

Over the course of a single day, Susan Walters' life had been permanently, irreversibly changed. The universe seemed to be having a laugh at her expense, setting her up as the sole means by which to stop an ancient evil. Everything else – the innumerable deaths, the discovery of another world, the revelation that magic was real – was all just extra.

All of this information culminated in her current predicament, which was dry-heaving over the meditation pond. The old man, Harcourt, rubbed her back while her stomach desperately attempted to empty itself of nonexistent contents. Tears and saliva dripped into the water, the trickling of the fountain drowned out by the sound of her sobs.

“It's alright,” Harcourt wheezed. “Let it out. I can't imagine how hard this must be for you.” With a flick of his wrist he called a pair of stools over taking a seat on one of them. “I wish we could have done this differently, perhaps meeting you months in advance and easing you into this. Sadly, when it comes to the Haunt, we always seem to be playing catch-up.”

“It...” Suz choked and coughed a bit before wiping her mouth. “It didn't come right after me. It stopped to kill a family, even the kids.” Her voice wavered, further sobs threatening to escape. “Why, why would it do that?” Susan had never been what could be described as a 'pretty crier'. Her eyes got puffy and bloodshot, her nose turned bright red and dripped, and her bottom lip stuck out in a manner resembling a bulldog – at least in her opinion.

The old man seemed unfazed by her appearance. “The Haunt is death and hatred and cruelty. It killed them simply because it could. Because it wanted to. You're thinking in terms of human motives, which is understandable. But the Haunt isn't human. It doesn't have feelings or drives; it's like an automaton in that respect. The Haunt exists solely to kill, hurt and destroy. Even if it has a goal, it can't resist the chance to cause more pain along the way.”

“And you brought me here,” she pointed a shaking finger accusingly, “to this nightmare. It's your people's fault this thing came back to life and started all this.” She let out a snarl while wiping her nose. “And you need my help to fix your fuck-up.” She took several steps back, her arm shaking more. “Well what if I don't want to help? My life was terrible even before you shits came into it. What if I just let the thing kill me and let the world burn, huh?”

“You say that like you have a choice.” Harcourt's voice was hard and cold as stone. “You think we don't know that there is something deeply wrong with our world? Every single person lives in fear of corruption, not to mention the constant threat of uncontrolled magic, enemy armies, dragons, and whatever beasts happen to live in the surrounding area. Life is hard, short and unforgiving.” His milky eyes seemed to be looking straight through her. “But even with all that, people deserve the chance for happiness. They have the right to life and deserve to live it, and if you think we'll let two worlds die just because one little girl wants to spite us, you are a fool as well as a coward. I would take no pleasure in stripping you of free will and turning you into a sombri, but the sacrifice of one person to save billions is one I would always make without hesitation.

“Or,” Harcourt relaxed, letting the grandfatherly kindness bleed slightly into his voice, “you can accept that life is cruel and unfair, and recognize that this is far greater than you alone. You can help us fight the Haunt of your own free will, because it is the right thing to do, and potentially find happiness and a life worth living along the way.” He stood and clasped her accusing finger between his gnarled hands. “None of us chose to be born into the life we found. We can spend our lives despairing that the world isn't the kind of place we hoped it would be, or we can accept that life can be cruel and work within the

established rules, bending or breaking them to suit ourselves. But to even have that chance, you must first play the game.”

Suz shook her head and pulled her hand back. “What is this? You admit you'd, what, mind-rape me if I don't cooperate, then act all friendly? What the fuck is this?”

“It's honesty,” was Harcourt's simple reply. “There's an old moral question called the 'train dilemma'. Even if it does windmill the issue a little, it's worth explaining here: suppose you see a runaway train barreling down the tracks, and ahead there's a large group of people. There's no way to warn them in time, and by the time they notice the train they'll be unable to get out of the way. They'll all die. However, from where you are, you can reach a switch to set the train on another track, where only a single person is in the way. Again, there's no way to warn this person and the train will kill them before they can get away. Do you choose to switch the track, thereby actively causing the death of one person? Or do you do nothing and let the group of people die, but you had no active hand in their deaths?”

Susan blinked. “I, I guess I'd switch the track. I'd feel horrible that the person died, but so many more people would die if I did nothing and there's no way I'd have a clear conscience.” She grimaced. “Yeah, I get what you're saying. That's an awfully cruel way to break it to me, though. Couldn't you have led with that dilemma thingy?”

“A person can deny a hypothetical. It's much more difficult to argue against a direct threat.”

“You're a prick,” she said, her tone factual and lacking any real malice.

Harcourt only nodded. “In order to reach my age, one has to compromise his morals at least once in his life. I'm a prick and I'm willing to accept whatever reward or punishment awaits me after death. But I'd gladly burn for eternity if it means that millions of others have the chance at life.

“But enough of these heavy and hostile topics. It's about time we got you a room so you can rest. Tomorrow we'll start basic survival training to keep you alive in the wilds, and hopefully within a week you'll be ready to set out without it being a suicide mission.” As he spoke, Harcourt unfolded what looked like a piece of plastic and swiped his fingers along it. The movements formed words – presumably this was some sort of tablet device – but Susan noticed that the words didn't match his finger movements.

“Hey, something I just realized: how am I understanding you? I mean, I doubt Byzantium's national language is English.”

“English?” a new voice chirped and Susan turned to see a petite woman, her black hair in a pixie cut. “Not a language I've ever heard of.” The woman sauntered forward and Susan realized just how tiny the lady was, five feet tall at most. “I'm Vrata,” she said with an offered handshake, “and we're speaking Common.”

“The language's full name is Commontongue,” Harcourt interjected, “and it's the language of trade and diplomacy, little altered from its origins as Mekhish. Of course, after Facod's redemption and departure, the newly free nations didn't want to refer to their common language by the name of their oppressor nation, so it was changed.”

“Okay,” Susan nodded to herself, “so how am *I* speaking it?”

The old man shrugged. “My best guess would be that not all of Facod's magic left him, which is really something the Vigil has suspected for centuries.” He shuffled closer to Vrata. “Magic is intrinsically tied to life: every living being has magic, but few have enough to use it. It's widely believed, though thus far impossible to prove, that magic is what holds a person's soul to their body. Since Facod didn't die when he went through the portal, it's likely some fragment of his magic remained. How that allows you to understand Mekhish, however, is a mystery to me.”

Susan took a moment to process that. “So, if magic is supposed to keep people alive, how does that factor into my world?”

“The working theory,” Vrata responded, “is that our worlds were once the same place. It explains why you recognize names like Byzantium, and I'm willing to bet the geography is pretty much identical. Whatever separated the worlds could also be the source of corruption, but that's getting so far into prehistory that it's not even funny. Even if Facod hadn't destroyed historical records while he ruled Mekh – apparently he wanted people to think he was a god – I doubt there's a single written or otherwise transcribed record of that time.” The little woman leaned against a cubicle screen, her negligible weight not giving the flimsy structure much trouble.

“Alright, so...how do people get magic in the first place?” Every new factoid made Susan feel even more an outsider.

“It's genetic,” the brunette continued, “same as being tall or short. Or, well, I shouldn't say it's genetic since we haven't been able to isolate or even confirm the presence of magic-producing genes. I guess the best thing to say is that it's inborn. Everybody has enough magic to keep them alive, but some have extra, and a rare few have a massive surplus.” Vrata flicked her hand and a mote of light appeared in her palm, shining like a fluorescent bulb. “We basically divide magic into three categories: cantrips, spells and rituals. Rituals get a bad rap because the majority of dark magic is ritualistic.”

“Whoa, whoa. Dark magic? How the shit does that work?” Susan clamped down on the urge to heave – she really needed to rewire her body for a different default reaction – and sat at the pond's edge. “Is that some sort of corruption-exclusive magic?”

“It'd probably be better if it were,” Vrata said with a sour look. “But it tends to run in the other direction: dark magic can be a gateway to hardcore corruption. The parsley definition of dark magic is any magic that demands harm be dealt in order to facilitate it.”

Susan blinked. “Okay, we'll get to that in a sec, but what the hell is 'parsley definition'?”

Vrata raised an eyebrow. “You know, the raw-bones? The most general and generic?”

“Oh, alright. In my world we use 'vanilla'. Now then, what's this about harm?”

“Well, we've told you how magic is intrinsic to life. Unfortunately, the opposite is also kinda true. It's like, uh...” Vrata grasped for the right comparison.

“Like splitting an atom,” Harcort supplied.

“Holy shit, that's right,” Vrata laughed. “You were alive when they tried that! Gods beneath, that must've been a nightmare. Anyway, yeah, it's like splitting an atom. Destruction brings power. You kill

a person, and all the magic tied up in keeping them alive leeches back out into the ether. Unless you're performing dark magic, in which case that inherent magic is siphoned into the spell and used to anchor it. Dark magic allows even people without usable magic to cast powerful spells, and those with magic to spare can turn into death incarnate.”

“The worst thing,” the old man wheezed, “is that a lot of dark magic isn't actively harmful. Many rituals are sacrificial in nature, offering human life in exchange for, say, bringing rain to a desert or helping crops to grow and feed a village. But touching that kind of power – the ability to take a life and use it to shape the very world – tends to change a person. They want more, begin to think about what they could do with further sacrifices, argue that criminals sentenced to death should instead be sacrificed, to benefit the community. It all seems reasonable, helpful even. But soon penalties for crime become harsher, leading to more sentences of execution, allowing more sacrifice. The ending of human life becomes casual, a simple fact. And the corruption spreads from the top down.”

“It seems like magic users are more vulnerable to corruption, but maybe that's just because we have power from the start,” Vrata sighed.

Susan looked between the two. “So, let's say I go along with this: march off, do the ritual, kill the Haunt. What then? Do I get to go home?” The lack of an immediate reply caused her to narrow her eyes. “...So what's the catch? Or, rather, what's the *next* catch?”

“We do indeed hope to send you home,” Harcort's tone was a mix of comforting and placating, “but we don't know if we'll be able to safely muster the power. Remember, it took the combined power of Facod – one of the mightiest mages of all time – and hundreds of others to safely open a tunnel to your world. The only reason we were able to send Koru through and retrieve you was because the Haunt just tore through reality and we could peel open the tatters.” He took a heavy breath. “If we are unable to open a passage, the Vigil will ensure you are hailed as a hero and granted safe haven wherever you choose to settle. You will, hopefully, want for nothing.”

“So the universe wasn't satisfied with taking my parents and making every day a waking hell, huh? Now there's a good chance I won't even make it home to my cat.” She let out a huff. “Fucking great. So, you said there'll be training? Take me there now, because I need to hit something.”

Vrata laughed. “I think you and I will get along just fine.”

The Vigil's underground complex housed a spacious gymnasium; rather, it was a gym combined with a weapons training range and freerunning obstacle course. By the time Susan arrived, it was already furnished with a sparring partner in the form of Koru. Of course, the blonde flushed when she saw her opponent was shirtless. Koru wore something akin to a white hakama and what appeared to be weighted bands on his wrists and ankles.

Lithely muscled like an acrobat, Koru inclined his head to Susan. "Since I've been assigned as your primary bodyguard, I'm taking it on myself to oversee your training. So, we'll need to get your baseline."

Fighting back the urge to stammer like a schoolgirl, Susan steeled herself. "And you're shirtless why?"

He smirked and tossed her a bundle of cloth. "Freedom of movement, Susan. I don't want you getting tangled in clothing and breaking your limbs. Go change before you try punching my face in."

Suz unfolded one of the items, seeing that it was basically a reinforced sports bra. "This isn't some elaborate setup for a striptease, is it?" A snorted laugh was her only reply. Scowling at Koru, she stepped into a side room and changed. The durable bra was a blend of artificial fibers, maybe something like nomex and lycra, and the bottom was a bicycle short covered by a skirt to help preserve her modesty.

Susan reentered the main room and found Koru casually waiting for her. "We don't have time for the fundamentals," he said, "so this'll be quick and dirty. Now, try to hit me." At her incredulous stare, he continued. "I need to see how you swing, how you fight. You can aim anywhere, use anything, but try to hit me."

"Alright. Fine." Suz called up all the anger and frustration she could remember, drew back her fist and charged with a berserk scream. She thrust her arm and leaned into the strike, putting almost her entire weight behind the blow. Koru used his right hand to bat her arm further to his right, sending her sailing past him. The white-haired soldier drove his knee up into her gut, doubling her over, and then shrugged her off his leg onto the ground.

"Good," he said, his face unreadable. "Again."

"I can't..." Susan wheezed, clutching at her soft stomach. "I can't get up."

Koru held up his hand and the Rod flew into his grasp from a nearby shelf. "Of course you can. You're just hurt. You don't want to get up because it'll hurt more if you do. So let's change that." The Rod reformed into a needle-thin thrusting weapon and he jabbed it into her exposed thigh, just deep enough to draw blood.

Susan yelped and curled in on herself. "What the hell!? The fuck's your problem?"

He poked her again. "Get up and it stops."

Suz scrambled to her feet. "You sick bastard! What's wrong with you?"

"The question is, what's wrong with you?" Koru moved into her personal space, tossing the Rod aside. "You have a monster who wants to kill you, who slaughtered an entire family without a second thought

simply because they were on the way, and you're sitting down whining, expecting a break?" He glowered down at her. "I'm being harsh because you need to survive what's to come. I want you to live through this and come out intact. So yes, I'll beat you senseless and show no mercy in your training, but only to make sure that you don't break in the real world. Now," he stepped back, "hit me."

Suz braced herself and then lunged once more. This time, she kept one foot forward to keep from being knocked off-balance. Unfortunately, Koru casually kicked her leg out from under her, toppling her forward and shoving her to the floor. "Good, you're learning. Try again."

Susan staggered to her feet. "When I finally get my hands on you," she panted, "I'm gonna kill you."

"You'll have to reach me first," he smirked.