

Susan had finally learned her lesson and had Silverstreak make her up some native clothes and currency so she could blend in a little better when arriving to this new world. Thus she was dressed in plain peasant garb, though made of special fabric that held heat in better. Susan could see why he had prepared it in that way, the local weather seemed to be brutally cold and people were rushing, heads down, from place to place around the town. It seemed to be late afternoon not that you could tell by the sun, which was currently blotted out by thick clouds.

She looked around, marveling at the castle in the distance. It was surrounded almost entirely by water, (well, ice currently) with only a few bridges connecting it to the nearby land.

I suppose that would make it harder to attack, you'd have to do it by boat. And boats burn pretty well, at least if you drop burning pitch on them from the castle wall, where troops would no doubt be climbing up from. If not they're soaking wet and unarmored, not a great thing to be when assaulting a castle.

It seemed to have a large outer wall, then a courtyard area, then the main building set back a bit from that. As she looked at it, the more she thought it looked like someone smushed together a castle and a large manor house, making one structure. It was certainly impressive, but indicated there probably wasn't a lot of technology around here. The nearby houses, made of stone with tile roofs, seemed to bear that out.

She saw a horse or two struggling through the snow, and some abandoned carts now stuck to the ground, unable to be moved. Out over the water, or what must have been water until just recently, boats were held fast by the now frozen lake.

"Look at this," Sparkle remarked, pointing. Susan looked over and there under the tree, which oddly had all its leaves, were flowers. Dying flowers, but flowers nonetheless.

"He did write sudden," she reminded her, seeing signs of a very "snap" winter everywhere. "But I think he has a different sense of extremes than we do. Something happened here."

"Think it's related to us?"

"Maybe. But messing with the weather? Doesn't seem all that deadly in the short term. Think we'll meet someone helpful right away? We usually do."

"I don't know, everyone here seems to be a bit 'frosty' if you take my meaning. And is it just me, or do they keep shooting dirty looks at the castle?"

Susan watched a moment more and found she was right. People did not look happy, even the few children she saw plodding through the snow, and tempers seemed to be running high. People snapped at each other to get out of the way, and there wasn't a pair of bright eyes to be seen. *These are a people that have had something terrible happen, some awful shock that's still processing.*

"The kids aren't playing," she remarked. "No snowball fights. No snowmen. No skating on the frozen lake. You think there would be some."

"And here we are without a single point in *Information Gathering*."

"Eh, skills like that are overrated. Like *Tracking*. If we're meant to find something out, the *narrative imperative* will make sure we do. The story wouldn't move forward otherwise!"

"I guess. So what's the plan, oh powerful one? Stand here in the snow until something comes along?"

Susan considered. "Would you like to build a snowman?"

"Too cold."

"Ah, true. Snow wouldn't stick together. Seems to be a tavern of some sort there, and you know the stereotype of adventurers and taverns. Let's get something to eat and listen to the gripes of the townspeople. One of them should have a quest for us, right?"

"I suppose finding that little girl led us to the wizard's guild back on the warlock world. Couldn't hurt. And my paws are freezing."

"Sorry about that. I could make you some little booties."

"I could jump on your shoulders and put them on your neck."
"Let's just go inside."

Once there, Susan sat down at a table and Sparkle slunk off to see what she could hear in the place, and a "tavern wench" took her order.

"You want how much for just that?" Susan gasped, when told the total. She didn't know anything about the local economy of course, but forget paying a gold piece for a couple of bottles of butterbeer, what she was asking for was outrageous.

"I'm sorry miss, but that's prices now," said the young girl, who had clearly heard it before. "The owner isn't sure when we'll be restocked, with the harbor frozen over like it is. So we're trying to make do."

She grimaced. "I suppose I can see that. Very well. But it better be good, and I'll expect the latest town gossip as well!"

The girl had a "are you kidding me" look on her face. "You mean apart from the queen going nuts and freezing the whole town?"

Bingo.

"Precisely. There must be something else to talk about around here. All I hear is the queen this and winter that. There must be something else a traveling adventurer can hear about."

"You'll not find any other gossip in this town," said the girl, walking away.

Still, that's enough isn't it? My next stop is the castle if the queen is involved somehow.

The serving girl had scarcely walked away when an elderly woman, sitting at the table next to her, beckoned her over.

"Did I hear you call yourself an adventurer? A traveling adventurer?" the woman asked.

"You did indeed. Why? Do you have work for someone like that? I do it all."

The woman looked her over. "You don't seem mad, or simple."

Susan's eyes narrowed. "I assure you I am not."

The woman's hands came up. "No offense meant of course, no offense. I was just surprised that's all. Rare enough for a man to go about spouting such non- uh, I mean such a bold claim but for a young woman such as yourself... well. You wanted town gossip?"

"Now you have my interest," Susan proclaimed with a grin and sat down. "What can you tell me?"

"There are those," she began, going back to shoving food into her month, "that believe this curse of winter wasn't the beginning of the town's troubles. That those poor souls found days ago were just the start of it, and more will follow afterwords. Like our very land has been cursed."

"What poor souls?"

"Four people that I heard, though it may be more now. In all corners of the village they were, found collapsed the day before the coronation. They live but they do not wake. So tell me, traveler, have you encountered the like in your travels?"

Susan considered, rubbing her chin. "Overwork? A coronation must have involved the whole town to some capacity, no?"

"Even a child? No, I've seen a lot of things in my long years, and I know the difference between a sleep of exhaustion and a person near death. This has gone on too long, it's something else."

"Any other symptoms? Odd coloring? Cough? Complaining of weakness beforehand?"

"You'll have to go talk to the ones taking care of them if you want to know that," she insisted. "You said you wanted town gossip, not a medical chart."

"You're right of course. Where can I find them?" *Wait, she knows what a medical chart is?*

"There's a plaguehouse to the east, set some distance away from the town. They've apparently been moved there."

"I'll check it out, see if there's anything I can do."

"You know some healing arts then?"

"I've picked up a few in my travels."

"Then my talk was not wasted then. Your food is ready."

"Hm?" Susan looked, and the girl was setting a dish down at her table. "Ah, so it is. Thank you for the conversation."

"Don't mention it. Just make sure you save those poor *souls*, Susan."

"I will."

Susan dug into the meal, simple enough fare but as she was used to just eating things created by *Create Foodstuff*, this was pretty good.

I should have the book research a higher grade spell, like Create Meal or Create Feast. That would work out better than- wait a second. Did that woman call me by name?

She turned around to demand how the woman knew her name, she hadn't said it that she recalled. But the woman was gone.

"She said you would pay for her meal." Susan jumped and whipped around, looking at the serving girl again. "The old woman. She said you would pay." The girl's hand was out.

Probably already did, the girl just sees you as a good mark, said The Darkness. But then, maybe it was the woman who saw you as a mark because you were from out of town. She did disappear pretty fast for someone that old.

Good point, wouldn't hurt to check, right? "How do I know she hasn't already paid?"

The girl seemed shocked. "Miss, we run a good, clean establishment here!"

Susan glanced at the ceiling, where overhead spiderwebs and dust sat upon the beams. *Clean, sure. But I suppose it is, for the time.*

"Very well."

Her purse considerably lighter, she met back up with Sparkle who had nothing else of major importance to report. They went east out of town, and came across a large building with an odd sign over the door. Susan scratched her head. "I suppose it means something to the people around here."

"Is this really necessary?"

"The timing is coincidental. And the castle isn't going anywhere, I'll bust into it after I've satisfied my *curiosity*. Why?"

"These are a primitive people, and we don't know how magic is regarded. Obviously they know about it, they aren't really freaking out over their queen turning out to be some kind of ice controller. I mean in the sense of 'oh no, what will happen to our kingdom now that our queen has been shown to have magical powers' rather than 'oh no, we're all doomed because apparently magic exists and our queen has some!'"

"I agree, but I'm still not following you."

"You tend to want to help people. Not a bad impulse, usually, I admit. If you go in there you'll probably get the knife out and go to town. Given the current situation, that might not be in our best interests. Despite you using magic for good, they may view all magic with more than a little suspicion right now. We may still need the help of the townspeople, let's not alienate them by whipping out a bunch of magic."

"I hear you. I'll see what the situation is before doing anything."

"Fair enough."

Susan knocked on the door and a woman dressed all in white opened it a crack. "Yes?"

"Good day!" Susan chirped brightly. "I am a traveling healer and heard you had some odd cases lately. I wondered if perhaps I could be of some assistance?"

"Oh! How wonderful, please come in." She held the door open, and Susan entered.

The house was mostly open, with a central column that held a fireplace surrounded by many beds, most of which thankfully which were empty. There was a fire going in the fireplace, and several people looked up from where they were sitting beside people lying in bed.

"We just have the mysterious plague victims at present," the woman explained. "I've been living in fear that more will be discovered, but none have been reported. My heart jumped when I heard that knock, let me tell you."

"Sorry to have startled you. Now, these five were all found on the same day?"

“Yes, within hours of each other.”

The nearest patient was a scruffy looking, dirt covered young boy with no one beside his bed. Susan went over to him, figuring she wouldn't disturb the others just yet.

The healer shook her head. “No family for this one. I wonder if someone is missing him or no one is?”

No one is.

Shush. “And he just lies here?” She nodded. Susan got a thirteen on *First Aid*, so she didn't seem too incompetent looking him over. She checked his forehead, listened to his breathing, took his pulse, that sort of thing. Her real purpose, of course, was checking him out with her various senses. “And the others are all the same?” The woman nodded again.

“Well, crap.”

“What is it?”

“How to explain...” *This boy hardly exists to my senses. He's obviously not magical, but even without making a Spirit Sense check, I have a ten rating in it. I can feel the spirit energy coming from every person in this room... apart from the people in the beds. I could close my eyes and point to the nurse, but spin me around and I would be unable to find this boy.* “This isn't a medical issue,” she explained. “This boy's soul, and the souls of all the victims here have somehow been removed.” *After all, if his energy had just been drained, it would come back. He's not under a spell that's further draining his power that I can tell. Or a dimensional effect. I suppose it could be a power, but transforming in front of this woman is probably a bad idea. I'll come back and check that later.*

“By the gods, tell me you're joking!”

Gods, plural? “I assure you I'm not. Their souls are missing. At least his is, and I'm sure the others are exactly the same, if they have the same symptom.”

“But then wouldn't they just be dead? And who but Hades himself could do such a thing?”

Bet you we could, with a spell or a power.

“I can't say. But you're right, if I don't get them back soon they'll die. Their bodies won't be able to last much longer.”

“Get them back? Why would they have been taken in the- who are you?” She stepped back. “To casually speak of souls, and getting them back? To even know such a thing, and speak with such conviction. You can traverse the underworld and make demands of Hades? Are you-” her voice lowered. “Are you a god yourself, having taken human form?”

Susan laughed. “I'm no god. And their souls are probably still around someplace, that's why they haven't died.” She put a hand on the kid's forehead, getting a fifteen on *spirit sense*. “There's a thin line, like gossamer, still attached to this boy.” *In other words he has one energy left. That's the conduit, and there must be a reason for it. Like she said, who but a god could do it? My question is why? They weren't killed, it's worse than that. They've been left to slowly wither away.* “It's faint, but it's there. I can't track it, but there still might be a way to find where it's gone.”

Good luck with that.

You know something about this?

Maybe. Maybe not. I just have to wonder, the part of me that's here, what's it thinking right now? I mean it knows sooner or later one of you Wanderers is going to show up. Maybe it's sending a message?

But why both? Why freeze the area and do this? Are the souls powering it somehow?

Who can say?

You could.

“Anything you can do, please, I beg of you.” The woman fell to her knees. “I can't pay you, the house is owned by the crown and I just volunteer here-”

Susan hoisted her up, and the woman was obviously shocked at how strong she was. “Get up. Don't worry about it, this is what I do. You just keep trying to feed them broth and such so they don't die while I'm gone. If I can I'll bring them all back, you'll see the results right away I should think.” *They should just zip back in, right?*

“Thank you,” she said with relief.

“Can I get their names? Obviously you don’t know the name of this boy but the others...”

“Yes, yes, of course. Anything you need.”

What I need now is a quiet spot to do some magic, and that means a room. At least that shouldn’t have such a high in the sky price.

“You want *how much* for a *shared* room?” Susan nearly screeched, having found an inn near the entrance of town.

“Sorry, space is at a premium at the moment,” said the man behind the counter. “You’re welcome to sleep outdoors, hyuck, hyuck!”

I’m also free to punch you in the face.

Ha, ha, you can’t now without asking your cat! Told you that was a bad idea.

Sure I could, long as I didn’t permanently hurt him. He would heal.

Do it then!

She said instead, “Let me guess, the coronation?”

“Exactly.”

“But wasn’t that days ago?”

“Yeah, but have you seen the harbor?”

“Oh. Right. No ships can go anywhere until the freeze is lifted.”

“That’s right. So you want a room or not?”

I suppose it’s coming out of my Resources: Money anyway, and I can have Silverstreak make me some more. It’s the principle of the thing. I’m here to save this entire reality from destruction, you think they would at least offer me a discount on a room. If they even believed me.

“Fine, I’ll take the room.”

“Very good. We do not accept responsibility for lost or stolen items. There is no insurance if the place burns down. We do not offer guards to prevent you being robbed...” He went on.

What is this, a hotel with an EULA?

Susan snorted. *Okay, that one was pretty good.*

Once in the room, Susan had to wait for her new “roommate” to go down to dinner as she rolled only a twelve on her LUCK check for the room to be empty. *One from minimum. I tell you, who’s rolling these numbers anyway? With my LUCK of nine, shouldn’t I be lucky enough to get high LUCK checks most of the... that way lies madness, doesn’t it? At least she could tell me a bit more about the coronation and what happened. Second hand knowledge, true, but still useful.*

With her gone, Susan could finally get out her book and work some magic.

“Where is the soul of the boy who no longer had it within him that I saw earlier tonight?”
Queen’s castle

“Odd answer,” remarked Sparkle. “Eleanora said that Queen Elsa fled the castle at the dance after she had been crowned. I suppose that doesn’t make it any less her castle, but why mention the ‘queen’s’ castle specifically? Why not just ‘the castle?’ Is there another one around here we should be looking for?”

“I don’t know, but while we have some daylight left, let’s get over there and check it out.”

“Not sure that’s such a good idea. Look.”

Susan peeked out the window and saw a snowstorm starting to settle in, obscuring everything for miles as the clouds thickened and snow formed a second barrier to sight.

“Oh that’s just great. I mean I can become immune to darkness and see perfectly at night, or immune to water and breathe underwater just fine. But I can’t become immune to falling snow obscuring my vision!”

“Plus there’s your *No Sense of Direction* to worry about. You go out in that and it’s over for us. We’ll never find the castle!”

“I think you’re right. But if this is some kind of delaying tactic... I’ll ask another *Question.*”

“Will any of the people I saw without souls die in the next two days?”
No.

“That settles that. I’ll track them down in the morning.”

“You sure you want to wait?”

“Why not? This can’t be The Darkness. I mean even if it took the queen over at some point, why run off? And when has it ever been that easy to find? I think this is just something like Illina, to get us pointed in the right direction. We save the kingdom, we’re heroes, she tells us something important, that kind of thing. No way do we find The Darkness in the first twenty four hours of coming someplace.”

“Yea, I suppose you’re right. And that storm looks nasty. I just hope we don’t wind up regretting it.”

So the next morning Susan found a quiet place to transform, after discussing it with Sparkle.

“We know powers override magic,” she argued. “Like when Dolands stopped you using *Acceleration*. We know the queen has *Ice* powers or magic or something. Now if it’s magic we can drop *Magic Domination* on the area and poof, no more ice magic for her. But if it’s powers, that’s not going to do a thing. Plus if it *is* The Darkness, it would just down my magic and then we’d really be in trouble because we’d be basically fighting both at once. An ice user and a being that can shut down our magic. Using *Metapower* we know will get both types, and it can’t be shut down.”

“I’m just worried about that transformation of yours, I guess. I don’t trust it yet.”

“Silverstreak said it was perfectly fine. I still remember the whasname skill, that one, you know.” She started snapping her fingers.

“Resisting?”

“Yeah, that’s the one! And I haven’t been violent all day!”

“We just got up.”

“Details! We’ll zip up there, shut her ice powers down, see if we can help her in some way, and boom, get on with things here. What could go wrong?”

Oh, thank you so much for saying that.

What?

So Susan took *Flight* and such, but she hadn’t blinked more than twice when both swung around and stared off into the distance. She didn’t even realize her costume had changed into a sort of winter version of the fuku, with fuzzy boots instead of leather, and warm leggings.

“That can’t be good.”

“No, I don’t think it can.”

“Come on.”

The pair rose into the air, straight up, to get a better view of things. As far as she could see both land and water were being plunged into winter, and even from this distance she could feel the power radiating from a nearby mountain.

“How can we fight *that*?” Sparkle’s eyes were wide. “That’s the most powerful thing I’ve ever felt! You couldn’t match that draining the whole town of energy! I don’t even need to make *Power Sense* checks to tell where it’s coming from. It’s basically all I can feel around here.”

“I’m going to have to agree. But don’t you see, that can’t be The Darkness. It wouldn’t be so wasteful with energy, would it? You think maybe her power took her over or something? I don’t know how powers work here. It could happen.”

“We better get over there right away.”

And hope even my Metapower is enough to hold it back. Just what is going on over there?

So the two flew onward, and both made *perception* checks as they neared the place they felt the power coming from. Sparkle got two higher, a nineteen, and shouted to Susan. "There's someone, no two someone's down there!"

"I think you're right. Come on."

They swooped down on the pair, who were looking back down the mountain, probably where they had come from. It was a woman and a man, the man in a green sweater and hat, with a gray jacket thrown over it. The sleeves were ragged, and his hair was sticking out in all directions from under the hat. The woman on the other hand was dressed almost for a ball. Her hair was braided into two neat braids that hung in front of her shoulders. Her cape was a dark magenta, and it, along with her dress, was embroidered very delicately.

Those two can't look more different. How in the world are they traveling together?

"It's completely frozen," said the man.

"But it'll be fine, Elsa will thaw it," replied the woman.

"Actually," said Susan, causing the pair to whirl about to look where she was hovering. "With the amount of power I feel coming from that mountain, your town is the least of your worries. Pretty soon the whole world is going to look like this."

She spread her arms to the side, indicating the snow covered trees.

The pair started screaming.

Might have made a slight miscalculation with my entrance there.

Look at their faces! You did good, kid! The Darkness protested.

Can't Fight a Mirror

When: After the screaming stopped

Where: Halfway to the North Mountain

The two figures, backed up against trees, had finally stopped screaming when Susan didn't attack them or anything and were now looking only "slightly" frantic. The snowman, if that's what he was, simply stood grinning at her.

Can a snowman change his facial expressions?

"You're flying!" shakily blurted the woman.

"Is that all you're worried about?" Susan asked. She had been hovering over the snow but set down gently. "There, now I'm not. Better?"

"Are you a witch?" asked the man.

"More importantly, do you like hugs?" asked the snowman.

"Did that snowman just talk?" asked the woman.

"Doesn't everybody?" he replied, turning around. "Hi! I'm Olaf, and I love warm hugs!"

"What is going on?" moaned the man. "Is this with you?"

"I thought he was with you," Susan answered. "What are you, anyway? Some kind of *ice* construct, that's for sure."

"That's sort of rude," remarked Olaf. "I wouldn't call you a flesh construct, now would I?"

"I don't know, you haven't had the opportunity."

"That's a good point." He paused. "There, now I did, and I didn't, so there."

"Who are you?" asked the woman again in desperation.

"I'm Olaf! Boy," he said to Susan, "she's pretty forgetful isn't she?"

"I think she was talking to me. I'm Susan, nice to meet you. Look, can I drop you two, you three, sorry, off somewhere?" She looked over to see the reindeer stepping close to the man, so Susan figured they must be together.

"Can you take us to the North Mountain?" pleaded the girl. "I have to speak to my sister!"

"No, I can't," Susan answered bluntly. "I'm headed there myself to take care of things. Your sister, and by that I take it to mean the queen everyone is cursing out in the village down there, is radiating *ice* power far beyond the local geography. If I don't turn her off soon, the whole world is going to be a frozen block of ice."

"She's that powerful? Impossible."

"I'm afraid it's very possible. I suggest you head back to the castle so you don't get in the way. I don't want to fight her, but if she's been taken over as I'm coming to suspect... well, she's not your sister anymore. I hope your last words to her were pleasant ones."

"Be nice," admonished Sparkle from behind her.

"Did that cat just talk?" asked Olaf. "I've never seen the like!"

"Says the talking snowman."

"I'm Olaf! What's your name?"

"Sparkle."

"Now we're getting somewhere!"

"Don't change the subject," snapped the woman.

"Yes, the subject is you going back to the castle. Are you going willingly or am I just proceeding without you?"

"Don't you dare hurt my sister!"

"As long as she still *is* your sister, she has nothing to fear from me. In fact I may be the only one on this planet that can shut her down for the moment and later teach her how to control her power. Given what I'm feeling though..." she glanced up the mountain. "She may be too far gone, and we'll have to look into a more permanent solution."

"Wait," said the man. "You *know* she did this. Turned this whole area into an icebox in a matter of seconds. You say you can feel her power from here. And you're still going up there? Alone? Are you crazy?"

"I'm not alone, I have Sparkle."

“Sorry, I didn’t count your *cat* as a person.”

“Do you see me as a person?” asked Olaf.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude but can we deal with you later? Talking cats, snowmen, flying girls, it’s all a lot to take in at once.”

“Fine,” grumped Olaf. “But I better get a hug out of all this.”

“Say I didn’t go alone. How are you going to help me against what you just said?” The man struggled to think of something he could actually contribute. “I thought so. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to be off. Unless you want to head back to the village?”

The man looked over at the princess. “We haven’t slept in like two days, we should go see how Prince Hans is doing at the castle.”

“No! My sister comes first.”

“Suit yourself,” Susan allowed, rising into the air again. “By the time you get there it’ll be over, one way or the other. I can take you back then just as easily.”

“Wait!” called the woman, but Susan ignored her and shot towards the mountain, Sparkle in tow.

“Should we have really left them there like that?”

“They wouldn’t have gone willingly, that much is clear. And I doubt you would give me permission to knock them in the head.”

“You could have used the sleep spell, chucked them in the *dimension* to get some rest. They looked exhausted.”

“I doubt this will take all that long. Look, there’s the... oh.”

As Susan neared the place, she understood what the *Question* magic had meant when it said the ‘Queen’s’ Castle. This immense structure probably hadn’t been there before, and Susan wondered what held it up. Out from the side of the mountain stuck an ice palace, with balconies, turrets, doors, windows, the whole works.

“How in the world?” asked Sparkle.

Susan shook her head. “I don’t know. Even to imagine such a thing seems unreal, but then to stand there and assemble it out of nothing but your own power? Does this person have a degree in civil engineering or something? Ice is *heavy*. By all rights it should just collapse in on itself unless the bearing walls are very precisely placed. And thank you Darkness for the knowledge of bearing walls. Because I’m pretty sure I had no idea what that was until just now.”

My so called pleasure. Hey I just had a thought. My knowledge is sort of leaking into you, right? What if I let some knowledge though, like how it feels to be burned alive? There you go, did that work?

Susan shuddered. *Thank you so much. Yes, it did.*

Any time! I’ll let you think about that one for a bit, then let you experience having your legs crushed by a boulder.

Wait, how do you know what all that feels like?

Let’s just say all Wanderers are not as squeamish as you are in driving pieces of me off various realities.

Ah.

Susan swooped down to the icy stairs that led into the place, followed by Sparkle, and figuring she would at least approach this situation with a minimum of decorum, knocked.

The door slid open.

“Smooth as ice,” remarked Susan, winking at Sparkle.

“Just stay frosty, we don’t know what to expect in there.”

Ice puns. I really am rubbing off on both of you, aren’t I?

Susan stepped inside, coming into a large hallway area with a decorative ice fountain planted in the middle of it. There was a set of stairs, seemingly held up by nothing at all going around the room and up to the second floor, and several doors were at each end of the room.

"We'll have to check each room systematically."

"I doubt the door opened by itself. She knows we're here."

"Indeed, Sparkle!" A voice rang out from the stairs, and a beautiful woman wearing a sparkling dress and an ice crown descended the stairs, catlike.

Meow. Focus, Susan. "So you are The Darkness," she accused her. "That figures, I doubt a purely human brain could have conceived of this castle and made it spring out of nothing. Awfully bold of you, isn't it?"

She swayed her way over the fountain and sat down, legs folded to one side. Her leg stuck out of the slit in her dress and she slowly and deliberately put a hand on it. "Whatever do you mean? And Susan, I'm ashamed of you. Can't we at least greet each other in a civil manner? We've known each other for so long now, we're practically family."

"Oh, very well. What was it Nita was always saying?" She gave a curtsy. "Fairest and Fallen, greetings and defiance."

The Darkness laughed a tinkling laugh. "That's it exactly. Tell me honestly now, am I the fairest in the land?" She stuck her leg out straight and caressed both hands along it. "Is this form not magnificent?" She stuck her chest out and sat a little straighter.

Susan felt a little heat rising to her cheeks. "Oh, uh, not bad, I guess. I'll give you a seven at least."

"A seven? I'm a nine and you know it. What a pity you've come here to murder me in cold blood. Think of what I'll look like when you're done with me. Run through with that ridiculously large sword of yours, do doubt. Just like poor Luna. Blood everywhere too I expect."

"Stop it!"

The Darkness looked sharply at her. "It's what you're planning, isn't it? Be honest."

"Is that why you didn't hide here? Why you chose that body and then just came up here after freezing the town? Because you figured I wouldn't be able to raise a hand against you?"

She gestured to Susan. "I don't see that sword in your hand yet, and we've been talking awhile now. I think you would have already attacked me, if that's what you meant to do. As far as not hiding- has it helped me before? You would have found me no matter what, and it didn't suit me here. That's all. It's just a nice plus the body that had these magnificent ice powers also happened to be so... hot."

"I wanted proof first, and you've given it to me. You'll have to die."

"What a pity. Just when this body finally gave itself over to me, too. How sad her sister will be, though I suppose she'll inherit the throne, so there's that." She stood and stretched, again emphasizing her form. "Well, get on with it." She opened her arms.

"What?"

"The stabbing. *Thrusting* into me, that big, *hot* blade of yours. You know you want to. I won't resist."

"It's some kind of trick," cautioned Sparkle. "But I do authorize violence against her."

"I'll turn her powers off before I get anywhere near her."

"I'm not a liar, I'll just stand here. Oh, but I do have one request? This body has never really known love. Do you think, just for a moment, you could kiss it? Her first and last kiss, before you kill it."

"No!" Susan backed a step away.

"I'm totally defenseless," continued The Darkness, taking a step towards her, arms still outstretched. "All my power is going to freezing the world. I don't have any left to use in here so you're perfectly safe. Just for a moment, this body wants to feel what it might be like to be in love. Can't you even give it that?"

"Stay away from me!"

"Why dear, you're trembling! Do you want me so badly? Rush into my arms, take me as you will. I won't resist, honest."

"Stay away from me! *Meta: Ice ne-*"

"*Meta: Metapower negation!*" A second voice echoed through the large chamber and Susan felt her *metapower* strike against The Darkness drain away like bacon grease out of frying pan and into a wastebasket.

“What?” Susan looked over to find a rather young looking redhead man in odd clothes standing in the doorway at the other end of the room.

“You’re a piece of work aren’t you?” he said, coming into the room and addressing The Darkness. She laughed.

“I knew you were covering me. I wasn’t worried.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean the whole... forget it. So, you’re Susan? Interesting mix of powers you have.”

“You have me at a disadvantage then,” she replied, doing a *power sense* on him. She couldn’t fail, and was surprised to find he had some of her powers, plus the ice powers from The Darkness and some Sparkle had taken, plus a couple she couldn’t quite make out. But she felt the same thing from The Darkness, so it must have related.

“Sensing me out, huh? It’s fine, I would have done the same in your... boots. So how do you want to do this? Two on two? One on two? Two on one? It’s all the same to me.”

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Oh, more talking? I heard you were like some kind of murder machine. Beheading innocent ponies and whatnot.”

“Will people stop bringing that up!”

“Not until it stops twisting your insides like a knife,” The Darkness gaily informed her. She held out a hand and a glittering ice dagger appeared in it, which she mimed twisting into Susan.

“Liar. You have plenty of power left, even creating this storm.”

“Naturally!”

“Fine,” said the man. “You want my life story? My name is Sangray, I got chosen by my boss here and it said it would spare my planet if I agreed to travel worlds and take care of people like you. I don’t really enjoy it, but my people stay safe. There, done. Can we get on with it?”

“I don’t suppose we could all take a little *nap* first?” She looked over at Sparkle, who nodded.

“Nap? What are you-”

As a free action, Susan went back into “magic mode” and did an instant casting of *Somnolent Smog*, along with Sparkle. The Darkness could only counter one of them, so she figured one would get through, put them both to sleep, and she could at least figure out what to do with The Darkness. With her time cut in half thanks to the return of *Accelerate Magic* she got... her minimum, a thirteen. It didn’t matter though, as both circles on the ground where the *Smog* should have been splintered and broke apart.

“You did that!” she accused Sangray.

“Guilty as charged. Now let’s see what we have here...”

“I don’t like this,” Sparkle said, trying to move on the floor. With her immunity to *ice* gone she was going to start sliding all over the place. She dug her claws in and got a little traction. “If they can both do it-”

“Tell me about it. Can I beat the crap out of them?”

“Don’t kill Sangray, he seems to be coerced.”

“I know.” She drew both her swords from the *sub-space pocket* and waited for the guy to make his next move. She didn’t want to go sliding around any more than Sparkle did, after all.

“Oh great, can’t you do something about this floor?” asked Sangray, grabbing the fountain now to steady himself.

“What? I’m not having any trouble.”

Wait, why wasn’t he having trouble before but now he is?

“Fine. Let’s see what else we have here... ah.”

What’s he doing? “Slash-all,” she activated, figuring she could hit them both with that. I’ll go for the legs, once Sangray is down I’ll consider him not to be an enemy anymore and just concentrate on The Darkness. He shouldn’t bleed to death by the time I take her out. I hope?

“*Elemental Sniper: Fire,*” cast Sangray, surprising Susan. She now found out what it was like to be on the other side of that spell, and have penalties for dodging on ice. She

managed it, but had to make a second COOrdination check which she failed miserably and fell over.

The Darkness laughed and shot a beam of cold at Susan, which was deflected with a “*Deflection*,” by Sparkle.

“Why didn’t you shut that down?” snapped The Darkness.

“Hey, I can’t do everything here you know. I wanted to get as much of her magic as I could, I figured that would be more useful.”

“Idiot! Don’t give her any clues, she’s very intelligent!”

Wait a second, is he trying to tell me something? First he had my powers, now he seems to have my magic...

“Hold everything!” she shouted, getting up on her elbows. “Are you telling me that the powers around you become your powers?” *Now where have I seen that before?*

“Hey, she is, you’re right.”

“Fool!”

“Don’t feel too bad, the only reason I got it so quickly is because I could do it once. It was pretty fun actually.”

“Really? I’d love to hear about it sometime.”

“*We are in the middle of a combat!*” screamed The Darkness. “Kill her already!”

“All right, all right. Keep your skirt on. Or not, whatever.”

Susan smiled. “You’ve both made a miscalculation,” she informed them, sitting up.

“Oh?”

“Yup. Sparkle, get clear, this isn’t going to work in your favor, just mine.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” She backed off.

“What are you up to now?” The Darkness asked suspiciously.

“She told you about me, right?” she asked Sangray. “I can go between powers mode and magic mode? And I get to choose the powers every time?”

“So?”

Something to ponder. What happens if I transform... but I don’t take any powers? Light of the Multiverse, Make Up!

Just as she said, Susan once again transformed, but this time not even her clothes changed. Magic fell away from her, and she took no powers apart from *Immunity: Ice* so she could at least stand up again without falling down.

“Then I lose the bulk of my abilities to fight you,” said Sangray, understanding the situation correctly. “Apart from what I get from her, anyway.”

“Don’t care about that,” Susan informed him. “I’m immune to ice, which is all you’ll get apart from negating my magic, which I don’t have anymore. But I’m guessing you can’t draw off my *imbued* items, just powers or magic I have as *backgrounds*. So now it’s one on two, yes, but I’m confident in my sword skills against two people who have only one power I’m immune to between them.” She did a flip and was upright again. “Shall we begin round two?”

“Certainly,” agreed Sangray. “But you’ve made a miscalculation.”

“Oh?”

Suddenly Sangray was holding a glowing energy bow, and the arrow was pointing right at her. “You think I don’t have any weapons, and that would be incorrect.” He fired, and Susan made her dodge by one to get out of the way. *Oh great. Well, one way to deal with a bow user.*

She rushed him, her speed covering the distance in a blink, and swung her sword, intending to just knock him aside the head with the side of the thing and hopefully knock him out.

Again she was surprised when an energy shield appeared and blocked the strike, knocking her back. She back-stepped and saw he now had a floating shield, a weird looking four legged animal on one shoulder, a headband, and a snake rearing up beside him. His bow seemed to be ready again, too, another arrow ready to fire. All were made of that same glowing energy, and all, Susan realized with horror, had a *spirit energy signature*.

“The souls of the coma victims in town!”

“Oh come on, you can’t have gotten *that* so quickly!” he protested.
“I ran into someone, a ghost actually, that could do that. Gave me a bit of trouble.”
“A ghost you say? How odd.”

Susan now backed away cautiously, trying to keep an eye on the snake, The Darkness, and the bow held by Sangray all at the same time. *If I smash these things, do those people down there die? It makes sense if he’s somehow turned their souls into weapons. Aarg, this sucks!*

To make matters worse, at that moment the woman from earlier busted into the place, sliding past the door into the room.

“Don’t you dare kill my sister!” she called desperately.

“Oh good,” remarked Sangray. “I have super strength now for some reason. How about that?”

“Indeed,” replied The Darkness. “I love having hostages around, don’t you?” She raised a hand to attack her sister. “Susan? How about you be a dear and throw those swords down?”

Crap, now what? And how did she get up here so fast?

“Three.”

Unexpected Help

When: "Three"

Where: Elsa's ice palace

"Dazzle!"

Susan cast the spell with all her might, which is to say the maximum amount of energy she could muster, after dropping her one and only power for magic mode. Of course she could now slip on ice again, and given a chance this Sangray fellow would again have access to her spells. She wasn't in a state of mind to give either of them a chance to do anything. Naturally, if it had been just her to cast, The Darkness would have shut it down and that would have been the end of it. But the power of Friendship was strong with Susan, and Sparkle, being on the ball, a cat, and also holding her action to do what needed to be done, cast *"Thrust"* at the same time.

The Darkness now had a choice to make. Go flying across the room in a very ungraceful manner, possibly take damage, and wind up in heap on the floor tangled up in her cloak *or* simply accept the delay modifier and remain where it was. It chose to remain where it was and negated Sparkle's spell. That meant it and Sangray made a RESolve check against Susan's spell, which she got a thirty one on. The Darkness got close, a twenty nine, and Sangray only got half what he needed.

Both gained a *delay* of twenty five, or roughly five seconds. In combat terms, Susan could basically *saunter* out of there and they couldn't do a dang thing about it. She considered it, just for the coolness factor, but instead on her next action she *spirit stepped* over to the pair and grabbed them both.

"Get us out of here!" she called to Sparkle, to also appeared next to them and hopped up on Susan.

Good thing spirit step leaves you with zero momentum when you come out of it. Otherwise moving at that actual speed would have slammed me into the wall over there because of the ice!

"Wait!" shouted the man, but that was just foolish in Sparkle's opinion. She cast *Teleport* and they found themselves back in town.

Susan breathed a sigh of relief. These two jokers were safe.

"Olaf and Sven are still-" he protested, but then it caught up to him where they were. "Outside? What's going on?"

"I just saved you, is what's going on," Susan explained. "Honestly, I told you she was dangerous!"

"You did no such thing," complained Anna. "You just... just... flew off. I demand to know what's going on!"

"Demand huh?"

"Calm down," Sparkle cautioned Susan. "Remember, we move a lot faster than they do, we know what things are about. They don't. And all this happened rather suddenly."

"There's no time. That *Dazzle* is no doubt wearing off and-"

"And what? You can't be thinking of going back there? He's *you*. Only by being here, away from him, is he somewhat powerless."

Susan's mouth opened and closed a few times, then she looked thoughtful, then brightened. "Oh, I see what you're saying. I need to fly to a remote part of the land, *telesummon* him with a *teleportal* open at my back, then just step through and close it before he can react. Easy."

"No, that's not- actually that's a decent plan. Huh. But that still leaves you going up there and killing her. You didn't seem really prepared for that just now, so are you any more prepared now?"

"No, but it has to be done, doesn't it?"

"Are you standing there calmly talking about *murdering my sister?*" shrieked the woman.

"My friend is still up there! And Olaf, shouldn't we see what he's about?" cried the equally upset guy.

“Oh goodness, like she’s going to hurt a freaking reindeer. Wait, did you just refer to a reindeer as ‘my friend?’ But fine, fine.” She raised her hands in surrender and opened a *Teleportal* back to the base of the stairs outside the castle. “I’m loving this *Accelerate Magic*,” she remarked. “Good choice.”

“Thank you.”

The guy went through and found the two, bringing them back to the town and Susan closed the hole again.

“Happy?”

“Marginally. Thank you.”

“Is this a town?” asked Olaf. “I’ve always wanted to see one. Oh, what’s that over there!?”

“Don’t go wondering off,” commanded Susan. “I don’t know what the heck you are, but I’m keeping my eye on you.”

“In that case, can I have my hug now?”

“No!” everyone shouted.

“Gee, bite a guy’s head off, I was just asking.”

“Now about my sister?” asked the woman.

“Oh very well!” allowed Susan. “Let’s get out of the snow, I’ll tell you the whole sordid tale of why she *isn’t* your sister anymore, hopefully get you to understand that if she doesn’t die the world does, and maybe I can get on with saving your entire freaking reality. Would that be okay with you?”

“You’ll have to forgive her,” put in Sparkle. “She really doesn’t want to kill anyone, of course. But it’s sort of like giving a cat a bath. Best to just plunk them into the water and get it over with as quickly as possible. It’s not fair to you, and she shouldn’t be taking it out on you, but she’s really her own worst *enemy*.”

“You know,” remarked the man, “I’m still not sure which I’m more freaked out by. The talking cat or the talking snowman. I need a drink.”

“I think I do too,” remarked the woman. “Let’s go to the castle, hopefully it’s still standing or whatever.”

“I’ve always wanted to see a castle!” exclaimed Olaf.

Susan did not get a chance to tell her story as there was a lot of commotion at the castle when the group approached. It turned out this girl, that Susan finally learned was named Anna, was in fact a princess and a search party had been dispatched about an hour ago to go look for her.

“When your horse returned without you we feared the worst!” said one of the guards now clustered around the group.

“Should we send someone after them?” asked another.

Susan sighed. “I’ll go. Give me a chance to clear my head. Sparkle, you want to explain things to them?”

“I suppose I better,” she answered.

The guards all jumped back, raising their weapons. “Did that cat-”

“Yes, yes,” Anna waved it off. “We’re going to have to get used to the biza- I mean the unexpected in the days to come. Let’s head inside and get warm. I’m practically *frozen*.”

“Yes your highness,” answered all the guards, and hustled them inside. Meanwhile, Susan considered, cast *Flight* on herself figuring no one was really watching her, and zoomed off towards the mountain again.

Away from the town she was able to use her ability with *spirit sense* to track down the small group of men riding horses towards the North Mountain, and called down to them.

“Hello riders! No, up here!”

They looked around nervously and finally one looked up, giving a shout as he saw Susan hovering there.

“More sorcery!” claimed the one in the lead, drawing his sword. He was dressed in a very military looking outfit, with a weird pair of black “wings” coming off the front of his jacket.

His pants were purple, which reminded her of her father, or at least her mother's stories about what her father wore, so she didn't take an immediate dislike of him despite his prejudice.

"What, you have something against magic users?" she asked, finding a low hanging branch and "flying" upwards against it, so she seemed to be sticking to it.

"Perhaps this kingdom really is cursed," muttered one of the men, but Susan didn't hear it because I need to portray her *poor sense: hearing* weakness at least a little bit, right? She did however see the two men in red coats raising crossbows.

"Oh, please, go right ahead," she called down to them. "Get it out of your systems. Just be very sure you get me with your first shots, crossbows are notorious for being very slow to reload. Unlike swords." She pulled her sword out.

After all, I can threaten all the violence I want, I just can't actually do any. There's a huge difference.

"Please, let's remain calm!" ordered the guy in the lead. "I am prince Hans of the Southern Isles. We mean you no harm. Put those down!" In a quieter voice. "You fools, she's flying and holding that gigantic sword like it was nothing. Do you really want to anger her? I couldn't lift that blade! Just her dropping it from that height would chop you in half. Plus, where did she pull it from? Did you see? I didn't. What else might she pull out if we actually attack her?"

The crossbows dipped a little.

"That's better," Susan told them, putting her sword back. "Now, if you're through trying to prove your manhood or whatever, I've been sent to find you and tell you I've brought Princess Anna back to the castle. I can take you all back if you wish. Or you can ride back yourselves, it makes little difference to me."

"It's some kind of trick, sire!" exclaimed one of the men in red. "Perhaps she works for the queen and is trying to delay us."

"For what purpose? Very well, if you can return us safely to the castle we accept."

"We do?"

"Of course we do. If the princess really has returned what need is there for us to be out here?"

"But the queen..."

"What about the queen? Our concern right now is Anna! Let her deal with her sister like she wanted."

The two men looked at each other, and Susan wondered what they were saying.

"Very well!" he called up to her. "Please take us back then."

"Sure."

Susan came down and opened a *Teleportal* back to the castle, which the horses reluctantly stepped through, all the while the men in red watched her like a hawk. Once through the closed it and there was more commotion at the gate as these new arrivals were greeted.

"I can take you to the princess?" said what was probably the highest (or lowest, now that I think about it) ranked guard that was available. He gave a hesitant bow, as if not exactly sure how Susan should be treated. The man had just seen a bunch of people step out of thin air, and he had Susan fly away so he knew she was powerful.

"Very well, my good man," she allowed. "Lead on."

It was somewhat warmer in the castle, with merry fires cheerfully releasing a tiny fraction of the energy stored in the bodies of trees in a most horrifically inefficient manner if you really think about it, in fireplaces in most of the rooms. Susan was ushered into a meeting room of sorts, where Sparkle was finishing up her tale.

"All up to date then?" Susan asked. "Great. Perhaps we can get on with this unpleasant business then."

"Give her a minute to process all this," chided Sparkle, looking over at the shocked Anna. "It's a lot to take in, even for a people that have some knowledge that magic exists."

"Very well." Susan plunked down in a chair and rested her chin on her hands. "But your world grows colder with every passing moment."

"A word, please?" Sparkle ask, padding past her.

“Sure thing, oh my conscience.”

At the other end of the room, Sparkle looked up at her. “Susan, I’m not sure how to ask this. Are you on some kind of revenge quest against The Darkness right now or something? I mean you’re in an awful hurry to go up and murder this poor woman.”

“I just think since it was kind enough not to hide this time, we should go take care of the problem. You felt that power, saw that cloud cover. This world isn’t going to last long under that kind of strain.”

“But it won’t freeze in the next day either. Even for someone being augmented by The Darkness, if she even is and this isn’t just all her, changing the weather of the entire planet isn’t going to be quick. You went up there thinking this would all be easy, and got an unpleasant surprise. Who knows what other tricks it has waiting for you up there?”

“I guess. And it’s true, old Darkdark has never augmented people before. But where else could that power be coming from?”

“Consider this- you get a certain amount of points when you transform, right? You can channel them into different abilities and natures, and get certain techniques. Maybe it doesn’t work that way here. Maybe she’s channeled all the ‘points’ she would get into one nature. *Ice.*”

“*Ice* and *Spirit*, if that snowman is any indication.”

“Still, my point is valid.”

“I agree. It’s a possible explanation for it. And maybe The Darkness is showing her how to tap *lay lines* like it did for the warlock controller. I couldn’t exactly check for them. Not that I would expect to find many on a mountain.”

“They could work differently here, too. Or perhaps that Sangray fellow brought her some hyperlarcovite to use, to speed the job along.”

She sighed. “True. I can’t really assume anything can I? And you’re right, I guess I do have a sort of vendetta against the thing. I’ll try to rein it in, okay?”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Sparkle?”

“Hum?”

“Thanks. This is the kind of thing I... need to hear, I guess.”

“No problem.”

“Okay, so, look. I’m sorry about being a bit... brusque with you earlier. Sparkle has quite rightly called me out on it. I hope you can forgive me, your majesty, it was no way for a knight to behave.”

“You’re a knight and a witch?”

“Who’s a witch? I’m a magic user yes, but- never mind. Call me what you want. The point is, incredible as it all sounds, what Sparkle has told you has probably been the truth.” Sparkle glared at her. “Well I don’t know what exactly you told her or how much, do I? Your sister is taken over, and it falls to me to deal with the situation. I’m not happy about it, but I know what’s required of me. Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?”

“Yes. Don’t kill my sister!”

She looked over at Sparkle. “You did get to the part where-”

“Yes, I told her the whole thing.”

“Then she told you that we’ve been told there’s no other way. Yes, if I got her current guardian, this Sangray chap away from her I could probably seal her power for a time. But I can’t stay here and keep her sealed. I am sorry. Believe me. But this is the only way.”

“But with all your power, unless I’ve seen everything you can do which I doubt, your only option is to go up there and end her life?”

“Yes.” *Looks like she finally is getting it through her thick head.*

“Well you can’t.”

Or perhaps not.

“I order you to think of another way. There. That’s how it’s done, right?”

"You think I haven't? You think as I stood over the last... well, the second to last person I had to kill, the last one I was a bit out of- never mind. You think I didn't cast about for some way to resolve the situation?"

Sparkle beckoned to lean over, and Susan did. "There is always the stone. You could charge it and give it to her."

"And face that energy in another world? Or have a world fall because Darkness could use it to take one out before an agent could get there? I don't want that on my conscience either!"

You're thinking like a human. Your concepts for what I want that energy for are similarly limited. Believe me, that's not why I want it.

"Is there a way?" Anna looked between them.

"Not one I am prepared to accept," Susan informed her, straightening up. "We both saw what just the rumor of a stone like this one did to the last world. I'll not have a repeat performance."

"So maybe if we offered my sister something, what has taken her over would leave?"

"It wants the energy of your entire reality. It won't settle for much less."

Anna's arguing continued. In the end, she would not be swayed and ordered Susan to at least think about the issue for another day or two. Susan assured her she had weeks of thinking about it under her belt, plus the being who sent her here said it was impossible and so she was inclined to believe him. Nonetheless Anna went to get some sleep and Susan went to go see what help she could offer the people taking refuge in the castle.

That afternoon, while helping to *conjure foodstuffs* for those that were there, she saw her friend the old lady sitting at a table and sat down beside her. (As each casting of the spell at full energy used would create about three meals worth of food per rating, $3 * 24 = 72$ people could be fed with one casting. Susan figured they could use that food up first as they couldn't exactly gather more at the moment.)

"We meet again," Susan greeted her.

"Indeed we do. Sorry about last time. You can't blame an old woman now can you?"

"I could." The woman eyed her. "But I won't. It's academic really."

"It's what? Something about a school? Maybe I am going a little deaf."

"No, it's-" *Must have gotten lost in the translation.* "It's not important. Money is easy to come by."

"Oh! Then perhaps I've killed a golden goose with my crass behavior. If I knew money was easy to come by for you I would have paid for the meal and sought friendship with you, which would no doubt pay more dividends. Story of my life, really. Why I remember when the farmer did that, you know. Broke my heart, but what could I do? It was his choice."

"You remember that, huh? How long ago was it? Anyway, thought it was just a story." *A story our worlds seem to share, at that. Strange.*

"Everything's a story, my dear."

What did she- Susan looked at her curiously. "Who are you?" She did a quick *dimension sense* but no, the woman belonged here all right. She didn't feel off to *spirit sense* and her *magic sense* said she was a bit magical, but then, everything around here had a tiny bit of magic in it she found. She looked around in wonder, intrigued.

"Just an old woman with a head full of tales. Hard to know what's real anymore. I mean look outside! That's a story waiting to be written isn't it? *The Day Winter Came On a Warm Summer's Eve.*"

"Too long."

"Oh, you like them short and snappy, huh?" She thought a moment. "How about *The Snow Queen?*"

"Catchy. I like it."

The woman looked her over with a "Hummm. You seemed troubled my dear. Come, tell an old woman your story and maybe there's some wisdom tucked away in this head of mine I can share to ease your burden."

There was something quite earnest (goes to camp) about this woman, so after only a second of hesitation, Susan did. She even found herself bringing out the stone and showing it to the woman.

“So you say if you put energy enough to explode an entire planet into this tiny stone and hand it over to this being of darkness, it’ll leave one world on its own?”

“That’s what it said. I don’t think it can outright lie to me, as on some level we are the same being. And while people lie to themselves all the time, I haven’t caught it lying to me yet. Laughing at me, yes. Showing me gruesome imagery lately, yes.”

I’m just getting warmed up.

“But an out and out falsehood? I don’t think so.”

“Then your answer is simple,” she insisted, handing the stone back.

“I’m not handing this over lightly, no matter how easily I could actually put energy into it.”

“I’m not suggesting you should. But this proves it *can* leave, if it wants to. You just have to make it want to.” She stood.

“But how? I can’t give it what it wants.”

“Naturally. Just like a parent that grounds their child, you must withhold something that this entity wants in order to make sure it does what it must. And it must leave this world, that much is clear.”

“Wait, parents ground their kids here?”

“Thank for you explaining things to me, Susan. We felt The Darkness come, but we also knew even our power was no match for it. We are of this world, while it come from outside it. It will take someone like yourself to deal with it, that much is clear. Having spoken to you, felt your strength of will, I think we can entrust the task to you. It would be a shame for Elsa’s light to leave the world, but you must do what is best, even if that is what is hardest. I wish you luck in your choice.”

She stepped around Susan, crossing behind her and Susan twisted around to the other side to try and grab her before she got away. “Seriously, who are-”

But the woman was gone.

“What are you doing?” asked Sparkle, coming over. “You’ve just been sitting there muttering to yourself. Are you okay?”

“You didn’t see the old woman? And I forgot to ask her how she knew my name. Darn it.”

“What woman?” Sparkle looked around. “From the tavern earlier?”

“I don’t think she’s- never mind. Maybe I’m just hallucinating now, but at least it gave me an idea. Come on, we have to see Anna.” Susan got up with a faint grin on her face.

“Maybe we can save her sister!”

Anna finally woke up again, near sunset that day which Susan figured would screw up her sleep schedule for weeks if not the rest of her life. Or maybe a day or two. I've heard it both ways. The point is, she excitedly burst into the queen's chambers the moment the guard said she was up, and waited while she brushed her hair out.

"What's gotten you so excited?"

"I spoke with... well I don't even know *what* she was, but she gave me a good idea. I could do it, maybe with *curse* magic but every *curse* has to have a cure. Given the resources The Darkness can draw upon, anything I come up with would probably be trivial for it to take care of. But I thought to myself, maybe there's a way locally to do what I want to do. I mean her power must come from somewhere, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about taking your sister's ability to manipulate ice away from her! Permanently. With no more power to freeze the world, The Darkness should lose interest in her and leave this world alone. It doesn't seem to be able to move across bodies once it gets to a place, and I've beaten it enough times you think it would have by now."

True. I would have loved to have made you slaughter your way through all your pony friends instead of just the one I managed to get into. Such a pity. Oh my goodness, I totally forgot to show you what it was like for her to get her head chopped off! Nah, I'll save it for when you're really annoying me. Or should I- no. Patience.

Would you be quiet?

Anna got it. "And if it moves on you don't have to kill her!"

"Exactly!"

"That's a great idea. There's only one problem."

"Don't tell me..."

"I have no clue where her powers came from or how to remove them. Until I told her about the whole proposal thing, I didn't know she even had powers." Her face darkened. "But of course my parents must have. They were probably the ones to tell her she shouldn't play with me any more when we were kids." She went over to the window, deep in thought. "I can almost remember the day. One day we were the best of friends. The next it was like my sister had died, though she was still right before my eyes." She bent her head, and Susan was surprised to hear her start to sing!

*Oh sister, my sister, where have you gone?
I'd always thought that I had done wrong.
Your self imposed exile was painful to see.
That day the two sisters, stopped being "we."*

*Our mother and father, they drove us apart.
And it felt just like I had been stabbed in the heart.
Could I have done more as you turned away?
No matter the distance your sister I'll stay.*

Heartsong! Susan felt, her *magic sense* buzzing. *They have heartsongs here! So ponyville isn't the only place- Amazing.* She pointed excitedly to Anna behind her back to Sparkle, who rolled her eyes and nodded her head. "I'll do everything in my power to save your world without killing her," Susan promised, taking her hands. "And my power is considerable."

"If you don't know," added Sparkle, "we can ask our magic itself. But if there's any chance someone around here would know, that would be much easier."

Anna shook herself out of her daydream of sweet, sweet revenge against the mother and father who had obviously driven a wedge deep between such close sisters, and looked into Susan eyes. "Our tutors always spent the most time coaching Elsa in kingdom running duties. Mostly I was the 'spare princess' and treated like I would just be married off to some noble someplace. That's why I wanted to find my own man, which I guess started all this, before they got any ideas about marrying me off to someone. But there's one thing I do remember from her lessons. The people outside the castle walls know just about everything, collectively. A farmer might not know anything about weaving, but you can bet someone he knows does. Let's go ask."

They made their way to the great hall, where dinner was now being served. Servants (and flunkies) bowed as the princess went by, and Susan couldn't help but think she could get used to such things.

Give yourself over to me and I'll get you all the bowing and scraping peasantry you could ever want.

Or I could continue to oppose you, and know in my heart that even though billions of sentient beings across countless realities don't even know my name, they live and love and enjoy life all because of my efforts. And that is enough.

Is it? Really?

"Good people, please pause a moment and listen!" Anna shouted at the front of the room. Everyone went silent, wondering what the princess might have to say. "Thank you. If there is one among you that knows, or knows someone who knows, anything about magic, please, step forward. We have a plan to break Elsa's winter and leave her unharmed, but it will take the efforts of those with more knowledge of magic than I possess. Please, any scrap, even an old folk tale or a charm you learned from your grandmother might be the key we need to put our plan into action." She leaned over to Susan. "Also we can check our own libraries. My parents must have researched her condition to try and help her control it."

(Of course we know they did no such thing, basically locking her into a room which only made things worse, but I digress.)

"I know some people," a voice cried.

Susan burst out laughing at Christoph stepped up.

"What? I do. You think just because I'm in ice dealer I don't know people? I know lots of people. Everybody needs ice."

"No, no, it's not that. It's difficult to explain." *Narrative Imperative, you strike again. Of course the guy she was running around the mountains with knows someone who knows something about magic. Like I said before, who needs Information Gathering? Or the Contact card, for that matter. Shoot, when did I last get cards anyway? Have I transcended the limits of even a Paragon and no longer need them? Or have I just not looked lately?*

"Then lead on!" commanded Anna.

So he did. He led them through the nearby forest and into a clearing, where a bunch of rocks were sitting there looking all the world like rocks. Which they seemed to be. If you didn't have the variety of senses Susan did. She also noticed something odd- the snow didn't seem to touch this area. With a quick *magic sense* she could tell some sort of *sun* spell was going, but that the *ice* technique pressing in on the place would probably weaken it sooner or later.

"Come on everyone, don't do this to me!" Christoph pleaded to them. "They're such jokers. They're pretending to be rocks, it's their favorite trick."

Anna looked over to Susan who rolled her eyes. "I can feel that you're alive," she called to them. "So you may as well show yourselves. It's not even funny anymore, look how serious my face is right now." She made a frowny face.

The rocks giggled.

Susan scowled *harder*.

They all burst out laughing and unrolled, and 40-50 small rocklike figures started jabbering that Christoph was home.

"And he's brought *two* girls with him!" one announced.

"Christoph you *dog!*" said another. "Not satisfied with one?"

"But can he satisfy two?" asked a third.

"Maybe he's here for some of our special moss?" asked a fourth, winking.

"Special moss! Special moss!" they started crying.

But the cries were cut short when a crystal wearing troll rolled through the place.

"There is strange magic here!" he announced, looking around.

"Ah, that would be me," Susan volunteered.

"And it has a blackness inside it," he continued, igniting a flame in each hand.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Susan shouted, waving her hands at him. "I've taken an oath to harm no creature without the leave of my cat. I'm trying to help you!"

"Cat?" He cocked his head quizzically and looked over at Sparkle as she stepped out. The flames went out.

"That would be me," she said. "And I commend your sense of magic to have picked up on it so quickly. But really, she may have a Darkness inside her, but that does not define her."

"I see." He looked over at Christoph. "There are strange forces moving through the world now, my boy. Will you vouch for this one?"

He looked over at her seriously.

"What, you have to consider it?"

"No, I do," he sighed. "She's with me. As is Anna. Grandfather, we need your help."

"The world needs your help," Susan corrected. "I am but a lowly servant to you all."

The troll snorted. "Unlikely, given what I feel from you. But if Christoph says you are with him, then you are one of us. What can we do for you, traveler?"

"Can you save my sister?" Anna pleaded.

"Elsa? So, she is behind our recent change in weather?" He pointed out of the circle that defined the troll's magic barrier. "I was afraid of this. I was a fool! I should have explained things more carefully to your parents."

"My- perhaps you should start at the beginning."

"The tale is not long to tell. Many years ago you were struck by her magic while playing, and your parents rushed you here. I was able to remove the magic, most of it, anyway." He pointed to her head, and she touched the lock of hair that was white.

"I always wondered..."

"Wonder no more. It was your sister that did that to you, quite by accident I hasten to add. And now, despite my advice, it has come to this. But her power is strange, otherworldly. Just like yours." Now he looked at Susan.

"My tale is a bit longer to tell. Suffice to say if there is any way you know of to strip Elsa of her powers without harming her, I think she, and this world, can be saved. Otherwise, I must put her to the sword." She twirled her sword out, then put it back.

The troll paced, hands behind his back. "Troubling. Very troubling indeed. To offer this power to one such as yourself... to even allow the world to know... it sets a bad precedent indeed. If only I had more time to consider, but even this place will not last long under the queen's onslaught."

"So there is a way," breathed Anna.

He spun. "Away with you! If I must tell anyone it will be her. Even now I have said too much. Away! Away!" He made shooing motions and the other two backed off. "You must swear to me that you will never- You as well!" Susan looked behind her, and a hundred eyes blinked at her. The other trolls were all leaning in as if to hear better. "All of you." There was a bit of grumbling, but they moved off. "That's better. Oh come down here will you, why must you humans be so tall?"

"Sorry about that." Susan sat on the ground.

"As I was saying. There is a way to remove a person's gift. It is not easy, and should be done in only the most dire of circumstances. For various reasons. But this seem to be a good time."

"What do I have to do?"

"That's the problem- I don't know completely." Susan started to slump with a sigh. "But I can get you started. It's been set up that way on purpose."

"Wait, is this some kind of fetch quest?" asked Sparkle.

"I'm not sure I take your meaning. You will have to travel to other parts of the world to gather the ingredients, yes. Each major power of the land has only one piece of the spell. Luckily we, the Earth Trolls, have a piece. Also I know the next place you must go, to get the next ingredient. From there you must convince that being of your need and they will give you the next piece, and the next place you must go."

"Seems reasonable," Susan allowed. "I wouldn't want knowledge this dangerous to fall into the wrong hands either."

"I'm glad we understand each other. I will retrieve the first ingredient momentarily. For now, I will tell you the kingdom of the sea is where you must continue your search. I know of nothing more than that piece of lore. I hope it is enough."

"You can't narrow it down more than that?" she hissed. "Do you know how huge the oceans are? The planet is mostly water!"

"Perhaps the object itself will lead you? I know not. I'm sorry, that's all I can tell you."

"Very well. Just knowing it's possible is helpful. Go and get what you need, I'll be right here."

"Very well."

He disappeared, rolling away into the crowd, which stayed a respectful distance from Susan. Who began to get worried as moments passed and he didn't return.

"You think he was just messing with us and just ran away?" she asked.

"That would be a little far to take a prank."

"True."

Moments later the crowd parted again and he was seen lugging a very tiny stone towards her. "Not as young as I used to be," he panted. "Sorry for the wait."

So is that tiny thing really heavy or is he just really weak? Guess I'll find out.

"It's quite heavy," he cautioned her, proffering it.

"Not to worry, I'm pretty str- oh gods!" She nearly was driven to the ground as he handed it over, but she recovered and strained to bring it up to chest level. "What the heck is this made of?" She peered at it.

"I know only the crafting, passed down through generations," the troll admitted. "But I know not how the stone is to be used. Only the one that will mix the brew knows that."

"Glad I don't actually have to carry this freaking thing around with me," she remarked, slipping it into her *sub-space pocket*.

"I'm not sure what you just did, but somehow it seems like cheating to me."

"Just putting into my inventory. Nothing to be concerned about. So you didn't happen to recall some other tidbit on the way back? No? Then I shall be on my way. Thank you. For your trust, and for the stone."

"Save our world. And the queen. I would like to see her again, now that she is all grown up. Anna turned out fairly well, so I must assume Elsa did as well."

Susan blushed, remembering. "Oh, ah, not bad. I probably won't be back, but you'll know when I succeed."

"Good luck to you."

She and the others waved goodbye to the trolls and headed back to the castle.

"That was a good suggestion," she said to Christoph. "Your knowing them may have just saved your world. Well, your queen anyway, I would have saved your world one way or other."

"So he had what you needed?" asked Anna. "You can save my sister?"

Susan shook her head. "One piece of a larger puzzle. And we don't know what the picture on the puzzle is supposed to be. Have you two ever heard of a kingdom of the ocean?"

Christoph shook his head. "I just deal in ice. That only requires the top few inches."

Anna looked thoughtful. "I know sailors are always praying to Triton for calm seas. But then people ask the gods a lot of things, and hardly ever get them."

"It's a start. Come on, we can refine where we need to go back at the castle."

South

"I guess that answers that *Question*," Susan grumped. "Then presumably underwater? I mean what's south of here?"

"I'll have somewhat fetch a map," said Anna.

Ah, servants. They can come in handy.

Once looking at the map, Susan realized she probably didn't have far to go. "There's a bit of water, then land again. As a kingdom of the *sea* is probably not on the *land* I would say head to the midpoint and see what shows up."

Anna sighed. "This is the path my parents took several years ago." She wistfully traced the path south. "Triton, if he exists, was not kind that day."

"If I see him I'll punch him in the face just for you." Sparkle glared at her. "Gently. Very gently. Won't even leave a mark."

She chuckled. "You have my permission. But will you be all right? Under the sea?"

"Leave it to me."

"The hospitality of the castle is yours, you'll probably want to start in the morning?"

Susan shook her head. "This is too important. Besides, the way I'll work it I won't need sleep so it's best to leave now and get a good start on this. I don't know how many things I have to gather, or what I'll need to do to convince whoever has the next piece to part with it. Even hours could make the difference."

"Oh. If there's anything you need..."

"Thanks for the offer, but we'll manage. Sparkle, you want to sit this one out?"

"You mean it?"

"Ha hahahahah. No. You're the only one that can release my combat potential. You're coming with me."

"I was afraid of that."

Anna saw her to the edge of town, sun now sitting low in the sky. "Good luck, okay? And be safe. I don't want you getting killed because I don't want you to kill my sister. I have a feeling you could have ended the threat to our world fairly easily but are taking the long way around to spare me some anguish."

"That's part of it. Mainly I want to prove you don't have to kill the host to get rid of The Darkness, and I would hate to kill someone as gorgeous as your sister. I mean someone who has already been through so much. I'm going now."

Smooth, Susan. Very smooth.

Out away from the town, Susan turned to Sparkle. "Time to switch to powers mode. You don't have so many points so let's talk about what you should take..."

That done, Susan transformed and flew high in the sky, then slammed down to break the ice and get through to the water. She had to hammer her way through, which she didn't mind, and finally enough had been cleared to let her jump in. She hadn't paid much attention to her outfit, but Sparkle saw it was more like a swimsuit now than a fuku. It still had what looked like a collar and skirt, but that was just the design printed on the suit itself.

How odd, she thought. *I guess all the 'going underwater' powers she took this time changed it that much.*

"Ready for a swim?"

"Never. But I suppose you did put your combat power in my hands, which couldn't have been easy. I'll have to stick with you. Let's just get this over with."

The pair plunked into the dark water and began their descent into the kingdom of the sea.

Susan's current powers:

Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	3
Environmental Adaption	2
Flight	2 (She has a lot of "ground" to cover and this is faster than swimming)
Invulnerability	2
Nature: Force	2
Nature: Metapower	2
Nature: Seeing	2
Immune: Darkness	2
Renewal	1
Speed	3 (This increases her base, and thus flight speed tremendously)
Teleport	3

Susan descended at top speed into the darkness under the water, relying on her *immunity* to darkness to see. Not that there was much to see, presently. Helped along by her *Seer* nature and a few hastily thought of *Seer* techniques, she figured she was on the right track to finding someone who could point her in the right direction. Sparkle was hanging on for dear life, but neither felt the least discomfort thanks to their *environmental adaptation*. Normally even someone with air at this depth would feel strange, given the pressures to be found down there, but she didn't even think about it.

What she did think about, however, was the merman flanked by two swordfish she nearly smashed into in the dark.

"Watch where you're going!" he called, disgusted. "Unless you're bringing back news of the king's missing dau- uh- uh- uh."

"Missing... what?" prompted Susan.

"Human!" the merman shouted, eyes wide in terror. His tail went into overdrive as he backtracked, turned around, and shot away from her.

"Why would the king have a missing human?" she asked, easily keeping pace beside him. "Also, this wouldn't be king *Triton*, would it? I need to speak to that guy if you can tell me where to find him."

"Human! There's a human! AAAAAAAAAA." The man was covering his eyes. "Attack her, attack her!"

The two swordfish looked at him. "Are you crazy?" asked the one.

"Yeah, shouldn't she be drowning or something?" asked the other.

"Something funny going on here," continued the first.

"There's something you don't see every day," commented Sparkle. "Talking fish."

"And what are you supposed to be?" the one on the left asked her.

"I'm a cat."

"Cat- fish?"

"No, just a cat."

"Weird. What's that stuff all over its body?" the one asked the other.

"You got me? Some kind of hair?"

"It's fur."

"Don't talk to them!" shouted the merman. "You know the rules!"

"Doesn't strike you as odd, Ariel going missing and now this human shows up? Asking to see the king? A human, I might remind you that is not dying horribly. And seems to be keeping up with you despite not having a tail."

The merman seemed to consider this and slowed, panting.

"And it's not attacking us or anything," said the other. "Maybe we should see what it wants?"

"You just stay back!" cautioned the merman.

"Or what?" scoffed Susan. "You'll swordfish me? Personally I think you would have to talk them into it, and they don't seem too keen on the idea. Don't worry, it's not like I'm a shark."

"SHARK?!" the three yelled, whirling around. "Where?"

"No, I was just... look, can we start over? There's no... what I said. There isn't one. You can stop looking."

"Don't *do* that!" said the merman. "My heart. You trying to kill me?"

"Are you sure?" asked the one swordfish, currently huddled up next to the other one.

"Completely. So calm down please. I mean you no harm."

Susan waited while the merman caught his 'breath' and finally seemed to accept he wasn't in danger from Susan.

"So, uh, human, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"My name is Susan. What's yours?"

“Nerio.”

“See, that wasn’t so bad, was it? And this is Sparkle.”

“Hello.”

“Now. I am on a mission of vital importance relating to the ice I’m sure you’ve gotten reports of near the surface. You have heard of that, right?”

“We have more important things to worry about.”

“I heard,” said the right swordfish. “Something about out of season ice. Don’t pay much attention to the surface world.”

“You might want to change that policy. If the weather doesn’t get fixed it’ll be ice all the way down, so you’re in just as much danger as the humans are.”

“You mentioned the king?” asked the left swordfish.

“That’s right. I’m told he might have something I need to fix the weather, so I came down to fetch it.”

“This is highly irregular. Escorting a human into the heart of the kingdom? Especially with emotions running as high as they are because of Ariel...” He looked over at the two.

“Everyone knows about her unnatural fascination with the surface world.”

“One might say obsession,” said the other.

“What if she was hanging out on a rock or beached herself? She could be a captive on land! Now this girl shows up and wants something of the king. Well, maybe the king will want something of her.”

The merman nodded, rubbing his chin. “I get it. You mean someone that can check out the land and report back. Maybe free her, if necessary. Yes, that could work. Very well. Come with me, I’ll escort you to the king.”

Finally.

So the group swam back the way the merman had come, and as Susan got closer to the kingdom she saw it was lit with naturally luminescent plant life and sea creatures were rushing everywhere. So much so that only a few even noticed she was human, doing a double take and swimming away at high speed. The “castle” itself was huge, rounded and organic like it had been grown out of the sea rather than built. Where Elsa’s ice palace was all angles and sharp edges, this structure was worn and soft, like it had been here for ages.

“So this girl Ariel-”

“Princess Ariel,” Nerio corrected.

“Apologies. So the princess has gone missing?”

He nodded sadly. “Apparently they had some kind of fight, and she hasn’t been seen for two days. He’s worried sick.”

“I can imagine.”

“Here, this will take us to the throne room.” He darted through a hole in the side of the building, and Susan followed.

No guards. I suppose there might not need to be any. What would attack this place? If fish around here are smart enough to talk, and the entire underwater domain is one kingdom, it wouldn’t really have any enemies. Just predator creatures like sharks. Who would also be smart enough not to be found near the heart of the kingdom.

Susan came into the throne room, where a very large merman sat worried on a shell like throne. To either side of him, bubbles lazily spewed from a sort of decorative pots on long tubes. Coral and seaweed decorated the pillars to either side, but apart from the throne the chamber was mostly empty. The king noticed Susan and his eyes hardened.

“Why is there a human in my throne room?” he roared, his trident leaping into his hands and starting to glow.

“Please, your majesty, allow me to explain!” pleaded Nerio. “I can explain everything!”

“Everything?” asked Susan. “Even the use of chaos theory to explain weather patterns? Where the majority of the mass of the universe went after the big bang? How they get jelly into jelly donuts?”

“What?” both merman asked.

"I guess not." *But at least now he's more baffled than angry.* "Your majesty, I know I'm probably the last sort of person you wanted to see, especially during the current crisis—"

"And what do you know about that, incidentally?" he asked, raising the trident again.

"Only what I've been told by Nerio here," she answered, unconcerned. "Seems you had a fight with your daughter and she's run off. Believe me, your kingdom has bigger problems."

"Bigger than my youngest daughter being missing?" He swam over to her and pushed the trident into her face. "You better explain yourself."

Susan's anger rose. *How dare he point that at me!* Then she made a *resisting* check, getting a twenty one. Her anger drained away.

Crap. Knew that would happen. This sucks.

She looked down at the trident, up at the king, and then over to Sparkle. "Is this what I usually look like?"

"Pretty much. Though with swords."

"Huh. Really glad I'm starting to get a handle on it, just a little." She turned back to him. "Look, this isn't helping. Not only could I probably take you if I had half a mind to, that wouldn't do either of us any good. I don't care what your *prejudice* against humans is, right now I need your help. And if I can help you in return, I'm happy to do it."

"You? Could take me?" He seemed genuinely amused. "I'm the god of the sea!"

"And I'm part of the hope of the multiverse, sent by a multi-dimensional being that sees your entire reality as nothing more than a leaf on a branch on a tree among countless others. So what? Tell me, do you bleed?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, once a month, for a few days at a time."

The king colored, not exactly sure how to respond to that revelation, but fortunately for him he got a reprieve.

At that moment, there was a commotion down at the other end of the chamber, and two mer-girls were struggling with each other. One seemed to be trying to drag the other into the chamber, while she struggled to get out.

"Now what?" Triton moaned. "I'll deal with you in a second, human. Arista! Aquata! What is the meaning of this? I'm trying to deal with something here!"

"I'm sorry daddy!" said the one with darker hair. "It's just that- AAHHH!"

Both started screaming and trying to fit through the door as they looked past their father and saw Susan floating there.

She shook her head in disgust. *Such a welcoming people, the mermaids. And what the heck are they wearing?*

Though it was hard to tell because they were thrashing around, both girls seemed to be wearing actual seashells on their chests.

Most uncomfortable thing to wear- ever. Why do they- how can- I don't get it. She looked down at herself. *Actually, come to think of it, what am I wearing? Huh, my power mode clothes changed to be more a swimsuit. Weird.*

Meanwhile, Triton was trying to calm his daughters down in the time honored tradition of shouting at them and making things worse. She figured this might take a little while, so she flew over to make herself comfortable on the throne.

As comfortable as I can be on something that seems to be made of rock. How can he sit on this thing?

The girls gasped and pointed.

"You dare?" Triton exclaimed, trident glowing again.

"It shut everybody up," Susan explained. Then she *teleported* to behind the girls, grabbing them around the shoulders. "Now, if we could all just stop shouting at each other—" Predictably, the girls shouted and tried to get away. "I can help you find Ariel," she said quietly.

"What did you say? Girls, be silent!"

The two girls quieted, but Susan was pretty sure they were still terrified.

"I said I can help you find Ariel," she said a bit louder. "But in exchange, I need something from you."

"Typical!" Triton grumped.

“How do you know?”

This question seemed to catch him off guard. “What?”

“How do you know? You two, Aquatica was it?”

“Aquata.”

“Fine. I’m Susan, by the way. How many humans have you actually *met*?”

“Well, none, I guess.”

“And you?”

“None.”

“Ah. But yet you’re acting like I’m a sh- that s word with all the teeth.”

“The what?”

“Ah, that might not have translated. Water breathing, sharp teeth, senses blood in the water?”

“A shark?”

“I didn’t want to say it. I saw what happened the first time I- speaking of that, where did Nerio go?”

They looked about the chamber.

“Is it safe to come out?” a timid voice called from behind a pillar.

“Oh, come out.” Triton drooped and slowly swam back to the throne. “Just state your business and go, human.”

And I thought Severus calling me ‘girl’ was bad. At least this is some ‘god of the sea’ rather than just a sorry excuse for a teacher.

She let the girls go and spun, facing them as she moved a little ways into the chamber.

“What did you girls have to say?”

“Daddy, Aquata told me she said she saw where Ariel went after your fight!” said Arista, swimming past her.

He perked up. “Is this true, Aquana?”

“I... well... the thing is...”

“Aquana!”

“I don’t want to get her in trouble!”

“She’s already in trouble,” insisted Arista. “Come on, Aquata, you have to tell him. Or I will.”

“All right. I saw her swimming towards the-”

“Yes?”

“The lair of the sea witch,” she finished in a rush.

Triton’s face hardened, and his trident started glowing again. “Ursula.”

“But you don’t really think... do you?” Aquata asked softly.

“Given how headstrong she is, I wouldn’t put it past her. And given she hasn’t been seen since. I’ll leave immediately.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Susan informed him. “I can explain what I want on the way.”

“Wait, why are you here?” he asked, glaring at her. “It has nothing to do with my daughter at all, does it?”

“No. It has to do with the weather. You have heard of the ice encroaching on your sea, haven’t you?”

He snorted. “I’ve felt it. I thought it was odd, but I had other things on my mind.”

“I’m here to stop that.”

“Really? A human, coming down under the water to-” He broke off and actually seemed to look at her, really look at her, for the first time since she got there. “Is that a cat?”

“You know what a cat is?”

“Cat- fish?” asked Nerio.

“No, just a cat. How is it you can survive here anyway? And what’s with the weird magic I feel around you?”

Finally, he starts asking the right questions.

Susan briefly explained that in a nearby kingdom, a being from another world that she was chasing took over the new queen of that land and was determined to freeze the world solid. "Then I talked to the rock trolls and they gave me—"

"Wait!" he shouted. "Everyone out of this chamber. Out! Nerio, was it? Thank you for bringing her here, I will reward you properly later. In fact, please stay by the entrance to the castle as I may have another task for you."

"Yes, my king."

"Daddy, what—"

"Not now, sweetie. I need to talk to the human alone. It will just take a moment."

The two girls shrugged at each other and swam off, followed closely by Nerio and his two swordfish buddies.

When they were gone, Triton turned back to her. "You're after her power, aren't you?"

"Taking it away and saving the world, yes. I don't want it for myself."

"If only I could believe you."

"The trolls did. I could show you the—"

"I don't want to hear it! I don't care what they gave you, you understand? I only need to know about my piece."

"I see. At least now we're on the same page."

"I suppose. Perhaps your coming at this time was no accident? Yes, I wonder." He floated around the room, thinking. "And you really don't want her power for yourself?"

"Don't need it."

"HA! Like I can believe that!"

"I'll prove it."

"Really?"

Instead of answering, she *teleported* again, coming beside him and grabbing the trident.

"Hey!"

She gave him a shove with her legs, and made a STrength check to wrest it from his grasp, getting a thirty four. Triton might be buff, but even he would have a hard time hitting those sorts of numbers (he got a thirty one to resist, ironically enough) and Susan yanked it away from him and *teleported* back to the entrance to the chamber.

"Give that back immediately!"

"Of course." She reversed it and offered it to him, waiting for him to swim over to it. He touched it with a finger and then grabbed it back quickly, probably expecting her to yank it back before he could grab it. She didn't. "See?"

"What? Oh."

"Believe me now?"

"No. You're still a human. But I'll make you deal."

"Go on."

"Bring my daughter back. I'll trade her for the next ingredient and the next location you have to go. If you can even make it there, but that's not my concern."

"No, it's mine. Very well, nothing is ever easy. I'll go investigate this sea witch and see what she has to say. But I'll need a guide. Well, I don't need one, need one, but it would make things easier."

"Tell Nerio I commanded him to show you where it was."

"He'll love that. Very well. When next I return, your majesty, I shall have your daughter in tow. Whether she wants to come or not."

"Good! Get going!" He turned back to swim up to the throne again.

Yeah, thanks for wishing me good luck and all that.

"He wants me to what?" Nerio wailed.

"Show me where the sea witch lives."

"I don't have to go inside, do I?"

"No, it's fine. Just show me the place."

"We're gonna die," said the one swordfish.

“Yup. Nice knowing you.”

“Nice knowing you.”

“Knock it off and come on. I don’t have all day.”

As the group approached the place, Susan could see why any self respecting fish person would probably stay away from this site. Undersea vents spewed a sickly purple gas towards the surface, and the bones of some giant sea creature rested on a rocky shelf, mouth open and lit with more sickly light.

“There you go!” Nerio said, backing off. “Have fun or whatever.”

“What? There? She lives there?”

“Inside, yes. That’s what I’ve been told. Mostly we just stay away from this place.”

“I can’t imagine why. I don’t suppose you know what sort of powers she has? I’d like to have some idea what she can do.”

“I just know she’s powerful. Sorry.”

“Okay. Thanks for bringing me this far, I appreciate it.”

“Sure, sure. You, uh, want me to... wait?” His face said he probably wasn’t going to.

Susan shook her head. “Thanks for offering. But hopefully she can tell me what happened and I’ll get after Ariel.”

“Good luck.” He swam away.

“What do you think?” she asked Sparkle, looking the place over.

“I think we need a plan. How do you want to approach the place?”

“With as much firepower as possible, but the trouble is we need information from this being, not to beat her up.”

“Could you use a *time* technique to see what happened? I mean do you trust a being that inspires this much fear to be truthful to you?”

“Not especially. All right, I’m throwing away *speed, seeing nature, and immunity: Dark*. It seems light enough in there. Give me a turn to change and we’ll head in. From there, I guess just play it by ear, see how helpful she wants to be. If I have to beat it out of her...”

“I authorize force against her.”

“Excellent. Let’s get this party started.”

Susan’s current powers:

Defense Boost	2
Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	3
Environmental Adaption	2
Flight	2 (She has a lot of “ground” to cover and this is faster than swimming)
Invulnerability	2
Nature: Electricity	2
Nature: Force	2
Nature: Metapower	2
Nature: Technology	2
Nature (Limited): Transition	1 (She can only turn water into other stuff)
Renewal	1
Teleport	3

Susan put a bit of effort into her plan to intimidate the sea witch into giving up the information she required, and swam inside. As she passed the entrance she stuck something to the upper tooth of the skeleton and grinned. The entryway was home to various weird looking plants that reached up and tried to grab her as she passed. She easily pulled away, but was shocked to see they seemed to have eyes and mouths as well as their ability to stretch to great lengths. She stared down at them.

"Admiring my collection?" a sultry voice asked from further in. "Please, come in, you needn't fear."

Susan laughed. "Fear what? You? I think not." She floated through the door to where a large half woman half, octopus sat expectantly.

"This is a surprise," she exclaimed, looking Susan over. "You're no creature of the sea, are you?"

"No, I'm not. But I've come in search of one, so perhaps you would be so good as to simply tell me the information I require and I can be on my way."

"Now, now," she tisked, wagging a finger. "I think we both know that even on the surface it doesn't work like that. I have something you want, you need to give me something I want."

"And is there something a simple human such as myself can offer the great witch Ursula?" Susan asked sweetly.

"Oh, very good. These baubles seem quite magical, how about one of them?" She swam over and ran a finger over Susan's *Materia*.

"How about this blade through the chest instead?" Susan offered, pulling a sword out of *sub-space* and holding it up to her.

"You would threaten me? In my own house? Do you know nothing of negotiation? I'll never help you with that kind of attitude."

"I was told the rumors surrounding this place on the way over here. And a person that does good works doesn't live in a place like this. They live someplace-"

"Rumors!?" she gasped, seeming offended. "Why, I've helped more merfolk than that so called king. Let me tell you about it!"

*Let me tell you of the man that they call Triton.
How he rules all of the sea with iron fist!*

"*Negation*," intoned Susan, activating her *Magic Domination Materia* with ten energy. Ursula stopped singing, gasping and confused as she staggered, yanked out of her song. She blinked, confused. "Yeah, don't need a *heartsong* from you of all people. Thanks anyway. Back to the subject at hand. I will leave here with the information I want, one way or the other. It's in your best interest anyway."

"How did you do that?"

Susan swung her sword up to rest on her shoulder. "Now, now, even here under the sea you know that's not how it works. You want to know something I know, you know something I want to know. Perhaps a trade?"

That stopped her in her tracks. "Done." She made a motion in the water with her left hand. "I'll want every scrap of information including but not limited to formula, ingredients, gestures-" She made the motion again. "That's strange..."

"Trying to do magic? Yeah, not going to happen, sorry. I've blocked all magic around me but mine." *Not that I can do any magic at the moment.* "And I am in *no way* giving you access to that spell. You want it, research it yourself. No, what I'm offering is this." She put her sword back and pulled out two cylindrical devices with a button on top. "More specifically, I'm

offering to *not* press this button right here in exchange for where Ariel went after she left here. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

"Just that button? What's the other one?"

"That's the demonstration." She pressed it, and there was the sound of a distant explosion and the house shook a little. She tossed the detonator. "That was your front door." Ursula swam past her, concerned, and Susan followed. The mouth was all cracked up and the tooth had been blown away. "Basically, I've put a bunch of those, ten times more powerful, under your house," she explained calmly. "You seem to have built it on some rather thin pillars, truth be told. What do you think would happen if those pillars suddenly shattered? Answer: your house would tumble deeper into the sea."

"I see. You really came prepared, didn't you? I approve. Now, these devices... would there be four of them? About this big?" She made a shape with her hands. "Sort of gray metal."

"How do you-"

She pointed, and Susan looked past the door. Floating there were two eel looking guys each wrapped around two of the explosives Susan had made. "Did you think you were unobserved? That you could just swim up to my front door and do as you pleased? No chance, darling."

"Of course, I could blow up your servants," she threatened, holding the detonator up.

What a dirty, filthy liar you are! There's no force on Earth that could make you press that button. Your cat hasn't given you the okay.

But she doesn't know that.

And if she calls your bluff? By the way, how did you do that anyway? Set up those explosives, I mean.

Uh, you didn't watch me?

I mean your magic let you. Does it go away in powers mode?

No. I swore to not do violence to any living thing. Blowing up stone? That's fine because stone isn't alive.

Maybe, maybe not. I've heard it both ways. Problem is, what about all those poor bacteria you would have blow up with the stone? What if there was a small fish nearby? Could you have still pushed the button? Those things are alive, right?

You've got to be kidding me...

Nope. You can't hurt a living thing, that's what you wrote down. Still feel like that Contract was a good idea?

But I was able to do it. The magic would have kept me-

*You were able to do it then, I agree. But not now. See, you didn't consider the rock to be alive before, so the magic didn't stop you. But **now**, you see, you do, because now you've considered all the tiny life you didn't before. So now you wouldn't be able to. Just like you can't press that button and destroy those two. It's your own fault, you know. You had to go making up contracts like that, so I had to start thinking about how to use it to my advantage. Haven't quite figured that part out yet. The least I can do is make you regret it as much as I can.*

You're a real jerk, you know that?

We are one in the same. Is she trying to get our attention or something?

Susan snapped out of it, and Ursula was waving her hand in front of her face. "Hello? Did you die just floating there?"

"Keep back!" she threatened, raising the detonator again.

"Uh, they left like thirty seconds ago." She pointed to the distance, where the explosives were sinking like a stone. The two eels were nowhere in sight.

"Aaaarg!" Susan tried to smash the button in anger, but found she couldn't.

Bacteria in the water too. Somehow she could tell The Darkness was smirking.

Giving a roar of frustration she tried to throw it, but it remained stuck to her hand.

Could fall on the button and detonate a curious fish.

I hate you.

I know! But isn't that just hating yourself?

Susan stuck the detonator back in the *pocket*. "Fine."

"Having trouble?" asked Ursula.

"No. Everything is just fine. Why? Now, where were we? Ah yes, the information on Ariel. Where did she go after she left here?"

Ursula laughed. "You're still going on about that? You have nothing to threaten me with, currently. So what makes you think I'll tell you anything? Unless you're planning to pull that sword out again? Murder me in cold blood? I don't think so, you don't seem the type."

She's right. You're far too squeamish for this kind of work. Best to just leave and come back when you've thought of a new plan.

Ursula started swimming away. "Come back when you have an effective threat," she called over her shoulder, and went laughing back into her house. "Or you want to give me that wonderful spell of yours!"

"That could have gone differently," remarked Sparkle. "I am compelled to point out—"

"Not one word!"

"Let me finish. Your restraint is admirable. She was basically helpless, and you didn't just start chopping her to bits. Despite having permission."

"What kind of person do you think I am?"

Hopelessly violent?

"You tend to take, uh, a direct path to your goals. That usually involves violence."

"Yes, speaking of that. We're going to have to modify the *Contract* once we get on land again and get a second."

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you later. For now, what are we going to do about her?"

"You're the one with *every power*. You tell me."

"I don't know. Anything that's an 'effective threat' as she put it sort of makes me uncomfortable. I mean I could *telesummon* her up above the ice and just leave her to freeze to death until she tells me. But is that really the kind of person I want to become?"

"Then you're going to have to think of something else you are willing to do."

Susan pondered. "It would be far easier if I was in magic mode. I would just threaten her with *Dead Magic*."

"You could quickly do a *breathe water* right?"

Susan shook her head. "A *breathe water*, a *light*, but what about the pressure down here? Would by eardrums just explode? Plus my regular clothes would come back, and I'm dressed in boots. My *swimming* skill is only a three, probably not enough."

"I guess you are compensating for a lot of things with your powers."

"Yup. Something indirect, that's what we need. Like with Elsa. Attack the problem from another angle."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking my powers are about to get a workout."

Susan flew away from the weird skeleton house and stopped above an outcropping of rock that stuck out of the sea floor in this area.

"We're going to lose most powers in favor of *natures*," she told Sparkle. "Naturally you should keep the ones keeping you alive."

"Naturally."

She concentrated, then her costume changed to be far more colorful, radiating out from the sphere set in her chest, which was poking out. "Interesting," she remarked. "Well, let's get started."

She began with a bunch of permanent "*Orb of light!*" which hung a great sphere of brightness in the water above. That lit the place up nicely, and Susan recovered her energy while she considered her next move. Already the place seemed *far* less foreboding, lit up almost as though by the sun. Her next move was to smash down and cart away a few protrusions sticking up from the ground, then use a *creation* technique to create a tall column slightly higher than Ursula's house. This was a solid piece of ceramic material, thick and strong, surrounded by many lesser columns which she simply drove into the rock by hitting

the tops of them. With that in place she created a huge disk, set atop the central column and secured by having the column poke through it. The others were resting directly beneath it, and she began the process of fusing them together to make it one giant piece. Her next move would have been to create a half dome and some seating to make a sort of amphitheater, but Ursula finally rushed out to see what the heck was going on.

“Urban renewal project,” Susan answered smoothly. “I was thinking to myself on the way in here, what does this area need? Culture! I answered myself. So I’m building you a new concert hall. I may not be Elsa, able to raise an ice castle with my brain, but I get by. Just putting the lights in improved this area immensely, don’t you think? Plus once this is done I’m putting tiny ones freaking *everywhere* around here. Blinking ones, spinning ones, different colors- oh man I can see it now. Merpeople will come from leagues away just to see it, it’ll be that epic. It shouldn’t be too long before the main construction on the platform is done. I can’t wait to see what sort of concerts they put on...” She paused, seemingly concerned. “Wait, it’s not going to be a problem, is it? All that noise? Creatures of the deep swimming by here day and night, remarking to themselves, hey, there’s where that weird Ursula lives. Back in the day she was some kinda major witch or something but now she’s just an old hag.”

“Okay, enough! I’ll tell you what you want to know! Get those lights out of here! This can’t be a witch’s lair with all this going on! And you know how long it took me to find a place with just the right atmosphere?”

Susan held out her hand. “Information first.”

“All right! She came to me to become human, so I made her human! She went up there to be with her prince. Satisfied?”

“Somewhat. You have any proof?”

“Can I do magic again?”

“Very well. But any sort of attack magic and you’ll be dead before you get three syllables in, I promise you that.”

Ursula reached into nowhere and pulled out a contract. “See, turned into a human, and here’s her signature. It’s all legal.” She pointed to the relevant parts, not that Susan could read them, but she did notice they used the same alphabet and there was Ariel’s name at the bottom.

“Legal!? Ha! I’m sure.” *But there’s no doubt about it, that there is the Contract spell. Wild! Is that the first absolute parallel with my magic I’ve seen? Oh wait, no that would be the gold I saw at the Cup that one time. It’s really too bad this person is all evil and stuff, and everyone’s afraid of her. I would have loved the chance to discuss her magic with her. What a waste.* “To my surprise, I’m familiar with that sort of magic, so I’ll accept it. I’ll kill the lights for now, but I’m leaving the platform. If you turn out to be lying to me, I’m starting them back up again.”

“I swear! She’s directly above us and flouncing around whatever kingdom is right there. You can’t miss it!”

“You have *no idea* how bad my sense of direction is. I could miss it, believe me.”

Susan killed the lights with *metapower* and Ursula looked relieved. “Now get out of here!”

“Gladly.”

“Now that was a creative solution,” Sparkle admitted on the way up. “I’m impressed.”

“Thank you. I figured the thing she wanted was mystique and atmosphere, that’s why the whole dragon bone castle or whatever that thing used to be. By giving her the opposite, she had no choice but to do what I wanted. Ah, ice. *Ice Breaker!*”

Using techniques Susan smashed her way through the ice again, then looked about.

“Seems to be a castle there,” Sparkle remarked. “Best not fly over there in the darkness. Someone might raise an alarm about witches attacking the place or something.”

“She’s probably asleep anyway. Sunrise should be in a few hours, we’ll hang out in the *Dimension* until then.”

Early the next morning Susan presented herself at the castle. She was back in magic mode, and dressed in her “peasant” clothing.

Though castle is a bit too strong a word, this is just a stone structure that happens to be slightly larger than the surrounding houses, put in The Darkness. I mean, where Elsa and Anna lived was far bigger.

I suppose I can't fault your reasoning there. Probably a smaller kingdom.

"Can I help you?" asked the man that met her at the door.

"Indeed!" she replied lightly. "I'm here for Ariel."

"Ah!" His face lit up. "That poor girl, I wondered if someone would show up to take her home. Not that she hasn't been a delight, but now that the prince has found his true love..."

Er, what? "Yes?"

"Well, she's more of a hanger on now, we weren't quite sure what we were going to do with her. Are you related to her?"

"No, not really. Her father has employed me to fetch her back, you see. He was quite worried when she disappeared."

"I should say so. Well, come in, come in. I'll have her brought down."

"Thank you."

She was led into to foyer, which was quite elegant, really. All marble columns and plush carpets on the stairs and crests everywhere. Looking over she saw a dark haired woman with a seashell around her neck hanging onto the arm of a man dressed in blue, but they passed out of sight.

The man that answered the door and a despondent looking girl appeared at the top of the stairs, and he led her down.

"Are you okay?" Susan asked the girl, who of course was gorgeous. Slim waist, flowing red hair, huge eyes... that seemed to have been crying.

"I'm not sure what's wrong," admitted the man. "I found her like this."

"And you didn't think to ask her?"

The man looked at Susan like she was simple. "She hasn't spoken a single word since she got here. Her father didn't tell you she was mute?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head.

"No." Susan's eyes narrowed. "He did not. Look, I saw your signature on that contract, so I know you can write. Get me some paper and you can tell me what's going on."

"Oh," said the man. "We never thought of that."

Susan face-palmed. *Wait, so how did they know her name?*

Ariel tried to get her to understand something, and she was clearly upset, but Susan couldn't figure out what she was conveying.

"Just wait until he gets back, you can just write it down."

She looked frustrated.

Finally the man returned with a stack of paper, a book to write on, and a quill with ink bottle.

"Here you are my dear," he said, offering the quill. "Please, don't be shy!"

She made hand motions to Susan who just shrugged. "What? Get on with it already."

She rolled her eyes and grabbed the quill, jotting something down quickly on the paper. Both leaned over to see what it was.

Susan looked at what Ariel had written. She looked back up at Ariel. Then back down at the paper.

You know, according to your stats you're supposed to be pretty smart, remarked The Darkness. *But there are times you can be really, really stupid. You know that?*

Not. Another. Word.

It just laughed.

Technique used in this chapter

Orb of light

Light

Level 13 (8+1+4) (Effect, Touch, P)

Create a shining orb, in the desired color, placed at the end of the hand as the technique is used. Being permanent, this orb will last until dispelled by a *darkness* or *metapower* technique. It illuminates clearly to the normal radius for the technique, 30m.

Learning About The Past

When: Just then

Where: Right by the front door

"I can't read that at all," admitted the man. "Are you getting anything out of it?"

Naturally, Susan was not. This put her in a bit of a quandary, as really someone sent to fetch someone and then insist they write something would probably be able to read what that person had written, right?

Seems logical to me. But then you were never really about logic, were you?

What do you mean? I'm very logical.

Right. Regular Vulcan you are. Still, you didn't even consider that the undersea kingdom would have their own language, did you? You've seen that there's no contact between the two civilizations, mainly because the merpeople are absolutely terrified of humans. So why would they share a language? I mean Ursula even showed you the contract, and you still didn't get it.

I know. Look, I could read her name, who would have thought our alphabets were the same but the language wasn't?

Uh, lots of languages use the same alphabet.

You know what I mean!

"Now that's an interesting- Hey!"

Sparkle, thinking quickly, shot past everyone and into the house.

"Sparkle? Get back here! Where are you going? I'm sorry about this," apologized Susan. "She's my cat. Follows me everywhere. Can't imagine what she's thinking now. She never runs off like this. Sparkle!"

"I'll retrieve her," said the man, taking off after her.

As the man went to chase her down, Susan did a quick casting of *Literacy* and found she could now read the mer-language clearly. Ariel looked surprised at the magic, but Susan flashed a grin and put her finger over her lips. "Actually no, while he's gone, what's going on here? You can really talk, right? Don't worry, I can understand you. You just didn't want to speak mer-tongue to them and..." Ariel was shaking her head and pointing to the paper. "Okay, you can't talk. What in the world?"

My father really sent you?

"Yes. He's basically got everyone in the kingdom out searching for you. He's quite distraught, really. One of your sisters saw you swimming towards Ursula's place, so he had me follow after you. I 'convinced' her to tell me what had happened and followed you here. I guess I should have asked for all the details, she didn't mention she had taken your voice."

That was the payment she demanded of me. Either she just wanted to be a better singer, or she knew somehow that Prince Eric's feeling for me were tied into it because I sang to him after I rescued him.

"Ah. How would she though?" *Sure, you didn't use some kind of siren magic to make him fall in love with you at all. Though maybe you just don't know you can do it, or maybe he really did fall for you with one look. I'm not judging you.* "Look, I'm going to have to get the whole story, and I don't think I'm going to be able to do that here. Will you at least come with me? We need to find a quiet place and work out some way of letting you communicate better. This writing stuff is going to take too long."

There's nothing here for me now. I'll come with you and face my fate.

As Ariel wrote this, she seemed incredibly sad, but the man, carrying Sparkle, came back before she could ask for more details.

"Here we are," he said, handing her over.

"Thank you so much. What has gotten into you, Sparkle? Bad, bad kitty. She didn't knock into anything, did she?"

"No. Oddly, after running into the other room she just stared at that girl the prince is insisting he marry later today. So strange. I don't think she liked her much... and confidentially neither do I. Something off about that girl. Still, Eric is... why am I telling you all this?"

"I don't know. Anyway, we've sorted this out, so I'll be on my way with Ariel."

"Oh?" he looked over at her scribbles. "Ah, so you have. Very good! I'm glad it all worked out in the end. What language is that- no matter. Oh, and you can keep the dress, consider it a memento of your time here. No, no, I insist!"

"Thank you. Let's go."

Ariel sadly handed the writing stuff back and followed Susan out of the castle, door closing firmly behind her.

"Now," said Susan, "let's find a quiet place and see what I can come up with. Nice work there, by the way, Sparkle. Knew I kept you around for some reason."

"Naturally. Like the guy said, I got a good look at that dark haired girl. She's got the guy under some kind of Venus spell. Charm magic for sure, from the feel of things."

Ariel stared at Sparkle.

"What are you doing?" came an accented male voice from Ariel's pocket. "You can't just speak to humans like that."

Susan looked down at what had poked out of the pocket. "Ariel, I don't mean to be crude, but I think you have crabs."

"I can take care of it," offered Sparkle, showing her claws.

Ariel shook her head and took Sebastian out of her pocket, holding him close.

"So, you can talk too, huh? Say, you don't happen to have a character sheet, do you?" she asked Ariel.

She indicated she didn't know what Susan was talking about.

Susan sighed. "Am I ever going to find someone like myself? Anyway, perhaps you can give me the run down, Mr. Crab?"

"My name is Sebastian," he said huffily. "Composer extraordinaire!"

"Nice to meet you. Can all animals talk on this world? Because that would really, really, suck. Humans would have unknowingly been eating sentient creatures for thousands of years."

"Never mind that," he insisted. "Who are you? I don't recognize you, and I know a lot of people in Triton's kingdom. How did you even get here? Did you have Ursula give you human legs as well?"

"Whoa, one question at a time. But for now, let's find someplace secluded we can talk. Or would you rather have this conversation right here in the street?" Sebastian looked around, realizing where he was. He crossed his pincers. "I thought so."

Once down at the beach, leaning on a rock, Susan got the whole story. Ariel, having just seen her 'cove of treasures' destroyed by her father, got an offer from the two eels she had seen to be led to Ursula. Who then made her *persuasion* check to get Ariel to sign the *contract* and hand over her voice, turning her human. She had until sunset *today* to get the prince to fall in love with her, and kiss her 'true love's kiss.'

Some kind of binding magic on the whole planet? Like heartsongs, you can kiss someone and just know you'll be with them forever? Kind of sucks for all those poor saps who fall in love but the 'magic' doesn't happen when they smooch. Do they just go their separate ways and keep looking, or stay together knowing there's someone else out there who is better suited for them?

"And if you don't, you turn back into a mermaid and then more than likely into one of those weird plant things I saw at the entrance to her little lair?"

Ariel nodded her head.

“Great. I don’t suppose you specified in the contract that she couldn’t interfere in any way?”

Shake.

“Naturally. You thinking what I’m thinking, Sparkle?”

“About crab? I mean about Ursula? Yeah, what other magic users do we know that might want to interfere in Ariel’s plan to win the prince? Problem is what do we do about it?”

“Get her to reveal herself? There is a spell to undo shape-shifts. Even under magical infatuation he might think twice about marrying a half octopus.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“True, if it’s magic. Crap. And I don’t want to just bust in there and lop her head off. I mean I do, but I don’t. You know what I mean?”

“Humans,” remarked Sebastian. “You see what I’ve been trying to telling you? Violent to the first and the last.”

“Hey, who stormed into a secret stash of human artifacts and rampaged through the place? Oh that’s right, the king himself. So don’t tell me there’s no violence down in the kingdom of the sea. Plus... sharks. Need I say more?”

“That’s a totally different thing,” he maintained. “Everybody’s got to eat.”

“Oh, so if I chop her up and throw her on the fire with the intention of eating her, it’s fine?”

“Well, umm...”

“That’s what I thought. Besides, doing that is what I *don’t* want to do. It’s just the easiest solution, and the one I don’t want to get used to using. No, just like before there must be some other way.”

The group sat and thought a moment. “What’s the deal with those captives anyway?” Sparkle asked. “Why do what she does? What does she get out of it?”

“She did call it a collection,” Susan reminded her. “Maybe she just gets a kick out of stealing triton’s subjects away from him?”

“Which is another problem- why hasn’t he gone to rescue them?”

They looked to Ariel, who shrugged.

“He is supposedly the king of sea,” Sparkle went on. “Why would he allow such a thing to continue? I can’t imagine he’s ignorant of the situation.”

“I don’t know,” hedged Susan. “People can turn a blind eye to a heck of a lot. Even kings- heck especially kings, right? As long as she’s not causing trouble, perhaps he just believes they get what they deserve for going there.”

“Different situation now though. His daughter is about to become one of them.”

“Good point.” Susan stood up. “Let’s go ask him.”

Ariel scrambled backwards, waving her hands.

“Look, you’re going to have to fess up to what you did sooner or later. Would you rather he see you like this, or after trying to mount a rescue attempt with you as a captive?” Ariel hesitantly indicated herself. “I thought so. We only have a couple of hours, and we know exactly where she is. Up here, playing with her new boy-toy.”

Hope she doesn’t break it.

Quiet you.

“We don’t know that for sure though, do we?” asked Sparkle.

“We can find out. *Telesummon!*” Susan cast the spell, taking the full time to get the bonus, as Sparkle cut the time in half. Ursula didn’t appear. “It looks like she’s not in the lair. Lair or here, where else would she be?”

“As much as I agree with the plan to go tell her father, Ariel can’t go down like this!” protested Sebastian.

“Of course she can. At least, I think so. One good thing about The Darkness leaking into me, I know certain things about my powers. Get out of those clothes while I transform.”

Oh, you’ve been waiting to say those words, haven’t you?

You know me too well.

Susan selected most of the powers she had before, plus a few others she had never used, and stuck the dress into her *pocket*, trying not to visually devour Ariel as she did so. "Now, let's hope this works. I've never done it before. *Gift Power.*"

Using a *metapower* technique she basically allowed Ariel to access to her own powers, in effect giving her an *Allegiance* weakness. There was a similar spell, of course, but Susan knew how to do this mostly through The Darkness, which made it grumble a bit. Ariel's eyes were wide.

Can you hear me?

Susan smiled. "Looks like it worked. You can speak for yourself at the moment, just like that. Plus you can survive underwater again, and of course you have my energy regeneration and *Force* natures, so you should know how to access them, as well."

I think I do. I can just make things explode now?

"Yup! Pretty neat, huh? So, do you want a moment to think about what you're going to say to your father?"

A moment or a year, there's nothing I can say that will change his mind.

"Come on, Ariel. You made a mistake, okay? That's what being a kid is all about. Trying things out, finding your place in the world. Okay, you got caught up in magic and Ursula and everything but he's going to be thrilled just to see you're safe." *Safe, sort of. It's like having a bomb strapped to her- we just have to disarm it before it goes off. Easy, right?*

But I'm not. Tonight I get turned into one of those creatures-

"Not if I can help it. And I'm sure your dad will have a few things to say about the whole situation as well. We'll figure this out, Ariel. I promise."

Why are you helping me like this? Who are you?

"Because I can. I don't have time to get into the whole story, just know this is what I do. And unlike certain eight legged creatures I don't charge for my services either." *Apart from maybe a leer or two, which totally doesn't count anyway.* She took Ariel's hand. "Now come on. I'll be right at your side, and we'll explain things to the king calmly and rationally, and everything will work out."

I... guess I'm ready.

Susan *teleported*.

"My daughter did WHAT?" roared Triton, after hearing the story. Ariel was pressed into Susan's back, hiding behind her. *If only I could enjoy it a little more.*

"Made a mistake," Susan shot back. "Did something in a moment of anger she regrets. I suppose you've never done something you regretted? I don't know, smashing up a collection of human artifacts that started this whole thing, perhaps?"

"You're not saying this is my fault, are you?"

"Just providing you a recent example, that's all. I'm sure there's enough blame to go around in either case. The thing you should be focused on now is, what are we going to do about this?"

"How long do you have?" he asked, slumping back in the throne.

Until sunset tonight.

"Not long. And even I can't break her contract magic. I really don't know."

"Perhaps we could check out her lair?" Sparkle suggested. "I don't think there will be any real clues there, but at least it's a place we know she isn't. And it's her base of power, we might find something."

"Sounds good to me. Come along, your majesty," Susan offered, holding out a hand.

"Let's see what poking around the place gets us."

With Triton's hand in hers she grabbed Ariel around the waist and *teleported* back to Ursula's lair, where the weird plant people shrank away from Triton.

"So this is what she does with them," he remarked, stroking his beard. "I always wondered."

You knew about this?

"Of course I did! You think anything happens in the sea that I am not aware of? I knew they disappeared, just not how exactly."

How could you let this go on?

"You have to understand, my daughter, what Ursula represents. She's... an undersea vent."

A what?

"Look outside. What do you see?"

Steam.

"Exactly. Without these vents that pressure would continue to build until it erupted. The vent prevents that from happening."

"In other words," theorized Susan, "she has a part in this society by removing undesirable elements you can't. Either by making them happier if they can pay the price, or turning them into those plant things."

"And thus the kingdom loses any subjects that might later go on to make trouble for me. She doesn't exactly have my approval, but she operates, however unknowingly, in my best interests."

Devious.

"If you had to run the kingdom, you would soon see the necessity."

"Guess that kills my idea to just *Dead Magic* the whole place then," Susan said wistfully. "If I could even find a way to survive down here while I cast it."

"What's this?"

"Cut it off from magic forever. She couldn't do any more spells here, she would have to move."

"She wouldn't even be able to enter, in that case."

"What?"

He looked over at his daughter and sighed. "I may as well tell you. Mermaids are a magical race, and their ancestry is..." He looked like he was eating something sour. "Regular old human."

Oh, that's why their alphabet is the same, but their language isn't. Either they're just from another part of the world and wound up here, or their language was changed to more easily be spoken underwater so it no longer resembles the original. One mystery solved I guess.

He continued. "Long ago I took some that wanted to live a different life and gave them a bit of magic, then brought them to live in the sea, where I did. That was the start of my kingdom, and it's only grown since then."

What are you saying, father?

He sighed. "I'm saying she didn't *turn* you human, she simply took the part of your magic that give you your tail, and your ability to survive here. Throwing in your voice was an extra little bonus for her, if what Sebastian tells me is true. There's magic in your song, too, my daughter."

"And if she took more?" asked Sparkle, excitedly. She sounded like she already knew and was just asking for confirmation.

He pointed to the plant creatures. "This. It's been too many generations, the mermaids can't exist, even as humans, without some *spark of magic*. Without it they just become like this."

"I knew there must be a reason," she exclaimed. "Susan, don't you see? She's pulling a mini Darkness. She's got their magic!"

"And that makes her extremely dangerous," agreed Susan. "It's a good thing I didn't try fighting her before, I may have been in for a shock when she could actually fight back."

"Do you realize the implications?" Sparkle went on. "Imagine how strong Tom was when he took over Harry, who was still a kid. How many mermaids worth of magic has she stolen?"

"Ah, but these aren't spellcasters," countered Susan. "So their magic wouldn't be that developed. I'm more concerned about what method she's using. Imagine researching a spell to rip someone's magic out permanently, and add it to your own. *Dead Magic* is bad enough, that just wipes it out of someone. To actively *steal* it, well, that's worse than Sangray up there.

At least he only gets my magic when I'm around. Imagine someone stealing my magical power permanently!"

"Their magic is strong, however," Triton cautioned. "You think it's easy turning humans into something that can live comfortably down here? And if they actively studied it, they could handle most spells. I admit a lot of their power is tied up in their forms, but not all of it."

Ariel looked thoughtful. *Is this why you hate them so? Or why you pretended to, anyway? Because you didn't want us to find out about what you had done? Where we had actually come from? And keeping the ability to use magic from us! I think that might be the worst thing of all.*

"I don't know. Maybe? It was so long ago now, and our kingdom flourishes. Most of my subjects are happy... aren't they?"

I guess, I never took a poll or anything. The only person I can speak for is myself, and I wasn't. I was just the outlier, one who would end up becoming like that, in the end. She gestured down. It's just too bad I happened to be your daughter. If I even am your daughter. Am... I... your daughter?

"Yes, of course you are! What a thing to say!"

But our kingdom is so old... or was that another lie?

"Oh Ariel." He moved to hug her. "Our kingdom is very old. And I have had many sons and many daughters. I have loved each and every one of them, watched them grow, then die. It doesn't get any easier."

"So you aren't just some merman who inherited the name Triton and the kingship from your father?" Susan asked.

He shook his head. "No. I am the true son of Poseidon. A god."

A god? You're immortal? She pushed her father away. I'm the daughter of a god?

"Some god. People just don't worship us as they used to. Much of my power has been lost over the years. I hardly deserve the title after so long, but it's what I was. Why?"

I don't know. It's just a lot to take in.

"I would have told you, or you would have figured it out eventually, when I never got any older while you did."

"Which is all interesting and such, but still doesn't really help us with the problem at hand," reminded Susan.

"We've only really realized just how bad we have it," Sparkled agreed. "We need to somehow cut her off from this source of magic before we engage her in combat. I mean I doubt she's just going to cancel the *contract* herself. Not after we've seen the length she'll go to for one more source of magic. We'll have to force the issue."

Ariel shook her head. *You won't. I will. This is my problem, and I have to solve it myself. Susan, show me how to use the powers to fight and I'll challenge her. Winner gets to keep the prince.*

"What?" everyone there gasped, even the plant things.

Not Much of a Training Montage

When: Just afterwords

Where: Ursula's lair

Susan was the first to break the silence. "I maybe didn't make this clear. Beating things up, it's kind of what I do? I'm sort of trained in just about every form of combat that there is, including magic, hand to hand, swords, two different types of guns- have I shown you my swords?" She pulled both out of her *sub-space pocket* and Triton lost a little of his glazed eye look to focus on them. "I call this one *Wreck it* and this one *Ralph*. Why do I call this one Ralph?" *Is that your doing?*

<whistling sound>

"Impressive. How do you even lift them?"

"Judge my arms by their size, do you? Magic is my ally, and a powerful ally it is."

Can we get back to me for a second here? asked Ariel, as Susan put the swords away again. *And yes, I'm certain you probably could white knight to my rescue. I have to ask myself- what would that mean?*

"Come again?"

Let's say you take her on and win, right? The prince is saved by some girl that showed up out of nowhere while I stand around and watch from the sidelines? And then you disappear again? What sort of message does that send?

"Ariel, I'm not sure I'm comfortable having you put yourself in harms way like this," argued Triton. He leaned over to whisper. "She seems more than willing, let her take care of it."

Daddy, this is my problem. I went to Ursula. I made the deal with her. It's my responsibly to fix it. Even if you are an immortal god or whatever, I can't rely on you to solve all my problems for me.

"I... look... help me out here!" he pleaded.

Susan considered. "It seems she's made up her mind. And I must say I admire her courage and dedication to this man she's fallen in love with. She fights just as much for him, to get him away from Ursula's control, as she does for herself and her future with him." She looked over at him seriously. "I think she's also sending you a message. That this is how far she's willing to go for this chance to shape her own destiny."

"Then it seems I have no choice but to allow this to continue. Ariel, do you really think you can win? You don't know what she can do!"

Susan's eyes twinkled. "Keep in mind, Ursula won't know what she's capable of either. Nor does she have any more combat training than Ariel does, I'd imagine. I mean she didn't look that buff."

Judge her by her size, do you? Magic is her ally, and a powerful- I get the point, thank you!

"Will you leave immediately?"

Susan "jumped" back a step. "Are you kidding? I have to figure out exactly what powers would be best for her to have and give her a crash course in them. Luckily we've got a few days which I hope will be enough."

"Days? We barely have eight hours!"

Susan laughed. "Then we have a week. After all, we have to leave an hour for calling her out and starting the fight. Maybe six days? Don't want to cut it too close."

"What are you babbling about?"

"Look, just trust me on this, okay? The fight will take place out on the frozen lake. Good amount of space to maneuver, and no one will get hurt with you fighting out there. Meet us out there in six hours. Ariel?" She held her hand out.

I'll see you daddy. I love you. She quickly kissed his cheek and took Susan's hand.

"Wait!" commanded Triton. He thought a moment, then concentrated, making a parchment (or what seemed to be parchment, it was underwater after all) appear in his hand. "Give this to Ursula when you see her. I think you will find her more amenable to this mad scheme of yours if you do."

“Sure thing,” Susan said, taking it. “See you in six days slash hours!” She *teleported*.

Ariel looked around with interest. *Where are we now?*

“My home away from home,” Susan answered. “Let me show you around the cabin. You hungry? I have food here if you are. Food from *other worlds!*” She made jazz hands. “Wooooooo.”

Shouldn't we get started right away? And are you going to keep me naked the whole time, because I've caught you staring at me three times now!

“I'm not staring!” Susan insisted, tearing her eyes away. “And don't worry, we'll get you some *armor* soon. As far as time goes, don't sweat it. This entire place,” Susan spread her arms to encompass the cabin and nearby lake, “is under a permanent *time* technique. Every day you spend in here equates to only one hour passing on the outside. Took a bit of doing, but I managed it rather handily.”

“It was a level eighteen technique,” Sparkle put in. “I know you don't know what that means at the moment, but just keep it in mind okay?”

Sure, level eighteen, whatever.

And so Ariel's training began. Susan thought for a bit before deciding on what powers to take, and thus what she would give Ariel. Naturally she took *Renewal* so they would have the maximum time to train, plus *sending* so she could communicate. She would swap them out once it was time to go. With that, Susan decided on

Armor	2
Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	5
Flight	2
Invulnerability	2
Immunity (Water)	2
Nature Primary: Force	2
Nature: Metapower	2
Nature: Time	2
Regeneration: Passive	4
Sudden Step	1

“I have to take *metapower* to give you these powers, so you might as well take it. If she throws some kind of curveball at us you can shut it down with that. I have no idea how many techniques you'll be able to use, mine are just taken from my now empty magic pool- and you have no idea what I'm saying, do you?”

What's a curveball?

It's Ron all over again.

So Susan explained what the powers were and had her create some must have techniques. *Velocity* of course was a given. A *force* shield was nice to have all around, but for offense, something a bit different.

“I don't recommend straight up beam attacks,” she cautioned. “You have to practice hitting with them, and we don't have time for you to become good enough for that. Focus instead on an area effect explosion and one close range attack. The explosion won't hit as hard and she could dodge it, but it's still a better chance to hit than just a beam.”

And for the close attack?

“Maybe something like this? *Force Blade!*” Susan got a long blade of light protruding out of her hand which she swept in an arc in front of her before it disappeared. “Technically an instant attack, but with some range and surprise factor because unlike a sword you would have in your hand, she won't see it coming.”

You would know better than I would.

“Exactly. Believe in your sensei. Now, you try it. And remember what I said- you can't call them out so the energy cost is going to be higher for you.”

Whatever that means.

And for six days Susan drilled the youngest princess of the sea in *Ariel* combat.
Because she can fly now. Get it? Ariel combat? Aerial?
Yes, you've only made that joke about a million times. Knock it off.
What? I'm bored! And I'm pretty sure that's one of those things that gets funnier each time you say it.
The only thing I can think of like that would be you saying "Ow, Susan stop hitting me."
You're no fun.

Finally the hour/day came. Susan and a far more confident Ariel, clad in her stylized armor, appeared outside the castle. She had basically been wearing it the entire time so Susan hoped she had at least gotten a point or two into *Armor Wearing*. It was basically just a forcefield anyway, as with a primary *nature* of *force*, and the *armor* power creating a suit of armor of the primary type, it shimmered and glowed with power.

With luck, she's got a new skill group or however they do it, for her combat skills.

"Ready?" Susan asked her before putting her final set of powers on.

Ready! she answered with a grin. *And if I don't get a chance to say this later, thank you. For making this possible and for letting me take the spotlight. I got the sense, working with you these past few days, that you don't really like to share it.*

"Susan not share the spotlight?" Sparkle asked as if shocked. "I can't imagine how you got that idea."

Susan stuck her tongue out and gave Ariel her powers, spending quite a bit of energy to do it. Not like she had any shortage, mind you. That done she turned and pounded on the door, not quite tearing it off the frame but those inside heard it.

"Yes?" asked the man who had answered the door earlier. "Oh my!" He looked the figures in armor over. "Why, I hardly recognize you in that getup. It is Ariel, isn't it?"

"It's Ariel," Susan assured her. "We need to speak to—"

The man held up a hand. "Would you believe me if I told you I've been expecting you? That charming girl Ursula, she said you might be back." He looked them both up and down again. "We don't want any trouble here..."

"We'll take it outside, believe me. Now, if you would be so kind as to fetch her?"

"I have been instructed to do so. Please, come in. Ariel, I believe you know the way to the waiting room?"

She nodded and led Susan off.

A few minutes later their heads turned as Ursula sauntered into the room. She started laughing when she saw them. "I expected you to be on your newly created knees, begging for mercy," she gasped. "Not this bizarre getup. What do you think you're doing?"

"She thinks she's challenging you to a duel to get that contract nullified and to kick you out of Dodge. Is this kingdom named Dodge? Whatever it's called."

"A *duel*? How delightful! And what on Zeus' green Earth would compel me to agree to something as banal as a duel?"

"Two things," she replied. "First, if you don't, I'll just cut you down where you stand and that'll be the end of it. The second is this message from King Triton." She handed the rolled up message over.

"And what does old fish rear have to say for... oh!" She read the note over seriously. "Oh I see. Yes that is a pickle, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"You didn't read this?" she waved it at them. Susan shook her head. "Then it delights me to inform you that your father wishes to make a wager with me! He wagers his trident *and* crown against my releasing his subjects that you'll win."

Ariel looked like she couldn't believe her ears, and tore the note out of Ursula's hands. She looked it over. "I was telling the truth, you know. And you could have asked- oh I've got your voice, don't I? Still want to go through with this? Knowing daddy's kingdom is on the line and not just your life?"

Ariel thrust the note back at her.

"I guess so. But do I want to go through with it? This is a dilemma, isn't it? I'm pretty sure I'll win, but there is the off chance she could get lucky somehow. But a whole kingdom, something I've wanted for years..."

"Yeah, life's full of tough choices, isn't it?" *Of course, you won't live long enough to collect your prize even if you do win. I'll make sure of that.*

"Quite. Very well, I accept. Shall we say... an hour after sundown?"

Ariel backhanded her across the face, then pointed out of the room.

Ursula's face twisted in anger, and Susan could see a visible magic aura forming around her. "You'll regret that, girl. I'll enjoy tearing you to pieces in front of your oh so special prince."

She pointed again.

"The battlefield is out on the lake," Susan informed her. "The king will meet us there."

"Ah, so I can more easily collect my prize when I win. Sensible. Lead the way, darling."

Ariel spun and marched out of the room, Ursula started to bring her hand up, but Susan grabbed it after *Sudden Stepping* over to her. "Watch it," she growled. "Out on the field you can use whatever magic you can bring to bear. Until then keep it to yourself."

"I was just going to swat a fly I saw, that's all," she grumbled, trying to pull her hand away. "Let go of me."

"I'm watching you." She let it go.

Ursula commanded Eric to follow her and he did without question. "Put on a jacket first you stupid man!" she said as he was about to just walk into the snow. "Honestly, I think I put a little too much into that control spell. Ah well."

Out on the ice, he blinked as it seemed Ursula released him. "What is that? And what have I been doing? Ariel? What are you wearing? And who are you? What time is it? What's going on?"

"Quiet!" Ursula shouted. "*That* is king Triton," she explained, and he was there, sitting on a throne made of ice.

Glad he found something more comfortable to sit on.

"You've been following me around like a puppy because I put a spell on you using Ariel's voice as a trigger. Yes, that's the fish girl herself. She's wearing armor, which is somewhat laughable because she's no knight. That's... I don't know who that is, if I got her name I've forgotten it again. Thinks she's a big shot, probably not all that. I'm Ursula, and once this little duel is over I'll be taking you for a little spin after the wedding. It's about a hour until sunset, and we're having the aforementioned duel. Was that everything? Good. Go stand over there. I hate to release you but I want to crush this girl with a minimum of fuss so I'll need all my magical power for the moment."

"Come along, I'll try to fill you in," said Susan, taking his arm. "I'm Susan, by the way. Nice to meet you."

"So, how are we going to do this?" asked Ursula.

"Backs together!" shouted Triton, his voice carrying over the frozen water. "When my trident strikes the ice, take five paces forward, turn, and the duel will begin."

"Sure you don't want to just hand your stuff over now, save your daughter the beating of her life?"

"Maybe I should just off you right here," he threatened, bringing his weapon up again.

Ariel held up a hand.

"Very well. Good luck, my daughter."

She grinned up at him.

"Ugh!"

Susan watched as the two woman "stepped" away from each other. As she looked closely, she could see Ariel's feet weren't touching the ground and she nodded. *Good, she'll have the speed advantage. Don't wait until- she's done it, good.* She had activated *Velocity* and started to blur a little, which Susan had coached her on.

"A fair fight is all well and good," she had said, "but you might need all the help you can get. Plus she's not going to play by the rules, so you might as well take that slight advantage if you get the chance."

"Can you tell me what's going on?" pleaded Eric.

"Shh. Not now. Watch the fight. That's Ariel, you're rooting for her. She's fighting for you, that's all you need to know."

"Begin!" Triton needlessly commanded, and both woman spun.

Ariel held off attacking immediately, she wanted to see what Ursula would do. She seemed to take no time but crouched and sprang up again, ripping an enormous chunk of ice out of the water before her and leaving a hole. She mimed throwing it and the chunk shot towards Ariel.

Who calmly stood there and chopped it in half with *Force Blade*, slicing upwards and causing the two halves to shoot past her.

Hey, no fair! How did she do that much damage to it? I mean it's probably not quite frozen solid yet, but come on!

That's the difference between her and you, explained The Darkness.

What do you mean? I'm so much stronger than her, and my technique would have been stronger because I could put more energy into it.

No, you don't get it. It sighed. I'll try to explain it. See, you're a Paragon, right? You see the world in terms of absolutes. You have an exact quantity of energy. You have a set number of XP. You do a random amount of damage based off no real world criteria whatsoever when you hit something, with a sword or with magic. But most people are more 'sloppy' than that. They don't have all that crap in their heads, and they don't get to re-roll if they don't like their results. In exchange, the universe lets them get away with things. Especially dramatic moments like this, where everything is on the line. It goes along with the nature of narrative. Would it make a better story? Then sure, she chops the ice in half, why not?

Take Elsa for example. You whine about how 'powerful' she is and wonder how she got that way. You even think I'm feeding her energy or information. But really, think how cool it would look to see that ice palace rising out of the night, despite her not having the architectural know how to make sure the rooms connect, and the hallways don't collapse, or whatever. She wants an ice palace, the universe gives her an ice palace. You can't do it because your reality insists on 'techniques' or a certain 'spell' like how you were making that undersea music hall. Magic, Susan, is so much more, if you could let the universe and the story guide you instead of the cold reality of numbers. But you are what you are, so it's a bit late to start wishing you had things differently.

Wait, are you saying because I... inconvenience the universe in some way by needing to attach a number to everything it punishes me by making me attach a number to everything? Like I would have needed to calculate damage to that ice chunk even if I was doing the same thing? But she gets a pass because it looks cool?

Basically. "He who lives by the numbers dies by the numbers" as they say. You don't recall this, but you weren't 'rolling the dice' when I had taken you over. Because I don't need that 'crutch' to get by. I could just do things. It's only you that is mired in that kind of reality.

Susan blinked. Is that why I don't meet many others like me? Is it somehow more advantageous to be 'sloppy' about things so most realities tend towards that?

That is a philosophical discussion we could have, at length, another time. Right now aren't you concerned about your friend?

Oh yeah.

Susan's attention went back to the match, which of course hadn't moved because her thoughts were being written, not any more action.

Ursula's eyes were wide. "Wait, time out, how in the world did you do *that*?" Ariel smiled at her and pointed at her throat. "Oh crap, no voice. Yipes!"

It seemed the battle was on in earnest.

Ariel Vs. Ursula

When: Just then

Where: Out on the ice

Ariel vanished, appearing high in the sky and with her palm downwards. An explosion rocked the ice, cracking it beneath where Ursula had been. She looked up.

Er, what? I could follow that through Power Sense but how did she know to dodge? Or does she just have good INSight? And she didn't look around, she knew right where to look. I don't get it.

She does have a piece of Ariel's magic, perhaps that gives her some sort of sense of where she is?

I suppose.

Ariel tried again, making another point explosion near Ursula who this time seemed to grab it up instead of dodging. Still on the offensive Ariel dived, bringing her *Force Blade* out which crashed against some kind of shield Ursula threw up.

"Where are you getting this kind of power?" she sneered, as the blade vanished and Ariel flew backwards again. "And your speed! You!" She spun and looked at Susan. "You've given her these abilities, haven't you?"

"You didn't think I would just allow her to come out here defenseless, did you?"

"I'll deal with you later!" She turned back to Ariel, who had grabbed one of the ice chunks and was flying away with it, sliding it along the ice. She did a slow turn, working her way towards the battle area again and when the ice had enough momentum she let it fly, spinning and headed right for Ursula.

The area around her shimmered and the ice chunk seemed to hit a sort of barrier but rather than bouncing off, it now seemed to be moving in slow motion and Ursula simply stepped to one side, where it slowly kept spinning past her. Ariel stomped her foot on air, because she could do that now, and considered her next move.

Ursula knew her next move, and that was to concentrate on the ice that was now only a little ways past her, which rose into the air. It shattered into thin strips, and with a wave of her hand she flung them towards Ariel, who put her own barrier up. Susan wasn't *Accelerated* so she couldn't exactly see exactly how it worked out, but some of the icicles smashed against the barrier, making it drop. Some hit her armor and deflected away, and one cut a jagged line against her scalp, making it bleed. Ariel put her hand up over it, fingers coming away red.

Wait, she's invulnerable! Did Ursula make them magical somehow? No matter, she has Regeneration.

Ursula exalted. "There's plenty more where that come from!"

Ariel's face hardened, and energy enveloped her, she was taking an action to charge.

"What are you up to, girl?" She waved her hand and a thin stream of water arced towards her from the hole she had made earlier. Ariel easily dodged it.

She pointed, and the *force* burst went off again, this time not targeting Ursula exactly, but rather the ice under her feet. It shattered, throwing her off balance and dumping her into the cold water.

Ariel crossed her arms and waited.

There was a glow from underwater, and Ursula burst from the water, now flying herself. Or rather, she was standing on an ice chunk.

Probably never developed a Flight spell, being underwater most of the time.

It seemed Ariel had come to the same conclusion. She pointed, and Susan felt her using *Metapower* to turn off Ursula's ability to control water. She plummeted with a cry and splashed back into the water.

What now burst from the ice was her true form, growing larger and larger as the ice cracked to make room for her bulk. Tentacles shot up, trying to grab her but she easily dodged them, then whipped a *Force Blade* across one, making Ursula cry out.

By then she was out of range, hovering over Ursula and no doubt wondering what to do. Ursula turned. "I thought you wanted to fight? No? Maybe your daddy then?" She brought a tentacle up to smash the king, who looked completely caught of guard.

Luckily Susan was not, as she had been technically holding her action this entire time for just such an act of betrayal. She *Sudden Stepped* in front of him while getting her sword out, and as the tentacle smashed into the ground she swiped at it, trying to knock it away. The opposed STLength checks were thirty five to twenty in her favor, and she did a little bit of damage to Ursula while knocking it away.

"Go after him again and I'll do more than just defend," she shouted up to her. "Then you'll be fighting both of us. *Velocity!*"

"It was worth a try," Ursula said with a shrug. She turned back to Ariel, who was powering up something again. Ursula tried to hurl bits of ice up at her, throwing them with her tentacles as she obviously couldn't do it magically now, but now her aura of power might as well be a shield, and she stopped dodging.

Susan could feel her power, it seemed she was putting most, if not all, of her remaining energy into a technique, which blazed out of her. It was an enormous *Force Blade*, which she drove into Ursula's chest and out the other side. "No!" she wailed, beginning to shrink again. Susan flew over and grabbed her so she didn't slip under the water, and tossed her to the ground in front of Triton. Ariel, panting, flew over as well.

"You... think you... won?" asked Ursula.

Susan pointed to her eyes. "I can see you're exactly into *gone*. You have no fight left in you."

"That's were you're wrong." Ursula gestured, and Ariel's *force* explosion, the one she had swept up earlier, went off point blank above her. It wasn't strong, Ariel couldn't put a lot of energy in at once, that's why she kept charging up, and ironically Susan took the brunt of it. She would have taken eight damage, but of course her *Giant's Soul* cut that down dramatically and her *Regeneration* easily took care of the minor scrape she sustained. The king and Ariel only took a point on the tail (or leg, as appropriate).

Ursula herself faired a bit worse, being hit in the body for a couple more points of damage and passed out.

The two contracts appeared above her and vanished, meaning far below a bunch of merpeople were about to swim out of Ursula's lair. This also meant that Ariel now turned back into a mermaid.

"You've got to be kidding me!" she shouted, then realized she had her voice back.

"Apparently you got your magic back," Susan explained, looking her over. She was still flying, of course, so she didn't just collapse to the ground, but she still looked annoyed. "And your voice."

"Ariel?" asked Eric, carefully walking over to her. "You can talk?"

"Oh boy," groaned Triton. "This is going to take some explaining. Could you maybe just forget you ever saw me? Or this fight? Or... yeah just the past few days in general?" He shook his head. "Yeah, kind of thought so. I'll leave that explanation to my daughter. Consider it the final part of your penance."

"Daddy!"

"Nope, not going to hear it. Look, I need to get this young lady the thing she actually came here for, I'll be back in a little while."

"What about her?" Susan asked, nudging Ursula.

"Isn't she dead?"

"No, but she's bleeding out fast. I could heal her if you wanted."

Triton considered. "Do it. We can't exactly hold her, but with my subjects freed, I'm sure her business will drop off rather sharply. Let it not be said I am a heartless god."

"As you command." Susan got out the healing knife and held it up to her until the wounds closed, and he hauled her into the water with him.

"Now can someone tell me what's going on?"

So Ariel explained how she saved his life from the storm and dragging him to shore. From there how her father found out-

"Your father, the god of the sea?"

"King Triton, yes. Shush."

He had found out and smashed her collection of surface trinkets, that she knew the purpose of.

"And when I see that seagull again, he's going to get a talking to, let me tell you."

"Seagull?"

"Yeah, animals can talk around here," Sparkle explained. "At least some of them. I didn't get a good answer as to which ones, specifically."

"I'll have to ask my dog," he remarked, evidently accepting Sparkle talking as a more minor miracle of the day.

This led her to the witch, losing her voice, coming up here, and now he had seen the rest of it.

"But what about the snow? This doesn't have anything to do with that?"

"That's my department," explained Susan. "In a kingdom quite far from here, or not actually, there's a queen that's been possessed. She has ice powers and is trying to freeze the whole world. Long story. I'm working that one out."

"Oh."

"Being with you these past few days has been a dream for me," Ariel went on. "But I'll understand if you don't want to be with me, now that you know what I am." She swished her tail at him.

"With all the stuff you can do? Flying and fighting off huge monsters like you did? Nobody will dare mess with you."

"Ah, about that," Susan interrupted with a raised finger. "Those powers come from me. I'm afraid she can't keep them."

"But you could go back to being human," said a voice from the water. Triton was back, holding what appeared to be a crystalline decanter of water. "I thought about it on the way, and what Ursula did gave me an idea. I can put magic on you to suppress part of your own magic, which will make you human. When you want to come visit us, you can lift that and become a mermaid again. Then go back and forth as much as you want."

"Would you do that for me?" Ariel exclaimed, flying over to her father and hugging him.

"Way I see it, you'd just get Susan to do something before she left, if I didn't. I would rather have you happy, absent, and not angry at me rather than happy, absent, and seething. At least in the latter case you'll be willing to come see your old man every so often."

Sea-thing? They're all sea things if you ask me.

Ugh.

"I probably would have," she admitted.

"And I would have," Susan admitted.

"And I'll come visit all the time!"

"You better."

Eric looked a bit shell shocked. "My father in law really is the god of the sea?"

"Don't get any ideas, boy!" he gruffed. "And don't think I won't take legs myself and come looking for you on land if you hurt my youngest!"

"No sir!" he answered quickly.

"Glad that's settled. Now, let's see..." He concentrated, his trident glowing and a spark of power detached itself from inside Ariel and formed a pendant around her neck. Her legs returned.

"Oh father, thank you!" she gushed.

"Not at all. You'll have to make a study of magic, I'm afraid, to put it back inside yourself."

"I was kind of hoping to start studying magic anyway," she admitted. "It might really be used to help people."

Oh no, another one. You've made another one! growled The Darkness.

Ha ha!

“And here you are, Susan. If you two would like to head back to the castle now, I need to speak to Susan about where she needs to go next. And this is for her ears alone.”

“Say, is that wedding still on?” Ariel asked, leading Eric away.

“I’ll come to the castle to say goodbye and take your powers,” Susan shouted after her. “I’d take them now, but we’ll let Eric see all of you after the wedding.”

She laughed as they both nearly stumbled.

She bent to take the water, and looked it over.

“The next place you’ll need to go is the underworld, ruled by Hades,” he explained. “He’s mellowed a little in the past few thousand years but he won’t be that easy to deal with. Plus I have no means of actually getting you there, so I hope you can do it on your own.”

“That’s not a problem,” Susan assured him, putting the water away. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, for getting my daughter back. Who knows how that would have turned out, otherwise. And now she’s into magic, and probably combat magic at that! Who would have thought?” He chuckled and shook his head.

“Yeah, I’m already hearing complaints about it.” He looked confused. “Never mind. Hades, huh? Wish me luck. You’ll know I’ve succeeded when the ice melts. If there’s anything you can do, bringing up warmer water or whatever? It might help.”

“I’ll do what I can. Not really supposed to influence the surface world all that much, Zeus might get a bit miffed about it. But then, the way he’s leaving things to run down...” He looked around. “Old argument. Susan, farewell.”

“Bye!”

And so Susan, once Ariel was alone again, went back into magic mode and her powers dropped away.

“Thanks,” she said. “You’ll at least stay for the wedding, won’t you?”

“Hummm...” She held her hands out like a scale. “Next stop on saving the world, or cake. Cake...”

Susan stayed for the ceremony and hoped these two people who really only knew each other like two days stayed together.

Joke’s on Elsa. You can marry someone you just met. The problem is staying married to them. Will her kids have enough magic to be merfolk? That might cause a bit of a panic. Oh well, not my problem.

She got a good night’s sleep and in the morning, said her goodbyes to... no one. Ariel and Eric were already gone on their honeymoon, which now that Susan thought about it... *Isn’t she only sixteen? Oh well, she learned about more than magic this week, I guess. Wait, how old was he? Ah well, I’m sure it’ll be fine.*

She did remember to change the *contract*, specifying she couldn’t hurt *sentient* or *animal life*, while leaving the possibility open to destroy bacteria and the like by attacking inanimate objects. Also she specified *permanent harm*, leaving open the possibility of doing all the non-lethal damage she wanted. After all, putting someone to sleep might make them bump their head when they fell, so she figured she should cover something like that too.

With that, Susan opened a *Dimension Gate* to the underworld from writings and stepped through. Sparkle followed nervously after her, and both looked around.

“This doesn’t seem right,” she supplied, having the most experience with this sort of thing using *Dimension Step*. “We don’t seem to be where we were, which is usually what happens.”

“We’ve never really *come* this far, it’s usually just one sub-dimension over. Being here is probably a lot different than just seeing it.”

“I guess. Does this place look a bit... boney to you?”

“Just a bit.”

As they looked around they saw nothing but bones everywhere near them. The path seemed to be made of bones, with bone archways leading to a wall in the distance. Towards this wall shuffled what Susan figured were ghosts, transparent people of all ages that neither rushed nor dallied on their way to the gate. Oddly they didn't float, as ghosts in her world tended to do, but walked as if still alive. As she watched, every few minutes one would appear, look around halfheartedly as if getting their bearings, and then shuffle down the path. She tried to stop one and talk to it, but it just passed through her without stopping, making her cold and tingly. She could feel an echo of *spirit energy* within them, though at the same time they were nothing *but* spirit energy, so it was an odd sensation to do a *spirit sense* on them.

"Hades must be in that direction someplace," figured Susan.

"And we're just going to march up to the gates, aren't we?"

"Of course. *Overconfidence* aside, I think I can take any number of dead people. If they do somehow start attacking me I'll just mode change and hit them with some *spirit* attacks. And we're not going to find him standing around here!"

"I guess. We are in the home for the dead, do try and show a little respect."

"As long as it's just a little."

Susan approached the gate where along both sides of the path various bone "houses" seemed to have been constructed. Outside each was a bored to death looking creature halfheartedly watching the endless throng of souls flowing by. Each looked different, but they shared various characteristics. Small bat wings, a solid color, naked, pointy teeth, forked tail, you know, the usual. One in particular seemed a smidgen more awake than the others as his eyes met Susan's as she passed.

It blinked.

It propped itself up on one elbow and registered shock.

It scanned the crowd, and came back to Susan.

It looked her up and down.

It hopped up and gave a shout. "We got a live one here!" The other creatures lazily looked over at it, and then realized what it was shouting. "A live one! We've got an actual living, breathing, person down here. And it's a *girl!*"

"A *girl!*" several shouted, jumping to their feet.

Oh great, now what?

"It is, it is! Look! If that girl's dead I'm a cupid!"

Susan suddenly found herself mobbed by these odd creatures while souls continued pass them. They would go around the little ones but they just walked through her, which made it somewhat hard to concentrate as they were basically all blabbering at her at once.

"Quiet!" she yelled at them. "One at a time!"

"You are alive?" asked the yellow one.

"Yes."

"How did you get here?" asked the blue one.

"Magic. Then I walked."

"You're really alive?" asked the green one.

"Yes, will you stop asking? I take it you don't see many like me around here?"

"Are you kidding?" asked the red one. "I don't even remember the last one. Was it Odysseus?"

"It must have been Thesus."

"No, it was Heracles."

"Theseus!"

"Dionysus!"

"Odysseus!"

"Never mind!" shouted Susan.

"Hades isn't going to be happy about this," remarked an orange colored one, just getting there. "You're not supposed to be here."

"Tell me something I don't know. That's the guy I need to find though. You know where he is?"

They took a step back. "You came down here and you're heading straight to the boss? What, do you want to bring someone back?" asked the yellow. "He doesn't like that one bit."

"Not one bit," chorused the group.

"No. I'm just here to talk to him about something. It's about that cold snap in the... mortal world."

"Cold snap?" asked the blue one.

"You didn't notice?" asked the red. "A bunch of people suddenly started showing up in winter clothes." He pointed and yes, it did seem like a bunch of people were shambling by in winter gear.

Great, people are dying because of this. I have to hurry.

"Ah, who knows what's going on in the human world?"

"I thought that was weird," said a pink one. "I didn't remember Persephone coming through here lately. That's usually when people dressed like that start to show up."

"So can you tell me where to find him?"

"You're not going to make him angry, are you?" asked the green one.

"When he gets angry he makes us all suffer," agreed the blue.

"Not if I can help it. I need his help."

"Promise?" asked all of them.

"I promise."

They went into a huddle, which Susan had to chuckle at.

"What are they?" asked Sparkle.

"Some kind of demon, I guess? This place seems pretty ancient Greek, what with those names they mentioned, but weren't most of the things around there... humanoid in legend?"

"Maybe they were, at first. Remember though, this is just this reality's afterlife. It could be very different from ancient myths from our reality."

The color squad turned back to her. "We'll tell you, but you have to promise that if anyone asks, not a one of us saw you," said the red.

"That's right," said the blue. "You didn't stop here, you didn't talk to us, this never happened. You snuck in some other way."

"Fine, that's fine."

"Okay then. Just keep going. You can't miss it, it's the tallest thing made of bones you'll see around here."

"What is?"

"Hades' castle, of course!" The purple one looked at her like she was stupid. "What did you think?"

"Well I don't know. Maybe that would be just the entrance and I had to go down instead of up. How would I know?"

"You can ask the guards, if you get that far," informed the green.

"Guards?"

"Sure. You think he wants a trillion souls massing outside his castle? Or trying to escape or whatever? Of course, mostly they just hang around..." The yellow one pointed at the souls going past. "This is the liveliest they'll be, honestly. At least unless they get into Elysium or something like that. You'll see."

"I guess so. Thanks for the help."

"What do you mean?" they all said. "You were never here."

"Right."

"I hope you're a good fighter," remarked the green one. "Past here it's going to be pretty non-stop combat to get anywhere. Hades really doesn't like surprises, and he's gone to a lot of trouble to keep things working in a certain way around here. You're going to be an obstacle to that. Hope you make it."

They watched her go, then went back to being bored to tears.

Susan didn't have long to go before she saw souls of every shape and size gathered before a river, and she "pushed" her way forward. Eventually she stopped saying "excuse me" and the like, because they just stood there, passive. The place was wall to wall souls, and Susan wondered why they were all just standing around.

She got her answer when the filthy guy, with glowing eyes and a simple pole came into view. He was standing on what seemed to be a simple wooden platform floating in the water and wearing a long, tattered, dirty cloak.

"What have we here?" he asked lustily, eyeing her.

A beatdown.

Susan wasn't sure if that thought was hers or The Darkness, and decided in this case it probably made no difference. She stepped up.

"You got a... heehee... 'coin' for me, darling?" He stuck the pole between her legs and started to raise it.

Yup, a beatdown.

Susan hopped off one foot and came down on the push pole gripped by Charon, snapping it off as she drove it into the ground.

“Hey! What’s the big idea?”

“That’s my line,” shot back Susan. “You want to explain yourself?”

“Explain this!” He whipped the now broken pole at her head, which she deftly caught by four after spending four energy. She then used her newly acquired skill of *Repost* to make a second reactive action, flinging the pole over her shoulder. What she didn’t expect was for him to hold onto it, or for him to actually bowl over the spirits he slammed into, making them all go down in a jumble.

“Perhaps a bit of *Flight*?” asked Sparkle, jumping atop her shoulders.

“A jolly good idea, old bean,” Susan agreed, casting the spell. “Let’s not incite the natives, rot what?”

Swiftly flying to the other bank she came to a sort of guardhouse with a large open doorway into a fairly simple open room with a door at the other end and three men asleep at their desks. She looked about, but there was no decoration at all on the walls, just the three desks, arranged to funnel people through the door, past the desks, and out the far door.

“Not much action going on here,” remarked Sparkle, poking at one of the men’s cheeks with a paw. “They are alive, or whatever passes for it around here.”

“Yeah, most everything around here is *spirit energy*, just like most things at the castle back home were magic.” She looked back across the water. “I wonder...” None of the men looked more senior than another so she just went to the one closest the door and bent down to his ear. “Ding!” she said, miming ringing a bell on his desk.

“Huh? Keep it down. What’s thee... zzzzzz”

She sighed. “DING!” she mimed again.

“What?” The man’s eyes opened a little and she squinted at her. “Wha?”

“I’m doing a sort of joke thing? Because I was too lazy to transform and use *creation* nature to make a bell? I suppose I could have used magic. Ding!”

The others started to stir.

They got a good look at her.

“You can’t be here!” exclaimed the man, nearly tipping his chair over trying to lean away from her. “I can’t judge a living person!”

“Did anyone see you?” asked the one other one.

“How did you get across the river?” asked the other. “Is Charon running again?”

“Lots of souls saw me, but none seemed to care,” she answered. “And if by Charon you mean the fellow with the pole back on the opposite bank, no, I flew here. He was more interested in innuendo than conversation.”

They looked at each other in confusion, and the one man brought out what seemed to be binoculars from his desk and went outside, peering across the river.

“He appears to be having some kind of fit over there. What did you say to him?”

“Not much. But I made my feeling clear nonetheless. Now, can one of you fellows direct me to Hades? I’m told his castle should be around here somewhere.”

“You, uh, you aren’t going to report us sleeping, are you?” the third one asked somewhat nervously.

“Yes, why is a live person wandering around down here?” asked the first. “You don’t look like a strapping hero, trying to prove yourself. How did you even find an entrance, I thought they had all been sealed up thousands of years ago.”

“Let’s just say I have my reasons, and I got here the same way I got here.” She pointed to the shack. “Magic.”

“You don’t look like a witch either,” remarked the third one.

“I’m a good witch.”

They stared and then burst out laughing. "A good witch. Nice one."

"Seriously, you won't tell him?"

"It's not exactly like there seems to be loads to do around here," Susan remarked, looking around. "I won't fault you for falling asleep."

"It's that Charon," explained the third. "He refuses to ferry anyone not buried with a coin. And how many people nowadays are buried with a coin?"

The three chuckled.

"Something better be done. That far bank is filling up. I'm surprised Hades has let it go on this long."

"Oh, he doesn't care about the day to day workings, you understand," said the first. "It's just that, well, us sleeping would give him an excuse to come down here and do you want your boss breathing down your neck?"

"I suppose not. Should I tell him about the backup though?"

The three shared a look. "He would probably come and ask why we didn't go tell him," pondered the first.

"And then we would have to tell him," pondered the second.

"And then we would really be in for it!" reasoned the third.

"Please don't!" they chorused.

"Hokay. I take it they're supposed to come over here?"

"You got it. We three judge them, send them on their way to the proper- How long were we asleep anyway?" asked the one looking through the binoculars again. "You really weren't kidding! Was there a war or something? Why are there so many souls over there?"

"You do realize populations rise, right? That one boat may have been fine when maybe a hundred people died a week or whatever, but I think it's a bit inadequate now."

"That's putting it mildly," he groused, panning over the crowd. "I think we're going to need some more help here." He passed them over to the other two who also looked through. "We were pretty bored."

"Sure, but that's not a cure for boredom, it's insanity."

"Doesn't mean anything if they can't get over here."

"But we're not doing our jobs and sooner or later someone's going to show up and ask why."

"Maybe I can help," suggested Susan.

"That's right!" the second one eyed her up and down. "We've got a witch here, we could build a bridge out of her!"

"A bridge that weighs the same as a duck," countered the third.

"I'm a lazy man, seems the lighter the material, the easier construction would be."

"I suppose souls don't weigh all that much, bridge wouldn't need to be all that sturdy." A chin was stroked as this was said.

"Not much wind round here either," put in one.

"Wait just a second! What if she's made of stone? That would be the opposite of a light material and easy construction!"

"You've got a point!"

Are they just going go on like this? Sparkle wondered to herself.

"Follows, please. I'm trying to look something up." Susan had her book out, and was paging through. "I'm sure there was a bridge building spell here someplace."

"Look at the very end, under the 'w'" suggested Sparkle, glad of the respite.

She flipped to the back and found what she was looking for. "No good. It's not permanent, it's concentration. Shoot."

"Why would something useful like that be permanent?" Sparkle scoffed. "You know how our magic works."

"Yeah, I know. So few are, not sure why I thought that would be. Okay, powers it is, as that I can make permanent as part of the technique."

"What are you-"

Susan put her book away and threw a hand into the air. "Light of the Multiverse, Make Up!"

With that she easily made a permanent *Teleportal* in front of the judges' station, and the souls started plodding through to stand before the desks.

"You've done it," said the first man, having picked his jaw back off the ground. "And you say this will stay here forever?"

"Yup."

"Thanks."

"Sure thing."

"Hey now, what's this?" Charon shouldered his way past the souls and found himself on the other bank.

"Why don't you explain?" Susan asked, rising into the air with Sparkle beside her. "After the line goes down a little!" She laughed and shot into the air, looking forward to where she next needed to go.

She spotted another high wall and what seemed to be a gate, so the two flew in that direction. Space here seemed odd. From above there seemed to be an infinite amount of space where souls just stood around, not doing much of anything. They were perking up now that other, newer souls were pouring in, but the majority were just standing there. Off in the distance, though it was impossible to say how far away, seemed a foreboding place Sparkle said she swore she heard voices screaming in torment, while over in another direction was an island where it seemed the only real "sunlight" in the place fell on. Oh, she could see all right, but it was a sort of uniform "dream" light that didn't really have a source. But over on the island she got a sense of light and warmth that was absent from the rest of the place.

She was about to fly over the wall when it suddenly shot up and met her, and no matter how high she flew she couldn't get over it. Swooping down she decided she would have to pass the gate she had seen off in the distance, and she headed in that direction. When she did, space stopped being "infinite" and she reached it within moments.

Of course. Infinite room for souls but if you need to get someplace, you can. It's an interesting system.

Impressed?

That such primitives could construct such a thing? Sure, I guess.

As she got closer she couldn't help but see what was guarding it.

"Dog!" screeched Sparkle, flying off to the right and crouching behind a rock that was sitting there. "Did it see me? I hope it didn't see me. Please say it isn't looking this way with one of its three heads."

"Sparkle? What's gotten into you?"

"I have *Phobia: Dogs* remember?"

"Really?"

She got out her character sheet. "Right here."

"Ah, so you do. Wow. This many worlds and it finally becomes an issue. Can't you make a RESolve check against it or something?"

"Oh sure. But I figured I would play it up, given I really haven't been able to until now."

Susan considered. "Fair enough. You want to stay here while I deal with it?"

"That's right."

"I'll send a *Teleportal* back for you."

"Fine."

"Oh, I'll probably just *shrink* him, so we're losing powers when I get over there."

"Just go and get us past that thing. What if it comes over here?"

"I'm going, I'm going."

Susan flew over to the three headed dog and looked up (and up) at the heads that were growling down at her. *Must be a size +4 if ever I've seen one. Was that dog guarding the stone just a puppy, then?* "Don't suppose you'll just let me pass?"

The barking and snarling indicated this was a negative.

Susan uncovered her ears. "Yeah, yeah, you don't have to be so loud about it. I was just asking."

More snapping and snarling.

“Get it out of your system, sure. I’ve heard it all before anyway. *Shrink.*”

What now stood before her was a puppy sized dog instead of a house sized one, and it seemed to realize this fact... and not be bothered by it. He yelped and snarled just as much.

“Really?” She picked him up, the three heads snapping at her but of course totally unable to damage her in the slightest. “I think I know what you need.” She spent a minute casting *Create Foodstuff*, and a pile of bones, meat, and crunchy biscuits appeared on the ground near her.

“Hey, do you want this?” She picked up a bone and let him sniff it. His attention turned to the food, and he started struggling to get it. “Do you? Do you want this? Go get it boy!” She tossed it and the dog wiggle out of her grasp and jump after it. He bounded after the bone and started tearing into it with all three heads.

Another casting, *Teleportal*, and Susan stuck her head through. “Hey Sparkle.”

“What?”

“Check out this puppy.”

Sparkle looked through and gave a cry, lunging to the other side of the rock as Susan howled with laughter.

“It’s not funny!”

“I know.” *Though it sort of is.* “I’m just helping you get the full experience from your weakness, that’s all. I don’t want you to miss out.”

“Can’t you put that a bit farther away?”

“Fine. Just a second.”

Susan continued down the path, where she opened another *Teleportal* and brought Sparkle through.

“Remind me to poop in your shoes sometime.”

“I’d just make you clean it up with *Hygiene.*”

“You know what they say, it’s the thought that counts.”

It was a straight path then to the castle of bones that Susan figured housed Hades, so she made her way up the path to the gate. Again, the place didn’t take long to get to, with space seemingly compressed to allow her to reach it quickly. The gate, also made of bones, was guarded by two skeletons, one with a sword and shield, the other with a huge ax.

“Halt!” cried the sword one.

“Whoa, check out that... flesh,” said the other.

“I’m more interested in her insides,” answered the first. “You must feel it.”

“All that flesh. And hair, look at that hair.”

“Pull yourself together, man!”

“How do you know I’m a man?”

“You’re not a man?”

“Please!” Susan cried, heading off what would have been a hilarious skit they had been practicing the last three hundred years. Guaranteed to tickle the ‘funny bone’ of anyone that happened through the place. Not that anyone did, of course. “I need to see the boss. Step aside.”

“Oh, well, with an attitude like that I’ll just *stand here in your way forever* how about that? Huh? How about that? It’s not like I’m going anywhere anyway, are you going anywhere?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” the other answered.

“He’s not going anywhere.”

“She’s not going anywhere.”

“I thought you were the boy, not me?”

“I was correcting you.”

“Ah, there you are then. We, that is the two of us, skeletons both, are not going anywhere.”

“Unless you have an appointment?”

“How would I have made an appointment? It’s the underworld!”

“You never know. You could have. Couldn’t she?”

"Are you sure that's a she? I've forgotten what they look like."

"Extra rib."

"What extra rib? That's a myth! Besides, it has all that flesh covering the ribs, how would you count them?"

"You don't have x-ray vision? I thought we all had x-ray vision."

"Look, I'm just going inside-" Susan started to say, taking another step forward. The weapons came down.

"Now, now, let's not be hasty," said the sword one. "We've got about a thousand comedy routines and you are going to stand there and listen to each and every one of them. Then, if you've laughed in all the right places, we'll maybe consider sending a message inside to tell Hades you want to see him."

"We might," agreed the other. "Or my name isn't red skeleton," added the ax one.

"I wanted to be red skeleton!"

"You were last time."

"How can you remember that far back?"

"Is this another one of the thousand?" Both nodded. "Bloody fantastic."

"I remember when I could be bloody."

"Yeah, wasn't that great?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Oh, well, I guess if you think about it that way..."

Susan pulled the swords out of her *pocket*. "Move!"

"And what if we don't?"

"Sparkle, if you would allow me?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Thank you, I- What?"

"No. They're just bored, and doing their jobs, and there is no reason to engage them in combat."

Susan considered. "To be completely honest Sparkle, I don't think I actually need your permission in this case."

"What do you mean?"

"My *Contract* specifically says 'living' things. Pretty sure that everything around here, these two jokers included, are not alive. I put it in so I could smash up property or golems at will, because that's not killing anybody. I consider them to be dead people animated by magic. Thus, not alive and thus easy pickings."

"Oh, rub it in why don't you?" asked the first one.

"Oh, you're the best two skeleton guards I know, says Hades. So you get to guard my castle gate says Hades. You think we do this because we want to?"

"You think we don't want to visit the fields sometimes, maybe see the flesh people doing their flesh things? But nooooo. We have to stand around here for all eternity."

"You know how *long* eternity is?"

"It's really long!"

"We aren't even half way through it."

"Half? I'd settle for a quarter. Eternity doesn't end!"

"We're bored!"

"That's right. We have feelings you know. Magically animated bones indeed!"

"A feeling, anyway."

"Right. We have a feeling you know. And now it's feeling bad! Right... right in this area." It indicated the entire body.

"Now look what you did," chided Sparkle. "You made them sad. If they could, they would be shedding bitter, bitter tears of sadness right now."

"We would!"

"Oh, sure, bring up another thing we can't do!"

"Yeah, how could you be so insensitive Sparkle?"

"Me? You started it. Next you'll be eating in front of them or something."

"Eating? You wouldn't dare!" shouted both of them.

"You know something, I'm just going to get rid of them and move on." She raised her swords again. "This could go on forever, and I don't have time for that."

"Wait, can't we talk about this?" asked the ax one.

"Come on Susan, you're better than this. You don't need those."

"So what do you suggest? Try and sneak in through the back door?"

"No. Take ten seconds and think about it. With your brain, not wreck it and ralph."

"Don't you start." Susan thought about it. "Phase?"

"Well done. *Phase.*"

She walked through the guards, the wall, and into the castle while they called for her to stop. She made her way to the center, looking at the bone architecture as the entire place seemed to be made of nothing but bones and eerie green light.

"You see? Not everything has to come down to a fight."

"I guess."

Eventually the two caught up with her and tried to keep her going in a certain direction, which of course she immediately went in. After a few turns she made her way to the throne room and found a powerful looking man with an aura of fire about him sitting on a throne.

"We're sorry!" the skeletons groveled. "We tried! Look!" The one swished his or her ax through Susan, who was still *Phased*. "It doesn't work. She's alive, but it doesn't work!"

"Yes, she's been causing trouble the moment she arrived here," Hades said dryly. "You may go."

They bowed their way out and Hades rose, walking down the bone steps that led up to his bone throne to circle Susan, looking her over.

"Surprising," he remarked. "To have seen such good deeds done by one who could rival me in evil. Not that I am, of course. But some have said that about me."

"Evil? Don't kid yourself, I'm a hero!" she countered.

"Really? I wonder. Still, nicely done with the whole Charon situation."

"You know about that? So then why didn't you do something about it?"

He yawned. "Oh, I would have eventually, I suppose. My myriad failures at taking over Olympus have allowed me to see the wisdom of not rushing into things. Not that the old place is what it once was." He went back up a few steps and sat down. "So! We missed an entrance between the mortal world and this one it seems. And you've made your way here. Let me guess- some cute boy caught your attention, died, and now you want him back again?"

"Not even close. I need your help taking someone's powers away. Specifically the object you can provide and the destination of the next person."

"Well well." He leaned forward, seeming interested at last. "That old spell is finally getting used, is it? Wasn't sure what Zeus was thinking when he coded that bad boy into the reality matrix, but I guess he's had the last laugh. So some kind of personal vendetta, I take it?"

"Sort of. More like saving the world."

He snorted. "Preposterous. You have some ulterior motive. Is it a boy?"

"No!"

"No? A girl then?"

Now it was Sparkle's turn to hold back a laugh.

"Not a word," Susan demanded of her.

"So I was right."

"I would just rather take her powers away than kill her, that's all. It's more about messing up the force that's taken her over and proving someone else wrong than the girl herself."

"And you say you aren't evil! I suppose I can help you. It's more work for me, otherwise, if all the people up there get killed all at once. Think of the paperwork!"

"I would think you'd be happy," postulated Susan. "You would have all the souls, the other gods would have none. Don't you get your power from them or something?"

"Hummm, yes, the idea does appeal, don't get me wrong. But it's somewhat more enjoyable to watch them just wither away like they're doing. Take Charon. Who buries people

with a *coin* anymore? So he just got to stand there, thinking about all the wealth he might have collected if that practice was still followed. His pride wouldn't let him take them for free, of course, and so everybody lost. All because of his greed."

"What would he do with coins anyway? It's not like he could spend it here!"

That brought him up short. "You know, I've never asked him. Huh, what would he- never mind. The point is, as time goes on people forget the gods and as they lose followers, they lose power. So now I play a long game, quite unlike the way I used to go about things."

"Sure, good for you. Getting back to the point, it wouldn't work anyway."

"Why ever not?"

"Because this entire reality would be wiped out, this place included. The Darkness would take it all, every iota of energy."

"I'm not sure what that unit of measurement means, but if you say so. Now, what task to give you to prove your worthiness for my item... that's the question."

"Oh come on! You can't just hand it over? Why do I have to jump through hoops for you?"

"Lots of reasons, the least of which is it amuses me. Now be quiet, I'm thinking."

Susan let him think for a moment, pacing about the chamber.

"Yes, I have just the ticket!" he announced. He gestured, and a large book dropped into his hand which he started paging through. "Yes, here it is. And it's still crossed out, as I thought."

Susan peeked over the edge, and it was just columns of names and dates, plus some other scribbling she couldn't read. But one row was crossed out.

"In pencil, as I knew he would be back sooner or later." He winked.

"Who would?"

Hades smiled. "Your task. My only real loss, apart from Persephone. And I get her back here a lot of the time so she doesn't count. What I want you to do is- retrieve a soul that once got away from me!"

He grinned a wide grin, and Susan felt a chill.

Another day, another person for Susan to bully

Time: An hour or so later

Place: On approach to the kingdom of Llyr

“You’re really going to do this?” Sparkle asked again, as the snow covered countryside passed beneath them.

“I don’t see what choice I have. The guy might not be as powerful as he was thousands of years ago because of the whole worshiper thing, but he’s still a god. A god of *death* I might add. I may be powerful and *Overconfident* but I’m not stupid. You think I could force him to give me what I want? And my rating in *Persuasion* is terrible.”

“True enough. Still, it didn’t stop you the last time you went up against a god. I figured you would try the same thing here.”

“What? You mean that Lone One and the blacksmith back on Nita’s world? One of those was a recording if you’ll recall, and the other wasn’t really a god anymore. She expended her energies to help create the universe and then gave up the rest of her power to live on Earth. I mean making a stupid *spear* killed her. Or maybe The Darkness did so it could take over the body. In any case, I’m supposed to be working on less violent ways of problem solving, remember?”

“I just wanted to be sure you did. So, if you’re not going to use violence, have you thought of what to tell them?”

“What else can I tell them? Lies, lies, and more lies.”

“Uh-”

“Only joking. I’ll just have to- what the?” Susan pulled up short and stopped flying. The area around the castle wasn’t covered with snow, and as she was back in magic mode, she could make *Magic Sense* checks which she did. “There’s a powerful magic up ahead. And look, no cloud cover over this part of the world.”

“Praise the sun.”

“Yeah. Not *sun* magic exactly though, but it is protection. It’s not *mars*, that’s more about flame than heat, but whatever it is, that must be what’s keeping this area from freezing. Actually it reminds me of that spell the rock people had going on their area. Huh.”

“To think anyone had the power to stave off the winter around here, even in this small an area. I mean the rock people, fine, but that was days ago. Winter should be gaining in strength now.”

“I know. Their kingdom was closer though, but who knows how that changes things. Come on.”

“I’m on your shoulder, I’m sort of going where you go regardless.”

“You know what I mean.”

Susan landed in front of yet another castle, and a pair of guards standing in front of a gate snapped their spears up.

“You know, just once I would love to drop out of the sky, have someone proclaim ‘It’s the one spoken of in prophesy! The one who will save us!’ And then they let us in and I can get on with it. But nooooo. It’s always this.” She waved a hand at the guards.

“The castle is closed!” one squeaked, looking to the other to be backed up in this statement.

“Until the current crisis is over,” added the other. “You can come back then.”

“Fellows, unless I speak to your queen this crisis will never be over, and all of you will either starve or freeze to death.”

“You bring news of the sudden snows?” asked the first.

“The queen said no one,” the second said, somewhat doubtfully.

“This is obviously a wit- a sorceress like she is. She would want to see her, right?”

“Wait here, I’ll go ask the king.”

“Good idea! Absolves us of blame if *he* lets her in.”

“Wait here,” he repeated, this time to Susan, and edged into the doorway behind him, spear still out.

"Please." Susan rolled her eyes.

They waited.

"So!" said the guard. "Weird weather huh? I mean, uh..." He looked embarrassed and whacked himself in the head with his spear. "You live around here?"

"No, my home is pretty far from here," she answered sadly.

"Been traveling long?"

She barked a laugh. "Longer than you can imagine. It feels that way, anyway."

"It, uh, it must be nice."

"Nice?"

"To, you know, fly. To be able to just," he snapped his fingers, "and get away from things."

Susan shook her head. "You can't run from your troubles. They either catch up to you, or-

Or they're inside you to begin with.

"Yeah, I hear you. I guess everybody has their own problems, huh? Even people with magic."

"Trouble is, those with magic get magical problems, just like those without it get problems without it. It's the same everywhere."

The two chuckled, but the guard sounded as if his heart wasn't in it.

"Stand here long enough, you start to notice things."

"Things?"

"Like that circle of protection? That's keeping winter back? Seems every hour that goes by it gets a little smaller."

"Keep your chin up, I'm halfway to solving it already!"

You hope.

"Really?"

The door opened again. "She can come in. But you better not be lying."

"Really," she answered, with more confidence than she felt. "Let's go then."

Susan found herself ringed by troops, and escorted through the castle. She wasn't taken to the throne room as she expected, but rather to a large workshop area that seemed to be mostly magical in nature. On the floor rested a tired looking woman concentrating on a sphere of light, and supported by a man in finery and wearing a crown. Susan could feel the magic radiating from the orb or the person, it was tough to say, it was strong enough to be unclear. The woman cast a quick glance at her and nodded, then went back to concentrating. She had very long, blond hair, which seemed to be turning white for some reason, and looked pretty young. The man was brown haired, muscled, and probably pretty tall when he was standing up. He turned to face her.

"Greeting, traveler. The guards say you fell from the sky and claim to have information about the sudden onset of winter. Is this true?"

"True, your highness," she answered with a bow, causing Sparkle to shift and have to jump down. She padded over to the ball and looked it over.

"Meyow."

"My name is Susan. I'm currently on a quest to end the sudden winter, which is being caused by a... well, a rather tragically possessed queen far from here who happens to possess the strongest ice manipulation powers this world has ever seen. This is Sparkle."

"Charmed," she said.

The man reacted with surprise. "A sorceress on a quest alone? Extraordinary. I am king Taran, and this is my wife, Eilonwy."

No, this is Eilonwy, your wife, you chauvinist pig. But Susan kept that thought to herself.

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you both. I did hear you talk just now, didn't I?"

"You did. Finally we meet someone who doesn't react with surprise."

He chuckled. "Living with my wife these last few years has taught me to expect just about anything. She has a talking ball, Pelydryn, you have a talking cat. What's the difference? So, let's hear it."

"Just a second. Are you all right?"

Eilonwy shook her head. "You try holding back winter for days and see how you fare at the end of it." Her face softened. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit worn out at the moment. I'll survive, thanks for asking."

"If there's anything you can do to help," Taran pleaded.

"Perhaps..." Susan answered, getting her book out. One casting of *Energy Gift* from writings later, and Eilonwy was looking perked up.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "Even if your magic is very strange!"

"It won't hold you for long. But with your cooperation maybe it won't have to. I'm on a quest, like I said. Basically I'm gathering the ingredients for a... spell... that will put an end to this winter."

"You said it was caused by a person," protested Taran.

"It is. And I can't exactly explain further. Only the greatest of need allowed the person who sent me on this quest to even tell me of the existence of the spell I hope to cast. I can't say more."

"If you can put things right, by all means, our kingdom is at your disposal."

Susan looked down. "Ah. Yes. Well, please hear the story first before you start saying things like that." The two shared a look. "Basically, each person that had a piece of what I need has wanted me to do something for them. This last piece is no exception. I need something from you, and you're not going to like it."

"Look, whatever it is," said Eilonwy, "I can't keep this up. I'll give anything to keep my kingdom safe, even my own life."

"Don't say that-" started Taran.

"I mean it, Taran. This is killing me slowly, and once it fails, I won't be able to start it up again. How much longer do you think I can keep winter from even this tiny part of our kingdom?"

Susan held up a hand. "Please, your majesties, a sacrifice is required, but it is not you he wants. Tell me, has someone in your kingdom died and been resurrected at some point in the past? Because that's who we're talking about here."

"Gurgi? This is about Gurgi?" blurted Taran. His eyes grew hard. "You better explain yourself."

"Perhaps you should go first," suggested Susan. "I want to make sure the story I was told was the right one."

"Easily enough to do that. The Horned King found the Black Cauldron because I was a stupid kid, and he sacrificed himself to stop it."

"That's not how it happened," insisted Eilonwy.

"No? If I hadn't gone looking for it, would those witches have handed it over to *him*? The Horned King was scary, yes, but I think they were more powerful. I mean they had the thing for years and never used it. Thus, the fault was mine."

She looked over at Susan. "It's an old argument. But he is right about one thing. Gurgi climbed into the Cauldron, reversing its power and destroying he who had set out to use it. Taran then traded the sword he had looted from a corpse- I mean *discovered*, for Gurgi's life."

Susan and Sparkle shared a look. The story matched up. This Gurgi fellow had apparently entered the afterlife, stood around as even that time ten years ago the ferry wasn't running, and three witches apparently snatched him back.

"That's the one then," she said sadly. "He wants that soul back, to erase that stain on his record."

"Who does?" asked Taran. "Who do you work for?"

Susan took a deep breath. "Hades. And I don't work for him, like I said he just has something I need."

Both looked skeptical. "You can't expect me to believe a god told you to come here and kill Gurgi."

"Believe what you want. But unless he dies Hades doesn't give me what I want and this planet turns into an ice cube." *And you don't want to know what happens after that.*

"Preposterous! Guards! Get her out of here!"

"Wait!" said Eilonwy, raising a hand as they sprang into action. "Taran, this isn't some kind of joke. She's serious."

"I don't care if she is! Gurgi saved the entire world once, and we are not asking him to sacrifice himself again. I mean what kind of story is this?"

"Maybe a true one. She knew Gurgi came back from the dead! How many other people would know that? Just us, Ffleuddur, and the witches. We haven't seen or heard from them since, what would they care anyway? They got what they wanted, the sword. What if she's telling the truth?"

"That means I have to accept the existence of Hades! And she's working for him, despite what she says."

"Well... he did come back, after all. Is it that farfetched?"

"No. But Gurgi has been my loyal friend for a decade now. I'm not just handing him over. Guards, seize her!" He grabbed up his sword that had been sitting nearby and unsheathed it.

They grabbed her, and Susan didn't resist. "Look, I don't want to hurt you," she pleaded. "This is hard enough as it is. Please don't make it harder."

"Throw her out of the castle- no, out of the kingdom!"

"Uh, your majesty, didn't someone say she could fly?"

"I don't care! Get her out of here! What are you doing?"

"We can't seem to move her!"

"What?"

"I really didn't want this. *Somnolent Smog.*" She filled the room with *Smog*, which of course Sparkle was smart enough not to breathe in. Or she counted as Susan for things like this, being her *companion* and all. It's not important. Susan, able to cast the spell in only three segments instead took a total of nine, getting a significant bonus. No one in the room could make that check and they clattered to the floor. (Eilonwy didn't, we'll get to her in a moment. She was faking it, but Susan doesn't know that.)

Susan shook her head. "This sucks."

"Yeah. How exactly are we going to find this Gurgi now, actually?"

"Crap! I don't know. Let me get some energy back and I'll get out *Question*. Maybe I can ask what room he's in or something. Stupid, I never should have given her some of mine. I thought maybe showing my good intentions-"

"That's the trouble. We don't actually have good intentions here, do we?"

Susan shook her head. "No we do not. Stupid Hades. Yeah, I said it. I hope you're listening match head!"

"Uh, maybe you shouldn't insult the god of *death*?"

"What? It's true. The guy has fire for hair, and I'm sure he's been called worse."

Susan bent over and drained the two nearest guards at once, figuring she had two hands and forty energy to make up, so why not?

"Something's wrong," Sparkle remarked, looking around the room.

"What is?"

"The queen's asleep, but her magic is still going. Can't you feel it?"

"Maybe she can maintain spells in her sleep? I don't know."

"Or," said Eilonwy, opening her eyes. "She's faking it to see what you would do."

"You canceled my spell out? Or do you just have a really high CON?"

"I have no idea what that means. But yes, I was able to protect myself from your 'spell.' Not that I've felt the like, again, your magic is unlike anything... It seems you won't be denied, yet you didn't kill everyone in this room. Why?"

"Like I said, I don't *want* to kill this Gurgi fellow any more than you want to. I don't want to kill anyone. Heck I don't want to *hurt* or even slightly inconvenience anyone. But Hades made it clear that's the only thing he would accept."

She regarded Susan. "You really have spoken to him, haven't you?"

“Yes.”

She let out a breath. “Then it falls to me. I’d never hear the end of it from my husband if I just let you go and kill Gurgi. But at the same time I should be saving my strength to keep my entire kingdom from freezing.” She held her hands out. “The needs of the many. The needs of the one. I guess this is why I’m queen.” The orb went mostly dark, and floated up in front of her, making a chirping noise.

“I know,” she said to it. “But what else can I do? She’s technically an invader into my kingdom and wants to kill one of my subjects. I must defend him.” She looked around. “My magic is the only thing that can stand against another magic user in any case.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment, I can just shut your magic down and that’ll be the end of it. You don’t stand a chance against me.”

She hauled herself to her feet. “That’s on you. I must do what I must do. Now, defend-”

“Hold it!” Sparkle shouted. “Don’t fight in here. Take it outside!”

“I suppose it would be a shame to ruin this room. Outside then?”

“The result will be the same. Lead on,” said Susan.

Eilonwy stepped over her sleeping husband and the guards and started down the hallway. Her ball of light trailed behind her. Susan and Sparkle trailed behind it.

“Think of something!” hissed Sparkle.

“Like what?” she hissed back. “She’s doing what she thinks is best. How can I argue with that?”

“You’re not really going to fight her, are you?”

“What choice do I have?”

Indeed, what choice do you have? The Darkness, if it had hands, would have been rubbing them together in glee. One life for a world. Finally! We can only hope next time it’s two, then maybe eight, until you think nothing of just slaughtering your way through people that ‘have to’ die.

You stay out of it. You sound like you’re enjoying this far too much.

Why shouldn’t I? Your discomfort is my lazy Sunday afternoon, after all.

It’s pointless. She won’t last two combat rounds. I’ll turn her magic off, get out a Knockout blade, and stab her with it. My Contract allows that.

Yes, that stupid contract. Still, you’ll have to get permission from your cat to actually do the deed. Hope she gives it out.

She has the same chance to think of stuff that I do.

Look, what’s really bothering you? Just how one sided this is going to be? Because growing up I seem to recall you rubbing everyone’s nose in just how superior your magic was at every opportunity. This seems no different.

A little. I’m going to make her look like a joke in front of her subjects. People that look up to her. Maybe even fear her a little because of her magic. I’m going to be seen as a monster that took the queen down in seconds! I’m supposed to be a knight, and fight fair. This doesn’t feel right, disregarding the whole killing Gurgi. Growing up, yeah, my magic was demonstrably better. And I was usually using it to do things they couldn’t. Good things, that helped people. I am doing none of those things here.

Hummmm... maybe I should help you out a little.

What? Are you feeling okay?

Don’t get me wrong. I’m hoping she actually takes you, forces your hand into killing her. You can do that if the situation calls for it, if I remember correctly.

I see.

So here’s a little hint. Think back to what you were feeling when her magic was active. And think about how she defended herself from your sleep spell, despite the differences in your magic. She couldn’t have known what was coming, but she was fine. What does that tell you? Think about what skills you haven’t used in some time. Make this a fair fight, as fair as you can with all your Materia and high energy and such.

Susan took out her character sheet and looked it over. *Rifle? No, shooting her with the ice gun is no good. Persuasion?*

Magic, Susan, magic! Do I have to spell it out? You're supposed to have a high REASON, try using it for a bit.

She thought back. It wasn't exactly a spell, it was just basically magic, being shaped to her desire. Like Ursula turning Ariel human. She had that wrapped up with the Contract and everything. Dang, wish I could have Magic Sensed that, maybe gotten an idea what it was about and how it related to my use of magic. Wait a second, I have a skill to let me use what is unique about a world, Adaptive Skill. A fair fight- Are you saying I could use her kind of magic instead of mine?

You do have a ten in the skill. I doubt she does. But she has more experience shaping magic here, so she probably has a higher Magical Theory. I think it might just cancel out and let you fight equally.

That would at least allow her honorable combat. And if I do start to lose, well, I can just switch back. Winning, after a good fight, that'll at least show her my resolve.

Good for you. I think we're here, better watch carefully. You may get some ideas.

Eilonwy turned, having reached a courtyard inside the castle walls.

"Is this sufficient?" she asked.

Susan looked around, noticing the guards lining the walls now, as she had missed them being lost in discussion with The Darkness. *Lots of witnesses.*

"It should be fine. Look, I'm not sure how much combat training you've had but I've had a lot. You can't beat me, and I've decided to fight you as fairly as I can. Please, just give up now."

"Never. Fight fairly indeed. I intend to fight to win, so you had better do the same."

"Good luck," Susan offered honestly.

Eilonwy seemed bemused. "You are an odd one. We begin!"

Balls of light sprang up in a circle around her, and Susan did a *Magic Sense* to hopefully give her some insight into what she should actually do next.

The battle was on.

I felt what she was doing, somehow drawing magic from the surroundings and shaping it to do what she wanted. Can I really do that? Guess I'll try it. What she's got there seems more defensive than anything, guess I'll check it out.

Susan first made a *Magic Sense* check, getting an eleven, meaning she could effectively cast a grade five spell as that's as much magic as she currently felt she could grab onto.

But how do I grab onto it? I feel like Adaptive Skill is for putting the magic to task, not for collecting it.

But Susan had a skill for collecting it, that of *Imbuing*, so she tried it. She got a sixteen on that, beating the eleven difficulty from her previous check, and she felt "eleven" worth of magic become available for her use.

Nice, it worked! Now to try shaping it. I want to throw something at her, see how those magical spheres react. How would I-

Almost without thinking about it she made a *Magic Theory* check, getting a twenty two, beating the difficulty of twice the effective grade for what she wanted to do. She knew what to do, so she finally made her *Adaptive* skill check, forcing the magic to obey her command. Oddly she found this was based on *PERSONALITY*, but she still managed a respectable sixteen. This beat her difficulty by one, and as she raised a hand, a spear made of ice formed into existence.

After all, with all the ice magic that must be floating around now, I figure this is easiest to create for my first time.

When she felt it was ready she tossed it, or rather brought her arm down and allowed the magic to streak the thing at Eilonwy. Two of the spheres broke off and smashed into it, shattering the ice into pieces, and the remaining ones closed the gap.

Yup, defensive.

Eilonwy then gestured and Susan's vision was cut off as some sort of metal band went around her eyes.

A good thought but even if I wanted to, I couldn't turn off my Spirit Senses.

They now both acted at the same time, and Susan was surprised to feel Eilonwy charging her, so she switched to the defensive. She made a *Magic Sense* check, getting another eleven, and didn't feel her drawing in more magic.

She's either going to rely on smashing those defense orbs into me, which I doubt will hurt, or... yipes!

Susan narrowly made a *Ninjutsu* check using *INTUITION* and caught her hand as it came down in a stabbing motion.

"You were going to stab me?" she asked, somewhat amused. "Seems sort of an unprincessly thing to do."

"Unprincess- how did you even do that?" She struggled to get free.

"I've learned lots of skills in my travels. I don't need to see you to fight you." *Well, okay, to defend from you, anyway. And I suppose I could use area effect attacks.* "That said..." she released her hand and Eilonwy stepped back. Susan touched the metal around her face and made her checks for a *Destruction* like spell. She got all the checks but the last one, missing it by two. The magic fizzled and she frowned.

Making four checks just to use a spell? I'm not sold on the idea.

Really? asked The Darkness. *No spells to memorize, you just have an idea and if you can envision the magic doing that task, it applies. To these people your way of doing things would be backwards and stupid. Only able to manipulate magic to do specific things? How limiting. They would say learning nine skills plus things like Theory and Scripture was stupid.*

But I have a ten in that skill. And I can't put energy in like I can with my way of casting spells. I mean PER? Who came up with that?

Aw, poor Susan can't overkill something because she decided to fight fair for once. Boo hoo. Of course it's PER, you're getting the magic to do something, aren't you? Be nicer for once and maybe it'll listen.

Oh, what do you know?

"Ah hah," exclaimed Eilonwy, "it seems my binding is too much for you. I'll throw you out of my kingdom in chains!"

Susan felt a heavy chain wrap around her, trying to bind her arms and legs together. She simply made a STRENGTH check, something she could hardly fail at, getting a thirty five. That technically did damage to the chain as though she was attacking it, and it shattered away from her.

"Impossible!"

"You can't chain me. Now let's try this again."

Susan again tried her checks to get rid of her reverse visor, and this time managed maximum on her last check instead of minimum. It vanished.

"That's better."

"Fine. So we'll do something even you can't break." She gestured downwards, and Susan felt herself growing heavier, and the ground near her started to cave in.

Did she just increase gravity around me?

Not that she would understand the concept of gravity, but yes, basically. She just wanted you to be heavier, the magic took care of the rest.

Of course, even making Susan four or five times heavier wouldn't really slow her down, but Eilonwy didn't know that. What she did know was that she and Susan would act together, as Susan completely failed her *Magic Combat* check by a fair margin. Thus she was prepared when Susan decided to simply do a *Thrust* style spell, and shoved the force away from herself.

"I can't believe you're still standing," she remarked, readying her next spell.

I can't believe that didn't get you.

She may not be a combat monkey like you, but she's obviously practiced magic for many years. She's doing well. Might even be a little faster than you, but she could be spending energy to reduce delay. Not that she has delay, mind you. If I had hands I would be shaking pompons and cheering for her.

Eilonwy obviously thought Susan's idea a good one, and threw force at her, but Susan simply didn't go anywhere. In fact, being held down by the gravity increase actually helped in this case, as wasn't going to go flying unless the force not only came from directly beneath her, but overcame the original spell too.

Susan wanted to shift the gravity away from herself, figuring it would hit Eilonwy a lot harder than it had her, and be easier than creating her own. Sadly, the effective rating of a spell to transfer an active spell effect to another point in space was pretty high, higher than the eight effective rating she got on her *Magic Theory* to figure out how to do it. So Susan wasted that action drawing magic without being able to release it properly, and just stood there trying to work out what to do with it.

Meanwhile Eilonwy was doing something, but Susan only got a ten on her *Perception* check so she didn't see what. So she continued on the offensive, after a bit of thought.

I was hoping I could exhaust her, given my store of energy must be higher than hers. But it seems her magic doesn't work like that, so I'm going to have to take a different approach. I don't want to hurt her, just stop her stopping me from doing what I came here to do. So how about I just keep her from using magic? I know how that works, after all.

She made the checks, again missing only the *Adaptive* skill, but held onto the magic. *I think I can just try again.*

But on her next action Eilonwy made the tree she had grown last action fall over, smashing into her. As she hadn't seen it she had to rely on *INS* rather than *COO* and couldn't put energy into her *dodge* check, so it hit her.

“Go down!” screamed Eilonwy, trying to drive the Susan to the ground. “Why won’t you go down?”

“Because you’re fighting me all wrong.”

“What?”

Susan didn’t elaborate, instead making another *Adaptive* skill check and that’s when it came to her that she couldn’t actually succeed.

I have a maximum roll of twenty for this. But the difficulty, if I’ve got this worked out correctly, is a twenty one. Twice my effective planet rating as governed by my Imbuing check plus twice the grade of the spell. To succeed I either have to spend XP or use a card. Cards! What cards do I have, and why haven’t I thought of them in so long? Is that your doing?

What, me? No. You just don’t seem to need them, that’s all. I mean really, what can take you down Miss Giant’s Soul? Even this battle is largely for their benefit, as what could they possibly use to hurt you?

What indeed. Let’s take a look here. Mutiny. Extra Action. And ‘glad I brought this shotgun.’ Seriously? These are all useless! Worse than useless! Aarg!

Aren’t cards cheating anyway?

Maybe, but it’s also just something I can do. I don’t begrudge her anything she can do in this combat, after all. And I’m being super nice, as you know. I just want to painlessly incapacitate her, I can’t believe there is magic actually beyond my reach doing it their way.

Reduce the radius. That would make it easier to do.

I guess. But I have to get the whole courtyard, or she’ll just move.

It sighed. *You’re thinking about your own magic, the kind that makes those circles. She’s not going to be able to tell where the anti-magic field starts and stops.*

Oh.

It didn’t matter, as at that moment Taran burst into the courtyard yelling “I’ll save you, Eilonwy! Get back you- oh.” His sword came down.

He took in the scene of Susan still struggling to get out from under the tree trunk that was currently rooting her to the spot, as she hadn’t actually been knocked over.

“I guess you have things in hand?”

“Yes dear,” she said smiling. “If you would just stay out of the way for a moment?”

“Of course!” He backed off.

“Now then, where was I?” She turned back to Susan, but the light around the castle dimmed as dark clouds started rolling in. She glanced upwards, back at Susan, then around the courtyard. “You aren’t doing that.”

“No, I’m not. Maybe as you’re not maintaining the magic to keep winter out it’s coming in full force?”

“No, that’s not it. Something else- oh!” Inside the clouds, three odd looking women appeared, making Eilonwy mutter “oh no.” One of the woman was quite tall and thin, while another was quite plump. The third was much shorter than the other two, and was wearing a tall hat, perhaps to try and make up for it. “What do you want?” she shouted up at them.

“Look at this, sisters!” said the short one. “We were right!”

“You’ve been busy,” remarked the tall one, looking the area over.

“Have you seen Fflewddur lately?” asked the bigger one.

“Not now, Orwen,” chided the tall one. “I think we’re interrupting something.”

“She wants to kill Gurgi!” Taran shouted up to them.

“We know, duckling,” said the short one. “That’s why we came. That and feeling a magical battle around here. Don’t see many of those, so we came to watch!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we made a bargain, didn’t we? His life for the sword.”

“Technically it was for the cauldron,” Orwen reminded her.

“They didn’t want the cauldron in the first place,” the short one spat back. “He really wanted the sword.”

“Exactly,” said the tall one. “If she kills him, you might complain that we weren’t keeping up our end. He’ll die of natural causes or not at all.”

“So you’ll help us?” Eilonwy called up.

The three laughed uproariously. "No chance, girly. But we will loan you something." She gestured, and that something flew to the ground, impacting with a thud and sticking there. When the special effects cleared Susan saw it was a sword, and Taran took a hesitant step towards it. "You'll really loan it to me?"

"We said we would."

"Hey!" Susan shouted up at them. "Whose side are you on? Don't help them."

"Why shouldn't we?" asked the short one.

"I'm the one trying to save your world, if you hadn't noticed!"

"Is that what you've been doing? Running about like a scared... whatever happened to that pig of yours, anyway, Taran? Taran?"

Everyone looked over at him, but he only had eyes for the sword, which he pulled out of the ground with a jerk. It started to glow, and Susan could feel the magic surrounding it.

I guess they can do Imbuing around here too?

"You won't kill Gurgi," he said, looking over his shoulder at her without turning around.

"Yes, I will," Susan replied, throwing the tree off herself.

"Then it seems I have no choice." He turned and brought it up, tossing his other blade to the ground. "Eilonwy, step back."

"No. He's my friend too. We'll stop her together." She waved a hand and the gravity went back to normal around Susan. "But are you sure about using that sword? You might kill her by accident."

"You couldn't."

"You think you can do a better job of killing her than I can?"

"I don't think your heart's in it, no."

"You think I was playing out here or something?"

"Wow, it's an even better show than I thought it was going to be," remarked the thin one. "Who needs magic?"

"Stay out of this!" they shouted up to her.

"Sorry," she replied sarcastically. "What about you, girl? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to offer them one last chance. How about it? If you think a simple sword is going to help, you're sadly mistaken. I will leave this place and return to Hades with your friend's soul. And I will take no pleasure in the act. But it must be done. Stand aside."

"Never," both said with conviction.

"Then I'm done trying to fight fair. *Elemental Weapon: Knockout*," she cast, getting a blade in each hand. A huge blade, taller than she was. *After all, why be constrained by reality when you're making the weapon by magic? It's not like it weighs the same as a sword this big, though I could probably swing something real around just as easily.* She looked around, but she didn't see Sparkle. *Odd. No Acceleration for me at the moment. Dang.*

"Oh crap," gasped Taran, probably mentally comparing the length of his sword to her two.

"Too late now."

Susan got highest in *initiative*, and with the gravity field gone, darted forward with all sixteen of her speed and slashed at Taran, hoping to just end this in two actions. That wasn't going to be the case as the sword in his hand flashed and blocked it, making her wonder exactly what the sword was giving him, as it obviously helped in some way. Without missing a beat she swung her other sword at him, which he again blocked.

Eilonwy put the defensive spheres around Taran, but Susan didn't care. *Unless she's changed the range on them, I'm fighting out of their reach.*

Both were still recovering from the sword strikes so Eilonwy cast again, not bothering to try and make it non-lethal now. Flames shot towards Susan, which she blocked with a quick casting of *"Deflection."*

Taran now tried to close with Susan, nullifying the advantage of her enormous swords, but as she was nearly 4 meters away it was going to take him a few *segments*. He actually made it before Susan could act with one *segment* to spare, and took a swipe at her. She took her free movement as part of a *parry* and batted it aside, then did a *riposte*, but the sword twisted in Taran's hand and defended him.

Oh, I see.

Fire rushed towards her again, but she just used her swords as a barrier, making it bounce off.

How fast is this girl? Susan thought as more fire sought her flesh. *I really miss Acceleration.* Susan just kept her swords in place, crossed in front of her like an X and hoped it would still be enough to protect her. It seemed Eilonwy got lucky though, deftly weaving the fire around them to strike her.

Still, it hardly singed her.

Now Taran was up again, the sword nearly dragging him along as it shot forward towards her. *I've got to get rid of one of these guys... or something.*

"Dazzle!" she cast reactively, hoping to stun him. It worked, and he staggered back. So she swiped at him with her sword as an off hand action, putting energy into COOrdination. Sadly, the sword itself wasn't *dazzled*, so it defended him using its own stats, and knocked the blade away.

"You know what? Fine." Susan turned her attention to Eilonwy who didn't have a magical sword protecting her. She shot forward and swiped, causing Eilonwy to scream and dodge out of the way. *You've got to be kidding me,* Susan growled to herself as the blade met only the open air. *It's the penalty for the spell. The size should have compensated, she must have dodged by one!* She tried again with her left sword, but again was denied. Still, she was on the offensive now and Eilonwy didn't have any skill in *close combat*, so she wasn't as fast at dodging close attacks as Susan was at giving them out. She swiped again, this time putting in double the energy she had been.

Still didn't work, Eilonwy kept screaming and backing away.

You really shouldn't play with your food.

Shut it. I put ten, count them, ten energy into that attack. Can she put ten energy into defense? I highly doubt it. What is going on here?

Just bad rolls I guess.

You're telling me.

"Stay away from my wife!" screamed Taran, rushing her again.

Oh great, he's recovered. "Dazzle."

This time she cast it on both, but Taran shook it off, bringing his blade to chop her in half.

It scratched her with one damage.

"You know something, go nuts. I don't even care," Susan growled at him. "I'm taking her out, and then I'm taking you out. So get it out of your system. Hack away. But you'll be sorry." She turned to deliver a blow while Taran hit her in the back this time, but even with the magic on the blade, without putting maximum energy into it he could only do a maximum of ten damage, which Susan divided it by fourteen. Resulting in one, because to hit something with a sword and do no damage would be cheating even for her.

I should have just done this from the start.

You didn't want to scare them.

Exactly. Ugh, this whole thing is stupid.

She finally connected with Eilonwy, doing sixty eight non-lethal damage to her body as *Knockout* damage was doubled. She crumpled to the ground and raised her sword to take care of the the king as well.

"Stop!" Sparkle's voice rang throughout the courtyard.

Sparkle stood next to an odd looking creature, what looked to Susan like a dog that was standing on its hind legs. She was leaned away from it, so while it wasn't a dog, Sparkle still didn't really want to get too close. Her ears were back and she looked mad.

"Honestly, all of you!" she chided, looking them over. "Did you for a second even *think* to ask him what he thought of all this?"

"Of course I thought about it!" Taran shouted back. "He would have agreed without hesitation. I can't lose him that way again."

"So you took away his choice, is that it? Because, what, you know best? This is a living, thinking creature here, and should be offered the *curtesy* of determining his own fate. What about all this fighting? You think he wants that?"

"Gurgi does not want his friends to fight to traveling lady," Gurgi said sadly. "Gurgi understands, even if master does not think he does. If Gurgi must return to the lake where he was when he died, Gurgi will go. Gurgi has always known someday this may be true."

"You remember?" Taran's sword stopped glowing and slipped from his hands. "You remember... being dead? Going to... to... the underworld?"

He shook his head sadly in reply.

"And you have lived with that for all these years. Gurgi, I'm so sorry." He walked over, leaving the sword laying there and knelt to hug his friend.

"It's okay, master. Gurgi is happy. Gurgi knows he will see his friends again, when they stand at the edge of the river when they die. Isn't that good?"

"Die? Eilonwy! If you've killed her-"

"She's fine," assured Susan, opening her hands to make the swords vanish. "My attacks are stun only. I'll heal her now." She went over, hiding the knife as she got it out, correctly figuring that would be misinterpreted for sure.

"I explained things to him," Sparkle was saying. "He's prepared to give his life so Hades is satisfied."

"I've lived a long time with the master in this castle," Gurgi said proudly. "I had many years because master gave up the sword for him. But now Gurgi has to go."

"I know, Gurgi, I know. I'll miss you."

"Don't cry master. I'll be waiting for you, on the banks of the river."

Yeah, you probably will, given the backup they had there. It'll take years to clear that number of souls from that area with only three 'judges.'

"I... guess you're right. We will see each other again, won't we?"

"What hit me?" asked Eilonwy, as Susan helped her sit up.

"You're pretty good," admitted Susan. "You lasted way more combat actions than I thought you would. Well done."

"Thanks, I guess? So you won, then? You're going to kill him?"

"Actually, no. Come to think of it, I can deliver him personally. My first thought, of course, was that I had to kill him. I see now that's sure to be messy, painful, and somewhat distressing for everybody. My new idea is to just do what did before, go to the underworld myself and hand him over. I survived there, he should too. Hades wants the poor... fellow... dead, he can- what is Gurgi anyway?"

Eilonwy smiled a sad smile. "We never really found out."

"Oh. Weird. I'll let you two say goodbye."

She got up. "It really exists, doesn't it?"

Susan nodded. "It really does. It's not the happiest place on earth-"

"But change is coming," said Hades, stepping out of nowhere.

Everyone gave a start of surprise. "Aren't you breaking a lot of rules or something, coming here yourself?"

He shrugged. "Eh. I was never much for rules. I'm sure you can relate, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. Still, I wouldn't want you to get in trouble."

He snorted. "In trouble? With who, Zeus? That fatso just lays around all day, bemoaning how good things were back in 'the old days' instead of actually doing something about it. I gave it up too, you know. Doing something about it, I mean. After you got the souls moving again I got to thinking- the underworld *is* my realm. Does it have to be so gloomy and boring? I'm not so sure. So I was thinking of shaking things up a bit. Can't hurt, and I have eternity to experiment."

"Good," agreed Susan. "That's excellent news!"

"So glad you approve. Now, about this Gurgi..." He looked around at the frozen scene of Susan casually talking to the god of death.

"Gurgi is ready?" Gurgi slowly came forward.

Hades gave a "tisk." "I had hoped you would do the deed yourself. Pity." He patted Susan's head. "You did your best, better luck next time."

Susan knocked his hand away. "Don't patronize me. You know I didn't want to kill him."

"So you were going to make his friend kill him for you? You are evil."

"No I'm not! Stop saying that!"

"I only say it because it's true. That aside," he waved her away, "you wanted to say goodbye, I believe?"

"You'll allow that, oh lord of the underworld?" asked Elionwy.

"Of course! I'm not evil, unlike some. I'll let you have a few minutes. He's consented to come with me, that's all I require. Oh, and here you are, as promised." He handed Susan a small box, almost a jewelry box, which she opened the lid of and looked inside.

"Ashes?"

"The ashes of the underworld. Don't go... I don't know, snorting them or anything."

"What?"

"Well I don't know what the spell requires now do I? Anyway, you'll want to be on your way, so let's give these two some privacy. I'll be back for you," he pointed at Gurgi, "in a moment."

"Where am I going?"

"You'll see, my dear. You do have a son, don't you?" he asked Taran.

"You stay away from-"

"Ah, ah, ah! Temper. That's a yes, then. We'll need to visit his room for just a moment. Come along."

Susan looked helplessly at the king and queen, unsure if she should thank them, apologize, somehow do both at the same time... She bent down to Gurgi instead. "I will make your sacrifice count for something. I'll save this world in your name. Thank you."

"Gurgi is strangely used to it," he answered. "Who else here can say they've given their life to save the world... twice?" He grinned.

"Nobody but you. Thanks."

He nodded and went over to Elionwy, so Susan hastened after Hades as she put the box away. She followed him through the castle and he seemed to know right where he was going, and went into a certain room which did seem to be a kid's room.

"It's rather strange there," he cautioned her, standing in front of the closet door and tapping it. "Still, I'm sure you'll fit right in, you monster."

"I'm not- forget it. What are you talking about? That's a closet."

"Is it?" he asked, a twinkle in his eye. He pulled the door open and there was some kind of empty room beyond it, lit by a dim light coming through some windows at the other side of the room. "Off you go, then."

Susan felt a weird sensation as she stepped through, and Hades let Sparkle go through as well. "Toodles," Hades said, waving goodbye. "Don't kill too many in there, now." He laughed and slammed the door.

"That jerk! Even if he is a god, I'll give him a piece of my-" Susan yanked the door open again but just saw another door behind it. "That's weird." She closed it, pulled it open slowly, but it was unchanged.

"Where are we?" asked Sparkle, looking around.

Susan slowly closed the door again and looked herself. There seemed to be stacks and stacks of doors in this room, which seemed to be some kind of warehouse for the things. Windows let in pale sunlight from above, and the whole place seemed to be made of natural material, like wood and stone.

"Not sure. Outside is that way, think you can *Phase* us through the wall and maybe we can get our bearings?"

"You forgot to ask who to talk to," Sparkle reminded her. "We have no idea where to go now."

"So we'll ask my magic. Something about this place feels wrong. Did you feel it, when we came through the door?"

"I felt something. Come on, can I *phase* us indeed. *Phase!*"

The two stepped through the wall and Sparkle dropped the spell so they could hear, and again looked around. What Susan saw was rather unexpected.

She seemed to be standing in the back lot of some kind of factory or something, but from the 1920s rather than the 1720s she was expecting. She heard the distant sound of traffic, and the bustle of a city off to her right. Looking in that direction she saw skyscrapers, of all things, short ones, but there they were. No one was in sight, and Susan gave it about two hours before sunset, the sun was quite low here.

"No snow," remarked Sparkle. "It's not even cold."

"Forget the weather, the people where we came from lived in castles and stuff. Did he send us through time or something?"

"Electric lights," Sparkle said, pointing. "How about that?"

"Yeah." Susan looked up to see what must be some kind of security lighting, off at the moment, spaced throughout the complex. There was a fence around the place too, but Susan was pretty sure she could jump it. "This is so bizarre."

"Want to keep moving or do the spell?"

"Let's check around here first, I want to make sure we're not interrupted."

"Good idea."

The two headed for the fence, which Susan jumped, and found herself in a parking lot, of all things. "Look at these cars!" she breathlessly gasped. "This is insane." There were only a few, but this was obviously where they parked, but the cars that were there- "Are those Model Ts? This is crazy!"

"They do look similar to really early cars," Sparkle admitted. "Though of course I never had much interest in such things."

"I didn't think they even had steam power, much less gasoline powered motor vehicles. Just look at this thing." They cautiously made their way over to the nearest one, and Susan put a hand on it. "It's real," she breathed, looking it over. "I don't get it."

"Hands off the machine," said the monster, coming up behind her and smacking her hand off it.

Susan turned to look at the creature, and found herself staring into the many eyes of what was literally a monster. Vaguely green, eye stalks (six of them), pseudopod legs and arms. She was too shocked to even move, but the monster had problems of its own.

It was staring at his (or her?) hand/protuberance as it started to actually melt away. It screamed in agony.

Susan looked to Sparkle. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Quick, heal it!"

"Right. Don't move!" She whipped the knife out and brought it up. The eyes tracked it, and with a clunk it dropped what was in its other hand. Susan briefly registered it as a lunchbox, before the creature went screaming bloody murder as it booked it back the way it had come. Seriously, it was screaming "Murder! Security! Help! Fire! HUMAN!"

Susan lowered the knife. "Hey, that thing's pretty fast for something that doesn't actually have legs."

"Didn't even have legs- worry about that later!" Sparkle pointed, and several more *things* burst from the building, all holding what looked like various weapons that were adapted

to their physiology. Short things, tall things, different colors and shapes, and what they were carrying would certainly be called guns, Susan recognized them through her old *pistol* skill as being old time pistols. They surrounded her, guns leveled, but all seemed hesitant to approach.

"It is a human!" said one.

"Shoot it!" said another.

"No, capture it! Someone must have let it out, we need to find out who!"

"I'm not going near it!"

"You're the biggest, you catch it."

"You know," Susan remarked, rolling her eyes. "I'm getting pretty tired of being met everywhere we go on this world with this sort of thing. I mean first the mermaids, then the dead didn't want me around, now this. I'm not feeling very welcome here."

"Just go back through whatever door you came from, human," said one. "We don't want any trouble here."

"I tried," she said honestly. "But there's something I have to do here. Someone I need to talk to. I can't leave until I do."

The monsters looked at each other. "Put her through another door," one shouted. "It doesn't matter which one."

"Good idea. You're coming with me, human!" The largest one there holstered his gun and went to grab her. Susan allowed it, figuring she would just use her STStrength to not be dragged anywhere, but again as the creature touched her he reacted as if burned. He jumped back and screamed in pain, his fur burning off on that hand. "Shoot her, shoot her!" he cried, staggering back away from her.

Multiple shots rang out, but these were not modern firearms, these were at best "wild west" six shooters. She covered her eyes with an arm and the shooting stopped, leaving her with little more than scrapes and torn clothes, as none could even reach fourteen damage so she didn't take a single point from all that. "You are starting to annoy me. Let me explain myself!"

"Reload, keep shooting!" cried one, spilling some bullets out of the pouch at his belt. The monster that had touched her was still crying in agony as his hand was now starting to dissolve, and the others were backing away, reloading.

"I don't know what's going on, but I can save him," Susan assured them, taking a step towards him. Two of the closest stepped in front of him, dropping their spent guns and pulling out clubs.

"I don't have time for this. *Telekinesis.*" *Crap, I'm still low on energy from that fight. I hope this doesn't drag out very long. I need to mode change and recover.*

The two monsters went flying out of her way and Susan slapped the knife against the monster's arm, being careful not to touch him and cause more harm. A shot rang out behind her, but it missed, striking the monster and jerking him away from her. He scrambled away, clutching his side. *I guess if he can run, he'll be fine. The... whatever... from touching me should at least be stopped. I hope?*

The monster continued shooting, and Susan spun. "You'll hit him again, you moron! Stop shooting! *Thrust!*" It failed to resist by one and went flying.

"It'll kill us all!" yelled one. "Somebody get the police here!" It took off running.

"Police? Get the militia!"

"Perhaps a strategic withdrawal?" Sparkle suggested, sticking her head out from under the car.

"Run? But I guess you're right. This situation isn't going to get better any time soon. *Flight.*" The familiar magic encircled the pair and they both took off into the sky.

"You aren't getting away that easily!" one of the monsters said as their body changed. Wings unfurled from the creature's back, and it took to the sky after them.

But Susan was faster, and she pulled away from him, darting between buildings and causing a stir on the ground as creatures of every shape, size, and color gaped and pointed up at her.

"There, that building there, the whole floor is dark," Sparkle shouted to her, pointing ahead. "I can *Phase* us in there and we can get our bearings."
And our energy back. "Suits me!" They headed that way and vanished inside.

"All right, what was that about?" Susan yelled, exasperated. They had cautiously checked out the room and found it empty, seeming to be office space, as there were desks in an orderly arrangement inside. Susan was now in powers mode, letting her natural *Energy Regeneration* bring her back up to full, as using the active method of doing so would call attention to them.

"I wish I knew," Sparkle admitted. "Do you think he betrayed us somehow?"

"Well I've never melted anyone before just from touching them," Susan complained. "I shouldn't even be able to, that's harm, and my *contract* should prevent it. Maybe because I'm not actually causing it, but I am the cause? More to the point, what were those things? How does this place have electric lighting while the place we came from has oil lamps? When and where are we?"

"I suppose you could call the Hub and ask."

That brought her up short. "Oh yeah, I could. Susan to Hub," she called, bringing the watch up to her face.

"Hub here. What can I do for you?" answered the agent.

"Where am I? Can you tell? And have I time traveled?"

The agent checked something on the screen. "Doesn't seem like it. You're in a funny sub-dimension, that much I can tell you. Getting some odd readings..."

"Odd is right. Look, two of the beings here touched me and started just, I don't know, dissolving. That can't be right."

"Can you hold the watch up to something?" Susan did, and a scanning beam shot out of it, playing over the desk. "Seems like normal matter. You shouldn't have trouble interacting with the beings there. Without getting you back here to have a complete scan done, there's not much else I can tell you but that. We wouldn't send you to a place you're incompatible with, believe me."

"That's a start, thanks. But I am still in the time and place you sent me, just somewhere offset a bit?"

"That's a good way to describe it. Do you want to come back, be put through again?"

Susan shook her head. "No, this is where I need to be, I guess. I'll work things out here."

"Okay. Anything else I can do then?"

"Nope. Thanks. Susan out."

"Good luck." The image went away.

"So now what?"

"We wait a few minutes and try to get some answers." She pulled her book of magic out. "I think I know just the spell."

"The spell" being *Reveal Condition*, a grade 4 Jupiter spell that Susan had no difficulty reading over and understanding. With her full energy back she had no worries about casting it, and she knew she was under a curse that went something like this.

As long as you remain in the Monster World, your very touch will burn like acid to all who reside there.

"That stupid Hades, he must have slapped it on me when he touched my head just before we got here! Some kind of curse, is my guess."

"Why though?"

"Who knows. Some kind of joke? Maybe he's evil after all? Don't ask me. How are we supposed to find who we need to get the item from, convince them to help us, and leave here if we can't touch anyone?"

“That shouldn’t be too bad, though, I mean you don’t have some kind of compulsion to touch people, do you?”

“No. Still, he wasn’t very helpful, was he? Damn him. Though I suppose as he lives in the underworld already-”

“Shhh. I hear something.”

“Human! We know you’re in there! Come out with your hands up!” was shouted through the door leading to the hallway outside.

“Bloody marvelous.”

Eye have no Eyes but still Eyes See

When: Just then

Where: Random office building.

“Now what do we do?” Sparkle asked, looking around. “It’s still too light outside, we’ll be spotted for sure if we leave.”

“We could go *Invisible*. Do monsters have “powers?” We could be *unseen* if they don’t.”

Sparkle shook her head. “For all we know some monsters can see through invisibility. Or have different senses all together. Or count as having powers because they are literal monsters! Can we assume anything about these creatures?”

“No, I don’t think we can. We need to think of something though, fast. I’d take us back to the room we first appeared in, but that place might be crawling with security, trying to find out how we came through. You know what, forget this place. *Light of the Multiverse, Make Up!*”

“What are powers going to do that magic can’t?”

“It’s just a shortcut. Come on.”

Sparkle jumped into Susan’s arms and both *Teleported* to her *Personal Dimension*, where she jumped down again. “We’ll have to hang out at the campsite, get away from the time dilation effect here.” She went back to magic mode. “Then we’ll slip out in a few hours when the heat’s off. A little *shape-shift* and we should be able to walk around without anyone spotting us.”

“Why not wait out the night here? Start again in the morning?”

“You were the one who said not to assume anything. Are you assuming their day/night cycle is the same as in the human world?”

“It must be, right?”

“Why would it be? Maybe they have that better technology because time moves faster here.”

“I suppose it’s possible. All right, the campsite it is. Wake me when it’s time to go.”

Susan’s current powers

Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	4
Flight	2
Invulnerability	2
Nature (Kinetics)	2
Nature (Knockout)	2
Nature (Metapower)	2
Nature (Seeing)	2
Shape-Shift	4
Sudden Step	1
Teleport	3

Later, disguised as a monster, Susan *teleported* back to the room she had just left. All was still, though something got shoved out of the way as she materialized there. She was currently maintaining a *Kinetics* technique that would at least keep things from brushing up against her by accident and getting killed.

“What was that?”

“My technique must have bumped something.”

“I didn’t say that,” said Sparkle.

“What?”

“What?”

“What?”

“*It’s the human! Open fire! Open fire!*”

“Oh crap. Come on!” Sparkle jumped into Susan’s arms and she ran for the window, activating a *Seeing* technique to see in the dark. Flashes of light went off around her and bullets whizzed by, some probably striking her more by accident than skill. She gave a silent

apology to whoever owned the building and smashed her way through the window, taking to the sky.

"They must have left monsters behind that could see in the dark, in case you showed back up!" Sparkle shouted.

"No, you think?" she shouted back, picking a random direction and just flying as fast as she could. "And this disguise is compromised, they've seen it. I'll have to come up with another. Darn it, I really worked on this one too."

Not to mention they know you can change your shape. They'll be more keyed up than ever, now. Heheheh.

"Smeg!"

Susan spent the rest of the night flying about, checking the city out from above. Just as with her own world, it gave way to what looked like farmland, and there was evidence of trains and cables carrying power or, she supposed, telegraph signals or something.

"Did they have telephone whenever the first cars were being built?"

"You don't know? Thought you were the queen of useless trivia because of that leak in your brain."

"Not this time. Hey, did they have telephones? Yeah, I'm talking to you, big, dark, and annoying."

What am I, your encyclopedia? What world do you mean? Technology advances at all different rates you know, depending on what problems worlds can solve with magic and what they can't. What makes you think these creatures don't all have some kind of telepathy or hive mind so they wouldn't need the telegraph?

Makes sense, actually. And my world, what did you think?

I have no idea. I don't know everything you know, just stuff I've happened to pick up.

"It doesn't know."

"Not important I guess."

"True. At least there seems to be the same number of hours of darkness here as the main world. So hopefully we can start getting our questions answered soon."

"Oh? How are we going to do that?"

"Library. Hopefully we can find one. If not hang out at a school or something, maybe swipe a textbook if they have them. Museum? There must be someplace around here that can tell us a little history."

"Who cares about history?"

"Easy. Think of who we've always talked to. Under the sea it was a king. Hades, a god led us to a king and queen. It's someone in power who can get us what we need. We just need to find out who the powers are here and go talk to them. Do the monsters have a king? A president? Is there a soothsayer or something, or maybe even psychic types we could go talk to? I mean we can't exactly drop back in on Hades, I have no idea how to get out of the place."

"Psychic *types*? They aren't Pokémon you know. Despite their looks."

"You know what I- hey, that's a story. You think they exist somewhere?"

"I suppose."

"Wild..."

"Anyway. We could try just *teleporting*. The powers versions works across dimensions."

"I did while you were asleep in the *Dimension*. Didn't get anywhere. We're stuck here until we go back through one of those doors, I think."

"Great. Another thing to worry about."

"Remember, we called the Hub before, they can always pull us out if we get nowhere."

"True. Okay, it's a good a plan as any, I guess. As long as you're doing it for the right reasons and not just to satisfy your *curiosity*."

Susan pretended to be affronted, while in reality that's exactly what it was. "I never!"

Some time later a newly constructed monster walked into a library and looked around. Sparkle had also taken the *shape-shift* power and looked like a tiny monster, her cover for needing history books, and she currently had her by the hand. "Oh great, card catalog!"

Susan moaned, missing her “indistinguishable from magic” technology. “Now how in the world do I use one of these things?”

“Can you even read monster?”

“I figure with a *seeing* technique I should be able to. Same as with magic, just touch the text and want it to happen.”

“Don’t forget announcing it to the world. You know, one odd thing about our way of doing stuff- we have to announce it or it gets harder. Eilonwy just seemed to want stuff to happen and the magic did it.”

“True. But if we’ve seen anything on this journey, it’s that things don’t have to make sense.”

Susan picked up a book that was on display and concentrated, spending the greater amount of energy so she didn’t have to shout out “*Comprehensive Comprehension*” in the middle of a library like a moron. She was rewarded when she opened the book to understand it perfectly, and set it back down to tackle the card catalog. (Not literally) Sparkle got bored of Susan paging through it and wandered off, and a short, round monster sauntered over to her.

“Need any help finding something?” it asked. “Because I can help you find it. Just please say you’re looking for love.” He leaned against the cabinet and blinked his four eyes at her.

Oh my... I guess you’re a cuter monster than I gave you credit for. Well done. Not even two minutes and already the locals are hitting on you.

Can it. That does raise the question though, how do these creatures tell their genders apart? I mean there’s a sort of blob sitting over there, is that male or female?

Can you tell a male fish from a female one?

Probably not, why?

Same idea here. They probably just know.

Great. “Actually I was looking for a history book for my *daughter’s* sake. She had some questions about our history and I wanted to make sure I got the answers right.”

“Oh, you have a daughter? Isle six.” The monster vaguely pointed and shuffled off.

Wow, people are the same everywhere, aren’t they? Even monsters are only after other monsters for one thing.

And you aren’t? Need I remind you what your cat is always saying? “Vaguely cute and female” is the phrase if I’m not mistaken. Plus, are you attributing human conventions to these creatures? Maybe they have a free love society and you just gravely insulted that creature right to its so called face.

Susan blinked for a moment, slamming the drawer closed. *You’re right. I’m a monster too.*

You’re human... but I repeat myself.

Ha ha.

Susan went over to isle six and got down a thick history book, which she sat on a chair by a window and hefted.

I can use a seeing technique to watch an attack happen thousands of years ago on the moon. Can I do something similar here?

Is that rhetorical because I don’t see why I should help by answering.

Yes.

In that case, I will. Because I know how much you love hearing me talk. Yes. But you won’t retain it very long unless you spend about the same amount of time with the material. It’s more commonly used to absorb knowledge from ruined works or stuff lost to age. If you just want a short lived info dump into your brain, go for it.

Thanks.

You see? Having me around isn’t so bad.

Stop trying to take me over and turn me into your personal servant and maybe one day I’ll believe you.

So Susan used the *Seeing* technique suggested by The Darkness and indeed, a skimmed over version of the history book in her hands was “downloaded” into her brain. The quick history of the monster world went something like this:

Long ago, the true world and the shadow world shared many things. But when the True People moved into the shadow world, the similar people (we know they call themselves humans now, of course, but as they all seemed to look alike to us, the name stuck) seemed determined to destroy us. We didn't take it personally. As we watched they seemed determined to destroy themselves, and everything around them, so we decided that's just how they were. It was decided we would have nothing more to do with them, so most routes between the worlds were severed. As the similar people fought their wars and squabbled over resources, the true people advanced their understanding of the universe. We developed mathematics, theories of gravity and power, and more. Oddly, the similar people didn't kill themselves off, (as we had long expected they would) and in fact it was found they had something unique to give us. A source of power that could be reliably collected and put to use. As the similar people called us “Monsters,” the “Monsters, Inc” was created to regulate this power and safely travel to the shadow world to collect it. With energy now flowing into the true world we developed even greater technologies like cars and lights. Our homes are heated, and our lives are made more convenient through the hard work of those gathering the energy of the shadow world.

Of course! There's no prejudice here based on “race” or “nationality” because every “true person” looks totally different from every other in the first place. They learned to get along and not argue over “sky cake.” This, in turn, allowed them to advance their civilization far faster than the “shadow world” and here we are today.

Ready to be devoured by me.

Yeah, no. Honestly, none of this interests you? The struggle of zillions of beings across billions of realities all with their own stories? Their own answers to the world they find themselves in? You just see us a food source.

Hate to break it to you, but there are more bacteria in your guts than people living on your world. You've never considered their stories, have you? You just live your life, doing what you do. It's the same with me.

I'm actually sentient!

Are you? Anyway, Nita (remember her?) would argue, were she here, they are as well, in their way. Why do you think she can't cure cancer? Her magic is predicated on preserving life, while yours seems intent on ending it. Without your ‘miracle cure’ she would have had to go inside her mother's body and actually talk the viruses causing her mother's cancer out of doing it. They would argue they were just doing what they were created to do.

As you're arguing now.

Exactly.

So you're no better than a virus?

It sputtered. That's missing the point entirely. You're the virus, not me. From my perspective.

Uh huh.

“Excuse,” said a voice over Susan's shoulder. She twisted around to look, and there was a tall monster in some kind of robe. Which was odd, because as Susan looked around it seemed other monsters, even those without fur, went about their lives totally naked. She had gotten used to it being a pony so it was no big deal, but as she glanced around she saw the others looking over in her direction with odd looks on their faces. (If they had them.) She looked at the speaker again and noticed the creature's eyes were bound, though it seemed to be looking right at her. It had pale yellow skin, a tuft of blue hair on its head, and three digit hands. An array of tiny feet supported it, making Susan think it probably glided along rather than strode.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Forgive me for asking, but is that a history book in your hand because you are in fact from the Shadow World and trying to understand this place you now find yourself in so that you can talk to the right person thereby attaining an item which will serve as one piece of the solution to save the life of a human queen you are hesitant to kill?”

Susan tried to parse that. *What, is he all lung inside there?* “Yes?”

“Excellent, then I am not too late and I respectfully ask that you accompany me to see the Honcho Head, leader of the resistance forces who has recently sought the help of the Seers of Elzabet for the best strategy for attaining his goal which also happens to coincide with you attaining yours?”

“What? Slow down! Do you mean the head honcho?”

“No.”

Susan waited for more, but no more come. *What, does this fellow have two modes; endless stream of words and monosyllable replies? Still, it knew about me, and what do I have to lose?*

“Indeed,” said the being with a smile. “Come.” It turned and glided away, heading towards the door.

Susan raised a finger, but thought better of it. She put the book away, found Sparkle, and headed out the door with the creature. They walked for some time, and Susan found herself wondering how the blind creature knew where it was going.

“By the way,” she asked at last, “is there something wrong with your eyes? I can fix it, if you would like.”

“I have purposefully negated my common vision so that my value to the Seers of Elzabet is increased by nature of allowing my inner vision to become stronger to compensate, thus allowing me more glimpses into the future and my surroundings on a level those without such gifts would find hard to understand if described.”

“Oh.”

They walked in silence another moment.

“I... appreciate the offer.”

“Of course.” Susan gave a little smile.

Finally they arrived at what almost seemed a temple, with a very clear “eye” motif, both as the building seemed to resemble an eye and there was eye symbolism everywhere. Her guide turned and led her inside. Almost inside the door was a desk and off to the left, what appeared to be a waiting area. The figure behind the desk greeted them.

“Brother Thadious, it is as you foretold. The Honcho Head arrived just moments ago, and I directed him to chamber four as you requested.”

“Thanks. Follow.”

A door to the right slid open, and Susan followed her strange companion through, looking at door numbers. Those rooms that were open all seemed different, some big, some small. Some dark, some not. One with lots of chairs in a circle, one with two chairs facing each other. Her guide knocked on the door of four and then entered. Susan took only one step into the room before almost reaching for her sword, as floating there was indeed the “Honcho Head.” A person sized head, no body attached, and looking remarkably like a human head scaled up.

“Honcho Head,” said her companion, taking a seat. “We know why you have come, and so I have brought you the answer to your question so that you two may come to a mutual understanding and have both of your concerns addressed leading to a brighter future for all the true people so I will leave you now that this future can begin.” He got up again and without a backward glance (not that he could) glided out of the room.

“Windbag,” muttered the head. “All these Seers are a bit kooky, if you ask me. Comes of peering into the future so much. Ah, were are my manners? I’m Honcho, nice to meet you.” It stuck out its tongue.

“Uh, and you as well?” Susan reached for it, but couldn’t quite grasp it. *Oh right, the technique that’s keeping me from touching anything. How am I going to explain that?* It turned out she didn’t have to, he started laughing.

“Love getting people with that! Well, come, sit, sit. And who is your friend?”

“Friend? Oh, this is Sparkle, and I’m Susan. What is going on here?”

He chuckled. “Sort of whisked you away, didn’t he? Like I said, crazy! But they’re usually right, and apparently they already knew what I wanted. You’re the answer, huh? Don’t look like much, no offense.”

Susan thought a second, then decided to put her cards on the table. That guy had seemed to know she was human and hadn’t freaked out, maybe this guy wouldn’t either? “What if I looked like this?” She dropped the *shape-shift*, but his reaction was not what she expected, given that the guards she eluded the night before kept trying to shoot her.

The head nodded, thoughtful. “So, the shadow world noticed, at last? Are you some sort of advanced scout? Or are you all that’s necessary? I saw the paper this morning, that’s what made up my mind. Figured it was best to come see what the Seers had to say, of course they’re sworn to secrecy so that’s fine. And here you are, don’t know how they pulled that one off, but if you’re willing to talk and let me explain... We aren’t all behind the new corporate mentality, and I hope I can convince you. Yes, you must be the answer all right, and just as I thought, the time is now. Strike before they get too powerful, that’s what I’ve always said. You’ll help, of course?”

“Help what? What are you talking about?”

“Why, the destruction of Monsters, Inc. of course! What else?”

Susan looked at the Honcho as if he had suddenly sprouted a body. "Destroy Monsters Inc? Look, I'm not here to destroy anything, if you think that you've got the wrong idea!"

"Really?" Honcho seemed genuinely confused. "Was the story of what you did upon emerging from the factory a fabrication? That your touch burned, and you threw people around like they were nothing? What was that, if not retaliation for our actions against your world?"

"Well, yes, that's true, those things happened. But I don't know what you're doing to 'my' world so you're going to have to start from the beginning. I've only just absorbed some of your history and I'm already beginning to lose it because I was whisked here immediately afterwards."

"So you're not here for some kind of revenge?"

"Revenge? Why?"

He stared at her, floating there. "You really don't know, do you? But if that's the case..." He floated lower, coming to rest on the ground. "Then I've said way too much. Are you, uh, going to kill me now?"

"No! Why would I do that? What are you going on about?"

"I was so sure," he said softly. "Humans are violent creatures, we've seen that throughout your history. I figured, well, all of us in the resistance did, that as soon as one person slipped up and humans found out about our harvesting they would retaliate. That's why I thought you were here. I mean all that violence against the company, how could it *not* be that?"

"You took a big risk, coming here alone, didn't you?"

"I didn't know the Seers would dump you in my lap, so to speak. But when they did I figured... but never mind that now. So why are you here, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Something is happening in my world, your 'shadow world.' I need something from this world to put a stop to it. Without it, their world dies and maybe yours does too, if they're connected somehow."

Oh, I'll be taking the energy of this place too, don't worry.

"And your attack last night?"

"Self defense. The first guy was an accident. He grabbed my hand, I didn't know I would do that to him. Then guards started shooting at me and trying to grab me so I ran. I was just trying to get away without hurting anyone else!"

A blue tufted head poked into the room. "We know what it is you seek and if you aid the resistance in the way we believe you will that thing will come into your possession quite naturally and we will then put you through a door back to your own world where you may speak to the one who will combine what you have and allow you to fulfill your mission." He went away again.

"Crazy. All of them," Honcho repeated.

"Solves my problem though. So tell me about this resistance, as I guess I'm being drafted into helping."

"Gladly!" He started hovering again. "You say you don't know too much of our history, so I'll lay the important points out for you. We've been watching you ever since you lived in caves and hoping you didn't find a way into our world like we found the ways into yours. You didn't, and agents stationed in the shadow world studied you closely to see what made you tick. They were the ones that discovered Scream Energy."

"What energy?"

"Scream. It turns out that when your people, humans, scream in terror, that energy can be collected by specialized equipment and converted into something we can use."

"What? That's preposterous! I mean there's no way that could be true. I mean you're telling me I could scream right now and it could power a lightbulb?"

Honcho shook himself. "Not you. I doubt you're afraid of anything, and especially not anything around here. It has to be a genuine scream of terror. There is a difference."

A light bulb was being powered in Susan's brain. "Which we are more than willing to provide you, because to us you look incredibly scary."

"Correct. One look at one of the true people and your kind react will manner of wailings and gnashings of teeth. Of course one must maintain balance- frighten you too much and you'll stop being scared because that's all we do. Scare you and retreat once we have the scream. Too little and our requirements for power won't be met. But that's beside the point. And where we come in."

"The resistance?"

"Exactly. We felt that it was wrong to basically terrorize an entire people just to power our modern day conveniences. But try telling someone who used to have to read by candlelight that they have to go back to that candle after they've seen an electric lamp. And the reason- because we don't want to scare the shadow people anymore. Most people here see you as little more than animals."

"Great."

"We don't, of course. But we knew that even if you were, animals can only take so much. Before long we would be totally dependent on the energy your race provides for us, and that would be the time shadow people- forgive me, humans- would pour through those doors and destroy us."

Susan couldn't help but nod. "If they knew, they probably would, so you're right about that."

"Plus, even if they never found out, there is another concern."

"What's that?"

"Monsters Inc. itself. What if we did depend upon them, for everything? Look at what we've been able to achieve in just a few short years after learning about scream power! Cars and busses, vans and trucks. How much further might it go, froggy, go?"

You have no idea.

"You're worried the organization might just sort of take over everything and then become too powerful to ever stop?"

"Exactly. You say that almost as if you know something..."

Susan chuckled, looking over to Sparkle. She nodded. "Let me tell you about a little company named Shinra. They figured out how to turn the life energy that left people when they died into electrical power, so if you think a little screaming is bad, think again. This was actually harming life, because that energy wasn't replenished, so they were literally killing themselves off. This company go so big, they not only controlled the planet's entire energy supply, they moved into other fields. Weapons. Space travel. Genetic Engineering. They weren't easy to stop."

"Wait, this happened in the shadow world? And what's generic engineering?"

"Not yours, no. See, I'm actually from yet another world you can't reach through your doors. A parallel shadow world, where events play out differently. In fact only a few are allowed to travel between shadow worlds, so let's just say reality is more complex than you first thought."

"I see it must be. I would love to hear that story from the beginning, but let's focus on our problem for the moment. So this Shinra seems very much like our Monsters Inc. does it not?"

"A very close parallel." *And one I wonder if I'll see again, if I travel long enough. I mean really, how many different stories can there be? Will I see parallels everywhere if I look long enough?*

"As it seems, according to the Seer, that our purposes align for the moment, will you help us?"

Susan drew a long breath and let it out. "I don't want to hurt anyone..."

"Nor do we! We simply want to destroy the capability of Monsters Inc to travel to your world so easily. This will force us to develop our own sources of power instead of relying on you. I can't imagine you're happy about learning what my kind has done to yours."

Susan got up and started pacing. "You say humans aren't harmed, only scared?"

"As far as the company line goes, yes. What really goes on inside that factory I can only guess. I suppose we should have sent in someone to report that, now that I think about it. Huh. I should write that down. Oh, right, no arms."

"You aren't thinking of letting it continue, are you?" Sparkle asked.

"What harm is it doing? I mean yes, if they become Shinra it could be bad, but I can't condemn a company for what it *might* do. And what if they did? Shinra was taking the energy of life itself, meaning less animals born, less plants sprouting. Just making someone scream and then getting out of there seems... rather tame in comparison. If I attack that place and even one person dies because of me, but if I had done nothing no one would have died."

"I see your point. We're going to have to go there eventually though."

"Why?"

"Seems like this world has something pretty unique. They can capture human emotion and use it later as a power source. How much do you want to bet that's why we're here? Remember those canisters we saw strewn about the place where we popped up? I bet that's what we need. A canister of scream energy."

"I could just get one here with magic! I know where they are."

Sparkle shook her head. "Those will be empty. You wouldn't leave fresh batteries just laying around the floor, would you?"

"Oh. No. I hate it when you make sense."

"Probably because it happens so often. No, we need a plan."

"I agree, but what can we do that doesn't involve hurting anyone but still lets this resistance achieve its goal?"

"I have to wonder- Honcho, the company knows about you, right?"

"We picket the place every day, they know about us. We've been doing some raids too, but small time stuff. Our members are becoming more bold, but the company has the money to hire real guards with real weapons. It's a dangerous game we're playing."

"Just the fact they know about you is good enough in this case. I think we can figure something out that makes everyone happy."

"Go on!" Susan prompted.

"Think back to Shinra and Cloud's group that we fell into. They started working together at the end, didn't they? They got the shield down around the crater, we went in and took out Sephiroth. They fought Weapon, we fought Weapon. By the time it was over, both sides realized where the other was coming from."

"You want the resistance and the company to come together over a common foe, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Common foe? Who?"

"Me," Susan answered quietly. "She wants to unite everyone against me."

"Thereby proving our point," exclaimed Honcho. "We show them how dangerous you are, and they'll have no choice but to shut down the program!"

Susan shook her head. "I don't like it. As long as humans aren't actually harmed, there's really no downside to 'scream energy.' It's clean, renewable, easy to collect."

"But we don't know that. Shinra thought they weren't hurting anything either."

Something is being gathered, how do we know that something isn't important to the people of this world somehow? Everything has its price. We should show them other ways of generating power."

"Certainly we could." She barked a laugh. "I can see it now. Two doors into the shadow world that exit to some remote location. Put them vertically, somewhat far apart here, right next to each other there, and toss a hunk of iron through. The iron falls through the bottom door and emerges into the shadow world, crossing a very short distance there before falling a long distance again here. The falling continues and you put a coil around it, getting all the free energy you could wish for."

"I should really be writing this down. Darn it I knew I should have asked for a secretary."

Susan smiled. "We'll note some ideas down before we leave. But really, scream energy just avoids so many problems like pollution and such I have to wonder if a little human fright is a small price to pay."

"But if your people ever found out- our supply would be cut off because they wouldn't be scared anymore, or they would invade just like we fear!"

"There would be a way around that," mused Sparkle.

"Like in our world?" Susan asked, wondering if she was thinking the same.

"Exactly. What if the company targeted a very specific portion of the human world?" Sparkle asked. "A portion that wouldn't be believed anyway, and is replaced every few years."

"Who?"

"Kids," both said.

"The young? You want us to target the young? Isn't that a little cruel?"

Susan shrugged. "Maybe. But I bet it would work. They'll frighten easily, there's lots of them so your supply will grow as your demand does, and if your people stay out of sight adults will stop believing in 'monsters' and make your efforts all the more effective. Just don't go for the same kids week after week, and after a certain age move on. They'll forget about 'monsters' as well, have kids of their own, and the cycle will continue."

"And you think this is happening on your world?"

"I know kids are worried about monsters, and adults are always telling them monsters don't exist. It sounds familiar if something similar to what you're doing is going on there. Man! How would I ever prove it though? That would be wild!"

"I suppose the plan has merit. The young would be easier to get alone, and if done properly there would be less risk to us. Scare them at night, the darkness helps us both be scarier than we are and increases the chances we'll not be seen clearly. But this still keeps power in the hands of Monsters Inc!"

"Oh right. Let me think."

"Wait, it doesn't have to. Look, my rampage proves you right, right?"

"Right..."

"Humans are dangerous, yadda yadda. Your group could demand to be hired as consultants or something. Yeah!" Susan's eyes lit up. "We stage the whole thing- start to finish. The company won't be able to do anything about me, but if you guys come in and 'save the day' by capturing me, maybe with some kind of 'secret weapon' or something, they would be forced to listen to you. You could basically get oversight of the company and can provide a system of checks and balances to their power. All in the name of protecting the world from us humans."

"I'll have to talk to the others, of course, but it seems like a sound plan. You would be willing to do something like that?"

"Provided you don't mind everyone surviving at the end of it, sure. My attacks will have to be non-lethal, but they'll knock out whoever I hit. Maybe you can lie and say they're dying, but you have a cure. They won't stay unconscious for long though, you'll have to move fast."

"I think something could be arranged. I'm sure we have members in the nearest hospital, they could provide some kind of fake remedy and claim we gave it to them, anticipating the attack."

"The public would eat it up."

"Yes, I think they would. Come! How would you like to meet some of our team? We can plan your 'attack' of the city and how it's going to go down. Get some things in place today and you can start your attack tonight."

"Can't wait," replied Susan, meaning it.

"You really meant it, didn't you?" Sparkle asked her some time later, sitting in an abandoned warehouse at the edge of town.

Why are there always abandoned warehouses to hide in? Weird.

"Sorry, what? I was thinking about warehouses. Meant what?"

"Looking forward to it. You actually are."

“A little. I mean who doesn’t have a rampage through the city streets with *absolute impunity* fantasy?”

Sparkle raised a paw.

“Sure, keep telling yourself that. But think about it, I get to cut loose, smash a few things up, make it look good, and tomorrow everyone will know that... I’m a terrorist. Huh.”

“Yeah. Think about that for a second.”

“Eh, whatever. I can’t do something that would result in harming someone if I tried. Everything is non-lethal and property damage. And consider this- which is safer from a rampage standpoint? The resistance organization rushing in there and getting shot by security guards or me, who can’t be hurt?”

“But you can still cause harm. That first monster was able to touch you. And what if a bullet bounces off you and hits someone else? So don’t think this is going to be totally risk free for these people.”

“I suppose. Actually, I’ll take off my LUCK increasing *Materia* and *talisman*, that way their bullets will be more ‘attracted’ to me.” She did. “There. Now more bullets will hit me than just go past, potentially hitting others around me.”

“I guess that will have to do. Still, I don’t like you looking forward to stuff like this. You’re supposed to be practicing less violent ways of getting things done, like you used to do. Snapping wands and threatening people. Putting them to sleep or hypnotizing them.”

Susan shook her head. “That was fine back home. They knew what I could do. Here that would be just boasting or a bluff. Plus, nothing around here is magical like it was at home. I have to follow up on threats, and things are more dangerous on these other worlds. I can’t just shut down someone’s magic if they aren’t using magic. And *metapower* will only get me so far. The stakes are higher, the risks greater. And it’s all practice for rescuing my father, I think I’m going need every trick I learn along the way once I get there.”

“Just try not to enjoy tonight too much, all right?”

“I’ll try.”

“Let’s go over the plan again.”

“Sure.” Susan pulled out a map. “We’re here. I’m headed in this direction-”

“*This* direction.”

“Right. This direction, back towards the factory. In about...” she checked her watch, “an hour and a half someone is going to provide an ‘anonymous tip’ about ‘the human’ being here and a bunch of cops should bust in. That’s my signal to start. I rampage back towards the factory where I’ll start busting the place up.”

“Which will be my opportunity to swipe a canister.”

“Right. The resistance will then net me with their ‘special nets’ and I’ll find myself ‘unable’ to break free. They won’t be able to harm me because of *invulnerability* and various immunities I can take when they try stuff. The factory people will ask why, I’ll tell them I’ve been given the powers of many humans to take revenge on scaring us all these years. (This will explain why I’m alone and why I can do so many things.) The resistance will argue I should just be thrown back because what else are they going to do with me? A Seer will then show up, offer their services, and put me through the right door back to my world, where my mission might finally come to an end because they promise it’s the workshop of the person that can mix the potion.”

“Seems about right. I’ll be guiding you from a distance, as we can’t trust you to actually make it there. Keep an eye out for me.”

“At least I’m not afraid of dogs.”

“I choose not to buy that off.”

“Same here. I have you to be my sense of direction.”

“Great. I guess all we can do now is wait.”

Two hours later as monsters with guns poured into the place: “Showtime!”

Susan has trying hard not to admit to herself how much fun she had been having the last twenty minutes, but couldn't quite manage it. The rampage had been going well, and she had even learned a few things. First, her STrength bonus allowed her to easily lift any stray cars that officers were using for cover and second that she could only physically throw those cars were it was guaranteed no one would be hurt. Trying to smash them through a shop window didn't work even if she couldn't see inside, presumably as it might hit someone hiding there. But an empty store was just fine to chuck something through.

She had dropped the *kinetics* technique after just a moment as it was clear everyone facing her had been briefed to stay far away lest they be "dissolved" at her touch. She simply had to toss aside anything they were hiding behind and any officer would scream and book it directly away from her. She instead focused on making it look good, and leaving a trail of destruction behind her. Initially she had argued against such measures, but the resistance assured her Monsters Inc was *swimming* in cash because everything ran on scream energy and whole industries had sprung up overnight to come up with new ways to harness it. So even when it wasn't being used to light up homes and such, companies imported canisters by the hundreds to power their research experiments to try and beat other companies to the punch developing the "next big thing."

In other words, one slightly torn up city street could easily be covered by the company, both weakening them financially and strengthening the position of the resistance who had been worried something like this was only a matter of time. So she went nuts, smashing everything in sight. It turned out some monsters did have "powers" like breathing fire or just growing to an enormous size, but with *Velocity* going that sort of thing was easy to dodge and she could turn their abilities off with *metapower*. Those that could do something like that seemed to be able to do only one thing, and were helpless without it. A monster that relied on fire breath suddenly standing there huffing and puffing to produce more was an easy target for the waves of *knockout* Susan was throwing around. Hard to dodge an energy wave that took up a whole street and was several meters high to boot even if you aren't a combatant. And it was clear nearly all of these people weren't. Despite their fearsome appearance, Susan found they were pretty much just like average humans. Oddly shaped humans, but they acted just like she would expect- If she had rampaged down a city street in her home reality (ignoring the fact she would have eventually faced competent magical opposition) the scene would probably have been the same.

But now, as planned, she strode up to the doors of Monsters Inc where a line of resistance fighters gripping nets waited. Susan had made the nets for them earlier, and they glittered with a metallic "thread" throughout, the "secret" substance that would "negate" her powers.

"Stand aside," she shouted at them, hoping Sparkle was now currently inside the place stealing a canister of scream energy. "You should know by now you cannot stop me."

"Fire!" shouted a crablike monster on the sidelines, and Susan looked up to see various monsters set crude explosive launchers into place on the roof.

Good thing I traded in Seeing for Protection before all this started. Just in case.

As they fired, Susan wordlessly put a barrier around the resistance fighters standing there in case the explosion got out of hand. Or claw. Or fleshy protuberance. Whatever.

BOOM!

Susan blinked through the smoke, waving it away and wishing she had traded *shape-shift* for *environmental adaption*. Still, she brightened, waving a hand and using a low powered but high radius *Kinetic* technique to push the smoke away.

"As I was saying-"

"Fire!"

"You know, this really isn't-"

BOOM!

"I'm starting to get annoyed."

"Fi-"

The Honcho floated in front of the man giving the orders. "You must see by now that conventional means are useless against this human."

The man growled, but shouted "Pull back!" and the troops on the roof retreated.

"Though I must say, a fine display of pyrotechnics. Of course, that probably did more damage than the human did..." He looked around, and various bits of the immediate area were on fire. "However did you come up with such a thing?"

"You think we haven't been planning for something like this ourselves?"

"For all the good it did you."

"So lets see you do any better with these stupid nets of yours, then."

"Gladly. Resistance members, cast your nets!"

Susan allowed herself to be entangled in the dozen or so nets that went flying in her direction, and she laughed. "You think this can hold me? I'll show you how wrong you are, monsters!"

With that she... did nothing. Okay, that's somewhat of a lie, she activated the active form of her *Energy Regeneration* which was quite flashy, surrounding her with an aura of power. *Might as well get some energy back while I complete the next act.* She allowed them to sweat it out for a few seconds, wondering if she was going to betray them at the last second but she glanced around. "What? It's not... working? Let me out of here, you ugly creatures! Let me go!" She started to fake struggling, making sure not to make any STrength checks and accidentally break out. "No! Somehow... getting weaker. What is this stuff? Release me at once!"

Susan turned her *energy regeneration* on and off a few times, then slumped over, scowling at them. "When I get out of here, you're all in trouble."

"Wait, that actually worked?" the crab looking guy exclaimed, incredulous. "Impossible!"

"Come over here, I'll snap your neck!" Susan threatened him. "Just wait, I get out of here..."

"Now you see? You need us," Honcho smugly gloated. "Admit it."

"What if we fired at her now?"

"I wouldn't," he cautioned. "Her powers may be weakened but I doubt that means conventional weapons would be any more effective. If you hit the net and she could get out. We don't have more, you know how expensive that stuff is to make?"

"Yes, do it!" shouted Susan. "I'm helpless, finish me off! A dozen more like me will tear this place apart when I don't come back! HAHAHAAH."

"What? Is it telling the truth?"

"Unlikely," mused the Honcho. "If a dozen like her could be sent, why didn't they? Why send just this one?"

"It's a her? How can you tell?"

The Honcho coughed and looked embarrassed.

"Ah, yes, never mind. Yes, she's probably just trying to goad me into attacking and freeing her by accident. But really, why didn't they?"

"Probably had agents standing by places we had been seen in the past, hoping to get lucky and make it through our portals."

The crab nodded. "Yes, that makes a lot of sense. Human, they want to send you back, what do you have to say about that?"

"You can't keep us out forever!"

"You misunderstand. Your choices are to go back or thrown in a hole somewhere and left to rot!"

"I'll get these nets off eventually!"

"It's true, that would be a risk," cautioned the Honcho.

The crab seemed to be thinking about it. "Answer some questions for me and I'll send you back."

"I'll consider it." *Actually, ask away. I need to stall and give Sparkle enough time to fulfill her mission.*

“What are you? It’s been a long time since my school days but I’m pretty sure I would have remembered my Human Studies teacher telling me you people could fly and blow stuff up like you’ve been doing.”

Now it was Susan’s turn to appear and think. She finally answered. “It’s true, most humans are as powerless as you monsters- sorry, True People, seem to be. But there are those few that wield magic and can do amazing things.”

“Magic has been studied, I believe. It’s not very strong here though, so it doesn’t explain how you can do so much.”

Oh, interesting.

The magic around here is ‘tied up’ so to speak in keeping them alive. You might say they’re all somewhat magical creatures, after all, how else would such a diverse group of individuals be able to mate and carry on their species? They can’t do magic because they are magic, so not much is left to draw upon to do spells with.

That’s surprisingly helpful, coming from you.

But meaningless. Who cares. I just thought you might like to know.

“That’s true, it doesn’t. I suppose I can tell you, as I’m at your mercy anyway. Many magic users from the Shadow World are maintaining my abilities in this one. These stupid nets,” more fake struggling, “must be disrupting that. So even if you could somehow manage to kill me, they would not only know how so they could prepare for it next time, they would start preparing the next person to come through.”

“How did you come through?”

Susan laughed. “I’m not telling you everything, crabby. Let me out of here and maybe I’ll be more generous.”

“Don’t let her out!” Honcho’s concern showed on his... well everywhere as he was only a face, really.

“I wasn’t planning to!” the man snapped back. “Now be quiet.”

“Don’t forget who made this operation possible,” he growled.

“Yes, yes, you won’t let me I’m sure. So what do you want? Why are you here?”

“Are you kidding me? Are you being serious right now? You’ve been invading our world since forever! You think we didn’t notice?”

“We never hurt you. We simply wished to study you.”

“Study how best to kill us!”

“No! Just... in general.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Prove what? I swear, not one of my agents has ever harmed a human. We as a species mean you no harm. Now or ever. We collect- we do what we’re there to do and we leave again. That’s all.”

“Yes, what is it you’re doing on that side, exactly?”

“Never you mind. I’m not telling you everything either.”

“Humph. I suppose that’s only fair. Still, I can say the same, so for the moment why don’t you just consider my little demonstration tonight a warning?”

“What? According to reports you’ve been smashing your way down the street and blowing people away left and right.”

“Ah!” Susan raised a finger. “But have any deaths been reported?”

That set him back. “Give me that!” he snarled, yanking what must be a walky-talky type device from a nearby monster. He spoke into it for a moment, then shoved it back.

“Apparently all the people you attacked have started waking up. A bit sore, but surprisingly none the worse for wear.”

“That was by design, not accident. My techniques could easily have been made lethal, but we felt simply getting your attention was all that was required. This time.”

“But what about those people you melted when you first got here?”

“Ah, now that I am sorry for. I didn’t realize my people and yours were so... incompatible. Possibly a side effect of living in such different worlds for so long? I don’t know, and it would be hard to study without putting your people at risk. I will be telling my people about it so that in the future such accidents don’t happen. Did... those two I touched die?”

"They'll live, but they've been badly hurt. The first more than the second, but they had to amputate a good portion of that first worker's upper torso to stop the degradation. He'll never work again, even in a scare factory like this one. He'll need too many drugs to dull the pain to be worth much to anyone."

"That was not my intent. I think I can help, though."

"Like I would trust you."

Susan pulled three *Regeneration* papers from her *pocket*. "You see these? They're a healing spell I was given, in case I needed them. Simply press them onto the being you want to heal, and say "*Regeneration*" while you will them to be healed. It'll work."

"It's some kind of trick!"

"I'll take that risk," said one of the resistance. "If she's lying, we'll know it here and now. I think it's what she intends anyway, you can see there's three there, we only need two."

"I can't tell, actually. I'll take your word for it but I'm not going near her. Get them yourself."

The monster carefully made his way over the netting, and Susan fluttered them down where he could pick them up after she pulled back a little. The monster shot himself in the arm then had someone else use the *paper*, which of course worked fine.

"It seems this time you're as good as your word."

"Look, I won't say we humans are saints. We're territorial, expansionistic, intolerant, greedy, smug bastards. There's been no shortage of us being cruel to each other for basically made up reasons, and I won't lie and say that's not the case. But we're also fiercely loyal to our own, inventive, inquisitive, and when there's a crisis we can pull together like you wouldn't believe. We're trying, day by day, for a better future. Isn't that what can be said about your people as well? Maybe we'll never be able to work together but you need to stop all this creeping about in our world before its war between us. How can we trust your intentions when you won't tell me what you want with us?"

"We can't!"

"Why!"

"I... can't tell you. We need you, that's all I can- what?"

The Honcho floated close to the crablike guy and started whispering to him.

And now for the bait on the hook- the plan to just use kids and regulate the flow of scream energy from the 'shadow world.' All overseen by the CDA, or Child Detection Agency, of course. The only monsters with the technology to stop us humans from rampaging about.

The two spoke back and forth in hushed tones, and finally the Honcho, looking pleased with himself, floated back to his original position.

"Very well. I've just been given the outline of a plan to... reduce our presence in your world. Can you at least give us, I don't know, a year? And if you're still unsatisfied come talk to us instead of just attacking?"

"I didn't want to attack in the first place. It all went wrong from the moment I got here. I was supposed to just make a demonstration, but like I said, I panicked when that first mon-person touched me and then people started pointing things at me and there were loud noises and metal started hitting me really hard and I wasn't sure what was going on or what those wheeled things were-"

"I understand. We'll make sure everyone knows not to touch the next human they see, believe me."

"That would really ease my mind. What are those wheeled things anyway? They were too heavy when I lifted them to be pulled by horses, and I don't see any horses. Do other mons- people pull them or something?"

He leaned over to the guy with the walky-talky and asked something, but it was too low for Susan to hear.

"He's asking why you don't know what cars are," Sparkle said, *shape-shifted* into her fairy form and making her way through the netting. "He's saying because they haven't been invented yet on that side, along with guns and such."

"You got it?" she asked quietly.

"Got it. We can leave at any time."

"Fantastic. Great job."

“Naturally.” She hid behind Susan’s hair.

“Never mind, never mind!” The man waved her query off. “You humans will invent them yourselves, I’m sure. So, the year?”

“I’ll ask my superiors, but as long as you show good faith by returning me with your word you will stop invading my world, I’m sure they’ll agree. If not I’ll try and get back here sometime and let you know.”

“Oh, so you’ve invented bureaucracy, at least. That seems like all I can ask for at the moment. Now, the Honcho has told me the Seers have informed him of what door you need to go through, but may I ask you bind your eyes? You probably toured the factory when you arrived but I would feel better about taking you through it now if you couldn’t see.”

“Very well.” Susan pulled a shirt out of her *pocket* and rolled it up, using it to blindfold herself. “Is that acceptable?”

“I have no idea if you even see in the same way we do, but I suppose. We’re going to pull you along, please don’t fight us.”

“That’s fine.”

So Susan was dragged through the factory, not that she could see anything, and with their direction put back through. She heard a door slam, and voices coming from her left. She took the blindfold off, shoved it back in her *pocket* and went back into *magical mode*. Having lost powers, Sparkle jumped down as a cat and started sniffing around as well. If they had done their job properly, she should be nearby the witch that could mix up the ingredients so she wanted *magic sense* at the ready.

She glanced around, and it seemed whoever lived here was somewhat obsessed with bears and carving them out of wood. Also an argument was going on in the next room, and Susan stepped around the corner.

“You’re a witch!” insisted the absolutely gorgeous young woman in the center of the room. Susan stared at this girl, entranced by her mane of red hair that fell in waves below her shoulders. It was the puffiest thing Susan had ever seen, and she longed, she *ached* to run her hands through it and feel how soft it was. Because it looked soft. And nice. And RED. This “You’re a witch.” “I’m a woodcarver!” went on as Susan got lost in her vision of that hair and that face being the only thing she could see as she lay on her back on a soft, soft bed somewhere.

Why do we even need other hair colors? Ariel had red hair, but it had been underwater all her life so to say it was ‘stressed’ would be a massive understatement. But that hair? That hair is lovely. I should do something with my hair, I just sort of let it grow... I bet I could come up with a spell or technique to change it to red. After I leave here, I mean, I don’t want them to think I’m copying them.

You know, The Darkness put in dryly. Studies have shown that woman are more attracted to scarcity than other factors. Take facial hair in men, for example. If shown a bunch of bearded men, more woman will chose a shaven guy as being ‘more attractive’ even if they were initially thinking one of the bearded guys was hot. And the same works in reverse, they’ll choose the bearded guy if shown a bunch of clean shaven guys. You’re just attracted to red hair because it’s scarce.

Maybe so, but it’s attached to someone with an eight looks at least, and check out that body! And that hair! How does she even get it to do that?

“Staring is rude!” said the crow from the rafters, and both the red haired girl and the crone she was arguing with whirled and stared at her. Susan dropped her eyes from the bird and met the pale green eyes of the red haired girl.

And look at those freckles! So cute! Stay calm, Susan. If you want to impress this girl you’ve got to do it now. You’ll never get another chance, so don’t fail that PERsonality roll!

“Uh, hi?” She grinned, then looked horrified.

YOU BLEW IT!

Teaching a Lesson

When: Several awkward seconds later

Where: Woodcarver/witch's hut

Susan cleared her throat. "I mean, good day to you both. And what a lovely... shop? You have here. Yes. Very... uh, bears. Many bears I mean. In the mountains and the cities even out at Pismo Beach- You're never out of reach from a bear."

The older woman stared at Susan, then tried to see behind her. She turned to the red haired girl. "Is she with you?"

"Never seen her before in me life."

Oh no, she would have a cute accent as well. Is there anything about her that doesn't scream sex appeal? Maybe she has robot legs under that dress. Big, clunky robot wheels instead of legs. Or that hair is actually a heatsink for the plate in her head that cools her CPU. Yes, that's got to be it.

"How did you get in here?" asked the woman.

"Would you believe a monster closet?"

"Monster? Who are you?"

Susan took a deep breath. "I'm Susan. I've come to put a stop to winter before it destroys us all."

The two looked at each other and both started laughing.

"Stop winter!?" said the young girl. "What are ya on about? Ya can't stop the seasons from turning!"

"I admit it's been a little colder than usual," said the older lady, "but it's nothing to get too excited about."

Sparkle jumped up on the table next to them.

"Cat! Cat!" yelled the bird. "There's a cat in the shop!"

"Perhaps if we could just all calm down for a second?" she suggested. "Susan can wipe the drool from her chin and take a moment, then perhaps she could be a little more coherent?" She glared.

"I'm not drooling!" Susan insisted, wiping her chin just in case.

"And now a talking cat! You're both witches! I knew it!"

"How many times do I have to say I'm a woodcarver?"

"I'll admit to being a witch," Susan said easily. "What's the big deal?"

The woman scoffed. "If you're a witch I'm a fairy godmother."

"Okay, maybe not a witch, but I'm both extremely powerful and versatile as a spellcaster. It more than qualifies me. But for this- I need your help."

"I was here first!" insisted the redhead, cutely stamping her foot.

"I have the greater need!" insisted Susan.

"Prove it!"

"Sadly, if she's going to say what I think she's going to say, I'll have to agree with her," the witch told her. "Tell me what you need from me, exactly."

"So you are a witch!"

"Yes, all right, I'm a witch, would you stop going on about it? Honestly, everybody thinks magic is the solution to all their problems but after they get it, they decide maybe they were better off beforehand. I've seen it many times. You'll be no different!"

"It's true. Sometimes the solution is punching someone in the face, not magic."

She grinned a little. "I don't think I can punch me mother in the face."

"I'd be happy to!"

"Susan!" Sparkle chided.

"What? Just trying to be helpful!"

"Ahem?"

"Oh, sorry. I need you to combine some ingredients I've been gathering from all over the world and strip Queen Elsa of her ice powers before the world gets frozen over." She glanced over at the girl. "Does that lend some perspective?"

A chair scooted over and caught the witch as she sat down, obviously a bit shocked. "Monsters. Yes, you came from... To think that spell would be used in my lifetime. I would never have dreamed-" She shook herself. "And you think you're the one to decide this, is that it?"

"It's either that or kill her. I could kill her, mind, but I would prefer not to, for one her sister requested I try something else first. Hence this crazy world spanning quest of mine."

"And what evidence do you have that doing this is the only solution?"

"I'm here, aren't I? The trolls that told me the method certainly seemed to believe it."

"Pah, trolls. Can't trust that song loving bunch. No, I'm going to have to go see for myself."

"Are you crazy? She's guarded by a man that can use all your powers against you. Plus he can rip the souls out of people and use them as weapons! You get near there and my only chance to resolve this peacefully goes out the window. Because you'll be dead. Or worse, another weapon for that red haired guy- what is it with this place and red hair, anyway?"

The witch cackled. "Don't worry, my pet. You think I learned magic for nothing? I won't get anywhere near the place. But before I do this I have to be sure. And there's some other components I'll need in addition to yours that I'll have to gather. Shouldn't take more than a day. Sorry dearie," she turned to the red haired girl. "But this really does take precedence. Oh, don't frown so!" She stood up and pulled Susan close. "You have a replacement! While I'm seeing what my magics tell me about the situation, this girl can help you. I'm sure it'll be a snap, if she's as powerful as she claims. Isn't that right?"

"Of course!"

"And not just because you've vaguely cute and female," put in Sparkle. "We help all kinds of people. It's just coincidence most of them are cute and female, like yourself. Did I mention-"

"Okay, we get the point!" Susan shushed her. "She's gorgeous, I admit it! What's the big deal?"

"Oh, thank you, I think?"

"I love your hair-"

"I thought you were in a hurry? Out, out! I need to work!" The witch shooed them out, followed them and closed the door, waited a second, then went back in for some strange reason.

Susan looked about, and it seemed they were in the middle of some woods somewhere. A black horse with white cannons and muzzle looked quizzically down at them, and Susan finally got a decent look at the girl. She was wearing a dress that was all torn to pieces, and that beautiful hair of hers actually fell below her elbows and had twigs and leaves all stuck in it.

I guess it isn't all sunshine and roses, having a cloud as hair.

"Are you all right?" she asked, looking the girl up and down. "You seem a bit banged up. Are you hurt at all?"

"Hurt?" She looked down at herself. "Ach, no, I'm fine. I'm still wearing the stupid dress, aren't I? And it does seem a bit torn up now that ya mention it. So now what?"

She started picking bits of the forest out of her hair, and the girl blushed. "Glad to hear it. That's better. Now you tell me about your problem and I come up with a solution." She looked around. "There's a log over there, you want to sit down? Or should we head back to where you live and talk there? I take it from the state of things you probably left in somewhat of a hurry, so maybe you're not too keen on going back there right away?"

She sighed. "Not at all, though I know that's impossible. Look, let's sit down then, shall we? I'm Merida, what's your name?"

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

"Nice to meet you," said Sparkle, waving a paw.

"Two talking animals in one day! What a marvel. And your accent- where are you from, exactly, and how did you get into that cottage like that?"

Ho ho! Do I detect someone else with Curious, I wonder?

"I'm from a long ways away," she hedged. "You wouldn't believe how far. As for getting into the cottage, I really did come through her closet. That's how that particular magic works. I'll be happy to answer all your questions about me, but let me work on your problem first, okay?"

"Oh, very well. I guess I'll start at the beginning."

So Merida told how she was being forced to marry one of the sons from the three other clans in the area, and her thoughts on the matter. Susan stared at her as she explained how she tried to get out of it.

"You mean to say you went out on the field, like an hour ago dressed in what used to be finery," she indicated the dress, "and declared you were shooing 'for your own hand' in marriage? You then outshot all three 'suitors' and totally pissed off your mother by chopping a tapestry in half. She threw your bow into the fire, causing you to run into the forest, see the wisps, and be guided to the witch's hut?"

"That's about right. Do you think what I did was wrong?"

Susan burst out laughing. "Wrong, are you nuts? That was *brilliant!* If I didn't know better, it's the sort of story I would be telling someone that I did. Talk about unconventional. You followed all the rules as they were given, and showed that none of the candidates were actually up to snuff. I do think each should have gotten like five arrows apiece, that one who got the bullseye just seems like luck to me. That would negate that... but that's neither here nor there. Wrong? By Hades, I should say not." She got up and started pacing in front of the log. "Springing it on your mother, who sounds like a control freak by the way, no offense, probably wasn't your best move. But you did follow the rules, which is probably why she got so upset. Oh man I wish I could have been there!" She drummed her feet into the ground.

"Merida you're amazing!"

"But now what do I do? She's probably still furious at me, and I've run off to boot!"

Susan calmed down. "That is an excellent question. Let me think." She paced for a moment or two. "We need to come to some compromise with your mother, but on our terms. Get her to come to us somehow, and be willing to listen."

"You could always just ransom her back to the kingdom," Sparkle joked. "We could use the spending money."

Susan halted abruptly. "That's a tremendous idea, Sparkle!"

"No, it's a terrible one. Did you miss the part where I was joking?"

"But think about it. Merida, you know your mother, would she come to your rescue if she thought you were in trouble?"

"I suppose, but what exactly are ya suggesting?"

"Let me answer that question with another question. When do you most appreciate something? Right after you lose it! We need to remind your mother that losing you is the worst. Possible. Thing. Once she realizes that, marriage will be far from her mind, and you can maybe get her to see reason."

"What reason is that?" Sparkle asked. "You're not making value judgments on their culture now, are you?"

"Oh. Well, maybe? Merida, how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Six- What? And they're planning your *wedding*? That's far too young!"

"In our society."

"In... our society," she agreed. "But still, come on! She's still a kid!"

"Didn't you *just* watch Ariel get married? And how old was she?"

"Er..."

"I am not a child!"

"Look, Merida, at sixteen your brain hasn't even fully developed yet. Believe me. And yes, maybe it does here, Sparkle, but I doubt it. They're humans and thus far humans have been about the same everywhere, no?"

"I can't argue that one, it's true."

"Okay. Sixteen. You should be having crushes all over the place and going on dates and getting to know dozens of boys (or girls) your age. Not just handed over to some stranger

you've never met." She turned to Sparkle. "At least Ariel was actually in love with her guy, and not being forced into anything. That's different."

"Sure it is."

"Exactly what I've been saying." Merida went on. "But," her face fell, "the clans are here. And they'll be angry because they each expected to have a fair shot at winning my hand."

Susan's face hardened. "Merida, you are not some prize to be won. They need to understand that, by force if necessary. You are not to feel bad because they came here with unrealistic expectations set by your mother. I forbid it, okay?" She grinned, and Merida grinned back.

"Deal. I can see them now, brawling in the throne room over me. Why did this have to happen? Can you really stop it?"

"I can but try, princess. I can but try."

An hour or so later, Susan was prepped and ready. Currently transformed into a large black bird and holding a lock of Merida's hair in her beak, she swooped through an open window and into the castle. Making her way towards the sounds of revelry, she came to a banquet hall where a worried looking woman was sitting on a throne while the enormous guy next to her was leading the room in some kind of battle song. She flew to the queen and perched on the armrest, looking around with glinting eyes. The queen immediately noticed and called for silence.

Susan set the hair down on the queen's lap and looked up at her. "Greetings, oh queen!" she called, spreading her wings in a mocking fashion. "My master bids me pass on a message to you, with that hair as proof of my words. So listen, and listen well!"

She heard cries of "witchcraft" but the queen silenced them. Susan went on. "If you wish to see your daughter again, come alone in one hour to the Leaping Boar at the edge of town. Bring enough valuables to impress her that the life of the princess is worth sparing. There you will receive instructions where to find her. Do this without fail and she will be unharmed."

"My daughter? Merida has been captured by a witch?" The big guy drew his sword and advanced menacingly on Susan. "I'll cut you down where you stand, bird! That shall be my answer to your master!"

"Back!" Susan shouted, doing a quick casting of *Thrust* with lots of energy thrown in, targeting his blade. It went shooting back but the man held onto it, impressing her. *I got a nineteen on that check, though I suppose you're big enough to have a much higher than average STRength. I made my point.* "I have delivered my message, I now bid you farewell. Remember, the Leaping Boar, one hour, alone." She flapped her wings and somewhat clumsily took off, flying out of the room and back into the setting sun.

Susan, in the new clothes she had made and carrying a staff, walked into the Leaping Boar forty five minutes later. With Merida's help and some *Creation* techniques she had made some area appropriate black leather armor and pants, topped off by a thick cape with hood. At her side hung a new sword, more for show but still somewhat visible while not being totally out of place like her Cloud swords would have been. In her left hand was a long, gnarled staff with an inset sphere which looked like glass but swirled with color and light. This effect had been created with *Illusion* and made permanent with *Metapower*, and served no real purpose but to impress.

So, you've become me after all.

Not really. This is all just dressings for the play we're about to put on. You'll notice I haven't actually tied up Merida or anything, she's right beside me.

Yeah, just keep telling yourself that.

Merida was, in fact, *Invisible*, while Sparkle walked beside her. Susan planned this to be just as enlightening for her as for the queen, to show Merida how far her mother would go to get her back, as Susan was pretty sure she wouldn't be disappointed in that area.

"I'll take that table in the back corner," she growled to the serving girl that hesitantly came up to her. "And make it quick."

"Uh, yes... mistress?" The girl was obviously at a loss as to what to call her, but Susan just stood staring until she turned and led the way. "And would you like something to eat?" she asked.

"You will bring me whatever you feel is the best meal made in this place. And be quick about it!"

"Yes!" she squeaked, and turned to go. Susan grabbed her hand.

"Girl!"

"Yes?"

"The queen will be along shortly, she is to be brought immediately to me, do you understand?"

"The queen?" The girl paled. "We are no place for a queen, please, do not even joke about..." She looked into Susan's eyes, and saw she wasn't joking. "Oh. Immediately. Yes."

Susan released her hand. "Then go."

The girl skittered away, and Susan kept from trying to think things like *Oh yes, I could get used to this.*

"I really hope you're not enjoying yourself right now," Sparkle cautioned, looking up at her.

"I have to make it look good. I gave her an hour, you can bet agents of the queen are already here checking out everyone coming into this place. Maybe all the people here are castle guards, I don't know. If I came in wearing a clown suit and throwing pies I wouldn't be taken seriously. This is all part of the act. It's what she *expects* to see, so I'm just giving her what she fears most- a competent, slightly scary witch of unknown power and potential that seriously would cut her daughter's throat without a second thought if I didn't get enough ransom money. Enjoy it? Perish the thought!"

"I hope you're right. Should have specified you couldn't lie to me in that *Contract*."

"What was that? My *poor sense* weakness must be playing up, all the background noise in this place. I didn't catch that last bit."

"Nothing."

"Ah."

Susan's food arrived, and she dug into it. She felt the chef probably got a decent result on his or her *cooking* check, as it wasn't spectacular but it wasn't poor either. In looking about the room her gaze fell onto a board that seemed to have wanted posters on it, and one of them she could have sworn was a *bear*.

"What's with the bear?" she asked, pointing over to it.

"Oh, that's Mor'do the bear. He nearly killed my father once, so anyone that captures him gets to name their reward."

"Mor'do, huh? Is that like Mahdi? The spice must flow? The worm *is* the spice?"

"What?"

"I concur. What?" asked Sparkle.

"I don't know myself, actually." *What are you putting into my head now, jerk?*

What? You don't know that one? It's a classic!

I think you're just trying to drive me insane by shoving little bits of pop culture into my brain. Quit it.

I can't help that your mental barriers aren't good enough, Susan.

Moments later a shadow fell over Susan, and she looked up from her fork.

"Queen Elinor, so glad you could join me. Please, sit." She gestured with the fork that had a bit of meat stuck to it to the chair opposite her, and the plainly dressed woman carrying the heavy sack sat as instructed.

"Where is my daughter?" she demanded, eyes nearly alight with rage. "If you've harmed her in any way-"

Susan waved her off and finished her forkful of meat. She set it down and pulled the staff closer to her, indicating the orb at the top. She waved her hand over it dramatically while

Sparkle cast a spell. As previously discussed, she created an *Illusion* that covered the sphere of another sphere where Merida could be seen, chained to something and looking around wistfully.

“As you can see, she is unharmed. For the moment. You have followed my instructions well thus far, as long as you continue to follow them no harm will come to her.”

“Forgive me if I do trust your word at face value. Or this image, which may not be a true vision.”

“Then trust my motivations instead. I saw your daughter charging through the woods alone, weaponless. She was easily taken.” This too was part of the plan, as Elinor didn’t approve of Merida’s training in the sword or the bow. Susan believed she should train whatever combat skills she could, and this was a little twist of the knife like ‘if she had been carrying that bow you threw into the fire, maybe she could have defended herself.’ “But I bear your family no grudge. I saw an opportunity, so I took it. Nothing more. The sack.” She held out a hand, and Elinor reluctantly handed the bag over. While she struggled to lift it, Susan hefted it easily, then spilled some of it out onto the table.

Those nearby gasped and pointed at the gold and gems that tumbled out, so Susan stood and threw her cape back dramatically, showing her blade. She drew an inch of steel from the scabbard. “Back to your cups, dogs.”

Eyes were immediately averted. She shoved the sword down and made of show of appraising the treasure. She stirred the bag, as there was more inside, then dropped the pieces she had scattered back into it, drawing it closed.

“So,” she finally said, “you must truly love your daughter to offer so much.”

“Of course I do,” she hissed. “Now is this enough or not? If not name your price, I must have her back safely!”

She paused a moment, pretending to think. Finally she looked over to the “empty” chair beside her. “What do you think, Merida? Should I give you back to them?”

Susan broke off the *Invisibility* spell with an unnecessary snap of her fingers, and Elinor stared at her daughter, smiling there in the seat next to Susan.

“Hey mum.”

Susan pushed back her hood and handed the sack of treasure back to Elinor, who silently accepted it. She then calmly went back to her meal.

"Can I get some ale for meself and me mum?" Merida asked the waitress who went by. She did a double take, probably wondering where this extra girl had come from, but nodded. Merida turned back to her mother. "I have a feeling this is going to be a long night, so we'll need it."

"Ale? In some tavern?" Elinor finally said. "This is no behavior for a princess—"

Susan's eyes had narrowed, and she slammed the fork down into the table, tines up, where it stuck. "One would think you would be more relieved to see your daughter unharmed, 'your highness,' and your treasure returned. Quibbling about proper princess behavior? I think we're a little bit past that, aren't we?"

"And you, I've never seen you in the village before," she went on, ignoring Susan. "Who are you, and why did you pretend to kidnap my daughter? I have fifty men outside this place, give me one good reason I shouldn't have you executed here and now for this?"

Susan laughed while Merida shouted "Mum!" and looked shocked.

Sparkle jumped up on the table. "You know," she remarked, "I think the queen might have close to your RESolve, don't you think?"

Susan considered it, looking her over. "You could be right," she allowed. "You want a reason? Fine." She bent the fork over with her pinkie finger. "Ten times that number wouldn't concern me in the least. In truth, wiping out your entire kingdom would be the work of minutes, if it took me that long. So I suggest you ignore me for now and instead have a very serious talk with your daughter before you lose her over this marriage thing!" She yanked the fork out and straightened it out again.

"She just wants to help, mum. The whole kidnapping thing was the cat's idea anyway."

"The cat?"

"Sparkle Felton, at your service." Sparkle inclined her head. "I said it as a joke, but sometimes Susan takes things a little too far. Still, it did get you here and that was the goal. I agree, you two need to work this out tonight, before she takes matters into her own hands."

"You really are a witch, to have a talking- What do you mean?"

Sparkle glanced over at her. "She claims proficiency with a bow. How hard would it be to take her fiancée out for a bit of a ride, arrow him through the neck, and come back weeping and distraught over 'bandits' or whatnot that had taken his life? I'm sure all sorts of accidents could be arranged by a determined young woman before any vows are spoken."

"She wouldn't!"

"No? I suppose you would know best, and target shooting is certainly a different animal, if you'll forgive me, than shooting a man down in cold blood. But desperate people sometimes do things they normally wouldn't."

The queen mulled this over as the ale was set down, and Merida took a long swig of hers.

"You shouldn't be drinking that!"

She slammed the cup down. "That's all it is with you, isn't it? What I shouldna do. Merida shouldna have a bow. She shouldna learn the sword. She shouldna have any freedom at all!"

"But I've allowed those things, haven't I? You have certain duties as a princess—"

"Allowed them? Grudgingly, yes. When I wanted to learn the bow, what was your reaction? Was it ago and be the best at it ya can, Meridaa or was it awy do you want to learn that, Merida? Study history, Merida. Do this cross stitch, Merida.' Everything I'm good at, everything I love doing is not 'fit for a princess' to hear you go on about it. Says who, that's what I'd like to know. Just because yer not good for anything but stalking about the castle in a huff—"

Susan put a hand between them. "Please refrain from any personal attacks, Merida. Stick to the issues at hand. The issue now under discussion is 'a mother's support of her daughter's activities.' How do you respond to that, Elinor?"

"You don't get any say in this!"

"Actually, I do. You should view me as the mediator in this discussion. If you two really want to work this out, you'll do as I say. Keep on task, no name calling or personal attacks, work towards compromise." She turned to Merida. "That does mean you won't come away completely satisfied, Merida. But nor will your mother. That's how you know it's a compromise. Now, you had the floor." She gestured back to Elinor.

"I've talked to her many times about this. She doesn't listen. Why should this time be any different?"

"Talked *with* her? Sounds to me more like you've talked *at* each other, but not *with* each other. Merida, this goes both ways. You both have to really want to work this out, or this is useless. You both have to listen to what the other has to say. And that might be hard, but it's all I can offer you at the moment. So both of you need to consider carefully what you say. Now. Elinor, what is it about your daughter's behavior that troubles you?"

"She wants to do things princesses shouldn't do! I mean what princess goes around shooting a bow?"

Princess Xena?

"Why not? Why shouldn't I learn to defend myself, or hunt for myself? You think I should just rely on men to do everything for me? Why can't I be the type of princess I want to be, rather than the type of princess you think I should be?"

"Because it's not your place to do those things!"

"Actually," broke in Susan. "I'd like you to see something. Sparkle, can you show her what you saw of my battle with Eilonwy?"

"Certainly." Sparkle created a new *Illusion* in the center of the table that went through her battle for the life of Gurgi.

"That," Susan announced when it was over, "was a queen. She was fighting me over the life of one of her subjects that Hades wanted back. And what about you? Wouldn't you have felt more confident coming to see your daughter's 'kidnapper' if you had some combat skills? Look around." She indicated the room again. "It's a world where strength is recognized over all. This marriage is about unification with other clans, right? Are you afraid her suiters will be driven away when they learn about her skills? Because any that actually catch her eye will only practice that much more to be worthy of her!"

"I just want what's best for her."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

The queen rolled the mug in her hands, staring down into the pale liquid. She took a sip and grimaced. "She talks of compromise. What about your other studies? Say I withdraw my objections to your interest in weapons and such. Would you pay more attention to them?"

"I could try, I suppose."

Susan nodded. "You will need to learn how to run a kingdom, at the very least. I might be able to browbeat everyone into doing what I want," she grinned, "but you don't have the raw power needed for that. You'll need diplomacy too."

"Like this talk?"

"Exactly. What if it was a dispute over lands? Or someone claiming someone else stole their cattle? The lessons of history and geography and even psychology will serve you well in that case."

"Psy-what?"

"How people think."

"Oh. I suppose."

"That's a start. But the main issue is the wedding. Correct?"

Both nodded.

"Now, Merida tells me she ran off after showing up the three 'contestants' by getting three bullseye in a row. You pulled her off the field and now she's worried the clans will be upset. Is that all true?"

“Ach, they are. Not that they aren’t always trying to outdo each other or at each other’s throats for one reason or another. But each expected to have a chance to win the hand of the princess, and they could easily use it as an excuse to go to war.”

“And whose fault is that?” asked Merida. “After all, I just had it sprung on me suddenly, as I was not so much as warned even a week ago this was happening.”

“It’s tradition. You would have known, if you had paid more attention to your studies.”

“Perhaps it’s time to change that tradition, then? Because there’s no way I’m marrying any of those people. I mean did you see them?”

“Yes, you are!”

Susan stuck her hand between them again. “This isn’t an argument, it’s just contradiction! Let’s try for a compromise. Merida, what is your core of your disagreement? Is it resentment for being forced to marry a stranger? Because that has happened before, and as with most things works out probably fifty/fifty. Is it that each suitor was completely unsuited? Is it because you’re just frightened about such a major life change? Or maybe it’s something more fundamental- you just don’t like men?”

“I... I don’t really know. Resentment, I guess? But it’s true, I wasn’t attracted to any of the sons of the chiefs...”

“So you never thought about it. And I can see why. Elinor, she’s sixteen. You don’t think that’s a little young to be making a decision that will affect her entire life? She’s not just getting a husband, she potentially takes over a clan, correct?”

“No, she stays here, and eventually her husband takes over as king.”

“So what happens if that clan has only one son? Would the two just merge- not important. If that’s the case, that’s even worse. You’re asking her to basically choose the future king of her clan on nothing more than one event in the games? I’m sorry, but that’s just stupid. If that had been your argument, Merida, you would have had a much stronger position.”

“It’s worked in the past!”

“You think so? But can you at least admit that perhaps having the clans travel here, compete in games with the crown and her as some kind of prize, and then leave again not the best way to go about fostering cooperation? Why not instead let her travel and live among these clans for say six months when she turns a certain age? Let her get to know not only the chief and his sons but the people, what sort of values they hold. Then she can say who is right for her kingdom, and the process is fair. It isn’t a contest, which degrades her, but rather an experience that helps to define her. Okay, maybe she doesn’t love the guy but he would rule the most fairly, which means she can at least tolerate him.”

“I might almost go for that,” Merida mused. “I wouldn’t mind seeing other parts of the country.”

“But the trouble is, it’s too late for that,” insisted Elinor. “The clans are here, the contest has been held. She’s angered them with her rash actions and she’s going to have to make amends with them somehow. That means marrying the one who did the best!”

“The way she told it, she put all their skills at archery to shame. Easy solution- you announce the games will be held a year from now and they can have a rematch. They all get to shoot and be eliminated at once. Last archer to hit the center of the target wins. If it’s her, they can try again the year after that. They get to keep trying until one manages it.”

“But what if it isn’t? That just delays the issue!” Merida observed.

“True. But at least you have the year to think things over, and maybe make the journey into their lands yourself. Nothing says you can’t tour clan territory and get to know your suitors, right?”

“But I don’t want to marry any of them! None of them seemed right, for me or the kingdom!”

“You’re going to have to marry one of them so you better get used to the idea!” Elinor stood up, shouting this. Conversation in the place stopped and everyone looked over at them. Susan pulled her back down.

“Why though?” she asked. “Are there really no second sons? Why not just rule her husband *must* come from an outside clan? Let her choose who she thinks will be the best king, even if it’s not the son of a chief or whatever you call them.”

“Even I can’t change that rule.”

“Yes you can! That’s the only advantage to having a monarchy! You can change the rules to whatever you want. ‘It’s that law that’s the problem. But am I the sultan or am I sultan?’ as they said in Aladdin. Actually, it’s odd how that story parallels this one. Of course, in that story the princess had fallen for someone, a homeless kid. In this story the princess wants nothing to do with her choices, for whatever reason. The sultan could have changed the law, didn’t, almost lost his kingdom over it, and then changed the law in the end anyway! So don’t give me that excuse.”

“That story sounds familiar... That actually happened, didn’t it? Aladdin, yeah, found a lamp with a genie in it, right? I heard about that, it happened a long time ago though, didn’t it? People have been looking for that lamp ever since...”

Susan gaped at her, then facepalmed. *I’m in the middle of half a dozen Disney adventures, aren’t I? I was just too close to the problem to see it.* She started banging her head on the table.

“Uh, are you all right?”

Ariel, duh! The Little Mermaid? I mean it was years ago but I should have remembered. I saw that movie! Why didn’t I realize it before? I can be really dumb sometimes.

No comment. And to be fair, it wasn’t totally your fault. Remind me to bring that up again sometime... When it will benefit me the most.

She wearily lifted her head from the table. “I’m fine. What were we saying?”

“Changing the law. If we weren’t in this situation it would be a different story. But we are. Something is going to have to be done.”

“I’m not marrying any one of them.”

Susan stared at Merida, trying to imagine what she might look like as an animated character.

Don’t bother, she’s not from anything you’ve seen.

But she is from a Disney film?

Not ‘from.’ She’s a story, same as you are. That story can be seen as a Disney film, but it’s not like she jumped off the screen to become real. She was here first, then her story was written.

I realize that. But I at least should have recognized her!

After you went to Hogwarts you sort of gave up on movies and such, right? Usually you were staying in the magical world, or were under attack or something. So you didn’t exactly keep up with cinema. Or TV. Or books.

True. Can’t believe I didn’t see it before though, the mermaid thing should have been a clue.

“Maybe you don’t have to,” Susan ventured, looking over at the wanted board again.

“There might be one way to satisfy everybody, even these other clans you’re worried about.”

“What do you have in mind?” Merida asked.

“This.” Susan got up and took the tacks out of the wanted poster for Mor’du. She slammed it down onto the table. “I’m about to go a-hunting bear. And I’m gonna do it in a cab-over Pete with a reefer on.”

“A what?”

Susan grinned. “It’s trucker slang. It means a refrigerated... trailer...” The two woman stared like she was speaking some other language, which technically she was as they had no words to translate what she was saying into. *Would you stop putting useless things into my brain already!*

Susan, I don’t think you quite get it. You’ve always spouted nonsense like this. Search your feelings, you know it to be true. It’s just you’re a little more aware of it now, that’s all. I can’t plug what has already leaked into you.

AARG!

“Never mind. Anyway, reward for the capture of this bear is any reasonable request granted by the king. The three clans will have no choice but to accept his judgment when I

haul this guy into his throne room in chains. How would they argue with the woman who subdued a bear?"

Elinor compressed her lips together and then spoke. "So you're just going to go over my head? Not compromise at all, but instead force the issue?"

Susan winked at her. "Lady, that's what I do. Your daughter seems insistent and I'm more on her side than yours."

"Mostly because she's still hoping Merida decides she prefers girls while Susan is still here," put in Sparkle.

"Shhh! The fact is, I don't think she should be forced to marry at sixteen. Or seventeen. Or at any age! It's tantamount to rape, which is what would happen on the wedding night because she certainly wouldn't be consenting. So yeah, your customs need to change. And social change of this magnitude needs a catalyst of equal magnitude. I plan to be that catalyst. As I am unwilling to walk into your castle and drum you and your husband in the head with a stick until you see reason, this will have to do."

"But capture Mor'du? It's too dangerous!" cried Merida, "I can't let you do this for me!"

"Please. The day I can't take a *bear* is the day I head home and give up magic forever. It's not going to be an issue, believe me. But I do think you should keep this up. You talked with your mother tonight. I can tell you're both strong willed woman who don't like backing down. To run a kingdom, that is needed. Elinor, you should be encouraging this in your daughter so she has the strength to keep your kingdom together when it comes time for her to take over. Merida, your mother has been through many issues as queen and learning from her is the best thing you can do, because she won't be around forever. There will come a day when you wish you could have just another hour with her, even if it is a shouting match. Learn to put aside your anger and focus on the issue at hand."

Like you did, with Luna almost being killed.

That was a totally different thing, and yes, I have been trying to do just that if you haven't noticed.

I hadn't.

"Otherwise, the rift between you two will just become larger and larger, until nothing can repair it. I mean you can see that happening, right? It almost happened this time. And I'm not saying that rift is repaired, either. Only you can work through that. But please, don't let it get any bigger."

The two looked at each other.

"I am sorry about what I did to the tapestry. And for running off."

"I'm sorry you feel this situation is unfair. And maybe it is a little. I'm sorry for not trying harder to see your point of view."

Okay, now that's a start! One bear, corner pocket, and tomorrow I can leave this place behind.

Oh, you think so, huh? You checked on that village near the ice palace lately?

WHAT DID YOU DO?

Bringing Home the Bear

When: Twenty minutes later

Where: High over Arendelle

Two figures hung without support over the quiet town of Arendelle twenty minutes later. Susan had safely seen the queen out of the tavern with her treasure and sent Merida back with her.

“When you see me next, I’ll be bringing a bear, and your problems should be solved,” she had said. Merida of course wanted to come, but Susan had shaken her head. “He can’t hurt me. You he could. I doubt he’ll even see me coming but why take the risk? I’ll be along soon, don’t worry.”

With that done, she had taken them back to the frozen town they had arrived in for a quick look around. “It seems deserted,” Susan remarked, looking down at the place through her binoculars. “Were they forced to move because of the cold?”

“That wouldn’t explain what The Darkness said.”

“Or what he didn’t. Come on, I think I see a light.”

The two crept forward, both *Invisible* and *Phased* so they could observe what was going on. Susan’s expression hardened as they passed through the wall and into the castle. It seemed the whole town was here, but only from a certain point of view. The halls of the castle, every inch of floor space, was taken up by unconscious people with blankets thrown over them. A woman in a maid outfit went through the hall with a candle, checking each one briefly, then moving on past them. She had to move carefully to avoid stepping on anyone, and by her expression she had done this many times.

“He’s been busy,” Sparkle remarked.

“Yeah. Which I don’t get. With luck, I’ll never need to assault the castle. The whole reason I’m traveling around is to avoid that. Avoid killing Elsa. Why take the souls of every person in town?”

“Hold them hostage, maybe? After you take her power, you’ll go to the castle and demand it leaves, right? I doubt it’ll go without a fight, even if she is powerless. It’ll still have any abilities it can manifest, right? Like that energy it wanted to use to destroy you when you were fighting it at home. Just not ice powers.”

“Maybe. Maybe that guy just likes doing it. Gets a kick out of it or something? Could he take them with him when he leaves?”

“Wow, I hope not. But I suppose the soul isn’t tied to any world, or you would have left yours back at home when you went into Inari’s world. Are you going to have to kill him before he gets away with them?”

Susan stared into the space Sparkle’s voice was coming from, though neither could see the other.

Actually it’s another reason.

Care to share it?

Not yet. You’ll know it soon enough. See, I just know something about this spell you’re trying to do that you don’t. So I’m getting prepared.

Then I’ll have to be prepared too.

Oh? How so?

I have a Soul nature. I bet I can shut down these souls he’s pulling out with that. Even if it’s only temporarily, it’ll be enough.

But if you have Soul nature then my agent will too. He can counteract anything you can do.

I guess we’ll see how it goes.

“I hope not. One problem at a time though. Come on, we have a bear to catch.”

Moments later, Susan and Sparkle stood amidst the trees where Merida had said they were most likely to find Mor'du.

"And how exactly are we going to find him? *Descry Creature?*"

Susan shook her head. "A skill I really haven't been using enough of, despite getting it up to a ten. Watch." Susan made her checks, getting above a fifteen on each, and sent magic into the air. Magic to call bears.

Too bad this only works around here. I like not having specific spells, just mold the magic into the right form and send it out. This spell should make any bear in the area come running, and Merida said this bear Mor'du has driven all other bears off. Or her father's killed them all, in his quest to find this one and kill it. So the one we see should be the right one.

"Be on your guard."

"What's the plan, anyway? I assume there is one and it's not just you slugging it in the face."

She smirked. "That would be rather amusing, wouldn't it? No. I'm going back to my old ways. *Field* and *Drain*. That should keep it docile. I want you on the sleep spell, we'll hit it with whatever we can all at once. In fact, hold back three segments as I cast *Balk* on the guy. Then we'll hit him with everything else."

"Sounds about right. Three segments? You'll need more than that to recover even if you... oh- *Acceleration*."

"You're so smart. Knew I kept you around for a reason."

They didn't have to wait long, at least from outside perspective as their wait seemed longer. A huge bear, bigger than Susan expected, came roaring out of the trees at her. She was curious for a second, as it seemed the magic had worked a little too well. He was supposed to be cautiously approaching the site, not charging them. Still, he was moving in slow motion so Susan took the one *segment* she needed to cast the spell (*Magic Acceleration not able to cut the .2 seconds down to .1 because the smallest increment of time she could perceive was a segment*) and hit him with it. She got an eleven, and as Mor'du wasn't the luckiest of creatures (he had been basically worked over by a witch, after all, and basically cursed) he failed the check, so his next action was at an eight penalty. He made a CON and a REA check against the combined magic of the two travelers, each not bothering to conserve *energy* on their spells at this point. Having become a true bear years ago, the man who brought his kingdom to ruin had only a .5 REA, so there was really no way possible he could get a twenty four on a REASON check. He ran straight into the swirling light of the spell and slowed to a halt, then got hit with the *Somnolent Smog*.

He dropped, sound asleep.

"All too easy," Susan remarked in a deep voice. "Perhaps he wasn't as strong as the- I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

"Doing what?"

"Never mind. Let's get him in chains."

With his energy drained (fifty six) and some thick chains created with *Creation* securing him, Susan used *Telekinesis* to float him through a *Teleportal* and towards the castle.

"So you're just going to demand the wedding be canceled forever?" Sparkle asked. "I ask only because you have a funny look in your eye and your surprises always raise my blood pressure."

Susan nearly giggled, but got control of herself. "Then get ready for a good one!"

"Oh dear. Please don't do anything I'll regret..."

"Sparkle! How could you even say that?"

So you're going to deliver this bear to the king, is that right?

Yeah, what about it?

Where he's going to kill it.

Again, what's your point?

Did you know I can access your senses? All of them, even the magic and spirit and seeing auras? It's true. How come you never check auras, anyway? Probably just not used to it. If you had bothered to check you would have figured this out as well. But I'll give you the freebee because it'll be amusing for me to watch. He's a man under a curse.

Wha- Susan suddenly found herself unable to take another step closer to the castle. Sparkle kept walking, then turned when she realized Susan wasn't following.

"What's the hold up?"

Susan strained forward, but couldn't lift her foot off the ground. "I can't get closer!"

"What?" She concentrated. "I don't feel any hostile magic."

"No, it's not that. I'm taking this bear to be killed! But now suddenly I can't!"

"What? That's impossible! It's not sentient... is it?"

"It didn't seem that way, not that we really gave it a chance to sit down and discuss the finer points of forest living. But The Darkness said he was a man under a curse, and suddenly I can't move!"

"Oh great. This is just great. You can't think it was telling the truth?"

"No! But obviously my magic does. Now what?"

"I authorize you to bring this bear to the castle to be killed." Susan nearly fell over, as she was off balance from trying to move, and caught herself. "That worked."

"But it doesn't solve our problem. This bear isn't a bear!"

"Indeed. You promised Merida to deliver him so her problems could be solved. Can you just let the king kill it?"

"I don't-" *And what are you laughing at?*

At the castle gate, Susan demanded entrance and the guard took one look at the floating bear and couldn't let her in fast enough. He guided her to a main hall, where men, seated by clan if Susan didn't miss her guess based on their kilt colors, sullenly sat waiting. Susan, hood thrown back and thumping her newly created staff gestured with it, and the huge bear floated into the room and landed with a thump in front of the dais. Atop it were three chairs, centrally seated was a large man, to his side both his wife and daughter, also seated. Naturally everyone sprang up as the king did, shock plain upon every face in the hall.

"You've actually done it!?" announced the king, breaking the silence. "I canna believe it!"

"I told you, dad," said Merida, a small grin on her face. She mouthed "thank you," to Susan, who gave her a slight nod of the head.

"As I promised your daughter, your highness, the bear Mor'du. I claim my reward, any reasonable request!" She held up the wanted poster.

"Aye, that you've earned. Is... is he dead?"

"No, simply knocked out for the moment. I have some... odd news, regarding him. But first! With your permission, your highness, I will restore that which this bear took from you those many years ago, so that you may face him whole again!"

"What's this? You mean you can regrow me leg?"

"With your permission?" She raised the staff.

"Aye! No tricks now?"

"You can trust her, dad," Merida assured him. "If she can do this, yer leg... why that should be easy."

Susan made some passes in the air with her staff while the actual person that knew *Regeneration* got busy casting it. Sparkle was *Invisible* for the moment, and lightly touched the king while attention was on Susan. Magical light swirled around him, and seconds later his wooden leg flew off as a new one grew in its place. He held it up, marveling at it as he wiggled his toes.

Everyone in the place cheered. *Good. Step one is complete. Maybe he'll be a little more merciful when I tell him this isn't actually a bear.*

"You've done it! How can I ever thank you, lass?"

"Yes, my reward... about that. I think there's something about this bear you should know."

"I know all I need to. He dies tonight!" The king stood and strode over to his weapon rack nearby, selecting a large ax. He was a bit wobbly, but he made it. "Have to get used to two feet again. Who would have thought."

"Sire!" Susan pleaded, stepping in front of the bear and putting her hands out at her sides. "Stay your hand for a moment before you make a terrible mistake!"

"What's this? Yer not protecting the brute, are ya? Why bring him here if not to let me finally be rid of the beast?"

"Because this *is* no beast! This is simply a cursed man, not a true bear! If you kill him, you'll be murdering a person!"

Everyone in the hall gasped and started asking one another if they thought it was true.

"How do you know that?"

"My magic told me. With your permission I will work to break the curse and see what the man has to say for himself. If you still wish to take his life after that, well, that is your right as the king." *I suppose.*

Look around, Susan. This is a barbaric time for these people. The king didn't get voted in because of his pottery making skills, it's because he's the strongest fighter. His hatred of this bear has gone on for years, trying to get him to stay his hand is going to be an exercise in frustration for you. You don't have the skill in Persuasion for it.

"Get on with it, but don't take too long," he cautioned. "Someone bring me a grinding wheel, I'll give you until I've finished sharpening this ax."

You'll give me all the time I need, jerk.

You see what I mean, though?

I still have to do all I can.

Futile.

But she bowed and clapped her hands. "Sparkle, appear!"

Sparkle dropped her *Invisibility* and pulled the book of magic out of their now shared *sub-space pocket*. They had marked the page before, and Susan was familiar with the spell so she got to casting. One *Suppress Curse* spell later and a naked man now slept on the floor instead of a bear. He had long hair, a thick beard, and some kind of tribal tattoos in blue along his arms and chest. Again, everyone in the room gasped and the king looked up from his grinding.

"Impossible."

"It is as I said. Will you allow me to wake him, or do you still pursue your course of vengeance against what might be an innocent man, simply cursed?"

The king got up from the wheel, holding the ax near the head. "Wake him, then. Let's see what he has to say for himself."

"As you command."

Again, Sparkle knew the actual *Awaken* spell, but in a moment the man was coming around. He still had no *energy*, and so was no real threat, but the king stepped in front of his daughter anyway as the man looked around.

"What-" he managed, looking fearful.

"Just take a moment," Susan said, walking to a nearby table and grabbing a pitcher. She poured something, probably wine, into a glass and walked over to him, offering it. He took it and gratefully drank it down.

"What's your name?" Susan asked, as he handed it back.

The man shook his head. "Don't... remember. Where am I? I remember drinking the witch's spell, and..." His hands flew over his mouth. "I killed them. Killed them all. Then I became the bear. What have I done?"

"You did this to yourself?" Merida asked, looking around her father.

He sadly nodded. "I had three brothers. When our father died I tried to take their sections of kingdom instead of ruling with them. I thought the witch could help me, but I was wrong."

"So the story about the four brothers is true?" Merida said to her mother, who sadly nodded and made sort of a "I guess so" gesture.

"What story?" asked the man.

"Your story," answered the queen. "What you've told us, it's a legend now. We didn't know you had become the bear, but we know the story of your kingdom, how it fell when one of the brothers betrayed the others. You've been a bear this whole time? I guess the story wasn't as old as we thought."

"So it seems," he answered sadly. "What happens to me now?"

"Now you have a choice to make," Susan explained. "The curse is still upon you. Without further work on my part, when I withdraw my magic you will again become the bear. Unless you remember how to break it?"

He gave a rueful laugh. "Oh, I remember. But it's too late. They've been gone for years. There's no help for me now."

"So, better off dead then?" asked the king, hefting the ax. "I can make that happen for you!"

Seems awful kill crazy.

Told you, The Darkness sounded wistful. Why can't you be more like that?

Never.

We'll see.

"I deserve it." He looked over at Susan. "At least you can let me die a man. For that you have my thanks."

"You don't have to die at all," she protested. "Haven't you been punished enough for your crimes? Your kingdom is long gone, your friends and family dead. Why lose your life this night as well? Let me help you start a new life, here and now!"

He shook his head. "And what would I do now? I'm nothing. What is left for me? A king who lost his kingdom, thanks to his own pride. Shall I wander the kingdom I destroyed, now aware of every moment? Let this be the end of me."

What do I do?

Are you asking me? Don't worry about it, it isn't like you brought him here... oh wait. I mean the man is a bear now, and he's committed numerous crimes against the kingdom here, right? Doesn't he deserve death?

He was a bear! He didn't know what he was doing.

We went to a witch for a dodgy spell, he got what he deserved.

Wait a second... "Did you know you would be turned into a bear when you drank what the witch gave you?"

"What?"

"You said you drank a spell, right? What did you want that spell to do? I mean you can't have wanted to be a bear!"

"No, I simply wanted the strength to take over the other sections of kingdom. I had no idea it would do that to me."

"So this is the witch's fault! Let us seek her out and demand an explanation! Isn't she more at fault than you?"

"I should have been more specific. Or not drank it at all. Who are you? Why do you care if I live or die?"

It was her fault, of course. She knew what would happen, and obviously chose not to tell him. And here's something you can mull over that's sure to make me quiver with delight. What witch do we know that lives in the area and is obsessed with bears?

Susan recalled a shop full of bear carvings, and ground her teeth together. *You don't think...*

The one that is going to make your potion? Oh, I think there's a good chance of it being her, don't you? Still want her help?

I'll worry about that later. "I just don't want to see you murdered, is that so strange?"

The man looked at her questionably. "Aye, it is." He put a hand on her shoulder. "You are a strange one. But do not fret, this is for the best. I am... prepared for this."

Told you. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

"He's right about that," agreed the king. "Now can you please get out of the way? I don't want you zapping me with a spell if I try and move you."

“This is my fate,” said the man, standing slowly. “And my warning to you all.” He looked about the room.

*Don't trust witches, they can be real-
Shut it!*

“I should have worked together with my brothers. I didn't. I see lots of colors here, four clans at least. Please, don't make my mistake. Work together instead of against one another. I did, and my kingdom fell. It could happen to you.” He stepped out from behind Susan. “Do it.”

“Gladly!”

Watch carefully, you might learn a thing or two about how this is done.

But Susan turned away as the ax smashed into the man's neck and did... five of the damage it needed to.

“That's funny,” remarked the king, “usually that works pretty well. I just sharpened this thing too. Oddest thing, sorry about that. I'll try again.”

Susan took a peek, and both men looked somewhat confused. The other man nodded, and the king pulled the ax back for another blow.

That was your fault too, by the way.

How was it my fault he couldn't take the man's head clean off? Not that I want him to, you understand.

That's exactly it. Your stupid Paragon nature is “leaking out.” He had to roll damage because your rules specify a “coup de grace” attack doesn't exist. He's still under your “protection” so to speak, because you don't want to see him get killed. There's still a chance you could step in and save him, drive back the king and escape. Your nature is thus influencing reality here. Either allow the man to die in your mind, thus breaking your connection to him, or go elsewhere before the next swing.

Where?

Technically, far enough away to not be able to get back in time. Of course, you can essentially teleport but just being in the next room, you wouldn't be able to see the act, so it would probably work. Easier just to accept his death. I mean it's not like you're swinging the ax at him. But at six average damage per strike, if he doesn't spend energy, he'll probably need at least two more. Could be messy, painful, and bloody for anyone standing nearby. That's you, by the way.

Susan took a quick step back. *You're enjoying this.*

Haven't we had this conversation before? I'm pretty sure we have. He's swinging the ax again, what's it going to be?

Hades take you.

Having mentally rejected any further ideas to save the man, the king's ax neatly sliced through his neck. No one seemed all that upset about the whole thing, and the king called for his guards to dispose of the body. They unceremoniously carried him out and Sparkle did a quick *Hygiene* on the floor to get rid of the... stain.

"So, about that reward you wanted, lass?" The king had climbed the stairs again after putting the ax back, and sat wiggling his new toes. "What can I do for ya? Go ahead, name it!"

Susan, still a little shocked at the apathetic attitude of the room turned to face him. "Your majesty, I had this whole thing planned where I was going to jokingly ask for your daughter's hand in marriage, which of course would have outraged you, and allowed you to see how much more reasonable just letting her marry who she wanted was. But I think I'll just skip it. A man died tonight, a very tragic end to a very tragic tale, and I don't think it's right. But that's my request- allow your daughter to marry, or not, as she pleases."

"I know she's not been all that enthusiastic about the whole thing," he allowed, "but I'm offering you the riches of my kingdom here. Are ya sure that's all you want?"

"That is my request."

"Then ask for something else," said the queen, standing. "A few years to get to know the suiters, perhaps, as you suggested earlier? She must marry."

"Why mum?" asked Merida.

"To have children, of course!" she exclaimed, like this was such an obvious thing it shouldn't need to be said.

"What?" Susan couldn't believe her ears. "You're causing all this strife between yourself and your daughter over future *grandchildren*?"

"How else will the succession take place?"

Susan stared at her. "What if she can't *have* children? Or they die young? Or her husband can't? You can not be basing her entire future around one day having kids. She's not just a baby maker!"

"You don't know my mother," interjected Merida. "That's exactly what she's thinking. Ach, I should 'ave guessed. Children of all things. Is it any wonder?"

The two stared each other down.

"My son won the competition!" yelled an aging man with white hair somehow sticking straight up into the air. He had about three chins, despite him looking rather scrawny and his eyebrows were almost stuck out as far as his mustache. "The princess choose the event, and my son won it. You all saw it! I say marry them off tonight! And don't let some witch interfere!"

Susan's head swiveled, coming to rest on the man. She stuck her staff out to the side and released it, letting it clatter to the ground, and stalked over to him. He cowered back a little. "I am in a very foul mood," she began. "When I went after that bear I figured, sure, it would be a little sad to bring a creature that inspired so much fear to be killed. For an animal to both allude capture for so long, and yet fight well enough to have a *wanted poster*... what a beast it must have been, I thought. But it was just a bear, right?"

"Then I discovered it was a man. A man who made mistakes, yes. A man who paid for those mistakes, too. I wanted to come in here and laugh, and joke with you all and try to get you to see trying to get that girl-" she pointed to Merida, "to marry, against her will, is the worst crime you could commit against her. I've known her less than a day, but just from the story she told me about going onto that field I know she's something special. What she did took courage, and ingenuity, and skill. Your son *lost*. All your sons did! But *still*, despite that, despite what you've seen here tonight, you're still insisting on this marriage? As far as I'm concerned you and the princess aren't even the same *species*! You are going to retract your 'claim' upon her and then you will *apologize* for seeing her not as a person, but as an object to be claimed to further your own interests."

"You can't come in here and tell us what we're going to do!" countered the big guy, younger and with more hair, who was sitting across the table from him. "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"The only one among you that argued for that man's life. No one else among you said a word." She looked angrily around the room. "Not one. Probably too busy enjoying the show!"

"It was rather entertaining," said a third man, similar blue tribal markings on his face, arms, and chest, and with a shock of black hair sticking out.

"You disgust me."

"Now that's going too far," said the big guy, standing up.

"And what is a pathetic little person like yourself going to do about it?" Susan went for her sword.

"Okay!" rang out through the place, and Sparkle *spirit stepped* between them, onto the table. She had activated her *spirit aura* as well, and an energy field engulfed her, making her radiate power that rattled the cups and dishes on the table. "That's enough. Susan, you're out of line. These people do not share our beliefs or our customs and we will not antagonize them because of their traditions. As far as you three," she turned to the men. "Do not make her angry. She may be prevented from permanently harming you by an oath she took with me, but she can still make your lives miserable. Believe me, she's very creative, and I saw her turn a werewolf, not a mere man, mind you, but a werewolf into a sheep because he deserved it. Don't make her think you deserve it." She turned back to Susan. "Hand off the sword. Now."

Susan mastered herself and spun, walking back to her staff which she bent and retrieved. She turned back to the king. "I have given you the bear and my demand for a reward. You heard the man's words tonight. *Work together*. For once put aside your lust for power and succession and actually try cooperating. Clans. Artificial distinctions that are meaningless. Aren't you all people? Try acting like it for once.

"Merida, I've done what I can. The rest is up to you. I'm heading back to the witch's hut to await her return. So I can save this reality and be done with it."

"Wait!" As Susan turned to leave the hall, Merida rushed down the stairs and to her side. "Please. At least stay the night here. Don't go. My dad's a good man, they all are. Even if they do forget it sometimes." She glanced over at the others. "Let's give them the night to think this over, and they can give us their answer in the morning. Please? You can stay in my room, even!" She looked longingly at Susan.

At was like a little ray of light was breaking through her anger, and Susan's mouth quirked up a little. "You're just worried they'll grab you out of it and marry you off tonight if I'm gone," she teased.

"Given what I've seen, they might." Susan face hardened again. "But more important, I've never actually had someone stand up for me before, like you have. Oh, my dad is sweet and everything but my mum runs our family. And all I've really ever had was my archery. Never someone me own age to talk to, just lessons and such. I've never really had... a friend."

Susan took her hand. "You do now."

"Thank you. We are retiring for the evening!" she announced. "I think you should all consider well what you've heard this night, and make the right choice come the morning. Good night mum, dad."

The two left the room, and Sparkle padded after them, normal looking again.

"Thanks," Susan said to her. "It almost got away from me back there. Again."

"Maybe you should have red hair," Sparkle remarked, shaking her head. "You've got the temper for it."

"Say, would you mind doing a little more magic tonight?" Merida asked.

"Gee, magic? Magic doesn't really exist, come on."

"How can you say that? Aren't you-"

"She's just teasing you. What do you need?" asked Sparkle.

Merida looked at Susan, who was smiling widely now. "You! Come on, I want to surprise my mother."

So Susan got a tour of the castle and used *Repair* to put a tapestry back together.

"It was ripped totally by accident," Merida maintained, when asked.

"Accident."

"Yeah. Hey, that's my bow! My mother must have pulled it out of the fire! Ach, it's still ruined though."

"Let me have a look..." She handed it over, and Susan easily repaired it as well, even making the bowstring good as new. She went to unstring it.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Merida assured her, taking it back and looking it over.

"This is just astonishing! Can anyone learn magic? I've been wasting my time with archery if that's the case!"

"You leave it strung? Wouldn't that warp the wood after too long? I suppose you would know better than I. As for magic, at least in my case you need *The Spark of Magic*. Not many seem to have it around here, though of course I haven't actually met a lot of people just walking around towns. I've been busy gathering ingredients. So I really can't say how many could take up the study if they had the means and the interest."

"Do I have it?"

"Let me see." Susan took her hands and did a somewhat longer than was strictly necessary *Magic Sense*. "Sorry, I don't think so."

"Ah well. Back to archery then."

"I suppose so."

And so the girls passed the night, having basically Merida's first sleepover. Susan talked about her adventures and Merida expressed a desire to at least see more of the world she now knew was full of mermaids and monsters and even gods. They finally got to sleep, not before Susan made a few powered alterations to her door and windows to keep out any unwanted guests, and the next morning set out to head back to the witch's hut. Early, as the clan leaders were set to give their answer that morning. Merida really wasn't that interested to hear what they had to say, and was happy to delay it as long as possible. Merida wanted to ride her horse, refusing *flight* magic, and showed off her skill with a bow as she rode. Susan had to admit her talent was substantial.

"You think she's a *Paragon of the bow*?" she asked Sparkle, as Merida hit yet another target from horseback. They were both flying beside her, leaving her free to show her skill.

"She's hit every target so far, I wouldn't be surprised. To really tell we would have to find someone that studied archery for years and get their opinion. Maybe have her outshoot them, or make some sort of impossible shot."

"I guess there are some advantages of having character sheets. We could just ask her, if she had one."

"Yeah, it's really too bad."

The girls waited most of the day outside the witch's hut. Susan was happy to have Merida show her how to use a bow, and figured she might as well put a point into the skill as she had a teacher. Sparkle went roaming around looking for small things to pounce on, and finally the witch floated down on her broom.

"Good evening, girls," she greeted them.

"Was it your magic that made the bear Mor'du?" Susan demanded without preamble, handing Merida her bow back. "Your curse that turned a man into a raging animal?"

"Oh, who can remember? So, are you ready to get on with your spell?"

"I suggest you give it a little thought," Susan threatened, taking a step towards her. "Because I'm quite interested in the answer."

"It's over and done with," Merida assured her, laying a hand on her arm. "Me father has his leg back and his revenge, so it's not worth pursuin."

Susan looked to Sparkle, who shook her head. "Better not. It won't gain us anything, even if we took her ability to do magic away."

"Don't worry your pretty heads," said the witch. "I don't do that sort of thing anymore anyway."

“Oh really? You mean to tell me if I hadn’t shown up, Merida here would have left empty handed?”

“Yeah, what sort of spell would ya have given me?” she asked. “If I had asked ye to change me fate. Something involving... bears, perhaps?”

“No one is ever told what might have been. Now, come in, and let’s have those ingredients.” The witch threw open the door to her cottage and clapped, activating her cauldron. She dumped a bag of stuff into it, and it started rolling and boiling.

Susan looked around, interested. *Wasn’t this full of bear carvings before? Weird.*

“I looked into what you said, and you were right. The world is freezing, isn’t it? So I guess we’ll get started, then, eh? Let’s have the first thing you got then.” She held out her hand.

“How about I just set it over here?” Susan replied, getting the rock and keeping it from slamming into the ground. “Or shall I just plunk it into the pot?”

“No, no, no!” she cautioned. “Ah, so that’s what the rhyme means. I did wonder. This has been shrunk for easier carrying.” She gestured over it, and the rock expanded. “Here you go, go at it.”

“Go at- what am I supposed to do with this?” Susan took the rather large warhammer the witch had taken from somewhere.

“Break it up. The first thing you need is a rock, crushed to powder, to show your grit. Also, I think you were supposed to be carrying it the whole time, to consider the weight of what you are about to do. But I’ll overlook that.”

Susan rolled her eyes and got busy smashing the thing to pieces, which the witch scooped up and dumped in.

“Now the next.” Susan handed her the water. “Water, which cleanses and washes away. Next. Ash, to signify change. Next. The wail of a child, for what will be lost.” The canister went in too. “And now the final ingredient.” She held out her hand.

“The what? I don’t have any others!”

“No? How is the spell supposed to know who to target? You need a bit of the intended, of course! I thought you knew about magic!”

“Of course’ she says. Thanks for telling me earlier, I could have gotten it before now. I don’t do your type of magic, you know!” *My magic, just having the intended person in mind would be enough. It’s always something.*

“Never mind. Just came back when you do!”

Susan and the others found themselves being shooed out of the place, and stood blinking against the fading light of day outside the cottage.

“Now what?” asked Merida.

Susan snapped her fingers. “That’s why the fortifications. It knew I would have to go back there!”

Got it in one. Can you beat a whole town’s worth of manifested souls? Plus a person that can throw whatever you can do right back at you, all while dodging my ice powers?

Tricky.

That’s the spirit! Go get yourself killed, at least it’ll be a laugh.

Now back at the castle, Susan was thinking over her options with Sparkle.

“Those souls can’t all be directed by him, right? We would only have to worry about a few at a time. He can’t concentrate on more than that at once.”

“I don’t know,” Sparkle replied. “They could be like your *Legion*, just given a task and they go at it. I mean why bother with so many if you can’t keep track of them?”

“Intimidation. Like soldiers putting uniforms stuffed with straw on a wall to trick an invading force into thinking they have more men manning the walls than they do.”

“I guess. And we can’t seriously damage them either, not without risking the lives of the people. And how much damage can they even take? I didn’t see a health level when I looked at them before, I mean a bow or a shield doesn’t have a health level. But that animal looking thing he had on his shoulder should count as a creature, right? It should have had a health level, it isn’t an object!”

“But if they did, your *contract* would keep you from seriously harming them.”

“Oh, right. Crap, you would have to give me permission for each and every one of them. This is not going to work!”

“So powers then, that *soul* technique you wanted to do?”

“But I’ll have to take *metapower* to shut down Elsa, and that means Sangray can shut me down. I can’t sneak in, either one would know I was coming. Teleporting him away doesn’t help if the souls are still there to fight. Teleporting her away from there with powers might work, she couldn’t shut that down. But again, she would know it was coming and be prepared to ice me.”

“You can become immune to ice.”

“Immune to *ice*, yes, but not immune to being encased in the stuff. Becoming immune just means she couldn’t damage me with an ice technique. Her power is just creating mundane ice in whatever shape she wants. Remember she grew that whole palace of hers, I bet she could do the same, just solid ice around me.”

“She would act next, unless you spent XP.”

“Which I could do.”

“Yes.”

“There is one other way, though I hesitate to suggest it. It would mean you sitting the fight out.”

“What? Why?”

Susan flipped through her book of magic, putting a finger in two pages two pages. “Remember this spell I had the book make, a similar spell to *Magic Immunity* so we could be immune to powers?”

“Sure.”

“And we have this spell, *Dead Magic*, and *Magic Domination* to keep people using magic around me.”

“But what they do isn’t magic.”

“Right. It’s powers. So I say, let’s ask the book for a better *Dead Magic* spell, one that’s probably grade ten but keeps anything not mundane from working. Magic, powers, supernatural stuff like *spirit step*, the whole works. *Dead Magic* is only grade eight, so there’s room to grow it.”

“And while inside that sphere of magic, I would be a simple cat,” mused Sparkle.

“Maybe I wouldn’t even be able to talk.”

“Exactly. We might not even be able to understand others from this world. I would have to rely totally on my mundane skills like *sword* and *ninjutsu*. Which I think I’m good enough with to cut off a piece of hair, grab it, drop the spell, and *teleport* away.”

“Wow. That would be... risky. But maybe doable? It would still be two against one-”

“No it wouldn’t,” interrupted Merida. “Because I’m coming with ya!”

Gunplay: A Play in One Act

When: A moment of sputtering later

Where: Merida's room

"It's just too dangerous!" Susan finally got out.

"Fer you," Merida countered.

"For- what?"

"Look, yer talking about totally shutting off all your abilities, right? Magic, magical items, the works. I've seen the jewelry you wear, and you don't strike me as the kind to wear something purely for looks. I'm guessing they all have some magical properties."

"Yes..."

"So how long have you had all this stuff at yer disposal?"

"Well, magic? Forever. I was born with it. My items I've made more recently and time is not constant between realities but in personal time I guess a couple of months. Why?"

"So you've never really been in a real fight without them, is that right?"

"I guess." *I did make them pretty early on, and back home I wouldn't say I had a lot of fights because wanded magic was so easy to get around. It was only after I left that I really started to realize what combat really was.*

"I see what she's getting at," said Sparkle. "She thinks you won't be able to fight without them. That you've grown dependent on your magic and might try to do some without thinking about it. Remember how you felt after The Darkness stole your *Giant Soul* item? You were about to go into a war zone and had to make a temporary replacement. I mean you can't really do damage without it."

"I don't want to do damage though, I just need a piece of Elsa. That's more about misdirection. And scissors."

"But how are you going to *get* to her, if dozens of souls stand in your way?"

"That's what the spell is for."

"Can ye risk it?"

"Risk it? Of course I can, I have to."

"What I mean is, if you do some spell to cut off all other magic, what happens if these souls get near it? Will they just die?"

"Oh." That made Susan pause. "You're right, I have no idea. Maybe Silverstreak could teach me some kind of KNOWledge based *Soul Theory* or something? Not that it helps me now, but I'll probably run into Sangray again. I suppose they could- Ah, but we could check!"

"How?"

"Approach slowly. If I cast the spell and get near one, my inability to do harm will take over. Either I won't be able to complete the approach or I'll have to drop the spell."

Sparkle started shaking her head. "It's no good." She pulled the *contract* out of the *pocket*. "It says perform 'no lasting violence' and 'sentient, living thing.' Making them disappear isn't violence, cutting them up with a sword is violence. And they aren't living things, they're souls. I mean that bow he was using wasn't 'alive' was it? So either one of those conditions might allow you to destroy them without triggering it."

Seems this contract of yours has just as many holes as swiss cheese. Do they have swiss cheese here? Do they have it but call it something else? Anyway, seems I'll just have to be a little more creative when I take you over next time, but all avenues are not closed to me. That's good news!

There won't be a next time.

Sure, just keep telling yourself that.

"The point is, you need someone to watch yer back, and that's me!"

"Have you ever been in an actual fight?"

"Well, no, but I've been hunting so it's sort of the same thing, right? And I'm not there to kill anyone, just watch out fer you!"

"And if you freeze up, pardon the pun, I'll be in a worse position than ever."

"I won't, I promise."

"You don't have *ranged combat*, do you?" asked Sparkle. "You could get her to a one rating in it before we leave."

Susan shook her head. "I only figured on using the pistol once, to kill Tom. And we remember how that turned out. So no, never put any points into that."

But it is untrained. I could put a point into it, and maybe teach her...

"Super. I suppose you could go ask Taran for help, he seemed to know how to handle a sword."

"Not sure I'd be welcome in that kingdom again."

"There is that."

"Wait a minute! A pistol!"

"What?"

Susan got out the pistol Jenny had given her and switched it on. "I've got so much stuff kicking around my *pocket* now, I need to keep some kind of inventory sheet. This has a non-lethal setting! And actually I have two shotguns, the one I made and the one I took from the military base. Plus I still have those grenades I got way back when I got the first pistol, from that guy who worked for the order. Bet one would blow a hole in a wall of ice."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Surprise them! Come in from a direction they won't expect."

You realize how stupid that idea is, right?

"You realize that won't work, right?"

"Yes, yes, it's just reminded me of that as well. It knows whatever I'm planning, so I can't actually surprise them. Fine, but yeah," she hefted the pistol. "I think this is actually going to come in handy."

"So am I coming then?"

"Yeah, you can come, but on one condition. Sparkle, I'm pretty sure there's a spell to recharge this, right? I mean Jenny said it was totally electrical if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, there is. Why?"

"We're both going to practice *Ranged Combat* tonight. Merida, get your bow."

So both girls spent some time shooting at each other, and Susan had to admit that Merida had a far higher rating in *bow* than she did in *pistol*. She took off all her *Materia* and only put *Invulnerability* on both of them so neither could hurt the other, even by accident. She was surprised to find how much heavier and slower she felt without it, making her realize that she was coming to depend on it, perhaps a little too much. *If the place my father is held at has no access to magic, this is how I'm going to have to fight. Well, not exactly like this because I hope to still have powers, that's the whole reason I went to Sailor Moon's world. But still, I'll be more vulnerable.*

That night she had the book work on a new spell, *Mundane Enforcement* which negated all that which was not strictly technological, or a creature's natural ability like a bat's sonar. She read it over and put it onto a *spell paper* for easy access, then handed it over to Merida. She explained what it was and how to use it, and Merida said she could handle that. But she was still a bit confused.

"Shouldn't you be the one to use this?"

Susan shook her head. "We're bypassing any forces on the ground. The plan is to fly overhead, smash the top of the palace off, drop inside, and get what we need as quickly as possible. That means as soon as we're down, you activate that because I might not be able to."

"Why not?"

"Like you said, it might destroy any nearby souls. I understand if you don't want to do this, but I can't take the chance he grabs any powers I have and uses them against me. And Elsa must be shut down immediately, or she'll just encase us all in ice!"

She stared at it. "Don't do things halfway do ye? I'm either in or I'm out, no matter the consequences."

Yes, an interesting way around your restrictions. Just get someone else to do your killing for you.

We don't know they'll die. They might just be forced into Hades or go back to their bodies. Or just vanish for the duration.

Sure, sure. Or they vanish forever, lost without a trace. And here you are, telling this sweet, innocent girl to do your killing for you. What a piece of work you're turning out to be.

What choice do I have?

Kill Elsa like you're supposed to. That would end this whole thing, wouldn't it? One life instead of the dozens he'll likely have active in that throne room.

Those people died the instant Sangray stole their souls. I'm certain they would rather die than be used in the way he is.

Maybe they enjoy finally having a purpose for their existence. Sangray gives them that. As weapons? Some great existence.

That's rich, coming from you.

What's that supposed to mean?

I mean Silverstreak turned you into his own person weapon, didn't he? Appealed to your 'better nature' while looking for Luna to 'save' these worlds you come to. You could just do your Question spell, get a no, and move on. Probably would have found her by now, too. But no, you became a weapon against me. Some great existence.

Just... just be quiet.

"You're right." Susan held her hand out for the paper. "It was wrong of me to ask you to do this. I'm sorry."

She stuffed the paper in her pocket. "You're trying to save the world. This seems like a small sacrifice to me. I'll do it."

"Thanks."

And so the girls hovered high over the ice palace, Merida's arms around Susan, where she could just make out shapes darting back and forth above the place.

"Souls that can fly, do you think?" Merida asked, squinting down at them.

"Probably. It's fine, we're not going to get any closer until we pop into the place anyway."

"We're not going through the hole yer making?"

"No. That's serving as a distraction, and hopefully making us some cover. You've got the spell ready?"

"Ready." Merida gripped it tightly.

"Then get ready. *Meteor.*" Susan used a *creation* technique to conjure up a huge rock, then the *Kinetic* technique of "*Meteoric Shot!*" to fire it at the place at high speed. The rock whistled through the air and just as it hit, she *Teleported* down into the throne room and Merida let go of Susan, landing with a thump. Both girls had sturdy boots on, created by Susan the night before, with metal grips in the soles. The palace was crashing down and Elsa was obviously trying to keep the place from shaking apart, but looked up as the two appeared in the room.

"I've come for your-" Susan looked over at her, and noticed something odd about her right away.

Elsa was bald.

What?

Did you think I wouldn't take precautions? I knew why you were coming. You came for hair, but what you'll have to take is blood. Or a finger. Or maybe an ear. I'll let you decide. Hey, you're free of your Contract now, right? No magic will work, so you can cut her right? Do some of that 'lasting harm.'

I don't believe this! You made her cut her hair?

I know. Who would have thought a girl could make such a sacrifice, right? Thinking of her as Elsa is not your brightest move. She's me now, and I don't care about my hair. I care about making you do things you don't want to. So, off it went, and now your options are few.

“Sorry, can’t hear you over my palace being destroyed,” Elsa shouted. “What was that?”

“Attack!” Susan shouted, raising the pistol.

But Elsa had won the initiative, and grabbed up two swords that were nearby, smirking. Susan also noticed she was wearing armor, some kind of full plate, which glittered in the cold light of the palace.

My gun’s non-lethal setting isn’t going to get through that!

Sure enough. You’re going to have to get her in the head. With your lousy skill at the pistol. Good luck!

Thanks.

Sangray went next, he raised the bow she saw him using before and dodged to the side, getting a thirteen. The arrow missed, but not by much.

Merida went, holding the *paper* up and shouting “Begone!” to activate it. Magic swirled, and all the souls in the room, including Sangray’s bow, vanished.

“Aw, shoot,” he said, dropping his hands. “Hoped to get you with that before it went away.”

Susan looked from Elsa to him, and noticed *he* wasn’t wearing armor. She shifted her aim, pointing at him instead. *Take him down first, even if he’s probably not much of a threat at the moment. That’ll leave us to concentrate on Elsa. He could still have some nasty surprises up his sleeve.*

She fired four times, as that was the number of shots she could take with her REFlexes of four, and put 5 energy into COOrdination. She got a sixteen, so three hit.

He staggered. “Ow! Fine, if that’s how you want it!” He pulled a gun from under his jacket.

What? getting hit three times with this gun isn’t enough to make him go down?

What did you think this was? Star Trek? That you could just phaser him once and that would be that? With you attacking him the gun rolls damage, and it may have rolled poorly just then.

“Oh great. Merida, get under cover!” Susan dived for a chunk of ice that had fallen, and Merida did the same beside her.

You had to bring guns into this, didn’t you? We could have settled this like reasonable beings, but no. You had to go shooting the place up.

On stun! And it hardly did anything to him.

True. Missing your powers now?

Elsa now shrugged and dropped one of her swords, making Susan think she too was going to go for a gun but instead held up a hand, palm up. “Hey Susan,” she yelled, “bet you didn’t see this one coming!” Dark energy started swirling above her upturned hand, and Susan groaned.

“That’s cheating! You shouldn’t be able to do anything like that.”

“Why not? It’s a natural ability for me, calling down energies from my home dimension. It’s not my fault they tend to react badly with these lower ones.”

“Ahhh! Take her out!” Susan moved her aim to Elsa instead of Sangray.

Merida, possibly doing some kind of *special maneuver*, drew two arrows at once and nocked the first, holding the second between two fingers. She fired, aiming at Elsa’s wrist and getting the shot exactly where she wanted it. Elsa screamed as the arrow pierced her wrist, grabbing it with her other hand as she dropped that sword too.

“Once I’m done with Susan, I’m going to enjoy tearing you apart,” she spat. She lifted the ball of dark energy with both hands, holding it over her head.

Susan and Sangray now went at the same time, Susan trying for a headshot on Elsa, Sangray going for her. Susan took her four shots, Sangray took three. Luckily, he was not as practiced as Susan was (even with her four rating) and the bullets slammed into the ice chunk instead of her.

Thank you, cover AR.

However, she was surprised to see Elsa twist out of the way, making her shots miss.

“You think you’re the only one that can spend energy?” Elsa taunted her. “Get over yourself.”

Merida, having an arrow ready, tried to put another shot into Elsa’s upraised hands, got her maximum roll and did five damage to Elsa’s unhurt hand, pinning them together and making Elsa cry out again.

Wait a second. A girl with a stupid bow is doing better in this fight than I am... with a high tech gun? This makes no sense at all!

Sure it does. Merida is an arrowing machine, it’s all she’s really good at. Her rating is beyond human limits, and will only improve as times goes on. You suck with a pistol, your skill is below average. What did you expect? Putting energy in helps, but only if your roll is good. You can still get a low roll and your skill doesn’t make up for it. She gets a low roll and her skill still more than makes up for it.

Oh, like I put energy into magic all the time, to make up for my six ratings.

Right. Let the girl have her amazing skill, you’ve got the worlds on a string. Though I suppose jealousy could be useful to me, I hadn’t considered it because usually you think you’re better than anybody at anything.

With magic, I am. Can we discuss this later, I’m kind of in the middle of a fight, here?

Sure, sure, not like these little chats of ours take any time anyway.

Elsa now acted, bringing her arrowed hands down and flinging the ball of darkness out at Susan. “Get out of here!” she screamed, going to push Merida out of the way.

Merida shook her head and instead grabbed her, forcing her down and covering her body with her own. Susan, being used to having a far greater STRENGTH hardly struggled.

What are you-

The explosion made Susan’s ears ring, and when her vision cleared the room was... changed. The cover was gone, there was a hole in the floor, and the other two were staring at some light in the middle of the room. “Merida!” Susan scrambled up and stared at her new friend, who was seemingly covered by some kind of *spirit aura* but that was impossible. *Isn’t it?*

“What’s going on?” Merida asked, somewhat terrified. “What’s happening to me?”

Susan heard a clapping sound and turned to look, and there stood Silversteak.

“Oh great, here we go!” Elsa mocked sarcastically, lowering her hands. The arrows were still stuck through them, but that didn’t seem to bother her. “Just had to jump in front of it, didn’t you?”

“What’s going on? What are you doing here?” Susan asked him.

“You finally found me one,” he replied, pointing to Merida. “That’s the trouble with you, Susan. You don’t give others a lot of chance to shine. But you, Merida, right? You shone on anyway, didn’t you?”

“Who are you?” she asked, awed, looking the being in silver up and down.

“I’m the one who sent Susan here, and I have a proposition for you, if you have a minute.”

“Do you mind?” shouted Elsa. “I’m in the middle of trying to kill Susan here, if you didn’t know! Sangray, shoot him!”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Good choice.”

“What proposition?”

“Come and work for me. When Susan leaves here, go with her. Become an agent of mine, and I’ll give you training and resources you haven’t dreamed of.”

“What then? What do you want from me?”

“Nothing but your cooperation. Either here, or as a *wanderer* like Susan. You can return here, use what I teach you to bring a little justice into the world, or I’ll find you a group and you can liberate worlds, just like she does. The choice is yours. But we can talk about that. At the very least, I invite you to go with Susan and consider your options. You impressed me, Merida. You came here at great personal risk. You have a strong will, and you’re willing to work hard doing something you love. Your skill with a bow didn’t come by magic, you worked

long and hard at it. And you protected her, putting someone else's life above your own without a second thought. Those are the qualities I look for in an agent. So, what do you say?"

"I don't know. This is all so sudden!"

Silverstreak laughed. "I understand. It's not an uncommon reaction to me showing up. You've got some time to think about it. Meanwhile, your actions should not go unrewarded. I bestow upon you the ability to use your *soulform*. I think you'll recognize it." He gestured and the light around Merida condensed into a magnificent bow, which she held aloft with awe.

"Use it wisely and well. Anyway, have to dash. For me this is like you touching a soap bubble lightly enough to keep from breaking. See you soon, Susan."

He vanished.

"Yeah, you better run!" called Sangray after a few seconds of silence.

"Shut up, Sangray," Elsa said wearily. "Great, now there's another one. You must be so pleased."

"I sort of am, actually," Susan replied with a smile.

Merida grinned, unbuckling the quiver of arrows at her side and dropping them with a flourish. "Don't think I'll be needing these anymore."

"No?"

"Nope. Because now I can do this."

She brought the bow up and with two quick pulls of her bowstring drove an arrow through the chests of both people across the way. The force of the blow drove them both back to the wall, where they were held fast by the arrow that had impaled them both in the chest. They gaped at what she had just done, even Elsa looking surprised about what was happening.

Susan ran over and grabbed her shoulders. "Stop it! We're supposed to be *not killing them* did you forget?"

"Look again." Merida gestured, and Susan spun to look.

"What in the world..."

Work to be Done

When: Seconds later

Where: Battle ground inside the ice palace

After Merida fired arrows at her two foes and announced they were in no danger of dying, Susan studied them carefully for what was going on. They had brightly glowing arrows stuck through them, that was obvious. They were pinned to the wall, given how Elsa was currently struggling to get free, but still the arrows didn't seem to be piercing their bodies. At least, no blood was spurting out of the wounds, and Susan was pretty sure there should have been.

She looked between the two, wondering if she should have Merida drop the spell and heal them despite being her enemies. Sangray seemed resigned, like the battle was over, but Elsa was trying to grab the shaft of the arrow, and finally gave a scream of pain and separated her hands. The arrows were still embedded in her, and she gripped the glowing one and concentrated on it.

The glow started to fade.

Oh, crap.

"Don't just stand there," Merida encouraged her, running towards Elsa. "Get what we came for!"

"What?"

This is why you're terrible at chess. You always lose sight of the goal.

What are you spouting now?

Meanwhile, Merida approached Elsa at high speed.

"Stay away from me," she shouted, letting go of the glowing arrow and instead gripping the two arrows stuck through her arms.

What is she- oh.

Merida reached the pinned girl and lashed out in a kick towards Elsa's shin. It connected and Elsa's eyes went wide with shock and pain.

You know, maybe she would be a better choice for me than you. I mean look at her go.

Don't you dare.

Elsa, having opened her hands again now had to contend with Merida grabbing the arrows and yanking them out, causing her to cry out again.

"Stop her!" Elsa commanded, eyes watering in pain as she looked over at Sangray.

"With what?"

"Shoot her!"

"Wha- oh." He looked down at the gun that was still in his hand. "Right. Forgot about that." He brought it up.

Susan acted, putting maximum energy into COOrdination and got a sixteen, minus some penalty for the called shot, and high energy packets of energy slammed into his arm, making him cry out and drop the weapon. His arm hung limp.

"That was my favorite arm you know!" he chided her.

"It'll grow back."

Meanwhile, Elsa was back to dealing with the arrow, and Merida was making a beeline right for her.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" she called, booking it past Susan.

"Good idea. Drop the spell."

"Got it."

"Teleportal!"

A moment later the two were resting outside the witch's hut, and Merida was inspecting the blood soaked arrowheads. "I hope this will be enough."

"I wondered why she didn't pull them out right away. She didn't want to lose track of them. But how did you pin them like that?"

"They're *soul arrows*. They hit their souls, not their bodies."

"Oh."

"Come on. Let's get this spell complete before that ice queen gets loose and starts making things worse somehow."

"Right."

The two went back inside and Susan allowed Merida to drop the arrow in, completing the potion. With a bright flash a snowflake appeared, suspended over the now empty cauldron.

"There you are, my dear," said the witch, getting a pair of tongs out and grabbing it. She swung it over and held it out to Susan.

"What's this?"

"Her power, of course. You took it away from her, but it had to go somewhere. So here it is."

"Wait, no, I thought it would just disappear. You mean she could get it back with that snowflake?"

"Her, or anyone that touches it. Why do you think the spell is so complex? We don't want just anyone using it and accumulating other people's powers, now do we?"

"No, I suppose not."

"So take it!"

"I can't take it! I have to go back to that castle and make sure The Darkness leaves Elsa. I'm not risking it falling back into her hands."

"It wouldn't even be safe in our *sub-space pocket* or *pocket dimension*, as The Darkness can see into those, apparently," put in Sparkle.

"Well I don't want it," the witch insisted. "And it'll bond to the next person that touches it, so you better be careful!" Merida pulled her hand back, as she was reaching for it.

"Oh."

"Once we know The Darkness is gone, I'd like to offer it back to her. It is hers by rights."

"What if she doesn't want it back?" asked Sparkle.

"All the more reason she should. I wouldn't give it to a person who really wanted it. It's too dangerous. Someone reluctant, who will not abuse it, that's the perfect person."

"I'm shocked. Figured you would waste no time grabbing it up."

"What, like I'm not powerful enough already? Besides, I don't think it'll work." She tapped her chest where the orb was. "I already have a power bonded to me."

"True. So what, then?"

"I have to assume Elsa knows she can get it back. Not many ways to get this far though, so it's pretty out of reach. Look, can you just set it down somewhere for the moment? I need to get back there right away."

"It's your crystalized manifestation of a *godgift*, you want it just hanging around here that's fine with me." The witch dropped it into a beaker she had sitting on the table and started tidying the area up.

Moments later, several new spells going, Susan stepped through another *Teleportal* back to the throne room. Both Elsa and Sangray whirled, and Susan brought up her pistol.

"Come back to gloat?" asked Elsa.

"I've come back to kick you off this world. Don't try anything, Sangray. It's set to kill now, and high enough TR to punch through your armor, 'Elsa.' I also have *Augment Skill: Pistol* going so if you'd like to experience my new, better aim, make a move."

Sangray slowly took his hand off his holster. "What's the plan, boss? You want me to make with some magic? I've got hers again."

Elsa sighed. "No point. Winter on this planet is over, at least my winter. I may as well admit—"

Defeat? Yes!

“-this temporary setback.”

Eh?

“What?”

Elsa looked startled and put a hand a hand up. “Oh, did you think you had *won*? No, no, no, Susan, that’s not how it works. You have to drive me off a world by killing my host. I won’t just leave willingly, I thought you understood that. I mean, okay, the ice plan was energy efficient, true, but I could destroy the world some other way. Or just go get that bauble you made, get this body’s powers back. Time means nothing to me, I could swim there if I had to.”

“I beat you. Leave!” Susan pointed the gun at her head.

“Or what? You’ll shoot me? Imagine the look on poor what’s her name’s face. Anna? Poor Anna. How she’ll look at you when you bring her the news. In fact, get out your iPad so you can record it for her. You *murdering* me, that is. It would make a great keepsake for her.” Elsa was grinning.

But Susan wasn’t. “I won’t let you leave here alive. I can’t. If killing you is what it takes, then fine.”

“That’s the spirit! But no, I’m going with plan B in this case. You thought you won, but you only made more work for yourself. Tootles!” She waved her fingers.

“Wait a second, let me get out of here!”

Elsa sighed and looked over at Sangray. “I suppose you could still be useful to me. Go on.”

“Thank you.” He concentrated and vanished.

“Where was I? Oh yes, bye!”

“What are you-”

Elsa slumped to the ground.

Susan took no chances, keeping the gun on her and making a quick *Dimensional Senses* check. She got minimum, which was still an eleven, enough to know The Darkness was no longer inside her.

Made plain by the fact that Elsa started screaming bloody murder, holding up her wounded arms and looking at them as though for the first time.

“Oh crap, we better heal her.”

“Stay away from me!” shouted Elsa, trying to scramble back across the floor. It was ice, so she didn’t get far as Susan pulled her healing knife and advanced towards her. Elsa took one look at the knife and started freaking out even more.

“I really have to turn this into a different shape,” Susan remarked.

Sparkle, doing something useful, cast *Somnolent Smog* and put Elsa to sleep, where she dropped limply to the ice.

“Oh, right. That worked.”

Sparkle rolled her eyes. “Just get on with it.”

With Elsa healed and sleeping her experience off at the castle, Susan explained what had happened to the best of her ability.

“So this creature left my sister, but you’re afraid it’s taken someone else over?” asked Anna.

“That’s about the size of it,” Susan replied. “Is there someplace really, really secure in this castle? Like the treasury or something?”

“Sure, why?”

“You’ll need to hang onto this for a bit.” Susan brought out the glass vial with the snowflake in it.

“What is it?”

“Your sister’s power. If she wants it back, all she has to do is touch it. But if someone else touches it first, they get the power instead, so keep it hushed up.”

“I see what you mean. I’ll take care of it immediately.”

“Great. We’ll go after The Darkness, but your kingdom should be safe.”

“The snows are already starting to melt. Look, thank you for doing things the hard way. I figure you didn’t have to, and I appreciate my sister still being alive.”

"Of course. It didn't turn out exactly as planned, it won't make things that easy. Still, I proved there is a long way, if I'm willing to work for it. That's more than I knew before. Take care of her, okay? I don't know how much of her time being taken over by The Darkness she's going to remember. Either way she'll need you now more than ever."

"I'll take care of her. I promise."

"Good."

They said their goodbyes and Susan left the castle, happy to see that people were stumbling out of the place under their own power, and didn't seem to realize their souls had been stolen for the duration. She found a back alley and did a *Question*, asking which direction to go in order to find The Darkness again.

Immaterial.

"If that isn't the most bizarre answer ever..." remarked Sparkle.

"I know. I asked for a direction. Does this mean I can go in any direction or none and I'll find The Darkness?"

"Want to try asking something else?"

"I'm going to have to. It must be around here someplace- wait a second, I think I'm getting a message." Susan turned up her wrist, which was vibrating, and tapped the watch Silverstreak had given her.

"Susan? Is everything all right there?" asked the agent.

"Somewhat, why?"

"It's just we're reading a temporal misalignment where you are suddenly. It's the strangest thing."

"A what?"

"You're not when you should be anymore. Did we send you to the wrong time by accident or something?"

So he can control the time I land. I did wonder.

"No, I made The- I made Darkvoid flee, but I thought it was just to a new body somewhere around here. Are you saying it fled through *time*?"

"That's what I'm seeing. Compatible hosts are few, thank goodness, so it probably found another at some time in the future. Come on back and we'll resynchronize you to that world's timestream event matrix."

Why do I get the feeling there's more going on with these reality jumps than I've been led to understand?

Because your tiny brain couldn't comprehend them in the slightest? Just a thought.

They are far more complex than 'agent presses a button and door opens' you know. You don't need to know the exact specifics of how they work, just that they do. Unfortunately for me.

I suppose. It's just my curiosity I guess.

So Susan went back, got Merida who was explaining things to her parents, and assured them she would be back before they knew it. She had to give them a crash course in temporal mechanics, that two times could run at different speeds relative to each other, but she got through to them. There was still some muttering by the visiting clans, but Merida manifested her new bow and drew another glowing arrow out of nowhere, and that grumbling stopped rather quickly.

Susan pulled Merida's mother aside.

"Look, this will be good for her. She can train a few months, maybe visit another world or two, and get some perspective on this whole thing. She'll come back older and wiser, I promise. Maybe even ready to look for a husband. After all, with age comes maturity."

"In most cases," Sparkle muttered. Susan pretended not to hear.

"And being away while getting training from literally the best the multiverse has to offer will not make her better at just archery. Agents have a wide perspective on things, because of the worlds they've seen and what they've lived through. She'll come back a better person, I assure you."

“Not like I’ve been able to stop her doing what she wanted anyway,” her mother admitted. “Promise me she’ll be safe.”

“She will be at the hub. The place the most powerful, and most trustworthy beings from all sorts of realities hang out. She couldn’t *be* any safer than being there. If she chooses, after her training is complete, to put herself in danger doing what I do, that’s her choice. But I hope she would at least come back and see you before deciding anything like that.”

“That girl? Hah! No chance.”

And so Susan gave Merida a tour of the areas at the Hub she knew about, and got her set up in a room. Merida was quite culture shocked about the whole place. Susan could easily extrapolate holographic displays and a single door that opened to different places because while vastly technologically inferior she could see her world developing such things in time. Plus, she had watched her share of science fiction. Merida, on the other hand, came from a world where science itself, much less science fiction, hadn’t really been invented yet. But she parted with the red haired archer, leaving her in good hands with an agent, and went back to the transit area.

“So how far am I going?” Susan asked, as the agent calibrated the portal.

“Couple hundred years,” he replied. “It’ll be a pretty different place.”

“Really? It’s a magic world, I figured it would stay that way. Something about magic energy versus technological energy? Like a world goes down one path or another usually?”

“Things change. By the way, you sure you don’t want to rest a day or so? You don’t have to rush off.”

“But I do. This world isn’t safe, so the job isn’t done. I want to finish it and move on to the next world.”

“Up to you. There you go, watch your step.”

“Thanks.”

Susan stepped through the doorway of light and stood staring. The world *had* changed. Gone were castles made of mortar and stone, these were modern skyscrapers. She looked about, and cars whizzed by her, looking more advanced than the ones she had seen in the monster world before, but not quite as advanced as the ones she was used to.

“Car!” screamed Sparkle.

“Yeah?” *Okay, there’s cars. What’s the big-*

“Behind us!”

BEEP

Susan spun, seeing a car barreling towards her and having the realization she was standing in the middle of a lane of traffic. Sparkle *spirit stepped*, vanishing, but she simply jumped, doing a flip in midair as the car sailed under her. (Seven on her *gymnastics* check, so it wasn’t as cool looking as she had hoped. Thirty three on her *jumping* check, and I don’t need to explain what that means, right? She fly high.) The woman driving obviously hadn’t expected this, and had jerked the wheel to the side. Susan came down as the car smashed into a mailbox at the side of the road and jerked to a stop.

“Oh crap!” *There are two kids in that- two kids and a baby! Why did they have to put me down in the middle of a freaking street!?* Susan’s blood ran cold. The occupants of the car had hit- hard. All three, the baby included, had been thrown forward by the impact of the crash, and the windshield told a story Susan didn’t care to read right now. *No seat belts? Are you freaking kidding me?*

Indeed. It looks like even with your little Contract, you can do harm- by accident. Wonder how far we could take that little loophole?

Shut up, shut up! “Sparkle!”

“Here.”

“*Regeneration*, and fast. Get two of them, I’ll *mimic* it for the other two. Pulling a knife here doesn’t seem like such a good move. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Got it. I can’t see them, get that door open!”

Susan tore it open and looked at the occupants, somewhat surprised to see the woman’s face actually rounding out again as if smacking into the windshield had flattened it

like a pancake. (Or an old style cartoon?) She seemed unharmed, simply dazed, but as Sparkle cast the spell on the two older kids, one boy and one girl, she targeted the baby and the mother. Oddly, the baby also seemed unharmed, and Susan could have sworn the baby's skin had been *metal* a second ago, but shook her head. *That's impossible.*

The wounds started healing and the family started coming around, but it wasn't long before there was quite the crowd around the car. Everyone seemed content to let Susan handle things, and stayed back from the wreck.

"What's happening?" asked the boy, staring at his bloody hands that were currently rejecting the glass that had been shoved into them. "Cool!"

"Are you all right?" asked the woman, looking at Susan with concern.

"Me? Forget me. You should have hit me, the impact would have been far less damaging to you all. Are you okay? And I'm so sorry about your car. I'll fix it in a minute, I promise. Here, let me help you." She got the girl, probably the boy's older sister, righted and out of the car, and the woman got out of her side and shook her head sadly at the mess that was her car.

"I'm healing," said the girl, feeling her head. "That isn't my power."

"Violet!" hissed the woman. "Nothing to see here!" she called, trying to shoo people away. "Everyone's fine. We'll take care of things, move along."

So, Alleviation or Repair? That is the question. I suppose as long as the damage is simply structural, Repair a few times would be faster. Better get to work, I get the feeling these people don't want to hang around here for some reason.

She got busy taking the entire second and a half to cast the spell, in order to get the bonus for "taking more time" which stacked with Sparkle's *Magic Acceleration*. The family watched in shock as Susan first repaired the windshield, the dent in the fender, the minor scrapes and denting to the hood, the bashed up mailbox and even a bit of the curb that had been knocked into.

"Cool!" said the boy, obviously pleased, and Susan wondered if he knew other ways to express himself.

"A magic user!" said the woman, backing away slightly. Susan went to smile and reassure her, but saw something when she met the woman's eyes.

Hey, is that fear? Neato.

Oh great, tell me being a magic user isn't against the law or something...

Getting the Backstory

When: Seconds later

Where: Random street. (Ha! Like it would be random!)

“Look,” said the woman, glancing around. “Even if you are a magic user, you maybe you can just make things repair themselves, how should I know? You shouldn’t be using your power out in public like this. Kids, get in the car, we’re leaving.”

“But mom!” protested the boy. “She fixed the car, shouldn’t you at least thank her? You always tell me to say thank you when someone does something for me.”

“Thank you. In the car.”

“Yes mom,” he said in a typical young boy tone of one who could think of no logical argument at the moment not to do the thing he was being told to do.

“I am sorry about surprising you,” Susan protested as the family got in the car. “But I think I got brought to this exact spot to meet you. That’s usually how it works, and I’m going to need your help.”

“Can’t help you, sorry. Just a regular housewife. Bye.”

“Let’s at least hear her out, mom,” said the girl. “I mean if she is a magic user, even I know that’s a big deal. And she came out of nowhere... and I would know.”

“If you won’t believe me, at least believe my cat.”

“Your what?”

“That would be me,” said Sparkle from the hood. “What Susan said was true. We’re chasing something, a being of immense power that *will* threaten your world. We’ve beaten it once, you might remember from history when the world started to freeze? We stopped it then, and it fled through time. Your time. So now it’s back, and we’re the only ones that can stop it. But we can’t do it alone.”

“You expect me to believe you’ve been around for hundreds of years, since the time of Queen Elsa? Please.”

“A real talking cat, mom,” said the girl. “She is a magic user! She’s got to be!”

“Maybe she made herself immortal with magic?” suggested the boy.

The baby made grabby hands and babbled incoherently.

The woman looked her family over, then sighed. “I suppose if a cat says it’s okay, then it is. Get in the back.”

“Thank you.” Susan did so, holding the door for Sparkle. “How come they always believe you and not me?”

“Good question,” she replied. “You actually have one higher PERsonality than I do, and our LUCK is the same with your bonuses. LOOKs too. Weird, huh?”

“I’ll say.”

Maybe it’s that unnatural aura of darkness emanating from inside your very soul? People can pick up on that sort of thing you know. Even without fancy skills. They know what you are.

Oh, be quiet. I’m Susan, and I’m here to help them.

By making them smash themselves up? Right.

“My name’s Dash!” said the boy, turning around in the seat. “What’s yours?” Susan looked him over, and saw he had his hair slicked back, and had a large forehead.

“Her cat said it, stupid. She’s Susan,” said the girl. She seemed to be hiding behind her hair, as most of it fell in front of her face. It was straight black, and she seemed as thin as a rail. *Get this girl a cheeseburger. STAT.*

“I’m not stupid!”

“Yes you are.”

“Am not!”

“Kids!”

“My name is Susan, and it’s nice to meet all of you.”

“I’m Violet.”

“This is Sparkle... who is thinking about something apparently.” Sparkle was staring at Dash.

“Dash? You like speed, or is that just short for something?”

“My full name is Dashiell, why? And yeah, speed is very much the Dash’s thing.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Why? Or could you just tell?”

Oh yeah, total lady killer when he grows up.

What? He’s actually going to kill people you think? Maybe I should recruit him.

It’s a figure of speech, which you well know.

“You don’t think he’s some kind of analog, do you?” Susan asked her. “We haven’t really found any close ones... just similar names and that could be coincidence.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just someone I know with a similar name. You wouldn’t know her, goes by Rainbow Dash.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Susan missed a beat. “Sorry- What?”

“Rainbow Dash! Rainbow Dash!” Violet singsonged. “Dash is short for Rainbow Dash!”

“Violet enough,” said their mother. “You can call me Mrs. Parr by the way.” She looked good for having had three kids, no gray in her brown hair which was cut and styled rather short.

“Sure, sure.” Violet was still humming and ginning at Dash. “You, uh, you know that name?”

“I wish I didn’t. At least she’s cool I guess.” He turned back around and crossed his arms, sounding like he didn’t want to admit something.

“Twenty percent cooler than any other... look, are we talking about the same... being here? Blue pony, rainbow mane?”

“You know the show?” Violet asked. “Who’s your favorite?”

“No way, you can’t.”

“Why can’t they?” asked Sparkle. “You think our world is the only one with story tellers? That maybe these people don’t have just as many stories as you do, just as true as ours?”

“But we’ve never found any-”

Sparkle shook her head. “You’ve never really looked, either. Not much time to browse through bookstores or take in the local cinema, if it even exists where we go. No, they’re there. Just like they’re here.”

“What are you two talking about?”

“Let’s just say whatever stories you might know? They’re more real than you might expect. As far as the ponies go? I met them. All of them. And Twilight Sparkle continues to be my favorite.”

“No way.”

“Way. Believe me. I have... video.”

“Wait a minute,” said Dash. “I thought you said you came from the past. Were there talking ponies in the past? Is that where that show comes from?”

“Oh boy... you’re going to have to hear it sooner or later. My story begins...”

Susan gave the “intro to the multiverse” spiel which the kids were obviously entranced with, but that “Mrs. Parr” wasn’t buying for a second. As she drove, Susan noticed the residential area here had really weird houses, and soon she was pulling up the driveway to her house. The garage door opened by itself and the car rolled inside.

“Don’t get a lot of snow around here, do you?” Susan asked, getting out and stepping out of the garage. She looked up at the funny flat houses all around her, all one story high. Every single house she had seen while being driven here had a flat roof, and quite honestly they looked pretty similar to each other.

“After the incident with Elsa the weather was never really the same,” Mrs. Parr explained. “Kids, go do your homework while Susan and I talk.”

“Mom!” both protested. “She should finish the story!”

“Plenty of time for that later. Go. Now.”

Both knew they were outranked, and went into the house. She handed the baby over to Violet. "And put Jack-Jack in his playpen."
"Okay mom."

Once the door shut she started the garage door closing and turned to face Susan.
"Now, who are you really?"

Susan looked at her, considering. Then she brightened. "I made something that might help you believe me." Pulling a candle out of her *sub-space pocket* she looked around for something on one of the racks along the walls to stick it in. She saw a wrench, shrugged, laid it out flat and tightened it so it stood up. "*Truth*," she said to it, touching it. The spell lit the candle and she turned back to Mrs. Parr.

"A candle?"

"Satisfy yourself. This candle will flicker only in magically generated wind and in the presence of a spoken lie. Tell it some things only you could possibly know. When you're satisfied I'll tell you who I am, and you can know I'm telling the truth."

She looked doubtful, but after several minutes of telling true and false statements to the candle she seemed satisfied.

"Finally. My name is Susan Felton. I am originally from another world and I am now traveling to find my girlfriend Luna. When that's done we'll go after my father, who I believe is being held somewhere without magic so he cannot escape. Along the way I save the worlds I visit from a force I call The Darkness who wishes to absorb all the energy of this reality and any other near it for his own ends. My father is fighting this force and I believe that's who has captured him. What I said in the car was true. I met the ponies, they're real. I've met others who you may know from stories. I have magic and power at my command and I will do whatever I can to protect you, and this world, from The Darkness."

A moment passed as Mrs. Parr watched the candle. "Oh," she finally said. "Look, it's leftovers night. Would you like to join us for dinner?"

"I would be delighted, Mrs. Parr."

"Okay. And call me Helen."

Naturally the two kids were right inside the door when Helen opened it.

"Didn't I tell you two to do homework?"

The were both grinning as they pushed past each other down the hallway.

Susan insisted on helping set the table and getting the food ready, and she continued the story of her adventures as she did. The kids were entranced, more Dash than Violet, but even she seemed interested.

Then the enormous guy stomped into the house. And he didn't look happy. He looked like maybe he had been in great shape once, but had let himself go. He was balding, and rather fat.

"Hi honey," he said, looking over at Susan questionably. "We've having a guest tonight?"

"Her name is Susan," said Dash excitedly, "she's a magic user! She came out of nowhere and mom smashed up the car trying to avoid hitting her and she fixed it and her cat can talk and she's been *so* many places she's been telling us about all of them-"

"Slow down, slugger! Who are you?"

"Susan Felton, nice to meet you, Mr. Parr." She went to shake hands. Turned out Mr. Parr had a pretty strong grip, but then, Susan matched him, which he seemed confused about. He looked at his hand. He shook his head. "What's this about the car?"

"It's fine," Helen said, walking over to kiss him. "She took care of it. Wouldn't even know it was... it's fine. She really can do magic though. Imagine! After all these years."

"Wait, really? You can repair stuff? Magically, I mean?"

"Yup!"

"Can you come with me for a second?"

"Uh, sure?"

"No, it's okay honey, I just want to... I need to ask her about... there's a thing... never mind. We'll be right back." Helen seemed very suspicious about this, but Susan followed him out to the driveway where his tiny car sat. She looked at the broken driver side window and bent frame.

"Bad day at work?" she asked.

"Can you fix it before my wife finds out or not?"

"Can I fix it?" she asked back sarcastically, already envisioning magical symbology which started glowing around the scattered glass.

After putting the glass back and fixing the twisted metal they went back inside and Helen started pulling things out of the oven.

"Take whatever you want," she called, "Dash, wash your hands. You too Violet."

"I know."

"So tell me what happened," insisted Susan as they started eating. "When I last left here, I had just stripped Elsa of her ice power and saved the world. Not that I'm bragging, of course. How did you go from that to skyscrapers in so short a time? Or has it been a short time? I didn't get an exact figure when I came from then to now."

"It's been nearly four hundred years since then," Robert informed her. "As far as our technology, that's mostly thanks to the first super hero. Soul Arrow."

"Soul Arrow was so cool!" put in Dash. "There are all these great stories about her, she's my favorite. She had this bow, and it could shoot these glowing arrows that-"

"Hold on- This all is because of *Merida*? Frizzy red hair, cutest accent you could ever hope to hear, fantastic with a bow out of all proportion? That Soul Arrow?"

"You know... of course you do," said Robert. "Not many outside the super hero community do, even today."

"Super hero? Look, maybe you should start at the beginning?"

"Not much to tell. After Elsa was stopped, Soul Arrow took credit..."

I suppose she might as well have, she did play a big part in it.

Stupid soul arrows. I'd like to jam one right up her-

That's enough out of you, big guy.

"...and became the first super hero, like I said. She trained others she found that had powers, even Elsa when she felt the time was right to take her powers back. She became Ice Queen."

Of course she did.

"After that, more and more people with powers started being born, and there was less and less magic in the world. That brings us up to today."

"No it doesn't. You said technology came from Merida too!"

"It did," insisted Violet. "At least, according to rumor. Supposedly there's this secret book hidden somewhere full of descriptions of technological devices she dreamed up. But the funny thing is... they all work. Scientists have been pouring over it, implementing the technology they found inside it."

Susan was shaking her head and grinning. "That little minx. She must have wandered around the hub asking how stuff worked, then recorded it. She took her training and the book back here."

"Which explains why magic has been leaving this world," agreed Sparkle.

Her smile fell. "What makes you say that?"

"Remember a long time ago? Inari told us how usually worlds had one or the other? As one grows, the other shrinks, because there's only so much potential energy a world has to work with. And you think Silverstreak didn't know about her little book project? Please, the guy is all about technology, he probably encouraged her. Will... had... have... encouraged her."

"Right. For us it hasn't happened yet. And I can't say anything about it to her because I wouldn't want to influence her choices and make this future not happen. What would that even mean? Going back, telling her not to... would I just remember different stuff happening?"

“Let’s hope you never have to find out. But wait, maybe you telling her about it is what makes her do it, think about that one.”

“Yeah.” She shook her head to try and clear it. “No. Anyway, thanks for catching me up. Sorry for being the catalyst that allowed Merida to destroy magic in your reality? I guess?”

“But it can’t be completely gone,” said Helen, turning from feeding Jack-Jack. “You can still do it.”

“I carry it with me. Basically I turn my own inner energy into magic energy. As long as a reality has the standard nine planets, or eight whatever, I can do magic. Don’t ask me why I need the actual planets to be in the sky, that fact has been a bit troublesome in the past for me. But forget me! What about you all? I know I heard Violet mention powers, Robert has super strength I’m pretty sure, and you know ‘super hero community’ stuff. So spill- are you all super heroes?” Susan expected smiles and talking about powers, but their faces fell. Robert even looked angry. “What?”

“I used to be. My wife too,” admitted Robert.

“Then the lawsuits started,” spat Dash, disgusted. “Tell her about the lawsuits, dad. And why we can’t be heroes anymore!”

“I got sued once, can you believe it? For saving someone!”

“What?”

“It’s true. There was this guy that was going to jump off a building. Which is a cry for help, not a real suicide attempt, but I digress. I can’t fly but I happened to be nearby and caught him. Smashed into a bank jumping from where I was to where he was, don’t get me started about what happened that night.”

“He’s kind of bitter about it,” Violet assured her.

“Anyway, guy sued me because he ‘got hurt’ when I saved him. After that other heroes started getting sued too. It was all downhill from there.”

“What do you mean? Certainly your ‘hero identity’ couldn’t be sued, it had no assets. Even if it did, why weren’t these cases thrown out of court like that?” She snapped her fingers. “You must have done much more good than any supposed ‘harm’ that came about from saving people.”

He snorted. “Try telling them that. No, the government believed it was in everyone’s best interest if super heroes just quietly went away.”

“And did they?”

“Heck no!”

“Things got really dicey for months after that,” explained Helen. “Our kids weren’t born yet, heck it was right after we were married, but many heroes didn’t take kindly to being politely told to fade away like they had never been.”

“What happened?” Susan asked, fearing the already knew.

“I think you guessed, judging from that look. They figured that if they couldn’t use their powers for good...”

“They would use them for bad.”

They both nodded.

“And that, Dash, is why you need to stop using your powers at school!” scolded Helen. “We know what happens to people who would be good, but who can’t stop using their powers. They turn bad.”

“Aw mom, I won’t go bad.”

“I hope not. But your father and I will be having words with you about being sent to the principal’s office, again, after dinner.”

He grinned at his father, who just looked disappointed.

“So let me understand this,” Susan went on. “Instead of just changing the law that no super hero could be sued for actions resulting from their heroic duties, they turned their back on you? And now people are put in more danger, criminals get away, people *die*, and you’re all forced to just read the news and think ‘I could have stopped that, if I had been allowed to?’ That’s nuts! How many officers have died trying to take down a criminal with powers when they have none fighting *for* them?”

“Tell me about it,” Robert growled, knuckles white as he gripped his knife.

“Wow. That’s... wow. I’m sorry. I know if I hadn’t been able to do magic growing up, something that was part of my very soul,” she touched her chest, “I would have gone nuts. I can only imagine what it’s like for you. Dash, I don’t know what your power is but I feel your pain. Going even a day without magic, for me, would be unthinkable. Hey!” she brightened. “After dinner, how about I guess everybody’s powers? Bet you having to do the dishes I get them all right! It’ll be good practice for me, too.”

“Gabaa batahta yaa thahahahahah!” said Jack-Jack.

Everyone turned and laughed at him. “I guess you’ve got someone to take you up on it!” Helen said lightly, shoving a spoon in his mouth.

Especially interested in you, little metal man!

Nice to Have Friends to Rely On

When: After dinner

Where: The Barr house

Susan discovered something interesting after going into “powers mode” and checking the family out with *Power Sense*. Also a man named Lucius had dropped by to take Robert bowling, (they apparently went every Wednesday). He was quite different than the Lucius she knew, having dark skin and a kind demeanor, and apparently the two had known each other for years. Nevertheless she kept an eye on him. Robert was torn at first, but he and Lucius decided to stay and see what Susan had to say. Lucius had powers, ice powers, which made her doubly nervous, but a quick check with *Dimension Senses* cleared him. She found out that everyone in the Parr family, even the baby, had powers, but they didn’t actually have powers.

“What?” asked Violet.

“Look, turn invisible for me, okay?” Violet did. Then Susan concentrated, shifted over to having that power herself, and followed suit. “See? Everything about me went invisible. My clothes, anything I carry, because I have the power to go *invisible*. I can still see your clothes, meaning your power isn’t the same as mine. Your power is to make yourself transparent or something. In fact it’s the same with all of you- you channel power through yourselves rather than expressing it like I do.” She became visible again.

“So what does that mean?” asked Dash.

“Nothing as far as you’re concerned, I guess. It’s just an oddity. Doing it your way has certain advantages, that’s for sure. Your father is way stronger than I can become, and you’re way faster than me if our calculations about your speed are correct. By more than double, if not more. And I can’t even imagine how I would do what you can do, Helen.”

“Almost as if they get a single expression of power,” put in Sparkle, “allowing them to put more ‘points’ than we can into it.”

“I don’t know,” Susan replied, staring at Violet. “She has *force* and *kinetics* nature, plus a power. That’s not singular.”

“I’m just talking about broad strokes. Who knows how it really works around here?”

“Maybe the big guy up stairs?” Susan answered with a shrug.

As Violet was the only one with a nature that allowed for techniques, Susan offered to give her some pointers.

“Mom says we’re not supposed to use our powers,” she protested. “Besides, I just want to be normal.”

“What’s abnormal about having powers? Seems like a lot of people on this world do. I’m not going to force you, but consider this. This super hero ‘ban’ might not last forever. Even if it does, if something happens you could have stopped, how bad will you feel if you’re unable to help because you never learned what you could do.”

“Oh, stop trying to guilt her into being you,” Sparkle chided. “Go try and work out who The Darkness went into this time.”

“Fine! But I’m here if you change your mind.”

“Wait, what about me?” asked Lucius. “From the way you describe it, don’t I have ‘techniques’ as well?”

“I’m not sure. From what you describe, it seems you just pull moisture from places and freeze it. You couldn’t, uh, form a whole ice palace in a single night, could you?”

“Of course not!”

“Oh good. Seems Elsa was just really special. Anyway...” She went and filled a glass up with water. “If you wanted to turn this to ice you could, right?”

“Sure.” He demonstrated.

“That’s different than the way I do it. I would need to create a technique to do that, and call it out, and use energy on it. You just will it to freeze. Similar power, but a totally different

application of it. Still, you all have powers. I might be able to teach you a few things, like *Power Sense* and *Power Control*. Those can come in handy for everybody.”

“You mean powers from another world? Oh can we mom, can we learn it?” Dash pleaded.

“Not until you’ve done your homework from this world. Both of you. Not that I don’t appreciate your wanting to learn something, Dash.”

“Fine.”

Susan laughed. “Plenty of time. Bring your homework to the same room and I’ll show you ‘one weird trick that has these temporal physicists scratching their heads.’”

So Susan used her favorite *Time* technique to let the kids get their homework done in record time, taking only a few minutes, and started drilling them all on her skills. It seemed Robert already knew about *Power Control*, it’s what he did when he used his super strength, even if he wasn’t exactly aware of it. Turns out he didn’t have any greater STREngth than Susan did, accounting for age and gender differences, of course. What he did have was the ability to dramatically boost his STREngth with energy in a way that made Susan rather jealous. She calculated maybe for every energy he got at least a +5 STREngth rather than +1, making it no wonder he was so powerful. He had basically developed *Power Control* on his own, naturally, just trying to become as strong as possible for his hero work. He didn’t see it in the same terms Susan did, but after she explained it, he agreed it could be nothing else.

“Nice to know how that actually works,” he admitted, seeming thoughtful. “Wonder what else we heroes could teach each other if we actually got together and worked out how our powers actually functioned. To think I was using a skill already that you made me aware of, something I could have been teaching people all along!”

“Yeah, you guys need some kind of super hero school, so the heroes of tomorrow can learn to use their powers, and not have to worry about hiding what they can do.” She looked at Dash.

“It’s getting late, you kids get to bed,” said Helen. “Plenty of time for more practice at this tomorrow.”

“Aw mom!”

“Robert, why don’t you fix up the guest room for Susan?”

“Don’t go to any trouble-”

She held up a hand. “I can see now I was wrong about you when we first met. Let me make it up to you. Stay, please.”

“All right, if you insist.” *I would have been just as happy to sleep in the dimension but whatever.*

Susan got a tour of the “trophy room” after the kids went to bed, which she was impressed with. Articles, dismantled gadgets, even his old costume in a sealed case. She touched one of the articles and cast her spell so she could read it, and shook her head anew at how this world had just thrown these people away after just one man had done so much good in the world.

“This one person did so much, think how much collective good every hero on Earth had done in their time! It boggles the mind.”

“One man with just one power,” remarked Sparkle, washing an ear with a paw.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you keep acquiring power and magic, but here’s a guy with only one power doing such great things in the world. Was it really worth it?”

“Yes. My opponent is far more terrifying than anything he would have faced.”

“I suppose there is that. I just have to wonder if we went about things in the wrong way.”

“Only time will tell that. Besides, I’m done getting powers, I have all I need.” She touched her orb. “And magic, well, that’s just useful. I have been thinking about it, though. I’m going to focus on my combat skills when I get back this time, Merida showed me that. Having fives is nice but I bet tens would be better. What brought this on, anyway?”

"I don't know. Almost killing these people by accident showed that if The Darkness took you over again, there would still be the chance it could hurt people. It would find a way, after all it has nothing else to think about in your body at this point. You don't need to give it any more ways of doing that."

"Little late to be worrying about that. What's done is done. And yeah, it might have pushed me to get this, but I'm in control again. And you're around to make sure I stay me. So quit worrying."

The next morning, Susan came down to breakfast to find a cross looking Robert reading the paper.

"Thanks for joining us," said Helen. "We thought you went into a coma."

"Ha. Ha. What's this?" Susan pointed to the headline, apparently there was a huge fire not far from where they were, and several people had died the night before.

"Something I could have prevented," growled Robert.

"You're not a super hero anymore Bob," Helen chided. "Give it up. It's terrible those people died but they *do not want* our help anymore. You have to learn to accept that."

Robert glared, not at Helen, but at Susan, and went back to reading the paper.

What did I do?

Hey, want to hear about something fun?

Don't tell me you set that fire?

Nah, that's kid stuff. I have a purpose, Susan, as you well know. No, I'm talking about something fun.

Do you even have fun?

Messing with you is fun. So guess what Bob and his buddy Lucius usually do every Wednesday?

Bowling. They said it right out.

Ah, it's refreshing you can still be so stupid. No, they go out and do secret hero stuff. They just tell their wives they go bowling as a cover.

Okay. Still not seeing where this is going.

Really? I'll spell it out for you then. In the original timeline, you know the one where you didn't show up and mess these people's lives up? That one? He went out last night as usual and saved those people from that building.

Susan dropped her fork, and the others looked over to her. "Sorry, little clumsy there, I'll just go wash this off." She picked it up and made her way to the sink. *Why should I even believe you?*

Why would I lie? You think this guy, with that room full of memorabilia, would just stop doing hero stuff? Could you stop doing magic? I think not. Which proved my experiment was a success, which is a huge relief in my mind, let me tell you.

What experiment?

See, you know that skill you have, Resisting or something, right? It lets you make checks against me if I try and get you to do something you normally wouldn't?

Yeah?

Well, you don't get that check if I make you do something you would normally do. So last night instead of letting them go, you persuaded them to stay and showed off, something you do all the time. Meanwhile a bunch of people died who wouldn't have otherwise. Which makes it all. Your. Fault.

Susan went back to the table and numbly started eating. She tried to think of a counter argument but really, it was right.

Isn't it wonderful? Soon I'll have you so paranoid you won't be able to trust any choice you make because I just proved I can take you over just enough to make something I know about happen, or not, as I please. You just have a nice think about that today, okay?

It was now around 2:00 that afternoon. Susan had been moping about thinking about what The Darkness had said, and discussing it with Sparkle. She didn't have much advice, but she argued it was foolish to try taking responsibility for what The Darkness did inside her.

“But how will I know? If what it says is true, just making me delay half an hour or turn left instead of right could be a disaster! It’s right, my skill wouldn’t protect against that. I really will turn paranoid about every choice I have to make. And honestly that wasn’t even a choice, it just turned out that way. I didn’t think to myself ‘I need to keep them from going out’ it just happened they didn’t go out. But it was because of me being here, like it said.”

“There’s no way either of us could defend against something like that. I don’t know, I really don’t.”

Finally she tried snapping out of her funk, using various techniques to try and figure out where The Darkness was. *At least if I find it here I can put a stop to it and get back, maybe Silverstreak would have some answers.* She was getting some strange results though. Normally the *Question* spell generated a simple yes or no answer, or at least a few words about a topic. She was more used to “*unknown*” when The Darkness was involved, but the spell did allow for an answer at most as many words as the caster’s *Jupiter* rating. In this case, that’s what she got. When she asked “Where is The Darkness in this world?” she got a list of places that seemed to be endless. After the first time she cast the spell and got a jumbled list of locations she asked again, and got a totally different jumbled list of locations. Both were sitting and discussing what that might mean when the phone rang.

A moment later Helen walked in. “It’s for you,” she said suspiciously.

Susan and Sparkle looked at each other suspiciously, and Susan got up, taking the phone in hand.

“Hello?”

“Susan? Thank goodness you’re there. Look, I have a favor to ask...”

“Please, I’m happy to do whatever to repay your hospitality.”

“That’s great, yeah, just great. Uh, can you get to the hospital in town?”

“The Hos-”

“Don’t say hospital!”

“House of guitars?”

“House of guitars?”

“Yeah, the great house of guitars, famous place. Why do I need to go to the place?”

“Can you just get here? Wait, you do know healing magic, right?”

“Yeeeeees. Without asking your wife for directions, I take it?” *Hummm, no google maps here. Could be tricky.*

“Yes.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. I can give you the address if that’ll help.”

“Just a second.” Susan set the phone down and quietly went into powers mode, taking the *Seeing* nature as well as *Healing* nature. She opened a *View Portal* using a *Seeing* technique, and saw a very nervous Robert Parr at a pay phone in a hospital lobby. That was good enough to *teleport* to, and she closed it again. *My goodness powers are so much more convenient than magic.* “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she called, and Helen came back in the room.

“What has my husband done now?” she demanded.

“He won’t tell me,” she answered honestly. “I’m off to go see what he wants.”

“I am coming with you. Let me get my purse.”

“You are? I mean, uh, yes, of course, that’s fine. Uh, right.” Helen went in search of her purse, keys, and made sure the doors were locked. Meanwhile Susan picked up the phone again.

“I can get there. But you’re not going to like it.”

“Why am I not going to like it?”

“Look, I apologize in advance, okay? Just... just be prepared.”

“Prepared? Oh no...” Susan could hear the color draining from his face.

“Yeah.”

“I’m ready to go.”

“Then grab on.” Susan hung the phone up as Sparkle jumped to her shoulders. Helen took her hand but Susan grabbed her up and *Teleported* before she could wiggle away.

"Hello? Hello? Susan? Are you there?"

"You can hang the phone up."

Robert jumped and spun, nearly wrenching the phone off the wall, but he composed himself. He saw his wife.

"Why are we at the hospital?" she asked.

"Uh, hi honey," Robert managed. The woman behind them looked over at him.

"Do I know you?"

"What? No, I was talking to my wife." He pointed at Helen, who was trying to get away from Susan.

"Put me down!"

"I can't yet, let me explain!"

"I'm not your wife," said the woman, walking away while still trying to keep an eye on him.

"No, her-"

"She can't see us!" exclaimed Susan. "Only you can, it's one of my powers. That's why I'm carrying Helen, so she's *unseen* as well. You didn't think I would just *teleport* into a hospital lobby and freak everyone out, did you?"

"Really? That's useful."

"Don't talk to me, others just see you talking to thin air. Let's find a place we can reasonably come out of and *then* we can talk."

"Oh. Woman's bathroom right over there."

"That'll do fine."

A moment later the group emerged. Sparkle had taken the ability as well, so while Susan took the minus two to suppress the power, Sparkle did not. Thus she didn't get thrown out of the place for walking around with a cat on her shoulders.

"So what is this all about, Bob?" Helen asked hotly. "Why are we at the hospital?"

Robert looked helplessly at Susan, who shrugged. "I apologized in advance. You can't expect to call home, ask for me, and not have your wife get involved."

He sighed. "I suppose. It's nothing serious, my boss just had, uh, a little accident. Yeah. I wondered if Susan could heal him, that's all. He'd be fine otherwise of course, just, this would be faster. I'm just thinking of him."

"She can't go using..." she looked around. "Magic or whatever."

"Actually, I could," protested Susan. "I turn my *unseen* back on, and I can go heal him right now. No one would be the wiser."

"See? I'll go show you where you can find him. Wait right here, Helen."

"First Dash, now you," Helen muttered. "Why are the men in my life always getting into trouble?"

"I think she suspects something," Susan said to him on the way up to the sixth floor.

"I should have waited until I got home, asked you privately. I panicked, wasn't thinking. That fire, and my boss this afternoon, I just couldn't take it anymore!"

"You, panicked? What did you do?"

"Nothing!"

"If you did nothing, why am I here?"

"Okay, maybe it wasn't nothing. Look, can you just get in there and heal him? And then I need you to go to where I work and... patch a couple of holes."

"Holes?"

"Yes, holes, okay? Ah, here we are. He's right through there. Can't miss him. Littlest guy here."

"Who are you talking to Bob?" Both turned and looked at the elderly gentleman in the business suit that had turned the corner.

"Hey Rick," answered Bob. "Talking to? Susan here." He looked over at her, but she just smiled, gave a little wave, and shook her head.

"Who? There's no one there, Bob. Are you sure you're okay? If work is stressing you out this much maybe you should see someone. I know a guy-"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Just get going will you?"
"Be right back."

Susan went into the operating room, and sure enough she found a short man being wrapped in casts like every bone in his body had been broken. She whistled.

"I don't think now is the time to be impressed."

"You're probably right. Just what did this guy do? Ah well, I guess we'll heal him now, then get the casts off when he's alone." She pulled the knife.

"Thought you took *healing* nature?"

"I did. But I thought it might have been like a broken leg or something. This'll be faster."
"I guess."

So she held the knife to his head, the only part of him not covered in bandages, and thankfully he was so out of it on pain medication he didn't even notice. Susan held it there a moment, letting him heal, then walked back out again.

"It's taken care of," she said to the two men out in the hall, pretending to wipe the knife off and sticking it back in the holster. "He won't be squealing to the fuzz about who did this to him."

"You didn't!"

"Who's this?" asked Rick. "And what's with the knife? Bob? Now what did you do?"

"I wanted her to *heal* him, she's a magic user. What did you do?"

"I simply did what you couldn't. Don't worry, it was as quick as I could do it! He didn't suffer." She drew a finger across the throat, then paused, enjoying the looks on their faces. "I healed him." She pretended to notice how they were looking at her and snapped her fingers. "Oh, you're worried about the knife?"

"Sometimes I wonder about you, Susan. Just tell them, will you?" Sparkle pleaded.

She laughed. "It's fine. Long story short, it's a healing knife. We'll get the casts off him in a minute when he's alone and he can go home today. No problems."

"Oh, thank goodness," Robert breathed, sagging with relief.

"Bob? Explanation. Now."

"You want to tell him?"

So Susan explained she was indeed a magic user, and had invisibly healed the man. He had seemed somewhat interested to meet an actual magic user, but then grew more and more concerned as he learned why she was there.

"Things have been quiet for the most part," he said when she was done. "But if this darkness of yours takes over a super, bringing all kinds of knowledge and power with it, we could have a real problem on our hands."

"Agreed. I'll be staying with the Parrs for the foreseeable future, if that's okay with you?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. So you'll know where to reach me."

"I'll keep an ear to the ground. So can you repair the damage to the office building? That'll save us a lot of hassle, if people can just go back to work tomorrow. The more time we have to account for the worse it is, as you can probably guess. We've already got everyone who was there in custody, ready to have their memories wiped. If your boss is healed and we get him home Bob, you might not even lose your job over this. He won't remember it even happened."

"That would be great. But a window is one thing, can you do, uh, larger areas as well?"

"I'm sure I can manage something. Has the area been cleared? I don't want anyone hanging around asking questions while I work."

"Obviously. Don't worry, this isn't my first time doing this." He glared at Bob. "That floor has already been evacuated and everyone sent home. You'll be able to get in without any trouble."

"Great. Just tell me how to get there and I'll have it taken care of."

"You got here quickly enough, can't you do the same thing?" asked Bob.

Susan shook her head. "I could lock onto you because you were known to me. I know nothing about this office building so I can't lock onto it. That means getting there the old fashioned way."

Which she did. Susan stood in front of the large holes blown through the wall and couldn't stop her eye from twitching.

"I keep counting them," she remarked to Sparkle, "but there's always the same number."

"There's four," Sparkle agreed. "Good thing there wasn't any, I don't know, piping or vents or whatever between here and there."

"Even through drywall, no wonder he got so banged up. Could I throw someone hard enough to do this?"

"I suppose you would calculate damage to the surface using the thrown object as a weapon. Or body, whatever. Drywall has a DTR of two, that's twelve damage to punch a hole in it."

"Multiply that by four, for each wall, and he did forty eight damage total."

"That's in the realm of possibility for you, right?"

"I guess. Well," Susan dropped back into *magic mode*. "Better get to work."

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Three Hour Tour

When: Three days later

Where: Parr household

Thursday and Friday passed uneventfully, with Robert going back to work as normal. He was amazed at the cleanup job everyone had done, both Susan for getting the office building walls repaired and the containment team for erasing everyone's memories of the event. Of course, he got chewed out again because his boss didn't remember doing so the first time, but he kept his temper this time and got through it.

"It was just so many things happening at once," he remarked to her that night. "The fire that I should have been out there rescuing those people from—"

Don't remind me. It's still snickering about that.

"—and then that guy getting mugged right where I could see. I just couldn't hold it in any longer. This time I just listened to his stupid clock speech and told him what he wanted to hear."

Susan had shown the family her *personal dimension*, time modifications and all, and had spent some time with them figuring out other applications of their power. She even coaxed Violet into some exercises, given it was just as much her responsibility to combat the coming Darkness as anyone else. They also had some long talks about what having these powers meant, and what she should do with them in a world that wasn't too keen on heroes anymore.

"Good thing you can be totally invisible then, isn't it?" Susan had asked with a grin. "Better get used to running around naked!"

It was now Saturday, and Robert was on the phone trying to reach his buddy Lucius to invite him to lunch. Susan heard this half of the conversation:

"What? Since when?"

"No, I haven't. Did he say anything?"

"He took that too? No, I swear, he didn't say anything to me. My wife would kill me, you know that."

"No, that's not like him, I agree. I'm sure he's fine..."

"Calm down. I have someone here that can help. I'll have her look into it and get right back to you. Yes, one of *us*. I know that's why this probably happened, but that's not the point now is it?"

"Right away, yes. Goodbye."

"What's up?"

"It seems Lucius took off yesterday without saying anything to his wife. He's been missing ever since. She can't get in touch with him and he's never just taken off like this. She's really worried."

"Do you think he got involved in some kind of super hero stuff?"

"No! He's the one that was always arguing against us doing..." He glanced over at Helen. "Anyway. Can you find him, like you did me?"

"But of course!" Susan changed and used the same *Seeing* technique she had used to find the hospital to look into where Lucius was. She got a bad feeling when her inner vision stayed dark. "Oh dear."

"What? Is he in trouble?"

"It could be worse than that," she answered, dropping back into magic mode and getting her book out. *I should really make a permanent version of this spell, I use it so darn often.*

One *Question* later and she had her answer to "Is Lucius Best dead?"

Yes.

"I'm sorry," she said, raising her eyes from the paper to meet Robert's. "He won't be coming back."

"No, that can't be! How can you be sure? When you asked about The Darkness you said you got a weird answer. Could he just have been captured?"

Susan shook her head. "I would have gotten *unknown* if he was shielded in some way. I got a clear answer to the question. He's... dead."

"Lucius is dead?" gasped Helen, looking shocked. The kids looked at each other.

"How? Where?" demanded Robert.

"That will take more *Questions*. I'm really, really sorry."

You should be. Want to hear something fun?

Oh come on!

Exactly, Susan. Another death to lay at your feet. You just keep racking them up here, don't you? That contract of yours, not such a good idea was it? When there was still the possibility of me taking you over directly I didn't have to resort to trickery like this. Still, step on a butterfly and who knows what the result will be? Oh that's right, I do, but you get to take all the blame. Priceless.

How is this my fault?

How is it not? Remember that bowling incident I spoke of earlier?

Yes... there was more to that event? How much can me just sitting around talking to people change the timeline?

You have no idea. See, agents have been tailing "Frozone" for some time, and they finally made contact. If he had been with VonSenior Incredible here he would have been contacted instead. And he would have survived the little tussle that got Lucius killed. But thanks to you, that didn't happen, the agent didn't find Robert yet, and now another person is dead at the hands of- well, you'll have to figure that one out yourself. I'm not giving you the answers, just enough information so you feel really bad. Not that I don't already know but... is it working?

I will find out, you know.

Probably. For all the good it'll do you.

So Susan asked the universe for more answers, and got the coordinates where Lucius died. Robert got out a map and looked them up, finding it to be out in the ocean somewhere.

"Probably a small island," he remarked, "not on any maps. But why go all the way out there?"

"I can ask, but it won't tell me much."

"Can you get us there? That would give us all the answers."

"Best I can do is fly there myself and send a *teleportal* back for you guys. But miles of empty ocean? I'd get lost and end up going in circles the whole time."

"She would, too," agreed Sparkle. "Trouble is, even I don't know much about navigation at sea. I wouldn't be any help."

"You shouldn't just go rushing off anyway," Helen protested. "Call Rick and have the government handle this."

"I can't do that. He was my friend, I'm not just going to hope they get to the bottom of it. Besides, if something on that island bested Lucius, do you think someone without powers could handle it?"

"But you're totally out of shape, you haven't done hero work in years."

"So? And look, there's more going on here. Where's yesterday's paper?" He searched around for it and turned to the section he wanted. "Here, see. Gazerbeam is missing too. I bet he went through the same thing and got killed out there as well. Someone is killing super heroes, it falls to us to put a stop to it."

"Yeah, we should put a stop to it!" agreed Dash.

"Oh no, young man. You're staying far away from that place. We all are!" She glared at Robert.

"I'm going, one way or the other. I feel as though I'm meant to be there."

"Meant to be there?"

My goodness, they argue like an old married couple- oh wait.

Is this some kind of force trying to right history? Is he experiencing an echo right now?

Ah, who can say?

"Well I'm going," said Susan definitively. "I've been told this is partially my fault, for being here, because I've taken you all off your original destiny lines." *Just like I did at home by being born, I guess.* "I have to do what I can to make up for it. I'll at least need help getting there."

"Told? By who?" asked Helen.

Hiiii!

"Someone I trust wouldn't lie to me, not about this anyway. Believe me, I feel bad about this, I need to make it right. I don't know if it relates to why I'm here, but it would certainly make sense if it was. If I was The Darkness, I would be killing off heroes one by one, that's the safest way to go about it. That way when Susan comes around and turns the heroes of Earth against me, there's less of them to actually fight. Either way it needs to be stopped."

Actually I would probably start with the kids, less risk that way. No, no, maybe you're right. Take out the loners first, killing kids would just make the parents upset and come after me. Your idea of my plan is totally wrong though. Oh man, to see your face when you realize what's really going on here. You should carry a mirror so I can see it. It'll be so sweet, I can't wait.

"Well said!"

Helen considered. "I suppose I could call in a favor, get a jet and fly us out to the coordinates."

"Can we come, please can we come?" asked Dash.

"Absolutely not. For one thing you think I'm taking Jack-Jack into someplace that dangerous?"

"Gaba yeewaaa thhhuubbbb."

"What does he have to do with anything?"

"I can't leave him here by himself, can I? You two are going to have to stay and watch him."

"Why can't Violet do it? She doesn't need me, and you might need someone fast."

"Stupid, they'll need my force fields more than your speed," countered Violet.

"My power's better, they'll need me."

"My power is better, and I'm the one they'll need!"

"Lucius was my friend too, not yours."

Looking at him now, Susan realized he was trying hard not to cry. Violet looked down, probably not very close to Lucius, but both wanted to help. That was only natural. She knelt down beside him.

"Dash, listen. Right now we're talking about going into deadly danger. We're going to face who knows what on that island, or whatever we find there, and we all need to be at the top of our game. It could be The Darkness who has taken over a super, or legions of robots, or just some madman. Yes, your parents have been away from it for a few years and honestly I don't want to risk them by bringing them along. But I need their help to get there.

"When we do, they're going to need to be sharp, and your mother is going to need to know Jack-Jack is safe here at home. That you all are. Only then can she fight how she has to- smart. Not reckless, because she knows she has you waiting for her to come back, and sharp, because she knows you'll have this place defended. For all I know this is a plan to get me away from here and kidnap you all. So you're going to have to stay alert and keep yourself and your brother and sister out of danger while we're gone.

"One day, yes, it will be your turn to rush off and face the dangers of the world this becomes. But for now you are untrained and untested. Dodging *knockout* bolts I throw at you in the *dimension* is a totally different thing than dodging bullets or worse from people honestly trying to kill you. You have to work up to this sort of thing. You think your father just went right to saving the world when he first started out?"

"Actually I-"

Susan glared at him.

"No, I mean, I worked up to it. She's right."

"The best thing you can do now is stay safe. That means staying here. If I need you once I'm there I can get you there in a flash, don't worry."

"But what if something attacks the house?" asked Helen. "Now I don't know if leaving them here is the right thing to do."

"I can make up a signaling unit, if they need us," Susan assured her. "It won't take long. Back to the issue at hand, you have to let your parents focus on what they need to do, and know you're all safe here at home."

"You better get whoever did this."

"I will. I promise."

"You better." He disappeared into his room and slammed the door.

"Thank you," said Helen honestly.

"As far as you two are concerned," Susan said, getting up. "When you get back? Train them. Not just your kids; all kids with powers. From what I see, heroes before just sort of all did their own thing. There was no structure, no rules of engagement you all followed. Maybe, if you figure out where you went wrong, and give your kids the benefit of knowledge you didn't have starting out, their generation can come out into the open again and start doing the good work you used to do. Start some kind of heroes union, that has funds to defend itself if one member is sued. Some of your old crowd must have become lawyers, or made tons of money they don't know what to do with otherwise."

A sort of Justice League, perhaps? Polluting realities with things from stories from your world. If I had a head I would be shaking it.

But aren't all stories true?

So you think just because it worked for one set of heroes, it would work for this set?

Maybe. But at least they could try something! From all accounts they did nothing.

She continued. "Let people who get saved, or anyone, donate to it. Make it tax deductible as a non-profit organization. I bet tons of people will donate to it, to pay less taxes and send a message to the people that sent you away. You could have fought back when the government shut you down, instead of just fading away. If you had, maybe whoever is killing you now would have been stopped before they even began."

"One thing at a time," said Helen, as Robert's eyes were lighting up with ideas. "You have a phone call to make."

His face fell again. "Lucius' wife. Crap. This isn't going to be easy."

And it wasn't. Helen made the first call so the jet could be prepared, and Robert talked to Lucius' wife as she went to dig out her old costume and change, putting it under her clothes. She also lay down the ground rules for the kids. Susan made a device with *technology* nature that had enough energy for a single use, so they could call for help if something showed up there while they were gone. When they were ready, Helen showed Susan a picture of the airfield and she got them there.

Twenty minutes later they were in the air and in their old hero costumes.

"Looking good, Elastawoman," remarked Robert, eyeing his wife critically.

"No I'm not. Stop it. Stop!" She playfully smacked him.

"I was thinking, we should have Edna make us some new suits. Maybe matching suits for the kids!"

"That would be a monumentally bad idea," Susan cautioned him.

"Really? I think as long as they promised not to wear them yet-"

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about if you were all seen in them at the same time because some crisis came up. Once you're seen in matching uniforms, it doesn't take a super genius to look into families in that area with that number of kids at the rough ages your kids are to find a lengthy but manageable list of candidates. Start murdering them one by one, and eventually they would find you, and your civilian identities are now compromised. Forever. It's like biometrics- you can't get new fingerprints if you lose control of yours. You two can't change the ages of your kids or how many you have. At least, not by more than one at a time."

"Oh yeah. Well, scrap that idea."

The group flew about two hours before something in the cabin started beeping.

"What's that?" asked Robert, pointing to a flashing light.

"Proximity alert! I think someone is shooting at us!"

"Are we close to the island?"

"Close enough. Hang on back there!"

"Wait!" cried Susan, touching the plane. "*Invulnerability*." She spent the extra three *segments* and two extra energy to make sure she got it off, and magical power swirled around the plane.

"What? What did you just do?"

"Protected us. Don't even bother trying to shake them off now."

"Are you sure? There's two missiles heading straight towards us!"

"Do I seem concerned?"

"I don't know, I'm looking out the window at the *missiles*!"

"It'll be—"

The sound of the explosion and the bucking of the plane cut her off, but when the smoke cleared everything was fine.

"Huh. Glass isn't even cracked," Robert remarked, looking at the window.

"Naturally."

Several more missiles hurled themselves at the plane, but it kept flying, and soon the island was in sight.

"I'm not sure where to put down," remarked Helen. "There doesn't seem to be any landing strip anywhere."

"That's not a problem. Hey Sparkle, wake up. Think you can- how did you stay asleep during the *missile attack*? Not even I could sleep through that."

"I wasn't asleep. I just saw no reason to open my eyes."

"My magic is unbeatable, there is that," Susan remarked modestly. "Anyway, mind *Accelerating* me for a bit? I might need the bonus, this plane is probably pretty heavy."

"Sure thing."

With that going and the extra time she could take, Susan got a sixteen and yes, she had rolled minimum. That was still enough to get 9,192kg or 18,000+ lbs, enough to maneuver the jet she was in. "Come in on a low approach and cut the engines, I'll set us down," Susan promised.

"You'll set us down? Without the engine going we'll drop like a stone. This is no glider."

"Hey, were you blown up by missiles just then?"

"I suppose not. Trust the magic, is that it? Coming up on the island now."

Susan carefully guided the plane down, which was a bit weird as she was inside the object she was telekinetically controlling with magic, which she had never done before. It worked, and the three stepped out onto the shore.

"Don't need this anymore," Susan remarked, now getting ready to *teleportal* it back to the airfield. "If it isn't The Darkness, let them wonder what happened."

Both she and Robert shoved it through the gateway back to the mainland, and Helen went through to call the kids and tell them she arrived safely. Susan left it open until she got back, then got under cover with the others.

"Do we split up, cover more ground?" she asked.

"Now that we're here can't you just ask your magic which way to go?"

"I suppose I could ask it how far in each direction to find the person responsible for the death of Lucius. Hang on."

The magic of course complied, and the three set out. Susan had her Enhance Sword out, not the crystal one, as she didn't need to be bigger at the moment. She cleared underbrush and fallen logs as the group made their way to the only distinguishing feature around here- the volcano near the center of the island.

"Which really, I shouldn't have needed magic to tell me," Susan complained. "Where else would they be?"

The place seemed to be on a heightened state of alert, with armed men running about or flying in odd bladed vehicles that seemed to use a *saw blade* around the middle as a method for aerial propulsion. Susan snuck them past with *Flight* and *Invisibility*.

As much as I love fighting, this isn't the time.

When did you start liking all this stuff, anyway? Went out of your way to avoid combat back home. Now you seem to almost look forward to it. Quite the change. Wonder how that happened? Wonder if you'll change some more.

Everything changes, Darkness. Even me.

Indeed. In fact, I think you'll be changing for the better, and sooner than you think.

What's that supposed to mean? "What?"

"What?" asked a deep voice to her left.

"You said my name. What is it?"

"I didn't. Did you?"

"No, I didn't," claimed Helen.

"Somebody did. I clearly- there it is again!"

"I don't hear anything," remarked Sparkle from around Susan's neck.

"Someone is calling me. Hello? Is someone out there?"

"We're *Invisible*. Who would know we were even here?"

"I don't know, but I hear someone calling my name."

"It isn't, you know, that? Just messing with you?"

"No. It sounds like a little girl. I know the difference between that voice and a little girl's voice."

"How would a little girl know where you are? Someone with the power to call for help over long distances or something?"

"I'm just telling you what I heard."

"Come on," said Helen impatiently. "We may be mostly unseen but if there's microphones around here we can still be heard. Solve the mystery of the girl calling your name another time."

"Fine. But I'm telling you I heard someone."

"This magic stuff is handy to have around," remarked Robert, as another squad blew past them without stopping.

"I've certainly found that to be the case."

Finally they came to a monorail system and followed it, which led into the mountain. Susan could have sworn she heard someone calling her again at least another three times as they made their way closer, each one more frantically than the last. But no one else said they heard anything, and following the monorail they came to the base of the mountain, where a figure in a costume, standing atop a weird spherical robot, was blocking the way.

"It has thermal vision, I know you're right there so you might as well show yourselves," the man shouted down to them. "Drop all this magic crap and face me!"

Well, well, well, he knows about magic. Candidate for The Darkness #1, nice to meet you.

What, you think I would take that geeky looking guy? Pa-lease.

Susan dropped the spell, and he jumped off the robot, coming to land in front of them with a burst from his rocket boots. He was dressed mostly in black with a white S across his chest, and both his boots and gauntlets were white. "You actually showed up, just like she said you would," he exclaimed, looking amazed. "I don't believe it. You know how long I've been looking for you?"

"Who are you?" Robert demanded. "Did you kill Frozone?"

"Who can keep track? So many supers have died around here, it's tough to say. But who cares about the past? You're here and my robot is ready for you. But don't worry, I won't order it to kill you just yet. You need to know *why* you're dying. So I'll just let it break you a little bit, and we can talk. Maybe by then you'll have remembered who I am. After all, I was your biggest fan back in the day?"

Robert looked him over as if trying to place him, and Susan did the same, not with her eyes, but with her other senses. Normal amount of human energy, and he didn't register to

dimension sense so it seemed he wasn't The Darkness. He seemed to have a health level too, so he wasn't a boss type.

Guess it was telling the truth. But then where are you? He must know your avatar, he knew about magic.

Without *Power Sense* she couldn't tell if he had powers, but it wouldn't take more than two actions to switch to power mode and cut them off once she saw what they were.

The advantage to these people having one focused power. Someone like me cuts that off and poof, they're helpless. I mean the advantage for me, not for them.

"You don't think the two of us are going to just stand there and let you hurt him," Susan remarked, tired of them staring daggers at each other. She hefted her sword.

"You must be the magic user? She said someone that could do magic would come along. I can't believe it. Magic, and apparently a sword as well? Why would you need a sword if you can do magic? Weird. Not like you're really a concern. And who is this? Elastigirl? What are you doing here? Is she really the only one of your old crowd I didn't kill? Or would no one else come with you after so many years?"

"We're a team. You want to fight him, you fight me as well," Helen said proudly.

"Team? Hey, whatever happened to 'I fight alone' huh? I guess the power of bon-"

"Let's get back to this robot for a second," interrupted Susan. "Because you talk pretty big, and this robot is pretty big, but what would happen to both of those things if I cut it down to size? And by that I mean *Shrink*."

Susan's magic splintered, and she whirled. Her *perception* check was only a ten, so she didn't much trust her eyes, but she didn't see anyone. The conclusion she drew was clear: *The Darkness is here someplace*. She swung her blade dramatically overhead and brought it down. "Show-

All by myself, don't wanna be...

When: A tense few seconds of silence later

Where: Base of the volcano

Sparkle had also whirled around, searching the nearby underbrush for signs of the local avatar, but she also came up empty. The silence, broken only by the buzzing of nearby insects and the rustling of leaves in the wind stretched uncomfortably as she waited for Susan to complete her sentence. She risked a peek over to where Susan was standing but then had to do a double take.

Where did she go?

"So she made herself disappear?" asked the yet un-introduced man now also looking around somewhat confused. "That's an interesting trick. Didn't take her for the running away type, but I guess it's not the size of the sword, it's how you-"

"Susan?" called Sparkle, starting to get a little panicked. "Susan?"

"Hey, a real talking cat! Do you know any poetry? Oh, how about The Raven? I love that one!"

"Buddy!" Robert snapped his fingers. "I knew I knew that voice from somewhere. Is this what you've been doing all these years?"

"Oh, now he remembers. You know, magic tricks aside, can we get on with this? I've waited a long time for my vengeance and revenge is a dish best served cold. Any longer in this sun and it'll start to heat up." He raised a hand and was about to punch a button on his gauntlet.

"Look, can you just wait one minute here?" called Sparkle. "Susan is just... gone. I don't feel her anywhere."

"Don't worry, pretty kitty," a new voice called, and everyone, including "Buddy" if that even is his name, turned to look at the silver haired woman in the business suit now standing atop the robot. "You'll see her again real soon. But not like you might expect."

"Darkness!" spat Sparkle, flexing her claws. "What did you do?"

"Darkness?" asked Buddy. "That's Mirage, she works for me. What are you even doing out here, and how did you get on top of my robot?"

Mirage laughed good naturally. "My dear boy," she drawled, "you have it backwards. I don't work for you, you're the one who works for me. You always have."

"Don't get above yourself." He pointed a gloved hand at her. "I built all of this!"

She pretended to yawn. "Whatever. What exactly are you threatening me with, anyway?"

"Uh, my zero point energy emitter?"

"You mean this one?" She held up a white gauntlet, and he looked down at his hand.

"Hey, give that back!"

Wow, she's fast. Can she stop time or something? Oh, that could be bad.

"My goodness you're thick. Next you'll be threatening me with this hunk of junk." She pounded the robot with a heel.

"Hunk of- Robot, destroy her!"

The robot underneath her gave a bit of a twitch, some sparks came off of it, and the red light inside the visor at the top went out. Mirage started laughing again, harder this time. "Oh, I timed that perfectly, didn't I?"

Okay, what's going on?

"Wait, this isn't the latest model. This is the one two generations old. But... But... I was riding the latest one out here, I know I was."

"Stupid boy! That one was loaded into the rocket and fired at Metroville as per the original plan- twenty minutes ago."

"Impossible! I would have noticed a giant *rocket* taking off from my base!"

"Just like you noticed you weren't actually wearing your gauntlets, and you were riding an outmoded and beat up robot to your big confrontation with Mr. Big there?"

"Mr. Incredible," corrected Robert.

"Whatever."

“Well, I...” He looked around, somewhat in a panic.

“You’re right though, I had to disguise it a bit and made it launch with the rest of the missiles so you wouldn’t get suspicious. Even my abilities aren’t foolproof and a rocket- pretty big.”

“What abilities? You don’t have any powers.”

She glared down at him like he was a naughty puppy. “My codename is *Mirage* and you think I don’t have any powers? How stupid can you be?”

“Stop calling me stupid!”

“So stop being stupid. I mean all this, as revenge against one person for snubbing you all those years ago? You were a kid, of course he wasn’t going to take you seriously. I mean, humans, am I right?”

“Speaking of humans, where’s Susan?” asked Sparkle.

Mirage facepalmed. “One track minds, that’s all I encounter. It’s so tiresome.”

“Like you don’t have a one track mind, energy thief!”

“Touché.” She gave a little bow. “Well, it’s about time for the rocket to land. Sparkle, you want to see your Susan again? Head back to the city and join in the fun. She’ll be there.” Mirage gave a little wave and vanished.

Teleportation?

One of the Omnibot’s legs gave way and it crashed to the ground, then began to roll away.

“No, my robot!” called Buddy, who was of course powerless to do anything about it. “My revenge.” He winced as it smashed into a tree with a crash and went still.

“Yes, let’s talk about that,” grumped Robert, who grabbed Buddy by his arm. “What exactly is going on here?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” recovered Buddy, who looked up defiantly at Robert.

“True, you don’t. But then again, I don’t have to stop doing this.” He started to twist.

“Ow, ow, ow! Okay, okay! You were supposed to fight the robot. I made it fight other supers to get it ready. Not that one, I mean. The one *Mirage* stole.”

“Your revenge was making me fight a robot?”

“No, and she called me stupid,” he muttered. “My revenge was being a better hero than you ever were. You were supposed to lose to it, then I would swoop in and stop it.”

“I suppose you would have a better chance, having built the thing. All went wrong, huh?”

“I know! You can’t trust anybody can you? Honestly, you had the right idea before, I see that now. Work alone. I have been stupid.” He slumped over.

“Look, what is all this about rockets, and the city, and all that?” asked Helen.

“May as well tell you, the plan’s shot to pieces anyway. We were going to load the final robot into the rocket and fire it at the city. It would emerge, you would get beaten up, I would swoop in.”

“Why a rocket?”

“What? You know how heavy one of these robots is? I mean it wasn’t at first, but after I hired *Mirage* and she started researching ways to make the armor stronger we needed a heavy lift vehicle to deliver it. Plus, it’s fast so the thing wouldn’t be shot down before the rocket arrived. Aw man, I was working for her the whole time, wasn’t I?”

Oh no, The Darkness had a hand in making that thing, and unless I miss my guess, brought in some exotic material/knowledge to make it better than any of the local technology. Great, just great.

“We have to get back there. Do you have another plane we could use?”

Sparkle shook her head. “I can get us back faster than that. But I have to call the Hub, tell them Susan’s been taken. We may need backup, otherworldly backup, if that metal she made the robot out of is what I think it is. Nothing here will be able to puncture it. You,” she pointed at Buddy with a claw. “Get anything from your base you think will be helpful. You made this mess, you’re coming with us to help clean it up.”

“You bet I am,” he agreed, standing tall again. “No one betrays Syndrome and gets away with it.”

“However you have to justify it to yourself,” Robert allowed. “I’m coming to keep an eye on you. Which way is the fastest back into the base?”

“Come on.”

“Meet back here,” Sparkle called. “I’ll *Teleport* us back to the city.”

Helen nodded and followed her husband, who was still tightly gripping Buddy’s arm.

This is becoming a disaster. How did Susan even get stolen away? Same way the gauntlet did? That’s a dangerous power, and now she’s not here to lock it down!

Sparkle made a check she figured she couldn’t fail to open her *sub-space pocket* and get the transmitter out so she could call the Hub, but her claws whistled through empty air and her eyes widened in shock. *I couldn’t make the check. What in the world is going on here?* She tried again and again, then tried various other skills, including her martial art and magic. All of them but the *pocket* worked normally. The skill was there on her character sheet, *sub-space pocket* at a five rating. But the skill just wouldn’t work.

There seemed to be a lump of ice in Sparkle’s chest as she frantically tried to work out what was going on. *It’s not magic, Silverstreak said it was a consequence of us moving between realities. Everyone that does it picks up a little otherspace as they go, and they can stick things into it. I didn’t think there was anything that could block me from opening it. Especially when not even here to stop me, right? She glanced around. I am alone now, right? I mean we know The Darkness can see into it, and pulled out the Black Materia before, so it would make sense to steal away my means of reaching the Hub. But I can’t reach in and grab anything. Spell Papers, food, water, nothing. I can’t even put a small stone into it, the skill just won’t activate.*

I have no means of contacting the Hub, and if Susan has been corrupted again, more fully this time? I’ll have no means of stopping her. And what’s the point of this robot thing? Backup in case the “steal Susan” plan didn’t go off? Or is she going to be riding around inside the thing doing magic? The only magic I’ll have is that I’ve memorized, and it’s mostly support magic for her! I thought this was becoming a disaster? This is a full on extinction event!

The others returned to find Sparkle pacing about, wearing a track in the dirt as she went back and forth.

“Is everything all right?” asked Helen.

“No, it’s not,” admitted Sparkle. “I can’t reach my communicator, and so I can’t call for backup. We’re on our own.”

“There’s still a few of the old crowd I know of, ones *Buddy* hasn’t killed.”

“My name is Syndrome!” protested Buddy.

Robert went on. “Maybe we can get some backup that way?”

“You don’t understand,” she protested. “Susan can turn you off. Yeah, maybe if we hit her with a dozen powers at once we could get through the robot’s armor. But attacking it a few at a time? She’ll just turn whatever powers are attacking her off, let the robot squish them, and move to the next group.”

“So what can we do?”

“I wish I knew! Susan is literally a world killer. Why do you think The Darkness wants her so badly? Keeps trying to get her to kill, to compromise her morals? Usually teams that fight The Darkness are four *or more*. She manages to do the equivalent work of a four person team with just me. We are in serious trouble. I’m supposed to call the Hub if this happens, have her yanked back and imprisoned. I did it once, I thought we had put things in place so this never happened again. If she really has been taken over again—”

“Don’t panic,” cautioned Helen. “We don’t know how bad it is yet. She’ll fight this creature’s influence, right? And she knows you, maybe you can get through to her, snap her out of it. Maybe this *Mirage* character is just trying to make you panic, and she’ll have nothing to do with the robot at all.”

“I hope so.”

“For now, let’s just get back there and look the situation over. One thing at a time, right? You said you can get us back?”

“Yes. Wait a second.” Sparkle looked over to the busted robot still leaning against a tree. “Are any of your bots up and running? If they could be brought into the fight with this one-”

Buddy shook his head. “She must have put some kind of kill switch into them, they’re all down. Heck, most of my base is down, we had to pry the doors open just to get my prototype gauntlets back.” He held up his hands, showing a much cruder version of the gloves he had been wearing before.

“Great. Fine then, we just have to hope for the best. Gather round and grab on. My spell will just move us, I don’t know *Teleportal*.”

The group did as asked, and Sparkle brought them inside the hospital lobby she had seen after Robert had assaulted his boss. She hated to do it, but she couldn’t exactly take Buddy to the Parr house, the two were giving no indication they were married which was probably smart. But Mirage had said the city, so the city it was.

Thankfully, with a twenty one LUCK roll, no one noticed, everyone there was too busy scrambling around, seemingly getting the hospital ready for something big.

Robert grabbed someone at random. “What’s going on?”

“What?” The man looked down, then brightened when he saw it was a costumed person grabbing him. Then he recognized the costume. “Hey, Mr. Incredible? So great to meet you! Where did you even come from, I didn’t see you here a second ago.”

“What. Is going. On?”

“Oh, sorry. Some weird rocket landed about a mile from here. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what that means. We’re going to soon have casualties, so we’re getting ready. You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“What, me? No. Just, uh, checking in. Anything I can do here?”

The man shook his head. “Go make sure nothing nasty comes out of that rocket.”

“You got it, citizen. Thanks for the information. Oh, which way to the rocket?”

The guy snorted. “That’s Mr. Incredible for you, always making people feel needed. Like I needed to tell you to go in the direction people are running away from.”

“Ah, yes, well, like you said. Come on Elastigirl.”

“Elatigirl too? I don’t suppose there’s time for an autograph?”

But the four were already heading for the exit.

“Great, a mile in this?” remarked Robert, watching the pandemonium in the streets. Average citizens knew what the rocket meant too, after all.

“Too bad you hadn’t listened to me all those years ago,” remarked Buddy. “You could have had rocket boots, like mine. Then we could have just flown there.”

“Not now Buddy.”

“Syndrome!”

“Look, Syndrome,” said Sparkle. “We’re going to have to run there. I can make it easier, but Susan has the *Flight* magic. You scout ahead and see what the situation is. You can make it there and back, meet us halfway and show us exactly where to go. Got it?”

“I’m taking orders from a cat now?”

“You will if you know what’s good for you,” growled Robert. “You’ve openly admitted to killing at least a dozen heroes over the years, and that base of yours is probably a gold mine of evidence of your crimes. You want to ever see the outside of a prison again, you’re going to have to start earning some good will. *Now*.”

“Fine, fine.” He activated his boots and soared off.

“You’re trusting him?” asked Helen.

“No choice. He’s all we’ve got. And even if Mirage or The Darkness or whatever installed some mods into the bot, he’s the best chance we have of taking it apart again. I’d rather let him loose now, see if he comes back to actually help, or just takes off. He comes back now, that’s his own choice, and he’d be less inclined to stab me in the back. At least until this is all over, anyway.”

“I suppose. Anyway, you have the means of getting us there easier, you said?”

Sparkle nodded and starting casting. *“Phase Other.” And thank you, Accelerate Magic, for making all my spells take half the time so I can take extra time instead of energy. I have lots it’s true, but no Energy Drain like Susan does. I’ll have to be careful.*

With the three of them *Phased* they ghosted through the streets without resistance, Sparkle now riding the wide shoulders of Robert to avoid having to run herself, and kept an eye on the sky for Buddy to return. He didn’t, and the group pulled up outside the rocket where he spotted them and landed again. The area was mostly clear, of civilians at least, but crawling with police cars and even a few tanks.

Figures. First the cops get hold of military grade guns, then they work themselves up to other military grade hardware.

The two screeched to a halt as Buddy landed and looked the situation over. “I didn’t come back because it was just sitting there,” he explained. “You think maybe Mirage wasn’t as good as she thought? Like she accidentally busted it too?” As if in answer the rocket split apart with a crash, and the spherical robot landed on the pavement with a cracking of concrete. “Or not.”

“No, it was waiting. Probably for me,” put in Sparkle. “So I could see whatever plan it has for Susan unfolding.”

“Correct,” allowed Mirage, suddenly standing near them. “The show is about to begin. Pay careful attention.” And she was gone again.

Sparkle hadn’t been idle. Technically she had, but *Spirit Sense* is a passive skill, not an active one, and in fact is one of the few that *is* passive. With her twelve REASON check she got enough to realize Mirage wasn’t just popping in and out or manipulating time, she wasn’t actually there at all.

Either that, or she’s a pro at hiding her Spirit Energy. I felt nothing from her at all. Ergo, she isn’t actually there. And the clue is in her name anyway, Mirage. She’s just making illusions, basically. That’s why he thought he was riding a different robot, and had his gloves on. Susan might have been taken days ago and I never would have noticed. But we made our way to the island and she didn’t need to maintain it anymore. But I would have noticed she didn’t have spirit energy, right? I suppose The Darkness could have given her a similar amount of energy, and she could have been posing as Susan for a time. Then make the illusion she vanished on the island, while Mirage just walked away to get the rocket ready.

The robot’s legs emerged, and it stood up, causing the nearby officers to start shooting at it, along with the tanks. But it made no threatening moves, and after a moment of soaking up damage (or not, Sparkle was pretty sure the shells were impacting off some sort of energy shield around the thing) the head popped up and a beam of light shot out the top. It resolved into a figure, then a girl, and then was clearly the image of Susan.

“Hello, everyone,” said the figure, the voice of Susan blaring out of every nearby radio. “My name is Susan Felton, and I’m one of the last true magic users on the planet. But what I want to talk about today is your attitude towards heroes. You all turned your back on them, and today I’m going to show you the consequences of that action.”

The beam disappeared, and the robot started shooting.

“How do we stop it?” demanded Robert of Buddy above the roar of tank shells being fired at the robot.

“I don’t know!” he insisted.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You were the one who built it.”

“I built a remote to control it too. Do you see any remote?” He held his hands up, showing his older gauntlets. “I’m lucky to have these at this point, and they won’t stop something that big. At least, not for long.”

“Great, just great.” He turned to Sparkle. “So how do we stop Susan?”

“I told you, we can’t. Especially if she’s inside that armored robot. She can easily counter anything you can do by just switching over to powers mode. Quite honestly I’m astonished she hasn’t already.”

“What about what she was shouting before? How this is some sort of punishment for the city?”

“That may be how The Darkness got a foothold this time. Maybe she was angrier about it than she let on, and it used that against her. We always thought it needed some kind of traumatic event, that’s how it came closest before. When she got powers it managed to worm its way in that way. But she hasn’t gotten any new powers, not on the scale she did before. So I don’t know how it’s driving her.”

“Marvelous. Anything else we should know?”

“Yes. With Susan gone, The Darkness can negate my magic easily. Usually we both cast a different spell, because it can only negate one thing at a time. But now there is only one thing, whatever I’m doing. So I’m probably not going to be of much use to you.”

“So it’s just you and me, honey,” he said to his wife. “Think you’re up to it?”

“I’m gonna have to be.”

And what is just a guy with enhanced STrength and a woman that can stretch her arms a little further than most going to do?

“What about me?” complained Buddy. “I can help.”

“Do you have any suggestions about fighting it?” asked Helen. “What worked before?”

“That’s just it. I had the algorithm ki- fight all those supers before so all that stuff wouldn’t work now. We can’t do anything that’s stopped it in the past, it’ll be ready for that.”

“Do what you can, I’ll think of something,” he grumbled, and took off running.

Passing a lamppost he easily snapped it off and reared it back like a club, while Buddy shook his head and took the sky, firing energy bolts at the thing from his gauntlet. Helen skirted the edge of the thing, using her elasticity to grab people that were near it and pull them to safety. The robot didn’t even seem to notice Robert bashing it with the lamppost, but again Sparkle noticed some kind of energy field around the thing. *Tank shells didn’t get through, what did he think a plain iron bar was going to do? Still, at least he’s trying something, right? If only I could get a signal into that thing, maybe I could at least talk Susan down.*

The robot, it seemed, could multitask, and continued shooting energy bolts into nearby buildings, causing debris to threaten those outside, and probably killing outright many inside. Meanwhile it stabbed through tanks like they were made of cardboard, and then threw them at other tanks. It could dedicate at least two of its six legs to this task, and someone nearby was shouting into a radio that they needed air support pronto.

Oh great, are they going to try shooting missiles at it or something? That won’t work. Argh, why didn’t I learn some kind of destroy technology spell? Not that I could get to use it. But I can’t just stand here!

“Not joining the fight?” asked Mirage, appearing next to Sparkle. “I must say I’m disappointed. Your master would have thrown herself at this challenge, even if it looked hopeless. Are you helpless without her, then?”

Sparkle took a moment to do a *Spirit* and *Dimension Sense* but that just confirmed what she already believed. Mirage wasn’t nearby. “You’ll just shut my magic down.”

“True. And your silly martial art wouldn’t do much against the armor I made for this robot. I came over here because you looked tense. Relax! There’s nothing you can do so just forget it. Enjoy the show for a bit and when you’re truly convinced you’ve failed, just head back to the Hub in disgrace. Maybe you can become some other group’s mascot. Sorry, I mean *Companion*.”

“I can’t go back. I can’t get to my *sub-space pocket* as you well know.”

“No?” She seemed surprised. “Well, well, it worked even better than I had planned, didn’t it? Oh yes, that’s going to make things interesting isn’t it?”

“What worked? What exactly did you do?”

“Now that would telling, wouldn’t it? No, best you find out on- say, what about I make you a deal?”

“Oh, this should be good.”

“I’ll open a portal for you to go back to the Hub. Right now, this very minute.”

“I won’t abandon Susan!”

“No? Even when she’s turned against you so fully?” She gestured to the scene before them.

“You don’t need her inside there, why even do this?”

“Why? My dear kitty, Susan has to feel despair. She has to know that she can never go back to Silverstreak, and that her only hope of finding both her friend and her father lie with me. I know where both are, after all.”

So how come Silverstreak doesn’t? Or has he been either lying to us, using us, or getting us ready for an even tougher fight than we’ve seen thus far?

“So then she makes a deal with you for them, and you get her, is that the idea?”

“Exactly! Right now she’s punishing a city that turned its back on those that were simply trying to save it. Selflessly, I might add. Just like she’s trying to save these worlds she visit. It’s a fear of hers, if you didn’t know. That one day she’ll run into a world that doesn’t deserve to be saved. What will she do then, I wonder?”

“What she always does. The right thing.”

“Letting me eat it? Perhaps. But enough of possible futures, I really want to enjoy this. Ta ta!” She vanished again.

Sparkle stood a moment longer, watching the two men dodging thrown items while trying to get through the shield, and then began to wonder. *How close is your attention on the battle instead of me? Let’s find out. “Detect Enemies.”* Sparkle cast, and immediately realized off her to right someplace was someone that wished her harm. *You let that through, and now I know your rough location. But does that actually do me any good?*

The body of Robert landed roughly nearby with a thump, and Sparkle ran to see if he was all right.

“I’ll be fine, but we can’t keep this up. It’s protected by some kind of energy barrier, and Buddy says he didn’t install anything like that. It must be from off world so any idea how to take it down?”

And in a flash, Sparkle had it. But it was... “Dangerous. It’s going to be dangerous. But I think I could take the thing down from the inside.”

“Don’t worry about me, tell me what I have to do!”

“It’s not you I’m worried about. It’s your daughter. I think she could bypass the shield long enough to get me inside by shoving hers against it. Do I have your permission to try?”

“Bringing Violet here? My wife will kill me. But if we don’t stop that thing... How good a chance do you think?”

Sparkle mentally checked her cards- *Adrenaline Boost, Wait For Me!* and most important of all a *Critical Strike*. *Even if it doesn't work the way I'm thinking it will, the card will make it happen.* "She'll be in minimal danger for a minimal time, and I'm 90% sure it'll work."

He didn't pause long to consider. He couldn't. "Get her. But if you get her hurt..."

"And get that gauntlet off of Buddy, she'll need it. Stall while I go get her, I'll be right back."

"She'll kill me," he complained, but got up and threw a chunk of building at the thing while Sparkle raced the other way. *Have to get away from The Darkness. I think it might be paying attention to me as we were talking, and it might take more issue with me doing a "Teleportation!"* she cast, dodging behind a van to get out of sight.

Taking the whole two seconds to cast she found herself in the Parr's living room, both kids glued to the TV.

"Where's the baby?" asked Sparkle, looking around. Both kids jumped, but then relaxed when they saw it was her.

"In his playpen, I just checked on him a few minutes ago," replied Violet. "What's going on? The news can't get too close but we don't see Susan anywhere."

"Don't ask. Look, I need your help. The robot we're fighting seems to have a forcefield around it, and I'm hoping you can get me through it. I'll tell you the plan while you get your clothes off."

"My clothes off?"

"Can I come?" asked Dash.

"There's nothing you can do," Sparkle replied, shaking her head. "Even your father can't get through this field. I think I have one chance, but it has to be Violet. And you have to watch the baby!"

"Aw!"

"Why do I have to take my clothes off?"

"Because you'll need to be invisible, and having your clothes running around is basically pointless."

"Oh. Come in my room then."

The two went there and she closed the door, then started stripping.

"The plan is, I am going to have a bunch of magic on me, and you will be invisible. We'll get as close as we can and you'll smash your barrier into the robot's barrier. That should shove it aside. Then you're going to use Buddy's gauntlet to immobilize the thing as long as you can, while you attack the robot... with me."

"With you?"

"Yes. I must become a kitty missile and you will chuck me as hard as you can into the robot. Up until the point you get close you'll be like a ghost, unable to touch or be touched by anything. This is for your safety, but we'll have to drop it to immobilize the thing long enough so you can throw me. I will remain ghostlike and hopefully make it inside the robot, where I will start smashing the heck out of it from within. You got all that?"

"Can't you just, I don't know, jump inside?"

"I could. And it may come to that. But for now, you will *attack* the robot with me. Do you understand?"

"Not really, but I guess you're the boss. So are we going, or what?" She stripped off the last of her clothes and Sparkle started casting.

I'm going to need Regeneration on myself, because I'm not able to be fussy where I come out of Phase. And this plan is for nothing if I get seriously hurt and can't do my end once inside because of being dead. I see why Susan was so gung ho for Giant's Soul now. Acceleration to get us near the robot fast. Phase for both of us- strike that. Phase for me but Phase Other for her. And now I see her fascination with Spell Symbol too, that's the only way to have a bunch of magic on yourself and still do anything else. Still, I have my own method...

"*Maintenance Augmentation,*" she cast first, cutting all future penalties due to magic by reducing the effective grade by three per spell. She had to put two energy in to get it up to a nine, but as she got back one that wasn't so bad. She was now at a -2 for that one, and cast *Regeneration* on herself, taking the extra time. That was now considered a grade 3 spell, making her penalty a total of -3. *Can't do Acceleration after all, as it is I'm going to be at a*

high penalty and if something goes wrong... With a sigh she realized she still had to get them back there, and after Violet went invisible she took the maximum time she could casting *Teleport* to get them both back into the action.

They appeared, and Sparkle made a LUCK check of eighteen to make sure they weren't too close to be squished outright, but yet not so far away as to be ineffective. That result was just fine though, and both heroes (or one hero and one villain turned temporarily aside from evil if you prefer) made their way over to where Sparkle was shouting for them.

Now to get the gauntlet and Phase both of us.

"Are you floating?" asked Robert, looking her over.

"I'm being carried of course."

"Hi dad! Chilly here, isn't it."

"We have got to get you a uniform of some kind that can go invisible. And don't call me dad while I'm in uniform."

"Oh sorry. I don't know, it's kind of interesting being out like this."

"Violet-"

"Just kidding da- Mr. Incredible. Now, before that robot smashes anything else up, can we get on with this?"

"I can't give you the gauntlet," Buddy explained.

"If you're thinking of betraying us-" threatened Robert.

"It's a safety feature!" he insisted. "Anyone but me tries to use it, it'll explode. That's just how it goes."

Great. "Fine. You're coming along then. In fact, once I get thrown into the robot you can get Violet to safety with those rocket boots you're so proud of."

"He can't carry me around, not like this!"

"Uh, just how old is this person who is totally not your daughter? And now I know why you're hanging around Elastigirl..."

Robert glared at him with a 'you better not touch my daughter' look.

"Now is not the time to start complaining, any of you. You want to save the world? Put up with it. Now stand still, both of you. *Phase. Phase Other.*" Sparkle was now at a -5 to every action, but wasn't concerned as she was being carried into action, and would drop most of these spells once inside. "Stick close to me," she said to Buddy as they neared the robot.

"Fire ur laser into the hole Violet makes with her force field. That should keep it still, right?"

"For a few seconds I hope, my power cell is already half gone."

"Hopefully I won't need more."

"Why do you need it at all?"

"So one of those giant arms doesn't just punch through the body of that thing and spear me dead, of course! I will need a couple of seconds to wreck the inside, I'm not Susan you know!"

"Oh."

The robot tried to stop the only person it could see, Buddy, from getting close, but the attack passed harmlessly through the party and they got underneath the monstrosity.

"Barrier, now!" shouted Sparkle, dropping *Phase Other* from the two of them. She herself stayed where she was, as Violet was technically the "surface" she had been standing on when she cast the spell. Violet put Susan's lessons to good use and slammed her barrier into the energy shield of the robot.

Buddy didn't have to be told twice, firing a beam of some kind from his finger, which crackled along the barrier, but then punched through and held the thing.

Yes!

Sparkle now felt herself being swung back, ready to be tossed, and with a meta-action declared the use of card 10 on Violet, making sure that if the armor of the robot had any other properties that might have been in place to keep her out, they didn't work for this. With that she was flung inside.

Another *reactive action* to drop *Phase* and she winced as wires and tubes were shunted out of her, tearing off two of her legs in a spray of blood. (One front and one back) Her LUCk check of 21 made sure her head or body hadn't been hit, but taking even minor amounts of damage when you were a -4 size modifier small was devastating. *Regeneration* started putting her back together, but she didn't have time to wait until the process was complete. She looked around calling Susan's name frantically, making a *perception* check of nine. Sadly, it was almost perfectly dark inside the robot so she didn't actually see anything of use.

So on her next action, which she spent *energy* to reduce *delay* on to get as quickly as possible, she did the only other thing she could do, a *Spirit Sense* check of eleven. (Yes, all of these are accounting for her penalties) She didn't feel anything living anymore, and figured the walls of the robot were probably blocking anything out.

She's not in here, not unless she's similarly shielded. But why go through the trouble? There's more going on here than I originally thought. But what I need now is light.

Sparkle closed her eyes and concentrated, making a *Spirit Aura* check, which lit the place up nicely to her eyes. She could also spend three more energy, not that she cared about that at the moment. Her legs were hardly reformed at this point, but she didn't have far to go, and made a climbing check to get a better view of the center of the robot where she saw some kind of central cylinder no doubt essential to the whole 'being a robot' process.

That's good enough. Stay right there. Spending max energy, she threw a "Destruction" at the thing, and was rewarded with it blowing away to ash before her eyes. *And no risk of an explosion doing things that way.*

The robot stopped vibrating, meaning she had done it, and the threat from that quarter was now taken care of.

And now for the greater threat. But first, a few rounds of healing, if you please...

A moment later Sparkle slipped out of the robot and took a look around. Fires were burning everywhere, and the authorities had circled the now crippled robot so they could feel they had contributed to the process in some way. She dropped *Phase* and wandered over to the group who was obviously distressed they could not take *Mirage* into custody.

"Let me guess," she said, looking up at her. "She's just a mirage, a trick of the light?"

"Can't touch her," complained Robert.

"And The Invisible Girl got away?"

"I already heard her name, you know," said a smug looking Buddy. "Wonder how many people of your build have a daughter with that name?"

"Be hard to find out behind bars."

"I'm right here you know," said a disembodied voice.

"Just checking." She turned to *Mirage*. "Where's Susan?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yeah, that's why I asked."

"Don't get smart with me, cat. Just because you took out my robot, you haven't won. I'm still free and alive, that means I can try again as much as I want."

"But you won't be getting any help from me again," promised Buddy. "And we'll tell the world about you so you won't find a safe place anywhere, illusion powers or not."

She placed a finger on her chin. "I suppose you all do know my little secret, don't you? Still, that's easy enough to remedy. I was just waiting for the cat to come back, the very next day, before I blew you all to bits." She raised a hand and darkness started emanating from it. "It's so energy inefficient to do this, I really hate to. But with you all dead I can go where I want because no one will be the wiser. Honestly, I should just do this in the beginning and be done with it, take whatever losses it causes me."

"Find her!" shouted Robert. "Look everywhere! Can't you do something?" he pleaded with Sparkle.

But our smallest heroine hadn't been idle during that whole speech. Talking might be a *free action* for her, but gathering the energy The Darkness kept trying to use to blow them all up took time, she knew that from experience. When the energy started gathering it set off her

Dimension Sense and helped her narrow down where Mirage actually was along with her *Spirit Sense*. She had then taken several *segments* to aim, and was finally ready.

As far as I can tell, she's right there. Called shot head, maximum energy. LUCK don't fail me now!

She struck, getting a seven, total, on the attack. As Mirage didn't see it coming, her difficulty to be hit was a five, and the two made opposed LUCK checks. Mirage rolled maximum, an eighteen, Sparkle rolled hardly better than minimum, a sixteen, and added her bonus for *Spirit Sense*, a plus two. She sighed. *Naturally*, and threw in an XP to succeed.

And after all that she barely rolled enough damage, a whole nine out of a possible thirty four, but that was enough to knock her out at least, and Mirage became visible again, crumpling to the ground. Her image vanished, along with the darkness energy she had been gathering from higher dimensions to use in trying to blow them up.

The heroes of this world looked around confused, wondering what had happened. Sparkle, the *Illusion* spell now gone as she had stopped concentrating on it, walked back over to them.

"You think she was the only one who could use *Illusion*," she asked, quite smugly. "I used it quite a bit when Susan and I got separated the last time."

"But... what?" managed Buddy. "You... right here... cat..."

"Don't take it too hard. After I took out the robot I let myself heal up and put *Illusion* on myself. Made it seem like I was someplace I wasn't. When I came out I had the *Illusion* cat come over and talk to you while I worked out where she was. Her gathering that energy was the final piece I needed to know exactly where she really was. I got behind her and that was it."

"Is she dead?" asked Helen, coming over.

"Unless she has a four CONstitution, and she does look pretty twiggy so I don't know, probably not. I still have the energy, I'll finish it."

"No," said Robert, holding up a hand. "This is our world. If there's no other way, I'll finish it."

"I wish there was."

"But what about Susan?" asked Helen. "Don't you want to ask what happened to her?"

Sparkle shook her head. "Can't give Mirage a chance to wake up. There's nothing you can do to stop her pulling down energy like she was trying, and just blowing up whatever prison you put her in. Susan is just going to have to find her own way back from whatever it did. Don't worry, she's capable."

"If you're sure..."

She turned her head to Robert. "Do it."

"Young lady, where are you? You are not to watch that, do you hear me?"

"Yes, mo- Elasti- what do I call you?"

"Oh, call me mom, he must have realized it by now. He's not an idiot."

"No, I'm not," said Buddy, activating his rocket boots. "See you suckers!"

"*Elemental Sniper (Wind)*," Sparkle cast, targeting the boots. She got a sixteen total which almost missed, but he was trying to dodge two things at once giving him a slight penalty, and she did some damage to the boots. Enough to throw him off course and slam him into a building, which knocked him out and restored his timeline to his original destiny.

"They never learn," remarked Helen, grabbing the boots off him by stretching over them.

"True."

It was now two days later. Sparkle was no closer to accessing her *pocket* and cleanup of the city was going smoothly. They had tried cutting the robot apart, but found nothing they did would even scratch it, so helicopters had been brought in to airlift it out of the city. She had stayed with the Parrs, and basically moped around waiting for some word from Susan. It was now about three PM on the second day when there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a woman named Susan. Susan Felton? Is she here?” asked a voice when Helen went to answer it. Sparkle’s ears perked up and she uncurled herself from the sofa where she had been napping. *I know that voice!* She skidded to a halt in front of the door, and looked up at the new arrival. “Nynaeve! Am I glad to see you!”

“Sparkle, it is you!” Nynaeve looked down at the small arrow of light currently cupped in her hand and closed it, stopping the flow of the One Power. “What have you two been doing here?”

“What do you mean? You weren’t sent to get me?”

“Get you? There was a withdrawal event days ago, if we’ve got our timeframes calculated properly. But no word from either of you. I was sent to see what was up.”

“Come in,” invited Helen. “It’s sure to be a longer story than can be told in a doorway.”

So Sparkle explained how Susan had disappeared, and how after that she couldn’t reach her *pocket* to call for help.

“I guess that explains it,” Nynaeve admitted. “We better get you back to the Hub so Silverstreak can start looking for Susan’s beacon. Yes, the communicators serve as a beacon, that’s how we lock onto them when it’s time to bring you back. It should send out a ping that he can trace, and track her down. Odd though, didn’t think anything could stop you from accessing a *sub-space pocket*.”

“This is all great news. Helen, thank you for your hospitality these last few days, but I have to go. No Susan by this time means she needs me, I don’t want to waste a minute.”

“I understand. The kids will be sad they didn’t get to say goodbye, but I’ll explain things.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank you, and Susan too when you see her. You two saved our world, and maybe gave us heroes back. There’s already talk of putting together an actual team, run by the government, that can make sure something like this never happens again. I hope you find her soon.”

So do I. It’s bad enough we’re out looking for Luna, I don’t want to have to start Wandering to look for Susan now as well. “Me too. Nynaeve, let’s go.”

“Nice to meet you, Helen. I wish I could have seen more of your world, but duty calls.” She lifted her own watch like device to her face. “Nynaeve to Hub, I’ve got one of them. Get the boss into a conference room and get us back directly.”

“Portal opening.”

The two stepped into light.