

Getting to the Plot

Time: 22 days later

Place: Susan's base

"There you are," said Susan, handing Remus the ring he had brought to her. "Slip that on, and you'll never turn into a werewolf again." For the past 22 days after Remus had arrived at her door to take her up on her offer, he had been staying with Sirius in the underground base. She figured this would be easier than trying to explain to her mother why a strange man had to hang out at her house for nearly a month, and went there daily to make food for them both and work for several hours. By this time the place looked amazing, though it was still punctuated by the sounds of distant explosions from the twin's sections. The first time it happened Susan had raced to the door, thrown it open, and got ready to either repel invaders or hit the twins with the *Alleviation* knife. The twins, grinning foolishly, said there was no need to get so excited about the whole thing. She didn't exactly buy it, but what they were doing was probably none of her business, as long as they didn't kill themselves. So she had just gone back to her section, shaking her head and wondering exactly what they were up to.

"This *Imbuing* of yours is really something," said Remus, putting the ring on. "Even if it does take a while, I think the results will be worth it."

"I just hope it gives you some piece of mind. Just be careful not to bite anyone, you're not cured so you can still transmit the curse."

Remus laughed. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"What will you do now?"

"I'm not sure. I've always managed to get by somehow, and it should be a little easier now, thanks to you. I'll find work someplace."

"Good luck to you."

Remus held out his hand. "Thank you, more than I can say. Really."

She shook it. "Thank you, professor," she said with a smile.

"Come back any time to visit!" said Sirius.

"You going to move back into your old place?" Remus asked him.

His face fell. "There's a lot of bad memories for me in that house. Why do you think I've been hanging out here, apart from the company I mean? I'm not sure."

"Let me know, all right?"

"Of course. We have to keep the Marauders gang together now that we're the only two left, right?"

"Yeah," said Remus a little sadly. "Take care, Sirius."

"You too."

Remus seemed to implode, and was gone.

"You'll be heading back too, then?"

"Unless I can help you with something, it's been a long day finishing that up. I'm ready for bed."

"No luck finding Peter, then?"

She shook her head. "No. The rat, and I may mean that literally. It worries me. If wanded magic can block my magic, then they may be more compatible than I first thought."

“Magic should really be magic, no matter what form it takes to cast.”

“I was desperately hoping that would not be so. What worries me even more is that if he spills his guts to Lucius, and I mean that figuratively, he’ll have told him how my magic works. He knows what I can do. If I was Lucius I would be having my wand charmed so it couldn’t be set on fire, teleported out of my hand, broken- though maybe you can clear something up for me.”

“Sure, if I can.”

“I know there are charms to make something unbreakable. Does it wear off that fast? Because seriously, giving wands to young kids who are prone to breaking things without making them unbreakable seems a recipe for disaster to me. Shouldn’t that be part of the purchase price, putting an unbreakable charm on them?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Sirius. “I don’t know that much about wand lore, as really that’s something you dedicate your life to.”

“I see. Is that also why there are so few wand makers? Are the secrets passed down through family lines or something? I mean, all your wand makers are killed and pretty soon you don’t have any new wands being made. That would effectively wipe out wizard kind, given enough time.”

“I believe the actual secrets of wand making are heavily guarded in the ministry. Any witch or wizard could study them and begin making wands if they had to.”

“Ah, I see. Because I know I can put magic on wands and it doesn’t change their performance. I did it to yours, increasing the DTR from a 3 to a 4 to see if it would work. You’ve been using it just fine. So it can’t interfere, unless, again, your magic is different.”

“Sorry, you did what?”

“I made it harder to break.”

“Ah, why didn’t you say?”

“The point is, now there will be two people that can defend against my magic, and possibly more. He’s obviously a Voldemort supporter, how did he get Riddle’s diary otherwise? So I have to assume all Death Eaters will know sooner or later. That’s going to make this difficult.”

“But they’ll only know which charms work by testing them in battle with you. So they’re taking just as much risk if they choose to face you as you take with them.”

“I guess you’re right. And there’s plenty of spells I still have left to learn that Peter doesn’t know about, so if I have to forget one and learn another, so be it.”

“That’s the spirit!”

Back home, her mother called her over and handed her a letter.

“This came for you today. By owl.”

Susan looked, and it seemed to have come from the Weasley’s.

“Yeah, it’s from the Weasley’s, you met them at the castle. Why are they writing to me? Thanks mom.”

She looked it over, then performed a *Magic Sense* on it, just in case it was not from the Weasley family but rather some sort of cursed object. She didn’t detect any magic on it, and so opened it. Inside was another envelope and a letter for her.

Dear Susan,

I hope your summer is going well. Ron told me you might be making an object to stop Remus Lupin from transforming in the full moon? I hope you succeed. Your "helping hand" assistant is still working out wonderfully, and I now wonder how I managed the house without it. If anyone can do it, I'm sure it's you.

The other letter enclosed can you please give to your neighbors, the Dursleys? Ron has told me they are very touchy about things, "the worst sort of Muggles" he called them. So I decided it was best to send this letter to you in case getting an owl sets them off. Ron has told me of Harry's stories of how they react to anything from the magical world. I hope you don't mind.

Everything in his letter applies to you as well, so please let us know right away if you will be able to attend.

Hoping to see you soon,

Mrs. Weasley

Wondering why they would send Harry's Aunt and Uncle a letter, Susan went over and stood in front of their door. She was going to just slip it into the mail slot, but if Senior got a hint it was from a wizard, he might just destroy it out of hand. Better to hand it to him and make sure he read it. She rang their doorbell after slipping it into a new envelope so it looked more like it came from the non-magical world.

"Yes?" he asked, opening the door a crack.

"Letter for you, sir." said Susan, impersonating the standard butler voice.

"It's not from one of your kind, is it?"

Uh, yes it is. But I don't have Compulsive Honesty, thank goodness.

"Do I look like an owl?" she answered. "It was just put in my mailbox by mistake. You really are paranoid, aren't you? It is for Harry though, and I *will* know if it is not delivered to his hand, intact."

"Fine." He grabbed it. "Thanks," he nearly almost managed to not turn into an insult, and slammed the door.

Susan rolled her eyes, but turned to go.

Ten minutes later, Harry was knocking on her door, grinning.

"Hi Mrs. Felton!" he said to Stacy. "Can Susan come with me to see the Quidditch World Cup this year? Ron's dad got tickets for all of us!"

Quidditch? I guess it would get me back into the magical world sooner, and I did enjoy spending time with Ron's family in the past...

"When does it take place?"

"Next Monday. And they say we can both stay there until school starts again. Not that Susan couldn't just pop us back here on a whim. But I for one am happy to get out of that house as soon as possible."

"If she wants to go, it's okay with me. This is Ron Weasley? The family we have Christmas dinner with at the castle?"

Harry nodded.

"Okay, I know them. And I guess Susan's proven she can take care of herself. You can go if you want."

"Thanks mom."

“We’ll have to go shopping or something before then. I haven’t seen much of you this summer at all.”

“I’m sorry about that, really I am, but I had to make that item for Remus before the next full moon. It was his fault for not telling me sooner, I could have had months to make it at school.”

“I know. You’re just growing up, or I guess “going adventuring” faster than I would have liked. Your dad warned me, it can’t be helped. I should be thankful you’re using your powers to help people rather than taking over the world.”

“Mom! I wouldn’t take over the world- not until I was done with school. Where else am I going to get minions like Harry and Hermione?”

Stacy started to look horrified.

Susan and Harry both laughed.

Stacy joined them.

“And you told them I would just bring the both of us to them, right?” Susan asked Harry, when told he had sent back a reply via his owl.

“You don’t mind, do you? I went quite cold at the thought of the Weasley family traipsing around their house. They’d both have heart attacks or something.”

“Still no clue why Senior hates magic?” Harry shook his head. “Anyway, I know the place. Come over at like 4:30 and we’ll shove everything in the *Pocket Dimension* and head over there. I can keep the portal open for a while, if you wanted to see a wizard’s house, Mom.”

“I should thank them for offering to have you over the rest of the summer.”

“With the amount of kids they have, a couple more won’t be noticed. And I help out, don’t worry.”

“If you think they won’t mind.”

And so, Susan, Sparkle, and Harry found themselves stepping through to the Burrows with Stacy, who looked about in wonder.

“What keeps it up?” she said, looking at the enormously tall house.

“Their magic, as near as I could tell,” answered Susan. “At least until I basically welded it together with my magic, anyway. Trust me, the perfect storm couldn’t touch this house. At least for the next eighty some years.”

“I’ll take your word for it, given that it looks like it’s about to fall over any second.”

Mrs. Weasley came out and invited her to come look around. Stacy looked back at the glowing hole in the air.

“It doesn’t strain you to keep it open?”

“I’m at a significant penalty to any active rolls, but I hardly expect to be attacked or need to make a *History of Magic* check in the next ten minutes. I cast it to remain until you went back through, that’ll be the end of this *scene*. Go on.”

They toured the back yard, where Crookshanks was busy chasing gnomes, and where the others came out to meet them. It seemed the entire Weasley family was there, including Bill and Charlie, and Susan asked how Norbart was getting along.

“Just fine. That professor Hagrid got him off to a good start, and he’s growing fast and enjoying the wilds,” answered Charlie.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Still no word on your stolen fortune,” said Bill to Harry. “Odd, that. I wouldn’t go so far as to say they weren’t looking, but it’s fishy that nothing has turned up in this time.”

“I’m getting by, with Susan’s little trick. Having my stacks of gold would be nice though.”

“Trick?”

“Yeah, best I don’t say any more. It’s perfectly ‘legal’, don’t worry.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“I have to get back to making dinner. Feeding all these people takes most of my effort, even with the *Helping Hand*. It was nice to see you again, Stacy,” said Molly.

“You too. Thank you for watching Susan for me.”

“No trouble at all. You’ve raised a fine daughter, and her magic is top notch. We depend on the *Conjure Foodstuff* item she made Ron, in fact. And she’s always quick to help out when we need it. She’s a treasure.”

“Well, thank you,” said Stacy.

She and Susan said goodbye, and she stepped back through the *Teleportal*. The task for that spell complete, it closed behind her, and Susan felt her –4 go away.

“What can I help with?” she asked.

Susan stared in wonder as Mrs. Weasley used some variant of *Telekinesis* to set knives chopping, food floating about, and plates to hover outside all at the same time.

Yeah, there’s no way I could do all that with my magic. For one thing I would have to concentrate on it all. Or maybe she has the Multitasker background? But the energy cost to cast all those spells in row, and now she’s lit a fire and is maintaining that on top of it all. Though I suppose the objects floating could be a secondary effect of the spell “Prepare Food,” whatever that is. She’s not concentrating on the knives, they are just doing their thing, and happen to be floating.

“Who leaves their wand lying about?” asked Susan, picking up a wand from the table. It turned into a rubber mouse. “What the heck?” she said, dropping it.

“Oh, another fake wand?” said Molly. “I keep telling them to put them away, but do they listen? No!”

Susan set it down again, and it turned back into a wand. “Hey, that’s actually really interesting!” She glanced around.

Yup, no way I’m risking Magic Sense in here. It wouldn’t be as bad as the castle, but given how much magic is floating around this room right now...

She put her hand near it, and traced the outline of the wand with two fingers. “It’s not an illusion of some kind.” She picked it up, and it turned into a rat again. “And now it’s definitely made of rubber. This thing has at least three different charms going on it, all at once.”

“What do you mean?” asked Molly.

“Well, it has to know it’s been picked up, that’s one charm. Then there’s some kind of *Transfiguration* charm on it to turn it from one form to another. Then another charm to tell if it’s been put down. Now that I think about it, there must be yet another *Transfiguration* charm to turn it back into the wand shape. And it seems to work reliably.” She picked it up a few times and watched it change. “I’ll tell you one thing, Mrs. Weasley. Making something like this with my magic would be almost impossible without at least a year of work. I don’t know how it is for you, but the more magic I put into an object the harder it is to add more functions. A four

function object would be unheard of, and probably passed through family lines for generations because of how difficult it would have been to make originally. And they made something like that into a joke wand. Maybe it's not so impressive to you, but it is to me. In fact, I could see how it could be turned into a defensive mechanism for wands."

"How so?"

"You could charm it so the rightful owner could pick his or her own wand up. It would just be a variant of this charm, so hopefully not too hard. Trigger the transformation for anyone else- so if someone tried to use your wand against you, they couldn't, because they would be holding a rat, not a wand."

"I suppose that could work."

"But that's just the start. Make it turn intangible instead, or burst into flame. Think about it- a wand that couldn't be stolen from someone because only the owner could pick it up. If this fake wand is just a test for something like that, I think they're really got something."

"I hadn't thought about it like that. But those toffee things have to go!"

"Toffee... things?"

"Candy that carries a charm or curse. Ginny nicked one from them and ate it, and while they had a good laugh, we had to figure out how to make her tongue shrink back to normal size."

"Is that what they're working on in the base? I did wonder."

"I just wish they put as much effort into their schoolwork as they do this joke magic."

"Hey, don't knock it. Have you been to the village by Hogwarts? Their joke shop does a tremendous business, let me tell you. And they have to be studying, you don't put four charms on an object casually, right? I mean, even your wizardry has some limits, right?"

"Of course it does."

"There you are then. Even if they're just building their portfolio, so to speak, to get hired making things for the Zonko's shop, I'd take them seriously. It's results like this, not what your grades were, I would look for. Remind me to tell you a story about a man called Bill Gates sometime. Sure, being in the right place at the right time is 75% of the journey, but at least they're off to a good start."

"You really think so?"

"I really do."

"Well, maybe I'm being a little hard on them. We'll see."

"How's Sirius going to get food now?" Harry asked at dinner. "Are you still going to back there every day?"

"Actually, with his name cleared he's been *Apparating* to get his own, lately. To remote places admittedly, but no one has been screaming bloody murder when they see him, so that's a start. He's trying to ease back into his life, you understand. Of course with a proper haircut and good clothes, he doesn't look much like his old wanted posters. So it's possible he's not even been recognized."

"And you said you invited him to come to the World Cup?"

"I did. I said I would send a *Teleportal* for him once we arrived. He might have to sit on the ground or whatever rather than in a seat, but he could have come. He said all those people would be a bit much at this point."

"Too bad."

"Have you spent any time getting to know him, Harry?" asked Hermione.

“Yeah, Susan’s taken me there a couple of times. He’s told me stories about my dad I really don’t believe. He seems like a really nice guy.”

“I’m glad to hear it. It would have been terrible if he turned out to be a jerk or something.”

“Yes, it would have.”

“Thank you for dinner,” Susan said to Molly, “It was very good.”

“Yes, thank you,” chorused Hermione and Harry. Ron just burped.

The girls looked at him.

“Oh, excuse me.”

“A word, Susan, if I may,” asked Arthur. He pulled her off to the side.

“What’s up?”

“I just wanted to ask you to keep your eyes open these next few days. With Sirius’ name cleared the next closest threat is now Peter, or other Death Eaters. I would hate to think that his reappearance might spark a resurgence in the movement, so to speak, but it’s best to be watchful. We’ll have people in key positions around Harry tomorrow, but with the number of people moving about they can’t do everything. You’re our best defense in any case, because you can stick close to him.”

“Expect that if Peter has told them how my magic works, they’ll be ready, and possibly exploit some weakness in my magic even I haven’t seen.”

“I do have to wonder how Peter was received. You said in your report to Albus that he might not be warmly greeted?”

“No, Lucius seemed to think he had found a Shiny Pokemon- I mean, a rare treasure, when he burst in on us.”

“So we can hope he hasn’t told them anything.”

“But we can prepare for him to have squealed everything to save his own worthless hide.”

“Yes, there is that possibility as well, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t worry, I and my magic stand ready to defend all those I call friends at a moment’s notice.”

“I do feel better with you around. Thank you.”

“By the way, how are we getting there? I’ve never seen the place, so I can’t take us.”

“No, we’ll go by portkey in the morning.”

“By what?”

“Portkey. It’s another way for us wizards to teleport.”

“How many ways do you need? Honestly, you have like four ways I’ve seen, and they all seem to be terrible or come with insane risks. Oh wait, I have heard of that, it’s what whisked us away when we went to do the arrest. Never mind.”

“Four? I only know about three.”

“There’s the Floo network. Apparition. Headmaster Dumbledore uses his phoenix, Fawkes, to teleport somehow, and of course there’s the portkey. I guess it’s the whole limitation of casting magic on yourselves, huh? Could you brew a potion that allowed you to teleport?”

“I’m not sure. Not a big potion maker, myself.”

“Strange, they seem useful, and kids at Hogwarts spend 7 years studying them. I guess we all have our specialties.”

“That we do. Anyway, we need to be up bright and early tomorrow, so you better get to bed.”

“Okay. Oh, and here’s a tip. Wake up Sparkle first, and have her cast *Awaken* on me. I have *Deep Sleeper* so you’ll never get me up that early otherwise.”

“I’ll tell Molly.”

“Thanks.”

And so, Susan and the others found themselves the next morning.

“How do you hold an event like this without the non-magical world finding out about it?” Harry asked Arthur.

“It’s not easy, let me tell you. Even with magic, covering such a large area is quite a challenge. Keeping a hundred thousand wizards safe from prying eyes is a task of months.”

“How many wizards would you say that is out of all of them?” asked Susan.

“Ah, now that figure I do know. We allow 15% of the wizards alive to attend.”

Susan stopped in her tracks, getting an 11 on her *Mathematics* check. “You mean to tell me that, in the world, right this second, there are less than a million wizards living on a planet with close to 7 billion people? For every one wizard born there are seven thousand non-magical people? No wonder you’re dying out, it isn’t that blood purity crap Draco was always going on about. If everyone followed that you’d all be dead already. You just aren’t having enough kids.” She looked over at Arthur. “Present company excluded, of course. You’re doing your part for all wizard kind, and all wizard kind thanks you.” She winked at him.

“Yes, well...” he cleared his throat. “Come along, we can’t be late!”

“Of course wizards live longer than non-wizards,” said Hermione as Susan caught up with her.

“That’s true, and I suppose they have to keep the population small to avoid being discovered. It still just doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“I know. You would think it would really be the other way around. Magic should have been a survival trait when it was first discovered. Those with magic live longer, and should have fewer diseases than non-magical people due to potions and such. But yet the opposite is true, and it seems like being born without magic gives you a better chance of survival. Was there some sort of magical plague at some point in history that wiped out most of wizard kind?”

“Not that we’ve learned about in school, I think. That I would have remembered.”

“Me too. If only I could *Research* things I’m interested in at a moment’s notice... oh wait, I can!” She jangled her key-chain.

“Personally, I prefer Google.”

They both laughed, but then Hermione sobered.

“That could be our answer, you know.”

“What could? Google? I don’t think they had anything to do with it, computers have only been around 30 years.”

“No, I mean, take us for example. How many normal kids going to school have to deal with giants, or serpents, or insane wizards that put their soul in objects? I’m guessing not many.”

“I see what you’re saying. Because we’re around magic, the dangers we face are greater to balance out our greater power.”

“Exactly.”

Just like I have an Enemy on my character sheet to balance some of my power.

“I’ll have to look into the number of wizard deaths per year and their causes versus non-magical deaths and see if the percentages are roughly equivalent.”

“Are you two talking about doing extra homework?” asked Ron, “During vacation? And you’re about to see the World Cup? You’re mad!”

“Some of us like learning new things, Ronald,” said Hermione.

“Some of us have a KNOWledge and REASON above the average, which is why we’re the PCs,” said Susan.

“I thought you said your REASON was only average,” said Harry.

“No, my INSIGHT is only average, while my REASON is quite above it.”

“Ah, now I remember.”

“Just up the hill now, kids!” said Arthur excitedly.

Good thing my ENDurance is higher than average too.

“Right, spread out, it’ll be something pretty plain. You can touch it, it’s safe until the appointed time.”

“We’re looking by hand?” asked Susan. “There’s no one around for miles, can’t you just use that spell that calls a certain object to you?”

“Oh, uh, yes, I guess you’re right. *Accio Portkey!*”

Honestly, even the adults are so conditioned against using magic for fear of discovery that even miles from nowhere they’ll prefer to do things without magic than with it. It’s bizarre!

An old looking boot zipped over to Arthur, which he directed to the ground with a wave of his wand. He checked his watch.

“Good timing, we can have a bit of a rest before it activates. Good thinking about using that charm, Susan.”

She looked over at the others, who shrugged. They all had an *I’m not going to be the one to tell him* look.

“Hello!” a voice said, and everyone looked over to see a person waving at them.

“Ah, that must be Amos. Come along everyone.”

Arthur introduced everyone to Amos Diggory, who worked (as everyone seemed to, oddly) for the Ministry. His son, Cedric, was also there, who Harry had played against in Quidditch several times.

“My God,” said Amos, “I knew you had a big family Arthur but tell me these aren’t all yours!”

“No, though there isn’t one I wouldn’t adopt given half a chance. These are Ron’s friends from school. This is Hermione, Susan, and Harry.” He said the last quite proudly, like it was quite an honor to escort Harry anywhere.

Maybe it is?

“You can’t mean Harry Potter!”

“And the world spins on,” said Susan quietly, remembering their first meeting on the Hogwarts Express.

“And this must be the Susan I’ve heard so much about. Ced has told me about your impressive magical abilities, young lady. And I’ve heard some of the departments around the ministry buzzing about things, and caught your name thrown about. Nice to meet you both personally at last!”

I keep forgetting my Prodigy background comes with an effective 1-point Reputation: Good background.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“My son also told me about the day he beat you at Quidditch, young man. Never thought I’d see the day, but I guess you can’t have everything, now can you?” He laughed.

“Dad, Harry was being targeted by like a hundred Dementors. I don’t know how I even stayed up with that many hanging around.”

“Oh, posh. Details son, that’s just details.”

Right. I’ve said that before. History is written by the winners.

“Nearly time, I should think,” said Arthur. “Are we expecting any more?”

“No, this should be all of us. The Lovegoods left a week ago, and the Fawcetts couldn’t get tickets.”

“Wait, Luna lives within walking distance?” asked Susan. She looked over at Hermione. “I wish she had told us, I would have visited!”

“Yeah, you two can be strange together,” remarked Hermione.

“I’m sure there’s some method to her madness, just as there is for mine. She’s a nice girl, and rather pretty if I do say so myself.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Gather round, everyone. Just touch it, a finger will do. That’s it,” said Arthur. “Now we wait, won’t be long.”

“Uh, this area does have charms against non-magical people seeing it, right?” asked Susan. “Because any non-magical person that happens to look over here is going to be very surprised when we dissa-”

Landing on the ground some distance away, Susan missed her COOrdination check by one to land on her feet, and went down in a tangle of limbs with some of the others.

“I hate any other form of teleportation but mine!” she shouted to the world in general.

“Is that really the best way to handle that?” asked Susan, as the group walked away from the so recently memory charmed Mr. Roberts.

“It would be terrible if he found out,” said Arthur. “What would you do?”

“Rather than memory charm him *ten times a day* why not just send someone out beforehand to explain that magic is real, and there’s no need for him to panic. He can then go about his business normally, and at the end of the event, if it’s felt he would be a security risk, give him one memory modification at the end to erase any knowledge of magical things he saw.”

“I guess it’s just that we don’t think they could handle the knowledge, you see? And we’re just not very good at dealing with them in the first place, it’s hard to know how muggles will react.”

“Well if he reacts badly to being told, memory charm him to forget he was told, and try something different. That’s got to be easier than running that guy who *Apparated* away raged like that.”

“Easy for you to say, I suppose. Not so close to the problem, so you see things differently. I’ll mention it for the next cup.”

Susan just shook her head as they walked past tents obviously not obeying the laws of the physical universe. “You all work so hard to keep one old man ignorant of the truth, and then go and do this? It boggles the mind.”

“I agree, they should keep it down a bit. But what can you do?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Give them a warning that they’re breaking the law and then arrest them if they don’t put it right by an hour’s time, maybe?”

“You’re right, of course. In theory, anyway.”

“And so stands another shining example of Wizard Justice. No wonder Voldi went bad,” said Susan.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Could your magic do this?” asked Ron, once the tents were up and they looked inside.

“Sure. Simple spell of *Pocket Dimension* permanently placed on the tent, and you would have a doorway into a limitless space you could just carry a room into.”

“Oh,” he said, obviously disappointed Susan wasn’t more impressed.

The next morning, it seemed Ministry personnel were hanging about while trying not to be too obvious about it. They were always heading back and forth near the tent, their eyes darting about. Arthur was able to point out most of them and tell what department they worked for, and Susan got the distinct impression they were keeping an eye on her as much as looking out for Harry. She wasn’t sure if she should feel flattered or annoyed. It wasn’t long after the food was cooking when Bill, Charlie and Percy popped in with a bang. They had all begun eating when a portly man made his way up to the tent, and Arthur jumped up to introduce him.

“Ludo Bagman,” he said, “The reason we’re all here, and thanks again.”

“Not at all, not at all,” he said, waving a hand.

Arthur introduced everyone, and they all thanked him for allowing them to come.

“Could I interest you in a bet of some kind on the match?” he asked, getting out a small notebook and quill. “One person bet me Krum would fall off his broom at least once during the game, I gave him excellent odds on that one.” He laughed.

“Very well. Put me down for a Galleon that Ireland will win.”

“Not very creative, but very well. It’s even odds for that one.” He scribbled in his notebook. “Any other takers?”

Fred and George made their bet about Krum getting the Snitch but their team losing the match, and threw in their fake wand. Ludo was delighted.

“I’ll give you 2 to 3 on that one, boys!” he said, making a note. “Good luck to you.” He passed them a receipt as well.

“Barty hasn’t been through here lately, has he?” he asked. “I’m trying to find him so he can translate for me. I can’t understand a word the Bulgarian is saying.”

They don’t have communication magic, either? Not even a potion of “understand language?” Why am I not surprised?

“Not past here, no. What about Bertha Jorkins? Has she turned up yet?”

“Not yet, poor girl. She takes being lost to a whole new extreme. Don’t worry, she’s disappeared and shown up again before, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Still, it’s a bit worrisome, isn’t it?”

“I suppose after all this fuss about the World Cup has died down- Ah, there he is!”

There was a loud crack, and a man in a business suit, very stiff looking, appeared next to the fire.

“There you are,” he said without preamble. “The Bulgarians want to add twelve seats to the Top Box.”

“Is that what they were jabbering about? One can hardly tell with that accent of theirs. I better go sort it out then.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Nice meeting you all, and I’ll see you later. I’m doing the commentary for the match! Shall we?”

They both disappeared.

For once Ron had more money than the others, as he had been saving for some time for this event. Not that Susan would have bought anything anyway. Still, they walked among the vendors and saw what was being sold. Soon enough it was time for the event to begin, and they made their way up to the top box.

“Too bad it’s so cloudy out,” remarked Ron. “It’s going to be awful if it starts raining during the match.”

“I think we can do something about that,” said Susan.

“And by we you mean you?” asked Ginny.

“Exactly.”

There at the top, Susan looked down to see the stands filling up, and marveled at the organizational nightmare it must be, keeping all this from becoming pure chaos. Looking across the way she saw a billboard, and groaned as advertisements were being scrolled across it.

I guess some things will never change.

The box was empty as they filed in, apart from one frightened looking creature at the end.
That is unmistakably a-

“House elf!” said Harry. “That can’t be Dobby, could it?”

The elf looked over at him.

“Were you saying Dobby, sir?” asked the elf.

“That’s the only house elf I know,” Harry admitted. “We met him last year. Do you know him?”

“Indeed I do sir, and what happened to him when that Harry Potter-” she looked at Harry’s face. “But you are him, aren’t you? You are the one that freed Dobby!”

“That’s right. You don’t sound pleased about that, if I may say so.”

“It’s really not my place to say, Sir. But after being freed, Dobby started having the most peculiar notions. Very unnatural notions, if you take my meaning.”

“He’s not sick, is he?”

“It could be termed a form of madness, yes. I hope it doesn’t worsen or start spreading.”

“What? What happened?” asked Susan.

“He wants to be a *paid servant*,” said the elf, as though this was a revolting idea.

“You’ll have to forgive me, but I don’t actually see the problem with that.”

“It’s not natural for a house elf. We serve, that is our purpose. Nothing more.”

“You can serve and still be given compensation,” said Harry.

The elf just shuddered and looked away.

“What’s your name?” Susan asked.

“I am Winky, Miss.”

“Are you okay? You don’t seem well.”

“I do not like heights, but my master has bade me to save him a seat, and so this is what I do.”

“Save him a seat?” asked Hermione. “We’re in a private box. It’s not like he’s going to lose it to someone else. He paid a lot of money to get that seat, obviously it won’t be used by anyone but him.”

“I know only what my master tells me.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but your master seems a bit weird.”

Winky just shut her eyes.

“It does seem suspicious, doesn’t it?” Hermione asked Susan.

“Yes, it does. But given how Lucius used to treat Dobby, it may be par for the course. He may just delight in causing trouble for his house elf like that. Remember, these are prime seats, meaning most people in here are going to be wealthy. And I’m not saying you have to be a jerk to earn lots of money, but that tends to be the case if you take my meaning.”

“I think I do. Speak of the devil.”

Lucius Malfoy and Draco came into the box, followed by a woman who must be Mrs. Malfoy. Lucius looked at Arthur in surprise.

“You have had a string of good luck recently if you’re able to afford seats here,” he said. “I doubt your house would have fetched enough to buy this number of tickets, after all.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Susan.

“You’ve met?” asked Arthur, looking between them.

“On many occasions,” Susan said hotly. “How is dear Peter doing anyway?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about... what was your name again? Suzanne?”

“Close Mr. Mafloy, close. Let us not quibble over details on such a beautiful day.”

He looked out the front of the stand. “Is this what you call a beautiful day where you come from?”

“Ah, yes! Thank you for reminding me. I really must do something about that. Enjoy the match!” She turned away from him, causing him to glare at her as she got her book of spells out of her *Pocket Dimension*. She started to read.

She beat the difficulty on her checks by at least five, and started to envision symbols around herself. Magical energy gathered and sparkled, and she saw the Malfoy’s watching her, slightly panicked. She stood.

“*Part Clouds*,” she cast, rolling a 13 on the check and making a dramatic gesture.

Ugh, minimum. Well, that’s what energy is for.

She concentrated on the spell, and very slowly, over about a minute, the clouds lessened and began to drift apart. Within two minutes the sun was shining brightly. She lowered her hand and sat down again.

“Much better, don’t you think Mr. Mafloy?” she called over to him.

He pretended he hadn’t heard.

“I can’t believe that just happened,” said Hermione, looking over the railing at the sky.

“I know. You would think a spell like that would be grade 10, right? Or take an hour to cast. I mean, the investment of magical energies on that scale would seem to be tremendous. Far in excess of just teleporting someone over a short distance or opening up a *Pocket Dimension*.” She stuck her book back in. “Yet both of those spells require the same or more time to cast. It’s very odd.”

“Magic,” said Harry. “Who can understand it?”

“Totally mysterious,” said Ron.

“Go Team Susan?” said Ginny, wide eyed.

“Darn right,” said Susan.

Winky just stared.

By that time others had come in, and the box continued to fill up. At last Ludo made his way inside and started things off. At once, beautiful creatures burst from the right side of the stands, and there was applause all around.

“Ah, Veela!” said Arthur.

Not familiar with that particular creature, and they look humanoid...

The Veela started started to dance.

Susan, Harry, and Ron stared in wonder as the music began and the creatures began to sway.

“NO!” shouted Susan, tearing her eyes away with a 20 on her RESolve check. She looked around the box, and saw even the adults were looking a little dreamy.

“*Dazzle*,” she cast on Harry and Ron, who looked like there were going to do something foolish, like jump down to see the creatures at a closer range. They staggered back, blinking against the magical lights and by the time their eyes cleared, the Veela had moved off.”

“Thanks,” said Harry.

“Uh, yeah,” said Ron.

“Honestly, even you?” asked Hermione.

“I’m sorry, they’re apparently magically delicious. They must have some sort of *Siren Song* spell they can call upon. Or maybe it’s just a natural ability for them?”

Next up came the Leprechauns, and sparkling gold rained down upon the stands from the rainbow display overhead. Susan casually picked one up and looked it over. She missed her *Perception* check (with a 7) to notice they were fake, but made her *Magic Sense* (with a 12). She chuckled and tossed the coin again.

“Are you mad?” asked Ron, scooping them up.

“It’s a spell,” explained Susan. “*Leprechaun’s Gold*, to be exact. Want more? I could make you tons of it back home. Strange to see such an exact duplicate of one of my spells here, though. They’ll disappear before long, mark my words.”

“Oh.” His face fell.

Then the players zoomed out, and the game began. The Irish team was doing better, but Susan, not really caring much for Quidditch, watched the mascots and the crowd more the game. She noted with amusement that Hermione even got into it, something she hadn’t expected, and nearby Ludo continued to call out the names and plays as they were happening.

“What the heck?” Susan peered over the edge as the Veela started hurling a silvery fire at the leprechauns. “They have some kind of *Elemental Blast* as well?”

“They don’t seem to be as pretty now, either,” remarked Hermione. Their features were becoming more birdlike, and she could even make out wings sprouting from their backs.

Susan realized she was right. “What the heck, they get *shape-shift* on top of all that? Those are some dangers creatures.”

And seconds after that, it was over.

So much for it lasting a week or more, that was hardly a half hour. Seems kind of pointless to get a hundred thousand people to an event that doesn’t even last an hour.

Ron was screaming about catching the Snitch when your team is behind, but she saw Fred and George looking smug.

Ah, of course. Their bet. Wonder how they knew? Wait a second, we’re within the time limit of a time-turner, could they... Nah!

They were first with their hands out to get their winnings. Ludo dug around in his robe while he worked out how much he owed them.

“You bet nearly 43 Galleons, rounding it off, and I said 1 to 3, right?”

“2 to 3,” said one of the twins.

“Ah yes, 2. Very well. So I owe you 43 plus about 29 for a total of 72, correct?”

Susan only got a 6 on her *Mathematics* check, so she wasn’t sure either way.

“Here you are then,” he said, counting some coins into a pouch. Susan looked over at him, and noticed he was acting a little funny. She still had the card, so she figured, why not?

I’m declaring the use of card 17, Hint.

Immediately after she had a thought she knew wasn’t her own. *That money was a significant amount, and you know how wizard law “works”. Check it before he walks away.*

“If you don’t mind,” she asked, grabbing the pouch away from the boys. They gave her a weird look, but didn’t protest. She looked in the bag, making a *Magic Sense* on it. She rolled absolute minimum, an 8, and decided to spend an XP for a re-roll. Time seemed to freeze around her and rewind just a second, allowing her to make the check again without anyone noticing. This time she got a 14. The entire bag of coins lit up to her magical senses.

She dumped the bag out, coins clattering to the grounds. Everyone in the box gasped. “Real coins, not *Leprechaun’s Gold*. Did you think I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference?”

“Are you suggesting that I would try to swindle these boys?” Ludo asked, affronted.

“I’m suggesting maybe you got your coins confused, that’s all.”

Arthur reached over and picked up one of the fallen coins, and held out a hand to Ron, who gave him a Galleon. He held both up and looked carefully at them.

“They do seem to be the same. Perhaps someone here has a galleon I can rent for a moment that they can certify is real?” he asked.

The wizard behind him offered one.

“Ah, thank you.” He compared them. “This one does seem to be a bit more sparkly,” he remarked.

“Arthur, are you seriously suggesting I would try and swindle your boys?”

“I trust Susan’s sense of magic. You owe me two Galleons as well, as I recall. I just want to make sure everything is on the up and up, that’s all.”

Ludo looked around, perhaps noting for the first time how many ministry people were around at the moment.

“Well, if she says I mixed them up, then I must have done,” he said, putting on a big smile. “I should thank for her keeping me honest, right?” He forced a laugh. “Let’s see, a different purse then.” He dug into his robes again, and started counting out more coins. “And here’s your two, Arthur,” he said, handing some over. He looked at them against the ones in his other hand, that were still glittering away.

“Thank you,” he said.

The twins held out the new coins, and Susan did another *Magic Sense* on them. She nodded, they didn’t register as being made of magic. They had charms on them, Susan had studied them before her little coin trick to make sure it would work, but that felt different to her senses than the fake ones.

“Thank you,” said one of the twins to her.

“Thank you,” said the other to Ludo.

“Ah, quite all right. Hope you enjoyed, everyone! Now, let’s make our way down, shall we?”

On the way out, Draco hung back from his family. “That was a very Slytherin thing to do,” he said quietly to Susan. “I hate to admit it, but I’m impressed.”

“Thank you. I think.”

And he was gone.

That evening, Hermione activated her *Tirelessness* item, and Susan got out her book and cast it upon herself. Taking the time she wiped out the symbol on her *Detect Lies* charm, and cast *Spell Symbol* on it again. Then she put *Tirelessness* on it, and then activated it.

It was only a -1 penalty, but why take chances?

She had been scowling and checking her character sheet before that, and Hermione watched this process with interest.

“You don’t have to stay up,” Hermione protested. “I just figured I would never get to sleep with all this celebrating going on.”

Susan motioned her over to a corner. "I'm worried," she said. "My cards just changed. That could mean trouble, but I don't want to worry them in case it turns out to be nothing. I turned in *What a Rush* for 1 XP, not that you probably care about that."

"When does it ever turn out to be nothing?"

"Exactly."

"So shouldn't we tell them?"

"Let them get some sleep. Nothing will happen until most stop celebrating, anyway."

Susan didn't notice Sparkle slipping out of the tent after playing card 16, *Hidden Agenda*, after deciding she was going to prowl around a little and see if something was up. She thought for moment, then magical energy swirled around her. "*Dimension Step*," she cast, getting a 14 and stepping into the astral plane.

Now we'll see what we can see.

However, Susan did have card 38, *Gimme Gimme!* so she was aware, on some level, that the discard pile now held her card 5 and a card 16. She thought about taking it, she could always use another 2 XP, but Arthur's words came back to her.

I just wanted to ask you to keep your eyes open these next few days. With Sirius' name cleared the next closest threat is now Peter, or other Death Eaters. I would hate to think that his reappearance might spark a resurgence in the movement, so to speak, but it's best to be watchful.

Better stick close to Harry then, she thought.

Two hours passed.

Hermione and Susan both jumped as Sparkle stepped out of nowhere between them. "They're coming," she said simply. "Get the others up, we'll need to pack the tents away."

"Where have you been? What are you talking about?" asked Susan. She didn't waste the action talking though, getting up and going to shake Ginny.

"No time for that. Haven't you been *listening*?"

Susan and Hermione looked at each other. They had been talking about things, not particularly paying attention to what was going on outside. She got a 7 on her *Perception* check, and shrugged. "I don't really hear anything out of the ordinary."

"What's going on?" asked Ginny.

"Throw something on, we're leaving."

"What?"

"Team Susan business."

"You mean like that giant? Okay, I'm up."

Susan was about to activate her *Magic Immunity* item, but then realized it could be Dementors. In that case she would need her knife, so she activated her *Magical Ally* instead. The dragon winked into existence.

"Wait for me outside," she directed it. "Attack anything that attacks you."

It nodded, and slipped out.

Ginny grabbed her wand and threw on a bathrobe. "Let's go." She looked excited.

“Stay behind Hermione and me,” she said, twitching the tent flap aside. The scene outside wasn’t pleasant. People were rushing everywhere, and a group of dark figures was moving with a purpose through the night.

“*Darksight*,” Susan said, touching her charm. The night lit up, and she could make out bedlam around her.

So, you’ve come after all.

A burst of green light came from somewhere, overriding even her *Darksight* and showing up in color with how bright it was. She and Hermione looked at each other in horror.

“Killing Curse!” they said at the same time. “Sparkle-”

“Way ahead of you boss. *Ally!*” she said, activating her collar charm. A lion appeared beside her.

“There are Death Eaters, here?” shrieked Ginny.

“Other people than Death Eaters can learn unforgivable curses,” Hermione reminded her. “And want to make trouble for others.”

“Oh, I suppose.”

Arthur ran up. “Oh, you girls are awake already. Good. I’ve just gotten Harry and the others up, we’ll be leaving shortly.”

“Want me to-” Susan started to say. *Wait a second. Putting a wand magic, dimensionally offset object inside an energy magic, Pocket Dimension might not be such a smart idea.* “We’ll have to leave the tents,” she said.

“I don’t care about the tents, protect Harry!”

“You got it.”

Once everyone was out, Susan saw that Harry was frantic. “My wand,” he said. “It’s gone! I looked all over the tent but I can’t find it.”

“Crap!” said Susan. “We’re out here with killing curses flying around and you’re defenseless?”

“I thought you said it would come back to me.”

“*Eventually* it will, but that’s no excuse to be careless with it!”

“I wasn’t. I can’t imagine where it got to!”

“What’s that?” asked Ron, pointing.

High above the ground were four people, and below them, four hooded figures pointed with wands. There must have been ten figures there, total, most of them looking up at the hovering people.

Susan got very cold inside.

“Sparkle, haste me!”

“*Acceleration*,” she cast. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“No, you protect Harry. Someone needs to be taught a lesson in the proper use of magic. Dragon, kill those hooded figures!”

The dragon roared and shot forward.

“Wait!” shouted Arthur, but with the blood pounding in her ears Susan didn’t turn or slow.

“*Immunity*,” she said, touching the appropriate charm on her bracelet.

The hooded figures turned to see a creature, twice as tall as they were, barreling down on them, and the one in the lead raised his wand. He muttered something and green light shot out, so he was totally surprised when the dragon plowed into him, driving him to the ground and

swiping his chest open with his claws. The man gave a horse cry and passed out, now bleeding to death.

“Oh no, it’s her!” one of the figures said in a familiar voice, and vanished. Another one took a look at the dragon, now trying to figure out which one to attack next, and reached down to touch the prone figure. They both vanished. The others readied their wands.

By that time, Susan was within range.

Only seven left, eh? Suits me.

“*Thrust*,” she cast, putting maximum energy into it. She got a 9, plus the 9 for the energy, plus another 8 thanks to *Acceleration*, minus 7 for casting it on all seven at once. That gave her a 19 total, and the hooded figures tried to resist. Two of them managed it, the other five went flying 7 meters away. They got tangled up in tents or hit trees, crashing to the ground. Sadly this also ended the spell that was keeping the figures suspended, and they too crashed to the ground.

The two that were left looked at each other. Both cast the killing curse at Susan, which of course didn’t work, and while they were stupidly trying to figure out why, the dragon tore into the body of the nearest one. Susan cast *Combust* at the one’s wand, figuring that was the quickest way to end any resistance there. She was right, as the wand burst into flames it was dropped, and the wizard that was standing there grabbed his buddy and also disappeared with a crack.

“What’s happening?” asked the woman, trying to struggle to her feet.

“Come with me if you want to live,” Susan said. “I’ll explain it all later.”

“Is that a real dragon?” asked the larger of the two kids.

“Why are you all blurry?” asked the smaller.

“It’s actually a magical construct I made to fight for me, and because I’m under a spell called *Acceleration*,” she answered. “Sir, are you hurt?” The man was trying to get up, but fell over again with a cry.

“It’s my leg,” he said. “I landed wrong when I got dropped. Go on without me.”

“Oh no. I’m not leaving you.” She walked over, then inspected his leg, getting an eleven on *First Aid*.

I’ll have to cut that pant leg off if I want to see- oh, now I’m doing it. Being around wand-wizards is really annoying me. I have a healing knife- which I can’t use. Could I get one of them to trust me enough to stab this guy? Uh, probably not.

“Do you have a knife?” she asked him. “I need to cut your pant leg off and see how badly you’re hurt.”

“My other pocket,” he said, reaching for it. He handed it over, and giving another quick look around, said to her dragon “Guard us. Attack any hooded figure from a distance with fire.” The dragon nodded and took up a defensive position. She went down on one knee and cut the pant leg off. He was trying very hard not to cry out, and Susan was trying to be as gentle as possible, but still be quick.

Now her eleven came into play, and she saw his leg probably was broken, there was a growing bruise under the skin.

“It’s broken, I’m going to try and set it, otherwise it’ll heal at a weird angle. This is going to hurt.”

Should have brought Sparkle along, she has Regeneration. I could also float him over there, but I think he’s had enough flying for one night.

She made another *First Aid* check and got maximum, easily setting the bone. The man cried out.

“Almost done,” she said. “*Healing.*” Magical energy swirled around the leg, and she saw the swelling go down.

“Still hurt?” she asked.

“It’s not as bad now, but it’s still painful. Is this magic? It is, isn’t it? I knew it!”

“Yes, magic is real. *Healing.*”

Oh, this time I get a 12, thanks a lot.

The leg healed the rest of the way, and the man bent his knee in wonder. “I think it’s totally fixed. That was amazing, young lady.”

“Congratulate me later, we need to move. Let’s get back to my friends. They’re in...”

With a sinking realization, Susan realized her *No Sense of Direction* was going to finally rear its ugly head. Usually, such as in the castle, she had paintings to ask or Sparkle to lead her, so it hadn’t been too much of an issue. But now, in the darkness, she couldn’t tell if she had come from *that way* or *that way* and was looking frantically around for any sign.

“We can’t go back to our cabin,” said the man, getting up. “They pulled us out of there and set the place on fire. With magic, I guess. Funny, never thought I would say that.”

I know where our tent was, I could make a Teleportal to get back there. Wait, no, can I step through it with Magic Immunity going? I don’t want to drop that until these people are safe, and now isn’t the time to test it. It would seem like my magic just opens the hole but if my Immunity makes it go away and leaves them on the other side... What am I going to do?

“I ran off to save you without thinking,” Susan admitted. “So I’m not sure which direction I came from.”

“The woods are thickest over there, could we hide in the trees?” asked the woman.

“Good thinking, that’ll be more defensible. Dragon, you take up the rear and follow us, I’ll lead the way.”

It nodded, and the six took off towards that direction. Susan, with her superior vision, was able to tell them to avoid various bits of junk as they made their way into the wooded area. As they were about to reach it, a glowing symbol in the shape of a skull with a snake for a tongue lit up the night.

“Call me crazy, but I think we’ll find them over there,” said Susan.

“You want to go towards that thing?” the man asked, looking up. “I appreciate the rescue and all, but be reasonable.”

“Fine. You head further into the woods, the attack is happening at the campsite, no one will bother you in there. I have to go check that out.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me, I’m a professional.”

“Okay, but I still owe you for saving me. I want to thank you properly later.”

“Deal. Dragon, follow me.”

“Bye dragon!” the smaller child said, waving to it.

Susan arrived as the ministry personnel were discussing Winky.

“Did you save them?” asked Ginny as she ran up.

“Yup, they’re heading into the woods. Figured I’d find you were that was,” she pointed up, “and came running. What’s going on?”

“Harry found his wand,” said Hermione. “Apparently Winky had it.”

“They think she conjured that mark.”

“What? Can they even use wands? And how would a house elf learn a spell like that, anyway?”

“Exactly,” said Arthur. “Susan’s gotten to the heart of it.”

“And where were you, Susan?” asked the man in the business suit.

Barty, right?

“Saving four non magic users from a bunch of Death Eaters. What were you doing at the time?”

“Trying to figure out what’s going on. Along with everyone else, I assume.”

“In any case, let’s un-stun her and see what she has to say,” said a man Susan didn’t recognize.

“Oh, very well.”

“*Enervate*,” said the man. She started to stir, then got up.

The man demanded an explanation, which Winky started to provide. She professed no knowledge of even having the wand in her hand. At this point Susan stepped in front of her.

“I’m afraid it’s my fault Winky had picked up Harry’s wand,” she said.

“Your fault?” asked the man in the “Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” Mr. Diggory. “I think you better explain.”

“Last Christmas I placed a spell of *True Ownership* on Harry’s wand. It literally cannot leave his presence for any length of time. Somehow, some way, it will return to him so long as he lives. If a bird happens by that bird will be compelled to pick the wand up and fly it back to him. It just so happens Winky was the closest thing to it at the time, and so the wand picked her to return it. It’s as simple as that. The bigger question here is, how did the wand get out here, where Harry has never been? If he had dropped it in the crowd, someone would have just picked it back up and handed it to him without realizing. But that isn’t the case, it was out here in the woods. Answer that question, and you’re halfway to finding out who cast the spell.”

“Let’s first determine if this is the wand that cast the spell,” said Mr. Diggory. “*Prior Incantato*,” he cast. A ghostly image of the skull appeared in miniature above the wand. “Ah hah!”

“Okay, but that doesn’t tell us who did it,” said Susan.

“The owner of the wand... must have...” He looked over at Harry. “Or perhaps not.”

“No, I think not.” said Arthur.

“Anyway, it was a man’s voice that cast that spell, not a house elf voice,” said Hermione.

“What’s the big deal anyway?” asked Susan. “That symbol in the sky doesn’t seem to be hurting anyone, but there are still Death Eaters on the grounds that probably are. Is this really the time or place to be having this conversation?”

“No, it’s not. Susan is right,” said Barty. “I suppose it doesn’t matter who cast the Dark Mark into the sky. With all the commotion in the area it could have been anyone. Come on, let’s get back to making sure everyone at the campsite is safe. You’ll be staying with the kids, Arthur?”

He nodded. Mr. Diggory handed the wand back, and the three ministry people disappeared.

“I really did not do it,” said Winky, looking forlorn.

“As I said, no one blames you for picking up the wand. But you won’t have that excuse next time, so I advise in future that you leave strange wands where you found them and instead find someone to take care of it.”

“I will miss, I will. Winky is sorry.”

“No need to be. Come with us, we’ll keep you safe until this whole thing is sorted out.”
“I suppose master did not give me instructions to the contrary...”

Making their way back to the tents, the Death Eaters seemed to have passed by or been driven away, and everyone was trying to stumble around in the dark and get things together. Susan just shook her head and cast several simultaneous *Light* spells, which brightened up the area considerably.

“Honestly, an entire wood full of wizards and not one thinks to try a light spell. Secret is out, people, no sense hiding it now from any non-magic users that arrive. I mean that mark in the sky is not natural, so a couple of lights is no big deal. But no, just stumble around in the dark until you fall across the body of a dead pit pony.”

“Are you feeling okay?” asked Ron.

“What, a girl can’t quote Monty Python at a time like this?”

“Who?”

“Just help putting out fires, okay?”

Susan and the rest spent about an hour putting out tents on fire, healing injuries (Susan did most of that, the others didn’t know any healing spells) and generally reassuring everyone things were back to normal. Twice the dragon and the lion got attacked, but Susan quickly shouted they were under control, and as they didn’t attack back, no real harm was done. Finally, drained almost completely of energy, Susan staggered back into the girl’s tent and sat down.

“Cocoa?” asked Hermione, going to make some.

“No, I’m going to sleep,” replied Susan. “I need to get my energy back for tomorrow.”

“You shouldn’t be tired, did you drop the spell?”

“No, it’s still going. I just used most of my energy casting spells tonight. It’s all well and good for you, you can cast spells all night without a problem. I would rather take ten percent energy recharging per hour than five, if it’s all the same to you.”

“You even get energy back at a specific rate?”

“Of course. How do you do it?”

“I don’t know. I just rest for a while and then I’m ready to keep going again.”

“Simple as that, huh? Good night.”

Susan went to sleep.

Summertime Fun in the Sun

Time: The next day

Place: Packing up the campsite

“So what was the deal with that floating skull, anyway?” asked Susan the next morning. They were busy packing up the campsite, folding the tents up and picking up anything they had dropped around the area.

“The symbol itself is harmless,” explained Arthur. “It’s what it meant that was the problem. It was a symbol created by you know who and shown off wherever the Death Eaters had killed someone. A tool of fear, in other words.”

“But did anyone die that night?” Hermione asked. “Susan saved those poor Muggles- I’m sorry Susan,” Susan had shot her a dirty look, “those poor non-magical people-” Susan was still staring at her. “What?”

“I saved those *people* Hermione. Simply *people*. The fact they could use magic or not is irrelevant.”

“I’ve heard you say “non-magical people” before.”

“I know. And I just realized how silly it sounded. I fell into the same trap, labeling people and separating them into little compartments. That’s what made those Death Eaters do what they did last night. Making it ‘us’ versus ‘them’ when really, it’s all just ‘us.’”

“Broader philosophical arguments aside, yes, the killing curse was used that night,” said Arthur. “But only once, thank goodness.”

“That’s right, I did see that green light again,” said Susan. “I put *Magic Immunity* on right after that. Odd that they didn’t do it right away, or in the same spot as the killing.”

“All I know is, the Death Eaters that you hadn’t scared away all took off right afterwards.”

“Huh. Scared their master had returned and they were feeling afraid he might be ungrateful for all the years he spent with his soul in little pieces?”

“Who can say?”

“But why attack at all?” asked Hermione. “I mean they caused a lot of property damage, that’s for sure. But what was the point? Now we know there are still active cells loyal to you know who, and security will be a lot tighter at places.”

“It’s the same all over,” said Susan. “Remember the Twin Towers? The government lost their minds after that happened, and now to fly anywhere people either have to be groped or walk through x-ray machines. When simply locking the cockpit door would have sufficed. Not to mention all the wiretapping, cameras everywhere, tracking everyone’s cell phones, storing emails for years, and who knows what else. With the magic equivalent to that any Death Eaters will be chortling into their soup as the ministry goes bonkers.”

“So another scare tactic?”

“Probably. The timing is odd though. I mean, Peter is ‘rescued’ by Lucius just a few months ago, and now after fifteen years, people are putting on masks again and making people who can’t fight back with magic float around? I don’t like it, not one bit.”

“Ah, there you are!” said a voice. Susan whipped around- *That is not a good thing to exclaim to someone on edge from fighting off wizards the night before.* Then she saw who it was.

“Oh, hello. Your family managed to stay hidden then? I looked for you but I guess someone was looking after you,” she said to the man she had saved last night.

“I’m Carl Roberts, by the way. I just wanted to thank you again for saving us last night. My whole family is fine, thanks to you.”

“I’m shocked they let you remember it,” said Susan, looking over at Arthur.

“We had a long talk, and they decided it was best to just leave things as they were. The kids will forget it soon enough anyway, and my wife and I, well, who would believe us?”

“Finally showing some sense at last. I’m glad to hear it. As for saving you, don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you’re unhurt.”

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you, not that there probably would be, given what you can do, don’t hesitate to ask. I’m in your debt.”

“Fair enough.”

The campsite straightened out, Susan and the others stepped through a *Teleportal* to the Burrows, where they were met by Molly.

“I’m glad you’re all safe,” she said, hugging each of them in turn. “Was it really as bad as the papers said?”

“The papers? Let me see that!” said Arthur. “I can’t believe this. Oh wait, Rita Skeeter, yes I can.”

Susan looked over his shoulder at the paper, which showed photos of tents on fire. She caught bits of the text, and it wasn’t very flattering to the ministry.

“Unfortunately she has a point,” she said. “They did get away, though I’m not sure how one could expect otherwise when the perpetrators could teleport at will.”

“Exactly,” said Percy, “that reporter always chooses the worst side of things to write about. She even wrote an article about what I’m working on, that the ministry shouldn’t be worrying about cauldron thicknesses when they could be hunting down vampires!”

“Er, isn’t hunting down vampires more important than cauldron thicknesses, if you think about it?”

“That’s not the point. She acts like the ministry can do only one thing at a time. Can you see me going out vampire hunting? No! We have sections for that sort of thing, and sections for international standards. We do both, not one or the other.”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at. Separate budgets, and all that.”

“Right.”

“I’m mentioned,” said Arthur, reading further.

“What?” asked Molly. “If I had seen that I would have known you were all right!”

Susan looked at her quizzically, then slowly moved her neck to look over at the clock that showed where the whole family was, and noticed the “dead” and “mortal peril” status around the dial. Everyone was currently at “home.” Her eyes flicked back to Molly without turning her head.

“Oh, right,” said Molly, looking up at it herself, “forgot about that.”

Susan just shook her head. *And these people call themselves wizards!*

“Anyway, I’m the “*Ministry official that emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark,*” where I “*Alleged that no one been hurt.*” No one was hurt, was I supposed to say they had been? “*Bodies removed from the woods,*” indeed. There were no bodies, and if there were, how would she have known if they were victims or attackers? Seems you made the story too, Susan.”

“Oh crap, someone saw me taking on those Death Eaters? It was dark!”

“Not dark enough. Listen to this: *“One unsubstantiated eye witness report has a young girl and a dragon fighting off a large group of hooded figures with wandless magic, saving the Robertson family before disappearing into the woods with them. They are rumored to be unharmed, though the so called eye witness was obviously deranged from their experience at the hands of the attackers to have fabricated such an unlikely heroine.”*”

“I suppose it sells papers,” Molly said sadly. “So you can’t really blame her for sensationalizing things.”

“I can if I want,” said Arthur petulantly. “I better go in to the office, see if I can be of any help.”

“It’s not your department, and you’re supposed to be on vacation. Let someone else handle it.”

“No Molly, I was there and saw the attack. We’re going to need all the information we can get to find out who those people were and bring them to justice.”

“I’ll come with you, father, I need to hand in my report to Mr. Crouch anyway. Just let me go change.”

“I need to tell you something,” said Harry, “come on.”

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Susan went upstairs to Ron’s room. “What’s up, Harry?” asked Ron.

“It’s what your father said- “we’ll need all the information we can get,” that made me think of it. I wasn’t going to tell you, but I guess I better. My scar is hurting sometimes now.”

Ron went pale, looking at Harry’s forehead as though seeing it for the first time. Hermione launched into a whole speech about telling someone like Dumbledore right away, and looking things up in books. Susan looked thoughtful.

“See, this is why I didn’t tell you before,” he said. “I knew this would be your exact reactions. Except for Susan, I never know what she’s going to.”

“I’m glad you know me so well,” said Susan. “This pain, would you describe it as stinging, pinching, stabbing?”

“Does that matter? I guess stabbing. It’s very sudden.”

“And what were you doing at the time you last felt it?”

“I had just woken up from a dream about him. I think I remember him killing some old man, and plotting stuff.”

“Him? Him who?”

“Voldemort.”

“Right, stupid question. Sorry. This is another piece of the puzzle, I think. Was Peter with him then?”

“Yeah, I think so. He was talking to someone, and it wasn’t him that did the killing, it was Peter.”

“He may not have been fully corporeal yet then. But if Peter was up and about, that means he’s riding somebody else now. Smart of him to do it away from me and my *Exorcise* magic. I suppose a person like Peter would know where to find one of his bits, and find someone to carry him around for a while. Oh, this is bad all right.”

“It’s worse than that, even. I think I heard a real prediction from Professor Trelawney during my last exam with her. She said he would rise more terrible than before, and all because his servant was going to return to him. That was the night Peter got away from us.”

“She says stuff like that all the time about you, though,” said Ron, skeptically.

“This was different. She didn’t remember it afterwards, and... no, it wasn’t her that said those words, it was something speaking through her. I’m sure of it.”

“I guess I’ve been around Susan enough to know just about anything’s possible with magic, so I’ll have to take your word for it, though. But what should we do next?”

“You think I should tell Sirius?” asked Harry.

“What’s he going to do about it?” asked Susan. “We should write the Headmaster, but if the man hasn’t already put it together I would be very surprised. And school starts soon enough, anyway. I hate to wait, but with the bungled attack at the Cup I would expect the Death Eaters to lay low for a while. So I doubt we need to do anything immediately. Just make sure to tell him once we get to school, okay?”

“We need to do something before that!” said Hermione.

“All right, how about this? Harry, I want you to make a list of times your scar has hurt and under what circumstances. Hermione, you’re our puzzle keeper. Write down all the pieces we have on separate squares of parchment. Peter. Death Eaters. Harry’s scar. Lucius. That sort of thing. I think it might help to keep track of everything, and maybe bring out the pattern that’s starting to emerge.”

“I’ll get on it!”

“Ron, I want you to do what you do best.”

“What? Stand somewhere and look dashing handsome?”

Susan thought a moment. “Yes.”

“You got- wait a minute.”

The next few days were tough on the Weasley family.

“Howlers every day!” complained Percy.

“Howler?” asked Susan. “Wait, I’ve heard that word before, I think Ron said it once. I never followed up on that. What is a howler?”

“An explosive message,” he explained. “You record your voice into a parchment, and it’s magically amplified when opened. If you don’t open it right away, magical force builds up until it explodes.”

“Sounds illegal, especially to send to a government building,” said Susan. “And there’s no charm you can perform on all mail to cancel out this magical time bomb when it arrives?”

Percy’s eyes widened. “You know, I never thought of that. I’ll have to look into the counter charm for making howlers, there must be one.”

Color me shocked. A wizard not thinking to try magic to solve his problems.

“Why’s dad always so late,” asked Ginny. “He works in Muggle Artifacts!”

“I know how you feel,” replied Molly. “But your father has always been one to lend a hand when one is needed.”

“Perhaps he feels responsible for creating this mess, talking to that reporter when he had no business doing so,” said Percy.

“Oh, come off it, several ministry officials were there, your father only thinks she’s talking about him. It could just as easily have been one of the others.”

“Still-”

“He’s coming!” shouted Molly, jumping up to look at the clock. Everyone glanced at the hands, which now showed the picture of him swinging from “Work” to “Traveling.” The fire in the fireplace roared, and Arthur stepped through.

Stupid Floo network, not counting as teleportation magic for my spell. Not that I want to lock them out of their own house, but it is a weakness in the spell if I want to put it on something else.

“What a day!” said Arthur, kissing his wife and dropping into a large chair. “It just keeps getting worse and worse at the office.”

“What’s up?” asked Ron.

“Apparently our good friend Rita found out Bertha went missing some time ago and that’s going to be the next smear campaign she targets us with.”

“Wait, back up,” said Susan, perking up. “Someone went missing?”

“Yes, a woman by the name of Bertha Jorkins. Why, is that important?”

“That depends. When, exactly, did she go missing?”

“More than a month and a half ago now, I would say.”

“You can’t be more exact than that?”

“I can look into when she was scheduled to return from her vacation if it’s that important. But why? Do you know her somehow?”

“Know her? No. But a month and a half puts it just after Peter went active again, and I don’t like coincidences. Especially not ones involving people that go missing. And you say no one looked for her in all this time?”

“We’ve been very busy with the cup and... preparations for another event I can’t really talk about,” he hedged. “And she’s got a reputation for being very ditzy.”

“Well, I have a reputation for yelling at people when they annoy me,” said Susan, “but I would hope that if I disappeared someone might do me the courtesy of looking into it. Hermione?” Susan looked over at Hermione, who nodded and untied her stack of parchment squares with the clues written on them. She added *Bertha Jorkins missing after Peter escaped* to a fresh square and tied them up again.

“We’ll pay for it, now, don’t worry,” said Arthur. “And we’ve all been saying we should send someone out to look for her.”

“That’s like Ron saying he should get a start on his homework, and then going out to play Quidditch. You know someone who has a *finding people spell!*” *Though I have to admit it hasn’t worked quite as I expected for various reasons.*

“I realize that.”

Susan looked around. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I? Sorry, I just... you don’t need to hear this from me, I’m sure. It’s just I’m worried that Voldemort is, at this very moment, carrying out some plan and I have no idea what it is.”

“Don’t be absurd-” he started to say, but looked around the room. “You kids are taking this seriously, aren’t you?”

“Has Ron not told you? We’ve faced down his spirit twice already, and I’m not looking forward to our third meeting. He seems to have wised up and is staying away from me until he takes someone over completely, and I’m afraid that person may be your missing Mrs. Jorkins.”

“He did, but I could hardly believe it. I thought he must be mistaken, or just trying to top the twins’ wild tales, or something. You mean he really was put under the Imperius Curse? My own son?”

“I really was dad.”

“Oh Ron!” said Molly, going over and hugging him.

“Mom, it was years ago now!” said Ron, trying to squirm free.

“I’m sorry I didn’t take you seriously, son. And Albus knows?”

“Of course he does,” answered Susan. “We’ve talked about it on many occasions while I’m in his office *Imbuing* stuff instead of taking *Potions* class.”

“I feel better knowing that. Wait, you could find her, couldn’t you? With that spell you tried to find Sirius with.”

Wow, a new record, it was only five minutes before he realized I could do magic, after I reminded him I could do magic!

“If you get me a picture of her, sure,” she replied, keeping annoyance from her voice.

“There must be one around someplace. I’ll bring one back- no, would you mind coming to work with me tomorrow? The sooner she’s found the better.”

“That would be no problem at all.”

“Excellent. That’s sorted then. What’s for dinner?”

That evening, while Ron and Harry were packing, Susan heard a howl of disgust from Ron’s room, and sauntered over there.

“Dress robes,” his mother was saying as she walked up. “You’re supposed to bring some for formal occasions this year.”

“I can’t be seen in something like this!” Ron shrieked. Susan had to take Ron’s side in this argument, the robes did look a little... frilly... for him.

“They’re all like that, even your father has some for events he goes to at the ministry.”

“I don’t recall seeing him wearing anything like this.” He turned to Harry. “You must have some, then, if they’re on the list for this year. Check it out.”

Harry shrugged and started digging through his luggage.

“I picked some up for you,” said Molly, “They should be there someplace.”

Harry pulled out a set of robes, more formal looking than normal ones, but still more like a suit than what Ron was holding.

“Those look okay, they’re completely different,” said Ron.

“I’m afraid those were a bit more expensive than we could afford, Ron. I’m sorry. I was only able to get them because the saleswitch *may* have overheard me remark I was buying them for Harry Potter and gave me a huge discount.” She looked smug.

“Hem-Hem,” said Susan, and everyone looked over at her. She gave Ron a long look.

“What?” he finally asked.

Susan’s eyes flicked to the wand that was laying on Ron’s desk, then back to the robes he was holding, then to his face. Ron looked over at his wand.

Molly looked at them in confusion.

“Just tell me, what are you-” Ron said. His eyes lit up. “Right. Magic. I better make sure I did my *Transfiguration* homework, I wouldn’t want to miss something important. Changing one thing into another is apparently a very worthwhile branch of magic.”

“It must be,” said Susan. “You’ve studied it for three years, and have how many more to go?”

“I just now began to get a true appreciation for all that studying I’ve done over the years. Perhaps a little more practice wouldn’t go amiss?”

“Practice does make perfect.”

“And some charms are so easy to perform, it’s silly not to learn them, you know, just in case.”

“I quite agree.”

“So the robes?” asked Molly, not following at all.

"I withdraw my complaints!" said Ron with finality. "Thank you for getting them for me, mom, I appreciate it. I'm sure they'll look good on me."

"Yes, right." Molly was looking back and forth between them all. Harry was trying to stifle giggles. "Just pack them carefully so they don't crease."

"Sure thing, Mom."

Molly left, still looking like all three had gone mad, and they all burst into laughter.

"You're getting better," said Susan. "You only needed a gentle prod that time."

"You think there's a spell for changing these clothes into something that looks like Harry's?" Ron asked.

"I don't see why not. I mean, you've been complaining about turning birds into goblets, one would think they would cover something useful like rag into dress robes."

"Maybe they figure if we can master bird into goblet, rag to dress robe we could look up ourselves," said Harry.

"Looks like you boys are due for a trip to the library, or at least earning some extra points in class by actively asking about a specific *Transfiguration* charm."

"Thanks," said Ron. "What would I have done without you?"

"Probably gone to some formal function looking a bit ridiculous. I have to say though, I'm rubbing off on you guys. Took your father only five minutes to finally ask about my magic to locate someone after we started talking about it. Pretty soon you guys will actually think magic *first* rather than a month and a half after the fact."

The next day, magic book in hand, Susan stepped through a *Teleportal* to the ministry. As predicted, there was a story about Bertha in the newspaper that morning, but sadly it didn't have a picture. So Susan took them both to the same office she had previously, as it was unlikely anyone would see her *Teleportal* there. As she stepped out into the hallway she discovered the ministry was noisier, more crowded, and more frantic than she remembered it ever being on her last visits.

"Starting to feel like my second home, I've come here so often," remarked Susan.

"They'd be fools not to hire you the second you graduated," said Arthur, leading her over to the elevators to go up to the record room. "With the various things I've seen your magic do, you could probably choose your own department and be running it in five years."

"Oh, it would really take that long? May as well not bother in that case," remarked Susan, with mock disappointment in her voice. Arthur grinned at her.

"Come on, there must be a picture of her someplace."

They rode the elevator down (and across) to the record keeping room, which seemed a little less frantic than the hallways.

Explaining what he wanted, Susan was disappointed to learn there was no photograph of Bertha on file.

"That reporter was trying to get one," said the wizard behind a desk. "She went away unhappy as well."

"No wonder there wasn't one in the article," said Susan. "You guys don't take pictures of your employees?"

"Why would we do that?"

"I suppose you already know what she looks like, right?"

"Right. Anything else we can help you with?"

Or not help us with, as the case may be.

“Not for now. Thanks anyway.”

Susan and Arthur walked back to the elevator. “I can’t believe she hasn’t had a picture taken since she started working here. Not one birthday party shot? Being caught in the background of some other picture? Anything!”

“Film is expensive to get developed.”

Yeah, I bet. More so lately I would imagine, given how nobody should be producing it anymore in the first place.

“And she wasn’t exactly popular around here. She’s been bounced from department to department since she started working for the ministry, as I hear it.”

“I see,” said Susan. “Where did she last work? We can still salvage this if you can clear it out for a while. Though maybe we can wait until lunch time, or something.”

“What are you planning?”

“Some more of that amazing magic you’ve so recently praised, of course.”

They entered the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and Susan looked around. Quite a different atmosphere around here, with Quidditch posters of varying ages lining the walls. She also noticed a great many “Triwizard Tournament” posters and memorabilia hanging around the office.

“Hogwarts?” she said, reading a poster. “What’s going on there this year?”

“Oh shoot, you weren’t supposed to find out about it until Albus announced it. Well, don’t tell the others, okay? I want it to be a surprise for them.”

“Want what to be a surprise for them?”

He pointed to the posters. “The Triwizard Tournament, of course.”

“Yes, but what is it? Wait a second, I do recall reading something about that in *Hogwarts: A History*. Something about students from different school doing dangerous tasks for the amusement of others, right?”

“I wouldn’t put it like- no I guess I would put it exactly like that. People did die in the past.”

“Great! And they chose this year, which just happens to coincide with a rise in dark wizard activity, to do this.”

“We can’t put our lives on hold because some dark wizard might do something. That’s Rita thinking right there.”

Susan grunted. “I guess you’re right.”

“Can I help you?” a witch said, coming over to them.

“Can we see Bertha’s desk?” asked Arthur. “We’re investigating her disappearance.”

“Her desk has already been pretty well gone over,” said the woman. “But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have another set of eyes- hey, she shouldn’t be in here!”

“She’s the one doing the investigating. I’m just here to help her find her way around.”

“What’s a kid going to do that hasn’t already been done?”

“I am right here, you know.”

“Well then? What are you going to do, exactly?”

“There’s a tracking spell I want to try, but I need to know what she looks like to cast it. I’m hoping she has some pictures of herself and her husband, or boyfriend, or family member hanging around in her desk.”

“I don’t think she ever had a boyfriend. Her desk is right over there, just don’t disturb anything.”

“Thank you.”

They walked over to her desk, and saw that it had been pretty messed up already, probably from previous searches.

“Don’t disturb anything my butt,” muttered Susan, looking over the contents. She noticed a calendar stuck to the wall that was nearly two months out of date now, with “Vacation” written on it. She seemed to write down just about every event in her life, conveniently with times.

“Look, she was probably here right before her vacation where it says “straighten up desk” at 3:00. She looked around, the few people in the area weren’t paying particular attention to her.

“*Time Window*,” she cast, getting a 17 on her check, and naming the exact time she wanted to see. She was rewarded with a picture of a witch cleaning her desk up, just as she hoped.

“Is that her?”

“This isn’t my department, so I can’t really say.”

I really don’t want to call attention to my magic here, but I may have to ask someone. Wait a second!

“*Pocket Dimension*,” she cast, getting out her camera. *This will blow their minds even more.*

She paused the playback, then took a picture through the *window*. She closed it, then walked back over to the lady who had directed them here. She grabbed a pencil off her desk before she walked away as well.

“Is this her?” she asked, showing the woman the back of the camera.

“Yes, that’s her. What is that?”

“A camera from the non-magical world. I find it sometimes comes in handy.”

And it’s a good thing I’ve stuffed a bunch of random stuff into my Pocket Dimension just in case I need it.

“That’s a camera? Are you sure it’s not magic?”

“Totally sure. Thank you very much for your help,” she said, shutting off the camera.

“Is your office quiet? I’ll need ten minutes for the spell.”

“Yeah, we can head that way.”

Susan walked into a curious “museum” of odd objects, mainly just random junk, but random junk you wouldn’t think to see in a ministry office. Keys, teapots, light bulbs of various sizes, an array of digital cameras (“Oh, so that’s what they are,” said Arthur, making the connection) and the muffler off a van, to name a few. Susan, not seeing any other free space, sat down on the floor and placed the pencil in front of her.

“What’s with the pencil?”

“It’s a possession of hers, it’ll make the spell work a little better.”

She began to read, and magical circles appeared around her, which she added to for the next ten minutes. Arthur sat down and watched, fascinated. The pencil disappeared, and Susan looked up from her book, sadly closing it.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Weasley, but Bertha Jorkins is dead.”

First Days of School

Time: Just before leaving for the train station

Place: The Burrows

There was some excitement before they left for the train station, as Arthur had a quick conference about someone called “Mad-Eye Moody.” Apparently there was some commotion where he lived earlier that morning.

“Someone creeping into his yard at night? You know he’s always jumping at phantoms,” said the head that was currently in the fire.

“Who are they talking about?” Susan asked Molly.

“Alastor Moody, Ex-Auror. That’s a dark wizard catcher, in case you hadn’t heard the term before. Apparently there was some trouble at his place last night.”

Susan cast a knowing glance at Hermione, who nodded and got out her stack again. *Attack on Alastor Moody the day before students start arriving at school* she wrote.

“Have any other Ex-Auror been attacked lately?”

“Not that we’ve heard about,” said Molly. “But then, half of Azkaban is there because of him. He has more enemies than most.”

“Enemies that are a bit emboldened, of late,” remarked Susan. “Perhaps they don’t want the ex-Auror to become an ex-ex-Auror and come out of retirement?”

“It probably was nothing though,” said Molly.

“It’s never nothing, Mrs. Weasley. My time at Hogwarts has taught me that.”

Susan once again argued for just heading to the castle directly, but the others wanted to ride the train once again. So Susan opened her *Teleportal* in the usual quiet spot and the Weasley family helped bring luggage through belonging to people without *Pocket Dimensions*.

Don’t some of those people have to work? thought Susan, looking at Bill. *I would have expected him to have returned to Egypt by now. Odd.*

They piled into their usual car, and a bunch of people they knew came to say hello and ask about their summer.

“I’ve been practicing potions,” said Neville. “Apparently the trace only picks you up if you do wand magic, and as I’m so rubbish at potion making I figured I would brush up.”

“You’re not rubbish at it, you just let Professor Snape get to you too much,” said Hermione. “How did it go?”

“Not bad. I’m actually more interested in the plants before they become potion ingredients though, oddly enough. I think making things grow is much more interesting than chopping them up.”

“You have always liked Herbology class most,” said Harry.

“Being able to read the directions while stirring has certainly helped as well,” he said, looking over at Susan. “I don’t know what I would have done without that cure.”

“People keep saying that to me. I’m sure you would have gotten along somehow,” replied Susan.

“See you at the feast!”

A little later, Draco stopped in. He was rather more coldly received.

“So are you going to enter?” he asked Susan.

“No chance!” she replied strongly, making an X with the arms across her chest. “There are so many problems with just the very idea.”

“Enter what?” asked Ron.

“You know, but you didn’t tell your friends? Are you sure you shouldn’t be in Slytherin?”

“Mr. Weasley wanted Headmaster Dumbledore to tell everyone.”

“Tell everyone what?” asked Ron.

“Still, why wouldn’t you enter?”

“That much should be obvious. Unless I somehow handicapped myself, there would be no contest between me and the other contestants. It wouldn’t be fair to them.”

“Fair? There’s a thousand Galleons on the line. Forget fair, this is about winning!”

“No, it’s about not announcing my kind of magic to the world at large. You guys know all about me, Professor Quirrell explained it all. But I really don’t want to have to explain my magic to the whole world. I would never be left alone! People would be coming all the time to have me try and teach them, or remember stuff about the past, or whatever.”

“Do you? Remember the past, I mean?”

“No. Memory is a physical thing, Draco. It’s in your brain. Your soul, that which is attuned to magic and gives you life, what ghosts are made of, and has in my case returned to this body for whatever reason- is something else. My memories of what I did in the past stayed with my old body. Why do think I still have to take classes?”

“I wondered about that. I guess that makes sense.”

Whew, he’s actually buying that. Good thing I came up with it just now! Go away, will you? I know what will make him walk away in disgust!

“It’s also why blood purity is silly. Magic comes from the soul, not the body. That’s why there are no ghosts of people that can’t use magic. It’s the spark of magic in their soul that allows them to continue to exist here, while their body is dead.”

“Every time I talk to you, that gets brought up. Do you really think I’m that shallow?” Everyone just stared silently at him. “I’ll see you later.”

“So what was he talking about?”

“I don’t know the details, I just saw some posters for the event. Apparently some kind of magical contest is going to be held here. I’m sure it’ll be announced at the feast.”

“Is what you said true though?” asked Hermione. “You wouldn’t enter?”

“I highly doubt it. Can you imagine trying to explain my magic after an event? Doing things no wanded wizard could? No thank you.”

“Still, a thousand Galleons,” said Ron. “I might brush up on more than *Transfiguration* with kind of money on the line.”

The rain kept up as the train sped through the evening and reached the castle at the normal time.

“Can you believe this weather?” asked Ron.

“No, I- *Deflection*,” Susan cast, knocking a water balloon aimed at Ron’s head out of the air. It burst and he flinched back.

“What the- Peeves! I’m wet enough!”

“You could be wetter!” Peeves shouted, throwing another at Hermione. She whipped her wand out and shouted *Dissendium* causing it to burst before it could hit. It too exploded in mid-air.

“Very nice!” said Susan, impressed.

“Thanks,” said Hermione, smiling. Peeves went on to start bombing others, his fun disrupted.

“Have you been practicing *Quick Draw* or something? Ten points to Ravenclaw.”

“You can’t give points,” she said, sticking her tongue out.

“Susan!” A familiar voice rang out from above, and Myrtle touched down in front of them.

“Myrtle!” said Susan, touching a charm on her bracelet. “*Phase*,” she said, then held her hands open wide. Myrtle flew into them, and the two hugged.

“I couldn’t wait to see you!” said Myrtle. “And guess what? I won the lifting contest again this year!”

“That’s great, Myrtle, I’m proud of you. And I’m glad to see you too. It’s been too long.”

“I got a special award because I didn’t lift a feather.”

“Oh? What did you lift?”

“A marble. And it was super tough let me tell you.”

“I want to hear all about it, but we better get inside. How about the fashion show?”

Myrtle looked down. “I only got third place,”

“Ah, the judges just didn’t want anyone to think it was fixed because you suggested the event.”

“Maybe.”

“Come on, I’m freezing, let’s get inside.”

The two held hands as they walked into the brightly lit castle.

“Good evening,” said Sir Nicholas as they sat down. He looked at Susan and Myrtle, still holding hands. Susan reached hers out and he shook it, amazed.

“Good evening to you,” said Susan. “I hope you had a peaceful summer, and are ready for the castle to be full of bustle again.”

“It has been a bit quiet without you all around,” he admitted. “Hello!” he said to someone else who called to him, floating away.

“I’ll have to become solid for a bit to eat, sorry Myrtle.”

“That’s okay.” She leaned close and whispered, “You can make it up to me later.”

They both grinned at each other and Susan dropped *Phase*, then sat down across from Harry and Ron at the Gryffindor table.

“Who do you think is teaching Defense this year?” asked Hermione.

“Not Sirius, I couldn’t get him to apply though I’m sure the Headmaster would have taken him on my recommendation. You don’t think this Moody guy, do you?”

“I suppose that trouble he had could have been foreshadowing.”

“Yeah, if this was some kind of story!”

The Headmaster himself was looking pensive, looking up at the ceiling rather than at any of the students. Finally the first years marched into the room, soaking wet, and went to stand in front of the Sorting Hat, which sang its yearly song.

Finally the sorting was over, and everyone began to eat heartily.

“So tell me about this marble,” said Susan.

“I wanted to do something different, like you,” Myrtle explained. “So I started practicing with a marble instead of a feather. It’s very different, lifting one over the other. It’s almost as if the feather wants to float, while the marble just wants to roll around.”

“And a marble, even a small one, must weigh a lot more than just a feather.”

“Sure does. And I held it up longer than anyone else held their feather, so that’s why I got the special award.”

“Well I’m proud of you. Pretty soon you’ll be the strongest ghost around.”

“Not that it really means anything.”

“Sure it does. You have a goal to strive for. Doesn’t matter if you’re a ghost or not, having a goal is important.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“What do you mean, house elves?” cried Hermione, to the other side of Susan. She had been talking with Sir Nicholas.

“House elves have always prepared all the food at the castle. They do the cleaning, lighting the fires, all that sort of thing. You didn’t know?”

“No I didn’t, I had never seen one here.”

They don’t use magic to prepare this amount of food? That’s got to be a chore. Did they start last week?

Hermione pushed her plate away from her, and Susan looked at her dubiously.

“So you’re going to let their effort go to waste, then?” she asked. “That’s a fine way to thank them for all the work they put in.”

“Don’t tell me you’re on the side of the House Elf Oppressors?”

“Oppressors? I was right there cheering when Harry said he freed Dobby and got him away from Lucius. And yes, his treatment of the poor creature should be outlawed, as House Elves are sentient beings just like us. But I wouldn’t let their effort here go to waste, that’s not going to accomplish anything.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Course I am. This food won’t keep, any that’s left over may just get fed to the moat monster or whatever. Better to just eat up, that’s my thinking.”

“You’ll really eat food prepared by what amounts to slaves?”

Susan thought for a moment. “We’re all slaves, Hermione. To one thing or another. The only truly free man lives in a cave, owns nothing, and eats only berries and nuts he finds in the wilderness. As soon as you say “I want that thing” you have just enslaved yourself. Is Lucius not a slave to his greed? Are you not a slave to your grades?”

“That’s totally different!”

“Is it? If you don’t get good grades, what happens?”

“I don’t graduate.”

“Uh huh. And if you don’t graduate, you become homeless. If you become homeless, etc. until you die. So the Elves here make their living as servants. I doubt the Headmaster goes and beats them every night. It’s no different than you getting a job to get the things you need to survive.”

“But they don’t have rights!”

“There I agree, but that’s a different thing than protesting their job of preparing food. Lots of magical creatures don’t have rights, or are killed with hardly a thought. Look at Buckbeak. Heck, look at Sirius! What rights did he have, getting thrown in Azkaban without so much as a trial, or a single shred of actual evidence he cast that spell that killed all those people. *They didn’t even check his wand to see what the last spell he cast was!* A procedure that takes all of, what, a second? So yeah, I’m more concerned with wizards getting fair trials than worrying about magical creatures.”

“Well, you can go ahead and think what you want. I’m not touching any more of this.”
“Suit yourself.”

And finally, Headmaster Dumbledore made his big announcement.

“I have a piece of news that might shock you a bit, so I please ask that you fully hear me out before making any judgments,” he said, looking around the room. “The inter-house Quidditch cup competition will not be taking place this year.”

“Yes!” shouted Susan, making a fist. The people at her table looked at her like she had gone mad. Elsewhere in the room people looked shocked. “What?” she asked, looking around. “It’s no secret I’m not a big Quidditch fan.”

There was a general murmur of accent. It was no secret, after all.

“Instead,” continued the Headmaster, “we will be hosting an event with two other schools called the Triwizard-”

At that moment the doors to the halls crashed open, revealing a grizzled looking man.

And now I know why his nickname is Mad Eye, thought Susan, watching his one magical eye swiveling around independently of the other one. He made his way towards the teacher’s table, staff banging loudly and echoing through the now still chamber.

“I guess it was foreshadowing,” remarked Susan.

Albus greeted the man warmly, shaking his hand as he got up to the main table. The both went back around again, Alastor sitting and taking some sausage.

“Before we proceed further, allow me to introduce your new Defense teacher, Professor Moody!”

Albus, Hagrid and Susan both applauded, and he tilted his head towards Susan in appreciation.

“What are you doing?” hissed Hermione.

“Any Auror that lives long enough to reach retirement must be pretty good, and deserving of our respect.”

“He looks like he’s had a few close scrapes,” said Ron from behind them.

“More than a few,” said Harry.

“Where was I? Ah yes, the announcement of why Quidditch will not be played this year. We have the honor of hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year, instead, which has not happened in over a century.”

Everyone looked confused.

“Oh, you probably don’t know what that is, given how long it’s been. Allow me to explain.”

And he did.

“So, wait. There’s only three tasks? Why can’t you guys play Quidditch still? It’s not like these events are going to take weeks to get through, right?” asked Susan.

“Maybe they need the field?” answered Harry.

Susan looked over at him skeptically.

“Okay, that’s a pretty weak excuse. I really have no idea.”

He went on to explain the age restrictions, which set off Fred and George.

“It should be based on ability,” said one of the twins. “If someone can demonstrate they’re good enough to enter, they should be allowed to enter no matter how old they are.”

“That would mean a lot of extra work,” said Susan. “This seems like just an arbitrary and easy to verify cut off, saving them effort.”

“I suppose most would want to sign up, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, imagine trying to test 80% of the students in this school. It would take weeks. No, they just chose an arbitrary cut off, and that’s that. Sorry guys.”

“We’ll see about this,” said the twins together.

“You could probably talk them into it,” said Myrtle. “If you wanted to enter.”

“Too bad I don’t want to. I have more important things to worry about, like the increased dark wizard activity lately.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be worrying about that?” asked Hermione.

“Aren’t you a little young to worry about Elf rights?”

“Touché.”

The next day classes started, and the group had Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures in the morning. That afternoon Susan and Hermione had Arithmancy, which Hermione at least was looking forward to.

I’ll probably have to put some more points in this year, a 2 in that skill just won’t cut it, even if I do roll 2d8.

They went down to the greenhouse and squeezed pus out of Bubotubers. At least most did. Susan used her *Temporary Tool* spell to devise a combination piercing tool with a sort of blast shield/funnel attachment that wrapped around the whole thing. This allowed her to safely prick the swelling bud, then funnel the liquid down into the bottle which she attached onto the bottom. She then squeezed the last of the liquid out once the majority had trickled down, controlling its release. She didn’t trust squeezing it, that seemed dangerous as the pus could burst out a weak point in an unintended place.

And for this I roll 1d6+1d8+3?

She raised a hand.

“Yes, Susan?”

“You say this pus can do funny things to the skin undiluted. What things, and how would we counteract them? Does it do good things for the skin if diluted? Also, what is the correct dilution ratio and what is it diluted with?”

“An excellent series of questions. Leave it to a Ravenclaw to want to learn more about things. Take a point for that, and I’ll tell you.”

She told them.

Susan left the class feeling a bit sorry she had asked, as what it could do turned out to be fairly graphic and hideous. And of course Professor Sprout delighted in describing in detail what it did to various parts of the body it happened to come into contact with.

“I’m so glad I asked,” Susan mumbled as she walked down to the Hut.

Down in Care of Magical Creatures Hagrid introduced the class to their new project for the year- his “Blast-Ended Skrewts.”

“But why would we want to raise them?” asked Draco. “What do they do? What’s the point of them?”

“What does anyone do? What’s the point of a newborn baby? We live, Draco, we live. Also they are magical, so parts of them could be used in potions, and they may turn out to be friendly. It’s going to be your job to find out.”

Draco just looked doubtful.

With that class over, Hermione sped through eating lunch and ran off to the library.

“What is wrong with that girl? You don’t think she got another time turner and is ditching us to go back and take another class, do you?” asked Ron.

“No idea,” said Harry.

“I certainly hope not,” said Susan. “She said last year she was afraid of getting ‘addicted’ to it, so to speak. Hopefully she wouldn’t run back to it.”

“And yesterday she wouldn’t finish the feast, but today she seems perfectly fine with shoving food in her face,” continued Ron.

“Changing your mind about things is the prerogative of a girl. You should get used to it.”

“As well as not explaining yourself?”

“Especially that.”

Hermione didn’t want to talk about what she was doing at the library during lunch, and after Arithmancy class, she and Susan went their separate ways. Susan went to the Headmaster’s office to start *Imbuing* something for the school. She had finished all her projects last year, and wondered if maybe she couldn’t do something bigger for Christmas this year. She usually started about a month or two ahead, but starting now would give her even more time to come up with something great for her friends.

“Do you have a moment, Susan?” asked Albus as she was sitting down to start looking through her book.

“Sure,” she replied. “Just going to get started on my ‘potions’ class, as usual. What can I do for you?”

“I would like your thoughts on the Tournament, if you have any.”

“Really? Why? If it’s not rude of me to ask that.”

“Perhaps I value your opinion. In truth, you have a unique perspective on things and you tend to see things we wizards don’t.”

“Okay. Well, my initial thought when I heard about it was that the timing was wrong. After Peter’s escape and the subsequent attacks on the World Cup, letting a bunch of spectators wander around the castle grounds seems dangerous. Then there’s the contestants themselves. They’re all coming from foreign lands, and presumably are given some kind of diplomatic immunity. Rules will be relaxed around them, I’m sure. How hard would it be for a dark wizard to take the place of one of these students and sabotage the whole thing? Polyjuice potion exists, after all. The only way to really tell that someone has been replaced is by catching them at some behavior they wouldn’t normally display. Easy to tell if Harry or Hermione or Ron got replaced, I know them all pretty well. And my magic gives me away. But a bunch of people that only have a 5 in our language? Don’t follow our customs? We would never be able to tell.”

“Now that thought had not occurred to me. Please continue.”

“Then there’s the danger issue. There’s only three events, so obviously you’re going to try and pack as much danger into each as you possibly can for maximum effect. I would put up something like Quirrell’s barrier around the whole place and enchant the play area to be

nonlethal. You can still get hit or thrown, but you just paralyze the area that would normally have taken damage so that nobody dies.”

“We could do that.”

“Then there’s the issue of why only three champions? Why not hold an Olympics like contest like the ghosts do while we’re away? I’m sure I could sit here and think up some exciting magical contests that could be held, which a large group could do simultaneously so it didn’t take weeks to get through. You hold a series of trials in school as part of normal classes, and those that do the best are randomly selected to compete. Then each event is done three times, once by each school, and the school with the highest points wins the event. The school with the highest points at the end wins the tournament. The way you’re doing it now, a bunch of students from two other schools get to come, but then just sit around as their champion does all the interesting stuff. Boring!”

“Good points, all around. Anything else?”

“You’ve heard the grumbling about the age restriction, so I won’t rehash that.”

“I appreciate it.”

Susan thought for a moment. “That’s all I can think of off the top of my head.”

“Those were some very valid points. I’m glad I’m asked. You may get on with your work now.”

“Actually, I would like to ask you something, if that’s okay?”

“I am at your disposal.”

“It’s about elves, or as you call them “House” Elves. My History of Magic class talks about goblin uprisings all the time, but not so much elf uprisings. Hermione has been going on about them, and I just wondered if they were always the way they are now.”

“Actually, they haven’t,” Dumbledore replied, looking around his office. “I have a book somewhere... ah yes, here it is.”

He rose, and waved his wand in the direction of a bookshelf near the ceiling of his office. (Albus had a lot of books.) It floated down to him.

“A rather sad chapter in our history, so most accounts of the Elf uprising have been removed from literature. But this book is the best example.” He paged through a moment. “It’s a rather short passage, give it a read.”

He handed the book over, and Susan skimmed it over. It was about a large group of elves rampaging about the countryside and trying to overthrow the government. Apparently they were doing a pretty good job of it for quite a while.

“So what happened?”

“About fifty wizards got together and placed a geas upon all elf kind. Overnight the once proud elven race was reduced to a subjugated existence. Nothing lasts forever, mind you, and Dobby may be a sign that the curse is finally breaking down after all this time.”

“Why couldn’t they be stopped some other way? Is their magic really that strong?”

“Now that you mention it, I would have to say their magic bears more resemblance to yours than to ours. They can teleport into places we cannot *Apparate* into, and perform feats that are rather different than our own.”

Note to self, never let an elf near my book of magic.

“And it’s this geas that makes them happy to be enslaved? Makes them punish themselves if they go against their masters, the whole bit?”

“The whole bit.”

“It seems like every time I think I’ve heard the worst that wizards have ever done, something else comes along to make me think again.”

“I’m sure those wizards thought long and hard about what they did.”

“Possibly. It does make me wonder though. Thank you.”

“Any time. I do encourage learning, being a professor, and all that.” He smiled.

The group was most looking forward to Defense, and what Professor Moody’s teaching style would be like. Everyone but Hermione showed up early, who rushed in just in time.

“What have you been doing in the library all this time?” Susan asked her.

“I’ll tell you when it’s ready,” Hermione replied.

Susan stepped behind her and ran a finger down her collar.

“Hey, what are you doing?” She jumped in surprise.

“Just making sure there isn’t a gold chain around your neck, that’s all.”

“I’m not using one of those again,” she said in a huff. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Then why all the secrecy?”

“You’ll find out. I think I hear him coming!”

Indeed, Alastor was approaching the classroom, and called for them to put their books away as he entered. He did a roll call, then leaned heavily against his desk.

“So Lupin has told me about the usual style of this class, begun by one Professor Quirrell. Actual combat exercises, is that right?”

Everyone nodded.

“Fantastic, those will continue.”

There was a murmur of approval through the class.

“Now, he covered dark creatures like Boggarts and such, right? Well, we’ll be covering curses and their effects in the classroom portions of our lessons. Sound all right to all of you then?”

Everyone nodded.

“Glad to hear it. I don’t have much time to spend with you-”

“Oh come on, don’t tell me you think the position is cursed?” asked Ron.

Alastor glared at him a moment, then smiled. “Ah, Ron Weasley, right? Your father helped me out a few days ago, as I’m sure you know. Decent sort. Do I believe the position is cursed? No. But I am retired, you know. I’m just doing this as a special favor to Albus. Sorry if that disappoints you. Now, curses! We’re going to start at the top and work our way down. Most at the Ministry would rather I start at the bottom and work my way up, but I think that’s silly. A dark wizard trying to kill you isn’t going to bother with some amateur hour, namby-pamby minor curse, are they? No they are not! They are going top shelf, so we are going top shelf.

“So: who can tell me about a curse most heavily punished under the law?”

Several hands went up, including Neville’s and Ron’s.

“You seem to be eager, go ahead,” he said to Ron.

“Imperius curse,” he said with a grimace.

“That’s one of the three, well done. And what do you know about it specifically?”

“I was put under it for about a year, first year,” he replied.

Everyone in the class gasped.

“Are you serious, boy?”

“Dead serious. I was made to report on the activities of Susan and Harry to someone I thought was Professor Quirrell, but who turned out not to be.”

“What happened to him?”

Ron looked over at Susan. “He... gave up the ghost, thanks to Susan.”

Heh, gave up the ghost. Nice one, Ron.

“Susan, huh? I’ve been hearing some things about you, maybe I should start believing some of them. In any case, a demonstration!”

He went over to his desk drawer, and pulled out a jar with three large spiders. He took one out and pointed his wand (*Where did he pull his wand from, did he have it a second ago?*) and said “*Imperio!*”

The spider began to do things no normal spider would, causing most of the class to break out laughing. Susan and her friends just looked concerned.

“They have the right idea,” said Alastor, pointing to them. “They know it’s no joke. Under the Imperius curse someone can be mentally commanded to do anything, and they’ll do it. Even slit their own throats. In the past it’s been used to make people give up secrets, act in ways they normally wouldn’t, and more. How would you feel if you didn’t know if your best friend was about to betray you to a Death Eater? And if they did, would it be because they had turned, or because they had been turned? No laughing matter, this one.”

He put the spider back.

“Luckily it’s one that can be fought off, with practice. We’ll be practicing it, make no mistake. Only a few of you will manage it, but you’ll all experience it so you know how it feels. Next curse.” He pointed to Neville.

“Cruciatus,” he said sadly.

“And you’re another one that has nearly firsthand experience with it, aren’t you, Mr. Longbottom?”

He nodded.

“Care to tell the class?”

“Both my parents were Aurors,” he began after a moment, looking down. “During the first wizard war, they were captured by Death Eaters when I was just a baby. Both were tortured into insanity by members of the Lestrangle family, most notably Bellatrix Lestrangle.” He spat the name out as he said it. “They spent the next ten years in St Mungo’s until Susan cured them a few years ago.”

There was a stunned silence as people looked back and forth between Susan and Neville.

“You do get around, don’t you?” asked Alastor. He barked a laugh. “Next I’ll be hearing how you survived a killing curse!”

“She did!”

“What?” demanded Alastor.

“Someone shot a killing curse at her when she first arrived here,” said someone in the back. “All us first years at the time saw it. Professor McGonagall even said “that was a killing curse” and hustled everyone inside.”

“And how did you manage that?”

“*Deflection*,” said Susan. “It’s a spell that hardens the air against a single, non-area effect attack, keeping anything from passing through. Because the energies of the killing curse travel from the caster to the victim, and it’s blocked by solid objects, the spell kept it from hitting me.”

“So this *Deflection* of yours wouldn’t work against the Cruciatus curse because it just causes pain to the person the wand is pointing at.”

“That’s right.”

“You got lucky, then.”

“Yes Professor, I did.”

“Anyway, back to the Cruciatus-” He got out a second spider and enlarged it. Ron scooted back.

“*Crucio!*”

Everyone in the room could see the spider was now in terrible pain.

“Enough,” said Susan, her gaze hard.

Alastor nodded, and the spider relaxed. He shrank it and put it away again.

“And we’ve already mentioned the third. Avada Kedavra.” He reached for the third spider.

“Don’t you dare,” said Susan, shaking her head. “Seeing that awful green light twice in my life was enough.”

“Twice?”

“The second time was at the World Cup.”

“Ah, yes of course. Very well. I was going to say there’s only been one person that’s survived that curse, but I guess now I can say there’s two.”

“It never hit me, so I can’t really say I survived it, though,” argued Susan. “Ducking behind something would have served as well. *Deflection* is just so quick to cast, why wouldn’t I use it?” *Of course it was Sparkle with her high LUCk that saw it coming, and cast the spell for me, but he doesn’t need to know that.*

“She brings up a good point- don’t get hit by any of these curses! Practice vigilance. Learn to Apparate so if you feel you’re in a bad situation, you can just get away. Stun someone before he can cast at you. There are plenty of ways to avoid getting cursed, even if it means...” he chuckled. “Ducking behind something. Don’t think you have to just stand out in the open, being an easy target. Ah, but then, I don’t have to tell you, do I? You’ve all had some experience with ‘live’ combat, haven’t you? I’ll be looking forward to seeing what you can do.”

The lesson continued, and at the end, Alastor asked to see both Susan and Neville in his office some time.

“I’m going to talk to Neville now, stop by when you can,” he said.

“Sure thing.”

That evening, Hermione finally came out of the library and met Susan, Ron and Harry in the common room.

“Is your secret project done?” asked Ron.

“Yes it is, thanks for asking,” replied Hermione, getting out a small box. She spilled out a rainbow of badges with HELP written on them.

“You made SOS badges?” asked Harry, picking one up. “What, you throw them in the air and they mark your location with light, right?”

“They cast a protective shield charm around you?” asked Ron.

“They carry you to safety through like the fifth method of magical teleportation I’ve encountered, because all wanded wizard teleportation methods are terrible?” asked Susan.

“No, it’s an organization! Help Elves Live and Prosper. HELP, get it?”

“What about THEE- Treat House Elves Equally?” suggested Harry.

“What about HURL- House Elves Unappreciated in Real Life?” suggested Ron.

“I’m partial to The House Elf Action Committee Organization- THACO,” said Susan.

“I’m serious you guys! We need to do something about this gross miscarriage of justice perpetrated against House Elves.”

Oh dear, do I even tell her? She worked really hard on these badges though...

“Hermione, can I offer you a piece of advice?” asked Susan.

“Maybe.”

“Look, the thing is...” Susan sighed. “It’s something I learned early in life with access to a *Detect Lies* spell. First, never keep a *Detect Lies* spell going when you really don’t want to know the truth. But more importantly than that I learned you have to pick your battles. For example: Your mom wants you to clean your room. You ask why it’s important to clean your room when her room is so messy. She gives you a stupid answer about responsibility or whatever that registers as a lie. This leads you to an uncomfortable truth- she wants you to keep your room clean because parents tell kids what to do and then kids obey. It’s the natural order of things. So you think to yourself, ‘is that battle worth fighting?’ and in this case, no, it isn’t. So you clean your room. Then, you want a kitten. Your mother doesn’t want you to have a kitten. She lists all the reasons for not getting a kitten. But you ask yourself the same question- “is this battle worth fighting?” To you, yes, getting a kitten is very important. Then you think back to her excuse about the clean room, and responsibility. You say to her, if cleaning my room teaches responsibility, won’t caring for a kitten teach the lesson much better?”

“Because you didn’t fight the battle of the dirty room, she now looks more favorably on getting the kitten because you showed responsibility, and used her own argument against her. She doesn’t have the excuse of “not keeping your room clean” as ammunition against the kitten. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“I guess. You want me to make sure the House Elf battle is worth fighting?”

“Exactly. What are the aims of your ‘organization’ exactly?”

“Well, I guess to make sure House Elves get fair wages and working conditions. Eventually changing the law about them owning wands and getting them a place at the Ministry.”

“Trust me, their magic is good enough without wands. At least, so I’ve heard, but that’s not the point. The point is you have two battles in front of you. Which are you going to invest your energy into? House Elf rights specifically, or against the ministry that does not pass laws prohibiting the mistreatment of all magical creatures? You weren’t there at the so called Buckbeak ‘trial’ but let me tell you, for the judge it was an open and shut case. It’s not just House Elves that are repressed, it’s all manner of magical creatures. They just happen to be sentient.”

“But if I can change laws regarding House Elves, wouldn’t changing laws about other creatures than become easier because there’s a precedent?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this, but I’m not sure the laws can be changed where they’re involved.”

“What do you mean?”

“How to explain...” Susan paused, thinking about how to tell Hermione what she learned without making her even more determined. “Wait a second, there’s a spell!”

“There’s always a spell,” said Ron, rolling his eyes.

“No, seriously. Look-” She got out her book of magic and paged over to the “C” s. “Here, read this over, the *Contract* spell.”

They did.

“Okay, what does a spell that creates an unbreakable contract have to do with House Elves?” asked Harry.

“Wait, so if you and I contracted that you had to punch Draco in the face once a week, you couldn’t not punch him in the face? The magic would just reach out, control you both, and he would get punched?” asked Ron.

“Basically.”

“Wicked!”

“Anyway, to answer the question, I asked Headmaster Dumbledore about how the House Elf race came to be the way it is.”

“I didn’t even think of that!”

“You wouldn’t have found anything, he said most books with the real story got destroyed. But the gist of it was, a *Contract* like spell was cast over them a long time ago, forcing them into the roles they now play.”

“That’s barbaric!”

“I agree. But it was done, and the Headmaster says it’s only now starting to fall apart. Dobby proves that, because of what he was able to do, namely, try and warn Harry.”

“So all my work was for nothing.” Hermione shoved the badges away from herself.

“I wouldn’t say that. They are treated poorly, but they don’t have to be. I would think a law could be put in place making it illegal to use force as a punishment against them. Not that Dobby didn’t try to use force to punish himself, but that’s a different matter. At least if it was found out an Elf was being mistreated, they could be taken away and assigned to another family. I don’t know. Without knowing exactly how the magic was performed, it’s hard to say.”

“I guess I have some thinking to do about this,” she said, gathering the badges up.

Susan reached over and put her hand over top of Hermione’s. “I think it’s great you’re passionate about this, I just want you to be informed of what you’re up against. Pick your battle carefully, and make sure you really can make a difference if you choose to fight. Kids around here aren’t the ones you’re going to need to convince. It’s lawmakers in the Ministry, and as Lucius will tell you, that takes gold.”

“I did sort of go off half cocked, didn’t I?”

“Maybe a little,” said Susan with a grin.

“Okay, you haven’t heard the last from HELP, that’s for sure.”

“And next time, tell us what you’re up to,” said Harry. “We are your friends, remember? You don’t have to do all this work alone. Unless you don’t trust our spell-casting ability?”

“No!” said Hermione a little too quickly. “It wasn’t that at all. I’m going to bed, see you tomorrow!” She ran off.

“I think I’ve been underestimated,” said Harry, a little hurt.

“I’ve been judged properly,” said Ron, gloomy.

Ending Deceit

Time: The next day

Place: Defense class

“Did you really cure Neville’s parents?” an older boy asked Susan. She had been telling the story, basically without changes, for the last twenty four hours.

“Yes, I did. And your next question is ‘How did you do it?’”

“How did- oh, I guess you’ve been asked before, huh?”

“A few (*billion*) times. I used magic. Which is weird, because I know all this magic, right?”

“One of those lost spells, right?”

“Exactly.”

“And did you really beat up a bunch of sixth years and break their wands?”

“Where did you hear that? It’s true I did it, but I haven’t been asked that one before.”

“I got woken up one night when they came back to the dorm, wandless.”

“Ah. Yes, that was me.”

“And you’re, like, always hanging around with Myrtle the ghost.”

“That’s me.”

“Cool.”

It seemed that Neville’s revealing of how his parents were killed rekindled interest in Susan, as many more people had talked with her in the last day than ever had before. Unfortunately it also reminded people of her battle with Quirrell, and they got quiet when she passed by. However, many people came to her for advice or to have tricky magic cast for them, which she was sometimes happy to do if it wasn’t too complex, illegal, or impossible.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think there are any spells to speak to the dead.”

“My magic cannot make gold. Do I look like I have stacks of gold just sitting around? Go take up Alchemy if you want to learn to do that.”

“You were doing *what* when you got this burn?”

Susan wasn’t sure what to make of her newfound celebrity status, which was of course part of the reason she hadn’t wanted it to get out in the first place. But she took it in stride, and was now sitting in Defense class again.

“Someone’s popularity has shot up,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, Neville keeps having to tell the story about his parents and how they heroically withstood the Cruciatus curse to frustrate Voldi.”

“I mean you.”

“Oh, right. I guess,” she said glumly.

“What? You aren’t happy about it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t mind helping people out with my magic, but it’s annoying to tell the same stories over and over. And if they found out about some of the other stuff I’ve done, like the Dementor thing, they’ll really go berserk.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Harry. “Soon the other Triwizard contestants will arrive and everyone will be talking about them.”

“That’s true. The way some people look at me though, like I’m some kind of monster. Someone put two and two together and figured out I made that dragon for Professor Hagrid. They saw me fighting the giant in the village, using a similar beast. Now I’ve had a bunch of requests for them. But I’m not sure if I want dozens of the things running around. I’m not sure the Headmaster wants dozens of them running around! The problem is people know I have it, so they’re afraid it’s going to come out of me or something if I get angry.”

“It can’t though, right?” asked Ron.

“I have to cast the spell or activate the *Spell Symbol*, I’m not the Hulk.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. The point is those people are extra nice to me and scurry away like I’m some kind of time bomb. It’s annoying.”

“People are always afraid of what they don’t understand. Your magic obviously works differently than ours, so naturally there’s some confusion about it,” said Hermione.

“Good. I don’t want people knowing how my magic works. Bad enough Voldi probably knows at this point, let’s hope no one else figures it out.”

“Quiet down!” said Alastor, thumping into the room. The room quieted. “Oh, you are quiet already. Good. We’ll be practicing methods of throwing off the Imperius curse today, so I hope you’re prepared.”

“But sir,” said Hermione, raising a hand. “Isn’t casting it on a person illegal?”

“Out there, sure.” He pointed out the window. “Controlling someone’s mind is a heinous act. But this is a classroom, and there’s only one way to teach you resist this curse. Nothing else but the actual article will do. Don’t worry, I’m not going to make anybody do anything they’ll be embarrassed about. Well, mostly. Who’s first?”

And so, one by one, each person in the class was put under the curse, and was unable to fight it off.

Alastor shook his head. “Not a single person, eh? I expected at least a few of you, honestly. Well, who’s left? Ah, our two stars, Susan and Harry. Susan, you’re up next, and I hope we’ve saved the best for last.”

Susan got up and stood before him.

He cast the spell, and she made a RESolve check against it. She didn’t put energy in, preferring to just see where the fates took her. Somehow she felt she nearly failed, even with her 25 result. Alastor was *good*.

She stood there with her arms crossed while Alastor looked at her. He looked down at his wand. “You don’t have that magical immunity of yours I’ve heard about going, do you?”

Susan shook her head. “Straight up RESolve check, Professor. I wouldn’t mind trying it again.”

“Very well.”

She got it cast on her again, this time failing to resist with a 17. She realized unless he did something to put her life in direct danger, she wouldn’t be able to make a new RESolve check to break free again. Thus she flapped her arms and did other silly things under Alastor’s direction.

“Looks like it worked that time,” he remarked, dropping the spell.

“Nobody’s perfect, even with a 10 stat,” she said, shrugging.

Harry, of course, got put under the spell but then managed to fight it off before jumping onto the desk as instructed.

“So how come you managed to stand there, cool as you please the first time, but get caught the second time? Harry here fought it off, why couldn’t you? You proved you could do it.”

“It has to do with my... physiology. I’d be happy to tell you after class.”

“Very well.”

He put Susan under it twice more, and she failed once and succeeded once. Harry finally managed to shrug it off after four attempts. Everyone gave them a round of applause.

“So,” said Alastor, dropping heavily into a chair and propping his leg up, “What’s so special about your physiology that makes you fight of spells differently than we do?”

“That’s just the thing, I can tell you how I do it, but I have no clue how you guys do it. Here, take a look.” She got out her character sheet and showed him.

“This tells everything about you!” Alastor exclaimed. “If an enemy got hold of this...”

“Can’t happen,” said Susan. “Watch.” She handed it to him, and when she took her hand off it, the sheet vanished. “It can’t exist apart from me.”

“That’s something, at least, but there was something else you wanted to show me?”

“Yes.” She took the sheet out again. “See, when I resisted that spell, I resisted it as though it was the *Dominate* spell, as that’s the closest spell to your Imperius Curse. So I’m allowed a RESolve check, which you see here is a ten, to break free. In essence I take a random number between two and twenty, then add ten to it and that’s how strongly I resist your attempt to control me. If you tried to make me jump off a bridge or something I would put energy, which you see here is 80, into the check. Say I spent five energy, out of my maximum of 10 for that attempt. My minimum result would then be a thirteen, and my maximum a forty. It seems complicated, but it seems perfectly natural for me.”

“I guess it must be,” he said, looking her sheet over. “Who did you lose?” He pointed to the “BG Card” field.

“My father. I’m not sure I really ‘lost’ him because I never really knew him, but we take things as they come.”

“I can sympathize. All right, now let’s talk about your magic.”

“The headmaster must have filled you in on it.”

“He’s told me some crazy stories, if that’s what you mean.”

“Believe me, they’re all true.”

“So if I went down into the woman’s bathroom and opened the chamber I would see the rotting corpse of a huge serpent down there?”

“Ugh, I hope not. I seriously hope someone went down and cleaned that mess up since first year. The smell would be horrific.”

“And I hear you’ve been making some miraculous devices for Albus instead of going to potions class?”

“I’m making them for the school, not him specifically. But yes, the way I put magic into objects is different, so potions class won’t do me any good. It takes me longer, for one, but it’s more convenient because I can put just about any spell into just about any object. I don’t need to learn, for example, a spell to warm me up, and then a separate potion to warm me up. I just put the warm up spell into the object, which could be a glass of water.”

“I see. He said he used your *Repair* object to mend a wand that had been broken accidentally. I didn’t even think that was possible.”

“To my magic, a wand is just a stick. So it just sticks the stick back together, if you’ll forgive the pun. There’s nothing inherently magic about a wand, it’s just a focus you need to control your magic. It’s not like breaking it makes the magic leak out or anything.”

“Don’t let a wand maker hear you say that. So then how come when people break their wands they can’t just file them down to be shorter and keep using them?”

“Maybe it’s psychological? I have no idea, I’ve never studied the phenomenon.”

“Fair enough. You say you get all this magic out of a book?”

“The book my father left for me, yes.”

“I don’t suppose I could borrow it, could I? Have a look through it myself?”

“I’m sorry, professor, but that book stays with me. I’m sure you could look after it safely, but if it ever got lost, that would be it for my magic. Trying to research new spells on my own would be time consuming, risky, and a total pain. It comes out of my *Pocket Dimension* to look something up, then it goes back into my *Pocket Dimension*. If Voldi got hold of it he could prepare for any spell I could cast on him, because it lists every spell I can learn. He knows enough about my magic through Peter, I don’t want to give him any other chances to learn more.”

“Smart attitude. Good. Well, I guess that about covers it then.” He went to rise.

“Would you like your leg back?”

“Excuse me, what?”

“It would mean giving up your magical eye, of course, but I could get *Regeneration* going on you if you wanted. Less than a minute and you would be a whole person again.”

“That’s a kind offer, but I’ll take the trade of the eye for the leg, if you don’t mind.”

“Your choice. But the offer’s always open.”

“Thanks.”

In the week preceding the candidates from the other two schools Susan had to fend off what seemed like half the school trying to talk her into getting a special dispensation for the tournament’s age requirement. She explained again and again her reasoning, but it seemed the more she protested, the wilder reasons she should be involved she heard.

“I’m not comfortable with the questions that would no doubt be asked of me if outsiders saw my magic. It’s well enough for you guys, you know all about it. I don’t want it in the papers or whatever.”

“No, I’m quite well off on my own, I don’t need the 1,000 Galleon prize, thank you.”

“I don’t mind taking exams, it’s just another skill check for me. What’s a skill check? Never you mind.”

“Yes, I do like showing off, but not to people I don’t know.”

And so on.

Finally the day arrived. The castle was sparkling clean, and everyone was told to be on their best behavior. Fred and George took this as a personal affront, but were checked quite thoroughly when entering the great hall that evening. The amount of fireworks, trick products

and mayhem causing gadgets the two had confiscated from their persons impressed even professor McGonagall. Two new tables had been set up in the middle of the great hall for the new students that would be joining them, and a special feast was planned. Everyone was herded into the hall before they were scheduled to arrive, and everyone was excitedly waiting that arrival.

“So one school is all male and the other is all female, is that it?” asked Ginny.

“Apparently so,” said Hermione. “It might be a sort of meta-contest, to see which educational method produces the most outstanding magic user. Does separating the sexes make them more or less likely to succeed? Are boys better at certain types of spells than girls? Can love and tolerance overcome the testosterone fueled posturing done by guys? I’ll be interested to see if any data can be gathered from the behavior of the ones not chosen.”

“Personally, I’m glad boys are around,” Ginny said, looking over at Harry.

“I guess, if you’re into that sort of thing,” said Susan.

“I’m pretty sure most are,” said Hermione, trying not to look at... any boy in particular.

“I’m rooting for love and tolerance, myself. Brohoof?”

“Brohoof.” Susan and Hermione fist bumped.

“Sometimes you seem to speak a third language, you know that?” asked Ginny, watching them.

“Third language? I didn’t know I knew a second.”

“Sure: English, Susan Speak, and Gibberish.”

“You’re missing out, Ginny, you really are.”

“Everyone, please give a round of applause for the students from Durmstrang!” shouted Albus, and the doors to the hall flew open. In marched a dozen or so brown clothed young men, tapping walking sticks in rhythm and sending up magical sparks at the base. They spun them and did a sort of manly strut through the center of the hall, where they stood at attention in front of the professor’s table.

“Oh, very nice,” squealed Ginny.

“I simply find myself wondering what brown can do for me,” mused Susan, thinking of a certain corporate slogan.

“I don’t think it would be very flattering,” said Hermione looking her over critically.

“Eh, you’re probably right.”

The headmaster of the school was warmly received by Albus, and they were introduced to the Hogwarts students. Now that their entrance routine was done they seemed a bit out of place, glancing around nervously. As they were led to the table it seemed someone hadn’t thought very far ahead, as they didn’t know what to do with their staffs. Several clattered to the floor as the Durmstrang students tried to prop them up beside themselves at the table. Karkaroff rolled his eyes and gathered them all up.

“Wait a second, that’s Viktor Krum,” said Ron. “He’s still at school? I didn’t know that.”

“Who?” asked Susan.

“You know- oh right, you don’t follow Quidditch. The seeker from the Cup? Got the Snitch, lost his team the match? Ringing any bells?”

“Oh him. I’m surprised they allow a student to play professionally like that. But I suppose if he had *Prodigy* like I did...”

“They would be fools not to, he’s a great Seeker!”

“Okay, so he has a good *Perception* roll, big deal. Once he spots the Snitch it’s all up to the broom he’s riding anyway, right?”

“No, there’s- um, you know! And that- other thing- that’s really important?”

“When you put it that way, I see I was a fool to even question the game. You’ve converted me Ron, well done.”

“Humph.”

“And now that same welcome for the students from Beauxbatons!” Albus yelled, and again, a dozen new students all dressed in a light blue seemed to float into the hall. They too did a sort of march, but with greater leanings towards fluid movements like a ballet than marching into battle. Susan watched them appreciably as their knee length skirts swirled and twirled with their movements.

“Now we’re talking,” she remarked.

“You got that right,” said Ron, eyes fixed on one girl in particular.

Following them was a woman at least a +1 size modifier bigger, and she was introduced as Madam Maxime.

“Hey, Professor Hagrid finally can look someone in the eye without stooping over,” said Ginny.

She too was welcomed to sit, and the Beauxbaton students sat at their table.

“Welcome to all of you,” said Albus. “I hope you find our little castle comfortable during your stay. We’re extremely pleased to have you here, and I’m sure everyone will be welcoming. Please don’t hesitate to ask anyone if you get lost or need assistance, cooperation between nations is what the tournament is all about.”

“No, it’s about beating the pants, or skirts, as it were, off the other teams,” said Ron.

“That would add a nice twist,” said Susan. “The person that gets the least points in an event has to do the next one naked.”

“After the feast I will be announcing the rules and regulations regarding the tournament itself, but for now, let us eat!”

As usual, the tables filled with food, and everyone started taking what they wanted from what was near them.

About twenty minutes later, Professor Hagrid came in, his hands bandaged. He looked around and made straight for Susan.

“Sorry to ask this during the feast and all,” he said to her, crouching down, “But if you could just have a look at my hand? Poor creatures don’t know their own strength yet, and a couple of them got me pretty good.”

“The Skrewts did this?” Susan said, appalled, as she unwound the makeshift bandage. His hand was pretty torn up, and one jagged scratch started to bleed again. It looked like a large burn across some of his fingers too.

And he should be taking half damage because of his size, or doesn’t it work like that here?

“*Healing*,” she cast, and the wounds closed up. He wiped the blood off with the rag.

“Ah, that’s much better. Thanks, Susan.”

“Any time. You want to look your best, after all.” She pointed over to where Madam Maxime was sitting, who had taken an interest in Rubeus as he had come in.

“Oh my!” he said, looking over at her.

It seemed the others at the table had also taken an interest, and one of the more beautiful girls at the Beauxbaton table grabbed her upper arm and winced a little. She leaned over to Madam Maxime and they had a quiet conversation, and Maxime waved her off. She rose and headed for Susan as Rubeus joined the head table.

“Excuse me, I wonder if I might speak to you a moment,” said the girl to Susan. She had an outrageous French accent, which will not be attempted in text because that’s really hard to read, honestly. Ron was staring at her, and Susan was glad she didn’t have any sort of weakness like *Lecherous* or things might have gone badly for her.

“Of course!” said Susan. “I’m Susan, it’s nice to meet you.”

“I am Fleur, and it is nice to meet you as well. I saw you make the healing magic just now, is that a specialty of yours?”

“You could say that. Do you need healing?”

“Yes, but not here, it is a little embarrassing. If I could meet you somewhere later and show you?”

“Of course! After dinner we can go up to my dorm room. Come meet me and I’ll take you up there.”

“Thank you very much, I will.” She went back to her table.

“You shouldn’t help them,” said Hermione. “Let them get healed by their own healers.”

“Hermione, I’m shocked at you. If there’s someone that needs healing, I’m gonna do it.”

“You just want to be alone with her.”

“I don’t deny that, but Myrtle might take offense to it. My aims are purely medical.”

“Where is Myrtle anyway?”

“She’s shy around new people, she decided to stay in her bathroom for the night.”

“I think she’s a Veela!” said Ron, finally tearing his eyes away from her.

“She can’t be,” said Hermione.

“Are you sure about that?”

As Fleur made her back to her table many heads turned to watch her go.

“She’s just someone they haven’t seen before.”

“If you say so, Hermione.”

While that had gone on, two more people came into the room and sat down by Albus at the head table, Ludo and Mr. Crouch. Ludo looked a bit haggard, almost like Professor Lupin the year before, though not as thin, and Mr. Crouch sat ramrod straight as usual. They seemed to speak cordially with Albus, and soon the moment had arrived.

“The moment has arrived,” he said, standing and walking towards the large covered object that seemed to be wheeling itself into the room. It stopped in front of the head table.

Albus then introduced Ludo and Bartemius and explained their role in setting the tournament up and approving the challenges for the contestants. He then tapped the box with his wand, and it seemed to melt away, revealing an ancient looking, jewel encrusted, golden chalice full of flames.

“To submit oneself, simply write your name upon a slip of parchment, and drop it into the flames. Twenty four hours from now the three students judged by the magic to be best suited for the tasks will be returned.

“Now, I know that some of you under the age of 17 may wish to put forth your names but I caution you against doing so. I myself will be placing an *Age Line* around the cup which will

deny access to anyone not of age. I fully expect some of you to try, however, and wish you luck in your endeavor. Let me know how it turns out for you.

“Finally, even those over 17 must give tremendous thought to entering. Should your name fly from the cup next evening, you will be required to see the tournament through to the end. Make sure that you are ready to play, and ready to... experience a great deal of pain should your skills not prove to be sufficient to the tasks. I believe that is all. A good night to you, and good luck.”

Albus began drawing a line in the air with his wand, which he walked around the cup, creating a circle. It hung in space, shimmering white and daring anyone under 17 to cross.

“So, can your magic get us across that line?” asked Fred, and he and George walked over to Susan. The majority of people made the motions to leave, but in reality were stalling to see if anyone was going to immediately put their name in. Everyone that was meanwhile was waiting for someone else to make the first move.

“Yeah, a quick *Teleportal* over the cup, and we can just drop our names in without crossing the line,” said George.

“Boys, I am impressed that for once, you have finally decided to think with magic first. But in this case, I really see no need for magic at all. And I am certainly not going to help you do what you have been expressly forbidden to do, because then either I would have to help everyone underage, not just you, or get in major trouble. Earn your money the old fashioned way- give the people what they want, at a price they are willing to pay.”

“How could we get by it without magic?” asked Fred.

“If you don’t see it, I’m certainly not going to tell you. I’ll give you a hint though, if you’re dead set on doing this.”

“Go on,” said George.

“You play Quidditch.”

“That’s our hint?” asked Fred.

“That’s your hint. Take it or leave it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, some of us have already made friends with the visiting students.”

Moments later, Fleur came over to her, looking shy.

“Come on, it’s this way,” said Susan, smiling at her. They went up to the dorms, basically alone because of everyone hanging around the cup. Working out the riddle to enter the common room, Susan led Fleur inside.

“This is, um, very nice,” she said, looking around. Puzzles of every kind from Rubik’s Cubes to magical, twisted shapes sat on shelves all around the room. Books also featured prominently, with many shelves groaning under the weight.

“Who is this?” asked Myrtle as she floated towards Susan from the fire.

“This is Fleur, one of the exchange students that’s going to enter the contest. She saw me healing Professor Hagrid and wanted me to heal her. And I just thought of another way to enter the tournament I bet the Headmaster didn’t think of. Fleur, this is Myrtle, a very good friend of mine who happens to be a ghost.”

“You have befriended a ghost? Customs are quite different here, aren’t they?”

“Not really. I’m probably the only human that hangs out with a ghost on a regular basis. It’s too bad, too, Myrtle is good company.”

“Really? I would never have guessed. Now what’s this about tricking the cup?” asked Fleur.

“It’s that age line,” explained Susan. “It assumes you’re going to be right next to the cup when you drop your name in. But write your name on a piece of parchment and then crumple it up into a ball, and I bet you could toss it into the cup from outside the line.”

“It must be spelled against such trickery!”

“I have no idea. But even if that didn’t work, you could have a ghost levitate the parchment for you. They could cross the age line, as some ghosts are hundreds of years old.”

“But a ghost cannot exert such control over the physical world, could they?”

“Myrtle?”

She looked around the room, selecting a small metal puzzle that had been undone. She concentrated and held out a hand towards it. Relaxing, the room got a little colder and one half the puzzle started to float into the air. She held it, straining.

“But this is amazing,” said Fleur. “I never thought a ghost could do more than a single burst of such energies!”

“She’s been practicing. I’ve been giving her some tips as well, so she’s really started to get good at it. She started with a feather, you know.”

It dropped to the ground.

“That was the heaviest thing I’ve ever lifted, you know?”

“You must have worked hard, to come that far.”

“I did. Thank you for noticing.”

“I will have to meet some of the ghosts in my school, to see if any are as remarkable is... what did you say your name was?”

“Myrtle.”

“Myrtle then. It was nice to meet you.”

“So, can you tell me what you need healed?”

“Not here, someone could come in.”

“All right, come up to my dorm room.”

Susan, Fleur and Myrtle went up the stairs, and Susan opened the door to the right chamber. Sparkle looked over at her from her place on the bed, then put her head down again.

“Why all the secrecy?” asked Susan.

“As I said, it is rather embarrassing. Please, I will have to show you.”

“All right,” Susan said, wondering what exactly she was going to be shown. Fleur looked around, then started to undress.

“You’re staring,” whispered Myrtle.

“So are you,” Susan whispered back.

“It is all right,” said Fleur, undoing her blouse. “I am being stared at all the time, so I am used to it.”

“I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t, but- what in the world?”

As Fleur took off her top she turned around, and three long, diagonal slashes were running across her back. “This is not all,” she said sadly. She sat down and pulled off her leggings, showing another set of scratches on her lower leg. She turned her arm, and there was another deep scratch there. She could see with her 13 on *First Aid* they were obviously infected. She gingerly touched the one on Fleur’s leg, and she winced.

“What did you do to get these?”

“I love to swimming,” she said, looking away from Susan. “Where our school is there is very beautiful lake. Much like the lake outside your school. But I would not want to swim there, it looks quite uninviting.”

“Go on.” Susan looked at the one on her arm.

“I snuck out one night a few days ago and went swimming. This is of course, how you say, prohibited? Yes? But the moonlight called to me and I could not resist. But I was attacked by something in the water, I know not what. I got away, as you can see, but I have paid the price for my disobeying the rules.”

“Why didn’t you just ask for healing- Oh, because you knew you were a candidate for the Tournament by that time, right?”

She sadly nodded.

“And if anyone learned that you broke the rules, you would have been passed over for someone else. I understand.”

“I stopped the bleeding as best I could, but working magic on yourself, it is not working too well.”

“Yes, a rather curious weakness in your magic.”

“My magic?” She seemed confused. “Don’t we have the same- it does not matter. I’m afraid to put my name in because I know I will not do by best with these wounds. But if I do not I will be called a coward and told someone could have come in my place who would have put their name in. Please, I know you have no reason to, and I may compete against your champion, but can you heal me?”

The Healing spell heals damage, all right. The problem is she’s more than just damaged. In fact, healing her with that magic would be worse because I would heal this infection up under her skin even more. Susan put her hand on Fleur’s forehead. Feels warm, she might be running a fever because of it. I could use Alleviation but I wonder if she’ll appreciate being stabbed with a dagger? Eh, it’s night time, and I still have the majority of my energy. I’ll just do it that way.

“Can you keep a secret- wait, stupid question. You did keep one. Sparkle, I don’t want to take the ten minutes.”

Sparkle got up and stretched, yawning. “*Energetic Accumulation?*” she asked.

Susan was looking at Fleur out of the corner of her eyes. She was rewarded by her looking around to see who spoke.

“Fleur, this is Sparkle, a very old friend of mine. Sparkle, Fleur, perhaps a new friend of mine.”

“Your cat? You are introducing me to your cat?”

“Oh, not just a cat,” said Sparkle. “I’m a wizard myself, thank you very much.”

“How can a cat be a wizard? I have not known you five minutes and already you have showed me two impossible things.”

“Strap in, Fleur, it’s going to be a heck of a ride from here on out.”

“She’s not joining Team Susan, is she?” Myrtle asked, pouting.

“Well, she already proved she can break the rules when she needs to. And she got away from whatever did this,” she touched the scratches on her back again. “She’s considered for the tournament, so she must be a pretty good spell-caster. Unless you can think of a good reason she shouldn’t, I would say it was up to her.”

“Fine. If you like her so much why don’t you marry her?” Myrtle said angrily, turning away and heading for the wall.

“*Phase,*” said Susan, touching her bracelet. She made an unarmed attack, with energy, against Myrtle and got a 15 (out of 28) grabbing Myrtle’s hand.

“Let go!” said Myrtle, struggling.

Fleur gasped.

“Never,” said Susan, spinning her around and gripping her shoulders. “Myrtle, I will never let go of you. Put the past in the past, remember? I’m here, and nothing will change that. No matter how many people are in Team Susan, no matter how beautiful they might be, they will never make me leave you. Okay?”

“You mean it?”

Susan nodded.

Myrtle seemed to take a deep breath. “I’m very jealous of you, just so you know,” she said to Fleur.

“There is no need, really. I will not try to,” she grinned, “steal Susan away from you.”

“Well, as long as you understand. I guess she could join, if she wanted.” She pulled her hand away and the magic, requested until she wasn’t touching Myrtle anymore, receded leaving her unghostlike again.

“Thank you.”

“How are you touching a ghost?”

“What, three impossible things is just too much for one night?” Susan asked with a grin. “Anyway, let’s get on with the healing before someone comes.”

“Yes, and before I see a forth impossible thing.”

Sparkle shook her head. “She really has no idea, does she?”

“I envy her innocence,” said Susan.

With a healthy dose of *Energetic Accumulation* by Sparkle, Susan cut the time down on *Alleviation* down to a minute, touched Fleur, and could not possibly fail to heal her.

Fleur relaxed as the wounds on her body disappeared, and her fever dropped.

“I feel so much better now!” she said, looking herself over in the mirror on the wall. “The wounds, they are completely gone. I don’t even see a scar! Thank you very much!” She ran over and kissed Susan on both cheeks.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, swooning a little. Fleur hastily got dressed again. “Can you lead me back to the main gate? We are staying in our carriage, it is enchanted to be rooms on the inside.”

“What do you think? We’ve blown her mind, shall we finish the job?” Susan asked Sparkle.

“Eh, she’ll see it sooner or later.”

“Prepare yourself. *Teleportal*,” Susan cast, putting the hole in the air behind her and opening it to the castle grounds just outside the main gate. Fleur tentatively stepped through.

“I am outside with a single step!” she exclaimed. “Your magic- have I not been studying hard enough or is Hogwarts magic just that much more powerful?”

“This is Susan magic. Maybe someday I’ll explain it to you.”

She shook her head. “I hope you can. Thank you again. And whatever Team Susan is, sign me up, okay?” She turned and ran towards the carriage, and Susan dropped the spell.

When you meet a brand new friend, it opens up a world. A world whose brightness never ends, it opens up a world. Susan got that song stuck in her head the rest of the night until she fell asleep.

You knew it was coming

Time: The next day

Place: Great Hall

The next day Susan introduced her new friend Fleur to the rest of the group.

“Everyone, this is Fleur, a potential candidate for Team Susan, Fleur, these are my friends. Harry Potter, yes that Harry Potter, who has lived next to me all my life.”

“Nice to meet you. And it’s Harry’s Heroes, don’t let you fool you.”

“This is Ron, part of clan Weasley.”

“Hi,” said Ron, a dreamy expression on his face.

“He’s usually a bit more talkative. Weird. This is Hermione, who I consider my intellectual equal.”

“Can I get your feeling on Elf rights?”

“Not now Hermione. And this is Ginny, another of clan Weasley and the youngest member of the group.”

“Nice to metcha! And we’re the Chaos Legion, don’t let her fool you.”

Susan bent down to whisper in Ginny’s ear.

“That’s been taken? Less Wrong? What are you talking about?”

More whispering.

“Fine, we’re Discord’s Lieutenants then?” She looked questioningly at Susan.

“Exactly, but I do have to wonder if that isn’t taking the joke too far...”

“That brohoof thing wasn’t?”

“Anyway, that’s the team. We fight crime and then fade into the night.”

“Isn’t that batman?” asked Susan.

“I thought that was the Ninja Turtles,” said Hermione. “Or maybe Darkwing Duck.”

“You are all crazy,” said Fleur.

“Hi,” said Ron.

“Snap out of it Ron,” said Hermione.

“Hi- wait a minute, I want to see her credentials!” said Ron. “She can’t just walk into Ron’s Able League of Fighters (or RALF) just like that,” he snapped his fingers. “For all we know she’s an enemy agent!”

“An enemy agent?” said Ginny. “Don’t be absurd big brother.”

But Susan’s words echoed in her mind. *“How hard would it be for a dark wizard to take the place of one of these students and sabotage the whole thing? Polyjuice potion exists, after all. The only way to really tell that someone has been replaced is by catching them at some behavior they wouldn’t normally display.” She came right over to me, but those wounds were real, right? Would a dark wizard really have the foresight to take someone’s place, get wounded, and then come here knowing I would probably consent to heal them?*

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” said Hermione.

“What, some kind of hazing ritual?” said Ginny, eyes shining with excitement.

“No, just make sure she doesn’t drink anything for the next hour and a half. Polyjuice would wear off after that time.”

“Good thinking,” said Susan. “And anyway, we’re not entering, remember? So why would an enemy agent infiltrate our group?”

“Get you alone some time and then *blam* it’s the end of RALF,” said Ron.

“Then she missed her opportunity,” said Susan, “As we were alone, in a manner of speaking, last night. Myrtle was with us, I don’t know if she counts. I think you’re taking Professor Moody’s lessons a bit too seriously, Ron.”

“She’s still from a different school, and we Hogwartsers have to stick together.”

“Hogwartsers?” said Ginny.

“It’s a thing.”

“Ron, unless, and until her name comes out of that cup, she’s just a visiting student from another school. And she should be shown every courtesy, as I’m sure she would have done if the situation were reversed.”

“And if her name does come out of the cup?” asked Harry.

“Then I will cheer her on as I would any of my friends, because friends are more important than some silly contest.”

“You have a very odd way of looking at things,” remarked Fleur.

“You know, you are not the first person to tell me that.”

“And she won’t be the last,” said Ron.

Suddenly, in burst Fred and George, looking excited.

“Here we go!” said Fred, brandishing a slip of parchment.

“Into the fire go our hopes and dreams!” said George.

“You guys figured out my clue?” asked Susan.

“Nope, we did the sensible thing and made up some aging potion. We only needed a drop, we’re almost 17 as it is.”

Great, I’ve finally got people thinking with magic first, and they apply my teachings to a situation that would benefit from less magic, not more.

“That’ll never work,” said Hermione. “You think a spell cast by the Headmaster himself is going to be fooled by a couple of fifth year students?”

“I guess we’ll find out!” said Fred.

Naturally enough it didn’t work, and Susan shook her head as they were led off, beards proudly leading the way, to the hospital wing.

“How would you have done it?” asked Ginny to Susan.

“I’ll tell you later, I don’t want to give anyone any ideas.”

A moment after that the rest of the Beauxbaton students came in and entered their names, and Fleur shyly joined them. She got some weird looks, having been in the hall already with the Hogwarts students. She got some dark looks as they all trooped out again as Fleur hung back.

“Go on if you want, I hate to cause you strife with your classmates,” said Susan.

“No, we are supposed to make new friends here, not just go from our carriage and back.”

Good thing I’m not paranoid, or I might think that was kind of excuse to stay near us.

Still, why bother, right?

“So what’s the plan for today, anyway?” asked Ginny.

“As no one has tried to kill me yet today, my schedule seems a bit open,” replied Susan.

“Why not show Fleur around the castle, maybe visit Rubeus?”

“This someone trying to kill you? It happens often?” asked Fleur, shocked.

Susan slipped an arm through hers and led her off to the entrance. “Let me tell you about the time Team Susan faced down a dozen angry dwarves on Valentine’s day.”

“You were possessed by He Who Must Not Be Named?” Fleur had one shock after another as the tour continued (“And here’s where I was almost murdered coming into the castle the first time” “Here’s where we fought off that sissy troll”) and they were now near the hut. Ginny was telling Fleur about how she founded Discord’s Lieutenants.

“Oh, call him Voldi, at least, I do,” said Susan.

“Yup, Ron and the others stormed down to save me, and had this gigantic battle with a basilisk under the school.”

“You are all putting me on,” Fleur said hopefully.

They all smiled and shook their heads.

“Your next line is, what have I gotten myself into,” said Susan.

“What have I gotten myself into?” asked Fleur. “Wait a minute!”

Everyone laughed. “I said the same thing,” said Ginny. “You get used to it.”

“It’s a good thing you aren’t allowed to enter, no one would have any chance against you with the things you’ve done up to now.”

“Probably.” Susan shrugged. “But come on, you must have had some other adventures than just a late night swim escape. We’ve told you all about us, now it’s your turn.” *And as it was night time, what were you wearing during this swim?*

“Well, there was one time when…”

As they neared the hut they saw Rubeus out playing fetch with his dragon pet.

“Hello all! And I see you’ve made a new friend? That’s great ta see!” he called. “Just playing with Filbert here. Come on in, I’ll put the kettle on. Filbert, greet our guests.”

“You have a pet dragon?” said Fleur, hanging back a bit as the dragon lowered his head to be petted.

“Nah, I tried to raise one, but *someone*,” he glanced over at the others, “thought I might get in trouble for having it, them being illegal and all. So we sent him away. No, this one is just a magical construct. Susan made it for me. Strictly speaking I don’t need to play with him, but he just seems so real I can’t resist.”

“Yeah, you’re basically just playing with yourself,” said Susan.

Ron snorted.

“Grow up, Ron. Professor, this is Fleur. Fleur, this is professor Hagrid, Care of Magical Creatures.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Professor, you look different somehow,” said Ginny. “Are you wearing a suit?”

He was indeed wearing a hairy brown suit, with a very loud green and yellow tie.

“Thought I might smarten myself up a bit while the visitors are around,” he said, a bit guiltily.

“Perhaps one in particular has caught your eye?” Hermione said shrewdly.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said evasively.

The girls grinned at each other. The boys were, of course, clueless.

“You haven’t had any more accidents with the Skrewts, have you?” Susan asked as Rubeus busied himself with tea.

“They’re too interested in killing each other than sticking me,” he replied. “We’re down to only about twenty of the original hundred. I’ve got them separated now.”

“Are they still getting bigger?”

“Yeah, about three feet long now.”

“Three feet? How big are they going to get?”

“Won’t know until they stop growing, will we?”

Is he trying to paint with all the colors of the wind or something? I think we should just cut them down so we’ll never know.

Conversation turned to the tournament, and trying to get him to tell them what the tasks were.

“We could have a champion right here, you know. I can’t say anything in front of her!”

Finally it was time for the second feast in two days, and the unveiling of the names. On the way back, Susan started to get a very bad feeling about things. *I really hope someone didn’t sneak my name into that stupid cup. I wouldn’t put it past them though. All that protesting I did would have just egged them on to try it.*

They made their way back to the castle and sat down at their customary places, and Team Susan wished Fleur luck. Some more enthusiastically than others, of course, but they all did. She thanked them, especially for showing her around and treating her like everyone else, and joined her classmates at their table.

Wonder if she is left out of things because of how beautiful she is. Like people feel they can’t approach her? Or they just want to get into her pants? I guess beauty is as much of a curse as brains are to boys growing up.

“Attention, everyone,” said Albus when the food was cleared away. “I know you’ve all been looking forward to this moment, and we should have the results directly. Now, if your name is called please proceed to the next chamber where you will receive your first instructions. And with that...” He got out his wand and waved it about, dimming the lights in the room until the goblet was the brightest light in the place. Tension mounted as the seconds ticked by. Albus made a show of peering into the cup, giving little gasps as though it was doing something. All eyes in the room were rapt upon him. Susan giggled a bit, *He does know how to work a room, doesn’t he?*

Suddenly the flames from the cup turned red, and a charred piece of parchment was flung into the air. Albus snatched it out and studied it.

Catching something that tiny and fluttering about would be pretty hard. Has the headmaster raised his Catching skill for some reason?

He turned the name upside down, tilted his head side to side, and squinted at it. Susan was about to shout “Just read it already!” when he said “Fleur Delacour.”

Fleur’s eyes went wide, and she popped up out of her seat. She flashed a grin at Susan, who smiled back, and she lightly ran off into the side room to scattered applause.

Another piece of parchment was spewed out, and again, Albus caught it without apparent difficulty.

What’s the headmaster’s RESolve, I wonder. Is he just putting energy into COOrdination?

“Viktor Krum.” There was much more applause this time, and he took a great bow before stepping off into the other chamber.

Now for the moment of truth.

A third parchment was released like a duck in a 1984 video game where you shoot two ducks or a dog laughs at you. A third time Albus caught the paper.

He frowned.

He stared.

Oh, goddess above, please no.

He pondered.

He cogitated.

I swear, someone will die for this!

“Susan Felton.”

“NO!” shouted Susan, jumping up from her seat and making an X across her body. “No! No! A thousand times no!”

“Susan, you must-”

“No!” Susan angrily stood on her seat, glaring about the room. “Who did it? Who put my name in that *stupid* cup? I told you *time and time* again I wanted nothing to do with this tournament. I don’t know who you are, but I will find you, and I will make you *pay*. You will pay in *blood*. Fess up now and I might go easy on you. Who was it?!”

She tried to look around, but everyone seemed as confused as she was.

“I must protest as well,” said Igor (Karkaroff), standing up. “This girl is obviously too young.”

“I’m afraid the rules are clear,” said Albus, when another shock tore through the crowd. The cup spat out another name, and Albus reached out automatically to grab it.

“Harry Potter,” he said, as the cup finally went silent.

Now there was pandemonium. Igor and Madam Maxime were shouting at Albus. Severus, for a wonder, was quietly laughing, the first time Susan had ever seen him even remotely show anything but disdain for anything. Students were cheering Harry, and many were protesting their innocence to Susan before she started busting the place up.

“Silence, please!” cried Albus.

The din went on.

“Silence!” he roared, sending a gout of fire into the air with his wand. Silence descended.

“Susan and Harry, I must speak to you. Please come up here.”

Susan hopped down angrily and glared at everyone she passed as she made her way over to Albus. Harry just seemed shocked and looked like he might be sick.

“Come along, through here,” said Albus, leading the way into the next room. Both followed.

The other two champions stepped back, obviously they had come to the door to see what all the noise was about. Susan glared at Fleur.

Wait, she couldn’t have done it. I saw her pull out the parchment she used and write her name. But maybe she palmed another piece, and put two in together? But why? The anger seemed to drain out of her.

“Fleur, I’m sorry to have to ask you this, but did you, however well meaning, put my name into the cup?”

“No, how could you even ask me such a thing?”

“Because-” *Wait, she doesn’t know my last name. I never told her that, I’m sure of it.* “No, you’re right, there was no way you could have. I’m sorry to have suspected you. I was just angry, and I had no right to be angry at you. Can you forgive me?”

“It is all right, I can see how distraught you were. But what about him?”

“That is exactly what I would like to know,” said Albus, as Ludo and the other teachers from the head table came in. “I take it you have no explanation Susan?”

“I swear upon my magic, Headmaster, that I did not try the half dozen methods of defeating your age line I thought of in the first five minutes to place any name, especially mine, into the cup. Nor did I tell anyone those methods.” She considered a second. “Anyone underage, that is. I shared one method with Fleur here, but she got in anyway so-“

“What methods?” asked Ludo. “Are you saying the age line wasn’t enough?”

“It shouldn’t even have slowed anyone down. It was more psychological than anything else, in my estimation.”

“Please explain,” said Albus.

“Sure. Put the slip of paper on a long stick and shove it over the cup. Shake it off.

“Levitate the piece of paper over the cup.

“Crumple the paper into a ball and throw it into the cup from a distance.

“Have a ghost levitate the paper into the cup.

“Ride a broom through the room so as not to touch the age line, and put your name into the cup.

“Bribe an older student to pass the age line and put your name, rather than theirs, into the cup.

“Write your name on the back of a slip of parchment. Offer someone who is going to enter a quill loaded with disappearing ink and hope they don’t notice the name on the other side. They write their name down, and it disappears leaving the first name to come out of the cup.

“Put a student under the Imperius curse and have them-“

“Enough!” said Albus. “I think we get the point.”

“Are you sure? I hadn’t really put that much thought into it. I’m sure I could come up with some really convoluted plans if those simple ones didn’t pan out.”

“Yes, I’m sure you could.”

“The fact remains,” said Igor, “that Hogwarts now has two champions, not one, and both have somehow bypassed the age restriction. Both of them should be released and a new champion selected from your school.”

“You know as well as I do that’s impossible, Igor.”

“No,” said Susan. They turned to look at her. “Please tell me you weren’t-” *Stupid?* “foolish enough to use a magical object with a *Contract* spell put into it. Tell me it was just a figure of speech when you said all that stuff about us having to compete without fail if our name came out.”

“That is, if I take your meaning properly, exactly the case.”

“Seriously? What possible reason could you have for using such an object? Just tell people they can’t back out. Why mystically force them to continue if, for example, they get too hurt to do so?”

“I assure you there are reasons.”

Great, the standard 'because I said so' adult answer. Super. I had thought you were above such things, Headmaster. It seems I was wrong.

"So what do we do about it," asked Minerva. "Change the contest?"

"I say we let them compete," said Alastor. "Bait the trap nicely, if you kids forgive the analogy."

"What trap? What are you talking about?" asked Igor.

"Someone put their names into the cup. Don't ask me how Harry's came out, it should have ended with three names, and that was that. Susan I can understand because of her enormous magical capacity, she would have naturally been selected if her name went in. The question I ask myself when I'm faced with an odd situation is 'who stands to gain the most?' Who stands to gain from Harry and Susan being in this competition? Susan, I've heard, has been dodging assassination attempts since setting foot here, so that's the continuation of a mystery, not a new one. Harry, of course, is the enemy of every Death Eater on the planet, so I'm sure any one of them would be happy to see him perish in this thing."

"But how would they have gotten in?" asked Ludo.

"Ask Sirius how he got in," said Susan. "I'm sure there are many ways, both magical and not, that someone could get into this castle."

"All of this is irrelevant," said Igor. "The scales must be balanced. We shall simply resubmit every member of our school until each school has two champions."

"I agree," said Maxime.

"We do not have the space or resources to double the amount of participants. Even adding one more will be a strain," said Albus.

"The events are months apart, are you really saying you couldn't have three one day, and the next three the next?" asked Susan.

"But then we would need two cups, and 2000 Galleons in prize money."

"Not really. It's judged by points, I highly doubt two people will perform exactly the same in all three events, leading to a tie."

"The more practical problem is that the cup won't accept any more names. It's spelled only to activate at the beginning of a tournament."

"So just pick a student at random! Or better yet, redo the *Contract* we're now all under and release us from it. Then do things properly, and just draw names from a hat rather than relying on a rather dodgy ancient magical artifact."

"It's not that simple."

"It seems to be that Susan here is adamant about not participating, or at the very least making sure the contest is fair. I only hear her coming up with solutions, but I only hear you making excuses why they won't work. Why is that, Albus?" asked Igor. "I hesitate to suggest this is your doing, directly."

"Then don't."

"It does seem suspicious," said Maxime.

"He probably can't help it," said Susan. "He's probably being manipulated by this *Contract* magic the same as we are, as the host."

They looked doubtful.

"You're awfully quiet about the whole thing," Alastor said to Harry. "What's your take on the whole situation?"

Everyone looked over at him. "What can I say? It seems out of my hands. Susan's magic might be able to break this *Contract* I've apparently been put under, but I can't. Susan can power

her way through any challenge, I have no doubt. I can't. I came this year expecting to play Quidditch, and go to classes, and maybe have some adventures with Susan, like always. Now I'm in the middle of some big blow up between schools that are supposed to be *working together* in a *friendly* competition."

The other two headmasters looked away.

"If I'm stuck for it, fine, I'll do my best. But I want to know how both our names got in there, that's for sure."

"That's the spirit!" said Ludo. "As it seems Albus is just as determined for it to go on as Susan is for it to not, and Albus has the final say, it seems it goes on. Shall we get on with the instructions?"

"I suppose," said Barty, who had been silent all this time. (He was, after all, just an Auror)

"I can't tell you much about the first task because that's part of the first task. Testing your daring in the face of the unknown. I can tell you it will take place November 24th, and it will be done in front of an audience. You may not ask for help of any kind from anyone to complete the tasks. You will face the first challenge with only your wands--"

"Can we drink potions beforehand?" Susan asked.

"No, you cannot. Once the first task is complete, you will have the information you need to perform the second. Also, you are exempted from end of year tests. Any other questions?"

"Can we wear jewelry?"

"I suppose," he said, looking confused. "But the only magic you can perform should come from a wand."

"Uh, I don't use a wand in my magic, as the ministry well knows."

"I think we are going to have to redefine the rules for Susan," said Albus. "I can see at least three ways she could complete the first task without stepping one inch from the starting position. We'll let you know of any additional restrictions before the event."

"So, basically they can use all the magic they know, but I can't use all the magic I know. That seems fair," said Susan angrily.

"My dear, this is meant to be a game. Games, by definition, must have arbitrary rules, otherwise why play them at all? And to be clear they will not be able to use *all* the magic at their command, the task will be proof against some forms of magic. As we cannot spell things against your magic at present, we must rely on your sense of fair play to make things more even."

"Fine, whatever. But I'm keeping this--" She jingled her bracelet at him. "No matter what you say. We can negotiate buffs by Sparkle later. I'll argue she's a part of me, like my arm, while I'm sure you will argue the opposite."

"Yes, we can discuss that later."

"That seems to be everything," said Ludo. "Good luck to you all."

"Wait," said Susan, as the two kids and their headmasters went to leave. "I want to apologize to both of you. I swear to you, this is not what I wanted. Especially you, Fleur. Having you be opposite me during this tournament is not what I had in mind. I wanted to root for you, and I was really glad it was you that was chosen. I'll still root for you, honestly, because I have no desire to win this despite the ease with which I probably will do so. But I understand if you want to break it off with Team Susan."

She thought for a moment. "After hearing your stories, it seems to me you attract this sort of thing in your life. I do not hold it against you."

"Thank you!"

“May the best woman win.”

“May the best woman win!” she echoed. They shook hands, and she nodded to Victor as he went past. The other teachers left as well, leaving only Susan, Harry and Albus in the room.

“So what now?” asked Susan. “Make some kind of statement we’re both stuck for it and we’re looking into how our names were pulled? Is there any way to query the cup for what name would have been given apart from mine? Maybe it could be taken back to that point and now that our names are out of it, we just take the next name it spits out? What about going back in time with a Time Turner and removing our names invisibly from the cup before it starts spitting them out? We have six hours after all.” *Wait though, how would paradox be resolved in that case, we wouldn’t know to do that without my name coming out... Oh, and they’re supposed to be top secret which is why Harry is looking at me funny.* “Forget I said that one.”

“You really don’t want to compete in this, do you?”

“Really? You’re finally picking up on that? It’s going to be watched. For all I know, it’s going to broadcast somehow to every wizard home in the world. I don’t want questions raised about my magic at this point. Remember that our original plan was to keep it as quiet as possible? That story Quirinus made up saved me from having to do that, but if someone really starts digging into it, they’ll know that’s a lie. You guys treat people without magic like they’re animals, even though they outnumber you thousands to one. I can’t imagine what would happen if people found out I could cure any disease, kill Dementors, summon up magical creatures to fight for me. Would you embrace my magic, or vilify it? Would people be picketing outside the school to have me killed, or lining up to be blessed? I don’t know, and I don’t relish finding out.”

“Would you mustard finding out?”

Susan gaped at him.

“Sorry, I guess that was in poor *taste*. Anyway, you better hurry if you want to *catsup* your classmates.”

“Headmaster, this is no time for jokes. We’re in a *honey* of a situation here,” said Harry.

“We better stop, Susan looks like she’s ready to *assault* us.”

“Your brains have broken, it’s the only explanation.”

“Don’t worry Susan, I’m sure things will work out in the end.”

“Oh, they’ll work out. It’s working out for good or ill that I’m concerned about.”

“We can talk more about thing tomorrow.”

“Very well. I’m going directly up to my dorm room. You want a lift, Harry?”

“That’s probably for the best. I don’t need my entire house staring daggers at me.”

“Good night, Headmaster.”

“Good night you two.”

“Good night.”

Harry stepped through Susan’s *Teleportal* to his dorm, and then Susan made one for herself. Both were troubled by the events of that evening, and wondered what else would possibly go wrong before the first month of school was even over.

Making the papers

Time: The next day (again)

Place: Ravenclaw Dorm

Time seems to be moving very slowly, thought Susan, waking up the next day. *Time was I would be fast forwarding through months at a time, now it seems like I've had several adventures over the past few days. Weird.*

She wasn't looking forward to explaining things to everyone, but she got up and dressed, then made her way down to the great hall for some breakfast. As she entered the room, conversation stopped and everyone looked over at her. There was a brief pause, and then everyone started whispering and leaning closer to each other.

I'm not sure what I expected.

Susan sat down and helped herself to a bagel, waiting for Harry to come down. When he finally did, Susan had to wonder: *Is that what I look like right now?*

He gratefully sat down next to her. The whispering and pointing increased.

"He doesn't believe me," he said, without preamble.

"It is unbelievable, even for us. I'm not sure I believe it myself yet."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. But I thought, after all we had been though, that I could count on him to be at my side."

"It just goes to show, you just don't know people, in the end."

"You got that right."

"I mean, you learn who your true friends are in a situation like this."

"Yes, exactly. That's exactly what I said to him."

"I actually think I came into the middle of this conversation. Who are we talking about here?"

"Ron of course!"

"Wait, *Ron* believes you somehow put your name into the cup?"

"That's what I've been saying!"

"I wondered why he didn't come down with you. So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, there's no magic that can fix this."

"Sure there is. A quick memory charm to make him forget he doubted you, and *poof* he's back to being your friend."

"Never work. Willow tried on that Tara, remember?"

"Oh, we both remember how that worked out."

"We sure do. Not well."

"Nope."

"There you two are!" said a cheerful voice. "What happened to you last night?" Fred (or George) dropped next to Susan.

"We had a party waiting for you, Harry, but the man of honor, that would be you, never showed," said the other.

"Funny that. And who do we know that can open holes in thin air and just be where they want to be?"

"Our good friend Susan, who, we heard, was also missing in action last night."

"We were quite concerned, actually."

"Heard rumors you had both been expelled."

“Who did you hear that from?” asked Susan.

“Oh, it’s all over the castle.”

“So what’s the story?”

“Yeah, are you competing or not?”

“Ugh, here we go, the first of a million tellings of what happened,” said Harry. “But I suppose we better get used to it.”

“Wait a second,” said Susan. “I’ve just had a brilliant idea!”

“Something to get us out of it?” Harry said excitedly.

“I wish. No, something to make sure we don’t have to tell the story over and over again. Fred and George, you’ll hear it when everyone hears it. Harry, come with me.”

Susan grabbed Harry and dragged him out of the room. “But my breakfast,” he cried longingly.

Moments later, they stood in front of Dumbledore’s desk. He has listened to their idea with interest after putting his own work away.

“A school newspaper?” he said, surprised.

“Exactly. We need to tell our side of the story, and unless we spend the rest of our lives telling groups of two or three students it will never get out. I propose a school newspaper, to be printed on demand when a story warrants attention. Like now, for instance! Lots of schools do it, it’s a great tool for those who want to work in the news industry to get some experience. I’ll write the first story about the events surrounding the Tournament, and Harry can rustle up some people to do interviews and such of the other champions. I’m certain there will be interest. What do you say?”

Albus looked taken aback. “You’re actually signing up to do more work?”

“I’m just getting the paper started. Maybe it’ll only have one issue, I don’t know. Once people are found to do all the things a paper needs done, I’ll just be a reader like everyone else. Trust me, this way saves me time, because I don’t have to tell what happened a million times, I can just say ‘that information is in the paper. Shoo’ and be done with it.”

“We’ve never had a school paper before. I wonder why? There are spells to duplicate writings, they aren’t difficult, and not many would need to be printed as they could be reused. I think it’s a fine idea, and you have my approval. Harry, you go and get Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick, they’ll be able to set up you a space to get started and teach you the spell for copying the paper. You can then teach it to others. I’m sure they know of some students who would like to help out, they can get started gathering articles right away. Susan- you have a lead article to write.”

“I’ll get started.”

And so, that Monday, after a very hectic Sunday, Susan stood next to the paper she had created as stacks of them flew off a pile (almost literally, many knew summoning charms) in the great hall at breakfast. The paper was called “Hogwarts Express News” and the main article read thus:

Scandal at Triwizard choosing!

By Susan Felton

It was a tense Saturday night when the names flitted from the Triwizard Chalice, and imagine the surprise on the faces of everyone when not one, but two names from Hogwarts appeared. After the champions, Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum were selected, only one more name should have been released from the Chalice. But none were as surprised as Susan Felton and Harry Potter to hear their names being read by Headmaster Dumbledore. It seemed that somehow, against their will, both of their names had been submitted and chosen by the Chalice! Predictably the Headmasters of the other schools, Igor Karkaroff of Durmstrang and Madam Maxime of Beauxbatons, were extremely upset by this turn of events. During an intense meeting directly after the event many possible avenues were explored and rejected due to magics placed upon the champions through the Chalice. In short, those chosen by the cup are magically compelled to compete, their willingness to do so or not irrelevant. "I assure you there are reasons," Headmaster Dumbledore is quoted as saying, when asked why such restricting magic is used to insure compliance in the Tournament. He would not comment further on the matter.

*So now, the Triwizard Tournament must contend with several thorny issues. The main one being two of the now **four** competitors did not want to compete in the first place. Second, the challenges must be redesigned in a short time to accommodate the fourth person. Third, both "dark horse" champions are under the age limit set forth by the rules. Fourth, and the point of greatest contention, Hogwarts now has a much better chance of winning because they have two challengers. One solution to this problem that has been put forth is to assign full points to the Hogwarts champions and then halve them, in essence giving Hogwarts a single score, albeit contributed by two people.*

Mysteries surround these events. How did the cup give up four names instead of three? How did the names of Susan and Harry get into the cup in the first place? Where other underage Hogwarts students placing their names in against the rules through an oversight on the part of the Headmaster? Susan and Harry have both agreed to give their best in the contest and try to make their fellow students proud.

"If I'm stuck for it, fine, I'll do my best." Harry is quoted as saying. Susan agreed that, despite the restrictions discussed that would be placed on the use of her magic, she would not back down from these challenges. "I'm representing my school, and I won't do that half way," she said.

Will Susan be vilified or seen as a victim? Will Harry learn the meaning of his name being chosen after the three champions were selected? These questions and more remain to be answered.

The paper had articles written by other people, and interviews of the other Champions, including Harry. The school learned that Fleur had a younger sister she was quite protective of, and that Viktor was once scared of heights before he discovered his aptitude for Quidditch and worked to overcome it. There had been a lot of frantic work done that Sunday, but it was done by Monday morning, and everyone in the school was talking about it. It seemed the Hogwarts Express News was a big hit, and people were just as excited about working on a school paper as they were to read it. Many offered to volunteer whatever they could, and the paper got its first photographer, Colin, who started snapping pictures left and right. But then, he always was, but at least now he had a hat with "press" in the brim, and was grinning like a maniac as he snapped away.

"And you came up with all this yourself?" asked Hermione, setting the paper down. It was immediately grabbed up by someone else.

“I came up with the idea for a paper. The layout and stuff was done by others, hastily assembled like those heroes in the Avengers movie. Though as it was my baby I sort of oversaw the whole process.”

“I wondered where you were all day yesterday.”

“Sorry about disappearing like that. It was rush, rush, rush to get it out. I wanted people to know the real story, so I wanted to stick close to it.”

“It looks like it paid off.”

All around the room, people were smiling at Susan and Harry again, and the other two champions had a ring of people around them.

“I’m sorry about not believing you,” said Ron.

“You should be,” said Harry. “After all we’ve been through together, I mean I saved your sister’s life once, remember? One would think I had earned the benefit of the doubt.”

“Let it go, Harry,” said Susan. “You already won that battle, no need to, ah...” she tapped the salt shaker.

“I hear you. It’s okay, Ron.”

“I just get so frustrated, you know? Susan has her otherworldly magic. Hermione has Photographic Reflexes, so she can learn spells super fast. Harry is famous because of... well, you know, and he does Quidditch. But me? What have I got? I’m nothing.”

“Don’t be silly, Blank Flank.” Hermione and Susan laughed.

“What did you call me?”

“Just because you haven’t found your talent yet, doesn’t mean you don’t have one,” said Susan.

“Wasn’t there an Avatar the Last Airbender episode like that as well?” asked Hermione.

“Eh, I’m sure every story has some variant like that. Look Ron, if you want to distinguish yourself, then do it. Find what you like to do, and practice it to become a master. I got lucky- Magic was a part of my very soul since I was little. I had my father’s book and the desire to cast spells my whole life. You didn’t see all the hard work I put in for years, because I came to the school with average ratings in my planets. You’ve only been allowed to do magic a few years, and there must be something you’re interested in.”

“There’s Quid-”

“Apart from Quidditch. That’s just something you watch done, I’m talking about doing something yourself- But hey, you could try out for the team next year, right? So that’s something to look forward to.”

“But how do I stand out? You all seem to have these natural gifts. I mean Harry flew the first time he got on a broom! Hermione is still terrified of it.”

“I wouldn’t say terrified...”

“Uh huh.”

“Maybe you just haven’t had a chance to practice your talent yet. Maybe you’re the worlds best Apparator, or maybe mastering an animal form will be really easy for you. You’re part of Team Susan, so if there’s anything I can do to help you find your talent and get your Cutie Mark, then you just have to say the word.”

“I will never say Cutie- that thing you said.”

Hermione and Susan laughed again.

“So what is your assessment of the Tournament now?” asked Albus, as Susan began her *Imbuing* session for the day.

“I now think it’s an ever more terrible idea,” she replied. “Mark my words, things are going to go wrong during this little ‘entertainment’ of yours that wouldn’t have if Harry and I weren’t competing. Oh, it’ll be all ‘How did that happen?’ or ‘That wasn’t supposed to happen!’ or ‘Get it off me, get it off me!’ that will only happen to us. I think it will be clear why.”

“You believe someone will use the event to once again try to kill you.”

“And without all that tedious bribing of dwarves or sneaking in of giants either; convenient wouldn’t you say? They just have to wait for the right moment, while our concentration is on the task and cast a quick severing charm on a rope or whatever. *Splat*”

“We are going to have extra people on hand in case something goes wrong.”

“Great! Even more opportunities for Death Eaters to slip in, only this time wearing ‘staff’ t-shirts. Could you set up a miniature “Thief’s Downfall” like the bank has? That would help put my mind at ease.”

“I’ll look into it. But all of what you said does not explain Harry’s involvement.”

“I admit, not many outside the ministry would have known the Tournament was even going to happen, so how would they have planned- oh no.”

“What?”

Susan got out a stack of papers that mirrored the puzzle Hermione was working on. She put a hole through the “Bertha Jorkins->Missing->Dead” one at the bottom and “Triwizard Tournament” at the top and tied them together with a piece of string. She looked at the rest a moment and then stuck a hole through “Peter is rescued” so that one was at the top.

“That’s a weak connection though,” Susan said, thinking about it. “Probably coincidence. Unless they just got really lucky kidnapping her, and she knew exactly what they wanted to know. It’s just not his style though.”

“What is?”

“Being so impersonal about killing someone. I mean, Voldi could have sent anyone to kill the Potters. If he had, he would be alive today! Well, maybe not alive, I would have killed him by now. But you know what I mean. He went there himself. He would want to know what happened, and then he would want revenge. He wouldn’t want some ‘accident’ killing Harry, he would want to do the deed personally. If for no other reason than to show his followers he was as powerful now as he had ever been. So there’s some other power in play here, some piece that’s missing. No other ministry people went missing before her, did they?”

Albus shook his head.

“It either was an accident and has nothing to do with all this, or they got really lucky. But then what goes here?” She pointed to the space below the chain she had made. “That’s the key- why Harry? Of course, it could have been someone just with a grudge against him, like Professor Snape seems to have for some reason. But I can’t imagine even he would go that far.”

“I assure you he would not.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it some more, but don’t expect any easy answers.”

“I never do. I did like your suggestion about combining your points together.”

“It seems the most fair, given that, in theory at least, the other two champions have had more time to study magic than we have.”

“But do they practice as much as you and Harry do?”

“Probably not. Harry knows Voldi will come after him, so he is always training someplace. As for me, well, you already know.”

“I do. The question is, would you be all right with him dragging you down?”

“I wouldn’t say he would drag me down, exactly. I’m confident in his abilities, and his courage. He didn’t run from that giant, though he could have. Should have, really, as that would have been the smart thing to do. No, he stayed right at my side and shot spells at it with Ron and Hermione. I think he can handle himself.”

“Then I shall make the suggestion to the judges and we’ll see what they say.”

“The question then is, do we work together on the challenges, or separately? Can we work through any clues we get, or do I treat him as a rival champion?”

“That is something we’ll have to discuss with them as well.”

Several days later Susan walked with Albus to the “wand weighing ceremony” causing Susan to stifle giggles. “Think I should give him my fake one?” she asked. “I’d love to see what he made of it.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Albus replied. “You can just watch until it’s time to take the pictures.”

“Too bad.”

Fleur and Susan greeted each other warmly, having gotten to know each other better over the last few days. Something clicked in Susan’s head: *No wonder Ron is all of a sudden trying to distinguish himself. He’s been hanging around Fleur, and he knows he’s the weakest link, goodbye!*

“Isn’t this exciting?” she asked.

“For you, maybe. I’m sure you could be covered in mud and still manage to make it look glamorous. Sadly the more ordinary among us don’t have it so easy.”

“Ah,” she laughed. “You are always complementing me. I will get a big head!”

“I’ll just have to puncture it by beating you in the Tournament.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” she said with a grin.

“But of course,” Susan said, grinning back.

Harry walked in, looking glum, but brightened a bit when he saw Susan and Fleur.

“And here’s our forth champion,” said Ludo, getting up. “The rest of the judges should be along in a moment. Then we can have your wands checked out and get those photos taken!”

“And did we have to do this now? Professor Snape was quite angry I had to leave his class.”

“When is he not angry about the world in general?” Susan asked, coming over to him.

“Good point.”

“And let me introduce Rita Skeeter,” he said, leading Harry over to a witch wearing magenta robes. “She’s doing a piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Harry skeptically.

“Wonderful to meet you, Harry,” she said, looking him over in a completely non-creepy way.

“So tell me,” asked Susan, coming over to her. “The Daily Prophet- does it actually employ Seers, so that the news can be printed before it actually happens?”

“No, that’s just the name,” said Rita, not taking her eyes off Harry. Then she seemed to realize who had spoken.

“Oh, it’s the other young champion, Sue Anne, right?”

“Susan,” she corrected.

“Marvelous. I shall want to interview both of you in turn! If that’s okay with you, Mr. Bagman,” she added.

“Oh, that’s fine with me,” said Ludo. “As long as Harry doesn’t have any objections.”

“Splendid,” said Rita, trying to steer Harry out of the room.

“*Telekinesis*,” said Susan, casting it on Rita. A magical circle appeared around her, and Rita stopped, unable to move forward.

“What the-”

“Your articles about what happened at the Quidditch World Cup were just so well written,” Susan continued as though nothing was out of the ordinary. “Of course you got some names wrong, but who can keep track of the little people, right? And of course many of the actual details were wrong, but it was dark, who could tell what was really going on? Certainly not someone paid to report facts, am I right?”

“I can’t seem to move. Something’s pulling me back!”

“Yeah, that happens sometimes. It’ll wear off, don’t you worry. Why don’t you just do the interview here? I mean, you can’t move, right?”

“You did something!”

“Me?” Susan tried to be a picture of innocence. “I would never interfere with the news, especially after just starting a school paper myself. It’s sacred, after all. Getting all the facts, reporting the actual events, and not rumors or guesswork like some kind of *tabloid writer*.”

“Release me!”

“Having recently started a school paper myself, did I mention that, I know how tough it can be to present a story without bias, or injecting your personal feeling into it.”

“Let me go!” Rita strained, and Susan let the spell go, causing her to suddenly jerk forward and fall over.

“Oh my gosh, are you all right?” Susan asked, helping her up. “What a time for it to wear off. It’s all the magic that floats around this castle, you know? It’s like you can never tell what crazy thing is going to happen next!”

Susan looked over at Fleur, who was trying not to laugh, and winked at her. Fleur had to turn away.

“What is going on here?” asked Albus, who seemed to have gone temporarily blind and deaf during the whole exchange. He had been examining a rather interestingly shaped crack in the wall. “Rita, are you all right? Why are you on the floor?”

He went over to help her up.

“You saw what that girl did!”

“Who, Susan? Are you accusing her of something? I didn’t see her do anything and I was right here. You must be mistaken.”

She was still sputtering when the other judges and Mr. Ollivander walked into the room.

“Gather around, everyone,” said Ludo, directing them to a table in the center of the room.

“Thank you,” muttered Harry as he sat next to Susan.

“For what? I didn’t do anything.”

Harry gave her a knowing look.

“I believe I will examine Miss Delacour’s wand, first,” said Mr. Ollivander. She presented it to him like a sword, grip first, across her left arm. He took it reverently and began to look it over. “Oh dear,” he remarked. “The core of this wand...”

“A hair from the head of a Veela, one of my grandmother’s,” she said.

So she is part Veela. Ron called it all right.

“I find Veela hair to make rather temperamental wands, but perhaps the blood relation will give you an edge. *Orchideous*.” Flowers burst from the tip of the wand.

Why does the spell “Orc Hideous” produce flowers? Oh wait, that’s Orchid-eous, I bet.

“That seems to be in order,” he said, handing the wand back. “And now for Mr. Krum.”

Again the inspection and again a spell was cast.

“Next we have Mr. Potter.”

Harry handed over his wand. “Have you even used this wand?” he asked, “it seems as new as the day it left my shop.”

“I take pretty good care of it,” Harry lied.

Susan glared at him with a *who lost it just recently?* sort of look. “Yeah, it isn’t the *Fabrication* I did on it at all,” she muttered.

“There also seems to be some kind of spell placed into it. Maybe more than one, it’s difficult to tell for some reason.”

“You can feel that?” Susan asked, surprised.

“I know my wands, my dear,” he answered. “Still, it doesn’t feel like any sort of curse, and if Mr. Potter knows about it already...”

Harry nodded.

“Then I would say this wand is also ready to compete.” He handed it back.

“And that leaves up with Susan,” he said. “And I now remember the day you came into my shop, claiming not to need a wand. Albus said I didn’t need to examine your wand, as well. Are you still maintaining you do not use one?”

“That is what I maintain, yes.”

“So be it. My work here is done.”

Once the pictures were taken, Rita hurried out of the room.

“Do you know,” remarked Albus, “That reporter once called me obsolete dingbat.”

“To be fair,” said Susan, “I once totally denied to Hermione that I called you a crusty old goat. It was right before we went to save Ron from the possessed Quirrell. As I recall I had just gotten a message from your Patronus that you had left for the ministry, leaving me to deal with the situation.”

“How did that work out for you?”

“Pretty well, actually, now that I think about it. Of course the difference is she put it in writing, in a newspaper, while I did not say it aloud to a close friend.”

“One would think there would be laws against that sort of thing.”

“I think there are, it’s called libel.”

“Ah, but she wasn’t reporting factually that I was a dingbat, she was writing an opinion piece.”

“And the Prophet is a respectable newspaper? Odd. If I was an editor I would have told her to tone it down a bit, but I suppose it sells papers.”

“She’s not going to be a problem, is she?”

“For you or for me?”

“Are not our problems one and the same, Headmaster? Are we not both on the side of righteousness and truth?”

“If our problems are one in the same, the chair in my office has developed a bit of a squeak from the right side when I lean back in it. But strangely enough, only on Tuesdays before the full moon.”

Susan smiled. "I'll see what I can do right away!"
"I appreciate it."

"You wished to speak to us about what rules you would be playing under?" said Igor.
"That's right," said Susan. "As the 'Hogwarts' Champion' do we tackle the challenges together, or separately?"

"Working together would only help them slightly in the first task," said Ludo. "The other two, being able to split up would be of tremendous value."

"Couldn't we just take the higher score of the two as the official Hogwarts score?" asked Madam Maxime.

"But that means one of the two would probably contribute nothing," said Albus.

"Nonsense," said Ludo. "They can't be that far away from each other in ability, they're the same age."

"I have often tried to impress upon you the differences in our magic, but you do not seem to understand. Trust me when I say that, given what little I know about what she can do, without her word she won't just snap her fingers and make the challenges moot, she would do just that."

"Impossible," said Igor. "Why, even Viktor's chances are not assured. Anything could happen!"

"Nonetheless."

Every eye was fixed on Susan. She stared back at them. "He is right, you know. Given any advance warning at all, even a day, and I will have a spell to overcome any challenge."

"Personally," said Albus, "I like her suggestion the best. Average the two scores into one. Allow them to work together on the clues, but not on the actual challenge. I think we could trust them to promise not to help each other, but they are friends. Even if different houses, I would not turn people who have known each other a good portion of their lives against each other."

"No, if they cannot help each other in the challenge, they should not help each other outside it," said Igor.

"I agree," said Madam Maxime.

"You would have them compete as though from a different school of magic, then?" asked Albus.

"It would seem you feel she does come from a completely different school of magic already. Let her prove if her magic is really so great as you say," said Igor.

And there's my out for Sparkle. She uses my kind of magic, so it's proving that if she casts Acceleration or something on me.

"Are you okay with this?" asked Albus.

"I'm not okay with this whole situation, but that will work. As soon as people realize I'm doing completely different things they'll want to know how. My being a 'different school' is pretty near the truth as far as I'm concerned."

"So we have your word you will not help Harry in any way?" asked Madam Maxime.

"I'm sorry Harry, but I guess there's no other way."

"Don't worry about it. The others are supposed to do it all on their own anyway."

"Then you have my word. We score points and face the challenges apart."

"Then let the games begin!" said Ludo.

Making Sacrifices

Time: Two weeks later

Place: Great Hall

“You see, it makes no sense!” Susan complained to Albus. “I’ve been watching this area with *Time Window* for the last week, on and off, and as far as I can tell, no one put my name, or Harry’s, into the cup.”

“And nothing else unusual happened?”

“Every hour, those that managed to get their names in without crossing the age line were removed by Professor Moody. But you said that was standard procedure.”

“I did ask him to perform that task, yes.”

“The only other odd thing is this. *Time Window*.” Susan placed a window above where she knew the cup had been and specified the exact time her name came out. “Watch this.”

She crawled the image forward, until just as the slip of parchment came flying out of the cup.

“Look right there, see?” She paused it. “You can hardly see it because of the fire, but isn’t that a C? And the last name, I think it starts with D? But quick as a wink, as soon as the paper clears the flame, you can see it becomes my name.”

She made the image go further in time, and watched again as Albus caught the slip and stared at it.

“Do you have any ideas, then?”

“What sort of invisibility magic do you have?” asked Sparkle, who felt she was being ignored lately.

“We can charm cloaks to make one invisible. Also there is a spell to make one transparent, which I didn’t bother to defend against. I didn’t feel I would need to.”

“The only thing we came up with is someone invisible, that put the name in at exactly the same time as someone else. The fire flared up when that happened, and that would have masked the second name. That doesn’t explain how four names came out though. Or why this slip seems to change, unless it was spelled to do that in case the person changed their mind or something.”

“Ah, as to Harry’s name, there is a charm that could have been used to make the cup believe there were four schools, not three. If Harry’s name had been placed into this phantom school, he would have been the only one, and thus, the only one selected.”

“That brings up a good point. How did the cup know which person belonged to which school? Two good points, actually. Was my name put in hoping it would come out, or was that assured? Three good- among the good points that brought up are how did the cup know? Was my name coming out just luck, and how did the cup know who would be ‘most suited’ to the tasks? Was it able to use the name as some sort of beacon and weigh the potential of each candidate? Because so many things, from what spells one knows to how well they can cast them will determine who is ‘best’ suited. Did the cup know what the tasks are somehow? If one of the tasks was swimming, for example, and another was broomstick flying, would it choose the best broomstick flier who couldn’t swim? Or the person only average at both? How does it judge our ability to do anything? My character sheet makes it easy for someone to judge me, can the cup access some sort of analog to you, and how do I get a look at it?”

Albus held up a hand. “You’ll just keep asking questions until you’ve unraveled the mysteries of the universe, won’t you?”

“To do otherwise is to dishonor my house, Headmaster.”

“Humm, yes, I suppose it is. To be honest I never looked into it that far. The cup has always been used, thus, it works the same way every time. That was good enough for me.”

“But your charms don’t last forever. How do you know the enchantments on it aren’t breaking down?”

Albus looked troubled. “I suppose they could.”

“But you would have no way of knowing one way or the other, until it failed to work completely?”

“I am ashamed to admit you have stumbled across the truth.”

“I see. This whole thing continues to baffle me. We are no closer to finding an answer, and now have only more questions.”

“I’m sorry you put all that effort in for nothing.”

“Not as sorry as us,” said Sparkle.

As it was coming upon the time for the first task to begin, Susan checked her cards that evening. She had 19: *Love Interest*, making her fall in love with someone. 9: *Extra Action* and 27: *Skill* giving her a 5 skill in something for a single action. As she had to play 19 to get the 2XP points, she gladly played it on Myrtle, and went to spend some time with her. She turned in card 27 for the 1XP, if she needed a skill she didn’t have by this point, well, there was a spell that could give it to her.

Sparkle’s cards, oddly, were all in the 20s: 20, 22, and 26. *Missed me, Failure, and Sacrifice*, respectively.

“Yeah, the tiny cat is going to jump in front of a bullet to save her master,” said Sparkle, disgusted.

“Ah, see, if you had the card when you offered your XP to me to make the *Alleviation* knife, that might have counted.”

“So, wait, I could have you make an item with my XP again, play the card because it’s a sacrifice, and get 5XP back?”

“What does the card read, exactly?”

A seeming piece of paper about the size of a playing card appeared before Sparkle, and she looked it over. “*You willingly give yourself up for the sake of others. Note that this does not necessarily mean giving up your life.*”

“XP is part of you, right?”

“It’s on my character sheet. I would have to think everything on my character sheet was a part of me.”

“Exactly. I’m not in control of it, but I would argue it worked that way.”

“So what are you doing standing around for? Get cracking!”

“Let me find something useful to make, first! Anyway, we have to go visit Myrtle so I can role play my *Love Interest*. Maybe I’ll ask her opinion what I should make, and learn with my 7 XP.”

“Susan!” cried Myrtle, floating over to her. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Just thought I would come visit. Let’s go to the common room, though. Nice as your bathroom is…”

Myrtle laughed. “I understand. Let’s go!”

They made their way over to the common room.

“So, I’d like your advice,” said Susan, setting her magic book down. “As you know, I’m going to be participating in this tournament thing, and I can probably learn one new spell before then. Also, Sparkle has generously offered to make me a new item, as she can potentially get some of the XP back she has to spend with a card. I thought we could look through my spell-book together and see what I might want to learn slash make. How does that sound?”

“You really want to involve me in this?”

“Why shouldn’t I? I don’t consider your advice any less valid than Hermione or Harry’s.”

“Oh, well, thanks. Let’s get started then.”

So Susan started paging through.

“There’s a lot of spells in here,” Myrtle remarked. “How many do you know already?”

“About seventy,” Susan answered, after consulting both their character sheets. “Though there is some overlap. Like we both know *Magical Ally* for example.”

“Wow. What does the grade mean?”

“That’s how tough the spell is to cast. I can only go up to 7 right now, so ignore any spell with a higher grade than that. For me to learn, anyway. For the object we can pick anything.”

“Got it.”

And so the two looked through the spell-book.

“You know,” said Susan, “We’ve been talking about curses in Defense class, I bet *Liberty* would allow someone to throw off the *Imperius* curse. Too bad it’s grade 10, yikes.”

“*Invulnerability* seems nice, you could fall off the castle and not get hurt.”

“Yeah, I’ve often thought about leaning that one. Trouble is most things that try to hurt me use magic, not bashing me in the head. And I have *Flight* and *Acceleration* for falling and dodging better.”

“I guess.”

“What about *Hypnotic Field*?” asked Myrtle.

“I don’t know, I have *Immobilize* already, that’ll do basically the same thing.”

“Expect when you face things like giants,” said Sparkle. “And it would only take one casting of that versus twelve for fighting, say, a bunch of dwarves.”

“You have a point,” said Susan. “Things that are really strong, like giants, tend to bust out of *Immobilize*. But typically really strong things don’t have a very high REASON. With both spells I could basically capture just about anything. You’ve convinced me. Thanks Myrtle, I had passed over that spell before, so I’m glad you suggested it.”

“Happy to help! Now we have to pick one you can put into an object, right?”

“Right.”

I was leaning towards some sort of elemental spell, too. Honestly though this is better, I don’t like hurting things, after all. If I can space something out rather than killing it, so much the better. Too bad it won’t work on Dementors, they don’t have eyes.

“You were talking about *Invulnerability* not being every useful, what about *Magic Reflection*?”

“I have *Magic Immunity* though. And I can’t exactly say what the “casting check” is for wanded wizards. You guys don’t seem to get resistance against spells like the killing curse. My

version of that, *Slay*,” she turned to the “S” section, “At least gives a CONstitution resistance, plus your target size. So casting on that giant he might have resisted with a fifteen or something. A dark wizard casting the killing curse just, zip, they die. So if I went with *Reflection* rather than *Immunity* it might get though, and that’s bad news for me.”

“And you can’t have both going, because one would negate the other.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, it was worth a shot.”

“*Invisibility* would be nice.”

“I actually know that spell already. And it’s only grade 3, so really it’s not tough to keep going. Making a ring that looked like the One Ring would be interesting though.”

“But doesn’t that spell end if you attack or cast a spell?” asked Sparkle.

“You think the item would keep it up?”

“If it’s permanent, I don’t see how it could fail to.”

“Interesting. Though actually you might become visible for a split second as you did the action, then the magic would reassert and you’d be transparent again.”

“Yeah, that’s probably what would happen.”

“Shape-shift would be kind of fun to have. Just wish yourself into a new form.”

“I agree, that would be fun. But not very useful. I can already cast spells to fly like a bird or breathe water like a fish.”

“Didn’t you tell me about doing a detention for Severus with the *Battalion* spell?”

“Now that was fun. Ordering around a bunch of soldiers *made of fire* and who would do anything I asked of them? Now that could come in handy.”

“And it’s grade eight, so that’s a tough one to pull off and maintain, right?”

“Yes, and it takes eight minutes to cast. Not something you can pull out at a moment’s notice in combat. Well, most couldn’t, I just throw eight energy into it and take no penalty at all.”

“Still, being able to whistle up soldiers at whim might be nice. You do say someone keeps trying to kill you.”

“Yes, but I do have my dragon.”

“What if it’s two dozen dwarves next time,” asked Sparkle, “Or a couple of giants?”

“If it’s that many, I think I would go with *Legion* rather than *Battalion*. It’s only two grades higher.”

“What does that get you?” asked Myrtle.

“Basically the same thing, just more of them. *Battalion* would get me maybe ten guys, *Legion* would get me twenty five.”

“Now that would be nice!”

“And a big surprise for anyone foolish enough to engage me in combat. *Poof* they’re surrounded by soldiers in armor, brandishing swords. I’m liking this idea.”

“It would save you twenty minutes of casting,” Sparkle said, reading the spell over.

“Yeah, even I would think long and hard about that one. I would need *Energetic Accumulation* and probably thirty energy to pull it off. That would leave me a bit tired.”

“Only problem is the corpse you have to find.”

“Corpse!?” said Myrtle.

“Oh, shoot, you’re right. I would need a fallen soldier and his equipment. Where would I get one of those?”

“A battlefield?”

“Or maybe...”

“That’s an odd question,” Albus said the next day. “Would I consider those that fought Voldemort in the war as soldiers? I suppose I would. You don’t need guns to be a soldier, just ask the legions of Caesar. So a wand would serve just as well. Why do you ask?”

“There’s a spell I want to *Imbue* called *Legion*. It’s a special situation, and we think Sparkle can sacrifice some of her XP for it, then get some back with a card. We’ve been looking over what could be useful to me, to activate in a single action rather than cast, and *Legion* fits the bill nicely. It usually takes twenty minutes, so using *Spell Symbol* would still be annoying.”

“And what, may I ask, does this spell do?”

“Bring forth a number of soldiers, wearing armor and carrying swords, that follow my orders and rush into battle without fear.”

“That could indeed be useful. What you need from me, then, is permission to exhume a body and use it in the *Imbuing* process.”

“If you think someone would consent to that.”

“They may, if you explain what it means. If you get the permission of the family, I will assist in getting you the body.”

“I assume wizards are buried with their wands?”

“Typically, yes. Wands choosing who to allow to use them most effectively, after all.”

“Then I know just who to talk you.”

“Harry, can I ask you something?” Susan asked at lunch that day.

“Sure, what’s up? You seem a lot more serious than normal today.”

“I want to create an object, one with a very powerful spell on it. But I need something, and it might be a sacrifice on your part.”

“You want my blood or something?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. The spell will create magical warriors that can fight for me. Normally it takes twenty minutes to cast, but putting it into an object will let me activate it immediately. We thought of making it permanent, but it’s too much XP to do it that way. So only I’d be able to use it, probably, because it would take ten energy. Still a bargain for what I get though.” She gave a little laugh.

“Are you avoiding the issue?”

“Ah, maybe. Um, to bind the spell into the object I need a... body.”

“You want my body?” Harry exclaimed.

Every head in the great hall looked at them and conversation stopped.

“What? No! Shoo. Shoo!” She made a shooing motion with her hand. Everyone turned back to their food.

“I need a soldier’s body,” she said quietly. “A fallen soldier. I thought, as your mother gave her life for you, would you mind terribly if I used her body? I totally understand if you just say no,” she said quickly. “I just thought, you know, what would she want? To just rot in the ground until the sun explodes or become a part of magical soldiers that can do more good in the world. And maybe save my life one day.”

“Wait, the sun is going to explode?” asked Ron. “Why did no one tell me? How much time do we have?”

“A couple of million years, don’t worry about it, Ron,” said Hermione. “Honestly, don’t you pay attention in Astronomy?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Harry was deep in thought.

“Her grave wouldn’t be touched,” Susan continued. “And even my magic can’t bring back the dead, so...” *Yeah, go ahead and finish that sentence, Susan.*

“Do you know, I’ve never even visited my parent’s graves?”

“Really?”

“All this time. I bet Headmaster Dumbledore would have taken me, if I’d asked him. They both died for me, but yet I have never even been there to say thank you. It would be hypocritical of me to say no, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t know, it’s up to you.”

“Personally,” said Ron, “If I was an evil wizard, I would use some kind of necromancy to turn them into zombies and use them to distract you. After all, you wouldn’t want to fight your parents, would you? Even if they were undead. Getting rid of them might be the best thing to do anyway.”

“Ron, go back to thinking about what your special skill is,” said Hermione shortly.

“Okay,” said Harry.

“You mean- thank you, Harry. Thank you.”

“With all you’ve done for me, I’m glad I can finally give something back. And I know you’ll use it well.”

“I will. I promise. Thank you.” She threw her arms around Harry and he awkwardly hugged her back.

“Can I see her... before you get started?”

“She’s been dead a long time, I don’t know if you’ll want to.”

“She’s probably was magically preserved,” said Hermione. “They typically do, for cases like that.”

“Really? Oh, well, of course, in that case.”

And so, surrounded by candles, Harry and Susan looked upon the body of Harry’s mother. She had her wand grasped in her hand, and she merely appeared sleeping.

“She was beautiful,” said Susan softly.

“Beautiful, brave, and a fine witch,” said Severus, stepping from the shadows. “Seeing her again brings back a lot of memories.”

“Professor!” remarked Harry. “I... didn’t know you knew my- but of course, you’re about the same age, aren’t you?”

“What exactly is this going to entail, Susan?” he asked, ignoring Harry.

“I can use the components in any order, so I was going to begin the process here. She’ll become a swirling pattern of magical energy, to be bound into the object.” Susan held up a narrow ring made of stone. She had spent some time getting it right, and along the outside was a relief of a wand on one side, and a lighting shape on the other. On the inside was an inscription, “For sacrifices made.” Severus looked it over.

“Shockingly, I approve,” he said, getting out his wand. Touching the ring, it flashed into silver instead of stone. He pushed it back to her. “Don’t screw it up.” Taking one last look at Lilly’s body he hurried out of the room.

“Maybe I’m beginning to understand him just a little bit more,” remarked Harry.

“He knew your mother well, for a time,” said Albus. “It is too bad events conspired against him, as they do so often. Come, let us leave Harry a moment alone.”

He put his arm around Susan’s shoulders, and they also left the room, quietly closing the door behind them.

“How long will it take to complete?” he asked.

“At two hours a day and four on weekdays? Two and a half weeks.”

“Not in time for the contest, then.”

“Do you think I’ll need twenty five soldiers for the first task?” Susan’s heart began pounding. “What are you having us do?”

“I was just making an observation, actually. Though of course many situations would benefit from having a platoon of soldiers, not just a tournament task.”

“Don’t scare me like that!”

“My apologies. But did you really think we would set a task that required that kind of firepower? Remember what sort of magic we have to work with.”

“Oh, right. How did he turn it into silver?” She looked the ring over, and it looked much better as silver than it had as stone.

“That is but a modification of *Transfiguration* magic. Of course gold is impossible to create without very difficult Alchemy, but silver is possible.”

“Odd that both of our magics have trouble with that substance. I mean, I can make a sword out of titanium in a minute or so, but I can’t make even a speck of gold. It’s weird.”

“One would think it would not be that much harder to create, but somehow it seems that magic knows the value of the metal somehow.”

“Magic does seem sentient. It ends for me when the task I ask for is complete. But it can make someone immortal or rain literal fire down from the sky. Why not create a few grams of a heavy metal?”

“Magic is quite mysterious.”

Moments later, Harry came out of the chamber. “Thank you,” he said simply, and turned to leave. There was nothing Susan could really say, so she just quietly began the *Imbuing*, turning Lilly into pure magic, and watching it swirl about the room, ready to be placed into the ring.

Battle of the Pens

Time: The next day

Place: Great Hall

The next day, Susan wanted to get an early start on her *Imbuing* before classes, so she got up early. She met Hermione, also having an early breakfast, as she probably hadn't gone to bed the evening before.

"You're not going to be happy," Hermione said by way of greeting. She set a book she was reading down, covering a paper.

"Then I shall deal with the problem, and once again become happy. Seems easy enough," Susan replied.

Hermione shook her head. "Promise me you won't blow anything up?"

"I don't even know any 'blow anything up' spells at the moment. I can set things on fire, that's about it. You know that."

"But you could learn some."

"Yes," she answered slowly, drawing it out like snake, if snakes could speak English instead of their own language. Which they probably draw out anyway. "What's going on?"

"Just promise me you'll talk to the Headmaster before you do anything... rash."

"Hermione! When have I ever done- yeah, okay, I promise."

"Cross your heart?"

"Anyone have a paper?" Susan shouted to the rest of the room. Several people looked over at her, then gathered their breakfast up and beat a hasty retreat.

Uh, what's going on? She looked back at Hermione.

"Give."

"You have to promise!"

"GIVE!"

"Okay, okay." Hermione gingerly slid the paper over to Susan, who developed a twitch almost immediately.

Dark Magics Performed at Hogwarts?

By Rita Skeeter

Your daring reporter, Rita Skeeter, has uncovered a most shocking ritual being performed at Hogwarts school at this very moment. Never before has such dark magic been gathered into one place, and under the direction of the Headmaster himself! Two days ago, Susan Felton, a student at Hogwarts School, asked and was granted permission to perform a dark ritual unknown to wizards until this time. The ancient book she was reading from, which crackled with dark energies, told her how to bind even more necromantic energies to do her bidding. Susan, a rather plain girl that hangs around Harry Potter, has already bound one ghost, Myrtle, to her dark desires, and other ghosts are extremely polite to her lest they also be ensnared. That afternoon, Susan and Myrtle combed the book for what next dark magic to perform, and they selected a most heinous ritual, one unknown even in the times of He Who Must Not Be Named. (Susan says his name freely, even shorting it to a more familiar form) This disgusting spell required a corpse of one fallen in battle, and Susan wasted no time ensnaring Harry Potter's mind to allow her to use his very mother for this ritual.

To make matters worse, Headmaster Dumbledore has not only allowed this travesty to happen, he went to collect the body himself the very next day! This so called spell will bind magic into a ring that Severus Snape helpfully changed from stone to silver, and will allow Susan to call forth a virtual army of undead soldiers! These soldiers will act at her direct order, and will apparently appear in full plate armor and wielding broadswords.

This misuse of magic must be stopped immediately, and I urge all of you reading this article to write to the ministry and have Headmaster Dumbledore removed from his post immediately.

Susan trembled with rage. Never before had she wanted someone dead with the fury she felt now. She couldn't even speak as she read and reread the article.

She's turned Harry's noble sacrifice into some kind of perverted dark ritual! Ensnared his mind? Bound a ghost? I'll ensnare her mind, see that I don't!

A horrified looking Hermione was edging away from Susan as magical energy started swirling around her, sending sparks and bursts of raw magic into the air near her.

"Calm down," said Sparkle. "You won't be of any use to anyone like that." She glared at Sparkle, who looked calmly back at her. "RESolve check, now," Sparkle said. "Get control of yourself."

With effort, Susan made a RESolve check, getting an 18. She calmed down.

"You're right," she said to Sparkle. "We need to think about the... appropriate... response for dear Rita. We must be cool and collected. *Silent Slayer*, do you think?"

"That will just make things worse," Sparkle replied. "Go see the Headmaster, see what he says to do."

"Yes, perhaps he might want her to suffer more before being killed. Good point. See you Hermione."

She didn't want for a response, she just walked off towards his office, then gave the password. The paper was forgotten, scrunched up in her hand, which was clenched into a fist.

"I take it you've seen Miss Skeeter's latest work?" Albus said as she stormed into his office, slamming the doors open.

"You mean the piece about me being some deranged lunatic, doing dark magics and being buddy-buddy with Voldi? No, why don't you tell me all about it?"

"I can see that you're angry-"

"Angry? We're a little bit past angry, Headmaster. Enraged? Furious? These might be closer to the truth."

"And what exactly do you intend?"

"Sparkle believes I should ask your advice, rather than just sending her a *Silent Slayer* or a very, very small bomb with *Send Object*. So tell me Headmaster, what is your *suggestion*?"

"I believe we should focus on how Miss Skeeter knew about the *Imbuing* at all. I take it you told no one but your close circle of friends?"

"Of course. You don't think one of them is under a curse again, do you?"

"I don't think even she would go so far as to use an unforgivable curse on a student, just to get a story."

"What then?"

“I believe your magic can pluck someone from whatever they are doing and bring them before you,” he said. “Why don’t we ask her?” He looked at her face for a moment. “I would ask for your word that you will not set her on fire right off.”

“First Hermione, and now you? What must you all think of me?”

“You did just imply that sending some sort of killing magic, if I am to take the right implication from the spell *Silent Slayer*, was on the table.”

“Did you read the article? She called for people to write and have you forced out of here!”

“She often does.”

That brought her up short. “What? Really?”

“In fact, I would almost go so far as to say this might do more to hurt her career than help it. She has always done more, shall we say, sensational journalism? But we all know what happened to the boy that cried wolf.”

“You think it will all blow over?”

“I think that if we explain the spell and what you’re doing, no one will need to fear you are performing dark rituals.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, explaining how my magic works. Because that might make people more afraid. But first things first. I’ll need to see where she is.” Susan got her book out of her *Pocket Dimension* and starting looking over *Descry Creature* again. Eleven minutes later, she looked up from the book.

“Did the spell fail?” asked Albus, looking around for her.

“Not as such,” said Susan, smiling. “But I did get a result. A very curious result. One I’ve gotten before, in fact.”

“It seems this is good news?”

“In a way, Headmaster, in a way. She’s going to write about me, fine. She who lives by the pen, should die by the pen. If you’ll excuse me, I have an article to put together for the paper.”

“But wait, what did you find out?” Albus called after her.

“You’ll be able to read all about it in the next issue of *Hogwarts Express Times*!”

Hurrying down to the “newsroom”, Susan sat down at an old typewriter and began to type. She paused halfway though, and opened up a *Teleportal* to her secret base.

More like Sirius’s secret base, given how much each of us uses it. But whatever.

“Hey Sirius, you around?” she called though.

A head poked around a corner. “Susan? Ah, thought I heard someone calling me. What’s up? I was about to start off for Hogwarts to watch the first task, this will save me the trip!”

“Glad I could help. Say, did you register your Animagus form after your name was cleared?”

“I sure did. Figured I didn’t want to give the ministry any reason whatsoever to have any interest in me.”

“Smart. Did you by chance see Rita Skeeter’s name on it?”

“There were very few names... I don’t think so. Why?”

“Come on through and I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, give me a second.”

He went and got a bag, shoved some stuff into it, and stepped through. Susan let the *Teleportal* go and handed him the Rita article. She turned back to continue typing.

Sirius's eyes popped as he read the article, then read her typing over her shoulder. He started to laugh darkly.

A half hour later she was assembling it with the other stories the paper currently had to publish, and gleefully started them copying. An hour after that, people were picking up the newspaper in the great hall, and reading the new headline.

Rita Skeeter: Unregistered Animagus?
By Susan Felton

After writing a sensational article in the Daily Prophet, the question was asked "how did Rita learn about events at Hogwarts she was not privy to?" In an effort to learn the answer, Susan decided to use a spell called Telesummon to bring Rita to the castle and ask her directly. However, because the spell requires that you know the location of the person you wish to bring before you, Susan first cast the spell of Descry Creature to locate her. This should have told Susan her exact location, anywhere in the world.

The spell failed.

It failed in a very specific way, and it's a way that the spell has failed before. The first time it was used to find out the location of the (then) criminalized Sirius Black. The second trying to find the location of the actual criminal, Peter Pettigrew. Both of these persons had something in common- when the spell was cast, they were in an Animagus form, and thus did not register with the magic. It has been confirmed that when in an Animagus form, that form must be visualized in the caster's mind, not the human form, if the caster wishes to find them. This points to Rita Skeeter being an unregistered Animagus and sneaking about the school in her animal form.

This would easily allow her to eavesdrop on conversations, even those she might misunderstand and then write sensational articles about. We at the Hogwarts Express Times urge Miss Skeeter to come clean on her reporting methods, and to issue an apology for the errors contained in her last article.

"Hello Sirius," said Albus as both walked into his office after the papers had been delivered.

"Hello, Albus," he replied cheerfully. "I see Rita's at it again?"

"So it seems. I'm surprised to see you here, however."

"Oh, I'm just passing through. I'll get a room in the village until the first task. Susan wanted to ask me something, so I figured I might as well take the opportunity to get here under her power instead of mine. Then I figured I'd come say hello since I was in the castle."

"Ah. And may I now ask what your excitement was about earlier?" he asked Susan.

Susan handed him a copy of the *Times*, and he read it over.

"I see," he said, after a moment. "That would explain things."

"How do I send this to someone at the Prophet? Like the editor or whatever?"

"Simply write the name on the outside and attach it to an owl. The school maintains a well-stocked owlery from which you may choose."

"I can show you where it is," said Sirius, as Albus wrote the name on the parchment he rolled up and tied.

"Thanks."

“I would beware any owls that come for you this afternoon,” he said. “You may get Howlers, or worse.”

“Headmaster, that’s what the *Combust* spell is for.”

“An excellent idea. But perhaps the fireplace in the great hall might be easier?”

“Less energy I have to expend, that’s for sure. Okay, I’ll keep it in mind.”

Sirius showed her how to “use” an owl, then went to find Harry before he departed the castle. Susan led him, slightly late, to Herbology, where he was sure to be. Sirius said he would wait outside the greenhouse until the lesson was over, and she went inside. Where everyone started excitedly asking her questions about both Rita’s article and her response in the Times.

“Settle down, children,” called Professor Sprout. “Plenty of time for that later on!”

“I’m sorry about this,” she said to Harry. “It seems even your sacrifice became fodder for Rita’s quill.”

“I’m sure if this measured response doesn’t get her attention, you can find some other response that will,” he said.

“You know, I was thinking the exact same thing earlier. Amazing, that.”

“At least you’re a little calmer now,” said Hermione.

“Hah, I am always the very picture of coolness and collectedness.”

“Right.”

“Why is everyone suddenly asking me about necromancy?” asked Myrtle that afternoon at lunch.

“Just ignore them, they have no idea what they’re talking about.”

“Maybe that’s part of the problem,” said Hermione, dipping a fry into ketchup. “We’ve all seen you do some crazy stuff, and the whole class saw you duel Quirrell that one time. People don’t know what you can and can’t do, so maybe they think you can bind ghosts to your will.”

“It wouldn’t be the craziest thing I’ve seen you do,” said Ron. “And this tournament isn’t going to help the situation. You’ll have to do more of your magic in front of more people. That’ll only make the rumors grow.”

“I know, it’s a real problem. But I’m not just posting a list of my spells, and saying “this is what I can do” for the whole world. That would end in disaster in a lot of ways.”

“Are you going to continue the *Imbuing*?” asked Harry.

“Of course. I can’t just leave that energy swirling around the Headmaster’s office forever. Sparkle spent the XP and used the card, and I’ve gotten the other ‘material components.’ I want that ring!”

“Yeah, it caused you enough grief, you might as well get the benefit from it,” said Hermione.

At that moment, owls swooped into the room, dropping two dozen or so envelopes, parchments and rolled up papers in front of Susan.

“Not a bad showing. *Teleportal!*” Susan opened a hole to the side of her, with the other end hovering above the fire in the fireplace she had looked at earlier. She dramatically swept them all into the hole, and then closed it. There was a small explosion over at the end of the room, and everyone looked over at it, then at her.

“Wow, they heard an explosion and thought of me. I’m touched,” Susan remarked.

“Maybe one at a time next time?” asked Hermione.

“Bah! Where’s the fun in that?”

“You really just burned them all, unopened?” Ron looked impressed. “What if there was actual good news there?”

“Then they can come and tell me in person. You think Professor Moody opens his own mail? I think not.”

“And that’s who you want to emulate, is it?” asked Sparkle. “The twitchy Defense professor?”

“It’s kept him alive this long. He must be doing something right.”

“Uh oh, act like you’re not doing anything wrong!” said Ron, looking over at Albus, who had gotten his own share of owls and had risen, looking around the room.

“We aren’t doing anything wrong,” said Susan.

“Oh yeah, old reflex. Sorry.”

Albus walked over to Susan.

“The minister of magic would like to see us this afternoon,” he said to her.

“I haven’t seen Mr. Fudge in ages! I’d be happy to meet with him, Headmaster!”

“Come up to my office after you finish eating. Oh, and it’s hopeless me asking for a little restraint?”

“Probably,” Susan answered after a moment. “But I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I can hope for. See you soon.”

“Aren’t you nervous?” Hermione asked when he walked away again.

“Why should I be? I didn’t do anything wrong. The Headmaster approved everything, he’s going to take the heat, not me. But really he didn’t do anything wrong either, if you think about it. I got Harry’s permission, the spell isn’t some dark magic ritual, nor have I enslaved anyone’s mind or cast necromantic magic on Myrtle. It’s all good.”

“And what’s he going to do to her? Snap her wand?” asked Ron.

“He could take her to-” Hermione started to say. “Oh, but you want to go there, don’t you?”

“Not just yet, but I could work something out, yes. After I killed all the Dementors in the place, there’s no way they could hold me there. I’m sure he realizes just how foolish that would be.”

“But you haven’t broken any laws, have you?” Myrtle asked, concerned.

“No, I haven’t. But wizard justice doesn’t exactly work like that. Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“I hope not.”

Susan finished up her lunch, and she and Sparkle made their way up to the Headmaster’s office again.

“Hello, Minister, you’re looking well,” she said, walking in. Both men looked quite grave, and Susan shook her head a little.

“Susan, yes. Albus has been telling me the particulars about this *Imbuing* of yours. Apparently Rita got it at least somewhat right.”

“What it does, perhaps. But it’s no dark ritual, I tell you that. Have you looked in that room? Would something that beautiful really be dark?”

She pointed to the room where the magical energies, ready to be bound into the ring, continued to swirl and make patterns. It really was quite pretty.

“Yes, I have. I’m just not sure about giving the power to summon up a squad of soldiers to a 14 year old.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “In that case, solve the mystery about who tried to kill me in my first year before I even stepped through the gates. Find out who sent the dwarves to kill me. Find out who sent the giant to smash up the village, and kill me. Find out who sent the bullies, twice, who probably would have raped me, and then killed me. This castle is not safe for me, Minister. I need to protect myself.”

“Your magic has carried you through thus far.”

“I couldn’t beat that giant. My enemy has been sending more and more dangerous things at me, and it’s only a matter of time before I, or someone close to me, gets hurt. I need to be ready. Making this ring just lets me get the soldiers faster. I could still learn the spell and get them in the normal time. Stopping it now would serve no purpose.”

“And you maintain that a spell that needs a body isn’t dark magic?”

“It’s just the enhancer. All my spells can turn a specific object, per spell, into magical energy to make them work a little better. *Imbuing* requires it. It just so happens this one needed the body of a soldier. What’s the big deal? It’s a body, she wasn’t coming back.”

“It just seems a little dark for a 14 year old to be getting into.”

“I *Imbue* stuff all the time! I’ve been working on this year’s Christmas gifts for my friends all along. It’s just a spell! A spell into an object. Nothing more.”

“It’s your spells I am mainly worried about. If you can summon up fearless minions at a wave, what else can your magic do? Can you use the unforgivable curses?”

“I have *Slay*, *Wracking Pain*, and *Dominate*, if that’s what you mean.”

“You know how to cast them?”

“I don’t have them memorized, no. I’m not stupid, minister. I know that just because the spells aren’t cast in exactly the same way or have the same incantation, if they do a similar thing I probably shouldn’t use them.”

“I’m glad to hear that, at least. Now what about this tournament? What surprises do you have cooked up for us there?”

“Are you going to tell me the challenges?”

“Of course not.”

“Then I cannot tell you how I would overcome them, can I? I’ll just have to muddle through as best I can. If that means I have to use a spell I haven’t yet demonstrated, well, I guess that qualifies as a surprise, doesn’t it?”

He turned back to Albus. “What do I tell them, Albus? I need to show that I’m acting in the best interest of everyone.”

“So tell them you came here, and determined Miss Skeeter’s article was inflammatory and ill written. That there was no basis for fact in her claims, and that she had no authorization to be on the grounds in any case.”

“Yes, Susan maintains she’s an Animagus?”

“I do. I think the reason I can’t get Peter is because he heard about my magic for all those years and worked out a defense. But it was exactly the same as with Sirius, and I’m pretty sure Peter and Rita don’t move in the same circles. At least I hope not. If those two are sharing information, ugh.” She shuddered.

“Yes, I see your point. Very well, Albus, but I warn you, your history can only protect you for so long.”

“Especially when my enemies have free rein in the ministry because of how rich they are.”

“There’s nothing I can do about that,” sputtered Cornelius.

“Then there is nothing I can do about Susan.”

“Very well. I will see you at the first task, Albus.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“I hope this doesn’t make too much trouble for you, Headmaster,” Susan said after he had gone. “I didn’t know this one piece of magic I was going to do would cause such an uproar.”

“Oh, trouble I am used to. It is a good lesson for the future, however. You never know how even the most innocuous of actions may come back to bite you. So, will you be working here this afternoon?”

The First "Challenge"

Time: The next day at breakfast

Place: Great Hall

"I have something to add to the puzzle," Harry announced. "Sirius told me yesterday, and with the excitement about the article, it slipped my mind."

"Okay," said Hermione and Susan, getting out their respective copies of the puzzle.

"Igor Karkaroff was a Death Eater," he announced.

"The guy they're letting be a headmaster of an entire school?" said Susan, writing that down. "Wizards certainly have a bizarre sense of justice, don't they?"

"He must have reformed or something," Hermione said.

"He gave up a bunch of names," said Harry. "That so called proved he was sorry for what he had done."

"And the wizarding world, taking pity on the poor man, offered him a high paying job with access to lots of impressionable young minds. Seems legit."

"He could be acting on Voldi's orders, I guess," Hermione said. "But he stays with his ship, mostly, from what I hear."

"Isn't that more suspicious?" asked Ron. "He wouldn't want to get caught snooping around, right? He puts the names in, and then lets the tasks do the dirty work."

"But if he was under orders to make sure I died, being a judge would be the last place he'd want to be. How would he sabotage anything out on the open like that?" asked Harry.

"All it takes is checking a rope or making sure a chain is tight to cut or loosen something. As a judge he might have the right to stop the challenge for an 'inspection' of things," said Susan.

"And staying on the ship isn't suspicious," put in Sparkle. "What's he going to do around a school? Attend classes? I don't think so. What is odd is that he doesn't pop back to his school until the tasks need judging."

"He would want to make sure his students stay in line though," said Hermione.

"Right, that would make sense."

"Or he might not want to *Apparate*, or even know how. Some wizards don't."

"They don't learn to *Teleport*?" asked Susan, shocked. "Now I know the wizarding world is messed up."

"There's one other thing," said Harry. "I'm not sure if I should even tell you..."

"What, you found out what the first challenge is going to be?" joked Susan.

"Uh, Professor Hagrid sort of showed me, yeah."

"And not me? That little sneak! I mean that big sneak! Well don't tell me!"

"Are you sure? I mean, we're not supposed to help each other, but if I let slip, by accident..."

"Nope. I want to be totally surprised. That way no one can say I had advance notice and learned a spell specifically for it."

"Okay. Hermione and I are going to be researching how I can... do... the challenge. So I guess we'll have to part ways for the moment."

"Ugh, this is stupid. We're friends, I shouldn't have to avoid you because of some stupid tournament. Wait a minute..."

"What?"

“Isn’t some huge binding spell supposed to be on the whole thing? That makes us compete and everything? Wouldn’t that apply to the teachers as well? Wouldn’t they be part of the *Contract* that, once they know something about the challenges, they physically cannot do anything to reveal what they know?”

“He seemed free to do what he wanted.”

“I’m starting to be annoyed with this whole situation.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Deep breaths,” said Sparkle. “It’s just spillover from yesterday.”

“I guess. Stupid Rita Skeeter and her stupid writing things. Hey, did you see that they published my article in the *Prophet*? It was in the opinion section, as a “Letter to the Editor” but still. He probably thought it would sell more papers to have us squabble there. We’ll see what she writes tomorrow, possibly a retraction?”

“That’s a little much to hope for,” said Hermione.

“I know, but a girl can dream, can’t she?”

There was no retraction.

And finally the first day of the Tournament arrived, and the champions gathered in the tents. Susan carefully watched the others, wondering if all three of them knew. She shrugged. *What does it matter, anyway?*

She looked over at Harry, hugging Hermione, and had to smile. *Though I wouldn’t mind a hug from her...*

Flash! Susan looked over to see Rita stepping into the tent behind a photographer. “Young love!” she exclaimed. “How...” she paused to think. As she did, Susan stepped past her invisible personal space bubble and glared up at her. “What’s your animal transformation?” she demanded.

“Susan! How nice to see you. What was that? Animal transformation? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Stirring! That’s the word I wanted.”

“Just so you know, you better eat, sleep, and breathe it for the next couple of years. Or you just might find yourself *Telesummoned* a very long way from home. It’s the only thing keeping you where you are at night.”

“Is that a threat?” she said lightly.

“Good to see you all,” said Ludo, stepping into the tent. Susan stepped away from Rita, vowing to ignore her. Albus followed him in, along with Barty.

Why is a regular Auror here for this?

“And now we come to the choosing,” Ludo said.

“What are you doing here?” Albus asked Hermione.

“Sorry, I’ll just, uh, yeah, leaving. Bye Harry. Good luck. You too, Susan.”

Susan winked at her with a grin.

“Now, challengers, around me, please. That’s it. Now, I’ll have you all reach into this bag, and you’ll pull out a model of what you’re going to be facing, okay? Ladies first!”

He offered the bag to Fleur.

Oh sure, pick the pretty one to go first.

She pulled out the Welsh Green, with a 2. As she wasn’t that surprised, Susan figured she did indeed know. She looked over at Krum- yup, no surprise there. She started to chuckle.

Krum pulled out the Chinese Fireball, with a 3.

Susan started to strain to hold back laughter, and started shaking.

“Are you all right?” asked Albus. That did it. She bust out laughing, stomping her foot on the ground. Everyone looked at her like she’d gone nuts.

“Seriously, dragons?” she asked. “There’s no way this is going to go wrong, right Headmaster? I was nervous it might be something *tough*.” She beckoned the bag forward. “Come on then.”

She pulled out the Swedish Short-Snout, with a 1, and Susan held it up to her face, admiring the spell-work. “The detail on these little guys is just amazing,” she remarked.

“Uh, yes,” said Ludo, not sure how to respond. “And for Harry...”

And Harry pulled out #4 the Hungarian Horntail.

She stuck the figure in her *Pocket Dimension*. “So, what restrictions are being placed on my magic, and what do we have to do? Subdue the beast or what?”

“Wait, you call subduing a dragon not tough?” said Ludo.

“I admit, it might take me two combat rounds, depending on what cover I had, and if I had *Acceleration* up.”

Susan had *Acceleration, Flight, Magical Ally, Phase and Immunity* loaded into her bracelet, just so Sparkle didn’t have to cast it on her at the time.

“Susan,” said Albus. “you can’t wish it to your hand, or open a hole in reality and just grab it. You other champions can’t use summoning charms, either, the eggs are spelled against that. Also Sparkle can’t cast any spells on you before you begin. Anything else is fair game.”

Ha ha, joke’s on you. I just have to say a word to get Acceleration.

“Right. Anyway, your task is to get the golden egg they’re guarding,” said Ludo.

“So if I defeat it, that won’t be worth any more points?” asked Susan.

“Uh, no. No more points for beating it up.”

Susan snapped her fingers. “Darn! Hey Myrtle!” she shouted at the ceiling.

Everyone took a step back and looked at her like she’d gone insane.

“Yes?” Myrtle answered, sticking her head through the top of the tent.

“Thought you might be hanging around. I just wanted to say thanks for your suggestion. Turns out it was the right one.”

“Oh, yeah, I see what you mean. These things look angry. Be careful.”

“Always. Love you.” She blew Myrtle a kiss.

“Not in front of everyone!” Myrtle said, trying to blush, and pulling her head back through the tent.

“Uh, right.” Ludo had a look like *when did I lose control of this situation?* “Well, I have to get up to the stands to do the commentary! See everyone there!”

He called Harry over, which Susan was a bit suspicious of, then hurried off.

“Now, at the sound of the canon-” Albus said, which went off. “Oh, just get out there.”

“See you in about a minute,” Susan laughed, skipping out of the tent.

Now, where are you my fine dragon friend? Hey, there’s the egg. Bet I could just put Invisibility on myself, and that would be the end of it.

“Here, dragon, dragon, dragon! Where are you?” she singsonged. Rounding a corner, she saw it.

Ah, there you are. Now, how to make it a little more dramatic? Ah, I know.

Looking the dragon over, she noticed it was tethered by a long chain, and wouldn’t be able to reach her. *That was nice of them, making sure I could take the full time to cast.*

She also saw magical screens floating in the air, displaying different views of the battlefield.

Wouldn't want to miss any of the action, now would we?

"Augment Skill," Susan cast, taking the full time, and getting a rating of 10 by putting 6 energy in. She got two back from her *Energy Boost*, and began to sing. She rolled a 17 on her *Singing* check, and everyone in the audience went quiet and leaned closer to hear.

The dragon roared and pulled at the chain.

Susan took a step, still singing, swaying now with the tune, and wordlessly cast *Hypnotic Field*. As she was still very far from the dragon she took the full time, and the -4 penalty for not speaking the words. She put maximum energy in, as she figured this one spell would finish it, and got an 18, total (She rolled a 12 + 9 energy - 2 wordless + 3 extra segments - 2 for *Augment Skill* = 20). The dragon rolled a resistance check, getting less than half what she needed to throw off the spell. Which of course was not enough. Colors swirled around it, out to a radius of 14 meters, and Susan stepped into it, still singing. The dragon was motionless, caught by the swirling colors that now seemed to dance around it. She sashayed over to the egg, picked it up, and still singing, made her way back to the tent.

Now back in the tent, she held up the egg. "This egg? I want to be sure."

Viktor had his mouth open, staring at the field, still shimmering around the dragon.

"Hey! Listen!"

"Yes, that egg," said Albus, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"Oh, okay." Susan leaned out the tent again and snapped her fingers, dropping both *Augment Skill* and *Hypnotic Field*. The dragon finished its roar, and the crowd broke out of its own reverie and started halfheartedly cheering.

"Let's head to the stands," said Albus, "you can get your scores and watch the others."

"Watch them flail about uselessly? Sign me up," she said softly. "Good luck to all of you," she said honestly. "Harry, I really hope you know what you're doing."

Susan walked with Albus up to the stands, and watched as Fleur got into position.

"You weren't kidding, then?" Ludo asked Albus.

"No, I was not."

"I see. We've decided to hold off giving Susan her, uh, score, until the others have gone. Maybe this challenge was too easy for the younger generation!" He laughed.

"Whatever," said Susan, not caring in the least.

It took Fleur more than ten minutes to get her version of charm magic up to a sufficient strength that she could run past it and grab the egg. She was panting and sweating as she held it up, and the crowd was screaming her name.

"You could have had that, if you'd stuck around," said Ludo.

"I didn't want that. I didn't want *any* of this, as I keep telling people."

"Oh, right. Still, she knew how to put on a show, that girl."

"Well excuse me, princess. I'm glad our life and death struggles are making such good entertainment for you people."

"Susan," Albus cautioned.

"What? It's true."

"Ever the diplomat," he said sadly.

Fleur came up the stands after her scores were announced. "Well done," said Susan. "You're a credit to your school."

"Don't tease me, I saw what you did. My charming spell was like a baby's compared to yours."

Susan shook her head. "I got lucky. My ghost friend Myrtle suggested I learn that spell a couple of weeks ago because strong things kept busting out of *Immobilize*. I just did it that way to confuse them."

"Whatever you did, it was easier than what I had to go through."

"Well, maybe you'll be better suited to the second task than I will. You never know."

"I doubt it."

"I'm trying to complement you, Fleur. Forget what I did- it's not important. What is important is that you went up against a dragon, and you are still sitting here talking with me, uninjured. Uh, for the most part. That's something to be proud of."

"I guess you are right."

Then Victor took his turn, and he too took much longer than Susan, but he too proudly held the egg up.

Finally it was Harry's turn, and he nervously peaked out from behind the rocks. The dragon shot fire at him, and he dodged further behind cover to get away from it.

Come on, Harry! You and Hermione were doing something all week, what was it? You guys don't have XP, and I could learn dozens of spells in a week without that restriction. You must have-

Suddenly a broom shot down from the sky and Harry jumped on it, taking off. The crowd went wild.

Okay, that was impressive. But you still have to get it.

He flashed down and tried to grab the egg, but had to roll to avoid getting toasted by fire. He zoomed off, making a wide circle to try again.

The chain holding the dragon broke, and it roared with delight and took off after Harry, shooting fire as it went. They both zoomed off to one side.

"Oh crap!" said Susan, getting up. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You can't help him with the task," he said.

"With respect, Headmaster," she said, shaking out her charm bracelet. "Piss off. There's a dragon loose on the grounds now, how do you not find that unacceptable I cannot fathom. What if this is a plan to kill Harry, or myself because I am known to get involved when my friends are in danger? I have to take that one down before the others get any ideas, or get loose because of 'accidents' that happen to be simultaneous. I warned you something like this would happen, and guess who gets to clean it up? Right, me. *Flight. Accelerate.*" Susan began to blur, and her feet lifted slightly off the ground as she touched each charm and spoke the trigger word.

Then she jumped atop the railing and pushed off, zooming into the air after the dragon.

Really could use Energetic Accumulation right now. Have to wait until it's far enough away from Harry that he doesn't take damage.

Susan caught up to the pair, and Harry made a tight turn, forcing the dragon to veer off and crash into the side of the castle.

*There! Good thing Knockout is Neptune, and Burst is Long range, that's 8 * 14 meters, I can hit him from anywhere.*

"Elemental Burst Knockout," she cast, getting a 20, and taking the 5 segments to cast it. It was too busy scrabbling against the wall to even know she was there, and the spell, at its full radius of 14 meters, slammed into the dragon.

Sorry about that, anyone who is inside the castle right there.

The dragon was hardly stunned, and looked around to see where that weird energy had come from. It spotted Susan, and roared at her.

Oh crap. What is that thing dividing damage by? Four? It's gonna take forever to deal with this, especially at 10 energy a casting. Is there something else I can do, though?

She mentally reviewed her spell list, which really didn't have anything that could seriously hurt this thing, which is exactly what she needed to do right now.

Nope, that's all I got, just hitting it with Elemental Burst until it goes down. Good thing I have Acceleration up so it's moving in slow motion compared to me.

She cast *Elemental Burst* again, and again the energy slammed into the dragon. And again, it hardly seemed to notice as it leapt off the building and started winging towards her.

No fair, that thing's faster than I am. Wait a second, maybe I can still salvage this.

Susan shot down to the ground, hoping the dragon would follow, and it did.

Yeah, come and get me.

"Need some help?" Harry shouted, coming from the side of the building.

"Go get your egg, I'll handle her!" Susan shouted back. Harry took off, and Susan nodded. *I doubt there's anything you can do against this monster. I just hope I can figure something out!*

Susan landed seconds before the dragon crashed into the ground, but she was ready. She had been casting a spell, and holding it until the dragon was in range again.

"Hypnotic Field," she released, burning another 10 energy. She was now down to 44, and was grateful her *Energy Boost* got her back up to 47. She was rewarded with a 25, and the dragon stood motionless like before.

Okay, now what do I do with you? You'll probably bust out of Immobilize even if I cast it on you like this. You would get the check after you left the area. Wait a second, I'm still Accelerated! I get a bonus to Mercury spells because of that. Well, what could I get then?

Susan did some quick math. *I think I roll 1d8+28 if I take the full time and put in max energy. Oh wait, my penalty for maintaining the Field. So 26. I'll see what happens.*

She got a 34, and bands of force wrapped around the dragon. As it wasn't damage, it didn't knock her out of the trance, and she fell over. Susan gave a start and realized Sparkle had passed her the cards she had gotten before.

Probably when I flew off. I just didn't notice because of the excitement. I've got a Failure card now. I can just make the dragon fail the check to break free. Sweet. Okay, I don't need the -2 anymore for my next 'trick' so let's make this dragon fail and be trussed up.

Susan dropped the *Hypnotic Field*, and played the *Failure* card on the dragon as it struggled. Predictably, it was unable to break out.

"And now to take you back, my fine friend," she said. *"Telekinesis."*

Again, taking the full time and spending max energy, plus the bonus from the *Acceleration*, (so she again rolled 1d8 + 28) Susan got a 30. That meant she could easily lift

67,108,864 kg, where a dragon weighed 18,400 kg. Susan walked over to the struggling dragon, pretended to pick it up, then flew into the air with it, as though she was carrying the thing. The dragon was flipped over, so the legs were up in the air, bound by glowing bands, and the dragon was still trying to break free. Her speed in the air was now unclear, as the rules she operated under didn't seem to have any provision for *carrying a captive dragon somewhere with Telekinesis magic*, but she made her back to the stadium as well she could. Even she couldn't get lost this time, as she just went high up and looked around for the Quidditch field off in the distance. She slowly made her way back, and was astonished to see that the screens were tracking her as she flew back into range.

She landed, and a bunch of people, including Charlie, ran up.

"Where do you want her," she asked, "holding" the dragon up with her left hand.

"Uh, her crate is right over there, if you don't mind?" he said, looking up at the helplessly wiggling dragon.

"Sure, whatever."

Susan concentrated on moving the dragon with *Telekinesis* at the same speed she was walking at, and managed it pretty well, "tossing" the dragon in with another *Mercury* check. She made sure the lid was closed before releasing the *Immobilize*.

"I don't know about you guys," she said, "But I'm beat. Doing that cost me like, half of my energy. I really need to learn a spell to deal with bigger things, they are just so tough for my magic to take down!"

"Uh, we saw the whole thing on the screens. It doesn't seem like you were having that much trouble."

"Yeah, I make everything look easy. Nice to see you again, Charlie." Her tone changed a bit to be more sarcastic. "*Thanks* for the dragons, I appreciate it. Oh, Harry wasn't hurt, was he?"

"No, but the judges are in a frenzy because they don't know what score to give both of you. I mean, you captured Harry's dragon! It got loose, so that kind of changed the whole equation. They're still talking about it, I guess. Nothing has been announced."

"That's good to hear. Oh yeah, my egg! I left it back in the stands. *Retrieval*."

The egg popped into her hands, and she looked it over. "So this is a clue, huh? This whole stupid thing is stupid. See you." She waved with two fingers over her shoulder as she turned and walked away.

Charlie, confused, let her go.

She walked off, back in the direction of the castle, leaving the stands behind. A fairy flew down next to her, landing on her shoulder.

"Ah, Sparkle. I suppose they saw the whole thing?"

"Yeah, half the screens tracked Harry, and half of them tracked you. I was heading to help, but I guess my *Acceleration* from before was all you needed. Uh, shouldn't you be heading in the opposite direction?"

"Why? I got the egg, which actually looks more like an avocado, now that I look closely at it. And my little souvenir dragon is in my *Pocket Dimension*. I didn't leave something else behind, did I?"

"No, but shouldn't you get your score? I'm sure the judges will want to talk to you."

"Exactly why I'm going this way. That Skeeter woman will be buzzing around, asking questions I don't want to answer. Especially if the whole thing got played for them. Thank you for the *Failure* card, by the way. That turned out to be the key to the whole thing, so it couldn't break free."

“Don’t mention it. That dragon though, it took two full *Elemental Bursts* and hardly slowed down!”

“I know. It does double damage, but then it got divided by three or four. Big things are just way too tough for my current spells. Thank Myrtle for *Hypnotic Field* though, it came in handy twice. I was shooting my mouth off back there about two combat rounds. I’m not sure even spending all my energy on *Burst* would have taken it down.”

“Yeah, saw that. What were you going to do without the failure card?”

“Oh, still do the *Immobilize* to squeeze the limbs together. Then a bunch of *Creation* to make a series of heavy chains to wrap around it, and a muzzle that was like a block of iron so it couldn’t breathe fire. Then drop the field someplace far away and see if it could break out.”

“That might have worked.”

“Yeah. But the next thing that big that’s after me I want to finish right away.”

“Didn’t Ron suggest *Shrink* at one point?”

“Of course! And that’s RESolve to resist, what RESolve does a dragon have?”

“I have no idea.”

“Bet it’s not as much as STrength!”

“Yeah, you got that right.”

“Well, someone thought my performance was okay, I got 6 XP, exactly enough to learn the *Shrink* spell. Guess what I’m headed to do?”

“Not bask in your victory,” said Sparkle, looking behind Susan as she entered the castle.

“Basking is for losers. I have magic to learn. Anyway, I don’t consider something this easy a victory. These challenges just aren’t geared towards my kind of magic.”

“Heaven help us if you ever have to face something that actually is...” she said, looking back at the stands and shuddering.

Apologies

Time: Two Hours Later

Place: High castle tower

It was two hours later when Hermione poked her head through the wooden trap door and looked around, spotting Susan. She was holding hands with Myrtle and saying something about how ghosts should probably be able to fly as quickly as they believed they could. They were both sitting cross legged on the floor, and the book of magic was open and left to one side. This room was obviously unused, as Susan had made tracks in the dust on the floor from being up here. Sparkle was laying down near them. Susan looked over and spotted her, dropping Myrtle's hand and *Phase* so she could talk to her living friend again.

"Here you are!" Hermione exclaimed, climbing up the rest of the way. "I've been looking all over for you!"

"Here I am," she said. "Did you check Professor Snape's classroom first?"

"What? How did you know that?"

"Called it," Susan said to Sparkle.

"And it seems you were right," she replied, cracking an eye open.

"I just thought about where I would be least likely to go, and thus, where I would be if I wanted to be alone. That was the first place that popped into my head so I stayed far away from it."

"Aren't you clever?" she said sarcastically. "I've been looking for you for hours you know."

"What? Why?" Susan asked genuinely. "You could have just asked anyone that can produce a Patronus, oh wait, that's you, to have them come find me and report back."

"I never even thought of that!"

"Of course not, it's magic. So what's up?"

"What's up? You ran away from the tournament! The headmaster thought you might be hurt, and didn't want anyone to see you weakened."

"Wait, you talked to him and he didn't even suggest it? Weird. Well, I'm quite all right, as you can see."

"So why did you come up here?"

"So people couldn't find me, obviously?"

"But why? There's been this huge party going on in the common room, and the judges wanted to speak to you about the points. I still don't think they've scored the first task."

Susan snorted and laughed. "That's their problem, isn't it? You can't ask the contestant how they want to be scored!"

"You still could have gone to the party."

Susan shook her head. "*You* should have gone to the party, and supported Harry, rather than looking for me. I'm... sorry you went through all the effort. I should have left you a note or something, it was short sighted of me to just disappear. I have to apologize to the Headmaster too, I was quite short with him earlier. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, we just don't understand why you ran off rather than celebrating with the others."

Susan appeared not to hear her. “And the perfect time for our mystery man to strike would have been when everyone was exhausted from the trial. *I left Harry vulnerable*. Guess I have something else to apologize for.”

“Is she making any sense to you?” Hermione asked Myrtle.

“I think she’s channeling the old me,” Myrtle said quietly. “I’ve been trying to talk her into going back down. Me! Can you believe that? Our roles are now reversed.”

“When I left you, I was but the learner. Now I am the master,” said Susan softly. “Sorry, what were you saying, Hermione?”

“Party. Downstairs. Come.”

Susan gave a low laugh, shaking her head. “I have nothing to celebrate. Did you see how hard the others had to work? There’s no comparison between them and me, and I’m just making them feel worse about themselves. Fleur was too busy comparing her performance to mine to congratulate herself for making it out of that arena alive. That’s not what I wanted. But I’m not going to make myself less than I am, magic wise, to make her feel better. So I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s only natural, to compare yourself to others.”

“Yes, to others. But not different systems of magic. That’s what’s been bugging me about this, but I haven’t been able to express it well. It isn’t about the people, it’s about the spells you know. Do you know a spell that can get you past a dragon, or not? If you do, it’s super easy. If you don’t, well, not so much. It says nothing about me as a person, or about any of us as people. Just as to what magic we’ve learned over the years.”

“So how would you fix it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe score it the opposite way? Not by how long it took to get past the challenge, but what challenges you had to overcome yourself to fulfill the objective.”

“But that would give you a zero score!” said Myrtle.

“Maybe that’s what I... wait a second. Say that again?”

“You would have gotten a zero score?”

“Exactly. That’s the key, right there!” She put *Phase* back on so she could lean over and hug Myrtle. “I’m so glad you came up here!”

“What? You want zero score?” asked Hermione.

“I don’t want any score, remember? I don’t care about that- and maybe that’s the point. Don’t score my performance at all. I go first and show the, oh, I don’t know, “ideal solution using magic” or some nonsense. Then they can be judged against me as to how close they came to the ideal. That way I’m still in the tournament to satisfy the binding magic, but I don’t actually count against the others. I’m still not convinced of this binding magic, by the way.”

“I hardly think the Headmaster would lie to you.”

“No, but he did admit the only way he would know the magic on the cup broke down is when it stopped working. Maybe it stopped working and we never even tested it.”

“I guess if you just refused to participate, you could see what would happen. You might just find yourself on the field.”

“Maybe. But I’ll tell them about scoring me at zero, it would make me feel a lot better about the whole thing.”

“So now will you come down?”

“And go to bed? Sure! I’m still in no mood to party.”

“Suit yourself, I guess. I’ll go tell the others you’re okay.” She glanced over at the book. “Were you learning magic up here?”

“Yeah. I was spending my XP for fighting the dragons. Taking Ron’s advice from before, actually. Anything bigger than me is just too tough for my magic to take down, even with the extra “damage” *Knockout* does. And any more deadly *Elemental* spell might catch someone in the backwash or hit them unintentionally. So why not shrink the thing I’m fighting? So now I know the *Shrink* spell.”

“And I thought I was hard core, studying all the time.”

“You study to pass exams, I study to make sure the next thing that tries to kill me doesn’t succeed. It’s a little different.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Hermione turned to go.

“Thanks,” said Susan softly, “For worrying about me, I mean. I’m not sure I deserved it.”

“Of course. If it were me that was missing, I’m sure you would have moved heaven and earth to find me. I could do no less.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

“See you tomorrow.”

It was, in fact, a pity that Susan missed the party, because she missed Neville being turned into a bird by a Canary Cream. (“seven Sickles each, bargain”) She would have been extremely interested, and asked them questions like “could you do other animals” and “how long could you make it last for” which might have helped Harry turn into some sort of aquatic creature for the second task. She also would have been delighted to buy some, as a candy that can turn you into an animal could be *extremely useful* for more than just joking around. She would have also mentioned this, leading Fred and George to truly realize the potential of wizards no longer needing complex Animagus transformations to become an animal if they wanted. A single animal, that they didn’t even get to choose when they started the process. But alas, none of this happened, and so Fred and George moved onto other things, with only the Canary Cream product to show for it.

“Of course you deserved it,” said Myrtle when she was gone. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“If I really wanted to hide away, I could have just opened a *Teleportal* to my secret base. Instead I climbed up here to the tower. Some part of me wanted to be found, I think.”

“Or maybe you knew someone would find you eventually, so they wouldn’t worry?”

“I... maybe. My whole coming here may have been a mistake.”

“What, the tower?”

“No, Hogwarts.”

“Now what are you talking about? If you hadn’t come here, Voldemort would have had Ron as his willing slave forever. He would have sucked the life out of Quirinus, and destroyed the stone. Then he would have marched down to the Secret Chamber, released the Basilisk, and started a new reign of terror. How could stopping that have been a mistake? Not to mention I would still be the blubbering, depressed girl who haunts a bathroom rather than who I am today.”

“That sort of thing is fine. Using my magic to save people, or make them things, or do things for them- that’s fine. Using it to just show off in front of everyone just feels wrong.”

“It’s not like you’re skipping down the hall rubbing it in everyone’s face. You can do what you can do, that’s all. Are you okay?”

“I’m just in a weird mood, I guess. Come on, let’s go down. I need to recharge my *Spell Symbol* and get to bed. It’ll probably be busy tomorrow.”

The next day at breakfast, people walked passed Susan and looked at her funny, but they didn’t bother her.

Not sure what I was expecting.

Albus came and sat down at the head table, and Susan thought *Now or never*. She walked over there.

“Susan,” said Albus, a bit coldly.

“I wanted to apologize for yelling at you yesterday. It’s been a weird few days, but that’s no excuse for my behavior. I am sorry.”

“You did warn me, that much was true.”

“But what I said before I... flew off, that was uncalled for.”

“At least you realize it. I find that school is an excellent place for making mistakes, as long as you learn from them. So your time in the north tower wasn’t wasted then?”

“What, do you have a map in your head you can just consult as to who is in the castle, and where?”

Albus looked a little more like his old self. “I can neither confirm nor deny the existence of a Hogwarts security system which I can use to keep tabs on people.”

“You could have told Hermione where I was, so she could have gone to the party.”

“Is Miss Granger a party goer, then? I believed she was more like you, preferring her books and her scrolls.”

“In any case, I’ll see you later for the daily *Imbuing*.”

“I am now once again looking forward to it. I must also tell you, running off as you did, that you missed the instructions for the next task.”

“Oh. Anything I should know?”

“It will occur on February 24th.”

“That’s it? Okay, I’ll be prepared. As I hope you’ll be prepared for the next ‘accident’ that happens to either one of us.”

“Given the nature of the next challenge, that would be exceedingly difficult.”

“I’ll take your word for it then. See you later.”

Susan made her way back to the table, where she found the rest of the gang waiting for her.

“So, she descends to the realm of mere mortals, once again,” said Ron, giving her a sweeping bow. “Good to see you this fine morning, my lady.”

“Knock it off, Ron, you have no idea what’s she’s going through,” said Hermione, elbowing him.

“Yeah, because she went somewhere and hid, like she did something wrong. You have no idea the panic you caused after you ran off. I still don’t know who’s winning the tournament.”

“Shoot, I forgot to tell the Headmaster my plan for the scoring! Oh well, he’ll need the other judge’s approval anyway. I’ll tell him this afternoon. You’ll be happy to know I took your advice,” she said to Ron.

“You’re going with my advice? Are you nuts? What if I get you killed? I’ll never hear the end of it!”

“About learning *shrink* magic. I finally learned it, last night. A bit late, but better late than never, right?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, could have come in handy when facing a huge dragon.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No, why don’t you tell us about it?” said Harry. “Did you not think I could handle it myself?”

“I didn’t know what their capabilities were,” protested Susan. “In my book of magic they’re listed as sentient, smarter than humans, and most of them are spell-casters. These on this world seem to be just animals, but I couldn’t take the chance. I didn’t know how smart they were, and if she would use tactics to roast you or what.”

“I could have out flown her, I bet.”

“You can go 180km/h on your broom?”

“I have no idea how fast that is.”

“Right, so how can you say you could have out-flown her? And that’s not the point. If she had seen something more interesting than you, say someone wandering around the grounds, easy pickings? She would have gone after them and forget the hard to catch flying thing. Right? It isn’t all about you, Harry, I had to make sure that thing didn’t hurt *anyone* because of this stupid tournament.”

“I didn’t think of it like that. I guess you’re right.”

“So were the judges completely flummoxed when you got back?”

“Yeah, they were arguing for almost a half hour. Most people just sort of left.”

Susan grinned widely. “Excellent. Exactly what I wanted to hear, thanks.”

“You want to make it as difficult as possible then?”

“That’s the idea! See, I had a thought last night. What if I was taking the wrong tack with my whole name in the goblet thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if someone knew about my magic and put me in there to win? They bet big on me, and I plow through the first task in under a minute. They think they’re in the clear, I have it won, and they’re seeing dollar signs. But wait, how do they score me? How do they score you? The longer I can make them sweat, the better.”

“So you think it was two people, one to kill Harry, but one to bet on you?” asked Hermione.

“Exactly. I don’t know what my dragon would have done, had I not just *Hypnotic Fielded* the thing into la-la land. But Harry’s got loose. So both theories are still valid, and one doesn’t cancel out the other.”

“How do we prove it one way or the other?”

“Easy. The heat is on, we just watch for the person that starts sweating...”

Two weeks later, Susan held up her shiny new ring which had just been *Imbued* with the *Legion* spell. She slipped it on and went out to the main office room.

“It’s done,” she announced proudly.

“Shall we see that it worked? I’m interested to see for myself what all that trouble with Rita actually accomplished.”

“Sure, but not here through. Might be a little cramped. And I should go get Harry, it’s his mother that made this possible.”

So she did and they went outside, where it was getting much colder out lately, and Susan held her fist up high. “For sacrifices made,” she cried, and spent 10 energy activating the ring. Around her, women made of fire appeared and waited for her orders.

“Now isn’t that interesting?” asked Albus. “I thought they were supposed to be men.”

“I did too. Perhaps because I used a female body, and everyone doing the spell used a male? It seems more fitting, anyway.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, looking them all over.

“Form up into a wedge!” she said, pointing. They marched over and formed into a rough triangle shape, with 5 in the back row. (It was one in the lead, one row of two, three rows of three, two rows of four and one row of five) “Very nice,” she remarked. “Imagine seeing that coming at you, with my dragon in the lead.”

“An impressive display,” said Albus. “Let us hope you never have to unleash them inside the school.”

“If it came to that, you would have bigger problems than them to worry about.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. That one day you’ll need this level of protection and it’ll be inside my school that it happens.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Many things, I assure you. But specifically relating to our conversation? No, not as such. But I plan for the worst.”

“Good thinking.”

That afternoon, in Care of Magical Creatures, Professor Hagrid was interested to see if the six foot long Skrewts, of which ten were left, wanted to hibernate for the winter.

They didn’t.

As the class was trying to get them under control again, Susan primarily handling defense with her *Deflection* spell, a familiar voice came floating over the field.

“Doesn’t this look like fun?” It was Rita Skeeter.

Time to get some information. I haven’t used this spell in ages!

“Lies,” said Susan, activating her *Detect Lies* charm on her amulet. She stalked over to Rita.

“Susan! How lovely to see you.”

Lie

“Didn’t get your statement about the tournament, so I sort of had to leave you out of the article. I hope you don’t mind?”

“What’s your animal transformation?” Susan asked, ignoring the jab.

“Are you back on that again? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lie.

“So you do have one. Good, that makes it easier. Is it some kind of rodent, like a rat? I know someone named Peter that turns into a rat, and it suits you.”

“I should hope, if I ever do try an animal transformation, it’s something a little bit more interesting than a rat!”

Half Truth.

“No, it would have to be smaller, wouldn’t it? Can an Animagus become anything? Like a bug?”

“I tell you I don’t know anything about it.”

Lie

“Is this woman bothering you, Susan?” asked Hagrid, walking up. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Rita Skeeter, a reporter from the Daily Prophet. I’m always looking for stories, and these creatures would seem to fit the bill.”

Lie

“She’s here to dig up dirt on either Harry, or more preferably, me, as her initial attempt to spark flames of controversy over this,” she held up her hand with the ring on it, “didn’t amount to anything. Plus she didn’t get to write about me doing the task because she hardly saw me in person.”

“Now that’s just not true,” Rita said sweetly.

Lie

Oh, I so love this spell.

“What I want to know,” Susan continued, “is where all this is coming from. Are paper sales really that low that you have to go nosing around this much? You wrote about the World Cup like it was the end of the world, then nothing. Now you’re here trying to chase down more stories about me. What gives? What did I ever do to you that would make you want to ruin my life like this?”

“People deserve to know the truth about what goes on here,” said Rita.

Truth

I suppose she could really believe that.

“Your version of the truth, or the actual truth?”

“They are one in the same.”

Truth

Wow, this is one messed up lady.

“You aren’t even supposed to be on the castle grounds,” Rubeus said. “Albus’ orders. You’re disrupting my class, go away.”

“What if I told you I wanted to write an article on these fascinating creatures here?”

“What kind of article?” asked Rubeus warily.

“Oh, you know, the usual. How long you’ve had them. How they developed, that sort of thing. We run a zoological column on Wednesdays, which I’m sure you read all the time.”

“Of course.”

Lie

Huh, I can’t turn it off for specific people. Sorry Professor.

“And of course on you, the man raising them. I’d love to ask you lots and lots of questions!”

“We can’t do it on school grounds.”

“That’s fine. We can meet somewhere.”

Susan, Harry, and Hermione, who had joined them, gave each other a look as Rubeus and Rita made a date later in the week to do the interview.

“Ta!” said Rita as she walked off.

They all looked at Rubeus.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay on topic. I know the hatchet job she usually makes of things. The Skrewts are safe enough to talk about.”

Susan shut down *Detect Lies* before it could inform her if this was a lie. She had learned to trust her friends after the whole incident with her mother and that spell. That's why she didn't have it going most of the time.

That evening, Harry came and found Susan.

"Winky is here in the kitchens," he said. "Dobby too."

"Winky? The elf that was accused of casting the dark mark? Why?"

"Apparently, Mr. Crouch fired her later that evening," he said.

"Great. And the binding magic on her is making her take it..."

"About as well as you would expect."

"Super. I don't think there's any magic I could even do to help, given the nature of *Contract*. Take me down next time, I'd at least like to see her, and Dobby, again."

"I gave him permission to come up and see us. He, at least, is happy to be here."

"That's good. Hope he does pop in, he's a good guy. Elf."

"And you'll probably be better company than Hermione. She was just shouting at her about how happy she should be to be freed, and that she should be getting paid like Dobby is."

"Shouting? That doesn't seem like her."

"Well, Winky was, uh, carrying on at the time, rather loudly."

"Ah. I did explain about the *Contract* magic they're under, right? I know Hermione knows what magic is, so no miscommunication there."

"No, I think she just hates to see something enslaved."

"So do I, but there's really nothing anyone can do. Feeling miserable about it isn't going to help anyone."

"Strange, that you should give that ADVICE. Weren't you feeling a bit bad about the way the first task went?"

"That's completely different."

Harry just nodded, an *I don't believe you for a second* look on his face.

Susan's Surprise Defeat

Time: The next day

Place: Transfiguration Classroom

And so came time for dance lessons, as Susan and Harry found out they would need to take partners to the Yule Ball.

"We could go together," Harry said to Susan as they went through the steps. Susan, of course, had taken *Gymnastics, Climbing, Catching, Bicycle and Throwing* as a skill group. *Dancing* was nowhere to be found on her character sheet. She looked. Twice. Luckily she still had 5 XP, and put a point into *Dancing* with a grimace. This wasn't needed as far as the skill went, *Dancing* was untrained. However, this was more a *Skill Specialization* without needing the 5 rating. She just wanted to learn this *kind* of dancing, which the 1 was for, and then just use *Augment Skill* on the night. XP being too precious to waste on something like this.

"Sorry, Harry. I like you and everything, but I already know who I'm asking."

"You can't!"

"Why can't I? She has as much right to attend as anyone. Or are you going to say I can't because she's... way older than I am, technically speaking?"

"No, no," he said hastily. "I wouldn't dream of it. Then who am I going to take?"

"I don't know. Hermione? You two seemed eager enough to hug before."

He colored. "She was just worried I would be dead later that day, that's all."

"Then take Ron."

"What?"

"He is your friend, isn't he? I mean, I'm dancing with you right now, but I'd rather be dancing with Hermione. Or really any girl in our class. You two could handle it, right?"

"I'm not sure the wizarding world is ready for that. Two same sex couples at one dance? Professor McGonagall might have a heart attack. Anyway, I'm not... you know."

"Odd that there doesn't seem to be a lot of gays here. Or maybe they're just hiding it? One would think for any given population the ratio would be about the same. There should be at least one percent, or like ten people around here. I should do a study if magic users have a stronger gender connection to their biological sex than the population at large."

"Sorry, what?"

"Never mind. Just my *Curiosity* again."

Several days later the group was sitting in the common room. Hermione was reading a school textbook, Ron was building a card castle, Harry was reading, but a sports book (*Flying with the Cannons*) and Susan was reading the school paper, which was doing quite well under her decreasing direction. Most of the posts had been filled, and they even had a full time editor now, so she didn't have to do anything with it if she didn't want to. It was still her baby, and she looked it over before it went to print, but it was nice to really read the stories too.

"Shouldn't you be doing something more constructive?" she asked, looking between Harry and Susan. "Or have you already worked it out, Susan?"

"Worked what out?" she asked, looking up from the paper.

"The egg, of course!"

"Egg? Oh, you that mean eggplant looking thing I got from the dragon's nest? What about it?"

Hermione looked terrified. “You mean you don’t even know?”

“Know what?”

“About the egg?”

Susan looked over at Ron. “Is this some kind of comedy routine Fred and George put her up to?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Okay, if you’re through being insane, perhaps we could have an actual conversation.”

“She ran off, remember? She didn’t get the information we did,” said Harry.

“That’s odd. I asked the Headmaster if there was anything I should know. He just said it would happen on the 24th of February. There’s more to it than that?”

“Apparently they’ve given us the egg as a clue.”

“Don’t help her! Headmaster Dumbledore didn’t. And he said you shouldn’t help each other!”

“Yeah, just leave it,” said Susan. “Honestly, think about it from Professor Quirrell’s point of view. I’m never going to get advance notice of things out there, am I?” She pointed out the window. “So better to get used to it now.”

“You’re not even going to try to figure it out?” asked Ron. “That’s either mad or… really mad.”

“If I haven’t mastered enough magic to get through by now, there’s no hope me mastering more before then,” Susan explained. “Oh sure, it would be nice to know, I suppose, but I can always read through a spell and cast it at the time if I need to. No big deal.”

“You’ll have to forgive her,” said Sparkle, perking up. “She really loves to play up her *Overconfident* weakness. I guess it makes up for her ignoring her *No Sense of Direction* weakness. Or how she had me learn *Awaken* magic to get around her *Deep Sleeper*.”

“She’s gotten lost in the castle plenty of times,” said Ron. “I’ve heard people laughing about it. She’s usually laughing along with them.”

“Sure, but not ‘on camera’ so to speak,” said Sparkle. “Not where they could see.” She pointed out at you.

Everyone looked over in the direction she was pointing, which was a wall.

“What are you pointing at?”

“Never mind, it would take too long to explain.” She put her head down again.

Everyone looked over at Susan.

“Don’t look at me, this time even I don’t know what she’s talking about.”

“How is everyone’s date situation?” asked Fred, coming into the room.

“Dismal,” said Ron.

“Terrible,” said Harry.

“Great!” said Susan. “She was super excited to be asked.” She gave a thumbs up.

The two boys glared at her.

“What? I still say you and Ron should go together.” Both looked faintly revolted. “You’d go with another girl, wouldn’t you, Hermione?”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Hum. Interesting…” Susan jotted something down in a notebook she slipped out of a pocket.

“What is?” asked George.

“Just a pet project of mine. Nothing to worry about. I bet Ginny would be happy to go with you.”

“I can’t go with my sister! That’s even worse than taking- Wait, you were talking to Harry just then, weren’t you?” said Ron.

“Picked up on that one right away, didn’t you?” she asked, eyes wide. “Even I’m not that progressive.”

“Is our brother a siscon?” asked Fred to George.

“How it would shock our poor mother to know this,” said George back to him.

“Shut up!” shouted Ron.

“Anywho... Just saying, Harry. She wouldn’t turn you down,” said Susan.

“Yeah, I’ll keep it in mind.”

Several days later, Ron asked Fleur, and Susan and Ginny were trying to comfort him in his time of need.

“I’ll never live it down,” said Ron, shell-shocked.

“I’m sure tons of people have asked her,” said Ginny. “You won’t have been the first, or probably the last.”

“She would have gone with you, if she had gotten to know you better,” said Susan. “It’s just rather unfortunate she hasn’t been hanging around lately. Team Susan isn’t the same without her.”

“She just sort of stared at me,” continued Ron.

“It could have been worse. She could have just laughed in your face.”

“That’s the bright side, is it?”

“What’s up?” asked Harry, coming in.

“Fleur has blatantly betrayed Team Susan by not answering yes when Ron asked her to the dance,” said Susan.

“Mind you, she didn’t say no, either. Ron ran off before she could say anything,” said Ginny.

“There was such a coldness in her eyes. Those beautiful eyes. And that beautiful hair. And that face.”

“Taking it pretty hard, then?” Harry asked.

Ron nodded sadly.

“Don’t feel too bad, I got turned down by Cho. She’s going with Cedric Diggory.”

C.D. I wonder...

“So we’re stuck for it then?” said Ron. “It’s fine for me, but you have to do the first dance, Harry.”

“Ginny! Would you go with me?”

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I’m going with someone already. I wish you had asked me sooner.” She looked glum.

“Who?”

“Um, Neville.”

“I guess he’s okay,” said Ron. “Well, you could still go with Hermione. Why hasn’t one of us asked her yet?”

“You probably think of her as a friend, rather than a girl,” said Susan.

“Yeah, that’s got to be it.”

“Did I hear my name?” asked Hermione, walking into the room.

“Will you go to the dance with me?” Harry asked.

“Oh, now he asks. Sorry, Harry, but someone asked me ages ago. And...” she colored. “I said yes.”

“Further betrayal within Team Susan?” Susan said in a low voice, pretending to be shocked. She pushed herself back into the chair she was sitting on. “Will this tear our intrepid adventuring group of heroes apart? News at eleven. Oh, and it better not,” she said, looking at everyone.

“Who?” asked everyone in the room.

“You’ll just have to find out on the night,” she said, flinging her hair back and walking past.

Susan’s *Curiosity* weakness got the better of her, and she followed close on Hermione’s heels, pestering in her.

“I’m not telling you either,” Harry and the others heard as they disappeared up a staircase.

And so it was Christmas morning. With the extra time Susan had to work on gifts, the sky was the limit. Ron was impressed with how tough Harry and Hermione’s wand were to break, and that they would always come back, so he asked for that. Susan had been glad to oblige him, and had finished the last hour of *Fabrication* the day before. She had put in loads of time prior to that, to make it more like a gift.

“Actually, I can breathe a sigh of relief,” he confided in her. “I’ve always been a bit paranoid about this wand, for some reason. Like I should have broken it already. It’s very odd. At least now it’s mine, and as long as a piece of it remains, it’ll grow back.”

Hermione got a ring with *Pocket Dimension* on it, which she said was just perfect.

“Well, I’ve seen you looking at me as I pull books and such out of it,” Susan said. “I figured you might like it.”

She showed Hermione how she had to concentrate on the portal to keep it open, and that she could put about a hundred pounds into it per time opened.

Harry’s, of course, was the one she was most proud of. She handed him a small charm which looked like the Gryffindor crest, and told him to clip it on with his other ones, the *Conceal Magic* and *Deflection*. He did, wondering what was in store for him.

“Okay, cast a hex at him,” she said. “Any old hex will do.”

“You didn’t?” said Ron, looking up from admiring his now like new wand.

“Just do it and you’ll see.”

Ron pointed his wand and cast something.

Nothing happened.

“This is...” Harry said excitedly.

Susan nodded. “It’s grade 8, so I’m glad I got started really early this year. But don’t get cocky. Remember, this is not the *Magic Immunity* that I enjoy, this is my old *Barrier Against Spells*. You can still get hit by Bludgers, so keep your *Deflection* item handy. But anyone who casts a spell on you thinking it’s going to work is going to be in for a surprise.”

“I don’t have to activate it?”

“I made it permanent, because I didn’t know if you could spend 8 energy. I hope you don’t mind the XP drain.”

“Didn’t even feel it.”

“Yeah. Anyway, Merry Christmas, everyone.”

Everyone filled into the great hall for the feast and the dance. Susan, wearing a dress she had made herself with the help of *Augment Skill: Dressmaking* and *Creation*, stepped lightly down the stairs with Myrtle at her arm. (Also *Teleportal* to get home, and *Research* to do some Internet searches for something suitable. But who’s counting?) Myrtle, wearing a dress she had envisioned herself, floated by her side. Susan had her charm bracelet hidden on her person, with *Phase* and *Augment Skill: Dancing* loaded into charms. She had *Magical Ally* and *Magic Immunity* also loaded, because she believed in taking no chances. Of course, the silver ring glittered on her finger, outside a white glove. She had cast *Phase* on herself, not caring about the penalty at the moment, saving the charm for when she had to dance in front of everyone.

She had spent an hour doing her makeup, or what passed for the skill- *Disguise*. As she had cast *Augment Skill: Disguise* on herself before beginning, she had gotten a 13*. As an NPC can only get a 15 max, she looked pretty good.

“They’re all staring at us,” Myrtle said.

“Because never before have they seen two more beautiful ladies. Also, all the boys are jealous we’re together.”

“I guess so.”

She looked around for Ron, and found him wearing a snappy set of dress robes, quite unlike the dress robes his mother had presented him with. He spotted her, held his arms up to show the robes off, and grinned at her. She threw him a thumbs up.

Then Susan spotted Hermione. *Someone made her checks well tonight*. Susan tore her eyes away to who was standing next to her as her date.

“Wha fur?”

“What was that?” asked Myrtle.

“Viktor? Viktor asked her out?”

“Who? Oh, Hermione? I almost didn’t recognize her.”

“You and me both,” said Susan in an undertone.

As Susan sat down to the feast, she realized with a start her mistake. She turned to Myrtle, who was looking at the plates longingly.

“I’m really sorry, Myrtle, I didn’t even think about the feast beforehand. We should have just arrived fashionably late, when the dancing started.”

“It’s okay,” she said sadly.

“No, it’s not. I should have been more sensitive to your feelings, and I’m sorry. If only *Phase* was touch instead of personal!”

“Could you *Imbue* the *Phase* spell into the food so I could eat it?”

“No, that would mean the next person who ate it would be *Phased*. Not that the food would be.”

“Oh.”

“We could just go hide until the feast is over. I don’t mind.”

“No, no, stay. You have to eat even if I don’t.”

“Are you sure?”

Myrtle nodded.

Susan sighed and turned back to her plate. *Having a ghost as a date is daring and cool, but it isn't without problems, I guess.*

Susan and Myrtle danced, both *Phasing* through people as they did, startling them.

Hard to keep your mind on physical space when it just don't matter anymore, Susan found. They even did a number or two in the air, Susan having put *Flight* on herself. Not hearing the music was a bit of an issue, but Myrtle hummed it for her, and it worked out.

Too late, Susan thought about how it would look for those silly *land bounded* people down below. *Probably like I'm showing off again. Well too bad for them.*

“Can I talk to you?” Myrtle asked, as a song wound down. She pointed up.

“Sure,” said Susan, wondering what Myrtle had in mind. They *Phased* through the ceiling and wound up in a classroom. Susan wondered if she should cast *Darksight* on herself, but her eyes quickly adjusted as Myrtle gave off enough of a ghostly glow to see by. She looked pensive.

“What's up? Are you not having fun? We don't have to stay.”

“It's not that. There's something important I have to tell you, and I don't know how to start.”

“Okay.” Susan began to get a bit nervous. *What could she possibly... Is this going to be good or bad?*

“The thing is, I really like you,” she said, looking away. “And I think you like me too. But I think you like me more than I like you.”

“I do like you a lot.” *The Love Interest card was played mainly for the points, I didn't need it to feel like I... oh no, it's bad, isn't it?* “Is that a problem? We can work out your being a ghost some time, if that's what you're worried about.”

“No, it's not that. It's just, you're the only one who ever really showed an interest in me. And you can touch me, which I never thought would happen again. It's just, I didn't want you to get the wrong idea. We can be friends, just, not... more. I'm sorry. I thought I should tell you, before things got more serious. I thought they might, after tonight.”

“Oh.” *Not exactly what I was expecting.* “Thank you for telling me now, I appreciate it.” Susan took a deep breath, trying to steady herself.

“We can still be friends, right? You're really my only friend, the others just put up with me, I think. To them I'm just a silly ghost that hangs around. To you I'm a person. I'm sorry I can't be what you want me to be. I can't love you. I tried. I tried *so hard*. I'm sorry.”

Susan stared at her a moment, watching as silvery tears spilled from her eyes, and vanishing when they left her face.

You could make her love you, with magic. Infatuate, Grade 6. Why not do it? You have the power, don't you?

Susan froze.

Where did that thought come from? That voice didn't even sound like me, did it? Make her love me? I can't do that! That's so much worse than the Imperius curse. Hey, I made a rhyme. Rhyme time, earn a dime! The only gay girl here and that's not fine.

Get it together Susan!

“Susan?”

“Sorry. Yes?” She realized she was crying now. “You can't feel what you can't feel. I understand. Of course we're still friends. Good friends. You'll always be part of Team Susan, that's a promise.”

“You probably want to be alone. I'll go. I know it was horrible of me to tell you like this. I was trying so hard to be happy tonight, but I just couldn't. I know what you went through to look nice for me. And you learned dancing for me, and everything. But I just couldn't do it. I hope you can forgive me.”

And Myrtle was gone.

I'm not sure what I want now. I can't go back down there, now. Guess I'll just go up to bed.

And with 10 energy, Susan made a STrength check to tear her dress off, which succeeded with a 21. A distant part of her thought it might be a bad idea to leave it there, but the larger part of her didn't care. The larger part of her didn't care about anything at the moment.

And so, Susan Anne Felton, the girl who was probably the most powerful magic user on the planet, sadly drifted towards her room like the ghost she couldn't stop loving. Helpless against the one thing she couldn't use her magic to fix.

Her own broken heart.

Author's note: The Paragon rules don't really say how the *Disguise* skill works in this case, so I'm taking it as an *Assist* roll to her LOOKs. So Susan currently has a 7 LOOKs, and got a 14 on her LOOKs check when she came into the room.

Life is the Bubbles, Under the Sea

Time: The next morning

Place: Ravenclaw Dorm

When Susan awoke the next morning, she saw the tattered remains of her dress thrown onto a chair near her bed.

I don't recall bringing that back last night.

"How are you feeling?" asked Hermione, sitting on her bed across the way.

"Did you bring that here?"

"I saw you leave, and figured she was going to tell you. I won't ask how you managed to tear it off like that. Are you okay?"

"You knew?"

"Myrtle had been asking me about how to tell you for a while. She didn't want to hurt you, but she didn't want to lead you on, either. She really was trying to fall for you, and she sort of hated herself that she couldn't. You had done so much for her, you see?"

"I see," Susan said numbly. "At least she had the guts to tell me in person. Get it- a ghost with guts!"

Neither of them laughed.

"Yeah," said Hermione finally.

"Somehow it doesn't seem like you fared any better," Susan remarked, sitting up. She saw Hermione's dress in a crumpled heap on the floor.

"Ron was being a total jerk. But I suppose I should have expected it, going with who I did. But really, are you okay?" she asked a little stronger.

"I'll survive. I won't go looking up spells to burn the castle down or anything, if that's what you're worried about. I just... I don't know. How are you supposed to find someone, you know? It's easy for you, walk up to any boy and they're yours. You have half the population to pick from, no shortage there. I have to find a girl I not only like, but likes me back in the same way. Do you know how impossible that's going to be? It's rather ironic, in this situation my being gay is a total weakness, but I don't get any background points for it! I think I got shortchanged somewhere along the way."

"There don't seem to be a lot of, um, lesbians around here," she admitted. "But maybe you've caught some girl's eye you don't even know, and they were just admiring you from afar because they knew you liked Myrtle and now they can do a big confession and you'll be happy ever after!" She said this in a rush.

"Do you seriously think that sort of thing happens in real life?"

"I suppose in a world of seven billion people, most things have happened at least once, right?"

"I guess. In all of human history that happened once, five hundred years ago. This used it up, and now it will never happen again."

Sparkle jumped up on the bed and started headbutting Susan. She scratched her ears. "Morning, kitty."

"Morning. Just as a matter of reference, I think I have it tougher than you."

"Oh?"

"Sure. How many talking cats have you seen in this world? I mean, Crookshanks is nice enough, but not exactly my intellectual equal, you know?"

“I never even thought of that! Still, if you wanted kittens one day, you could have them. The guy doesn’t need to read you poetry to get that done, right?” Susan gave a weak smile.

“We should all just swear off boys forever!” said Hermione.

Susan looked at her with hope.

“I’m not actually swearing off boys forever.”

Susan sighed. They both gave a weak laugh.

“Want to get some breakfast?”

“I don’t feel like eating.”

“I know, but you have to anyway. Come on.” She went over and tugged Susan’s arm.

“Okay, fine.”

“A pity about the dress, I really thought it looked good on you.”

Susan stared at it. “*Repair*,” she cast, then watched it knit magically back together.

“Here,” she said, handing it over. “We’re about the same size. At least until we grow some more. You can have it, it’ll look good on you too.”

“Are you sure? You must have put a lot of effort into it. Or did you make it with magic? I didn’t see any seams when I looked it over. It was just one solid piece of material.”

“Yup. *Creation* magic. I won’t wear it again, but nothing stops you from enjoying it. Take it.”

“Thanks. Actually, why don’t we trade?” She picked up hers and held it out. “I’m not sure I want to wear mine, either, after last night.”

“It was that bad?”

“Ron was going on about how I was fraternizing with the *enemy*, as if attending a dance with Viktor meant I was going over to the other side, or something.”

“Did he ask you, or did you ask him?”

“Does that matter?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Well, he asked me.”

“Really? You go, girl! So, details...”

“What do you mean, details?” She colored.

“Was he nice? Did you do the Donkey Kong together?” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“The what?” she asked, shocked.

“Oh, you don’t know that one? It’s a dance, it was on the Pac-Man Fever album*. I’ll let you listen to it someplace YouTube works.”

“It’s an actual thing? And how did you even hear it?”

“Yeah, it’s real. I heard it... I mean I found out about it... Huh. When did I hear about it? At some point I guess. Anyway, what did you think I meant?”

“Never mind. But yes, he was a perfect gentleman. I was having fun, up to the point it all fell apart.”

“You and me both. Oh well, what can you do, right?”

“Soldier on.”

“Exactly. Soldier- my ring!” Susan looked down at her hand. “I had gloves on, I know I didn’t take-”

“*Pocket Dimension*,” said Hermione, sticking her hand into nothing. She pulled out a silver ring and handed it to Susan.

“Is that what I look like, doing that? Thanks.”

“I thought I would keep it safe for you. You don’t even remember me taking your gloves off last night before I got you into bed?”

“No.”

“I guess it hit you pretty hard. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I will be,” she said sadly. “Thanks for being here.”

So Susan had a little breakfast, and the boys came over to sit with them.

“Good morning, Ron,” said Hermione.

“Good morning, Hermione,” said Ron.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“I did. Yourself?”

“Oh, quite well, thank you.”

“That’s good.”

“Any plans for today, then?”

“Nothing special, I don’t think. You?”

“No, nothing special.”

“I see.”

This went on for a moment.

Harry and Susan just sat in silence.

Ginny came bouncing down the stairs. “Morning all!” she said in a chipper voice. Then she took another look. “Who died?”

“Last night didn’t work out, for any of us, really,” Harry said.

“Really? I had loads of fun. Neville is actually *quite* the dancer. I guess I have you to thank, Susan. He told me about how useless he was before you cured him. I wonder what time it was when we said goodnight?”

“Well, bully for you,” said Ron.

“Honestly, what’s the matter with you all?”

They all just looked at her.

“Okay, you don’t want to talk about it. I get it. But if I don’t see you guys all smiling again soon, I’ll tell Fred and George. And they take their getting people to smile very seriously, so you better watch out. See you!”

“Someone took her peppy pills this morning,” remarked Susan.

“I remember being that young,” said Ron. “Not a care in the world, me. Funny how the years can change a man.” He savagely stirred his morning oatmeal.

“I don’t think you’re that much older than her,” remarked Harry.

“Not in years, maybe. But in life? That’s where you get weighed down. Am I right, Susan?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Right, I’ll just be... over here, then.” He scooted down the table a bit and concentrated on his breakfast.

Several days later, just as Susan was starting to feel a bit better, she started to feel a whole lot worse. She hadn’t seen Myrtle in several days, and was going to go up to her bathroom and tell her to come out already, when she saw the latest *Daily Prophet*. There was an article, written by Rita Skeeter, that focused on Rubeus and the fact he was a half giant. Also that he was

breeding dangerous magical creatures, and she implied he was always one second away from snapping and murdering everyone around him.

“Do you know,” asked Susan causally. “After the dance, and I mean right after, I had half a mind to try *Telesummon* again and see about getting Rita? Force her to reveal her animal transformation? I just wanted to lash out, and that would have been so easy to do.”

“And you mention this because you’re feeling the urge again?” asked Hermione.

“You know me so well. If only I had given into that impulse.”

“You would be in a lot of trouble right now, let me tell you,” said Harry. “So I’m glad you didn’t.”

“How did she find out?” asked Ron. “We only found out at the, uh, ball, because we overheard him. Accidentally.”

“It’s kind of hard to miss,” said Hermione. “He is rather a bit taller than the average person.”

“But how do you get a half giant though? I mean, giant parts and human parts aren’t exactly sized for each other,” asked Susan.

“You’re the one with the shrink spell,” said Ron.

“Seriously?”

“How should I know? I don’t want to think about it.”

“Wait, he was talking about it at the ball? Were there any animals nearby you can remember? Like a bird or something?” asked Susan.

“We were trying to hide, not catalog the local wildlife.”

Susan looked over at Harry.

“Sorry.” He shrugged.

“You have failed Team Susan,” she said ominously. “I hope that you do not fail again.”

“I see you’re feeling a little better,” remarked Hermione.

“Oh, I was being serious.”

“What?”

Susan looked at her with an all too innocent expression. Hermione grinned.

“What are we going to do about this?” asked Harry.

“What can we do? She’s free to write what she wants. Much as we would like to expose her secret, without proof we have nothing,” said Hermione.

“Even finding out what her form is wouldn’t help, we would need eyewitnesses to the transformation,” said Susan.

“If only there was some magic to tell if someone had an animal form,” said Ron.

“Good point, Ron!” said Susan, getting her book of magic out. “Nothing useful under the *Detect* family. It’s all things like poison or disease or enemies or invisibility. What about the *Reveal* family? Nope, just *Condition* and *Defenses*. Not very useful. Sorry, I got nothing.”

“Your magic doesn’t actually have an equivalent to the *Animagus* transformation though, does it?” asked Hermione.

“No, shape-shift is all I have. There’s magic to reveal the true form of someone, but again, we would have to catch her first, and prove I hadn’t just shape-shifted her in the first place.”

“So could you ask the book for a new spell that can do it?”

“You mean a spell that could force her to change? The trouble is the book would be trying to force someone to perform a totally foreign piece of personal magic. That could go wrong. Much easier to cast *Dominare* on her and force her to confess.”

“I think that would also be illegal,” said Ron, remembering his time under the unforgivable curse.

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes open,” said Harry. “Any weird animals we see around the castle, grab them up like the golden snitch and stick them someplace.”

“I can stick someone in the *Pocket Dimension*, right?”

“There’s air, if that’s what you mean. They have to be under the weight limit, though. If she turned back, you’d never get her out. She would have to be animal form again, and there really wouldn’t be much we could do to convey that.”

“A big glowing sign stuck through?”

“The location for putting something in is totally random though. It could be light years away for all I know.”

“Oh.”

And so their lesson was unicorns that day in Magical Creatures, which sent the girls, even Susan, into paroxysms of delight. Ron and Harry kept pestering Professor Grubbly-Plank about where Professor Hagrid was, but she wasn’t talking.

They went over to his hut, but there was no answer at the door.

“I can get us in, one way or the other,” offered Susan.

“Let him be alone for now,” said Harry. “We’ll keep trying.”

And even more days passed without seeing him, until after the latest trip to the village, where Hermione and the others burst into the common room where Susan was sitting. She was doing some *Arithmancy* homework, and had raised her skill to a 4. She had just rolled a 19 on the check to understand it, and was writing the answers down.

“What’s up you guys?” she asked, as everyone burst in on her.

“We have to get into Professor Hagrid’s hut, right away!” said Hermione.

“Why, is he sick?”

“No, you fool, we’re gonna kill him. And Simba too,” said Harry.

“Good idea,” said Susan. “Who needs a gamekeeper?”

“Idiots!” said Hermione. “There will be a gamekeeper. I will be gamekeeper!”

Ron by this time was trying to edge away from them all.

“Oh, get back here, Ron. Really, you don’t even see Disney movies? I watched that movie so many times growing up!”

“Me too!” said Susan.

“What?” asked Ron.

“Anyway, we saw Rita in the village, and she was horrible to us as usual. I’m not going to take any more, we’re getting our real professor back.”

Susan snapped her book shut. “I thought you would never ask. *Teleportal*.”

The swirling energies appeared, opening to a scene inside the hut. Headmaster Dumbledore sat there, calmly sipping tea as the hole in the air opened behind him.

“Someone to see you, I think, Rubeus,” he announced without looking behind him. He took another sip of his tea.

And so the gang spent some time persuading Rubeus to return to teaching their class, and he reluctantly agreed.

“And it’s a good thing,” said Susan. “You would have looked very silly floating out of this place to your lesson. I would do it, make no mistake.”

“She would, too,” said Harry.

“I know she would,” said Rubeus.

“Good. With that settled, I have another friend to make see reason today. If you’ll excuse me?” She stepped back through a *Teleportal* to a broom closet she knew as a good point to keep it away from prying eyes. “I’ll leave this open for you all, save you walking back to the castle. It’ll collapse when you’re all back. See you later.”

“Myrtle!” Susan called, stepping into her haunt. “I know you’re here, so you may as well come out.”

“Susan?” said a quiet voice, peaking around the stall.

“You know anyone else as loudmouthed as me? Are you going to show yourself around school again, or am I going to have to smack some sense into you too?”

“Too?”

“Yup. Just got back from talking to Professor Hagrid about that article Rita wrote. Which you would know, if you weren’t hiding in here.”

“I still feel terrible about what I said.”

“I won’t condemn you for telling me the truth. You should know me well enough to know that.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Mad? I was never mad. Not at you, anyway. I saw what I wanted to see, and I should have known better. It was my fault for turning you into something you weren’t in my head. But I meant what I said before, we’re still friends. We just can’t be anything more than that. If that’s what I have to accept to keep you around, then that’s what I’ll accept. It’s as easy as that.”

I say it’s that easy, but it really isn’t. It’s going to take some time for me to heal. But I think this is a good first step, and a good lesson for me. Ask someone their orientation before creating a little fantasy world in your head where you’re together, when you’re really not.

“Are you sure you aren’t plotting some horrible revenge upon me?”

“You know I don’t operate like that. If I’m going to do something to you, it’s going to be to your face, loudly, so everyone can see. I don’t do back alley, cloak and dagger type stuff.”

Myrtle came out the rest of the way. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too. Now come on, no more sulking. I’m the one that should be sulking anyway.”

“I guess if you’re okay...”

Not really, but I’ll take a half a loaf over none, I guess.

All too soon, it was time for the second challenge. Ron, Hermione and Harry started a campaign to devour every book in the library, it seemed to Susan. They were obviously looking for something specific, but she had no idea what.

“They seem rather frantic about it,” Sparkle remarked as they both watched them, invisible. They were both too far away to hear what they were discussing, as Susan didn’t want any hints before the day. Sparkle was in Susan’s arms so they didn’t get separated.

“What in the world is the second task that has sent them into this tizzy?”

“What I want to know is, shouldn’t he be working it out himself? That is the rule, right? And Hermione for one is a pretty good stickler for rules.”

“I suppose they could look for spells in general, then casually mention to him to read over a certain book, that just coincidentally has the right spell they need.”

“At least they are looking for a proper magical solution this time. Not just ‘get a broomstick and hope for the best’ like last time.”

“You got that right! Still, I really hope it won’t be me rescuing Harry again this time.”

“What, you want him to dramatically rescue you?”

“Wouldn’t that be a reversal!” Susan said. “Harry Potter, saving me! Oh, the shame of it!” She had to leave the library rather quickly after that, as her howls of laughter were attracting attention.

The evening before she was told to meet at the lake at 9:30 the next morning.

“The lake?” she said. “That’s an odd place to be that early in the morning. The lake will be there at 10:30, still, right?”

“I’m just delivering the message,” said the older girl who had been sent to find her.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Good luck.”

At 9:20, Harry hadn’t arrived, and Susan was wondering if he hadn’t come up with any solutions to whatever the lake problem was. At 9:25 he appeared, running towards the dock, where boats were being launched. The magical screens again floated in the air, above huge platforms that had been constructed to stick out of the water. Each was tracking a different champion, and each, magnified on the screens, looked nervous. Susan was looking around, wondering what the heck she was doing here. She had her standard complement of spells loaded into her bracelet, and was wearing a bathing suit under her clothes, just in case. She had checked her cards, and saw she had 7: *Success*, 24: *Retry* and 46: *It’s not as bad as it looks*.

It doesn’t take Always Prepared to know that if someone says ‘be down at the lake’ that one wear a bathing suit. Still, why are we doing this task in February, when it’s still, you know, winter? That water must be near freezing! Good selection of cards, too. That Retry will come in handy, given I have no XP anymore. Why did I spend my last 4 on Arithmancy? Stupid! And a success is always good.

Suddenly a new card appeared, and somehow Susan knew Sparkle had given it to her. *An XP bonus, thanks Sparkle!* She played it, and a 2 appeared under her “EXP” box.

“Welcome to the second task!” said Ludo, his voice magically booming. “Last night, something was taken from each of our champions. At least, that was the original plan. Due to some discussion about the safety of all concerned,” he looked over at Albus, who had on an innocent expression, “The original plan has been modified. Rather than going down to get a person, each champion must retrieve a banner, like this one.” He held up a banner with *Ludo Bagman* written on it.

What? Some actual sense was used for this? Astonishing!

Susan looked over at Albus and gave him a thumbs up, and he nodded his head once back.

“They will have one hour to return once the task begins. I wish them all luck.”

He muttered a charm, and his voice went back to normal levels. “The same restrictions are being placed on you, Susan. You have to go down there as well.”

“It’s just as well,” she replied, pulling off her clothes and sticking them into her *Pocket Dimension*. “I would have to see the banner to bring it to myself anyway.” She shivered, wishing she had learned *withstand weather* but figuring she wouldn’t be exposed long.

“On the count of three then!”

A huge 0 appeared on the screens, and then went up to 1. Then 2. Then 3, and the cannon went off. Everyone but Susan jumped, or was pushed in Harry’s case, into the water. Susan shook her head.

Now, they won’t have put them very far, swimming speed is greatly reduced next to running speed. Maybe 40 meters that way, and then straight down? That should do it.

“Are you going?” asked Ludo.

“Just giving them a little head start, it’s only sporting,” Susan replied. “But if you insist. *Flight. Darksight,*” she said in succession, touching two of her five charms. She hopped down off the platform and hovered just atop the water, making it look like she was walking on water.

Still, I probably should have bought off No Sense of Direction by now. She took off “walking,” wondering how to compensate for this. I suppose just heading down is fine, but I won’t be able to really tell once I go underwater, which way is down if I’m Phased. I need to somehow get down to the bottom without getting lost. After that, just look around for some kind of beacon or something. They’re only giving us an hour, it can’t be that hard to find, right? In reality though, Phase just keeps me from getting wet. Wet and cold. I could tell easier if I wasn’t Phased, but colder. Which is more of a concern right now?

Susan mentally reviewed her options, looking down. She reviewed the objects she could pull from her *Pocket Dimension*.

“Ah, of course!” she exclaimed, brightening. She stopped walking and looked around.

This would seem to be far enough.

Susan stuck her hand into her *Pocket Dimension* again, pulling out the large iron keg that held the basilisk venom from her first year. *This will sink nicely.* She had Albus enchant the container to be proof against the acidic nature of the venom, it had eaten through her first keg rather rapidly. The walls of it were still a centimeter thick, and it weighed a ton. “*Light,*” she cast on it, making it light up. *Now, does Phase protect me from needing to breathe? I’ve only ever done it in air. Oh well, I’m only at a -1 so far.*

“*Breathe Water,*” she cast, taking care of that problem one way or the other. She then heaved the glowing jar into the air and touched her third charm. “*Phase,*” she said, watching it *plunk* into the water and sink.

Susan followed it down. She looked around with interest, and saw the rock shelf the platforms were sitting on in the distance.

It’s not empty down here at all! I could have found my way, I bet. Oh well.

She felt she needed to make a LUCk check for some reason, and was startled. *Have I ever had to make a LUCk check before? I bet it’s important, and my LUCk of 4 might not cut it.*

She “rolled.”

Eleven, that’s not too bad. One from my maximum, anyway. You know what, I’m spending the Success card, this is too important to take the chance on. The 7 disappeared from the “cards” box on her sheet.

And so, as luck would have it, Susan saw not only saw the mermaid city come into view, she seemed to be right on top of it, and floated down with the jar. It came to rest on the bottom of the lake, and she looked at all the aquatic creatures looking at her. They were not the “half

maiden” creatures of legend, but much more animalistic. They also carried weapons, and Susan wondered how they made them down here.

She saw a bunch of them probably singing, and realized that would have led her straight here as well. They were swaying and opening their mouths as one would while singing, anyway.

I guess they did think it through. Now, do I drop Phase, get wet and nearly frozen, cut the banner off, and just fly out of here? Or do I fly up, drop Phase when I'm almost out of the water, and use Retrieval now that I've seen it? They did say I couldn't wish it into my hand. I'll have to get wet.

Susan ended *Phase*, then cut the banner loose with *Cut*. *Mermaid song washed over her, and she had to make a RESolve check to not get drawn closer to them. Ah, they really wanted us to get drawn here, huh?* She grabbed the jar of venom, *they might move it, and then Retrieval wouldn't work*, and started back up. Even she couldn't get lost “flying” through the water straight up, it seemed as if she was flying past some low hills until she burst out of the water with the banner.

“And our first champion is out of the water with her banner in... just under five minutes.”

There was no applause. In fact there was some booing, but Susan saw it was from the Slytherin students. *Wa-Waa.*

Now what would happen if I placed a Teleportal just so, one end under the water, the other end a couple of meters up above them?

Susan, however, did not give into this fantasy, and calmly “walked” across the water again. She gave a little hop, and was back on the platform, shivering.

Should have borrowed Ron's Withstand Weather charm.

She stopped maintaining the *Light* spell, and it went away. She put the jar back in the *Pocket Dimension* and saw Hermione making her way over.

“That seemed a bit easier than the dragon thing,” she remarked, pulling out her wand. “I would have expected them to get harder.” She swished her wand around, casting a spell without asking, and Susan hastily cried “*Immunity*” as Hermione cast, touching her forth charm.

Hermione looked shocked, and Alastor had his wand out, and was pointing it at her.

“I just wanted to dry you off!” she protested.

“You can't just run over here and start casting spells on me, you know. You could have been the person that put my name in the cup, now polyjuiced, and coming over here to kill me!”

“Honestly,” said Hermione, turning to go.

“Stay where you are, Missy,” said Alastor harshly. “Susan isn't wrong. In fact, I'm giving her ten house points for reacting like she did. Though I would have done an offensive spell, not a defensive one.”

“What if I had been wrong?”

“I didn't say a lethal one. Interesting that's where your mind went to, though. There's hope for you yet.”

“She's been with me all morning,” said Ron, hurrying up. “She can't be someone else.”

“Unless you're someone else, too,” he said.

“I can clear this up,” said Susan. “*Telesummon!*” she cast, and Hermione disappeared with a squeak, only to reappear on the other side of her. “She's herself. I got the real one,” she said to Alastor.

“An interesting method. If you're sure then.” He reluctantly put his wand away.

“Sorry, but I had to be sure,” said Susan.

“He’s rubbing off on you,” she said, glaring at Alastor. “Do you mind if I now dry you off?”

Susan dropped all the rest of her spells, and weight returned. “Sure thing.”

She pulled on her clothes while the other champions struggled to get down to the flags. “As I was saying, the merpeople didn’t even attack you. It hardly seemed a challenge at all.”

“You’re right. Though my *No Sense of Direction* gave me a bit of a scare there for a moment.”

Albus came over to her, still watching the screens. “Not flying off today, then?”

“Why bother? They realize how pointless my score is. I still say I shouldn’t be scored at all.” She pointed up to the stands. “I guarantee you the others will get cheers when they finally emerge.”

“Possibly.”

“I have to commend you on your use of non-living objects. You really were going to kidnap people and put them down there?”

“That was the original plan, yes.”

“And may I ask who came up with that cockamamie caper?”

Albus’ lips moved silently. She thought he said cockamamie? “Our resident announcer,” he finally said.

“Right. Make things a little more exciting, right? I’m sure that’s the kind of thinking that got people killed doing this tournament before.”

Albus just nodded.

“What did Harry do, anyway? He couldn’t have put a spell on himself, you guys don’t have many of those,” she asked Hermione.

“I have no idea. Professor Moody found us in the library and made us leave. Harry hadn’t found anything at that point, so I don’t know what he ended up doing.”

“He seems to have gills,” Susan remarked. “And I know potions were forbidden because I asked about that. I’ll be interested to see what he has to say.”

She started reloading the spells into her charm bracelet, this wasn’t over until Ursula sang.

Fleur was next up, she had cut through the water like she was born there, and she climbed out with her banner. She got a lot of applause, and Albus looked over at Susan with an *I told you so* look.

Fleur came over to Susan, a blanket around herself.

“I have to thank you again,” she said to Susan, softly. “If you hadn’t healed my wounds before this all started, I would have been in real trouble.”

“They would have healed by this time though, right? It’s been months!”

“Most wounds caused by magical creatures don’t heal up very well without magical healing. I don’t know what attacked me, so I can’t say if they would still be there or not.”

“Plus, you would have had some ugly scars to explain.”

“That is true.”

And with that, Harry and Viktor came up at about the same time, to much wilder applause.

“What was I worried about?” Susan asked no one in particular. “You have some explaining to do about gills, though,” she said to Harry.

Albus came over to her. “The scores are going to be announced. I take it you maintain indifference in the matter?”

“Quite correct.”

“Then I shall tell you this. The third and final task will take place on the 24th of June. You’ll be told the task a month beforehand to prepare.”

“Thank you Headmaster,” Susan said gratefully. “*Teleportal*.” A hole opened behind her into the castle, and she stepped through. “Anyone else for the Susan Express? No? Good job down there, Harry. See you later.”

The portal closed.

Back in her room, she examined the egg after taking it out of her *Pocket Dimension*.

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” asked Myrtle, floating over to her.

“You got back here fast! Or didn’t you go watch?”

“No, you were right. Ghosts can travel quickly when they want to.”

“Ah, I see. I just thought I would look it over, now that I’ve finished the task this so called clue was about. What was the clue? It looks like an egg to me. That doesn’t have anything to do with the lake, or merpeople.”

“Why do you always do things backwards? It opens. I watched Harry figure it out not long ago. I think someone gave him a hint though, maybe Professor Moody. He was always asking if Harry had worked it out yet. If you open it underwater there’s a song that plays, and that was the clue.”

“I see.” She stuck it back again. “Bizarre. And I learned that *Shrink* spell for nothing, I guess. Oh well. It’ll come in handy at some point I’m sure.”

“What’s the plan now?”

“It’s only 10:30, I’m not sure. Maybe something will attack me now that I’m alone in the castle, relieve my boredom a bit.”

“What’s that?” shouted Myrtle, pointing behind Susan.

She whirled.

*No really, go look it up

Clues and ‘Tudes

Time: The next day

Place: Common Room

“So how did the other champions do it?” asked Myrtle. “They didn’t seem to need to eat anything nasty before they went in the lake.” She sighed. “What I wouldn’t give to eat something, no matter how nasty.”

Susan was still a bit miffed at Myrtle for tricking her the day before. She had almost blown out the castle wall with *Thrust* before she realized Myrtle was laughing at her. However, she was interested in the answer.

“Bubble head charm,” said Hermione. “But I can’t figure out how they stayed down so long. They would have used up the oxygen right away in a space that small.”

“Is there some kind of air freshening charm?” asked Ron.

Hermione looked over at him, stunned.

“What, have I got something on my face?”

“No, that’s the answer. That’s what we did wrong, Harry!” said Hermione excitedly. “We were looking for one spell to the job, not a combination. I feel like such an idiot now.”

“I guess you both just got fixated on a single spell?” asked Ron.

Harry nodded. “Hermione wasn’t the only one. I’m just as much to blame, to don’t feel too bad. What I’d like to know is where Neville got that Gillyweed from. And for some bizarre reason I keep thinking Dobby got it for me. It’s madness!”

“That would be pretty weird. A plant that can transform you into a version of yourself with gills. I’d like to try it sometime,” said Susan.

“Too bad we didn’t think to ask Fred and George how they make those Canary Creams, maybe you could have turned into a dolphin or something by eating one of those instead,” suggested Ron with a laugh. This time everyone looked over him. “What?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Ron?” Susan asked.

“I’ve just been trying to pay attention to things more, that’s all. I’m trying to find my special talent.”

“Oh, your cutie mark? I approve of this,” said Susan. “Carry on!”

“No, my special talent.”

“Good work, Ron,” broke in Hermione, as Susan was about to do the usual and take things too far. She was actually looking at him in a new light. Or in this case, a new shadow, as an older boy was now standing behind him.

“Hey chief,” he said to Susan.

“*Chief*” is what they call me down at the paper, Susan found herself remembering.

“What’s up, Dan?”

“You might want to read this- it’s Rita’s latest work.” He passed a paper over to her, holding it up with two fingers, like it might bite him.

I’m going to regret reading this, aren’t I?

“Thanks. You want this back when I’m-” She looked up, but he was already *sprinting* away. “Huh.”

“I’ve got a theory,” said Ron. “It involves the general happiness level of those at this table, and you *not* reading that paper you’ve just been handed!”

“No, I better see what it’s about.” She looked down.

Massive Cheating Discovered at Triwizard Tournament
By Rita Skeeter

When your lovely reporter, Rita Skeeter, saw Susan Felben complete the first task for the Triwizard Tournament in record time, she was suspicious. Whoever heard of putting a dragon into a trance by singing to it? But the events there got stranger- the dragon that Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived and everyone's favorite to win, was supposed to face "mysteriously" got loose.

"I checked those chains myself just moments before," said a young man with red hair. "There's no way it got loose by its own strength. I think someone tampered with the restraints."

After this so called "accident" both Harry Potter and Susan flew off, with Harry returning moments later to claim his egg. This put his time at second fastest after Susan.

Susan and the dragon then returned later, with the dragon somehow being "carried" by her in one hand. We were shown her "subduing" the dragon far away from the field, where such events would be easier to fake. Obviously this "dragon" was also some sort of fake, made magically light so Susan could perform this "feat" of daring. Imagine trying to get us to believe that a fourth year student, who many at the school describe as "quite useless, actually. I've never seen her in charms or potions class," could tackle a dragon herself. Also to note, when she zoomed off to "fight" this "dragon" she was not riding a broom, and sources tell me she was never seen in Broomstick Riding class her first year.

This event caused the judges to suspend scoring the events until some sort of baseline was created for dealing with Susan's antics. More realistically, the scoring was halted by Albus Dumbledore to put his school's champion, Harry Potter, ahead. Once it is determined that Susan's actions in the tournament are not her magic, she will be disqualified. That would mean Harry Potter would then go from second to first place. After all, with no numeric scores to keep track of, when Harry is declared the winner, no one will be able to dispute the announcement. Susan's helping him to win forgotten.

It is the second task where the Headmaster's deception shows through more strongly. He would now have you believe that Susan can walk on water, breathe underwater without any spells or special efforts, and, once shown the way with her glowing orb of cheating, descend directly to the banner she was to retrieve. Once again she had the fastest time by a wide margin, with Harry Potter and Viktor tying for last place. Or really, second place, if you keep the cheaters out of the game. I'm sure it was to the Headmaster's dismay that Fleur Delacour easily retrieved her banner and emerged before the others. That girl can swim!

The events surrounding the desperation of Albus Dumbledore to see his school win are easy to imagine. Take a person with little magical talent and bewitch the cup to give up her name. Then offer her an ultimatum- "Perform in the Tournament or you're expelled." She then has spells cast upon her by hidden wizards or witches, and performs seemingly impossible feats to distract everyone from the other performances. She is found out as a fake, the Headmaster claims no knowledge of the events, and Harry wins the Tournament. We can only hope Albus comes to his senses and dismisses Susan before any more damage to his reputation is done.

Everyone at the table waited for her eyes to start glowing or fire to shoot from her nostrils. She just sighed and handed the paper to Hermione.

"I warned him this would happen, too," she said.

“Almost as if you knew the plot before it actually happened,” said Sparkle, looking off in the distance, past her. Susan tried to see where she was looking, but it was just another table of students. Sparkle was a picture of innocence.

“I’m just good at figuring things out. I have high mental stats for a reason, you know.”

“Of course.”

“This claims the Headmaster set you up! That he’s using you to cheat!”

“I have to agree with her on this one, that’s what it looks like.”

“What?” Hermione was shocked.

“Think about it, I did things they didn’t. They plunged right into the water, right? I cast some spells, walked across the water, and found the banner quite easily.”

“How did you do that, actually?” asked Harry. “And what was that glowing thing all about?”

“I didn’t want to get lost, I didn’t realize there was so much plant life and stuff down there. I probably wouldn’t have needed it. As for finding it so easily, I played a card on my LUCk check to succeed. Good thing I did, too. But maybe I shouldn’t have, getting lost would have made it look more realistic. But then I would never have found it. I just made the thing glow so I could follow it to the bottom, as my *No Sense of Direction* weakness would have made me get lost otherwise.”

“Yeah, you were the one that didn’t care about the whole thing,” said Ron. “Why not just come in last on purpose?”

“I said that months ago, that I would do my best because I was representing the school.”

“Oh yeah. The old me probably wasn’t paying attention.”

“I’m glad the new you is.”

There was a pause.

“Sorry, what?” Ron had been distracted by one of the Beauxbatons’ girls walking where he could see, skirt swishing back and forth in a rather hypnotic manner.

“Never mind. I would like to know who is quoted saying I don’t go to charms class. They might wake up naked, suspended from a tower somewhere having used my ‘quite useless’ magic for the job.”

“They probably wanted to be anonymous for that very reason,” said Harry.

“So what are you going to do?” asked Sparkle.

“The article is more aimed at the Headmaster than me. He’s going to have to explain it, not me. Maybe he’ll have me perform magic for the judges so they know it’s coming from me? I don’t know. I hope he doesn’t, I would rather it remain as mysterious as the dark side of the moon.”

“You and me both.”

“Luckily the ministry already knew about your magic because of your work with the Longbottoms,” said Albus when she went to speak to him about the article. Professors Moody and Snape were there also. “So they know you can do impossible things. They will issue a statement before the next task that says they are satisfied you’re not cheating, or being helped by me somehow.”

“So I won’t have to demonstrate anything? That’s a relief.”

“Albus,” said Severus, “the ease at which she completed the tasks suggests she was cheating somehow.” He turned back to her. “Are you sure you got no advance notice about the tasks in any way?”

All three stared at her, and she felt herself making a RESolve check for some reason. She got a 16. She felt an odd presence in her mind.

Odd, I don't have Compulsive Honesty or Liar, why would I need to make RESolve checks?

"No. I didn't even try to work out the clue for the second task, and I had no idea what Harry and the others were working on in the library beforehand. As for the dragons, I think Harry and the others knew, but I wouldn't let him tell me, for this very reason. The spells I know are just general purpose spells, or suggested by others, or that I knew from years ago. I didn't learn any specifically for the challenges."

"And you still to do not have any knowledge about who put your name in that goblet?"

"No! How many times do I have to say it?" All three looked at each other. "What?"

"Nothing, we just had to be sure," said Albus wearily, waving them away. They both left. *I feel I'm missing something here.*

"The question is, will that satisfy the general populous? All those people saw me doing those things, and they'll be wondering if Rita is actually right in this case."

"Ah, but that's the great thing about magic, Susan. No matter how many spells you know, there are always more you don't."

"I guess you're right." *For now.*

"All right, let's go over our clues again," said Susan, days later. The group was sitting in the common rooms after classes, and Hermione pulled out her "puzzle pieces."

"Months before we know anything about it, a witch from the ministry goes missing. No one cares to investigate. Susan's magic tells us she's dead," she started.

"Then, at the world cup, Death Eaters show up and have some fun," Susan said, getting it out. "There, someone sends the dark mark into the sky and a house elf gets blamed."

"Note there are no attacks since then by Death Eaters," remarked Susan. "And Peter escaped before that, don't forget."

"Mr. Crouch initially accepts the explanation of why the elf, Winky, had a wand, but later gives her clothes and dismisses her."

"Where she comes to work here, if you can call sitting around drunk work," said Ron.

"My scar starts hurting and I have dreams about Voldi and Peter killing some guy," said Harry. "And don't forget, how did my wand get out in the forest to be the wand that sent the mark into the sky?"

"There's a disturbance at Professor Moody's house right before school begins, and he claims he was attacked. He seems to be teaching classes just fine though," said Hermione, pulling that card out.

"Next, the tournament begins here, and two names not put into the cup come out. Mine and Harry's."

"To our mutual dismay," said Harry seriously.

"Igor Karkaroff was a death eater years ago, but got off." Hermione put this card at the top.

They all stared at the pieces for a moment. Susan shook her head. "It's too nebulous, yet. I don't even know if some of these pieces do fit together. It's the last task in like a month, and we're still no closer to an answer about why we're in it. No one behaves oddly, and no new clues have been added in ages."

“There is one thing- Igor came to see Professor Snape. Showed him something on his arm, which he seemed terrified of. I caught a glimpse, it was some kind of tattoo.”

“Can you take us back there, and do you know when this was?” asked Susan.

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, I bet I could. Come on!”

So the group snuck down to the dungeons and stood before the locked classroom.

“I can open it,” said Hermione, drawing her wand.

“No need,” said Susan. “Your magic may trigger some kind of alarm if the door is unlock. Hold hands, everyone.” They did. “*Phase*,” she cast, and they stepped through the wall.

“*Lumos*,” said Hermione, as she already had her wand out. “Where was he, Harry?”

“Over there,” he pointed.

“Excellent!” said Susan, rubbing her hands together. “*Time Window*,” she said, giving the date and time Harry had specified. The group saw Igor turn his sleeve up, and there was a dark mark, moving, on his arm.

“Do you see?” said Igor in the past. “It’s never been this clear, never since-” Severus interrupted him, and Susan paused the playback.

“Well, well,” said Susan. “A moving tattoo. That’s got to be magical. I wonder, if I *Imbued* ink, and then had a tattoo done with that ink, would that allow me to hide a spell on myself, rather than rely on jewelry that could be lost? Furthermore could I use *Conductive Displacement* to create the tattoo rather than sitting there having ink injected into my skin for hours?”

“I think you’re missing the point,” said Hermione. “That Dark Mark getting clearer can’t be a good sign.”

“If Voldi has found someone to possess, as they got weaker and he got stronger, it might cause that to resurface as well,” said Susan.

“And that’s bad news any way you slice it,” said Ron.

“Not as bad as the news is going to be for you,” said Severus, stepping from the shadows. Susan, not seeing this room for years, forgot there was another door. “What are you all doing here after hours? And what is that?” He pointed to the *Time Window* Susan was maintaining.

“We wanted to see what *Headmaster Karkaroff* was showing you, that’s all,” said Susan. “And it was quite interesting, too.”

“It is good, after the thefts occurring in my office, that I took the additional measure of warding the classroom as well.”

“What thefts?” asked Susan.

“Gillyweed, for one,” he said, looking at Harry. “Boomslang skin, and mayfly wings for another.”

“Do you guys know what that means?” Susan asked.

“It means you are brewing Polyjuice potion,” said Snape angrily. “And I will know why before you leave this room!”

“Uh, I don’t “brew potions” as you well know. And what does this potion do, anyway?”

“As if you didn’t know. It transforms the drinker into someone else.”

“Oh, that one? I guess I have heard of it. Sparkle, if you would?”

“Certainly,” she said, touching Susan. “*Shape-shift*.”

Suddenly there were two Severus Snapes in the room.

“Why would I need a potion to transform myself into someone when my magic can do it much more efficiently?” asked the second one.

“I- You- What?” Severus sputtered. “Is that really what I look like?”

The others nodded.

“I never realized- enough of this trickery! Put yourself back at once!”

“Fine. Being a man is kind of weird, anyway.” She looked down, then gave a jiggly hop. “Huh. Is that what that feels like?”

“I command you-”

Susan was her own shape again. “So, as you can see, you’ll have to look elsewhere for the thief. I have no use for your ingredients, as my *Imbuing* works differently. And Team Susan has no use for a potion when my magic does a better job anyway. Sorry, Professor.”

“But you still did break in here, so I do get the pleasure of taking some points from your houses. Let’s see, how many should I take from you?”

“Why don’t you ask the Headmaster? He’s right there.” She pointed behind him.

“Do you really expect me to fall for that old trick?”

“I’m not sure I should be pleased or not that you didn’t even glance this way,” said Albus, who had obviously sipped in behind Severus. “Had I meant you harm, you would have been harmed.”

“Headmaster!” said Severus. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I entered quietly. It was the oddest thing, me walking along and for no reason at all, deciding to check out the potions classroom. Strange how these things work, isn’t it? Now, I think were about to take some points off for the investigative work done by,” he smiled, “team Susan?”

“They must not be above the rules, Headmaster!”

“I agree. They should be good little sheep, and never think of stepping out of bounds when they see or hear about something relating to dark wizardry. Because that will surely keep them safe.”

“You are setting a bad precedent if you allow them to flaunt their actions.”

He looked over at Susan. “She may show off a bit more than most, but I have never seen her do anything that I would call ‘flaunting,’ Severus. Harry obviously told them about Igor’s behavior and they came to see what he was so afraid of.” He pointed behind them, to the *Time Window* still hovering in the air. “Am I right?”

They all nodded.

“Susan, after all, does have incredible healing magic. If he was in distress, or cursed as Professor Lupin was, naturally she would want to help.”

“And this so called *Team Susan* somehow getting into the tournament?”

“You were there when she verified she had nothing to do with it. And given the problems it’s caused her, I’m sure she curses daily the person that made her go through all of this.”

“I do, believe me.”

“So it appears I am to be overridden *yet again*,” said Severus, turning to leave. “But mark my words, one day you will regret all the leniency you showed with her and her friends.”

“One moment, professor!” shouted Susan after him. “If I could just have a moment of your time, both of you. Could you just roll up your sleeves for me? It seems there’s one headmaster who was a Death Eater, so why not two? *Now*, if you please, and no sudden movements towards your wands.”

The others looked at Susan, glanced over at the *Time Window*, and started edging their wands out. Susan shook out her bracelet with a slight wave.

“How dare you!” said Severus, fury written across his face.

Susan pointed to Igor. “That makes me dare. If there’s a convenient marking that shows who is and who is not a supporter of Voldemort, I think it’s worth taking a little peak. For all I know, one of you put my name in that cup, under the order of your master, Voldemort himself.”

“His lessons really are rubbing off on you, aren’t they?” asked Albus. “But you haven’t gone quite far enough, I’m afraid.”

Susan thought for a moment, as Severus stood and trembled in rage.

“Ah!” she said at last. “How long does this jolly puce potion last, anyway? We should make sure neither of you are someone else. And of course you’ll have to have *Magic Immunity* cast on you, to make sure you aren’t under any controlling curses. Does that about cover it?”

“That gets the important points,” said Albus.

“Actually, now that I think about it, a quick *Magic Immunity* would be enough, because it would make you immune to the potion, turning you back into yourself should you be someone else at the moment. If you both have no objections?”

“I do not. Severus?”

“Very well, if it will end this business.”

“Fine.” She held out an arm. “Both at once, I think. If you wouldn’t mind touching my arm?”

Severus’ eyes shot imaginary daggers of *killing you forever* but he stomped over and put a finger on her arm. Albus, smiling, did the same.

“*Magic Immunity*,” Susan cast, taking 4 extra segments. Neither of them changed.

Susan breathed a sigh of relief. “It seems you are both who you say you are,” she said. She let the spell go. “Now the arms, please.”

Albus showed her both arms, but Severus stood with both his arms crossed.

“I’m going to have to ask you to trust me where Severus is concerned,” he said.

“If you vouch for him, that’s good enough for me,” said Susan.

“Then I believe our business here is concluded?”

Susan looked over at the others, who looked like they wanted to cast *Shrink* on themselves and disappear from sight.

“I think we are. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Oh, any time. It was an interesting experience, being immune to magic, even for only a moment.”

Severus just spun on his heel and stormed out.

“You know,” said Susan, “It might be easier to trust that guy if he wasn’t a total jerk to Harry, and three fourths of a jerk to everyone not in Slytherin.”

“We all have our weaknesses,” Albus said.

Yeah, and his is apparently Prejudice: Anyone Not In Slytherin.

“I hope you learned an important lesson tonight.”

“Yup,” replied Susan. “If you’re going to do some sneaking around, do it on the astral plane, not on this one.”

“Uh, not exactly what I was going for, but, okay. Back to your dorms now.”

“See you tomorrow, Headmaster.”

“Where even stranger adventures await, no doubt.”

Her BG Card Becomes Doubly True

Time: Several Weeks Later

Place: Quidditch Pitch

“It looks like an improvement to me,” said Susan, looking out over the field. “It also looks as though they’ve compressed space here someplace. Was the field this big before?”

In place of the normally flat field the teams played Quidditch over, the place had been greatly modified.

“Good eye to spot that, just what I would expect from you, Susan,” said Ludo, walking up. “And you’re all here, good. So, you’ve had a chance to look it over, I’m sure you all realize by now what the final task will entail?”

“It should be a-maze-ing,” said Viktor.

“I’m sure- oh, yes! Clever. Indeed, it will be a maze.”

I hate it already.

“We have to get through a maze?” asked Fleur. “But that is quite easy, you just keep your hand on one wall.”

“Not exactly. Firstly there will be obstacles in the maze, such as creatures or traps. Next, the task will not be to find your way through the maze, but rather to find the cup, which will be placed at random inside it.”

“I hope it’s not too random, it could be around the first turn,” said Susan.

Ludo laughed. “Right you are. No, it’ll be placed by a person, not with magic. We were initially going to just have it be in the center, but with Susan’s uncanny ability to, uh, out-think the challenges, we’ve had to make a few adjustments.”

“Why not just keep it in the center?” asked Harry.

“Well, for one thing, you can all fly. So between now and then you could easily just fly over the maze, sketch or memorize it, and take the shortest path to the center. With the cup being placed somewhere random, we negate that.”

“I applaud your efforts,” said Susan, impressed. “Now you’re starting to think like a Felton.”

“I’ll take that as a complement, I guess. Oh, and your restrictions, Susan. I’ve been told you can just turn yourself into a ghost like form and just walk through stuff?”

Susan felt a pang of sadness, thinking about Myrtle. She nodded.

“We would appreciate it if you didn’t do that. There’s no way you can wish the cup into your hand, because you won’t know where it is, correct?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then that’s all right. Obviously you can’t just fly over the walls, or open one of your holes in space to get a bird’s eye view.”

“What about a creature made of magic?” she asked, thinking about *Magical Ally*. *If I created another creature with a different casting of the spell that could fly, I could have it look and lead me.*

“You mean like a Patronus? No, we won’t allow any magical constructs that can comb the maze for you.” He gave a knowing smile. “That includes your ring, Susan.”

“You just know all my secrets, don’t you, Mr. Bagman?” she asked coyly.

“No, I really don’t. Any other questions?”

“Can I fly if I don’t go above the tree line?”

“You mean to get over an obstacle or something? I guess, though the others don’t have brooms.”

“I won’t use a wand, so we can call it even.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “I suppose you can fly if you want.”

Yes! My flying speed is way higher than my walking speed.

“Except you seem really pleased about that for some reason, so I’m going to retract that, and say no flying is allowed.”

“Come on! Give me something to work with here!”

“I am, I’m not requiring you to be blindfolded.”

And a good thing too, I need to see my target for most of my magic.

“I see your point.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“In what order will we enter the maze?” asked Fleur.

“You will all enter simultaneously. As we still have no idea how to score Susan’s performances we can’t have you enter in terms of points. So we’re going to grow four entrances, and you’ll all go in at once. Whoever gets the cup first wins.”

“So why did we do all the first and second tasks?” asked Viktor sourly.

Ludo hesitated, then brightened. “To qualify you for the third, of course. Couldn’t have just anyone running the maze, now could we?”

No one looked like they believed him.

“Sorry about that,” said Susan.

That night, Susan thought about the maze.

My being directionally challenged won’t matter much if there’s no destination in mind. It’s like Fleur said, follow one wall and you’ll be fine in a maze. That’s how I got out of the maze that became my base, after all. The problem will be retracing my own path. They may have compensated for the “following the wall” trick with different kind of maze than I dealt with last time. I don’t want to be stuck going in circles. Wait a second...

She got out her book of magic, and looked up a spell she had used before.

Path Tracer, grade 3. “See the path the target has taken recently.” Why couldn’t I be the target? Wouldn’t that give me real time information about where I’ve been? The line would trail from me, and I could see if I was going in circles or not.

Susan immediately used *Creation* to create a flat metal disk the size of a coin, and loaded *Path Tracer* into it with *Spell Symbol*. She flipped it in her hand, humming to herself. *That problem’s solved. I love being a Natural Magician. And with that in mind, I don’t have enough XP to raise any important skills because there’s always new magic to be learned. So I should probably use a bunch of it up learning new magic!*

It never hurts to be prepared, after all.

The trouble is, Hypnotic Field has certainly proven its worth, but that assumes I have some way of dealing with what I’ve captured. With that dragon I could have waited until help arrived. In the maze, that’s going to be a problem. I can’t keep a couple of grade 7 spells going to keep whatever horrors are inside from further chasing me. I could Shrink them, but that’s just trading a grade 7 spell for a grade 6 one. Hardly an improvement. I suppose I could learn Sleep, that’s only grade 3. They couldn’t resist, the description even says “unable to make any rolls” which would mean resistance checks.

A very evil grin spread across Susan's face as she continued reading.

"Any damage will break a subject out of the spell." But what if there was a way to get the benefits of the Sleep spell, make sure they couldn't wake up, and recharge my energy at the same time? Oh wait, there is such a spell, it's called Energy Drain. They can't roll to resist that, either. I drain them of enough energy to drop them to negative ENDurance, so they go unconscious. Even if I get too much and it starts causing damage, snapping them out of the spell, all they'll be able to do is fall over at that point. And it's only a grade 5 spell? Sign me up!

At least, I hope it would work similarly, if Harry was forced to do a thousand jumping jacks in one sitting, he probably would pass out. So that should be the same for them or for me, right?

So Susan learned *Energy Drain* five minutes later, and wondered if she should save her remaining 6 XP or get one more spell.

That's two successes, I may need them in the maze.

She paused.

Wait, why do I care? I didn't even want to be in this stupid competition.

Oh, right, because at the end of the maze is the confrontation with the person that put our names in, and the dramatic reveal of what this has all been about. I mean, it's obvious, right?

And so the day of the tournament arrived. Susan blearily found herself being shaken awake by someone, and remembered her *Deep Sleeper* weakness. She went back to sleep.

Icy cold water splashed into her. Susan jerked awake, yelling.

"My goodness, you weren't kidding. You are hard to wake up," said Professor McGonagall.

"Professor?" asked Susan, blearily trying to focus.

"Get dressed. Quickly. I'm sorry to wake you like this but something terrible has happened. Go to the headmaster's office immediately."

She turned and left Susan confusedly staring at her.

Where's Sparkle, why couldn't she wake me up. I like Awaken a lot better than Conjure Icy Cold Water.

Susan hurriedly got dressed, looking out the window. It was a nice day, with the sun shining down through happy, white, puffy clouds.

I bet it's going to be a wonderful day, Susan lied to herself. Full of things going right, in every way they can!

Susan met Sparkle on the way to the Headmaster's office.

"Do you know what's going on?" asked Susan.

"All I know is some shimmering cat thing came and found me, said to go to the headmaster's office, and disappeared."

"Super. On the day of the tournament? This can't be good."

She used her password to open the door, and stepped in. A few familiar faces and some unfamiliar ones looked over at her.

“No time for introductions,” said Albus, standing. “I’m afraid I have bad news for you Susan. There’s no way to soften this blow, so I’ll tell you right out. Your mother has been abducted.”

“What?” asked Susan. She hadn’t been expecting that.

“Open a portal to your home and I’ll explain.”

Susan shook her head, trying to clear it. “Why-” She started envisioning symbols and her kitchen instead. Everyone stepped through the *Teleportal* and looked around.

“This way,” said Albus, leading them into the living room.

How does he know the layout of my house? What’s that?

Along the wall, in the same glowing, silvery type as was left behind in Harry’s vault, hung the words:

Lose the tournament and she dies.

Win and you both go free.

“Mom?” Susan shouted, desperately dashing from one room to another.

“She is not here,” said Albus sadly. “We’ve checked quite thoroughly.”

The others dispersed, obviously looking for clues, and casting various forms of magic with their wands.

Susan ignored all this, running up and down stairs calling for her mother.

“Where is she? Who took her?” Susan demanded, grabbing Albus’ robes.

“We were hoping your magic would tell us that.”

“Oh, right. Not thinking so well right now. Sorry. Just... just a second.”

Susan got out her book of magic, turning to *Descry Creature* and looking it over again. She started casting, but Sparkle ran over with a hair scrunchy.

“Good idea,” said Susan, starting the casting over. The scrunchy disappeared, and Susan was dismayed to get the same result as what she got trying to tell where Peter was.

She slammed the book in frustration. “They’ve got her locked off, like Peter. I can’t find her.”

Albus looked worried. “I see,” he said. “Our magics told us she has been gone almost a day at this point.”

“How did you even know about it?”

“All the champions’ families are invited to watch the third event, and so your mother was included. Someone from the ministry came just moments ago to bring her to the castle. He found the door broken open by force, and these words upon the wall.”

“The door? Fine. *Time Window*.” She specified the present, and started rewinding. She saw a flash of motion and went into normal playback: the ministry man peer inside, wand at the ready. He gaped in horror at the words on the wall, then closed the door again. She went back to rewinding, and when there was another flash of motion she started it playing normally again.

She watched in horror as her mother went to the door, which was blown open by magic. Nothing was there outside, however, but a spell went off and Stacy fell over, unconscious.

“That’s no fair! My invisibility goes away if I cast an offensive spell!” she said with outrage.

She watched as the words appeared, and her mother’s body was levitated away. She could see out the door that once away from the house her mother simply vanished.

Great, I can’t use Path Tracer either.

“It seems,” said Albus, “that whoever put your name in the Goblet of Fire didn’t want you throwing the tournament at the last minute.”

“But I can’t imagine they would simply allow me to walk away if I won. They wouldn’t have gone so far as to abduct my mother in that case!”

“I agree. Sadly, it seems you have become the bait and the person most likely to survive when the trap closes. You’ll have to be, for I fear you shall be inside it, and cut off, once you win.”

“Unless these are the actions of someone really desperate, like someone made a huge bet on me to win. And they’re just coming up with a little insurance.”

“Let us hope that will be the case.”

“It isn’t. It was *him*.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because only he could create a spell that will block my *Descry Creature*. Someone who would bet on me, like Ludo for example, wouldn’t know how to do that.”

“That does make a certain amount of sense. I’m sorry to spring this on you like this. I know you must be worried.”

“You have no idea. I don’t think Peter and his boss are the type to go serving their hostages tea and biscuits.”

“But I can almost guarantee she is a hostage, still, at this point. For one your magic did not say she was dead, and why charm a dead body against detection?”

“To keep me wondering.”

“Agreed. But the second point is, I think they want something from you. They will use your mother to try and get it.”

If Susan wasn’t so distraught here she might have come up with a brilliant plan of using the shrink spell to shrink herself and Sparkle to a size able to ride in Albus’ pocket. He would then be *Shape-shifted* into her, and they would cast the magic to make it look like she was alone, and running the maze. That would fool the perpetrators. Once they revealed themselves, Albus could reveal *himself*, arrest them, and march them into the ministry for trial. Problem- Solved. Too bad she’s not thinking straight at the moment, it would have been a very good plan.

Albus, of course, can’t come up with plans like that because as powerful as he is, strictly speaking he’s an NPC.

“So now what? We just have the final event as normal?”

“The words imply you must *win*, not just *finish* the tournament. If we call it off, or tell the others to do less than their best, I’m afraid that will be breaking the restriction they have placed on us.”

“There must be something we can do!”

“I can only think of one thing- win.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Sparkle, two hours later. Susan was pacing the Headmaster’s office, awaiting any word of her mother being found. *After all, they may have been so obsessed with me not finding out, they made some elementary mistake a wanded spell would discover.*

“What?”

“In the maze. I’m coming with you.”

“Of course you’re coming with me! You think I’m crazy? I’m not going to go in there without all the firepower I can muster.”

“As long as that’s clear. And stop pacing, you’ll only get your 5% energy back during *light activity* after all, and you’re pacing pretty strenuously there. I know you used a lot of energy opening portals and *Time Window* and casting *Descry* and all that.”

“I’ll be fine. First monster I see is going to get a one-two combo of *Hypnotic Field* and *Energy Drain*.”

“You learned *Energy Drain*?”

“Yeah, just last night. In fact, how much XP do you have? You should look for some spells to learn if you have spare XP.”

“Good idea. Let me see the book.”

“This *Combust* spell, you know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just curious. I was thinking if we were fighting wizards, destroying their wands would be a nice start, and end, to the battle. So I was thinking *Destruction*, but wands are made of wood.”

“But they could probably be spelled to not burn. Peter knows I can set things on fire, after all. Even if the wand itself couldn’t have a spell cast on it, I bet a bracelet of *No Oxygen* could be created and worn on the wand hand. That would keep it from catching fire.”

“You have a point. *Destruction* just blows crap up. I’ll keep looking.”

“*Attract Magic* might be fun. Turn any spell cast at us back on the caster!”

“Except that’s the same problem as *Reflection*, we don’t know what their casting checks might be. Their skill could be measured from one to a hundred for all we know.”

“Oh, right.”

“What cards do we have? We must have gotten new ones.”

“Oh yeah.” They both get out their sheets. “I got some nice combat cards, a *Power Overwhelming* which could come in handy given how I cast spells, a *Missed Me*, very nice for combat, and an *Adrenaline Boost* giving me 1/8 my energy back. Lame, I’ll take the 2 XP.” The card vanished and 2 points appeared on her card.

“I have some interesting ones,” said Sparkle. I’ll turn in my *What a Rush* because if a cat is increasing a physical stat, something is really, really wrong. I’ll take the XP instead.” That happened. “As for my other two cards, I’ll get two for one, with card 40, *Get ‘em While They’re Hot*, and then take that card back and play it again, Sam, with 38, *Gimme Gimme!* That leaves me with *Extra Action*, *Unfailing Resolve*, *Critical Strike* and... *ugh, Mutiny.*”

“Play it, I dare you.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think the companion will betray her master, thank you.”

“Good choice.”

“We can play cards on other people, right? Think we could play it on Peter if we see him, make him betray Voldemort?”

“I don’t think it works like that.”

“Pity.”

“Okay, I got it.”

“What did you decide?”

“With the extra XP I got from the *What a Rush* card I can learn two spells: *Destruction* and *Elemental Line: Ether*.”

“*Elemental Line*, huh?”

“Yeah. Imagine snaking a line across a doorway as a trap, or surrounding a bad guy with a twisty circle of lines he has to cross multiple times to escape from. Being *Ether* it has a chance to make the target into a ghost temporarily, or shunt them into Purgatory forever! What’s not to like? It was either that or *Line of Protection* but I think this one is better.”

“That would be another way to non-lethally take someone down. I like it.”

“Glad you approve. Now it’s time for some KNOwledge checks.”

Sparkle got a 15 and a 13, enough to learn both spells, and they both went back to waiting for any news.

Which they did not receive, and that evening, both went down to the playing field with Albus. Sparkle was in her fairy shape, peaking out of a pocket of Susan’s robe. Susan had *Magic Immunity*, *Magical Ally*, *Darksight*, *Acceleration*, and *Energetic Accumulation* loaded into her bracelet. She was going to activate most of them once the task began, to be maintained until *she was safely standing back outside the maze*. Her friends were waiting for her.

“Where have you been all day!?” asked everyone.

“Sorry, I can’t talk about it,” Susan replied.

“Headmaster Dumbledore said you were preparing for the maze and shouldn’t be disturbed. Is everything all right?” asked Hermione. “You’ve never prepared this long for anything!”

“Everything will be fine,” said Susan, wishing she had put points into *Deception* rather than *Persuasion*.

“Good luck,” said Ron. “We’ll be cheering for both of you.”

“Thanks,” said Susan simply. She went over to her starting position, and the others looked over at her, concerned.

Harry shrugged and went over to his. Magical screen floated over the maze, showing each person and slowly floating so each could be seen by everyone.

Ludo announced the task would begin, and the cannon fired.

All four raced into the maze.

“*Darksight*, *Acceleration*, *Energetic Accumulation*,” Susan said, touching each of her charms in turn. She pulled out her coin and said “*Path Tracer*,” and was relieved to see a line extending from where she had been when she looked over her shoulder. She tossed the coin, it didn’t matter anymore.

*Whoever came up with Spell Symbol should be given a medal. I'd kiss them even if it was
guy!*

Now to find the competition, and eliminate it.

Running The Maze
 Time: Seconds Later
 Place: The Maze

Susan's plan was simple, direct, and capitalized on her recently learned spells. With no room for error, she was going to have to win this tournament. That meant either finding the cup before anyone else, or taking out the competition so they couldn't find the cup, and searching for it at her leisure.

Accelerated as she was, she had a good chance of doing either of those things.

She ran headlong into a Skrewt and skidded to a stop. She grinned.

Time to put my plan- one problem, I don't think they have eyes.

She threw herself to one side as a pincer went to grab her. She easily avoided it.

"I'm taking the full time," she said to Sparkle.

"Got it!"

Time for plan "B" then. "Shrink," Susan cried, putting 6 energy into the spell and taking the full 6 delay to cast it. The Skrewt shot fire at her, but Susan trusted Sparkle to take care of it.

"Deflection!"

The fire very nearly reached her, and Susan flinched back a little as magical energies solidified before her, blocking the heat and flames.

Susan's spell went off, getting a 15. The Skrewt shrunk down by 5 size modifiers, to a -3. That made it the size of a house cat, but it didn't seem to notice.

Right, no eyes.

It attacked again with a pincer but she easily took a step and avoided it.

"Now what?" asked Sparkle.

"Glad you asked. *Immobilize!*" Susan cast instantly, trusting to her *Acceleration* bonus for being a Mercury spell to get it off.

The Skrewt busted free.

"The heck?" both of them said at once.

"Take the time, I'll watch it," said Sparkle.

Susan began casting again. She took the full time of 5 segments, and the Skrewt attacked again. Sparkle, not bothering to put more than 1 energy in, was shocked when the Skrewt's claw sliced through the *Deflection* and hit Susan in the foot for 1 damage.

"Ow!"

"Sorry! Trying to save energy. I didn't think this thing would be so tough."

"Immobilize!" Susan got a 26 this time, and the Skrewt was wrapped up tight.

"Sheesh, that was annoying," said Susan. "Trust me to run into the thing that doesn't have eyes right away. Energy time!"

She touched a finger to the bundle and cast *Energy Drain*, getting a 12. She got no energy.

"I am really starting to hate this creature," she remarked, taking a step away from it.

"Elemental Burst: Knockout!"

Being *Knockout* and a smaller creature, the damage was multiplied by 2 and then again by 4. This meant 64 damage to the body, and the Skrewt stopped moving.

“Thank you!” shouted Susan to the sky, releasing the *Immobilize* and finally draining the creature of energy. She had to be careful and only drained for three actions, because she didn’t know how much energy the creature had. She didn’t want to kill it, after all. She took back 15 energy and now had more than her maximum.

“Shall we continue?”

“Indeed!” said Sparkle.

Susan tediously repeated this procedure for another 2 creatures she met in the maze, (with eyes, and low REASON scores) until she came upon Fleur.

“I’m sorry about this,” she said.

Fleur leveled her wand.

“About what?”

Magical circles appeared underneath both of them. Susan decided she would cast wordlessly, as Fleur didn’t know she could do that. She always cast her spell verbally, because of the -4 penalty. *But Fleur probably won’t attack until she hears me say something, so if I don’t say anything, I can probably take the full time. It’s only 1.75 seconds. She can’t beat me.*

“What are you doing? Stop it!”

And there we have it. Hypnotic Field.

The Hypnotic Field sprang up, and Fleur stared into it, entranced.

“I’m not sure you can hear me,” said Susan, stepping up to her. “But my mother has been kidnapped. I have to win this or she’ll die. So I’m afraid I have to take you out of this competition.” She shook her head. “I keep having to work against you, when in reality I wish I could have just gotten to know you better. Maybe in another world. *Energy Drain.*”

Susan drained Fleur until she passed out, and Susan dropped the *Field*.

“Are we just leaving her here?” asked Sparkle.

“No, not with all the crap we’ve been running into from the wandering monster table. We’ll stick her someplace safe.”

Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to the school infirmary, and used *Telekinesis* to gently lower her to the bed inside.

“You know, casting spells on people that can’t fight back is so much easier!”

“I can see the appeal. Not to mention things that don’t have a ridiculous STRENGTH or size modifiers.”

“You can say that again.”

Susan repeated this procedure on Viktor, though he didn’t waste time talking. As soon as he saw the circle he cried “*Crucio*” causing Sparkle to hastily fly in front of his wand to save her.

“Are you okay?” she asked with concern when he was dealt with. She knelt down to pick up the tiny form off the ground.

“I will be. Good thing it’s just pain, and not actual damage. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

“What possessed you to jump in front of his spell like that?”

“Can’t be blocked with *deflection*, remember? It just causes pain to whoever is in front of the wand. So I put myself in front of the wand.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks. Did you at least get a RESolve check against it, like you would for *Wracking Pain*?”

“Yeah, but I figured it might confuse him a second longer, you not yelling out but a small fairy doing so instead. That would give you the opportunity to cast what you did and take him down. Plus, I wanted to save my energy for the main event.”

“Good thinking.” She shook her head. “To think he would know, much less cast, an unforgivable spell...”

“True. He could get in a lot of trouble for that.”

“Yeah, like, going to Azkaban for life. Think he’s been put under *Imperio*?”

“He’ll claim he has. It’s the penalty box for you my boy.”

Susan drained his energy and threw him, a little more roughly than may have been necessary, into the hospital wing.

“What about Harry?” asked Sparkle as the *Teleportal* closed.

“I don’t know. Let’s hope we get to it before he does, and it’s a moot point.”

Susan took off at a run again.

She rounded a corner, and there was Harry, sitting cross legged in front of the cup.

“You’ve just been sitting here?” asked Susan. “How did you make it here so fast?”

“I have no idea,” he replied. “Did you have to fight anything on the way here?”

“A whole bunch of stuff. Why?”

“For me the maze seemed pretty quiet. I wanted to know why. So I waited for you.”

“Wait a minute- how did we meet?”

“What do you mean? Oh, you think I’m not myself?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“You cast a light spell, I think it was. And of course Sparkle talked to me, and I fell over.”

Susan smiled. “That was pretty funny.”

“So what’s going on?”

Susan sighed. “You know how our families could come and watch?”

“Yeah. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came to see me. I was surprised when your mother didn’t show up. She knows about magic.”

“She knows a little more, now. Apparently, last night sometime Peter or another agent of Voldi showed up and abducted her.”

“You’re kidding?!” The shock was plain on Harry’s face.

Susan shook her head. “Saw more of that writing, like what was in your vault. Plain as day- Win or she dies, basically.”

Harry was silent a moment. “I see. It’s been quiet here, nothing has leapt out to attack me and prevent me from winning.”

“That is odd. Maybe it is just a bet, and whoever did this couldn’t... no, your path was cleared. And I think Viktor was under the *Imperious Curse* because he used an unforgivable on me.”

“No way! This keeps getting worse!”

“I know. But if whoever wanted me to win did it, why make him do that? No, none of this makes sense.”

“There’s one way to find out.” He glanced over his shoulder at the cup. “Win.”

“Okay, but you’re winning too.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course. Ludo said it himself- whoever touches the cup wins. We both touch it, we both win. If something is going to happen when I touch this... well, it could be dangerous.”

“We’ve gone into danger plenty of times. And you know I’m not leaving you to get all the XP.”

Susan laughed. “You don’t even get XP!”

“How do you know?”

“Okay, okay. If you’re sure?”

Harry nodded, wand gripped tightly in his hand.

“On three then.”

The world went black as they touched the *Portkey*.

The two found themselves standing in a graveyard, obviously much further east because it was darker here than it had been in the maze. Sparkle zipped out of Susan’s pocket and started looking around, while the others did the same.

Oh great, it was a portkey.

Meanwhile, Sparkle was thinking along similar lines. *Good thing we had that foreshadowing earlier or we wouldn’t be aware of what just happened.*

“Immunity, Ally,” Susan said, activating the final two charms on her bracelet. Her dragon appeared.

“So predictable,” said a familiar voice.

“Show yourself!” shouted Susan, looking around.

“Of course,” said Lucius, stepping out of the shadows. He was behind Stacy, and pointing his wand at her. “How lovely to see you again, Susan.”

“Mom!”

“She’s unhurt, for the moment. Dismiss your... friend there, and she shall remain so.”

Susan stared at him. Her mother just sort of stood there, unmoving.

“If you’re thinking of trying anything,” said Lucius, “Know that I can cast the killing curse very quickly.”

Faster than me performing an Extra Action? I’m not so sure. Still, I can’t risk him killing my mother, but I need time!

“And when you do,” Susan replied, starting to shake with rage, “You’ll have no more hostages. And nothing will stop me killing you. And I know where you live, so your mansion will be next. I’m sure your bank vault will be easy to find too, and that’ll be last. Your family will have nothing.”

I really wish I put points into Deception!

Lucius laughed. “You don’t mean a word of it! The dragon, if you please.”

“You better do it,” said Harry.

“Listen to your friend, Susan, he knows what’s best.”

Susan snarled at him, and the dragon vanished.

“Very good. You can come out now, Peter.”

Peter came out from behind a Mausoleum, a bundle in his arms and a large iron cauldron floating after him.

“The gang’s all here,” Susan said sarcastically.

“Indeed,” said another familiar voice. There was a flash, and the pale form of Tom Riddle stood there, looking older than the last two times. “Thank you so much for accepting my invitation. Wand.”

Peter flicked his wand, and Harry’s went sailing away.

“And so you are now both helpless. It took some doing, given that I cannot attack you directly, Susan. But I think this works just as well, don’t you?”

“So what’s your game? Why are we here?”

“Harry is here just in case you didn’t come,” Tom explained. “I knew I wanted one of you, but after hearing what Peter had to say about you? Oh, I wanted you so much.”

“Ugh. You’re not my type. And I can throw off *Impero* if I need to.”

Tom laughed. “No, you misunderstand. Show them, Peter.”

Mom, come on! Why are you just standing- oh, crap.

Peter moved the blanket aside, and showed he was carrying a baby.

“You’re possessing babies now? Isn’t that a little low, even for you?”

“This is what I have been forced into, thanks to you!” Tom shouted at them. “Two pieces of my soul destroyed. My followers, scattered. My power, broken. Because of him!” He pointed at Harry, who suddenly covered his scar with his hand and looked like he was in pain.

“Interesting,” said Tom, calming down. “But something for another time. Bind them both, and blindfold Susan. Peter tells me she has to see her target, that will further reduce her threat.”

“What are you going to do?” demand Susan.

“Watch, or in your case, listen, and learn.”

Peter put the baby next to the pot, and backed both of them up against a nearby tombstone. The stone flowed around them, holding them. They were close together, and as Peter tied a rag over Susan’s eyes, she grabbed Harry’s hand.

At least if we Phase we can go together. But that still leaves my mother! How are we going to get out of this?

Then she remembered. *Oh, right, he’s immune to spells because of the item I made him. He can’t be Phased now. CRAP!*

“Now I will tell you why you are here,” said Tom.

Yes! Monologue! That will give me time to think of a way out of this.

“I originally was going to use Harry’s blood for this ritual. It would keep me from being hit by any rebound curses, you see. But there are so many other ways to kill him, and something I wanted much more. You, Susan. Your power.”

“What are you talking about? You have to be born with this power, and it comes from another world. I can’t just give it to you.”

“Perhaps not, but I can take it. Begin the ritual, Peter.”

“Yes, master,” he said, speaking for the first time. “Bone of the father, unknowingly taken.”

There was a splash in the cauldron.

“Flesh of the servant, willingly given,” his voice rose as he said that, and there was a scream and another splash.

Did he just... I don’t want to think about it.

“Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken.” Susan felt something cut her arm, and she realized what he was going to do.

The baby- he's trying to use his soul, a baby's body and my blood to be reborn!

She started struggling. "Remember your mother," said Lucius.

"Wait!" she cried. *That always works in movies.* "You're making a mistake, Lucius. You shouldn't be following him, you should be following me!"

"Oh really?" he said, amused. "And why is that?"

"Because you know I'm more powerful than he is. I also have more to offer you. Can he make you immortal? Would he, even if he could? What about your family? I could make you all immortal, and give you some of my magic directly. You don't serve Tom out of loyalty, you serve out of fear. Join me, and together we can destroy Voldemort forever! Then I'll take over the ministry, with you at my right hand. Think of it, wizards no longer having to hide out of fear of discovery!"

Good thing talking is a free action.

"No more having to be second class to a bunch of powerless people. We could rule the world, together! What do you say?"

"Actually, she makes a good argument," said Lucius, surprised. "What have you given me that demands my loyalty, but fear?"

"You would betray me now, at my moment of triumph?"

"Wait, have I been helping the bad guy this whole time?" muttered Harry. "I will join you, Lord Voldemort! Together we shall protect the world from Susan's tyranny. Free me now!"

Good job, keep them off balance. You are keeping them off balance, right? You don't really mean that?

"You would betray me, if she had made that offer to you," said Lucius.

"She would never follow through with it. You know that. She's just trying to turn us against each other! Peter, the blood, now!"

"Would you allow *me* into your service?" said Peter, who Susan realized was still standing near her.

"Of course, if you stand with me now."

"NOW!" shouted Tom.

"Yes, master," said Peter, shuffling away.

"Coward!" shouted Susan.

There was a larger splash, and winds started whipping around them both. They tore off the blindfold, and Susan looked in horror as a form rose up from the cauldron.

"I am reborn," said Voldemort, stepping out of it.

What, just like that?

"Robe me."

Peter shook out the robe and placed it over Voldemort's shoulders.

"And what is this?" To Susan's horror, Voldemort was holding a character sheet. "Oh yes, Peter said this might happen. This is a character sheet, is it not?" He tilted it so Susan could barely make it out. Her eyes widened, and Voldemort chuckled. "I see that it is. Wonderful, that means the spell has worked. It seems I am now a *Natural Magician* in addition to being a wizard. Look, Peter, I have a five point enemy. I assume that's you." He looked over at Susan again.

"I'm flattered you think I'm as powerful as the combined military forces of the world," *though I suppose in a way I am, I could totally take them.* "But I'm sure I'm only part of it. Every wizard stands against you."

He chuckled. "Not every wizard." The sheet vanished. It reappeared. It vanished. "Fantastic. Now, for the main event. Wand."

Peter bowed, looking down, and held out Voldemort's wand out to him.

He took it, and grabbed Peter's arm. Susan noted with horror his other arm seemed to be missing. Voldemort pressed the wand to the moving tattoo on Peter's arm, and he cried out. So did Lucius. So did Harry.

"Now we shall see," he said, taking his character sheet out and looking at it again.
Keep playing with it, you'll go blind.

This is no time for jokes, Susan. Death Eaters will be here any second, and I still have no way out of here. I should have just let him kill my mother rather than allowing him to be reborn. I'm such an idiot!

She looked over at her mother, who was still just standing there, as though she didn't have a care in the world.

If only I knew Teleport, or Teleshpere. But no, I have to actually step through my Teleportal. Susan noticed Lucias' attention was now on Voldemort. Maybe there will be a distraction enough to let be grab both of them and Phase?

Hooded figures started appearing, then bowing to Voldemort.

"It has been far too long," he said, when it seemed no more would arrive. "Yet you arrive when I call, as you should. What am I to do with you? You have all lived in comfort these long years, while I waited, unable to act. You did not seek me out as you should have, did you? Did you believe me gone forever? Broken by the power of a mere boy?" He pointed to Harry. "You now see how wrong you were."

"Forgive us, Master!" said one hooded figure, falling to the ground beside Voldemort.

"Certainly."

There was a collective gasp.

"Not. *Crucio*." The man went into spasms. The others stepped a pace away from him.

"This is just a taste of what I went through, all those years. You should all be on your knees before me, writhing in agony for your sins!"

Wow, this guy doesn't have a God complex at all.

"Look how Peter has helped me." He stepped away from the gasping man, and grabbed Peter's chin, forcing him up. "He gave his own arm to see me reborn. Would any of you have done as much?"

"If we had any sign at all, any whisper, we would have acted," said one.

"There were signs aplenty, you fools!" he shouted. "But see, I am not uncaring. Those who give themselves to me willingly are rewarded equally."

He spun his wand, and a silvery hand clamped onto Peter's arm, giving him two hands again.

"Oh, thank you, master!" said Peter, looking at it.

Voldemort started going around the circle, naming those who were there, and those who were not. Susan noted the names with interest. He came to an empty space.

"And of course, the one currently at Hogwarts, where he remains my spy still."

Severus?

"It is thanks to his efforts you see these two before you," Voldemort swept his arm over to Susan and Harry. "But now, let the main event begin! You will now see how little power Harry Potter has, and how much I have. For I will kill him using the magic of his friend, the power given to me through my rebirth. Susan's magic!" He waved his wand, and the stone flowed away

from both of them. “Over by your mother, Susan. I know our magic can’t touch you, but remember, if we see even the merest hint of a magical circle, your mother dies. Harry, come with me.”

Harry looked over at Susan. She shook her head. *There’s too many, and until my mother is safe, I can’t act.*

“Someone get him his wand, not that it will do him much good.” He laughed.

Wait, does he think he’s immune to magic now? That’s a spell, not something that comes along with being a Paragon, like me. He said “our magic can’t touch you” is he just assuming I’m immune, or have the spell up? He only knows what Peter has told him, and I think he’s gotten some things wrong. That could be our chance!

“I hear Susan only has one actual attack spell, *Elemental Bolt: Fire*. I’ll have to come up with some more when I figure out how. For the moment, it will have to do. As our wand magic is too risky to be used on Harry, Susan shall have the pleasure of watching her friend die by hers, instead. Gather round, everyone.”

He couldn’t have gotten my spells too, could he? She glanced over at Peter. Maybe I’m right about him not understanding me as well as I feared he might. He might think casting my magic is the same as casting his magic. The words of the spell and a gesture, because that’s how I do it. He doesn’t know he has to make planet checks, and envision the formula. I’ll have to risk it, that’ll be my opening.

The Death Eaters formed a circle around Harry and Voldemort, with Susan, Stacy, and Lucius outside it.

“You should have taken my offer,” said Susan.

“Quiet,” barked Lucius.

“Your wand, Harry.” Voldemort flicked, and the wand came back. “And now we shall duel. I will be interested what spell you choose to cast.” He put his own wand away. “I have already told you which spell I intend. Macnair, give us a slow count of three, if you please? On three, then, Harry.”

“One,” said Macnair.

Okay, my first goal is distraction. I’ll call out the Legion with an XP, so I can take another action right after that. That’ll be Thrust on my buddy Lucius here. That should throw him pretty far. Open a Teleportal and shove my mother through, then clear a path for Harry so he can jump through. His Barrier Against Spells won’t work against that. The spell is opening the hole, he just has to go through it, which is not a spell.

“Two.”

I hope Sparkle is paying attention.

“Three.”

“*Elemental Bolt: Fire!*” shouted Voldemort. He copied Susan’s normal motion exactly, and not a blasted thing happened.

Surprise, jerk.

“*Stupefy,*” shouted Harry at the same time, and a red light smacked into Voldemort.

Who went down in a heap. There was a large measure of shock that went through the Death Eaters.

Susan allowed herself a small smile. *Take that, moron. Probably doesn't know how to make resistance checks yet either, or is at penalties for being recently resurrected. Figure that out later!* "For Sacrifices Made," she said, spending the 1XP. She willed the soldiers into a second ring, inside the first one created by the Death Eaters.

"Kill them all!" she shouted, and the soldiers raised their weapons. The Death Eaters yelled in surprise, as the area was now lit by glowing soldiers made of fire.

"*Thrust!*" shouted Susan, whirling on Lucius and taking her held action.

"*Elemental Line,*" she heard Sparkle shout. A glowing line appeared and wound its way around each Death Eater. Lucius went flying, Susan was still under *Acceleration* after all. She started casting *Teleportal*. There was pandemonium around the circle. The soldiers pressed the attack, making the Death Eaters step over the *Line*, and they cried out. Some went misty like a ghost and were surprised to see the sword blades of the soldiers passing through them. Harry stunned another wizard, and leapt out of the circle over his body, towards Susan. Sparkle swooped down.

"Get us out of here!" the both shouted.

"Working on it! *Teleportal!*"

The portal opened to just inside the maze, and Susan tried to shove her mother through. She was not expecting her mother to do a Kung Fu shout and strike, trying to hit her. Susan, even accelerated, couldn't get out of the way, and took 12 points of damage to the body. *Oops, I only have 10 points, I'm 2 into gone!*

Susan spent her *Missed Me* card, and time rewound a second, making Stacy miss.

Okay, won't try that again.

"What the heck?" said Harry.

"*Thrust,*" said Susan, targeting her mother through the portal. With nothing to really grab onto, she went flying, but then somersaulted back to her feet.

When did my mother become a ninja?

Harry and the others jumped through the portal, and as Susan closed it behind her, she saw the Death Eaters teleporting away. Peter had grabbed Voldemort and looked at her, possibly with a tiny bit of respect for what she had done, and vanished. The *Teleportal* closed and the scene was lost.

Susan had to put energy into dodging another of her mother's attacks.

Her mother was just about to slam a heel into her leg, and she spent another XP to get a plus two, managing to dodge.

"*Immobilize!*" cried Sparkle, casting a Mercury spell and also getting the bonus from *Acceleration*. Bands of force wrapped around Stacy, and she struggled to get free.

"What the heck is going on?" asked Harry.

"She's under the *Imperious Curse* of course," said Susan, reaching out to touch her mother. She took the full time, casting *Magic Immunity* and Stacy went limp.

"When did your mother turn into a ninja?" asked Harry.

"You know, I asked myself that very same question."

Albus, Alastor, Minerva and others ran up to where Susan was, just inside the maze. *I wanted this magic to last until I was safely standing outside the maze, and I may still need it, after all.*

“Are you all right?” asked Albus. “What happened?”

“That’s a surprising long story for how short a time we were gone,” said Susan. “But more importantly than that, we know a spy for Voldemort is here at the school.”

“Do you know who?” asked Alastor.

“Probably Professor Snape,” said Harry.

“I’ll go get him!” said Alastor.

“Stay here,” Albus commanded. “Why don’t you come up to my office, all of you, and we can discuss what happened?”

Susan was loathe to lose the magic from her *Spell Symbol*, but if she wasn’t safe in the presence of Albus Dumbledore, where would she be safe?

“What’s going on?” asked Stacy. “Why did I attack you? Where am I?”

“Mom? Are you okay?” The bands around Stacy melted away, and they hugged each other.

“I’m fine. A bit hungry, but okay. Those wizards just broke into my house!”

“I’ll have to do *Fortification* on it sometime. Come on, you can sit down in the Headmaster’s office. I don’t want us out in the open like this if we can help it.”

“Good thinking,” said Alastor. “Lead the way, Albus.”

They all left the field, where very confused people in the stands were milling about, uncertain what was happening.

“You caused quite a stir with what you did,” Albus remarked. “Where can we find Miss Delacour and Mr. Krum, incidentally?”

“Hospital wing. They’ll be fine after a little sleep.”

“Remind me never to play chess with you.”

“Noted.”

They reached the office, and Albus summoned sandwiches and milk, which Stacy gratefully tore into.

“Now, what happened?”

“I have to apologize,” said Susan. “The story you are about to hear is mostly my fault.”

“No it isn’t,” said Stacy, swallowing. “I don’t blame you for not wanting them to kill me. Doing what they said was the right thing to do, and don’t you forget it.”

“Perhaps starting at the beginning?”

“The trophy was a portkey, it took us to some cemetery someplace,” said Harry. “And Susan’s mother was being held hostage by Lucius. Then another Voldemort spirit showed up, and started rambling about how lucky he was.”

“He took my blood, Headmaster. And that child was reborn into the fully grown man Voldemort.”

“And what about this do you believe is your fault?”

“I should have let them kill her, don’t you see? I should have killed her myself, rather than allow my blood be taken. Don’t you see?” Susan was sobbing now, why were they so *stupid*? Didn’t they realize what had been *done*?

“He took her powers, Headmaster,” said Harry softly. “He got a character sheet, and said he was a *Natural Magician* now, just like Susan.”

“Oh no!” Stacy paled. “That maniac got hold of your magic? Is that what he was babbling about all that time?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s all right Susan. We can still beat him... somehow. How long do we have?”

“What do you mean?”

“His spell didn’t work, remember?” said Harry excitedly. “He tried to burn me alive, but it didn’t- AAHH!”

Harry fell over, clutching his scar.

“Harry!” Albus exclaimed, kneeling by his side.

“He’s awake again. Angry!” Harry managed. “Torturing Peter... for failing him. Spell didn’t work... Peter doesn’t understand why. Oh, he’s angry!”

“You can see into his mind that clearly?” Albus was stunned. “This has gone further than I thought.” A moment passed, and finally Harry was able to sit up again.

“As I was saying, we still have time,” Harry continued. “He took your *Background* but not your *Skills*. He doesn’t have any spells memorized, and the only source of them is your book. He doesn’t understand casting magic as a *Planet Check*, he just waves his wand around.”

Susan blinked. *He’s right. We do still have time.*

“Yes, he has a character sheet, but that alone isn’t going to do him much good.”

“You see,” said Albus, “all hope is not lost. What happened then?”

“He tried to kill me with fire, Susan’s fire, but of course it didn’t work. I cast *Stupefy* on him, and he went down. In the confusion Susan called her soldiers out, and Sparkle did... something. Some spell I hadn’t seen before. The Death Eaters were caught by surprise though. Susan opened a *Teleportal*, but then had to fight off her mother-”

“Sorry about that.”

“And got us back here.”

“Wait, you stunned the Dark Lord?” asked Alastor. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, he went down like a sack of potatoes. He had such a surprised look on this awful looking face. I’ll remember it forever.”

“Humph!” said Alastor, reaching for his flask again. He was about to bring it to his lips when Sparkle, still in fairy form, darted up over Susan’s head.

“*Destruction*,” she cried, and the flask exploded. And by “exploded” it turned into a fine ash, and a bit of smoke. A putrid green liquid splashed out, all over Alastor.

“That, uh, was my best flask!” said Alastor. “What did you do that for?”

Sparkle settled herself on Susan’s head. “Maybe it’s just my high LUCk, but I notice you drink from that flask at least once an hour. Rather an odd behavior, given what we know about the potion one must take to turn into someone else.”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“Not at all. Just requesting you don’t drink anything for the next hour. Simple enough, right?”

“Yes,” said Albus. “I’m sure you can go without for the time being.”

“I don’t have to sit here and be accused of... of... not being myself. I’m going to go get Severus, he really should be here for this.” He lunged for the door, which didn’t open. He turned back, wand in hand, but Albus was already pointing at him. Red light shot out, and Alastor went down.

“It seems your idea was sound,” said Albus, sinking back into his chair. “Well done.”

“About time someone recognized my contributions,” said Sparkle, giving Susan a thump with her fist.

“I’ll buy you all the catnip you want.”

“That would be... a good start.”

Albus waved his wand, and the silver phoenix shot out, flying towards the outside of the castle again.

“Severus should be joining us momentarily. Then we will get the full story out of whoever this actually is. We’ll have to find the real Alastor, as well. Presumably he’ll be close, so the impostor could get the needed ingredient for the spell. How much time do you estimate that we have?” asked Albus.

“I don’t know,” admitted Susan. “It depends on how much XP he got, and how soon he realizes he needs to shift that XP over into his skills. He’s going to be working magic out, from scratch, so he’ll have to get a high enough rating to cast the spells he wants while trying to research the spells he wants. Spell research is tough too. I think it’s a number of days equal to the casting difficulty, and 100 dollars’ worth of materials per day. I’ve never had to do it, my book can do it for me because of the modifications my father did to it. But if he does nothing else for the next year, and he focuses his efforts on things he can’t already do, like making himself immune to magic, he could become pretty powerful.”

“What about that backlash? You’ve mentioned that,” said Harry.

“Yeah, if he doesn’t do the spell right, it’ll blow up in his face. He would probably start small though, work his way up over time. I don’t know. With luck he’ll just give up because Harry humiliated him so much when it didn’t work.”

“No, he’s seen what your power can do. He’ll want it for himself, especially after all the trouble he went through to get it,” said Albus.

“Then I would suggest moving quickly,” said Susan. “Before he finds out what he can really do.”

The group waited then, in silence, for Severus. As they did, Alastor became Barty Crouch Jr, his features changing as his leg grew back. The eyeball rolled away and Sparkle almost sprang after it, but remembered herself.

“Who’s that?” asked Susan.

“That is the son of an Auror, Barty Crouch, who you may have seen wandering around during the tournament.”

Severus arrived with the truth serum, and Barty was made to spill the beans on the plan. He put Susan’s name in the cup, knowing she would be judged worthy. He put Harry’s in under another school. He made sure they both were steered towards victory, so that Voldemort would have his choice of them when the time came. He explained his involvement in the World Cup events, and stealing Harry’s wand. He told everything.

“There goes the puzzle,” said Susan. “My question is, why didn’t you realize it? Behavior, I’ve said. Twice even! The only way to tell someone is not themselves is by behavior. You must have noticed he had different mannerisms than the real one!”

“Alas, I did not,” said Albus, sadly. “Now, we must fetch the minister. He will wish to hear this testimony personally. I will go and get him. Minerva, Severus, I can trust you to keep an eye on this man?”

“They both nodded.”

“You two are unhurt, I take it? Do you need to visit Madam Pomfrey?”

“I think all of her alcohol is medicinal, Headmaster. We’re fine.”

He gave a small smile. "Then you are free to find your friends, who I'm sure are worried about you."

"I think I'll stay here, just the same," said Susan. "I don't want this guy to meet with any... unfortunate accidents." She stared at Severus, who glared back.

"Suit yourself. I will return in a moment."

When he did return, he looked furious.

"Albus, what-" Minerva started to say.

He held up a hand. "Susan, I often believe you do things in an over the top way. I will have no problem if, in twenty seconds, you exceed even that expectation. You will know what I mean."

Susan looked at him curiously, and Cornelius Fudge stepped into the room.

He was followed by a Dementor.

"Dementor! *Pocket Dimension!*" Susan pulled her knife out of nowhere, and advanced on the creature. It backed up against the wall and seemed to look over at the minister.

"Don't let her kill me..." it rasped.

"Susan, put that away at once!" said Cornelius. "You're... frightening this poor... Dementor." Even he looked confused speaking that sentence.

"You bring one of those things here? In my presence? I've killed dozens and I'll destroy dozens more before I'm through. As for you-" She stalked over to the creature and held the knife up to the Dementor's face. It flinched back. "Were you there, on that night, when I slaughtered so many of your kind?"

"I was," it softly said. "We call it the night of sorrow."

"Good. Catchy. I like it. It's your lucky night, because you get to escape my wrath a second time. Are you not lucky? Say you are."

"I am lucky."

"That's right. You get to carry a message for me. Voldemort has returned. He has mentioned you might ally with him. You will take the message to your... kind... that this would be a very bad decision on your part. You will all die at my hand. All of you. That is a promise. But if you spurn him, you get to live longer, understand? Side with us against him, and buy your species further time to exist. But side with him and that will be the end of you." She pointed with her free hand. "Fly away. Now. Carry my message. I expect to see you defending our school, not besieging it. Are we clear?"

"We are clear."

"Then get out of my sight."

The Dementor edged around the knife to the window, passing through it and out into the night.

Albus looked smug. "I told you. You didn't want to bring that thing in here."

"You knew she was here! I wouldn't have if I had known that. And what's all this nonsense about Voldemort returning?"

"True. All true. This man can tell you."

Albus started to question him again, and the minister's face got more and more pale. *Maybe some good will come out of this, after all.*

End of School

Time: About an hour later

Place: Headmaster's office

"He didn't believe us!" Susan yelled, stalking around the office after the minister left. Crouch Jr had been taken into custody by several Aurors, and the minister had left looking very frustrated. He didn't want to believe anything Albus had said, and it didn't look like he was going to take his advice about the giants, either.

"The trouble is, we're working against human nature," Albus explained.

"Human nature? To be stupid?"

"Yes, exactly. When people have a problem they tend to ignore it until it gets much worse than it would have been, had they taken care of it right away."

"Seriously?"

"I'm sure you've done it yourself."

"Uh..."

"The point is, the minister does not want Voldemort to return. He's spent the last thirteen years telling everyone they are safe. That the evil times will never happen again. Now you are telling him that his job is going to become much more difficult. That people will start dying again. That fear will return to the hearts of many. And so he would rather just turn a blind eye for as long as possible."

"But we aren't, right?"

Albus looked grim. "No, we are not. Envoys will be sent to the various magical creatures that supported him last time. Perhaps we can keep them from joining him this time. I must say, your performance with the Dementors was inspired."

"Performance? I don't have *Acting*, Headmaster. That's what is going to happen."

"I see. I'm glad I can count on your support."

"Our support," said Harry. "I'm sure Hermione and Ron will also be ready to join the fight."

"And don't forget me," said Sparkle, finally back in her cat form.

"Yes, we each have our role to play in the upcoming war. Thank you."

"So what now?"

"Nothing can happen until tomorrow. It is late, and I'm sure with all the excitement today you're both ready for bed."

"We'll have to find the others, let them know we're all right," Harry said.

"I have to go down to apologize to the other champions. Explain myself," Susan said.

"I have to catch up on my naps. Do you know how all this rushing about has interfered with my beauty rest?" Sparkle said.

Everyone chuckled.

"Keep up that sense of humor, you'll need it before all this is done. Go on, I have my own tasks to do now. We will speak of your part soon."

"One moment," said Albus as they went to leave. "I almost forgot." He handed them a sack of gold coins.

Susan lovingly ran her hands through it. "The precious!"

"Do you know how much money this would be sent to a gold smelter?" said Harry.

“It’s yours, you both won, after all.”

“No, Headmaster, we all lost. Harry, how would you feel if I cruelly said we didn’t deserve a Knut of this money?”

“I would say you were insane. We earned every bit of that gold!”

“Did we?”

Harry sighed. “No, we didn’t. What do you have in mind?”

“A peace offering.”

“Tell me more…”

And so Susan went to the hospital wing with two smaller bags of gold. She tossed them at Fleur and Viktor. She rolled max on her *Throwing* check, an 11, and the bags landed neatly on the beds.

“What’s this?” asked Fleur, surprised.

“My apology,” said Susan. “And I hope enough to buy a few minutes of your time to explain why I had to do what I did.”

“There are hundreds of Galleons here!” said Viktor, opening the pouch.

“We split the winnings, as really we should never have been in the contest in the first place. And I didn’t pay enough attention to see who would have been- wait a second.”

“What?” asked Harry.

Susan went over to Viktor. “*Magic Immunity*,” she cast. His eyes unfocused for a moment. “You broke the curse!” he exclaimed. “I’m free! Thank you! That was terrible, being under someone else’s direction. Whoever did it hadn’t given me any new directions, but I could still feel myself under their control.” He shuddered.

“I thought so. He was under the *Imperius Curse* after all. I don’t suppose you know who cast it on you?”

Viktor shook his head.

“Too bad. As I was saying, I didn’t pay enough attention to see who would have won otherwise.”

“You’re just giving us your winnings?” asked Fleur, letting the coins drip through her fingers.

“Harry and I are pretty set for money, strictly speaking. And after what I did to you both, I felt you deserved it.”

“Why *did* you do that, if you were just going to give us the money?”

“Where to start…”

Susan explained about her mother being abducted and about Voldemort being resurrected.

“Say this is not so!” exclaimed Fleur.

“No, if she says it, it happened,” said Viktor. “I have watched her many times with Hermione. We can trust her.”

“You do hang around looking at Hermione an awful lot. And you took her to the-” *disastrous* “-Yule Ball. What are your intentions towards her, anyway?”

“She is very interesting girl. I would like to know her better.”

“I guess I could live with that. Look, it’s going to get a lot worse before it gets better. I don’t know if the conflict with Voldemort will spread to your countries, but I would ask you to be ready. You were chosen as champions, so you know your stuff. Don’t slack off- in fact,

intensify your training. Gather friends, people you can trust. Get them ready too. I may need all the friends I can get when Voldi finally makes his move.”

“You have our support at least,” said Fleur. “And not just because of this.” She jingled the bag. “Knowing what you’ve been through, and doing the tournament besides? You may be younger than me, but I know I could still learn a lot from you.”

Susan blushed. “Thank you.”

“I am still part of Team Susan, am I not?”

“Now and forever. Thank you, Fleur.”

“You have my wand as well, and any others I can convince. I am sort of famous Quidditch player, after all.”

“Thank you. We’ll need all the support we can get. Get some rest, I pulled all your energy out forcibly, and I don’t know what that means for you guys. Hopefully there won’t be any complications.”

“Madam Pomfrey says we will be fine in the morning.”

“Good. And thanks for listening. It makes me feel a little better, knowing you aren’t too mad.”

“500 Galleons buys a lot of forgiveness!” said Viktor with a laugh.

And so came the ending feast. Stacy sat with Susan, and got some weird looks, but Susan didn’t want to allow her mother out of her sight at the moment. Not until she took certain precautions, and got a few answers.

There were no decorations, no laughing people. Everyone sensed something was wrong, after the disastrous way the tournament had ended. Rumors abounded, and again people were looking at Susan and Harry with suspicion.

“If I could have your attention,” said Albus, standing up. “You’ll no doubt by now have noticed there are no decorations in the hall, and no winner for the tournament has been announced. That is because there was no winner, only losers. Susan and Harry did indeed touch the trophy first,”

Whatever happened to that thing, anyway? Is it still just laying there on the ground?

“But you all saw them vanish from the maze for several minutes afterword. The ministry does not want me to tell you what happened while they were gone, but I choose to have the courage to tell the truth. Both of them witnessed the resurrection of Voldemort, at the cemetery where his father is buried.”

There where gasps of astonishment thought the great hall. Albus let them talk a moment and held up his hand. There was silence again.

“They fought, and managed to return here with Susan’s magic, in order to tell us of this event. Not many could have done so, as all those in the past who faced Voldemort in person died. I salute them both.” He raised his glass to them.

We got lucky. If he had stayed with wanded magic instead of trying to show off his “new” power, there would have been no distraction. No distraction and that fight would have gone a whole lot differently. We got lucky, and that’s all there is to it.

“The ministry would have you believe that Barty Crouch Jr, who took the place of the defense teacher before term began, is merely a poor, twisted man. A man who *believed* he was following Voldemort’s orders to interfere with the tournament. They would further have you believe that Susan and Harry are liars, or attention seekers, or worse. But you know they are

none of these things.” He paused. “Well, Susan is a little bit of an attention seeker, I’ll have to give you that much.”

There were a few grins.

“But the fact remains, dark times are ahead of us. Even now, Voldemort researches new and deadly ways to cause us fear. New ways to drive us apart. New magic to enslave us. We must stand strong, and we must stand together. Death Eaters are few. They gain power through fear and the inaction of people who could stop them. I urge you to courage and action.

“We are stronger than they are because they do not have trust. They have fear of betrayal.

“They do not have friendship, they have associates to be discarded on the way to power.

“They do not have openness, they have secrets and lies.

“I do not know what the future holds. But if we work together, if we stand as one against the darkness...” He looked over the room, seeming proud of what he saw. “Then we have nothing to fear. Enjoy your summer, but be watchful. They will cast the first spell, we must be ready to respond in kind.”

“So,” said Hermione as the group sat on the train, watching the miles go by. “Any plans for the summer?”

“Training,” said Harry. “Lots and lots of training.” He tapped his *Conceal Magic* item. “Personally I should have just gone to the secret base with Susan and trained there. But Headmaster Dumbledore insisted I go home for some bizarre reason. Wouldn’t tell me exactly why, so much for truth and togetherness.”

“I didn’t get much XP for escaping Voldi, but maybe if you guys can come over one at a time I’ll make you each a Dementor Slaying Knife. I guarantee a +4 against Dementors. We may need them.”

“Naps,” said Sparkle. “Plenty of naps.”

“I’m going to be looking hard for my special talent,” said Ron. “I think if there’s any time it should come out, now would be a good one.”

Hermione and Susan looked at each other. They both nodded. “We are the Cutie Mark Crusaders, on a quest to find out who we are!” they singonged.

“Not going to ask,” said Ron.

“What about you, Hermione?”

“Actually, I was hoping to get a copy of your *Light* spell, Susan. Or some other spell we have in common.”

“Uh, okay?”

“If I can figure out how your magic works, maybe I can translate some of your spells into spells we can use!”

“You mean figure out the wand pattern and phrase from my spell formula? I suppose they are both magic...”

“Yeah! And by starting with something known, if I figure out how to cast your light spell, maybe I can figure out how our magics relate, and do it for others.”

“Actually, you know a spell to create water, right?”

“Yeah, *Aguamenti*, why?”

“Better start with that one. Your light spell makes the tip of your wand light up. Mine makes a glowing ball of light, or makes some object shed light. So that’s a little different. But making water is making water.”

“Ok, you have a point.”

“Just don’t lose it, okay? If Voldemort got his hands on it, that would be a clue as to how to create spells of his own. I want to slow him down as much as possible.”

“I’ll stick it in my *Pocket Dimension* while I’m not using it.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you have one of those now. Silly of me.”

The door to the compartment opened. Everyone looked over, and there stood Draco.

“Hello, Draco. Haven’t seen much of you this year.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“How’s your father, by the way? I hope he wasn’t too badly hurt when I escaped from him.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course. But tell him this- my offer is still open. He can join me, and win, or stay on Voldi’s side, and lose. I have years of experience over Voldemort, and I know exactly how to use my magic. He’s starting from scratch, and there’s no way he’ll be able to catch up. Our being Paragons makes that true, it’s just a fact. My offer is open to you, too. I don’t know about following in a father’s footsteps, because mine is off saving worlds somewhere. But I know I want him to be proud of me. I’m sure it’s the same with you. You want your father to be proud. Just make sure you can be proud of yourself, first.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’m always lecturing you. Sorry about that. What was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“I guess I already got my answer. You really saw him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. The whole gang got together when he called, and they seemed to be afraid of him more than anything. I wonder how long a group built on fear can really last.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“If that’s your choice. I just hope it isn’t you and me across a battlefield one day, because I think you know how that would go.”

“See you next term.”

“See you, Draco.”

And so, Susan and her mother stepped through the *Teleportal* from the train station, back into their home.

“I’ll have to call work, they’re probably wondering where I’ve been the last few days!”

“Before that, though- were those moves you used on me part of the spell you were under, or are you actually a ninja?”

Stacy laughed. “All these years, and never once have you done a *Magic Sense* on your dear old mom.”

“Why would I?” asked Susan, doing one then and there. She got a 13, and felt there was magic inside her mother’s rings. “What? How?”

“Did you think your father would leave me defenseless? After his stories about the worlds he had been to, I asked him if I should be worried about stuff happening here. He said evil lived everywhere, and I should be prepared. He made two *Imbued* items for me, my wedding ring and my engagement ring. The wedding ring has *Augment Skill: Martial Arts* on it and the engagement ring has *Acceleration* on it. The *Acceleration* I of course have to turn on and off, but the *Augment Skill* one is always active.”

“So you were commanded to fight me, and it turned out you were a Kung Fu master? Super. Wait a second, isn’t martial arts trained only?”

“I went to classes before he did the ring. Once I had a “1 rating” in it, in other words, learned the basics, the ring just made me better.”

“So those ‘meeting’ you go to twice a week, they’re...”

“Classes. I keep my hand in it. My teacher says he’s never had a student like me, though I have to hide the rings when I’m in class. You were exactly right about Kung Fu though. It relies on reflexes more than strength, and with *Acceleration* on that’s the bonus I get.”

Susan tried to imagine someone with an effective rating in *Martial Arts* of a 20, moving under *Acceleration*. “Uh, remind me never to get into a real fight with you.”

“Sure thing. So what are we going to do now? This Voldemort guy, he sounds like bad news. I want to help.”

“For one thing I’m using *Fortification* on the house, like I did for the Weasleys. I’ll have to sacrifice teleporting in, but that’s a small price to pay. I don’t want wizards busting in here again.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. Depends on who can come over, and what items they want made. And what the Headmaster assigns me to do, I guess. We’ll just have to see.”

“I’m behind you, whatever happens.”

“Thanks, mom. I’m glad you weren’t hurt.”

“I’m glad you came to rescue me. You are just like your father, you know that? Charging in and smashing through any barriers in your way. I guess he had *Overconfident* too.”

“Well deserved, and I’m sure it came up way more often than his other weaknesses, just like it does for me.”

“According to his stories, oh yes.”

That evening, Susan performed the same trick, spending all her *Energy* in a single action with *Energetic Accumulation*, and casting *Fortification* on the house.

The next morning, about 9:30, there was a knock on the door.

Susan opened it, and was surprised to see Rita Skeeter standing there.

“What do you want?” Susan asked, acidly.

“The story of the year!” said Rita with a smirk. “Can I come in?”

“I don’t know, can you?” Susan asked, throwing the door open and bowing her inside. Rita looked confused, and stepped inside.

“Huh, I guess you can. Okay, let’s sit down and you can get the scoop of the century.”

“I’m all ears. What was that about, anyway?”

Susan grinned. “Oh no, endings have to be earned. You get the beginning of the story before you get the end. But if you really want this interview...”

“Yes?”

“There’s going to have to be a few provisions. Like I want to read it before it’s published. No sensationalism. Just report the facts, as I tell them to you, and leave your typical commentary for the tabloids. Clear?”

“If you give me what I think you’re going to give me, I won’t need to sensationalize anything.”

Sally walked in the room. “Hello?”

“Mom, this is Rita. She’s a reporter for a wizard newspaper called the Daily Prophet, and no, they don’t use Seers, despite the name. Miss Skeeter, this is my mother, Stacy Felton.”

“Nice to meet you,” they both said, shaking hands. Stacy pulled Susan over into the corner.

“Isn’t this the woman you wanted to wreck a thorny doom upon?”

“Yeah. But if we can get her on our side this time, we can use her powers for good instead of evil. And she *came into the house*.”

Stacy nodded. “Okay.”

“I don’t suppose I could get an interview with you, Stacy? How it feels to be the mother of the girl at the center of all this?” Rita called.

“One story at a time, Rita,” Susan said back.

“Maybe some other time.”

Stacy left the room, and Susan came back over to sit with Rita.

“So you have your mother’s last name then? Interesting. What happened to your father?”

“That’s a very different story than the one you wanted.”

“Oh, so there is a story there? Very well, I’ll content myself with what happened the night of the third task then. I heard you babbling about Voldemort being back, so what exactly happened and where did you go?”

Susan told her the story of what happened. She debated telling Rita that Voldemort had stolen her magic, and decided against it. Most wouldn’t know what that meant, and it would just raise more questions about her. She ended up saying she had caused the initial distraction when Harry was about to fight his duel, and escaped that way. It was close enough to the truth, and who was going to come asking for a correction? A Death Eater? She also didn’t mention about frightening away a Dementor, that would really do a job on her reputation.

“Which brings us to last night,” she finished. “I put a spell over the house in case they decided to come after me right away. Basically no one that means me any harm can enter, nor can it be destroyed by anything less than a nuclear bomb. As you were able to enter, that meant you didn’t mean to harm me. In person or with your pen.”

“I see. What exactly is a nuclear bomb?”

“Oh boy. Wait here.” Susan went to get her iPad, and did a search for the test footage from the nuclear bomb blasts. She passed the iPad over to Rita and hit play.

“I heard about this in Muggle Studies,” she said after watching for several minutes. “But I never believed Muggles could destroy so well without magic. Guess I was wrong.” She looked the iPad over. “Is this window thing magic?”

Susan laughed. “It might as well be, for how well most people understand it. But no, it’s no more magical than car or a plane. Just an application of science.”

“Like this bomb?”

“Exactly. I don’t think Voldemort would ever look into things like this, thankfully. He wants to rule people, not ashes and silence.”

Rita passed the iPad back and Susan shut it off. “So that’s the story. Print it if you must, but beware that the ministry is going to take a very hard stance against knowledge about him being resurrected getting out. The minister made that point quite clear before he left that night. And worse than that, Death Eaters may come after you, they don’t want it known their master is back until he can reestablish his power base.” *And figure out my magic.*

“Knowing exactly what spell they used will help. It can be researched if a father’s bone, a servant’s flesh, and an enemy’s blood can really bring someone back like that. If so, that’s partial proof you saw it happen right there.”

“Every little bit will help.”

“And don’t worry, I know how to take care of myself. I’m not just writing news, I’m writing history. Think about it! *The Second Wizard War, by Rita Skeeter.*”

“Don’t do a word count until you’ve sent it to your editor.”

“Good advice. Now, do you think Harry will answer a few questions?”

“He might. I can go get him. His guardians have some kind of burning hatred for magic, so anything to do with it is taboo in the house. I’ll have to bring him here. You don’t mind waiting, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Mom, I’m going to get Harry!” Susan called. “Rita wants to ask him a few questions!”

“Okay!” Stacy shouted back.

As Susan headed out the door, she heard her mother ask Rita if she would like something to drink.

“Yes?” asked Mrs. Dursley, opening the door. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Your welcoming manner brings a warm glow to my heart, Mrs. Dursley. I wonder if Harry is available? I need to borrow him for a moment if I could.”

“Borrow him for the day, for all I care. I’ll send him out.”

“Thank-”

The door slammed in her face.

She debated using *Phase* to pop through the door and wait for Harry on the other side. *Perhaps the more childish Susan might have done that, but the new, more responsible Susan will forbear and wait patiently. I was kind of a jerk to people in the past, them especially. Maybe I should be a little less quick to whip out the magic and a little more- Nah, what I am thinking?*

A moment later the door opened and Harry, smiling, stepped out.

“Couldn’t even stay away from me a single day.” He shook his head, mock resignation on his face. “Are you sure you’re gay?”

Susan looked darkly at him. “Rita’s here.”

“You finally captured her? That’s great! Now maybe we can get some answers!”

Susan shook her head. “No, she’s here to write the article about what happened. She just wants to ask you a few questions.”

“Wait, she interviewed you?”

“Yes. I thought it was time to put her pen to use for us, rather than against us.”

“I see. Anything I should avoid mentioning?”

Susan gave him her version of events.

“Okay. I never thought I would be doing this. Let’s go talk to Rita stupid Skeeter.”

When Susan got back, her mother and Rita were chatting about the house, and Rita smiled at Harry.

“It must have been nice, growing up, to live so close together!” she exclaimed.

“Susan was a light in an otherwise dark time, yes. I hope you’ll be printing an apology to Susan and myself for what you wrote in the paper. And Hermione? Did you write about Hermione? I can’t be sure you did or not, I don’t recall.”

“Apologize? What for? Was I untruthful in some way, Harry? I don’t think so. Now, my questions for you...”

Rita asked how it felt to be facing Voldemort with only a wand and a single friend at your side, that sort of thing. She had him describe how Voldemort looked and what he did, and what he thought the Death Eater’s plans were.

“Consolidate power,” Harry answered at once. “Right now he’s weak, with only some of his Death Eater group left to provide support. He’s not going to attack until he’s sure of victory, and he holds all the cards. We don’t know when he’s going to attack, so of course he’ll pick our most vulnerable time. He’ll let us wear ourselves out trying to watch everywhere at once, while he hides and gloats from whatever stronghold he’s chosen to occupy. When he feels the time is right, he’ll strike.”

“So what would be your advice to the general public?”

“Bust out your old notes from *Defense Against the Dark Arts* class, or take a refresher course. Get together with others and practice those defense spells you haven’t used since then. Form watches to bring suspicious things to the ministry. Brew healing potions and stock up on medical supplies and non-perishable food. We don’t know what form his attack will take, so we have to be ready for anything.”

“You realize none of that will ever happen?”

“Probably not. But at least when he does attack we can say ‘we warned you.’”

“Okay. Well, thank you both. I have quite the story to write up, so I’m going to get started.”

“Remember, I get to read it before you publish.”

“Of course. Have a good day, both of you.”

“By the way, how did you find me?”

“I’m a reporter,” said Rita as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s my job to track down stories. Later!”

She breezed out.

“So now what?” asked Harry.

“We take your advice, of course. You get to practicing magic. We can use the basement, I’ve got a lab set up down there, and the Headmaster provided me plenty of materials for *Imbuing*. I’m going to start making you a knife that doesn’t need charges. We may need all of them we can get. And not just for killing Dementors, either. The shape may not suggest it, but plunging it into someone that’s dying will save their life.”

Harry nodded gravely, and followed Susan down the stairs, pulling his wand from a holster strapped to his arm.

He was going to be ready.