

"You seem pensive," said Harry, taking a break from slinging spells at Susan's *Legion*. He figured the best way to practice was to have two or three of them running about while he tried to hit them with spells. They were also commanded to attack him with their swords, aiming for non-vital areas only, of course, so he could practice using his *Deflection* item as well. It tired him out after a depressingly short time, but Susan insisted he keep at it.

"I have no idea how you calculate your energy total, or how you raise it," she had said. "But if you keep depleting it and do these combat exercises, you're sure to raise it naturally. I hope."

Harry didn't see any harm in it, so he went along with the suggestion. He had to be hit with the knife a couple of times when they got a lucky shot in, or two attacked at once. But he was, in Susan's terms, *raising his close and magic combat skills*. Most of the *Legion* just stood around, as Susan couldn't call forth only part of the group, but as they were mindless he wasn't concerned about that. But what he was concerned about was Susan, sitting there instead of finishing his knife, lost in thought.

"What?" asked Susan, shaking herself out of her reverie.

"What's up? You've just been sitting there."

"Oh, yeah. I was just thinking about how to beat myself."

"Didn't know you were into that self flagellation stuff. You're not turning this into a porn dungeon, are you?"

"No!" she exclaimed, giving him a playful push. "My mom would have a few things to say about that. It was difficult enough to convince her to let me set up the lab down here, and clear the space for you to practice. No, I'm worried that when Voldi emerges from his little cocoon he'll be immune to magic, or at least spells. It's all well and good for me, I don't abuse it." Harry looked doubtful. Susan continued. "But him, on the other hand. If we're both immune to magic, how are either of us going to hurt the other?"

"Can't you, like, cast *Meteor* or something? Smack him with a few giant space rocks?"

"You mean *Meteo*? This isn't *Final Fantasy* you know. Calling down falling rocks would have just as much chance to squash me as whoever I wanted it to hit."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. There must be other physical spells though, didn't I once see one that could call magma?"

"Yeah, again, overkill? I want to take one guy out, not a parking lot full of people. But you're right though, I'm just going to have to find something to hit him with that's not magical while I'm hitting him with it."

"Too bad you couldn't just shoot him!" Harry laughed.

"Yeah, from like the next building over!" Susan joined him laughing.

"Hey, that's a good idea right there! Fly up to the roof of a building so you know it. Then just drop a *Teleportal* under him, to that rooftop. A little over the edge, I mean. \*Splat\*. Can't magic away gravity."

"Except he can teleport. He wouldn't fall far before he just teleported away. Sure, he would slam into the ground wherever he teleported to, but not as hard as he would falling the whole distance."

“Oh, yeah.” He thought a moment. “Could your dragon hit him?”

“Depends if he researches *Barrier against Spells* or *Magic Immunity*.”

“That makes sense. There’s always the Darth Vader attack.”

“What? Force choke from across the room?”

“No, throw something at him with *Telekinesis*.”

“Hummm, Light Saber...”

“You could make one?” Hey, Harry was a wizard, but every boy wants a Light Saber.

“A magic one, sure. A simple *Elemental Weapon (Fire)* would do it, make it TR 10 so it’ll cut through anything, and just make it a tube rather than a blade. Trouble is, it would just bounce off *Immunity*. Now, if I could somehow come up with a spell to channel and contain scientifically generated plasma, we would really have something.”

“Seems impractical anyway.”

“Yeah, without a high rating in the weapon, years of training, and *The Force* you’d more than likely cut your own leg off swinging something like that around. And forget defense. The only reason they can bounce blaster bolts back is they’re letting *The Force* do the blocking for them. Basically a form of predicting the future, and having the blade in the position to block before the shooter can pull the trigger.”

“Well, I can still dream, can’t I?”

Susan laughed. “Sure thing! I could make you one made of *Knockout*, that wouldn’t be quite as dangerous.”

“I’ll think about it. I have enough to worry about mastering magic, to start learning Kendo as well.”

“Yeah, get back to work! We rent those soldiers by the hour, you know!”

“Hey, right back at you!”

“What do you mean? I’m done, boy!”

“Seriously?”

“Here you go. Use it responsibly.” Susan passed him the knife, which Harry took and looked over.

“It’s a healing shiv, how can I not use it responsibly?”

“I’m sure there’s a way.”

“Thanks. I mean it. That was a lot of work.”

“Yeah, it’s a tough spell, I admit. But I did it for selfish reasons anyway.”

“Oh?”

“If you’re going to be at my back in this fight, I want you to have weapons that actually work. It helps keep me alive just as much as it helps you.”

“That is rather selfish of you. What a selfish, uncaring person you are.”

“It’s true, I admit it.”

They both laughed again. But then Susan sighed.

“You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“I really am. Him getting my magic changes things. I thought I was invulnerable. I mean look at what I’ve done in the past! But the thought of a guy with all kinds of dark magic, plus my magic at his command? He won’t make the mistake of trying to show off again. He’ll bide his time, and learn exactly what he can and cannot do. Plus, I’ve stayed away from the more destructive spells. What if he researches something I never even thought off? Or if he learns to channel wandless curses through my magic somehow, so he can hit multiple people at once? There might be no limit to what he could accomplish.”

“His energy won’t be limitless.”

“No, but he has followers he can drain of energy. They won’t dare resist when he ‘asks’ for a ‘donation’ of energy. He could have a rating in the hundreds, versus my maximum rating of eighty or so.”

“Here I was thinking it couldn’t be that bad. Guess I just didn’t put enough imagination into it, huh?”

“We just have to stop him before he figures too much out. That’s all there is to it.”

“Which brings up what the heck the others are doing.”

“Yeah, it’s strange. I mean, sure, Headmaster Dumbledore must be busy, but to have us just sitting here, cooling our heels...”

“Maybe he knows I’m training? And you did ask for all that *Imbuing* stuff, so maybe he’s just giving you time to work. He knows you’re not slacking off.”

“I guess. It still bothers me though. At least there hasn’t been any mass disappearances, or any breakouts from Azkaban. We would have heard that, I think.”

“And nothing after Rita’s article, either.”

“Yeah, she hasn’t written anything else. Think she got fired for it?”

“That would just be dripping with irony sauce, wouldn’t it? Her first actual article with real, actual facts, and she gets fired. She would come bug us again though, right? ‘Look what you kids made me do! And I lost my job and everything.’ I can see it now.” Harry got a dreamy expression on his face.

“I’m kind of torn- on the one hand it would be sweet, sweet, poetic justice, but on the other we need her to get the word out.”

“No, we need a minister that doesn’t bury his head in the sand.”

“Ha! Look at us kids, discussing politics like old people. Come on, I need a break. Let’s take a walk or something.”

“Yeah, I feel I haven’t been getting enough exercise.” He looked over at the soldiers.

“You can still move, can’t you? In that case I think I’m being pretty lenient.”

“Yes Sir, Sargent, Sir!”

They laughed. “Come on.” She grabbed a knife holder she had created with *Creation* earlier, and strapped the *charges* version of the knife to her left leg. Her right leg already had her knife strapped on. Harry slid his knife into his holster and looked over at her.

“You really are going commando, aren’t you?”

“Hey, stop peaking under my skirt, you pervert!”

“What? No, I meant the knives, not... I mean, I didn’t see... I wasn’t looking... Are you really not?”

“That’s for me to know,” she said, pushing him up the stairs.

“Hey Sparkle, we’re going for a walk. Want to come?”

“Cats do not go for walks,” answered Sparkle. “We may go for a prowl, but never a walk. Especially in this heat.”

“Suit yourself. More XP for me if we get attacked!”

“Who’s going to attack you around here?”

“Ah, fresh air!”

“Wonder how Professor Hagrid is doing,” said Harry. “You think the headmaster sent him after the giants?”

“Probably. Who else but a giant of a man to negotiate with giants. Hey, isn’t that your cousin?”

They looked over, and a group of boys was calling goodbye to a “Big D.” It was Junior.

“Hello, Dudley,” said Susan, acknowledging him. “We were just about to go for a walk. You can join us, if you’d like.”

He looked incredulous, as did Harry. Harry pulled her away and said in a quiet voice, “You’re inviting him along? Why?”

“He’s my neighbor too, you know. But I hardly know anything about him. Nothing wrong with having him along, is there?”

“But... But...” Harry sputtered. “He’s *Dudley*.”

“And? Draco was Draco, but I gave him a chance. Can I do less for your cousin?”

“Who’s Draco?” asked Dudley, falling in beside them.

“Just a boy from school,” replied Susan. “Son of a Death Eater, who I hope turns away from the dark side.”

“Death Eater? Cool name.”

“You would think so,” said Harry hotly. “They follow Voldemort, the most evil wizard ever to live. Just last month they captured us, used Susan’s blood to resurrect him, and then watched me stun him in a duel because he was trying to show off. We narrowly escaped with our lives.”

“You’re putting me on.” He looked over at the two, who shook their heads.

“I wish we were,” said Susan. “Things would be a lot simpler right now.”

“What kind of school do you go to where that kind of stuff happens?”

“It doesn’t, to most people,” explained Harry. “It’s because of people like me and Susan, who fight to keep dark magic away from people like you that you get to sleep soundly at night.”

Dudley thought a moment. “Is that why you don’t sleep soundly at night?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve heard you. Talking in your sleep. Muttering about being killed. It’s kind of funny, actually.”

Harry sighed. “I guess I have been having some bad dreams lately. I didn’t know they were that bad. Do you think your magic can do anything?”

“About dreams?” Susan emphatically shook her head. “Best I could do is another *Imbued* object like I gave Hermione so she doesn’t have to sleep. And even then I cautioned her to only use it every other night. Your brain needs dreams, Harry. If you don’t dream you go insane. I’ve read about it. You have to take the good with the bad.”

“That sucks.”

Dudley snorted. “You guys are just walking down the street, discussing magic?”

“Why shouldn’t we? Anyone who hears us will just think we’re talking about D&D or something. Wizards aren’t supposed to *do* magic in front of non-magical people, but talking about it is okay. People can believe what they want if they don’t actually see magic being performed.”

“What’s your school like, anyway?”

“What do you care?” said Harry. “Your father wouldn’t want you asking about that anyway. Big D, honestly. Susan, he beats up little kids! I can’t believe I’m even talking to him like this!”

“What about you? Acting so high and mighty all the time because you can do magic. You think that makes you better than me? At least Susan said she wanted to talk to me. Throw that... thing... away and then we’ll see how tough you are.”

“Harry!” said Susan, shocked. “Have you been... bullying Dudley?”

“Bullying? No, I just... I-”

“You have, haven’t you? I don’t believe this. You’re better than that, Harry. I’m surprised at you. Dudley, I’m sorry if Harry’s been bothering you, I’m sure now that you’ve brought it to his attention he’ll cut it out, right?”

“You’re one to talk,” Harry said to her.

“What? What are you talking about? Sure, I stand up for myself, and for my friends. But I don’t- you really don’t see me as a bully, do you?”

“I’m just saying.”

“No, I’m not a bully. Am I?”

“Kinda,” said Harry. “I mean, usually it works in our favor and everything, but how is what you do any different?”

“Because... I don’t just... It’s totally different!”

“Lover’s spat, huh? This is entertaining. I’m glad I came with you guys!”

“I’m gay, you idiot. We’re just friends.”

“Huh? But he’s always hanging out with you.”

“To get away from your family.”

“Hey, they took him in when his parents were killed. He should be grateful.”

“Oh yeah, real grateful. They’ve done a great job being the parents I never knew. Locking me in that cupboard until Susan made them stop. Giving me your old clothes to wear.”

“Are you doing something? It’s getting colder.”

“Colder?” asked Susan. “What are you-” she glanced up. “Dementors!” she shouted, drawing her permanent knife. With her other hand she pulled a loosely knotted necklace from around her neck and activated it. “*Undead Annihilation.*” She started glowing with holy light, and thought about how glad she was to have *Spell Symbol* to make stuff like that. *Didn’t plan to use it against so few, but making another is the work of moments so why not take every advantage?* Tossing the now expended “pendent” aside she drew her other knife. *I really must remember to check my cards before leaving the house.* Susan became aware of three new cards on her character sheet. She turned in the *Skill* card for 1 XP, leaving *I Don’t Think So*, making an opponent re-roll, and *Sacrifice*, which Sparkle had used before.

*I am not sacrificing myself for Dudley!*

“Crap, I’ve got incoming here as well!” Harry said, stepping over so Dudley was between them. He drew his knife and his wand. They both went back to back with him.

“What are you two talking about?” said Dudley, scanning the sky. “There’s nothing there.”

“You can’t see them? Crap! Stay between us!” shouted Susan. “I really wish Sparkle was here!”

“Your cat?” asked Dudley.

“Yeah, not going to be fun without *Acceleration*. Do we run, or fight?”

“You have to ask?”

Harry gave a fierce grin. “Should it worry me that your answer doesn’t worry me? I do spend too much time with you- Susan, you are my happiness. *Expecto Patronum!*”

The glowing stag materialized between them, next to Dudley, who jumped away from it.

“Stay next to it, it’ll protect you,” screamed Susan, as the first Dementor reached her. She rolled *Initiative* and the fight was on.

She was annoyed when Harry went before her, slashing at the Dementor with his knife. *Must be his high REFlexes from having to catch a flying ping-pong ball.*

He hit it, and the thing shrieked and started disappearing.

“The heck is that thing?” Dudley shrieked along with it, stumbling into the stag.

“You can see them as they die?” Harry asked, looking to see which one would attack next. They seemed hesitant, like they didn’t expect him to be able to kill them.

Susan had two bearing down on her, probably going to try and grab her arms, so she struck out twice, using an *Off Hand Action* for the second swing. She used 8 energy on COOrdination on both, as her skill at *Dagger* was still only a 1. She got a 22 and a 14, scoring on both. She got back a total of 6 energy with *Energy Boost*.

*Maybe it won’t be so bad. I doubt these things are used to dodging, and they probably don’t have energy to spend on the attempt. Plus with both our defense spells going...*

Then she realized her delay had just gone up to an 11, because she didn’t have the *Off Hand* skill to decrease it. Or *Close Combat*.

The Dementors she had mentally assigned D1 and D2 then went next, and they went to grab her as well.

“*Deflection*,” she cried, casting it in two areas at once. She used 8 energy, saved 2, and got a 20. They bounced off the air before her. Susan used her last two energy she could spend to decrease her delay by one.

*Okay, that’s never going to work. I’m going to have to take the -2 and do an attack as they grab me, as a reactive action. Otherwise I’m never going to get another active action.*

Dudley, still looking around wildly, crouched down behind the stag.

Simultaneously, one Dementor went for Susan, and the other went for Harry. Susan’s came straight at her, as the ones to her left and right were about to make another grab. The one attacking Harry reached in from his left. Both slashed with the knives.

Susan missed, and the Dementor grabbed onto her right wrist.

*Okay, time for another Off Hand*, thought Susan, taking one and stabbing the thing with the knife in her left. It couldn’t both dodge and hold on to her, and so the knife sunk into its arm and it started disappearing.

Harry’s would have also grabbed him, but the Patronus, watching for its caster, suddenly blazed up, making the thing throw an arm over its face and hiss, cowering back.

Susan’s delay was now a 24, and unknown to her, she would be attacked next on a 10. *Okay, enough of this crap.*

Susan spent an XP for an extra action, and cast “*Successful Strike*” on both Harry and herself instantly. The spell went off with a 10, (she was at a -2 penalty for the Dementors being there, a -1 for casting it instantly, a -2 for casting it on two people) but they still got a +12 to their next attack.

The Dementor directly in front of Harry made a grab, and Harry, feeling pressured with 4 of the things still around him, again struck out at it. He was amazed to connect, but as that one disappeared, the one behind it took its place and also made a grab. He made another attack, and was relieved when that one got scratched and started to burn away as well.

The two trying to grab Susan went again, and the Stag lit up again, driving the ones facing Harry back a little more. With her bonus Susan made one magically enhanced attack and

one non-magically enhanced attack as the two moved to grab her again. She got a 20 with her left, enhanced, hand, but totally missed with her right, so the one on the right grabbed her.

It seemed to watch, concerned, as the one on the left burned away and it was left facing Susan alone.

She smiled. *Time for a bluff roll?* “You can still run.”

“Flee!” it rasped, letting go of Susan. “Or we shall all be destroyed!”

The other two turned and fled, all three taking to the sky and moving out of sight.

“Come back here and fight, you cowards!” Susan yelled after them, hoping against hope they didn’t actually come back any time soon. She was down to 34 energy after all that.

“That sucked!” said Harry, breathing heavily. “Thanks, Prongs,” he said to the Patronus. It nodded and faded away as Susan’s glow also subsided.

“Okay, new rule!” said Susan. “We don’t leave the house without *Acceleration* loaded somewhere. Or we just drag Sparkle along if she wants to come or not.”

“What were those things?” Dudley asked.

“Dark creatures,” spat Susan. “Creatures I’ve sworn to wipe off the face of the earth. I’m getting a good start on it, too.”

“You’ve fought those things before?” Dudley was shocked.

“Once is too often. Come on, we better get off the streets. If anyone saw that, there will be some questions. Especially if people without magic can’t see them. To them it would have just looked like we were flailing around with knives. Not easy to explain.”

“You don’t have to justify it to me,” said Harry. “Let’s go.”

“Are you okay?” Susan asked Dudley.

“Yeah, I guess so. That light that was coming off your spells seemed to drive them back, and it made me feel better too. I’m still a bit shaky though. Those things... I only got a glimpse of them when they died, but that was enough.”

“Have some chocolate when you get home. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s the sort of plan I can get behind.”

“Are you three all right?” asked a new voice, running up.

“Yes, Mrs. Figg,” said Harry. “Nothing to worry about. Just practicing for a little play, that’s all.” Mrs. Figg, of course, was a few houses down from Harry and Susan, and they were all on friendly terms.

“Play? You were fighting Dementors! I saw the Patronus! Thank heavens you all weren’t killed.”

“Uh, you’re a wizard?” asked Harry.

“I’m a squib, as he well knows. Totally useless in a situation like this. Oh, I’m going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!”

“Who?” said all three in unison.

“Never mind that, just you three go straight home!”

“Maybe Susan’s house could keep them out. My house would hardly be a deterrent to creatures like that. And I’d rather see them coming.”

“Whatever, just get inside. I never thought I would live to see the day. And you killed them, right?”

“Not all of them,” Susan said bitterly. “Three got away.”

“That’s more than most could say. Go on, quickly, before they return with reinforcements!”

*But if they return with reinforcements shouldn't I be around to destroy them? I don't want them flying around the neighborhood looking for me.*

"All right, we're going," said Harry.

*I guess we're going.*

The three cautiously started to walk home, watching the skies as they went.

"You think he's gotten some of them under his control already?" Harry asked.

"They aren't attracted to hostility that I ever heard. This was a directed attack. Directed against you and me. Crap, my one knife is almost out of charges now. I guess I'll just keep it around for actual healing. I was going to give it to Ron or Hermione."

"You were going to give it to Hermione, don't lie."

"Okay, you got me there."

"We were getting a little, uh, heated, back there, weren't we?"

"Yes."

"Dudley, I apologize for... bullying you."

"I'm kind of sorry for all those things I did to you over the years. I didn't know you were dealing with this kind of crap on top of that. I mean life or death struggles with evil magical creatures? If that's what it costs to go to a school and learn magic, count me out."

"You get used to it."

"Used to it? That's horrible. I'll see if I can't talk to dad, maybe get him to back off a little."

"You would do that for me?" He seemed genuinely surprised, and pleased.

"Well, no, now that I think about it. He really hates magic."

"Do you have any idea why?"

"Not a clue."

"Figures. Here we are. Thanks for the knife, Susan. You finished it just in time, I guess."

"No problem. Told you I did for selfish reasons. I'm sending a missive to Dumbledore, he should know Dementors are wandering around."

"Good idea. We should also send word to Sirius, he'll want to know what's going on, too."

"Good plan." Susan looked up. "Hey, I think there's already an owl heading to your house."

The other two looked, and sure enough, there was an owl swooping down and heading inside the Dudley's house.

"That can't be good. You don't mind waiting outside for me, do you?" Harry asked Susan. In answer she pulled out her knife and gripped it tightly.

"None shall pass!"

"It says I'm expelled from Hogwarts!" cried Harry, shoving the letter at Susan a moment later.

"What?" Susan skimmed the letter.

*Performed a Patronus Charm at such and such a time.*

*Presence of a Muggle.*

*Severity of the breach.*

*Destroy your wand-* "The Hell?"

"I know!" shrieked Harry. "What am I going to do?"

"They won't be able to enter my house if they mean you harm, and breaking your wand certainly qualifies. This is nuts, for one thing a Patronus is used in only one circumstance! How could they- wait a second." Susan looked at Harry, and yes, the *Conceal Magic* item hung from his belt loop. He hadn't dropped it while fighting the Dementors, so how-

"Yeah?"

"You've been doing magic all freaking morning inside my house. How in the heck did the ministry know, immediately, that you had used this particular charm?"

"I didn't even think of that! I was thinking about *saving all of our lives* and being rewarded by being *expelled*."

"Destroying your wand, too. Wizard law makes no sense to me. In the first place, why send you a letter this is going to happen? Why not just send the person to destroy the wand, and that person explains why? This gives you time to run away- is that what they actually want?"

"Is this really the time for philosophical dissuasion?"

"Talking is a free action, it doesn't take time."

"Of course it takes time!" Harry was yelling louder and louder now.

"Oh, maybe that's only in combat. Well, again, you can use that spare wand I still have in my *Pocket Dimension* but come to think of it, they probably can tell one wand from another."

"Of course they can! What am I going to do?"

"Calm down!" Susan shouted. "I'm standing right here. If you think I'm going to allow my best friend's wand to be broken, and don't forget I can *Repair* wands, then you must not know me very well. We have a lot of options here, and panicking isn't going to help any of them."

"You're right." Harry took a deep breath. "Of course, you're right. There's no need to panic."

"Oh, you should panic, boy," said Vernon, coming outside. "What is all this about? And stop talking about... you know what... where people can hear you."

"You stay out of it!" Susan said harshly. Then she looked over at him. "Huh. You know something? You're right. I guess I do bully people a little. I'll have to work on that. Let's see, *please* stay out of it. Yes, that sounds better. Please stay out of it, this is a matter between Harry, myself, and the Ministry of Magic."

"You people in government? No wonder my taxes keep going up."

"I don't think that logically follows."

"Never mind. What's all this fuss about?"

“Oh, just saving your son’s life. No, don’t bother to thank me, it’s all in a day’s work for our hero. Of course the ministry is worried someone might find out about magic- whoops, he already knew. So what do they care?”

“You saved Dudley’s life? I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe what you want, it’s the truth.”

Another owl swooped down and Susan made an *Animal Handling* check, getting a 6, and held up her arm for it to land on. Its claws scratched up her arm and she winced.

*Failed that check I guess.*

The owl had a parchment, which Harry took of its leg, and unrolled it. That done, the owl flew away. Susan sighed over her non-lethal damage, and decided to leave it for the moment.

“Apparently the Headmaster got wind of it as well, and he’s trying to sort it out,” he reported, passing it over to Susan.

“Sadly I’m not sure his word carries as much weight now as it used to. Still, that’s a bit of good news, right?”

“Who?” asked Vernon.

“The man who runs the school. You met him when he came demanding how Susan’s letter got into Hogwarts before we started attending classes. He was the one that did most of the talking.”

“I suppose I recall.”

“He also holds various offices and honors within the magical community. He got wind of this crazy accusation put forth by the ministry and is seeing what the legal precedent is for the case.”

“What case? What accusation? Come in here and explain what is going on!”

“Fine. The owls will come if I’m inside or out.”

“Not you,” he said to Susan as she stepped up to the door.

“Because your flimsy wooden door would keep me out, should I have half a mind to come in.”

Vernon scowled at her. “Oh, do what you like.”

“Harry? Do you want me guarding out here or with you?”

“With me is guarding me. Come on.” He leaned in to whisper. “He’s a little more civil with you around. I’m sure you can hardly tell, but I can. Come on in.”

They went back inside, and Harry related the events that brought them here.

“Is that true, son?”

“They were fighting something, that much I could see. When one of them died, I saw a sort of cloaked figure that burned away. They took out like seven of the things. I watched.”

“You didn’t join in? If they could take these creatures, so could you.”

“They were invisible until the instant they died. They seemed surprised I couldn’t see them, actually. To kill them they had to use those knives they carry, Harry only used the one spell. The one that protected me. I think Susan was using magic to help her connect better, rather than fight them directly. Oh, and she was glowing too, but I don’t know how that helped.”

“You two fought off Dementors?” asked Petunia.

Everyone looked over at her, flabbergasted.

“You recognize these creatures they described?” asked Vernon.

Petunia nodded. "My sister told me about them once. Said they were horrible things. Sucked the happiness and the life right out of you. I thought she was just trying to scare me, that something that evil couldn't exist in the world. I never believed..."

"She got it right. Susan has sworn to destroy every last one of them, and she's killed about a hundred already," said Harry. "We didn't expect to get attacked here, though."

"Do you think more of them will come?"

Susan shook her head. "There's only three reasons they could be here. One, they've gone over to Voldemort who thought a mere ten of them could take me. He has now learned differently, and will send 10 times that number next time. Two, they did this on their own, and now those left alive regret it, and they won't be back. Three, the ministry actively sent them here to take us out, because we keep trying to convince everyone that Voldemort is back. They'll think of something else since this plan failed."

Petunia gasped.

"Oh, heard that name before, have you? Yes, the man that killed your sister was recently resurrected. Let's just hope he doesn't find this place, it wouldn't take him a minute to have it torn inside out."

"You're scaring them!" Harry protested.

"Really? And they shouldn't be? I am! This isn't some nebulous 'terrorist threat' you know, Harry. Do you think Lucius would have hesitated a second before killing my mother, had he seen a spell of mine being cast? Voldemort started torturing that one guy right in front of us, remember? And let's not forget Peter chopping his own arm off. These are dangerous men, and pretending they don't exist just puts these people, who are totally incapable of defending themselves, in more danger."

"I guess you're right. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, if you see men in masks coming towards this house, get over to Susan's. They can't hurt you if you're inside there."

"No one is going to chase me out of my own house. Especially not one of your kind."

Harry shrugged. "Die then."

Vernon started to say something, but another owl swooped into the room, and Harry grabbed its letter. He scanned it.

"Apparently I get a trial," he said, handing it over to Susan.

"August 21st. Well, you should be honored. I mean, not even Sirius, I.E. Peter, got a trial, and that was for blowing up a bunch of people."

"Wait a second, if these things really were hanging around, how come you two are still fine? Dudley here seems more shaken than I've ever seen him, and apparently he can't even see them."

"They have a little trouble with me," said Susan. "My soul isn't one they're used to. It takes them awhile for their power to find me, so to speak. And I had a spell going that confuses them, making it harder for them to focus their powers on me."

"I've been in their presence before, I know what it feels like. So I can cope better. Get him some chocolate, he'll be fine."

"But what did they do to him?"

"They have some kind of dark aura that surrounds them," Harry tried to explain. "It precedes them, and gets stronger when they're right next to you. They didn't directly do anything to him, he just got hit by their depression field."

Susan would have said they had a *Manifestation* ability, if she knew what *Demongate High* was, but that was a totally different world than this one.

“And only you have weapons that can kill them?”

“The only two in the world, as far as I know,” replied Harry. “Until Susan came along, people didn’t even think they *could* be killed by anything. That’s why they’ve been contained in the wizard prison, so they aren’t just roaming the countryside, killing everything they come across.”

“What’s so special about these knives then?”

“They’ve basically been... blessed... let’s say, with healing magics,” explained Susan. “Magics that are in direct opposition to what they are. Watch.” She pulled out the knife and set it on her scratched up arm. The scratches faded. She held her hand and up wiggled her fingers. “That’s better,” she said, putting the knife away again.

“Let me see if I have this straight in my head,” said Vernon, sitting down wearily on a stool in the kitchen. “The man who murdered your parents died the night he did so, right?”

“Part of him did.”

“Part of him, sure. After all this time, he’s been, what? Made whole again?”

“More like, one of his remaining parts has become the whole.”

“Sure, why not? And you fought him, and got away. You tried to warn people, but they didn’t listen. Now you think he’s sending these creatures after you, to finish the job. Or it’s the people you tried to warn, or it’s just a bunch of random ones that happened to see you wandering around outside.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“I don’t want my family put in danger,” Vernon said quietly.

*Oh, masterfully done, sir. Put the ball in his court, make him feel guilty for staying here and putting you all in danger. You know he’ll respond to that.*

“I’ll go over to Susan’s, at least her mother understands about this stuff, and would be glad to have me for a few days.”

“Wait,” said Petunia. “Didn’t you say something about your mother almost being killed?”

“She was abducted and held hostage to make sure I didn’t just mow down Peter and Baby Voldemort like weeds. Which I should have done, and just let my mother die. But I couldn’t. So yes, she knows about all this stuff.”

“Do you think they would do the same with us?”

“Not sure. I think they might realize I love my mother a lot more than Harry loves you. Pity, really, you would probably just be killed for being in the way rather than abducted. If he left, of course, you would have no magical support at all, and any wizard could walk through that door and do whatever they wanted to you.”

“Vern, can we really just let him leave and go over there? They might still come here first, looking for him. At least with him here he can know what’s going on and do that spell that protected Dudley again.”

“You can’t exactly put a sign on the lawn- Dementors please check next door, now can you?”

“No, I don’t suppose I can. Very well, but if these things hurt my family...”

“You will be the latest in a long line of victims killed by Voldemort. Which will then only grow longer. Don’t worry, they don’t want the non-magical world to know about them any more than the magical. Killing you would only raise questions they don’t want asked right now.”

“Then it seems we’re stuck with you,” said Vernon. “You can stay up and keep watch for any more of those creatures if you want.” It didn’t sound like a suggestion when he said it.

“Sure, I wouldn’t want them sneaking up on us. You better get home, Susan.”

“Okay. You sure you don’t want to stay over at my place?”

“I better guard them. Any more might come here first, after all.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Harry nodded, and Susan went out the front door. *Told Sparkle she would be missing out on XP. She’s gonna be jealous!*

Later that night, a small *Teleportal* opened over Harry’s bed, and Susan looked through to see him lying there. She was standing outside, *Teleportal* now not working inside the house.

“Everything as okay as can be expected given the circumstances?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Any news on your end?”

“I tried to find the Headmaster with *Descry Creature* so I could send him a little note, but it failed, just like Peter. I think he’s gone someplace heavily warded.”

“More heavily than Hogwarts?”

“They just ward against wanded teleportation and non-magical people finding it. He’s probably gone somewhere that’s warded against every type of scrying possible. We know there are Seers in the world, after all. Voldi could employ one just as easily as anyone. And warding against that would block my magic too.”

“I guess we’re on our own then.”

“As usual.”

“Not really. Usually we have at least part of Team Susan hanging around. It’s weird we can’t find anyone. You think some kind of magical barrier’s been put around the whole neighborhood?”

“Couldn’t be. The ministry found out about my use of the Patronus quickly enough, didn’t they?”

“Sure, but we know what a communications breakdown means.”

“Only one thing. Invasion.”

“Exactly. Come on over, sleep in my house tonight.”

Harry shook his head. “I have to defend them. They are my family, after all.”

“I understand. I’ll come running if stuff starts blowing up over here.”

“You better.”

“Good night.”

And for four days, life went on for Harry and Susan. There were no other attacks, but whenever she or Harry tried to contact their friends, it failed. Susan was getting worried.

“Maybe I should take a quick trip to the ministry myself, see what’s up,” she said to Harry. “I know where it is, after all. I could sneak around invisibly.”

“They might have detectors that don’t rely on sight to tell if people are there. Invisibility cloaks exist, after all.”

“Yeah. Plus, they’re sort of against us at the moment. We want our team, not the people that don’t even believe us.”

“At the very least I expected someone to come down and ask us about the attack. It’s like they just don’t care we had to fight off almost a dozen Dementors.”

“Instead you’re being punished for it. I know what you mean. Still, they didn’t put much effort into finding out about the Peter/Sirius issue, so something like this probably doesn’t even appear on their radar.”

“Not that they know what radar is.”

“I wonder if Dementors show up on radar?”

“I wonder why Dudley couldn’t see them? I didn’t know magic gave us extra senses or whatever.”

“Good point. That would be an interesting spell. Not to become invisible, but rather to just be ignored by normal people.”

“If only you had something, I don’t know, a book maybe? Something that could get you new spells if you asked it.”

Susan laughed, and pulled her book out. “I would like a spell to be ignored by anyone that does not possess magic,” she said to it. She put it back. “We’ll see what it comes up with. Totally useless around school, of course, but it could be fun to play with if the grade isn’t too high.”

“So do we just keep doing our own thing? You wanted to make knives for Hermione and Ron, but with them out of touch, that’s not going to happen.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I’m raising one of my skill groups from a 5 to a 6, so I don’t have to use so much energy on those spells. So no making stuff for myself. I guess we just keep training. We could head to Diagon Alley, see what the old wizard crowd is up to.”

“No, better stay here. That’s what the letter said.”

“I guess you’re right. Look at us, a couple of kids who can’t wait to *go back to school*. We should both have our heads examined.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure there will be some bizarre happening here soon, take our minds off things.”

“Yeah, looking forward to it.”

That night, Susan watched as the Dursleys sped off in their car. She noticed they were all nicely dressed, and she went over and knocked on Harry’s door. She made Sparkle come this time, and they waited for Harry to come down.

A tall figure cracked the door open, and she saw a wand poking out.

“*Thrust!*” she cast, wondering why she hadn’t needed to roll *Initiative*.

*Maybe after I perform this action?*

The figure grabbed the door and went nowhere.

“*Magic-*” Susan started to say, touching her bracelet.

“Susan?” asked a voice from inside. A light came on, and Remus was standing there.

“Professor?” She looked around, and there were two people she personally knew standing there.

*Scratch that, four people.* Remus, Alastor, and Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom all smiled at her.

“Good reflexes,” said Alastor. “But that spell needs a little more oomph.”

“And I just raised *Mercury* too. I don’t know how you managed to resist it, but I did roll kind of crappy. Anyway, nice of you all to drop by, finally!”

“We’ve been busy, and you seemed able to handle yourselves.”

“How’ve you been?” asked Remus.

“Well, thank you, professor,” answered Susan. “Anti-curse still holding up okay?”

“Nary a twinge, thanks. And it’s just Remus now. Professor seems a little formal.”

“Okay.”

The stairs creaked, and everyone turned to see the door open a crack.

Suddenly Harry was there, throwing off his cloak and sticking his wand back in the holster. His knife went next. "Everyone!" he said, with evident surprise. "You're here!"

"Invisibility cloak. Another person with good instincts," growled Alastor. "Also armed to the teeth, wand and knife, huh? Your defense professors were worth something, I guess."

"You didn't think I would just rush down here with all this noise going on, did you? It's great to see you all, though I don't know some of you. I think I've seen your pictures before, though."

"We can do introductions later. Get packed, we're leaving."

"Finally!" said Harry, a grin breaking out on his face. "Where are headed to? The burrows?"

"A little more out of the way than that. You'll see."

"I'll go get my trunk."

"I'll help," said a purple haired witch, bounding after him.

"I'm Tonks," Susan heard her say as she went up the stairs.

Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom came over to Susan.

*Oh crap, these are exactly the people I didn't want to see- ever.*

"I know we haven't been formally introduced," said Frank Longbottom. "But I hear from Neville we have you to thank for our trip back from madness."

"I just got lucky the spell worked the way it did. It was no big deal."

"Maybe not for you, but it was for us. Thank you," said his wife, Alice.

Susan blushed and looked down. "You don't need to thank me."

"So Albus said. He said you didn't want any recognition, that you were just helping Neville get his family back. We just wanted you to know it really meant a lot to us that you even made the attempt. Every day we can be with our son, watch him grow up, hear his stories of school- it's something to be treasured. No words can ever express how we feel. We won't waste the gift you've given us."

"Then we've even," said Susan, raising her head. "If what I did can help someone else, and that help can help someone else, I'll be repaid in full."

"Seems a lot of us have Susan to thank for our even being here," said Alastor.

Susan's face fell. "In more than one way, sadly."

"You're talking about Voldemort? Put him out of your mind. He was coming back with or without you. Maybe he's a little stronger now, so what? We just have to get stronger still."

"Well put," said a wizard standing over in the corner.

"Where are we headed, by the way?" asked Susan. "I'll probably need to find a picture of the place if I haven't seen it before."

"We're going by broom."

"Why? I can just open a hole in the air directly there. Why take the risk of flying all over creation?"

"You can seriously get us all there with a single step?"

"Yes."

"I suppose that would be less risky, telling you where to take us rather than flying all the way there."

"You don't have to give me the exact address, just the general area."

"Okay." He told her a general area.

"All right. Never been there, just a second."

She went over to the Dursley's computer and wiggled the mouse. Several wizards watched with interest as she brought up google maps and typed in the address. (She rolled a 13 on *Computer Use*) She dropped into street view and started moving the street about.

"Which way? This way or that way?" she asked.

"Is that... live?" asked Alastor.

"Nah, date says about a year ago." She pointed to the corner where the date sat. "But the way cameras are springing up everywhere, I wouldn't doubt it could be, twenty years from now. So, is this close enough or can we get closer?"

"Can you move the view that way?"

"Sure." She clicked the mouse.

"This... this is magic!" said one of the witches.

"Nope!" said Susan happily. "Just a butt-load of time and money, and google driving cars everywhere that have funny cameras on top."

"Stop there. Yeah, that's close enough."

Susan looked the site over. She went back into directions mode and typed in the two addresses.

*Doesn't hurt to know the distance and direction. Even if I would get lost trying to get there otherwise.*

"Okay, I can get us there." She closed the browser, and snapped the monitor off again.

"We never learned about that in Muggle Studies," said a wizard.

Susan looked him over. *Mid 60s I would guess.* "They probably didn't have computers when you were in school. They've only been around for like thirty years."

"In thirty years they've gone from nothing to a box you can just ask for pictures of anyplace and it'll just show them to you?" Alastor seemed concerned.

"I could do maps on my phone," said Susan, pulling her cell phone out. "I just wanted the larger picture, that's all. Technology moves fast, you guys ignore it at your peril."

"Before I saw that I would have agreed with you. Anyway, I think Harry's done."

He came down the steps, the trunk floating behind him.

"I'm just going to *Teleportal* us there, so keep it aloft. Everyone ready?"

They all nodded.

"Super. *Teleportal!*" she cast, taking the extra time. The portal opened to where she had seen, and they all stepped through.

"That just saved us *hours* of flying," exclaimed Tonks, looking the edges of the hole over in wonder. "Amazing! How come our magic can't do that?"

"I ask myself that all the time, believe me," said Susan, rolling her eyes. "Which way?"

"We're nearly there. Come on."

The group made their way past a bunch of buildings, and Moody stopped in front of a normal looking apartment building. Alastor suddenly became concerned.

"You can't see it, can you? Your magic can't work like that. Tell me you can't see it."

"See what?" Susan reached out with *Magic Sense*. "There's something there, I can *feel* it, emanating magic. But what am I supposed to be looking at?"

"You don't see anything right there?" He pointed ahead of them.

"Nothing special in particular."

"Wait a second," said Sparkle. Magical energy started gathering around her. "*Dimension Step,*" she cast, vanishing. She was back a second later. "There's a house there on the Astral. I couldn't get into it though, oddly enough. First time that's happened."

“Well, that’s something, anyway. Here, read this and memorize it.”

He passed a piece of paper to Harry, who looked at it, then passed it to Susan, who then showed it to Sparkle.

Soon they all could see the house.

“It was there the whole time,” figured Susan, “We just couldn’t perceive it. Interesting. It’s more of that weird Dementor like magic.”

“Must have been,” said Sparkle. “Wonder if I could get there through the Astral now.”

“That’ll have to wait, come on.”

He hustled everyone inside, with Tonks nearly shoving someone over.

“Sorry,” she said. “Can’t see in here.”

“Not that that matters to you,” Remus said playfully.

“Don’t go far inside, and stay quiet,” Alastor hissed. “I’ll get the lights on.”

As what must have been gas lamps started flickering on, Susan looked about in interest.

*Haunted Mansion at Disney? Eat your heart out! I sort of felt bad sneaking in with magic, but to be fair I mostly just wandered around. That ride I went on, I should send them some pictures so they can redesign it properly.*

“Welcome to the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix,” Remus said proudly.

Information Dump

Time: Seconds later

Place: Sirius' house

"I better go tell the second team to stand down, we won't be needing them," said Alastor. "That *Teleportal* magic of yours would certainly come in handy, Susan. Glad you're on our side. See you all later." He went back outside again.

"Excuse me," said Susan quietly. "I think all my magic will come in handy, thank you very much."

Molly appeared out of the gloom of the hallway. "Hello, everyone," she said quietly. "Glad you all made it safely. And way ahead of schedule too..." she looked confused, but saw Susan. "Oh, of course. Anyway, they'll probably start the meeting soon, why don't you and Harry go up and see the others? And stay quiet, there are *things* living here we don't want woken up."

"Things?" Susan asked, looking around.

"Things," Molly verified, and motioned them to come upstairs.

"See you all later," Harry said to the assembled group.

"Yes, thanks for coming to get us," said Susan.

Remus shrugged. "Rather anticlimactic, after all the planning we put into flying here. We just aren't used to stepping from place to place. I think we'll have to have a full listing of what you can do, Susan, in case we need it."

"Apart from bringing the dead back, just about anything, given enough time."

The others looked skeptical, but she gave a little wave and followed Harry up a dingy flight of stairs.

"That room there," said Molly, pointing. "I'm getting dinner ready, it's a nightmare trying to keep people fed when they're always coming and going like they are. Go on then!"

Susan, Harry, and Sparkle went into the room, and Hermione and Ron descended upon them.

"You're finally here!" said Hermione, hugging them both.

"Yeah, it only took us being attacked by Dementors and then waiting almost another week. Honestly, is this a group of high energy freedom fighters or a bunch of tottering old people?"

"Little of both, I think," said Ron. "Nice to see you."

Susan stretched to look at Ron's backside. "Got your cutie mark yet?"

Ron scowled at her. "I've been too busy cleaning to figure out my talent, if you must know."

"Cleaning? You mean this place? Where are we, anyway? Don't they know I have a perfectly decent secret base... that Lucius knows the location of? Okay, never mind. Where are we?"

"Sirius' house," said Hermione. "He's been dying to see you, Harry. You should have seen him when he heard you got attacked."

"Yeah, he was in a right state," said Ron. "Still, seemed pretty pleased when he heard you managed to kill a bunch more of those things."

"Not as many as I would have liked," remarked Susan sourly. "So is all the security stuff why my magic could find you?"

“Probably,” said Hermione. “Apparently there’s all kinds of ‘leave me alone’ magic on the place. That’s why we’re using it as the headquarters.”

“Smart. So your mom was saying something about *things* living here?”

“Yeah, the Black family kept some weird stuff, let me tell you. And there’s a painting in the hall that keeps shouting at us.”

“You’ve been here the whole time?”

“The Headmaster thought it was best to get Hermione here right away,” explained Ron. “She would be very useful as a hostage, and as you know they’re not above that sort of thing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“And of course my parents signed right up when the call came out.”

“I would have been shocked if they hadn’t,” said Susan.

“Still, if you’ve just been cleaning I guess I won’t feel too bad about being left out of things for so long,” said Harry.

“You haven’t messed a thing, believe me. Just a lot of people coming and going, and a lot of meetings we aren’t invited to.”

“Which is weird, because you would think I would be consulted about Voldi’s progress in my magic. But if they think they’ve got a handle on it...”

“Maybe he’s acting a little like the ministry himself,” ventured Hermione. “You know, trying to believe things aren’t as bad as they really are?”

“I guess. Let’s not do that, ourselves. We will plan for the absolute worst in all things. Even... *Destroy Magic*.”

“You mean him working out a spell to destroy magic?” Hermione put her hands over her mouth.

“In an area or a person. Maybe I should finally learn it, I just hate to think I have that kind of power. I mean I’ve been casting it on our coins to have them melted down all this time, but that’s just from the formula. I may need to try and cast it on him before he casts it on me.”

“Is there much chance of him figuring that spell out?” asked Ron.

“It’s grade ten, of course, so it would take a long time. I guess it just depends on what his priority is. Getting me out of the way? Getting followers? Supplementing his magic with mine? There’s too many possibilities.”

“This has been a cheerful discussion.”

“Hello you two!” said a cheerful voice, and Ginny stepped into the room.

“Hi, Ginny!” said Susan. “Good summer so far then?”

She made a face. “Please tell me you know some good cleaning spells? We can’t use magic but you can, right?”

“There’s *Hygiene*, it’s only grade 1. I could pick it up, I still have an XP left. And Sparkle knows it. Are you not enjoying your cleaning duties?”

“Not so much, no. What’s the point of knowing magic if you can’t use it?”

“An excellent question. My mother has said she can come help out on weekends, and do whatever she can otherwise. So we’ll have a little more help. And my *Legion* can do stuff, as long as I can give them clear enough directions.”

“Can I hug you?”

“Hugging is acceptable,” Susan said with a big smile.

“Speaking of hugging,” said Ron, “You’ll never guess who hung around.”

“Who?” asked Harry, trying not to look at Ginny and Susan hugging.

“Fleur! She got a job at Gringotts, and she’s been in and out of here as well.”

“Excellent! I’m really glad to hear that.”

And so Harry and Susan were brought up to speed on Percy, and articles in the paper about Susan and how dangerous her magic was, as the ministry had come out and said she wasn’t cheating in the Tournament.

“So they’re painting me as the villain now, eh? I’ll have to work on growing a mustache I can twirl.”

“This is serious,” protested Hermione.

“I know it is. My magic is dangerous, that’s the whole point. So is yours, or Harry’s. Heck, I’m sure Ginny, with just the spells she knows, could find some creative ways to kill someone if she had to. It’s not what you know how to do, it’s what you do with that knowledge. Even wizards should know that.”

“That’s the trouble. If they come right out and say it, the Longbottoms will go public with how you cured them. That will make the ministry look bad because someone with such dangerous magic doesn’t go around healing people, usually. So it’s been subtle.”

“Subtle we can probably deal with.”

From downstairs they could hear the door opening and closing again, and it sounded like people were arriving.

“All right, it sounds like they’re going to be meeting. Let’s go.”

“They won’t let us in, they say we’re too young,” said Ginny bitterly.

“We’ll see about that,” said Susan.

The group tromped down the stairs, with Susan leading the way. She looked around and saw a room others were going into it. She marched over to it.

“Where do you think you’re going, Missy?” asked Alastor, blocking her way.

“I assume we’re meeting now, yes? It seems something is happening.”

“The order is meeting, yes. You guys aren’t invited. Back upstairs with you.”

“Really? That’s interesting, given it’s my magic he’s stolen to come back to life. Voldemort is my problem now, and I’m the only one who is going to be able to fix the situation.”

“Have a rather high opinion of yourself, don’t you?”

“No, just a low one of you guys. Tell me, the last time Voldi was running around, what stopped him?”

“Uh...”

“Exactly. A baby. Harry here. It wasn’t by your efforts at all, was it? In fact, the way I hear it, he was totally spanking you and on the road to *total victory*. He made a single mistake—trying to kill Harry himself rather than letting an underling do it. Still don’t have a good answer as to why that is, by the way. Regardless, what exactly makes you think you’ll do any better this time around? After all, this time even the Ministry is against you.”

“She has a point,” said a voice inside the room. It was Tonks.

“Stay out of it, *Nymphadora*.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“*Nymphadora*? That’s kind of a cool name. Don’t you like it?”

“Would you?” Tonks looked down over Alastor’s shoulder.

“It’s different. Susan is so plain, and ordinary. You want to trade?”

“I’m not sure that would work...”

“Ah well. So are we in or not?”

“Absolutely not!” said Molly. “You’re-”

“Too young,” Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Molly said at the same time.

“Told you,” whispered Ginny.

“I say let them in,” said Sirius. “Hi, Harry! Sorry I didn’t come see you earlier, I’ve been talking with Kingsley here.”

“It’s fine. We can catch up later.”

“Of course you would say that,” said Molly, wiping her hands on a towel as she came into the room.

“With just the stuff I’ve heard about Team Susan doing, I would say they were more than qualified.”

“That’s not the point,” said Alastor. “Look, you’re not going to back down, are you?”

“I’ve never backed down from anything in my life,” said Susan.

“All right. You two, with me. The rest of you, upstairs. I need to have a little talk with Harry and Susan. I’ll be right back.”

“You’re not going to tell him?” asked Molly.

“They need to know why, otherwise she’ll just use her magic to find out. That *Time Window* of hers tonight while they should be asleep. Or a pinhole *Teleportal* we can’t see. Or some other spell she pulls out of nowhere. The reason why won’t hurt.”

Molly shook her head. “I suppose you have that much right. I just hope they understand.”

“They seem mature enough to handle it. I’m making the call. Come on.”

They followed him into another room, and shut the door. It seemed like a family tree was painted on the walls, and Alastor got his wand out and cast some spells at the door.

“You’ll probably tell them anyway, but it’s your choice. There’s a reason we don’t want you knowing our plans, Harry.”

“Me specifically?”

“You, specifically. We’re worried that connection of yours to Voldemort might run both ways.”

“You mean those visions I have of him, when he was torturing people?”

“Exactly. If there’s even the slightest chance he can somehow tap into that, and learn our plans through you, it would be a disaster.”

“That would be bad!”

“So now do you understand why we want to keep you out of it? It’s nothing against you or Susan. Albus has told me all about the things you both have done, made, fought off and accomplished. I’m impressed, and that’s not easy. I’d take either one of you at my side in a fight, no doubt about that. And when the time comes to fight, as long as you’ve shown me you can handle yourselves you’ll be nearby to provide support. We’re too short staffed to turn down anyone willing to take the risk at the moment. But for the sake of the Order, you’re going to have to remain ignorant of certain points. After the meeting we can give you a general overview, but that will have to do. Got it? I’m telling you this, Susan, for exactly the reason I said. No finding out and letting stuff slip to him, okay?”

Harry seemed deep in thought. “Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. Who knows what magic he has at his command? Especially now when Susan’s magic has been thrown into it.”

“He won’t have come up with anything too great in a month, I can tell you that. But yeah, if he worked on a spell like that, to rummage around in your head... It’s a sound reason, Harry. We can’t take the chance where magic is involved.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “I don’t like it, but I do see your point. I won’t try to find out any more than you’re prepared to tell me.”

“Good lad! Knew you would see reason. You’re like me, don’t want to just be told you can and can’t do something without knowing why. I get it. And I’m sorry it worked out this way, but there you are.”

“Thanks for taking the time to explain it.”

“I was young once too, believe it or not. I know how it feels. So I have your word, both of you?”

“You have my word,” said Susan. Harry echoed her.

“Good. Now I have a meeting to get back to.”

He left, and Susan and Harry looked at each other.

“Do we tell them?” asked Harry.

“I hate to keep things from them. Think about if it were Ron and Hermione in here, and us out there.”

“It would really worry them, knowing he might be seeing their every move.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of creepy. I guess we just see how much they press us for knowing?”

“Sure.”

“But... Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“If you start to feel he’s influencing you, or that he’s trying to read your mind or something, let me know, okay? A *Magic Immunity* might cut you off from him while I maintain it.”

“Influencing me?”

“Like if you feel something and you don’t think you would normally be feeling that way. I don’t know. Just... try to be more self aware, is all I’m saying.”

“I’ll try.”

“So?” asked Ron when they came back in.

“He made a convincing argument,” said Susan. “We’re going to be given an overview, and help where we can.”

“But he promised us a share of the action, when the time comes. We have to convince him we can handle ourselves though,” said Harry.

“What does that mean?” asked Ginny.

“Probably doing what we’re told without complaints. Not causing trouble, and maybe he’ll see what magic we can do. That sort of thing.”

“Who are you two, and what have you done with Susan and Harry?”

“I can see reason,” said Susan. “And the reason is a good one.”

“Okay,” said Hermione. “That’s good enough for me.”

After the meeting broke up everyone went down to dinner, and Tonks of course tripped over the umbrella stand with a crash.

Immediately the curtains flew apart, and the portrait of the old woman that was behind them started screaming at them.

“*Silence!*” shouted Sparkle, and the area went quiet.

“Thank you,” said Susan, lowering her hands from her ears. “Charming portrait. It hasn’t been burned why?”

“Now, why would you want to burn the portrait of my mother?” said Sirius, rushing over. “Nice work with keeping her quiet. How did you manage it?”

Looking over, the curtains were still blowing in the wind, and it looked like the picture was still ranting at them, but no sound was coming out.

“Silence spell,” explained Sparkle. “It’s useful for sneaking around. Not, of course, that I need it.”

Sirius drew the curtains back, keeping his head back, as obviously he stuck his head into the bubble of silence and started hearing her again. By getting the curtains closed the wind behind them seemed to die, and Sparkle let the spell go.

“We’ve been trying to get it down, but we think there’s a permanent sticking charm on it.”

“So why not just cast a silencing charm over the curtain area, so it can’t hear noise? Then it won’t start screaming, right?” asked Susan.

Sirius held up a finger and was about to say something, but then closed his mouth again. “That’s an excellent question. I guess we were just so focused on getting rid of it, we didn’t think about just shutting her up.” He drew his stolen wand out and started gesturing across the area.

“That should help. Well done, Susan. Come on, we have a lot to catch up on!”

They went into the kitchen, where Fred and George were already helping set the table with magic. Everyone greeted them warmly, and Sirius started introducing the others who were staying for dinner.

“And this useless lump is Fletcher Mundungus, who was supposed to be watching the area around your house, Harry. Hey, wake up!”

“Wha? Huh?” The man at the end of the table came awake. “Oh, is the meeting over?”

“Yes, and a wonderful contribution you made. Silence. Here’s an idea, you can apologize to Harry for letting him almost get killed by Dementors!”

“Harry? Oh, Harry Potter! Yes! I feel I do owe you an apology.” He shot a glance at Sirius. “I was on duty at the time, but a very limited time business offer came up I had to see to. I stand to make a tidy profit on some cauldrons, and I thought I would only be gone a few moments. How was I to know he’d be attacked in the next ten minutes, anyway?”

“Fletcher here is our resident... underworld expert? Is that what you’re calling yourself now?”

“Sounds better than what you lot are always calling me.”

“Underworld expert?” asked Harry.

“He can get us things on the sly, mostly, and he has his ear to the ground with the more seedy establishments in the area.”

“Really?” asked Susan with interest. “You,” she said, pointing to him, then crooked her finger. “Come with me. We’ll be back in two shakes.”

Fletcher followed Susan, bemused, as the others looked questioningly at her.

“Can you get just about anything?” Susan asked, dragging him back into the room with the family tree.

“Given enough time and money, yes. I do pride myself on acquiring that which can, uh, help the Order.”

“And I can count on your silence?”

He drew himself up. “What do you take me for? Some lowlife criminal?”

“Certainly not.” She got out a pen and a piece of paper and started writing on the wall what she wanted. “I’m writing it because there may be people listening at the door.” She finished, and there were three items on the paper. “How about this? Any problems?”

Fletcher goggled at it. “This is Muggle stuff!”

“Is that a problem?”

“Well, I guess not. But so many? And five of these?” He pointed to the last item.

“Think about who our opponent is going to be. Is the quantity going to cause a problem?”

“Fifty? I don’t know... I don’t usually deal with this sort of thing, so I don’t know how they come. Nor do I know how many is suspicious to be buying at once.”

“I wouldn’t need it all at once. A few for the first item as a starter, and maybe one of these, to start?” She pointed at the last. “But if you can find a source of them, I might want more than that, besides.”

“What are you going to do with it all?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Go to war. That is why we’re here, presumably?”

“This will cost you, I hope you realize that.”

Susan pulled a wad of cash out of her *Pocket Dimension*. “As they are non-magic, here’s some money from that side. And don’t skimp on the quality. I want a decent, fairly new model. Not something that’s been rotting in someone’s basement a hundred years. 1990s or newer, please. Tested, cleaned, ready to go.”

“That’s a tall order. I don’t know how long it might take.”

Susan slipped 9 Galleons out of her pocket and slipped them to him. “For your trouble. And the same again next month.”

“Well, now that’s a different story!” he said, hefting them in his hand. “I suppose it is for the order. But do you know how to use this stuff?”

Susan shook her head. “Not yet. But I’m going to.”

“Okay. It’s your money. I’ll let you know what I can find.”

“Thanks!”

They got some odd looks coming back to the dinner table, but with everyone’s “help” (Tonks provided a -2 on her *Assist* thanks to a really bad *Clumsiness* roll) dinner was served.

Afterwards, there was a small “discussion” about who was going to stay for the “overview” and who was not.

“Ginny is just too young,” Molly argued.

“She’s a member of Team Susan,” said Susan. “And we stick together. Either we all get the same information, and we all help in the capacity we are able, or none of us do. I *Teleportal* back to my house with Hermione, and you all lose my considerable store of magic.”

“You’re blackmailing us? With You Know Who?” Molly looked like she couldn’t believe it.

“He’s coming for us, make no mistake. Me, either to eliminate from the board, or get me on his side to help him master *Natural Magician*. You get in his way, he goes through you. And he’s coming for you because you are going to fight him, and he can’t have that. To do that he’s going to have to get through me. Now we can either stand, united, against him, or we each get to stand alone. Let me remind you- You need me a lot more than I need you.”

“And you think you aren’t a bully?” asked Harry.

“These are facts, Harry. I am merely making sure they are known by all. Ginny is older now than we were when we went into the Chamber of Secrets to rescue her. Do you realize that?”

Is she any less capable than you were, then? I think not. Will she be on the front lines? Probably not. But I'm not going to shield her from what's going on, because she deserves the truth. We all do. How do you think she would feel if Mrs. Weasley comes and says her father, or George here, is dead? Her first thought, at least mine would be: 'If only they had let me help, maybe this wouldn't have happened.' You want to protect her? Well and good! I respect that, it's a parent's duty to protect their child. But giving her ignorance about what's out there and what her part is only increases her risk, not decreases it. You have the sex talk with your kids not to make them run out and start doing it like rabbits, but to make sure they stay safe when the time is right. Maybe her part will only be to clean this house and keep it safe for the front lines. But at least then she knows, and can take pride in her part, rather than sulking and doing the job half way."

"So you're going to take responsibility for her?" asked Molly.

"In terms of sending her to fight or not? She hasn't proven herself to me in that capacity as of yet. I would have to watch her spar Harry or Hermione before I even considered it. I'm talking about knowledge here, that's all."

"We all have to grow up sometime," said Arthur, putting a hand on Molly's shoulder.

"My baby girl..."

"Mom, I'm not a kid anymore."

"All right. You can stay."

"Thanks!" She said that more to Susan than to her mother, but both nodded.

"Sadly, for all that, we don't actually have that much news," said Sirius. "Voldemort is biding his time, just like you said he would. He's not doing anything openly, and only a very careful tailing of those you mentioned at his revival have shown something's up at all."

"And the ministry itself is not going to lift a finger to help us?"

"Correct," said Arthur. "Cornelius is getting paranoid, you see. He thinks this is part of a coup attempt by Albus."

"What was that quote from the Wheel of Time series? Sparkle, you read it, didn't you? Use that *Photographic Memory* you paid good background points for!"

Sparkle raised her head and recited:

*"Loose a lion – a rabid lion - in the streets. And when panic grips the people, once it has turned their bowels to water, calmly tell them you will deal with it. Then you kill it, and order them to hang the carcass up where everyone can see. Before they have time to think, you give another order, and it will be obeyed. And if you continue to give orders, they will continue to obey, for you will be the one who saved them, and who better to lead?"*

"Ah, something like that, yes," said Tonks.

"And something Tom said to me- he was originally dissatisfied with the ministry. He was talking about Azkaban, which is where I learned about it. He originally wanted to reform the ministry and that's why he originally rebelled. So does Cornelius think Mr. Dumbledore is about to rise in power like that?"

"He remembers that Albus had more support than he did, when the position became vacant," said Arthur. "It's just Albus didn't want the job, so he got it. And then of course there's you."

"Me?"

"With you at his side, Albus has a lot more power than he would alone. You've made your mark on him, Susan. First you heal two people of madness right in front of him. Just pulling that off would have been the lifetime work of a witch or wizard, and their name would have gone

down in history for it. But you?” He chuckled. “You were just getting started, weren’t you? A few years later you start threatening him with the destruction of Azkaban. He might have just written it off as bravado or whatever, but then you had to go and prove to him you can destroy Dementors. That night when you scared that one off must have really shaken him. They’ve never really feared anything before, you see. Even a Patronus is a temporary solution when they’re around. They’ll get through it eventually, if the wizard isn’t strong enough, or if there are enough of them. If you can get them afraid of you, and convert them to your side...”

“I might send them after him, or anyone else I see as a threat to the Headmaster’s, or my own power. Okay, that explains a few things.”

“Easier to believe in the threat he thinks is seconds from knocking on his office door than in some dead dark wizard,” said Tonks.

“For all he knows, you’ve got Albus under your power, and you’re using him as a distraction from your own gathering of people and power,” said Sirius.

“I guess I shouldn’t have been going around shooting my mouth off, huh? Sorry about that, guys.”

“Told you,” muttered Harry.

“All right, so, theory time. Do you guys know the story about my father?”

Most everyone at the table shook their heads.

“I’ll tell you about him sometime. The point is, there are worlds parallel to this one, in which different choices were made, or different kinds of power arose. Just work with me here. Pretend I was never born- Harry and some other person finish the tournament, right? Voldi has no interest in the other person and probably just kills him. Takes Harry’s blood and is resurrected. Harry... gets away somehow, I have no idea how.”

“Maybe the portkey works both ways?” said Ron.

“Right, because I would charm an object to let my greatest enemy escape my grasp. Be serious Ron.”

“It was just a suggestion.”

“We’ll go with it for now. He gets back, and tells everyone what he’s seen. You guys get together because even without me around, Cornelius doesn’t believe Harry. What’s Voldi’s next move? In other words, without my magic to occupy his attention, what’s his plan?”

The others looked at each other.

“He already knows about it,” said Lupin. There was no mistaking who ‘he’ was. “So there’s no harm in telling them, right?”

“Of course, the fact it happens at all is not common knowledge,” said Arthur.

“And they’ve already brought up the question of why Voldemort went personally to kill Harry. It would answer that question.”

“All right, but please don’t spread it around,” said Arthur. “There was a spell put over the whole planet a long, long time ago. We can’t even conceive of how such a thing was done today, but they did it. You know about Seers, right?”

“Like that so called professor of divination?” asked Hermione.

“Exactly like her,” he answered. “They can sometimes speak true prophesy.”

“And someone had one about Harry, am I right?” asked Susan.

Arthur nodded. “Harry and Voldemort, actually. That’s why he went personally, to make sure the prophesy wasn’t fulfilled.”

“Expect I’m guessing it was?”

“We don’t know. It seems like it was, but he came back, so it must have been misinterpreted. That’s the problem with Seers, you see? You can’t get a straight answer out of them.”

Susan nodded her head. “That’s why I’ve never tried the *True Question* spell. You get a riddle that may or may not help. And if you take it one way, but it actually says something different, you’re worse off.”

“What does that have to do with the spell these ancient wizards cast?” asked Hermione.

“I’m getting to that. The spell collects the prophecies and solidifies them in the Department of Mysteries. It did this because so many were just going unheard or misheard. The Seer has no recollection of what they spoke, which is a real problem. The ‘spell’ so to speak can happen any time, and getting a single word mixed up in a prophecy is worse than having it at all. So they’re recorded, where they can be listened to later. We think Voldemort heard some part of it, somehow, and we think he’d want to hear the whole thing for himself. So in your other world, Susan, that would be his goal. Hear that prophecy so he knows what went wrong.”

“Couldn’t he just send a lackey in to get it?”

Arthur shook his head. “Only the persons it relates to can take it down. Anyone else dies.”

“Pleasant. And he can’t exactly wander into the ministry, can he?”

“They’ve been stepping up security there,” answered Tonks. “Not because of him, mind you, but because of you, Susan. They’re pretty sure it’s hopeless because your magic works differently, but they’re giving it the old college try. Oh, they aren’t mentioning you by name, but memos floating around mention your description and to keep an eye out for anyone matching it. That sort of thing.”

“Great, I’m becoming public enemy number one, for something I have no intention of doing. Isn’t wizard justice grand? Back to Voldi, he figures out where it went wrong, corrects it, and then turns his attention to taking over?”

“That’s probably what would happen.”

“But now he’s going to study his new magic, buying us time. It works against us because without overt action on his part, it’ll be easier the longer he takes to deny he’s alive again. Clever bastard.” Susan sighed.

“Does that satisfy your curiosity, all of you?”

Susan looked around, and the others seemed satisfied.

“I think it does. Thank you. Both for the straight answers, and for treating us like people and not just silly kids. Team Susan will work hard at whatever tasks you set for us, won’t we, team?”

Everyone smiled and nodded.

“I want him stopped as much as you do. I have the power. Use it! Use me! I can provide you a complete list of spells I know, and anything you want me to do, let me know and I’ll say yes or no that it’s possible or not. That’s all I ask.”

“Fair enough,” said Arthur. “You’ve shown you can handle yourselves, we’ll do what we can to make sure you don’t feel left out. Susan is right, this situation impacts you all, and I can see you wanting to be helpful.”

“But for now, it’s bed time,” said Molly.

“Aw, mom!” said Ginny, but Susan held up a finger and looked at her. “Sorry. Okay, I’ll go. Thank you for letting me stay.”

As Susan followed the others upstairs, she heard Arthur remark to Molly. “It seems Susan’s a good influence on her. She really is growing up.”

Susan felt a strange sort of pride in that statement.

“So are you actually going to play at being a good little girl and do what they ask?” Hermione asked Susan as they changed for bed. Ginny perked up and looked over at her.

Susan smiled. “Why, Hermione! That almost sounded like an implication that I am not a good little girl!”

“Answer the question.”

Susan laughed. “Can’t fool you for a minute, can I? We are going to clean, and cooperate in every way, I meant that much.”

“But?”

“But we’re going to the ministry sometime very soon and grab that prophesy. Harry will have to come, but I can stick it in my *Pocket Dimension*, or you can. I don’t trust Voldi not to come up with some way of getting there and grabbing it. And if he tries, too bad for him, it’s already gone.”

“And you have a plan for this, I expect?”

“Hermione, I always have a plan. Which I’ll tell you tomorrow, after I finish making your favorite pancakes!”

“But I like waffles better...” she protested.

Ron finds his passion

Time: The next day

Place: Order headquarters

True to her word, Susan made Hermione ~~pancakes~~ waffles for breakfast, which required only minor calibrations. She said she would tell everyone the plan, but not where adults could hear. She also asked Molly about her mother coming to help.

“Does she have any magic?” Molly asked.

“Sort of. It’s rather specialized, though. But really, Ron and Hermione can’t do any magic, so that’s not a requirement, is it?”

“No, I guess not. And Merlin knows we could use the help. If she doesn’t mind just cleaning...”

“For the moment, no. She would like to take a greater part at some time. My father’s stories really captured her interest, but she despaired of having any adventures of her own. And his tales of the magic he’d seen made her wish there was magic on this world. Imagine her surprise when she learned there was! So she’s interested in learning more about magic, and this seems like as good a time as any.”

“Okay. But will she be able to get into the house? We need Albus to write her up a slip if she’s coming inside.”

“That’s a good question. If I open a *Teleportal* inside this house and lead her through, I don’t see why she wouldn’t be able to see it like a normal house. It’s only if she went outside that she would have trouble getting back in, because she wouldn’t be able to perceive it from out there.”

“Give it a try, if it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.”

*Yeah, and it backfires and sucks me into some weird dimension...*

Susan cast a *Teleportal* to the outside of her house, and went to get her mother. She stepped through and greeted Molly.

“Guess it worked then,” she said.

“So this is a wizard’s house, huh?” said Stacy, looking around.

“It’s a dark wizard’s house, technically. We’re retrofitting it with the Philosophy of Morals and Values upgrades,” said Susan with a grin. “I’ll show you real wizard’s house later, if that’s okay with you Mrs. Weasley.”

“I saw her house, once, remember? You took me through to look at it.”

“Hey, that’s right!” Susan snapped her fingers. “How silly of me. So, what’s our first task?”

“Get Harry and Ron up.”

“Yeah, boys should clean just as much as girls! I’ll go get them.”

A half hour later, armed with spray bottles, the “Cleaning Senshi” went into the drawing room, where a set of curtains buzzed as though with a thousand angry bees. Stacy had a bottle in each hand, and Susan was jealous of her potentially having an *Off Hand* skill high enough to use both hands.

*Not that it would do me any good for casting spells, though.*

“Right,” said Molly. “I’ll flip them up with magic, you all start spraying. One good squirt will paralyze them. Are you sure you want to be in the front, Stacy?”

“Trust me,” she replied with a grin. “You guys just get any I miss.”

“The daughter takes after the mother,” Molly said, rolling her eyes. “Okay. Don’t let them bite you, you’ll swell up. I have antidote-”

“And the healing shivs!” put in Harry.

“But I would rather not use it,” Molly finished. She brandished her wand. “Everyone ready?”

“Accelerate,” said Stacy, and before Susan’s eyes Stacy started going into overdrive, far above any level Susan herself had been at with that spell.

*Just how good was my dad?* she thought, as the curtains flipped up and Stacy went full on *Kung Fu Master of the Spray-bottles*.

Susan stared in wonder as, dual wielding spray bottles, her mother made the flying insects look like they were moving in slow motion. Susan had dropped into “combat time” and waited for any to get past her mother to spray.

None did.

*She’s using reactive actions, that’s a one delay for each squirt. There’s no way those are active, but she’s still scoring 100%. Moving without Acceleration I would take seven delay per squirt. She’s doing two attacks at one delay each, so she would squirt 6 more times than me per my action!*

Stacy ran out of spray with a few still coming, and she flipped the bottles over and used them as mini clubs. She swatted them out of the air, where someone squirted them after they hit the floor. The buzzing had stopped, and in a semi-circle around Stacy was a line of weird, bug looking things.

Everyone goggled at her as she resumed normal speed.

“Whew, that was fun!” she said, catching her breath. “I haven’t gotten a chance to use *Acceleration* for a while. Moving at that speed might not be good for me, after all, so I try to avoid it if I can.”

“That was spectacular!” said Ron, the first to recover. “What was that?”

“Kung Fu. I’m sort of a master of it, thanks to my husband’s magic. I just adapted it a little for Bottle Fighting. Seems to have worked out pretty well.”

“How good is she in your terms?” Hermione asked Susan. “I could hardly see her movements.”

“If she mastered the art at a 10, like I would, she would be among the best in the world. The *Augment Skill* spell on her probably doubles that, as I can’t see my father having less than a 10 rating in that planet, especially as he would be just as much of a cheater as myself.” Molly looked at her funny. “He would have put energy into the spell when making the item, artificially increasing his rating. It’s what I would do.” She mouthed “oh.” “So she’s twice as good as the best people on earth. Kung Fu relies on REFlexes, so with a +10 bonus to her REFlex skills from the spell, at least, she’s now three times better than is normally possible for people to achieve. If she had been born with a high REFlexes or put points in to raise it, she might roll a 50 on a single maneuver. Rolling a 30 means you’ve almost done the impossible, for me. That’s how good she is.”

Everyone looked at her in awe.

“Sure, but I can’t do anything else. Yeah, I’m fast, but all Susan has to do is lift me off the ground with magic, and I’m useless.”

“But think about combining that with magic,” said Ron, his eyes wide. “Can you see it? Moving around a battlefield and slinging spells with that kind of precision? Combining your... what did you call it?”

“Kung Fu.”

“Right, Kung Fu with magic. That would be incredible!”

“It would be interesting to try,” said Harry.

“Your father did mention something... what did he say about that? He met a man in his travels that combined martial arts and something else. Guns, that was it. It was some kind of gun based martial art. He said the guy fused a high level math, martial arts, and pistol marksmanship into a single, fluid fighting form. He said I could try it, but I never had the patience for the advanced math... or access to loads of guns.”

“Don’t know what guns are, but that wouldn’t be a problem for me,” said Ron. “I’d want to use magic. A magical martial art. Could you... teach me this Kung Fu of yours?” His eyes were bright.

“I’ve never seen him this excited except for Quidditch,” remarked Hermione.

“Quidditch? That’s rubbish, I see it now. So can you? I can’t really pay you, but maybe we could work something out?”

Stacy laughed. “I know what a single one of your coins is worth in my world, thanks to Susan. Just a couple of them a month and I could quit my job!”

Ron looked over at his mother, pleadingly.

“We might be able to afford a few Galleons a month, if you’re really interested in doing this. But you have to keep your grades up! I want “A”s or better on all your O.W.L exams.”

“Right. I promise!”

“Glowing reports from all your teachers now!”

“Of course.”

“Very well. I’ll see what we can work out.”

“Thanks mom!” He hugged her.

“Who is this, and what has he done with Ron?” Hermione asked Harry.

“Maybe he’s found that beauty mark you girls keep talking about.”

“*Cutie* mark. *Cutie!* Beauty mark, honestly.”

“Hermione!” said Ron, running over to her and grabbing her hands.

“What? What? You’re holding my hands? Why are you holding my hands?”

“You can tutor me in Arithmancy, right? If I’m making a magical marital art, it would make sense to use magical numbers, right? I’m dropping Divination, you always said it was rubbish anyway, right? I’ll start Arithmancy instead!”

“You really want to learn about Arithmancy?”

“If it’ll help with my magical Kung Fu, yes.”

“I suppose I could. They say the best way to learn a subject is to teach it, right?”

“No, the best way is put points into it,” said Susan.

“I’ll let you know if I get some to put in. Otherwise I’ll just have to do it our way.”

“I suppose it works, for you.”

“This is going to be great! I can’t wait to get started!”

“You’re going to have to wait, this house needs cleaning, and put that in the bucket!”

Molly caught Fred (or George) trying to sneak a doxy into his pocket.

“Of course,” he said, pretending to drop it in but palming it instead.

“I can give you some exercises to do, and some moves to practice, so you can get started,” said Stacy. “The math part... I don’t know. I can tell you what Elysian told me about it, but he only had a high level understanding himself. You’ll have to do the hard work of basically reinventing what people practiced on that world with regularity.”

“Someone had to come up with it originally, right? If you can get me started-“

She nodded. “I can. Lucky for you it *is* just numbers, and not some kind of power they had. If you can figure out the method you can apply it to magic as easily as they did to gunplay. There’s nothing supernatural or magical about it, according to him. And he would know. Given that, my training is yours if you want it.”

“Thanks a lot! This is going to be amazing!”

*Good to see him excited about something. Reminds me of me after I cast my first spell.*

With the doxies taken care of, they turned their attention to the case of magical objects in the room.

“Now be careful with these, we don’t know what some of them do.”

“Actually,” said Susan, “It might be my turn to shine a little. I’ve been practicing my *Magic Sense*. Not in the sense of improving my rating, but rather trying to filter out magical distractions and focus on one thing at a time. I figure it might come in handy, being able to use the skill around school without needing a couple of aspirin afterwards.” She turned to her mother. “Learned that one the hard way. The whole freaking castle is magical, nearly took my head off the first time I tried it. It was like stepping outside expecting a light shower and finding I was 10 feet down at the bottom of a pool instead. Anyway, I can tell you which objects are magical, and maybe even what sort of spell is on them!”

So Susan concentrated on each object in turn, telling them the silver thing had some sort of movement based magic. The music box had a sleep spell inside it, and a small, silver box she said wasn’t magical, but had a magical something inside it. She stared at the locket for a long time.

“This seems so familiar to me,” she said. “But I can’t put my finger on why. It’s radiating a dark power, I can tell you that. Not a spell, but Pluto magic. That deals with death and spirits, for those not in the know. I don’t like it.” She tossed it into the bin.

That afternoon, the group met Kreachar, the house elf. Molly was down shouting at Fletcher, when the elf shuffled into the room.

He was muttering to himself about the shameful acts going on in the house, and Susan watched him sadly.

“What is that?” asked Stacy.

“Elf,” said Harry sadly.

“That’s an elf? Anything you can do, elves can do better? That kind of elf?”

“That type of elf doesn’t exist that I know of,” said Susan. “The reality is much grimmer. They were the victim of a rather nasty *Contract* spell that turned their entire race subservient to humans a very long time ago.”

“Seems like he won’t last much longer. Excuse me, elf?”

“You have an odd magic about you,” said Kreachar, looking up at her. “You’re no witch, Kreachar can tell that much for sure. But what are you? And the girl as well. Something very odd

about her, isn't there? Leave old Kreacher to his tasks, odd woman. Magic users who aren't Witches, what's this world coming to?"

"I just wondered if you wanted my daughter to heal you, that's all."

Kreacher seemed not to hear her. "Next it'll be Muggles that are somehow wizards. All coming into my Mistress's house and fouling the place up."

"I'm sorry for what was done to your race," said Susan, dropping to one knee and looking him in the eye. "And I know the spell forces you to believe you don't want it any other way, but if I could fix it, and free your race, I would. I want you to know that."

"And now it speaks to Kreacher, the magical girl who isn't magical. As though Kreacher cared what it had to say. What would the Mistress say, if she saw the scene?"

"Probably one of the unforgivable curses," muttered Ron. "Not that it would help her any against Susan."

"Yes, the Mistress would have certain magics at the ready, she would," he said as he turned away again.

"Come on, there's no help for him," said Susan. "Let's go help with lunch, okay?"

None of them saw him clutching the locket as they sadly left the elf to his devices.

"So what is the plan to get the prophesy?" asked Hermione that night, as they were getting undressed.

"That's easy. I'm going with Harry to this hearing, and hopefully I can poke around and find out where this Department of Mysteries is located. All I need to see is the hallway, after all. Then, late at night we *Teleportal* in, and Sparkle steps us over to the Astral plane. No, strike that—reverse it. We can just *Teleportal* to that location on the Astral. Can we do that? One way or the other, whatever. We poke around until we see a room full of prophesies, then find the one that relates to him. I then know the location. We leave, because there might be alarms on the thing if it's picked up, and head back here. I use *Retrieval* to get it here, making sure I'm not the first one to touch it. Harry catches it before it falls, as he won't die. Though it's probably something in the room that goes off, rather than the object itself killing you. Either way, he then hands it to me, and I stick it in my *Pocket Dimension*. They do a scrying on it, well, it's gone, bye bye. And it doesn't matter that alarms or whatnot go off in the room, we're all miles away."

"Except that I think they know your magic can do that."

"What if they do? I certainly don't know about anything as secret as a prophesy."

"But if they come after you..."

"With what evidence? There won't be so much as a hair of mine in that entire place. We'll do everything from the next plane over. Even if they had some kind of *Time Window* magic, it would just show as disappearing. Anyway, it would strengthen our case, because I would place the blame squarely on Voldi. He just figured that spell out faster than I thought, that's all. Not a jury in the land would convict me."

"Aren't you the one always complaining about wizard law?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, don't worry, it'll work out."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

And so the days before the trial passed. Ron seemed to have truly found his passion, and he and Hermione could be seen, halfheartedly doing the jobs they had been assigned while talking animatedly about Arithmancy or how to apply it to magical martial arts. Fred and George

smirked at them and made doe eyes when they thought he wasn't looking. Molly just sighed and often muttered "My boy is growing up so fast!"

Ron, for his part, practiced the moves Stacy had shown him every evening, and Susan couldn't help but wonder if Hermione's *Photographic Reflexes* wouldn't help her to master the art faster than Ron could. She had a bit of a head start on Ron, after all, because she already was good at Arithmancy. She showed no interest in leaping about and rapidly punching the air, and Susan figured maybe she was letting him develop this without showing him up.

*I guess that could be love, right? Or maybe she just isn't interested.*

Finally, the day of the hearing arrived. Harry came down wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and Susan glared at him.

"What are you wearing?" she asked. "Go put on your suit... dress robes! Whatever they're called here. You're going to court, not a nightclub! And don't forget all your *Imbued* stuff, just in case it goes badly. Not that it will," she hastened to add.

"Oh, I guess you're right. Be right back."

Susan shook her head. "Honestly, what is wrong with that boy?"

Coming down a second time, Harry looked much more presentable.

"Much better," said Susan. "Now you look like a respectable member of society, rather than a delinquent. I'd let you off just as you are. If I didn't prefer girls, anyway."

Harry glared at her and sat down at the table. Sirius, Remus and Tonks were there, and gave him what might be considered sympathetic looks. Sparkle was washing herself.

Tonks yawned wildly. "Morning, Harry. Sleep all right?"

"Not exactly, but I'll get through."

"I've been up all night, it'll be good to get some sleep."

They all tried to reassure him that everything would be fine.

"Everything will be fine," said Susan. "Expelled or not, you're coming back here, with your wand, and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

"You'll be, uh, coming with us then?" asked Arthur.

"Aren't I the magical pack-horse that's going to whisk us there?" asked Susan, genuinely curious. "I got up early and everything because I figured it would be easiest. Sparkle is coming too, in case things get ugly."

"Now don't go bullying the court!" said Arthur, shocked. "Harry, you have to be respectful, and keep your temper. Just answer their questions the best you can, and everything will be fine."

"You're being heard by Amelia Bones, she's fair. She'll hear your side of things, don't worry," said Remus.

"And only Harry is allowed to go in," Arthur added. "So even if you do come--"

"And can they tell someone is in the room who is not using *your* type of magic? Because I'm going to right by Harry's side, as I know he would be at mine, were the situation reversed."

"Are you sure you want to risk it?"

"Risk what? Anyway, I was there when the attack happened, you know. I should have been called in as a witness in either case."

"I don't recommend it, but your mad schemes have worked out for you before."

*Of course*, thought Sparkle. *She's the main PC in this story.*

"So is Susan taking us?" asked Harry.

“I figured we would get there without magic, but reminding them who your friends are... I don't know, that might backfire. Cornelius does seem to be afraid of you in some way, Susan. You and Albus. I think we'll just get there the old fashioned way.”

“Suit yourself. Easy in, hard out, as they say.”

“Are you making lewd jokes again?” asked Harry.

“What? Glad to see you can still focus on what's important even with this event hanging over your head. But no, I read that phrase in Another Fine Myth.”

“Well, it is another fine myth you've gotten me into.”

“Exactly.”

Inside the Courtroom

Time: Moments later

Place: Approaching the ministry building

As they got near the building the Susan/Sparkle part of the plan flickered and vanished.

“Courage, squire,” said Susan. “Know that I’ll be by your side no matter what.”

“Okay,” said Harry, looking pale.

They got past the security, and into the building.

*So much for increased measures to keep me out. Are they even trying?*

Riding the elevator was a bit of a tight fit, as Susan had to squish behind Harry so someone didn’t accidentally bump into her, but they managed it.

*Should have Phased before using Invisibility, then it wouldn’t have mattered. Oh well.*

*Too late now, I guess.*

Arthur talked to a man who said he was carrying a fire breathing chicken, and Susan hoped he wasn’t.

*I mean, who would carry a creature that can breathe fire in a cardboard box, anyway?*

*Though I suppose it could have been made less flammable with magic...*

They went past level after level, but no “Department of Mysteries” yet.

*Pity.*

They got off on level two and went into Arthur’s office, which looked rather the same as it had the first time she had been here. Messy, and full of junk from the non-magical world.

“What are you still doing up here?” asked a very old wizard, busting in the room suddenly.

“What do you mean?” asked Arthur.

“The time of the hearing was changed! Didn’t they notify you? I sent an owl to your house just in case but you must have passed coming here. The hearing was rescheduled for 8:00 this morning, and down in courtroom 10!”

“My goodness, that was five minutes ago. Thanks, Perkins. Come on Harry!”

All three of them broke into a run and made it to the lift again, and Arthur pressed the down button.

“Department of Mysteries,” said the pleasant voice as the doors opened. Arthur hurried out and down the hallway.

Susan looked around with interest. *Thank you very much.*

“Wait up a second, I have an idea,” said Sparkle softly.

“We’re already late-” said Arthur, but Sparkle was already casting. She shifted them over to the Astral, and Susan took a quick look around.

“Good thinking,” she said. “Now we can step over into Astral before we come here, and never register we were here at all.”

“Got it?”

“Got it.”

They returned.

”-and you know what that means!” Arthur finished.

“Let’s go!” said Susan.

“Oh, right then.”

They went down a set of stairs, then past thick oaken doors with golden numbers hung on them.

“Here we are!” said Arthur. “Go inside, quickly.”

“Are you-”

“I’m not allowed in with you. Sorry Harry. Good luck!” Arthur shoved him inside, then held the door so Susan could slip in. It banged shut, and both looked around. Susan had been here before, when Buckbeak was tried, so she knew the rough layout. She looked up, and all the seats were full.

*Huh. How about that?*

“You’re late,” said a voice from above.

“Uh...” said Harry.

Susan leaned over to him and whispered into his ear. “I offer my sincere apologies to the court. Bow.”

Harry bowed. “I offer my sincere apologies to the court.”

“It was not my intention to delay these proceedings in any way,” Susan further whispered.

Harry said that too, and straightened up.

“Well, yes. Just so long as you understand. Please sit.”

“Yes, your honor,” Harry said. They both moved to the chair, where Harry sat. Susan was going to make a *Hiding* check behind the chair, but she figured if she hadn’t been caught by now, she wouldn’t be. She stood next to Harry and looked up.

The man that had been speaking was Cornelius Fudge, and Susan glared at him invisibly.

He launched into a standard speech about what who was present and what was going to happen, when Albus swept into the room like he owned the place.

“Ah, you got our owl then?” asked Cornelius.

*So he is allowed council then. That’s good. I was afraid I might to reveal myself and take that spot.*

“Alas no, I must have missed it. But I like to think I’m *Always Prepared* and came a bit early this morning for other business.”

*Is it just me, or did he just look directly at me?* Susan held up a hand. *Yup, still invisible.*

“It just so happened I fancied a stroll down in the courtroom area, and heard your voice. Funny how these things work out, isn’t it?”

“Yes, quite amusing.”

Susan noted quizzically that while Harry was looking up at Albus with relief, Albus was staring hard at Cornelius. In fact, he hadn’t looked at Harry at all since he came in the room. *Strange.*

“We’ll get you a chair then,” said Cornelius.

“Oh, don’t trouble yourselves,” Albus said, creating a chair out of nothing.

*No fair, Creation takes me a full minute! Though maybe he knows a charm that makes chairs?*

Albus sat down, looking quite amused about the whole process. Cornelius read the charges, and started asking Harry stuff.

“You are Harry James Potter?”

“Yes.”

“And you produced a Patronus on the Second of August in the presence of one Dudley Dursley?”

“I did, but-”

“Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside of school until you come of age?”

“Yes, but-”

“And you knew Dudley was there, with you?”

“Of course, but I had to use it-”

A different voice rang out. “Was it corporeal?”

“You mean solid? Yes, it’s a stag. It’s always a stag.”

“How long have you been able to produce a true Patronus?”

“Since my third year of school.”

“Third year? How impressive.”

“That is not relevant to this case,” Cornelius said, banging the sphere that looked like a dark marble on the desk. “The fact remains that he did any magic at all, in front of a Muggle.”

“Dementors!” shouted Harry.

Susan’s hand automatically went for her knife, and she looked around in alarm.

“What’s that?” asked Cornelius.

*Oh, he wasn’t saying there was one here, he was just trying to get their attention.* She relaxed a little.

“It was the only way I could protect us from the Dementors that attacked us. Without that charm going we wouldn’t have been able to fight effectively.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that Dementors attacked you, in full daylight, in your own neighborhood?” asked the witch again.

“I can’t say if they were there to attack Susan or myself, as we were together, and both caught up in the fight. But they did. 10 of them. Only three escaped.”

“Ah, I wondered when this would be brought up,” said Cornelius, looking around the room.

“What do you mean?” asked the witch.

“Naturally he would want to cover his use of magic, and Dementors can’t be seen by Muggles. So he goes and uses a spell-”

Albus stood up.

“Yes, Albus?”

“I have to wonder, what does the court believe Harry was using his magic for, in the first place?” He looked around the room.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Don’t you? It just strikes me as odd, that if Harry was fighting with his cousin, he would have used a hex. He did not. If he was showing off, flying upon his broomstick or conjuring up a potion to get someone’s face back would have been more impressive, and not set off any alarm at the ministry, because it’s not a spell. A Patronus is a purely defensive magic, created to counter a specific dark creature. The creature Harry and Susan fought off the evening in question.”

“Ask if the alarm actually went off,” Susan whispered to Harry.

He raised his hand.

“Yes?” said Cornelius.

“Did the alarm actually go off? You have some record of that which can be produced?”

“You have already admitted to producing the Patronus, so what does that matter?”

“Ah, an interesting point,” said Albus. “After all, Harry could be under the Imperius Curse, and is now lying about having done the magic.”

“To what end?” sputtered Cornelius.

“Who can say? To be sure, I would rather the evidence be produced, just for the sake of completeness.”

Cornelius looked worried. *Well-well-well, looks like we have you a little hot under the collar Mr. Minister. My magic didn't fail at all, did it? As far as you know, Harry did no magic because it didn't trigger the alarm. Which presumably notes the person, time, and magic performed. Without that record, you have no case. This whole thing was a set up of one kind or another.*

“I'm sure we could take a recess, walk all the way over to the records department, search through their mountains of parchment—”

“You don't have it near to hand? With a case of this magnitude, I would have expected it. Very well, let us continue then, and you can have the receipt entered into the official case evidence before Harry is sentenced. Now, I believe my original question was the matter of what the court believed Harry was doing, casting that particular charm.”

“The circumstances don't matter—”

“I'm afraid they do! After all, magic can be used in a life or death situation, even by minors. *That is the law.* Usually an Obliviator squad is sent to modify their memories, rather than holding a trial, but we live in strange times.”

A pudgy witch leaned forward, and Susan glared at her. *Oh goody, it's Mrs. hem-hem. What did she ask the Headmaster before I cured the Longbottoms? Oh, yes: "Is it your belief, Headmaster, that this young girl will succeed where witches and wizards much older and wiser than her have failed?"*

“The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister,” said Cornelius.

“You must admit, Albus, it does seem a tiny bit, well, outlandish, that this boy claims, with the help of his companion Susan, to have killed seven Dementors. I mean, honestly, are we to believe this... this... fairy tale?”

“I'm surprised you hadn't heard! Cornelius, did you not inform other members of the ministry you yourself witnessed her killing a Dementor at the school? During that whole Sirius Black incident, have you forgotten?”

“That was some sort of trick, I'm sure of it! So naturally enough I did not tell anyone. What would have been the point?”

“Then perhaps we should have Susan come and give testimony herself? And another demonstration? I do believe the accused still has the right to present witnesses for the case?”

“Well, she didn't come in with you, I know that much,” said Cornelius. “Nor with Harry and Arthur. So it would take hours to get her here. We really don't want to delay matters that long.”

*You were watching us quite closely, weren't you? And yet, here I stand, meters away from you. Idiot.*

“Oh, that's quite all right,” said Albus, waving a hand. “She is, shall we say, always near to hand?”

He took out his wand, and traced a symbol in the air, which glowed red and hung in the air, apparently solid. He put his hand on it.

*Now what the heck are you doing?*

“Susan,” he said quite plainly. “I know it’s an imposition, but could you join us in the courtroom below the ministry building?” He nodded, and took his hand away. The symbol vanished. “She will be along shortly.”

Susan suppressed a giggle. *I see, we’re making him believe I’ve taught you some way to communicate with me, which you’ve just used. Of course, he had to guess I was here, as that did absolutely nothing. Good thing I actually was, it would have been a mite embarrassing for him, otherwise.*

“*Light*,” Susan cast, using max energy so it was as big as it could possibly be. Casting a spell automatically broke her *Invisibility*, and she dropped the ball of light right in front of her. A second later, she dropped the *Light* spell, as well.

*With a little luck, they’ll believe I just appeared in a flash of light. You aren’t the only one who can be showy, Headmaster.*

Susan looked around with interest. She was rewarded with looks of horror on the faces of the assembled court members. *Yeah, I’m awesome.* “Oh, hello, everyone. Harry! How’s it going? Oh, you probably can’t comment on ongoing litigation? I got your message, Headmaster, what do you need?”

“This is all very irregular!” said Cornelius.

“I admit, her entrances are a trifle showy, but it did save us time getting her here, didn’t it? Susan, can you describe the night you and Harry were attacked?”

“Certainly, Headmaster. Shall I do so now?”

“If you please.”

“Very well. Harry, myself, and his cousin were walking and discussing... dreams, I think it was. And we were wondering if Harry was bullying Dudley, and if my attitudes toward people could be considered bullying. In any case, Dudley mentioned he was feeling colder, and we both looked around. Five Dementors on either side of us swooped out of the sky to attack. Harry managed to get up his Patronus shield by remembering that I was his happiness while I activated my protection spell. After that we both pulled out our knives and engaged them. They seemed more interested in pinning us or grabbing us than doing E type damage with their claws. Probably because they didn’t bother to put points into *Unarmed*, rather relying on the *Life Force Drain* ability they possess. This hampered them, and allowed us to overcome our surprise penalties. It was a pretty near thing though I must say, luckily the merest scratch from our knives destroys the creatures. After we took out the majority of them, the ones that were left fled, saying how they didn’t want to all be destroyed. At that point the Patronus vanished, probably because the scene had ended, and we made our way home in case more were in the area. I could show you, if you’d like. I did it for Buckbeak, showing the events with my *Time Window* magic at the location. I would be happy to create a *Teleportal* for you to all step though.”

“Preposterous!” said Dolores with a snort. “This is such a fanciful fabrication. No one could take it seriously! And what are these words she uses? ‘E type damage’ and ‘points’ and *Teleportal*? Does she think we are leaving this room before the trial is concluded?”

“That is merely her regional dialect,” explained Albus. “I’m sure you understood the gist of her statement. As for leaving, if you do not wish to travel to the location in question, I’m sure Susan would be more than happy to demonstrate here. Summon a Dementor to the courtroom. Of course it would mean the loss of another of the foul creatures, but I for one can live with that.”

“I would be interested in seeing this so called weapon that can destroy Dementors,” said Dolores.

“Seriously?” asked Cornelius, eyes wide.

*Oh, losing control, are we? Things not going to the script you so carefully planned out?*  
“I’d be happy to show you. Seeing as how the honorable judge here seems to believe what he saw before was an illusion of some kind.”

“Oh, very well. There are some here, in case they’re needed. Go and have one brought down.” He gestured to a wizard standing by the door, who nodded and left.

“Meanwhile, the question of what a sizable force of Dementors was doing flying around Harry’s neighborhood should be addressed.”

“We have not verified the claims that there were Dementors there in the first place. Until Susan shows she can, in fact, destroy the creatures, Harry’s claims of using the Patronus are still in question.”

“Let us assume, for the moment, that she can. I believe you yourself witnessed her scaring one away from Mr. Crouch?”

“Scaring something is a far cry from killing it.”

“Agreed. But something like a Dementor would not be afraid of one little girl without reason.”

“Oh, very well. You are going to tell me they were acting on the orders of someone from outside the ministry, correct?”

“That was indeed the exact point I was going to make. You have an excellent recall of our previous conversation.”

“There is no way that is possible. They are under our control, as they have been for many years.”

“So you’re saying, then, and correct me if I’m wrong, that someone in the ministry ordered this attack?”

“Why would someone do that?”

“An interesting question, to be sure. The only other explanation is ten uncontrolled Dementors roaming loose in the world. Which I would hope you would find extremely alarming.”

“If there even were Dementors there, which I doubt. The fact is, it is only Harry’s use of magic before a Muggle that is under consideration here.”

“And the circumstances surrounding that use of magic,” Albus reminded him.

The door opened, and a Dementor glided in, followed by a hawk Patronus, and the man who was sent to get him. The Dementor seemed to look around, and turned to face Cornelius.

“Yes?” it rasped.

“Do you know this girl?” he demanded, pointing to Susan.

“Girl?” It bent over to perceive the area he was pointing to. “She is *here*?”

“You can’t sense her?”

“I was not present at the Night of Sorrow. She has been described to me. Allow me a moment...” It seemed to focus on Susan, who slipped the knife from her leg holster.

“It is the destroyer! Allow me to leave, please, before she kills me as well!”

“What is this Night of Sorrow?” Dolores demanded.

“So many dead. So many taken to learn how to perceive her. So few escaped to spread the word. That is the Night of Sorrow. Please, may I go?”

There was a general uneasiness that went through the assembled court. “Quiet, please,” said Cornelius. He turned back to the Dementor. “You truly fear for your life?”

“Yes.”

“Susan, please destroy it.”

“No!” said the Dementor, floating away from her. He backed into the Patronus and seemed to be in pain. “Please! Has my service not been acceptable? Have I not done as you asked? Why must I be destroyed?”

“Proceed, Susan.”

The Dementor turned to her. “What if I swore service to you, instead?” The members of the court gasped.

“I have been ordered to destroy you, and I do so gladly. How many humans have you eaten over the years? How much happiness have you smothered?”

“I will swear never to eat another human! I will use only animals! I do not wish to die!”

Susan was walking towards it, shaking her head. “Poor thing. I’m sure the people you ate wished the same. I must admit though, I’m beginning to understand you a little. You are what you are, and everything has to eat, even you. Strangely I take no pleasure from this. Do you have a name?”

“No. We are known to each other.”

“I see. Do not fear, your end shall be swift.” And as she said “swift” she plunged the dagger into the Dementor, and it burned away.

“You will regret it. He has offered us much,” it said in a whisper as it burned, facing Cornelius. Then was gone.

There was pandemonium in the seats above, as Susan turned, gripping her knife. Cornelius was banging his sphere, calling for order. People were looking at her as though she was a Dementor, or something worse. She heard two people arguing if she had committed murder, but the other person was saying you couldn’t murder a Dementor, they weren’t alive.

“Order!” Cornelius cried, standing up. Dumbledore looked especially pleased. Finally everyone calmed down a bit.

“Is any further evidence of Susan’s claims necessary? Is there any further doubt that Harry and Susan were attacked, as they describe, and fought for their lives? What other evidence do you need, Cornelius? Did you not hear what it said? Face the facts, I beg of you.”

“Order! I will have order. I did not hear it say anything, that much is clear. Do you have other evidence to present, then?”

Albus shook his head. “The defense rests.”

“Then the vote shall be taken. All those in favor of clearing the accused of all charges.”

*What? They don’t even get a chance to deliberate?*

There was a heart stopping moment when Susan wondered if no hand would be raised, and she started mentally preparing her next few actions. She fully expected to roll *Initiative* at any second. Slowly, a hand went up here and there, and soon the majority of hands were up.

“Those against?”

The remaining hands went up, though there did seem to be a few that were abstaining from the vote.

Cornelius sighed. “Cleared of all charges.” He banged the sphere. “This court is adjourned.”

Albus made his chair disappear. “I knew you could see reason. I must be off.”

And he turned, without looking at Harry or Susan, and nearly dashed from the room.

*What the heck?*



Back To School Sale

Time: 30 seconds later

Place: Courtroom

“That was odd,” said Susan to Harry as she watched Albus rushing off.

“He didn’t even stay long enough for me to say thank you,” Harry replied.

“Did he even look at you? I don’t think he did.”

“No, he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t want to seem too familiar?”

“Little late for that. Look, we can talk about it later. Now that I’m here there’s something I need to take care of. I’ll see you back at the house.”

“You aren’t going to do something foolish, are you?”

“What do you mean? I’ve never done anything foolish.” She tried to take on an innocent air, for all the good it did her.

“Right. See you then.” Sparkle jumped back into her arms.

Just in case anyone was watching, Susan cast *Light*, again wordlessly, and snapped her fingers as Sparkle cast *Dimension Step* and moved them over to the Astral. Hopefully this would look exactly like how they arrived, and would occasion no further comment.

“This will be perfect, if I can steal it right out from under them,” said Susan.

“Just be careful, we don’t know what protections they’ve put around stuff here.”

“On the astral plane? They don’t even know about it, I’ve looked into it.”

“Okay.”

They stepped into the hallway, past the ghostly form of Mr. Weasley, who was pacing the hall, and went past him. She went back down the hallway and passed through the only door they had seen and into a circular room with doors evenly spaced around it.

“Now what?” asked Sparkle.

Susan looked about with interest. She could see, from her perspective “above” the world, through the walls and into each chamber beyond.

“Weird place,” she remarked. “And what the heck is in there?”

“I’m not sure,” said Sparkle. “But I’m glad we’re here and not there next to it.”

“You got that right.” Susan moved her head this way and that, trying to pierce the “fog” of ether and see where she should go. She got closer to each door, trying to see what was past it, and finally settled on a direction. She walked back and forth a few times, and finally came to room that seemed to stretch on into darkness. She stood in awe as what seemed to be a limitless number of shelves stretched away from her. Upon these shelves were spheres, but what they were made of she couldn’t say. She walked passed rows and rows of them, glancing at names and dates that meant nothing to her.

“There’s got to be tens of thousands of these things in here!” she said after a moment.

“How in the heck are we going to find the exact one we want? And look, this one is hundreds of years old. Don’t these people get rid of anything?”

“Good question. We’d have to go back across to do any sort of scrying, and even then, *Descry Object* might not work.”

“I don’t know. Let me see something.” She reached into her *Pocket Dimension* and pulled out her spell-book.

“You cannot search for an object that is either not unique or that you have never seen,” she read. “Would it count as unique? I mean, all these spheres look the same, but they’re really the solidified energies of the prophesy, right?”

“Don’t look at me, I have no clue.”

Susan thought for a while, reading the spell over.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to cast the spell, but hold it. When I complete it, you step us over again. I’ll release the spell and get a direction, if I get anything. You step us back over again. If some kind of alarm goes off, we’ll know it because a zillion people will start running around here. If that happens, we leave. If it doesn’t, we’ll go in that direction for a while and repeat it until we narrow it to a specific shelf.”

“Sounds good. Whenever you’re ready.”

So Susan cast *Descry Object*, targeting “the prophesy relating to Harry Potter” and held it. Taking all the time she could, she got a 31 – 4 for doing it from writings.

*It’s odd, I can only take 50% more time in casting a spell to make it easier. That means this spell should cap out at 22 turns to cast. But casting it from writings I have to take a minimum of 30 turns. But I can take 50% of that number, making it a total of 45 turns. Why or how does the magic know I’m casting from writings or not? Wouldn’t that imply a spell I have memorized which takes a long time would be better cast from writings if I wanted the maximum result? As long as it’s a +5 delay to casting, to negate the –4 from casting from writing, my result is always going to be some insane number. I’ll have to think about that.*

Sparkle stopped maintaining *Dimension Step*, making them appear in the shelves. She let the spell go, and was rewarded with a result.

“That way,” she said, pointing for Sparkle’s benefit. (She did have *No Sense of Direction*, after all.) “About 200 meters.”

“Okay. *Dimension Step*.” Susan and Sparkle waited for anything to happen.

They waited.

And waited.

“I think it’s safe, they should have been here by now,” said Susan.

“Yeah. Their wards or traps are probably on doors and such, not in the room itself. Let’s go though, just in case.”

“Right,” said Susan, going the wrong way.

“Uh, it’s that way?” said Sparkle, pointing with a paw.

“Oh, sorry. I’m glad I came with you!”

They repeated this procedure twice more, and finally stood before the shelf with Harry’s prophesy resting on it.

“Good thing I’m getting this out of the way,” remarked Susan. “If old Voldi put together this package of spells, there’s no way anyone could have stopped him.”

“Which brings up a scary point. If he comes up with something like *Dimension Gate*, he could stick the point of his wand out a tiny hole and just killing curse whoever he wanted. And only we would be able to reach him!”

“Yeah, why do you think I was freaking out so much that he stole our magic? He could come up with plenty of things like that. That’s why all this rushing around by the Order, and my making those lists of things to watch for done with my magic.”

“So, any idea how we’re getting out of here now? The only other place we’ve seen on the astral is under the school, when we passed over that magical fire.”

“We could head there. I have energy enough to open two more *Teleportals* easily. I’ve been using extra time, not energy.”

“Though I suppose we could head to the courtroom, step back across, and go from there. Then we would only need one *Teleportal*.”

“That could be safer. That’s actually why I wanted to do this now, while I was here. I wasn’t sure if I even could *Teleportal* between locations on the astral.”

“I don’t see why not. It’s a dimension just like ours. It just sits between Heaven and Earth. It would be using *Teleportal* to jump from one plane to the other that would be problematic.”

“I suppose you’re right. We’ll head back to the courtroom, I doubt there’s any alarms on them.” Susan started off.

“That way.”

“Oh, right.”

And so Susan stepped back into the house, to find the others celebrating Harry’s “victory” over the ministry.

“Welcome back,” said Harry, grinning. “Have a pastry.”

“Thanks,” said Susan, choosing one. “I feel I deserve one anyway.”

“Did you?” asked Hermione.

Susan nodded.

“Did you what?” asked Molly, suspicious.

“Just a small bit of business I had to take care of at the ministry. Not to worry, they never even knew I was there.”

“What business? What did you do?”

“Just a little tour of the place, really. There’s always the chance I’ll have to go there, so seeing various parts of it might come in handy. I swear, that’s all I did, just looked around.”

Molly looked at her as though she was trying to determine if Susan was lying, but as she was actually telling the truth, this didn’t help.

“Well, you’re back now. Thank you for helping him out? Harry was saying something about your testimony?”

“It was nothing, just a bit of storytelling on my part. And by storytelling, I mean telling the sworn truth, and nothing but the truth. And killing another Dementor. At this rate, they’ll be gone before you know it.”

“I wish,” said everyone.

An hour or so later, Harry, Hermione, and Susan were in the girl’s room, talking with hushed voices.

“So are you going to do it?” asked Hermione. “Bring it here, I mean?”

“Actually, I had an even better idea,” said Susan. “You’ll love this, Harry.” Susan started casting, and a minute and a half later was holding a sphere, seemingly made of glass. “This is what they look like. I’m going to open a *Teleportal* right here to where the prophesy is. Harry,

you reach through and grab it, then put this one in its place. Then if someone comes to check, it's still just sitting there, as always."

"Cool," said Harry, smiling.

"Ready?"

He nodded.

"*Teleportal*." Susan made it as small as she could, and Harry looked through to make sure he knew what he was grabbing. He reached through and took it, then stuck the fake into the same spot. He held his breath a moment, making sure it didn't roll away, and pulled his hand back. The *Teleportal* closed.

"Harry Potter, master thief!" he intoned, holding it aloft as though a tune was going to play to mark the achievement.

"Yeah, yeah, give it here before someone walks in on us."

Harry reluctantly handed it over, and Susan stuck it in her *Pocket Dimension*.

"Mission accomplished. Let Voldi puzzle that one out."

All three were grinning.

"Now all we have to do is figure out Voldi's next move after that one, and make sure that one can't succeed either. Keep doing that, and we'll have him beat at every turn before he even realizes what's happening."

They had a small feast that evening, and the next day got back to work cleaning the house. Their spirits were high, though only some of them knew exactly why. Ron continued taking lessons from Stacy every evening, and he and Hermione were always to be found discussing Arithmancy during the day. Susan asked about other possible moves by Voldemort, but there was nothing as specific as the prophesy they would tell her about. She even had Hermione do some *Research* into his activities last time, but nothing major came up.

Then the school letters arrived, and with it, Ron's *Shiny New Prefect's Badge*.

"No way!" said George, as Ron dropped it as though it was red hot. "Who in their right mind would make you a prefect?"

"What?" said Fred, mirroring his twin's shock. "There's got to be some mistake! Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't say anything about me being one."

Ron still seemed a bit of a loss for words.

"Well," said Susan. "Didn't Professor Lupin become a prefect because the current headmaster thought he might better control his friends, James and Sirius? It could be something like that."

"Yeah, got to be," said George. "Hey, you aren't?"

Susan shook her head. "Nope. Just a nice, normal school year for me this year, thanks. With the occasional life and death struggle, assassination attempt, and general bizarre stuff that goes on, I mean. Wouldn't want my life to get boring."

*Or lose out on that XP I get for doing all that stuff.*

No one had picked up the badge, and Ron nudged it with his foot.

"What's the big deal, anyway? It just means more responsibility."

"There are certain privileges that go along with it," said Ron faintly. "Like I can give out detentions..."

The door burst open and Hermione rushed in. "Did you- are you?"

Everyone in the room pointed at Ron. He grinned sheepishly. "Me," he said.

“Ron, that’s wonderful!” There was only the slightest of pauses in between the ‘that’s’ and ‘wonderful’ as though Hermione wasn’t sure which adjective to use.

“I’m still not sure what all the fuss is about. It just means extra work, which takes away from what you should be doing. Preparing for war.”

“It won’t take that much time,” Hermione protested.

“Neither will getting killed by Voldemort. Your choice.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy? Besides, I don’t think being a prefect and getting killed by Voldemort are the only two choices.”

“No! Certainly not.”

“Right,” said Fred. “She could not be a prefect, spend her time knitting hats for house elves, and still get killed by Voldemort. That’s a third choice right there!”

Hermione glared at him.

Molly came in the room, carrying sorting out clothes. “Ginny said book-lists had come in. If you give them to me I’ll get all your books this afternoon.”

“Actually, I’ll come with. I need to head to the bank for this month’s allotment of coins.”

*Which I owe to Mundungus for getting me that item, if he can.*

“Sure. Easier to get there your way anyway. What’s this?” She picked up the prefect’s badge from off the floor.

“My, uh, prefect badge,” said Ron, looking away from her.

“Oh Ronnie-” Molly threw her arms around her son. “That’s just wonderful. Congratulations! Oh, your father will be so proud. Of course we’ll have to get you something as a reward. Is there something you’d like?”

“What do you mean?”

“We got Percy an owl, but you already have one... Or, wait, no you don’t. Why did I think you did?”

*That’s weird, it’s happened again. Like Ron thinking his wand should be snapped, or that his mother was angry at him for no reason. What causes that?*

(Astute readers will recall Ron got “Pig” from Sirius, who never went on the run because Susan and the others cleared his name. He was later named Ophthipitus and had his own adventures with a very charming young witch we will never meet.)

“Actually, just keep paying for my Kung Fu lessons, that’ll be fine.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“That’s all I want. I’ve got a broom, or Susan if I need to go somewhere-”

“I’m not your pack-horse.” Everyone looked over at her. “Okay, I am, I admit it.”

“And I’ll soon be able to learn how to *Apparate* so I’ve got that covered. Susan made my wand whole, and I can *Transfigure* my dress robes if I ever need to wear them again. Susan made me a new cauldron ages ago with *Creation* and after the whole thing with Scabbers, I’m not keen on a pet. Trying to fuse martial arts and magic is really what I’m interested in right now. And I know you have to pay her in gold, as that’s the only thing she can exchange in the Mug- in the non-magical world.”

“Okay, I just don’t want you kicking yourself later. I really am proud, Ronald, well done. Oh, I’m going to go write your father right away! I just feel like I’m going to burst.” She ran out of the room.

“Bit emotional,” said Fred.

“Glad we were never chosen,” said George.

“Don’t stick yourself when you put the badge on!”

They left.

“I wonder who your counterpart is,” asked Hermione. “I’m in Ravenclaw, so there must be a girl not in Team Susan you’ll have to get to know.”

“I suppose so,” said Ron.

“Just don’t get too close to her,” Hermione said, leaving again. Ron stared at the door, confused.

*Now I’m detecting a note of jealousy.*

That evening at dinnertime the main dining room was decorated with a large sign congratulating Hermione and Ron, and nearly everyone they knew from the Order had been invited to the party. Mundungus motioned to Susan when he came in, and she joined him in the other room.

“Got part of the order you put in. Having a little trouble with the third item,” he whispered, pulling out a thin wooden box. He opened it and Susan broke into a wide grin.

“You really managed it. Excellent. Huh- Stubby little thing, isn’t it?”

“I thought it might fit your hand better.”

“Let’s see.” She lifted it out, and hefted it. “It’s heavier than I would have expected.”

“What weight do you put on a man’s soul?”

Susan looked up at him again. “Seriously?”

“Someone said it to me once. I thought it was appropriate.”

“Well, don’t worry. The person I’m going to use it against has already died a couple of times. This is just insurance.” She pointed it and sighted down her arms, holding it in both hands.

“Whatever.” He handed her a jingly bag, which was also quite heavy.

“Ah, very good.” She put the item back in the box and closed the lid. She took the bag and peeked inside. “Yes, I think that’ll be enough. Thank you.” She picked up a booklet from inside the box and flipped through it.

“Care and maintenance. Thought you could use it.”

“How thoughtful! Yes, this will be everything I need to know. It even shows *that*. I was going to look it up, but I guess now I don’t need to. Thanks.”

“Sure. Now, about the third item...”

Susan handed over the 9 Galleons she had promised him.

“Oh, it’s not that, exactly. Thank you though. I just don’t know if I’ll be able to get them. They’re not something you can just walk into a shop and buy, you know?”

“That’s why I have you getting the stuff for me.”

“Yes. Right. Okay, I’ll keep trying.”

“Do that.”

Susan took a moment to cast a spell (from writings, that she had been working on) over the item, and then a quick *Healing* to fix the one point of damage it had caused her hand.

Susan walked back out the party, much more secure now about facing Voldemort than she had been in weeks.

*The main one will need at least an Imbuing to really become useful to me. I might want to use Fabrication on a couple in the bag, just in case he does go for Invulnerability. I don’t see*

*how he would, though. Oh yes, we're beating him before he even knows to set his pieces on the board.*

After the party, Molly went up to deal with the boggart that had been knocking about, and Susan volunteered to go with her.

"Not that I can particularly help, mind you," she explained as they climbed the stairs. "I just want to see if my fear has changed."

"Changed?"

"Yes, it was rather bad before. I apparently was afraid either of losing my magic totally, or becoming the next dark lord. Well, dark *lady* I guess."

"What do you think it will be now?"

"Not sure. Maybe getting killed by Voldemort and he takes over the world using my magic? Something like that, I suppose."

"And you want to see this?"

"I want to know!"

"Why?"

"So I can make sure it doesn't happen, of course."

"But how is seeing your worst fear going to help it not happen?"

"That's easy. If it should come true, I won't be paralyzed with fear, because I've already seen it, analyzed it, and done my best to work around it."

Molly shook her head. "If ever there was a person who should be in Ravenclaw..."

Up in the room, Molly opened the door of the writing desk, and stepped back. A form flowed out, and there stood Voldemort, holding Susan's book, open in front of him, as he laughed and laughed. Magical circles were spinning around him, all seemingly different planets, and all (Susan didn't know how she knew this) grade 10 spells.

"Yeah, about what I expected," said Susan.

"How are you going to get around this?"

"I could put a spell of *True Owner* on my magic book, but it hardly ever leaves my *Pocket Dimension*. Plus, I'm not exactly sure if being in my *Pocket Dimension* counts as being "nearby" enough for the spell. I'll probably take it out less, I've been transferring the spells I use most from writings, like *Descry Creature*, to separate pages, so I can just pull the individualized sheets out rather than the whole book. That way someone can't run by and grab it."

"That seems reasonable."

"The trouble is I think the contents of my *Pocket Dimension* sort of fall out wherever I am if I'm killed. So if Voldemort did somehow kill me, he could just pick the book up and be on his way. I thought about putting some kind of *Elemental Trap* on it, but I'm sure he would check for that sort of thing before opening it. I could use *Spell Symbol* and make it destroy itself if any hand but mine touches it, but if someone accidentally brushed up against it, that would be that. No more book. So it's a tricky situation."

The Bogart was waving a hand at Susan, like "Hello? Still here? Be afraid?"

"Look, it's night time, why don't you just leave?" She pointed to the window. "Otherwise she's just going to use her spell and destroy you. Find something to inhabit that won't call attention to yourself and live a nice, quiet life. How does that sound?"

The thing looked at her like she was nuts.

"Suit yourself. Mrs. Weasley?"

Molly stepped forward, and the Bogart shrank, becoming Ron, who was apparently dead.  
“Okay, that’s not unexpected.”

“No, not that!”

Susan looked over at Molly. “It’s just an illusion. Do the spell and get rid of it.”

“How do I make this funny?”

“I don’t know, you’ve never watched any Warner Bother’s cartoons, have you?”

“What?”

“Thought not. Maybe a party hat?”

Molly didn’t even snort.

“Wow, tough crowd. Hey, what do Wizards have for breakfast? Wand-erbread.”

Molly stared at the dead Ron, which had started to ooze blood unto the carpets.

“A vampire, a werewolf and a human go into a monster’s only bar. The barman points to the human and says ‘we don’t serve humans here.’ and the vampire says ‘I know, that’s why I bought my own.’ and sinks his fangs into the guy’s neck.”

Molly smiled a little.

“What will Ron use to get around when my mother’s done training him? Kung Floo powder.”

Molly snorted.

“What do you get if you cross a dragon and a giant? We’re not sure, but we can’t get it away from Professor Hagrid. He says it’s cute.”

Molly grinned.

“Why does Professor Lupin have to worry about the moon when he goes to the barber? If it’s full, he gets changed an extra 10 Sickles.”

Molly started to laugh. “*Riddikulus!*” The vision of Ron vanished.

“Thank you,” said Molly. “Let’s keep this between us girls.”

*What do I want between me and another girl? A double headed-*

“Everything all right in here?” asked Harry, poking his head into the room.

“What color are Harry Potter’s eyes? I don’t know, I can’t stop looking at his scar!”

“Now that’s not funny,” said Molly, trying not to laugh.

“Did I miss something?” asked Harry.

After he had gone, Susan looked at Molly seriously. “I want you to know, I’ll do everything I can to make sure no one in your family, or any family, is harmed. I can’t promise they won’t be, because I don’t know what their dodge rolls are, but if I can do something to keep them safe, I’ll do it. You have my word.”

*After all, haven’t I already begun?*

“I know, Susan. Thank you. You’ve been a treasure, in more than one way. And your mother, getting Ron interested in something, even if I don’t exactly understand what it is...”

“It’s something that’s going to help keep him alive,” Susan said simply. “And I hope he stays as passionate about it in a couple of months as he is now.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to see it work. The fusion of Magic and Martial Arts? It would take dueling to a whole new level, let me tell you. And if he can create something no wizard has ever thought of? I’d like to not be the only one in Team Susan that can claim that honor. I mean, really, everything I’ve done came from my book. I could be the last of my kind, a Paragon, but it

was the efforts of those, like my father, that allows me to do what I do. If he can create something himself, well, that will overshadow my doings, and I think that would be okay.”

“If you wanted to date him, I would support you.”

“What if I wanted to date Ginny, instead?”

“Uh, are we still doing jokes?”

Susan just sighed.

There was the usual scramble at the last minute to get to the station, despite Susan being able to open a *Teleportal* for the group. She also had to do some quick healing on Ginny who got knocked down a flight of stairs by a trunk that got away from the twins.

“Honestly,” she said, checking over her *Healing* handiwork, “This is what happens when you force magical people to not use magic for seventeen years. They don’t learn the control they need until someone gets hurt. That, or someone just botched a LUCk check. You okay?”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Ginny. “I’m sure they’re just excited to be going back to school.”  
The twins laughed like Ginny had just told the funniest joke they had ever heard.

The group stepped through from the headquarters to the Burrows, and from the Burrows to the station. Obviously going directly would have been a huge security risk, as anyone glancing in the direction of the huge hole in the air would see into the inside of the house.

“Thanks for the lessons so far,” Ron said to Stacy. “I’ll see you in a few days, once I get my schedule figured out. Susan says she doesn’t mind getting us together twice a week, so I can still train while I’m at school.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Keep your eyes open, Harry,” said Sirius. “There are rumblings about some big happenings at the school this year. And I don’t mean another Triwizard tournament.”

“Don’t worry, with-”

“Sirius Black!” a man yelled, pointing. “That’s Sirius Black, the notorious murderer who escaped from Azkaban! Help! Help!”

Everyone in the station looked over at the guy, then at Sirius.

Someone near the guy leaned over and whispered to him.

“Really?” He shouted, surprised. Those near him nodded their heads. “What do you know? Completely innocent, huh? Sorry about that.” He slunk away, embarrassed.

“As I was saying, with Susan’s protections and Susan herself being there, we don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Expect for bunnies,” said a young looking witch walking past.

“Hey Luna!” said Susan. “Save us a seat on the train, will you?”

Luna gave a vague gesture and started her goodbye ceremony with her father.

“I suppose we should begin our prefect duties, right Hermione?” said Ron as the train pulled out of the station.

“What? Responsibility in Ron? Who are you?”

“The new Ron is very responsible. Not as much as Percy, mind you. But I have to be disciplined if I’m going to learn martial arts.”

“We’ll see you two later,” said Susan.

“See you,” said Harry. “Don’t be too hard on the first years, now.”

“And no hitting on your counterpart, now,” said Susan, bumping her elbow into Ron.

"Of course not!" he said, coloring.

"Come on," said Hermione, hauling him off.

The group made their way to the back of the train, where Luna was already sitting in an otherwise empty car. She had stuck her wand in her ear and was wearing a butterbeer cap necklace. They met Neville on the way, and invited him to sit down with them. He seemed a bit nervous around Susan, and kept not making eye contact with her.

"Oh, come on," she said, pulling him in with her.

"Hi Luna," said Ginny brightly. "Did you have a good summer?"

"Acceptable, thanks. You?"

"Cleaning, mostly. It wasn't the greatest, to tell you truth."

"Luna, this is Neville, and of course Harry," said Susan. "Boys, this is Luna Lovegood. She's a potential for Team Susan but with our wartime focus I'm not sure she'd be a good fit."

"You can't just say stuff like that to her," hissed Harry.

"Course I can. It's true, isn't it Luna?"

"We should make peace, not war."

"You see? She speaks her mind, so I figure she should be able to accept the truth as well."

"She's in Ravenclaw," said Ginny.

"The greatest weapon we have is our own minds," said Luna.

"Our own minds, and the magic to set stuff on fire," Susan clarified.

Luna just shrugged.

"Excuse me," said Sparkle, "is that toad the same one I rescued from the boat first year? And kept finding on the train?"

"It's Trevor, yeah. Why?" Everyone looked over at Neville's toad.

"How long to toads live, precisely?"

"You don't think... another Scabbers situation, do you?" asked Harry. His wand was suddenly in his hand, drawn from under his sleeve.

"Nice *Quick Draw*," said Susan. "And good thought, Sparkle. Anyone know?"

Everyone looked at the toad, who didn't seem to mind being the center of attention.

"We need someone with *Trivial Knowledge* to come along," said Susan. "Though I suppose I could cast *Magic Immunity* on the toad. That would turn it back to a human if it's an Animagus."

"You better, just for our peace of mind," said Harry.

"What's going on?" asked Neville. "What's this about Scabbers? Why is everyone looking at my toad?" Luna was looking out the window. "Well, almost everyone."

"Long story. The short of it is, a rat that Ron had was a wizard hiding out. So now we have to be suspicious of every animal that seems to live longer than it should. Set him down on the floor there, Neville."

"Okay?" He did, and leaned away from Trevor.

"Wands out. Ginny- oh, you already have your wand out. 5 Susan points. Ready, Neville?"

"My wand is in my trunk!" he protested.

"What?" said Susan. "Without that you're not a wizard at all. Get it out, man! Don't you know Voldemort is back? His Death Eaters could attack this train at any moment!"

The toad seemed unconcerned any of this was going on.

“Are you serious?” said a new voice, a female voice. Everyone looked over and saw Cho standing there.

“I’m always serious. And you are?”

“Happily content in my ignorance, I guess?”

“I think she meant your name. It’s Cho, Susan. She plays Quidditch. Susan, Cho. Cho, Susan.”

“She is known to you? That’s fine. Where’s your wand, if I may ask?”

“Uh, back with my bags, I think?”

“You think? The one thing that, without which, you are no witch! And you just leave it laying about?”

“Lay off, Susan, it’s not a big deal,” said Harry. “Not everyone has to expect a life or death struggle before lunchtime, you know.”

“Not a big deal? How can you say that? Someone sits on it accidentally and \*poof\* she can’t do a single spell. Seems like something I would keep a close eye on.”

“I’m sure she’s careful with it!”

“The evidence suggests otherwise!”

“Are you going to check the toad or not?” Luna asked, still not looking at them.

“Well, I was going to ask if *Cho* here wanted to cover the hallway in case he makes a break for it. But without a wand, all she could hurl are insults, which won’t be very helpful. Neville, you cover the hallway.”

“Okay?” said Neville, having gotten his wand out while Harry and Susan were arguing. He looked like he was thinking it might just be best to smile and nod, or failing that, run far, far away.

The toad looked up at Susan in a way that any other toad on earth would also have done.

“All right then. Everyone be ready. If this toad turns out to be a person, he or she is going to bolt. Pick your favorite spell and let them have it.”

“My favorite spell makes flowers,” said Luna.

“Your favorite *attack* spell, thank you for allowing that clarification, Luna. Here we go!”

Everyone watched as Susan cast *Magic Immunity* and touched the toad. Cho looked on interested. Luna was still staring out the window.

Nothing happened.

Susan let out a breath. “Well, I’m glad that’s settled. It seems this is a perfectly ordinary toad, Neville. Congratulations.” She picked up Trevor and handed him over.

“Uh, thanks? I think?”

“I think they live about forty years in captivity,” said Luna. “But I really can’t be sure.”

“I still would have had to check. Wait, how long? You’re going to have this toad when you’re forty five? Wow.”

“That was anti-climactic,” noted Cho.

“It sometimes happens, you take them where you can get them. Did you need something?”

“I just wanted to say hi to Harry.”

“Oh!” Susan gave Harry a knowing look. Susan switched to her seductive voice.

“Something we should know, Harry?”

“What? No!”

“Uh huh. Look, it is nice to meet you, I’ve just been a little on edge lately,” said Susan, sticking her hand out. “It’s unfair of me to- anyway, come on in.”

Cho shook it. “You said something about *him* being back?”

“Yes, though I’m sure you’ve been reading in the papers about how it’s Albus Dumbledore that’s the problem, not a long dead wizard.”

“Something like that.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment. “So how was-” Harry started to say.

“I actually came-” Cho said at the same time.

“Sorry!” the both said. They grinned. “Go ahead,” said Harry.

“I actually came for two reasons,” said Cho. “One, to say hi to Harry. Hi.”

“Hi,” said Harry, looking sheepish.

“The other to talk to you, Susan.”

“To me?”

“She’s concerned about something in her life,” said Luna.

“How can you possibly know that?” asked Susan, surprised.

“It’s obvious,” she answered. “Just look at her.”

Susan looked at her. She didn’t see anything special about her. *She is pretty though. But if she’s after Harry...*

“Maybe she has *Empathic*,” suggested Sparkle.

“It’s true,” said Cho. “Something odd is going on in my life, and there are all kinds of rumors about you in school.”

“Like what?” asked Susan, eyes narrowed.

“Like you work for the Headmaster, making stuff in his office all the time. That you were at Harry’s trial, and talked an entire courtroom out of punishing him. And all that stuff at the tournament. And more that I just can’t actually believe.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. So you think I can help, or you think my magic can help?”

“They aren’t the same? I don’t know.”

“Start at the beginning. What’s troubling you?”

“It started with the ball last year. I had the strangest feeling that Cedric should have been competing and not you, Susan.”

*Yeah, you and me both. Not many others with the initials C.D. that could have put their names in.*

“I started to feel this odd sense of dread after that. Like he wouldn’t be around much longer. Then at the maze I could have sworn he was dead afterwards! I mean, how crazy is that? He was sitting there right next to me, cheering you two on, and then you both disappeared. ‘That should have been him’ I remember thinking. And then when you both came back, I kept glancing over at him to make sure he was still there. Being around him after that was just too much. Every time I got near him, I thought he shouldn’t exist. It was so spooky.”

“All this sounds like good news to me,” said Susan after a moment. “If he should have been in the tournament, things would have worked out quite differently. For one, he would have been killed right off. As Voldi would have used Harry to resurrect with, he wouldn’t have taken my magic. Uh, don’t let that get out, it’s sort of a secret.” *Have to be more careful about that.* “Without taking my magic, he would have dueled with wands, rather than getting clobbered by the stunner of Harry’s. With no one to whisk Harry back, he would probably have died in his duel with Voldi instead. Positive, on the whole.”

“I know, it is positive. I just couldn’t even look at him anymore, in the end. I kept seeing his face, dead, on the ground. Is there something wrong with me? Am I going mad?”

Susan sighed.

“It seems to be getting worse,” remarked Sparkle.

“I know,” Susan said back. “And I’m not sure what it means.”

“What do you mean, worse? This sort of thing has happened before? To others? I’m not mad?”

Susan shook her head. “You’re not mad. It’s nothing I can put my finger on. But in the past few years, things have happened and people have said to me they think something other than what’s happening should be happening. Remember Ron walking around for a week thinking his wand should be broken?”

Harry nodded.

“Strings,” said Luna. Everyone turned to look at her. She had put on a weird set of glasses, and was looking at Susan.

“What?” asked Susan.

“Do you know, that Japanese people believe that lovers are tied together by fate with a red string that trails from their pinkies?” She held up her little finger. “They can tangle, but never break.”

“What does that have to do with people claiming reality should be different?” asked Susan.

“I wonder.” She took the glasses off.

“We have that in Chinese mythology too!” said Cho, looking interested. “Are you saying that fate itself is becoming tangled because of what Susan has done?”

Everyone but Luna was staring at Cho, and so didn’t notice when she crooked her finger and watched as Susan’s gave a little jerk. She gave a “that’s interesting” look and turned back towards the window. “With her magic, isn’t anything possible?”

“You’ve always said that,” Harry said.

“But my saving Cedric’s life by him not being there wasn’t anything to do with my magic. I was dragged kicking and screaming into that stupid tournament, remember? That was because fake Professor Moody put my name in the goblet so that Voldi could get his hands on me.”

“But if you hadn’t been born, that situation would have worked out differently,” noted Sparkle.

“But there are trillions of people that aren’t born all the time. What difference does that make?”

“Your being born was a little more complicated than most. And we know alternate realities exist. We don’t know how they are made, or what form they take. Even your father said the worlds he visited were so separate as to be... what did he say? Different books on a shelf?”

“Yes, well, that’s true enough. You have a point. But *they* wouldn’t... feel that, would they? I mean, time moves, right? We all get moved along with it.” She made a gesture with her hands, trying to articulate what she was thinking.

“Don’t look at me, I’m just a cat.”

“So did you have a question, or did you just want to tell me?” Susan asked Cho.

“A little of both, I think. My question of have you heard of this happening before has been answered. You said it has, and it’s getting worse. I’m not going mad, but maybe what I’m feeling is some kind of... alternate reality?”

Sparkle nodded. "Whatever worse means in this context," said Sparkle.

"Right- we traded Cedric's life and possibly Harry's for Voldi getting my magic. Only time will tell if that's bad or horribly bad. Thank you for coming to us with this." Her eyes gleamed wickedly. "Tell you what. Harry, I want you to stick close to Cho. Maybe she has some ability to work with alternate realities or sense changes across them. Cho, anything out of the ordinary, you point it out to Harry, okay?"

They both tried to protest, but Susan wouldn't hear of it.

"No, it's your duty now. As part of Team Susan, I'm assigning you this task. It could be important, after all. Cho, Harry here is my top agent, I have full confidence in him. He knows what to look for, and he can protect you if you need it."

"I guess you should come meet my other friends," said Cho, "I mean, if we're going to be, uh, working closely together from now on. And you can tell me about this *Team Susan*."

"If you want," said Harry, standing up a little too quickly.

"Nice meeting you all. Thanks for listening and not just saying I was crazy. Cedric said I was being silly and wouldn't take it seriously at all."

"Trust me, the stuff that's happened to me? I take anything even slightly bizarre seriously now."

Cho and Harry left, making Ginny look jealous.

"What did she mean, getting her magic?" Cho asked as they walked away.

"Oh boy, that's going to take some explaining... And it's not Team Susan, it's Harry's Heroes, just so you know..." He moved out of range.

"That was a nice thing you did," said Luna.

"No it wasn't. You know I like Harry!" protested Ginny.

"Yeah, and he probably likes you. But until you tell him how you feel that emotion may as well not exist. Trust me, if you like him you want him to be happy above all else, right? If he's happy with Cho, then you can be happy for him."

"If you love something, let it go?" asked Luna.

"If it comes back to you, that love will be stronger," said Susan, grinning.

"Is that why you let Myrtle go?"

"You know about that?"

"I know you were the only person seen hanging around with a ghost a lot of the time in previous years. Then after the dance you stopped."

"Guess it wouldn't take a Ravenclaw to figure that one out."

"No, but it helps. I think..." she seemed to say more to herself, "that if I found someone I really liked, it wouldn't matter to me if they were a boy or a girl. I mean, we're all people, right?"

"If more people shared that sentiment, I think the world would probably be a better place," replied Susan, a little sadly.

"Am I part of Team Susan?" asked Neville after a moment of silence.

"I don't know, do you want to be?"

"What does that entail, exactly?"

"Well, I look you over, and if I like you, I say 'Neville, you're part of Team Susan,' and then you're part of Team Susan."

"Do I have to pay dues?"

Susan grinned and looked over at Ginny. “Dues. Now there’s something I never thought of. What do you think?”

“I think the most junior member should pay them.”

“Ah, which wouldn’t be you anymore, now that we have Neville. Wait, were you the last person added?”

“Wait,” said Neville, “it happened already?”

“Yup. I own your soul forever. Oh, did I not mention that part?” She put on an expression of concern. “You weren’t using it, were you?”

“Give it back!”

They all laughed.

“So what is Team Susan?” asked Luna.

“You mean Ginny’s Gifted Youth?” asked Ginny.

“Hey- don’t you start!” protested Susan.

“We all call ourselves something different,” she explained to Luna. “But basically anyone who is friends with Susan gets to be in ‘Team’ Susan. We help each other out, and from what Ron has told me, get attacked by stuff trying to kill Susan all the time.”

“Aren’t you overreacting?”

“Believe me, I wish she wasn’t. You may regret wanting to join, Neville,” said Susan.

Neville shook his head. “I’ve seen your magic. If something’s coming for you, I want to be right next to you, as that’ll be safest. Anywhere else and I might be part of collateral damage.”

“Sensible.”

“Just how powerful is your magic?” asked Luna. “And what did you mean when you said *he* took it?”

“Anything on a local scale, that is, short of blowing up the entire Earth or bringing back the dead, my magic can do it. And what I meant was, Voldi (that’s what I call him) did some kind of resurrection ritual with my blood and got that potential himself.”

“That could be bad.”

“Bad is the least freaked out word to use. Trust me, with my magic a dozen people could be killed in an hour while he sits at home knitting. That’s why the Headmaster tried to get the word out these past few months, and... well, you’ve seen the result.”

“Yes, the Daily Prophet has not been kind to either of you. However, there is an alternative magazine, if you wished to tell your story.”

“Yeah, the school paper I started last term. I didn’t get a chance to publish the article, but I wrote it. It’ll go in the instant we get back to school, let me tell you.”

“Actually, I was thinking of this one...” she pulled out a Quibbler.

Susan took it and looked it over. “You think they would print the story? I wouldn’t want the ministry to get after them.”

“I’m sure they will. My father is the editor.”

“Really?” Susan looked interested. “Wait, has he said that he would print things I write, or are you putting words in your father’s mouth he may not find to his taste?”

Luna laughed. “That was a good one! You extended the metaphor quite nicely. I’m sure I could convince him.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. I’ll want to get the Headmaster’s perspective, he may have some other plan in mind which I don’t want to ruin.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” remarked Ginny.

“I agree,” said Neville, “and I hardly know you.”

“Hey, if Ron can be more responsible, I can be more responsible.”

“Someone taking my name in vain?” asked Ron, sliding the door open. He looked around the cabin. “Told you it was Harry!”

Hermione came in, also looking around. “I... guess it was,” she said uncertainly. “Did you guys know Harry was going into a cabin with Cho?”

“What?” said Ginny with mock surprise. “And after Susan here basically threw them together, too! What could he have been thinking?”

“Susan did?”

“She came to tell us about some weird thing she’s been feeling, and Susan ‘assigned’ Harry to stick with her, in case something else weird happened.”

“It wasn’t my fault they kept staring at each other like they wanted to do something more than stare at each other.”

“So you’re playing matchmaker now?” said Hermione, sitting down next to Luna. “Hi, Luna.”

“Hello, Hermione.”

“This is Ron, by the way. They’ve founding members in Team Susan.”

“She means Hermione’s Knowledge Seekers.”

“They mean Ron’s Kung Fu Force Against Evil,” said Ron.

“Can I just keep my own sense of humor and not use yours?” pleaded Neville.

“Neville! Welcome to the group!” said Ron. “In other news, prefecting is going to be interesting. Guess who Slytherin got?”

“I think we only know one Slytherin, it had to be him,” said Sparkle.

“Bingo!”

“Did you just say prefecting?” asked Luna.

“That’s what it is.”

“I guess. I didn’t want to freak out before, as no one else seemed to think it odd, but is your cat talking?”

Susan laughed. “Ah yeah, you don’t know her, do you? Luna, this is Sparkle, my *Companion* and friend. She’s a wizard, like me, and she can talk.”

“I could even sing, if I put points into it,” said Sparkle.

“Could you do a number from *Cats*? I love that musical!” said Hermione. Sparkle just looked meaningfully at her. “Well it was worth asking.”

The door opened again, and Draco looked in.

“Speak of the devil,” said Susan.

“And the devil appears,” finished Luna. Susan gave a nod of respect to Luna.

“Just checking in,” Draco said. “Making sure everyone was behaving themselves.”

“I heard you became a prefect. Congratulations,” said Susan.

“I- yes. Thank you. Where’s Harry? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you two apart once we get to school.”

“Alas!” she said, overacting and throwing a hand up to her forehead. “He has left me for another. Why do boys only go for LOOKs and not REAsOn or KNOWledge, I’ll never know.”

“Harry has a girlfriend?”

“I wouldn’t call her that... yet. More like, she has a bodyguard. She came and told us some weird things she was feeling and if we could help. I said Harry should stick with her for a while in case it happened again. They just happened to be making eyes at each other the whole time.”

“I see. I get that feeling sometimes. Like the world isn’t right somehow?”

“Yeah? You do?” Susan leaned forward. “Go on.”

“Around you guys, mostly. I want so much to insult you, but you’ve really given me no reason to. You’ve always been nice to me. Preachy, but not spiteful because of who my father is. So why is my natural inclination to be a bother to you and Harry? It doesn’t make sense.”

The others looked at each other. “Interesting. Let me know if anyone you know complains about stuff like that,” said Susan. “I’m thinking it’s important, I just don’t know how yet.”

“I really only know Crabbe and Goyle. They wouldn’t know weird if it ran up wearing a mermaid costume and smacked them with a dead fish.”

“Well, keep an eye out, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll see you around?”

“Of course. And again, congratulations on being chosen for prefect. It is quite an honor, the way I hear it.”

Draco seemed to stand a little taller. “I guess. Bye.” He left.

“Why are you so nice to him?” asked Neville. “As part of Team Susan do I have to be nice to him too?”

“Shouldn’t you be? Has he given you some reason to not be nice to him?”

“Gee, I don’t know. It just seems wrong, somehow...”

“I know why she’s nice to him,” said Luna.

“Oh, go on then,” said Hermione.

“Everyone says you can catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. Of course, if you actually test it they go for the vinegar, but I digress. The point is, she’s laying a trap for him, getting him on her side, in case she needs him later.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Hermione asked, shocked.

“I never thought of it in those terms. I don’t think of him as a fly, just as someone who was told a lot of things growing up that might not be true. That’s all. If we give him a chance rather than just shooting him down, like he said, because of who his father is, maybe we can change his mind a little bit.”

“That’s why he called you preachy?”

“Yeah, I tend to do that when he’s around. Didn’t this time though, I think.”

“Did you actually set two bowls out and see which one attracted more flies?” Hermione asked Luna.

“Of course. You’re in Ravenclaw too. I would have expected you to understand.”

“It’s just so pointless!”

“It was something I didn’t know. So I tried it, and now I do. What’s the big deal?”

“It’s just... I’m only saying...”

“She has you there, Hermione,” said Susan.

“I suppose you would have done the same?”

“No, I have Google.” She suppressed a grin.

Soon everyone but Neville and Ginny were laughing.

“I don’t get it,” said Neville.

“Don’t worry, neither do I,” said Luna.

Which set them all to laughing again.



## Starting a New Term

Time: Stepping off the train

Place: Train Station

As the group stepped off the train, they noticed there was a distinct lack of large, hairy, and shouting.

“Didn’t Hagrid make it back yet?” asked Ron to no one in particular.

“Must not have. I hope he’s okay,” said Susan.

“We would have heard, though, if he wasn’t,” said Hermione.

“You’re probably right.”

“Hey, look!” said Luna, pointing. Susan looked over to see Harry and Cho talking animatedly. She smiled, but Ginny scowled.

The group went over to the carriages, and Luna stopped to pet something in the front. Everyone looked at her like she was nuts, as there was nothing there.

*Can she see something we don’t? She isn’t using those weird glasses of hers, but then, if she had before she would know something was there, wouldn’t she?*

Luna got on, and Susan thought about just asking outright, but then thought she might try a different approach.

“They look sort of weird, don’t they?”

“Oh, you can see them too? *That’s nice.* Rather like horses that need a really, really, good meal. I do hope they’re supposed to look like that, and that they aren’t being mistreated.”

“You mean those animals that pull the carriages?” asked Neville.

“Exactly what I mean,” answered Susan. “I can’t actually see them, Luna, but I inferred their presence from how you were acting towards them. You can, Neville?”

Luna looked a little more surprised than usual, and jerked her head to look over at her. Neville nodded, and looked at Luna with gratitude.

*Maybe he never met someone else that could see them?*

“You tricked me,” she said, sounding pleased.

“That I did. But I will strive never to deceive you.”

“An important distinction. Thank you.”

“They aren’t pulling themselves?” asked Hermione.

Luna and Neville both shook their heads. “There’s something there, all right,” he said. “It always has been, but I don’t know what they’re called.”

“Maybe we’ll find out some time in Care of Magical Creatures,” said Hermione, turning to look out the window at the castle that was drawing nearer. Well, the castle wasn’t moving, it’s just that from the fixed point of reference of the coach... you know what I mean.

Everyone proceeded to enter the great hall, and find their seats. Luna stayed with Hermione and Susan, and sat down with them. Cho came up and sat with them as well, and Harry sat behind them, with Ron, at the Gryffindor table.

“All right, Cho?” asked Susan.

“No oddness yet. Thanks for assigning Harry to me, he’s nice.”

“Sure thing!” She looked around the room. “Well, well, well,” said remarked slowly, “If it isn’t Mrs. hem-hem herself.”

“Which, I presume, it is?” asked Luna.

Susan nodded.

“What are you talking about?” asked Hermione.

“That woman in the pink sweater, next to the Headmaster. She works for the ministry. She was there making snide remarks when I cured the Longbottoms, and then again at the trial.”

“She’s sitting where the Defense professor usually sits,” remarked Luna.

“That can only mean bad news.”

Luna stared at her. “I don’t like her.”

“Neither did I, first time I saw her. And if you don’t like her, that means she bares watching.”

“You can’t just look at someone and decide you don’t like them,” said Hermione.

“Why not?” She leaned over away from Cho. “I’ll bet you Ginny decided she didn’t like Cho the moment she saw her.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

“I guess you don’t believe in love at first sight, either then?” asked Luna. “Because it’s the same thing, only in reverse.”

“Love at first sight is just a myth,” said Hermione huffily.

The two stared at each other. There was a commotion at the doors, and the first years, looking around nervously, entered. Everyone turned to see them proceeding up the main hall to be sorted, where the hat sat on a stool before the teacher’s table. Professor McGonagall got up.

The hat launched into a lengthy speech (three whole pages) about togetherness, virtually unchanged from the original reality. Susan’s “meddling” hadn’t reached those levels yet, thank goodness, and everyone started remarking how different it was than previous years.

And the sorting began.

“Hello,” said a timid voice behind Susan. Myrtle floated up from the floor, looking nervous.

“Hi, Myrtle! Good to see you again!” said Susan. “You had as good a summer as can reasonably be expected, I hope?”

Luna snorted.

“Yes, thanks. It’s nice to see you again.”

“And you. Anything odd gone on around here while we were gone?”

She shook her head. “Just the normal activities the ghosts put on, why?”

“Just asking. Thought after that rousing ‘little’ speech by the Sorting Hat something major had happened.”

“Not that I know of.”

“Pity.”

And with the feast concluded, Albus introduced the two new teachers, and was interrupted by Dolores, who launched into her prepared speech.

Albus seemed quite interested, but as Susan watched, it seemed like he was trying to catch her eyes. She stared at him.

He lifted a folded parchment from the table, and tapped it thoughtfully against his cheek. Then it pointed it at her, and set it down again.

*I do believe he wishes to tell me something. Now if only I had a spell to whisk an object to myself from across a room. Oh wait, I do.*

Susan wordlessly cast *Retrieval*, taking what extra time she could. As it was less than 20 meters away her difficulty was negligible, and in a flash of light, it appeared in her hand. Albus nodded, and she began to read.

*Dear Susan,*

*Welcome back to what I'm sure will be another exciting year of learning and adventure here at Hogwarts. As I am sure you worked out, given the number of Ravenclaw students you have laid claim to for Team Susan, the ministry has taken the unprecedented step of assigning a spy to lurk within our very halls. I would advise, therefore, that we maintain a distance this year, lest the ministry, however wrongly, increase their levels of paranoia where we are concerned.*

*I have assigned your class schedule accordingly, and you will find the blocks of time you normally spent in my office performing your fine Imbuing skill should now be spent in the dungeons during potions class. As Professor Snape has not rescinded his request to never see you in his classroom again, a small room nearby has been reserved for your use. You will find it well stocked with high value items you may use in your efforts. Feel free to put more time in there, should you need it.*

*Naturally, if there is some emergency or other event you feel I should know about, I'm sure a bright young girl like yourself can find a means of letting me know on the sly. Perhaps something to do with magic? If nothing else, leave a note at the place you did such a good job cleaning with your friends, and it will reach me.*

*I'm sure I don't need to tell you, but please try to keep your temper in check with the aforementioned spy. I believe you can make RESolve checks for this effort? After all, we do not want to make waves, do we? Of course, I fully expect you to plow your way ahead as you always do, and hope that the consequences for you aren't too severe. I will not be able to intercede on your behalf, which I'm sure given your Overconfidence you would not expect anyway. You will no doubt believe your magic and your guts can pull you through any situation, which I am having a hard time finding a counter example for, so press on!*

*Also, you should probably hold off printing any inflammatory articles in the Hogwarts Express Times. I would hate to have the fledgling paper shut down after such a good run last year. Don't worry, the time for the truth will come soon.*

*In closing, I hope you have a good year, and earn lots of XP to put to good use in your classes. Please welcome your friends back from me, as well.*

*Respectfully,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

*P.S. Rubeus is fine, no need to start tracking him down, he'll be along soon enough.*

Dolores finished her speech, to little applause.

"That was even worse than the hat's speech," said Ron. "Can't we just get on with it?"

"Oh Ron, pay attention," said Hermione. "You don't realize what she was saying?"

"She was talking, but all I heard was blah-blah-blah."

“I thought the new and improved Ron would have paid more attention.”

“Hermione, I can only do so much.”

“Well, for your information, the ministry is obviously interfering at Hogwarts!”

“Hermione, you don’t know the half of it,” said Susan, indicating her note.

“You can tell me later. We prefects need to show the first years where to go.” She stood up. “First year Ravenclaw students, gather around me, please!”

Susan, Hermione, Cho, Luna, Myrtle and Sparkle sat (or floated) in the Ravenclaw common room after Susan had filled them all in about what they were facing. Others in the room were hanging about, pretending to do other things in order to hear what she had to say. Susan considered asking Sparkle to put up a *silence* shell but figured they should hear it too.

“No wonder the papers have been tearing you and Headmaster Dumbledore to shreds,” said Cho. “That story couldn’t possibly be true!”

“I don’t sense any deception from her,” said Luna. “If anything, she’s understating the case so as not to scare us.”

“I just want to you know what we’re up against. What I’ve told you is the truth about what happened to me. If you want to help, I welcome it. If you don’t, then walk away now while you still are not involved at all. Cho, I don’t know if you have some ability to see changes in the world or just got a funny feeling because something big didn’t happen. Either way, you came seeking answers so you’re involved with us now. I won’t hold it against you if you say that’s as far as you want to take things. Luna, we’ve known each other a few years, but not well. I’d like to get to know you better, you seem like someone I could get to like. For you that means battle exercises. Preaching peace is all well and good, but when I face my next attacker, be that Voldi, some agent of his, or my mystery enemy from past years, you might be there. And I can’t fight and protect you at the same time, so you have to learn to protect yourself. Are you going to be okay with that?”

“What has to be, has to be. But why don’t you just find out who is trying to kill you and just put a stop to it? That would reduce the number of people we would have to worry about, wouldn’t it?”

“It has to do with my... lineage. I can explain later, it’s not for the others.” She gestured to the other people around the room, who bent to their imagined tasks more furiously. “Suffice to say, I think it’s different people each year. I say this because it’s different methods every year. And until I actively buy the weakness off, I’ll always have one enemy or another after me. Look, I know you don’t understand what I mean, but I can show you privately later.”

“As long as you understand it,” said Luna.

“What exactly does that mean for us?” asked Cho.

“Studying and practicing various curses,” Susan counted off on her fingers. “Learning to block hostile magic. Getting your *Magic Combat* delay down so you can be faster casting spells. Learning to summon a Patronus, when they come there will be hundreds, and not even I can kill that many at one time. Basically, start practicing Defense Against the Dark Arts as though your lives depended upon it.

“They do.”

“Let’s do it,” said Luna, smiling.

“I don’t know,” said Cho. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“You won’t be able to sit the war out,” said Hermione. “He’s coming, and with possibly more terrible magics than we can predict right now. Don’t be the person that needs looking after. Be the person that can look after others.”

“I said I’ll think about it, okay?”

Hermione glared at her.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Susan, putting a hand on her arm. “You and Ron and Ginny got thrust into this because you hung out with me. If she wants to hope this whole thing will pass her by, well, I hope that happens. Someone should lead a normal life, and I would envy hers if she had it. A little. I wouldn’t give up my magic or knowing you all for it, but she has a chance. If she walks with us it takes her down a different path than her life would normally have gone. We need to respect her choice.”

“Tangled strings,” said Luna mysteriously.

“It’s not that, I think I do want to fight,” said Cho earnestly. “I just have the strange feeling now is not yet the time. That maybe my time is coming?”

“Follow your heart,” said Luna. “It will lead you true.”

“I don’t need an answer now,” said Susan. “When you’re ready, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks.”

The next day, the original Team Susan met in the great hall and were talking about Harry’s altercations in his common room. He said he had to defend Susan, who said she could defend herself, thank you very much.

“But I appreciate the sentiment,” she said to him. “We had quite a little group around while I was explaining things to Cho and Luna. Luna is with us, but Cho said something about her time being later.”

“We can use all the help we can get, but Luna?” asked Ron.

“What? I feel she really understands me. It’s quite refreshing, actually.”

“And of course on the train she implied she wouldn’t care that you weren’t a boy if she found she really liked you.”

Susan colored. “Did she? I must have missed that.”

“Uh huh.”

“So how did you find Cho?” asked Susan, quickly changing the subject.

“She’s nice,” said Harry. “Doesn’t strike me as having a, what would you call it? High PERsonality, I think? But she introduced me to her friends, and we got along okay.”

“What does that mean?” asked Ron.

“People with a high PERsonality can get other people to do what they want, and then make them think it was their idea at the time. Forceful, you know? Voldi probably has one, he just uses it to get followers rather than friends.”

“Do you have one?”

Susan shook her head. “Average. I am neither remarkable or terrible at interpersonal relations.”

*At least according to her character sheet, thought Sparkle. I think someone fudges the numbers at times for role playing purposes.*

“Oh, there you are Harry,” said a tall, dark skinned girl walking up to the table. “Been looking for you.”

“Hi, Angelina. What’s up? You know my friends? Susan, Ron, Hermione?”

“I know Susan by reputation. Hello everyone.”

*That must be my Prodigy, I don't have any other backgrounds or weaknesses relating to reputation. Oh, it might not work that way for them.*

“What's up is Quidditch. I'm team captain now.”

“Congratulations! I guess you're the person I need to talk to, then.”

“About what?”

“I'm not playing this year.”

“What?” everyone said.

“But you love Quidditch!” protested Ron.

“You always say it's the highlight of your time here!” protested Hermione.

“*Magic Immunity!*” protested Susan, casting the spell on Harry and touching him.

Everyone looked at him as magical symbols swirled around him and settled. “Sorry, I had to be sure,” she said, when nothing happened.

“Look, I lived without it last year,” he explained. “And with everything going on now, I feel my time could be better spent practicing battle magic than flying about.”

“But... Quidditch!” said Angelina. “Seeker! Winning!”

“I know, I know. It's not that the games are that long, it's just practice, and the increased workload for this year because of O.W.Ls and everything. Something has to give!”

“Practice?” asked Susan. “How can you practice looking about the field for a golden ping pong ball? Perception is LUCK and INSight, you can't train it. And you're already the fastest on the field with that broom of yours. Why would you have to practice?”

“The team has to practice together,” Harry said. “And I feel that I would be bringing the team down because I would be distracted by everything else going on. You'll need a new keeper, right? So now you'll need a new Seeker, as well. I'm sorry, but that's what I have to do.”

“Okay,” said Angelina. “But let me know if you change your mind. You have until five on Friday, okay?” She walked away.

“I'm sorry being my friend has caused this,” Susan said sadly.

“It wasn't anything to do with you. I need to practice, that's all there is to it. You saw him, Susan, but I felt his rage afterwards. He's coming, and no amount of Quidditch will help me.”

“That was a really grown up thing to do,” said Hermione. “It must have been hard.”

“The right thing to do usually is. Come on, let's eat so we can get to class.”

“Yeah,” said Hermione, distracted.

“So do you know where this room is I'm supposed to be going to?” asked Susan on the way to potions class with the others.

“I think it's just down the hall, wasn't it a closet?” said Hermione.

“There was another door there, I figured it was for storage,” said Harry.

“Oh, hi Harry!” said Cho, walking around the corner.

“Hi, Cho!” replied Harry brightly.

“Hey, maybe *you* can talk some sense into him!” said Ron. “Do you know Harry's given up playing Quidditch this year?”

“Yeah, we talked about it on the train.”

“You talked to her about it, but not us?” Ron seemed scandalized.

“I wanted an outside opinion, that’s all. I knew Susan would say that was the smart thing to do, she’s never liked it. Hermione would agree with her and say I should be spending more time studying anyway, and you would be indignant without being able to really articulate why.”

Ron stared at him. “You’ve been spending too much time around Ravenclaws, you know that?”

“Well, anyway, I’ll, uh, see you all around?” said Cho, backing away. She turned and hastily made a retreat.

“Thanks a lot,” said Harry.

“What? I was just asking...”

“You boys need to spend less time thinking about Quidditch and more time thinking about O.W.L.s, honestly,” said Hermione.

“Hear, hear!” said Susan. “But replace O.W.L.s with ‘just about anything else’ and you’ve got it.”

Both boys mirrored disgust at this prospect.

Susan went to her assigned cubbyhole, while the other three proceeded on to Professor Snape’s classroom. The cubby was laid out exactly like her lab upstairs, and she saw the cabinets were well stocked with a variety of, to put it bluntly, leavings. But each was marked with a price tag, so she could provide the correct worth in silver for the magic.

*How paranoid do I want to be? Susan asked herself. What are the chances Voldi has, in the months since he got my powers, worked out Jupiter magic enough to cast a seventh level spell, Descry Creature and Clairvoyance, a fifth level spell? He knows the castle well enough, but Descry Creature would only tell him I was in the castle, not my exact location. Unless he was standing outside, he probably wouldn’t be able to tell with enough resolution to use Clairvoyance to see me. On the other hand, he has followers he can drain of energy. He could learn only one spell, Clairsentience, and just cast it a couple of times. That one can be moved to L distance, so if he started where I was likely to be, he could eventually find me. I wonder if the castle’s wards block scrying attempts? Wish I could, I don’t know, ask the Headmaster? Crap, he could spy on the headmaster’s office just as easily as on me. Better make a note of that.*

Susan grabbed some parchment, but got an actual pen out of her pocket. She wrote:

*Headmaster: Do the wards around the castle block all types of scrying? If not, your office at the very least should be made secure against it, or Voldi may be able to see into it at any time with my magic. I have taken care of it on my end so he cannot see me do Imbuing or read my book.*

She folded it over and stuck it through a *Teleportal* onto the kitchen table of the Order.

*Back to my immediate problem. Any time I take my book out, there’s a chance Voldi may be “over my shoulder” looking for clues about my magic. I could cast Concealment but that’s not perfect. He could punch through with a better check result than mine. That’s why I love Magic Immunity so much. No check against that one, stuff just doesn’t work on me anymore. The problem is to do the Imbuing of stuff I first have to decide what I want to make, which means paging through the book. Then having it open while I work.*

*Lucky for me there is a solution!*

Susan pulled a sheaf of papers out of her *Pocket Dimension* that had a spell written on them. *Good thing the Headmaster asked about this before school ended last year. He just wanted a place to stick that practice field generator, almost as if he suspected his Defense teacher for the next year might not be keen on us using them. But in this case, it solves a bunch of my problems...*

She opened the cabinet doors and looked at the back of them. *Screwed in, fantastic.*

Using a combination of *Temporary Tool*, *Telekinesis* and her new spell of *Personal Dimension*, thirty minutes later when a student was sent to check on Susan's progress (Severus didn't trust an unattended student to not be slacking off) they found an empty room, and reported even the cabinets were missing. Severus stormed down there to see for himself, and glared at where the wooden cabinets had been so recently stocked with reagents as per Albus' orders.

Had he stayed until potions class was over, he would have seen a very curious hole in reality open, showing a dreamlike landscape beyond, and a humming Susan stepping through and back into the hallway.

"Can't follow me in there, can you?" she said to the bare walls. "Didn't think so. You're going to have to do things the hard way, HA HA HA!"

Harry poked his head in. "Uh, are you talking to the walls? I thought this was supposed to be a lab for you?"

"I moved it, it's safer to work where it is now. Come on, I'm hungry. It took a lot of energy to steal to borrow the contents of this room, I don't suppose you'd lend me some of yours?"

"What would that entail?"

Susan laughed. "Come on."

"Professor Snape is being his usual grumpy self," complained Ron. "What did you say that made him so angry part way through the class?"

"He stopped by?"

"He sent someone to check on you. He came back saying that was just an empty room, not a lab, and Snape stormed off. When he came back he was grumbling something about stealing and he kept saying your name."

"Yeah, like he was cursing it," said Hermione.

Susan laughed. "I'll have to send him an apology. Poor guy, he just can't catch a break where I'm concerned, can he?"

"What happened?"

"I was working elsewhere. A little spell I had my book whip up just before the school year ended last year. I don't want Voldi to see how to actually do *Imbuing* or get a look at my book. So I want to take it out as little as possible now. Thus, I do that sort of thing elsewhere now."

"Oh," she said simply.

“I haven’t learned the spell, but casting it from writings is fine. It takes about eighteen minutes, with the extra time, but it’s not a combat spell, so who cares? I can dump energy into it.”

“I guess no-one?”

“Exactly. So he didn’t take it out on you guys, did he?”

“Actually, he was shocked at how well my potion came out,” said Harry.

“Yeah, you’ve never done that well in potions class,” said Hermione. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just felt extra focused lately. Like I really want to be concentrating on something. Learning, you know? It’s great, learning new things, isn’t it?”

Everyone looked at Harry as though he had sprouted another head, which was now speaking, rather than the normal one he usually had hanging around.

“Er, yes it is,” Hermione said at last. “I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

“Must have just sunk in then,” Harry said lightly. “So, what’s next? Arithmancy?”

“Yeah, as we both dropped Divination to take that instead.”

“Super! Can’t wait to get started!”

*Okay, someone’s acting out of character, but it seems positive, so do I tell someone?*  
Susan sat thoughtfully, but came to no real conclusion.

## The Defense Professor Takes the Stage

Time: Just after lunch

Place: Defense classroom

It was a quiet group of students that went to their seats for the first Defense Class, as no one quite knew how to take a Defense teacher that, quite frankly, it did not look the part.

*I mean honestly, what is that woman going to do in a fight? She's totally out of shape, anyone can see that.*

"Good afternoon, class!" she said, as though she was expecting a reply in kind. She didn't get it.

After drilling them on what she expected, she put the "course aims" on the blackboard with her wand.

- 1) *Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic*
- 2) *Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used*
- 3) *Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.*

Susan's hand immediately went up.

"Yes, Susan?" Dolores asked.

"I just wanted a bit of clarification regarding point 2, if I may?"

"Go ahead."

"It just seems to imply that there are situations which call for defensive magic, but in which defensive magic is not "legal" to use. Am I reading that correctly?"

"You are."

"So, for example, if a dozen or so Dementors swoop down on someone in broad daylight, threatening your life, the lives of others, and possibly the entire neighborhood, is that a situation where defensive magic can be used?"

She ignored the question. "Now, does everyone had their copy of *Defensive Magical Theory*?"

Everyone looked a bit shocked that the professor hadn't even acknowledged the question.

"Come, come, you know what sort of answer I want when I ask you something. Do you all have your copy of *Defensive Magical Theory*?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," most everyone said.

"Excellent. I would like you to turn to page five and read chapter one. There will be no need to talk."

Everyone got out their books, including Susan, who started leafing through the book. She started to giggle. After a moment she had to close the book and put her head down on the desk, she was shaking so hard from trying to keep from laughing.

"Are you quite all right, dear?" said Dolores.

Susan raised her head, and couldn't stop herself when she looked over at the Professor. She burst out laughing.

"Did someone slip her a laughing potion at lunch?" someone asked.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, getting herself under control. “It’s just, I wasn’t ready. I didn’t think it was going to be so hilarious. I apologize for disrupting your class, professor.”

“You find the book amusing?”

“That I do, professor. As far as I can tell, wandless magic users require a wand motion and an incantation to learn spells. There is not a single wand motion described in this book, nor is there a single incantation. What, exactly, do you expect us to get out of this?”

Other people were now looking through as well, and frowning as they came to the same realization.

Hermione’s hand went up.

“Yes?” Dolores said, probably to avoid answering Susan’s question again.

“She has a point. In your course aims you don’t say anything about using defensive magic.”

“Using it? Why would you feel you would need to use it? Do you fear for your safety in my class? I assure you, it’s perfectly safe.”

“That may be. Given the times we’ve been attacked in this school I would have to question that statement, however.”

“Attacked? Nonsense. By what?”

Susan started counting on her fingers. “Let’s see. A troll, dwarves, blast ended Skrewts more than once trying to get them under control for magical creatures class, a giant, admittedly that was in the village, older kids…”

“Don’t forget the basilisk,” said Harry.

“Ah yes, the giant snake. Dementors, a dragon or two, a werewolf…”

“That’s preposterous!”

“I saw them fighting a giant in the village,” someone said. “It was shouting Susan’s name and everything. They were amazing!”

“I saw them fighting off those dwarves Professor Lockhart brought in,” said another. “The dwarves didn’t stand a chance!”

“Quiet!” Dolores shouted. “You will raise your hands if you wish to talk in my class.” Immediately several hands went up. “Yes, you are?”

“Dean Thomas, Professor. I don’t know about all that, it does sound like they get attacked every other day. But this is a Defense Against the Dark Arts class, isn’t it? If there was no need to learn to defend ourselves against Dark Arts, why would the class even exist?”

There were mutters of agreement to this sentiment.

“It is merely a precaution. If you see dark wizard activity, you can recognize it and report it to the proper authorities, who are trained to deal with it.”

“But this is school, we’re supposed to be training to deal with it, so we can take those positions of authority when we’re graduated.”

“The ministry believes that a theoretical knowledge will be sufficient to allow you to graduate,” she patiently explained. “Yes, Harry?”

“What you’re basically saying then, is that we will not learn a single spell in your classroom?”

“You will learn the theory behind defensive magic. Study this hard enough, and you are sure to pass your O.W.L exam with nothing to worry about.”

“So in the meantime I shouldn’t worry that Tom Riddle, AKA The Dark Lord AKA Voldemort has been resurrected by Peter Pettigrew? Is that what you’re saying? That theory will get me through?”

“Not to mention his posse of Death Eaters, or the fact he can do my magic now,” put in Susan quickly.

A hush fell over the classroom.

“Ten points from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.”

Everyone glared at Dolores.

“Now I wish to make this clear,” she said. “The ministry’s position is that a certain dark wizard was totally destroyed when his curse on Harry Potter rebounded and struck him instead. Harry and Susan would have you believe otherwise. This is a lie.”

Susan stood up. “So may I ask what the ministry’s position is on what happened at the tournament? Harry and I vanished from the maze when we touched the cup. Where did we go? I explained where we went, what is your explanation? We were gone several minutes, how do you account for that time? Was anyone dispatched to find the cup in the graveyard I described? Was the grave of Tom Riddle’s father checked to see if it was missing a bone? Did anyone inquire as to the whereabouts of the people we said were there at the time we said we saw them? Was even the slightest effort given to conclusively prove we are liars, or are you just hoping that we are? Because we all know how it turned out for Sirius Black, don’t we?”

Harry stood up. “I would also be interested in hearing the ministry’s position on these events.”

Hermione stood up. “I would as well.”

Ron looked over at them, and gave a weak grin. Susan shook her head a bit. He seemed relieved.

“Come here, the three of you,” she said, getting out two parchments. They gathered up their books and stood before her desk. She finished writing and sealed the parchments with magic.

“Take this to your heads of house,” she said, handing them to Susan and Harry.

“Hermione, you of course will accompany Susan. Good day.”

The three turned to go, but before she left, Susan spun to face the class. They all looked concerned. “Do you all remember what Professor Quirrell taught us? Speak up, he said. If we see something wrong, don’t just look away. Step up. Question! Challenge! I see only two others really paid attention that day, and I am ashamed of all of you.” Many heads looked down, eyes downcast as well.

She left.

“Honestly, that woman!” said Hermione, as she and Susan made their way to professor Flitwick’s office.

“I suppose if she wants to keep her job she has to defend the ministry’s views,” said Susan.

“Did they do any of those things you mentioned?”

“Probably not. I offered many times to take them there, by force, if needed, and show them with *Time Window* what happened. But I think they’re willing to overlook even the most stringent of proof, in favor of making my life difficult.”

“Hey, with luck, we’ve been thrown out of her class like you were with Potions, and we can go practice someplace else instead!”

“That’s an idea, actually. We can only hope.”

They knocked on the door of Professor Flitwick’s office, and let themselves in.

“Ah, what can I do for my two, well, my star pupil and the girl who has magic I can’t begin to understand?”

Susan wordlessly handed over the note and he unsealed it, giving it a read.

“So?” asked Susan. “Have we been banished from her class? Please say we have!”

“Uh, no, just given detention.”

Susan snapped her fingers. “Darn. And I made sure to leave a spy in the class just in case.”

“Is that why you didn’t want Ron to stand up? Good thinking!” said Hermione, impressed.

“Thanks.”

“Ahem,” said Professor Flitwick. “It says here you were quite rude to her?”

“I might go so far as to say a bit or even slightly,” said Susan, scratching her ear, “but I wouldn’t say ‘quite.’”

“And you further maintained that you know who has been resurrected?”

“Oh come on, even you won’t say his name? Call him Tom, if you must. We know who he is.”

“You’ve faced him and lived. You’ve earned the right to say his name. I haven’t.”

“That’s a load of rubbish. You fought against him before, I’m sure.”

“Yes, but that’s neither here nor there. Tom then, you said he was back.”

“It’s a little thing called the truth. I like to use it, keeps people on their toes because they aren’t expecting it.”

“I know, but you have to realize some truths people just don’t want to hear.”

“She better get used to it, he’s not going away. And I’m not going to stop gathering forces to oppose him.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. But I would ask you to be a bit more... discreet in your efforts?”

“I suppose if I’m in detention I can’t very well be practicing, or *Imbuing* or learning spells. All right, I’ll ease up around her. But it was valuable information we got, because now we know exactly where she stands and what she believes. That was worth a little detention, I think. How many?”

“Every day this week, five o’clock, her office, starting tomorrow”

“Very well. Anything else?”

He seemed to hesitate. “Did you steal an entire potions cupboard?”

“Did someone report seeing me carrying one off?” she answered with a grin.

“It’s just we seem to be missing one, and you were assigned to be there at the time.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll put the cabinets back before the end of term. I’m just borrowing them.”

He looked around her. “Where did you put it? Shrink spell?”

“Nothing so mundane,” scoffed Susan. “Just a bit of expansion on my *Pocket Dimension*, that’s all.”

“Ah. Well, as long as it’s safe.”

“Quite safe, no need to worry.”

Susan and Hermione ran into Harry on the way to their last class of the day.

“How did it go for you?” asked Hermione.

“I got biscuits,” said Harry, still looking a bit confused.

“Biscuits! We didn’t get so much as a crumb! That greedy bastard!” said Susan, smiling.

“Did you get yelled at?” Harry asked.

“No, just cautioned to be a bit more subtle. You?”

“The same.”

“I see. Hey, there’s Ron! Ron!”

Ron jogged over to them. “You really aren’t ashamed of me, are you?” he asked breathlessly.

“What? No, I wanted you to stay there. What happened after we left?”

“She just started going on about how wrong you both were, and that if anyone sided with you against the ministry there would be repercussions for them. Then she had us go back to reading, and not another word was said the whole time. There were some people with more thoughtful expressions than the reading required though.”

“Fantastic!” said Susan, pumping her fist.

“How is that fantastic?” asked Harry.

“Easiest way to get someone to do something. Forbid them to do it.”

“Well done on the whole paying attention thing, Ron,” said Hermione.

“I figured she would ask. It was the sort of thing it seemed she would want to know.”

“And I did. 5 Susan points!”

“Are you actually keeping track of these things?”

“Nah, if you don’t know how many points you have, I don’t see why I should.”

“Then those five brings me up to a million points, what do I win?”

“Oh, sorry, the first prize level is two million points, didn’t I say? Keep trying!”

They all rolled their eyes.

That evening at dinner the complete Team Susan (seven humans, a ghost, and a cat, minus those members that didn’t go to school anymore like Fleur) went over what happened in the defense class. Lots of people looked at them, as the story had spread by this time, but no one seemed to want to approach.

“What are we going to do about her?” asked Ginny.

“Sadly there’s not much we can do,” replied Susan. “As the ministry would frown on me turning her into a toad.”

“Could you do that?”

“*Cursed Form*, *Venus* spell, grade 8.”

“You already looked it up?”

“I’ve had this book for most of my life, you know? I have a pretty good idea about what spells it has.”

“I guess. So what are we really going to do?”

“For the moment, nothing. Let her think she’s got us cowed, drop her guard a little. When her attention isn’t on us as much we can think about some plan of action.”

“Could you turn her into a cow?” asked Ron.

Susan shook her head. “Has to be smaller than the original form. I could turn her into a calf.”

“But we can still recruit for Team Susan, right?”

“Sure, but very carefully. Did you have someone in mind?”

“No, just if anyone expressed interest I wanted to know what to tell them.”

“Tell them to come see me directly. I’ll need to see how good they are at offensive magic before I give the okay. If we’re not getting any training this year, they’ll have to already be pretty good.”

Hermione looked thoughtful.

That evening, Luna came to talk to Susan.

“I hear you were pretty brave, standing up to Professor Umbrage like you did.”

“Brave? I wouldn’t say brave. It’s more pigheadedness, a high RESolve, and *Overconfidence*. And Harry and Hermione were there to back me up.”

“Would things have gone differently if they hadn’t been there?”

“Probably not,” she admitted. “But at least I did have someone there to stand with me. You should be calling them brave, not me. After all, they have more to lose.”

“Because you could be expelled and you would hardly care, right?”

“I would care a little, all my friends are here.”

“But you’ve never really needed this school, have you?”

“I suppose in a technical sense, no. I had to learn about my magic from my father’s book. And I could make a living with just the spells I know now, I’m sure. But I still needed to get old enough to have people take me seriously in the magical world. Would you trust an *Imbuing* done by an eleven year old? Even though I think I’ve only put one point into it since I got here?”

“Does that mean you’re no better at it now than you were when you started school?”

“Exactly. I keep learning more magic, rather than saving up and improving my skills. Apart from things like Herbology and Arithmancy, that is.”

“I’m just going to go on thinking you were brave, if that’s okay with you.”

“That’s fine with me.”

At the appointed time, Hermione, Susan and Harry went into Dolores’ office. Susan took a look around, noticing all the animated cats painted on plates that she had hung upon the walls.

“Oh, they’re just darling!” she cooed, running over to a line of them. “Look, there’s a Scottish Fold, and a Maine Coon, and a Russian Blue. How in the heck do I know that? And they move, too! Hello little ones! Hello!” She waved a finger at them, and they responded by putting a paw up. “And they’re interactive! That’s amazing!”

“Hem-hem.”

“Oh, good evening Professor! I’m sorry, I just love cats and these are just so precious. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Yes, well...” Dolores seemed a bit put out, this was obviously not what she had been expecting. “Please sit down, all of you.” In front of her desk were three small table and chair sets, upon which sat a piece of parchment. The three sat down. “You’re all going to be doing some lines for me tonight.”

*Lines? The heck?*

The three looked quizzically at each other and shrugged, hands darting into bags (or *Pocket Dimensions*) to get out pens.

“Not with those,” she said, smugly. “You’re going to be using a very special quill of mine. Here you are.”

She handed three quills over, one to each of them.

“Seriously?” asked Susan. “Do you know how inefficient these things are, compared to a modern ball point, Professor?”

“I despair of you ever getting the message, Susan, but perhaps with this quill we can make an effort. You are to write ‘*I must not spread lies*’ until I tell you to stop. Get started then.”

“Excuse me, professor, but we don’t have ink,” said Hermione.

“Oh, you won’t need any,” Dolores said.

Susan’s eyes narrowed and she held the quill, feather pointing away from her, in two fingers. She got a 15 on *Magic Sense and Theory*, thanking her past self for practicing that skill. It wasn’t a numeric thing, but after so many years around places that were literally *steeped* in magic, she figured she better start figuring out how to filter out anything she didn’t want to sense. She was rewarded with senses that were not any better, but that were more focused, so that her head didn’t come off when she used the skill around the castle.

“I can see why,” she said, gazing at the feather in revulsion. “There is a very interesting spell on this quill, isn’t there?”

“You can see that?” asked Dolores hesitantly.

“I “see” something, but how do I classify it? *Jupiter*, yes! It’s a punishment spell, isn’t it? Or better termed a *Curse*. These quills have been powerfully cursed!” She dropped the feather to the table and pushed her chair away from it. “You’re giving us a cursed object to serve detention with?”

“I wouldn’t bother with all the theatrics, just start writing.”

“Okay, but I’m telling you, it’s not going to work. I have *Immunity* after all,” said Susan, touching her bracelet.

The other two watched as she picked up the quill again and started scratching on the paper. She gave a loud “HUH! Isn’t that interesting?” as she tried to write with it. She dragged the feather across the paper, and then shook it as though trying to start ink flowing. She put the point to her tongue, and then tried again. “Professor, it doesn’t seem to be working!”

“Yes, I can see that. Give it here.”

Susan handed it over with a shrug and Dolores got out her wand. She touched the tip to the feather, and Susan suppressed a smile. Then she wordlessly cast *Combust* on all three quills in the room. She took the one extra segment, and put in 5 total energy. This gave her a total result of 12 for the difficulty 7 spell, and Harry and Hermione yelped and threw the quills away from themselves as they burst into flames. The one on the desk also burst into flames, causing Dolores to jump back. She threw water at the fire from her wand, and watched in disgust as the two other quills burned to nothing.

“You did that somehow,” she accused Susan.

“Me?” Susan said innocently, rolling an 11 on her *Deception* check. “You saw me sitting here the whole time. Did I cast any magic that you saw?”

“I know full well you don’t cast magic like we do. The ministry has taken a very active interest in what you can do, I’ll have you know.”

“But what reason do you have to suspect me, and not some failure of your own magic? I mean, you can’t just accuse people without proof, yes?”

“I’m pretty sure I saw magical energies around the feather before it burst into flames.”

“I didn’t, and I would know. Are you sure you saw that, or do you just want to believe you saw it because you want to discredit me? There is some precedent for that, according to you in class this afternoon, professor.”

“Don’t think this is going to get you out of your punishment.”

“Can’t you make more of those quills? Not that they’ll do any better than these three, I hasten to add. You can’t blame me if our magics interacted in such a way. I’ve always been cautious about that sort of thing.”

“She really has,” said Harry.

“She’s mentioned it many times,” added Hermione.

“Very well, as I have no *proof*. Get out your regular quills and start writing that way.”  
*Yes, I think I beat her INSight check with my Deception roll. Super. That quill thing really scared me, Curse is a grade ten spell!*

Some time later, the three left her office and found Ron in the hallway, doing Kung Fu moves.

“Finally!” he said. “I was waiting for hours!”

“You didn’t have to,” said Harry gratefully.

“Course I did. And I can practice here just as easily as anywhere else. What was she making you do, anyway?”

“She gave us a quill with a curse on it,” said Hermione. “But Susan set fire to it with her magic, so we just did the lines normally. Do you know what that quill would have done?”

Susan shook her head. “No I don’t, and I don’t want to. *Curse* magic isn’t something you fool around with. I’m just glad she accepted it wasn’t me. Never thought I would beat someone in *Deception*.”

“And we still have a mountain of homework to do just from today!” cried Harry.

“I guess, as it’s a special circumstance,” said Susan, “that I could cast *Tireless* on us all, except for Hermione, that is, and we can do homework instead of sleeping.”

“I’d rather be sleeping,” said Ron, “but yeah, if we got this much homework on the first day, we’ll probably get as much on the second, so we better do it.”

“Let’s go then,” said Hermione.

She did not try the cursed quill on them again, but Susan made sure *Magic Immunity* was up on all three of them before they set foot in her office for the rest of the week, just in case.

With some help from *Tireless* magic and not having to worry about Quidditch, all four had their homework done by Saturday afternoon. Ron said he wanted extra tutoring in Arithmancy and spell casting, which made Hermione's eyebrows shoot up, but she agreed to help him. They went off to a quiet corner, Hermione looking a bit dazed.

"He's really taking it seriously then?" said Harry.

"That, or he just wants to impress Hermione," said Susan.

"You think?"

"Could be both, I guess. I calculated it out, if he gets a half an XP per day for the next nine months of school he could probably raise his Magic, Kung Fu and Arithmancy skills to a 10. If he does nothing else, and just happens to be a *Paragon of Skill* at martial arts. And he was me and it worked that way for him. How your actual 'ratings' work I have no idea."

"Don't you call yourself a Paragon?"

"That's what it says on the top of my *character sheet*. See?" She held it out. "I'm not actually sure why. That is to say I do, my father was also one, so naturally I became one too. But why my *sheet* puts that at the top, who can say. I mean there's people who are *Paragons of Skill*, at least, I consider them to be. You must know really good musicians or big brains like Einstein that only come along once in a great while? They're *Paragons of Skill*. Basically they get to advance a single skill without human limit, and at half the cost it would usually take."

"I'd like that for magic!"

"Yeah, that would be nice. For you, anyway, I would only get a single planet. The point is, *Martial Arts* usually costs double points, but with *Paragon of Skill* you're back to it costing normal. My mother has said he's learning fast, that's why I suspect he is one. That, or his interest in training is making him put extra XP in for accelerated learning. Not knowing which is driving me crazy you people are so messed up!" She balled her fists up in frustration.

"Yeah, I can see why you would think that. You think even though he doesn't know he has those backgrounds like you do, he might on an unconscious level, and finally be able to put them into use?"

"Right, that's it exactly."

"I hope you're right. It would be a shame if he put all that time and effort in only to learn he can't fuse the two."

"Eh, Kung Fu is useful enough on its own, as is Arithmancy, really. You can make a living doing either one. Training others in Kung Fu, or being an... Arithmetician? Is that a word?"

"I have no idea what you call a person that works in that field."

"Well, one of them, anyway. And getting his magic up to a ten certainly won't hurt, as he is supposed to be a wizard."

"But isn't that the Headmaster's level? I mean everyone calls him the greatest wizard, right?"

"So maybe he's a *Paragon of Skill* with magic, and he's got a 20. I would more say Professor Lupin or Quirrell had a ten in magic. That's the level he should shoot for."

"But that takes years!"

“Not for someone properly dedicated. Though again, it might work differently for you.”

“In any case, do you have any plans for this afternoon?”

“Just some *Imbuing*, as usual. Why?”

“Wondered if you could bust out your soldiers. Maybe Ginny, Cho and Luna could get some spell combat practice in. Maybe even Neville, if he’s feeling up to it.”

“I was going to say, that’s an awful lot of girls if you’re the only guy. Still, an excellent idea! Let’s go find them and have a bit of fun! You know, as far as that goes, it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to pick up a weapon skill of some sort, or learn some Kung Fu from Ron. You know how vulnerable your magic is. In case you don’t have your wand handy, I would feel better knowing you had a second combat skill to draw on, like Ron does.”

“Yeah, maybe sword and that elemental sword of knockout you said you could make me earlier.”

“That would work.”

“I’ll think about it. Hard to train if we have no one to teach us, though. We can’t just put points in like you can.”

*Like I’m doing with that thing I got from Mundungus. Yeah, that’s kind of sad for them.*

The newer members of Team Susan were delighted to have some “live” targets to practice on. Cho was a bit more interested when she heard Harry was going to be there too. They spent the afternoon in an unused classroom that was big enough, and a few others drifted by and expressed interest in the exercise as well. With 25 soldiers at her command, she had enough for everyone, but she had to caution them not to use anything water based or that actually caused damage.

“Because they’ll explode, killing you,” she said, when asked why. “And I would rather not have to clean up the mess. Let’s keep this classroom the way it is right now. Un-exploded.”

They laughed.

They weren’t laughing an hour later when Professor Umbrage stuck her fat head in the door and gave a shriek of outrage. All heads turned towards her. The soldiers stopped moving, as they had been commanded only to dodge. With nothing to dodge, they had no orders.

“What is going on in here?” she shrieked.

“Just getting a bit of exercise,” Susan replied. “Around me, please,” she said her her *Legion*, pointing in a circle as she walked over. They made a semi-circle around her, cutting off view of the other students, and making a wall of flame around Susan. Dolores’ eyes darted nervously among them all.

“There’s certainly no school rule about exercise and having a bit of fun on the weekends, is there?” she asked.

“Fun? Exercise? Those are soldiers! You’re doing combat training of some kind!”

Susan scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous, professor. Why would a group of kids want to do combat training? No, no, no. We’re just having a little contest, that’s all. We just wanted to see who could score the most times with a spell. My soldiers here,” she gestured behind her, “don’t mind leaping about, or getting hit with spells, so I brought them out.”

“They’re made of fire! They are wearing armor! They have swords!”

“I admit, their intimidation value is rather high. Oh, don’t worry, it’s perfectly *safe*. I’ve ordered them not to attack, only to dodge. We’re in no danger, I assure you. They are under my *complete* control.”

“That’s not the point!”

“It isn’t? I guess I misunderstood your haste. I would have thought the safety of the students was foremost on your mind, that’s why you ran up here. If not that, then what? Does someone need this classroom? We can easily move, or go outside if you’re worried about us breaking something in here.”

“You’re totally missing the point!”

“I’m sorry. I guess you’ll need to be a little clearer, I’m not sure what it is you’re driving at, Professor.”

“The minister will hear about this!” She turned on her heel and walked away.

“About what?” called Susan after her. “You haven’t told us what we’re doing wrong yet! And she’s gone. Back to your places, everyone.”

“Will it be okay?” asked Ginny.

“We aren’t breaking any school rules, you know. And I told her what was going on, all this ‘combat training’ nonsense will never fly.”

“But isn’t that what we’re doing?” asked Luna.

“Of course it is, but as long as we can claim it’s not that, then it isn’t that, you get it?”

“I’m not sure it works that way…” said Neville.

“Well you better not play chess again, ever. Because that’s all about battlefield strategy, and could also be considered ‘combat training’ now couldn’t it?”

“You do have a way with words.”

“Thank you. Back to the game, everyone, unless you want to stop now?”

Most stayed.

Later that night, they filled Ron and Hermione in about what happened.

“And she thought you were doing combat exercises?” asked Hermione.

“Yup. I have to wonder who gave us away, the classrooms aren’t exactly frequented on weekends,” replied Susan.

“And she was that upset?” asked Ron.

“Yeah, but she couldn’t do anything about it. We weren’t breaking any school rules, she should couldn’t take points from us. And it wasn’t her class, so she couldn’t put us in detention. She just sputtered about the minister hearing about it.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

“Not so much. If they get scared of me and start beefing up security and such, they’ll be in place when the real threat comes along. Though they were supposed to be doing that before, and I didn’t see anything on the way to Harry’s trial. I just walked right in.”

“But aren’t you worried they might come to arrest you or something?” asked Hermione.

“For what? I’m just a kid. They would have a hard time justifying my arrest without evidence of some huge crime I’ve committed. And as I haven’t done any huge crimes, they have no leg to stand on. Nope, let poor old Mr. Fudge worry himself about my magic. After all, it’ll be my magic, in the end, that comes for him. It just won’t be wielded by me.”

“I think you should be more worried,” said Hermione. “You know they don’t go much for evidence in the wizard court. Look at Sirius, or Harry. If they say you’ve done something, they just cart you off.”

“The thing is, Hermione, their magic can’t hold me. Unless they kill me outright, from behind so I don’t get even a *reactive action*, or keep me unconscious and somehow neutralize

Sparkle, I'm not staying imprisoned anywhere for long. As far as I know, they don't know any magic that suppress magic in an area, after all."

"That's all the more reason to be worried! If they learn all that, and you pop in and out of places enough with *teleportal* that I'm sure they know about it, they'll just come up with something really nasty to use against you."

"If that happens because one person is afraid his job is in jeopardy, by a fifteen year old girl, the magical world is further gone than I thought. And if that does happen, you all will have more to worry about than me being gone, because it'll mean magical law, such as it is, has totally broken down. If the government can just make someone they don't like disappear, well, you better make sure you never say a word against them or you'll be next."

"So are you still going to help people train?" asked Ron.

"But of course. We might need to find a better location though, or *Teleportal* everyone to the secret base. I think there's at least one big room that can handle us down there. And don't worry, you'll still get taken to your lessons."

"Thanks."

The next day the group received several shocks. The first, a sign had been posted outside the main corridor about "Educational Decree Twenty-Four" which read:

By Order of  
The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

No student may participate in any activity that resembles combat training, including the use of non-living, animated magical constructs, spell accuracy exercises, or physical prowess.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four.

"Wow," remarked Susan.

"Yeah," said Harry. "This is aimed straight at you, Susan. It's like she's putting a big arrow, pointing at you, with a 'danger' sign at the end."

"It's kind of flattering. What is most *amusing*, however, is her thinking this... sign... is going to stop me."

"It would be too much to hope for," said Hermione. "My question is, what's a 'High Inquisitor?' I didn't know we had a low one."

"I'll give you three guesses," said Harry darkly.

"That bit about physical prowess, that's you, Ron. You're the only martial artist around these parts. Did she catch you practicing sometime?"

Ron shook his head. "I was doing some moves outside her office. Think she has some kind of magic up to see what goes on in the hallway outside?"

"I wouldn't put it past her," said Harry. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"Hey, you think the Quidditch teams jogging around the lake in the morning counts as 'activities of physical prowess?'"

When they sat down, they learned their fears were correct, as Dolores Umbridge had been appointed “High Inquisitor” and given powers to inspect teachers.

“But not do anything about it, I notice,” said Susan, reading the article over. “Expect more of these so called *decrees* to give her more and more power.”

“To what end, though?” asked Hermione. “This seems a little much just to keep an eye on you and the Headmaster. If anything she would want to be less obvious about it, give you enough rope to hang yourself, sort of thing.”

“No one said she was good at her job,” said Ron, wolfing down some bacon.

“It’s actually one stroke against each of us,” said Susan. “Me, because she caught me with my *Legion* out, and the Headmaster, to get rid of teachers that side more with him than the ministry. After all, the support of all the teachers at Hogwarts is not something to scoff at, if someone is looking to take over.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Hermione. “So what’s our next step?”

“This obviously means war. We aren’t going to stop, we’re going to expand. All of you, put out feelers to see who would be interested in actual combat training. We’ll see what the general feeling is, then meet someplace, maybe in the village, to discuss it with them.”

“But what about decree twenty four?” asked Harry.

“Oh, we still won’t be breaking that. Obviously these decrees only can be enforced on school property. We won’t be on school property, so there’s really nothing she can do about it.”

“How are we going to manage that?”

Susan’s eyes sparkled. “You’ll see.”

The next Defense class started much like the first. Professor Umbridge came in and told them to start on page 19, chapter 2.

*Wait, it would have taken me about ten minutes to actually read 14 pages, no matter how small the type in the book is. What did they do for the rest of the class time?*

“There will be no need to talk. Or laugh, Susan.”

Susan just looked at her. She didn’t bother opening the book, and neither, it seemed, did Hermione.

*I wonder how sophisticated an illusion I could make? Could I “watch” a movie by presenting what I remember into an illusion in front of me? Maybe I could even “play” tetris or something. Of course there would really be no randomness because I would be controlling the pieces that were being created. Could I cast the Illusion spell somewhere else, then cover the magical symbols that appear with the illusion they are not there? Really wish I could get my book out, I’d put some more spells down on individual sheets so I can refer to them-*

“Susan, did you not hear me say what the class was going to do today?”

Everyone looked up, and over at her.

“Why, no, professor. I heard you just fine.”

“Then take out your book and read, please.”

“And that’s you making a *Teaching* check, is it? Why not just assign us the reading as homework, and you don’t have to be bothered coming?”

“Did you enjoy your detention so much you would like another?”

“Do you enjoy lording your power over people so much you would assign one to a person sitting quietly and not disrupting your class?”

“That is not the point.”

“Then what is? I see Hermione has also not taken her book out to read. Is she going to be given a detention as well?”

“I will deal with her in a moment. You are telling me that you will not do the reading?”

“Perhaps I have already done the reading. Perhaps I’ve read the whole book.”

“And have you, then, read the whole book?”

“I’ve skimmed it. Large swaths don’t apply to me, because they deal with magic I am easily immune to.”

“You think they don’t apply to you?”

“I know they do not. You saw it yourself when your quills caught fire. My magic and your magic clash, my magic wins.”

“Ah, so you admit you did something to my quills then!”

“No, I admit no such thing. I merely point out that I am magical in a different way than you are, so learning about your type of magic is a waste of my time.”

“You may believe that, but you must still pass your exams at the end of the year.”

“What do you care that I pass my exams? I’m seriously asking- do you care that I, or anyone in this room, passes their exams? Because it doesn’t seem like it.”

“Of course I do, what a thing to say.”

“And yet you seem oddly reluctant to actually teach us. Reading out of a book is fine for history class, though I wouldn’t even call that teaching. To teach history one must understand the minds of the people making the historical decisions, not just that ‘such and such happened on such and such date.’ To teach otherwise is just teaching a collection of facts, not history. The same applies here. We must learn how dark wizards think, what drives them, and how to respond. We can’t get that out of books.”

“The ministry believes the course as I have set out to teach it will be sufficient.”

“And I will be most interested to know the results of that belief when exam time comes. But telling the difference between jinxes and hexes and whatnot is pointless for me, because they’ll bounce off just the same. I have no desire to disrupt your class, I hope you believe that. But let me sit here quietly if I wish, and let me worry about the exam at the end of the year.”

“I’m afraid that will simply be unacceptable.”

“You can give me all the detentions you want, it still won’t force me to read a book... Oh, of course!”

“What?”

“You’re afraid that if one person stops doing the reading, more people will stop. If enough people stop, they won’t know the material. If they don’t know the material, they’ll fail the exam. If they fail the exam, it reflects either poorly on you, which you don’t want, or on the ministry program you’re following. By showing the program was a failure, it’ll look bad for the ministry, which is reeling from all those scandals in recent years. This isn’t about me, it’s about *self preservation*.”

Susan looked around, and many heads were nodding. There was muttering that she was right, and realizations were dawning on faces.

Dolores looked like she was trying to come up with a suitable response.

A hand went up in the middle of the classroom. Susan saw it was one of the people who worked on the paper with her last term.

“Yes?” Dolores asked, turning away from Susan. Susan smirked.

“How *does* the ministry explain imprisoning Sirius Black for all those years when he was totally innocent? When will the guilty party be brought to justice?”

“That is not under discussion right now!”

Ron’s hand went up.

“What?”

“My father works for the ministry, you might know him. He said Harry Potter was put on trial for fighting off ten Dementors in his home town in broad daylight. Has the ministry determined what those Dementors were doing there yet?”

Dolores seemed to grow a little more pale.

“We are not discussing what the ministry does, you are to read... your... chapter!”

There was a buzz as the people nearby Harry and Susan (who were by this time known to be neighbors) asked them if it was true, and what happened. Susan started telling them.

“Silence!” Dolores roared. “Turn to page 19 and begin reading chapter 2.”

*So, will you be good little sheep or stand up to her?*

They were good little sheep, and bent back over their books. Susan sighed and shook her head.

“You,” she pointed to Susan. “Just... just sit there quietly.”

Susan spread her hands. *That’s what I was trying to do, jerkface.*

*Now, what was I thinking about? Something about illusions?*

Dolores stalked over to Hermione. “And why aren’t you doing the reading?” she demanded.

“I’ve already read the whole book. Quite honestly I wasn’t impressed.”

Her eyes threatened to bulge out. “Not! Impressed?!”

“No, I would have to question several of the central tenets the author posits, and I will be writing him in hopes we can one day sit down face to face to discuss certain points.”

“You will, will you?”

*Hey, a palindrome! Wait, not exactly, what would you call that?*

“Is that against some school policy, writing to people?”

“No, that, once again, misses the whole point.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to!” she said in a huff, and stomped back her desk, where she plopped down in her chair and glared at everyone.

Hermione and Susan just shrugged at each other, and went back to having an hour of their lives wasted. A greater crime, by far, than many others that could have been perpetrated against them. After all, if their quills and books had been stolen they could easily be replaced. But time... once stolen it’s gone forever. (Except maybe in Susan’s case, who will probably make herself immortal by the time she’s 30.)

But it’s the principle of the thing, in either case.

## Gathering Forces

Time: Two weeks later

Place: Just outside the village

“And why won’t you tell me how many people you expect to be there?” asked Susan. The available members of Team Susan were heading into the village, and each person claimed they had done their share of recruiting.

“Because they might not show up, so we don’t want to get your hopes up,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, a lot of people said they *might* come, but that’s a far cry from actually showing up,” said Ginny.

“And you still haven’t told us how you’re getting around the rule about not having combat practice in the school,” said Neville.

“Let me have my dramatic moment. Sitting around that so called Defense class twiddling my thumbs for the last two weeks has made me want to take up *Meditation*. Which I would be fantastic at, given my RESolve of ten, by the way.”

“You’re probably good at everything you do,” said Luna. “Because you put your mind to it.”

“More because I put points into it, but I guess it’s the same thing. Not even a rough estimate?”

“More than five?” hedged Cho, “but probably less than two hundred?”

“See, hard numbers. Was that so difficult?”

“I’m not sure that’s really all that helpful,” said Hermione.

“Ah well. I suppose it doesn’t matter, when it comes down to it. Five or five hundred, I can accommodate them.”

“Are you sure we should be going to the Hog’s Head?” asked Luna, as they passed The Three Broomsticks.

“It’s more out of the way,” replied Hermione. “We can better control who’s there watching us.”

“I don’t see why I had to come,” complained Sparkle.

“*Silence*, of course. You’re another layer of protection for us. Anyway, you haven’t been in many adventures recently, your XP total hasn’t gone up much lately, has it?”

“No, I guess it hasn’t. Okay, you convinced me.”

Fred and George waved to them as they passed the joke shop, and one of them stuck his head out the door and shouted “We’ll be down in just a moment!”

Susan waved to them, and continued on.

Entering the “pub,” Susan looked around in disgust.

“Honestly, do these people not know they have magic? How can anything get dirty when a simple wave of the wand and a word or two will set things right?”

“I think it’s more about atmosphere than anything else,” said Hermione, unsure of herself.

“The place has that aplenty,” said Luna, slowly revolving in place and looking the walls up and down. There were only a few other patrons in the place, none of whom seemed to pay the group any mind. Susan stepped up to the counter.

“Yeah?” said the barman, an older man with long, gray hair and a beard. He was powerfully built, and a stub of a cigar was held in his teeth.

“Eight butterbeer, please,” she said.

“One Galleon,” said the guy.

Susan shook her head, managing to not slam the bartender’s head against the bar for so casually ripping everyone off. *Nearly two thousand dollars worth of gold for a couple of sodas. I will never understand the wizard world as long as I live.*

She handed him one, and took the bottles the man handed over. She had to blow the dust off, and asked Sparkle for a quick *Hygiene* in case there was any tetanus growing on them.

They sat in silence a moment, and Susan began to wonder if *anyone* else was coming. The door opened, dinging the bell that was over it, and the bartender looked up from pretending to clean a glass. (The default action for any NPC bartender in any world, except for maybe those dancing ones in *Secret of Mana*)

People starting pouring into the place.

They didn’t stop until the cigar dropped out of the man’s mouth, falling forgotten to the floor.

Susan started to silently laugh, finally building up to full blown guffaw.

“Stop moving around, I’m trying to count!” shouted Fred. Others were already pulling tables and chairs over by Susan to make one big table.

“Hi, can I get 58 butterbeers please?” Fred asked the barman. Still a bit shocked the man grumbled “Wait a second,” and disappeared into a back room. He came back out carrying a case, and sliced it open with a knife he pulled out from under the bar. He started handing out bottles.

“Cough up, everyone! I’m not that rich, yet,” joked Fred. Money showered him, and he passed it over.

Finally, everyone settled down when Susan stood up. She was smiling broadly. She also got an 8 on her *Speaking* check, which wasn’t great, but wasn’t bad either. “Thanks for coming everyone, *this is fantastic!* I am really glad to see you all here today! No, check that, I am ecstatic!”

“So what’s this all about?” asked one boy. “Neville just said something about having a proper class? But you’re running the show?”

“You have a problem with that?”

“Nah, I’ve seen you fight a couple of times. It’s just I’m pretty sure I remember you saying you couldn’t train us, years ago.”

There was a general agreement.

“Before I say anything, Sparkle, if you would?”

“Sure. *Silence*,” she cast, defining an area around the group. A magical circle appeared under the tables, rotated slightly, and vanished.

Many people gasped. “Did that cat just cast a spell?”

Susan held up her hands. “Please do not be bamboozled by the talking cat. This is a magical village, and I have seen three more fantastic things just on the way here.”

“Yeah? Name them.” said a witch.

“Okay, you’ve got me there. She is pretty amazing, and I’ll explain everything about her, and myself, that I can- later. To answer your question, you’re right. I won’t be teaching you.

Unless Hermione has made any progress deciphering that spell I gave her?" She looked over at Hermione.

Who shook her head. "Sorry. I have no idea how those magical equations translate into a wand motion."

"Pity. Anyway, what I am going to give you is a place to practice. In this place you will find the original barrier field created by Professor Quirrell, so we can practice in complete safety. Also away from any prying eyes, such as might be attached to our oh so cuddly Defense teacher. After last term the Headmaster asked me to look after it, and now I see why the crusty old goat did so. He guessed we would be here today! Once you enter the place I have in mind you will be taught by my good friends, Hermione, Harry and Ron. Each has something unique to teach you, be it their experience of events these past years at school or fighting styles you may not be aware of. But more important than that, you will be teaching yourself. Learning your own limits and strengths. Because that, my friends, is just as important a lesson as any you could learn from any of us."

"Why should we bother?" asked a boy. "The papers say it's impossible for you know who to be back. He's dead. Gone. You even got in trouble with Professor Umbridge for saying it."

"Go ahead and believe that, if it makes you feel better. But do you think evil itself died with him? Voldemort was once a boy, much like you, named Tom Riddle. He had dreams, and hopes, and desires. He ate at the very tables you eat at, in the great hall. He took the same classes you take. So tell me, what's to stop the dark lord of our generation if we just sit on our wands in Defense class and do nothing? You don't have to believe me, but look out there, at the world. Would you feel better not knowing how to defend yourself, should you need to?"

"Well, I just want to know one way or the other. I don't know who to believe."

"I will be happy to tell you the story. In fact I've already written it, and you can take a copy with you. I was going to publish it, but Headmaster Dumbledore cautioned me to wait. Harry and I both saw him return. More terrible than he ever was, and again, I will explain why-later. Right now I just want to know how many of you are with me, and willing to put the time in."

"Did you really fight off *ten* Dementors?" asked a girl.

*A few more than that, but that's need to know only.*

Harry and Susan nodded. "I produced my Patronus and used the knives Susan had made, the only thing we've found that destroys them."

"*Made?* What are you, part Goblin?" asked a boy, looking at Susan.

She chuckled. "No. My magic allows me to create weapons and such, but I have no idea how close my technique is to that of the goblin's. Because I have never seen their technique. But it works, and that's all that matters."

"What else have you made?"

"Oh, I make stuff for Harry, Hermione and Ron every Christmas. Trinkets and such, you understand. I've made their wands return to them if lost, and be harder to break. Ron can make food out of nothing-"

"That's impossible!" one boy protested.

"Better show them, Ron."

"Sure thing." He got out his *Conjure Foodstuffs* item and activated it, creating a heap of simple bread, fruits and cheese.

"Okay, it's not impossible," said the boy. "And you call that a *trinket*?"

George reached over for an apple and bit into it. "Cheers."

“As I was saying, I made Professor Hagrid’s dragon. It’s a magical construct, not a real creature.”

“I wondered why he was allowed to keep it,” muttered one boy.

“Hermione’s robes are like armor and will never decay-”

“What about that sword in the Headmaster’s office?” asked another girl.

“Yup, a bunch of you saw me make that, right? I put some magic on that to make it sharper and unbreakable, as well.”

“You’ve made all that stuff in just a couple of years? Do you know how much Goblins charge for even one sword?”

“Ever wonder why I never took Potions class? That’s the reason, I was making that stuff instead.”

There was a general amazement.

“But remember, I’m not the one teaching you. You should be asking Harry and the others about the quality of their coin, because that’s where you’re going to be.”

“But they’ve been with you through most of the battles you’ve been in,” said a boy.

“Yeah, they all helped with those dwarves.”

“And I caught Ron practicing something,” said a girl, blushing. “I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but he was jumping around and pretending to fight a bunch of people, I think. It was pretty impressive, whatever it was.”

“Thanks,” said Ron.

“And everyone knows Hermione is top of the class,” said a boy. “She’s always getting points for Ravenclaw. We know what they can do, it’s the same stuff we can do. They just seem to be better at it, because they hang around you and get attacked all the time.”

“Sign us up,” said a boy. “If it means getting the full story, and maybe giving you some gold to have an item or two made, the extra work will be worth it.”

There was a lot of nodding of heads.

“Yeah, down with Umbridge!” said another boy.

“I can’t stand her classes. Just sitting there reading,” said a girl. “Please!”

“Very well,” said Susan. “Anyone not committed to this, please leave now.”

She waited. Everyone looked around to see if anyone else would leave, but no one did.

“Excellent,” Susan said, obviously pleased. “You’ve made me proud, all of you! Now for the insurance. *Pocket Dimension*.”

Susan pulled out a rolled up parchment out of nowhere, and several people whistled. She began to fix the magical formula and symbols in her mind, casting the spell from writings, and a magical circle appeared on the table. Seconds later, a paper and quill popped into existence, and Susan rolled hers up again. She picked up the quill.

“This,” she said, maintaining the *Contract* spell, “is a *Contract* spell. I am going to write out a few terms, and you will all sign your name to the bottom. Not that I don’t trust you, or anything, but I would rather not have one of you go running to Ms Umbridge when you leave here. This,” she tapped the paper, “will make sure of that. You will be able to read what I wrote, and you can still leave at any time. Now then...”

Susan began to write, and the others crowded around.

*S.T.F.U.*

*Susan’s Training Force Underground*

*We, the undersigned, agree that all activities pertaining to the group S.T.F.U are to be discussed\* only among ourselves. Forbidden subjects are:*

*1) Combat exercises conducted within Susan's Personal Dimension. Times, dates, frequency of meetings, or any variation thereof relating to this topic*

*2) Meetings or other strategy sessions pertaining to Voldemort or other dark wizards and witches such as Death Eaters or other lawbreakers. This includes evil or dark creatures such as Dementors*

*3) Susan's Fabrication or Imbuing items or weapons that are given to members*

*4) Information about how Natural Magician magic functions*

*\*Where discussed means in writing, sign language, any means of verbal communication, speaking in dreams, semaphore, Morse code, or any other means of communicating ideas to another.*

Susan signed her name and passed the quill to Hermione.

"This is magical in some way?" someone asked as she bent to sign. "Where did the ink come from you used to write that?"

"Ah, yes, allow me to go into detail. Remember last year, when I was quite upset about my inclusion into the Triwizard Tournament?"

"We remember the shouting," said one boy.

"Well, when asked why, exactly, a new name couldn't be chosen I was told I was under a magical binding that would force me to compete, even if I did not wish to do so. I did not test this theory, but this paper is the embodiment of that same spell. When you sign you are magically bound to the terms of the contract. For example, you will not be able to speak to someone who is not also here, right now, under any circumstance, about what we do for S.T.F.U. If I give you a ring with a spell that makes you faster you will not be able to mention it to anyone. If someone asks you, "How does Susan's magic work" the contract will force you to say "I don't know" or remain silent. Like I said, I'm protecting myself and all the rest of you with this. You can still walk away."

"I just wanted to know what I was signing, that's all."

"Honestly, S.T.F.U?" asked another girl.

"We needed some name," Susan said with a shrug.

"How do we get out of it?" asked Luna. "Once we are all heroes and want to give interviews for the paper."

"We all sign another *Contract* that says 'I, the undersigned, release all parties from the S.T.F.U. contract.' \*Poof\* it's gone, and you can talk about it freely."

"Sounds reasonable."

Everyone signed. With the last signature the quill vanished, and Susan felt the magical drain on her systems go away.

"Great," she said, grabbing the contract up and shoving it into her *Pocket Dimension*. "Let me show you where we'll all be training."

Everyone went outside and followed Susan down the road a ways. When she felt the group had gone far enough, and no one was around, she stopped.

“This might take a moment, prepare yourselves!”

She got out another packet of paper from her *Pocket Dimension* and started reading. Magical symbols appeared before her, and when the spell was nearly done she shoved the papers under her arm and thrust her hands out, palms facing away from each other. She made a dramatic pulling apart motion, and before the assembled group a tear opened before them, leading them to a field of flowers. Off in the distance, mountains could be seen, and in a slight valley to the west, a lake. She stepped through and motioned everyone to follow. They looked around in wonder.

“Welcome to my *Personal Dimension*,” she said with a smile. “Sparkle, if you please?”

“Of course,” said Sparkle, and went out to cast the *Illusion* that the tear wasn’t there.

“You own a dimension?” a boy said.

“It’s an extension of where you see me pulling stuff from all the time. That spell opens a small hole, big enough and short lived enough to take a single object through. This, on the other hand,” she spread her hands wide. “Gets created from my own imagination, and the door can accommodate anything that will fit through.”

“What’s that?” asked a girl, pointing to a cottage off in the distance.

“My lab, mainly. I figured I might need a private place to work, and there’s no place more private than this. Off to your right you’ll see the practice field, where the spell barrier has already been set up. I’ve been given the activation spell, but of course a wand-wielding wizard will have to do that. So, what do you think?”

“It’s your happy place,” remarked Luna, falling on her back and looking up at the sky.

“Well, yes, this particular scene was pulled from my mind when I created it. So I suppose you could say this is my ideal environment.”

“Are you sure you aren’t a god?” asked Neville, sliding up to her.

“What, just because I can do a piece of magic that opens a temporary hole to a temporary dimension? I die and this all goes poof you know.”

“I would suggest not dying.”

“Yeah, that would be ideal.”

“So when are we meeting?” asked one boy.

“Yeah, some of us still have Quidditch practice,” said Cho icily.

Harry shrugged. “Honestly, would you rather be flying around or in here, learning to fight?” he asked.

“With a group this size?” asked Susan. “Probably when more than 10 people want to. We don’t all have to be here at once, after all. The problem is that we won’t be able to have the entrance in the same place every time. I also don’t want to keep it open while we’re in here. Even with *Illusion* magic covering it, someone is bound to stumble into it. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that’s your problem. I provide the door, you guys figure out where to put it so it doesn’t get found. You guys can charm things to do whatever you want, I can’t. What we need is something like the entrance to the Hogwarts Express. Non-Magical people just walk right by, but we magic users know it’s there and slide through to the station. Figure something like that out. I can’t do everything for you!”

“So you can make objects with magic, but not something like a portkey?” asked a girl.

“Right. Your charms wear out when you do them. My magic doesn’t. But while you can charm objects all day long, it takes me weeks to do a single object. So it’s a trade off. I could make an object that could *Teleport* you, but with this number of people school would be over by the time I was finished.”

“I see. That is more like Goblin magic. Weird.”

“There are two secret passageways in the castle Filch doesn’t know about,” said Fred. “One of them is collapsed, could your magic clear it?”

Susan nodded. “Sure, there’s a *Passageway* spell I could do once. Still, it would be suspicious if a bunch of people were always going to a certain place at a certain time. Wait a second, portkey you said, right?”

“Uh, yeah? What about it?”

“I had a thought. When we went to the Quidditch cup, the portkey activated at a certain time. Could one of you make up some object like that? You could carry it, and every night at a certain time if you’re alone and want to come, hold it while it activates. It takes us to the secret passage, where I’ll be waiting with the door open.”

“That might set off some kind of alarms though,” said Hermione. “*Hogwarts: A History* doesn’t go into exactly what the protections are.”

Everyone thought for a moment.

“Just think about it, okay? We don’t need to decide now, and it might take some time to set up. I want to wrap this up, having that open doorway into this place makes me uneasy.”

“Anything else we need to discuss?” asked Harry, looking over the throng of people.

“What exactly can Hermione and Ron teach us?” asked a boy.

“Hermione is our spell expert,” said Susan. “If you can’t get a spell quite right, she can probably correct what you’re doing wrong. Also, she only has to see a spell a couple of times, or once, to learn it. So she knows a wide variety of magic and she’s extremely precise. That means she’s really good at doing spells, because precision is important. Ron is our fighting master. I want you all to start practicing some other form of defense apart from magic. He can teach you an unarmed fighting style, but if you prefer to learn something like a sword or throwing knives, we’ll work something out.”

“Why bother?” asked a girl.

“An excellent point. Can I see your wand a second?”

“Uh, okay?” She got out her wand and handed to Susan, who immediately chucked it into the grass away from the group.

“Hey, what did you-”

Susan slapped her, rolling *Unarmed* untrained, and putting 10 energy into *COORDINATION* to make sure she connected. The girl wasn’t expecting it, so didn’t dodge, and Susan connected. With her 3 *STRENGTH*, she didn’t do more than a point of non-lethal, but it still stung.

“OW! What are you doing?”

“What are you going to do about it?” asked Susan, putting her fists on her hips. “You’ve been disarmed, and now you’re totally helpless. If you knew an unarmed fighting style I would never have connected. Don’t rely on your tiny stick of wood for your defense, because you could be caught without it at any time. In fact that’s lesson one for all of you. Target the wand of the wizard you’re fighting, and the battle is over. Once they don’t hold that stick, there’s going to be nothing they can do.”

“Okay, okay,” she said, rubbing her cheek. “Point taken. Can I have my wand back now?”

Someone ran over and retrieved it.

“Thanks.”

“Anything else?” Susan shouted.

Everyone looked around, but no other issues were raised. “Okay. I’ll write up everything I can about what questions I think you’ll have, and leave it here. You can read it on your next visit. Get me the time that’s best for you over the next few days, and we can work out a schedule of some kind. Thanks for coming, everyone. First one out checks to make sure the coast is clear!”

Everyone filed out, and Luna got up from where she was laying.

“You could live in here,” she remarked. “If you can make food, and that water down there is drinkable.”

“I could. I would just lack one other very important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Friends.”

“Good thing you’ve got some that would offer to come with you then, isn’t it?”

Susan smiled. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Leaving the *Personal Dimension* and watching the door close, Susan rubbed her hands together. “This all went better than I expected. I’ve always wanted my own cult.”

“Excuse me, I don’t think we’re a cult,” said Hermione.

“No? Well, I can dream, can’t I? Anyway, I must have been making some kind of impression all these years. Sure, I wished the number was closer to two hundred, but I’ll settle for 60 or so. They won’t be fighting Death Eaters any time soon, those guys have decades of experience over us. But they won’t be easy meat for anything that does happen to attack them, either.”

“I’m pretty excited,” said Neville. “I want to see how far I can go, and make my parents proud of me. Maybe one day I’ll be in the Order, too.”

“They would be lucky to have you,” said Ginny.

“Thanks.”

“What are we going to do about making sure that many people aren’t discovered?” said Harry.

“We’ll take a page from the terrorist playbook. Hermione, that’s your homework. Look up how terrorist groups function and not get caught.”

“Okay,” she said. “I have an idea for letting people know where to meet too, but I’ll have to look up exactly how it works.”

“That’s great! I knew you would come through. No combat training indeed.”

“Is that *Contract* spell of yours a thing, or did you fake it and are relying on the psychological effects to make sure people don’t let knowledge of S.T.F.U. slip?” asked Luna.

“It’s a thing. You’re all magically bound, now, like it or not.”

“Okay. I just wanted to know how guarded I needed to be. But if I really can’t let our secrets out, it’s less of a concern.”

“Don’t worry then.”

“What I’m worried about is me teaching other people Kung Fu,” said Ron. “I’m still learning it myself!”

“Then it’ll be excellent practice for you,” said Susan. “We’ll break up the sessions, half magic, half other weapon. That means you being there every time, Ron, so maybe you’ll have to

borrow Hermione's *Tireless* item, or maybe I'll make you one. It's going to be a busy year, with O.W.L exams coming up and everything. I hope we can fit it all in. What I really need is a spell to get you a full night sleep in a shortened time. That would be less dangerous than not sleeping at all."

"S.T.F.U could also do study sessions outside the *Dimension*," said Hermione. "That's allowed, after all. We do it all the time anyway, the common rooms are always packed with people studying."

"Good point. We'll see how it all goes, we've got the whole year ahead of us. Time to iron out these little wrinkles. I tell you, I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too," said everyone else, and laughed.

## Admonishments

Time: The next day

Place: Outside the entrance to the great hall

“Oh, come on!” said Harry, after reading decree twenty five, which banned all “Student Organizations, Societies, Teams, Groups and Clubs” unless permission was granted by Her Pinkness.

“Of course,” said Susan, “There is a loophole big enough to drive a truck through.”

“What’s a truck?” asked Ron automatically.

Susan rolled her eyes. “The point being, all of those things are defined as “a regular meeting” so as long as the “Organization, Society, Team, Group or Club” meets only *irregularly* they would be fine.”

“Odd of Her Pink and Fluffy Self to be so inexact,” said Hermione.

“Like I keep saying, we don’t know she’s any good at her job,” said Ron.

“How did The Pink Menace find out about it anyway?” asked Harry. “There’s no way any of us told her.”

“Hard to hide that many kids in the Hog’s Head, especially when Susan gets up to talk to them all,” said Ron. “Even with a silence spell going, anyone would have seen something was up.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Susan. “Still, the first one didn’t stop us, neither will the second.”

“There is another loophole,” said Hermione shrewdly. “When we’re not at the school, we’re not students, we’re just kids. When we’re in the *Dimension*, we’re not at school. Plus, we aren’t a “Student Organization” at all, are we? We’re a *cult*.”

“Wait a second, you said we weren’t a cult just yesterday!”

“We are now. Cults aren’t banned!”

“I’ve got... my own cult... and I’m dancing!” singsonged Susan, doing a little swaying motion.

“Well, Neville was saying something about you being a god, right?” asked Ron.

“Yeah, I keep telling him I’m not though. Goddess, maybe. If I’m a god, what’s my dad? He’s way more powerful than I am, according to my mother.”

“Why is that, do you think?” asked Hermione. “Mixing with our DNA that isn’t totally compatible with his?”

“In my terms, I think he had access to different backgrounds than I did. He always said to my mother he was a very special case, and that’s why he was able to travel between worlds like he did.”

“But you said that was external, not his own power, right?” asked Harry.

“Right. I mean to say it was because of his unique backgrounds he was chosen to do it out of the available candidates. I just got access to the more ‘plain’ magical backgrounds. If that makes sense.”

“We’ll take your word for it,” said Ron.

All that day, Susan had to field questions about people concerned they might be expelled. Susan explained to them their new status as a “cult,” and meeting irregularly.

“I’m not sure about having you as the object of a cult,” one older boy said to her.

“Then don’t. It’s a cult of Susan’s Magic, or just magic in general. That’s vague enough, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“We had to go ask The One of the Pink for permission to reform our Quidditch team,” said Cho at lunch. “And I hear she’s making the Gryffindor team sweat, as she hasn’t given them permission yet.”

“That’s a funny thing to do,” said Harry.

“It’s possible she still believes you’re on the team, Harry.”

“In for a bit of a shock then, isn’t she?”

“Maybe more than one,” said Susan with a smirk.

It was in History class, with Ron’s *Scribe* item taking notes, that Hermione noticed an owl with a hurt wing looking sadly into the classroom. It was staring at Harry, and had a piece of parchment attached to its leg.

Susan created a *Teleportal* and reached through, making the owl jump a bit. But it dutifully climbed on her arm and she pulled it through. If Professor Binns noticed this action he gave no sign, continuing his monologue about giant wars. That’s wars between giants, not just really big wars.

“There’s something wrong with her wing,” Harry whispered.

“What?” Susan hissed, her 1 point *Poor Sense: Hearing* finally making an in character appearance.

“Her wing!”

Susan shook her head and shoved a pen at him.

*Her wing*, he wrote.

*Obviously*, she wrote back. *I could use Healing but it would heal at that funny angle. You better take it after class to be looked at.*

*Right.*

Harry took the parchment, and it looked up at the window again, then back at Harry.

“Just stay here for now,” he whispered to it, and the owl started preening its feathers back into shape.

After class, the group went to find Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“Why couldn’t you hear me?” asked Harry.

“You were whispering, and I have a one point *Poor Sense* weakness for hearing.”

“You’re hard of hearing?” asked Ron.

“WHAT?”

“I SAID-” Susan was smiling at him.

“Just slightly. It ties in with my *Deep Sleeper* really well. I’m a little hard of hearing so it’s hard to wake me up, get it? Normally it’s not an issue, I mean how often do you make hearing based *Perception* checks? But that time you were whispering so it went into play.”

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, what do you think happened to this owl?”

“I think it got attacked. What was the note?”

“Oh, right. Here.”

*Come visit me tonight. S.B.*

“I think Stubby Boardman wants to see you tonight,” remarked Ron.

“Who?” asked Harry. “You don’t think it’s Sirius?”

“Oh, it’s probably serious, otherwise Stubby wouldn’t have sent you the note.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re channeling Fred and George now?”

“I call them where I see them.”

They knocked on the door of that staff-room.

“Yes?” said Professor McGonagall, looking to see who it was. “Harry, why are you carrying an owl through the halls?”

“It’s hurt, I thought I should let Professor Grubbly-Plank know.”

“Couldn’t you have healed it, Susan?” she asked, as she opened the door and motioned them in.

“Sparkle could have done it, but she hates History of Magic class. She’s off sleeping somewhere. My *Healing* would have worked, but it’s being held funny, and I wanted to make sure it wasn’t broken. If it was it might heal wrong, which would be worse.”

“Good thinking,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “We’ll make some fine Care of Magical Creatures graduates out of you yet. I’ll take it from here, don’t you worry!”

“Thank you.”

“You do realize-” Minerva said, “that any communication between Hogwarts and the outside world can be intercepted?”

“Hey, if we needed to send a letter it would be via Susan Express, and appear directly. You should know that, you got her very first one,” protested Harry. “Tell what you told me to Stubby Boardman, he’s the one sending me letters at school!”

She mouthed “Stubby Boardman?” and then realized who he was talking about. “I shall be sure and mention it the next time I see him.”

The rest of the day passed in the normal fashion, one hour at a time, and finally after dinner Susan stepped Harry, Sparkle, Hermione and Ron through a *Teleportal* back to the Order’s base.

Someone heard them, came running, and tripped over something. Tonks slid out of the kitchen and skidded to a halt in front of them. She looked up.

“Oh, hi everyone!” she said brightly. “Everything okay?”

“We were about to ask you the same question,” said Susan, offering a hand.

“Thanks. I’m fine. What brings you back here?”

“Sirius wanted to see us,” said Harry, holding up the note.

“Oh, okay. He’s due back any minute now, come and sit down.”

Looking around, the house seemed slightly cleaner than before, it was obvious more work had been done since Susan and her friends went back to school, but not a lot.

“School going okay?” asked Tonks.

“Eh, you know how fifth year is,” said Hermione.

“Hah, don’t remind me!” said Tonks. “But Auror training is worse, believe me. Still, I sympathize. Piles of homework?”

“Loads,” said Ron. “I don’t know what we would have done without Susan’s magic, letting us stay up late without getting tired.”

“Still, we’re learning loads, and that’s important.”

“Good. Defense training going okay?”

“If you call sitting around doing nothing ‘okay’ it’s going a treat,” said Harry. “Because that the only instruction we’re getting.”

“If you wanted to pop back here for some lessons, there’s usually someone around. I’m sure anyone in the order would be glad to give you some pointers.”

“Really?” asked Susan. “You think so?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Hermione?” asked Susan knowingly.

“Yes,” she said, “I know what you’re thinking. I can pick up some new stuff for... for... Hey, it really works!”

“What does?”

Susan smiled. “Oh, just a... I can’t tell you,” she finished lamely. “Huh. How about that?”

“They’ve formed a secret society to practice their battle spells in Susan’s *Personal Dimension*,” said Sparkle.

Every head turned to look at her.

“You never- Aarg, I can’t even say that!” Susan howled in frustration.

“Sadly, Susan’s *Contract* is now working against her, because she can’t tell one of her allies about the plan either. I guess she forgot cats can’t hold a pen. So I never signed, and am free to talk about it.”

“And a good thing, too, otherwise this would have been a really awkward conversation.”

“Outsmarted yourself, huh?” Tonks grinned.

“Apparently,” said Susan, ashamed.

There was a \*pop\* and Sirius shouted “Anyone home?”

“We’re in here Sirius!” shouted Tonks. He walked in.

“Harry! You got my message, great to see you again. How are you!”

“Fine, thanks. You?”

“Oh, couldn’t be better. Working for the Order is just like old times. And greetings to the rest of you, of course.”

They all said hello.

“So, heard you guys formed some kind of group to fight Voldemort at the school?”

Shock registered on their faces.

“Yeah,” said Tonks, “They were just not telling me about it.”

“The Hog’s Head, I tell you.” He and Tonks chuckled.

“But... silence spells! Precautions! How?” sputtered Susan.

“You guys are still being watched by our side, you know?” said Sirius. “Just in case.”

“Thanks a lot, Hermione!”

“Well I’m sorry I don’t have ranks in *Intrigue* or whatever.”

“Points,” clarified Sparkle. “Ranks would be a different system. I mean world.”

“Whatever.”

“So tell me all about it!” said Sirius.

“Well, *I’d* be happy to,” said Sparkle sweetly, while Susan stewed.

Sirius’ grin got wider as Sparkle told them what had happened at the first meeting. “So she was the first to sign, probably wanting to show the others it was safe. Sadly, she forgot to leave in a clause about telling you, or the Order. She just wrote “discussed only among ourselves” so now she’s stuck. Anyway, then she...”

“Well, good for you!” said Sirius, when the story was finished. “It sounds like you’ve got... most everything... under control, Susan.”

“Expect if you need help with something relating to S.T.F.U you won’t be able to ask us for it,” said Tonks.

“At least not directly,” said Sirius. “Obviously if you say you need something and you can’t tell us why, we’ll understand.”

“It was a good thought, don’t get us wrong. You should have run it by someone first rather than just trying to do it all on your own. We’re here to help, you know?”

“Sorry,” said Susan honestly. “I know.”

“Don’t take it too hard,” said Sirius. “I made a similar mistake, and it cost a lot more than some embarrassment. A mistake I can never repay...” He looked over at Harry.

“Still, the problem of how to get everyone together at the right time and keep the entrance hidden has to be solved. But I think Hermione is taking care at least part of that.”

Hermione could neither nod or shake her head.

“Well, if there is anything, in general, that you need, don’t hesitate to not ask,” Tonks was having trouble getting through that sentence for laughing.

“Are we doing the right thing? There is the danger of us being expelled,” said Hermione.

“Only while she’s around. Once Voldemort shows himself, and he will, the ministry will realize why you were doing it. So even if you somehow got caught, it wouldn’t be forever,” said Sirius. “I say go for it.”

“Your mother isn’t too happy about the situation, Ron. And even less so that Ginny’s involved. She thinks you’re all too young. But she admits you’ll probably all run into danger in the future, given that you have in the past. But she does want you all to be careful.”

“I understand,” said Ron.

“As long as you’re a little more subtle about things from now on, I’m sure it’ll go well. We just wanted you to know you had to be extra careful. If we knew immediately what you were doing, you can bet Dolores does. Thanks for coming.”

“Is there a way to get us messages that’s not by owl? That one you sent was attacked, Sirius,” said Susan.

“We could leave them for you someplace.”

“That’s an idea. I could check once a day if you show me where they’ll be. And did you get my message to the Headmaster?”

“Yes, right away. He said he would try his best. Come on, there’s a desk no one uses, I’ll show it to you, we can leave messages there if we need to.”

“Great. Lead on!”

The next day, Hermione seemed to be making good use of her *Research* spell, with her nose in the book whenever she wasn’t in class. She told all the impatient people that came to see if any progress on the problem had been made to look for dead end corridors and other nooks people normally didn’t go.

“If you want to help, that’s how to do it,” she said. “Make note of what floor it is, and we’ll mark it on the map.”

“What map?” was the inevitable next question.

“The one I’ll give you later. Shoo!”

She set Ron and Harry to basically copying the Marauder's Map Harry had onto normal parchment. (Not the magical part, just the lines to get a map of the castle) Once that was done, she had them draw grid lines and number each square that was created. She then ("Give us a break, there's more?" complained Ron. "I have Kung Fu to practice!") had them copy that 60 times, one for each person.

"My part is hard enough, just do it!"

Susan was actually impressed. They picked up the copying spell easily enough, and sat there flicking their wands over the parchment, making copies of each floor of the castle, then moving on to the next one. *That would seriously tire me out.*

Hermione, for her part, was *Transfiguring* Knuts into Galleons.

"Uh, I thought you needed a Philosopher's Stone to turn metal into gold." Susan said. "My *Creation* magic can't even make the stuff, and it can make just about anything."

"It's not real gold, I'm just making them look like gold."

"Ah, because being expelled for breaking the rules isn't enough, you want to go down for counterfeiting coinage as well. Gotcha."

"You'll see! Let me concentrate. I want to have my *dramatic moment*."

"Point taken. Sorry."

"How's it going?" asked Luna, who dropped by.

"They are hard at work, using magic to solve a problem they had." Susan pretended to wipe a tear from her eye. "I'm just so proud of them."

"Why wouldn't they use magic?"

"HA! The stories I could tell you. Like this one time they were chasing Crookshanks, who was after Ron's rat, around the room instead of just levitating them both off the bat. It took years for me to pound into their heads to think with magic. I mean it's bizarre. They come from a completely magical oriented society, right? Most wizards don't even know what electricity is. But rather than use magic, they chase a cat around a room."

"Maybe magic can't solve all problems."

"Not wanded magic, no. Rather than learn useful magic, they spend time learning how to vanish a snail. What are they working on in charms class? Silencing frogs? Who cares!?"

"They're working their way up. That's how it goes for us."

"But it's been years, and I still have to do most of the magic for the group. How long until they can reliably do magic at my level?"

"Maybe they can, but you are just too impatient, and don't give them a chance."

"What?"

"If there's something that needs doing, do you just wave your hand and do it, or ask them if they know a spell that can help?"

Susan thought for a moment, back to all the times she showed her magic as "superior" to theirs. Did she ever really give them a chance to shine? A ball of ice started forming in her stomach because she knew the answer- No, she had not. In her quest to show up everybody she tried to do everything, which didn't allow her friends any room to grow. With a shock, she had a revelation: *I'm a terrible person! What have I been doing all these years? I was trying to help them, but maybe I did more harm than good.*

"I'm holding them back, aren't I?" Susan said softly.

Luna shook her head kindly. "You have good intentions. You just need to learn to trust they can stand on their own, too. That you don't have to solve every problem on your own."

Believe in them, like they believe in you. I see that they do, that's why they're working so hard for S.T.F.U, which is your baby."

Susan gave a wan smile. "How do you see so clearly, Luna?"

"I look. And I listen. Some things you don't need a *background* for, you know?"

"Now you're just talking crazy talk."

"Am I glad I'm not out in that," said Harry, as rain pelted down the next evening during the time for Quidditch practice. Hermione was still at work on her part of the project, and Ron had asked for some training time, so Susan had let him into the *Dimension*. Both were sitting in the common room, doing homework. Sparkle was curled up on Susan's lap, purring. "Giving up Quidditch did have a slight benefit."

"Do you miss it?"

"Sure. Flying is great, and the feeling of winning all those house points all at once made it worthwhile. But there's more important things."

"Yeah. It's a weird sport anyway, to be played in all kinds of weather. I wonder if-" Susan stopped cold. *I just offered to show off again. But it's a spell they obviously can't use... or is it? Could the Headmaster stop the rain if he wanted to?*

"Wonder if what?" asked Harry, looking over at her.

"Nothing. Luna... nothing."

"Okay."

Fred and George spotted them, and hustled over.

"Could we see you?" asked one of the twins.

"Privately?" asked the other.

Susan looked around, no one was paying attention to them.

"Can you do a quieting spell or do you want to go someplace else?" she asked. *Yes, I didn't offer my magic first, I can be taught!*

"Oh, yeah, that would work," said a twin, getting out his wand. He chanted and pointed the wand, making a square around them.

"The thing is, we're a little concerned about... something," said a twin.

"Hopefully we don't have to be too specific," said the other.

"Go on..."

"You know the snackboxes we're inventing?"

"The ones Hermione is always after you about? Sure. I was meaning to ask you about those, actually."

"Sure, but we really need to get going, so we'll come to the point."

"The point is, the Fever Fudge we're testing has a curious side effect."

"A side effect that will make the upcoming Quidditch practice a bit unbearable."

"So we're asking for your help."

"What exactly do you want from me?"

The twins looked at each other. "They produce... sores."

"And not the type that help one fly on a broomstick. Soars, get it? Quite the opposite, in fact."

"Oh, you want healing!"

"She understands, Fred!" said George.

"Thank the stars," said Fred.

“You don’t want to go to Madam Pomfrey because she would ask questions more uncomfortable than the sores, am I right?”

“Can we not dwell on it and get to the healing portion of the favor?”

Susan laughed. “Sure, but it’s going to have to be the knife for you fellows.”

“We don’t follow,” said the twins in unison.

“Healing magic won’t work, because sores are not damage. But *Alleviation* magic will, because it puts you to rights at once. Trouble is, you don’t want to stand there for ten minutes while I cast the spell on you.”

“We would prefer it a little quicker than that,” said Fred.

“So the only other way is for me to stab you with the knife. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt a bit.” Susan unstrapped the knife from her leg, and people in the room started paying more attention. “Oh, can you kill the silence spell?”

“So they can hear our screams of agony?” said George, looking at the knife.

“You do have the right knife, right? Who puts healing magic into a knife anyway?”

“Someone that uses it to kill Dementors. The silence spell?”

“Fine,” Fred grumbled, and canceled the spell with his wand.

“Just a little test of an upcoming Fred and George product, nothing to be concerned about everyone!” she said loudly to the room. People nodded and went back to their tasks. “Shirts up, boys.”

The twins looked doubtfully at each other, then shook hands.

“Nice knowing you, George,” said not George.

“Likewise, Fred,” said not Fred.

They took their shirts up a little and Susan drove the blade into their bellies in turn, slowly removing the knife and watching it heal the wound as it was drawn out. The twins moved about a little as she strapped the knife back.

“Feels like they’re gone!” said Fred.

“We owe you one!” said George.

“I’ll be talking to you about those sweets, you can pay me back then,” said Susan, a wicked glint in her eyes.

“Did we just put our names at the bottom of a blank contract, Fred?”

“I think we did, George.”

“See you boys. Have a good practice!”

Thunder rolled in the distance, and the twins groaned.

## Not Too Old to Begin the Training

Time: The next morning

Place: Great Hall

“Harry, you look terrible!” said Susan as Harry came to the table for breakfast the next morning.

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” he replied.

“Excitement about S.T.F.U?”

“No, dreams.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Arithmancy I guess? Some kind of formula that I was working on and close to perfecting.”

“Formula? That does sound like a nightmare,” said Ron. “No wonder you were tossing and turning last night.”

“Sorry if I kept you up.”

*Formula? It better not be...*

Susan took one of her spell formula out of her *Pocket Dimension*. “It wasn’t something like this, was it?”

Harry looked it over. “Yeah, it was exactly like this. How creepy is... oh no. You don’t think-”

Susan nodded sadly. “Unfortunately, that’s exactly what I think. Is that even possible?”

“I’ve been feeling really focused lately, is it because *he*’s feeling really focused?”

“That would be a scary proposition,” said Hermione. “And suggestive of a deeper connection between the two of you than was previously known. Your scar has hurt in the past, right? This may be some secondary connection between you two.”

“Great. Make it stop.”

“I’m not sure even my magic could do that. Especially without fully understanding what’s going on. I mean, is it your mind? Your soul? I wonder...”

“What?”

“I’m just thinking about those objects we destroyed before. They held pieces of his soul, right?”

“Right,” said Hermione. “That’s how he was able to come back, right? Using one of those pieces of soul and implanting it into a body.”

“My thought is, what if there’s more of them? Even here, inside the castle?”

“How would we ever find them?”

“Good question. The point is, what if they’re sort of a booster antenna that Harry can sort of latch into somehow?”

“What’s an antenna?” asked Ron.

“Sends out or receives radio waves,” answered Hermione.

“What’s a radio wave?”

“We’re going to be here all morning, aren’t we?”

“Hey, the new Ron is curious about the world around him.”

“Anyway, it’s a thought. That would mean it was the soul, then?”

“Could be. It’s only a theory though,” answered Susan.

“Another theory is that he’s seen your spell formula enough because you two grew up together,” said Hermione. “And he knows Voldi is probably working to master Susan’s Magic, and so he had a regular nightmare about it.”

All of them looked at each other.

“Nah.”

“So is there anything we can do about it?” asked Ron.

“This sort of thing is without precedent, I’m afraid,” said Hermione sadly. “So there’s really no *Research* we can do.”

“What a pity, I have like ten free minutes a day I could squeeze a bit more into,” complained Ron.

“If you wanted, you could sleep in the *Dimension*,” offered Susan. “It might not reach there.”

“Actually,” said Sparkle, looking up from her plate, “it probably would, if it’s the soul.”

“How do you mean?”

“Souls can move interdimensionally, that’s how you can have them running around Heaven or Hell. So naturally if their two souls are somehow connected, it wouldn’t matter what plane they were in.”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that.”

“I can’t sleep there the rest of my life, anyway. I have to learn to deal with this. Especially if it starts getting worse, now that he’s back.”

“It looks that way. Sorry, Harry.”

“This should take your mind off it,” said Hermione. “I got the coins done yesterday.” She handed each of them a coin to look at.

“Super! What’s it do?” asked Ron.

“Pay careful attention, we’ll need to hand them out to everyone, as well as the maps,” she said. “Now, you see this number...”

“So Hermione made these,” Susan said to a small group of her allies at lunch. “Take one and a map.”

Everyone did so.

“You’ll see the map has been subdivided into squares, and each has been given a number. That’s the section of the castle you’ll find the entrance when it’s your night.”

“How will we know it’s our night?” asked Luna.

“Good question!” She passed out a list of the names that had been signed onto the *Contract*, each having a 1, 2, or 3 next to them. “Find your name and remember your number. That’s what group you’re in. Now, the coins.” She took Luna’s coin and set it on the table. “Hermione called this a *Protean Charm* and explained how it works. Apparently when she changes her coin, the rest of them change to match. Which is pretty neat, actually. Anyway, you see this long number here?”

Everyone did.

“The first digit is the group that is meeting that night. Right now you’ll see it’s 0, as no group is going to meet until we’re sure everyone has a coin. In order to meet irregularly, I’m going to roll this.” She held up a d8 with two fingers. The others looked at it skeptically. “It seems appropriate for some reason. Anyway, this will determine which group meets that night. We’ll meet every night, so if you miss one, another meeting will happen shortly. If you miss too many feel free to stop in at a different number, but don’t make a habit of it. Now the next number

is the time, which will always be between six and eight o'clock. You'll have fifteen minutes from the time shown to get there, and then we leave without you. The last digits are the numbers printed on the map, to know where to meet that night. Got all that?"

"But won't we still be meeting regularly if it happens every night?" asked a boy.

"Ah, but it won't. Sometimes the die will roll a one or a two, and that means no group will meet. It's all random, not regular at all."

"You're cutting it very fine," he said.

"Maybe, but do criminals really worry about gun laws?"

"What's a gun?"

"Never mind. Ron also wishes me to remind you, don't lose the counterfeit coin. He has a brother that works for the bank, and he says they take a dim view of counterfeiters. They have a standing army ready to send out after anyone who does it. Got it?"

Everyone gripped their coin tightly and nodded.

"Good. See everyone at the first meeting."

"I hope you'll see me before then," pouted Luna.

"You can come see me any time."

The next afternoon, Susan rolled a 3 on her d8, so group 1 was going to meet that night. She rolled 2d12, (getting a 12) as there were about 24 good hiding spots around the castle, and set the time at 7:03. Hermione changed the coin with her wand and said the others should have changed by now. They could hardly wait.

That night at 6:50, Susan, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Sparkle went to the end of a dead end that had been chosen and Susan worked on opening her *Personal Dimension* from writings. Sparkle had created the illusion that the hallway ended a bit shorter than it actually did, so they had some room to work. At about seven people started arriving, calling out "hello?" in a hushed voice. They got yanked and pulled through the illusion.

At 7:08 Susan and Sparkle stepped through, and the door to the *Dimension* closed. Every member of team 1 had shown up, no one was going to miss the first time, after all.

"Right!" said Susan, after everyone was "inside." "We'll meet until 9:00, so that's an hour of magic and a little less for physical combat. Get to it. If anyone needs me I'll be down in my lab, *Imbuing* stuff."

Susan, down in her cabin, could just see them out her window practicing spell-work, and it looked like it was going well. The barrier, activated by Hermione, was doing the job well and keeping everyone safe. Harry and Hermione moved about everyone, making suggestions and corrections to wand-work, and it looked like Ron was doing quite well. An hour later, there was a knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she singsonged in a falsetto, opening the door. "Hey, Hermione! What's up?"

"Three people say they'd rather learn the sword, and Harry said he probably would too if you were serious about making him one. You said you would think of something, have you?"

"Oh, I think I can accommodate them. Let's go."

“So what kind of a sword would you like to learn?” she asked the four not now being taught by Ron. He seemed nervous when she glanced over at him, but at least they were getting something out of it.

*I hope.*

Standing before her were two boys she didn't know, Harry, and a girl. They introduced themselves as Latasha, Daniel and John.

“What do you mean?” asked John.

“Well, there's long swords, short swords, stabby swords, cutting swords. Did you have a style in mind, is what I'm asking?”

“Can I get a ninja sword?” asked Daniel.

“Sure. How about you?” she asked the girl.

“I'm not that strong, so I was thinking maybe a rapier or a fencing sword?”

“Ah, a thrusting sword. Okay. How about you, John?”

“How about a Sword of Omens looking thing?”

“Not a problem, though if you want it to actually 'work' that'll take some time and some silver. What about you, Harry?”

“You know what I want!”

“A plastic bat? You got it.”

“I'm not sure that's right.”

Susan laughed. “I know. I'm not sure what I could make that would simulate what you want, as you might change your mind about *knockout* later once you've got some experience with a sword. I'll just make you a sort of tube, I guess. Give me a few minutes.” She proceeded to cast *Creation* four times, and about five minutes later she had what everyone had “ordered.” She made Harry a sort of energy blade made of regular stuff. If you looked at it from the top, it would be a rod, and sticking out from the rod were six thin, sharpened blades. Not very good for actual combat, but useful enough for practice, she thought.

“But how are we going to practice?” asked John.

“That's easy. *For Sacrifices Made.*” Twenty five soldiers appeared near Susan, and she turned to them. “These four are your opponents. Fight them one on one. You are not allowed to attack except after defending 10 times. You are only allowed to attack at half speed. Do you understand?”

The figures nodded, and formed up into four rows.

“There you go. Every eleventh strike of yours better be a block. As you get better I'll let them attack more freely. Sorry I don't know any sword masters, so you'll just have to learn in actual combat. Good luck!”

The four looked dubious, but realized it was the only chance they had.

“Wait a second,” said Latasha. “We can't just carry swords around everywhere! If we get disarmed from our wands, how is knowing how to use a sword going to help us?”

“Don't worry, I've already got that covered. When you get better and find you want to continue, I'll put a spell on you so you can have it at hand when you need it.”

“Oh, okay.”

Susan had to heal a couple of wounds, even at half speed. It seemed actual sword fighting was tiring, hard, and not very much like movies would have you believe.

“My arms are killing me!” said Harry when time was up. “I'll be glad when my blade is weightless, let me tell you.”

“I’m actually glad to hear it,” said Susan. “That means you really worked today. Tomorrow you’ll be a little bit stronger. Keep it up.”

“I guess.”

“Well done, everyone!” shouted Susan. “I hope you all learned something, and had some fun. I’ll see you all back here when your number comes up again.”

“How are we going to get out without being seen?” asked a boy.

“Easy. Sparkle is going to step out of the *Dimension* and throw up the *Illusion* again. Then we’ll step through over the next few minutes when the coast is sure to be clear.”

“See you in a moment,” said Sparkle, casting *Dimension Step*, and vanishing.

*Lucky we found out the Dimension Step spell could work this way. It doesn’t have to take you between earth and astral, it can be between Personal and Earth. Better start opening the door, it’ll take a bit.*

Susan cast from writings and opened the door back to the hallway, and peaked out. The *Illusion* was in place, so she stepped through and looked out the tiny hole Sparkle had made in the “brickwork.”

“Clear,” she said. “The first four of you, go!”

After a few minutes everyone was out, and Sparkle dropped *Dimension Step*, appearing back in the *Personal Dimension*. She then stepped across again out the door, and Susan closed it.

“That seemed to go well,” said Hermione as the girls made their way back to the Ravenclaw dorm.

“I couldn’t quite tell from the cabin, we might have to move the barrier field a bit closer. I’m glad to hear it, though! This might actually work!”

“Harry and Ron get three times the practice everyone else does, though.”

“They’re in three times as much danger, as presumably they’ll be standing next to me when Voldi comes a knocking. You’re welcome at any meeting, by the way. Have to tell the rest of Team Susan they are as well.”

“That’s true. I just worry they’ll not have enough time for homework at this rate.”

“It’s a matter of priorities, Hermione. Besides, practicing spells will save them time, later. A lot of their homework comes from not mastering the magic of the day someone’s trying to teach them. As they get more accurate with their wand-work, they’ll need less time mastering spells.”

“I guess now that you mention it, they have been picking up spells faster. Ron since he started working towards Magic Fu and Harry since... well, since Voldi came back, to tell the truth. There’s still potions class though?”

“Who cares about potions? They don’t seem inclined to brew up any outside of class. And isn’t that generally just a matter of following directions? How do you screw that up?”

“You would think that, wouldn’t you? The problem is we’ve never had a place to make them they won’t be disturbed.”

“I could get more ingredients if you guys wanted to do some potion making in the *Dimension*’s lab. There’s room, and if I left a note of what you wanted to make, I’m sure the Headmaster would be glad to provide it.”

“The only trouble is, if they get it wrong they could burn the place down. That’s why we have that class in the basement, I think. Less to catch on fire because of all that stone. I don’t know why they seem to have such trouble.”

“Maybe it’s a matter of concentration. Perhaps with the discipline Ron will learn from now teaching Martial Arts himself, he’ll improve. Or maybe away from Professor Snape breathing down their neck...”

“He is applying himself to Arithmancy with a passion. It’s kind of nice, actually.”

“Oh? Is the new Ron catching someone’s eye, then?”

“Don’t be silly!” She looked away.

“I’ll give you the same advice I gave Ginny. Don’t wait to tell him your feelings. You’ll regret it.”

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

“A little. My father could have kept his mouth shut when he met my mother. In fact it would have been the smart thing to do! He knew he was leaving, why cause himself further heartache down the line? But if he had done that, I wouldn’t exist. Just because you think you might get hurt, or you’re worried you’ll only be together while you’re in school because you’ll go in different directions after you graduate- have the time together. Who knows what you might accomplish?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, so there’s something to think about!” she said, tickling Hermione.

“Stop!”

“What’s all that racket?” Argus voice came down a side passage.

Susan grabbed Hermione’s hand. “We’re running, Hermione! *Invisibility!*”

They made it back to the dorm, laughing and feeling good after a night of S.T.F.U.

*Today was a good day.*

The next day she rolled an 8, group 3, and that was the group Fred and George were in, so after everyone went in she motioned them over.

Previously that day she had sent another message to the Headmaster when she checked the desk at the Order’s Headquarters and put in a request for lots more potion ingredients.

*Harry, Ron and Hermione asked about making potions to help them out. Need actual ingredients for useful brews.*

Unfortunately, this was S.T.F.U business, so Susan found she couldn’t put her hand through to deliver the note. She quickly rewrote it.

*Need actual potion ingredients, can’t say why.*

That afternoon when she went into the cupboard to step into her *Personal Dimension* she found boxes full of potion ingredients, and spent the class time moving them into the lab. She then set up a potion lab with tables and such in her cabin.

*Good thing I thought of lots of rooms for this place.*

“I suppose this is about the blank contract?” asked George.

“I guess we’ll get it over with. What do you want?” asked Fred.

“I want weapons,” said Susan, eyes alight. “And you two are going to make them for me.”

“Us?” said the twins.

“We don’t know anything about weapons.” said Fred.

“You want Fletcher for that kind of stuff, right?” asked George.

“Nope, I know what I want. And it has Fred and George written all over it.”

“Why doesn’t it have George and Fred written all over it?” asked George. “How come you always get to come first?”

“F comes before G, duh.”

“Anyway... I was thinking, these candies of yours, perhaps they could be weaponized.”

“Hard to get someone to have a snack in the middle of a duel,” said Fred.

“I know that. I’m not stupid. What I’m asking is, can you make them better? For example, a liquid that vaporizes on contact with air? Give us the antidote, throw a few bottles around, and the other side goes down without casting a single spell. You might not need words, but you still have to breathe, after all.”

“Maybe. Never thought it about,” said George.

“Or if you can’t do that, then how about a liquid, and put them into darts? Or make it a contact poison, and just splash someone with it.”

“Inventive,” said Fred.

“Brilliant!” exclaimed George. “Think of the prank potential of an eyedropper full of liquid!”

“Boys, focus! We are going to go against people who want us dead. I would rather us not be murders. I want to incapacitate people, and get their wands away from them. That way they will be harmless.”

*Expect for one person, and I already have the weapon I’m going to use on him.* She considered Dolores Umbridge. *Okay, maybe two people.*

“Ah, and anything Fletcher sells you is likely to be lethal,” said Fred.

“Exactly. You’re developing stuff to make people ill already. I just want it taken from sweets to a form that can be given to the unsuspecting or the unwilling.”

“Which brings us back to pranking,” said George. He held up a hand. “I know, I heard you the first time. We’ll see what we can do. Is there a place around here we can set up shop? Otherwise we’ll have to head to the base.”

“Come with me.” She led them to the cabin, where the potions lab was waiting for them.

“We’ll get to work!” said both twins, grinning.

“Knew I could count on you!”

The next day there was a Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor.

“Are we going to the match?” asked Harry.

“The Monster in Pink will be there,” said Ron. “I’m staying in the castle and working on *Arithmancy*, and then some ‘combat training with a focus on physical prowess’ as she might say.”

“I’d like to check on the potions in the *Dimension* if you don’t mind opening the door,” said Hermione. “I don’t trust Fred and George to not blow the place up. And I’d like to get a few of my own started.”

“I suppose I should get some homework done, in case Susan doesn’t roll a one or a two tonight,” said Harry. “Are you sure you can’t use healing magic on my arms?”

“Not damage, sorry. Or is it? That pain you’re feeling is your muscles getting bigger. Tough it out, somehow I’ll make a man out of you! What I am saying, women have to deal with more pain than men. Be a woman!”

Sparkle didn’t say anything because she was napping.

“I guess that’s that!” said Susan.

They later learned there was a bit of a scuffle between some Slytherin and Gryffindor students, but it was quickly sorted out by the teachers that were there. They didn't hear anything about anyone being banned.

What they did hear, on the other hand, was that lights were on in Rubeus' hut, and that evening Susan *Teleported* them down to the door and knocked. Filbert was outside, and looked them over critically. He seemed to recognize Susan, and bumped his head on her.

"Hi there, Filbert," she said, patting his head. "You kept him safe, I hope?"

Filbert nodded.

*Wait, should Magical Ally be able to respond to questions?*

The door opened.

"By the beard of Starswirl, what in the name of Equestria happened to you?" said Susan, as she looked Rubeus over. He was, to put it mildly, a bit damaged. His face was bruised and swollen, and he seemed to be favoring one leg.

"I'm on it," said Sparkle, readying *Regeneration*.

"I'm fine, no need to go on about it," humphed Rubeus. "I've had worse."

"I will not stand here and do nothing when you are in pain," said Susan. Sparkle looked over at her. "That's why I'm having Sparkle use *Regeneration* on you."

He seemed to relax as his injuries faded. "Thanks."

"The giants weren't keen on you coming to see them, I take it?" asked Hermione.

"How did you- I mean, what are you talking about?"

"Oh come on. Headmaster Dumbledore last term suggested sending an envoy to the giants, and then you disappear. It's not rocket surgery."

"What's a rocket?" asked Ron.

"Gets you into space," said Susan.

"Well, I hope no one else is as smart as you guys, or we're all in trouble," said Rubeus.

"Don't be stupid," said Ron, grinning. "You can't go into..." His grin faded as the people from the technology world looked at him. "Space, huh?"

"Anyway, how did it go?" asked Harry. "You didn't get that hurt just getting back here, did you?"

"No, that was later. Anyway, can't exactly tell you, can I? Top secret, this is."

"Then I guess we can't tell you what's been happening around here while you were gone," said Susan. "Like us having to fight off nearly a dozen Dementors before school started."

"Or me nearly getting expelled," said Harry.

"Or my learning Kung Fu," said Ron.

"What's Kung Fu?"

"Don't you start, one is bad enough!" said Susan. "And anyway, we can't tell you. Top secret, and all that."

"It is?" asked Ron.

Susan sighed. "Selectively."

"Oh, I get it."

"That's blackmail, that is," said Rubeus.

"More like trading intel. You tell us about your adventure, we tell you about ours."

"Oh, very well!"

“Knew you would see reason in the end. So- giants!”

“Yeah, I’ve been in talks with giants.”

“How did that go?” asked Hermione.

“Actually, pretty well. We managed to find them right where Albus said and went down the first day with our gift for the chief.”

“What was it?” asked Ron.

“We?” asked Hermione.

“Everlasting fire. Olympe was with me, didn’t I say? We presented it to the chief and asked for an audience the next day. Wanted to take it slow, you know? I hate to admit this, but they can be a little dim.”

“Can’t imagine why, their brains must be as big as my whole body,” said Harry.

“Well, they’ve got more body to run, don’t they? Anyway, they liked the fire and the next day we gave them a helmet. Goblins had made it indestructible, see?”

“What, he didn’t trust me to do it? I bet they charged him a fortune. Go on.”

“Well, he listened to what we had to say, about staying out of any conflict with humans. After all, there’s only about seventy or eighty left in the world, using them as soldiers would wipe them out totally.”

“Sounds reasonable, though I can’t see the species ever bouncing back,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, real shame that. So we said he should think it over, and we would be back the next day to talk it over some more.”

“He didn’t get killed or something in the night!?” asked Ron.

“No, he was fine. What would make you say that? Though it was strange, Olympe and myself half expected it as we came down the mountain. Could have sworn Death Eaters were involved as well, but no, he was just sitting there, same as the last two days.”

The others traded glances.

“What?”

“Just a local project. Something that keeps cropping up, we can tell you later. Go on with the story.”

“Not much else to tell. We gave him a gift of dragon skin, and the chief said he would stay out of human affairs so his race didn’t get killed off. Then we started back.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got hurt,” said Susan. “Did something attack you?”

“Nah, that was personal, me getting hurt. Nothing to do with the mission, so you just never mind. I did want to talk to you about Filbert, though.”

“Oh?”

“He seems to be getting, I don’t know what you would call it. More aware? More awake? Should he be doing that?”

“Honestly, he’s not supposed to be out as much as you have him out. He’s a temporary ally made of magic. My book tells me how to cast the spell, but that’s it. You’ve kept him out for years now, and who knows what that means for the spell.”

“He isn’t dangerous, is he?”

“Only to people dangerous to you. He still follows your commands I take it?”

“Yeah. It’s just he seems to know sometimes what I’m about to ask him, and he just does it.”

“Interesting. I’d be excited to get a full record of his progress in another ten years or so, see if the trend continues.”

“You think he’ll get even smarter?”

“I have no way to predict that. You’re charting new territory for us both, keeping a spell active that long. I mean, sure, Hermione’s robes were *Fabricated*, but they weren’t in the shape of a creature. And you’ve treated him like a real dragon, playing with him and interacting with him, rather than just giving him orders. Harry has a couple of permanent spells on him, but he doesn’t talk to them.”

“I get what you’re saying. He could slowly be coming to life, then?”

Susan shrugged. “A kind of life, maybe. He’ll never be a real boy, I mean, dragon. Like mating and stuff. At least I don’t think so... I mean he’s made of magic, not matter.”

“Just thought I would let you know.”

“Thanks. Keep me updated on any further changes, okay?”

“Will do. Now, what about this attack you were talking about?”

“Well, we were walking down the street one day-”

\*Knock Knock\*

“Once again I heard a tapping, something louder than before,” said Susan. “Let us see then what there that is, and this mystery explore!”

“It’s not the wind, that is the door!” said Hermione.

“You guys shouldn’t be here!” said Hagrid. “Do you have the cloak with you, Harry?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Professor, it’s probably the Headmaster.” She threw the door open.

Dolores Umbridge stood there.

“You?!” Both exclaimed in exactly the same tone.

“You should not be out of the castle!” said Dolores.

“Why? I’m here with a Professor. Certainly that isn’t against the rules.”

“It’s after hours!”

“Yeah, he got back late. And it isn’t as though I was wandering the corridors, now was it.”

“There *were* no footprints in the snow leading here. How did you- That’s not the point!”

“Then again I find myself asking you what is the point? You seem to not be able to articulate yourself well.”

“That just earned you another week of detention young lady.” She drew herself up to her full height.

Susan considered. “No, I don’t think so.”

“What?” She looked at Susan as though bat wings had just burst from her back.

“I’m not in your class right now, and in fact, I’m not even on the castle grounds at the moment. This is a private residence.” She indicated the hut around her. “The rules state I can’t be in the *castle hallways* after hours, but they don’t say I can’t be elsewhere in the world. I could sleep at home every night if I wanted to. I admit, it was never specified in the rules because it’s just not practical for wand-wielders to bounce around like that, but it is totally practical for me. In short, you have no power over me here at all. Especially not to give out detentions.”

Dolores’ mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“Yeah, who are you, coming into my home and giving my students detentions?” thundered Rubeus. “I invited them here, and they came. So we lost track of time, that’s not a big deal is it?”

She looked up. “You are Rubeus Hagrid?”

“That’s right. And you are?”

“Dolores Umbridge, Hogwarts High Inquisitor,” she said.

“Didn’t know we had a low one,” muttered Rubeus.

“I know, right?” said Susan with a grin.

“She’s also ‘teaching’ us Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Harry with disgust.

“You?” Rubeus looked her over. “Have you even seen a dark wizard?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Really? Would you trust a skinny chef?”

“I am not here to discuss that!”

“Then why are you here at this time of night? Whatever you have to tell me, it couldn’t have waited until morning?”

“I just wanted to have a talk with you, but now I see I need to escort these children back to the castle. I will call upon you later.”

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself,” said Susan. “I’ll just take us back with *Teleportal*,” She cast the spell, and a hole opened back to the common room of the castle.

“See you in so called class tomorrow,” said Susan, stepping through. The others stepped through and waved. “See you later, Professor. Glad you’re back, we’ll have to finish catching up tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you then.”

The *Teleportal* closed.

“One of these days you’re going to go too far,” said Harry.

“I hope so,” said Susan. “I can see the headline now- Dolores Umbridge Attacks Student, Community Outraged!”

“This is part of your *plan*?” asked Hermione, aghast.

“Not until just now. We’ll have to see if there are any other rules for wanded wizard that don’t apply to me. Could be fun. See you boys tomorrow.”

Susan skipped off while the others just stared at each other, horrified.

Person Made of Mud

Time: The next day

Place: Outside the common room

“Can’t say I didn’t expect something like this,” said Susan, looking at the latest Decree.

By Order of  
The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

Any student found within One Hundred And Fifty Miles from the school grounds shall be subject to all rules and regulations as though they were within the castle itself.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-Six.

By Order of  
The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

Within the castle of Hogwarts, the High Inquisitor will have the power to punish students as though they were in her classroom.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-Seven.

By Order of  
The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

The High Inquisitor will have final say over all punishments given by any teacher, with the power to alter such punishments as given by other instructors.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-Eight.

“Wow, three in the span of time between last night and this morning,” said Ron. “That’s got to be some kind of record.”

“I don’t see how you’re going to get out of it now,” said Hermione. “The next time you go into her class, she’s going to bait you into something, and then give you detentions or whatever. She’ll make it extra long, to get back at you for what you did last night. And the Headmaster can’t even override her now!”

“You’re worried because you don’t know what I know.”

“What? What are you going to do this time?”

“Only what she deserves, Hermione. Only what she deserves. Honestly, passing these stupid laws targeting me. She really should have known better, and just observed my behavior. But no, she has to go poking me with a stick all the time.”

“Maybe she’s doing the same thing to you as you said last night. Trying to provoke you into using magic on her,” said Harry.

“Maybe. She’s going to have a long wait though. I don’t care about her, she’s a little fish trying to pretend she’s a shark. I have bigger fish to fry.”

“I just hope you aren’t jumping from the frying pan into the fire.”

“She can’t expel me, I think the ministry knows I would just disappear for a while, then reappear to take out Azkaban. Cornelius needs me here so his lapdog can keep an eye on me. Even if she does give me detentions, she can’t back it up with anything else. At least for the moment, she can’t expel people, only punish them.”

“But at the rate these so called laws are being passed, it’s only a matter of time?”

“I think even the ministry would hesitate to give her that kind of power. They haven’t just booted Headmaster Dumbledore out for a reason, even they need some deniability.”

“I guess.”

Before class that day, humming a jaunty tune, Susan went out to the lake with a piece of paper. She had read the spell over, using 1 XP to get a plus two bonus for reading it, as it was grade 8 and she got an 11 on *Magical Scripture*. She touched a reloaded charm and said “Link me,” which saved her reading that one out in the cold as well. Also she wouldn’t have to maintain it, which would be nice. She used *Elemental Attack* on the ice near the lake, and it melted to become mud. Susan started to cast a second spell, using 20 energy (she had Sparkle cast *Energetic Accumulation* on her before coming out here) to cut the time from 16 minutes to 10, and getting a +14. Susan smiled as the spell went off, and her plan went into motion.

“I see that you are still not reading your book,” said Dolores sweetly. “Either of you.”

“That is correct, *Inquisitor!*” she said. She said *Inquisitor* like a Protoss warrior would say *Executor* as in “*En Taro Adun, Executor.*”

“I just suggest you do so,” she said.

“Aren’t we a bit past that, *Inquisitor?*”

“It seems we are. I must reluctantly place you in detention until the school year is over.”

There were cries of protest, and Dolores raised her hand for silence. Susan was unconcerned.

“Really, *Inquisitor?* Are you sure about that?”

“Oh, I am quite sure.”

“I see. It’s just, according to decree twenty-six, *Inquisitor*, I must be within one hundred and fifty miles of the castle for you to have power over my punishments.”

Dolores gave a tittering little laugh. “I believe you are sitting in my classroom, thus it applies.”

“I beg to differ, *Inquisitor*. Belief is a powerful thing to be sure, but facts are even more powerful. What you are seeing, and talking to, is indeed *my avatar*, not me. In fact, I am laying quite comfortably in bed, at home, at the moment. I believe my house is quite a bit more than one hundred and fifty miles away from the castle.”

“What are you talking about now, your ‘avatar’ is here, not you?”

“Ah, yes. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proofs. Hermione, I believe you know some kind of severing spell, do you not?”

“Yes?”

“Come-come, Hermione. You either do, or you do not.”

“I do then.”

“Excellent. Please come here and sever my right hand.” She stood up and held out her hand. “With your permission, of course, *Inquisitor*.”

“Oh, please, continue.”

“Thank you, *Inquisitor*. Well, Hermione?”

“If you say so.” Hermione got out her wand. “*Diffindo!*”

Susan’s hand dropped off the *Plastic Proxy* and turned into mud.

There were gasps of surprise from everyone in the room.

“As you can see, *Inquisitor*,” she held up the stump, “I am merely an avatar, currently made from the mud found near the lake.” She stuck the stump into the mud that had splattered on the desk, and cast “*Repair*” using the *Projection Link* she had put into her *Spell Symbol* earlier. The hand reappeared, flowed back up, and reattached itself. She flexed the fingers.

“Thank you, Hermione. I have now proven, *Inquisitor*, I am not within range of your laws at the moment. Nor shall I be, ever again. Shall we at last stop this little game of cat and mouse, and you can leave me alone as I wish?” She sat down.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” said Dolores after a moment.

“I think I’m good at coming up with solutions to problems. And right now, my problem is you. For some reason you seem fixated on me, like I was a lover spurning your advances. Why? What have I done to you to make you target me so? What does your minister hope to gain by sending you here to harass me like a five year old?”

“You will have to ask him yourself.”

“An excellent idea, *Inquisitor*. I suppose he’s at the ministry building right now?”

“I would assume so. Why?”

“I need a direction for my spell of *Telesummon*, *Cornelius Fudge*, *Minister of Magic* I command you to appear before me!”

Susan covered taking the extra time by putting the extra words into the spell, and rolled maximum, a 20. Even with her penalty for maintaining *Plastic Proxy* that was more than enough. The Minister of Magic, mid-sentence to someone else, appeared in a burst of magical light.

“What in the world?” he cried, looking around nervously.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Fudge,” said Susan brightly. “Wondered if I could have just a moment of your time?”

“Susan?! You brought me here?”

“Yes, your *Inquisitor* suggested I ask you something directly, so here you are. My question is this- Why have you sent this lapdog of yours to constantly harass me like this? Leave. Me. ALONE!”

“Return the Minister at once!” shrieked Dolores. Students started getting out of their seats between her and Susan, in case spells started flying.

“Oh, he’s in no danger, don’t freak out,” said Susan, not even looking at her. “Well, minister?”

“Her investigation is not directed at you...”

“Don’t give me that. All these ‘educational decrees’ are specifically aimed at me, and you know it. They’ve all gone up after some altercation with her.” She pointed. “So what’s the endgame huh? Try and drive me out of the school? You know I’m not really learning anything here anyway, my magic comes from other sources. Discredit me by making me so angry I attack your lapdog? The headmaster is the bigger threat to your position than I am. If she really is here for educational reform, like you claim, then leave me out of it. Call her off, and stop provoking me.”

The door burst open, and both professors McGonagall and Flitwick burst into the room. “We heard shouting down the hall, what’s going- Minister?”

“Hello, Minerva,” said Cornelius.

“What is going on in here?” she finished demanding. Dolores had her hand inches from her wand. Students were pressed up against the walls, looking fearful. Cornelius Fudge was looking quite out of place, and actually a bit terrified he had just been plucked from whatever he was doing to be brought to the school.

“Just clearing up a few things,” said Susan. “With the minister here, about his *Inquisitor*.”

“Stop saying it like that!” shrieked Dolores.

“*Inquisitor!*” Susan shouted as though she was a Dalek shouting ‘exterminate.’ “*Inquisitor!*”

“Shut up!” Dolores had her wand out, pointed at Susan. Everyone still sitting lunged out of their seats, taking cover under their desks.

“You see what you’ve given us?” Susan asked softly. “A teacher so incompetent, she can’t keep control of her class without resorting to pointing a wand at people. A teacher who insists reading a book will somehow allow us to pass our exams at the end of the year. A teacher who has made her class cower in fear for their lives!” She pointed at the people on the floor. *Though I suppose that could have been me?* “This is your answer to us trying to warn you that Voldemort has returned? This woman, who seems more interested in power trips than teaching her students? Really? We want to help you, but you are making that impossible, Minister!”

“Perhaps you should come with me, Susan, while you cool down a bit. I’m terribly sorry about this, Mr. Fudge,” said Minerva.

“Why don’t we all go see Albus, maybe we can straighten all this out,” said Cornelius.

“An excellent suggestion!” said Susan. “Lead the way.”

The students started to get back up as Susan left, and the three of them went up to the Headmaster’s office.

“Cornelius!” exclaimed Albus, “This is a pleasant surprise. I wasn’t aware you were coming to the castle today.”

“Neither was I,” he said, “But Susan here had other ideas.”

“Did she now? Allow me to apologize on her behalf.”

“Yes, well, we can worry about that later. Look, I realize this whole High Inquisitor business won’t be the easiest thing to adjust to.”

“These decrees, one after another, don’t help matters. You know I have the best interest of the students at heart. If there is a teacher here not performing to a decent standard, I would want them removed just as much as you would.”

“Yes, of course. I do have a confession to make, Susan.”

“Oh?”

“I may have handled this whole thing badly. I admit, I panicked a bit after I saw what you could do. I mean, who else on earth could just snap their fingers and bring me here?”

“Voldemort,” said Susan darkly.

“So you keep saying. But you’re the one who is in front of me, not him. So it’s you I have to be concerned with.”

“So work with me instead of against me. The Headmaster will attest to how hard I work for those I consider allies and friends.”

“The gifts she has given them thus far at school would have set her up nicely for a few years, should she had sold them instead,” he admitted.

“But I can’t! You can imagine the headlines! ‘Minister of Magic works with fourteen year old girl. Does One Eighty on Voldemort Returning.’ I’d be laughed out of office!”

“And you’ve never heard of subtlety? I can help you just as much from the sidelines, with your blessing, as I can by your side.”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Then we remain as we were. Unfortunate. Can I at least have your word your Inquisitor will leave me alone for the duration? I have told you my goals, there is no need to spy on me. I will give you fair warning before I begin my attack on Azkaban.”

“You see! How can I ignore you when you make statements like that?”

“How can I not see you as an enemy, when you allow that place to continue to exist? You know I can destroy them. Take me there without telling them, and allow me to get on with it! Bring them to me one at a time, and in an hour or two you will have my complete support from then on.”

“I can’t do that. We must have a prison for dark wizards.”

“A prison, yes. But not a giant torture chamber. Not staffed by creatures that eat souls. It’s not your place to destroy a man’s soul, it’s the task of a higher power that they be *judged*. At the end of their days, giving them a chance to sincerely repent their actions.”

He sighed. “I will ask Dolores to ease up on you, but that’s all I can do. You are a danger from my perspective.”

“I don’t deny that. My magic is powerful, there’s no doubt. But I can only offer it to you so many times before I start thinking about offering it to another.”

“I know. You have to promise me not to bait her, anymore, though.”

“Oh, suddenly I’m the adult and she’s the child? Minister, I wish only to sit quietly in class while the others read their stupid book. She stays out of my way, and I’ll stay out of hers.”

“Very well, we can agree on that much, at least. I’ll go talk to her now, and return to the ministry through the floo network. Good day, Albus.”

“Good day, Cornelius.”

He left.

“At least we came to some agreement,” said Susan.

“Young lady,” said Professor McGonagall, “I am quite frankly appalled at your behavior today. I’m still debating taking points or putting you in detention myself.”

Susan looked at her for a moment. “Professor,” she said at last, “I’ve never taken any of your classes, but I know you by reputation. My friends speak of you in good terms, and I think you could be a person I would greatly respect, like the Headmaster here. They tell me you are strict, but fair, and always give them a chance to explain things. I say this because unlike the Inquisitor, I think I would value your opinion of me. So please, tell me why my behavior troubles you.”

“You ripped someone out of whatever they were doing and brought them here! The Minister of Magic, no less.”

“The Inquisitor suggested it herself. Perhaps she wasn’t speaking literally, but I took her statement to mean that she was. I doubt I could have just made an appointment to see the man.”

“I too would caution you about doing that,” said Albus. “It could cause some concern if he went missing suddenly.”

“Right, because the last person that went missing from the ministry had immediate search parties sent out for her, right? Oh wait, no, *she died*, and *no one cared*. *I had to find out she was dead using my magic, an entire month after the fact.*”

“I know from your perspective they must seem incompetent-”

“You mean evil? There’s a clear line, Headmaster. They take bribes, we know this as fact. They use dark creatures for their own ends. Fact. They lose employees who turn out to be murdered by Death Eaters, and they don’t send a single agent to investigate. Fact. Is there a part of this organization, apart from the one Mr. Weasley works at, that isn’t corrupt?”

Albus sat back in his chair, looking worried. “I do wonder sometimes, if maybe it isn’t time for a change.”

“So again I have to ask,” said Susan, looking at Minerva, “Tell me what I should have done differently. She is out of control with power, you know that. She is targeting me, that much is also plain. I will not roll over for her or anyone. To do so would be to dishonor my father, in his quest to destroy evil upon countless worlds. If that means bringing her boss here so he could see firsthand what she was doing, so be it. I can’t go to the Headmaster with my concerns, he said when term started we should not see each other this year to avoid giving them more reason to fear us. My friends are in the same situation as me, and have no authority anywhere. There’s no one I can talk to, and no one I can get advice from. I can only follow my heart as best I can. It seems a very Gryffindor thing to do.”

Albus chuckled. “Of course, a Slytherin wouldn’t have hesitated to do what you did, either.”

“A little of everything, that’s me.”

“Just try to show a little bit more restraint in the future,” pleaded Minerva.

“Oh dear, you think I haven’t shown restraint. I’ll do my best to turn it down another notch, I guess.”

“Very well, you may go.”

Susan wandered the halls for a bit, thinking. She peaked into classrooms until she found the one Draco was sitting in, and waited outside the door.

After the bell rang, he came out and noticed her.

“Something I can do for you?” he asked.

“Yes. Tell me what it’s like being a Slytherin.”

“Why, you want to trade up?” he joked.

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

Draco stared at her. “You’re serious?”

“Something happened today, maybe I could… use your advice.”

“Crabbe! Goyle! I’ll catch up to you later.”

“Are you sure, boss?” asked Crabbe.

“Just go. And don’t call me that in front of other people.”

“Okay. Forgot. See you boss.”

Draco shook his head. "Sorry, you were saying?"

They walked to a bench in the hallway and sat down. "I wanted to know what it's like to be a Slytherin."

"Well, I can tell you. First of all you're discriminated against because everyone not in Slytherin thinks you're evil. So try helping a Hufflepuff out with homework, or rushing to help someone alongside a Gryffindor. Everyone will wonder what your ulterior motive is. Of course, even within Slytherin house there's a lot of gossip and backstabbing and political maneuvering for status. Everyone is afraid to form a real friendship with anyone else or they'll be considered weak. Everyone is obsessed with family trees, and how you can trace your lineage to some wizard or witch of note. Or how much your dad makes. You're looked down on as being stupid by Ravenclaws, cowardly by Gryffindors. Hufflepuffs are the absolute worst. If I hear "I may be in Hufflepuff, but at least I'm not in Slytherin," one more time I'm going to scream. Want me to keep going?"

"I guess it's tougher than I thought. I never looked at it that way before."

"What brought this all on, anyway?"

"I did something today, and the Headmaster said a Slytherin wouldn't have hesitated to do what I did. I wondered if he was right."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Worked around the latest 'educational decree' and got the Inquisitor even more angry with me. Then I brought the minister to the class and yelled at him to call her off. Right in front of her."

Draco goggled at her. "You did what? Yelled at the Minister of Magic?"

"I'm not proud of it."

"Are you sure you shouldn't be in Gryffindor? They're the stupid, brave ones, right?"

"I guess it was a little stupid, huh?"

"If you don't have any leverage over them, yeah."

"Any what?"

"You know, pictures of them in a compromising position. Evidence of a drug habit, or sworn testimony from their sex slaves. That sort of thing."

"And I would need these things why?"

"Without them you're vulnerable! She can do anything to you and without some blackmail material, there's nothing you can do."

"I was thinking it might be stupid for a different reason, but okay, I can see that."

"Always find some kind of leverage on someone you don't like. If you have to, make it up."

"You mean, like, use shape-shift magic to turn into her, and turn Harry into the Minister, and snap photos of us doing it in some sleazy hotel? Then send them to the minister with a note "I bet the paper would love these, if my demands are met they'll never see the light of day."

"You learn fast. I like the way you think, too."

"Thanks, I think. And you say people not in your house think you're all evil? It's totally undeserved."

"That's not evil, that's just common sense! How are you going to get ahead in the world otherwise?"

"Honesty, hard work, love and tolerance?"

“We both know that would never work. You were honest with the ministry about your magic and what it can do, right? And presumably you were honest about *him* coming back. Where did that get you?”

“Presumably? That’s an interesting word, coming from you. Or didn’t your father tell you anything?”

“I can’t say anything more than I have said. Answer the question.”

“A lot of trouble.”

“Exactly. Better to have kept your mouth shut, quietly gather forces, and take him out when you’re sure of victory.”

“That sounds like something he would do.”

“Of course. He’s not stupid, you know.”

“No, I don’t suppose he is.”

“So to answer your original question, no, it’s not something a Slytherin would have done. We would have stabbed her in the back, either literally or figuratively with blackmail. Not hauled her boss to the school and yelled at him. We’re the house of cunning, not the house of shouting.”

“I guess I do tend to prefer the ‘in your face’ confrontational style of problem solving than the sneaky kind. So I guess I’m not very Slytherin at all.”

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it.”

That evening, Susan talked to Luna about the same thing.

“Luna, you haven’t known me very long. How would you describe me to someone that never met me before?”

“Forceful,” she said immediately.

There was a pause.

“That’s it?”

“Oh, I get more than one word? Okay: courageous, impulsive, loyal, hard working. Powerful magic.”

“Humm, impulsive... That’s my real problem.”

“Yes. You seem to have an idea, and then act on it immediately. Like when Neville asked about Team Susan. You just joined him up at once without even thinking about it.”

“But I knew him from before.”

“And then there’s what happened this afternoon. If the rumors of your latest exploits are true?”

“They probably are.”

“Did you think about what the consequences would be for bringing the minister here? Or did you just have the thought, and then did it?”

“I just sort of did it.”

“See? You believe things will work out, at least I hope it’s that, not that you can just shout everyone into thinking your way.”

“I don’t think I do. But Professor McGonagall was right, I shouldn’t just whisk people from place to place. If anything he’s more paranoid about me than ever, as he knows I could just put him someplace. *Crap!*”

“If he does think that, maybe he’ll look into a spell to stop that happening, and Voldemort won’t be able to do it.”

“I guess I could think of it that way. So your advice, apart from letting others do what they can, magically, is to think things through more? I guess that’s what she was trying to tell me, as well.”

“Not too much though, or you’ll never do anything. Like this.” She leaned in and kissed Susan’s cheek, then smiled at her reaction and walked away. “See you later!”

And so things seemed to improve where the Inquisitor was involved. Neither tried to bait the other and while there were a lot of glares and muttering from both, a sort of cold war developed between them. Dolores “inspected” the Care of Magical Creatures class rather gleefully, as though taking out her frustrations on Rubeus, but it seemed he had *Overconfident* about things as well. At least he said he wasn't worried.

Susan continued holding S.T.F.U sessions every night (as indicated by the d8) and everyone was improving. Ron was still feverishly studying magic, math and Kung Fu, and Susan caught Hermione staring a little too long at him as he demonstrated something or got in a particularly good spell against someone. She had also been helping him decipher the notes her father had left about exactly how to fuse the three, something about probability and geometry and intuition. She said it was a fascinating exercise.

The group was still rotating between types of combat, sometimes a small group against a larger, sometimes one on one. The three sword users were also improving, Hermione having the idea to head home and download some videos from the internet about sword fighting. Everyone was impressed with the iPad, marveling how something like that could work without a trace of magic. She was now allowing her soldiers to attack at full speed, every 8 defends, and sometimes a soldier didn't even get that many before being struck. Oh, they still had a ways to go before fighting a person with actual sword training, but how many of them were you going to find in the wizard world? She even had the Kung Fu students go up against the sword using students (using bamboo practice blades she made) to see how it felt for them to fight someone with a different style. They had grumbled about “Muggle Arts” in the beginning she knew, but every member of S.T.F.U stood a little straighter, and seemed more confident than they had been before they started.

*And that was worth all the hours they've put in, even if they never use it in their lives. Knowing that they won't be caught unawares, or unable to defend themselves in any situation, is good for them.*

Susan's gifts for Ron, Harry, Hermione, Neville and Luna were just about ready, and the lab was now stocked with various potions and some failed attempts by the twins to weaponize their creations. Susan put points into her classes, and into a skill she was going to use against Voldemort, should it come to that. She now had it up to a five, having looked into putting a permanent *Augment Skill* on it and finding that would have cost her 1 more XP to do. Luckily she didn't need to actually “practice” a skill to learn it, she just increased the number on her character sheet and somehow knew what she was doing. She still had to laugh at the group, jumping around inside the barrier field to get better at magical fighting.

*I wonder what's it like, not being able to know exactly how good you are at something? To not know you can spend discrete amounts of energy, and just have to wing it? Not to mention waiting until you actually feel tired to know you can't spend anymore. How do they do it?*

Then, one morning just before Christmas, Susan was jolted awake.

*Too dark, what woke me up?*

“You have to get up,” said Sparkle, having just cast *Awaken* on Susan.

“What?” asked Susan, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. She realized there was a glow off to her right, and several other people were awake in the dorm. She looked over to see Harry’s stag Patronus standing there.

“Meet at in the dorm, something’s happened to Mr. Weasley and we need to get there,” it said in Harry’s voice. It vanished.

Susan hurriedly pulled on clothes and made her way to the common room, forgoing *Sneaking* that she didn’t have anyway for *Running* that she had at a 4. Hermione, Luna and Cho were at her side.

*Really have to cannibalize that skill group. I could use the XP for magic skills. Not the time Susan!* she berated herself, coming to a halt before Ron and Harry.

“What is it, what’s going on?” asked Susan.

“It’s Ron’s dad, I just had a vision about him being attacked!”

*Master the impulse to just go running off. Figure the situation out, then act.*

“Okay, how do you know it wasn’t a normal dream?”

“It was too clear, for one. *I just know.* It felt different, we have to hurry!”

The other girls looked concerned, but everyone looked to Susan.

“All right, I don’t disbelieve you. It’s just Luna here said I should consider things a little more before acting.” Luna smiled. “Where was he? Someplace I can get to, I assume, or you wouldn’t have called me.”

“The corridor outside the Department of Mysteries.”

“What was he doing there?” asked Ron, looking very worried.

*Oh crap.*

“I can guess. Come on, everyone. Wands out!”

Everyone called their wands out with a word, wincing as they appeared through a small hole in their hands.

*Oh yeah, that’s the stuff right there.* Susan couldn’t help but feel extremely proud of her friends at that moment, and began envisioning the symbols for *Teleportal*. She cast, rolling max, and the doorway opened.

“Dad!” shouted Ron, leaping through.

“Whatever did this could still be around, be careful!” shouted Susan. *I can’t believe I just cautioned someone to be careful. Luna really did rub off on me.*

The rest of the group also went through, forming a circle around Arthur, who was unconscious and bleeding on the floor.

“*Regeneration?*” asked Sparkle.

“*Pocket Dimension,*” Susan said by way of answer, pulling out her Dementor Slaying Knife. She stabbed it into Arthur, and he started breathing better.

“What the heck?” asked Susan, as three wounds on his legs didn’t heal, but kept bleeding. She withdrew the knife and stabbed him in the leg, but they stubbornly continued to bleed.

“Crap! Okay, try *Regeneration* then.”

Sparkle cast it, and everyone waited, but the wounds didn’t close.

“Come on, we can’t stay here,” said Susan. “If we’re all found like this, they’ll think we’re attacking the ministry. Harry, Hermione, levitate him through the portal and we’ll take him to the hospital wing.”

Luna smiled at her again, and gave a nod. As Harry and Hermione cast, everyone jumped back through the portal. “There was a time you would have just used your magic, right? Good job delegating,” she said.

“Congratulate me later, two separate spells just failed to heal these wounds. That’s not even possible! At least he should be stable, with *Regeneration* going on him to replenish his blood. Come on!”

Once back through, the group rushed to the hospital wing, Cho breaking off to go wake Madam Pomfrey. Susan sent Luna to wake Professor McGonagall, and she herself went to the Headmaster’s office.

*Where does he sleep, anyway?*

She opened the stairwell with her password, *thank goodness it still works, even if he said I shouldn’t use it*, and fidgeted impatiently as the stairs began their slow rise to the top. *Maybe I should have just used another teleportal to get there. No, trust the others, they’ll watch him. And Sparkle is there...*

Knocking on the door, it opened without apparent effort, and she found the Headmaster there.

*What time is it? He’s still up? Maybe he has magic like my Tirelessness spell?*

“There seems to be some excitement below,” he remarked. “Good evening, Susan.”

“You had better come, Headmaster. Mr. Weasley has been attacked by something in the Department of Mysteries headquarters.”

“And you learned this how? I hope you haven’t been wandering about that place when you should be asleep.”

“I was asleep, Harry saw it somehow in a vision. Ask him. I just came to get you.”

“Very well. Where is he now?”

“By now? Hospital wing. Headmaster, my magic didn’t work on his wounds!”

“That is distressing. Come, we shall descend.”

Walking quickly back to the hospital wing, Susan found Madam Pomfrey attending Arthur while the others were shoed out into a nearby curtained off area. Susan went over to them.

“How does it look?”

“Bad,” said Ron, looking scared. “She says she doesn’t know why the wounds aren’t closing.”

“Susan, and Harry, if you could come here a moment?” Albus asked, looking around the curtain. Both moved to the other side, where a pale Arthur was weakly smiling at them.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the rescue, but how did I get here?” he asked.

“That is a story I too would much like to hear. Harry?”

“I was asleep, and suddenly I was... well, you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I assure you I will not,” said Albus. “Please continue.”

“Well, I was a snake, okay? And I was heading down the corridor to the Department of Mysteries. I saw a man, Mr. Weasley, I mean, sleeping.”

“Tut tut,” said Albus.

“Do you know how boring guard duty is?” said Arthur weakly.

“I mastered- I mean the snake mastered the impulse to bite him, but then Mr. Weasley stirred, and I couldn’t be found there. I mean, the snake couldn’t be found there. The snake didn’t want to be-”

“I take your meaning,” said Albus.

“Yes, right. The snake lashed out and then I guess fled? I woke up then.”

“I see. You were, then, the actual snake?”

“In the dream, yes.”

“Albus, I can’t do a thing for this man,” said Madam Pomfrey. “He must be moved to St. Mungo’s immediately.”

“Very well. I will make the arrangements. Susan, I will depend upon you to move quickly. Gather up what belongs you need and have Ron wake his brothers. Take the entire Weasley family to the base, where you can stay for the holiday and await word of Arthur. She must not find you out of your beds. Cho and Luna, you must return to yours, and I’m certain I can depend on your silence?”

“Yes, headmaster,” they both said.

“I understand, Headmaster,” said Susan. She strained to open two *Teleportals*, one to the girls’ dorm, one to the Gryffindor common room so Harry and Ron could get their stuff, and Fred and George. *Won’t be able to do much other magic, two grade 10 spells really drags me down!*

“Wait, what about Ginny?!”

“I’ll get her,” said Luna, dashing through the Gryffindor portal.

A few tense moments later and Susan had gathered up anything that wasn’t in her *Pocket Dimension* that was laying around, and shoved it into a bag. She dropped two gifts on Luna’s bed with a hastily scrawled note, one for her, and one for Neville, and went through the portal again.

A moment later Luna came through. “She’ll be down in a moment, I told her to hurry.”

“Sorry we have to say goodbye like this,” said Susan. Luna hugged her.

“It’s okay. We’ll have plenty more, right?”

*Maybe.*

And she was gone.

With everyone there, Susan dropped both *Teleportals* and made a new one into Sirius’ house, then closed it behind them.

“Not exactly how I envisioned starting the holiday,” remarked Harry.

“What’s going on?” asked Ginny. “I find Luna of all people standing over me, saying there was some emergency, and now I’m back at the headquarters. How did she even get into my dorm, and where did she go after that?”

“Yeah, what’s up?” asked Fred.

“Come on, Sirius should be around someplace,” said Harry. “We’ll find him, sit down, and I’ll tell you the whole story.”

“And your magic failed to work?” Ginny asked, hands over her mouth. “What does that mean?”

“I wish I could tell you. It wasn’t an active resistance, Voldi wasn’t maintaining a spell on Mr. Weasley to make him keep dying. I can’t imagine a simple snake bite resisting *Alleviation* though, so I’m at a loss.”

“You should have expected it sooner or later,” said Sirius. “You’ve always been concerned about the interaction of our two types of magic, right?”

“Yeah, it could be some kind of creature trait, like that basilisk petrifying people. I couldn’t cure that with *Softstone* because they weren’t turned into stone like my magic expected. It still worries me though.”

“He’s in good hands at St. Mungo’s, they have lots of experience with stuff like this,” said Sirius.

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” asked Ginny.

“Of course!” said Susan. “We found him only moments after the attack, and even if it couldn’t close the wounds, *Regeneration* would have replaced any lost blood. He was conscious when we left, so he can’t be that badly off, right?”

“What I want to know,” demanded George, “is what our father was doing there this late at night?”

“Guarding the prophecy if I’m not mistaken,” said Susan sadly.

“You mean the one we-” Harry asked.

Susan nodded her head. “Seems we outsmarted ourselves again.”

“What’s this?” asked Sirius.

“After you told us about it we decided not to let something like that just sit around in a warehouse someplace, and stole it. The thing that’s there now is a glass replica.”

“Wait, back up. You’re telling me you broke into the Ministry building, made your way to the Department of Mysteries, found the prophesy, took it, hid it, *and* replaced it with a fake?”

“Yes?”

“And not even we knew about it!?”

“Well, that’s what happens when people get a ‘general overview’ rather than a ‘here are the things we the Order are doing.’ The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.”

“Fog of war,” said Harry.

“Right, exactly. How did you know that?” asked Susan.

“I’ve watched you play Starcraft,” said Harry.

“Oh, right.”

“You broke into the Ministry...”

“Oh come on, you can’t say you’re all that shocked, can you? It was easy. Finding the dang thing was the hard part. Do you know how many rows of those sphere things are in that room? I had to cast *Descry Object* like three times or so!”

“No, I don’t know how many sphere things are in the room because I’ve never *broken into the Ministry.*”

“Your loss. They’ve got some weird stuff down there.”

“I can well imagine. Anything else we should know about you’ve done behind our backs?”

“Apart from that thing we can’t tell anyone about, no.”

“That’s somewhat of a relief. I’ll have to tell everyone they can stop guarding that hallway, I guess.”

“No!” said Susan. “That would be a dead giveaway there’s nothing in there worth guarding. If he is after the prophesy for some reason, it would make good bait for a trap.”

“Or that we got scared off because of the snake thing.”

“I guess. Crap, I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

“Done what?” asked Harry.

“Acted without thinking. And she just warned me about that, too. I went off and grabbed him. If the snake hung around to see what happened after the bite, he got quite a show, right? A hole opening in air, us pulling him through. Even the stupidest of bad guys would say ‘huh, I wonder how they knew so quick that happened?’ right?”

“Are you saying you should have just left him to die?” asked Fred.

“No, I should have had Sparkle cover the whole hallway in *Illusion* and then fake someone stumbling into him and carrying him off.”

“Oh, I see what you’re saying,” said George.

There was silence for a moment.

“Well, I have some fatigue penalties to get rid of,” said Susan. “So I’m going up to bed. See you all in the morning.”

The next day, Harry pulled Susan aside after breakfast and told her he was worried.

“About what? You were warned this might happen, right?”

“Yes, but being warned about something and actually living through it are two different things.”

“I’m not sure what I can tell you. It doesn’t seem to be a mental thing, because you were seeing through the eyes of a snake. If it was mental, you would have been seeing through his eyes? Actually, if he was steering the snake, or if he’s an animagus that turns into a snake... see, there’s just too many variables. And given how my magic failed last night, I’m not sure even if something I made would protect you.”

“But why did I see the scene so clearly? I’ve never seen him doing anything else.”

“Really? Because you’ve said that you’ve had dreams about pouring over my sort of spell formula.”

“But those were just... it wasn’t... I don’t know.”

“Look, you’re worried. I understand that. But the headmaster didn’t lock you up, or take your wand away or anything. So he must not be too concerned with it, right?”

“I guess.”

“He may be just as in the dark as you, but he has a lot more experience with weird magical things. I would say trust him, and don’t worry too much.”

“But what if it gets worse? What if one day I can’t separate myself from him, or I start attacking people because that’s what he wants? He’s only been back a few months and already I can see what his pet snake is doing? What sense does that make, anyway?”

“I don’t know. If it got that far, and I doubt it will, I would put *Magic Immunity* on you and then make you an item with it. It’s obviously a magical thing, so that should block it out. You wouldn’t be able to use magic yourself, but it would give us time to figure out a more permanent solution.”

“Maybe you should just do that now.”

“No, I’d rather have you able to do magic. Right now it’s just when you’re asleep, so be careful. If you start seeing things he’s looking at while you’re awake... then tell me and we’ll work on it.”

“Okay.”

That afternoon, on the way to St. Mungo’s, Susan reviewed *Alleviation* in her mind.

*What can that spell not heal? It’s supposed to put everything back the way it was before it was broken. That means objects, people... could it be a temporal poison? Like it infected him in the past somehow? Regeneration should have done the job at least temporarily though, but those wounds never even began to heal. It’s so bizarre!*

“Hello, everyone!” said Arthur brightly.

They all greeted him back.

“Still no luck with the wounds?” asked Susan.

“No, they still bleed like mad if they’re not tightly covered. It’s too bad I didn’t actually see what bit me, maybe I could identify it and get a cure.”

“I could go back and take a look with *Time Window*,” offered Susan.

“No, you shouldn’t be seen around there. If someone caught a glimpse of what you were looking at...”

“I know, but if it would help that much we could work something out.”

“I’m sure it won’t be long. What’s funny is they don’t find any trace of poison in the wound that keeps it from closing up. Oddest thing.”

“They wouldn’t, *Alleviation* cures all poison. It’s supposed to cure everything.” Susan froze. “Everything... but curses.”

“He’s cursed?” asked Molly.

“That’s it. That’s the explanation. The snake doesn’t just bite you, it curses you with snakebite. That’s why it won’t heal!”

“I’ll mention that as a possibility, though I’ve never heard of a cursed snakebite,” said Arthur.

Susan, meanwhile, felt relieved. *It wasn’t that my magic failed, I was just trying to make it do something it was never intended to do. I couldn’t stab Professor Lupin and have him turn back into a human, right? I needed to make him a permanent Suppress Curse object.* “Okay,” she said. “If they can’t find the cure, I think there’s something I can do for you. But I’ll let the experts take the lead on this one.”

Harry grinned at her. “Nice of you to step back and share the limelight,” he said.

“It’s something I’m working on. Thought I would try it out, and all that.”

“We’re just glad you two are around,” said Molly. “You’ve both done so much for us. Freeing Ron, saving Ginny. We can’t ever repay you.”

“No payment needed,” said Susan gruffly.

Another Holiday is Upon Us

Time: Christmas Day

Place: Order Headquarters

And so, Christmas came to the Order. This year, Susan had actually ordered rings with the crest of their house made and enchanted them, rather than making stone charms. Ron, Harry, Hermione and Ginny exclaimed over them.

Oh yeah, Hermione showed up because she didn't really like skiing.

"So they can't just be normal, right?" asked Ron. "I mean it's okay if they are!"

Susan laughed. "Nope, they're from me, after all. I suppose you want to know the trigger word for them, then?"

"If you don't mind."

"Okay, they're primarily combat focused this year, given what we're likely to face in the future. Your other gifts were more utilitarian, hope you don't mind."

"Just tell us!" said Ginny, eager to give her first *Imbued* item a shot.

"Okay, umm, Hermione, you can go first."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at Susan.

"Okay, Hermione, your trigger word is *Doubles* and I want you to imagine copies of yourself where you would like them. Five of them."

"Okay. *Doubles!*" she cried, and suddenly there were six Hermiones in the room, all moving in sync.

"Oh wow, that's really neat!" cried Ginny. "Wait, which one was the real one? I've lost track."

"That's part of the magic, actually. Now someone has a one in six chance of actually hitting you with a spell, Hermione. Though in reality, my father's reality, it would require opposed LUCk checks and you would get a bonus to it. I don't know if that works here, but I figured it could still be useful."

"They do everything I do! It's weird, but I like it. Thanks."

"Just remember, you can add to the illusion by making a dodge, even if a spell isn't actually going to hit you. If something does hit one, it'll vanish."

"Got it." They all vanished.

"Let's see... Harry! You already know what yours is, and your trigger word is *Blade*."

"How careful do I have to be?"

"Extremely."

"Not Knockout then?"

"No, it's lethal. I figured with you taking an interest in sword fighting, better to have a lethal weapon, given our opponents."

"Okay. I'll wait until I'm outside to see what it looks like."

"Good plan. It's wind, in case you wondered."

"Okay."

"Ginn- Ron!"

"Oh, do Ginny before she explodes," said Ron.

“Fair enough. Ginny, I want you to imagine stunning someone with a bunch of sudden lights and say *Dazzle*.”

“Hey Fred, get in here!” she called.

“What’s up?” asked Fred, coming into the room.

“Dazzle!” said Ginny, staggering him, as he tried to shake off the sudden lights that surrounded his head.

“What was that?” asked Fred, looking around.

“Sorry it doesn’t last that long, you guys don’t have combat delay that I can see, so I have no idea how you would perceive his delay in combat terms. But even a second can be the difference between a wizard hitting you with a spell and you hitting them.”

“I can see how it would be useful. Thanks.”

“And finally Ron. Yours is the one I feel matches you best. Go ahead and *Accelerate*.”

“*Accelerate!*” cried Ron, and began to blur a little. “My own personal *Acceleration*, thanks. Now I don’t have to rely on Sparkle to cast it on us anymore.” He did a few punches in the air. “Yeah, I’m feeling it. Thanks.”

“Sure thing. Yours doesn’t drain energy, Ron, but all the rest do. What that means, Ginny, is that you can use the ring to death. So don’t go overboard on it, okay? No more than twenty times in quick succession, and by that I mean, in an hour. Give it twenty four hours before you use it that much again. With practice you’ll know the safe point, as you’ll get tired using it out of proportion to the task you’re doing. Don’t overdo it.”

“Got it.”

The family then went to visit Arthur in the hospital again, and Susan opened a *Teleportal* in an out of the way corner so they didn’t have to tediously cross space to get there. She was always looking behind things and around things for unobtrusive nooks she could use, and it paid off. They went up to see him, and he and Molly started arguing about stitches.

“An interesting idea,” said Susan, “But it’s going to take a lot more than that if he’s been *cursed* with snakebites.”

“You mean non-magical people actually do sew their skin up?” asked Ron.

“If the wound is bad enough, yes.”

“Wild. Say, weren’t we supposed to be headed to the fifth floor for the cafe?”

“Yeah, did we stop climbing the stairs too early?”

“Yeah, it’s still the forth.”

“Back the way we came then,” said Harry.

“Wait, is that who I think it is?” asked Ginny.

“Oh no, not him.”

“Hello!” said a familiar person, giving a big smile. “I expect you’ll be wanting my autograph then?”

“So called Professor Lockhart,” said Ginny. “You’re still here?”

“I’m not sure. Do I seem to be?” asked Gilderoy. “I do seem to get confused every now and again.”

“Ginny, what did you hit him with?” asked Ron, staring. “It’s been years.”

“I thought it was just a standard memory alteration spell I pulled out of *his* memories. But maybe it wasn’t. I’m not sorry, he was an old fraud!”

“Maybe so, but even frauds have families. Do you have a family, Mr. Lockhart?”

“Oh, I expect everyone does, somewhere. Now, about those autographs...”

“Guys, I think I’m getting the urge to be impulsive again. Any objections?” asked Susan.

“Going to hit him with the old D.S.K\* then?” asked Harry. “I suppose.”

“Of course!” said Hermione. “We caused him to be like this, we have to fix it.”

“Excuse me, he caused this to happen to himself,” said Ginny. “He was going to take the credit for the *Chamber* if you recall. I saved you guys, you’re welcome.”

“Still, his secret is long out,” said Susan, “And it would be cruel to allow this to continue. Motion passes three to one. *Pocket Dimension*.”

“Hold still, Mr. Lockhart, we’ll have you cured in no time.”

“Cured? Of what?” asked Gilderoy.

“You know what? *Dazzle*,” said Ginny, and sparkling light played about his head.

“Pretty,” he muttered. Susan rolled her eyes and stabbed him with the knife.

A woman screamed, and everyone looked over at her. It was a nurse, and she was pointing at the blade now stuck in Gilderoy’s chest.

Which was being held by Susan.

*Oops.*

“This isn’t what it looks like!” said Harry hurriedly.

“Security!” yelled the woman.

A few moments later, everyone had calmed down, and the four were sitting, heads down, in the head healer’s office.

“Honestly, what is wrong with you kids?” asked Molly. “You can’t even go to a hospital without causing a... a... an international incident.”

“It’s just the shape of the thing. If it was shaped like a magic wand, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation,” protested Susan.

“Pulling a knife in the middle of a healing ward, really? What were you *thinking*?”

“We were thinking it was the fastest way to cure Lockhart,” said Harry.

“Who promptly regained his former memories and started trying to kill you all with his bare hands, as he shouted for someone to get him his wand. There are people here who need peace and quiet, you know!”

“Ron handled him easily enough,” said Susan.

“By punching him repeatedly in the chest? That was ‘handling’ him?”

“I was holding back,” Ron said sullenly.

“That’s not the point! The ward caught on fire!”

“I still have no idea how that happened,” said Susan. “But I’m pretty sure it wasn’t my fault. In our defense we did get it put out in the end.”

“By soaking the entire place! What do you have to say for yourselves?”

“Never mind all that, explain this knife of yours to me again,” said the head healer.

“As I said, I made it to kill Dementors. It just so happens the only way I found to do that was the *Alleviation* spell I cured the Longbottoms with. I made it into the shape of a knife so I could stab them with it, because it’s expedient.”

“And it will cure anything?”

“Not anything. Mr. Weasley’s wounds are some kind of curse, and it doesn’t work on curses. Also if one were really cut up it might not heal all the damage right away, it may need more than one stab. It heals a certain amount, you see. But poisons, diseases, damage, even lost mental faculties, if they weren’t just caused by natural aging. It’s the most powerful healing spell I can ever know, just in a rather unusual form.”

“I see. We do have some cases here, hopeless cases, that we’ve been looking after for years. Let me borrow this for a half an hour, and I’ll overlook the... incident this afternoon.”

“With one condition. You tell those that are cured it was an experimental treatment, and my name is never mentioned. If it got out I had that spell, a line would form outside Hogwarts that stretched for miles, with people begging to be cured of the most minor afflictions.”

“Done.”

“Done then. A half hour, and not a minute more.”

“I’ll be back in a half hour. Thank you.”

“Don’t think this is getting you off the hook with me, any of you,” said Molly.

“What did I do?” asked Ginny. “I was against it from the start!”

“Yeah, but because you didn’t want him cured, not because you thought that would happen,” said Ron.

“You could have stopped her,” said Molly.

Ginny snorted. “Mom, the Headmaster of Hogwarts couldn’t stop her. The minister of magic is terrified of her. Voldemort himself stood before her with all of his old followers, and couldn’t stop her escaping. She’s taken out dragons, dwarves, and an eight hundred year old serpent that could turn things to stone with a look. And you want *me*, little old *me*, Ginny Weasley, to stop her? Just like that. Seriously?”

Molly glared at Susan. “I have half a mind to confiscate that knife and any other magical items you’ve made until you’re of age.”

“Right, and the next time Dementors attack we’ll all be helpless. Great plan. Pull the other one.”

“Susan, you have to learn your actions have consequences!”

“Right, and in this case, the consequence is a bunch of sick people get healed.” She held up a hand as Molly started to say something. “I know what you mean. That’s why I asked the others if I should do it or not. It’s been pointed out to me that I’m a bit impulsive. But that was, like a couple of weeks ago? It’s going to take some time to learn to not follow my first impulse. It’s taken me this far, after all. But I am trying, and they did agree.”

“And how were we to know a healer would come looking for him right that second? Or that Mr. Lockhart would act that way?” asked Ron. “He should have been pleased to have his memory back!”

“Yeah, I didn’t even play a *Disaster Strikes* card, so I don’t even get extra XP for all this. It sucks!”

“Yeah, how did this happen?” asked Harry.

*Maybe the Narrator thought it would be hilarious*, thought Sparkle, who until this time was sitting quietly on Susan’s shoulder in her *shape-shifted* fairy form.

They all just looked at each other and shrugged.

“All that aside, I am going to be writing to your mother about this whole incident,” she said.

“Oh, okay. *Teleportal*.” A hole into Susan’s house appeared, and Susan called into it.

“Hey mom, you around?”

“What is it?” said Stacy, coming into view. “Oh, hello,” she said to the others.

“Mrs. Weasley is going to write a letter to you about how I cured a guy of magically induced amnesia, didn’t realize he hated me, got into a tussle with him, and as an apology to the hospital I had to loan my healing knife to the director so they could heal a bunch of people they haven’t been able to cure otherwise. Just a heads up.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks for letting me know, I guess?”

“Sure thing! See you later! Merry Christmas!”

The hole closed.

“Very funny,” said Molly.

“Crap, I did it again! What is wrong with me?” Susan asked the ceiling.

*I’ve been asking myself that for years,* thought Sparkle.

“I think it’s because magic came so easily to me,” said Susan later that day. They were sitting around the kitchen table drinking Butterbeer and Ginny had asked why she reached for her magic for just about everything.

“Is it that easy for you?” she asked.

“Magic is part of my very soul,” Susan explained. “A *Natural Magician* like my father and me can pick up a spell intuitively, in a couple of minutes. Another type of spell caster from his world, that has more parallels to wizards here, incidentally, is called a *Scholar of Magic*. They require hours of study on each spell. Also we can use our own internal energy to shape the energies of the spell, and I have a lot of it. *Scholars* can’t. So I don’t mind dropping five to ten on every spell. If I’m not in combat, there’s not much danger of me running out in a day.

“Once I was old enough to realize I had a character sheet, and could read well enough to start going through my book, picking up magic was as natural as breathing for me. I allocated my starting *Skill Points* into *Skill Families* and I could cast spells from any planet, and be decent at it. So I did.”

“And with no restriction on using magic like we have, you came to depend on it,” said Harry. “That much was clear even back when we first met.”

“Exactly. I wonder if it isn’t just that your magic might be ‘dangerous’ if you started learning it too soon, but that you become like me, and think nothing of using it. That’s why you’re kept from it except in school.”

“Fred and George are like that, remember the trunk incident?” asked Ginny.

“I do. It’s going to be a hard habit to break, not just calling out a spell and getting a result. But Mrs. Weasley is right, and Luna is right. I have to learn to be a little more thoughtful and a little less impulsive. Wonder if I should buy off *Overconfident*.”

“That’s like your defining characteristic,” protested Ginny. “I joined this group because... well, I wanted to be more like you.” She blushed.

“It wasn’t to get closer to Harry?” Susan joked.

Harry and Ginny looked away from each other.

“Anyway, if you don’t have that, what do you have?”

“Let’s see!” said Susan, getting out her character sheet. “A Stat Penalty in STrength, Low Pain Tolerance, Curiosity, No Sense of Direction, a slight hearing problem, Deep Sleeper and a 3 point enemy, which seems to be *Inquisitor* at the moment.”

“I keep forgetting you can just look that up.”

“I agree, *Overconfident* does seem to come up more often than not.”

*Yeah, because you’re a total min-maxer,* thought Sparkle.

“We all have our negative character flaws,” said Hermione.

“Even you?” asked Susan. “Come on!”

“No, even me. If you weren’t around, I probably would have been considered a show off, because I can learn spells so quickly.”

“I guess. Glad I’m around to swoop up that title then. How about you, Harry?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” said Ron, “without Susan to prod you into studying magic like she did, you would have been a total jock at the school. And that’s it. I mean, you can play Quidditch way better than you can do spells, am I right? Without her to compare against, you wouldn’t have striven to be as good in magic as you are right now.”

“A jock? Me? I guess. What about you then?”

“I always thought I was useless. I finally found something I’m interested in though, and I even found out it works! Though I did get in trouble for it...”

“How about you, Ginny?” asked Hermione.

“I guess I’m kind of a coward,” she said.

“What?” said Susan, not believing her ears. “You? You’re in Gryffindor, how can you be a coward?”

“You’re right. Harry, I really like you, and every time you look at Cho I feel like I want to break something, possibly her.” She turned back to Susan. “There, are you happy?” She fled the room.

“We really do need to have these get-togethers more often,” said Ron, taking a pull from his bottle. “They just seem to clear the air in all kinds of ways.”

Harry was just staring out the doorway into the next room Ginny had disappeared to.

“Shouldn’t you be going after her?” asked Hermione sweetly.

“I don’t know, should I?” asked Harry, an edge of panic in his voice.

“Boys!” said Hermione, leaving the room in a huff.

As the holiday break wound down, Susan found herself at a bit of a loss as to what to do with herself. The house was now clean, and she had no *Imbuing* to do. She had spent her XP so she couldn’t learn any new spells, and the incident at the hospital kept playing in her mind.

*Should I have just left him as he was? He seemed happy enough before, but really angry afterwards. Still, I couldn’t help that he decided to hijack other wizard’s successes, now could I? He was bound to get into trouble for doing it sooner or later. It just happened to be with us, who felt sorry for him and then tried to cure him. Another wizard who got their memory erased by him and recovered it would have just jinxed him, I’m sure.*

*That brings up another point- where are the wizards and witches he put memory charms on? Maybe with him cured he can unearth them again and I can cure them, as well.*

*Why are they called memory “charms” when you’re screwing with someone’s very self? Change my memories, and you change who I am. Shouldn’t they more properly be called memory jinxes? Or memory curses? If only I had a Defense teacher I could ask.*

*Wait a minute, I do have a Defense teacher I could ask! Two of them, actually. Have to remember to ask Professor Moody or Lupin when I see them next.*

*Would others describe me as arrogant? Would they be right?*

*Luna kissed me on the cheek, does she like me? Did she like her present? I wonder if Neville likes his? How are his parents doing, I don't see them around much. Does the Headmaster have them on a light duty, given what they already went through for the order?*

*What's our inquisitors next move? Will this "truce" between us last? Will she last in the position of Defense professor if the position is really cursed?*

*Did she just say Snape?*

"Snape?" asked Harry, looking up from his chess game with Ron.

"Professor Snape, dear," corrected Mrs. Weasley. "He's here to talk to you. Come on, he says he can't stay long."

Susan hopped down off her seat and smoothed her dress. "Let's see what old crook nose has to discuss with you," she said.

"I don't think he'll be pleased to see you if he came to talk to me."

"Too bad for him. The new Susan might be less impulsive," she turned to the others, "she might not, of course." She turned back. "But you're still my friend, and I don't think he does social calls. This is business, and we're in it together."

"You're right. Come on."

They went into the kitchen where Sirius and Severus were seated at the table across from each other. They stared at each other with mutual dislike, Sirius with the burning hatred of the sun for ice, while Severus was the frosty stillness of the moon.

*Note to self: when time permits, write steamy Sirius / Severus fanfic and post to internet erotic stories website. Neither will ever see it, making it the perfect crime.*

She struggled to not giggle.

"You are not needed for this discussion, girl," said Severus.

"Yes I did have a lovely break, thank you for asking, *man*. Yours was chock full of both 'bah' and 'humbug' I expect?"

"I do not have time for this. Leave so that I may make the Headmaster's wishes known to Potter."

Susan folded her arms over her chest, making it clear she was going no-place. "Known to Harry, you mean? If you would like respect, try giving it first, and see if you don't receive a bit more in return."

"A very good point," said Sirius. "You are in my house, it wouldn't hurt you to be a bit civil, would it?"

"Why risk it? Very well, as you will not be moved, *Susan*," he said Susan as one might say "child rapist." "And you are the same, Sirius?"

"I want to know what you have to say to him. I am Harry's godfather, after all."

"And a shining example you set for the boy, I'm sure. Very well, I will continue. The Headmaster wishes for you to study Occlumency under me this term."

"I've never heard of it," said Harry.

"Obviously something to do with the vision you had," remarked Susan. "Perhaps some means of reading Voldi's mind more accurately?"

“Quite the opposite,” said Severus. “Though I suppose you deserve some small credit for deducing even that much. It is a mental discipline that will allow you to defend your mind against intrusion. Not your everyday sort of magic, but useful nonetheless.”

“Unfortunate he can’t learn to allow the flow of information only one way,” said Susan. “It would be adventitious to our side if Harry could continue getting a sense of what Voldi is thinking about,” said Susan.

“That is the thinking of a child,” said Sirius, rising to leave. “You will appear before me in my office at six pm. Monday. If anyone asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Heaven knows you could use the practice.”

“Perhaps if Harry had someone who could teach properly,” said Sirius, also getting up, “he would excel at potion making as well.”

“Does he excel in something then? I haven’t seen him display any greater aptitude than slightly below average in any discipline.”

“Maybe you just haven’t been looking hard enough.”

“And maybe you see what you wish to see, rather than the reality that is in front of you.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I believe my meaning was clear.”

“I suppose you got a lot of practice in seeing reality, after being rejected by Lilly so many times. Or was seeing her with James reality enough for you?”

“You dare bring that up?” Severus reached for his wand, and Sirius did the same.

The kitchen door banged open, and Arthur proudly walked in. “Susan, there you are! You were right! Oh.” He looked around the room. “Is this a bad time?”

“No. I was just leaving.” Severus hastily shoved his wand back into its holster and pushed past everyone coming into the kitchen behind Arthur.

“That was interesting,” remarked Susan. “So, no more curse then?”

“Exactly,” said Arthur excitedly. “All they had to do was...”

“So, Occlumency, huh?” asked Hermione a few moments later when Team Susan was together again. “Sounds like something we should all learn.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Harry. “I get taught it, and pass that knowledge onto the rest of S.T.F.U. Still, classes with him will cut into that time unfortunately.”

“It’s a good thing you guys don’t seem to have XP,” remarked Susan. “Now you have to learn some other skill on top of everything else?”

“Yeah, but the flip side is I have to have lessons with professor Snape. I can’t just write down ‘Occlumency’ and put a number next to it like some people.”

“Yeah, I guess. He called it a mental discipline, wonder if I could learn it?”

“I thought you got some sort of resistance to mental attack?” asked Hermione.

“That’s true, I should get a RESolve check, and that’s my highest stat. Maybe this skill is in place of that for you?”

“I know one way to find out,” said Hermione. “*Research.*” She started looking her book over.

“I hate to slice our time even shorter, though,” said Ron. “We don’t get much time for each group as it is.”

“I suppose a half hour for physical combat and a half hour for mental seems reasonable,” said Susan.

“Except no one but me has Voldi crawling around inside their heads.”

“True, but if our resident *Inquisitor* gets desperate for answers, she might resort to mind reading magic. I would like the group to have at least a rudimentary defense.”

“It seems to be a fascinating branch of mental science,” said Hermione, reading from her *Research* book. “Listen to this: Each practitioner of the art seems to manifest the protection differently. For example, one person may envision a net to snare those who try to read their thoughts. Another may have an opaque barrier, to obscure them. Further examples include a mirrored sphere protecting the inner recesses of the mind, showing the attacker what they wish to discover rather than the victim’s true thoughts. And finally some sort of invisibility cloak draped over the thoughts which allows the victim to passively hide and watch as their attacker struggles to find even a glimpse of thought.”

“That one sounds good for you, Harry. You’ve got that cloak after all,” said Ron.

“Yeah. Does it say which method is best, or how you go about choosing?”

“I think it just sort of works out differently for each person. You just have to create your defense and successfully envision it.”

“You know what I would want?” asked Ginny. “To have my mind be a huge fishbowl, and inside are thousands of fish. My thoughts would be at the center, and the fish would just be swimming round and round them to obscure them.”

“That would work,” said Ron. “I might want some creepy old mansion with thousands of rooms where my thoughts were hiding. And put monsters and stuff inside to scare away any attackers!”

“I think more a library with a lot of fake books,” said Hermione. “An attacker would have to take down each book and read it to find the real one.” She turned to Susan. “Do you have any mind read magic? We could get started practicing now!”

“I have mind linking magic, that allows two people to communicate without speaking, but no magic to try and break into the vault of the mind, so to speak. I do remember reading about something, though. Wait there.”

Susan got out her scroll of *Personal Dimension* and opened it up. She went and got her book, then sat on the other side of the door and looked it over.

“Apparently in my father’s travels he met people called ESPers. People with fantastic mental abilities that were not magical in nature, but rather pure mind power. He wasn’t sure if there were any hiding out on this world or not. There are some notes in the book about what they can do, and apparently there’s a spell in here to grant a tiny fraction of that ability to someone. Apparently he never took it any farther, because honestly, magic. It’s called *Psychic Power* and it’s a grade 7 spell. Seems a bit high for what it gives you, but okay. Sadly, he notes that the ability of *Mind Read* that ESPers seem to possess requires training to use. So I would also need a spell called *Precipitant Proficiency* to grant me the ability. I would get a 1 rating for every 5 I got on the check. Then I would probably still need *Augment Skill* so in total that would be a grade 7, and two grade 5 spells to do it. I would be at such a high penalty it probably wouldn’t work anyway. Sorry, I tried. I could have the book come up with a mind reading spell, but Harry had a dream about something that was happening, he’s not just reading Voldi’s mind, right?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Harry.

“There’s hope though. I’m sneaking you in to that first lesson, Hermione. He must be planning on reading your mind somehow, Harry, and that mean a spell. If you can pick it up...”

“I can start letting others practice the technique! Great idea!”

“I’ll be *Curious* to see how it works, and how Prof Snape explains the technique.”

“I’ll keep looking, maybe they’ll be some instructions in here.”

“Actually, give me a few minutes to read over this spell. I’m going to try giving you a rating in the skill and maybe you can see what it feels like!”

“Great idea. You don’t mind?”

“Mind? Casting magic? Who do you think I am?”

“Sorry, forgot who I was talking to.”

“Silly.”

And so the group that was returning to school took the Susan Express and stepped through onto the grounds directly. In order to make sure no one saw the inside of the room, Sparkle covered it with an *Illusion* of a forest. As they stepped out, a jangling blur took off a pair of glasses and hit Susan, hugging her.

“Welcome back!” said Luna brightly.

“Uff!” said Susan, the air having been knocked out of her. “How did you know where I was coming from?”

“Oh, there are ways,” she said mysteriously. Susan looked concerned. “Don’t worry, only I can use this particular one. So what does my Christmas present do? You wrote a note with a trigger word and a warning about not using it inside. I didn’t think I should try it outside either, until I knew what to expect.”

“Let’s get everyone through and this door closed, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Fair deal. Did you have a good holiday?”

“Pretty good, yourself?”

“Not bad.”

With everyone back through and going up to the castle, Susan and Luna stopped by the forest.

“Okay,” explained Susan. “I’m going to stand right here. Pretend I’m an evil wizard about to cast some hideous spell at you.”

“Does the spell look hideous, or is it doing a hideous thing to me?”

“Both.”

“Scary. Okay, so you’re about to cast a spell.”

“Stand back a little farther. Little more. Okay, now imagine me being impeded by the plant life around here, and say *Entangle*.”

Luna did, and the plants in the area reached out to grab her, which she allowed to happen.

“Wow!” said Luna, looking over the area.

“Nice, huh? Even better, if there’s no plants around the spell is helpful enough to make you some.”

“How do I turn it off?”

“Just decide you don’t want me to be entangled anymore.”

The plants went back to normal.

“I see why doing it inside might be a problem.”

“Not if there’s a bunch of people chasing you down a hallway. Then it’s perfect. But I don’t think the teachers would appreciate it, your setting that off inside the castle.”

“Right. Oh, before I forget, Neville says thank you. He said it will come in handy the next fight he’s in.”

“It should.” *What did I make him? Oh, right, a Haze item so he’s harder to hit too, like Hermione. Just a different kind so if someone figures out the one, they won’t have both of them.*

“Let’s get inside, I have some news of a new skill we’ll be trying to learn in our meeting.”

“Do tell.”

Arm in arm, the two went back to the castle to talk about Occlumency and the new schedule.

\*Dementor Slaying Knife

## Consequences

Time: 6:00 PM Monday

Place: Just outside Severus' office

"Now remember," said Susan, "We're going to be invisible, but not inaudible. Don't say anything."

"I know," said Hermione.

"Right, sorry. Okay, Harry. We'll be right behind you, and we'll see what he does."

Harry nodded. "Right."

Susan cast *Invisibility* on Hermione, Sparkle, and herself, then dragged them along with her *Phase* from *Spell Symbol*. Harry went in, and the two girls stepped through the wall into the potions office. Sparkle was there to provide an *Illusion* that the room was normal to hide the magic that was going to get them out of the room again.

*Eww, glad I didn't feel myself walking into that,* thought Susan as she looked around where they had stepped through. Various things floated in jars on shelves, and both of them passed through without resistance. Harry went to stand before Severus' desk. Susan dropped *Phase* so they could listen in after making sure they were well away from anything that could damage them when they came out of it.

"As you have summoned me, so do I arrive," said Harry, spreading his arms and bowing. *He's been spending way too much time around me.*

"You have been spending way too much time around that girl," said Severus.

Wow.

"In fact, I'm surprised to find you here without her. You two normally are joined at the hip."

*I'm not so far away as that, crook nose.*

"I thought, given your dislike of her, she should be elsewhere for this, professor."

"So you do have a small bit of sense. Astonishing. We will begin. Stand and take out your wand."

"Very well, professor. *Materialize.*" Harry's wand appeared in his hand, and he was careful not to wince at the tiny hole it made in his palm.

"How did you... *her.*"

"Professor?"

"Never mind. You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of."

Susan had struggle against laughing. *So he calls out his windblade and chops your head off. You did give him permission, after all, and you know what they say about the best defense.*

"This is teaching me Occlumency, professor?"

"I am going to attempt to break into your mind. We will see how effectively you resist. I have been informed you can successfully throw off an Imperius Curse, though it was not Alastor Moody who cast it upon you. Thus its strength may be in question. In any case, similar mental discipline will be needed for this. We will begin... now. *Legilimens!*"

Harry stood there as the spell obviously bounced off his *Barrier Against Spells* item. Severus stared stupidly down at him.

"*Expelliarmus,*" Harry said simply, and in his shock, Severus' wand flew away from his hand.

“So, will there be anything else, professor?” asked Harry, genuinely curious.

*Wait, what just happened? He didn't explain anything. He didn't even try to explain. We learned more just reading about Occlumency in the Research item then Prof Snape told him, which was nothing. No techniques, no visualizations, just a spell and then Harry's mind gets read? I don't get it. Either this guy has no actual clue what he's doing, or he just botched his Teaching check so badly Harry would have gotten a negative rating in the skill. She had a further thought. No wonder he teaches potions, all he has to do is write something on the board and say 'follow this recipe.' It's more his speed.*

“How did you do that?” Severus demanded.

“Do what?” asked Harry honestly. “*Expelliarmus?* That's a standard dueling spell, isn't it?”

“You know what I mean, boy! No one is a perfect Occlumens from birth. How did you deflect my spell?”

“Oh, I completely forgot! Susan made me this, it makes me immune to having magic cast on me.” Harry pulled out his gift from several years ago.

“That girl again.”

*Old crook nose seems to developed an eye twitch, he should have that looked at.*

“Sorry about that, it slipped my mind, Professor. I didn't realize you would be using a spell, as obviously I'm not using a spell to get into Voldi's mind.”

It didn't seem that Severus could stare with further shock, but he managed it.

“You have the audacity to *shorten* the Dark Lord's name? A tradition no doubt borrowed from *her*,” he said darkly.

*Wow, does he have the Obsessed background over me, or something?*

“That's not his name,” protested Harry. “His name is Tom Riddle, and he's a boy, just like me, that took dark magic too far. He killed my parents, and I hope he's prepared to die for it.”

“What gives you this confidence, Potter? Knowing that *she* is at your side?”

“Partially. I've worked hard to get where I am today, and I've held my own in the fights we've been in. I was the one that killed the basilisk, after all.”

*With a little help from Power Overwhelming, but you don't know that, do you?*

“Well, let me tell you something. There are those who believe she is not all that she appears. Always remember this: Death walks at her left hand.”

Susan went cold. *How does he know about what I put into my left hand? No one should know about that! If Fletcher told the Order about what I bought...*

“What do you mean, death walks at her left hand?”

“I've said too much.” He bent down to get his wand. “Just don't get cozy with her. One day she'll show her true colors and be taken down. Perhaps that joyful task will even fall to me. Now, put aside your little toy and let us continue this.”

*Little toy? With that and his Windblade there's not much you could do against him, crook nose. Toy indeed. Do you know how much that would go for at auction? More wealth than you'll ever see!*

“Now wait just a second- if Tom is standing in front of me he's not going to waste time prying into my brain. What you're doing is completely different than what I'm doing, and what you all fear he'll do back!”

“Yes, your so called *connection* to the Dark Lord is an unknown variable in all this. As I do not have it, I must simulate the phenomenon as best I can. I do this with *Legilimens*. Now do you understand?”

“So you’re taking on faith it will work, rather than any solid evidence. I see. All this may be a waste of time.”

“Exactly as I argued it, shocking as it is for us to actually agree on something. The item?”

“Very well, Professor.” Harry took out the tiny stone figure and set it within arm’s reach.

Severus cast *Legilimens* several times on Harry, who seemed to do fairly well, as Susan saw it. He managed to throw off the effects in two or three active actions as she saw time, which she felt was pretty good. Severus, of course, said he was dismal and gave him weird advice.

“You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep- empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

“Very well, professor,” answered Harry, plainly confused.

*As well he should be, is Hook Nose teaching him Meditation or Occlumency? Occlumency depends on having your visualized barrier in the ‘corner of the eye’ so to speak, so you can solidify it if you feel someone trying to get access to your thoughts. The correct advice would be to visualize this barrier all the time, so pretty soon it’s a habit and you’re never without it. At least according to the book, which I would trust over that so called lesson. None of this makes sense.*

Harry left, and Hermione started pulling away, but Susan held her back a moment. She wondered if Severus would do anything interesting, but it seemed he just went back to doing grading.

*Pity.*

Susan activated her next casting of Phase from Spell Symbol and was relieved to not see the flash of magic appear, as the room was still covered by Illusion. They stepped through and went to the common room to find Harry.

“Did you understand what he was babbling about?” Harry asked Susan.

“Not exactly. Not being what I appear, my foot. I’m the daughter of a guy not from this world, not some demon in disguise. And what was that nonsense about death at my left hand?” *As obviously I’m not telling them about what I ordered. Especially if Voldi can peek into Harry’s mind and know what he knows. He’ll defend against it and it’ll be worthless.*

“You do a lot of the gesturing for your spells with your left hand,” said Hermione.

“I guess, but I’m left handed if you hadn’t figured that out. He seemed to think it was something specific though.”

“He was really shaken when I disarmed him. Did you see his face?”

“Yeah, for a guy who kept telling you to master your thoughts, I think he could take a few remedial lessons himself.”

“You did learn the spell though, right?” asked Ron.

“Yes, but given what I saw it do to Harry, I’m not sure I want to use it.”

“Hey, I would rather have you poking around my subconscious than him!” protested Harry, “and I want more practice before Wednesday. That guy is the worst teacher ever! Now that we’re back I want to see if the library has any books on Occlumency. Obviously I’m not going to get anywhere relying on *his* teaching.”

“Something else odd I noticed,” Hermione remarked. “He was furious with you for calling Voldemort ‘Voldi’ like Susan does, and kept calling him ‘the dark lord.’ That sort of sounds like something a Death Eater would do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, practice. Lots and lots of practice. I don’t want that guy near my brain again. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go visualize my invisibility cloak in finer detail so I can throw it over my thoughts when needed. See you all later.”

As the group came down the stairs the next morning, it was a sullen and quiet room they walked into. The teachers looked more worried than they ever had before, and conversations were whispered, not spoken in a normal voice.

“Who died?” asked Susan to Luna, as she sat down to get something to eat.

“No one yet, but it’s only a matter of time,” she said sadly, showing her a newspaper.

“Oh crap,” said all of them together. There was a picture of a tall, triangular building, billowing smoke, that seemed to be set into a small island someplace.

“Azkaban,” Susan said darkly, reading the headline. “We meet at last.”

**Mass breakout from Azkaban  
Ministry fears Peter is “rallying point”  
for Death Eaters**

“That’s right, you could go there now from this picture?” asked Hermione.

“Yup. I knew I would have to find out what it looked like sooner or later, but this isn’t how I wanted to do it.”

“Don’t suppose the minister will finally come around?” asked Ron.

“Probably not. At least your godfather won’t be blamed, Harry.”

“Yeah, can you imagine? It’s weird though, I could have sworn I saw his name there for a second.”

“You were imagining things. Why now, though?”

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Why break them out now? I mean, the people there were the most loyal to him, right? They didn’t say they had been acting under a curse, they admitted being his followers. Why did he wait so long to free them?”

“Probably researching a spell or two to help,” said Harry.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. He’s feeling confident, so he puts on his traveling shoes and stages a little breakout.”

“Oh, I’d love some traveling shoes!” said Luna brightly. “Do they let you take ten steps instead of one, or just make you walk faster?”

“Whichever you wanted, if I was making them. Crap.”

“What?” asked the group.

“Pretend I’m the minister of magic. I’m paranoid about a little girl, who shall remain nameless. This little girl has repeatedly made threats about taking Azkaban out, and I know she can scare Dementors into doing stuff. What if I now believe this girl has offered these ten escapees their freedom for their loyalty?”

“You would never ask for help from Death Eaters,” said Harry.

“I know that. You know that. But does he know that?”

“So you’re asking what you would do?” asked Luna. “Tell your inquisitor at the school to step up her efforts to expose the plot.”

“Exactly. This isn’t going to end well.”

“There’s something else that hasn’t ended well,” said Hermione sadly. “Take a look at this.” She pointed out the article about Broderick Bode being strangled with Devil’s Snare in the hospital. The article went into detail about how the plant had been overlooked because of a small fire that had broken out earlier in the week, and the incident with Lockhart.

“He’s dead because of us?” Ron asked, aghast.

“We would have recognized that plant, we’ve seen it before,” Hermione said sadly. “And if we hadn’t caused that commotion...”

“If I hadn’t you mean? If we had just walked him back to his bed we would have seen the plant and alerted them. That’s what you’re thinking.”

“We can’t say it would have happened that way.” Hermione seemed to be trying to convince herself as much as Susan.

“We would have walked right by it,” said Harry bitterly. “We could have saved him. All because of stupid Lockhart trying to kill us when Susan healed him.”

“No, all because stupid Susan had to go showing off again. I’ll see you later.”

Susan felt she had to put some distance between her and her friends. She wandered the nearly empty halls, somehow more concerned with the death of one man she didn’t even know than the escape of Death Eaters. They could be dealt with.

“You can’t hold yourself responsible,” said a voice near her feet.

“Sparkle! You scared me. I didn’t know you followed me.”

“I am your *companion*, you know. We’re in this together.”

“I know. I just feel like for all the good I’ve done, if it means the death of one person, was it all worth it?”

“Like Hermione said, there’s no guarantee you would have noticed that plant. And if you start feeling responsible for every person you pass on the street because you didn’t plunge your knife into them, on the off chance they’ll die of some disease the next day, you’ll go mad.”

“I guess. It’s just we were right there!”

“Yes, and circumstances were against you. I mean, think about it this way- with all the dangerous things you’ve done it’s lucky you’re all still alive.” *Not that you aren’t PCs, and who kills off PCs in the middle of a story? Somebody who doesn’t care about backlash from fans of the story, that’s who.*

“I feel how I feel, and I feel like it’s my fault.”

“My telling you it wasn’t isn’t going to help, but I’ll say it anyway. If that man was supposed to die that day, he was going to die. Wouldn’t have mattered by what.”

“You mean like an object with *True Owner* having to come back?”

“Something like that.”

“I don’t know. That sounds like philosophy or something. Fate. I’m not sure I even believe in that sort of thing.”

“You think your father worried about every person on every world he visited? Did he feel bad that in the course of saving a whole planet, if one or two innocent bystanders may have been hurt or killed?”

“If he was any kind of man to be respected, yes!”

“Okay, maybe that was a bad example. I’m just saying, you can’t lose focus over this.” *Though I suppose some might call this character development?*

“I know. It shouldn’t have hit me this hard. And I do tend, on average, to do more good than harm, that’s for sure.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe I’ll build him a little monument in the *Dimension*. At the very least someone will remember his death, and that will remind me to think things through a little more.”

“It’s your *Dimension*, you can do whatever you want with it.”

“Stupid Lockhart, it’s all his fault, really.”

“There’s the Susan I know.”

The next two months passed without incident, though not for lack of trying on the part of Dolores Umbridge. Another “decree” was passed, not aimed at Susan specifically this time, which gave her a slight smile. Apparently teachers had been talking about Death Eaters and the breakout, as the Decree disallowed them from giving “information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.”

This of course caused all manner of hilarious complications as teachers could no longer give advice relating to clubs, Quidditch maneuvers after games, or career advice. It was hastily amended to read “without the Inquisitor being present.”

During this time Susan thought more about Luna’s offer to publish her account of the Voldemort Resurrection, as more and more people were coming to her to ask for her story. She knew Harry was also getting a lot of questions about it.

One bright spot was that with Hermione’s help, Harry was starting to get the techniques down for Occlumency. It seemed having a teacher that actually cared, and give you useful feedback about what they could and could not see helped tremendously. Severus had still told Harry nothing of the actual technique, but seemed grudgingly impressed by the fact he was actually making progress.

“Honestly, it’s like he didn’t expect me to make any progress, so he didn’t even try to teach me the technique. He let one tip slip out in an unguarded moment, so I know he knows more than he’s letting on. Thank goodness I have two friends that love to obsessively look stuff up,” he remarked after a particularly grueling session.

“Yeah, with his so called lessons,” added Ron, “all he would have succeeded in doing is make Harry feel useless he wasn’t learning the technique and probably making it easier for Voldi because of all the attacks his mind has undergone.”

Several members of S.T.F.U had agreed to allow Hermione access to their minds, and were also making progress. With others to compare to, Hermione was also learning other avenues of attack, and how to tell what was most effective at blocking her. This cycle of reinforcement kept everyone interested and sharpened all their skills.

Combat training, both unarmed and armed, was also moving along, and Ron was now doing excellent in classes strictly involving magic.

“It’s just a matter of paying attention to the movement and getting the pronunciation of the words right,” he said. “Can’t imagine why I had trouble before.”

“I tried to tell you!” said Hermione, not unkindly.

And so Valentine’s Day came around, and Harry said he was meeting Cho to go into the village together that day.

“You sly dog!” said Ron, elbowing him.

“Quit it!”

“I’m going to be walking around with Luna,” said Susan, “So it’ll just be you and Hermione, I guess. You sly dog.” She elbowed him.

“Quit it!”

They all laughed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go with Ginny?” asked Susan.

“Why do you keep wanting to get me together with my sis- oh, you were talking to Harry.”

Everyone pretended they hadn’t heard him.

“I don’t know,” said Harry at last. “I just feel it’s right, seeing Cho now.”

“Oh, one of *those*,” Susan said knowingly. “Carry on then.”

And so Luna and Susan walked about the village, talking about various things. Sparkle padded along by their side, happy to get out of the castle for a while.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” said Luna, looking around. “Everyone freaked out about Sirius being free, but he was innocent. Now ten actual Death Eaters have escaped and there’s not a Dementor to be found.”

“Two reasons for that,” said Susan simply. “One, if any did show up here the minister knows I would kill them on sight. And two, they probably would only come to attack, having now probably joined Voldi’s side.”

“It just worries me nothing seems to be happening where they’re concerned.”

“Me too. I’d look for them, but why do the ministry’s job for it, as they didn’t even ask.”

“Wouldn’t it just bounce back anyway? I’m sure they’re all protected now.”

“That too.”

“Do you think you might have handled him wrongly when you first met?”

“I’ve actually thought about that a lot. But it all comes down to that prison. I realize intellectually it’s as much a prison for the guards as it is for the people in the cells. But just the thought of that man, sitting in his house, probably served by elf slaves, while other people have the life leached out of them a tiny sliver at a time; It makes my blood boil. He’s not the one who set the system up, I shouldn’t blame him. But he allows it to continue, and isn’t that just as bad?”

“But telling him you’re going to swoop down and destroy the whole place, what choice did he have but to react the way he did?”

“I know. But then there was all that others stuff- not giving Sirius a trial, losing one of their workers and not even bothering to search. It all adds up.”

“But isn’t he just a cog in the machine? You don’t dislike him personally, do you?”

“No, I have nothing against the man personally. He might be an idiot, but I don’t think he’s malicious in what he does.”

“You just think you could do better.”

“Heck no! I don’t want his job. You know how much paperwork is involved being minister? I just think it could be done better, maybe by someone who was a little more caring.”

“What about Headmaster Dumbledore? You think he wants the minister’s job?”

“He never indicated to me that he did. I think he’s happy just running the school, honestly. I mean he turned the job down once, right? If he wanted to be minister we would have him.”

“Are you sure? He never said anything about a private army, or your training some kind of army?”

“Luna, are you feeling okay? You know full well what we’re doing!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. So, about the army...”

“Just a second.” Magical symbols spun around Luna as Susan began casting, touching her arm.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Nothing to be worried about. *Magic Immunity!*” Luna staggered, clutching her head. Susan grabbed her. “Are you okay?”

“What happened to me? What was I saying?”

“Thought so. You were being controlled. Do you remember anything?”

Luna looked confused. “I... don’t know. Something about finding out what you were up to, I think?” She looked terrified. “I’m sorry! I didn’t know what I was doing!”

“It’s okay, Luna. It’s not your fault. Ron got hit by the same thing first year, and I know you well enough now to tell you were acting funny. With Ron I didn’t know him, so I couldn’t tell.”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know. For now...” She glanced around. “Don’t say anything more. A certain *someone* could be lurking around invisibly. Hey Sparkle, you learned that *Detect Enemies* spell, didn’t you?”

“I did. Just a second. *Detect Enemies.*” She concentrated. “Someone is moving away at a brisk pace, heading back in the direction of the castle.”

“Figures. I need a spell that can make invisible things glow or something, so I can target them.”

“What about, say, *Detect Invisibility?*”

“I don’t know if their magic is like our magic of *Invisibility*. It would show someone under a cloak, but I think their actual spell is more like a camouflage.”

“*See life?*”

“A grade 8 spell just for that? Are you nuts?”

“It is rather high. I would think *Visibility* or *Shining Magic*. Grade 5, they aren’t too bad. It’s just leaning a spell I’ve wanted once in how many years? But doing it from writing takes too long. Oh well, we’ll think about it.”

Luna was still clutching Susan’s arm for support. “Hey, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I will be. Having that spell forcibly ripped away from you like that isn’t the easiest experience, you know?”

“How about some hot chocolate? Will that make it all better?”

“Oh, it might be a start,” replied Luna, a twinkle in her eye.

Inside Madam Puddifoot’s tea shop, Susan and Luna walked passed Harry and Cho with a grin.

“Join us!” Harry said, springing up from his seat. “Please!”

“No, no, no, you two have fun,” said Luna, grinning.

Susan, however, beckoned them with a crooked finger on each hand. They leaned in close.

“Listen, Luna was under the Imperius Curse and was pumping me for information she already knew. Three guesses who she was going to report back to. Keep your eyes open.”

“Should we head back?” asked Harry.

“No need for that,” Susan answered. “Just make sure the people you’re close to act in character. In fact...” She touched Cho cast *Magic Immunity* again. She didn’t react. “Okay, you’re clean.”

“What about Harry,” protested Cho.

“He has that charm I made him to be immune to spells. She couldn’t cast on him if she tried all day. Neither could I, if it came down to it. So he can’t be cursed.”

“Oh.”

“Have fun, you two.”

They went to another table, giggling like... well, teenage girls actually.

“I think I want to do it,” Susan said a few minutes later.

“You don’t think we would be rushing into it?” asked Luna, curious.

“What do you mean? You asked me if I wanted to publish months ago. With what’s happened, I think the time is right.”

Luna recovered magnificently. “That’s what I mean- doing it right after that is sort of reactionary, isn’t it? Wouldn’t people think, why now? Why not when it first happened?”

“I can make some changes at the beginning. You know, ‘in light of recent events and no answers given by the ministry’ sort of thing. Make it look like I’m stepping forward despite the ministry not wanting me to all this time.”

“Okay, that seems reasonable. Do you want to clear it with the Headmaster first?”

“I probably should. Talk to your father and see if he’ll do it. Without that we’ve got nothing anyway. By then I should have my answer.”

“Okay. I’ll owl him tonight.”

“Make sure to use code or reference it indirectly, that one owl got attacked, remember?”

“I always write to him in code.”

“Oh. Sensible.” She gave a little laugh. “Owl him tonight. Only in the magical world could Owl be a verb.”

That evening Susan stuck her head through a small *Teleportal* into the Headmaster’s office.

“Excuse me,” said softly, seeing no one was around.

Albus looked up. “Susan! Have you lost weight recently?”

“Very funny. Would you mind if I had Luna publish the account at this point?”

“Are you prepared for what will come after?”

“All that needs to happen for the bad guys to win is for good men and women to stand and do nothing,” Susan quoted.

“Very well, I wish you luck.”

“Good night.”

Susan's Fury

Time: Monday Morning

Place: Great Hall

Dozens of owls swooped in to the great hall at mail time, prompting Susan to begin wondering how you trained dozens of owls to either all arrive at the same time, or wait around until a specific hour to deliver mail.

*Can owls tell time? If they can tell time, are they intelligent? If they're intelligent, how intelligent are they? Time is a human invention, for owls to understand it wouldn't they have to be as smart as humans? Snakes can talk to certain wizards who have that Parselmouth background, how smart are they, usually? They don't act smart. Maybe they're smarter than we are, to stay hidden for so long. What other animals might have human-*

"They're all for us?" Harry asked, as owls dive-bombed them.

"What?" Susan snapped out of her reverie.

"These letters, they're addressed to us."

"Into the fire, you think? The last time I got letters it turned out badly, if you'll recall."

"I do. How about this, let's let someone other than you open some, and if they think you should read them..."

"Here you go, Hermione," said Susan, shoving them over.

Hermione silently read one after another, sometimes looking happy, sometimes annoyed.

"Go ahead and read them," she said.

They did.

"Mail already?" asked Luna, coming over. "It was just put out this morning, too. Positive responses, I hope?" She held up a copy of *The Quibbler* and Susan smiled as she was the front of it.

**-IN HER OWN WORDS-  
THE LONG NIGHT RETURNS  
WHAT HAPPENED THE NIGHT  
TWO KIDS SAW TERROR REBORN**

"Not bad, not bad at all!" remarked Susan. "I like the headline."

"Thanks. Dad made a few corrections and things to your grammar, I hope you don't mind?" asked Luna.

"I only got a thirteen on that check, I'm not surprised."

"A thirteen isn't bad, is it?" Harry asked.

"I had *Augment Skill: Writing* on at the time, so yeah, actually it was."

Hermione was scanning the article. "This is different than what you actually told us."

"Yeah, I figured it would only cause confusion if I-"

Cho ran into the room, grabbed up Harry, shouted "You actually stunned He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" and planted a kiss on him that went on long enough to attract Dolores' attention.

"What's going on here!?" she demanded. They broke apart sheepishly, both bright red. Dolores caught sight of the paper. "Is that- What did you do?"

“Here,” said Susan brightly. She got out a pen and signed the front page with a flourish. “Signed copy, just for you. That’ll be worth some gold someday, hang on to it.” She bumped a finger against the side of her nose.

Dolores’ face quivered and twitched as various emotions fought for their time in the spotlight.

“We at the ministry have tried and tried to be patient with you,” she said at last. “But I can see now that you won’t listen to reason. To think you would go so far is this! I am shocked at your behavior.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t bother me very much, coming from you,” said Susan darkly.

“We shall see about this!” She walked off.

It wasn’t two hours later that a new decree, number 30, had gone up. It was the shortest one yet.

***Any student found in possession of the magazine The Quibbler will be expelled.***

“Does she really expect it to be that easy?” asked Ron at lunch. “It seems people are having a delightful time finding ways to hide *The Quibbler* in plain sight. One of the mirrors in the boy’s bathroom on the third floor now has a scrolling line of text going across it. Guess what it reads?”

“Something about a certain night?” asked Susan. “Written by yours truly?”

“Exactly.”

“Why is the version you wrote for the paper and the version you told us different?” asked Hermione.

“That’s easy. For one, I don’t mind explaining my magic to S.T.F.U, they need to know exactly what I can do and what I can’t if they’re going to have any faith in my abilities. But the population at large doesn’t need to know what I can do. To say that, with time, Voldi can basically blow up the earth if he wanted to would just cause confusion because they don’t know my magic can do that sort of thing. And to write about him *stealing* my magic would only make things worse.”

“Wait, you could blow up the earth?” said Ron, disbelieving.

“I admit, it would take some preparation. I would need to drain the energy from a sizable number of people. Then put *Energetic Accumulation* on, then unleash it all in something like *Solar Orb* or *Elemental Storm*. With fifty people’s worth of energy in it, my rating would be, to use round numbers, a thousand or so. That’s a sphere a thousand kilometers in diameter, and twice that gets damaged immediately. Then I let it go, and it doubles in size, causing damage out to four thousand kilometers. That would turn the United States into a crater, anyway. The aftermath of such an explosion would probably kill the rest of the world eventually. Change that to a hundred people, or more? That’s a planet busting spell right there.”

“No wonder you were freaking out before,” said Ron. “And you said your father is more powerful than you? If Voldi could do something like that with your magic, that he stole...”

“Ah, but when you’re talking about that kind of prep work for one spell, it hardly matters. His magic had more oomph, and he had more energy, that’s all. I have no idea how much energy Voldi has, or what spells he’ll prioritize creating.”

“Oh.”

“You seemed to give Voldi more credit in the article, too,” continue Hermione.

“Well, I had to, didn’t I? Without the explanation of why he just stood there and let Harry stun him, he would look really stupid. I figured that might make him a bit angry. I know I would have been, if the situation were reversed.”

“So you just made his magic fizzle?”

“I figured that would be easiest. I even wrote that one of the Death Eaters shouted ‘My Lord, I told you it was too soon after your resurrection, your magic is not yet recovered!’ as we got away.”

“Which explained why he didn’t immediately break his followers out of prison, either. You figured he just recovered fully, and mounted the attack immediately afterwards. It fit together pretty nicely.”

“I thought so. It presented him in a way that was scary, but scary in a way wand using people could understand. I also put in that I hoped his magic was gone for good, sacrificed for the resurrection ritual. That’s why I didn’t post the article right away, so people wouldn’t panic. Now that it’s been proven he’s powerful again, I had to speak out. I’m pretty proud of the way I told enough of the truth to hold together, but not the exact truth.”

“Have people been bugging you about it, Harry?”

There was no reply.

“Harry!”

“What?”

Hermione smiled sweetly. “Your lunch is not going to eat itself, Harry.”

“Oh yeah, lunch!” He started eating like he was ravenous. “Lunch is great, isn’t it?” he asked, mouth full.

“What I don’t understand,” said Ron, “is why she kissed him now? She knew what went on that night, we told her already.”

“Maybe seeing it in print really made it hit home? I don’t know,” said Susan. “I feel sorry for Ginny though.”

“I know. Even after confessing, Harry still goes for the Asian girl. Why is that, do you think?” asked Hermione. She turned to Susan. “Be honest, if you had the choice between a redhead and an Asian girl, which one would you pick?”

“Is this a trick question?” she answered after a moment. “I would either just take them both, or have a cage match and winner takes all.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s the only fair way. There’s enough of Susan to go around.” She winked. “And if the two girls couldn’t get along with each other well enough to have me as the tasty cream in the iced girl cream sandwich, one of them deserves to be taken down in the ring.”

“You’re impossible.”

“That’s me, the impossible girl.”

That evening, after a very successful day of making the Inquisitor run herself ragged trying to find copies of *The Quibbler*, Susan heard a tap-tap-tapping upon her window as she got undressed. There seemed to be a large, dark bird outside, carrying something in its beak. Susan let the bird in, and held up a finger for it to perch on. It proffered the tiny scroll, and once Susan had taken it, flew away.

*Was that a raven, tap-tap-taping, on my window glass this eve? A darkish sort of bird to send this message I received. Who doesn't use an owl to send their message anymore? And will this raven, as departing, happen to say "nevermore?"*

It didn't. It just left. In fact had it known Susan's thought it would have secretly resented the implication it would say something so foolish and nonsensical. But no one knew that, so we'll just get back to the story.

Susan shrugged, and did a *Magic Sense* on the parchment paper as she moved into the light.

*Nothing.*

She opened the tiny scroll, and upon it were these words:

*Susan,*

*Thank you for not making me look the fool.  
Perhaps one day I can repay the favor.*

*L.V.*

*Of course,* thought Susan. *Why would he use something as mainstream as an owl to send messages?*

Then she froze.

*I just let that bird in. It could have been him, shape-shifted into a bird! I'm going to have to be much more careful from now on, given he knows I'm stupid enough to allow strange animals into the castle. Stupid-stupid-stupid Susan. Negative a million Susan points!*

A full week went by, with no more nocturnal messages, and the whole week, Susan pondered telling her Team about the message. *Would they take it well? To think that Voldi actually sat down and wrote me a thank you letter, it makes him seem more human. But all their lives they've been taught to think of him as inhuman. That the magics he did made him a monster, and no longer a man. I've spoken to the younger version of Tom, and he seemed a bit like me. He just wanted justice. What turned him into the person everyone feared? Was he just caught in circumstance he couldn't deal with any other way? Made into a villain, like the ministry has with me? But that wouldn't explain Death Eaters, would it? He must have gone bad at some point, thrown his morals away for achieving his goals. How easily can I go down that same road?*

It was the next evening, when Susan was doing homework, that she got her answer. The silvery Patronus of Albus Dumbledore swooped down to her and quickly said "Susan, come immediately to the office of Professor Umbridge. Do not cross the intervening space." It vanished.

Susan looked at the others and Sparkle leapt up from where she was sitting nearby. "Go!" said Hermione, looking terrified. "Something awful must have happened!" But Susan was already casting. "*Teleportal!*"

The hole opened and there were Albus and Dolores, standing over the writhing form of Luna Lovegood. It looked like she was having some kind of seizure or fit, thrashing about on the floor. She was blue, and getting weaker.

“What did you DO?!” Susan shouted, jumping through the hole. Hermione gasped behind her, and Sparkle followed. Susan unsheathed the knife from her leg, where she had been wearing it lately. She wanted it a bit closer than in her *Pocket Dimension*, after everything that had happened recently. Just in case.

She plunged the knife without hesitation into Luna’s chest, and she gasped, muscles going limp as though strings controlling her from above had been cut.

“Luna!” she cried, kneeling and cradling her head. “Luna, please be all right!” She pulled the knife out.

Luna’s eyes fluttered open, and she took in great lungfuls of air as though coming up from deep underwater. “Hey, you...” she weakly said at last. “You came.”

“Of course I came,” said Susan, tears forming in her eyes. “I’ll always come for you, no matter what. Across time and space if I have to.”

Albus laid a hand on Susan’s shoulder. “I’m glad that worked.”

“Yes,” said Susan bitterly. “After all, tomorrow’s headline could have read *Dolores Umbridge Accidentally Murders Hogwarts Student*. Wonder how secure her position would have been after that?”

Luna brushed a tear from Susan’s cheek. “Hey, it’s okay. You saved me, so no tears now. Only smiles.”

“You should take her to Madam Pomfrey at once,” said Albus. “Your magic is miraculous, but there may be further complications. Let me talk to Professor Umbridge about this, alone.”

Susan ignored him. “Can you stand?”

“I think so,” Luna heaved. “What happened to me?”

“That is exactly what I am going to find out. Come on, let’s get you up.” Susan helped Luna up, and crossed the office to the still open hole in the air. She passed Luna over to Hermione. “Take her there, okay? I’ll be along after I’ve taken care of some business here.”

“Don’t do anything-”

Hermione was cut off by the *Teleportal* closing. Susan stared at the cat dishes on the wall for a moment. She allowed herself to fully experience the rage that was building in her heart.

*Okay, thought Old Susan, I get to come out one last time, right?*

*She almost killed Luna, thought New Susan.*

*Glad we’re agreed.*

Magic started to crackle in the air around Susan, as her fury mounted. Her hair began to stand on end and even the cats cowered back from where she was standing. The room got darker and her eyes, unseen by her, went black as coals. She looked behind one shoulder.

“I’ll only ask you this politely *once*. What did you do to her?” Susan’s voice was steel.

“I... I don’t have to answer to you,” said Dolores, moving slowly away from where Susan was standing. “Headmaster, perhaps we should-”

“*Hypnotic Field*,” cast Susan, using maximum energy, and taking the whole 2.5 seconds to cast. She got a 27 total on the check, which there was no way Dolores could beat.

“Sorry, Sparkle,” she said, as the *Field* was larger than the room she was in, and caught the Headmaster and Sparkle as well. *And perhaps some people out in the hall? Oh well.* “Not to worry, this will only take a moment.”

She went over and cast *Energy Drain* on Dolores, carefully draining exactly 29 energy.

*I want her weakened, not unconscious. Not knowing her ENDurance and RESolve make that tricky, but about 30 is a good number. This way even if she put energy into her STrength check to break out, she'll just go unconscious instead. If it works that way for them, and it must, our physical laws aren't that different, just expressed more exactly for me.*

She now had 102 energy, and plucked the wand from Dolores' hand. She went to the window, opened it, and chucked the wand out. She gave it a little wave. "Bye bye!"

"*Immobilize*," she cast, using 8 of her stolen energy and taking the extra time. She got a 19 total, and doubted the slightly gone to seed inquisitor could beat that even without drained energy and the *Field* restricting her mental processes. She stared hard at Dolores, wondering what she was thinking right now.

"Don't worry, I won't kill you," she said sweetly. "You're going to give a message to the minister tonight, so you at least have to be able to talk."

She looked over at Albus. "Ah yes, the Headmaster. Better make sure he can't interfere in this." She walked over and searched his robes for his wand, which she pulled out.

"Nice wand. Distinctive." She held it up with two fingers and swished it about. "Maybe I could sell it- The Wand of Albus Dumbledore. Bidding begins at 100,000 Galleons."

Susan, of course, didn't realize bidding on *The Elder Wand* should start at a million, but we'll forgive her that ignorance.

She stuck the wand in her *Pocket Dimension* and walked back to Dolores. "I'll allow you to talk again," she said, waving a hand and dropping the *Field*. "I hope I like what I hear."

"This is outrageous!" shouted Dolores, struggling. "Free me at once!"

"Or what?" sneered Susan. "You'll make a *decree* at me? I've had just about enough of you and your paranoid delusions, *Inquisitor*. I'm going to ask a second time, and I hope I get an answer. What... did you do... to Luna?"

"Albus, please! Don't let her hurt me!"

Albus gave a sort of half shrug, like, "You saw her take my wand, what do you want me to do about it?"

"ANSWER ME!" yelled Susan, and one of the nearest plates shattered as magical energies swirled and danced around Susan.

"Veritaserum! I gave her Veritaserum, that's all! She shouldn't have reacted that way, I don't know what went wrong!" Dolores struggled against the magical bonds, now looking terrified as her situation began to become clear to her.

Susan's anger deepened. "I do. Our magic interacted again. I made it so none of my cultists could tell you anything about what we were up to, in case one of them was an agent of yours."

Dolores mouthed *cultists?* disbelievingly.

"Then you went ahead and tried to magically force her to tell you. By the way, Headmaster, did you know this woman put the Imperius Curse on Luna before we went out on Valentine's day?" Dolores paled. "Remind me, that's a life sentence in Azkaban if it got out, right? It would take some doing to prove, of course, but I could do it. Because that's what I do, you see. I prove things, unlike your ministry. And unlike you, that just sort of flails around doing all the wrong things.

“Anyway, I noticed it and cleansed her easily, so I guess *Magic Immunity* beats *curse*. Seems our magics were at equal strengths this time, and she tried to tell you, and not tell you, simultaneously. Had I been any later, her death would have been on your conscience. Yours, *Inquisitor*, not mine. Your stupid, *STUPID* quest to find out what we’re up to. You want to know? Huh? We’re going to kill Voldemort for you, as your ministry is too inept to do so. That’s all I can tell you. Now where is it?”

“The Veritaserum? The desk!” She looked over at it.

Susan rummaged through it, grabbing a bottle out. She spun. “This?” Dolores nodded, and Susan smashed it on the floor.

“*Telekinesis*,” Susan cast, lifting Dolores in the air. “You’re coming with me. *For Sacrifices Made*.” 25 soldiers appeared in the room around Susan. Dolores gasped.

“What are you going to do? Where are we going?”

“Shut up,” said Susan. Dolores tried to cower back. “Follow me,” she said to her *Legion*. “Anyone who tries to interfere, *politely* detain them,” she said to them. She walked past the Headmaster, and the tiny part of her not consumed by rage wondered why he wasn’t even trying to talk her down. Perhaps he was too busy staring at the dark pits she couldn’t see that used to be her eyes, wondering if this was it, if she had made her choice and would now take the dark path he feared.

And so, Susan along with a floating, helpless Dolores and a rather worried Albus marched through the halls. Dolores was struggling and calling for people to free her, but everyone took one look at Susan’s face and the army behind her, and they shook their heads. They weren’t stupid. Sparkle brought up the rear. Susan was back down to 80 energy.

Susan looked over the door she stopped at, the office of Severus Snape. “*Lies*,” she said, touching her bracelet.

It was locked, so she cast *Elemental Bolt* on the lock, melting it to slag, then kicked the door in. The crash resounded through the halls, and things in jars lining the walls shattered and chinked together.

“What is the meaning of this?” Severus demanded, popping up from his desk and going for his wand. “You? Albus, what’s going on?”

“I’m afraid she’s in control at the moment,” said Albus easily. “You’ll have to ask her. Though I’m pretty sure I know what her demand is going to be.”

“Veritaserum,” said Susan. “How much do you have on hand?”

“I gave my one bottle to the Inquisitor,” he answered smoothly.

*Lie*

“As I told her when she requested it.”

*Not a lie*

Susan marched over and grabbed his robes, pulling his face closer to hers. “I suggest you not lie to me tonight, *professor*. Remember that I have death at my left hand. I could introduce you, if you want.”

Shock was plainly written on Severus’ face, and she could tell Albus was stunned as well.

“Oh, he told you, did he?” said Severus, his expression returning to normal. “Not surprising.”

“I was there, moron, invisible. I wanted to make sure you were teaching Harry properly, which *predictably* you weren’t. So we started our own lessons, thank you very much. Now I’ll ask again. Where is your current stock of Veritaserum?”

“Is that why he’s improved so much?” His eyes flicked to Albus, who must have nodded. “Very well. This way.” He jerked away from Susan and went over to a box on a shelf. He handed her three small vials of liquid.

“And this is all your current stock?” Susan asked.

“Yes.”

*Not a lie*

“Very well.” She smashed two of them on the ground, making Severus wince, and stuck the third into her *Pocket Dimension*.

“How much is needed? It could come in handy.”

“Three drops.”

*Not a lie*

“Fine. I’m pleased you decided to tell the truth, thus far. I hope it continues. Now, are you making more?”

“Not presently, no.”

*Lie*

“*Thrust*,” cast Susan, sending him hurling backwards, smashing into a rack of ingredients and sending them tumbling to the floor. Glass jars broke, and Severus cried out in pain.

“I told you not to lie to me! A student almost died tonight because of you! You and that woman floating behind me. Do you see her? Do you? That could be you just as easily! Is that what you want? Keep lying to me then!”

“Albus, are you seriously just going to stand there?” Severus asked, not yet trying to get up.

“She took my wand rather neatly,” he replied. “I’m afraid I’m powerless at the moment. And you know that she must choose her path for herself.” He shook his head. “Honestly, what made you tell Harry as much as you obviously did? She could easily guess the rest, she is not stupid.”

He struggled to rise. “I was... not in control as I should have been.”

“Are you going to answer me?” asked Susan.

“The blue cauldron is my current attempt at making more.”

*Not a lie*

“Wised up, huh?” With another wave of her hand, Susan silently cast *Thrust* again, sending it flying.

“I believe we’re done here,” said Susan with a sense of satisfaction. “If your magic is not up to the task of repairing your door, I’ll be around to fix it tomorrow. I suggest you not brew any more of that stuff. I’ll be around to check up on you, and you know I can tell truth from lies. Good night, *Professor*.”

“Do you think you can just walk out of here after what you’ve done?” Severus was up and pointing his wand at Susan.

“*Immunity*,” said Susan, touching her bracelet. “And just what do you think you’re going to do about it? Attack me with your stick?” Susan laughed. “Attack a girl that’s not attacking you in any way? Is that your plan? Ask yourself, are you better than the Headmaster and the Inquisitor combined? Because I took them both out with a single spell.” She readied another casting of *Hypnotic Field*.

“I have had enough of your-”

“Severus!” said Albus sharply. “This is not the time.”

“She is a danger! More so than the Dark Lord, even you must see that now! She has done exactly what I said she would at the beginning. Destroy her, before she truly comes into her power! You must see her eyes, what is she becoming?”

*What about my eyes?*

Albus shook his head sadly. “We were past that point even as she first set foot in the castle, my old friend. Possibly even back as far as the day her father set foot on our world. Her surviving that killing curse should have been indication enough. We must let the situation play out, and give her the chance to choose rightly. You know that. I only hope it is not too late.”

“Guess you won’t... what was it you said? Have the happy task of taking me out today? I say again, good night.” Susan spun and walked out the door.

“And now for you,” she said to Dolores.

“You are taking a message to the minister, as I said earlier. The message is this: We are not enemies. The headmaster does not want his job, his turning it down before should have been a clue there. I do not want his job. I want three things: actual law in the wizard society. Not just people like Lucius Malfoy handing over gold to have whatever he wants as law happen. I want real trials, with real evidence. I want Dementors dead. That is all. Any training I or anyone else in this castle does is to the aim of defeating Voldemort. Not taking over the ministry. This is his final chance. He either acknowledges that Voldemort has returned and stands with me, or I consider him my enemy, equally dangerous as Voldemort. Now you, on the other hand, will not attack any person in this castle again, with truth serums or spells. It is now under my protection. You are welcome to continue performing your duties of pretending to teach the Defense class, and keep an eye on me until you are convinced I am telling you the truth about my intentions. But if I hear you have hurt anyone in this castle again... My anger will be far more terrible than you have seen tonight. More than 60 people are directly influenced by my magic. If you try your little trick with the truth serum again, you will kill one of them. You do not know who they are. Think about it. *Teleportal.*” Susan opened a hole to the ministry building. “Give my message to the minister. I’ll be eagerly awaiting his reply.”

With a final *Mercury* check she tossed Dolores through and dropped all spells, imagining her bouncing and skidding along the corridor at the ministry building.

“As for you,” Susan said to the Headmaster.

“Yes?”

“This is your school. Protect it. A student almost died tonight because of you, and your inability to control one ministry agent. You had the chance to run the ministry yourself, and avoid this entire situation. You turned it down. Thus I hold you partially responsible.”

“I have no power over Dolores, you must know that.”

“But you knew this would happen, didn’t you? You knew Voldi wasn’t gone for good. You knew the Order would once again be needed. And instead of being able to unite the magical world against him from a position of power you chose to *run a school* where you are *powerless* to influence anything. We’ve all paid for your mistakes, it seems. Try not to make any more. I’m going to see Luna. I sincerely hope that she is well.”

Susan began to walk away.

“Ah, my wand, if you please?”

“Oh yes, your stick. *Pocket Dimension.*”

She tossed one of the three most valuable objects in the world through the air at Albus, who caught it. "One other thing..."

"Yes!?"

"You can prove someone put Luna under the Imperius Curse?"

"With a bit of help from her and a *Time Window* or two, yes. She was acting under its influence, and trying to get information out of me about what I intended. Information she already knew. Doesn't take a genius."

"I see. For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your friend."

"Not as sorry as you would have been if I hadn't made it in time." Susan walked off, Sparkle at her side. She did not see the resolved expression of Albus as he thought about the truth of that statement, or the white and color coming back to her eyes as her anger slowly drained from her.

She fought the law. And won.

Time: Around 4:00 PM the next day

Place: Common Room

Naturally, it was all over the school that Dolores Umbridge had been trussed up “like a Christmas turkey” and floated about the halls the previous days. Susan’s reputation grew, and those that liked her before now seemed to be on the verge of starting their own cult dedicated to her. Those that thought she was a bit scary before were now scurrying away when she came near. The members of S.T.F.U weren’t really sure what to think, especially when they heard what had caused the whole thing. Everyone liked Luna well enough, though she was a bit strange. There were rumors about her and Luna being more than friends, which most of S.T.F.U had no problems with.

“They’re both a bit odd, it’s only natural they would get together, isn’t it?” most would have said, had they been asked. By a sort of unspoken rule it wasn’t directly discussed, but they didn’t deny any rumors either.

Luna, for her part, was unscathed by the experience, and was released from the hospital wing an hour after arriving. Susan figured her magic considered the *Veritaserum* a “poison” and simply purged it from her body. It was killing her, after all. Both had snuck away to the *Dimension* together after that, and came back looking rather pleased.

“Susan, please come to my office. Bring Luna with you,” said the shimmering Patronus of the Headmaster at 4:00.

As Luna was right there with her, Susan wasted no time in packing up her things and heading that way, opening the door with her password and riding up. “*Immunity*,” said Susan, because she believed a healthy dose of paranoia in the morning was a delicious part of this complete breakfast.

The minister was there, along with two men she believed were probably Aurors.

“Susan,” said Cornelius, “I’ve come to hear your side of things.”

“You mean about the *Inquisitor* using the Imperius Curse on Luna? Super. I’m all yours.”

“Ah, no, about your assault on both the Headmaster and the High Inquisitor last night. Albus does not wish to press charges, but Dolores, of course, does.”

“Assault? Oh, you mean where I stopped her from killing Luna last night with magic! Right, right. Is the testimony of the Headmaster not enough for you?”

“Before we, er, decide what course of action to take, we would like to hear your side of things.”

“I see. And the unforgivable curse and attempted murder charge against Ms Umbridge...”

“Those charges are why we are not arresting you this very second.”

“That, and you wouldn’t really be able to,” said Susan sarcastically. “But go ahead and tell yourself that, if it makes you feel better.”

“So what happened last night?”

“I found Luna an inch from death because of the actions of Ms Umbridge. I thankfully managed to save her life. The Headmaster, knowing I might be a bit *ticked off* tried to get me away from her. I ignored him and put the room on lock-down with *Hypnotic Field*. I took her wand away so she didn’t try anything stupid, and tied her up with magic so she couldn’t get away. I then took her down to see Professor Snape and make sure all vials of that truth poison

were destroyed. I did so. After that I gave her the message to deliver and returned her to you via the ministry building.”

“You didn’t threaten her at any time?”

“Not that I recall. In fact I recall saying I wouldn’t hurt her at all, because I wanted her to deliver the message. I said if she went around poisoning people under my protection I would be quite angry at her. But that isn’t exactly a threat, now is it? That was just a statement of fact. You poison people- I get angry. Quite natural, really.”

“You did not use any offensive spells or threaten her in any way?”

“I did not.”

“I did try to tell you,” said Albus.

“Very well. This is the girl who claims to have been under the Imperius Curse?”

“I do make that claim,” said Luna.

“What statement would you like to make about that?”

“As far as I can remember, it happened sometime just before Valentine’s Day. I remember walking through the halls go and meet Susan, then the next thing I remember is seeing her and having the burning desire to ask her a bunch of questions.”

“And don’t forget, Sparkle detected someone hostile to us legging it away right afterwards.”

“How convenient, all of this being done by invisible figures,” said Cornelius.

“We can easily penetrate a *Disillusionment* charm,” said Albus, “If you can show us the scene, Susan.”

*Duh, I keep forgetting that wanded wizards probably have ways of detecting the ways they can become invisible.*

“You could cast such a charm over top of a *Time Window*, allowing us to see who it was?” asked Luna excitedly.

“I believe it would work,” said Albus.

“With your permission, then, Minister,” said Susan, for once not just opening a *Teleportal* at the drop of a hat. “We shall return to the scene of the crime.”

“Oh, very well.”

Susan took them to the village, and created a *Time Window* where she believed they were. Sparkle then corrected her and she recast it facing the right direction.

They watched themselves being watched by Dolores until Susan tore the *Imperius* off of Luna. Then she went out of frame as she hiked up her robes and ran back to the castle.

“How do I all know you aren’t making this all up?” he asked.

“I’ve used this as evidence in court twice now, if you’ll recall, Minister.”

“Oh, yes, the Buckbeak trial.”

“And the innocent Sirius Black? Let us not forgot him.”

“Yes, you’ll never let us live that one down, will you.”

“Certainly. Let me age you ten years, and then freeze you solid so when you wake up, ten years have passed you by. I have the spell to do both, the latter is called *Freeze*, simply enough. I’ll forgive you readily then.”

“Ahem. In light of this... evidence, I suggest we just let the whole matter drop. No charges will be pressed against you, and none will be leveled at Professor Umbridge.”

“I see,” said Susan darkly. “So, what you’re saying is there’s two kinds of laws. She uses *Unforgivable* curses, which should result in an instant lifetime jail sentence. She spies on us

invisibly. She nearly kills Luna. But because it might bring those events to light in my trial as to why I so called 'assaulted' her, you want to let the matter drop?"

"Do you want to go to trial?"

"I want equal justice for everyone. I can't say the laws don't apply to me, obviously they do. But I'm pretty sure her chances of getting off are much smaller than mine, especially given I'm still a minor. And I didn't actually assault her, that I know of."

"Perhaps some concession could be made? Dragging this all through the courts... I mean, even in the non-wizard world deals are made, correct?"

"That is probably a sad reality. But yes, there is one thing I would accept. A full psychological evaluation done on her. The woman is obsessed, and I can't rule out that she's not mentally ill. When she hands me a clean bill of health from a licensed psychologist, I'll allow the matter to be dropped. After all, if she *is* mentally ill, she couldn't really be held accountable for her actions, now could she?"

"A neat little trap," remarked Albus.

"What's this?" asked Cornelius.

"If she is found to be mentally unstable, and you employed her, that makes you look bad. Dolores avoids prison, but who will hire her, knowing her state of mind? On the other hand, if she is not, and acting under your orders did these things, it makes her look bad. She then did these things in her right mind, knowing full well the consequences if she were caught."

"And you'll always have leverage over her, won't you? Because you'll always be able to prove a deal was made, and that she should, by rights, have been thrown in prison."

"Why, Minister, what a *Slytherin* way to think. I'm sure Salazar might have had that in mind, but I am too pure and delicate for such ideas."

Luna snorted.

"I suppose I could agree to this. Will you allow her to continue to watch over the Defense class, as she has been, while she is evaluated? I have no idea how long it will take, I'm not an expert in that sort of thing."

"I'm glad you used precise language there, 'to watch over' rather than 'to teach' as you might otherwise have. Very well, I would not want rumor to spread further. And perhaps it will show that I can be reasonable, when reasonable choices are presented to me. But no more decrees, no more sneaking about and spying on me. Is that clear?"

"I never ordered her to do that, you know."

"Not that you would admit to, anyway. Fine, I believe you. Now perhaps it's time for you to start believing me."

"I can't publicly say you were right, yet!"

"Yet? When, then? How is waiting going to help?"

"I just can't, the situation is quite delicate."

"Very well. I'll give you some more time."

"How much time?"

"Until Voldemort openly declares himself and you find yourself with my power to help or without it."

"Very well. I'll see you later, Albus."

"Goodbye for now, Cornelius."

The minister and the two Aurors disappeared.

"Shall we return to the castle as well?" asked Albus, turning back to the *Teleportal* Susan had kept open.

“Certainly. I’m glad that’s taken care of, for the moment.”

“Once again, the jaws of fate snap at your heels, but you manage to outrun them. I hope I am nowhere near when they finally catch up to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure most of the world would survive!” Susan joked.

Albus had an unreadable expression on his face as he stepped through the hole back to the castle.

The next day, Susan got another call to come to the Headmaster’s office, but alone this time.

*What have I done now? It’s hardly been twenty four hours.*

“Come on, Sparkle, let’s go see what The Man wants now.”

“Good afternoon, Susan,” said Albus as she walked in. “I’d like you to meet Griselda Marchbanks, she’s head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Susan politely. They shook hands.

“So this is the wonder child?” said Griselda. “Strange, I thought she’d be taller.”

*Crap, I never updated my character sheet to reflect my new height as I got older!*

“One second please,” said Susan, getting out her character sheet. She concentrated, and .8 disappeared from her *Height* box while 1.5 took the place of it. The sheet disappeared again.

“Oh, why did I think you were so short?” asked Griselda. “I could have sworn when you walked in here... No matter.”

*Cosmic Rewind*, thought Sparkle. *No one noticed until just now, when someone brought it up. So changing it made it seem like it had always been that way.*

“The reason I’m here,” explained Griselda, “is because exams are coming up, and Albus has requested some interesting changes for you.”

“Ah, I did wonder how that was going to be handled. We learn very different magics, after all.”

“Yes, he mentioned you don’t even use a wand?”

“Correct.”

“So if I asked you to describe the wand motion for a certain spell...”

“It would be meaningless for me. I could describe the physical motions, if any, and the spell formula I must envision, but not a wand motion.”

“I see. I can scarcely credit it, but he says your ancestry is from beyond this world?”

“Also correct. My father came from outside this reality. That’s where my magic comes from. Him, not the world.”

“I ask because I wonder if you might know how schoolchildren on that world are tested?”

“You know, I’ve never thought about it! Magically, I have perfect recall of all spells I’ve given up XP to learn. I don’t need to make KNOwledge checks to recall that I know a certain spell, I just know what I know. From what I understand, people here might have to do that? On the flip side, they don’t have to spend XP to learn things, so it’s a trade off to be sure. In fact, now that I think about it, people from my father’s world would probably just show their character sheets to an examiner. If they have the correct rating in the skills they are supposed to, they pass. If they don’t, they fail. Take a look.” She got it out again. “See, I have fours in all the skills related to my classes. That means I’m slightly below average for what would be expected of me at my age. I make up for it by having a 7 KNOwledge.” She turned the sheet over. “That basically means I have a good memory, better than average, in fact. So if I needed to recall

certain facts about each of these areas, I stand a better than average chance of doing so, even though my skill is slightly below average. Does that make sense?”

“Where did you pull this from?” asked Griselda, looking the sheet over.

“It’s just sort of mystically attached to me. It’s not magic, those without magic, like cyborgs, have character sheets in my father’s world. It’s like you having ten fingers on your hand. I have ten fingers... and a character sheet.”

“I see. What are these planets? I see you have Astronomy separately, so it can’t be knowledge about the planets themselves, can it?”

“No, my magic is broken up into Planets based off the domain the spell falls under. Motion is Mercury, while fire is Mars, get it?”

“Ah, yes, that does make sense. I see you have average or above average ratings in all your magical skills.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t see potions...”

“I can’t make potions like you do. Consider my *Imbuing* skill to be my *Potions* skill and *Animal Handling* to be *Care of Magical Creatures*.”

“Ah, so you have 7s in those skills? Which is above average, if I’m understanding you correctly? All these numbers fall between zero and ten?”

Susan nodded.

“Does this list the spells you know?”

“It does,” said Susan, flipping it over again and showing the *Notes* section.

She did a double take. “It’s different!”

“Yes, it has three sides. Don’t ask.”

“And this is all the magic you know how to do?”

“Not exactly. I can come up with a grade 0 spell on the fly, not that I ever have, they’re typically useless. I can also cast from writings, which takes longer and is harder. So really I can cast any spell you can think of, given a bit of time. These are just the ones I want to have at my fingertips, without looking them up.”

“I see. Can you do that again?” She flipped it over several times, watching as the “front” and “back” changed each time. “Extraordinary.”

“So, does that help, at all?”

“I recognize most of these skills, like swimming, that’s obvious. But what’s this one?” She pointed to the last skill on the sheet.

“That’s what I’m going to use to kill Voldemort, or anyone else he makes immune to magic,” Susan answered simply.

“Ah. Right. Of course.” She grinned nervously.

Albus peered over at the sheet. “That would do it. You actually have one of those?”

Susan just looked at him knowingly.

“Yes, dumb question, right? How did you even- I don’t want to know. Carry on.”

Griselda was now turning it back and forth, matching things up. “Ah, I think I’m understanding this now. So your reasoning abilities are even better than your memory, and your resolve is as high as humanly possible?”

“For better or worse,” she replied, thinking about all the times her stubborn nature got her into trouble.

“Basically, in a nutshell, you’re a very smart girl who can figure things out and remember things very well.”

“That’s me!”

“Very well. I’ll exempt you from the written portions of the Charms and Transfiguration, Potions completely, and Defense... well, answer how you would deal with the various threats on the written and I’m sure you’ll do fine. We’ll take your kind of magic into account. You can explain what you know or show similar spells for the practical. You won’t have to take the potions practical, Albus has told me about the things you’ve made under his supervision. Obviously Arithmancy, History and such will have to be taken. Though with your excellent memory I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“Thank you very much!” said Susan.

“Not at all,” said Griselda. “I’ll be keeping my eye on you after graduation, I hope you go on to do great things.”

“Oh, not to worry, I have a few ideas.”

“I’m sure you do. Will there be anything else, Headmaster?”

“That’s all for now. I’ll see you in a few weeks for the exams.”

“Stay well.” She disappeared into the Floo network.

“One other thing, Susan,” said Albus as she turned to leave.

“Yes?”

“I’m taking you out of the Defense class, as well. You’re obviously not getting anything out of it, and I think it would only serve to further antagonize Professor Umbridge.”

“That’s fine. I can use the time to copy more spells onto individual sheets so I don’t have to pull my whole book out when I want to look something up. He probably wouldn’t bother, but I don’t want Voldemort to watch me casually flipping through it with scrying magic.”

“An excellent idea. Also, I’m not sure you can tell me because of that magic you put on Luna, but perhaps you can indicate, in a general sense, how the group that disappears every night into your *Dimension* is doing on their spell-work?”

Susan grinned a huge grin.

“Excellent. Carry on.”

Not Repeating the Mistakes of the Past

Time: Three weeks later

Place: Headmaster's Office

"Here you are, Susan," said Albus, handing over a piece of paper. "She's been deemed completely mentally fit."

Susan took it and looked it over. "That's almost scarier than knowing she wasn't. What was the *thinking* then, going as far as she did?"

"It seems Dolores Umbridge is a very dedicated woman, willing to go to any lengths to do what she feels is necessary. Rather like a young girl or two I'm familiar with."

"I'm a mini-Umbridge?" Susan said, disgusted. "No, I can't be that bad. I haven't... okay well I did spy on Professor Snape and Harry, but at least Harry knew I was there. I haven't made someone do something against their will with magic."

"Nonetheless you have a tendency to bowl people over in an attempt to get your way."

"Ah, but they still have the choice. I could easily *Possess* the minister or *Dominate* him to come out and say Voldemort has returned. He couldn't do that, then do another about face later and say he hadn't. I just tell people, here are your choices, live with the consequences."

"One could argue she was doing the same."

"By making ridiculous decrees aimed at me? Look, the minister just sort of set her loose on us. Everything I did was reacting to her ridiculously trying to control everything and find evidence of activity that wasn't going on."

"Of course, when she did that, you stepped up what you were doing to spite her."

"Yeah, I guess? More like to make sure people aren't helpless out there in a world with Voldi running around."

"I just want you to realize you aren't so different. Do you think Voldemort sits around thinking 'how can I be evil today? Muhahaha.' No, I don't think so. He thinks, 'how can I reach the goal I've set for myself.' He sees us standing in the way of his goal and we call him evil when he strives to attain it. She's the same way. So are you, or Ron."

"I guess every person is the hero of their own story."

Albus nodded. "On that we can agree."

"All right, I'll try to see things from the other person's point of view. Along with not immediately using my magic and thinking over the consequences of my actions. Man, being New Susan is much tougher than being Old Susan."

"Growing up often is."

"Is that what I'm doing? You can have it. Any word from the minister?"

"None, I'm afraid."

"You think he'll ever admit he was wrong?"

"Not unless he's backed into a corner over the issue. I fear Mr. Fudge is a very proud man."

"And by then it'll be too late. Once Voldi shows himself it'll be because he feels he's mastered the spells that complement his own magic and he needs no more."

"About that, how many spells do you think he'll have?"

Susan shook her head. "There are too many variables to even guess. Like how much XP did he get when he converted? If any. Has he had 'adventures' so he's earned more? What *Planet*

*Ratings* does he desire? Is he going to specialize in one or two planets or go for all of them, like I did? I would guess he would concentrate on a few, because he doesn't have a magical book to read spells out of. But I could be totally wrong."

"We'll just have to be ready for anything."

"I'm afraid so."

"If I might hazard a guess?" asked Sparkle.

"Go ahead," they both said.

"He's the major villain, right? Presumably, as all your years of school have centered around his actions, or what he did in the past, or whatever."

"Yeah, what's your point? I mean, with how people freak out about him, I hope there isn't someone higher up, holding his strings."

*Oh no, I really hope that wasn't foreshadowing.* "Well, as you know, as a kitten I traveled with your father a little while and I picked up a few things. One of those things was that bad guys basically have what they need to become a problem for the heroes."

"You're saying he could have more spells than I do right now?"

"If it's reasonable that he could somehow research them while in hiding, or 'off camera' as your father would say... yes."

"But he can't have gotten more XP than I have, with all my adventures!"

"Sure he could. Don't you know, the challenge level for the hero always goes up along the journey? If the hero faced the final boss in the first hour of the story, they would be totally destroyed. The villain has to put up a good fight, just not too good that they win in the end. Given how powerful you are now, and you probably won't face him for a couple of years yet, you have room to grow. That means he has to be around that level of power as well when you finally face him."

"So am I the heroine of the story?"

"Your story, like the Headmaster said. Harry is the hero of his, and Hermione, hers. You all have your challenges to face."

"But I'll win because I am the heroine?"

"No, not necessarily. Remember, Voldemort is the hero of his story, too. From his perspective, you're the bad guy that's stopping his goals. One of you will have to triumph, so don't go thinking you're invincible. One missed roll in combat and you're paste, same as your opponent. You have to grow to be a challenge for him, hence your adventures. I think it will even out, in the end."

"Well, what she said," Susan said to Albus.

"I do not relish the thought of having a Voldemort that can do everything you can do, and most everything I can do, as well."

"I hear you. But we have something Voldemort doesn't."

"A frog choir?"

"Friends to fight for. Each Death Eater will fight alone, and won't care if another is hurt, because that just means they are now closer to the top. We will fight with one will, one resolve, one cause. Our enemies shall talk themselves to death, and we will bury them with their own confusion! We shall prevail! Ka-BOOM!"

There was silence for a moment.

"Uh, sorry about her," said Sparkle. "She gets like that sometimes."

"I hadn't noticed," said Albus.

Susan just grinned.

For the rest of the day Susan thought about growing up, and what Voldemort would study before he emerged again. The problem was, she didn't have enough information to go on about his goals this time. Whatever he wanted last time, it was not guaranteed he would want the same things now. He was less human now, for one, and had a wider amount of magic to choose from. Plus the only version she had spoken to was the young Tom, not the Tom at the height of his reign of terror. She was just going to have to continue having adventures and getting XP, and hope that she could counter anything he did.

She also thought about her father, who apparently had some special backgrounds that would have really come in handy for her. Each spell had a counter, that if cast at the same time as the original, would cancel it out. Apparently her father didn't have to know the exact opposite spell, he could just make a planet check that opposed the original caster. It cost him 3 backgrounds points, but in a world of *Natural Magicians* it would no doubt come in handy. She would really like to have him around to advise her now.

"I've been thinking about my family," said Harry that night as they sat and did homework.

"Really? Me too," said Susan. "That's weird."

"Yeah. I was wondering, how far back can your *Time Window* show?"

"Couple hundred years, why? Want to find your grandparents or something?"

"Who are my grandparents?" Harry said, giving a start. "I've never even thought about that!"

"I have no idea, we'll have to look that up sometime!"

"Definitely. But the reason I ask is, could your magic show the castle as it was when my father was here?"

Susan sat up excitedly. "I bet we could. We know when he was at school, and I bet we could look up the time and date of the O.W.L exams he took. He would be coming out of the room at a known time, we could follow him around afterwards!"

"Would you be willing to do it?"

"Yeah! I'd love to see your mom and dad!"

"Let's go!"

So the team ran down to the library and asked Madam Pince about old exam times. They had to explain why they wanted them, and she dug through some records and found what they were looking for.

"Thanks!" they all said, tearing off again. They gathered in the great hall, which was mostly empty at this time of night.

"Okay, *Time Window*," said Susan, naming the time of the exam. As it was unspecified exactly how big the *Window* could be, she put it from one wall to the other looking into the room. Sunlight shown from the *Window* as the hall came alive with students at desks, each writing answers to their test.

"They're doing the exam, we got it right!" said Hermione excitedly. "This is amazing."

"Look for my dad," said Harry, straining to look around the tables.

"Too bad it can't be made three dimensional," remarked Sparkle. "That you could walk into, rather than having to stay on one side."

"That would be nice. Something like *Time Volume* or *Time Area* rather than *Time Window*. I don't see why it would be that much more difficult. Probably grade 9 though."

"I don't know, grade 9 gets you *Time Door*, right? That will actually move you through time."

"True. Maybe grade 8 then. I'll have the book look into it. I wouldn't mind dropping one XP and forgetting *Window* for *Area*."

"Oh, that's got to be Severus," said Ron, pointing.

"Yeah, looks like it. Oh wow, the gang's all here!" said Hermione.

"What?"

"Look, isn't that Sirius, and Lupin and *Peter*." She spat the last name.

"So my dad's got to be around here someplace. Peter. Wish I could just reach through this window and strangle that guy right now."

"Yeah, that would really change history," said Susan. "For one thing, we wouldn't have grown up as neighbors."

"Because my parents would still be alive."

"Yeah, that's more important all right."

"Could your magic get us back there?"

"With *Time Door*? Wow, let me think. It's one week per Saturn rating, as I recall. How many years has it been since this took place?"

"Uh, like fifty I guess?"

"Okay, so multiply 50 by 52 weeks in a year... Ron!"

"2,600?"

"Great. So I would need a rating about 2,700 to be safe. Divide that by 25, the average amount of energy a single person has."

"About a hundred and ten?"

"So there you have it. I drain a hundred plus people of energy and I can go back in time to kill Peter. If that much energy doesn't make me explode first."

"That's almost doable. We have 66 people in S.T.F.U and they can't be average, right? I bet they would let you, if you asked them."

"I suppose they could all have higher RESolve or ENDurance. Still, messing about that far back in time... I'm not sure I would want to even consider it."

"Can you go forward?"

"Forward is easy! I can go a year per rating into the future. I could go see what the year 4,600 is like!"

"If we aren't a radioactive slugeball by then," said Hermione sadly.

"Well, obviously I would have a few protection spells going before I left. Where is your dad?"

"He's got to be here, right?"

"We keep looking past him. Look." Ron pointed.

"That's Harry- wait, what?" asked Hermione.

"Wow, people have said I looked like him, I didn't know it was that close though."

"Oh, he's getting up, the exam is over!"

The exam papers flew to the other side of the room, nearly out of sight, and James got up to meet with his friends.

"Let's head out," he said, walking out of the frame.

"Want to follow them?" asked Susan.

"If you don't mind."

“Not at all. You can always donate some energy if I get low.” She smiled, then turned the window the other way around so they could watch where he went.

“Looks like outside,” said Harry.

“It’s not too late, we can see where they go if you want.”

“Sure.”

“Okay, let’s see if this works...” Susan dropped this *Window* and they five walked outside. She cast the spell again, this time making it huge, extending at least 100 meters away. Sunlight again lit up the area, and people milling about were taking an interest. James and the others emerged, and seemed to be heading down to the lake, so the group ran down there and Susan made another *Window*. A moment later the four friends were seen coming down the path and talking.

“This is fantastic,” said Hermione. “You could become a historian! Or a history teacher. Why just listen to a ghost drone on about history when you could stand and watch it happen!”

“Or, I could put the spell on an actual pane of glass or something, and give it to an actual historian. Then I could get on with more important stuff.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t you think this is amazing?”

“It is, actually. I keep expecting them to turn and look at us, but of course they have no idea. Wow, that’s kind of creepy.”

“That we’re eavesdropping on them? It happened fifty years ago, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.”

“No, I mean this is sort of a historic time, isn’t it? Voldi returns and all that? What if, in the future, people are watching us now, watching people in the past?” She gave a wave. “Hi, people of the future! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Don’t do half of what she would do!” put in Hermione.

“Could you put up some kind of detection, or blocking spell up?” asked Ron, looking around nervously.

“Why? Would you do anything different if you knew you were being watched?”

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

“You know, I read a book about a scientist, don’t ask, Ron, who harnesses micro wormholes to spy on any location, in any time. It destroys privacy for every person on earth, and allows them to accurately study the past. It was a good book.”

“What’s a wormhole?”

“Never mind. What is James doing?”

“Playing with a Snitch, apparently,” said Hermione.

“That guy has a 10 REFlexes,” remarked Sparkle. “He might have been great at Kung Fu.”

“Sorry I couldn’t find a more interesting scene for you, Harry,” said Susan. “But it is just after an exam, so they would be just hanging out.”

“Wait, something’s happening,” said Harry. “What are they looking at?”

“Wait, is that professor Snape again? Why did he follow them?”

“Is James-”

The group watched, transfixed, as James hexed Severus and bullied him.

They watched as Lily, Harry’s mother, came over to try and defend him.

They watched as she stalked off.

Susan closed the window.

They stared in silence for a bit.

“We... should be getting back,” said Ron.

“We should never mention this again,” said Hermione.

“To anyone,” said Susan.

“Are you okay, Harry?” asked Sparkle.

“That was my father?” asked Harry. “He’s worse than you, Susan! At least you don’t go picking on people like that.”

“What do you mean, worse than me? I would never do something like that, not even to...”

*Oh, but you did something like that, didn’t you? asked New Susan. Who was floating Dolores through the halls? Tied up, so she couldn’t move?*

*She had nearly killed Luna, replied Old Susan. Severus wasn’t hurting James. He could have just ignored the kid, not made sport of him. We had a good reason for what we did.*

*But we could have sent her back with the message, then gone to bully Severus, shot back New Susan. Who I think has had enough of that sort of thing in his life, don’t you? It’s no wonder he hated James, and by extension, Harry. They look so much alike, it’s like the ghost of his worst enemy coming back to haunt him.*

*Speaking of haunting, Myrtle hasn’t been around lately, we should go visit her.*

“Susan? Did you Blue Screen of Death or something?” asked Harry.

“Check her eyes, see if there’s a rainbow ball spinning around,” said Hermione, looking closely at her.

“Sorry, just having an internal dialog with my old and new selves. You’re right, Harry, I’m a mess, aren’t I?”

Harry shrugged. “Like I said, you’re not that bad. But only when held up to that standard. I can’t believe it. People must always be saying how great my father was because he got killed. If he hadn’t he would just be another bully. I’m going to bed.”

Harry stalked off.

“Maybe we should not do anymore sightseeing into the past,” suggested Ron.

“Yeah, it hits a little too close to home,” said Susan.

*Too bad, thought Old Susan. I was going to suggest doing it around your house so you could see your father. Wonder what kind of man he was, hummmm?*

*I still could, thought New Susan. He wasn’t a bully, was he?*

The next day at lunch, Susan got up from the table and said “I’ll be right back,’ to her team. She nerved herself (easy with her RESolve of 10) and walked in front to the teacher’s table. They looked curiously at her.

“Can you amplify my voice?” she asked. “I have something to say to everyone. I’d do it myself, but I think your spell does it evenly through the room.”

“Nothing too shocking, I hope?” asked Albus.

“Just an apology or two,” replied Susan.

“That is shocking. Go ahead.” He pointed his wand at her, and she turned around.

A moment later, everyone got quiet, pointing and looking at her.

“A few weeks ago, some of you may have seen me floating the High Inquisitor down the halls. I’m sure you all know by now why I did that. I just wanted to say that recently I realized something. I was out of line doing what I did. High Inquisitor, you have my sincere apology for

what I did. I won't do detentions or anything for you, because of what you did to Luna, but I do want you to know I regret my actions that night very deeply.

"Furthermore, I also was rather rude to Professor Snape that very evening. He deserved better treatment from me. Probably from the beginning, when we first met. I would also like to apologize to him. I was very angry that night, but I had no call to do what I did. I can't replace what I broke, but I can return what I stole."

She slipped the bottle of Veritaserum out of her pocket and set it on the table in front of him.

"I hope you can both, if not forgive me, at least know that I recognize I did wrong, and will be trying hard to not repeat the mistakes I made that night. This is a place of learning, after all, and it turns out I don't quite have as much figured out as I thought I did.

"That is all."

Albus put his wand away.

"Thank you," she said to him.

As she walked back, several people stood up and started clapping. She recognized them as members of S.T.F.U. She shook her head sadly and they stopped.

The faces of Dolores and Severus were frozen with shock. Albus leaned over and whispered something to Severus, and he shook his head as if to clear it and said something back.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Susan?" asked everyone as she sat down again. Conversations around her started back up, and she heard her name all over the room.

"Harry," she said. "People can regret what they do. Sometimes, I think maybe people fall into patterns of behavior that then become expected of them. I don't know your father's mind. Maybe he really did enjoy tormenting the young professor Snape. But maybe he just thought if he didn't, his friends wouldn't respect him anymore. I don't know. Maybe he enjoyed it but that was the last time, because he knew he had gone too far. We can't know that either. People say he was a great man, okay, maybe he hasn't such a great kid. Give him the benefit of the doubt, okay?"

Harry nodded mutely.

Susan looked down at her plate. "I'm not that hungry anymore. See you all later."

She left, to do some more thinking about life.

The theft of Hermione

Time: Ten minutes later

Place: Myrtle's Bathroom

Susan wound up in the bathroom where she found Myrtle, floating about as usual.

"Susan! This is a surprise."

"I realized I hadn't seen very much of you, and thought now was as good a time as any to see how you were doing. Why don't you come see me anymore?"

"I thought it best if I just stayed out of the way."

"Nonsense, you're a part of Team Susan, same as anyone else. You have unique skills and a unique viewpoint. And we are still friends, right?"

"You always said we should be, but not to repeat myself, I thought it best if I just stayed out of the way."

"Don't think like that. That's the way you used to think before we met. Remember we talked about trying to overcome your imprinted nature?"

"Yeah. I do float about the castle more, and people talk to me. I haven't flooded anything in a long time."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. It's funny, isn't it? We're both trying to fight against our instinctual nature. I should have taken some of my own advice, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

Susan explained about what she had done, and how she had apologized.

"But isn't what she did, well, evil?"

"That's just the thing. What's evil? One person follows their beliefs while another opposes those beliefs. Aren't both going to call the other side 'evil' and try to vilify them? I can't know Professor Umbridge's mind, if she enjoyed the things she did or if she hated herself for doing them."

"Sort of a 'this hurts me more than it hurts you' sort of situation?"

"Something like that, yes. Apparently she's in full command of her facilities, but she believed what she was doing was right. Everyone does, I think."

"Command of her... what?"

"She isn't mad."

"Oh! Well, if everyone in the world was mad, a sane person would be locked up as being different."

"True. Standards of behavior are cultural. But we judge a person's behavior against how we think we would act. And I'm not sure that's fair."

"But you have to draw the line somewhere!"

"Yes, you're right. You start gunning people down in the street and you can't just say 'well, it's his belief those people should be gunned down.' now can you?"

"Gunned?"

"Killed. With a non-magical weapon."

"Oh, okay. No, you can't. You have to stop them."

“But if it’s a war, you’re perfectly justified, no- expected, to kill as many people on the other side as possible. But you aren’t considered mad when the war ends. You’re considered a hero for surviving, and killing the enemy.”

“I’m not sure what to tell you. I don’t think I’m going to be much help.”

“I don’t think anyone can. It’s just something each person has to work out for themselves, I think. There is no easy answer, because we all just see the world differently. Take you, for example. Most people that see you think, ‘oh, a ghost’ and ignore you. But I see you and think ‘oh, that’s my friend Myrtle.’ and would want to talk to you. Totally different reactions over something as simple as seeing you. How can we ever hope to come together on anything more complex than that?”

“I think... every choice we make defines us, doesn’t it? I think consistency, more than anything, shows if we’re mad or not. If we see a bunny and one time we chase the bunny to kill it, and one time we ignore it, and one time we pet it... that’s mad.”

“That’s why we always joke about ‘who are you and what have you done with such and such.’ I think. We want to reassure ourselves that the pattern we expect people to follow hasn’t been messed up in our brains.”

“Maybe. But if a person started out trying to kill the bunny, got counseling and only pet it, and then started ignoring it, and then kept ignoring it, we wouldn’t be so suspicious. That’s more a progression from non-okay behavior to okay behavior.”

“Well, Professor Umbridge’s behavior was consistent. She kept trying to do her job, and I kept trying to make it hard for her. But what standard of behavior do you adopt? I can’t just let people walk all over me!”

“Whatever level allows you to sleep at night?”

Susan looked at her for a moment. “I guess you’re right, the only thing you can do is try to understand another person’s viewpoint. If they believe a certain thing, and the general consensus of society is that viewpoint is wrong... but most in the wizard world believe Azkaban is necessary. Don’t they? Do they really sleep better knowing people’s souls are getting sucked out, and that happiness draining creatures are floating around? I mean, the non-magical society believed owning people with darker skin was correct at one time. I mean, really? It took a lot of change both personal and societal to realize ‘hey, maybe this isn’t right,’ you know? But at one time, speaking out against society would have got you labeled mad. How do you know what battles to fight? How do you decide to step up and go against society? Is the ministry of magic right to do the things it does, and I’m the one in the wrong? How can I ever know? Their society works, and it’s been around a long time. Who am I, a young girl, to come along and say another way would be better?”

“If you could convince enough people you’re right, maybe it would be?”

“That’s the thing. Voldi convinced people he was right. People shared his viewpoint of results through terrorism and joined him. But most would still say he was evil. After all, his group does a lot of fear spreading and general mayhem, right? But is that done for its own sake or because it brings attention to the issues at hand in a way that can’t be ignored? More importantly, are Voldi’s action justified, as I’m sure he believes they are?”

“I certainly don’t know. Most won’t even say his name, that’s how scared they are of him. Does that help?”

“Exactly! What’s all that about? Though I suppose in the magical world, names have a bit more power? I don’t know. But how do I know he isn’t right to be doing what he’s doing?”

“Didn’t he, like, murder a bunch of people? I mean like innocent people?”

“I guess that’s what I’ll have to find out. My greatest fear is still becoming like him—someone to be feared and hated, rather than someone you can come to for healing and acceptance.”

“Then my advice is to stop floating people around and start trying to work with them.”

“I’m going to try, Myrtle. I promise you that.”

And so a few more days passed, with more people being friendly towards Susan than ever before. Susan still wasn’t going to Defense class, and Harry reported Severus has eased up on him a little since Susan’s apology. They figured that Severus was always mean to Harry because he was getting back at the only person he could, his son, for all that bullying years ago. But mixed in with that was the fact Susan had also made his life a little more miserable and they were friends. But the apology seemed to have mollified him a bit, and though he wasn’t exactly friendly, he was at least a bit more professional.

And so Susan went to see Professor Flitwick for “career advice” not that she really knew the man.

“Ah, Susan!” he said, as she walked in for her appointment. Dolores was there, and she inclined her head to acknowledge her. Dolores gave her an odd look so Susan sat down. “I must admit I’m not sure I can really advice you, as you haven’t ever been in any of my classes! But the Headmaster has told me you are quite talented in many areas so you must have options available to you.”

“I do have a few things I would like to discuss with you. First, what can you tell me about goblins?”

“Are you insinuating something?”

Susan sat and blinked at him. “Sorry, what?”

“Never mind. Did you have something specific in mind?”

“Oh, uh, yes. How would they react to someone going into competition with them?”

“What, you want to open your own bank?”

“Bank? No! I mean making things like armor, or *Imbued* items that carry my kind of enchantments rather than yours. Mine don’t break down, you see, which I guess yours do.”

“Easy to make, easy to break, that’s one of the little ditties I tell in my charms class.”

“It fits, my putting spells into objects is anything but easy.”

“So I’ve heard. Now of course there is no one goblin organization that controls the manufacture of armor and weapons. Each smith has their own techniques, handed down to their descendants, and they can charge what they like. However the actual process of making the armor or weapon is a closely guarded secret among the goblin race. If they thought you had somehow mastered the technique, they might come after you. But I must say, you don’t really have the build of a blacksmith...”

“Oh, I’m not going to actually make the weapons or armor, people would bring me things, like their wands, to enchant, which would then become akin to goblin made works. And of course putting a spell into a ring or amulet would require the ring or amulet. They can’t do that, can they?”

“That would further distinguish you from goblins, using premade items. If you could show the customer themselves were bringing in, and then leaving with, the same item... Hummm. As for putting spells in, maybe they could. But they are not allowed wands, a point of

contention between our two species, actually. So it would be impossible to say until they received that right and tried it.”

“So the two go back and forth, each promising to reveal the techniques but neither wanting to make the first move.”

“Something like that. You’re only one person, I take it we can’t use the technique you use?”

Susan shook her head. “Several people have tried, but they can’t even get started. It seems unique to my kind of magic.”

“Interesting, that deserves further study. But if you could show the technique couldn’t be passed down, they might just ignore you. It’s tough to say. There must be a way to apply the techniques, we’re all magic users, after all. And the goblins must do something similar...”

“Talk to Hermione, she’s the one trying to figure out how my spell formula apply to wand user.”

“Is she now? I will speak to her about that. What else did you have in mind?”

“Some sort of magical troubleshooting service. If there’s a problem someone has, like being bitten by a werewolf or something, that wanded magic can’t easily deal with, I thought it might be nice to have a place people could go for a ‘second opinion’ so to speak.”

“Such as magical cures, like the Longbottoms?”

“Exactly. I hesitate to offer that sort of service, because the line would be tremendous and I would never get any sleep. But I do have an energy draining spell now, so I could take a portion of a person’s energy and use it to cure them. So I could do it as many times a day as is needed. But if I put hospitals out of business, and then there’s some plague or something I can’t deal with on my own... it’s tricky.”

“And one would need to sing your praises in order for you to get more business. So you couldn’t exactly swear people to secrecy, now could you?”

“Right.”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t do both. Someone comes to you with a problem, like they’re being haunted by a ghost or whatnot, you can decide what is the proper solution, give them a price, and take care of it. If the solution is an item with a spell, so be it. If it’s just you going and taking care of the problem personally, that’s what you do.”

“Susan’s Magical Solutions... no, sounds too much like a potions shop. I’ll have to think about it. Do you foresee any problems going into business for myself? I mean, I’ll have O.W.Ls and N.E.W.T.S or their equivalent from the school, but would anyone lend me money given I’m an unknown risk?”

“Unknown risk?” Professor Flitwick almost fell off his chair. “My dear girl, can you really be that ignorant of your reputation? I admit we are a bit sequestered here, but your fame—”

“Infamy,” said Dolores, trying to disguise it as a cough.

”—if you will, is already reaching the heights of Harry Potter himself. Your name makes the papers quite regularly, and you garnered a lot of support with that public apology a few days ago. From the rumbling I hear, in any case.”

“That was reported in the news?” Susan was shocked.

“Of course. Hogwarts is watched very closely, given it’s one of very few schools in the magical world.”

“I didn’t realize,” Susan sputtered. “But there’s not reporters roaming the halls, how does that sort of thing get out?”

“People write home about things that go on, reporters sniff things out, who can say.”

“I see. I guess that could be beneficial later on.”

“As long as it’s more positive stories and not you, um, attacking ministry officials.”

He glanced at Dolores, who scowled.

“Yes, going to try and avoid that in future.”

“Anything else on your mind?”

“No. I figure I have to go my own way because traditional jobs require certain expected levels of magic. The magic I know seems a bit more uneven- widely superior on some areas, but inadequate in others. So I figure it best to stick with what I’m good at-”

“Making trouble?” muttered Dolores.

”-and let the Galleons fall from there.”

“If you really can match goblin quality items in any reasonable length of time, you can pretty much name your salary. They fetch a high price, even making one or two a month would set you up nicely. And that’s in addition to whatever spell-work you can do to solve problems on the spot. I don’t think you’ll have any trouble.”

“Thank you professor, I appreciate the information.”

“Not at all, not at all. Good luck.”

The next afternoon Susan went looking for Hermione. She found Ron climbing a set of stairs.

“Have you seen her?” she asked Ron. “I need her to change the coins for tonight’s meeting of S.T.F.U.”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t. I saw her after class, but that was about an hour ago. She said she was going to the library, did you check there?”

“What? Find Hermione in a *library*? Of course, why didn’t I think of that!”

Ron glared at her. “First place you looked?”

”\*DING DING DING DING\* you win a prize. But not a Hermione, because I still don’t know where she is.”

“Well she must be around somewhere. Hey, Harry!”

Harry walked up. “What’s up?”

“Have *you* seen Hermione in the past hour?”

He shook his head. “Where do you want to meet her?”

“Normal place, Ravenclaw common room,” replied Susan.

“Okay. *Expecto Patronum!*” he cast, getting out his wand. The stag Patronus appeared, looking around a bit and then seemed to actually shrug, and then disappeared.

“Uh, that’s, uh, not supposed to happen...” said Harry in a shocked voice.

“What does that mean?” asked Ron, an edge of panic in his voice.

“Why are you looking at me, I don’t use a Patronus,” said Susan.

“Hey, Susan!” called a voice from above. It was Neville, and he was waving a piece of parchment. “Stay there!” He ran down to her. “Been looking for you, guess who I saw in the halls a little while ago.”

“That could be anyone, we need more of a clue than that,” protested Ron.

“Let’s just say he wasn’t the worst Defense teacher we’ve ever had after all...”

“Professor Lockhart?” said Susan. “You actually saw him wandering about the castle?”

“Yup. Said I was supposed to give you this-” Susan yanked the parchment away from him. “Hey!”

She scanned it over.

“Oh, no!”

“What?” asked Ron.

“He’s taken her out of the castle. Listen to this:”

*Susan, Harry, and Ron,*

*I have stolen Hermione to exact revenge against all four of you.*

*I have taken her to this location.*

*Come get her if you dare.*

*Gilderoy Lockhart*

*P.S. There is a curse on this paper. You have 30 seconds to leave school grounds before it explodes, killing you all. HAHAHA. Good luck.*

“Crap!” said Susan, looking at the picture of the place imprinted into the bottom of the note. “*Teleportal!* No time to explain, get through.” She pushed Harry and Ron through the hole. “Neville, Hermione has been kidnapped by Lockhart. Tell the Headmaster. We have to go after him immediately.” She dived through and closed the portal, throwing the paper away from herself.

It fluttered to the ground, then shot towards Harry’s leg, wrapping around it.

“Get it off!” Harry shouted, shaking his leg.

“Wait, there’s something written on it,” said Susan, grabbing his leg and looking at it.

*I’ll explode if you try to get me off, or go back. HAHAHA.*

“Oh, this is just great. I didn’t think he was good enough at magic to do all this!”

“Maybe he hired someone. Where are we, anyway?” asked Ron.

“I have no idea. I’m just glad that picture showed some cover. Can either of you tell where the castle is from here?”

“*Point me,*” said Harry, getting out his wand. “Well, that way is north.”

“Judging from the angle of the sun, I would say the castle was... that way. Why do you ask?” asked Ron.

“We’ll see if you’re right. *Telesummon.*” Sparkle appeared in a magical flash.

“What the?”

“Sorry to bring you here so abruptly, Hermione’s been kidnapped, by Lockhart of all people. And that piece of paper said it would explode if we didn’t get out of the castle immediately.”

“I see. Where are we?”

“I have no idea. Let’s carefully look around.”

“Wait, shouldn’t we get the Headmaster here, or something?” asked Ron. “He would want to know one of his old teachers went nuts and started kidnapping people, right?”

“Neville will tell him. New Susan is going to trust him.”

“So we’re on our own then?”

“No, we have each other.”

Ron rolled his eyes and started looking around.

Susan got out her character sheet to see if she had new cards. She did, and she traded in an *Adrenaline Boost* for 2 XP. Sparkle offered up her *Love Interest* in case anyone wanted to fall in love with anyone in the near future, and turned in her *Unfailing Resolve* for 1 XP.

Hills stretched behind them, and there was very little vegetation, either trees or grasses. The air was hot and dry, and they could hear the buzzing of insects all around them. The group peeked around the corner, and saw they were behind a storage shed of some kind made of stone. There was a truck parked nearby, an old looking pickup truck with a cloth dome over back. The place seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, and there was a large building, made of the same beige sort of stone that the shed was made of. There were voices, and the group hastily pulled back as men in a sort of uniform went into the shed, rummaged around, and came back out. As they left the group looked around the corner again and saw they were carrying guns.

“Guns?” hissed Harry. “Not magic? Where did he send us?”

“Put that away!” said Susan, to Ron, who had gotten his wand out. “We’re not in the castle anymore, so if you do magic now, we’re going to have a heck of a time explaining it.”

“Oh, right. What are guns?”

“Non-magical weapons. Don’t be in the way if they point something at you, get under cover. Trust me, they will kill you, and painfully.”

“Right. You think they’re muggles?”

“I don’t know. But it’s a nice trap, isn’t it? If we do magic in front of them, not only will be doing magic outside the castle, we’re doing it in front of non-wizards.”

“You shouldn’t care,” said Harry.

“I don’t care. But if Ron does it, it’s your trial all over again.”

“Right. So how do we get inside?”

“Normally I would have just said storm the place, but New Susan is all about waiting and watching, seeing what a situation is before storming in with a bunch of magic.”

“Okay, you’re in charge of operation: Rescue Hermione.”

“Wait, are we sure she’s in there?” asked Ron. “The Patronus acting that way is still bothering me. It should have run off, distance doesn’t mean anything to it, right?”

“You’re right. Give me a few minutes...” Susan got out her pages with *Descry Creature* on them, and did a search for Hermione. The others kept a lookout and noticed some activity in the structure.

She got back nothing.

Trope Creation

Time: Immediately afterwards

Place: Hallway

“Is she dead?” wailed Ron.

“No, it’s the same result I get when searching for someone who’s turned themselves into an animal. He’s hidden her somehow.”

“Creep. Well, the place has a bunch of people in it, and they all seem to be carrying some kind of weapon,” said Harry.

“The weird thing is they all have these face masks on, or at least part of their face covered by something. But they aren’t American, I heard them talking and it’s just gibberish.”

“Knew I should have studied Gibberish instead of Gobbledygook,” joked Harry.

“Come on, she’s in real danger!” said Ron.

“Sorry.”

“We could do the old sneak in gag,” said Susan. “Stun a couple of them, take their uniforms and just stroll on in there. I mean, if they’ve made it easy for us by covering their faces, or heck, Sparkle could just shape change us into whoever we stun!”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “Just because these are non-wizards, doesn’t mean there aren’t spells laid on the place that only allow access to those who are supposed to be here. The magic would be able to tell, even if we did disguise ourselves somehow. Or these are wizards in disguise, ready to stun anyone that doesn’t give the right password as they walk by each other. You said they were talking gibberish, right?”

“You’re right, it’s too easy. He knows I just rush into things, that’s probably what he’s counting on. A frontal assault.”

“What else is there?” asked Ron.

“Maybe there’s some kind of underground passage we could sneak in,” suggested Sparkle. “I’ll check the astral and report back.”

“Good idea. Take a look at the place too, see how heavily guarded it is.”

“You got it. *Dimension Step*.” Sparkle vanished.

“Couldn’t we just get in that way?” asked Ron. “You did it at the ministry, right?”

“That would certainly work, no wizard here seems to know about the astral, so they can’t defend against people walking around in it. The problem is going to be making sure no one sees us stepping out of thin air. If they really are non-magic users, and they see us...”

“I know. Memory squad, and we don’t want the ministry involved,” said Harry.

“Exactly.”

“Wait though,” said Ron, “you can make us invisible!”

“Yeah, but I can’t make us rescuing Hermione invisible. If she’s in some cell in there, and then she ‘magically’ vanishes...”

“Oh, right. We have to actually make it look like it was done all without magic. In other words, get the keys and open the door. Crap- him using people that don’t look like wizards was a masterstroke. We can’t be sure!”

“Yeah, who would have thought he had it in him? If we go in that way, there’s the question in their minds “how did they get past all the guards?” I doubt that’s as bad as them

actually seeing magic, but I really would like to avoid anything that might even be slightly gray area. Let's not give the ministry any excuses to cause trouble for us."

"Seconded," said Ron.

"Motion passes," said Harry.

"So how are we going to get inside?" asked Ron.

"That's up to Sparkle."

Who predictably returned at that exact moment. "Did someone say... wonder?" she asked.

All three looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Never mind. Come on, there seems to be some kind of tunnel leading away from the place. I bet we can get in that way." Sparkle took them, crouched low, about half a mile from the main building. "It's around here someplace. It was camouflaged under a rock, I think."

"There's a suspicious rock," said Ron, pointing.

"Why don't you do the honors," said Susan. "I may need to conserve my energy."

"Not a problem," said Harry, giving his wand the old swish and flick. The rock levitated up and out of the way, revealing a hole in the desert ground. There was a metal ladder built into the side, and it looked like it hadn't been used in a long time. They couldn't tell how far down it went, and Harry stuck his wand into it and cast *Lumos*.

"Doesn't go down too far. And you said this goes right into the place?" asked Susan.

"Sure does. Which is what worries me."

"How do you mean?"

"A dark, underground tunnel? Unguarded? You don't think that's a little too convenient? He wants you all dead, remember?"

"She's right," said Susan. "This tunnel could be laced with explosives or something entirely non-magical. Even some kind of poisonous gas. We would never see it coming."

"So this is out too?" asked Ron in desperation. "What are we going to do, then?"

"Calm down, Ron, we've only just got here. Better to figure out the best way than just charge in there the first way we see and get massively in trouble."

"I just can't stand that she's in danger!"

"I know. I would feel the same way if it was Luna. We'll get her back, I promise."

"Okay, let's keep looking then."

Harry floated the stone back, and they went back to behind the shed.

"Is there something propped up on the roof there?" asked Harry, squinting against the sun and pointing.

"Could be some kind of skylight. Which makes no sense, why would they want more heat and sun in the place?"

"Good question. Must be some kind of trap. He knows we can fly, so he would expect us to maybe try by air."

"Yeah."

"Hey look," said Ron, pointing at the building. "Someone's come out to have a smoke."

They looked, and sure enough, the door was propped open and a guy had set his gun down and was puffing away on his cancer stick.

"It's like he's daring us to come in that way! I can't believe this guy!" said Ron.

"I know, he's taunting us. He knows where we are, I bet. Having a nice little laugh from inside while we work out how to get past his little guards there. Oh, I'm so going to mess that guy up when I see him next. And by mess up, I mean, turn him in to the proper authorities."

“Glad you specified that,” said Harry. “So is there any other way in, and by in I mean out, because we could just *Phase* through the wall if we wanted to get in.”

“That truck is bothering me,” said Sparkle. “You don’t think it was put here as some kind of plot device? I’m going to check it out.”

“What does she mean, *plot device*?” asked Ron.

“Don’t look at me, she might be my *Companion* but that doesn’t mean I understand everything she says.”

Sparkle snuck around the tires of the truck, then made sure no one was looking. She hopped up into the back, looked around, then jumped down again.

“It’s full of ammunition and explosives,” she said, coming back. “I think it’s meant as a distraction.”

“What, we set it on fire?” asked Ron.

“Oh, we don’t *just* set it on fire. Harry sets it on fire and then Susan casts *Combust* on it. The whole thing will go up in flames.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Like Sparkle said, it would be a distraction. That’s our in,” said Harry excitedly. “Something went off in the truck, blowing it up. Sure, not exactly commonplace but explainable without magic. They’re going to be busy trying to put it out for a while. We sneak in while invisible, then find Hermione. You, Ron, get to take out the guard or guards standing around. We get her out, book it back out here, and get away.”

“Okay, that could work. Better be invisible before you do the fire though.”

“Can’t. *Combust* would be considered an offensive spell, and I would become visible again. Wait, I’ve got an even better idea!”

“What?” asked Harry.

“Sparkle, your *Magical Ally* is just a big lion, right?”

“Yeah, why? Oh, you want a second distraction to add to the first.”

“Exactly. They’ll be fighting a huge lion and the fire at the same time. And no one will believe them when they tell someone how big it is, it’ll just be them exaggerating.”

“How do we know lions are around here?” asked Ron.

“Eh, there’s lions everywhere. It’ll be fine.”

“Whatever. So the final plan is...”

“Harry sets the cloth on the truck on fire. I explode it, while Sparkle gets out her lion. I make us invisible and we sneak through the door. We find Hermione, see how she’s guarded, and take it from there.”

“And I can’t use magic,” grumbled Ron. “I hope this works.”

*Yeah, no save points here,* thought Sparkle. *Wonder if that could be a spell. Some kind of temporal lock that can take you back to the place and time you cast it if something gets screwed up. Oh well.*

“Any time you’re ready Harry.”

“*Incendio!*” Harry shot flames at the truck, and the dry cloth covering it quickly caught fire. Susan cast *Combust* with a penalty to her rating, and sure enough, the fire caused an explosion out to 2 meters. This fire set off the ammo and grenades in the truck, and they exploded. This reduced the truck to a mere skeleton and there was another explosion as the gas tank caught fire as well. A lion, with orders to stun, only, roared out from behind the shed and made for the guy standing there, his mouth open, staring at the truck. He grabbed up his gun and

started fumbling with it as the lion bared down on him. People inside started yelling and pouring out of the doors, and guns were pointed out of windows.

Susan cast *Invisibility* on the group, and they made their way inside past the guard trying to fend off this huge lion that had appeared out of nowhere.

*So far so good.*

Once inside, they quickly passed people facing out of windows and carrying buckets, like that was going to help save their doomed, exploded truck. There was panic in the whole place, and Susan couldn't help but wonder what, exactly, this place was. It didn't seem to have any magic going nearby at all, according to *Magic Sense*. It looked, now that she was up close, like a terrorist group rather than the lair of a slightly pissed off "celebrity" wizard. There didn't seem to be any lower levels, but they did come across a guy standing nervously in front of a door, holding his gun like he was ready to fire. The group was around the corner from him.

"Guess I'm up," said Ron. "*Accelerate.*"

"Wait," said Sparkle. "*Armor of Magic.*"

"*Augment Skill,*" cast Susan. "I'll have to make you visible, so you come around the corner rather than just appearing out of thin air."

"Got it."

"Good luck!" said Harry.

Ron shimmered back into visibility, and charged around the corner.

The man yelled something in Gibberish and shots were fired. Peeking around the corner Susan saw the one man down on the floor, and another running from the other direction. Susan cast *Dazzle* on him, and Ron took him down as well with a few well-placed strikes.

"There really is something to this method," he remarked, grabbing the keys from the guy. He motioned the others forward and started trying different keys. 4 keys in he felt the knob turn.

He turned the knob.

He slightly pushed the door open.

The door slightly opened.

He pushed it a little bit more open.

It opened a little bit more.

The sounds of gunfire continued outside, and there was shouting.

The door opened a tiny bit more.

"Just open it!" said Susan, pushing past him.

There stood a young boy looking up at her.

"Hermione?" asked Susan.

The boy replied something in Gibberish.

“Uh, did they give her Polyjuice potion or something?” asked Harry.

“That wouldn’t have caused her to forget how to speak English,” protested Ron.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Think she’s someplace else then?”

“Just a second and I’ll ask him,” said Susan, setting out of the room. *I just hope he hasn’t moved it for some reason.* “*Retrieval,*” she cast, and into her hand dropped a metallic object fitted to wear over the ear. She had made it for the school, but she didn’t think the school would mind if she borrowed it.

“Can you understand me now?” she asked the boy, who was gibbering away her two friends.

“Oh, your Pashto is perfect,” said the boy. “Are you three here to rescue me?” He looked doubtful.

“Actually, we’re here to rescue a girl, have you seen her? Very bushy hair.”

The boy shook his head. “I have not heard the guards saying anything about another prisoner. Are you American? Why do you have a cat with you? You don’t even have any guns, how did you get in here? Are you taking me home?”

“Uh, one question at a time, kid. He says she’s not here,” she said to Harry and Ron.

“Not here? She’s got to be!”

“Look,” she said to the kid. “Who are you, anyway? What are these guys doing here?”

“My name is Mirwais Karzai, son of Hamid Karzai.”

“Okay, but why did they kidnap you?”

Mirwais looked dubiously at them. “I am the president’s son. You know, the president of Afghanistan?”

“Is that where we are? I did wonder.”

“You are very strange. Can we go now?”

“Thank you. In a second. He says he’s the president’s son, and we’re in Afghanistan.”

“Where?” asked Ron.

“I’ll explain later. Look, we better get out of here.”

Sparkle pointed down the hall.

“Is that cat pointing?”

“Yes, she’s, uh, specially trained. Come on.”

The four left the room, stepping over the bodies of the two men, one of which was beginning to stir. Ron kicked him in the head and he went down again. Mirwais looked awed. “Awesome, are you ninjas?! You’re not dressed like ninjas.”

“You think we go around dressing like ninjas nowadays? That would totally give us away.”

“Oh, you’re right. I never thought about that. They’re going inside. You actually look more like wizards.”

“No such thing as wizards, kid.”

Sparkle led them down a flight of stairs, and looked around as if trying to figure something out. Susan snapped her fingers.

“The escape tunnel!” she said. “It might be around here, we can leave that way!”

The four spread out to look, and Ron shoved a cabinet over, showing a hole in the wall. “Come on,” he said.

Harry lit his wand.

“Cool flashlight.”

“It’s a ninja flashlight, pay it no attention.”

“Can I be a ninja when I grow up? Do you have to go through a lot of training? You don’t look very old. Does being a ninja keep you young? How old are you? When did you start ninja training?”

“Quiet!” hissed Susan. “We are trying to escape with our lives here, if you hadn’t noticed. Let me concentrate!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it, just save your questions until we’re safe.”

Harry shoved the rock out of the way and the group started climbing. It wasn’t that deep, Susan handed up Sparkle and climbed out herself.

“So now what?” asked Ron. “We can’t exactly use magic to get home with the kid here. And where exactly are we going to take him, anyway?”

“I have no idea. Is it just my  $-1$  to auditory *perception checks* or has the gunfire died down?”

The other two listened. “I think it has, but we’re pretty far away, right?”

Mirwais screamed, and pointed. The others looked, and Sparkle’s *Magical Ally* was running towards them.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him. “He’s on our side.”

“You travel with a cat *and a lion*? Who are you people?”

“The ones that rescued you. What did I say about questions?”

“That’s the biggest lion I’ve ever seen!”

“Oh, you’ve seen a lot of lions close up, have you?”

“Uh, well, no...”

“Okay then.”

With the boy’s attention on the lion, Susan called upon *Temporary Tool* for a pair of binoculars, and stared looking over the place they had left.

“Where did you pull those from?” asked Mirwais.

“Secret compartment. You just love asking questions, don’t you?”

“Is that bad?”

“Not as such, no. I think they’re all down,” she said to the others.

“Maybe he ran out of targets?” ventured Ron.

“Could be. Harry, take him over there, there’s at least a little cover if someone shows up. We’ll go back and look for Hermione now that things seemed to have calmed down a bit. Mirwais, go with him, he’ll protect you. We’re going to back to look for our friend we thought was there, okay?”

“Okay.”

The two scampered off, and Susan, Ron and Sparkle jumped on the lion’s back.

“Take us back to the compound,” he said to the lion, who started booking it back.

“Could your lion really have taken them all?” shouted Ron as they rode.

“Sure! He has an effective 13 REFlexes, plus the bonus from *Acceleration*. He can *Knockout* with a touch, and halves damage because he’s a  $+1$  size modifier. And they were NPCs, they have crap for stats or backgrounds! I would have been shocked if they had managed to damage him more than a little.”

“Oh.” Ron turned around and mouthed “NPCs?” at Susan, who just shrugged.

With its speed of 38 it took no time at all to get back and they looked around. The truck was still burning, and men were on the ground, unconscious.

“Guess we should have just done that in the first place,” remarked Ron, bending over to pick up a gun from an unconscious guy.

“Ron, don’t touch that, you don’t know how it works!”

“Yeah, but he does. And if he wakes up, we’ll have him to deal with. Better to disarm them while we can, right?”

“Oh, I see what you mean, good point. I didn’t even think of that. Okay, let’s go.”

So the two walked about the battlefield, stripping everyone of their weapon and making a pile of them. They then walked the inside, grabbing any loose weapons or gear they thought looked dangerous to allow these people to have.

No Hermione.

“Well, crapnuts,” said Ron.

“Yeah, he set us up, didn’t he? Now we have no idea where Hermione is, and we’ve got the kid to deal with.”

“What are we going to do with him? And all this stuff?” He indicated the pile of guns.

“I’m taking the guns, I’ll get rid of them somehow,” said Susan, getting out the formula for her *Personal Dimension*. She opened it up and threw the guns and explosives through, then closed it up again.

“Do you hear that?” asked Sparkle.

“No, I don’t, what is it?” said Susan.

“I hear it too. It’s coming from the air, I think,” said Ron.

“We better go take a look.”

Susan was still maintaining her *Tool* and peered out at the helicopters that were bearing down on the location.

“I think they’re US military!” said Susan excitedly. “Probably here to rescue the kid!”

“But we already did. We can’t explain how we got here!” protested Ron.

“That’s okay. When we get back, Harry can stun the kid. I’ll shove him through a *Teleportal* back here. No one will believe his story about three kids, a cat and a lion saving him, they’ll think he dreamed it or something. Come on, before they get closer!”

So the group raced back to where Harry and Mirwais were hiding, and Harry dubiously stunned him. Susan made another *Teleportal*, and Harry wafted him through back into the room they had found him in. Susan watched the helicopters land.

“Okay, they’re American soldiers, all right. And boy do they look confused. They’re going inside. Some are cuffing the guys we left outside and just letting the truck burn. It’s almost out anyway. One guy is trying to wake up one of the guys under *Knockout*. Good luck fellows, he’ll be out a few minutes. They expect some kind of ambush I think, they’re still acting cautious. Ah, they found the kid, great. You didn’t cast your spell very strongly, right?”

“No, he should only have been out a few minutes.”

“Yeah, he’s there. Looks like he’s talking animatedly. Probably asking a million questions.” She started to giggle. “I so wish I could see their faces when the kid asks about American ninjas in wizard robes.”

“Is that what he was going on about?” asked Harry.

“Oh, he wouldn’t shut up, honestly. Wonder if I was ever that bad with my mother and my *Curiosity* weakness. I’ll have to go tell my mom I love her, if she had to put up with that day after day.”

“You should tell her that anyway,” said Harry, a bit sadly.

“So can we go now? Hermione is obviously not here,” said Ron.

“What about the explosive paper?”

“You head back, keep the *Teleportal* open, and get someone to get it off me!” said Harry.

“Wait a second... *Finite Incantatem!*”

The paper dropped off his leg, and the writing disappeared.

“Oh, great,” said Ron. “Think about that earlier, would you?”

“We had to be here to rescue Hermione anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess. Come on, maybe the Headmaster will have some news by now about where she is.”

The four went back to the castle, stepping through to the common room, where Hermione was sitting, studying.

“Where have you guys been?” she asked innocently.

## Hermione's Tale

Time: Some time ago

Place: Common Room

*Let's see,* thought Hermione, *I have about an hour before Susan will need me to change the coins. I'll go do some homework in the library. Hey, isn't that...*

"Hello, Professor Lockhart," said Hermione, surprised. "Did you come to see the Headmaster about getting your old position back?"

"Hermione! So good to see you again." Gilderoy gave her a #3 smile. "Actually I came seeking you and your little group of friends. Wanted to apologize for my ghastly behavior at the hospital, can't imagine what I was thinking of."

"That's very kind of you. Susan just apologized to some teachers for things she did recently, so she knows what it's like to act in the heat of the moment. Shall we go find her?"

"If you could lead me to her I would be ever so grateful."

"Who are your, uh, friends?" Hermione looked behind Gilderoy, and there were two tough looking wizards standing behind him, trying to look inconspicuous. They had their wands out and were twirling them, and seemed like poster boys for the "these are the guys your daughter is going to fall for" society. Bad boys, in other words. They leered at her.

"We ran into our friend Mr. Lockhart here in the village," said one. "And as we're graduates of Hogwarts ourselves, we thought we would pop back in and see how the old place is holding up."

"Yeah," said the other. "Graduates. Top marks, us. Nice to see the old stomping grounds again, you know what I mean?"

"Mr. Lockhart was kind enough to invite us along, and we agreed."

"And here we are!"

"Nice to meetcha."

"Nice to meet you both," said Hermione hesitantly.

*Are they threatening him? Did they use him to get into the school for some reason? I wonder if I could somehow stun them and see what Professor Lockhart had to... I've been spending too much time around Susan. I'm starting to think with my wand, like a... like a... a boy! I'm sure it's nothing.*

"Well, we'll head to the common room, she's probably there."

"Take the scenic route," said tough number 1.

"No rush on our account," said tough number 2.

"Lead on!" said Gilderoy.

As Hermione wound her way through the castle halls she grew more and more concerned as the two didn't seem to be reminiscing about their time here at all. If anything, they were more concerned about getting away from anyone in the halls. Her mind made up, Hermione decided to try and stun them both the first chance she got. She turned down an empty corridor and materialized her wand.

She spun, but tough number 2 was too fast for her, or had anticipated this, and she found herself looking up at them, as though with an odd perspective.

*What just happened?*

She was scooped up by tough number 1, and realized she had an animal's body now.

“Grab her wand and let’s go,” said Gilderoy.

“Why take the wand?” said tough number 1.

“I... don’t know. She just shouldn’t be without it.”

“We’re kidnapping her, Gilderoy, not taking her on holiday.”

“I just feel we should take it, that’s all. Who’s paying for this operation, anyway?”

“You’re the boss.”

The tough grabbed up the wand, put it into a pocket in his robes, and the three determinedly walked back the way they had come.

“Now, we just need to find someone to give the note to on the way out,” Gilderoy remarked. He spotted Neville.

“Neville, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Professor? Have you come to teach Defense again? We would seriously like you back, at least your lessons were somewhat practical.”

Gilderoy flashed him a #5 smile, no sense wasting the good ones on guys, after all. “The headmaster said he would consider me back for next year. Actually, I’m glad I ran into you!”

“You are?”

“I am indeed. I was hoping to run into Susan so I could give her this.” He pulled out a piece of sealed parchment from his robes. “But I have to run. Could you give it to her instead?”

“Sure, I guess. I see her around all the time.”

“Good. If you could just find her soon, that would be great.”

“Okay, I’ll go look now. Hope to see you next year, Professor.”

Hermione’s newly lengthened ears picked up his muttering “Anyone would be better than Umbridge,” as he turned and walked off.

“Now then, gentleman, shall we go?”

The three made their way into a secret passage out of the school, and Disapparated. Hermione felt herself being squeezed as though she was traveling through a very small tube, and they popped out someplace she didn’t recognize.

“So now what?” asked the guy carrying her. “That enchantment won’t last forever.”

“It will last long enough,” said Gilderoy, rubbing his hands together. “Oh, to see the looks on their faces when they realize their precious *Hermione* isn’t where she’s supposed to be.”

“Shouldn’t we just kill her?”

“Oh, no. The group must suffer for what they did to me. I’ll figure out something, as I wasn’t sure who I would catch on my little trip to the school. Now that I know who I have, however...” he laughed. “We’ll think of something suitable. Bring her inside.”

They went into the house they were standing in front of, and Hermione found herself being dumped into a cage. A rabbit hutch, to be exact.

*A rabbit? They’ve turned me into a rabbit? I think they’re making fun of my teeth! Oh, when I get out of here...*

But strangely, it didn’t seem like she could get into the proper frame of mind that she wanted to be in.

*It’s this rabbit brain I’ve been shoved into, she thought. It just doesn’t have the capacity to get angry at someone. If he tried to hurt me I would bite him, but the rabbit I’ve been turned into doesn’t care past that.*

With horror she came to her senses and discovered she was eating rabbit food without realizing it.

*I have to get out of this body!*

“Watch her,” Gilderoy said to tough number 1.

“Ah, what’s she going to do as a rabbit?”

“She’s the smart one, we shouldn’t underestimate her.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Come on, we’ll go think of something suitable for our new pet.”

“I’ve always liked rabbit stew.”

“Don’t be disgusting.” Gilderoy threw the wand down on top of the cage and both men walked off.

“Just you and me little bunny,” said the tough. “Do some trix, I mean tricks for me, little bunny!” He rapped on the cage. Hermione’s beady eyes stared at the man.

*Even if I could get my wand, there’s no way I could hold it. Can I still talk in this form? Sparkle can, but she’s a special case.*

Hermione tried to say something, but nothing came out.

*Guess not. Super. What’s he doing now?*

The man had conjured some dandelion leaves, and was poking them through the bars of the cage. Against her will, Hermione’s mouth started to water. They looked really good. She hopped forward, but the man yanked them back.

“Aw, not fast enough bunny! Try again!”

The man amused himself for several minutes, and Hermione’s rabbit body fell for what he did every time.

*Got to get control of myself!*

“You’re too funny, bunny,” said the man, going to sit down. “And now I have to watch you, like you were going to escape somehow. Honestly.”

Several minutes passed, with Hermione hopping uselessly around the enclosed space.

*Could I throw my weight against the side of the cage and tip it over? I didn’t see how it was fastened though, that might not help me any. Come on, Hermione, think. Your wand is right there!*

The man casually got up again, and seemed drawn to Hermione’s wand, which he picked up and started swishing through the air.

“Always wanted a girl’s wand,” he said, then sniffed it. “Funny, I thought it might smell different. Say…” he leaned down over the cage. “Do you use your wand for anything other than spell-casting? I think you know what I mean.” He made a rude gesture with it, involving two fingers on his other hand. “I’ve always wanted to ask a girl that, but never had the nerve. Is there a *Vibrate Wand* charm girls never told boys about?”

Hermione stared blankly up at him. *I guess rabbits can’t get embarrassed either. Good to know.*

“And so I go and ask someone I can’t even get an answer from. What a waste.” He pulled his wand out and started comparing them. “I expected it to be, I don’t know, softer somehow. Something. It’s just a wand.” He tried setting it down again, but seemed to change his mind. “I have the strangest feeling I need to give this back to you. Weird.”

He wandered around the room a moment, seemingly unaware he was even carrying it anymore. He kept staring at Hermione Bunny, and seemed to be arguing with himself.

Finally he reached in and grabbed her, pointed his wand at her, and she felt the world grow smaller again. He handed over her wand again.

“Now why in the world did I do that?” he asked, taking a step back from her.

“Stupefy,” said Hermione, pointing her own wand at the guy. (She didn’t know talking was a free action, and could have replied to him and still cast her spell) He looked shocked and fell over. “And I’ll take that,” she said, grabbing his wand. “*Incarcerous*.” Ropes appeared out of nowhere and wrapped around him.

*Thank you, Susan, she thought, looking at wand. That True Owner stuff comes in handy, huh?*

Hermione heard footsteps down the hall, and overturned the table that the rabbit cage was sitting on. She dived behind it.

*And again for the combat exercises. Though that was more Professor Quirrell, I guess.*

The other tough burst into the room and stumbled over the trussed up body of his partner. “*Immobulus!*” cried Hermione, freezing the guy. Sadly he still had momentum, and kept falling over, smashing his head on the floor.

“Is everything okay in there?” asked a timid voice from around the door-frame.

“You might as well come out,” said Hermione. “You know you can’t match me in spell-casting.”

“How did you get loose!? Honestly, I’m taking my gold back, these guys are obviously not the men for the job they said they were!” The sound of running feet were heard and Gilderoy retreated back down the hallway. Hermione carefully looked out and saw him fling open the door and run smack into a person standing on the other side of it. There was a woman standing behind him, who looked over their shoulders.

“Mr. Lockhart, what are you doing here?” said the man. “I’m here about a use of underage magic, you know anything about that?”

*Wow, that was quick.*

“She tried to kill me!”

“Who did?”

“Her, the girl! Hermione! You have to save me!”

“I’m sure we can straighten all this out. Come out from behind there, I can see you!” said the man, moving past Gilderoy and coming into the house. “Drop the wand and put your hands up.”

Hermione retracted her wand into her hand with the *Somatic Sword* spell she was under and put her hands up.

“What happened with those two?” he asked.

“I stunned them. They kidnapped me and turned me into a bunny.”

“A bunny?” asked the woman.

“I got better.”

“I think we’re going to need the whole story... wait a second Charles, isn’t that Ezra Marnie? He’s wanted all over the place. And that’s his partner, Al “the spiker” Reanne. There’s a reward out for the capture of those two, I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, I captured them,” said Gilderoy instantly. “And then I... it was... there was a...”

“Yes?” asked the man. “Did you not say she was trying to kill you?”

“Uh... what I meant was...”

“Let’s see your wands, both of you. Nice and slow. I want to see what spells you’ve been casting lately.”

“Don’t you need a warrant or something for that?” asked Hermione.

“A what?” asked the woman.

“Never mind.” Hermione got her wand out again, and handed it over. *It’ll come back to me, no worries.*

Hermione’s, of course, showed the stun spell she had last used, while Gilderoy’s showed (of course) a memory alteration charm being cast.

“I think we better take you both down to the ministry for questioning.”

“I have to get back to school! These three kidnapped me, and the Headmaster will be looking for me!”

“We’ll send Albus an owl that you’re safe. I want to know what’s going on here. You can either come with me willingly, or be stunned like those two.”

“I’ll come,” said Hermione. *But I hope you don’t get in the way of Susan “rescuing” me from the ministry.*

“And so,” Hermione said, finishing her story, “They brought me to the ministry and I told them the story. Gilderoy couldn’t come up with anything, so they changed him with a bunch of stuff and let me go. The headmaster came to get me, and I arrived back here a few minutes before you did. They gave me a sack of gold for catching those two criminals though. I’ve got it in my *Pocket Dimension* at the moment.”

The three stared at her, impressed.

“Well, say something.”

“Well done, Hermione!” said Ron first. “That was amazing!”

“Thank you, Ron. Not as amazing as Susan would have been, I’m sure, but I managed on my own.”

“No, no, you kept your head, waited for your moment. I approve,” said Susan.

“Well, like I said, I could hardly do otherwise. Rabbits don’t seem to have quite the emotional range as humans do.”

“Still, poor Lockhart. Shown to be a fraud, had his memory erased, then cured, and he throws it all away on some cheesy revenge quest. What a waste,” said Harry, shaking his head.

“At least some good came out of it. We did rescue the chatterbox, right?” asked Susan.

“Not to mention the XP. We haven’t had a lot of good, old fashioned adventures like that in a long time.”

“Yeah, what happened to those? XP has been thin on the ground lately. I haven’t learned any new spells in ages. And I should be learning more now than ever!”

“I’m not the one in charge, don’t look at me. It’s true though, the final battle would seem to be looming, I hope we have the XP to learn what need before then.”

The next day, Susan, Harry and Ron were called to the Headmaster’s office, where he tapped without speaking to a newspaper from the non-magical world that was sitting on his desk. The front page was dominated by a story, and the three began to read.

### **President’s Son Saved!**

*In a daring rescue attempt by marines in Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, president, was tearfully reunited with his son, Mirwais Karzai, late yesterday. “I don’t remember*

*much,” said the son, “But I think there were these ninja wizard guys who showed up before the solders. There was a girl that talked kind of weird, and a red haired boy and a boy with a funny mark on his forehead.” Marines were baffled as it appeared a truck had exploded before they arrived, and someone had knocked all the terrorists out, left them, and stole their guns. To further add to the mystery, some of the terrorists found there seemed to have been mauled by a large animal, no sign of which was ever found. The rescue was carried out without a single shot being fired, and relations between Afghanistan and the US are now at an all-time high because of this cooperative effort.*

“It wasn’t our fault!” protested Harry.

“We were just trying to find Hermione!” said Ron.

“It was an accident, and it’s all Mr. Lockhart’s doing anyway!” finished Susan. “He’s the one who sent us there!”

Albus stared at them, then looked at the paper, then back up at them.

“We tried to do everything so it could be explained without magic!” said Harry.

“Sparkle’s lion was just more powerful than we expected and took them all out instead of just keeping them busy,” said Ron.

“I didn’t even let Ron take his wand out, he relied only on Kung Fu!” finished Susan. “I thought you would be pleased at our restraint!”

Albus kept staring at them, leaning back in his chair and resting his chin on his fingers after putting his hands together.

“I think we did good,” said Harry. “We didn’t let anyone see us use magic, and the people there can’t prove anything well enough to involve Obliviators.”

“Yeah, there were like a dozen of those guys with gums-”

“Guns, Ron. Guns.”

“Yeah, guns. Against the three of us. We snuck around and everything!”

“What’s going to happen to us? Is the ministry pressuring you?” asked Susan. “I mean it’s obviously us from the description so the ministry probably knew it was me right away, right?”

Albus just shook his head and waved a hand, making the door open.

The three stared it at, and then back at the Headmaster.

“We’re really sorry,” said Harry.

“There was this exploding note, that’s why we didn’t come get you,” said Ron.

“I think we better just go,” said Susan, as Albus was now shooing them out with more dramatic gestures. They passed through the doorway and it slammed behind them.

“He must have been really angry,” said Harry. “He wouldn’t even speak to us.”

“He’ll write my mother, I know he will. I’ll get Howlers for a week. I won’t be surprised if he picks a new prefect. I’m doomed.”

“Maybe we can make it up to him somehow? He didn’t even listen to our side of it. It’s totally unfair!”

The thick, oaken door totally muffled Albus' howling laughter and pounding on the desk, and several portraits on the wall grew concerned about how long it went on for. Later, though they didn't see it, 50 points were added to both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor houses.

Testing, One Two... Testing

Time: The day before exams

Place: Common Room

“You don’t have to take the written part of the exams?” said Hermione, scandalized.

“Didn’t I mention that?” asked Susan innocently. “What am I going to do, answering questions about wand movements and charms I can’t use?”

“I guess. It just seems unfair.”

“Hermione, everything about my magic is unfair. Remember, I walked into this school a better wizard than most people are now. I could have skipped school, gone into business *Imbuing* stuff for people, and no one would have been the wiser.”

“You don’t have to convince me. You do still have to take the History of Magic exam though, right?”

“Yes. Anything that’s only written, like Herbology and History I’ll have to make my checks for.”

“Funny how I don’t have to take any tests,” said Sparkle. “I guess people just look at me and think *cat* rather than *powerful magic user in her own right*. Sad, really.”

“How would you hold the quill?” asked Ron.

“I could shape-shift into something with hands.”

“Do you even know how to write?” asked Harry.

“I suppose. I don’t have any weaknesses that say I don’t. It’s assumed that if you know how to speak a language you know how to write it, for us.”

“I see,” said Hermione. “And will you be cheating on these exams as well using your magic?”

“I haven’t decided. Probably. It’s not like they can tell. And if I really needed to make a History of Magic check in the field for some bizarre reason, I’ll always have the spell to make it better.”

“I see.”

“The tests are meaningless anyway. Anyone who wants to know how much I know about a subject can just look at my character sheet. You guys have to take silly exams because there’s no other way for you.”

“Must be nice,” said Harry.

And so Susan walked into her first exam, the practical for “Charms” and sat down with her examiner.

“Susan Felton, that name sounds familiar,” said Tofty.

“I may have been in the papers somewhat recently,” she said nonchalantly.

“Oh yes, I have a note about you. Something about not taking the standard test?”

“Yes. Wanded charms seem a bit useless at this level, like changing the color of something. Who cares? I would much rather put the time into spells that are a bit more useful.”

“And why is there a cat sitting next to you?”

“The cat is with me.” *In reality, she’s here to fill in any gaps in my own spell-casting. We learned different spells for a reason, after all.*

“Well, there’s no rule against having your pet with you, I guess.”

“Pet,” Sparkle snorted.

“Did that cat just... never mind. So why don’t you demonstrate some of your magic for me?”

“Of course! How would the standard test begin?”

“Well, I would ask you to make this eggcup do some cartwheels for me.”

“Levitating an object that weighs a couple of grams? I think I can do better.”

Susan wordlessly cast *Telekinesis* and a magical circle appeared around the examiner. She got a 13 with her -2 penalty, and took the full 9 segments to cast.

“What’s this?”

Susan flicked a finger and the examiner found himself floating towards the ceiling.

“My word!”

Everyone looked over at the examiner, helplessly flailing about in the air.

“I think that covers the telekinesis portion of the exam, does it not?”

“Indeed,” said the wizard, now being lowered to his seat again. “And you did it wordlessly!? You aren’t even supposed to begin that until next year. What else can you show me?”

Susan pointed to the large empty space behind the examination section and a magical circle appeared. She took 12 segments this time, spent a bit of energy to counteract the -2 (*it is a grade 8 spell after all*) and wordlessly cast *Magical Ally, Major*, getting a 13 again, exactly the difficulty.

*Maybe I shouldn’t be so stingy with my energy, but I don’t know how many spells this guy will want to see.*

A +1 sized dragon appeared in the space and looked over at her for orders. Several people cried out in surprise, but Susan quickly got up and went over to it, calling “It’s okay, it’s just a summoned creature. Totally under control. Dance for me, dragon!”

Susan made a *Dancing* check, getting an 8 (-2 for maintaining the dragon) so she awkwardly shuffled about the dragon tried to mimic her. The examiner came over.

“May I touch it?”

“It’s not an illusion, or anything. Go ahead.”

Tofty reached out a hand and stroked it. “Amazing. Can it breathe fire?”

“Dragon, -10 penalty to hit, head-shot, *Elemental Bolt Fire* on me. *Deflection!*”

The dragon, following orders, shot a narrow stream of fire at Susan’s head, who deflected it easily. (The dragon had *Augment Skill* for the *Bolt* that’s why Susan chose it to have a total -13 penalty. Just in case it rolled high and she didn’t.)

“I see that it does, and you have a spell for deflecting things, I see. Very well, very well, I like what I’ve seen so far. Please continue.” He went back to his seat, and the dragon disappeared.

Susan grabbed a piece of paper of used *Cut* to slice it in half with her finger, then *Repair* to put it back together again. Then she set it on the ground and set it on fire with *Combust*. She then put it out with *Elemental Conjure: Water*. She walked through a wall, pulled stuff out of her *Pocket Dimension* and used *Shrink* on Sparkle.

Sparkle, taking her cues from what Susan said she was doing gave her *Augment (STR)* to lift the examiner with one wand, *Leap* to jump extra far and *shape-shifted* her into the examiner.

“Okay, okay! No more! I get it, you weren’t just posturing when you said your magic was advanced. Thank you.”

Susan walked out, hoping she hadn’t gone overboard.

“Showoff,” said Harry.

“Wait, you weren’t even there.”

“So? Are you telling me you didn’t show off?”

Susan just whistled and looked around the room in the universal “innocent” act.

Harry grinned at her.

Susan went into her Transfiguration practical not knowing exactly what to expect. She didn’t even know what Transfiguration entailed, usually.

“Ah, Susan, heard about your charms exams. Should I expect a similar surprises for Transfiguration?”

“I’m not sure, I’ve never really taken a Transfiguration class, so it’s tough for me to know what kids get up to there.”

“I see. Then what do you do when you want to turn something into something else?”

“Why would I want to do that? I would rather just make the thing I wanted, either with *Temporary Tool* or *Creation*.”

“Okay, why not demonstrate those for me, and we’ll go from there?”

“Sure. *Creation* takes about a minute though... in fact, let’s do this...”

Susan used *Creation* to make a large chunk of sparkly red rock, then used *Sculpt* to turn it into a small dragon.

“That was quite impressive! Could you have made the dragon immediately, rather than reshaping the stone?”

“Yes. I just wanted to show that I can create material out of thin air, and that I know a spell to reshape stone.”

“I see. Now, what was that second one?”

Susan made a variety of tools, as the examiner suggested them.

“I can see why you would think *Transfiguration* would be a bit beneath you. To be able to call up any sort of object you can think of... amazing. Can you do human transfiguration?”

Sparkle brushed up against Susan and turned her into a +3 size modifier humanoid dragon with *Shape-Shift*.

“Oh my,” said the examiner, looking up at her.

“Perhaps something a bit smaller?” Susan suggested.

Sparkle obliged by turning her into a unicorn.

All the girls in the room went “ooooohhhh” and she pranced and strutted a bit. (And did a bit too much unnecessary tail swishing)

“I guess that answers that question.”

Susan sat back down.

“Now what about Vanishing something?”

“You mean destroying it? There is a spell I could learn, called *Destruction* but I don’t like that sort of magic, so I’ve stayed away from it. Knowing I could just cast that and turn someone’s head into a fine powder is something I’m not yet ready to live with.”

“Very well. I’ve seen enough to know your magic is on par with ours, and in reality much more useful. Thank you.”

Susan then took her first non-spell-casting practical, Herbology, and rolled for it, getting a 12. (She decided not to cheat on that one)

[  
As a note, the following scale, modified from the Demongate High setting, will be used, in which grading will be as follows for classes:

1-2 = T, 3-4 = F, 5-6 = P, 7-9 = A, 10-13 = E, 14+ = O

]

Susan was sure to write *I'm the non-wanded one* on the top of her Defense written test, and went down to the practical with the same level of nervousness as the other two. Which is to say, none.

"Now then," said the examiner. "Imagine this wooden dummy here is a dark wizard that's trying to kill you. Show me what spell you would use."

"*Elemental Bolt (Fire)*," Susan cast, taking the whole three segments to cast and doing a called shot to the body. Fire shot out of her hand and slammed into the thing (it wasn't dodging and had no LUCk and thus, no *passive dodge*). She did 7 damage to it, which blasted a hole in it, but with a DC of 18 more than half was left.

"Ah," said the examiner, licking his lips. "Yes. I have been told you don't do things half way. Now what you would do if you wanted to, say, keep them alive for questioning at the end?"

"I suppose killing even a dark wizard should be avoided if at all possible. You'll have to play the part of the wizard, I can't exactly demonstrate my non-lethal method on something made of wood."

"Very well." The examiner got out his wand and pointed it at her.

"*Hypnotic Field*." She put 6 energy into it, leaving 5 for the extra oomph in the spell and took the full time. (It was a classroom setting, after all) She got an 18, which the examiners' check to resist did not overcome. He stared at the pretty lights and she slipped his wand from his unresisting fingers. "I would then snap the wand in half and walk away, confident the dark wizard posed no further threat. Of course I might search them for extra wands, and such." She looked around. "Oh, sorry about that!" She ended the spell, allowing everyone in a 10 meter radius to get back to whatever they were doing. "And your wand, sir."

"Thank you. Effective, surprisingly effective. Even against a group, from what I just saw. But in a group your opponents won't be standing there waiting for you to finish casting. What would you do facing, say, four people?"

"I would say *For Sacrifices Made*," said Susan, throwing her ring hand in the air, and visualizing her *Legion* to appear in a ring around the examiner. Their swords were drawn, and their faceless heads stared menacingly down at the man.

"Good answer," he said weakly, looking around at them. "Could, um, they go away now?"

She demonstrated *Phase* against a "werewolf," as you can't bite a "ghost" and both *Lubricate* and *Dazzle* against things like giants that were too big to use magic on directly.

"Wait a second, are you the Susan that took out a fully grown dragon in the Triwizard Tournament? You got past the one and then captured the other, single handedly? And helped stop that giant that was rampaging through the village?"

"That was me."

“I thought you looked familiar. Why are you even here, taking this test? You pass. Obviously. Now get out of here. Go. Go on! Shoo!”

Her other exams had no practical portion, so she just rolled them straight. She already had an edge over the others, if she did really bad somehow she could re-roll with XP, or get a bonus. She figured that was the only “cheating” she would do, because really, she wanted Hermione’s respect.

*Care of Magical Creatures: 9*

*Arithmancy: 12*

*Astronomy: 10*

*History of Magic: 7 (she re-rolled with XP, getting an 11 that time. She wanted to be a straight E student, if possible, and knew that one class would mess that up. Being the last exam, she spent the XP and smiled when she realized she had done it.)*

And exams were done!

It was that evening of the History exam that Susan received her second raven from Voldemort.

Second Journey to the Ministry

Time: That evening

Place: Ravenclaw Girl's Dorm

Susan took no chances this time when the raven tap-tap-tapped upon her windowpane. She used *Retrieval* to grab the message, which seemed bigger this time, and the bird flew off. She did a *Magic Sense* on it, to be sure, and began to read.

*Susan,*

*I hope your exams went well, though I'm sure you weren't worried in the slightest.*

*I write to you today to fulfill my promise and repay the debt I owe you. It has recently come to my attention why, exactly, the ministry fears you so much. Apparently, there was a prophecy spoken soon after your birth that relates to you and your magic. This is what drives the ministry to watch you so closely. As a show of good faith, I will meet you in the prophecy room, tonight, at midnight, to lead you to this prophecy. I will come alone, and my wand shall not be drawn.*

*As you have little to fear from me, I request you also come alone. It is only others you will endanger if we are caught through sheer luck on their part. I will meet you in front of Harry Potter's prophecy, which I already know to be a clever fake. Well done on that score, by the way. There was a time I would have given much to hear it. Now, I believe, yours is more relevant to both of us.*

*I hope to see you tonight.*

*L.V.*

"What do you think?" she asked Sparkle.

"It's not his style to do a trap, is it?"

"That's just the thing, we don't what his style is. Everyone talks about the horrible things he did, but not about the man himself. For all we know, there is someone higher up than him, and using Voldi as a puppet to achieve his own ends."

"We can't rule that out, I guess, but it wouldn't have lasted through his death. At least, I hope. What are you thinking?"

"Go there. I need to see him for myself. See if he keeps his promises, that sort of thing."

"It's dangerous."

"Like he said, with *Immunity* going I don't have that much to worry about. And you can come. If there's any trouble just step us over into the Astral."

"Couldn't you just go with *Plastic Proxy*?"

"Not if I want to play my *Overconfidence* properly."

Sparkle rolled her eyes. "Fine, be that way. But at least leave a note or something, in case you don't come back."

“Why wouldn’t I come back? What’s he going to do to me? And I think he wants to hear this prophecy just as much as I do.”

“He’s had months and months to work out spells and raise his ratings. I don’t think you should underestimate him.”

“So buff me up good before we leave. *Acceleration*... wait, you can’t if I’m going to be immune to magic. Well, he can’t be more dangerous than an angry, living, breathing dragon. And he said come alone, magical allies and *Legions* don’t count.”

“So you have some sense, at least...”

At nearly twelve, Susan opened a *Teleportal* into the prophecy chamber. She chose a row a little far away from where she remembered Harry’s being, though Tom had certainly seen inside the castle if he wanted to *Teleport* there. Her *Legion* and *Ally* stepped through.

“If I call for you, come running,” she said to them. “Otherwise, stay out of sight but follow me as best you can. You-” she pointed to one, “Come with me.”

They all nodded.

They waited, listening. The place seemed deserted and quiet, and Susan relaxed a little bit. At 11:58 she made her way, with Sparkle, to where the meeting was supposed to take place, and there he was.

Getting a good look at him now, she saw Voldemort had taken on the qualities of the snakes he no doubt held in high regard, being of Slytherin house.

*His pale face and slits for a nose gave him Creepy for sure. I’d love a peek at his new character sheet. Jerk.*

“Ah, you are prompt. You don’t have *Timekeeper* by any chance, do you?”

“So you looked up backgrounds and weaknesses?” *But how? Oh.* “I guess you figured out the *Research* spell.”

“A spell to gather information? When you know so little about what you can do, what’s the first spell you would create? And you brought a friend I see, but at the same time are quite alone, as I instructed. I don’t count your cat. Good evening, Sparkle.”

“Good evening.”

“I assume the rest of your ‘pack’ is nearby?”

“It would be safe to assume that, yes.”

He shrugged. “Trust must come from somewhere. It may as well start with me. As you can see,” he held up his hands, “my wand is not at hand. Not that I need it for the meager stock of *Natural Magician* spells I’ve been able to research. Come, let us not linger. Follow me.”

*So far so good, it seems he’s kept his promise.*

Voldemort led her to a shelf like any other, and just as before, there was a tag that had been recently changed. It listed the same initials as before, with a date a few days after Susan was born. The most recent change to the tag was the addition of her name, which had been done just before she entered school.

*They’re on the ball about something things, I guess.*

“Take it down,” said Voldemort, “And I will, with your permission, draw my wand and activate it. We will be able to hear the words.”

Susan nodded and reached for it, hand closing around it and lifting it from the shelf.

Voldemort nodded, and slowly reached into his robes, pulling forth a wand. He tapped the sphere, and a ghostly form hovered above it. Sadly, Susan had not taken *Divination* or she would have, possibly, recognized the voice of the Divination instructor. But she hadn't, so the voice that issued forth from the figure was quite unknown to her.

*She is come. The outside girl. Know her by three signs-*

*She will be born of no father.*

*She will walk beside death at her left hand, life at her right hand.*

*When she has made the seven into one, it is not her magic she will use to destroy her greatest foe.*

*All prophesy is over, for her coming was unseen by all. She comes from beyond, her seeds reshape the world.*

*She twists destinies as you would knot a string. Ah, I feel it twisting even now, as prophesy dies and is reborn.*

*Set upon the path of anger, the magical world destroyed at her hands.*

*Set upon the path of forgiveness, the second age of magic awakens.*

The figure vanished.

"I see," said Voldemort. "We are to be enemies after all, then."

"You understood all of that?"

"Not all, but more than you, I think. One line was aimed directly at me, to be sure. But even you no doubt understood why the ministry would fear you so. You came from outside the world, thus reshaping it. Events specified by prophesy before your birth were now voided, as your presence and magic did things we couldn't. And of course the last two lines are the most pertinent- you could destroy the world or usher in a new age. Given the choice, I'm sure the ministry would rather carry on with the status quo than risk you destroying all magic."

"Why are we to be enemies then? You hate the ministry as much as I, or at least your younger self did."

"True, I think we both see the need for change. I think, however, that you do not put much faith in my methods."

"And what are your methods? Today is a new day, isn't it? You have been reborn, make a new start in this as well. I'll give you the spell for shape-shift, no one would have to know it was you. Work within the law this time, to revise wizard law over time to be more fair as I one day hope to. After all, laws can change, and there are ways in place to change them. Use them!"

He sadly shook his head. "No, my path is set. I learned long ago the only change that would satisfy me would be *sweeping* change. Revolution. After all, isn't it the duty of all people to rise up against a government they believe no longer serves them? How did you do in your history O.W.L I wonder? Even in the magical world there are examples of this."

"So it's the status quo as you say, how I think things should be, and how you think things should be. Result, a three way clash in the magical world."

"It needn't be so. Join me, perhaps you can temper some of my more radical followers. I find it unfortunate that those that can fund my efforts do tend towards the Slytherin side of things rather than Ravenclaw. They are passionate people, and not above getting their hands dirty when they must. Or paying someone else to," he added with a chuckle. "Whereas a Ravenclaw like

yourself would use cool logic, I'm sure. Or just stand aside. The victor would be weaker, in any case, would they not? A perfect time to attack, just when they believe their victory complete."

"I don't want to attack anyone. That's still Slytherin!"

"But at the same time, you would not want either of our ideals to remain, because what the ministry does currently disgusts you."

"That's true. But what about you? I can't join you until I know exactly what you stand for."

"I stand for wizard superiority in the world. Why do we cower and hide what we are? It's foolish. We should be ruling the world, not dying out. Look at all the petty squabbles that go on between nations. I believe there should be only two- wizards and non-wizards. Think of it: No more war between peoples. No more hunger, or disease. Combine our magics with what Muggles have done to compensate for not having magic and think what could be accomplished! Yes, we would have to regulate them a bit, but can you say we would do worse than they have already done to themselves? Forests cleared to harvest wood a wizard can speak into existence. Garbage buried in the earth to rot a thousand years that a wizard could make disappear in an instant. They should be on their knees before us, thanking us for enriching their lives and their world, not destroying it while we hide our powers."

"So you want to rule the world?"

"I want to guide it along a better path!"

"Better in your eyes."

"How is children dying of starvation while wheat rots in fields elsewhere better than what I would do? Would a regime, with an immortal wizard at the head to take the long view of the world, really be so bad?"

"Just how far would you suppress those without magic?"

"Far enough that they got the point it was useless to resist us. Let the common person live their tiny lives, what difference does it make to me? They wouldn't even need to be told it was magic. Things would just start working out better for them. Wizards could make of this world a paradise, you must realize that!"

"But to do it, you would kill anyone, destroy anything, that stood in your way."

Voldemort sighed. "Have you ever tried to give a cat a pill? Even if that cat needs that pill to survive, it will fight you with all its strength to not put that tiny thing in its mouth. It will spit it up. It will foam at the mouth. Why? Because the cat is stupid and doesn't understand. Isn't the world the same way? You can see the path I walk, I know you can. Walk it with me! Be my conscience if you must, but let us not squabble amongst ourselves. Save your energy for the real battle."

"I... don't know. It's not something I can just decide right now. You make a good argument, but people are so afraid of you. That means something too."

"Very well. I suspect that prophecy has already shown me your path. But I can wait a little longer. Sadly, certain agents that oppose me are getting closer to my places of power and may need to be dealt with soon. Until you, personally, raise hand against me, I will welcome you into my fold. I would suggest putting some thought into it and making up your mind soon about standing with me, or standing alone. Thank you for coming this evening."

And he dissolved into mud.

"Coward," Susan remarked, as Sparkle cast *Hygiene* on the spot, taking the mud away. Susan pulled another fake prophecy from her *Pocket Dimension* and set it upon the shelf, then sat down on the floor and wrote out the words as she and Sparkle remembered them. (Susan got a 16

on her KNOWledge check to recall them, and Sparkle assisted with a +1, her *Photographic Memory* not helping much as this wasn't "seen" information.)

"Let's go," said Susan, dismissing her guardian spells and opening up a *teleportal* back to the castle. "We have some things to discuss with the others tomorrow."

The next day, Susan got the core team together and told them what had happened the night before.

"Are you nuts, going there alone?" asked Harry. "We should have been lurking nearby for backup. What if it was a trap to have you captured by the ministry?"

"What, you think Vlodi sent the ministry an owl saying 'by the way chaps, Susan, your enemy number 1, is going to steal a second prophesy tonight don't you know?' I don't think so."

"Still, they could have had alarms or something."

"They didn't the first time I was there. It all worked out, can we just focus on what I learned, please?"

"Just try not to rush off on your own again, okay?" asked Hermione.

"I wasn't alone. I had Sparkle, a dragon, a lion, and twenty five soldiers."

"I suppose that force could have handled most anything. Anyway, what did you learn, really?"

Susan smoothed out the paper she had written the prophesy down on. "We know now why people keep saying things should be different. They're right. Cho thought Cedric should be dead, and he probably should have been. Without me around, someone else would have been chosen as the Hogwarts champion in the tournament. It could just as easily have been him. That's the biggest thing people have said, right?"

"Just your being here changes a million little things a day," said Hermione. "Without that sword you made, how would we have destroyed the ring?"

"Good point, that's another major change."

"So what do we do about it?" asked Ron.

"Not much we can do. I'm not about to go live in a cave someplace and not make an impact on the world. You guys are stuck with me."

"Where would we have practiced Defense stuff this year?" mused Harry. "Would we even have done that? How do we know what things that have changed in the world are good and what are bad?"

"Only history can tell us that, Harry," said Hermione. "We just have to do the best we can. Forget prophesy, the world is how it is."

"So you're saying we should ignore this?" He picked up the piece of paper. "And I was sort of curious about mine, now. Could you look up the incantation to activate the one we already had?"

"I guess I could do some *Research*," said Hermione, putting her hand out for the book. She started looking through it.

"At the very least we learned what his goals are," said Ron.

"Yeah, if you think he was telling the truth about it," said Harry.

"He could have totally been leading Susan on, that's a good point."

"To what end?" asked Susan. "If I had joined him it would have been pretty obvious right away if he was telling the truth or not."

"Not until he took over and things started getting better or worse, though. And by then it might be too late," said Sparkle.

“He just didn’t seem like some raving lunatic, like everyone makes him out to be. He was rational, well spoken...”

“Could he have been using magic? Like *Augment Skill: Persuasion*?” asked Harry.

“I can’t say it’s impossible. That’s only a grade five spell, so not that tough.”

“Even without that, he knew what he wanted to say to you, and about your personality through spies here at the castle. After all, we know the family that Death Eats together, stays together.”

“So he worked it all out before hand, you mean, and was just sort of reciting what he thought I wanted to hear.”

The others nodded.

“You can’t be thinking of actually joining him?” asked Ron.

“No, the man is a wanted criminal. We know his organization did horrible things in the past, just ask the Longbottoms. I just have to wonder: how did the guy that made such a good argument to me go that far wrong?”

“With good intentions,” said Harry.

“One step at a time,” said Ron.

“Once he started down the dark path, forever did it dominate his thoughts,” said Sparkle.

“Always two, there are,” said Susan, her eyes widening. “A master... and an apprentice.”

“The question is, which of you is the master?”

“Oh dear...”

“Okay, let me try something,” said Hermione, looking up.

Susan got out Harry’s prophesy, and they sat and watched it as Hermione poked at it with her wand and looked at her book. Suddenly that same ghostly figured shot out of it, and began to speak.

The group listened to the original Prophecy sphere, and the voice faded again.

“Well that was depressing,” said Ron. “What the heck power were you supposed to have that *he* didn’t know?”

“It can’t refer to Susan, he knows that power now. No, wait, it was spoken before she was born, so it can’t relate to her at all. I don’t know.”

“Technology,” said Susan. “I bet Voldi is a wizard through and through. Like your dad, no offense Ron. What he thinks he knows of the non-magical world is sketchy at best, and totally wrong at worst. Maybe you were supposed to set up a minefield around the school or something, so if he ever attacked it his army would get creamed by a power he didn’t know.”

“Tanks vs Wizards?” said Harry.

“I don’t know. But it can’t be magical knowledge, can it? Even without knowing my magic, do you really think you could beat a wizard the whole world is afraid of? What kind of power is there apart from magical and technology?”

“Physical, Social, Economic, Political, Intellectual and Spiritual,” recited Hermione. Everyone looked over at her. “Well you did ask.”

“Fine, let’s start with Physical. Getting an egg from a dragon might mean flying well, but I don’t think your broomstick flying will really defeat Voldi.”

“Ron’s the one with Physical power anyway,” said Harry.

“Yeah, which I only got because of Susan’s mom. If she had never been born I would never have even known about my talent for Magic Fu.”

“Then you said social? I’m pretty sure popular opinion is already against Voldi and for Harry, but again, not going to help.”

“Agreed,” said Harry.

“Then Economic. I think he’s richer than you, as you still haven’t gotten your fortune back.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Political... I suppose if you got the ministry on your side, but the prophesy seemed to imply that you, alone, could beat Voldi. That one of you would have to kill the other. So that’s out. Then intellectual, and I’m sorry, but Hermione has you beat there. Maybe she could think of a plan to beat him? But is that “knowing” a “power” that he “knows not?” I don’t think so. And Spiritual- I suppose you could have trained up an army of ghosts or something. Appealing to a higher power doesn’t seem likely to work, unless we’re talking about spells being an appeal to a higher power that actually get answered. So none of those fit.”

“And what about the part about us having to finish each other off?”

“I don’t think he cares about you anymore. He knows he can become immune to anything you throw at him. I’m the biggest threat to him now, because in theory I can kill him the easiest. Remember what mine said- that I would destroy my greatest foe not using magic? I already have a plan if he figures out *Magic Immunity* or *Barrier Against Spells*.”

“Is he your greatest foe then?” asked Harry.

“If he isn’t, I shudder to think who is. He took my magic, Harry. That makes him very dangerous to everyone. Him using my magic to cause mayhem and destruction would make him my enemy real quick like a bunny.”

“I know. I guess it does fit. So did we learn anything from all this?”

“Yes. I have to keep my temper in check, and not go nuts crazy like I did with Ms Umbridge. That’s my dark side, and the path that leads to magic being destroyed in this world. And yes, I do know exactly how I would do it, thank you. We have to find out what the “seven into one” means, and Harry needs to figure out what power Voldi doesn’t know, in case I fail.”

“Always good to have a backup plan, I guess,” said Hermione.

“Hey, why can’t you be the backup plan? I was here first! I’m the one he “marked as his equal” you know?” He pointed to his scar.

“Oh, by all means, I’ll just step aside shall I? Good luck with getting past his two different types of magic when you face him. I’m off to Hawaii.”

“Only joking.”

Battle at the Cave

Time: Saturday Evening

Place: Ravenclaw Girl's Dorm

With exams over, the castle was winding down for the summer, and people were making preparations to pack and leave the next day. Susan was still troubled by what she had seen and heard in the prophesy room. Who did she throw her magical weight behind? The ministry she had no love for, or Voldemort, who everyone regarded as evil? She wasn't foolish enough to believe she could fight both, if it came down to it, and unlike Voldi she didn't want to rule the world or anything. She just wanted the torture of prison victims to stop and for more fair trials. Was that so wrong?

She blamed the Headmaster for not taking the Minister post, and wondered if she should work her way up to one day become Minister. But did the minister make laws, or just sort of generally keep the ministry running? He wasn't a king, after all, which is basically what Voldi wanted to be. It was efficient, but too easy to corrupt. That's why there were presidents and ministers and cabinets and branches of government. But when they were all equally corrupt, where did one turn?

Was revolution the only way forward, as Voldi believed?

Susan didn't buy it. *Violence can't be the answer, a committee with oversight power, that honestly wanted to do their best, could be used to root out corruption...* Dolores Umbridge's face swam in front of Susan's mental eyes. *Oh, right, we saw how that worked out around here, didn't we?*

Susan was sitting on her bed, petting Sparkle, and trying to resolve the conflict within her so she could decide on her next step. *Maybe if I cast Augment Stat: REASON on myself I could think more clearly and come up with an answer? The trouble is it's not a math problem, it's a moral issue.*

Her thoughts were broken when a stag, which she recognized as Harry's Patronus, ran up. "Susan, there's trouble. Can you come down to the common room?" It vanished.

Sparkle jumped up and followed at Susan's side as she went down the stairs, out of the Ravenclaw dorm, and into the castle common room. Several members of S.T.F.U were there, looking worried. As she came in they parted, and she was surprised to see Kreacher standing there, looking worried.

"What's going on?" she asked the assembled group.

"It's the Order," said Harry. "They've gone to attack some stronghold of Voldi's or something, I guess. Well, you tell her." He looked down at Kreacher.

"Kreacher has heard them, saying they were getting close," he said. "But Kreacher had misgivings, yes he did. Death awaits one of their number there, he can feel it."

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Not long. They are probably about to begin the attack at any moment. Please, he is not the master Kreacher would have chosen, but Kreacher fears for his life. Thus Kreacher is compelled to do what he can to help. Please, come with me to where he is and help save them!"

"I think it's a trap," said Ron.

“There is the possibility,” said Susan. “You know where they are?”

“Kreacher heard them speak the location, yes.”

“But you say you *feel* he is in danger. If he’s gone to fight Death Eaters, then I would think he would be. What makes you so sure?”

“I am sure, that is all Kreacher can say.”

Susan looked at the faces around her. Ginny, Cho, Luna, Neville, Ron, Harry, Hermione all looked back at her. “It could be an *echo*,” she said, using the term they had come up with to identify those events that seemed not to have happened because Susan was around now. “Though usually they happen after the fact, not before it.”

“Can you give us any more information about this feeling of yours?” asked Hermione. “It’s not that we don’t believe you, precisely, we just have to be sure before we rush off.”

“Elves know things,” said Kreacher. “It is our gift, and how we are able to do that which wizards are not. Please, we must leave!”

“Wait a second...” said Susan, doing a *Magic Sense* on Kreacher. “You can levitate things, right?” She picked up a book and held it out. “Make this float for me.”

“What does this have to do with saving Kreacher’s master?”

“The sooner I understand the sooner we leave,” said Susan.

“Very well,” he said, pointing at the book. It started floating, and Susan didn’t get any kind of reaction from *Magic Sense*. She smiled, and looked at the group. “Elves are ESPers,” she announced smugly. Cho, Luna, Ginny, and Neville looked confused, but Ron, Harry, and Hermione looked interested.

“You said something about that before,” said Ron. “Something about mind power, right?”

“Exactly. I only have the notes my father made about things he observed ESPers doing, but they aren’t magical abilities. Kreacher, you can leave your body and fly around as a sort of mental energy, can’t you?”

“How do you know this? It is a most closely guarded secret among the elves!”

Susan grinned. “And I bet you had to practice that ability a lot before you could learn to teleport, am I right? Can you touch something and know its history?”

“Yes,” he said, as though admitting he was a pixy in disguise.

“How about throwing lightning?”

“No, I can’t do that.”

“You probably can. Tell you what, after this is over I’ll make you a list of what ESPers on other worlds can do, and you can practice them, okay? For now, I think I believe you.”

“Because he’s an ESPer?” asked Luna.

“Exactly. They have a finely tuned sense of things, and can even get glimpses of the future. If he’s getting his information that way...” She looked down at him.

“Yes, Kreacher looked to see if the mission would be a success. Kreacher saw that it would not.”

“Probably because Voldi is immune to magic, or just an avatar of some kind. Okay, we’re yours Kreacher. Everyone, wands out, we’re going into battle.”

“Wait, you mean to fight Death Eaters?” said Cho, taking a step back.

“To back up a bunch of people already fighting them, actually. Why? If you don’t want to come, that’s your decision.”

“Come on, what have we been training for?” asked Harry. “We’re all nervous, but we have Susan with us. Put your trust in her, at least.”

“Yeah, I’m going,” said Ginny proudly. “And... I’ll go wherever Harry goes, so there. If you won’t, then you better not see him anymore.”

“I just... I can’t. I’m sorry.” She ran off.

“That was abrupt,” said Ron. “Anyone else leaving? Luna? Neville?”

“I might get to see Bellatrix... I owe her. I’m going.”

“I’ll follow you anywhere,” said Luna. Susan flushed.

“Even so, Kreacher can’t take all of you,” said Kreacher. “Kreacher is only one elf, after all.”

Susan snapped her fingers. “Of course! ESPer teleportation works by physically carrying people through space. That’s how it gets through wards against Apparition. Another mystery solved- Sparkle, you’re up.”

“Got it,” she said. “*Augment STRength*,” she cast, more than doubling Kreacher’s strength.

“Kreacher feels strength flowing through him! Kreacher thinks he can carry everyone now! Grab on!”

Wands were drawn or materialized, and with a crack, Kreacher and the rest vanished from the halls of Hogwarts.

They found themselves in a large cave, and flashes of magical light lit the area as the people inside dueled. Sirius, Tonks, the Longbottoms (“Mom, dad!” shouted Neville) and others battled people in masks. Albus, Mad Eye and Lupin were dueling Voldemort himself, who wasn’t even bothering to block their spells. He was just attacking, and it was all the three could do to keep up.

*Obviously Accelerated*, thought Susan.

Ron, Neville and Hermione sprinted into the fray, activating their special items. Ron blurred into *Acceleration*. A line of Hermione clones came into existence. Neville also seemed to be hard to pin down, his form bouncing and jerking like a badly tuned analog TV. Ron was ducking and weaving, not even looking where he was casting his stunning spells, but scoring all the same. Two Death Eaters went down, and two more started casting spells at him, which he blocked or dodged.

*He really has been able to create Magic Fu hasn’t he?*

Harry, protected by his *Barrier Against Spells* item was also not bothering to block anything, he just started casting stunners into the fray, walking calmly through the combat as if he didn’t have a care. Even Kreacher got into it, slamming people back against walls without even being near them.

Luna stayed by Susan. “I doubt you need it, but I’ll support you if I can,” she said. “Even you aren’t invincible.”

Susan felt a burst of appreciation towards her, and smiled.

“Thanks.”

Those dueling turned to see who was coming, and Voldemort spotted her. He stopped shooting spells at the three he was fighting and turned away from them. Spells of all kinds continued to bounce off of him. He walked towards her, and the three vainly tried to stop him. Luna also raised a wand as he approached. He took no notice.

“Have you decided then?” he asked when he was close enough.

“In less than 24 hours? No!”

“I suppose it was the elf, then, that brought you here? You couldn’t have found it any other way with Paragon magic. As long as you don’t help them, my offer stands.”

“I... I don’t know what to do.”

“I suggest you decide quickly.”

He went back to dueling the three.

“Susan, whatever he’s told you is bound to be a lie!” shouted Albus. “He cannot be trusted!”

“Quiet, old man. You never trusted me from the start. Maybe if you had, shown me a bit of compassion rather than mistrust, things could have worked out differently.”

The four moved off, and the battle continued.

“Please, stop fighting!” she shouted. “There must be another way than just trying to kill each other!”

No one responded, they were too far into combat mode to spare her even a glance.

“I don’t know what to do...” whispered Susan.

“You can’t just stand here, they’re all in danger!” said Sparkle.

“Yes, they all are. That’s it. What cards do you have?”

“Cards? What difference- oh, here.” Sparkle put a paw forward and showed Susan her character sheet.

“Card 16? That’ll do. I may as well get some XP for this. I would have preferred mutiny, it’s worth more. Oh well. Do you mind?”

“No, go ahead and take it. I can get it back with card 38. Oh, it may interest you to know that the discard pile now has an *Experience Bonus* and a *What a Rush* card, probably turned in by Voldi.”

The 16 disappeared from Sparkle’s character sheet, and Susan knew it was now on hers.

“Great, like he needs more XP. I declare the use of card 16, *Hidden Agenda*,” she said, taking a meta-action to use the card. “Now, I need *Energetic Accumulation* if I’m going to get the whole cave.”

“You got it. *Energetic Accumulation*.”

Susan started gathering energy, and with half her total used, she cast *Hypnotic Field*. With a 45 effective rating, and a 58 roll, there was no earthy way anyone could make a REASON check against that. The battle immediately halted. Harry stunned his latest opponent, and stopped, looking around.

Voldemort turned again.

“This is your solution?” he said into the silence that now fell over the cavern.

“Just leave, why do we have to try and kill each other? Is there really no better way than this?”

He seemed to consider. “I suppose this hideout is compromised. And personally I value your good graces more than I want to kill Albus this evening.” He looked over his shoulder. “I’m sure you realize by now that not a single one of your spells touched me this evening. Your magic is no longer any concern of mine, why should I fear you now? Paragon magic truly is a force to be admired, isn’t it? I really must remember to send Susan a gift to repay her for it.” He turned again and feigned surprise. “And here she is! How lucky! I can repay her directly.” He moved off. “Death Eaters, we are leaving this place. I will break you out of this spell and you will go to our number 4 hideout. You will not attack any helpless members of the Order. I have given them a taste of what fighting me will be like in the future, and perhaps that will make them do the

smart thing and stop trying to defy me. But of course, I don't hold out much hope of that." He moved among his Death Eater force and covered their eyes, breaking them out of the spell. One by one, they disappeared, some carrying those who had been stunned. Finally only he remained. "When next we meet, Susan, I hope you will have a better answer for me than this."

He disappeared.

Susan made sure no one with a mask was left, and dropped the *Field*.

"What in the heck was that all about?" shouted Sirius. "You just let him go? This is the most evil man on the planet, you can't just—"

Albus raised a hand, cutting him off. "I suspect she realized what was going on, and was trying desperately to think of a means of saving us. He was toying with us, you must see that. I'm not sure how much more bragging he would have done before finishing one or all of us."

"I was a little busy at the time, what do you mean?"

"He didn't block a single spell," said Lupin. "Just let them splinter off of them. He really has taken your magic, hasn't— oh put that down, Mad Eye."

"She let him escape," said Alastor, pointing his wand at Susan. "That makes her just as bad as him."

"Alastor, you know that three spells would have seen us all finished tonight," said Albus gently. "You further know he has no problem using said spell, as he has so many times before."

"But he didn't. She let him get away!"

"Mad Eye," said Frank, standing between him and Susan. "I won't let you hurt the person that cured my wife and me. You heard him, she hasn't joined him, she just doesn't know who to trust right now. And this isn't helping. Do you honestly believe we could have gotten out of here without injuries if these kids hadn't showed up?"

"We were winning, I'm sure of it."

"We were losing, Mad Eye," said Lupin. "We can't fight him, not anymore. You saw your spells bounce off, what do you think you were going to do? I doubt even Susan could have done anything, he's obviously immune to magic like she is."

"Are you somehow immune to magic?" Alastor demanded.

"Of course not. But I have a spell that make me immune. Apparently, now he does too."

He lowered his wand. "I don't like it."

"Nor do I," said Albus. "But the game has changed, and we must change with it. If he is immune to magic, then we must find some other way of dealing with him."

*I could have, thought Susan, sadly. He seemed to really be here, rather than in avatar form. I could have ended it. But I still am not convinced it's the right thing to do.*

"For now," Albus continued, "let's return to headquarters and talk about what our next steps will be. We'll need to come up with some new plans if we face Voldemort again, that much is clear. While Susan has often threatened people with her *Immunity* magic, saying that she couldn't be stopped if she got serious, I never really understood the impact of those words until tonight. I don't mind saying I am more afraid of that man than ever before. Susan, I beg of you, help us. I don't know what you two have been talking about, or how you have even been communicating with him, but he will betray you. He is no longer human, I think, and he does not have human compassion or empathy anymore. If he ever did. Please, come and talk to me sometime about your concerns. We can't stop him without you."

*Yes you could. You could make the same plans to kill him I have. It's your ignorance that blinds you.* "That's just the trouble, you want to stop him. And by stop you mean kill, I assume? I could have killed him tonight, when he was focused on you. Because you all make the same

mistakes, and you don't even realize you're making them. But I didn't, because maybe I believe that all life is precious, even his. And killing him isn't the solution, because another will just take his place. Or he'll come back, like he did this time. You need to fix the root of the problem, not just snip off the leaves."

"This is not really the place to discuss it. I know school is ending, but please, I want to understand your views and help you understand mine. Will you do that for me?"

"Of course. Maybe over the summer, or early next term."

"You know better than I do any delay only gives him more time to research new spells."

*And he probably got some XP for that fight sequence, too,* thought Sparkle.

"Another couple of spells won't change the seriousness of the situation, trust me."

"As you say. Thank you all for coming this evening. I'm not sure how you found out about this raid, but I'm glad you were here to set things right. Ron, your fighting technique seems strange, but it does seem effective. Harry, I see your grades in Defense are well deserved, you've been working hard. Good job. Hermione, your wand-work was excellent, whichever of you is the real one. Ginny, you need to be a little bit faster, but otherwise quite acceptable for your age and experience. Luna showed loyalty to Susan, staying by her side, a very Gryffindor thing to do. She is also to be commended just for coming."

*Crusty old goat. Can't stop being a teacher, can you? Even in a fight for your life, you managed to critique my fighters? Or are you just making it up?*

"I assume you can get back on your own?"

Susan nodded.

"Then I will see you all later. Thank you again."

With that, one by one, the Order members vanished.

"Are you really thinking of joining his side?" asked Harry, walking over to her.

Susan shook her head. "I don't know. I have to go by what I see, not what other people think they saw, about him."

"They were fighting to kill, those Death Eaters," said Ginny.

"Yes, because the Order busted in and attacked them! Who wouldn't try to defend themselves in that situation? Until Voldi leads some kind of attack himself, or Death Eaters are proven, on his orders, to be making trouble, it's all just heresy. And I won't fight without proof. I know the ministry has done evil things, like the prison. I can see it, it's a thing. All I know about Voldi is he wanted to be left alone and his organization has a bad reputation. Have any deaths on his orders been proven? Is there evidence he's killed anyone since he returned? I don't know of any, do you?"

They looked at each other.

"How do you know he wants to be left alone? Did he tell you?" asked Luna.

"Because he isn't out causing trouble," said Susan. "Even researching my kind of spells, he still has his own to fall back on. The smart thing to do when he came back was move fast, seize power at the ministry before they could react. Then install a figurehead, rule from the shadows, and then start researching stuff. He didn't. He just went away. He could have immediately killed everyone in the order tonight, but he didn't. Is this the behavior of a lunatic? A murderer? I don't think so!"

"Unless he's holding back to try and convince you."

“What does he need me for? Obviously he’s figured out at least some *Planets*. Mercury, Venus, Sun, Saturn, and Jupiter from the spells I know he knows. He probably made a skill group of them.”

The others looked puzzled.

“Never mind. The point is, my help will save him some time, but what does he care about time? The man is immortal, we know pieces of his soul were scattered about, we destroyed two of them. Who knows how many are left out there? Fifty or a hundred years is nothing to the man, if he’s smart. If I was him I would just keep my head down and start amassing wealth, spells, followers, the whole bit. He’s got the time. Even if I wasn’t around, he could have just hidden out until the one wizard everyone says he was afraid of dies- the headmaster is no young man, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“But he knows you have a head start on him,” said Neville, “and you’re getting more powerful too, right? So isn’t his goal to either get you on his side or get you out of the way, permanently, so he doesn’t have your magic to worry about any more?”

“Yes, now that he’s tested his new powers against actual opponents, he may want to ensure he’s the only one around with that magic,” said Luna.

“And there’s only so much magic he can have going at once,” said Sparkle. “Just like us.”

“I just need to think about things some more. Come on, let’s go back.”

“Wait,” said Luna. “We have a valuable opportunity here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your magic can look through time, right?”

“Yes.” Susan wondered where she was going with this.

“And where are we now?”

“A cave? Oh!” Susan realized what she was talking about. “A place they met! Maybe even hideout #3.”

“Exactly.” Luna looked pleased.

“Hey Ron, do you recall if I ever used *Time Window* when Scabbers was around?”

“Not really?”

“That figures. Still, if he hasn’t realized it yet...” *It is Saturn, which I know he knows, because he implied knowing the Research spell. But maybe he didn’t look any further.* “It’s a worth a try.”

“What’s this?” asked Neville.

“If he doesn’t know I can look into the past and see what he was doing here, we can see what was discussed before they arrived. If Peter saw the spell, though, then he will have told Voldi and this whole thing could be a setup.”

“Paranoid much?” asked Ron.

“Never paranoid enough,” she replied. “Keep in mind that all the spells I’ve seen him do, *Teleport, Acceleration, Research, Barrier* are all things Peter knew my magic could do, because he saw them. So naturally he would have researched them first, because he knew they worked. He would be extra careful about letting a location like this be known to me if he knew I could look into the past and hear what he had to say.”

“So let’s do it!” said Hermione.

And so, a few castings later to get close enough, Susan and the others stood in front of a *Window* and watched in horror as Severus Snape provided information to Voldemort.

“How long until they arrive, do you think?” Voldemort demanded of Severus.

“I told them you would meeting the Death Eaters here in twenty minutes, so probably ten if they wish to ambush you.”

“Good. And you’re sure the girl has not been informed?”

“Albus tells her nothing, that I can see. She used to go to his office quite regularly, but at the start of this year stopped going almost altogether.”

Voldemort chuckled. “It seems your dislike for the girl is rubbing off on him, perhaps? Or does he begin to realize how dangerous she is? He knew her choice from the beginning, after all.”

“I cannot say.”

“It is of no consequence. Tonight I will show Albus and his merry band just how futile it is to fight me. I can’t wait to see the look of horror on the face of Albus when he sees no spell can touch me.”

“Are you certain of that, my lord? Can you trust this *Paragon Magic*,” he sneered, “when your own has served you well for so long?”

“I admit, getting my followers,” he indicated his masked and robed force behind him, “to attack me in earnest to truly test the spell has been trying. That is why I must know its limits now, before I construct any further plots. If anyone can think of a way around my new protection, it will be him. He’s had years to think of how he might stop the girl, after all.”

“I still believe you should just kill her and be done with it, my lord. She cannot have that spell that makes her immune to magic up at all times, so there must be some sort of magic you could use at a distance.”

“What? You wish me to complete the task you failed at so many times? I am not your servant, Severus, so you would do well to remember your place!”

Everyone gasped and looked at Susan.

“I do know my place, my lord. I only mean she is far more dangerous than any fleet, or army on earth.”

“Which is why I want her on my side, if that is at all possible. But prophesy says she sides against me, and so I must accept that outcome. She seems hesitant to choose a side, but that will not last. As soon as she learns how far I am willing to go, she will no doubt be horrified and come after me.”

“You lied to the girl? Usually she has a spell going to detect that sort of thing.”

“Lied? No, I took no chances. I simply did not tell her the whole truth. That I will use any and all creatures: Dementors, giants, inferi, and more, to achieve my ends. That I will control who I must, kill who I must, threaten what I must. You have told me how she hates Dementors, even creating weapons to actually kill them, something I didn’t even think was possible. I am certain she will not approve, and how could she? I recall a time when I found the creatures as she does now- an affront to all life.”

He paused, then almost seemed to be talking to himself. “That feeling seems to have passed, as of late. I have never stopped to consider why.”

He turned back to his Death Eaters, who laughed as he said “She is soft, and would no doubt rather we *talk* out our *feelings* than actually get anything accomplished.”

They laughed.

“That is why I must make myself as invincible as I can- even seemingly immune to spells, there could be loopholes to this magic I am not aware of. Albus will find them for me, I think. Any chink in my armor she is bound to exploit, knowing the ins and outs of her magic far

better than I ever will. But if *Immune to Spells* is proof against all the magic Albus can think to throw at me, I believe that will be a good start.”

“But you have learned so much!”

“Bah. Peter has told me of the size of that book she used to haul out every few moments. I have not even scratched the surface. Also consider this: If you had succeeded as you hoped, all those years ago, I would not be where I am today. Nearing the goal I sought for so long—immortal, invincible. Be glad I allowed you to live after your brash decision to try killing the girl. You could have cost me everything. I would have had to use Harry Potter to resurrect myself, and now he is of as little consequence as Albus.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are right.”

“Now begone, before they find you here!”

“Yes, my lord.”

He vanished.

“Now, the rest of you. Ready yourselves, tonight we shall have some sport!”

They all laughed again and got into position. Susan fast forwarded time a few moments, then watched as the Order teleported in and started the battle. Moments later Susan and her group arrived, and the battle was over.

She rewound it, thinking maybe there was more before that, but as they teleported in they remained silent, until Severus came in to deliver his news they were coming. Then she went back further, but no other motion ever showed up. *Naturally, they already knew the plan. This was a setup, not a meeting that was interrupted.*

“We certainly learned a few things, didn’t we?” said Luna. “It doesn’t seem like that was staged at all.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Susan. “And I think a little talk with the headmaster *is* in order, don’t you? Especially about a certain *potions master.*”

The others just nodded.

Cleaning Up Loose Ends

Time: Immediately After

Place: Headmaster's Office

"I didn't mean immediately," said Albus, as Susan pushed open the door to his office. "I only just got back, myself."

"Thought you might like to know your so called Potions master is a spy for the other side. Oh, and he was the one trying repeatedly to kill me before. But if you would rather wait until I get back, that's fine." She turned to leave.

Albus stood, knocking his chair back. "Tried to kill you? Are you certain?"

"Well, given that he told Voldi he should just kill me out of hand, and then Voldi replied he wasn't Severus' servant and should know his place, I'm pretty certain. Oh, and then he berated Severus for trying to kill me, saying it was good for him that he didn't succeed, otherwise he would have had to use Harry to resurrect himself and now would not have my fabulous magic to play with."

Albus stared at her, then righted his chair and sat down again. "I see. This is more serious than I thought. I knew he was upset when he learned you were..."

*Yes? Referenced in a prophesy? The one that could break the world?*

*"...coming to school here after you broke his wand that one time."*

*Oh, I see. Not going to tell me even now? And you're supposed to be the good guy?*

*Riggggh.*

"Are you sure it wasn't something else?"

"What else could it have been? No, this is troubling, no doubt about it. I will have to have a talk with him. How did you find this out, anyway?"

*Ah, didn't even answer my question, in case I had my truth spell going. Very smooth. I guess I can't blame you, but you could have given me the benefit of the doubt.*

"After you left, Luna had the bright idea to rewind time in the area and see what they were doing before you guys arrived. That's when we saw Severus reporting to his so called real master."

*Though now I have to wonder, are you maybe hoping Voldi takes me out? So you don't have to in case I choose the "left hand" path of death? But then who would fight him? Oh, it must be a pretty pickle for you, isn't it?*

"I thought you found that out last year."

Susan thought about it a moment. "No, how would we have found out?"

"I could have sworn... No matter. Yes, I know Professor Snape reports to Voldemort. He reports what I wish him to report."

"He's a double agent."

"Correct."

"And how do you know he's actually working for you? Some kind of *Contract* magic? *Veritaserum*? For all you know, he's told Voldi everything and only reports to you what Voldi wants *you* to hear. Like tonight, when he decided to toy with you a bit. I mean, given how many times he tried to have me killed, can you still trust him?"

"I have my reasons, and yes, they are magical in nature, oddly enough. He can be trusted."

"So you knew what you were walking into tonight?"

“We did. I had hoped to at least catch a few Death Eaters or perhaps even figure out a way to capture Voldemort himself. However, your nullification magic is quite impenetrable.”

“So you got nowhere, and then I showed up.”

“And a good thing you did, too, I was getting desperate. But one good thing did come out of it. While Voldemort showed we can no longer cast spells upon him, he saw the ease at which you ended the battle with your *Hypnotic* spell. So he will think carefully before deciding to attack a location where you are, lest his soldiers stand about helpless.”

“That’s just the thing- given enough time he won’t need those soldiers, he’ll be enough. He can maintain spells or make objects making him unstoppable, and then use wandless magic so he doesn’t run out of energy. That’s the biggest concern with my magic, just not being able to do any more after a certain point in a protracted fight. That’s why I focus on spells that end things quickly.”

“That’s wise. I think we can count on him not making things for his followers, like you do.”

*Followers? You mean my friends?*

“He, I think, would tend not to trust them, and would not want to give them any advantage in case they decided to betray him. So at least we won’t have an army of immune people to worry about, just him. Tell me, this magic that makes spells bounce off him-”

“Wait!” said Susan, holding up a hand. “If we’re going to discuss his weaknesses, I would rather do it in a more secure location.”

Albus smiled. “You think this office is not secure enough to speak in?”

“You think my magic cares about what protections you’ve cast?” Susan rebutted.

He conceded the point. “What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.” Susan got out her scroll and reread *Personal Dimension*, tearing open the doorway and stepping through.

“Remarkable,” said Albus, “where are we?” He looked over and saw the practice field barrier set up near the cottage. “Ah, this is where you put those. I did wonder.”

“That’s right, my own little home away from home,” said Susan. “There’s no chance he can scry on us here, unless he’s researched spells even my book doesn’t have. So what were you saying?”

“Yes, the spell that makes him immune to spells, what weaknesses does it have?”

“Let’s take a look.”

She took Albus down to the cottage, where her book of magic was now being kept, and started paging through it.

“Nice place you have here,” he said, looking around. “Is that our potions cupboard?” Potions, both labeled and stoppered and those still simmering were sitting around the lab, ready to be finished and bottled. The empty cupboards were stacked nearby, ready to go back.

“Oh yeah, I promised to get the cabinets back to the castle. I’ll do it tomorrow morning.”

“No rush.”

“Ah, here it is. He called it something different, but you can name the spell whatever you want. I think he’s using *Barrier Against Spells*, just like I did at first. Here we are: *No spells, neither helpful nor harmful, can affect her, although her equipment and ability to cast spells remain unhindered.*”

“That would seem to imply I could cast a spell to, for example, set his wand on fire, as I would be casting it on something he was holding, not on him directly.”

“It could be interpreted that way. I suppose it would be easy enough to check. Want to do it now?”

“I hate to keep you up.”

“Don’t worry about it, apart from the cupboards my schedule is free tomorrow. I can sleep in. And it’s better to know, just in case he tries something immediately and you need to stop him.”

Susan cast *Barrier Against Spells* on herself from the book and took a piece of parchment, rolling it up and pointing it like a wand. Albus got out his own wand and pointed it at her.

Nothing happened.

“Well, that didn’t work,” he remarked. “Any other ideas?”

“Sure, lots of them. Summon up acid or a huge rock to drop on him. That magic is in the summoning, not in the object. Though it looked like he was *Accelerated* so his dodge will be pretty good. Put a barrier around him and fill it with water, drowning him. Suck all the air away from him so he suffocates. Stab him with a sword.”

*Put a bullet in his head.*

“Have a thousand bees attack him, or inject him with snake venom. Cut off both his arms and legs with a chainsaw. Drop him from a great height, then have Superman swoop down, carry him up, and drop him from higher.”

“I get the point, thank you. Never knew you were so imaginative when it came to killing people.”

“I have the same spells he does, you know? If he wants to kill me, he’s going to have to be just as creative as that. I can compensate for a lot of those, which I thought of to see how he might go about killing me. Hopefully he doesn’t yet realize just how vulnerable he is.”

“Yes, let us hope. I will certainly keep that in mind, when next we battle.”

“Good.”

*Or if you have to fight me, I suppose.*

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll get back.”

“No, not at the moment, I guess. I’ll have to come with you, the door will open back in your office, and I’ll get to bed.”

Which was a total lie, because Susan went and grabbed Hermione’s *Tirelessness* item and activated it. She poured over her father’s notes in the book, compiling a list of ESPer abilities he mentioned. When she was done, she had a list of forty ability names and what he believed they did. She brought it down to the newspaper room, where a press had been enchanted to make copies of things, and ran off a few copies. As she stood there she wondered if she’d be able to start the paper up again next year, and what sort of ministry presence there would be in the school when she returned.

*I suppose I could yank him into that cave, and show him the battle. But I sort of promised not to do that kind of thing anymore, right? Plus, the man doesn’t believe the Headmaster, he’s not going to believe what I show him, he’ll just think it’s a trick. If only Voldi could have been seen by him in person somehow. Wait a second... I know there’s a spy, Severus. Could I, over the summer, create a fake spell-book? One that looked like mine, but had totally wrong formulas in it? Then leak that the Ministry is demanding to see my book so they can figure out how to regulate my magic. That would be the only target too juicy to pass up. Stage a sort of court, with Sparkle running Detect Enemies. Then anyone invisible or shape-shifted could be pounced on.*

*Would he trust it to a subordinate? I don't think he would. But would he come invisible or shape-shifted? Either one I couldn't dispel with Immunity because of his Barrier Against Spells. Oh, but what about Dead Magic? If I maintained that, as soon as he walks in, \*poof\* he's back to himself again. Heck, maybe they might want a courtroom that can't have magic done inside it, and I could just use Destroy Magic instead. If they played their cards right they could even catch him! **That could work!***

Susan stood, envisioning headlines the next day.

## **Susan captures Dark Lord**

### **The Dark Lord's Boner\***

**"I would have gotten away with it  
if it weren't for those kids"  
— You-Know-You  
back and on trial**

Susan had to stop thinking of headlines and sneak away again, her laughter was threatening to bring Filch running.

The next day, before the train left, Susan recruited a couple of people from S.T.F.U to help put the potions closet back together. She kept the ingredients, figuring Harry, at the very least, could work on more during break. She usually found herself at The Burrows, as well, so Fred and George would want to continue their research. They asked what happened about Severus, and she said the Headmaster trusted him and was going to look into it.

"After all, he could just be taking credit for the attacks to gain favor," said Luna.

"But he lost it," protested Hermione. "You heard Voldi back there."

"Maybe favor isn't the right word. Like, he wanted to show Voldi he hadn't lost his touch, that he was still capable of killing. To prove he was fooling the Headmaster all along. You know, 'I tried to kill Susan right under his nose three times, but she still escaped' sort of thing."

"Yeah, that could be."

"What are you going to do about it?" Luna asked Susan.

"Nothing. I don't want him knowing I know, in the first place. The only way I could have found out is by doing what I did, and that will alert Voldi if Severus is on his side. The Headmaster has ways of finding things out, so it's less suspicious if he confronts Severus. Secondly, I think my *Enemy* has shifted to Voldi now, and away from Severus, so he probably won't try again. Plus Voldi told him not to."

"But he tried to kill you!"

"Yeah, and in a fight between us I would try to kill him right back. Knowing what I know now, that he's reporting to Voldi, I might just sneak a *Tracer* spell onto him and see where he goes. Even if he is working against us, there are ways he can be made to work for us without his even knowing it. That's more important than a little revenge."

"How about a lot of revenge?" she muttered.

Susan took her hand. "Come on, we don't have too much time left together until the train gets here. I don't want to argue with you about it."

“I know. I just... thinking that he cast the killing curse on you in cold blood like that makes me so angry.”

“Think of it from his perspective, knowing what we know now about the whole situation. My magic is dangerous, and he knew one day I would choose either a dark or a light path. Maybe he knew his real master was out there somewhere, waiting to return. Maybe he knew I would be chosen to provide the blood, and thus another person with my kind of magic would be born. He felt that might be too great a risk. Remember that one line: “It is not her magic she will use to destroy.” Maybe it’ll be his magic that destroys. I’ll be more careful around him, certainly, but he’s not the danger to me. Voldi is.”

Luna smiled. “Okay. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t planning anything.”

Susan pretended to be shocked. “You set me up!”

“Maybe.”

“Little minx! You’ll pay for that!” She stared tickling her.

The boys just kept levitating cupboard units out of the *Dimension* and tried not to act too interested.

And so, Susan went and said goodbye to those she was leaving behind, like Myrtle and Rubeus. She stopped down to the kitchen to see how Dobby was doing, who was fine.

“But thank you for thinking of me, miss!” he squeaked.

“Dobby, what I tell you before? It’s Susan, not miss.”

“Dobby did not think you would remember.”

“You’re a free elf, use my name. Anyway, how’s Winky?”

“Doing better, but still pining over her former master.”

“I see. Well, I have something here that might take her mind off it. Come on. I’ll need your help, as well.”

“Of course, whatever Dobby can do!”

They both walked over to Winky, who looked up at her.

“Hello, Winky,” said Susan. “I’ve got a job for you if you’re interested. Something that might help the entire elf race and make up for all this moping around you’ve been doing.”

“What are you talking about?” Winky said sadly. “Winky is of no help to anyone.”

Susan regarded the empty Butterbeer bottles tossed carelessly around, and wondered if she was even in any fit state to even listen.

“The Winky I remember is,” she countered. “I remember an elf who was terrified of being up so high in the stands, but who still followed orders. That’s the kind of dedication I’m going to need to have this task fulfilled.”

The other elves around perked up a bit, curious as to what this was.

“You’re going to need to work hard, and stop all this feeling sorry for yourself. If you succeed, your name will go down in elf history, I promise.”

Bleary eyes looked up at Susan. “Are you mocking Winky?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Kreacher, another elf I know, gave me some hints and let me figure out how your so called “magic” worked. You’re actually ESPers, doing things with mental power alone, and not magic at all.”

The other elves looked shocked. “Who is this?” demanded Dobby. “Who has given our secret to wizards? What family does he serve?”

“Don’t worry Dobby, only I and my friends know about it. I haven’t given wizards any further reasons to fear you. And only I understood what he was talking about because of the notes my father made from outside this world. No one else would have realized what it meant. He kept notes on it because there’s a spell to let me do some of the things you can, to a limited degree, and he was interested in non-magical abilities. His world also may have had ESPers itself, his notes aren’t clear on that point.”

He seemed a bit mollified. “This secret has been unknown to wizard kind since the beginning. To think we are betrayed now...”

“But it wasn’t a betrayal, Dobby, and that’s where you all come in. Especially you, Winky. Here.” She passed out the sheets she had made with the ESPer powers listed. “This is a compilation of my father’s notes. I doubt it’s complete, but I asked Kreachter if he could do some of these things, and he said he couldn’t. But I think you can. Your task, Winky, is to figure out how and then teach the others. You have the whole summer to get started, and I want to come back and hear that good progress has been made, okay?”

“We can do many of these things...” said Dobby, wonder replacing anger. “You’re saying we could do many more?”

“I don’t see why not. You just never had the opportunity to try, or maybe some elves have kept powers secret even from other elves. I don’t even call this a complete list, there may be other things you can do as well even I don’t know about. I’ve promised him the list as well, so maybe when I get back I’ll bring him along and you all can compare notes. But you’re the one I’m relying on, Winky.”

“You would trust Winky with such a task? Why?”

“Exactly as I have said. You have a good RESolve, and you’re going to need it to work on figuring out how to do some of these things and not give up.”

*At least I hope you do. Would a person with a high RESolve mope around like this? Oh well, the others will support her I’m sure, and maybe this will knock her out of her depression.*

“Very well, Winky will try.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. If any of you have any ideas, or can do any of these things but don’t think others can, talk to her. When you’re done you should write a book about how these abilities are used, so other elves can learn too.”

“One step at a time, Miss,” Winky said, already looking more determined.

“Good luck,” she said.

“Thank you, Miss. I will see you next term a new elf!”

“I hope so, Winky. I hope so. See you then.”

She moved off, and some elves crowded around Winky, already giving her suggestions.

*Not going to give her any time to change her mind, eh?*

Others ran to get cookies and other snacks, which they pressed into Susan’s hands with words of thanks.

“We were afraid nothing would shake her out of it,” said one. “That seems to have done the trick. Thank you.”

“It’s okay if Sally tried some of these things on my own, right?” asked one.

“Of course. Just make sure to share your findings with Winky so she can tell the others.”

She finally got out, laden down with food and good wishes.

“How did you know just what to say to her?” asked Dobby as they stepped back out into the hall. “Hermione has been down many times to try and talk Winky out of her depression, but only you succeeded.”

“Easy. I gave her something to do, something I said only she could do. And that it would redeem her name. If I know Hermione, she was always saying how ‘Winky should be more like Dobby, and crave freedom and paying and time off.’ Right?”

“That is exactly right!”

Susan shook her head. “I thought I had explained things to her, too. The binding magic on the elves wouldn’t allow that to work, she should have known that, being in a *Contract* herself. I understood what the magic needed for her to feel like an elf again. A task, and a worthy one. I want you to start practicing the stuff on that list as well, Dobby. Your race might be under that enchantment for a long time yet, but there’s no reason you can’t know your full potential.”

*Of course, it’s just as likely that wizards suppressed the knowledge of some of the more dangerous ESPer powers like Cohesion and Chronokinesis. Too bad. We’ll need those powers if it comes to war again. And if I can have a castle full of ESPers fighting for me... us, I mean us, that will also negate Voldi’s Barrier Against Spells. Getting set on fire or Mind Blasted isn’t magic if they do it.*

“Dobby will. Thank you. And thank this Kreacher for me, too.”

“Sure thing. See you next term, Dobby. Stay well.”

“And you, Susan.”

She next tracked down Severus, and put her plan to cast *Tracer* on him into action. She first read over the spell, easily getting more than the 9 difficulty to read and understand it. She put *Invisibility* on herself and Sparkle, who then cast *Dimension Step* and held it. Susan then cast *Tracer* from the book and held it, following Severus around while carrying Sparkle. She wanted until he was distracted checking a potion, and saw her moment. She brushed the back of his neck and released the spell, becoming visible for an instant. (She had to touch him, not his robes, or the spell would have gone into the robe.) The spell went off, and Sparkle released *Step* so they faded immediately into the astral. He whipped around, but Susan and Sparkle were already walking away chuckling. He was swinging his arms around wildly looking for invisible people, but they were, literally, a world away.

*You work for me now, big boy, and you don’t even know it. I don’t care what anti-screaming magic Voldi comes up with, I’ll be able to find you no matter what. Be seeing you, potions man... soon.*

Once in an empty room, two floors up, Susan stepped back into the human plane and went to make sure she had everything packed.

“I hope you’ll visit over the summer,” Luna said when they were sitting in the train and heading home.

“Of course! Just send me a picture.”

“I’m not that far from Ron’s house, actually.”

“Great! Somehow I usually end up there before school starts, so that should work out.”

“What’s wrong, Harry?” asked Hermione. “You seem worried about something.”

“I keep feeling sad because Sirius is gone, then I remember he’s fine. I think it’s just an echo, it’ll pass.”

“Sirius got killed in the original timeline? That would have sucked,” said Ron.

“You think he would have been killed in that cave?” asked Hermione.

“I don’t think the cave happened in the original timeline,” said Susan. “Think about it. The cave was a trap for the Headmaster, to show Voldi couldn’t be touched by magic. He wanted to show off because of me. Without me around, no immunity and no cave. So it must have been something else that went down, or was supposed to, I mean. Not that I want him to die or anything! I should have said not supposed to. You know what I mean!”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“How good is Sirius, anyway?” asked Luna. “We’ve spent the year practicing in the *Dimension*, do members of the Order practice too?”

“Good point. Maybe I should offer them the *Dimension* over the summer. It wouldn’t hurt. I just hope Voldi’s forces don’t.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to be great,” said Ron. “You just have to be better than the person you’re dueling.”

“Speaking of being great,” said Neville, “Those were some sweet moves you used back there in the cave. What was that?”

“Magic Fu,” said Ron, buffing his nails on his robes. “No big deal... for me.”

“Think you can teach me?”

“Sure!” He fished his *Arithmancy* book out of his bag. “Here you go. When you’ve mastered all the concepts in here, let me know and we’ll start your Kung Fu training.”

Neville had a “is this a joke” expression on his face, while Ron, Susan and Hermione just laughed.

And the train traveled on.

\*It’s an old time saying that we don’t use anymore. For reasons I hope are obvious? Look up “batman’s boner” on google sometime if you don’t believe me.