

Story Notes:

The working title of this novel is “The Siren Amulet”. All C&C appreciated. Please send correspondence to cevans42 at yahoo dot ca.

Note the deliberate misspelling of “magik” used sparingly throughout the work. It is meant to be neither “magic” nor “magick”, but a cross between the two. For the purposes of this story I needed an “older” form of the word, and didn’t want to use either of the other two in order to distinguish it.

I didn’t want to step on the turf of magick. This book is not meant to have any witchcraft, pagan, or Wiccan themes. If there are any, it’s unintentional, since I admit to knowing nothing of these things, other than their existence.

The chapters are also quite short, so they may conglomerate later.

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Chapter 1

Setting up the Pieces

Brian returned to Laurier Heights Collegiate, where he was seeking out his charge. He could tell Fiona had incredible potential. He had been looking in on her since he found her roughly two months ago, and that was almost completely by accident. Brian nearly fell into a reverie about the moment he first laid eyes on her and could feel her energy radiating, stronger than anyone else he'd ever met. And she was completely unaware of it. He snapped out of it and came back to the present.

The vaulted ceiling near the centrepiece of the whole school, the fountain, was quite a sight to behold. The benches around the outside were taken by a few students, some talking with friends, some reading or studying, and some just taking in the flow of the water in the fountain, lost in their own thoughts. The hallways were nearly empty, as most students were in class. Students with a spare this period were asked to generally keep to the cafeteria, the library or the fountain since talking in the halls could become a distraction for those in class.

He moved on to her third period class, Math. The hallways seemed even larger now that they weren't filled with students moving between classes. Sections of lockers in different colours lined the halls. He reached the closed door and walked through it. After a moment of looking at the blackboard, Brian could see the teacher was covering related rates, a Calculus concept. The teacher continued, oblivious to Brian's presence. He took an empty seat at the back. Although it took more energy to actually sit on the chair rather than just standing in it, it felt more "right" to him. He mused briefly about his preconceptions and how they still hadn't changed; it still seemed

incredibly weird to walk through a door even though he'd been doing it for years. He also realised, for what was probably the tenth time, that he could have Travelled directly into the room, or walked straight through all the classrooms from the outside in to get to it. Old preconceptions die hard, he thought.

Brian turned his attention to Fiona. She was, without a doubt, pretty. Her fine features and green eyes that almost seemed to have a light of their own would already be enough to pick her out easily in a crowd, but her fiery red hair made them both seem even more impressive. Although her hair seemed to be almost an embarrassment for her, he quite liked it. It fell loosely down her back below her shoulders. Her attractiveness had garnered a lot of attention throughout her life, both positive and negative, and so she usually acted shy or withdrawn. Part of her not wanting to get attention could be seen in her almost complete lack of makeup and that her hair wasn't styled into something more fashionable. It wasn't working on Brian though. The fact that she looked that good with hardly any makeup attracted him even more.

"The rate of change of x is dx by dt , so plugging in our previous results, 12 and 4, gives us 3. Any questions?"

"Could you explain how we got 12 again?", asked one student.

Brian could see Fiona starting to get bored. She had a knack for Math, which suited him. He continued thinking about whether or not a relationship with her might work, but she was too young for him, too naïve. Brian wasn't terribly old either, but his travels had taken him from the Nexus to the Outer Reaches. He had seen so much: so many different worlds, races and cultures. Not to mention how the passage of time had affected his development. Physiologically, he was only 25, but because he had spent so much time near the Outer Reaches, he had enough experiences to be 60 or perhaps even 70. Of course, after her training she would gain 8 years herself without aging more than 2 physically.

The Protectorate, the organisation that had shown him the world of magik and guided him to his knowledge of it, had a small world almost as far out as anyone known had ever Travelled. They could spend years training there and only a few months would have passed when they got back to Earth.

Even better, they also had a world where the passage of time was effectively almost 10 times slower than Earth. The Protectorate could send someone to pick up a trainee from their bedroom, Travel with them to De-

cichron, have three full days of training with a full 8 hours sleep each night and then return them to their bedroom fully refreshed at the end of the last night of full sleep. The remaining roughly 40 minutes left time to actually travel to and from Decichron and a little bit extra just in case.

It really was a spectacular find, and they had only found it about 150 years ago, Earth time. Before that, they had to use a complex system of training on several different worlds so that the timing ended up coming out right. It would have taken months of manual calculations at that time to come up with it, but fortunately an alliance with a more technologically advanced race provided a faster solution. Although they didn't give out much of their technology, it was a simple matter of programming for them to come up with a best fit solution.

Back then, a substantial amount of training time was lost just in Travel time. Even with several worlds, the timing was so bad they had to have a few different people on each world just to chauffeur people around, because Travelling when half asleep could be deadly. A person who fell asleep while Travelling could end up phasing in in the vacuum of space, the middle of a planet or a star. Each would be an incredibly painful death, except perhaps for phasing in in the middle of a star. That would be almost too short to even feel pain. Even worse, they would lose an experienced Traveller plus a new recruit. The Ability was far too rare for that to be an acceptable risk.

The Protectorate had people scowering old records, ancient text from other races, and just plain Travelling around trying to find a place like Decichron from the Protectorate's earliest days. Poor nights of sleep don't make for good training, and enough of them can cause effects similar to psychosis. They had even lost a few recruits to suicide before they had figured out a system to ensure no one was being trained too hard. Thankfully, that hadn't happened in nearly 400 years.

The Protectorate now concerned itself with an amulet, called the Siren Amulet by some, but if anyone said simply "the Amulet", everyone would know which one was being talked about. Stories of what it had brought about over the millenia were in the myths and legends of nearly every race that had refined the Ability. Its power was simple. It was a beacon, a siren's call in a universe where finding planets, let alone other civilisations took centuries of research and Travel. Its power was so great that when activated, every one in the entire known universe with the Ability would be able to point to exactly where it was. This amulet was the main driving force that allowed civilisations to find each other. It would stay active for years, then disappear

without warning. Many had tried to trap it, but preventing it from being lost again had never worked in any recorded history, myth or legend.

There were stories that the place of its activation had become a new centre of trade in the universe for millenia, and there were other stories that blamed it for the greatest wars in all of recorded history. Either way, holding the amulet was power, power to completely remake the politics of the entire universe. If it were found by a warring race and used against a peaceful plant with rich resources, the results could be devastating.

Even within the Protectorate there were differing views on how it should be used, but it was all moot as no one knew where it was. Myth and legend suggested that there was no pattern to finding it again, that its appearance in space and time was essentially random. There were even stories of it "going off" by itself far from any known habitable planet.

In the meantime, the Protectorate would do what it always did. Try to find more recruits, train them to the best of their Ability, and have them try to find even more recruits. For those who had enough power to Travel great distances, they would continue to vie for support among the known civilisations with the Ability so that if the amulet were found by one of the allied races, they would have mutual protection from the great and terrible wars that might arise from the use of the amulet.

Brian was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he nearly jumped when the bell rang. He chastised himself, because his carelessness might have ended up causing him to phase in in the middle of the class. The shock of the students would not have made his superiors very happy.

He watched as the students packed up and left for the final class of the day. Fiona was still unaware of the interest she had attracted, and there was a great deal riding on her successful membership in the Protectorate. Still, it was not their way to force membership on anyone. Everyone was given as much information as they could provide without letting on too much. It was a fine line, but one they had carefully and successfully walked for centuries.

Brian sat through Fiona's last class of the day, English, and then Travelled to the one bedroom apartment he rented in the same city. This time he Travelled directly inside, as there was nowhere closeby that he could phase in without attracting attention. It was fortunate that he was able to pick it up so quickly, but it was smaller than the accomodations he was used to.

He prepared the letter and book that was about to be provided to Fiona. The Protectorate felt that being met by a stranger was too forward, and so they had come up with the less personal but less threatening letter and book

system. It wouldn't be long now before Fiona would be presented with the choice.

Even though the method was already prescribed, Brian thought the book would be a particularly good first contact. She often retreated into science-fiction and fantasy as a form of escapism and stress relief. If she was able to develop to her full potential, she could easily become the heroine of her own science fiction and fantasy story.

Chapter 2

Embarkation

It was lunchtime, and Fiona and Mary walked to the cafeteria of their high school. Kyle was waiting at the fountain, near the cafeteria door, as usual.

“Hey Fiona, where are all your friends?”, Kyle jeered.

“Go away Kyle.”

“Oh, I forgot, that’s your only one.”

“She is not my only friend. Go away.”

“Just ignore him.” Mary suggested.

“He is such a pain in the ass.”, Fiona mentioned to Mary, deliberately talking as though Kyle wasn’t there.

“Don’t let him get to you. That’s what he’s trying to do. Just ignore him.”

As they walked by him into the cafeteria, Kyle threw a pen at Fiona, and scoffed, “You dropped your pen!”

Fiona turned and picked it up, and looked angry enough to throw it back at him. He fled in mock surprise, laughing at her. He knew she wasn’t going to throw it back because that would mean she was stooping to his level. She dropped it on the floor and kept walking with Mary.

“Ugh, why does he keep doing that?”

“Because you don’t stick up for yourself. That makes you an easy target.”

“And why didn’t you yell at him or something like usual?”

“You need to stick up for yourself. I was trying to leave you an opening so that you could do that this time.”

“He’s so childish and immature. He needs to grow up.”

“Why don’t you remember to tell him that when he’s bothering you?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, I don’t want to think about it any more. Let’s just get lunch. I’m starving!”

They sat down with their usual group and started unpacking their lunches. The conversation was in full swing.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t as good as the movie we saw last weekend.” Vicki said.

“You went to a movie last weekend?” Fiona piped in.

“Yeah.” Vicki continued, not giving any more information.

She felt dejected that they hadn’t even bothered to call her. She finished her lunch, listening in but not really participating.

“The letter and book have been prepared then?”

“Yes.” Brian answered.

“She has as much strength as you do now?”

“Yes.”

“And her mana field will most likely grow once she starts using it.” Although it was an obvious statement to all present at the meeting, it still carried quite a bit of weight. “We can’t afford to lose her.”

“I know. That’s why you assigned me to her.”

“I don’t want it to get to your head, but you’re the best we’ve got, and yes, that’s why we assigned you to her.” He took the briefest of pauses. “Proceed.”

“Thank you.”

Fiona was sitting on the school bus on her way home. She was thinking about Kyle’s comment about not having any friends and the fact that they hadn’t called to find out if she wanted to see the movie. The discussion at lunch, mainly about boys, dating and fashion didn’t really strike a chord

with her. Although she thought of herself as good looking, she thought that blondes were the ones that were sought after. A friend had even tried to help her dye her hair, but that was a disaster best left forgotten. She spent most of her free time engrossing herself in books, the further from reality, the better.

The bus arrived at her home. She stepped off the bus and made her way up the driveway. She was more than ready to forget the day and dive into a book. She unlocked the door, walked in and locked it, called out "I'm home" to the empty house and went upstairs. As she dropped her books on the floor of her room, she was taken completely by surprise. A powerful and odd sensation, like nothing she had ever experienced, prompted her to look over to her bed. On her bed was an envelope and a book. She slowly walked over to her bed, and sat down to take a closer look. The envelope simply had her first name, 'Fiona' handwritten on it.

The book seemed heavier than she originally thought. The binding was of dark brown leather, and it looked very well used. Fiona couldn't remember ever handling a book bound in leather. There was an ornate circular symbol, and the words "First Steps: Being an Introductory Treatise on the Use of Magik" handwritten in black ink, only somewhat distinguishable from the colour of the cover.

That's odd, she thought, isn't magic spelt with a "c"? Come to think of it, I've seen it spelt "magick", but not "magik". She rifled through the book's pages, and saw that they were all blank.

"Huh?" She wondered aloud. "Is this supposed to be some kind of diary?"

She opened the envelope roughly with her fingers, and took out the letter. It was also handwritten.

The Protectorate has offered you this book so that you may understand the Ability that you have. Your Ability is a rare gift, and the talent to control the gift, rarer. This book will first help you to realize you have a gift that most people do not have. As you continue to explore this book, you will gain the talent to control your Ability. Not everyone who has the Ability has seen this book, and some with the Ability never will.

You must discuss this book with no one. Do not ask your parents, for it does not pass directly from parent to child. Do not ask your friends, for even if they know, they must deny ev-

everything. If you attempt to show this book to people who do not have the Ability, it will not appear to them. If you rustle the pages, those without the Ability will not hear them. If you press further to make those who do not have the Ability aware of the book's existence, The Protectorate will reclaim the book as easily as it has been left for you.

More information about The Protectorate you will not find in this book, for it is an organization shrouded in secrecy, and must remain that way. As you progress through the book, more and more chapters will become open to you. Once you finish the third chapter a member of the Protectorate will meet with you to discuss the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of membership. The fact that this book is in your hands shows you The Protectorate has invested considerable time in ensuring you will be able to meet the requirements of membership. However, an organisation which forces membership on its members will eventually crumble. It is the strong hope of The Protectorate that you become a member, however, it is your choice to make.

If you choose to become a member after completing Chapter Three, you will immediately be granted the rank of Initiate, and you may continue reading the book at your leisure. You will be free to leave The Protectorate at any time.

If you choose not to become a member, you will not be allowed to continue to read the book. It will be reclaimed.

Now that you have read this preface, the first chapter will be open to you.

Good Luck,
The Protectorate

“Well, the letter seems pretty high and mighty. They’ve invested considerable time...in *me*? Open to me?” In confusion, she looked at the book again. “Now I see chapter one written here! I hope the book isn’t written like the letter.”

She looked at her watch. As usual, she would have about an hour and a half until her mom got home. Well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt to read a little,

she thought. I wasn't going to do my homework before supper anyway. She threw the letter and envelope on the bed, and started reading the book, not even taking the time to get up and sit at her desk.

First Steps: Chapter One: Feeling Your Energy

Those with the Ability naturally attract magikal energy. You probably aren't aware of this energy right now, but this chapter will show it to you and teach you how to feel it.

To help you, this book has its own energy, and some of the examples will use it up. Once an example has been completed, you will need to provide your own magikal energy to perform the example again. The book will show you the way, but after you complete an example, you will not need the book to perform it again.

Magikal energy is a type of energy, just like heat, light, sound and movement. The difference between it and other forms of energy is that most people feel heat, see light, hear sound, and feel movement, but only those with the Ability can feel and use magikal energy. Popular works of fiction and some role playing games refer to "mana", and this is a simple word to say and write, so when we refer to mana, it is magikal energy that we are talking about.

The first example will reveal to you where around you your mana is and how much of it you have. People have the Ability to varying degrees. If your Ability is strong, you will attract mana faster, and your mana will be packed more tightly around you. Mana is not bound by matter or other types of energy. It will flow through air, water, light, stone and fire with equal ease.

When you finish reading this page, and turn to the next, you will see your mana around you as a blue fog. The denser the fog, the denser the mana. Shortly thereafter, the fog will dissipate. When the fog dissipates, it will dissipate from the centre outward, so you will be able to see how far away from you it stretches.

She turned the page. Suddenly, the book glowed a soft blue, and the fog

formed quickly in the same colour. It was difficult for her to see. She could only make out the book, parts of the bed and herself. After a few moments, the fog started to dissipate, and a few moments after that, she saw the edge of a sphere of fog reaching out to the far wall, and she was in the centre. Then the fog vanished. She continued reading.

When the fog first formed, if you were unable to see the edge of the fog, then you have the Ability strongly. If you were still able to see everything around you, then you have the Ability weakly. Remember, it is not black and white, strong and weak, but shades of grey, in degrees. No two people have exactly the same strength.

Her final traces of doubt were completely gone by this point. Her world had changed. She checked her watch again, and noticed she had an hour until her mom came home. “I’ve been looking at this book for half an hour? Where did the time go?”, she wondered aloud.

It is time for you to feel what you just saw with your mind. You now know that you have the Ability, and you now know your mana is surrounding you at this very moment. It can travel through all forms of matter and energy and it forms a sphere around you, called your mana field. This book also has its own supply of mana imbued within it. First, you will learn to feel this book’s mana. When you first walked into the area around the book, you likely felt its power. It was probably a feeling you would not be able to describe to another person, because it is likely you have never felt it before, and were never taught the language to describe it.

“So that was what that feeling was...”

At the end of this paragraph, leave the book where you found it, and walk away from the book. Go further away than when you first experienced the sensation, then back toward the book

again. You will likely start to feel it again when the periphery of your mana field crosses the book. Do this several times to orient yourself with the feeling, until the feeling becomes more familiar to you.

Fiona walked out of the room and waited for a moment to try to contain her excitement and nervousness. She walked back into the room and felt the strange sensation again. She also felt tingling down the back of her spine. She walked in and out of the room a few times until she no longer felt the tingling in her spine. She walked back to the bed.

She noticed that the letter and envelope were gone. She walked over to the bed, and felt for them, as if they had turned invisible to her. She couldn't see them or feel them. I know I threw them on the bed, she thought. Oh well, maybe they slipped down the side. She continued reading.

Now you know how to experience the feeling you are searching for. Imagine that this feeling is a sixth sense. You have always had it, and you have always felt your mana around you with this sixth sense. Over time you have learned not to pay attention to it because the amount of mana around you doesn't change unless you start to use it up. If you ever noticed that you felt it again, or tried to describe it to someone else, they wouldn't understand, because they don't have the sixth sense that you do. Until now, you didn't know what to do with the information you were getting, but now you know what it is. Imagine that this information you are getting is similar to the sensation of touch. You can touch things, and move them around with your hands. You can use this sixth sense to feel and manipulate mana in the same way.

Try to once again feel the mana around you, as you once did as a child, not knowing what that feeling was, and unable to communicate it to others. Concentrate on the same experiences you had when you walked in the room, and use those experiences to guide your search. Remember the size and density of the blue fog you saw earlier. Now search for that fog again, only with your sixth sense, your magikal awareness, instead of with your eyes.

Entranced by the words and the meaning behind them, Fiona gradually started concentrating on the experiences she had had. She remembered the fog that had surrounded her before. She was just starting to feel something when she heard the door unlock. She quickly put the book back on the bed, dived into her backpack, and grabbed the book she was supposed to be reading for English class, "Who has seen the wind", by W.O. Mitchell. As she picked it up, her mom walked in the door downstairs. Phew, just in time, she thought. Fiona walked to her door.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi, mom."

"Anything interesting happen today at school?"

She hesitated and said, "No."

"Is that book for English class?"

"Yep."

"We're going to have lasagne for supper."

"Great! I can't wait."

To herself, she thought, I can't wait to keep reading that book. She remembered reading that those without the Ability would not be able to see the book, so she thought it was safe for now to sit on the bed. She also realized that if someone caught her reading the book, it would look like she was staring at her hands. She started reading the book for English, but couldn't put the other book out of her mind.

She couldn't concentrate on what she was reading, so she just set the English book back down. She closed her eyes and concentrated again on feeling her mana. After what seemed like a full minute, she started to feel the mana all around her. She kept at it, each time reducing the amount of time it took to find her mana slightly. Her mom's voice broke her concentration.

"Honey?"

Fiona opened her eyes. "Yes, mom?"

"Are you tired?"

"Yeah, it was really boring at school today."

"Maybe you should go to sleep earlier tonight."

"Mom, I'm 17 years old. I think I know when to go to sleep."

"Alright, alright. Could you come and set the table for me, please?"

Fiona hesitated slightly, and gave in. She set the table quickly and returned to her room. She picked up the book for English again, and tried to read, but the words didn't sink in. Her mind kept wandering to the other

book. She shut the door to block out the sounds of supper being made, but it wasn't what was keeping her mind from her homework.

After more struggle to read the book for English, her father came home. She knew it must be close to supper time. She could hear her father and mother talking through the closed door, but couldn't make out the words. After a moment, she opened the door, and walked downstairs.

"Hi dad."

"Hi honey. Anything interesting happen at school today?"

"No."

"Your mother tells me you were actually getting homework done before supper today. I'm impressed."

"Well, I have to get two chapters read by tomorrow."

"Supper is in about 10 minutes."

"Thanks."

She went back up to her room, and started to take notes to force herself through the book for English. Supper was good, but she was preoccupied, and participated even less than usual in her parents' discussions. After supper, she went back to her room and closed her door again. She worked on her ability to find her mana until it only took a second or two with only a little concentration.

Fiona looked her watch again, and was surprised to see that it was getting late. After the effort of the day's mental concentration, she was able to fall asleep easily.

Chapter 3

Laying the Groundwork

The next morning, Fiona woke up to the harsh sound of her alarm and turned it off quickly. She remembered strange dreams of shadowy figures in blue fog.

She got dressed for school, continuing to think about the new world she was being pulled into. She'd certainly read her share of stories about magic or wizardry that was kept from the general, unsuspecting population. Fiona was lost in thought as she continued to get ready for school, and took the bus in. No one noticed much difference in her, since she was often wrapped up in her own thoughts, but no one suspected that it was something completely new that she was thinking about.

It was a struggle for her to concentrate during her classes, which wasn't usually a problem. Now she had something to look forward to that had nothing to do with school. Still, she was able to keep up appearances, and the teachers of her morning classes didn't notice anything was different.

At lunchtime, Mary and Fiona walked to the cafeteria, and Kyle was waiting on one of the benches of the fountain, as usual.

"Hey, Fiona!" Kyle called.

Fiona didn't even so much as look over at him.

"What did you bring for lunch?" Fiona asked Mary.

“Hey! Fiona!” Kyle called again.

“Uhhh...ham and cheese today.” Mary managed to get out, Kyle obviously distracting her.

“What else?” Fiona prompted.

“Uhhh...apple juice.”

“Fiona!” Kyle almost screamed.

“Huh. You finally got the hang of ignoring him.”

“Him who?”

If Fiona had actually looked at Kyle at this point, which would have ruined it, she would have seen a look of the greatest confusion on Kyle’s face.

Mary and Fiona walked into the cafeteria and sat down with Vicki and the others, who barely registered their presence. Fiona, quiet as usual, didn’t appear any different to anyone other than Mary.

Thousands of light years from the nearest habitable planet, the Amulet reappeared in the vacuum of space. Its appearance went completely unremarked.

Just as in thousands of legends, it began sending out pulses very slowly, each one too small for the even the most talented magik user to detect. Over time, it would grow in frequency and intensity until someone activated it totally, or it would do so on its own eventually.

In English class, the teacher asked her a question about one of the chapters she was supposed to have read but she couldn’t answer it.

“Fiona, you really need to keep up with the book or you won’t get as much out of class.”

“Alright, I’ll catch up tonight.”, she said, trying to end the issue quickly. It wasn’t like her to promise such a thing so hastily. She saw a few brief confused looks from her friends out of the corner of her eye. Fortunately, the teacher relented, and stopped asking her questions. With her mind still firmly on the mysterious book, the rest of the day passed slowly.

Once you can see your mana, chapter two will be open to you.

I didn’t realize I could start on chapter two already, she thought.

First Steps: Chapter Two: Focus is the Key

Mana, or magikal energy, is just another kind of energy, like heat energy, light energy, sound energy, electrical energy, and kinetic energy. Also, it is possible to convert between these different forms. That means it is possible for you to convert the mana that surrounds you into heat, light, sound, electricity, or movement. This book has been imbued with these transferences. But before you can convert between different kinds of energy, you must learn to focus your mana on the area where you want to convert the energy. At the end of the chapter, you will focus your mana on this book, and in so doing, move this book across a smooth, flat surface with the power of your mind.

A tingling sensation ran down her spine.

First, find a flat, smooth surface to set the book on. The top of a desk or table is best. Clear out a space about two handspans around the book.

She grabbed most of the papers on her desk and quickly dumped them on the floor.

Take a moment and feel the mana around you, and feel this book's magikal power. As you hold that feeling, and turn the page, you will sense the transformation from mana, magikal energy, to movement, kinetic energy, and the book will move to the right. Again, make sure there is some space for it to move. Turn the page.

Fiona concentrated on her sixth sense, and turned the page. She felt the book get more powerful somehow, as if it were larger, and it started to move to the right. Not only was there the sensation she had learned to interpret as mana, but a new sensation. It felt like the book was a part of her body, and she could feel it move with her sixth sense. When the book stopped, so did the feeling. It had moved about the length of a ruler.

When you turn the page, this book will levitate. As it does so, it must continually convert mana to kinetic energy in order to remain balanced against the force of gravity. You will feel the book continuously using mana, but it will float motionless in the air.

She turned the page, and could feel the book get more powerful again. It rose to about the length of a ruler over a few seconds. She could feel the book continuously using its energy to remain in place. After a few moments, the book slowly came to rest back on the desk, and the feeling died down.

Now, you will provide some of your own mana to the book as it moves to the left. The first step to accomplishing this task is to learn to focus your mana, and make it denser around the book. You have learned to feel where your mana is, and you will now try to focus it. If you don't focus your mana, then it will be denser around your body. Think about this concept for a moment, and feel your mana around you once again, and understand that the farther away you feel your mana, the less of it there is. When you

turn the page, this book will pull some of your mana towards it. Concentrate on the feeling you have. If you concentrate on the feeling after this book stops tugging on your mana again, it will form the key to focusing your mana all by yourself.

She focussed her mind on her mana as much as she could, and turned the page. She could immediately feel a pull on her mana, almost like a drain pulling water down. At first she tried to resist, and hold her mana where it was, but realized that she wanted to focus her mana, not pull it away. As she tried the opposite approach, the book started to move to the left. She felt the same odd feeling of movement again. She was so suprised that she stopped, and so did the book. A tingle ran down her spine. She focussed her mana again, and the book moved further to the left. When the glow around the book started to fade, she stopped again. Words started to appear on the page.

Congratulations. You have learned to focus your mana. Chapter Three is now open to you.

Fiona looked at her watch and realized it was just about time for her mom to come home. She quickly hid the book under her bed and put the papers back on the desk in her room. Although it was unlikely anyone else would see the book, even in plain sight for her, it was out of the way so at least no one would trip over it.

She thought about the day, and that she had promised her English teacher that she would be caught up by tomorrow. I better read those chapters because I *know* she'll ask me about them tomorrow, she thought. She still felt drawn to the book, but she knew she had to read her English book tonight for sure. It made it even more boring than usual, but that night she managed to finish her homework.

Chapter 4

A Glimpse of Things to Come

As she pulled the book out from under her bed, she remembered back to English class that day. After a good grilling, her English teacher was convinced that she had read the book. Thank goodness that's over, she thought, and opened the book to Chapter Three.

First Steps: Chapter Three: Getting into Motion

In the last chapter, you focussed your mana on this book, and this book used that energy to move. Now, with some help, you will provide the energy *and* the will to make this book move. By the end of the chapter, you will be able to move objects around with your mind, without the need for this book's power.

A now familiar tingle ran down Fiona's spine.

Clear a space around the book so it is free to move. When you turn the page, focus your mana on this book as you did in the last chapter. As you concentrate on focusing your mana, also feel the tranference of the energy. Only by observing this feeling closely will you be able to move this book by yourself.

She turned the page. Nothing happened. She focussed her mana on the book, and it started to glow a soft blue and move to the right. She could feel the mana being transferred into movement. It felt like the book was a part of her body and she could feel its movement to the right with her sixth sense.

Now, remembering the feeling you just experienced, focus your mana on the book, and cause that feeling to occur. This time, you do not need to turn the page, since the book will not be using its power.

She focussed her mana on the book, and started to remember the feeling of movement she had from the book. She imagined that the book was just an extension of her body, and she wanted to move it to the left. At first nothing happened. She redoubled her efforts, focussing more of her mana on the book, and trying to move the book more. The book slid very slightly. She focussed even harder, and forced the book to the left. It slid right off her desk, taking the rest of the papers with it. She was too stunned to move. She looked over at the book with a weird mix of delight and fear. She stared at it, wild thoughts running through her head. Suddenly, she heard a key opening the front door. She quickly grabbed the papers and started to put them back on her desk, leaving the book on the floor for the time being.

“Hi, honey,” her mom called up from the foyer. Fiona thought briefly that she should have closed her door, but then realised if she had done that, she might not have heard her mom come in.

“Hi, mom.”

“What’re you up to?”

“Oh, just organising some papers on my desk.”

“Wow, first you do your homework before supper, now you’re cleaning your desk. I’m impressed. You haven’t even gone out with your friends in the past few days, so you could finish your homework. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I must say I like it.”

She needed to switch the topic of the conversation, fast.

“What’s for supper?”

“Chicken helper, the roasted garlic one.”

“Great, I can’t wait!”

She thought she heard her mother say, ”That makes two of us.” With her mom busy in the kitchen, she picked up the book to put it where no one would trip over it, but stopped. She opened the book to the next page. Fiona felt a pulse, a quick burst of mana being used. She continued reading:

You have completed Chapter Three. A member of The Protectorate will come to see you when it is convenient with you to discuss the rights, responsibilities and privileges of membership.

If you choose to become a member, you will immediately be granted the rank of Initiate, and you may continue reading the book at your leisure. You will be free to leave The Protectorate at any time.

If you choose not to become a member, you will not be allowed to continue to read the book. It will be reclaimed.

All the other pages were still blank, which was nearly all of the book. By the number of pages that were left, there could be fifteen or more chapters, similar in length to the previous three. What was that about “convenient with me”? How will they know what’s convenient with me until they talk with me?

Across the city in his apartment, Brian was incredibly curious about how Fiona was doing. The rules specifically disallowed looking in on her directly while she was learning. His mana field might be detected, or worse, the allure of helping her out if she was having trouble would be too great. He tried to concentrate on detecting the minute amounts of mana that would be required for the exercises, but realised it would be fruitless. Even he didn’t possess enough Ability to detect those amounts from so far away.

Brian felt the unmistakable pulse the book sent when Chapter 3 was completed. The fact that he was concentrating on detecting the use of mana redoubled the effect. A chill ran down his spine.

“Dear God. Already? That’s bordering on natural talent with the Ability. No one has ever gotten to the end of Chapter 3 in three days. Not in our recorded history.”

A second chill ran down his spine.

Brenda turned over in bed to talk to her husband. “Tom?”

“Yes, hon?”

“Do you think she’s asleep?”

“I think so.”

“Have you noticed how Fiona seems to be, well, different lately?”

“She seems to be a bit more interested in her school work.”

“There’s that, but I get the feeling she doesn’t want to talk anymore.”

“When did you notice it?”

“In the past day or so.”

“How can you tell in just a day?”

“Call it...women’s intuition.”

“OK, so what do you think is happening?”

“Irritability, not going out with her friends, tiredness, those are all signs of depression.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“I’ll try to watch for anything else, and I’ll try and talk to her.”

“I think you worry too much. Promise me you’ll leave it be for a few more days at least.”

“Alright.”

“Speaking of being tired, we should get some sleep too.”

Chapter 5

The Meeting

The next morning she awoke with memories of dreams of tall men in black suits, black ties, black sunglasses and earpieces coming to find her. Half the time she was trying to run away, and half the time she was looking for them.

After school, she got home and made extra sure to lock the front door. She went up to her room, and as she dropped her backpack on the floor, she heard a knock at the door. She froze. Oh, it's probably some kid wanting me to sponsor him or her for something or other. No big deal. She walked downstairs and opened the door, and saw a boy about her age in a silverchair T-shirt. As she was about to say, "Are you here to get me to sponsor you?", he said, "I'm from The Protectorate".

She paused. "Huh?"

"I'm here to answer your questions about The Protectorate."

"I thought you wanted me to sign up to sponsor you for something or other. You don't exactly look like a secret agent."

"Yeah, I get that a lot. But seriously, if I looked like a secret agent, I'd stick out like a sore thumb. Why don't I just wear a sign that says, 'Hi, I'm from a secret organisation?' "

She thought about this, and laughed. "Come on in", she said, her guard let down a little at his joke. Brian and Fiona sat down at the kitchen table.

"Could you pull out the tome?"

"You mean, the book?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sure." She went to her bedroom to grab the book, and returned to the kitchen table quickly. She was still a little unsure about her new visitor.

“OK, let’s start with the name, ‘The Protectorate’. What exactly are you protecting, anyway?”

“Innocent people.”

“That’s kind of vague.”

“Well, that’s the best I can do right now. Exactly what we do needs to be kept absolutely secret, and until you’ve been with us for a few months, and we make sure it’s a good fit, I can’t tell you.”

“Hmm...sounds like I’m applying for a job.”

“That’s not far from the truth, except that instead of paying you, you get to meet people like yourself and hopefully save more lives using your Ability than anyone has in say, firefighting or police work.”

“So you protect innocent people?”

“That’s right.”

“Protect them from what, exactly?”

“I can’t say yet, but the major responsibility of membership is going to come at some point in the future, when there will be a lot of lives at stake. Unfortunately we don’t know exactly when.”

“You mean like some major Earth disaster like a meteor or earthquake or something?”

“Something like that.”

“How do you know it’s going to happen? It seems like all those other kooky end of the world stories that never happened. Like Y2K, but even more vague.”

“With Y2K, we had time to get prepared. I hope it’s the same with what’s in store for us. By the way, we call it ‘Phase III’. Hopefully, it won’t be the end of the world, because we’ll be ready for it, and we’ve planned for what happens after it as well. Unfortunately, I can’t explain why we know it’s going to happen or what it is that’s going to happen until you get promoted.”

“Alright, so what *can* you tell me.”

“How about the rights, responsibilities and privileges?”

“OK.”

“You have the right to leave at any time. As for responsibilities, we need to have a rapport of absolute trust. If I ever lied to you, I’d be out of the organisation, no questions asked, no excuses taken. Same with you. Unfortunately, you can’t be as candid about us with non-members. We’re all preparing for Phase III by continuously honing our Abilities. When it happens, everyone’s going to know who we are and what we’re doing, and

hopefully we're going to save a lot of lives, but before that happens, you've got to be quiet about all this. It's unfortunate that we're asking you to be completely truthful with members and hide all this from non-members, but for now, it'll have to stay that way. I suppose it's part of the tradition of our organisation, and it has served us well, but it's a bit hypocritical. That also means not using your Ability obviously in public. Do that and you're out. It's fine in a small way, if no one sees or understands what you're doing is, say, beyond reality. Keep it a closely guarded secret.

"The privileges are that you can ask for my help when you're troubled or in danger, and I'll be there no matter what. If you join, I'll teach you how to signal me. I know a lot about you, in fact I was the one who suggested we give a book to you, but unfortunately I can't reciprocate. We have strict rules about contacting other members. Those with lower rank signal people of higher rank, but those of higher rank don't go and see people of lower rank regularly so that it limits what we know in case someone from the outside wants to tear down the organisation. I don't know how to contact people of higher rank other than signalling them, and they can assess the situation properly when they arrive. People at the same rank don't know each other, and don't find out about each other. That way, if one of us is captured, which hasn't happened in over two hundred years, the people of higher rank will scope out the situation, and try to rescue a person in danger if possible without revealing who they are. That way, if a person of lower rank is coerced into signalling a person of higher rank, the person of higher rank won't get captured."

"Wow, you guys have thought a lot about all this."

"In the beginning, when more people knew about magik, more extreme measures were needed to ensure that we remained a secret. Unfortunately it was needed because regular people tend to mistrust us. The rules are strict, but we've remained together for quite some time. No one knows exactly how long, but there are rumours The Protectorate has gone back to the Dark Ages."

"So that explains the letter."

"As far as we know, the letter was first written in Latin. During the Dark Ages we had to go even further underground. At one point, many considered us to get our powers from Satan, and knowledge of any kind was almost considered Satanic, so a lot of it had to be destroyed before anyone outside the organisation could get their hands on it, or discover who we were. It was basically a witch hunt, about 600 to 700 years before Salem. We hid the most

important documents and destroyed much of the rest. Unfortunately, some things were lost forever. After that, we wanted to make sure of complete secrecy.

“As for the tome, it chooses a style that makes for easy reading for the reader. If you knew Japanese best, it would appear in Japanese. The cover would appear on the other side, and the pages would appear right to left. Unfortunately, making a tome like that was one of the things we lost during the Dark Ages. We only have a few of these, but they’re incredibly resilient. As long as they stay around a mana field, they’ll probably last forever.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“I’ve laid out all the rights, responsibilities, and privileges, and you’ll have to base your decision on that. For those three things, there aren’t going to be any more strings.”

“And I can read the rest of the book.”

“Yes.”

She thought about all this for a minute in silence.

“Alright, count me in.”

Brian was nearly unable to hold back his relief.

“OK, but remember, you can’t lie to another member or reveal your Ability to anyone, regardless of the consequences. That’s absolutely unforgivable.”

“I understand.”

“Alright, I’ll teach you how to signal me. Use it when you’re in danger, or if you’ve been on one chapter in the book for a week and can’t get it. Don’t abuse the signal.”

“I won’t.”

“Alright, here goes. As a courtesy, I’ve pushed some of my mana away from you so that you didn’t get overwhelmed when you walked to the door. You’ve only experienced the tome’s energy, and the tome’s energy pales in comparison to both your energy and mine. Do you remember the feeling you get when you walk close to the tome?”

“Yes. I can feel it right now, in fact.”

“That’s good. I’m going to slowly move my mana back around myself now. You’re going to feel much the same sensation, but it will be stronger this time, since I control much more mana than the tome. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“OK.”

At first, she felt as though there were two books in the room, but the new one got stronger and stronger, and closer and closer to the boy. Soon, it was so strong that she didn't need to concentrate to feel it anymore.

"How are you doing so far?"

"OK, I guess."

"Alright, I'm almost finished."

She could then feel his full power. It was roughly the size of her own.

"Am I about as strong as you?"

"You have about the same amount of mana around you as I do. Your Ability is about as strong as mine, which is pretty strong. When I first noticed you, I nearly froze up. But size isn't the only thing that matters. It matters how well you can use it too." He said suggestively.

Slowly she could feel the mana surround them, and soon couldn't tell the difference between her mana and his mana.

"When two people who have the Ability meet and hold their mana close like this, it surrounds both of them. Mana doesn't have an owner, it just moves toward people who have the Ability. If a stronger person has used up some of their mana and walks near a weaker person, then more mana will collect around the stronger person. If you were weaker than me, when I leave you, I'd focus some back into you from a distance. You should do the same if you meet someone weaker than you. It's only fair.

"Also, when two or more people perform some collaborative magik, they work closely together so that they can benefit from the mana of all of them combined.

"To signal me, you need to focus your mana and transfer a lot of energy in a short burst. You should always keep some mana around for signalling in an emergency. Don't ever use it all up. It doesn't really matter what you transfer, but the best thing in most circumstances is to make the wind around you blow faster. First of all, it's simple. You already know how to move a solid object, the tome, so making the wind around you blow faster will be child's play for you. Second, it's not as conspicuous as, say, making a fireball flame up to the sky like a flare."

Fiona laughed, then nearly jumped in surprise.

"Can you really make a fireball?"

"It's difficult, but possible. It wastes a lot of mana, but it's really showy."

"No doubt..."

"You'll get there. Now slide the tome a little on the table."

She remembered the force she used before, and eased it off a little. She focussed the same amount, but tried to slide the book just a little. The book slid slightly on the table.

He looked impressed. "Great. That's a good measuring of force. Now focus on the air above the book, and move that."

She did, and felt a very small breeze.

He said, "Good. You know you made a new record."

"I did?"

"Yeah, you got through the first three chapters in three days. I think you have a natural talent to go with your Ability. Most people struggle with the first few chapters for at least a few days each. The previous record was five days."

She didn't know what to say, so he continued, "Now force the air above the book harder."

She focussed the same amount as before, but used the same amount of force she used on the book when it slid all the way off the desk. They both felt a strong breeze.

He said in amazement, "Wow, that's good. I could have felt that in the next block. Try moving the air outside."

She got up out of the chair. He said, "No, have a seat. Do it from here."

"OK..."

She focussed her mana on the air outside. It took more effort than usual to pull the mana from around her body outside, but she managed. She forced the air to move, slowly at first, but with increasing intensity.

"OK, stop now. You're going to blow the trees in your backyard over." He joked. "With the amount of transfer that you just did, I'd be able to feel it from across town. Also remember that anyone else with the Ability who is near will also be able to feel it, and in time, you'll be able to feel it if I did the same amount of transfer across the city."

"After I feel you signal me, I should be able to be near you in about ten seconds."

"Did you say ten seconds?"

"That's right."

"From across town? How?"

"That's another secret for now. It's in chapter fifteen. Oh, and signal me when you get to the end of chapter fifteen."

She heard her mom drive up in the car.

"Oh, shit! My mom's going to see you!"

“My cue to leave. Good luck, Initiate.”

He put his hand on the book and it started to glow a faint blue. Then he stood up and a blue fog encircled him. She could feel that he was using a lot of mana for whatever it was that he was doing. Very quickly, it seemed as though he was made of the blue fog. Then he was gone.

She heard a key in the lock, and realized she wanted to hide the book, but it was too late. She was standing by the time her mom opened the door.

“Hi honey, what’s up?”

“She looked at the fridge. Oh, I was just looking for something to eat.”

“Well, there’s some leftover Chicken Helper in there.”

“Oh, right. That sounds good. Actually, on second thought maybe I’ll just have something to drink.”

She grabbed a glass from the cupboard, and got some water.

“How’s school going?”

“OK.”

She focussed her mana on the book, and she held it aloft. Her mom didn’t even blink. Good, she thought, she can’t see it. She carefully moved the book through the air, past her mother’s head to the stairs. Her mom was completely oblivious. It was all she could do to avoid having the water go up her nose. As the book got further out from her, it got harder and harder to focus on it. It then slammed to the ground, making a huge thump. Fiona cringed.

“What?”

Quickly thinking of a cover up, she said, “Oh, I just remembered that I have to read two extra chapters for English class tonight. I’d better get started.”

“OK. You know if there’s anything you want to talk about, I’m here.”

“Yep.”

She took what was left of the water to the stairs. When she got there, she floated the book up to her other hand, taking it up the stairs in one fluid motion. She set the book and glass of water on her desk, and closed her door. That was odd, she thought. I’ve never tried to move something at the edge of my mana field. I’d better not try that again. She opened the book to chapter four.

In the past chapters, you learned how to convert mana into kinetic energy. In this chapter, you will learn how to convert mana into heat. This book is special in many ways. In particular, it can't be burned. At first, you should focus on this book when you practice. You must take great care when you perform the conversion, or you may set something on fire accidentally. It is a good idea to have some water nearby.

She looked over at what was left of the water sitting on the desk. That was lucky, she thought. I hope I don't have to use it.

When you turn the page, this book will use some of its mana, and heat up a few degrees. Hold your hand on the book when you turn the page, and as you feel the book heat up, concentrate on the energy transference taking place.

She turned the page. It felt as though the book was a part of her body, it was cold, and it was heating up to body temperature. She could also feel the temperature by touch, and tried to put these two feelings together. It only rose a few degrees, barely able to be felt by touch, but slightly easier to feel with her sixth sense.

Now focus your mana on this book, and raise the temperature further. Make sure the water is within easy reach.

She moved the glass of water closer to the book, and focussed hard on one spot in the centre of the book. She felt the book as an extension of herself again, and tried to imagine her blood flowing through the book, warming it up. She felt a spike in the temperature of the book, and quickly stopped. She picked up the book, to look for any ashes or burn marks on the table. There were none. As she placed the book down, she saw new words on the page.

Heat is difficult to control, and you should always be careful when using it, since fires are even harder to control, magikally or otherwise. Chapter Five is now open to you.

She realized that it wouldn't be long until supper, so she put the book out of the way, and started on her homework.

Brian phased in on Drexl. He remembered the startled reaction on Fiona's face when he left so abruptly. He tried to remember the first time he had seen someone phase out, and smiled at the recollection. He had picked up the use of the fog to ease the impression on people seeing it from his mentor. It was practical, but it had a certain flair to it. Without the fog to cover his exit, she would have seen his insides as he phased out. It had taken some time to become used to the sight of someone phasing out without the fog as well as with.

It had also taken him quite some time to get used to the bluish tinge in the trees and grass, and the two suns here. He didn't need to signal his presence, since anyone here could feel the amount of mana required for a person to phase in. Ken opened the door of the cottage and rushed up to greet him. His long cloak was flapping in the breeze.

"Brian! Have a good trip?"

"Hi Ken. The Travel itself was pretty uneventful."

"I hope it didn't take too much out of you."

"I've been making a lot of runs lately, but I'm starting to get used to it again."

"So I assume by that smile on your face that you have good news for me. Why don't you come in and have a seat?"

"Sure."

They walked into the cottage and took seats at the large table. Both the cottage and table had seen a lot of use, but they were well kept. Most of the

important meetings in his life with The Protectorate had happened around this table.

Ken started first. "So she accepted?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. You said that she has the Ability as strongly as you do?"

"Yes."

"We can't afford to lose her."

"I know. Should we have a 24 hour guard?"

"You taught her how to signal you?"

"Yes."

Ken contemplated in silence for a moment, and said, "How many operatives do we have in the immediate area, on average?"

"Enough to cover her 24/7."

"Hmm...I think the shield should offer her enough cover while she's asleep. We haven't had any enemies show up for quite some time. Besides, we don't want to violate her privacy. How much did you tell her?"

"Only as much as she needed to know to make a decision. Although something tells me that if she got to keep the book at the end of the deal, she would have agreed to anything."

"The book holds a great deal of power over someone who has just received it. It is imperative that we don't use that power incorrectly."

"I know."

"What about her talent?"

"She beat the record."

Ken was left speechless for a moment, with his mouth open. "How many days?"

"Three."

"That's a cause for great celebration! That will give us a much needed boost for Phase III. Although, we should wait until she finishes the book before we celebrate. That will also give me time to prepare. What's her favourite food?"

"Chicken nachos supreme."

"A girl after my own heart." Ken chuckled.

"Is there anything else?"

"Any news on the Amulet?"

"We've got everyone we can spare still looking for it. We're trying to reach as far as we can out there, but it would help if we had someone who could Travel farther and detect it from farther away."

They lapsed into silence as they both contemplated what would happen if someone else found it first. If The Protectorate found the Amulet first, then they could choose when Phase III would begin, and where. Even if some other group found it before them, it could still turn out to their advantage, as long as they didn't use it against Earth directly. Although The Protectorate had not existed the last time it was used, other races they had met told stories of its existence, and that after its use worlds had been conquered and massive trade alliances had been formed. It seemed that nearly every race that had a story about the Amulet had a different perspective on how it should be used, if at all. Some would be perfectly content if it was never found again.

They had heard a full range of stories, from the genocide of several species of sentient life in great lengthy wars, to opening the door to meeting hundreds of peaceful civilizations. The Protectorate sometimes dealt with one trade alliance that had been formed after the use of the Amulet, and the alliance had been around for millennia. Those ties would become crucial at the start of Phase III. Some in the Protectorate foresaw Earth becoming a new centre of trade in the universe, others were more cautious. The consequences of finding it, taking it to Earth and activating it could be equally devastating. If the Amulet were found, it might cause a rift in the Protectorate. There had been rifts before, but not in the lifetime of anyone currently in the organisation.

Still, since there were no records of the Protectorate ever finding it, many believed it would never reappear in their lifetime.

Chapter 6

Self-Confidence

The next day, Fiona said goodbye to her mother and father as usual before they left for work, and as she was tying her shoes, she wondered how small an object she could move with her Ability. She looked at one of the laces, and thought it would be a good test. She focussed her mana on it, and tried to move it, but felt and saw both laces move. Fiona focussed tighter on one of the laces, and successfully moved it slightly with her Ability. Her concentration was broken by the need to get out to the end of her driveway to catch the bus, but she vividly remembered the feeling of satisfaction she got by passing her own test, even until lunch hour at school.

As she was walking toward the cafeteria with her friends, she saw Kyle berating a smaller kid near one of the doors. For a moment, she was happy that it wasn't her this time, but she quickly put that thought away. People were standing around, but everyone was focussed on the argument. Usually Kyle's attention span for bullying wasn't long enough to attract onlookers, Fiona thought in amusement. She distracted Kyle and the onlookers.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing!" Fiona yelled. Kyle looked over to her and did a double take as he realized that not only was Fiona speaking up, she was doing it on someone else's behalf. Now that she had everyone's attention, she deftly started to untie Kyle's shoelaces, as she had practiced earlier. He took an almost imperceptible moment to regain his composure, oblivious to what was really going on down below.

"What's it to you?"

"Don't you think he's had enough?"

"Mind your own business!"

“Pick on someone your own size!”

“Who, like, you?”

He lunged at Fiona to try to scare her away, but tripped over his own shoelaces, since Fiona was still holding them with her Ability and hadn't had time to let them go. There was a huge uproar of laughter, then the smaller boy darted into the cafeteria. Kyle, now speechless, tied his shoelaces, and stomped off, thoroughly embarrassed. She felt a jolt of satisfaction.

“That was lucky,” her friend Mary said.

“He had it coming to him. Besides, if he had of made it over to me, I would've kicked his ass anyway.”

“Where did all that self-confidence come from? You've never stood up for anyone that I can remember. Sometimes not even yourself.”

“I've been reading a...self-help book.”, she covered quickly. That's not even far from the truth, she thought.

“So that's why you haven't been out of the house lately.”

“Yeah.”

“The author of your self-help book needs to write more about socializing with peers.”

“OK, ok, I get the hint. How about we go to the Palasad tomorrow night?”

“Sure.”

After she got home from school, and had just finished walking up the stairs, she heard a knock at the door. As she walked back down the stairs, she wondered who it could be...but her train of thought was derailed as the full force of another mana field caught her by complete surprise. Why is he...Oh my God I've used my Ability in a public place, oh shit I'm going to lose the book. As she opened the door she expected to see anger and resentment for trusting her on his face, but all she saw was a bright smile.

“Hi, come in.” She said lamely.

“I was impressed with how you handled that incident at school.”

“You...were?”

“Yeah, I would've done the same thing.”

“Really? But what about using my Ability in a public place?”

“I admit it was gutsy, and if anyone found out...that would have been...a very unfortunate turn of events, but you distracted them pretty well. Protecting the innocent, which is exactly the reason we exist, is what you did today. Doing it with your Ability without anyone knowing takes talent and skill. Today, you showed me you have both.”

“Oh,” was all she could manage for a moment, and then asked, a little indignantly, “How did you know?”

“I keep a close eye on you. It’s part of my...job.”

“You’re watching my every move, just waiting for me to screw up!”

“No, that’s not quite true. Yes, I’m responsible if you make a mistake. But it’s partly for your protection as well. We can’t afford to lose you, we can’t afford to lose anyone as a member, really, but that doesn’t mean you get carte blanche. Everyone needs to abide by the rules. You let your emotions guide your actions today, and sometimes that’s exactly what you need to do. But when you think about using the Ability in public, you better use your head too, and make sure no one finds out. All I’m suggesting is that you remember to use restraint. I’m watching what you do in public to make sure you live up to our high standards, since I know you’re capable of achieving them. You know how I mentioned you made a new record with the tome, and the previous record was five days?”

“Yeah?”

“That was my record. But don’t worry, I don’t hold a grudge. I’d better go before your neighbours say anything to your parents. If anyone asks, tell them I was trying to spread the Word.” He smiled, and walked away.

Damn, she thought. I forgot to ask for his name. Although, he probably wouldn’t have told me anyway. Fiona locked the door, and went back to her room to study the book further. She still had an hour before her mom was due back home.

First Steps: Chapter Five: Just Chillin’

In the last chapter, you learned how to convert mana into heat. In this chapter, you will learn how to convert heat into mana. Cold is the absence of heat. When you convert heat into mana, it will make the focussed object cold, and you will have added its energy to your mana field. Performing this transformation is

exactly the opposite of the last chapter, so use that fact to your advantage.

When you turn the page, this book will use its power to convert some of its heat energy into mana. That mana will be formed near this book, and will become part of your own mana field. You don't need to concentrate on how much mana you get, because it will only be a small amount. Concentrate on the transformation taking place, and remember it.

She turned the page, but kept her hand on the book. It felt as if it were an extension of herself, and it started to cool down slightly. Words formed on the page.

Now, perform the transformation yourself.

She focussed her mana on the book, and remembered how she heated it up in the last chapter. The book started to warm up. Now she imagined pulling some of the heat out of the book, and adding the energy to her body. Nothing happened. With the confidence she had learned in the previous chapters, she tried again, with more effort, but still, nothing happened. She focussed her mana tighter on just a small part of the book, near her hand, and tried with a lot of effort. Nothing happened. "What am I doing wrong?", she whimpered aloud.

She remembered that the boy had told her not to signal him unless she couldn't figure out a chapter in a week. It made it even harder on her that she had just seen him. A week? Surely he couldn't have meant a whole week. I'll try for a few more days. I'll get it, she resolved. Unable to continue for now, she started her homework.

That night she was sitting at the supper table with her mom and dad as usual.

"Could I have the car tomorrow night? A bunch of friends and I are going to the Palasad."

Her mother and father looked at each other for a moment, and her mother said, "Don't they serve alcohol there?"

“Only after 9 o’clock. Then you need to get an arm-band. But don’t make me come home at 9. It’s just getting interesting by then. Besides, all my friends and I are under-age, how am I going to get a drink?”

Her mother thought about this for a moment, but she didn’t really need to. Fiona had used this argument before, and already knew the answer before she opened her mouth.

“So you meet a cute guy who gives you a drink.” She quickly added, “That’s even worse with all those ‘date-rape’ drugs around. You can never tell.”

“Mom, I’m old enough to take care of myself. Besides, I’d be driving home, and I know better than to drive drunk. Especially under-age.”

Her mother and father shared a long look, and her mother relented.

“Alright, I suppose you deserve a break after studying so hard for the past few days. Be back by 11 o’clock.”

“Thanks! No problem.”

“And if you have any alcohol...”

“I won’t have any alcohol,” she emphasized.

Chapter 7

Building Alliances

Derek phased in to the room the Network had provided to him at exactly the appointed hour. He could arrive for a meeting here without anyone on the planet knowing and disappear just as easily. The Network prized punctuality above all else. With everyone on the planet practising punctuality, the system could run smoothly, with everything at the appointed hour, everything occurring according to the Plan.

Although the Network was a system of computers, and there were many ways of interacting with it, it realised the importance of face-to-face communication to humans, and provided a holographic person as an avatar.

The avatar and Derek bowed formally and equally deep as a greeting.

“Greetings, Derek. I thank you for your timely arrival.” the hologram offered.

“Greetings to you, avatar of the Network. I thank you for your time.” Derek replied, just as formally.

“Please sit.” The Network shifted the image of the hologram to appear seated. Derek sat in the perfectly real chair beside him.

“We and The Protectorate have both gained much from our mutual alliance. We have considered your request for holographic emitters, and we have determined that they will not be effective for making it appear as though you are a different race.”

Derek’s face fell.

“We have discovered...another option.”

Derek improved his look to cautiously optimistic.

“We have developed a series of genetically engineered adenoviruses that will change a human into one of the forms you have provided, and the means for returning a transformed person into their original form.”

Derek was completely awe-struck, and speechless.

“They take approximately two Earth days to complete a transformation close enough to mimic the forms you have provided, but the end result is a hybrid. The internal organs remain human. The process also requires a substantial amount of sustenance and elimination. There is also some pain. “We continue to develop newer and better forms of these adenoviruses that either do not create as much pain, or provide enough endorphins throughout the process that the pain is not felt. We will also attempt to reduce the length of time required for the transformation. “These new discoveries have provided hope for some on our world who have problems with body image, and so we will not ask for quite so much in return.”

Derek was still struggling with the possibilities.

“We require sand to make glass for fiber optic cable. Many of our older cables need replacement. We will provide these serums and the means for returning a person to their original form for 1 372 metric tonnes of sand. “We will not disturb the beaches of our world to procure this sand because the loss of their beauty would affect world morale. We turn to you.”

The Protectorate had many uninhabitable worlds from which to get the sand required. The only problem was arranging for the transport of so much of it. It could take months for the transfer to be completed, but the Protectorate was nothing if not patient, and they had enough talented people.

“We will not be able to guarantee the quality. We could continue providing you with impure sand until you have enough pure sand for your needs. Simply tell us when it is sufficient.”

“We find your offer acceptable. We will provide a place for you to phase in the sand and when we have enough we will fulfill our part of the agreement.”

If Derek was dealing with anyone else, he would have suggested that for each fraction of sand provided, they would provide a serum for one more race, but the Network had never attempted to weasel out of any contract once made. From time to time, they had suggested alternatives, but they always maintained they would uphold the original agreement if the changes were not acceptable.

“A most mutually beneficial arrangement. The only problem I can foresee is that it may be difficult to find volunteers to try the serum. You have not had any humans to test it on. I don’t doubt you can provide what you have

agreed to, but many will be scared of such a solution. Our most publicised efforts in genetic engineering on this scale have resulted in the death of the patient.”

“We were not aware of your own efforts, and thus we had not anticipated this potential problem. The people of this planet are not too different genetically than humans. We can provide you with clinical trials and the studies with the people we have directly helped with their self-image problems. We will, of course, remove the personally identifiable details to ensure confidentiality. If you find this information insufficient we will attempt to help you find a solution.”

“I hope that will be enough. You have been most generous, as always. I will inform the Protectorate.”

“Thank you. We see no need to change the next meeting time. We will find a location for you to phase in the sand by then, and we will inform you of the location at that time.”

The hologram shifted again, and was now standing. Derek also stood.

They bowed again.

Derek phased out, and began the Travel back to Drexel. The Protectorate would be most pleased. Although he was raised in a Western family, he suggested the bow as a greeting because the Network wasn't able to produce an avatar that gave the particular nuances of a firm handshake. The only thing to find out now was who was interested in becoming the first to use the Network's serum. As it would turn out, they were about to have the entirely opposite problem. The members of the Protectorate had the pioneering spirit in spades.