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New Beginning

Time: The day they left Hogwarts castle

Place: ???

The woods were sparse and pleasant, with soft yellow sunlight filtering down through an endless variety of leaves above. Along the branches of the trees which held these leaves sang just as endless a variety of birds, and small fuzzy creatures darted and played along the trunks as well. No creatures suffered here, and fear was unknown. Curiosity, however, was not, and as the doorway of light opened into the forest, birds and animals gathered around to see what would happen next. Unsurprisingly, a girl named Susan with green eyes, blond hair and a bit of a swagger stepped through and looked around. A cat named Sparkle quickly followed her. The cat was a normal, everyday, plain looking cat, but looked around as though it was intelligent. She was followed by a girl named Luna, who was gripping a wooden wand tightly. Luna had long, nearly white hair, and she was just a smidgen shorter than Susan. Both were dressed in traveling clothes, with good stout boots, sensible pants, and several layers on top that could be removed in warmer climates. Luna had a pouch hanging at her belt, which was bigger on the inside, and she carried all manner of things that might be useful on a journey such as this one. One particularly valuable book rested inside, so she might learn more magic along her journey. Susan, of course, carried nothing, having near instant access to her *Pocket Dimension* which held her own book of spells, along with various odds and ends she had picked up over the years. And of course she carried her own "paradise" around in the form of her *Personal Dimension*, in case they ran into a completely inhospitable environment.

Where they found themselves, however, was warm, with a pleasant breeze that rustled the leaves of the trees overhead. Both looked around with interest, but the trees, even spaced apart as they were, obstructed vision. Susan looked at Luna as if to ask "which way" but Luna just shrugged. Susan pointed, but Luna shook her head. She bent down and poked at the earth with her wand, and in seconds, a flower had grown there.

"Just so we don't start going in circles," she remarked. "I would hate to cut into a tree or anything here."

"Yes," replied Susan. "Let's not antagonize our host."

The two walked through the forest, with Luna making more flowers as they went to track their position, and they soon came back to what Susan recognized was the first flower Luna had made.

"But we've been going in a straight line!" she protested, looking at it.

"Then let's head this way."

Twice more they adjusted course, after returning to the spot they had arrived in, and came upon a cute looking cabin in a clearing.

"There she is," said Susan.

"If she's in."

"I don't think she can go anywhere..." Susan stepped up to the door and softly knocked.

"Come in," said a voice from within, and the door cracked open. Susan pushed it the rest of the way, and stepped into the room. It was a rustic looking living room, and she saw other rooms connected by doors, leading into a kitchen and possibly a bedroom.

"These flowers are lovely," said a small figure, coming from the kitchen. She held a vase full of the flowers Luna had been making, and set them down on a table.

"Lady Inari?" asked Susan, looking the girl over. She had fox ears, and wore a Japanese kimono. Her hair was fiery red, and she was about half as tall as Susan.

"Maybe I am, and maybe I'm not," she said. "Come in, close the door. Were you raised in a barn?" She giggled, walking through the other door, and the two girls looked at each other. Luna swung the door closed and they stepped after her. The room they entered was bare, but had a large circle drawn in chalk in the center. The girl was looking this way and

that, obviously trying to decide what marble she wanted to go for. Colorful spheres littered the floor of the place, and Susan was careful where she was stepping as she saw them all. Sparkle batted one out of the way, and had to hold herself back from pouncing on it as it rolled. Human intelligence or not, she was still a cat.

"Look, my father told my mother, who warned me about your little games. I know who you are."

"Why did you ask, then?" She flicked a marble with her thumb, knocking one out of the circle.

"I felt it would be polite."

"Good. Politeness is important. What can I do for you, Susan? And aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Luna, this is the Lady Inari. Lady Inari, this is my friend Luna."

"Nice to meet you," said Luna, going to shake Inari's hand. There was a buzz and Luna jumped back.

Inari laughed, showing the buzzer she had. "Got you!" she said, grinning.

"Uh, yes you did. I must say, you're aren't what I expected."

"Didn't Susan tell you about me?"

"I thought she must be mistaken, or her father was having a little joke at our expense."

"While I would support the joke, no, this is how I am. So, you've come at last."

"It seems you know why I'm here. Saves me some explanation."

"You're here to track down your father," she said, knocking another marble. "I have to admit, even I'm a little worried. He hasn't checked in lately, and that's a problem."

"Do you know where he last was?"

Inari didn't answer for a moment. "No," she said at last. "I let them, and fate itself, guide the selection of worlds your father and his group went to." She held up a marble. "I sent them to the first world they went to, but after that, they had a choice of twelve."

"That isn't so bad. I feared it would be totally random, and I'd spend years searching. If I could even find them at all."

"It gets even better than that," said Inari, going over to a chest Susan hadn't realized was there. "I know I put it someplace..." She opened the lid and started rummaging through.

"These are worlds?" Luna asked Susan softly. She nodded. "I don't mean offense, but who are you, Lady Inari?"

She looked back over her shoulder. "I'm one of those higher order dimensional beings you've heard tell of. We're not all soul sucking monsters, you know." She went back to rummaging.

"Oh. Then how can we be... here?"

"Magic," said Inari.

"Right."

"Here it is!" Inari announced, pulling out an old, brass key. "That's the best way for you to proceed," she said, almost handing Susan the key. "Wait a minute, did I check you girls over?"

"Check us over?"

"Of course. I won't let you contaminate other worlds with disease from your own. Plus if you aren't fully healthy we'll have to do something about that before I let you go. World traveling isn't to be taken lightly, and you've got to be in top form if you want to do it. Don't worry, it won't hurt a bit."

Inari traced a weird symbol in the air, leaving behind a yellow trail where her finger had been. She completed it and slammed it into Luna, who was standing closest to her. The symbol vanished, and Inari closed her eyes and thought for a moment.

"Okay, you seem clean," she said. "No major diseases, and in good health. Next!"

She repeated the procedure for Susan and Sparkle, announcing they were also allowed to travel between worlds.

"I should hope so," said Susan, a little put off. "I don't recall being sick a day in my life."

"Probably because it wasn't important to the narrative," Sparkle muttered.

"But you could carry something that's harmless to you, but devastating to another world. You wouldn't want to be known as a plague carrier, would you?"

"I suppose not. I want to save worlds, not leave behind death wherever I go."

"Then what I did should be good piece of mind for you," Inari said, now handing over the key.

"It's magical," Susan said, taking it and doing a *Magic Sense* on it.

"That it is," giggled Inari. "I'll send you to the first world they landed on. It's up to you to track down what happened to them and where they went after that. This key will vibrate when you're near the place they left from. Stick it into the air like you were unlocking a door, and it'll open a gateway to the world they went to."

"I can follow them and figure out where they got stuck! Brilliant. Thanks a lot!"

"Sure thing. I wish I could do more, but this way seems the best way."

"It sounds good to me. I'm no more than 12 jumps behind them. I'll have found them in no time."

Inari smiled. "Be careful. Traveling between worlds is not to be taken lightly. Your father went with a group of three others, and he was much more powerful than you. But if you are dead set on going..."

"I am."

"Very well. I will issue you this warning. You seem to carry your magic with you, as a *Natural Magician*. Luna, your magic seems quite personal as well. I say this because you may visit worlds that are totally dominated by technology. This will leave little magical energies for you both to draw upon. Also, keep in mind that magic between worlds may work very differently. But I suppose you know that, given how different your magics are and the fact you came from the same world. Until you know the rules of each world, be especially cautious."

"We will," the girls chorused.

"Good. Now, see if you can find where your father left from, and use the key. The door will stay open for some time, so secure it before you go through. The trip can be a bit... tricky."

"We seemed to pass through some kind of intermediary space," said Luna. "Is that what you mean?"

Inari nodded. "It has weather and moods of its own. Even I do not like to linger between worlds. Strange things happen there. Prepare yourselves."

Susan nodded, then held up the key and started walking around. It wasn't hard to find, as right outside the door it started vibrating like mad. She held it out and was fascinated when it seemed to slide into a lock. She gave it a turn and twisted it, then pulled it out. A glowing rectangle appeared, and Susan handed the key to Luna.

"Keep this safe," she said.

"Of course," Luna replied, dropping it into her pouch and drawing the top closed again.

"Thank you, Inari," said Susan. "We'll have news for you soon, I hope."

"I'm sure you will. You know the spell to come back here, if you need my advice. I'll have to make a note to discuss that with your father when he gets here. Not that I don't like visitors, you understand, but I would rather that spell not get spread around. You do understand, I hope?"

Susan nodded.

"Good. I wish you luck."

Susan grabbed Luna's hand, and Sparkle jumped up to Susan's shoulder, and they stepped through. The door closed behind them.

"Did I forget to tell them something?" Inari asked herself. "I guess it wasn't important..." She went back to playing with her marbles. (Only some of which she had ever lost.)

On the other side of the door, a strange, colorful space swirled around the three, and there was a sense of motion though no landmarks existed to gauge their progress against. All around them, in the distance, were doors of light, openings to other worlds.

It was through one of these openings that a young boy tumbled, heading straight for the three of them.

"Flight," Susan cast in desperation, but nothing happened. "My magic-" she said as the boy crashed into her. This sent them spinning off course, and she felt Luna's hand slip out of hers.

"LUNA!" she called, as her friend spun off through this odd space and through a nearby door. Susan, the boy, and Sparkle sailed through another, and Susan hit the ground, getting the air knocked out of her.

"What has Zero Louise done this time?" she heard someone saying.

Susan opened her eyes, and all around her stood young kids, boys and girls. They seemed to be wearing some kind of uniform, and each had an animal of some kind at their side. They also held wands.

Didn't we just leave this party?

Underneath her, someone groaned. She remembered what happened and looked over at the boy that had crashed into her.

Are you going to let him get away with what he did? The Darkness inside whispered to her. *You know what going off course means for the both of you.*

"Shut up!" Susan yelled to herself, grabbing the boy by the collar and hauling him up to a sitting position. As much as she hated to admit it, The Darkness had a point, and she felt herself getting angry.

"What did you do?!" she screamed at him. "How could you have been so careless! Do you know what you've done? You've just stranded a friend of mine in some unknown world!"

He groaned and struggled to open his eyes. "What?" he managed.

"Answer me! Fix it!"

His eyes popped open. "What are you talking about? What's going on? Who are all you people?"

Susan jerked her head and looked around, the uniformed boys and girls had gathered around her, watching interestedly. Behind them all was an older man with a staff who exuded an air of responsibility and authority. "Never mind them, open that doorway, maybe I can still remember which one she went through."

"Which what she went through? Look, I'm in the dark about all this, you know?"

"What do you mean, in the dark?"

"I was heading home from getting my laptop repaired, okay? In the middle of the sidewalk I saw this glowing door. I couldn't resist going through it, like it was pulling me. I found myself here."

Susan blinked at him for a few seconds. "You're in the same boat as me? I- I apologize for shouting at you. I will now shout at the correct person." She looked around, marveling at the massed children and animals staring back at her. "Who is responsible for this debacle?" Susan shouted, releasing the boy and causing him to flop down again. Every kid there pointed to an embarrassed looking, pink haired girl that was looking down. Her hair was long, and she had reddish eyes, and was also probably the shortest person nearby. Susan stalked over to her.

"I have you to blame for all this?" she demanded.

"Blame?" said the girl, flushing. "I did the spell properly, I can't help it that a couple of plebeians... got in the way or something." She stepped over to Sparkle, and grabbed her up. "See everyone, I summoned my familiar, just like I said I would!"

"Please unhand me!" said Sparkle. The girl gave a yelp and dropped her, and Sparkle gracefully landed on all fours and smoothed down her fur with her tongue. "I am Susan's 'familiar' if you please, not yours. Now kindly explain what's going on! Believe me when I say you don't want to make Susan angry."

"You can talk?" the girl asked. "But I haven't completed the ceremony yet!" There was a general ripple of amazement through the ranks.

"Of course."

"What did you call me?" demanded Susan.

"Plebeian. You know, a commoner."

"You mean an NPC?" asked Sparkle.

"A what? I'm talking about someone who can't use magic."

"Can't use magic?" snorted Susan. "*Elemental Attack: (Fire)*," she cast, throwing flames into the air. Everyone there took a step back.

"Okay, you can use magic," said the girl, uncertainly. "Um..." she looked over at the tall guy.

He stepped up, pushing past the crowd. "Hello there, I'm Professor Colbert. I do apologize for all this, on behalf of the magic academy. May I ask your name?"

"I'm Susan Felton. This is Sparkle. Can you tell me what's going on?"

He chuckled. "I can certainly try. Here, young man, let me help you up." He extended a hand.

"Thanks," said the boy.

Professor Colbert looked at him funny, but shrugged. "This is the familiar ceremony, where second year students summon their familiars." He swept a hand around, showing all the animals accompanied by wizards. "Don't ask me how, but somehow Miss Le Blanc de La Valliere has somehow called you all here."

"No, if I'm understanding this correctly, she called him." Susan pointed at the boy. "I just happened to be in the way. Honestly, yanking things out of their home realities? That's routinely done around here, is it? Rather irresponsible, don't you think?"

"Usually it's just animals," Colbert admitted. "And you, young man? What's your name?"

The boy stared back at him blankly. Susan's eyes darted between the two.

"Dude," she whispered, "he asked your name. Don't just stand there. Did you hit your head or something?"

"Oh, sorry. Saito Hiraga. You can really understand them?"

"What did he say?" asked Colbert.

"What's he saying now?" asked Saito.

Susan sighed again, closing her eyes and dropping her head. "You aren't getting any of this, are you?"

"I can understand *you*, and your cat, which is sort of freaking me out to be honest, perfectly. Anyone else just sounds like gibberish. So I've only gotten the gist of this conversation from what you say."

"Terrific!" said Susan sarcastically. She turned to Colbert. "He can't understand a word you people are saying. Do you have a *Communication* spell you can use?"

"No, sorry, I don't know anything like that," Colbert admitted.

"Seriously?" *Why am I not surprised? Wanded magic is useless.* "Fine, I'll just use mine. Give me a second. *Pocket Dimension.*" Susan reached through what she expected would be a hole in the air, but nothing happened.

Okay, that's never happened before... She envisioned the symbols for the spell, and tried to once again make a *Pluto* check. Again, nothing happened. Her blood ran cold.

"I can't open my *Dimension*," she said to Sparkle.

"Don't panic. We know your magic works, you did it before. Let me try. *Phase.*" Nothing happened. "Okay, now you can panic."

"Is something wrong?" asked Colbert.

"Is something wrong?" parroted Susan. "Is something *wrong*? I'm knocked off course, I lose my friend to the multiverse, now I find out for some bizarre reason I can't do *Pluto* magic here. Do you know what that means?"

"No?"

"It means I'm stuck here, you idiot! All my stuff is in there! My book of magic, the spell to open the gateway back to Inari's world, my equipment, everything. I'm cut off!" She was shouting.

"Now, now, calm down. I'm sure something-"

"Calm down?" Magical energy started sparking off Susan's body. "You know the worst thing to say to someone that's getting angry? Calm down, that's what! That only makes it worse. You!" She whirled on the pink haired girl. "You got me into this. Fix it!"

"I can't," she said quietly. "I'm... sorry."

Oh, she would have to be totally cute. A little of her anger drained away. *Focus, Susan!* "I need to see whoever is in charge around here- immediately."

"Yes, that might be best."

"But I haven't finished the ceremony!" complained the girl, giving a little pout.

"Oh, you're finished," said Susan.

Colbert sighed. "No, she should finish. It is a sacred ceremony that determines a mage's life. That this unfortunate thing happened, as serious as that is, doesn't change that. However, can you be sure she was summoning this boy and not the cat?"

"My name is Sparkle," said Sparkle. "And I am Susan's three point *Companion*. We were legitimately traveling between worlds to follow the trail of Susan's father. This boy, Saito, has already admitted to answering the call of this girl here. He's your man, not me."

"My name is Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Valliere," said Louise.

"Just call her Zero," someone called. Everyone laughed.

"This is all very irregular. Very well, you may complete the ceremony with the boy," Colbert said to Louise.

"Can he do magic?" she asked.

"She's asking if you can do magic," Susan told him.

"What? Magic? No, of course not. Is that why they're wearing the funny clothes? They're some kind of wizards?"

Susan rolled her eyes. "He can't." *Wait, what did he say he was doing before this? Right, getting a laptop repaired. Not exactly a wizard activity, that.*

"He's a plebeian? I can't make a plebeian my familiar!"

There's that word again. And I thought 'muggle' was bad. "Oh, you're complaining now? Really? Are you sure about that? Do you want the list again of how my life and the life of my friend Luna is totally screwed up now thanks to you?"

"Look, I'm sorry to involve you in this-"

"Finally, an apology!"

"But if I don't, I'll be expelled. My grades... uh..."

"She does have a little trouble with magic," whispered Colbert.

"No?!" said Susan, pretending to be shocked. "I would never have guessed. I am shocked and surprised." Susan stopped and took a deep breath, covering her eyes with her hands. "You're loving this, aren't you Darkness? Probably laughing it up this very minute. Okay, getting upset isn't going to help me. I'm going to be calm and rational. Calm. Rational. Nope, not helping."

"We'll figure something out," said Sparkle. "Obviously they have dimensional magic, it's just reworking the spell to open a door here rather than somewhere else and pull someone through."

"No, summoning is Venus, remember? It happened to pull someone from another world, but it's still a summoning spell, not a dimensional one."

"Okay, we'll work out what's blocking *Pluto* magic and take it out so we can get access to your Dimension again. Or you could research a variant of the spell to talk to someone in dreams and ask Inari for help. What I'm saying is, we have other options."

"Right, you're right. I shouldn't panic. Okay, let's see your headmaster or whatever and get this whole thing straightened out."

"But the ceremony-" said Louise.

"Fine, fine, hurry it up. She still has some kind of ceremony to do involving you," she said to Saito. "I hope you're prepared."

"Look, can you explain what's going on?"

"Basically these people irresponsibly use magic to tear creatures, usually animals, from their home realities, rather than just going to a pet store like sane people. You got caught up in it. Due to billion to one odds our paths crossed while you were moving from one world to another, and I got knocked off course, coming with you. Apparently, this makes you some kind of wizard pet, like that floating eyeball thing over there." She pointed. Saito looked over and shuffled away from it. "That's you. You're a floating eyeball now. Congratulations. Is it better than being a tin dog? I don't know. Anyway, this girl, Louise whatever whatever keeps going on about this sick ceremony she has to complete or get kicked out of school. Personally, we're in the same boat- you should be working out how to get home and back to your life,

same as me. I have stuff, important stuff, to be about. Namely to track down my father, and now, my friend who you briefly saw, who is now alone on an alien world. That about covers it."

"What's this ceremony?"

"No idea. It's usually animals so it can't be too perverse, I hope."

"I should say not," said Colbert, shocked.

"Does he understand?" asked Louise.

"As much as anyone can who's just been ripped from their home world."

"Then I will complete the ceremony." Louise stepped closer to Saito and said some ritual phrases, then kissed him.

"Oh, wait, maybe I'm the familiar after all," said Susan.

"Down, girl," said Sparkle. "Remember Luna."

"What, a girl can't get any sugar on the side- What the?"

As the two broke apart, magical energy started gathering around Saito. He looked terrified.

"What did she do to me?"

Susan did a *Magic Sense*. "I don't know what's happening, but something powerfully magic is going on. Brace yourself!" she said to him.

He screamed and clutched his hand, and Susan watched, half in horror and half with great interest as a group of symbols appeared on the back of it.

Saito passed out.

Getting Some Answers

Time: Seconds later

Place: Courtyard inside the school

Susan rushed to Saito's side as he collapsed, the only one to do so. She looked him over, getting a 9 on her *first aid* check. As finding the “status of individual” was only a 5, while “assessing condition” was a 10, she knew he was still alive but not what was wrong. She tried another *Magic Sense*, getting even worse, an 8. Due to the strength of the magical field now surrounding Saito, this was still more than enough. She grabbed his hand and looked at the still glowing runes now seemingly burned onto it.

“Okay, some sort of Saturn magic is being burned into him. We need to get him to the infirmary where someone can watch and make sure he survives the process.” She turned to the only adult who seemed to be there. “Mr. Colbert, right? Would you like to do the honors or should I?”

“Infirmary?” he asked, walking over and looking down at them both. “We don’t actually have anything like that here. Maybe we should though, come to think of it.”

“What?” Susan exploded, popping back up. “What if someone got really hurt? Isn’t learning magic a bit dangerous?”

“Not especially,” he replied. “If someone seriously took ill their parents would be informed and a healer would be brought.”

“Fantastic,” she muttered.

“In any case, he should be fine. I’ve never seen a familiar spirit be knocked out by the ritual, but then, it’s not been done with a human before, either. He won’t die, that would negate the point of the whole thing. For now, let’s take him to Miss Valliere’s room. She is responsible for him now, after all. Then we can take you to see the principal.”

“Fine,” spat Susan. “Maybe he’ll know of some magic to get me out of here and back to what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Mr. Colbert swished his staff around, and Hiraga rose gently into the air. He led the way through a set of doors at the far end of the courtyard and the students were excitedly whispering amongst themselves.

“For now, get to know your familiar a little better, I’ll be back in a moment,” he called to them.

The group walked down torch lit corridors, not unlike those of Hogwarts. She didn’t see any moving paintings or stairs that rearranged themselves, so it seemed even though this place might superficially resemble the school she had known, many details were different. Louise unlocked her door and Hiraga floated inside, onto the bed.

“I’ll have to put some straw down for him to sleep on,” Louise remarked, looking around the room. It was pretty stark, with a small table, dresser, bed, and closet within view. The candle had lit itself as we had come in and-

“Wait, what did you say about straw?”

“He’ll need some. I wouldn’t want him to sleep on the bare floor. I’m not insensitive to his needs, after all.”

“Straw? He’s not a horse, he’s a person! He’ll sleep in a bed just like you do. I don’t know how things are done around here, but you’ve seriously screwed up two different lives with your shenanigans, the least you can do is show a little respect.”

“Shenanigans?” shrieked Louise. “I did the ceremony properly and got my familiar spirit. This plebeian.”

“You are not going to treat him like an animal.”

“I’ll treat him any way I want. It’s none of your concern.”

“I think it is my concern. Someone has to make sure he’s doing all right, and you don’t speak his language!”

“If you do, I’ll make you regret it!” She brandished her wand.

“What are you going to do, fail to cast another spell at me?”

“Girls, please!” said Colbert, finally stepping between us. “Now is not the time.”

"Oh, but I think it is," countered Susan. "Much better to set the expectation right at the start than to have to try and change her behavior later. She expected an animal, fine. She got a person, and she needs to change her attitudes accordingly."

"I'm standing right here, and my name is Louise!" she growled.

"Something can be worked out, I'm sure," Mr. Colbert said wearily. "For now, let's bring you up to see Mr. Ottman."

"Fine. Sparkle, you mind staying?"

"Not at all," she said, jumping up on the bed and sitting down. "I'll need to start seeing what magic I can and can't use, anyway. Besides, I'm the one with the better healing magic, should I feel he needs it. Sun should work, I mean they have a sun, don't they?"

"Yes, if we're going to be stuck here we'll need to know what, exactly, our limitations are." She looked towards the ceiling. "You could have been a little more specific about this, Inari."

"Who?" asked Mr. Colbert.

"The being that- never mind. Come on, which way?"

The group trooped up to the principal's office, which Mr. Colbert knocked on and entered. Inside was... well... Dumbledore. Old guy, with a white, long, wispy beard, and wearing a pointy hat and gray robes. The only thing missing were the glasses.

"I'm not sure what I was expecting," remarked Susan to no one in particular.

A gnarled staff sat behind him, making Susan wonder if somehow these people "graduated" from using wands as they got more powerful, as Mr. Colbert also walked with a staff rather than a wand. Or did people that used a staff as a focus just start out more powerful, or was it a personal choice?

Also in the room was a young looking woman with green hair, which Susan wondered about. *I'll have to look and see if that's common, I wasn't really paying attention to that kind of thing earlier.* She looked over at Louise. *Though I suppose if pink isn't remarked upon...*

"Well, well, what have we here?" asked the principal, leaning forward in his chair.

"Mr. Ottman, this is Miss, uh... I didn't get your last name."

"Susan Felton. Nice to meet you."

"And nice to meet you," the principal replied. "This is my aid, Miss Longbill."

"Hello."

"Hi."

"So, what can we do for you? I take it this is about the excitement I saw in the courtyard a moment ago?"

"Yes, sir," answered Mr. Colbert.

"Ah, Miss Valliere, what have you done now? Wait, you haven't summoned this girl as your Familiar Spirit, have you?"

She looked embarrassed.

"No," Susan answered for her. "She summoned the boy currently recovering from the experience in her room. He went unconscious after she kissed him and magic started swirling around him. I just happened to be in the way at the time."

"In the way? I'm afraid I don't understand."

Susan sighed. "Look, the short of it is, other worlds exist. I'm from one. He's from another. I left my world to seek my father, who travels between them fighting a malignant entity I have termed "The Darkness." It was just our bad luck to collide in the space between worlds, knocking a friend who was traveling with me into yet another world and stranding us both where we are now. She has the means to follow my father, I have the spell to return where I came from. Both of which are useless or out of reach at the moment."

"Astonishing!" said Miss Longbill. "I never would have imagined it. How many worlds are there?"

Susan turned to her. "I passed through a space with countless doors of light. I couldn't begin to give you a hard number."

She looked impressed.

"That is certainly a unique tale. Please allow me to extend my official apology on behalf of the academy. Whatever we can do to assist you, just let me know."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. For the moment, I need information and some quiet. I need to know what kind of magic is still available to me. At least one kind, which would allow me to access my book of magic, is not. If others aren't as well..."

"I'm not sure what that means, but as I said, whatever we can do. I would love to learn about magic from another world!"

Susan saw that he was looking at her somewhat excitedly, and decided he was probably telling the truth. *After all, how many times in your life do you meet someone from another reality?*

"But first things first. Louise here brought someone that seems to be Asian, and he doesn't speak your language. Mr. Colbert says you don't have translation magic?"

"Perhaps somewhere in the archives?" asked Miss Longbill, looking at Mr. Ottman. He shrugged. She explained, "We haven't needed any magic of that sort in hundreds of years. Not since the language of the world was standardized."

Huh, that's the first intelligent thing these people have said to me so far.

"I could take care of the problem myself, if I had access to my spellbook. Sadly it wasn't something I needed on a regular basis myself, so I would have to research the spell from scratch if you can't help. That'll take time. Meanwhile, it seems this sort of screw up is somewhat expected of Louise? Something about grades?"

Louise glowered at her. "My spells tend to explode, I admit. But I'm getting better?"

Susan could tell even she didn't believe it. "Wait, you backfire *every* spell you try to cast? How are you still alive?" She turned to Mr. Colbert. "Why wasn't this looked into before she started tearing people out of their home dimensions?"

"We have hundreds of students to teach here," he hedged. "We can't spare the attention for just one."

"Oh, I see. So you just let her continue failing, causing destruction and whatnot, rather than looking into what might have a simple solution. Completely reasonable, of course."

"What do you mean?" asked Louise. "What simple solution?"

"I don't know, I've been here less than an hour. But it seems to me that if your magical energies are that erratic, you either need a better focus than that wand, an additional focus apart from it, or just plain more practice in the basics. Or maybe you're trying to do a type of magic you shouldn't be attempting, like if I tried to do wand magic. I'm actually not even sure what would happen in that case, I never tried it."

"I... I don't want your help in any case."

"I wasn't offering my help, I was just wondering if anything like that had been explored. There's a reason your magic messes up. If you can't be bothered to research the reason, don't expect me to. Wait-" She turned back to the principal. "I take it you don't have character sheets here?"

"Have what?"

"Character sheets." Suddenly Susan was holding hers, and everyone strained to get a good look at it.

"Where did that come from?" asked Miss Longbill.

"I guess not." She put it "away" again. "Just a thought. To answer your question, I have no idea. It just comes when I want to look at it. Sparkle, that's my cat, she's the same way."

"Fascinating," said the principal. "You carried some of your physical law into our universe." He leaned back in his chair again. "Astonishing."

"Yes, well, it's normal for me. So just to be clear, you don't have any sort of magic to move between worlds, right? Just summon creatures from them? If I could just step through to a world where I could use Pluto magic for two minutes I would be far better off."

Everyone shook their heads.

"Super. Then I am stuck here, it seems. We both are." Her eyes narrowed. "By the way, you haven't had any trouble with beings trying to take over your world or anything, have you? Ancient evils? Magic energy disappearing and you can't figure out where it's going?" Again, they all shook their heads, somewhat more concerned. "Oh good. Maybe The Darkness hasn't noticed your world yet. I can tell you more about that later, so you can prepare if it ever does try sucking your dimension dry of energy. For the moment, I'm going to see what Planets I can cast from and take things from there."

“Miss Valliere, why don't you go see to your Familiar Spirit?” asked the Principal. “We'll also take a peek through the archives, see if there are any books that detail your condition from past students. Maybe there is something in our libraries that could help.”

“Oh, thank you very much!” she said, surprised. She gave a small bow and left the room.

“Jean, if you could work with Matilda to check the archives for some translation magic? I think that would ease our other new guest into things here. And I'll have to meet him, once he wakes up.”

“Of course, sir,” said Mr. Colbert. Both of them left as well.

“Odd that you seem to speak our language perfectly.”

“Hiraga said he heard me speaking his language perfectly. I think Lady Inari, that's the being that gave me the ability to go between worlds, did something to me. And didn't bother to tell me, of course.”

“I see.”

“Now, if you want I can get out of your hair to do some magical tests, or if you're interested...”

“I am interested. You mentioned the planets- Are you talking about physical planets? I can tell you about our solar system, if that would help.”

“Maybe. I know you don't have a Pluto, that's for sure.”

“No, our six planets are Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. And of course we have two moons, but maybe I shouldn't assume all worlds have two.”

“No way, we only had one! Interesting, I'd love to know how that happened. Anyway, it seems three whole branches of magic will be denied to me, but I better check just to make sure. Let's see, I'll try to make a little water, that would be a good test for Neptune. And I could manage a spark for Uranus without any trouble, normally. Let's see how it goes.”

Naturally, it went terribly, both grade-0 spells she tried to use didn't even fizzle, as she found she couldn't even make the check in those skills. “Great, so what can't I cast?” she asked herself, getting out her character sheet again. “Eleven spells, including my favorite combo of Hypnotic Field and Energy Drain. Oh crap, I can't use Spell Symbol either? AARG!”

“So your world actually has more planets than ours? I would have thought something like that would be somewhat constant.”

“Me too. And you say you have two moons? I wonder...” Susan looked thoughtful, looking at her character sheet again. “Would you mind if I cast a minor spell on you? I only know three Moon spells, and only one would actually show if what I'm thinking of works.”

“I suppose, if it's not harmful.”

“Oh, no, it won't hurt a bit. It just confuses opponents for a second.”

“You may proceed.”

“Thank you. *Dazzle!*” she cast, and where usually small motes of light would dazzle the senses of the target, in this world she got a huge flash that made him cry out. She got the sense that his Delay went up by 12, rather than 6, as it should have. This still was hardly noticeable, and the principal shook it off.

“Yup, moon spells have a double potency. To think my magic actually relies on the physical bodies that populate the solar system.” She shook her head. “That hardly seems worth it.”

“Interesting spell,” Mr. Ottman remarked. “What do you other ‘moon’ spells do?”

“Tell me the direction of north and let me see in the dark. Like I said, not very useful to have at double strength. Now if you had two suns...”

“Our planet would have been burnt to a crisp and life would have never evolved here.”

“There is that. All right. For the moment I'll head back to Louise's room, so Hiraga doesn't wake up and freak out when he can't talk to anyone. I'll take stock and see what my next move is going to be. I can still *fabricate* and *imbue* things, if you think unbreakable swords or armor, or magical items might sell for a good price on this world I can at least earn a living that way.”

“Unbreakable you say? What about wands?”

“Oh sure, wands too. Staffs, anything.”

“I think we could work something out. Do you think you can find your way back okay?”

Susan barked a laugh. "I have *No Sense of Direction*. In a castle this big I would be lost in a minute."

"Very well. Motsognir?" From Mr. Ottman's shoulder a mouse perked up. "Can you lead her back to Miss Valliere's room?" The mouse squeaked and ran down his robes to the door. "You don't mind following a mouse, do you?"

"Oh, is he your Familiar Spirit? He's so cute! I don't mind following him."

"Great. Come and see me whenever, my door is always open to you. Oh, before you go, would you mind terribly doing a guest lecture on your type of magic? I think some of our students would be quite interested, and in stories of other worlds! Plus if there are magical skills we could learn from other worlds, we'll employ you to teach them!"

Susan shrugged. "Sure, only have a rating 2 in *Speaking*, and no rating in *Teaching* but I'd be glad to compare our magics sometime. I can put a few points in *Teaching* if there's something I can really teach. We can talk about it sometime in the next few days."

"I look forward to it."

"I'll see you later."

As Susan walked behind the mouse, she thought about what being stranded here meant. *Would Inari even be able to tell I was here? She didn't open a door to check on my father or anything, she sent me to do it. That suggests no. My father's magic could open a door to her world, but that's Pluto. Without that planet or something similar to draw upon, how will I ever get out of here? Strange that she didn't warn me that I might find a place like this, only that magic might be different between worlds. Probably that key she gave me doesn't depend on planets, given she's the lady of magic or whatever my father said about her. Could I somehow contact her in a dream? How do I know she even sleeps? This is going to be a long journey.*

Having arrived at Louise's door, she gently knocked and heard a faint "come in," from the other side. Louise was sitting at her table, staring at Hiraga. "No change?" she asked Sparkle, who perked up from the bed. She shook her head. "I could cast *Awaken* on him, and I've been monitoring this magical change that's he's been going through. It's concentrated in his hand now, so hopefully he'll wake up on his own soon. If he doesn't, I guess we'll have to think about what might happen waking him up magically."

"We can decide that when the time comes. You know what spells we can't cast?"

"The last three planets, unless I'm missing something?"

Susan nodded. "Yup. No more energy stuff for me. That's going to be a handicap."

"Are you just going to ignore me, then?" asked Louise.

"Why no, would you like a scathing remark of some kind? I thought up several on the way back here."

"No," she pouted.

"You realize Inari played us?" asked Sparkle.

"What?"

"Yeah, thought about that while I was just sitting here. Remember that key she gave us?"

"That I stupidly gave to Luna? Yeah."

"It wasn't stupid. You were showing her that you trusted her with your dad's future. I thought it was sweet. Anyway, we know your dad came to your world... because you were born there."

The implication of that took a second to sink in. "I could have just gone home and gone on from there!" she shouted, eyes wide. "I might have only been one world behind him! Not to mention I would have wound up at home anyway! Oh, she's so getting slapped when I see her next."

"Uh, might I recommend not slapping the higher order dimensional being? She could probably crush you like a bug, despite what she looks like."

"Mentally. A nice mental slap in the face."

"Thank you for clarifying. So, what next?"

"Nothing much until the local magicians do some research. I offered my services *fabricating* and such, so we'll have an income stream, at least. And I want to make sure my

imbued items still work. Actually, should have tested that before offering, now that I think about it. Oh well.”

On her person Susan had her ring with *Legion* in it, and the knife of *Alleviation* which worked just fine. She was able to test it by bringing out her *Somatic* Beretta and put it back, damaging her hand by one point. The knife easily healed it, so at least she knew even without the outer planets, she had a lot of options should something try killing her. Of course she couldn't reload the Beretta, all her ammo was in her now inaccessible *Pocket Dimension*. Of course all the food in her *Personal Dimension* was going to go bad, even refrigerated as it was. She had it stocked with long lasting items, but it looked like she might be here for a long, long time.

The rest of the afternoon was spent discussing (and discarding) various plans with Sparkle, and nearing sundown there was another knock on the door.

Louise opened it, and a younger student was standing there with a cart loaded with food.

“I was told to bring this to your room,” said the boy. Louise stepped back and let him in. “Will he be all right?” he asked.

“Hopefully,” said Susan. “Now that food has arrived we'll try waking him up. I doubt he'll want to miss this. Thank you.”

“I'll be back in a little while to take the dishes back.”

“Thanks.”

Louise just gave a look which Susan took to mean “of course you will,” and the boy left again.

“He's been stable, nothing magical has happened in a while,” remarked Sparkle. “Do you want me to wake him?”

Susan nodded. “Go ahead. Worst thing that could happen is he goes right back under again, and we leave him until he's ready. He had quite a shock, after all.” She glared at Louise, who it seemed was waiting to be served, as she wasn't getting any of the food off the tray. Susan turned back to watch Sparkle touch Hiraga and cast *Awaken* on him. Magical energy swirled, and he groaned and opened his eyes.

“Oh, so it wasn't a dream.”

Communication

Time: Immediately after

Place: Louise's room

"Come and eat," said Susan to Hiraga, "you must be pretty hungry after all that's happened."

"Starving. How long was I asleep?"

"A couple of hours. Figured after the shock you got it would be better to let you sleep. How are you feeling?"

He sat up and swung his legs off the bed. "Okay. My hand feels weird, but I guess that's to be expected?" He looked at it, then rubbed it as though it might come off. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"I expect so. Think of it as a magical tattoo. I've made one for someone, it's not that far off. I feel some kind of Saturn or equivalent spell, so it'll be something to deal with learning, technology or time. I can narrow it down later, if you want."

"I'd like to know, if it's giving me some kind of magical ability, what that ability is. I mean, this is some kind of magical world, right?"

"Oh, I should give you the welcome to the multiverse speech. Looks like there's a bunch of food here, what do you want?" She shoved the table over, as there were only two chairs. One person was going to have to eat sitting on the bed, but that was fine.

"Oh, anything," he said, walking over to the cart and grabbing a plate off. "Though eating without chopsticks is going to be weird." He went to go sit back down, and Susan grabbed a plate as well. She picked up something meaty and put it on the ground for Sparkle, who nodded her thanks and jumped down to it.

"So are you from China?"

"Japan, actually."

"Ah, we have one of those! One day when I'm not jumping between worlds I'd love to explore my own. I haven't seen much of it, and I wish now I had. We could compare how your Japan and my Japan were-" She stopped as she realized Louise hadn't joined them, and they both looked over at her. "Come and sit down," Susan said, exasperated. "You don't need a ticket."

"My familiar should serve me!" she replied haughtily. "I shouldn't have to serve myself now."

Susan snorted. "You're serious?"

"What?" asked Hiraga.

"She wants you to serve her."

"Get out of here!"

"That's what she said. Look, Louise, we're all equal here. You want to sit and eat with us, fine. You want to stand there with a sour look on your face and watch us eat, that's fine with me too. But no one in this room is going to serve you. Get over it."

"He's just a plebeian, and my familiar! It's his duty to serve me!"

"Okay, couple of things, princess. First, he's a person and you expected an animal. Did you see me waiting for my familiar to serve me? No, she doesn't have hands, you see. So I don't know what, exactly, you expected when you did this so called summoning but odds are you would have gotten an animal. Just like everyone else. That animal would not have served you. So neither is this person. Second, there's a word on my world; Muggle. I don't like it, and I never did. I'm beginning to not like this word I feel is similar, which my translation matrix is rendering as 'plebeian.' He is a person, not a thing to be given a derogatory label."

"It's not that derogatory, it just means a commoner. You know, someone who can't use magic."

"Can't use... wait a second. Are you telling me that you're some kind of noble? Because you can use magic?"

"My whole family can. Every family that can use magic has become ennobled at some point in history, and that's continued until today. I mean you don't think a person who could use magic would stay a peasant, do you?"

“So magic is passed through families here, too? That makes sense. And at some point in history they decided magic wouldn't be kept secret, and so they became a ruling class. Interesting.”

“So I've changed your mind, then, now that you know I'm your better?”

“What? Better? Ahahaha. No, why would I have changed my mind? Look, just because he doesn't know if he can do magic that doesn't mean he can't. Maybe his world doesn't have a lot of magic but now that he's here in this one, he can pick up that skill. Or maybe he has some other weird ability from his world that he thinks is normal but turns out to be special on this one. There's still this weird rune to consider, who knows what that can do for him. It's obviously magical, I can feel it from here, so it's doing something to him. To say he can't use magic, at this point, is rather silly. And let's be honest, all your magic is explosions, which we could do with gunpowder, if you have that sort of thing on this world. So you're not all that great of a magic user, if that's all it takes to be a noble.”

“Even with all that said, he's definitely not.”

“Neither am I. But I'm not serving you either. So take that as you will.”

She sighed and looked us over, finally deciding I wasn't going to budge, and Hiraga couldn't really understand what was going on anyway. She grabbed a plate of her own and sat down to eat with us.

“Wasn't so hard, was it?” I asked with a grin.

“You have no idea.”

We ate in silence for a moment. “Right, so, welcome to the multiverse. Other worlds exist, and apparently they are more diverse than I first thought. I've only been to mine and this one, because I just started out. But my father went to a bunch to try and save them from this creature I call The Darkness. I call it that because that's what it looked like to me last I saw it. Basically it wants to break out of the dimension it lives in and go up, rather than down which I guess is much easier for it. So it needs the energy of our lower dimensions to do that. Dad got stuck someplace, I'm going after him. Or at least I was.” She glared at the tiny pink haired girl.

“I already said I was sorry,” said Louise.

“There was no way you could have known,” I said. “And I'm sorry for losing my temper when I first got here. I should tell you, there's a piece of The Darkness inside me, it was put there before I was born. It wanted to try and corrupt me so I wouldn't take up my father's work. Didn't work, but it talks to me sometimes now, tries to get me to do things I normally wouldn't.”

“That must be terrible,” said Hiraga.

“It's annoying, that's for sure. But it's really only when I could do something it considers 'evil' that it tries to influence me. It isn't just talking my ear off while we're sitting here.”

Hiraga looked thoughtful for a moment. “I guess there's only two possibilities. You're telling the truth, and I'm stuck here for the duration along with you. Or I'm in some kind of coma and this is a hallucination that my brain is using to try and heal itself. And there's no way to tell the difference from where I'm sitting.”

Susan held up the knife she was using to cut her meat. “I could cut you, see if you feel pain. Would that prove it for you one way or the other?” She grinned.

“That's okay,” he said, holding up his hands. “I'll take your word for all this. What I want to know is, what now?”

“Good question. The teachers are looking for a spell to allow you to understand and speak the language. If they can't find you one, I'll research mine and make you an item with it so you won't have to worry about that. As far as she goes... Louise, he wants to know what to expect now? What happens after this ceremony in other words?”

“Usually we just get to know our Familiar Spirits and what they can do. Then we go on with our studies. I don't know what it will mean now that a plebei- a person has been summoned.”

Susan repeated this.

“Great. While she's in class, what am I supposed to be doing?”

“You probably won't be able to go very far. And you're still in school yourself, right?” He nodded. “Not going to be much for you to learn here, either. I mean this place is lit by candles

and torches. Unless you wanted to study blacksmithing or something?" They both chuckled. "One thing you might want to take up is some kind of weapon."

"What makes you say that?"

"If this is a magical world, and I saw some of the types of creatures that were floating around in that courtyard, it would stand to reason those sorts of creatures are also roaming around wild out there. If that's the case you're going to need to defend yourself. Even a farmer would have some skill at an ax or a bow if they got attacked on the road. Louise here has at least explosion magic to defend herself with, you've got nothing. Unless you're some kind of martial arts master?" He shook his head. "There you are. This is a world where the strength of your arms determines your fate, if you're a peasant. And despite what I said earlier, that's what you are. You should have some skill relating to your new 'position' of being a Familiar Spirit."

"I hear you. And really, if she can only do explosions it might be better to have someone around that knows how to fight. But how will I be able to learn? I won't be able to pay anyone, and this is a magic school, not a military academy."

"Leave that to me," Susan said confidently. "I do know the Augment Skill spell, and both Teaching and Sword: (Slashing) are untrained. I'll just put those two spells on myself and I can show you the basics, and spar with you!"

"That sounds good, but where are we going to get a couple of swords?"

Susan waved this off. "I'll make us some after we eat. It'll only take a couple of minutes."

He gave a short laugh. "Magic does come in handy, I guess."

"I guess."

"My laptop!" he suddenly said.

"Huh?"

"I must have dropped it when I entered that weird portal! You didn't pick it up or see it when I collided with you?" Susan shook her head. "Man, it's long gone now. I just paid to have it fixed, too. Darn it!"

"There's still some hope. Time runs differently between dimensions, apparently. What's weeks here might be just a few minutes where you're from. You might return to see it still just lying there."

"Or a minute here is weeks there and if I ever get back a thousand years will have passed. Still, I can hope."

"I have no way to tell you which is more likely. Sorry."

"That's okay. Having it would have been nice, though."

"Well, having access to my full complement of spells would be nice, but here we are. You wouldn't be able to recharge it anyway." She gestured to the walls, as if to say "no electrical sockets." *Though I could research a spell to do it, if it was really that useful around here.*

"There is that."

So the dishes were stacked back up on the cart and Susan sat down to do some *Creation* magic, and the two watched her, interested.

"What type would you like? Katana?"

"Sure." Hiraga shrugged. "It's as good as any, I suppose."

"I think I recall enough what they look like to get you something close," she said, getting a 16 on her KNOledge check. She began to cast.

Nine minutes later she had two gleaming katanas with wooden scabbards. She also used magic to create some leather, and Augment Skill to get the needed skill to wrap the hilt properly. Both had been pretty impressed, as Louise said magically creating objects like that wasn't usually done, because they tended to degrade rather quickly. Their magic could do it, though, and much more quickly according to her. She was also somewhat interested in those magical circles Susan's magic generated, but was trying to act like she wasn't. To save her some time, she had gotten some glue from somewhere, and they were just waiting for it to dry when there was another knock at the door.

Louise went to open it, and it was the same younger boy that brought the cart.

"I can take the dishes away if you'd like," he said. "And I've been told to show Susan and the Familiar Spirit to their rooms, if you're ready."

"Sounds good to me," said Susan, getting up and stretching. She grabbed the two swords and the others got up as well. "He's going to show you to your room," she told Hiraga. "I'll keep these until tomorrow, make sure they dry properly and don't need adjustment before we can use them."

"Sounds good," replied Hiraga. "See you tomorrow, Louise."
Susan translated, and said goodnight herself.

The next day, Susan was awoken by Sparkle and looked around. "There's some kind of gong sound going," she explained, "but I figured you wouldn't hear it."

"That's probably the case," Susan replied, getting out of bed. She had made herself a nightgown to sleep in the night before, and thanked her past self for memorizing that spell. *I think it's going to really come in handy around here.*

Sparkle cast *Hygiene* on her once she was dressed, cleaning her and her clothes without effort. She waited a moment, looking out the window at the beautiful day, then went across the hall and knocked on Hiraga's door.

"Morning," he said, sleepily. "Guess that's their alarm clock, huh?"

"Either that or it's a fire drill and we're all going to die, but given no one is running about in a panic, I think it's fine."

He grinned and slipped his shirt on. "I wonder where they keep the showers in this place?"

"Got that covered," said Sparkle, doing another *Hygiene*, this time on him.

"Thanks. I feel clean. Wow, I could get used to this magic stuff!"

"Yup, I'm great all right. Now, which way do you think breakfast is?"

"Let's just follow everyone else, it shouldn't be long."

"Good point. Oh, belt this on, you better get used to walking around with it." Susan tossed him a sword, and showed she had already put hers on as well.

"Came out pretty good," he remarked, looking over the wrappings.

Susan buffed her fingernails on her shirt. "Given my rating in the skill is my rating in the planet, and I can make the rating in my planet far above human limit by spending energy, I should hope so."

"I think your translation spell is failing," he said, cocking his head. "I didn't get much of that."

She waved it off. "Never mind. Basically I'm awesome at magic, so go me."

They both laughed.

"Hey, there's someone! Let's go!" He belted the sword on, tying a knot in the leather strap she had left over from the Creation last night, and they closed the door and hurried after the person they had seen.

The banquet hall reminded Susan of Hogwarts, and she estimated across the three tables there were about 250 students in total. Not many, but then, maybe there are a ton of magical schools around here and not just one.

Pink hair wasn't too common, so Susan and Hiraga found her and sat down.

"Wow, at least we'll eat well here!" remarked Hiraga, looking over the feast that had been prepared.

Wonder if there's an elf equivalent that works here? Have to look into that.

She turned to say hello to Louise, but saw her eye was twitching. "What's wrong now?" she asked.

"He shouldn't even be here. He should be eating with the rest of the Familiar Spirits. Or at least on the floor."

She pointed to a plate on the floor, set with a single roll. Susan busted out laughing. "Don't start that again, princess. You might start annoying me, and you wouldn't like me to be annoyed with you, believe me. I know it's tough to wrap your head around, but he's a person, same as you. Start treating him accordingly or I'll break your rune-" *Wait, crap, that's Pluto*

magic and they don't have a Pluto. "Well, I'd figure something out to break your hold over him, and we'd just disappear into the night."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

Louise glowered but didn't say anything.

People in uniforms were walking about the hall, setting things out, and Susan caught the eye of a pretty maid with a wave.

"Excuse me," she said, "can I get something suitable for my cat? With all the familiar spirits around here, someone must provide for them, but I have no idea who."

The woman looked her over, then brightened. "You're that visiting wizard, aren't you? I was told we had a visitor, apparently from another world?" Susan nodded. "Wow, and I'm talking to her. I'll go see what I can find right away!"

"Thank you very much."

She hurried off, and came back with something Sparkle said smelled delicious. Once everyone was seated they spoke some kind of weird 'prayer' and everyone dug in.

That done, Louise led them out to the courtyard again, where tables had been set up and everyone wearing a black cloak was out playing with their Familiar Spirits.

"Must be nice," remarked Hiraga, looking around. "Kicking back, playing fetch with your dog or floating eyeball or... what in the heck is that thing?"

Susan looked, and it was a rather large, red, lizard looking thing with fire for a tail.

"Charmander?" she asked with a grin.

"Wait, you know about that?"

"Wait, what? You have-"

But they were interrupted by Colbert spotting them and jogging over. They greeted each other and he had a big smile on his face. "We found a spell we think will work," he said, taking a book out from under his arm. "I've been looking for you so we can get you speaking our- he can't understand a word I'm saying, can he?"

Susan translated, and Hiraga said "Great. Whatever he has to do, let's do this!"

And so Colbert looked the spell over and cast it while swinging his staff around.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"If you can understand me, yes it did," Hiraga replied.

"I can! Amazing, it did work."

"I guess so! Thank you very much."

"Oh, no trouble, none at all. Did you sleep well last night? How are you adjusting to life here?"

"Haven't had much time to really think about it, I was asleep or unconscious most of the time. As long as there's some hope of me eventually returning home, I'm sure this will be a nice enough place to visit."

"I can't make any promises there," he said, his face falling. "Sorry."

"It's only been a day, I don't expect instant results," said Hiraga with forced cheerfulness. "With two different kinds of magics at my disposal, I'm sure something can be figured out."

"We'll try our best, at least give you the option of going or staying. You are a Familiar Spirit now, whatever you were before. That means something to us."

"And what gives you the right to disrupt his entire life by stranding him, sorry, us, here?" asked Susan in a low voice.

"As I said, we are looking into ways of opening a door to another some other world, so you can at least use your magic to get back to where you were, Susan. That might be easier than trying to find your specific worlds, if what you said about the number of 'doors' you saw is accurate. Please give us a little time."

"Of course, I understand. New magic just doesn't grow on trees, and you have students to teach and whatnot. It's fine." *For the moment.*

"One problem at a time, right? At least now you can talk to us, so that's a minor hurdle out of the way. I'm going to head back, enjoy your day off."

We all said goodbye, and Hiraga introduced himself properly to Louise.

“Glad I can talk to you directly now,” she said. “Though I’m not sure how to handle our time. I can’t exactly pet you like a dog, can I?” Looking around, there were several dogs, and they were all excitedly being petted or played with.

“If it’s all the same to you, Louise,” Susan said, tilting her sword, “I think our time is best spent getting this guy trained up in this. You two can ‘bond’ or whatever when he takes a break.”

“Let’s do it,” said Hiraga with a grin.

Celebrity

Time: Moments later

Place: Corner of the courtyard, away from the others

Hiraga pulled the katana from the scabbard after untying it, and set that out of the way. Susan was busy casting *Augment Skill: (Sword: (Slashing))* and putting max energy into it. This got her a skill rating of sixteen, almost double what a normal human could achieve. She was about to do the same for *Teaching* when Hiraga yelled out to her.

“Come and see this!”

She went over to him and he held out his left hand so she could see the rune on the back of it.

It was merrily glowing now with an inner light.

“It’s active?” she postulated, doing a *Magic Sense* on him and getting maximum. Even with the penalty for holding onto *Augment Skill*, that was enough to tell he was radiating magic much more strongly now than before. “Oh yeah, it’s doing something. Do you feel different?”

He took a few swings with the sword. “Actually, I think I know what I’m doing with this now!”

“Care to test that theory?” she asked with a grin.

“I’d be delighted.”

Both brought their blades up into a guard position and started circling each other. Susan got the initiative, and slashed at him, quick as she could. She was confident that with a sixteen skill she could stop the blade if he didn’t manage to perry it.

It was a good thing she was so confident, he didn’t manage it. But then, she had rolled maximum, a twenty-two.

“Okay, still getting the hang of this...” remarked Hiraga, swinging at her and getting under her guard.

“Guess we’re even,” she said with a grin, blade an inch from her skin. *I rolled an 18 to parry that strike, what’s his skill rating?*

Both then went into a flurry of blows, all of which were blocked by the other. They sprang apart.

“Not bad,” said Susan.

“Thanks,” responded Hiraga.

“No, I was talking about myself.” Hiraga gave her a dirty look and she laughed. “Just kidding. Ready to continue?”

“I was waiting for you.”

Again the clash of blades, but despite Susan’s rating, it was a stalemate. There were some close calls, but as people gathered around to watch, everyone could tell neither had a clear advantage over the other. Finally they broke apart again and Susan held up a hand.

“This is getting us nowhere, obviously you don’t need my help to master that weapon,” she panted. “I think we’re done here.”

“Awwwww,” said the crowd, which Susan looked to see surrounding them.

“Go back to your lives, citizens,” Hiraga called. “Show’s over.” He picked up the scabbard and slid the sword back into it. As he let it go the glow subsided and vanished. “Huh. Not exactly worth leaving my entire world behind, but at least we know I’m not helpless.”

“That’s for sure,” remarked Susan, also putting her blade away. “You’re above human level, I can tell you that much for sure.”

"That was amazing," said a voice, and a golden haired boy carrying a rose stepped up to Susan. "Magnificent," he went on. "Such strength, and form! I am "The Bronze" Guiche, may I have the honor of your name?"

"Susan Felton, nice to meet you."

Wait, so he comes in third all the time or what? asked The Darkness. *Who gives themselves the title of "the bronze," anyway?*

That's a good point actually.

"Susan? What a strange name, but a beautiful one," he hastened to add. "And your odd clothes... wait, you were the one that appeared alongside this boy when Zero called her Familiar. Little did I see of your beauty then, but now, in the sparkling daytime, how can I resist you?"

He leaned in for a kiss, and Susan stuck her sword in the way, partly drawing it. "Don't even think about it, buster. Anyway, I play for the other team."

"Other... what?" He said, opening his eyes again and looking confused. Then he saw the sword an inch from his neck.

"Guiche, what are you doing?" asked a girl with a red bow in her hair. It was done up in a complicated style, in ringlets, and two separate bangs covered a rather expressive forehead.

"Oh, Montmorency, you came to watch too. What am I doing? Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I think you know. Is he bothering you, miss?" she asked, looking at the bare blade.

"Not at all," answered Susan, sliding the blade back in. "He was just leaving."

"Yes, he was," spat Montmorency, grabbing his ear and stalking off with him.

"He's always getting into trouble," purred a fiery redhead, wearing a gold choker and a modified uniform that left a lot of her ample skin exposed. "Now me, on the other hand..." She grabbed his arm and pressed it to her body, making Hiaga drop the sword he was trying to tie on his waist.

"Leave my familiar alone, Kiche," shouted Louise, trying to yank him away. "He's not another conquest for you!"

"Whatever do you mean, Zero?" she asked, innocently.

"All you people need to go through sensitivity training!" shouted Susan. "Off with you! Go! Go on!"

"I'll be back for you," purred Kirche, blowing Hiraga a kiss and walking away with her salamander or whatever it was.

"Honestly, who does she think she is?" pouted Louise. "Grabbing other people's property like- I mean..." Susan's gaze now turned to her. "Grabbing my... familiar... You know what, forget it! What was all that about, anyway?"

Susan bent down to retrieve Hiraga's sword, and handed it to him. "Given the rune was glowing the whole time, I think it's something similar to the spell I used. He was able to use the sword with magically induced proficiency. Believe me, I doubt any regular swordsman on this planet could match him."

"You really think so?" asked Hiraga.

"I know so. I know my rating at the time. Even with the drag of maintaining my spell, we were even. That's pretty impressive for someone who probably never held a real sword before."

"Guess training is off," he remarked, looking around at the thinning crowd. "Now what?"

The group spent until lunch time testing Hiraga's ability with the (rather poorly maintained, if you wanted Susan's opinion) weapons found around the school. There was a small armory, and they carried out axes, bow and arrow, spears, shields, different types of swords, and even a rusty old mace. As Hiraga touched each one he said he felt he knew how to use it perfectly.

"So that's it," said Hiraga, putting the last arrow into the center of a target they found. "Near enough the center every time as far as I'm concerned."

"Seems that way," Susan replied.

"Excuse me," said someone behind them. They turned. "We're serving lunch, and I brought something for your cat, as well."

"You really did?" asked Susan with a big smile. "That's really thoughtful of you, thanks."

"Oh, it's okay."

"I'm Susan, I never did introduce myself this morning." She stuck out her hand. "Oh, or do you not have this tradition?"

"We shake hands," said the maid, returning the gesture. "I'm Siesta, nice to meet you all."

Louise just snorted like it was beneath her, but Hiraga shook hands with her too. Susan noticed he seemed a bit smitten, and she could understand why. *There's a person in an actual maid outfit right in front of me. That's a +2 modifier to LOOKs if I ever saw one. And of course she's super cute on her own.*

"Please, follow me," said Siesta, "and I'll lead you to your table."

"When you do get off of work?" asked Susan, walking next to her. She realized how that sounded and blushed a little.

"Oh, uh, not until late. Why?"

"Nothing bad," said Susan, waving her hands. "I mean, uh... What I mean to say is, I'd like to talk to you. Both of us are not from around here, so I'd really like your take on this world from your perspective. Louise is a noble, so," she lowered her voice, "I'm not sure she really knows how the world works or not. I'd be interested in what you had to say about life here."

"Is that all?" she said, giving a laugh. "I'd be happy to. Actually, you should go down and see the kitchens. After lunch they won't be busy with dinner for a little while, they might be willing to answer some of your questions."

"Good idea, I'll see about finding my way there. Thanks for the suggestion."

"Sure. Here we are. I'll go get your main course now, while you start on this."

Main course? Man, it's good to be the king, I guess.

The two thanked her, and she gave a curtsy and a smile, then walked off with a little bounce in her step. Both caught the other looking as she retreated and pointed. They laughed at each other.

"What are you two doing now?" asked Louise, exasperated. "You're not flirting with the servants, are you? Because that would really reflect poorly on me."

"Good thing everything isn't about you, then."

"So I take it you're, uh..." he pointed to the disappearing maid. Susan nodded. "That girl I knocked away from you when we collided? Was she your..." He held up his pinky finger, and Susan had watched enough anime to know what that meant. She nodded again. "Man, that's terrible. You must be worried sick. I'm really sorry about that."

Susan shrugged and started to eat. "I'm not worried about her safety, Luna can take care of herself. She's got strong magic, for what it is as it's not as good as mine, and a good head. Whatever world she finds herself in won't know what hit it. It's just ever finding her again that I despair of. I don't know. Maybe Inari has some kind of magic gizmo she can use to track people. She's super powerful, being what she is, so I wouldn't put it past her. I'm not going to panic until I have all the facts, and that means getting back to her and talking it over."

"Still, I don't think all worlds are as nice as this one. Man, I don't know what I would have done in your place. If you ever feel like talking, I'm here."

"Thanks."

"Just keep, you know, quiet on that subject. You know how people in medieval times would react to learning about that."

"I have to deal with so called modern people's reactions sometimes. Still. So yeah, you don't have to tell me."

"What are you two talking about?" broke in Louise. "And what does it have to do with that maid?"

Both shook their heads. "It's not important. Eat your... whatever this is... before it gets cold."

"It was delicious," said Sparkle, having wolfed it down and licked the plate clean. "I hope I get a main course too!"

That afternoon the group went down to the kitchens, as suggested by Siesta. They were quite honored to have the dimensional travelers around, and were more than willing to talk. It wasn't until Louise got bored and wandered off, saying she would be back, that they got the real story though.

Susan was unsurprised to learn that conditions here were about as bad as she expected. The common people were seen as little better than slaves by those who knew magic, and had little opportunity to make their lives better. Laws were supposedly equal, but with no such thing as a court system or public defenders, they had little recourse when accused by someone with money. Those with magic had magical, political, economic power over everyone else, and they didn't hesitate to use it.

That explains Louise's attitudes somewhat. It's just how she's been raised. Basically she has the weakness Prejudice: Commoner or something. All magic users... I shouldn't think that, there may be magic users hoping for change right now. It would be unfair to lump them all together. But getting through to that girl is going to be difficult.

They thanked the cooks and made their way back up to their rooms when they said they had to get dinner started. Cooking for three hundred people (and their animals) was no small task, so they basically finished serving one meal and then started on the next. And without the aid of modern appliances either.

I'm not sure if this is worse than having elves do it, thought Susan as she made her way through the castle. At least they do get paid for their efforts.

It seemed by that evening, word had spread about the pair, and at dinner that evening everyone wanted to sit near them. They were asked about the 'weird' swords they were wearing, and what their worlds were like. Susan was still wearing hers, after all she made the darn thing and couldn't put it into her *Pocket Dimension* at the moment. *It could be useful if that weird guy tries kissing me again, after all.*

She also demonstrated her magic, calling upon her *Magical Ally* and allowing people to hit her with the sword while she was *Invulnerable*.

I suppose this is as much excitement as they've seen in a while. After all, they don't have the Internet and youTube. Just going to classes, missing their parents, and worrying about grades. They crave the unfamiliar same as I do. Susan didn't mind, and it seemed Hiraga didn't either, but Louise seemed down because everyone called her Zero and spent more time fawning over the visitors than her. Guess we'll have to see if something can be done about that Zero they keep calling her.

That night, Susan made her way to Louise's room after several false starts to properly play her *No Sense of Direction* weakness. Knocking on the door Sparkle swiveled her ears and said she heard crying on the other side.

Ah, an opportunity for my Poor Sense weakness of hearing to make an appearance. "I don't hear anything," she said.

"Go away," she heard through the door. Louise's voice sounded strained.

"Louise, it's me, Susan. I want to talk to you. Please, can I come in?"

She waited a moment and the door opened a crack. "What do you want?" It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Susan thought her eyes were red and puffy, and her face was streaked with dried tears.

"Can I come in? I'm just here to talk," she said gently.

"Do what you like," she growled, throwing the door open and stomping back to her bed. She threw herself down and glared at Susan, who gently closed the door.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sitting down next to Louise.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "Just everyone exclaiming over how great Susan is. 'Oh, show me your *sword*, Susan. Show me your *magic*, Susan. Tell me about your *world*, Susan.' And my Familiar is just as bad. Everyone said I couldn't do it, but I did. I summoned a Familiar, and possibly the best one anyone has ever seen. You saw what he did with all those weapons, I doubt stupid Kirche and her stupid lizard could do that. But does even one person

come up to me and apologize for doubting me? No! It's all 'Zero sure screwed up didn't she?' and 'What will you blow up next, Zero!' My name is Louise!"

"I know. I don't even know why they call you that." *Something to do with screwing her magic up all the time? I wonder, does she have any actual friends here? No one really talked to her directly all day that I could see...*

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

They sat in silence for a moment. "There's a story on my world," Susan began at last. "It's told about a mother who has a young daughter. Every night the mother is exasperated because she feels the little girl has been naughty at some point during the day, and tells her about it. But one day the woman says goodnight to her daughter and is about to leave the room when her daughter sobs and starts to cry. The woman is concerned, is her daughter hurt? She turns back to the child, who says through her tears, 'wasn't I even a little bit good today?' Turns out the little girl did everything she could to try and live up to her mother's ideals, and her mother hardly even noticed. And even worse, didn't even think of praising her. That little girl is you, Louise. I can't say you did good, because you've trapped me here. My father and my friend are still out there, lost or trapped on some other world. But I'll still admit you did something extraordinary. You did summon a Familiar Spirit. Not only that, from another world, and just kissing him gave him a fantastic power. I don't know what that means, or why. Did you screw up or was it your destiny to be together? Only time will tell that. But you're not useless, and after a few days people will stop gushing over us because we'll be old news. Just have a little patience, okay?"

She put her arm around Louise's shoulder and hauled her up, giving her a squeeze and holding her tight.

"You mean all that stuff you said?"

"I sure do. And what I said to you yesterday. That's what I came to talk to you about, actually. Maybe with my help we can figure out what's going on with your magic and put it to rights. How does that sound? Hiraga obviously doesn't need my help, so I need a new mission while I'm here. That mission is you!"

"I didn't think you even liked me. Why would you do that for me?"

Susan sighed. "Louise, you can't help the world you live in. I'm seeing you through the lens of my world, which is very different. For all I know, time runs slower here and you're actually in what my world would consider the 'middle ages.' Maybe you haven't had the chance to go through the social reforms my world did. I can't blame you for that. And I don't really know you, so I can't honestly say I dislike or like you. But the one thing I do, my world, this world, any world- that's help people that need it. That's what I'm all about. It's what my magic is all about, why I learned spells like *Repair* and *Alleviation*. Why I made a dozen *Suppress Curse* objects for a pack of werewolves and didn't expect to be paid. If you're willing to work with me and put the time in to figure your magic out, I'm willing to do what I can for you. Maybe with my senses and knowing how magic works and your own world's books about things, we can come up with an answer."

"No jokes? Someone didn't put you up to this?" Susan shook her head. Louise sighed and nodded hers. "Okay. I would be... very grateful for your help."

"Then you have it. I'll sit through your classes tomorrow, get a sense of things, and then after dinner we'll start figuring your magic out, okay?" Susan started to get up, but Louise grabbed her hand.

"Can you stay... just for a little while, I mean? You don't even have to talk, I'm just..." she looked almost ready to cry again. "I'm just so lonely here. You're the first to ever... to ever..."

"Come here," Susan said, holding her close. "You don't have to be alone anymore."

Perhaps an hour later, Susan didn't have *Timekeeper* and clocks weren't in evidence anywhere she could see, Louise had cried herself to sleep. Susan had tucked her in, kissed her forehead, and slipped out.

It's been really tough for you, hasn't it, she thought on the way back to her room. Because of your backfiring magic, no one wants to be your friend and so you decided you

didn't need any. That made you even worse, as now you went out of your way to be nasty to everyone. But I think inside is just a confused little girl, struggling as best she can and not knowing where to turn. At least Neville had me looking out for him, and a physical condition I could easily cure. I don't think it's going to be so easy this time.

And why do you seem so excited about that prospect? asked The Darkness. *Looks like just a lot of unnecessary work to me. It's useless, forget it!*
Now I know I'm doing the right thing.

Learning

Time: The next day

Place: Classroom

“So if I’m understanding this,” continued Susan, after the teacher went over the basics of their type of magic. “A ‘line’ mage, using two elements, is basically casting two separate spells *simultaneously*. This creates one higher level spell than just using one element. Then a ‘triangle’ mage is casting three at once, and ‘square’ caps it off by casting four separate spells all at the same time? That’s nuts!”

“And hence why there are so few square mages in the world. You’ve understood it perfectly.”

I almost wish I hadn’t. Imagine casting a Mars and Jupiter spell at the same time and getting some weird combination of the two. “Thank you,” she said, sitting back down again. Hiraga had remarked upon “how Japanese” the class was, where if you got called on you stood up to answer the question. But from what Susan could tell, the textbooks were in French. She couldn’t read them, but she recognized French when she saw it. *So I’m speaking and understanding French right now?*

And so the day progressed as normal. Susan and Hiraga learned a little about the history of this world and how magic played part in that development. By the end of the day Louise raced through dinner and her “homework,” some of which was trying to cast certain spells so she didn’t bother. Finally she closed her book and spun in her seat, causing them both to look up from what they were looking at.

“I’m ready,” she announced.

“Good, because this book is giving me a headache,” replied Hiraga with a yawn.

“What do you mean?” asked Susan, closing her own. “You can’t possibly understand any part of it, can you?”

“That’s just it. I almost feel like I could, but it won’t come. It’s the oddest thing.”

“Who cares about that?” asked Louise. “Let’s find out about my magic!”

Susan laughed. “Okay, you’ve been busting at the seams all day, let’s head to the courtyard and see what we can find out.”

“We can’t, you know, do it here?” she asked, cheeks getting a little red.

“Not if you’re going to be exploding everything! Look, there’s no shame in this. You’ve been living with it more than a year, now you’re getting some help to control it. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Besides, I’ll need something to compare your magic to. Hopefully there will be someone willing to help we can snag and talk into casting some spells for me.”

So the four went down to the courtyard again, Sparkle to help feeling out the magic with her *Magic Sense* as well. Once there they saw the redheaded girl, standing next to a girl with blue hair and glasses, carrying a staff. She seemed to be talking to a huge dragon, and Susan muttered “perfect” and stalked over to them.

“Greetings!” she called to them, getting close. They all looked over, including the dragon. “That is a fine example of dragon kind you have there.”

“Her name is Sylphid,” said the blue haired girl quietly.

“Pleasure to meet you!” Susan bubbled. “And you as well. I don’t think we’ve been introduced. Susan Felton, dimensional traveler at your service.”

Susan held out a hand, but Tabitha shied behind Kirche.

“She’s sort of shy,” she explained. “But everyone knows who you are. Why are you still hanging out with Zero, anyway?”

Louise pouted and stomped her foot.

Susan chuckled. “Actually, I’d like your help for a little experiment. Possibly both of you, if you’re willing.”

The two looked at each other, and Tabitha gave a slight nod.

"Guess she's okay with it. What do we have to do?"

"Nothing too difficult, I think. I just want to get a sense for 'normal' magic," she made air quotes, "before I try to figure out what's wrong with Louises'."

"What did you do with your hands just then? Are you mocking me?" snipped Louise.

"What, you don't have air quotes?"

"Air... quotes?" asked everyone but Hiraga.

"Never mind. So can you do it?"

"I think between the two of us we can handle that. What do you say, Tabitha?"

"Okay."

"Move back a little, you two," said Susan to the others. "I don't need your rune thing messing up my senses. Oh, and I don't know if this means anything to you guys, but please try to cast them as strongly as possible."

"Fine with me," said Kirche, getting her wand out. Tabitha just held up her staff.

"One at a time, if you don't mind." Susan closed her eyes and concentrated on her magical senses. Kirche said some gibberish and Susan made her check. She got an 8, her lowest possible, but Sparkle got a 15. "Crap, I didn't get it!" complained Susan.

"I did," said Sparkle. "It was a Mars spell, all right. Next."

The girls repeated the process for all four elements, and Susan was satisfied. *Though it's not fair they can use Uranus and Neptune elements when I can't. Also it's a good thing that blue haired girl... Tabitha? It's a good thing she's such a good caster, I got a 9 on one of her spells and still managed to tell what it was.* "Thank you girls, that verifies what I thought. I don't suppose either of you is a line mage?" They both shook their heads. "Pity. It would have been nice to feel out a dual spell. Okay Louise, you're up!"

"What do you want me to cast?" she asked nervously.

"On the one hand I want to feel it out, and the stronger it is the better. On the other if you're going to backfire it I don't want you to blow yourself up. Whatever you think is appropriate. Maybe start small and if I don't get it, we can work up to a larger one."

"Okay. Here goes." The others got out of the way, and even the dragon took a couple of steps back. *Huh, even the dragon knows what's up.*

Susan again closed her eyes as Louise spouted some gibberish and the spell exploded nearby. Susan got a 12 and Sparkle got a 10 on the check.

"I didn't get it, it was too weak," muttered Sparkle.

"I got it, and it was weird! Once more, please, if you can? Same intensity if you can."

"Okay." She exploded something else nearby, and this time Sparkle got a 15 and Susan got a 14.

"Oh yeah, I see what you mean," said Sparkle. "What the heck was that?"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Kirche. Tabitha looked interested and wasn't hiding behind her anymore.

"Okay, check this out," replied Susan. "My magic is quite different from yours, that's a given right?" Everyone nodded. "But on some level, magic is still magic. I can sort of taste the rainbow and compare your type of magic against mine. By casting purely elemental spells I could tell what planet they represented, if you had been casting like I did. Fire for Mars, that kind of thing. But what Louise did..." She turned to her. "It didn't feel like anything these two did. In fact, it didn't feel elemental *at all*. The closest I would fit it into my type of magic would be..." she paused.

"Moon," both she and Sparkle said together.

Susan nodded. "Thought so. And that's why her magic goes so wild, at least in terms of *Natural Magician*." She pointed up. "Two moons."

"Darkness?" asked Sparkle.

"I don't know, it doesn't really fit, that's just the closest I could come. I'm sorry, Louise, but I don't know what the heck your magic is doing. I had hoped doing this might... what?"

Both the other girls looked completely shocked at what Susan was saying, and had backed away from Louise a couple of steps.

"No, it's not possible," protested Kirche. "You must have it wrong. There's no way she's a-" She stopped as Tabitha tugged her cape.

"It fits," she said simply.

Kirche stared at Louise.

"Look, my senses don't lie. Her magic is totally different from yours. I'm surprised one of the teachers didn't recognize this, but whatever. If that explains why her spells go wrong, we have our answer. You're trying to do magic in an element you're not suited for." Even Louise looked spooked as Susan looked over at her. "What? I take it this is rare, but what's with this reaction?"

"Principal," said Tabitha, pointing back towards the building.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. Come on." Susan turned to go, but felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Wait, you said you sensed this? And you did have your eyes closed, I watched you. Can you teach us that technique?"

Tabitha perked up.

"I can try. I offered to teach my skills but I haven't heard anything from the principal about doing that yet. You're magical in nature, it stands to reason you can learn to sense magic like I can. Or *Imbue* or *Fabricate* for that matter." *Though Harry and the others couldn't, possibly because they have their own version, potion making and whatever the goblins do for imbuing. Huh, it might be S.T.F.U. all over again.* "I'll ask the principal about it, maybe I can start a new club or something. Or take a rotation in one of the magical classes."

"I'd like to learn," said Tabitha.

"Okay. Even if it's just us after school, I don't mind. We'll see what he says."

"Thanks. And Ze- Louise? Look, if it turns out you... you know... I'm sorry for the way I treated you. Before."

"You better be," she replied, taking off at a fast pace towards the door. Not wanting to be left behind, Susan gave a wave over her shoulder and followed.

The principal, initially happy to see Susan and inviting her in, stared at the group when she explained what she had felt.

"Who else knows about this?" he asked sternly.

Susan and the others traded glances. "Kirche and Tabitha I think their names were? Tall girl with red hair and short girl with blue hair."

"You got it right," stated Louise.

"Bring them, and get Colbert," he said to Miss Longbill, who bowed out of the room and went to fetch them. "I really hope they don't go spreading it around, but I guess what's done is done."

"What? I admit they reacted like Louise had just grown another head, but come on. What's all the fuss about?"

Mr. Ottman sighed. "I've suspected for some time, but the Familiar that Miss Valliere summoned, and that rune, made it all but certain." He pointed to Hiraga's hand, and he looked at it again.

"This? We figured out what it could do for me, is it something special?"

"You what?"

"Yeah, the very next day when I was going to start teaching him the sword. We were equal, and I sure didn't expect that."

"Wait, your skill rivaled that of the Gandalf?"

"The Gandalf?" both Susan and Hiraga snickered.

"Gandalf," Mr. Ottman corrected. "That rune is legendary. And you figured it out in less than a day? People work fast on your world, apparently, Miss Felton."

"And it seems people here keep secrets just like wise old wizards from my world. Honestly, letting her think she was useless? Allowing people to bully her and call her Zero because she was trying to channel magic incorrectly? What a Dumbledore thing to do. I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"I'm not sure what that is, but the appearance of a Void Mage is very serious business. There are those in the world that will want to destroy her before all four come together."

"What happens then?" asked Louise.

“According to legend? Disaster. Or a miracle, depending on who you ask. You have to keep in mind, the last Void mage existed six *thousand* years ago, so records from that time are spotty, at best.”

“Great,” put in Susan sarcastically, “that means there’s no one to teach Louise here how to properly channel her magical energies! Or proper spells for her ‘school’ of magic.”

“Sadly, that is the case. We’ll try to find any records we can, but it will take time.”

“I understand,” said Louise. “It does mean I’m not a failure, though?”

He shook his head. “Yes. Your magic is different, and equal to ours in every way.” Louise smiled. “But you can’t go spreading it around. Like I said, your existence needs to remain a secret!” Her face fell.

“So I’m still Zero Louise, huh?”

“I better not teach anyone my *Magic Sense* technique, if what you say is true. They’ll be able to tell the difference in her magic just like I did.”

“That is a concern,” allowed Mr. Ottman. “Of course, feel free to teach Louise here, if she can learn it.”

“If you want. It’s come in handy every so often.”

Louise nodded, and the door opened, admitting the others again.

Mr. Ottman swore them all to secrecy, and looked quite relieved they hadn’t told anyone else. He allowed them to learn *Magic Sense* as they already knew, as long as they didn’t further teach anyone until they left the school. Both agreed.

“Good,” finished Mr. Ottman. “I’m glad that’s taken care of. You’re both adjusting to life here?”

Susan and Hiraga nodded.

“I’m glad to hear that. We haven’t found much, and what we have found is rather impractical at the moment. I’d rather get a more complete picture than raise your hopes unnecessarily. So I hope you’ll forgive the lack of information for you thus far.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” forgave Susan. “And you must have other things to do, too. As much as I would like an instant fix for this, realistically I know that’s not possible. I mean if I can’t do it because that branch of magic is denied me, and you’ve never explored the possibility of other worlds, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Quite. If there’s nothing else, I will bid you good night.”

They all looked at each other, and no one could come up with anything, so they said good night and went back out into the hall.

“I guess you really are one, huh?” asked Kirche, after making sure the coast was clear.

“Seems that way,” Louise said haughtily. “So I better not hear one more Zero out of you, is that clear?”

“I guess, but then people might ask me why I stopped calling you that, which would be awkward. How about just in public? You’ll know I don’t mean it anymore.”

She fumed, but accepted the necessity.

“Too late now, but come to Louie’s room after dinner tomorrow and I’ll start teaching you *Magic Sense*.”

“Looking forward to it,” said Tabitha.

With that, the group broke up and went their separate ways for the night.

Susan found Siesta hanging out in the hallway near her door, and she gave a shy smile and wave. “If you wanted, I have some time to talk.”

“I’d like that. Come in!” *Maybe I’ll make another friend tonight. Twilight Sparkle would be proud!*

They talked for some time, getting to know each other. Siesta seemed like a nice person, interested in Susan’s adventures at her old school.

“So many things have happened to you. How did you ever get through them all?”

“It’s both the blessing and the curse I shall carry with me all my days,” Susan replied, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. “To gain the XP I need to improve my skills and learn my spells, one adventure after another must I face.”

The girls laughed.

“Wait, gain what?”

All too soon Siesta had to leave, but hoped they could talk again soon.

“Yes, this was nice. Maybe one day I can meet your family. I’d love to see how people who aren’t nobles live.”

“When I get some time off, I wouldn’t mind taking you to meet them.”

“Really? Great. Thanks a lot.”

The next day passed swiftly, Susan again sitting in on some of Louie’s classes. The teachers were a little weirded out by having such an old student, but given that Susan actually wanted to learn about history and literature and spells of this world, they couldn’t fault her enthusiasm. After all, she wasn’t going to be actually *tested* on anything, she could just sit there and drink it up. Compare it to what she knew of history in her world, and see what differences and similarities existed. Siesta went out of her way to serve them at mealtime, which Susan felt a little weird about. But she seemed cheerful enough doing it, and both Kirche and Tabitha hung out, so it was actually pretty fun getting to know them, too. Susan caught Hiraga staring at Kirche several times, which just made her shake her head.

Boys.

With evening come, they gathered and Susan took off her ring. Having cast *Augment Skill: Teaching* on herself, she knew exactly how to train the others.

She also took off her knife and charm bracelet, setting them on the other side of the room.

“I just want you to focus on the ring for now,” she explained, holding it up so they could see it. “The ring and the knife are actually equal in power, but this is easier to hide, which is going to be our first exorcise. I’m going to hide it, everyone has to feel out which hand it’s in.”

As they played the “game” Susan explained exactly how they should be feeling it out as best she should. She just made a “check” in the “skill” but with her rating in *Teaching* currently at a 15, she knew how to explain it to them so they could get it easily. As all three found the ring more times than chance would explain, she congratulated them on “getting a 1 in *Magic Sense*” with a smile.

“Everyone except me,” complained Hiraga.

“That’s to be expected,” explained Susan. “You’ve gotten a bit of magic placed on you, but that doesn’t make you a magic user, like us.”

“Humph.”

“Now for the rest of you, it’s just a matter of practice. Just don’t try sensing things when there’s a ton of magic around. It doesn’t seem too bad here, but the last castle I lived in was saturated with the stuff. Almost took my head off the first time I tried it. It took a lot of practice to narrow my focus down and get past the interference. You can use it to find magical objects, tell what spells are going without looking, and more. So sense around, see what you can find.”

“Can I see that?” asked Tabitha. Susan handed it over with a shrug and she concentrated on it. “I feel fire,” she said at last. “Wind, for movement. The power of the Earth... metal? This is a powerful object, isn’t it? What does it do?”

Susan smiled. “Wow, Tabitha, you must be a pretty *Fast Learner* to have gotten all that. Yeah, it will generate a small squad of soldiers made of fire that follow my orders. So you really have gotten the hang of the skill already.” She reached back and handed her the knife from the bed. “Here, see what you make of this.”

Tabitha again closed her eyes and concentrated on the knife. “Mostly water. Washing away, healing. Maybe a touch of fire to burn out that which is unwanted.”

“Again, very close, probably as close as you can come relating my magic to yours. It’s the most powerful healing spell I know.”

“Wait, you put a healing spell into a knife?” asked Louise.

“It made sense at the time,” Susan replied with a smile. “On my world there used to be creatures called Dementors, that would suck out a person’s soul. They were immune to

basically everything I threw at them expect my most powerful healing spell. Basically I was healing a wound in the world, I guess. I don't know exactly why, only that it worked. As it takes ten minutes normally, I weaponized it into a knife so I could just stick them with it. It's a little inconvenient now, but it still works if you stick it into a person. The wound it causes just heals up as you pull it out, so it's fine."

"Used to be?" asked Tabitha.

"I destroyed them all. Hundreds fell to that blade, and I would do it again without hesitation."

There was silence for a moment.

"Okay, on that note," began Kirche, "we better get to bed. It's getting late."

"You go," said Tabitha. "I'll want to ask Susan something. Privately."

Kirche looked confused, but agreed, and thanked Susan, saying she would see her tomorrow.

Lousie hung back after Hiraga left.

"I just wanted to say, thank you."

Susan waved her off. "Sure thing, it's no big deal. I didn't have anything else important to do right now. Sparkle and I have talked about trying to research some kind of dream spell to tell Inari we're in trouble but-

"That's not what I mean," she broke in. "I mean for... everything. You found out I wasn't useless at magic. Now you've given me a skill only two other people on this world have. Three, but I mean you'll probably leave again someday. And you may have even helped me..." she looked over at Tabitha, still turning the knife over and over in her hands, "make some friends."

"That part is up to you," Susan said, wiggling her finger. "But Kirche and Tabitha seem nice, and you all share a secret now. That's a powerful thing for bringing people together."

"I guess so. Well, good night."

"See you tomorrow."

Susan sat down next to Tabitha on the bed, and waited for her to speak. Finally she looked up and said softly, "Just how good is this healing magic of yours?"

"How good is my healing spell? Let's put it this way; I first used the spell to cure two people that had been tortured into madness by dark wizards. They were fine afterwards. As long as it isn't a curse it'll restore lost stats, heal diseases or poisons, even erase scars or tattoos."

Tabitha looked at Susan with something approaching hope. "If I ask you to come with me, right now, and cast this spell..."

"I would. Without hesitation. As long as it isn't someone eeeevil. Is it someone eeeevil?"

Tabitha shook her head. "We'll get back pretty late."

"We'll only have to make half the journey. It won't be that late."

She popped up off the bed. "Let's go!"

"Hey Sparkle, taking care of a thing. I'll send the *Teleportal* back if I need you."

"Got it."

Tabitha made sure the coast was clear, then quietly slipped into the hallway and motioned Susan to follow.

Probably against school rules to just run off. Wonder who I'm going to cure here?

They made it down to the gate without incident, as Susan had gotten a 12, her maximum, on her LUCK check.

What? Making me roll LUCK? What's that all about?

Susan figured Tabitha would head to the stables, but instead she just whistled and a moment later, her blue dragon whirled out of the sky and landed before them.

"Do you mind flying?" she asked.

"You actually ride him? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. It's fine, as long as you say it's okay."

"Down." The dragon hunkered down, and Susan made an untrained *Riding* check to get on. She only got a 7, even after spending 4 energy, but Tabitha helped her up. "Hold on tight," she cautioned. Susan put her arms around Tabitha and tried to lock her knees around the beast's neck.

You don't have to tell me twice. I just wish it was Luna I had my arms around right now.

"Home," commanded Tabitha, and the dragon loped forward, powerful wings stroking, and the three took to the sky.

The landscape, mostly gently rolling hills and farmland, sped beneath them. Looking up, Susan was amazed at the brightness of the stars. *Of course, no light pollution here, and less pollution in general I'm betting. Smell that clean air!*

"Doing okay?" shouted Tabitha back to her.

"Great!" *Oh yeah, I could get used to this. I've never ridden a motorcycle, but I think it might be similar.*

They flew for some time, Susan trying to see what kind of infrastructure and houses were nearby the school, but it was pretty dark. The moons were both crescents, and looking up at them she was reminded that she did know a spell to see in the dark.

I could always fly out here myself, sometime. Hard to say, but this dragon is probably twice as fast as me, even putting max energy into Mercury. Still, they can't have classes all the time, I'll see it soon enough. Right now I think I'll just enjoy the moonlight.

Possibly an hour or so later, the dragon started descending, finally coming to a stop in front of a large house. Looking around the dark, she could tell that maybe it wasn't being kept up quite as it should, as the bushes and other landscaping didn't exactly fit the image of a place this huge. *But then, they don't have power tools, do they? Maybe this is as good as it gets?*

Tabitha and Susan slid off the dragon, Susan stretching her legs and shaking them out as her muscles protested.

"Sorry, should have warned you."

"No trouble. It's not damage, so I'll be fine in a minute."

"Wait," she told the dragon, and went over to the door. "Hopefully she's in bed. We'll have to be quiet."

"You got it."

Tabitha nodded, then turned to the door. She traced a symbol on it and said something, and was able to open it.

Some kind of password on the door, or just an unlock spell?

The two made their way through the house, Tabitha creating a small light for them to see by. She cautiously opened a bedroom door and looked inside. "She's a pretty sound sleeper, because of her condition. I'll put a silence spell on the room, just to be safe."

"Good idea."

She wiggled her staff again, then nodded and beckoned Susan inside. She saw a gaunt woman sleeping in a large bed, a small doll clutched in her hand.

Good, she's asleep. Wait, am I going to be able to say the words to the spell? If I had a Moon Silence spell going, I would have to cast as though not saying the words. Guess I'll just take the full time and not bother with the words one way or the other.

Susan went over to the woman and lightly touched her head, then began envisioning the magical symbols she would need to cast the spell. Circles spun and shimmered around the woman for fifteen minutes while Tabitha looked on impatiently. In the end she got an 18 on her *Sun* check, plus the five for the extra time, minus the two for casting without the incantation. More than was needed to successfully cast the spell, and both watched as the woman seemed to fill out again. Tabitha put her hands over her mouth as her mother's hair went from nattered and lank to shiny and full. Her face became beautiful, and where her hands used to be bone and sinew, they became normal again as well.

"Is... is she?" Tabitha whispered, as though not daring to hope.

"The spell obviously worked. Wake her up and find out."

Susan stepped back, somewhat out of the light created by Tabitha, who gently shook the woman's shoulder.

"Mom?" she asked, her voice sounding like she was about to cry. "Mom, wake up."

Her mother's eyes fluttered open, and then widened in shock. "Charlotte? What are you doing- Wait, what's going on? I feel so different, like I've just woken up from a nightmare that I felt would never end."

"Oh mom!" wailed Tabitha? as she threw her arms around her mother and started to sob. "You're really cured. She did it! She healed you!"

Susan silently slipped out of the room, allowing them their reunion in private.

Now, do I make a swift exit, as I did when I cured the Longbottoms? And what is with other forms of magic not managing a decent curative spell? I mean this is getting ridiculous. Their magic really couldn't have handled that? I mean she looked pretty far gone, and without knowing exactly what was wrong it's tough to say what had caused that. Some kind of disease, and they don't know about bacteria and such yet?

Susan wandered the house, carefully, after doing a quick grade 0 *Sun* spell for a candle flame sized light. She found a living room, *or maybe a sitting room given where I am*, and sat down. She didn't have long to wait until Tabitha/Charlotte and her mother came to find her.

"What are you doing sitting here in the dark?" chided Tabitha, ginning like she just won the lottery. "You healed my mother."

"This girl healed me?" asked the woman. "And what strange clothes she wears. But who cares about that, it seems I owe you a debt of gratitude."

Susan got up. "Please, you don't really owe me anything. It was just sheer chance I came here, and I'm just glad to be able to do what others couldn't for you. Oh, I'm Susan, by the way. Susan Felton."

"Susan, I am honored to meet such a powerful mage as yourself. And so young!" She walked over to Susan and threw her arms around her. "What is mine is yours," she said softly. "The kingdom of Gallia owes you a great debt, more so because of your humility." She released Susan, holding her at arm's length. "You must call me Esme."

"I would be honored."

"What is going on?" A man with a white mustache that seemed to wrap around his chin stormed into the room, holding a candle and what looked like a mace. The weighty steel dropped from his hand and clattered to the floor as he took in the scene. "My lady, you are restored, standing before me whole again? How can this be?"

"Faithful Percerin, have you been looking after me all this time? I'll have to give you a raise." She grinned as she said this, and the man went down on one knee before her. "Oh, stop that nonsense this instant. If what I seem to recall about my condition is any indication, you deserve a small holding of your own for what you put up with. But to answer your question, I'm not sure. Charlotte was not very clear about how my recovery was attained, just that a new friend of hers was the cause."

"Friend?" The man seemed a bit shocked, and looked over to Susan, who gave a little wave. "This truly *is* a night of miracles. I will get some tea and we can talk." He got up, *a bit stiffly*, thought Susan, *this is no young man, especially for medieval times* and he picked up the mace and hurried out of the room.

"I've almost forgotten what tea tastes like. It'll be nice to not need to be forced to drink something. And somewhat of a relief to the staff, I'm sure." She gave a rising laugh, and Tabitha once again came over and hugged her. "Ah, my daughter. It's been the hardest on you, I'm sure. Come, we have a lot of catching up to do."

"Perhaps I should just come back later?" asked Susan.

"Nonsense. As far as I'm concerned you're part of the family now. Come on."

Sitting down at a table, Tabitha lit several of the candles in the room while the man busied himself serving tea.

"Shall I wake the others?" he asked. "Would you like something more than tea? I could make you something if you wanted it, my lady."

"Just tea for now, Percerin," Esme replied. "And I think we'll keep this recovery quiet, for the moment."

"My lady, surely this miracle should be told to all!"

She shook her head. "No, my position is even more insecure now, given how long I've been ill. It's been years, at least. My little girl is all grown up!"

"Mom!"

Position? thought Susan. *Now what I have done?*

Wow, that took far less time than I thought. Well done to get it out of the way, Susan.

What did?

For you to realize that even doing things with the best of intentions can lead to disaster. You don't even know who you healed, didn't even ask or care. Now we'll see what kind of damage has been, which should be delightful- for me, anyway.

Esme saw the thoughtful look Susan had. "How much did my daughter tell you about herself?"

"We've actually only known each other for a day," admitted Susan. "She found out a secret about one of her classmates, and because of that I was giving her some private lessons in sensing magic instead of teaching the technique to everybody. Long story. Apparently people here didn't know they could do that, so it'll give her a definite edge in the future. Anyway, she found out I knew a powerful healing spell and asked me to come with her. I didn't even know who you were when I healed you. She didn't say specifically and I didn't want to pry. When I get here you obviously needed it, and she said you weren't evil. That was good enough for me. I did notice the resemblance when I first saw you, of course." *Even*

here, it seems blue hair isn't that common. "I didn't even know that name you keep calling her, I thought her name was Tabitha."

"You took the name of your doll?" Esme asked, laughing.

"You thought it was me," explained Charlotte.

"Did I? A thousand curses on the man that tried to get you to drink that potion!"

"I always wondered why you grabbed it and drank it instead. I mean you could have just thrown it and had him arrested."

She looked a bit embarrassed. "Who can say what was going through my mind at the time. In any case, what parent wouldn't sacrifice their life for their child? The point is, Susan, you didn't know about our family when you came to heal me?"

Susan shook her head. "Nope. Didn't matter to me. Someone requests my help, I give it. Their station is unimportant."

"To think such chivalry existed in this world." Esme seemed amazed. "If I could I would knight you immediately!"

"Why don't you, mom?"

Esme shook her head. "We've been left alone probably because of what happened. You still in line for the throne, after all."

"You're a princess?" asked Susan, in shock. She looked Tabitha over in a new light.

"You really didn't know. Extraordinary. My husband and his brother were both candidates for the throne, and my husband was the favorite. However, he was killed in a "hunting accident" and Joseph ascended instead. That poison I ended up drinking was meant for her, to remove her from the picture."

Charlotte looked down. "As my mother saved me, I was instead sent on impossible missions they thought I would get killed doing. Slaying dragons and such."

"No wonder you picked up *Magic Sense* so easily. You must have XP to spare after all that!"

"She must have what?"

"Oh, sorry. That's just my regional dialect. I mean you must have experienced a lot after all that."

She nodded. "I'm actually a triangle mage. Please don't tell anyone at the school, I don't want them to feel uncomfortable because of it."

"You really are growing up," exclaimed Esme. "I'm so proud of you, my daughter. But our position is far from secure. If the king learns I've recovered he might realize his hold over you is more tenuous. That could be troublesome. Until I'm sure I've fully recovered, and I learn what's been going on while I was... unaware... it's best if I keep a low profile for now."

"You may want to brush up on your magic, too," suggested Susan. "You may need it."

She nodded seriously. "My old wand should be around here somewhere."

"I can fetch it," put in Percerin.

"Tomorrow will be fine. I need a decent night's sleep, quite honestly." She yawned. "I remember waking up all the time during the night for so many years..." she shuddered. "Best if those memories are put behind me."

"I'll let you get some sleep," said Charlotte, getting up. "We need to be getting back ourselves."

"We can come visit anytime," said Susan with a wink. "Just let me know you'd like to come."

"You did say something about that before, what did you mean?"

"Come, I'll show you, if we're heading back. Esme, I'm glad to see you're up and about. It was very nice meeting you."

"And you," she replied. "I know you don't want anything, but I'll think of something to repay your kindness."

"The friendship of your daughter will be more than enough," she said. *Dear Princess Celestia, today I made a new friend, and she's a princess just like you! Well, maybe not exactly just like you...*

"Especially if she becomes queen one day, no?" Esme bumped Susan with an elbow.

"I don't plan to stay, actually. As I said, my being here was an accident I need to rectify as soon as possible."

"Then there is something I can do for you! Do you need money to travel?"

Susan shook her head. "It's too complicated to explain now. Some other time, perhaps."

"I'll look forward to it. Come and visit any time. If I'm going to have to pretend to still be insane, I would love the company of someone who knows the truth."

"I will."

Esme and Charlotte embraced again. "I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered.

"I'm glad you are," Esme returned. "You must tell me all about your adventures. You've grown up to be a fine, strong young woman. I'm proud, so very proud of you my daughter."

After their goodbyes, Susan and Charlotte went out to where the dragon was napping, and she raised her head.

"We won't need you for the way back," Susan said. "If you think the healing spell was good, hold onto your staff for when you see this. *Teleportal!*"

Both were suitably freaked out by the hole in the air she created, allowing them to simply step back through to the school.

Yeah, that never gets old.

The dragon took off again, and both silently made their way into the school and up the stone stairs. Charlotte walked Susan to her door.

"Good night, see you tomorrow," Susan chirped.

"Wait. I don't have the words to thank you."

"Like I keep saying-

"But I have this." Susan was shocked to find Charlotte kissing her, and closed her eyes. It wasn't a kiss of passion, but of thanks, and Susan could feel the warmth in it. It didn't last long, as Charlotte, blushing furiously, broke the kiss off. "It was my first," she muttered quietly, and turned down the corridor, head down. She nearly ran out of sight and turned the corner, disappearing.

"Huh," remarked Susan, touching her lips. "I guess that's acceptable."

She went to bed that night with a grin.

The next day she wouldn't meet Susan's eyes, and Louise demanded to know what had happened after she had left.

"That's her story to tell," said Susan, grinning wickedly. "We all have our secrets."

The day passed normally, but oddly, Siesta was nowhere to be seen. Someone else served them, and by dinner time Susan had a bad feeling about the whole thing. She made her way to the kitchens, only to find Hiraga already there.

"Are you looking for Siesta, too?" he asked.

"Yeah, is she around?"

"Apparently, if I'm understanding this correctly, she was 'transferred.'"

"Transferred? What does that even mean?"

"From what I've been told," he pointed to the head chief, who had eyebrows enough for two men, "some aristocrat saw her when he was here to discuss things with the principal. Count Mott, I guess. He requested her service and when an aristocrat wants something, they tend to get it."

"She didn't say anything about this! That's weird."

"We were kind of busy last night. Maybe she heard you practicing and decided she wouldn't bother you?"

"I guess. Man, I was just getting to know her, too."

The silently mounted the stairs back up to their rooms. "I have to admit, I'm a little worried about her," Hiraga said at last.

"He's a noble, not a child molester. Siesta is only seventeen, she told me that before. It might be a good opportunity for her."

“Maybe you don’t have the same history, but people where I came from had weird ideas about that in the Middle Ages. Like, you’re an adult at maybe thirteen?”

“Oh. Yeah. Tell you what, Char- Tabitha and Kirche are coming for their daily lesson in a few minutes, we’ll ask them if we should be worried. After all, we don’t know the culture here and this may be perfectly normal.”

“That’s not normal,” explained Kirche. “For Mott to show up and then Siesta to disappear the next day? You’re right to be a little worried.”

“I knew it,” Hiraga said, smashing a fist against the wall. “What’s he planning?”

“Mistress,” said Charlotte, and Kirche nodded.

“He wouldn’t take her against her will, though, would he?” Susan asked, aghast.

“If he did, there isn’t much she could do about it,” replied Kirche.

“Rescue?” asked Charlotte.

“It would make sense this happened now,” explained Sparkle, perking up. “Given who we are. A rescue would be a nice opportunity.”

“Wait, are you saying we’re to blame for this?”

“Not blame, exactly.” Sparkle sat up. “It’s a *Paragon* thing. Without adventures we don’t get cards or XP. Without XP we can’t advance our skills. I noticed the same thing traveling with your dad. The world was doing fine, we show up, and suddenly in that area there came problems his group could solve? It happened more times than coincidence would allow. It seems it follows you, too.”

“I’m not one to turn down the call to adventure. How about it girls, up for a rescue mission?”

Rescue

Place: High in the air

Time: Twenty minutes later

Everyone there had enthusiastically signed up for the rescue, and Susan created some black outfits for everyone with *Creation*. She managed to do it in two castings, as black, stretchy cloth was not that heavy. One set of tops, one set of bottoms, so everyone could just pull them on. By joining the outfits at the sleeves and pant-leg, this made it “one object” that just had to be cut apart. Hiraga was shooed out of the room and took his own outfit across the hall while everyone changed. She also checked her cards, spending the *Rally* to get another card for herself and Sparkle, netting a *Took a Night Class* card.

“Too bad this won’t stick around very long,” said Sparkle looking wistfully at her character sheet. “This might get us a spell we couldn’t get any other way, and thus be much more useful than normal.”

“We’ll have to think about it,” said Susan. “Maybe something will come up on this mission. But if not, yeah, think about what we’re missing right now and use it before it’s gone.”

“So why are we doing this?” asked Louise, staring angrily at Kirche’s curvier body as she stripped.

“Because we can’t wear school uniforms while we are illegally breaking and entering a nobles’ house. Plus with the hoods up it’ll be harder to tell who we are.”

“Why not me?” asked Tabitha.

“You’re hanging back,” explained Susan. “If it got out, however that happened, that you were involved, I’m guessing it would get very tricky politically.” She nodded, conceding the point. “You can show us the way, and we’ll ‘drop in’ on Mott and make sure he’s behaving himself. If not...” She punched her hand. “He’ll regret it.”

So the group had *Flight* magic put on them, and Sylphid the dragon kept her speed down, and they approached the house from the air. The dragon was big, but not large enough to carry everyone, so they were pacing her to the side. Charlotte pointed. “That’s the house.”

“Then this is as far as you go. Want me to send you back, or are you okay with flying?”

“We’ll be fine. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The group watched her go, hanging in the air. Sparkle was in her fairy form, sitting on Susan’s shoulder so she didn’t tire herself out trying to flap her wings. They hovered over the house, watching as pinpricks of light, probably guards carrying torches, moved about the premises.

“What’s the plan?” asked Kirche. “You seem to have done this sort of thing before.”

“Oh, I dabble,” Susan replied with a smirk. “Okay, do we need to get a little closer? I’d like to be sure she’s actually here before we make any other plans.”

Sparkle looked down. “If we do, you can lower me while I maintain it. Just a second.”

She cast a spell, *Detect Friends*, and nodded. “There’s one person friendly to us in that house. This side.” She pointed.

“That’s our maid,” said Susan happily. “Okay, there’s a small something on the other side of the house, that’ll work perfectly. Kirche, you’re going to go set it on fire. Make sure there are no animals or anything living inside.”

“Right now?”

“No, it’s our distraction. Let’s see if she needs us first. If we need it, I’ll send you. Stay there and make sure someone doesn’t come put it out right away. We’ll come get you. We can’t go *Invisible*, but I doubt those guards will look up. Be quiet and try to stay out of sight. We’ll come up with the rest of the plan on the fly.”

Everyone nodded, and they all dropped towards the roof of the house. Hovering over it so they didn’t make a sound, Susan flipped over and peeked into the windows she saw. The third window was the winner.

Inside, dozens of candles were lit, illuminating the two figures within. One was a naked Siesta, crying and pressed up against the wall by the other person in the room. This was a half-naked man, turned away from the window as he struggled with Siesta.

“Kirche,” Susan growled, “distraction. Now.”

“On it.”

She flew off.

“Sparkle, on my signal, silence spell on this window. Louise, blow it open. Hiraga, he’ll be yelling for guards once we’re inside. Hopefully Kirche’s fire will draw most of them off in that direction. Try not to kill any of them. I’ll handle the count.”

“Got it.”

Susan tensely waited, growing more and more angry as the man lost more of his clothes and continued forcing himself on the protesting girl. Suddenly there was an explosion from the other side of the house, and cries of “fire!” rang through the air.

Huh, guess she doesn’t know how to hold back either.

“Now!” said Susan, and Sparkle cast *Silence* as she had been ordered.

“It’s in place, blow the window,” she said.

Louise dropped down and said something, and the window silently blew to pieces, spraying the inside of the room with fragments of glass and wood. The man whirled, and Susan could only imagine what was going through his mind as he tried pulling his pants back up again. Three figures, dressed all in black and with their faces covered hovered just outside.

“Stay here,” Susan said to Louise, and she and Hiraga darted forward into the room.

“Mott, I presume,” said Susan to the man, staring in shock at the new hole in his wall.

“Let’s have a little talk about basic human decency.”

“Guards!” he shouted, lunging for a length of wood Susan saw was still in easy reach.

His focus? No, I don’t think so.

“*Combust*,” she cast, and the dry wood instantly caught fire, causing him to yelp and flinch back. *I so love fighting magic users with that weakness.*

“Get dressed,” Susan commanded Siesta, who looked around for something to wear.

Looking over there, Susan saw her maid outfit had been torn off her, and growled again.

“Check the closet. He won’t miss some pants and a shirt.”

“Who are you?” demanded Mott. “Guards!”

The door rattled, and Hiraga calmly drew his sword. There was a pounding from outside, as it was obviously bolted shut and would take some time to get through.

“*Thrust*,” Susan cast, sending the man flying and knocking into the wall behind him. He cried out and went down, and Susan saw the back of his head was bleeding.

He’ll be fine, thought Darkness.

Yeah, probably, Susan thought back.

Wait, seriously? He sounded a bit hopeful. *There’s hope for you yet!*

I’m just getting started.

Susan strode over to him as the door started giving away as the people outside battered it down. She grabbed Mott’s throat and looked him in the eye. “Where I come from, doing that to a person is called rape. There, I would take the matter to the authorities, and let them deal with you.” *I wouldn’t expect much, even there. People still have funny ideas about ‘consent’ that only a lot more education and common sense are going to cure. But at least some effort is being made.* “It seems to be a little different here, as you people seem to make your own rules. Fine. Now I’m making the rules. I ever get wind that you’re even thinking about trying something like this again? I’ll be back, and I won’t stop at one measly window. Think about it.”

The door smashed open, and the guards were surprised to find a black dressed figure tearing into them like a master swordsman. Their weapons were smashed to pieces in seconds, and they groaning on the ground, bleeding from multiple shallow wounds. Susan turned back to Mott. “I’m being clear here, right? You’re getting all this?”

Mott hastily nodded, and Susan let him go, allowing him to slump to the floor. *Maybe he’s a little bit more hurt than I thought?*

She cast a quick *Healing* on him, and saw that Siesta was ready. She was holding the pants up, Mott being a much bigger (around the middle) person than she was. Hiraga sheathed his sword and grabbed her up.

"I think we're done here." He and Susan lifted off the ground again and started for the window.

Mott was weakly calling for more guards, but it seemed the fire had done the job of making them all run in the other direction to try and get it put out.

"I'll be watching," Susan couldn't resist saying before she turned and flew out the window herself.

They met up with Kirche, who was having far too much fun shooting jets of fire at anyone trying to get close to the main blaze, and the six took off into the night. They set down a few miles away, as Hiraga couldn't carry her anymore.

"Just as well, we weren't flying all the way back anyway. Siesta, are you okay?"

The maid had her head buried in Hiraga's shoulder, and was sobbing. Realizing she was on the ground she pushed away from him and tried to run, but got tripped up by the pants coming loose and falling around her ankles. Susan tried to suppress a laugh as Siesta tried scrambling away. She lowered the hood from around her face.

"It's okay, Siesta, it's just us. It's Susan and Hiraga and Louise." The others pulled down their hoods as well, and Siesta wilted with relief.

"That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier!?"

"If you were fooled, Mott won't know who we are, so that part of the plan worked. Sorry about that. Come on, let's get you home. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Siesta shook her head.

"Good. Apart from the fact I don't have an excuse to go back and set fire to more of that mansion of his. Ah well. We'll have you back to the school in no time, give me a second for a *Teleportal*." Susan cast and opened the portal back into her room, much to the amazement of the others.

"Yup, we'll probably beat Tabitha back," Susan chuckled. "Come on."

Once safely through the door closed, and the familiar stone of the castle surrounded them.

"You really are okay, right?" Susan asked, leading Siesta to the bed and making her sit down. "Physically, I mean." She nodded. "You guys better go," Susan said to the others. "She's just been through about the most traumatic thing someone can, and packing everyone in here isn't going to help. Thanks for the help, though."

Everyone wished her a good night, and hoped she was okay. Siesta managed a weak smile, and Sparkle, back in cat form, nuzzled her as the room emptied out. Susan locked the door and came back to sit down by Siesta. "They're gone," she said softly. "It's just you and me. Did he hurt you in any way?"

"I was so scared!" wailed Siesta, hugging Susan and starting to cry again. "If you hadn't come... or if you had been just a few minutes later..."

"Hey, the hero always arrives just in the nick of time, right?" Susan stroked her hair.

"It's okay, you're safe now. No one will hurt you here."

They stayed like that for probably a half hour, Siesta slowly putting the experience behind her. "I'm sorry," she said, pulling away from Susan. "You probably think I'm just a big cry-baby right now."

"Not at all," said Susan. "He had total power over you, both as a noble and as a magic user. If I had my full power here I would have made sure he could never do magic again. Then he wouldn't be a noble either."

"I hate him!" Siesta spat powerfully. She tore off the shirt and pants, leaving her naked again and throwing them as far across the room as she could. "I would rather walk back to my room naked than touch something he wore for one more second!"

I'm not complaining.

"Shall I walk you back? I can understand if you don't want to be alone tonight. You're welcome to stay here."

"No, I better get back. But at the same time I don't think I want to walk around like this, despite what I said."

"Here," said Susan. "You can wear this. I'll get ready for bed anyway!" She pulled off her shirt and handed it over, and Siesta tugged it on.

"What is this material?"

"My magic made it. I just wanted something tight, stretchy, and black, and that's what it gave me."

"Amazing."

Having put on the pants, Siesta hugged Susan again. "Thank you again. For caring."

"Of course. And next time, come see me if something seems wrong. I might as well do all the good I can while I'm here."

"I will," she resolved, "and I'll be sure to thank the others tomorrow, as well." She slipped out the door and down the hall, bare feet hardly making a sound as she disappeared down the stairs.

Guess I haven't lost my touch. Even used a bit of teamwork to get the job done. How about that, I can be taught!

--Meanwhile--

Somewhere, in a random weapon shop, inside a random barrel, a sword thinks to itself: *Yup, any day now, he'll show up. I'll be back with Gandalf again. Just you wait. It'll be soon, I can feel it. Gonna be so great, slice up some baddies. See the world. Any day now.*

Oh, how disappointed that sword is going to be.

--Meanwhile--

A thief with green hair helps herself to some jewelry, using Earth based magic to bore a hole in the roof of a castle. There's just no stopping a pro, right?

--Back with our heroes--

The next day at lunch, Kirche asked Louise what she and Saito were going to do for the exhibition, and Louise dropped her fork in surprise.

"I totally forgot about it. Or rather I purposefully didn't think about it because of my peculiar Familiar."

"What's this?" asked Hiraga.

"Sort of a talent show for Familiar Spirits," explained Kirche.

"I'll win," said Charlotte, not having any knowledge of the future and such. She was just confident.

"Yeah, you have a huge dragon," admitted Susan with a laugh. "All you have to do is stand there, point to the dragon and say 'I have a huge dragon.' How can anyone hope to beat that?"

"What are we going to do?" asked Louise, staring at Hiraga.

He shrugged. "The only thing I can do, if you're willing, Susan."

"I've never been a straight man before," Susan said, trying not to grin. "We could do the old 'who's on first' routine if these guys know what baseball is."

"What? Not comedy, I mean sword fighting!"

"Oh, that. Everyone saw that before, though. Still, will they allow me on stage? I'm not your familiar."

"Ring," Charlotte put in, pointing.

"Hey, that's an idea, you could beat up my... no, wouldn't work. They explode when they die, so cutting them up would leave a big flaming hole where the stage used to be."

"Still, I bet if someone who can make Earth Elementals conjured up a few for you to fight, that would work," admitted Louise.

"I think Guiche can do that," said Kirche. "We could ask him later."

"Uhg, that guy? I guess it can't be helped."

"Who is this?" Susan asked.

"You met him. He tried to..." she giggled, "kiss you, after your little match with Hiraga here. Uses a rose because a wand is just too mainstream?"

"Oh him. Don't remind me." The others nodded in sympathy, all of them having been the subject of his 'attentions' at least once. (Everyone but Louise anyway.) "At least he's stayed away from me since then."

"Guess you made an impression on him. I doubt anyone's ever held a sword to his throat before!" Kirche said, laughing.

"Ah, it did him some good."

That night, there was a knock on Susan's door, interrupting her training session with the others. She opened it to see the principal standing there, staff in hand.

"Good evening," he said, looking inside. "Hard at work, I see. Interesting. I wonder if I could borrow you for a moment, Susan."

"Sure thing, Mr. Ottman. Be right back, everyone."

She stepped out into the hall and started walking alongside the principal.

"How've you been?" he inquired.

"Oh, you know. An adventure here or there. Attending some classes. Teaching some stuff. The usual."

"Good, good. I must apologize that no magic has yet been found to send you on your way."

"It would surprise me if anything like that existed here. I mean, until you know other worlds exist, why try reaching them?"

He gave a little cough. "Yes, exactly. And how has Louise been?"

"Better, since she understands her magic a little better. Hard to study it when the only thing it seems she can produce is explosions, but it did come in handy recently. If I could still cast *Dead Magic* I would have her cast into that to improve her control, but no such luck. I'm not sure what I can do for her."

"I do hope the knowledge serves to take away a little of the sting of being called 'Zero' all the time. Turn here."

"Where are we going, actually?"

"All in good time, my dear."

"And here we are." Two stern looking guys in armor flanked the door, and nodded to Mr. Ottman as he stood before it.

"Now that's a big door!"

"Quite. This is our vault, and I wonder what your sense of magic could tell me about it."

"Let me see." Susan slowly opened herself up to the nearby magical impressions, and was quite shocked (or not, he had called it a vault) that even with her 8 result (her lowest possible) she could feel quite a bit of magic sealing the door shut. "Quite an impressive number of spells you have going here," she hedged. "Is there something in particular you wanted me to sense?"

"Well, my true purpose was twofold. First, to find out if your magic could add anything to the defenses here and secondly to ask for your help."

Susan took out her character sheet and looked over her spell list. "Trouble is, I could think of a few things, if I had my book. How would you guys get past them later, though?"

"It's only temporary, as I'll explain in a moment."

"Oh, okay. These walls are made of stone, I could technically use *Sculpt* to seal it off... or not, as it seems now that I think about it, I would have to 'target each individual brick.' So that's out. I guess not."

"Quite all right. The reason I ask is that there's a thief operating nearby, and we think she is going to hit this vault sometime soon. Our normal number of guards is going to be busy escorting a royal visitor for the exhibition tomorrow, leaving us understaffed. I know you have no real reason to help us, but if there was something you could do, I would certainly appreciate it."

Yup, the Paragon adventure train is rolling through town all right. Sounds like tomorrow I'm going to be fighting a thief. Sounds interesting.

"I think I can," she replied, looking around the hallway to fix it in her mind. "I'll have to watch the exhibition from the back, but that's not a problem. I'll catch this thief for you."

"Ho ho! I'll hold you to that!"

"Naturally. Now, if you can just lead me back to my room... I get lost in the corridors quite easily. It's one of my cute little flaws, you see."

"This way."

Neither saw the green haired lady watching them from the shadows. Wonder what's she's thinking about? Probably something totally unrelated.

Thief

Place: Outside the school

Time: About 2:00 PM the next day

Several carriages pulled by magnificent stallions drew up in front of the school where the entire class had been gathered. Susan, having gotten some advice on what to wear, was standing in a somewhat formal dress made with *Creation*. She had made it a little closer to what someone from her world would wear, but either way she was out of place. The teachers all wore robes, while the students had their uniforms and capes on.

Don't they have, like, dress robes? Huh.

The princess, who Susan saw was quite young, probably about her age, talked with Mr. Ottman who was kneeling along with the other teachers. She had somewhat short red hair, falling about to her shoulders. She was wearing a rather poofy white dress that covered her completely, and had a weird sort of purple top which covered her upper arms and turned into a cape. Three opals decorated the front, and the simple "crown" that adorned her head.

That cannot be practical. Looking over the line of kneeling people, Susan was struck by another thought. *Why are the teachers wearing those long robes that cover everything, but the secretary, Miss Longbill, right? Why is she wearing a mini-skirt? She does have nice legs though, you have to admit.*

She was then hustled inside and probably put under guard.

Wait, she's a princess? But I thought Charlotte was the one in line for the throne? I'm so confused.

With that the students dispersed and the day ended normally. Susan wracked her brain for a spell to learn with the card before it disappeared. She figured as the next day was her next "adventure" she would get new cards, not that she needed them for the last one.

Yeah, I'm just that awesome.

"Actually, would you mind if I used it?" Sparkle asked.

"Hey, it's your card. Just because I got it for you with the Rally, doesn't mean you need to give it to me if you have something in mind."

"It's just I've lost all my attack spells. My two *Elemental Touch* were *Knockout* and *Magic*, and my *Elemental Line* was *Pluto!*"

"Go for it." She chuckled.

"What?"

"By taking away *Knockout* we actually become more dangerous. You'll have to damage something now, rather than just inflicting non-lethal."

"You're right." She got out her character sheet and took a look. "Actually, never mind. I'll just spend the *Wild* as the *Night Class* and you can have the other one."

"Ha! How did that happen?"

So Sparkle learned *Elemental Line* (Wind) but Susan went a little less mainstream. She concentrated on learning a Mercury spell to switch the position of two objects. The card activated and she learned the spell of *Transposition*. This was a grade 6 spell allowing "Two targets within range, of which you may be one, instantly switch positions via teleportation."

Think of the fun I could have with this spell! Make enemies hit each other. Switch a pebble and a sword. Throw a pebble in the air, switch it with a person, and watch them splatter all over the ground. The fun could be endless!

Susan was not privy to the conversation had between the princess and Louise later that night, and the next day rolled around.

Don't these kids ever have classes? They've had their Familiar Spirits less than two weeks, right? How are they giving some kind of talent show already? Ah well.

She was stationed in back, wearing a modified version of her "infiltration suit." This one was sleeveless, and featured shorts rather than pants. It was also white, rather than black. Under her chair, Sparkle was interestedly watching the proceedings, while Susan occasionally

looked through the egg sized *Teleportal* she had created to spy upon the vault hallway. She had stuck the other end in a spot she hoped wouldn't be easily seen, but couldn't do much about the light shining in that it generated.

Seriously, when he said most of the guards would be out here, I didn't think that meant there would be no guards on the actual vault. What if I hadn't been here? The thief could have just walked up to the doors without any opposition at all. As it is... She looked over to the small tent that had been erected for the princess and the principal. There seemed a shortage of guards there, too, hardly five, and while they wore a bit of armor as basically shoulder pads, they didn't seem armored enough to be guarding a *freaking princess*. Also, were they wearing weapons of any kind?

I suppose the pads could be imbued, but then why have the pads at all? Put it into a necklace or something. I don't get it.

As Guiche was laying on a bed of roses with his Familiar, Susan caught movement in the hallway. As she watched, a cloaked figure stood before the doors and started doing something.

Show time!

"Come on," she said to Sparkle, getting up. "Time to bag us a thief."

"*Acceleration*," Sparkle cast, as per the plan. Susan stopped maintaining *Teleportal* and cast *Light* instead, throwing the glowing ball into the air. Mr. Ottman saw it and nodded, getting up after saying something to the princess. He started making his way past the seats to where Susan was heading to. Basically an open area she could put the thief, out of the way of the princess and everyone there.

"For sacrifices made," she said, holding her ring up. Only the words were necessary, of course, but she felt honoring Harry's sacrifice in that way didn't hurt. A ring of soldiers made of fire appeared, and looked to her for orders.

"In a moment someone will appear in the middle of the ring," she told them. "Detain them, but do not attack unless you are attacked."

They all nodded their understanding and readied their weapons.

"Impressive, but where is the thief?" asked Mr. Ottman, coming up behind her.

"Just waiting for you. Can't start the show without all the actors being present, now can I?"

Susan began casting again, taking the full time. *Yes, see that magical circle appearing around you? Nothing you can do about it, thief. And here we go. "Telesummon!"*

Susan felt her resist, and her eyes widened in shock. *What the heck is her RESolve, anyway? Maybe I should have put more energy into that. I'm spending an XP to make her reroll, take that!*

And with that, Fouquet stood in the center of a ring of steel. She was somewhat "disguised," with a hood pulled low over her face. Two long green bundles of hair stuck out from underneath, reminding her of-

"Miss Longbill?" Mr. Ottman took a step back in shock.

"I was just checking to make sure the vault hadn't been disturbed when suddenly I found myself here!" she confessed, looking around. "Are these fire golems yours, then? I've never seen you make anything like them!"

Dang, should have had Detect Lies going. I hate not having Spell Symbol.

"Then why are you wearing those weird clothes, with your face covered like that?"

"Uh..."

She was wearing a sort of teal dress that ended in the front by her knees, but was longer in the back. Around her waist was a corset, and her sleeves were super long and flowing like a shrine maiden outfit. *And what's with these people and capes? No capes!*

"I think we had better go inside and sort this all out," said Mr. Ottman, eyes narrowed. "Susan, if you could have your constructs conduct her inside, perhaps we can question her more thoroughly. I would be interested to know exactly why my secretary would be so concerned with security."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," said Miss Longbill, bending down to touch her hand upon the Earth. There was a rumbling, and suddenly a huge construct made of rock rose out

of the ground, with her at the head.

Susan and Sparkle rolled *Initiative*. Sparkle began casting *Destruction*, focused on one of the legs of the construct. Miss Longbill drew her wand, but was too high up for Susan to see it clearly enough to snatch with *Transposition*. (She wanted to use a Mercury spell, because of her bonus from *Acceleration* rather than the Venus spell of *Retrieval*.)

Is this thing a creature or an object? Susan wondered, as she cast *Lubricate* on it. In this case, it probably wouldn't matter, as all she really wanted to do was bring Miss Longbill back down to Earth. *The affect in this case will probably be the same.* At the same instant, Mr. Ottman brought his staff down and sent some kind of *Elemental Attack: (Wind)* at the creature's legs. This, sadly, hardly even scratched it. Above, Miss Longbill stumbled but caught herself, a spike rising out of the construct's head for her to grab onto. *Shoot.*

The construct now balled up a fist and struck out, stone fist descending on the group to smash them. *"Deflection!"* cast Susan. The fist smashed right through, but rather than spend an XP, Susan mentally declared the use of her card *Extra Action*, so that action took no time. She tried again, spending more energy this time. Ties go to the defender, so the fist smashed against her magical circle with a crash and stopped.

Susan saw spikes made of Earth crashing down on them, and dodged, her *Acceleration* finally coming in handy. *Is she laughing up there?*

Sparkle's spell finally went off, cast strongly enough to destroy 65kg (or 143lbs) of rock.

[Here we pause so the Narrator can look up about how much rock that is.]

[Narrator finds a lot of pictures of fish tanks.]

[Okay, not enough to blow the thing's leg off but targeting the lower leg of the thing will at least sever it below the knee.]

The construct started to tip over. Sparkle made a LUCk check, and being a cat paid off, she got a 24. Meaning it's tipping away from the group so they won't be crushed. Above, Miss Longbill struggled to hold on to the spike as the thing tilted.

Whew.

Given her *Accelerated* status, she and Susan now went simultaneously, Susan targeting the construct, Sparkle targeting Miss Longbill. Sparkle tried *Immobilize*, which thanks to *Acceleration* went off perfectly, while Susan went for the only spell she had that could deal with larger stuff, *Shrink*. Both cast instantly, Susan spending her maximum energy to get it off quickly. Both succeeded, and the construct instantly shrank to be just a little bigger than Sparkle. Miss Longbill fell to the ground with a thump, bands of force wrapped around her so she was unable to move.

She could still move her wand, which she did, but Sparkle cut her off with an instant casting of *Elemental Line (Wind)*, again thanking her decision to go with that element and get the benefit from *Acceleration*. She threw max energy into it, because she was maintaining a few spells now, but still beat the difficulty easily.

Miss Longbill shrieked as the spell nearly cut her hand off with 13 damage, and she dropped the wand, rolling away from the line as best she could. The construct crumbled to dirt, and Mr Ottman blinked, not having done anything more than one attack that whole time.

"You guys don't mess around, do you?" he asked, bringing his staff back up. People were just turning to see what the commotion was about, and up on stage the princess looked over worriedly as her "guards" got in front of her, swords drawn.

"How did you do all that?" shrieked Miss Longbill, trying to inch away from them. "What are these bands?"

Susan took great pleasure in telling her; "Magic."

"Come on, let's get you somewhere secured," said Mr. Ottman, levitating her. "We can have the council pass sentence on you later. Oh, and congratulations, Susan. You single handily captured the most notorious thief in these parts. I'm sure your reward will be forthcoming." He sighed. "And now I need a new secretary. What a bother."

With that he walked off. Susan was going to call after him that she didn't need any sort

of reward, but then remembered her *Resources: Money* background. *Wondered how this world was going to get me that. Maybe this is the way?* She dismissed her *Legion*, some of whom were still getting up after being tossed about when the construct appeared out of the ground.

With the threat and excitement over, the exhibition continued, and Charlotte easily won, because dragon. Susan clapped along with everyone else for her new friend, troubled about the “thief” being someone she knew personally. *Can you imagine, the secretary of the principal being an outlaw? She was decent at magic, too, she could probably have made a better living guarding other people’s treasures and such rather than stealing them. Pity.*

The lives of the students finally went back to normal, with classes resuming, some of which Susan attended. Some, like their practical magic classes she didn’t bother with. She knew how their magic worked, and it wasn’t going to help her to learn the specifics. She was still interested in their history, so attended that class as she couldn’t just pick up a book and read about it herself.

Two days later she received a summons to appear before the princess, and got directions on how to get there. Then she had Sparkle listen to the directions and look the map over, because she wasn’t doing the navigating.

Pity they don’t have a network of computers and a company obsessed with mapping the planet. I could just step there. Oh well.

With that, Susan was flying towards the capital with Sparkle to receive her reward. The palace was easy to spot, it was easily as big as an entire section of neighborhood that surrounded it. Most of the place was forested, but along the river and bridges that crossed it some mansions had been built. *Rather close together, unless they’re all owned by one person?*

Susan dropped out of the sky in front of the gate and told the guard there who she was.

“You are expected,” he said, relaxing his grip on the sword. He gave her some directions and told her where to wait, then let her inside. Susan looked around as she walked through, and it was a palace all right. White marble statues, huge rooms, crystal chandeliers, the works. *How do they light those candles?* She thought, looking up at them. *It must be awfully dim around here at night.*

Magic, stupid!

Oh. Duh. How do I feel you shaking your head? Do you even have a head inside me?

She sat and waited, then was finally called in to see the princess. The guards allowed her in, then closed the door behind them, leaving Susan alone with the princess. *No guards? Strange.*

“Please,” said Anrietta, getting up from her throne. “Come closer.”

Susan came forward and dropped to one knee. “As you have summoned me, so have I come, your majesty.”

Anrietta giggled. “Please, we both know you’re not one of my subjects, so you really don’t have to do that.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Susan, relieved. “I don’t have *Etiquette*, so I wasn’t really sure how to react- wait, how do you-”

“Mr. Ottman told me. I know you came from another world, so it’s fine. Honestly, people bowing and scraping all the time gets old, can we just talk? And call me Anrietta.”

She sat down on the steps leading down and patted a space next to her. Susan sat down and held out a hand, which Anrietta shook.

“Nice to meet you, Anrietta, I’m Susan. And this is Sparkle.” A fairy flew around her head a couple of times, landed, and became a cat again.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“What a beautiful cat!” exclaimed Anrietta. “And I hear she can cast spells, as well?”

“That’s correct,” answered Sparkle. “You really did hear all about us, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “It’s why I’ve asked you here. I mean the main reason is this, of course.”

She pulled a rolled up scroll from a pocket in her robe and handed it over. Susan unrolled it, then popped up with a gasp. "This is... Sparkle, come take a look! Oh my goodness!" She held it so Sparkle could see.

"Stop fooling around," said Sparkle, rolling her eyes. She turned back to Anrietta. "We can't read your writing."

She laughed, clapping her hands together. "Oh yes, you two are going to be perfect. I mean nobody makes jokes in my presence. Nobody. I can't remember the last time I genuinely laughed. My being a princess means absolutely nothing to you, does it?"

"Ah, I'm not sure how to answer that question," Susan hedged, sitting again.

"Honestly. Please?"

"Quiet frankly, no. I have no idea the political situation here, or how you came to power. Are you admired by your subjects or detested? Are you fair in your dealings or tyrannical? Royalty is fine, but it's too easy for it to become corrupt. Heck, it's too easy for democracy to become corrupt, how does monarchy hope to avoid it?"

"I hope to," she said quietly.

"I wish you luck."

"I may need it. But back to this." She touched the document. "It's a royal order to allow you to withdraw coin as you see fit, up to 10,000 new gold. I wish the kingdom could give you more, but this is actually the bounty for catching the thief. It was put up by the nobles."

"I have no idea how much that is, but I can see why you didn't just hand me a sack full of coin. Nobody could lift it."

She laughed again. "You're right. If you wish, the royal treasury can handle it, and allow you to withdraw funds as needed."

"How much interest am I getting?" she asked shrewdly. Anrietta just looked confused.

"For letting the kingdom use *my* money, for other loans and such I mean. Shouldn't I get some kind of... you don't have that here, do you?" She shook her head no. "Ah, that figures. Sure," she said, handing it back. "I can get back here easily enough. Just have someone show me the way to the treasury and introduce me."

"I'll take you myself," said Anrietta. "But there is the main reason I asked you here."

"Yes?"

"I can't really pay you-"

Susan waved her off. "I was recently reminded by Sparkle that it is a *Paragon's* duty to answer the call to adventure. To refuse is to deny my heritage and my father. The experience I shall gain along the way will be more than enough, I assure you."

"The task is not difficult, but it is important. You saw the town on the way in? Across the river?"

"From above, but yes. It looked like a nice enough place."

"Thank you. The nobles live on this side of the river, of course. I have been hearing rumors of nobles... overstepping their considerable liberties in the town. I want you to learn the truth of this matter, if you can. I know you'll be honest in your report, because you have no reason to lie or deceive me."

"Gee, I thought it was going to be something tough, like slaying a dragon that threatened the town, or rooting out bandits along the road. Or something really tough, like catching millions of bunnies before they eat up all the carrots in the fields. That kind of thing."

She laughed again. "If any of those things come up, I'll know who to call. So you'll do it?"

"I would be glad to make sure the nobles are not causing too much trouble here. You can rely on me, your majesty."

"Please, you don't have to call me that."

"I just said it because it rhymed- it didn't actually rhyme in your language, did it?" Susan sighed. "Zecora would be very displeased."

Neighborly

Place: The City

Time: One hour later

“Overstepping their liberties, what does that even mean?” Susan asked, walking down into the village.

“Darned if I know,” replied Sparkle, back in fairy form and perched on Susan’s shoulder. “We need a plan, boss.”

“You got that right. But first we need to blend in more.”

It was true. Susan was wearing the dress she had made when the princess first had visited the school, and it was earning her some odd looks. She wanted to see what sort of clothes the people in this town wore, and go from there. She had money now, a jangly pouch full of lesser currency, but magic was still cheaper. Besides, now that she had money, she was going to spend it on important stuff- magical supplies.

The treasurer at the castle had explained that most peasants never even saw gold in their lifetimes, so it turned out the 10,000 gold was actually worth a bit more than she had anticipated. At least here. Susan took most of it, as it wasn't, strictly speaking, coming out of the kingdom's coffers and she figured no matter what reality she ultimately ended up in (if and when she got out of this one) the stuff would be useful. As long as she didn't spend too much of it, her *Resources: Money* background could be satisfied while on the move, and there was a spell to turn one type of currency into another.

Still, it was a question of how much, exactly, her magic believed items bought with the currency were worth for the purposes of Fabrication. She recalled from her book that “Any form of *fabrication* has a monetary cost equal to ten times the EXP cost.” So was that in gold? It had worked out funny between dollars and Galleons, because of how exactly they counted up their coins. So she wasn’t sure how much stuff would be necessary in this world. And leaving it, what if gold was worthless somewhere but copper was really expensive? How would her translation magic handle that? And of course prices might not even be consistent across worlds...

I mean if a loaf of bread costs a penny on this world, but a dollar on another, how does the magic know? Plus it isn't a one to one correspondence, because these people haven't heard of the metric system either. It's more like Hogwarts, where so many coins equals so many others. Rather than just ten and a hundred. I'm just going to have to buy some stuff and see how much the process consumes. And I suppose I should get out of here before worrying about currency exchange rates across realities.

Susan’s plan was to improve Hiraga’s sword to be DTR/OTR 10, so it would be basically indestructible. If people were going to go around summoning creatures made of rock, he was going to need some way of dealing with that. For Louise, an attack spell, one of the two Sparkle and her had between them. Explosions were all well and good, but rather indiscriminate to throw around. One of the reasons Sparkle went with *Line* rather than *Burst*. Perhaps a new Imbued item or at least a spellcasting focus for her? She hadn’t thought that far ahead. *It has to be useful offworld as well as here. I don't plan to be stuck here without Spell Symbol forever. Or perhaps some magical research... With Sparkle's Photographic Memory we might have an easier time recreating some of the spells in my book if I need them.*

Susan found her current target, a place that looked like an inn. As expected, the sign was pictorial, as it seemed many peasants didn’t know how to read. *Most probably would in a town this size, but an inn has to cater to visitors from outside.* She stepped inside and looked around.

“Can I help you?” asked the man behind the counter.

“That depends. Do you have rooms available?”

“I do!” He named the price per night, and Susan shrugged mentally. *At least it's not*

thousands of dollars worth of gold for a single bottle of soda.

She paid for a week in advance, and the man handed over a key. "You don't have any luggage?"

"I travel light," she admitted.

"Okay."

With that, she went up to her room and looked around.

"Homey," said Sparkle, flying down and turning back into a cat. "And I think I hear dinner."

"You would really eat mice?"

"Unless you would rather them running across you in the night."

"Enjoy!"

"Thank you."

Susan spent several minutes casting *Creation*, making herself some new clothes. These were more in the style of fashion here, and she wished for a mirror so she could see how she looked.

"You're lucky you get glass in the windows," Sparkle chided her. "Do you know how expensive an actual mirror would be here? We may take them for granted, but these people don't."

"I suppose you're right."

"Anyway, what's the plan now?"

"Phase two is a little bit more magic, and then seeing what the townsfolk have to say about life here. Hopefully something interesting will come up."

"How's magic going to help there?"

Susan winked. "Oh, they'll tell me anything I want, when I have a fifteen rating in *Information Gathering*."

Sparkle laughed. "This town won't know what hit it."

"You got that right."

Susan also stepped through a *Teleportal*, leaving it open, back to the school. She found Louise and told her not to worry, but she would probably be gone for a few days on a mission for the princess. Louise looked confused, and said that sounded so familiar, but shrugged and wished Susan good luck.

Some kind of echo? Even here? I suppose my presence does change events here, doesn't it? I wonder if I should be more careful about that sort of thing. Oh well.

So Susan left Sparkle to start cleaning out the rats and other vermin from the hotel, and went looking for things to buy. She decided that small but somewhat "expensive" items was probably best, as she didn't want to lug a bunch of crap around. As the cost of the item, rather than size or the composition was specified, this made the most sense. It was also at various shops she should get the information she needed about the behavior of nobles in the town.

On her third try she rolled high enough to succeed (a 22) and the shopkeeper looked around nervously.

"You seem like a nice girl, so I'll tell you. Living here stinks."

"What? Literally? Like the sewer system is backed up or something? I didn't smell anything on the way here. I mean no one obviously cleans up after the horses, which is weird because that could be used as a composting agent and produce some really good dirt. You could just pick it right up, for free. That's crazy, just letting a natural resource sit there to rot!"

"The who on the what now? No, I'm talking about taxes, not... oh, horse manure. Good one. Yeah, our tax collector is what you might call a 'horse's rear end' if you know what I mean."

"Tax collector, huh? What's his story?"

"He got the bright idea that when he comes along to collect the taxes, he takes a

casual look around and mentions how tragic it would be if maybe your place caught fire that night. Or if some gang of thugs tore the place up and took your daughter. To make sure this doesn't happen he 'suggests' a small fee be paid, directly to him. Those that don't pay up find their shops destroyed the next day."

"And even if you all got together and protected the place all night, he's a magic user. There's no way you could beat him."

"What, you think he does his own dirty work? He's gotten a bunch of beggars together and they do whatever he tells them. Rumor is he keeps them in line with a combination of threats and just enough money to keep them happy."

"So you could stand up to them."

"Are you nuts? I would rather lose my business than be dragged off to the castle dungeon for not paying my taxes. He reports I haven't paid, and it'll be soldiers after me, rather than a bunch of drunks with torches."

"How can the princess allow such a thing?" *Was her attitude towards me a cover?*

The man hesitated, looking around again. They were alone. "Don't get me wrong, her highness is a wonderful girl, but I don't think she's told everything. I mean the laws are clear, and if you were the adviser to a seventeen year old, you would tell them about the poor sucker who can't pay his taxes? The one currently rotting in a cell someplace? No, because she would feel sorry for the man and let him free. Once it got out, no one would pay taxes because the punishment went away."

"Is that the only reason you do something?" she asked seriously. "Avoiding punishment? Not because it's the right thing to do? I'm not talking about taxes, I mean if it wasn't illegal to murder people, would you go out on a rampage? Of course not, because it's still wrong to go kill people."

"As long as we're not talking about taxes- no. But you don't mess with nobles, even you should know that much."

"I'm beginning to see that. Thank you for the information."

"Sure. I don't mean to scare you off if you really are thinking of moving here. I just want you to be aware of what you're getting into." He looked her over. "I'm sure you could find a good man here, settle down and start raising a family."

Susan struggled to keep a straight face. *As if that's even remotely on my mind right now. I have my father and friend to find, and then his world to save. Start a family indeed. But I suppose that's what a peasant girl would be thinking about, moving to a town like this.*

"And I do appreciate it. Maybe someday I can repay you. Have a good day. By the way- this tax collector. What's his name?"

"Turenne."

Susan nodded her thanks and was on her way.

A moment later she was ducking into an alley which was clear and thinking about how best to use this information. *The thing is, he probably keeps a secret record of who has paid what, so if a shop starts getting more popular, he knows to shake them down for more 'protection' money later. Finding that book is going to be the key, but proving it exists is going to be my first step. I can't just barge/sneak into his place and start tearing it up without some idea what I'm looking for. Luckily, a man named Tom gave me the technique I am about to use.*

Susan dropped *Augment Skill* and instead started casting *Research*. Several minutes later she had an odd looking book, all about the man named Turenne. Having done that she put *Augment Skill* back on, this time for *Research*. Smiling, she went to go find a place to have some lunch and look through it. By the end of her meal, her *Research* check of 25-4 was enough to get his address, things he had ordered that showed receipts, and a listing of all the 'protection money' he had amassed thus far.

It's written somewhere, otherwise this spell wouldn't be able to show it to me. With that book handed over to the princess, it'll show evidence of corruption, exactly what she wanted. Even without it, his estate would show he's worth more than his job provides, and I'm sure someone at the palace would love to know where that extra money is coming from.

The book and her *Augment Skill* went away, and Susan thanked the person that had served her. She left a generous tip and headed for the address she had learned from the book.

One problem, I can't read their street signs! Maybe researching that spell to understand written language wouldn't be so bad after all. I'm just glad the Research spell translated everything for me.

Crap. How am I going to know the book when I see it? One thing at a time, Susan. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Once across the bridge, she asked the first noble she saw which way she should go to get to the place.

"What, the tax collector's place? Why? Gone to beg for your husband to be released from jail?"

"Yes, kind sir," she tried to plead, getting a six on her untrained *Acting* check. "Please, if you know the way, can you tell me?"

"Find it yourself, filthy peasant." He walked away, not sparing her a backwards glance.

Filthy? I'm cleaner than he is, given I get magically clean every morning thanks to the Hygiene spell. Stupid noble. I'm beginning to see the problem with this kind of society.

This presented Susan with a problem. Most nobles rode, not walked. Even going back for her fancier clothes, she would still be out of place going to see the tax collector on foot. *I suppose I could raise my Acting temporarily. Wait a second... Magic Users have Familiar Spirits, and we know Charlotte has a dragon, so why couldn't I have one, too? I'm so smart.*

Susan headed back to the inn, getting lost several times because of her *No Sense of Direction*. She could have just used *Teleportal*, of course, but she was enjoying being outside after being cooped up in the school. Unlocking her door and looking around to see if Sparkle was back, she stepped into her room. She wasn't, so she proceeded to change back into her fancier clothes. She also used *Sculpt* to reshape some of the stone on the wall and put the items she had bought into the hole, then closed it up again. *I miss my Pocket Dimension.*

That done she made her way back across the river, and conjured up her *Magical Ally (Major)*. She climbed aboard the horse sized creature and this time when she *demand*ed to know the location of the tax collector's home, the man she stared down couldn't tell her fast enough. Naturally she had to ask twice more, but she finally stood in front of the place, now needing to come up with the next stage of her plan.

Option one; Walk up to the door and knock.

Option one point one (he isn't here.) Demand to wait inside. Take any forces inside with magic and ransack the house looking for the book.

Option one point two (he is here.) Threaten to expose him. Have immunity spells going so anything he tries bounces off. After he changes his pants, get him to hand over the book.

Option one point three (either.) Raise my Persuasion skill to a seventeen and just demand the book. Seriously, what chance would they have against me?

Option two; Sneak in using Shrink, Unlock, and Flight. Have a look around. Use Time Area to replay his movements in the house until you find whatever record books he keeps. Steal them all and leave.

Susan took a quick peek at her character sheet. *Yup, still have Overconfident. Option one it is then!*

She took extra time casting *Invulnerability* and *Barrier Against Spells*, because she wasn't an idiot, and walked over to the door to announce herself. She was now at a -9 to every check, and once again really, really missed *Spell Symbol*. She was going to drop the *Ally* once she went inside, which would help a little. *Still, a -9 is a little ridiculous. Maybe I*

should create the Invulnerability one as an item.

She knocked, then waited.

Soon a man dressed as a butler opened the door and started to enquire what he could do to help. His eyes fell upon the *Ally* and his mouth dropped open.

"I demand to speak to Turenne the tax collector," Susan said, drawing herself up. "You will fetch him for me. I will wait inside while you do."

"Ah, ah, a thousand pardons, great mage, but the master is not in at the moment."

"I see. My patience is not unlimited, but I will remain until he arrives. You will show me to a suitable location."

"Yes, yes of course. Please, come right this way."

Susan turned back to her *Ally*. "You are dismissed," she told it, for the man's benefit. She waved a hand, ending the spell, and he melted away. "Lead on."

Susan was led into a sitting room, and found a well dressed woman lounging there, reading a book.

Okay, his wife doesn't exactly fit into one of the sub-plans. Now what?

"A visitor? How wonderful!" she said, setting the book down. She looked Susan over. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Anise, is there something I can do for you?"

"Perhaps," Susan replied, sitting down. "How much do you know about your husband's work?"

"Oh, nothing at all," she twittered. "I just make sure his money goes to where it needs to, as is proper with his station. I don't care how he makes it. He works directly for the princess, you know."

As a tax collector? An exaggeration if ever there was one. He may work for the kingdom, but that's like saying an IRS agent works for the president himself.

"I'm glad you brought her highness up. It's on her orders I've been tasked with getting to the bottom of certain... discrepancies... in your husband's bookkeeping."

"Discrepancies? Bookkeeping? What are you saying?" She glanced around nervously.

"Quite frankly? This lifestyle you have," she gestured around her, "isn't possible on his income. The princess wants to know where the extra money is coming from."

"Are you suggesting my husband is taking bribes?" she demanded angrily.

"I'm suggesting that something is amiss, and I'm to get to the bottom of it. You can either aid me in my task or stand aside and allow me to get to work."

"I can't just let you barge in here and say you're under the orders of her highness without some kind... of... what's that?"

Susan unrolled a royal decree, signed and stamped by Anrietta herself, which she was told basically gave her license to do exactly what she was doing. Root out corruption.

The woman stared it, silently reading it over. "It seems I have no choice but to comply," she said, her lips twisting into a grimace. "My husband keeps meticulous records, I'll allow you to examine them."

She turned and made her way through the house, Susan following behind. She was brought to a study, and Anise started piling books onto a desk. "I think there are some more somewhere. You can get started looking through them, I'll be right back."

Susan took the top one off the stack and sat down, then started slowly paging through it. Anise left the room.

Now, once she's found whatever it is she's looking for, I'll demand to be left in peace. Then I can use Time Area and figure out where he keeps the hidden one she obviously doesn't want me to find. Because this gibberish isn't going to get me anywhere.

The numbers were different, our modern numerical system having begun around the time the printing press was invented. Mages could write with magic, so didn't need any such system, and peasants didn't need to know how to read in most cases, so that was out. Susan stared at the gibberish, wondering how ethical it would be to begin a cultural revolution by leaving some plans somewhere on how to build certain things. Like a printing press and adding machines. She wasn't sure what this language was supposed to look like, but she felt

this guy's handwriting was-

That's when she took a fireball to the back of the head.

"Oh dear," she said, shaking her head as the flames harmlessly dissipated. "I really did hope we were going to do this the easy way."

"Take her!" Anise shouted, and a burly man burst into the room. Susan looked at him with faint amusement as he dropped a thick wire over her head and started trying to choke her. She sighed. "Now I have to add assault charges to the list. And it seems you're in on it, despite what you said, and I know the princess is going to be most vexed when she hears about that."

"What are you doing, you fool?" Anise screamed. "Kill her!"

"I'm trying," said the man, straining to pull the garrote ever tighter. "This isn't working!"

"How perceptive," Susan praised him. "Want to try something else, or should I begin defending myself?"

He let go of the garrote and slugged her in the face with his meaty fist. Again, the impact did nothing.

"Step aside, fool!" she growled, and raised her wand. Susan crossed her arms over her chest. "Go ahead, knock yourself out."

"You... You!" She chanted, and a blast of air shot out, making her hair sway and knocking the desk over. Susan quite calmly remained sitting in the chair, then glanced behind.

"I guess I'll have to do something about this, if you're going to start destroying evidence."

She got up, and the man beside her started raining blows down upon her.

"How is this possible?"

The woman now shot spells at her with total disregard for the man standing next to her, who jumped back out of the way.

Have to be something low level, stupid -6!

"Dazzle!" she cast, taking the full segment to cast it. The two staggered back, the flash of light that resulted breaking both their concentrations.

"And *Thrust*." This she added an extra segment to, as why not? She only got a seven, having rolled one from minimum, but they were at a -12 to their STRength check to resist, and both went flying away from her.

Neither got up.

Not wanting to kill these people, Susan dropped her spells and did a quick *Healing* on both, targeting their bodies. She didn't see any bruising on their heads, but wondered if she shouldn't drop *Healing* and have Sparkle teach her *Regeneration*. It was only 3 more XP and far more convenient, healing everywhere at once.

That done, she used *Time Area* to rewind time in the area until she saw the secret hiding place for Turenne's books, and grabbed them up. One quick *Teleportal* later and she was handing them over to the princess, who started going through them and looked more and more angry as she did so.

Anrietta said she would need time to fully read them over, and Susan took her leave. She was exhausted from throwing all that energy around (figuratively, she still had a little left and she wouldn't start getting fatigue until it was all gone) so she went back to the inn and settled in for the night, her job well done.

Cleaning House

Place: The palace

Time: The next day

That morning, Susan presented herself at the palace as ordered. She was treated with a little more respect, but was asked to wait until her majesty finished her current business. Susan replied that would be fine, and was shown a place to wait and had tea brought.

“Wonder what kind of stir you’ve caused by fingering that tax collector,” mused Sparkle, her ears swiveling. “Seems this place is in kind of an uproar.”

“Really?” Susan hadn’t seen much more activity on the way in.

“You probably can’t hear it, but it’s buzzing around here. Quite the difference from the last time I was here.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Susan noticed a mirror over in the corner and went over to see how she looked. She was wearing a different dress, newly created just that morning, after having Sparkle teach her *Regeneration*.

“Why did you learn *Healing* in the first place?” she had asked.

“It probably seemed like a good idea, at the time.”

Wish my hair could be done up fancier, she thought wistfully to herself, turning this way and that in front of it. *Seems kind of a waste to wear a dress this pretty and... have I ever had my hair cut? I’ve never even thought about that before. How weird is that?*

The door banged open and Anrietta burst in, looking for Susan and smiling widely when she saw her. Guards rushed past her, obviously unhappy they had been left behind, but seeing no threat to the princess they bowed their way out. Anrietta sagged into Susan’s arms, hugging her.

“You really came through for me,” she said, smiling. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I hope the nobility starts to understand they just can’t walk all over the peasants without fear of reprisal now.”

Anrietta shook her head, stepping back. “Not after I’m through with that tax collector. He’s been stripped of his title, and his assets are being seized to pay back the money he extorted from the people. Plus those books you got? They were a treasure in disguise, because they noted down other noble’s behavior he had observed and was using for blackmail material. You’ve shaken up everything around here. And in a single day!”

Whoops.

“I wish I could stay and talk, hear how you went about it. But the place is on high alert now. You know that thief you caught?”

“Don’t tell me...” Susan’s eyes narrowed.

She nodded. “She escaped sometime last night.”

And here’s me without access to my Descry Creature spell.

“She blasted out a wall or something?”

“I wish it were that simple. Apparently someone opened her cell door and let her walk right out. So somewhere in my kingdom is a traitor.”

“Would you like to know who that traitor is?” asked Susan, a dangerous glint in her eye.

In for a penny, in for a pound, is that is? Wonder what sort of repercussions this little ‘good deed’ will have?

Quiet, you.

“Oh, but I couldn’t ask you for another favor, so soon after-”

Susan put a finger over her lips. *Oh my gosh, I’m touching a princess’ lips. Of course, I kissed a princess earlier didn’t I? Huh.* “It’s a single spell. Bring me to where she was being held and I’ll have an image of the person responsible in under a minute.”

“Done,” she exclaimed, taking Susan’s hand and pulling her along. “I’ll have a coach readied immediately.”

Anrietta seemed to be having an argument with someone before she got on the coach

with Susan, and they weren't being subtle about it.

"I insist on accompanying you," he was saying. "This girl, Susan, where did she even come from? You've been alone with her now on several occasions despite my recommendations. Now you're just going to hop into a carriage and visit a prison with her?"

"I have it from a very trusted source that she's of impeccable character," Anrietta countered. "She is an unmatched mage and swiftly becoming a personal friend. Plus she is responsible for first catching 'The Sandy' thief and putting Turenne behind bars. If you will not take my word for it, as the crown princess, at least put your faith in her actions."

"She could be lulling you into a false sense of security-"

"Please! If she wanted to, I'm sure she could steal me away or kill me right this instant. When we went to go take Turenne into custody, two people were found, out cold. One triangle mage and one burly man holding a garrote. She somehow overpowered both of them, but left them still alive, despite evidence they were attacking her with everything they had. The room there was a mess! Personally I feel safer with her around than with you. That is all I am saying on the matter. Now step aside."

"Very well, your highness."

"You may follow on horseback if you wish."

The man's reply was lost, and Susan made her way over to the carriage as Anrietta beckoned.

"I'm sorry about him," she apologized. "I do understand his concern, but he won't even listen to me."

"He's right," admitted Susan. "I could have been a threat to you. Why did you see me by yourself that first time?"

Anrietta grinned. "Didn't she tell you? Louise and I have been friends since childhood. I came to visit her when I was at the school, and she told me about you. Catching Fouquet was all well and good, and I watched your magic take down that golem. But I needed someone I could trust, and she said if it wasn't her, it had to be you."

"Wow. I'll have to thank her when I get back."

The carriage started moving. "So that's why you get to hang out with a princess." She grinned and winked. "It's a great honor, you know."

"Oh, I know," said Susan, bringing up an imaginary fan and fanning herself with it. "All my friends at the academy would just simply *die* if they knew."

Both fell into laughter.

But they weren't laughing as they stepped into the prison.

"I wasn't told conditions here were quite as harsh as this," said Anrietta, looking around.

Susan thought back to what that man who had told her about the tax collector had said. "That's something you may have to get used to," she admitted. "Always try to see the situation for yourself, if you can. Less chance of misunderstandings that way. Not to worry though, even in my so called 'enlightened' society, prisons are not much better than this. Despite numerous studies that say the threat of punishment does nothing to deter crime."

"I would love to sit down for a week and hear all about where you come from."

"Maybe when things calm down a little. I'd be happy to."

She shook her head. "I wonder if they ever will. Show me the cell, please."

"Right this way," said the warden, leading them inside.

Susan cast *Time Area* into the cell, and rewound back from the current moment until she caught movement. The princess and warden stared as a figure with a neatly trimmed beard and wearing a mask over the top of his face came into view. She paused it again.

"This is how events played out last night?" the princess demanded, back in princess mode.

"Yes, your highness," said Susan, back in "loyal subject" mode. "I could show you us walking into this place if you would like more proof. I am magically replaying time in this vicinity, and the image is true. Do you know this man?"

A look of determination and rage started taking over Anrietta's face. "I would recognize that beard anywhere. This man is Jean-Jacques Francis, Viscount of Wardes, captain of my

Griffin Knights. At least he was, until this moment. Come on, we have an arrest to make.” She turned on her heel and stalked out, Susan ended the spell and mutely followed.

“Ride ahead to the palace,” Anrietta was saying to the man that had followed her here. “Gather up some reliable men and mages. Do not tip Jean-Jacques off. I will be placing him under arrest *personally*.”

“Are you certain that’s wise-” he started to ask, but saw the look on her face. “I’ll go at once, highness.” He jumped on his horse and took off, leaving Anrietta and Susan to climb into the carriage.

“Actually, I could get us back immediately if you wanted,” offered Susan.

She shook her head. “I want to see if Marquis is loyal to me. If he is, my orders will be followed and we will take Jean-Jacques by surprise. If he is not, we shall see how far this corruption goes.”

“All right. I’ll be there by your side as long as you need me.”

She is a sucker for a pretty face, it seems, thought Sparkle. Of course, it does seem to be a worthy cause, rooting out corruption. But I think there’s some in every society, even ours, so where would it end?

Her face softened a little. “Thank you, Susan. What would I have done without you? But dragging you into all this, I feel bad.”

“My magic is pointless unless it gets used. Don’t worry, I follow in the proud tradition of my father. Making life miserable for those that would abuse their power or threaten the innocent.”

“He must be very proud.”

“I like to think so. I’ll ask him once I’ve rescued him from whatever world he’s stuck on.”

Anrietta looked at her curiously, but lapsed back into silence.

She probably has a lot on her mind right now. If I had Spell Symbol I would be making her some. Actually, that reminds me. Susan checked her character sheet, and as she expected she had new cards. Yup, it’s going to be a fight. Having no use for Glad I Brought this Shotgun she turned it in for 2 XP. The only real weapon skill I have goes with the gun I already have and can’t reload here. Getting another just like it isn’t going to do me any good.

But an *Extra Action* could always come in handy, so she held onto that and watched the countryside fly by on the way back to the palace.

“It may come to a fight,” Anrietta said once they returned. “Some of his griffin knights may side with him, and he’s an accomplished mage himself. Take him into custody but do not fatally wound him. I need to know if he’s working for someone and what their goal is.”

“Yes, your majesty!” everyone there shouted.

Looks like this Marquis guy is on the level. Until we run into the ambush, anyway.

Susan started to put *Barrier Against Spells* on herself, but then thought better of it.

These people seem to use just elemental attack magic, in other words, magically creating elements. They aren’t hitting me with spells like I do, Shrink and the like. They just blast fire or air around. The magic is in the making, it’s not magical fire. I think Invulnerability will serve. Sparkle put Acceleration on them both, of course. Then they marched through the halls of the palace to where she had been told Jean-Jacques was currently.

They found the man commanding some kind of drill in the field outside the castle.

“Good morning, princess,” he said, sweeping off his floppy hat and bowing. “How can I be-”

“Jean-Jacques Francis, you are under arrest for treason against the kingdom.

Surrender your weapon and come quietly.” Anrietta’s voice rang out strongly in the courtyard, and Jean-Jacques dropped his hat.

Treason? That’s a death sentence, isn’t it?

There was a shocked silence as the recruits stopped what they were doing and froze, unsure what they were hearing.

“A poor joke,” said the man, snatching his hat up again.

“Not an hour ago, this girl’s magic revealed to me an image of you, visiting the prison

where The Sandy Fouquet was being held. I then watched as you called her Matilda of South Water and opened her cell. You then handed back her wand and watched as she WALKED AWAY! I will have the truth of this matter and you will stand down. Throw down your weapon!”

“I’m unfamiliar with this magic, are you sure you aren’t being tricked in some way, your majesty?”

Several of the griffin riders landed. “Sir, what should we do?”

“The princess is obviously under some kind of compulsion. Quickly, grab her so we can bring her to a specialist and break her out of it. And that blond haired girl too! She’s behind all this, I wager!”

“Enough. Seize him!” Anrietta shouted, pointing her scepter. The guards with us charged forward, and the others looked to Jean-Jacques, who calmly drew his sword. They took their cue from that, and engaged the others.

Susan stepped in front of Anrietta, as the scene before them dissolved into more of a brawl than an orderly arrest. One man from the opposing side broke free, and Susan and Sparkle swatted him back with *Thrust*. He went flying back, crashing into another man. She also had a bit of fun with *Transposition*, switching soldiers fighting on the side of the princess with soldiers fighting against if they were going to be hit. With *Acceleration* going it looked like everyone else was moving in slow motion, so she was able to pick her targets.

Finally the opposition was down, and Jean-Jacques stood alone, ringed with steel.

“I say again, drop your weapon.”

“Odd magic that girl is using. I wonder how she’ll deal with this.” He pointed his sword and cast, and Susan heard an explosion behind her. Horrified, she watched as the castle wall exploded outward, sending huge chunks of stone towards the princess.

Even *Accelerated*, she didn’t have time to waste thinking if this counted as one attack, so *Deflection* would catch all of it or not. She simply grabbed the princess and spun her around, putting herself between the rocks. They impacted her, knocking both the ground, and from Jean-Jacques’ point of view, squishing them like bugs.

Susan heard voices shouting as the weight of a castle wall crushed her. It was difficult to breathe, but she was on top of something soft and warm.

“Anrietta,” she managed. “Are you-”

“Alive,” she gasped, then tried to cough. “Hard to get a breath.”

“Sorry, little tight here. Usually I date someone at least a few times before letting them this close. And it’s a princess to boot! At least it’s my lucky day if it isn’t yours.”

She tried to laugh, but groaned instead. “Stop that. Get us out of here. I think I’m hurt pretty bad.”

“As you command.”

But how, that’s the tricky part. If I had some kind of spell to be aware of things that were around me, that would be cool. I could Transposition us out of here.

Uh, how about instead of thinking about what you don’t have, chided Darkness, think about what spells you do have that could get us out of this.

Okay, fine. The trouble is, I have to see my target in order to cast something at it. Let me think. Mercury is out anyway, same goes for Mars, Uranus, and Moon. Great, so the one time I really need physical magic, I can’t move. This is just typical. Susan tried to shift around so Anrietta would be more comfortable. Okay, wait a second. I’m still Accelerated so I bet I could get Teleportal off pretty darn quick. What if I Shrank us both, then used the Extra Action? The Shrink would therefore have taken no time, so the rocks wouldn’t shift yet. Spend the card, position a very tiny Teleportal right next to us. Scoop up the princess and sprint through it to safety.

“Okay, have a plan. Need you to hold on tight, okay?”

“You want to be even closer? I thought that was part of the problem?”

Both tried not to laugh, and Susan gathered her thoughts. *Okay, card first, 0 delay, then Teleportal when my hands are free again.* “Here we go.”

She made a Venus check and cast *Shrink*, taking the full time. After all, it was the delay after shrinking that was the problem. She put in 6 energy, making her rating in Venus a 10, meaning they could become -5 sized, or about the size of a spider. The extra +2

compensating for the fact she was casting on two people, not one. She got a 19, easily enough, and both shrank down to almost nothing. The princess became -5 sized, while Susan, carrying her, became -4, just in case her legs were injured and she couldn't walk.

With one hand now free, the other cradling the princess, Susan cast *Teleportal*, putting in max energy and trying to cast it instantly. She got an 11 plus the bonus from *Acceleration*, meaning she could put the other end at least 100km away. As she wasn't trying for anything nearly that far away, she got it, and sprinted through.

"Where are we?" asked Anrietta, looking around in wonder.

"Under the throne," Susan replied. "I thought I would give you the chance to play dead awhile if you wanted."

"Why would I want that?"

Susan shrugged. "I have no idea. Just thought I would give you the option. If there was some advantage to you being dead that you could think of, now is your only chance."

She giggled. "I would love to sneak away and see the world with you, but that might leave my kingdom in a bit of a quandary. I better make an appearance soon."

"Okay, you got it. By the way, you said you were injured?"

"Yes, actually. Please don't set me down, I don't think I can walk."

Susan lifted her dress, and one of her dainty feet was twisted at a weird angle. "That must be extremely painful!" she exclaimed. "How can you stand it?"

She grinned. "I'm not standing, you're carrying me."

"You know what I mean!"

"By not thinking about it too much."

Of course, I have Low Pain Tolerance, so my ideas of pain may be skewed. Maybe she has High Pain Tolerance, for all I know.

"I'll have you fixed up in a second, hang on."

Susan cast *Regeneration*, and soon Anrietta was back on her feet again, flexing them and showing off those great legs of hers. "That was amazing. You're amazing. In fact, you're the reason I'm alive right now. How can I ever repay you?" Susan found herself being hugged again.

Bet you could take her right here, right now, if you asked for it, thought Darkness. Or at least get a kiss out of it.

Shut up.

"Probably by sending me on even more dangerous missions. I mean that's how these things go, right?"

"Sadly, you're probably right," she said, taking a step back. Her hands were still on Susan's shoulders. "But you deserve a title or something. I mean you could have died trying to save me when those rocks hit you."

"Full disclosure, I was utterly immune to any physical force when I grabbed you. Oh, I could have suffocated, true, but not be crushed. That's why the rocks settled how they did."

"Still..."

Susan waved her off. "Titles won't mean anything once I leave this world. Though I suppose when I finally get home, being able to call myself a knight or something, legitimately, would be kind of fun." She shook her head. "Come on, time to figure that out later. As you're still alive, let's make sure your subjects know before everyone starts having heart attacks trying to get you out from underneath the stone."

Wait, if Arthur became king by pulling a sword out of a stone, what do I become by pulling a princess out of the stone?

She nodded, then looked up. "Gives me a different perspective, looking up at the throne from here. How do I fill such a huge chair?"

"Way too many slices of cake?"

Anrietta threw back her head and laughed, pounding Susan's chest with her fists.

"You... you... jerk! I was trying to be serious. Just for that I should appoint you my jester. Why don't I have a jester?"

"Seriously? I don't know. I've never been a queen. You have to do what you think is right, and hopefully it's what is right for your people, as well."

She stopped laughing and looked Susan in the eye. "I will. I see now that just ruling

over people isn't good enough. I have to give them reasons to believe in me. Like you've given me for believing in you. I have a lot to think about. Thank you."

"Sure. All part of the service. Shall we?" She held out a hand, and Anrietta smiled, taking it.

"Let's."

“Your majesty!” everyone shouted as Anrietta came into view around the side of the palace. Magicians trying to carefully levitate rocks stopped and stared, some losing their concentration. The rock pile shifted and collapsed, sending up a plume of dust.

“Good thing I wasn’t still underneath all that,” Anrietta muttered. Susan snickered. Everyone ran over to her and went down on one knee.

“I was certain you were under there,” gasped the shocked Marquis. “How did you escape? The cat said you were probably still alive, but we rushed to get you out.”

“Be at ease,” she replied. “Susan’s magic was able to free me, but brought us inside the castle walls. I apologize for worrying you.” There was a shocked murmuring that a princess would ever need to apologize to anyone. “I don’t suppose Jean-Jacques was captured as I ordered?”

Everyone bent their heads. “I take full responsibility for his escape,” intoned Marquis. “Naturally I will accept any punishment your highness wishes to lay out for me.”

“You have nothing to say in your defense?”

“Only that I took the safety of your majesty to be of the greater importance. I immediately called for the mages to start moving the stone and free you. The scoundrel got away in the confusion.”

Anrietta looked sadly at the jagged scar now cut into her palace wall. “That’s going to be a problem. Very well. Begin restoration efforts immediately, and send the griffin riders out to look for Jean-Jacques. He can’t have gotten-” Susan was shaking her head. “You wish to council some other course of action, loyal mage?”

Yeah, she’s back in full princess mode. Pity she can’t really be herself most of the time.

“Yes, your majesty. If you give me a moment, I can make sure the rest of the griffin riders are loyal to you, rather than to him. It would be a grave loss to the kingdom if the griffins were stolen out from under you. I assume they are somewhat difficult to train? Whereas new riders can be trained fairly quickly.”

“What would you have them do?”

“Line up here. I’ll ask them a question and they can begin the search immediately after.”

“Very well. You heard the mage- line up!”

Susan put *Detect Lies* on herself, non-verbally so they wouldn’t get the RESolve check against it. After all, they just saw light and symbols swirling around her for an instant, they wouldn’t have a clue what that meant. But hearing her shout “Detect Lies” would pretty much give it away.

She went down the line, asking each soldier “are you more loyal to your old captain, who has been revealed to be a traitor to the crown, than you are to the princess?” Anyone who said “No” or “the princess” and wasn’t lying was allowed to leave. She had to have two of them arrested, and Anrietta shook her head sadly as they were lead away.

“I could get used to having magic like yours at my disposal,” she remarked, once they were gone.

“If I had my full ability to cast spells and my spellbook, I could track Jean-Jacques down for you. Sadly, that’s not possible, so I’m not sure what else I can offer.”

“You have done enough, loyal mage. You rooted out corruption and found a traitor in my own ranks. More I cannot ask at this time. There is much here to be done, and you are no doubt weary from you efforts to free me. You may return to the academy and await my summons, which I shall make once I have decided how best to reward you.”

Susan went down on one knee. “Your majesty, I hear and obey. It is my honor to serve.”

Anrietta gave a little smile and a wink, which Susan returned.

“You are dismissed.”

"You gave me quite a scare," said Sparkle on the way back to the inn. "But I was pretty sure you were still okay because *Acceleration* was still going."

"It was pretty *rocky* there for a minute. Wasn't sure I could *pin down* a solution being so *pressed* for time. But that princess, she sure does *rock* my world, but I think if I made a pass at her I would get *stonewalled*."

"Someone's feeling chipper all of a sudden."

"Hey, I saved the life of a princess today. How many people can say that?"

"I can think of a few. Mario. Link."

"I mean people who actually exist!"

"Like you're so 'real.'" *Who can say we won't meet them on this journey? That would really blow her mind.*

"I think I am, actually."

"Just keep telling yourself that. Anyway, what's the plan now, boss?"

"See if I can get some money back for not staying the whole week at the inn, head back to the school and see what trouble they've gotten in while I was gone. See about spending some XP, that sort of thing."

"It has been pretty non-stop here. Once the adventure train started rolling it's not slowing down."

"Yeah. But that's fine. Think of all the magic I can memorize once we leave here!"

"True."

So Susan went back, cast *Stone Sculpt* and got her stuff back, and checked out of the hotel. That done she walked around the back and opened a *Teleportal* back to her room, where she put her stuff away and went in search of the others. Hiraga, across the way, didn't answer when she knocked on his door, so she shrugged and headed to the stairs to go down.

Oddly, the school was rather quiet, and Susan wandered the empty halls wondering if some terrible thing had happened that wiped everyone out.

"They could have left a- forget I said that."

"Wondered if you would finish that sentence. There must still be someone here, want to check the kitchens?"

"Sure, someone there might be able to tell me where our favorite maid is."

"Wait, I'm the one that casts *Hygene* on you every morning. Doesn't that make me your favorite maid?"

"You're my personal servant, not a maid. There's a difference."

Sparkle rolled her eyes. "I see how it is."

"Summer vacation?" asked Susan once she had found Siesta. "Don't these people do any studying at all? What the heck? If they aren't lounging around drinking tea it's because they're away on vacation. Sheesh!"

"We have to take a pay cut, too," she replied, nodding. "Because there's less to do around here now. Many of us go visit our families at this time, rather than sticking around. I was just finishing up a few things... say, would you like to come visit my home?"

"I would like that," admitted Susan, but she shook her head. "Very much. On the other hand, I have some projects I wanted to take care of, and this actually works out perfectly. If they're going to be gone a little while I can probably get them done before everyone gets back! On the gripping hand, I could meet your family and come back here in the same day."

"The what?"

"It's from a book, three handed aliens... you had to be there."

"Oh, okay. It is three days away... by horse. Unavoidable, to only spend a day there and then have to start back. But what can I do? I want to see my brothers and sisters again."

"What can you do? You have but to ask, dear lady." Susan bowed. "I'll have you there before the sun goes down this very day."

"What?" She was shocked. "How?"

"You just leave that to me. Are you taking anything?"

"I had a small suitcase packed, I have to travel pretty light."

"I know what that's like. Show me where it is and when you're ready I'll meet you out by

the front gate.”

“Okay?”

So Susan got to see Siesta’s room and then headed out to the front gate, where she saw Charlotte and Kirche getting into a coach.

“Hey!” shouted Kirche, waving her hand above her head. She turned to Tabitha and pulled her out. “Look, Susan’s back!”

“No, this is Susan’s front! This is my back.” Susan turned around.

“Ignore her, she’s in a weird mood,” said Sparkle. “Leaving for vacation, then? Have you seen Louise and Hiraga around anywhere?”

Kirche shook her head. “Not lately. Don’t know where they got to.”

“Ah well. I’m sure they’re fine, and have not gotten into any shenanigans while I was gone. See you girls in a week or so!”

“Invitation,” said Charlotte quietly.

“Great idea, Tabitha! Why don’t you two join us? Tabitha lives pretty far away but you don’t want to hang out around here, do you?”

Susan laughed. “My, my, my. Aren’t I just the popular one? And here’s me wanting to get some work done while everyone is off playing. And usually I’m the one lounging around while you’re in class. Odd how that works. I do appreciate the offer, but I’ve already had an invitation to visit Siesta’s house.”

“Insistent. Gateway.”

“I suppose I could hang with you girls the next day, and still have a few days here to work. And I’ve already seen your place, Cha- Tabitha. So yeah, I could get there easily enough. If you insist...” She nodded. “Guess that’s settled. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, see you then! Wait, want me to send you on? I can easily make a portal big enough to fit the carriage through. Save you some bouncing around.” She looked over at the solid metal wheels and lack of suspension springs on the carriage.

“No trouble?”

“You kidding? Get in, I’ll get to casting.”

“Thanks!” exclaimed Kirche. “Confidentially, I kind of hate these things.” She turned back to Charlotte. “No fair, you let her visit before me? When?”

“Explain later.”

The coach door closed, and through the window Susan could see Charlotte already opening her ever present book.

How did those two ever get together? Kirche must have the patience of a saint. Or perhaps the Patient background.

Susan sent them on with *Teleportal*.

You know, it's too bad I don't get better at things by practicing them. That must be nice. With all the magic I do for people, you would think I would already be the greatest wizard in the world. Wait a second, why didn't they just fly on the dragon? People are so weird sometimes.

Probably twenty minutes later Siesta showed up, changed out of her maid uniform and into a simple blouse and skirt.

“Oh yeah,” Susan said, looking her up and down critically. “I just had a thought. We need to get you out of those clothes immediately. Strip!”

“What?!” Siesta shrieked, putting her hands over her chest.

“That skirt, it’s not going to be practical, I’m afraid. Come with me.”

“What? I... that is? How?” Siesta sputtered as she was led by the hand back to Susan’s room.

On the way Susan explained how Charlotte had also invited her over, so Susan was only going to get here there and visit a few hours before heading off.

“Not that I don’t want to stay,” she explained, “but I do really want to get started on these projects I have in mind. But I hate to refuse anyone...”

“You don’t have to apologize, it was just a spur of the minute thing, anyway.”

"Here, put this on," Susan said having reached her room. She handed over her "stealth suit," the only other streamlined clothes she had.

"I can't wear this!" Siesta protested. "These are..."

"Mine? Don't worry, I washed them with magic."

"No, no, I mean they're," her voice dropped, "men's clothes."

"By the energetic staff of my father, just put them on already. Men's clothes, do you hear that, Sparkle?" Susan was laughing.

"The what?" Siesta's eyes were wide.

She stopped abruptly. "Huh. I guess that could be taken two ways, couldn't it? I mean my father had a wizard's staff that allowed him to manipulate energy in his environment. I've already said 'by the gaudy purple robe' and something about his pointy beard, so that was the next thing about him."

"Oh. And why do I have to wear these clothes?"

"What? Don't you trust me? Do you want to get there tonight, and have 6 days with your family, or not?"

"Very well."

Susan watched, with some interest, as Siesta pulled off her peasant clothes and hesitantly pulled on Susan's outfit. They stretched pleasantly, and Susan gave a small sigh. "Now, was that so hard?"

"I just hope none of the other staff sees me like this."

"Why? Don't want them knowing how fabulous you look in black? Come on."

"What about..." she gestured to the cast off clothing.

"Oh, go put it with your stuff and we'll get it when we arrive. I'll be waiting out front for you."

"Okay." She lass scampered off.

Nice abscond.

"You do realize she's grown up with a very different set of values than you, right? There was a pretty clear divide between what men and women could wear in this sort of time period. Heck, it would be like Harry walking around in Hermione's clothes. What sort of reaction do you think that would achieve? Even in 'modern' society, a man wearing a dress would get them some funny looks."

"You mean Ron? Because Harry is the boy who lived, he can't do wrong. I bet within a week it would become the new fashion."

"In that case I do mean Ron. Ron *before* he learned martial arts."

"Oh, now again, that's a totally different story."

Siesta was still blushing when she peaked out of the door to the school and hastily looked around.

"Just me. Come on, once we're in the air you'll forget all about it."

"Air?"

"Didn't I say? *Flight!*" Susan used maximum energy to get the most speed possible, casting on herself and Siesta.

"*Shape-shift,*" cast Sparkle at the same time, turning into her normal fairy form.

Susan started hovering.

"You mean I can do that? How?"

Susan smiled. "Just think a happy thought, and you'll find your wings. Come on." She held out a hand. "It's easy, hardly even have to think about it." Siesta tentatively reached out and began to rise, grasping Susan's hand. "That's it. Now, which way?"

"Follow the road for now. I only know that way to go, but we can cut across country later, when we get closer."

"Then come on!"

Susan shot forward, dragging Siesta behind her. "Oh my goodness!"

It didn't take long for Siesta to get over her trepidation, and soon the miles were zipping

by under the pair. She even imitated Susan, pretending to swim when they passed a caravan, even playing tag and doing loops and swoops.

"How high can we go?" she asked.

"Until it starts becoming difficult to breathe, why?"

"I want to see the land like a bird. Come on!" She started to climb.

Hey, now there's an idea for the princess. Showing her the kingdom from above. But can't mages here already fly? I'm sure I've seen that...

That high up, Siesta said she saw her village, and stared at the world around her. She was breathing heavily, not from exertion but partially from excitement and partially from the thinner air.

"I'll remember this sight forever," she remarked, slowly spinning. "You've given me so much, and we've only just met. Thank you, Susan. Even if you do make me wear men's clothing."

"Are you still worried about that? I mean if it's still bothering you, I'll take it back and you can fly the rest of way naked."

"How do you always know what to say to make things worse?"

"It's a gift."

The two fell against each other laughing, and started in a straight line towards her home village.

As they got nearer, Susan slowed and stopped, hanging in mid-air. "Do you want to change again? We can walk the rest of the way if you don't want to show up like that."

Siesta shook her head. "I can see why you made me change. Trying to fly like that in a skirt just wasn't going to work. I'll wear it. I mean I've seen my great-grandfather's 'flight suit' but wait until my family sees me in this!" She did a twirl, and Susan was so shocked by her words she didn't even register it.

"Wait, say that again."

"My great-grandfather. I didn't meet him because he died before I was born. But others in my family still tell his stories about... the other... why are you looking at me like that?"

"Other what, Siesta? Other *world*? Is that what you were about to say?" She grabbed her wrist.

"Ow! Yes, what's the big deal?"

"Sorry, sorry." She released her grip and looked at Siesta as if for the first time. "You... black hair. You have black hair, Siesta. No one on this world has black hair. Pink hair, green hair, blue hair, blond hair, golden hair, red hair- Why didn't I see it before?"

"See what before? They're just stories, Susan. I mean other worlds- oh." Realization finally dawned on Siesta's face. Susan could see it written there- *Oh yeah, I know two different people from two different worlds, and my great-grandfather wasn't just some raving lunatic. Whoops.*

"Yes, now you begin to see? Is there some kind of dimensional tear somewhere around here? I mean if others have come through without being summoned by Louise, maybe these two worlds are linked more strongly than I thought. If I could find that tear, maybe I could make it through to your great-grandfather's world and get all my magic back! Then get after Luna!"

"I'm sorry, I never thought to tell you. I just didn't put the two things together. Honestly, I didn't even think about those stories until just now."

"It's fine," Susan tried not to let too much sarcasm through in her tone. "But this is vital information. I'll need to hear about how he arrived here, maybe that will be a clue as to where the tear is." She grabbed Siestas' hands. "I have hope again, and a lead to what I need to look for, Siesta! And you gave that to me! See, now we're even. Come on, let's go meet your family."

Turned out Siesta had seven siblings, and she was the eldest.

Eight kids, Catholic? But I guess these people have never heard of birth control.

She got to see what peasant life was like; noisy, messy, rowdy, and loud with all those

kids around. She pitched in with making the meal, despite the families' insistence she was a guest. "Siesta serves me at the academy all the time. It's my turn to pay her back a little."

Of course, with only a 3 in *Cooking* she slipped a little *Augment Skill* in there, and managed to help make the best meal they ever had.

Almost immediately afterward the older kids started getting the younger kids ready for bed.

Right, lamp oil or candles are probably expensive. And it'll take some time to get this many people to bed before dark. And then get them up in the morning to start work. This is just practicality on their part. It's really no wonder things stayed the same for so long on my world, then accelerated. These two adults have their hands full providing for their families, they don't have time to invent a better washing machine or whatever. Plus they're kept down by the magic users, who have all the wealth. She shook her head. *I guess the 1% never changes.*

With the house quieting down, Susan and Siesta slipped out.

"Thanks for inviting me," Susan said genuinely. "You have a great family, and I can see they really love you. That's a great thing to have behind you."

"I know. I do my best, but I have to wonder what real future I have just working as a maid at the school. That's your fault, I think."

"I tend to do that. You do have one big advantage, if you have the dedication."

"What's that?"

"The library at the school. I bet if you were interested in something, you could learn more about it there. They must have books other than just tomes on magic, right? Even if it takes a few years, reading through books a little at a time, you could do it. Not many others have that kind of resource. Plus time, as you don't yet have a family to take care of. When you're done with work, your time is your own. Don't stop learning, and who knows where it might lead."

Siesta nodded. "I'll have to think about it. What I might be good at, and be able to learn. Sorry I didn't get to show you my great-grandfather's artifacts."

"Clever girl. It's just an excuse to get me to come back again."

"No, I really-"

Susan laughed. "I'm teasing you. Look, enjoy your visit here. I'll come get you in six days, okay? You can show me then."

"Okay. Thanks."

They hugged, and one quick *Teleportal* later Susan was standing in front of Charlotte's house, pulling the rope to ring their bell.

She was met with a bit less enthusiasm than she expected, and Charlotte looked more pensive than normal.

"I can come back later," Susan started to say.

"Mission," said Charlotte, handing her a rolled up scroll.

12

Spirit

Place: Charlotte's house

Time: The next day

Susan and Sparkle had spent a rather lonely night in a very plush bed, as Charlotte and Kirche weren't much in the mood to talk after they explained what the king wanted Charlotte to do next.

I mean it's a girl's sleepover. We're supposed to play truth or dare, and braid each other's hair and stuff, right? And I wanted to try on some of Charlotte's clothes, I bet she has some really frilly, girly stuff.

Susan, freshly cleaned with magic and full of delicious food laid out by servants sank into a plush chair and looked over at the others sitting opposite her.

"So let me see if I remember this correctly," she began. "There's this water spirit that's causing trouble nearby, yes? For some reason the spirit, that normally lives in the lake, has decided to expand her territory or whatnot and is flooding a village. Our task is to stop it."

"My task," corrected Charlotte.

"Yes," agreed Esme. "This is our families' problem, not yours. We can't drag a guest into it!"

"As if I would allow my best student to go off on some dangerous mission and get XP without me. Esme, please understand this is what I do. I solve problems for people. Usually with magic, because that's what I have. Anyway, didn't you call me family before?"

"I may have said something like that..."

"It's settled then. Let's come up with a plan of attack and then get this thing done. You only have a week of vacation, why waste it?"

"You really won't be denied?" asked Esme.

"Oh no. The creature I am destined to fight, that even now holds my father in its grip on some far away world, would love nothing more. But I have to fight, just as he does, because otherwise world after world will go dark and shrivel away to nothing. Every battle I face is another step on that journey."

"Then I shall wish you good luck."

There's a spell for that.

Susan and the others crested a hill overlooking the flooded town. Susan whistled.

"Now that is a flooding. Who does this spirit thing think it is, anyway? It has no idea what it's in for. So, what is it in for?"

The two girls shrugged. "Have to find it first," said Charlotte.

"What she means is, the spirit could be anywhere in the water around here. We have to somehow get the thing's attention, then somehow drive it off."

"Drive it off? Not destroy it? I mean it'll just come back, right?"

Kirche shook her head. "Be like trying to evaporate all the water on the Earth. It's an immortal representation of what water is. Not just a creature that happens to be made of water."

"Dangerous."

"Exactly. Because of the power it wields, one slip up and we're drowned rats."

"And yet we're still out here," commented Susan.

"King commands."

"She was telling me last night that she's done a lot of dangerous missions for the 'king' who hopes to bump her off that way. He's been disappointed every time. Let's make sure he says disappointed, right Charlotte?"

Oh, seems 'Tabitha' came clean about her name, at least to her best friend. That's good.

She nodded. "Still no plan."

"I have a plan, if you want to get the thing's attention," said Susan. "Tell me, if I swam down there, what are the chances of me coming back up again?"

"I doubt it would attack you or anything. Spirits like this see us more as vermin, I think.

It won't want to expend the effort. Plus it's weakened during the day."

"Why?"

"Sunlight, maybe? Not sure, but water does evaporate more during the day, right?"

"I guess. Okay, I'm going to go down and check it out. After that we can get it up here. It'll be up to you girls to take it out. My only attack magic is fire based, and I'm not sure that's going to work on a water elemental."

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see." Susan started taking her clothes off.

"What are you doing!?"

"I'm not going to swim in my clothes. Besides, no one around here but you."

Stripped down, Susan cast a quick *Augment Skill* on herself, for *Swimming*. She only had a three, enough to not panic and drown in water, but she thought being a better swimmer than that would be handy right about now. Also she put on *Darksight*, because where she planned to go was not likely to have much light.

With that she dove into the water with a splash and started making her way towards the center of the village. Once she figured she was pretty close she took a deep breath and dove, powerful strokes bringing her a few feet underwater. Houses here were hardly covered to the roof, so it wasn't all that deep. Susan looked around, then saw what she was looking for.

A well.

She swam towards it, then grabbed the wooden roof that stuck out the top and looked up. *I know I can reasonably hold my breath for 10 seconds per ENDurance point, so that's 80 seconds. I don't need to go too deep, I guess. Plus my Overconfident weakness...*

She slipped inside, feet first, and used her hands to descend as far as she could. Her vision steadily became black and white, but she could still see the edges of the stone perfectly.

Really wish Breathe Water worked around here. Stupid missing planets. She let go a bubble of air and watched it float up. *Okay, this is deeper than I thought. This is probably fine anyway.*

Susan started back up, and popped up out of the water with a gasp. She made her way back to the others and climbed out, dripping.

"Did you get what you needed down there?" asked Kirche.

"Not as deep as I wanted to go, but acceptable. Now we just need someplace to put it all. Good thing I got a good view of the land yesterday with *Siesta*."

"Put what someplace?"

"You'll see," she replied with a wink, then cast *Flight* on herself. *I figure I'll dry in the air, then put my clothes back on.*

Susan sped towards a nearby but unconnected body of water and hovered over the center of it. *This looks like a good a place as any.* With that, she cast *Teleportal*, putting one end in the air here, pointed down, and the other underwater, inside the well. Predictably, water started gushing out the hole in the air, and Susan nodded, satisfied.

"And now we wait," she said, returning to the flooded area where the others were still a bit confused as to what was going on. She started getting dressed and looked over the town. "Hopefully we won't have long."

And indeed, if the Narrator's calculations are correct, a 1m hole placed 7m down inside a well will siphon off a large swimming pool sized amount of water every thirty seconds. Estimating the area underwater at about 40 x 40 swimming pools, (but three times as deep) gives us 512000 cubic meters of water. With a drain rate of 77.21 cubic meters per second, the water should take 110 minutes to totally drain from around the town. Of course, this doesn't take into account the lesser amount of pressure that will result in a partial draining. It also assumes gravity and the atmospheric pressure in this area are constant with Earth normal, which we have no clue is correct or not. Also the Narrator could be totally wrong in how he did the calculations, because he sort of poked around on the Internet for formulas.

And he's collage educated. So ask him how much of that stuck around. Go ahead, ask him.

Excuse me, do you mind?

Oh, sorry. Back to the story. Wait, who said-
DO YOU MIND?

About an hour later, the water level around the houses had clearly diminished, and Susan had explained how she was using her *Teleportal* to syphon the water off and hopefully get the attention of the water spirit. They were tensely waiting on the shore when suddenly a gigantic waterspout shot up and seemed to angrily regard them.

"What are you doing to my water, you things?" it roared.
Susan got up.

She looked to Sparkle, who nodded, and cast *Acceleration* on them both. As she did, Susan cast *Invulnerability* on herself, after dropping the *Teleportal*. "Spirit of water, hear me!" she shouted at the thing. "I am Susan Felton, and I represent every living thing in that town you have seen fit to destroy. Every bug, every plant, every animal which could not escape cries out for justice. I will see that justice done."

"You presume to lecture me, you thing? I will crush the life out of you and resume my vengeance against all your kind that dirty the water!"

"Not. Likely."

This seemed to enrage the spirit further, causing Susan and Sparkle to roll *Initiative*, because the fight was on. Sparkle went first, but held her action, as per the plan. She was going to run interference for the other two, protecting them with *Deflection* along with Susan. Who of course went second, and also held a segment, waiting for the inevitable attack.

It came the next segment, as water shot out of the spout and sped towards the group. "*Deflection!*" both cast, wishing it was a *Mercury* spell rather than *Sun*.

Susan, putting in 8 energy and Sparkle, putting in 6, got one more than the effective attack roll, and the water harmlessly splashed off the magical circle that appeared in the air. They both went up by 1 delay, that being reactive for them. The waterspout, if such a thing can be possible, seemed taken aback.

"What was-"

It never got to finish the question as icicles and a gout of flame shot at the thing, forcing it to dodge twice, as the attacks were not simultaneous. Incredibly, for such a huge amount of water, (Susan estimated a +3 size modifier for the "creature") it managed to dodge. Susan made a *Magic Combat* check, something she wasn't actually very good at. She only managed to beat the spirit, a seven versus an eleven, and put her hands up again, ready to cast.

"Again!"

"*Deflection!*" both cast, this time getting two less than was needed. Sparkle used her *Don't Think So* card, forcing the spirit to re-roll the attack.

It got one higher.

So she played her *Wild* as a *Lucky Break* and the water jerked and missed them, as Kirche and Charlotte's magic both slammed into the creature as it attacked. (They went simultaneously.) The creature roared, but more in frustration than pain. Susan now saw the perhaps- fatal flaw in her plan. She and Sparkle were reacting, keeping them all safe. But only the other two could actually hurt the creature.

"Quick, put *Acceleration* on the others and drop it on us!"

"Yeah, I get it. On it."

Sparkle did just that, casting it instantly because that one was a *Mercury* spell, and so she got the bonus from her own *Acceleration*. With that done, she dropped the first casting,

and the world sped up again.

Susan dropped *Invulnerability*. That -3 was really working against her, and she felt it was better to protect all of them than worry about herself. As this was a reactive action, she continued to hold. The water spirit was fast, it was no wonder the two mages were so hesitant to come out here, and it attacked again.

This time they got two more than the attack, and again the water harmlessly splashed away from them. *At least it seems like this thing doesn't have an area effect technique. Just the equivalent of Elemental Bolt (Water).*

Charlotte got in a good hit, ice punching through the water, and seeming to stagger the creature. Kirche followed it up with fire, but missed. Charlotte, now much faster than she had ever been in her life, followed it up with another attack, which was narrowly dodged.

At least it's on the defensive now.

Both girls attacked at once, and Charlotte showed how much better a mage she was by hitting a third time, while the fire went wide.

Okay, I'm getting bored just standing here. She decided that, while her magic couldn't make her own magic better, it might just be able to help make the girl's aim better. *It seems their magic just goes in a straight line wherever they're pointing. If they point better, they hit better. They seem to have no trouble actually casting. Seems to work just the same as it did with Harry and the others.*

With that in mind, Susan took the full 5 segments to cast *Augment Skill (Wand Aim)* on both girls.

They got to attack twice more as she did, and when she did, they started not missing anymore. This further enraged the creature, as with their greater speed and now greater accuracy, they didn't give it a chance to attack.

Finally it decided to throw a huge plume of water into the air, and Susan yelled "I can't block that!" in a panic. Charlotte had it under control, as she simply blasted air out of her staff and deflected the whole thing. She now went on the defensive as Susan watched, the creature getting blasted with Kirche's fire again and again.

Finally the waterspout shrank back. "Please, no more," it cried. "I submit! No more pain, please!"

The girls stopped, wary of a trick.

"You'll reduce the water level back to what it was?" demanded Susan.

"Yes, yes, my word on it. Stupid creatures, should not have been that fast. You cheated. Cheated me. Probably sent by him. You already have what you want, why do you further torment me so? I hate you all!"

It disappeared.

"Okay, what was that all about?" asked Susan.

The others shrugged.

"Thanks for the help," said Kirche. "I don't know how you slowed her down like that, but it was a big help."

Susan laughed. "She wasn't slowed down. You were sped up!"

They waited around the rest of the afternoon, watching the water level go down.

"Kept her word," remarked Charlotte.

"I do feel kind of bad though," said Susan. "What she said at the end, and it sounded like she was really hurting."

"She started it," Kirche said with finality, then barked a laugh. "Guess you've survived another impossible mission, eh, Charlotte?"

She nodded.

"What are you all doing here?" asked a familiar voice from behind them. They all turned, and up the hill rode Hiraga, Louise, Guiche, and a girl Susan wasn't all that familiar with. The strangest thing was Louise, who was riding on the same horse as Hiraga, and was making moon eyes at him. Two moon eyes, even.

"Oh, you know," dismissed Susan. "Saved a town. Drove off a water spirit. Well, these girls did all the work. I just helped a little that time. Given my situation, maybe learning some more attack magic would be the thing to do..."

"Water spirit?" The girl hopped off the horse and stalked over to the group. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, you can still see the water," offered Kirche. "It was way higher this morning. We beat the water spirit that was causing it, and we're just making sure she keeps her word."

"You actually took an elemental spirit *in combat*? That can't be possible!"

"Glad we didn't know that beforehand," she deadpanned. "Though honestly, I don't think it would have been possible without Susan's magic. It's really something."

"Oh, you!" Susan acted embarrassed.

"Who are you again? Oh, wait, you came with Hiraga, right?"

"Susan Felton, at your service, my lady," Susan mocked with a bow. "What brings you all the way out here, so deep into the space sticks there isn't even a space Radio Shack?"

"What?" The girl was clearly confused.

"Let's just go back!" whined Louise, snuggling up to Hiraga more, if such a thing were possible. "I'm fine. The potion just opened my eyes a little, that's all."

"Are you saying we won't be able to get the ingredients, then?" asked Hiraga, trying to push Louise away.

"Did I miss something?" Susan asked, looking the two of them over.

"Suffice to say, Louise accidentally drank a love potion I... may have made."

"Still didn't catch your name." Susan managed after several minutes of howling laughter.

"She's Montmorency," said Guiche, "Shining star, most beautiful flower of the entire school."

Eh, I suppose she's decent looking enough.

"Nice to meet you. So, love potion, huh?"

"Never mind why, we need to talk to the spirit and get part of its body to make the antidote."

"Didn't ask why. Louise, could you come over here, please?"

"If it's okay with my love?"

"It's fine, Louise. I think Susan has something in mind."

"That I do."

She got down off the horse and stood very demurely in front of Susan. "Hi!" she said, almost looking embarrassed at such a bold choice of words. She giggled, looking down. "You're pretty!"

"Okay, all in favor of just leaving her like this? Because she is ten times as cute this way." Susan raised a hand. Everyone just stared at her. "No? No one but me?" She sighed. "Fine. *Magic Immunity.*" She tapped Louie's forehead and magical circles appeared around her.

Louise blinked a few times.

Then her eyes widened, as though in terror.

Then she ran screaming away from the group, back the way they all had come.

"Louise!" called Hiraga, trying to turn the horse and failing miserably. He thudded to the ground trying to get off, then took off after her, calling her name.

"That's handled," Susan said, turning back to the others. Montmorency was edging away from her, looking terrified.

"What was that? What are you?" she stuttered.

"Oh, knock it off. You know I'm from another world, is it so hard to accept my magic is different, too? I just made her immune to magic for a second, which knocked the potion out of her system."

"I just met you a minute ago. I don't know anything about you!"

"You saw me arrive with Hiraga there, where did you think I came from?"

"I have no idea!"

Susan sighed. "Anyway, can we go now?"

"No! I have to make sure the spirit is all right."

"Are you nuts? That thing just insulted us by calling us 'you things' and then attacked us. You want to *talk* to it?"

"I've done it before," she maintained. "And I'll do it again. You have to deal with them properly, which you obviously didn't. They're not human, they don't see the world the same way we do. To them, we basically just crawled out of the swamp or wherever we came from. We're babies."

"It did say something about us already having what we wanted. I wouldn't mind figuring out what that was all about."

"Just stay back and let me do the talking this time."

"Sure, but I'll have my magic on standby in case it attacks again."

The group walked down to the water's edge, where Montmorency pricked her finger and rubbed the blood on her little frog Familiar. That done it plunked down into the water and the group waited. Some time later the frog came back, and a very tiny waterspout appeared before them.

"I'm lowering it. Please, no more pain. No more torment."

"I'm here to apologize for their behavior towards you earlier. They had no right to attack you like that."

"Yes, those things had no right to do that. When I am recovered I will seek them out and-"

"Be careful how you finish that sentence," threatened Susan.

The spout sank a little lower. "I will not seek out any vengeance. I will not be happy to reclaim the water inside them one day, when they are no more."

"Very well."

"Stop it, Susan. Can't you see she's scared?"

"Does this thing imply that I would be fearful of her? Because she can make the others too fast for me to hurt? That she can make their magic strike me without fail? Because I am not!"

"No, no, what I mean is... I'm trying to... I'm trying to explain things in the way she'll understand."

"That thing will never understand me. Why do you summon me, you thing? I am weary from combat, and raising the water and now having to lower it again. It goes against my nature. Speak and be gone."

"I wanted to know why you came to do this thing. You must have a reason, tell me what that reason is. Perhaps she can use her magic to aid you, rather than hurt you."

"She is now our sworn enemy. Why would that thing help us?"

"If I was in the wrong, I would do whatever I could to put that situation to rights," insisted Susan.

"Ha. Words. They will not sway me."

"Then perhaps my actions will. My magic helped hurt you, perhaps it can help heal you as well. If you give your word that you will not attack us again, I will try."

"More tricks!"

"No tricks. I did not know this girl was known to you. If I had, things would have been different. I am sorry for that."

The spout seemed to change shape, as though thinking it over. "Very well. What must I do?"

"Just allow me to touch you while I cast the spell."

"It cannot be worse than what the thing has already done. I will allow this."

That's what you think. If I knew Freeze, or Stasis or something else nasty...

Susan put that out of her mind and held out a finger. The water rose up to meet it, and she cast *Regeneration* on the spirit. It shrank back down and seemed to consider. "I am growing whole once again."

"Does that help to convince you?"

“Slightly. You wish to know why?”

Montmorency nodded. “Please.”

“Very well. For many years I have guarded a great treasure. Andvari’s Ring. It is too dangerous to be in the hands of you things. I must retrieve it. As I can only move within the water, then the water must cover the land so it can be reclaimed.”

“All this for a ring? That must be some magic inside it!”

“Indeed.”

Susan waited for the spirit to go on, but it didn’t.

“Very well. It seems I did attack you without knowing the whole story, and I thought I was better than that. I do not have access to my scrying magic, but I do promise to track down where this ring has gone. Such a powerful treasure will make ripples in the world, I’m sure. When I find it I will keep it safe, and bring it to you when I can.”

Again the hesitation.

“It seems I have no choice but to believe you. If I seek the ring again, you will come with your strange magic and hurt me over and over. This I do not want. I have touched you and felt your water. If it joins with me again I will know you have failed, and I will start my search again.”

“Agreed.”

“Then allow me my rest.”

With that, the spout disappeared, and Montmorency breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m never going to get this *Fabrication* done, am I?” Susan asked no-one in particular.

13

Letter

Place: The School

Time: More than a week later

Without access to her spellbook and what few scrying spells she did have, Susan and Sparkle could do little more than *Research* the ring the water spirit was talking about. She had hoped someone might have written about it in their diary:

Dear Diary,

Today I stole this sweet ring from a water spirit! How did I even do that? I must be able to do breathing underwater magic or something. Crazy!

But that would be just silly, so while she now knew all about it, she was no closer to finding it than she was before. Things were calm at the school, and Susan got busy *Fabricating* Hiraga's sword when he and Louise got back to the castle. She explained why he needed to stick around, and for an unbreakable sword he was more than happy to do so and watch her work.

She also exploited a strange characteristic of her heritage as a *Paragon*. She worked a number of hours on the project, but didn't actually make the *Fabrication* check until the very end. When she was getting close, she put *Augment Skill (Fabrication)* on herself, raising her skill by nine. As the only thing *Augment Skill* couldn't increase was spellcasting checks, she shaved nine hours (an entire day of work) off the project. Of course, this was because *Augment Skill* raised the rating of the skill by the rating in the *Planet*, and a *Natural Magician's* rating was determined by the energy they put into the spell.

Once I get Energetic Accumulation back, I'm going to have to try putting all my energy in at once, raising my rating by seventy or so. With the total difficulty of this project being a 74, and my skill of 7, I should be able to make an unbreakable item in an hour. Sure, I'd be wiped out for the day, but making the check right before I went to bed, I could make one a day, rather than four a month.

Hiraga went to go chop some rocks or something, as Susan told him the blade would never dull, and he should get used to swinging it around.

"After all," she reasoned, "you may have an unnatural rating in the skill, but your body is still that of a high school student. An actual swordsman would just wear you down and chop you to bits when you can't parry anymore."

"Good point," admitted Hiraga. "I'm off to train."

She had some leftover materials, so she increased the DTR of Louise's wand as well, figuring even if it wasn't unbreakable, at least it would grow back if it ever did become broken.

She was finally ready to start thinking about what to do with the *massive* amount of XP she was carrying around (36) when out of the blue, the princess showed up at the school.

"Anrietta!" she cried, as the princess came into her room that night with Louise and Hiraga. She popped up off the bed and ran to hug her. Louise's eyes were wide and she was sputtering something about using the princess' name and actually hugging her.

"Oh, we've been closer than this," Anrietta assured Louise when Susan let her go.

"Haven't we, Susan?" She narrowed her eyes and purred the last seductively.

"Any closer and we would have been one person," she replied, tapping her nose.

Both dissolved into giggles.

"This is outrageous!" Louise finally managed to get out.

"Oh, don't be so uptight," Susan admonished. "She's obviously not in princess mode right now. Don't make her feel uncomfortable by pretending she is."

"Princess mode?"

"I like it," remarked Hiraga.

"You don't get a vote!"

"Anyway," cut in Susan, "unless you somehow managed to duplicate my *Teleportal*, your being here means you flew here. That overprotective guy from before won't be too happy when he finds out you snuck out. And you brought Louise and Hiriga, so you're not here to confess your undying love for me. So what's up? You took an awful risk coming here, so there must be a good reason for it."

Anrietta turned serious and made sure the door was closed. "It is, actually. I've come to ask for your help again, I'm afraid."

"Excellent, I wouldn't mind forty XP at the end of the day. What can I do for you?"

"There's a letter," she began, walking to the window and looking out. "I sent it to the man I love, but now I fear the contents will serve to undermine me, politically."

"How so?"

"He is a prince in another country. But I have decided to marry a prince in a stronger country, in order to protect my people."

Susan was silent a moment, pondering. "That sounds like a terrible idea?"

Louise gasped and went to one knee. "Please forgive her, your majesty. She comes from another world and—"

"Be at ease," assured Anrietta, gripping Louise by the shoulders and making her stand again. "I would value her insight and honesty in this matter."

"It touches on what I said before. Your country is only as strong as your people's belief in you. If you follow your heart, people are going to see you as a person of values. If you marry for political power, they will see you as nothing but a schemer. And what if something should happen to you, or to him? The other will immediately be suspect, and throw the kingdoms into disarray. If you marry for love, the people will know nothing like that happened. You have to think carefully about what image you want to project."

"There is a lot of truth to your words. There's one thing I haven't told you." Anrietta seemed ashamed, and her head fell. "He's my cousin."

Louise gasped.

"So? Oh, right, the whole heir thing. That could be troublesome, but couldn't magic be used to insure a healthy child? I wonder..."

"That's not exactly the reaction I was expecting."

"Yeah, I often try to think how people expect me to react, and then do the opposite. Okay, you're related, so what? If you love him, there's a reason for that. Don't throw it away so easily."

"Is that sort of thing normal on your world or something?"

"My world, or the world I come from? Because I live in my own little world."

"She really does," put in Sparkle.

"Hush, you. Yeah, people there have some funny ideas too, I'll admit. There's a saying I've always liked; 'When you're in the majority, think about the reason the people in the minority are there. What do they know that you don't?' So yes, the majority of people would have Louise's reaction. So I have to ask myself, why? What do those people who wouldn't have that reaction know that I don't? Isn't love- love? As long as you're not using head games to try and manipulate someone into loving you, who cares? Okay, so maybe having kids is a little more dangerous, adopt! Or just don't have kids. Like I said, you're, uh, expected to produce heirs so I can see why it's a problem."

Anrietta nodded her head sadly. "In any case, the formal declaration has already gone out. I need to make sure that letter is never discovered. I think I can trust you to take care of it. I want Louise to go with you, first because she's my friend and I trust her. Second, she can be your guide and show you where you need to go." She slipped a ring off, and handed to Susan. "This will be your proof that you come from me."

Susan gently took it, doing a *Magic Sense* on it in case it was special in some way she should know about. (It was an item worn by royalty, after all.) She felt a low level magical aura around it, but nothing spectacular. "Very well," she said, slipping it on. "Where do we start?"

"You'll take a ship to Albion. I've already told Louise where she needs to guide you from there."

"Anything else I should know?" She shook her head. "In that case, how about we get you back? Not that I don't think you're safe with me, because you are. But if someone has found out you're missing..."

Anrietta smiled. "What a good subject you are. Always thinking of the needs of your princess."

"I live to serve."

They both laughed again, but Anrietta only for a moment. "Thank you for agreeing to this." She held up a hand. "I know, you say you get that weird XP out of it you keep mentioning, but I will find some way to reward you for all you have done for the kingdom."

"What did you do, exactly?" asked Louise.

"She didn't say?" Anrietta seemed surprised. "Why, she exposed some corrupt nobles, treason in my own ranks, and saved my life all in the span of a day! I can't believe- no, I can believe it. You didn't even mention it to them, did you?" She looked Susan over like she was some kind of zoo specimen or rare bug no one had ever seen before. "Can there really be a person, on any world, that does things like that and then tells no one about it?"

Susan shrugged. "When you've had as many adventures as I have, it stops being a big deal. I know I did good, that's all that matters. Oh sure, if someone sees me doing something and thinks it's cool, fine. But bragging about stuff isn't my style."

"Showing off, yes. Bragging, no," confirmed Sparkle.

"They're totally separate things."

"Thank you anyway. It probably seems silly to you, worrying about a letter. But I will rest easier once it's no longer out there to be found."

If it wasn't a letter, it would have been something else, thought Sparkle. The item may change, but the mission? The mission never does.

And so Susan got her back to the throne room as though she had never left, and made arrangements with Louise to leave the next day for the port town of La Nocher. Basically they would fly there, and Susan asked why they couldn't just fly to the place directly. Louise said that was certainly possible, but it was pretty far away and she was not sleeping outside somewhere when she could be snug on a boat.

"Okay."

With that, Susan and the others made their way to La Nocher and stayed the night, awaiting the next ship to leave in the morning. Susan was impressed with the boat, which she floated over and looked at while it was still light enough. It turned out not to be a sailing ship, but an airship... which looked exactly like a sailing ship.

I suppose so it could be used in the water? Because honestly that design is totally impractical for a ship that can float in the air. What if the magic failed? Or they went under attack or there was a fire onboard? They can't land that thing without sustaining super heavy damage to the bottom. If they made it flat, and put some wheels on the bottom, they could land and not have a whole ship to rebuild. Makes no sense to me...

The next morning she had Sparkle wake her up early to go down into the town. She wasn't worried about getting lost, all she had to do was *Flight* her way back up to the ship, as the inn was right underneath it.

In town she picked up some more little things she could use for *Imbuing* or *Fabrication*, now having a better idea about the cost ratio her magic considered normal. She still had no real plan in mind, but that XP was bothering her. Like money in a savings account that earned no interest, XP sitting there unspent did no one any good.

Oh sure, I could raise my Planet ratings, but with energy I've never really felt the need, and I've never run out in a fight. Day to day stuff doesn't even matter, so that's not a concern. Of course, this all hinges on the fact that I usually end fights within a round or two. What if I met up with someone like me? Remember trying to fight Tom? Fighting myself was terrible, because he could counter my magic with his own. There could be others like him out there, or worlds that don't have even as many planets as this one! Perhaps I should train with the sword, and make it unbreakable as well. Putting Augment Skill on it, I could get a pretty high

rating and depend less on my magic, should it prove unreliable or ineffective. Then if I lose my magic I would still have a weapon. It doesn't need reloading, and if I have my own skill, the Augment Skill is more just a bonus than anything else.

What to do.

She spent a lot of time on the ship that day staring out and thinking about it. Sparkle sat with her, and Susan turned to her.

"We haven't really done much looking into how we're getting out of here," she remarked. "Does that bother you?"

"Why would it bother me? You're the *PC* here, I'm just the *Companion*. Besides, I think something will come up when it's time to leave."

"Awful big thing to leave up to chance!"

Well, I know a bit more about how the universe really works than you do. But you haven't traveled enough to pick up on it yet, and I swore not to reveal it until you did. Finding out what you really are... it can break some people, according to your father. Better that you figure it out for yourself and ask the question. "I don't think it's chance. I mean, think about it; Hiraga appearing as he did, just when you were traversing the worlds? The odds against that are so small, it just smacks of interference."

"By Darkness or Inari?"

"Who can say? We haven't really seen any evidence of Darkness here, but then, until he tipped his hand on our world we wouldn't have known. Either way, I don't think your being here is an accident. I mean your very attitude about leaving confirms it, in a way. Sure, we looked into a little, and they don't really have the magic we would need to leave, but that was the end of it. You just accepted it and we've been going on adventures ever since. That suggests *purpose*. Like there's something you need to do here."

"Our foe is unlike anything I've known. Perhaps I needed more XP, a lot more, before I faced him. Maybe that's why I'm here, and why Luna was taken away. Even if I make it to another world, and get back to Inari's place, I still have to look for her. That means more worlds and more adventures."

"True. It begs the question- can we really fight beings that view entire realities as just marbles?"

"We couldn't kill that water spirit, right? But we could cause it pain, and drive it back. Perhaps if enough people like my father and me step up, we can make him think twice about this invasion plan of his. Make the cost too high for him to continue."

"I hope so. Besides, you've gotten some clues that there is a way back. From Siesta, of all people. A random maid you happened to meet, thought was cute, and got to know. I mean of all the maids in that place, you pick the one that *happens* to have ancestry from beyond this world? I think that's to keep you looking and show you the path, when you need it and your purpose is done here."

"It all makes sense when you explain it. Glad to have you along my old friend!"

"Nowhere I would rather be."

In the end, she decided to hold off, and just keep accumulating XP for now. She wanted the full range of her abilities to draw from, so making a hasty decision here might cost her later. Sure, it seemed like she had a lot of XP, but making an item or two would make that disappear quite quickly.

And I'm not helpless. I can always call upon my soldiers to fight for me. With my new trick I can make an item really fast, so let's get back to Inari's place and see what she thinks is best. She knows the kinds of worlds out there, so she would be invaluable to figure out what was most useful across all of them.

In any event, it didn't matter because the journey only took a day, and Susan and the others headed to a church out in the countryside. They walked in, but Susan didn't see anyone about.

"Are you sure this is the place?" she asked.

Suddenly, a bunch of armored figures, with weird looking swords and helmets, jumped out from behind the pillars of the church and stood ready. The swords they were holding weren't even swords, they were rods with hand guards. The end wasn't even pointy, it was flat, meaning stabbing someone with one probably wasn't going to work very well.

I suppose they could be magic?

One in particular strode up to them.

"I am here by order of Princess Anrietta," she announced, holding the ring up. "State your intentions or suffer the consequences."

"We'll see about that," said the figure, bringing his own hand up. On his finger was a similar ring, in red. He held it near the other ring and a flash of light jumped between them.

"Is that what that spell is? How disappointing. I knew it was a weak spell but that's just silly."

"Really?" asked the figure, putting his arm down and taking his helmet off. "And who are you, to be so young but still so jaded?"

"Susan Felton. And you are?"

"Wales Tudor. You have the princess's ring. If you seek me, then you have found me."

Moments later, in the back of the church, Susan handed Wales a letter from the princess. *I just hope I'm not retrieving that one later, as well. But hopefully she didn't sign her name to this one.*

He briefly read it, then went over to a drawer where he pulled out a similar envelope.

"This is the letter she speaks of," he said sadly.

"Excellent!" said Susan, looking around the room. The nearest candle was right there on the table, so she held it to the flame until it burned to ash.

"Hey!" said Louise as it caught fire. "You can't just—"

Susan silenced her with a look. "You heard the princess. This is total blackmail material. Why would I allow it to leave this room? She was very concerned about it falling into the wrong hands, I have now made sure that is an impossibility."

"I suppose that is for the best," admitted Wales.

"Anything I can do for you?" Susan asked. "Otherwise I'll just be heading back, I guess."

"No, I don't—" The ground shook, or maybe just the building, like something heavy just hit it. "What was that?"

"Prince," yelled a man, barging into the room. "We're under attack by a huge golem!"

Susan and Sparkle immediately began casting as Wales grabbed up his sword and Hiraga drew his.

“Time for a real test of what this sword can do!” he said, grinning.

Louise looked doubtful. “Want me to hang back?”

“Why? Always something that needs exploding in a fight,” replied Susan, after she finished *Invulnerability*. “You need the practice too, and in this case we want something blown up.”

“Okay.”

Susan and Sparkle were *Accelerated* as normal, and Susan grabbed up a candle with an evil grin. *I should wear an onion on my belt, which was the style at the time, so I always have something to switch things with. Ah well.*

The group ran out into the field in front of the church, where a huge construct made of rock was again pounding the side of the building. Standing in front of the door was the traitor, Jean-Jacques, and five soldiers in armor backed him.

“Ah, thought if we followed you it would lead somewhere interesting. Wales, I’ve found you at last!”

“Don’t know what good it’ll do you,” snarked Susan. “Look around. No castle to throw at me this time.”

Jean-Jacques raised his sword. “Ah, it is you. How did you escape from that, by the way?”

“I have a better question. How exactly do you intend to fight us?”

He barked a laugh. “Have you seen me fight?”

Louise, the shortest and slowest character, burst from the doors and stopped dead.

“Jean-Jacques? What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Ah, our wayward Louise. Is our marriage still on?”

Susan looked over at her, and she was blushing up a storm. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Uh, that’s the treasonous fellow who threw part of a castle wall at me and nearly killed the princess. Of course you know him, why wouldn’t you?”

“That was you?” she screeched. “You’re a traitor to the crown?”

“Perhaps I don’t believe in that crown anymore. Perhaps I believe in something greater.”

“Like what?” Susan demanded.

“Beat me, and maybe I’ll tell you.”

“Fine.”

He laughed again. “With a candle?”

“Take a look at your sword. Now back to me. Now back to your sword.” Susan cast *Transposition* instantly, getting a sixteen, while Jean-Jacques got a 12 (despite spending 7 energy on *RESolve*, poor guy). He was now holding the candle and she was holding the sword. “Now back to me. What’s in your hand? I have it, it’s your sword, and you’re holding a candle. I’m on a horse!”

He looked down at the candle in his hand. “Attack!” he shouted, angrily throwing the candle down.

Susan and Sparkle rolled *Initiative* as the five soldiers in front of them charged.

“*Elemental Line (Wind)*,” Sparkle cast, weaving the line in front of the soldiers, then back on itself to strike out directly at Jean-Jacques. He had started forward, but somehow saw the line and jumped away from it, unharmed.

“*Thrust*,” cast Susan, targeting him as he was off balance from the dodge. He leaned into it and that -3 worked against her again, he didn’t go flying as she intended.

“Man, we’re really striking out here, Sparkle.”

“Tell me about it. This is so humiliating.”

The construct took a step towards them, and Louise raised her wand. “Explosion!” she shouted, and the impact tore into the creature’s chest, ripping part of it away.

“Nice!” said Susan, looking over there.

“I was aiming for the head!”

Sparke held, now maintaining the *Line* and *Acceleration*. She figured the first soldier over the thing would be in for a nasty shock, and she didn’t want to deny him the experience.

The first soldier that was going to cross the line got a reprieve, as Wales raised his sword and shot a bolt of wind at him, striking his right arm and spinning him around.

Aw!

“*Lubricate*,” cast Susan, targeting the ground under Jean-Jacques, who was still several meters away. She got a 15 total, knocking over half of the people currently over that way. Jean-Jacques stayed up.

Wind erupted from the line as one of the soldiers touched it, knocking him backwards in a spray of blood. He went down and didn’t get back up.

Hiraga turned towards the construct, and dashed forward quickly, rune on his hand glowing.

Jean-Jacques, careful to avoid the line and falling down, made his way to the soldier that was down to grab his sword.

We can’t have that, now can we? Susan asked herself, looking around. *Ah!* She cast *Transposition* against the sword and a boot from the only soldier still up and running. The soldier did not manage to resist losing his boot, and he found a sword in place of it. He went sprawling, and hit the line, which again triggered a massive blast of wind, killing him instantly. Jean-Jacques looked at the boot and back over to Susan. “Stop doing that!” he called over to her.

By this time, the construct and Hiraga had met, and Hiraga nicked the thing’s leg. He did his maximum damage to it, an eight, but that was divided by three so it didn’t amount to much.

Louise sent another “*Explosion*” its way, blowing another chunk off the body.

The prince shot wind at one of the soldiers on the ground, smashing into the guy’s helmet and throwing him backwards. Three of the five soldiers were now unmoving, and Jean-Jacques realized that, in short order it might be five. He was still unarmed, and Susan was eyeing him, as if daring him to make a move towards another weapon.

“I’ll get you yet, just you wait,” he cried, pulling a vial of liquid from beneath his cloak. Susan had actually been holding for several segments, waiting for him to try something. She dropped *Invulnerability*, shrugged, and cast *Transposition* again, trying to give him the candle back and cause the vial to go off into the grass somewhere. She didn’t beat his RESolve check this time, so he popped the cork and drank it down.

Shoot.

One of the soldiers was trying to see where the line was, to see if he could edge around it. Sparkle hadn’t done anything since the line, so she went ahead and cast *Thrust* on him, knocking him off his feet and throwing him back nine meters. He barely missed a tree and slammed into the ground, snapping his right arm and causing him to scream in pain.

“So brutal,” remarked Jean-Jacques, starting to fade away.

“As if you wouldn’t have done the same to us!” Susan countered.

“Oh, bet on it. I’ll repay you in kind, somehow.”

The last soldier standing saw his boss fading away and decided he would get out of there the only way he knew how, and took off running.

With Jean-Jacques all but disappeared, the two native magic users turned their attention to the construct and started pelting it with wind and explosions. Sparkle recast the line, surrounding them all in case Jean-Jacques decided to sneak up on them from behind while invisible (or whatever he had done). She then joined in with *Destruction*, once again targeting the thing’s legs while Susan almost lazily cast *Shrink* on it again.

Miss Longbill, or whatever her name was, saw she was once again going to lose and threw up a huge cloud of dust, converting what was left of her golem even as it shrank. This allowed her to get away while the others waited for the dust to settle.

"I can't believe they got away again!" groused Susan. "I should have slapped *Immobilize* on the guy right off, rather than showing off with *Transposition*."

"You were having a little too much fun with that spell," remarked Sparkle.

"At least I got his sword." She gave it an experimental wave. "If you can call this a sword, anyway."

"I can't believe it," said Louise with a shake of her head. "My fiancée was actually a traitor to the kingdom."

"Yes, let's talk about that," said Susan, rounding on her. "How did this happen?"

"It was something our parents set up," she insisted, waving her hands in front of her. "That's all. I haven't seen him for months! Honest."

"Arranged marriages? Great."

"I can't be out in the open like this," said Wales. "I need to gather my men and find a new place to hide."

"Sorry about this, I guess we brought them here, however unintentionally."

"And help drive them away again. For that, I thank you. It seems the situation in the kingdoms is deteriorating faster than I thought, if they are willing to attack a prince in broad daylight like this. Give my love to Anrietta."

With that, he turned and went back into the church.

"Guess that's our cue to leave as well," said Susan. "All aboard the Susan train."

"This sword still doesn't pack enough punch," complained Hiraga. "Is there anything else you can do about it?"

"Using *Imbuing* on a *Fabricated* weapon is possible, of course. The difficulty just goes up, meaning more hours of work. Plus I'm not sure what I know that would help."

"Maybe *Augment STRength*?" asked Sparkle. "I know that one, but I still don't think it'll help against something like that."

"Yeah, it's a creature made of solid rock. You can't expect too much, even from the sharpest sword in existence."

"It's also partially held together by magic, that makes it harder to damage," added Louise.

"Oh. Still..."

"We can talk about this later. Come on."

"Wait, what about the injured?" asked Sparkle.

Susan blinked. "You're right, I didn't even think about them. I'm used to you using *Knockout*, not *Wind*. I expected them to get up again." She looked them over. "I think the ones that hit the line are pretty far gone. And they are technically enemies of the kingdom. Can we help them, ethically?"

"I've never really killed anything with my magic before," remarked Sparkle sadly.

"Yeah. I mean I shot Tom, I was prepared for that. This... this is different. But they would have killed us, right?"

"Yeah. They were just doing their job, they couldn't know what my *Line* would do to them. I kind of feel bad, now. But I didn't have any choice, right?"

"It's just, I don't know. It doesn't feel real, does it? Like they weren't people, just an obstacle for me to overcome. You think it's because of The Darkness inside me?"

"Maybe. I guess there isn't anything we can do. Someone will find them and take care of it, I guess."

"Yeah. Nothing we can do."

Susan opened her *Teleportal* and they went back to the school.

The next day, Susan brought all of them to the castle and reported to the princess that the letter had been destroyed. However, she noticed the princess seemed distracted, even distant.

"Is there something else I can help you with, Anrietta?"

"This hasn't been widely announced, so don't go spreading it around. But it seems the kingdom of Albion has been subjugated and renamed Reconquista. A man named Oliver

Cromwell used a combination of magic, political power, and raw force to overthrow the royal family. It seems they are not waiting around, as reports place soldiers in that area moving to converge on this one. By tomorrow, it seems I must contend with my kingdom being at war."

"Wasn't that prince we saw yesterday from there?" asked Hiriga.

Anrietta nodded. "He was driven from the castle, that's why he was out hiding in the wilderness, where you found him. He's the only surviving member of the royal family."

"At least he's still alive, out there fighting," said Susan.

"I do take some comfort in that. When you first came in here, I feared the worst, that he had been killed. I had the most horrible premonition of that last night, but you say he was fine when you left him."

"That he was. And he had a squad of loyal men with him, so I'm sure he'll be fine.

Princess, I can't fight a war for you, but you know my magic is at your command."

She gave a wan smile. "That means a lot to me."

Louise went down on one knee again. *She's always doing that.* "My magic as well, such as it is."

"What, explosions in a pitched battle? Yeah, that could never be useful."

"Will you stay here, in the place? At least for tonight. There will be a meeting tomorrow about what to do, and I'd like your input. I know you can just make it here, but you should at least get a little bit of a reward for all your hard work. Live like a princess for a day!"

Susan laughed. "You drive a hard bargain, Anrietta. We'll stay."

She seemed a bit relieved, and told them she would have rooms prepared. They took their leave and went to go back.

The next day, Susan and the others went to the meeting, and she saw an older version of Anrietta sitting next to her. *Oh, duh, of course she has a mother. I wonder what happened to her father?*

Also around the table were various nobles, and soldiers stood at attention in the four corners of the room.

"We're bringing children into this meeting? No wonder this country is going downhill," remarked a man with a wispy mustache, dressed in green. The man was dressed in green, not his mustache, just to be clear.

"These are my personal-" Anrietta started to say.

"Bodyguards," finished Susan. "And anyone who doesn't like it can fight any one of us, one on one, for that honor instead. Of course, you'll probably die, but..."

"Bodyguards?" he sneered.

Susan walked over to him, looking him straight in the eye. "Yes."

"Okay, okay, just checking. Can we get this meeting started already?"

The nobles were concerned that the attacking country seemed superior in terms numerical advantage. They counseled sending diplomats into Reconquista to try and negotiate some kind of neutrality agreement.

"What do you suggest?" Anrietta asked Susan.

"Do we know this Oliver's motive?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" asked a noble dressed in red.

"Just recently I attacked and drove off a water spirit, because I didn't understand why it was doing the thing it was doing. If I had found that out, the whole conflict could have been avoided. Until we know why this is happening, we won't be able to properly counter it. Perhaps he wants something that just happens to be on the other side of your country, and if we didn't fight him, he would be happy to leave us alone. Perhaps he wants to conquer the world, in which case if we take him out, the war is over. You see? Two different goals, two very different responses from us."

"Let's say he does want to conquer the world. How would you handle that?" asked a man in purple.

"If that's the case, you need friends, and fast. Travel to other kingdoms for soldiers and present a unified front. If that's not practical, you'll have to fight in a totally different way than he does. You say he has the numbers, that's huge in war. Okay, turn that into a disadvantage.

Don't strike at them, strike at the supply train. Deny them water. Have mages turn the land into a swamp, or too rocky for wagons to travel on. I've seen one mage raise a huge Earth Golem, hire mages that can do that to provide cover for your front lines. Get creative, because you're going to have to take out several of his guys for every one of your soldiers you lose just to stay in the running."

Several people nodded, it was true.

"Very well," said the princess. "Susan has often told me that the strength of the kingdom lies in the strength of the people's belief in its leaders. I will head the defense force personally, and inspire my people with my example. Meanwhile, do as Susan recommends. Send your diplomats to the new empire, see what they want from us. If that can be learned, perhaps this war can be cut short."

The meeting went on, deciding how best to supply their own soldiers and other mundane things Susan didn't care about. They also talked about how best to utilize magic, which Susan was glad to hear. *You have it, use it, that's my motto.*

Susan was contemplating making an item to maintain *Invulnerability* for her when there was a frantic pounding on her door. She hadn't yet returned to the school, Anrietta having insisted on her staying at least for dinner. Sparkle looked up as she opened it to see a soldier standing there.

"Urgent message from the princess," he told her. "An enemy ship has been sighted in the air over the kingdom! The princess demands your presence immediately."

I doubt she said it like that, but okay.

Susan and the others followed the man, and he led them out to the field behind the castle. There, rows of troops were getting ready to ride to meet this new threat.

"Only one ship?" asked Susan. "That doesn't seem like an invading army. More like a mercenary group that somehow got hold of a ship. Are you sure it's from this new kingdom?"

"We think so. Nevertheless, we have to check it out."

"I just hope it isn't part of a faint, designed to lure soldiers away from the where the real fight is going to take place."

"It's a good thing I have you then, isn't it?"

Susan smirked. "I guess I could open a hole in the air for you, if you asked nicely. But I've only been a couple of places around here. We may need to go in totally the opposite direction."

"It's the town of Talb, have you been there?"

"Okay, that's just stupid," replied Susan. She turned to Sparkle. "What are the odds that one ship, probably all that we could reasonably take down, would show up in the one place I happened to have visited? Does that make sense to you?"

"I suppose it does in the larger context."

"Larger... What does that mean?"

"Don't worry about it for now. Just accept it as a bizarre coincidence."

"I guess I have no choice but to do that very thing. Okay, I'll put us right outside the village, everyone get ready to ride through. *Teleportal!*" Susan made it as large as she could, and watched as soldiers on horseback poured through.

"This magic could change the nature of war," remarked Anrietta, watching her soldiers go through. "With this, even numerical superiority wouldn't mean much, as an entire country's worth of soldiers could be brought to wherever the action was. Fresh, because they didn't have to march there. Or insert strike teams behind enemy lines. Or just dump lava on a town from above."

"Yup, that's all true," agreed Susan. "Aren't you glad I'm on your side?"

She nodded vigorously.

Susan and the others watched the ship approach, and Susan waited for the other shoe to drop. It was just a standard sailing ship, converted however they did in into something that would float, and sailed here. It had some cannons on the side, true, but it was made of wood. *Couldn't one fire mage just blow the whole thing up? From here, even?*

"Guess we'll capture it," she said, shrugging.

"Capture? Are you crazy?" yelled Louise.

"Hey, if they're stupid enough to come here with no backup, no troops, no nothing, it's our duty to make them regret that mistake for a very long time. What better way than to capture a powerful military asset like this ship? They can't be that easy to make."

"Can you do it?" asked Anrietta.

"I don't see why not. The four of us-

"Five. I'm coming too."

"If you're sure that's wise. Okay, the five of us, made *Invulnerable*, and possibly *Accelerated* if you think you can manage five, Sparkle? Plus all the soldiers I can whistle up in an instant. We'll be back for tea."

"Then cast your spells and let's go. We have a ship to take down."

Ship

Place: The air above the village of Talb

Time: Moments later

Susan and Sparkle put in maximum time and energy casting their two spells, and both went off perfectly. Susan then put *Flight* on the group and they took the sky.

“Follow us and take care of any aerial support they have aboard,” Anrietta commanded her forces. “Ground troops, stand by in case we fail to take the ship. Bring it down by any means necessary.”

They gave a cry and the five were off. They were now hovering above the ship, looking down. It seemed everyone there was in a panic, as they probably didn't understand where all these soldiers had come from. *Wanted to sneak in quietly, huh? Thought maybe you could take a few villages out, soften the kingdom up for a surrender? Not while I'm around. Wait, what is this ship still doing here? Or was it just coming this way and someone got back to the castle fast enough to report it, gather these forces here, and then we just happened to get here before it passed? These people don't have telephones, how long does a message take to get from one end of the kingdom to another? And these people would have had to ride out here. This ship would have been long gone.*

I don't get it. Of course they could have a magical communication network of some kind around here I just haven't seen.

“Wait here a second, I'll get things set up. Come on, Sparkle. No holding back now.”

“You got it. *Ally?*”

“*Ally.* Let them do the work, our penalty will be pretty high.”

“That's for sure.”

“Here we go.”

Susan slammed into the deck of the ship, going to one knee. Sparkle sat calmly on her shoulder. *Oh yeah, I look so cool right now.* She raised her head and called into the silence that followed. “I am here to accept your surrender! Fight me, and die.” The soldiers started laughing. *Okay, you had your chance. For sacrifices made.*

Suddenly, they weren't laughing anymore as twenty five soldiers made of fire appeared in a ring around Susan. “Sweep through the ship,” she called to them. “Kill anyone that fights against you.” It was poor orders to give, but Susan figured rather than try to micro-manage them, she would rely on a soldiers' instinct to attack things to make sure they engaged the right people. If someone got smart and just didn't attack, her *Legion* would pass them by. *Couldn't be helped. Any other orders might result in one of my team getting attacked, and I don't want that.*

They moved, driving the soldiers there back. The others landed in the space and joined the battle, as they were able. Hiraga darted forward and started cutting up soldiers. Anrietta started casting magic, and Louise sent *Explosions* into their midst, further confusing them. Susan dropped *Flight* and began to cast again, *Magical Ally, Major*, putting in the extra 4 segments to counteract their penalties from already active magic. A dragon and a lion appeared, and stayed with their respective person to protect them. One of the enemy dragons landed nearby and Susan's tore it apart with hardly any effort.

As her forces were sweeping the ship, she moved about, looking for survivors. After someone could no longer fight one of her soldiers they lost interest and went looking for someone else. So very few were actually dead, but all were majorly wounded. Susan directed those that wanted to surrender or were badly hurt to the front of the ship, where Sparkle's lion could keep an eye on them. She felt confident (or *Overconfident*) enough to leave the dragon and go looking for survivors on lower decks, and she was marching them up with her sword drawn one at a time.

Of course she had no idea, at the moment, how to *use* a sword. But after being beaten up by a woman made of fire, if someone else comes along and points a sword at you,

shouting "Move!" you listen to them. She had come back down and was rounding a corner when she ran into a clean shaven man wearing green, who had a very feminine hairstyle.

"You," he spat, raising a fist and showing her a ring. "You're the cause of all this, aren't you? You're the one with the strange magic, who called up those fire golems!"

"How perceptive."

"Now you're going to work for me!" The ring started to flash, and Susan made a RESolve check against some kind of *Dominate* effect. She spent ten energy on her RESolve check, getting a thirty one, easily enough to shrug off anything this world could throw at her.

"Shiny," she said, looking him in the eye.

"What?"

"I'ma take it."

"What?!"

With that she grabbed the ring out of her pocket that she was bought in case she wanted to *Imbue* it and cast *Transposition*, switching the ring for the ring. She missed it by one, and decided as she had gotten an *XP Bonus* card at the beginning of this adventure, she was still up even spending one for the +2. She spent it, and the rings switched, the one in her hand going out.

She put it in her pocket.

"Give that back!" shouted the man, going to grab her.

"Make me!" she said, skipping past him, her *Acceleration* making it easy to slip past him. She bolted back up the stairs, and he followed, running smack dab into her dragon, who had been told to wait. She spun back to him.

"Surrender, and go sit with the others," she demanded, pointing her sword at the man. "You have no chance to survive, otherwise. Make your time."

"This isn't over," he snarled, turning and following her command. "You may have captured me, but the war will go on."

"Oh, you're an important one, are you? That's good to know." They climbed onto the deck, and Susan looked for her *Companion*. "Sparkle, keep an extra close watch on this one, he thinks he's important."

"Will do."

Moments later, the rest of the group came back up from below and said the ship was under their command. They were going to fly it back to the castle where the prisoners could be put under guard, and see what else the newly establish kingdom wanted to give them as a present. There were going to pick up their forces, which apparently had been battling Miss Longbill and Louise's "buddy" on the ground, and had taken some losses. Both had, of course, once again escaped.

"This guy seems to have an inflated idea of his own importance, not unlike myself. Of course in my case it's deserved, but the point is, he was wearing this and tried to do something to me with it."

She pulled out the ring.

"That's Andvari's Ring, at least I think!" exclaimed Anrietta.

"Oh yeah?" Susan looked it over. "Actually, now that I look at it, this does seem to match the description. How about that, I can keep my promise to the Water Spirit earlier than I thought."

"That ring wouldn't have gone to anyone low ranking. Who are you?" demanded Anrietta.

"Oliver Cromwell," he said sadly.

Susan burst out laughing. "Wait, what? You were really stupid enough to come here, by yourself, with no backup, no soldiers, apart from what you could fit on one boat? How in the world did you think it was going to go? That you would just sail to the capital, announce who you were, and everyone would just welcome you? Honestly, you cannot be that dumb."

"It made sense at the time."

"I bet. Well, I guess we'll have to see if this really does end it or not. If someone was pulling his strings, and just wanted him out of the way now that they didn't need him anymore, that would explain why he's here. In that case the war isn't over, and we need to get back and

continue preparations. If it was just him, which I doubt, this war is over before it began.”

“You haven’t won, if that’s what you think.”

“Really? We’ll see. Meanwhile, there’s a more important question here. One that needs to be answered before we go anywhere.”

“What’s that?” asked Anrietta, concerned.

“What am I going to call my new ship?”

They both laughed.

Sadly, the war continued, though Reconquista seemed in a bit more turmoil with the loss of a battleship and their “leader.” Susan and the others remained at the palace, ready to be called upon again if it became necessary.

“How did the blade do against just regular troops?” asked Susan when they had a moment.

“Great!” Hiraga exclaimed. “I mostly went for their blades, which the sword smashed right through. They didn’t have much fight in them after that. Plus they couldn’t really hurt me, so they gave up pretty quickly.”

“All right, so it was worth the effort. That’s good to know. After fighting that stupid rock creature so much, it must have been nice to go against regular soldiers for a change.”

“Especially when it looked like they were moving in slow motion compared to me.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve never had *Acceleration* on you, have you? I’m so used to it now, I take it for granted everyone moves slower than me in combat. Anyway, keep practicing, this situation might get worse before it gets better.”

With war fever in full swing, Susan had some down time at last, and started putting some points into *Sword: Slashing*. She also took a trip back to the lake, and stood there wondering how to get the ring back to the water spirit.

“How did that girl do it the first time?” asked Sparkle, looking around.

“I think she smeared some blood on her familiar, who went down into the water. I guess we could try that.”

“Wouldn’t hurt. Okay, just a second.”

Sparkle became a frog with *Shape-shift* and Susan used her knife to get some blood. She stabbed it into her leg and slowly drew it out. The wound healed behind it, but she was able to collect some blood off it and wipe it on Sparkle’s back. “I’ll be right back.”

Shortly, the waterspout was back, and Susan held up the ring.

“As promised, I return this to you.” *Don’t lose it next time.*

“You kept your promise? I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it. Should I just toss it in the water?”

“That would be acceptable.”

Susan gave it a toss, and it plunked into the lake. She watched it sink, and it vanished out of sight.

When she looked up, the waterspout was gone as well.

“You’re welcome,” she said sarcastically. “Come on, let’s go back.”

Several days had passed, and it seemed the country of Reconquista wasn’t taking the loss of its leader laying down. They continued to mobilize troops, and the princess was crowned as queen. The country officially declared war, and the boys in the school were getting ready to leave and become soldiers.

With the school empty of boys, Susan thought things might become less interesting, but Sparkle perked up her ears the next day and said something was going on. Susan looked up from the notes she was making about *Avatar of War*, the spell she was researching. It was grade eight, so one higher than *Invulnerability*, but seemed much more useful. She stood up and looked out the window.

Outside, in the courtyard, the girls were all standing in pairs and seemed to be trying to hit each other with a staff that had a cloth bag tied to the end, blunting it. “Oh, this should be good.”

Susan went down to see what the heck this was all about (she had *Curious*, after all) and walked over to Hiraga.

"What's this all about?" she asked, jerking a thumb back at the girls.

"Training, I guess. Apparently the queen has sent some soldiers here to prepare the girls for any eventual attack."

Susan looked over and saw several people in uniform- no, as she took a look she saw it was several *women* in uniform. In fact it was only women here, and they carried both a gun and a sword.

Wait, a gun?

"They have gunpowder here?" she asked, surprised.

"Apparently."

One of the girls came over to them. "Who are you?" she demanded of Susan.

"Susan Felton. You're here to train these girls, huh? Wouldn't teaching them how to shoot be better than teaching them how to poke someone with a stick?"

"Oh, you know about guns?" she asked, surprised. "They're relatively new, too."

"May I?" she asked, holding a hand out.

"I... suppose?" She unholstered the pistol and held it out.

"Look at this!" she squealed, showing it to Hiraga. "It's muzzle loading! Can you imagine fighting with something like this?"

Hiraga looked it over with a grin. "That's where it begins, though, isn't it? How long until they have modern firearms? The balance of power might change big time, then."

Susan nodded, looking the gun over. It was obviously a flintlock pistol, single shot, firing a lead ball none too accurately. Made of wood and steel, and probably hand made because the assembly line hadn't been invented yet that she could see. To her, a museum piece, but to the owner, the latest in "you die now" technology.

"What do you mean, modern?" snapped the woman, taking the pistol back. "This is the latest design."

"They've gone a bit further where we're from," Susan explained.

"Oh? Do tell."

"Nope!" Susan answered brightly. "Not giving you technological advances hundreds of years early. You want a better gun, come up with it yourself. I won't be the one responsible for throwing your world into chaos by letting peasants rise up and destroy magic users. And that's exactly what I can see happening, once you have guns that don't need thirty seconds to reload."

"Fifteen!"

"Whatever."

"I still don't know who you are. You wear odd clothes, same as this girl here, and what are you doing here, anyway?" she asked Hiraga. "I thought all men were conscripted into the war effort."

"I'm not a citizen of the country, so that doesn't apply to me. Susan and I came from other worlds. I'm a Familiar Spirit, technically, while she just happened to come here by accident."

"And can you fight?"

Both shrugged. "Sure," they answered.

"I've even started to put points into my sword skill," said Susan, "in case I run low on energy in a protracted battle. And I'm researching a spell you might like, Hiraga. I think it'll serve better than what I gave you at the ship."

"Looking forward to it! A better spell than that one must be pretty special!"

"If you can fight, show me," said the woman, unconvinced. She walked over to grab some wooden swords that were laying out of the way.

"I need a real weapon," protested Hiraga.

"Not for this, you don't," countered Susan. "You need to increase your stamina, remember? This is a good opportunity to do it."

"What about you, then?"

Susan shook her head. "It doesn't work that way for me. Besides, I already have an eight ENDurance. I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I only have 38 XP and I would need 45. I

suppose I could increase STrength, that would only take 20.”

“What are you two babbling about? Pick up those swords!”

“You’re not the boss ‘o me,” said Susan. “Totally pointless anyway. I don’t get better at things by repetition. And he doesn’t count as a teacher, so it wouldn’t even help me spend XP faster. He might get some benefit out of it, but I better make him something a little closer to what he normally uses.”

“Why?” Hiraga asked.

“You don’t want to train with a weapon of the wrong type. You’ll get used to the way that kind of sword feels in your hand, and then get confused when you go back to the katana. Better to have a wooden katana and practice with that.”

“Oh, that’s a fair point.”

“Hang on.” Susan took a minute and a half, and handed Hiraga a wooden replica of his sword. “There you go. I can *Repair* it when it gets too banged up. Just come see me.”

“I will, thanks.”

“A sword with a curved blade? Interesting.”

“It’s the style of my country. I guess as she was nice enough to make this for me, we’re doing this.”

Susan stepped back and the woman brought her practice blade up too.

And then easily disarmed him.

“Maybe you should just run around the parimeter to get your stamina up,” Susan remarked.

“Maybe that is best,” he agreed from on the ground where he had fallen over after being disarmed.

“That won’t improve his sword arm, though,” she remarked, pulling her blade back and letting him up. “Swinging a blade around is hard work. How about I take you through some forms first, and you can do them over and over. Even a wooden blade will give you some sense of how long you can go in a fight.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She put Hiriga through his paces, then told him to continue repeating those motions until he couldn’t move anymore. Susan was watching the girls flail about uselessly on the field, and turned back to the woman.

“Never did get your name,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Agnes, captain of the squad.”

“Nice to meet you. I couldn’t help but notice you’re all girls here. Isn’t there a war on? I figured you would be at the front lines as well, or at least there would be some guys in your company.”

Her face darkened. “The princess- the queen is too soft. She believes war is no business for a woman and sends us to do... this sort of thing, instead.” She indicated the mages.

“Yes, this is rather thankless work, isn’t it? In reality, shouldn’t they be training in battle magic, rather than sticks?”

Agnes snorted. “Do you know how easy it is to disarm a mage, and turn them into someone with no more magic than myself?”

Susan laughed out loud. “You sound like me. I said the exact same thing once, to a bunch of wand using wizards. How about that?”

“And were you preparing them for war?”

“I was, actually. I had them learn martial arts or swordsmanship in addition to their magic. Not that it would have helped, against the creatures they ultimately faced. But I think they were better fighters for it. Still, they should learned unarmed, rather than stick, I mean if you’re worried about them not being mages during an attack.”

“It’s more about training the mind than the body. Readyng them to defend themselves. One thing at a time.”

She nodded. “You’re probably right. There was one difference, between my students and yours.”

“What’s that?”

“My students came to me, and wanted to learn. Your students were forced into it. And no-one wants to be forced into anything. So they’ll only do this halfheartedly, and resent you the whole time.”

“Perhaps. Or are you suggesting something?”

“You have to motivate them. Either stage some kind of ‘attack’ that deprives them of their wands and hope no one gets hurt, or offer some kind of prize to the person that improves the most. That second one I might be able to help with.”

“You have something?”

“Not this second, but for the winner? Hey everyone!” she called. “Stop a minute!” Everyone turned to look at her.

“We’ve decided to make this a little competition! Every day you train like this, you get a chance to face the captain here in combat. First person to touch her with your weapon, oh, three times, I’ll make you a magical item. Any piece of jewelry you bring me, I’ll put a spell into it. That spell will allow you to tell, without fail, if someone is lying to you. Think that might be useful?”

There was a buzzing of chatter as the girls talked about it, and Susan would have heard the word “boys” and such if she didn’t have that *Poor Sense (Hearing)* weakness. In any case, they all nodded and accepted the deal, then went back to banging each other with the sticks. This time a bit more wholeheartedly.

“That might actually have worked,” remarked Agnes, as Susan walked back over to her. “You can really do it, right?”

“What, the item? Sure. I’m not a liar. It’s a pretty low level spell, but useful. Wait, you’re not going to actually lose to any of these girls, are you?”

“I should hope not,” she snorted.

“Okay. Hummm, maybe I should offer you some incentive, too? But you’re more a fighter, aren’t you? Okay, how about this? If you can go a whole week without getting hit once, I’ll make you an item that you can activate and stagger an opponent’s senses. That’ll keep them off balance and may even save your life one day. How does that sound?”

“You would do that for me?”

“Hey, I’m offering them a prize, it’s only fair if I offer you one, too. Maybe an earring,” she said, reaching up to touch Agnes’ ear. “I bet earrings would look pretty on you, and that way you would always have it with you.”

To her surprise, Agnes blushed and looked away. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. I have spell research to get back to, so come tell me how it goes. And no cheating, if you don’t get attacked that day doesn’t count. You have to do seven days of them trying before I’ll make it.”

“See you later.”

“Bye!”

She’s cute when she’s embarrassed. When I get back I’ll have to write a thank you note to Slughorn. I never took his potions class, but Hermione told me about his little “challenges” and how they motivated the class to succeed. Did she ever use that luck potion? She sighed. Wonder what you’re doing right now, Hermoine.

“Back to work!”

Keeping Promises
Time: A Week Later
Place: Susan's room

That morning, with only three days to go until Susan could see if she had gotten her magical symbology right for *Avatar of War*, she looked for the others at breakfast. She first looked for Siesta, but found neither her favorite maid nor her friends.

She started to get worried.

As no one she spoke to had seen them leave, she went to the principal's office.

"Yes, apparently her family wanted her to come home," he admitted. "We can't exactly keep people here against their family's will, so she's gone. They left early this morning."

"And Siesta?"

"Who?"

"My friend, she works here as a maid! I can't find her either."

"Oh, I have no idea. For them to disappear at the same time, well, I'm sure they're together."

"I hope so. I guess no one would steal a maid..." *Except for that one guy, who did. But he did go through official channels. Unless he wanted to attack me indirectly, get some revenge? I hope you're okay, Siesta.*

As the principal wasn't worried, and Susan had no idea where Louise lived, there wasn't much she could do. She went back to magical research, having cut the number of days by three thanks to Sparkle's *Photographic Memory*. (She had rolled a KNOWledge check, and for every five rolled, the number of days decreased by one. Not exactly in the standard rules, but it makes sense, so this Narrator is going with it) So Susan was always asking her to look things over, and help with whatever it was she exactly did that used up "materials" while trying to work the spell out anew.

After her daily eight hours of work (with breaks of course) she decided to wander out to the field and see how the girls were doing with their training. They seemed somewhat improved, and while she watched, several of them challenged Agnes to try and win the *Detect Lies* item. Agnes was using a sword, making Susan wonder about exactly how fair that was, but she was a swordswoman, after all. *And I never specified they had to use the same weapon.*

Flushed and sweaty, Agnes dismissed them, and sheathed her sword. She noticed Susan standing there, and called her over.

"Pay up," she said triumphantly, smiling.

"Not even once, huh?"

"That's right. I'm actually glad you suggested this little exercise. I've been getting a good workout these last two days, so I hope it keeps up. These girls are still hopeless, of course, but at least they have a little bit of motivation now."

"Glad to hear it. A deal is a deal. Come to my room tomorrow morning and we'll go shopping for what you want me put the spell into."

She blushed. "I'll have to get them pierced, you know, if it's earrings."

Susan shook her head. "Doesn't have to be. Could be a ring. Necklace. Ankle bracelet, whatever. I was just saying I think you would look good... sorry, better with earrings. I noticed some of your fellow soldiers wearing them, so I know it's not prohibited."

"I'll... think about it."

That evening, Susan went back to the castle to get out some more money, again minor denominations. She hadn't even spent 10 gold of her bounty. *Stupid needing materials for this stuff is stupid.* She did take out two gold coins though, because what she had in mind would probably be expensive.

The next day, Susan was surprised to see someone she didn't recognize for a moment standing in front of her door, looking a bit embarrassed. "Agnes?"

"I didn't want to be clunking around in my armor, now did I?"

"Wow, you look great. Come on in, I'll open the portal back to town."

"Open the what?"

"You didn't think we were going to walk there, did you? Come on."

Susan pulled her inside, then went about casting *Teleportal*.

"This is magic I've never even heard of!" exclaimed Agnes, cautiously sticking her hand through. "How did you learn this?"

"From a book my father left me. I'll tell you all about it, come on."

Sparkle leapt through as well, and the portal closed behind them.

"Now, I think the jewelry store is that way."

"That way," corrected Sparkle. "See, this is why I have to come along. She's hopeless at directions."

"Talking cat. Don't see many of them, even around mages."

"Oh, I totally forgot to introduce you. Sparkle, this is Agnes. Agnes, Sparkle."

"Hello?"

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"You too. Wait, you didn't use a wand. You really are from another world, aren't you?"

"I really am."

"I asked some of the girls about it, they told me how you arrived with that human Familiar Spirit. I couldn't believe it."

"Yeah, I didn't want to believe it either, but here I am. Come on, time is wasting."

Walking to the shop that sold jewelry, Agnes asked about Susan's world, and she was happy to tell her about it, and about her friends there.

"I made them so much stuff," she said, grinning. "But of course I was gaming the system to buy the stuff I needed. I mean my *Resources: Money* would have seen me get that cash one way or the other, but beating the system seemed so satisfying. Oh well. Here we are!"

The person behind the counter, a 30ish year old woman greeted them.

"My friend here is looking for some jewelry," Susan said, when Agnes didn't step up.

"We have fine jewelry of all types," said the woman. "My husband makes it, I sell it. What were you looking for in particular?"

"Earrings," mumbled Agnes.

"Sorry, didn't catch that."

"Earrings!" she almost shouted.

"All right, no need to shout. I see you'll have to have your ears pierced then. Not to worry, I'm an old hand at that by now. We'll see you through it. Now, what sort of design would you like?"

"Something that fits pretty close to the ear, nothing dangling," said Susan. "And gold, if you can manage it." Agnes looked over at her curiously. "Less chance of an allergic reaction."

"A what?" asked the woman.

"Do you ever have people come back and say the piercing bother them? Itch more than they should? Break out?"

"Why yes, every so often. You know what causes that?"

Susan nodded. "The body is reacting to the metal. Usually nickel. For some reason, there are people who just can't tolerate it, and their bodies go nuts trying to get rid of it."

"Well I'll be. And you say recommending gold would solve their problem?"

"I've never heard of a gold allergy." *At least on my world.*

"I'll have to give that a try, next person that comes in with that problem. Well, we don't have much in gold but I can show you what we do have."

She took a case out from behind the counter and there were four pairs of earrings sitting there. One looked like rubies in a setting, one was probably amethyst. The other apparently didn't even rate because Agnes seemed to make up her mind immediately.

"The purple ones," she said with finality. "The red ones remind me too much of fire."

"Not to be indelicate, but they are rather expensive. Are you sure?"

Susan pinged a gold coin down on the counter. The woman's eyes got a little wider, and she studied the coin. "Seems real enough. How did you come by gold?"

"We both are employed by the queen," Susan answered honestly. "And not as maids. Please do not take our current appearance as our normal one. We're taking a day off and thought it would be nice to relax and blend in a bit."

"Oh!" the woman sat up straighter. "My ladies, please forgive any insult I may have inadvertently-"

Susan cut her off with a wave. "Please, just treat us like any other customer. That's all we are right now."

The gold disappeared. "I'll get the needles and such, wait right there." She put the others back behind the counter and disappeared through an open doorway into the back. Susan picked up one of them and held it against her ear, brushing her hair back out of the way. "I think they complement your eyes nicely."

"Stop it!" she replied playfully. "What are you doing?"

"What?"

The two stared at each other, and the woman returned with a tray. On it was a needle, a lump of what looked like wax, a bottle of ink, a brush and some cloths.

"Have a seat," she said, pulling the chair out and offering it to Agnes. "Now, how high do you want them? About where mine are?" She turned her head and showed Agnes, who nodded. "Fine, fine." She uncorked the ink and made a mark on her ear, then did the other. She looked back and forth. "That seem straight to you?"

Susan turned her head and looked. "Shouldn't that one be a little higher?" (The woman had gotten a 13 on her check to place the first, but a 7 on her check to place the second)

"You think? Yeah, I do think maybe you're right. Let's see." She made another mark. "How about that?" (She got a 14 that time)

"That's much better."

"Fine," she said, picking up the needle and the wax. "Now, I'm going to hold this against the back, and push the needle in-"

"Hold it!" cried Susan, eyes wide. "What are you using to sterilize that thing?"

"Do what?" asked both.

"You know, kill the..." She facepalmed. "You have no idea what bacteria are, do you?"

"Now what are you talking about?" asked the woman.

Susan sighed and shook her head. "Just get me a candle, will you?"

"Okay."

The woman lit a candle and set it in front of Susan, who took the needle and passed it through the flame a moment. She shook it in the air and blew it off, cooling it down.

Both ladies looked at her as if she was nuts. "Look, sometimes people come back here with infections, right? Pus? Pain? Swelling?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"And you've never stopped to consider why? Good news, now you know. Bacteria, or the tiniest life-form you can possibly imagine, are responsible. Passing it through the flame will, I hope, at least kill most of them. That should reduce the number of complications. Making sure to clean them with some kind of alcohol once a day will also help."

"Okay, are you two just trying to trick me or something?" The woman put her hands on her hips.

"Look, you can prove it to yourself, that's the great thing about *science*. The next ten people that come in here, do as I've recommended. Follow up with them. Did they experience more problems, fewer problems, or about the same number of problems? If more, which I highly doubt, ask yourself why *that* might be and go from there. If the same, the flame isn't enough or there are other factors at work. I'm no expert. If less, I was right, and you've just advanced the understanding of disease by a hundred years. Congratulations. Figure out how to apply that empirical knowledge to other fields, like childbirth and on the job injuries."

"Sounds reasonable enough," she replied, not truly convinced.

"Anyway, it should be cool enough now. Please proceed."

“Right, where was I? Pushing the needle in, right. Are you ready for this?”

“Exactly how much is this going to hurt?”

“Oh, come on,” said Susan. “You face down people with swords, and you’re worried about this tiny little needle?” She took Agnes’ hand. “I mean, sure, it’s driving a sharp piece of metal completely through your body and out the other side. There will probably be blood *everywhere*.” Agnes eyed the needle suspiciously and started breathing a little faster. “I’m only teasing you. Come on, look at me. I’m right here. One little pinch for each side and it’ll be over.”

“I never should have let you talk me into this.”

And so, moments later Agnes and Susan walked out of the shop. They were still holding hands, and Agnes’ other hand kept jerking up like she wanted to feel the new earring. Each time she mastered the impulse.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I noticed you haven’t had it done. I was hoping... we would get it done together.”

Susan shook her head. “Wouldn’t stick. I get *Regeneration* magic cast on me all the time. They would just heal right up.”

“Healing magic? You get injured that much? What kind of dangerous life do you lead?”

Susan laughed. “No, no, it’s more like routine maintenance. By leaving *Regeneration* on once a week, my body gets a nice little refresh. Anything that might become a problem later on is taken care of. I don’t know if it extends my lifespan or anything, but it can’t hurt.”

“I see. So do they look okay?”

“Yeah! Hard to see them with your hair like that though. If you want to show them off, we can trim the hair there a bit.”

“Maybe I only want certain people to see them.” She mumbled, looking away.

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s go stimulate the local economy. I have a ton of gold to spend before I leave this world, and for some reason I’m feeling generous.”

“Stimulate the... Are we shopping? What are we shopping for?”

“I’ll need various things for the *Imbuing*, they get used up during the process. Plus I thought you might like a new outfit to go with your new earrings.”

And so the two girls went shopping. Agnes was still trying to not touch her new jewelry, and kept looking around for a mirror in the shops they went to. Finally they sat down for lunch at place with outside tables, and they ordered.

“So tell me why being reminded of fire is bad. Did you get burned as a little kid or something?”

Agnes’s face fell. “It’s not something I like to talk about.”

“No pressure!” assured Susan. “If you don’t, it’s fine. I thought maybe it was an embarrassing story or something like you almost burned down a barn when you were six.”

“No, I...” She took a deep breath. “My village was burned down when I was very young. I was the only survivor.”

“What?” Susan’s hands flew over her mouth. “Oh, Agnes, I had no idea. I’m so sorry to bring that up. I really screwed that up, didn’t I? I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. It’s what made me who I am today, so you might as well know. For some reason, when I was very young, a bunch of mages appeared in my village and without warning, burned it to the ground. A passing stranger found me, and hid me, and we escaped. That’s when I swore I would get really strong one day, and find the people who would do such a horrible thing. It’s why I joined the Queen’s army as soon as I was able, and have trained hard ever since.”

“That’s awful,” Susan admitted. “To lose your entire family like that, I can’t even imagine. You must really be a strong person, to have come so far.”

“I guess. I just hate the fact that those murderers are still walking around, totally unpunished.”

“That I can identify with. I’ve gone a little crazy myself, when one of my friends was almost killed by accident. If she had died because of *that woman*, I don’t think there would have been a force on that world that could have prevented me from murdering her where she

stood. If I'm still around when you find one of them, let me know. We'll take them together, for all those that were killed that day."

"Okay."

And so the subject moved on to life around the castle, and things Susan knew about from her world like planes and cars and magic, when suddenly a girl about their age stopped in her tracks and stared at them.

"Captain?"

"Oh no!" Agnes moaned. "Wait, what are you doing out here, Mallory?"

Mallory laughed. "You gave me today off, like two weeks ago, don't you remember?"

"I guess I did."

"Wow, I wondered why you of all people didn't come to practice today. I guess now I know."

"I'm not on a date or anything, Susan and I are just shopping for the stuff she needs to make my magical item. And... and then we stopped for lunch! That's all!"

"I didn't think you were," Mallory assured her. Susan didn't hear her mutter "But I certainly do now."

"What was that?"

"Nothing! I was just surprised to see you out of uniform, that's all. I never see you out of uniform and why do you keep trying to hide your ears with your hair oh my goodness you finally had your ears pierced! Do you know how long we've been trying to get her to do that?" she asked Susan. "But now she's done it for you. I guess you must be pretty special."

"It's just for the magic item! The earring is going to hold the spell, that's all!"

"She was always worried someone would tear them out in combat," Mallory continued, as if Agnes hadn't spoken. "We all said she was too good to let someone get that close, but she insisted. Well done."

"Thanks? I think?"

"I'll leave you two to it. Have fun!"

Agnes sputtered something while Mallory stepped a little closer to Susan.

"Oh, and *please* get her to lighten up a little? Do *whatever* you have to do." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "I've never seen someone as uptight as her." She turned towards Agnes again. "No offense, captain, but even you need to unwind a bit every now and then. I'm happy for you two. See ya!"

With that she bounced away.

Agnes sat with her hands covering her eyes. "This is going to be all my squad talks about for weeks, you know that, right?"

"She doesn't know you," protested Susan. "I doubt you told her what you told me. She doesn't know what drives you. We all have our own personal demons to contend with. Please don't judge her too harshly."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about this... date."

"Oh," said Susan, flashing a grin. "Is it a date now?" *And given what she was suggesting, or what I think she was suggesting, I think they already suspected your preferences.*

"No! I mean, unless you wanted it to... I mean... I should just go!"

Susan caught her arm as she got up. "Sit down, captain, that's an order. Let's at least finish lunch. I should tell you, I do already have a girlfriend, but she's a world away from me right now. If I don't find a way to leave I may never see her again. I wonder what she would say if she saw me sitting here with you. The point is we're just becoming friends, if that's what you want. Nothing more. Let them tease, we'll know the truth."

"Are you saying you... prefer girls?"

"I take it you do."

"I... I..."

"Unless I hear a no in the next five seconds, I'm taking that as a yes."

"I've never admitted that to anyone."

"Maybe not even yourself? It must be very hard, living in the time that you do." Susan sighed. "Agnes, you have a hard road ahead of you, I'll tell you that straight out. In this time,

in this place? I can see your wanting to keep that a secret. Many people even in my world wouldn't tell any but their closest friends, because of how they would be seen. I don't envy you."

"I always told myself I didn't have time for romance. That boys were just a distraction, and I didn't need them. But I finally realized while it wasn't boys I wanted to make time for, I did want to make time for girls. And you're the same way? I'm not... sick?"

"Sick? No, of course not! Don't even think that for a *second*. You just have a different preference. I mean what makes a boy want to chase a girl in the first place? What makes one person like mushrooms and another hate them? Brain chemistry or something, right? I don't even know if scientists on my world know for sure, and as you might have guessed from hanging out with me this morning, they know a *lot*. Are people with red hair broken? Do blue eyes signify evil? Of course not! Being attracted to someone is the same way, it's just a thing. It's not even a place on my character sheet, it just happened. Sick. Is that really what you've thought all these years?"

Agnes mutely nodded, eyes shining.

"You're not. You're a beautiful, skilled, capable woman, and any person you give your heart to is lucky indeed."

Agnes broke down and cried.

What we do for friends

Time: One week later

Place: Susan's room

Susan and Agnes headed back to the castle after lunch, though Susan would have liked to spend more time with her. Of course, she needed to hang around for the *Imbuing*, but they couldn't really talk while she worked. Susan left the earring in, as the skill didn't specify any actual location for the object while she worked. With her new trick of using *Augment Skill* it only took sixteen hours total to finish, and she watched as magic settled around the earring and sank inside.

"Okay, your trigger word is *Dazzle* and thinking about the person you want to stun. I made it energy based, so I'll tell you the same thing I told others I made energy based objects for. You can use it to death. It only saps a tiny portion of your energy, and as I've seen you jumping around practicing I'm pretty sure you have a high *RESolve* and *ENDurance*. But use it too often in a fight, and it'll work against you. It should stun someone at least two seconds, giving you plenty of time to put the hurt on them. It's a moon spell, so it should be double potent, whatever that means in this case."

"Even a second's hesitation on the battlefield can mean life and death. Thank you."

"Hey, you earned it, didn't you?" She lowered her voice. "Wonder what I should do if you go a whole month without taking a single strike?"

"They're getting better," she remarked, not rising to the bait. "Maybe in a year or two I could take them into battle. I just hope that doesn't have to happen."

"You and me both. It's been nice, having you here. I hope you'll still come talk to me, even though you got your item."

"You know where to find me. Don't let that sword rust in its sheath."

"I have researched the spell I wanted to learn, *Avatar of War*. Another 8 XP gone, so I'm down to seventeen after raising my *Sword* skill to a five. Man that stuff goes fast!"

"I still have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm sure the loss is keenly felt. I... hope you don't mind if I do come, just to talk, now and again. I have a lot of thinking to do, about things. Who I am, and what I'm doing with my life. Having someone to talk to that understands my position would be nice."

"My door is always open," Susan replied warmly, giving her a quick hug. "For anything."

"Now what?" asked Sparkle.

"Good question. Louise, Hiraga, and Siesta came back after a day. So them being 'home' didn't last long."

"Is it just me, or are those two acting even more weird than usual lately?"

"Beats me. They've always had a bizarre relationship. At least she's starting to see him as more than just a beast, I think."

"You would have beaten that out of her if she hadn't."

"Got that right. 8XP, I wonder."

"Now what?"

"An item to hold this *Avatar* spell. I won't get it back, but I won't need it off this planet. At least I hope. No, in fact I know. If I can't cast the spell, having *Spell Symbol* wouldn't do me any good."

"Why would you cast it on yourself anyway? Are you planning to rely on the sword more?"

"Since I learned different worlds can take my magic away, yes. I don't care who you are, a sword through the gut is bad news. I wonder how my father coped."

"He had the staff. That wasn't magic, and he could attack and defend with it. I think he said it was the soul of a *Spirit Energist* that had been placed into the thing. Whatever that was. And he had companions, three of them. Like Inari said, you're alone, and that makes it extra dangerous for you."

"I'm not alone, I have you!"

"While I appreciate the sentiment, I'm in the same boat as you. Without my magic, I'm

just a cat. A smart cat, but in the end, a cat. I can't steal people's powers or become part dragon. I'm not sure what the dog did, I stayed away from her." She shuttered. (Sparkle had *Phobia: Dogs*) "Each person in his team had their strengths, and mostly they worked together well."

"I hear you. Well, leave it for now, until I can talk to Inari. I've been okay with *Invulnerability* going, the penalty isn't any higher for *Avatar*. Plus the intimidation factor, maybe no one will want to mess with a 3m tall giant in armor, carrying a flaming sword!"

The students were now doing battle magic, as it seemed Agnes had relented and admitted it could be useful. So they now split their time between "weapon" training and magic, which Susan approved of. She even sparred with Hiraga that day, both of them using practice weapons, and more for his benefit than hers. But it gave her something to do.

The day after that Susan went in search of Siesta, and offered to help with her duties around the castle in exchange for what she remembered of her great-grandfather.

"I'll come to your room tonight, you don't have to do maid stuff!" she insisted.

"Come to my room tonight? Oh Siesta don't tease me so!" "I'm at loose ends now," Susan protested. "I have the spell I wanted and I don't know what I would research next. Before something else happens I'd like to hear about how he got here, and maybe look into getting home. And won't the day pass a little quicker with some help?"

"Okay," she sighed, then gave a wicked grin. "But you have to look the part."

"Does this mean..." Susan's eyes were wide with hope.

"Come with me!"

Susan gave a squeal of delight and spun around, trying out various poses. "I'm in a maid's uniform! What do you think, Sparkle?"

"Oh, a +2 bonus to your LOOKs checks, at least." Sparkle rolled her eyes and wondered if facepawing was a thing.

"I know, right? Oh man, I wish I could take a picture, this is priceless. I'm going to have to work on a mirror for my room before I take this off." She swished her hips back and forth, making the bottom of the dress sway back and forth. "Shoot, why didn't I think of that before? I could easily make a mirror, it's a solid."

"Not all one piece though."

"True, but I could make the front half of the frame, then the glass on top of that inside a bevel. Then *Create* a highly polished sheet of metal right on top of that. Put regular old glue on the wood part and a final piece of wood as the backing to keep everything from shifting around. It would be passable, if not the prettiest thing you had ever seen. And it could be pretty big, glass for mirrors is pretty thin, so that's not a concern."

"I guess it would work."

"Sure. Now lead on, Siesta. I want to be the best darn maid I can be!"

So Siesta told her about the "dragon" her great-grandfather rode in on, and about the man he said he came with who returned almost immediately. It turned out he got stuck here, and lived out his life in the village Siesta was born in.

"And a good thing too," remarked Susan. "Otherwise you might not exist!"

It had taken him some time to learn the language, and such, but apparently he had a good life, and Siesta was full of stories he had told. Mostly she didn't have the technological background to really understand the things he had talked about, or the details had been blurred with time. (Or he just made crap up.) Nonetheless, she felt she was hearing about a world that someone with a really overactive imagination had made up, even though she had lived somewhere similar all her life.

In the end, Siesta got about 1.5x the work done she normally did (there was some inefficiency explaining things to Susan, and recalling the stories that accounted for .2. The other .3 was doing things in parallel, like serving the food, that couldn't be accelerated) and she was very thankful for the help.

"I might even be able to stop early for the weekend!" she said, looking over the list of

things she was assigned to do that week. "I hope my stories were worth it."

"They were. And being a maid was worth it, too. A lot of people started ordering me around, then freaked out when they saw it was me. They couldn't believe I would become a maid! Maybe it'll help them start thinking of you as a person, not just a person to bark orders to."

"Never happen."

"Yeah, I know. I'm a dreamer. Thanks, Siesta. I'll have Sparkle clean this before I give it back. I really want to try making a mirror before I take it off."

"Can I come? It's not often I get to see a real mirror! Or your magic at work."

"Sure! If you can lead me to some decent glue that'll hold wood together, anyway..."

So after some careful thought, mostly about how the wood might fit together, and some *Augment Skill* magic later, Susan had a rather functional full length mirror in her room. She posed, looking at herself, and Siesta did the same.

"This would sell for a lot of money," she remarked. "And you made it look so easy!"

"Only trouble is, I'm not sure it'll stick around after I leave. Objects I make this way only stick around as long as I'm alive, and I'm not sure being on another world would count as 'alive' here in terms of the spell. That's why I've really only made things for myself, or that I could take with me, like the clothes."

"You made that sword for Hiraga, didn't you?"

"And then improved it. By *Fabricating* it, I've basically made it more real. Theory states it should stick around no matter what, because of the nature of *Fabrication*. That's the hope, anyway." *If not, that blade I made for Hogwarts is long gone by now...*

"Thanks for showing me this, and how you made it. I guess we traded a lot today."

"Sure. Since you're here, want to take this back with you now? I can change out of it."

"Okay."

So Susan stripped and Sparkle cast *Hygene* on it, making it cleaned and pressed. She got dressed for bed and said good night to Siesta, who returned the sentiment and went off down the corridor.

"Seems you've made some friends here after all," remarked Sparkle. "They'll be sad when you leave."

"If I can leave."

"That was a segue, by the way."

"I noticed. Yeah, the news isn't hopeful. I think two people came from Hiriga's Earth, in planes. Probably world war two pilots, given the markings she said were on the 'dragon.' One went back immediately, the other couldn't find the portal again."

"Meaning it's invisible, just a small crack some pilots found by really bad luck, or it opens and closes at random."

"Either is troublesome. I mean if it's in the sky someplace we'll never find it! Especially if we look for it and it isn't open."

"The only way I can see is if we scanned the sky constantly, and observed a slice of weather that didn't match up."

"Right, their weather might be different, greenhouse gasses and whatever. It could be raining but sunny here. Still, how would we find even a plane sized hole in the sky? I was hoping it would be something they stumbled through on foot, and we could just go back there and poke around. No such luck."

"Still, if one gateway existed, perhaps--"

There was a knock on the door.

"Coming," trilled Susan, yanking it open. Agnus stood there, looking worried.

"Oh my. Please, come in!"

"No, I'm not here for that," she said, blushing a little. "I need your help. If you're still willing?"

Susan tenderly touched her earring. "For a friend, anything. Tell me what you need while I change." Susan stripped off her nightgown and pulled out her "stealth suit." "I don't mind if you look," she said with a grin, noticing Agnus looking away.

She cleared her throat. "The queen has gone missing. I'm going to get the authority of Sir Lishman to close the roads while we look for her."

"Missing? Oh no, this is terrible! I really wish I had my scrying magic. No time for wishing though." She pulled on her clothes and started to close the door, Sparkle at her side. "I can get us to town in a flash-" Agnus pushed her back into the room and shut the door behind her.

Oh, I thought we were in a hurry? I suppose there's time for a little-

Agnes put her mouth near Susan's ear. "I have reason to believe Lishman was one of the people involved in burning my village. Are you still willing to go all the way with me?"

Shouldn't we get to first base before going all the- focus, Susan! "I don't go back on my word."

Agnes looked into her eyes a moment, but with a 10 RESolve, Susan didn't show any hesitation. "Okay. Thank you." She pulled the door open again and headed out.

What, not even a little one?

"We can leave from my room, you know," she said, hurrying to catch up. "We don't have to go anywhere."

"I left my rain cloak by the door, and we'll have to get you one."

"Rain?"

"It's raining, can't you hear it?"

Susan listened, but shook her head. "I'm slightly hard of hearing, I only got an 8 on that *Perception* check."

"You say weird things sometimes, you know that?"

"I thought that's why you liked me. Because I wasn't like other girls."

She just gave a slight shake of her head and headed down the stairs. After putting on the rain cloak, Agnus said they would head to the stables to get her horse.

"I'll just let us fly there. It'll be faster. Quieter, too. We won't have to bother with horses."

"You really do things differently, don't you? Okay, have it your way."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* and they stepped through to the city. Sparkle had already changed into her fairy form and was hiding in Susan's pocket. She cast *Flight* on them both, and Agnes sped towards the house on the noble's side of the river.

The rain was really coming down, and even with the cloak, Susan was soaked in minutes. *Why did the queen have to choose tonight to disappear?*

"Wait here," Agnes said when they got to the house. "Out of sight."

"You aren't taking him out?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. We need more evidence, and there's more than one element at play here. The queen wants that one. I want him."

"You got it. But if you're not out in five minutes, I'm coming in after you."

"Better make it ten, he'll probably make me wait out of spite, coming to see him like this."

"Got it."

Susan hid around the corner, and watched as Agnes went inside.

"Think she'll be okay?" asked Sparkle.

"She's got her pistol and her sword. Plus, it's been like twenty years. This guy probably doesn't even remember the incident. But listen for a gunshot away, I won't hear that sort of weapon, not in this downpour anyway."

"You got it."

Moments later she emerged, and hustled back over to Susan. "Now we wait. If I'm right, he's going to leave in a few minutes now that he knows the queen is missing."

The two hunkered down in the rain to wait. But rather than him leaving, another man arrived. He knocked on the door, and spoke to the man inside for a moment. As he rode off, Agnes rose into the air and motioned Susan to follow.

"He won't dirty his hands, or go out in this rain. That's the man we'll have to follow. Come on."

Susan rose after her, and they kept him in sight, hovering about the road.

He crossed the river into town, and made sure no one was following him. At least, he looked around, but didn't think to look up. Susan and Agnes clearly saw him enter a building from their vantage point on the roof of the place across the street.

"Let's go," she said, dropping down out of the sky. This startled someone in the street, who jumped back.

"Susan?" cried a familiar voice. "What are you doing out here?"

"Louise? How in the world did you get here?"

"No time for that, have you seen Hiraga?"

"He's missing too?"

"Too?"

"No time for that, the man I'm trailing went inside. Wait here a minute. Come on, Susan."

"Right!"

Despite Louise's protests, Susan and Agnes barged into the place, which turned out to be an Inn. She briefly saw the man as he turned the corner, going upstairs, and Agnes wasted no time using *Flight* as a "jump" to make it up to the second floor silently. Susan followed.

The man knocked on a door at the end of the hall, and a man with a walrus like mustache answered. Susan couldn't make out what they were saying, but she relied on Sparkle to, who was poking her head out of the cloak and looking that way.

Susan felt herself making a LUCK check, of all things, and got an eleven.

One from max, she thought to herself. *That's got to be enough to avoid whatever-*

"Achoo!" Susan froze. *Have I ever sneezed before? And what does LUCK...*

Suddenly, she found herself being thoroughly kissed, pinned against the wall, as the man they were trailing walked past them. He smirked and nodded his head, probably thinking about heading back to his bunk.

So if I'd have gotten a fifteen would she have torn some of my clothes off, too?

With the man down the stairs, Agnus drew back again, with an odd expression on her face. She shook it off and hopped down the stairs again, bursting out the door and looking for the man.

"He went that way," Louise said, pointing. "Now will one of you tell me what's going on?"

"Can you give her the ability to fly as well?" Agnus asked.

"Sure. Give me a second." Susan dropped *Flight* on them and recast it, getting all three of them.

"We're following that man. I bet he's headed to the theater, and that's where we're going. Come on."

All three rose into the air and took off after him.

"Wait, so she's not missing?" asked Susan, floating over the theater.

"Do you really think we would lose track of the queen?"

"So it's all a plot to expose the people we're tracking now?" asked Louise.

"Exactly. I'm sorry to have misled you, Susan. The queen said you would help when she explained her plan, even not knowing about it. Seems you've made an impression on her, as well." She went on quickly. "But also said we couldn't tell anyone, and that included you. I trusted you, and her highness did too, I want you to know that."

"It's okay, I understand. What's our next move?"

"Come with me. Louise, here's a ticket. It's a little damp, but so is everything around here. Slip in and wait for our signal. You'll know it when you hear it."

"Got it. Hiraga is there too, right?"

"He better be."

"Okay. I'll see you when it's all over."

"Where are we going?" Susan asked as Louise dropped out of the sky and went inside.

"There's a secret tunnel under the theater I know about for some reason. We're going there. Just in case the bastard tries to escape, we'll be waiting for him."

And so Susan and Agnes waited in the semi-darkness and silence. Light was being cast by their swords, Susan's that she had brought to her side with *Retrieval* and Agnes' which of course she had with her at all times. Both were under *Avatar of War*, and stood roughly 3m tall with gleaming armor.

"And we're immune to fire like this?" asked Agnes.

"Won't even touch you," replied Susan. "You should be a little faster in combat, too. Your sword does extra damage as well, fire damage I'm afraid to say. Sorry, it was meant for Hiriga, not you."

"I'm satisfied to turn that man's weapon against him."

"Sounds fair to me." They waited a few moments in silence. "So, was that your first?"

"First what?"

"Kiss, of course!"

"I am not talking about that now!"

"Oh, okay. I just thought you should know, it was very nice."

"I'm really glad you can't see my face right now."

"Will you two cut it out?" snapped Sparkle. "Flirt later."

"Sorry, mom!"

Both chuckled.

Some time later, they saw a flash of light descend from the tunnel above, and a magic user dropped lightly to the ground. He froze when he saw the two armored figures standing there.

"And so the rat scurries away," said Agnes, bringing her blade up. "That means the queen's plan worked. And now you're mine. I can repay you for my village."

"Village? Wait, is that Agnes? I wondered, since you asked about it earlier." He seemed to take in the fact she was towering over him. "How in the world-"

"Never mind that. Any last words?"

"How about you spare me in exchange for information? You know that record you're looking for? I know where it is."

"Keep talking. Every second is another second you get to live."

"It's hidden in the vault under the magic academy. You can find out who did the deed, rather than just who gave the orders. You want them, right?"

"I want all those responsible dead. But I do thank you for the information. They will soon join you in death."

"Not if I take you down first!"

A massive explosion rocked the tunnel, but Agnes just jumped right through it and stabbed the guy through the chest.

"No way!" he managed, as his clothes caught fire and he slumped to the ground. He didn't even scream as the blade was drawn back and he started to burn.

With the threat gone, Susan's magic receded and the armor around them vanished. Agnes sheathed her sword and walked away, not even looking back.

"Come on, drinks are on me."

Susan didn't think making any flippant comments was really appropriate, so she just walked by Agnes' side, arms almost touching. Sparkle looked back at the dead man, then at Susan, deep in thought.

Concerns

Time: The next day

Place: Susan's room

"Before we go down to breakfast, can we talk for a bit?" asked Sparkle.

Susan froze, her hand on the doorknob. *Okay, this is new. Sparkle never wants to 'just talk.'*

"Sure," she replied, letting her hand fall and turning around. "What's on your mind?"

Sparkle stared at her for a moment from the desk where she was sitting. "Honestly, I'm becoming a little concerned."

"About what?"

"Well..." Sparkle seemed very hesitant. "About your recent behavior."

"What do you mean?" Susan was nearly offended.

"I'm just not sure I like where you're heading right now. And I think, if you take a step back, you won't either."

"Oh, this should be good," said Susan, crossing her arms over her chest. "Please, enlighten me."

"There's this new focus on combat, which I have to question."

"We've always been combat focused, I mean why do you think I made the ring?"

"Yes, you made the ring so you could stay *out* of combat. Same with the *Ally* spell. But now you're learning how to use a sword? I mean the gun kind of made sense. Tom wouldn't have expected that. But now you seem almost eager for personal combat."

"It's just being practical. I told you, if we find ourselves in a world where none of my magic works, I want to be ready."

"Is that all it is? You didn't bat an eye when those soldiers died during that attack on the church. You didn't even try to help them, or even feel bad afterwards. I thought maybe it was shock or something, but you just moved on."

"What else could I do? Feeling bad for them, who chose to follow a traitor like Wales, isn't going to help anything."

"What could you do? How about that knife you strap to your leg every morning? One quick plunge into each one and they might have lived! Run away with the others, gone back to being farmers or whatever."

"I-" Susan hesitated, face going pale. "I never even considered it. It's like I just sort of... forgot about it. You don't think The Darkness can actually make me forget things, do you?"

"If so, that's even scarier than I thought. But let's move to what happened last night. You just stood there, no in fact you encouraged Agnes to murder that man in cold blood. You gave her the *Avatar* spell, knowing she would just off the guy."

"That's on her. I can't control her actions."

"But you didn't even suggest another course of action! Shouldn't that man have gotten a trial? You were all about how the magical world didn't really bother with evidence gathering and such back home. But here, because a cute girl had her village burned twenty years ago, you're okay with it?"

"She needs closure to move on."

"Closure? Is that what they're calling it now? How do you know that village wasn't infected with some kind of plague? That the people responsible don't hate themselves for what they did, even today? She was just a child, she wouldn't have understood what was going on."

"But she must have looked into it since then."

"I hope so. But she still chose to murder a man! Didn't you always take a different path? Think back, like say when those bullies attacked you by the lake. What did you do to them?"

"Snapped their wands, gave them a good talking to."

"Right, but you didn't kill them. You gave them another chance. An out. Then later, when you learned *Dead Magic*, you dealt with people, evil people, by taking their magic away. Severe, but acceptable, because they were still alive at the end."

"I don't have that luxury here."

"But you still have other options, lots of them! Okay, you lost three useful planets. Your response was to escalate to killing magic, rather than look into alternatives?"

"I haven't had a lot of down time, you know. And you learned *Elemental Line (Wind)* didn't you? It was you who killed those men, not me."

"I'm your *Companion*. To a certain extent I'm an extension of your will. You want me to do something, I typically go along with it. Anyway, this isn't about me, it's about your behavior. I mean let's go back to Agnes for a second. What are your intentions there? To string her along, seduce her, and then just leave again?"

"No. She just needs a friend, someone who understands her."

"But you like her."

"Sure, she's a great person."

"Is she? How do you know? You just met her, and most of her life has been training to track down these fire mages she talked about."

"Okay, so she has the *Lost Loved Ones* or *Tragedy* background cards. Or maybe both! And maybe she has the *Obsessed* weakness. We don't know."

"Exactly! You don't know. But there you are, making moon eyes at her, and flirting, and I didn't see you struggling against her kissing you last night. Did Luna mean so little to you?"

"I might never see her again! This may be where I spend the rest of my life!"

"And that brings us to the main thrust of my argument. Who is our enemy?"

"The Darkness. You know that."

"I wanted to make sure you remembered. Tell me, if you were The Darkness, how would you make sure a potential threat was out of the way?"

"Why don't you tell me, if you're so smart?"

"Exactly what's happened. Bring you to a place you can't easily escape from. Dangle some people in your way that need help, because he knows you can't resist that. Sweeten the pot with a girl who could fall for you. The only girl around who might fall for you, as everyone else seems to be focused on Hiraga, if you hadn't noticed. And don't forget, that creature is inside you, too. He tried to corrupt you once. Luna seemed to act as a stabilizing force against it, which is when he started talking to you directly. You think he wouldn't try again? Now that Luna is gone, I would certainly try again, if I were him. And here you are, getting more violent, forgetting about Luna and going after another girl... there's more than one way to influence you. If he can get you to fall in love with this girl, you might not want to leave even if you find the opportunity."

Susan seemed to hesitate. "Don't be ridiculous, I still have to find my father, even if I did give up on Luna."

"Maybe it's hoping you'll decide your father isn't worth it. That your love for this girl is stronger than the bonds of family, especially as you've never met the man. If it can influence you enough to forget the *Alleviation* knife, what else can it do to you?"

"I... no. No, that's crazy. My father fell in love, and he still left. I was the result. To avoid feeling for the people I help is to deny myself. To deny him, and the sacrifice he made leaving my mother and me behind." She collapsed heavily to the floor, staring into space. "I can't not feel, can I? Can't I make friends? Is it my destiny to wander the worlds, alone, forever?"

Sparkle shook her head. "I know, it's not easy to consider all the angles. And I'm not Luna, I don't see things the way she does. But I see you changing, and I have a duty to point that out to you. No one knows you like I do, because I've been with you your whole life. I know you're trying to find yourself. To figure out the best magic, the best path to take to help people with the tremendous gifts you've been given. I'm just saying, *be careful*. The Darkness is in you, and with your power that makes you very dangerous if you should go bad."

Susan's face hardened. "I can't second guess every decision I make, I'd never do anything!"

"I know. But do you admit the danger is there?"

"I... guess I have no choice. After what I now know happened."

"Then I've said my piece. You're the one in charge. I'll follow what you say and do what you want. I just hope I'm not going to watch you become Tom in the process."

Susan closed her eyes. "Sparkle? If you do see me becoming Tom, I want your word

that you will take me out. You're right, that my magic is dangerous. And if I keep going on adventures and getting XP, I'll only become more so. I'll try to rely on your judgment, but you have your orders if I get... out of hand."

Sparkle jumped down and padded silently over to her, bumping her head against her knee. "You have my word."

"Thank you," she said, picking Sparkle up and hugging her. "And thank you, for looking out for me. And if you see me forgetting things, don't hesitate to speak up."

"Of course. What are *Companions* for?"

Susan opened her eyes. "Okay, after breakfast I'll start researching a new spell. Something I can use like *Hypnotic Field*, that can take out a bunch of enemies without harming them."

"Good girl."

That afternoon, Agnes came and sat down next to Susan. She was eating with Louise and Hiraga, not doing much talking as she was thinking about what Sparkle had said earlier.

"It seems I need to call upon you again, Susan," said Agnes hesitantly. "Sorry if I'm a bother to you."

"Whatever I can do to help, of course."

"Thank you. It concerns the information we got last night."

"Oh, about the vault under the academy?"

"Exactly. As a reward for my help last night, the queen has given me permission to seek out the records of the event. However, the principal claims he never got any documentation about it, so he won't release the seals on the door. I wondered if your magic could help me?"

Susan considered. "I do know *Unlock*, sadly that's a Uranus spell, and I don't have access to that branch of magic here. Nor can I *Phase* you through, because that's Pluto. Huh, wonder if I could *Telesummon* a door off its hinges? Wait, no that only works on people. I mean *Retrieval*. I could try that, but it would mean rebuilding the whole door later." *There's an interesting idea for a Mercury spell. A short range teleport you don't need to see the destination to go to. Of course Phase would work just as well, but Sparkle was just talking about alternate spells. And I wouldn't have to learn it, just research it. I wouldn't be using something like that in combat. I wonder.* "If there was a crack in the door I could probably *Shrink* us enough to fit through it, burn it down with *Combust* or just smash it down with *Avatar* going. But again, that means rebuilding the door."

"Oh, I see. What about you, Louise?"

"I would be happy to blow it up for you!"

"Ah. Well, do you know anyone who would help us?"

She considered. "My sister might. She's a pretty good mage, and not above breaking a rule now and then."

"Would you mind asking her for me?"

"Not at all. I'll let you know this afternoon."

"Thanks. I do want you to come, though, Susan. In case she can't we can discuss the other options."

"Suits me."

Later that day, the entire group met up in the girl's bathroom, and opened the storage closet at the back. A fake wall was pushed out of the way, then replaced, and the pair went down a winding set of steps to a hallway.

That's certainly an odd parallel to my world. What is it with things being hidden in girl's bathrooms?

The air was stale and dusty, and the lantern Agnes was carrying cast a dim bubble of light around them. Oddly, no spider webs or tiny rodents were seen, making Susan wonder if this place had been magically proofed against such things somehow.

The hallway was blocked by a door made of heavy stone, and some odd designs on raised plates could be seen.

"Here it is," said Agnes. "See what you can do."

I just hope the queen actually did give her permission for this. I guess I should have asked...

Susan felt around with *Magic Sense*, getting a 16 on her first try. While she did that, Louise's sister, Eleanor, looked at them through what seemed to be a pair of opera glasses. Having apparently deduced the "combination" she pointed her wand and basically demanded, in what appeared to be English, the locks be unlocked. To Susan's surprise, they sprang open, and Eleanor looked pretty smug.

Okay, what was that? That was no incantation, I've heard them practicing battle magic. They're like Harry, they say a bizarre phrase and magic happens. Those phrases aren't translated when I hear them, they seem to be gibberish. But she said something in her native language and that worked. Weird.

In any case, the door opened and the group continued. The hallway went for some distance, then opened up to a bridge over a chasm that the light couldn't reach the bottom of.

"Don't use magic, and don't try to take anything out," warned Eleanor, pointing to a warning written above the door. "Seems like something bad might happen if we do."

"No danger of that with me," remarked Agnes. "Come on. And put those wands away!"

And so the group entered what could only be called a library of forbidden knowledge, and the group set about searching for the record Agnes was looking for. Naturally, they found it after some time, and even more naturally, the page containing the name had been torn out of the book.

"Maybe the page is still around here somewhere." Agnes frantically started looking for loose papers. Susan put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on. Anyone who tore that page out wouldn't have just left it here for someone to find. It was probably removed before being placed here, as the magic would have kept it from working otherwise. I'm sorry, but it seems you'll have to look elsewhere for your answers."

Agnes looked about to argue, but then deflated. "You're right. I'm sorry to have dragged everyone down here. Let's go back."

I don't know if I should be relieved I didn't have to talk her out of killing someone else, like I should have before, or sad because now it seems she'll never get closure. Maybe if I'm really bored for a week or two I'll research the Question spell and get the name for her that way.

Two weeks passed.

Susan completed her research for the wide area sleep spell, under the *Moon* domain to make it extra effective. As *Moon* dealt mainly with poisons, darkness, and the senses, the spell created a volume of mist that when breathed in, dulled the senses and put people into darkness- in other words, sleep. She called it *Sleep Mist* for obvious reasons.

And just like that, it came in handy.

Susan came awake to see a scruffy looking man in her bedroom, holding a mace and looking down at her. He had apparently been shaking her, trying to get her to wake up.

"Took you long enough to wake up!" he complained. "Get up! Move!"

Susan blinked at him. "Huh?" she managed, blearily.

"Get up!" he shouted, tossing her sheet aside. He stared, and Susan knew what that LUCK check had been for the night before. She had gotten an eleven, one from max, and decided to sleep naked because it was so hot. The man was distracted, and Susan took advantage of it.

"*Thrust*," she cast, using six energy and taking the two segments. Magic swirled around the man, but he dug his heels in and didn't go anywhere. Susan even knew she had new cards, and spent her *I don't think so* to make him reroll, but he got even higher.

"What was that?" said the man, eyeing her suspiciously. "Oh, forget it. He won't mind just one."

He shot fire at her from his mace.

"*Deflection*," she cast, again using six energy. This succeeded, a seventeen versus a twelve, and the flame harmlessly bounced off the swirling light that appeared before Susan.

You know, she thought in the timeless space between one action and another, I originally didn't want to learn something like Magic Reflection because I didn't know what sort of casting check other people might be capable of. But Deflection works just fine, so maybe I was worried for nothing. It would be nice to just have this guy's fire turn on him. Susan succeeded on her *Magic Combat* check, because despite his higher "rating" in the skill, he wasn't that bright. She knew they would act simultaneously, and decided to try a variation on that very idea.

Not that this was supposed to be a combat spell, but that's what energy is for, right?

She cast *Teleportal*, putting one end in front of herself and the other to the side of the man. As the difficulty of this spell was the distance, and it was less than a meter away, that meant she had to roll a seven or better. Technically a six, but one energy went into the spell, so only nine would be used as extra power, leaving her a minus one to the ten segment spellcasting check. She got an 11, he got a twelve, so Susan spent 1XP for a bonus and the portal shimmered into existence before the flame could hit her. The flame then came out from behind him, where the other side of the *Teleportal* had been placed. It hit the man's body, catching him by surprise and setting him on fire. He failed both his LUCK check and his RESolve check, so not only did he take 10 points of fire damage to the body (randomly struck) he started taking additional damage and dropped his mace, freaking out as the flames climbed up his clothes.

Susan got a 16 on her RESolve check not to freak out, but was still unsure what to do. She couldn't put his flames out, *Elemental Conjure (Water)* was a Neptune spell, and she couldn't do that here. Nor did she know *Extinguish*.

Wait a second!

She took the full time this time, creating another *Teleportal*, this time above the lake she dumped the water into from the nature spirit. She rolled max, and a hole appeared, leading to water. She shoved him through and he splashed into the lake, dousing the fire. *Hopefully he has presence of mind enough to swim to safety, but he's really not my problem anymore. Sparkle would be pleased, I could have just let him burn. Where is Sparkle, anyway?*

Susan hurriedly pulled on her "stealth suit," grabbed her sword, and peaked out. The hallway was empty, and she wondered if this was some kind of attack directed only at her, or if others were woken up but had left already. *I do take longer to wake up, it's true.* She crept down to the next door and found it opened, with no one inside. She checked the other doors on her floor, and they were also empty.

Where's Hiraga? I would have thought he would be out here kicking butt and taking names. She checked his room, but didn't find any corpse, or even evidence he had been there that evening.

Troublesome.

Susan hurried outside, and met up with the other soldiers in the courtyard.

"Susan!" exclaimed Agnes, running to give her a hug. "I shouldn't have been worried, but I was."

"He did take me two whole actions to take out. Stupid spell resistance, but I suppose I'd be grateful for it if it was being cast on... are you crying?"

"No! I'm just grateful you're all right." Agnes wiped her eyes. "Anyway, we've been attacked, as you can probably guess. They're moving the students into the great hall for some reason."

"Not killing them?"

Agnes shook her head. "No, hostages."

"Excellent. I have the perfect spell to use once everyone's assembled. Come on."

Susan and the other soldiers made their way to the window, where they peeked in. It seemed the attackers, which seemed to number only eight, had separated those they had found. Probably to make it easier to watch them. The maids and other staff were being guarded by two between the center and left tables. The principal, staff, and a few other adults were being covered by four men, one in a purple cape. They were between the center and

right tables. To the far right two more covered the students.

“Three simultaneous castings? No problem! Just wish I knew where-”

“Want some help?” asked Sparkle, having made her LUCK check to be there on time.

“Sorry, I was out prowling and these guys attacked. Took care of one, boy was he surprised to be fighting a cat! Not that I would call what we did fighting, exactly.”

Susan looked, and she was obviously *Accelerated*. “Did you kill him?”

“I *Thrust* him pretty hard, but I doubt that finished him off. I figured getting to you was more important.”

“Okay. You learned the new sleep spell, right?”

“Sure did. Figured it could come in handy, being able to make areas that much bigger.”

“Good call. This time though I want you to assist me. I don’t want these guys making their CONstitution check and breaking out of it. They might hurt the hostages. I want three bubbles of the stuff, by the center of the maids, centered on purple cloak, and centered on the students. That should get all of them in one shot.”

“Purple cloak? You mean the guy with the funny mace?”

“That’s the one. We’ll take the full time, they won’t know what my magic means, and it’s less than two seconds. They won’t reach the edge in time.”

“You got it. On three?”

Susan nodded. “One... Two... Three.”

Both started casting, getting a combined total of 34 on the spell. (hey, it was Moon, so it’s doubled) As the radius was “Moon rating in meters” and Susan’s effective Moon rating was currently twenty one, just one casting would have been enough to fill basically the whole room. Everyone inside slumped over, and Susan nodded, satisfied.

“That was easy.”

She waited a few minutes to make sure they were all deeply asleep, then ended the spell and told the others to quietly make their way inside and start tying the bad guys up.

“But get their stupid focus away from them. Their staff or mace or whatever they do magic with!” She said when they looked at her funny.

“Oh, right.”

19

Sleep

Time: Several days later

Place: Susan's room

And so, the would be terrorists, who had planned to force the queen into something or other by holding the school hostage, fell without bloodshed. Having their wands returned, the staff quickly tied up the ruffians and floated them away to the dungeons without even waking them. Everyone went back to bed, but scout parties were sent to make sure no more forces were in wait in the area, just in case this first attempted failed.

None were found.

Susan spent several days researching *Relocation*, just in case something like that came in handy at some point in the future. She was woken up that morning by Sparkle, and there was a knocking on her door.

She blearily opened it, and Agnes was standing there.

"Come with me!" she said, without preamble.

"Can I get dressed first, at least?" asked Susan, rubbing her eye.

"No, I mean, I'm being sent to the front lines with her majesty. Today. This morning, in fact. Will you come?"

"This is a bit sudden!" Susan remarked, waking up a little more. "Why couldn't you have told me this, I don't know, last night? Or two days ago?"

Agnes shook her head. "I kept trying. I didn't know how to tell you. But I made up my mind. Please, I want you by my side. If not for me, then help me protect the queen. You know her and respect her, don't you? She's going to the front, she could be killed. You could prevent that."

"I suppose it's only temporary, not that I've gotten many answers here about getting back on my own mission."

"You'll come?" Agnes grinned widely.

Susan shook her head in mock resignation. "How can I say no to you? Let me get dressed and pack some stuff. Where should I meet you?"

"Out front. Thank you for agreeing. Thank you so much." She turned to go.

"You could stay and watch, if you wanted." *Shoot, there I go again. That is just the sort of thing I was always doing back at Hogwarts. Saying stuff before I thought it over. If I didn't know better, I would say I had some kind of weakness that makes me do that, but I don't, right?*

Agnes laughed. "Win this war for me, and I'll... I'll... be your love slave forever!"

"Promise!?"

"You have my word as a soldier."

"I'm holding you to that!"

Agnes just laughed harder and walked away.

Dressed, sword and bag at her side, Susan went to knock on Hiraga's door to tell him she was going away, "to the front" apparently. He didn't answer. *Does he have Deep Sleeper too?* She quickly made her way to Louise's room, but she also didn't answer, making Susan a little worried. *They're probably just at breakfast. I'll swing by there on the way out.*

But breakfast wasn't being served yet, and Susan ran to the front of the castle to tell Agnes she couldn't leave without finding out what happened to the pair.

She needn't have bothered. Standing with the force getting ready to leave was a sleepy Hiraga and a Louise that looked pensive.

"So you are coming," she remarked, looking over at Susan.

"I'm just glad I was given the choice," she muttered, shooting a look at Agnes. "As this was a sort of last minute thing."

"Oh, I thought you would have been asked by the queen directly, that's why I didn't mention anything. If I had known-

Susan waved her off. "It's fine. I would have tracked you down regardless. Are you both sure about this, though? We're heading to a major battle zone here."

"I have to do my part to help the kingdom," Louise maintained. "While I may only have one spell... oh, that reminds me."

"All right, move out!" shouted Agnes, mounting her horse.

"Guess I'll show you in a second. Come on." Louise and Hiraga climbed onto nearby horses. "Oh, shoot, we didn't get a horse for you!"

"Where are we going? If it's someplace I've been..."

Louise shook her head. "I don't think so. It's near the capital, South Gotha."

"Ah well." She cast *Flight* on herself, and rose into the air. She kept her speed way down and paced the group, sighing with how slowly they were probably going to travel. "So what did you want to say?"

Louise got out a leather bound volume, and handed it over to Susan. She turned it this way and that, looking it over. "What's this?"

"Her majesty gave it to me the last time we saw each other. She said it was a book with void spell incantations in it, but so far it's been blank. I wondered what you could make of it."

"Tough to say now," replied Susan, flying backwards and opening the book to shield it from the wind. Indeed, the pages were all blank. "I'll take a look when we next stop." She handed it back.

"Okay."

They stopped for lunch, and Louise dug the book out again. Susan did a *Magic Sense* on it, getting a nine. Sparkle got an eleven, and between the two of them decided it did feel like the type of magic Louise did when she made things explode. She handed it back.

"I don't think she was mistaken. There is magic in there, connected to Void. The book I lost access to when I came here may be similar. I could ask it for spells and the next day it would have them inside. Maybe it's similar, you have to need a spell before one shows up. Trouble is I don't know what you would ask it for, because I don't know what 'element' Void is. Obviously destruction, blowing things up kinda destroys them. But there must be more you can do. I don't know, ask it for things mages around here can't do and see what it turns up."

"Okay, I'll think about what to ask. Thanks."

"Sure!"

After several rough days of travel the group arrived at the town. Susan had thought about going back to the school to sleep at night, but decided if the musket squad was going to be out here in the wilderness, so would she. Even Louise didn't seem to complain too much, and they neared the city.

Anrietta greeted everyone warmly.

"Thank you for coming, Susan. I didn't ask you to get involved because this isn't your fight. But I guess you came anyway."

"Agnes asked me. She wasn't sure if she could protect you as well as I could. Plus she said if I ended the war, she would do something nice for me."

"Oh? What's that?"

Both looked over at her, and she was pointedly not looking back at them. "Just a personal matter between the two of us. Nothing to worry about."

"Could you? End the war I mean?"

Susan considered. "Tricky. Given time I could research something like *Elemental Storm* and rout any size army. Short of that, with just what I know now? Hey Hiraga, how do you feel about taking on an entire army with just the two of us?"

"Would you have your fire soldiers going, and that *Avatar* spell of yours?"

"Naturally."

"We could take them."

Susan laughed. "You think? Well, anyway, I've recently been reminded that taking lives may not be the best habit to get into. I've been considering those words, and destroying lives

is rather final. It's sort of the lazy solution, the easy way out. Any fool can kill, but to humiliate your opponent? Sap their will so they never want to fight again? That's the best way."

"I don't think that's what I said at all!" piped up Sparkle.

"Okay, I was paraphrasing. The point is, if I can't come up with a better solution for this war than just slaughtering thousands, what good am I?"

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Depends. What's the situation here?"

"Several days ago this town was occupied by enemy forces. They pulled back and allowed us to retake it. We think we know why, now. According to our scouts, tens of thousands of soldiers and mages will be descending upon this town once again in mere days. Possibly as early as tomorrow."

"Basically, they didn't want to be boxed in by the town, and retreated, waiting for their reinforcements?"

"We think so."

"How many troops do you have standing by here? Can I get more here with

Teleportal?"

Anrietta shook her head. "Not enough, and probably not. We're spread pretty thin. But I don't want to abandon this town again, not after we just retook it. How would that make me look, as a queen? Going back and forth, not being able to hold onto territory I was able to take."

"But how would it look if you died here? What would happen to your kingdom?"

"Dying for my subjects? They would fight twice as hard in the future because of it."

"I suppose that's possible. Let's make sure that doesn't happen, so we don't have to find out which of us is right."

"Deal. What's your idea?"

"Depends. How much rope do you have?"

Susan asked for a piece of paper, and started sketching out some circles. "The spell I used to put the men to sleep back at the academy can be made 24m across, using just my base energy. I can cast it 16m away, so putting it at the maximum range I'll be 4m from the affected area. Taking the full time they should drop instantly, given it's a Moon spell and I'm at twice potency for that planet. At just a little over a second per casting, taking the full time doesn't concern me.

"However, it still costs me energy to cast. That means I can cast the spell about eighty times in a row before I go unconscious. As I'll want *Avatar* going it'll be a bit lower. In any case, Hiraga and I will be armored up and waiting for the first troops to arrive. I'll put a 24m swath of them to sleep. At this point, as many people as possible will rush out and disarm them. Hopefully they can be tied up at the same time, depending on how quickly you can do that. I'll want a steady stream of weapons flowing away from the battlefield, carried by anyone and everyone we can get to do the job. I'll move up as the army marches forward and repeat the sleep spell so the first ones don't get woken up. Repeat eighty times.

"Hiraga, it's your job to protect me so I can keep casting the sleep spell. I'll have my blade out, and I'll defend myself, but I'm looking to you to keep anything off me. The more enemy soldiers I put to sleep, the less our side has to fight through."

"I'll be right at your side," he promised.

"As we go, any forces you can muster, Anrietta, will be hitting them from the flanks. Mages and archers will probably tend to clump up, so I'll be able to put large groups asleep and keep your forces safe. With the demoralizing tactic of huge areas of soldiers dropping at once, I think it'll be a rout before long. With the enemy soldiers disarmed they won't be able to fight, and will be forced to surrender. Strip them and march them back where they came from, in shame. Tell whoever sent them they can have their soldiers back, but if they try anything like this again, their soldiers will just disappear instead.

"If that doesn't discourage war in your kingdom in the future, I don't know what will. Then have your own mages start researching a similar sleep spell so you can do this in future yourself. Thoughts?"

“You would just stand out there, unprotected?” asked Anrietta. “You’ll be slaughtered by arrows or spells! A bow can shoot way further than 24m.”

“Sure, but an arrow pierce metal twice as tough as your best steel? I don’t think so. You haven’t seen the spell, but Agnes here has.”

“It’s pretty impressive. If she says not to worry, then don’t worry.”

“I guess you know your magic best. I’ll have this information told to the townspeople. If they want to help disarm the sleeping enemy, I will welcome them. Tell them I myself will be fighting at their side. Also have them bring any and all rope they can lay hands on. Susan, if you could open a portal to the towns you have been to, I will have agents gathering rope there as well. Also more mages, possibly even from the school, as even an untrained mage can manage a simple rope trick.”

“They have been training, but to put those girls on the battlefield?” asked Agnes.

“Guess we can see how good a trainer you really are,” joked Susan.

“I’m sure they’ll do just fine.”

And so the town got ready. Stockpiles of rope were created, and many of the men from the village said they would be honored to fight beside the queen. Many of the women said that as well, but they were sent in the opposite direction with the children of the village, an equally important task.

About a third of the girls from the academy volunteered, including Kirche and Charlotte, who Susan greeted warmly. “No rushing off,” she told them. “Your dragon isn’t any more invincible than you, and I don’t want you getting killed out there. Disarm and enchant only!”

Charlotte nodded, but Kirche fumed.

And so it was the night before the battle. The current estimate of troop movements put them arriving in about twenty hours. In other words, just about sundown.

Great, we’ll have the sun in our eyes when they attack. Someone planned this well.

Susan, with her 10 RESolve and *Overconfidence*, had no trouble falling asleep. Pity her, for because of her *Deep Sleeper*, she didn’t feel when someone slipped into bed next to her. A person in search of a little closeness before the coming battle, who put her arms around her and wondered if this odd girl was going to her death despite her confidence in her magic. But she did snuggle closer, and dreamt nice dreams about worlds without war.

The next day, Susan refused most requests that involved magic, saying she wanted to have as much energy as she could for the coming fight. *If ever there was time I missed Energy Drain, this would be it. With the energy from even half the townspeople here, I could probably cover the entire land in sleep mist and end this war without a single death.*

Was my coming here no accident? Is Inari trying to tell me something? To be creative, like I’m doing now, and rely on others? Rather than just throwing energy at the problems in my way? I really wish you weren’t such a trickster, Inari. Maybe you could have just, I don’t know, given me a powerpoint presentation on the subject?

And so, with the enemy army in sight and the queens forces in place, Susan took a deep breath and stepped up to Hiraga and Louise.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready!” Hiraga confirmed.

“Good luck, you two,” said Louise sadly. “I wish I could be of more help.”

“In a war where we want to kill everyone, you would be. But killing that many people... I don’t know what it would do to you. If we do get overrun, though, it falls to you and the others that are back at the hospital they’ve set up. Don’t allow them a single step they don’t pay for.”

She nodded. “I won’t.”

She hustled off, and Susan turned back to Hiraga.

“Two castings of *Avatar of War*, coming up.”

“Three, actually, if you don’t mind,” said Sparkle.

“Are you sure? I thought you might want to hang back, maybe do some healing at the hospital. I don’t mind if you want to protect Louise.”

Sparkle shook her head. “My place is at *your* side. Especially if something goes wrong and you need *Acceleration*. I don’t have your energy, but I know the sleep spell. Even I could turn the tide of battle, you know.”

“Okay, but stick close. Even being small and armored, it’s still going to be dangerous for someone your size.”

“Who said I was sticking with this size? *Shape-shift*.” Sparkle became a small mountain lion, currently -1 size modifier, or about half as big as a person.

“Oh, as you grow another size modifier, you’ll be human sized and armored. Good idea!”

“Thank you.”

Susan cast, using the extra time and minimum energy to get a 10 rating for the spell, with three targets. She did lift a busted up sword and a burning torch, the enhancer for the spell. That gave them both an effective rating of 12, so hopefully if it worked the same for him, his difficulty to be hit went up by that amount. With Susan’s *Passive Dodge* against arrows at a 9, an archer would have roll better than a 20 (she was +1 size) to bypass the armor and hit her. Possible, with energy, but what archer was putting energy into each arrow, when they had forty or fifty arrows to put downfield at a time? Not one, that’s who.

She drew her now +1 sized katana and it was sheathed in flame, and she noticed Sparkle’s claws were similarly alight. She laughed. “You’re upping our intimidation checks, that’s for sure,” she remarked. “I feel powerful,” Sparkle admitted. “I can see what you see in it.”

They started forward.

The line of soldiers stretched back quite a ways. But they were marching, and in formation, at that.

“I was pretty nervous a minute ago, but now suddenly I’m not,” Hiraga remarked.

“The spell makes you immune to ‘moral effects.’ Facing down an entire army would count.”

“Oh.”

The leading edge of the marching soldiers took in the three enormous figures before them. Two were human, but no human ever stood so tall. No armor ever flashed so brightly in the setting sun. No animal like the one that stood by their side, claws dribbling flame like water, had ever been known. They seemed confused. Did they attack? No other forces could be seen, did these two believe they could fight the entire army?

Suddenly someone must have shouted orders from the back, and weapons were raised. A cry went up, and they began to run, bloodlust taking over, months of training and preparation bringing them to this moment. A moment they knew they could win, and add this kingdom to the glory of their-

They fell asleep, faceplanting into the ground and losing their grip on their weapons.

One down, seventy three more to go.

20

Victory

Time: The next day

Place: The palace

And in the end, Susan's plan came off perfectly. Because honestly, if one person (Hiraga) in the original timeline can break the enemy line and kill that number of soldiers, that same person can do it while revved up with Susan's magic. Both Hiraga and Sparkle focused not on killing their foes, but smashing their weapons so they could no longer fight. Seeing a giant moving about the battlefield, feeling the heat of the weapon it wielded as it tore the sword out of your hand? These were enough to demoralize the toughest of... peasant. Fire spells washing over them, leaving them unharmed frightened the mages, and Susan put a significant portion of the enemy army to sleep right there on the battlefield.

Plus Anrietta was there with her forces, driving those who did not get caught in the mists back with deadly magic and arrows and bullets. The death toll was high, but not on the side of good, and when the retreat sounded, the cheer that went up almost woke up those sleeping on the battlefield a hundred meters away.

Almost.

Susan's conscience was clear. She had enabled a great victory for the kingdom, and did it under her own terms. She hadn't just stood on a mountainside and called down fire or acid upon the advancing army, though that potential was in her. (She would have preferred to do that with *Knockout*, but even she can't have everything.) She had fought on the ground, her energy steadily ticking away, but taking out dozens of soldiers with each tick. The queen's forces from each side had done their job, keeping the enemy from spreading out and avoiding the worst of the spell. With her foes boxed in and tripping over each other in their rush to avoid her magic, they had nowhere to go.

And so the war came to an end. Susan was one of the first, having stayed at the castle with Agnes, to hear about the peace treaty being signed. If it could be called such a thing, as Wales was back in power. The Reconquista leaders having been taken out when the victory they had promised hadn't materialized. That, and actions by allied countries, ended the war quite nicely. That it was possible at all was because of Susan's planning and magic at the last battle, but the general populous was just being told battles had been won and that was that.

With the proper nobility once again in charge, the country changed its name back to Albion, and basically said "yeah, we aren't at war with you guys anymore. Here's some money for reparations." Of course, it wasn't Wales' fault, so Anrietta didn't want to accept it, but she did have a kingdom to run. Her marriage, put off because of war breaking out, was never mentioned again, probably because the person she actually wanted to marry was back in power. They were probably just trying to figure out the legal way of doing so. Without the looming threat of a more powerful kingdom swallowing them up, they now had the time.

The day after the peace treaty was signed, Agnes came to see Susan and become her "love slave." After an honest discussion that Susan did still plan to leave and neither could get too attached to the other, they decided to spend the night together anyway. Both liked the other, had no other real opportunity for intimacy with another person on that world, and were rather flush with victory at the moment. They had a lot of nervous energy to work off.

A very good time was had by both. The morning after, Susan invited her back any time, and Agnes merely said "You have but to say the word, my master," and couldn't stop giggling for several minutes. Tickling may have been one of the causes, but this is unconfirmed.

And so the students went back to the magic academy. Susan refused all titles, honors, and ceremonies, saying it was her magic that won the day, not her, in the strictest sense of the word. So honoring her was like praising the plow that tilled the fields in the springtime. It was the horse doing all the work, while the farmer guided it. In this case, she was the plow, her magic was the horse, and destiny itself was the farmer. Susan managed to escape while Anrietta, eyes crossed and giving random minor twitches, tried to figure that metaphor out.

Several days passed peacefully. But one morning, Susan was awoken again by a stranger in her room. A well endowed stranger.

"Not again," she groaned. "What is it this time?"

"You sleep like the dead!" said the creepy lady looking down at her. "For a moment I thought you were dead. Now, you will come with me, void mage!"

"Will I?" Susan asked, interested. "Wait, what did you call me?" She got up on one elbow.

"Void mage! I watched as you used your magic during the last battle. Only a void mage could be so strong!"

"Oh, right, yup, that's me. Void mage. Been one all my life. How exactly do you intend to leave here with me?"

"Do not underestimate my power!"

"What about your muscles? Can I underestimate them?"

"What are you talking about? If this is some attempt to stall me-"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I just notice you don't look very strong, that's all."

"Enough of this! Get dressed immediately, and if you cry out I'll make you pay for it." She raised a wicked looking dagger.

"How about I do this, instead? *Immobilize.*" She cast it instantly, so the woman wouldn't have time to react, and put in her maximum energy. Sadly, while Susan had gauged her STREngth appropriately, she underestimated this woman's RESolve. As she spent seven energy on her STREngth check, she threatened to break out with a twenty-one. Susan, thinking that might be a bad idea, spent two XP for a +4 and she went nowhere. "Right," she said, hopping out of bed.

"What is this? How? Release me immediately!"

"Oh, I think not. Tell you what. How about I just go get the principal or someone," she went over and closed the window, "and they can throw you down in the dungeon. How does that sound? I've seen them, very posh. You'll love it."

The woman struggled. "I will not be trifled with!"

"Wouldn't dream of it. I'll request the embassy suite for you. Now don't you go anywhere!"

Susan left her room, shaking her head. *Seriously, how did she get up here? Must have come in through the window.*

She managed to make it to the principal's office and almost all the way back before she felt her spell somehow be broken and knew, before she opened the door, that the woman was gone. Sparkle came padding up. "What's going on?"

"I can't believe I just did that," said Susan, shock written all over her face. "I just left someone totally unguarded, believing they couldn't escape. So naturally they did. I'm some kind of super villain!"

"Someone was in the room? Does that make them the good guy?"

"It was a girl, and I hope not. She was too creepy to be a good anything."

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning," said Mr. Ottman.

So Susan explained.

"And she called you the void mage? This is troublesome. If someone is moving against void mages, we need to discover why. Obviously they got it wrong this time, because Louise is not using her magic openly. But it is still a concern. Get dressed and come to my office later, with her. I'll need to speak to you both."

"Where were you, anyway?" asked Susan, as they headed to the office.

"Just wandering around. I do have *Short Attention Span* you know, and watching you sleep isn't the most exciting thing in the world to do. I have to play my weaknesses, same as you."

"As long as you have some excuse. Honestly, doesn't this place have wards or something to let people inside know someone evil just snuck inside?"

“Ah, you’re here, good,” said Mr. Ottman, when Louise and Susan had arrived. “Please, sit down and I’ll explain a few things.” Both did. “I’ve been looking into legends about the Void element, and about those that have used it in the past. It’s hard to separate fact from fiction because the last time it surfaced was so long ago. One thing is clear, only four people can use Void at any one time. And the historical precedent is that’ll appear in the world at about the same time. Legends differ. Some say that the four together will cause a great calamity, while others say the four arise in response to one, and defeat it.

“What does this mean for you two? Well, it seems clear someone wants to get you together. That’s why this odd woman you say appeared in your room was insistent you come with her, rather than just stabbing you in your sleep.”

“Comforting thought.”

“It could have been worse. Plus, with attention focused on you, they do not know about Louise, and so we have the advantage. We knew some of their plan, plus they want the wrong person. Even if they manage to catch you, I am more confident in your ability to escape, Susan, than in Louise’s ability to do so. No offense, Louise.”

“None taken,” she grumbled, obviously offended.

“Our task now is to find the other three.”

“Why would they want us together, though?”

“Perhaps to cause this great tragedy that legends speak of? After all, there’s a fifty/fifty chance of that. Or, in the event that doesn’t happen, destroy you so you can’t combat whatever it is that caused you to be able to channel Void in the first place. And thus, again, bring about tragedy.”

“Have there been any indications of something stirring in the world that would require power like hers?” asked Susan.

Mr. Ottman shook his head. “Nothing like that. But we are forewarned, and I’ll alert the allied kingdoms to watch for any unusual activity in the world.”

“Sounds like just about all we can do. Looks like I better start researching the *Question* spell.”

“Anything you can do to help make our job easier would be appreciated.”

“I don’t suppose the academy could provide me materials and a place to work? That would be easier than me going back to the city to buy stuff, and be more comfortable than working in my room.”

“We have plenty of space for magical research! I wish you had said something earlier. Louise, can you show her? Use whatever you need from the labs!”

“Thank you.”

“You may also want to become roommates with someone, just in case this lady comes back.”

“I’ll ask Charlotte or Kirche, they might not mind.”

“You could ask me,” pouted Louise. “Or am I not good enough for you?”

“Uh, I don’t want to sleep in the same room as the Void mage. If she comes back and you use Void magic, she might recognize it and switch her focus to you!”

“As long as there’s a reason.”

And so, Susan researched *Question* for ten minus three days, Sparkle having rolled a 16 on her KNOledge check to remember the symbology of the spell. Susan had moved in with Charlotte, who very nearly almost somewhat showed a hint of excitement at the prospect. But she was honored to be asked, and Susan was able to talk about how her mother was doing since her recovery. She always became more animated then, but soon went back to reading. *If ever there was a person that exemplified the Bookworm background, it’s her. Say, how do I know about other backgrounds and weaknesses I don’t have? Must be a Paragon thing, just being able to recognize them in others.* She also insisted that another bed wasn’t necessary, and while nothing happened between the two, Susan would sometimes awaken to find them snuggled together, which suited her just fine.

The day Susan finished *Question*, she went to the principal’s office with the formula and Louise, and announced her intention to ask the universe where she should look for the

nearest Void mage not in the room. Mr. Ottman said to proceed, and Susan took her time casting the fifteen turn spell. (Recalling that's only a minute) The answer she got back was:

"The Fairy Woods"

"And so we have our answer," said Susan.

Charlotte didn't mind flying them both out there to take a look around, and riding the powerful dragon it didn't take long to reach the wood. Looking down through the trees, neither saw any sign of habitation in the forest, just vegetation.

This place is pretty big, thought Susan as she peered down. And why would someone be living out here rather than in a village or town? That doesn't make much sense.

"There's a clearing, let's land because I'm going to try something!"

Charlotte just nodded, and set the dragon down.

Susan pulled out her notes for *Question* and set about casting it again, at least twice. As they were at the edge of the forest, and she could use *Compass* to know which way was north, she was going to ask the magic how far East and how far North or South they should go to reach the nearest Void Mage. *That Compass spell finally came in handy. I learned it because of my No Sense of Direction but just knowing which was North was never as handy as I thought. Oh well.*

The spell told her to go a certain number of steps East and South, so Susan and Charlotte made their way on foot in the indicated direction. They soon came to a cabin, highly camouflaged so it couldn't be seen from the air.

"This must be the place," remarked Susan, walking up to the door. She knocked. "Hello?" she called. "Anyone home?"

There was no answer.

"Look, we just need to talk to you for a moment. If you're there, please come out. We mean you no harm but you are in great danger!"

"I should say so," said a familiar voice behind them. "Thank you, Void mage, for leading me to the very place I needed to go."

Susan and Charlotte spun, and there stood the creepy lady Susan had seen earlier. She had weird marks under her eyes and very long hair. She was also wearing a tight outfit that may as well have been painted on for all that it concealed. Around her, a dozen wolves stepped out of the forest and growled menacingly.

"I won't lower my guard around you, this time. Surrender and come with me."

"I don't think so. You want the person inside this cottage, you'll have to go through me first. And as you want me alive, I don't really feel I'm in much danger."

"But what about this other one? Attack!" she commanded the wolves. Charlotte blew them away as they raced at her.

"Oh, you brought a sensible bodyguard after all," she sneered. "But there's more where they came from!" More wolves appeared out of the darkness of the forest.

"Okay," said Sparkle, stepping forward. "This is a clear case when *Line* is called for." She started casting.

"Odd, you have an animal Familiar? I thought all void mages got humanoid ones. Shows what I know."

The line appeared, snaking towards the woman, then encircling the house. As the wolves charged forward they got blasted with wind, and were none too smart as they kept running into it. Rather than explode into gore they just sort of melted away, leading Susan to believe they were just summoned constructs of some kind. Suddenly, flying creatures also appeared, and Susan shouted to Charlotte that the line wouldn't handle them. So she blew them out of the sky without apparent effort.

"It appears you are quite well protected," said the woman. "But my master can wait, for a time. We know who the last void mage is now, so it's only a matter of time. Farewell!" She melted into the woods and was gone.

Sparkle waited a moment to make sure nothing else charged the house, and let the line go. As she did, the door cracked open and the person inside peeked out.

“Like I said, you’re in danger. I guess I have to apologize, as I led them right here. You’ll have to come with us, I’m afraid. At least until we learn who is trying to grab up Void mages. Can we come in?”

The figure glanced around nervously through the cracked open door. “You defended me,” she said at last. “I guess you can come in.” She opened the door and stepped back.

“Hello!” Susan said, getting a good look at the woman. She shook her head to clear it. “I mean, hello. I’m Susan, this is Charlotte, and my companion Sparkle. You are seriously going to have back problems when you’re older. I mean, uh, little help here?”

“Jealous,” was all Charlotte would say.

“Don’t stand there gawking, she did invite you in,” said Sparkle, moving past the pair. “You’ll have to forgive them. Please, what’s your name?”

The woman stared down at the cat like she had never seen one.

“Before that,” said Susan, finally tearing her eyes away. “Let’s make sure you really are the one we need to see. Charlotte, you know this skill, why don’t you try as well?”

“Okay.”

Both called upon *Magic Sense*, Susan rolling the check and Charlotte doing whatever she did to determine success or failure. Susan got a 14, enough to feel the power of Void in the woman, now that she knew what to look for. She had spent some time feeling out Louise before she left, just in case there was some question of who the actual Void mage was.

Charlotte shook her head, getting a bad roll and not succeeding.

“Keep trying, I felt it,” said Susan, entering the house. “You’re a Void mage, all right.” She stuck out her hand. “What should we call you, anyway?”

“Tiffania,” said the woman, shaking it.

Tiffania joined the party!

The group was seated around a table, sipping tea, as Susan explained why they were there. She also took a good look at their host and the inside of the house, which were neat, spartan, and filled with natural tools and implements. The cups, for instance, were just sections of branch hollowed out and smoothed. The teapot was metal, but the stove was a stone block. There was only the one chair at the table, so the three were sitting on the floor, and it was clear Tiffania's dress was the only thing she was wearing.

As far as her appearance, she was golden haired, and her body was toned and tanned, probably from living alone in the forest for who knows how long. Her dress was simple, a sleeveless affair held up by a length of cord that went around her neck, which threatened to spill her out at any second. Tied around her waist was a thin piece of white cloth, and coming down barely to her thighs was the rest of the dress, slit completely up the side to her waist. She was also wearing a floppy hat, which she had jammed on her head and kept reaching up to smash further down onto her head.

Susan estimated her looks at least at a seven or eight, if you were into that sort of thing.

"So you live all alone out here?" she asked, having finished her rather lengthy introduction about why there were out here tramping around in the woods.

Tiffania nodded.

"I see. Seems you're going to become a rather important person very soon, especially now that creepy lady knows where you live."

"No, I'm not very important, and I can't do magic, you have to believe me."

"Maybe you think you can't, but I can feel it within you. Sorry, but your time of solitude is over. I won't force you to come, of course, but if we leave that woman who attacked us will return. She will force you to go with her, and I have no idea of her intentions. I guess in the end it comes down to you. Do you trust us, who defended you but also have unknown intentions towards you, or her, who was happy to use force to get what she wanted?"

"Right now I just don't think I can answer that question."

"Sadly, we'll have to stay here while you think it over. I don't want to lose you so soon after I found you. But if you say we should leave, we'll leave." She took another sip of tea and waited.

"Let me think for a moment," she pleaded, moving off and looking around. As though in a bit of a daze, Tiffania gathered a few things into a bag and set it down next to them. "I guess I'll have to trust you."

Susan smiled. "I'm glad. Come, finish your tea and we'll go back to the academy right away. I know it might be a bit of a shock to meet so many people at once, so we'll try to keep you away from the students until you're more comfortable. Okay?"

She nodded, and finished her tea. She cleaned up the dishes and finally it seemed she couldn't put it off any longer. She said she was ready to go.

"Don't be nervous, we can come back here as easily as we leave, you'll see. This isn't the last time you'll see this place. Now prepare yourself, people usually freak out a bit when they see my *Teleportal!*"

And so, Tiffania came to the school and was introduced to Mr. Ottman. He stared a little too creepily at her, but finally shook it off.

"So what's the plan now?" he asked.

"Finding number two was a snap, let's go after number three tomorrow. I'll use *Question* right now, if Louise is out of class, and we can get a fix on the next Void mage. We'll have them together in no time." She paused. "Of course, if the disaster happens... well, you've got me so it should be fine. Better to get them together under controlled circumstances, right?"

"I suppose."

And so they got their answer. "Romalia"

"You'll have to take a ship to get there," Mr. Ottman informed them. "I can book you passage, you can get to the port town easily enough, right?"

"Not a problem."

The next day, Susan and the others, that being Tiffania, Hiraga, Louise, and Sparkle stepped through a *Teleportal* to the town of La Nocher, to take a floatship to the town of Romalia. The trip took a few days, but no one bothered them. Tiffania obviously had not been out of the woods in some time, and kept asking about things they were passing over. Susan deferred to Louise about that sort of thing. She was quite excited to be traveling, though still painfully shy if any of the other passengers happened to speak to her.

Landing at Romalia, the group was impressed with the architecture here, and the huge structure in the distance. The main road seemed to run right towards it, and Susan eyed it suspiciously.

"Come on," she said, looking around. "We'll find a quiet place for me to cast *Question* a few times, and narrow down where this next void mage is."

The spell indicated they should basically go straight, right up to the huge tower.

Figures.

"Why didn't I use this spell instead of all that *Descry Creature* and such before?" she asked Sparkle. "This seems way easier."

"They aren't just going to let us walk in," said Susan, as the group walked closer to it. "Any ideas for how to get in and find this Void mage?"

Everyone shook their heads. "Something odd about that building," remarked Hiraga, "but I can't put my finger on it."

Susan snapped her fingers. "It's like the school! Look, there's the five spokes of the wheel or whatever, that represent the five elements here. Man, you guys do take magic seriously."

"Of course," said Louise, simply.

Once nearer to the structure, Susan saw there were windows at the top, and some were open.

"What do you think?" she asked, pointing them out. "Fly up there and let ourselves in? The place is pretty big though, and it could be anyone inside."

"If that's the case," put in Louise, "they could be in any one of the five side buildings. We could wander around the tower while they're over there!" She pointed randomly.

"Why not just ask the *Question* spell for the name of the person?" asked Sparkle, somewhat annoyed.

"Oh yeah, this isn't like the forest. I could just ask that, couldn't I? A name is short enough. Give me a second." She found another quiet place under some trees and bent over the spell again, reading it for the fourth time that day.

"Vittorio Serevare," was the answer from the spell.

Louise gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

"You know that name?" asked Saito.

"That's the pope!"

Susan groaned. "We aren't going to get in to see him. Not without a lot of fast talking. I suppose I could increase my *Persuasion* rating with *Augment Skill*."

"You know who he will see?" Susan shrugged. "The queen! Can your portal open into the castle? You know she would come if you asked her."

"Good point. To have the queen randomly pop up though... I guess we can ask. I can always get back here, now that I've seen it."

So Susan and the others went behind some buildings and went back to the castle where Anrietta was, and asked for an audience. As the queen's orders stated nothing was to

be denied these people, she was quickly summoned and told the situation.

"And this woman is a Void mage as well?" she asked, shocked. "And now you've found out the pope is the third? You don't mess around!"

Where have I heard that phrase before?

"Do you mind getting us in to speak to him?" asked Susan.

"Not at all." She clapped her hands, and ordered a carriage be readied immediately.

"We'll just head back through your portal, if that's okay with you."

"I like this plan, I'm proud to be a part of it."

Within the hour the group was back in front of the building they had just left, and the queen caused quite a stir when she stepped out of the carriage.

"Forgive us," said the guards. "We were not informed of your arrival!"

"Yes," she replied, trying to hide her grin, "we decided to come rather suddenly."

The group was brought into the building, and the pope was summoned. They were waiting in a large chamber, when they heard footsteps from the passage on the right. A man dressed in a white suit, who had two differently colored eyes, appeared and looked them over.

"Julio Chesare," he said with a bow. "You all caused quite a stir coming here as you did."

"We do apologize," said Anrietta. "But the matter was quite urgent."

"It must be. My master will be along in just a moment, I'm sure. I don't recognize any of them," he pointed to us, "and they don't seem to be your bodyguards."

"I will tell his holiness why we are here."

"As you wish, your majesty."

The group didn't have long to wait, as a guy with a funny purple hat and robes stepped in from the left.

"Your majesty," he said formally.

"Your holiness," she replied, just as formally.

Louise went down on one knee, Tifannia followed her, but Hiraga and Susan remained standing. The man was young, Susan saw, probably late teens, and had long hair like a girl's. He carried a staff topped with an inverted teardrop with wings, and wore the same symbol around his neck.

"You should kneel!" hissed Louise.

"I don't see any reason to," remarked Susan. She looked down at Louise, who was trying to tug her down. "I've met as near a thing to a god as any mortal ever will, and my enemy may as well be one itself. This," she pointed to him, "is just a man."

"A very curious man," said the pope. "Even more so now, with that kind of claim. May I ask your names?"

"Your holiness," replied Anrietta, "this is Lousie, a friend of mine since we were very young. Her Familiar, Hiraga, from another world. Susan, a most extraordinary mage that was brought here by accident, and her Familiar, Sparkle. Lastly, Tiffania, a girl I actually just met myself."

"Pleased to meet you all, I'm sure. But this cannot be a social call, your majesty. Please, speak freely in front of Juilo."

"Your holiness, Louise and Tiffania are both Void mages."

"Ah!" Vittorio's eyes widened and studied each person in turn. "And so the four can finally be brought together. I knew the other two must be out there, but I never thought they would just appear out of nowhere. How was this accomplished?"

"Yes, how was this accomplished?" Anrietta asked the others.

"Just a little spell. As no one told me there were four of you guys, I never thought to look. But when someone mistook me for one, and tried to abduct me not once, but twice, I thought maybe I should move on it. And here we are. By the way, if you're a Void mage, and I know you are, and you say to speak freely in front of this man... should I take it he's your Familiar?"

"I am," said Juilo, taking off one of his gloves. A rune similar to Hiraga's was seen.

Susan snickered.

"What?" snapped Louise.

"You know how contracts are made."

She thought for a second, then went really red.

"Yes, that aside," said the pope. "This will cause me to accelerate my plans quite a bit."

"What plans?" asked Susan, suspiciously.

"We must reach the heart of the forth void mage, King Joseph of Gallia."

"Wait a minute, I've heard that name before."

"That's Tabitha's uncle," explained Louise.

"Wait, the guy who had his brother killed so he could take the throne? Who tried to off Charlotte and got her mother instead? Who put her through all those trials to try and bump her off after that? That King Jospheh?"

"Uh, yes?"

"He's a void mage as well? That's just great."

"I admit, he's a ruthless man, but his kingdom holds together."

"Oh, I'm sure it does. Under his iron fist. So is he the one that's trying to have me abducted? Why?"

"I cannot say. I can only hope he will change his mind once he sees we three together."

"Highly doubtful," mused Susan. "In any case, if someone can point out his rough location on a map and show me a recent portrait of the man, I could have him here within the hour."

"We mustn't rush," cautioned the pope, putting up a hand. "Do you know why Void exists? Why it hasn't been seen in the world for so long?" Susan shook her head. "It means that something terrible is coming. Something that only we Void mages might be able to stop. We're going to need his power, and soon."

Louise looked worried, and Susan could guess what she was thinking. Her explosions weren't really all that powerful, and Tiffania just found out she was a Void mage. What could she do, against something so 'terrible' that the pope was willing to try and rehabilitate a man like Joseph, in order to get his power?

"What sort of terrible thing are we talking about here?"

"The texts say only 'a calamity that burned the world.' Please, accept rooms here as my guests while I figure out how best to use the knowledge you've given me. Julio can show you our guest quarters. I must go and pray for guidance."

While I do something worthwhile, and actually get some answers.

She opened a *Teleportal* so the queen could go back to the castle, and the group waved her off as she rode through it. She seemed very pensive, and with good reason, if what the pope had said was true.

The group got rooms all next to each other, and once settled in, Susan got them together for another casting of *Question*. She asked her magic what was the nature of the "calamity that burned the world," but got back "unknown." She tried various other ways of phrasing the question, but even asking if there was some kind of looming threat to the world, all she got back was "unknown."

"What does that mean?" asked Louise.

"Something is blocking my magic, and it would have to be pretty powerful in order to do that. The book you got, it hasn't shown any spells yet?" She shook her head. "Great. You two girls better figure something out, because if my magic isn't going to work on this thing, it falls to you two and the pope. I don't care what he does, someone like Jospheh isn't going to just change his mind after doing all those terrible things to Charlotte. I mean he killed his own brother, or had him killed, anyway. He's got the power, and he's not going to give it up. We can't count on him, so the three of you are going to have to be able to compensate for his not being around. I hope you're up to it."

And I hope this isn't The Darkness taking a hand in things here. Burning the world sounds like something it would do, because then it could gobble up all the energy without resistance. And it could easily counter my magic, like it did before, showing Tom how to set up areas my summoning magic couldn't reach. Just like now with my scrying magic.

I'm worried.

"I have a confession to make," Tiffania said softly. "I do already know some magic."

"That's great news! What is it?" Susan began to get a little excited.

"I can erase memories from people."

"Oh." Susan began to get a little less excited. "I'm sure that'll come in handy. At the very least, you girls can trade spells, right? Better to know two spells than one, that's my motto."

Both girls looked at each other. "I don't think so," Louise said at last.

"What? Why? You both use the same element, right?"

"It's not that, it's just every spell I try to do causes an explosion. Wouldn't the spell to wipe minds also cause an explosion?"

"It's similar for me," explained Tiffania. "I just wind up erasing memories. It's like I can't control it."

"Then what good is that book, if any more spells ever show up inside it?" Neither had an answer for that. "Okay. Wait though, you did the Familiar summoning spell and it worked, right?"

"It still exploded," she said, looking down. "You probably couldn't tell because you were in the middle of it."

"Ah. We'll have to ask the pope what his special power is sometime. Maybe Void magic just works that much differently, and you each get access to only a part of it. That would be weird, but I suppose there could be some logic to it. Like it's so powerful you can each only use a tiny portion of it? I guess if we say there's only a finite amount of magic in the world, and all mages draw from it, that would make the magical 'well' pretty low. Thus each mage can be roughly the same power. But with you, and only four people drawing from that 'well' the potential is higher. I don't know!"

"Should we get people preparing for some kind of disaster?" asked Hiriga. "I wouldn't want to cause a panic, but it might be a good idea."

"That could work against us. People might see the Void mages as the cause of the event, and try to murder you. Then when and if it happens anyway, they'll have no way to stop it."

"Yeah, she's sort of a dower sometimes like that," remarked Sparkle.

"But only scholars know about things like Void mages," protested Louise. "And no one would connect some old legends with what's happening, right?"

"I don't know enough of your old stories to be able to answer that question."

"There is one consideration," said Sparkle. "What if this legend of something that can burn the world is true. Further, what if time runs at a similar speed between all our worlds. I mean Hiriga hasn't talked about any technology we don't have, right? So that's roughly equal. What if this civilization has actually arisen twice? Once the first time, then the world burned, and then the second time after that, when it got bored or defeated or whatever. Wouldn't that explain why they're still at this level of technology and we aren't? It's because they had to invent everything from scratch again!"

"Okay, now who's being a downer?"

22

King

Place: Main hall of the vatican

Time: The next day

“Have you made a decision, your holiness?” asked Louise, bending down on one knee before the pope, like always.

“I have, and that is why I have called you here. I believe a direct approach should work best. We will all travel to the kingdom of Gallia where I will ask him to join forces with us against whatever comes.”

“Oh boy...” said Susan, not believing her ears.

“Do you foresee some problem with that plan?” he asked her.

“I just hope he doesn’t annoy me so much I just take care of him then and there. Do you know what he’s put his niece through? Plus, it will mean showing him the real Void mages. Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Some risks will have to be taken. Why would showing him the Void mages be an issue?”

“Because of that creepy lady that’s shown up twice and tried to abduct me. I don’t know who she works for, and she’s got the wrong idea that I’m the Void mage. To tell her she’s wrong will put Louise at risk.”

“I can’t hide forever,” protested Louise. “And I never asked you to pretend to be me in the first place.”

“Still, it worked out for us. I even gave some thought to letting myself be captured to see who was behind all this. But if we’re going to some other kingdom, there’s no time for that.”

“Her presence could be explained,” put in Hiraga. “Let’s say I’m your Familiar, and Louise is the Familiar of Tifannia.”

“Hey, that could work! Well done, Hiraga.”

“Thanks. Your magic does me the most good anyway, so I’d want to stick with you if things went bad.”

“There is that. Fine, but I want him off balance. Before we leave, or actually as I’ve never seen the place, just before we arrive I want to call up some other people to join us.”

“If you think it will be beneficial, please, call upon whoever you would wish,” replied the pope.

“Oh, you are okay with being named as a Void mage, right, Tifannia?”

“This is all moving so fast. I’m not sure what to think any more. As long as you all think it’s for the best, I’ll go along with it. I mean, if the pope is willing to reveal himself as a Void mage, can I do less?”

“Hey, wait a second!” interrupted Louise. “She’s right. I don’t want to hide behind anyone. Besides, if everyone finds out I’m the Void mage, they’ll finally stop calling me Zero! Let’s just tell him the truth.”

“I guess the risk is yours to take. My presence will be a little harder to explain, in that case, but I guess it’ll work out. I can always just be your bodyguard. It would fit, given I did stand in for you in the creepy lady’s mind. We could just say the time has come to reveal yourself and leave it at that.”

“Fine. It’s about time I got some credit for what I can actually do. Rather than just listen to people teasing me about what they think I can’t.”

“So we are decided?” asked the pope.

Susan shook her head. “It’s a crazy plan, but who knows, it might just work.”

And so the group headed to Gallia. True to her word, Susan *Teleported* back to the castle to collect Queen Anrietta and the school to collect Charlotte. She waited until she was between classes, then pulled her aside.

“Hi, Charlotte, got a question for you!”

“Okay?”

"We're about to go confront your good old uncle. Turns out he's a void mage. Who knew?"

"Shocked!"

"I know. How did the pope find out, anyway? Huh. Point is, how do you think he would react seeing your mom up and about?"

She shook her head. "Unsure. Quite surprised."

"Do you think we could go ask her if she wants to tag along? We'll be arriving in just a few minutes and I want to get as many high ranking people that have cause to hate him as possible. That will show him how serious it would be to refuse us."

"Why go there?"

"The Void mages. The pope has this crazy idea that he can be reasoned with if we're all in the same place."

"Impossible."

"That's what I told him! But I figure if his way doesn't work, my way will. How do you feel about becoming queen in his place?"

"Intrigued."

"Good enough for me. Want to go see your mom?"

"Okay."

So they stepped through to her house, and her mother was more than happy to finally see some action.

"I've been cooped up so long pretending to be crazy, I'm actually going a little crazy. It's time for all the charades to fall away!"

"I'm ready," said Susan, back with all her forces again. The pope looked between them all.

"You've made some influential friends," he remarked.

"Yeah, all part of a day's work. You go in there and do your thing. But just know that if it doesn't work, I'm stepping up and we'll do things my way."

His face hardened. "I'm still not really sure who you are, that you think you can just take over this mission. The others seem to defer to you, so I've not said anything, but your attitude could wreck everything. This situation must be treated with care, we need his help."

"Long story short? I'm a dimensional traveler from another reality, and we do things my way because I get results. And because I'm falling back into my old pattern of just running people over. Darn it, why did I have to lose Luna!?"

"Who?"

"The person I started traveling with. That's part of the long story. And no disrespect to your office, but we don't need the help of a psychopath like this so called king."

"Remember what you learned with Mz Umbrage," cautioned Sparkle.

"Hey, what I did worked, didn't it? This man doesn't deserve to be in power, just like her."

"He thinks he does. He'll see it as the result of the tragic sacrifice of his brother, who had to be eliminated so the 'right' man could take the throne. Him."

"Which is exactly why he shouldn't have it."

"I agree, I just want you to keep in mind his point of view."

"I'll try. Don't worry, I'm not just going to float him around. I don't know what Void spells he knows, for one. I'm not stupid."

The group stood just behind the door, waiting to be announced and enter the king's chamber.

"I suppose you won't be bowing to the king, either?" asked the pope.

"No chance," agreed Susan. "I'll bow to Anrietta, because she's earned my respect by being a good queen and fighting for her people. I mean she came to support her troops and fight alongside them knowing she could be killed at any moment. This man is the opposite of her, with what he's done."

"Why am I not surprised?"

“His holiness, the Shield of the Founder, St. Aegis the 32nd!” announced the guard. “His bodyguard, Julio Chesare.”

“Her majesty, Queen Anrietta of Tristain!”

“The lady Esme d’Orleans, and her daughter, Charlotte Helene d’Orleans, Chevalier de Norfatul!”

“Louise Franchoise Le Blanc de La Valliere...” The man visibly paled. “Void mage! And her Familiar, Hiraga Saito from... Japan?”

“Tiffania Westwood Tudor of Albion. Uh, Void mage!”

“Susan Felton. Walker of worlds, slayer of dragons, Natural Magician, and seeker for the moon. Her familiar, Sparkle!”

“The moon?” remarked Sparkle.

“Luna.”

“Ah. And what dragons have you slain?”

“I captured some. I could have killed them if I wanted. Same difference.”

The king was not looking as startled as Susan had hoped, but he did look down at them, interestedly. The others were on one knee, but Susan swaggered up behind them and looked up at the man.

“Goodness,” he said at last, “to what do I owe the company of such auspicious names? And I see you’re up and about, Esme. I was not informed you were feeling better, I would have visited!”

Yeah, with a sharp knife.

“We have much to discuss, your majesty.”

“I’m sure it’s something serious, to bring the pope, a queen, two Void mages, and whatever it is that girl is, together.” He pointed to Susan. She gave a little wave back. “Shall we retire to the banquet hall? I’ve had some refreshments brought, I’m sure you’re all weary and thirsty from your travels.”

“I would like that very much,” said the pope. “There are urgent matters I must discuss with you. Best if we’re sitting down for them.”

“Very well. Please, rise. I will be along in a moment. Guard, see they are taken care of. Oh, why is that angry looking girl still armed in my presence?”

“I’m sorry, my king,” said the guard that announced us. “We insisted she be disarmed, but as we were carrying the blade away, the sword returned to her, several times. She said she could keep this up all day, and could we get on with it? We thought it would be fine, after all, she was in the presence of His Holiness. And we did not insist on depriving Her Majesty of her magical focus, which we thought would be the greater overall threat...”

“Very well,” he waved the man off. “I suppose a sword won’t be of much threat to me in any case. Proceed.”

The group was led to a large table, where Hiraga sat down and started filling a plate.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” he asked, as Susan just stood against the wall watching everything.

“You do know his penchant for using poison, right?”

“Oh yeah. Maybe it’s best not to.” He pushed the plate away again.

“He’s not going to poison the pope!” Louise said, exasperated.

“Exactly. Because the pope isn’t going to eat or drink anything in the stronghold of a potential enemy!”

“Is he my enemy?” asked the pope, filling a goblet. “I choose to trust, and have him as a potential ally instead.” He drank it down.

Well, if he starts writhing and thrashing I’ll hit him with the knife. Hey, I remembered it! He didn’t.

A moment later, the king entered with some of his guard, who took positions around the room. They eyed Susan suspiciously and she eyed them back, equally suspiciously. With him walked the creepy lady, who did seem surprised to see them all there. She kept looking back

and forth between Susan and Louise.

"Please, don't be shy, make yourselves at home," he offered, sitting down.

"Why don't we get down to why I'm here?" suggested the pope. "Then we can put this mistrust that some have behind us."

"I agree. Please, speak openly."

"As you heard, two of our members are Void mages. That was not the complete story, as I did not announce that I too, am a Void mage. Julio here is actually my Familiar. And I see you have brought your Familiar, as well?"

"You may call her Sheffield."

"We've met," snarled Susan.

"Yes," said the king, "it seems my intelligence was incorrect about a few things. But why now... ah, of course, you found the other two before I did, and so the four meet at last. Congratulations."

"It's not a matter of finding anything. The four Void mages are together, for the good of the world. I have traveled here to ask that you pledge yourself to our cause, whatever that may be, when the world is threatened."

Wait a second, is the awakening of the creature or whatever is supposed to threaten the world the cause or the result of the four coming together? I mean, presumably the four Void mages have been around since the youngest was born. Why would the thing wait until they were old enough to threaten it? I guess that means the creature is about to wake up. But how does the world know to respond with the Void mages? Is magic that sentient to choose four people in the world after so long and go into them? I don't get it.

"Is that why you've come here? For my help? Is the world being threatened, then?"

"Luckily, no, not at this time. However, it is only a matter of time now that the four have come together. At least, that is what I believe, according to prophecy."

"Perhaps. You speak of the creature that destroyed the world long ago."

"I do."

"What sort of thing was it, I wonder? I'd be interested in seeing it myself."

"You must be joking."

"Oh no," he replied seriously, shaking his head. "To look upon the devastation caused by such a creature of legend? To see cities destroyed, lands blighted... it might be quite moving. I have to wonder, would I shed tears for those who had lost their lives? To look upon the tens of thousands dead, would I feel pity? Helplessness? Or would I feel nothing at all? I'm almost eager to find out."

"Eager? Now you must be joking!"

"I find little comfort in humor of late. No, if that is why you have come then I fear you will leave disappointed. You will not be getting my pledge of support, should this creature you fear appear somewhere in the world. If I did, you would expect me to rush to your aid should you wish to battle it. If you wish to battle it, you will mean to stop, or destroy it. If it is stopped, I will never be able to look upon the full devastation it causes, and never know if I might feel sorrow for those that were lost. So, as you can see, my support would be quite impossible. If there is nothing else?" He started to rise again out of his chair.

The pope seemed quite flummoxed. Susan had to admit, it wasn't the reasoning even she had expected. She had believed maybe he would hold his support hostage for land, or wealth. Maybe demand yearly tributes to keep him on "standby" should the beast attack. She had hoped seeing his family and the queen and the three Void mages would at least give him pause, maybe say "Give me some time to consider your words" and such. But he apparently went off the deep end, and basically said, "Let the world burn, I want to watch and warm my hands on the flames. Oh, and maybe cook some sausages."

"Shall I take over?" she asked, when the pope tried several times to frame his thoughts and failed.

"Oh, you have a different proposal?" asked Joseph, sitting back down. "I wondered about your role in all this."

"Quite different. The pope, or should I say 'his holiness' has given you option one. I will

now give you option two.” She laid a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “You’ve been a real jerk to the rest of your family to secure that throne you’re warming. Personally, I don’t think your attitudes are good for the kingdom, and your being a Void mage just makes it that much worse. So here’s option two. You step down from the throne and my girl Charlotte here steps up. You apologize for all the wrongdoing you’ve participated in over the years, and accept exile from the kingdom. You can become a monk or something, and spend the remainder of your years in quiet contemplation of your sins. You can help them when this creature appears because that can be the start of your atonement. I’m not sure even that would be enough to remove the whole stain of your sins from your soul. But it might be a good start.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I personally will declare war upon you. My Familiar has reminded me that getting into the habit of killing the people that you disagree with is a bad one. I’m sure I could come up with something creative that still fits all the terrible things you’ve done. I’ve heard Charlotte’s stories of you, and I’m inclined to believe she’s leaving the worst parts out.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I think you’re probably smart enough to keep the worst parts secret.”

He seemed to take this as a complement, rather than laugh, which is what Susan was expecting. *What’s wrong with this guy?*

“Rather unconventional, declaring war on a person. Are you sure it shouldn’t be queen Anrietta threatening my kingdom with war? I assumed that’s why she was here.”

Susan shook her head. “I have no problem with your kingdom. My problem is just with you. I’m sure she would back me, but there’s really no need. I would be enough to take care of the problem, myself. She’s here because I hoped a display of how many would be against you if you didn’t cooperate would show you we were serious. I see that didn’t work, so now it falls to me. They’ve already been in one war, I don’t want to push them into another. You deal with me, as an independent agent, and leave Anrietta’s kingdom out of it.”

“How intriguing! You do know I’m a Void mage, correct? And I know you are not one, because the other three are right here in this room. I doubt the *pope* would lie to me, after all.”

“He hasn’t. The other three are in fact Void mages. I am not, but I’m confident in my skills, and my magic.”

“How confident?”

Susan regarded him suspiciously. “What did you have in mind?”

“A duel. Your magic and sword against my magic, and sword. If you win, I’ll step down.”

“Now I’m intrigued. You’re really that confident? You say I don’t know what you can do, but the same applies in reverse.”

“I am. It seems the most direct way to show my resolve in this matter. I fear if I don’t make my position clear from the start, his holiness will be hounding me the rest of my life. No one has time for that.”

“And if I win, you’ll do as I said? Help the Void mages? Give Charlotte the throne?”

“Of course!”

Susan turned to the pope. “What do you say?”

“Oh, I do get a say in this. I was beginning to wonder. I wonder... perhaps a wager?”

“Wager? The pope wants to make a bet with me?” The guards seemed about ready to faint from shock, but Joseph seemed to taking it in stride.

“That’s correct. I’ll wager a substantial portion of wealth, we can decide the specifics later, that you’ll win. If you do, you’ll agree to help us when we need it, and your kingdom gets the gold.”

“But if I lose, I have to help anyway. I lose either way.”

“True. But perhaps the money will help ease the sting of not being able to watch the world burn.”

“Wait, are you betting against me?” Susan was shocked. *But of course, he doesn’t know what I can do either.*

“I’m betting with the world in mind. My wealth will be of no use to anyone if we are wiped out. This way I get what I want either way.”

“Perhaps you could,” said the king. “But it would have to be something else. I have no interest in money. Your life, perhaps, and lives of at least a dozen shrine maidens. Yes, I think

that perhaps killing you with my bare hands might be the equal to seeing the world burn. Yes, snuffing out the life of some young women, watching them breathe their last, with my hands around their throats. Making you watch, again and again, as I go down the line. Until only you are left. That might be enough, as it would be more personal. Hummm.”

Okay, this guy is going down, I don't care what I have to do.

Again, the pope seemed a bit out of his league. “It would have to be after the world destroyer was stopped, of course,” he sputtered.

“Naturally. It is one or the other I crave. Your life in my hands, or the fate of the entire world. And it all hinges on one overconfident little girl. It seems fitting.”

You mean Overconfident but that's just my local dialect again. This guy is insane. But the pope... is he really confident enough in my skills, or just willing to throw his life away if it means the world got saved? I guess I don't know enough to answer that question, but if it's the second... dang. He just went up a couple of notches on the Susan Scale.

“Then it seems we have a deal?” The pope looked back at Susan.

“I want it in writing, and displayed prominently throughout the kingdom,” she insisted. “I don't want the people thinking I'm just attacking you, or anything. It has to mean something, and for that, they have to know what's at stake.”

“That I'm fighting you to avoid fighting for the sake of the world? Shrewd, they would turn against me in an instant.”

Crap, he picked up on that fast. He's no dummy all right.

“You can word it however you wish. Even keep part of it secret. But your subjects have to know that if you lose to me, your crown is broken and a new one is forged for your niece. Fight the duel for your honor, or something.”

“That much I will agree to.”

“Then it seems we have a deal.”

The morning of the second day dawned stormy, with flashes of lightning in the distance. King Joseph had stayed away from the group, but true to his word had spread the news about the duel far and wide throughout the kingdom. With no idea what Joseph's magic would be, there wasn't much they could plan, so Susan and the others that had remained basically hung out at the castle. The plan was for Susan to maintain *Augment Skill: Sword (Slashing)* while Sparkle maintained *Armor of Magic* and *Acceleration*.

"After all," she reasoned, "he did say my magic. Just because it doesn't come from me necessarily doesn't mean one *Natural Magician* is different from another. He didn't know Sparkle could cast spells, but that's no reason to assume she couldn't."

"There was every reason! Cats here don't use magic. Aren't you sort of cheating?" asked Louise.

"Hey, I either cheat or I do not cheat. None of this 'sort of' stuff. And no, I don't see it as cheating. If he wanted to have an arm wrestling contest or something, fine. But he's pitted my magic and sword against his, and Sparkle is my companion. That makes her magic my magic. I mean if she used a completely different type of spellcasting, maybe you would have an argument. But she doesn't, so there. Besides, you want me to win, don't you?"

"Winning with an underhanded trick isn't winning at all."

"Uh, I'm still going to be in the ring with him, you know. I could just as easily send in my dragon, or my twenty five soldiers made of fire fighting for me. That's my magic too. So be grateful I'm doing it this way at all."

"You're trying to humiliate him or something, aren't you?" observed Hiraga. "For what he did to Charlotte."

"That's part of it. A big part, probably. And I don't want him to cry foul later, either. He doesn't know what I can do, I don't know what he can do. He could have used yesterday to prepare all kinds of tricks. I'll have to deal with that just like he'll have to deal with what I can do. I have no idea if something I see him do is part of his magic as a Void mage or something else. I can't call him on anything he does, he can't call me on anything I do."

"Seems fair to me."

Louise harumphed. "I still don't like it."

Susan also worked out parry or dodge, that is the question. With my Augment Skill going my range of rolls will be 20-27. With Acceleration going, my range for dodge will be 13-20. I guess parry it is, then. Mostly because I can put more energy into my Augment than Sparkle can with Acceleration and my dodge is terrible to begin with. Wait though, I'll have the Armor going, that will add +12 to my difficulty to be hit. So even if I rolled minimum, he would have to roll a 26 to get past the armor and hit me. So that range is actually 26-32. Glad we had this little talk.

The duel was taking place near the castle, where an area was already set up for tournaments for things like jousting and magic proficiency. (And no weird hoop games, Susan was interested to note) There was a ring already marked off, and the stands were quite packed with people as the group made their way there.

Susan had swapped her sword for Hiraga's, just in case, and looked confidently up at the people who were yelling and cheering. *Do they even know who they're cheering for? But I suppose an event like this doesn't come along very often, so really any excitement is better than none. I have to remember these people don't have the Internet, or any real means of getting news from other places. This will be something they'll be telling travelers about for weeks. They saw the king fight, and that's probably pretty rare just by itself.*

Joseph appeared from the other side of the ring, looking regal in his oddly stylized armor these people seemed to favor. It left the legs free, so was mostly a Half-plate, and he

didn't bother with a helmet. *Those things can save your life, you know. Wear your helmets, kids.*

He waved to the crowd, who cheered and booed him in equal measure. He stepped up to the ring and took his broadsword from a young boy, probably a squire. He stepped into the ring but looked up, as though unconcerned.

"Not a great day for it!" he called. "Are you sure you don't want to postpone this?"

"Worried all that metal will attract lightning?" Susan called back, drawing her own sword and handing the scabbard to Hiraga.

"I see you aren't wearing any. I guess you are confident!"

"I see you are, so I guess that means you aren't?"

He cocked his head to one side. "I suppose, given what I said, that would be the proper thing to say, wouldn't it? It is rather traditional, but then, given that the nature of this fight is rather untraditional, I could dispense with it. Make the sides more even, as it were."

"Do what you like. I don't mind." *My blade will cut it like tissue paper in any case.*

"Very well. Shall we begin?"

Susan raised her sword into a guard position and stepped over the line. "Ye-" She didn't even get the whole word out before she was throwing herself to the side, dodging his blade.

How did he-

And the fight was on.

Susan narrowly dodged, and the armor didn't activate though she swore his blade was millimeters from where it would have. She took her 1/10 movement, 2m as part of the dodge, and started thinking furiously.

He was across the whole freaking ring, can he control time or something? Let's feel him out.

She made her attack, not doing a called shot but just seeing where the dice would fall. (Figuratively, the Narrator has the dice) In this case, it landed on his left leg, which was unarmored, and she got first blood with six points of damage out of her possible eight. He tried to do whatever it was he had done to get over to her, which worked, but he staggered slightly as he appeared over on the other side of the ring.

He stared at his hand, which was now coated in blood as he had slapped his hand down over his wound reflexively. "You can't have seen through my technique already," he remarked, as though commenting on her hairstyle. "You must have just gotten lucky."

"Try me again and we'll see."

Susan held her action, as even with her increased speed, she knew there was no way she was crossing that distance. Joseph vanished again, appearing this time behind her, and she again threw herself to one side as he swung his blade. The ghostly form of her armor appeared around her, and the blade bounced off, causing him to snarl. Susan swung again, and he again tried to vanish and reappear elsewhere. Figuring she would keep her momentum going, she did a called shot to his leg and just nicked him as he vanished. Once again he appeared on the opposite side of the field, and both stared at the other.

"Seems you have some kind of armor after all," he remarked. "Seems it's gone invisible again, though. Or is it gone now that I've hit it? Care to tell me which it is?"

"Seems to me your leg wound isn't slowing you down any. Care to tell me why that is?"

"So you haven't figured out my ability. Or are you just feigning ignorance?"

"Stop bouncing around, come over here and fight me like a man, and find out for yourself. Or are you so afraid of a little girl you have to keep your distance?" Susan tried an untrained *Taunting* check, but only got a six. Joseph saw right through it.

"I fight the way I fight, girl! You won't get lucky a third time."

Susan by now had figured out that when Joseph disappeared from in front of you, it meant he was soon going to be near you, so she was ducking even as he faded out. But this time he didn't appear next to her, swinging, but rather off to the side where he threw a knife at her. She popped up, not technically having dodged yet, and swung her blade. She made a called shot to the knife, getting one more than his attack, and knocking it aside.

"Getting smarter, huh?" she asked. "How many of those do you have?"

"You're not human! No one could have deflected that blade out of the air. You're some kind of demon, sent here to topple my throne! I see it so clearly now!"

"Yes, a demon... who walked in with the pope."

"You even have the pope under your vile spell! Archers, destroy this abomination of Hell before it does more evil work here!"

Wait, archers?

Susan looked where Joseph was calling to, and saw people in the stands raising crossbows. Everyone else was starting to panic and push to get to the edge and get the heck out of there. The archers were trying to get a bead on her, but with all the pushing and shoving, they couldn't get a clear shot. *That won't last long, have to think of something.*

"You never intended our duel to be fair, this was your plan all along!" Susan accused, taking a step forward.

"Did you really think I would give up my crown, just like that? Don't take another step!"

He pointed, and Susan looked over to the stands. The others, having been in the front row, were busy fighting the soldiers that had been concealed with the peasants in the rows behind them. The regular people were mostly getting in the way, so it was confusion in the stands. Hiraga, of course, was doing just fine. He was protecting Louise, who didn't want to explode anyone but was holding her wand ready. Sparkle was on her shoulder, doing the occasional *Thrust* if someone got too near. Charlotte was also handling herself well, freezing people into place by sticking their lower bodies to the ground, or freezing their weapons in solid ice. The pope and Julio were nowhere to be seen. Esme was being held by soldiers at swordpoint, and the two were moving off to the side out of the way of the fight. Charlotte was too busy fighting to have noticed.

"And now you're taking people hostage? I don't believe this."

"Believe it. I can spin this little duel to my advantage in so many ways, even going so far as to say the pope has been tainted with evil. They all saw what you did. No human could have kept up with my speed, the plebeians will believe their eyes and my reputation will grow. I'll be the one that saved them all."

"You haven't taken me yet," snarled Susan.

"Would you sacrifice Esme to escape? The other seem to be holding their own, but how long until a stray arrow takes one out? You really are a demon!"

"Who said anything like that? *Transposition!*" Susan cast it instantly, hoping her bonus from *Acceleration* and some energy would be enough to switch Joseph for Esme. It wasn't, and Susan thought about possible options. She realized Sparkle was somehow giving her card 3, *I Don't Think So*, and forced Joseph to take another look at his *RESolve* check to stay where he was. This resulted in a much more favorable result for her. As Esme didn't exactly know what was going on, but knew she was in a bad situation, she allowed whatever was happening to happen. Suddenly, Joseph found himself being held by his own soldier, who was quite surprised by this turn of events.

He's right about the arrow thing. They won't pierce my Armor but they could hit someone else. Probably by accident. We need some cover and a hasty exit, both of which my magic can provide.

"*Magical Ally, Major!*" Susan cast, taking the full time. Her newest *Ally* appeared, as Susan remembered now that she had reworked it after learning *Avatar of War*, having forgotten how to cast the original that knew *Deflection* and *Elemental Bolt*. This one just knew *Thrust* and got all the benefits from having *Avatar of War* put on it. Its claws and teeth (when it opened its mouth to bite) were covered in flames, it was armored, and now a +2 size modifier rather than +1. *Portable cover, on demand.*

And if the peasantry thought a bunch of people pulling off loose clothes to reveal armor and crossbows was scary, the appearance of a fully armored, elephant sized dragon really made them lose it.

Do they have elephants here?

The soldiers let their arrows fly in the general direction of the thing, which of course bounced off the DTR 6 armor harmlessly. Joseph gave the soldier that was grabbing him a shove, and shouted to fire at the girl, the dragon must be a trick! Sadly, most didn't hear him over the mad scramble to get out of there, and any that did now had the rather lengthy

process of reloading to look forward to.

Susan, having taken cover behind her dragon and now relying on it to take care of anything that got too close, dropped her *Augment Skill* and started working on *Teleportal*.

Thank goodness that's a Mercury spell, even if it's grade 10. Two and a half seconds later she had a portal that could go more than ten million kilometers, more than enough to get back to where they had met the pope in Romalia.

"Get through," she shouted to Esme, who was still staring at the dragon. She shook herself off and nodded, running towards it.

"You aren't getting away," said Joseph, appearing in front of it suddenly.

"Neither are you," Susan remarked, "*dazzle*."

She saw him shake it off (getting a 27 on his RESolve check).

"What are these spell you're using?" he asked. "And where's your wand? You aren't using that sword as a focus, I see that now."

"Bite-" She didn't get to finish the thought as he suddenly disappeared again, reappearing next to her and swinging his sword. Ties go to the defender, as his blade bounced off her midsection. *Argh, this -7 I'm under is killing me. And swinging my sword at him now would be 1d8-2! That's not going to hit.*

However, the dragon was not so encumbered, and lashed its tail at him, which being used as a weapon burst into flames. It got a 45 to hit, having a rating in *Unarmed* of 15 and a COORdination of 17. It really wasn't Joseph's day, as the dragon hit a 4 on the *Hit Location* table, that same left leg that was hit before. The dragon easily tore it off, not even counting the extra fire damage, even as Joseph disappeared and reappeared elsewhere.

As he only had one leg to stand on (too soon?) he toppled over, dropping his sword and screaming in agony. That is, until he passed out.

Oh great.

"Get through," she called again, unstrapping her knife.

"You want me to do it?" Esme called, holding her hand out for the knife. "I hate to make a girl as young as yourself a cold blooded killer."

"What? No, you don't- just get through!"

"Okay." Esme shrugged and dived through the hole in space. With her greater speed, Susan easily made her way to Joseph's prone form before anyone else could, and raised her knife to plunge it into him.

Good thing the leg went with him. That means I "have the whole creature" though he is in "separate pieces." Actually, why did the leg... never mind that now.

Are you sure you want to do that? asked The Darkness. *I mean you know what he's like. Toss the leg away and heal him if you must. That will save his life, which is what you want, right? But he'll never be able to fight again, and will probably have to step down, which is also what you want.*

As much as I would like him gone, after what he said I can't leave things like this. You both really would turn me into a demon. My running now will prove him right, and make him a martyr. This way, anyone who heard him call me a demon will have to question why a demon would turn away from her escape and save his life.

I suppose you know best.

The knife came down, and magical energy swirled around him, and suddenly he was whole again.

"Come on, we have to get out of here!" she called to the others, who were, along with everyone else who had seen the king fall, staring at her.

"I healed him, rather than letting him die," she shouted over the noise and confusion.

"You all saw it. I'm not your enemy, he is! I won the duel, call for him to honor his word!"

She and the others took off towards the portal and got through, leaving the confusion behind. Susan dropped it and the *Ally*, resheathing her knife.

"Are you all okay?" she asked.

"What did you do?" asked Esme. "I watched through that hole in the air. I thought you were going to slit his throat, but it put his leg back instead? What kind of magic is that?"

“Susan magic. His injury would have been a rallying point for any plans Joseph would have made after this. He could have declared war anywhere, citing demons and his injury, and the people would have gladly allowed it. This gives him two legs to stand on, so he has no case.”

“You’re fired,” said Hiraga.

“Plus he could have died before any healers could get to him, or from infection later as I already know you don’t know what bacteria are. Anyway, that could have gone better. Where’s the pope, by the way?”

“We were all told he wasn’t feeling well this morning. I guess we should have investigated further, or come told you about it,” admitted Louise. “Sorry about that.”

“Never mind. Which way is the place we just were?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean which way is it? If I wanted to walk there, which direction would I go? This actually works out better, because I need to know the “general distance and direction” which I know better now than I did before. While I was there, he could have been anywhere in that area. But now I know he’s still somewhere in that area, but I’m here, so the entire kingdom is in one direction rather than half of it being behind me. Just point it out and let me worry about my magic.”

“That way,” said Charlotte, pointing.

“Thank you. *Telesummon*.” Susan took the extra time, and as she was no longer maintaining anything, a surprised looking pope popped up out of nowhere.

“Goodness,” he said, looking around. “I guess now I know how Familiars feel.”

“Yes, how do they feel?” asked Susan, looking pointedly at Louise out of the corner of her eyes.

“What about Julio? He was in the cell with me.”

“Cell?” asked Louise.

“Just a second. Explanations later. *Telesummon*.”

Susan got the exact same result, and the Familiar of Vittorio appeared beside him.

“Hey! Help!” he was shouting, and he stumbled as though no longer holding onto anything, which he must have been doing before. “He- oh. Uh, what?”

“It’s all right, my friend. We seem to be safe. What happened?”

“The king planned a little bit more ahead than I thought. The duel went south when he saw he couldn’t win, and there was a sort of fight. We ran away.”

“Not that you couldn’t have taken his kingdom by force, should you have wanted it,” remarked Esme. “I’ve never seen two people move like that. And he was at your mercy just then. I wouldn’t have healed him like that.”

“Yes, well, he was doing something, that’s for sure. I was sort of in the middle of it, Sparkle, did you get anything from what he was doing?”

“Near as I could tell, it was some kind of *Swiftstep* effect. I mean he disappeared from one place and reappeared in another. If he was actually crossing the distance his legs would have snapped from the strain of stopping. Plus his cape wasn’t fluttering everywhere, and if he was running that cape would have been in the way. So he was just sort of willing himself where we wanted to be and his magic did the rest.”

Susan nodded, that was the best explanation. After all, *Acceleration* made her faster, but not fast enough to vanish and reappear. Even to someone *Decelerated* she would still seem to move from place to place, not just appear somewhere instantly. “Didn’t seem to help him much. I nicked him with my sword... sorry, your sword Hiraga, and you can have it back.” They traded again. “Anyway, I nicked him both times.”

“He would still need to do an *Active Dodge* I guess,” postulated Sparkle. “Your enhanced sword skill beat his evasion roll both times. He still *Swiftstepped*, you just cut him before he totally got it off.”

“Think I’ll stick to long range stuff unless absolutely necessary. Anyway, are you all right, Mr. Pope?”

“Mr. Pope?” mouthed Vittorio. He shook his head. “I’m fine. I was detained coming out of my room this morning and marched down to the dungeon ‘for my own safety’ and left there. They didn’t explain anything and went away again. Despite the rough treatment I am

unharmd. What happened at the duel?"

Susan and the others began explaining what happened, when suddenly someone burst into the room.

"Your holiness, you have returned early! You must come quickly, something terrible has happened!"

The group traded glances, then followed the man out. Passing a window, Susan saw that it was stormy here as well, even this far away from where they had been.

No, that's not ominous at all.

Here's Johnny! said The Darkness.
Oh crap.

A haunted man sat, staring at nothing, as the group walked into the meeting room. He stared blankly at them for a moment, then seemed to come to his senses and register who he was looking at. He jumped up out of the seat and started to go to one knee.

“Don’t bother with that, I’ve been told something terrible has happened. What is it?”

“Your holiness, I saw it with my own eyes. Fire and devastation as far as I could see. I hurried here as soon as I realized the cause, but I doubt anyone can stop the beast.”

“Beast? What beast? Please start at the beginning, my son.”

“I’m sorry, your holiness. At the beginning, yes. I am a messenger that flies between several villages on a griffin. I was delivering a message to someone in the town near Dragon Fire Mountain. That town...” The man seemed distraught, but pulled himself together again. “That town doesn’t exist anymore. It was burned to the ground.”

“An entire town! This is worse than I feared. Go on,” urged Vittorio.

“Of course I looked for the cause, checked for survivors, but there were none to be found. I thought perhaps the mountain was actually a volcano that had gone unnoticed for hundreds of years, because it looked like part of the mountainside had exploded outward. But something crawled away from the village, leaving a burning track behind it. I didn’t need to get very close to see what it was. I still can’t tell you, but I can tell you what it looked like. A dragon, made of stone, and covered with a black fog. Other, lesser dragons, hovered nearby. Where it walked the land burned, and the sight of it terrified me beyond words.”

“But to burn an entire village, how big would you say it was?”

“I believe it would stand as tall as this building, your holiness, if not taller.”

Vittorio’s eyes widened and he sat down heavily. “To think it would come so soon. We aren’t ready, and one of the Void mages is now even more heavily against us. But we must try, and do everything we can. How long ago was this?”

“I flew straight here for hours. Yesterday, midday.”

“And could you tell where it was heading?”

“Gallia.”

“Where we were?” breathed Susan.

“It wants us. The Ancient Dragon wants to consume Void, the thing it most fears. Just as happened before, long ago in history. And there are only three, to stand together against it. I fear we may be outmatched. If it destroys us the world will have no hope at all.”

“Eh, you have something better. Two *Natural Magicians*. Wait a second, can it sense Void mages somehow? I guess we would have to believe it does, right? Given it was making a straight path towards where you all were. Will it turn aside and come here now? Or will it go for Gallia because it believes alone, that one Void mage is easier to destroy?”

“It matters little,” insisted the pope. “We must stop it before any more towns are burned. Do you know how many lives are between the mountains and Gallia? How many villages?”

“Even one is too many, I agree. I could get troops and such closer but I’ve never seen these places you’re talking about. Unless you want to return to Gallia and leave from there, but I don’t think we’ll be really welcome there. Especially when the king learns he no longer has you hostage. He’s not going to want armies pouring out of holes in the air into his kingdom.”

“My kingdom,” said Charlotte. “Stupid uncle.”

“Yes, well, sadly you haven’t been crowned yet, so you ordering the military to start marching might be met with skepticism.”

“There’s no time to waste,” said Vittorio, standing again. “We must send messengers to all nearby kingdoms. Susan, if you can take us to see queen Anrietta, at least we can get her troops mobilized quickly.” Susan nodded. “Thank you, brave messenger. Stay here as my guest, and when this situation is taken care of, you will be rewarded as is your due. Your early warning may have saved many lives. Come Julio, I have messages to write.”

He swept out of the room, leaving the others at a loose end.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" asked Louise.

Susan shook her head. "I could ask the *Question* spell where it might go next, but remember, I asked it if the creature existed and it couldn't tell me. I don't see why it would work now. I could let us fly somewhere, but you guys could do that on dragons or whatnot. Or take a ship there. I don't think I can really help here, sorry."

"Wait, the book!" she exclaimed, and ran out of the room.

"Book? What book?" The others looked confused, and a few minutes later Louise was back, holding the book of spells that was still blank. "Void magic is supposed to be geared towards fighting this very creature, right? Maybe this book will finally reveal the Void spells we need to combat the... what did his holiness call it? The Ancient Dragon?"

"If it's going to, now would be the time."

She held the book close, and closed her eyes. Everyone in the room waited, holding their breath until suddenly the book illuminated, filling the room with light. Louise gasped. "It worked!" The light cut off, and she opened her eyes excitedly, then started paging through. "There's two spells here. An actual *Explosion* spell, which I have to believe is much more potent than me just casting other spells and having them blow up. And something called *World Door*. That sounds promising!"

"Try it and see what happens," suggested Susan. "Try to focus on the creature. I know it wasn't the greatest description but I have to believe you and this Ancient Dragon are linked somehow. That's why it woke up when it did, because the Void mages came together. It stands to reason you should be able to track it down."

She nodded, and got out her wand. Setting the book on the table, she pointed the wand to the side and started reading, causing the wand to glow with energy. It seemed like a long spell, *but of course she's casting from writings, which for me would increase the time by fifty percent*. When she was finished, a small hole appeared in the air, just like Susan's. They all crowded around it and looked through, and Susan could see a forest burning off in the distance. There was a dark shape that towered over the trees in the area, and it seemed to stop and look their way, as if sensing the magic of Void being used.

"Can't... hold it!" Louise complained, and the portal winked out. "We'll never get through if I can't make it bigger or hold it longer than that. I'll try again!"

"Wait," said Susan, "I saw through it. I can take us there with my magic. If yours is anything like mine, the size will be relative to how practiced you are casting the spell. Don't tire yourself out though, we'll need you more for that *Explosion* than for anything else."

"Okay. Come on, let's find the pope."

"You actually saw the creature?" he asked, looking through the book. "At least we know he's not too near anywhere populated. Still, we'll need to move quickly before he gets too far away to be useful."

"I was thinking I could go through and scout the area," volunteered Susan. "Maybe I can find a good place to lure it to, though I can't imagine what that place would be."

"If you're willing, I won't stop you. Any intelligence we can gather about the creature is more than we know now, six thousand years later."

"Okay. I'll be back."

"You want us to come?" asked Hiraga.

"No, better not. You saw how it turned to look at us. It sensed Void magic. Let's not let it know someone is in the area until we have a plan of attack."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* and stepped through. Sparkle came with her, then jumped up on her shoulders.

"What, no fairy?" she asked, looking around at the fire that was spreading across the forest in the distance.

"I'm trying to save my energy, we might need it all before the day is out."

"Yeah, and I used a bunch fighting that useless duel. I should have specified chess or something. *Flight*."

High in the air, Susan looked the area over. The creature was just as the man had described it, and enormous.

“Do you think damage works the same way here?” she asked Sparkle.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that thing is a +6 size modifier, wouldn't you say? I mean it's hard to judge, but those dragons flying around it are +2 or +3. It's easily eight times as big as they are.”

“Probably.”

“So what's the most damage you can do with *Elemental Line: Wind*?”

“Here? My planet rating can be as high as 12, so 2d12.”

“Now afterwards you divide that by 6. So the most damage you could do it would be 4. And that's on a maximum roll! How many times would you have to make it cross that line before damaging it, one at a time, would even make it notice?”

“I'm guessing a lot. It's made of rock, or at least it can smash through rock if it was sleeping in that mountain. That means it's pretty dense, and probably has a high DTR and thus, a lot of health.”

“Exactly. I have one actual combat spell *that it's immune to*. Even if I could hit it with something I would still have to get close enough. Those dragons flying around aren't going to-”

“SUSAN!” cried a deep voice, reverberating over the landscape.

“Yes?” Susan said in a small voice.

“SUSAN!” the voice called again.

“Oh no, it knows you're here. Wait, how is that possible?”

Why not go down and see what I want? Maybe I just want to introduce myself. I mean, I've not met you yet, in this guise.

“Darkness says that's him down there. Wait a second, if you can take the form of a giant dragon, why didn't you in my world? I'm not buying it.”

Don't be stupid. Darkness sounded annoyed. I have to work with what I find on each world. To go there in my real form would totally unmake an entire reality. I can't have that, I need its energy. So I have to choose a suitable vessel that will allow me to gather it. On your world it was that slightly crazy Tom Riddle. This world has an engine of destruction unlike any other. I mean, honestly, was your world even trying? I had to take your magic and his to even be a threat. Look at me down there, isn't that a magnificent form?

“So that is you, down there?”

Part of me. Just like part of me is in you. And is attacking countless other world even as we speak. Parallelism for the win, in other words.

“Okay, we're worse off than I thought. Imagine Tom taking the form of that thing down there, and you basically have what we're facing. It won't have his magic, because that magic doesn't exist here. But it can do whatever this creature would normally do, and have at least a human level intelligence, rather than being just a beast.”

I think I'm being insulted.

“Uh, it's looking at us.”

“And that's our cue to leave. *Teleportal!*”

Susan stepped back through, snapping the portal shut behind her.

“Did you see it?” asked Louise.

“I saw it,” she replied sadly. “And learned a few things. I don't even know if it's possible to beat it. Not unless that other new spell of yours is orders of magnitude larger than anything we've seen you blow up so far. It's just too big.” *And it can probably do things with Darkness' power that the original creature couldn't.*

“We can't just give up! We have to try everything!”

“I know, I just want you to know what we're up against.”

“Did you see anything in its path we could use?” asked Vittorio.

“Unless you can collapse a mountain on it, no. I mean if it could be lured to the middle of that valley it's passing by, maybe that could be collapsed and slow it down. But to actually kill the thing? You couldn't six thousand years ago, why do you think you would be able to do it now? We need to seal it back up again, or drop it into the ocean or something.”

"We don't know how it was stopped all those years ago," he replied sadly. "I doubt it ran out of things to burn, after all, we're still here. We can only battle it as well as we are able."

"I'll help as I can, of course."

"Thank you. Just being able to move troops around quickly will be of tremendous benefit. In fact, my forces here should be ready within the hour. Can you take them to meet up with Anrietta's troops? As we are the only ones available, we shall be the first into battle."

"Of course."

"Then please open the door now, so we can go there and tell her what has happened. She'll need that same amount of time to get her forces ready as well."

"Very well."

And so, Susan watched as a depressingly small number of troops filed past, through her *Teleportal* into Anrietta's kingdom. She had left it open, going back and forth between the two places to deliver messages and such. Finally the last soldier was through, and Susan started opening a portal back to the place she saw the creature.

It was big, but not really all that quick. Hopefully it won't be too far away. These people can't ride dragons, they would risk the creatures turning on them if they got too close. And there aren't that many griffins in the kingdom they can ride.

At Vittorio's insistence, Susan placed the other end of the *Teleportal* near the valley she had seen, and both forces started marching through. Susan decided she should keep it open in case they needed a quick retreat.

"I'm hoping it will turn and come through this area when it senses we're all nearby," explained Vittorio. "Then, our Earth mages will collapse the area and pin it. That's when Louise will hit it with *Explosion*. I will also be seeking to harm it with my Void magic of purification. It should harm a creature of evil, such as this monster. Tiffania, your job is to erase the memories of any dragons that should come near. Hopefully that will confuse them and make them wander off without attacking."

"I'll do my best!"

"So will I," promised Louise.

If it does get pinned down, maybe I can get down close enough to cast Shrink, not that it would help much against something as huge as this thing.

"Are you sure using a dragon is wise?" asked Hiraga, as Juilo and the pope mounted the white dragon Juilo had brought through the *Teleportal*.

"My ability as a Familiar is to control beasts," he explained. "I can keep control of it." *I hope you're right.*

The Ancient Dragon did seem interested in what everyone was doing over there, and slowly turned to head towards them. It seemed the lure of the three Void mages was enough to make it turn, just as the pope had hoped. Earth mages were raising elementals, like the one that Miss Longbill had used, though they were not as big and impressive as hers had been. Others were weakening the structure of the nearby cliffs, making them more ready to collapse. Susan looked her character sheet over as everyone worked, trying to figure out a way she could help.

Makes you feel kind of helpless, doesn't it?

I admit, it's not a feeling I'm used to.

Relying on others when you're so used to taking care of problems yourself. Must be pretty grating on you.

Do you have a point?

Just making conversation.

Soon, the dragon came into range and looking around. Soldiers lined the walls, which Susan thought was a bit dangerous. Weren't they going to collapse those walls in a second? How far away could they reach with their magic? The pope was with Juilo, the rune on his hand shining with inner light, and both were on the dragon. Hiraga, Tiffania, and Louise were with the ground forces, ready to strike when the creature was buried. Susan and Sparkle were

again in the air, hovering near the pope in case their magic could be useful in some way. Susan's *Legion* was also out, patrolling the area, with orders to attack any dragon in range. The air felt charged, and lightning struck nearby, setting more fires. The ground trembled with every step the Ancient Dragon took, and it seemed a cloud of dragons accompanied it now, ready to follow it into battle. Susan could see the shape of the creature through the cloud of darkness that shrouded it, and its glowing eyes swept the scene.

"What are you little people doing down there?" it asked, sounding amused. The creature's voice was low and projected like thunder. Everyone there seemed amazed it could speak. "Did you think to lure me down into that place where you weakened the rocks? And harass me with these little Earth elementals?" It crushed one, as if making the point. "I don't think so." It took in a mighty breath, then shot fire at the walls of the valley, making them tremble, melt, and start collapsing. "Go, my pretties," it intoned, and the dragons shot forward towards the knights.

Wait, if they can use magic, aren't they nobles? If they're nobles, why are they knights? Figure that out later!

"Now I must do my part," said Vittorio, standing. "That black mist will interfere with my spell, but it cannot be helped. We will need to move closer, Julio."

"All right."

The dragon slowly moved forward as the pope started chanting, and his hand lit up with magic. The dragon roared at him, and for a wonder it seemed to actually start hurting the thing.

Oh, I see. The way you deal with huge things is to give them the opposite of Regeneration. That will tear anything down pretty quickly. That sort of thing wouldn't be divided by the size of the creature. Now why didn't I think of that?

Lower to the ground, Tiffania was wiping the memories of what dragons she could, and that actually seemed to be working. They would glow briefly, then give up the attack and fly away. Hiraga was protecting Louise, his OTR 10 sword able to slice dragon scale quite easily, while she harassed them with minor *Explosions*. It didn't do much more than give him an opening, but it was enough.

Gee, maybe they can take it out with only the three of them. My Legion would be the equal to stupid King Fancy Pants, as even he can't be in twenty five places at once. We can do it. We can win. We feel great!

The dragon knew it was the pope that was hurting it, and so through the pain of its degeneration it drew in another mighty breath.

Oh boy, I hope this works!

"*Deflection!*" both Susan and Sparkle cast, as the dragon breathed fire at the pair. Technically, even if it was huge, the stream of fire it shot out was a "single attack" and was not "area-effect." It was actually just a scaled up version of Susan's own *Elemental Attack: Fire* and could technically be blocked by a shield. A shield used by a giant, perhaps, but the rules didn't specify a shield held by a human hand.

The attack bounced off, and Julio nodded his thanks for keeping them from being cooked alive.

Used ten energy for that, can't do that too many more times, even with Energy Boost.

"Ah, Susan," said the dragon, its fire expended. "Causing trouble wherever you go. One of these days I'm going to really put some thought into paying you back for that. But today, I think I'll eat this guy."

"Eat?" Susan and Sparkle said together. As they watched, a third eye opened on the Ancient Dragon and the one the pope and Julio were riding started being drawn towards the mouth of the Ancient Dragon. Susan saw she had one chance. "*Augment STRength, now!*" she said to Sparkle, who was confused but complied. As she cast, Susan readied the spell she was going to use, and flew backwards away from the creature. Julio tried in vain to do whatever he did to control his dragon, but it was no use, and both were drawn ever closer to their doom.

Just as the teeth snapped shut, Susan cast.

Defeat

Time: Just then

Place: The air over the Ancient Dragon

As the jaws of the Ancient Dragon closed over the poor, defenseless minor dragon the pope and his Familiar were riding, Susan cast a spell. She cast the only spell she could think of that would get the two out of there in one piece and deprive the Ancient Dragon of its meal. She cast a spell, and she actually didn't bother to put much energy into it, as the difficulty was the distance and they were honestly right there. But it was being cast on two people, so she put a little energy into it. I mean she'd be a fool not to, right? She can put in four and be almost guaranteed to get two back with her rating in *Energy Boost*. Even as high as six and three in a pinch, though that isn't as sure a thing.

But what is a sure thing in life? I mean, there you are, being pope, right? Then this weird girl starts acting all high and mighty and these two other Void mages are found. The very next day you're staring down a dragon and thinking maybe being up where the thing's mouth was wasn't such a good idea. You can feel the heat of the flames as the dragon you're riding helplessly inches closer. Teeth as big as you are can be seen, and you can't help but wonder what this creature would need to eat in a day to actually support this amount of mass.

Oh right, the spell. Susan cast *Telesummon*, getting a 16 by taking the full time (it was only 1.6 seconds, and it took longer than that for the Ancient Dragon to open its mouth. She was at a minus two for casting it on both of them, but used four energy, so it worked out. As the jaws closed, both men found themselves in Susan's arms, and with her *STRength* augmented by magic, for a total of eleven, she could easily lift 350kg. That's over 770 lbs for those that are more used to those measurements. Both men were strapping, healthy boys, but they didn't weigh nearly four hundred pounds apiece.

Susan continued flying away, fast as she could. It took a second for the dragon to realize it hadn't gotten the meal it wanted, and started inhaling for another blast of fire. Amazingly, the pope hadn't lost the spell, apparently willing to give his all even to the last second, and he went up another slight amount on the Susan Scale.

"We're getting too far away!" he said. "My magic won't be able to reach him."

"I can't defend us with both hands holding you guys. Sorry, I have to drop you, Julio!"

"NO!" cried the pope.

"I'm only teasing. Hope you've got this by yourself, Sparkle!"

"I'm at half energy, I can't promise to deflect too many more."

Susan changed direction, with the majority of the dragons having flown to follow his "attack" command, the sky was now much clearer. She figured if she could get behind him, he wouldn't be able to effectively shoot fire at her.

Sparkle *Deflected* another blast of fire, but had to spend her card 71, *Lucky Break* to not die.

"Okay, that's all my cards, unless you have something up your sleeve, the next one might hit us."

"Yeah, *Extra Cash* and... oh, a *Damage Add*," that she immediately played on the pope. *Forgot about that one, wasn't thinking we could hurt this thing at all, so I didn't bother playing it.* The Ancient Dragon roared as it took more damage that turn, and decided it was not in the position it wanted to be at the moment. It took one more breath, this time directing fire away from Susan and towards the soldiers on the cliff. It was petty, and some of the dragons got roasted, but it didn't care about that. The humans there died, so it felt it had accomplished something, at least. It deliberately didn't roast the side with the Void mages, probably because it wanted to eat them too, but raw, not cooked. It then raised up on its hind paws and shouted "Enough of this!" Slamming into the ground it knocked people over for a mile (or so) and a shimmering energy barrier sprang up around it.

Susan could tell the barrier was blocking whatever Vittorio was doing, as the Dragon's flesh started to heal again rather than peel away. He stopped maintaining the spell and looked at that barrier.

"Now what?" he asked.

“Unless you want to *Teleportal* down below the barrier and be cut off totally from our support, I don’t know. Watch it to see if it moves and start attacking it when it does? That spell of yours hurt it, but awfully slowly. We’re going to need a good plan for our next attack.”

“I agree. But we have hope now, we’ve shown it can be pressed, and even frustrated. To think it could talk! Come, set us down and let us take stock of who made it through the attack.”

“We only made it through because of you,” Julio put in. “Thank you for saving our lives like that.”

“Not a problem. I once used that spell totally inappropriately so I like to think my using it today has made up for that, somewhat. Come on.”

Susan flew down to the ground, where everyone was picking themselves back up after being knocked over by the Dragon’s attack.

Was that a power, or just the raw STREngth of that creature? she wondered.

It turned out, half the soldiers that had come had perished in the creature’s last fire attack, and Vittorio made a point of asking the captain for the names of the men that had died when this was over.

“I’ll have some kind of monument made in their honor,” he promised.

Yeah, made of this thing’s bones, I hope.

“So what’s our next move?” asked Louise, as everyone gathered around to see what was next. Susan was busy plunging her knife into anyone who was wounded, or into their armor to repair that.

“We need to get more people attacking it directly, rather than just the pope,” suggested Hiraga. “Did you see, when he was using his spell that mist or whatever started to clear. I bet some phosphorus grenades or rockets would put a dent in it. If only I could get something like a modern fighter jet, put some missiles into it while the pope weakened it. We really still have no clues as to how to move between worlds? Siesta’s great-grandfather got here somehow, right? And Void magic is supposed to help us fight this creature, right? So now would be a great time for some kind of spell to appear in that book to get me home.”

“Actually,” said Louise, getting out her book, “it may have already, and the clue might be in the name. This spell is called *World Door*. What if that means I can open doors to other worlds, too?”

“Hey, that would be amazing! You really think it would work?”

“I’m happy to try. If your weapons are really that much better than our magic, we could certainly use them.”

“How about it, Susan?” he asked. “We have all the planets, and you’re always saying how much more powerful you would be if you could only have access to all your magic. Could you help me clean out an army base or something, get some explosive weapons to use here?”

“Sure thing! It would let me get my book of magic out, at the very least. And if it works once it’ll work again, and once this situation is over I can go back, then have a little chat with Inari. That creature though, it knows I’m here. I should probably tell you, it probably now knows our plan, too. Sorry, my fault kinda, but can’t be helped. As soon as I’m gone it may resume the attack. We’ll probably want to get more people here, maybe fire or water mages, people who can deflect or neutralize that fire breath of his.”

“With some more time, we can get additional forces here. You dropped that *Teleportal*?”

“Yeah, when it started shooting fire at you and I needed all my concentration for that.”

“Then let us go back and start bringing more forces here. The call has gone out, and people should, I hope, be rushing to aid us. We’ll both stay here, Julio, you can go and organize things on the other side. That way all the Void mages and Susan will be here, and it’ll stay bottled up in that shell while it thinks of what to do next.”

“Got it.”

Susan opened the *Teleportal* again, hoping she might get some rest soon. Even her

energy wasn't limitless. People started coming through, in small groups at least, and all wearing different styles of armor. Some didn't have armor at all, and claimed to be mercenaries.

"I put out the call for them, too. Not all magic users are nobles, of course. Some lose their titles, or have no use for them. Some just want to further their magical arts and can't be bothered with the other things that come along with being a noble. But everyone has to eat. So they hire their services out, and I figured with a large enough bounty on the head of this creature, everyone who helps can take a share and make some money. Like I said before, I'd rather be poor and alive than rich while the world burns."

"Sensible," agreed Susan.

He started coordinating their positioning around the Ancient Dragon, based on what they said their specialties were, and while the force looked pathetically small in Susan's eyes, she herself was a good example of not judging a book by its cover. Who knew what sort of magic these oddball characters knew, *I mean that little guy is carrying around some kind of tuba or something. What's his deal?*

Night started creeping up on them, and Susan told Vittorio she would have to close the *Teleportal* to sleep. She needed to get her energy back, so when the creature started moving again, she would be ready. He said that was fine, and told Julio to just have people wait there for the next morning, ready to fight at sunrise. He said he would, and Susan shut it down for the night.

It passed peacefully, the glow of the two moons and the energy shield around the creature lighting the place up enough so watchfires weren't needed. Susan got to sleep as early as she could, in case it picked midnight to start attacking again, but to an immortal creature like the Ancient Dragon, one night was hardly worth considering, so she woke refreshed the next morning.

"Ready to try this?" Louise asked, after a light breakfast brought through the portal.

"I better shrink us," Susan cautioned. "Remember, the one just between two places on this world was pretty small. To go between worlds might be even smaller."

"Good point."

Susan put *Flight* and *Shrink* on Hiraga, Sparkle, and herself, and hovered in front of Louise.

"Wait," said Hiraga, "how will we get back?"

"I can get us back," explained Susan. "My father left plenty of notes in my spellbook about moving across worlds. Four times he had to move these enormous towers between worlds, to put them back in their right positions. They had been moved to disrupt the energy they were keeping in check so The Darkness could take it for itself. So a variant spell of *Dimension Gate* can be used. It's just you have to see the dimension you want to go to, or have certain information he was able to gain from the towers themselves in order to do it. So normally most people can't. As I've been here some time, I can open a door back here."

"Guess I shouldn't have worried, you really are powerful!"

"Magic is powerful, I'm just the conduit."

"Whatever you say. Okay, we're ready! Good luck, Louise!"

She held out a hand, and Hiraga perched there. Louise raised her wand, and intoned the gibberish words to the spell she needed to open the World Door. To Susan's amazement, it worked, and a modern day Japan met her eyes.

"Let's go!" said Hiraga, flying up and pulling her. "That's home, let's get through before it closes."

"You better come back, Hiraga!" shouted Louise as both darted through. Susan felt Hiraga's hand leave hers, and suddenly she was full sized again, and standing in an odd room that some kind of energy barrier in front of and behind her. The one behind her vanished, and she heard a pleasant voice from out of nowhere.

Meanwhile, Hiraga looked back through the hole, looking for Susan. "Didn't she come through?" he asked.

"She isn't there?" Louise managed, before she couldn't hold the spell anymore and the door closed.

Both looked around, wondering what had happened, as Susan was on neither side of the door.

Back with Susan...

"Please remain calm. You have been redirected from your intended transit destination. Your transit is very important to us. An agent will be along shortly to assist you. Please remain in the holding area while your threat level is determined. Thank you for your patience."

"Uh, what?" asked Sparkle, looking around.

"Yeah, what?" asked Susan, also looking around. The cell she was in was stark, little more than a metal box with one side open. That side shimmered with energy, and probably not the 'oh that tickles' sort of energy, should you be stupid enough to poke it with some kind of appendage.

"If you would like the previous message repeated, please say 'repeat that.' Otherwise, remain in the holding area while you are scanned. The scan is non-invasive and completely harmless." There was a pause. "You have not said 'repeat that' so the scan will now commence." A beam of light swept over Susan, and she shielded her eyes. She needn't have bothered, it was gone again a second later. "Your results will now be computed, and an agent will be dispatched to assist or destroy you, as appropriate. We thank you again for your patience."

"Right. Sure," said Susan, wondering what in the blue blazes was going on. Heck, it might even be shifted up to Navy blue blazes. She didn't have long to wait as almost immediately a figure approached the cell from down the hall. It seemed her cell was directly opposite the hallway leading away, and the energy barrier vanished.

"Sorry about that," said the figure, which was roughly human shaped. It was covered, from head to toe, in a silvery liquid armor that reflected Susan's worried face back at her. Where a human would have eyes, a faintly glowing red visor was inset into the metal. Otherwise, there wasn't a seam or rivet on the entire figure. A staff, pointed at both ends, could be seen sticking out from behind one shoulder and the figure's leg. "You bear the mark of Inari, so you must be okay. Are you in some kind of trouble, or shall we just put you back at your intended destination?"

"You know Inari? Can you take me to see her? My friend got lost between worlds and I have no idea where she is!"

"I guess you are in trouble. Please, come out of there and we can see about finding your friend. And greetings to you as well," he said to Sparkle, giving a little bow.

"What is this place?" she asked, stepping out and looking down the hall. It seemed to be filled with a bunch of identical cubes, each with an energy barrier across it.

"Welcome to The Hub, I'm Silverstreak, and I'm sure you must have a lot of questions. Come, I'll offer you something to eat and we can sit down to get you squared away."

"I just ate, but some answers would be nice."

"Right this way!" He indicated the hallway where he had come from, and both started walking through the narrow corridors.

"Homey."

"Ah, yes, this area is rather stark, isn't it? Don't worry, it opens up further on. If something should come through that isn't as pleasant as yourself, we need to be able to contain it and this sort of layout helps. Here we are." They came to what looked like an elevator, and Silverstreak stepped inside. "Meeting room 453 is free, I believe. We'll head there."

"Fine with me." The doors closed, and then a second later they opened again.

"And here we are. If you'll just come this way?"

"People say I don't mess around, they don't even know."

Silverstreak chuckled. "Yes, one of the advantages of having a complete understanding of how time and space work means no tedious waiting for elevators."

Susan followed the being into a very rich looking meeting room, all ancient wood and

plush chairs and though she couldn't see any lighting devices, the space was still evenly lit. Silverstreak motioned her to sit, and she did, a cup with what looked like water materialized on her right. Silverstreak also sat, and she noticed the staff now standing straight up next to him, as though balanced on the point.

"Who are you? What is this place? How did I get here?" A million more questions fought their way to the forefront.

"Let me give you a little background, that should answer most of your questions. Any you have after that I'll be glad to address. Sound fair?" Susan nodded. "Great. Let's tackle the last one first. How did you get here? It's actually a security system I created, triggered by a being leaving a world by a different means than they entered."

"Wait, so then why didn't the guy next to me come along? He got brought to that world by a different method than he left."

"Did he? Then it should have. Wait, was it a different person?"

"No, the same person. Just a different spell."

"Ah, that might explain it, the system may consider that to be same method if it's the same person. I'll look into it, make sure that isn't an exploitable weakness or anything."

"So how is this a security system?"

"Consider this situation- a nefarious type gains access to other worlds and starts to exploit them. He or she brings some magic or technology of a level unseen on the world he travels to. The beings there banish them using what means they can, either to just get rid of that person back to their own world, or to another so it's not their problem anymore. Well, instead of doing things at random or inflicting someone like that on another unsuspecting world, they're redirected here. If needed, we can take care of the situation or help the person if they need it."

"I need help, there's no doubt about that."

"And it shall be freely given, if your story is what I think it will be. But now let's go back to the second question; what is this place? This is the Hub. It's where my agents and those I deem worthy to get my direct assistance meet. From here we watch the comings and goings between worlds, and defend those we can by keeping Darkvoid away from them. I take it you two have met, given you carry a piece of him inside yourself."

"You're talking about The Darkness?"

"It has many names, usually given by those that meet it. Is that why you're traveling? But no, let me answer your questions first, after all, I am the host. Where was I, ah, who am I? Well, you've met my 'cousin' for lack of a better term, Inari."

"You're another higher order being?"

"Correct. There's a few of us running around, and we each seem to have found our specialty for interacting with the, no offense, lower dimensional planes. Inari went with magic, and being a trickster, usually. I focused on technology, and trying to be as straightforward as possible. In fact, I can probably wager, and win, that she really didn't tell you much of anything at all."

"You got that right! She didn't even mention about the language thing, or that I could understand all languages."

"It's actually far worse than that. If you don't find it too creepy, may I see your character sheet?"

"Finally! Someone who knows about them. I guess it's okay, I mean you scanned me, I have to think you already know about as much about me as you could learn from this." She handed the sheet over.

Silverstreak took it with reverence, something Susan didn't even think was possible for others to do. He looked at the front, then flipped it over to the skills section. "Yeah, I was afraid of that."

“Afraid of what?” Susan was concerned, looking over the page to see that maybe her skills had gone away or something. They seemed to be all there.

“Oh, it’s nothing bad!” Silverstreak hastened to assure her. “It’s just... Inari. She really didn’t tell you anything, as usual. ‘Let them work it out for themselves, Silverstreak, it’s more fun.’ My shiny metal butt it’s more fun. There’s a couple of skills here that you really need as a dimensional traveler, and she just expected you to figure them out on the fly while dodging whatever the world was throwing at you.” He shook his head, laying the paper down. “We can fix that in a moment. I was telling you about myself, and my kin. Like I said, I’m Inari’s counterpart, but for technology rather than magic. We both do similar things, and that’s to send people to various worlds to take care of problems there. We can’t go ourselves, for various reasons, but beings like you have no trouble passing between worlds. It’s like we watch the tree, you keep the branches free of parasites.”

“Tree?”

“Ah, yes, it’s best to think of the different realities as branches of a tree. Here, I’ll demonstrate.” He waved a hand, and a hologram of a tree sprang from the table. “The trunk is where the realities started. There was one reality, and the tree was small. But as time went on the tree grew, and branches appeared. This is why most places have humanoid type lifeforms and somewhat similar conventions. They all came from the trunk. Now as each reality grew, more branches and then leaves appeared. We’re concerned with the main branches, or how close to the original way the dimension is supposed to run. See, if Darkvoid, or The Darkness in your case, gets the original branch it gets all the sub branches too. So it doesn’t bother with individual leaves, out at the fringes of possibility. It’s why, when you travel, you see worlds that are so radically different. If you stepped only a little ways away you would end up with only minor differences. You see?”

“Sure. If you’re attacking a castle you start at the bottom, and pound the heck out of one wall. Not at the top and arrange your forces to attack the whole thing. Once one wall goes down, the castle is finished.”

“Exactly. So, have you been to many worlds?”

“Just the one. I was actually supposed to be tracking down my father, but literally ran into someone going from Inari’s place to where my father first went. That’s how I ended up where I did.”

“I see. Wait, that was your first dimensional hop? Has it been going okay?”

“Hardly. I got stuck there because they didn’t have all the planets, and I couldn’t get out my magic book so I had to rely on just spells I had memorized or could research myself. Now this huge dragon thing is on a rampage and burning everything in sight. It’s not going well. We were trying to get some weapons from another world to fight it.”

“Yeah, that’s a standard solution. Just a second.” Silverstreak turned to the side and drew a line through the air diagonally, which seemed to light up like a computer display. On the other side was a woman sitting down at some kind of terminal, and Susan could see many other beings behind her, all busy with stuff. Talking, comparing what they saw on their screens, getting water, it was like an interdimensional office building.

“What can I do for you, boss?”

“Check up on the situation in 3874734 for me, would you? And what’s going on with 7543485?”

The woman shook her head. “Getting worse. Darkvoid clones keep popping up, and they’re getting closer to the key to destroying the whole place. The one clone is resisting, but I don’t think he can hold out much longer.”

“Keep me posted. I think I may have found someone who can help.” He pointed a thumb at Susan.

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” gushed the woman. “I’ll put it on my priority list. And you

wanted 3874734, right? I'll have that for you in a few minutes."

"Thanks." The window closed, and he turned back to Susan.

"Sorry about that, it doesn't stop around here, I'm afraid. Where were we? Oh, right, you came here because you used a different type of magic to leave 3874734 in order to get weapons to fight this creature, right? I guess I better go over some of the rules, before you get caught in a really bad situation."

"Rules?"

He nodded. "I didn't make them, but they exist. It pays to keep them in mind, and it relates to the skills I talked about earlier. This is actually going to be much easier for me than most, as you're a Paragon. I can just put the skills on your *character sheet* and not have to spend time explaining how to do them, and tediously teaching you the slow way. You just make the checks, you don't have to understand the theory."

"True. But you should give me some explanation, right?"

"Oh, of course! Now the first skill is something we call *Adaptive*. Basically, it lets you pick up the fringes of something unique to the worlds you visit. For instance, if you went to a world where everyone piloted some kind of mech, you could jump in one and start piloting it. Something like that is trained only, see, so you couldn't use *Augment Skill*."

"You still know about my kind of magic?"

"Sure. Just because I don't specialize in it, that doesn't mean I'm ignorant of it. Now, the great thing with *Adaptive* is that you can swap it out. You have a 5 rating in the skill, but you don't have to throw that skill away in the next world and pick up another. It may use a different stat, but the skill roll remains constant. Secondly, it will let you bypass the need for certain backgrounds. Like using a different type of magic, if everyone on that world has that type of magic, you can use it too. The basics, anyway, like I said."

"That would have been nice to know beforehand," she remarked darkly.

"Inari, am I right? Now the next skill is *Dimensional Attunement*. With this skill you can... wait, you have *Magic Sense*. It's that, for dimensional stuff. You can use it to sense out other travelers like yourself, or tell if an object doesn't belong in a certain dimension."

"That would be great for telling who was being influenced by Darkvoid."

"That's right. Now, about objects- be careful. Any object exclusive to a world will stay there when you leave. Even if you put it in your *pocket dimension*, it'll stay behind and you won't find it when you ask for it."

"That's no fair!"

He shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's the way things are. It's a way to keep contamination to a minimum, I think. Technology will generally come along, because most worlds will eventually come up with most devices. And any that are too advanced won't be figured out because the people won't have the background information to construct duplicates. Maybe not power sources, so keep an eye on that. Super efficient power sources may come from material only found on one world, so you might find a gun but not the battery!"

"Like back in the world you were just in there's a rock called Windstone, if I'm reading this report right. Makes an island float I guess?"

"Yeah, I visited that place!"

"Okay. That wouldn't come along because that stuff is native to one place. But if you brought a wand or one of their pistols it would be fine. You see where I'm going with this? You can pretty easily tell what will and what won't, because anything that won't you probably haven't seen before." Susan nodded, frowning. "Don't worry, there's a way around the restriction, for things you really, really want to bring along. The *sub-space pocket*. Items you put into that can be pulled out everywhere. Plus it's not magic, it's an act of will, so it'll work without casting any spells! I don't know exactly where it came from, but when people, long ago, started moving across dimensions and sometimes found they could summon up things they fell in love with on certain worlds, I looked into it. The technique was refined, and it's been in use ever since."

"What's the catch? There must be one, if it's breaking the 'rules' like that."

"The catch is, the size of the pocket directly relates to your skill. It rises pretty fast, but you won't be putting a car in with a one rating. You can fit... a book, at most, to start. I guess whoever set it up figures if you put the time or XP or practice into making the space bigger,

you can probably be trusted with whatever you put in it.

“So that’s three things to put XP into. Now, if you can think of two trained only skills I can make it a skill group and get you them for free. Otherwise, with your permission, I’ll take 3 XP and put them on your sheet so you have access to them.”

“Are there magical skills I don’t know about? The people where I just was didn’t know about *Magic Sense* but I could teach them about it, and they picked it up.”

“Let’s see...” He picked up the sheet again and scanned it over. “No, not really anything you don’t already have.” He looked her over, or at least the red in his visor seemed to shift a little bit. “Apart from your companion, you’re traveling alone?”

“I wasn’t. The person traveling with me, Luna, got knocked into when Hiraga hit us. She went spinning off somewhere.”

“You did say something about a friend. I think you better tell me your story before we go any further.”

“Sure.” Susan proceeded to tell him about her father, and how he had left and left her the book. (She got it out of her *Pocket Dimension* with a sigh, and Silverstreak looked it over as he listened. While she was thinking about it she also got a few other things out, mostly spell formula she thought she might like, and set them aside to take) She told him about how Tom had been taken over by Darkvoid and how he had taken her magic as well. She talked about fighting him inside Harry and deciding to go after her father. First to make sure he was all right and if not, take up his quest to save his world. She finished by talking about what she had gone through with Louise and the others, and finally coming here.

“That’s quite the task you’ve set for yourself!” Silverstreak seemed impressed. “I think I’ve heard of your father, actually. There are so few dimensional travelers around, I hear about them all sooner or later. Yes, quite the challenge.” He picked up her character sheet again. “Fifteen XP. It would be enough...”

“For what?”

Silverstreak considered his words carefully a moment. “I could give you a new background. If I’m thinking of the right person, your father effectively had it, given he carried a staff which gave those that touched it certain abilities. This would be a little different, but still pretty effective for you. It comes with about seven skills, most of which you probably wouldn’t need. But two you would really like, and that would make up the skill group. I’ll give you a rating of 0 in the others, just to say you’ve gotten the “training” in them, if you want to pick them up later. How does all that sound?”

“Like a once in a lifetime deal.”

He laughed. “It pretty much is. And if you don’t mind me keeping this book for a little while, while you finish up taking out that Dragon you were talking about, I can get you some new magic, as well. I’ve got some good spell casters around here, they can put some spells you’re missing into the book, and I can augment it with some sensors. That way it could analyze things from other worlds and come up with equivalents in your magical ‘language’ so to speak. You’re one of the lucky ones, more versatile than most.”

“I would need to at least get the *Dimension Gate* spell and my father’s notes so I can make it back to the place I was. Other than that, you’re welcome to it.”

“I can make you a copy, it’s no big deal.”

“And you’re really willing to do all this for me?”

“Ah, yes, remember what I was saying before about you being a possible solution to a problem somewhere?”

“Yes?”

“In return, I want you to give up your quest, temporarily,” he hastened to add, “to find Luna, and help these other people out. I think one of your spells in particular is going to solve their biggest problem quite nicely. I hope it doesn’t go that far, but if it does, I would like an agent on the scene and you have the spells for it. The one I’m thinking of is not even that high a grade! While you do that I’ll work out some possible vectors your friend took, and get you the data so you can check those worlds where there’s a high probability you’ll find her.”

“That would be such a big help. Wait, can Sparkle get the background too? She has XP to spend, and if it’ll help me it’ll help her.”

“Sure, if she’s willing to spend it on this. Trust me, it’s well worth it, for your particular

situation.”

“I have been saving it for when we left that world. I suppose now is a good a time as any,” Sparkle remarked.

“Deal then. Let me see your character sheet, too.”

Sparkle jumped up on the table and her sheet appeared, and Silverstreak materialized a pen out of somewhere and started marking them up. “There you go!” he said brightly, handing them back.

Susan eagerly looked at the BACKGROUNDS section, and it seemed she was now a *Spirit Mage*. It also seemed she knew about *Spirit Energy* now, and how to tap into sources of power like *Ley Lines*. She was down to 3XP, but told herself it was worth it.

“You can check them all over mentally later,” he told them. “And I’ll add some notes about the skills I’ve put down in your book. Time passes quickly here in relation to most places, but it still passes. Let’s make sure we’ve gone over everything and get you on your way. The situation in 7543485 can’t wait too long.”

“And I always pay my debts. Thank you, for everything.”

He shrugged. “You paid for it. I just made it possible for you to access. It seemed only fair, given your situation. It doesn’t make up for losing your friend, but hopefully it makes it a little easier to find her.”

“I hope so.”

“Great. Now, let’s get you some equipment so you can get back here!” He stood up and the door opened, leading into the space she saw earlier.

Does this guy not like to walk, or just show off? Making a map of this place would probably prove to be impossible, if this guy can just rearrange the corridors at a whim.

Everyone looked up at Susan walked in with Silverstreak, and given her *Overconfidence* she looked them all right in the eye. They greeted her warmly, and went back to work.

“How much time do we have in 7543485?” he asked the woman he had spoken to earlier.

“Hours, at best. She’s about to leave her party and go off on her own. She’ll get slaughtered for sure!”

Silverstreak shook his head. “And that would be a waste. She’s the last of her kind on that planet, and there’s a lot the people there could learn from her. Okay, come on over here.”

He led Susan over to a shelf where there were sitting some watch looking devices. He picked up a smaller model, and handed it to her.

“Put it on, then make a code so if someone steals it, they can’t use it.” Susan did as she was asked, snapping it around her wrist. It lit up, and a five digit number appeared. “Turn the crown to move the numbers.” She did, then Silverstreak had her draw a shape over the numbers, which activated the display. “Normally it’ll show you local time, but the real power is in the press. Click the crown in.” She did, and the clock was replaced with a bunch of tiny icons, all circles, that probably meant various things. “See the one that looks like a Japanese archway? Scale it up with the crown, that’s the way. That’s the one you’ll use to get back here. It’ll make a portal big enough to step through, and the watch will also serve as your pass around the hub. When you get a moment, have a look around! After you do what I want you to do, that is.” Part of his visor went dark, meaning he must be winking.

“I know.”

“Just teasing. Now, click the button under the crown.” She did, and Silverstreak’s picture popped up. “If you want to talk to me without coming back, like if you have a question or something, feel free. You might get one of these fine people depending on how busy I am, but they can answer your questions too. I would ask you don’t do it around others, I like to keep my existence a secret, for the most part. Those that already travel between worlds is fine, but if bunches of people start trying to get in here... well, it just adds to my workload.”

“I can see where that would be an issue. They would be wanting you to solve all their problems.”

“You got that right. You can play around with the other functionality later, but really it’s pretty mundane. You’ve probably used similar devices, just bigger. The nice thing about this is, it’s technology. So even if you run into a world with little to no magic, it’ll still work and get

you back here.”

“That would have come in handy- I keep saying that.”

“Don’t get them started. They all have some story about her. Now, unless you have some other questions, let’s get you back to fighting that Ancient Dragon!”

“I haven’t had time to think of any more! Now I know how Tiffania felt, being whisked away by me into a war with a dragon! Oh, I do have one. Where is best to go in order to get the explosives we need to take out the Ancient Dragon?”

“Let’s take a look.” Silverstreak went over to an unused console and started tapping things in. “You’ll land in Japan, there’s the Yokota air base, bet you could get a pretty advanced plane there. You’re sure your friend can fly it?”

Susan nodded. “It’s a weapon.”

“So it is. Very well, is this picture good enough?” He showed her a view with a snowy mountain rising in the background, then there were some lower hills, then the base itself.

“It should be.”

“Great. If you think of more, I’m only a press away. Come on, your friend will be worried about you, though only a few minutes should have passed.” He brought her into a room with an archway and some equipment attached to it, and started punching things in. “Good luck. And thanks. Every agent I have blocking Darkvoid is another branch of the tree that stays safe. Drive him out of that world for good.”

“Is it for good? What prevents him from coming back?”

“That’s... technical. Believe me, we do something to branches he leaves so he can’t go there again. It works.”

“Okay. I’m ready.”

“Step through then, it’s all set, you’ll appear where you were going to, and it’s been about eight minutes.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back!”

“I know.”

Susan stepped through the archway of light, and looked around for Hiraga. Several people reacted to her suddenly appearing there by edging away and walking quickly, or just rubbing their eyes because they didn’t believe them.

“Now if I was Hiraga, where would I be?” Susan asked herself.

“Right over there?” said Sparkle, pointing with a paw. He was leaning against a wall somewhat out of sight, trying to hide the sword he was still carrying.

“Who has the best perception checks? You do, that’s who! Come on.”

“Susan, you’re here! I was getting worried,” he exclaimed as she walked up. “I hoped if I hung around here you might eventually show up. You’re the only way I have to get back, after all.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Little unscheduled detour on my part.”

“What happened?”

Susan grinned. “Something good, for a change. Come on, let’s find a place I can open a *Teleportal* from and we can get this show on the road. I know where we have to go to get the good stuff, so let’s get to it!”

Assault

Time: Several minutes later

Place: Outside the Yokota air base

"Well, it's too big to get in a *Hypnotic Field*, and I suppose that would be a bit over the top anyway," remarked Susan, looking the base over through the fence.

"So what is the plan?" asked Hiraga.

"Your main goal is a plane, right? We'll have to *Shrink* one down and just walk it out of there. I don't know what would happen if I stuck one that was *Shrunk* into a... wait, I wouldn't be able to get it out again when we got back. Forget that. Okay, we'll see if we can find an unwatched armory room with some explosives, grab them, and then get a plane."

"What, they're just going to let us walk in there? I don't think so."

"Who said they would even see us?" She put her hand on Hiraga's shoulder. "We're going to be *Invisible*." Susan cast, taking the full time and targeting all three of them. They faded out.

"This must be one of those spells you lost access to on the other world."

"That's right. And Sparkle is going to give us another."

"That's right," she replied, "*phase*." The three were now invisible and could pass through normal matter, so Susan dragged Hiraga through the fence and towards the base.

"That was weird," he remarked, looking back. "Can anything touch us right now?"

"Not unless there's wizards on this world you don't know about."

"I highly doubt it."

"That's what someone from my world would say, just keep that in mind. You might want to look around if you ever get the chance."

Susan and Hiraga walked through the base, staying still when someone passed near just in case they noticed the odd distortion being caused from the *Invisibility* spell. It wasn't *Veil*, after all. Susan found she could sometimes tell when someone was coming down a hallway towards them, and once she stopped them as someone came out a door.

"How are you doing that?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's part of that new skill set I got while I went 'missing.' Do you know, I think it's *passive*. I'm actually sensing their energy, not unlike how I sense magic. Magic though, I have to actively try and feel out. This skill just seems to tell me things are around. I can't wait to play with the others!"

They stuck their heads through various rooms until they found some explosives and stepped through.

"Ah, now I have to start thinking about technology again," remarked Susan, looking around the room. "Cameras."

"True, stuff disappearing from this room might cause a few alarms to be raised."

"Don't forget about me," piped up Sparkle. "I have *Illusion* back again. I can just cover the whole room with an *Illusion* and let you scoop up everything. Once we're ready to leave I'll just drop it. They won't know what happened, as to the cameras everything will have just disappeared at once!"

"Sounds good to me! You're not touching anything, are you, Hiraga? We'll have to drop *Phase* and I don't want you losing any limbs."

"Go ahead."

So Sparkle dropped *Phase* and cast *Illusion* in its place, making the room look totally normal as the two cleaned it out off all things that go boom. They made a big pile and Susan used *Creation* to create a large box to hold them.

"I can only put a single object in," she explained, "so I'm going to put in the box rather than the individual guns. They'll come along for the ride in any case."

"I can't see what you're doing anyway."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

She opened her *Pocket Dimension* so they didn't have to lug the box around, but Susan still needed *Augment STRength* put on her to shove it inside. "I'll need it to get the stuff

out, too, so keep it on me until we get out of here.”

“Sure thing.”

“Aren't we being a little too wasteful with energy?” asked Sparkle, with the group now walking through the halls in search of the hanger. “We have a huge dragon to fight once we get back.”

“Oh, not to worry, there's plenty of energy around here, if you know where to look. I have a good spell to use now, and it'll even give those I steal from a nice nap. I'll find some people on the way out near the plane. We can't have anyone raising an alarm there, right?”

“Guess you've thought of everything.”

The three found a hanger full of planes and Susan had *Energetic Accumulation* put on her. She gathered energy until she could fill the entire hanger with *Somnolent Smog*, which she did. With the crew inside asleep, and *Magic Immunity* put on Sparkle, Hiraga, and herself, she went through and grabbed energy from everyone who was there. This gave her 160 energy so she was at 210 total. *More than enough, I hope?* She was almost as twitchy as if she was *Accelerated* because she was bursting with power, and Hiraga looked her over. (Both were visible again because they were immune to magic.)

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, I'm great. I really, really missed Pluto spells, you know that? Come on, you found a good plane? Let's *Shrink* it and get it out of here. This is really great, don't you all think it's really great? I haven't felt this pumped up since we got to Louise's world and I think I've really missed it-”

“Take a breath!” commanded Sparkle.

“Oh yeah sorry. Plane?”

“Yeah, it's fueled and armed. You think we can really just walk out with one?”

“Sure. Lead on.”

It was tough to see through the *Smog* but Hiraga led her to the fighter he had chosen, and Susan cast *Shrink* on it, allowing her to gently pick it up. She put *Invisibility* back on them after ending the *Smog*, which of course let people inside again. They started running around inside almost immediately to try and figure out what was happening.

“I don't want to be the guy in charge who has to explain where a bunch of explosives and a whole plane went to!” said Hiraga, laughing, as they walked past people running in the other direction.

“I don't envy them. Still, we'll put this stuff to a much better use than they will, trust me. We'll save an entire world, rather than just blowing up people who happen to have a different opinion than they do.”

“Isn't what they do and what you do basically the same thing?” asked Sparkle, aware of irony. “Just you use magic?”

“I'm a surgeon, this stuff is a blunt instrument.”

“If you say so.”

Now some distance away from the base, Susan got the box of weapons out again and read her notes about how to open dimensional doors to get back. It was a variant of the spell that opened the gate to Inari's dimension, but with some changes. Her dimension was actually protected somehow, so the magic had to punch through that too. This spell was simpler, and opened a hole back to the area they had left.

Susan set the plane down and let *Shrink* go after stepping far enough away that they didn't get knocked over when it grew again. They flew back to the area where the dome was still up around the Ancient Dragon. Hiraga landed and everyone crowded around the fighter, having never seen anything even remotely like it. Susan started passing out explosives, and Hiraga told people how to use them. Luckily most were point and shoot, expending their payload and then becoming useless, because these people couldn't make more ammo. She hoped one shot would be enough, as long as there were enough of them at one time.

“So how do we get it out from under that dome?” asked Louise, hefting a grenade she

had been given. Susan had opened another *Teleportal* back to the kingdoms, moving more troops through for the final assault. There were now hundreds of mages in the area, griffins in the air, and a great number of different elemental forms stomping about.

"How about an *Explosion*?" suggested Susan. "If it's anything like my *Elemental Burst*, I can specify the point the explosion starts from. Can you place it just under the barrier and blow it to pieces from the inside? If it hurts the creature it may lose it that way, too."

"I'm willing to try."

"Okay. Vittorio, you and Julio are going to be under *Avatar of War*. I should have done that earlier, I keep forgetting it makes you immune to fire. I'll put it on the dragon you're riding too. Try and stay away from that third eye, and you should be all set."

"Wait, that implies you're not going to be there!" he protested.

"I'm not. I'm going to be using a spell I got out of my *Pocket Dimension* called *Elemental Devastation*. It's the only thing I can cast here that will even have a chance to take out a creature that big. In fact, I'll hit him in the face, that'll keep that third eye closed and hopefully discourage it from breathing flame at all. Along with your spell, Vittorio, a barrage from Hiraga's fighter, the elementals, and whatever else the mercenaries can do, I think we have a chance. Of course any *Explosions* you can do, Louise, would also be helpful. All of you, try to avoid the big ball of wind energy that's going to tearing it up in the front. If you fire into that, the explosive will just be torn to bits rather than actually harming the beast."

Everyone nodded, and turned to get into position to start the final assault.

Susan started reading over *Elemental Devastation* as Louise chanted her *Explosion* spell, trying to get it under the barrier that covered the Ancient Dragon. Hiraga was in the air, circling the beast in his new toy. Knights, mercenaries, arial troops on griffins, everyone was ready and hoping this would end the threat of the Ancient Dragon once and for all. They didn't know they were also saving other worlds, by keeping The Darkness (she figured she would go on calling it the pet name she had for it, maybe annoying it just that little bit extra) from sucking up the energy of this dimension. Saving their entire world was enough of an incentive for them.

The area lit up from Louise's *Explosion*, and even Susan was impressed by the devastation that would have resulted. She knew because her *Magic Sense* went off quite by itself, the spell was powerful enough to overwhelm her senses even when she wasn't concentrating on them. As it was, the Ancient Dragon roared again and the barrier went down.

"You worms think you can defeat me?" it bellowed. "Don't get above yourselves. I have burned worlds!"

"Burn this," Susan muttered, letting go with *Elemental Devastation: Wind*, the only real element this world had that would do enough damage to this creature. She found she could spend eleven energy now, thanks to her new skill of *Spirit Manipulation*. That meant she could put ten energy into her spell with the one to activate it, giving her a rating of sixteen. That meant the intense elemental energy was that radius, and the creature felt it. With the pope above, shining with Void energy from his spell and rockets hitting it from all sides, the Ancient Dragon was in a bad way. It totally didn't expect Hiraga to scream out of the sky and fire at it from a fighter plane, or feel the blasts of modern grenades. Elementals of all kinds surged around it, pounding it as best they could, while other magic, some nearly as strong as Susan's spell, pelted it.

In reality, it didn't stand a chance.

It tried to get its barrier up again, but Louise was always there to blow it down again with minor *Explosions*. Susan noted that subsequent ones weren't as strong as the initial one, and wondered if she had played some local equivalent to a *Power Overwhelming* card for the first one. Susan had to move the area of *Devastation* as the creature tried to get away from it, but with energy to burn, she had no trouble casting it several times. Finally, some time later, the creature crashed to the ground and moved no more.

A cheer went up from the assembled forces, and Hiraga put the last few missiles the fighter carried into it for good measure. But the eyes were dark, and the black fog that had surrounded the creature was gone.

The Ancient Dragon was no more, and The Darkness had been driven off another reality.

Louise looked exhausted but was all smiles as Susan and Sparkle walked over to her. "What were we worried about?" she chirped. "It just took two different kinds of magic, and technology this world has never seen. We could have handled it."

"Not to mention they still have a pope," said Hiraga. "So, I see you have a new watch, another gift from wherever you went?"

"That's right. It'll get me out of here and onto the next world that needs me. It's already been lined up, in fact, so I can't stay. Apparently the situation there is falling apart, and they can really use my help."

"Are you sure? I'm guessing we're going to have a huge party after this, you should at least stay for that!"

Susan shook her head. "I've never been one for the glory part, for whatever reason. Ask Hermione." She shook her head. "I'll just collect all the stuff I've made around here, and be on my way."

"You'll go say goodbye to Siesta, at least, I hope!" insisted Louise.

"Of course. I might leave her my stealth suit, and hope it sticks around when I leave. It looked good on her."

"I wish I could have seen it!" put in Hiraga, and Louise elbowed him.

"Look, in case Louise can't open larger doors, you want to go back to your world now?"

"I think we can come up with a potion to shrink him, if it becomes needed," said Louise. "And I'm pretty certain I can make them bigger. Unless, I mean, you don't want to stay?"

"No, I'll stay, at least for now. I mean we're all heroes now, right? I don't want to miss the party! And we can go back and forth, I'd like to show you my world. I'm not sure where my place is now. This Void stuff may be done but I'm still a Familiar, right?"

"Okay. Good luck you two, I mean that."

He started unbuckling his sword. "You want this back?"

She waved it off. "Keep it. It's yours, you paid the XP for it, whatever that means for you. Use it well."

"I will. Thanks."

"Sure. It's been interesting, Louise. I'm glad you found your place in this world. Keep studying Void magic, now that we know all your spells don't explode. I'm sure there's more to learn about it, and maybe one day in the future someone will read the book you write about what you find out about it. Save them from being called Zero."

"Yeah, I have a lot of school ahead of me, especially now that I can show everyone I'm a Void mage. Maybe even teach *Magic Sense* to people!"

"Sounds like a plan. Just be careful of King Joseph and his creepy Familiar. They'll probably still be after you."

"I will."

The pope landed nearby, and hopped off the dragon he was riding. "The Ancient Dragon does seem to have perished. We owe you a great debt, Susan. Thank you for everything. I wasn't sure about you when I first met you, you seemed quite overbearing. But your magic came through for us."

"Yeah, it's something I have to work on. Glad I could help. Don't waste that life you've been given."

"I won't."

Susan talked with some of the others, and then said her goodbyes. Queen Anrietta was also there, and spoke her gratitude. She also knighted Susan then and there, who laughed and said she would get everyone to call her "Lady Felton" from now on.

"I'm still calling you Susan," spoke up Sparkle.

"Spoilsport."

She went back to the school to say goodbye to Siesta, and gave her the clothes. "They'll be impractical to carry around anyway. I can always make more, if I need them."

"But you say they might disappear if you leave?"

"Yeah. Sorry to give you such a lame parting gift. But if they don't, as long as I'm alive they'll be around. So you know what's happened to me if they ever vanish."

"I'll keep them nearby. I hope I disappear long before they do."

They embraced. "Thanks for letting me be a maid for a day, I really did enjoy it. Bye."

"Bye, Susan. I'll never forget you."

That done she went back to her empty room and activated her new watch, opening a portal back to the Hub.

Goodbye, crazy world. I didn't ask to visit, but I'm glad I was able to help out everyone here. You cost me a friend, but I'll find her, I've already sworn that. And I learned a few things, like how to survive without all my magic, and that I should carry my book between worlds in case I can't get at it any other way. Though I suppose now I can put it in the sub-space pocket. I should always be able to get to it from there by what Silverstreak was saying.

"Ready?" she asked Sparkle.

"Ready."

Both stepped through, and found themselves back in the transit room they had left from. The room was empty, and Susan stepped through back to the "control" room.

Silverstreak was nowhere to be seen, but everyone looked up to see who was arriving.

"Oh, you're back!" said the woman she and Silverstreak had been talking to. "You're just in time. The situation in 3874734 has deteriorated and we were afraid you wouldn't make it. Come on, I'll put you through. Do you need anything?"

"Where am I going? What's the magic situation there? What do I look for? Where's my—" The woman handed her the book of magic back, and it seemed to have several gems now inset in the cover. "That answers that one."

"These are the sensors," the woman explained, pointing them out. "Just put whatever you want analyzed on the book overnight, and if it can make a spell that's similar, it will. Also you'll find a bunch of new spells, as promised. As for the type of world it is, there's not a lot of time to explain it all. It's very different, but then I guess they all are, in a way. It has all the planets, I understand that was a concern in the last world you were at?" Susan nodded. "No worries then. But their magic works quite differently. Silverstreak said to tell you to keep your eyes open, you should be able to get some decent equipment there, and some good ideas for more magic. Come on, you have to save her, there's moments left!" The woman pulled Susan back into the transit room, and started punching in numbers.

"This is the girl we were talking about." On the screen, a young looking woman in a pink dress and red half-jacket seemed to be praying atop an odd pillar stuck out of the water. She was quite pretty, and was lit from behind by a green light coming from a gem set in her bow, holding her braided brown hair. "Look up there." Susan looked through, and a man with a blade that must have been taller than he was slowly descending upon her. "She'll get chopped to pieces. See the break in the wall? This place is ancient so it's falling apart. That's your way through. Don't engage the man in black, leave that to the others that are already there. He'll slaughter you because you won't understand how to fight him."

"Hah. Don't be so sure."

"Seriously, don't. That's the local version of Darkvoid!"

"Oh. Never mind then. Better learn how their magic works first, like you said."

"As long as you understand. Just grab up the girl and jump off into the water. He shouldn't follow, he'll be too busy dealing with the others. You can call back here later to get more specifics, but they should be able to answer your questions. Get through, quick!"

Susan made a *Sub-space pocket* check, getting a 7, enough to stick in a book I guess (since I made the skill up), so her tome of magic disappeared from her hand. *Neat.*

"*Augment STRength*," Sparkle cast, figuring if she was going to be hauling someone around, it might come in handy.

"Thanks!" Susan said, moving back a few steps to get a running start. "This can get wet, right?" she asked, holding up the "watch."

"Of course, it'll go anywhere!" replied the lady.

"Just checking. Okay, here we go, wish me luck!"

“Please keep her safe!” said the woman as Susan bolted past her, emerging into the next world. Both the girl, the guy with the thick sword standing in front of her, and the hot looking guy with the scraggily hair and long katana seemed quite shocked to see her appear out of nowhere. She took advantage and grabbed up the girl, jumping the break in the surrounding barrier that was probably to keep people from slipping and tumbling off.

“Hope you can swim!” she called as they fell.

“I can’t!” managed the girl.

<Splash>

Oh, great.