indicating the ship. “They treat everyone, even the Emaan who are at least as technologically sophisticated as they are, as inferiors. I’ve had to play along, but I haven’t liked it. And I’ve tried to restrain others where I can, but it doesn’t work very often. They are who they are.”

“I see. But they are trying their best to save the world.”

She sighed. “They are trying their best to save the world.”

“Then for now, that’s who I have to stick to.”

The trip was uneventful, and over any open areas the ship accelerated greatly, as obviously Robert wanted this “mission” to be over and to get on with what he believed was more important. By mid-afternoon the ship landed on the outskirts of town and he basically threw Jenny and Susan off the ship.

“But this isn’t anywhere near headquarters!” protested Jenny. “Sir.”

“So? She’s your responsibility, isn’t she? I’m sure you can get her there, or are you telling me such a simple task is beyond you?”

“No, sir. It’s just we could have flown there in half an hour-”

“A half an hour the Singularity gets further away. You are dismissed!”

The ramp closed and the ship silently rose into the air, then spun with thrusters and pulled away.

“Charming man,” remarked Susan. “Remind me to send him a Christmas card. Do you have Christmas? Do *they* have Christmas?”

“I think they did, at one time. Come on, we’ve got to find a cab.”

It took another three hours for the pair to work their way through the city and make it to the headquarters building, and both were a bit cranky and short tempered after the trip. Susan marveled at how militarized the culture here was, with just rows of buildings without spark of imagination or style.

“They could be whisked away at any moment,” Jenny explained when she mentioned it. “So they’ve come to build strictly for function.”

After they pulled up in front of a large gate, Jenny’s identity was confirmed and her orders checked. They were allowed past, but once up the stairs and into the building Susan ran into another problem.

Their version of the TSA.

“Please deposit any items you are carrying into the bin,” said a bored looking guard at the door. “And you’ll need to put that backpack through the scanner.”

I hope Silverstreak built it to withstand x-rays or whatever they use.

Susan reluctantly took the watch off and put it in the bin, somehow knowing her limited command of Sun magic had just been cut off. Taking off her *Wizard Bracelet* required a RESolve check, which she got a sixteen on. That even more reluctantly went into the bin, and she felt heavier and more sluggish as she did. Unstrapping the knife caused the guard to perk up a bit.

"You can't take a weapon in here!" he said, staring at it.

"Uh, she's got a pistol right there!" Susan protested, pointing at Jenny's sidearm.

"She's not a civilian, you are."

"It's a knife, someone would just shoot me if I threatened someone with it." *Which I can't, because it would only heal them. But try explaining that to this guy.*

"Rules are rules. There are some lockers over there if-

Susan shoved it into her sub-space pocket. "There, it's gone. Happy?"

"What did you just do?!" The guard jumped up from his seat, and at that moment alarms starting going off as Susan's backpack hit the center of the machine it was passing through.

"Now what?" she moaned, eyes darting around as other security personnel ran over, guns drawn.

Oh crap, if I get hit with one of those now... She made a grab for the bracelet (using ten energy, a sixteen) but the guard pulled it away from her (using five energy, a seventeen) and Susan began to panic.

"It's okay," shouted Jenny over the siren. Susan wasn't sure if this was directed at her or the guards, but she stepped between them and her. "It's nothing dangerous, I'll vouch for her."

"It's some kind of bomb!" insisted the guard, "and she tried to get these back. Arrest her!"

"She's here by invitation of the general!" insisted Jenny. "She's just... uh... bringing some tech for the scientists to look over, that's all."

But the soldiers there weren't listening. They advanced on Susan, shouting for her to get down on the floor, and "one" was getting out handcuffs. Guard "two" was reaching for her, and Susan reacted, making a *Spirit Aura* check and getting an eight. As with Sparkle this reduced her ability to use energy, though again as with Sparkle she probably wasn't going to be throwing twenty energy into any one action any time soon. The guard stopped reaching for her as energy billowed out, covering her body. Nearby, papers and dust blew away from her.

If my Spirit skills are all I have, then that's what I'll use.

"Wha- what's going on?" asked the man fearfully.

"Shoot her! Shoot her!" gibbered number "three" as he backed away a step. Guard two brought his gun up, ready to fire. Susan was right there in front of him though, and now had a difficult choice to make. Jenny was right behind her, so even if she did dodge his shot, which she could attempt thanks to Ninjutsu, chances were good it would just hit her, instead.

Especially because my LUCk is down, thanks to that guard taking my bracelet. This is-

Wonderful! broke in The Darkness. *I wish I had known this was going to happen, I'd have made popcorn.*

So she tried a disarm instead, spending energy on COOrdination. She was at a

minus six to this action, a minus two for the *Aura*, a minus three for the called shot, and a further minus one for wanting to have control of the gun at the end. (If she manages it, she gets the gun before he can shoot. If she doesn't, she gets shot.) She spent fifteen energy, and what do you know, she probably would have spent twenty if she could.

It wouldn't have helped.

The round impacted into Susan, through her *Aura* and did seven damage to her body. She staggered back, in shock. Three more damage and she would be unconscious. Another hit like that and she would be dead. Nearby, people screamed and started running in all directions which they didn't get to do very often and so were relishing the opportunity.

I am never taking that bracelet off again.

Guard "four" drew his pistol, throwing the basket of stuff down, while "three" held his action to see what Susan would do next. "Cuff her, cuff her!" number "one" was shouting, "Don't shoot her!" But in the confined space of the opening he couldn't get to her. It was now number "two" going again, and Susan made a *Close Combat* check, getting an eleven to see where she was in the initiative order. She missed it, the soldier got a thirteen, so Susan spent two XP for extra actions to make sure she got them off before they could act, and pulled the knife out of her sub-space pocket again. She jammed it into her own side, where it healed her completely. She left it there, the only magic she had at her disposal.

"You shot me," she said, enraged, "I'll kill you for that."

The guard looked at her like she was crazy, and went to pull the trigger again. So again, Susan tried disarming him, with a much better result of a twenty this time. This made sure their rolls were reversed (get it) as he only got a thirteen. Susan yanked the gun away from him, to his surprise.

"Okay, shoot her, shoot her!" yelled "one" as he started backing away again.

Guard "three" and "four" now took a shot, at a penalty because Susan had cover from the doorframe and wall. The bullet from "three" passed through the wall and bounced off her *Aura*, ricocheting wildly away. "Four" missed totally.

"Don't shoot her, don't shoot her!" yelled "one," unable to make up his mind.

Susan now did a *Gymnastics* flip over the conveyer belt and made a grab for her bracelet in midair. She got a thirteen on the flip, a three on the grab, but spent her *Bonus* card for a plus two, grabbing it. As she landed she made another *Gymnastics* check to roll behind the machine and get cover again. She got an eight on that one, so she was under cover but not yet up. Jenny could now move up, and stood in the doorway wondering what to do. She didn't want to use powers that would tip them off to her extra dimensional status, but she didn't want Susan to get shot, either. On the "gripping hand" pulling her sidearm and shooting at the guards would probably get her shot, or court marshaled or something, and then she couldn't help Susan. Of course if she did get shot, Susan would probably go even more berserk, so her safest bet was probably to do nothing.

The guards now moved, trying to see past the machine and get a shot at Susan, who didn't yet bother to stand up. She just dropped the gun and shoved the bracelet back on her arm, feeling strength flow back into her as her spirit once again became that of a giant.

Number "one" leapt atop her, trying to get her hands behind her back so he could

slap the cuffs on. He made a STrength check to do so, Susan easily beat him with her *Wrestling* check of twenty six, and hurled him into guard four, slamming them both against the wall and stunning them.

“Two” now got out his handcuffs, because his gun had been taken away, and strode forward himself. Guard “three” stepped around him and took a shot at Susan, allowing her a reactive action to try standing up again. She got nearly maximum, and was up as the guard pulled the trigger. He got a fifteen to hit, but her passive dodge was once again a fourteen. With the bonus AR from the *Aura* the bullet hit that and smacked off.

“Four” had not gone down like “three” had, and moved so that if he missed shooting Susan in the back, he wouldn’t hit “three,” which you had to admit was quite thoughtful of him, given the circumstances. He fired, getting an eighteen, but he needed a twenty two to pierce the *Aura* so again it bounced off. “Two” now arrived, and made his grab for Susan. She now had both hands free (the gun having tumbled to the ground) so she allowed him to grab her, then made another reactive *Ninjutsu* action to get the cuffs away from him as he did his *off hand* action of slapping them on. It was fourteen to twelve, and Susan had a pair of cuffs in her hand.

Guard “three” fired a third time, and again it bounced off the *Aura*.

I could probably shut that down, they couldn’t really hurt me in any case, but I guess for the “wow” factor I’ll leave it.

She could now take an active action, and slammed the cuff onto the arm of the guard that was still trying to move her arm. There was no “handcuffing” skill so she just rolled an unarmed attack with them, getting a ten. He let go, and she missed. “Four” held, as “two” was too close for comfort.

“One” was now up, and rushed Susan, intending to do a *tackling maneuver*. He charged her, trying to drag her to the floor. She didn’t bother dodging, and went nowhere with her twenty six check verses his fifteen. Guard “three” tried bashing her in the head with the butt of his pistol, and as Susan wasn’t dodging, and this wasn’t ranged, his difficulty to hit was a thirteen. He got a twenty, and even did his maximum damage, which caused Susan to just glare at him.

“One at a time,” she chided. “Honestly, there’s enough of me to go around, boys.”

It was finally delay forty, and roughly ten seconds had passed since this all started.

“What’s going on down here?” roared the general, skidding to a stop from around the hallway where his office was located. “Stop that at once!”

What Can You Do With a General

Who: Susan

Place: Government building

Time: Just then

“Sir!” yelled number “two” to the general from he was standing and trying to drag Susan to the ground. “She tried to sneak in a bomb!”

“A bomb?” he asked, looking over at the backpack, now sitting forgotten on the end of the conveyer belt. “Great job getting it out of the building, then. Or calling a bomb disposal squad, or really anything useful apart from endangering innocents in the area.”

“Oh. Uh...”

“And she put it through the detector, right? That’s what made the alarm go off. So she wasn’t exactly sneaking it in, was she?”

“Sir, she did have a knife,” put in “one” pointing at it. “See, right there!”

“Yes, she seems to have stuck it into herself, unless one of you got it away from her?” He waited, but all three shook their heads. “I see. So we’ve gone from a bomb to a knife, which still doesn’t explain her glow, opening fire in a location where civilians are present, or the fact that she was accompanied by private Everywhere who could have given you the authorization code for her being here.”

“Authorization code?” both girls said.

“Didn’t Robert give you the- for crying out loud, where’s Larry, I personally handed him a copy of the orders.”

“He was relieved an hour ago,” said “four,” the one that had been at the door. “I replaced him.”

The general put his head in his hands. “I guess I expected you earlier, so didn’t think to tell him to pass those orders on to his replacement, should you have been delayed. Why were you delayed, exactly?”

“Sir,” spoke up Jenny, “Captain Swicher dropped us off on the edge of town, so we had to make our way here by car.”

“He did, did he? Typical. I want someone here at great speed, he does the minimal- did he immediately take off after the Singularity again?”

“I believe so, sir. That is what he said to us.”

“Idiot! Oh, will you let her go already? And get a medic down here, that knife wound will have to be looked at, even if it was self inflicted for some reason.”

“Sir, there’s still the matter of the bomb.”

“You’ve all shot at her *how* many times? Do you really think she would need a bomb? Very well, Susan, is it?”

“Nice to meet you, sir!” she called over to him.

“What’s this?” He pointed to the dimensional stabilizer.

“It’s a dimensional stabilizer,” she answered.

He looked thoughtful and walked over to the screen, where there was a frozen image of the inside of the device. Then he grabbed that dimensional scanner everyone seemed to carry and pointed it at the thing. “There are odd readings coming from that,” he remarked. “You!” he shouted, pointing to another person arriving. “Go down to level sixteen and bring Phillip up here. Tell him I said to come.”

“Yes sir!” He saluted and punched the button for the elevator.

“In the meantime...” He walked over to Susan. “You seem to be having trouble holding onto her,” he remarked. He was right, all three were unable to get a good grip on Susan because of the *Aura* she was putting off, and kept trying to grab her better.

“Yes sir, there’s some kind of force pushing us back,” said “two.”

“What would you have done next, had I not arrived as I did?” he asked her.

“Thrown them off, maybe threatened one to get someone to listen to what I was trying to say.”

“Thrown off how?” he asked, interested.

“You really want me to demonstrate?”

“I’m curious to know.”

“I can’t be held responsible if they get hurt,” she cautioned.

“We have a competent medical staff here, it’s fine.”

“Sir!” the all protested, shocked.

“Very well.” Susan made some sort of flashy martial arts move, combined with a *pushback* that sent them all flying.

“As I thought,” he remarked as they all staggered to their feet again. “Would you mind turning that glow off for the moment?”

“Sure.” Susan dropped it.

“Ah, thank you. Now I can see what you look like. As that object is supposedly the cause of all this trouble, why exactly do you need a dimensional stabilizer?”

Susan wondered how much to tell him. “It’s your messed up planet, certain abilities of mine require a more stable dimension than it provides. I was sent here with it so I could use at least some of my powers.”

“Powers? Like that glowing energy? That wasn’t some kind of force field?”

“It was, but it was generated by me, not some technological device. If that’s what you’re asking.”

“Pity. We could use something like that against our enemies the Mu.”

Susan noticed Jenny looking sour, and wondered if maybe she had picked one up in her travels she hadn’t shared.

He continued. “Still, you seemed to do well enough separated from it. Or does it have a radius you have to stay in?”

“Actually it targets my watch, which was also taken. I wasn’t using any ability I needed it for.”

“And you still couldn’t take her down?” he asked the soldiers, now standing nearby. “One young girl against the four of you. I’m ashamed. No wonder the Mu are pressing us so hard.”

The looked down, angry, but the elevator opened and a guy in a lab coat stepped out.

“You wanted to see me, general?” he asked.

“Yes. Can you identify this object?”

“I can try.” He looked it over. “Strange,” he said. “It looks almost like a scaled down version of what we’re building downstairs.”

“That’s good enough for me. You’re dismissed,” he said to the soldiers, who cast a nasty glance at Susan and started walking off.

“Take your items back, and please accept my apologies,” he said. “I’m General

Wright, but please, call me Jeffrey.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Susan Felton.” Susan went and got her watch back, then hefted her backpack.

“Ah, are you sure you should be lifting that with your injury? I can take you down to the infirmary immediately.”

“Injury?” Susan wondered what he was talking about. “Oh, the knife!” she exclaimed, pulling it out finally. “Totally forgot about it. No worries, it’s fine.” She looked around for some tissues as it was bloody and the general handed her a handkerchief.

“Ah, thank you,” she said, wiping it off. Then she had a new problem. “I’m going to have to get this back to you later,” she said, looking at it. “Forgive me, but giving you my blood to study... that’s probably not a good idea.”

Jenny nodded her head.

“I understand, that wasn’t my intent,” the general said. She put the knife back in her leg holster and the handkerchief in her *pocket*.

“So, is there a place we can talk?”

“My office is this way, please, come with me.”

Susan and Jenny entered behind him, and Susan sat down in the chair in front of his desk. Jenny remained standing at attention and the general looked between them. “You did nothing during all that. Why?” he asked her.

“Because I knew it wasn’t a bomb, but didn’t know how to get them to believe me.”

“In part thanks to Robert, but why trust her? By all accounts you were assigned to her and then requested to come with her. Why?”

“We... share a common interest. Seeing the Mu destroyed,” she hurried to say. “I saw her fight and I think she’s the person for the job.”

“I see.”

“Plus bullets were flying everywhere and me rushing in there might have been misinterpreted.”

He chuckled. “Good point. Oh, sit down, you’re a veteran of several skirmishes, you don’t need any more military discipline. Besides, it doesn’t look like it agrees with you.”

“No sir. Thank you sir.” She sat down.

“So, Susan! You’ve come to save us from the Mu, is that right?”

“That’s right. They’re being programmed to wipe you out by something I’ve tangled with elsewhere. But I have to wonder, now that you know the other Singularity is out there, shouldn’t you just divert all your resources to bringing them in rather than fight the Mu?”

“Oh, why’s that?”

“If the dimensions split apart again, your Mu problem is solved.”

“True.” He looked thoughtful. “Would you help us with that?”

Susan shook her head. “The Mu comes first, for me. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I think the intelligence behind the Mu is somehow responsible for this whole mess you’re in.”

It was the general’s turn to shake his head. “No, it’s clear it was the uncalibrated space/time bomb that was going to destroy the space elevator.”

“That was the catalyst, perhaps, but what hand pushed the big red ‘do not push’ button that made it blow up? For lack of a better term, the intelligence now running the Mu can possess people, as well. It could have made someone tamper with the bomb or otherwise sabotage it to bring this situation about.”

“But that was before the event. Was it something native to the world before? And just what are we talking about here that can ‘possess’ people? Some kind of... ghost?” He clearly thought the idea was ridiculous.

“No, it’s from outside the whole mishmash of worlds you find yourself with. Just like me. And just like me being able to do things you can’t, it can do things I can’t, and one of those things is control people it’s taken over. That’s why you need someone like me, who also comes from outside and is equipped to deal with it.”

“I see. Well, you’re basically on your own then, but working alongside us, at least we won’t get in your way. As you say, our finding the other Singularity is our priority. We don’t know where the Mu base is, how they teleport around to attack us, nothing. If you can find out anything relating to that, we’ll help you bomb the place to ash. But short of very good intel, it takes most of our resources to protect the major cities of the world from Mu attack. We have precious few soldiers to send out after the Singularity, and the ones we did seem to be developing some kind of fixation on the task.”

“We noticed.” Susan glanced over at Jenny, who nodded.

“I guess Roberts are just passionate about their work?” ventured Jenny.

“They’re something. So, I ask again, given we can’t help you find the Mu, will you help us find the Singularity, at least in the short term? Or do you have ways of tracking them down? That dimensional stabilizer, perhaps?”

“No,” she answered glumly. “In fact, I was separated from someone when I arrived, and haven’t been able to locate them thanks to all this dimensional interference. So I’m not sure how to track down the Mu either.”

“Pity.”

“You have no idea, but in reality something is bound to come up. It’ll come after me and let something slip, or I’ll have an idea later. At least that’s what has happened in the past.”

“Then I suppose I should assign you some rooms here, while you figure out your next move.” He went to press a button on his desk.

“Actually, I had a question, if you have a few more minutes?”

“Ask it.”

“What exactly do you need the Singularity for? Jenny- ahem Jennifer here didn’t exactly know, only her general orders that everyone got, to scan for him.”

“Ah.” He leaned back in his chair uncomfortably. “We don’t actually know that either.”

“Then why-”

He threw up his hands. “What else do we have? We know the space/time bomb did this. It created that weird energy pocket in the sky that orbits the planet. We found one Singularity already and now we know there is at least one more. The first one, Olson, told us his wingman Kei was the only other person near the blast when it went off. Olson registers to our instruments as being dimensionally linked to that thing in the sky. By experimenting on him, with his permission, we developed the idea that somehow he and his partner could somehow fix this. Perhaps just getting them together

with the anomaly will be enough. Our scientists have a lot of theories and mathematical models and whatnot, but not many hard answers. We're... still experimenting with the best way to fix the world. I can't say more at this time, any specifics are top secret."

"And likely not to interest me in any case. Very well."

"Whichever way it goes, having *more* options rather than *less* is the better situation to be in."

"I can get behind that. So, is this Kei person refusing to work with you? I mean you must have sent his old wingman, Olson, to get him on board, as soon as it was discovered he was around, right?"

The general looked disgusted. "The whole thing was botched from the start, mostly due to Robert's incompetence. He arrived not long ago and was picked up by an Emaan trading vessel. Our sensors picked him up, and as per orders our troops moved in. A little too aggressively, the Emaan didn't want to give up something as valuable as a Singularity so they actually started shooting at them! One thing I should tell you about Emaan- they're shrewd negotiators. Good at science, building and repairing systems, but pretty greedy."

"They wouldn't, like, hold Kei hostage or something, would they? I mean they're holding the world hostage, is more like it!"

"Exactly. That's exactly what they're doing. Who knows what they've told Kei, if they've even told him what he is I would be surprised, but given their response to our first request to sit down and talk we can expect more of the same. They'll probably head to their territory where they'll hold his existence over us until we accede to their demands."

"But they're in the same boat you are!" protested Susan. "Greenhouse effect, Mu attacks..."

"Don't underestimate their greed, or their desire to 'get even' with us for incidents between our two nations in the past. We're not good neighbors, let's put it that way."

"Even with the Mu breathing, so to speak, down your necks?"

"Even so."

"Huh. But taking him by force is no better, is it? He'll be against you on principal. If he makes friends among the Emaan who get killed it'll make the situation even more grim."

"That's why we want to get to him soon enough so he isn't taken in by their lies. And we have Olsen, he understands his duty to the world, and can explain it to his old partner. If Kei it is, we have no evidence it's him. For all we know there was someone nearby in a foxhole that got swept up in the blast just like Olsen did, and we still have to wait for a third Singularity to appear!"

"I guess things are tough all around."

"We're doing our best, but resources are limited because of the shifting world. Crops don't grow well in the heat. Water supplies are limited because lakes tend to disappear and be replaced. It's a mess. And there's another thing to consider."

"What's that?"

"The only way to reach the energy pocket is the space elevator that started this whole mess. But that's Mu territory and our intelligence reports that area is receiving the bulk of Mu forces. Even if we did have both, we would still have to fight our way through to actually use the place. And it's been under their control for years, does it even work?"

How much repair does it need and can we even do the repairs? Just getting near the thing is only the start of what we need to do. Then we need to hold it while we work out if it's still usable or not. It's all rather depressing, to tell you the truth. Please don't go spreading that around, I mean morale is bad enough and anyone can see the logical steps, but bringing it up... that would be poor form."

"I get it. Wait, don't you have that weird ceiling that wrecks stuff? How does the elevator get past it?"

"That was ground zero, the dimensional distortion radiates away from it, but doesn't completely cover the area."

I bet that means my magic would fully work there! Excellent.

"Okay, that's good news. Still, if they were going to topple it they would have by now."

"That's our thinking as well. Perhaps they're hoping to get the two Singularities themselves, and somehow use them against us."

"Oh. Actually, that's a good point. You don't know what to do with them apart from bring them together with the energy pocket and hope something good happens. What if instead it makes something *bad* happen? Like, they know it's a bad idea, are making a token effort at 'defending' the elevator so you think that's a solution, but in the end are just going to let you walk up to it?"

"I've seen pictures of the number of units they have. That force is no joke."

"You've seen pictures of robots," she protested. "What evidence do you have they are fighting machines and not shells just mindlessly wandering around to fool you?"

"You mean like putting men made of straw on a castle wall at night to fool invaders into thinking there's more forces than there really are?" Susan nodded. "Okay, I concede the point, I don't have evidence."

"After all, their resources aren't limitless either. They need tons of metal and silicon and plastic and oil and whatever to build one fighting unit. Plus they aren't just swarming you, teleporting in a million robots to one place, razing it to the ground, and then teleporting to the next place. So they have limited capability or power generation facilities."

"They seem bent on our destruction," he mused. "So you're right, a machine wouldn't hesitate to overwhelm us if it could. It doesn't have a life to lose, or a survival instinct. Yet the AI doesn't do as you've suggested. Why?"

Susan shrugged.

"Seems you've given me some things to think about. For now, let's wait until Robert reports back in. If he catches the Singularity tonight, fine. If he doesn't we'll have to come up with another plan."

"Maybe I could go in alone," suggested Susan. "They see a bunch of war machines coming at them, of course they're going to respond with force. Maybe a single, unarmed machine could get close and we could at least demand their demands for opening some kind of negotiation. The more you throw force at him, the less he'll want to work with you guys even if he's getting accurate information from the Emaan. He'll see you as just bullies, throwing force around to get what you want without regards to the consequences."

"It's true, we are a military culture, so we tend to think only in terms of military power. I'll let you know tomorrow what happened and we can make our plans then. Are

you sure you're willing to go alone?"

"Jenny will come with me. We can fit two people in an Ishkick, if they're friendly enough."

Jenny reddened.

"I suppose," conceded the general. "But you could be captured..." Susan gave him an "are you kidding?" look. "Well, yes, perhaps not. Certainly an odd situation we've found ourselves in with your arrival, but we'll welcome your assistance. Please let us know if we can provide you with anything."

"Deal."

So the two were assigned quarters, and hung out until the next day, when they received the *worst. Possible. News.*