

Susan had spent the XP she received for clearing another world, finally getting up to a ten in *Gun Fu*. Sparkle had increased her skill in *lifestreaming* to an eight, raising her skill group of those separate skills. Susan was quite excited, though of course quite aware she could be walking into a huge trap.

"I'll basically be holding my action," she told Sparkle as the machine flared to life and a doorway into a new reality opened before them. "That way I can use an action and get us into *powers mode* if I need to. Whatever is there I can thus easily become immune to."

"We don't put you down anywhere dangerous," protested the agent that was running the machine.

"Sure, and I've never been pulled off course by three months either- oh wait."

"Fair enough. Good luck. I hope you find her."

"I do too." Susan pulled her guns, took a deep breath, and stepped through the portal.

The city she found herself in was quiet, almost too quiet, and her *spirit sense* went off like there were several Trances nearby. Both looked over in that direction and saw figures standing opposite each other. Oddly, there were all floating in midair, and Susan's eyes went wide.

"Is that a *broom*?" she asked, hardly daring to believe her eyes.

"I can't tell at this distance," Sparkle admitted. "We need to get closer."

"And so closer we shall be. Hop on!" Sparkle jumped up to her shoulder as Susan's wings spread, and she was shortly winging her way over to the group. One line seemed to be wearing all black, and as Susan neared them the guy in front pulled his sword out and sent an absolutely astonishing amount of flame at the figure dressed in white that was before them. This flame formed into a dome, caging him completely. The rest were somewhat astonished at this level of power, or so it seemed, as they were all gaping at him. They were all fair skinned, apart from the guy with the fox head, and apart from the guy wearing a pink overcoat, all wore black kimonos with white accents. There were short people, tall people, men, woman, and all had swords and serious expressions as they turned once she got near.

Across from them was a group mainly dressed in white, and looking just as diverse. Their outfits were more white with black highlights, and both groups were radiating power like she had never felt before.

But none of that mattered. Because next to the group and a little ways back was a familiar girl. She too was dressed in black, but riding a familiar broom and holding a slender stick of wood, there was no mistaking her.

"LUNA!" cried Susan, nearly knocking her off the broom as she swooped over to her. Luna gave a squeak of surprise as she found herself being hugged rather tightly, and felt tears coming from Susan's eyes.

"Susan!" she yelped, as it was tighter than she would have expected. "Told you she would come, didn't I?" she said to someone nearby.

"Oh Luna, I've missed you *so much*."

"You're late. What did you do to your hair?" Susan pulled back, looking her in the eyes, and saw the questions there. "And your eyes, apparently?"

"Is that all you have to say?" she teased. "I spend years, *years*, mind you, across multiple realities looking for you. The Darkness finally got tired of it and told me where you are. I rush to your side, and the first thing you ask about is-"

Luna figured the best way to cut this off was kiss her, and Susan figured that as a tactic, it had its advantages. But all too soon she broke it off as crashes were heard in the distance. Everyone looked, and some pudgy guy was having a fit about the towers being

broken, and yes, Susan could see in the distance that monster looking things were trying to smash down some towers that had appeared.

"I guess I am late," she admitted. "Who are we fighting, and how hard do we have to beat them up?"

"They're called Hallows, souls that have lost their hearts in grief. But they're strong, Susan, I know you're a great power back home but these things..."

Susan grinned at her, laughing. "I've picked up some tricks since I've been *wandering*," she assured her. "I can handle it."

"And some guns, apparently? You better tell me everything when this is all over."

"Only if you do the same!"

"Deal. If you're sure..."

"I am."

"Then let me show you "some tricks" I've picked up since I've been here." She raised her wand high. "*Seek for the truth, Belahime!*" There was a flash of light, and instead of holding a wand Luna was holding what looked like a magnifying glass.

"Interesting trick," Susan agreed. "But why turn your wand into that?"

"I *released* it," she said excitedly. "And I can't want to get back home and show everyone. Susan, *I know why wands choose their owners!*" Her eyes were shining with excitement, and Susan got caught up in it.

"That's great! Luna I'm really glad for you."

"Let me show you can it can do. Pick one." She indicated the figures, who were still just standing around. At least in most cases, as one dude was now sitting on a chair made of bone, there in midair.

"That guy's annoying me for some reason," she admitted, pointing to him. "How about him?"

"Okay." She looked through the glass. "Okay, he attacks with *time* and his weakness is... huh. His weakness is himself?"

"Time, eh? That's helpful to know. Sparkle, as we discussed?"

"Your wish is my command, oh captain. Luna, nice to see you again."

"And you, Sparkle. Glad you made it. I will make with much petting later."

"I'll look forward to it. Susan isn't the only one with stories to tell."

Luna laughed. "I'll be glad to hear them all. Now get out there and *totally slaughter those stupid Hollows!*"

*Wow, bitter much?*

"Your wish is my command, fair lady," Susan promised, drifting back from Luna and bowing. When she was sure she was out of range she shouted over, "Let me show you something now. Light of the Multiverse, *Make Up!*"

#### Susan's current powers

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Defense Boost         | (2) |
| Energy Siphon         | (2) |
| Immunity (Time)       | (2) |
| Nature (Metapower)    | (2) |
| Power Stat (STR)      | (2) |
| Power Stat (COO)      | (2) |
| Speed                 | (5) |
| Stat Adjustment (COO) | (3) |
| Sudden Step           | (1) |
| Teleportal            | (5) |

#### Sparkle's current powers

|                     |      |
|---------------------|------|
| Energy Regeneration | (10) |
| Matter Meld         | (2)  |
| Nature (Time)       | (2)  |
| Nature (Protection) | (2)  |
| Immunity (Time)     | (2)  |

Sparkle, having taken *Matter Meld*, which allowed her to "soak into" a material and control it as though it had become her body, sank into Susan's armor. Of course, she

activated "*Velocity*," first. This insured she didn't fall off while Susan was maneuvering. She then activated the active form of *Energy Regeneration* which she planned to keep up during the entire combat. Susan then made a check in *power control* to synchronize with her, and the amount of practice they had with this ensured it worked. She could now feed Susan power and maintain *velocity* but have the characteristics of her armor and thus be much harder to damage. The aura of *time* around the armor and thus Susan would damage anything that came too near, and Susan's own immunity to *time* would keep her safe.

"You weren't kidding!" Luna exclaimed.

Susan just shouted "I haven't even done anything yet," with a smile, and *sudden stepped* over to the dude in the chair. Then she started shooting him, clicking the dial up until it seemed to start hurting him. He seemed surprised that it did, and Susan noted it was up to TR 9 so she wasn't doing much damage, but she hoped it would be enough.

"Enough!" shouted the man, getting up. "I don't know who you are or even *what* you are for that matter, but if you wish to challenge the king then I will not disappoint you!" He smashed the throne he was sitting on and pulled out an ax that was rather ridiculously large. Holding it in front of him it blocked her shots, then he raised it and brought it down with a mighty slash. Naturally she had to make an *active dodge* check, despite the fact she wasn't dodging. She was opening a *teleportal* before her, and to the side of the guy. It was thirty seven to thirty in Susan's favor, and so he got slammed by own attack and went flying into a nearby building.

Susan erupted into laughter. Oh, she felt good, seeing Luna again, really fighting as one with Sparkle and it seemed to be working. She had put nineteen energy into that, Sparkle's energy, sent as a reactive action. The "king" extracted himself from the building in shock as she regenerated it.

"You dare mock me?" he raged below her. "You do not know the depths of despair I will send you." Suddenly there was silence all around her and the king seemed to *spirit step* before her. He raised his ax again. "Now you will know fear."

"Oh really?" she asked, holstering her guns. "How about I just end this in one punch, as a tribute to a bald headed guy I met not long ago?"

"What?" The man seemed to hesitate, then *spirit stepped* away from her again. Noise could again be heard as battles were raging around the pair. "Impossible, how could you still move?"

"What do you mean, still move? Did you do something?"

His eyes narrowed. "What are you? You're no Shinigami. Nor do you have a wand like that broom riding girl we've been having such trouble with."

"Oh, you can't even comprehend what I am," she told him. "Now are we fighting here, or what?"

"That's my line," he said, lowering the ax again. "I will show you something you cannot comprehend. *Rot, Arrogante.*"

A black fog engulfed the man and Susan moved within range of her *power sense* so she could see what he was doing. A quick check later showed a *time* nature, just like Luna had said, but that was about it. When the fog cleared it was no longer a man standing there, but a human skeleton in a dark people robe. The white bone of the skull was highlighted by the golden crown upon the, well, crown, and he had a thick black ruff around the neck area. Oddly comical bandaged feet stuck out of the bottom of the robe.

"You have a magical girl transformation?" Susan sneered. "And what happened to your ax? You have disarm yourself to use it? That's stupid. You're stupid."

The king didn't seem to know how to respond to all this, so he just put a finger to his, well not lips, teeth, and said "*Respira.*"

More of that black fog shot out and it washed over Susan.

"Now you will know- eh?"

The fog passed and Susan stood unharmed. "And what was that supposed to- you know what? You're lame, I don't even care."

And the figure, in shock, allowed her to simply *sudden step* over to him and punch him in the face with him even dodging.

She used energy, of course, but this time she had the *power stat (STR)* power. This curious little ability multiplied her STRength by 1/2 the energy she spent instead of simply increasing it on a one to one basis. So as Sparkle fed her seventeen energy she increased her STR by 25, making it a 28 total. (I admit, the ability for her is rather weak sauce, because of her low natural STRength.) But it did allow her more damage and she slammed into his head for seventy four.

As he dropped his body burned away. *Hey Luna, he isn't only vulnerable to himself, whatever that meant, he's vulnerable to being punched really hard in the face. Have to thank Silverstreak for the energy shield that allows that to be high enough OTR.*

"Next?" she called, taking a step back. This caused her to completely avoid the energy beam that would have hit her otherwise. She looked up, and saw a guy in the distance pointing a gun at her. "Twenty four passive dodge, jerkface," she muttered, pulling her guns and winging towards him. When she was in range she did another *power sense* and as she figured this guy primarily had *force* nature so as he wasn't attacking her just yet, she called to Sparkle "Time into Force!" and switched her immunity. As she did Sparkle changed her primary nature to Force and the aura around her changed into pure energy. Susan also took that opportunity to change up her other powers just a tiny bit.

Susan's current powers

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Energy Siphon         | (2) |
| Immunity (Force)      | (2) |
| Nature (Metapower)    | (2) |
| Speed                 | (5) |
| Stat Adjustment (COO) | (5) |
| Stat Adjustment (LUC) | (4) |
| Sudden Step           | (1) |
| Teleportal            | (5) |

She now had a *passive dodge* of thirty two thanks to her LUCk of seventeen and skill in *Gun Fu* of ten. She held her guns out towards the man. "I was to take that earlier attack as an invitation, yes?" she asked politely.

"You may take it as you like. Now defend yourself!"

He vanished.

Susan now made a *Gun Fu* check of nineteen and stepped to the left, not even looking where she was shooting. (She had been holding her action to see what he would do) She beat his passive dodge with both hands and put eight shots into him. That did twenty damage to him but interestingly her *passive dodge* was not enough, but she's immune to *force* so it bounced off anyway. It seemed she was up again, her *off hand* action taking only 1 *delay* so she didn't move the guns but just kept firing. She hit with both again, doing another seventeen.

*Curse this high TR I have to use! Of course maybe this guy isn't as durable but I have assume he is, having just eaten almost forty damage and still being up.*

He then went, once again vanishing to reappear elsewhere but Susan didn't even bother pretending to dodge. *After all, I know my immunity works against this guy, so why raise my delay?*

She casually swung her guns around and made another check, hitting only once with the left hand but four times with the right. This dropped him, and Susan continued shooting him as he fell until he too burned away.

"Next?" she called, that having taken all of 2 seconds.

"That's my friend Susan," Luna proudly said to the lady next to her. "Did I mention that?"

"I know you said she was powerful, but she could win this entire battle by herself!"

"She tends to do that. Look at her shining right now!"

"I see it, but I don't believe it."

No one immediately stepped up to be the next fight for Susan, so she looked around. The shrimpy guy was fighting a woman with yellow hair, so she figured she would go help him out. The woman was shooting water blasts at him, and Susan smiled.

*Thank goodness these people seem to only have one nature.*

On the way over she didn't even bother changing her powers, just got in range and got behind her. "*Meta: Nature Denial Water,*" she called out, turning the lady's *water* nature off. The next water blast she tried to do fizzled, leaving her looking at her weapon in puzzlement and letting the kid get a solid hit in. It seemed he was an ice user and rapidly froze her as she could no longer call upon her element to defend herself.

"I didn't ask for your help," he sneered at her.

"You're welcome, kid," she replied, looking for another target.

But it seemed there wasn't one. The towers were too far away to worry about, and the main force seemed to still be buttoned up inside the dome of flame. Most of the guys in black hadn't moved. *Not that I needed it, but thanks for the help, fellows.*

Suddenly, what looked like a *teleportal* opened into some dark space, and the guys in black stared as some little kid followed by a huge creature came out. *Sheesh, that thing's a plus four if it's in inch. But it hasn't come all the way through- there's still a chance.*

She changed her *immunity to Dimension nature* and made for it, gathering energy from Sparkle as she flew. When she felt she had enough and was near enough she called out "*Dimension Seal!*" As a tear in space couldn't make a resistance check anyway it slammed shut, tearing the creature in half and making it burn away. The kid screamed and *spirit stepped*. Susan lashed out with a kick reactively, putting energy into STRength as she did so. It was nineteen to twenty one, so she connected to his right leg, doing seventy six damage to it. (She had gotten twenty one energy from Sparkle meaning her STRength was up by thirty for that action.)

This of course shattered the leg. Awful hard to stand on air with only one leg to stand on so the boy dropped out of the sky, and Susan shot him on the way down until he was dust from it.

"Next?" she called dramatically.

"Oh, I see what she's doing," said the woman next to Luna.

"What?"

"Fighting."

Luna was confused by this statement. "What do you mean? Your people are always fighting, aren't you?"

"Sort of. I mean usually we do a lot of standing around and talking, or taunting our opponents. Or waiting for them, or like now, where we're just standing here and letting her do all the work. Or fighting amongst ourselves about who is "stronger" and so who "deserves" to take someone out. Or whatever that creepy scientist guy is usually doing. Not her. She sees an opponent, and she does the fastest thing possible to take them down. She doesn't play games with them, or hide her true powers, or hold back."

"That's my girlfriend."

"It's an odd technique. I'll have to try it sometime. Huh, not having ten minutes of conversation with the person you're trying to kill." She shook her head. "It just seems wrong somehow."

The flames around the man vanished as Luna flew over to Susan, and then hovered beside her. The man started walking on air towards them.

"That's the man behind it all," she said, aiming her magnifying glass at him. "Think you can take him out as easily as the others?"

"Are the others going to lift a finger to help me?"

Luna looked back. "They actually can't. Apparently his ability is to control what they see, so they couldn't be sure they were attacking him or hitting empty air."

*So then why are they here? That entire battle could have been some kind of illusion then, right?*

"I see. Thanks for the tip." She swiftly changed her *immunity to illusion*, along with making a few other modifications now that she wasn't fighting a gunman anymore. The man walking towards her was carrying a sword, so she took something more useful than just better LUCK. "Can you get a reading on him? He does seem to be there, by the way."

"His weakness is his orb. Orb? That doesn't make sense."

"Orb? Are you serious? He really- never mind, it does to me. Slow him down but don't get too close okay? I assume you've been practicing magic as well as releasing your wand?"

"Of course." She backed off, and the man watched her go, then looked over at Susan with a scowl.

"Great, you got sent here in time. Yay."

"Ah!" Susan grinned. "Do I even need to make the check?"

"Don't bother." He looked around. "What did you do to my army?"

"What, that pathetic lot? They didn't seem all that great, could you not find any strong fighters in this reality?"

The man put his hand up to his face. "You have no idea the irony in that statement, do you?"

"Not really. Look, can we get on with this?"

"Why? Can't wait to get her clothes away from her?"

Sparkle snickered somehow from within the armor.

"Hush, you." She bonked it. "Never you mind," she said, raising her guns. "Time for the ultimate battle, of ultimate destiny."

## Taste of Luna Magic

When: Just after rolling initiative

Where: Above the fake city in the Shinigami world

## Susan's Current Powers

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Dash                  | (1) |
| Defense Boost         | (2) |
| Energy Siphon         | (2) |
| Immunity (Illusion)   | (2) |
| Nature (Metapower)    | (2) |
| Nature (Protection)   | (2) |
| Power Stat (COO)      | (2) |
| Power Stat (MAN)      | (2) |
| Stat Adjustment (COO) | (5) |
| Stat Adjustment (MAN) | (5) |
| Sudden Step           | (1) |

Susan made a *ranged combat* check against the *close combat* check of The Darkness and came up three short. So she didn't know when it would go and simply decided to shoot at it by way of getting this combat started. The Darkness was making the same check, its *close* against her *ranged* and also fell short by three. So it also didn't know they would be going together. They did. His blade sought her throat while she pelted him with high speed energy packets. Susan found to her delight that the *velocity* she was under made her pulling the trigger much faster, as by the rules she could fire as many shots from each gun as her REFlexes in one action. So she did.

He fell back in a hail of gunfire, forty damage having been done to his body.

Luna was up, and cried out "*Expelliarmus!*" and the sword went flying out of the hand of The Darkness.

"Really wish I could negate that magic like I do Susan's," The Darkness remarked, then seemed to concentrate. His wounds started healing up.

"No fair!" Susan took her action, keeping up the rate of fire, but this time The Darkness wasn't attacking and dodged it.

Both were up again at the same time, Susan didn't need to make a check as she had just seen The Darkness dodge and knew from how it was moving it had impressive stats in the body. So she let it attack her so she could do a touch based *metapower* technique, using energy fed to her from Sparkle. "*Regen Breaker!*" she called out, *overcharging* it several times. He did a pathetic eight damage that time, which wasn't enough to even give her another point, and he backed off again.

"So now you think I can't regenerate anymore?"

"That's right."

Luna pulled a bottle cap from her pocket and with an off hand action tapped it with her wand. "*Locomotor Bottle Cap,*" she cast.

The Darkness looked around, spying the sword that was still falling to the ground and vanished, taking it back in hand again.

Susan shot him with her left hand, this time not using *Gun Fu* so she could take the aiming bonus from her cybernetic systems. She got a thirty seven to hit, but took off two for maintaining the technique. The Darkness easily dodged it, then *spirit stepped* up to Susan again, swinging.

She parried, trying to kick upwards and knock the sword from his hand. She managed it, but he held onto the blade with a successful STrength check. Luna was up again and managed to sneak the bottle cap past The Darkness because of how small it was. It was now sticking to his back.

The Darkness and Susan made their opposed checks again, and Susan was again missed but this time only by one. They now went simultaneously so Susan, her leg still bent, simply decided to try smashing it up into his jaw, while he once again swung for her neck. Both were attacking so neither could dodge, and both hit. The head of The Darkness snapped

back and Susan took another few points of damage to the head. She was now at a minus one penalty.

All three now went at once, with Luna casting "*Epoximise*," on the small bottle cap, sticking it to The Darkness. (We're going somewhere with this, don't you worry)

The Darkness simply stepped back as Susan struck out again. Not so much making a dodge but taking some free movement and given its speed it may as well have been a dodge. It made a RESolve check to negate the technique and heal again. It made it, and healed.

The Darkness was now at range again, so Susan lifted her left hand gun and put energy into MANipulation, multiplying it to a fantastic degree. (It started out as a 20 because of the power she put into it.) She wasn't aiming so the shots hit somewhat at random, not even giving The Darkness another penalty in the limbs it hit. But it was once again at a total minus three.

It suddenly seemed to realize that Luna hadn't really been attacking it at all and looked over at her. She was pointing her wand and Susan got ready to throw some sort of *protection* technique on her.

"What are you doing over there, anyway?" it asked. "I expected fireballs at the very least."

"Haven't you heard?" Luna asked sweetly. "I can't fight like Susan does. I have to fight *dirty. Engorgio.*"

"What?" both Susan and The Darkness said. Suddenly instead of a tiny bottle cap like metal object sticking to the back of The Darkness, there was a satellite dish sized metal object sticking to the back of it.

"If you think this can hold me..." The Darkness threatened, struggling now like a fish on a plate. As his arms touched the plate they got held fast, and even though he seemed to be straining as hard as he could, the metal didn't bend in the slightest.

"Yeah, I put an unbreakable charm on it before, on all my bottle caps actually. So good luck."

"I'll destroy you!" He wiggled a bit more.

Luna shook her head. "You don't belong here. Go home and leave us to our business."

"Well said, Luna," Susan agreed, putting her guns away. "Now, let's see about that orb, shall we?" The front of the white uniform The Darkness was wearing was all shot up, and the glowing orb could be seen underneath it.

The Darkness started to laugh. "It's a part of me, and as long as it exists I'm immortal. And it's basically unbreakable, so it'll just keep rebuilding me. So go ahead, tear it out. That should at least free me from this stupid thing."

"I wonder," pondered Susan. "See, I know how to deal with bonded orbs, you forced me to with the whole doomsday thing. You should know better than to use the same trick twice." She brought her watch up to her mouth. "Susan calling Hub, I need an immediate extractor. Strike that. Reverse it." She put her right hand out and the object dropped into it. "Got it. When I signal, open up a door to a place at the Hub that can be sealed off. No powers, no getting in and out. You can do that right?"

*Affirmative*, was printed on the face of the watch.

"On my signal!" Susan sped over to the helpless form of The Darkness, who was struggling and looking worried.

"What are you planning to do?" it demanded. Susan ripped the front of the outfit off and jammed the extractor against it.

"End you. I'm pretty sure as there's no soul in here it'll come out just," **pop** "that easily."  
"Noooooo!"

"Now!" commanded Susan and a small doorway of light appeared next to her. She tossed the extractor through and commanded "Close it!"

It winked out and The Darkness, now unable to rejoin his body to that of the Hōgyoku, but powerless to try, simply burned out and was unable to reform. Luna shrunk the bottle cap back down once The Darkness had totally burned away, but was wary it was a trick.

"Did that do it?" Susan asked the watch.

*Withdrawal event registered*, it flashed.

“Great!” Susan looked around. “Want to introduce me to everyone?”  
“Sure thing! Come on.”

So Luna and Susan drifted over to where the men in black were hanging in the air, and several waved to Luna as she got near. Most of them looked worried or even angry, and Luna flew over to the guy with the long beard that had ribbons through it.

“Yamamoto-san, this is Susan,” she introduced formally. “I did try to tell you she would come.”

“So I take it you’re leaving then?” he asked bluntly.

Luna seemed disappointed in this response, but pressed on. “I guess so. She did come all this way to find me, after all.”

“I suppose she did.” He turned his head to look at her. “Just how long have you been searching?”

“About two years. Why?”

He stared at her. “It seems we still have a lot to learn about what strength is. Aizen is dead, yes?”

“Sorry if he was a friend of yours or something. But he got taken over by The Darkness. He wasn’t who he seemed.” She leaned over to Luna. “That was the guy we just fought, right?” She nodded back. “Right.”

The man shook his head. “Unbelievable.” He turned and bellowed “Pack it up and return things to normal around here. We’re heading home.”

And so cleanup began. Susan hung there as Luna said goodbye to the friends she had made and many were quite warm with her, asking her to keep Luna safe. She said she would, and in a fairly efficient manner the city below shimmered and all the people that should have been there came back. The guys in black somehow left, and a fairly flummoxed Susan was now alone with Sparkle and Luna. She had since turned her wand back to normal and put it back in the sheath at her arm.

“They didn’t even say thank you,” Sparkle noted. “What’s up with those guys?”

“You have to understand,” Luna began, “they’re a fairly proud bunch. They put *way too much* stock on who’s ‘stronger’ than other or how good their ‘bankai’ is. My doing magic, and Inoue and the others getting powers, well, they didn’t understand it or really approve of it. And they came expecting that not all of them would make it. Imagine if you were about to fight a huge battle and some kid you’ve never seen pushes you aside and defeats your enemies singlehandedly.”

“I’d be... humm. Interested to learn how I guess.” Luna gave her a “really?” look and Susan relented. “But I’d be mad too, I guess? Who cares, let’s just go.”

Ten minutes later, Kurosaki burst out of the space between realms and stood there in midair wondering where everybody was.

“This isn’t Inari’s world,” Luna remarked, stepping into the transit room.

“Ha, no, this is where one of her... contemporaries? Allies? I don’t even know if they’re the same race or what. Anyway, he’s a friend, and there’s a lot of people that come and go here. We’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“Yes, we do.” Luna looked into Susan’s eyes, and she nodded. “A lot happened to you, didn’t it? I mean guns? And what’s with that outfit?”

“What? Oh, my sailor scout getup. Yeah, all in good time. So, uh...” She looked around nervously. “Do you want to, uh...”

“Hear your story? Of course! But not right here.”

“Right, trading stories. That should be first.”

“I can leave you two alone if you want,” Sparkle offered suggestively.

“No!” Susan answered quickly. “I mean, unless you want.”

Luna laughed and threw her arms around Susan. “You can beat up monsters but you don’t know how to act around little old me?” She took Susan’s hand. “Show me around this place. Show me off, maybe?” She asked with a grin. “Then we can talk. I am glad to see you,

and we'll get to everything don't worry. We've got time." Then she seemed to realize something. "Wait, unless we don't? Do you know where your father is? Are we off immediately to rescue him?"

"Ah... no. Not yet. The thing is, you're not coming."

"Why not? I helped just now!"

"I know, and I'm grateful. But he's probably being held someplace magic doesn't work, and that's why he hasn't busted himself out yet. I mean we can ask Silverstreak where he might be, but we've always assumed when I went to go get him, I wouldn't have my magic."

"That's why the guns. I get it. Well, one step at a time, okay?"

"Right." She squeezed Luna's hand. "We'll head to the main control room, he's usually there."

So Susan introduced Luna to Silverstreak. Other agents came and went too often for Susan to keep track of, especially as she didn't really hang around to get to know people there. She found Winry, Merida, and Nynaeve and introduced them, and everyone was glad to see the two reunited. When they were done walking around Susan went to the conference room Silverstreak had said to come to, that he had a surprise for her.

"Surprise!" everyone yelled when she came into the room, and Susan found herself being hugged from all angles.

"What?" she managed, and everyone was talking and laughing at once.

"She met a lot of girls on her journey," Luna remarked to Sparkle.

"Yeah, about that... you're not the jealous type, are you?"

"Oh dear," is all she would say.

Finally Merida, Jenny Everywhere, and Sailor Mercury were seated around the conference tables with big smiles.

"It's so good to see you all," Susan gushed. "Jenny, I can't believe you finally made it here!"

"Neither can I," she admitted. "I finally found another *wanderer* who could send me to Inari. He did, but instead of being there I found myself here and Silverstreak said you were on your way, so I didn't have long to wait. And here you are!"

"This is great! But Ami, why are *you* here? Did you become an agent? I mean it's fine if you did, I'm just surprised to see you, and not, no offense, Makoto."

Ami shook her head. "No, *he* came to ask if I wanted to help you, as I have a good grasp of technology. He said you could probably use my help, and you were martial artist enough for the group."

"I suppose, but what's this all about?" she asked Silverstreak.

"What do you think?" he replied. "I'm pretty sure I know where your father is being held."

Susan looked at him critically. "You've always known, haven't you?"

He nodded. "Better to say I've always suspected. There's a place, a reality, where Darkvoid basically won. But instead of just taking the energy of the reality in total, it left just a bit. Enough to sustain some life there, but keep most special abilities from working."

"In other words, a prison world," suggested Luna.

"Exactly. For people Darkvoid hopes to convert, rather than simply destroy outright. Your father, just like you, would be a powerful asset to that side."

Susan nodded seriously.

"Just what can we expect there?" Merida asked.

"You're here because your *soulform weapon* will continue to work. And your skill with a bow is unmatched. Jenny has access to guns, lots of guns, and Ami has her pocket computer that can reveal weaknesses and do hacking. It may be powers based, but it's still technology, so it'll work."

"My *lifestreaming*?" asked Sparkle.

"Yes, that'll work too, because it's basically a natural ability for you now. But Susan's magic and *metapower* transformation won't."

*Ugh, so much for getting super powers. It figures the thing I got to replace magic for rescuing my father would be off the table.*

*Of course it is. I got those powers for another shot at taking you over. Not to actually help you. And I've known about them so long of course I shut that sort of thing down in my prison world. But don't worry, you can always have me support any powers you want when you're there. It's basically how I do it with the others.*

"Wait, the others?" Susan asked aloud.

"Others?" Sparkle asked.

Silverstreak nodded knowingly. "Darkvoid is talking about his guards. Any person there working with that side will probably be given an exemption. Their powers will work." He turned to the others. "They'll be fed energy from Darkvoid itself, and you can bet there will be some strong ones there to keep a prison break, such as the one we're talking about, from happening."

"But it's even worse than that, isn't it?" Susan glumly admitted.

"How so?" Jenny asked.

"Because we can't actually kill them."

Looks were traded around the room. "I don't mean to sound ignorant, which I am," Luna finally spoke up, "but these are the worst of the worst, right? If they're guarding a prison for the thing that eats realities..."

"But how many are there *willingly*?" Susan demanded. "How many are like me, and maybe just weren't as strong as I was in saying no? Innocent people that started out with good intentions but have slowly gone bad. Either through a type of corruption like this," she indicated her eyes, "or just being brainwashed. We can't just say everyone there is the same, that they started out on the side of Darkvoid. Maybe they've been taken over and could be saved. Maybe they're like that Miruku fellow, doing what he is in a last ditch attempt to keep his planet safe. I won't let them die without having a chance to explain and perhaps free themselves."

"It's an awful risk," Merida put in.

"But one I would want someone to give me, if I was the one there guarding the place and some other group was coming to get one of their loved ones. Isn't it the same for all of you?" She looked around the table, focusing on each one, and each slowly nodded.

"Can someone like that be brought back?" Luna asked.

"It depends on how they were turned," Silverstreak hedged. "At the very least, they could be made comfortable or sent back to their own worlds. In the case of those not turned but simply struggling as best they can, well, we take care of their worries and they'll maybe join our side. If they can't be saved, we can just put them back on their original worlds. If those worlds are locked away from Darkvoid, they could rant all they wanted but be powerless to act on it."

"So just let me understand all this," Merida said. "We have to plan a prison break for a place we've never seen?" Silverstreak nodded. "Which could have traps and technologies from any number of worlds. Which is patrolled by an unknown number of beings from other realities of unknown power and intent. All while our most powerful group member is severally limited to only her prowess with a gun and martial arts. And we can't kill anybody?"

"Yes, you understand perfectly," Silverstreak agreed. "But it's not all bad. You have me! I can provide you all sorts of neat toys. Like these!" He stood up and put his hand on open air. There was a light like a scanning beam moving down it, and he reached into the space that was revealed.

"Not another black hole bomb!" protested Susan.

He laughed. "Nothing like that. Here." He spilled a bunch of small red and white balls onto the table, which came to a rest in the middle.

"Are those..." Susan paused, blinking at them in astonishment. "Are those Poké-balls?"

"Ah, you recognize them, good. Yes, that's just about what they are. Modified to capture humans though, instead of animals. Not that humans aren't animals, but normal ones are programmed to ignore anything with, well, to put it in Susan's terms a REASON higher than one."

"Poké-balls?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing, I guess. I just... what are we supposed to do with them?"

“Catch them all, of course!”

Susan groaned.

“Seriously. I won’t be able to just open doors for you to throw people through. That will really put the place on high alert. But if you can wound them, and get them into these, you can bring them back here at the end without having to try hauling around a bunch of prisoners.”

“Darkvoid will know we’re there! It knows we’re sitting here talking right now!”

“But we haven’t started to plan anything yet. It knows you’re coming, it always has. And I have one more little gift for you, specifically.” He brought out a different watch. “Let’s trade.”

They did, and Susan strapped the new watch on. “I take it this one does something special?”

“That’s right. You may have noticed that Darkvoid doesn’t instantly know what you’re planning or thinking. There’s a delay when you’re fighting the one outside you.”

“I... maybe?”

“That’s because the part of Darkvoid inside you has to tell the part that isn’t, using what is essentially telepathy. All the pieces don’t just know, they’re basically separate ‘people’ at that point. This watch will block that.”

“It won’t be able to tell the greater part of itself what’s going on with me!”

“Right. So we can put you down someplace it won’t know, and the guards will be on their own. You sneak in right, and maybe they won’t even know you’re there until it’s too late.”

“This is amazing! You really are breaking out all the toys aren’t you?”

“Just some things we’ve been working on. I knew this day would come, after all.”

“Great.” She picked up a ball and looked it over. “Okay. We have a chance. But this is my father, none of you has to come.”

“Of course we do,” Jenny protested. “I would have been stuck on that mixed up world if not for you, and who knows where I would have ended up if I hadn’t left where and when I did. If that world had been fixed and I wasn’t ready, what would have happened to me?”

“You trained us, told us about our powers on a level we wouldn’t have had,” Ami added.

“We, all the scouts, owe you. I can help put that debt to rights.”

“And you made my being here possible,” Merida finished. “I would have just been another normal person back on my world. Here I’m something special, and I can do something special. When I do go back it’ll be with ideas and powers I wouldn’t have dreamed of before.”

*True. And we know she does come back, because in the future her world has been shaped because of her.*

*Oh, thinking of hiding behind her when the bullets start flying? Maybe that was just the reality she did come back in. This one you’re in she could still die.*

*I wonder...*

“You have done a lot of good,” Sparkle admitted. “You can feel proud of that, you know.”

“Thanks everyone. We’ll do what training is needed and go rescue my father.” She turned to Luna. “But first, I think you owe me a story! You all don’t have to stay, if you don’t want to.”

Everyone protested that they would love to hear how Luna fared after they were separated, and Luna said she didn’t mind them all being there. (“Any friends of Susan are friends of mine. Odd that you’re all girls, though...”)

“I arrived in the world of the Shinigami on a dry, quiet night,” she began. “And these two guys were beating up a third...”

## Luna Begins Her Tale

When: ??? after being separated from Susan

Where: ???

“It was a nearly cloudless night when I my eyes opened and I beheld the full moon, hanging weightless in the sea of stars I saw above me,” Luna began, standing and dramatically looking up, sweeping a hand upward as if the stars were there in the room with her. “But those pinpricks of light were cold, like a lover spurned upon a deep winter night. They were stars, but they were not my stars.”

“Wow, you’re good at this story telling stuff!” Susan gushed.

“Shhh,” everyone said, eyes on Luna.

“A breeze swept over me, dancing among the many nearby trees and making a sound of warning. I heard them, ‘danger, danger’ they told me. I knew that they were right. I remembered Susan’s hand leaving mine, the terror at being separated from her, but even worse- I had been knocked off course. I was now stranded amidst those countless doors of light, perhaps never to see her, my father, or my friends, ever again. My body was sore from the trip, I must have fallen a ways when I went through that door and landed here. But I took the warning of the wind of pushed myself to a sitting position. Something was wrong, I could feel it...”

Luna got to her feet and looked around. She seemed to be in a park or at least a slightly wooded area, with a road next to a rather high wall off to her left. Through the bushes and trees that separated her from the road she saw two men in black clothing, swinging swords at a figure that looked like a high school girl. She was expertly dodging them, but Luna wondered how long she could keep it up.

*Do I help her? Susan would just rush in, but I’m a stranger here. I don’t know the situation. Plus...*

She checked the holster for her wand and the pouch at her side, and pulling the wand out she let out a ragged breath. It was intact; she was still a witch. Then she shook her head as if to clear it.

*Right, Susan made it unbreakable before we left. I shouldn’t have worried. Still, I’m going to need all my magic and wits if this world allows girls younger than me to be accosted by gang members waving swords around. But isn’t that a parked car over there? How can they have cars and not guns? What is really going on here?*

As silently as she could, Luna crept closer, trying to stay behind a thick bush that grew at the side of the road. She was near enough to see the figures clearly now. One had red hair, odd angular tattoos across his forehead, (where his eyebrows were supposed to be, making him look *extremely ridiculous*) and was doing all of the talking. His “opponent” was a girl probably even shorter than Luna herself, wearing a knee length, flowing dress of light blue with a backpack slung across her shoulders. Her hair was short, and a strand of it fell between her large, blue eyes. She was wounded on her right side, her sleeve torn and some blood dripping down her arm.

Luna gripped her wand tightly. *I have to decide soon!*

The other man was hanging back, and seemed almost board with what was going on. He stood, haughty and proud, his sword still sheathed, and some sort of scarf wrapped about his neck and shoulders. His hair was divided into several parts, and held in place by some sort of metal guide.

*Which is the more dangerous? If I have to help her, do I take him out first, then the redhead? He might whirl in surprise to see his friend fall, that would give me time to get that blade away from him.*

The redhead moved towards the girl, victory, whatever that meant in this context, assured. He raised the sword, and Luna raised her wand and thought about the motion she would use to cast her spell. But the man’s eyes widened as a bolt of some kind went sizzling past him, forcing him to dodge!

Everyone looked back where it had come from, and out of the gloom stepped another man, coming into the circle of light created by the overhead lamp. He was wearing glasses, and carried a bag as though he had been out making a late night purchase. His hands were wrapped in bandages and his hair fell in front of his face in two parts. Luna idly wondered how it stayed there so perfectly, but then chided herself.

*Certainly we aren't the only ones to have invented... what did Susan call it? Hair gel?*

She lowered her wand just a fraction, waiting for the moment to see what this newcomer would do. Would the two gang members flee now that they had been seen? Would the quiet one now move to attack this witness? Could he even defend himself, as he had no visible weapon? He looked confident, his gaze level and unafraid. Luna wondered how he had generated that energy blast, he held no wand.

*Is he like Susan? Does he not need a wand to do magic? Was what he did magic? Susan had been teaching me to sense it, but I didn't feel anything. Of course she called it an "active skill" so I wouldn't have felt any because I wasn't expecting to.*

The man spoke to the others, who were surprised he could see them, and obviously wary of this newcomer. The other moved to back up his friend, and the girl hesitantly got up, looking unsure if this person should be here.

Suddenly their mood changed, the man with the red hair changing his stance and bringing his sword to rest on his shoulder. He asked who the man was, but said if he didn't want to answer it would be fine. He would just "kill him first."

Luna's wand came back up.

The girl jumped in front and pleaded with the man, who she called "Renji" to wait, and Luna's eyebrows raised a little.

*So she knows her attacker's name? But that still doesn't give me enough information.*

The new arrival said his name was "Ishida Uryuu" and he reiterated that he hated "Death Gods" whatever that was.

The redhead seemed to get excited, or furious it was hard to tell with that forced grin on his face, and he once again reiterated his desire to now murder this "Ishida" in cold blood.

*My goodness, they've only just met and both have stated rather matter of factly that they are intent on murdering the other. I can't just stand here!*

Luna gave a small gasp of surprise as somehow, as if off-screen, the newcomer was defeated and fell over. Blood oozed from the slash across his chest, and he was gasping weakly as if he couldn't believe it either. She took a step back, hand flying across her mouth. *I didn't even see the guy move. What did he do? If I'm going to help, I really have to pick my moment. I get the one and the other spots me, it'll be me on the ground like that guy! Her fingers tightened on the wand, and she realized she was breathing more heavily. I can do it, just be calm. Susan wouldn't be afraid, I won't either. I can still help that guy. I know a healing spell, as long as he's not dead I can save him. Hold on, okay?*

The redhead stepped up to the man, holding his sword aloft, and making Luna wish she knew a spell to call down lightning. The man gave his name, clearly intent to kill Ishida, and Luna's hand, despite a slight tremble, aimed her wand at his back.

*He'll pull his sword back before he swings. Even just a little, he won't be able to help it. That's my cue. I'll disarm him, stun the guy next to him, and hope he hasn't gotten his sword back by the time I recover. I can do this. I can save their lives.*

Luna was so focused on the blade she didn't notice the yellow haired guy, dressed as these two were in a black kimono over a white one, sneaking up on the guy. He didn't notice either apparently, as the man, holding a sword far, far larger than the other two smashed the pavement in front of Renji and making him jump away in surprise.

*He's in midair! He won't be able to dodge it now!*

Luna's wand followed and she changed the motion she was about to produce in her mind. It made the slightest motions, the almost bare minimum\* needed to produce the spell of "Stupefy!" There was a jet of red light from her wand which impacted his head quite neatly and knocked him out. He fell to the pavement in a heap and his sword clattered away.

The element of surprise now gone Luna hoped the other man would at least be incredulous enough to not immediately attack. And even if he did, he would have to draw his

blade first, giving her a little more time. Her wand swung in his direction and as she predicted, he was going for his sword.

"What?" the yellow haired guy muttered, clearly surprised.

Luna didn't waste any time, again shortening her next spell to make sure she could get it off before that man got his sword out of the sheath. He was doing a *Quick Draw* but she didn't know that. Both made their checks and Luna got three less than he did on her check, eleven to fourteen. This mattered little, the important thing was that it was going to take .2 seconds for the sword to clear the sheath instead of happening as a free action, but her spell was going to go off immediately. The eleven was just to make sure she would hit. The sword didn't have a LUCK check to make (despite being somewhat "alive") so she beat the difficulty.

"*Epoximise!*" she cast, and try as he might, the man standing there was not going to be able to fully expose his blade that evening. He looked down at it, incredulous as it now seemed glued to the inside of the sheath. Both took their delay for the action.

The yellow haired guy was now up, and put himself between the woman the two were after and the man now struggling to get his blade out.

But the girl peered around him. "Brother," she asked as if she couldn't believe her own eyes, "what in the world are you doing?"

"This guy's your brother?" yellow hair asked, his sword lowering slightly. "How can a guy who can't even draw his own sword-"

"Is this some kind of Demon Art?" the man angrily interrupted, tossing the whole thing down. "And what you did to Abarai-san, I assume that was as well? But I didn't see you do it, and Rukia didn't either. How have you done these things?"

"I didn't do anything," he protested.

"Wait, do you have an accomplice? That red light, yes, it came from over there." He turned his head. "Come out, I can see you crouching there!" he called.

"A girl?" the one called Rukia said, and everyone seemed a bit surprised as Luna revealed herself.

"You're a girl," Luna informed her. "Are you saying we shouldn't be able to defend ourselves?"

"You weren't defending yourself," pretested Rukia's brother. "You were defending her." He pointed.

"About that, why are you attacking your own sister?"

He ignored the question, totally looking down on her both physically and mentally.

"Why are you pointing a stick at me?"

"This *stick*," she threw back, "allows me to do *this!*"

*Accio half drawn sword*, she thought with a flick of her wand. She took the full time (.8 seconds) because she was doing it wordlessly and the sword jumped up into Luna's outstretched other hand. Or it would have, if Rukia hadn't thrown herself in the way and tackled it.

"Don't you dare touch my brother's sword!" she shouted, holding it against her chest as it tried to wiggle away from her.

Luna ended the spell and it went still again. "They were attacking you," she protested. "How can you-" The boy in white on the pavement gurgled something, and Luna shook her head. "They were attacking someone else, too. Look, can you cover me a second?" she asked the yellow haired boy.

"Who are you anyway?"

"Can you cover me?" Luna repeated, this time a bit of iron in her voice. *I guess it works for Susan...*

"Sure, I guess." His sword came up again, and he put his eyes back on Rukia's brother. The man watched, looking maybe 1% interested in what she was doing.

"Thank you." She moved the few steps necessary and put her wand onto the back of the fallen boy. "*Vulnera Sanentur*," she intoned, envisioning the spell healing the boy. "*Vulnera Sanentur*." She kept it up as the blood that was on the pavement seemed to be sucked back into the boy, and another moment later he sat up, gingerly touching his chest and finding himself unharmed.

"I- thank you," he said, not believing it. "There isn't even a scar."

"Naturally. But we aren't out of danger yet."

"I know." She straightened again, and held her wand ready to cast. "Perhaps you'd like to explain all this before it comes to violence again?" she asked Rukia's brother.

"We are simply bringing my fugitive sister to justice," he said, sounding bored of the whole thing.

"You're a criminal?" she asked Rukia.

"Only in the strictest sense of the word," she hedged. "If I hadn't done what I did, a lot of people would have died."

"I see. So your brother and his buddy came to get you- and in the process decided to nearly murder this innocent man that happened by, and this other guy dressed like them? That's justice around here?"

"How can you see them?" asked the boy in white, getting up. "Never mind, tell me later. The point is it isn't surprising. Death Gods do whatever they feel like, one of the reasons I hate them so much. They don't care much for our concepts of justice. They feel above all that."

"Death what?" *They said that before, still not getting it.*

"You attacked not even knowing what they were?" He was surprised, and looked over at the red haired one still sprawled out on the pavement. "Managed to take out one of them too. Amazing. Figured he'd be up by now..."

"I saw Rukia getting ganged up on. How was I to know they had some legitimate claim?"

"Legitimate claim?" snorted yellow hair. "Making what Rukia did a crime is totally nuts."

"That is not for you to judge, boy," said her brother.

"He believes what he says," Luna told them. "But you two aren't lying either... I don't know what to do."

"Perhaps you can simply step aside and allow us to do our job here?"

"No apology for you almost being killed I see. Look, it's Rukia, right?"

"That's right."

"Your brother believes you've done wrong, you believe you did it for the right reason. If you go with them, can your name be cleared? Have they just been..." she looked the other boys over "...overzealous in their attempt to bring you in? You did seem to be trying to get away from them before."

"I was trying to keep my friends out of it, and I panicked when I saw who it was. And no, brother, you didn't handle this very well if you were wondering." She glared at him. "I don't want you getting hurt, any of you. I'll go willingly."

"Rukia, no!" protested yellow hair. "It's three to one, and he's unarmed. I guess he's your brother but we can take him."

Rukia sadly shook her head. "I'm sorry, but you can't. He just hasn't gotten serious yet. I don't know what you did to Renji... he'll be all right, right?"

"He's just stunned, honest."

"Okay. I doubt you'll get another shot."

*I stuck his sword, didn't I? Why couldn't I get him with another spell?*

"If you're going peacefully, that's different. You'll at least get a trail, I hope, for your supposed crime?"

The boy in white gave a short laugh. "Don't count on it."

"I'll accept my punishment," Rukia said, hanging her head. "Even if they do execute me, I think I'll still have the moral high ground if you consider *why* I did what I did."

*But you'll still be dead.* "You're willing to die for your beliefs," Luna said softly. "That, I respect." Then back at her normal volume. "And perhaps this incident will be the spark that lights the fires of change for Death Gods." *Whatever they are.*

"You're kidding, right?"

Luna looked at the boy. "You're very negative, aren't you?"

"You can say that again," said yellow hair. "Never met someone so uptight before."

"Are we free to go, then?" asked Rukia's brother, very, very, *very* coldly and sarcastically. Almost as if he had spent long hours practicing the exact inflection to most convey his utter disdain for all that was going on.

“As long as you don’t attack anyone else here, and she goes of her own free will, you may depart.”

“Thank you so much.” He grabbed the sword from his sister, (holding it awkwardly as it was now nearly double length and sharp in the middle) hauled the red haired guy over his shoulder, and commanded Rukia to grab that sword, which had clattered away. She did something to it after picking it up, shoving it forward into the air, where it disappeared. An oddly stylized door opened as though the sword had been a key of some kind, and slid apart down the center into light.

*Some kind of teleportal like Susan uses?*

“Wait, you can’t just go with him!” yellow hair protested.

Luna now pointed her wand at him. “We are, however, letting her do just that,” she assured him. “This is her choice now, and she has the right to make it. Her fate depends on whatever laws she follows in her society.”

“As for you, boy,” said the man over his shoulder. “We’ll be back for you now that we know where her powers went. For now we only have authority to take back Rukia, but you can be assured we’ll be telling our superiors about all of this.” He glared at Luna as though making a personal promise to investigate her personally and started through the doorway.

“Wait, what?” He lapsed into silence, and as it began to rain the two vanished through the doorway which closed and slid shut behind them. This too, vanished.

*Wow, it rains fast around here. Didn’t think it was that cloudy a minute ago.*

The group stood around a moment, now at a loss as to what to do. Luna had put up a minor shield charm to keep the rain off, and the others were blinking at it as if not believing what they were seeing. “That didn’t exactly go as planned,” yellow hair finally said, shoving his sword, which Luna now noticed was about as tall as he was, back into a sheath at his back.

“On the bright side,” said the other guy, “we’re still alive.”

“And I, for one, would be interested to know how that was accomplished,” said a new voice, behind them.

Everyone turned.

*\*In other words, she took a -3 penalty to the spell-casting check to bring the time down to 2 segments.\*\* She put 5 energy into her MANipulation and he was at a penalty for surprise and being in midair and already dodging another attack. I don’t think he can do “spirit step” yet. He doesn’t seem to at this stage anyway. Not that their abilities and powers stay consistent, grumble grumble.*

*\*\*Originally I wanted to make Luna as a “Harry Potter RPG” character and give her different stats and everything. I even found a non-commercial one online and looked it over. It was, to put it somewhat bluntly, rubbish. It starts with 2 sample characters that have numbers that don’t add up.\*\*\* Then it talks about character advancement... when I haven’t even started making the character yet. Then assigning stats, what does this sentence even mean: “Start with these scores: 10, 9, 7, 7, 5, and 4. Assign eight points to these scores; one point increases a score by 1.” There’s six numbers, but 7 stats. But it never says to do anything with these “scores.” Why not just say “take 50 points and put them into your stats. Don’t have anything lower than a 4.” tl;dr- awful, awful, awful. So I made her a Paragon character, it’s flexible enough. I assigned “grades” to her magic based on close spells in paragon, and that sets difficulty and time to cast. As we have no idea what Harry Potter magic is based on (PERsonality? KNOwledge?) I made it MANipulation (“swish and flick”) and gave her five skills for the five branches. Curses, Jinxes, Charms, Conjurations, Transfiguration. Not that it matters, they’re all in a skill group so they all have the same rating. I just wanted her to spend XP properly. So she can accelerate by increasing difficulty just like Susan. She can put energy into MANipulation but not magic directly. (She casts as a scholar of magic) And*

anyone hit by her spells doesn't get resistance checks, because it's **magic**. See below for her "character sheet." She got extra XP because she's not a starting character any more than Susan was at this point in the story. She's studied and fought at Susan's side, and made stuff before she left. She also has a couple of Seer powers from Demongate High that match what we've seen her do in the books, sorta, and to make her more interesting. She did have Susan's guidance for a couple of years after all so she would have been able to hone those abilities more than she would have.

She will NOT be gaining XP like Susan did. She will simply spend time, because that's more realistic. She trains a number of hours equal to the rating she wants to go to times 5, and she can advance to that rating. That means to go from a 1 to a 10 rating she would have to study for basically 275 hours to master a skill. That's a month and a half if she did nothing else for 8 hours a day. (She "gets" as much study per 8 hour day as her REASON. So a "dumber" person might have to study for 8 hours but only gets 4 hours of benefit (4 REASON), someone "brighter" might get 10 hours of benefit from only 8 hours (10 REASON). This more directly rewards a higher REASON) To raise her current skill group to a 9 then would require 825 hours of study or 138 days. Of constant training. That seems reasonable to me. \*\*\*\* It's more time, the XP way would be 5 weeks, but who would have enough adventures in a 5 week period to get 27 XP? That's like 7 adventures all in a row. That pace would kill anybody. So it evens out. I mean getting to high ratings should be hard. Most people are good at like one skill group in their whole lives, but average at a whole bunch of stuff. It's more realistic that if you really want to be that great at something, you're going to put the time in.

\*\*\* they may have been "rolled for" but it doesn't say, so how is one to know? Taking your stats by rolling dice? What if you roll all ones? What if the guy next to you rolls all 6s? I mean that's how life is[citation needed] but do you really want to play that all 1s character now?

\*\*\*\* I had originally suggested something like this when Paragon was being made. I mean the combat system is totally different than D&D, let's get rid of this stupid XP concept too! Make a clean break. He wanted a more realistic system, but he didn't go for the one thing that would truly make it realistic. As Luna isn't a Paragon in any case, I get a bit of leeway. So there. She took XP to get her starting skills/spells, but then it goes away and now just becomes time. She doesn't spend it for potions or charmed objects anyway and I can fudge a roll that might kill her so spending it for rerolls wouldn't happen so it's not being used.

### Character sheet:

name: Luna  
setting: Wanderer  
age: 17  
hair: dirty blond  
eyes: silver  
hand: right  
gender: female  
height: 1.6  
weight: 54  
blood: B  
birthday: February 13, 1981  
background: Lost Loved One  
maxEnergy: 25  
size: 0  
DTR: 1  
Speed: 8  
STR: 4  
END: 5  
CON: 5  
REF: 6  
COO: 5  
MAN: 7  
LOO: 6  
REA: 6  
KNO: 7  
RES: 5  
INS: 7

PER: 5  
LUC: 5  
perception: 1d6+7  
lift: 25  
maxLoad: 12.5  
penRate: 5  
CurrentEnergy: 25

Backgrounds:

Spark of Magic 1  
Wand Caster 2  
Seer (HP limited) 2  
Animal Empath 1  
Thoughtful 1  
Empathic 1  
Patient 1

Weaknesses:

Magical Focus 1  
Curious 1  
Frail 1  
Oblivious 1

Notes: Don't forget she has an entangle item made by Susan.

Skills

2, runeology, KNO, 5, 1d6+1d8+5, 0  
3, Research, REA, 3, 1d12+3, 0  
2, herbology, KNO, 5, 1d6+1d8+5, 0  
1, transfiguration, MAN, 8, 1d6+1d8+8, 0  
4, gymnastics, COO, 5, 1d10+5, 0  
2, astronomy, KNO, 5, 1d6+1d8+5, 0  
1, charms, MAN, 8, 1d6+1d8+8, 1  
4, quick draw, REF, 5, 1d10+5, 0  
, potions, KNO, 5, 1d6+1d8+8, 0  
4, Broomstick Riding, COO, 5, 1d10+5, 0  
2, care of magical creatures, KNO, 5, 1d6+1d8+5, 0  
1, Conjuraton, MAN, 8, 1d6+1d8+8, 0  
1, Curses, MAN, 8, 1d6+1d8+8, 1  
3, writing, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
3, botany, KNO, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
3, Irish, KNO, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
4, magic combat, REA, 5, 1d12+5, 0  
2, Arithmancy, REA, 5, 1d12+5, 0  
3, history of magic, KNO, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
4, Energy Boost, END, 5, 1d10+5, 0  
1, Jinxes, MAN, 8, 1d6+1d8+8, 0

, persuasion, PER, 2, 1d10+2, 0  
, business, KNO, 2, 1d6+1d8+2, 0  
, riding, END, 3, 1d10+3, 0  
, singing, PER, 1, 1d10+1, 0  
, swimming, END, 3, 1d10+3, 0  
, teaching, PER, 3, 1d10+3, 0  
, animal handling, PER, 5, 1d10+5, 0  
, Magic Sense, INS, 4, 1d6+1d8+4  
5, Reading, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
, dancing, COO, 3, 1d10+3, 0  
5, glimpsing, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
, meditation, RES, 3, 1d10+3, 0  
, makeup, MAN, 1, 1d6+1d8+1, 0  
5, soul gazing, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
, ESP, INS, 5, 1d6+1d8+5, 0  
, marketing, KNO, 2, 1d6+1d8+2, 0  
, cooking, KNO, 4, 1d6+1d8+4, 0  
5, dream, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
5, Premonition, INS, 3, 1d6+1d8+3, 0  
, Information Gathering, PER, 3, 1d10+3, 0

Spells

Just about anything we've seen in the books and maybe a few we haven't.

Combat

Combat Delay:

Default Delay      Active: 7      Reactive: 4  
Magic Combat    Roll: 1d12+5    Active: 6      Reactive: 3

lethalCap: 12  
lethalPen: 2  
headCap: 9  
headPen: 1  
nonlethalCap: 18  
nonlethalPen: 5  
totalGone: 5

#### Inventory

Wand (in arm holster) (With true owner and a higher DTR through fabrication because if you think Susan let her come without at LEAST that precaution, you haven't been paying attention)

pouch of bottomless putting stuff in

Broom

Key she was keeping safe

5x healing potions

Other assorted potions and ingredients to make more

Spell Papers (have to work out exactly what later)

trunk

winter clothes

summer clothes

jacket

Camping Stuff

Flashlight (windup)

## Can You Hear Me Now

When: Probably about an hour later

Where: Nearby general store

The man who stepped from the shadows, complete with umbrella, was wearing odd wooden shoes that looked like someone had made sandals out of a small table. They were thick, stiff wood and looked hard to walk in. He had on a funny striped hat that hid his eyes, and a jacket with diamonds all around the lower edge. Both his hair and face looked a bit *Bleached* but the umbrella in his hand was wide and colorful.

"Sandal-hat," the yellow haired guy had said, as though in greeting.

"You could ask my name," said the fellow, looking a little hurt. "But of course I already know yours, Kurosaki-san. It's this pretty young girl here I'm most interested in at the moment." He swept a bow in her direction. "Urahara Kisuke, at your service my lady. May I know your name as well?"

"I'm Luna Lovegood," she replied, spreading imaginary skirts in a curtsy. Then the wand came back up. "This man is known to you, Kurusauske?"

"Kurosaki," he corrected. "Call me Ichigo."

*Itchy go? That's a weird name.*

He went on. "And yeah, I've seen him before. He's no threat to us." He looked back at the guy. "You aren't, right?"

"Heavens, no!" Urahara agreed, other hand upright as if to show his vulnerability.

"Quite the opposite, I'm here to help!"

Kurosaki nodded, and Luna put her wand away again. She considered her options.

*I should consider my options; I have no local currency, I'm lost to the multiverse, don't know the physical laws here, and have already been in my first fight not two minutes after arriving. I can't read that sign over there, so it's a wonder I can even understand these people. For all I know they'll want to burn me as a witch, and oh yeah The Darkness is probably around here someplace. Heck, it could be any of these people! So options: None.*

"I could use some," Luna admitted.

"I will happily give you all the help you need in exchange for your story," Kisuke assured her. "I'd even offer you my arm so you could share my umbrella, but by the looks of things you don't need it."

"I appreciate it."

"I guess I'm going home," the guy in white announced. "Sorry I was so useless here." He turned to go.

"Actually," called Luna, "you might want to stick around. The news I bring is not good, and it concerns everyone. If you can fight, even a little, you have to be prepared for what is to come."

"What *is* to come?" Kisuke wondered, as if he didn't already know. (His local enemy)

"It's not really a story for the rain, those two are getting soaked. Can we take this someplace else?"

"Of course! Follow me." He clacked off down the street, and Luna went after him.

"Please, come with us," she said to the boy. "Better to tell my tale only once, and like I said it involves you all."

"How so?"

"You like being alive? Having a planet under your feet?"

"Yeah?"

"Unless someone stops the thing that's coming, both of those things won't be true anymore." She started off down the street.

"Come on, let's see what she has to say," Itchigo goaded him. "She saved your life a minute go don't forget. You owe her that much right?"

"I would like to know how she did that..." he mused. "It didn't feel like what I expected rapid healing like that to feel. Can't hurt."

"That's the spirit!" He whacked the guy on the back and both boys ran to catch up.

Luna had been led to a general store looking place, and then in through the back where the man obviously lived. There they were met by a large man with a pointy mustache, thin glasses, and blue apron over a white shirt. He went to fetch them tea and they all sat down around a low table.

"Can I get your names, please?" she asked, looking around the table. "I'd like to know who I'm talking to."

"I'm Uryu, I'm a Quincy."

*A what?*

"I'm Itchigo, temporary Death God."

"Don't forget me, I'm Urahara and I am simply a humble shopkeeper."

Itchigo snorted.

"What are these words you keep using? Like what's a Quincy and what's a Death God? It's not anything like a Death *Eater*, is it?"

"I'm not surprised you don't know what a Quincy is," Uryu spoke up. "But you can see him." He pointed to Itchigo. "How can you not know what a Death God is? And I've never heard of a Death Eater."

*Just a minor coincidence then?* "I guess I better start at the beginning..." Luna told them about how she had just come from Inari's world, and what had happened to bring her here. She showed them her wand and broom, and explained about The Darkness that was no doubt lurking about someplace. She demonstrated her magic; floating things about, making water, and flowers. She also showed them how she could fly on her broom, but they were more interested in how she pulled it out of her tiny pouch. They were now back inside and Urahara was looking her wand over.

"Amazing, simply amazing," he gushed. "I can almost feel... well, that's for a later time, anyway." He handed it back. "I'm sorry to hear about your friend. I hope she finds her way to us."

"She will," Luna assured him with all the conviction she could muster. "You don't know her. Nothing will keep her from tracking me down, even if it takes a thousand years."

"Hopefully not that long. In any case, you've complicated our lives but given us early warning of this Darkness force you say will have preceded you. Luckily my advice for the two of you," he looked over at the boys, "remains the same. Start training as if your lives depended on it."

"I certainly don't mind." Itchigo stated. "But I'd rather immediately go after Rukia. She could be killed any time right?"

"Don't let the ease with which Luna stunned Renji through you off, Kurosaki-san. I was watching the whole thing, and didn't step in because I wanted you to see the difference in power between yourself and those two. Little did I know an alien being, no offense, was about to step in."

"None taken."

"They can't be that much stronger!"

"Yes they can," Uryu protested. "They took me out immediately. I still don't know exactly how."

"I suppose you're decent too," Itchigo allowed. "Are you sure they just didn't take you by surprise?"

"I was surprised all right. Believe me."

"You'll need to get far stronger before you can go after Rukia. There were only two here, but there will be dozens in your way if you mount a rescue operation. Just as strong and stronger. I can help you with both things. Give me ten days to get you into shape and I'll have far fewer reservations about sending you on to Soul Society to rescue your friend. Deal?"

"If you're sure she'll be okay until then."

"I am."

"Not that I don't believe you, as you seem to be telling the truth," Luna interrupted. "But how do you know this?"

"Oh, I have my ways," he answered with a wink. "Now, how about this. You still have school tomorrow, right?"

"It's our last day. I could just ditch..."

"No, go and finish the year, we can start later. Come back here afterwards. Meanwhile, I'll put Luna up here and I can answer some of her questions tonight. Like what a Quincy is, that sort of thing. No sense you rehashing ancient history. Get some rest instead. You can come train here, if you wish, or if you're worried about Quincy secrets or whatever, do whatever training is appropriate for you elsewhere."

"It's actually like mid-morning for me," Luna admitted. "So my sleep schedule is going to be a bit messed up the next few days. So staying up and getting things straight for me would be ideal."

"Can we beat something like this Darkness?" Uryu asked. "Something like that... seems it would just crush us."

"It has to use mainly what it finds, depending on how 'compatible' it is with the world from what I understand. That's why it just doesn't manifest and crush the whole planet. It hid inside Tom on my world, and seemed to just be slowly bleeding Susan's father's world dry a little at a time over years. It'll be strong, but there's one of it and lots of us."

He got up. "There is training I can do. Ten days, you say? Not a lot of time but I'll see what I can do. Thank you, for the tea, and you for saving my life."

Luna smiled warmly. "Of course!"

"Guess I'll be off too. Actual magic. Man, as if finding out Death Gods were real wasn't enough of a mind bender. See you later, Luna. Thanks for trying to keep Rukia safe. You're a stranger so you didn't have to, but I really appreciate that you did. I can't really repay you, but I won't forget."

"I didn't do it to get repaid, and you're welcome all the same. I'll see you tomorrow!"

"So, a brief lesson on our world, then?" asked Kisuke when the others were gone. He sipped some tea. "A Quincy is a human with an abundance of spirit power. They channel it into the shape of a bow and use spirit power in the air to create arrows. There's like two or three of them left as I recall. They were wiped out because they destroyed Hollows, that is, souls that have gone bad and lost their hearts. Death Gods, on the other hand, fight by purifying them, thus leading the souls back into the soul cycle. The more souls Quincy fighters destroyed, the less soul energy there was in the world. Taken to extreme..." He let her finish the sentence.

"No more life on the planet. The soul energy would be gone, no more rebirth because here souls come from someplace."

(Susan here interrupted to comment on the parallels between this world and the world with Aerith and the *Lifestream*. Luna said she would love to explore the parallels once Susan told her story, and went on...)

"Exactly. Death Gods by the way are souls too, but souls that have kept their hearts and trained to increase their fighting powers over many, sometimes hundreds, of years. They exist in Soul Society, where souls of people that die go. Some come and go in this world because Hollows find their way here too, and have to be dealt with before they do much harm to this world."

"Huh. How about that. A world where the souls of the dead can train and protect the living from... others souls of the dead."

"That's about the size of it. Rukia gave our friend Kurosaki-san the power to project his soul, thus becoming a Death God. That's the crime she's accused of. She did this to save his family that was under attack by a Hollow. A Hollow she couldn't beat."

"Why do you call him Kurosaki-san?"

"That's his name."

"His name's Itchigo."

"That's his first name, yes. He hasn't really given me leave to address him with such informality."

Luna stared at him. "Where exactly am I?"

"The town of Karakura, Japan."

"That's what I thought."

"Why do you seem so distressed?"

"I suppose it's nothing. It's just weird I can understand you, that's all. I don't speak Japanese. Irish, yes, a little anyway."

"Odd, you sound like a native to me."

"Very odd..."

"Anyway, let's talk about your magic and what's it's capable of. May I see your wand again?"

"I suppose."

He looked it over, smiling more and more.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Tell me, do you know the name of this wand?"

"Name? Gee, I never considered it to *have* a name. What an odd question."

"Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Sure. It chose me right before school, from Ollivanders when I was eleven years old. It's pine, nine and three quarters inches, and contains unicorn hair, two strands."

"Everything but the name," he mused, tapping it into his palm. "But you say it chose you?"

"That's right. There were hundreds of wands in that shop. Only this one was right for me."

"Very interesting! You may wonder why I'm asking about this..."

"I am, a bit."

"You'll find that the swords that Death Gods carry have a curious property. One I'm going to start training Kurosaki-san in tomorrow. Calling out their name allows them to start releasing their full power. Further synchronizing with them past this state allows *bankai* or allowing the spirit of the weapon to manifest outside the user's soul."

"You think my wand is similar?" she asked, getting excited.

"I do. I'm getting the sense that this wand very much wants you to know its name, just as a soul slayer in the hands of a Death God does. Your story about the wand choosing you would fit that theory nicely." He handed it back, and Luna looked it over with new eyes. "What other reason could there be for that?"

"We've never known," she breathed. "Do you think what you teach him could work for me, too?"

"I don't think we have anything to lose by trying it. I take it you're already good enough with magic to hold your own. You don't need further training in that when there's something else more useful you could be doing."

"Oh, I'm nowhere near Susan's level," she protested. "Her magic is far more powerful and versatile. Still, just like her being in our world, me being in this one should be similar. Nobody else has magic but me, making me unique. No one will know what I can do, giving me a big advantage."

"But the main point I'm making is, would another few days of practice with magic really benefit you all that much?"

"Oh. Probably not."

"But potentially unlocking the power of your wand, now that would be worth a few days of effort, don't you think?"

"What do you think might happen?"

He shrugged and laughed. "With soul slayers it's anybody's guess. From turning into ash or doubling the weight of anything that hits the blade. But it would be something personal to you, and matching your style. After all, the wand choose you, right? It wouldn't be something impractical."

"I'm always willing to learn new things. And imagine taking this knowledge back to my world! What do we have to do?"

"First you have to learn how to get in touch with your inner soulscape. There you can meet your, well wand spirit in this case I guess, and learn its name. From there we can work on bringing it out. I'll get you started, from what I've seen you'll probably be a quicker study than Kurosaki-san. Don't get me wrong he's got power all over the place, but he isn't the brightest of learners."

“What’s my first step?”

“First let’s make sure you’re comfortable...”

Luna had *meditation* at a three, so she was familiar with the technique, and simply needed to direct her efforts towards entering her inner soulscape while holding the wand and bringing it “with her.” As there seems to be no difficulty associated with this step in the “spirit weapon” entry in the “spirit hunter” description in the Demongate High book, we’ll say she manages it without much trouble now that she has a teacher for the skill. (It doesn’t even say you need *meditation* so she’s probably already ahead of the game) She needs to roll a twelve PERSONALITY check to actually claim the weapon, but for now Luna opens her eyes to find herself looking at a dry concrete fountain that looked like it belonged in a park somewhere. In fact, she was in a park she noted as she looked around, but hanging from the trees in lieu of fruit were books. The expanse of green seemed endless, but each park seemed finite. The section she was in had stepping stones leading to the fountain from the cardinal directions, then a ring of stones probably 15 paces out joining them all together in a circle. This repeated, the trees and shrubs dotting the landscape forming no pattern she could see at the moment.

Beyond this park in front of her was another, looking more like a playground, while to her left in the distance was what looked like a petting zoo, and to her right a water park. She turned around to see what was behind her, and was startled, giving a jump, as there seemed to be a person standing there. But as she looked closer, it wasn’t a person because the head was covered in feathers, and there were folded wings protruding from the person’s back. The head of the person was down, and they seemed to be holding something that they were looking at.

“Excuse me?” she said softly, not wanting to startle as she had been startled.

The head of the figure came up, and then without moving another muscle, spun smoothly halfway around to look at her. “And *whoo* might you be?” asked the owl.

“You just wanted to make the pun, didn’t you?” Luna answered. “Because I’m sure you must know.” She looked the face over and it was a big owl. It stood like a human, and had hands, but the face was that of a brown owl.

The owl clicked its beak. “Sure, take all the fun out of it!” The head turned back. “Honestly, one of you finally comes for a visit but did you figure it out yourselves? The fact we’ve been calling and calling you, trying to get you to notice us? Nooooo. You had to travel to a whole different reality!”

“I’m sorry. But I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“Wands choose their owners, that was the rule! And the clue, not that any of you picked up on it. We’re just trying to help you know.”

“I said I was sorry, but really how were we supposed to know?”

There was a sound like a book being snapped shut and the figure turned. “I suppose I shouldn’t take it out on you. Still, that friend of yours has really landed us in a bad situation, haven’t they? Are you really sure about her?”

“Of course I am!”

“Hummm. I’ll take your word for it. Anyway, now that you’re here, maybe we can get to know each other a little better.”

“I’d like that! I’m Luna, what’s your name?”

“Oh, getting right down to business, is that it?”

“What?”

“I see how it is. Not going to inquire about my health, or ask what you might do for me in exchange for my help out there,” she pointed with a finger out to the side after shoving the book under her other arm. “Just let me have your name and I’m off.”

“No, it’s not like that. I really don’t know the protocol here, I’m sorry. Asking your name seemed the first thing to do.”

“Oh, I suppose *just* because no one has ever done this before I should excuse your ignorance, is that it?”

“If you wouldn’t mind?”

The owl eyes, unblinking, stared at her.

“So, uh, how are you?”

“Not bad, not bad. But I could be better. I’m quite thirsty, that old fountain has never really worked right. You want my help, I’m going to need you to fix it.”

“Fountain?” Luna turned to look. “But isn’t this sort of happening inside my head? Or inside my wand? Or inside my soul? How can you be thirsty?”

“I’m thirsty because the fountain doesn’t work,” the owl repeated. “I thought you were much smarter than this, but we may be here awhile.”

“So I’m not asking the right questions, is that it?”

“Maybe.”

Luna began to pace around the fountain, looking it over for any clues. It was circular, with a horn like protrusion from the center the water probably shot out of. It was only a few paces across, and seemed dry as a bone. “I guess I’ll start with, ‘what is this place?’”

“Very wise. This place is where your ability to do magic intersects with my ability to channel that magic into the world.”

“So it’s neither just my soul or my wand, but where they meet?”

“That’s what I said.”

“And you’re... literally my wand?”

“I’m how you perceive the core of your wand, yes. That I get to walk around and talk is just a bonus.”

“But my wand core is unicorn hair!” she protested.

“What difference does that make? You think I should be a unicorn? How does that match up with you?”

“Okay, don’t need to get angry about it.” Luna looked around, wondering if she was missing something. *This does seem to match up with what Susan described as her journey through the soul to fight Tom. But why would a figurative owl that represents my conduit of magic need figurative water? Wait, water?* “If you want water, isn’t there a water park right over there?” She pointed, then blinked.

“You mean right here?”

Luna looked around and she was now standing inside a very dry water park. She could see the park she had just left, and beyond that the petting zoo. Now to her right seemed to be a carnival, with flashing lights and games all set in stalls. “No water.”

“That’s right. I thought we might start with the fountain, then maybe move up to the park. You’re not Susan, you know, you can’t throw it around like she does.” The owl looked around. “Personally I’m not sure you could even fill this park up. The fountain may be all you can manage. You are only human, after all.”

“Throw what around?” Luna was confused, but felt like maybe she knew the answer. “Water? Like this?” Susan had described how she could make things she remembered happening happen inside the *soulscape* so she simply willed it to rain.

“Ack!” said the owl, putting her wings over her head and bolting under a nearby canopy. “I said I wanted a drink, not a shower!”

“But it would fill this place up.”

The owl looked at her like she was nuts. “Are you crazy? You know how long that would take? Besides, this is *rain*.”

“Yes?”

“Look.” She pointed to the ground.

Luna looked, and there were no raindrops there. The pavement wasn’t wet. “Oh. It’s literal then.” *I could make it rain for days but water would never collect because all I’m doing is summoning the idea of rain. Not actual water from the sky. There is no water, sky, or rain.*

“We do know where we are, right?”

“Yes, yes, I figured it out. How do we get back to the... never mind.” The pair was back at the original fountain and Luna stopped the rain.

“Any other bright ideas?” the owl asked.

“It’s obviously not something I can just summon up. Like you said it’s not what you need. Would probably just vanish when I left anyway. And I have no idea how fountains actually work, so I don’t think it’s a test of my skill with pipes. Is there a reason I appeared here first and not, say, at the petting zoo?”

"This is the center of you," the owl answered. "All things radiate from here. Your love of animals, your desire for adventure, memories of your time as a child..."

"Is it endless?" Luna hopped up on the edge of the fountain and stood on her toes to try and see further.

"As endless as you are."

"I'm quite limited, I think."

"But you see quite far. Don't sell yourself short, Luna. You've been learning to use your gifts thanks to that Susan girl, and for that I applaud you. More books pop up all the time."

The owl indicated the trees. "You have more than just me to draw upon, and I think you're going to need all your abilities to survive in this place."

*He must be talking about what Susan called my 'seer' nature. She pushed me to explore what I could do remembering my dreams and trying to ferret out the future. Sensing spirits and telling people's emotions.* "These books, what are they?" She hopped down from the fountain and went over to low shrub where a book was.

"All you know," was the answer.

"This one is my book of spells, grade 3!"

"It even got most things right."

"Oh, like you could-" The owl looked at her. "Right, you're magic, or whatever. So what's that book you were reading when I got here?"

"This one? Take a look." The owl handed it over and Luna looked at the title.

### The Art of Flowing The Soul

This didn't help her much and she flipped through it. "It's blank."

"Of course it's blank. You haven't written it yet. You are the first one to come talk to one of us, as far I know."

"I don't get it, how does this have to do with anything?"

"Finally, she starts asking the right questions. It has everything to do with it."

"Can you be more specific?"

At this the owl looked a bit uncomfortable. "Sadly, no. I know I need something from you, and it relates to that book, and the fountain. But like I say you're the first so you're really going to have to figure it out on your own."

"We Ravenclaws do love our little puzzles," she said gaily. "Just so long as we can check the back of the book to see if we got it right." She closed the book and looked it over, but it yielded no other clues directly.

*Flowing the soul. The fountain needs water. Rain isn't water, it's simply rain. The books detail what I've learned. The owl needs something from me, claims to be 'thirsty.' Wants to help me, but needs something in exchange for that help. The owl isn't really here- she's just how I see the conduit that allows my magic into the world. Magic must come from my soul. This place is my soul. My magical conduit is thirsty for my soul? The soul is life. Life is energy. Could this owl need my life energy to manifest? I'm here to learn to manifest the 'full power' of my wand, something that must be possible because the owl was here to meet me. Just like the shop owner said. How does a simple shop owner- no, not the time. Naturally it would need my energy, Susan is always going on about how much energy she has. Her magic is directly powered by it. Is this owl directly powered by mine, I just have to give it some? Quincy fight by using spirit energy to manifest a bow. The shop owner said Itchigo had an abundance of it. Could it be represented by water here?*

"How would I give you my energy?" she asked the owl.

"Energy? I just want a drink." But the owl sounded more positive now, as if she was asking questions that were on the right track now.

Luna had a sneaking suspicion and looked down at her hand. "Do you have something sharp?"

"Apart from my cutting wit?"

Now it was her turn to give the owl the evil eye. "I'll take that as a no. Here." She handed the book back and closed her hand around a visualized knife. The owl's head turned this way and that, seeming a bit excited. *It's all figurative. You aren't really cutting yourself.*

*Your body is out there, safe. This is just a ceremony. I'm letting the energy of my body flow into the space where my magic and my ability to project that magic meet.* She steeled herself and cut her palm, redness welling up out of the wound. *I feel like I should say something.* "My name is Luna Lovegood. I offer you my lifeblood in exchange for your assistance. Let us become one, let my energy flow into you, let your power aid me in times of need." She tilted her palm and a single drop of blood fell upon the empty fountain.

Water burst forth from the top, and she felt the scene around her flicker. She looked over at the owl, who was reading the book again. "Not a bad start," it admitted. "You'll get the hang of it but for now I'm still thirsty."

The world was growing dark, and only the owl could now be seen. But she too was fading. Before she faded completely she looked up at Luna.

"I'm *Belahime*. Let's *seek for the truth* together, okay Luna? See you next time."

Luna opened her eyes.

## Taking The First Step

When: 5 hours after Luna went seeking the will of her wand's core

Where: Hopefully still the store someplace

Luna looked up at an unfamiliar ceiling, finding herself to be laid out on a soft futon with a blanket thrown over her. Her wand was clutched in her hand, and she brought it up at arm's length before her eyes.

"Belahime," she whispered softly, smiling up at it.

"So you managed it, then?" a new voice asked her. Looking over at it a black cat came into view, and Luna felt no other presence in the room with her. Logically then, it was the cat that spoke. It sounded male, making Luna wish Sparkle were here to finally have another talking cat to talk to. This one was all black, and short haired, and was staring at her just like Sparkle used to. It was a talking cat all right.

*What would two talking cats talk about? Would they compare claw sharpness? Complement each other's tails? Do some cats have cuter whiskers than others from another cat's point of view? Would one cat be embarrassed or nervous if they thought the other cat had cuter whiskers?*

"I did," she replied, rolling over and propping herself up on one elbow. "And you are?"

"I'm Yoruichi, and you're Luna if I've got that name correct?"

"That's right. Nice to meet you. Tell me, are there simply talking cats in this world, or are you an animagus?"

"I'm not familiar with that term."

"Oh, forgive me. It's the term my people use for a person that can become an animal. My transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall, could become a cat."

Yoruichi stared at her for a moment. "You're going to be no fun at all, are you?"

"I'm sorry?" Luna asked, confused.

"Never mind. I'll go get Kisuke."

"Very well." Yoruichi silently padded off and Luna sat up, stretching. Unsure what her next step might be she put her wand away and drew her legs up underneath her to await the return of the shop owner. She didn't have to wait long, as all smiles he was coming into the room again with a tray of sandwiches and congratulatory praise.

"I am hungry, thank you," she said, reaching for one. "Does the process normally take a lot out of a person?"

"Usually it's a soul doing this, you understand," he clarified. "So it's a little different. But oddly, souls do eat, at least spiritual food in their home dimension and real food here. To be clear, however, you've been inside your meditation for five hours."

"Five hours!" she gasped. "I didn't think it was that long." *No wonder I got hungry.*

"It's very dreamlike. Some seem to take a long time but don't, and others are resolved quickly but still take some time to come out of. Yours is about the average."

"That's good to know. Is it... proper to speak of what happened inside?"

"You can, or not, as you wish. Know that all quests to find the name of your... companion, in this case, are different and highly personalized. But Yoruichi does tell me you said a name as you awoke?"

"Yes." Luna smiled broadly and took her wand out again. "Meet Belahime."

"So my theory was right, then." He too was smiling broadly. "Always a good feeling. And a good, strong name too. Of course it's nice to meet you again, for the first time, Belahime." (His sword is named Benihime, by the way. Maybe he did something, and that's why they're so similar? We'll never know.)

"So what now? Can I call out her power?"

Kisuke shook his head. "There is still some way to go before that." Luna's face fell. "Don't worry, just learning my suspicion was correct and that you were able to learn the name in the normal way gives me great hope for the rest of the process working as well. First you must learn to channel your spirit energy into the, well wand in this case. You must be fairly proficient at it, but your meditation should have given you some clue as to how to accomplish it."

“There was a fountain I had to put my blood into, and then water seemed to come gushing out. Belahime complained about ‘being thirsty.’ Is that what you mean?”

He shrugged. “It’s different for everyone, of course. But we do have some training aids here, you can practice putting energy into it and we’ll see if you have the basics of the technique down. If you do we can give you some pointers and then you can try it on the wand.”

(Here Susan interrupted and asked if she had technically learned Spirit Manipulation as a spirit mage and after a quick scan by Silverstreak, he agreed she had a close analog. The way he put it was “The conduits for spiritual energy inside her body have been widened. Just as they have for you. Not to quite the same extent, I don’t know if she can learn the other skills like spirit step but we could always give it a try. They would have to be widened further for that, but we have teachers here if she wishes to continue that training.” Susan was impressed, both with her learning something like that basically on her own, but also for the insight into how the technique had been engraved into her consciousness. Unlike her ability to just write numbers down on a “character sheet” everyone else had to sort of work things out as they went. It didn’t explain why Hogwarts teachers were so bad, but it made her a little more sympathetic to the trouble they went through to learn things.)

“Let’s do it!”

“I do like a willing subject. Student. I meant student. Did I say something else? I meant student.”

“I... think you’re lying.”

“Don’t be silly. Come along.”

So Luna followed him into a workshop looking area where very weird looking things dotted workbenches around the room. Most were in various stages of being built, and for the moment Kisuke ignored them all and rummaged around in a set of small drawers. “Ah, here it is!” he exclaimed, pulling out a small crystal. It was just a chunk of glass, really, something that almost looked like it had been melted off some larger piece and saved for just such an occasion. He handed it to her and Luna looked it over. “Now, what you need to do is put a bit of spiritual power into this crystal. If you’ve done it, the crystal will glow. When the glow is bright enough we’ll know you’re ready to try it with the wand.”

Luna blinked at it. “I’ll give it a try.” She concentrated, holding the crystal in her palm and putting the fingers of her other hand over top of it.

*Imagine water flowing from your body, through the arms and into the palms. Then out the palms and into the crystal. The fountain, remember the fountain. Give the crystal a drink.*

The glass began to glow just faintly after a moment of concentration.

“Well done!” Kisuke praised. “You do have the basics!”

“Amazing,” Luna gushed honestly. “I really did it.”

“You really did. Take it back, have some sandwiches, and keep at it. I’ll be back to offer some pointers throughout the day. Take it easy though, you are using your spiritual energy for this and it will tire you out just as much as, say, lifting weights would.”

*Susan has talked about her “energy” enough that I know what he’s getting at. I wonder how mine compares to hers? Could she do this? How brightly would the stone glow?*

“I’ll be careful. Thanks.”

As the sun rose on Japan that day Luna continued trying to make the stone glow, which would make the spiritual conduits in her body more used to being used in this manner, and widen them. She also got to meet the two shop assistants, a red haired young boy named Jinta, and a young black haired girl named Ururu. Jinta was quite loudmouthed and acted superior to her, but Ururu had some good insights and sat with her for a time. She was able to tell what Luna was trying to do, demonstrated what the stone should look like with a large amount of energy put into it, and was able to count as a teacher for the duration. Jinta was bored and wandered off almost immediately, but Ururu said she didn’t mind helping, and

he could do his share of the chores for once. Ururu seemed quite soft spoken and shy, but Luna took a liking to her and thanked her for the help.

Even Yoruichi was able to help by offering some pointers, and of course Kisuke came by from time to time, restoring her spirit energy so she could continue her training. In this way she got the benefit of multiple teachers and renewed spirit energy, cutting the training time down.

“So you have spell like techniques?” she asked after the first time.

“I guess you would call them that,” he admitted. “They’re not magical though, just us using spirit energy in certain ways. And they’re mostly combat focused, either healing, protecting, binding, or simply blowing stuff up.”

“That must take a lot of practice! I can hardly make a stone glow!” she finished with a laugh.

“Some never master it at all,” he assured her. “You’re doing fine. Especially given your circumstances.”

“Thanks.” *I am worried about Susan, but I know she’s probably more capable than me. But we were both knocked off course, and I’ve got the key that can tell us where her father went. She has the spell to get back to Inari’s place though, so I shouldn’t worry. And she’s got Sparkle with her, so she’s not alone. There’s nothing she can’t handle, I’m sure of it. Even now she must be back, trying to find a way to track me down. I have to believe that.*

That afternoon Yoruichi stopped by again and padded into the room. “How about taking a break for a bit?” he asked.

“Gladly,” Luna answered, setting the stone down next to her.

“Keep it,” Yoruichi told her. “It can go in your pouch, right?”

“Sure. What’s up?” She stuck the crystal in and stood up.

“Thought you might like to take a little walk. I can show you around, and there’s some people I want you to meet.”

“I love meeting new people! And I’d love to see more of Japan too.”

“Then we’re out of here!”

The pair walked down modern city streets, and Luna looked very out of place in a country as homogenous as Japan. She was a foreigner and a minority, something she had never experienced before. She got some odd looks, and more than one person asked to take a picture with her. It made her a bit bemused, but she took it all in stride. Finally they reached an area of construction and she followed Yoruichi, sneaking into an empty building that was being renovated. (Or torn apart before being demolished, she couldn’t tell.)

At the top floor were two people, obviously waiting for her to arrive; one boy with long brown hair, but long in the front so it partially covered his eyes. He was wearing a red shirt with white leaves on it, and he had darker skin than anyone she had seen around here. He was also taller and more muscular than anyone she had seen on the street, despite him looking quite young.

*Mexican decent? Or whatever their equivalent is?*

The girl was wearing light pink, both her top and skirt, and her hair was lightened to what the Japanese call “chapatsu.” It was long enough reach all the way down her back, and was held in place by two snowflake shaped hairpins. Luna knew what parts of her Susan would be staring at, and felt a momentary pang of jealousy. Her tight top showed her body off well.

“Ah, good, you’re both here,” Yoruichi exclaimed. “Luna, this is Orihime, and Chad. Orihime and Chad, this is Luna. I thought you might like to train with others around instead of alone in that stuffy room. It’s more fun that way, right?”

“Train?” asked Chad.

“Oh, is she like us?” exclaimed Orihime, bouncing over to her. “It’s soooo nice to meet you! You must know Itchigo too? How? Have you known him long? Do you know what your power can do? I guess you must-”

“Orihime, give her a chance to answer,” admonished Chad.

“Oh sorry, I’m just sort of nervous, and excited about all this. Aren’t you, Chad?”

He paused before answering. "Yeah."  
"I knew it! I knew you were! Oh, let's be friends okay?"  
Luna laughed. This girl was all right.

So it turned out that Chad could fire energy blasts and Orihime could summon up a squad of "fairy warriors" that would provide her various abilities.

That is, after they figured out how.  
*So wait, they've only done it once?*

They stood here, simply yelling and throwing their hands in the air (like there was room for free will in a deterministic universe) to try and activate them. This wasn't successful in the least. Luna didn't really have anything to add, so she simply sat on a wooden crate nearby and concentrated on making her piece of crystal shine, she's gonna let it shine. But Yoruichi bade them to remember how they were feeling the first time their powers activated, and she looked up.

"You have something to add?"

"No, it just sounded so familiar," Luna admitted. "Susan said nearly the same thing when we were learning how to apparate. When Susan Bones did it she said to fix that event firmly in her mind and recall it for the next time. Then fix that one in her mind as the new standard."

"Sounds like a smart person, this Susan of yours," Yoruichi remarked.

"What's apuretu?" Orihime asked, obviously unsure of the pronunciation.

"Oh, I'll show you." Luna hopped down and put the crystal away, then visualized herself in the other corner of the room. She didn't put any energy into RESolve (not that she would have called it that anyway) but the eight she got was enough to traverse that distance no problem. She shook her limbs out as the others (but not Yoruichi) stared at where she had been. The cat had tracked her, probably from following her spirit energy.

*Ugh, hate that sensation. Well, it was only a short hop.*

"Where did she go?" asked Chad.

"Right over there," the cat answered, pointing with a paw. "We've got a long way to go if you can't track spiritual energy yet."

They gave a start as they saw where she was, and Orihime rushed over to her. "That was so neat! How did you do that? Can you teach us to do that? Can you go anywhere? I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

"It's okay," Luna replied with a laugh. "I did it with magic. No. Anywhere I've seen."

"Oh, right." She concentrated, trying to remember her own questions that she had just gotten answers to.

"Anyway, back to what you were trying to do."

"Right."

Luna just walked back.

They finally managed to call forth their power, though Luna had to immobilize one aspect of her powers that was chasing her around and complaining about being called out when there was no danger.

"Have you never heard of training?" she asked him as he hovered there, unable to move.

"Honestly, he's so uptight," one of the fairies said.

"Serves him right, being like this," said another.

"Being out is fun, he should enjoy it," said a third.

Luna looked them over. They were about as big as a hand, and varied in appearance considerably. Some male, some female. One really wide one, the rest slender. They flew without apparent support and seemed good natured apart from the one. There were six total.

Luna cast a charm to make one of her bottle caps unbreakable so when Chad managed to cover his arm in a kind of armor, he would have something to shoot at that

wouldn't break. So they both got some practice in, both in using and in calling out their abilities.

Luna was impressed, it seemed people here could develop wildly different abilities depending on their personal style, as she had now met swordsmen who were actually souls. An archer that made arrows from environmental energy around him, a man that could shoot energy blasts out of his fist, and a woman protected by seemingly sentient, tiny, flying people. They had encouraged her, and reminded her how they could be used and directed.

*How can her power know better than she can how it should be used? Would Belahime know what she could do, if I asked her what her called out ability is? She knew she wanted 'a drink' but couldn't articulate what that meant. Or was that a limitation in me? She looked the two over. The variation is astonishing. Everyone that learns magic gets the same spells. They can be better or worse, based on practice, but still if you know what magic can do, you can probably tell what someone holding a wand will attempt in any given situation. But around here, you never know what someone might do, because their powers are so individualized. She touched her wand, now back in the holster. However, it stands to reason whatever power we call out of our wands would be fairly personal, so if I ever make it back home and can teach the technique to others, we might get that way too.*

And so the group trained together for the next ten days. Ichigo learned the name of his sword and called out its power, which made Luna pout a bit.

"Don't be discouraged," Kisuke had told her. "That guy has so much spirit energy, his spiritual conduits were blown open long ago. He's going to have to learn to control it the other way, if he ever wants to do any sneaking around. He's like a beacon to anyone that can sense energy at a distance. Which will be basically everybody where he's going."

"Oh."

They worked together under the shop, Luna floating bottle caps around for Chad to try and hit, and when he was recovering she shot bolts of light at Orihime to stop with her "sacred tri-link shield." Ichigo of course studied sword fighting with Kisuke, who it turned out had a soul slayer hidden in his cane. Luna herself got instruction in lighting up her crystal, which after ten days of them helping her and more trips to her inner soulscape, was lighting up just fine. Kisuke expressed regret there wasn't more time to try and help her activate its power, but said she was at least ready to make the attempt now. She had been watching Ichigo do it, and figured it didn't look that hard.

"But the difficulty is based on how powerful the sword, or in this case, the wand, becomes," Kisuke explained. "These that are not as powerful are easier to call out. So while it may be good in the short term to have the power released right away, it also means you won't get much benefit from the transformation. Better to have to struggle a bit, that will mean the powers of the new form will be special and helpful."

"Wait, new form? You think my wand will change form, just like Ichigo's sword does?"

"Impossible to say, really. But I wouldn't rule it out."

"I guess you're right. Neat." *But isn't his sword basically a part of him? Like those clothes he wears when he comes out of his body to go into spiritual form. He's not naked, they're just spirit energy. So really they could look like anything. This,* she looked at her wand, *is a physical object made of wood. How in the heck would it change?*

And so the group (Luna was on her broom, and Uryu (the Quincy) was coming too so he was standing there) stood before the portal to the spirit world, and threw themselves inside knowing it would only stay open four minutes.

Their journey to help Rukia had truly begun.

This is Not a Fight Manga

When: Just after four minutes later

Where: The afterlife

There were some lyrics Luna couldn't get out of her head as she flew next to the others that were running from what looked like a locomotive. They were traveling down a dark, damp passageway that was closing up behind them, and in deadly danger. But she couldn't help humming.

*In the afterlife.  
You could be headed for the serious strife.  
Now you make the scene all day.  
But tomorrow there'll be Hell to pay.*

Orihime blocked the train looking thing at the last second, and the group were spat out of the portal to splat upon the ground in various embarrassing poses. Luna, of course, was fine, simply hovering on her boom.

"Everyone okay?" she called down.

"Just peachy," answered Itchigo, trying to sit up. "I guess we made it then."

The group looked around and from where she sat, it looked like the group had landed in an old Japanese fishing village from a thousand or so years ago.

"This is your afterlife?" Luna blurted, thinking that this couldn't be right. The streets were dirt, the houses ramshackle and run down. "This is what you have to look forward to when you die?"

"This is it. Good to be home," remarked Yoruichi, looking around. "Smell that air!"

"I am, it's..." Uryu wrinkled his nose. "How can it even *have* a smell? We're souls at the moment."

"One of those little mysteries," he answered.

"Hey, that part looks better," Orihime said, pointing. And it did. At least, not in terms of modern construction, but the streets were stone and the buildings looked better too. Better built and better repaired. It also stretched as far as the eye could see.

"Looks like that's where we need to go!" yelled Itchigo. "Come on, let's get there and under cover before we're spotted." He started towards it.

"Wait!" cautioned Yoruichi. "Don't approach carelessly or you'll die!"

"Die?" He dodged out of the way as enormous blocks of stone fell out of nowhere, forming a wall around the place. Dust and debris flew from the impact, and Luna had to put her broom in forward motion just to stay where we was. "Oh," he said, looking up at it from where he had fallen.

*Now how in the world did they do that?*

"It's been a long time," said a voice up ahead, "since someone has tried to come through the gate of pure souls without a pass."

As the dust cleared and Itchigo struggled up again, a figure at least three times as tall as normal humans came into view. He was carrying a huge ax, and looked down at the intruders.

"Come at me any way you like!" he challenged them, smacking an ax handle on the ground. Luna could see him clearly now, the dust was gone. All obstacles disappeared. From the fez (which was cool) adorning his head to the odd clothes he was wearing. His clothing was only half there, covering only half his chest. (To be accurate it was three quarters there, nothing below the belt was visible for which Luna was eternally grateful) His chest was partially bare, and he had a strange looking arm guard on the side that was not covered in cloth.

Yoruichi introduced him to the others, leading Uryu to say "Basically, in order to enter, we have no choice but to defeat him."

This shook Luna out of her reverie. "Are you nuts?" she called down to him. "We're not here to go around beating people up. Honestly, men! Weren't you *listening?*"

"What?"

“Just... just stay there a second. And don't arrow anybody. Beat him up, honestly, what's that going to help?” She flew over to the man, coming to his eye level. ““Hello sir,” she called.

“What's this?” he asked. “A flying girl?”

“My name is Luna. You're Jidanbou according to our guide?”

“That's right. What can I do for you, little lady?”

“You mentioned a pass. Where would we go to get a pass to enter the court? We need to see someone inside fairly urgently.”

“Ugh, what?”

“When you came down, you said we didn't have a pass. Where would we go to get one?”

“Get a pass?” He rubbed his chin. “I did say that, didn't I?” He set the ax in his other hand on his shoulder and was apparently thinking it over. “Pass. Pass. Oh!”

“You remember?” she asked excitedly.

“Not a clue!” he said triumphantly. “No one's ever asked that before.”

“Would someone inside know?”

“But you can't get past the gate- oh right you can fly apparently.”

“Apparently,” she replied with a wink, taking off. She peaked over the wall, and people of various ages, sizes, and genders looked back at her. They were all dressed pretty similarly, in that same black outfit that Itchigo had on when he changed.

*And why those clothes, exactly? He wouldn't have thought of them, he wears normal jeans and t-shirts when he's not in school. At least he has when he showed up to train. These people might have a uniform they change into that looks like that, but how did he automatically get it when he went into soul mode? Weird. Where does cloth even come from- heck where does any of this even come from in the afterlife?*

“Hello down there!” she called, waving to them.

There was a general milling about and pointing at her, no one really had expected to see her. Much less have to talk to her.

“How did you get up there?” one person yelled up to her.

“I can fly!” she yelled back, bringing her broom into better view by floating a little higher in the air.

“She's really flying,” was the general sentiment.

“Can you help me?” she called down.

“What do you want?”

“A pass to enter the court! We need to speak to someone about a prisoner that was recently captured. We have important information for their trail!”

Again there was more muttering Luna couldn't make out, but they all seemed confused.

*Do they not know about Rukia's capture? But then, would a soldier necessarily know about goings on in another part the country?*

Finally a man pushed through the others deferred to, and Luna looked down at him. He had pale hair, the same white on black uniform, but his was covered with a white mantle. He had a white belt into which his sword has stuck, and apparently he had no arms. Or maybe they were crossed behind him, but Luna didn't see any sticking out of the sleeves.

“Hello up there!” he called.

“You in charge around here?” Luna called back.

“In a way,” he hedged. Someone whispered something to him, like Luna could hear a normal tone of voice from where she was. “You want a pass to come in here?”

“If that's what we need!”

“Now don't that beat all? Why'd wanna do that?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Can I meet you someplace? All this shouting is getting on my nerves!”

“I suppose as long as you don't touch the ground none, you can't really be said to be here, right?”

“You're inviting me inside?”

“If you want to take it that way.”

*Ugh. But at least he seems willing to explain things.*

So she flew over the wall, feeling a faint discomfort as she did so, and hovered in front of the man. "Much better, thank you," she said to him.

"Why sure thing. You really are flying, and on a broom no less. I really thought it was a tall ladder or somesuch. What can we do for you?"

"I want a pass to visit Rukia, she was taken into custody eleven days ago and brought back here."

"Gee, that's never been done before," he admitted. "Course, not many do what she done, either. I'm technically in the protection squads, we're sort of the military around here? But what you're talking about is more a matter related to law enforcement." He scratched his ear. "There are representatives out there you could talk to, in order to get a pass."

"Can you direct me?" she pulled a pad of paper and a pen out of her pouch and handed them over.

He looked at them, back at her, then back down again. He shrugged. "Eh, why not? Been a while since I was out there," *in the slums* hung in the air, unsaid, "but I might be able to give you a rough map." He took them and sketched a quick map, then handed it back.

"Thank you very much!"

"Don't mention it. You have a nice day now, okay?"

"You too!" She waved and took off, flying back over the wall. "I'm back!" she announced, coming to the ground again. "We just have to follow this map and see if the official there will allow us in."

"Let me see that," demanded Yoruichi, and Luna held it up for him to see. "Oh, yes, I guess that would be the place to go in this case."

"Great." She turned to the others. "Honestly, there were dozens of people in there. Did you really think you could just smash the gate down and fight your way through them all? We're here to make sure Rukia gets a fair trial or failing that, rescue her. Not get *ourselves* in trouble with the law."

"I sort of already am," Itchigo admitted. "I'm still walking around with Rukia's powers."

"Did you call out *her* sword's name or *yours*?"

That set him back a pace. "Mine," he admitted. "Unless grumpy old Zangetsu is hers, which I doubt."

"Then the powers are yours, no?" He looked thoughtful but had no answer for her.

"Come on. Thanks for your help!" she called to the big guy, who stared at their backs as they went into the city.

A half an hour later the very puzzled official asked her to please repeat the whole story again, because his age must be catching up to him, he had no idea what she was talking about.

So she again told him she and her friends wanted to access the court and more specifically where prisoners were kept. She wanted information about Rukia's trial (if over) or to sit in on it as witnesses (not her specifically, the others). Or to form some kind of appeal to a higher court with new evidence (brought by them). Or at the very least to talk to the woman before sentencing (if tried but currently unsentenced) or execution (if sentenced). "I mean she has the right to see her friends one last time, doesn't she?"

"This is all very irregular," complained the official. "I can tell you right now, once the sentence has been passed own, it is very rarely overturned again. There's no 'higher court' as you put it."

"No higher court? Preposterous. What if new evidence comes to light? The same court would hear the case?"

"What new evidence?"

"How should I know, I wasn't there for the original trial, was I? But none of us were called to present evidence for or against, and we're the only ones who would have that evidence. Ergo, none was provided. If no evidence is provided, how do they know a crime was even committed?"

"And certainly the intent of the action must be taken into account," put in Uryu. "Some crimes are not crimes if the intent is proven to be non-criminal."

“What about her lawyer, can we speak to them?” asked Orihime.

The man looked between them all. “Who are you people?” he demanded. “What are you talking about? What are these words you keep using?”

“We don’t have such things,” Yoruichi explained. “It’s really quite a backwards system, now that I’m seeing it from the other side... odd.”

“Did that cat just talk!?”

“Now you listen to me,” Luna said, trying a Susan impersonation. *I see why she does it now. This would go on all day otherwise. Honestly, I’m surprised her outbursts don’t happen more often. She’s used to just waving her hands and fixing things. Stuff like this must be extremely frustrating for her.* “You are going to talk to your superiors, who are going to talk to their superiors, up the chain all the way if we have to, until we get an answer. We *will* see Rukia one way or the other. Am I being clear about that?”

“Fine, if it’ll get you out of my office. Wait here a minute.” He stepped out.

“Do you really think this is going to work?” asked Itchigo.

“Better than your plan would have,” Luna assured him. “Do you even know where she’s being kept?”

“No.”

“Do you know the layout of the court? How she’s guarded? Is she even still alive? No? I didn’t think so. If at the very least we get in to see her we can have those questions answered and stand a better chance *sneaking* in and pulling off a rescue.”

“You can teleport!” Orihime realized, snapping her fingers. “Could you get us past the wall?”

“That’s the plan,” she said with a wink. “But I would need to know some quiet spots to go to.” *Hopefully the same principals work here. Susan could teleport into the castle despite it being barred from our kind of magical travel. Because she used a different method altogether. Something pulled at me as I went over the wall, but it wasn’t much, and I hardly felt it. I bet it would similarly have no defense whatsoever against magic. Maybe it was trying to figure out my broom, but as it wasn’t spirit energy based, it didn’t know what to do and just let me pass. I would have to take them one at a time, which would not be pleasant, but neither would them dying of a thousand cuts. Or one. Across the neck.*

“Don’t worry, Kurosaki-kun,” she gushed, grabbing Itchigo’s hands. “She can do it. Her way will work!”

“I hope she knows what she’s doing.”

*I got past the wall. Worst come to worst I’ll just ferry them over that way, one at a time. Hopefully it gets dark around here, we could do it then.*

“If it doesn’t there’s still your plan,” Uryu reminded him. “We’ll have only lost a few minutes waiting here.”

“I guess.”

A tense hour passed.

But the man returned, looking a bit shocked. Following him was a nondescript man with brown hair, eyes, and rectangular glasses. “I found someone who says he’ll let you in,” the man explained.

“I’m Aizen,” said the man with a smile. He wore the same uniform as the man Luna had spoken to, the one with the white mantle. *Must be a more highly ranked official?* “When I heard there was someone flying around I just had to come and see for myself. I’m lucky I ran into this man who was asking around about letting some outsiders in to see Rukia.”

“You can get us in?” Itchigo challenged.

“I don’t see why it would be a problem to let you say goodbye to your friend. You do give your word not to cause any trouble, don’t you?”

Everyone looked over at Itchigo.

“Why is everyone looking at me? You don’t even know me!” he protested to Luna.

“Says Mr. Storming The Castle.” She turned back to Aizen. “He’ll behave.”

“Excellent. Please, come this way.”

The group started to walk towards the inner court, and Aizen fell in beside Luna. "May I ask, was it you who was flying about?"

"Why yes, how did you know?" she asked, becoming slightly suspicious.

"Your spirit energy," he replied. "It doesn't seem to have the same 'flavor' if you will, as the others."

"You can tell that?"

He laughed. "Only after many years of practice, I assure you. Tell me, someone said something about a broom? And is that a wand strapped to your left arm there?"

"Yes, it's a wand." Her hand twitched towards it, wondering if maybe this guy wasn't a little *too* perceptive.

"I have a confession to make."

"Yes?" Her arm went closer.

"I absolutely adored stories about witches when I was a small boy. Riding around on broomsticks, making potions and cackling in the night. Ordering around flying monkeys and looking for dazzling footwear."

"I have never cackled," she clarified with a pout.

He laughed again. "And I don't see any warts on your nose, nor are you green. So obviously some things were, shall we say, dramatized. You don't melt in water either, I bet."

"If I had, showers would be a-" She stopped dead. "Are you talking about the Wizard of Oz?"

"Hey, I know that story!" Orihime spoke up.

"What?" She looked over at the others, who were nodding. "You all know that story?"

"I do," added Chad.

"How is that possible?"

"How is it not possible?" asked Aizen. "It was written many years ago, and when the man came here he continued his writings. His imagination knows no bounds, when it comes to his fantastic world."

*Stories can cross realities? What's a story in one can be a story in another? I suppose if the same person is in two realities, there's a chance they would write the same story. Guess I shouldn't be shocked at anything that happens, I don't really know enough about the mechanics of traversing the multiverse to say that something is impossible. What do I know? One book being found in two realities? Why not? Who says it's even the same story? It could just be similar, with totally different words chosen.*

He continued. "I always thought Dorothy was a bit in the wrong. It was her house that killed the witch's sister. Isn't it right her possessions go to a family member? Dorothy basically stole the shoes of a recently dead person. All right the house wasn't her fault, but she made no protest about keeping the shoes. That's just not right." He started walking again, and the others followed.

"Guess I never thought of it that way," Luna admitted.

"There are two sides to every story," Aizen told her.

"Are you trying to tell me something? Like maybe Rukia is guilty, and should be punished?"

"I'm just talking about my absolute delight in meeting a real witch. You *are* a real witch, are you not?"

"I don't know, technically I haven't graduated school yet. I'll go back and do so when I return home," *and maybe teach a class of my own?* "But it was important to go with my friend so the headmaster allowed me to defer my last year."

"What a kind fellow he must be! And probably the stereotypical wizard with funny hat, long beard, half-moon spectacles?"

"Yes, that's the guy."

"Splendid!" He seemed really pleased. "What a delight to find out these things are real. I simply must make a sojourn to the real world and look for this magnificent school of yours. The world really has changed if real witches and wizards now exist. Tell me, what it is called?"

"Hogwarts." *Good luck finding it, it's in another reality.*

"Is it really now? And this friend, you must think quite highly of her. Could I meet her as well?"

“Susan? We got separated. I hope she comes to find me, in fact I’m sure she will, but she’s not around at the moment.”

“Susan you say? What a fine name. Ah, we turn left here. It’s a bit maze like past here, keep together or you’ll get lost and have a heck of a time explaining why you’re here. You can see our destination, it’s that tower there in the distance. Should we get separated, head there or have whoever finds you escort you. Just give them my name and we’ll get it sorted out. Now over there you can see...”

Smoothly, very smoothly, Aizen turned conversation to the local layout and history of the place, which had become far more splendid as they had made their way back to the inner court. He asked about the others, how they knew Rukia and what school they went to. He even remarked he could feel some kind of power coming from them and they were eager to talk about it.

*What a nice man*, Luna thought, *taking the time to do this for us. He’s very personable.* The others seemed to like him, and Yoruichi silently padded alongside them, not suspecting anything was amiss.

But of course, it was.

The group stood before a large tower, connected to the nearest point via rickety wooden bridge. Aizen went to speak to the guards to get the access key, and Luna looked around so she could find some good places to teleport to. *Though I suppose directly inside the prison would be best. That way we would even get some time to escape without anyone even suspecting she's gone.*

"If you would come this way?" Aizen asked politely. "The guards are opening the door for us."

The group crossed the bridge and he let them inside. "I'll be waiting right out here," he told them. "Take all the time you need."

"Thank you," everyone said to him, passing through the door. Inside was basically an unadorned stone tower, with stairs along the edge leading to window slits that could be looked out of. And nothing else.

Well, Rukia was there, the "nothing else" above was to indicate there was no furniture. No TVs, no other cell mates, no bars at all really, (iron or drink serving) it was a drab, awful place. Luna said as much.

"This is a drab, awful place!"

"What... what are you all doing here?" Rukia demanded, hopping down the wide steps to see them.

"We come to bust you out, sister," Luna said playfully.

"You can't!" she protested.

"Not right this second," Luna agreed. "We just needed to be sure you were all right."

"I'm fine. How did you all get here?"

"Are you really okay?" Itchigo asked, running to her and grabbing her shoulders. "Why did you just run off like that?"

"I was trying to save your life," she replied, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. "You weren't supposed to follow me here."

"What were we supposed to do? Just forget you? No way. Especially considering what happened. No lawyers? Was there even a trial? Why lock you up like this?" He indicated the tower.

"It's traditional," Rukia explained, as though to a small child. "I'm supposed to sit for thirty days and think about what I did."

*They're making you stand in the corner? What are you, five?*

"Oh, that's not contrived," Uryu added.

"You stay out of it. You shouldn't even be here!"

"Sorry for being worried about a classmate."

"You just wanted a chance to get revenge on Renji."

"No I didn't." But his tone and gaze betrayed that was probably exactly what he was thinking.

She glared at him, then at the others. "And what about you all? What made you think coming here was a good idea?"

"Why shouldn't we come see our friend?" Orihime asked, confused. "I mean turning into spirits I guess was a little dangerous, but it worked out in the end."

"Worked out? How did you even get here? The other captains didn't try to stop you?"

"One led us here," Luna explained. "He's right outside. We asked to come see you, and he agreed."

Rukia sat on the step, her strength leaving her. "You... just asked?"

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't have believed it. You seriously just asked? And they let you in?"

"Well Mr. Hothead here wanted to charge the gate, beat up everybody, and take you by force but luckily cooler heads prevailed."

“By that she means she flew over the wall, talked to someone, and then found a representative outside the wall who would get us a pass to get in,” explained Yoruichi.

“Did that cat just talk?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” he asked, licking a paw and washing an ear.

“What a novel idea,” Rukia admitted. “Probably why it worked, someone’s having a laugh at our expense. Or gathering forces right outside the door right now.”

“Why would they do that?” Luna asked honestly. “We’ve seen you, and as agreed we’ll be on our way. We haven’t broken any laws, what would they hold us on? We were invited in, and we’ll leave as agreed.”

“But Itchigo has my powers!”

“So? He’s the *victim* here, of your supposed law-breaking. You don’t take a gunshot victim to jail for illegal possession of bullets. You take the bullets out of them. If someone wants to collect his powers later, that’s a separate thing.”

“You don’t know how these people think. They’ll just want him dead too.”

“Then social changes are needed, *immediately*.” *And Susan thought wizard law was bad back home!*

“That won’t help you!”

“Ladies, please,” Chad begged, stepping between them. “We’ve done what we came here to do, yes?”

Both backed down, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s better.”

“Do you have what you need?” Yoruichi asked.

“You aren’t seriously thinking of taking me out of here right now?”

Luna shook her head. “That would reflect badly on the guy who was nice enough to let us in. We’ll depart, as promised.”

“But you could teleport her out?” Orihime asked.

“Maybe. But one at a time. I can’t risk more, I’m not all that practiced in the technique. And what if I couldn’t get back in for some reason? You would all be stuck here and then you would be in trouble, for the jailbreak.”

“Teleport?” asked Rukia.

“That’s the plan. Just sit tight. You have days left, right?”

“Nearly twenty by my count.”

“Then there’s plenty of time. We know your location and how you’re guarded. We’ll get back here one way or another and spring you.”

“They’ll just send more people after me!”

“I was actually thinking about that,” Itchigo said. “You had a fake body made, right? So normal people could see you?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Why not just have one made that didn’t look like you?”

“Ah-” Her mouth hung open.

“Hey, that would be a great disguise!” agreed Luna. “They could walk right past you and- shoot, I wish I had known before this!”

“Why?”

“We could have swapped. Bring one that looks like me and one that looks like her. Put me in the one that looks like her and leave me. Put her in the one that looks like me and she walks out. Then that night I just teleport out.”

“That would only work in the real world, not this one,” explained Yoruichi. “A fake body would a soul formed construct here.”

“Oh, I get it, we wouldn’t ‘fit’ into it. Still, would have been nice to know. Maybe we could have brought a fake to prop up and she could get in the pouch or something. The option would have been nice.”

“Anyway,” Itchigo turned back to Rukia. “We’ll get you out now that we know you’re okay.”

“Don’t put yourselves in danger for me.”

"Don't give us that," Luna protested. "There has been a grave injustice (see what I did there?) done here and we're going to make it right. Once you're out you can start stirring up support by telling your side of things. Expose the corruption in the government. Or, you know, just hide out and pretend it never happened."

"I'll think about it. But you, I don't even know you. Why are you here?"

"It's something my friend Susan would have done, for one. How can I fail to live up to that ideal? And I think events swirl around this happening. How can it be coincidence I landed where and when I did? Plus I'm a stranger here, I need friends in this world, and fast. How better to make them that rescue you? I mean they'll owe me big time, right?"

"Is that why you're doing it?" Orihime asked, eyes big.

"What if the situation were reversed? You fell into my world and watched two guys beating me up. You have no money, you can't read the language, you have nothing to rely on but your own wits. Wouldn't you help with the possibility of gaining knowledge of the world and allies on your side when it was over? Even if it was in the back of your mind, not the foremost reason? I'm just being honest right now."

"I suppose."

"So sit tight," Itchigo told her. "And expect, I have no idea what. But something. Soon."

"I guess I can't dissuade you."

"That's right. See you."

Everyone said goodbye to her, and after knocking on the door found that there were no more guards than there were before, and Aizen was standing there expectant.

"Did you say what you wanted to say?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks," replied Itchigo. "She's being treated, if not well, at least as per customs here, so we really can't say too much about that."

"And you'll follow me peacefully back outside the inner court?"

"We will."

"Then let us proceed."

They made their way back and Aizen left them at the place they had entered from.

"Thank you very much," Luna said to him. "It just goes to show that sometimes, amazing things can happen if you just *think for a second* and *ask* instead of just running off someplace."

"Indeed. Everyone, have a restful stay and a safe trip home. Here," he handed them a small pouch. "There are some inns nearby that are not... totally horrible. Stay the night on me."

Itchigo took it. "Thanks, that should make things easier."

"Of course. We probably won't meet again, not until you all die, anyway." He laughed. "See you then." He walked off with a wave.

*Did he just imply it would be soon?*

Itchigo opened the pouch and it indeed contained coins. "They use money here?" he asked in general.

"Apparently," Uryu agreed, taking one. It was a small iron coin with a rectangular hole in the middle. "Weird."

"Let's see about finding an inn and getting some rest. We're going to have a busy night," predicted Luna. *If indeed it ever becomes night here.*

But it did, and the group left the inn and headed to the wall.

"Now if this works," Luna told them, "I'll just go to the cell she's in, get her back here, and we signal to have the gate opened again to get us back home."

"How do we do that, by the way?" Uryu asked. "I think I missed that before we left."

"Well, we, uh... how do we do that?" Luna asked.

Everyone looked at everyone else, and came up at a loss.

"You don't think that shopkeeper wanted to strand us here, did he?" Orihime asked nervously.

"There are certain gates to the real world we can use," Yoruichi explained. "One thing at a time."

"How do you know so much about it?" Luna asked her, suddenly thinking of it. "You knew that gatekeeper's name, and you obviously knew Aizen because you made no protest about him leading us around. Who are you?"

"Yeah, why are you helping us?" Uryu asked. "Luna made her case..."

"You're going to start questioning me *meow?*"

*Oh, that was just bad.*

"I just wonder why we didn't question it before," Chad mused.

"I'm with Kisuke, isn't that good enough?"

"And how does a shopkeeper have a soul blade and a hidden training area and all that?" Uryu further wondered. "Doesn't that seem strange to you all?"

There were nods around the group.

"Never mind that, let's just get Rukia and go!"

"Very well, but I want some answers when we get back," Itchigo growled.

Luna readied herself and visualized standing in the cell where Rukia had been. She apparated, but found it taking much less time than she had expected. Blinking away the feeling of being squashed she noticed something was up. She hadn't gone quite as far as she had hoped. In fact, she had hardly gone anywhere at all. She made a 10 LUCK check, so she wasn't seen, but from what she could tell she was simply on the other side of the wall. She shrugged mentally. *Probably had to get through the wall in my first jump, then into the cell with a second. Maybe I screwed up the "check" as Susan would say? I'll try again.*

But this time instead of going forward she seemed magnetically pulled back to this spot, and went nowhere.

*That's odd. Never had that happen before. Is this wall doing something? But how, they would have no concept of magic around here. Her blood went cold. But there is one who would. The Darkness. It would know about magic, and how to counter it even here. Have I stumbled onto some plot and I'm going to be sorry I stuck with these guys? But no, I'm the only source of information they have. Otherwise they would trying to fight it totally blind. Can I even get out again?* She tried, and was just stuck at this end of the wall. *Great, just great.* She got her broom out and, after closing her eyes and feeling if anyone was around, decided it was safe and zipped back over. As she had thought, the others were standing right there.

"What happened?" asked Itchigo.

"I didn't get anywhere," she explained. "Something stuck me to the wall. I tried getting further out, but it didn't work, I just felt pulled back to the wall."

"So now what?"

"I'll get us over the wall at least. If we can sneak back to where we were, we can still do this. I'll just have to ferry us over the wall on my broom once we get back here."

"Should we all go?" asked Chad. "More people means more chances to get separated, or spotted."

"But also more people to fight if we do," reasoned Itchigo. "I say we started this together, we end it together."

Uryu seemed fine with it, but Orihime seemed worried.

"We got this far without fighting," she told them. "I hope we can keep that up."

"We'll do our best. It's up to your sneaking skills," Luna told her.

"I can scout the way, a black cat is perfect for this," Yoruichi told them.

"And don't sell me short, I have more going for me than just magic," Luna told them. "I can warn if someone's coming. I am sort of a Seer you know."

"That reminds me, you better dampen down your spirit energy, Itchigo. Someone feels that walking around they may want to investigate."

"I'll try," he said, not sounding like he liked the idea.

"One at a time then. The sensation isn't pleasant, but as souls you should be okay. Who's first?"

They discussed it, and Luna took Uryu. "He's the most experienced, and has long range attacks," she told them. "I can't say this isn't a trap of some kind, though I don't get any

sense it is yet, but attacking from range would be better. If I have to get him out of there via broom, he can defend himself while riding it. You can't, Itchigo."

"Fine, just go."

*And I hate to just take Orihime, though her shield would probably be more ideal than arrows. She's not a combatant, she might panic if discovered. Uryu seems pretty cool under fire.*

So one by one the group was snuck in. Yoruichi was small enough to be carried with someone, and they found an empty room to hide in until everyone was safely inside the wall.

"You can lead us back to the cell?" Itchigo asked Yoruichi.

"I can."

"Then let's go."

The group advanced, Yoruichi on point. With a combination of her stealth, Luna's *ESP* and *premonition*, plus some quick thinking by Orihime the group got close after about two hours. (Orihime it seemed could 'reject' something inside the field generated by two of her fairy spirits. This is how she healed, rejecting the wound rather than direct healing as Susan or Luna would have done with magic. So when they got pincered she simply rejected a portion of wall, which was quieter than blowing it up, stepped into a side passageway, and then rejected the rejection putting it back. Luna was impressed.)

The bridge and tower access were guarded as they were before, by lower ranking officers that carried these weird pole arms. They were a staff taller than the person with a U shaped bit of iron at the end, more for pinning someone in place than actively hurting them. Eyes now looked out at the tower from hiding.

"I'll take care of the guards," Luna told them. "I can stun them from the air, and from the back side first. That way they shouldn't raise an alarm. You rush the bridge after that. Orihime, can you reject that door?"

"I bet I can!"

"Great. We get her out and make our way back to the wall. I'll carry her on my broom, she's probably not in the best shape after sitting in there for nearly two weeks. Same deal on the way out though, Yoruichi, then me, then the rest of you. We move together and get out together."

"Shouldn't you just jump her out immediately?" Uryu asked. "You can make it back to and over the wall from here, right?"

"And leave you all? What good will that do if then you get captured? We would have just traded one prisoner for many others, who now would be guilty of breaking the law here."

"Plus she can't make it back to the real world without us," Chad reminded him. "So she would still be trapped, just in a larger box."

"Good point."

"Tell me when they're not looking in this direction," she told them, getting her broom out. "I'll signal you when it's safe."

It wasn't long before they said "now" and she took off above the place. To physically describe it, there was a tall tower standing alone inside a deep pit. Connected to this by the bridge was a wooden guard house, reaching only a few stories tall. The tower, well, it literally towered over everything in this area, so the guard house was not nearly as impressive. It had balconies all the way around, and that is where the guards currently were. They were not exactly the cream of the crop, but there were four, probably one for each corner. They were not exactly at their assigned posts, instead wandering around on the balcony and talking to each other.

*I can't use a stunning spell, that makes a red light. But there is another spell I could use.* Luna flew high overhead and then across and down, coming to hover over the roof of the place. *No outcry yet. We might just pull this off.*

"*Petrificus Totalus,*" she cast, taking the full time. She needed a "twelve" to cast it, but got an "eleven." She only knew the spell hadn't worked because the guy didn't fall over. She then had to wait until one was in a good position again, and gave it another go.

This time she was more careful with her wand movement and got a “sixteen” making the first one go down.

“Hey, what was that?” asked the guy who got the highest on *perception*.

“What was what?”

“You didn’t hear a thump?”

“I didn’t hear a thump. Hey, you hear a thump?”

“I didn’t hear a thump. You hear a thump?”

“I didn’t hear a thump. He heard a thump.”

“You heard a thump?”

“I’m just going to check it out. Honestly, why do I have guard duty with you jokers all the time?” He went grumbling to the other side where Luna was waiting for him.

“*Petrificus Totalus.*”

“Okay, now I heard a thump.”

“So I did!”

*Great, but I can probably get two of them at once.*

“The two rushed over, and Luna once again cast *“Petrificus Totalus.”*

Both fell, all four had been paralyzed. Luna cupped her hand around her wand.

“*Lumos. Nox. Lumos. Nox.*” She watched as the others crept across the bridge and made it to the door, so she swooped down under the bridge to get out of sight.

“I reject!” called Orihime, and the group rushed inside.

Tense seconds went by.

“She’s not here,” called Uryu softly.

“What do you mean, she’s not here?” Luna rose on her broom and shot inside, quickly racing through the place straight up. She held her wand high overhead. “*Lumos!*” She was also turning and scanning the stairs, but no trace of Rukia could be found.

“Oh no, it’s a trap!” called Uryu, the glow of his bow lighting up the entranceway. Chad put his arm out and it transformed, and Itchigo got his sword out.

“What?” Luna swung close to the slits on that side and looked out, and there were an awful lot of people on their way here, holding torches and swords and whatnot.

“We’re totally cut off!” Itchigo growled, looking around.

“How could we have been so stupid?” asked Uryu. “At least they’ll have to come single file across the bridge.”

“Put the door back at least, that’ll slow them down,” called Luna, flying down to the others. “You can destroy the bridge through the slits, right? How good a shot are you?”

“I’m very good!” Uryu assured them, and started up the stairs to get a good vantage point. “I can cut the ropes that hold it up, give me a second.”

“But won’t that just make us more trapped here?” Chad asked.

“I’ll blow out the other side with magic,” Luna planned. “I can ferry you out one at a time if I have to, go straight up so they can’t reach me, and make a couple of trips.”

“I reject!” The door came back.

“Can someone widen this a little?” Uryu called, trying to get a good angle out one of the slits. “I can almost reach it.”

“Be right there!”

“Wait, something coming up through the floor!” Itchigo called, reading his sword. It was true, in the gloom of Luna’s *lumos* spell one of the blocks that made up the floor was trembling and lifting. “Stand ready!”

“I’m going to surprise them, lift it off!” Luna called. Itchigo got to one side, and Chad covered the other. “Box in that third side with your shield, don’t let them go that way!”

“Right. I reject!” A shimmering triangular shield covered one side, and Luna took the last one.

“*Locomotor Block!*” she cast, again taking the full time. It was fairly heavy, but she managed a “fifteen” and the block smoothly popped out of the hole.

“You kids need some help?” Aizen asked as he poked his head out of the hole.

## Escape

When: No time has passed

Where: The tower floor

The scene, if one needs reminding, is that our heroes had just snuck into the tower to rescue their friend, Rukia. Or in Luna's case the complete stranger. But you get the idea. Sadly, she wasn't actually in residence and there were powerful people coming to capture the group. But there was a secret passage into and out of the tower, which Aizen had just popped up out of, asking them if they needed help.

Aizen looked at the group, weapons ready to blast/chop to pieces whatever came out of the hole in the floor. "I mean if you would rather take your chances out there, it's fine with me."

"You're helping us?" asked Itchigo. "Why?"

"Perhaps I think there are two sides to her story, as well," he theorized. "Is now really the time to get into it?"

Itchigo looked over at the others. "Well?"

"They already have us, this would be going a little too far," Luna figured.

The others agreed, and she levitated the stone back into position as the last one down the ladder. The group climbed down and down, finally reaching the area under the tower.

"Here I must leave you," Aizen told them. "But I've come prepared. I have a map-"

"Wait a second, where's Rukia?" demanded Itchigo. "I thought she would be down here!"

"Oh, no, she's not here," answered Aizen. "She was moved after your visit. I had to report it, of course, and the others believed it might be a prelude to a rescue attempt."

"Which it was," agreed Chad.

"Which it was," repeated Aizen. "But I know where she got moved to. I'll get her out and send her along. You can meet at the end of the route I've marked out for you on this map. Don't get lost, the tunnels down here are quite extensive."

"We'll come with you!"

Aizen shook his head. "Best if you just get out. You've not really been seen, and so you're still innocent. Not so if you're seen with me. Plus that shows me to be a traitor, and I could no longer provide you any assistance from the shadows like I have been."

"But can you do it unseen?" protested Luna.

He smiled. "Thank you for your concern, but to answer your question, yes." He indicated his sword. "The powers of my sword will allow me to get her out unquestioned. You really should go. I'll send her on shortly, you have my word."

"We'll just have to trust him," Itchigo stated. "He didn't betray us before. Thank you."

"Of course. Here's the map." He handed it over. "As you can see, you're here and you start down this passage and turn right."

"I see it. Okay, keep that light on Luna and let's get out of here."

"Thank you," Luna said honestly. *I guess he was just curious about me.*

"Not at all. Seemed you didn't have to die for us to see each other again. Go well." He turned and made his way down the other way, presumably to come up elsewhere. The others turned and followed the map. There were a series of twists and turns, and about an hour of tense walking through the place, but nothing attacked them. At the end was a very long tunnel that ended in another ladder, and when the group climbed it they found themselves in a field someplace, the city off in the distance. Itchigo lowed the trap door and slid down the ladder.

"We'll wait here for Rukia," he announced.

As they had walked, Yoruichi had told them what she knew about Aizen, that we has a captain of some renown that was neither a freak like that weirdo Kurotsuchi or lazy like Kyoraku. He did his job, was good to his subordinates, and could at times display more power than most gave him credit for.

The group waited. The sun came up over the fields. They started to get worried. Finally, after a few hours Itchigo decided something had happened and they needed to get back there. The group agreed, and they started off. They were met with a surprise, however,

as having turned back they ran into a collapsed portion of the tunnel they had last gone down, the straight part. It was far enough back that they hadn't heard any explosion or collapse, and stood staring at it in shock.

"So now what?" asked Uryu, scrambling down from the top of the rubble. He had tried digging a bit but it seemed the passageway was blocked for quite a ways.

"We disturb this, and the whole thing could come down on us," cautioned Chad.

"So what, we've got to head out, then back into the city and then somehow cross the wall again?" Itchigo asked.

"Plus figure out where Rukia is now being held, and come up with another rescue plan," Luna agreed.

"Are you sure we shouldn't just do it my way?"

"No!" everyone shouted.

"Okay, okay. Bite my head off why don't you."

"Could you move this rock, with magic?" asked Yoruichi.

Luna shook her head. "No more easily than the others. I could blast it, but that might cause it to collapse further."

"Luna."

"Too bad. I guess we have no choice but to go around. How did this even happen, anyway?"

"Luna."

"Wait, someone's calling me. Hello?"

"Luna."

"I don't hear anything," Uryu said, as everyone was looking around.

"Wand."

"Oh, I think it's Belahime. Maybe she has some insights. Just a minute." She sat down and pulled her wand out, taking some deep breaths to steady herself. In a moment she was looking at the fountain, merry bubbling away.

"You heard me, good."

"What's going on?"

"Call me out. I can help."

"Really? That's great, but how?"

"You'll see. I know you might be nervous about this, but if you can reach me out there as you do in here, it will save you some time."

"I'll give it a try!"

"I hope to be with you soon."

The scene faded.

"I'm going to try calling out my wand's power," she announced, standing up.

"Will that make your magic stronger?" asked Yoruichi.

"I don't know, but Belahime says she can help. I'm willing to give it a try. There's no risk involved, is there?"

"None that I know, but how do we know soul slayers and wands are similar in this respect?"

"I guess we don't. But if this works and she can help..."

"I wish you luck."

"Any tips, Itchigo? You've done it now a couple of times."

"Don't force it, persuade it," he answered after a moment.

"Okay, I'll try. Here goes-" She sent energy into the wand through her fingertips. "*Seek for the truth, Belahime!*"

At this point, Luna needs a 10 to succeed on this check, while her current maximum is an eleven. That means there's a 2/11 chance she makes it. She gets an eight on her first attempt, and the narrator is spending XP for her to succeed because that's how non-paragon characters work, right? As long as they can reasonably succeed at something they typically do. Moving on.

Luna found herself holding the magnifying glass instead of her wand, and thought *that answers that question about it changing*. The group congratulated her on pulling it off (they didn't know what we do) but then became more serious.

"So what's it do?" asked Itchigo, being a pragmatist.

"I've no idea!" Luna chirped. "But I guess the shape suggests looking through it, so let's take a peak, shall I?"

She looked down the hall at the rubble, and while it wasn't visual exactly, she knew that there was a weak point in the debris. A weak point that if hit properly, could clear the whole thing and be safe. She walked towards it, keeping that point in sight, and then pulled a bottle cap out of her pocket.

"Can you all target this with your attacks?" she asked, setting it on the point she knew was correct. "And it has to go straight through, not come in at an angle."

Uryu and Chad looked at each other and nodded.

"Your wand told you this?" Yoruichi enquired.

"Not in so many words. But I think part of the truth of something is any weaknesses it has. And so it showed me that."

"Guess it can't hurt to try it."

"I can help too, Tsubaki can chop straight through it," Orihime offered.

"Looks like we have a plan," Yoruichi allowed. "Get into position, everyone."

And so those with ranged attack (which was, uh, everybody not a cat) squeezed together so they could be as straight on as they could and on a count of three sent their attack down the hallway towards the bottle cap. The rock and dirt blew outward, and enough of the passageway was cleared to allow them to make their way back to the maze part, and follow the map backwards to get to the tower again.

"I hope Aizen's all right," Orihime said to Luna as they waited their turn on the ladder.

"I do too." *I hope he hasn't betrayed us. But if he was our enemy, why help us escape?*

Itchigo and Chad shouldered the block out of the way, revealing the once again empty tower... which wasn't empty. There was a young man there with a broom, now trembling in fear as a bunch of people poured out of the secret passage.

"What do we have here?" Itchigo demanded, pointing his blade at the kid.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me!" repeated the boy.

"Where's Rukia?" he demanded.

"You're too late," he insisted. "She's gone."

"I know that. Where?"

"How would he know, Kurosaki-kun?" asked Uryu. "Let's just go."

"I do know, so there!"

"Where then?" he asked, his bow appearing again.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me!"

"How did you get to be a death god?" asked Yoruichi.

"Did that cat-"

"Don't even say it," interrupted Itchigo. "Rukia. Where?"

"The execution was moved up. It goes against tradition, but given the odd happenings last night, that's what they decided."

"Moved up to when?"

"Today, sometime, I guess? Soon maybe?"

"What?" everyone said at once.

"Don't look at me, I'm just supposed to clean the place out for the next person. Not that it was used a lot before this."

"I know where they'll do it," Yoruichi told them. "But getting there, that's the problem. It's up on that high peak you might have seen. Come here, I'll show you out the window slits. They're supposed to point to the thing that's going to kill you."

*Because that's not mean.*

"Stay there," Chad told the boy.

"Yes!"

They all took turns looking out the window.

“You mean we’ll have to walk all the way down the stairs to ground level,” Itchigo asked, “then back up another huge set of stairs cut into the side of area there to get to the top?”

“Exactly. It’s not far if you can fly, but walking there will take a long time.”

“I can fly. I could take someone with me, too. How will the execution take place?”

“See that huge spear? It’ll be released from the ground and stab her.”

“Right, because that’s practical,” Uryu grumped.

“More of that tradition stuff again.”

“Which I’m getting a little tired of.”

*Me too.*

“So presumably she’s there’s now?”

“Or on her way up the stairs, yes.”

“Then it’s perfect. I just fly over there, pluck her off, and meet you guys back here. We escape through the tunnel again, and are now out in the wilderness where we can plan our next move.”

“Want me to come?” Uryu asked.

“No, this time I want Orihime.”

“What, me?” she asked, pointing to her nose.

“You can block that thing if we get there too late. Arrows won’t do.”

“Block... that huge thing?”

“Does the size matter?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never really blocked anything for real, before.”

“I believe in you. Will you come with me?”

She looked the group over. “I came this far, I guess. I have to see it through.”

“Good answer. You could also block any attacks they send at us while I take care of her restraints, if any.”

“Can you carry three people?” asked Yoruichi.

“Not three full grown adults, no, but have you seen the size of that girl? She’s tiny!”

“True.”

“She’s smaller than me!”

“I agree with you.”

“We won’t have the same speed, but I’m hopeful that the distance will work for us once I get her. They won’t be able to fly after me, right?”

(I mean, no one uses “walking on air” at this point. During his fight with Renji, (either one) he could have just stood on air and used his superior reach to take Itchigo out without risk. But no, he just stays on the ground. So obviously this is something the Bleach authors thought of later and sort of ‘retconned’ in with no explanation. Sort of like the underage restriction of magic while Hermione is bragging about doing magic at home at the start of the series. So we’re ignoring the skill because *it doesn’t exist*. Why make TWO separate flying objects (in the anime) for people that can walk on air? And rapidly move from place to place? Answer- they wouldn’t. And in the anime when Itchigo is freeing Rukia no one ‘air jumps’ up there to stop him, they just stand around the ground. And let him. So there.)

“True,” he agreed, because of the above. “But we might be able to in the future.”

“Why is that?”

“Reasons?”

Luna blinked at the cat who was not making sense. “I’m going now.” She pulled out her broom and went to put away her wand. She blinked at it. It was a wand again. *Now how about that?*

“That’s probably for the best.”

So the two girls sped off, Orihime delighted to be flying and hanging on to Luna as she did. “We’ll buzz the stairs first, then head to the upper section,” Luna told her. “The further from that weapon we are, the better I’ll feel.”

“I agree. Why can we still talk normally? I figured there would be crazy wind going on.”

“Magic. It’s a charm on the broom itself. Like the one keeping you on because have you ever tried balancing on a stick? It’s not going to work.”

“Ah.”

But the stairs were empty, and as Luna approached the spear sort of caught fire and rose out of the ground. “Oh great, they’re starting. Get that shield ready, it’s going to be close!”

“You got it!”

The spear turned into a huge bird made of fire, hovering in front of Rukia who was in turn hovering in front of this huge inverted U shape seemingly made of a white stone material.

“I reject!” Orihime called out, as the bird went to strike. It was held back by the shield but Luna could feel the heat radiating off the thing.

“I’m moving to grab her,” Luna called out, bringing the broom down and tugging Rukia. In front of her feet and at her sides were three white, stone boxes that she seemed to be mystically attached to, and wasn’t coming off of. *That’s what is making her float?*

“I can’t hold this back forever!” Orihime called, strain in her voice.

*Is she feeding it energy or something? Everything at once, but of course it is. Wait a second, Susan faced big things...*

“*Diminuendo!*” she cast, pointing at the bird/spear. She got a “fifteen” and she needed a fourteen, it being a grade “six” spell and the thing being so huge. It shrank from a +3 size modifier to -1, half the size of a person.

“Oh, that’s much better. Thank you. It’s almost cute now.” It rather mindlessly pecked at the shield but couldn’t get through any better now it was smaller.

“Now for these stupid blocks. *Deletrius!*”

The first block, on her left, fell away, and she grabbed Rukia who was quite limp.

“Get out of here!” she called.

“No chance. *Deletrius!*”

The second one was destroyed, and the third one fell, leaving Luna to try pulling her onto the broom. “Hang on!”

She urged the broom forward and made a tight loop, heading back to the tower.

“You’re taking me *back to jail?* What sense does that make?”

“You didn’t get your thirty days, so we figured you would want the full experience,” Luna joked.

“You’re not serious?”

“Of course she isn’t,” said Orihime. “Have a little faith in us.”

So the broom swooped in through the door and the group again made their way down the passageway. Everyone was glad to see Rukia again, and free this time, but they all knew they weren’t out of the woods yet. Heck they weren’t in the woods yet, they were still in the passageway outside the field that led into the woods. Rukia was weak, according to her the stone that the tower was made of did that, to keep prisoners from breaking out, and that it was only temporary. Itchigo was happy to carry her, and this time it was Luna collapsing certain portions of the underground tunnel to buy them time. (She did several passageways and some junctions they didn’t take, just to further confuse the trail).

But another hour later and they pushed their way into the open air again.

“Thank goodness,” said Aizen, there to meet them. “You’ve caused a real panic back there, you know? Luckily because the date got moved up, hardly any captains were around to watch. And there was the whole flying thing, I guess...”

“You get around, don’t you?” Luna asked, suspicious once again.

“I do,” he admitted. “But finally you’re safe, Rukia. I have something quite urgent to tell you all, before you go any further.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Someone really wants you dead,” he answered simply. “What did you *do* in the human world that was so terrible?”

“Nothing!” she yelled back, trembling. “Just saved some people.”

“But someone wanted to assure your death,” he went on. “Even going so far as to plant a bomb inside your body.”

“What?” Everyone looked over at her, and took an unconscious step back.

“Not to worry, I can remove it,” Aizen assured them. “But then you must return to the human world and have no more to do with soul society. It’s for your own protection, of course.”

“You really think someone went that far?”

“I know they did. Don’t you think it odd, that you were not given the traditional thirty days? That after these kids came to see you, the very next day they brought you to be killed? You must know something, or have seen something, or done something that made someone very nervous.”

“No, nothing like that,” she mumbled.

“But come, we don’t have a lot of time. Allow me to remove the bomb, and I can send you on your way back to the real world. I promise to look into this, see who went to such great lengths to have you killed.”

Rukia looked up at Itchigo. “We better listen to him,” he said. “He’s been nothing but helpful to us. And why would he lie about this? I know it sounds unbelievable-”

“It does. I wouldn’t believe me,” Aizen told them. “But it should only take a moment. She shouldn’t be harmed, and I’ll take the bomb away and defuse it.”

“Is that even possible?” Luna asked.

“The crazy stuff the scientist types come up with around here? I wouldn’t doubt it,” answered Yoruichi.

“Have I given reason for you to not trust me?”

“No...” *Your curiosity was probably justified. And would The Darkness help us, even in part? Why would it? But a bomb? Why go to such lengths?*

“Do it,” Itchigo told him. “But I’ll be watching you.”

“As well you should. Come, can you stand, Rukia?”

“I can stand.”

“Please, everyone else step back a bit.”

Itchigo set her down and stepped back, and Aizen took a small canister out of his shikakusho and pressed the top of it. Bamboo looking stakes shot out of the ground and his hand withered and turned green.

He shot forward, plunging his hand into Rukia’s chest.

Aizen carefully pulled a small object out of the hole his shriveled, green hand had made in Rukia's chest, and after he did so it closed up seemingly leaving her none the worse for wear.

"I'm all right," she said, somewhat wondrously. "There really was a bomb." She was running her hands over her chest.

"There really was," Aizen said, holding it away from himself. "I now need to get this someplace I can disarm it, or blow it up safely." He took his sword out and stuck it into the air in front of him. "Meanwhile, you kids can get back home. I'll let you know what I find out about this whole plot to kill you, Rukia. Meanwhile, stay out of sight okay?"

"I will. Thank you, Captain Aizen."

"It was no trouble." He pulled the blade out and the familiar rice paper sliding door slid open, showing white light beyond, and everyone jumped through it and ran through the familiar spirit passage back to the real world. They jumped out and into the streets of Japan, looking around to get their bearings.

"We're pretty near where we went in from, the store is this way," Itchigo told them.

"Why head there?" asked Chad.

"We didn't go through a spirit exchanger, we're technically still souls, right? It's fine for me, my body is waiting at home. But you guys might have some problems."

"Oh."

"Is it just me," asked Uryu on the way there, "or despite achieving our goal does anyone else feel unfulfilled? Or, like, we got played somehow?"

"So you did just want to try fighting that Renji guy!" Orihime admonished.

"No, it's not that. It's just feel like that should have gone way differently."

"It's thanks to Luna we got in and out as quickly as we did. And none of us has a scratch. I'd say we did really good. And Rukia is here, isn't that great?"

"It's good, I'm glad she wasn't killed. But who put the bomb inside her? When? Why was it so important she die? How did Aizen know about the bomb? Why did he keep helping us?"

"You worry too much. She's safe, we're back, everything's fine."

"I hope you're right." He looked down at his gloved hand. "Not sure why I bothered, is all."

"Plans are rarely followed, planning is essential," Luna told him.

"I guess. I just have the feeling I took this off somewhere along the line, but here it is, no problem."

*Uh oh.*

"I know how you feel," agreed Itchigo. "I feel like I should have fought, like, some really strong guys but we didn't really fight anybody."

"Isn't that good?" Orihime asked. "I'm glad we didn't have to hurt anybody."

"Me too," agreed Chad.

"It just doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel right at all." He shook his head and everyone lapsed into silence for the rest of the journey.

"Oh, you're back!" Jinta greeted them. It was late afternoon that day and he was goofing off in front of the store.

"Welcome back," Ururu greeted them. "I'll tell the owner you're here."

"Thanks!" Luna told her.

Moments later they were back to normal and Tessa, the store assistant, brought more tea. Rukia still needed a fake body and Itchigo was still in spirit form, his body wandering around somewhere to avoid suspicion. (They could put a fake soul into it to animate it.)

"So tell me everything that happened!" Kisuke insisted.

So they did. Up to the point where Aizen took the bomb out and got them back.

"Aizen? And he took a bomb out of you?"

"That's right," Rukia agreed. "Small thing, round, swirling colors."

"And you didn't fight anybody?" Everyone looked around the table and shook their heads. "You just kind of asked?" Everyone nodded. "Weird."

"That's what I said!" Uryu exclaimed. "It's weird, isn't it?"

"I guess. It just never occurred to me you kids would actually go through proper channels or anything. I guess anything's possible though."

"Was it really a bomb?" Rukia asked. "Because I don't recall anyone putting a bomb inside me."

"Ah." Kisuke looked away and took his hat off, turning the brim around in his hands. "About that."

"Yes?"

"The thing is... You're sure he took something out of your body?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, okay. I guess I have to... apologize."

"What? You put the bomb there?"

"It's not a bomb! Not exactly."

"So what was it?" asked Yoruichi.

He put his hat back on and rubbed his face. "It's something I made a long time ago. Something dangerous. I put it inside Rukia to keep it away from people. Even me."

"What? When?" she demanded. "I never knew this!"

"You weren't meant to. It was just supposed to disappear forever. But apparently Aizen somehow found out about it and wanted it for himself."

Uryu pounded the table with a fist. "So the whole thing was a setup?"

"Seems that way. He was able to get it out with only you kids watching, so no one's the visored. Wiser, I mean. Wiser. Budweiser. Hehe. Budwi- never mind. I could use a drink."

"You okay?" Luna asked, concerned.

"Just fine. That's why he wanted you killed, and with that specific method, Rukia. He was hoping to get the object out that way. I guess he settled for the other way, which was the better way anyway."

"We have to go back and tell them," Itchigo insisted.

"Who would believe you?"

He sputtered a moment. "We can't just do nothing."

"What's it do?" Luna asked.

"It can give death gods hollow powers, or vice versa."

"What powers do hollows have? Aren't they sort of mindless beasts, drawn to consume souls?" Uryu asked.

"The kind we get around here are, yes," he explained. "But as they grow in power they can do some pretty nasty stuff. They can get smarter too, become more like humans again that can reason and plan."

"So why bother? Experimentation?"

"He wants an army?" asked Chad.

"Maybe he wants to do it to himself, I don't know," answered Kisuke. "But whatever the reason, we better stay on our toes."

"I suppose I could go back," offered Yoruichi. "But without some evidence..."

"I could testify," offered Rukia.

"You're still a wanted criminal!"

"Forgot about that part..."

"And he hasn't actually done anything illegal yet, has he?" asked Luna.

The others thought for a moment.

"I suppose not," admitted Kisuke. "Rukia did give her powers to a human, so he didn't frame her or anything. He helped you escape, but again good luck proving that one, especially without testimony."

"We can't condemn the man for what he might do!"

“But the object is too dangerous to be out in the world. It can only cause harm, believe me.”

“And putting it *inside* some unsuspecting woman was the best way to deal with the issue? How did that ‘solution’ even enter your mind?”

“I can’t take that back now, can I? We can only deal with the situation as it is. I did try to make it doubly safe. That fake body she was in was supposed to turn her all the way human, so there was no chance of it getting out again.”

“Oh, that’s why. Thanks, thanks a lot,” Rukia complained.

“Sorry.”

*And it probably would have vanished if she died a human. If it was hidden ‘inside’ her soul if she died she would have gone on to soul society to be reformed without it.*

“So what, we head back and confront him?” Luna asked.

“With what evidence?”

“And we’re back to square one,” she pouted.

“Sorry.”

“As interesting as all this is,” Uryu announced, getting up, “I’m heading back home. Obviously I’ll keep my training up, if super powered hollow are going to start showing up. Otherwise this is your problem. Glad you’re not dead, Rukia. See you all later.” He left.

“Guess I should be getting home, too,” Itchigo agreed. “You want the closet again, Rukia?”

“I’ll need some place to stay, at least until my *completely different looking body* is ready.”

“Yes, odd how that never occurred to me before,” Kisuke admitted. “Male or female?”

Rukia considered. “It would throw people off even more...”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Oh, did you want me to be female so you could borrow it?” she asked teasingly. “Now that you’ve heard they can be swapped around like that?” She was smiling.

“What? No!”

“I’d let you, you wouldn’t even have to explain.” She grinned wider.

“I said no!”

“No questions asked!” She was wiggling her eyebrows and moving seductively.

“Stop it!”

She laughed. “Okay, okay. Make it female just in case.”

“Very well.”

Orihime and Chad also left at that point, and Luna waved goodbye to them from the door.

“You don’t think Aizen is this Darkness fellow you were talking about, do you?” asked Kisuke.

“I suppose he could be. Heck, you could be. If this thing can make him more powerful, he might use it to help in wiping us out. But he seemed so considerate. Hard to think about that nice a guy also wanting to end our existence.”

“I guess you’re right.” He shook his head. “I never should have made that thing.”

*Fact Check- completely true.* “So what now?”

“Everybody keeps training, I guess, and we see who shows up looking for Rukia.”

“Better start calling her a different name, to go with her different body.”

“Ah, true. I’ll mention that to her when it’s done. Better get to work, not that I’ll get paid for any of this.”

“All this is your fault!”

“No it isn’t- okay maybe it is,” he allowed. “I’ll go fix you up a room, it seems you’ll be staying here.”

“You wouldn’t throw me out onto the street, would you?” Luna made puppy dog eyes at him.

“I suppose not. Come along.”

It took three days, but finally Kisuke created a fake body that wouldn't assume Rukia's appearance when she went into it. Unfortunately this meant it took on somewhat of a random appearance each time she went into it, so they came up with an unobtrusive hand signal in case there was any question it was her. Ichigo and the others came every night to train, which Luna was more than happy to help with. She also helped around the store, and even made deliveries at night on her broom when it was dark enough no one would probably see her. Yoruichi rode with her, to give her directions, and Luna more than once imagined someone happening to glance up and see her silhouetted against the moon. Witch on broomstick, black cat behind her? *Wish I had packed my pointy hat.*

That was also the day the two death gods showed up seeking answers to what had happened to make Rukia and three others vanish at the time same. It was of course Renji and Rukia's brother, Byakuya. As they approached the store Luna's hand went to her wand, though she didn't pull it out just yet. (She noted they were unarmed for the moment, probably walking around in fake bodies.)

"So are you here to talk this time, or is history going to repeat itself?" she asked them.

"I am here to find my sister," Byakuya informed her. "To see if she was in league with Aizen and the others or kidnaped by them or simply plotting on her own."

"What did Aizen do? Did he make a bunch of hybrid hollows already? Kisuke said it wouldn't be ready for months!"

The two looked at each other. "Make what?" asked Renji.

"He simply disappeared, shortly after you all did," Byakuya explained. "Along with two others. It seems my hunch was correct, you do know something about it."

"We know he used us for his own gain. Your sister is fine, you actually missed her by about an hour, but we can get her back here. Aizen left, huh? We figured he would stick around now that he had what he wanted, but I guess not. He's probably got a secret base somewhere... secret lab? Anyway, come in. You can have some tea and hear all about it."

"I will listen to what you have to say," Byakuya promised. "But real world tea just doesn't have the complexity of flavor I crave."

"I hate tea," complained Renji. "Got anything stronger?"

Luna rolled her eyes. "Just follow me."

"This is not my sister," Byakuya said to the group when Rukia returned.

"Of course I am, stupid brother!" she told him. "I got a fake body that doesn't look like me to lay low while my powers return! Honestly, I can't even look at you right now. You just left me to die, didn't try to change anyone's mind at all. Do you really care so little for me? Why adopt me if you're just going to toss me away? You didn't even ask my side of the-" Luna put her hand on Rukia's arm. She took a deep breath. "I'm just in a fake body. I'll show you later."

"You can do that?" Renji asked, his mouth full of cookie.

"I can now," Kisuke answered. "But tell me about Aizen."

"What's to tell?" replied Byakuya, still not convinced about his sister. "After the invaders were led by Aizen to the prison and then broke in later that night, he wasn't seen again. As neither were you, or them, we believed the events to be related. Then orders from the 46 chambers stopped coming so that was investigated, and they turned out to have been murdered at least a week ago, if not more. Aizen had been controlling all orders out of the place, including the order for your capture."

"So he could get her back and get the object out of her," Luna put in.

"I do not know enough about that to comment. With that revelation I decided something bigger must be going on and when the opportunity presented itself, I came here to learn the truth of the matter."

"Kinda makes you wonder about the whole rule that no one else is allowed inside," Renji remarked, helping himself to another cookie. "I mean if people came and went into that place all the time the murders would have been noticed way earlier. Am I right?"

"No doubt more of that 'tradition' I kept hearing about while I was there," Luna surmised.

“Be that as it may,” continued Byakuya. “I am asking now, what has been going on here to explain your behavior, sister? Depending on your answer I take you back to be executed myself, or bring news of your innocence.”

So she told him.

“So you did give your powers to that boy. This is troubling.”

“Which then insured she would be killed in the manner Aizen needed to get the object out,” put in Luna.

“Are you saying he thought that many steps ahead?”

“This guy did,” she pointed a thumb at Kisuke. “He had that body ready for her to slip into. You know, the one that insured her power wouldn’t come back and the object would be further hidden?”

“Are you collaborating with Aizen?” he asked Kisuke.

“No! I want that thing gone more than anyone. I’ve seen what it can do! I just... happened to have it around, that’s all.”

“And what would you have done, brother? Just let the whole family die? And then go on to cause more havoc? Who knows how many might have died that night if Itchigo hadn’t stopped that hollow.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten into that situation in the-” He stopped as Rukia glared at him, and tried again. “Yes, I would have let them die because that’s the law.”

“Forgive me for not having your refined sense of duty to a bunch of edicts handed down by people hundreds of years ago who never battled a hollow in their life. I saw a chance some people could be saved, I took that chance.”

“Laws that have outlived their usefulness should be struck down, or revised,” Luna agreed.

“But the law is the law.”

“But if it’s never challenged, nothing will ever change! Someone has to be the first to step up.”

“I’m not sure this law should change.”

“Yes, yes!” Kisuke interrupted, clapping his hands. “We can argue points of law later. For now, why don’t you tell these nice gentleman why you’re here, Luna? We need to get soul society prepared for what is to come, after all.”

“Very well...”

So Luna once again told her story and demonstrated her magic.

“So that’s what hit me that night,” Renji commented.

“I’m not sorry. You were trying to hurt Rukia.”

“I was taking her into custody!”

“I didn’t see any handcuffs. You were swinging your sword around and that’s not how you take people into custody!”

“Yes, well...”

“So that’s where we stand. Aizen may or may not be The Darkness. Anyone you know could be. But if they tend towards, I don’t know, seeking world ending power it’s probably a good sign.”

“This may further explain how Aizen was able to see so far ahead. But it does not excuse Rukia.”

“Give it a rest already! Honestly, it’s like you’re itching to plunge that sword of yours into her. Just what kind of perverted stuff is going on in your mind?”

His face went rather stony. “She’s actually adopted into the family.”

“Oh, so she’s a step-sister? That’s even worse! Have you ever found, you know, secret pictures of you he’s kept?”

“NO!” Rukia was bright red. “It’s not like that!”

“So what’s the deal with him being so hot to see you dead? I mean if that’s not displaced... something else... I don’t know what is.”

“I will not have this conversation,” Byakuya insisted.

"It is sort of-" Renji began, but cut off when both siblings glared at him.

"So quit it. She may not be 'innocent'," she made air quotes, "but it was for the right reason. And Itchigo isn't using his powers to rob banks or whatever. I mean you aren't, right?"

"Of course not."

"There you are. So lay off the killing your sister stick. I'm not buying it and you've got bigger things to worry about! You've already admitted her 'trail' didn't exist because the people that do the trails were all dead! So at the very least she should get a real trial with real evidence presented and all circumstances explained."

"Very well," he said, standing. "I will take this information back to soul society. And you are right, she had not been found guilty properly, so I will drop the matter for now."

"Thank you."

"You will be staying here for the duration?"

Luna nodded.

"Very well. If we need to contact you again, or to bring you back to show your 'magic' to the others, we will return."

"I'll be here."

"Then I will take my leave." He walked out.

"Thanks for the cookies," Renji said, scrambling up and following him out.

"He ate all of them!" Jinta later complained.

Luna had made herself useful around the store in many ways, one of which was transporting large items. Kisuke had explained that sometimes a person would want a lot of stuff, or one large item, and had to be turned down because he didn't have a delivery truck. Just a couple of (admittedly above average) kids, and that guy in the apron. Who was that guy anyway? How did he come to hang around the place? Heck, how did the kids come to be hired there? From where did their strength derive? For the kids could fight, they sparred with Itchigo, Chad, or Orihime on request and held their own.

But Luna thought it might be rude to ask, so she just accepted them.

Back to the delivery situation, Luna could shrink something down with her magic, and then cancel the spell when she got to the destination. She could also make plants grow instantly with a different spell, so the shop started doing a great business in flowers, shrubs, and small trees it wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. She also knew *Reparo* which while not as good as Susan's *Repair* spell (it couldn't put a functioning wand back together, after all) it was useful and Luna soon had anything that had been lying around broken put back together and working. And let's not forget her *seer* nature either, which while not fully developed yet was a source of delight to everyone having their "fortunes" told while they shopped.

She also put more effort, mainly at night while the others trained, to reliably call out Belahime, and we'll say she raised her "skill" to a "two" for now.

Then Byakuya came back and offered them an invitation to return to soul society to share their side of things. The group agreed, and he led them back across the border between the living and the dead, and into the court area. From there he took them to the main building where the captains had meetings- and basically just stood around because there was no table or anything there. At the sides of the room when the group entered were most of the captains; the huge guy with the bells on his hair (and little girl on his back), the guy in clown makeup, the kid who looked about twelve, the guy with the basket over his face, the guy in pink and others. Luna wasn't sure she should be intimidated or if this was some sort of joke at their expense. But everyone looked super serious, but then if it was a joke, naturally everyone *would* look super serious, wouldn't they? It would only be after convincing them this rag tag assortment was a cabal of grizzled veterans that they would all yell "surprise" and get a big laugh out of the whole thing. There was an easy way to find out though, as she doubted Yoruichi would lie to her.

"And they're the captains?" Luna asked, looking around the room.

"They're the captains," Yoruichi agreed.

"Even the..." She pointed to the little kid with the white spiky hair.

"Even him."

"Huh." She looked at who was standing directly before her. "Master Roshi?"

"I'm afraid you've confused me with someone else," said the ancient guy at the head of the pack. He opened one eye a little wider as he said this, as he was squinting pretty badly.

*Don't they have glasses here?*

He had a beard that reached almost to the floor, a thick walking stick he was leaning on, and was bald. His eyebrows were the most ridiculous thing about him, sprouting from the sides of his face and dropping down past his chin. Or at least where his chin might be, as it was hidden is his pure white mustache/beard combo. "I do not know this Roshi, but he sounds strong. You may call me Yamamoto."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Luna, this is Chad and Orihime. You know, of course, the recipient of Rukia's powers, Itchigo."

"We know of him. Allow me to introduce the captains." He went around the room and introduced everybody. "But let's talk about why you're here. Byakuya has told me some disturbing things but I wanted to see this 'magic' for myself."

“Of course. I’m happy to demonstrate it.”

“Also I would like clarification on a few points, such as what may be driving Aizen at this point and what we can expect from him.”

“I know only what The Darkness did on my world,” she admitted. “It’s not much to go on.”

“But more than we have now. First let us see your magic, that is the proof your story is true. And I am most interested in these others, who have manifested unique and strange powers.”

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to demonstrate as well.”

So they all took a turn out in the training area, and each hit a target with their ranged attack. Chad showed how strong he was, Orihime demonstrated her shield and rejecting something, and of course Luna flew on her broom and created water and made a stone grow to enormous size. She also took a few tries to call out Belahime, only two tries being needed to get the 10. (She got a five and an eleven, taking the -1 penalty for immediately retrying.) She told several of them uncomfortable things about themselves, like the big guy not knowing the name of his sword (so she told him), and the little kid having a time limit on his “bankai” (whatever that was).

(It turned out to be the next, and final, release of power a normal death god could achieve.) *So can my wand do the same? I’ll have to try and find out!*

“This is all very troubling,” Yamamoto admitted. “I was quite hoping that you were lying, or tricking them in some way. But it appears you are not. I can clearly tell those two are doing something with spirit energy when they use their abilities. I can also tell you are not. It isn’t our type of incantation, but yet you called out the name of your wand as we do our blades. I have no choice but to accept you come from a world where death gods are instead witches and wizards. Some sort of local equivalent, in any case. Your wand changing shape and gaining abilities you do not have is proof of that parallel.”

“And thus my warning of The Darkness is also true,” she reasoned.

“Indeed. Now tell me about what we can expect from this Darkness.”

“On my world it took over the most feared wizard in the land. It then devised a plan to steal my friend’s magic, making it more powerful.”

“This is the friend that had been born of a man from yet a third world, and did different magic than you did?”

“Susan, correct. Once it had two types of magic it hid itself away to master her type of spells. It then forced a confrontation whereby it allowed Susan to kill the body it inhabited so it could fuse with the body of my friend Harry, who had ended up with another part of Tom’s soul when he was just a baby. The two soul fragments attracted each other thanks to a spell, and they became one. It then had three times the magical power of a normal person and set about taking over the world.”

“How was it destroyed?”

“Susan had her soul removed and a ghost delivered it into the hybrid. They were then able to track down The Darkness and the original man, who ultimately fought back against it and allowed his own life to be taken, forcing The Darkness out of the world.”

“Much like the inner world we see when we talk with our soul slayers.”

“Yes, at least from her description and what I’ve seen in talking to my wand. I have to assume it’s similar.”

“So if it follows that pattern it will seek to strengthen the body of the host and then move into an all-out attack on our world?”

“That is a reasonable assumption. But don’t be misled, The Darkness could be in anyone, and the Aizen thing would have happened regardless.”

“Then this is even more troubling than I first feared. There is no way to detect this presence?”

“I suppose if one person could enter another’s ‘soul landscape’ or whatever you call it, they could search for The Darkness there. Otherwise, acting out of character or someone suddenly vanishing and reappearing with a force to try and end the world.”

“Then Aizen is our most likely candidate at the moment.”

“True. He did take something that would allow him to become stronger, or make a bigger army for himself.”

“Ah, the original object that Kisuke was banished for creating. Yes, it seems his zeal for advancement comes to plague us again.”

“To be fair I think he did what he could.”

“He shouldn’t have created the thing in the first place!”

“But we must accept reality as it is.”

“Believe me, youngster, after a thousand years I’m pretty good at that.”

*Huh. If a thousand years old I reach, look as good, I certainly will because Susan will have made me immortal with her magic. Why does he look so old? Can a soul really age?*

“Probably so. That’s my story and what I can do. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but your reality isn’t the only one under attack. Take comfort in knowing my friend is out there someplace, fighting this same fight and trying to make her way here.”

“A small comfort if Aizen becomes some sort of monster we can’t stop before that happens.” He turned to the others. “The next question is, what to do with you three?”

“I’d rather not give these powers up,” Itchigo volunteered. “I’ve been stopping hollow in the real world, and I think it’s valuable work.”

“Indeed. Your ability we at least understand. These others,” he peered at Chad and Orihime, “baffle me. Humans with abilities like these, are you simply evolving or are there other forces at work here? I mean Quincy we understood, but this seems so random.”

“I would be more than happy to perform some experiments on them,” the guy in clown makeup spoke up excitedly. His fingers were wiggling as though he had lost control of them in his excitement. One had one seriously long nail, adding to his comical appearance.

*That guy seriously creeps me out.*

“I’d like to keep them in one piece, Mayuri-san. Thanks though.”

“No fun,” he muttered.

“If there was only one of them I might accuse *them* of being The Darkness, but there are two. Could The Darkness have made another person have abilities to throw us off the trail?” He squinted at both but neither really had an answer for him. “Plus, unless hiding a great deal more power than they’ve displayed here, neither is much of a threat.”

“I’m not sure how to take that,” Chad admitted, scratching his head.

“Any way you wish. The same holds true for you, Luna. While your magic might be versatile and useful, it doesn’t seem like you would be a front line fighter.”

“No, probably not,” she admitted.

“But you could be useful, if behind attackers that could protect you. You are also reported to know healing magic, I believe?”

She nodded while thinking *Susan would call that ‘meat shields’ I believe.* “I could serve that way too, away from any real fighting.”

“Are you thinking of having these kids participate in any battles?” asked the man wearing a pink top over his black and white shikakusho.

“They exist,” he explained. “Perhaps the world has given us exactly what we need to combat this current threat. Just because they are inexperienced, untrained, nearly devoid of spiritual power, and human, I won’t just ignore them.”

“Magic seems like cheating,” said the big one with the bells. “I don’t like it.”

“Boo, magic!” squeaked the pink haired girl on his back.

*Please, everyone, tell us how you really feel. Shouldn’t have told that guy the name of his sword, he looks like he’s been eating lemons ever since.*

“I suppose they could be trained up a bit,” pink shirt agreed reluctantly.

“I can’t offer much,” Yamamoto went on, “especially given I do not know the nature of the threat yet. But I’m sure we’ll help out where we can. Now, let us move on to other matters.” He indicated the door and it was opened to reveal Rukia, looking a little perkier than the last time Luna had seen her.

“We’re dropping the matter of her impropriety, given the positive result, the fake “trail” she received, and the fact we have bigger things to worry about. Her soul blade has been returned to her and her strength is recovering now that she has been here a few days. She has requested to remain with you, and in fact I have insisted. Kurosaki-san has her power,

thus what he does with it is her responsibility. She will be... assigned... to watch over him." Itchigo seemed to chafe at that, but if it got her off death row, and allowed her to get back to work, he couldn't really complain. I mean what's the alternative? They somehow take his powers back and then give her an actual trail? Luna gave a slight nod to him, and he shrugged.

"Happy to be of help!" she said, smiling.

*And not dead, presumably. Redead? Again dead? Dead squared? Second time around dead? What do they call it here, I mean they're all dead. Returned to the cycle has a nice ring to it.*

"She'll be along in a few days, maybe a week or two, so we can be sure there are no long term effects of what she did. I just thought you all might like know."

"Wait a moment," interrupted her brother. "Part of her original crime was spending too much time in the human world. If she has to 'watch over' as you say this man she gave her powers to, isn't she still breaking the law?"

"You know," Luna said, turning to him. "I now understand things a bit better here. Thank you, Mr. Genryusai, for making it clear to me. Would you like me to tell you what your problem is?"

"Oh, please, enlighten me."

She pointed to the old guy. "You have leaders that live for a thousand years! It's no wonder your laws and your thinking seem to be from the dark ages. It's no wonder your customs are so rigid and inflexible. How could they not be? The world *changes* you know? You have to be able to change with it. To say there are no extenuating circumstances to the law is to invite disaster. To never change a law because the guy in charge thought, a thousand years ago, that was the end of the story but was fooling himself. *There are no absolutes in the universe.* Not even that one."

He struggled to parse that last bit. "We death gods especially must follow the law, to set the example for everyone else."

"What? No, that's like saying police officers can never drive over the posted speed limits to respond to calls about break ins or gang activity. That they can't ever fire their guns in self-defense because they might kill the person shooting at them. *You* are the exception to the law by the nature of your authority. Yes, cops shouldn't just wave their guns around or drive whatever speed they want all the time. I'm not saying that. I'm saying laws cannot be absolute for all people in all situations. Intent, result, the situation, what good comes from a negative action, all must be taken into account."

"So what would you have me do?" asked Yamamoto.

"I don't want 'oh, we're kinda busy right now so we're dropping the matter.' I want Rukia *pardoned* for her actions and I want her brother and Renji to *apologize* for the way they treated her."

The man squinted at her for at least a minute or two, thinking.

"Perhaps I am getting too old. The world is changing..." He looked over to the other two. "Byakuya, it would have only been temporary, until we were sure he could be trusted. But I see your point, the law is the law, currently. But I am not unmoved by what Luna said. I will officially pardon her and provide official documentation allowing the time restriction in the human world to be negated in her case. We have to choose new members of the central 46, perhaps it is time to look our laws over too. As far as an apology, well, me ordering them to is meaningless if they don't mean it. Agreed?"

"Agreed. It's more than I expected. Thank you." Luna formally bowed to her but Orihime has shouting with joy and hugging her.

Her brother looked conflicted, Rukia just seemed surprised. With the passion of her argument or Yamaoto actually admitting she might be right only she would know. Everyone moved to hug or congratulate her (as appropriate) and the man banged his cane on the floor.

"She will also be training Kurosaki-san, and sending me regular reports as to your progress, Chad and Orihime."

"I'll do my best, sir!" Orihime assured him.

"I fight for Itchigo," Chad told him.

"Tell me more about this 'bankai,'" requested Itchigo.

“All in good time,” Yamamoto allowed. “This meeting is adjourned.” He turned and left without looking back.

Orihime wanted to have a party for Rukia immediately but Byakuya was hanging around looking sour and insisted on taking them back right away.

“You can throw a party for me when the doctors here say I’m recovered enough to go back to the human world,” she promised.

“I’ll start planning it right away!”

“As far as you,” she said to Itchigo. “Don’t go doing anything I wouldn’t while I’m not there to keep an eye on you.”

“Gee, and I was planning to rob all the banks in the area tomorrow before you arrived. Darn.” He snapped his fingers. “Guess I can’t now.”

“I could do it for you,” Luna offered. “I bet Orihime would help, she could take the walls of the vaults out while I shrink down the cash for easier transportation. Then just fly out on my broom.”

Byakuya gripped his sword tighter and clenched his teeth.

“Would you?” Itchigo asked excitedly.

“Anything for my friends!”

They all laughed. All but one, but you realized that already I expect.

“If you’re all through being juvenile,” Byakuya growled. “Let’s get you out of- get you back to the real world.”

“Lead on, oh stoic one!” Rukia told him. “I’ll at least see you all off.”

“See you soon,” Luna said to Rukia as the gate opened. “Get plenty of rest, or whatever it is you do to get your powers back. Run laps? Lots of nude moonlight swims? Whatever.”

“I’ll do plenty of all that,” she replied with a laugh. “Maybe my ‘brother’ will want to join me for the last one?” she teased, but he didn’t redden just looked more like he wanted to murder everyone there. “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“You and anyone else in the future who might be faced with another difficult choice. If you guys really do live more than a thousand years, you have to get better at long term thinking, not just for the next year or so.”

“You’re right.”

“Get through,” Byakuya insisted.

“See you!”

And so a month had passed without major incident. Or really even a minor one. Otherwise it would have been written about. Luna was of course worried that Susan hadn't yet shown up, but had been further training in bringing out Belahime. Rukia was around and had joined the sparing group, and several minor hollow had shown up and been dispatched.

That evening before training Itchigo arrived and pulled Luna aside.

"Would you mind coming with me?" he asked her.

"Not at all, where are we headed?"

"There's a group of people that have contacted me, they call themselves Visored.

Apparently they're a group of death gods that have hollow powers."

Luna's eyes widened. "Has Aizen already started... no wait these must be the original group made before Kisque tried to hide the thing."

"Exactly."

"You want me to tell my story again, get them on our side?"

"Actually," he hesitated, "they claim I could do naturally what they were forced into doing by the object."

"Huh? How do they know that?"

"Wouldn't say. Just that I have an inner hollow and it could break free of my control at any time and run amok."

"Weird. Has that ever happened before?"

"According to them, no."

"So again we come to how do they know? You want me to see if they're telling the truth?"

"That's part of it," he hedged. "I want you to feel them out, see if any might be The Darkness."

"I didn't really deal much with it directly. Why would it be, though?"

"Easy. Maybe one of them is The Darkness, is lying about how they came to be, and now wants to corrupt me as well, joining their ranks."

"Good thought. It still could be anyone so we can't relax our guard."

"How do I know it isn't you?" he joked.

"Why would I have told you about the existence of myself, so you would be on greater guard against me?"

"I don't know how your mind works."

"That would be pretty dumb though."

"Agreed."

"Any case, I can't feel out The Darkness\*, it doesn't work that way. But I can probably tell if they're on the level. If they are trying to save you from yourself, or at least saving others from being killed if you go bonkers, I would say take them up on it. They aren't asking for your first born or anything, are they?"

"They don't seem to want anything but for me to join them."

"That's fine then. Though I'm unclear on what 'join them' means."

"So am I. They don't seem to have jobs or anything, they just hang out."

"Without fake bodies they wouldn't be seen by normal people anyway. So what else could they really do?"

"There is that to consider. Well, let's see what they have to say in any case."

"Good enough. In this case, you're really recruiting them. If you became friendly with them, you might be able to get them to fight with us against The Darkness."

"They think they're getting me, but really I'm getting them to fight on my side!"

"Exactly."

"I like it!"

So the two told Kisuke they would be back in a bit and walked over to where Hirako had said to meet. This was (somewhat predictably) a beat up abandoned warehouse with a large garage door on the front. He knocked on the door beside that one, and it was answered by a man with yellow hair.

"Nice of you to drop in, Itchigo," he said. "Hey, she's cuter than you said, come in."

They both entered, and standing there were eight people. The place was pretty busted up, with holes in the ceiling that led to higher floors. Off to one side there was a couch and TV, but not much else.

Luna looked the people over. Of the men; one had hair that looked like a star. There was the yellow haired guy, a guy with ear piercings and one in his eyebrow that. His eyebrows matched his hair, gray. The other two had even weirder hair, one brighter yellow that was rather long, and the big guy with darker skin had both pink hair and a pink mustache. There were three ladies, one with green hair and flight goggles on her head. The shortest one was wearing a track suit and had pulled her blond hair up in two bundles that stuck out the sides of her head. And finally a tall woman with brown hair in a ponytail and red glasses.

"What's she doing here?" demanded the smaller girl. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"No, she's here to make sure you're on the level."

"Ha! How she's gonna do that?"

"With this," Luna answered, holding up her wand. "*Seek for the truth, Belahime.*"

"Oh yeah, forgot about that..." Itchigo muttered.

Luna got a "fourteen" on that check and looked the group over through the lens. "They seem clean, but I'd still like to get to know them," she announced.

"What was that?" asked the girl.

"That was me looking for the truth about you," Luna replied. "And I know you act all tough and want everyone to believe you're uncaring, but it's only because of how scared you are of letting anyone get close to you again."

"I... no. You're... you're wrong." She turned away, obviously uncomfortable with the truth being told. But then, who wouldn't be?

"Would you be able to tell if The Darkness was in them using your glass?" Itchigo asked her.

"Probably not," she admitted. "But it was a good first step. I mean the being is above me in power, it can probably hide the truth about itself. But if it can't... like I said, a good first step. Let's hear about your plans for my friend here."

The guy that answered the door, Hirako, told them the group needed to get Itchigo's "inner hollow" under control before it took him over.

"But how do you know this?"

"We can just feel it. Believe me, we know our own."

"But you don't know how it happened?"

"He was just born that way?"

Luna turned to Itchigo. "Could the object have not actually been sealed as well as Kisuke thought? Could it have been maybe randomly doing stuff, because it didn't have any intelligence controlling it?"

"At this point anything's possible I guess."

"I guess. Like I told Roshi, we have to deal with the reality before us."

"Who?" asked the others.

"The old guy running things in soul society. Has eyebrows that could probably keep him aloft if he could flap them?"

"Why Roshi?"

"That's who he looks like," she insisted. "You don't have Dragon Ball Z here?"

The others shook their heads.

"Anyway, what's the procedure?"

"Basically we force his inner hollow out, and give him the chance to beat it up inside his inner space."

"So I should get in all the combat training I can beforehand," Itchigo mused.

"What? Don't be stupid. Your inner hollow is *you*. It will know everything you know. It takes the form of a physical fight, but really it's just your willpower to overcome your baser

nature. Once you've overcome it once it shouldn't be a problem again, and you can control the mask and the greater power it provides you."

"Oh."

"And you don't want anything for it?" Luna clarified.

"We want the city to be standing a month from now. We live here."

"Fair enough. He seem to be on the level, at least," she told Itchigo.

"I'll have to think about it."

"Think about it? Why?" he wanted to know.

"What if I lose? It takes me over and you have to kill me, right?"

"Pretty much," he admitted. "But isn't it better to take that chance here, where we can contain the situation, instead of out there in the middle of a fight?"

"Where you would almost certainly turn against any allies, your inner hollow not caring about them, presumably," Luna reasoned.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm leaning towards doing it for sure. I just need to consider all the angles for once. Usually I just rush into things without thinking. For once I'd like to take the time to think about something before I plunge in."

"I guess it's up to you, we've made our pitch," admitted the man. "You know where to find us."

He turned away and flopped down on the couch, turning the TV on. The others went to their corners and started doing whatever it was they usually did. (goofing off, certainly not training like Susan would have)

"I guess we'll come back later," Itchigo said to Luna, and the pair went out the door.

"So what did you think?"

"Hard to say, when the one guy did all the talking. But they seemed sincere, and... well here." She grabbed Itchigo's hand and closed her eyes. She had to try twice, getting a "seven" and then an "eleven" minus one again for the retry. "I see you donning a mask and fighting a man with a set of teeth outside his mouth."

"You what?"

"Just what I said. That seems to be in your future."

"I see. Literally or figuratively?"

"Yes."

"Right."

"I would still like to know how they know. And how it happened to you."

"It could be fairly common," he mused. "Maybe soul society just quietly 'takes care of' anyone they feel is manifesting the trait."

"Given that Rukia's own brother was willing to just let her be killed, that wouldn't surprise me in the least."

"Better get back to tonight's training. Even if this inner hollow thing is just a contest of wills, if it takes the form of a fight I'd rather have as much experience as I can."

The next day Itchigo hadn't decided yet and Luna went out for a late night delivery on her broom. She was flying back when suddenly a hole opened in the air behind her and a huge figure jumped out. She heard the crash of him landing and spun, looking for what could have made such a clatter. What she saw was mostly hair with arms and legs sticking out, and a white mask that he opened up at the teeth so he could see out better. The hole that represented his missing heart was huge, easily bigger than Luna herself was as the creature was a +3 at least. It was smack dab in his chest, and Luna wondered how the top half could support the weight when so much of the center of the creature was missing. It carried a huge sword on its back, and looked around stupidly.

"Kurosaki... Luna," it intoned, as if it couldn't make up its mind. But it had seen her.

"Make up your mind," she shouted to it, speeding up. *Maybe I can keep it busy and lead it back to the store. I wouldn't want it tearing the place up. But it's going to tear through power lines and knock over trees just from walking by.*

"Luna!" it repeated, charging after her.

*Oh great. But it hasn't drawn its sword... which is sticking out towards the right.* She couldn't exactly make a 90 degree turn but she could circle a fairly large building, so she made for one. She planned to circle around it to the right, hopefully getting enough of a lead to almost lap the creature. She could then do something about that sword before it was drawn and caused her further problems. She didn't expect the thing to simply jump over it, partially smashing through and leaping after her.

"Luna!" it called again.

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

"Fight me!"

"No!" *Now what? Bigger building? Wait, I know magic!* Luna took one hand off her broom and slid her wand out. "*Fumos!*" A thick black smoke appeared in the area, trailing behind her, and the creature ran into it and Luna kept it up, swishing her wand left and right to widen the area.

"Where are you?" it roared.

*Not telling.* Now she was able to dodge right and summoned the image of the sword in her mind. The hilt, at least. "*Accio sword!*" she called, taking the full time.

(here we pause to look up what a sword this massive might actually weigh. I found a calculator for flat steel bars and figuring 250mm across, 60mm high and 4m long it would be 471kg. Now it's tapered, because it's a sword, so shave some off of that. We'll call it 400. Of course according to the wiki the weight of the Grand Fisher is about 800kg so it is reasonable that he would carry a blade half as weighty as he himself is? I suppose he has a STRength of +6 due to size, maybe a 7 normally as he didn't fight with STRength but with 'cunning.' So a 13 which is enough to lift 450kg so... yeah, okay.)

So Luna didn't get it, her spell could only lift 320kg currently. The creature jumped out of the smoke, unaware she had tried anything, and grabbed onto the side of a building looking for her.

"There you are!"

"*Descendo!*"

"Wha?"

She got a "sixteen" on that one, more than enough and the massive form plunged downwards, crashing back into the smoke below. It didn't exactly know martial arts, so delayed 7 segments getting up, enough time for Luna to try again. "*Accio sword.*" This time it was an "eighteen" and the sword left the scabbard and started hurling towards her. Not to worry, she has a plan, and went forward again trailing the now suspended sword behind her.

"Noooo!" called the figure behind her, now up and jumping out of the smoke again after it. He would have to beat her eighteen and I very much doubt this guy has any points in "catching" so he rolls his COOrdination and adds two, just to be fair to him. He missed. She outdistanced the sword by a little bit more and pulled up on her broom, stopping it and twisting in place.

"*Diminuendo,*" she cast as it got closer. She got another "eighteen" which beat the difficulty by four making it shrink down to a zero size modifier or about the size of a normal broadsword. The charms on the boom allowed her to balance on it without holding on and she raised a hand, the earlier spell guiding it right to her. Her fingers closed on it and she held it aloft. *Great, now he's at least 20% less dangerous.*

"Give that back!" screamed the creature, shouldering a car out of the way and making to ready to leap again.

"When I can do this? *Bankai!*"

"WHAT???"

But of course Luna couldn't do a real bankai, she simply took advantage of the momentary shock of the creature and stuck her wand securely behind her ear and urged her broom forward again, grabbing it with her right hand.

"You tricked me!" shouted the creature, starting after her.

*Come on, someone get here. I'm going to have to start attacking this thing now, luckily my magic works beyond the range he can-* Her premonition warned her and she dodged out of the way as he sent an energy blast up at her with a "sixteen."

"Well dodged," it praised. "He said you could fly but I didn't believe him. But I only have to hit you once."

He started gathering energy, no doubt trying to produce a wider beam this time.

*Only one spell I know that can help in this case. It's a complex one, who will fire first?* She thought she might need to cut the time in half, putting a bunch of energy into MANipulation to compensate. She looked back and made a *magic combat* check, beating his *ranged combat* check to compensate. She knew she would go first and took the full time.

"*Deprimo!*" she cast, getting a "twenty three" while her difficulty was sixteen. The creature was pinned by a tremendous downward force, and tried making a STRength check to stand up again. He missed it by getting a "twenty" and his energy blast, now pointed downward and unable to be stopped, tore through the ground at his feet. People nearby screamed as from their perspective, the road just exploded for no reason.

"I'll... kill... you..." he managed, and started crawling away from the area of super gravity.

*Oh no you don't.* Luna now pulled up on her broomstick, rising as fast as she could. When she felt she was high enough she balanced on her broom again and grabbed her wand. She aimed, hanging the sword down and finally letting it go. "*Finite Incantatem,*" she cast after she let it go. She did that well enough and the blade, now enormously big and heavy again dropped like a stone. Not to wound the creature, which she might have tried but wouldn't have worked because you can't cut yourself with your own soul. Not to crush the creature, which would have worked because while you can't *cut* yourself, a few hundred pounds of metal falling on you is going to mess you up. But rather to *trap* the creature, which she did with a "sixteen." The sword fell through the hole in the thing's chest and smashed deep into the pavement, and now it couldn't go anywhere without reaching behind and pulling the sword out. But it couldn't do that because if it lifted an arm off the pavement it was going to go splat.

It was trapped, at least for the moment.

*Whew.*

"Very well," it said, seeming more confident now. "I will show you my true power then."

*Uh, what?*

The top half of the mask somehow broke off, and the creature started to grow in size, also becoming more bestial. It grew massive tusks from the shoulders and the head became elongated. It lifted itself out past the sword with a "forty two" STRength check, and grasped the hilt. A car, which couldn't see it of course, (I meant the person inside couldn't obviously) smashed into the thing's arm and bounced off in a spray of glass and twisted metal.

*I have to do something about this thing. Can my shrink spell take it down? I didn't think attacking it directly would work, because trying to attack a dragon with magic just makes it angrier. But maybe that's because dragons are resistant to magic, rather than just the straight size being an issue. Wait a minute, size?*

"*Engorgio!*" she cast, targeting the sword that she already knew she could use magic on. It now enlarged as well, up from a +3 sized sword to a +7 sized sword. This put it at about sixty four meters long, (209 feet) and at least 8,000kg in weight. The creature now made a LUCk check of "thirteen" while Luna made an opposed LUCk check of "fourteen" (I gave him a 6 LUCk so it was fair) so the sword was moving towards him at the moment and didn't smash the street up. Instead it pinned him as even a +4 size creature is going to have a bit of trouble with 8,000kg falling on top of him. It didn't directly hurt him, but he wasn't going anywhere either.

Finally Itchigo showed up with Yoruichi on his shoulder, to show him where to go. He looked at the massive thing now pinned under its own sword, and a rather smug Luna floating high in the air covering him with her wand.

"You did this?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"Had to. Can you please do something about it before it gets up? We can talk later."

“Oh, sure.”

He dispatched it, and the body and sword of the Grand Fisher turned into spiritual energy to be one day born again.

*Victory pose!*

None saw the smaller hole in the air close up, and the watcher went back to report to his master.

\*Thanks, Inari!!

“So what’s the actual means you’re going to use to do this?” Luna asked the assembled Visords that Saturday. Itchigo did have a life and school, so this sort of thing had to be done when other commitments were taken care of. The whole group was there, and they all had their swords hanging at their side. Itchigo was of course in soul form, and his body was taken over by the modified soul created for that purpose.

“Why are you here again?” Sarugaki asked. (that was the little girl Luna had said was afraid of people leaving her)

“Uh, because we’re sort of friends, and maybe I can help out?”

“We’re not friends. I don’t even know you! In fact I hate you, hated you the first time I saw you!”

“She’s friends with Itchigo, not you, stupid,” said Hirako, the main contact that had let them in the day before. “And she hates everybody, don’t take it personally.”

*I do sort of, though.* “Oh. I knew that!”

“She’s here because I don’t trust you,” Itchigo told them bluntly. “And if I’m betrayed, she can carry news to everyone in soul society and they’ll destroy you. To make sure they get The Darkness as it could by then be inside any one of you.”

“Her?” asked the Aikawa, the one with the starfish hair.

Luna got a “fifteen” on *premonition* and whipped her wand out of the holster, pointing it behind her at the girl with the regular glasses, Yadomaru. She had her sword out and was pointing it similarly.

“Oh,” she said simply. “Nice reflexes.”

“Thank you.” She turned her head to Itchigo. “Senpai noticed me!” she stage whispered.

He sighed. “Never should have told you about that.”

The sword went back and Luna put her wand back with a laugh.

“To answer your question,” Hirako went on, “in a moment we’ll go down to the lower level. Then we’ll perform the... ceremony and lock Itchigo behind a barrier. His hollow will come out, and we’ll hold it back while inside his soul they battle each other for supremacy. Should he win, all will be well. Should he lose, well, we get to destroy him.”

“Is there anything we can do to prepare, to make the contest more favorable to us?”

He shrugged. “If there’s a strong reason for you to come back, focus on it while we perform the ceremony.”

“Orihime’s boobs?” Luna suggested to him. “If I ask her I bet she would agree to show them to you when you come back! Anyone have a cell phone? I’ll call her right away.”

“Oh, nice plan!” Hirako agreed. “Could I get her number, by the way?”

“That’s... not what I’ll be thinking of!” Itchigo assured them, turning red.

“Well, that’s up to you.”

“Can we just do this?”

“Sure. Ushoda?”

“Yes,” said the big guy with the pink hair. He clapped his hands, and the center of the floor rose up as though hinged on one side, revealing a staircase.

They descended into a training space much like the one under the store, basically a mostly empty area with various platforms made of rock dotting it. Though it did seem to have a sky, as well.

*Did we enter an offset dimension, or is the rock above us just ‘enchanted’ to look like sky? The staircase just sort of goes into nothing on this side...*

“This should be a big enough spot. Lay down here.”

“Lay down? Do you want my sword?” He offered it.

“Nah, keep it. Believe it or not, you’d be harder to control if it was outside the barrier.”

“Really? Huh. Okay.” He lay down.

“Now I’ll begin the ceremony.” Itchigo nodded. Hirako put his hand near Itchigo’s face and his palm started to glow. Then he snapped his fingers. Itchigo sort of spaced out, and he ran his hand over his eyes to close them.

“That’s that.”

“That’s a ceremony?” Luna asked.

“If I had called it ‘knocking out Itchigo’ it wouldn’t have sounded as cool. Ushoda, you’re up again.”

“Very well.” He called out an incantation, and five heavy blocks fell out of nowhere and pinned Itchigo in place. He then put a glowing barrier around the man, and everyone waited.

They didn’t have to wait long, as the pillars started to quake as Itchigo tried to get up. He managed it without too much trouble, and when he was standing (and the dust cleared) he was changed. His face was now halfway covered by a white mask, and his eyes were wild and differently colored. He went to pick up the sword that was next to him, and Yadomaru stood up.

“Open it here, I’ll go in first,” she offered.

“Wait!” cried Luna. “You’re going in there?”

“If we let him pound on the barrier, it’ll break in no time. We’re distracting him.”

“I don’t think you need to do that,” she explained, getting her wand out. “Let’s see how he deals with this. *Petrificus Totalus*.” She got a “twenty one” on that check, near her maximum, and the figure of Itchigo went rigid and fell over. “Also, just to be safe, I do know a charm to strengthen barriers. I wonder if it would work here? May as well try it. *Fianto Duri. Fianto Duri. Fianto Duri.*” she cast, over and over, walking the parameter. The others tensely watched, but Itchigo didn’t immediately get up.

“This might be a boring afternoon after all,” pouted Kuna, the girl with green hair.

“I’ll have to watch him pretty closely, recast the curse when he gets up. But I’d love to hear more about you all. It would help pass the time.”

“You really stunned him, didn’t you?” asked Muguruma, the piercing guy, looking through the barrier. “I guess magic really is something.”

“Yup!” *And I’m coming to appreciate what I can do without Susan around. Not that I don’t want her around, but she’s been pretty hard on wanded magic but if she had given it a chance, it may have surprised her.*

Luna continued casting the spell when needed, and the others kept a careful watch on the time it was taking. Itchigo continued to transform, getting odd feet, a complete mask, and a hole in his chest like a hollow. At about forty five minutes in he grew a tail, and his legs were covered in white. Luna’s magic kept him paralyzed though, but no one relaxed while the procedure was going on.

“How long will it go on?” Luna asked.

“The longest was a little over an hour,” Muguruma told her. “I don’t know if paralyzing him in this way will extend or shorten his natural time though.”

“If it truly is an internal struggle, what goes on here shouldn’t change anything, right?”

“Hard to say, given how few times this has been done.”

“Ah, so.”

But after a little over an hour there was an explosion of energy and the shell that had been forming around Itchigo was shed like snakeskin.

“Is he still alive?” Luna asked.

“We need to get you sensing spirit energy,” Ushoda told her, “if you can’t even tell that.”

“I suppose if I can learn to put it into my wand, I could learn to sense it too. But is he okay?”

“Like I said, it was so boring!” Kuna told her. “What a disappointing end, too. Pity.”

“Is he dead?”

“Guess I’ll head upstairs,” Otoribashi figured, turning to go. (He’s the guy with the brighter yellow hair.) “No sense being down here anymore.”

“Could you throw that shovel down here?” Aikawa asked.

"I think I remember seeing it. I can chuck it down, give me a minute." He turned to go up the stairs.

"I'll just go see for myself then, shall I?"

"Oh, stop teasing her everyone. He's fine. Bring the barrier down."

"Of course." Ushoda snapped and the barrier went down, allowing Luna to rush forward and check him out.

"Wait, if you can't sense spirit energy, how did you know I was behind you?" asked Yadomaru.

"I can sense the future, it tells me if I'm in danger. And I can sense things around me, like you can see someone. I can't feel their energy but I can tell that they're there."

"Weird."

*Of course, I could have told if he was alive just by sensing him in that way. But I was a little worked up.*

"Yes, I'm fine," Itchigo told them. "Don't all inquire at once." Luna helped him up, and he put his sword back. "I'm not even as sore as I thought I would be. I guess it worked, huh?"

"It worked, but now you have to learn to put the mask on when you need it," Hirako told him.

"So actually I've only just started? Great, just great."

"Want me to stick around?"

He shook his head. "They did what they promised to do. I think we can trust them."

"Very well. Thanks everyone." *Not that you did any of the work, but you were prepared to, and that's the same thing.*

"Magic," began Sarugaki, as if forcing the words out. "I guess it's okay."

*Does that mean I'm okay?* "Thanks," Luna said with a smile. "I may not be here long, after The Darkness is taken care of. It depends on when Susan finds me. But I'd like to be friends while I'm here, if that's okay with you."

"Humph, whatever." She looked away.

"I'll come back to see how he's doing. I'll bring cake! Red velvet, right?"

"How did you know I liked- that stupid glass of yours!"

"It's part of the truth of you. See you then!" Luna ran off.

The next day, as promised, Luna brought a cake she had baked (she got a "seventeen" on her cooking check, so it was pretty good) and saw how Itchigo was doing with his training. He could hold the mask for about a second, so it wasn't really very useful yet. He was getting smacked around by Sarugaki, which if nothing else Luna supposed would train his ability to dodge.

As they sat around eating cake, Luna brought up why this training was even needed.

"I mean what is it about this mask that makes it come off so easily?"

"It's a force inside your soul that's basically the opposite of you," explained Ushoda.

"Naturally it's going to resist you using it."

"Wait, so inside him is the spirit of his sword and the opposite spirit of his hollow?"

"Exactly."

*Huh. Getting pretty crowded in there. Do they actually talk to each other? Would he hear it? That would drive me nuts.*

"Can you all hold it the same length of time now?"

"No, Kuna can hold it the longest," Aikawa admitted.

"She didn't even have to go through this endurance training," Yadomaru said.

"Really?! So why aren't you training him instead of you?" She pointed to the green haired girl first, then Sarugaki.

"Because only Sarugaki is stubborn enough to go over and over it with him."

"Say dedicated, dummy!"

"I call it what it is. Thickheaded nature."

"You want a beating too?"

"You guys are such good friends," Luna observed.

"No we're not!" they both said at the same time. They glared at each other and then at Luna, as if to dare her to continue.

"That aside," she wisely moved on. "Perhaps Kuna could at least give him some pointers? What does it feel like to hold it as long as you do? How does that feeling differ from what you're feeling? When we learned to teleport, or as they call it 'apparate,' Susan told the teacher off for basically calling the first success a failure because Susan (that's Susan Bones, a different Susan) didn't do it exactly perfect. Nor did he have her explain to the rest of the class what she had actually *done* when she managed it. She was quite cross, as I recall. Something similar should be done here. What does she do, or think, or have that you don't? And how do you get it?"

"I guess I never thought about it," admitted Kuna. "Let me see..." She put her mask on, which was somewhat bug shaped. It had two big eye holes, slanted from each other, and four smaller ones near the mouth. It also had two "antenna" sticking out the center front. "What do I feel?"

She tried to explain, and Luna insisted they go around the table and put their masks on, then describe what they picture in their minds as they did it. What they thought about when the masks were on, how their thought patterns may have changed. That sort of thing.

"Thanks," Itchigo genuinely said when they were done. "I think that might help a little. Maybe I'm just thinking about it too much. I just have to accept the feeling I get when the mask goes on, that I'm becoming someone else. I just have to trust that I'm still me, mask or no."

"So let's get back to work, idiot! Thanks for the cake," she quickly and quietly muttered to Luna, looking embarrassed, then ran off.

"Wow, she really likes you!" Hirako observed.

Three days later a force of Death Gods arrived in the world, led by the little kid captain. They had showed up at Itchigo's school, but he sent them on to the store, which was somewhat of a tense moment for everybody as technically, Kisuke had been banished from Soul Society.

"But I was framed by Aizen," he insisted. "As I tried to tell everyone back a hundred years ago!"

"I know that feel," Rukia agreed. She brightened. "Maybe we can get you a pardon now too."

*Pardon for you. Pardon for you. Pardon for everybody! Wait that's a good thing.* "Not that we don't appreciate the help, but is there something specific we can do for you?" Luna asked.

"We're just here in case we're needed," said the only woman to accompany the three men. She was named Matsumoto, and had long blond hair and a very loose shikakusho to accommodate her proportions.

"I'm here because this is probably where the first battles will take place, and I'm hoping for some serious combat," claimed the bald one, named Madame.

"Ah, the same," the pretty boy one, named Ayasegawa, agreed a little too hastily.

"I'm here to keep these jokers in line," explained captain Hitsugaya.

"I guess you can camp out in the training center, that is if Kisuke doesn't mind," Luna assured them. "Unless there's some sort of death god inn you guys run for people on this side."

"Usually it's just one person per area," explained Hitsugaya. "A force this large in one place is almost unheard of."

Kisuke was punching numbers into a calculator he had pulled from somewhere. "There go my profits for the rest of the year," he muttered, resigned to feeding all these people and getting nothing in return.

"So we can stay?" Matsumoto asked, clasping her hands together.

"Guess I have no choice. I'll consider it my penance for somewhat creating this situation in the first place."

Everyone got settled in, and the next day when Luna went down to see how everyone was doing, something was wrong. Oh everything seemed normal, there was the bald guy sparing with Renji. The pretty boy was lounging. Matsumoto was sitting cross legged with her sword, obviously communicating with it. (Or using the pose as an excuse to take a nap) There was Rukia, trying to keep up with that lady who was appearing and disappearing.

*Wait a second.*

Luna made a quick count and there was one more person than there should have been. She couldn't see her clearly because she kept vanishing but she seemed to have dark skin, long hair, and a different sort of uniform than the others. Suddenly she vanished and appeared directly in front of Luna.

"Yah!!!!" she squeaked, almost getting knocked over in her haste to back up and draw her wand at the same time.

The woman laughed and held out a hand, steadying her. "Don't be so jumpy, it's me!"

"It's you!" There was a pause. "Who are you?" Luna didn't recognize the voice, and she was sure she had never seen this woman before.

"It's me, Yoruichi."

"Oh!" Light dawned in Luna's eyes. "This is your human form? Nice!" *So is she a male cat, or do cats here just have deep voices, or does she do a voice in that body to trick people? Sparkle sounds like a girl cat, why doesn't she?*

"Thanks. Figured I would get in on the action. I've been a cat a long time, wanted to make sure my skills hadn't gotten rusty." She sighed. "They sort of have, actually. I'm going to have to build my endurance back up a bit."

"I should have realized. I just came to see how everyone was doing, looks like they've settled in."

"Yup. The captain is out scouting, if you needed to see him."

"I thought I was just not seeing him, like maybe he was behind a rock or something."

She snorted. "He is pretty young, isn't he? But he can perform bankai, and that's all they really look for. Not that he isn't serious about the job, he is, and he does command respect. But you just can't take him seriously, can you? Anyway, back to work!" She vanished again and Rukia raised her sword, and the two went back to playing "tag" or whatever it was they were doing.

*But seriously, what are we going to do with all these people now?*

And so time passed. Rukia pronounced herself back to full strength and everybody trained or patrolled or complained they were bored. Kisuke tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to get them to help out around the place. The problem was that despite being far older than their appearance suggested, they didn't know how to really *do* anything but fight. Which was fine normally because that was their job, normally. But here it was a waiting action, and they were more like police forces than military forces. Military forces knew the job was 70% waiting around, 30% heart pumping danger where any second could be your last. Most of these guys didn't have that kind of discipline. They were used to going out and destroying hollows all the time.

*Do that many people die with their hearts unfulfilled? Seems a shame. If these guys were more proactive, making sure people near death didn't turn into hollows in the first place when they passed, soul society might be a very different place.*

Luna at least continued her "delivery service" and making plants grow and such. The month passed, and the next, so it became late October as it does. Only the normal amount of hollows were seen, below average in capability and strength, the kind that any one of the assembled forces could destroy in one hit. But the tension was there, like what was Aizen doing all this time? Kisuke assured them the object would need time to power up fully, and as he was the only one who had actually seen it, they took his word for it.

It was during one of her late night deliveries that the second attack directed at Luna took place.

Maybe this IS a Fight Manga

When: Oct 29<sup>th</sup>

Where: In the air above the city

“Something’s coming,” Yoruichi warned, looking around from the back of Luna’s broom.

“Another hollow?” she asked, pulling her broom to a stop and looking around herself. She made an ESP check, getting a “twelve” and pointed. “There.”

Yoruichi looked, and Luna was right. Standing atop a building not far in the distance was a man with a funny looking hat on his head.

“Get close, but don’t go down there, I’ll just jump.”

“Got it.” Luna swung the broom over and hung in the air above the man.

“He’s different than the last,” Yoruichi cautioned. “You better stay here.”

“I can support you from here. Be careful.”

“Of course.” She hopped off the broom and by the time she had landed, she was back in human form. Luna edged closer to hear what they were saying, but stayed above and behind the man. She was cautious, she knew that these guys could fire energy blasts, called cero.

“I’m really going to fight a naked woman and a witch?” remarked the man. “I must have displeased my master in some way.”

“Your master being Aizen?” Yoruichi asked.

“I have no other. Perhaps I was a greater disappointment to him than I realized, and this is my punishment.”

“I can’t help you there. You could always return to your world peacefully.”

He shook his head. “That I cannot do. I do have a mission to perform here.”

“Then I guess we better get to it.” Yoruichi got into a fighting stance, and Luna, wand already out of course, looked the man over. He had a prominent chin, and a thin braid of hair at the back of his head. His “hat” also covered part of his face, mostly his left eye, and it looked like a skull having two eye holes. Luna couldn’t tell how he could see out of it, the holes weren’t in the right place, and wondered if being a soul the man didn’t actually need his eyes to see. Maybe he just saw with that part of his mask because it was his eye, or maybe he was blind on that side.

*I could check, but transforming my wand may shift his attention to me. I’m sure she can handle him. I’ll still try to attack from that side though.*

His uniform was white, with a black trim, and his sword was at his side tucked into a black belt.

No, his sword was in his hand, and he was attacking Luna, who rolled to the side to try and dodge. She wouldn’t have managed it, and taken nine damage to the body, but Yoruichi was there knocking the sword away from her. She was then up and tried to disarm him, striking out at the hand holding the sword. He pulled back, vanishing again, and she followed.

*Oh great, how am I going to hit someone that keeps popping in and out like that?*

*Answer: aim where they’re going to be.*

Yoruichi was driving him back, attacking again because she was slightly faster because of her martial arts skill instead of a sword skill. (The martial arts skill reducing her delay further while his sword skill did not) But the difference in stats was still too great, and again he dodged her. She and Luna now went, and Luna made a *premonition* check which I’ll say serves as a bonus of +1 for every 5 to her next attack. So he now had to dodge two attacks, Luna’s “*Expelliarmus*” and Yoruichi trying to disarm him as well. Luna got a “twenty four” total (only rolling a “nine” on *premonition*) and Yoruichi got a “nineteen.” (there are some minuses for the called shot, of course) He finally rolled below both, and whichever one was the cause, his sword flew away from him.

“Oh dear,” he remarked, as Yoruichi’s foot tried to slam him into the pavement below.

She just missed him several times, and he dove for his blade, scooping it up again.

And Luna promptly did another “*Expelliarmus*,” this time getting a plus two for a total of thirty. Yoruichi finally connected on the same action, kicking him in the right arm but then jumping back.

"Ah, did you feel my strength?" asked the man. "Attacking me bare handed isn't going to be very effective."

"Stalemate then, if we can keep you from your sword."

"Yes," he admitted, "you ladies seem to be focused on disarming me. I suppose I should do something about that."

He didn't bother to dodge Yoruichi's next attack, he simply took it and appeared next to his sword again, which he brought up. He started to glow a pale yellow and put both hands on the hilt of his sword, one behind the other. "Slice, Tijeketa!" he commanded, and there was an explosion of yellow energy around him.

When it cleared he was not holding a sword anymore, but instead his arms were now longer and more skeletal. His upper half was covered by a thick armor that looked like a butterfly, and his helmet now pointed backwards and covered his face. It also seemed he had a tail, extending from the back of the helmet, and it was pointed up so she figured it was like another arm for him.

"Now you can no longer disarm me," he announced. "I am Koufang Shawlong, and you cannot defeat me."

"Yoruichi. And I'm sure we can think of something." She made a fist, holding it parallel to the ground, and Luna saw some kind of energy forming around it, which then completely covered her arms and back.

"Oh! It does seem this fight is only just beginning."

The two seemed absorbed in showing off their stuff, so Luna simply pointed her wand at the guy and took the minus two in order to not speak the incantation, and a further minus four to cut the time. She put in as much energy as she could to compensate.

*Confringo*

She managed a "seventeen" which beat Koufang's passive dodge, and he took twelve damage to the body with a cry of surprise and pain. (It was a TR 9 attack)

"I have underestimated the power of magic, it seems," he managed, looking up at her. He vanished, and again Yoruichi had to intervene by blocking the attack. She had the man's "claw" in her one hand, so she drove the other against his chest, where some of the armor had cracked from the force of Luna's explosion magic. But his arms were long, and while he couldn't get away at the moment, he could still stay out of her reach. She followed it up with an "off hand" action, driving her feet at him. She again missed.

Luna didn't want to risk the same spell, given how close Yoruichi was now, so she settled on "*Engorgio*" on Yoruichi while backing up. She managed a quick "thirteen" even taking the penalty for speed, and suddenly Yoruichi was a +1 modifier now. (She could have been bigger, of course, but Luna had seen she liked precise strikes and being any larger might have thrown her off too much to actually use the greater size effectively.)

"Thanks!" she called.

"Of course!"

"Ally support and direct attack, magic is indeed dangerous," muttered Koufang.

Yoruichi knew that even though she was bigger, and had a greater reach, she was no more skillful in her attacks and they had been dodged very well. So she changed her tactic and simply slammed the arm she was holding on to, hoping to break it. She overcame his STrength check when he tried to pull away, so she held on, and did sixteen damage to his right arm. This hardly cracked it. But she wasn't one to give up, and repeated the procedure. This did another twenty five and now it was quite cracked indeed. She felt the strength go out of it, it would be useless for the rest of this fight. She let it go and it flopped to Koufang's side.

Luna, who had been waiting for them to be separated, now took her shot with another nonverbal *Confringo*. She managed a "thirteen" and again, not being able to sense magic or hear when she was going to attack served her well, and it connected. But he only took another five to the body.

"I would have torn her apart if you hadn't been around."

"Why do you think I've stuck so close to her?"

They both vanished again, Yoruichi on the offensive as always. But again he managed to dodge. Finally she connected (by one, he rolled a "twelve" for Pete's sake) and did another fifteen to the body. Koufang looked to be in pretty bad shape by now, but he wasn't going to

back down. That was fine with Yoruichi, who did another quick strike and now, finally, Koufang's penalties started to work against him. At least, that was the theory as he got a "seventeen" to dodge while she got a "fifteen" to attack.

*What is this guy made of?*

She started casting the spell she had used against the big guy, the gravity spell which she didn't want to accelerate because it was pretty complex. Her wand made the starting motions through the air.

Yoruichi missed again, then finally he rolled a "twelve" and he got hit in the body again for another twelve. He was still six from gone, and finally plunged to the ground, unconscious.

"And now for the finishing blow!" Yoruichi announced.

"Wait!" shouted Luna.

She stopped. "You're right. Would you like to perform the killing blow? You've earned it. You fight a lot slower than we do, but you didn't run, and you helped a lot!"

"No, don't we have to hit him with a soul sword, so the energy he's absorbed will go into the soul cycle properly? You or I just killing him will be like a Quincy doing it, right? Isn't that bad?"

Yoruichi stared at her. "You would ask that, even of someone like this?"

"Of course! In fact it's even more important in this case, over a regular hollow. Because he's so much more powerful, that much more will be lost."

"I suppose you're right. I'll carry him back to the... no, I can't leave you alone, in case another attacks you. Can you carry him on your broom?"

"I can, with a little magic. But first, *Finite Incantatem*." She went back to her regular size. "And now for him. *Reducto*."

With him shrunken down it was easy to carry him, and the two delivered their captive back to the store.

Again, neither noticed the figure in the distance, slipping away to make their report on the battle.

"Actually, I'd rather not kill him," Kisuke explained. "If we study him, it might tell us how far along Aizen is in his plans, and how he was able to use the orb to do this so quickly."

"If you can keep him unconscious, I suppose it's fine," allowed Luna. "Just promise me when you're done to kill him with a soul sword."

Kisuke tilted his head and looked her funny for a second, but then shrugged. "That's fine."

Naturally, everyone wanted to hear about the battle and expressed their disgust that they couldn't be part of it.

"It's weird that both have popped up around you," Chad rightfully expressed.

"Just lucky I guess."

"Lucky is right," agreed Madame. "I want to see some action!"

"Unless you can turn into a cat and ride on my broom, I think it's going to have to be business as usual."

"How does Yoruichi do that?"

"I certainly don't know! I don't even know exactly what's involved when my people learn to do it."

"And I'm not telling," Yoruichi said, scratching her ear with her back paw.

"I wonder if it wouldn't be wise to have you all nearby when she goes out at night," Kisuke wondered aloud. His face told Luna *to please get these people out of here at least for a few hours a night, please, please, please*.

"They could follow behind me," Luna agreed. "But really I'm sure it's just coincidence because I'm out there and you guys aren't."

"But the captain is always out on patrol," protested Matsumoto. "And he hasn't been attacked. Of course he might be too short for them to see from where they are."

Hitsugaya just rolled his eyes. He was used to it.

“But I’m on a broom. That opens a much wider area because I’m up high and can move quickly. So naturally if something comes out, I can see it because of my vantage point and get to it because of my speed.”

“I guess. Still, you should be careful.”

“Of course.”

And so Luna continued her deliveries for four more days, the group dutifully following her by jumping across buildings and walking on air. Which they could do now. With no explanation needed or asked for. It was on this, the fourth day, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup>, that a large hole opened in the air and five more beings stepped out of it. All were humanoid, carried swords, and had partial masks on their faces.

“Well, well,” said the one in the lead. He had bluish hair, a large hole in his midsection, and a coat that showed more than it hid of his torso. His arms were mostly covered, and his mask part was just a set of teeth on the right side. “Look what we have here.”

“I knew you would come,” Luna called to him.

“Oh? Me specifically?”

“That’s right. I saw you fighting a friend of mine when I looked into his future.”

“Was he winning?”

“I don’t get that kind of detail.”

“I see. You’re pretty calm, facing a force of this size.”

“It’s because I know something you don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“That in about five seconds, a bunch of death gods are going to be here. They’ve been itching for some action for months so I think they’re going to have some fun playing with you.”

“Oh?” He looked around, probably doing whatever they did to sense energy.

“Hey, she’s right,” agreed the one with the red hair on just half his head. “There are a lot of strong energy sources coming this way.”

“Take care of them. I’ll take care of her.”

“Okay boss.”

The four scattered, going to their destined fights. But one fighter had been removed from his original destiny in this fight; Shawlong. So while Granz was getting smacked around by Renji, and Liones was fighting Madame (while Ayasegawa stood around and watched, because reasons), Grindina was going to fight Matsumoto, and finally the last, weakest one, Rinker was going to fall in a single blow to Rukia. That left in the field; Yoruichi, Hitsugaya, and Itchigo against the strongest who was before them now, Grimmjow.

Yoruichi warmed up her demon magic martial arts mojo while Hitsugaya got out his sword.

“Hey, wait a second,” Grimmjow told them. “Aren’t you missing somebody? We can wait a bit if you want.”

“You would really wait?” asked Hitsugaya.

“Sure, why not? I don’t feel any of you are really a threat to me anyway.”

“That’s nice of you,” Yoruichi told him.

“Are you really going to fight him like that?”

“Like what?”

“With no clothes on, that’s like what. You really need me to- is that why you want to wait? So you can leer at her a little longer?”

“Oh, I didn’t even notice,” Grimmjow lied, looking away.

“I can’t carry clothes around with me in cat form.”

“You could start walking around in your normal form for once. Why do you take the form of a cat anyway?”

“Why shouldn’t I? Saves me energy to ride around the broom.”

“Hey, did I miss any- OH MY GOODNESS!” Itchigo arrived, jumping up on air like it was going out of style but then turning his back on Yoruichi.

*When did he even learn to do that? He was training with the mask, did they happen to mention how to do it? And he’s supposed to have terrible control of his spiritual energy, is the technique just that easy or is he a natural at it?*

“Are you going to fight like *that*?”

“I was just saying that!”

“Boys. Can we get this started, please?”

“Now that everyone’s here, that should be fine,” Grimmjow told them. “One at a time or all together, it’s all the same to me.”

Naturally, he attacked first. He went for Yoruichi, because the person he wanted to eliminate was Luna, who was behind her. (You always kill the spellcaster first, it’s common sense.) She tried to block it but didn’t manage it, and took 10 damage to the right arm. Not the greatest start. Hitsugaya came at him from the side, giving him a slight flanking bonus, otherwise ties would have gone to the defender. Sadly this didn’t matter as his sword was only TR 7 while Grimmjow’s DTR was an 8.

Yoruichi and Luna now went at the same time, Yoruichi moving to punch the guy and Luna figuring she would help out first by getting that sword away from the guy. It had worked pretty well the last time, after all. “*Accio Sword!*” she cast, cutting the time down to nothing. He couldn’t exactly grab for it because he was fending off Yoruichi, and the sword was plucked from his hip and flew into Luna’s outstretched hand.

“Oh, you think that’s going to help you?”

“It can’t hurt.”

“I don’t need that to take you all out.”

Itchigo now slashed at him, his sword released on the way so it was in “cleaver” mode not that this changed the TR or anything. He missed completely.

“You guys suck.”

“Shut up!”

Yoruichi went for him again, and once again missed.

“Bankai,” Hitsugaya intoned, and we’ll assume he gets it because no one on the show, even the guy who just learned bankai like two minutes before he rescued Rukia didn’t fail to call it out, so we’ll assume it’s not a skill for them but just something they can do once they know how to do it.

“Gotta get me one of those,” remarked Itchigo as Hitsugaya got ice wings, a tail, and dragonish looking ice feet. He also got twelve ice petals floating above him, which Luna thought was a curious waste of power.

Look at the martial arts user up again, can she hit? Why no, her roll was below his minimum to dodge. But at least he’s being kept busy, right?

Luna and she were up at the same time, and she figured it was time to stop him squirming about so they could actually start doing some damage.

“*Arresto Momentum!*”

## Breaking And Entering

When: Just after the last spell

Where: In the air about the town, because that's a thing now

In our last chapter, Luna had just performed a spell on Grimmjow to keep him from dodging Yoruichi's attack. So we pick up there, with her getting a "sixteen" on the attempt. She gets it, and while he tried to dodge the magic absorbed the kinetic energy (not that she would have said that's what it was doing) and rooted him in place.

This allowed Yoruichi to strike, doing seventeen damage to his body. Don't get too excited, this is hardly a scratch for this guy.

"What in the world?" he managed.

Seeing Hitsugaya pulling out his best stuff, Ichigo did as well, no doubt wondering what all that training was for if he didn't get to use it this battle. He put his fingers up to his face and made a pulling motion, making his hollow mask appear. After this time he could hold it for three seconds, so at segment 32 it will break off. For now it's giving him a +4 to all his physical stats.

"What the heck?" asked Grimmjow, looking over at him. "This is not going the way I planned."

"Good," said Yoruichi, trying to hit him again. His penalty and a lucky roll for her means she gets him again, and another fifteen to the body is applied.

Hitsugaya now caught up, and swung his blade at the guy. Not to do damage, but to release a stream of ice at him in hopes of damaging/slowing him further. It missed totally.

Yoruichi went again, because this should be called the Yoruichi combat show apparently, and misses completely again. But the next action was the combined one again, like in Chrono Trigger when you did that cool X slash with two swordsman? Oh man I want to play that game again now... er, sorry. The fight, right. "*Arresto Momentum!*"

She got it off, again beating his passive dodge so Yoruichi got to slug him again doing twenty two to the body.

This put him at 54 and he dropped like a rock.

"What am I even training for?" Ichigo asked no one in particular. His voice sounded weird, like it was being run through a sound effects machine kids would play with.

"Yeah, train for another hundred years if you want to keep up with me!" Yoruichi told him.

"Go back to being a cat!" he yelled, averting his eyes.

"Aw, you're so cute. Somebody with a sword go finish that guy off. Kisuke doesn't need another research subject, it's been a couple of days so it can't have changed that much."

"I'll do it," Hitsugaya said, resigned.

"Here, smash this first," Luna offered, holding the other sword. "I'd keep it as a souvenir, but it's going to vanish when you kill him anyway. But just in case he's faking or something..."

"I'll take care of that," Ichigo told her, taking it and putting the blade across his knee. He smashed into it with his blade, breaking it in half.

It vanished shortly after that as Hitsugaya stabbed Grimmjow over and over until he died. "That was... interesting," he remarked, flying back up to them. "I didn't even need to have my limiter removed. Is it just me, or does anyone else think that was too easy somehow?"

"We didn't make the mistake of fighting him one on one," Luna reasoned. "Yoruichi seems super fast compared to you swordsman, which helped. He didn't have his sword out at the beginning so I got it away from him. Yoruichi and I were synced a little bit, so I could keep him from dodging her attacks which I think helped."

"It helped a lot!"

"I think manly it was just the fact we ganged up on him. I don't care how strong or fast you are, trying to deal with the four of us was just asking for trouble."

"Plus he's been in his current form for what, a week at most?" thought Yoruichi. "Of course he wasn't going to use his sword, he would have only gotten that recently, when Aizen

used the orb to transform him. He would be totally inept at it! And I am pretty awesome,” she added modestly.

“What’s this about a limiter?” Luna asked, going back to earlier in the conversation.

“It limits my spiritual power by 80% when in the real world,” he explained.

“Okay... so not your strength or skill with a blade or anything like that?”

“No, nothing like that.”

*Just what Susan would call ‘energy’ then. She always said she had ‘eighty’ so that would take her down by 64, leaving her 16? I think I did that right.* “So what difference would that make? Yes, if you were fighting for ten minutes, having more spiritual power would have helped. But just fighting one person, for a few seconds, you would hardly notice.”

“True,” he nodded. “That’s very true.”

“Are the others okay? Do we need to help elsewhere?”

It turned out the only one who needed help was Matsumoto, but only because she was playing dead and waiting for the limiter removal authorization. Luna zipped overhead, used her gravity spell on the guy, and the others cut him down where he stood.

“Wait, you can’t authorize your own limiter to be removed?” she asked, amazed. She was healing her injury, and noticed Yoruichi needed it to and said she would do her next.

“Can’t you just ask the captain, he’s right there. What higher authority is there?”

“I’m going to request that change be made,” Hitsugaya promised. “If they can’t trust my judgment in these sorts of situations, why am I even a captain?”

“Well said!”

“It does make a lot of sense,” Matsumoto agreed. “Must be more of that thousand year old tradition stuff, right?”

Luna could only nod in agreement.

The group got back together, with Madame and Renji both looking pretty beat up.

“Wait a second,” Madame said angrily. “I get all beat up but she doesn’t have a scratch?” He pointed to Luna. “You aren’t even a death god!”

“No, but my three companions are. And I wisely didn’t get hit by anything!” *Because it would probably kill me instantly, to be totally honest. I saw what force she was hitting with, that weird power aura on her arms active or not.* “What about you? Ayasegawa doesn’t have a scratch either, maybe you just suck at fighting.”

“Now look here you-”

“I didn’t actually fight,” he said, stepping between them.

“You what? You just stood there? You’re both morons! Come here and let me heal you.” She started to. “Not that you deserve it. Honestly, do you think we’re playing games here? You’re not just fighting for your own amusement or whatever, you’re fighting to protect people here that can’t protect themselves. If you can’t understand that, don’t bother coming here again.”

“You don’t get to lecture me!”

She put her wand down. “Then I’m not healing you either. Maybe your hurts will be more of a lesson if they’re a bit slower to go away.” She turned to the other guy. “As for you, if you’re not going to fight, you’re a waste of space. If we get attacked again you will do your part, is that clear?”

“There’s no reasoning with these two,” Matsumoto assured her. “You were right the first time, they are both insane.”

“Great, the perfect people to be defending Earth at our side. Come here!” she commanded Renji, and started healing him instead. “I hope you didn’t do something just as stupid, like not using bankai or trying to ‘fight fair.’”

“Are you kidding? I went bankai immediately and gave that fight everything I had! I wouldn’t have turned down help, fighting one on one is the pits!”

“Good. Someone with a reasonable policy.” She smiled at him and nodded. “You I will be happy to heal.” Then scowled over at Madame again.

Matsumoto and Renji both laughed.

Later that night the group was sitting in the back of the shop with Kisuke, who looked worried.

"They're getting stronger, aren't they?" he asked quietly.

"That one did take more of a beating than the last, and it was a whole different level than that big guy Luna nearly took care of all on her own."

"If it hadn't been all of us," Hitsugaya admitted, "I couldn't have taken him. I saw how he was dodging Yoruichi, and I didn't even think that was possible, she's too good. I wouldn't have laid a finger on him."

"Aw, you're cute kid!" She reached over and ruffled his hair.

"Hey, quit it!"

"He's also making more," Matsumoto observed. "First it was the big guy, then he refined the process and made one human shaped."

"Indeed," Kisuke agreed. "Then he made so many he felt he could send five at once, with the strongest one probably being the last one he made."

"Or he felt he could just make more if those were lost," Renji said. "How long in between do you think he has to let the orb rest? I mean he seems to be accelerating the process. Can he make a hundred a day now? Ten? A thousand?"

"I don't know how he's using it at all," Kisuke protested. "Either I was wrong, it didn't need any time to get back to full power after I sealed it and put it inside Rukia, or he's found a way to power it externally."

"There is one thing we can be sure of," Rukia put in. "These attacks are clearly targeting Luna."

The group looked around the table, and everyone nodded.

"It's been three times, I don't think there's any doubt either," Kisuke agreed. "Aizen probably used the first two in order to see what you were capable of, what spells you knew and how effectively you used them. Then he sent a group large enough to take you out. He didn't think we would all be here, and that saved us this time. He may send even more through next time."

"If he really is The Darkness now, he would know what I could do, though. It's been inside Tom, he was doing wand magic himself. There would be no need to test me. And even if that weren't true, it would know what I can do because Susan knows what I can do, and Susan has a part of The Darkness inside her as well. It knows what she does."

"That does raise a fair point. But what other explanation is there?"

"A scary one. That Aizen is Aizen, and someone else, maybe someone we don't even know yet, is The Darkness."

"That is scarier. We have to deal with the threat in front of us, though."

"Exactly," agreed Madame. "So I say we attack!"

"What?" everyone but Ayasegawa cried.

"Yeah, forget sitting around here. We go to where he is, fight our way through his guards or whatever, and get the orb back. He just sent his latest troops, right? That means he's at his weakest!" He looked around the room for support.

"I guess he does have a point," admitted Kisuke.

"And contrary to popular belief, there is such a thing as sneaking around," Yoruichi advised. "We can use these jokers as a distraction, cause a big noisy fight in one place while the more sneaky forces enter from another way."

"Problem there is, he would probably keep the orb with him, right?" asked Rukia.

"We only need to see it for a moment, and Orihime can reject it," Luna told them.

"I hate to bring her *there*, though."

"She's on the sneaking team. She can get us through walls and stuff, too. With luck that team never even sees anybody. It'll be made up of low energy people so they're hard to detect, especially next to the high energy people out in front."

"But how does that team find the orb?" Kisuke asked. "I don't have a detector for it, or anything."

"That's where I can help," Luna explained. "With my ability to glimpse the future, I can get a sense that going one way or another leads us closer to our goal. Then we just keep going in that direction."

"That almost sounds reasonable..."

"Let's do it!" cried Madame.

"Hold on there," cautioned Ayasegawa. "We've got to go get the captain first."

"What? Why? We don't need his permission, let's just go save the day. We'll get to fight, and come home heroes!"

*Did you forget that yours almost killed you because your buddy was just standing there? They won't be weaker than that at this point. Maybe you're not the great fighter you think you are.*

He shook his head. "I'm thinking about afterwards. What happens if we all come back and tell him about the great fights we had against Aizen's minions."

He paled. "He'd kill us for sure! He'd say we should have come and got him so he could join in!"

"Exactly."

"We have to go get our captain."

Luna rolled her eyes. "That's fine. Anyone else you think should come along, too. You know their capabilities more than I do. Your group should probably have a good healer along too, just in case."

"Ah, if you want to be all 'thinking ahead' and stuff. Fine, we'll grab someone from the protection squads."

"Tomorrow morning, then?" Luna asked.

"That will give us time to get back there, find everyone interested in going, and get back here," Madame agreed.

"And those of us that need sleep can get a good night's rest before the battle."

"Should we call Orihime now?"

Luna shook her head. "She would just be super nervous and not sleep tonight. Give her the option tomorrow. Along with Chad and Uryu, they don't have enormous amounts of energy, right?" He nodded. "So it'll be a good sized team, lots of ranged fighters, a healer and shield maker, and of course me."

"Sounds good," Yoruichi agreed. "He'd never expect us to attack his stronghold directly, I think this'll work."

So Luna went to bed as the meeting broke up and the ones going back to Soul Society left to get more help. The morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> dawned with a rather large group of people standing around the training area. Kisuke, Ichigo, Yoruichi, Uryu, Rukia, Orihime, Chad, Renji, Madame, Matsumoto, Ayasegawa, Hitsugaya, bell guy and the kid on his back, Byakuya, a guy with a tattoo of "69" on his cheek which wasn't suggestive of anything at all, clown makeup guy and his aid (he was muttering about research specimens), a woman wearing her hair braided down the *front* of her, around her neck like a built in scarf, and basket head.

"You got a lot of help!" Luna exclaimed. "This is great!"

"We ran into a few people we thought would want to come. Let's get this started!" Madame told her.

"No sense waiting around, I guess," she admitted. "We all know why we're here, let's do this."

So the group ran through a very different portal than the one to where plus souls lived, and entered the realm of the heartless. The territory of hollows, that place of bleakness and sand, of eternal twilight and eat or be eaten;

Huenco Mundo.

The place was a dump.

No seriously, it was trashed. The group arrived next to a totally gigantic structure and fanned out, captain level fighters forming a ring around the mere humans who thought they might be safe for even an instant in this, the most unforgiving of places. But nothing attacked

them. Nothing moved. As the group looked around they noticed holes blown in the walls of the structure before them, and the corpses of hollows both big and small littering the ground.

"What's this?" bell guy demanded. "Did somebody get here first?"

*They don't vanish here when they're killed? Is there some sort of breakdown process that happens, just like in the real world?*

"How horrible," Orihime remarked, looking around.

"Fan out," Kisuke ordered. "Infiltration group, looks like you might be able to just walk in, after all. Everyone else, search for survivors who can tell us what happened here, or anyone still able to fight. Beat them but don't kill them, we need information."

The "inner" group moved out, and passed through the walls of the place expecting an attack at any moment. As Luna passed the outer walls, that were thicker than she was tall, she couldn't help but wonder what it was they were made of, and who put them up.

*It must have taken years and years to build something this size. Who did it? From what the others said most hollow are simply beasts, acting on instinct to devour their fellows. It's only when they've eaten hundreds or perhaps thousands of their fellows do they even begin to take on a glimmer of their former intelligence. Even then, what would they need with something like this? They don't have electrical power here, or oil they can burn. How did they raise all this? Just with their "powers?"*

Moving further into the structure brought basically an entire city into view, complete with a fake sky and clouds, which she could see holes in as well where the blackness of the sky outside now pierced through.

*What did they do, paint the whole thing? Where would they even get paint? Blue paint especially. Do they really want to be reminded of what they were that much? But they have no hearts, so why would they care? None of this place makes any sense.*

This group had to stay together, because none of them had the strength individually to fight anything they might meet, and so moved as one through the "city" streets and past the stark buildings inside the dome. And it was a dome, Luna could see that now, as the "clouds" were also painted on, and if you looked you could see how they curved. No one spoke, the silence was huge and oppressive. Even here, it looked like battles had been fought, and the city had paid the price. Luna kept her senses open, as did the others as they were able, and with a "nine" roll she missed the nearby survivor. Luckily, Yoruichi got a "nineteen" on her version of spirit sense and led the group in that direction, looking for answers. They came upon a woman, badly injured, and Orihime immediately sent her two fairies to begin rejecting those injuries. The woman looked up at them.

She was blond, with her mask remnants covering her right eye completely, with three "teeth" hanging down from it. Her remaining eye was green and her yellowish hair was swept back and cut fairly short. She had a wide, black belt around her hips and a flowing white skirt. She had no sword. Half her shirt was torn off, but it was coming back as Orihime rejected her wound. It looked like an energy attack, not a sword slash, is what had done her in.

"Who did this to you?" Luna gently asked her, kneeling by her side.

She weakly laughed and shook her head. "What are you doing? If you wanted information wouldn't it have been better to demand it first, then heal me if I cooperated?"

Now Luna shook her head. She took the woman's hand and put hers over the hole in her body that represented her missing heart. "You may have lost your heart, and so you can't imagine a world where someone would simply want to help another person. Even if that person could be considered an enemy. But I haven't lost mine." She put the woman's hand in the same place on her chest. Orihime smiled and nodded. "Tell us, or not, we won't let you sit here in agony and watch you die. But if you want to stop who did this, so more of your kind aren't killed, we need to know. You have a place in the soul cycle, yes, even you. I don't wish you ill, you're doing whatever you were meant to do. I can no more hate you than a wolf that eats a rabbit to survive. But right now something has happened- something not in the natural order. That is, right now, our common enemy. So I ask again, who did this to you?"

The woman stared at her a long time. Finally she spoke. "You're asking the wrong question. It isn't who did this to me. I was... I was hiding. I think... I think I got hit by accident. A stray cero that went wide. Must have smashed through quite a lot, to only damage me this much. When the fighting stopped I tried to make my way out of the city. This is as far as I got."

“But who did this to the city?” Yoruichi pressed. “What could cause all this destruction? Who were you hiding from?”

She closed her eyes and seemed to gather herself, then opened them again.

“Aizen. Aizen did all this. He’s gone nuts.”

"Wait, Aizen did this?" asked Orihime. "But wasn't he helping you? Making you stronger with the orb he pulled out of Rukia?"

"We thought he was," she admitted. "I mean, he seemed sincere but we all followed him because we knew he was stronger than any of us. And he did provide a lot of us more power, and basically left us to our own devices."

"So what changed?" Yoruichi asked.

She sighed. "I don't know. No, in a way I suppose I do. It was always his intent to 'wake up' that orb of his. He wanted to use it to get stronger himself, not that he needed it. From what I understood of his meetings with the ten strongest Arrancar he felt he had hit a limit in his skills and needed the power of the orb to surpass them. What happened though, I can't say. When I saw him rampaging around he looked like one of us, a hollow with a mask, and simply went smashing everything in his way."

"That sounds familiar, actually," Luna told her. "A friend of mine, Itchigo, had a hollow inside his soul. This one group hiding out in the human world told him to get it under control or it would control him. Then go berserk, which I have to assume meant something like this." She indicated the surrounding carnage. "He got it under control with their help, and they dropped the matter."

"Oh, that's what that mask thing was, I did wonder," Yoruichi put in.

"So you think he tried something like that, using the orb?" Chad asked.

"And it backfired on him?" further asked Uryu.

"Maybe? I don't know, just that he was trying to kill everybody around here, and fairly well succeeding."

"Do you know where the orb is now?" Yoruichi asked. "Even you must see it's too dangerous to keep around."

"I know where it was. In the aftermath of this..." She weakly waved a hand around.

"Who knows?"

"That's a start. How much longer, do you think?"

"Just a few minutes."

"Will you help us?" Luna insightfully asked. *She might not, after all. Healing or no.*

"I guess," she finally answered. "You're right, that orb... it's not meant to be used, if this is the ultimate result."

"Thank you."

The woman looked at her. "You really mean that."

"Of course! You don't have to help us. But you choose to, and that's not heart that's just common sense. And I'm grateful for it. You could refuse simply out of spite and go your way."

"I guess. I'm Menoly."

Luna smiled. "I'm Luna, nice to meet you!" *I wonder, these souls lost their hearts. But what if... they could find them again? What if they could heal that emptiness in their souls? Not through magic or powers but just simple friendship. I wonder if anyone has even tried. Not much opportunity I guess.*

Moments later the group was on the move, plus one new member. Menoly led them through the streets, but said she wanted to check on some others before she would show them where the throne room was.

"Will they attack us?" Yoruichi wanted to know.

"I'll talk them out of it," she promised. "Besides, all the strong fighters were taken out by Aizen. I could feel that from where I was."

They found a wounded woman about Menoly's height, but with dark hair and the opposite eye covered by her mask. Orihime healed her too, and with some effort, agreed that maybe Aizen wasn't worth following anymore, now that he had gone crazy and, you know, killed everybody.

She went off in search of other survivors, but not before telling what she had seen. "I felt a huge surge in power," she explained. "And ran there, thinking Aizen was under attack somehow. But he wasn't, the orb was in his chest and he was trying to tear a mask off his face."

Luna looked at Yoruichi and nodded. "That's about right."

"He looked at me and drew his sword, then seemed to change and told me to run. I... I'm ashamed to say I did. He scared me, more than usual."

"You have to understand," explained Menoly, "Aizen's strength is a quiet strength. The strength of the mountain that you just can't cross over. What I felt in that instant was the strength of the ocean, and a storm to sink any ship that dared sail."

"Very poetic," teased the dark haired woman. "But I suppose it's true enough. From what I could tell he then started attacking everybody."

"Great, so he's even more dangerous now?" Yoruichi grumped. "I better tell the others." She did something with "demon magic" and passed the message on to those outside, getting back no one had found anything alive outside yet. "So presumably he's not around anymore. But I've told them to be careful."

"Will most of them take that advice?"

"Er, some will?" she hedged.

They encountered several more 'servant' type Arrancar, overlooked in the attack and glad to be alive. Menoly no longer had to keep her word about finding the orb, as the group now knew what had happened to it, but any new piece of information could be vital. But the city was huge, and sweeping it totally would take days. The group thanked Menoly, who said she was going to gather up the survivors and decide what to do next.

"Just try to put our lives back together, I guess," she replied, when asked about her plans. "I really don't know."

"Good luck," Luna offered, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Menoly looked away. "Thanks."

Back with the "attacking" group now, Luna saw they had a few prisoners of their own under guard. They made their way over there.

Sitting and looking forlorn were a very young looking kid, like she was six or so. She had green hair and a cracked mask. Beside her looking worried were a yellow and black spotted guy with a huge face and highlights on his mask, and a thin one with purple arms and legs with a mask like an insect face. He had one eye covered by a tiny square of purple cloth.

"Found these three skulking around," said bells guy.

"We weren't skulking," protested the thin one.

"We were coming to see what happened, don't cha know?" finished the bigger one.

"Nel is scared!" said the kid, holding tightly onto the thin one.

"It's okay, it's okay," he said, patting her. "They won't hurt us."

"Figured you would want to talk to them," Renji said. "They claim to have seen Aizen."

"We did, that we did, don't cha know?"

"Hey, it's okay," Luna knelt down to offer a hand to the child. "You don't have to be afraid. We're here to help."

"Are you?"

"We are."

"Are you really?"

"We really are."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"Really honest?"

"Really honest and true." *What's that Susan is always saying from that show about ponies she loves so much?* "Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

The girl giggled. "You're funny! Nel like you!"

"I like you too, Nel. I'm Luna."

"Like the moon?"

“Yes, like the moon. I know it might be hard, but can you tell us what happened?”  
“I guess.”

But she didn't.

The thin one spoke up instead. “We saw Aizen. He came screaming down out of the sky as if he knew where we all were. He looked us over and said ‘you’ll never do,’ and sort of flew off again.”

Everyone shared a look.

“What did he look like? How did you know it was him?”

“What do you mean? He looked like Aizen, of course. There’s no mistaking that guy.”

“He wasn’t wearing a mask?”

“Mask? Not that I saw, no.”

“What about a hole?” She pointed to the hole below his armor. “Or an orb?”

He shook his head. “His jacket was closed. We couldn’t tell.”

She looked to the others, just shrugged. They didn’t know what to tell her.

“So that’s it? Zip, hello, you’ll never do, zip?”

“That’s about it, don’t you know?”

“Okay. That’s helpful, thank you.”

“So what happens to Nel now?” Nel asked.

“You can head into the city if you want. There are other survivors in there, and they’re going to figure out their next move. If you want to hear what they decide, you should probably stick close to them.”

The two men shared a look, and nodded. “We’ll go. Thank you.”

“Thank you!”

The three were released, and everyone stood around wondering what had happened.

“Could he have beaten it, like I did?” Itchigo asked. “He must have a strong will. That explains why no mask, and him being lucid again. He would have to go through the same endurance training I was.”

“But then why leave? If he beat up all the other Arrancar around here he would have no trouble with the captains. Why not just attack the real world, or soul society?”

“Remember what he said to those three- you’ll never do,” Luna reminded him. “I think he’s worried about what we were talking about last night. Getting overwhelmed no matter how powerful he is. He can’t fight everybody at once.”

“So he’s gathering troops again,” Ururu reasoned.

“But to what end?” Chad asked.

“That’s a good question,” Luna agreed. “If he’s The Darkness, to simply begin the slaughter of everyone in three worlds here. But he left Nel and the other two alive. That doesn’t make sense either. If he’s just Aizen, he must have some plan in mind now that his strength has been increased.”

“And until we know that, we don’t know what his next move will be,” Rukia stated.

“Exactly.” But she considered. “I wonder if there isn’t a way to force his hand, almost...”

“What do you have in mind?” asked bells guy.

“We know he’s been sending troops out to either test or eliminate me. I head back to the real world and we might be able to draw him there, too. After all, that body is still vulnerable to my magic. With support I can help take him down like we did that fellow last night.”

“So we head back to the real world?” Kisuke asked.

“Let’s head to soul society,” Luna suggested instead. “We need to tell the others, and make sure that place isn’t under attack at this very moment.”

“Yeah,” bell guy agreed, “I’ll be pretty angry if I came all the way here to fight him, and he went all the way there and we just missed each other.”

So they traversed a gate again, and everyone in the courts was rather surprised to see the group hurriedly making their way to the commander’s meeting place. The other captains

were called in, and once they had arrived the story was told. Aizen was now a visored, they still didn't know if he was The Darkness, but they had a plan to draw him out.

"But he could be there right now," the commander told them. "We can't be in two places at once."

"But in essence, we can," Kisuke assured them. "It's a little risky, I agree, but we can use the tunnel to get ready."

"Tunnel?" asked Luna.

"The tunnel we use to go between our realms, I think you're familiar with the train looking thing that sweeps it out?"

"Yeah, we saw it."

"Properly opened, it can act as a sort of gateway through time, as well. That's why the sweeper, so it isn't abused. We can make a short jump back, it shouldn't be too risky, and have the extra time to get the town safe. Then we just wait. If he comes there, great, we'll fight him without worrying about collateral damage. If he attacks here, we can get through the tunnel quickly enough to get back here and provide reinforcements."

"That's a lot of ifs," he complained.

"Can't be helped. We don't have enough information about his goals to accurately predict his next move."

"And if he chooses to attack neither place?"

"Then we make a new plan. But his goal is close, it must be. That's why he fused with the orb. I doubt he's the type to come this far and then go on vacation."

"True." He paused, thinking it over. "It's better than nothing, and more than we knew before. I'll approve it, and meet you in the real world in three days."

"Very good. We should be able to set it up unseen, and have it ready by, well, now, actually. You should be able to leave right after we do."

"Then I'll see you in a few moments."

He nodded, and went to make the preparations for the tunnel opening that would also take them through time.

Grabbing a paper from a newsstand, Kisuke announced it had worked, they were now three days in the past, back on Nov 1<sup>st</sup>. He told them they would have to stay out of sight, but had jobs for them all.

"Actually, we're heading back," Yoruichi told him.

"What?"

"Itchigo and I. We're heading back. He doesn't have his bankai and now that it's three days ago, I have hope I can bring it out before the big battle."

"In three days?"

"I have a special method. We can stay out of sight in one of my hidden training areas, and I'll put him through his paces. We may need another bankai user before this is over. Especially one that can use a mask like he probably can. Even if it is only for a few seconds, it could make all the difference."

"Whatever you say. I'll readjust the tunnel and get it open again."

He and the group said their goodbyes, and Itchigo went through the tunnel to try and learn how to call out his most powerful sword aspect.

"So we can't actually activate these until we know our previous selves are gone from the area," Kisuke explained after one of the pillars was "delivered."

"To avoid paradox?" Luna asked.

"Exactly. This is basically going to cut off the city but replace it with a version made of spirit energy."

"Why do that? Wouldn't a big open space be better?"

"It's just how they work, there isn't time to make new ones. Besides, sometimes cover can be useful."

"True." But then she thought of another problem. "Uh, but what about people going in and out? Phone calls? The internet?"

“Not a problem. Anything crossing the barrier will go into the real one, which we’ll temporarily stick in a big empty space in soul society. So they won’t even notice the difference.”

“Then why not just turn them on now?”

“Because my ‘younger’ self would no doubt notice, and come looking for the reason. Those with high spiritual power are ignored, as usually that’s just us. We wouldn’t want to accidentally go there when we wanted to be here.”

“Oh, and you want to avoid coming face to face with yourself.”

“If I can avoid it. Very messy business.”

Finally time caught up with them and the pillars were activated. The city shimmered, and emptied. A ton of strong fighters, including the old guy that looked like Roshi, showed up in the real world and started their wait for Aizen’s attack here, or there as it was now less defended. Matsumoto came to find Luna.

“This almost completely slipped my mind,” she said to her. “Someone needed to tell you, don’t look at Aizen’s sword release. We managed to figure out he was lying about it, and that’s how he started this whole thing.”

“Lying?”

“About what he could do. He said it was a water based technique, which used mist to make illusions in the air. But that’s got to be a lie. We think he can actually plant illusions directly in the mind of the person that sees it. That’s how we thought orders were coming from central 46. He made us think that.”

“Great. So you’re going to have to rely on us humans that haven’t seen it, guaranteed, to direct you in the coming battle.”

“That’s about right. And we want Chad and Orihime to stay back, of course. He can guard her, and she can do healing.”

“That’s fine, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“Naturally you should be with us, but stay behind us.”

“Like I did before, I know. My best role is support, I know that.”

And so the group waited. But they didn’t wait long, and there was Aizen and his new troops. The two groups stared at each other, daring, perhaps, the other to make a move first.

“He’s right there,” she told everyone, pointing.

“That’s where we think he is.”

“And there’s...” she counted and told them how many others.

“Same. He’s not using his power at the moment.”

“And then you showed up,” Luna finished. “Beat the crap out of everybody, by yourself, and we came back here.”

“Not bad,” Susan admitted. “What was I worried about?”

“I can’t imagine. I’m just glad Aizen was The Darkness, if he hadn’t been I don’t know where we would have looked.”

“And so apparently he was in the orb?”

“I guess?”

“We registered Darkvoid in the orb you sent though,” Silverstreak told them. “It took over a computer once, why are you surprised about an orb?”

“Why not just take him over directly, like it usually does?”

“That wouldn’t have increased his power? I really don’t know what rules this possession style takeover Darkvoid uses operates under. Not having practiced it myself.”

“But yet you know it can’t be broken expect by killing the host?”

“We’ve had plenty of people captured it’s been done to, and my agents have tried all kinds of things. Believe me, it’s the only way. I would have taken it out of you, otherwise, when you first came here.”

“I get it. Well, if that satisfies everybody, and it does me, we can get you safe and home, then I can go after my father.”

“But I can stay the night, right?”

“I hate to make these girls wait, despite how much I want to be alone with you.”

“Oh, go be with your girlfriend a day or two,” laughed Jenny. “We can always find something to do around here, right girls?”

The others gave knowing nods, winks, and elbow nudges.

“Thanks.”

The two, hand in hand, ran off but Silverstreak’s blank face was grim. “The next one may not have such a happy ending. All of you, I have a few instructions for you once you find her father.”

They leaned close, and they didn’t like what they were hearing.