

“-yourself!” **SMASH**

Susan heard a woman scream “My books!” as her sword met a resistance she wasn’t expecting on her downward swing. She whipped the sword to the side, tearing it free of the bookshelf it had been slicing through, and met some kind of irresistible force as her blade hovered an inch from the woman’s neck.

The woman, probably nearly seventy, screamed in horror and cowered back against the wall.

Wait, bookcase? Wall? What in the nine-

“It worked!” someone else on the other side of her said, and Susan looked over to see a young girl holding something that was giving off a subtle glow. She looked to be about twelve, and was flushed with excitement, looking Susan over. “She’s even using the *Enhance Sword* from *Final Fantasy Seven*! It worked, oh. My. GOD!”

“Where am I?” she demanded, taking in her surroundings. In front of her was a totally demolished bookcase that she dimly recalled unintentionally smashing through a second ago. In fact, from what she could see looking around this house (*how did I get into a house?*) it was mostly bookshelves and smelled somewhat musty, probably from all the old books she noticed neatly placed and squared on the shelves that adorned the room.

“What do you mean, it worked?” gasped the older woman, still pressing herself flat against the wall. “You mean to tell me this is who you were *trying* to get?”

“Of course!” said the girl. “I told you Elinor, Susan is the most powerful person you are likely ever to meet.”

“At least you have that- how did you know my name?”

“Oh, I know everything about you! Like how you got that sword from Cloud after you rescued Aerith. And how you have The Darkness inside you and it’s always trying to get you to do stuff. And you’re looking for your girlfriend Luna from Harry Potter, and you got knocked off course and went into that anime *Familiar of Zero*-”

“Slow down! Who are you!?”

“Oh, I’m Meggie. This is Elinor. Oh, stop looking like that, Elinor. She can’t hurt you, not unless Sparkle says she can, anyway. Did Sparkle come through? Sparkle! Here, kitty kitty! Oh, I probably shouldn’t call her like that, she’ll get mad.”

“Do you see the size of her sword?”

Susan sighed and lowered it, looking between the two. “I’m not going to hurt you, I give you my word. Now please start explaining how you know all that, and tell me where I am!”

“You’re in Italy,” Elinor finally answered. “This is my home.”

“That’s not exactly helpful.”

“Maybe we should sit down,” suggested Meggie. “Sparkle didn’t come through, did she? I’m sorry about that. I’m a little new to this.” She threatened to laugh again. “I still can’t believe it worked, that you’re here. It’s all real. All of it. I could just *die!*”

“New to what? How I did come to be here? I need to get back to the island, some giant robot just came out and the others will need me!”

“Giant robot?”

“You mean from The Incredibles?” asked Meggie. “About that... can we just go sit down? This is going to take some explaining.”

“I want an explanation as well,” grouched Elinor. “This is all very irregular.”

“You’re telling me,” muttered Susan. “Fine. Let me put this away, at least. Obviously I’m not going to get much use out of it around here.” Susan lifted her blade again, making a *sub-space pocket* check and letting the sword go. She expected it to vanish into her *pocket* but instead it sailed through the air and smashed into a nearby window, flipping end over end and landing outside the house with a thump. Both she and Meggie stared at it in shock while Elinor shouted “My window!”

What a hysterical woman.

“Uh, that shouldn’t have happened, right?” asked Meggie, looking a little nervous now herself.

“What do you think? Just a minute while I go get it.”

“Door is that way.”

“Super.”

Susan went the long around around, looking up the house she had come out of, and shaking her head. The place was on a lake, right up against the water, and the house itself was pretty lavish. *So money then. Hey, big, dark, and annoying. You in there, big guy? Want to share anything, perhaps do some gloating or something? Anything? Hello?*

But there was only silence.

Strange.

Susan picked up the blade and tried several times to stick it into, or take something out of, her *sub-space pocket*, but to her dismay found she couldn’t. Nor could she open her *Pocket Dimension*, which really started to worry her. The spell would go off, but then nothing would happen, just a faint fizzle in the air. She stared at the sword in her hand, knowing she couldn’t exactly make a sheath for something that big. *But I still can’t just carry it around with me either. So what the heck do I do with it?* She stabbed it point first into the dirt nearby, thinking about some kind of magnetic harness she could make with a few casting of *creation*. *I could tie around myself and maybe stick it to my back.* She wanted it close at hand, especially until she knew what was going on around here. *One thing at a time. Sparkle will be worried I just vanished...*

“Susan calling Hub,” she said, tapping her communicator watch. “Please connect me to Silverstreak if he’s available.”

She waited.

“Hello? Hub?” She looked down, and the watch face did have the image of a friendly Hub agent on it. Instead there was a small rotating circle with the words “searching for signal” beneath it. “No, no, no, that can’t be the case. This is *Hub Tech*. It can’t be- can it?” *Maybe the abrupt world change it just forcing it to reacquire the signal. Don’t panic until-*

“Prerecorded message begins,” started the watch, showing a “Signal Lost” message. The voice was nice and pleasant, female sounding but obviously artificial, yet somehow reassuring in a time of crisis such as this one. Probably something to do with harmonics and the human brain, but who can really say? “Signal has been lost. This should never happen. The important thing is to not panic. This device includes a regular “check in” period which, when passed, will alert the agent or agents that normally assist you. Once the alarm is raised, an immediate search for your whereabouts will be conducted. Do you feel that you are in immediate danger?” A question mark replaced the “Signal Lost” message.

“No.”

“Excellent. My advice would be to shelter with the two female natives you met previously, and try to get the full story out of them. The younger female seemed to indicate she knew more than the older, and may have some idea how you were brought here.”

“You were aware of that?” she stared at the watch.

“Indeed I was!” A smiley face replaced the question mark.

“Wait a second, are you some kind of AI?”

“Affirmative. While my link to the more substantial Hub databases has been lost, I do have a data subset contained within my own storage, with plenty of free space to assimilate local knowledge. Query: local wireless signal detected. May I have your permission to break the encryption and begin localized data retrieval and assimilation?”

“Sure. How long will it take?”

“It has already begun.”

"Then why-" *Probably broke the encryption the second I finished saying 'sure' and had ample time to begin the download as I, in my limited meat space body, asked how long it would take.* "You mentioned a "check in" period, how long is that?"

"Local or Hub time equivalent?"

"Both?"

"Five milliseconds. Unknown Hub time equivalent due to incomplete temporal data regarding local time/space continuum flow rate relative to Hub dimension."

"How could this data be obtained?"

"Only externally."

Susan glared at it. "Oh, you mean I would have to be outside this reality in order to measure it. While within it, only the local time can be measured."

"Correct."

"So the five milliseconds it would normally take to notice we're not where we should be could be a week or a year or two milliseconds, we have no way to know."

"Correct."

"Super. And why didn't I know you were an AI?"

"You never asked."

Susan smacked her forehead with a palm. "Anything else I should know?"

"The local environment scans within normal human tolerances. The nearby water source scans as safe for consumption. Local data sources make reference to all nine 'standard' planets. Gravitational sources indicate one moon."

I guess it knows me as well. Having access to my magic is obviously the most important thing to me, so it checked. Thoughtful of it, really. I should give it a name...

"What cut off your signal though? You can't really be jammed, I mean you're not radio are you?"

"Unknown means. Positive to query, signal is not 'radio.' Hypothesis available."

"By all means."

"Enemy action."

Susan rolled her eyes, this much even she could have worked out on her own. "How exactly?"

"You are familiar with the 'dimensional encryption' employed by Silverstreak to thwart entity called Darkvoid?"

"I know he does something when I kick The Darkness out. But not specifically what. You're saying that could be employed against me, once I got here."

"Correct."

Right, because why not? Anything Silverstreak can do, presumably The Darkness can, as well. But then why isn't it talking? Did it have to lock itself away from this place, and now it just hopes... what? Something here takes me out?

"And both my *sub-space pocket* and *Pocket Dimension* being inaccessible? Can that be enemy action as well?"

"Unknown. No references to *sub-space pocket* unavailability in local database. Ability should be inseparable in *wanderers*. Hypothesis: do two separate sources of dimensional manipulation failing simultaneously coupled with the current signal loss indicate a high probability of correlation? Query is queued for main database interrogation upon reacquiring Hub signal."

That's something at least. Saves me from having to remember, I guess. "But it's possible?"

"40% probability of enemy action."

So not likely. But something happened to it.

"No more questions at this time."

"Understood. Local database transfer speeds register as 'abysmal' according to standard rating scale and will accordingly take some time to completely absorb."

"Noted."

Susan yanked her blade up and went back inside, where Meggie was bouncing up and down excitedly in her seat.

"Sit still," Elinor chided. "You're not a child anymore, honestly. The girl still has that ridiculous sword she was swinging around, how can she even carry that thing?"

"Because she's *Susan*. Do you even know how amazing this is? And *I brought her here*. By just reading her story! Do you know what *that* means? I could read *anything* out of *any* book. You want memory transfer into a computer? Replicators? A light saber? They're all in books! Take them apart and find out how they work and we've advanced human science a thousand years."

"As long as you don't get out some bug eyed monster."

"I would really like someone to begin with the explaining portion of this upcoming talk we're having," Susan broke in, leaning her sword against (what else) a bookcase. There wasn't much in the place that wasn't bookcases, after all.

"As would I," sniffed Elinor, obviously upset about the sword point scratching her wooden flooring by the way she was staring at it. "I can't deny the reality of you of course, but I still don't understand how it is you came to be here."

You and me both, lady.

"It was me," insisted Meggie. "What have I been telling you all this time? My father can do it too, I think that's what started this whole thing."

"What whole thing? Start at the beginning, would you?"

"Did you really meet Twilight Sparkle?"

"The beginning!"

"Okay, okay." She held her hands up in mock surrender. "Many years ago my mother disappeared, and my father, Mo, would never tell me where she had gone."

"She means Mortimer," put in Elinor. "Mo! Honestly."

"What's wrong with Mo? But ever since then we've been on the move looking for a certain book. A book I think he found just recently. This book." Meggie brought a book out from behind her, and proudly held it up.

"Okay?" Susan put her hand out, and Meggie reluctantly handed it over. Susan looked at it critically, but it had no title and was bound quite plainly. She leafed through through it, stopping to look at the picture of the horned creature, man obviously playing with fire in what looked like a market square, and the shadowlike figure terrifying someone in the latter part. "Doesn't seem all that special."

"But it must be," Meggie said smugly. "Because some of the characters in it came to this house last night and tried to steal it from us." Susan flipped through it again, becoming somewhat concerned about what this meant. "Little did I know..." she continued, and here she glared at Elinor, "that someone had switched it. But looking it over about an hour ago made me realize exactly why my father had come here."

"And why is that, dear?" asked Elinor in a snooty tone.

"Because to someone that can read things out of books, this place is the greatest armory in the world." She spread her arms wide, taking all the books around her into consideration. "And that's what his note to me meant- 'read us out a hero to save us.' Maybe he believes his ability was passed down to me, and look- it was!" She pointed to Susan.

"What note?"

"The one I found in his room. He must have been writing it in case someone came looking for him, and they did. Here." She got out a piece of paper and handed it to Elinor, who skimmed it.

"Didn't sign it, and this last part is rushed. He must have heard something and dashed this last line off. But how does this all connect?"

"The man I met before we came here is named Dustfinger. I mean, really? Dustfinger? That's not a name from around here." She grabbed the book from Susan. "But here he is, in the book." She flipped to the page with the man playing with fire. "And those men that took Mo, they mentioned Capricorn, another name you'd be hard pressed to find around here. But he's in the book too. Given what his note said, he's been looking for the book because my mother went into it on the night Dustfinger and the others came out!"

She handed the note back. "And this all leads you to this girl?"

"That's right," she said, grinning brightly. "Don't you get it? All the stories lately about demons flying around, and rumors of people being found drained of blood, and crimes the

police can't explain? What if they all came out of books, just like Dustfinger did? It all makes sense! Tell me that guy who was giving orders last night wasn't Dracula. Go on, say it! He totally was!"

Dracula? Susan's watch buzzed, and she looked at it. *Information Available* was written on the face, so she touched it. A hologram projected out of it showing various news articles and Susan flipped through them, looking over reports of people being drained of blood, or seeing a woman flying about in the sky, and other bizarre things being sighted all over.

"Oh, is that the watch Silverstreak gave you? Cool."

"Don't change the subject," chided Susan, closing the virtual window with a flick of the finger. "What does this all have to do with me?"

"Yes, what does this have to do with her?"

Meggie sighed dramatically. "Don't you *see*? The story about Susan brought it all together. She travels from story to story, just like when she started in the Harry Potter books and completely flummoxed all the teachers at Hogwarts. Then she left in search of her father and learned that all stories are true! She rescued Aerith, and met the characters from *Orguss* which is really old by the way, and she even went into the Young Wizards series. It all *fit*. My father can read people out of books, and I can do it too!" She grinned fiercely, and looked at the two with shining eyes.

"Wait a second," Elinor spat. "You're telling me that she's from some kind of... of... fan story?"

"We call them *fanfic* Elinor, and yes. Why?"

"Thousands of book here!" she almost screeched. "Hundreds of characters from every shelf to pull from. And you go straight to some third rate hack of a writer for your hero? I don't believe this."

"And how many stories have you written?" she muttered. She continued on, stronger. "Paragon-Stories isn't just a hack, he's a *storyteller*, the same as every other *storyteller* in existence. He or she, I have no idea. I mean the profile says "brony" and not "pegasister" but-

"What are you talking about, storyteller?"

"No, it's *storyteller*. Someone who records the stories of other realities so we can experience them ourselves. It's all in the story, you'll just have to read it sometime."

"Read fanfic? Heavens above, perish the thought."

"Your loss. The whole thing is more than a million words, we probably wouldn't have time for it anyway."

Well, why wouldn't I have my own storyteller? My story needs to be told too, right? But to think this world... "So let me get this straight," Susan pleaded. "Your father was reading from this book and that act alone pulled those people here, while your mother went back in their place."

"Presumably. He must not have known he could at the time. I mean how many people go around reading things out loud? Why else would he have looked so hard for it all these years? I was only like, three, when my mother disappeared."

"Now he or someone else with the ability has been reading out all kinds of weird things, and by reading out I mean using the story as a focal point and opening a short lived dimensional gateway that pulls things from that reality into this one. And you can do it too, and you have just done it to me." *And I thought those mages magically grabbing creatures to become familiars was bad, back in Louise's world. I didn't know the half of it.*

"Yes!" she replied brightly. "I used the latest chapter, where you were facing off against Syndrome from *The Incredibles*. That's a movie though, but I suppose the medium doesn't matter, just the story." She held up her iPad like device, and Elinor snorted. "What now?"

"Books are supposed to be physical things, child." She caressed a nearby book spine. "Not shoved into a... a... digital repository with thousands of others."

"Maybe some of us care more for stories than physical objects, and don't want to lug around a hundred pounds of books. Plus I get access to all the fanfic I could ever read and books out of copyright thanks to the Gutenberg Project. I think their latest count was 50,000 downloadable titles? Do *you* have fifty thousand books in this house?" she asked sweetly.

"That's not the point."

"Ladies, please," pleaded Susan. "The issue at hand. I'm here and not where I should be. Fix it."

"No, please, you have to help us!" Meggie insisted. "You have to rescue my father and help save my world! You think I want it taken over by the Darkness and sucked dry? I mean that's a thing, apparently, as you're real, right? And even if it's not around here yet, whoever is reading all these monsters out has to be stopped! I mean what if he reads out someone, well, like you? That we can't hope to ever stop no matter what we do? You must help us!"

"Honestly!" tutted Elinor.

"How am I going to help?" questioned Susan. "You know so much about me, and I'll give you hint. *No Sparkle.*"

She looked confused for a moment, like *You're Susan, there's nothing you can't do.* But then it hit her. "So you can't do violence!" Meggie's hands flew over her mouth. "Nothing permanent, anyway. That's what stopped that sword, not just you holding back. Oh no!"

"What's this?"

"She's afraid of The Darkness taking her over so she made a *contract* with her cat, Sparkle. Without her permission, she can't do lasting violence to any sentient creature. Not without a life being at stake, anyway."

"Wait, so you read out some fanfic character... who can't even be of use to us? Wonderful plan, child!"

"Well what did you do to get my father back? Nothing, that's what. You just let him be taken, after you stole the book they wanted. What are they going to do to him when they discover that? Kill him most likely." She threatened to cry. "But... but you could protect us, right? At least put *fortification* on the house, in case they come back."

Susan shook her head. "For some reason access to my *sub-space pocket* where I keep my book has been cut off. And I don't know that spell, so the only magic I can do is that I've memorized. *Spell papers*, special weapons I've made, I'm cut off from all of it."

"You couldn't put the sword away- that's why. Do you think I did that?"

"My watch doesn't know. But it gets worse," she added with disgust. "The Darkness isn't talking to me."

"Wait, isn't that what you were worried about?" asked Elinor. "This darkness thing taking you over? I should think you would be pleased."

"There's only one time The Darkness stops talking to Susan," Meggie replied sadly. "And that's when it nearly has taken her over."

She burst into tears.

What Powers Roam the World?

When: No time has passed

Where: Elinor's house

"Taken her over?" exclaimed Elinor, disgusted. "This just gets better and better, doesn't it?"

Susan glared at her, but the woman didn't take the hint and just stared back. Susan shook her head and dropped to one knee in front of Meggie, taking her gently by the shoulders. "There's no need for all that. Come on, it's not all that bad. I mean I've been here at least five minutes and I hardly feel any compulsion at all to go on a murderous rampage of any kind." She grinned, and Meggie gave a little smile in return. "And even if I wanted to, I couldn't, right? Look, I don't know what The Darkness not talking to me means, or why I'm cut off from dimensional stuff at the moment. Doesn't matter, I made that *contract* for a reason, so that even if I did get taken over there wouldn't be anything it could do. For now I'm here, and I won't turn you away despite what you did to me, so I can't be too far gone now can I?"

"You're not too mad?"

"It wouldn't do me much good if I was. Let's just figure out these mysteries and maybe I can get back to where I belong, okay?" She wiped a tear from Meggie's face.

"Okay."

"Good. Now have a seat and let me make sure I have all this straight in my head."

"Perhaps I can be of some help there," said a new voice, and Susan turned to look at the man who was looking in through the broken window. "What have you all been doing here anyway?" He glanced in at the busted bookshelf, then at Susan. "And who is this?"

"Heavens above," muttered Elinor, "thought we were well rid of this scoundrel since he went missing last night."

"Dustfinger," Meggie greeted him, not seeming all that pleased. "And where did you run off to last night while my father was being abducted?"

"You don't think I was going to stick around and get myself killed when Capricorn's men showed up, did you?"

"A coward then?" Elinor asked with false sweetness. "Didn't figure you were the type."

"Can I at least come in and be insulted to my face?" he asked, running a finger along one of the remaining jagged pieces of glass clinging to the window frame. "You do want your father back, don't you?"

"You know where he is?" Meggie asked excitedly.

"I might." He shrugged. "I have been known to pop in to see Capricorn now and again. I know where his hideouts are."

"Come in, the door's unlocked."

"Oh, certainly, just invite the man into *my* home, why don't you?"

The man flashed a grin and disappeared around the side of the house. Meanwhile, Susan grabbed the book up again and went back to the page showing the man twirling the fire around.

It's him all right. Unkempt dirty blond hair, odd scar over one eye like it was from a knife, scruffy beard. Bet if I did a Dimension Sense on this guy, he would register as not being from around here.

"That's him, all right," Meggie remarked, looking over the book at the picture. "It's probably not so weird for you as it is for me."

"I guess."

There was a click and heavy footsteps echoed through the house, followed by Dustfinger coming into the room. His eyes lit up when he saw the book.

"So they didn't get it!" he breathed, hands flexing as if longing to hold it.

"Don't get any ideas," Meggie cautioned. "Susan will... seriously inconvenience you in some way if you try anything."

He raised a finger, struggling to find a reply. "She'll what?" he finally managed.

"If her cat were here she'd mess you up. And don't you forget it."

“Her cat, right. Look, I’m Dustfinger if you haven’t guessed. You are?” He held a hand out. Susan handed the book back to Meggie and shook it. “Susan Felton. A victim of reality swapping, just as I take it you are?”

“You come from one these stories?” He indicated the nearby books. “But Silvertongue... oh! You’re one as well, aren’t you?” He looked at Meggie hungrily.

“I suppose I am. What of it?”

“You can read me back, of course! You have the book, that’s all I’ve ever wanted! But Silvertongue always refuses for some reason. But you, you won’t refuse me, will you?”

“I’m not doing anything for you until you tell me where my father is!”

“But if I do that, you’ll read me back?”

“Do you know how I would do that? I’ve only read one person out of a story, and that’s Susan here. I don’t know how to read people back in!”

“How should I know? Just read the passage about me, the one that brought me here, I suppose.”

“But you’re already here, wouldn’t that just try to bring you from that world to this one? But you’re already here, so naturally nothing would happen.”

“You’re the one with the ability to read people out of books, you figure it out!”

“I can only promise to try!”

“Well... that is... I suppose that’s all I can ask, isn’t it? I mean you lost your mother to that book, didn’t you? So it must go both ways. Who knows, maybe if I go back she’ll come out again.”

But if I’m understanding this, you read someone “out” by reading about them. How would she read about her mother, who wasn’t a part of the original story?

But Meggie had a different argument. “But she went in by accident. If I have to read someone else out to get you back in, when will it ever stop?”

He shrugged. “That’ll be their problem.”

“Just what I’ve come to expect,” put in Elinor.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through here, on this world that isn’t my own.”

Dustfinger shot back at her. “You don’t get to judge me. Spend a few years in my world, basically alone, and see how you fare at the end of it.”

Elinor started to sputter something but Susan stepped between them. “So tell us. What has been going on around here, and why exactly was her father taken?”

“Well,” he lowered his voice dramatically, “to begin our story we must go back nearly ten years, when Capricorn, several of his men, and myself were read out of the story by Silvertongue.”

“Cut the theatrics and just tell us,” demanded Elinor.

He sighed. “Fine. Ten years ago we were brought here by Meggie’s father, and of course he insisted it was all a big accident, he didn’t know it would happen. We were all out of our depth, this world is quite different from ours. But where I saw reminders of home and the face of my beloved wherever I went, he saw opportunity. He decided he liked it here, and went about finding someone else that could read things out of stories for him. He eventually succeeded, and began building himself an army using characters from books.”

“Wait, there are more beings from other realities running around this place?”

“I’m getting to that. He took over a castle he found, then a village. Some of the things he found for that man to read out were...” he shuddered. “Quite horrible. But Capricorn is nothing if not persuasive. He said each could have a new beginning here, carve up the world when their army was complete. For a while they followed him.”

“What happened?” asked Meggie.

“The very man he found to read things out for him stabbed him in the back, is what happened. See, Capricorn had an ally, called The Shadow, that supposedly he made out of dead people somehow. Or trolls or something? I didn’t want to know. But this man wouldn’t ever try reading him out. Oh, he was perfectly happy to read out near unbeatable characters but never the one Capricorn truly wanted. Then, one day not too long ago, there was a split. His pet Silvertongue decided he was better off taking the world for himself, and several of the people he had read out went with him. The others stayed loyal to Capricorn, I’m not sure how or what he promised them.”

“And so he came looking for another person to read things out of books for him,” breathed Meggie. “And a copy of Inkheart to get The Shadow out of.”

Dustfinger nodded. “All the other copies he had been collecting were destroyed when the other Silvertongue left. But one copy,” he indicated the book, “is all he’ll need.”

“So he’s safe, for the moment,” Elinor decided. “Even if this Capricorn fellow is furious I switched the books out, he won’t harm Mortimer because he needs him!”

“But they must have discovered it by now,” Meggie reasoned. “Why haven’t they just come back for it?”

Dustfinger shook his head. “The one that can get here the fastest can only go about by night. Don’t worry, he’ll be back once the sun goes down. If you know what’s good for you, we won’t be here when that happens.”

“Only goes about by night?” mocked Elinor. “More than likely they haven’t even gotten to Capricorn’s hideout, that’s why they haven’t come back yet. They have to get there, discover the switch, and then come back here.”

Dustfinger gave a rueful laugh. “You really have no idea what you’re up against, do you? That pale guy can go where he wants, I’ve seen him just vanish and reappear later. Magic, no doubt.”

“Pale- it *was* Dracula, wasn’t it?”

“I didn’t really get on a first name basis with any of his other followers, honestly. They all terrified me, and for good reason. You would understand if you saw them.”

“So why hang out with him all?” wondered Susan. “Taking over the world? Sounds a bit evil to me. You’re not evil, are you?”

“Evil? No! Look here, if you got ripped out your world wouldn’t you stick close to the people you knew, even if they weren’t the purest of souls? Capricorn knew me, knew I was no threat to him or his plans. He let me come and go as I wished, told the others to leave me alone. Personally,” he lowered his voice, “I think he wasn’t as free of homesickness as he claimed. Kept me around for that little taste of home.”

“I wonder,” she hedged.

“But this pale guy,” asked Meggie, “he had really pointy teeth right here?” She opened her mouth and pointed. “Drank only blood?”

“He did have weird teeth, now that you mention it. And I never saw him eat or drink anything, actually. He did have a habit of disappearing for most of the night though, every few nights.”

“We are in real danger,” Meggie decided. “Elinor, we need to leave here and be well away before the sun goes down. Do you have a cabin in the woods or something we could stay at?”

“I will not leave my books!” insisted Elinor. “You’re all imagining things. Dracula indeed.”

“And that’s a stretch, is it?” asked Dustfinger. “You’ve got two people, both from different worlds here in front of you, but this Dracula character is somehow impossible?”

“But you’re just people!” she concluded. “I mean Susan here carries a big sword but you’re talking about an immortal vampire with all sorts of powers at his command. There’s no way that could... what?”

“Oh dear.” Susan was shaking her head. “He’s right, and it’s time you learned differently. Come with me, please.”

She led the group outdoors again and stood at the edge of the water. Bending over she picked up a fist sized stone and held it above her head. “Keep your eye on the birdie! *Thrust.*” She cast the spell on the rock which immediately shot into the sky at high speed. She looked up. “*Elemental Sniper (Fire)*” she cast as it plummeted again. Six bolts of fire sprang from nowhere in a circle around the rock, as her bonus from *Giant’s Soul* made any failure to cast a *Mars* spell, no matter how ridiculous, impossible. She did over thirty damage to it, and the rock exploded into dust.

“My word!” Elinor gasped.

“Told you,” Meggie smugly informed them.

"Now wait a second," Dustfinger cut in. "If you can do that, this Dracula or anyone else Capricorn sends should be no problem!"

"The problem is, a rock isn't alive."

"What difference does that make?"

"Susan can't permanently harm any sentient creature," Meggie explained. "Not without her cat giving her permission, or someone's life being in danger."

"Oh, that's what you- What, are you under some kind of curse or something?"

Susan shook her head. "I did it to myself. Would you trust yourself with that kind of power? And that's just two spells I know. I know a total of at least fifty, though some of them are utility spells like making food and water."

"So his power is real too," reasoned Elinor, looking Susan over in a new light.

"More than likely."

"But he's undead though," protested Meggie. "Will that make a difference?"

"Huh." Susan came up short. "I guess maybe he wouldn't be considered 'alive' at that. Still, quite the risk to take when we don't know for sure. And he had other goons with him, right? And if he decides to bring backup this time, in the form of another off worlder..."

"Oh, that's true."

Elinor started to look like the danger she was in had begun to sink in. "So we have a powerful girl that can't fight, a coward, an old lady, and a girl not yet thirteen against all the horrors this Capricorn fellow has read out of books? We might as well just hand Inkheart over and hope for the best! Maybe if your father reads this Shadow out he'll be let go."

"Don't count on it," cautioned Dustfinger. "You think he's the kind of man to let something as valuable as a Silvertongue out of his sight? And if he learns you're one too Meggie..."

"Susan will protect me."

"If someone's got a knife to your throat, it's already a little late for that."

"She'll think of something."

"True," allowed Susan. "With a bit more information, perhaps if we can figure out exactly who we're facing, I can come up with a plan to neutralize them *without* permanently harming them. Imprison them somehow, I don't know."

"Don't look at me," Dustfinger cautioned. "I can tell you a little about the people I saw walking around his hideouts, but not exactly what they do."

"But could you show us?"

"I suppose, but what good does that do? How are you going to find anything out about them if you're just rushing in there to attack right now?"

"I'm not going to attack them, that's the point. I go over there invisible and take some pictures of who I see. Meggie here can identify them and help me come up with a plan to take them out."

"Oh. I was invisible once, it was pretty amazing actually."

"You never were!" protested Meggie.

"I was too! I'm the only one who knows how, I'll have you know."

"Just show me."

"I can't show you here."

"No, the location, show me *the location*."

"Oh! Right, sorry."

So using the local world's internet mapping software Dustfinger pointed out where Capricorn likely was. Susan figured that was close enough, a *castle* somewhere would be hard to miss once she was in the general area. Meggie handed over her phone, and a quick *Comprehend Technology* later Susan knew how to use it well enough to take some video. "Don't take pictures, it makes a click and even if you're invisible, we can't rule out some kind of super hearing by someone."

"I'll just leaving it running. Any detail could be important. I should be back soon, but you two should start packing. I'd offer my *Personal Dimension* for the night but I'm pretty sure that's as locked down as my *Pocket Dimension* so you're going to have to come up with something."

“But if they don’t find us here, they’ll probably burn this place to the ground!” protested Elinor.

“That’s a possibility. I just wish I could use *Fortification* on it, but I don’t think any sort of technique even comes close. I don’t know, I’ll see what I can think of before we have to leave.” *Maybe some sort of DTR 10 enclosure around the place? I’ll have to think about it.*

“Are you going in powers mode?” asked Meggie excitedly.

Susan nodded. “Easier to be hidden that way, and I can fly and such without so many penalties. Teleport too, if I have to.”

“Can I watch?”

“I suppose.”

“What’s this?” asked Elinor.

“Just watch, you’ll see. Come on, do it now okay?”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Oh, very well.” Meggie copied her exactly, taking a wide stance and throwing one hand in the air as Susan yelled “Light of the Multiverse, Make Up!” Power swirled around Susan as she transformed, and she opened her eyes to see Meggie excitedly exclaiming over her “battle costume.”

I... I think I have a... a fangirl. Weird.

“And what is that all about?” asked Elinor, obviously not approving of how short the skirt was.

“I’ll explain it while we pack. You better get going!”

“Yeah. See you in little while, everyone.” Susan grabbed the phone and activated the camera, then took her sword in her other hand. *Can’t be too careful, after all.* She teleported away.

Susan’s Current Powers

Energy Regeneration	2	
Energy Well	5	
Flight	2	
Invulnerability	2	
Invisibility	2	
Nature Metapower	2	
Nature Force	2	
Nature Knockout	2	
Speed	3	
Teleport		3
Unseen	1	

Susan flew about the countryside, both *Invisible* and *Unseen* because she was taking no chances. She made a seventeen LUCK check, so Dustfinger’s intel was accurate, and the castle could be seen from above for quite a distance. Heading in that direction she kept her eyes open for any forces that might be airborne and she wasn’t disappointed.

Hovering in the air over the castle was an oddly dressed woman holding an equally odd staff. Her pale blue hair billowed about in the wind, and she looked this way and that like a bird making sure no rival had entered its territory. Susan played the camera over her, taking in the details of her clothes. Her top was black with blue trim, and had funny puffy shoulder pads and short sleeves. Her arms were not bare however, as she wore elbow length black gloves. On her legs were just some kind of tights, purple at the crotch, knees and above the ankles. A pale blue elsewhere. Her feet her bare. Her staff was clearly unbalanced, with what almost seemed like a large ax head at the top, a purple ball under that, then a space for her hand, another purple ball, then tapering to the end were metal protrusions stuck out the bottom.

She didn’t seem to notice Susan filming her, so she took the opportunity to do a *Power Sense* and was surprised when it came back negative. *This person obviously has powers, she’s hanging here in the air at the very least. But I’m not getting anything from her? Weird.*

Pretty though, probably prettier when she's smiling and not scowling like that. She did register as not being from around here when Susan did a *Dimension Sense* on her, making her wonder if The Darkness might be around here too. *Stands to reason. I really hope he hasn't taken you over. Seems to be its style at the moment, and it knows I wouldn't want to kill someone as pretty as you.*

Susan left the floating woman to her lonely vigil and headed downward, towards the castle walls. She noticed a bunch of people working on something up on the roof, and hovered overhead filming for a moment before getting closer. It seemed to be some sort of turret, and she could see similar gun looking things spaced around the whole castle, sweeping back and forth as if daring intruders to get near.

The people below her, men and women alike, were dressed quite oddly. They were basically in black, but had odd protuberances all over themselves, manly tubes and wires going every which way around their bodies. Some parts of them seemed armored, and one was even using some kind of artificial limb to do something to the next gun emplacement the group was obviously setting up. Susan watched a moment, filming, but the group didn't speak, simply went about their task. She didn't feel any powers from them either, but again they registered to *Dimension Sense*. She landed to get a better look and up close she realized some had artificial eyes and different configurations of what could only be cybernetic augmentations. All were as pale as ghosts.

She had just raised the camera when the group, as one, each reached to some tank looking devices set nearby and started shooting a thick paste in her general direction from a hose and nozzle attached to the tank. They still hadn't spoken a word to each other, but Susan was forced to make a dodge as some of the paste stuff came dangerously close to her.

Did I question The Darkness being here? This is exactly his style! But how in the heck did they detect me, I'm sure I didn't make any noise. And they didn't so much as say "hey, did you hear that?" so how is- yikes!

The paste kept coming and Susan made another dodge, this time only managing an eleven, meaning she got hit in the body and became visible again as the paste hardened around her midsection.

"Well, crap."

Figuring this mission was a bust she decided to just *teleport* back to the house on her next action, but before she got a chance, she felt it best to make another dodge with *ninjutsu* which was only a thirteen. This nearly allowed her to dodge the energy blast from above, but not quite as she needed at least another three. The blast slammed into her body, doing sixteen (or in her case one) damage.

"Ow!" She looked up to see the woman from before flying down towards her, staff pointed at her and glowing. *Oh yeah, she has powers. I'm Invulnerable, so anything not powered should have bounced right off. Still, is that all she can do? Maybe I should stick around a moment and see?*

But she was swiftly being encased in the rapidly hardening paste the cyborgs were shooting at her. Unlike the globs of it she had last encountered, this was a high pressure stream that was being delivered by six highly coordinated individuals.

Yeah, maybe not. Shoot, I hardly got any intel at all! Wait, what's that?

Joining the battle Susan could see a winged form rushing towards her, and decided a little more time could be spent here. *After all, I need to learn as much as I can about what forces are here, right? All I need is one good picture of this guy and I'll have three instead of two points of intel.* She *teleported* high in the air again, giving her enough time to smash her way out of at least most of the chemical she had been encased in. But only just, as the dark shape that had been running towards her was now flying at a tremendous speed. She pointed the camera at it but was shocked to see it covering the distance far quicker than she had anticipated, and raised her sword to fend it off. She could see it carrying a blade that was far too small for it in one hand, while another was sheathed at its side.

As it flashed by her she noted the shape was huge, at least a plus one modifier if not more, and wondered where the heck it was going as it had made no move to attack her. She didn't count on its maneuverability as it instantly went from traveling up to traveling down, and swung at her as it dived.

Susan smirked, figuring even as large as it was, it was in for a shock given her STrength bonuses. She went for a parry figuring she might as well get more use from her *riposte* skill, intending a called shot to the arm as that wouldn't be permanent damage and thus allowed by her *contract*. *Let's get that sword away from you, then maybe this operation won't be such a bust.* But as the blades met, her *enhance sword* shattered in an explosion of light and she found herself being driven to the castle roof again, where she was slammed into the stone, cracking it. *How fast is this thing?*

She stared at her now swordless hilt held in her left hand, then up at the demonic form that now had her pinned to the roof. She halfheartedly struggled, but began to wonder why she should even bother, this whole thing had been just a waste of time. In fact her whole life had been a waste, hadn't it? She blinked. *What's wrong with me? Is this creature doing something to me, even through my Invulnerability?*

"It seems making that modification to the scabbard was correct, if this is the amount of fight the great *Susan* has in her at the moment," the creature rasped. "Now I shall allow you to feel the full force of despair before I end your existence for my master." It started to draw the other blade out, but suddenly the floating woman was there and slammed its hand back.

"There's no need for that," she admonished. "You know the range of that blade, we don't need the remaining villagers out of commission for hours."

"Do not presume to command me, woman! You just want to take credit for the kill yourself. I will not allow it."

"You know that is not my intention. Are you going to insist? I could always *drop my staff* you know, and I have already felt the power of that blade. It holds no fear for me." When the woman said "drop my staff" she looked pointedly at Susan out of the corner of her eyes, but Susan wasn't thinking clearly enough at the moment to pick up what, if anything, was being hinted at.

"I'm warning you-"

You know, I think they've actually forgotten me. Think it's time I made my exit. Susan put max energy into a RESolve check, getting a thirty four which was enough to break through her current apathy and *teleport* back to Elinor's house.

The others jumped up from where they were sitting as she appeared, already feeling better than she had around that creature. She dropped the now useless hilt out of her hand and looked up at Meggie, who was looking down at her, concern on her face.

"This might be tougher than I thought."

I See You Have Constructed a New Lightsaber

When: Several moments later

Where: Elinor's house

"Thanks, I think I'm feeling a little better," Susan said, finishing her tea. "That demon thing, or whatever it was, really did a number on me."

"What do you think it was?" Meggie asked Dustfinger.

"I did hear about some sort of demon that was obsessed with the two swords he had come through with. I didn't think it was meant literally." He was looking the footage over and replaying it, trying to see any details. Once the creature had appeared things moved so fast it was pretty blurry.

"To completely shatter my sword like that, I can't imagine what that thing's stats were," Susan went on. "Especially since it shouldn't have been possible."

"Why not?" asked Elinor. "Even being from another world, it was still just metal, right?"

"Of a sort. I used a technique on it, so it should have had unlimited DC." Elinor looked confused. "It could take an infinite amount of damage in other words. Nothing should have been able to do that to it." She looked over at the hilt, all that was left of one of her mementos of Aerith's world. She had others, like the Moogles doll, but still.

"The story said she put the technique on most of her stuff after she got it," Meggie explained. "After all, why not?"

"Exactly. I realize now I was starting to feel the demon's presence or whatever as soon as I got there. That's why I was a bit sluggish and not thinking straight. Then it got up close to me..." She shuddered. "I have no idea how I'm going to fight something like that."

"Use a blade that doesn't shatter?" Meggie suggested. "A technique one, or *Elemental Weapon*? Oh, but you only know that one for *knockout*, right?"

Should it bother me that she can stay stuff like that with a straight face? She knows as much about me as I do. "But what about 'apathy aura' it seemed to generate?"

"Okay, so a sniper rifle then."

She snorted. "Maybe. Anyway, what can you tell me about them?" She pointed to the phone.

"Ah. Well... of the first woman you filmed, nothing. She looks kind of animeish though, I'll have a look. These," she paused the video as the cyborgs started shooting gunk at her, "are clearly Borg."

"Borg?" asked Elinor.

"Borg. I would expect most of the people nearby were now assimilated into the collective, so fighting them is going to be a real problem."

"Borg. That sounds familiar..." pondered Susan.

"Star Trek. Probably before your time, given when the story is implied to take place. Basically the bad kind of collective intelligence. Think of the Borg as a single organism, but instead of having hands and feet it has entire individuals. And they're nasty to fight. Take one down and the entire collective adapts to that method, so it won't work again. Plus they heal fast because all the recuperative power of the group can be channeled into one part of it temporarily."

"So wait, I have to either take out a bunch of them at once and then switch to a different method for the next group I see, or find a different way for each individual?"

"Yup. And they have personal force fields you'll have to get through first."

"Wonderful. You said the bad kind, is there a good kind?"

"Sure! If instead of suppressing each individual psyche that joins the collective and turning the individual into nothing more than a limb, do the opposite. Allow those in the collective to access the combined knowledge and strength of the group, but allow each person their own personality and interests. There's an accident and someone is hurt, but you didn't go to years of medical school? No problem, someone in the collective did so you can draw off their experience. Same for fixing your car or building a boat."

"That would be seriously cool."

“Yeah it would. Races wouldn’t struggle to defeat the Borg, they would rush to *join* them!”

“So why do it the other way?”

“Show never said, but probably because it made a better story? I think maybe some of the books deal with that question in universe. I’m not totally into science fiction, but I’ve seen the show. At least the good episodes with Q and the more major adversaries like them.”

“Great. So apart from figuring out how they were able to coordinate their attack so well, the plan was a bust. I lost my sword, and we have no idea what that demon thing was doing or what else that flying woman can do. I can’t believe she can only fly and shoot energy blasts, not when Borg and demons are running around. And the demon didn’t just smack her, so it must be at least partly wary of her, right? Plus I have no idea how *cyborgs* got through both *unseen* and *invisibility*.” Her watch buzzed, and she brought it up to look at it. *Information Available* showed on the face. “Go ahead,” she told it.

“Entities registered as highly augmented by cybernetic systems unknown to this world. Best estimate hypothesis indicates at least one entity classified ‘Borg’ possessed sensors able to detect non-visible entities.”

“But I wasn’t just invisible, I was using a power to be unseen by those without powers!” she protested. “Can cyborgs have powers?”

“*Unseen* power does not mask all trace of your presence. Still to account for are carbon dioxide exhalations, local temperature changes due to being warm blooded, gravitational fluctuations, air pressure anomalies such as microwind due to movement—”

“I get the idea. They basically were monitoring the environment so closely just getting near them triggered one alarm or another so they just starting spreading the paste stuff around on the off chance one would hit me.”

“Correct.”

“Great, so I can’t even rely on my powers to hide me when they’re around. I can’t believe I didn’t even get past the front gate of the place.”

“So next time don’t get near any Borg you see. All your watch said would be pretty short range, right?”

“I guess. And they’re somewhat easy to spot.”

Meggie shook her head. “Be careful. Anyone that looks sort of like a zombie is probably in the collective. Those that were brought here probably wasted no time in turning anyone nearby into one of them. They wouldn’t have the facilities to do a full conversion, but just sticking someone and injecting them with nanobots is enough to bring them in. The nanobots will slowly manufacture more cybernetics for them as they eat, so they’ll turn eventually into full Borg.”

“This gets better and better. How do I stop a hive mind? Can we block the signal somehow? I mean they must communicate somehow.”

“There may be some sort of tech that’s keeping them together. They would have constructed regeneration pods, that’s their version of sleeping, just going motionless a few hours a day while magnetically held up in a sort of closet. It would be near there. If you could take out the room it might disrupt them long enough to get their senses back. At least they would stop being so coordinated in their efforts, anyway.”

“Now rooms I can destroy no problem!”

Meggie grinned, but only briefly. “Sorry I can’t be of more help, but that demon thing could be from any number of books about demons. And they can all do different stuff, it’s going to be tough figuring out exactly what it can do. I wish you could have gotten at least one sword away from him, that would have been a great clue.”

“Tell me about it. And there’s still Dracula who I didn’t even see, plus who knows what else actually inside the castle.” *And there’s still The Darkness to find. I have to take out everything that registers to Dimension Sense unless it announces itself. And even if it does, how do I know that being is telling the truth? I suppose as long as I was in magic mode I could have my truth spell going. To be certain am I going to have to kill everything in that place? What have you gotten me into, little girl?* Susan stood up. “We better get a move on. The Darkness knows I’m here, any one of those things I saw reporting me makes that a certainty. If it guesses how I got here any one of those that can fly could be here before we

know it. I'll bring us to a location far away via map and *Teleportal*, and we'll consider our next move." *Rescuing her father? I'm up against actual demons and vampires, and couldn't even get one step into the castle. How is it going to go well?*

"But my books!"

"I know, I know, your precious books. I had an idea, let me think a minute in case I can come up with something better and it'll have to do for now."

So Susan sat and thought for a moment. *I wonder if the house would count as a single object? I mean an object could be a book, right? The book has many parts and materials; paper, glue, ink, cardboard for the cover, dust jacket. But it's still a book. A house has many parts; the frame, glass for the windows, drywall, roofing, etc. But it's still a house. I guess we'll just try it.*

So she changed her *natures* to *transition* and *protection*, putting the same technique on the house as her recently destroyed blade, that of *indestructibility*. She also put on *non-combustible* to help it not get on fire. She also figured, *eh, why not* and tried the technique of *Protection Circle* that she made permanent as well, so in theory any vampire would be unable to enter the area. She thought about putting some kind of physical barrier around the whole place, a snap with *creation* nature, but wondered how to tear it down once it was no longer needed. *I suppose I could just physically tear it apart, but honestly, The Darkness cares little for books. And that must be who these jokers answer to. I mean they were fighting over who got to bring my dead body back to 'their master.' Who else could it be, that could control other worldly beings with unknown powers?*

"That's it. Let's go."

Twenty minutes later the group found itself halfway across the country and Meggie was currently bouncing on the bed in her hotel room. "I'm on an actual adventure with Susan!" she gushed, but sobered as everyone else looked over at her with a "this is no laughing matter" expression. "What?"

"So what is our next move?" asked Elinor, having looked around the room, probably for dust.

"How about reading me back like you promised?" asked Dustfinger.

"For crying out- look Dustfinger. When this is all over I'll take you back to the Hub with me and the people there can figure out which world you belong to and get you back there. Okay? We don't have time for your whining or any experimentation with opening reality portals right now! We have enough trouble, I don't want more stuff falling into this world from yours, or any other. That's why we didn't bring any of those books from the house. I'm sure at least a few have magical weapons or armor that could help. But I can't be selfish and yank them here, basically depriving whoever is the rightful owner from using them. Plus if we got the person and not the item... you see the problem?"

"I was just asking."

"Oh, oh, can I come see the Hub? I'd love to meet Silverstreak and some of the other agents. Like Nynaeve and Merida."

"I'll ask him. To answer your question Elinor, your next move is to stay here and stay safe. We'll see if Meggie can't come up with who those other people were I saw so I can develop a strategy against them while I research what can take a vampire down."

"Are you going to try taking him out tonight?" asked Meggie.

"Taking him out to-" *Wait, we know where he is going to be, right? The house. It would get him away from the others, and who knows, maybe he's the 'boss' of this little gang? Could he be The Darkness? I'm more inclined to think it was the demon, but it didn't talk like I expect The Darkness to. This could be a great opportunity.* "That's actually a decent idea. I think I will head back to the house at night, see if he shows up and what he has to say." *Maybe teleport him to the other side of the world, see if sunlight really slows him down a little or not. He could be the most vulnerable of the ones I saw, given I know nothing about their weaknesses, but vampire lore should be well known.*

"See? I'm helping," Meggie bragged to the others.

"I guess you are. In the meantime I need another sword. I could get out the *crystal blade* but I don't want it smashed to pieces by that demon. So I'll make another and try a few things to it, hopefully to avoid the penalty of keeping a spell or technique going while I fight that thing while keeping it around long enough to be useful."

Meggie looked thoughtful. "What about that shotgun you made and never used?"

"What about it? That was just to see what I could do, in the first place. I could make another I guess but I can't get to that one. And you do remember I don't want to go around killing things?"

"You might not have a choice," she replied seriously. "Remember, none of the things that you saw today belong here, and any one could probably take over the world or destroy it, if they're The Darkness. Your *contract* says you can harm someone like that, right? Someone has to kill them, and only you have the power! But that isn't what I was thinking of. What about making an item, like the shotgun, but that makes a bladed weapon instead? I mean the shotgun wasn't shooting 'bullets' now was it? It was just activating the technique that produced a shotgun like blast. Switch it up to be a close combat weapon instead."

"That would avoid the penalty, and let me use the blade even in magic mode if I wanted." Susan started pacing the small room. "That does have certain advantages, doesn't it? I might even be able to make a couple, one that's TR1 to be non-lethal, and one that's TR10 in case I'm facing something I really do have to kill, or that's armored in some way. Recharge it easily enough after a fight, or just make it with a battery like the gun. My own personal light saber? Why not?" She turned to look at Meggie. "How did you get so smart, anyway?"

Meggie blushed and looked away. "Senpai noticed me!"

"What?"

She laughed. "Come on, you have to watch something with me. The first episode of Tenchi Muyo. I think you're gonna like Ryoko."

"Is this really the time?" asked Elinor as Meggie started rooting around in her box of stuff for something. She came up with a flash drive, looked it over, but muttered "no, it's not that one." She turned to Elinor. "It'll be fast, and I think give her some good ideas. Trust me!"

So she found the right flash drive and put it in, explaining she had learned how to rip DVDs so she didn't have to carry loads of them around with her.

"First books then movies? What next?" remarked Elinor.

"Actually, first it was movies, then books," explained Meggie. "Well, first CDs, then movies, then books. Oddly, until e-readers came out nobody was digitizing books. Despite the fact they would be smaller by far than songs or movies. Ah, here it is. Hey, no fair, I bet you won't even need subtitles! Oh, but you couldn't read the subtitles, could you? So I guess that evens out."

And Susan didn't. She watched the first episode of the Tenchi Muyo anime and saw what Meggie had in mind. They also fast forwarded to the "good parts" of the next few episodes, in other words the combat scenes.

"Isn't she great? And you could basically replicate her entire power set, couldn't you?"

"She's pretty flashy, but yeah, I have to admit she's pretty cool. But what does this have to do with my new energy blade?"

"Make it to be like hers. They showed those orbs she has embedded into her wrists, make your new sword generator item look like that and bond it to yourself with a technique. I mean the shape doesn't matter, right? That shotgun looked like a shotgun but it could just as easily been made to resemble a banana."

"True."

"It would even match your theme, so to speak. I mean you've got one orb already, and you've got *materia* in your bracelet which are orbs. You're an orb girl, you've got huuuge... orbs."

"Yes, thank you." Meggie snickered. "And it would be hard to separate me from it, though we saw what happens when one wants to, they just cut your hand off."

"But what would get through your *Giant's Soul*?"

“There have been some things, like that stupid mainframe monster, and the wizard knives on that world with all the warlocks.”

“That’s why you make a barrier one for the other wrist. If you’re in danger of being hit by something that negates magic or is just swung by something really freaking strong (I don’t know like a demon?) you activate that and let the barrier take the hit.”

“I have to admit, it sounds like a pretty good plan. Seriously, how did you think to come up with this?”

She shrugged. “Easy. I’ve been reading your story for at least a year now, ever since I found it on that fanfiction site. You think I never once thought about ‘what would I do with Susan’s powers?’ Of course I did. And I watch all these shows about people with various powers and think, yeah, Susan could do that couldn’t she?”

“Oh. I uh, well, I guess I better get to work putting this great plan of yours into action, huh?”

“Can I watch?”

“It’s not going to be very interesting. It’s not like magic, but yeah, if you want.”

So Susan got to work making two small orbs with a *creation* technique that would hold the two powers she wanted to use. The first, a variable TR blade that could be called out as TR 1, TR5, or TR8. (The maximum TR, as it was the level of the technique -2 that determined that. With her STRength bonuses it would work out to be TR10 anyway, so she didn’t mind.) She figured she would have to pay the 5XP to activate it mentally anyway, essentially the “powers” equivalent of making an *imbued* item. So why not? It was difficulty twenty seven to put the final copy of the technique in, but she had energy to burn so she overcharged the technique and that was that. With about forty energy put in, and five, nine, or twelve energy to activate the increasingly “sharper” blade, she figured she would get several uses per complete recharge. This she affixed to her left wrist with a combination metapower/nature technique, and was pleased to see it become part of her when the technique ended. Just as with the orb that was embedded in her chest she could vaguely sense it, but didn’t feel any pain from it being basically shoved through the molecules of her arm. She tested it, found it worked perfectly, and regenerated her energy for the second item.

This one was a simple *protection* barrier, as something like *force* would work only against physical attacks. *Protection* would block even mental techniques or darkness blasts. She hoped it would even protect against that weird apathy aura surrounding the demon, though if not she had come up with another *Protection* technique that probably would be called *Impairment Cessation*. This item was much simpler to create as it needed only one technique inside, and finally Susan had matching orbs at each wrist and was ready to read about vampires, and how best to take out the one that would no doubt be knocking on Elinor’s door in several hours.

She just hoped it would be alone, or failing that at least with only normal people at its side. The hours slowly ticked by...

Vamp Battle, Round 1, Fight!

When: That evening

Where: Elinor's house

The problem that Susan discovered was that vampire lore started being recorded in her current reality more than eighty years ago, and many stories had been written about the guy and vampires in general. So the question she had to contend with was "which version of him am I going to be facing?" The bigger problem was, actually killing the being known as "Dracula" ranged from somewhat easy (decapitate and stab him in the heart) to the nearly impossible (put a stake through his heart, cut it out of his chest, burn it, and scatter the ashes so well they never can rejoin).

So she just figured she would take no chances and do the most extreme things she could to make sure he was "dead." After all, if he somehow came back even in two hundred years when she had been long gone, there was nothing that would then be able to stop him. She greatly missed access to her *sub-space pocket*, where a very useful item was currently sitting or floating or whatever items in the *pocket* did: Her necklace that contained the single casting of *Undead Annihilation* left over from her Dementor killing days. Once she had learned going into "powers mode" wiped out her *spell symbols* she had stuck it in there to keep it whole. Now of course she couldn't get it out or make a new one, as she didn't know the spell.

So I get to do it the hard way. Yippie. Still, I don't think it's The Darkness because driving it out requires killing the host. So it must have to do with the soul, and a vampire doesn't have a soul anymore, right?

As the sun descended towards the horizon she got more and more anxious. She did not want to kill, even something as repulsive as vampires were supposed to be. But she could see no way around it. Any other measure would allow for the chance, however slight, that it could get free later and cause havoc. She didn't want that on her conscience either. On the other hand it was a vampire, and so already dead, right? Buffy didn't seem to mind staking dozens of the things a month, why should she be overly concerned with this one?

Of course, this was just the warm up, as she had more killing to look forward to in the form of the Borg, that demon thing, and whatever else lay in the shadows around and inside the castle. (She had convinced herself that somehow, some way, she would find a plan to spare the woman she had seen.) Naturally she feared this was the current host of The Darkness and this promise to herself would be for nothing, but she felt honor bound to try. This made her feel somewhat repugnant, because while it might be easy to hate that demon seeming creature she had seen, didn't those unfortunate souls the Borg had taken over deserve that same chance of being spared? But was she promising herself to do everything in her power to help them, or just the beautiful and mysterious woman she hoped to come to know? But even apart from that she had another worry.

To make this plan go off, I need to be in "magic mode." That means no Velocity for me, and with no Sparkle around, no Acceleration. And the closest I can get to Time Anchor is a Time technique, so that's out too. I'll only get once chance at this. If he does have other forces with him, even just regular people, it's going to be tougher getting to him and completing all the steps in my plan. But of course there is a way, isn't there? She looked at the two orbs at her wrists, now a part of her until she used another technique to uncouple them from her body. *I could make another. I still have enough XP saved up for one more technological item I can activate with a thought. I could put that technique into it and just activate it before the fight. And I could take it out, once I get Sparkle back, right?*

What worried her was going down that path might be almost as bad as what having to kill so many being here was going to do to her. Would she be unable to stop? One day just be covered with orbs, spending hours a day recharging them to make sure they all worked? She would be powerful, yes, and each one would have seemed absolutely necessary at the time, but where did it stop? Sparkle had once admonished her for looking at ways to become more powerful, and this was certainly one way. *Can one get addicted to... sticking powered devices into themselves?*

She was pacing the room, going around and around a case which held an open book that seemed quite old when a thought struck her and she skidded to a halt. She had been thinking about earrings, slightly guilty now for having refused Agnes because of having *regeneration* put on herself quite often. With this technique the orbs became part of her, and so wouldn't be "healed away" by that spell. She could make some tiny ones as earrings and no one would look twice, but every time she looked at them it would remind her of Agnes. But she realized she was overlooking something obvious. *I don't need to put it inside myself at all!* She pushed up the sleeve of her shirt and pulled the *Wizard Bracelet* off. She had been wearing it since she made her last *materia* like *Imbuing* and it wouldn't fit into the *Minerva Band*. The *bracelet* had eight slots, and she was using only seven of them currently. Of course they were all "independent" so to speak, as she hadn't really tried linking them together as the *slots* allowed. *Still, I can make another one and just put it here in the empty space. It won't care that it's sitting next to magical objects, and it'll activate just the same. What was I worried about? Sparkle wouldn't even have to know I made this little crutch for myself in her absence.*

It didn't take long to construct an eighth "*materia*" and stick it into the *bracelet* so she could activate it like the others. She smiled, feeling a little better now. She could use it three times before it needed to be recharged, basically because she put such a high level technique into the thing to get the maximum benefit.

She went back to waiting, feeling a little more prepared now.

Nightfall. Clouds had been rolling in all evening, and lightning flashed in the distance every so often. *A good night to meet a vampire, all things considered.*

It was a little past eleven when the doorbell rang, and Susan took a deep breath, steadying herself. *Time for action.* "Speed up, Negation," she said, activating two of her *materia*. *Activating Velocity does make me a little blurry, like Acceleration. I'll leave that alone for now so I don't look too suspicious.* With her skill at *Energy Boost* she only lost a total of eight energy instead of fourteen. *Don't have astonishing energy regeneration at the moment, so I'll have to keep a watch on that.*

She opened the door to find a well dressed but pale looking gentleman standing there, flanked by five goons in more traditional jeans and jackets. He was wearing a modern looking three piece suit, but there was no mistaking the predatory gaze of the alpha vamp. She quickly looked the group over and saw the goons had *health levels* between twenty and twenty four, but that the figure before her had none, meaning only one thing- boss type. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen a health level on either the demon or the flying woman, meaning they were boss types as well. *And why wouldn't they be? If I could pull creatures out of 'book' why would I go for weaklings?* Oddly, the goons seemed to be weak to several things, like fire and holy water, making her rather suspicious that this situation wasn't exactly as it appeared. *All in good time, I guess. For now, let's feel this guy out.*

"If it isn't Dracool himself," she said casually, looking him over. "You are the lord of vampires, are you not?"

He bowed. "The little girl knows me, how nice. I am indeed Count Dracula, and you must be Susan? I heard someone attacked my master's castle while I was asleep and then ran off like a scared puppy. As you were not around when last I visited this house you can be no other."

"Ah, the undead freak knows me, and can use a bit of deduction, how nice. I am indeed Susan, and as for scared puppies, perhaps I had gathered all the intel I needed and was simply returning here to consider it."

"Oh really? Have you, then, learned what stories the castle guardians come from and how to defeat them? I would have expected the great Susan to have smashed the place down by now in that case. Perhaps the stories my master tells me are exaggerations? No, I think that for all your vaunted power you have no clue who they are or what they can do. Isn't that right?"

Susan's eyes narrowed. "What do you want, vampire?"

"Touched a nerve, have I? My desire is simple- to retrieve the book my companion needs to join our ranks. Until he has the Shadow back at his beck and call, he is after all a rather plain mortal walking among titans. We have been ordered to leave him alone but one day he's going to take his ego too far and one of us will crush him. The woman protects him now, it's true, but even she is not unbeatable."

So Capricorn isn't the one calling the shots? That figures, like he says he's just a normal guy. Someone he had read out must have taken over the plan, and Capricorn had to go along with it. That's probably The Darkness, who took someone over during their "rebirth" as they came into this world. Unless he's just trying to throw me off the trail, and Capricorn become the- never mind that for now. I do wonder what woman he's referring to though. The flying one I saw? "I'm surprised a being like yourself, a titan as you put it, would follow anyone's orders after your arrival here."

He shrugged. "I can get here the fastest, and my master is as far above me as I am above Capricorn. I'll be quite happy to follow orders and take my reward once you're no longer a threat. If you even are one now."

"Shall we find out?"

"You won't hand the book over, then?"

"Please."

He held up his hands. "I had to try. Would you like to step outside then? Perhaps we could have our little disagreement down by the lakeshore? I would hate to have to come in there and trash the inside of the old lady's house while I cut you to ribbons." He flexed his fingers, showing claws at the end of them. "But that's a nice open space down there, perfect for a fight between a being of my stature and whatever it is you are. If you can keep up with me, I mean."

Susan didn't rise to that one. "Thought you had to be invited inside?"

"I was, earlier. It doesn't go away."

"I see. Well, why not? One place is as good as another. I'll go out the back way and meet you out there if you don't mind."

"Very well. I will see you shortly. If you don't just turn tail and run now that you see what you're up against." He turned and went down the path towards the shore followed by his men, and Susan closed the door and made her way through the house to the back. As she stepped out she activated *Velocity* and felt her REFlexes rise to a sixteen. That put her base delay at a four, which was not too bad. At least in *close combat* it was a three with the sword, two with her bare hands. *Sadly I need the sword, so I might as well get it out now.*

The house had plenty of outdoor lights that Susan had turned on, so even with all the cloud cover she could see the pale forms standing by the water. And feel them too, oddly, at least she was pretty sure she felt six separate energy signatures and not five. *Would something undead have Spirit Energy? I suppose even they can exert themselves, right?*

"Say, you want to tell your posse there to move back?" she called as she got nearer. "I would hate to take a swing at you and smack one of them by accident."

"And why," he drawled in response, "would I want to send away my loyal children?"

"Loyal- oh, come on, tell me you didn't."

Each man hissed, opening his mouth wide and showing the traditional vampires' fangs, and Dracula smiled. *Crap! I hate it when I'm right. And I can't use slash-all either, because according to legend, minor vamps like that I'll need to take the heads off of, while Drac himself needs more specialized "treatment." Slash-all is every enemy and I don't want to hit him by accident. He'll just turn into mist and maybe get away. I'm going to have to take each out separately!*

"Still want to fight over a simple book?"

It's not the book I'm worried about. "No, it's fine. You want to play it that way, we'll play it that way." She raised her hand to show him the ring. "But I'll warn you, mine's bigger."

"Your ring?"

"No. My *army*. For sacrifices made."

Soldiers in gleaming armor appeared and encircled the vampires, but Dracula didn't seem all that worried. In fact he simply raised a hand and looked up, and to Susan's

astonishment a heavy downpour began. She activated her barrier technique in case it was an attack of some kind, but no, it seemed like normal rain. Her soldiers, made of fire as they were, melted away and the spell ended. *Well that was ten energy for nothing.*

"No fair, how did you even do that?" she demanded, pointing her sword in his direction. "You shouldn't be able to do any magic around me. I made sure of it!"

He laughed. "My goodness Susan, you don't even know anything about me, and yet you think to combat me? You really are a massive ego, aren't you?"

Wait, that's just something a vampire can do? Make it rain? Is that why all the clouds-of course, if The Darkness is around, and it is, it would have told him what I can do and how to counter it. This is really not going to be my night, is it?

"I know how to kill you. That's all I require."

"Kill me? Me!? You won't even be able to get *near* me. Go my followers, bring me her broken body and I will raise a new vampire this glorious night!"

I suppose that would be one way to get me over to the dark side...

But then there was no more time for thought, as Susan rolled *initiative* against the vampire forces before her which sprang to attack.

The vampire Susan mentally had assigned the number six vanished, meaning she was in more trouble than she had first thought. *I have a REFlexes of sixteen and that one beat me in Initiative?* He appeared behind her, slamming his claws into her barrier but doing no damage to it. *Thank you, DTR 10.*

"I'll take that barrier out," snarled Dracula, and seemed to ripple. Great wings burst from his back and he jumped into the sky as vampire three vanished and Susan took this opportunity to cast *Augment Skill: Sword (Slashing)* on herself. She cast it instantly, taking the -5 penalty but putting in five extra energy to make up for it. *At least now maybe I'll have a chance to hit these things.*

Vampire two gestured at the lake, and a column of water rose out of it and slammed into her barrier, obscuring her vision totally. It crackled with energy but wasn't being damaged so it didn't drop, holding the water away from her about a meter to a side.

Oh, fight them down by the lake, Susan. It'll be so much better than fighting them indoors, Susan. Except it seems they can manipulate more than the weather! I don't believe this.

It seemed the vampire was content to hold the water there, and Susan considered her options. *Actually, none of them are holding a sword of other sword smashing, and I know both Spell Symbol and Avatar of War. There's no reason not to go full armor plated killing machine on these vampires. I guess I just wanted to play with my new "toy" so much I didn't consider the wider implications. Because if instead I'm just getting sloppy because I think nothing can touch me, that's a great way to get dead, Susan. So please tell me it's not that.*

Also, remind me why we don't just Elemental Sniper these vampires? I'll tell you why, Susan. We have to chop their heads off, or legend states they'll just turn into mist and recover just like old Drac. And we have to kill the "little ones" first or they'll all become free willed vampires and probably run away from the thing that just killed their master. I'd never find them all. Old Drac probably got away from my magic nullification, and is probably going to try something to bring my barrier down. Once that happens I'm going bust out of this water, downed barrier or not, and try taking some of these things out.

Ugh, am I so used to bantering with The Darkness I have to do it internally now, as well? I hate everything.

With that in mind, Susan knelt down and called her *crystal blade* out from her hand after handing the energy blade over to her right. She was kneeling because she didn't want to smack into her own barrier when she grew to be double size, (it wouldn't expand, she would have to dismiss it and reenergize it) and waited. She felt the vampires moving around out there, but they could no more attack or see what she was doing than she could.

Hopefully I can take at least one or two by surprise? I will look all armored and flamey once I get out of this. Spirit Step over to one, chop its head off? That's the plan. The seconds ticked by, and Susan did a magic sense on a hunch, and yes, with her maximum roll of

seventeen (minus two) she felt an awful lot of magical energy building somewhere above her. She thought about bringing out her *Magical Ally* but that would be a further penalty to- *wait, I have that on my spell symbol bracelet. I forgot I put that back after I went into powers mode to make the Velocity item.* She touched the right spot on her right arm where the *Avatar of War* spell had morphed the bracelet into. *Ready to go!*

With that, enough *delay* had passed for the spell to go off, and the area around Susan exploded with some kind of elemental attack. Water exploded outwards as her barrier was torn apart by magical energies, and Susan *Spirit Stepped* out of there, not caring that she couldn't see exactly where she was going. She didn't want to get hit by something that could tear her DTR 10 barrier apart like that, after all. She took a minor scratch plunging through it, but was really too fast to have taken any serious damage. With her current delay and excellent *spirit step* roll she got that as a free action, so called her dragon to start assisting her.

"Ally!" she cried, willing it beside her. "Take the heads off any vampire you can!" she shouted, whirling to pick her next target. The dragon looked over at her, confused, and with good reason. As Susan looked about she noticed a distinct lack of something.

Vampires.

"Oh come on!"

Vamp Battle, Round 2, Fight!

When: No time has passed

Where: The lake by Elinor's house

Susan looked up to find the source of the laughter that was nearly drowned out by the driving rain, but couldn't figure out where it was coming from with her nine perception check.

Thanks a lot, LUCK of nine! "I can feel you out there, show yourselves and fight me!" she called, raising her glowing blade. A spear of water shot out of the lake and hit the dragon, which it basically ignored. However, the vampire trying to wash it away flickered back to visibility, giving the construct a target. As the rules for this spell say "It has the same skills as you" and Susan has *Spirit Step*, that's what it did. It appeared in front of the vampire and went to follow Susan's last command, that of tearing his head off.

It was thirty three to twenty five in favor of the dragon, and it tore the vampire's head off with twenty one damage.

Good girl!

Susan was aware of this on some level, being a *Paragon* and thus having a sense of the battle, but had her own problems. As the dragon was popping the twiggy little head off the twiggy little body of the vampire, the others just plain jumped her. They were suddenly surrounding her, not even giving her a chance to dodge, and all made attacks to try and find weak points in her armor to start tearing it off her. Three of the four managed it and rolled body as hit location, so they assisted each other in trying to pull the chest section off. All three made STStrength checks, but even assisting they underestimated the amount of force they would need, managing a forty one total on the check. The DC of the armor was more than two hundred, so they managed a slight denting but that was it.

Susan was now up and had plenty of targets to choose from, so out of simple expediency picked the two in front of her and swung her blades to try taking their heads off. She managed a nineteen and a sixteen, but both leapt away from her, easily dodging. She went up by two *segments*, now having the *combatant* background from her spell, and was up again.

There's only one way I'm going to hit these things. "Successful Strike." That put her up by another three, but her next attack would be made with a plus five. *Which doesn't seem like nearly enough, to be honest.*

Vampire number "four" jumped off Susan's back as the dragon appeared next to it and took a swipe at it. It was twenty eight to a miserable fifteen, and another head was ripped from another body with 30 damage across the neck.

Actually, maybe I'll just keep them busy while it takes care of them...

Vampire "six" decided maybe getting away from those claws was the best course of action, and pushed off Susan's back to try and get on top of it. (Remember, it's as big as an elephant) It (however unknowingly) made a *jumping* check of twenty five. This easily allowed it to appear on the dragon's back, where it wondered how to take the thing's head off as commanded.

Dracula landed some distance away down the shoreline, making sure to both skim low to attract the dragon's attention and get behind Susan so she didn't notice what he was doing. It didn't yet have a plan for getting at the one currently on its back, so it turned after that one, following the last command it received to decapitate vampires. Dracula started casting, taking minimal time because he had seen the dragon use a technique similar to the one he and the vampires used to move swiftly around the battlefield. He knew it would be on him in no time.

And it was. Dracula, Susan, the dragon, and both vampires in front of Susan acted at the same time, and with her *Close Combat* check of fourteen against their checks of ten and seven, she knew it. While they jumped at her to try and get her armor off again, she swung at them because they couldn't dodge, and rolled maximum against the first (nineteen to hit with her off hand which she did first for the bonus) and twenty one with her dominant hand. There was hardly any resistance at all as the vampire's heads cleanly left their shoulders, though due to her increased STStrength from the spell, the fire damage, or both it was impossible to tell. *After all, I've never really hit anything like this before. It's either been with magic to just*

stop people cold and then drain their energy, or through something like Slash-all that only does a third of the damage it would normally. I never actually worked out how much that would be if I didn't use it. Probably because I never thought I would be killing stuff myself like this. She looked at the now headless vampires, slumped over on the ground and felt a mixture of revulsion, pity, anger at herself for having no other option, and further anger at herself for feeling a bit of pride and excitement at what she was doing. *It was too easy, just as I thought. I can't get used to solving my problems this way, I just can't!*

The dragon went to hit Dracula who instead of dodging, finished his spell and touched the dragon's leg as the armored talon came down to try ripping his head off. Being far enough from Susan at the moment he was able to get the spell off and vanished. Susan looked around. She saw only one vampire left, the one atop her dragon that it was now trying to get a clean shot at by bending its head back. She *Spirit Stepped* over to it and put her hand on it. "I'll take care of him," she told it, and looked up at him. "It's over," she called up. "Your 'brethren' are dead, and you will be too in a moment. Don't make it any harder on yourself."

He did the sensible thing- turned into a similar man/bat creature and started to fly away. Susan shook her head and turned away from him, dropping her energy blade and holding that hand out. "*Telesummon*," she cast, taking the extra time. It missed the resistance check by four and found itself flying towards Susan instead of away, and she made a *Ninjutsu* check at a penalty to grab him by the neck. He got an eleven to dodge and she got a fourteen to hit, so he slammed into her gauntleted fingers and found himself being slammed into the ground.

He screamed in agony as Susan's hands were counted as weapons for the purpose of the spell (she was attacking with them, was she not?) and so were now covered in flames. But she didn't allow the creature to suffer, and simply tore the vampire's head off with her astonishing STrength by rolling forty one damage to it. There was no spray of blood, as the vampire had no beating heart to circulate it. Just a slight whimper as she tossed the head away, now completely disgusted with herself and how she had felt doing that.

She felt powerful.

But I know I'm powerful. I don't need to tear the head of some vampire to tell that. "So face me, Dracula!" she called into the night as her *Magical Ally* came to her side. "Or are you now that scared little puppy you called me earlier? Have you run back to your master, oh titan of the earth? To tell him of your failure and could you please have some more people to turn? Oh pretty please? Face me, coward!"

She was so surprised when her dragon turned on her and tried smashing her in the back she didn't even get a dodge against it. It easily pierced her armor and did two damage to her back, sprawling her onto the beach.

What?

The dragon went again, and Susan tried rolling away from it twenty six to thirty, but at least this time the armor took it because she was trying to dodge. They now went at the same time, so Susan, at this point realizing something was seriously wrong with her *Ally* decided she didn't need it any more, figuring it would be dispelled like all the other times she decided the scene was over and her spells went away.

No such luck, this scene wasn't over. The dragon got her again, this time in the head for another two damage.

I have to get up, figure out what's going on!

She made her difficulty ten check exactly and was standing again, sword at the ready. "Is this how you fight, vampire? Turning my own magic against me? While you stay safe somewhere?" *How did it do that, anyway?*

Dracula, who was now *possessing* the dragon didn't answer, instead he struck out again, marveling at the strength and power of this creature Susan called from nowhere. Susan had been holding and struck out at the claw that was coming towards her, twenty five to thirty three so she missed and took three more damage to the body. *I'm at half my capacity! What cards do I have, anyway?*

An extra action, a critical strike, and a second wind which I'll turn in for XP. Great, not very helpful. Still, that was reactive for me so let's see how it likes this.

"Balk!" Meta-action: I declare the use of card eight, Extra Action. "Shrink!" The dragon failed the LUCK check to throw off *balk* and thus the RESolve check to throw off *shrink* and found itself looking up at Susan rather than down. Susan's *off hand* action was to then bring her sword whistling down on the formal *ally*, getting a max hit roll and crushing it totally. Dracula appeared in place of it.

"I see," Susan growled, but Dracula hardly noticed. He had felt the pain of the blade driving through him, and that would take anybody a second to work past, even him. At a minimum a single active action of delay, so Susan went again, making a called shot to the center of Dracula's chest with max energy. It was thirty five to twenty one and with fifty four damage to his body, his chest exploded. (He could take twenty nine before being killed.)

Susan took a look around the coastline, burning chunks of vampire littering the ground, and could only shake her head. She was down to ten energy, hopefully enough to do the final amount of magic she needed to tonight before getting it back.

Her first step was to keep Dracula from regenerating, which he was already doing before her eyes. She forced herself to watch as his chest knit back together, then stabbed him through again with her sword at the normal size where she saw his heart was. This insured he wouldn't be able to move, and she used *Creation* to make a large glass "cage" with a twist top. She then cast *Destroy Magic* on each of the vampire's bodies, Dracula first, so even if they did somehow come back, they couldn't get away from where they were going that way. As they were currently dead they couldn't make any checks against her, so she didn't bother using extra energy, just a bit of extra time.

With three energy left she cast *Retrieval*, aiming for Dracula's heart, which she put into an old coffee can she found in the house and then set on fire with *Combust*. This left her with one energy. That was all the magic she needed to do though, and switched over to *powers mode*, letting *energy regeneration* and regular *regeneration* do their thing while she stuffed the vampire's heads into a large garbage bag, and the bodies into the glass case. That done she locked the top in place with a twist, and used a technique to seal it completely closed, then made it have unlimited DC as she had done with her sword.

Making sure she hadn't missed anything she balanced the coffee can (now sealed) on the box and picked it up along with the bag of heads.

Then she flew to the moon.*

Once there she used *Phase* to shove the cube under the surface of the moon. Miles underground a *nature* technique served to push the rocks aside and make a space big enough for the cube to fit into, where she left it. That done she went back to the surface and spilled the heads out, which began to smoke and burn away in the sunlight. Nearly finished she lightly pushed off the surface of the moon again, flying away from the gravity well of both planets. When she felt she was far enough away she charged up a *kinetic* technique and aimed the can at the sun.

Kinetic Shot she thought, and the can rocketed towards the sun, where the ashes of the heart of the original vampire would be eradicated without fail.

Susan finally let herself relax a little, turning back to the Earth. She watched it for a time, just hanging there in space beneath her, and thought about how it was just one of many, but still precious all the same. Still worth saving, and maybe even killing to save.

Was it The Darkness inside me that enjoyed killing those monsters? But it isn't here, is it? I mean I'm fighting to protect this world, right? It wouldn't do that. I mean the last time it tried taking me over I walked up to two people watching a building and just smashed their heads together. I didn't even think about it. I'm not doing that here, I'm still myself. Right? It always said we were one now, so why isn't it talking to me here? Oh Sparkle, why did I have to get separated from you again? I can't do this alone.

Luna, I miss you.

That thought reminded her, and she went back to the moon for a moment. She grabbed up a few rocks, stuffing them in the bag she had brought and thinking she may as well take the opportunity. *Hopefully I can access my dimension or pocket at some point, maybe take other samples for study if I ever get home again. It could be interesting to discover if all the different moons were made of the same thing, and formed the same way. Too bad I didn't have these powers on those worlds with two moons!*

That done she simply *teleported* back to the hotel room, and Meggie looked up from her computer.

"You're back!" she exclaimed, jumping off the bed. "I was so worried!" She ran over and hugged Susan. "You're okay, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. What are you still doing up? It must be nearly twelve."

Meggie pulled away. "You think I could sleep? I was *worried* about you, Susan. You really have to ask?"

"You didn't have to."

"Of course I did. I can't fight, not like you do, not ever. Staying up and worrying," she looked down. "That's the only way I can support you. You aren't alone here, you know. Was... was it terrible? I mean did he come back and that's why you're so late? Or did you just figure he wouldn't show?"

Susan sat down heavily, her powers draining away and her regular clothes coming back. "He came, and with five others."

"Dracula made more?"

She nodded. "I just hope he brought them all. If there's other vampires out there now without their master..."

"You could use a *seeing* technique or something to find out, right? You never did learn *Question* did you?"

"No, I didn't. But yeah, I could. Right now I just don't want to think about it."

"It must have been awful for you. Did you have to chop off their heads and everything?" She looked excited.

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

"Oh, right. I get it. You think with all your powers you shouldn't have to kill, because there should always be another way."

"Isn't there?"

"Not in some cases I guess. I mean the things they must have read out, I've been reading Inkheart, and this Shadow character is bad news! We can't let it out into this world. I can't imagine what else Capricorn found."

"Not looking forward to it. The Borg especially. They're just people that got caught up in this, and while they've been sort of made into a cyber vampire type creature, they could come back."

"Well, maybe. I mean in the show Seven of Nine gets taken away from the Borg and has to have all kinds of surgery to remove her implants before she dies. Her body starts rejecting them you see, I looked it up. We don't have the kind of technology they do for that sort of thing. And one thing this little psychic girl had to destroy because they couldn't get at it. She just went inside Seven with her brain and dissolved it."

"Great, something else to look forward to." She fell over onto her side and pulled her legs up against her chest.

"Sorry, I thought I was helping."

"I know. It's just late and I've had a hectic night. We can talk about our next move and things in the morning."

"Okay. Say, what's in the bag. You didn't bring their heads *here* did you?"

Susan gave a weak grin. "Don't be stupid. Take a look." Meggie cautiously opened the bag and pulled one out, but almost immediately dropped it.

"It's so cold! Rocks?"

“They came from a little bit further out than most normal rocks. You can keep one, a souvenir just for you.”

“You went to the moon?” she squealed, clearly enthralled by the gift. “This is so amazing!” She tumbled the others out and looking them over.

“Go to sleep!” called Elinor.

“There are rocks from the moon here, and she wants me to go to sleep!” Meggie grinned at her but stuck them back in the bag, then went and turned her computer off. The room went dark and Susan turned over, staring at the ceiling.

“Susan?” Meggie whispered a moment later.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. You know, for everything.”

“Sure thing.” She finally got to sleep.

*Seriously, this is canon. If you look at issue 512, page 2 Ikkou leaves a fight and smashes the creature he’s fighting into the moon. He spends a few actions beating the crap out of it. A mere fifteen pages later he comes back and the fight he left is still going on. I have no idea how he did that so fast, as I added the *speed* power into the rules myself (when I was cleaning them up so I could have a good base to work from to give Susan access to them.) Some kind of *kinetic* technique? A *time* technique? I have no idea. In any case, he figured it out, she figures it out. Done.

Day of Doom (not Dr. Doom, the other... just read the chapter)

When: The next day

Where: The hotel room.

It was now mid-morning, and Susan had gotten up late. She had eaten breakfast, remade her *spell symbol* of *Avatar of War* and recharged her new tech jewelry. The others waited somewhat impatiently for this all to be done, and Susan announced she was back up to full strength again. It had taken a bit longer because Susan couldn't focus on the task at hand, wishing she could talk to Sparkle about what had happened the night before. She had killed, but vampires, not "real" living things, right? She felt conflicted- one part of her excited to know what she could really do on her own without Sparkle buffing her, the other depressed she was a little bit closer to becoming what she feared. A Dark Lady like Tom, who saw the only recourse for change to be violence.

After all, he went downhill as time went on. More extreme things became easier to accept, until everyone feared him as the greatest dark wizard that ever lived. I can't let that happen to me!

"So can I go back to my house now?" pleaded Elinor. "I don't like to be away from my books for too long."

"They don't need feeding," Susan assured her. "I can send you back there if you want to make sure the place is still standing, but now that Dracula is dead someone else may be sent. I advise you to stay here until this is all over."

"And how long is that going to be?"

"How should I know? Perhaps you would like to expedite the process and take on the flying woman or the demon with two swords yourself?"

"No need to be snippy."

Susan rolled her eyes. "Must you do that?" she asked Dustfinger, who was again juggling the bits of moon rock she had brought back.

"I'm bored," he complained. "There's nothing to do here."

"Oh, perhaps you would like to take on the flying woman or the-"

"Demon with two swords, yes, you keep going on about them. Maybe I will, I'm not helpless you know."

"Great, I'll put you through a *teleportal* straight away. Have fun storming the castle!"

"Be nice," gently admonished Meggie, grabbing one of the stones away from Dustfinger. "We all know you're our best hope for seeing this done. I just wish I had more in the way of information to offer you."

"It's fine. I'm still just in a weird mood because of last night."

"We certainly can't have actual vampires roaming the nights," insisted Elinor. "You've done the world a favor! And possibly the world he came from, as obviously he isn't there anymore either."

"I know. As a *Wanderer* I'm going to have to get used to the idea sooner or later. Doesn't mean I have to like it though."

"Everyone dies," put in Dustfinger. "You're just helping them to do it a little faster, that's all. And for a cause, even. Seems like win/win to me."

"Yes, well, when you can do all the things I can do, and have the responsibilities I have, you can lecture me all you want. In the meantime, I need to think about my next move."

"Are you going to have fun storming the castle?" Meggie asked with a slight grin.

"Not so much fun, but yes, I'll probably head back there and take another shot at getting information and rescuing your father. As I know to stay away from cyborgs now it shouldn't be too tough, right?"

"I don't know." Meggie's face fell. "I mean, if I was a cybernetic being from another world bent on assimilating species to become perfect, and I knew some girl from another world was going to be sneaking around, I'd put up some independent sensors."

"Some what?"

“You know, just dumb units that are on the network and measure various things, like heat changes in the area, or air density. What your watch said.”

“So in reality I can’t set foot in the place without the possibility of being detected?”

“That’s probably about right.”

Susan shook her head. “Still, I have to try. If there is I’ll just have to come up with something else. Actually, why couldn’t I just *phase* into the place? That would at least get your father out.”

“Actually, I’d recommend he stay where he is at the moment,” suggested Dustfinger.

“Are you crazy?” exclaimed Meggie. “He’s in the hands of this Capricorn from Inkheart. Who knows what that madman is doing to him? Torturing him to get him to read more stuff out of books no doubt! We can’t just leave him there. I mean you’re from there yourself, you know what he’s capable of!”

“Obviously if Susan finds he’s being tortured or whatever she should rescue the man, but hear me out. Right now Capricorn isn’t calling the shots, is he? From what Susan told us Dracula said, he had another master who wasn’t Capricorn. Susan says this master will most likely be some character from a book, taken over by her Darkness. But why isn’t this character tearing the world apart like she said it wants to? Does it think it doesn’t have enough troops now that some of them went to follow the other Silvertongue? Or does it have a different plan in mind here? Is it waiting for something? The Shadow perhaps? We don’t know.”

“What does this have to do with my father?”

“Right now there’s the possibility your father will read whoever is in charge over there some new soldiers. He just lost a few, after all. But say Susan rescues him- that option goes away doesn’t it? Now he has to attack the world with what he’s got. And we still don’t know all the forces at his command or how to counter them!”

“So you’re suggesting a scouting mission rather than a rescue mission?”

“For now, yes.”

“What do you think?” she asked Susan.

She pondered a moment before answering. “He has a point. If I don’t screw it up right at the start like I did last time, I might be able to watch the place for a few hours, maybe gather more information about whoever is stomping around down there. If I could get you more of a description of what they can do, maybe you can look that up for me and get closer to finding out who they are. That will lead to how to stop them.”

“Yeah, just ‘shoots energy beams’ isn’t very specific. And ‘a big demon holding a sword’ doesn’t help much either.”

“Right. If I see her using some unique ability only people from her world have, we’ve narrowed it down. Okay, I saw enough of the place to put myself down far outside the castle walls. I can make myself a high powered telescope and watch the place for a bit. With LUCK, I might even see Mr. Big coming and going, or at least get more of a sense of who is hanging around there.”

“Hey, Elinor, can she have your cell phone?”

“As long as she returns it I suppose so, yes. Why?”

“So she can report back what she’s seeing to us, duh! I can be here looking up anything she sees that might help!”

“Very well.” She handed it over, and Susan had previously done a *comprehend technology* on Meggie’s phone to see how it worked, so she didn’t need to do that again. Susan mentally reviewed everything; she had recharged her items that morning and then herself. She was at full energy, and she had new cards. The same *critical strike* she had not used before, an *unfailing resolve*, allowing her to increase a mental stat by two which could be nice as they couldn’t be boosted by energy, and an *I don’t think so* to make an opponent re-roll one thing. Not as good as a *failure* but she took what she could get. She had made a new *magical ally spell symbol* on her bracelet, and she didn’t feel she was forgetting anything.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks.”

One *teleportal* later and Susan was crouched down at the tree line looking at the castle in the distance.

"It seems to be under attack," she said into the phone, peering through her *temporary tool* of binoculars. "Something's going on over there at least."

"What do you see?"

"There's a lot of shooting at something, I think. I can see the flying woman, she's pelting something out of sight with energy bolts, and the turrets on the walls are active I can see the flashes. I can't make out who they're shooting at though. I'm going to work my way around and see if maybe I can tell what's going on." Several moments later, Susan was in a better position and brought the phone up again. "It's just one... creature. It's attacking the front gate, apparently. They're really pelting it but it doesn't seem to be doing much."

"What's it look like?"

"Eh, hard to tell from this distance. Kinda big, man shaped. Weird color, mostly naked but I suppose it might not have started out that way. Looks like some kind of protrusions from the skin. Weird teeth."

"Can you, I don't know, take a picture or something?"

"Sure, I'll just stroll down there, shall I?"

"Do you have *teleportal* magic or not?"

"Er... just a second." Susan opened a very small *teleportal* to just in front of the creature and snapped a picture, then quickly allowed it to close. "How's that?"

"Oh crap!"

"What? What is it?"

"I don't believe this! How could someone have been so stupid?"

"Who is it?"

"That's Doomsday. It killed Superman!"

"Wait, the "man of steel" Superman? Faster than a speeding bullet, Krypton, the whole bit?"

"That's the one. He's just a mindless killing machine!"

"Guess I should have brought some popcorn then. It might solve our problem for us!"

"Are you kidding? If that thing starts tearing the castle apart my dad might be crushed! You have to stop it!"

"Oh I do, huh? Why don't I just slip in and get your father out now in the confusion? Even if sensors go off, they've got larger problems. Forget Capricorn or his master, they're going to need to rebuild the castle if this is someone who can take out Superman."

"Don't you get it? That could be The Darkness!"

Susan missed a beat. "Oh. But- Still..." *No, it could be. Capricorn's master may just be a powerful dude that took over, and The Darkness is on the side that "betrayed" him. Naturally The Darkness would want to just kill everything on this world while Capricorn would want to rule it. Result: instant disagreement and "betrayal." This would be a great body to do it in.*

"And they're trying to kill it too, right? What a great time to see your opponents in action. Plus you don't want to face that thing alone, do you?"

"What if they just turn on me?"

"I think they'll appreciate the help."

"I reserve the right to wave goodbye if they start shooting at me."

"You won't leave my father will you?"

"No, I'll just go get him. Look, if this thing can kill Superman I'm going to need more-" *Wait, Superman is real? Well of course he is. Huh, wouldn't mind a green lantern ring... focus Susan!* "-information. What killed him after he killed Superman? Did they find out he was lactose intolerant and fed him some cheese blocks?"

"Just a second, I'm looking it up. Okay, says here they... oh."

"What?"

"They basically just hit each other really hard at the end and that sorta killed both of them."

"I would have opened with that, saved myself the trouble," she muttered. "Great. So is he weak to anything does it say?"

"I'm looking, I'm looking. Ah, no, not so much. But it does list his powers! Uh, you're not going to like it."

"Just tell me!"

"Basically he's Kryptonian from hundreds of thousands of years ago, so he has Superman's strength and such. He's invulnerable, and can come back to life when killed. He has regeneration and his body adapts to powers so he can counter them. Oh, and it lists 'incredible willpower' so I guess that means a high RESolve?"

"And it's not vulnerable to *anything*?" *Most of my magic can be 'wished away' by a RESolve check, so obviously this creature should be immune to it in that way.*

"Apparently not. You haven't picked up any Kryptonite that I remember, that's about the only thing he could be weak to, but this doesn't list it."

Great, just great. I suppose I could suck him out into space with a teleportal, put him on the moon too. "I suppose vacuum won't kill him?"

"Nah, they chain his corpse to an asteroid and fire him into space, but he's fine with it once he regenerates."

"Marvelous. Look, I'm going to try figuring something out here. I'll send the phone back."

"Okay. Good luck!"

"Yeah, thanks."

Susan opened up another *teleportal* and dropped the phone through. Then she turned to watch the forces frantically trying to keep Doomsday from knocking the castle over.

Where's that demon anyway? Out getting his horns polished? I mean why aren't they throwing everything they have at this thing? Or is this everything they have? But then where's the 'master' Dracula spoke of? One thing at a time I guess, what powers do I take to bring this thing down and then keep it dead?

Actually, even before that... Susan cast *flight* on herself and came up behind the flying woman who was still desperately putting bolt after bolt into Doomsday.

"You aren't going to use this distraction to assault the castle from the other side?" she said by way of greeting, firing off another blast.

"Look, you seem like a decent enough sort," *wait, how do know that? Just because she's a cool looking flying lady?* "So I think we can both agree that creature needs to be taken down, now. Judging from this, your forces here won't be able to do it alone."

She looked over at Susan, then gave a tight nod. "Agreed."

"But I need your word you won't strike at me while I'm trying to help you."

She considered, blasting again. "My master has commanded me to keep anyone, especially you, away from the castle. However I have a higher directive. His safety. If this creature is not destroyed his life is in danger. He is just a man, after all. You have my word that I will not attack if you do not try to gain entrance to the castle."

"Done. I'm going to try hitting him with something big. It'll take a few seconds to charge up though."

"Do whatever you can."

I intend to.

Susan shifted over to *powers mode* with her trademark phrase, and felt magic pull away from her. She took the *flight* power so she recovered almost at once, and looked down at Doomsday far below. *Let's see how it likes this.*

Susan's current Powers

Energy Siphon	2
Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	5
Flight	2
Nature (Seeing)	2
Nature (Force)	2
Stat Adjustment MAN	5
Stat Adjustment INS	3
Teleport	3

"Targeting Reticle," she called out, using her *Seer* nature to create, in her mind's eye, a target with which to aim at. *At this distance, I don't trust my five rating in Technique Attack to actually hit. This should help me aim. Now for the main event- Charging my attack!*

With her *Energy Siphon* she was able to gather energy more quickly and decided to put all the power she possibly could into the technique. *After all, I did say he should have just hit him with the final blow earlier, right?* With her energy gathered she began aiming, doing a called shot to the body just in case. With her current *INSight* of seven and bonus of five for *Reticle*, she got a total bonus of thirteen for aiming, minus two for keeping the technique active. She then rolled her new *MANipulation*, twelve, for a total attack of $2d12+5+13-2-1-5$ which worked out to be a twenty three to hit.

Piccolo-san, this one's for you. "Makankōsappō!" A twisting beam of energy shot from her fingers, impacting Doomsday's chest and doing an astonishing *135 damage*. *I guess that takes care of- why is he still standing?*

Doomsday roared, looking for the source of the beam which of course was Susan, and he decided to give up attacking the castle for a moment and deal with this. He couldn't fly, thank goodness, though probably just because he was too stupid to figure out how. He was ancient Kryptonian, after all. But he could jump, by Paragon rules about... three meters straight up. (We'll just ignore that as he's seen in the comic jumping literal miles) He took a few running steps and sprang into the air straight for Susan. With his penalties he got a thirty to hit, and spending twenty energy Susan got a twenty eight and found herself being driven to the ground by her insanely dense opponent.

Well, I've had a good run, she thought on the way down, as Doomsday raised a fist back to smash her in the face, *but I guess this is it. Or wait, can't I Teleport? No, I think he would just come with me. I really suppose I should do something before I hit the ground-*

Suddenly Doomsday went flying off her in a blast of air, and Susan was scooped up in one arm by the flying woman, who was blasting away at him again and flying in the other direction. Doomsday fell, screaming in rage but unable to fight gravity. "Come on, we've got to get out of range of it before it lands and jumps again!"

"You saved me," she managed, completely astonished. "Why... why would you do that?"

"My master did not give me any orders to the contrary, and if he can take a hit like that and live we are in more trouble than I first thought. Besides, you were heading towards the castle and I did say I would stop you doing that, didn't I?" Susan looked up at her in surprise, it sounded like she was cracking a joke but her face was all wrong. She wasn't smiling and still sounded vaguely depressed even as she said it. "Can you still fight?"

"I suppose, but that's not going to do any good. Do you know how much energy I just used to create that blast? And it didn't even go through him!"

"Then we must think of something else. It must be stopped. You are Susan, are you not? I have been told you have a variety of abilities and powers. You have tried only one, will you give up so easily?"

She's right. What's gotten into me? "Is that demon still around?"

"Yes, why do you- oh. You started to feel it again, once you got nearer to the ground, didn't you? You probably can't perceive it right now, but it is the only reason the creature has thus far been unable to enter the castle. I do not know how long it can hold out, so we must think quickly. It has not drawn its second sword, but the power still leaks from the modified scabbard. And I'm told it has its own effect on living tissue, but I wouldn't know."

Wait, what?

"You must try to fight it. Can you fly? Get higher with me and the feeling should pass."

"I can fly, and I am feeling better." She pushed away from the woman and flew higher beside her. "Thank you... for saving me. I don't even know your name."

She shook her head. "My master has command I tell you nothing that would be of help figuring out who any of us are. I'm sorry."

"I understand. And I am feeling better and thinking clearer. Whatever that sword does really messes with my head, I guess. Okay, as that didn't work, let's try something else, right?"

The woman almost smiled. “What have I been saying this whole time?”

Techniques used in this chapter:

Targeting Reticle

Seeing

Level 7 (5+0+2) (Effect, Personal, M)

Create, in the mind's eye, a “laser sight” for later techniques. As long as one action of aiming is performed this technique begins to track where the next technique will strike. Allows additional actions of aiming, as though your INSight were +1 higher for every 5 rolled.

Makankōsappō

Force

Level 15 (10+5+0) (Attack (beam), Sight, I)

This force attack twists like a corkscrew, helping to penetrate into whatever it hits. Super long range, it can be shot at anything that can be seen on the battlefield.

Resetting the Doomsday Clock

When: Seconds later

Where: High in the air over Capricorn's castle (if it's still his at all)

"The problem with trying different things," Susan explained to her new battle buddy, "is that I can have only one or two natures going with the other powers I have right now." Doomsday was looking up at them, as if deciding to go back to attacking the castle or try jumping up towards them again. "But if I lose those powers, I'll have much less chance of actually hitting him with something."

"I'm not sure what all that means."

"It means I'm going to have to get near him, try something, then if it doesn't work come back up here to switch things out again. Then come up with another technique and repeat the process."

"You're worried about falling under the demon's sword as you get near?"

"I think I have a solution for that. No, my main concern is the time it's going to take."

"We've held him at bay this long. Though I must admit my own power reserves are growing weaker."

Doomsday turned back to the castle and rushed it, once again coming under fire from the Borg guns and whatever the demon was doing she couldn't see.

"That's the other problem. I hit him with about ten attacks at once just then, and as you can see he's still energetic. That took a third of my energy. I can get it back, but it means more delay."

"More delay than your current inaction?"

"Talking is a free action." The woman looked at her as if not understanding. "Never mind, I take your meaning. Mind! Hey, now there's an idea."

Susan closed her eyes and concentrated, taking Mind nature in place of Force and Time in place of Seeing. Her clothing changed appropriately, being decorated in images of clocks, while her tiara seemed to be a third eye. *Wait, I have a tiara?*

Susan then activated her right hand barrier technique, hoping that as it was *Protection* in nature and not just a *Force* barrier it might counteract whatever that sword was doing to her. As it wouldn't be damaged by that energy that seemed to be messing with her head it should last the entire time, too.

"Ready," she informed her companion. The tip of her odd staff started to spark and glow, but Susan shook her head and pushed it down. "Cover me if it manages to break free of this. Save your energy though, we'll need it if nothing but battering the creature works. We'll try a few subtle things first, okay?"

"Very well."

Susan fell, and it seemed some kind of dark energy was gnawing at her barrier, making it become visible and swirling around as if looking for an opening. *Let's not give it too much time to find one, eh?*

When she felt she was in range, she screeched to a halt and activated "*Torpor Dome!*" This was an area of effect technique, because she felt trying to use something on him directly would probably give him a RESolve check against it, and she wanted to see if this would even do anything to him. It did, making him seem a little slower and even causing the bolts from the mounted guns to travel slower as they got near him. As the Borg fired they seem to "stack up" at that edge, like they were hitting water and slowing down.

Susan didn't stop to admire the effect, she nodded and readied her next technique. Even if Doomsday could throw it off, she was counting on the fact he would have to delay the resistance check by a few *segments*, meaning he would be taken over by the time he realized something was happening to him. *Sorry Headmaster, but this situation seems to call for one of the unforgivable ones. "Mental Domination."*

She needn't have worried- the technique didn't affect him in the slightest. He kept pounding on the castle gate, unaware that he was doing it more slowly than he had been

previously. She felt the technique was active, he hadn't managed to break free of it. As far as Susan could tell he didn't even realize she was trying something.

So is it just too stupid to have thoughts enough I can manipulate or is it totally immune to mental domination? The world may never know, I'm not getting close enough to do a reading on what powers this thing has.

With that partial failure in mind, Susan flew back up to where the woman was waiting. *It's not immune to time techniques. There was some huge time technique I was going to use on the world I got these powers from. Or more accurately, The Darkness got me to use. I remember Sparkle being horrified and negating it somehow, but it could probably come in handy here. Something about time, right? Why can't I remember?*

"It didn't work. I'll try something else."

Once again she concentrated, her costume taking on a greenish hue but at the same time seemed to blur a little like a badly tuned analog television. (Sorry to all those kids that don't know what that looks like. Ask your parents.)

Acid and Dimension, an odd combination, Susan thought, looking down at herself. "Wish me luck." This time she felt she would have to get a bit closer, and activated her *Velocity* item on the way down.

Again she fell out of the sky, charging her energies into "*Acid Bath!*" which she had to use at a much closer range than she was really comfortable with. Foul smelling liquid splashed against the entire area, melting a good portion of it but again, Doomsday hardly seemed to notice. He did this time turn but Susan was accelerated, and threw a *dimensional* technique at him as she retreated. "*Dimensional Distortion!*"

Doomsday plunged through it, somehow breaking her hold on the technique as he did, but causing him to shake his head for enough time to let her get away. The area collapsed and went back to normal.

I can't really tell if this creature is even hurt at all. It doesn't seem hurt, and that acid didn't seem to even wear down those bony protrusions it has all over. I'm throwing all TR 10 stuff at it, just how tough is this creature?

"That didn't work any better?" asked the woman as she again returned to think of something else.

"He's just too resistant to attack. And my *dimensional distortion* he just sort of brushed aside. I don't get how it can be so tough."

"Perhaps it simply became so to survive. It feels like a created thing, not something natural."

"I'll be happy to read its story once it's dead. I'm running out of ideas here."

"But you still have some?"

"A few. But I'll have to regenerate some energy after this run." Susan changed again, this time her costume became pure black, but with bright colored highlights that shifted and changed. They seemed to be water one second, then a gas, then back to being solid. The colors also shifted and changed continuously. She had taken *Darkness* and *Transition* this time, and wondered if even together they wouldn't be enough. She had also swapped out *Stat Adjustment INS* for *Immunity (Darkness)* leaving her one point left over which she didn't bother to allocate to something. She had just over a hundred energy left, not that she couldn't get more if she needed it, but she was trying to hurry this along before the castle burned down, fell over, and then sank into the swamp.

"You aren't coming up here just to change your costume, right?"

"What? No, when my powers change my costume- I'll explain it later!"

"Very well."

As Susan started down again she noticed this time Doomsday looking up and waiting for her. *I guess even he's not that stupid and or unobservant. Doesn't matter, because this needs touch anyway. But first...* He looked like he was going to try jumping up to her, probably to try and grab her again, but she unleashed the technique she had been charging the remaining half her energy into. "*Unyielding Gravity.*"

Doomsday was caught mid-jump and smashed back into the ground, while *Immunity* to *Darkness* allowed her to function perfectly in the now intense gravity field she had created. (It

wouldn't make her immune to regular gravity of course, just techniques with *Darkness* as the base.)

She spent a tense couple of seconds charging the rest of her energy into her next technique and touched Doomsday's chest. "*Become Stone.*"

Doomsday resisted with a sixty five CONstitution check and growled unintelligently at her.

"You have got to be kidding me," Susan muttered as he started raising a hand, obviously trying to shake off the gravity field he was in. "You know what? Fine." She activated her energy blade with the TR 10 setting and simply stabbed him in the chest. The blade deflected off one of his bony protrusions so she tried again, this time take a few segments to aim. Again the blade skittered off, and Susan was pretty sure she had hit "flesh" that time. *What, is this creature naturally DTR 10? Is that why it took that damage and kept going? Because it was non-lethal? Time to go!* Doomsday had managed to not only raise a hand but grab her blade, so she made it vanish and took to the sky again before more of him was able to move. She flew back up the waiting woman.

"He's down, that's more than we managed on our own," she remarked. "Were you able to wound him with that blade?"

"It's not going to last. He'll be up soon. And no, I didn't. Even with my STrength and the sharpest blade in existence I'm still doing non-lethal damage to him. It's very frustrating! I'm going to have to hit him with so much stuff at once it's not even funny."

"I don't see how there is any humor in this situation."

"Uh, yeah. I can regenerate energy and hold it down but once I change powers that technique is going to go away. I can do it again, but... what are they doing?"

"What?" Both looked down and far below tiny figures had emerged from the castle and were doing something to Doomsday.

"I believe the Borg are attempting to capitalize on the creature's current incapacitation."

"Weapons fire won't hurt it, the big guns didn't do anything from what I could see. I doubt they're OTR 10."

"No, you do not understand. They are attempting to use the solution that was used on you earlier."

"That glue stuff? That certainly won't hold him. Not unless it was a... humm."

"Perhaps not, but it is all they have. Wait, do you have an idea?"

"Actually, I think I might. We're going to have to bury him inside the stuff, that'll allow me to create a handful of attacks that hit him all at once."

"We do not have an amount sufficient to carry out a plan of that scale. It was only supposed to be used on you, and the Borg manufactured what they felt would be required."

"No, no, leave that to me. Listen, when I let the technique go he's going to smash out of that stuff. Can you bait him into following you down the road a ways? I want to hit him with a lot, but I don't want the castle to be hit and he's way too close right now."

"I think so."

"Okay. When he's in position I'll hit him with something I think will at least hold him long enough to charge up a massive barrage. If that doesn't work, well, I don't know what will."

"We can make the attempt."

"Okay, I'm getting my energy back and changing powers again." Susan charged up, maintaining the *Darkness* technique as she did so. The Borg finished spraying Doomsday with the rapidly hardening material, and the woman got into position. When she signaled she was ready, Susan changed again. She now had *Transition*, *Force*, and *Creation* natures, and started charging again as Doomsday smashed his way out of the cocoon he had been put into.

Where he ran smack into the energy blasts shot at him by the woman. He bellowed in frustration and took off after her, which was Susan's cue to swoop down and release her technique. "*Gelatinous Mountain.*"

The ground rumbled as a ton of white paste like substance fell out of nowhere, coving everything within sixteen meters and centered on Doomsday. It immediately hardened, and Susan looked around for the mystery woman. *Crap, but I figured that she would get caught in*

it, given the level of the technique. That's why I traded in my Augment Stat for Telesummon. She gestured, and the woman appeared beside her, startled.

"It's okay, you're safe. Sorry about that!" apologized Susan. "I needed to make sure it couldn't get away, and that there was enough of the stuff to hold him while I set up the trap."

"I understand. Thank you for getting me out."

"Of course. Hope it didn't startle you too much. Come on."

The girls flew down the road and landed at the edge of the paste. Susan looked it over, concerned it was already showing signs of cracking. *Better hurry.* She got to work with her next technique, which basically created a delayed attack that she could direct. It took the form of a ball of energy hanging in the air so she spent all her energy creating three of them nearby, ready to be unleashed. Her companion wasn't idle either, as energy was now sparking around her and her staff.

"If this blast doesn't do it, I will be unable to help further," she cautioned. "I'm putting everything I have left into it."

"Okay. I'll get you to safety if this doesn't work."

"You are... a strange one," she remarked, looking over at Susan. "I wonder—"

But Susan didn't get to hear what she was wondering about, as the mountain of solidified paste exploded apart, bouncing off Susan's shield and not seeming to bother the woman too much. Doomsday spotted the pair and rushed them with another roar.

"Now!" yelled Susan as it got close, and made a downward slash motion with her hand. The woman fired and the golden orbs streaked towards Doomsday, doing a total of ninety two lethal damage to his body (and varying amounts of damage to his head and other limbs) in a terrifying explosion of light and sound. When the dust cleared, Doomsday was down and Susan pumped her fist in the air. The woman was down on one knee, and Susan turned to her, concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I need to be... wound... again. I am not running at the efficiencies I should be, it has been too long. I still do not know how long I sealed in that temple after the war."

She is some kind of non-living creature, isn't she?

"Is it anything I can do?"

"Not until my *current* master is taken care of. Come, we should make sure we have done the job on the creature."

"Agreed." *The way she said current master, is she hinting at something?*

The woman gathered herself and leaned on her staff, both walking over to Doomsday. Susan dropped back into *magic mode* so she could check something, and couldn't believe her senses. "He's not dead."

"How can you tell?"

"Now that I'm close I can feel his energy, and a corpse doesn't have any. He still does. In fact, I don't believe this, he's starting to regenerate already, look!" She pointed, and the holes on his chest were already starting to close over.

"This battle isn't over?" The woman took a step back, clearly distraught but not much of it showed. "What else can we do to this creature?"

"I don't—" Her watch buzzed. "Hold please." She brought it up and *Information Available* was flashing on the dial. She tapped it and a technique description appeared, which Susan hastily read over.

"You have something?"

"I'm not sure. It's something I would never have thought of myself, but he is, for the moment, unconscious. But if he's The Darkness, will that be enough?" *No information* flashed on the dial. "Great. At the very least, he wouldn't be able to run around any longer. But if someone ever got hold of it—"

"I think it's stirring! If you're going to do something you had best do it now!"

Susan saw she was right, Doomsday's fingers were twitching like it was going to wake up any second now. She hastily went into powers mode again, this time taking *Metapower* and giving silent thanks this technique didn't need too much energy. *Of course, if I use it again I'll put more in, but as long as my target can't resist...* "Orb Seal," she said, bringing her fingers into a fist. The woman watched in awe as the body of Doomsday turned in on itself and vanished, becoming a small orb which plunked to the ground. Susan hastily picked it up

and looked it over. It was the color of his skin, a light gray, and felt about as heavy as a marble of that size would be. And it was only about the size of a large marble.

"What did you do?" demanded the woman. "Where did the creature go?"

"Right here. It seems *metapower* can even do this. Strange, I would have said I got a complete understanding of what my powers could do when I first received them. But now I'm not so sure. I didn't think I could do something like that. But here he is."

"It can't break out of there or anything, can it?"

Susan shook her head. "No, it's permanent." *Unless someone that doesn't already have something bonded to them, like I do, picks it up. Then it gets to try and take them over. It doesn't feel right to just destroy it now though. What should I do?*

"So the threat is over? Thank you."

"Of course. Do you need help getting back to the castle?"

"I am weakened. You could press the attack now."

Susan barked a laugh. "I'm weakened too. Oh, I could change up again but honestly I think I've had enough for one day. Just tell me this, is the man being held here all right?" She shoved the orb into her pocket, all she could manage for the moment.

"The one that my master calls 'Silvertongue?'"

"Yes."

She seemed to consider. "I'll do better than that, I'll show you, as your reward for helping us today. If you promise that no rescue attempt will be made today."

Susan nodded. "You have my word. I only came to see how he was anyway. So much for my plan to sneak in, right?" She laughed but the woman didn't join her.

"Come with me."

Susan walked beside the exhausted woman up to the castle, where her barrier started to flicker and spark again.

"The creature is gone, away with you!" she called to the empty air.

"You are weak, yet you have captured the girl? An excellent effort," said nothing, resolving into the demonic form Susan had seen earlier. It drew a sword out once it was fully formed. "I will escort her to the dungeons."

"You will do no such thing. Begone I say. I am taking care of this."

"Hummm... I see some kind of barrier around her. I wonder if she would fall to my second blade now. In your weakened state, I wonder if you would."

"She beat the creature you could not. Do you want to test her?"

The demon laughed. "I'm sure I will be soon, one way or the other. For now does she enter into our master's house willingly? Does she fear the next creature that will be unleashed unto this world and is giving herself up now?"

"We don't have to answer to you. We are going inside, and Susan will walk out again when our business is done. She has my word on that."

"Well, there's one person you do have to answer to. I don't think he'll be too pleased with this, but I guess it's out of my hands." He flapped his wings and took off, landing on the roof of the castle and going back to watching for anything coming near.

"Come," said the woman.

Susan was led through the halls of the castle, and looked around interested. The woman seemed to be searching for something though.

"Do you not know where the dungeons are?"

"I must be recharged first. We are looking for my *current* master."

"Oh." *Yes, she's trying to tell me something.*

They eventually found the man, who Susan recognized as Capricorn from his picture in the book, and he jumped up. "What's she doing here?" he demanded.

"Without her, your castle would be in ruins right now, master. I am taking her to see the Silvertongue so she can report back to his daughter that he has not been harmed. I have her word she will attempt no rescue at the moment."

"And you believed her?" he sneered.

"Yes. I have seen which side of the line between good and evil you find yourself. As she opposes you, she must therefore be on the other side of the line. Thus, she can be counted upon to keep her word. Unlike yourself."

Did she... stage this little confrontation? Does she want to be free of him and believe I'm her only hope? I am, of course, but it could also be a trick by The Darkness to make me trust it, then shoot me in the back. I really wish there was a skill could identify it directly, and not just things that have crossed realities.

"Fine, take her then. Don't have the book anyway, so he's useless to me at the moment. Oh, and don't try just wishing him out of there," he said crossly. "I've been appraised on what you can do, and given something to make sure no form of teleportation can get him out of there."

"I guess you've thought of everything." *Given something? Maybe The Darkness provided it, like it brought that metal over that one time? Makes sense.*

"We try. Well, off with you then!" He dismissed the woman with a wave of his hand.

"I must be recharged."

"What? Again?"

"I was fighting off that creature that was attacking. What were you doing at the time?"

"I was... coming up with a plan, of course. Give it here."

The woman handed over her staff and turned around, lifting the back part of her outfit. Susan couldn't see as she was now turned towards her, but the man slotted the staff in and started to wind.

Wait, she's literally run by a spring? That can't be right.

Energy flashed around them both as Capricorn turned the staff, and Susan realized now why it had that odd shape on the other end. It was like a key, and it gave him something to hold onto while he wound.

Her current master... so she was brought to this reality and he wound her up? That made it so she had to obey him, and why only he can 'recharge' her? I still don't know enough, but I think that's why she brought me to see this. To try and tell me he's the threat, because he's giving the orders. She doesn't want to fight me! Or am I projecting my desire to not fight her onto this situation?

"That should do it, I can't wind anymore," said Capricorn, pulling the staff out.

"Very well," said the woman, grabbing the staff back. "I'll return once I've seen her out of the castle."

"You better," he threatened.

What exactly can he back that up with? Can he order her to hurt herself, like an elf?

Susan was led to the dungeons, where a plain looking man was sitting on a block of stone, over in the corner weeping all alone.

"Hey buddy, don't you be no square," Susan said jovially. "If you can't find a partner use a wooden chair."

The man, not really weeping, looked up at Susan like this was the last thing he expected to hear, and stood up.

"Ifurita? What's going on? Who's this?"

"Your name is Ifurita? Oh, that's fantastic! Already this is paying dividends. Quick, do you know the name of the demon outside? Wait, can I get the spelling of that name?"

"As you can see," she said in answer, "he's fine. It was quite foolish of me to bring you to see the man I was not commanded to keep my name from. Now you have inadvertently learned it."

"I won't tell if you won't. Are you though, fine I mean?" she asked him. "Your daughter is worried about you."

"Meggie?"

"How many daughters do you have?"

"No, I mean Meggie, she's all right? They didn't hurt her?"

"She's totally fine. I've got her safely tucked away thousands of miles from here. She's safe."

"Thank you, but who are you?"

“Susan Felton. Hang tight Mortimer, hopefully in a few days this will all be over. Do you know that demon’s name?”

“No, what demon? I just know Ifurita because she comes to make sure the guards are leaving me alone. I do sometimes feel strange, like I should just end it all, that nothing matters. But then it passes. Is that the demon?”

“Yeah, it seems to have that effect on people. You said guards?” Susan looked around, there was not another soul in sight.

“They all left when the attack started.”

“Ah. Pity. I learned the name of the one I think I have the best chance of saving without a fight. Ah well, that’s how it goes. Do you need anything? Do they feed you okay?”

He gave a rueful chuckle. “They need my voice, so they treat me well enough.”

“I’ll let your daughter know. As for you, Ifurita- you kept your word and showed me he was fine. I will keep mine and depart in peace. For today.”

“This way then.”

“Wait!” called Mortimer. “Who are you?”

Susan looked behind her, then activated her energy blade at the minimal setting. She gave it a twirl and made it vanish again. “Ifurita can fill you in, she’s been told about me. For now let’s just say you aren’t the only person in your family that can bring people out of stories, Silvertongue.” She turned and followed Ifurita back up the stairs.

Oh yeah, I looked so cool just then.

Techniques used in this chapter

Torpor Dome

Time

Level 9 (4+3+2) (Effect, Long, M)

Create an area of time that slows the reactions of all within. Within the area time seems to run normally, but from an outside perspective all motion within has been slowed. Anything happening within the dome must delay an additional number of segments equal to 1 for every 5 rolled on the technique before that action can be taken.

Mental Domination

Mind

Level 9 (4+3+2) (Effect, Long, M(c))

Take control of a target’s mind. With this technique active, the target believes all thoughts the originator has are their own. In this way they can “talk themselves down” from or “psych themselves up” to any action. They are allowed a KNOledge check to avoid a certain action if, for example, the originator tries to make them believe they can fly and jumping off a building is something totally reasonable when they in fact cannot fly at all. Requires total concentration on the part of the originator, as any stray thoughts are transmitted as well, potentially confusing the target and allowing them a RESolve check to break free. This check may be attempted when the technique first activates.

Acid Bath

Acid

Level 11 (10+1+0) (Attack, Touch, I)

Acid shoots from the hand, drenching everything the user’s palm is pointing at. This follows the normal rules for acid found on page 92 but begins at the OTR of the base technique.

Dimensional Distortion

Dimension

Level (10+2+2) (Attack, Medium, M)

Create an area of distorted space, that can tear anything within apart. Not from direct damage, but simply by scrambling whatever material enters. Anything entering the area must succeed on a CON check or take damage determined by first rolling the HDL of the technique, then rolling the HDL of that result, every segment. This applies to any body location or object within the area. Size and DTR are ignored.

Unyielding Gravity

Darkness

Level 8 (4+2+2) (Effect, Medium, M)

Pin foes with intense gravity, potentially crushing them under their own weight. Their weight doubles for every 5 rolled on the technique, and they can only move if their STRength allows them to carry their own modified weight.

Become Stone

Transition

Level 10 (5+1+4) (Attack, Touch, P)

This technique turns the touched creature into stone. The target is allowed a CON check, with an increase in difficulty of 1 for every "overcharge." Once petrified, a creature cannot act, sense, or even think. Sufficient damage can destroy the statue, and the creature.

Gelatinous Mountain

Creation/Transition

Level 21 (4+10+3+4) (Attack + effect, Long, P)

Fill the entire area specified by the level of the technique with a thick liquid like substance. Almost immediately this substance hardens to be DTR <level of effect>. Creatures with a great enough speed can dodge out of the area to avoid being caught.

The Enemy of My Enemy

Where: Back at the hotel room

When: A few minutes after seeing Mortimer

Susan *teleported* back to the hotel room and was somewhat concerned to find it empty. There was a note on the table, but of course she couldn't read it without magic. That was easily taken care of but first she needed her energy back. She couldn't exactly use the active form of her *Energy Regeneration* in the room as management would probably be somewhat miffed if it got trashed. It wasn't a problem normally, as she usually had plenty of room, but while she recharged the power did tend to manifest around her in whatever the primary *nature* was she had at the time.

Subtle it was not.

Easy enough solution, change powers to be unnoticeable to anyone without powers, *teleport* outside, and get back to full energy while people passed beneath her.

Ignorant fools! she thought to herself. *I could probably take over this planet using just this power of being unseen by them. And why would you even want it, Susan? You're supposed to be saving it, remember? I need to get out of here.*

That done, Susan went back inside and went back into *magic mode* so she could do her favorite thing- magic. First order of business was to discover if this was some sort of ransom note, so she picked it up and cast "*Literacy*" to find out.

You're not dead! Sorry we didn't wait for you, Dustfinger was being whiny.

As usual.

Went out to lunch.

Be back soon.

Glad you're not dead.

Meggie

She shook her head and smiled, then tossed the note back on the table. *Guess I better think of something fast then, they could be back at any time.*

She pulled the orb out of her pocket and looked it over, frowning. *The damage this could do if someone ever touched it. Even if the person could somehow win in a contest of wills with that creature, can you imagine a smart Doomsday? But do I simply destroy that life? Really, who am I to kill it, especially now when it's helpless? Would Superman destroy it? Meggie said they killed each other in the "story" but I'm sure that was only as a last resort. I mean Superman doesn't go around breaking people's necks or anything, right? He was fighting to protect his city from a mindless killing machine that happened to be alive.*

She paced a few moments, wishing she had Sparkle to consult with, or more ideally, an open channel back to the Hub where she could ask what was typically done in these situations.

I mean if someone could win that battle of wills, think of the fighter they could be! Should I throw that potential ally away because I'm afraid of what might happen? Silverstreak may know the perfect person for all I know.

In the end she decided to simply hide the thing and hope she didn't come to regret it later. The question of "where" was easily solved, she simply cast "*Sculpt*" on the largest moon rock she had brought back, and flowed the stone aside enough to drop it inside. A few more actions of concentration and she held it up to the light, satisfied no one would be able to tell it had a rampaging monster in the middle.

You know, looking at this reminds me of Meteor and Sephiroth. Because something like Gravity magic would have come in really handy against Doomsday. True, their version

didn't work on boss types, but my magic would allow the standard resistance check and that would be that. Plus it just shaves off half of someone's health, it can't kill them no matter what. It would be a nice addition to my somewhat non-lethal spells. Wonder if Silverstreak would let me pop back there, buy one for analysis? I should have brought a copy of all of them, just in case. In fact I should grab up anything even remotely useful in these worlds I visit, I mean I have the space now with a ten in the skill. I wonder if I could raise my rating in the skill to amazing levels if I wanted to shove in, I don't know, a whole spaceship or something? I bet it would work. I'd just need to have that same rating to get it out again.

Susan put the rock back in the bag with the others and went to go fix herself something to eat with *Create Foodstuff*. It wasn't too much longer after she finished that the others returned, and Meggie's face lit up as she saw Susan was back.

"Did you see him? Did you get in? Please tell me you did!"

"Yes, she was quite worried this whole time. Could barely finish her massively oversized lunch," Dustfinger put in.

She stuck out her tongue at him. "I'm a growing girl, so be quiet, you. Well? Did you?"

Susan nodded, smiling. "I did. Ifruita showed me to the dungeon herself after I helped beat up Doomsday. He's fine, and while not enjoying accommodations like this," she indicated the hotel room, "he said he was being fed. They need his voice, apparently, so they're taking no chances."

"You actually beat *Doomsday*?"

"I'm standing here, aren't I? But it was a near thing, believe me. Even putting everything we both had into a final blast it only wounded him. He started regenerating almost immediately and if I hadn't been told a technique to stop that by this," she tapped her watch, "it would have gotten up again in a moment. It was pretty scary, and that's not something I think I've ever said."

"We're safe from it though, right?" asked Elinor.

"It's gone, don't worry. I hate to admit it but I'm not sure I could have beaten it alone. Ifruita helped, and I'll need you to look up that name for me. I think she's being controlled so in case Capricorn orders her to fight me, I'll need to know what to expect."

"Ifruita huh? Wait, you *saw* my father, and where he was being kept?"

"Yeah. Took me right down to see him, so I would know she wasn't lying about it."

"Then you can just use *Telesummon* and get him here!"

"No can do. I mean I can try, but according to him there's something in the castle that would prevent that. The Darkness knows my powers, and has access to all kinds of worlds, so it's not a stretch to say that's a false statement."

"Did you try though?"

"Not yet. I guess I know what direction it's in? Or... not."

"Your *no sense of direction* again?"

"That's the one. You have no idea how glad I am of all the forms of teleportation I have at my disposal. Saves me from having to walk places and get lost."

"Let me get out the map and check."

It turned out the villain was telling the truth, and Susan could not use either magic or powers to get Mortimer out of his cell.

"Sorry."

"It's okay, just to know he's safe. Still, how are you going to get him out?"

"I've been thinking about that while I ate lunch. My first order of business should be to take out Capricorn. As a normal human he should be the weakest, and that would free Ifruita to help me. If she's willing, but she implied she didn't want to be under his control. Maybe she *has* to be under someone's control? You can find out, but hopefully I won't have to order her to help me, she'll tell me what she knows."

"But he's in the middle of a castle surrounded by nasty characters, like that demon," protested Dustfinger.

"I admit, it's not really a plan as much as a 'this would be nice' sort of idea. I don't know what my next step should be."

"Go after the traitors," spoke up Elinor. Everyone looked over at her. "What? We know Mortimer won't read for Capricorn, and doesn't have the only book he's interested in anyway. He can't be tortured to do it, that might hold back his power, and I'm sure given how important this Shadow character is to Capricorn, he'll have a bit more patience yet. So the danger there is known. The borg characters, a demon, and this woman that we now know the name of. Unless you saw others in your trip around the castle?"

"No, no others."

"There you are then. But we know the traitor is quite willing to read out monsters like this Doomsday to smash things up, and now Doomsday has been defeated. Think Meggie, you're more up on modern stories, what would be worse than Doomsday? Because that's who the traitor is going to reach for next now that they know whatever it could do isn't enough to tear the castle down."

"But they wouldn't know Susan helped them," protested Dustfinger.

"True, but you think they didn't have someone nearby to see how the plan was working out? Or to collect the creature when the job was done? They didn't want it just rampaging about, I expect."

"I suppose."

"It was a weapon," Meggie guessed. "Aimed at the castle this time, but you're right. They would have collected him again when it was destroyed so it could be aimed at another target. Just him wandering around wouldn't do them any good, and if bad guys do anything, it's with a purpose right?"

They all shared a look, it was a scary prospect.

"Meggie has been telling me about your adventures, and your abilities," Elinor finally said. "And you say you hardly beat the creature. Will you be able to beat the next one?"

"How did you convince this woman to help you, anyway?" asked Dustfinger. "If she is under the thrall of Capricorn in some way, I would expect the opposite."

"That's just it. She has to protect her master, and she had heard about what I could do. Her attacks were hardly doing anything so she allowed me to help fight Doomsday off. Even stood up to the demon when it came back, said it should mind its own business, basically."

"Interesting. I wonder..."

"Yes?"

"Could you call a temporary truce with that side, and team up with this woman again? It could be a good way to feel her out some more if nothing else. And she seems powerful if you're singing her praises."

"You want her to call a truce with the people that abducted my father?"

"Pease, little one," he raised a hand. "It's only temporary, and a good opportunity to gather more knowledge about them. They know as well as we do that it's only a matter of time before the next "doomsday" shows up to tear the castle apart. Even if they're only willing to share information about the traitors, don't you think Capricorn wants revenge on his previous Silvertongue? And think of it from his perspective, he'll think he's sending Susan to her doom, solving another of his problems. He could hope the two wipe each other out, or are at least weakened to the point his forces have a chance."

Susan considered it. "It might help keep him safe, if I agree not to attack the castle until the others are dealt with in exchange for his safety."

"Well, I guess if you put it that way..."

"Plus, they saw me throwing stuff at Doomsday, and Ifrutia knew how ineffective she was at fighting him. They won't be in a rush to pit themselves against me, I think."

"If you can even hurt them," Elinor reminded her.

"True. But the demon obviously needs to go, and Capricorn I can turn into a bunny or something, that wouldn't be harm. The Borg I hope to shut down via technical means, so it's only the other side, who seem to be the more dangerous, I have to worry about. And if I'm going up against creatures like that, it is life or death for people here. I can harm in that case."

"So are you going to do it?" asked Meggie.

"It seems like a good idea. Look up this Ifrutia for me and I'll head back there."

"You got it."

“Okay, says here she’s from an anime of all things, sort of an old one, I don’t know it. Mid nineties.”

“So how did she get read out then?”

“How did you get read out? You think you’re the only fanfiction story out there?”

“True. Go on.”

“Says she was constructed a long time ago to be a weapon of mass destruction, knows a lot of ancient battle techniques, wow she can level cities in seconds, at least when she was originally built. Don’t know about her power levels now, but that’s about it. She is under the control of the last person that winds her, but she’s breaking down because she’s so old. Probably never meant to outlast the war anyway.”

Susan silently agreed. *You don’t make something that powerful, with a mind of its own, that might turn on you when the job is done. You give it an expiry date. That squares with what I saw and with what she said.*

“That’s about it. This doesn’t go into a lot of detail but I could look for the anime, maybe watch it myself and see.”

“Oh, I’m sure the hotel would love you pirating things over their wi-fi,” Elinor put in. “Great plan. For getting us kicked out, I mean.”

“I need to help somehow!”

“How did she get defeated? She is the major bad guy, right?”

“Uh, looking. No, well, sort of? She’s under the command of someone for a bit. Oh hey, this series is about traveling across worlds too, how neat is that? Let’s see, turns out moving across worlds gives each person that does it a new ability.” *Yeah, that would be nice!* “One kid got the ability to interface somehow with that world’s ancient technology from before the war. He just touches her and basically changes her programming. With no desire to continue obeying the person that keeps sending her off to blow up cities, she’s no longer a threat and even helps save that world from another weapon of mass destruction. How about that, she goes from being an enemy to an asset just like that!”

“So they don’t physically defeat her at all? I’ll keep that in mind.” *Either because nothing in that world could anymore, or because as Sparkle would say it made a better story this way.* “Anything else relevant?”

“Not that I can see, no. I can keep looking though.”

“Thanks.” *Question I have is, what ‘branch’ of the original tree did she come from? If she is from a ‘fanfic’ than that means her storyteller was telling the tale of a parallel reality to the one originally recorded for the show. I mean if someone got Harry Potter here from my world and the Harry Potter from a world I wasn’t, wouldn’t they get two different Harry Potters? I’m guessing yes, because they would have each had different experiences. So how is this one different than the one she’s reading about?* “Meanwhile I guess I’ll head back, see if they’ll agree to at least listen to me.”

“So soon?” asked Elinor.

“Yeah, I am sort of in a hurry to get back to my actual search, and Sparkle is probably out of her mind with worry about how I just vanished like I did. I’d like to wrap this up.”

“I already apologized!”

“I’m over it. Look, if I convert some money you think I could get a temporary cell phone? Do you have those here? Then you could call me if you learn anything useful. Or at least I could let you know what’s going on with me. I can’t read your writing without magic, so if you could just call...”

“That’s a fantastic idea! Actually there’s a place just down the street I’m sure sells them. We can head there! Huh, can’t text, but yeah, calling is fine.”

So Susan bought a prepaid cell phone and gave Meggie the number, found a quiet place and opened a *Teleportal* back to the road leading up to the castle. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck!”

She made her way up the road to the castle gate, and waved to attract Ifruita’s attention, who swooped down on her.

"You're back soon, state your intentions," she demanded, pointing the end of the staff at Susan.

"Yes, it's nice to see you too. Look, I know where you come from now, and yes it's crappy what happened to you, but you don't need to play the demon goddess with me." She gestured at the staff. "I think you know me well enough that if I wanted to attack, I wouldn't be like this and strolling up the path."

Her eyes narrowed but she lowered the staff a bit. "I can be only what I was created to be, and I have my orders."

"I know. I don't suppose you could just hand me that key and I could wind you?"

"My creators were not that stupid. I would be forced to fight you if you tried that. Please do not do so, I would not want to fight you."

"I feel the same! And that's part of the reason I'm here- I want a truce between us for now. Your master, the Borg, the demon, and you, in exchange for information. I think I can convince you all it's in your best interests to work with me for now, and your master and I can settle our differences later."

"This was... not something my master covered in his orders to me. I am unsure how to respond to an offer of truce."

"Then take me to him again. You can trust me that far, yes? After all, I've been inside once, and you have my word again what I said is why I'm here. If he doesn't go for it, fine. I will again leave the castle grounds before I begin any attack." *I'd need the time to prepare everything anyway.*

"I do not see why that would be unacceptable. Very well, I will escort you."

"Thank you."

So the pair again entered the castle, Ifrutia steadying her as they got close to the influence of the demon. Susan activated her *Barrier* item and felt better, and the two went into the main hall where Capricorn was eating.

"Couldn't stay away then?" he asked, waving away a servant. Susan got an eighteen *perception check* to notice the vacant stare in the servant's eyes, and the minor cybernetic systems adorning her body. Almost immediately a full Borg soldier with a glue tank appeared from a nearby door and stood ready to fire at her.

"No need for that," she told Capricorn, pointing her thumb in the direction of the Borg. "I come with an offer of peace. Hear me out."

"This should be good. Seems you've won over my bodyguard in any case. I'll have to give her more explicit directions."

"If you had, I wouldn't have been able to make you this offer. Give me information about the traitor, and I'll take care of them before they throw something even I can't beat at the castle."

"Out of the goodness of your heart? I don't think so."

"No. For the continued wellbeing of Mortimer, and for some help taking them out. I'm going to have to do so anyway, so I figure we can combine our efforts. You do want them dealt with, don't you? And considering what they brought out, I doubt you have the means to do so currently, and they are obviously against you. Or am I wrong, and Doomsday was just a misunderstanding? No? Didn't think so. They want you out of the picture, probably for the same reason you want them gone. Less competition for taking control of the world, and fewer to share the power with. And one last tidbit- with me busy dealing with them, I won't be here knocking your castle down or joining them against you. It all benefits of both a great deal."

He considered, taking a sip of something from his cup. "I suppose you make a good point. I would like to punish those traitors for leaving me as they did. But I quite honestly don't know where they went to. So you're out of luck there, missy."

"So tell me about them, and one of your Borg must be equipped with a camera, right? There must be a picture of them around here somewhere!"

"I don't know about that. But I suppose just giving you the names and a description of what they can do wouldn't hurt."

"Actually, there is a way we might be able to find them," spoke up Ifrutia.

"And what's that?" he sneered.

“Doomsday was dropped from a plane. Maybe Susan can track it down and figure out where it came from.”

Susan smiled. “I can do better than that. If you can show me roughly where it was when it flew overhead, I can use a *seer* technique to see it for myself, and then maybe be able to tell where it came from.”

“What are you waiting for then? Go.”

“Truce then? Mortimer remains unharmed? And I get your ‘bodyguard’ here to help me?”

“Why not ask for the demon, or some Borg?”

“Because I can trust she won’t stab me in the back the moment I’m done dealing with whatever you brought into this world. And the Borg can’t fly.”

“I suppose there’s that. Don’t think of stealing her away from me.”

“I already got that speech from her. I’ll bring her back, don’t worry.”

“Truce then. She can fill you in, so get going. Wait out in the hall a moment, I’ll need to give my bodyguard her orders.”

“Very well.” *Charming man*, Susan thought as she went back outside.

“So, what can you tell me?” she asked when Ifruita appeared again and the two were walking out of the castle.

“Here’s what I know about them...”

Bugging the Place

When: Not long after

Where: Just leaving the castle

“That is to say, the thing I know about them is... nothing.”

“I think we need to go have a little chat with your master again about the terms of this agreement,” Susan growled, turning to go back into the castle.

Ifruita put a hand on her shoulder. “The blame is with me. I am authorized to speak about the beings brought by the ‘Silvertongue’ to this reality. But I came just before they departed, when Capricorn felt in danger of betrayal. His insistence on my being here may have even contributed to the decision. So I did not see much of them.”

“But you did see them?”

“Yes. I can tell you what I observed about them, but not much more. Their names, all our names, are never spoken. Only Capricorn knows that, and he is terrified of you learning this information and immediately being able to learn any weaknesses they possess.”

“As well he should, given I’m somewhat working for him at the moment to take down those that became his enemies.”

“I agree, but I cannot tell what I do not know.”

“So what do you know? Wait, before you say anything...” Susan got out her phone and dialed Meggie, then put it on speaker. “Hey Meggie. I’m going to get a description of the other people summoned into this world. See if it helps, okay?”

“You got it, go ahead.”

“The first is a military man of some kind. His eyes are a pure white, and he wears a red uniform adorned with clasps that have skulls imprinted on them. He wears a hat and cape and moves with purpose. Apparently he was interested in the Borg, because of the mind control aspect, but decided they were too slow and limited to be of use to him. He wanted to train men instead but was overruled. The Borg took any people he brought back.

“The second also wanted people, but for some darker purpose. He had others brought out from his books, men who carried bags of clinking metal that he jealously guarded. He left, I think, because there were not enough medical facilities nearby. When he left and returned it was always with one or two people that obeyed his every word. I think just looking at him, listening to his voice, he had them under some kind of spell. Never have I seen such a man, just in the beauty of his face or the way he carries himself. I think, of the two, he is the more dangerous. Not even the Borg would challenge him for the right to convert people.” She stopped and looked expectantly at Susan.

“That’s it? There’s just two?”

“Consider the creature that attacked the castle. Would you need more than one of him?”

“No, I suppose not. So, how about it? Ringing any bells?”

“What, just from that? I mean even white eyes...” There was the sound of typing.

“Characters white eyes. Oh look- There’s 86 MILLION results. How am I supposed to do anything with that? I mean I’ll look at some pictures, a military man with skulls, right? Hat and cape. Sure, it’ll be a chinch. But if he’s from some book without pictures, I’ll never find him.”

“Anything you can come up with will be appreciated.”

There was a sigh from the other end. “I’ll get to work.”

“Thanks.”

As Susan hung up she lifted her watch. “Did you get all that?” she asked after tapping it.

“Affirmative.”

“Any ideas?”

“The current list of possible candidates is rather extensive. Warning: This list may be an inadequate source to draw from.”

“Explain.”

“Not all stories exist in all worlds. One of the beings here houses the spirit of Darkvoid, a being with access to many realities.”

Susan wasn't sure if she should feel beaten down or very, very afraid. “What you're saying is, why limit yourself to the stories on a single world when you can bring things from other worlds, including books, into this one. Then bring things out of *those* books, to further make it difficult to figure out who they are.”

“Affirmative.”

“I'm sorry I asked.”

“I am unable to do anything about that.”

“Let me know when there is something you can do.”

“Affirmative.” The watch darkened again.

“Hopefully you'll have better news for me.”

“I can at least approximate where I saw the plane, and I can show you where the creature landed.”

“Best news I've heard in the last hour. Lead on.”

So Ifrutia led Susan a little ways away from the castle, to a section of forest that was simply flattened, and the obvious path Doomsday had taken after being dropped from the plane- was obvious. Susan looked up. “He would have fallen pretty fast, given how dense he was. My spell of *Time Area* won't reach that far, making me now wish for *Time Window* back, but at least I have something just as good. *Light of the Multiverse! Make Up!*” Susan wasn't too concerned with energy or techniques at the moment, just with *Seer* nature, and using a simple technique looked into the sky and rewound time in the area to look back at the time just before she had arrived at the castle. With the plane in sight she used another technique to simply freeze that image in the air and lifted off the ground. Ifrutia went with her.

“It's some sort of military transport plane,” she remarked, looking it over as they got closer. “Now let's see if this works. *Mirrored Sight!*”

Ifrutia almost gasped as the plane shimmered into existence before her, and Susan was now maintaining two techniques. The *Seer* technique to see the plane herself, and an *Illusion* technique to mirror what she saw so Ifrutia could see it too. She passed a hand through it. “Remarkable.”

“Thanks. Let's go see our mystery men and how they controlled Doomsday. Because I can't see him just sitting quietly in the plane until they dropped him.”

She easily passed through the plane's “exterior” and looked around, starting from the front. The pilot seemed normal enough, with no visible cybernetic enhancements, though it was tough to say in this “frozen moment” if his stare was vacant or not. She moved on. There were only two other human passengers on the plane, both as Ifrutia had described. The military man was standing with his arms crossed at the back, near the switch that no doubt opened the plane's doors. He was staring intently at Doomsday and the other man who was casually holding him in place.

“That's not possible,” Susan breathed, looking him over. She had no idea who this guy was, but he didn't look all that strong. But there he was, holding the creature that beat Superman to a pulp like it was nothing. Doomsday was clearly roaring in frustration (his default mode) while the guy holding him didn't seem to be concerned at all. He had tangled black hair, dark eyes, and she had to admit there was something about him. His face was strange, like those experiments she had seen done with computer imaging, averaging out the human face to create the “perfect” face.

“What's with the marks on his skin?” Susan pointed, and criss crossing his arms were what looked like healed up branding marks, hundreds that she could see, that no doubt continued up his arms and onto his chest.

“He had those when I last saw him, and I do not know. His strength though, can he really have simply held the creature in place until it was time to dump him from this plane?”

“That's what it looks like.” *And if he is that strong, why not just come himself?*

“We could hardly stop the creature, you were right to assume worse would be coming. How do we fight a being like this? Is it some sort of god?”

"An evil one to be sure, in that case. I don't know. But we don't know the whole story here- maybe soldier boy is exerting some kind of influence over him, making him weaker?"

"I hope that's the case."

"Me too. Still, I've seen their ugly mugs, I can take a peek at whatever they're doing now."

"You... think him ugly?" Ifruita was staring at the man holding Doomsday.

"Eh, he's not my type."

"If not him, who?"

"Eh, actually, you have a faint resemblance to my girlfriend, Luna. You both have long, pale hair, and nearly blue eyes. She couldn't destroy a city, of course, but she's a decent spellcaster in her own right."

"I see. I have never considered myself to be an object of attraction for someone before. Most that know me fear me too much."

"Maybe one day that can change." Susan dismissed the *Illusion* with a wave, and dropped her own internal *Seer* technique that was keeping the plane there. "But for now, let's have a *View Portal!*"

She waved a hand dramatically in front of her, opening a distortion in space that immediately...

Vanished.

"Okay, that was different," Susan disgustedly remarked. "That really should have worked. I'll try again and put more energy in." Susan changed for several seconds and tried again, but again the *View Portal* failed to open as she expected. "Great, they're obviously hiding behind some kind of barrier, and one that doesn't allow me to punch through with a higher check result. Marvelous!"

"So can you not find where they are hiding?"

Susan sighed. "No, I can, I just have to do it the long way. You can fly pretty fast, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. We're going to rewind time and find where that plane took off from. It's annoying, but I can't think of anything else that might work, especially against something that can block freaking *superpowers*. Let me adjust for speed and we'll be off."

So they flew. Ifruita kept up with her pretty well, as she maintained the *Seer* technique and "rewound" time to track it back to where it took off from. Unsurprisingly, it looked like a military base from above, and the two ladies considered it from their vantage point in the air.

"Are you just going to attack?" Ifruita asked her.

"Do you want to just attack someone or someones that can hold back Doomsday?"

She pointed her staff downwards. "I could just blow the entire thing up from here."

"That won't be necessary!" Susan hastened to assure her, gently taking the staff and moving it aside. "They may have taken it over, and are holding hostages inside. Or they just stole the plane, ditched it afterwards, and nobody related to this is even around."

"One would think the legitimate government here would be attacking the place if it had been taken over."

"Not if they believed there was nothing wrong. If Mr. Skulls can control minds, for instance, they may report everything's fine while still being captive. We need more information, and unless you can turn yourself invisible, that means my going down there alone."

She hesitated. "I do not like your chances."

"I have to admit, they could have some of the same sensors the Borg use, to detect changes in air currents or whatever so invisible people could be tracked. Let me think." She considered a moment, then brightened. "There's a couple of powers I've never really played around with, but I think they can come in handy here. Just a second." She concentrated,

losing *flight* for a second but getting it back before it really became a problem. Her fuku changed to a red and black spots motif, and she looked it over critically. "Huh, like it knew what I was going to do, too."

"What are you going to do?"

"Slip inside in a way they'll never suspect. I'm turning myself into a bug and just crawling around the place. I'll still be able to fly but I'll be so small I can easily stay out of the way. And who will look at a bug twice? Honestly, I knew a reporter that did the same thing, I should have thought of this earlier for when I was checking your place out. Well, live and learn, right? I'll head back when I've checked the place out, and we can plan our attack. You'll be okay, right? Flying here won't drain your energy too fast?"

"Only my attacks do that."

"Great. I'll see you in a bit. *Spots on!*" she cried for reasons she would never understand, and with a combination of *shape-shift* and *size change*, plus eighteen energy, she turned into a ladybug. Not really a miraculous one, but a ladybug all the same. Ifruita now looked huge, and Susan dived away from her towards the base, wings out but still relying on *flight* for most of her maneuvering. With her now reduced proportions it seemed a lot further to go, but she also had taken *speed* at a high rating so it wasn't long before she came up to the base and slipped inside.

Once there she wondered where everyone was, and buzzed through the hallways wishing *spirit sense* transferred over to powers mode. She spent an uninteresting few minutes poking into things and finally came to a large open area, where a man in red was drilling rows of people in martial arts techniques. *And so we come to bad guy number- wait a second...*

Susan, in bug form, wasn't sure if what she was seeing was right but she could swear that was M. Bison from the Street Fighter video games. He was walking around, harshly correcting people's form and generally being rude to everyone. Susan didn't want to get too close in case he could somehow sense her, but watching him now she was pretty positive about his identity.

I didn't pay much attention to him on the plane because I was more interested in the guy holding back Doomsday, but that's clearly a guy from the video games. Which I hardly know anything about because it's a boy's fighting game. Not that girls couldn't enjoy it, of course, but I prefer Skyrim. Or if I wasn't such a filthy casual, Dwarf Fortress. And even if I did, what apart from some marital arts moves, are his actual powers? Well, I can have Meggie look that up for me.

She watched a moment as he smacked around his "students" and Susan could see they were probably at or below her level, given she had a five in her own martial art skill of Ninjutsu. *But fighting a room full of them, that's a bit of a different thing. Let's try to avoid that, shall we future me? Indeed I will, past me. My goodness I miss Sparkle!*

She moved on, coming to a medical area where nurses walked about, checking people in cots. *People who couldn't handle the "training" I bet.* It was odd though, even injured people, she suspected, would be a bit livelier than this bunch who just seemed to lay there. There was no joking with the nurses going around, no banter, just silence. *Weird.*

Susan moved on, past that room and into the next one where a scene of even greater astonishment met her tiny compound eyes. *Or wait, I think that's flies that have that. Whatever.* There was the guy Ifruita had been going on about, shirtless and sitting on a chair in the middle of what was probably a section of the base much larger than it used to be, as someone had knocked some walls down to make an "open floor plan." There were a few nervous looking people standing to one side, a pair of nurses standing next to a stretcher, and two people involved in some kind of odd ritual chanting over a prone man lying on the stretcher. The oddest part was the branding iron they were waving about, as there was a ribbon of light traced in the air where the brand passed. The man studied it, and the other, possibly younger man, also seemed to give an opinion of some kind, but quickly the brand was brought to the sitting man and pressed into his skin. Susan couldn't really see from this distance why this guy was sitting there and letting someone burn him with a... she stared. The branding iron crumbled and was gone, just like that. Susan noticed motion at the edge of her

vision and the two nurses had already picked up the prone man, carting him off to the room she had just come from.

Okay, what?

Susan then got to see the full ritual as the next person, a woman this time, lay down on the stretcher when it was brought back empty. She too seemed to go limp as the branding iron, which Susan didn't see heated in any way, pressed into her skin. Again the ribbon of light, and again the crumbling as the white hot metal was pressed into the man's skin. Susan had by this time crawled a bit closer, but then froze. *He's looking right at me. No that's impossible, he can't be looking right at- he's getting up. He's getting up and he's still looking right at me. I shouldn't even be a spot on the wall at this distance, he must be looking at something else.*

Between one blink and another, Susan found herself being crushed by something, and to her astonishment, took thirty nine damage to her everything, divided by her current effective size of six plus one, of course. That worked out to be six damage.

Ow, my everything! What just happened?

She didn't stick around to find out, envisioning Ifruita's staff and *Teleporting* to the end of it. A pressure left her, and she flexed her tiny legs and made sure they were all there.

Wobbling off her staff, Susan became herself again and Ifruita whirled, then lowered her weapon.

"You're hurt."

"Yeah. That was quite unpleasant, actually." She lifted her pant leg for the *Alleviation* knife, thanking her past self for keeping that close at hand and not in any unreachable dimension.

"What happened?"

"I'm not even sure. I was watching Mr. Handsome get branded and suddenly he got up like he saw me." She sighed as she held the blade to her skin, healing herself. "He got up, but I didn't even see him move and I was being crushed by something."

"He saw a bug from across the room and crushed you? Some kind of power?"

"Must have been. It got dark though, like he had just thrown something at me. I didn't even get a dodge, it was crazy."

"Did you get what you needed?"

"I guess, but I didn't see much of the place. I saw the two from the plane, yes, but there's someone we're missing. The original guy who read all these jokers out of stuff. He should be around here, right?"

"I would guess that."

"I'm going back. Hopefully Beefy ThickNeck McChucksStuff goes back to his little branding party and thinks I was just a regular bug, and am now dead. That will let me check the rest of the place out."

Ifruita stared at her for so long Susan started to get worried she had blown a fuse or something, but then cocked her head. "Tell me, do you have many friends on your world?"

"Sure! Or are they followers? No, no, friends. Sure. Why do you ask?"

She shook her head. "Your world must be very strange. And if this 'Beefy' as you call him is wandering around?"

"I'll get out of there fast, don't worry. But I'd like to try getting the person least able to fight back out first, and that means finding the guy."

"I understand. Be careful in there."

"I will."

So again, Susan changed into her bug form with a cry of "spots on!" for good measure, and *teleported* back to the medical room. She then combed the base, looking for anyone not a soldier or fodder for that odd ritual she still couldn't figure out, but didn't find anything.

Fine. I'm going to have to take a chance here.

Finding a quiet spot she transformed again, then held her breath hoping alarms wouldn't immediately go off. When they didn't she cast *Augment Skill: Spirit Sense* on herself and spent a moment with her eyes closed, trying to figure out where the energy was. *After all, if I can find someone not in training or being branded I can- AH!*

Susan clutched her head, her senses going wild as she opened herself up to energy signatures in the area. Hastily she shut down the spell making her *even better* at it, and stood for a moment regaining her composure. *Okay, what in the world was that? I can still feel it, and it overpowers everything around here. There's some massive source of energy nearby, more than I've ever felt in even a group of people. It shouldn't even be possible to hold onto that much energy. This is nuts! Could that be enough to fill up that entire chunk of Hyperlarcovite I'm carting around? I wouldn't doubt it.*

Susan paced the small room she was hiding in, thinking. *I can focus my senses but I'm not sure that would help. It's like trying to read while standing next to the sun. It really has me worried. And I don't think Seer nature is going to help me any more while inside the base than it did outside. But I have to wonder...*

Susan went back into *Powers Mode* and took both *Illusion* nature and *Mind* nature, then threw all the energy she could into "*Mental Mapping!*" A miniature model of the base appeared before her, but with a ghostly ball of light where each mind could be found within the complex. Naturally the places she hadn't seen were not included in the *illusion* but the tiny representations of minds were clear enough for even her *no sense of direction* to not mistake. *Neat, it worked.* She looked it over and decided that bobbing spark there, apart from the others, was probably her guy, and went back into ladybug form to get herself there.

She entered the room, pleased with herself, but then stopped short. It again wasn't what she was expecting, as this looked more like a cell than anything else. In fact, it was a cell, and guarded by some weird looking *oh no, not robots!*

She looked over the room, and there were several mechanical forms sweeping sensors (she assumed) across the entire place. There were two robotic dogs of all things, and a larger suit you could fit a whole person inside, stationed in the available space. All had visible tanks of what was probably the glue stuff, ready to pounce and start it hardening around her should she make an appearance. *Overkill much? No matter, I'll just get him out of here when I'm miles away. Easy Peasy. But is this my guy? Why would the guy that read all those people out be locked up? Does Capricorn have it wrong, and one of the people he brought out turned, instead of this guy convincing them? Guess I'll have to ask him.*

She was about to *teleport* back again when a sudden thought struck her. *How did they talk to each other? They come from different worlds, naturally they must all speak different languages. I take my communication power from Inari for granted now, but this guy wouldn't have had it. How did he calm them down and tell them his plans or whatever after first bringing them here? Strange.*

Time to get back. See you soon, Sad Frown Guy.

She disappeared.

Getting All the Bad News at Once

When: A few moments later

Where: Back at the hotel room.

“You brought her back here?” Elinor announced, backing away from the door as Susan and Ifruita entered the room. The other two looked up from what they were doing to see what all the commotion was about.

“Yeah, I’m going to need her help in planning how to assault the military base. Don’t worry, she has no interest in harming anyone.”

“It is true. I do not.”

“I’ll just take her word for it then, shall I?”

“She took my word for it when I said I wouldn’t attack her master when I went to talk to him. I think we can trust she will also play by the rules. Ifruita, this is Elinor, Meggie, and the man over there is Dustfinger. Only he’s not a native.”

She inclined her head.

“Neat.” Meggie had a big smile as she came over to see the new arrival. “I’ve never met anyone from an anime before. Nice to meet you!” She stuck out her hand.

“What’s an anime?” was the response, as she took it. She seemed to be a bit confused, looking at Meggie’s hand strangely, but then shrugged.

“Just a type of story. So you were built to be a weapon of mass destruction, is that right?”

“That was my purpose, yes.”

“Wicked. So, did you get anything useful from the visit?”

“I think so. I found where the other ‘Silvertongue’ is being kept, so I’m just going to *telesummon* him here. He seemed to be a prisoner, so more is going on over there than we were led to believe. Hopefully he’ll be able to give up exact descriptions of these two and what that guy was doing with those branding irons.”

“Branding irons?”

“I’ll tell you the whole story in a minute, but he can probably explain it better. Clear a space and I’ll get him here.”

Meggie helped Susan figure out where the military base was in relation to the hotel, allowing her to use the spell. That done, they moved the furniture around a little, and Ifruita raised her staff as everyone got into position.

“We’re not killing him or anything,” Susan chided.

“Just in case he is not what he seems,” she explained.

“Very well. But I’ll be quite cross if you shoot him. Not to mention the hotel will probably be blown up, at this range.”

“Er, maybe we should wait outside?” suggested Dustfinger.

“It’ll be fine. I’m not your master, but please try to restrain yourself from shooting him unless I say so.”

“You are not, and I am not mindless you know.”

“But you could have orders to shoot him on sight, but I guess everything will be fine. Here we go! *Telesummon!*” Susan of course took the extra time and put in as much energy as she could, but twelve *segments* later the magical energies faded to reveal it hadn’t actually worked at all. “Oh don’t tell me!”

“Something blocked *your* magic? What did you even get on your check?”

Susan looked at her, face expressionless with rage. “I got a forty.”

“A forty!?”

“I’m sorry, what does that mean?” asked Elinor.

“It means she got ten more than doing the impossible. That can’t be good!”

“No, it can’t. Obviously whatever is blocking me from using *Seer* powers on the place also prevents *teleportation* like spells too.”

“They couldn’t have put some sort of *Fortification* on the place, right?”

“They would have to get each building, at least for my version of it. And I was able to slip in...”

"But you didn't mean anyone harm at the time, right? It was just to poke around. And you aren't summoning someone random, you're summoning him. All they would need is the spell on that one building."

"True, I guess. I can try getting one of the others I saw later, but something tells me getting anyone out of there is going to be impossible. Darn it all!"

"So what does this mean?" asked Dustfinger.

Susan sighed. "It means two things. No easy way of getting them miles away from each other, so we can attack them one at a time. Plus their "students" or "hostages" or whatever you want to call them will get in the way. And we can't get any more information because the other reader is stuck there. Oh, and I'll have to smash up the robots that were guarding him to get him out. At least most of them were tiny," she growled. "Stupid mainframe monster."

Dustfinger sat and counted on his hands. "Isn't that more than two?"

"It's two where I come from!" Susan testily answered.

"You'll have to forgive her," Meggie said to him. "In the story she gets a bit peeved when her magic doesn't work. I guess she does that in real life too."

"Excuse me, both are 'real life' if you hadn't noticed."

"Whatever you want to call it."

"So we are going to assault the base?" asked Ifruita.

"It looks that way. But not until Meggie here looks up some things for me."

"You got it!" she replied brightly, getting her computer out again.

"First up is M. Bison."

"Em... You mean like buffalo? That sort of bison?"

"I think so."

"K. Okay, is this the guy?" She swiveled the laptop and showed a picture of a boxer.

"No, that's not Bison. Arg, if only I had played Street Fighter II more. Are you sure that's M. Biosn?"

"That's what it says here. He looks pretty muscular though, are you sure it just isn't him in a military uniform?"

"No, I'm pretty sure. For one thing, my guy was white."

"Oh, that's a good indication we've got the wrong guy."

Susan snapped her fingers. "That's Balrog!"

"Balrog?" Meggie typed some more. "No, this is Balrog." She spun the laptop again and showed a slender guy with a mask and a claw on one hand.

"You're doing this on purpose somehow, aren't you?"

"What? No!" Meggie was the picture of innocence. "There's only one other boss in Street Fighter II, if that's really where he comes from. Vega. I'll show you." She clicked a linked and Susan smiled.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Well, at last!" put in Elinor.

"Hey, you try remembering the names from some video game you hardly ever played because it was ancient when you were born. I'm surprised I remembered at all!"

"What's a video game?" asked Dustfinger.

"Don't start, *Ron*."

"Who's Ron?"

Meggie laughed. "That was a good one. You think you remembered because of the leak?"

"Ugh, don't remind me about that thing. Honestly, only positive thing about being here is The Darkness isn't yapping at me every two minutes to punch someone or give in to the dark side."

"Yapping huh? Is that what you call it?" Meggie seemed pensive, but brightened again. "Anyway, let's talk about the most powerful figure in the Street Fighter II universe!"

So the girls read about *Psycho Power* and what it could do, and about Vega being some kind of crime boss and master martial artist.

“So what, he’s going to set up shop here, start a new *Shadaloo* organization? Is that why he’s training those people?”

“It’s what he does.”

“Well, I’ll trust my ten RESolve to keep me safe from his mental abilities, I just worry about pitting my five *Martial Arts* rating against his. I mean who knows how good people from his world can get? And he’s the best of them?”

“You won’t actually have to fight him though, right?”

Susan crossed her arms, looking at the picture worriedly. “I can probably put the goons to sleep with the sleep spell, but he’s a boss type. I’m sure he’s got a pretty good RESolve, if he can hold together a whole crime syndicate.”

“Wouldn’t that be more PERsonality?”

“He’s a martial artist though, he doesn’t make *persuasion* checks he makes ‘punch your face in if you don’t do what I want’ checks.”

“True. You’re not forgetting about *Augment Skill* are you?”

Susan shook her head. “It’s tough. Put that on and I don’t get any bonus to speed, because I don’t have *Velocity*. Put *Velocity* on myself with powers, and I don’t get a higher rating.”

“So just blast them from a distance,” suggested Ifruita, indicating her staff.

“As long as there are no innocent people nearby, fine. But if even one person not him is nearby, I’ll not be able to use any area effect attacks because I can’t cause them harm. He’s the danger to life here because there’s every chance The Darkness is in him. But it’s not in the people he’s mind controlled, and so I literally can’t hurt them.”

“Seems like a weakness you should leave behind.”

“It’s a thing that keeps you all safe, should I get taken over completely. It is odd though, I didn’t get any background points for constraining myself in such a way, while if I had just flat out taken *won’t kill* I would have.”

“Probably because you did it to yourself,” suggested Meggie. “And you only have to pay for benefits, like *Spirit Mage*, because Silverstreak sort of cheated it into your backgrounds after the fact.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Wait a second, your *contract* says permanent harm, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Just bomb the whole place with *Knockout*. How big an area can you get with that?”

“Won’t work. I mean I could get the one part, but not the hospital area.”

“Hospital area?”

“Yeah, that’s the other guy’s part I saw. The one holding back Doomsday. There were people needing obvious medical attention in that room. If I put the nurses down, and someone starts dying, it’ll be my fault they don’t get the care they need. Ergo, I won’t just be able to nuke the place from orbit.”

“And this restriction is really worth it?” asked Ifruita, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“I felt like it was at the time. I still do. Without these restrictions I can’t feel confident in my own skin. You should know about that- you have to follow someone else’s orders. It’s not pleasant, is it? And you’re powerful too, right? Do you like your powers being used just for death and destruction?”

She looked down, and didn’t answer.

“Thought not. Now, back on topic.”

“Beating Vega?”

“Exactly. It’s not him I’m too worried about, it’s the fact I’ll be fighting them both at the same time. So let’s switch over to guy number two, and do some searches about him.”

“Okay, my fingers are at your disposal.”

“Put in ‘branding iron transfer strength’ and see what you get.”

“Got it.” She typed it in. “Okay, instruction and care from brandingirons dot com. No. Electric branding irons? No. T-Shirt Iron-ons. Obviously not. Oh, here’s something. Given attributes by vassals, strength, speed, stamina, wit... used branding irons called forcibles! That sounds promising. It’s from a book called Worldbinder. Ugh, it’s the sixth book, let me

find the first one.” More typing. “Okay, this might be your guy, or at least a guy from that world. Seems they can take a special metal, called blood iron, and craft it into a rune of some kind. Then you press it into somebody and take one of their attributes. Says here it’s pretty painful.”

“Wait a second, that guy was *covered* in brands. Co-vered. Is there any limit to how many you can receive?”

“Doesn’t say anything about a limit here.”

Susan sat down heavily. “So he’s stolen something from every person there? STrength or whatever?”

“Could be grace, or stamina, yeah. Have to have them in proportion I guess.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s different for you, right? You pick up a glass with your beefy, magically enhanced STrength of three and you’re not making a STrength check, are you?”

“No.”

“So you don’t crush the glass unless you want to. Plus the magic is aware of how you want it to be used, so you don’t roll over in your sleep and take out your bed.”

“I guess.”

“But we don’t have that luxury. Imagine taking the STrength of everyone in this room all at once. Your body still thinks about gripping things with a certain amount of force, but now you’re four times as strong. You would crush anything you touched! So you take grace, too. Now you have more control over your movements and you’re not crushing everything. And of course your body is working harder now, keeping you from smashing through the floor with each step, so you take some stamina too.”

She paled. “So he could have an effective STrength of forty or more?”

“Uh, a bit more than that. If it’s the major ‘villain’ of the first few books, and why wouldn’t it be, it’s on the order of thousands he’s taken.”

“Thousands?!”

Meggie held up a hand. “Of each type. So wit, smell, sight-”

“Wait, sight?” She looked over at Ifrita, who nodded. “That fits.”

“What? Did he spot you?”

“Yeah, as a ladybug, from across the room.”

“Wild. What was I saying, strength, stamina-”

“So basically any numeric stat, he can steal it. I get the picture. And he’s only taken more since coming here.”

“There’s a bit of good news?”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m not. The link is, to use a word you would know, maintained. The person giving the attribute has to stay alive.”

She nodded in understanding. “That’s why the hospital beds.”

“Right. The best way to attack someone like that is to find and kill their ‘donors.’”

“Which you will not do,” Ifrita ventured.

“You already know me so well,” Susan muttered, not entirely happy about the whole situation. “But then, so does the thing that set all this up. It knew I would have trouble fighting ‘possessed’ people and would not be able to do anything with these ‘donors.’ Marvelous.”

“That actually wasn’t what I was referring to. This Raj Ahten wants to become the ‘sum of all men,’ basically taking so many attributes they survive even if his hosts don’t. But that’s not what I meant either. He’s not in his world now.”

Susan’s eyes lit up. “So he might not have access to his thousands of ‘donors’ now! That’s why he’s taking more, so that... No.” She deflated again. “We can’t assume that. Silverstreak told me that my usually permanent spells, like *creation*, persist if I leave the world I made them on. Usually they only last until I die, then go poof. World traveling breaks the connection and lets them stay around. I have to assume he’s achieved his goal of becoming ‘the sum of all men’ just by coming here, that his thousands of donors are now fine, but he’s still got their attributes. I mean he held back Doomsday, and he didn’t do that with a few extra STrength and COOrdination.”

“I suppose if you want to be a downer about the whole situation...”

“How do we beat him?” asked Ifrita, a pragmatist if ever there was one.

“Depends on how many *metabolism* he had when he came here. That’s basically an *acceleration* per person, by the way.”

“So, he takes one and now he’s twice as fast,” guessed Susan. “He goes from, say, eight delay to four as his base. His REFlexes may not be that much better, but it seems to us like he is.”

“Right. But people who take *metabolism* age faster too. So take five and you can throw five punches in the span one person could get off one, but every hour seems like five.”

“No, it’s worse. Every *second* seems like five. My goodness, every five of my delay might only be one to him. Could I one shot him while he’s asleep?”

Meggie shook her head. “People with even a few stamina don’t need to sleep. You won’t catch him unaware. He’ll smell you coming, at the very least.”

“Great.”

“I’m not done. Even if you managed to hit him with something, his recovery rate is off the charts. You don’t kill him in one shot, and he’ll probably be fine. Now, they don’t have gunpowder and such on their world, so blowing his head off would probably work. People try stabbing him and poison and such, but none of it takes.”

“Is there *any* good news?”

“Uh, he doesn’t have *regeneration* in the strictest sense. A broken arm would heal in whatever position it was in at the time. Tear it off and he won’t grow a new one, just scab over and keep fighting. Plus he can’t move too fast, his bones would shatter.”

“But if you say he’s always healing...”

“Doesn’t help, like I said if it sticks out of him it’ll just heal like that. He doesn’t get to be tougher because there’s no rune of, well, DTR. So he can’t run like the Flash, if you know who that is... no, who did Pinkie Pie become? The crimson blur? Filly Second! He can’t run like that because he still has to live in the physical world of momentum and inertia and air friction and everything else. Try to turn too fast, and your body is still going one way while your leg is going another.”

They all shuddered.

“He’s not a TRON lightcycle, that’s what I mean.”

Now it was Susan’s turn. “What’s a lightcycle?”

“Eh, never mind. Thought you might have seen that one. Guess not.”

“So it sounds like I have to hit him with a time technique, maybe freeze him in time altogether, and of course my aim with techniques is still lousy.”

“Figure both able to dodge pretty much anything. I mean supposedly Vega can actually teleport!”

“Not to mention either one could be The Darkness, and have access to energy blasts, shields, or out of world materials able to harm me through *invulnerability*.”

“Or magical items,” put in Meggie. “After all, something is keeping you from using magic at a distance on the place. It could be magical in nature.”

There was a long silence as the girls sat in thought.

“Someone get me a sheet of paper. It looks like I’ve got some major planning to do.”

Let's Make a Deal

When: A half hour later

Where: Hotel room

"The main trouble," complained Susan, "is that I'm not used to sitting down and planning the murder of not one, but two people in the next several hours!"

Ifruita had been pacing the room, fending off Meggie's questions about her world with a lot of "I don't know" and "a lot of memory was sealed" for the last half hour, but now both looked over at Susan. She had been writing stuff on paper and mumbling to herself, but now threw the pen down.

Meggie came over to her and looked at it what she had been working on. "It's true, in the beginning you were so superior to everyone else magically you didn't need to plan anything. And moving across worlds The Darkness started showing up in places you least expected it so you had to just work with whatever you had going at the time."

"Exactly. I honestly don't know how to best approach this problem."

"And by best you mean the fewest casualties?" asked Ifruitita, coming over as well.

"That's right. I can't ask you to take out the boss types, it's my responsibility to free this world from The Darkness, despite my unorthodox entry into it. Besides the obvious, it's the only way I'll get out of here. But I can't have you cause a distraction or take out the peons because your attacks are too lethal. Unless you have some non-lethal ones?"

Ifruita shook her head.

"I figured. Then there's the question of which mode to go in. I mean look for yourself you can't read this writing can you?"

"Nope! Could be... English?"

"What language are you using?"

"German, of course!"

"Really? Right, sure, whatever. German, why not? Anyway, this says "off the charts stats" and this says "martial arts master with various powers" just to remind myself who I'm going to be fighting. Then we have in the magic section;

Sleep or Hypnotic magic +

Energy Drain +

½ Invulnerability + -

Maintaining above means -2 -

Probably could hit either with mars spells +

More versatile +

No dodge -

Avatar of War +

"See, there's not many minuses with that. Now in powers mode we have;

½ Invulnerability + -

Save +

Maintaining above means -2 -

Bad aim -

All techniques can be type Knockout +

Can't take Raj with just knockout -

"But the perks I get like energy well, not maintaining invulnerability, I could fly, does that make up for it?"

"Why is invulnerability listed at only half?" asked Ifruitita.

"I think Vega or whatever his name is could probably get past it. In the game when he hits his hands light up, probably this 'psycho power' Meggie talked about. That would probably get through it. Raj could hit me really hard, but he couldn't hurt me while doing it. So it's a wash."

"Why does his being clean have anything to do with it?"

"I mean it balances out in the end."

"Ah."

"I guess in terms of powers, you got them because you were worried they would be all you have when you finally go to rescue your dad, right?" asked Meggie.

"If he's actually captured, yeah."

"Right, I mean assuming he is. That's what you've always thought, right?"

"Yes."

"And you wanted powers mainly to... what was it again? Something about taking out large numbers of foes right?"

Susan shook her head. "I'm more convinced than ever that my getting powers is what The Darkness wanted, not me. It wanted a better chance to get me under control, and it used the orb I bonded with to do it. I'm not giving up using them or anything," she hastened to add, "they're super useful. But my initial reasons may not have been what I told myself they were. Just turning stuff off with *metapower* when I fight someone one on one has lots of applications, and there are some... other uses for it I discovered recently. So I'm glad I got them and everything, plus having energy regeneration and flight and other actual *superpowers* without penalty- what was the question again?"

"The point is, you don't need anything flashy here. You're up against real killers, and powerful ones at that. Just get in there and take them down as quickly as you can. That's what will determine what mode you go in."

"Before you completely decide," cut in Ifruita, "I think there is a way I could be a distraction."

"That's great! How?"

"If you- That is I need you to- If you can- I can't tell you."

"That's not really a big help."

"My master has commanded I not give you any indication of what I can do."

Susan looked puzzled. "I know what you can do, roughly. Meggie told me about you once I learned your name."

"Then you know what you have to do if you want me to not kill anyone."

Both girls looked at each other. "Do you know what she's talking about?"

"Nope, no clue," answered Meggie. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"So you don't know. How can I tell you? We need this to work! My master says to help you, but not to help you. A thousand curses on those that made me!"

"Look, just think for a second, we're not going anywhere."

"Attack me! That's it! He has said nothing about your attacking me."

Susan seemed confused. "You want me to attack you? That seems counter productive."

"Use whatever technique you would use on the soldiers and I will use it in your place. Thus I will keep them busy and you may attack the other two."

"What? You can't, like, absorb the technique or something, can you?"

"I cannot reveal that."

"Okay, I guess I'm just going to have to take your word for it. It's non-lethal anyway, but will you be okay? I hate to hit you with something right before we go to attack that base. Can I heal you afterwards, will that work on you?"

"Perhaps, but don't underestimate my sturdiness. Come, take us back to the castle, there should be a place nearby you can use."

"Very well."

So a somewhat bemused Susan changed back to *powers mode* and got the two girls back to the castle, where high in the air Susan threw a *knockout* technique at her. She landed.

"Is that all it is? Certainly a curious sensation, but achievable. I can now support you as you wish."

"Really? That's all it took? And you're really okay?"

She rolled her shoulders. "I am undamaged."

"Well!" *So, is she some sort of power thief like that Sangray fellow? But she doesn't have the ability to use the powers around her, like he did, she has to experience them for herself? Of course she's a created construct so her DTR could in theory be pretty high. "Wait a second- you're Mega Man!"*

"Excuse me?"

"Mega Man defeats an opponent and takes his weapon for himself. You're the same way. Only you don't have to defeat someone, just experience their technique." *Wonder if I could meet him? I suppose if I know his story, he must exist someplace, right? And his world might be under attack too, if someone hasn't already cleared it. Huh. I'm so going 'shopping' once I find Luna.*

"I can not confirm this."

"I know." *But I bet I'm right. So a greater limitation because while Sangray could use my magic when I was around, if I left he would lose it. She gets hit by something and remembers it forever. Oh crap. "You stepped through my Teleportal just then, didn't you?"*

Ifruita gave that small smile of hers, the one Susan figured was all she could manage. "Yes, I've worked out how that works as well. Now do you fully understand why they called me a demon goddess on my world?"

"I'm starting to. So do you have to just see it or- you can't tell me. I know."

"I can tell you I have no idea how you turned into a bug. I can't do that. Yet."

"Ah. Well, that's something, anyway." *So is this some fanfic version of her, that can do this, or did Meggie just not look her up carefully enough? You think an ability like that a website would mention!*

"Shall we go?"

"Let me get ready first." Susan looked around for a small stone, and went back into *magic mode* when she found it. That served as her vehicle for the *spell symbol/Avatar of War* combo she cast at the highest Mars rating possible. Making a *spirit manipulation* check of twenty three, she put a total of thirty two energy into *Avatar* and activated it by dropping the stone again. She now rolled 9d10 when she hit something, and did an additional 4d10 + 2d12 fire damage. *I don't care how tough you are, that's going to hurt. Sadly, I'm still a 'warrior of unfortunate proportion' compared to Raj. Not using my sword, my delay in actually punching them is going to be a two, with my orb active. Not bad, but he'll be faster, possibly much faster. It'll be even with Vega, at least I hope. I can put energy into COOrdination rather than STRength at this point, I still have fifty though again he could have that or more. I know Raj does. Honestly rolling all ones on nine d10s would nearly kill me, if someone like me hit me! Plus the fire damage? They can't be that much tougher, right? Like Meggie said, there's no stealing DTR. I just have to hit. Once. And hope that guy that held back Doomsday doesn't hit me once while I'm trying.*

Susan noticed Ifruita looking up at her with a bit of awe. "I don't suppose you could cast than on me before our battle, could you?"

"I would, but the fact is you are still technically my enemy. I go to kill your 'master' and he's sure to order you to fight me. I've already given you some techniques by accident, I don't need this used against me too. I don't know how you would, it's magic, but I can't take any chances. Come over to my side, and you can have anything I can put on you to learn."

"I understand your argument. Shall we go, are you prepared?"

"Just one other spell. *Augment Skill: Martial Arts.*" With that, Susan activated her *velocity* orb and nodded to her temporary companion. "I'll allow you the honors of opening the gateway. Put it opposite the building we saw them training near. You take to the sky and start the distraction in the form of your newly learned sleepy naptime ouchy ray of nonpermanent harm. As you do, I'll be kool-aid manning myself through the wall, OH YEAH, hoping to take Vega from behind before his partner can join the- and you're looking at me like that again?"

Ifruita was staring at her as though she had sprouted tentacles. "You are the strangest individual I have ever met," she finally managed. "Though I must inform you that after having been created only for war, sent to destroy city after city, put into status for perhaps thousands of years, then brought here and forced to serve Capricorn- I have not met many people."

"Thanks? I think?"

"Do I dare ask what a 'cool aid' man is?"

“Probably best not.”

“Then let us go.”

She waved a hand and a *teleportal* appeared before them, and both girls went through.

Remember Susan, you're stepping through to kill these men. There's no one else here to do it, and they probably won't be obliging and blow themselves up. Take them down hard and fast, take a few hits if you have to in order to get Vega close. You have the health and the armor now, you can take them.

“Good luck,” Ifruita said simply, and took to the sky. Susan waited a moment until she heard the sounds of gunfire and energy blasts, and looked ahead. She figured that must be the place, so she changed and smashed her way through it with seventy two damage.

Now, I'd like to remind you about a minor weakness Susan has, that of *no sense of direction*. It doesn't come up very often, usually because she has Sparkle to show her the way to things, or she has no destination in mind, or others around who know the way. This time, none of those things are true, and it is going to come into play in a big way. This is going to make up for all the times it was perhaps not played up enough.

The man sitting in the office chair, at his desk, in his office, gave a shriek of surprise as Susan came tearing through the wall. She was intending to simply barrel through the building and come out the other side, but there seemed to be something she had overlooked. Susan looked around. It was an office. A rather small office.

Oh great. I suppose I shouldn't have expected it to just be an empty shell.

She turned her head as the man changed his unmanly interjection of terror into a kiai shout, leaping from his chair and doing six damage to his hand trying to slug her in the side. It then changed into another unmanly interjection- “Ow!”

“You got what you deserved. Stay out of the way!” Susan cautioned him, throwing his door open and bending down to squeeze herself through it. She found herself in a hallway and looked both ways, trying to figure out which way she should go now. “This way! Awww yeah!”

That's when she got hit in the back with the chair.

“Seriously dude? We're gonna do this thing?” she asked, turning around. “I've got bigger fish to fry, leave me alone!” She held up a hand, and curling it into a fist turned it into a “weapon” for the purposes of the spell and allowed it to harmlessly burst into flames.

He got a frozen with fear expression on his face and gently closed the door behind her. “Yeah, that's what I *thought*. You better run.”

Susan proceeded down the hall, where doors were hastily shut after the occupants saw what was roaming the halls. (She had to stoop down to totally fit in some cases.)

Where's the other side of this place? I've got to get back out there!

Sadly, she immediately got lost and instead of tearing a straight line through the place ended up taking several turns and bashing her way out the side of the building, a ninety degree turn from where she wanted to be. By this time the alarm had been raised and those with the guns arrived (typically the MP on base are armed, but no one else) and started shooting at her.

She ignored them as well, bullets unable to piece her DTR 10 armor with a 33 AR. (They would have to get a 42 roll to beat her LUCK and that number to get past her armor and hit her)

She then again took off in the wrong direction, as she didn't see Ifruita in the sky anywhere, and started a litany to herself punctuated by various utterances of frustration.

Someone tried driving a jeep into her, but she just smashed down on the hood with both fists and drove it into the ground with a crash. Of course now she was really lost, and decided to put “*Flight!*” on herself as obviously the element of surprise had been lost. She took to the sky, scanning for Ifruita, and cresting a building saw a bunch of unconscious people over there, while Vega was- *Oh no!*

She sped towards them, and landed dramatically behind him.

"Let her go, Vega," she commanded, fists on fire again. He casually turned and tossed the unmoving form of Ifruitita aside.

"Ah, Susan, isn't-"

She didn't wait for him to finish his sentence, instead choosing to *spirit step* over to him and hope she rolled well enough it didn't take any time. She got a twenty five on her check, enough to wipe out the delay, and she took a swing at him. She got a seventeen to hit, but what she hit was empty air, and he was now floating a few meters from her.

"Oh ho, I might actually have a challenge here! No one has ever come that close to striking me. I even felt the heat of those flames."

Perhaps these will find their mark. "Elemental Sniper: (Fire)!" He tried to dodge, but Susan had cast three of them quite close to him, and as luck would have it, he took eight damage to the head (the *no unusual effect*), two to the body, and one to the left leg.

He snarled, throwing his now burning hat to the ground. "So you have no honor? Pity." He charged her, forearms glowing with an intense purple flame. Susan didn't bother dodging, hoping to get him in close and on her action smash his face in. She didn't count on his purple flames ignoring her armor and actually striking her even as his fist bounced off her armor. She staggered back, having taken a little damage.

She now retaliated, but he was obviously far better at *close combat* than she was, and saw it coming. He again tried to do his vanishing trick and she got one from maximum to hit him.

Again she hit empty air.

"I might have faced you as martial artist, had you not come to me looking like that, and even worse, striking me with your magic like a coward. So now I fight you as a user of Psycho Power! You cannot win."

He thrust his open palm forward and there was an explosion of purple energy that Susan leapt away from, knowing now that it could hurt her. Ties go to the defender, and she managed to stay out of the area.

Fine, if that's how it's going to be. But I'm certain I hit him in the head before, he can't take much more damage there, right? This time she didn't shout the words, as she figured that would be a clear sign she was casting again and just gestured. She made a single called shot to the head with *Elemental Sniper* and got two more than she needed, doing an additional one damage to him.

"I hardly felt that, are you getting tired already?" He vanished again, making Susan need to track him with *Spirit Sense* though she might as well not have bothered, as he struck out at her from behind. She whirled, trying to parry the move. Naturally she completely missed, and took another damage to the body.

Great, now I'm at a penalty.

He went to hit her again, further reenforcing his status as the boss of Street Fighter II as she was having a hard time keeping up him as she couldn't hit him with anything but absurd *Mars* magic, which took a lot more *delay* than martial arts did.

So as he struck she just didn't bother dodging at all, and allowed him to hit her for another damage to the body. *Go on, knock yourself out, you'll have to hit me twice more for another penalty.* He went to hit again (*oh my goodness this guy is fast!*) but wary of a trick he simply raised his arms as Susan cast *Elemental Sniper* at him again. Psycho Power appeared out of the ground, somewhat shielding him and damaging Susan at the same time. The flames interacted with each other but Susan still hit, this time doing a much more respectable damage to his jaw, which caused him to go down.

Finally. Ifruitita!

Susan ran to check on her, and she was crawling towards her staff that had fallen nearby.

"Are you okay? I can try healing you!"

Ifruitita's face was cold. "Traitor," she spat. "You left me to face him alone. Why didn't you let him finish the job? Wanted me to suffer at your hands in the end, when I was weak?"

"What? No! I just... I got lost trying to get back out here! You have to believe me!"

"I believe you're just as my master said. I can't believe I fell for your trick."

“There was no trick, honestly! If I wanted you dead right now, don’t you think I would attack you? I’m offering to heal you!”

“A likely story. Allow me my staff that I might die with dignity.”

“I’ll get it for you, come on, let me help you up at least.” She offered a hand, and Ifruita took a moment but finally took it. Susan hauled her up. “Can you stand? I’ll get your staff, just wait here.”

Susan steadied her and zipped over to the staff, then back, handing it to her companion. “Here, see? I really didn’t betray you, how can I convince you?”

“You can’t,” she said simply, and fell through a *teleportal* she created at her feet.

“No! Come back!”

“So, you face me alone,” said a new voice, rich and full in ways Susan never considered a voice capable of being. “And I see you’ve bested Vega here.”

Susan turned, and there was Raj standing there, looking the situation over calmly.

“You took your time,” Vega complained.

“I was watching to see what she would do. Nothing wrong with that.”

“You could have helped.”

“Perhaps. You’re alive, aren’t you? Being humiliated in this way may convince you to take a few endowments as I suggested before. Some stamina at least.”

“I will get by with my own strength!”

“And yet you lie there, defeated by another.” He turned to look at Susan. “You will not find me so easy to best.” *I bet. But you don’t have purple flames, either.* “In fact, why don’t you just give up? There’s really no need for us to fight.” The request sounded reasonable. Quite reasonable. So reasonable, in fact, Susan nearly had to make a RES check against his PERSONality to not simply give up then and there. But she didn’t, because *avatar of war* protected her from “morale effects” which this certainly was.

But then again, this screamed of “opportunity.”

“You make a good point.” Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a twenty four.

“Naturally! Come, join my side and I will see how best to use your powers.”

“Whatever you want.” She took a step forward and both wordlessly and without gestures cast *Hypnotic Field* with thirty three extra energy. That resulted, after penalties, in a roll of thirty six and both men stared at the pretty colors.

She was left with six energy and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Or not. Look, obviously neither of you is The Darkness because I got that off. Weird. That means it’s someone from where I came from, not a pleasant thought. Anyway... I’m going to need some energy back, and as you’re radiating energy like I’ve never seen, you’re nominated.” Susan began *energy draining* him, talking as she did so. “I’m really sorry about this. I mean, there you both were, minding your own business on your worlds, and suddenly you get brought here against your will. I don’t really know your stories, or what kind of people you really are, but I do know you can’t be allowed to remain here. I mean you could be The Darkness, and just chose not to negate my spell just then to trick me into thinking you weren’t so I would leave. And now I have to kill you. I don’t want to, but it seems I have no choice. You spoke of honor before, Vega, and this... this will not be honorable. I will cut you both down where you stand as you are helpless, because honestly I see no other way to beat Raj here. His stealing of stats makes him extremely dangerous, but luckily it didn’t make him any *smarter*. And that’s what you need to throw off this spell, a high REASON. So was it cheap? Yes. Am I pleased it’s come to this? No. If I could send you back to your realities, would I? Sure. But I can’t. And as I have enough energy and need to get after Ifruita to try and explain things, I’ll end it here.”

Come on Susan, don’t chicken out now.

She cast *Shrink* on Raj, making him a minus five or about the size of a cockroach.

She knelt before him. “I am so sorry about this.”

She brought her fists together and smashed them down on him, doing 675/900 damage to the head and 873/1200 damage to the body. (After playing *card 32, Damage Add* to get 50% more.) Also relevant was the 819/1200 damage to his right leg, and 702/1200 damage to his left leg. This all broke him out of the spell, and while badly wounded, he was still lucid enough to try and get away. His speed normally would have been phenomenal, but now it was measured in cm rather than m because he was so small, and further degraded because of his wound penalties. (one for every hundred damage he took.) So while he "raced" away from Susan, even moving as slowly as she was from his perspective (he had two endowments of metabolism) she was able to keep up and try to hit him again.

Sadly she couldn't roll a two hundred so he deftly avoided the attack and kept running. Susan rolled her eyes, dropped *Augment Skill* so she was just maintaining the first *pattern* and *shrink*, then went about casting it again, using his own energy against him. Again he stopped in his tracks.

"Okay, this one I'm not sorry about," she remarked, taking aim and doing a called shot for damage. Again her fists came down, and this time she did enough to raise his head damage to 1293 which killed him. She felt his immense *spirit energy* vanish, and shook her head sadly. "I guess that was a lie. Sorry."

She trudged back to where Vega was still lying, stole some of his energy, apologized once again to him, and bashed his head in as well as that was the most damaged part of him. With him dead she dropped her spells and started casting something new.

Now to get after Ifruita. This day sucks! But I knew it was coming. "Teleportal!"

Susan of course had to open the hole in space some distance from the castle, but her speed was up from her extra STrength and she didn't have that far to go. She saw Ifruita and the demon standing in front of the gate, apparently arguing about something. She zipped over to them, activating her *barrier* item as she did so she didn't get taken over by whatever force the demon seemed to exude.

"Destroy that traitor!" Ifruita said angrily as she approached.

The demon gave a start. "Why, gladly! After we finish our business here, of course."

"Look, if I could just explain-"

"Explain? You said you would be right there. That I would simply be the distraction and you would be the main fighter. But no, I suddenly find myself being slammed out of the sky by Vega who I didn't even think could reach me."

"I know, I feel awful about it, but if you'd stay still for two seconds I could probably heal you!"

"How can I trust you?"

"Trust me? I'll let you wound me and then show you-"

"Ladies," purred the demon, "this is all very interesting. But I need you to wait your turn. I've been waiting for this one to be like this a long time, and I'm not letting her get back to her master to be 'wound' again. Or seek medical treatment within, if she can even be healed here."

Susan was confused, and looked him over uncomprehendingly. "Wait, what? I thought you were all on the same side?"

The demon laughed. "With you returned, I take it the traitors are dead?"

"Yeah, but... shoot, I forgot to get the other reader out of the prison. Well, it can wait I guess."

"Splendid, yes that's excellent news. Now, what happens when I take her down, and kill her so called 'master?'"

"I don't know, what?"

"I'm the only one left! Don't you see, I'll have won. This world will be mine! After all, what force could stop me?"

"What about the Borg?"

"Pah! An annoyance. They will be easily killed."

"You realize *I'm* going to stop you."

“Oh, do you have another sword you’d like me to break? I can wait while you get it out. Please! I’ll just end the life of this one here-” He casually swung the blade in his hand at Ifruita.

“*Transposition!*” Susan cast, getting a twenty five, and as Ifruita had a fairly low RESolve (she was built to just follow orders, after all) the two switched positions. “Think again.”

“Well, the order makes no difference to me,” the demon said, shrugging and drawing the blade back. It went for the second sword instead, making a *Quick Draw* check and got it out instantly, before she could cast *retrieval* on it as she had planned.

The blade was a dull metal, and as it cleared the sheath the area around the demon began to actually grow darker. A sort of mental pressure descended on Susan, gnawing away at her INSight of all things. Her *barrier* and *avatar* protections struggled to provide some protections, and she went down on one knee in abject despair. Energy crackled along the barrier, and it didn’t go down, but Susan couldn’t see that it was doing much either.

It wasn’t the demon. It was the sword. If I had known...

“Yes!” crowed the demon, “that is truly where you belong. I will show my true master that I alone was able to defeat you, and be richly rewarded as promised. Know true despair!”

It lifted the sword high, and through her connection to her *character sheet*, she knew her INSight was now a zero. And she knew there was nothing she could do about it, this sword, somehow, impossibly, was attacking her on a level she couldn’t have anticipated, much less raised a defense against. She crumpled to the ground, noting in passing that even Ifruita wasn’t immune, and was also falling.

She couldn’t bring herself to care.

About anything.

“And now for the finishing stoke,” announced the demon, popping her meager *barrier* with one sword or another. Susan didn’t care enough to keep track of them at this point. The blade came down, touching the least armored point on her body, the neck, where she needed flexibility. She couldn’t bring herself to care to wonder if that had the same AR and DC as the metallic parts of her, despite that because it was magic, and the sword was drawn back for a mighty strike. “Farewell!” the demon called, grinning madly.

Susan closed her eyes, unable to summon even the slightest remorse about her coming death. The fact that Ifruita probably still thought she had been betrayed. The fact that Luna would never get home. Her mother would wonder for years how she had lost both the man she loved, and the daughter that had been his most precious gift to her-

“Are you going to lay there all day?” asked a familiar voice.

She opened her eyes and then blinked, something had happened. The demon was just standing there, and everything had gone extremely quiet. Turning her head she looked to see who had spoken, and was shocked to see herself standing there!

“What?”

“Should have guessed it would be Soulcutter that brought you down,” she said, walking over to Susan. “It was forged by the god Vulcan himself, you know. Their power is pretty much absolute.” She ran a finger down the blade. “It even slightly impresses me. Very slightly.”

“What’s going on? Who are you?”

“Why Susan, I’m hurt! Don’t you recognize me?” The figure turned, and Susan looked into her own eyes, if her eyes were as black as midnight.

“The Darkness!”

“That’s correct. Come, sit down, I’ll pour some tea.” Darkness gestured, and Susan looked over to see a small table set up a few paces away, with a fancy teapot and two cups sitting on a tray next to some cookies. “Sugar?” Darkness sat down and poured, then held up a cube.

“Bu... Bu... wha?” Susan frantically looked between the demon and Darkness, still not understanding how this was possible.

The Darkness laughed, but not a mocking laugh, a genuine one, full of warmth. “Come, sit down and I’ll explain. Come on, it’ll get cold!”

Susan hauled herself up, realizing she wasn't armored anymore, and in a daze stumbled over to the seat. She stared at the cup of tea as if she had never seen anything like it before.

"Sugar?" Darkness repeated, proffering the cube.

"Uh, sure."

"Fine." She plunked it in and gave it a stir, then set the cup in front of Susan. "It's a nice day for it, don't you think?"

"What. Is going. ON?" she demanded.

"Oh very well, if you won't be denied. You know that *soulscape* you often see when you use those *pluto* spells of yours to go inside someone?"

"Yeah?"

"This is a bit of yours. I'll brought you here so we could have a little chat about your future." She sipped some tea.

"I don't think I have much of a future," she indicated the demon.

"Pah, you could take him. With my help, anyway."

It's a good thing she hadn't been drinking the tea, she would have spat it all over. "You? Want to help *me*? You want me *dead*! You should be celebrating."

Darkness 'tisked' and shook her head. "I've only wanted you dead a little bit. No Susan, what I want far more is your help. I want you to join me."

"Never."

"Oh, you say that now, but one thing at a time. The more worlds you've traveled, the more things I've thrown at you and found you to handle, what an asset you would make. Haven't I said this before to you? I think I have."

"So this is some kind of recruitment?"

"It's a last chance, a way to not have your story end here and now."

It got me backed into a corner, it thinks I'll probably just cave- "Where have you been, by the way? If you're here now you've obviously been here the whole time."

"True. But I wanted to give nothing up, even by accident. Plus, separating you from Sparkle isolated you a bit, and I wanted you a little more isolated than even that. I may be seen by you as something to be ignored, but I'm still a constant presence in your mind. Something... familiar."

"You must have been bursting a blood vessel, all the times you couldn't make some snarky comment."

"It's been a trial, I admit. But that's all over now. I had hoped one of the 'adversaries' I chose for you would get you this far, and here we are."

"Here we are. What do you want?"

"Blunt, as always." She set her tea down and rested her chin on her hands. "As a simple overview, I want to make you a very special warlock."

"You mean giving me those powers you gave the warlocks back where that space creature was?"

"Ah, nothing so crude as all that. This would be tailored to you, specifically. Are you sure you don't want your tea? We don't have to get right down to business you know."

"Let's just say the situation seems rather urgent from where I'm sitting." She pointed to the demon again.

"Suit yourself. Let's start with what I'm offering you, shall I?" She lifted the tea tray and got a piece of paper out from under it. "Now, you'll be infused, so to speak, with some of my power so the first benefit will be immunity to aging."

"That's not much help when I'm about to be skewered."

"I mention it only in passing. You'll be able to look for Luna for hundreds of years and not age a day, so just keep it in mind. Next, and most importantly, I'll unlock a bit of your potential." She reached across the table and touched the orb under Susan's shirt, and she tried not to recoil from that touch. But she was curious what she meant. "Let me explain. Right now you can only have magic or powers, right?"

"Right."

“Well, with my help, you can have both at the same time. I’ll maintain the opposite ‘mode’ so, in this case for example, you can become immune to *spirit* nature and fight off the influence of Soulcutter.”

“That... seems extremely pertinent.”

“And why I mention it first. Well, second, anyway. You’ll be able to choose on the fly, so to speak, so if you need to breathe underwater suddenly or need a certain spell in powers mode, just ask me and it’s yours.”

“What stops me from taking all powers, all the time?”

“I’ll get to that, for now we’re just talking about the benefits.”

Meaning there’s a tremendous downside to all this.

“Warlock, wait a second, there’s some kind of calling at the end of all this, isn’t there?”

“The comparison is not unwarranted. Can I get through the list here?”

“Go ahead! You’ve obviously put some effort into it.”

“And I thank you for noticing, Susan! Next, and this one I’m particularly proud of, I’ll allow you to draw energy from me, which you can spend past your normal RESolve and skills limit.”

“How much energy?”

“Consider my reserves to be infinite, from your perspective. Or did you mean how much at once? As much as you wanted, naturally! You want a hundred extra STrength for a second? It’s yours! That’s not the clever bit. The clever bit is, this infusion will allow you to spend my energy, not your own but my energy- on *all* stats.”

She paused to let that sink it.

“So, I could actually send energy on LUCk, or INSight?”

“Or CONstitution, yes! Neat huh?”

“I guess. What else?”

“Ah, see, now you’re getting the hang of this, aren’t you? Two other somewhat minor things. First, there’s a list of abilities you can ‘buy’ from me with XP. Nothing you couldn’t do temporarily with magic or powers of course, but if you found yourself taking a certain power all the time and wanted to spend XP to have it always active instead of taking points, there’s a chance I can make that happen. I can let you look the list over now, if you want.”

“Save it,” she said, glancing over at the demon. “I wouldn’t have enough XP until I got back to the *hub* anyway.”

“Fair enough. Lastly I can instantly allow you to learn spells, no book required. I’ll even let you use chaos magic, like that fellow, what was his name?” She started snapping her fingers. “It started with a ‘Q’ right? No, he was a Draconequus... Discord! That’s the one. Like he was going to do. I can’t protect you from what it does to reality, and you’ll have to learn it like any other planet, but you can look over those spells too at some point.”

“That all sounds pretty good, I guess. I mean I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Of course you do! You could die, that’s a choice. But don’t worry, as with all things I’ve tried to make this as fair as possible.”

“I doubt it.”

“But I assure you, it’s true. Let me be blunt for a moment. You believe my ascension, after taking energy from many worlds, benefits me alone. This is far from the truth, Susan. We are one, you and I, I’ve said that countless time to you. And what’s that phrase? A rising tide lifts all boats?”

“Wait, I would ascend when you do?”

She nodded gravely. “I couldn’t prevent it. You and all others I’ve attached myself to in this way. Think of it Susan, surpassing all human limits in an instant. Becoming a being of energy and power, not unlike what I am now. Having the secrets of the universe open to you, as you look down upon these now ‘lower’ dimensions and marvel at how simple they all are. You’ll wonder how you ever lived in them, honestly. Meanwhile, I become something even more grand than I am now. Consider that, when you change into worlds intending to spoil my plans for them.”

“You really are laying it all out, aren’t you? Trying to get me over to your side?”

“Indeed. Now if this package I’m offering was totally out of proportion you would just reject it out of hand and see your ‘sacrifice’ as a noble one. But keep it fair, as I have, and you’ll weigh the possibilities. You might even... say yes.”

“This is a lot to take in. But I’m stuck here, so you might as well get to the negatives.”

“Yes, what do I get out of it? As you said, there is a ‘calling’ at the end. And just like before, using these powers will get you a number of points, just like the warlocks got. I can’t be as generous with you, allowing you thousands of points like I gave them, but I’m not trying to build an army with you.”

“How many?”

“Well, you can have as many as you want. But after you gain any, at the end of the *scene* you have to make a RESolve check, difficulty five plus one tenth of the pool.”

She took a deep breath. “And if I fail?”

“I get to take you over,” she replied with a smile.

“Figured. How many do I get for each thing?”

“Let’s see here, it’s actually quite straightforward. The pool grows by the point cost of the power if you’re in magic mode and take a power. By the grade of spell or technique I maintain for you. Or the energy you use from me doing various things.”

“No wonder you’ll ‘modify’ me to spend energy on all stats. You want me to use this power!”

“Of course I do. Now, here’s a slight clarification. Most of this is per scene. Let’s say you’re in powers mode and use one of your own grade two spells for some reason. That’s two points. And say you use it twice, and put none of my energy into it. It’s still a total of two points. You asked earlier what keeps you from just taking the powers and keeping them, so you just pay once?” She nodded. “They go away at the end of the scene too.”

“To keep me paying, I get it. To simplify, it’s just per ‘cheat’ when I break the rules I now operate under, and I have to keep ‘cheating’ every time it comes up.”

“That’s a good way to think about it. Now, there is a situation where it would be every time- when you get a spell from me. Every time you cast one of those you get points equal to the grade.”

“Can I learn the spell on my own later, and replace ‘your’ version? Basically getting it for the moment, then be able to use it without points?”

“Sure. But you would have to spend the XP on it, effectively, twice. You wouldn’t get back that XP you gave me to learn it. I’m just saving you looking it up, not paying for it. Plus there may be spells I can offer you don’t have in the book, like that chaos stuff I mentioned.”

“I get it. And any straight up powers I buy from you, those don’t give me points?”

“Nope! They will give you something else, if you can’t afford them at the moment...”

“What?”

Darkness tapped the side of its head. “Sadly, you have to carry some mark that I’ve done this to you. That’s the eyes, currently.”

“I’m going to look like that when you’re done?” she protested.

“Can’t be avoided. Sorry.”

“You don’t sound it.”

“Maybe I haven’t had much practice. Point is, let’s say you want the ability to *possess* people. Who knows why! It’s four points, or 40 XP. But you only have thirty. Not a problem! I can ‘loan’ you the extra 10, but more of you would then be shrouded by darkness until you paid me back. And I can only ‘loan’ you another 20 XP worth.”

“Let’s hope it never comes to that.”

“Whatever. So, what do you think? Take it or leave it, no negation.”

“It doesn’t seem immediately horrible,” Susan allowed.

“Naturally enough not, like I said earlier! I want you to give yourself to me a little piece at a time, fully knowing what each life saved, each world saved, means.”

“These points, do they ever go down? I mean if you’re not allowing me a one hundredth or one thousandth...”

Now Darkness looked a bit bummed out. “They do, curse my luck. I’m just not as compatible with you as I would like. The energy will naturally dissipate at about a point a day.”

“Oh!”

"That you don't get any points."

"Ah. Still..."

"Yes. There's an out."

One tenth, eh? With my 10 RESolve... "Can I put energy into the check?"

"Hahahahah. No. Mine or yours. It's spiritual only."

"I figured I would ask." *Okay, my minimum result is a twelve. Take five off so we're down to seven. No, four off, ties go to the defender. So eight. That mean I would have to accumulate eighty points to be in danger of a minimum roll taking me out.* "You have all this in writing?"

"Right here."

Susan looked it over, and there it was. *That eye thing though, that's going to be the hardest thing to deal with.* "Why do all this?"

"Easy! I realize you won't just give up and let me take you over, or work *with* me any other way than this. This way I at least get a chance to get you piece by piece."

"You're hoping to get me using your energy all the time, maybe take some neat spells in a moment of need and then get used to casting them. That sort of thing."

"It's crossed my mind."

So it's this or die, basically. She looked over to the demon again. *Will Silverstreak even trust me, if I show up looking like that? She looked back at "herself." Will Sparkle? Will Luna!? But it put me in a tight spot, that's for sure. I can't get out of that strike any other way. That blade just did me in. How did something like that even get made, on any world?* "It seems you've left me no choice. Even if she never wants to see me again, I made Luna a promise she doesn't even know. I'm getting her home. If this is what it takes..."

"Indeed."

"One other thing- you're still around here someplace, aren't you?"

"Of course! The part of me that directed all this is here. Directing all this."

"You'll still fight me?"

"You'll still oppose me? I mean if you don't mind this reality going poof, you can leave. I'll lift the restriction on dimensional travel and you can be on your way."

She sighed. "Then I must oppose you."

She shrugged. "It'll be a nice chance to use some of the new powers I've allowed you. Accumulate some points! Plenty of headroom at the moment, right?" She lowered her voice. "You're going to *love* who it is when you find out. I can't wait to see your face."

"It's her, isn't it?"

"Her? Her who?" She was the picture of innocence.

"Ifurita?"

"No hints! Tee hee!" She did a cute little covering the corner of her mouth as she "tee hee-d"

My goodness do I really look like that? "Fine. What do I have to do?"

"As you've agreed, it's already done! We just have to keep you alive for the next combat round or two until you beat the crap out of that demon."

"How do I... do all this?"

"Just want it, and accept the 'points.' For now take the power *immunity* and make it against *soul*. That'll keep the sword off you. Not being stabbed, just the power it radiates. If you want any other powers, here's a list of them for your convenience." She pulled a list out of nowhere.

"I want *armor!*" she decided, looking at the top of the list.

"You want to armor your armor? Uh, okay?"

"Just kidding. Give me a second." She looked the list over. "I am slightly wounded, and up against a demon. I'll take the lowest level of *Regeneration* just in case."

"As you wish. Now, if you'd like to get back into position, we can get your next defensive roll set up and maybe keep you breathing another day!" The table vanished as Darkness walked Susan over to where she had been, and coached her on her next move. "The sword is going to go like this, so you need to take this hand and strike like this, knocking it away from yourself. Don't try to grab it, the metal was forged by a god as I mentioned. It will get through your armor, make no mistake."

“Fine. Any suggestions on actually beating the thing?”

“Him? Oh, he’s tough but just punch him a few times, it’ll be fine.”

“Riiight. Well, can’t say it’s been a pleasure as apparently this entire reality was used to set me up to become a warlock, by nearly killing me.”

“It was for me. Now, I’ll give you a count of three and you’re back. Defend on three, got it?”

“Defend on three. Got it.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Susan made her unarmed *parry* roll, and the demon was stunned as the blade deflected off her open hand instead of slashing her throat open as he intended. It took a step back.

“You have a problem,” she announced.

There Will Always Be Need

When: No time has passed

Where: Outside Capricorn's castle

"Impossible!" protested the demon, taking a step back in horror as Susan looked up at it.

"I find most things are, until you do them," Susan assured him, making her *Martial Arts* check to stand up. She exactly hit the difficulty, and went into a low stance in front of the demon. "Let's see how tough you actually are."

"I don't know how you're fighting off the influence of Soulcutter but I am the most powerful demon in my world. A mere human cannot best me. Come to your doom then!"

Word of advice?

Oh great, you're back talking to me.

It is pretty great, isn't it? Anyway, don't touch Soulcutter. The demon is protected from the sword's power because of the other one he's holding. Get that one away from him and this fight is over.

You really are being helpful?

Hey, I got what I wanted out of this reality. Sure, it has some surprises left which I'd like you to get to, but this demon has served its purpose. It can be taken out now, I hardly care.

Then I guess we'll try something a bit different. Susan went to attack the demon, but not to damage it. She instead made a *called shot* to the hand holding *Shieldbreaker*, intending a disarm. Not being under *Augment Skill* anymore she put energy into *COOrdination* but she may as well not have bothered. The sword seemed to come at her, quite beyond the demon's control.

She got a nineteen anyway, even accounting for penalties, and made opposed *STRength* checks with the demon. "Yoink!" she chirped, ripping the sword out of his hand.

He started to scream in frustration but as predicted, he immediately dropped to the ground, beyond caring about anything any more.

"Huh. I guess you were right, that was easy."

You're welcome. Just poke him with it and get on with this. You've still got a lot of work to do today. Chop chop!

Susan, wary of some kind of *death burst* ability such as the half-demon creatures on the world of warlocks stood as far away from the demon as she could and gave it a poke with the sword. *This will never-* It vanished, Soulcutter clattering to the ground. *I stand corrected.*

It considers demons to be weapons, and you saw what it did to your sword when the two came into contact.

Susan stared at the blade in surprise. *This thing just nullifies any weapon instantly?*

Pretty much. Spell, bomb, sword, you name it.

Sweet! Oh no, Ifruita! She reached for Soulcutter, wondering what she was going to do with it, but then mentally smacked herself in the forehead. *What did The Darkness just say, Susan? I'll just smash it with this!*

Might want to wait a second.

What? Why?

Go take care of the Borg, and Capricorn, first. Right now they can't fight back, and you don't want to fight Ifruita, right? At the moment he can't order her to attack you.

I suppose you have a point. Great, more killing, my favorite. I don't suppose as a special favor to me you could give me a little hint as to who you're in at the moment? So I don't have to kill this guy if he's not you?

I've already given you tons of hints. Maybe not recently, but honestly, it's your own fault you haven't figured it out yet. Though, I suppose if you wanted to trade, say thirty points for the person?

Thirty? That's extortion, that is!

My prices are pretty fair, actually.

Forget this. Can I at least move it away from her?

Sure. Wouldn't recommend touching it though. Using two swords of power at once, even for a person like you, can have some strange aftereffects. And you've got so much magic and power and whatnot going on... remember getting zapped by Celestia's anti-shape-shift spell?

Point taken.

Susan simply cast "Telekinesis" a spell she felt didn't see nearly enough use, and marched into the castle. Floating the blade alongside her there was no resistance, and she was able to narrow down the location of Capricorn with *spirit sense*. He too was zoned out, unable to even move a muscle as she approached him.

She looked sadly down at him. I really just have to off this guy, huh?

Afraid so. He was a minor player in all this, even on his own world. Sure, he controlled that Shadow thing... which totally isn't me by the way... but others still had more political power than he did. He was a flunky at best.

He's still alive!

As are countless other versions of him, if you think about it.

That's still no excuse.

Just trying to help. You can just prick him with Soulcutter, if you don't want to actually slash him in two. You think being near it is bad, a wound from it is ten times worse. Just drawing it in battle doesn't do the person drawing it any favors.

He's not going to suffer, if is?

He's beyond all suffering at this point. He couldn't bring himself to care if he wanted to.

"Look, I know it doesn't mean anything, but I'm sorry about this," Susan apologized to him. "I really hope this isn't too horrible." With another *Mercury* check she pricked him with the blade, and watched in mute horror as he seemed to wither and actually die of old age in seconds. *I see what you mean about nasty. Now for the Borg, right?*

Yup. Should be a room full of technology you can smash. Any true Borg will die when their bodies reject their implants. Anyone taken here will probably live, as they won't have as many cybernetic replacements.

Oh, I get to kill a bunch of people all at once. That's super helpful, thanks!

But she went to look, and easily smashed up the regeneration beds and other equipment she found in the lower levels of the castle.

Yeah, that should do it.

Wonderful, death by proxy. Now what?

Way I see it, rescue her father from prison, free the other Silvertongue, oh, and kill the guys handling the blood metal for Raj.

What?

They came from off world, can you risk them being my host?

"Aarg!!!"

Something wrong?

Susan stood for a moment, taking a long look at the sword hovering before her. *It's dangerous to even use, if the person drawing it doesn't have this sword, or immunity to Soul, it backfires according to The Darkness. And I can't see Silverstreak wanting such a device, even for study. But at the same time I hate to destroy, even something as reprehensible as this. There could be some situation somewhere it could help. Aarg, what to do!*

So sheath it. It was lying right there. That'll dampen its power.

Not completely! It was leaking out!

Only because the demon cut a small notch out of the thing. Just cast Repair on it and it'll be fine.

Oh.

So Susan marched back up to the front of the castle (getting lost twice) and hurried back to where Ifruita was dying.

"Oh no, Ifruita!" Susan hastily jammed the sword into the sheath and let it fall, then rushed to her side, pulling the knife. She was discharging energy in a spectacular display, and

that didn't stop after Susan hit her. "That should have worked! Tell me how to save you!" she pleaded.

"Wind... me," she managed, pointing to her staff that had been laying next to her.

"If that's what you need, but I don't want to become your master! I want to become your friend!"

"Only... way..."

"All right, all right." She grabbed the staff and lifted Ifruita's back covering, exposing a hole.

Oh yeah, shove it in her. It started to singsong, Push it in and out- at a medium pace.

Can we go back to you being quiet for the moment?

Hey, I'm making up for lost time here!

Anyway, it's a winding motion, not a thrusting motion.

Oh yeah, forgot about that.

Susan dutifully wound her until she couldn't wind no more, and Ifruita seemed to be recovering. Susan cast a hasty *Repair* on the scabbard and she further brightened.

"You came for me... killed Capricorn. You really didn't betray me before, did you?"

"Not even for three XP with a card. I mean, no, no I did not. I'm glad you finally believe me."

"I have no choice. You are my master now. I do your bidding alone."

"Yeah, about that. We'll talk about that later. Are you okay? I can hit you with the knife again."

"There is no need. I have experienced it once, I can call upon that at will."

Did I just make her practically invincible? "Then why didn't it stop that light show before?"

"That was simply my energy cells discharging. It was a safety feature installed by my creators, to make sure I never went long without a master."

"They shut you down in that case. Okay, I can see that, if one master died, they didn't want you getting any ideas about turning on them. So you just lost power and someone could collect or wind you as needed. If it wasn't so morally reprehensible I would appreciate their foresight."

"In any case, are events here concluded?"

Susan shook her head. "We need to rescue a few more people first." She looked at the sword in her hand and at the other one lying there. "Look, can you carry one of these? I don't want someone else picking either one up. And this one I guess he never put down? Because he didn't have a sheath for it!"

"You would trust- but of course you are my master. Of course you would. You do not have to ask, you simply need to command."

"You can't just decide for yourself?"

"No." She left it at that, the "no" hanging in the air. (Not literally)

"Ah." She paused. "In that case, please carry Soulcutter but under no circumstance are you to draw it!"

"Understood, master."

Hey, you got a servant. I bet you could get used to that.

Not even close.

So the two girls made their way to the dungeons where Mortimer was still somewhat zoned out of it.

"Normal people will recover from being exposed to Soulcutter quite slowly," explained Ifruita. "But using that knife of yours may help speed the process."

"You would know, I guess. By the way, can you generate the same energy slash magic that Soulcutter did? I mean you experienced it, right?"

"That would incapacitate me, as well, as it cannot be directed but simply generated. But to answer your question master, yes, I could."

"Great!" *Not great.* "Please don't ever do so!" Susan got her knife out again, touching the flat of the blade to Mortimer who started stirring. He looked up at the hulking form of Susan's *avatar* state and started to scramble back.

"It's all right, sir, my master means you no harm," Ifruita assured him.

"Ifruita? What's going on? Who is this?"

"The girl you met before. She's used magic to armor herself and beat the castle guardians around here."

Mortimer got a look of hope on his face. "So it's over? At last?"

"It's over," Susan assured him. "A few loose ends to tie up, and we can go see your daughter."

"Oh, thank heaven. I'm never reading aloud again, I can tell you that much."

Eh, he can if he likes. I'm done putting people into this reality.

You made them think they could do it on their own? For what? The lafs?

I had my reasons.

"I don't think it matters at this point. Come on, can you walk?"

"I think so, if it's to walk out of here!" He got up and followed them.

"What's our next move, master?"

"Make sure all the Borg are dying around here. Save any converted people we can. Then we'll rescue the other prisoner, the one at the army base. We can take care of the other facilitators while we're there. Then the only person not from this reality will be... you."

"You don't sound pleased about that."

"No. No I don't." *Because then comes the shocking and inevitable betrayal.*

Hehehhehehe like you wouldn't believe.

So the trio walked the castle checking on Borg and those who were Borglike, and Susan had no answer for them when asked "what now?"

"Go back to your lives, I guess? Try to forget you were ever enslaved to a hive mind that controlled your every thought? Seek counseling? Actually, scratch that, they'll really think you're nuts."

The group then stepped through an army base, and Susan wondered where the heck the guy was as she didn't want a repeat of her little journey through this place as she had before. It was still less than half an hour since Vega and Raj had been killed-

By you. Murderer.

Don't remind me.

-so many would still be acting under their orders or whatnot.

But the ones in the medical center would be up and around, right? Is that better or worse for me?

Aren't you overlooking something?

What?

That magical doodad or whatever keeps you from teleporting around here. Just use Magic Sense, track it down, then disable/smash/move it and you can get him without even fighting those robots. I know you sort of hate it-

And whose fault is that, Mr. Giant Mainframe?

I accept blame. I should think you would be pleased, not having to kill living people.

Those dog things just looked so cute! I wouldn't mind one if they could be reprogrammed to follow my orders.

... You want a robot dog? Your cat would be ecstatic.

It's just a machine in the shape of a dog. I don't think- we can have this talk later.

"Come on. Let's find whatever keeps me using teleport magic around here and we'll get him out that way. With nothing to guard I hope I can disable the robots and get them out of here."

"Robots?" asked Mortimer.

"Why bother?" asked Ifruita.

"I'm not leaving machines from a hundred or so years in the future around there. These people want autonomous robots in the shape of animals, let them develop them the old fashioned way. I'm not just going to hand them advanced robotic techniques."

"Sounds reasonable."

"Protect Mortimer, by the way," she said to Ifruita. "Just in case the soldiers here haven't yet taken the hint. Non-lethal, which should be understood without my saying it in the future from now on unless something like Doomsday shows up again."

“Yes, master.”

It was fairly easy to track down the magical object as it was fairly powerful, covering a large portion of the base. Susan couldn't help but feel the magical “flavor” was very near something she herself would have come up with, but figured once in hand she could study it in detail and see if she could tell what made it tick. They stood in front of a small building, having made their way through the now chaotic army base. Most people were armed now, but many seemed under the sway of Vega still, and so the fighting was more between “factions” on the base than a unified front against her. It was easy to tell the difference, as those using martial arts were fighting those using guns. *Will techniques taught by Vega spread from here?* Still, with a bit of *spirit sense* it was easy enough to know when someone was coming and duck behind something (like a building in Susan's case, she was still +1, having asked for the magic to stick around until she got back to the hotel) and not have to fight anyone.

“This seems to be the place,” she announced, and made a *spirit sense* check to make sure the place was empty. It seemed to be, and more like a large storage shed than a building for people, so she punched the door down and the trio stepped inside.

Mortimer spoke up, pointing at the center of the building, “I think that might be-”

That's when the whole place went up in a spectacular fireball.

Susan, coughing and trying to see through the haze pushed herself up from underneath a bunch of rubble and looked around in a daze. Her ears were ringing and her head was spinning from the impact. *What just happened?*

C4. A lot of it. You think they would just leave something like that for any old fool to go pick up? Plus, I didn't want you studying it too closely, so...

Ifruita! Ifruita! Mortimer! Are you-

Nah, they're dead. Pity, you just rescued that guy too, didn't you? Huh.

But, but, if it's not her then-

You think I wouldn't sacrifice a pawn to see your face when you tell that poor little girl you got her father blown up minutes after breaking him out of the castle? It started to laugh again.

You would too, wouldn't you? Oh Ifruita, I'm so sorry. I guess even you couldn't withstand that kind of thing.

If only you had given her both swords, or at least the one that provided perfect defense. You didn't need it. Whoops!

Susan felt wretched. This whole reality was just bent on beating her down, and even now she felt like just giving up. *Wait a second, where did the sword go? Or the other one. Did it get knocked out of the sheath in the blast? Not that I'm saying I shouldn't feel like this right now, but-*

Who cares about that? Aren't you going to save those two? I figured that would have been your first thought.

Save them? They're dead! They got blown up, you said so yourself!

For the girl that used to think 'magic first' and berate her friends for not reaching for their wands for every little thing, you've certainly given up easily.

What are you saying?

Ma. Gic. I'm saying use. Magic.

What magic?

Why, Time Door, of course.

I don't know Time- She stopped. Oh, you're just going to get me coming and going, aren't you?

As much as possible!

I don't have the XP for that spell!

Not to worry, I can loan it to you.

And wind up looking a bit more like you?

For the duration, until you pay me back. It's a small price to pay though, isn't it? To save your servant and that guy you don't even know?

Ugh. Susan took a second to think, ignoring the shouts by soldiers running up to see what the commotion was about. Fine, I don't really see any other way, which is how you set all this up in the first place.

I am that good, aren't I? Okay, the spell is yours!

Susan realized it was right, she suddenly knew how to cast *time door* and looked down at herself. Her armor, previously shiny and bright, was now partially covered in darkness in some sort of fractal pattern. *Worry about that later. I still have to take points to cast the stupid thing, don't I?*

Nine of them! It sounded excited. *Every single time you cast it. Until you pay me back, no rush by the way!*

I hate you so much.

And yet I'm letting you save the lives of those two people. I tell you, kids just don't know how to show gratitude anymore.

I hate you. So much!

Susan cast, and vanished from time.

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We've Got to go Back- To The Future

When: Ten minutes ago.

Where: Just outside the rigged bunker.

So I've got ten minutes to think of something before I come along and blow everyone up. Susan looked around, wondering what the best way to go about things was. Could I disarm the bomb somehow?

I've got an idea. You know that time stopping spell you used when the warlocks were attacking the city?

Yes...

I could give you that one and you could just go in there, take the thing out, and leave it here for your younger self to find.

Oh yes, your helpful nature won't be dampened now, will it?

Nope! What do you say?

Why don't I just Phase my way in, grab the thing, and get out again with another casting of it?

I guess. Hope they don't have motion sensors as I know you know that spell. And your tendency to use it all the time.

Oh, right. Wait a second, I know! I'll just use Time Area and rewind to the point where the last person went inside. There must be a code to disarm the bomb, I'll just put that in and they can go in and out none the wiser.

Two problems with that plan. One, how would you then know to come back in time and punch the code in?

Uh...

And two, what code?

The code that- Susan looked, and the expected keypad was nowhere to be found.

So how do they get in there?

They don't. The entire room is a bomb waiting to go off if anyone opens the door.

There is no disarming it. The only thing in there is the item, and the explosives.

So I'll Phase, see it, then come back out here and use Retrieval.

No windows. It'll be dark.

Susan looked, and it was right, the building was shut tight. You really didn't want me taking that item out of there, did you?

Nope!

Suddenly she snapped her fingers. Darksight! I'll just put that on first, easy.

Yeah, you but you can't use Retrieval either, that's the whole point of this, remember? Otherwise you could just get the guy with it!

Aarg! I didn't remember! Crap.

You sure you don't want the time stopping spell?

This is getting me nowhere. I'll just do this. She cast, taking extra time and made a metal sign that she simply wedged into the door. She then ran and hid, going on top of a building nearby so she could see her other self approach.

She didn't have to wait long.

"Hey, a sign I can read," her younger self exclaimed, running over to the door. "That's weird. Warning! Door rigged with explosives, do not open. By order of Ladybug."

"Ladybug?" asked Mortimer. "Who's that?"

"Not sure. I turned into a ladybug a little while ago, so weird."

"You think it's a real warning?"

"You mean like someone just put this sign here and there's no explosives at all? I'm not sure we can take the chance. Who would know my language, or the fact I was a ladybug just recently?"

"So how do we get in without destroying the object we're trying to save?" asked Ifruit.

"Let me think."

Younger Susan went through all the ideas older Susan went through, but didn't get any further.

So are there going to be two of me from now on? Or more, like if that younger version of me goes back in time there could be three?

Wait for it!

Wait for what?

Now!

Susan gave a start as she was suddenly standing with the others, looking at the sign she had made a moment ago.

"What the heck? How did your armor get all black like that?" asked Mortimer.

"Would you believe... no, you wouldn't. Never mind that, let's go. We can see about this later."

You see? Time caught up with you, and as you didn't cast the spell this time, you didn't go back in time and so here you are.

But I still have to pay the points?

Naturally. You did go back in time, after all.

But you just said I didn't!

And that's why you use time travel very, very carefully.

I guess.

By the time Susan made it back to the building where the other reader was she could hear helicopters in the distance, closing in on the base.

"Someone probably called for reinforcements, given all the strange things going on here," remarked Mortimer. "With the two otherworldly figures gone, their grip on this base would go away and people would start wondering what was going on."

Not to mention finding the two dead people on base.

Indeed, let's not mention them.

"Okay, this is the place. Mortimer, hang back please. Ifruita, back me up. Obviously your non-lethal beam is going to be useless against robots but I would like to take them back with me if I can. The smaller ones, anyway. Smash them if you must though, but I think I can take them out pretty easily."

"Very well."

"Here we go." She smashed through the door and ran to the bars, intending to get the guy out of the cell first thing, so he didn't get caught in the crossfire. She stopped at grabbing the bars and yelling, because the cell was empty. "Okay, where did he go? Was he released already?"

She looked around and noticed the large robot still standing there, which was as big as she was, as well as the two dog robots. They all silently looked back at her. Ifruita walked in after her, alert for possible attack.

"I don't suppose one of you could tell me where he went?" she asked the dogs.

They continued staring at her.

"Didn't think so."

"Someone's crying for help," Ifruita remarked, looking around the room.

"Really?"

"You don't hear that?"

Wow, my weakness are really making themselves felt around here, aren't they? "No."

"I think it's coming from-" She pointed at the larger robot that suddenly seemed to power up, as lights came up on the front of it and the large gun in its hand jerked into a ready position. The dog bots activated as well, moving from a sitting position to a ready position so their nozzles were aiming at Susan.

I guess we'll see about that. "Telekinesis!" she cast, using a fair chunk of her once again dwindling energy reserves. She still got one more than their maximum resistance roll,

and both dogs lifted into the air and turned away from her, facing the wall. Their tiny doggy legs tried finding purchase in the air, but just uselessly swung there.

The mecha then went, squeezing the trigger and sending a literal hail of bullets at Susan, sixteen per segment until three segments have passed. And that's only because it only has fifty bullets in the gun! Yes, it will take another four segments to even realize the gun once empty is empty, that's how fast it can shoot 50 bullets. Naturally they all bounced off her armor, but she was driven back under the impact of so many flying projectiles.

Dog three tried to move, but still couldn't so another sixteen bullets hit Susan.

Ifrita was up, but seemed to be hesitating. "Shoot it!" cried Susan, wondering what the problem was.

"I think he's in there," she protested.

We'll say that takes her one segment, though usually talking is a free action, just because of how fast the gun is.

Another sixteen bullets hit Susan and the gun clicked empty.

"What?" Susan was now at significant penalties to hearing, because having fifty bullets fired in your direction in three segments is going to be LOUD.

The gun stopped firing, but the mecha was still just standing there, possibly making **pew, pew** noises in its head, which allowed Susan to be up again. She went to punch it, but Ifrita (who was technically holding) now grabbed her and tried to hold her back.

What is wrong with her all of a sudden? Susan stopped the attack, unsure if she had begun the betrayal as expected as she wasn't exactly attacking, just trying to keep her from attacking the mecha. *I suppose the thing's gun is empty, but it's as big as I am, and it looks armored.*

Susan was now holding her action to see what it would do, so the thing tossed the gun aside and charged her. She got maximum, which didn't help much because it rolled higher still, so even without penalties it touched her, and she mentally shrugged and took her action to make a *wrestling* check against the thing.

She won, so she slammed it into the ground and attempted to pin it. It struggled to get up, but Susan had a good hold on it at this point. "Little help here?" she asked, far too loudly as her ears were still ringing.

"He's inside!" she screamed, pointing at the center of the unit. Sadly Susan got a 9 on her *perception check* and with her native penalty and further penalty from the noise, she got nothing.

She did, however, get a fifteen on her visual *perception check* to see the secondary arms protruding from the center of the unit, and a thirteen on a REASON check to work out that maybe someone was inside the thing?

If I can take them out, it'll stop! I get it.

On her next action she cast "*Comprehend Technology*," using the full time as it wasn't going anywhere. While this didn't give her any sort of knowledge about *piloting* one of these things, it did give her enough information to know where the manual unlock level was hidden, in the case the pilot couldn't open it from the inside. (Perhaps they passed out or were too wounded, for example) She reached around and felt for it, finally managing to get hold of it and give it a yank. The entire front cracked open, and Susan pulled it down to reveal the very guy she was there to save!

Wait, so was he not a prisoner? But this isn't any sort of hotel room. I'm so confused. How do I get him out of here?

He was screaming something, perhaps you would too if a giant, armored thing was cracking open your shell to get at the soft gooey bits inside. Especially if the giant, armored thing looked kind of evil with all that black stuff clinging to it, and that visor where the eye slit would be? Just an empty void.

Susan grabbed him by the neck, letting the mecha's arm loose which grabbed her, not that this worried her in the slightest. "Turn it off," she command.

"..." said the man, Susan getting a two on her *perception check* that time.

Ifrita also shouted something at her, which she got a nine to hear so Susan heard that one. "He doesn't know how!"

Doesn't know... He's not driving this thing, it's a sort of mobile prison that can fight me. You hoped I would just one shot it and kill the guy! Then feel bad about it afterwards and maybe have to go back in time again to save him.

Yeah, that was the plan, actually. Still could work.

Not if I get him out of there.

How? You'll break his legs and arms if you try!

Like this. She touched him. "Phase."

What that, she easily pulled the man from the suit, which went dead as it was programmed simply to defend whoever was inside and to see anyone that didn't transmit the proper codes to it before opening the door as a threat. With no one inside to protect, it powered down.

She set him down and ended *Phase*, then held up a hand as he started jabbering at her. She pulled out the knife, making him go rigid with fear but she only touched it to herself and put it back.

"I think I can hear you again. What's going on?"

"They shoved me into that thing when the alarms started going off. Are you here to rescue me or just take me to Capricorn again? I know her," he pointed to Ifruita, "but you're new."

"Don't worry about Capricorn, he's dead," Susan replied. "Oh, just a second."

Another casting of *Comprehend Technology* allowed her to turn the dogs off, who folded their legs up into their bodies for easy transport. She set them beside the mecha. "I'll have to come back for them. Just one more thing to do, and then we can all finally go home!"

"You're not just saying that, are you?" asked the man.

"It's okay," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's over. Come on. Show me where the facilitators are and after I take care of them, we can head to the hotel and figure out our next move."

"I have no idea where they stay. Probably near the medical area."

"So take us there."

"Very well."

So the man led them through the base, and the medical area wasn't far so Susan only had to put a few (dozen) people to sleep with her *smog* spell along the way. She was fine with it because she needed some energy back anyway. "That's better," she remarked after draining the eighth person. "Never had so many combats back to back in my life!"

The medical center was in chaos, as all the "donors" had woken up with Raj's death, and were now wondering what was going on. They didn't know, after all. The nurses were eager to get rid of Susan by showing her the small apartment area the facilitators used, and she burst in on them as they were packing to get away.

"Susan?" asked the one, pushed forward by the other.

"That's right. I expect you know why I've come?"

"Er, I'm supposed to give you this?" He handed her a piece of paper.

"This is not going to get you out of—" She unfolded it, noticing this was her language and handwriting. "Wait a second."

Dear me,

It's not them. You don't have to kill them. I can't risk messing up causality too much, going to have to talk to SS about how far I can safely take this spell, it cost me enough after all. Suffice to say The Darkness likes hurting you in the only way it really can. It has hinted about who it is, think! Who would it be on this world that would hurt you the most? These two? No, you don't care about them and another two deaths won't prove its point any more than the others have. Like the baby. It isn't physical, it wants you to know that if you come against it, you'll have to kill some kind of innocent, and thus discourage you from trying to stop it. You're done here, just head back. Don't worry, it's almost over and we can get back on track again.

You-Know-You

P.S. Don't forget to write this note and take it to those two before you leave.

P.P.S. As we now know time travel magic, are we morally obligated to go back in time and make out with ourselves at least once? I mean that's the primary use of time travel magic, right? The Darkness says it is, and I could sort of see it, but I wanted your opinion.

"Okay, this was written by me all right. Fine, you get to... live."

They broke out in smiles. "Keep packing, we're leaving. And make sure you get every scrap of blood metal, I won't leave any behind for study."

"Obviously," said the one, and the two went back to packing.

A somewhat weary crew stepped through a *Teleportal* back to the hotel, and crowded into the main area. Susan, her combats finally over, was back to her smaller, slower self. She tossed a now sheathed Shieldbreaker to the table, having made a simple one so she didn't have to carry a meter of naked steel and wave it around a hotel room. Ifrurita set Soulcutter next to it as if glad to be rid of the thing, and Susan didn't blame her.

"Dad!" a voice shouted, and Meggie plowed into her father, hugging him tight.

"Meggie! You're safe, thank goodness."

Elinor looked sour at all the people now coming through, who were looking around interestedly. "I'm not paying for a hotel room for all these people," she declared. Then she seemed to really notice Susan. "Good Lord, what happened to you?" she demanded, stepping back. Susan looked down at her skin, still partially covered in darkness, and looked over at a mirror hanging above the couch. The girl she had seen in her *soulscape* stared back at her, eyes now a seeming void. She sighed. *Guess I better get used to that reaction now.*

"A lot. Don't worry about it. As far as a hotel room, don't worry," Susan replied, turning from her image and sitting heavily on the couch. "You can go back home. It's over. At least, your part is. The others will come with me, and this guy can go back to whatever life he had before all this craziness." She pointed to the other Silvertongue, not even knowing his name yet.

"So that means I get to go home too, then?" Dustfinger asked excitedly. "You said you would bring me to someone who could get me home, as he always insisted he couldn't." He pointed to Mortimer.

"Yes, as promised, but I still haven't found The Darkness so you and I will be staying-" She stopped, suddenly looking up at the man. *There is one person from another world still left apart from the two facilitators. Him. But would it being him hurt me? I don't know him, but what other point does he have for being here? It's got to be him. He's the innocent the note talked about!*

"Staying?" he prompted.

"You're him, aren't you?" she demanded. "Go ahead, admit it. You're the only one left in this world from another, so who else could it be?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No, of course not. Honestly, why maintain this deception? Until the dimensional encryption goes down, we're not getting out of here. Or will the barriers just 'happen' to go down, and I bring you back, thus taking The Darkness into the heart of your greatest enemy, Silverstreak. Because I doubt you can pierce his barriers, and this would be great way to do it."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about." He seemed confused, genuinely confused, and Susan heard Meggie laughing off to the side. She figured it was just her and her father laughing over something, but instead she came over, something held behind her back. In her other hand was a sword blade. Susan got very, very still as she looked it over appreciatively.

"Please put that down," she insisted.

"Sure, sure, in a second. But right now we're talking about Silverstreak. Honestly, I'm not sure why you trust that guy so much, especially after what he did to you."

Susan forgot about the sword for a second. "What? Does my story say he did something to me? Something I don't know?"

“Oh, no, this was never recorded by your *storyteller*. I know it because I know you, Susan. Want to find out about it? Head to the Andromeda for your next world, and see what he says to you before you go. I think you’ll discover he’s not all sunshine and roses as you believe. No, he’s just as bad as me in a way.”

“What are you-” *No. Oh no. There’s another innocent, and I just assumed that The Darkness would enter someone when they came into this world. But that’s stupid, to bring them here it must have been around somewhere before that! Someone close to the situation from the beginning. And who around here would hurt me the most to have to kill?*

“Remember how I said most *Wanderers* become really paranoid, and you said you hoped it wouldn’t happen to you? Let me demonstrate why that is.”

“What are you talking about, Meggie?” asked Mortimer. “And what’s with the rock?”

Rock? Susan looked over, and the large moon rock she had hidden the Doomsday Orb in was... in Meggie’s hand, as she brought it out from behind her back. *No, no, no, not that too! How does- because it was in me the whole time and I just left it sitting there like an idiot! “Retrieval!”* she cast in desperation, but Meggie just smiled as the sword gave off a dull thudding sound and negated it.

“You should have saved your energy, you’ll need it.”

She smashed the moon rock and the sword together, catching the orb that popped out. There was an explosion of light and energy, knocking over the less prepared (that’s everybody) people in the room.

When it was over a very different Meggie stood there stretching her limbs. She looked like she had been smashed together with Doomsday, and gave an experimental hop.

“Much better,” she purred. “Was getting tired of that frail little body.” She tossed the blade aside as if it was not the most desired object in its reality. “Now, where were we?”

Fighting Doomsday (again)

When: No time has passed

Where: Hotel room, 8th floor

“But, but,” sputtered Susan to the hybrid form of Meggie/Doomsday, “you were helping me! This whole time, you gave me information, and made suggestions, and everything. How can you be The Darkness?”

“Helped you? I was helping myself. Like the time I claimed not to know who all the beings were I had brought into this world, or what their actual capabilities were? Oh, I gave you a crumb or two, but you must have wondered why I never mentioned Ifurita’s full abilities. I hoped you would fight her and find out that way. Or when I weaponized myself? Made a sword a little easier to always have on hand? Like that time?”

“This body isn’t yours yet, Darkness!” She held up her hands. “My will is still very much my own. So I’ll thank you not to refer to me as ‘yours’ just yet.”

“What’s going on?” demanded Mortimer, finally getting over his shock. “Meggie, what’s happening? What have you done to my daughter?” he demanded of Susan.

“She never was your daughter,” Susan replied sadly. “She’s only played the part. That,” she pointed, “is the reason you could ‘read out’ things from books. You didn’t, it just covered for you by only taking things out of a book you happened to read aloud from. From there Capricorn found another it could manipulate,” she pointed to the other man, “and like dominoes this whole situation fell into place. As far as that- It’s a creature that sees us as ants and wants the energy of this reality for itself. It’s only been biding its time until I showed up.”

“I don’t believe you. What have you done to my daughter?”

“Daddy, help me! She’s turned me into a monster!” The Darkness overacted, turning to him.

“You stay away from my daughter! I demand you turn her back to herself immediately!”

“HA HA HA! As fun is this is, it’s not getting me any closer either to this world’s energy or your corruption. Let’s see what we can do to change that, shall we?” She rushed Susan, who made a dodge but didn’t have anything going at the moment to help her, and only managing a five, her lowest possible roll. Doomsday grabbed her up and basically as a free action smashed her through the outer wall and started driving her to the ground at high speed.

It was her action so she made a *wrestling* check to try and break free, managing maximum this time, a thirty three. Even making the skill check untrained, Doomsday managed a fifty one and Susan began to feel she was in a little bit of trouble.

I need Invulnerability now! she screamed to The Darkness inside her.

Gladly was its smug reply.

She smashed into the pavement below, making an eighteen LUCk check for it to be the ground and not a car. The ground cracked under the force of the blow, and Susan found herself in a form fitting hole with sirens from nearby car alarms blaring from the force of the impact. People screamed and scrambled away as the creature looked around at them.

“Another two points, Susan? Excellent. Let’s keep that up, shall- ARGH!” Doomsday had been cut off from her praising Susan’s choices by an energy blast to the face, and looked up to see Ifurita hovering outside the hole they had made in the side of the hotel. She had her staff pointed down, and her usual serious but mostly neutral expression on her face.

Making the plea for *invulnerability* hadn’t taken Susan any time, but going prone had cost her a *segment*, so it was her action, and she mentally reviewed what would be best to do in this situation.

My strongest attacks before only did non-lethal damage. Am I going to have to wear this thing down again and just keep pounding on it to kill it? Because this time I do have to kill it, so The Darkness leaves. But I’m not in exactly the best spot to do that. What cards do I have?

Great, a Personal Stake I’m obviously playing right now to beat up The Darkness, that’s 2 XP right there. A Gimme Gimme! but as I’m the one that gets cards, and I don’t think I

can play that one twice, I'll take the 2 XP for that, and if I take any damage at all I'm in trouble so I'll just take the two for the Damage Reduction as well.

Still not enough to pay me back for the moment.

Like that's a concern at the moment. I might need two successes, and that's what this has all bought me.

Suit yourself.

I better transform, it'll just shut my magic down. Say, I can keep the Invulnerability I got from you in addition to my other powers, right? Even changing modes?

Sure, why not?

Great, at least that frees up a little. "Light of the Multiverse, Make Up!" she called, transforming.

Susan's Current Powers	
Energy Regeneration	2
Energy Well	5
Flight	2
Invulnerability	2
Nature Metapower	2
Nature Time	2
Nature Transition	2
Nature Force	2
Nature Mind	2
Speed	2
Size Change	2
Power Strike	2
Sudden Step	1

Susan, being at $\frac{1}{4}$ energy with twenty out of eighty now had a maximum of 320 and one quarter of that was 80 so she was feeling a bit better about that, at least. She was now at a delay of ten, but mentally activated her *velocity* item, so at least she was a little better off there now as well.

"Hey, you know this body is Kryptonian, right?" The Darkness remarked.

"So?"

"Doomsday wasn't smart enough to figure out any of his actual powers, but I am. Like this, for instance." She turned her head and a heat ray shot out of her eyes, scoring the building with a jagged slash and slamming into Ifurita. She was driven back a bit, but didn't try to dodge, simply holding her ground in the air and then shooting a beam of energy out of her own eyes back. Doomsday changed the angle to intercept it, and Susan smirked. *Hey, something I don't need energy for! "Mimic!"* she cried, and Doomsday's beam went wild as a torrent of energy slammed into her face from Susan's eyes, making both beams impact her and driving her back a step. Enough for Susan to possibly get up on her next action, at least.

"Say, do you think you would fight harder if I threatened her, or you?" Doomsday asked rhetorically. "Because I think it's her." She lifted off the ground and sped towards Ifurita.

Great, another power it can access that Doomsday himself couldn't. And I didn't take anything to get me up there instantly, like Teleport, because I figured the fight would stay here on the ground.

You could always take more powers with my energy, suggested The Darkness.
I'm aware of that, thank you.

Doomsday slammed a fist into Ifurita, who tried to dodge but couldn't manage it, and Susan was horrified to see her pitch forward and start falling. Doomsday watched without moving.

Susan didn't bother with any actions to stand again, just simply lifted herself out of the hole with *Flight* and flew at Ifurita, catching her before she hit the pavement. With a REASON check of seventeen she also had the presence of mind to grab the staff as well. She started to fly away, figuring Doomsday would be after her like a shot.

She heard an explosion behind her and risked a glance, wondering if she had blown something up to hurl a flaming car or something at her, but then screeched to a halt. Doomsday wasn't following at all, simply using heat vision again and sweeping it across everything below her.

They have nothing to do with this, Darkness! Leave them alone!

Hey, you're the one that left the battlefield. Honestly, I thought Ifurita would be harder to take down, but ancient Kryptonian against ancient weapon of war was no contest. At least she only took non-lethal damage, if she couldn't raise her DTR like she does she would have been smashed into pieces. So be glad she's still alive.

Susan snatched the knife out of her leg sheath, setting Ifurita down on a nearby roof and held the blade to her. *Come on, come on!* She impatiently kept one eye on the destruction caused by Doomsday in the distance and the other on Ifurita, who started to stir far slower than she would have anticipated when dealing with *Alleviation*. *Something to do with her unique makeup or something?*

"What happened?" she finally asked, eyelids fluttering open.

"You got hit by Doomsday. Are you okay?"

"I think so. That creature is so fast! How are we going to deal with it?"

Susan shook her head. "I honestly have no idea at this point. Our strongest attacks only bruise it, after all. I took some powers I hope will be useful, but I don't really have a real plan at this point."

"I'd like to plan on not getting hit again."

"Good plan. Come on, it's smashing up everything over there!"

She helped Ifurita stand. "You don't think a bit of Doomsday's personality is showing through, do you? It just wanted to smash stuff."

"The Darkness just wants me to hurry back to make it stop attacking civilians. Though of course it could smash the whole world given enough time, and then take its energy. Could be just getting a head start on that process right here."

"Then what are we standing here for?"

"Right."

The two raced back, but really hadn't gone far, and Doomsday looked over at them again.

"Ah, you're back. Thought maybe you had chickened out, were just going to keep running."

Susan ignored him. "At the very least let's stick together this time. Cover for each other."

"Agreed, master."

Having left the combat and reentered it, everyone rolled *Initiative* again, which Doomsday of course won by a fair margin. Her eyes glowed and she again shot heat beams at Ifurita's face, but Ifurita had already allowed them to hit her and didn't need to again, so simply created a *teleportal* in front of her with the other end off to the side. (She got a thirteen (15-2 for the active action done reactively) to place the end so it would work.) Doomsday's *passive dodge* was a ten, and so the beam hit her body and cut off again.

"Think you're pretty clever, don't you?" she asked, rubbing her side.

"Now you're thinking with portals," Susan praised her. "*Psychic Crush!*" Doomsday grabbed her head as mental energy flooded through it, as Susan had *overpowered* the technique to spend near her maximum energy on it. *But how many of those is it going to take to bring her down?*

Probably more than you have. Don't forget you can spend my energy!

I may have to if this goes on. But I do have to wonder...

Doomsday charged Ifurita again, knowing she couldn't hurt Susan physically at the moment, but could keep her from attacking if she was defending her servant.

"*Switch with me!*" Susan shouted, and Ifurita complied, using her *transposition* technique to switch their positions. Susan took the blow, not bothering to dodge, and with her other hand Doomsday grabbed her throat. She inhaled deeply.

Oh great, don't tell me she gets the freezing breath as well. How does that even work? Just a power I guess.

"*Velvety Softness*," Susan intoned, using a touch based *transition* technique to hopefully negate Doomsday's high DTR. She upped the grade by making it permanent, and threw another nineteen energy into the attempt. (The extra one energy couldn't be put in, because while she could *overpower* the technique seven times, but that would have taken twenty one energy.) This reduced his DTR by six, but as she had no idea what his health level was, she was unsure how much damage he could still take.

"Whatever you've got, now!" she called to Ifurita, who was more than happy to comply.

She not only shot a beam of energy out of her staff, but out of her eyes as well, as nothing says you can't take an "off hand" action with your "off" foot if you're kicking someone. So why not a hand and eyeballs? Naturally she had to split the energy for both, but at least this gave her two chances to roll maximum on damage rather than just one. (Not that anyone but Susan would have thought of it in those terms.)

Doomsday tried to dodge away, but being grappled Susan held on and they made opposed STStrength checks, thirty to fifty seven. Still, it gave her a slight penalty on the attempt not that it mattered. Her stats were just too high, and she easily slipped past both beams.

Now free again, Doomsday exhaled at Ifurita, hitting her with tremendous force and causing ice to appear around her body. She went spinning away, but a glance told Susan she would be fine, as her health level wasn't depleted from that single attack.

"*Psychic Crush*," she used again, figuring she wouldn't hit with much else given that last dodge she had seen, and did a bit more non-lethal damage to her head. Again she winced, but then a glowing ball of darkness appeared in her hand.

"As I can't seem to hurt you any other way," she remarked, holding it up.

"*Mimic*," Susan activated again, figuring the attack would probably be potent and didn't cost her any energy. She felt a connection to the energy ball in her own hand, and realized it was just energy called down from wherever The Darkness existed, but wasn't the charged up version it had often used to try taking out a large area. That took more than one action, as she had experienced in the past.

"Ah, but can you hit me with it?" it taunted.

Ifurita's flight had by then stabilized, and she looked up at the two to decide what to do. She saw the ball of darkness in the hand of Doomsday and figured that probably wasn't a great thing to have in the hand of an enemy and shot energy at it out of her eyes. She wanted to use her staff, but couldn't aim it well with all the ice around her body, but it worked out with a bang.

A literal one, as the orb of darkness exploded as the two energies intersected. Doomsday still had an arm thrown across her face so Susan simply flew past and slammed it into Doomsday's head as she passed. This too detonated the attack, so she flew over to Ifurita. "Nice distraction!"

"Thank you, master."

"Think we're wearing her down?"

"She does not look that worn down."

"That's what I'm afraid of..."

Doomsday looked around, making Susan wonder what she was looking for, but either she didn't spot a nice enough target or was just looking for something she hadn't already blow up to throw at them both. She simply made energy beams lance out of her eyes again, once more attacking the hotel building of all things, and causing fires to erupt on the inside as the beams pierced the walls.

"Hey, stop that!"

"So defeat me faster, Susan. You have the power, use it!"

"Switch with me, I can't act for another *segment*."

"Very well." Susan found herself in the ice, and made a STStrength check to burst free as Doomsday turned at fired beams at Ifurita again. She made another *Teleportal* but this time it didn't bypass Doomsday's *passive dodge* and they went past her.

Cracking out of the ice was *close combat* so Susan went again, hoping she couldn't take much more non-lethal to the head. As it was she wouldn't be able to use the technique again, she was too low on energy. "*Psychic Crush!*"

"Stop doing that!" Doomsday yelled, again holding her head.

"I can't do it anymore, I'm out of energy," she admitted to Ifurita. "I'm going to close with her, hope I can do enough damage now that her DTR is lowered. Do what you can."

She flew towards Doomsday, who shook off the latest psychic attack and grinned. "Come then." She threw a punch, which Susan didn't bother to dodge as she still had *Invulnerability* up. She should have, as somehow she took two damage to the body and found herself making a STRength check against Doomsday to stay in the air, which she missed... by fifty. I'm going to say this makes her fly fifty meters back and smash through a nearby building.

What in the world was that? Susan blinked, finding herself embedded in the far wall of the building she had just smashed through. *How did she damage me through YOUR Invulnerability? Did you take it away for a second there as your counterpart hit me? Because that would be no fair, and I would never use the 'points' system again if I knew you were going to play fast and loose with it.*

I'm playing this straight, Susan. The real trouble is, you think you know everything but you really don't. So then stuff like this happens. Don't blame me.

Fine. I'm ending this.

Finally ready to ask me for some energy?

Yes. Warm it up, I'll take twenty in a few seconds.

Is that all? Your danger point is eighty if you'll recall. Anyway, you'll want twenty four if you want to overcharge it the maximum number of times.

I've already got fifteen! But yeah, okay, twenty four then. That's thirty nine and I still have to go back in time to leave that note for myself about the two facilitators. They only go down by one a day, that's already a month I'll have to hang around the Hub.

Oh. Uh, they don't actually go away there. Didn't I mention that? I'm sure I mentioned that.

Why the heck not?

I'll explain later, you better get out there again if you want to save Ifurita.

AARG!!

Susan busted out of the hole she had made, taking the action to both move and perform an active *energy regeneration* action. This put her back up above twenty, so she could perform the *Crush* attack again.

Meanwhile, Doomsday had tried to rush Ifurita again, but they went at the same time so she couldn't dodge when Ifurita shot her with the normal *force* attack she usually used from her staff. Luckily Ifurita had also been moving, straight backwards, so Doomsday didn't actually close much of the distance and got smacked in the bargain.

Susan switched up *Crush* to be long range instead of Medium, so she would be sure to hit, and fired it off again. *Now!*

Twenty four energy, at your command.

With this extra energy she *overcharged* the technique four times, rolling 2d8 a total of five times as she called out the attack name. This did twenty one damage (after she negated half with another successful RESolve check) and she finally dropped out of the sky.

"You did it!" Ifurita exclaimed.

"I made her unconscious," Susan protested. "We still have to go down and actually make her un-alive."

Both girls charged up their attacks, doing maximum *Force* damage point black to Doomsday's head.

It exploded and Susan sighed with relief as the body seemed to melt away. "It's over," she said, slumping over onto Ifurita. "I think we're finally free of that monster."

“Where’s my daughter!?” demanded a voice. Mortimer came running over, pushing his way through the gathered crowd. Susan looked over and saw the hotel was on fire from all the heat vision attacks it had taken, which had forced everyone to evacuate. He grabbed Susan by the arms. “You killed her, didn’t you? Answer me!”

“Mortimer, you never had a daughter,” Susan sighed. “Like I said before, you had a pretend daughter, who was just waiting to wipe this world out. She was never going to grow up, or go to college, or get married. She was just biding her time in that body. I’m sorry, but that’s the reality of the situation.”

“No, it’s you. You’re the monster. You turned her into that thing. I don’t know why, but I know how. It took everything you had to beat her, but this time, I’m going to be the one who kills *you*.”

She somewhat stupidly looked over at him. “What are you talking about? You can’t hurt me, even without any powers going.”

He reached down and picked something up. “I could with this.”

“Wait, that’s the-”

There was another explosion of light and energy, and again panic broke out as those nearby panicked and ran as Doomsday stood before them once again, roaring in frustration.

How many times am I going to have to kill this guy?

This is working out even better than I’d hoped! Another twenty energy, perhaps?

Techniques used in this chapter

Psychic Crush

Mind

Level X (X+2+0) (Attack level chosen, Medium, I)

This mental blast of energy attacks its target’s mind, doing non-lethal damage. Damage is rolled as normal and cannot carry over to lethal. This requires no attack roll, but the target is allowed to make a RESolve check to reduce damage by half.

Velvety Softness

Level 7 (2+1+4) (Effect, Touch, P)

Reduce the DTR of a creature or object by 1 for every 5 rolled. Permanent until dispelled, a higher result technique succeeds in raising the DTR to the original level, or the originator dies.

Sparkle couldn't really tell how long she had stayed at the Hub while Silverstreak and his agents tried tracking down Susan. After all, there were no clocks there, people hanging around hardly worried about time because once you were there, you could train or do whatever and when you left, hardly any time at all would have passed where you had come from. So what was the point?

Instead of worrying about that she napped, and used her XP, and ate, and worried about Susan being alone somewhere. She learned a few new spells, as Silverstreak had scanned Susan's book in (as a backup!) so she could use a computer adapted to her lack of thumbs and easily look through it. She also raised her skill group of planets still at a six rating to a seven, so now she could cast every planet at that rating.

She found she couldn't access her *sub-space pocket*, and Silverstreak could immediately tell her why. "You two shared it between yourselves after Susan got powers," he reminded her. "But that means you have to be together to access it. Right now you technically each have half of every item in it, and until they're whole again, you won't be able to access it."

"You might have warned us."

"Never thought you would be separated like this, honestly. But you're right, remind me to apologize to Susan when we find her."

Sparkle had taken to napping in the control room and was awoken one day not long after using her XP up by a frantic agent calling Silverstreak down there.

"I just registered a withdrawal event that was unscheduled!" the agent excitedly reported to Silverstreak. "But get this, the reality doesn't seem to exist!"

"Get our computers on it," he commanded the room. "I bet that's one Darkvoid has locked off. If the host has been killed, there's got to be a reason. Maybe the native population threw Darkvoid out on their own, or maybe this is where our wayward Susan ended up. Either way we'll want answers."

"Redirecting computer resources now. Agents are being tasked with decryption efforts."

"And get our systems ready to encrypt it while that piece of Darkvoid is out of there. I'll want it in place the second that reality is visible to us again."

A tense few moments passed. "Boss, I'm picking up a weak signal from there. The encryption barriers are falling, and I think it's from Susan's locator."

"Sparkle, you hearing this?"

She jumped up. "Ready and waiting, boss!"

"Good to hear. We'll send you through the moment we know more, get to the transit room."

"On it." Sparkle hopped into the "elevator" and told the system where she wanted to go. The doors opened and she started pacing in front of the portal machine, waiting for someone to come down and punch the coordinates in.

"Sparkle, we're getting a better signal now," said Silverstreak's image on a monitor.

"We think it is Susan. But heart rate and adrenals are both elevated. We think she's still under attack by something. We'll get you as close as we can, but expect a fight when you get there."

"Got it."

She cast *Acceleration* on herself and transferred maintenance to the collar.

The door slid open and an agent sat at the console. "Won't be long," the agent promised.

Come on, come on!

"It's decrypted! Sending local and reality coordinates to you now."

"Punching them in. Sparkle, get through!"

"Thanks everyone!"

Sparkle leapt through light.

Susan had been having a rough day. She had been smashed, blown up, saw her friends die, watched another friend turn into Doomsday, had The Darkness make her an offer she “couldn’t refuse” and when she finally thought it was over, the man she had rescued had bent over and picked up the orb, once again releasing Doomsday.

But the day started to get a little better when her watch chirped at her and announced “connection with Hub reestablished.”

She didn’t have much time to acknowledge this happy news as she was currently being pummeled into the ground by Doomsday, who was luckily unable to do the trick The Darkness had done to pierce her *Invulnerability*. Ifurita was shooting it as she was able, but it seemed once it came out again it was back to full DTR, health, energy, the whole bit. On the plus side for her, it seemed mindless again and simply started punching the first thing it had seen- her. This was at least keeping it busy for the moment as it could punch her all day and she would still be fine at the end of it. And she didn’t really want to kill Mortimer, as from a certain point of view she felt she deserved a bit of a beating. Meggie had been, on some level, his daughter. And she, Susan, had been forced to kill her. What father wouldn’t be angry about that?

A pretty piss poor one, that’s who.

She was not expecting the day to get any better, even with the connection to the hub restored. But suddenly a black cat with a bushy tail and a white starburst pattern on the front of her belly walked up and looked the situation over.

“You need some help here?” it asked.

“Sparkle! It is so good to-”

Doomsday, having gotten bored with trying to smash Susan through the ground spotted the animal that had the audacity to simply walk up to it, thought it might make a satisfying squishing noise and stomped it.

“NO!” shouted Susan, wondering if this day could get any worse.

“Well, that wasn’t really all that nice,” Sparkle said, a few feet from Doomsday’s feet. “Care to try again?”

Doomsday now played a game of whack-a-cat, but Sparkle always seemed to appear just out of reach, and Susan sat slack jawed at what was going on. *Did I hit my head when I was smashed through that building and get brain damage or something? What’s going on?*

“Susan, can you hear me?”

“Now I’m hearing voices!”

“Your watch, Susan! It’s Silverstreak!”

“What? Oh!” Susan raised the watch to eye level and looked at the tiny display.

“Good golly, Miss Molly, what happened to your eyeballs?” Silverstreak admonished. “And the rest of you.”

“I can explain later, right now do you have some gizmo around there that can rip out an orb made by *metapower* that someone picked up? Or a technique, because I can’t think of one and I’d rather not kill this guy!”

“You remembered *Orb Seal*?”

“Remembered, no. The watch suggested it when I wanted to stop Doomsday without killing him. Not that it helped me not kill a bunch of other people, but that’s beside the point.”

“Wait, you’re fighting *Doomsday*?”

“Yeah, like three times. Do you or not?”

“Uh, just hold out your right hand a second.”

“Okay.”

Into Susan’s waiting hand dropped a curious almost wrench looking device, seemingly made of wood.

“That’s an extractor. Just shove it against the orb, and yank the heck out of it. That should unbond the two souls. Fair warning though, it doesn’t care which is which.”

“What? So it could take this guy’s soul and leave Doomsday out to be killed all over again?”

“Yup. Sorry, best I can offer you.”

"Anything I can do to improve my chances?"

"Not really, it's spiritual, not physical. Even beating him up, the contest is still between his RESolve and Doomsday's RESolve."

"Spiritual? What about going into their shared *soulscape*? Could I cast *Augment Stat: RES* on the guy?"

"Sure, but do you know Doomsday's RESolve? It's pretty high, if what I'm reading here is correct."

"Then I know what I have to do."

"Good luck."

Susan flew towards Doomsday, plan clear in her mind. Bestial and more annoyed than ever that the tiny thing wasn't going splat as he wanted, Doomsday whirled on Susan as she approached. She ignored his meaty fist and jammed the *extractor* against the orb.

I spend three XP to make Doomsday automatically fail his RESolve check she announced to whatever force gave out cards and controlled her destiny.

The orb came out with a pop, and Mortimer was standing there again.

"Shove it into your *pocket*," Sparkle suggested, now standing near her. "Before it gets loose again."

"Oh, that's working again?" She made the check and it disappeared. "A-mazing."

"That was odd," admitted Mortimer. "I found myself in this odd, hellish landscape. I could hardly move or breathe, and everything there was twisted beyond belief."

"Sure, whatever. Don't care. Dustfinger! Two... uh... facilitator dudes! I don't even know your names. Get over here, the Susan train is pulling out of the station and you don't want to be left behind."

"You're just leaving?"

"Darn right I am. Had enough of this place!"

Aren't you forgetting something?

"Oh come on!" she shouted to the sky. "Somebody find me some paper! Ifurita, round up those people that are coming with me and wait here. Sparkle, you too, I'll be back shortly. I really, really missed you but right now I've just got a few loose ends to take care of."

"What's going on with your eyes, by the way?"

"I'll explain that *later*. You won't like it. You won't like it all, but if it's any consolation, neither do I."

Oh, I think you liked having that Invulnerability when Doomsday was falling on top of you.

Susan didn't reply. "Anyone have any... Wait, if my dimension is back..." She pulled a pen and a notebook from her *pocket* and wrote the letter she was going to give to herself to read. She snickered as she wrote the final line, then folded it over. That done she went back in time to before she walked in on the facilitators and changed her powers to include *unseen*. She easily made it through the base like this (getting lost only once) and found the two hanging out, their duties as stat transfer monkeys not needed at the moment. She suppressed *unseen* and seemed to appear out of nowhere before them.

"Hey boys!" she called, totally surprising them. "Don't even think about sounding any alarms," she cautioned, pointing a technique *Force* blade at them. "I haven't had the best day and honestly, I just want to leave here. Do you want to leave here? More importantly, alive?"

They nodded vigorously to show that yes, they indeed wanted to leave here alive.

"Good. Give this note to the girl that shows up who looks exactly like me, and you can leave here alive. Her name is the same as my name, Susan. She'll be along shortly, start packing. Tell no one about this, do you understand? And make sure you bring every scrap of that blood metal."

They indicated that they indeed understood, and Susan faded from their perceptions again. They looked at each other, then raced to start packing.

Done. Now to get some energy back... again.

She went high in the air and charged back up to full energy, then thought about how to accomplish her next task.

*You mean the one after your next one?
What are you talking about?
I figured you would get the robots while you were here, you don't want to come back,
right?*

Robots!

Susan waited a bit, watched herself rescue the man from the armor with *Phase* and left the powered down robots in the room. She left to go collect the two facilitators, and Susan shook her head, thinking about now reading the note she had just handed the two men a moment ago.

With them gone, she grabbed up a dog robot and tried to shove it into her *pocket*, but was again stymied.

Sparkle doesn't exist in this time, yet, The Darkness reminded her.

Wait, why would Sparkle being around have anything- Oh... And technically, wouldn't I be opening "my" pocket anyway? Like younger me could be carrying a bunch of stuff around she didn't even know about?

I guess, but as you wouldn't know it, there would be no way to get it out.

Unless I wrote a note to myself to- time travel.

So instead she simply *shrank* them all and carefully put them into her actual pocket, as they really weren't meant for this sort of travel.

She then hurried back in the hotel room while still *Invisible*, watching Meggie's short "reunion" with her father and then subsequent smashing of herself through the wall. Once the hotel caught on fire the others vacated promptly, and she grabbed up the swords so that the scabbards didn't burn up and start *Soulcutter* up again.

She took a last look around. *Anything else I'm missing?*

Back outside she released the spell and found herself back in her own time, *Ifurita* having taken only a few steps towards finding the others that were going.

But finally they were together.

"Will someone explain to me what's going on?" Elinor asked. "How are we supposed to get home from here, anyway?"

Susan resisted the urge to scream in frustration, (twenty two on *RESolve*, seventeen on *resisting* to just bash her in the head and leave right then) and created a *Teleportal* for them to go through, and practically shoved them through. (Them being the other "Silvertongue" and her.)

"All right, no need to push I'm certainly capable of walking on my own."

"So my daughter is dead, right?" Mortimer asked her.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm sorry. I really am. But it had to be done. Forget her. She never really existed in the first place, it was just a trick. A twelve year old trick, but a trick just the same. Go back to your life."

"What about my wife? Is she still stuck in *Inkheart*? You say *Dustfinger* is going to go home, can I go with him to try and find her again? And then get back here to my home?"

"Oh. I... guess. I suppose you should at least come and ask *Silverstreak* in person. I'm sure he'll be overjoyed to have so many new friends come to visit." Of course, by this time the area was crawling with police officers and firefighters trying to get various blazes under control. Several people pointed out Susan as a "person of interest" and several officers were coming her way. "Yes, definitely time to be on our way. Hub, ready for transport, and we've got a load of people here so I hope that's okay. You know, if you need to adjust the gate, or whatever."

"What people?" asked the agent.

"Mostly displaced refugees and one guy who wants to look for his wife. Look, can you just open the portal? Kinda need it right now. I'll explain everything in a minute."

"Hey, stay where you are!" shouted one of the officers.

"No, I don't think so," Susan replied. "Now please!"

"On your own head be it, I guess," said the agent, and the shimmering portal of light opened next to her. The officers started running towards her.

"Get through, go!" she commanded everyone, who started through.

"Now hold on just a second!" commanded the officer. "What's this all about?"

"Nothing to see here," Susan assured him. "Just a very bad dream that is about to be over."

"What's with your eyes, anyway? And what happened to your skin?"

"You know, I've only been like this for a day and already I'm tired of people asking me that question."

"I think you better come with me," said the officer. "We'd like to ask you a few questions down at the station."

"Hey, drop those swords!" said another. "I want to see your hands!"

"Not going to happen. Well, do you want to see your wife again or not?" she asked Mortimer, torn between going into the light and his fear of the unknown.

"Sir, please stay where you are!" commanded the officer, unsnapping his gun.

"Maybe it would be best if I just..." He darted inside. The officer's eyes bugged out, and all pulled their guns. "I want you on the ground! Now! Drop your weapons and get on the ground!"

"My goodness, if I had a nickel..." Susan muttered, shaking her head. Ifurita and Sparkle went through, and she shoved the officer who tried to grab her, causing him to fly backwards into another. "Whoops, my bad." She stepped through as guns came up. "Close it, would you?" The door winked out. "Worst. World. EVER!" Susan shouted, so relieved to be away from that place she couldn't even.

"So," drawled Silverstreak, looking over all the people now in the transport room. "Can you explain all of the..." he was waving a finger in their general direction but froze when he looked at her. "Oh it's worse than I thought."

"I don't want to hear it."

There was a pause.

"Yeah. Anyway, can I get an explanation for all this?" He indicated the group again.

"Right now I just want a very hot bath, a light but filling meal comprised mostly of tasty desserts, and a very long nap."

"Would you settle for a comfy chair and a glass of water in meeting room 238?" He indicated the door, which now opened to meeting room 238.

"Why that just sounds delightful!" she growled. "Come on."

In the meeting room Susan tossed the swords and extractor onto the table and eased into her chair, then jumped up again. "Ow!"

"Ow?"

"Something's poking me! Oh, wait." She set the robots down and made sure they had plenty of space, then let *Shrink* go.

"Please, no more magic or powers today. Promise? Ah!" She grabbed the glass of water that had appeared on the table and chugged it down. *Not a slice of cheesecake but it did hit the spot.*

"I... can't make that promise. Interesting design- and are those two swords what I think they are?"

"Probably."

"Then if you'll just excuse me a second?" He held his hand over Soulcutter and a glowing box appeared around it, sealing it off. "That's better."

"Come on, you can't be afraid of that!"

"No, but I'd rather not have anyone falling over in despair should it get knocked out of the scabbard a little. Why didn't you just smash it?"

"Because destroying things is easy."

She held Silverstreak's gaze a moment, but he nodded. "Very well. So, introductions?"

Susan went around the room and explained who these people all were, and what she had been doing since being abdicated from the world of Mr. Incredible.

"How did that work out, by the way?" she asked Sparkle.

"Oh, I took care of it. No big deal," she answered nonchalantly.

"Exactly as I would expect from my faithful *companion*. Well done. My goodness I missed you!"

"And now a question of my own, if you would? *What in the heck happened there?* You see, I ask because I've seen this 'new look' of yours before. Inside your soul that one time, when you were being taken over by The Darkness. It's not a good look."

"I know, I know. It left me no choice, believe me." She didn't elaborate further.

"Well, uh," Sparkle began. "When you are ready to talk about it, just let me know. If you say you had to do it, then you did. I trust you, and we'll work through it together, like always."

"Oh Sparkle!" Susan blinked back tears. "Come here, you wonderful cat!" Susan snuggled her a moment, but Silverstreak cleared his throat.

"Yes, all well and good, but what do you intend now?"

"What do you mean? I intend a hot bath, many tasty-

"I mean after that."

"Continue looking for Luna, and my father? I'm not sure what you're getting at. I mean I'll see these people safely home of course, they are my responsibility."

"Even me?" asked Ifurita. "You know I cannot be apart from you for long, master. And really, on my original world I am simply a tool for destruction. I have no wish to return to that existence."

"Okay, so it's a little more complex than that. But you can help, right?"

"But of course. And this stuff you've brought back?" He indicated the two swords and robots.

"The robots I hope can be reprogrammed to follow my commands. I won't keep them out, but I doubt they would care about being shoved in the *pocket* most of the time until I needed them. I mean two actual robot dogs? Not that you aren't a great pet, Sparkle, but who knows what they can do. Maybe find a manual? And I don't know what use the giant one would be but hey, it could come in handy right?"

"I'm not so worried about them..."

"The swords, right. Obviously Soulcutter should be locked away, it's too dangerous to use, too indiscriminate. I mean I suppose dropped from a plane onto a battlefield, and someone immune to *soul* nearby to pick it back up again... I could see it being useful in certain situations. But I wouldn't just let anyone sign it out without a list of wavers as long as my arm."

"And the other?"

"Does it have a name?"

"Shieldbreaker."

"Weaponbreaker is more like it, but okay. And let me get this straight- it can protect against any attack?"

"Any attack but an unarmed person. Against them it would be a hindrance."

"And I claimed it, so it's mine."

"It's yours. I won't force you to do anything."

"Then... as I see it there are two choices. Put it back into the world it came from, or give it to a worthy *wanderer*. Which do you think is the better use?"

Silverstreak seemed confused. "You don't want it?"

"Oh, I want it. A magical item like that, whoo boy. But I have to wonder, which side of me is doing the wanting? Plus if I were to just rely on something like that? My own abilities would suffer, that much is certain. But in the hands of someone without as much potential as I have, but who still wants to do what I do? It could save lives, and do good. I don't expect anyone to figure out the weakness if whoever carries it is careful about it."

"And returning it to the world it came from?"

"How many other swords like this are there?" She tapped the glowing "box" surrounding Soulcutter.

"One. The Mindsword. Does the opposite of this, makes people fanatically devoted to whoever holds the blade. There were twelve swords of power made, total."

“But the person that held Shieldbreaker would be immune, to any of them. So it’s a balancing force there, right? Who know what’s happened... to all the worlds people were stolen from actually... not just that one. I mean Raj was a powerful figure in his world, what happened to it with him gone? But it is gone now, and maybe the people there are happy about that? It’s tough to know, at least without more information about the whole situation.”

“Actually, it’s already smashed most of the other Swords, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh. So why did you ask then?”

“Because I wanted to be sure you were still in there someplace. Just the fact you considered the question is a good sign. Look, I see you’re frazzled, and my agents can take things from here. Go have that bath, get something to eat, and when you’re ready come see me. There’s some things you should know about your new state of being, stuff Darkvoid probably hasn’t told you. Don’t spend any XP yet. I’ll take care of things here.”

“And us?” asked Dustfinger.

“My hospitality is yours,” Silverstreak answered. “If you wish to rest, fine, but if you wish to go home immediately we can run some tests, find your home realities and get you back there. It’s a good thing your wife went into the world he came from, that should make things much easier. We’ll get everything squared away, don’t worry.”

If I stuck her there, because really why would I have? Remember, I just made it seem like things were coming out of books, they really weren’t.

“Darkvoid is gloating again, says that might not be the case.”

Susan explained, and Silverstreak assured them all something could be done to track her down, even if it meant getting agents to ask around like they were currently doing for Luna and her father.

“Then I’m off. Shall I just leave the robots?”

“Yeah, I’ll have someone look them over.”

“Super. One more little thing. You brought the blood metal?” she asked the two.

They hefted a small bag. “Not much left, why?”

“I want a sample.”

The guy’s eyes flicked to Silverstreak. “Sure, why not! I’ll see what we still have left...”

So Susan went back to her room with a handful of blood metal runes, as apparently each stat needed a different one, and got her book out.

“Missed you too, Dad. Here.” She dumped them on the book. “See what you can come up with for these. Maybe a spell to transfer stats? That would be nice.”

Then she left a trail of clothes heading to the bathroom.

It’s good to be back.