

1           Zuzanny couldn't remember how she got there, or even where she  
2 had been before she showed up in this blank empty void. She figured she  
3 had to be somewhere different than she was before, otherwise, this would  
4 all seem familiar. And she wouldn't have bothered taking note she was  
5 there.

6  
7           Everything around her was black. Actually, it was debatable  
8 whether there was anything at all around her, black or otherwise. If  
9 there were walls, or a ceiling, Zuzanny couldn't distinguish them from  
10 the bit of blackness she happened to be standing on. ~~She looked~~

11  
12           She looked down. There was a ring of light encircling her feet,  
13 like she was standing under a spotlight, but either the light was so ~~faint~~  
14 faint, or the ground was that deep a color, so that it was barely ~~visible~~  
15 visible. ~~She~~

16  
17           She looked up. There was no light source to be seen. ~~Not a spotlight~~  
18 even stars, a moon, or a sun, much less a spotlight.

19  
20           She must be indoors, then, she figured. So there must be some ~~wall~~  
21 walls around here somewhere.

1           She held up her hand. Despite the lack of a visible light source,  
2 she could see her appendages as clearly as if she were standing outside  
3 on a clear summer day.

4  
5           She could also see her breath, puffing up into her vision every  
6 few seconds. She crossed her arms, suddenly aware of ~~how cold it was.~~  
7 the cold. Well, it certainly didn't feel like a summer day.

8  
9           She spun around, scanning her surroundings once again. Just in  
10 case she missed something.

11  
12           Nothing. Still the same empty blackness, with no variation but  
13 herself and her own little circle of light. This time, though, it didn't  
14 seem...right. Her first observation she took on faith that, yes, her  
15 surroundings consisted of nothing but empty blackness. Something in her  
16 second observation triggered a reaction in her head. There was something  
17 off.

18  
19           She remembered a trick Iwona had shown her years ago. She  
20 squeezed her eyes shut as much as she could, and listened.

1           At first, it didn't seem to work. The only sound she was aware of  
2 was her own breathing. Scowling to herself, she pressed her palms into  
3 her eyes, and held her breath, listening with all the fervor her 10-year-  
4 old body could muster.

5  
6           There it was. Off to her right, she heard a muffled ~~rubbery,~~  
7 ~~crunching~~ sound, like someone treading on a fragile surface, but not  
8 particularly caring if their steps crack it. And it was moving. Not with  
9 any direction or speed in mind, just a leisurely meander, as if wandering  
10 a museum.

11  
12           Not opening her eyes, Zuzanny turned to face the sound. Then, ~~with~~  
13 a deep breath and all of her ~~fragile~~ attention span focused on the source  
14 of the noise, she stretched her arms out in front of her, and took a ~~giant~~  
15 giant, hopscotch worthy step.

16           And then another.

17           And then another.

18  
19           And another.

20  
21           And another.

1                   And one more.

2  
3                   Her fingers kept twitching with each step, expecting to collide  
4 with something. When the sound suddenly ceased, she continued thunking  
5 her way in the direction she last heard the noises.

6  
7                   "What are you doing?"

8  
9                   Zuzanny jumped involuntarily, opening her eyes in the process.

10  
11                  Standing next to her, in a personal fractal of ice and frozen  
12 air, was a lady. Her hair and robe were the same dark shade, that only  
13 stood out from her surroundings because of the occasional swirling  
14 snowflake encircling her, breaking the uniform black around them. A ring  
15 of keys hung from her hip on a pale cord, and she held a scythe in her  
16 right hand like a wizard's staff. She reminded Zuzanny of Laurienty. ~~Kind~~  
17 Kinda. Not really.

18  
19                  Zuzanny cocked her head to one side. "Were you the one making the  
20 crunching noises?"

1 "Like this?" the lady took a step forward, her foot crunching  
2 against the ice.

3

4 Zuzanny nodded. "Yep. That. I was trying to find you, then."

5

6 The lady laughed, causing some of the snow around her head to  
7 speed up as if in a shaken snowglobe.

8

9 "What?"

10

11 "Usually people try to avoid me."

12

13 "Why?"

14

15 "I frighten them."

16

17 "Why do you do that?"

18

19 "Can't you guess?"

20

21 "Yeah," Zuzanny said, poking at passing snowflakes. And she let ~~h~~

A1

1 the point drop there.

2

3 "Are you okay?" she asked, still playing with the passing snow.

4

5 "What do you mean?"

6

7 "Are you sick? You look...really thin."

8

9 The lady smiled again in response. "No, it's just another part of  
10 the job."

11

12 "Ah." She moved her attention back to the surrounding void. ~~"Where~~

13 "Where are we?"

14

15 "My passageway between worlds. It's another part of the job."

16

17 "Do you know how I got here?"

18

19 "I have an idea. I can check if you'd like."

20

21 "Yes please."

A

1           The lady crunched ~~over~~to stand directly in front of her. She  
2 gently brushed away Zuzanny's bangs and began rubbing the middle of her ~~h~~  
3 forehead, ~~as~~if cleaning something off, before holding her face still by  
4 the chin in her other hand.

5  
6           After scanning her face, the lady backed up, her own brown ~~furrows~~  
7 furrowed.

8  
9           "Well, you didn't get here the usual way," she said.

10  
11          "What are the unusual ways then?"

12  
13          "It depends. Which world did you come from?"

14  
15          Zuzanny scrunched up her face, trying to remember.

16  
17          "Is...Faerie a world? I think I came from there."

18  
19          The lady looked askance, reaching protectively towards her key  
20 ring. "I highly doubt that."  
21

1 "Why?"

2  
3 "They've locked their entryway. I can't get in, and no one can  
4 leave."

5  
6 Zuzanny glanced from the key ring to the lady. "Can't you unlock  
7 it?" she asked, pointing at it.

8  
9 The lady glowered at her thoughts. "If I had my key. But they ~~stole~~  
10 stole it long ago."

11  
12 Zuzanny considered ~~this~~ a moment. "And the entryway is the ~~usual~~  
13 'usual' way of getting here?"

14  
15 "Yes."

16  
17 "Didn't you say I came here in an unusual way?"

18  
19 "Yes, but even in worlds where I'm welcomed, those means are  
20 dangerous. The risks involved would require a very strong motivation."  
21



1 "Like what?"

2  
3 "Are you trying to retrieve someone?"

4  
5 "I don't think so."

6  
7 "To seek advice or answers from the dead?"

8  
9 "No, that's not it."

10  
11 "Did you want to know what happens after you take the 'usual' ~~route~~  
12 route?"

13  
14 "Kinda...but not exactly."

15  
16 "Do you want to die?"

17  
18 "No..." realization sprang onto her face. "But I know people who  
19 do."

20  
21 The lady's defensive stance slackened slightly. "What?"

"I remember how I got here! And why!

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