Saphira's Story

by Lucario16

Summary

An EGS fan is transported to that universe and given a strong incentive to reveal magic. Things don't always go according to plan.

Notes

This story is canon-compliant with EGS until the end of Squirrel Prophet, but continues to use some events afterwards. The magic system used is slightly different for story-related reasons which will become obvious as the story proceeds. Though Dan Shive has avoided stating a year for the comic’s timeline, I will follow the Shiveapedia timeline, meaning the card game tournament in Squirrel Prophet took place on January 10, 2014.

Note that this story updates daily. The easiest way to see the new update is to scroll to the bottom on the "Entire Work" page and refresh the page after it updates (which is usually around 5 PM EST). I do not post entire chapters at once, but in ~1000-word installments. At the conclusion of each chapter, there will be a short break for me to increase my buffer (so that I don't have to break up a chapter).

I would like to encourage comments. I don't have an editor. If I get grammar horribly wrong (I'm writing a character's thoughts. There will be some bad grammar.) or there's some awkward phrasing or you don't have enough information to know what I'm talking about, I'd like to know. Also, one of the worst things as an online writer is to think no one is reading what you're writing. A hit doesn't tell me whether you visited the page once or read every chapter.

Some people might notice this feels rather like a series. I certainly treat it as such in my writing, but I can't really call the story complete until the full ending. If you want to separate it into "books," here's my suggestion:
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See the end of the work for more notes.
Awakening

25 October 2014
2:05 AM EST

Woo. Finally finished.

I knew Munchkin took a while to finish when you had more people, but I severely underestimated the time for eight people who know how to play the game well. Good thing I rode my bike tonight – there’s no way I’ll catch the bus. Even though I plan on sticking around a bit, I put on my coat and backpack. May as well warm them up while I’m still indoors. “Hey, Brandon. Since I’ll be getting home late anyway, mind if I look through the deck to see what cards we didn’t play?”

“Sure. Just don’t keep me here too long.”

When you have every expansion, it’s a pretty thick deck. And though I’ve looked through it before, I’m pretty sure there was at least one card I haven’t seen before tonight. Hmmm… was this a promotional of sorts? I pick out a card I’m fairly certain isn’t standard. It seems… thicker than normal. What’s this written on the edge?

10 January 2014
10:10 PM CST

Aaaah. Woah. What just happened?

This… isn’t the 2nd floor lounge in Lee Hall. Is this a bedroom?

Wait. Do I know those people?

AAAAAAH!!! MY HEAD!!! *thunk*

…

“If you are reading this, then you are a dragon. This is the Mymoir. Everything you read here was recorded by a dragon. If you have any questions, think them and you will find the answer, if it is recorded here. When you have learned to cope with the new information flooding your brain, you will wake. Try to gather yourself first.”

Huh? New information? Woah!

“Each dragon can sense one element of the world around them. Barriers, forces, chemicals, masses, light, sound, electricity, or heat. The element doesn’t seem to matter based on the dragon’s preference, but rather based on what the dragon will need. The element also matches a specific eye color; this is often used by new dragons to determine their element, if they do not understand what they are sensing. A dragon’s eye color will change to match their respective element when they awaken. This is also their scale color for their dragon form. In the same order as above, the colors purple, red, green, orange, white, black, yellow, and blue are the appropriate eye and scale colors for dragons.

“Sensing, by default, is a stream of numbers in a cloud of points around a dragon. The range is inversely proportional to the dragon’s magic power, or magic capacity. It is assumed that sensing is what causes a dragon to fall unconscious when they awaken – hence the term, for when they learn to cope. Understanding the numbers comes first; then, when a dragon knows what they can sense,
they can use that knowledge to simplify the information, usually in terms of something they already understand, such as a color image. For new dragons, remember that you can search the Mymoir for previous solutions found by other dragons.”

Okay, that was a lot of information. Maybe I need to learn to skim a bit. Hmm. What’s a dragon?

“A dragon is a person (in all recorded cases, a human) who can use draconic magic. If you have not heard of dragons, it is likely because dragons are in hiding of late, due to events in 1226 A.D. Note to new dragons: you can and should tell your family that you are a dragon, and what that means. You can also tell your friends, but you should be sure they are trustworthy. Just because they shared their lunch with you that one time does not mean they are trustworthy.

Use of draconic magic comes with a set of abilities which is standard to all dragons, with some small differences between them. First, the dragon form, for which this is all named. If you have an idea what a dragon should look like, that is likely similar to the appearance of your dragon form. You can use magic to shift to your dragon form by picturing it in your head and holding your objects, then giving it a small push of will – that is, activating the magic. This takes a large amount of magic, but it will also heal any injuries you may have suffered, including eating poison and losing limbs. Note that this, like most transformation magic, will take precedence over any non-transforming object, person or animal nearby. So do not use it indoors, unless you want to partially collapse the building you are in.

“Second, the sensing and use of an element … Whatever element a dragon can sense, they can also manipulate. For example, a dragon that can sense light can also create or destroy light, or cause it to pass through an object. You can use spells to make this process easier.

“Tertiary abilities include reading the Mymoir, understanding and writing in Draconic, reduced aging, magic resistance, and magic ability detection.”

I think I’m starting to understand. I wonder why it’s treating me like I’m a little kid?

“Most dragons awaken near the start of puberty. To date, recorded ages are between 8 and 16 years old, with most new dragons younger than 12.”

Ah. I… guess I’m the oldest to awaken, then. This’ll be fun. At least I’ll probably have better control and maturity than most new dragons.

It keeps talking about numbers for sensing. I understand numbers pretty well, what with all that vector calculus and such in high school. Why would numbers knock me out? Wait, hold on. I think… I… oh, wow, that’s a lot of numbers. Let’s… try to parse this information.

…

I’m very glad I took a CAD class. If I group the higher numbers, maybe I can start to make out objects? Wait, it said something earlier about color maps. Can I make a dynamic color map, like a topographical map or something?

“Even for dragons that do not fully grasp their senses, it is possible to change their understanding of the information to learning something easier. If there is only one number per point, the sense is likely mass, electricity or heat.”

That sounds like me. Any more?

“With such senses, it is possible to define a field in terms of the maximum and minimum values available, and to tweak the output for better understanding. Here is an example spell for defining
the field.”

Okay, with this I should be good. Let’s try it.

10 January 2014
11:08 PM CST

That’s a lot of red and white near me. Maybe whatever I can sense is more plentiful near me? I think I can make out some hard edges, though. Hmm. Wherever I am is… house-shaped, I think. If I broaden the upper range of the spectrum, maybe I can get a better grasp on what’s going on.

It said mass, sound, electricity, and heat, right? Unless I’m in a strong electric field (and I sure hope not – I’d like to still be able to use my computer after this) I doubt it’s electricity. And since I haven’t drowned yet and am still breathing, either the atmosphere is really dense here or I’m not sensing mass. So I’m probably sensing heat.

In that case… I appear to be in a house with 5 human-shaped objects. Wait, no, I think that one’s me; I can sense a warm rectangular object near them. I hope my computer’s not glitched out of sleep mode again. So in the house, there are two people in the room with me and two somewhere else at the same altitude. Huh. Um… if I’m sensing heat… then my rudimentary understanding of human biology (heat concentration in organs) says that one’s a guy and that one’s a girl. I think. Maybe.

Yeah, probably.

Is she trying to poke me awake? Her hand looks like she’s holding something, but if it’s room temperature I don’t think I can sense it. If she is poking me, I must still be pretty out of it, because I’m not feeling it.

Looking at myself… Well, my coat’s certainly warm. I hope I don’t overheat before I wake up. And I don’t appear to be in a comfortable position. I hope I’m not sore when I get up. How good of sensing can I apply to myself?

Wait. Am I a girl?!!

Okay, if that’s true then it’s quite possible my memories are not my own. Like in EGS, with Ellen. Well, better to know that now than when these people inevitably ask me for my name. What should it be?

Darn it, I can only think of one. I’d rather not name myself after someone else I know. Guess I’ll go with that one. Oh well, I like it enough anyway. If I’m really not who I remember, maybe the name can bring me as good of friends as it did for him.

Okay, my neck is starting to hurt. Yep, she’s poking me. In the face. Good thing I’m wearing glasses.

“… out for over an hour now, if that thunk was her. Do you really think poking her is going to wake her up sooner?”

“You never know until you try. And it’s not like this is going to make her take longer.”

“What if she’s hostile?”

“Then your choices are hide in the bathroom and jump out the window, since she’s blocking the only door to our room.”
“Fine.”

“Nnnnh.”

“Ah!”

Yes, that’s a girl. I still think I know her from somewhere. Why is everything so blurry?

“Who- who are you?” The guy sounds pretty nervous. Is that a martial arts ready stance? How well does that work against someone who’s pinned to the floor with 20 pounds on their back?

“Um. I’m Saphira, I think.”

“You think? You don’t know?”

“How did I get here?”

“How am I supposed to know that? We were sleeping when we heard something smack the door, and you were unconscious on the floor!”

“Oh. Well, the ‘I think’ is because I’m not super sure of anything right now.” I take off my glasses. Huh, I can see better without them. I guess just because my stuff is a copy of what I remember it doesn’t mean my body is… which makes sense when I think about it. “Do I know you two?”

“I don’t know anyone named Saphira.” “Me neither.” “Well, let’s at least get you off the floor.” The girl held out her hand. I may as well take it. History says it’s hard to get up from a position like this.

This is so weird. It’s almost like I’m seeing double, with the overlay of my vision and that heat sensing thing the Mymoir talked about. Good thing it’s color-mapped now, or I might have a lot of trouble seeing anything. Now colors are just a strange mixture.

These two definitely seem familiar, but I don’t recognize their voices. Where have I seen them before? “Sorry, I’m still a bit confused. Could you… tell me your names, at least?”

“My name’s Ellen, and he’s Elliot.”

Gah! “Woah, are you alright?”

That- That can’t be a coincidence! With that in mind, yes, they do look quite a lot like how Dan draws them. And I’m a dragon, apparently… I don’t remember dragons being mentioned in the EGS-verse, but if they’re as hidden as the Mymoir says, I guess they wouldn’t be mentioned. Well, there was the one summon, but I’m guessing that wasn’t really a dragon. It didn’t look like one anyway. I guess that theory seems… plausible enough. I think I’ll confirm it with them, though. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just- just a bit surprised. I think I can match the name with the face, now, but I don’t believe I’ve met you before, and I didn’t think I ever would.”

Elliot considers my words for a moment. “Are we famous or something? Never mind, I know both our faces are all over the internet, if you know where to look.”

“Yeah. You… have a movie review show on YouTube, right?” I’ve gotta find some way to make introductions without mentioning comics. I’ll probably have to talk about it at some point, if I have no history in this world, but for now let’s keep it more believable.

“Yep! Do you like it?”
“I haven’t watched much of it, to be honest. I like what I’ve seen, though.”

“And how do you know me?” Ellen seems both disappointed at being left out and confused. Probably still wondering how I got here.

“You hunt monsters with another girl, right? Well, not really monsters, but, well, you know what I mean.”

“I wouldn’t really call any of them monsters, but yes. Though I sort of wish I hadn’t had to bring back that gorilla alive.”

“Heh.” Okay, introductions done, now onto ‘how did I get here?’ and ‘what do I/we do now?’ and most importantly ‘how do I get them to trust me enough to talk with the rest of the group?’ Because whether or not I have a past, I need to talk with Mr. Verres if I’m going to figure anything out about where I go from here.

10 January 2014
11:27 PM CST

“So, any better idea how you got here?” I don’t think Ellen’s going to let that go. Too bad for her.

“I am now absolutely certain… that I have no clue how I got here. And I don’t think I’ll be finding out anytime soon.”

“Oh.”

“In addition, I am also now certain I have no clue who I am, or what I’m doing here.”

Elliot looks less concerned than most people would be with that. “You have amnesia?”

“Not really. More like… memory replacement? Or something? I remember a past, but based on what you’ve said and what I’ve learned of myself recently, I’m not so sure it’s my past.” I pause. “Is that… confusing? Not that that’d be a problem. I’m confused, myself, honestly.”

“No, I think I get it.” Of course he would. Ellen should, too, what with her past. But I don’t want to make it sound like I know as much about them as I actually do, or they might kick me out. Or worse. “So do you have anywhere to go home to, then?”

“I remember my parents living in Maryland, and myself presently attending Virginia Tech. The last thing I remember before here is getting ready to bike back to my apartment. Are we anywhere near Blacksburg, Virginia?”

At least they seem surprised about that. Ellen’s the first to answer. “I- I don’t know where Blacksburg is, but Moperville isn’t anywhere near Virginia. What time was that memory?”

Well, I’m wearing a watch, so at least I don’t have to rely on my crappy memory for that one. And if it’s a copy and hasn’t updated… Yeah, that looks accurate. “Assuming my watch is still accurate and a large amount of time hasn’t passed, it was around 2 AM on October 25, 2014.” I do remember it being 2 AM. My watch says it’s around 3 AM, so I must’ve been out for about an hour.

“October 2014?” Something about what I said doesn’t match Ellen’s memory, it seems. “Let me see that.” I take off my watch and give it to her. “Wait, this just says Saturday on 10-25. There’s no year.”

“I’m fairly certain of the year. And if you set the date, it asks you for the year, so it can set the day
of the week. And automatically give you any leap days. Here, let me show you.” I take the watch for a second, then switch through settings in front of her until the display reads "YEAR 2014."

Ellen purses her lips. “Huh. That does say 2014. Are you from the future, then?”

“What time is it here?”

“Almost midnight, January 10, 2014.”

“Oh. Then… a future, maybe. Or maybe… Have you read The Chronicles of Narnia?”

“No. But I’ve seen the movie for my show. Or… one of them, anyway. Isn’t that a fantasy series?” Maybe I can get Elliot to actually read the books the movies are based on. Project for another time, I guess.

“Yes, with a setting involving travel between worlds. A major plot point being that time passes at different rates for different worlds. I’m saying it’s likely that, at the very least, my memories and my clothes are from another world. At least as far as I can make sense of it.” Given the author, I know the point of the story was not the fantasy or the world travel, but it’s not inaccurate to say the setting involves parallel worlds. If I’m in the EGS-verse, maybe a lot of fiction is true, using parallel universes? Huh.

“Then where are you from?”

“I likely won’t know that until I run into someone who recognizes me. And since we’ve established that I’m a long way from anywhere I recognize…”

“Wait. If your memories are from another universe, how do you know us?” Whoops. Sounds like Ellen paid attention. More attention than I paid. Uh, how do I get out of this one? I don’t want to lie…

“Maybe… um… hmm.”

…

Maybe I should think before I speak.

“Alright, I know I know that stuff about you, and you’ve confirmed it’s true. So maybe my universe has people similar to you two?” Oof, I know that’s not true. I’ll be paying for that one later. But I really don’t want them to throw me out.

Ellen seems more convinced than Elliot. Or maybe they both realize I have nothing to say but they’re too kind to let on? I wonder if it’d be good or bad if they realized how desperate I am.

“Okay, let’s say we trust you. What’s next?” Or maybe I haven’t convinced Ellen. Oh well.

“I don’t know who I am, how I got here, or what I’m going to do. If my memories are from another universe, that also means I don’t know where my home is, if I have one. So for the first point – Can I stay here tonight, at least?”

They look at each other. They say siblings can exchange words with a look, but I was never able to do that with my brother. Maybe it’s easier for these two? Ellen answers, hesitantly: “I… guess so?”

Elliot seems more sure. “It’d be kind of cruel to kick you out. You’re dressed pretty warmly, but it is January in Moperville, and I’m pretty sure that’s colder than anywhere in Virginia in October.
Plus, I mean…”

“We do have a guest bedroom. I’ll show you there. We don’t have another bed in there, but there is a couch. I hope it’ll be alright.”

“I’ve slept on worse.” At least there aren’t any large rocks in a couch. And sleeping on a cot 4 inches shorter than you for a week will teach you how to sleep on most any shape of surface.

She turns to face Elliot. “We’re gonna have to talk with Mr. Verres, aren’t we?” He nods. Yay! (don’t show excitement-don’t show excitement)

She turns back to me. “Stay quiet. I don’t want you to wake our parents. We’ll probably have to introduce you to them in the morning, but it’s best if we don’t worry them right now.” As little as that might actually bother them. The Dunkels don’t seem to react much to anything. I wonder if their dad will even look at me. He pays more attention to the newspaper than anyone I remember. “I don’t know if Mr. Verres is in town, but we’ll contact him soon. He should be able to sort things out for you, and maybe find out about your past.”

“That would be nice, thanks.”

11 January 2014
8:00 AM CST

Thankfully, Ellen had the current time, so I could set my watch off that, since my phone says it has no signal. Probably because the contract for it is in another universe. Then I checked what I had with me. Yep, everything is as I remember. Which is to say an exact replica of what I had before all this. Which is to say none of my clothes fit me besides my watch. It seems I’m a little shorter than I remember. Plus I'm a girl.

More specifically, what do I remember, just prior to all this?

It was nearing the end of October. I rode my bike to Robotics, then Nerf Wars, then had ice cream, then played Munchkin with the Nerf Wars folks. The game took forever, but when it ended, I picked up my backpack to leave and then…

Then what?

Then nothing, as far as I remember. The very next thing I recall is reading the Mymoir. I feel like there should be something more, but it’s just not there.

Anyway. Girl. Yay. I guess one of the first things I’ll have to do is get new clothes. At least these kind of fit, anyway, so I should be able to make do at least until that chat with Mr. Verres.

And on top of that, I never really got to sleep, at least not for a few more hours. The Mymoir is almost as bad as Wikipedia. Maybe worse, since I don’t need an internet connection to read it. Plus it has a few thousand years of information from a few dozen people, instead of a few years of information from a few hundred thousand people.

At least I know I’ll have plenty of time to read it. And I think I got the most important topics out of the way last night/this morning. Of course, I got information in exchange for functioning on less than five hours of sleep today, and that’s after the 27-hour day I got yesterday. Woo.

*Knock-knock* And my heat senses say… that’s Ellen outside the guest room door. Right, I should probably still be quiet. I get up and open the door slowly. “You need to introduce me to your parents?”
“Yeah, I don’t think we’ll be getting you outside without them noticing. It’s probably best if you wait here until I come to get you in a bit, but I wanted to make sure you’d be up.” She looks me over. “Are you wearing the same things you were last night?”

“It’s not like I have any other clothes.”

“Oh, right. I have some clothes you can borrow, if you like. Though you’re a lot taller than me…” Yeah, more than a head taller. I doubt she has pants I can wear, and her… bust… is a lot bigger than mine, but maybe she has a shirt that would fit? Even if it’s not a warm shirt, I am a heat dragon. I can make it warm. Plus there’s nothing wrong with wearing a coat that’s slightly too big.

“I kind of doubt your pants would fit me, but maybe a t-shirt?”

“I’ll see what I can find. Oh, and before we chat with my parents, maybe you can give me a story they might believe?”

“I don’t like lying, but I’ll see what I can do.” She closes the door and heads for her room.

Hmm. Obviously, I can’t say everything I disclosed last night, since it’s inconsistent without additional information. Maybe… Urgh! They never brought up magic! Okay, this might be pretty hard. Should I… tell Ellen I know about magic? Hmm.

No, I don’t think so. Not right now, anyway.

Okay, maybe just stick with as much truth as possible without talking about comics.

*Knock-knock* “You can just come in here.” Looks like she brought her/Elliot’s trademark plain black t-shirt. Whatever. I have a coat, and I’d like to at least be wearing something clean on the bottom layer. “Thanks.”

“It’s not particularly well-suited to the weather, but you do have that coat…”

“It’s fine! Here, let me get changed.”

“Oh! Okay.” She turns around. I’m not sure why. I mean, I’m just changing my shirt, and we’re both girls… I guess it’s something else I’ll have to get used to.

This is… slightly uncomfortable. Not tight, just… Probably just something I’ll have to get used to, at least before I can get some clothes of my own. At least it’s clean, anyway. And coat back on, because it’s easier to warm the air inside my clothes if they trap more air. And I guess the shirt I’m not wearing should go in my backpack.

“How does it fit?”

“Not super well, but I think we already knew that. At least it’s clean.”

“True. You have a story?”

“Basically just as much as I know for certain. My name is Saphira, I somehow appeared in your bedroom last night, I don’t know my past, my stuff and my memories come from another universe.”

“Maybe leave off that last part.”

“If we can. I know some stuff. Just not a whole lot that’s super relevant.”
“How do you know you’re not from that other universe?”

“Because- well, remember how I was wearing glasses while I was unconscious last night, and I took them off after I woke up? I found that I could see better without them. And that’s just one difference between the person I remember being and who I am now.”

“How do you know you’re not from that other universe?”

“Okay. Makes some sense, I guess. Mind telling me more about this other universe? Maybe we can piece together what happened.”

“Not right now. Maybe later. It’s a long story, and I don’t like repeating myself.” And I don’t want to weird her out too much. “Maybe when we’re talking with Mr. Verres?”

“He’s out of town today, but he’ll be back tomorrow. But we can wait on that, if you want.”

“Thank you.”

“Say, what were you planning on doing today?”

“If I can’t talk with Mr. Verres, nothing.”

“If I can’t talk with Mr. Verres, nothing.”

“Then… um… Wait, that’s not a good idea.” If she said what I think she said, I bet she was considering something involving magic. Maybe I should tell her I know about magic. Hmm, how to do it? Oh, I know!

11 January 2014
8:21 AM CST

I guess I can kill two birds with one stone, too. “Hey, can you show me where a bathroom is? I, um, can’t find it, and, well…”

“Oh! Right, sorry! Here, come with me.”

I do need to use the restroom, but I also need to show Ellen some magic so she knows I know what I’m talking about. Heat isn’t something you can really show off, but if I fill the sink after I wash my hands… Oh. I guess Nodwick wasn’t kidding when he said using the restroom would require a whole new skill set.

While I’m in here, I take a bit of time to look myself over, since this is the first time I’ve seen a mirror since waking up as a dragon. I’m nearly as tall as I remember, and my face is kind of similar, though definitely female. I probably look similar to how my mom looked when she was younger. My eyes are the deep blue the Mymoir told me to expect. My figure is pretty slender, so not much has changed there. But my hair! I can tell I have a bit of a bedhead, but yes! I’m not balding! I have long, straight, brown hair (the same color as I remember) that ends about mid-chest. I guess washing my hair will take longer than I’m used to, but that’s something I’ll get to later.

After washing my hands, I open the door a bit. “Alright, I’m done. But could you come in here for a bit first?”

“Uh, okay. What did you want?” After she fully enters, I close the door behind her and sit on the (closed) toilet.

“Just watch the water in the sink for a bit.” I’ve plugged the drain and filled the sink about halfway with water.

“Oookaay.” Ellen looks really confused, but I don’t blame her. I just don’t really have a better way
to put it, especially if I don’t want to let on that I know she can use magic. And it’s not like I can show her my dragon form.

Nothing visible happens at first, but I can tell the water is getting more red, at least to my heat vision. Then bubbles form and start to rise, and the water starts steaming. I can see she’s thinking of touching the water. “If I were you, I’d stand back a bit.” When the water gets to a rolling boil, I stand up and push the lever for the stopper on the drain. Good thing it’s not one of those old-timey ones where the stopper is pulled out via chain, or I’d have to cool the water first. And I bet I cleared the drain of any clogs that might have started to build up.

“What just happened?” She still looks pretty confused, but I’m fairly sure she knows I used magic. Just a matter of phrasing now.

“I… boiled the water. With, um, with magic. Remember how I was unconscious for a long time last night? I was learning what I just became able to do. I’m also a bit tired right now since I kept learning a few hours after you showed me to the guest room.”

“You just… learned? Is that something related to your memories? I’m pretty sure magic isn’t something you can just learn.” Hah! She acknowledged she knows about magic. The way is open!

“I have a pretty rare kind of magic that comes with an instruction manual. I know it’s rare because the manual said so. Something else in that kind of magic is I can tell if other people can use magic, and… you can, can’t you? A different kind than me, but…” The smell of a caster is pretty strong on her. I knew already from reading EGS that she’s a caster, but it’s mighty convenient I have another method to tell that apart anyway.

She looks away. Considering her words, probably. “Yes, I can use magic. I can show you later if you want. As for what I was talking about before you asked to use the bathroom – I was planning on doing some more ‘monster-hunting’ stuff later today, with a few of my friends. Since you don’t have anything to do, would you like to come along?”

“Sure. I think it’d be a good idea to meet some more people. And maybe I can help. This instruction manual has a lot more than just stuff about my magic in it.”

“Where, exactly, is this book? Was it in your backpack?”

“No, more like… in my head. I can explain later. Shouldn’t we talk with your parents first?”

“Right! I almost forgot. Here, you go back to the guest room. I’ll come and get you when they’re ready.”

“Okay, see you in a bit, then.” I walk back to the room and close the door. With my heat senses, I watch her walk downstairs. Judging by her parents’ positions, I’m pretty sure they heard us up here, but I guess they’re about to find out what’s going on anyway.

Right now, I wish I was a sound dragon.

Okay, she’s headed back up here. I’d best brace myself for what’s coming. *Knock-knock* Ellen doesn’t really need to knock, but I guess I didn’t tell her I can sense where people are around me. I open the door and walk out. “Do you think it went well?”

“Pretty well, although they did hear us while we were both up here.” She’s whispering now. I guess she doesn’t want them to hear this part? Or maybe she’s just conscious of how not-quiet we were before. “All you should have to do is introduce yourself and answer their questions. Oh, and don’t let it bother you if it doesn’t look like Dad’s paying attention.”
“Eh, I know from experience that you can absorb a surprising amount of information while not looking at the speaker.” We head downstairs.

11 January 2014
8:50 AM CST

“Mom, Dad, this is Saphira.”

“Yellow.” Whoops. Greetings from video games rear their ugly head once again. Here I am, the walking reference machine! I hold out my hand to shake Mrs. Dunkel’s. After a short hesitation, she shakes it. “A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. … Ellen’s mom.” Yes, I did recall that she never told me her last name. Point 1 for Saphira.

“Dunkel. What brings you here?”

“If I knew that, I might have a different greeting. But I’m glad that I at least ended up with hospitable hosts for last night.”

Mr. Dunkel actually takes a glance at me. He seems a bit startled for a second – probably by my height, since I tower over everyone else here – then goes back to his paper. “It’s nice to know that our kids were nice to you, but I’d appreciate it if they told us first.”

“Dad, I already told you we didn’t even know who she was until nearly midnight, and she was blocking the door for an hour before that.”

“Then maybe you need to learn how to unblock a door.” I smile a bit. That’s just like him. I think he just knows parenting phrases and uses them whenever something similar to their proper usage comes up.

Mrs. Dunkel seems more on top of things. “So, Saphira, how old are you? Are you from around here?” I’m sure Ellen told her the second already, but she’s probably doing a security-check-type thing.

“I’m 19, and no, I’ve never been to Moperville, or Illinois for that matter, at least as far as I can remember.”

“Right, Ellen said you’d lost your memory…?”

“Something like that. I don’t really know who I am or where home is or anything like that, but that doesn’t mean I can’t start crafting it. Like my name, for instance. I’m not sure what my real name is, so I picked one from what I can remember.” Considering I’m not certain I existed at all before last night, that’s true enough.

“Oh. I hope you can remember yourself, then.”

“That would certainly be helpful. But even if I don’t, I think I can get on with what I do remember, anyway.”

“So what were your plans from here?”

“Um, welllll…”

Ellen answers for me. “I figured she could hang out with me today. I’ll contact Mr. Verres as soon as he’s available, which Tedd said would be tomorrow morning. For tonight, would it be alright if she stayed here again?”
“At least you asked first this time. Sure.” Mr. Dunkel pauses for a moment. “Wait, did you sleep on the couch in there last night?”

“I’ve slept on worse.” It really wasn’t that bad. It’s no futon, but it’s still better than a short tent on rocky ground.

“We’ll see what we can do to make that more comfortable for you. In the meantime, maybe Ellen can get a grasp on the gaps in your memory.”

That would both take a while and cover some uncomfortable ground. Like comics. I’m saving that for Mr. Verres, but maybe I can get Ellen to invite the rest of the Eight to be there, too. Get all the awkwardness passed in one go.

“Mind if we head up to my room? We can at least sit there while we’re talking.”

“Sure. I’m warning you, though, this might take a while.”

“We’ve got plenty of time.”

I’m planning on talking about dragons the whole time we’re up there. Or anything else that will keep me from talking about comics, at any rate.

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Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever just sat and talked with someone for so long. Of course, there was a lot to talk about. Some of it I knew already, but it was interesting hearing it from her point of view. And thankfully I didn’t talk about comics at all, though I did talk about more than just dragons.

Mr. and Mrs. Dunkel did manage to set up an inflatable mattress in the guest room. I don’t know why they would need one normally, but I guess it’s just in case, since there’s no guest bed now. Anyway, I’m now in the guest room gathering my thoughts because Elliot came home and needs to get ready for his date with Ashley tonight. I wonder how he’d react if I told him the contents of his actual dream just before he met her.

Ellen now knows that my memories involve being a male college student. Yet even when I talked about that, she didn’t let me in on her own history. I guess she really doesn’t have to, and that’ll be made apparent tomorrow, but it might’ve been nice. It is really personal though. And we’re hanging out with Diane (because somehow Nanase doesn’t have access to a car and Elliot is taking the Dunkel’s) and Charlotte (because she’s the host of this get-together) tonight, apparently, and they don’t know, so I guess there’s nothing lost.

So while Elliot’s getting ready to go out with Ashley, I get to prepare for a lot more time talking with people I know a lot about but not letting on how much I know. At least Ellen now knows she doesn’t have to knock on my door, since I can tell when she’s standing outside it.

And the fact that she’s standing there now means it’s probably time to go. I open the door. “Are the others expecting I’ll be coming?”

“Yep. I just got off the phone with them. They should be here soon, so we may as well be ready by the door.”

“Okay.” Cars that are on are very obvious to my heat sensing. Even more so when coming into my range. First there’s nothing but cold (dull purple/black) outside, then suddenly something very hot (bright red/white) comes into the range. Yes, I set the colors like infrared cameras. That looks like two girls in the car. “I think they’re here, actually.”
“You can sense them already?” It must look strange to her – if I don’t close my eyes, it’s easier to understand my senses by looking in that direction. But the only thing visible by light in that direction is a wall.

“I told you, my range is a quarter mile. Saying ‘they’re here’ is about like saying ‘they just pulled onto the street.’ But it’s not like I know what they look like, so I’m really just saying ‘two girls in a car just pulled onto the street.’ Anyway, we should probably head downstairs.”

“Probably.”

As I put on my shoes by the door (they’re too loose, but oh well), Ellen looks out the window. “Yep. That’s them.” She opens the door and we head outside. Why’s Nanase in the back seat? Diane’s a friend, not a chauffeur. Then Ellen sits with her. Oh. I open the shotgun door.

“Hi. I’m Saphira. Can I sit in the front seat? I think it’d be awkward for us all to be in the back.”

“Just so long as you get in quick. I’d like the car to retain heat.”

“Oh! Sorry!” I get in hurriedly and shut the door, maybe a little too hard. “Uh… Like I said, my name’s Saphira. And you are…?”

“Diane. Nice to meet you. So how’d you meet Ellen?”

“I… kind of… appeared in her bedroom last night?”

“Appeared? You mean like teleported?”

“I’m pretty sure I can’t teleport. But I don’t know how else to describe it. One moment I was examining a deck of cards at Virginia Tech, the next I was in Ellen’s bedroom and backward in time nine and a half months. And then I passed out.”

“That sounds like more than teleporting. But I guess if you can’t explain it better I’m not going to get an answer.”

While Diane and I were talking, Nanase and Ellen started up a conversation in the backseat. “… rather talk about this date we’re on now,” Ellen was saying.

“Oh, Uh—”

“What date? You’re not on a date!” It seems Diane doesn’t understand these two’s idea of a date. Nanase’s pretty defensive on that one. “Says who?”

“Says me? You asked if I wanted to help you solve a mystery!”

“Or rewrite history?”

Diane and I aren’t sure where Nanase is going with that one. “What are you—”

“DUCKTALES! WOO-OOH!” they both shout. Probably reference to something I haven’t seen/read.

Diane’s not so thrilled. “I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

“What was that? That sounded like a reference. I mean, I make a lot of references, but that’s one where I haven’t heard the source.”
Now Nanase is incredulous. “You mean you’ve never watched Ducktales?”

“Uh, no. I don’t watch a lot of TV or movies.”

“Oh. It’s a cartoon, but it’s really good. Maybe I can show you later.”

“Alright. I might have time for that. Once I’ve got my important stuff done, like figuring out where I’m going to live from now on.”

“Ah, right, sorry.”

11 January 2014
4:33 PM CST

I know a lot more about Ellen and Nanase than Diane and Charlotte. Those two have been major characters in exactly one story arc, the New Years party. I don’t think Charlotte even appeared before then. At least she guarantees I won’t be the nerdiest-looking one here, though I’ll certainly still be the tallest.

Charlotte looks surprised to see me, as much as I can tell with her hair hiding most of her face. “Did nobody tell you I was coming?”

“No. Who are you?”

“My name’s Saphira. Nice to meet you.”

“Saphira like the dragon in that movie?” Of course she would have heard of Eragon, with her hobbies. But the movie was terrible. The good part about the books is the worldbuilding, and the people who made the movie took the plot and skimmed the setting.

“I am insulted that that awful movie is the first thing you think of. My name comes from a much better source.”

“I am sorry that you are insulted. What is the source?”

“The books the people got the name of the movie from.” Because to say the movie is based on the books is like saying a pet rock is alive.

“Ah. My bad. So why are you here?”

“I woke up in Ellen’s bedroom last night with no memory of who I am or how I got here. Ellen says she can do something to help me tomorrow, but we figure if I’ve got nothing better to do I may as well help out.”

“Alright. If we can all gather at the couches I’ll read you in on the mystery to solve.”

It seems Diane is already seated on the shorter couch. Since I bet Ellen and Nanase will want to sit together again, I guess I’ll sit with Diane.

Once we’re all seated, Charlotte starts explaining. “For the past couple of months, there have been multiple sightings throughout Moperville and neighboring areas of a spooky cloaked figure with a feminine, but somewhat spooky, voice. More specifically, a couple of witnesses described her voice as sounding like a low, feminine growl.”

Nanase seems a bit surprised. “She’s talked to people?”
“She’s said very little. Most of the time, she’s simply fled after being seen. Other times, however, she’s shown herself long enough to ask young adult men their names before running off.”

Diane is more unimpressed. “This sounds ‘spooky’ and all, Charlotte, but it also sounds like some jackass in a cloak. It’s probably just a dumb prank.”

“I would have agreed with you, Diane, prior to two days ago, which was when people finally got pictures of her.” Charlotte does something with her phone to bring up an image on her TV. The cloaked figure is clearly shown on a rooftop. The quality is good enough that someone must have had at least a smartphone camera on them, and the figure must have been sitting still for some time. And the figure is… clearly not human. There’s no sense of scale here, so I can only guess, but it looks somewhat like a wolf. The cloak was clearly made for the creature, with the way it bunches between the head-like area and what is probably forelegs.

Diane’s a little more impressed now. “… Okay, yeeeah, that does not look right.”

“Okay! So where do we start our spooky maybe-lady in a cloak hunt?” Ellen seems raring to go, but if we knew a location, I bet we wouldn’t be here.

“By reading these various articles I’m about to email to three of you and figuring out whatever we can. Diane, I will need your email address. Saphira, you’ll need to look over someone’s shoulder, or I can print out the articles if you’d find that easier to read.”

Before I can answer, Ellen voices her disappointment. “We’re just going to read?”

“And share ideas, brainstorm, et cetera.”

Nanase puts her hand on Ellen’s shoulder. “It’s not exciting, but Charlotte’s right. We need to figure out what her deal is and where she might be.”

Time to speak up. “I don’t think we’d be sitting here if we knew where she or it was. If Charlotte had a location, she’d probably just tell you. Besides, if you thought you’d get right into it, why’d you invite Diane? Oh, and Charlotte, yes, I’d like it if you printed the articles.”

“Sure.”

Diane also voices her reasoning. “What did you think we were going to do? Run around random places until we bump into that thing?”

“… But reading, though.”

11 January 2014
5:26 PM CST

Since I know next to nothing about the layout of Moperville, I’ll probably help the most here if I look for descriptions of the creature and use the Mymoir to attempt to figure out what it might be. There are a lot of descriptions of summoned monsters and magic creatures (that wizards created, mostly) in there, and picking out the most likely ones might give clues to behavior or goals.

Unfortunately, outside of the picture Charlotte showed earlier, there’s not much to go on. Which means I’m just reading the Mymoir a lot. And since Ellen’s the only one here I told about the Mymoir…

I feel a tap on my shoulder. Diane’s voice sounds pretty annoyed. “Are you investigating or sleeping?”
I open my eyes. “I’m reading about magical creatures and monsters. I figure I’m the only one who can contribute meaningfully on that part, and knowing what the figure might be may help.”

“So is this information on the back of your eyelids or something?”

“I have a magic link with a bunch of people who are hundreds if not thousands of years old. This link, called the Mymoir, comes in a form not unlike Wikipedia, and I find it easier to read it if my eyes are closed. I think I’ve gotten all I can get from the articles anyway.”

“Ooookaay. Well, Charlotte ordered pizza a bit ago, and it’s here now. I figured I’d wake you to at least see if you wanted some.”

“Oh. Thanks. I guess I don’t notice much when I’m reading.”

“So did you figure anything out?”

“It’s probably not a summoned monster, but the only magical creatures that fit the description died out hundreds of years ago or longer, as far as we know. I can give descriptions of them and their behavior if you think it might help though.”

“How many people are contributing to this Mymoir?”

“Less than a hundred.” Instructions in the Mymoir said not to give out the total (40, including myself) unless absolutely necessary. We don’t want someone thinking they’ve accounted for all the dragons when they’re putting their evil plan into motion.

“If it’s that few, maybe a few creatures slipped through the cracks. You may as well give us some details while we’re eating.”

Ellen’s already started on her first piece. “Pizza. Pizza for the brain.”

“Does this mean you’re going to actually start investigating like the rest of us?” I guess I wasn’t the only one getting on Diane’s nerves. At least she believed me when I said I wasn’t sleeping, much as I could use it right now.

“Look, we all know if one of us is going to find something useful in this mess, it isn’t going to be me. I’m here for when you want something punched.”

I’d like to think she’s a bit smarter than that. It’s not like she’s a musclehead. “You’re not giving yourself enough credit, Ellen. You could notice something we’d miss.” I guess Nanase thinks so, too.

“Notice what? This cloaked girl’s inconsistent as heck.” I think heck is pretty consistent. “I can’t make heads or tails of her.”

“She seems pretty consistent to me. She immediately runs when spotted unless asking for someone’s name.” Thanks, Charlotte. Like I couldn’t read that directly from an article.

“Yeah, she’s a super stealth ninja who’s only seen while asking someone’s name, except for all the times she’s left herself totally visible on the edges of rooftops and stuff? Either she slacks off when there isn’t someone she wants to question around, or there’s two of her, and one’s way better at sneaking than the other.” Huh. I admit I did not pay that much attention to those details in the articles, but I suppose if one creature slipped through the cracks there may well be multiple. Which means I might be looking for creatures that can reproduce rather than particularly long-lived ones. Ellen pauses eating when she notices everyone staring at her. “What? Did I get sauce on my shirt?”
Charlotte’s the first to break the silence. “Assuming there are two of them, how do we proceed?”

Ellen is visibly surprised. “Za?” I have no clue where she and Elliot get that from.

I guess everyone else gets to speak now, too. “If every instance of name asking is one cloaked figure, and every instance without is another, we should organize those encounters separately.” That may help the rest of you, Nanase, but I think I already got all the help I’ll get from that.

“Then we can determine if the timing and locations of the incidents support there being two of them, and hopefully narrow down where either of them are likely to be.” I guess Diane’s right. I’ll need some form of evidence before I can really start eliminating possibilities.

“Yeah, and if there are two, it might help my search for what the figure might be.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh. Ah, I’ve been reading the Mymoir for information on monsters and magical creatures that might fit a description from an article. I haven’t been having much luck, although I am learning a lot.”

Nanase and Charlotte look confused. I guess that eliminates the possibility Ellen told them what I was probably doing. “What’s the Mymoir?”

“It’s a thing like Wikipedia in my head that has information written by other people who have similar magic to myself. There’s a lot of information, particularly on history and magic.” C’mon, Ellen, back me up on this!

“She told me about it earlier today. Sorry, I guess I forgot to mention it.” Thank you.

“Anyway, dividing the encounters is a one woman job. You four can devour pizza while I take care of it. Good work, Ellen.” Thanks, Charlotte. I wasn’t really reading those anyway, so it’d take me longer than anyone else here.

“See? What did I tell you.”

“Yeah, so stop being lazy.” I don’t think Diane’s going to let that go.

“So, wait. You all think I’m right about there being two of them?”

“It sure would explain a lot if there were two of them.”

“I can’t say I paid much attention to all that, but anything that narrows possibilities is helpful, I’d say.”

“Shoot, I’m going to be lazy all the time forever now. It gets results.” Sure, Ellen. Sure.

11 January 2014
5:52 PM CST

I don’t think my information helped anyone much, but at least everyone now believes me when I say I wasn’t sleeping earlier. That or they believe I have an overactive imagination. Either way it filled some time while Charlotte attempted (and attempts, as it’s ongoing) to narrow the search area. We are talking about magic now, and from all my reading today I may have something more showy than what I did with Ellen this morning. Plus I don’t have to worry about surprising someone too much and accidentally alerting someone else.
“Say, Nanase, how did Charlotte know that you have magic? When I asked you about your magic at the New Year’s party, Charlotte knew stuff about you not having magic at the time.” I don’t remember Diane not being part of the initial conversation there, but I guess it’s coming out now.

“Oh. I can make a fairy doll that sticks around after I stop inhabiting it. Charlotte picked one up off the school floor after I used it last year… You want to see what it looks like?”

“Sure! I mean, I’d like to better understand what you’re talking about, and seeing it is easier than describing…”

“Okay. Hold on a sec.” Her eyes close, and suddenly there’s a tiny version of her with wings hovering in front of Diane. The doll speaks. “This doll’s bonded with you. You can keep it if you want afterwards.”

I can tell Diane’s doing her best not to squee.

“While we’re at it, why don’t I show you what I can do? I mean, I mentioned some of it last time we were here, but I didn’t really tell you what that meant…”

“Uh, sure.”

Ellen FV5’s herself. Wow, that does have quite the effect. I hope she’s used to the mental part of the effect by now, although it should be (mostly) okay since we’re all girls here. “Huh. That’s interesting, I guess. Does it work on other people, too?”

“Yes, but not Saphira.” Because dragons have 100% resistance to common magic.

“Unless I let it. Speaking of which, you want to see something showy I can do? I mean, I have a lot of things I can do, but this one is indoors-friendly and doesn’t take a lot of time or risk.”

“The thing you showed me this morning took five minutes, so I’m interested.”

“Okay. Explanation is required first though. First off, the Mymoir is not just information. I, and others like me, can use it to record spells that we can use. Not all of us can use all the spells there. Second, my kind of spells only work if they’re really well-defined. Which means a lot of things we can do just don’t get done until there’s a need or want for it. Third, spells work better with either a name or understanding. I haven’t had the time to understand this spell, so I’ll be using a name. Fourth, spells can be renamed. Naming convention says to name it after the person who wrote it, but otherwise just try to describe the spell. I decided this morning that the name didn’t adequately describe the spell, so I renamed it. The first name sounds like a little kid named it, but the guy was over 800 years old when he wrote the spell. Anyway, without further ado… Jorge’s Skin to Scales!” I renamed it, because no way am I letting a useful spell keep the name he gave it.

The spell is, in general, a partial dragon transformation. It does almost exactly what the new name describes, though. The user keeps their humanoid form, but their hands and feet become claws and their clothes are included in the transformation. Their face is unchanged, other than that their entire head (hair is gone) is now covered in scales. So basically I’m now a blue scaly clothes-less version of myself with claws. Not that it’s indecent, since the scales are pretty thick most places. It’s more like I’m wearing a thick onesie, as far as that goes. You can’t see any skin unless you try really hard. Plus the dragon form isn’t one-to-one for biology with the human form, so those things people are most concerned about seeing on a naked woman don’t even exist on me in this form.

It’s also a pretty useful spell in that dragon scales are fairly effective ablative armor. They’ll fall off under too much stress, so there’s more than one layer. Plus they’re pretty good shock absorbers, so
I could probably shrug off most attacks in this form. I wouldn’t want to use it for friendly fights, though, because claws. And it’s really obvious I’m using the spell, so no using it if I want to hide my magic.

Maybe I’ll learn to understand the spell so I can make a better armor spell.

“Uh… Wow.” Nanase seems to be at a loss for words.

“That is both a lot faster and showier than this morning, even including the explanation. Also wow.”

“That is… impressive. What did you mean by ‘my kind of spells’?” I guess Diane’s more inquisitive than she wants people to believe.

“I use a different kind of magic than Nanase and Ellen. There are four magic systems in this world, and one individual is not confined to one system, though that is often the case. For example, though, Nanase’s guardian angel spell is from a third system.”

“It is? How do you know?” The Mymoir, obviously.

“Wait, I never told you about that spell. How did you know about that?” Darn it, Ellen. Also, minus 1 point for Saphira again. What am I at now, negative two?

“I am starting to believe I may have to tell you sooner than I wanted. Unless you can wait a day.”

“A… day? What’s tomorrow?”

I whisper in Ellen’s ear. “Mr. Verres, remember?”

“Oooo, riiight. Sorry, I- I guess I can wait.”

“Can I get in on this?”

“Sure, if you can come to your uncle’s house tomorrow.”

“How about me?” Oof, I’m not sure I can swing it to get Diane there.

“That would be… not up to me. I can tell you afterwards, if you like, but you have to promise not to tell anyone. I’m sorry, I’d like for everyone to know but I’d also like for people to not think I’m insane.”

“Now I’m really interested. Okay, I promise, but only if it’s really crazy.”

“It is. I don’t think I have to worry on that one.”

11 January 2014
6:35 PM CST

Between Charlotte’s efforts and Ellen’s guesswork, we narrowed the possible location of one of the cloaked figures (the less stealthy one) to somewhere near downtown Moperville. It’s helpful to note that that includes a park, which might be useful for me if I wish to practice magic in dragon form in private, if it can hide a magical creature for months on end.

Then we watched Nanase play Mario Kart against her double. She lost a lot, but I’m pretty sure it was just from the random items. I could play against her just to be sure (since I have played a lot of Mario Kart and like to think I’m fairly good) but maybe some other time. Right now, the most
important thing is that Elliot is calling Ellen.

“You changed while on a date? Nice.” Ellen, if he’s on a date, a girl answering Elliot’s phone is not necessarily Elliot. “Uhhh.” I guess I was right. “WHAT?!” Now I really wish I was a sound or electric dragon. “Where are you now?... Of course you are.” She pauses for a bit. “What’s happening?... Tiger griffin?!”

A… griffin? I read about that earlier. After the events in 1226, a wizard thought he might create a race that could replace dragons. He tried to be sure the race would be as different from the dragon that caused problems as possible, while still able to take the dragons’ place in society. The result was an all-female race (that can still somehow reproduce) of griffins with a strong sense of justice, a large amount of magic power, and possibilities to learn a wide variety of spells. He was more successful with his creations than most other wizards – the race actually outlived him, and survived long enough to produce three further generations – but they still ultimately died out. And even though they were set to replace dragons, a lot of the dragons who were alive at the time say they would have at least made good allies were dragons to surface again.

But they’re almost definitely all dead. So if there’s a griffin here, then this must be some of that parallel world stuff this universe hasn’t seen much of since Ellen finished getting new memories from that nose boop. It stands to reason that if they were so successful here, griffins may well have lived on in another world.

Wait, if it’s shown itself, that’s not good for their target. And if they showed themselves in a mall, their target might be a person. We might want to get going. I do know that at the very least I can take a griffin in a fight, between my dragon form and my immunity to their magic.

“Guys? We might want to get over to the mall right now. I’m fairly certain the griffin’s target is a person, and as far as I know, the only people who are guaranteed a win against a griffin are dragons. So if we want the griffin to not kill anyone…”

“Right, right, got it. Getting ready.” Ellen hangs up.

“Dragons?"

“Like Saphira. Now if we want Elliot to live, we might want to get going.” Well, if Elliot’s her target, at least he might be able to survive for a bit. But we still had better hurry.

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We're in the car now, and Nanase’s trying to contact Elliot with her fairy doll while Ellen’s un unsuccessfully attempting to get Ashley to answer Elliot’s phone. Diane’s driving and Charlotte’s asking me what a dragon is.

“Like Ellen said, I’m a dragon. The stuff I’ve showed you, like the Mymoir and the Skin to Scales spell, is only possible for a dragon. I have a bunch of other stuff I can do besides, but unlike Nanase and Ellen, I don’t get whole spells. I have a basic set of abilities that I can customize much like programming a computer. If the other dragons or myself never put in the effort to make new spells, I’ll never gain any abilities.”

“Gotcha. So what exactly makes you so sure you can beat a griffin?”

“Griffins use the same kind of magic as Nanase and Ellen. Everyone has some level of resistance to that, but dragons are totally immune unless we lower our resistance willfully. On top of that, my dragon form is armored enough that I should be good to go with any sort of attack from them,
really, unless the fight stretches on for a while. And that’s not even talking about the other stuff I can do, which can take most opponents down pretty quickly without killing or even seriously injuring them.”

“Well, then, I just hope we’re on time.”

“Why isn’t it working?!?” I guess Nanase’s end isn’t going well. “I’ve met him and I’ve been to the mall before, so it should be working!”

“I can read the Mymoir for answers, but that might not be terribly fast.”

“Then read! Oh, god, what if he’s dead?” She’s on the verge of tears. Read fast.

The fairy doll spell was used often for ancient long-distance communications. The person had to have met both parties and visited both locations, so it was pretty expensive and anyone with the spell was almost certainly well-traveled. Sometimes, the spell would be used to spy on opponents by hiding out of sight (which is easier when you can fly, don’t need to breathe, and are much smaller). However, the spell would be defeated if the target had powerful wards or had some way to mask their identity to the magic. That’s it!

“He’s probably not dead. The spell can be blocked by powerful wards or masking one’s identity. And if it’s a griffin we’re talking about, they probably have pretty powerful wards. An AOE ward would do the trick, and keep the target from receiving magical outside help.”

Looks like I wasn’t fast enough to stop the tears, from both Nanase and Ellen. But at least Nanase has hope in her eyes now. “Then I guess all there is for it is ‘Drive faster, Diane.’”

“I can’t go any faster without hitting someone. You want to blame someone, blame the traffic engineer.”

Suddenly Ellen’s phone rings. “Elliot?!” I guess he’s alright, but now Ellen looks furious. “You JERKS! Neither one of you could’ve answered the damn phone?... We thought you might be dead!” Well, I had reassured her just before the call, but I guess that doesn’t mean much now. “Because Nanase tried contacting you with her fairy spell, and it kept not working!... Exactly!”

I hate only hearing one side of a conversation.

“‘Tara’? You guys made friends?” I guess we weren’t needed. But we’re on our way already, and something tells me we won’t stop until we can actually see Elliot is fine. “We have a good idea where to look. Where do we meet you?... Is Tara going to accept that your friends just happen to have this information?... And maybe it’ll look super suspicious if you can’t explain how and why we know all this. We’re going to be there... We’ll keep our distance until you wave us in. Besides, if she’s on that bad of a hair trigger, then you need backup.” He doesn’t know I’m a dragon unless Ellen told him before his date, but I don’t think him knowing that would terribly matter at this point.

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“Once Elliot gives the okay, Nanase, Saphira and I will join them and explain the hows and whys we know stuff.”

“You want us to wait in the car?” Diane sounds disappointed, but I think she’s also a little relieved.

“I’m not assuming that the freakin’ tiger griffin won’t flip out if it turns out we’re wrong or
something. If just me, Nanase and Saphira go, then the only bystander we have to worry about is Ashley.”

“What is it about ‘bystander’ that sounds so condescending?” Probably because it implies you’re useless in a fight.

“I have a guardian angel form. What’s your move if the tiger griffin flips out?”

“Get behind you, obviously.”

Charlotte’s reading something off her phone. “According to social media, the griffin is a knight who only attacked Cheerleadra because someone who presumably couldn’t lie said Cheerleadra had done something to her wife, and she ceased hostilities after getting hit with a soccer ball. Diane, do you have a soccer—”

“No.” I don’t think that would’ve helped much anyway.

“There is also evidence to suggest that Cheerleadra is Ellen’s brother.”

“WHAT?!” Diane screams. Ah, right, she didn’t know that yet.

“Road! Road!” Because everyone loves a backseat driver, Nanase. At least it was necessary this time.

Ellen’s visibly upset, though. “Charlotte! Why would you say that?!”

“I’m not vocalizing deduction. People are claiming a floating elf Jesus called her ‘Elliot Dunkel’.” Sounds like an immortal I should be cautious of. They can’t do anything against me, but I definitely don’t want them after my friends.

“What.” Exactly what it sounds like, Nanase. Also the first time I’ve ever heard a flat what.

“But… how would that even… you were on the phone with Elliot when Cheerleadra was talking to the griffin, right?” How can Diane have all the evidence and still miss the conclusion?

“Yes. That is what happened.” You may have been a bit obvious there, Ellen.

Charlotte and Diane got out of the car, despite Ellen’s directions. Eh, even if I weren’t invited or a dragon, I would’ve wanted to be somewhere I might be better able to assist my friends. Ellen seems less happy though. “You’re outside the car. That is the opposite of staying in the car.”

“I cannot help if I remain in the car.”

“You’re ready to throw down with a tiger griffin?”

“I am ready to do what I am best at.” Charlotte, you’re best at analyzing social media. Eh, whatever.

“… Thank you. That totally clears things up.”

“What’s your excuse?”

“Girl, I do what I want.”
Oh well. It seems the other party’s spotted us and headed over here. Yeah, I could definitely take the griffin in a fight, but her inner heat pattern suggests she’s not getting ready for that (since her muscles aren’t hot from tension).

“Hey, guys. Uh, this is Ashley…”

“Hi!” Well, you don’t look nervous at all.

“… and Tara.”

“Greetings.” If this was still a comic, I can almost guarantee that would be a non-regulation font.

“‘Sup? I’m Ellen, and this is Charlotte…”

“Greetings.”

“Nanase…”

“Hello.”

“Saphira…”

“Yellow.” Sorry, that setup was too perfect.

“And Diane.”

“Uh… Yeah. Hi. And stuff.”

“It’s… Forgive me, but… just Nanase? No title?” Confirmed, Tara is from a parallel world.

“A title? Like what? Why would I have a title?”

“From your aura, I was expecting ‘princess’. You have inside you the blood of queens.” If there was any remaining doubt… Huh. I guess Tara can’t sense my magic? I guess if her senses use common magic in a direct manner, she couldn’t.

“I… what?”

“This is based on what I was taught in my world, so perhaps it’s different here, but your aura simply radiates royalty.”

Diane isn’t the only one who’s confused (I’m not, but nearly everyone else is), but she is yet again the first to voice it. “How does that even… even with ‘because magic’, that’s a stretch. You just look at people and know stuff like that about them?” No, it’s because magic and history, Diane.

“Some things about them, yes. It’s how I knew the flying woman was actually Elliot…” Well, there’s one thing I don’t have to worry about hiding anymore. “… that you’re Elliot’s twin in spite of having an oddly… different sort of magic potential…” I’m not sure why Ellen looks surprised. “…and that you’re a potential vampire hunter.”

“What.” I already knew that was a possibility, but it’s nice to have it confirmed. And since she didn’t say anything about me, I’m now certain she can’t sense anything from me. Actually, I’m a bit surprised she didn’t say anything about an aura black hole or something.

Ashley is not good at hiding surprise. “Vampires are real?!”
“Not like in books, but yeah. I helped kill one.” Wow, spilling all the secrets today. Will Diane have any surprise left in her for when I tell her about my memories tomorrow?

“… Are you certain you’re not royalty?”

“Wait wait wait—How exactly am I a potential freakin’ vampire hunter?!?”

“I can explain it to you, but first there is the matter of my missing wife. I understand you have a general idea of where she might be?”

“Yes, we think so. It’s just a theory, but we think she’s—”

“Forgive me. I don’t believe you have ill intent, but I have already been fooled once. I would like to know how you know, and why you were looking for her to begin with.”

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Info dump finished, and we’ve decided to drive to the belltower in the park. Time to split up cars.

“Well then, ah… could you take my car then, Ellen?”

“Make things simpler, sure. Ashley, you’re with me, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine.”

“Right. I’ll go with Charlotte and Diane.”

“What, you’re not going with Ellen?” I agree with Diane. After Nanase and Ellen’s behavior tonight, that is surprising.

“It’s safer if I go with you.”

“Oh my god. We’re all going to the same bell tower. How are you gonna make us safer in the car, backseat driving?!” Told you so. No one likes a backseat driver.

“I’ll go with them, if it makes you feel better. Don’t worry, Diane, I’ll be quiet.”

“Ugh, fine.”

“We will see you there.”

“Yeah!”

“After we see Elliot turn into Cheerleadra.”

“Oh right.” I guess the two of them would like to see that, as they’re the only ones here who haven’t yet, directly or indirectly.

“Right. Well, uh…” Come on, Elliot, we all know you can do this. Just pretend you’re doing another round for Tedd! “Okay. Here goes…” Watching this happen is definitely more interesting than seeing it in a comic. I know I saw Ellen zap herself earlier, but it’s neater without the light show. I just wish he didn’t have to turn into a girl for this.

Huh. That’s a new outfit. I guess he has further customization for the spell now.
“I have to ask. Is there a combat advantage to humans having large mammaries, and if so, do I want to know what it is?” Unless your combat is like Jabberwocky versus Math in GrrlPower, they’re a huge disadvantage.

“Why aren’t you Cheerleadra?” Ellen’s not the only one confused.

“Um, I… was thinking about how I wished Cheerleadra looked cooler, and I guess I wound up with… this?”

“Interesting… So you don’t have to look like Cheerleadra to get super powers, but your control is limited?”

“That’s cooler? That costume looks painted on! How does that even… clothes do not work that way!” I guess Diane would know more about that than me, since I like loose clothes.

“It is bewildering that it can be that skin tight while allowing freedom of movement and not being indecent… Nice Futurama reference, by the way.” I guess Charlotte’s watched more of that than I have, since I don’t get it.

“Future-what-ah?” And it seems Diane hasn’t even heard of the show.

“The TV show? ‘Windmills do not work that way?’”

“… Dork.”

“Hmph. Well, as fascinating as that form is, you should reset and try again.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“People will be debating if you’re Cheerleadra. The linchpin will be whether you can transform.”

“So if someone sees some new superhero flying around with a griffin tonight, it’ll actually support that.”

“Correct. How nerdy of you to get that so quickly.”

“I’m smart! That doesn’t make me a nerd who likes nerd things.” Too true. Let’s see if we might amend that.

“Can I get pictures first?” Only if you keep them to yourself. It’s not like the government will be surprised.

“Uh… sure!”

“Is that really a good… Okay, sure. Have fun.” Don’t worry about it, Charlotte.

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Diane looks a little… unsettled. “Okay! Well! That was great! We’ll meet you by the belltower!”

“You’re certainly in a hurry to go.” Thank you, Captain Obvious.

“… It’s cold out here.” I can fix that, but I don’t think that’s what she cares about. And I don’t have a lot of practice with that yet anyway.
“Well, uh… That was certainly a lot to take in.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Not only is Elliot Cheerleadra, but he can turn into other girls, too! And he thought that outfit looked cool? He also really seems to have hit it off with a cute girl who’s into that sort of thing? How do I compete with that?! Do I want to compete with that? Elliot seems like a genuinely good guy, but is that enough? I mean, there’s more to consider, right?” Guess what’s on Diane’s mind.

“I was referring more to you being a potential vampire hunter.”

“What, that garbage?”

“Garbage?”

“Yeah, garbage! I’m not going to hunt vampires, and she also thinks Nanase is a princess! That griffin’s full of it!”

“She also knew Ellen was Elliot’s twin.”

“Oh my god! She deduced that people with nearly identical faces are twins?! She must be a wizard griffin!... Saphira, you not going to say anything?”

“I told you I’d be quiet. If you want my opinion, though, I believe the griffin was referring to Nanase being a powerhouse when she said she seemed like royalty. If she’s from another world, that may be the norm there. As for your potential, it doesn’t mean anything if you don’t awaken it. And plenty of people with a similar potential have used it for other things in the past.”

“Oh. I guess it makes sense if you put it that way. Wait, do I have magic potential?”

“I can only sense if people are already magic users of some kind. People with dormant power don’t register, though if their magic potential has an active effect on them I can sense it in dragon form.”

“Great, more mythical creature stuff.”

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We drove the rest of the way in silence. It wasn’t very far, anyway. Past some railroad tracks and then with enough distance and trees that the belltower at the park can still be peaceful.

We’re outside the car now, though I’m not sure why, as Charlotte’s explaining: “We should accept that it’s unlikely we’ll be the ones to find Andrea. Using the belltower as a landmark makes sense, but staying right by it doesn’t. It’s too public. She’ll be in nearby woodland, if in this area at all.”

“Well, I can sense heat within a quarter mile of myself. If her heat pattern is like Tara’s, I know what to look for. Wandering around a bit might help if she’s sort of nearby, but we should still stay kind of close to the parking lot for when the others arrive.”

“What’s taking those dorks so long?”

_Holy carp how did I not sense that!_

“DIANE!” Charlotte tackles what is clearly an aberration, quite likely a vampire. Good thing we
have Diane here, though she’s quite possibly why it showed itself. Dragon form time.

Vampires can use common magic. That means I’m immune to most of their attacks, but they also often have physical abilities that could take me down, and I’m not used to fighting. My magic gets ten times stronger in dragon form and I get a bunch of armor and I’ll be larger, so that should make the fight easier. But vampires still regenerate from any non-magical attack, and draconic magic is so soundly based in physics that I can’t actually do any damage it won’t regenerate from. So a dragon versus a vampire is a losing fight, but there are people on the way who can kill it. And even if it’s a losing fight, that doesn’t mean I can’t adequately stall.

Shifting to dragon form requires a dragon to hold their two objects that represent them. These are objects we own or view as ours at the time we awaken, and they’re always small enough to hold in our hands. What they are is extremely personal; I’ll explain more later. A dragon cannot lose these objects. If they are lost or even destroyed, simply picturing them will cause them to reappear repaired in the dragon’s hands. They hold 90% of our magic while we’re in human form, so fusing with these is what gives the dragon form its power.

Objects in hand, I picture what I think my dragon form will look like. I’ve a pretty good idea – I’m pretty particular on what does or does not constitute a proper dragon. Picture it, and will to transform. Whoa!

Everyone/thing looks… way shorter. The vampire looks surprised. I guess it hasn’t seen a dragon before, though to be fair, dragons are really rare. Plus I don’t think it expected for anyone here to have magic. Surprise over, I think I ought to do my best to kill/significantly distract it.

**DIE, MONSTER!!** I can’t speak audibly in this form, but everyone I wish to can still hear my mental shout. I try to stomp on it, but it’s too quick.

First up, wall of ice between it and Diane and Charlotte. There’s nowhere near enough water here, but I’m not hurting for magic. I get to full after only 6 hours, and I haven’t exactly used a lot of magic outside of for transforming. So the wall of ice is made of frozen air.

“Fine. Deny me my prey, will you? I guess I’ll just take you down, first!” The vampire summons a set of axes. Six, because for some reason this thing has six arms. Good thing the axes are magic. They vanish upon striking me without doing any damage. The vampire’s arms actually keep going as if they were never holding anything. I can feel it pounding on my scales, so I guess it’s pretty strong, but it doesn’t hurt at all. “Took out my axes, huh? Let’s see how you like my bombs!”

They’re also magic, and also vanish upon touching my scales. If he was smarter he’d throw them short, so I’d at least be hit by the shockwave of air. And while he was tiring himself, I located a spell in the Mymoir.

**Fred’s Human Incinerator!!** Fred wasn’t the greatest guy, but at least I got some offensive spells from him. Of course, the vampire can regenerate from this. But maybe being on fire will at least distract him by light and pain. Where is my backup?

Of course, all this is really doing is making the vampire desperate. I’m still the primary target, though my wall of ice faltered when I cast the spell. And since the vampire’s magic isn’t working, it’s simply attacking with its hands and overly large teeth/jaw. And the worst part is I can’t actually do anything about it. I’m not familiar enough with my dragon form to know where and how I can form ice armor, and heating the vampire more won’t do anything. So all I can really do is act like an agitated cat while he tears scales out of my back and bites holes in my wings. AAAAA!! That hurts a lot!

It’s slowing down, now, but probably only because I’m slowing down. If I’m put out of the fight,
Diane and Charlotte will die in short order. Time for something more desperate: attempting to awaken Diane from high stress. There are a few ways for a common caster to awaken: training, magic use, immortals, and, occasionally, high stress. Like what happened with Susan. **Diane! I can’t beat it, but you can! You need to summon a weapon to kill it!**

“What? What do you mean, summon a weapon?”

**That’s what these things are weak to! Tara said you’re a possible vampire hunter because your magic potential says you can summon weapons!** Not yet, but if backup doesn’t arrive soon, I hope I can get her stress up enough. Where the heck are they?

The vampire can clearly see I’m not winning this fight. He’s still attacking me, but he’s eyeing Diane and Charlotte. Then he leaps off my back. **No!** I exclaim, forming another ice wall. He slams into it and it visibly cracks. Diane looks pretty frightened on the other side.

**Diane! You can summon weapons! You just need to get one you can kill this thing with!** She’s crying, now. Come on, just a little more. I don’t have the freedom to feel bad for doing this right now. Maybe later. The vampire is pounding on the ice, and it cracks more with every hit, even though I’m thickening it as much as I can. **Diane! What sort of weapon would you use to protect your friends?!** The vampire gives one last hit and the wall shatters. **DIANE!**

The vampire pauses. Diane has… started glowing. “I’ll not let you hurt my friends. Move, and it will be your last.” She summons a bright green shotgun and pumps it. It’s magic, so I don’t think ammo really counts here.

The vampire jumps. *BOOM!* It stops midair and a massive, cone-shaped hole appears in its chest. I don’t think it’s surviving that one. It falls to the ground just short of Diane and is suddenly ash. Right, vampires spontaneously combust when they die. It was already on fire from Fred’s Human Incinerator, but now it’s actually dead.

**Thank you, Diane,** I sigh, as the pain starts to overtake me.

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I can barely hear it as a car pulls into the parking lot. “Diane! Charlotte! Are you alright?! We saw a bright green flash, and—” Nanase’s voice cuts off.

“SAPHIRA?!” Ellen screams. She sounds pretty close by, but there’s too much pain… I can’t really tell where anything is.

“What’s going on?! Is everyone alright?” That would be… Elliot, I think? What’s that smell…?

“Saphira! You need to change back! You need to shift to human form!” Shift… right. I picture how I normally look, according to the mirror in the bathroom this morning. Was that really just today? I transform and- whoa, that’s disorienting. I collapse to the ground. “Are you okay?!”

“I am now, thanks. I’m really glad I told you transforming heals a dragon’s wounds.” It’s pretty odd. There are still some phantom pains associated from my torn wings and the hole that was in my spine, even though my wings don’t really even exist right now and my spine has healed like it was never hurt. I’m also glad that my dragon form will not be injured when I eventually change back, though I definitely don’t want to do that right now.

Wow, that’s a lot of blood and scales on the ground.
“What happened here?”

“A vampire attacked Diane and Charlotte tackled it. Then I used my dragon form to stall for you guys to arrive. Where were you?!”

“Train.” Nanase’s one-word explanation is laced with anxiety and frustration. It also explains a lot.

“Anyway, while you guys were waiting for a train, the vampire nearly killed me, decided that was good enough, and went back to attacking Diane and Charlotte. Then Diane awakened, summoned a shotgun and killed it.”

“Oh.”

“Forgive me, but… a shotgun?” Thank you, Tara, I was wondering that as well. Susan summons swords. Was it something from my prompt? “What sort of weapon would you use to protect your friends?” was it? Hmm.

“It’s America, darn it.” Well, I have to agree with Diane on that one.

And suddenly Tara notices that Andrea’s standing just within the nearest undergrowth. How long has she been there? She rushes over to her wife and gives her a… hug? I’m not sure how to describe it for non-humanoids.

If she was that close, why couldn’t she have helped? Maybe she only came over after the green shotgun blast.

Elliot’s still in Cheerleadra form, and now that no one’s hurt anymore, he seems to have tensed up. “We need to go! That gunshot must have gotten people’s attention! The police will be here at any second.” I somehow doubt that, unless hunting is forbidden in the park. But her shotgun was pretty powerful.

“Oh, okay. You know how to get to Charlotte’s apartment, right?” Ellen would know that. He did fly there on New Year’s, after all.

“Yeah, good idea. I’ll meet you all there.”

“You are the boy I attempted the code phrase with?” That’s probably also a non-regulation font, but hey, they’re non-humanoids who can somehow speak audibly. That’s more than I can say for my dragon form.

“Uh…”

“Your current form suits you well. It is quite cute.”

“Oh, thanks, I…”

“We intend to return home as soon as possible, but you are owed some answers.”

“And perhaps you might have information that can help us. There is a secure place for us to talk near here. We should go there immediately.”

“Oh. Uh, well, my friends are going to meet up by one of their homes, so maybe…”

“Is that location away from people?”

“It’s an apartment complex, so… kinda sorta not at all?” Way to sum it up, Elliot.
Everyone else headed out prior to Andrea speaking. I’m not sure why they left with me still here, but I’m not really bothered by the cold (since I can heat the air around me) and it’s not like Elliot can’t carry me back if he has to. Plus I’d just like some time to cool down, and a walk in the woods is nice, although in the area we’re travelling… I’ve had experience with the Appalachians that I really wish I didn’t, but I do have Jorge’s Skin to Scales now so between the two I’ll be good. And if they want answers, a dragon is probably best.

“This is awkward to get through even with floating.” I guess you have to worry more about tree branches, at any rate. Good thing thorns can’t get me through my scales.

“Most humans lack the experience to traverse this sort of woodland safely, let alone swiftly. We are unlikely to be seen or followed.”

“I can traverse it safely or swiftly. With scales I don’t have to worry about safety, so the only thing to worry about really is how much noise I’m making. But since I can’t sense anyone else within a quarter mile of us, we’re probably good.”

*Bzz bzz* That sounded like a phone on vibrate. I look in the direction of the noise. *Bzz bzz* Why is Elliot’s whole body shaking?

“Are you alright?”

Elliot puts his right arm across his waist, like he’s trying to feel for his pockets. Does that skirt even have pockets? “I-I don’t know, I—Ashley?”

How is he hearing her? Does the Mymoir have anything on the superhero spell?

“You’re calling me on a phone? This is a phone call? I don’t have my phone! I just sort of… buzzed all over, and now we’re talking!” Oh. If this is from his cell phone, I don’t think the Mymoir would have anything. The last recorded instance of this spell was prior to the invention of cell phones.

“I guess?... I don’t know how I answered, I just—”

“You pressed your arm against your stomach immediately prior to replying to something.” Huh? Andrea, I don’t see where you’re going with this.

“What?”

“I believe it is reasonable to conclude that your belly button is functioning somewhat literally at this time.” O...kay, then.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You have spell books in this half of the world, yes? It’s possible you should reference yours with greater frequency.” What an understatement. If only you knew.

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Elliot pauses for a moment. He’s probably listening to Ashley. “Right, sorry… Tara and Andrea didn’t feel safe going to Charlotte’s apartment complex. Saphira and I are with them in some not person-friendly woodland close to downtown Moperville… Sorry, if I knew how to record this
with my mighty cell phone powers, I would.” I guess the only thing for it is to read his magic book or test stuff out.

“Wait, if they didn’t know where we were, why did they leave without me?”

“Good question. Can you fly?”

“Yes, but not without practice, and I don’t want to fly near an apartment complex any more than Tara and Andrea do.”

“I… suppose I could carry you, then?” The look on his face says ‘Awkward.’ I’m feeling the same way.

“I… guess it could work?”

Suddenly, a Nanase doll appears! “Seriously?!”

“An *avatar* spell?!” Andrea’s pretty impressed. “And with *persistence*? That is *rare*, your highness. *Very* rare.”

“I, uh… I’m not a princess.”

“Right. Forgive me. Where I am from, the royal bloodlines of humans have the strongest magic of all the humans.” It would be interesting to compare history with these two, but I guess that’s not what we’re here for.

“It does feel strange not to address you as royalty when you can produce such an avatar.”

“Making a little fairy appear is that impressive?”

“Do you have any idea how many laws of physics you’ve broken just by making that fairy, your high—Er, ma’am?” Huh. I guess without dragons, magic research has taken a different road for them. Dragons understand the universe to be operating by two standards. One (physics) where processes have neutral or positive entropy generation, and the other (magic) where processes have negative entropy generation. The nature of magic is such that it doesn’t care about physics much, usually.

“We view the laws of physics more as polite suggestions. Elliot, can you tell Ashley I’m here?”

“Probably. Ashley, you there? Nanase’s here now… Uh…”

“You should ask Ashley to hang up. This could be awkward with her listening in on only what you’re saying.”

“I don’t know. It seems rude to—Okay, I see your point. Ashley, I hate to ask this, but could you end the call? It’ll make it easier to talk to the griffins… You can call back if you guys think of something to ask.”

“Nanase, why did you guys leave me here?”

“Oh, uh… sorry, I guess we kind of forgot?”

“Gee, thanks. I can see you’re really worried about me.”

“You can fly, though, right? Those wings weren’t for show?”
“No, they weren’t, but I’d also like it if as few people as possible knew about dragons existing right now.”

“Oh. Um… Elliot can carry you back? Sorry, I know that sounds really awkward.”

“We’ve already talked about it. Yay…” I roll my eyes. Time to ask my question. “Andrea, were you close by when the vampire attacked, or did you only come by afterward?”

“I was in the area. However, it looked like you could handle it. I’ve only heard legends of dragons, but you certainly seemed powerful… And your expression says I should’ve helped.”

“Maybe!”

“I am sorry. Why could you not defeat the vampire?”

“Magic is, in general, a system of balance. People and monsters who use different sorts of magic have immunities and weaknesses to each other. In particular, my magic cannot permanently maim a vampire, and a vampire’s magic cannot affect me. But I only heal when I transform, and a vampire heals constantly.”

“Ah. Then I apologize for my ignorance. We are always happy to assist those who might otherwise become victims of vampires.”

“And killing vampires. That’s always good.”

“It’s possible the vampire’s reason for being here was related to my own.”

“The energy clog.” How does… right, it came up during Nanase’s fight against Not-Tengu. “Tara mentioned it.” There’s that, too. “There’s a lot of extra magic energy around here, and you’re investigating an energy clog.” More like an entropy clog, but scientific details don’t matter right now. “There’s some sort of link between the magic in our world and yours, isn’t there?”

“It is, in fact, the same energy, just as it is also the same world.”

“Sort of.”

“It’s the same world, Tara.”

“Yes, Andrea, but for all intents and purposes…”

“All intents and purposes?! They are of the same reality, and share a magic bond!”

“Okay, maybe not all intents and purposes, but it’s basically a whole different world aside from that, right?”

“‘Aside from that’? Do you understand how important that is?” This is why nerds and fighters don’t often get married.

“Of course I don’t! You’re the scientist! I slash things!”

“Well, now this all makes sense.” Agreed, Elliot, agreed.

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“I don’t really understand how your world is our world, either. Could you explain please?”
“Certainly. Are you familiar with the existence of other universes?” I sense a wordy explanation coming from Andrea in the near future.

“We’ve met people from other universes, yes.”

“My sister has memories of living in one.”

“As do I.”

“I… my goodness. That’s far from the answer I was expecting. In any case, imagine each universe as a coin, and each coin has two sides. Each side is different and cannot see the other, but they are still connected.” Even more literally ‘can’t see the other’ for dragons. People can make open portals to other universes and look through them, but dragons can’t sense portals at all. “Though there are exciting theories about them being more like dice, which would help explain many fluctuations in the flow of magic at certain points in the world, and provide explanations for the apparent creation and destruction of matter, which should be im—Beside the point! Beside the point. Point is, at least two sides. One world. They share magic.” The dragon concept is that universes are clustered, and those clustered near each other can exchange information, have travel, etc., and generally have the same laws of physics and magic. A universe like the one I’ve memories from would presumably be outside the cluster this universe is part of. “And this city of yours is supposed to be one of the spots where magic flows back to our side, but it’s not.

“For a long time, the flow of magic was simply slower. It’s reached a point now, however, that we’re not sure any is getting through. Our side has no shortage of magic energy, but this has inconvenienced those who formerly made use of that particular energy influx, and might be indicative of a bigger problem.” Dragons have made note of similar things happening at various points in history, though we don’t know why. Maybe I should share.

“So you decided to investigate.”

“Yes.”

“Did you find out why this is happening?”

“Unfortunately, no. My ‘accomplishments’ include losing track of where to go to get back home, not finding anyone with useful information, and confirming things I could have confirmed from home.”

“You mentioned it’s possible that the vampire from earlier was here for the same reason you are?”

“Yes. I’ve seen and killed half a dozen while here.”

“Y-You’ve killed… half a dozen?!” Yeah, that is pretty shocking. Half a dozen in a few months is quite a lot more than history would say of even the most populated cities. They must be travelling in from elsewhere. And there’s only two reasons I can think of for that, and I really hope it’s the energy clog, or I might have to hurt Magus a little.

“Six vampires? And you say you’re not a fighter!”

“Oh, stop.”

“Seven vampires. There have been seven vampires in downtown Moperville?”

“That we know of.”
“I doubt it’s more than that. Two of your ‘immortals’ assisted in my hunting them.”

“Two? Spikey hair, look like brother and sister?”

“Yes! You’ve met?”

“Briefly. It’s a long story, but they helped us sneak out of a mall earlier.”

“That explains it. They were about to tell me something when they suddenly sent me after a vampire. At least, I hope they were going to tell me they found you.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“They’ve been thrilled to have me around killing vampires for them, and they’ve had no success finding where I need to go to get back home. On top of that, they supposedly missed that you were on this side of the world looking for me. I can’t help but wonder if they would have withheld information to keep me around and killing vampires for them.” I can tell looking at Nanase that this is likely the same pair that ‘helped’ her and Susan in France. Isn’t that also the pair that’s been following Elliot around? What’s their story? “They have helped me stay hidden, so I’m grateful for that, and the slaying of vampires is a noble endeavor. One better done by natives to this world, but I was available.”

“So the energy is attracting vampires, and it’s already attracted seven…”

Time to pipe up. “Maybe. I can think of one other reason they’d be here, but I really hope it isn’t that. Because if it is, that means I need to act quickly on something I have no clue where to start.”

“And that is…?”

“There’s another kind of aberration in Moperville. Specifically, a body snatcher. A trapped soul that is desperate for a solution to his problem has been talking with it, and they may be working together. Since the trapped soul apparently has a lot of immortals that don’t like him, he may be having the body snatcher call in vampires to distract the immortals.”

“And you know all of this how?” I knew I’d have to talk about this eventually, and since I’ll be talking about the full story in the morning I don’t mind spilling relevant information now.

“The reason is uncomfortable to explain. Suffice to say it’s tied up in my alternate universe memories.”

“I notice that you refuse to refer to aberrations as anything other than ‘it’. Why is the trapped soul a ‘he’? And what’s a trapped soul, anyway?” Observant Nanase is observant.

“Aberrations, to the understanding of dragons, are not and never were people. A trapped soul is someone who has not died and yet somehow finds themselves without a body, usually accomplished with very complex or powerful magic. This one in particular is a good person who swiftly found themselves in a very bad position. I’d like to help him if I can, and I have a fair idea how, but it’s risky and I don’t know the consequences of or the full sequence of actions required. And I’d need his cooperation, of course, and I don’t know how to contact someone who can only be a passive observer of us unless interfering with weak magic. Also, needless to say this sort of thing is rather rare.”

“I can’t say I grasped all of that, but if you do I guess that’s good enough.” Of course Elliot wouldn’t get it. One of the two to three people that need to understand doesn’t get it. I may have to write this all down for him.
“It’s not. The actions required to help him also require other people, and I can’t ask them to help if they don’t understand. But I can explain more fully later. For now, let’s go with ‘either the vampires are showing up due to excess energy or because a body snatcher is incentivizing them coming here.’”

“Okay. So. One more reason things are more complicated or worse than we thought.”

“Look on the bright side. If it’s the energy, they’re just randomly showing up. If someone’s pulling strings? Strings can be cut.” True, Tara. I haven’t the first clue how to unclog the entropy flow, but looking for a body snatcher may be marginally easier.

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“I’m afraid I don’t know anything more about the immortal who deceived me. Ancients always have some bigger picture in mind, but he was helping me find Andrea, and I believed he couldn’t lie, so I didn’t question his motives.”

“The ancients on this side have a different agreement than ours!”

“Well, I know that now.”

“I’ve told you about it before!” Andrea seems frustrated. I would be, too.

“What?! When did you—Whoops.”

‘Whoops’?!’ Elliot, Nanase and I shout in unison. You nearly killed Elliot!

“I think that’s everything. If there’s nothing else, we are very eager to return home.”

“Will you be coming back?”

“Possibly. The energy problem does persist, but I’m not sure what more we can do from this side.”

“Before you go, I’d like to say: the dragons on this side would love to learn if you find out what’s causing these magic clogs. They’ve been happening fairly frequently for the past several hundred years, and it would be great if we knew how to fix or prevent them.”

“So you don’t know either?”

“No. It’s true we like to not say everything, because none save dragons and immortals live long enough to learn that much, but we really don’t know what’s going on here. Other than that it happens periodically and tends to wear off after some period of time not more than a decade.”

“Ah.”

“Thing is, now that we know about the clog, we might know someone who can look into it.”

Andrea and I are equally shocked. If he’s talking about Mr. Verres, I’m fairly certain he’s already looking into it. “Really?!”

“We know people who are already trying to figure out the energy buildups.” Ah, so it was Mr. Verres. I guess knowing that parallel worlds are affected might help him? “They don’t know what’s going on, but maybe they’ll figure something out based on what you’ve told us?”

“We really must return home, but if they find anything…”
“What if we met back here in a few weeks?”

“Time for us to rest for a bit and their allies to research… Might we meet back here after sunset four weeks from now?”

“Meet here. Um… well, four weeks from now is a Saturday, so that should be fine…”

“Is there something wrong with this location?”

“Aside from the risk of a tree branch to the face.”

“Maybe… I think we can find this spot again, and we’d see you, so…”

“That’s a good point. I’m trusting Tara can find this spot again…”

“I have memorized the tree formations.” That’s pretty impressive, actually.

“… but it will be night again, and we’ll be trying to stay out of sight, so…”

“I can sense you even if you’re not visible. It’s rather difficult to hide your heat signature if I’m looking for it, and I’ll pick it up if you’re within a quarter mile of me. Outside of that, though, I’ve got nothing.”

“Aren’t you a cell phone now?”

“That’s… not how I would put it…”

“You’ve got a map app with GPS, right? Could you bookmark our coordinates?”

“How the fork would I…” He pauses for a second with a confused look on his face. “I know our exact GPS coordinates and can see what looks like a floating picture of a satellite view of here. I also know where all the nearby restaurants are.” Sounds like magic plus technology is really useful.

“Until we meet again.” And the griffins are gone.

“And next comes the real scary part.”

“Talking to Tedd’s dad about all this?”

“Telling Susan she might be adopted and introducing her to Diane.”

“Uh… what?”

“Diane was targeted because she has a detectable affinity for a type of magic that vampires are vulnerable to. The same thing happened in France with Susan! The griffins killed six vampires while they were here, and they just left! Diane’s super inexperienced with magic! She’s at greater risk than anyone right now! She needs the full story, and that includes Susan!”

“Are you sure I should be hearing any of this?”

“Shut up. I know you know more than you let on. I doubt any of that was a surprise.” She’s got me there.

“Okay, okay. You’re right about Diane needing help, but are you sure she and Susan—”
“Look the same, sound the same, similar personalities, born within twenty minutes of each other, Diane was definitely adopted, same magic affinity, and an immortal protected Diane while acting on favors owed Susan. Actually, Saphira, do you have any more information on this?”

“I know just as much as you do in this regard.”

“So… you have a bunch of reasons to think they’re sisters, and you think Susan might be adopted because you know Diane was adopted, and why would you put only one twin up for adoption?”

“Yes.”

“You know that’s the whole cover story my family has for Ellen, right?” Either he forgot I was standing here, or he agrees with Nanase on the depth of my information.

“And it’s a terrible cover story!”

“No, it’s… okay, yeah, maybe it is. And an immortal did Diane a favor for Susan?”

“He stopped her from drinking the punch on New Years and said he owed Diane’s sister a favor. At least, we’re pretty sure who did that.”

“Okay… Maybe Susan was adopted, but that’s not the sort of thing you want to tell someone without being sure.”

“The most we can be sure of is that she might be adopted, and we’re way past the point where we can keep putting it off!”

“We can ask Tedd’s dad! We’ll have to talk to him tomorrow anyway.”

“You want his opinion on whether we should tell her?”

“No, I want to know if Susan’s adopted. There’s no way he doesn’t know.”

“My uncle doesn’t know everything.”

“No, he doesn’t, but there’s no way he hasn’t done background checks on every friend Tedd has ever had.”

“… Oh my god. You’re right! He’d be extra thorough, too! He’d want to know if anyone they’re connected with might be an issue!”

“And he’ll have advice on how to help Diane, and he can alert government funded vampire hunters or whoever!”

“I needed to talk to him tomorrow anyway.”

“Hmph.”

“What?”

“Nothing. You’re right. I’m just annoyed our solution is ‘my uncle will solve everything’.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure something will keep it from being that simple.”

“I guess I’d better fly myself and Saphira over to Charlotte’s apartment…”
“Do you know the way from here?”

“Not really, but I have GPS, so…”

Yay. Awkward time.

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“Do you mind if I fly as fast as possible?”

“I should be okay with the cold as long as we get there quickly. Plus it’ll let the awkward be over sooner.”

He pauses for a moment. I guess he’s putting in the flight directions.

“Okay, ready. How should I carry you?”

“I’m guessing weight isn’t an issue, so however you think best. My first thought is ‘Like your cape’, but I don’t want to choke you, so…”

So now he’s doing the Superman carry. Not the most dignified, but I really don’t want anyone spotting a dragon. But it’s extra awkward because I’m almost a foot taller than him right now. And he’s now shouting at the GPS.

“No, I will not ‘turn around when possible’! I’m flying! I don’t care where the exits are in the subdivision down there!”

“Have you considered doing a simple point-to-point, like when people go geocaching? Or like what pilots use?”

“Uh… no.”

“You might not find it on a map app, but a simple GPS, like the old Garmin devices, can do it really easily. You just need the coordinates of both locations, and a good GPS can get you within about 5 feet of your destination. I’ll bet there’s a phone app for it.”

“Great. I’ll consider it when my phone is in my hand.”

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“I think my best bet is to land in the shadows between those… garages? I think those are garages. Does every apartment get one?”

“It depends entirely on the complex. Oftentimes, you have to pay extra rent for that.”

“Gotcha. Now, should I use a secret identity form?” Okay, he definitely trusts that I know more than I let on.

“Probably best not to. I’m with you anyway.”

“True enough.” He lands, and we walk towards our destination. Ashley has clearly seen us and is running our way. “Hey!”

“Elliot!”
“Not too upset that I’m a guy again, are you?” I should probably go stand with the rest of the group.

“You’re sure you can find out if Susan was adopted before talking to her?” Diane is saying to Nanase.

“Pretty sure. He might even already know whether you’re related.”

“That’s… disturbing…” Yeah, it sort of is.

“So… I guess it’s time to go home?” Yes please, Ellen.

“Sure. Uh, how…?”

“The same way we all left, I guess. I confirmed with my parents earlier – Saphira is staying in our guest room tonight. As for everyone else, well…”

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So now we’re all in our respective cars the way we came in. It’s sort of strange, really. So much has happened tonight, and I still have a lot to think about, especially for tomorrow. Speaking of which…

“So, there’s going to be a big meeting tomorrow at Mr. Verres’ house where everyone gets up to speed, right?”

“What makes you think that?” Right, Ellen didn’t pick up on my knowledge yet.

“History of the group.”

Nanase considers my answer. “Fair enough. Why bring it up now?”

“Can you try to get as much of the group together as possible? If I’m going to surprise people, I’d like to do it all at once. On top of that, I need to figure out where I’m going to live in the short term…”

“Short term?”

“As in I plan on going to college as soon as possible. Which may not be for a while, depending on if I have an academic history and how quickly I can scrounge up an acceptable one if I don’t.”

“Well, I guess it’s good to have plans. Sure. And I’ll see if I can get my uncle to let Diane come, too. I know he’s not the most trusting guy, but she has awakened.”

“Is that what you call it, when someone gets magic?” She has magic, but next to no knowledge thereof.

“It’s a draconic term, actually. Other folks adopted it for their use later, but if you’ve watched a dragon awaken it’s fairly obvious why the term is used.”

“I could see that.” Well, Ellen, you were there for my awakening.

“As for letting Diane come, is that really the most wise thing when Susan coming is a possibility?”

“No, I guess not.”
“Sorry, Diane. I promise I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“You had better. You already swore me to secrecy.”

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And now everyone is home, at least at the Dunkel household. Elliot’s still, well… I think he has really mixed feelings about tonight. I know I would. I mean, I still have mixed feelings, but it’s strange… I think I can parse it out pretty well, and I’m not left confused. Is this what being a girl feels like?

Even though shifting to dragon form cleaned my clothes, I’m grateful to Ellen for giving me some sleepwear. At least I’ll have something relatively clean to wear tomorrow, even if I still don’t have any clothes that fit me. She’s also letting me borrow some (lower) underwear (yes, I am aware that girls call bras underwear), at least until I can buy my own, since wearing men’s underwear is kind of uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, I don’t yet have the luxury of looking for a church. Something to look forward to, I guess. And given the contents of the Eight, I’m not surprised none of them attend church, so the meeting will be at 10:30 tomorrow morning.

I guess there’s just one last thing to do before I go to sleep. Time to make my existence known to the other dragons.
Dragons are an interesting lot. There are a lot of ‘restrictions’ on whether or not a person can become a dragon. I broke at least two of those. Dragons seem to be ‘chosen’ to awaken, as they always come when they are needed, and gain abilities and experiences necessary to avert a crisis. They will always be in the right place at the right time, no matter how they might attempt to avoid it.

No dragon has ever died of old age. In fact, only one dragon has ever died – a heat dragon by the name of Fred, who died in 1226. More on that later. After awakening, a dragon will age at about 0.2% the normal rate – or 1 year of aging on a dragon takes about 500 years. This is very apparent in that most dragons awaken in early puberty. Since I awakened at 19, I look about as old as the first dragon, who awakened in the 1900s B.C. at the age of 11. Since the awakening of James, the First Dragon, dragons have awakened on average once every hundred years, leaving us with 40 dragons before me including the death of Fred, the Dead Dragon. However, I broke that trend; the dragon previous to myself only awakened 10 years ago. Which is why the other dragons aren’t particularly looking for evidence of a new dragon around now.

Dragons generally have an element that is not the same as or paired with the previous dragon. I don’t really break this one, as the previous dragon is a mass dragon, but the one immediately prior to that was electric. Element pairs (ones that have similar range and power) are Force and Barrier, Light and Sound, Mass and Chemical, and Heat and Electricity. This is also notable in that it seems romantic relationships among dragons of paired, but not the same, elements tend to go better than with other element combinations. So a lot of male electric dragons will be happy with my awakening.

One last thing about dragons: most elements seem to be fairly evenly spread as far as awakenings go. However, prior to myself, there was only one other heat dragon: Fred. For several centuries dragons believed there were only 7 elements. Then Fred awakened after the death of his town’s resident monster hunter/adventurer, the father to a half-immortal who happened to be Fred’s best friend. Fred was only eight when this happened.

Young Frederick was the son of the town’s nobles. As a small town in Medieval England, they were essentially the owners of the town. They did not care for their son associating with the son of an adventurer, but there were worse friends to be had, and it was always good to earn the trust of a monster hunting family. They pampered their son and prepared him for the life of ruling the small town.

When their son awakened as a dragon, they were not happy. Dragons, in their eyes, were not ones who ruled, but slaves to commoners. To be fair, it was and still is dragon policy to not rule a nation or even a small town, although that does not say we cannot be business owners or significant advisers to rulers. However, Fred determined he would be different.

As the first heat dragon, he had little to go on for what he could do with his magic. Sure, he had examples from other elements, but other than mimicry he had to come up with everything himself. Fred also had a peculiarity: electric dragons average 1/6 (0.167) of a mile range, but his range was only 1/20 (0.05) of a mile, meaning he had significantly higher power than expected. And over the years, it became evident that he thought very differently to most dragons. He had several spells that other dragons could only guess to their purpose. Eventually, however, much of it became clear.
In the year 1223, twenty years after Fred’s awakening, he murdered his parents.

No dragon had seen it coming. He had been different than previous new dragons, but he was the first of his element, and he wasn’t significantly different, at least not obviously. As no dragon before him had been unstable, other dragons weren’t looking for it. They do now, and they have a fair idea what to look for as well, but it didn’t help Fred any. From dealing with a number of unstable magic users they also have a fair idea how to help keep any more like Fred from going off the deep end.

From the murder of his parents, Fred set out to become the dragon-king of England. Instead of slaying monsters and protecting the people, he hired and used monsters and subjugated the people. Any who opposed him burned to death. From his high magic power, it was also impossible to harm him, as he would simply melt any blade that attempted to strike him. He became a ruler through fear.

None dared oppose him. He had struck such fear into the hearts of the people that none even reported it to another dragon. Only one was brave enough to speak up: his former best friend, the half-immortal. It seemed that, in honor of their former friendship, Frederick would not harm the man. Three years after the start of Frederick’s campaign, Adrian Raven reported to Sean the Wandering Dragon the condition of the present-day nation of England.

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Other dragons confronted Fred, but it became evident from his attacks in return that no dragon or group thereof could best him. So dragons had to find another plan. As with any other part of the overall magic system, there is balance. And as we are immune to common magic, so there are rare non-magic-users who are immune to draconic magic. So while some dragons set out to find one of these who could best Fred, others set to finding a weapon Fred could not melt. There was one special blade they could recall that a wizard had made some time ago: a blade that would have the same magical abilities and properties as those of the user. The sword’s last owner had driven it into a large rock with their magical ability to pass through solid objects. When they released the sword, it essentially fused with the rock, rendering it useless to any who could not separate the particles.

Eventually, dragons found both of the required parts to the plan: a young man by the name of Arthur (Note: not a king. Never a king, actually. Same name and sword as the older guy, but the older guy was famous for driving off invaders, not dealing with a dragon), and the sword in the stone. After he accepted their plan to rid the nation of the mass-murdering tyrant Frederick, they led him to the sword’s location. A mass dragon separated the sword from the stone while Arthur held it, and Arthur drew his soon-to-be dragon-slaying sword, Excalibur.

Finally, the last step was at hand. Frederick was not easy to track without alerting him. The best way was by using the extended range of dragon form to attempt to locate him. However, despite his extremely short range, this proved difficult. He had monsters that would alert him every time. Our best scout was required – a sound dragon who had, just five months prior, become pregnant with the very first dragon baby.

We knew that dragon form biology was not one-to-one with human form. There are no organ systems that are not useful for fighting – for instance, there is no digestive tract. The contents of our stomachs essentially go into ‘storage’ while we are in dragon form. Another system that the dragon form lacks is a reproductive system. So not to risk it, Meriam the Scout Dragon had kept from transforming since the start of her pregnancy. But we were running out of time. If Frederick caught onto the dragons’ plans – and they had found both components in England – then our
chance might be lost. So we had her transform, and she found him. But when she changed back, there was no child in her.

The time for mourning had to wait. Arthur was given directions and as much help as possible without a dragon escort. So Arthur tracked Frederick. With the rest of the dragons in hot pursuit, they chased Frederick across England. After three days of no rest, he finally landed to regain his energy, having had no ability to eat or drink in dragon form. When Arthur caught up to him, he found what appeared to be a weak, starving, parched eight-year-old child who was begging for mercy. But he was a duplicitous murderer, and we had warned him as much. So as Fred the Tyrant tried his last trick and failed to incinerate the sword or its wielder, he became Fred the Dead.

Arthur became a hero to the people of England, and several nearby nations besides. But the reputation of dragons was ruined. We were driven into hiding by the people of Europe who had once been our best friends and allies. We were hunted by the people of the Islamic nations, who claimed to have known of our potential evils all along. And even those places far away refused to associate with dragons, and claimed the death of Meriam’s child was her own fault, the due punishment for our sins. To this day there are still no dragon children, in perhaps in memoriam. Or because dragons are too afraid to risk it.

So we hid. Even as magic fell before the wave of ‘progress,’ we hid. Even as villains with magic increased at a rate greater than that of the heroes, we hid. Even as wars broke out that could have been prevented with the knowledge and wisdom of dragons, we hid. And the dragons knew: they knew that had they discovered Fred’s instability sooner, it might have been prevented. It was not from nowhere. The Mymoir is, by default, readable by all dragons. But you can mark something as private, and then only you can read it. Until the time of your death. And the dragons read Fred’s notes from previous years, and knew something had always been off. And there was no heat dragon before, and no heat dragon since.

Until me.

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The Mymoir has something like a chat room. Dragons can set it up to be notified when something is posted in it, since the likelihood of a dragon reading it when something is posted is very low. The notification is often in the form of something the dragon can sense appearing where it has no right to be, such as a small burst of electric activity a few feet to their left. Obviously, dragons can customize such notifications.

The chat room is frequently the first notification of a new dragon, though some have been found by other methods. Anyway, that’s how I’m going to introduce myself. The Mymoir is written in Draconic – at least, that’s the English name for the language. Draconic is an interesting language, in that it has symbols that express entire ideas. Draconic is not a language of words, syllables or even letters, but a language of ideas. As such, even though the language can be written and read effortlessly by dragons, no one has ever learned it, as the variety of symbols required for the language is too much for anyone but a dragon to follow. The language automatically updates for any new symbols required, and all dragons can read any new symbols just as easily as the rest of the language. So regardless of personal histories, all dragons can at least communicate through the written language of Draconic. If it has a pronunciation, none know it.

By default, our first names will appear beside anything we post in the chat room. Dragons can customize it to additionally express nicknames, scale color, or any other information. At any rate, I should probably stop putting this off. I have a lot to talk about.
Saphira: Surprise new dragon!

James: Akiko, are you messing with us again?

Akiko: No, this one isn’t me.

Sean: Only ten years have passed since Manuel awakened. Can there really be another so soon?

Saphira: I believe my case may be something of an exception. I think I was created only yesterday from the memories of someone outside this cluster of universes.

James: I can see you’ve read a lot, at least. What do you mean by your statement?

Saphira: My memories contain dates from the future and are from the perspective of a young man. In addition, people I met over the past day existed in this other universe only in comic form.

Sean: That is strange indeed. A work of fiction, you say?

Saphira: My… other self was an avid reader of many kinds of fiction, particularly fantasy. This comic featured people that I met in person today. In addition, I appeared in the house of two such people, and promptly awakened when I appeared there.

Sean: You do not sound like our typical new dragon. In particular, your writing suggests you are much older. May I ask your age?

Saphira: I’m 19.

Akiko: Is there a reason your name doesn’t express your scale color?

Saphira: Uh… I’m new to this?

James: That sounded like a lie.

Saphira: Please don’t ask my scale color.

Saphira: Whoops, I didn’t mean to write that.

James: If she has read a lot of the Mymoir and does not want to express her scale color…

Akiko: It’s blue, isn’t it.

Saphira: Yes.

Sean: If you were that worried, then I suppose you cannot be too bad. We will still be sending someone to interview you and your friends, such as they may be.

Saphira: I haven’t even met most of the group yet. Only three of the main eight.

Sean: There will be time before one of us meets you. We first have to determine who will go, and when. Where do you live now?

Saphira: Moperville, IL. The town has an unusually high awareness of magic. Just today a griffin from a parallel world appeared in a mall alongside three immortals. Also present was a young man using a superhero spell.

Saphira: I have read that you are seeking a dragon and location to attempt to reintroduce magic.
Can I volunteer?

With the start of World War II, it became apparent that the world would benefit from awareness of dragons, as our advice could have at least helped with the treaty that ended World War I. In addition, the population of the world was rapidly increasing and with it problems stemming from a misunderstanding of magic. Lastly, it was determined that Fred had been largely forgotten by the world and our reputation was about as neutral as it was going to get. Since the conclusion of World War II, dragons have been waiting on an appropriate location and a dragon to volunteer. With this, I am the first to volunteer, and Moperville is the best location found to date.

James: That would be… interesting, to say the least. How soon would you be willing to make your announcement, and can you give any more relevant details on Moperville?

A dragon’s announcement is a traditional sort of thing. Fred was the last dragon to give one. Essentially, it’s an announcement of their awakening, and a declaration of their commitment to protecting their hometown (and possibly surrounding areas) from any threats of a magic nature. Dragons are not to interfere in national affairs, such as wars, but they can protect those who are not in the fight. And there are often better powers available than dragons for protecting against threats that are not magical.

Saphira: I can give it in about a week at the earliest, though I can wait longer if you like. It’ll just be harder finding a place to fly.

Saphira: Moperville is a small semi-urban area that has a relatively large magic community that the public is at least aware of. Like I said earlier, there is a young man here with a superhero spell. The spell hides his identity, but the superhero persona is rather popular and well-liked. In addition, there is a man that until recently made a living from teaching martial arts that were particularly inclined towards awakening magic users. He ended it when a dragon-like summon destroyed his dojo and attacked the public. If I can reintroduce magic here, I plan to ask him to consider training only those who have already awakened to their magic. At the very least, he excels at training those with magic even he does not have.

James: A dragon-like summon?

Saphira: A multi-colored dragon with a head like a bulldog. It could spit fireballs. It was stopped only by the martial arts master and one of his students knocking out the summoner, who had been under the influence of an unknown immortal. Normally, the summoner only has enough power to create a small fairy.

Sean: At least it was significantly different in appearance to real dragons, though you may have a harder time for that.

Saphira: No harder time than I’ll have with the last three significant residents. One man I’ll be speaking with tomorrow is the former head of the U.S. federal government’s magic division. His current position is as head of the department dealing with immortals and extraterrestrials, such as Uryuoms.

Saphira: His son is a wandmaker, though he doesn’t know it, despite having made wands. I suspect that’s due to his interaction with Uryuoms; he probably thinks their technology is powering his wandmaking. I don’t think he’ll be particularly hard to talk to, but getting to him through his father may be difficult.

Saphira: The last resident of note is Adrian Raven.
It's worth noting that dragons don't keep track of the locations of half-immortals. We don't interact with them too often, though finding one in residence near a dragon usually means that the community will either have an unusually active magic community or an unusually high incident rate. The former is usually because of their presence; the latter usually causes it. Eventually, one or the other will change locations, but that's usually because somewhere else has need of them or is more interesting.

James: And if she has read enough to want to hide her scale color, she knows we know of him.

Saphira: I plan to make contact with Adrian well before my announcement. That’s part of why I set next Saturday as the earliest.

Sean: If you are as visibly hesitant to talk to him as you were with us, and you approach him first, it should be easier. He will be cautious, but he will not strike someone down without cause.

Saphira: Is one week enough time before my announcement?

James: If you are serious about this, then you should begin making plans and arrangements immediately. We will provide you with potential answers to questions, and you can make use of this function of the Mymoir during the announcement ceremony. We will also create a plan of action for the time following your announcement.

Saphira: Thank you. In that case, I probably should go to bed. I really need the sleep.

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Susan couldn’t come because she has work at the video store today, but everyone else is here, at least. Not that I’m inside yet. I can just count the number of people inside, and Ellen told me Susan couldn’t come. Right now, Mr. Verres is giving me a rather interesting welcome that reminds me of when Elliot came here in a secret identity form.

“How exactly am I supposed to trust you?”

“I can prove that I know enough I should be in the group?”

“And where did you come by this information?”

“I’ll explain once I’m inside.”

“Which doesn’t help me now.”

“Let’s say I have memories from another universe that gave me way more information than you’d think. Can you at least take Ellen, Elliot and Nanase vouching for me?”

“Come inside.” From his tone, it sounds an awful lot like he’s about to use some magic on me. I think he’ll be sorely disappointed. Once we’re inside, he holds his hand in front of me. Nothing happens.

“What? What did you do?”

“Did you just try to use magic on me?”

“Yes. But even if you resisted it, it should have had some effect.”

“Let’s put it this way: if Susan summoned a sword and used it on me, it would vanish instantly
upon contact with my skin and would not deal me any damage nor have any backlash for her.”

“So you simply cause spells to expend all their energy instantly in attempting to get past your resistance.”

“Something like that.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll have to take the word of others this time.”

And he finally lets me properly inside the house. Yep, the gang’s all here, besides Susan. A shame, since she’s the most likely to be able to house me. I guess we’ll talk when she gets off work.

Elliot was voicing his concerns about his identity last night and while we were in the car this morning, and it seems he’s now relating it to the rest of the group.

“I don’t think you should be worrying about your secret identity, Elliot.” Mr. Verres looks like he has a concealing plan. I guess his previous job lends itself well to that.

“People have that immortal jerk saying my name on video!”

“Cell phone video combined with the terrible open area acoustics of a crowded mall, not to mention the fact that several people claim they saw some short pink-haired girl turn into Cheerleadra.”

“Yeah, but if they already know one transformation was involved…”

“You think they want you to be Cheerleadra? People don’t want to hear that the local superheroine is a man. The simplest explanation, and the one people want, is that the pink-haired girl is Elliot Dunkel.”

“But I’m Elliot Dunkel!”

“People can have the same name, Elliot. This is a thing that can happen.”

“And both pink-haired girl Elliot Dunkel and me Elliot Dunkel are friends with Ashley?”

“See, that’s actually easy and convenient. Ashley met ‘Rose Elliot’ because she overheard her name. ‘What a coincidence. I know another Elliot Dunkel. Let us chat like girls do.’ I’ve been a girl for less than two days and I know girls don’t think or speak like that.

“Spot on.” Seems Nanase agrees with me.

“‘Rose Elliot?’”

“And Ashley just happens to wind up helping Cheerleadra because of that?”

“Based on what you’ve said of her, it’s quite believable, and also lends credence to the idea that she had only just met Rose Elliot. Keep in mind that whatever explanation is given only has to be more acceptable than the ‘You are Cheerleadra’ alternative, and that the goal isn’t convincing everyone. This is more a matter of creating reasonable doubt.

“Also, I’m going to manufacture a Cheerleadra sighting somewhere while you’re in class and surrounded by witnesses. Obvious solution, and everything’s fine so long as Ashley can sell the ‘only just met her’ angle.”

“…You couldn’t have opened with that?!”
“Well, you kept saying things, and I had actually intended to point out the much bigger issue. Also, you’re welcome.”

“What bigger issue?” Elliot and I ask in unison.

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Tedd glances at me, then looks at his dad. “Are we sure she should be here?”

“I probably know all of the events, but may not have connected the dots just yet.”

“I guess we’ll know by your reactions, then.”

“So what bigger issue, then?”

“An immortal has made a game of trying to kill Elliot.”

“Oh. Right. That.” I still don’t see it.

“And last night may have been his third stab at it.” Keep going…

“Third?! When—”

“The fire people and the dragon.” I feel a pressing need to correct Mr. Verres, but it can wait. “You are the common element between the attack on the comic shop and the martial arts dojo.” Ah, I think I get it now.

“And the way Dex was being controlled was by being ‘guided’ while empowered in such a way that made him extremely open to suggestion.”

“A convoluted means of control that strongly implies the manipulator was an immortal.” I also know that Mr. Raven believes it was Pandora. This doesn’t seem like her doing, though…

“But… the first guy didn’t come into the shop after me… and Dex was already at the dojo when Grace and I showed up.”

“The dojo is simple. It would be easy for an immortal to spy on any of us and know where we were going to be. As for the comic shop, well… I’m less certain. That might not have had anything to do with you at first. You showing up as Cheerleadra might be what first got them interested in you.”

“That still doesn’t…”

“The dragon is also worth noting. As powerful as your Cheerleadra form is, both Greg and Grace were also at the dojo. Greg easily defeated fire person after fire person, and the immortal would have been able to sense Grace’s power. Based on the number of fire people summoned, Dex could have summoned another heavy hitter. Instead, he stuck with disposable henchmen.”

“They were to keep them busy… because I was the target.”

“Dealing with an immortal stalker like this is difficult, but not impossible. I have a plan.” I do too, but I’d have to speak with them first.

“That will not be necessary, Sir Edward.” Sounds like I’ll get to execute my plan.

A tall, pale, white-haired immortal appears in the middle of the room. I brace myself. It would be a
breach of immortal law for him to act against us directly, but I need to say my piece before he leaves. “For the record, I consider the whole of my efforts with Dexter to be one attempt. Best two out of three, boy. In spite of your cowardice and incompetence, you have bested me twice.” I think he’s referring to Elliot running from Tara rather than fighting her. “More accurately, several of your allies have bested me, but what matters is that I am bored of you. I tip my hat to you!” He literally does so. “Well, them.”

“COWARDICE!” Elliot is mad. There is no ‘seems,’ here.

“Elliot—” Mr. Verres is cut off.

“I put myself between a dragon’s fireball and traffic, and I flew right towards Tara when I heard there was trouble!” Honestly, Elliot, you’ve seen a real dragon and you still got the terminology wrong.

“Whom you then proceeded to run away from like a little girl.”

“You ran from her too!”

“I chose the better part of valor instead of allowing a battle that would have leveled the mall and everyone in it. Quite a bit different.”

My turn. “ENOUGH!”

“What makes you think you can call upon a dragon?”

“You—you? What do you have to say?”

“You’ve convinced me, now—you were definitely trying to kill Elliot. But I say to you: if you so much as attempt to harm any of my friends, you will have a dragon to deal with, and not something so weak as that monster you made Dex summon.”

“What makes you think you can call upon a dragon?”

“Take a better look at me. What am I? I know you can tell.”

He squints in my direction. He probably hasn’t seen a dragon personally, but I can pretty much guarantee a past self of his has. “You—that… power…? Wait.” Oh, he’s getting it. A moment more of thought, and he suddenly looks like he’s actually afraid. There we go.

Immortals and dragons, as the two longest-lived groups, have quite a history together. Immortals are pretty much made of common magic. As such, they cannot have any effect on dragons. Dragons, on the other hand, can kill immortals. It’ll just force a reset, and we have to be in dragon form to injure them, but it’s still rather frightening for them. Usually, though, we simply take different roles in teaching the public about magic and interacting with them. It usually doesn’t get so bad that we have to take out an immortal, but for something so personal…

“I- You- Fine, you’ve won this without a fight. But if you feel confident making that threat…” He’s talking about how I have to be in dragon form to hurt him. No reason hiding it, the plan’s already moving.

“I plan on making my announcement within two weeks from today.” The date’s not really set until I can get a location. “From there, the others are working out a plan for our reintroduction to the public worldwide. Necessarily, we’ll need to talk about immortals…”

“Ah. Then it appears I will once again have a use in this world, and find myself less bored for it. I find myself actually looking forward to it. Good day to you!” He smiles, then vanishes.
“What—what was that?” It appears I have quite effectively confused everyone else in the room.

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“Exactly what it appeared to be. I threatened him, he asked how I could be confident in my threat, I said something that verified my threat and pleased him at the same time, and he left.” Which is basically a very vague summary of what just happened. I don’t expect that to clear up much for anyone, but it’s a better explanation than I’ve seen elsewhere before.

“But… that… Okay, I’m confused for terms. Based on what we heard, I think there were two different uses of the word ‘dragon,’ but I’m not sure what the second means?” Point for Sarah!

“That thing Dex summoned is not easily described as anything besides ‘dragon,’ but that’s not what it was. The term I’ll use is either ‘monster’ or ‘dragon-like summon.’ As for a real dragon…”

“Saphira is one. If her word isn’t enough, we saw her last night.” Thank you, Nanase. I guess I’ll be explaining my magic before my past, but either order works, I suppose.

*Bzz bzz* I guess Elliot’s phone is still on vibrate. He checks the screen. “Susan says Tensaided’s offered to give her the day off in case I need her help with protecting my secret identity?” Well, that’s awfully convenient. Bring her over!

“Tensaided? Susan’s boss? How much does he know?!” Likely not much more than the general public, although he does know Elliot’s connected with Cheerleadra given how he got hired last summer.

“Uh…” *Bzz bzz* “A-Ashley wants to talk about our cover story!” No, not right now, please. I’m sure he can put it off anyway.

“Of course she does, but Tensaided—”

“Probably doesn’t know very much. The only reason he should know anything more than the rest of the public is because in order to get Elliot hired last summer, Susan told Tensaided that Elliot was like a Lois Lane for Cheerleadra, and that hiring Elliot was his best chance to meet her in person.”

I thought Elliot knew already that I know a lot I probably shouldn’t, but even he looks shocked. “How did you know all that?!”

“I told you. I have memories from another universe, and I plan on explaining today. Now, if we want Susan to hear it at the same time as the rest of you, I suggest you tell her to take the day off and come over here.”

“But what about Ashley?”

“You can talk with her later. Having more information might help anyway. And although this will take a while, it’s not like it’ll take all day.”

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“So what’s all this about? Elliot just said I should come over here so we would talk about something completely different to what Tensaided suggested.” Susan walks into the basement and looks around. She is noticeably surprised when she sees me. “Who is that?”
“Hi! My name’s Saphira. Nice to meet you!” Super cheery is not how I feel right now (more like super nervous) but it makes me feel slightly better when that puts her off guard. At least I know her enough to know how she’s likely to react.

“Um… Nice to meet you? My name’s Susan,” she says hesitantly. “How exactly did you convince Mr. Verres to let you in here?’”

“Ellen and Elliot vouched for me. Plus it’s not like I’m the one who’ll be learning much about people today…”

“And what makes you say that?”

“I may as well get to explaining.” I look around the room. “So! What should I explain first? My history or my magic? Let’s make this easy: raise your hand if you want me to explain my history first!”

Thankfully, there are nine people besides me here, so it’s not like it’ll be a tie. Mr. Verres, Nanase, Grace, Ellen (I told her a lot about dragons yesterday, so I don’t expect her to be interested in that right now), and Justin raise their hands, and Susan just looks super confused. That’s five, though, so it looks like personal history first. It might make more sense this way anyway, as it is in chronological order.

“Alright. Personal history it is then. Let’s start by saying I’m certain my past took place in another universe, and I’m fairly certain I didn’t exist prior to Friday night. On to my history…

“My memories are not of myself. My name, as I have chosen, is Saphira. However, the person I have memories of for my past is a young man by the name of Kevin. His past has a great bearing on who I am, though I’m not going to give you his whole life story. That would take all day and then some. Instead, I’ll give you some relevant details.

“Kevin likes a lot of fiction, particularly sci-fi and fantasy. He gets this mostly from novels, comics, and video games. He’s also a huge nerd and an Eagle Scout. Of particular interest out of that list is comics.

“Paper comics were his introduction, from a superhero comic his dad bought him as he was growing up. When he got older, he found that he could find more comics by the same author online for free. Other comics were advertised in the sidebar, and those linked to still more… Eventually, he had a sizeable group of comics to read that updated almost every day, when taken together. To my last memory of him, he still reads these whenever they update. It’s gotten particularly easier now that he’s in college and has his own computer.

“Why all this talk about comics? Well, let’s jump a topic for a moment. I know you all know about parallel universes. One theory of parallel universes is that they occur in clumps. Those within these clumps can directly communicate with each other. Those outside these clumps have no way of knowing the others exist. But what if there was another way to learn about these other universes you have no way of contacting? What if, perhaps, what is declared fiction is in fact a window into another clump of universes?”

I’m pretty sure some people can guess what I’m getting at. Mr. Verres and Justin in particular seem intrigued. “Wait. Are you saying Kevin read about us in that other universe?”

“Precisely. To be more exact, he read about this universe in a webcomic that the author named after himself. So don’t think there’s anything relevant in the title, really. But the comic covered the last year of this universe’s history, with a little more from flashbacks. So that’s how I know that
Grace is half space alien and one quarter squirrel, Ellen was created with the Dewitchery Diamond, and Susan’s never been on a date. Not that there’s a problem with that. Kevin’s never been on one, either.”

“Do you really expect us to believe that?”

“I have no other source for my information. If you want to believe I got that from some other means, go right ahead, but I can’t confirm any other method than what I just told you. I… do have more than just facts, though. Since it was a comic, there were many memorable moments. So I can recite some of the funnier quotes. For example, when Elliot came here after first using his superhero spell…” I point at Mr. Verres. “‘When was the last time you actually read your spellbook?’ I point at Elliot. “‘March?’” I point at Mr. Verres again. “‘Your current girliness is the only thing keeping me from smacking you upside the head.’”

Mr. Verres is at least impressed by the memory. “That was… surprisingly accurate. Okay then. I… guess I’ll take that.”

“Of course, that’s not the end. My last memory was Kevin finishing up after playing a card game. He was looking through the deck when suddenly I was in Ellen and Elliot’s bedroom, with a copy of everything Kevin had on him outside of the deck of cards. Then I awakened as a dragon, which knocked me out, and then I woke to Ellen poking me in the face with a pencil.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s not a problem.”

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“So let me get this straight. You have memories of being a guy in another universe, and this guy read a lot of comics, and one of them was about us?”

“Yes, Tedd, that about sums it up.”

“So who was the main character?” Justin shows his knowledge of comics. I wonder how he’ll react if I give a comic-related answer?

“Who’s the main character in The Avengers?”

“Hmm… Uh… good question? Is that your way of saying there wasn’t one?”

“Not that I could tell. I mean, you eight, not including Mr. Verres, were pretty much all main characters. There are some of you I know more about than others, but that’s basically how it was.”

“And you just happen to have these memories?” Susan doesn’t seem so trusting, but I guess I can’t expect too much after a revelation like that.

“Ellen just happens to have some of Elliot’s memories.”

“But that’s totally different!”

“Just because the method was visible doesn’t mean it was all that different. I mean, I certainly wasn’t formed from the Dewitchery Diamond, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t made from a similar method. As for who or what caused it, your guess is as good as mine.”
“So, uh, what’s next, then?” I’d think Grace would have a fair idea…

“I need to tell you all about my magic, and then I need to find out where I’ll be living for the foreseeable future and how I’ll get clothes and an education and citizenship and all that jazz.”

“I can do something about all of that, once you explain your magic.” I’m guessing the part he isn’t saying is, ‘especially if your magic makes you someone of interest to the US government.’ Thankfully this version of the US is okay with studying people from a distance, unlike some other ‘fictional’ versions. And it’s a good thing the other dragons were ready to be revealed, because this would have to happen whether they liked it or not.

“Alrighty then! Should I get right into it, or do people still have questions on the other topic first?”

Sarah raises her hand. “Are you saying that all fiction is another reality?”

“Most likely it isn’t, but some may well be. I wouldn’t be surprised if The Chronicles of Narnia were true in some clump of universes.” I mean, if EGS reflected a reality, it’s a reasonable guess that something C.S. Lewis wrote was true somewhere.

Ellen’s next. One guess for what she’s going to ask about. “Are you saying your history is a lot like mine?”

“In some senses yes. In others definitely not. But it would be a good assumption that I don’t know a whole lot about what it’s like being a girl. Especially as Kevin only had a brother and basically never hung out with a girl. At least Elliot had Sarah.”

“Ouch. At least you’re in good company here.” I sure hope so, and knowing this group I suspect the only one who might give me trouble is Mr. Verres.

“So is that it?” No one else raises their hand or speaks up. I clap my hands together. “Alright then, on with the magic lesson. I hope you’re ready for an info dump!

“As I said before, I am a dragon. Being a dragon means I can communicate with the other dragons whenever I feel like it, so I know a lot about magic now. For this, I’ll mainly be talking about dragons and draconic magic, as you all already know a lot about common magic.

“As dragons understand, magic has four main divisions, or types. Each type is further divided. For example, common magic contains casters, wizards, and other sorts of magic users. For dragons, we each have an element, though not in the ‘fire, earth, water, air’ sense nor the periodic table sense. More like major components of physics. My element is heat.

“Because I am a heat dragon, I can manipulate and sense the heat of everything around me. It’s pretty hard to sneak around without me noticing, since you’d have to somehow mask your heat signature in such a way that the entirety of your body appeared to be at the same temperature as your surroundings, and not just the surface of your body. I sense heat volumetrically. As for manipulating heat, I can move it around or straight up generate or destroy heat energy, though that’s harder in terms of magic consumption. For a basic example, though, I can boil water in a sink or freeze the air.”

“No way. How can you just freeze air?” For a girl who’s part space alien she’s pretty dismissive. “Air freezes at less than five Kelvin!” Right, she’s pretty smart and well-studied, too.

“By removing the heat energy of all the mass in a given volume, I can basically force any air in the volume to solidify. Here, I can show you, though it’ll be pretty small and I strongly suggest not touching it.” I form a short wall roughly 1 ft. x 1 ft. x 1 in. in the middle of the floor. Since I can’t
force matter into the area, it takes about a minute. Mr. Verres pulls out a meter stick and knocks it over with a *klink*®, and I let it sublimate. Since I didn’t actively heat it back up, the air near where it was is now noticeably cooler. That took more entropy than boiling water, but I’m not exactly hurting for entropy right now, and my magic reserve is constantly refilling anyway. I’m still a little tired from the effort, though.

“Using magic for something like that isn’t particularly difficult, but I’ll get physically exhausted if I use too much. A dragon can’t burn out, but trying to use magic with too little remaining will cause the spell to fail. What I just did wasn’t much of a spell, really. More like brute forcing it. Dragons’ spells have to be very well-defined to work.

“A dragon’s communication with other dragons is through a mental link we all have that is something like Wikipedia for dragons. The English name for this link is ‘Mymoir.’ Dragons can write articles and spells and whatnot there, and there’s even something like a chat room. It’s written in a language that I interpret the name as ‘Draconic.’ The language is not really one of words, though, and only dragons can read or write it, as far as I’m aware. The ability to write and interpret the language is inherent to dragons.

“Dragons live a really long time. Immortals live longer, technically, but they reset every so often. Dragons are human and do not reset. However, we don’t get any more powerful as we live longer. Just more skilled from millennia of practice. As for the really old dragons, they don’t look very old because a dragon’s aging process slows drastically when they awaken. If I live 500 years, I’ll only look about a year older, now.

“I have other abilities besides, but they’re minor and don’t tend to matter a whole lot most of the time. Except for the last major one: a dragon form. All dragons have a dragon form that matches what they think a dragon should look like when they awaken. This form both always exists and doesn’t in a way that’s rather complicated to explain. Suffice to say I need to eat a little more than normal and muscle growth can occur even when I’m not in that form. Obviously, I can transform between how I look now and my dragon form.”

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“One last thing about the dragon form: It greatly enhances my magic abilities and maximum reserve. When I change back, that extra magic inhabits two objects that were mine and meant a lot to me when I awakened. Now, they’re technically a part of me. I can’t ever lose them, and if they are apart from me or destroyed I can summon-slash-recreate them by simply picturing having them in my hands. As they tell a lot about me, I’d like to show them to you all. I don’t think it’s really fair that I know a lot about your pasts and you all don’t know much about mine.”

I pull out the first object, a small blue rubber dragon with red eyes. The detail work is impressive. I’d love if I was skilled enough in any craft to make something like that from any material. “This is a dragon game token that Kevin’s dad bought for him in Maine. I think it symbolizes my love of fantasy and the importance of my family and friends. It’s rubber, so you can bend the wings and whatnot. Like I said, you don’t really have to worry about damaging it, since I can remake it if it’s destroyed.” I hand it to Susan so she can start passing it around.

I pull out the second object. I’d normally hesitate more with this one. Kevin usually only showed this to his Christian friends, because only they’d really appreciate it. But I think it’s important that this group gets to know me, and this is the easiest way I know how. It’s a small red crucifix, with a fish embossed on the front and the words ‘Isaiah 53:5’ engraved on the back. The whole thing was made on a 3D printer, as is visibly evident. “This is something Kevin designed and made after his
dad bought a 3D printer when he was a senior in high school. It shows my love of technology and how much my faith matters to me.” I also hand it to Susan. The dragon token is now about a third of the way around the circle.

“Does it show this stuff about you or about Kevin?”

“I’d like to think both, Nanase. It’s not like I have a significant history of my own, and I existed for all of about three seconds prior to becoming a dragon.”

“Oh. I guess that’s fair.”

“So you’re a big Christian, then?” I hope Justin doesn’t have a problem with that. His voice sounds more curious, though. “What’s this reference on the back?”

“A verse out of the Old Testament. I can recite it if you want. Honestly, I think the verse means more to me than it ever did for Kevin.”

“Go ahead.”

I close my eyes to recite from memory. “‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.’”

“Why would that mean more for you than for Kevin?”

“Because if last night is anything to go by, I’m going to feel a lot more pain than Kevin ever will.”

“What happened last night?” Right, Susan probably hasn’t heard.

“A lot. The relevant details right now are that I protected a pair of girls from a vampire. But vampires are essentially immune to dragons, so all I could do was distract it and form ice walls to block it off from the girls. And while it wasn’t hurting them, it hurt me a lot.”

"A vampire?!!"

“When we got there, the vampire was dead, but… Saphira…” Ellen shudders.

“She… had a huge bloody hole in her back. I think she was missing a vertebra. And her wings were in tatters.” Nanase doesn’t look like she’s terribly happy recalling my injuries.

“She seems fine now. What happened between then and now?”

“When a dragon transforms, they heal all wounds. I am very grateful for this. It also means my transformation takes a great deal more magic than it would for Elliot or Grace, but I’ll take it.”

“So how did you kill the vampire, if they’re immune to dragons?”

“I never said I killed it.” I hope she can tell from my expression I don’t really want to talk about this more. I’ll leave that to Nanase.

“So what’s this dragon form look like anyway?”

“A whole lot like that small dragon token, but… different?”

“Great description, Elliot. If Mr. Verres can set up some spells to block the view of his backyard, I can show everyone. It’s not terribly huge, though it is a lot bigger than this room could
comfortably hold.”

“I’m curious to see what this looks like, too. Will your resistance allow my illusions?”

“So long as they don’t attempt to come in physical contact with me, I shouldn’t bother them.”

Everyone starts heading upstairs. While heading up, I get closer to Ellen and Elliot and whisper to them: “I… sensed something strange last night when you two showed up at the tower. Once I’m in dragon form, could you two come outside with me? I’d like to investigate further now that I won’t be in massive pain.”

Elliot whispers back. “We’ll have to ask Mr. Verres if he’s alright with it, but I’d be interested to know what it is. What sort of thing did you sense?”

“I think something’s up with your magic in a way I can detect. I read what I could of the Mymoir last night; I might be able to tell what it is and maybe even do something about it if it’s a problem.”

“Huh. Okay. I guess we’ll see when we get to it.”

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It’s still really cold outside, but when I can make my own heat that shouldn’t bother me much unless it’s really windy, too. Or raining. Which thankfully it’s neither, right now.

I can see everyone gathered at the glass door to the back porch. It’s… kind of strange, heading out here to do this. Last night was an adrenaline rush, so I didn’t think much of it, other than that I had to do it or Diane and Charlotte and possibly myself would die. With no emergency and everyone watching, though, I’m actually kind of nervous. I guess I know now why dragons make spells to show off a bit when they transform. Too bad there isn’t one for heat, though I wouldn’t use one of Fred’s if he had made one.

Well, I know how to do it. I guess it’s time to do it. Make sure there’s nothing around… this looks pretty clear. I don’t actually know how big I am. Not too large for this space, I think. Maybe I’ll ask someone for a picture. Alright, items in hand and… woah!

It’s a good thing that transforming is a whole spell. As in once you start it runs to full execution, and nothing you do can stop or reverse it until it’s over. Because there’s no way I’d be able to do this if I had to concentrate on it the whole time, swift as it is. It’s… really strange. My body changes from bipedal to four legs, but my legs are significantly shorter by proportion so I’m on four feet instead of hands and knees. And I get a tail and wings, and my neck is much longer and more flexible. Moving my wings isn’t too hard. It’s not much different from shifting my shoulders in human form, though the extra sensation from the air under them is interesting. Moving my head around so that I can see most of my body (it’s really hard to look at the middle of my upper back, but my sides and most everything around me is fair game) is also weird, and moving my tail is odd, too. I guess I just have a lot to get used to.

Mr. Verres has opened a window. “Are you done checking yourself out now?”

**I’ve never had the chance until now. Last night I was only in this form for a fight, and it’s not like this is something I was born with.**

“Did you just speak into my head?”

**I actually spoke with everyone here, but yes. Only the people I want to hear me can hear me. I
can’t speak out loud in this form, though, so this is the only way you’re going to get anything from me.**

I can see Elliot talking with Mr. Verres, but I can’t hear him. I’m sure I know what he’s talking about, though. He opens the sliding glass door and comes outside with Ellen. Yeah, that’s definitely a magic smell. But… it’s a mixture. They don’t just smell like common casters right now. What’s that other smell?

“So… what’s up?”

**Hold on a second, Elliot, I’m thinking. For an idea, though, you smell like you have multiple kinds of magic active on or in you.**

“Smell?”

**I can sense magic power in the form of a scent for a person. I can only sense active magic, though, not magic potential. But I can tell what sort of magic a person can use and how they use it in the broadest sense. For example, Nanase and Susan smell the same.**

“We smell like casters, then, right?”

**Not quite. I mean you two definitely smell like casters, but… Oh! I think I have it! You have some active draconic magic in you! That makes sense!**

They both look surprised. Ellen voices her confusion. “Draconic magic? How does that make any sense?”

**A lot of common casters and wizards have made a lot of magic artifacts over the years. The ones that do really strange things are the ones that were produced with multiple kinds of magic. In a living thing the magic will work separately, but in an inanimate object the magic will interfere, usually, especially if the magic is made to act on something else. Wizards can pick up spells they can’t even use and sometimes put them in artifacts and wands on accident. If Abraham was near a dragon prior to making his Dewitchery Diamond, that could explain why it has such a strange effect on those who make use of it.**

“There are other artifacts like the Dewitchery Diamond?”

**A whole bunch, though that one’s the only one dragons know of that can make a person. For example, a wizard made a test wand that was supposed to shape rocks and similar objects into perfectly round spheres. However, he stuck some draconic magic in by accident and the wand would not only make rocks spherical, but it would also make them affected by a force equal to twice their weight in the ‘up’ direction. That was the first invention of balloons.**

“Huh. I bet there are a lot of interesting things like that, then.”

**Not too many, since dragons aren’t too common. But enough of that. I can tell that this draconic magic the Dewitchery Diamond imbued in you two is interfering with your magic. It’s probably partly responsible for the lack in variety you’re getting with your magic, and possibly why Elliot still has magic builds. I think I can do something about it, though.**

“Wouldn’t removing draconic magic from us be dangerous? I mean, if I only exist because it’s in the Diamond—”
**I didn’t say anything about removing it. I’m thinking I might be able to strengthen it, or at least keep it from holding back your other magic.** Cutting the chain would be dangerous, in the same way Ellen said. But if I can buoy the magic or make it able to keep itself afloat, it would probably help the two a lot. And make it a lot less likely that whatever Magus is planning would be dangerous to the two of them. I asked the other dragons to look into it this morning, and their current theories don’t seem very pleasant.

“Is that really a good idea?”

**Don’t tell the others, but I know about some events from the comic that there’s no way anyone else here could know about. One such event is still ongoing, and its conclusion is looking pretty dangerous for you two. If I’m right about this, this could at least make you a little safer.**

“Dangerous?”

**One or both of you could cease to exist.**

“Oh. And what if you’re wrong, and this is dangerous?”

**Then I’ll cut out early, and the worst that could happen is you getting new spells could be delayed by about a month, probably. It’s not like this has been done before by dragons. But I’ll be attempting something similar to what immortals have relayed to dragons about how they awaken people.** This really is pretty similar to what was described. I wonder what’ll happen if I get all the way through it?

“Can we… talk it through a bit first?”

**Sure. I’ll keep you warm.** By brute forcing it, but keeping warm the area near them that I can define with my eyes as ‘not a person’ isn’t terribly difficult.

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“Okay, we’ll let you give it a shot. But we want to hear about this ‘event’ later.”

**I was planning on explaining it to you anyways. Just be aware the comic didn’t show everything, and I can only explain what I know.**

“That’s fine. Let’s get this over with.”

**Just in case, I suggest you two spread out a bit while staying in front of me.** I focus on their weaker magic. It’s certainly active, but not in a usable manner. Just enough to have an effect on their other magic. Knowing what I know of for what’s in them, I attempt to find something similar in myself. The immortals said that they need to forge a temporary connection to the person in question. To make this safer, I’m going to attempt to do this to them both at once, since I can tell they’re still magically connected even if Ellen would be physically fine if Elliot died.

No need to make something so sturdy as the chains that bind their magics together within them. A thick rope should do the trick. I can feel my well of power. For how shallow the Mymoir says it should be, given my range, I’m fairly certain I have more than enough for this task. While in my head I’m forming the rope of magic energy, in the physical realm I close my eyes. **Let’s do this.**

I remember Kevin’s time as the knots guy in his Scout troop. I know this isn’t physically relevant, but with my understanding of magic… The water rescue knot is the bowline. I mentally tie the
knots and with a surge of entropy I send it to each of them. I then feed them power and watch as they grow stronger, more solid, with every moment. When it seems they’ve matched their counterparts above them, I expend the magic holding the ropes together to pull them to the surface, and they come out with a splash. I open my eyes.

It seems what I just did had physical consequences, as well. Before me are not the faces I’ve come to know, but two erect lizards with wings. The best description I can come up with is that they look a lot like those Aeralfos from Twilight Princess. I don’t know what happened, but I highly doubt they’d look like that if I just made them full dragons. And they’re brown. That’s not a normal scale color. Do they have a ninth element, or something else entirely? Plus, they still have the other component of their magic; I can smell it on them.

I think it was Ellen on my left. They’re identical right now. She lets out something between a growl and a screech. I’m guessing that’s the kind of sound I’d make if I tried speaking out loud. **You need to think at people if you want them to understand you.**

She makes another noise and cuts it off. **Za? Ah… ohhh… right.** I guess she gets the hang of it.

**What did you do to us?!**

**It looks like I… sort of awakened your latent draconic magic? I can still smell the other magic on you, so don’t worry. You should still have all of your other magic.**

Elliot spends a bit of time looking at his sister. I guess he doesn’t need to look at himself. **Wow… are we dragons?**

**Since you didn’t spend an hour unconscious, I’d say probably not full dragons.**

**Can we fly with these wings?** Ellen unfurls hers. The wingspan is impressive, but it probably still has to rely on the inherent force magic dragons use to fly.

**You probably can, but we should go back inside right now.**

**Oh, right. How do we change back?**

**Just picture how you normally look and put some force of will behind it. It’s likely rather similar to how you normally use magic.**

**Sounds like it. Okay, now…** Elliot trails off, then shifts back to human form, and Ellen follows soon after.

Guess it’s time for me to change back… Wait! First - **Hey, can someone up there get a picture? I want to see what I look like.**

I watch as Sarah pulls out her phone and takes a photo. Tedd opens the door. “I think we’re good to go now. You can come back inside.” I shift back to human form – whew, the size difference is still disorienting – and walk up the steps and through the door.

Mr. Verres is waiting with a stern look. “What did you do to Elliot and Ellen?”

“I’m not sure. They shouldn’t have any more trouble with their magic now, though. But something like that’s never been done before. I guess if we were to put a name to it, we’d call them half-dragons?”
“So what exactly can a half-dragon do?” I think Tedd’s speaking for everyone right now.

“I don’t know. This is something new. Clearly, they have a dragon form, but since they’re not unconscious right now either they can’t sense anything or they’re better at ignoring it than any full dragon. And I don’t know of any dragon that immediately shifted to dragon form when they awakened.”

“How in the world did you do that, anyway?”

“I’m… not totally sure? I mean, I know how I did it, but I’m not sure why I could do it. I performed something like what an immortal does when they awaken a caster, except their magic was already partially active or I couldn’t have sensed it at all. As for how things go from here, we’ll just have to test stuff and see what happens. At a guess, they probably have two separate pools for magic to draw from, one for each kind of magic they can use.”

“Huh. Well, if you two are up for it…” One guess for what Tedd means by that.

“Maybe in a little bit. We do have some other stuff to do first.”

“Like talk to Ashley.” Oh, right. I completely forgot about that. I guess he can talk to her over lunch or something?

“Hey, Mr. Verres: can you do something about finding me housing? I don’t have anywhere to go that I know of, and I know you don’t have the room…”

“I will attempt to find any information on your past that might come up, if you can give me everything you remember that may be relevant. In the meantime, though, you do bring up a good point. I don’t have anywhere to house you, and at the very least the paperwork for your citizenship, assuming nothing turns up, will take a day or two. I loathe to say I do not have a plan, but that is the case.”

I actually kind of hoped that would be the case. Process of elimination says the Dunkels and Mr. Verres have no room for me, the Browns likely don’t have room, no way the Kitsunes would take me, and I wouldn’t want to live in the same house as Justin if I knew anything about his family anyway. Susan, however, lives in a huge house with just her mother, her mother (despite her prejudices) has no problem with girls, and honestly, Susan is one of the people in this group I’d most like to get to know better. “I do have a plan for this case, but it relies on others’ charitability, so…”

“And what is that plan?”

“Logically speaking, Susan’s family is in the best position to house me.” A woman and her daughter aren’t much of a family, but I don’t have a better shorthand term for it. “But they would need to approve of that first, obviously.”

Susan appears to be thinking it over. I did say ‘logically,’ and she’s one for logic, so she’s probably thinking through my process of elimination. “I cannot speak for my mother, but I would not have a problem with it. How old are you anyway?”

“Somewhere between a day and a half and 19 and a half years.”

“So somewhere between the length of your memory and the length of Kevin’s, I take it?”
“Precisely.”

Mr. Verres is thinking it over. “Well, if we go with something closer to the latter, it may increase the speed of the paperwork some if I determine you have as much history as Ellen did at first, because being a legal adult means we won’t have to establish a legal guardian for you. But if that’s the case, that also means you have no money and next to nothing with you, so you’ll need a host anyway. I don’t think my coworkers would like the thought of putting a dragon in public housing.” I think he’s only saying this in front of me because it’s pretty clear from my speech that I’ve already thought of that. As a dragon, I could probably find some way to live anyway, but I’d like to be a little more firmly established. And Mr. Verres probably wants me to be happy with my living situation. “Given Ms. Pompoms’… disposition towards men, she probably won’t want to talk with me…” This is probably the first time most of these people have heard Mr. Verres think aloud.

“She can talk business with men. She just wants to avoid them most of the time. I’ll talk with her first, though.” Well, that’s good to hear.

“I will get started on the research. Saphira, I need you to give me everything you can remember that might help.”

“Wait!” What is it, Sarah? “You still haven’t explained all that stuff about announcements yet!” Oh, right. That was… I look at my watch. That was only about two hours ago. Wow. I’m seeing a lot of time stretches lately.

“Sorry. I bet everyone wants to hear, and that’s pretty relevant, anyway. Time for a very short history lesson, and then this meeting will finally be over.”

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Susan’s now up to speed on what happened while she wasn’t here. She was pretty distressed to learn that an immortal had been targeting Elliot, but now she seems just as curious as the rest of the group.

“Now that you all have a pretty clear understanding of what a dragon is, I’ll give you a brief history of dragons, and how that relates to what happened earlier.

“The first dragon, James, once was a shepherd-boy to a now-famous man named Abram. He awakened one night after tending the sheep. The next day, he protected the sheep from lions using his dragon form and his ability to create barriers. Long story short, he continued being a shepherd-boy until Abram’s death, then left to explore the world a bit. Along the way, he met a few other dragons as they awakened, and they in turn either helped their communities or left to explore the world. Eventually, James returned to Israel, where he lived for quite a long time.

“Over the centuries, and eventually millennia, dragons gained a reputation for being a shield to the people of their nations from any sort of magical disaster. They were also teachers, inventors, advisors, and much more. Having a dragon in your country was considered a great blessing. For those who did not, dragons would travel to prevent a crisis, and for lesser things there was always Sean, the Wandering Dragon, who circumnavigated the world on a regular basis.

“Dragons’ relationships with immortals were… interesting. Immortals guide and empower humans, but their morality can be questionable. Dragons, being human, were much more connected with the people, and could be considered judges for immortals. That’s not to say that we were always on opposing sides, however. There are far more immortals than dragons, and dragons cannot help or teach everybody. Several dragons and immortals have been the best of friends, at
“Since immortals are pretty much made of common magic, the power relationship between them and dragons is rather in the dragons’ favor. We’re immune to nearly any harm that they could attempt to cause us, but we can force them to reset by injuring them significantly. Think something like Doctor Who. However, we have to be in dragon form to hurt immortals, so it’s rather public when we do so.

“Which brings us to why the immortal earlier questioned my ability to follow up on my threat of harm. Obviously, no one here had heard of dragons before I became one, but my description of the old world was pretty much the opposite. Why is that the case? That, in particular, is a very long story, and if you ask me later I can tell you. But as for right now…

“In ancient days, when a dragon awakened, they would give something of an announcement to the town or country of their residence. It was mostly just a formality, but it was also a time for the area to get to know their dragon better. However, just under 800 years ago, everything changed when a dragon betrayed everyone’s trust. Long story short, he became a mass-murdering tyrant over the nation of England, and the other dragons and a special Englishman executed him. Since then, dragons have been in hiding, hoping that the memory would fade to legend.

“The memory of the one dragon, and dragons as a whole, has now done just that. However, with dragons out of the picture, a lot of change has occurred recently, and not all of it was good. Certain world events, in combination with rather concerning events with immortals, have convinced us that we need to take the stage again, as soon as a good location is found and a dragon volunteers. This happened last night; I volunteered, and Moperville was determined to be a very good if not optimal location to formally re-introduce both magic and dragons. So the current plan is for me to hold an announcement ceremony sometime in the very near future, while the other dragons are formulating a more specific plan for the years to come. I say ‘more specific’ because a vague plan was available as early as seventy years ago.”

Everyone looks kind of dumbstruck. They probably need a bit to process all of that. Today has been rather exposition-heavy. I wonder if I’ve outdone Mr. Verres, the Endless Barrel of Exposition?

At the very least I’ve added to his barrel. He seems to be the first one to process it all. “When were you planning on telling me this?”

“As soon as I remembered to do so. If possible, I’d like to make my announcement this Saturday. I don’t really need a whole lot of set-up, just a place to do it that’s fairly public. I imagine shifting to dragon form in public in broad daylight will get a fair number of people to stop by. Plus it’d be contrary to my aims if I told the public about dragons prior to the event, though I’ll still tell a few choice folks.”

“And what aims would those be?”

“To inform the public about magic and dragons. But I really don’t like repeating myself.”

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“No! Absolutely not! Out of the question!” I think I remember Mr. Verres telling Tedd something along the lines of knowledge of magic for the public being bad, but I thought that was just for black market reasons. Which is yet another area where public knowledge and acceptance of magic would tend to cut that back to at least as low a level as black market gun sales.
“I’d think the authority of dragons is greater than yours, but what makes you think this is such a bad idea?”

“Magic wants to be used, but only by a small, select group of people. If a large number of people know about it, there’s no telling what might happen.”

“That’s… rather inconsistent with the history in the Mymoir. 800 years ago, nearly everyone knew about magic. Unless magic has drastically changed, which we would have noticed, maybe your understanding is wrong. As the dragons understand it, common magic can only be used by a small number of people due to a genetic and dynamic constraint.” I pause for a moment. “I… um… I could draw a simple chart, if you like? But I don’t have materials for that.”

“Not a problem, let me get some for you.” Mr. Verres magically creates an easel and one of those massive note paper thingies behind me. Then he walks over to Tedd’s desk and pulls out a marker. Interesting use of magic, there.

“Thanks. As I was saying, there are both genetic and dynamic constraints on the number of people who can use common magic. Genetically, a small proportion of the world will always be able to use common magic. Such is the case with wizards, for example. On top of that, a small proportion of the world can be casters or have magic marks.” I draw axes on the board behind me. I label the x-axis ‘Casters and Other’ and the y-axis ‘Difficulty of Awakening’. I further label the x-axis with marks from 0% to 2%, and the y-axis from ‘miniscule’ to ‘unachievable’. “I know the marking here is rather vague, but basically, the curve for awakening difficulty of casters is something like this.” I draw a third-order curve with an always-positive slope that runs from the bottom-left corner to the top right. “For times like the present, we find ourselves more in the area over here.” I make a dot near the 0.5% mark. “This is when the chance that a random person you bump into is a caster or has a magic mark is around 1 in 200. As you can see, it’s rather easy to awaken right now. For times when magic was more obvious—” I make a dot very close to the 2% mark “—the chance was closer to 1 in 50. However, as more people awaken—”

Tedd interrupts me. “The chance of someone new awakening approaches zero, as the difficulty becomes unachievable. I think I get it.”

“Precisely. It’s worth noting that this is a simplification, slightly. The difficulty of awakening is based on both local and worldwide factors, though local has more influence. If the proportion worldwide is close to 2%, it’s impossible for anyone to awaken, but if it’s just near 2% in your area, travelling might let you awaken.

“More people knowing about magic will bring us closer to the 2% mark, but the number will never get significantly higher than that worldwide unless something drastic happens, and in this day and age the chances of that are nearly zero. For an idea of frequency, it’s happened twice ever, and both of those were when leaders of empires requested immortals to mark their entire armies. Today, magic isn’t nearly as useful as technology when it comes to war, and the population of the world is higher in proportion to the size of armies, so the chance that marking a single army or even two armies will unbalance magic is incredibly low. Plus the fact that magic isn’t super predictable means most military leaders would opt for technology anyway.”

“So having people learn about magic isn’t a problem, is what you’re saying.”

“Not in the long run. In the short run, it might create some problems, but when people learn what it is, how it works, how it should be used… I imagine there won’t be much difference between now and eight-to-nine hundred years ago, except that there’s a lot more technology now. Plus dragons will be helping to sort things out, and I imagine a lot of formerly-bored immortals will be happy to help. After all, if people know about magic, they gain more influence, and immortals with more
influence tend to act more responsibly. And if they don’t, there’s always the old relationship between dragons and immortals. They might have forgotten, but dragons can remind them.”

There’s an awkward silence in the room for a bit. Then Elliot speaks up. “So! I think we’re all good here on information for a bit! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I should go have a chat with Ashley!” He gets up and starts walking to the door.

I put down the marker and follow him. “My stuff’s still in your car, remember? Mind if I get it out before you leave?”

“Za? Oh, right. Sure.”

I follow him out to his car, and talk as we walk. “Hey, if you want to tell Ashley you’re a half-dragon now, that’s your business. But I’d like it if you didn’t show her until I can coach you on what you can and cannot talk to others about for dragons.”

“What sort of things?”

“Generally, information that would be bad for dragons if it got into the wrong hands. Like secret vulnerabilities and whatnot. That information is for dragons’ ears only, and if you’re messing around with your dragon form you’ll probably figure some of it out yourself.”

“Gotcha. I guess Ellen and I will talk to you later about that stuff?”

“Yep. And I’ll try to coach you guys on how to fly.”

“I’ve flown before.”

“Not in a way that is similar to how bats fly, you haven’t. And since the instructions are in the Mymoir, and I’m not sure you can access it, and I need to learn how to fly anyway…”

“Group instruction and testing, got it.” I grab my backpack out of his car. “I’ll… see you later, then?”

“There’ll be someone near me who can contact you if I ask.” Looks like the others are filtering out, now. “See you later!” I walk back toward the house. Susan stops me at the front porch.

“I’ll talk to my mother about housing you, at least for the next few nights. If it turns out you really don’t have a past here, would you be alright with staying with us until you’re able to support yourself?”

“I was sort of counting on it, really. But out of the group, I think you’re one of the people I most want to get to know better, and if one member of the group were to host me, I’d most like it to be you.” She starts blushing. Huh? Why would she…? Oh. “I-I mean, you’re intelligent and interesting and… remind me a lot of myself, really.” I hope she doesn’t take that the wrong way. Spending a lot of time around Elliot and Ellen yesterday confirmed that I am definitely attracted to guys. Which is kind of weird, since Kevin was very much attracted to girls. With his memories, I can sort of understand what he found attractive, but… there’s definitely a disconnect, there. I’ll look at the same thing he would’ve found attractive and feel nothing. And some things he wouldn’t have noticed now make me… Well, I’m most certainly not Kevin, at any rate. Great, now I’m blushing.

Susan’s still blushing a little as she walks to her car. “I’ll see you later.”

“And I’ll be having tons of fun with Mr. Verres. I hope your end goes well.”
“Mother shouldn’t object to having a guest for a couple of nights, at any rate.”

“Bye!” I give a short wave goodbye and walk back inside. From my heat sensing I can tell she’s gotten in her car and started the engine. I really hope that does go well. Annd there’s Mr. Verres. “Well now! Time to see how well my memories of addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses holds up!”

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Turns out a large number of those addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses either don’t presently exist or belong to someone other than I remember. Some are still accurate, such as those that belonged to some of Kevin’s friends, but any that were for Kevin’s family are not. Signs strongly point to him and his family never having existed in this universe, which I suppose is both a blessing and a curse, really.

Mr. Verres still has some other research to perform to determine my previous existence, but in case he doesn’t find anything I’ve provided him with a name for myself so he could get started on that paperwork. Unfortunately, I needed a middle name, and I couldn’t come up with anything else, so… my name will be Saphira Flametongue Bjartskular. It’s not like my middle name is any less usable than Kevin’s is, and my first name doesn’t sound right with Kevin’s last. Plus most people will never need to know my middle name anyway.

And for my announcement stuff, I’ve assured him that the only information on magic I will be sharing is what can be found in the Mymoir without any input from me. He was pretty worried I’d be sharing info the government really doesn’t want to be public. Maybe he doesn’t get the scope of information in the Mymoir, but just sharing that info there’s no way I’ll run out of stuff to talk about.

Mr. Verres also asked what sort of relationship most dragons had with their nations’ governments. In the old days, they tended to be advisers on internal policy. Dragons will not be advisers on foreign policy, as our connection with each other tends to give us a bit of a bias. We’ll also never serve a country’s military directly, for much the same reason. Now, however, most governments are not aware that their nations even contain dragons. Just about the only reason they ever become aware is if dragons try a social experiment, such as attempting to gain a marriage license for a marriage that occurred over a thousand years ago. Plus it’s dragon policy to not lie about our approximate ages, so when a person asks a dragon how old they are and they reply with a number greater than 200…

As for the situation regarding my lack of appropriate clothing, he’s seeing if he can set up something like what they did for Grace. Basically, a prepaid card that I’ll use on clothing only. Since I have no clue what I’m doing shopping for women’s clothes, I’ll ask Sarah if she might help me there. I know for a fact she helped Grace with that, and she may well have helped Elliot (on the day before Ellen’s creation) or Ellen. At least I have some sort of idea for the general type of clothing I’ll want to wear.

Speaking of Ellen, she and Nanase were to talk to Susan about Diane today. They’ll have done so after Susan finished talking with her mom. I asked Mr. Verres, and he said Diane is definitely not Susan’s sister, though they might be half-sisters. I sincerely hope not, but I’m not sure how else they may be related. Well, there’s only one way to find out, and that’s speaking with at least one of Diane’s parents, so we might never know that answer. Still, they have a similar affinity and they’ve both awakened, so they should still get to know one another, even if there’s no way Mr. Verres would let Diane into the group.
As for the group, I know Mr. Verres was keen on keeping it at eight, but he’s kinda stuck with letting me in. I know too much to leave out, and besides, I’m the only dragon he knows about within the US. (There’s another that has been living here since the French Revolution, but he doesn’t need to know that.) That makes me pretty important, and since he’d probably need to give me the same sort of information as the Eight, he decided to make it the Nine. Which is probably going to cause him some trouble at work, but dealing with special folks like myself is both part of his job and reason his department (that he heads) exists.

Anyway, now’s about the time Susan should be coming back here, to report on her mother’s decision on whether or not to house me. I hope it went well, especially since I’m not looking forward to living by myself if I can’t get housing from within the group. Plus I’ll need to get educational records and a job somehow, and I don’t have a driver’s license, let alone a car. Not that I’m planning on getting a car if I can avoid it. I’m not afraid of walking a lot, and if it’s a really big distance, I hope I’ll be able to fly a large section of the travel, at least once people know I’m a dragon.

Wow, my mind tends to wander.

Hey, there’s a girl pulling into the driveway. That’s probably Susan. I should get ready to leave.

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Now that most of the awkward stuff is out of the way, I find myself looking forward to having clothes that fit. (Notably: shoes.) I know that’ll be another awkward fest, but at least the reward will be immediate and tangible. Mr. Verres is standing at the door with me and Susan.

“So how’d it go, Susan?”

“Mother wants to meet you first, but I’m sure she’ll let you stay. Although she’ll want to talk with Mr. Verres first if this becomes a longer-term thing.”

“About what I expected. Shall we go, then?”

“Yeah. We shouldn’t keep her waiting, and I’ll need to teach you a few things when we get there.”

“Okay.” I turn to face Mr. Verres and hold out my hand for a handshake. “Thanks for everything today, and thank you in advance for all the paperwork and stuff you have to work with on my account.”

He shakes my hand. “You’ll be filling out some of it yourself, but mostly just signatures. And a lot of it is my job. You’re welcome, though.”

“Okay, see you later!” I walk out the door with Susan.

“Why’d you shake his hand?”

“Just something Kevin was raised to do in thanks, greeting or farewell. I don’t see why I should be any different.”

“Is that backpack really everything you have?”

“I only have whatever Kevin was wearing at the time of my last memory from him. Really, I’m glad he’d picked up his backpack. There’s a few expensive things in here, like his computer and calculator. And thankfully he had his laptop charger with him, too.”
“Oh. That is nice. Why’d you say a calculator is expensive, though?”

“Higher level math in his high school required better calculators. This one is $150.”

“Ouch. Yeah, I wouldn’t want to pay for another one of those.”

We get in her car. It’s kind of cold in here, so I guess the drive wasn’t too far, since the car’s engine is still warm. Oh well, I can fix that. What does Fred’s heat-to-temperature table say again, for air at 70°F? Right.

We’re both quiet for a second, then Susan notices the air in the car is heating up. “Wait, the heater isn’t that good in this car. Are you doing that?”

“No reason to stay cold if I can do something about it. I just need to know how warm I need to make something and have a volume defined, and I can do it.”

“Oh. I guess that’ll be something nice if you end up spending a long time at my house. How much magic power do you have anyway?”

“You know how much Nanase has every… however long it takes her to recharge?”

“Yeah.”

“I have at least five times that, and I recharge to full from empty in six hours.”

“Oh. I guess you don’t really have to worry about running out of magic, then.”

“Not unless I’m in a tough fight. But it’s always nice to find a use for it. And there are plenty of things you can do that I can’t, like that fairy summon thing.”

“True. I bet Tedd could make a watch for it, though.”

“Those watches are just really small wands. And although he could definitely make a wand for it, I couldn’t use the wand anyway. That’s a completely different kind of magic from what I use.”

“He’s making wands?”

“Yeah. I thought he knew that. I guess I’ll have to tell him he’s a wandmaker? Though I thought that was fairly obvious.”

“What’s special about a wandmaker?”

“They don’t get spells, but they can make wands of spells they’ve only seen once. And they can make wands of spells they’ve never seen, though those only work if they have a good understanding how it should work, kind of like a dragon writing a spell.”

“That does fit with what I’ve seen. What difference would telling him make, then?”

“Judging by what Kevin read, Tedd seems to think he’s nothing special and the only reason he’s getting anything done is based on the TF gun he was given a few years ago. It’d probably both boost his confidence and give him more room to experiment if he knew that he’s the one fueling all this stuff. Then maybe we’d get some wands from him that don’t just transform people.”

“So is this thing about being a wandmaker just something Kevin read? Because that might not be completely accurate.”
“No. Just as I, as a dragon, can tell the difference between a caster and a wizard, I can tell the
difference between a wizard and a wandmaker. Kevin never read the term ‘wandmaker.’ However,
the scent was unmistakable today: Tedd’s a wandmaker. The Mymoir has a section on how
different types of magic users smell.”

“Smell?”

“That’s the best description I can give for how my brain interprets that sense.”

“Okay, then. Well, we’re here.”

12 January 2014
4:42 PM CST

“That was fast.” I look outside. “The comic said your house was huge, and this is pretty big. I’ve
seen houses similar in size, though. Although those houses were for families with at least five
members, not two. I can’t imagine you two clean it.”

“We hire cleaners. A lot of the space is unused, though.”

“Well, at least it should get some more use, now.” I put on my backpack and we head inside. When
we get in the door, Susan picks up an electric megaphone. Right. Wait, her mom is- “No, Susan!
You don’t need to do that. Your mom’s in the next room over.”

“Oh! I guess you can tell where people are?”

“It’s not terribly difficult.” Ms. Pompoms is walking toward us now. When she rounds the corner I
give a nervous wave in her direction. “H-Hello, Ms. Pompoms! My name’s Saphira.” I hold out my
hand.

“My family is pretty tall. Both of my brothers are taller, though.” Tedd measured my height while I
was at his house. I’m 6’1”, which is pretty tall for a girl. But I’m still three inches shorter than
Kevin and his younger brother. To prevent confusion, I’m going to refer to Kevin as my brother,
much as Elliot is Ellen’s brother.

“Your… brothers? I’m sorry, I had the impression you didn’t have any family?”

“Not- not any family I can contact, but I’d prefer to reference them as though they’re alive.” Plus
even if they’re not alive on an Earth, they’ll at least be alive in heaven. Though even with how
slow Dan moves through his comics, I’d hope they’re still alive. But being a dragon means I’ll
likely outlive them by a lot. If the multiverse is like in Chronicles of Narnia, then at least I’ll see
them in heaven.

“Oh. I’m sorry if I brought back painful memories.” Even with how little she thinks of men, she
does seem genuinely concerned about me being unable to contact my family. Maybe my presence
will be good for her. At the same time though, she might be hoping for Susan to marry me or
something, so if I want this to be good for her I’ll probably have to find some way to improve her
view of men. That can wait.

“I… haven’t had the luxury of thinking on it yet. I prefer to be positive, though.”

She hesitates for a moment. There probably isn’t much you can say in response to that. “Susan can
show you where you’ll be staying. If Verres determines this will last longer, I expect to talk the
details out with you and him.”
“Understood.” I turn to Susan. “So. Care to show me the path to my room?”

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“… and if you get hungry, there’s plenty of food in the kitchen. I trust you can find your way there?”

“Are all the bedrooms upstairs?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because I can only sense concentrations of heat and cold, and the answer to ‘can you find the kitchen’ is ‘only if I can freely wander the first floor.’ I mean, I can tell where the refrigerator is, but I don’t know where any walls are.”

“Oh. Then I guess I’ll show you in a bit. You… don’t have any clothes other than what you’re wearing, do you?”

“Ellen let me borrow some underwear and a t-shirt, but other than that, no. Mr. Verres said he’ll try to get a prepaid card by the end of work tomorrow, if he can’t find any of my family. I figured I’d ask Sarah if she could help me shop for clothes.”

“That sounds fine. I’ll ask Sarah for you tomorrow.” She pauses for a moment. “Just how much interaction with women did Kevin have?”

“Past elementary school, next to none excluding his mom and occasionally at school. He never had a girlfriend, and all of his friends were guys. Not that he had many of those, either.”

“No one wanted to hang out?”

“No, he was just more of an introvert. Plus his concept of ‘hanging out’ was board games and video games, and he didn’t spend a whole lot of time doing things that had more than four participants. He did like soccer and laser tag, but again, he didn’t do those very often. So if a ‘friend’ is someone you hang out with in more than one activity, I think he had two?”

“That sounds… kind of lonely. And sad.”

“He wasn’t ever lonely, but he was alone a lot. And… correct me if I’m wrong, but prior to meeting Elliot and Tedd, you were much the same way with Sarah and Catalina, right?”

“Oh. I guess you’re right there. So if you’re the same way with women as I was with men until last year…”

“I’m not prejudiced, I just haven’t much experience around girls. But yeah, I think everything will be a can of awkward for quite a while.”

“I don’t think that’s how the phrase goes.” Her tone is more serious, but I can see a hint of a smile. I laugh quietly. “I don’t know a phrase for that. But I’m hoping I can at least learn enough that things will be less awkward in the future.”
Today was the first time I actually took a shower. Shifting to dragon form cleans me just as much as it heals my injuries, so I wasn’t too dirty yesterday. But I had to take one today. And in doing so, I learned more… personally… the differences between my body and Kevin’s. I also learned why it’s expected that women take longer in the shower: hair is a lot harder to clean when it’s not so close to your scalp. I think I’m going to need to buy a hairbrush, at least. In the meantime, I hope Susan doesn’t mind too much that I used hers. I cleaned it before and afterwards, so it should be fine.

After getting a shower and having breakfast, I had the house to myself. So I found a comfy chair and studied Jorge’s Skin to Scales, to see if I might make a better version myself. That spell is… complicated. I think I have a better understanding of the sort of language structure a spell needs, now. And I might understand the spell well enough I can cast it without the name, though I think I’ll keep using it just for clarity of thought. I think I’ll start working on a… less-complete version tomorrow. By that, I mean the transformation will only be part of my body. I hope I can get what part of my body able to be changed on the fly, though I’ll set a safe default for if I need armor fast. And I hope I’ll be able to make it not affect my clothes, so maybe I can have the scale armor hidden.

Mr. Verres called around noon today. I guess he was on lunch? He said that he hasn’t found any sort of history for me, so he’ll have a card for clothes for me when he gets home from work today, and he’ll work on getting some sort of education set up for me as soon as possible. Since Kevin was in college, I should be able to either get a GED or spend a very short amount of time in high school. Neither of which will get me into a good college, but there is the Moperville Community College. Which is also helpful since I’ll be in Moperville for at least two more years, then, so it should be good for the local magic community, once I get that started.

Kevin never really was into writing a journal, as below-average as his long-term memory is. But if I’m going to live for thousands of years, it’s probably best that I write this down. So I’ve written entries for the last two days, and I guess I should write an entry for today. Susan should be getting home from school soon.

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That’s probably Susan in that car. I’m starting to get a feeling for the difference between individuals, but it’ll probably be a while before I can pick a person out of a crowd. I should be able to tell the difference between Susan and her mom, though. Should I stay in here or should I greet her at the door? Eh, it’s not like I have much to do right now, and I should ask her how it went with Sarah. There’s no way I can shop for myself on my own.

I know she knows I can sense her, but I’ll give her a bit of space when she first gets in the door.

*Slam* Door is shut, 2, 3, 4, now. “Hey, Susan!” I say as I round the corner into her view.

“Ah! Oh, right. Hello, Saphira. I guess I’m going to have to get used to you being here.”

“When he called earlier today, Mr. Verres said he couldn’t find anything on my past, so he’ll do something about setting up an educational record for me. As in I’ll still have to prove myself, but he’ll get the ball rolling. So it might be that in a little while I’ll be going to school with you, though
what classes I’ll be taking will be up to how well I do on tests. And if I pass all of them he’ll submit paperwork so I can get a GED.”

“GED?”

“General Education Development diploma. Basically the equivalent of passing high school, though it’s usually what people who flunk out of high school take, so it won’t look too good for colleges.”

“That sounds like the raw end of the deal.”

“Well, with it I can still go to a community college, and if I do well there I can get into a good four-year university. So it’s not like I’m up the creek without a paddle, but it’ll certainly be hard going, at least for that. And like I said, if I don’t do well enough to get that, I’ll be going to school with you. But before all that: Mr. Verres said he’d have a prepaid card so I can get clothes after he gets home, which’ll be around 5:30. What did Sarah say about helping me out?”

“She said she’d help. She actually seemed kind of excited. Personally, I’d be annoyed that I’d be doing this yet again, but I guess it also means she’ll get to know you a little better?”

“Or at least learn how little I know about women’s clothes. I’ve never liked shopping for clothes, and this will probably be even worse.”

“How little do you know, exactly?”

“The only time Kevin went clothes shopping with a female was with his mom. And like I said, he never had a girlfriend.”

“So… next to nothing, then.”

“I know general kinds of clothing I’ll probably like, but other than that, no. And since I’ll be shopping on a budget and have to buy an entire wardrobe including shoes, socks, underwear, and a rain coat, I’m thinking I’ll have to buy cheaper clothes.”

“No winter coat? Are you thinking it’d be fine to wear Kevin’s?”

“No, I’m thinking I’m a heat dragon and so long as the air around me isn’t moving too much I can keep myself warm. But I’ll still get wet, so I’d like a good rain coat.”

“Oh. I guess that’s fair. Plus you said you’d tell everyone you’re a dragon pretty soon anyway, so no need to worry about hiding your magic.”

“Keeping myself warm isn’t really anything visible regardless. But there is that, at least while I’m in Moperville.”

“You’re thinking of leaving?”

“I’m thinking I’ll temporarily leave for a four-year college, prior five years passing. The other dragons said to wait five years before directly telling anyone outside of Moperville about dragons or magic.”

“Directly?”

“Appearing as a dragon in public is definitely going to alert some people outside the town.”

“Right.”
“…I probably shouldn’t hold you at the door any longer.”

“Yeah, we can continue this in a bit. Hold on.” She heads upstairs, and I follow her.

13 January 2014
2:58 PM CST

“So, what do you want to know?”

“What makes you think I want to know something?”

“…I’m not good at small talk. If someone provides a subject, I usually can jump in, but otherwise I
don’t really know how to just sit and talk.”

Susan thinks for a second. “If Mr. Verres is going to be working on making an identity for you, do
you have a full name?”

“Saphira Bjartskular.”

“Where’d the last name come from?”

“It’s Old Norse for ‘bright scales.’ I got it from the same book series my first name is from.”

“You took your name from a book series?”

“I couldn’t think of anything else, and I like the name anyway. Plus that series was pretty important
to Kevin. He was introduced to it by the person who became his best friend through middle and
high school, and that series was the jumping off point for their friendship. They knew each other
before that, but they really became friends through that series.”

“Does the series exist here?”

I look away. This is sort of embarrassing. “Yesss, buuut… if you want to read it, just keep in mind
that I picked my name because I like it, not because of the character in the book that has it. Just…
please don’t make fun of me for it.”

“I might tease you a bit, once, depending on why you’re so embarrassed about this, but I won’t
mock you. What’s the series?”

“Inheritance. The first book in the series is Eragon. If you want an approximate length, each book
is about the same length as each of the last four entries in Harry Potter.”

“Did Kevin read a lot of books?”

“Not tons, but quite a lot prior to high school, and a little more after starting that. Just to name a
few series… Redwall, Inheritance, Harry Potter, The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lord of the Rings,
The Chronicles of the Lensmen…”

“Wow, okay, stop. That’s a lot. And… I haven’t heard of some of those. I guess there’s a lot of
good series out there.”

“Some of those are better than others, depending on what you’re looking for. The Chronicles of the
Lensmen, for example, has a fairly good plot, good characters, fantastic sci-fi, and pretty good
worldbuilding, excluding a world or two. By that I mean it’s a space travel series.”

“What sort of sci-fi?”
“Minimal parallel universes and maximum strange planets and space aliens. Probably a lot like Star Trek, though it’s very much a product of its time. Although the author goes a lot more into the science than I think Star Trek does. For example, he actually explains the physics behind the faster-than-light travel and he got a lot of future technologies right considering the series was published prior to the start of World War II. It’s actually pretty interesting how much stuff he got right.”

“Like what?”

“Like his description of a nuclear reactor.”

“Okay, yeah, that’d be pretty impressive. But why did you say it’s ‘probably’ a lot like Star Trek?”

“I’ve watched maybe three episodes of The Next Generation?” Susan looks both surprised and… offended? I know she likes Star Trek a lot, but she seems to be taking this personally. “I don’t watch a lot of TV. I’ve read up on a few episode plots only because they were referenced in something else I was reading.”

“Okay, while I’m reading this Inheritance series, you’ll be watching Star Trek.”

“That’s a fair trade.” I guess I know what I’ll be spending a lot of free time on, at least when I’m stuck on coming up with more spells.

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A few episodes of Star Trek later, Sarah came by to pick me up. We went to get the card from Mr. Verres, and now we’re on our way to the mall. “So, do you have some idea where you’d like to start?”

“Wherever you think is most important. Strategically, though… obviously, my socks fit, but I only have one pair. My shoes do not fit. If we’re going to be walking a bunch, I should probably get shoes first.”

“Any sort of preference?”

“I like distance running shoes. Even if I’m not going running, they last a really long time, and they’re pretty comfy. At least, when they fit.”

“I’m guessing that’s what you’re wearing right now?”

“Yes. Kevin got them for running initially, but they still worked in college even when he biked everywhere, so…”

“Well, your strategy does make sense. But after that, we’re probably going to have to do this from inner layers out.”

“Wheee. May as well get the awkward out of the way as swiftly as possible.”

“Do you… have any idea what your measurements might be?”

“Unless it corresponds with men’s sizes, no. Kevin only had a brother, no other siblings.”

“At least I know somewhere to go. I’ve been there with both Grace and Ellen, so I have a good idea what to ask for.”

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Seventy dollars for a pair of shoes later (thankfully, women’s running shoes cost about the same as men’s) and we’re finally on our way to the place Sarah mentioned earlier. She won’t tell me what it’s called, but I think I know what they sell. Yay. Oh well, I’m going to need it. Let’s just hope other clothing items take less time, because otherwise we’ll be here all night. I also believe we’ll be taking a couple of trips to her car so we can drop off some purchases and some of Kevin’s clothes that I’m still wearing. At least I’m a heat dragon, so the cold won’t bother us so much.

What is bothering me is the music in the mall. I got transported from the end of 2014 to the start of it, which means that just as *that movie*’s popularity started to die off, I got to live through the hype a second time. I haven’t even ever seen the whole thing! (Since Kevin walked into two viewing parties with both well into the movie when he got there.) And I know someone’s going to state the connection to me at some point.

It seems Sarah’s slowing down. I guess we’re near the goal? I look around a bit. Yep, that seems like the place. Wheee.

“Is it a fair guess to say you’ve never been in this sort of shop?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“Don’t worry. These people do this sort of thing all the time. Maybe not as often for adults, but there are a lot of girls who avoid this and have to do it later anyway, so it’s more common than you might think.”

“Are you giving me the same reassurances they gave Ellen?”

“Maaaybe. Wait, did Kevin read about this?”

“No. I didn’t even know you did this with Ellen until you told me in the car. And all I knew of you doing this with Grace was what happened after you left the mall that night.”

“Oh. Okay then. Well, hopefully something like that won’t happen.”

“If it does, at least you’ll know what’s going on this time. But I also sincerely hope not.”

“Alright, enough stalling. We don’t want to be here all night, and there’s a lot to do after this.” She makes to shove me inside. I’m probably stronger than her, since some of my dragon form strength bleeds over into my current form, but I do need to get this done so I let her push me in.

We probably look pretty comical, with someone who’s only average height pushing a girl more than a head taller than herself. But I’m also dressed in men’s jeans and a men’s coat, so the workers probably have some idea what’s going on. We receive a “Welcome!” from the saleslady approaching us. “How can I help you today?”

“My friend here doesn’t know her size. It’s also notable that she’s on a really tight budget.” The card is hopefully enough for a week’s worth of clothes, but that’s from a mixture of optimism (that women’s clothes cost the same as men’s) and pessimism (that women’s clothes in *Pokémon X* and *Y* cost twice as much as men’s), so I don’t really know how far it’ll go.

“We’ll see what we can do.” She turns to face me. I can see that her nametag reads ‘Mary.’ “My name is Mary. What’s yours?” I know from Kevin’s part time job that a lot of folks with nametags introduce themselves, but he never did because it felt kind of redundant.
In spite of her attitude, I’m still pretty nervous. Or maybe it’s because of her attitude? There’s a reason Kevin never shopped where he worked unless it was unavoidable. “S- Saphira. S-sorry, I- I’ve never done anything like this before. My clothes are hand-me-downs from my older brother.” Which is true enough. They were Kevin’s clothes. And since I told Mr. Verres to set January 10 as my nineteenth birthday, Kevin would nominally be older than me.

“Well, hopefully we can get you into something that was made to fit your body shape. Although with your height, I can understand having to find men’s clothes.” I’m planning on finding clothes that depend less on height for adequate coverage. I don’t think they make many pants for women that are over six feet tall.

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Well, that was an… experience. I hope I never have to do that again. It was probably also an experience for the saleslady, teaching an adult how to put on a bra. Although I know my measurements now, so hopefully I can shop for myself from now on. Sarah tried to talk me into just getting the measurements and then shopping somewhere else, but while that is budget-savvy, that’s also rather mean, and if everyone did that they’d go out of business and be unable to help others in a similar situation. (Yes, I am aware that that is a marketing strategy, but I still think shopping somewhere else would be rather mean.) So we just bought some of their cheaper bras that fit me.

“Next up, the other inner layer.”

“Please tell me we can just buy that in a department store.”

“Yes, we can. There are more expensive ones you can buy in a store like the one we just left, but for everyday use there are some in department stores.”

“I’d ask why the more expensive kind exist, but I think I already know the answer to that one. Keven wasn’t that kind of guy, but it’s not like he never encountered that kind of guy.”

“So do you know all the different kinds?”

“Men have boxers and briefs. Kevin preferred briefs. It stands to reason I’d like something similar.”

“That narrows it down to three kinds, I think.”

“Yay. I think in this case, I’ll just go based on a picture on the package.”

“That’ll probably be good enough.”

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7:03 PM CST

Another thing you can buy in a department store is a sports bra. Since Sarah told me it’s mandatory to have one if I plan on exercising, I decided to get two. I also bought some socks. With that out of the way, it’s now time to finally get my clothing people will actually see.

“Do you have a style in mind?”

“Generally, loose-fitting and modest clothing. I was thinking along the lines of t-shirts and skirts. Besides, I don’t think I could find pants that would fit me.”
“While you’re correct on that last part, I can’t imagine Susan would be all that happy with the style.”

“‘Skirts are just so men can look up them.’ That sound like her?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Well, I think it’s a lot harder to look up a girl’s skirt than to stare at her butt when she’s wearing jeans.”

Sarah giggles a little at that. “Well, you’re not wrong. I wouldn’t say that to Susan, though.”

“I will if she makes fun of my skirts.”

Sarah gets a little closer to me and starts whispering, “Anyway, I was wondering about your style because I have a mark for a spell that makes a sort of simulation of myself and my surroundings, and it’d let me try on some clothes for you in a lot less time than it’d take you to try them yourself.” I knew she had a mark—she smells like it, and I’ve been near her for hours—but I’m not going to say anything about stuff like that to people with magic unless they bring it up. It seems too much like a violation of privacy to bring it up myself.

“Can I see the simulation?”

“No, Tedd said only I can view it. It’ll include people, though, and continue to reflect reality as long as I don’t do something I couldn’t do in real life.”

“How long does it take?”

“As long as I keep it up. I do know that time passes faster in the simulation than in reality, though.”

“Alright, then I say give it a shot.”

“Are you… sure you’re alright with me doing this?”

“I honestly don’t care. If only you can view it, then I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Okay. My eyes will be closed while I’m using it, so…” She closes her eyes. A few seconds later, her eyes open again.

“That was fast.”

“You weren’t in the simulation. I remember now that Tedd said anyone with their guard up won’t be in the simulation. Why’s your guard up?”

“As a dragon, by default my resistance to common magic, such as your spell, is 100%. I can consciously lower it, but relaxing will raise it again.”

“That sounds like the opposite of what Tedd said it was like for most people.”

“Dragons aren’t ‘most people.’”

“True.”

“Could you cast it again right now, or do you need to rest first?”

“I’d need to rest first. That spell takes a lot of magic.”
“Oh well. Just remember that if you want to use magic on me, you need to ask first.”

“I guess no one’s going to ever surprise you.”

“Not with common magic. My draconic resistance is low, and I don’t have any resistance to other magic types. But all of those are rare, so…”

“I’ll ask about those later. For now, we still need to get you some clothes.”

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I now have a fine assortment of t-shirts and skirts. I also picked up a hair brush while I was at it. Since I’ll need something nice to wear on occasion, I picked out a plain dark blue dress that matches my eyes. Even better, that means that if I get a partial version of Jorge’s Skin to Scales working, I could possibly spice up my dress with scales near the edges. Plus I just like the color to begin with. Sarah said I was being bland, but I can pick out something else when I have money of my own. She did admit that the dress looked nice on me, although there’s no getting around it being a little short. At least I won’t have to buy or learn to walk in high heels.

There wasn’t enough left on the card for a really good rain coat, but all it has to do is keep me dry. I can make up for any loss in thermal properties, mostly. But I need a coat rather than an umbrella because otherwise nothing I own will have long sleeves, and I can’t do much against the cold if the air around me isn’t trapped. Sarah talked me out of the blue one, though I can’t say I blame her for that one. Still, she couldn’t say bright colors suit me all that well, so I got one that’s medium orange. So wearing it makes me feel like I’m hunting. I had to explain that one to her.

With all that done and purchased, I put on one of my outfits before heading out to the car to head home. Thankfully nothing like with Grace happened this time. So now we’re having a conversation as she drives me back to Susan’s place.

“Do you think it went well?”

“I wish it could’ve been less awkward at the start, but I think I’m happy with what I got. I wish pants fit me, but I’ll probably have to go to a specialist store for something like that.”

“Maybe like Big & Tall for women?”

“Unfortunately, that store only caters to people who fit both categories.”

“Oh. That’s a rather small amount of people.”

“Yeah, you’d think they’d have stuff for people who only fit one category. Anyway, I wanted to ask: if I manage to get a place to do my announcement, could Carol report on it?”

“She doesn’t work for a Moperville station. That station’s for all of Illinois.”

“There aren’t any single-city-only stations I know of. Besides, she’s previously reported on a bunch of other magic stuff. I can’t think of any better way to reach people outside of the tiny number that might actually be physically present for my announcement.”

“Where were you thinking of having it?”

“If possible, maybe in front of Tensaided’s video store? I know he’d be thrilled to have something like that there, though I’ll have to be vague when I ask his permission. Plus it’s in the middle of town, according to Susan when I asked her where it was last night.”
“I guess having it there makes as much sense as anywhere else, if you don’t want to hold it in the park. Which I’m guessing you don’t because no one’s there in the winter.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, you work on getting a place, and I’ll work on getting Carol there. How much can I tell her?”

“‘Something important will be happening there.’”

“No way her studio will dispatch her with a description like that.”

“Okay, you can tell her that mythological creatures will be involved. I don’t want you specifically mentioning magic or dragons, though.”

“I might be able to work with that. And for the tip source?”

“Either ‘someone I trust’ or ‘a mythological creature.’ Or something else you think sounds good. I’d prefer if you avoid my name, though it’s not like she’s going to know who I am.”

“Alrighty then. You just let me know when you have a time and location, and I’ll try to get her there.”

“Even if she’s not there at the start, she’ll probably show up partway through if she’s working. I’d just prefer for her to be there the whole time.” We’re outside the Pompoms residence now.

“Okay. Let me help you get these bags inside, and I guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“Thank you!”

14 January 2014
10:05 AM CST

As predicted, Susan was not very happy to see me in a skirt. I responded with the same thing I told Sarah earlier. Susan wasn’t too happy to hear that, either, but at least now she’s willing to take the trade-off. She still won’t wear a skirt, though.

So now I have a choice to make this morning: should I attempt to make a partial skin-to-scales spell, or make use of the fact that I now have my own clothes and try to get something done? Mr. Verres is going to come by once he gets off work today so that he can talk terms for my longer residency with Ms. Pompoms. I’m thinking I should probably attempt to get a job, but since I don’t have legal papers yet I can’t apply anywhere. Hmmm. Maybe I can try to find places that are hiring and get applications? Then when I have the necessary information, I can fill them out and return them. That sounds workable.

Now where should I apply? Kevin worked in food. That was boring enough for one lifetime, but I think anywhere I can get a job will be like that. Maybe I should try for something close to my interests, though. Perhaps some sort of hardware store? If I’ll be going to college for mechanical engineering, it might be nice to learn a bit about tools and such. Plus when I’m bored I can try to reverse engineer the stuff. Reverse engineering without disassembly is hard, but perhaps I could find a way to use heat magic to detect internal mechanisms? That would be useful anyway. Alright, hardware-type stores it is, at least for my primary round of applications.

Thankfully Susan gave me the Wi-Fi password for her house, so I can use my laptop to look up locations. It’d probably be best if I went there in person, though, plus walking around town will help me get the lay of the land. And I don’t have any trouble walking as long as the total distance
is less than ten miles.

With that criteria… it looks like I can go by three places today. Better than nothing. I guess I’ll just pack a lunch and get going. Though printing out these maps is probably also a good idea, since my phone still has no contract. I’m sure I’ll be back before anyone else is home, but I’ll leave a note on the kitchen counter anyway. And if I get bored while I’m walking, it’s not like I can’t write a spell and walk at the same time.

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These places are probably looking for part-time workers while school is in session, since they’ve lost all their summer hires. I’ll bet a lot of spaces have already been filled, but being a girl probably helps when I’m looking to work at a hardware store. I know that’s not the most positive reason, but since I’m also a dragon I think I can overlook that sort of thing, since I know they literally can’t take advantage of me, as annoying as the customers might be.

Two larger stores, and an Ace. I’m not sure which would be best, but I guess I’ll just have to pray I get the right one for me. I hope they do the choosing for me, since I have no clue what I’d pick. Whichever paid the most, I guess.

It’s the middle of the day on a weekday, so there aren’t too many people around. I’m going to make the assumption that I’m starting school soon when I ask for applications, though it’s not like I’ll be able to return them right away anyway.

As for once I finish this… if Susan has work today, I’ll ask if I can accompany her for the ride there. It’s not like I can’t walk home. But asking Tensaided if I can make my announcement on Saturday is probably a good idea to do as soon as possible. If she doesn’t have work, I’ll either contact Elliot and Ellen to talk about dragon stuff or ask Grace where Mr. Raven lives. I’ll have to talk with him before my announcement anyway, and I think yesterday was way more awkward than talking with him will be.

Now, let’s see… is it possible to create scales without transforming my clothes?

14 January 2014
2:50 PM CST

Looks like I got home before Susan. I got applications from all three, though the one at Ace was the easiest. And had the most-surprised manager. I guess he didn’t expect a girl to want to work there, not that I blame him. The job there is for restocking shelves and working at the register, but I think I can handle that. The other two had more openings, but just based on today I think I’d rather work at the small store.

As for my spell, I think I’ve got the basics handled, but I’m still working out the kinks. I can successfully create scales without changing my clothes, but specifying where I want the scales is harder than I thought. At least I managed to make it not create claws, based on the testing I’ve done since getting home.

Aaand Susan’s at the door. “Welcome home!”

“Hey, Saphira.”

“Just curious, and because my plans for today sort of depend on your answer: are you scheduled to work today?”

“Did you want to do something together?”
“More like I wanted to ask Tensaided if I could use the space in front of his store for my announcement.”

Susan looks thoughtful. “Hmmm. Well, he’s certainly a big enough geek that he’d let you, but are you sure you’re fine telling him ahead of time?”

“I don’t have to. There are ways to describe it without being too specific.”

“Like what?”

“‘I was wondering if I could use the space out front of here for some mythological creature stuff this Saturday.’”

“That makes it sound like a furry convention.”

“I’m aware of that, but there’s plenty else I can also say. But it’s a moot point right now if you’re not working today.”

“Weren’t you going to talk with Mother and Mr. Verres today?”

“That’s not for another couple of hours. If you drive me to the video store, I’m fine with walking back.”

“Really? It’s a few miles one way.”

“Kevin is a hiker. He can do over ten miles in a day with forty pounds on his back. I think I can walk a few miles with nothing weighing me down.” I’m not telling her I’ve already walked nine miles today, but I’m really not all that tired after that. Plus I learned a lot more about the area from my walk.

“Are you sure you’ll be safe?”

“You’re worried about a dragon being safe. I mean, it’s true, I did basically lose that fight last Saturday, but that was while I was protecting two people. I know how to run away.” Plus I’ve got my partial skin-to-scales spell, which is only slightly more helpful than Jorge’s spell, but it does avoid claws meaning I can still run.

“Alright, I’ll take you with me.”

“Thanks!”

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“So how much do you know about Mr. Tensaided?”

“He’s a huge geek in more than one sense of the phrase, he has an experience system for his clerks, and he really likes Cheerleadra.” Susan looks like she’s trying not to crack up at the first part.

“That’s… a fair assessment. I wouldn’t say the first part around him, though.”

“I know his type. Kevin saw them a bunch at game fairs. I hardly think he’s sensitive about his weight. Though I still wouldn’t say that to his face.”

“Anyway, I probably should get inside. You probably know how to handle yourself, but keep in mind he’s my boss and he’ll probably realize I brought you here.” We get out of Susan’s car.
“Gotcha, don’t embarrass you or get you fired. I don’t think I’ll be here too long anyways.” Susan heads in first. I’m still a bit nervous, so I hang back a bit while she checks in with Tensaided. Either she said something or I stand out, because he’s walking over here now.

“Another friend of Susan’s, huh? How can I help you?”

“I- um- Could I talk to you for a bit?” I say in a hushed tone. I don’t want anyone to overhear what I’m saying.

“What about?”

“I wanted to use the space in front of the store for something pretty soon, but I’d have to get your permission first…”

He looks both surprised and confused. Not that I blame him. “Why here?”

“Mostly because I’m pretty sure you’d be okay with it, though also partly because it needs to be somewhere I can attract attention without doing too much to announce the event ahead of time.”

“Why would you hold an event without announcing it?”

“Because the event is an announcement, and announcing it would sort of ruin the point?”

He squints at me. “Okay… why are you so sure I’d be okay with it, then?”

“Because Susan pretty much described you as a huge geek, and while I’m certain I don’t know as much about that sort of stuff as you do, I’m also fairly certain you’d be interested in my announcement.”

I’ve got him intrigued. Now is the most critical part. “What… sort of announcement would you be making?”

I shouldn’t say too much here, but… “It has a lot to do with a particular mythological creature. I can’t say much more than that.”

“Surely there’s more to it.”

“My name is Saphira, not Shirley.” I hope he appreciated the reference a bit. I haven’t seen the movie, but at least I know where it’s from. “As for more to it, I really can’t say much, but I do have to warn you that there may be minor property damage and you probably won’t get many customers while it’s going on.”

“Minor property damage?”

“As in I might gouge some grass out of the ground. I’ll be standing on the grass, but that area isn’t large enough for anyone else attending the announcement to stand there.” His store has one of those tiny areas of grass across the parking lot that are pretty common near strip malls and the like. I’m just glad there isn’t a bush or tree in it. “And standing on the parking lot would both be uncomfortable and possibly gouge the pavement.” That’s enough that he probably understands this won’t be an ordinary event. I shouldn’t say any more, though.

He’s got this look on his face like he’s trying to process what I just said. “Gouge… the…” he says in a very confused voice. He gathers himself. “What time were you planning on holding this event?”
“Saturday around noon for the start, continuing for as long as attendees still have questions and I still have answers.”

“This Saturday?”

“That’s the one. I understand if you’d want me to put it off, though.”

He vigorously shakes his head. “No, no, that’s fine. Do you want to put up posters or something?”

“No, I’d like the attendance to be as organic as possible. I’m fine if there aren’t many people here at the start.” I’m planning on doing something that a lot of people will notice at the start anyway, and besides, hopefully Carol will be here. “Is this arrangement alright?”

“You’ve certainly got me curious. And if you can put the grass back where it came from, I think I can deal with the rest.”

“I can’t replant it, but I’m not unfamiliar with moving uprooted patches of grass.” And various other kinds of yard work. “I guess it’s a deal, then. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

He still looks sort of confused, but his businessman self is taking over. At least he didn’t want to charge me for using his land. I guess I should be grateful. I walk toward the door to begin my journey back home. As I open it, I hear Tensaided say to Susan, “So, do you have any other interesting friends I should meet?” I wonder what he’d say if she told him ‘yes.’

14 January 2014
5:45 PM CST

True to his word, Mr. Verres is here. Ms. Pompoms doesn’t seem terribly comfortable to be talking with him, but it’s not like there was much of an option. I’m not super interested in a lot of what they’re saying. Most of it is just Mr. Verres confirming that I don’t have any official records that haven’t been created in the last few days, and Ms. Pompoms trying to understand why it’s his job to get me housing. I guess I should chime in. I hope it’s okay that I say this, but I’m thinking Mr. Verres doesn’t want to spill any of my secrets.

“Ms. Pompoms, I am very grateful for any assistance the two of you have offered, but you’re missing a key point here that Mr. Verres likely doesn’t want to talk a whole lot about.” I turn to Mr. Verres. He seems tense from my statement, but I mostly plan to talk about myself here. “You have a picture of me from Sunday, right? I’m sure you had to show someone at work to justify your actions on my behalf.”

“… Yes, I do. Are you sure?”

“I think she’ll understand a lot better if you show her. Besides, she’ll find out on Saturday anyway. I just reserved the space today.” I don’t want him to think I’m holding that sort of information from him. “Plus, I don’t think it’s fair to have her agree to something she doesn’t fully understand.”

He turns to take out a picture, presumably. Ms. Pompoms looks a little frustrated. “I don’t understand what?”

“Hold on. That can’t be you. These… things don’t exist!” Oh, come on. I know you know that’s a picture of a dragon. I don’t look that different from how dragons are portrayed in popular culture.
“Fine then. **Jorge’s Skin to Scales.**” Her eyes widen as my clothes seem to meld to my skin, which proceeds to turn blue and rapidly become covered in large scales. Then I end the spell and the process reverses.

“That’s… impossible…”

“I’m a dragon, and what I just did was something of a partial transformation. As you can see by the picture,” (which thankfully includes some of the back porch for scale) “a full shift would be too large for indoors. I’m saying all this because I want you to know that my status as a rather special individual is what makes it Mr. Verres’ job to at least take care of the legal part of my problems right now. Housing isn’t necessarily his job, but it’s related to the rest, so…”

Now she’s a mixture of confused and irritated. “Do I need to know anything else?”

“Just that being a dragon is the reason I need to eat a little more than my frame makes it look like. Thankfully, most of the energy for that form comes from elsewhere, but I still need to have *some* physical energy sustaining it.”

“Is there any danger of you accidentally causing damage?”

“Not any more than normal. The potential maximum damage is higher, but… What I can do is, simply by how it works, very intentional. If I shift forms, I put a lot of effort into doing so.”

Ms. Pompoms turns to face Mr. Verres. “Is this at all related to what happened last April?”

“Saphira has assured me that that was not a dragon.”

“Dragons are monochromatic. If you see something that is more than one color, it’s not a dragon. For how I know what it looked like, there are still pictures on a news site’s archives.”

“So what’s this about Saturday, then?”

“I’ll be making an announcement to Moperville that I am a dragon. Being a dragon used to be something of a big deal. I, and the other dragons, am hoping it can become a big deal again, in a positive way.”

“Other dragons?”

“You didn’t think I was the only one, did you?”

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A long explanation later, I think Ms. Pompoms got the gist of what’s going on. She agreed to house me on the condition that I do my best to gain independence from her goodwill. Mr. Verres assured her she can claim me as a dependent on her taxes. I agreed to her terms and showed her the job applications I picked up today. She wasn’t super pleased that those jobs would have me working in a place where the vast majority of the customers were men, but I assured her I wasn’t worried about it, and I’d find that more interesting than most other places I might find a job anyway.

At least she seemed happy that my career of choice would pay a lot, though I’d do it even if it didn’t.

With that settled, Mr. Verres informed me that he will be setting up proficiency tests for me at Moperville North. The tests will take place on Thursday and Friday. If I don’t pass all of them, I’ll start school there next Monday, taking whatever is necessary to graduate in the least time possible.
Not a lot of prep time, but it’s not like I can really study for them anyway.

Beyond that, he’ll have my legal status cemented by the end of his day tomorrow. I guess things are really getting set up. I’d best be ready for what’s to come.

14 January 2014
6:47 PM CST

Since I’d best chat with Elliot and Ellen tomorrow, I asked Mr. Verres for their home phone number before he left. With that in hand, I’m now calling them up to set up our chat. Thankfully, the Pompoms have a home phone.

“Susan? I thought you were working tonight.”

“Saphira. Hey, Elliot.”

“Oh. Hey, Saphira. What’s up?”

“I just got confirmation that I’ll be staying at the Pompoms residence for the foreseeable future, and I was thinking I should chat with you and Ellen after school tomorrow. You know, about dragon stuff.”

“Oh. I don’t think tomorrow will work.”

“Why not?”

“Ellen has magic practice with Grace and Greg, and I have basketball with Noah.”

“In that case, can I tag along with either one or both of you? Unless both things start and end at nearly the same time, I mean. I want to talk to Greg, and I really need to talk with Noah.”

“What about?”

“Greg because, as a dragon, I should probably have some sort of self-defense training. Greg in particular because my knowledge of him suggests he’s really good at designing self-defense training around magic abilities, and I’d like to learn how to use my sensing in a fight against multiple opponents. Plus I can probably take harder hits than most people.

“Noah because he’s really close to Mr. Raven, and Mr. Raven and dragons have… an interesting history. If I want to do my announcement peacefully, I need to talk with Mr. Raven beforehand, and talking with Noah first might make that easier.”

“Is this an interesting history because he’s half-immortal, or something else?”

“That’s not unrelated, but not the key point here. But the fact that I’m a heat dragon in particular will mean he’ll probably be very suspicious of me. He has a bit of a personal history with another heat dragon. I can explain all that later.”

“Maybe when you’re explaining stuff to Ellen and me, then. Ellen’s thing starts and finishes first, so I’ll ask her if you want to tag along. Can I trust you’ll be near the phone you’re calling from now tomorrow after school?”

“Sure. Let me know what’s going on! Oh, and in case you’re wondering: my current fastest mode of transportation is walking. So she might need to pick me up.”

“Gotcha. I’ll call you tomorrow.” *Click*
I guess I better finish that partial transformation spell before tomorrow after school, then.

15 January 2014
12:49 PM CST

It works! Yes! Alright, one more shot. This time in front of a mirror. “Saphira’s Partial Armor!” I watch as everything below the middle of my neck and above my wrists and ankles shifts to scales, without altering my clothes. Just to check completion, I take off my shirt and twist around. Perfect! Thicker scales down my back, more flexible but still hefty scales down my front. End the spell, and my body shifts back to normal. Shirt back on before leaving the bathroom. Finally!

So it’s not completely customizable yet, but the default amount works perfectly. With that in mind, I think I can make it so that picturing the desired area beforehand can make the spell more customizable. That’d probably work better for using the spell in public, anyway. For today, though, this is good enough. I don’t really care if Greg can easily tell that I’m using magic, I just don’t want to have claws on a training mat. He’s already had one dojo destroyed by a dragon-like summon; he doesn’t need one ruined by a dragon.

I’ve written my first spell! It’s not a heat spell, but every dragon can use it. I wonder if Ellen or Elliot could use it? If they can’t access the Mymoir, maybe not, but I haven’t really tested any of their abilities. They could well access the Mymoir without being thrust into it as I was. I wonder if I’ll get to speak with Noah today too? I hope he doesn’t try to break my neck, at least. My Partial Armor spell wouldn’t help against that.

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*Beep-beep-beep* Oh! That’s probably Elliot! Susan’s not home yet, but she has to drop off Sarah first. I think Elliot rides the bus? I run over and pick up the phone. “Saphira speaking.”

“Hey, Saphira, it’s Elliot.” Wherever he is, it’s pretty noisy. He’s probably calling from the bus. “Ellen said she’s fine with you tagging along. Since she just goes to the dojo straight from school most weeks, she’ll be picking you up soon.” Right, she usually drives Grace home. I guess that makes sense.

“Alright. I’ll make sure I’m ready, then. Talk to you later?”

“Yeah, after everything else is done. See you then.” *Click*

I did tell Susan and Ms. Pompoms last night what I’d be doing this afternoon, but I’ll leave a note on the counter anyway. Although Susan will probably be home before Ellen gets here. Speaking of which, that’s probably her outside right now.

Note on counter, I head over to start putting on my shoes. It’s funny how you notice the little things. Kevin would always bring his knee to his chest when putting on his shoes, but I have to hold my leg a little further away or out to the side. This is almost as bad as when he decided to learn how to tie his shoes slightly differently so they’d stay tied longer. Just acting a little differently is slowing me down a lot.

While I’m still slowly putting on my shoes, Susan opens the door. “Are you heading out already?”

“Elliot just called and said Ellen would be here soon.”

“I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

“Yep. Seeya! Actually, I think she’s already on the street.” I finish putting on my shoes and head
outside. It’s still rather chilly, but heat dragon. Yeah, that’s Ellen and Grace. I walk to the end of the driveway and get in the car when Ellen pulls up.

“You’re not cold standing outside? I mean, I know you’re a heat dragon and all, but…”

“As long as it is neither windy nor raining, I should be fine. If it’s either of those, that’s why I bought a rain coat.”

“You look cute in your new clothes!”

“Thank you, Grace. I mostly picked them because they’re comfy and easy to wear, but your statement also applies.”

“…Was that a Pokémon reference?”

“Maaaybe.” Right, Grace likes old video games. “What I said isn’t false, though. And I like that the clothes are modest. If I’m going to be stared at, I’d like it to be either for my height or because I’m a dragon.”

“So do you have a date set up for that announcement thing?”

“This Saturday around noon. I’d like for people who haven’t seen my dragon form to show up, though if you have someone in mind you can get to come that might be nice. It’ll be outside Tensaided’s video store.”

“How’d you get that space?”

“I asked him in person. And I gave him probably a little more information than necessary.”

“Like what?”

“I told him that I’d have to stand on the grass, because if I stood on the parking lot I might gouge the pavement. Then I said I really couldn’t say any more past that.”

“Yeah, that’s probably more than necessary. But if he’s as nerdy as Elliot said, then that definitely helped. He’s probably racking his brain right now to figure out what you meant by that.”

“Probably. So, what sort of format does your training have?”

“Mostly, Ellen blasts me with spells while I try to block them.”

“Can you deflect them? That might be easier.”

“The point is to get stronger, not necessarily better at fighting. But that’s a good point.”

“So, Saphira, what sort of thing did you have in mind for today?”

“I don’t have any money, so I can’t pay Greg, but I was going to see if I might ask him for training. And possibly get him started on a new business.”

“A new business?”

“He shut down his old dojo not just because it got wrecked but also because he knew that teaching folks without magic techniques that would help them get magic is sort of dangerous and irresponsible. However, there used to be a career that’s pretty similar to that that he might like doing, since it’s a mixture of what he was doing with his old dojo and what he’s doing now with
“‘Used to’ be a career? What sort of career?”

“Magic training. Back when people knew about magic, if you had magic you either got training from your parents or someone else who had magic like you. It was rare that someone would be skilled in teaching those with dissimilar magic, but such teachers were heavily sought after for monster hunting teams, as learning to fight in tandem with each other or to fight against other kinds of magic is pretty useful. I figure something like that would also be pretty useful for a dragon and/or a burgeoning magic community, since it would bring together a bunch of people who might not otherwise meet.”

“Gotcha. And with your announcement this Saturday…”

“He might be able to get a ton of business with a career like that. So although I can’t pay him, maybe he’ll accept advertising?”

“It’s worth a shot, I guess. He’ll probably be pretty happy to learn he might still be able to teach something like that.”

“And if he’s not willing to go it alone, maybe Mr. Raven could help. I’m sure he’d know how to do it right, anyway. He was alive before dragons went into hiding.”

“He’s that old!?”

“Yeah… Actually, Grace? I know you know where his house is, and I really need to speak with him before Saturday. Could you… give me his address? And I don’t know how much it’ll help, but maybe you could let him know I’ll be coming by there tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure I should do that.”

“Let’s put it this way: if I don’t speak to him before Saturday, someone might get hurt. Because his history with dragons isn’t the most positive, and I’d rather avoid the problems that might come from extreme prejudice.”

“Should I tell him you’re a dragon?”

“No… just… tell him that it’s really important that your friend speaks with him. And that I’m willing to accept any punishment he might want to give you for giving away his address.”

Ellen turns and looks at me for a second. Thankfully we were at a red light. “Hold on. You said ‘extreme prejudice.’ Isn’t that phrase usually used to indicate deadly force?”

“Yes. I’m not kidding, he actually might want to kill me. I’ll be really cautious though, and I’ll definitely avoid anything that might make him even slightly mad.”

“Why would he want to kill someone he’s never even met?”

“Another time. Let’s just say heat dragons aren’t the most popular element.”

15 January 2015
3:15 PM CST

Now we’re sitting outside the dojo, and I realize I forgot something critical: Greg can sense magic power. And although Grace is pretty overpowered, her compared to me is about like a 150-watt
bulb compared to the Mythbusters’ miniature sun. Which explains why my heat senses say he’s curled up in a ball in the back corner of the dojo.

“I think you guys should go in first and explain to Greg that it’s your friend standing outside. For his confidence’s sake, he should probably be the one to approach me.”

“Why wouldn’t you come in with us?”

“Because Greg can sense magic power, and I’m a dragon. According to my heat senses, he’s presently cowering in the back corner of the dojo.” It’s serious, but I can’t keep the amusement out of my voice. This is the same man that rushed in to save Grace when he sensed someone more powerful than himself in the Verres’ house. His courage then was admirable, but I guess I’m too powerful for him to want to mess with me.

Ellen glances at Grace with a look that says something like “Here we go again.” I don’t know about the ‘again’ part, though. I can’t think of any situation that has been like this before. Unless he could somehow sense Tedd’s power. We all get out of the car, but I stay out of sight from Greg’s corner while the two of them head inside.

I can’t hear what they’re saying, but Greg’s body seems to cool a bit. Maybe muscles get warmer when they’re tensed up? That would make sense. He’s not curled up in a ball anymore, anyway. A bit more talking and he’s now stiffly walking towards the door. I bet it’s taking all his willpower to walk towards me.

He opens the door. “S- Saphira, is it?” He’s still holding onto the door, though.

“Yes. You’re Greg, right?” I hold out my hand. He just stares at it. “Handshake?”

“O-oh, right.” He shakes my hand. His grip is pretty strong, but he is a martial arts instructor. “W- why don’t you come inside?”

“Sure, thanks.” He keeps standing there for a second, then remembers what he said and walks inside. I catch the door as it’s closing and enter as well.

“I guess I should explain why I’m here. I was wondering if you could train me? I’m probably going to get into a lot of fights with powerful magic users, and I’d like to be able to defend myself without seriously injuring them.” Basically, without burning/freezing them or having to step on them in dragon form.

“Me, train you?” His surprise is evident in his voice. “How could someone get as powerful as you are without any training?”

“It’s inherent in the kind of magic I use that I had no power one moment and then all this the next. I’ve done some martial arts in the past, but that was years ago. I’m confident I can beat most opponents with my full power, but as I said, I’d like to not send my opponents to the hospital. Plus it’s probably better for my image if I don’t do that.” Plus I don’t want to use my MP on the random encounters before the boss appears.

He appears to have gathered himself a bit better now. “Let me get Ellen and Grace started, and then we’ll talk about your thing.”

“Alright.”

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“So, what sort of arrangement were you looking for?”

“You know your old Anime-Style Martial Arts school? Something like that.”

“I’m not doing that again. As I told my previous students, doing something that can give people magic power is irresponsible.”

“What if you were only teaching people who already had magic power, like you’re doing with Ellen and Grace?”

He does the The Thinker pose for a second. “Hmm. I suppose that would be better, but I don’t think there are too many people out there like that.”

“Well, you’re right on that. The average chance that a person has magic can’t be greater than about 2%. Not counting people like myself, but 40 in 7 billion isn’t increasing that percent by a lot. “But as far as I can tell, you have a special gift for training that people used to travel great distances to come by.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Not just that. I’d also like you to train me. But I know it’s a business, and I don’t have anything to pay you with. So… would you train me in exchange for me finding students for you? One of the things I can do is tell if a person has magic, and if they do, what kind.” Plus I’ll be doing my announcement thing on Saturday, which should give me some influence. “And if you don’t think you can do this by yourself, I have someone in mind who may be able to assist you. I’d have to ask them first, though.”

“I’ll think about it. If you’re serious about wanting me to train you, though, you’ll first have to tell me what you can do.”

15 January 2015
3:35 PM CST

Greg and I are standing off to the side while Ellen and Grace are doing their magic thing. I think it’d be more helpful for Ellen if they were sparring or something, but I don’t know enough about Grace’s telekinesis to help her. She uses genetic magic, and telekinesis is not a recorded ability in the Mymoir for that sort of magic.

“I’ll give you a full rundown of my abilities later, but for now, I’d like to do an incremental version. One ability at a time, for the ones I want you to train me on at least.

“First up, I can take a harder hit than most when I have an active transformation. But it only helps where the armor is visible, and while it’s impact-resistant and cut-resistant, it won’t help against other kinds of attacks. Saphira’s Partial Armor.”

To his credit, he doesn’t look all that surprised. Then again, he knows what Grace can do. “Is there a reason why the scales are blue?”

“My eyes are blue. I can’t change either of those colors.” Dragons don’t know what causes what, but there’s no questioning that element, eye color, and scale color are linked. “Before you start testing how hard I can take a hit, you can do that with the second of two things I want you to keep in mind as you train me. However, I think that’ll work better if you experience it before I explain it. I’m going to close my eyes, and I want you to try and hit me while I try to dodge. My reflexes aren’t the greatest, so I’d like you to take it slow at first and get faster as you go.” As Kevin clocked it in Aerospace Engineering class, his reflexes are about three times slower than average.
Though he’s also pretty good at dodgeball, at least for the dodging part. Throwing strength could use some work.

With my eyes closed, I can still see Greg nearly as easily as with them open. He looks sort of different, colors-wise, but the silhouette is the same. I can’t see his face, though, so I can’t read his eyes or anything. But it’s not like I’m looking at a 2D cutout. I’m getting a 3D sense of him and can tell when he’s throwing a punch or kick.

It’s been a very long time since Kevin did martial arts. Dodgeball is far more recent. It’ll definitely be apparent that that’s the case in my dodging technique, as I don’t recall how you’re supposed to dodge kicks and punches. I know it’s different though, as the ball isn’t still attached to your opponent, so you don’t have to worry about it on the rebound. So I’ll have to back off more than jump out of the way, but still try to keep away from walls so I’m not pinned.

He’s definitely getting faster. I’m not used to having to dodge more than two or three things at a time, and I’m now noticing the subtle differences in moving my body versus Kevin’s. I’m more flexible, but my balance is slightly different and not having visual cues for movement is also throwing me off. Dodge dodge jump dodge duck dip dive dodge *wham* goes the knee of justice. I’m not hurt, but he winded me and knocked me to the floor. “Uncle,” I wheeze, my eyes now open.

“Are you okay?” He’s holding out his hand.

“I’m fine… just… a little winded.” I end the armor spell and grab his hand as he pulls me to my feet. I notice that Ellen and Grace have paused their training to watch Greg and myself.

“That was pretty impressive, how much you managed to avoid with your eyes closed. And you were able to keep away from walls, although your technique could use some work. How were you able to tell what I was going to do?”

15 January 2015
3:39 PM CST

I’m not sure why Ellen and Grace haven’t gone back to their practice. Maybe they’re resting? They already know what I’m going to say. I wait to get my breath back, then explain. “I can’t tell what you’re going to do any more than someone with their eyes open could, really, but I can basically get a color map in my head of the heat around me. If you had tried attacking me from behind, for example, I would’ve been able to dodge just as well as your attacks from the front. That’s how I was able to keep away from walls—they don’t quite have the same heat energy as the air around us, so when I could tell I was too close to one, I rotated the fight so I wasn’t backing into one. But my reaction time could use some work, and I’ve only been able to sense heat for a few days. Anyway, I thought the demonstration could at least show you better than I was able to explain what the ability might be useful for.”

Greg’s actually nursing his knee a bit. He must’ve hit me pretty hard. I’m glad I had my scales active. “That ability certainly could be useful against multiple opponents. And the fact that you’re able to talk does demonstrate those scales’ usefulness. But why do you think you’ll be fighting powerful magic users?”

“It’s… because of what I am. People like me represent the sort-of-last-resort fighters. I hope I won’t get into fights too frequently, but when I do, it’ll be because no one else can win. Basically… you know that thing that wrecked the ceiling of your previous dojo? I could easily defeat and/or pin that thing. Without any training, and without getting hurt. But doing so without training would also cause a lot of property damage, and possibly get bystanders hurt. I’d like you
to train me because I want to protect people with minimal risk to others. I’m not worried about myself getting hurt, but simply being able to win a fight with magic isn’t good enough.”

“I… think I understand. And you’re good at making it sound like it’d be irresponsible to not train you. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“I’d get training whether you trained me or not. It’s just that the people who can train me properly are a limited resource, and you doing so will free up the others from having to train me. Plus I’m… nothing near the level required for higher training. I’m not really fit at all. I’d be breathing hard even if you hadn’t knocked the wind out of me.”

“Well, at the very least, I think I can handle that much. Why don’t you come back next week, and I’ll have a training plan ready for you? And if you can find enough students for me, maybe I’ll consider reopening my own dojo.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you then.”

“In the meantime, I’ll run you through some basic training most new students should be able to handle, while Ellen and Grace continue their training.” I guess my sheer amount of power is overshadowing Ellen’s new power, because I’m surprised he hasn’t yet noticed that she’s a half-dragon. As for his training, I’m pretty sure I know what it’ll be. I wish Kevin had kept up with basic fitness. I mean, he’s not fat, but my endurance isn’t what it used to be.

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At one point in the training, (Sensei) Greg suggested I wear something more modest than a skirt. I responded that his options were either a skirt, my partial armor spell, or a martial arts gi. He said he’d try to find a gi that would fit me before next week, but if I’ll be fighting with the partial armor spell active, I should train that way too. So now I get to train with the extra weight of scales all over my body. Yay.

After we finished, Ellen dropped off Grace at home, then brought me over to Elliot’s basketball thing with Noah as they were finishing up. I’d probably find that more attractive if not for how nervous I feel right now. And even once I’m finished talking with Noah, I’ll get the fun job of talking about Magus with Elliot and Ellen. And dragon stuff, but that’s easier.

Wait, can Noah sense magic power? I don’t remember. I think he could sense Grace’s power when they finished the Dex fight? But it’s not likely Raven told Noah about dragons, anyway…

There’s no real reason for me to wait in the car, since I want to talk to Noah before he leaves. Besides, although Fred didn’t give me many useful spells, I did find one that’s particularly useful right now: Fred’s Thermal Regulator. It basically makes it so that I can set up a desired temperature and it keeps the air within a few inches of my skin close to that temperature. And once I cast it, I don’t have to keep thinking about it to keep it going; I just have to will it to end.

It sounds like Noah has noticed me. “… friend seems impatient. Why don’t we… wrap it up?”

“No… she told me yesterday that… she just wants to speak with you. I bet she doesn’t want you… to leave before you two talk.” They’re both breathing heavily, so they’d probably wrap it up soon anyway.

“Still… it’s cold out here.”

“I don’t mind the cold. I just don’t want you dashing off the moment this ends.”
Noah scores one last basket, and they both look like they’ve had enough. “Good… game! See you… next week?”

“Yeah.” Elliot’s too out of breath to give his voice much enthusiasm.

“Why don’t you go wait by the car?” I don’t say ‘in’ because I know it feels good to relax in the cold after a workout. “I’ll chat with Noah once he gets his breath back.” I walk over. No handshake this time, because I don’t want to force him to stand up straight. Instead I give him a little wave. “My name’s Saphira. I don’t want to alarm you, but I mainly wanted to talk with you because of your fight with that monstrous summon last April.”

“That… wasn’t me. You must have me… mistaken for someone else.”

“Don’t deny it. That disguise was terrible. But that’s beside the point. What I want to know is: how much do you know about dragons? And what would you do if you met a real one?”

“A real one? What are you implying?”

“That… thing you fought wasn’t a dragon. That was a summon. Real dragons aren’t summons.”

“If that wasn’t a dragon, then I guess I don’t know what I’d do if I met one. Probably protect people from it, I guess. Or run.”

“Hmmm. I guess no one’s explained dragons to you. That’s fine, then.” I turn to walk away. That much will probably get him to ask Mr. Raven about dragons, which might clue him in on what sort of person to which Grace gave his address. And if Noah doesn’t know about dragons, then I’ve no reason to try to convince him to not attack me on Saturday.

“Wait! What do you know about dragons?”

“A lot. It’d take a while to explain. Just… remember that if they’re monochromatic, you probably should try to talk to them before you attack.”

“Mono…chromatic?”

“Nice talking to you, and thanks for indulging my curiosity. I guess I’ll see you later.”

15 January 2014
5:00 PM CST

Now that we’re all at the Dunkel residence, I guess it’s time to talk with Elliot and Ellen about serious stuff. “Alright, I have two topics for you guys. You want dragon stuff or other stuff?”

“Other stuff?”

“An assortment of topics ranging from recent history to why you two need to be cautious for the near future. You should be safe while you’re near me, but…”

“Why don’t we lead with that? I want to be able to pay attention while you’re talking about the dragon stuff.”

“I don’t think you’ll pay much attention whatever the order after I said that, but fine. As for the recent history, I think you know where I got the information.”

“Kevin.”
“Correct. Anyway, this all starts three years ago, though I don’t have much information for back then…”

“**About three years ago**, a trapped spirit arrived in this universe, after some wonky magic interaction from a sparring match managed to get him here without his body. He’s stuck in this universe with no way back, in the same plane of existence that immortals and some aberrations inhabit. From the tiny bit of time for the sparring match, I know that his name is Magus, and one of his friends is a girl named Terra. It was Terra’s magic, in combination with a magic item Magus held, that resulted in his being transported and trapped here.

“At some point after arriving here, Magus met an immortal who agreed to help him out with regaining a body. I’m not totally sure what the plan in full was, but with the help of the other dragons I think I’ve got a pretty good guess. Essentially, Magus and the immortal planned to use a stupid complicated and dangerous plan involving the Dewitchery Diamond to give him a body. Elliot, remember when Tedd zapped you with FV5 last year? That was because he had been influenced by Magus to do so. I get the feeling that the TF gun breaking was also from either Magus or the immortal.”

“Wait, so all that was *his* fault!?” Ellen sounds really angry. Hey, don’t be too mad; you wouldn’t exist if not for all this.

“Technically, yes, but mostly the immortal’s, since Magus can’t speak with anyone but immortals and aberrations directly, but the immortal could have easily spoken with someone who could try to help Magus, such as Mr. Verres.”

“Have you told any of this to Mr. Verres?”

“Nooot… yeeet… but I’m planning to, once I get everything else done that I need to get done this week. Or you could tell him, since I’m basically telling you two everything I know. I’m just telling you now because I also have to talk about dragon stuff with you two, and I definitely can’t tell that to Mr. Verres.

“Anyway, it was Magus’ influence that resulted in Ellen’s creation. The next step of the plan could have followed rapidly, but it hasn’t for one reason or another. Essentially, Magus needs to be present when you, Ellen, zap Elliot with your base spell. I’m not sure what that’ll do, but apparently Magus really needs it to happen. And here’s where things get tricky.

“Magus has proved from his actions that Kevin’s read about that he’s generally a moral and upstanding guy, but he’s also really desperate. I really, really want to help him, but I’m not sure how. You zapping Elliot without Magus present won’t have any unexpected effects, but I’m not sure how safe it’d be with him present. According to the other dragons, that could do anything from making you two lose your magic to causing one or both of you to cease to exist. Thankfully, my awakening you two as half-dragons might make the latter possibility a whole lot less likely, though it might also add some interesting magic interactions that are rather difficult to predict.

“As for what Magus has been doing recently… Remember when Abraham came here and tried to kill Ellen? That was when Magus showed his morality the strongest. The immortal commanded him to **force Mr. Verres to murder Abraham**, Magus refused, in spite of the promise of that causing him a great deal of difficulty later, alongside the immortal abandoning Magus.

“Which leads me to why you two have to be especially careful right now, and why you should be safe near myself. Remember who else Magus can talk with? With no one else to turn to, he’s started plotting to finish the job and regain a body by **working with a certain kind of aberration called a body snatcher**. Body snatchers can take complete control over a single person’s actions for
an unlimited period of time and are very difficult for people to detect, as they have next to no physical form. I don’t know what they’re planning, but I get the feeling that the reason there have been a bunch of vampires in Moperville lately is because of them.

“Thankfully, aberrations have weaknesses that are pretty easy to understand. Vampires, which are almost completely physical beings, are mostly immune to physical harm and horribly weak to magical damage. Body snatchers, which have next to no physical presence, are extremely weak to physical damage. My magic, being pretty soundly based in physics, has next to no effect on a vampire, but I should be able to dispatch a body snatcher with ease. In addition, my ability to detect magic users means I can almost certainly tell when a body snatcher is present. So I don’t know how much it’ll help, but if you think someone’s acting strange…”

“Call you. Gotcha. We’ll let everyone else know, too.”

“Thanks. That’s about all the help I can give, right now. So if you take a bit to get your heads sorted out, I’ll start talking about the dragon stuff.”

15 January 2014
5:12 PM CST

“Are you two ready to listen some more? I’m going to be talking about some stuff you probably should know, and some stuff you definitely shouldn’t tell anyone else. It should be obvious which is which, but if you don’t know assume it’s part of the latter category.”

“Why shouldn’t we tell anyone?”

“Because dragons have some pretty major weaknesses that aren’t too difficult to exploit if you know what you’re doing.”

“Like with the vampire?”

“That was unsuccessful stalling. If I didn’t know people were coming and I actually knew how to fly, I would’ve just grabbed Diane and Charlotte and fled. Fleeing is not a bad option in a situation like that.”

“So what do we need to know, then?”

“Let me just talk, and you can imagine for yourself. First up: dragon form is not one-to-one on organs with human form. Some things are the same. Obviously, the cardiovascular system is stronger. However, some things don’t exist at all. How this works then depends on the system.

“I’ll assume you know basic human biology. Dragon biology is basically ‘everything required for combat.’ For starters, the dragon form does not include a digestive system. Most of the form’s energy comes from magic. So don’t try to eat or drink anything in dragon form, because it’ll go down your windpipe. Also, don’t sleep in dragon form. You won’t get hungry or thirsty, but you can still die of hunger or thirst. Not that a dragon has, but they have been mighty parched upon shifting back to human form. You also can’t go to the bathroom, but if you waited long enough you might have wet pants right after you change back.”

“Oooo. Something tells me a dragon learned that one the hard way.”

“You’d be right on that one, Elliot. Actually, you’d be right on pretty much all of this. Thankfully, your digestive tract sort of goes into holding while you’re transformed, so you won’t have an empty stomach when you change back. Another thing that doesn’t exist in dragon form: a reproductive system. Mostly, this is pretty convenient, especially for female dragons.”
Ellen smirks at me. “Not that you’d have experience with that.”

“Not yet, but I get the feeling I’ll understand soon enough. However, this is also inconvenient for female dragons. Something else we found out the hard way: whatever is in your reproductive system when you shift forms is not still there when you change back.”

“And something tells me this comes from something most dragons would rather not talk about.”

“One subject to especially not bring up with older dragons: why are there no dragon children? And related topics.”

“There is a story there that I’m not sure I want to hear.”

“You’ll hear it at some point, just not today. I have too much to do right now. It was bad enough reading about it. Last major topic to not tell anyone: dragons awaken roughly every hundred years. I broke that pattern, but I’m kind of special. So right now, there are forty dragons, since the first dragon awakened 3900 years ago and one dragon has died since then.”

“Only one?”

“Dragons don’t age much. James may have awakened 3900 years ago, but he looks like he’s about the same age as I am. The one that died is part of a very sad story that explains why people nowadays mostly haven’t heard of dragons. The first reason dragons decided to come back is because now the public only has vague legends of that tale, so our reputation has mostly recovered.”

“It must’ve been pretty bad, for this to be a ‘recovered’ reputation. A lot of people think dragons eat people.”

“Let’s just say… well, dragons all have nicknames after a bit. James is ‘the First.’ Other dragons are Sean ‘the Wanderer,’ Akiko ‘the Prankster’—”

“Akiko!” Right, that’s the same name as Nanase’s little sister.

I close my eyes to read the Mymoir. “A Japanese light dragon that’s about 2600 years old. She’s also known as ‘the Thespian,’ for her various roles in Japanese performance arts over the centuries. She presently acts and uses her magic to create special effects for lower-budget studios.” I open my eyes again. “I get the impression that Akiko also likes to prank others with her magic, such as by making walls seem invisible so that people run into them. And in case you’re wondering, she’s presently in Japan.”

“Oh. Okay. Huh, I wonder how Akiko would react if she was told there’s a dragon that shares her name.”

“She’d probably be ecstatic. Anyway, the reason why I bring this up is because the one dead dragon is Fred ‘the Dead Dragon.’ Just prior to him becoming ‘the Dead,’ his name was Fred ‘the Tyrant-King.’”

“Ooooh. So how’d he die, then?”

“By exploiting some of the weaknesses I discussed earlier, alongside some other stuff. Generally speaking, dragons prefer to not kill people. But this was lawful execution. He already stood condemned by any sovereign power that had heard of him prior to his death. Most of the time, dragons will rehabilitate criminals. But Frederick was too far gone.”
“Aaanyway, changing the topic… Remember how I said that dragons don’t fly like Cheerleadra? Our magic is pretty firmly rooted in physical laws. So flying is mostly a lot like it would be for bats, although we, meaning us three, at least, do have six limbs. I say ‘us three’ because a dragon looks however they think dragons should look when they awaken. So dragons come in all sorts of shapes, even though we’re mostly the same size. Plus, although our wings are mostly large enough to keep us aloft, there’s an innate bit of force magic that dragons use for flying that will reduce our weight sufficiently to keep us aloft. It’s not enough to keep us up by itself, though, so you can give up on the idea of just picturing where you want to go and flying there. You still have to flap your wings and such. Actually, would you two want to go flying with me later this week? Maybe Saturday morning, prior to my announcement? I can give a better explanation then.”

“If it’s prior to your announcement, wouldn’t people freak out?”

“There has to be somewhere around here you could consider ‘in the middle of nowhere.’” Come to think of it, isn’t the housing facility for the Dewitchery Diamond in the middle of nowhere?

“Maybe if we drive south for a bit… sure. How long were you thinking of giving it?”

“Only until 10, at the latest. Since my announcement will be at noon, I’d like to be outside the video store by 11. Maybe give us three hours?”

“I think we could do that.”

“That’s a plan, then. Last thing: trying to see what you two can do. I’ll just give a basic rundown of dragon abilities that we might be able to test quickly, then ask the other dragons what they think. First up, the Mymoir. Think of a question you don’t know the answer to that you think other dragons might know. Concentrate on it, and you should get an answer. Probably a wordy answer at that.”

“Any suggestions?”

‘How many dragons have there been of each element?’”

“How about ‘what are the other elements?’”

“I haven’t told you that yet?”

“No.” Whoops. They both close their eyes and look like they’re concentrating for a few moments.

“Well, any luck on getting the answers?”

“No, I just feel kind of silly.”

Alright. Well, I’ll tell you the other elements, then we’ll move on. Heat, electricity, force, barrier, mass, chemical, light, sound. Each does pretty much what you’d think. None of them overlap, but as you might imagine, there are ways to produce similar effects with some of them. Like using chemical reactions to produce or absorb heat, or electricity to make light.”

“Makes sense.”

“Next item: the draconic language. Do you guys have something you don’t care much as to whether it gets something engraved in it? Like a piece of paper?”
“You can’t write it?”

“The magic ability of dragons to produce the draconic language on a material predates stuff like pens. It gets engraved in the surface of whatever we’re ‘writing’ it on. I can try to transcribe it, but it’s much easier to just use a bit of magic.”

“Okay, hold on a bit.” Elliot gets up and heads upstairs. A bit later, he comes back with a few sheets of paper. “Is this enough?”

I take the paper from him. “Plenty. Alright, Draconic is not a language of words, but ideas. So if I write my name—” Holding one sheet of paper between the palms of my hands, I give it a bit of magic to engrave my name in the paper. It’s just barely not deep enough to cut through the page. “—then it appears one way, but if I write what would be the same words, but don’t think of them as my name—” I do just what I said “—then they appear different. See?” I hold the paper in front of them. Light comes through the thinner sections more easily, so the symbols are clearly visible. If they can read it, it should be easier for them to read what I wrote than to analyze the symbols, which are actually slightly different from each other.

Ellen looks puzzled. “Why does one line say ‘sapphire bright scales?'”

Elliot reads the top line. “Your last name is Bjartskular?”

“Hey, you guys can read it! Congrats!”

“Wait, is the line I read just a translation of your name?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Did you come up with that name before or after you knew you were a dragon?” I don’t think Elliot appreciates my humor.

“After, but from Kevin’s history, I would’ve named myself that anyway. Saphira, at any rate. Bjartskular is because Kevin’s last name sounds odd with my first, and because I’m a dragon.”

“So what language is that from, anyway?”

“My last name is Old Norse. Kevin read it in a book.”

“Say, you said your announcement will be in front of the video store I worked at last year?”

“Yes.”

“Does Tensaided know you’re a dragon yet?”

“No, but I bet I’ll make his day this weekend.”

“With how much he liked Dragonliver, definitely.”

16 January 2014
2:55 PM CST

We ran through the rest of the abilities, but none of them really showed anything. Either Ellen and Elliot are too weak or they just don’t have them. Afterwards, Ellen drove me home and I got some much-needed rest for today. Mr. Verres came by this morning and took me to Moperville North for some placement tests. Today was English and Science, tomorrow will be History and Math. The science test was fairly easy, although it’s been a while since I did some of it. Thankfully I’d taken
Biology, Physics, and Chemistry over the past two years. English wasn’t the most fair test. There were sections based on books that are not in the curriculum where Kevin grew up. I did my best, but I have my doubts.

The tests finished before school did, so I got to come home and prepare for this afternoon. Yay, I get to talk with Mr. Raven, the guy who has the least reason to hold back on attacking me.

Since I’m sure Mr. Raven gets home late most afternoons, I’ll wait until Susan gets here to head out. Then between the delay and the fact that I’ll be walking there he should be home before I get there. Speaking of which…

At the sound of the door opening, I head downstairs. “Hey, Susan!” Why does she look nervous? Her thing with Diane isn’t until tomorrow.

“Hello, Saphira. Hey, um, how much do you know about Diane?” Oh. I guess anticipation is making her nervous. We can talk about it today, fine.

“Kevin doesn’t know much, but I did spend a few hours with her last Saturday. I can tell you a bit, if you like.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

She puts her stuff away, then we sit on the couch in the TV room. “Since Diane’s not part of the main group in the comic, she doesn’t appear too often. Her first few appearances, she was simply annoying to Nanase – actually, I think she called her ‘Diane the Pest’ – and rather rude towards Justin, though that was nearly a year ago. Back then, she dated a lot of guys, mostly so that she could get them to buy her stuff.

“More recently, she’s taken to watching your review show, though that’s probably just because Elliot’s on it. She refers to you as ‘Lanky.’” Susan looks a little mad at that comment. She’s read it a bunch before, though. “She doesn’t think Elliot’s her ideal man, but she wants to date him to get practice for the ‘real thing,’ because he’s a lot closer than anyone else she’s dated. And… that’s about it, as far as Kevin can tell. She’s appeared once more, but that didn’t give many insights into her character.

“As for last Saturday, she showed me that although she’s pretty intelligent, she thinks of ‘nerd’ as an insult. And she’s rather to-the-point if you’re annoying her. And as for what her magic showed me… she’s fiercely protective of herself and her friends, given the chance to defend them.”

“What kind of weapon did she summon, exactly?”

“A shotgun. From the way she used it, I don’t think she’s ever actually held one before, though. As for why a shotgun… in her words, ‘It’s America, darn it.’ I guess those old-timey films got to her.”

“I can think of a few reasons I’d rather have a shotgun than a sword.”

“Well, a sword probably doesn’t draw as much attention. Even though it’s a magic shotgun, it still let off a resounding ‘Boom!’ when she used it. But it was a one-hit kill at range, so I can’t fault her too much.”

“Anything else?”

“No, not really. You’d probably learn more from asking people who attend school with her. Kevin knows of her having a few friends for longer than the past year, though for the life of me, I can only recall Rhoda. And I sort of doubt you’ve met her.”
“Yeah, not so much. Thanks for the information.”

“I hope your thing goes well tomorrow. Anyway, I probably should get going. I need to have a chat with Mr. Raven today so he doesn’t kill me on Saturday.”

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Even assuming Mr. Raven can’t recognize a dragon on sight, I think I’ve given him plenty of warning. If Noah spoke with him last night, he’d know that either a dragon or someone connected with dragons is in the neighborhood. He’d also know to ask for eye color, so if Noah paid attention to that, Mr. Raven should at least suspect there’s a heat dragon in the area. On top of that, Grace talking with Mr. Raven should let him know that I’ll be stopping by either today or very soon, and the combination of the two should pretty much tell him that a heat dragon named Saphira wants to talk with him. My purpose isn’t stated, but if he knows that I set that much up on purpose, then he should at least be a bit more relaxed when I show up at his door today. Even if he isn’t, I’ve got my Partial Armor for a reason.

Huh. I guess he does sort of live in the woods, almost. I guess it’d keep prying eyes away. Plus he’s got that giant tree in front of his door. Not that it blocks a ton in winter. May as well knock; I can sense that both he and Noah are inside.

Wow, I think I can smell Mr. Raven from out here.

*Knock knock* Oh, a doorbell. *Ding-dong* He’s moving towards the door, so that should be enough. Stand back a bit like I’m selling popcorn again.

After looking through the peephole, he opens the door. Uh-oh, he’s carrying his cane. And that thing hides a sword. Yay. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.” He does a good job selling the ‘grumpy old man’ act, but I’m fairly certain he knows I’m a dragon, and that I therefore know he’s a half-immortal.

“I’m not selling anything. I was wondering if I could talk to you in private?”

“How did you get my address, then?”

“My friend Grace gave it to me. She wouldn’t have, but I told her it’s really important I speak to you before Saturday.”

“And what’s on Saturday?”

“My announcement.” That should give him everything he needs to know. He grips his cane in such a way that suggests he’s going to unsheathe the sword within. Uh-oh. My eyes widen. “Saphira’s-Partial-Armor!” I quickly squeak, covering my head with my arms.

After a moment or two of standing there like that, I get the feeling he’s not about to run me through. The blade of his sword is barely showing at the top of its sheath. As he fully sheaths his sword and puts it aside, I lower my arms and end the spell. “Partial armor?”

“This version preserves my clothes and hair and doesn’t give me claws.”

“If your first instinct was to protect yourself, I suppose I have less to worry about than I thought. Still, you should come inside and explain why you’re having an announcement when no other dragon has had one in over 800 years.”

“While we’re at it, I’d like to invite Noah to the announcement. It’s not likely something he’ll get
the chance to experience twice.”

“We can talk about that after you explain yourself.”

“Fair enough.”

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4:35 PM CST

Mr. Raven already knows about dragons, so my explanation was a lot shorter than for most anyone else. Of course, I still had to explain my and the other dragons’ motives, but still pretty short. Thankfully he took ‘I can sense him just around the corner’ for how I knew Noah lived here. He didn’t call Noah out here, so I guess he’ll have a talk with him later about his eavesdropping.

“How much does Grace know about my past with dragons?”

“Just that it’s not all that positive, and if I didn’t speak to you before my announcement you’d be likely to attack me.”

“I would like to say you’re wrong on that count, but you are a heat dragon…”

“On that note, I’d like to offer thanks on behalf of all of the other dragons and myself. Things could well have been worse had you not spoken to Sean. So… thank you.”

“I can’t imagine things becoming much worse than they did, but you’re welcome.”

“So can Noah come to my announcement? It’ll be on Saturday at noon outside of the Video Rental Store.”

“I’ll talk with him about it. Did you have anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Well… Obviously, if I’m having an announcement, I’ll have to explain the general principles of magic. Do you know Greg, the former owner of the Anime Style Martial Arts dojo?”

“We haven’t met, but I have heard of him.”

“He has a gift for teaching those with dissimilar magic. Though he doesn’t want to teach students without magic, I thought he might want to teach students who already have magic. I mean, he’s already doing it anyway, I just thought he’d want to have an official business of it. Anyway, I brought it up to him, and he seemed interested, but he was also afraid he’d be overwhelmed. If he’s having a hard time of it, would you mind giving him a hand? I know you should know from times past how this sort of thing would go. I didn’t promise him you’d help, or even tell him who I had in mind as an assistant, but…”

“What do you mean by assistant?”

“I mean it’s not your full-time job or anything. You’d just help when he really needs it. And maybe give him some guidance on how this should go?”

“Couldn’t you help with that? That is one of the duties of dragons, is it not?”

“I expect to be busy with lots of other stuff, like explaining stuff to people who don’t have magic. Sure, I’ll help, but I’m also pretty young. I’ll be receiving training from him, too.”

“Ah. Then I have one last question: what duration have dragons planned for this change to society?”
“From Saturday, at least five years before I show magic to the public outside of Illinois, though I won’t be showing much outside of Moperville. After the five years pass, I’ll do pretty much the same thing for the US as I’m doing here. At the same time, other dragons will talk about magic in their hometowns, if the dragons want to talk and people want to listen. It’s estimated at a minimum of ten years before the world at large knows about magic, and that’s an optimistic estimate for the pace. It’ll probably be decades before the world truly accepts magic, although the model used for the optimistic estimate accounted for cell phones and was put together by Sean.”

“I suppose the Wanderer has some idea what he’s doing there. Now, if that’s all you have to say, I believe I have some preparations of my own to take care of.” I’m curious as to what that is, but I’m still tense from earlier and would like to leave as soon as possible.

“Thank you for talking with me. I’ll be on my way.” I stand up and walk to the door. “I… guess I’ll see you later. Bye!”

That went well. Guess I better rest up for my History and Math tests. And I better be glad I won’t have Raven for a teacher if I screw History up.


To Be a Dragon

Chapter Notes

I know some people won't like how Saphira handles Magus. Just... bear with me. There will be a reasonable explanation for this, though not until the end of Chapter 5.

17 January 2014
2:55 PM CST

Final tests done, now I just have to wait on the results. Math wasn’t too hard (I should hope not, with all the math I’ve taken) but History was a bear. Turns out taking the easy way out on college history courses doesn’t help much with high school placement tests. I’ve never been good at memorizing dates or figures or really any of that history stuff. I’m much better when I can actually see a connection.

Speaking of which, I’ve finally got my Partial Armor spell working in full. I can even generate individual scales wherever I like. If I want to create a scaly trim to my sleeves or something, piece of cake. Just picture where I want the scales and Partial Armor does the trick.

I think I’m finally out of things to do. Susan’s got her thing with Diane tonight, so once she leaves for that, it’s time to sit back, relax, and plan my announcement. Not that there’s a ton of stuff to plan, since a great deal of my time there will be simply answering people’s questions. Wait! I think I forgot to tell Sarah when and where! Actually, I’ve told Susan, so it’s possible she’s passed it on… I’ll ask when she gets home.

So anyway, once Susan’s gone, just relax a bit. Maybe I’ll watch some more Star Trek while she’s out.

Oh, Susan’s home. Better go ask her.

Wow, she looks really nervous. “Maybe you should try to relax a bit. It’s not like Diane’s going to bite your head off.”

“No, but she already knows a lot about me and I’ve never even seen her before and I don’t know our relationship.”

“You are two people with mutual friends who have never met. And she knows one aspect of who you are. Whatever your genetic history, I’m not sure it really matters. Just try to act normally. At least you’ll be able to recognize her, right?”

“Yeah… I guess.”

“Anyway, the thought just struck me: I totally forgot until right about now to tell Sarah where and when I’d be having my announcement. Did you… pass it on yesterday or today?”

“Yeah, I told her on our way to school yesterday.”

“Thanks. That’s one less thing I have to worry about. So… when’s your thing with Diane, anyway?”
“Not until 6:00.”

“Well, I have little to do besides prep for tomorrow. Do you want to relax by watching some Star Trek with me?”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

---

With Susan gone to her thing, it’s just myself and Ms. Pompoms in the house. Susan left in the middle of an episode, so I finished watching it. With that over, maybe I should try to bond with Ms. Pompoms a bit? How would I do that?

*Beep-beep-beep* That’s the home phone. Maybe Susan forgot something. Though it’s not like I have transportation. I start walking towards the phone, though Ms. Pompoms picks it up first. “Hello?” She stands there for a moment. “Oh. It’s for you, Saphira.” She holds the phone out to me.

“Hello? Saphira speaking.” I start to walk upstairs. Why would someone call me, specifically?

“Ohthankgod.” That’s Nanase’s voice.

“Nanase? What’s happening?”

“Would you happen to know where Ellen is?”

“You probably have a better idea on that.”

“She said she’d meet me at the college at six.” What time is it? Oh. 6:30. That’s a little late.

“Why are you calling me, then?”

“She’s not picking up, and neither is Elliot. And my fairy doll isn’t working with either of them. And she told me yesterday to call you if someone was acting strange. I’d say she is.” My eyes widen. Oooh crap oh crap oh crap.

“Where is Elliot supposed to be right now, barring anything Ellen might have said in the same conversation where she promised to meet you?” Because if that was Sirleck making a promise, who knows what else the monster lied about.

Nanase pauses for a moment. "At his house, on a date with Ashley."

“Great. Can you come pick me up at Susan’s house and drive me to the Dunkels’?” Please no please no please no.

“Why there?”

“If you can’t hear the urgency in my voice, do-it-right-now-please! I don’t have time to justify this! I’ll explain when we have time!”

“I’ll see you as soon as possible then.” *Click*

No no no nononono. Crapcrapcrap. Better put on my shoes, though I get the feeling I’ll get an instinct-based flight in the near future. Good thing I read how to fly earlier this week.

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A little hyperventilation later, I think I’ve calmed enough to do this right.

“Ms. Pompoms?”

“Yes?”

“That was Nanase. Something’s happened, and she’s coming by to pick me up. I’ll probably be home late.” My fear isn’t keeping me from speaking clearly, but it’s still readily apparent in my voice.

“Is this something I should know about?”

“Probably not, but even if it was it’s a long story and I really don’t have time to tell you. Just trust me when I say I’ll be fine, but I need to act fast to ensure all of my friends will be fine. No, Susan’s not in any danger, as far as I know.”

“So this is a dragon thing then?”

“Something like that, yes.” A car… That’s probably Nanase outside. I’ll not keep her waiting.

“Alright, I’d best be outside when Nanase gets here. I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye!” I quickly put on my jacket and head out the door. My present smidge of adrenaline means I don’t even really need Fred’s Thermal Regulator right now, which is great because I think I’ll be using a significant amount of magic in the near future. Yep, that’s her. When she stops at the end of the driveway, I quickly get in the passenger seat.

“You look worried.”

“I’ll explain later. Dunkel residence, now.”

“Got it.” She steps on the gas. She’s driving safer than Diane was last Saturday, but still kind of fast.

“Since my range is enough, I’ll just need you to get close and point out which house is theirs, just so I’m sure which one I’m checking. If they’re inside, we’ll invite ourselves in. At this point, that’s justified. If they’re not inside, you’ll need to proceed to your uncle’s house. I don’t know if he’s home, but if he isn’t, Tedd or Grace being home would be enough.”

“I can check. Of course, we’ll need to be stopped for that, but we’ll know for certain.”

“Right, fairy doll. Sure, check once you stop outside Elliot’s house.”

This is a lot faster than walking. Sure, flying would be faster, but next to no one here knows about dragons yet, and I wouldn’t know where I was going. Which is why, if Elliot’s not at home, we’ll be picking up someone who knows where the Dewitchery Diamond is before flying to the rescue.

“We’re on their street now. Their house is the one three from the end.”

Picking that out based on the stuff around it… that matches up. Heat sensing says… no one’s home. I guess he hadn’t picked up Ashley yet? Or for some strange reason they took her along. Crap. “No one’s home. Check on Mr. Verres, then off to his house.”

“Right.” She pulls over and closes her eyes. I’d definitely drive if (a) I knew the way and (b) I had a driver’s license. Kevin has a license, but my picture isn’t on it.
“He’s home, and now he knows we’re on our way.” She starts driving again. “Anything you can explain while we’re in the car?”

“How much did Ellen say yesterday?”

“Just to call you if someone was acting strange.”

“Okay, whatever I say, pay attention to the road and don’t stop until we’re at Tedd’s house. The reason to call me is because of a specific kind of aberration.” At the word *aberration* her eyes widen, but she does keep her eyes on the road. “It can take control of a single person at a time, but it’s hard to tell it’s there if you’re not a dragon and don’t know what you’re looking for. And since its method of control uses magic, dragons are thankfully immune to it. And since they have next to no physical presence, unlike vampires they are really weak to a dragon’s attacks.”

“So why weren’t you protecting Ellen, then?”

“I had no way to know when or who it would attack. I gave her the most protection I could: I warned her about it and told her to tell others to call me if someone was acting strange.”

“And that’s why I’m not really scared and doing nothing at the college right now, so I guess it worked.” She slows in front of a driveway. “We’re here.”

I get out of the car. I talk as get out of the car. “Let’s get inside, then. We need to act fast. Thankfully, I have a pretty good idea where Elliot and Ellen are headed. And if they’re not there or en route, I have no clue where they are, and waiting for more than an hour will basically guarantee we can’t do anything to help at all.”

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6:57 PM CST

Mr. Verres was just as cautious about us as on Sunday, though he didn’t do more to me than confirm that his magic failed. “What’s going on?”

“No time to explain, really. I’m fairly certain Ellen is under the control of a body snatcher, Elliot and Ashley are not where they should be, and I’m pretty sure they’re all headed towards wherever the Dewitchery Diamond is currently being housed, if they all still exist.” I can tell that I’m speaking quickly, but I’m really afraid of what might happen if we wait too long.

“This has the sound of something you knew about but didn’t tell me.”

“I can’t explain everything in one day! I was going to tell you on Saturday or Sunday, once everything else was finished! But enough of that—we need to hurry. Do you know the location of the Dewitchery Diamond, and how to get there?”

“Yes, but—”

“Great. Body snatchers are weak to dragons, and dragons are immune to them. Also I can fly a lot faster than you could drive.”

“I can get a team there a lot faster than you could fly.”

“I can fly at 180 mph, in theory. In practice, I’ve never flown, but I think I’ll get the hang of it quickly. Plus, body snatcher and possibly wizard a lot stronger than you. I’d suggest forming a blockade on the highway, but keeping their distance. But we need to go now.”
“Fine. Where are you going to take off from?”

“I don’t care, really. If anyone was going to cover it up it’d be for less than a day anyway. Front yard or back yard?”

He sighs. “Back yard. Let me grab my phone so I can call some people.”

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Quickly now. In the Verres’ back yard, I make sure I won’t wreck anything when I transform. Right. Dragon, cross, **shift**. Big again, no time for that. I can take two or three passengers. With passengers I have to fly a little more carefully, but it still shouldn’t be that rough of a journey. I squat a little so they can climb up. **Hop on. I suggest one of you holding onto my neck. The other should sit right behind them.**

Mr. Verres climbs up first, once he puts his phone in his breast pocket. I guess it’d be less awkward with him in front anyway. Also, good thing they’re both wearing jeans, if this’ll be anything like described in *Eragon*.

Nanase’s on board now, so time to take off. I spread my wings. “Do dragons take passengers often?”

**No, except for emergencies and escorts. The former happening more often than you’d think, but it’s still rare. Dragons will also take along their friends for fun things, but that’s still pretty rare. Is everyone ready?**

“Yes,” they both say, slightly out of sync.

**Hold on tight!** Following the instructions I read a few days ago, I flap hard, though every stroke is deliberate and takes a second or two. I angle my wings so I’m rising more or less vertically. My back is tilting down, but not so steeply Mr. Verres and Nanase are in danger of falling off so long as they don’t let go of my neck. It should level out when I start moving forward. **What direction? Also, I can sense you pointing if you do so with your whole arm.**

“Do you know what direction south is?” Mr. Verres is shouting, slightly.

**Yes, generally.** I start flying the direction I’m pretty sure is south, based on the maps I used to walk around town the other day. He doesn’t correct me, so I guess I was right. And I can tell he’s not gripping my neck so hard now that my back has leveled out a bit.

As he continues to give directions, I speed up a bit. **I guess I ought to explain my plan. Mr. Verres, you are not only necessary for directions, but you also actually have authority here. I want you to tell the guard to not involve himself, as this is way more dangerous than he’s compensated for. And once the dust has settled, you might be able to sort things out.**

**Nanase, I want you to mostly stay out of the way. Maybe shield Ashley. I don’t want you fighting either of the two antagonists I expect to be involved. They both outclass you, as far as I’m aware. And one will be attached to Ellen, so there’s that, too.**

**When we approach the building, I ought to be able to tell at least how many people are in there. In this form, my heat sensing range is about two and a half miles. I can also speak with anyone within that range, selectively. Of the possible five people and a monster in the building, I have only one I wish to speak with. Hopefully, I can get that person to bait the monster into a vulnerable position, one where I can kill it. It’s also really important that it’s still attached to Ellen as I do so, because I am confident she can heal herself by shifting to her dragon form and back. If it’s on
someone else, I might hurt them in a way that would take a long time to heal and possibly require surgery.**

“Wait, what sort of thing are you thinking of doing?”

**I’ll be careful, but I’m going to burn the aberration to death. Ellen might be a little burnt by the end, but like I said, she can heal herself.**

“Isn’t there some other way?”

**No way I can think of that doesn’t make someone vulnerable. The idea is to kill the aberration before it really knows what’s going on. I can sense it while I’m in this form, so it shouldn’t be too hard to only directly harm it and only hurt Ellen by proximity.**

“I… guess you’d know better what you’re doing than I would. You’re not worried about it being like the vampire?”

**It has next to no physical presence. Not only can it not directly harm me, it’s horribly weak to physical damage. Thanks to how draconic magic works, vampires are pretty much immune, but body snatchers are extremely easy to kill.**

“…Alright.”

17 January 2014
8:06 PM CST

Other than Mr. Verres’ directions and phone calls, we continue to fly in silence. Eventually, the building in question comes into view. Just a little further, and I can finally sense the interior. It seems we’re a little late; there are five people inside. Three men and two women, though one of the men is a long ways from the rest of the people. I’ll assume that’s the guard. Of the remaining group, one man is sprawled on the floor, and one woman is squatting next to him. If Sirleck hasn’t changed bodies, that would likely be Elliot on the floor and Ashley next to him. I slow in the air.**I’m going to talk with Magus to attempt to lure him and Sirleck outside. As they can likely see me from here, I’ll go for intimidation. It’s not like either of them can hurt me anyway.**

“Sirleck? Who’s—” I ignore Nanase and speak directly to Magus, but not Sirleck. This will probably go best if that thing is unaware of my presence until it is too late.

**Magus!** I can sense him flinch, but I don’t know my sensing well enough to tell if he opened his mouth. **I strongly suggest you move outside with the aberration in tow. Do not let it know I am here.** I pause. He’s probably wondering why he should follow my directions. Well, if his world knows about magic still, they probably know about dragons. Not to say dragons are the same in all worlds, but…

**I am a dragon. I cannot hear your reply, but I can sense your location. If you do as I say, I promise that neither I nor my companions will harm you. If you do not, I am not responsible for what happens next. That is on your own head. I will give you a few minutes; the idea is to get Sirleck outside the building none the wiser. I suggest leaving your other companions behind.**

Thankfully, I know that he really doesn’t like Sirleck and would probably do anything to get rid of it. If someone appeared with a plan to get rid of the aberration, I don’t think he’d hesitate for a second.

Magus and Sirleck continue to stand there for a bit, then start moving outside. Ashley stands up, and Magus pauses for a second, then Ashley squats back down. Speaking with Nanase and Mr.
Verres now… **Magus and the aberration are moving outside. It appears Sirleck has not jumped bodies yet, so I should be good to go with my plan,** **I start moving toward the building.** **When they get outside, I will surround Sirleck with a wall of ice and land on its host. Then I will kill Sirleck. You two are free to dismount whenever you please. If Magus tries to run for it, inform him that I will pursue him if he flees.**

“Understood.” “Got it.”

The two hesitate at the doorway for a second. It seems Magus does not trust Sirleck. That’s fair. Eventually they decide to continue, Magus in front. I don’t give Sirleck the chance to pounce on Magus, as I immediately bring up a thick cylindrical wall of ice around Sirleck as it leaves the building! Magus leaps away as I pull in my wings and come crashing down, my front left foot directly landing on Sirleck!

Sirleck tries to get away, but it’s too late. My eyes burn with fury. **Sirleck! This is the end of the road!** **You will pay for what you’ve done!** **I drastically increase the heat energy around Ellen’s body, and she starts screaming.**

“ELLEN!” Nanase shouts. I understand her concern, but Ellen should be fine. Any damage she suffers will be only from proximity to Sirleck, and will be non-lethal, though perhaps painful.

The scream dies as the area around her bursts into flame, the outline of Sirleck clearly visible against the pavement. Finally, finally, Sirleck turns to ash, and I cool the nearby air and move away from Ellen. Oooo. I think I gave her some second-degree burns. Well, so long as we don’t disturb them too much before she can transform…

Oh. Great. It seems the destruction of a body snatcher has the same effect as it leaving. Ellen’s not going to wake up for a few hours. Which means we need to be really careful with her until she does. At least she won’t feel the pain, and when she finally wakes the areas should just be tender and sore, until she transforms. But this’ll be fun to explain to her folks.

Nanase runs over. “Ellen! Ellen! Are you okay?!” She moves closer, and I impose my head between her and Ellen.

**She’s been magically put to sleep by the destruction of the aberration. She should wake in a few hours. As for her injuries, she can heal them when she wakes. They aren’t lethal, though we ought to be gentle with her until then.**

Nanase backs off a bit. “Okay. I get it… I think. She’s not in any pain?”

**If she is, we can’t do anything about it. But I don’t think she can feel anything right now. She’ll probably be sore when she wakes, though.**

“Okay.”

Mr. Verres is pointing a wand at Magus, but he seems a lot more terrified of me than Mr. Verres. Huh. Magus is younger than I thought. I speak to both of them, along with Nanase. **Don’t harm him. I promised Magus wouldn’t come to harm. Though I didn’t promise anything else.**

**That said, I do know that Magus only did all this because he was very desperate. Magus, I wish you had waited until I could explain your position to Mr. Verres. While you think of how to explain your story, I suggest you go inside with Nanase and grab Elliot and Ashley.**

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8:10 PM CST
As Magus and Nanase walk inside, I hear him ask, “How the hell did you befriend a dragon!?” I guess dragons are very different on his world. I’ll ask him to tone down the language later.

Mr. Verres walks over to me. “Did you really have to burn Ellen like that?” Her face and abdomen are badly burnt, since those spots were in direct contact with Sirleck. Most of the rest of her is fine, though.

**The aberration was very close to her skin. I wish I hadn’t hurt her, but at least she can heal herself when she wakes. In the meantime, do you think you can carry her to her car?**

“How the hell did you befriend a dragon!?”

“Where is it? And how do you suppose I’ll open it?”

Assuming it’s the only parked car in the vicinity with a warm engine… I move my head to point in its general direction. It should be that way. Either she, Elliot, or Magus has the keys. Search her pockets? Thankfully, only her upper body has any sort of burns. Her pockets and their contents should be fine.

He finds her keys quickly enough. As he’s carrying Ellen to her now unlocked car, Magus and Nanase come back with Elliot over Nanase’s shoulders and Ashley in tow. Magus’s eyes look a little red. … Has he been crying? Ashley’s eyes widen upon seeing me. Thankfully, this time I’m not covered in gore. Now that I have the time… Magus doesn’t seem to have the same magic problem Elliot and Ellen had until recently—actually, he doesn’t smell like a dragon at all—but the smell of a dragon is much stronger on Elliot now. And the way he’s unconscious… that’s not normal for the Dewitchery Diamond.

“Miss Dragon,” Magus says, bowing, “would you happen to have any idea why Elliot is unconscious? I am afraid I do not know the reason, and therefore cannot cure it.” His bow had respect, but his voice is quavering.

There’s no reason to be so formal. I’m not royalty or anything. As for the reason… at a quick guess, I think the Dewitchery Diamond made him a dragon. His unconsciousness similar to that of newly awakened dragons, and he certainly smells like a dragon, though he also still smells like a caster.

“It… made him… a dragon? But he’s not…”

I don’t know what dragons are like where you’re from, but dragons here have two forms.

“Wait, are you saying you don’t always look like this?”

That is correct. I’ll be staying in this form for the time being, however, since we do all need to get home, and it’s not like that car can fit everybody. But we’re not going anywhere before you explain what’s going on to those who do not yet know. Don’t worry about the cold; I can keep you all warm just fine. For now, Nanase, why don’t you put Elliot in his car? I’ll keep the car warm, too.

“Are you alright?”

Yes, Ashley, I’m fine. I wish I could say the same for Ellen, but she’ll be fine when she wakes.

Her brow furrows. “What do you mean by that?”

Her close proximity to a burning aberration didn’t do her any favors. The aberration is now dead, but Ellen’s upper body is burnt pretty badly. She can heal herself with magic when she wakes.
up, though.

“Oh. That’s good, I guess. And Elliot will be okay?”

**Assuming he is a dragon now, he’s technically not unconscious right now. He’s just really confused by a massive influx of information, and probably has a headache as well. On record, it takes a new dragon somewhere between half an hour and four hours to open their eyes after awakening.**

“Oh. I… guess I’ll talk with him tomorrow, then.”

**As for Magus… You took a huge risk doing this, you know that? If you had paid even a bit of attention to Elliot and Ellen this past week, you would’ve known I was here, and you would’ve known I wouldn’t be long to help you. I was just really busy and trying to be cautious. I even asked the other dragons the likely outcome of your plan and how else we might help!** **Speaking of which, I need to tell them what just happened. Maybe in a bit.

Okay, I know I’m missing something. On my world, dragons are basically natural disasters. I was training as a battle mage to help defend my town from them! How is it that dragons are so willing to help people here?”

**Dragons here are people. They might be in your world, too, but if they are history likely took a different turn about 800 years ago, when the elder dragons executed the tyrant-king. As such, dragons are governed by their humanity rather than their power, and live to protect, teach, and help others. If your tyrant-king was not felled, it’s likely no one save dragons on your world knows that story. Actually, easy test: have you heard legends of a man named King Arthur the Dragonslayer? From a few contacts over the centuries, dragons know that Arthur (and Fred) is pretty much static across realities where dragons are good guys. Yeah, our Arthur wasn’t a king, but from having the same name and sword, the legends were a little… conflated. But he’s basically unheard of in other realities.**

“No. I can’t say the name rings a bell. King Arthur, yes, but not as a dragonslayer.”

“Wait. He was a real person?” Of course Ashley’s heard the legend. Most people that like fantasy stuff at all have.

**Yes, though the story is for another time. Right now, I think Magus owes Nanase and Mr. Verres an explanation.**

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8:15 PM CST

“Hold on a moment, first. You seem to know a lot about me, but why do you keep calling me Magus?”

Speaking to just Magus now. **That’s your name, isn’t it?**

“No. I mean, it’s my nickname, but… where did you get it from?”

**It’s what Terra called you, isn’t it?**

He squints his eyes at me, and his voice takes on an accusatory tone. “How do you know about her?”

**I know a lot of things I probably shouldn’t. I have memories from an alternate universe that
treated this one as a work of fiction. So anything the author deemed important enough to show is something I know about. That information source is now closed, but…**

“I… suppose that’s not much stranger than my own background.”

Back to speaking to the whole group. **So if your name isn’t Magus, then what is it??**

He takes a deep breath. **“It’s Ellen.”**

Hold on. Kevin’s memories notwithstanding, my heat sensing says he’s a guy. Unless that’s a side effect of how he got his body back, I’m pretty sure his spirit was male, too. **I can only think of three ways that makes sense. Please tell me it’s not the third.**

“It probably isn’t. What are you thinking?”

**One. Naming conventions in your world are different than here. Two. Your spirit is female, but your body is male because you were reborn from Elliot. In which case I can easily see you asking Ellen to use her base spell on you as soon as she wakes up. Three, Terra likes changing her friends’ sexes as much as Tedd does to himself, and for some strange reason the sex change stuck when your spirit was forced into this world.** I’m guessing Terra is an alternate to Tedd, since Magus looks like a blonde Elliot.

“Magic is common in my universe. If what you want to do with your life is better suited for the opposite sex, it’s easy to switch.” That’s worse than I thought. “I always wanted to be a battle mage, so I became a man.”

Talk about the psychological issues with that later. **I’d think being a woman wouldn’t cause you that much difficulty. You can use magic to make up the difference in physical strength.**

“Magic strength boosts are relative to one’s physical form, as are any number of combat spells! So then they’re weaker than they should be, like my friend Terra!” That explains the ‘your potential is wasted’ quote. But I think Magus needs to get a handle on why your sex doesn’t necessarily have to match your job, and why it’s generally healthier not to do something like that to yourself. Wow. If that’s a common stance there… The more I hear about… her world, the more it sounds like A World Without Piffany. I sure hope someone can fix it.

**Maybe physically, but in this world women are more commonly powerful magic users.** Probably because they're more commonly magic users, but that's not something that's easy to research.

“I am not having this conversation again! I don’t have to justify who I am to anyone! I am a man! It’s part of who I am! It’s part of who your Ellen is—”

**Whoa, stop. I won’t force this issue on you, but you don’t get to force your ideas on others. If Ellen wanted to be a guy, she could’ve asked Tedd at any time in the past year. I don’t think he would’ve had a problem with it.**

“Elliot, the person he’s copied from, was willing to travel a hundred miles and sneak into a government facility just to be a man again faster than he would have otherwise. I didn’t need to amplify his feelings to make that happen. As a result, Ellen gets created. And what does everyone do? Railroad him into staying a woman. Because he was the duplicate. Because he had to be different. Because there couldn’t be two Elliots." Identical twins are a thing. Look into it. "He was pushed into adopting a gender identity not his own to fit an identity Elliot created for his temporary convenience, and to keep magic a secret."
I’m not going to get into the gender identity thing too much, but take it from me: I have 19 years of memories of being a guy, but I’m certain that’s not the same person that I am. As a dragon, I am equipped with tools to identify differences between the memory of who I am and how I presently act, so that I can tell if I’m under some sort of personality-altering enchantment. I know I’m not under one right now, but from my analysis, I’m not the same person from those 19 years of memories. I am a newly created person. My soul is female. You need to at least ask Ellen first before trying something.**

“I was going to do that anyway!”

Oh. What Magus is planning on doing is still wrong, but at least she was going to ask first. Not that I think she can right now. **She’s unconscious. She’s horribly burnt, and even that didn’t wake her up. Do you really think you can wake her? And if you do, will she be in a state of mind that she’ll be able to properly think over your offer?**

“…Maybe not, then.”

**Just wait a bit on it. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to talk with her about it later, I’m sure of it. First, explain yourself to Mr. Verres and Nanase properly, then you can worry about other stuff.**

17 January 2014
9:30 PM CST

After Magus cooled down a bit, she finally decided to explain herself to Nanase and Mr. Verres. We’ve decided to keep calling her ‘Magus’ for clarity’s sake. Magus’s story wasn’t much different from what I told Elliot and Ellen on Wednesday, though it did have a lot more detail. And it seems she’s really mad at Pandora, though I can certainly see why. She didn’t give Pandora’s name, though, even though I know she knows it. I guess sharing her identity will be up to me. I probably won’t unless it becomes relevant.

I did not know that the tiny immortals following Elliot were the same two who awakened Nanase and marked Susan, nor did I know they treated Magus so harshly. Thankfully, they died improperly, so I won’t have to take it out on them in the near future, but I’ll be on the lookout for similar behavior.

Mr. Verres decided he’d drive the car with Elliot, Ellen, and Magus inside. Magus seems likely to submit to Mr. Verres’ authority, so at least I don’t have to worry about tracking her down. She did kidnap three people tonight, though, and Ellen’s injuries are directly due to her actions, so she’ll face some sort of criminal punishment. That said, she’s not yet a legal resident of the US, and I get the feeling Mr. Verres will have some authority over the sentencing, so I asked Mr. Verres (while including Magus in the conversation) if he could make the punishment something like community service, or essentially what will work out to helping me with Moperville’s magic community after my announcement tomorrow. Yes, I’m still going to do that, though I guess I’ll have a lot more on my mind tonight than planned.

I also wrote a note in Draconic for Ellen to explain what happened to her and tell her to transform when she wakes up. Of course, it was in Draconic because I can’t really write anything while in dragon form. I cut it into the dirt next to the building and had Mr. Verres take a picture, then scratched it out with my claws when he had it. He said he’ll find a way to get it to her for when she wakes up. He’ll probably just text it to her and write a note to check her messages.

And for myself, I’m flying back to Moperville with Nanase and Ashley on my back. Nanase’s stronger and weighs slightly more, so she’s in front. Plus she’s better dressed for this sort of
Ashley, on the other hand, is having the time of her life. “This is awesome! I can see why Elliot said he likes flying so much!”

“This is actually only the second time I’ve flown, the first being on my way here. It is pretty neat. Though I won’t be trying anything fancy. I think a smooth landing will be the most complicated thing I try tonight."

“I thought flying was easy?”

“Ask any pilot: taking off and level flight are easy. Landing is impossible to fail. Landing safely is hard. That said, my experience with both says that level flight is easier in an airplane than as a dragon."

“Experience with both?”

“My dad has a private pilot’s license. I’ve spent a little time flying his plane on family trips, though I only ever did the ‘keep the plane over the pink line’ thing. As in I kept the plane on the flight path according to the GPS."

“That’s still so cool. What does your dad think of you flying this way?”

Nanase turns her head around. I think it was to shoot Ashley a look, but I don’t care.

“I… can’t contact my family. It’s not for reasons related to being a dragon, but I don’t think I’ll see or hear from them again for a very long time."

“Oh. Sorry for bringing it up.”

“Anyway, we’re nearly back to Moperville. I’ll be landing in the park, since I don’t think it’s a wise idea to land in the city streets. Nanase, I do recall that your car is at Mr. Verres’ house. Could you direct me to a location in the park that is sort of close to his house? I’ll keep an eye on Ashley while you go get your car, and then you can drive us both home."

“It’ll be a bit of a run, but that’s fine. You okay if I just point?”

“Sure."

With Nanase’s help, I find a spot to land where the woods aren’t too dense, and make a much softer landing than I did at the other end of my flight. Then Nanase and Ashley disembark, Nanase leaves, and I finally get to shift back to human form. It’s much colder, but a Fred’s Thermal Regulator and I feel a lot better. Thankfully Magus had put Ashley’s coat on her before she kidnapped her, but I still brute force the air near her a little warmer.

“Thanks. How did you know where to find us?”

“I knew a bunch of Magus’s story before tonight. Not all of it, but a whole lot. Maybe 90%? I told what I knew to the other dragons, and they worked out…” I now know Magus is a girl, but for some reason I don’t think much of this group would like or understand me if I referred to her as such. “They worked out his likely plan, whenever he got around to executing it. When Nanase called tonight and told me Elliot and Ellen were nowhere to be found, and that Ellen had been acting strangely, I had a pretty good idea where you were.”

“Oh. That’s useful. How did you know all that?”
“I have memories from another universe where this one is a work of fiction. I know that sounds crazy, but it’s true, as far as I can tell.”

“I can accept that.”

“As for why Nanase called me, I had told Elliot and Ellen a bunch of what I knew on Wednesday, and told them to tell their friends to call me if someone was acting strange. I’m very glad Magus waited until after Ellen told Nanase to call me should such a thing happen.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty lucky.”

“Dragons know better than to call something like this lucky. This sort of thing happens a lot. Dragons are almost always in the right place at the right time, with the right amount of preparation. We’re pretty sure dragons are chosen for their purpose.”

“Does that mean it’ll be that way for Elliot now, too?”

“I’m not completely sure he’s a dragon. No other dragon has awakened by that method. That said, I’m the oldest person ever to awaken as a dragon, so it’s not like we’ve discovered everything about how that all works.”

We sit in silence for a bit. I’m sure her mind is filled with questions, but either she’s too polite or can’t pick one. “I can’t say I’ll be answering the same sorts of questions for the public as I can for you, but I’ll be having a sort of Q & A-type thing tomorrow at noon outside of the Video Rental Store, if you want to come. I’m not expecting a ton of people at first, since I haven’t told a bunch of people and I told most of my friends not to come, but I think some passersby will stick around as the event proceeds.”

“Wait, what?” I think she’s more confused than surprised.

“I, and the other dragons, think it’s high time the world remembers dragons and magic. So the whole thing will start in Moperville tomorrow. As time progresses, the knowledge will spread, but we’ll give it time before forcing it. But to start, I’ll be making use of a traditional event of dragons past.”

Now she’s much more surprised than confused. “Okay. I have sooo many questions, but I think they can wait a day. I’ll make a list.”

“Please give other people the chance to speak.”

“I will, but no promises on when I’ll run out.”

“I think you’ll stop asking when the amount of information makes your head hurt. Trust me, dragons have access to a lot more information than most people can process.”

17 January 2014
10:37 PM CST

This whole thing took a lot less time than I thought it would when Nanase called, but it’s still been over four hours. Susan got home a while ago, and Ms. Pompoms said Susan was really tired but wanted to speak with me in the morning. I was planning on going flying with Elliot and Ellen, but after tonight, I understand if that’ll have to wait. I guess I’ll let them call me tomorrow, and I’ll speak with Susan if we’re both up before Elliot and Ellen call me.

Ashley was happy to be home when Nanase dropped her off. Ashley had called her parents while
she was riding on me back to town, but they still looked relieved that she was back home safe. After her last two dates, I’d be surprised if they let her continue dating Elliot. In their eyes I’m sure he’s a magnet for trouble.

I reported tonight’s events and Elliot’s condition to the other dragons. They agreed that the most likely condition for Elliot is that he *is* now a dragon, though what kind of dragon remains to be seen. Plus this would now be the third dragon in the same century, and the second in Moperville. I guess God’s preparing us for a tough road ahead.

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I wake well-rested. I can tell Susan’s already moving around. What time is it? I look at my watch. 7:33. Not as late as I thought, but it seems Elliot and Ellen decided to sleep in a bit, since the scheduled time was 6:30. That’s fine. Anyway, I probably should talk with Susan. Good thing heat senses make it easy to find someone in a house this big.

“Morning, Susan.”

“Oh! Good morning. Hey, why weren’t you home last night?”

“That’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time. I don’t start work until 10.”

“Tensaied’s making you work today?”

“He said he doesn’t want to miss whatever you’ve got today.”

“That’s fair. It’s not like you haven’t seen it up close, and I’ll make sure you’ll hear some of it. So is it really important I wasn’t here last night until after nine?”

“Not… not *too* important…” Her expression says I really should’ve been here, but I can only work one crisis at a time.

“What happened?”

“Diane and I got attacked… by six vampires.” What?!

“She’s okay, right?”

“Yeah. We… had some help. Mr. Raven was there, and some immortals helped a bit, too.”

“I thought they weren’t allowed to act directly?”

“In Diane’s words: ‘It’s empower and guide, right? Care to guide my aim?’”

I chuckle. “Heh. I guess that works? And I might have said this before, but judging by how she used the shotgun last week, I’m pretty sure she’s never held a real firearm.”

“Like you have tons of experience.”

“Kevin has the Shotgun Shooting merit badge! It’s only a 12-gauge, but still.”

“12-gauge?”

“Pretty much the weakest shotgun out there.”
“Maybe you could teach her some aim?”

“I can take her to a gun range. I’m not an instructor. So is Mr. Raven okay?”

“Between the three of us, the vampires didn’t get the chance to hit anyone. The mall was a little wrecked, but it turns out a long-range weapon is pretty great, especially if you can stun the target.”

“Diane didn’t make too many holes?”

“I don’t think that shotgun can actually harm anything that’s not a vampire.”

“That’s useful.”

“So can you tell me about your night?”

“Sure, but be warned: you’re probably going to get really mad. I was furious.”

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“… and then I finally got home.”

“Wow. That was long. I’m glad what I had to deal with was a lot simpler, at least.”

“Yes, I imagine tracking down your aberrations was a lot easier. Plus you didn’t have to trick them into a vulnerable spot, just beat them into submission.”

“Couldn’t you have simply burned it from a distance?”

“No. I couldn’t risk it fleeing at the first bit of pain. When I wrapped my claw around it and Ellen, it was trapped. I’m not kidding, killing those things is really hard, especially for non-dragons.”

“Then I guess I’m glad you knew where they were.”

“If I hadn’t, the most likely end would be Elliot in the same condition, Ellen in the same condition except not burned, and Magus under the control of the body snatcher. Or if Magus somehow defeated the body snatcher, Ellen would be a guy now. Because somehow Magus thinks that’s what she would want, even though she’s never asked Tedd for something like that. And apparently Magus can change people as easily as Tedd, except permanently.”

“Well, at least Elliot and—” *Beep-beep-beep* “Who could be calling this early?”

“That’s probably Elliot and Ellen. We were supposed to go flying this morning, but I figured we could all use some sleep.” It’s 8:10. We could probably still get some flying done. I pick up the phone. “Saphira speaking.”

18 January 2014
8:10 AM CST

“Hey Saphira. It’s Elliot. Are you still good to go flying this morning?”

“Sure, though we might need to cut it short. Incidentally, how much do you remember of last night, and when did you wake up?”

“I don’t remember much at all, aside from what Magus said before he used the Dewitchery Diamond, but Ellen remembers a lot. She told me what went down, at least until she fell asleep. And I woke up around four. Yes, I’m a dragon now.”
As I figured. Still… “You spent eight hours unconscious from awakening?”

“I think I had a lot more information to get the hang of than normal. I’ll explain later.” I’m curious what that means, but I’ll probably learn in under an hour.

“Is Ellen awake?”

“Of course. Actually, she woke me up. I guess her unusual sleep did more for her than mine did for me.”

“Makes sense. Is she alright? Can you put her on?”

“She’s fine. Here you go.”

There’s a brief pause as the phone presumably changes hands. “Did you have to burn my face so badly?”

“Considering that was one of three attachment points for the body snatcher which was then on fire, I think the fact that you had no open wounds is an accomplishment. But I promise to try to do better if I ever have to do that again.”

“Noted. I appreciate the short explanation Mr. Verres texted me, which I note was in Draconic. Although I did remember a lot of what you wrote. Where did you record that?”

“In the dirt outside the facility that houses—er, housed—the Dewitchery Diamond. I scratched it out after Mr. Verres took the picture.”

“I’m guessing there was a good reason you had that in Draconic?”

“I can’t write in English when I’m in dragon form. Incidentally, how much do you remember of last night? Elliot said ‘a lot,’ but…”

“I remember everything until you burned Sirleck to death. Thankfully, I didn’t feel any pain at the time. The next thing I knew I was waking up in bed and my face and sides hurt. And yes, I looked in the mirror before I transformed.” I’m glad I didn’t spend too long looking at her last night. That looked like it hurt.

“Thank you very much for telling Nanase to call me before all this happened.”

“I wish she had called you before it got as far as it did, but it’s nice that you were able to help.”

“Oh, right. Hey, since you said you remember everything until I killed the body snatcher… Do you have any idea why it waited so long to jump ship to Magus? I’m a bit puzzled on that one, though not unhappy. Magus doesn’t smell like a dragon at all. I doubt he could’ve healed himself.”

“Yeah, I do know something there. I’m why he didn’t jump. Specifically, I held him back, though I’m not sure I could explain how. Or why I was able to do so in the first place.”

“Maybe your draconic magic didn’t play nice with Sirleck’s control? I know that dragons are outright immune to such control…”

“Mmm. That sounds about right, I guess. Anyway. The note said that Mr. Verres was taking us home, then would take Magus somewhere else. Any idea where that is?”

“I haven’t contacted him since last night, but I assume some sort of holding facility while they work out what’ll happen to someone who is in much the same position as I found myself a week
ago, except that he kidnapped three people last night. I did vouch for his character and suggest a sentence, though. Basically, I’d like if he helped me with all that results from my announcement today.”

“I think he’d appreciate that. From what little I learned of him last night, he’d probably take it seriously. Would he really be a lot of help?”

“Just having someone to talk with about practical uses of magic would be nice. I’m sure his world has a bunch of magic-based consumer products. And I think Elliot, Tedd and I could teach him about this world’s magic pretty quickly.”

“Hang on. Can I put you on speakerphone?”

“Go ahead. Mind if I do the same? Susan is here with me. Don’t worry, Ms. Pompoms isn’t around.” Specifically, she’s on the first floor and we’re in Susan’s room on the second.

“That’s fine.” Two beeps and the conversation of two is now one of four. Sort of.

“Hey, Saphira? Do you have any idea how the Dewitchery Diamond might have affected me from using it twice? Besides making me a dragon, I mean.”

“There’s a bunch of things it could’ve done, especially since Magus altered the diamond prior to using it. But if I were to guess… Have you read your spell book today?”

“Why would I?”

“You probably didn’t gain any spells, but the ones you already have could’ve been altered. After all, those resulted from the Diamond’s influence on your magic, right?”

“I didn’t think of it that way. Hold on a sec.” He pauses for a few seconds. “No. Nononono. Where are they?!”

“Elliot?” Susan sounds kind of worried, but I think my theory has been confirmed. He’s still a caster, but…

“WHERE ARE ALL MY SPELLS!?!?”

“You… do have some left, right?” Sorry, Ellen. I don’t think using the Dewitchery Diamond twice was too kind to him on that front.

“No. No. No. Why isn’t it working?” He actually sounds like he’s going to cry.

“There’s one spell left in here. When did you get this?”

“**Thursday**, as far as I know.” *Snff*

“I’m going to guess the spell has nothing to do with transforming yourself.”

Ellen answers my statement. “You would be correct.” I think I can hear Elliot whimpering in the background.

“Magic theory: using the Dewitchery Diamond a second time got rid of all spells he gained as a direct result of the influence of the Diamond. What sort of spell is it?”

“Something to do with his vision? I think it [**enhances his vision and maybe highlights stuff.**]"
“That should be great for flying around. He probably can use these spells even while he’s in dragon form. At a guess, I think his spells without the Diamond’s influence will be augmentation spells.”

Elliot stops sobbing for a moment. “…Meaning?” His voice is cracking, but I think he’s pulling it together.

“They’ll grant you superhuman abilities, like better vision, strength, flight, etc. You won’t be able to transform without a wand, but you’ll probably eventually regain most of the physical abilities you got from your superhero spell, plus some extras. If you wanted a wand of your old spells, Tedd ought to be able to make such a wand as long as he’s seen you do it at least once before.”

“Tedd can make wands?”

“Yes, Elliot, he’s a wandmaker. I could tell from being in the same room as him on Sunday. Read about it.”

There’s a pause as he references the Mymoir. “…Which means no more Cheerleadra. I meant to show him, but I never got around to it.”

“Hey, if you get the physical abilities and Tedd gives you your old basic transformation, you’ll be able to replicate the effect mostly, right?”

“Yeah, Ellen, that’d be one way for him to do it. It might be a while before he can do that, though. Although in the meantime, he is a dragon. It’s not like he’s useless.”

“…We should go flying today.” I guess it’d be good for him to get his mind off his loss. “I’ll go by Tedd’s afterwards, but flying first.”

“I’d also like to test Ellen’s possible dragon abilities while we’re at it, but yeah, I’m up for flying. It’ll be nice not doing that in an emergency. What time can you two pick me up?”

“We can be there in 15 minutes? We have a place picked out already.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

“See you!” *Click*

I turn to Susan. “No closing for them?”

“I wasn’t much a part of that conversation. And I don’t know what to say to Elliot. Are his spells really gone?”

“Sounds like it, and I don’t think he’ll ever get them back, even with a dragon’s lifespan. But like I said, it’s not like he’s powerless. He’s a dragon. I don’t know what kind, but I’ll find out when he gets here. There’s a color chart for eye colors.”

18 January 2014
8:32 AM CST

How are Elliot’s eyes still brown? That’s not a dragon color! I know his method of awakening was an exception, but so was mine, and my eyes turned blue!

Susan greets them as I stare dumbfounded at Elliot’s eyes. “You guys can come in if you want.”

“No, we’re just picking up Saphira before we start our drive to the flying location, since she hasn’t had her announcement yet and people would probably notice us.”
“I’m going, I’m going. But you’re going to explain your element to me while we’re on the way.”

“Sure.”

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“So how exactly are you a dragon with brown scales?”

“I have all of the elements and… none of them? I mean, I can sense every element, but I can’t manipulate any of them.”

“Which explains why you were out for so long.”

“Yeah. I can’t see how the sensing is very useful if I can’t do much, though.”

“There are plenty of experimental physicists who would kill to have abilities like that.”

“I guess that’s true. Do you… think that’s something I could do?”

“What?”

“Be a physicist. I… just realized, last week, I have no idea what I want to do after high school.”

“Are you good at math? Do you like math? Because if you aren’t or you don’t, I wouldn’t suggest being a physicist. If you really have no idea, there are a couple of ways to go about finding out, though.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you’re a dragon. There are plenty of dragons with plenty of occupations. Try asking them for some of their favorite parts of what they do. If you find yourself interested, maybe they’ll agree to be your mentor, or maybe it’s something you can study in college. If you don’t find anything from that, maybe travel the world a bit or maybe go to a community college as an undecided major for a bit. There are plenty of ways to find your way in life, and you’ve likely got thousands of years to figure it out. And it’s not like you have to settle on one thing.”

“Oh. I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“And that’s not just for dragons. The time constraint for other people is tighter, certainly, but there are still plenty of ways to find what you want to do. And living in the US probably makes it easier than most places, though the nation of residence hasn’t made much difference to dragons. If you want to find one where it made a difference, I guess you could look up Sahara? I mean, she still became a surgeon like she wanted, just not with nearly as many patients as she could have. Not that she isn’t doing good work.”

“Who’s Sahara? You mean like the desert? Why is it pronounced differently?” Ellen’s the only one here with no access to the Mymoir. It makes sense she’d ask that question. (Pronunciation guide: her name sounds like the UK version of the desert name, which yes, is pronounced differently to the US version. The middle syllable sounds like ‘hard’ without the ‘d,’ instead of like ‘hair.’)

“Sahara’s nickname is ‘the Doctor’ or ‘the Surgeon.’ Yes, that name has been around longer than Doctor Who. She’s the dragon with the most medical experience and expertise. As for why she shares a name with a desert… let’s just say Arabs don’t like her too much. Yes, the desert is named after her.”
“Why wouldn’t they like her? Did she do something to them?”

“She wronged them by being a dragon and by being a woman interested in medicine, specifically surgery. Arabs don’t like dragons a whole lot, probably because the first dragon lives among Jews, and they also think medicine and surgery are men’s jobs.”

“They’re wrong!”

“I agree, though I’m not saying I want to be a doctor. Looking at you after killing the aberration last night was enough to make me want to retch. However, we’re not going to be able to change those people’s minds. They drove Sahara into the desert long ago. She still lives there, and she helps anyone who will not be helped by the people she grew up among. So when the people there refuse to help someone, they tell the person to ‘take a walk in the desert.’ Thanks to Sahara, that’s not always a death sentence. She can’t find everyone, but she is a light dragon, so she has a pretty long range.”

“How does she live?”

“She’s a dragon. No matter the circumstances, we find a way.”

18 January 2014
9:15 AM CST

We took the highway for a lot of the way here, but now we’re on some roads that are a lot more empty and small than our proximity to Chicago should allow. At least when I compare it to Maryland. “Are we nearly there? I want to have some time to fly a bit after checking Ellen’s possible abilities.”

“Just about. What did you have in mind?”

“It’s possible for dragons to make wands, sort of. We have to engrave a spell on something that can hold a bunch of magic. Fortunately, dragon scales are just such a material. Also, any dragon can create any element of wand, but you have to have the correct element to use the wand. I’d like to see if Ellen has an element by having her cast spells from every kind of dragon. Simple spells, but every element all the same. And while we’re at it, I’ll see if she can cast Jorge’s Skin to Scales.”

“That spell you said you renamed?”

“That’s the one.”

“What was…” Elliot pauses, his eyes now closed. Then he bursts out laughing. “Ha! Okay, I see why you renamed it.”

“Not fair. Elliot, what was it originally called?”

“Don’t tell her. She’ll crash the car.”

“I have better control than that!”

Elliot smiles. “Alright, I’ll tell you when we get there.”

“Come on!”

Ellen pulls over in an area that could very well be considered ‘the middle of nowhere.’ There’s no intersection in sight. Thankfully, we won’t be here too long, and the road is deserted, so the
likelihood of a ticket is slim.

As soon as Ellen puts the car in park, Elliot lets her in on the secret. “Jorge’s Halloweeny Disguise.”

Judging by Ellen’s laughter, I think he made the right decision not to tell her yet. She’s gasping for air. “That’s- that’s even worse than I had thought! Where did a name like that come from?”

“You can probably tell, but he made it for a Halloween party. Bear in mind that as dragons we look younger than we are, and our maturity is typically a strange mix of our actual age and what we look like. He’s over a thousand years old now, but he only looks like he’s 13.

“Anyway, maybe we should get started. I went ahead and made most of the wands yesterday morning.” I pull one of the dragon scales from my backpack. “Yes, these are all inscribed on *my* scales. I pulled them from myself when I was practicing my Partial Armor spell. Don’t worry, I washed them.”

“Couldn’t you get them from another source? I know we shed scales in battle. Those might be less… bloody.” Yes, Elliot, but…

“The only such source would be from the aftermath of my fight with the vampire last Saturday.”

Ellen grimaces. “Never mind, I’ll take these.”

“Besides, scales from a dragon’s back are thicker and heavier.”

“I’d ask where these came from, but I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Let’s say it’s somewhere that the scales are easily removed but not too large.” Namely my arms and legs.

“Enough talk of biology. Let’s see… how about this one with mass magic?” The one that makes a shallow hole in the ground? Go right ahead.

---

As it turns out, Ellen could use every wand except the one for Jorge’s Skin to Scales. As a test, I could use that one and the heat one, and Elliot could only use Jorge’s Skin to Scales. So I guess he really doesn’t have an element as far as that goes. And Ellen has every element. Though I prompted her to try using one without the wand, and she couldn’t do it, so either she didn’t really understand the spell or she needs a wand to cast anything draconic beyond her dragon form. Good thing she has a full dragon for a brother.

“Alright, with that done, I guess we should spend what little time we have left in the air. Ellen, has Elliot explained to you how to fly?”

“No, I haven’t. I haven’t read it myself, actually.”

“Fantastic. Well, dragon form first. Actually, I’m curious to see what Elliot’s objects are.”

“You probably won’t be too surprised by at least one of them.” He first summons his black belt. That makes sense, anyway. Anime Style Martial Arts was probably really important to him. Then he summons his spell book.

“Oh. Your other spells were… really important to you, weren’t they.” I mean, he was crying for
them earlier, but…

“I’ll go by Tedd’s later. Right now we don’t have a ton of time.” Then he shifts to dragon form.

Wow. That’s really big. I mean, it’s pretty much the same size as my dragon form, but I’ve never been standing next to that. He looks… similar to my own dragon form? Though I can tell there’s some Asian influence to the design, and he sort of looks older and more… masculine. I think I understand now why the Mymoir says dragons tend to find other dragon forms more attractive than intimidating. I quickly rush a short distance away and transform to hide my blush.

By the time I’ve finished, Ellen’s already in her form. **Okay. If you’ve ever closely watched a bird or bat fly, you should know a lot of what I’m going to say. To take off, you’ll need to angle your wings so they’re slightly pushing you backwards—** I spread my wings and show the angle **—and flap them faster than normal. ‘Normal’ speed is… well, on the downstroke of a flap you rise, and on the upstroke you fall. The upstroke has your wing angled so it has next to no influence on the rate of your fall—** I turn my wings to show this position **—so you’re only falling due to gravity. So ‘normal’ speed is where you only rise enough during the downstroke that on average you stay at the same height. Naturally, for landing you flap slower. Getting the hang of these speeds just takes practice. Also, Ellen, you’ll be flapping faster than Elliot or myself.**

**We’re not getting to anything fancy today, are we.**

**No, we don’t really have the time. I figure just taking off and landing will eat up our time today. But that’s still pretty important for everything else, so…**

**Alright. You did it last night, right? So you can show us?**

**Um…** If I had really movable lips I would bite them. I don’t, so I just look away sheepishly. **That was a bit of an adrenaline thing, both times. I sort of had to do it to save people’s lives.**

**So you don’t remember?**

**Not that I don’t remember, but…**

**Then what’s keeping you on the ground?**

***Have you guys ever done a trust fall?***

18 January 2014
9:29 AM CST

**Of course we have!**

**I sense a story.**

**Okay. Normal trust falls I have no problem with. Kevin did a bunch of falls for his martial arts when he was younger. However, in 2010 he went to the Boy Scout Jamboree where they had a team-building course. The last item was an extreme version of a trust fall, where it was off a platform that’s about six feet off the ground.**

**So how long did Kevin stand there?**

**Long enough that he was told to get off the platform and wait for everyone else before getting back up. And when it was his turn again, he continued standing there until someone threatened to knock his legs out from under him.**
**So, what, we have to threaten you to get you to fly?**

**I hope it won’t come to that, but…** Wait, what’s that? No, no, that can’t be. That heat pattern’s consistent with a geyser. And it’s right under me GAH!

**Congrats, you’re flying!** Wait, is Ellen holding a scale?

I look around and notice that yes, I am flying. Huh. I guess it’s not too bad. If I can do that well without even thinking… I land.

**That was… a very creative solution. I congratulate you on that front, though that was still pretty mean. Alright, I think I should be able to take off now…** And just like that, I give a proper demonstration. I bend my legs and give a short hop followed by flapping my wings fast-like and rising a few dozen feet into the air. I stay at that height for a short period of time, then land again.

**Do you think you two could mimic that?**

**We can give it a try, at least.**

---

Not only were we able to take off and land, I was also able to teach them to glide in a straight line. All it requires is a specific wing angle and keeping your head and tail pretty straight, but it’s still pretty fun. Although it made my wings hurt enough that it’s evident I might have to fly more often than the standard once per week to get up to snuff.

“So where should I drop you off?”

“Hmmm. Elliot, do you think Tensaided would let Susan keep my backpack behind the counter? I won’t have a lot of time to walk there.”

“He shouldn’t have a problem with it as long as it stays out of the way.”

“Then you may as well drop me off there, Ellen. I probably should try to gather at least a bit of a crowd before my announcement.”

“How were you planning on doing that?”

“By sitting outside in clothes that are clearly not warm enough for the weather. By which I mean what I’m wearing right now, before you get any ideas.”

“You might get a few looks, but I don’t think people will stick around for that.”

“They might if they ask me why I’m sitting there. And it’s not like I have nothing to do. I can try to write spells or something while I’m waiting for noon to roll around.”

“Will Elliot or myself have to do an announcement?”

“Not if you don’t want to. At some point in the Q & A, I’ll mention that I’ll be going flying every Saturday unless it’s raining, and I’ll set an open invite for people with magic that lets them fly to join me. That should give you two an excuse. And if you’re worried we’ll get a bunch of people from that, the only people who can fly that I know about in Moperville are Grace, Nanase, and Noah, and Noah insists that I’m mistaken as to who it was that took care of that dragon-like summon after ‘Cheerleadra’ was badly hurt.”

“Oh. That shouldn’t be too bad, then.”
“Wait, that was Noah?”

“Did you not talk to Justin afterwards? He could tell who it was right off the bat. Anyway… you two still might want to leave early so that people don’t see you land on those days, but it shouldn’t be terrible. Oh, right. Outside of Susan, no one’s heard from you since last night as far as I know. You might want to talk with people, let them know you’re alright.”

“Well, we’re going by Tedd’s house after we drop you off so I can get at least one wand from him.”

“Maybe after that, you and Ashley can go on a normal date for once? Everyone’s eyes will be too much on me to give you any trouble, not that I’m aware of any other trouble that might come.”

“Hey, we’ve hung out in a normal way!”

“Maybe at school. Your first date ended with a griffin attacking you, and your second got you briefly possessed by a spirit and got her kidnapped. Maybe you can spend one date without a major event. Honestly, at this point I’d be a little surprised if her parents let her keep dating you. As far as they might be able to tell, you’re made of bad luck.”

“Oh. Yeah, a lunch date might be a good idea.”

“Okay, yeah. After our talk with Tedd, you drop me off at home and go spend some time with Ashley.”

18 January 2014
11:03 AM CST

Ellen had me leave the wands in her car, since she’s the only person I know of who can use eight of the nine. Inside the Video Rental Store, I find that while it’s not crowded, this is probably the busiest it gets since the rise of Netflix, especially with schools still in session. I walk over to Susan.

“Hello, Saphira. I thought you weren’t going to come inside?”

“I wasn’t but then it occurred to me that I need somewhere to put my backpack.”

“Oh. You can put it behind the counter.” She leads me there and I set it where it shouldn’t get in her way.

I turn to head outside… wait a second. “Is that Nanase and Akiko over there?”

“Yeah. Nanase comes here fairly often, and she sometimes brings her sister. Judging by how Nanase’s acting, though, she’s probably here today just so Akiko could watch your announcement. Why?”

I lean closer so I can whisper without anyone overhearing. “Akiko shares her name with an actress dragon. Do you think this store might have some of her movies?”

Susan steps away a bit. I guess I was too close. I stand back up. “You can always ask Mr. Tensaided. So long as you have a title or production company, he should know if we have it.”

“Alright. I asked her for a list of recommendations earlier when I noticed the matching names.” I walk over to where Tensaided is standing. He’s talking with another customer, so I wait until he’s finished.
“Can I help – Oh! You’re doing your event today, right?”

“Yes. Not until noon, though. In the meantime, I was wondering if you had any movies from a list of mine in stock?”

“Can I see the list?”

“Sorry, I left it at home.” More like it’s written in the Mymoir, but he doesn’t know about that just yet. “I have it memorized, though. If I name the title or production company, do you think you would know if you have it?”

“What genre?”

“For starters, they’re all Japanese movies. And appropriate for a younger audience. I want to see if I can recommend these to a friend of mine. No sense in recommending something you can’t find around here.”

“I might have a few. What did you have in mind?”

Akiko’s list isn’t from some of the more prestigious production companies. She doesn’t tend to work with those companies, anyway, as they’d have a harder time keeping her specific abilities a secret. Plus larger companies can pay for special effects that don’t rely on magic.

The list of films includes some that she liked for different reasons, such as the story, the actors, or her work. One in particular was pretty interesting, and one that Tensaided most likely has, given his apparent love for fantasy and dragons. To end on a possible high note with him, I’ll name it last. Akiko recommended that one because she had a lot of fun making it, as she got to play two parts, one for her human form and one for her dragon form. Plus for visual effects she was sometimes told to ‘go nuts.’ Her work stands out especially for its quality, and while she said the story was lackluster, the film still sold pretty well just because she was in it and the visual effects were ‘stunning, given the budget.’ That remark appears on a lot of her works.

I name the last one on the list. “Oh! That rings a bell! It had a pretty amazing realistic dragon!” Can’t get more realistic than real, right? “I think it’s… there!”

“Neat!” I take a look at the cover. I can’t read Japanese, but this looks like how Akiko described it. “I’ll have to remember this. Thanks for the help!” I put it back on the shelf.

“You’re welcome.” He wanders off to help another customer.

Now then, are Nanase and Akiko still here? That did take a bit. Oh, hey, it looks like they’re at the register. I think Nanase’s doing her best to stall until I appear outside. May as well go give her the good news, then, and possibly drag her away from the register for a bit. “Hey, Nanase.”

Nanase jumps, then turns around. “Ah! Saphira!” She looks pretty relieved to see me. “Hey, how are Ellen and Elliot doing?”

“They’re fine. We spent a couple of hours together this morning. Right now, either they’re at Tedd’s place or Elliot’s trying to spend some uninterrupted time with Ashley. Given how poorly his last two dates went.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“Care to introduce your sister?”
“Oh! Right. Akiko, this is Saphira. Saphira, Akiko.”

“You’re really tall, miss.”

“Thank you.” I look back at Nanase. “Say, ah… there’s an actress I know of with the same name as your sister, and Tensaided just confirmed for me that he has a movie she starred in. Would you like to take a look? I can give a rudimentary description of the plot, if you like.”

“An actress shares my name?!” I don’t know what would make Akiko more excited.

I bend over. It’s hard to talk with someone so short, but she is only eight. And Japanese. “Yes. Do you want check it out?”

“Can we, sis?!” Ah, to be young and excitable. Explaining my youth will be rather difficult, now that I think about it.

“Sure. What sort of movie is it?”

I start walking in the direction I just came from. “It’s about a young girl connecting with the spirits in the world around her.” I lower my volume a bit. “The, um, the actress recommended it to me for your sister. She recommended a lot, actually, but Tensaided only had this one.”

“Gotcha.”

“So which one is it?!” I pull it off the shelf. “You can read Japanese?!”

“No, I just know what the cover should look like. Sorry if I disappointed you.”

“No, I shouldn’t get my hopes up.”

“Actually, my parents lived in Japan for a couple of years. They brought back some of the cultural foods, but I get the impression they didn’t learn much of the language.”

Nanase seems kind of curious. “Why’d they live there?”

“Air Force work in Okinawa.”

“Ah. I don’t think they received a warm welcome, in that case.”

“From my understanding of Japanese culture, I don’t think they would have anyway simply because they’re not Japanese.” Japan is very isolationist, as far as I know. Along with that, their part in WWII was for pretty much the same sort of reason as Hitler’s stated reasoning. Namely, they believed themselves supreme to anyone else nearby, especially China. At least as much as I remember. Don’t quote me on that. No, I haven’t asked Akiko.

“That’s fair.”

“But thanks to that, some of my favorite foods include sushi and yakisoba, so…”

“Hold on. Shouldn’t you be prepping for your thing that’s at noon?”

“Yes. Right. I’ll be outside.”

18 January 2014
11:45 AM CST
As I thought, there aren’t too many people here. Nanase and Akiko stuck around, after renting some videos (and extending one Nanase was supposed to have watched with Ellen last night), and some other people have stuck around as well. Especially once they asked what I was doing out here and I said I was holding an event at noon. Generally, the exchange was something like this:

“What sort of event?”

“Something no one is likely to experience twice, unless they live to be over a hundred.”

“Who holds an event only once a century?”

“A group of people where something only happens once a century. And we’ve held off on holding it recently. The last one was over 800 years ago.”

“How would you remember something like that?”

“I don’t. I’m not old enough for that. But there are records of it, and I wanted to give it a try. Don’t worry, it’s nothing dangerous.”

“So how many people need to be here?”

“No one at all, really, but the more the better.”

So from that and similar exchanges, I’ve gathered a small group of roughly half a dozen people. Tensaided ought to be coming out soon, and I’m certain more people will show up after it starts. I’m also fairly certain Noah is hiding on the roof of the video store. Plus Carol should be here any minute. Speaking of which, I believe I spot the heat of something that is shaped like a TV camera. I hope it doesn’t overheat. Eh, I can probably help on that end. Plus it’s pretty cold out here, not that I’m outside without Fred’s Thermal Regulator active.

The Channel 4 News van pulls into the parking lot. That’s a lot more support than I thought Carol would get—I thought she’d be coming in her own car—but I guess she is working right now. And then the reporter steps out and I confirm that that is indeed Carol. Good show. I wouldn’t want to have to deal with yet another unknown. Plus she’s likely to work with me for any inherent difficulties in my announcement.

She walks over and holds out her hand. “Carol Brown, Channel 4 News.”

I shake her hand and greet her before letting go. “Saphira, host of what will soon be quite an event.”

“What sort of event? I’m afraid I don’t have much to go on, nor much to speak about.”

“That’s intentional. The event is an announcement followed by Q & A, but I want people to have to think of their questions during the event. That ought to make it shorter, though there will still be plenty to talk about. And I tend to answer questions thoroughly.”

“I can tell. So, do you have any suggestions for how I might spend the time prior to noon?”

“For yourself, maybe chat with some of the people I’ve convinced to stay. For your cameraman, I suggest setting up the camera so he has a clear view of what’s going to happen. As for the type of shot… if he can imagine a small tree where I am right now, that ought to be good enough.”

“How small of a tree?”
“No more than twenty feet tall.”

“Got it. Ty, can you set up over there?”

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It’s a shame I don’t have anything set up yet for transforming in a fancy manner. Then again, most dragons don’t in time for their announcement. Your ‘fancy transformation’ is supposed to be a bit of an expression of yourself, so using someone else’s is a no-no. I guess I’ll just have to make sure I have one set up for later stuff like this.

Alright! Everything looks all set up. The clock is ticking down to noon, and Carol’s all ready to go. A few more people showed up last minute, including Tensaided, though I bet the Channel 4 News van helped a bunch there. Well, time for the first dragon announcement since the time of King Arthur.

As my watch shows 12:00, I stand up and step back so that I’m just behind the center of the grassy area. “I strongly suggest that everyone stays off the grass,” I say loud enough that everyone should be able to hear. Then I summon my dragon figure and my cross, and shift to dragon form.

I hear gasps as I shift, and I see Ty double-check that his camera’s filming. When my transformation is complete, I pause for a moment, spread my wings, then give a mental shout to everyone in my range—all five miles in diameter. **RESIDENTS OF MOPERVILLE! MY NAME IS SAPHIRA! YOU ARE MY CITY, AND I AM YOUR DRAGON!!!**

18 January 2014
12:02 PM CST

There is a long period of stunned silence. I wonder whether it was my transformation or my announcement that had the greater effect? The combination of the two certainly had quite the effect. I pleasantly note from my expanded senses that none of those driving cars have crashed, though quite a few have pulled to the side of the road. Not that I’d know where the roads are if the sun wasn’t warming the asphalt.

Okay, they’ve been silent long enough that they’re probably just working out which question to ask first. Any moment now…

One middle-aged man speaks up. “What did you mean, we are your city? Are you claiming you own us?”

Really, that’s your assumption? **I don’t claim to own anyone any more than most people do when they say, ‘My hometown is blank.’**

“Oh. Of course. Right.” He seems a bit embarrassed.

A woman probably in her late thirties speaks next. “Then what do you mean when you say that you are our dragon?”

**I mean that I have certain duties as a dragon, and I will perform those duties with specific emphasis on Moperville. Generally and vaguely speaking, my duties are to help folks.**

Carol finally speaks. “You’re not moving your mouth. How can we hear you?”

**I’m not really speaking to you. I can’t talk in this form. It’s more like I’m thinking at you, and you can hear my thoughts as if I were speaking aloud. Of course, that means my words aren’t
technically audible, so no one on the other end of that camera’s signal can hear anything I say. On that note, Carol, I’d appreciate it if you repeated my words. I’ll give you a bit to catch up, while I answer some less-important questions. Don’t worry, I’ll shift back to my previous form prior to giving any really lengthy answers, so you won’t have to repeat any of those.**

As Carol gives a bit of introduction to what she’ll be doing, a boy who’s probably in high school asks a follow-up question. “Shift to your previous form? What do you mean?”

**Were you here prior to my announcement?**

“I was in the video store.”

**Ah. I’m a human, but I can transform. Transforming takes effort along with a set amount of magical energy. I have a finite maximum of that at any given time and it takes time to get that back, but other than that I can transform pretty much whenever I feel like it.**

“Oh.”

“Dragons are real!?” It seems Tensaided is fully conscious once again. Not that he fainted, but he was nearly catatonic for a bit.

**Yes. There aren’t many of us, but dragons are real and have been around for quite a while.**

“Can I… touch you?” I think he’s trying to make puppy dog eyes. This is how I expected Akiko to act, not him.

My face isn’t very expressive, but I narrow my eyes a bit. **…If you must?** If he was a child, I’d react to a question like that a lot better, but he’s a grown man for crying out loud.

He squees as he runs over and touches my leg. Then he throws his hands in the air and runs away a short distance. It’s probably best that he cools down a bit.

After that short show, Akiko is finally bold enough to ask her question. “Are you the same Saphira that Sis introduced to me in the video store?”

**Yes, that was me.**

“Can I… ride you?” That’s pretty awkward phrasing, but she’s only eight or nine years old. I think I get what she means.

**Sure. Uh…** I bend my front knees a bit and lower my head to the ground. **Climb up. When you’re seated behind my neck, I’ll lift my head again.**

“Oh! Wow! Thanks, Miss Saphira!” I smile a bit, and she backs off for a second. I guess my teeth might be a bit intimidating. But she gathers her courage and approaches, and I close my eyes so she can’t poke them on accident. With Nanase’s help, she gets herself seated in the same location Nanase sat just last night on our way home, and I open my eyes again.

It seems Carol’s ready, since she’s turned to face me. I stand back up, then bend my neck around so that I can see Akiko out of the corner of my eye. **You can stay up there as long as you like, at least until I have to shift back to my human form. If you want off, just let me know and I’ll let you down.**

“Okay!”
I wait a moment while Carol repeats that. Then she readies the stage. “Just so we’re clear, what’s the format for this?”

**I will wait on questions.** I pause between sentences and phrases to let Carol repeat me. **If I think the answer will be lengthy, I will request that the asker hold their question until after I shift back to human form, so that I can answer the question without you having to repeat me. Otherwise, I will answer the question however I deem appropriate. Some questions I will be unable to answer, either because I do not know or I should not answer. In either case I will make my reasoning known using information I am comfortable sharing.**

“Would you be alright with Channel 4 News using social media to gather questions?”

**I, and the other dragons, would greatly prefer if the news of my existence in general is confined to the broadcasting region for the station, by which I mean Illinois. I understand you have a website, and I’m fine with you using that. But I’d like to keep this somewhat of a secret from the world at large, at least for now. Not that there’d be a massive problem with the secret getting out. But history suggests that uninformed folks try dangerous stuff, and we’d like to avoid that if at all possible.**

“You mentioned other dragons?”

**Dragons are spread around the world. We all have a mental connection. I’ll get more into that later, but that’s a lengthy explanation. What you need to know right now is that I’m able to talk with any of them if they want to listen, and I’ll be relaying your questions to them, and possibly their answers back to you. So if it sounds like I know a lot, it’s not just me. You’re effectively speaking with a bunch of dragons.**

18 January 2014
12:13 PM CST

Tensaided has gathered himself once again, and launches into the first question. “A bunch of dragons? How many are there?”

I pause. **Have you read the Evil Overlord list?**

“Yes.” I’m sure he has, but… many people look confused.

**For those who don’t know, that’s a somewhat nerdy compilation of reasons why every would-be evil overlord has suffered failure in fiction, phrased as a would-be evil overlord might phrase it for setting personal policies. For example, there’s an item on there that says the garbage will be incinerated rather than slowly crushed. For dragons, obviously we’re not evil overlords, but… one of the things that’s on the list is knowing where your possible enemies might be before enacting your diabolical scheme. If we don’t give people the total number of dragons, the chance of someone accounting for all the dragons goes way down.**

“So… you’re not going to tell us?”

**That would be correct.**

The high school boy from earlier speaks up. “Is Saphira your real name or just a nickname since you’re a dragon?”

**It’s my real first name.**

“Are you saying it’s from that Eragon movie? That film sucked!”
**I agree that the movie was terrible. The book was a lot better. But the name is used in real life, just rarely.** I’m not telling the public that I picked the name because it was in the book. But I looked it up, and it is on a list of baby names. I’m not sure how common it was prior to the publishing of Eragon, though. Which is relevant because my established date of birth is January 10, 1995, and Eragon was published in 2001.

From my heat sensing, I can tell Akiko is raising her hand. Just before someone points it out to me, I respond, **Yes, Akiko?**

“Wait, you could see my hand?”

**Not as such, but I could tell you were raising it. What did you want to ask?**

“Your wings are really big. Can you fly?”

**Yes, but I’m not going to fly right now. There’s not really enough room around here to take off or land without blowing people over or damaging property.**

“Awww.” Maybe I’ll take her flying later.

I’ve started to attract a bit of a crowd. A young man is standing with a woman who is presumably his girlfriend. With a smug look on his face, he says, “Your wings are large, but there’s no way those can support your bulk. I bet you can’t really fly.”

I glare at him a bit, and his girlfriend looks at him, worried for a second. **Nice taunt, but I’m still not showing off just yet. However, you are right that my wings aren’t large enough to fully support me; I have a bit of innate magic that helps to keep me aloft when I want to fly. It’s not enough to do the job by itself, though. I still have to flap, and I create quite the downdraft when I do so.**

A less rude middle-school boy speaks up. “Will we see you fly anytime soon?”

**Probably not today. But for fitness reasons, I’ll be flying around town regularly. Not over buildings until I’m confident in my abilities, for those of you who might be worried. And although I have yet to fully explain the topic, I do have an invitation of sorts: Dragons aren’t the only people who can use magic to fly. If anyone in town or nearby can use magic to fly, feel free to join me if you see me in the air on a Saturday morning.**

Justification for Elliot and Ellen to fly with me in the near future, and if Elliot eventually gets the component spells to pretty much make the superhero spell again, then people might see Cheerleadra flying with me as well. Plus a schedule for if people want to ask me more questions later.

“Other people can use magic to fly?”

**Plenty of people. Well, not plenty… but that’s a really long answer. Any other questions before I shift back?**

“What sort of questions would be short?”

I pause to relate the question through the Mymoir. I repeat the other dragons’ response: **I can talk about my general abilities. It’s a long explanation to start, but after that, being in dragon form is particularly suited to answering those sorts of questions. Carol, are you up to repeating one fairly long explanation?**

“If you can keep it to one and continue your pattern of pauses, then yes, I believe I can.”

18 January 2014
Time to give a general description of dragons. I make sure to give the prepared answer the other dragons gave me earlier, though I also make sure the phrasing doesn’t sound like I’m reading it from a book, which is pretty much what I’m doing. The explanation doesn’t cover *everything*, but some of it makes little sense without additional explaining, and I’d like for Carol to not have to talk so much. This is probably the most she’s ever had to talk for her job.

**Before a dragon becomes a dragon, they usually—** (that is, with every dragon except Elliot) **—can’t use any sort of magic. There is no indication that they will become a dragon. When they become a dragon, they suddenly gain all of the abilities of dragons, which will never change as long as they live, though they can get better at using the abilities. Gaining these abilities always knocks out the new dragon, since it overwhelms their mind, which is why we call it *awakening*. Because one moment they’re an average human, and the next they wake up with pretty much the most magic power a human can wield.** That’s not strictly true, but it *is* the most magic a human can wield without external help.

**Being a dragon comes with a large suite of abilities. These abilities are largely the same across all dragons. Only two really differ, and I’ll get to that. First, for all dragons: we get a dragon form. We can transform into, well, something like what you see now. The exact morphology depends on what the dragon *thinks* a dragon *should* look like immediately prior to them becoming a dragon. I had a very definite idea of what constitutes a proper dragon. Imagine what I felt when I realized that a proper dragon looks however someone thinks it should look. Though all dragons are nearly the same size.

**Before someone says, ‘what about that dragon last April?’, that was *not* a dragon. Dragons are not all the same color, but are always monochromatic. As in my scales are all blue, but not all dragons are blue. From the pictures I’ve seen, that ‘dragon’ was at least three colors. It would be more accurate to refer to it as a *monster*, because it’s an organism created by magic. More on that later.

**Dragons also have greatly reduced aging. As in about 1 year of aging for a non-dragon takes about 500 years for dragons. So while I say that no dragons have died of old age and the first dragon is still alive, the first dragon doesn’t look like a decrepit old man. Since he awakened at about twelve years of age, he looks like he’s in his early twenties.

**The communication with other dragons that I keep referencing is something we call the Mymoir. At least, that’s the name I get when I read it in English. Think of it as something like Wikipedia crossed with a forum, but it’s in our heads and only dragons can read or write to it. All dragons that speak any language can read it, as it’s in its own language, known in English as Draconic. I keep saying ‘in English’ because that’s my native language so that’s pretty much how I interpret Draconic. Think of it as a universally translating language that only dragons can read. There are more symbols in Draconic than even in Chinese, because the symbols aren’t phonetic or even words. They cover entire ideas. If a new idea is created, so is a symbol, and all dragons can read it without having to learn it.** I pause for a bit to let that soak in. I understand it’s likely very confusing. I’ve had a week with it and I still don’t get how this works.

**As for abilities that are not the same for all dragons: every dragon has an element. This element is tied with their scale color, which is always the same as their eye color. A new dragon’s eye color can change to match their element; my original eye color was hazel. For the rest of my life, I’ll have deep blue eyes.

**And for how the dragon’s element is determined: no one knows. But two dragons with the same
element will always have the same scale color. Since my scales are blue, I am easily identifiable as a *heat* dragon. Dragon elements are not like the traditional *water, earth, fire, air,* nor are they periodic table elements, but rather elements of physics. So for myself, I can sense and change the heat energy of my surroundings. If you were here before noon, you would have noticed me sitting out here in clothes that are not particularly suited for winter weather in Illinois. However, I wasn’t cold because I could freely raise the temperature of the air around me by turning magic energy into heat.

**Of course, there’s a maximum range to how far I can sense my surroundings. That range is the same as my speaking range in dragon form. So when this whole thing started with my announcement, anyone within my sensing range for heat would have been able to hear my mental shout. So I guess the hardcore analytics in Moperville can try to figure out my range. Although I can also speak with people selectively, so only the people right in front of me can hear me right now.**

**Lastly, I can use the Mymoir with my other abilities to form *spells,* of sorts. Think of it like computer programming, but in Draconic and working with my basic abilities instead of basic computer functions. So I can have partial dragon transformations that basically give me scales and complex spells that keep the temperature of a mass in a volume within a very specific range.**

**So that’s the basic explanation. Are there any questions or requests for demonstrations?***

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When I started talking about sensing heat around me, Noah started climbing down from the roof. I guess me knowing he’s there kind of negates the point of staying out of sight. Though I’ve been speaking to him the whole time. I wonder if he hadn’t realized I can pick out people to speak with?

About three-quarters of the crowd seems to be just trying to soak it all in. I guess that was a lot of explanation, but I haven’t even started into the really interesting stuff. Although I guess ‘interesting’ is subjective, and I *am* a bit of a nerd.

The girlfriend of the boy who taunted me is the first to pipe up. “Just *how* much detail do you get from your heat sense?” She turns to her boyfriend. “Do you think I phrased that right?”

**I can sense everything with exactly as much detail as I want. However, I still have to interpret what I sense, so most of the time, I get an average of the measurement of a volume. So, for example, right now I can tell the location of everyone within my range, but unless I focus on them, I can’t tell anything other than that they’re roughly a human-sized and human-temperature object. And even if I focus, the only detail I’m getting is how much heat energy is where in their body. It’s still hard for me to recognize people I’m around all the time that way. Although I *have* only been a dragon for a week so far.**

“You’re only a week old?!” an older man exclaims.

**No, I’ve only been a dragon for a week. I’m 19.***

“Oh.” His turn to be red from embarrassment.

**By the way, it’s dragon policy not to lie about our ages when someone asks. Though most people think dragons are lying when they do that. I mean, when a dragon is applying for citizenship in a country they’ve lived in for over a hundred years and their application says they’re about a thousand years old…**
“Did that really happen?” a college-age girl asks.

**Yes. Most dragons can’t vote in their countries of residence for that reason. Not to say they’ve been forced out of many countries. They just won’t let you register if they think you’re lying about your age.** I smile and exhale heavily, and a few people back off a bit. I know intimidation is a large part of the dragon form, but I didn’t think laughing was that scary.

“How finely can you control the heat of your surroundings?” I think that’s the first sensible question Tensaided has asked.

**Really well. I can get the accuracy within any range of energy. For temperature, I need to know the specific heat first, but I can still do it really accurately. Though, ah… I don’t have any sort of demonstration prepped.** I pause for a second to ask the other dragons. **Well, I guess I could make an ice sculpture of sorts.**

Carol seems confused. Turning to me, she says, “Saphira, there’s no ice here.”

**I meant I’d form the ice by freezing the air. Though I’d need to make the pattern… Oh, I think I know what I can do.** Kevin spent some free time making 3D models of Pokémon last year. I think I can replicate the structure of the Ivysaur leaves and flower bulb, though I won’t be replicating the rest. Just add a stem and a base so it doesn’t topple.

**If everyone could please clear the area in front of me, I can make a small ice sculpture. About ten feet back should do it.** The sculpture won’t fill the space, but I don’t want anyone getting too close to frozen air. Talk about frostbite.

With the area clear, I get a good sense of the volume I need to freeze. Next, I form the flower base so it won’t topple, rooting it to the asphalt, then I form the stem, flower, and leaves, making sure each stage is strong before moving on. I’m keeping the whole thing at basically absolute zero and maintaining the air temperature a few inches from the surface at the same heat as the surroundings. I’ll need to be careful to reheat the air rather than just releasing it, since it’s rather close to people and the sculpture is about five feet tall in total. That’s a lot of frozen air.

Tensaided slightly raises his hand nervously. **Yes?**

“What is the flower made from?” His hand is still up and shaking.

**Frozen air. At a guess, I’m keeping it at about one degree Kelvin.**

“Isn’t that sort of dangerous?”

**Only if you touch it.** I turn my head to look at Carol. **Do you think you’ve had a good shot? Maintaining this is a little difficult.**

Carol talks into her cell phone for a second. I guess she doesn’t get fancy telecommunications with her station yet. “Yes, you can get rid of it now.” I rapidly heat the volume the flower takes up (though I only raise it to the heat of the surrounding air), and the statue sublimates.

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Well, that’s most of what I have to do in dragon form done. If people just want me to explain stuff now, I’m fine with that.

“Where did you get the idea for the flower from?” a young male voice asks. I look for the speaker.
It’s a boy who looks like he’s about ten years old. His mother’s standing with him. She doesn’t look like she was very prepared for standing in the cold this long, unlike her son. I guess I’ll get a revolving crowd when it gets too cold for people. I’d keep them warm, but I only really have practice with heating a space containing a small number of people. I don’t want to know what happens if I try the same thing on an area that does not contain clearly defined materials.

**I really like Pokémon. For any other fans out there, see if you can guess where the design is from.**

“Oh! Which game’s your favorite?”

**My first was Sapphire, but I really liked Emerald. Although Explorers of Darkness had the best story.** Given his age, he probably hasn’t played any of those, but Explorers of Darkness is a must-play.

That does not seem to be the answer people were expecting. I guess hearing someone who’s so intimidating talk about liking Pokémon is a bit surprising.

“Do you need to stay in that, ah, form any longer?” I guess Carol is tired of repeating everything I say.

**No. Sorry, Akiko, but you need to get down now.**

“Awww.” Nanase walks over to just below where she’s sitting as I bend my front knees again. She takes a short hop into her sister’s arms and I’m free to change back.

**Well, with that done…** I pose so that I’ll probably be standing when I change back, and concentrate on how I normally look. I shift back… and yes, I’m standing, with my objects in my hands. I put them in my pockets as Carol walks over and puts the mic in my face. “I believe I’m ready to take questions with longer answers now. However, I won’t be able to make stuff like that giant flower again. My magic is much stronger in the other form. Making something even half that size would leave me panting now.”

“You get tired from using your abilities?”

“Physically tired, yes, like after a good exercise. I have a good idea how much I’m capable of, though I won’t find any hard limits until I try something that’s too much for me.”

“Does transforming tire you out?” Carol seems a lot more at home now. I guess she’s pretty used to interviewing people, but not people where she has to repeat everything they say.

“Shifting to dragon form uses a lot of magic. It also sections off the amount necessary to change back, so even if I run out I can still shift back. So in simpler terms, getting bigger is tiring but getting smaller is effortless.”

“You said earlier you have a finite amount of magic. Can you clarify?”

“Sure. At any given point in time, I have a finite amount of magic energy. This amount will constantly replenish over time up to whatever my maximum is. For dragons, this takes about six hours from empty to full. If I have no energy, I can’t use any magic – such as to transform or make an ice flower – and I’ll be physically exhausted because the dragon form gets most of its physical energy from magic, and technically speaking I’m always in both forms. Exactly how that’s true is not well-understood, but that’s how the Doctor describes it.” Wait for it…

I wipe a tear out of my eye. “Sorry, sorry, I just had to phrase it that way. Every dragon, after a few years, gets a nickname. The nickname can change later, but it’s basically a shorthand for identifying a specific dragon, since we go by first names only, as some dragons are older than last names. One dragon is known as ‘The Doctor’ or ‘The Surgeon’ because of her chosen profession. She’s basically the best human biologist on the planet, at least when it comes to organs and musculature, since she’s been at it for almost two millennia. And of course, she has the best idea what’s going on with dragon biology.”

“Honestly, it’s difficult to believe people can live that long. Do you know why dragons seemingly live forever?”

“According to the Doctor,” (yes, I really like that nickname) “people who can use magic naturally live longer. Dragons just have so much magic it lengthens our lives to the extreme. Although it could also just be a part of the other abilities we have. There’s really no way to know.”

“Perhaps now would be a good time to explain why you keep talking about other people using magic besides dragons.”

“Do you have time for a long explanation?”

“Now that I don’t have to repeat you, sure.”

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I knew I’d be talking about this, but since me and scripts don’t do too well, I just made sure to know the key points. Where to start… How about with the general mechanics of magic?

“Okay. Strap in, it’s going to be a bumpy ride. Unless you’re like me and just fascinated with this sort of thing. Let’s start with the definition of magic.” I smile widely. I really enjoy this topic, but I’ll be teaching the general public the type of stuff only engineering students usually learn.

“In accordance with the second law of thermodynamics, any process has, in total, neutral or positive entropy generation. Thermodynamic efficiency is generally defined as how close to zero entropy generation a process can get away with. If you define the system of concern tightly enough, a process may appear to have negative entropy generation, but when the system of concern is the whole universe, processes always have zero or positive entropy generation. At least, this is what is presently taught in high school and college.

“Let’s shift that idea a bit. Clarify it. New definition: a physical process always has zero or positive entropy generation. On the other hand, a magic process always has negative entropy generation. With this in mind, you can get a more complete picture of the universe. Magic is, essentially, the opposite of physics. Pretty much anything that can’t be done with physics can be done with magic. Like the flower I made earlier. Physics says that heat energy will naturally travel toward areas with less energy. This generates entropy. By contrast, I used entropy to move heat energy away from an area with less energy.” Actually, I caused the heat energy in that area to cease to exist (take that, conservation of energy!), but I could have accomplished the same thing in the way I’m describing. Plus it would use less entropy to do it that way, though it would be more complicated and probably need a spell.

“Basically everything in magic works something like that. My shift to dragon form also uses entropy as the fuel for it to occur, though it’s a great deal more complicated. With these definitions established, you can think of entropy as basically magic energy. Which of course leads to the next point: physical processes generate magic energy, and the imbalance caused by using magic
generates physical energy. So for anyone worried about the heat death of the universe—essentially, the point where all physical energy is used up and there’s a ton of entropy in its place—you can rest easy knowing that energy is part of a cycle and not a one-way process.

“So with all this in place, we now get to talk about magic systems! In this universe, there are four magic systems. A ‘magic system’ is basically a group of magic stuff people can do that has the same power source. What I mean by that is that magic tends to be a bit particular about the source of the entropy in regard to whether it can or cannot be used for a particular task. For this purpose, we can split it along lines commonly used in physics systems: electromagnetic, nuclear, and gravitational. Electromagnetic is further split into chemical and other. So for our four magic systems, the sources of entropy are chemical, nuclear, gravitational, and other electromagnetic.

“Chemical entropy is, of course, the most commonly available entropy on Earth, as every living thing produces it constantly. There are several reasons why people who use chemical entropy are known as ‘Common magic users,’ and that’s one of them. Another is that this is the most common type of magic user. Other than dragons, these are the people I expect to spend the most time talking about. I’ll get more into that in a bit.

“Nuclear entropy is a whole lot rarer, as are the people who can use it. Specifically, nuclear entropy is what fuels draconic magic. Since stars generate light, and therefore entropy, by fusion reactions—a nuclear process—it’s technically correct to say that dragons are solar powered.” I leave a bit of time for people to laugh. “So yes, our magic energy comes from the stars. Though I suppose we’re also a bit biased on the subject of nuclear reactors.

“Gravitational entropy is pretty constant.” Yes, I’m putting physics jokes throughout this whole speech. “Not many people can use it naturally. I don’t expect to talk about this a whole lot, since being able to use gravitational entropy is purely up to genetics. Which is one of the reasons its users are called ‘Genetic magic users.’ Dragons like to name things descriptively. Being creative isn’t useful when no one can keep track of what you’re talking about.

“Other electromagnetic entropy is very rarely used, though it’s slightly more common than dragons. However, most of its use goes unnoticed. It’s also rarely useful, and for that reason and others dragons generally refuse to talk about it. I won’t go more into this subject.

“So with all that explained, I’ll give everyone a few minutes to process what I said and decide if they want to hear more.”

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“Where exactly are you getting all this information from?” I look up from where I’m sitting, taking a break. It seems the speaker is a guy who’s around my age. They probably attend one of the nearby colleges.

I guess people have finished thinking through what I said. Or they just gave up. Personally, I greatly enjoyed that read earlier this week.

“I explained earlier; I read a lot of information out of the Mymoir. For those who weren’t here earlier, that’s the mental link between dragons that’s a lot like Wikipedia.”

“But how did dragons get that information?”

I stand up and walk over to Carol. “Can we start this up again?” She nods. Answering the man’s question, I continue: “Thousands of years of research. And it’s not just dragons that have made the
discoveries. It’s just that dragons’ records are better than most. Anyway, can I take this to mean you’re ready to hear more? I’ll just be talking about Common magic. I’m basically done with all the other topics.”

“I’m sure we’d love to have some more answers.”

“I’m sure you’ll be talking about this for weeks. It’s not like I expect everyone to get it on the first go.” I shake my head. “Anyway, Common magic: most people that can use magic can use this sort of magic. If you want numbers, dragons have a sort of… census from around 1100. The reason the data is so old is because dragons have been pretty much hiding for the past 800 years, roughly. However, the data on Common magic has plenty of history. It’s just that the most recent data is 900 years old.

“Common magic users come in a variety of forms, by which I mean it’s not a homogeneous community like it is with dragons. The various kinds of Common magic users consist of—with some key terms here—wizards, wandmakers, casters, and those who can use Common magic with assistance. Wizards and wandmakers result from a mix of genetic and… something else we don’t know. But they’re designated from birth. You can’t become a wizard. The proportion of the world that is wizards and wandmakers is roughly one in ten thousand people, or 0.01%. This population is roughly 50% male. The population of casters is variable. Casters ‘awaken’ from people who can use Common magic with assistance. Awakening is based on a variety of factors including how often the person uses magic. The maximum proportion of the world population that can be casters is two percent. Right now, it’s probably closer to one percent or possibly lower, since not many people know about magic, so people don’t use it all that often. This population’s male/female split is variable over time, but it’s usually more female. Lastly, we have the people who can use Common magic with assistance. As far as we know, this is purely genetic—and it certainly seems that way because of the numbers I’ll give you in a minute—but it might be based on other factors, since it’s a lot harder to track. Especially because the proportion of the world population that can use magic with assistance is roughly half. As in about half of people can use Common magic with assistance. And according to the data in 1100 AD, roughly two-thirds of that population is female. Meaning about two-thirds of all women in the world can use Common magic with assistance, and roughly one-third of men can do the same.

“Using Common magic with assistance means a great variety of things, but essentially it boils down to this: the person cannot use magic by themselves, but in the presence of something that contains Common magic geared toward a specific goal, they can activate the magic. So through the sets of abilities of Common magic users, we get the following: Common casters can use magic by themselves and get their own spells. These spells reflect who the caster is, but are dependent on other factors such as genetics. Spells can be grouped into categories such as transformation, augmentation, summoning, illusions, and so on. Casters generally can only get spells from one category. Wizards do not get spells of their own, but by being present when magic is used, through no personal effort they can gain the ability to copy spells to use later. Wandmakers don’t get any spells, period. However, from observing the use of spells even once, they can learn how to imbue magic into objects and even create new, custom spells. And objects that have been empowered by wandmakers can be used by anyone in any of the four categories of Common magic users, though some people might struggle to activate particularly powerful or complicated magic.

“So as for why I held my announcement and this Q&A session today: Dragons want people to be able to use magic without the fear of being seen as strange or anything like that, and we want people to be able to benefit from our centuries if not millennia of experience. In ancient days, people used magic for help or enjoyment or profit or what have you. There were negative uses as well, sure, but it’s not like that’s gone away. The person who invented dynamite saw its use in construction and demolition. Then armies used it as a predecessor for hand grenades. Magic’s the
same way, really. You can use it for great things or... not so great things. But if you can use magic, you’re not alone, and we believe that magic can and should be used to help society progress to a brighter future. Though I should warn any potential wrongdoers that dragons take their roles as guardians seriously.”

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For some reason, it doesn’t seem like Carol’s done just yet. I’ve been talking for over an hour including breaks. “Do you have anything else to say today?”

“No. I thought my conclusion was clear enough. But if there are any straggling questions, I suppose I could answer them. I won’t have terribly long answers, though.”

“If we have more questions to ask you, when would be a good time?”

“For the general public as well as for news stations, I’ll be flying for exercise regularly. Usually on Saturdays when it’s not raining. When I land after I’m done, you can ask your questions, if I don’t have anything else pressing for my attention.”

“What can you say about superheroes?” a girl shouts, though I don’t think she had to be quite so loud.

“I’m guessing you’re talking about Cheerleadra. That’s just a person using a Common magic spell. The spell itself is rare, but the Mymoir has a bit of information on it, if you’d like me to tell you.”

“Is Cheerleadra a guy?” I thought Mr. Verres had addressed this, though I’ll admit I didn’t pay attention to much news this week. I don’t know what his ‘Cheerleadra sighting’ consisted of.

“If you’re asking about who the spell user is, I can’t say.” Really, I can’t. I mean, I know who was Cheerleadra, but I’m not going to say that. And it’s not like Cheerleadra really exists anymore. “The Mymoir says nothing about that sort of thing. The superhero spell is an augmentation spell, mostly, meaning it grants the user superhuman abilities such as strength and flight. Depending greatly on the user, it can also come with a clothing change and/or a transformation. One instance in history had a clothing change, but no transformation or mask of any sort, because the user loved soaking up the glory. Most of the time, though, there’s some sort of identity masking, because the user wants to help people but doesn’t care for or wants to avoid recognition. But although there’s a lot of variation in the spell, it usually doesn’t incorporate any drastic changes, since the user typically specializes in augmentation magic.”

“So what sort of magic is responsible for that dragon-thing that attacked the bridge last April?”

“That was not a dragon,” I say through clenched teeth. “That was a summoned monster, created by Common magic. Though I’d be remiss to not point out that summoned monsters can be quite helpful. Any sort of extremely risky job that doesn’t require attention to detail is generally well-handled by summoned monsters, since if they ‘die’ the caster can simply summon them again. In times past they were commonly utilized for mining or construction. So something like what attacked that bridge could also be used to transport heavy loads through tight spaces in lieu of a vehicle that could handle the job, or could be used to transport an important person or two to a site quickly.”

“And what about that creepy girl from the news last March? Was that another summoned monster?”
What happened in March? … April was Cheerleadra because Elliot hadn’t read his book since March. Ellen became a thing in January and I don’t think anything happened in February. Grace’s birthday party was in March. And between them… ah, Sister II. So the creepy girl on the news would be… Pandora. Great.

“Sorry, I couldn’t recall that event for a bit. That was… Well, humans are not the only conscious creatures in this world. Another one is a group of beings that call themselves ‘immortals.’ Yes, dragons think that name is stupid. They’re not actually immortal, and they don’t even live as long as dragons, as far as their memories go. They reset every once in a while because they’re essentially Common magic condensed into a creature, which makes them rather unstable in nature, since they’re pretty much literally made of entropy. And entropy can be a synonym for chaos.

“Since they’re basically made of Common magic, they can help people out when it comes to using and learning how to use Common magic. At the same time, they can be a bit… unhinged, and they often struggle with human morality, since they’re not human. There are far more immortals than dragons, and they can be great instructors, but their chaotic nature means dragons also get to spend a lot of time fixing stuff immortals make worse. And as they are conscious creatures, understand I am speaking about the whole of them. Just like humans, they can be good or bad, and most are neutral. You don’t see them a whole lot because they only have a physical form when they want to. Dragons are just really rare and tend to blend in.”

I guess I did sort of promise to talk about immortals today. I hope I didn’t cause any problems for myself and Elliot going forward.

The crowd is quiet for a moment. Then… “Will you go out with me?” Ah, the inevitable question. The voice sounded young and male, but I don’t particularly care to find out who asked.

“Remember what I said about dragons barely aging and living for practically forever? There are a few reasons why dragons usually only marry other dragons. For one, it’s hard to find a partner that’s okay with having an apparently ageless spouse. For two, a dragon will almost certainly be more magically and/or physically powerful than anyone else. You can hardly call marriage a partnership in a dynamic like that. For three, it’s pretty unfair to the non-dragon that they’ll spend their whole life with someone, but that time will be only a tiny fraction of the life of their spouse. And fourth, people generally want to marry someone who can really understand them. And someone who’s not a dragon but can truly understand one is a very rare person.”

The crowd is quiet again. “So is that a no?”

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After that last question, there weren’t really any other important questions. Carol packed up and left, and most of the crowd dissipated. A few people stayed behind, mostly people I know from this week or the comic. I took the opportunity to replace the grass my claws moved earlier.

Tensaided keeps making like he’s going to approach me to thank me or something. I walk over to him and hold out my hand. “Thank you for giving me this space for the announcement today.”

He takes a moment to register what I said, then enthusiastically shakes my hand. “You’re welcome. If there’s anything I can do for you…”

“Don’t you have a store to manage?”

“Oh! Right!” He runs inside. I can just imagine Susan laughing at the sight of him, though not
visibly because he is her boss.

“Um…”

I turn around. Oh! I think that’s Catalina! (She’s pretty recognizable.) She’s… a caster? When did that happen? “Yes? Did you want to ask me something?”

“My… friend and I wanted to know if you could explain some more about magic?” She’s probably talking about Rhoda. Rhoda at least has a mark and probably has figured out that spell.

“Sure. I’d like to head home at some point, but I’m happy to explain some more personally. Especially since I can tell you’re a caster.”

“You- you can? And is that what that’s called? I mean, it fits with what you said earlier, but…”

“Yes, you are. Detecting that is… one of the abilities of dragons that I might have forgotten to talk about. As in I actually forgot, not that I skipped over it on purpose.”

“Oh. So…” She points toward the side of the store, and following her finger I spot Rhoda around the corner. “Could you come with me?”

“Sure. Could I… have your name?” I am determined to not let my comic knowledge slip here. Although living with Susan would at least give me a bit of an excuse.

“Oh! Sorry! It’s Catalina. And my friend is Rhoda. Thanks for this.”

“Not a problem, really. I didn’t have much else planned for today.”

We move around the corner of the building and… well, it seems Rhoda is a caster as well. She shrinks away as I approach her for a handshake, so I put my hand down. “Uh… nice to meet you?”

“You’re really tall.”

“That’s just genetics. Being tall isn’t always fantastic, though.” Like bumping my head on the bus. And great difficulty when going caving. “So what exactly did you two want to talk about?”

Rhoda doesn’t seem too inclined to talk. Based on what she said, I guess height intimidates her? I don’t really remember much about her from the comic. “We, uh, we wanted to know if you could tell us more about magic. And being casters, since apparently that’s what we are.”

“I can’t really say a ton more about magic. Either because I shouldn’t or because I’m going to need more specific questions. As for being Common casters, depending on how long you two have been such, you might already know most of what I’m going to say. Do you want to hear it anyway?”

“Go ahead.”

“Your first spell can be based on a lot of things, such as genetics, personality, and stuff like that. The first spell generally will determine your specialty for future spells. Again, specialty categories are stuff like illusions, summoning, augmentation and so on. The more you use magic, the faster you get more spells. When you get spells, you usually first use them on accident, unless an immortal gives you a magic book that will tell you what your spells are. The language in magic books is often confusing, though. I’m not sure whether that’s intentional or because the magic that makes the book is poorly defined. Or maybe something else altogether.”

“Oh! Rhoda has a magic book!”
I turn to face her. “You’ve met an immortal? I warn you to be cautious. They can be rather misleading and manipulative.”

“They just gave us my magic book and a note on it. We never actually saw the immortal. The note matched a lot of what you said just now, so I think we should be good to trust that, too. But is there anything else you can tell us?”

“Well… for that, I guess I’d have to know what you can do? And maybe how you’d like to use it.”

“What do you mean by that last part?”

“I know a few people who can train Common casters and wizards, but the training would depend on your intention. Plus, of course, you’d have to be okay with other people knowing what you can do. Alternatively, you could just tell me, and I could spend some free time helping you out… but I’m going to have a lot on my plate already. Though I wouldn’t say no to helping you as friends or whatever.”

“Uh…” they say in unison, as they look at each other. Then they turn back to me. “Could we just tell you?” Catalina says.

“Not here, though,” Rhoda quickly adds.

“Where did you have in mind?”

Catalina thinks for a moment. “Would you be alright with doing this at my house?”

“My current mode of transportation is walking. I was dropped off here by two of my friends, but I’d be fine going wherever with you, so long as I can get home before dark. Oh, and… do you know Susan Pompoms?” I mean, of course Catalina does, but no comic knowledge.

“She’s my best friend. Why?”

“Oh. That’s convenient. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I’m presently residing in her house. I also left my backpack behind the counter in the video store, so I’d need to get it before we go anywhere.” I can see the jealousy in Catalina’s face, that I get to live with Susan. I’d honestly prefer getting to live by myself (or with my family), but this is way cheaper for me and getting to know Susan is important.

“Well, any friend of Susan’s is a friend of mine. And now I have a better excuse for my parents as to why I’m inviting you over.”

Rhoda can’t resist a little probe, though. “What sort of circumstances would have you living with Susan?”

“That’s… personal.” I don’t really have a good way to phrase it.

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Catalina’s house is in the same neighborhood as Elliot’s, I think. It’s difficult to tell because I haven’t really been paying attention to directions any time I’ve been there. But her house is the same style as his.

Catalina’s parents were amicable, though I don’t think they watched or heard my announcement. Something for Catalina to talk about later, I guess. I hope they don’t watch it while I’m here,
though. That would be awkward.

So now we’re up in Catalina’s room. The place is… well, a fair bit more decorated than I would make my room. I mean, Kevin’s room is decorated with 3D prints, but I generally like leaving the walls plain. Less time investment for when I have to move every so often. I do wish I had one or two of Kevin’s plushies, though. I can definitely tell that she likes cats, though I wonder if that’s just because of her name. If she has any pets, they’re not near us.

“I’m guessing we came here because you’d rather show than tell me what you can do?” And then I notice that Rhoda’s height now matches my own. “Never mind, already addressed. Did you do that to yourself?”

“Yeah. I can use it on other people, too, but I thought you wouldn’t like me using it on you without warning.” She seems a lot more confident now. Is that from the added height or being in a private place?

“You can’t use Common magic on a dragon without warning them.”

“As in… wait, what?” Catalina scrunches her face up.

“Everyone has some level of spell resistance for every kind of magic. The level differs by the kind of magic they can use, and the kind being used on them. For any kind of magic, the resistance to a person’s own magic type is higher than the general public’s resistance. For example, if someone tried to use Common magic on Rhoda, and she didn’t want it, they’d have to spend more magic to get it to take effect, or the duration of the spell might be a lot less than intended. Similarly, if a Common caster likes the effect of a Common spell, they can use some of their own magic to increase the duration of the effect. That’s basically how it is within a magic type.

“For Common casters resisting Draconic magic, the resistance is generally about zero. Although that is the same rate as for the general public. For dragons resisting Common magic, the resistance is basically infinity. If a dragon does not intentionally lower their resistance, it’s impossible for any Common magic to take effect. Which is another reason why dragons are called upon to take down rogue Common casters or wizards.”

“Does that… happen often?”

“Only as often as such occurs and the local heroes can’t take them down. ‘Monster Hunter’ is still a job title in some places.” Namely Japan and Europe. But it’s a lot more open (and showy) in Japan. “Not that that’s a bad thing. Honestly, I prefer that to the solution of ‘the government will take care of it.’” Which is what it is in the United States most of the time. “Because if you can’t tell who can take you down, you generally don’t take your chances as often.”

“I guess that’s another good reason for people to not find out who Cheerleadra is. So why aren’t you doing the same thing here?”

“Because the dragon form is always the same size, and if the bad guy is in a building I don’t want to destroy, I need people to know they can count on me.”

“Oh. That’s fair. Hey, what happens if you’re stuck in a cage and can’t transform?”

“If I’m stuck in a cage, transforming will break it. The rule of thumb for all types of magic is ‘transformation is convenient.’” Unless your name is Vlad. “If your transformation would take you through an indestructible wall, too bad for the wall. Once the shapeshifting is complete, that rule of thumb ends, but for any type of transformation, obstructions will be destroyed. That’s why I stood
on the grass today. If I stood on the pavement, I had a good chance of gouging it with my claws when I shifted forms at the start.”

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The two of them are silent for a moment, then Catalina perks back up. “Want to see what I can do?” Before I can answer, Rhoda has cat ears and a furry tail.

“Is that…” I cut myself off. There’s no way she’d know whether her spell is because of her name or her personality. “How long does that last?”

“I… um… I’m not sure? I can make it end whenever I feel like it.”

“That’s normal. Whatever. Say, for both of you: when did you first notice you had magic, and how many spells do you have? Or think you have, in Catalina’s case.”

Rhoda’s the first to speak. “I’ve had mine since May, at least. And I think I have about a dozen spells?”

Wow. That’s a lot. I mean, she smells strong, but that’s not very conclusive. I’m in a caster’s bedroom. It would smell strongly in here regardless. “You seem to be one of the more powerful casters out there. Your magic book will be rather thick by the end of your life.”

“How thick?”

“You know the joke that goes, ““Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” wasn’t quipped by someone who’d been hit over the head with a dictionary’? Add ‘or Rhoda’s spell book.’ Actually, if you die a natural death, you might well have an Encyclopedia Britannica on your hands.”


“And how many spells do you have? You’re a caster, so you have to have at least two. When you awaken you get a new spell.”

“Then I think it might just be the two.”

“Oh. In that case… it’s difficult to judge, but I think you might be a weak-to-average power caster. If you’re average, you’ll probably get about 4 more spells this year. Weak would be 2 or fewer. Assuming you use your spells once daily, since you get more spells as you use magic. So if you use your spells a dozen times a day, you’ll get more faster. Although if you use all your magic you’ll burn out and not even be able to use your magic for a while while you build it back up.”

“Burn out?”

“Anyone with magic of any kind has a maximum amount they can store for later use, and this builds up over time. For dragons, our range is from zero to 100% and it takes six hours to go from empty to full. If we try to cast a spell with too little magic remaining, it’ll fail. For Common magic users, the range can extend to negatives. If you try to cast a spell with too little magic remaining, it’ll succeed. However, if you go below zero, it takes longer for your magic to build back up, and you can’t use it again until you hit full capacity. Plus you might have a hair- or eye-color change, and trying to use magic from wands or whatever will have unintended consequences. This is called ‘burning out.’”
“Gotcha. Hey, while you’re here, would you mind if we used our magic on you? Since you said it would help us get more spells.” I guess Catalina wants to catch up with Rhoda.

“Sure. Go ahead. It’s not a big deal, since shifting to dragon form will remove spells, fix injuries, clean clothes, and so on. If you take me to the park before dropping me off at Susan’s house, I’m fine with whatever.”

“Really?” Rhoda blushes a bit. “Do you, uh, have any suggestions?”

“I don’t really know what you can do. But honestly, I’m fine with whatever.” So long as they don’t make me a guy or something, but their spells don’t seem like they’d do that. And I trust they won’t try something awful on me. I mean, I just told them that dragons will take down rogue casters.

Catalina whispers something to Rhoda. “Are you sure?” she replies.

“Yeah, I think it’s fine. And then I can use my spell on her, too.” I guess whatever it is, I’m getting cat ears and a furry tail. That’ll be different from the thick, scaly tail I get with my dragon form.

“How long do spells last on you?”

“Exactly as long as intended. If I don’t resist them to begin with, I can’t do anything about their duration aside from shifting to dragon form.”

“Alright. Uh, is your resistance down?”

I focus for a second. “It is now.” No sooner are the words out of my mouth than I’m looking up at Rhoda. A couple of seconds later, I’m small enough to fit in her hand, judging by what my heat sensing tells me about proportions. At least my clothes shrank with me, so it’s not like those Germahn Labs things from EGS. And then I suddenly have cat ears and a tail. The ears feel… kind of weird, though I wouldn’t notice them if I wasn’t investigating. The tail is a lot more flexible than my dragon tail, which generally has at most one bend in it. I can get at least one inflection point out of this tail. It’s… actually kind of weird having a tail but no wings. Thankfully, the tail somehow pops out of my back above my skirt, so no tail-based indecency here. Although I could just use Partial Armor if that wasn’t the case. Thankfully, having different kinds of magic in a living thing just means they don’t interfere if possible. I wonder if I can make my tail scaly? Probably not. It’s not part of the biological area defined in Partial Armor.

“So how do you like it?”

“I can see how this would be inconvenient, but having a new perspective is interesting.” And thankfully Common magic transformation rules mean I’m extra durable like this. I can probably take a greater beating (proportionally) in this form than I can with Partial Armor.

Rhoda picks me up, then sets me down on her desk. “It’s a little awkward talking to someone so much smaller than me,” she says without me asking for an explanation. Being picked up like a doll was a little awkward, but less so than flying with Elliot last Saturday.

“Actually, you gave me a great idea. Maybe for later, though.”

“What is it?”

“Can you get the same ratio of size reduction, regardless of the starting size?”

“I think so. Why?”
“I was thinking of maybe you shrinking me while I’m in dragon form one day. Then I could go through the day in dragon form. I’d change back to normal size if I shifted to human form, but for a while that might be interesting.” Especially if I do it on a school day at college or something. I wonder how people would react to a large lizard with wings jumping around in the buildings? Obviously, I’d have to warn people first, but…

“I… might be able to do that? When were you thinking?”

“Oh. Not for quite a while. I think people should get used to the idea that dragons and magic are real before I go doing something like that.” I might be able to do that before leaving town for a four-year university, unless Moperville adjusts rather quickly.
Identity

Chapter Notes

For this chapter especially, I ask you to keep in mind that whenever Saphira mentions Kevin, she is talking about me. Although names and places have been (mostly) changed or obscured, the events and memories are real. So when it sounds like I might be talking about something I don’t know about firsthand, if Saphira says Kevin remembers it, then yes, it really happened to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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I spent a bit more time at Catalina’s house (still shrunken) before Catalina and Rhoda drove me home. Rhoda cowered at my dragon form in the park, so I guess she’s not too good with size differences. Which might be the reason for her magic being what it is. For myself, I found that such a drastic change in size is rather disorienting, though I was fine after about a minute. I hope that gets better with experience, because losing a minute in a fight is not okay. Maybe I’ll ask Rhoda to shrink me some more so I can practice that. I can think of a few situations where sneaking in a miniature dragon would be useful.

Since I finally had some free time, I decided I ought to research the local churches and select ones to visit until I find one that’s a good fit. From Kevin’s experience, I know that the website is not the greatest way to select a church, but it can narrow it down a bit. Looking at the church’s constitution, beliefs, etc. can at least give a good feel for what it might be like. Of course, actually visiting the church is necessary to really get it, but I can eliminate some of the really bad ones right off, and some of the ones where the style is just too foreign.

I’ve selected two that ought to be okay, at least. One’s pretty conservative, but so is the one Kevin grew up in. I’m a bit worried that it might be too difficult to get to know others at the church, but with a bit of effort it might be a good fit. I’ll be visiting that one tomorrow. The one for next week, just to see if it might be better, is slightly less conservative in the music style, but it doesn’t seem too bad. It’s not one of those weird ones like what Grandma and Grandpa attend, but it’s a smaller church that uses music like Kevin heard on the radio driving to work and back. As for their church beliefs, it should be good on that front. I might ask the pastor to clarify some of them though.

As for getting to each of them, I’ve printed off maps and selected either a walking route or a mix of that and takeoff/landing spots. The former will make great use of my ability to fly. The latter is too far from a landing spot to really do anything but just walk there, although that means it’ll take over an hour to get there. Which is why I’m doing that one next week, not tomorrow.

It seems Susan’s finally home. I head downstairs. “How was your shift?”

“It was calm while you kept everyone outside, but other than that, it was a typical Saturday rush. Mr. Tensaided was less than helpful after you left. He should be okay by tomorrow.”

“Did he pass out?”
“No, but he was hyperventilating for a bit. Then he took the *Eragon* movie off the shelf.”

“Oh boy. I hope he realizes how awful that movie is.”

“I’m guessing he doesn’t care in this case, but what makes you say that?”

“The author was good at pretty much one thing: worldbuilding. His characters were archetypal at best, and his plot was basically ripped from *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. In typical Hollywood fashion, the *Eragon* film kept the characters and some of the plot and stripped out all of the worldbuilding.”

“Ouch. I haven’t watched it myself, but I’m guessing that’s not the greatest film then.”

“If I was doing a movie review show, there’d be some yelling. The only reason it got any good reviews at all was because the CGI was okay. Anyone who didn’t read the books thought the film was meh and anyone who did thought it was awful.”

“So should I read the books or watch the movie first?”

“If you read the books, then your show gets someone on both sides, since I don’t think I’ll convince Elliot to read them.”

“But he’s a dragon.”

“Then he can appreciate the CGI. I don’t think it’ll change anything, really.”

“Moving on… what were you doing since your announcement thing? Besides chatting with Catalina and her friend.”

“They drove me home, then I had some food and started looking up churches for tomorrow. If I’m gone before you get up tomorrow, I’ll be at First Baptist Church of Moperville. Here, I can show you a map.”

She holds out her hand in a ‘stop’ gesture. “That’s fine. I’m curious, though: why *are* you a Christian? I thought they didn’t like magic.”

“There is a difference between dragons, common magic, and the particular magic that is condemned in the Bible. Basically, if you have that kind, it’s a mercy to kill you. For an idea, think of it as pretty much the opposite of Nanase’s *Guardian Angel* spell.”

“It… powers you up and hurts others?”

“Essentially. It also hurts you a lot. And you can’t stop using it.”

“Oh. But that didn’t really answer my question.”

“Okay, I was raised in a Christian home, but I’d like to think I would’ve found Christianity anyway.”

“You weren’t raised, Kevin was. You know what it’s like, yet you want to choose it again? Or are you just doing things because Kevin would?” Is this because she’s not a Christian or something else?

“I’ve made several decisions strictly because Kevin wouldn’t, and I’ve plans for the future that he wouldn’t have. But I chose this again *because* I know what it’s like.”
“You want to have your life controlled by a man?” Ah. It’s the shadow of her dad rearing its ugly head again. It’s probably more than that, but I need to clarify first.

“I don’t know what you think of Christianity, but that’s not what it is. There are good reasons why the pastor is male. As far as my limited psychology knowledge takes me, part of it is that men learn a whole lot better from other men. When it’s strictly a women’s group, women can teach just fine. And it’s not like the pastor has a ton of control over individuals. He just provides guidance for the church and regularly teaches from the Bible.”

She looks a lot calmer, now, but still kind of confused. “Oh. I get it. …Sort of. I still don’t get why you’d want to be affiliated with such a male-dominated group, though.”

Huh. How to talk to her…? “I’m willing to try a little thought experiment, if you’ll follow along?”

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“What sort of thought experiment?” Hey, that’s one step forward. Let’s bring out Susan’s intellectual curiosity. Hopefully not the one Dan likes to show.

“I’ve never done this before, so I can’t promise anything… but it’s a logical process. I know you like logic stuff, so I’m going to try to craft an argument that puts my reasoning in simple terms.”

“I’m not dumb.”

“I know that. You’re pretty intelligent. And probably more street-smart than me. But I want to be totally clear, so I’m trying to clear away the ‘Christianese’ that might otherwise creep into the conversation.”

“Oh. Go ahead, then. We should probably sit down if this’ll be a while.”

“Good idea. TV room?” Susan nods. We head into the TV room and sit on the couch facing each other. “First up, some instinctual thought. We’ve already got what you think of Christianity.”

“That it’s a bunch of men trying to cling to their backwards patriarchy and brainwash women into following them?”

“Sure. Now then: which is worse, Christianity or Islam?”

“They’re both awful.”

“But personally, to you, which is worse? I’m not going to get mad for your answer. I just want to establish the starting point.”

“Except for you, I guess I’d have to say Christianity? Only because they’re so hostile to others.” She ended her statement like it’s a question. I had a feeling she’d say that, though I’m going to clarify the point.

“Okay, which does the majority or loudest people in American society say is worse?”

“Christianity, by a long shot.”

“Despite the fact that Muslims regularly infringe on women’s rights and basically treat women like dirt or worse.”

“Why do women follow it, then?”
“Because they get killed or disowned if they don’t. I’m not emphasizing. There’s a dragon that comes from that society. She now lives in the middle of nowhere.”

“Can’t she move somewhere else?”

“She believes she’s doing the most good she can by staying where she is. That’s beside the point, though. Alright, we’ve established which one is worse by society’s standards. Now for the logic experiment. I want you to think of things in terms of the stage I set. Is that fair?”

“Makes sense.”

“Okay. Now then: in the world, there are two opposing supernatural forces. Let’s be neutral and call them Force A and Force B. Sound good?” She nods. “Force A and Force B really don’t like each other. Between them is people. Both forces want as many people as possible to choose them. Choosing one side necessarily excludes the other. However, the rules are different for each side.

“Force A represents truth, justice, etc. It wants what’s best for people in the long run, but might be painful in a shorter view. After all, your muscles get stronger when you tear them. That’s why you’re sore after good exercise.

“Force B represents basically doing whatever you want. How can it be bad if it feels good? And you don’t necessarily hurt others doing it. Helping people feels good, too.

“Concerning the rules for choosing a side: as Force A represents truth and justice, it must exclude anything that’s even a little smudged with Force B. Think of it like… Let’s say you have a cupcake, and after unwrapping it you drop it on the ground. Outside. And it just rained. Will you pick up the cupcake and eat it anyway, or throw it in the trash and get a new one?”

“Who would pick the former?” Susan’s making a pretty disgusted face. I can’t blame her. I did try to make the point clear, though.

“Someone who really doesn’t care. I agree, though, you throw it out and get a new one. You can’t clean a cupcake. Brushing off the dirt might make it look nice, but you know there’s a ton of stuff you can’t see all over it that’ll make you sick if you eat it.

“Now, Force A is much better than you or I at cleaning cupcakes. It’s so good, in fact, that it made a way that not only cleans the cupcake, but also prevents it from ever getting dirty again. Alright, enough with the cupcake metaphor. Anyway, Force A made a way for anyone who wants to purge the influence of Force B from themselves in such a way that they won’t have to worry about it ever again.

“Of course, Force B will take anyone it can get. If Force A won’t take them, it’s perfectly fine taking them for itself. Think of it like the trash can in the cupcake metaphor. Anyone’s great. But Force B isn’t content to just smudge some people. It doesn’t want Force A to get anyone at all. And it’s really worried about that cleaning method. If a person uses that, Force B can’t touch them.

“Force A is the truth. It hands out the cleaning method for free, to anyone who wants it. No other method is good enough to cleanse people of Force B, and Force A won’t settle for anything less. But the cleaning method can be used an infinite number of times and still be good enough for more.

“Force B is not the truth, and it’s really good at hiding the truth and the cleaning method with white lies, half-truths, and outright falsehood. It doesn’t need to avoid stuff from Force A altogether. It’s fine with partial victories, because even a partial victory over a person is a whole
victory, since Force A can’t take anything touched by Force B without that cleaning method. And Force B won’t just hide the truth. People who used the cleaning method are still in the world for all to see. Force B won’t sit back and let them tell others about the cleaning method. It’ll get the loudest people it has and point out everything those sided with Force A did that wasn’t true, wasn’t just. It’ll point out how much more fun it is to just do whatever you want, without caring about truth or justice. It’ll make sure no one wants to be near those who sided with Force A.”

“I… I think I get it.”

“Good, because I ran out of things to say.” I smile, and she chuckles.

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Susan’s looking thoughtful. “So… I think I can guess what Force A and Force B are in the Christian point of view.”

“I’d sure hope so. To clarify, though, neither force is a religion.”

“Is that really what Christians think of the world?”

“Yes. A good summary of society, anyway.”

“Hmmm.” She looks like she has a lot of questions. I’ve had to deal with a lot of that today. I hope she’ll talk sooner than the crowd right after my announcement. It’s not late, but I’d like to have dinner at some point. My lunch after getting home wasn’t enough. “Well, you’ve certainly given me something to think about. Good job on keeping it pretty logical, anyway, though I did have a bit of trouble following you towards the end.”

“I can clarify if you have questions.”

“I think I can think it through.”

I exhale heavily. “Thank you.”

“You’ve had enough talking for one day?”

“Enough for a week. But I won’t pass up an opportunity like you just gave me.”

“Actually, now that I think about it… you’ve done surprisingly little talking on that subject. When I invited a known Christian to stay at my house, I was afraid that was all you’d talk about.”

“I know from Kevin’s experience that there’s little point in talking when no one wants to listen. If you ask, though, I’ll answer.”

“Possibly more verbosely than the person wants.”

“Possibly, but I hope they’ll at least listen to a bit of what I have to say.”

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I think enough time has passed that it should be safe to contact Elliot now. No reason to call him since we’re both dragons. Into the private message chat of the Mymoir! I hope he’s set up a notification. If he can. I’m not sure how it’d work for magic like his. Actually, never mind. It’s probably better to just call him. At least I can still record phone numbers in my journal in the Mymoir.
“Hello?”

“Hey Elliot! Saphira speaking. How was it with Ashley today?”

“You were right about her parents not trusting me. They don’t know about what happened on the first date, but their daughter being kidnapped on the second date didn’t help.”

“So what you’re saying is…”

“I sort of had to have a lunch date with her… inside her house. She was disappointed she couldn’t ask questions at your announcement.”

“I can see how that might be a bit stifling. You know, I can answer her questions in person later if she wants.”

“I think you answered most of them anyway. She didn’t seem too put out that she missed it. She was just happy to know I was okay, after everything that happened last night. Thankfully, her parents didn’t insist on being next to us the whole time, even if they wouldn’t let her out the door with me.”

“Did she ask about you being a dragon?”

“I said all I could say at the moment was ‘yes.’ She seemed fine with that answer.”

“I bet she expects to go flying with you later. So did it go well, considering the restrictions?”

“Mostly. No incidents, at least. I think that’s the most normal date I’m likely to have with her.”

“What do you mean, ‘mostly’?”

“Her house is within your range.”

“So… you heard my announcement?”

“Yeah. I think you did a pretty good job, for people who knew you beforehand. Ashley was surprised, but also really excited when I told her what the announcement meant.”

“And how did her parents take it?”

“There were a couple solid minutes of panicking before Ashley and I could calm them down. It helped a lot that she was able to explain that you’re the reason she got home before midnight.”

“If at all. With both you and Ellen unconscious, and presumably Magus gone, she might have had a hard time getting home last night after dragging you two to the car. Her parents probably would have had to pick her up from the government building.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks. Anyway, after calming down Ashley’s parents, we watched the rest of your announcement Q&A on the broadcast. I think Carol did a good job keeping up. Mr. Verres might be a bit frustrated with how informative you were, though.”

“All I promised was that my information would not come from the comic. I never said anything about restrictions on information from the Mymoir. And if you were reading the chat room during that, you’d have seen how much help I was getting.”

“Yeah, I don’t think any other dragons will be mad at you for what you said. And, uh… thanks for the stuff you said about the superhero spell.”
“There’s no reason to tell people that you used to be Cheerleadra. Besides, I’m not going to give names or descriptions of magic users unless they’ve expressly given me permission. But giving particulars on the history of the spell outside of your use does make it seem a lot less likely that you could have had the spell. But, uh… How did Ashley take the… uh…”

“The part about dragons and dating?”

“Yeah.”

“She looked at me with puppy-dog eyes. I told her I was there right then, wasn’t I?”

“You didn’t think about it at all, did you?”

“No really.”

“I guess that’s something to consider before you next talk to her.”

“…So, is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“Not quite. You see, dates were rarely stated in the comic, but based on a fan timeline that used the passage of time that was stated… it’s coming up on a year since Ellen’s first independent memory, isn’t it?”

“Now that I think about it… yeah, it is. Why bring it up?”

“Does she celebrate her birthday with you, or would she want a separate party?”

“She celebrated with me last year, but… I can ask if she’d want another party or get-together or something. When would you celebrate your birthday? January 10, or on Kevin’s birthday?”

“January 10. Although that’s not far off from Kevin’s birthday if I decided to go with that, I’d like to be totally clear that I consider myself a wholly separate person from him. I don’t want to confuse anyone, least of all myself.”

“Not going with the ‘twin’ thing?”

“He was 10 months into 2014 when I appeared at the start of it. Plus I’m pretty sure time moves at different rates between here and there. Even if it doesn’t, one could claim that I’m older than him for the date. Though as a dragon, I’ll pretty swiftly get passed up in apparent age. One could also claim that I’m only a week old. So to just keep stuff simple, my birthday is set on January 10. Besides, it’s not like people are going to meet him.”

“I guess.”

“So can you ask her about the party thing?”

“Sure. Hang on a sec; we’re both home.”

This would probably be a lot easier if we were just talking in the Mymoir, but I get the feeling I won’t know if he knows how to do that until either he tells me or I can ask him in person.

“She said she’d think about it. It’s not for nearly two more weeks, but that is a bit short notice. It probably won’t be a birthday party, but it might be a good time to get together with a bunch of our friends. Oh! And one more thing. She said you promised Diane that you’d tell her about yourself, but Diane told Ellen at school on Friday morning that you hadn’t talked with her yet.”
“Right. Crap. I totally forgot, what with everything else I had to do last week. I guess I know what I’m doing tomorrow afternoon, provided I can call her tonight or tomorrow. Thanks for the reminder. I guess I’ll see you later?”

“Do you know yet if you’ll be going to high school?”

“No. That’s someone else I need to call. Alright, I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

“See you later.” *Beep beep beep*

18 January 2014
4:57 PM CST

I didn’t have Diane’s phone number, but thankfully Susan had gotten it prior to heading home after all the ruckus at the mall last night. Just thinking about it now, I guess it was a good thing that I forced Diane to awaken, though I still don’t feel too good about that. But if she hadn’t had magic last night, we might be looking at some bodies or worse. Susan said Diane was thrilled that she was able to help, anyway. I guess Ellen can’t call her a ‘bystander’ any longer.

“Diane? It’s Saphira.”

“Oh! Hey, um…”

“Yes?”

“Was that really you on the news earlier?”

“Yeah, that was me. Did you watch much of it?”

“Not really. You… kind of lost me when you started talking about thermo-whatsit.”

“Thermodynamics. And that was pretty far in.”

“I didn’t say I tuned in at the start. And your dragon form looks a lot different in the daytime. A lot less scary, for sure.”

“I also made sure I wouldn’t be looming over the cameraman. Anyway, I was calling because Ellen just reminded me that I forgot to tell you what I promised last Saturday.”

“She just told you now? I talked with her yesterday morning!”

“I guess she had more important things to think about. As did I. Sorry about that. Would you be willing to meet up somewhere tomorrow?”

“Does it matter where?”

“If it’s not too windy or raining, we could even meet outside. But anywhere that won’t have a ton of people. Although… You know what, I might be able to arrange meeting here.”

“Where’s ‘here’?”

“Susan’s house. Ms. Pompoms just made me promise I wouldn’t invite any men over. I don’t think she’d have much of a problem with me inviting you over. And having you over means Susan will likely get some time to spend with you without an adrenaline rush.”

“That… might be nice.”
“Is it fine if I hang up and call you back? Ms. Pompoms is home, but I haven’t spoken with her since my announcement today. This might take a while.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you in a bit.” *Beep beep beep*

To be precise, Ms. Pompoms is in a section of the home I’ve only entered when no one else was here. It’s something of a den. Basically the same as the living room in Kevin’s home, but it actually has a door. Plus there are some pretty large bookshelves in there. Judging by her posture, I think she’s reading a book. That or napping, but sleeping in that sort of position is a recipe for a sore neck.

I put the phone back on the charger, then walk quietly to the den’s door. *Knock knock* “Come in, Saphira.” I hear a book closing and being put aside.

I open the door. “How’d you know it was me?”

“I know what my daughter’s walking sounds like.” Makes sense. Kevin could always tell his family members apart based on the cadence of their footsteps down the stairs. I close the door behind me. “What did you want to talk about?”

“A… couple of things, actually. First, um…”

“The thing you did on the news?”

“I am steadily becoming surprised by the proportion of people I know who were watching that channel today. I mean, I did tell my friends to watch it, but… I’m kind of surprised the channel kept me on that long. They must’ve cancelled stuff for my announcement.”

“You were probably the biggest news that station has had in quite a while, especially for Moperville.” I guess that’s true. Politicians wouldn’t come here. Illinois isn’t exactly a swing state. And I don’t think I’ve ever heard much news coming from this state. Heck, Kevin had never heard of Naperville until people tried to pin down Moperville’s location. “I am curious, however. What exactly do you hope to gain from this?”

“I thought I was pretty clear earlier.”

“You told them what dragons wanted from this. What do you want?”

“I—” I stammered. What is it to me, personally? I mean, this will definitely help people in the long run, but…

…I’m not looking to gain fame. I like to keep to myself.” As was clearly evidenced by Kevin’s social habits in college. Aside from organized meetings, he stayed in his dorm or apartment as much as possible. “Really, I’m doing this for much the same reason as I plan to become an engineer. I can see… designs in the world around me. Devices that have yet to be made, that can help people in every way imaginable. I know things don’t always work the way I plan, but… I know I can help, and I want to help, in any way I can. I don’t quite know yet just how I can help, or what sort of effect my help will have… but I know that, at least in the domain of magic, people have to know something about it for me to be able to help at all. I’m doing this because I can see ways to improve the world I live in, and I want those improvements to be realized.”

“Interesting. Usually, that sort of motive only appears in someone who has yet to understand the problems that will come, or in someone who desperately wants to hide or atone for a crime. But in
your words, and in your voice, and in your body language... I believe you.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, what other things did you want to talk about?”

“Just one other thing. You know the girl Susan hung out with last night? Diane?”

“I believe that was her name, yes.”

“Could I invite her over for tomorrow afternoon? I promised to talk with her last week, and I just
now got around to it. Plus, I think Susan would like to have some interaction with her in a more
familiar setting.”

“Have you spoken with Susan about this?”

“Not yet, no. I figured I’d need your permission before that was an issue.”

“I suppose that’s correct. Yes, you have my permission. Be sure to let Susan know before inviting
her over, though.”

“Thank you! I’ll let her know.” I start heading out of the room. Ms. Pompoms stands up.

“Since you’ve given me a good stopping point in my book, I’ll start making supper.”

“Oh?” I’ve been making my own meals this week. I didn’t think the Pompoms ever ate together.

“I make supper on weekends, when I’m not exhausted from dealing with men all day.” There’s a
lot of hate in that word. I don’t think I’ll be able to help her on my own.

18 January 2014
6:04 PM CST

Susan was okay with inviting Diane over tomorrow afternoon, so I guess I’ll be seeing her around
2:00 tomorrow. Dinner with the Pompoms was interesting. I don’t have a lot of experience with
cooking, but I tried to keep track of the heat patterns I was sensing in the food. Maybe I’ll be able
to cook with magic in the future? At the very least, I was able to keep my food warm in spite of my
slow eating.

I probably should call Mr. Verres now. Best to find out what my schooling situation is before
Monday night. (MLK day equals no school on Monday.) Plus, I might be able to ask about maybe
chatting with Magus a bit. I’m sure she’d like an opportunity to talk with me at length on a few
topics.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mr. Verres, it’s Saphira. Do you know what my scores were on my tests this week?”

“You didn’t pass them all. I’m still setting up everything, but it looks like you’ll be attending
Moperville North. Is that alright with you?”

“I’m living with Susan. It’d certainly be convenient.”

“Okay, then. You’ll need to show up to school early on Tuesday morning and go to the principal’s
office. He’ll give you your schedule and tell you how this will all work. Got it?”
“Noted. While I’m on the phone with you… is it possible that I could try to speak with Magus tomorrow? Sometime after 4?” I don’t expect to have to talk with Diane for that long, but better safe than sorry.

“You want to explain something to him? He watched today’s broadcast.”

“Even so, there are probably some topics that would be better explained in person. For example, I didn’t talk about King Arthur today, and that’s probably something Magus would like to hear about.”

“Why is that relevant, really?”

“In this world, ‘King Arthur’ actually refers to two people, one of whom was actually a king, and another who killed a dragon. They both had the same name and sword, but the dragonslayer came along a few centuries after the former. The dragon he slew, the ‘Tyrant-king,’ was threatening to overthrow and slay the dragons older than himself, and there was little the other dragons could do about it. They equipped Arthur, chased the rogue dragon, and enabled Arthur’s feat. I believe that was a turning point in multiple worlds’ histories. In our world, after the slaying of the Tyrant-king, Arthur became regent to the king of England, and to his protest, the remaining dragons were persecuted into hiding. Apparently, in Magus’s world, Arthur failed in his quest and the elder dragons were either slain or driven into hiding, where they presumably remain. Just based on what Magus said of dragons and Arthur.”

“I thought dragons didn’t want that story to resurface.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t share it, but there’s a big difference between hearing the story and experiencing it. Plus, dragons now have a bunch of precautions in place to prevent something like that happening again. One such precaution is that any new dragons are soon visited by older ones after awakening. For myself, that should be happening within the next few weeks.”

“Oh. Should I… prepare to accommodate them?”

“Any dragon that’s visiting is one who can pay for a hotel.”

“Never mind, then.”

“So… about Magus…”

“He’s on a rather strict probation that prevents his use of magic on anyone that doesn’t approve of it first.”

“I’d say good luck enforcing that one, but I imagine you’re relying on me to enforce it if he violates the condition.”

“Your announcement was rather important in convincing the judge to go with that one.”

“Happy to be of service.” No, really. I’d like it if she could help me out at least a little, possibly with Greg’s training. “So where will Magus be staying?”

“I’m trying to set up an apartment for him, but presently he’s in a holding facility. If you still believe in him after spending years with only immortals and aberrations to speak with, I think he can stand a holding facility for a few nights. But if you want somewhere to speak with him in private, I think I can set it up.”

“Sure. Thanks. You can give me directions later?”
“Yes. I will talk with you tomorrow.”

“Before you leave, I just thought of something… Wouldn’t Magus’s use of the Diamond yesterday have woken Abraham? I mean, I know he was stone, but the last time Kevin saw him he was behind bars.”

“Yes. They’re actually being kept in the same holding facility. I called ahead to the facility when you told me that the Dewitchery Diamond was likely to be used prior to us flying to its location. Abraham was remarkably amicable when the team explained that we knew exactly what was going on and could take care of his job for him.”

“Has he actually met Magus yet?”

“No. But maybe we can work something out now that he’ll likely not return to stone in the near future.”

“With the Diamond destroyed, I can’t imagine he’ll ever return to stone.”

“Most likely not, no. But that’s something to sort out later.”

“Oh. Well… Thanks for everything. I guess I’ll talk with you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Goodbye.” *Beep beep beep*

18 January 2014
8:13 PM CST

I… think I’ve got everything set up. I’ve made an email address so I can sign up for stuff online. And fill out applications and whatnot. I’ve filled out the job applications I picked up earlier this week. I can return them on Monday. And I’ve wasted an hour comparing the online Kevin knew of to what it is here. Some of the names of things have changed, but it’s mostly the same. I guess it’s time to go to bed… You know what? No. I’m still strung up from everything last night and today. If I want to get some good rest, I should listen to some music first. I hope I can find some of the same songs Kevin listened to last year.

Now, what would be a good song…? Ah, I know. Yes, it does exist here. *Click*

“Oh, what I would do to have…”

I know I did my announcement today, but that’s just the beginning. I can’t really back out at this point, but… I’m really scared. What if I screw it up? I might not cause the same sort of trouble as Fred, but if I’m not able to handle what’s coming, why would people trust dragons to help at all? I…

I need to trust that God won’t send anything my way that I can’t handle. I have help available to me if it’s too much for myself. I’m not even the only dragon in Moperville. I… I guess I’ll just do my best to be prepared.

Song ended, next song. Check the sidebar… *click*

“Is there anyone that fails…”

I… The first thing I did when I found out where I was… I lied to Elliot’s face. I…

I won’t be able to see my family ever again. At least not until I die. Maybe not even then. I…
I can’t… stop… these tears…

“Or would the love of Jesus/ be enough to make you stay?…”

God put me here for a reason. I… I need to be strong. But it might not hurt if I at least told someone what I’m going through. But who would I even tell?

Next song… *click*

“Who breaks the power…”

I… my heart is pounding… my tears won’t stop…

“Who makes the orphan/ a son and daughter?…”

“Lord, I need you now.” I can’t even see, my eyes are so full of tears. Breathing is difficult as I choke back a silent cry. I can’t even properly sing along to the words I know so well; my voice cuts out as I reach the end of each line.

One more… *click*

“Who am I…”

I sing along to the lines as they come. My voice is clearer now, but still cracking a bit. I… I’m not important. But if God wanted someone else to do this, I wouldn’t be here. I…

“… that the voice that calmed the sea/ would call out through the rain/ and calm the storm in me?”

Suddenly, my tears stop, but my voice cuts out entirely. I…

…

When I can think coherent thoughts again, I close my laptop and go to bed.

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First Baptist Church of Moperville is too far to just walk there, but it’s not too far to combination fly/walk there. In fact, it’s not too far from a good landing site. So after walking a short distance from Susan’s house, I transformed and flew nearly all the way to church. Then I only had to walk about half a mile to get the rest of the way here.

It occurred to me this morning that while I managed to remember to get a dress, I didn’t get any dress shoes. So I’m wearing the incongruous combination of my dress and running shoes. It’s my first time to the church, so that shouldn’t reflect too poorly on me. But given the apparent dress code here, I might have to buy some fancier shoes if I’m going to keep coming so that I don’t stand out too badly.

Huh. I think this is actually my first time attending a church where I don’t know anyone. I’m… actually sort of nervous. I hope I don’t stand out that much…

I walk up to the greeter at what is apparently the front door, judging by the amount of people milling about inside. The door itself doesn’t stand out much. I wonder if this church even really has a front door. I guess if it serves the function, the appearance doesn’t matter too much. The greeter opens the door and holds out his hand. “Good morning! Are you visiting with someone?” I guess he has good knowledge of the membership here.
I take his hand and stiffly shake it. “N-no. I’m… new to the area and looking for a church. I didn’t really have anyone to ask. I found you through your website.”

“Well, I pray you’ll find a good home. Thank you for visiting.”

“Thanks.” I walk inside. This is… the largest crowd I’ve been in since becoming a dragon. It’s actually a little overwhelming. Though I’m not sure if that’s from my heat senses or just because I’m not one for crowds. Desperate for something to do, I make my way over to a bulletin board that looks like it’s for church news and the like.

Looks like pretty standard stuff. “Pray for Our Senators”… “Teen Singspiration Next Saturday”… wait, what’s this? I walk a little closer. Why is there a picture of my dragon form on the bulletin board?

I walk right up to the board and read the caption. “Promotion of Blasphemous Magic: Discussion after Sunday Evening Church, 1/19”. Ooooh dear. This is one of those churches. The other dragons warned me about these. I don’t think I’ll be coming back here. At least it doesn’t seem like anyone recognizes me. They probably just don’t expect a ‘blasphemous magic-user’ to attend a church and assume I’m not the person that appeared on the news yesterday. I guess I can stay for the service, but I won’t be coming back, at least not for a long while.

One woman nearby sees me staring at my picture on the wall. “It’s sad something so sinful could happen nearby, isn’t it?”

“I just wish people would recognize the truth.”

19 January 2014
12:15 PM CST

I managed to extract myself from the conversation at the bulletin board without incident, but the service wasn’t too good either. The worship section was nice, but it was clear that the pastor wrote his sermon after my announcement yesterday. The whole thing was on that one passage in Exodus that is perfectly clear in the original language and perfectly vague in English. Dragons have James and Sean for translation, but a fair number of churches today don’t really understand what it was talking about.

As I shake my head and pick up my stuff before heading out, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I look up and see a guy who’s likely about my age. “Excuse me,” he whispers, “are you… the dragon that was on the news yesterday?”

…

“Oh, sorry. I must have been mistaken.”

“Wait! Can we talk somewhere in private?”

“Hold on. I was right?”

“Private, please,” I whisper. After that sermon, I really don’t want to talk with him anywhere that people are likely to listen in. But I would like to clarify the truth to him, if possible. Maybe open the door to coming back someday.

“Oh. S-sure. I think I know someplace.” I stand up and he leads me out behind the building to a
lightly wooded area. I actually would have landed here, were it not for the fact that I don’t want to take off or land on private property without permission, and I’m pretty sure this is still the church’s land.

“You’re not here with your parents?”

“I’m in college.”

“Oh. Easy mistake.” I swear, ages are difficult enough to discern without magic thrown into the mix. And guys are even harder to tell. Kevin was balding by the time he graduated from high school, yet he couldn’t grow facial hair for his life.

“So why did you want to talk in private? Are you really the dragon I saw on the news?”

“Yes, I really am. As for why in private, were you listening to the sermon?”

“Yes… in which case, why were you in a church? There’s no way—”

I summon my crucifix object to my hand and hold it out. “I’m a Christian.”

“Is this some sort of trickery?”

“I used magic, but I’m not tricking you. That object is a part of me, because of how much it meant to me prior to my becoming a dragon. Look at the verse on the back.”

“Isaiah 53:5. I don’t know that one.”

“Go ahead and look it up.”

He pulls out his phone and fires up a Bible app. I think that’s the same one Kevin has on his phone. Which I’ll have on mine, once I finally have a phone contract. “Oh. But… I thought magic was from the devil. So how are you a Christian?”

“The same way anyone is. As for the source of magic… Remember how I said there were four kinds of magic yesterday, but I only talked about two of them? Or were you not watching?”

“Sorry, I didn’t see much. Just enough to identify you.”

“Anyway, that verse in Exodus…”

“‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’?”

“That’s only talking about one kind of magic. Specifically, those who use magic sourced from demons.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I know a guy that’s older than the written Bible. He’s read the original text in its original language.”

“I find that rather difficult to believe.”

“I talked about it yesterday. No dragon has died from old age. Something I didn’t specify yesterday is that the first dragon was a shepherd-boy for Abraham since before he was named Abraham. He’s still alive and kicking today. Actually, he’s more fit than I am.” Though that’s not saying much. I’m barely in shape. James could beat Greg in a fight in only a few seconds.
“No way.”

“Yes way.”

“So… the translation is wrong?”

“No, not wrong, really, just extremely vague. The translation was produced in a time where people didn’t know much more about magic than they do today. The original text was very specific, but the people making the translation probably didn’t realize that there was more than one kind of magic.”

“Oh. Then… today’s sermon…”

“Would be valid in a world with only that one kind of magic. The stuff I was talking about yesterday was more along the lines of ‘let’s not ignore half of physics.’”

“Half of physics?”

“Watch the broadcast. I already explained it.”

“I get the feeling that’ll be your answer to the rest of my questions.”

“Probably.”

19 January 2014
12:47 PM CST

A short walk and flight home and I’m greeted at the door by Susan. “How did it go?”

I answer as I walk inside. “I won’t be going back there.”

“Why not?”

“Remember how you said yesterday that you thought Christians didn’t like magic? Exactly that with that church. Guess what the subject of today’s sermon was.”

“Ouch. Did… anyone recognize you?”

“To my knowledge, only one person, and they only spoke to me after the service. They were also receptive to the idea that the translation was rather vague on that particular subject. But I still don’t think it’d be a bright idea to return there. Thankfully there’s more than one church in Moperville, and I already have one picked out for next week.”

“I… guess that’s good, anyway. Does it… usually go like this?”

“I don’t really know. Kevin’s only tried out churches once. It did take him a few weeks to find one, though. Either because the church’s style was too foreign to what he grew up with or because it just wasn’t a good church for him. Christians aren’t perfect, and neither are churches. But most try to be the best they can.”

Susan’s silent for a bit. I guess I have a knack for ending conversations. I may as well start a new one. “Well, we’ve got a little over an hour before Diane gets here, right? Anything you want to do to prepare?”

“Does she even know how to get here?”
“I gave her your address when I called her back last night to confirm.”

“Oh. Then I… ah…” Susan starts to tense up. Is she getting nervous again?

“It’s your house. You’ll get to relax while she’s here. No fighting monsters or anything. Plus, if anyone should be getting nervous, it’s me. The whole point of her coming here is that I can explain how I knew her prior to meeting her, which means I get to talk about Kevin again. And like I said before, the comic didn’t exactly make her look like a great person.”

“I guess you won’t be flattering her, anyway.”

“I don’t think the author thought of her as a main character when she was first introduced. I think the intention was to show social antagonists, not just life-threatening ones. But the author doesn’t know everything about this universe.”

“Wait. How exactly do you think of this whole comic thing?”

“I think it’s healthier to believe that we determine what happens in the comic, not the other way around.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to think about it the other way.”

“Although the author does have what he calls ‘non-canon’ stories. He probably determines what happens in those.”

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Diane apparently didn’t have any trouble finding the place, as she showed up a bit early. Though the size of the house apparently overwhelmed her, since she stood still outside for a bit. Or maybe she was just bracing herself for coming inside.

I greeted her at the door. She was a bit surprised when the door opened the moment she rang the doorbell. “Oh! I guess you did know when I was coming.”

“That, and I could sense someone at the door. You don’t need to ring the doorbell to let me know you’re here, but I won’t open the door until it rings. Just in case you need to brace yourself or something. I know how nice it is to get in the right headspace first.”

“Oh. Ah, thank you.” She walks inside and looks around. “Is Susan here?”

“Of course. But the point of you coming over is so that you could hear me talk, right? So do you want to do this with just me, or would Susan being present make you more comfortable?”

She looks like she’s debating it for a few moments. I mean, she’s only met each of us on one other occasion, but she’s also watched a ton of Susan’s review show online. And my announcement yesterday probably wasn’t quite so endearing. The only things I can think of from that would be letting Akiko sit on my back and making a giant flower from frozen air.

“I… might be more comfortable with Susan present.”

“Alright. Come this way, then.” I make my way towards the TV room, where Susan’s already waiting. If she had said no to Susan’s presence, we would’ve had this chat in my room.

Susan turns to face us as we walk in. “Hello, Diane. It’s… nice to see you again.” She still looks a little stressed, but hopefully she’ll relax as I recap my history again.
“Th-Thank you for everything on Friday!” Diane stammers. I guess that’s still on her mind.

“And on that note, I’m sorry for what I did to you last Saturday. If I had known that help was so long in coming, I could’ve grabbed you and Charlotte and left, or simply shouted at Elliot and Tara to come to our rescue. There’s no reason beyond my inexperience that I should’ve done what I did, and it’s not right to stress someone like that.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I understand why you did what you did, and if you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to help Susan and Mr. Raven on Friday, right?” She looks at Susan appealingly.

“Yeah. Thanks for your help. Who knows what would’ve happened if you didn’t have magic yet.”

“Speaking of which… right before the fight, you tried to call someone, right? Who was it?”

I grimace. “That would’ve been me. I told her to call me if there was any trouble, since we knew there were a lot of vampires in Moperville, and two potential vampire hunters in the same spot would be an irresistible target.”

“Then why didn’t you pick up?”

“I… had something else I needed to take care of.”

“She told me already. Don’t worry, but it was important.”

19 January 2014
2:15 PM CST

“You can’t possibly expect me to believe that.”

“Believe what you want, but she did know a lot about us before she even met us. And I don’t think my friends would’ve told her what she knew about me.” I verified my knowledge with Susan earlier by telling her what Kevin read of the events in France. She was pretty shocked at first, though it did verify my story for her.

“So what did this comic say about me?”

“…Not much, really. Your introduction was when you asked Nanase to sit with you at lunch, and she said she would if you let Justin come along. You responded by saying he’d scare off guys that would buy you stuff. At one point, you also called Justin ‘defective.’ All of that was about a year ago.”

Diane’s not great at hiding her astonishment. Her mouth is wide open until she notices, then she clamps it shut. “It… uh… did it ever have anything nice to say?”

“Not until New Years Eve. In that one, Kevin read pretty much every interaction you had with others the whole night. So, still not all positive, but you did show some positive qualities then. I didn’t really think of you as a great person until I got to meet you, though.”

“And what do you think of me now?”

I pause to consider. She’s not the greatest person ever, but she’s a whole lot better than she appeared in the comic. “Well, you’re certainly deeper than you first appeared. I can’t say I know a ton about you, but I’d appreciate you being my friend.”
Diane just sits there for a moment. “I… guess I couldn’t have hoped for anything better than that. I accept.”

“On that note, is there anything about magic you want to ask me? I’m probably the best person to ask.”

“Well… I was wondering why my shotgun didn’t damage any stores or anything on Friday.”

“You had an immortal help you aim and they didn’t give you a magic book?”

“Zeus didn’t seem terribly inclined to help if he could avoid it.” From Susan’s tone, I’m betting Zeus is Jerry’s new incarnation. He vowed to be Susan’s ally, but he probably wants to be as independent as possible. Well, he is a fairly young immortal.

“In that case…” I close my eyes to search the Mymoir. A bit later, I find reference to what could be another version of Diane’s shotgun. “Based on other versions of your spell, I’m guessing your shots can only actually hit the intended target. If they hit anything else, the pellets will either pass through the object or fade away on contact, in either case not affecting the non-target object.”

“That’s pretty useful.”

“So I guess I can used it in an enclosed space with no risk of collateral damage?”

“Yeah, but at a close range a sword would be more useful anyway. And remember that your shots won’t obliterate most things quite like they do vampires.”

“Next question: is this shotgun the only thing I’ll ever be able to do with magic? Because I see the fairy that Susan’s got on her shoulder, and I’d like to be able to do that.” Based on the way the fairy is now hiding, I’m guessing Susan completely forgot that she had a fairy summoned.

“I can’t say you’ll get the same spells as her, but if you use magic, you’ll get new spells. The more you use magic, the faster you’ll get spells.”

“When am I ever going to use a shotgun?”

“I could… go with you to a shooting range? I can’t imagine it costing a lot if you say you’ll be using your own weapon and ammo.” I can’t say I’d take her there. She has a car and I don’t.

“Am I even legally allowed to own a shotgun?”

Oh. I never thought about that. “That’s… state by state. I don’t know the laws in Illinois.”

A swift search on Susan’s phone later we have our answer. She starts reading the page aloud.

“Based on what this says, you are legally allowed to possess a firearm, since you’re eighteen. But you also need something called a ‘FOID card’ that your parents need to approve you getting. You haven’t been convicted of a misdemeanor, have you?”

“No…” I know Diane’s been drinking underage before, but I guess she wasn’t ever in legal trouble for that. “So I need to tell my parents about this before I can even use my magic in public?”

“No. But you do need to tell them if you want to practice your magic in public. And with the sound blast your shotgun lets off, it’s probably best that you have this card anyway, in case people start asking questions.” And I guess I’m a bit lucky her eighteenth birthday has already passed. This would’ve been really awkward if she wasn’t allowed to have a real shotgun.
“There’s no way they’ll let me get that card. They didn’t even let me go out with my friends for my birthday this year.” To be fair, they did keep you from getting drunk, which is critical for letting you get the card.

“Saphira or myself could go with you to ask if you think it’d help.” Susan turns to me. “That… is okay, isn’t it?”

“The first mention of Diane’s parents in the comic was when Rhea brought them up at the New Years party. I know next to nothing about them.” I turn to Diane. “But as a dragon and as your friend, I’ll support you if you need it. Besides, your magic only harms what you want it to harm. I have to be really careful if I want to avoid injuring somebody or causing critical damage to a structure, and I don’t need any legal thing to use mine. Needing a license for magic is dumb, but if you need it I can help you get it, to the best of my ability.”

“I… thanks for the support. I think I can convince them on my own, but if I need the help, can I call you?” Diane’s facing me, so I guess she’s talking to me.

“I have somewhere I need to be after four today. If you want to do it some other day, fine. Or you can call Susan. I don’t have a phone of my own,” at least, not one with a contract, “so you’d be calling the home phone here anyway.”

“I don’t live that far from here. If I head home now, I should be able to let you know how it went well before that deadline.”

“Fair enough.”

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The home phone is ringing, so I’m assuming that’s Diane. “I’ll get it!” I call to Susan as I walk to where the nearest phone sits. I pick it up. “Saphira speaking.”

“Hey, Saphira, it’s Diane.”

“How did it go?”

“Not- Not so well. Like I thought, they don’t trust me enough.”

“Have you told them the reasoning has to do with magic, and that Illinois gun law still wouldn’t let you purchase a firearm anyway?”

“Yes.”

“Have you let them know that having the license means that you can learn how to use a gun properly, and that you’ll likely have to use a gun in self-defense anyway?”

“No…”

“Should I head over there?”

“Probably.”

“Have they watched my announcement?”

“Maybe?”
“How about you confirm that first.”

Diane puts me on hold. About a minute later, the buzzing for ‘hold’ goes away. “Yes, they’ve watched at least the first part of it.”

“Do they know what my human form looks like?”

“Maybe? We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Just get over here.”

“Or maybe you can have them watch that part prior to me getting there. I want to be up front with your parents, if they’re going to trust me. And ultimately, trust you.”

“Fine. Do you need my address?”

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An address later and Susan drove the two of us over to Diane’s house. I wonder what her parents will be like? I don’t even know what they’ll look like, since their children are adopted. But based on the actions that Diane’s described to me (and that Kevin read), I’d tend to think they’re fairly reasonable people. Diane hasn’t particularly given them any reason to trust her (that I know of), so I understand why they’d be hesitant to let her get a license to possess a firearm.

As we discussed on the way over, Susan won’t be coming inside (unless later invited in), but this will likely be quick, so she’ll stay outside in the car. We stop outside the two-story home that seems roughly average for Moperville.

After ringing the doorbell, I’m greeted by both of Diane’s parents. They look like a… fairly average white couple, if you account for the fact that brown and blonde hair are rare in this universe for some reason. Huh. If one thing stood out about my appearance, I did not think it would be my brown hair. Anyway, Diane’s father is well-built if slightly overweight and clean shaven with short sea-green hair. Her mother is certainly younger than Ms. Pompoms, with an average frame and shoulder-length magenta hair. They’re both roughly average height, which means I tower over them both.

It just occurred to me that I don’t know Diane’s last name.

Diane’s mother looks a little stunned that I actually showed up. Her father is less surprised, but he looks a little suspicious. I hope to fix that by being as to-the-point as possible. And friendly.

“Hello!” I give them a quick wave. “My name is Saphira. Diane asked me to come here to explain why it would be awfully nice if she could get an FOID card. I’m sorry, I don’t know your last name?” I hold out my hand to Diane’s father.

He takes my hand and gives it a brief shake. His grip is firm, but not too tight. “Woods,” he says in a gruff voice. “Do I understand correctly that you are the dragon that appeared on the news yesterday?” He says the word ‘dragon’ as if he can’t believe he’s saying it. Well, it has only been a day.

“Yes, that was me.” I extend my hand to Mrs. Woods, and she shakes it as well. Her grip is pretty light. “A pleasure to meet you both.”

“If we’re going to have this discussion, it may as well be indoors. Come on in.” Mrs. Woods’s voice is pleasant and slightly deeper than my own. At least, deeper than my own sounds to me. I’ve yet to listen to a recording of my voice. I don’t really have a lot of terms for how to describe a female voice, now that I think about it.
The layout of their house is a lot like the Dunkels’. Diane’s sitting on a sofa in the family room. “Should I sit with you?” I ask her, and she nods. Mr. and Mrs. Woods take their seats in the lounge chair and in the adjacent kitchen (on a stool), respectively. The lounge chair is a lot closer to Diane and myself, so that’s probably why her father is sitting there.

Mr. Woods looks at me sternly. “Now then. Explain to me why it’s so critical that my daughter gets a license to possess a firearm.”

I turn to Diane. “Have you actually showed them your magic yet?”

She looks away sheepishly. “No. Have you showed your parents?”

Really, Diane? “I just told you why that’s not possible! But I showed Ms. Pompoms before she agreed to house me. That counts, right?”

“What’s this about our daughter having magic? All she said was that she needed it for reasons relating to magic.”

“Diane, just show them.”

“Ugh, fine.” She summons the same brilliant green shotgun I saw last Saturday. It looks a lot more real up close, but the color makes it look almost like a children’s toy.

Her parents, on the other hand, are astonished. “Since when have you been able to do this?” her mother half-exclaims.

“Since eight days ago. This is only the fourth time I’ve actually created it, though.” Diane looks and sounds happier to have it on her lap. I wonder if the spell gives her a bit of a confidence boost, or if that’s just how she is?

Mr. Woods is scrutinizing the firearm sitting on her lap. “Is that a real shotgun, or something else?”

“It’s—” Diane and I start to explain. She nods at me, and I continue. “It’s made of magic. It’ll stop existing when she stops maintaining it. I’m fairly certain it can’t fire real rounds, but the rounds it fires seem real enough until they hit something. Besides looking like they’re made of translucent green plastic, like the gun itself.”

“And what happens when they hit something?”

“Are you fine with Diane giving a demonstration in your backyard?”

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They were, so now we’re set up with me holding an empty soda can at one end of the yard, and Diane and her parents at the other. They were very hesitant to let me be the target stand until I demonstrated that me simply nudging the shotgun made it vanish. Besides, I can heal myself by shifting to dragon form.

To further demonstrate what happens to non-target objects, there’s also a tree between myself and Diane. It’ll also let me know whether she can hit her target through something or just if her line of fire is clear.

“Remember, Diane, low power. Simply denting the can will be enough,” I mildly shout.
“Got it, got it.”

This set up also lets her parents see how terrible her form is with a shotgun, since the idea here is to convince them to let her learn how to use it properly. It’s been years since Kevin fired one, but I can see a few things even I could tell her how to fix.

Actually, I think I can hear her father giving her a few pointers. “You need to lean forward, or the kick will knock you over.”

Diane adjusts her posture a bit. “Ready!” she shouts. That’s not what you say for shotgun shooting, but she’ll learn. I brace myself and hold the can further out to the side, with my fingers lightly grasping the bottom. *BOOM* I can see a circle of pellets coming towards me. They pass straight through the tree and knock the can out of my hand, though I could tell that the shot was more centered on the tree (and myself) than the can. As expected, my clothes are untouched, and I didn’t feel any of the pellets, although I could feel the displaced air afterwards. That wasn’t nearly as loud as the first time, and I’m at about the same distance. Either my hearing is better in dragon form or she does actually get to set the power on each shot.

I find myself smiling as I search for the can. Sure, it wasn’t the greatest shot, but she got to show off her magic. Kevin always liked bows better than other ranged weapons, but I wonder if Diane will learn to like this? And even if she doesn’t, she’ll probably get something she likes sooner or later.

The can really wasn’t in the center of her shot, judging by the damage. It has a few dings on it, and two holes go straight through, but it’s still mostly in one piece. I pick it up and take it over to where Diane and her parents are standing. “Not the greatest shot ever, but we did confirm some things. As I guessed, your shot went straight through the tree.”

“You’re not hurt?” Mrs. Woods asks.

“Not a scratch. Here’s the can. Let’s look at the tree while we’re at it.”

The tree is also perfectly fine. A couple of twigs fell from the displaced air, but that’s a lot less damage than you’d expect from even a pellet gun. Mr. Woods grunts. “Well, you’ve certainly convinced me that her shotgun is safe, so long as her judgement holds. And her posture convinced me that she should get lessons on proper firearm use and safety. But I still don’t understand why she should have to use this in the first place.”

“Diane, mind explaining what happened last Saturday and the following Friday?”

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Diane dutifully explained what caused her to awaken in the first place, as well as what happened in the mall on Friday. Although she conveniently left out the fact that Mr. Raven is a half-immortal. Her version of the events then wasn’t much different from Susan’s, but she had a better vantage point by virtue of the longer range of her weapons. Diane’s mother is now considerably more worried for her daughter’s safety, and her father agreed to go with her to get the FOID card. And to oversee her first few lessons at the range.

I walk over to Susan’s car to find her playing a phone game. Frankly, I’m a bit surprised she’s still here. I open the door. “Took you long enough,” she says as I get in the passenger seat.

“Sorry about that.”

“Was that Diane’s shotgun I heard earlier?”
“Yes. I thought a demonstration would help our case. The end result is that she can get the card, and her father will attend the first few lessons with her, but her parents do know what happened on Friday. And the night she awakened.”

“Ouch. Hey, it’s pretty close to that deadline you mentioned earlier. You want me to take you there, too?”

“Yeah, but I need to call Mr. Verres for directions first. I’m supposed to be having a talk with Magus.”

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It seems that Mr. Verres’s idea of a ‘private chat’ location is the apartment that Magus is supposed to move into once she’s released and the contract is signed. Presently, the apartment is vacant, so the complex was okay with letting her ‘check out the place’ today. In return, law enforcement required that she wear a recording device that will be active for the entire time I am not in her presence. Thankfully, if I concentrate, I can determine whether or not the thing is on by checking for tiny amounts of heat generated by the electronics. Even wiring has resistance, and electricity traveling through something with resistance generates heat. It seems taking out the batteries was good enough. We did note that the on/off switch didn’t appear to do anything, however.

“Thanks for making sure the thing was actually off, Saphira. I want to be able to talk freely with you.”

“As do I. I’m probably going to say a few things I’d rather not have other people listen in on later.” Like the details of the death of Fred. Magus isn’t a dragon, so she’s not getting the full story, but I will be including details about Arthur’s invulnerability. I’d like her to be able to actually fix what’s going on with the dragons in her world, if she ever gets to return.

“What if this place has security cameras?”

“They wouldn’t be in the apartment. But I can do a sweep if you like.” She nods, and I take a few minutes doing a check for hidden electronics. Since it is a vacant apartment, our seating options are ‘lean on the wall’ or ‘sit on the floor,’ so there’s not a whole lot for me to check. “It’s clean,” I finally say. Magus is sitting on the floor, so I sit opposite her.

“So… I’m guessing that there’s a few things you want to talk about? I watched your, ah, ‘announcement,’ yesterday, so you don’t have to repeat any of that. It was very interesting. Do you think I’m a caster or a wizard in this world?”

“You’re a wizard. Going forward, you’ll learn other people’s spells simply by being nearby when they use them. But you can’t use magic you learn if it’s not common magic. Although you could still mistakenly put it in an artifact, which, by the way, is exactly how the Dewitchery Diamond did what it did.”

“What sort of magic did it have?”

“A bunch of common magic that should have done what Abraham wanted, and some Draconic magic that resulted in the removed enchantment becoming a living being. Which is why Elliot became a dragon on Friday. He took the full brunt of the Draconic magic when you reconfigured the Diamond. At least, according to what the other dragons believe. There’s no real way to know.”

“How exactly do you know I’m a wizard, not a caster?”
“An… ability I forgot to mention yesterday. Dragons can sense what sort of magical ability someone has by ‘smelling’ the active magic on them. We can also differentiate between wizards, casters, and wandmakers.”

“Oh. So you’re certain, then.”

“Yes.”

“So… I really want to get home. Would you happen to know a way?”

“Even with all of the dragons’ knowledge, our knowledge of inter-universe travel is rudimentary at best. Dragons are dimension-locked—we can’t even perceive portals when other people create them. And recording others’ knowledge only gets you so far. I have no idea how to target a specific universe with a portal.” I pause. Wait a second… Tara and Andrea! “Come to think of it, though, there might be people visiting in three weeks that would have some idea, since they came to this universe, went back to their own, and plan on returning then. Maybe you can talk with them when they visit? I don’t know if they’re from your universe, but…”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to, I guess. What else did you want to talk about?”

“Dragons in your world versus here. I think you should start.”

“Okay, then.” She thinks for a moment. “Growing up, I always heard a lot about the dangers of misused magic. There were tons of rogue monsters all over the place, from wizards’ experiments to overpowered summoners and everything in between. ‘Monster hunters’ would find and slay the beasts in the wild, and ‘battle mages’ would defend their areas of residence from encroaching threats. With the power I had, I decided I wanted to be a battle mage.

“One of the beasts that monster hunters would never seek out were dragons. Ferocious beasts, they would slaughter entire towns at the least provocation, and often for no reason at all. It fell to the battle mages to defend these places, so most of the time the more powerful and well-rounded magic users would become battle mages, while monster hunters would focus on offense and a quick getaway in case of failure.

“You already know how I got here. While I was in training… I heard many things about dragons. If they are, mechanically, anything like you described yesterday, it would falsify some of the rumors. But in terms of their demeanor, they are not anything like what you described.”

“I would imagine as much. I’m sure you find it shocking to be able to have a friendly conversation with a dragon.”

“To say the least.”

“I’m guessing no one’s ever killed a dragon in your world?”

“That is incorrect. Several dragons have been slain, but we never found any indication that they were human. Although their biology was rather curious. It was almost as if they got all of their energy from magic itself. There wasn’t any digestive system to speak of.” Oh. I guess that ship has sailed, then. So either I should imply that that’s different here, or emphasize that Magus should keep it a secret. I don’t like lying, so I’ll go with the latter. I quickly stick the knowledge in my journal, just in case. I’ll tell the other dragons later.

“The Doctor says that the dragon form is a true second form. If your dragons are like myself, I guess that proves it. The only dragon to die here was in his human form when he was executed. As for biology…” I lean in close. “Don’t. Talk. About it.” I sit back again. “Seriously, that’s a closely-
kept secret here. No one except dragons is supposed to know about it. Remember what I said about the Evil Overlord list yesterday? Same thing applies.”

Her eyes widen. “Okay. Uh, what if it gets out?”

“Then dragons have a prime suspect, because to our knowledge the only other non-dragon that ever knew that was King Arthur.”

“What exactly is the story with this ‘King Arthur’?”

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I still didn’t tell her the whole story, but I get the feeling the rest will come out in short order, depending on her knowledge of dragon form biology.

“… Anything else?” Or maybe not.

“Well… there is what you were saying about Ellen on Friday.”

“I don’t have to justify myself.”

“If you take magic actions the person doesn’t like, you have to justify yourself to the US courts and, in your case, the dragons.”

“Why in my case?”

“Because I’m friends with Ellen and I know you personally. But I’m betting you don’t know a bit of stuff about Ellen that you probably should, given your presence at the start of Grace’s birthday party last year.”

“How did you—oh, right.” I did tell her about the ‘work of fiction’ thing.

“After Grace was saved from Damien and the rest—sort of—” since Grace was the one who ultimately killed Damien “—a person from another parallel universe made contact with the rescue group. She used a spell on Ellen that gave her memories from yet another parallel universe, one where Ellen grew up instead of Elliot. This world also had knowledge of magic, but no knowledge of dragons. I’m guessing the knowledge of magic came from there being a lot more Uryuoms on that Earth. Or ones at least living a lot more public lives.

“So if you’re thinking that Ellen has been railroaded into being a woman, I guess you’re free to think that, but she does have more memories of being a girl than being a guy.” I don’t expect this to settle the issue, but maybe Magus will think a little harder before making the decision for Ellen.

“I… I did notice something, on Friday, when you destroyed Sirleck. I was wondering if you might know what it was?”

“What is it?”

“At that moment… I think your eyes were red? I thought you could only have blue eyes?”

…What? “Hold on a moment, I believe I need to read the Mymoir a bit.”

Now what do I search for? I don’t think ‘red eyes’ is going to turn up anything other than force dragons. Maybe… temporary changes? I skim the article. No, I’m not looking to permanently change my appearance in human form. Useful to know, though. How about dragon form
appearance? No, I already knew about our morphology. Maybe it’s related to our dragon form indirectly? Uh… let’s look at personal objects again. I have a lot of red in one of mine, and a little in the other. Yes, this looks like it.

I speak aloud, reading the Mymoir as I do so. “‘When a dragon is acting on one of their primary concerns linked to their objects, a visual change may be temporarily apparent on their dragon form. This change often mimics one of their objects, whichever is more reflected in their current actions.’ Actually, I believe I know which one.” I summon the dragon miniature to my open right palm. Like I remembered, it has red eyes. And I think that one’s related to my value of family. I guess I sort of think of Ellen as family.

“Can I… take a closer look?” I nod, and she gingerly takes it from my hand. As she examines it, she asks, “What’s so special about this?”

“It’s something I have that I remember from the other world. Dragons always get two objects to hold most of their power when they’re not in dragon form. This is one of them. The other me in that other world got this as a gift from their father.”

“So what’s your other one like?”

I summon my cross to my left palm. She stares at it, wide-eyed. “Wait a second. You – you – Are you one of those crazy people who thinks a person’s sex should always match what they were born with?” I guess this is a pretty big deal on her world, too. Nice to know that even if the physical rules are different, God’s character is the same in all dimensions. I mean, that was one of the first things I checked in this world, but…

I narrow my eyes at her. “Yes, I’m one of those Christians who believe that God made us the way we’re meant to be.”

“I – I don’t have to justify myself to you. You can’t possibly understand me!”

“You’re right, I—” Wait. No, that doesn’t sound right. “No, that’s wrong, I—” What’s going on? It’s like I’m trying to remember something… something…

I…

Oh, crap.

“I…” I say, my voice shaking. “I… think I do understand you.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Hold on a moment. I can’t possibly let this take hold of me again.” My legs shaking, I stand up and move over to the wall to prop myself up. Then I sink to the ground, clutching my knees to my chest.

I close my eyes, bow my head, and fold my hands in prayer. My voice shaking as tremors rack my body, I pray: ‘Lord, I know that I lack confidence. I… I can’t do this on my own. I can’t drive it out. Nearly a decade of failure precedes this moment, and I – I don’t have confidence in myself. So please – if I can’t be confident on my own – give me confidence in you.” Tears stream down my face as I feel my guilt leave me.

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Magus moved to another room as I poured out my heart. I guess she’s not too comfortable around something like that. When I could see clearly again, I shakily stood up and walked over to her. The bottom of my shirt is now soaked with tears, but either laundry or a shift to dragon form will fix that.

“Are you okay?” she asks me.

“Yeah, I – I should be, now.”

“What— what just happened?”

I briefly consider clamming up, but this is important. I’ve never shared this with anyone before, and this is the best opportunity Kevin or myself have ever had. And I can’t really say I’m done with it if I don’t have the confidence to open my heart to someone else, can I? “I – It’s really personal. But it’s also really, really important that I share this with someone, right now. So… if we could sit down, again?” Magus nods and goes back to the room we were in previously. I take my spot up against the wall. I need to share this, but that doesn’t mean I’m sure I can support my own weight right now.

“This is… this is mostly about the other me, in that other world. The one with memories of this place as a work of fiction. But… as I just found out, it had carried over to me, just not as prominently. And… I couldn’t take the risk that the same trap would take over my life.

“My… other self, is a guy by the name of Kevin. He’s a little older than me, and he lives in a world without magic. Or at the very least, a world with no public knowledge of magic. Kevin is, generally, a nice, but private, guy. He’s an Eagle Scout, and he likes to do service projects and help out at church. Presently, he’s in his second year of college.

“But… I – he – was raised with traditional values. Not that there’s a problem with them. But he was raised with chivalry, and the idea that the guy should take the initiative in every romantic relationship. Of course, he also went to public schools, which can be filled with dumb ideas like ‘you should try to date as early and often as possible.’ And he found, in sixth grade… that he didn’t have the confidence to ask anyone out.”

“Of course not! He was a middle schooler!”

“That’s… not the thought process he followed. I know the origin of the thoughts, still, and I know the results, but I can’t tell you what he thought back then, nor how long the process took. But soon after he found he lacked the confidence to ask someone out, he found that he envied girls for not having to do the asking. And that envy morphed into wishing he was a girl.

“And, well… that’s what’s followed Kevin for nearly a decade, now. He… it’s his earnest wish that something, anything will magically turn him into a woman. It fills his dreams and his nightmares. To keep from being bored at work—he works as a busboy—he tells himself stories about different ways people could magically turn him into a woman. His faith as a Christian keeps him from ever acting on any of those wishes… but it’s poisoning his every thought.

“He knows it’s a problem, that it’s not right, and he’s tried, several times, to end it… but never with the focus on the root problem. He’s asked God to remove the wish, and that does remove the problem temporarily, but with the root issue still present, the wish comes right back.

“I think the only reason that same lack of confidence had yet to affect me is because I am a woman. I was made this way, but… I thank you for prompting me to think on it. Because of you, the root problem now resolved. And I pray that someday, somehow, Kevin will think seriously
about the origin of all this… and fix it, just as I have.” With that, I notice that tears are once again streaming down my face and I’m quivering mightily. I clasp my hands together near my ankles and whisper a quick prayer of thanks to God.

Chapter End Notes

It was in my thinking about this story that I finally resolved this. Not Saphira talking with Magus, but with one of Tedd’s relatives. Resolving this problem directly led to me writing this story down and publishing it. (Yes, I am sure it’s resolved. I don’t have to try not to think such things anymore. It just… doesn’t happen.)

That said, there’s quite a lot more story left. I’ll be re-writing it, certainly, but I have plot ideas sufficient for a long road ahead. So I hope that anyone who’s stuck with me this far will stay here for a while yet.

And yes, I told someone in person before writing this here.
Magus didn’t have much to say to me after all that happened. I didn’t need words; I was just glad she listened. I’m sure she has a lot of thinking to do. After I gathered myself, I helped Magus repair the recording device then flew from a patch of grass outside of her future apartment to the city park. Then I walked back home. Susan was a bit startled to see me home, as I’d been planning to call her with the phone Mr. Verres had lent to Magus, but I’d needed the walk to clear my head. The flight cleaning my tear-stained shirt was a bonus.

Ms. Pompoms is a pretty good cook. It’s also clear that the meals are intended to have leftovers for the weekdays. I guess that’s a fair system she’s worked out, though I intend to try cooking for myself on those days. Just normal cooking for now. I’m not quite ready to do much more than reheat stuff with magic.

*Beep-beep-beep* Huh. I wonder who could be calling at this hour? I let Susan pick it up.

“Saphira, it’s for you!” she calls. I pick up the nearest phone (the house has a network of them) and when I hit ‘talk’ Susan hangs up. (You can hear when someone else joins. It’s just like the network Kevin’s parents had at their house.)

“Saphira speaking.”

“Finally.” It’s Nanase’s voice again. However, it doesn’t have quite the urgency it did on Friday.

“Did something happen? Why finally?”

“Your announcement happened. I’ve been trying to call you all day today. Did you know how negatively people might take it?”

“If I hadn’t, I found out at church today. And I’ve been busy. But I’m guessing your mom didn’t take it so well?”

“How did you know? Something from Kevin?”

“Yes… although you should have all the same information he does.” Minus what happened just after she first used the Guardian Angel spell, but her newest information makes that pretty much obsolete.

“Uh… I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.”

Did she… not connect the dots yet? I mean, it’s just a guess, but… I may as well try to confirm this ‘fan theory.’ Or at least have her ask her mother about it. I don’t like forcing improvements on people, but I’m just giving her information she already has. It’s up to her what she does with it. “I… I can explain, but it’s not exactly something that’s appropriate to do over the phone. Could you fairy doll to me, at least?”

“You need to drop your resistance first. I already tried that earlier today.”

“Gotcha. How about you hang up, then wait five seconds and pop over here?”

“Sounds good.” She hangs up, and I lower my guard. Five seconds later I have a fairy Nanase
floating in front of me.

“I’m going to not touch you on the assumption it’ll end the spell. Is that okay with you?”

“Good enough for me.”

“Alright. Now, let’s get into it. I have a theory for why your mother acts the way she does, particularly with regard to you and Akiko, but especially for you. Yes, Kevin’s read your complaints about your mother’s expectations.”

“Oh.” She turns red. I guess that was a little private.

“First, however, I’m going to prove your mother knew about magic prior to my announcement. And I’m not just talking about the strange things that happen in Moperville. First item on the list: what’s your relationship with Tedd?”

“He’s my cousin. He’s also, well—I don’t often visit him, for good reason.”

“How exactly are you related?”

“Our mothers are sisters.”

“Next item: why, precisely, did you have a magic fight at the New Year’s party a couple of weeks ago?”

“That man was threatening the entire party.”

“Let’s call him Not-Tengu. It’s what the author of the comic calls him, anyway. So why exactly was Not-Tengu in Moperville?”

“Because of the magic buildup here.”

“And why did he target the party you were attending?”

“Because… because of my relationship with Tedd’s mother.”

“And why is Tedd’s mother so important to him?”

“Because she’s the person who took him down the previous time.”

“Now then: when do you think her magic manifested?”

Her eyes widen. “Oh. Oh my god. My mom knew about magic the entire time, didn’t she?”

“Signs point to yes. There’s more, though. What’s your aunt’s current occupation? Based on what she did to Not-Tengu.”

“She… ah… I’m not sure I have a term for it. But this is like what Jerry said to Susan, right? Someone local that takes down monsters and bad guys with magic?”

“Monster hunter, and yes, most likely. Next: what does Tedd think of his relationship with magic, as of last summer when you tried out his magic watches while burned out?”

“I’m… not sure he ever said.”

“Oh. Then… ah, I’m sure it’s okay. But don’t tell him I said this. This is about your relationship
with your mom, but it relies on Tedd’s relationship with his parents a bit. Tedd believes he’s magically impaired. That loud wand that Mr. Verres used on Elliot and Ellen when they were starting to have buildups? It was used on Tedd a lot when he was younger. Hint: it said he couldn’t use magic.”

“There’s no way that’s true. He made those watches, right? Or was that just because of all the technology he has lying around?”

“It’s because of him. The loud wand gave the same result for him as it would now give for Elliot, who is a full dragon now, if you didn’t know. But still a caster.”

“Wait. He resisted it?”

“Precisely. But back to your relationship… Tedd’s mom is?”

“A monster hunter, you said.”

“And Tedd supposedly?”

“Couldn’t use magic.”

“And where is his mother now?”

“She’s… somewhere in Europe.”

“And why do you think she might have left her family?”

“I… don’t know.”

“If you were in your mother’s shoes? Keep in mind her apparent dislike for magic.”

“What would my mother think?” She puts her hand to her chin for a second. She quickly breathes in. “Oh. She thinks her sister left her family to become a monster hunter, doesn’t she?”

“Probably. Now put that in context with her expectations for you.”

“Mother… she wants me to be anything but like her sister, doesn’t she?”

“And now you’ve got everything Kevin thinks. Keep in mind it’s a theory. But it has a fair amount of supporting evidence. So, to summarize: your mother likely wants you to study hard so that you have a possible means of supporting yourself aside from magic. And she says she wants you to be a homemaker, because, specifically, she doesn’t want you to abandon your family.”

“Does she know that I can use magic?”

“You were burned out for months. Do you really believe Noriko was never burned out before?”

“I – I need to talk with my mom.” The doll suddenly becomes less realistic and falls to the floor.

20 January 2014
8:51 AM CST

I woke this morning well-rested from having the best sleep I’ve had in ages. Today’s MLK day, so I don’t have school just yet. But I should at least take advantage of today to return my job applications. To that end, I’ve taken a shower and am eating breakfast (cereal).
Wait, what was that? There was… oh, right. I set it up that my Mymoir PM notification is a small burst of heat above and to the right of my head. I close my eyes and read the message waiting for me.

Sean: We have set the time for our visit. Al and I will be travelling to Moperville to arrive on Saturday, January 25. I will stay for as long as is necessary. Al will stay for four days.

Saphira: At a guess, you’re arriving when my morning flight ends. Is that right?

Sean: I do not know when that would be.

Saphira: Probably around 9 AM. As stated, my takeoff and landing point will be in the park, though if Elliot and Ellen want to keep their identities secret, they may be landing elsewhere.

Sean: I see no reason to hide my own identity there. I will fly in under my own power. Of course, Al will be travelling by commercial flight.

Saphira: I’m sorry, but I don’t know why you two specifically are coming, nor where you two are currently.

Sean: I am presently located in Canada.

Saphira: Makes sense then. You’ve got the most convenient location of the elders.

Sean: Yes. As for Al, you should know where the War Dragon is located.

War Dragon? Ah, right. He’s the German electric dragon that didn’t leave his country even while it was embroiled in two world wars after he awakened. Not that he was an active participant in the wars (actually, he helped keep his entire town uninvolved), but that’s rather unprecedented. But since he’s an electric dragon, I’ve got a fair guess as to why he’s coming.

Saphira: I recall him now. I suppose two of you coming makes sense, as you do have to investigate two new dragons. Although our friend groups overlap a lot.

As in they’re basically the exact same. I think the only two people I’ve spoken with that he hasn’t are Mr. Raven and Rhoda. And maybe Ms. Pompoms.

Sean: I assume by Elliot’s lack of response to my message to him that he has yet to set up a notification. Would you be able to contact him regarding this message?

Saphira: I’m not sure how he would set up a notification, unless he linked it with my Partial Armor spell or something. But yes, I can call his cell phone. Thank you! Oh, and while we’re at it… I have a favor to ask.

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“This Saturday? What am I going to tell my family?”

“Your parents do know you’re a dragon, right?”

“Uh… I haven’t told them, but I guess?”

“You probably should tell them. And it’s not like the visit is particularly difficult to explain. Sean and Al will just be trying to determine whether you’re a stable individual. And when it comes to asking people who aren’t your parents, Sean’s particularly well-practiced at asking around without cluing people in as to why.”
“Speaking of which, why is someone as young as Al coming?”

“I’m not saying he told me as much, but… Al’s an electric dragon. I’m a heat dragon. Take a
guess.”

“Oh.” I can hear him chuckle faintly. “What will you do, if, um…”

“If he asks me out? I’m hoping he won’t be that tactless, but there’s no way I’m going out with
someone more than five times my age. And I’ll tell him as much. I might go out with him when
he’s only double my age. But… I mean, I have a lot of respect for the guy. But I kind of doubt he’d
respect a brand-new dragon, and I don’t want a relationship where my partner is basically always
saying, ‘You didn’t know that yet?’”

I can hear him laugh again. “Keep going like that and you won’t date anyone until you’re over a
hundred.”

“And how is that a problem if I’m going to live to be ten thousand?”

20 January 2014
10:25 PM CST

I dropped off my applications at the two larger stores first. One person didn’t bat an eye and told
me where the box was. The second gave me a double-take, but probably assumed I wasn’t who
they saw on TV. Or that the TV thing was a hoax. The manager at Ace Hardware, on the other
hand…

“I’m sorry, I’m still trying to wrap my head around this whole thing. You’re the dragon that
appeared on the news on Saturday, right?”

“Yes, that was me.”

“Why exactly do you want to work here?”

“I need to save up for college. I want to get a mechanical engineering degree, so that’s going to
take a lot of money. And for that degree, knowing a lot about tools will probably help. I… don’t
have a ton of experience in that area, besides occasionally fixing broken stuff by-the-manual or
using power tools on fallen tree branches.” Which was a serious problem in Kevin’s yard. Good
ing thing his parents had a wood-burning fireplace. And I’m not sure I should mention how many
ways he learned to use tools that were not intended by the engineer/manufacturer.

“You might get better experience in that area by working at a repair shop. Your role here would
simply be selling the right tool.”

“Knowing the right tool for the job goes a long way. Using a wrench as a hammer might work, but
having the right hammer gets the job done better and with less wear on the tool.” Not to say Kevin
hasn’t used pliers as a hammer before. Or a knife as a screwdriver.

“So would anything about you being a dragon have bearing here?”

“It’ll keep me from being bored. There’s always something I can try with my magic. Of course, I
wouldn’t do that when there are customers in here. Oh, and there are some blocked off
availabilities on my application.” Namely church, school, training with Greg, and flying on
Saturday mornings.

“Alright. I’ll have a look over your application and get back with you by the end of the week. I also
may need to call you back for a more formal interview.” Well, he is a franchise owner. I have no idea what sort of restrictions he operates under. At least I believe him when he gives me the time window. Sometimes, ‘by the end of the week’ can mean ‘in the next few months’ when you’re dealing with businesses.

“Thank you. Have a nice MLK Day.” I shake his hand and walk out the door to head home.

Whew. Wasn’t quite ready for that. But at least that interview seemed to go better than the ones Kevin did at career fairs. Although the competition here is a lot less fierce. And I know it’s unfair to guys, and I hate that, but my being a girl will probably greatly increase the chance that he’ll hire me, if it came down to that.

“Hello.” Ah! I didn’t sense anyone nearby… but now that I’m looking for it, my nose is filled with the smell of Common magic. I turn around to face the immortal behind me.

Oh. I narrow my eyes at her. “Pandora.” She’s in her adult form, with her feet on the ground. Presumably so we might have a longer conversation without people staring. Not to say her getup is normal, but oh well.

“You know me?”

“How much do you know about my history?”

“I’ve been a bit distracted for a while now. Your announcement on Saturday was a pleasant surprise, though.” She smiles menacingly. “Why have dragons decided to show themselves, after all this time?” I’m betting she hasn’t reset since before dragons disappeared. In which case she was pretty much the least-surprised immortal on Saturday.

“Two world wars might have had something to do with it.” The second may well have been prevented, with better diplomacy. And a kinder treaty at the end of WWI. “The rampant use of Common magic for evil is probably another large part of it.” Not to say it’s really gotten worse in terms of worldwide per capita, when you consider non-magic users. But while the proportion of villains is static, the proportion of heroes has shrunk. And bored immortals have caused a lot of problems. Probably some we don’t even know about. “But I’ve only been a dragon for a little over a week. I’m not the best person to ask.”

“But I do notice that you’re a heat dragon.”

“I’ve already spoken with your son. I assure you, I don’t mean your family any harm. That said, I have spoken with Magus. You know, the former trapped spirit that you abandoned because he wouldn’t frame Tedd’s father for murder of an aged wizard?”

“I… wasn’t thinking about it that way.” She hangs her head. She doesn’t seem terribly surprised by my statement, so I guess she’s actually thought on it since then. Which is actually a little surprising to me. “You said ‘former’?”

“Yes. As of this past Friday, he succeeded on the path you set him down. Shortly afterwards, Ellen and I aided him in removing the body snatcher that helped him from existence.”

“I… I can’t make things up to him. But if you might give me his location, I could at least apologize.” And since Magus now has a body, Pandora can’t actually act against her. I see no reason not to. But… I probably should ask Magus first.

“If you’ll contact me later, I can let you know whether Magus would be okay with that.” Not that I think Pandora can’t find her first if she tries.
“That’s… acceptable.”

“And as for me being a dragon… Know that my duty is to those under my protection. If you do something that endangers this town, I will take it up with you. And destroy you, if you make that necessary. But I rather hope that you, and the other immortals here, won’t make that the case.”

“And if you are neglecting your duties or abusing your power, I will notify the other dragons. Although…”

Wait, what? I was expecting the preceding sentence as a typical deal between immortals and dragons. What else is there?

“I’m going to reset, soon. As soon as I have fulfilled my promise to one more person.” She disappears.

I wonder what suddenly caused her to want to reset? Was it the dragons resurfacing? And what was that promise she spoke of?

20 January 2014
4:45 PM CST

Long story short, Magus was surprised, but allowed me to give Pandora her address, since she pointed out, as did I, that Pandora could just find her if she wanted to. Of course, with no way for me to directly contact Pandora, I figured leaving a note to her on my desk was good enough.

Ms. Pompoms decided to finally get a phone contract for me. The fact that I already had the phone probably went a long way towards that. I’m on the same family plan as her and Susan, so I guess I’ll use Wi-Fi as much as possible (not that Kevin didn’t do the same), but thankfully the phone plan has gotten a bit of an upgrade since last year.

So with little else to do but wait, I decided I should probably try to do at least a little exercise for fitness’s sake. With little memory of Kevin’s exercise outside of running (for track team), I went with some push-ups and sit-ups (which were not part of Greg’s basic training last week). I expected to have some difficulty, but… I’m presently lying flat on my back. If I try to sit up for longer than a few minutes, I start to cramp up a lot. Push-ups were always difficult for Kevin—afer he quit martial arts—but he never had trouble with sit-ups. This is awful. It’s been over half an hour! Okay. If I’m having this much trouble, I really need to exercise more. I don’t think twenty push-ups and sit-ups should ever be this bad. And if that tiny bit of exercise is kicking my butt, I can’t imagine what it’ll be like after training with Greg on Wednesday.

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Dinner finished, backpack ready for tomorrow… I guess I could listen to music again tonight? I know how my entry for Saturday night might have made it sound, but listening to music feels good, even if it makes me cry. And I think I needed that. But maybe some different music today. More cheerful? Let’s see if I might find some like that.

“Hello, my name is Regret…”

Kevin’s heard this song before, so I know it’s actually an upbeat song. But it’s never really meant anything to me. Maybe today that’ll be different?

“…And I have believed them/ For the very last time!”

I find myself shouting along to the words. My heart’s bursting out of my chest—this is the most joy
I’ve ever felt in connection with a song. And I know where it’s from, too: what happened yesterday with Magus. The words of the chorus have never felt more true. I really have been set free from that past.

Susan comes into my room. I’m actually surprised—with how absorbed I was in the song, I didn’t notice her approach. “Saphira?”

I close the video tab. “Yes?” Even with the interruption, I can still feel the small smile on my face.

“What… was that?”

“I – Yesterday, with some prompting… I finally let God heal my heart. And… this song is perfect. I can’t contain it—I just feel fantastic.” Who am I used to be the song I connected with the most, but after that experience, I think Hello My Name Is will be my song going forward.

“I don’t think you really gave me enough to go on, but if you feel great, I guess that’s great. But I do want to sleep before tomorrow, so if you could keep your happiness quieter…?”

“Now you sound like my mom.”

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Standard practice for waking up before a scheduled event, at least that Kevin established for himself, is to get up about 2 hours early. So I woke to my alarm at 4:30 AM today. Although I may want to set that alarm a little later. Getting a shower that does not conflict with Susan is a lot easier than I thought it would be, and getting everything else ready didn’t take all that long. Although to be fair, today is only my first day of school.

As it turns out, Susan normally drives herself and Sarah to school. When she told me such this morning, I decided I should sit in the backseat, so that Sarah wouldn’t waste time outside. Since if only two people are taking a car, the second generally sits shotgun. If Sarah’s on autopilot, she’d naturally open the side door without checking for a passenger.

Which did of course surprise her when she got in and noticed me in the backseat. Although I think she noticed the car’s temperature first; I don’t care how good your heater is, it won’t be as fast as having a heat dragon in the car.

“You’re coming to school with us?”

“I didn’t do as well as I’d hoped on the placement tests I took. We’re a little early today because I need to pick up my schedule before classes start.”

“Oh. Right, Susan did tell me that yesterday. So what classes do you think you’ll be taking?”

“Probably English and History, based on how I felt taking the tests. Math maybe, if only because it’s been so long since I took the level that was on the test.”

“What was on the test?”

“Algebra and Pre-Calculus.”

“And when did you take that?”

“Kevin took Pre-Calc his freshman year, which is over four years ago by my memory. The last math classes he took, and therefore the most recent in my memory, are Differential Equations and
Multivariable Calculus.”

“Those sound hard.”

“Differential Equations was hard. Kevin took Vector Calculus in high school, which both contained Multivariable and was more fun.”

Sarah scrunches up her face. “I’m having a hard time believing math can be fun.”

“Then it’s a good thing you don’t want to be an engineer.”

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I’ve only seen the outside of Moperville North a couple of times in the comic, but overall, it’s not all that different from the schools Kevin attended. Probably built in the same era. Except as far as I can tell, there’s no bomb shelter under the school.

And considering what Kevin knows of the status of the fire safety mechanisms in this school, I guess it’s a good thing I’m a heat dragon.

My schedule is… well, it’s much the same as I expected. This school is on a six-period schedule, but it only has one schedule that you repeat every day. Unlike the two four-period schedules that alternated for Kevin. To fill in my schedule (and comply with federal regulation), my one-semester schedule is Art, double History, double English, and Gym. With that sort of schedule, I can complete high school with the required credit in only one semester. Although that’s not going to get me into any four-year university, but I sort of counted on that one already. And when I say ‘double,’ I mean that one of the classes is the normal class, and one is remedial. So yay, I get to spend a third of my school day around people who are either so bad at a subject I can’t really understand them or just really, really lazy or distracted. I honestly have no idea how to connect with such people.

From showing my schedule to my friends, I also know that I’ll be sharing lunch with Tedd, Elliot and Ashley, and I’ll share my normal English class with Ashley. And for some reason Tedd’s been taking Art every year, even though it’s only required for one year, so I’ll be sharing that period with him. Since Kevin always took Chorus when required for fine arts credit, it’ll be nice having someone who can help to coach me. But I understand not being allowed to take that class. Joining mid-way through practice for a concert isn’t fair to anyone involved. Plus I’m not certain what vocal range I’m in. Kevin was something between tenor and alto. My voice is certainly higher than his, but I don’t think I’m all the way to soprano.

21 January 2014
7:00 AM CST

Apparently, Art class has assigned seats. Makes sense, anyway. You don’t want too many other people messing with any art supplies you leave behind between classes. When I arrived, the teacher gave me an open seat near the back. Luckily, Tedd is only three seats away, in case I need help. Actually, the teacher recommended that I ask Tedd for help if I have any questions. I suppose that at this point Tedd’s more of a teacher’s assistant for the class than someone actually taking the class.

A few people walking in after me did a bit of a double-take when they saw me. I’m guessing those were the people who actually watched my announcement. Well, if a teacher has me introduce myself, I’m definitely including ‘please watch my announcement,’ regardless of which class that’s in.
Well, that was… enlightening. I didn’t think joining an art class halfway through would be so challenging. I mean, Kevin did avoid art classes on the basis that people said they were difficult and he could already read sheet music anyway… but I guess that’s one class that’ll be more than just review for me. I’m very grateful for Tedd’s help.

Next up, remedial History! Yay! Which is even better, since this is yet another school (like Kevin’s) that only requires 3 years of History, so even in my normal History class I’ll be one of very few seniors. I’m not sure if that’s better or worse. I guess I’ll meet a lot more people, but in practice I generally only get to know people outside of class.

Navigation has a whole new challenge when you can actually tell where all the hallways and stuff are without them being in sight. By which I mean I can sense where everyone in the school is located. It’s also a little distracting, but I guess it helps when I need to go to the bathroom. Since I won’t have to ask for directions, just wait for a girl to go to the bathroom during class and remember her destination. Which is good, since I seem to have lost Kevin’s ability to hold it for 8-9 hours at a time.

Also funny: if someone wants to ‘light one up’ in the bathroom, I can put it out.

Remedial History seems to have the composition of students I’d generally expected. The class is smaller than normal, but not like last-period physics senior year. (Kevin was one of eight students in that class.) For both this class and the English pairing, I have the same teacher both periods, so they at least should understand that I’m not a dunce, just someone with rather special circumstances. As for the rest of the class… well, they’re all here as well, so I guess I can’t get made fun of too badly. But thankfully I have a bit more maturity about that sort of thing than Kevin did in middle school.

The bell rings and I am quietly relieved that I don’t recognize anyone here. Now I just get to study some history that Kevin was crap at learning and dragons don’t care about recording. (Dragons record culture, not wars.)

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Because nothing can ever be too convenient, I actually have lunch between fourth and fifth periods. That is, between my two English classes that are in the same room. As a bonus, Tony is in my remedial English class. I’m not sure if he’s actually dumb or just playing the part he expects, though, since he seemed a bit more on-the-ball than some of the other students in that class. Plus he recognized me, so I guess he also watches the news at least occasionally.

Locating three people in a cafeteria is harder than you’d think. Let’s see… I think Tedd and Elliot both buy lunch. No idea on Ashley. Maybe I should just pick a seat and hope they join me. It’s not like it’s terribly hard to pause my lunch if they don’t do that. Never mind, I found Ashley.

“Hello! Mind if I join you?” I think I know the answer to my question, but it never hurts to be polite.

“Hey, Saphira. Go ahead.” I sit down across from her. “Um… Sorry I missed your thing on Saturday.”

“It’s not a problem. You deserved some peaceful time with Elliot after your last two dates. And I was tired of answering public questions anyway.”
“I… still have some questions?”

“I can answer more for you in private than in public. I mean, you could just ask Elliot, but if you want me specifically to answer them, you can try to set up a time and place? You probably have more going on than I do, at least right now. I’m trying to get a job so I can save up for college.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Ah… my brothers were both studying computer engineering last I heard. I think mechanical engineering would be more suited for myself. At least for the heat thing, anyway. But I don’t think I want to deal with more programming than I already have to do for my magic.” With that, I finally take out my lunch: a can of soup and a spoon. I was careful to grab a can that had a pull tab so that I wouldn’t need any sort of can opener at school. Since I know schools can be pretty bad at judging what’s too small of a blade to not get suspended for it. And I’m not sure how sharp my claws would be if I used my Partial Armor spell. Or if opening a can with them would hurt.

“Why do you have a can of soup?” I hear Tedd ask behind me, just before he sits down beside me.

“It’s my lunch.”

“Okay, better phrased: why is it not in a thermos?”

“I don’t need one. I can just heat it here.” I may not be comfortable doing much cooking with magic yet, but simply heating a can of soup, with the boundaries defined by the can, shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll be sure to heat it slowly so it doesn’t explode from trapped gases, though.

With the can open, I start to warm it. Thankfully, I can easily adjust the temperature if it’s too hot or cold. “Already using magic on day one?” Elliot asks before sitting down next to Ashley.

“No reason not to. Plus I felt lazy on prepping lunch this morning.”

“I guess that’s as good a reason as any.” Elliot leans in close and whispers to the three of us. “It’s coming up on one year since Ellen’s, ah, creation. At Saphira’s suggestion, she thought it might be nice to have a sort of get-together with most people who know that secret. Just to relax and have fun.” He sits back again. “Would any of you be interested? We were thinking of holding it next Friday.”

“I see no reason why I couldn’t go. I can pass on the invitation to Susan, if you like.”

“It was your suggestion, so I kind of expected you to come. But spreading the word for me would be nice, thanks.”

“I’m in.”

“Thanks, Tedd.”

“I’ll have to ask my parents, but I definitely want to go.”

I lean towards Elliot. “Are you planning on inviting Magus as well?”

“No. I know he and Ellen need to talk at some point, but I don’t think there’d be much relaxing going on with him there.”

21 January 2014
1:30 PM CST
At the end of lunch, Tedd pressed a note into my hand. It told me to go to his house after school today, because he wants to talk with me about magic. I guess today’s the day he’ll find out he’s a wandmaker, if he hasn’t already.

With everyone else headed into the locker rooms, I head into the gym to hopefully find my teacher. Assuming they’re not policing a locker room, anyway. I mean, if they are, I’ll have to just ask permission in front of the whole class, but…

There’s one teacher in here. They match Sarah’s description of my teacher, so…

“Excuse me, are you—?”

“You’re… Saphira, right? Refer to me as ‘Coach.’ And I don’t believe I can pronounce your last name.”

“Understood, Coach. It’s Bjartskular.” (Kevin had only ever seen it as text, so my own pronunciation is best-guess. The ‘Bj’ I pronounce the same as ‘fj’ in ‘fjord.’)

“Thank you. Now, what are you in here for? I can’t get you a uniform until class is over.” I’m not aware of that ever taking a long time, but I am prepared.

“I’m assuming you won’t let me participate if I’m wearing… well, what I’m wearing right now?”

“No, that’s not allowed.”

“What about this, Coach?” Time for my second spell to shine. I made Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales after finishing Partial Armor. It’s basically the same as Partial Armor except that it replaces clothes (so it’s better for exercise, as I won’t ruin my clothes when they catch on my scales, but it can’t be concealed). For this instance, I make it cover the same area as the default except that the cutoff is a little before my elbows and knees instead of my wrists and ankles. And since I made this form for exercise/combat and can’t wear a sports bra while using it, I made it a bit more dragon-like and reduced my bust enough that that won’t be a problem.

“That’s still not standard… but it might meet the dress code.”

“It can’t become indecent,” since the ‘indecent’ parts of me don’t really exist right now, “and it won’t hinder my movement. Although I might still bleed if the wrong scale is pulled out.” The ones I removed for the wands for Ellen didn’t cause me to bleed, but if I lose scales from more sensitive areas, like my abdomen, then I’ll probably bleed a lot. Though removing such a scale should be pretty difficult and would hurt a lot.

“I’ll allow it for today, since you don’t have a uniform yet. But if you forget your uniform in the future, you’re under the same penalty as everyone else.”

“Understood, Coach.”

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Now I understand why sweating is so important. The parts of me that are covered in scales don’t sweat, and by extension tend to overheat. Thankfully I could use my magic to prevent heat exhaustion and heat stroke, but I don’t think any other dragon will be using that spell for extended periods of time. Just to make sure, I put it in the notes for the spell.

But at least for today I get to ride home while not stinking up Susan’s car with my sweat. Good thing I can still heat the car even if we have to open the windows.
“So, I hear you caused an uproar in gym today.” Susan’s deadpan leaves me unsure as to whether she’s being sarcastic.

“Well, I wouldn’t call it an uproar. But there certainly were a lot of surprised people.”

Now Sarah’s surprised. “Wait, you really transformed in gym class?”

I lower my head to my right hand. “No, not a full transformation. What I did was… well, Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales.” I replicate the spell I just ended ten minutes ago.

Sarah is still surprised, but less so. “Yeah, I can see why that might surprise some people. Especially if they didn’t watch your announcement on Saturday.”

“I can’t exactly just do the one thing and leave it at that. People might wonder if I was serious about the whole thing. By reinforcing it in public just three days later, I think people will understand that I will support public magic use and defend against those who might abuse such power.” I end the spell.

“Or at least understand that magic’s real. Does this mean Susan and I will…?”

“No, unless you want people to know you can use magic. Or just don’t care if people know. But yeah, if Susan wants to just have her fairy out in public, she can. Just keep in mind that people will know she can use magic, and that might come with some expectations.”

“Changing the subject…” I guess I made Susan uncomfortable with that line. Chances are good she won’t be showing off just yet. “Are you thinking of doing any after-school clubs?”

“I’ll be pretty busy, between being a dragon, doing martial arts stuff with Greg, and the fact that I’ve applied for a job so I can save up for college. But I might have time for one. I’m guessing you’d like me to join your feminism club?”

“If you can. I mean, you don’t have to…” But her voice sounds like she’d really like it if I did.

“Has the mission statement changed since you pitched it to Elliot?”

“I’m… not sure what you’re talking about.”

“And I quote: ‘Who said anything about equality? Female superiority all the way, sister!’”

Susan’s face turns red, and Sarah’s heats up as well. “Oh. Yeah, it’s changed.”

“In that case, I guess I could at least attend a few meetings. I’m a lot more interested in math and science, but being well-rounded is also pretty useful. Plus I might want to learn more about how other people think, if I’ll be pushing for social change regarding magic.”

21 January 2014
3:04 PM CST

*Knock-knock-knock* The difficult part about this house is that I can never tell who’s answering the door, with two people fond of transforming into each other inhabiting it. At least until they open the door. A wandmaker smells nothing like a Genetic magic user.

“Hello, Grace,” I greet the person who looks nothing like Grace.

She looks shocked. “How’d you know it was me?”
“As a dragon, I can tell different kinds of magic users apart. It’s very easy to tell you and Tedd apart, provided you’re close to me without obstructions.”

“Oh.” After I close the door behind me, Grace changes back to her default human form and squints at me. “That doesn’t seem very useful.”

“It’s pretty good for threat analysis. Or just knowing what sort of stuff to talk about.”

We head down to the basement, where Tedd’s waiting for us. There’s a wand on his lap. Well, I say ‘wand,’ but it’s really just a special stick, until Tedd imbues it with magic. I have no idea why immortals can produce something that has the physical properties of wood and the magical properties of metal.

“I’m guessing by that stick that you now know you’re a wandmaker?”

“How’d you know?” Yay, I was right!

“You smell like one. It’s… one of those minor abilities of dragons.”

“Smell… You know what, I’m not gonna question it. How long have you known?”

“Since I first spoke with you. It’s not hard to pick up active magic on people, unless it’s really suppressed, like the half-dragon thing with Elliot and Ellen.”

“Which is now a moot point for Elliot.”

“I like to think I increased his chances of survival. But there’s really no way to know what would’ve happened to him on Friday had I not been here. Anyway, I get the feeling you wanted to talk to me about your magic, and possibly Grace’s?”

“You’d be correct on both counts. Is there anything you can tell me about being a wandmaker? And when you talked about wandmakers on Saturday, were you thinking about me?”

“On Saturday, I was basically reading a script the other dragons wrote for me. As for you, being a wandmaker… You probably already know a lot about what that entails. Actually, who told you? Because I kind of doubt you came to that conclusion on your own, and there’s no way your dad knows.”

“…An immortal. It doesn’t matter who.” But if it’s one I know… Definitely not the one from last Sunday. Also definitely not Zeus. The two that were protecting Elliot from Magus probably don’t know. That leaves Pandora, the mother of Tedd’s godfather. Makes sense. Is he the one she made a promise to?

“Well, then they probably taught you pretty much everything, so I’ll just get into some of the stuff I know you’d like to know. First up: using food to transform people. The food has to be able to hold the magic, and the magic has to activate on contact. Activation on contact is something the Dewitchery Diamond did. If you can convince your dad, you may be able to speak with Abraham on that matter, since he’s now awake, although I can’t guarantee he’ll be eager to share that secret.” Actually, I can pretty much guarantee he won’t, but it’s probably not terribly hard to figure out. “As for holding the magic, food isn’t the greatest substance for holding magic. The best physical objects are metals and gemstones. However, objects created by magic, such as the wandstick on your lap and dragon scales, are far better than their physical properties might suggest.”

“How much better?”
“Organic substances are the bottom of the list. Wood is near the top for organics. Metal is about two-to-ten times better for holding magic, in terms of volume. Gemstones are hundreds of times better than metal. Wand-sticks are physically wood, but magically similar to metal. Dragon scales are physically something like ivory, but magically similar to gemstones. Gemstones are still the best, though.”

Tedd sighs. “So if I want to have food transform people, I need to fill it with inedible stuff.” Grace makes a face.

“Not… really. If you make gemstone or dragon scale powder, it might be possible to only put a tiny amount of the magic-holding substance in the food.” Well, with dragon scales it’d be more like flakes than powder, but pretty much the same thing. “So it might slightly color the food, but if you do it right it can be undetectable. In theory. This is something I thought of after I read up on wandmaking today, not something that’s actually been tried before.”

“And how do you suppose I’ll get my hands on these things?”

“Well… I can make dragon scales for you. But I ask you not to waste them. Pulling out a scale is like pulling out a clump of hair.” Tedd and Grace wince. It’s not quite as bad as that sounds, but it still hurts. “But just one scale should get a whole lot of use, if that’s what you’ll be using it for. Although… you know you can make wands that do things other than transforming people, right?”

“For that, I think I’d have to observe other stuff first.” Right. Other than from Sarah and Susan, I’m not sure he has.

“There are some pretty basic spells, like making a lamp or marginally improving strength. You might be able to figure those out on your own. But I wouldn’t want to stifle your creativity by making too many suggestions.”

“Anyway, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Right then. Saphira’s Partial Armor.” I form a single scale on my right thigh and, bracing myself, remove it, ending the spell afterwards to close the wound. I head up to the kitchen and clean off the scale in the sink (and make sure the sink is clean), then return to the basement and hand the scale to Tedd. “You’ll find that flaking it off against the grain is the easiest way to reduce its size. For impacts and cuts across the grain or with the grain, dragon scales are very difficult to destroy and may destroy your tools instead. Also, be sure to use it within a month. As they’re made from magic, dragon scales will fade from existence if they’re not imbued with additional magic within about thirty days. If they are, however, they should last pretty much forever.”

“Thanks. Although now I sort of want to just leave it alone and watch what happens.”

“I can guarantee that any observation you’re thinking of making has already been done.”

21 January 2014
3:11 PM CST

“Wait. You’re the dragon that made the partial armor spell, right? So how do you know so much about dragon scales? Wouldn’t they be really difficult to tear out of a full dragon form?” I guess Elliot told Tedd about Draconic spell naming schemes.

“They’re certainly larger, but… do you know what ‘ablative’ means?”

“I do!” Grace says excitedly. “You’re saying dragon scales fall off to reduce damage when dragons are attacked, right?”
“Exactly. Dragon combat isn’t exactly rare, so any scales collected after practice matches are liable to be experimented with. My Partial Armor spell, and Jorge’s Skin-to-Scales besides, just make gathering scales a lot more convenient, especially because the scales aren’t in excess of five pounds each.”

“Each!?"

I face Grace. “You can modify your strength, right? I’m betting you still couldn’t lift me, while I’m in dragon form.”

“I’ll take that bet. Not right now, of course. But maybe some other time?”

“I’ll let you know if you’re hurting me when you try it. I don’t think my biological structure will be too friendly to being picked up at a single point.”

Tedd interrupts us. “But anyway, about Grace…”

“Yes. Right. Were you watching when I said there were four kinds of magic?”

“Dad made us watch the whole thing. Not that we wouldn’t have anyway. You did a great job.”

“Thanks. At any rate, Grace is a Genetic magic user. Meaning the entropy for her magic comes from gravity-based energy conversions.”

“So dropping stuff gives me magic?”

“Not… quite…. Gravity is generally pretty entropically efficient. However, the orbit of celestial bodies and the return of launched objects such as aircraft and space shuttles probably gives you what you need. Basically, the vertical movement of really large objects is probably what helps the most. If you played basketball all day, you probably wouldn’t get a fraction of the energy required to shift to your half-squirrel form from just that. So it’s just like what I said on Saturday—gravity-based magic is pretty constant.”

“I thought Dad said that Grace and the TF gun didn’t use magic?”

“Not to his understanding at the time. They both use Genetic magic. Uryuoms are Genetic magic users and have a ton of gravity-based technology, just like many humans are Common magic users and humans have a bunch of chemical-based technology. I mean, we also have other stuff, but pure humans can use three of the four kinds of magic.”

“Are dragons unique to humans?”

“While it’s theoretically possible that some alien species may have dragons, if they do, they have an entirely separate Mymoir and have never contacted any of the dragons on Earth. Not that any dragons here have ever left Earth, either. But dragons have enough knowledge of alien species to conclude that this universe may be a merging of what was once many universes.”

“Huh?”

“If you know a bit about the creation of the Earth as recorded in the Bible, it says that there was no death before sin, thus precluding there being any kind of sentient species aside from humans. Or else they’re suffering from a curse brought on them by humans, which would be unfair. If you speak with enough space aliens, you find that they all have similar stories, books, and legends. The conclusion that dragons reached, alongside many we spoke with, is that prior to that initiation of a death cycle, each universe was separate, but at or after that given moment, they all merged
together. At least, that’s the most popular theory among the religious groups from each sentient race.” As I checked, Revelation reads a little differently in this universe compared to what Kevin read. I wonder if the universes will separate again when the time comes for that? And if they do, what will happen to people like Grace?

“I’m sorry, you lost me,” Tedd says, a look of bewilderment on his face. Grace has a similar look of confusion.

“Eh, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is that Uryuoms are likely a space-faring race because of the kind of magic they can use. And dragons on Earth don’t know of any other dragons out there.”

“Do you have any special knowledge for me, like you did for Tedd?”

“You’ve already expressed every known ability for Genetic magic users, plus some extras. Prior to you, dragons had no knowledge of telekinesis among people like yourself.”

“Oh. Uh, glad I could help?”

22 January 2014
3:15 PM CST

Day 2 of school, same as Day 1, except that I received a lot of backlogged classwork and homework yesterday. Thankfully, they’ll give me two weeks to do it (as it’s presently the third week of school for this semester), but I think that’ll take up a lot of my free time in the near future. And today I had a gym uniform, so no freaking out classmates that didn’t watch my announcement. Scales weigh a lot more than the uniform, but honestly, the chest reduction was welcome as far as exercise goes. Not that I have a ton there in the first place, but I can see why being on the A-team might be nice in some circumstances.

Speaking of which, it’s time for Week 2 of training with Greg. I should probably start referring to him as Sensei Greg, if he’s going to go through with this training thing.

“Before we start today, I want to clarify: Saphira, you’re a dragon, right?”

“Yes, that was me on Saturday.”

“You won’t wreck the place, right?”

“That monster wasn’t a dragon. If I want to try combat in dragon form, I’ll do it in the park or something. If I ever shift to dragon form in here, then that means some supremely powerful enemy is hiding in here, but I’d still try to take them outside first. And the only level of heat magic I want to try with your training is my heat sensing, to tell where stuff is around me.”

He looks relieved. “I’m… guessing you thought your thing on Saturday would get me students if I opened shop, right?”

“Maybe. You’d still have to verify whether they have magic, but I can tell with a hundred percent accuracy, if I’m close to them.” It does register as smell, but unlike smell, it also has a hint of direction to it. So while it’s confusing if I’m surrounded by casters, I can tell which people out of a group of two or three are magic users, and what kind.

Ellen speaks up. “Elliot said you’d call your next place ‘Real Martial Arts.’ You… do have a better name prepared, don’t you?”
“Ah… no.”

“I’m, ah, not fantastic at naming things. I’d call it ‘Magical Martial Arts.’ And unfortunately, the dragons that are pretty good at marketing don’t speak English, so I’m not sure their names would translate well.” I mean, Draconic gets the idea across, but culture is also a big part in this sort of thing, and you don’t get that with just the idea.

“Well, if you can find me students, I’ll consider opening shop.”

“For a start, I think I can convince Elliot and Justin to return.” Elliot because he needs training on using his senses in a fight, and Justin because he’ll come if Elliot does. I’m not sure what his magic does other than make him stronger, however.

“While that’s nice, I’m not sure I can make a business off of five students.”

“I agree. I’ll try my best to find some others, but about the best I can do until you commit is act like I’m advertising for a Kickstarter project. I did find you help in the case that you need it, though. And… ah…” I look away. I planned to do this right before I left, but it seems like a good idea to bring it up now. “There are… two other dragons coming to town to visit me soon. At least one of them will want to evaluate your ability to train me, likely through a sparring match between you and them.”

“Soon? How soon?”

“This Saturday. They’ll probably be here around four days.”

“Right! Well, we had better get started, then!”

“Don’t exhaust yourself before sparring with them.”

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He might not exhaust himself, but he sure exhausted me. I guess he’ll take the other dragons’ decision on whether or not he should continue to train me. I asked Ellen to communicate the training idea to Elliot and Justin. (Elliot first, of course.) Grace said she’d talk to Justin even if Ellen couldn’t.

The rest of this school week was pretty uneventful. I’d bore myself if I bothered to record everything I do. Normal, bland school work at school, followed by make-up school work when I get home. As for spells, I’ve been trying to think of a useful heat-related spell I might be able to make. Maybe something that can detect solid objects? I could at least pair that with an action later. Yeah, that sounds good for a piece of a spell.

Anyway, now I get to see what Susan’s feminist club is like. Kevin never joined any club anything like this, so I have no idea what to expect. It’s probably not a project-based club like Robotics, so maybe it’s more like Boy Scouts but without ranks? How would that even work?

Susan told me what room it’s held in, and I’ve gotten a pretty good grasp of the layout here, but I’ve still got my map out just to be sure. Matching the map with my heat sensing, I’m pretty sure there are already a few people in the room, including Susan. Come to think of it, I have no idea how many people are in the club, except that there has to be at least seven. I wonder if the club is still entirely female?

Map away so I don’t look like a moron, since I can just follow my heat sense now. A bit later and I open the door. Yep, that’s Susan, so I guess I’m in the right spot. “Um… hello?”
“Nice to see you could make it, Saphira.” Well, it was this or walk, since she’s my ride home. And it’s raining today. No use being sarcastic, though.

“Saphira?” It seems Catalina is already here.

“Well, given that I want to have at least a bit of variety in my activities and skill set…”

“Wait, what? I thought social stuff was all you did? What about on Saturday?”

“Social stuff is what I do being a dragon. My preferred activities include lots of math and sciences. That piece on Saturday where I talked about thermodynamics? That was basically a small part of my favorite field.” Well, not exactly. I still like structures and gears and robotics and stuff more, but being a heat dragon has given me a new appreciation for heat flow and fluid mechanics. “But coming here should give me practice before I have to do any more stuff like last Saturday.”

“Oh. I was wondering why you were smiling for that part. You just made my head hurt.”

Darn. I mean, I love that stuff, but I get that people might not understand. It’s about the same way for me when people start talking about planning ahead during a fighting game. (Kevin and) I just hit buttons and hope things work out well.

Some of the other girls here are giving us strange looks, but most of the people in my classes (especially Gym) have now either watched my announcement or learned enough that dragon stuff is no longer a surprise. “Here, let me just get this over with. Saphira’s Partial Armor.” The default is fine for this.

The girls I have yet to meet widen their eyes. One raises her hand and immediately asks her question. “Uh… did your chest just… get bigger?”

I sigh. “Really, that’s what you notice? It’s an unintended side-effect. Actually, what happened is that, even under my clothes, my body is now covered in scales. So when your skin essentially gets thicker, everything seems to ‘get bigger.'”

“Oh. I am suddenly less jealous.”

“Doesn’t that catch on your clothes?”

“That’s preferred to having something sharp penetrate my chest, but yes. It doesn’t happen a whole lot, though, since the edges of my scales are smooth, not sharp. I mostly made this spell for combat.”

“You plan on getting into fights?”

“No. But on my very first night of being a dragon” (not counting when I awakened) “I got pulled into a fight that, had someone else not stepped in, I would have lost, and lost my life for it.”

“I am suddenly a lot less jealous.”

25 January 2014
9:05 AM CST

The manager from Ace Hardware called me yesterday to let me know I got the job. I guess that technically wasn’t any more difficult than when Kevin got his first job, but it sure seemed more stressful. Of course, then I had to go back to the store anyway so he could walk me through everything. Apparently, I need to get some jeans or khakis somewhere, as I’m not allowed to wear
a skirt to work, but I’ll get two work shirts a few days before I start, which’ll be in about two
weeks. And since I don’t have the cash for pants, I guess I’ll be borrowing from someone (either
Ms. Pompoms or possibly one of the dragons visiting today).

The second day of flight practice with Elliot and Ellen had a lot more time for us. As I suspected,
no one else joined us, but at least we got to practice most of the basics of flight. (No room to
practice speed flight or dives.) Elliot said he’d take Greg up on the offer, if Greg decided to train
magic users, although Elliot’s a smidge worried that he’d have to tell Greg he’s a dragon. I don’t
think it’ll be a problem. So, three hours of flight later… my wing muscles are really hurting. I
thought my shoulders hurting last week was bad, but now my chest hurts a ton, and it’s kind of
difficult to breathe. It’s good I don’t need to breathe to speak in dragon form.

As we’re getting ready to end it, I spot an orange shape in the distance. **Elliot, do you see that?**
I ask, turning to face it.

**Yeah. Hold on a second…** He trails off as he activates his one Common spell. **Yeah, that’s
definitely Sean.**

**Okay. I think I can stay up a tiny bit longer, but we’ll be landing when he gets here. Is that
alright?**

Ellen looks at me incredulously. **Are you really that tired?**

**Just because you two are fit, it doesn’t mean that everyone exercises like they should. Kevin
rode his bike regularly, but only for commuting, and other than that I’ve done more in the past two
weeks than he did in over a year.**

**Ouch.**

A few minutes later, Sean comes into speaking range. **Greetings, Saphira, Elliot, and Ellen, our
newest dragons and only half-dragon. A nice day to fly, is it not?** Wow. And here I was thinking
his writing in the Mymoir was formal. I suppose he did learn English only shortly after the
language was invented. He must have someone translating his travel books into more colloquial
language.

**Good morning! Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be landing.** I have no idea how other dragons
fly long distances without overheating. Maybe I’m just more used to air conditioning.

**And Ellen and I will be landing somewhere else. Sorry, but we don’t want others to know about
us just yet.**

**That is fine. I will land near Saphira.**

I descend to my take-off point from earlier, where a small group of people has gathered. Carol and
a cameraman, plus two other people. One looks like a jogger. It is still cold outside. I bet the non-
news folks are just here to watch dragons fly. I guess that’s sort of like birdwatching?

The non-jogger holds onto his fedora as I land. Hold on a second, is that—is that—? And as soon as I think
it, he’s gone. Definitely the immortal I threatened two weeks ago. I guess he got what he came for.
At least, he was smiling before he vanished.

Carol doesn’t wait a second before launching into the first question. “Saphira! Who were the other
two people up there with you?”

**If they wanted you to know that, they would’ve landed with me.** I shift back and hastily use
Fred’s Thermal Regulator. The jogger leaves while I’m doing that. Then I look skyward, waiting for Sean to arrive.

“What are you looking for?”

“You may want to stay out of the center of the clearing, ladies,” we hear from a young voice with a thick German accent behind us.

I spin around. Yup, yellow eyes. “Al! How did you get here already?” He’s tall and moderately buff, and thickly built. He definitely looks younger than me, but only barely. His hair is a golden color that nearly matches his eyes.

“My flight arrived yesterday evening. I had the taxi leave me at the edge of the park earlier today. Nice flying, for your first full day of practice.”

I have a ton of respect for the guy, given what he’s done, but it sounds like he’s doing his best to get on my nerves.

“I’m sorry—how do you two know each other?” Carol and I have both walked over to where Al was standing, but Carol is decidedly very confused.

“I suspect that will be answered in short order,” Al replies, as I suddenly feel the gust of wind from Sean landing behind me. I have to get better at checking my surroundings with my heat senses. How did I miss a dragon?

It seems Carol has completely lost her composure. This is just too much, too soon. Her mouth is agape as she stares at the vividly orange form of Sean in the middle of the clearing.

Sean’s dragon form is much less bulky than mine or Elliot’s. His wings form a smooth curve on the leading edge (instead of having a leading point) and his head is a lot thinner, with a few long horns at its back that curve towards his neck. His legs are proportionally longer than either of ours, as well, with knees facing much more outward than forward. Just like Elliot and myself, his back and the top of his neck and tail is smooth.

“So yes, if you were still unsure, I am a dragon,” Al confirms.

25 January 2014
9:13 AM CST

Sean stays in dragon form for a bit, without speaking, to let Carol recover. “A-are there any more of you coming?” she says shakily.

“No, this is it. These two are here to make sure I’m a stable individual who won’t go mad with power or anything like that. They won’t be staying all that long, either.”

“I have a ticket for a trip home next week. Sean –” Al gestures towards him “– will stay as long as is necessary.”

At that, Sean shifts to his human form. His frame is much leaner than I expected, but his strength is still readily visible. He’s kind of on the short side, and his eyes betray a wisdom much beyond his apparent years.

“I believe you can see why I call him the Halloween Dragon.”

“Al! Could you not refer to me as the Wanderer as the other dragons do? And does my violet hair
mean nothing?”

“I believe it just makes the rest of you look darker by comparison.” He’s being really rude, but I can see the bond between them. It takes my every effort not to smile.

Sean gestures to Carol. “I apologize for my friend. Now is his first time being in such a place that dragons are not a secret. However, we must be going. There is much to do in the near future, though none of that will be public. Just know that we will be evaluating Saphira’s character, as I have done with many other dragons.”

“O-okay.” She turns to face the camera, and gives her sign-off.

I lead Sean and Al out of the park. “I don’t know where the two of you want to go first. Al, it’s probably best if you don’t follow me home, but Sean, if you want to speak with Ms. Pompoms, you need to be cautious.”

“I am aware. I have previously spoken with many like her.”

“Then where should I go?”

“Maybe talk with Elliot and his family? I can give you their address.”

“That would be acceptable. Yes, you should go there.”

“And both of you: did you get what I asked for?”

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Since Ms. Pompoms told me not to invite men over, I obviously had to warn her when I knew which dragons were coming and when. I strongly suspected that only Sean would be visiting my home, so I only talked about him as such. She… wasn’t terribly happy, on Monday.

“So let me get this straight. You’re not inviting a man to visit, but he has to come here anyway?”

“Not specifically here. He just has to chat with you and Susan to decide what sort of people you are and what sort of influence you’ll be for me. Also he’s very old and very good at this, so this’ll be over faster and easier if you just act like yourself and don’t lie to his face.”

“I can’t trust a man. How do I know he’s not coming here to take advantage of Susan?”

I stared at her. “He literally travels the world. He’s flying here from Canada, where he’s presently living after previously spending time in every other country in the world. The only reason he has to visit Moperville is because a new dragon awakened here. I mean, he’d be living in the US in a few years anyway, but not necessarily here.”

“How exactly would he get here?”

“He has special international status. Since his job is writing travel guides and his country of origin is ‘none given,’ the general policy for him in most nations is ‘don’t do anything bad and we’re good.’ Especially since he never spends more than about five years in one country anyway. As far as governments are concerned, he’s a peaceful tourist who brings in other tourists.”

“There were no woman dragons available?”

“Canada’s dragon is otherwise engaged, and there’s no way the Officer could leave Mexico for more than a day or two.”
“‘The Officer’?”

“Sierra is pretty much the best law enforcement power in Mexico, especially when it comes to reducing the activity of gangs and the rest. Although she thinks the country has been relying on her a bit too much lately.”

“Alright. Give me some time to think about it.”

Yesterday, she let me know that she was okay with Sean coming here as long as he only did exactly what I said he would do. I told her she didn’t have to worry about that. Back to today…

“You were not exaggerating. For only three people, this is a massive house.”

“I have no idea how Ms. Pompoms justifies it, for just herself and her daughter. Even with three people it’s way too much. Well, I may as well get this over with.” I ring the doorbell.

Ms. Pompoms answers the door. She’s… significantly dressed up. The idea of this thing is that it’s supposed to be informal. I guess I failed at getting that across to her. Or maybe her expectations are just a lot higher than mine. “This is Sean?” she asks, pointedly facing me.

“Yes.”

“He’s much younger than I expected.”

Sean looks at me. I guess he knows it wouldn’t go well if he spoke. “Like I said last Saturday, dragons have greatly reduced aging. He’s over three and a half thousand years old.”

Ms. Pompoms glares at Sean for a second, then lightens up a bit. “You may as well come inside.”

I’m sure the Sociologist has this well in hand.

25 January 2014
10:32 AM CST

Another Mymoir PM notification…

Elliot: For this being his first time, Al’s being pretty thorough.

Saphira: I’m guessing he taught you how to use this?

Elliot: Yeah. I’ve got it set up to generate a scale… in a hidden location… when there’s a message for me.

Saphira: Makes sense. For myself, I have a small burst of heat in a specific location relative to myself.

Elliot: How are things going with Sean?

Saphira: He’s finished talking with Ms. Pompoms. Or more likely, he hit the point where he believed he was pushing it to keep the conversation going. He’ll probably spend a lot longer talking with Susan.

Elliot: He’s not talking with you?

Saphira: Maybe later. Or maybe Al will talk with me. I get the feeling that Sean’s assigned to me, and Al to you and Ellen.
Elliot: In that case, make sure you don’t hit Al.

Saphira: He’s annoying to you, too?

Elliot: I think he expects everyone to understand everything he says.

Saphira: Which is a little ridiculous, given his career history.

Elliot: Tell me about it. But yeah, he’s rather skilled at getting on people’s nerves.

Saphira: Well, I don’t have memories of being raised as a girl, so hopefully my lack of subtlety will get the idea across. But Kevin was never one for hitting people unless they intentionally drove him over the edge, and I think I have a better handle on myself than he did.

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“This is the man you decided should train you?”

Sean and I, together with Sensei Greg, are inside of the dojo Greg teaches at. There’s another class in here today (not one of Greg’s), but we called him here so that they could have a couple of sparring matches, possibly as a demonstration to the class, after talking things over a bit. I guess Greg is getting used to my power, since he didn’t cower when he met Sean.

“Yes. He… invented his own style of martial arts that could train Common magic abilities for unawakened casters, and he’s fairly inventive besides. And it’s not like I’m nearly at the level required for a dragon to train me. I mean, I first have to work on basic fitness.”

“I see.” Sean turns to face Greg. “And what do you think of this arrangement? Be honest.”

Greg looks like he’s building up the courage to say what he thinks. “While it’s an honor to teach a dragon, I’m a bit hesitant to get into this whole ‘magic martial arts’ business again. I don’t want the responsibility for training someone who then uses their abilities to do bad things.”

“I can say from experience that most people who honestly train become heroes, not villains. A good teacher should be able to detect warning signs and send their students down the correct path. But there is something you are not saying.”

“I… really shouldn’t.”

Oh. Is it about that? May as well test the assumption. “Is this for financial reasons?”

“I mean, I like the idea that, if this goes forward, you’d advertise for me, but…”

“If that is all, you should find this adequate payment.” Sean takes a tiny nugget of gold out of his pocket. Ah, I remember reading about this. Should a mass dragon not have adequate amounts of the correct currency, they carry around a small amount of gold or another precious metal. As a mass dragon, they can then make more of it for their needs. They don’t do it very often, for economics reasons. The piece that Sean holds out to Greg is a little smaller than the size of Sean’s fist. (Sean has small hands, or at least, much smaller hands than Greg.) I note that he’s cut off a small piece to put back in his pocket.

Greg holds out his hands in a ‘stop’ motion, unwilling to take it. “Oh, no, I really can’t accept that.”

“It is made with Draconic magic. It is entirely permanent. The gold can be split, separated, and separately reused indistinguishably from any other gold in the world.”
“No, I mean that’s way more than my training is worth.”

“Then perhaps it will be adequate for a long time, in Saphira’s stead. She has already informed me of her financial difficulties. Although your popular culture may have led you to believe that this has far greater worth than it does.” With that statement, I’m guessing it’s worth a few thousand dollars.

“A-alright.” Greg holds out his hand. When Sean hands it over, it’s clear from Greg’s reaction that the metal weighs a lot more than he was expecting.

I giggle. “Gold is dense. Or did you think that wasn’t really gold?”

25 January 2014
1:23 PM CST

Greg looks around for a bit, then decides to head outside and lock the gold in his car. When he comes back, he asks Sean. “So I think I now have a pretty good grasp on what Saphira can do, but what exactly can you do?”

Sean shifts position, pulls out the nugget again, then answers, “As a mass dragon, my senses detect the amount of mass filling any given space. I can determine the state of matter for a volume, but determining exactly what fills the volume can be… difficult. As for my manipulations, I can increase or decrease the mass of an object in any way I choose. This nugget is pure gold. If it was not, any more of it that I created would have the same purity as the original mass. However, a chemical dragon can remove the impurities before I work with it. We can use this metal for practical examples.” Sean holds up the nugget, and before our eyes he forms it into a small statue of Greg. Then he cuts off an arm.

Greg’s eyes widen. “That’s… kind of disturbing. Wait, can you to that to actual people?”

Sean reduces the gold back to its original size and pockets it. “Their resistance would work against me, but yes. Not that I have ever had cause to do so. In any case, would you be willing to spar with me? I would like to evaluate your level of skill before I agree that you should train Saphira.”

Greg squints at him. “But you already paid me.”

“Do you believe I cannot remove the mass from your vehicle? However, even if you should not train Saphira, her idea for this ‘magic martial arts’ is not a bad one, and the gold should cover some of the startup costs. Magic training for larger groups has historically been performed by wizards, dragons, immortals, and people much like yourself. With the reported amount of magic activity in this area, it would be best for the sake of safety for there to be some formal magic education here.”

“You’re even better than Saphira at making me feel like I have to do this.”

“It does not need to be you, but there should be some.”

“Okay, let’s get this sparring match over with. The class is getting ready for their own sparring, so we can use the mats.”

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It took a bit more setup than I thought it would, so now I’m sitting with the martial arts students while their instructor (an older Asian man) referees the match. The match rules are basically that no magic is allowed, since Sean would resist Greg’s, and it should be a clean match. And since this is evaluating Greg’s skill, his rules for matches prevail. Meaning that immediately prior to the fight, some level of taunting should be thrown.
“I should warn you that I will ‘take it easy on you.’” Sean’s ready stance isn’t one I’ve seen before, but it’s still somewhat like Greg’s more generic one.

“I don’t need your pity, old man!”

“This ‘old man’ can have a more serious fight with you afterwards if you like, but for a serious evaluation I need a longer fight than that would produce.” I get the feeling Greg would be out for the count in under a minute. He may be skilled, but he lacks the experience to overcome Sean.

“Fight!” The instructor lifts his hand from between Sean and Greg and quickly moves out of the way. From how the two are watching each other, I don’t think he had to move quite so fast.

Apparently satisfied that Greg did not make the first move, Sean darts around him and moves to elbow him in the side! Greg dodges and follows with a sweeping kick, which Sean jumps over.

At that point, it became too difficult to make mental notes as I struggled to keep up with what was happening. The students around me looked rather inspired by the fight, anyway. It seemed to go on for hours. (My watch said it was more like four minutes.)

Finally, Greg calls out, “I yield!” and collapses to the floor, panting.

Sean is breathing heavily, but it seems more like he just had a good workout. He bows deeply to Greg. “I bow to your skill and dedication. It seems you would make an excellent teacher for Saphira.” I think Greg is too winded to respond.

The other instructor approaches Sean, hand raised for a handshake. Sean grasps his hand, shakes once, and releases. The instructor queries him, “May I ask where you are from? That was no ordinary skill. I would be honored if you would instruct me.”

“I originated in an area in northern Africa. More I cannot say, as the area has changed much since I first left. As for instructing you, I apologize, but I must leave town soon. If you are still here and willing to learn when I make my residence in the United States of America, I may teach you some of what I know.”

26 January 2014
10:24 AM CST

I wish I went to this church last week. It is presently snowing. (Thankfully, it’s a light snow.)

As a heat dragon, walking in snow is only difficult in that I get wet. I know enough about snow and ice (thanks to Maryland weather) that I can keep from slipping by regulating the temperature of the sidewalk/street ahead of myself. I brute-forced it today, but I might make a spell if this keeps happening. I was able to work on my spell for object detection while I walked, anyway. Or at least I’m better able to determine how I might detect an object.

This church is roughly the same size as the other one, but it seems like the average age is lower. Hopefully it’ll be friendlier to magic users. No greeter at the main entrance on this one… I feel overdressed. Not that there’s any inappropriate dress here, but I’m clearly one of the nicer-dressed folks in here, despite my tennis shoes.

And I think I smell Common casters. If they’ve been here a while, this might be an okay church.

At the door to the… ah… let’s go with ‘sanctuary.’ At the door to the sanctuary there are two greeters. As I approach, the one on the left holds out his hand. “Good morning, miss.”
“Uh… Good morning.” I quickly shake his hand. “Um… I…”

“Looking for a place to sit?” I nod, relieved. “Follow me.”

He leads me to a mostly-empty pew that says ‘Reserved for Guests’ on a plaque on the end. I sit and he walks away.

“Is that the dragon lady?” I hear from a young voice behind me. A quick check from my heat senses verifies the origin of the voice: a young boy sitting one pew behind me and a little to my left.

“I’m sorry, sweetie?” The voice comes from someone who is presumably the boy’s mother.

“She looks like the dragon lady from TV.” Okay, yeah, the boy’s pointing at me. I turn around. The mother is… I need to work on my descriptions. If I’m going to recall this in a thousand years, I should give it my best shot. Fine. The mother is a white woman, thinly built, with red-orange wavy hair, the kind that wouldn’t be out of place in Kevin’s world. She’s wearing a lightly-colored dress. Looking to my right, the man that is presumably her husband (and presently talking with someone to his left) is wearing a suit and suit coat and is lightly brown-skinned and looks fairly stereotypical for his skin color, with very dark green hair. Their two boys seem to be an appropriate merger of the two, with bright red hair (lighter than Nanase’s) for the both of them. The younger boy (the one who’s pointing at me) looks to be about Akiko’s age, I guess, while his brother looks three or four years older. It’s hard to judge while they’re sitting, but I think the whole family is slightly on the short side.

“Jason, it’s rude to point. Oh!” She notices I’m looking at her. “I’m sorry if my boy caused you any discomfort.”

“It’s not a problem.” I turn to face Jason. “Yes, I am the ‘dragon lady.’ But I’d prefer if you called me ‘Saphira.’”

Jason’s mother looks at him. I think I know what that look means. “I’m sorry, miss.” That name works too. He perks up. “Can you breathe fire?”

“No, dragons can’t breathe fire. With a lot of practice, I can imitate it, though.”

“Oh.”

His mother speaks to me again. “If it’s not too much trouble, could we— I mean, my family and I— speak with you after the service today?”

I take a moment to try to figure out why. Then I realize that her family is the source of the Common magic smell in here. “Of course.” I smile, and turn back around.

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That was a much more typical sermon, though this church has embraced technology a lot more than Kevin’s old church. By which I mean they made liberal use of PowerPoint, and not just for a once-per-month presentation that never changes. Not that I can really tell on some things, but I’m pretty sure the sermon will change every week. And I’m pretty sure my questions have been answered, so the only people I need to talk with is the family behind me.

“Saphira?” I hear the mother ask. I turn around.

“Where would you like to speak with me? Keep in mind it’s still snowing.” I hope I don’t have to melt too much snow to get home. Snow takes a while to melt, even with heat magic.
“If it’s alright with you, could you follow us home? I promise it’s not far.”

“I walked here, so I sure hope not. That said…”

Her husband finally speaks. “It’s no problem. Our car can fit five.”

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It turns out ‘our car can fit five’ is exactly correct. The mother (which I now have a name for: Mrs. Jacobs) sat in the back with her kids. I feel a little guilty sitting up front, but I understand a mother’s need to control her kids when they have guests. And from Kevin’s memories, I know not to get offended if the kids say something rude.

Speaking of which, the younger one seems determined to not let me get a chance to relax. “Have you been a dragon your whole life?”

“No.”

“How long, then?”

“A couple of weeks.”

“You were a dragon since you were a couple of weeks old?”

“No, I became a dragon a couple of weeks ago.”

“What were you before that?”

That… is a better question than he realizes. “I’m not quite sure how to phrase my answer. I’ve always been human, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Are you not human anymore?”

“No, dragons are humans. I guess dragons before they become dragons are just not dragons. Sort of like… you go to school, right?”

“Yeah. Only ’cause I have to.”

“Well, that makes you a student. What were you, before you went to school?”

That shuts him up for a bit. Of course, that just means his brother, Jared, gets to ask a question. “Why’d you walk to church? Couldn’t you come with your family?”

“My family doesn’t live around here, and I don’t have a car. And once this whole thing gets going, I hope to mainly get around by flying if it’s too far to walk. But I don’t mind walking a couple of miles.”

26 January 2014
12:23 PM CST

The Jacobs’ house is another average Moperville home. (Not to say they all have the same floor plan, but they’re rather similar.) I guess I really shouldn’t expect anything different at this point.

Mr. Jacobs welcomes me inside. “You’re probably wondering why we wanted you to come home with us.”
“Your entire family is casters.”

Mrs. Jacobs fails to hide her surprise. “I expected the guess, but not the certainty. How did you know?”

“An ability of dragons I failed to mention. I can tell what kind of magic people can use, so long as I’m in close proximity to them. So I can tell that you can all use Common magic, but I don’t know exactly what you can do.”

Suddenly, Jason is the same height as me. Not in a natural growth sort of way. It’s more like he’s stretched, with his legs and torso unnaturally long for the rest of his body. “We can change size!” he exclaims.

“Jason!” his mother says sternly, as she glares at him.

“What? All you said was to only do this at home! And it’s not like the dragon lady didn’t know already!”

“And Dad can’t change size, either.” Jared explains in a more deadpan tone.

I guess the boys got their magic from their mother, then. Although I’m wondering what Mr. Jacobs can do now. I should probably clarify for them… “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to. I already know plenty of casters, and, well…”

“Thank you,” Mr. Jacobs replies. Turning to his wife, he continues, “I didn’t hide it from her. I don’t think I could if I tried, given what she said about her resistance, anyway.” From his words, I’m guessing he can use illusions. Possibly information magic as well, if he can predict his son that well. Or maybe that just comes with raising the boy.

Mrs. Jacobs pinches the bridge of her nose. “It’s probably for the best.” She turns to face me. “I think the answer is no, but would you like if everyone showcased their magic?”

“Right now? Only if they plan on fighting monsters or whatever comes. Eventually? Only if they want to. I view magic as a talent or skill. Sort of like being good at math. It’s not constantly on display, but if you want to use it or show off, go right ahead. Although for families, it might be best if the parents make that decision,” I say, looking pointedly at Jason.

“You think there will be monsters to fight?” Mr. Jacobs looks concerned.

“Maybe? It’s not like Moperville hasn’t already had its share of monsters, and, well… When a dragon awakens, it’s usually a sign of hard times to come. The running theological theory is that God knows what’s coming and prepares people to take care of it. Because dragons are always at the right place at the right time. We just do our best to be prepared for when that time comes, so that we don’t have to take care of things the hard way. Because doing it wrong can mean very bad things for everyone involved.” Dragons have lost a lot of battles over the millennia. There’s a lot of experience behind our rules of engagement, and the last rule is that if you can’t win, you run, taking as many allies along as you can. Because if you can’t win the first time, information is very important in winning the second time.

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Al decided he should interview me today (Sunday) after I got home. Since there’s no way Ms. Pompoms would let him in the house, we did the interview in the park (yay for heat magic!). The snow made for an interesting backdrop. I wonder if we’ll have school off tomorrow, or if Illinois is as confident as Kevin heard Ohio is regarding getting vehicles through snow. Maryland certainly
wasn’t confident at all; we lost school when the snow didn’t even stick.

Most of the interview wasn’t really worth putting in my journal. I think Sean gave Al a checklist, and he mostly stuck to it. Al certainly had some training on this prior to coming here, anyway. There was one section that is worth recording, at least if I change in the coming [long period of time]. Or even in the short term.

“How do you think you influence your friends?” Al has been questioning me for over an hour at this point. I think we finally got to the point where he’ll ask me about how I view myself, rather than how I view other people and all that stuff.

“Mostly, I’m the sole Christian influence on their lives, so I need to set a really good example.”

“And how do you do that?”

“Firstly, by doing my best to be a good person. They already know I’m a Christian, so I should do my best to at least offset any negative views they have of Christians. And if they have any religious questions for me, I should be as well-informed as possible to either answer their questions or point them to a good source of answers.”

“I see. Aside from that, how do you interact with others?”

“I’m… a bit of an introvert. I’m fine with larger groups of friends, but I try to stay away from crowds if at all possible.”

“You chose to change dragon policy.”

“I’m aware of what that means with regard to crowds. It just… had to be done. But I’m going to do my best to live a quiet life, when I don’t have to deal with that.”

“Perhaps we should invite another dragon to train you for crowd handling.” Probably Akiko or one of the other dragons with more public professions. I doubt the Sociologist (who likes to stay unnoticed) or the materials engineer—that is, Al—could teach me all that well for that.

“I mean, if they have to…”

“Lastly, how do you see yourself?”

“I’m—give me a minute.” I’m not the same person as Kevin. I could see that even before I had my announcement. I’m certainly more outgoing than he is. And thanks to my talk with Magus, I have loads more confidence (not in myself, but self-confidence is weaker than what I have, in my opinion). But that’s not to say Kevin and I are entirely different in personality.

“I’m… not perfect. But I’m doing the best I can to better myself. I like to keep to myself a lot, but if my friends want to do something, I’ll jump on it. Although if there’s any real risk involved for no real reward, I might be a bit more cautious or try to talk them out of it. Regarding intellectual pursuits, I like to learn as much as I can, so long as I have a bit of interest in the subject or I might be able to use the knowledge somehow. I think that both magic and technology can and should be used to improve people’s lives, and I like to work on stuff the general public will use, rather than just one industry.”

“Is there anything else you would wish to share?”

“Honestly, I’m done talking.”
He laughs, a deep, hearty laugh. “That is fair. I have one more thing I wish to talk with you about…”

“No, I won’t go out with you.”

He looks at me. I think he understands how I knew that was coming. “You should at least let me say my piece!”

“Look, I have a lot of respect for you. Protecting your town even in the midst of two world wars, discovering the materials we have to thank for modern electronics… and defeating a vampire. But I won’t date someone more than five times my age.”

“I’m only one hundred six years old!”

“My point stands. Look, I won’t go out with you right now. I still have too much to learn. But maybe, when the gap is only double my age… I’ll consider it.”

27 January 2014
3:45 PM CST

On Monday, after school, Sean and Al decided to take me and Elliot to have a chat with Abraham. Since this is something we’re doing in our official capacity as dragons, but Elliot doesn’t want people to know he’s a dragon, three of us are flying and Elliot is riding on Sean’s back. Al’s dragon form is much like mine in general morphology, though it’s both slimmer and more muscular than my own. In addition, he has spikes running down his neck and the upper portion of his back. The spikes are sharp near his head, but become rounder and more like a ripple the lower they are on his body.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Elliot asks nervously.

Sean responds. **Abraham does not know good dragons. He was raised under the shadow of Fred and fell into his sleep not long after the fall of Fred. When next he awoke, dragons were nowhere to be found. I am certain that Saphira’s announcement has put him on edge. We should reassure him of our good intentions.**

Since the location of the government’s magic-oriented holding facility is still a secret, Abraham has been moved to a less-secure normal holding facility in Moperville. To facilitate the transfer, he is now guarded by a small number of powerful wizards. I’m not sure they’ll be necessary when four dragons are in the same building.

We land in the nearly-empty parking lot outside of the facility, taking care to not damage the pavement. (Sean can fill any cracks we inadvertently create.) The guards outside of the building are visibly nervous as we touch down. I guess this is the largest number of dragons flying together since nearly 800 years ago. After Elliot dismounts, the other three of us shift to human form, and the four of us enter the main lobby.

Honestly, it looks a lot like I’d expect, given the depiction in the Phoenix Wright games.

We wait a bit of time for the guards to set up a room for us to talk with Abraham in private. Still, it’s in a government building, so they’ll likely learn everything we say here. Public speech only. Finally, they lead us to a room that looks an awful lot like an interviewing room for suspects (thankfully with no table). Abraham is sitting in one of the five folding chairs in the room that are presently set in a circle.

Abraham glares at us. “They told me I’d be speaking with dragons. I thought at least one of these
chairs were for wizards. How did you get them to let four of you into this building?!” he half-shouts. Then he notices that one of us is Elliot. “Hold on. Weren’t you the cursed man I found last year? You can’t possibly be a dragon.”

I answer before Elliot can respond. “He wasn’t, but it turns out that a possible consequence of using the Diamond twice is becoming a dragon. Probably from the Draconic magic you stuck in the Diamond. Which, by the way, is likely the reason the removed curse came to life instead of vanishing entirely as you intended.”

His eyes widen. “My… my mentor’s diamond…. He said there was something special about it. Could that have been it?”

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I believe my mentor said, one time, that the diamond had a secret. I never learned that secret. Perhaps he used something from a dragon?”

I look at Sean and Al. Al shrugs. Sean seems just as puzzled. He answers Abraham, “To the dragons’ knowledge, dragon scales are useful for powerful wands and artifacts. However, a dragon scale should not inherently impart any sort of magic to any spell imbued in them. It is feasible that your mentor would have obtained a dragon scale, but that alone should not be responsible for the properties of the Dewitchery Diamond.”

While Sean is talking, Elliot and I decide to sit in two of the chairs present, with myself immediately next to Abraham (to his left) and Elliot to my left. Al and Sean notice when he finishes and sit as well, with Sean to Abraham’s right.

Abraham looks at all of us. “Forgive me. I would like to verify that all of you are, in fact, dragons, before I continue this line of questions.”

Thankfully, we prepared for this. Al gives a countdown on his fingers. When he hits zero, we speak in unison. “Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales.” Abraham is astonished as our clothes are replaced with dragon scales. We all used the default version of the spell.

A few moments pass. Abraham finally speaks, facing me. “So it is true. You are the heir to that abomination,” he says firmly.

“I don’t think of him all that highly either. He deserved to die, for what he did. But I will do my best to change people’s opinion of heat dragons specifically, and dragons in general.” From what I know of his past, well… I summon my cross object to my hand and hold it out to him. “Here. Go on, take it. This is… one of my draconic objects. A part of me, of who I am.” Abraham stares at it as though it’s a trap. “I promise, there’s no trick here. I want you to trust me.”

He cautiously takes it from my hand, holding it as though it’ll burst into flame at any moment. A fair precaution, I suppose. “What is this, exactly?”

“I… designed it, before I became a dragon. The symbolism, down to the color, is all deliberate. It was produced by a 3D printer, if you know what that is.”

“Not particularly, but I have plenty of time to research that later.” Abraham turns it over and reads the reference on the back. I wonder if he knows the verse? He then hands it back to me and turns to face the rest of our group. “Explain to me why dragons returning is a good thing.” I guess we’ll be here a while.

27 January 2014
It took a long time, but I think we finally answered all of Abraham’s questions. We left the same way we arrived (after ending our Partial Skin to Scales spells), landing at the park. However, Sean stopped Elliot and I from heading back to our respective residences after shifting back to human form.

“I would like for the two of you to hear of this opportunity prior to the end of my stay in Moperville.

"On occasion, areas are struck with such disasters that magic is the preferred method of cleanup. For natural and technological disasters, the best cleanup method is frequently Draconic magic. In particular, have you two been informed of the disaster affecting the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan?"

I raise my hand and slightly curl my fingers so that I’m pointing towards Sean. “That was that thing with the earthquake and tsunami, right? It happened in Kevin’s world, too.”

“Didn’t that happen three years ago?” Elliot asks. “How is that relevant?”

“I ask because the technology-based cleanup is still ongoing, and Akiko has recently secured the dragons a chance to help with the cleanup by utilizing our magic, although she did not use any of those words with the Japanese government.”

“I’m guessing that’s because Japan thinks magic is for entertainment only?”

Elliot just stares at the two of us. I answer his question before he asks. “It’s in the Mymoir. Japan has known about magic publicly for centuries, but only uses it in theater and other entertainment industries. Why do you think they have so many magic-based anime and the like?” (In Kevin’s world, it’s probably just because of their mysticism.)

“Oookaay, then.” Elliot turns to Sean. “So what would we do, for this ‘opportunity’?"

“The date range is not specifically set, but as we now have a heat dragon that is in school, if you would like to help, you would travel to Japan during your ‘spring break’.”

Elliot interrupts Sean. “Why specifically a heat dragon?”

At this point, I’m pretty sure Elliot knows next to nothing about nuclear reactors. “Probably because nuclear reactors make a ton of heat and getting too close is dangerous. If the cleanup is still ongoing and dragons are going to help, my guess is that we’re going to remove the radioactive metal that is causing the problem from existence. That takes mass dragons, but making it safe to do so probably takes a lot more than just mass dragons.”

“You are close in your estimate. However, barrier dragons will protect any dragons at the site. Your job as a heat dragon would be to allow water to drain away, as the workers presently maintain a ‘submerged status’ for the uranium, which reduces the mass dragons’ ability to approach and remove the correct mass, as we will not use our dragon forms for this task.”

“That sounds… really hard. I’m not sure I can remove that much heat. You do realize my range is high, right?”

“Akiko began her work to obtain the permit before you awakened. However, any further assurance we can grant the Japanese government is appreciated.”
Elliot steps forward. “And what exactly would I do? I can’t manipulate anything.”

“Your sensing would be just as appreciated as that of a chemical dragon for determining the presence of uranium and radioactive contamination. Perhaps more so, with your additional senses. Regardless, I would like for you to extend this invitation to Ellen. You can give me your responses through the Mymoir.”

I raise my hand. “Uh…”

“What is your question?”

“How exactly are we getting to Japan?”

“Your travel and other expenses will be paid by the power plant company, as part of their contract with Akiko.”

Elliot doesn’t look terribly interested. “I’ll… think about it.” He turns to leave, and I follow him.

Once we’re a short distance away, I ask him, “You aren’t planning on going, are you?”

“I mean, sure, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but… I really don’t like travelling.”

“You’ve got to try new things at some point. I’m pretty sure I’ll be going. I mean, even if I can’t really help, I’ll still get to see Japan!” And a nuclear reactor! A busted-up one, but still! “Though I’ll probably want to do nature stuff, if there’s any time for tourism. I’m not really one for crowds.”

“Eh, you make a good point, but… well, I’ll tell Ellen, anyway.”

28 January 2014
4:06 PM CST

Today, I got out of school and actually had a bit of time to myself before Sean’s notification to come to the park. I’m guessing this means he’s leaving today. I thought he’d stay longer since there are two dragons to check, but having Al along probably helped. Plus he probably thinks Elliot and I can keep an eye out for each other.

I approach the designated spot to find the other four already there (including Ellen). I think I can hear them chatting about the general state of things in Moperville. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Near the top of the list is convincing Mr. Verres (and the rest of his department) that this is a good idea, because I’m pretty sure he’s still very against this whole thing, given what he said to Tedd before I arrived.

“You’re late,” Ellen says as I join the group.

“I walked. Not everyone has a car.”

“Most people do.”

“I do not.”

Elliot sighs. “Sean, you move so much, I don’t think anyone expects you to have much of anything.”

“It is true that my lack of material possessions is instrumental in my travels. I understand that the lifestyle is not for everyone.”
I laugh. “Yeah, no, I like having some place to come home to.” ...I just realized I’m thinking of Moperville as a ‘home away from home.’ My ‘home’ is still back in Maryland, but I’m never going to be able to really return there. If I’m going to keep Moperville as ‘my city,’ as I said in my announcement, I need to start thinking of this place as home. Which means I probably should spend some time getting to know the area.

“Anyway, everyone has been gathered to talk about what to watch out for, based on your personalities.” I think Al slightly improved his English from interviewing people here. He’s a little less formal, at any rate.

“First, Saphira.” Sean faces me head-on. “You are kind but maintain healthy skepticism regarding anyone you do not think of as a friend. However, you may be entirely too trusting of your friends. In particular, I am thinking of what you told Rhoda. Similarly, you may be too reckless when you do not perceive a risk, although you may need to be a little more reckless if there is any true danger.”

“I… guess I’ll do my best to work on that? I hope Elliot can at least back me up.”

“That may work, but he has many of the same shortcomings as you do.” He turns to face Elliot. “You are sometimes too willing to help. Leaping into combat you are not prepared for may kill you one day. Remember that retreat is a valid tactic. Additionally… I advise that you protect Ashley. The time may come when you will need her help, as she is the best candidate for a Holy caster that I have come across recently.”

Ellen jumps in. “Hold on a sec. What’s a Holy caster?”

I have the best example… and I realize just now that I forgot to talk about this earlier. How much stuff am I forgetting?! “You know Nanase’s Guardian Angel spell? That’s a Divine spell. That’s why it’s guaranteed to burn her out—she doesn’t have that kind of magic, normally, so casting it requires an energy conversion that takes more than she has. The fact that it’s a Divine spell is also why there are a bunch of prerequisites for casting it.”

Ellen’s holding her head now. “You answered another question I might have had, but mostly you just made me more confused.”

Elliot raises his hand. “I’ve got this.” Really. I guess he did some reading on the Guardian Angel spell earlier? Because I don’t know what else would prompt him to read the Mymoir. Unless Sean brought this up to him earlier and repeated it for my and Ellen’s sake. “Remember how there are four kinds of magic? Common, Draconic, Genetic, Divine.” He raises fingers for each. “Common is what most people have. Draconic is… obvious. Genetic is what Grace can use, along with all Uryuoms. Divine magic is… well… I’m not claiming to believe this whole ‘Christian’ narrative, but there are magic beings in this world beyond immortals, and they fuel Divine casters. Divine magic is further divided into Holy and Evil, based pretty much entirely on intentions. So Guardian Angel would be a Holy spell, for example.

"Divine casters are divided in pretty much the same way. Evil casters become, well, that, because they asked for it. They lose all control over themselves because they give it to the being empowering them. These people are the most deadly foes for dragons, because we can’t resist their magic, although they can’t resist ours, either. This is half of why dragons don’t talk about Divine magic: it increases the chance that bad people will ask to become Evil casters, instead of just being bad people. The other half of the reason is that it lowers the chance of a person becoming a Holy caster or getting Holy spells, since they know it exists, and Holy stuff only comes if they don’t specifically ask for it or act with the intention of getting it. So when Nanase got her Guardian Angel spell, it was only because she didn’t know she could get it, but she was in the right mindset
for the spell.”

“That doesn’t seem fair at all! You’re saying Nanase was lucky she could save my life!”

Sean steps in before Elliot or myself could respond. “It was not luck. What it was, I cannot say without involving religion to some degree, but she received that spell because she was able and willing to use it. But the restrictions Elliot spoke of are true, to the knowledge of dragons.” As always, dragons only know what we’ve observed. Elliot and I broke a lot of supposed restrictions for dragons awakening.

“I feel I should clarify one last point,” Al says. “Anyone can get Divine spells, but non-Divine casters are subject to restrictions when they use said spells. Divine casters can use the spells at any time, although that is likely because they are nearly always in the right frame of mind to use their spells.”

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“Lastly, Ellen,” Sean continues. “You are not a full dragon and cannot access the Mymoir, so I cannot hold you to our standards. However, you should accept that, if you are not so close to other dragons, you are a stronger defense than most and should not be distracted fighting small targets. At the very least, you should be available for contact if there is an emergency.”

“And in English?” I guess Ellen doesn’t have tons of experience with overly proper English.

Al responds, “Without the Mymoir, other dragons cannot reliably contact you, so we can’t expect you to act on the same priorities.”

Elliot stops him with his hand to Al’s chest. He then continues the response, “Remember when Dex summoned that huge monster and I kept it from hurting people while Grace and Greg took down Dex? That’s basically what a dragon is supposed to do. We can take harder hits and hit harder, so we take care of the bigger threat, even if it won’t solve the problem.”

“But I don’t have a full dragon form!” She pauses. “Although, I guess I do still heal when I transform. Okay, I’ll take that.”

“That’s not to say you can’t take smaller targets, but you need to be careful about getting distracted,” I say.

“You’re one to talk,” Ellen retorts.

“I know! I know. Just, something to watch out for.”

No one’s talking, so… “I think I should let you know… I’m planning on helping with the Fukushima thing. I haven’t talked with anyone else about it yet, but I’ll try to get permissions to leave then.”

“Remember that you will require a passport,” Sean responds automatically.

“Oh. Right. I… guess I should get on that. I’ll need it even if I can’t help in Japan.”

“If I come, can I bring Nanase?” Ellen asks.

“The dragon policy is that all assisting dragons are equally paid. You are free to use your pay however you wish. However, non-dragons cannot visit the power plant.”
I stare at Sean, my mouth half open. “We get paid?!” Elliot exclaims.

“Dragons are paid for tasks that require payment, as an offer for a free service would be refused. If you help with volunteer efforts, you will not be paid. This was only possible through corporate means. Akiko can clarify further.”

“How much pay?”

Al stares at Ellen, trying to get a read for her motivation. “If the amount is first on your mind, you should not come. Greed should not be a motivator for dragons. However, the amount should be well sufficient for any travel expenses for yourself and a friend. And… we are aware that some dragons may not currently have sufficient funds for the travel, as the dragons will not be paid until the company confirms that our efforts are successful. Therefore, Akiko will credit any attending dragons the necessary amount for travel.”
Amusement

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Once we (Sean, Al, Elliot, Ellen, and myself) finished discussing financials for the Fukushima project, we said our goodbyes and Sean flew home while Al headed off to the airport. Al expressed disappointment that he couldn’t attend the party he heard about, but said he needed to get to work soon. I think he’s a project leader? Anyway, back to business as usual. Right now, that means training with Sensei Greg at the dojo.

“Good news, everyone!” Greg shouts as we walk inside. “Magical Martial Arts will be a thing!”

Ellen looks at him. “Um…”

“I haven’t nailed down the name or place yet. I just wanted you to know I’ll start it up soon.”

“Let me guess,” I say in a bored tone, “you cashed in the gold?”

“Yeah. But doesn’t that lower the price of gold? Making more of it?”

“Mass dragons can get rid of it just as easily. He can convert some of his money into gold when he gets home, then destroy an equal amount to what he gave you. I guarantee he has sufficient cash to do that, just not in American dollars.”

“I guess that works,” he says, shrugging. “Anyway—Saphira, you need to do some harder exercise. I’m thinking of putting you on the One Punch Man training regimen.”

“I have no idea what that is.”

“You don’t–!” Greg exclaims. “You have an anime to watch later.”

“Alright, if Susan will let me take a break from Star Trek.” The Next Generation is absurdly long. Susan has made good progress with Eragon. And appropriately mocked my name.

“The One Punch Man training is!” Greg pauses for dramatic effect. “100 push-ups! 100 sit-ups! 100 squats! And a 10-kilometer run! Every day! And no A/C in the summer or winter, to train the mind!”

“I don’t think I can do any of that, except the last part.”

“Heat magic is cheating.”

“Then no, sorry. I can train my mind enough by making spells. Besides, I live with other people. And for the physical part, maybe I can work up to that, but right now about one-fifth might be more appropriate.”

“I will take your opinion into consideration, but I will not let the student set the training. Let’s go!”

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Normally, I stop exercising when it starts to hurt. Sensei pushed me until I couldn’t move. I guess Sean really motivated him. And he made it harder each time I called him Greg, so no more doing that. I know he means well, but I still really don’t like exercising that much. I don’t get what
people mean by ‘runner’s high’: Kevin never experienced it, no matter how much he exercised.

Even with how much he pushed me today, Sensei made it clear that exercising in human form only once per week isn’t enough, despite the fact that I also have gym class every schoolday. So I’ll be training in his dojo on Wednesdays and flying on Saturdays (or a make-up day if it rains), and doing some portion of the One Punch Man training regimen on all other days. For now, I get my choice of either 20 push-ups, sit-ups, and squats or a 5-km run daily. I’m sure that’ll ramp up as I get better. My initial preference is the run whenever it’s not raining or snowing.

I finally finished my object detection spell. I tested it with minor heat flares for objects of a specific size. Still no object tracking, but that’ll probably take a ton of math. Even with what I have, I should be able to check when something stops moving, and I can think of one useful spell for that sort of thing. Now to make it.

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Thursday, lunch time.

“Elliot: you got any further details on this get-together for tomorrow?” My speech is a weird mix of vocabulary and slang, I know.

“Yes. Tedd, could you make muffins for everybody? No preference on the kind.”

“Of course! I’ll make a variety.” From Tedd’s face, I’m sure they’ll all be Muffins of Doom, probably using the dragon scale I gave him. It’s a party for Ellen, so you get one guess as to which spell he’ll use. Elliot doesn’t know about the scale, so I wonder what he thinks the face means.

“Great! It’ll be at my place at six, if that’s alright with everyone.”

We (Tedd, Ashley and I) all give our variations on “no problem here.”

“Okay. It’s not a party or anything, but we’re not planning on going anywhere. Just having fun with everyone. My parents won’t be home, but they trust us not to make a mess. We’ll order pizza, and we’ve got some games and Netflix if people want to watch that. Beyond that, pretty much everyone that’ll be there has magic, so…”

“I’ll be sure to bring some magic watches for Ashley.” He’s already told her what those are. I’m not sure they’ll be necessary with his Muffins of Doom, but maybe he wants to throw them off the scent. Or he’s just not ready yet with the dragon scale flakes.

“Thank you!” I think that would actually be the first time she’s used magic. With that in mind…”

“Uh… there’s no guarantee you can actually use the watches. I mean, there’s a one in three chance you can’t.”

Elliot glares at me. “Don’t jinx it!”

I lean back, holding up my hands. “Hey, I just don’t want her to be disappointed. I’m certain I can’t use them. Being able to use magic should be a pleasant surprise.”

“Don’t worry, Ashley,” Tedd reassures her. “I’ll bring wands in case that’s a problem.”

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From Elliot’s report, everyone can come. If Tedd’s got his dragon scale flakes working, I’m sure Justin will be a little less enthusiastic about the get-together. Susan and I are a bit early, but only three people aren’t here yet (from the ten that reported their intent to come).

Elliot answers the door. If he’s here, I bet Ashley’s here. Which means her parents gave him a bit less trouble this time. “Hey, Elliot!” I greet him.

“Glad you could make it.” He lifts his head to look behind me. “You too, Susan.” Then he notices the gift-wrapped box (slightly smaller than a breadbox) in my arms. “You know, you really didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s not just from me. You helped too.”

“Am I the only one that doesn’t know what’s in the box?” Susan asks, frustrated.

“No. I’ve only talked about it in the Mymoir,” I tell her as we walk inside. That’s probably the most I’ve told her about the box today.

Everyone else here is sitting in the family room in front of the TV. Tedd, Grace, and Sarah make up those presently absent. Ellen and Ashley are talking up a storm. “You can put the box in the kitchen,” Elliot says as we pass it.

“Okay.” I take a brief trip to leave the box on the counter.

When I enter the couch area, I hear Ellen say, “You wanna see it?”

I turn to Elliot. “See what?” I ask, as Ashley replies “Sure!” to Ellen.

Ellen stands up, her arms out to her sides and her legs slightly spread. I note that she’s turned so that her back is not facing anything. Then she shifts to her dragon form. I think this is the first time Ashley could’ve seen it.

“That’s awesome!” Ashley shouts.

**I know, right!?** Ellen replies excitedly, her lips pulled back in a grin.

I raise my hand. “Hold on. You weren’t this excited when I awakened you. What changed your mind?”

**It’s possible you might be something of a killjoy. We were both really excited, but you make it hard to express that.**

“Have you ever thought you might be too serious all the time?” Elliot queries me.

“Oh, come on! People can be expressive around me!”

“No, not really,” Nanase responds, as Justin shakes his head.

“You might need to lighten up a bit,” I hear from a voice behind me. “Sorry about not ringing the doorbell,” Sarah continues sheepishly. “Your door was unlocked, and…”

**It’s not a problem.**

“I hold that I need to be serious about my magic. I can hurt someone if I’m not careful.”

Elliot gets in front of me and stares into my eyes. “I understand that Draconic magic is dangerous.
But if you can’t relax, you’ll go crazy, and we don’t need another crazy heat dragon.”

**You’ve read a lot about all of us, right? Do you remember my double-date with Nanase, Tedd and Grace?**

That was brought on because… Tedd was obsessing over his magic research. Have I been like that? I know Kevin thought of himself as sort of a mix of Tedd, Elliot, and Susan. Tedd and Susan because… because of exactly the sort of thing they’re talking about. I guess I might be a little too serious, but throwing caution to the wind is also a bad idea. “Fine,” I pout. “I’ll make an effort to be less serious. But I’m still going to be careful about my magic.”

Elliot steps back. I didn’t realize he’d been looking at me the whole time. “We’re not asking you to be careless, but I don’t want to see you in trouble because you can’t de-stress.”

Just then, I notice that Tedd and Grace have arrived behind me, both setting down a few trays of muffins. “Hey, Elliot, your front door was open, so I hope you don’t mind that I closed it.”

Sarah raises her hands to her mouth. “Shoot! How’d I forget that?”

“I didn’t know we were bringing presents!” Grace exclaims from the kitchen.

“That’s the only one,” I answer loudly. “It’s a gift for Ellen, so I thought this would be an appropriate time to give it to her.”

“Since everyone’s here, should I just open it, or should we do something else first?”

“We might want to order the pizza first,” Elliot responds. He knows what’s in the box. This’ll take a while.

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Pizza ordered. I was thankfully not outvoted on having one Hawaiian pizza. Baked pineapple tastes amazing. Anyway, we’re all gathered in the family room, with Ellen on a folding chair in the middle (in front of the TV), holding her gift in her lap.

“I thought I was clear that this wasn’t a birthday party,” she complains.

“I’d give you this around now regardless, but I think this is an appropriate time. I mean, it is a one-year celebration of your existence, right? That’s the whole reason I brought it up in the first place.”

“Just open it already,” Justin says impatiently.

“No, I had a lot of those boxes. I… save most containers I get.” I look away, embarrassed.

“I was going to say, it’s awfully heavy for clothes.” Ellen opens the box. “Okay, now I’m more confused.” She pulls out the plain black trapper-keeper held within. It’s presently zipped shut because I didn’t want any of the contents falling out.

“Open it up,” Elliot prompts her. He sounds a bit excited. He was right earlier when he said he didn’t contribute much, but he did buy the binder and the commercially available contents.
Ellen unzips the trapper-keeper and opens it. The way she opened it, the people sitting to her right (Tedd, Grace, and Sarah) could see the insides before she could, and Grace’s eyes lit up immediately. Ellen looks at the first contents in the binder, then looks at me and Elliot. “How did you get all this?”

“Sean and Al brought most of it with them. Elliot bought the binder, pocket page, and paper, and I put it all together. This is a gift to you, the only half-dragon, from all of the dragons.”

Ellen stares at the pocket page (made to hold nine trading cards, currently holding eight dragon scales of all colors) for a bit. Then she hastily puts the binder to the side—on the floor—as her eyes tear up, and she runs and hugs Elliot and myself tightly, in that order. (We were sitting side-by-side to Sarah’s right.) I think this is the first time I’ve been hugged by someone that wasn’t in my immediate or extended family. It feels great, and I can feel myself smiling as I return the hug.

Ashley’s bent over the binder. “Can you tell us what this says?” she asks when Ellen lets go of me. “I can’t really tell, beyond the different colors of scales. And the paper is just as incomprehensible.” Well, of course you can’t. Everything in that binder (beyond the tabs on the dividers, which are labeled with each Draconic element) is written in Draconic.

“If you want, Ellen, I can give general explanations for each scale. For a basic wand, the entire spell will be transcribed on the wand, but all that’s there for these is a standard Mymoir reference. The rest of the spell is recorded both in the Mymoir and on the paper in the binder.”

“And I’m guessing each scale is the same color as the element of the spell?”

“Yeah,” Elliot answers her. “Al was actually able to make it so that most of the scales come from the dragon that wrote each spell.” I was pretty impressed he was able to get so much done on such short notice.

“We may as well get started. I’m sure everyone wants to know what these do.” Ellen pulls out the red scale. “How about the force spell?”

“Jorge’s Antigravity. A simple enough spell: an object you define will not be affected by gravity for the duration you define. Generally, force dragons will use this to effortlessly move heavy objects.”

Ellen smiles mischievously. “I can think of a few other uses.”

I give her a wary look. “We tried to pick or make spells that were either general use or just nice to have. Most of these aren’t meant for combat, but I’m sure someone creative enough could come up with ways to use them for fighting.”

Ellen puts the red scale back in its pocket. “Continuing around the rainbow…” she says as she pulls out the orange scale.

“Lei’s Universal Splitter. Define the object you want to cut, the thickness of the cut, and the line you want to cut along, and it will split the object, as long as it’s in range. This is a ridiculously complicated spell, since it can work with complex objects. If you had the range, you could split a building with it, not that I’d suggest trying with anything you don’t want to wreck. Alternatively, you can use it to make clean cuts through complicated stuff like pizza.”

“I’m starting to understand why you wanted me to have this. This is really nice. What’s the next one do?” She holds up the yellow scale.

“Al’s Charge Manipulator. This is a complicated spell that Al’s constantly modifying. Basically, it
searches for the section of an electronic device that can hold the greatest charge—usually the power source—and either fully charges or fully discharges it, your choice. You can fully charge your phone with it or discharge the car battery on your foe’s getaway vehicle.”

“I guess there’s no need to worry about charging cables anymore.”

“It’s probably healthier for your batteries to charge them in the way the manufacturer intended. This is more for emergencies.”

“Oh. What happens if I use it on something that doesn’t normally hold a charge?”

“Probably nothing. The only reason Al has to keep changing it is because people keep sticking larger capacitors in stuff.”

“Alright. Chemical,” Ellen says, holding up the green scale.

“Hui’s Flavor Changer. Though that might translate differently for someone with a better vocabulary than myself. Anyway, it’s pretty self-explanatory: pick something, preferably food, and it’ll change the flavor to something you imagine. It won’t do anything about texture, though. But it’s nice when you don’t have much choice in what you’re eating. If you’re wondering, this one’s on a 1-hour time limit, in case you accidentally change something that isn’t food.”

Ellen’s getting the hang of this. She’s holding up the blue scale now.

“Saphira’s Bug Zapper. It’s… not the greatest right now. I haven’t had the time to work on object tracking beyond determining when something stops moving. Basically, it picks out objects with internal heat that are roughly, eh, this size—” I hold my right index finger and thumb about one millimeter apart “—to about this size.” I widen the gap to about a centimeter. “When they stop moving within a couple of inches of your skin, it fries them to a crisp.”

Grace stares at me. “That’s… kind of…”

“How much time have you spent in ‘the great outdoors’?”

She squints at me. “A lot?”

“And what’s your relationship with flies and mosquitos?”

“Oh. Now I’m jealous of Ellen,” Sarah says. “But what if they don’t land on you?”

“That’s why it works within a couple of inches of your skin. The spell doesn’t care if you’re moving, so long as the bug isn’t. So if you move to smack it and it flies away when your hand is only an inch away, it’s already too late. And if it lands on the edge of your plate, just bring your finger close enough to zap it.” I pause. “Kevin’s done a lot of camping.”

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“Moving on…” Ellen declares, holding the violet scale.

“Emil’s Air Filter. This spell creates a barrier on the inside of your nostrils that only lets clean air through. I wouldn’t suggest using it when your sense of smell is important.”

“Yay. Now I can sit in the smoking section.” Ellen doesn’t seem very excited.

“It’s useful for smog, pollen, and foods that taste great but smell bad, like the durian fruit. And
almost any sort of airborne chemical weapon, if you’re unlucky enough to be in such a place.”

Ellen looks thoughtful as she grabs the white scale. “Okay, that’s sounding a bit better. Light.”

“Akiko’s Basic Invisibility. It makes the chosen object generate light to match incoming light on the opposite side. Beware that it doesn’t perfectly match what would happen with light traveling through the appropriate space, so you can still see the edges if you pay attention.”

“That seems… less than useful.”

“Use it on your chair.”

“Uh… okay.” Ellen stands up holding the scale and closes her eyes. Then she opens them and, staring at the chair, she forcefully declares, “Akiko’s Basic Invisibility.”

I look at where the chair… is, but no longer appears to be. The spell is a lot more effective than Akiko’s notes implied, although it’s still readily apparent to my heat senses. I can still see the edges if I look for them, but I don’t think most people would notice objects with this spell active if they didn’t know to look.

“Wow. How long does the spell last?” Nanase asks. Everyone is visibly surprised.

“Until Ellen ends it. A lot of these spells are ongoing effects that Ellen needs to consciously end. Unlike Common magic, Draconic magic needs to declare a process for reversing a spell’s effects for it to properly end. Those that aren’t ongoing should be fairly obvious.”

Ashley looks like she’s fantasizing something. “Does it work on people?”

“I wouldn’t suggest using it in a hazardous location, but yes. Just be careful not to get in someone’s way while it’s active. And of course, anything you interact with will look like a ghost is moving it.” Ashley looks more excited the more I talk.

“And the last one?” Ellen holds up the black scale. She’s sitting on her still-invisible chair.

“Meriam’s Eavesdropping. Use it, and you can hear everything the target says as if they were right next to you. The spell replicates the sound on a slight delay, so don’t use it when you could hear the target anyway. The target has to stay in range the whole time, but the target doesn’t have to be a person.” Now Nanase has a mischievous grin on her face. “I don’t know how all of the spells were picked, but it’s a safe bet that some kept in mind that you like monster hunting.”

“That was… quite the gift,” Tedd remarks. I wonder if he’s thinking of his gifts to Grace last year.

“Like I said, it’s from all the dragons. And without something like this, Ellen has a ton of magic she can’t use. It’s like if you couldn’t make wands and didn’t have access to any magic items.”

“I can see why you gave it to her. I’m just saying it’s quite the gift.”

“So!” Justin declares. “There are warm muffins in the kitchen, I’m hungry, and the pizza won’t get here for a while.”

I remember what happened last time Tedd answered the door for pizza while transformed. From the apprehensive look on his face, he does too, and he got the dragon scale flakes working. But I don’t want to give it away, and Tedd’s not saying anything…

I walk over to whisper to him. “If Elliot answers the door, it should be fine, right?” After all, the
delivery person should just think it’s Ellen answering the door.

Tedd’s face relaxes, and I guess Grace heard me because she replies to Justin, “Sounds good to me!” I guess it’s time to get this train wreck underway.

Nanase slides next to me. “What were you whispering to Tedd?”

I could tell her, but she’s about to find out anyway… “Don’t worry about it.”

“But—!” I hold my finger to her lips.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.”

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Justin’s already made his way to the kitchen with Grace right behind him and most of the rest of the party in tow. Tedd is staying where he is. I figure I may as well eat a muffin; I’ll resist any magic in it anyway.

I reach the kitchen to find everyone else standing around while Grace explains what each muffin variety is, pointing to each in turn: “… blueberry, and that tray is plain, and that tray is chocolate chip!” Each tray probably has about two dozen muffins piled high, which is a pretty good yield from one scale. I’m surprised Tedd didn’t make them all blueberry to disguise the blue scale flakes. Maybe he’s a better baker than I thought.

Before Grace finished speaking, Justin, Sarah, Elliot and Ashley grabbed muffins of their choice (Justin and Ashley grabbed blueberry, Elliot plain, and Sarah chocolate). In quick succession they all take a bite, and all but Elliot are FV5’d. None of them notice at first, until Susan shouts, “What the hell, Tedd!?” Jig’s up.

Grace answers for him. “Remember how I said last year at my party that Tedd’s food additives were only theoretical? Not anymore.”

Tedd appears at the doorway. “Hey, it worked!” he exclaims, smiling.

“Then why am I not transformed?” Elliot asks.

I stare at him. “Elliot, you’re a dragon.”

“Oh, right, magic resistance.”

Susan’s still mad. “Seriously, Tedd, what the hell? You thought this would be a good time for an experiment?”

“Uh… yes?” Tedd replies quietly.

Sarah speaks up. “It’s not that bad, guys, really. And I’m sure he has a wand to end the spell with him.” She should be pretty used to this sort of thing, given her occupation last summer.

“Yeah, I do. It’s only supposed to last eight hours anyway, but the muffins will all do that.”

I squeeze to the front and grab a blueberry muffin. “Well, I for one want to see how good Tedd’s baking is.” I go to take a bite, then hesitate. I just promised everyone I’d learn to relax a bit, and I’m sure it’ll be fine for tonight. I lower my magic resistance and take a bite.
Tedd’s a pretty good baker. Then I realize that I’ve transformed. It’s... kind of odd, transforming not under my own power. Being so short is the first oddity I notice. I’ve always been taller than everyone I know (aside from Sensei, who’s even taller than Kevin), and Kevin is three inches taller than I am. Now Elliot and Susan are taller than me. Next I notice the drastic figure change. Tedd was right: if you don’t think about it, you don’t notice so much. But my hips and bust are much larger than I’m used to. I’m grateful that Tedd decided to stick a clothes transformation in the spell so that my clothes still fit. And the last thing I notice… Elliot is… I’m reminded of when I first saw his dragon form, but this time… I blush fiercely and hide my face. “Elliot,” I call out, “lower your resistance and eat a muffin before I do something I’ll regret.”

From my heat sense, I can feel Ashley blush as she turns to look at Elliot. He takes another bite of his muffin, and when Tedd is the only guy in the room I lift my head again. Yep, Elliot matches Ellen perfectly, and is no longer such a problem for me.

“What was that about?” Ashley asks.

“He’s a male dragon, so he’s naturally more attractive to me than other men,” I say matter-of-factly. “Which normally isn’t much of a problem, but this form exaggerates my attraction to guys and further messes with my head, so, well…” I trail off, my face hot.

“You knew all that and let it happen anyway?” Susan asks.

“I mean, I just promised to try to relax, and we’re in a private setting, and I can fix it myself, so I don’t really see why not. It’s not like this spell drastically changes my personality or anything; it just screws with my judgement if I act on instinct.” Not that I wouldn’t be okay with personality shifts in a setting like this. Personality shifting spells can be a fun way to improve yourself (by learning what aspects you like and don’t like), and a dragon can remove any active spells by shifting forms.

“Fair enough.” Nanase shrugs, then eats a muffin.

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A few minutes later, everyone’s had a muffin. I think Susan relented because everyone else decided to go along with it, and I think Justin is staying that way because he doesn’t want his friends to have the same sort of trouble I talked about for myself and Elliot. The muffins don’t transform Grace’s clothes, but she isn’t properly affected anyway.

All told, I don’t really feel the effects of the ‘messes with girls’ inhibitions’ effect Elliot talked about at Grace’s party. Or maybe I just have trouble noticing it. But my basic thought analysis says it’s not having that much effect, beyond my initial outburst.

“If we eat more muffins, will it increase the effect?” I ask Tedd.

“No. Good idea, but it’ll just increase the time to eight hours since your last bite.”

“No. Not a ‘good idea.’ Don’t do that, please.”

“You know, I never noticed how similar Saphira and Susan look,” Sarah says. It’s true that right now we’ve got basically the same build, but... no, never mind, we always have similar builds. But right now, it’s like we have the same body with different faces and hair colors. And clothing, of course.

“Well, we know for certain Saphira and I aren’t related.” Still no conclusion on the Diane thing,
but I’m not expecting one.

“But my looks, well, *might* be.”

Everyone stares at me. “Please clarify,” Susan requests.

“You know how you *got taller and all* when you awakened? For dragons, it’s more of an ongoing effect. If I really want to look some way, and I’m not affected by a spell, my body will gradually change until it matches how I want to look. So I only look like I normally do because I *want* to look that way.”

“How gradually?” Tedd asks.

“It takes at least three weeks—yes, I can transform within that time—and I can’t do any changes that aren’t able to be gradual. For example, a female dragon will *always* be female.” Not that I *want* to be a guy. I have memories of it, and that’s enough for me. If there was *any* chance someone’s spell would make me a guy, I’d pass the role (of test subject, helper, teammate, etc.) to someone else. Kevin’s already been down *that* rabbit hole, and I feel no desire to fuel an addiction. “But if I wanted to be five feet tall, I could, or if I wanted to have green hair, I could, or if I wanted a *bust* like Nanase’s, I could have it.” Not that I would want that, if I plan on being an active dragon. I look at that and can only think of how *impractical* it must be during any sort of fight. “It also doesn’t affect strength at all if I want to be more or less muscular. My *appearance* would change, but I won’t get stronger without exercising.”

“So you look similar to me because you *like* looking that way?” For some reason, I get the feeling that Susan doesn’t like her looks for reasons beyond *finding clothes that fit*.

“Yeah. It feels familiar, it feels practical, and beyond all that, I feel attractive. I *like* the way I normally look. There’s *no way* I’d choose to look any different, not for quite a long time. I can’t say how I’ll feel in a thousand years. But right now, I am who I am, and I look exactly how I want to look.” Not that everything about my body is entirely how it would be without magic. Shaving my legs or arms would be pointless, since transforming would restore the hair. But that doesn’t keep me from making my leg and arm hair blonde (AKA nearly invisible).

There’s an awkward silence for a bit. Tedd finally breaks it: “So, how did everyone like the muffins?”

“They’re really good!” Sarah responds.

“You’re a good baker, Tedd,” I compliment him.

“Hold on,” Nanase stops us. “Grace said ‘additive.’ What did you put in the muffins so they could hold the magic?”

“Uh…” Tedd’s mouth is gaping and he’s looking up and away. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to tell them specifically what was used, though it’s not like fish or reptile scales aren’t used for dishes in foreign countries.

To save face, I answer for him. “Certain materials hold magic better than others. I gave him the list the dragons have. I assume he picked something without much flavor or texture.” I don’t *know* he used my scale. It’s just really likely, since I didn’t feel like I was eating sand. As for whether I find that gross, it’s better than chewing fingernails. (Thankfully, I’ve kicked that habit.) This was thoroughly washed beforehand. And like I thought earlier, it’s not much different from using a fish or reptile scale in his cooking.
Mymoir PM notification:

Elliot: There’s not much on the list that he could’ve used.

Saphira: Yeah, I know.

Elliot: Did you give him a scale or something?

Saphira: After I washed it, yeah.

Elliot: Ewwww.

Saphira: Google 'shark fin soup' when you can.

Elliot: Fair enough.

“Elliot, why did you make a face?” Ashley queries him.

“It’s nothing, just something Saphira said.”

“You two can have private conversations without being in dragon form? Do dragons have telepathy, too?” I can’t tell if Ashley’s jealous or mad. Best keep everyone happy.

“It’s the private message function of the Mymoir. Think of it like texting each other. You don’t do it like this unless it’s something you don’t want everyone to know. Like specifically what Tedd put in the muffins.” I pause, then realize what I just said. “Not that it’s inedible or anything!” I add hurriedly. “It’s just that most Americans wouldn’t think of it as acceptable food, even though a lot of folks eat disgusting stuff all the time.” Like false raspberry flavoring, which is most certainly not just raspberries. Let’s just leave it at ‘an animal product.’

“You knew the muffins would transform us?” Justin asks accusingly. Sheesh, everyone is getting on my case today.

“No, just strongly suspected. I gave him the list nearly two weeks ago.”

“It’s not a problem,” Ellen says calmly. “I was planning on transforming everyone anyway, if you let me. Actually, does this stack?”

No.

“I don’t know, but I strongly suggest you don’t try it.”

“What, would it make things permanent or something?”

“No. But at the moment, I have no desire to experience a strong personality shift.” Not one that FV5 would produce, anyway. I’m normally only attracted to men, but this spell changes that and reduces my ability to think clearly. I do not wish to find out how we would act if our minds were even further altered. “Maybe if someone who can undo it isn’t transformed. But a stack of this spell where people are inclined to keep it going with nothing stopping them is a bad idea.” Plus a personality shift that strong is bordering on Evil magic.

Something that likely resembles pizza in a delivery car enters my range. Thank God. “I think the pizza’s nearly here.”

“I probably should pull out plates and napkins, then,” Elliot replies. “Ellen, care to help?”

“I can help!” Ashley enthusiastically exclaims.
Ellen shifts position. “I’ll get the table ready. It can’t seat everyone, though.”

“That’s fine. I can stand and eat. Lots of camping.”

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I can now see why Susan asked why Nanase isn’t fat. It’s actually kind of interesting that she can force her body to be less efficient when using food for calories. Is that something specific to variety casters or something everyone can learn?

…

Okay, apparently everyone can learn it. It just takes some technique and practice. Not that it’s really useful for people without Common magic. Still, it’s a fair substitute for simply having a magic battery. Speaking of which…

“Nanase, are you aware you can store your extra magic in something instead of having to eat so much?”

“Huh?” she asks when she finishes what was in her mouth.

“You’re forcing your body to waste energy so you can have more magic. But it’s possible to just store extra magic in something for later use, kind of like my objects,” I clarify, summoning my dragon figure to my open right hand. “Just make sure it’s something you’ll have when you need it.”

“Can I see that?” I forgot that Ashley hasn’t seen my objects yet.

“Sure.” I walk around the table to hand it to her. It’s strange not being able to simply reach across the table, and I’m a little worried I’ll overbalance if I lean to reach her.

“Awesome! This thing’s like a miniature Saphira!” Ashley looks at me. “No offense.”

“None taken. But I think the figure looks more masculine than my dragon form.”

“What sort of things would work well for storing magic?” Nanase pulls us back on-topic.

“If you’re going to have it on you all the time, I’d pick some sort of jewelry, so long as it’s not plastic. Metals and gemstones can hold a lot.”

“Is that what’s in the muffins?” Justin asks.

Whoops. “No,” Tedd quickly answers. “Other stuff can work pretty well too, but might be a little odd for Nanase to carry around all the time.” Nice save.

“Oh, okay.” I hope people forget about that soon.

“So if I store magic, I won’t have to eat so much? I’m sure Mom will like that.”

“I mean, you’ll have to stop forcing your body to waste energy, but yeah. Just store your excess energy in something whenever you’re going to sleep or whatever.”

“Uh… how do I do that?”

Uh… it’s fairly straightforward for dragons. Basically, if we want to store magic in something other than our objects, possibly for other dragons to use, we set the item as a ‘wand’ that does
nothing but store energy. “I guess Tedd might have to make it into a special kind of wand, but sticking your magic in something is similar to casting a spell on it. You just touch it, think about it, and sort of push your magic into it. To use the stored magic, you need to be in physical contact with the item and pull energy from it.” Come to think of it, I might be able to do better at Fukushima if I store up magic on scales that way. Mental note (in the Mymoir) for later.

Tedd raises his hand. “I had to make a special glove for that, but it was easier to use than you described, so maybe people can do that anyway?” Oh, right the thing with the algae/whale.

“Maybe. People have been doing stuff like it for a long time, anyway.”

“So what do we have planned next?” Sarah asks.

“Not much, really. And I think Tedd was planning on us staying here the whole time?” Ellen answers questioningly.

“Like I said, I brought an ‘undo’ wand just in case, but pretty much, yeah.”

“Anyway, we have Netflix, video games, board games… or we can just hang out. And of course we can play around with magic, too.”

I’m not that into watching TV. I can enjoy a good story, but there’s a reason Kevin only reads one or two serial comics among the thirty or so webcomics he follows. And I think Susan’s filled my available space with Star Trek. So I’d like to peruse their game collection, I guess. Or… I think there are a couple of people here that I still owe explanations for stuff.

By the time I’ve finished thinking, everyone else has already moved to other sections of the house. I might be thinking slower than normal right now. Makes sense, if the form makes you more instinctive. I… hope I don’t do anything especially dumb tonight, or Sean might make me do mental effect training or something.

First up: Ashley wanted to know about the King Arthur story. I can’t tell people apart with my heat senses right now, so I’ll just have to wander a bit. Nanase, Ellen, Tedd and Grace are pulling up Mario Kart on the Dunkels’ Wii (I note it’s Double Dash) in the family room. Following my heat senses, I find the other five browsing the (very limited) selection of board games in the guest room upstairs. It’s strange to think I spent my first two nights in this room.

“Hey, Saphira. Come to join us?” Susan asks as I walk in.

“Sure. What were you thinking?” The selection does not contain anything I would think of as a ‘real’ board game. With six people, I’d play RoboRally, but their library needs a little expansion first.

Elliot pulls out a game. “We can try Monopoly.”

“Only if you’re okay with following the rules as written in their original form—no house rules. It makes the game go way faster.”

“How so?”

“If you auction properties people don’t want to buy, and don’t do anything like the ‘free parking’ house rule, people bankrupt faster, making the game end in an hour or two instead of seven.”

Elliot looks at Ashley. “What do you think?” He was facing her, but I think he was asking the whole group.
“It’s worth a try, I guess,” Justin answers.

“I want to see how well that works,” Ashley muses.

“I’ve never played it that way. Sure,” Sarah responds. [Journal note: I might need a thesaurus for today’s entry.]

Susan shrugs. “Then unless anyone else has any suggestions, it’s unanimous.” It’s quiet for a bit, so Elliot takes the game downstairs, and we follow him to the dining room.

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Picking tokens took longer than I thought it should have. There were several that Susan absolutely refused to pick. Then she yelled at me for picking the iron. (‘You’re reinforcing stereotypes against women!’) I just picked it because it’s flat-bottomed and a very different shape from the other tokens.

I’m not going to waste my time recounting later how the game goes. It’s *Monopoly*. In the end, I don’t really care.

A few turns in, when we sorted out how the ‘auction’ would work, I got around to the actual point of my joining their game. “Ashley? Remember how I mentioned King Arthur when I was talking with Magus?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to hear that story now?”

Mymoir PM notification. Gee, didn’t see that one coming.

Elliot: Are you sure? You *know* why I didn’t tell her that one yet.

Saphira: I’m just telling broad strokes. It’s not like I’m going to tell her exactly how the dragons beat Fred.

Elliot: How do you avoid that one?

Saphira: ‘They cornered him’ is close enough, right?

Elliot: I… guess that’s **technically** accurate.

“Saphira? I said ‘yes.’”

“Sorry about that. Anyway, King Arthur’s story is *why* dragons are relatively unknown up ’til now. Not that it’s his fault. Just… a lot of people were hurt, and a lot of people were betrayed. And at their most generous, people didn’t want to have anything to do with dragons anymore. Many dragons were hunted and had to run away until those who had been alive at the time had been forgotten. Our world still feels the effects today. It’s the point where dragons changed the course of history. And most critically, it’s the diverging point between our world and Magus’s.”

Ashley widens her eyes. “Wait. This is *that* important?”

Justin raises his hand. “Hold on. I thought King Arthur was just a guy who drove off people invading England? I mean, there are legends of him fighting a dragon, but…”
“Actually, England has had two King Arthurs, of sorts. The first drove off invaders and became king. The second bore his name and his sword and fought a dragon, but never actually became king, just a regent. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

“About 800 years ago, dragons were widely respected and revered. Not everywhere, but most places, at any rate. We were helpers in times of trouble, and at other times, we were teachers, advisors, escorts, healers, researchers… you get the point. Having a dragon in your town or nation was a great honor. Even nations without dragons would see one eventually, as Sean travelled the world. It was at that time that Frederick became England’s first dragon.

“At first, the people loved that one of their own was a dragon. But… Frederick was… well, I’m not a psychologist. But about 20 years after his awakening, he made it clear that he thought the honor and respect afforded dragons was not enough. In his life, Fred became known as the Tyrant-King of England.”

“I think I know why you said people felt betrayed,” Susan fills my pause.

“Yeah,” Elliot answers her. “Basically nothing after this point made much difference as far as how people thought about dragons. It’s why most dragons are still ‘hiding in plain sight.’ Kind of like myself, I guess.”

I continue my story. “Up to this point, Magus’s world and our own share their history. This next part, for all intents and purposes, never happened in Magus’s world. I can clarify what happened there later, but basically, his world’s Fred still lives, and many of the older dragons do not. In our world, the older dragons hatched a plan to take him down.

“A dragon’s range and power are inversely proportional. My range is very high for a heat dragon, so I have much less than average power. Meaning my magic pool runs dry faster, for the same spells. Fred was also a heat dragon, but with much lower than average range. Also fun: dragons tend to make spells for stuff they do a lot. There’s a good reason I have access to a spell called Fred’s Human Incinerator.”

“Oh…” Everyone stares at me dumbly.

“I’ve only used it once, setting a vampire aflame to distract them. I can’t kill vampires with the spell, but they still feel pain, at least.”

“Oh. I was wondering why the ground was burnt that night,” Elliot says.

“Anyway, Frederick proved himself very hard to kill, but there is a way, and dragons found it. Arthur was a man with immunity to Draconic magic, and Excalibur is a sword with abilities that will change to match the wielder. So with a man that Fred couldn’t burn and a sword that Fred couldn’t melt, the dragons cornered Fred and Arthur killed him. Arthur became the regent for England, but many called him King Arthur in reference to his namesake.

“It was at this point that dragons were largely condemned in the eyes of the people, and without dragons to teach, the knowledge of magic faded. Not immediately, but eventually, most people had largely forgotten both dragons and magic, and so we reach the state of the world today.”

“Oh. Uh, wow.” Very profound, Ashley.

“In Magus’s world, Frederick was not executed. Instead, he murdered many of the older dragons. As a result, Magus’s world hasn’t forgotten magic or dragons, but lives in constant fear of dragons. I don’t know how the gentler dragons fare there, but I’m guessing it’s not well.” I wonder if some
might still fight to protect people? Probably only from other dragons. And from D&D-type fiction, I think I know how that would be viewed by the public.

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A little while later, and I’m… not doing so well in the Monopoly game. Not that I expected to do well. I’m not great at planning around other people, and with this spell making me more impulsive, I’ve made some rather poor strategic decisions. Like giving Sarah the third yellow property.

The conversation’s gone this way and that; some parts more interesting than others.

“So, Saphira, how are you liking the feminist club?” Susan’s asking.

“It’s… interesting. I wasn’t expecting much, really. Kevin never did anything like it.” It’s sort of like focused social studies. I’m probably the most-skeptical girl in the club, though. As in I question the legitimacy of women’s claims when they say a person’s a criminal, and do further research. It is surprising how few times the ‘criminal’ is just a jerk, but it still happens. And sometimes it’s that the woman is a jerk. I wonder if there’ll be any more active, well, activities. Probably. I mean, I’ve only been to two meetings, and they were only an hour each. “I’m sort of wondering how magic will impact everything. You know, barring people getting spells like the active one here. I rather hope that’s not frequent.”

“Why not? Wouldn’t it be good if people could see what it’s like to be a woman?”

“Think of how the worst people might use it.”

Susan takes a moment to think. Then she jumps in surprise. “Oh. That’s really bad. I see your point.” Yeah, a spell that makes the target female, attractive, and more attracted to others…

“For the same reason, if Tedd’s going to sell wands, I’ll do my best to bar him from selling any sort of sex-changing ones.”

“You think he’ll sell wands?” Elliot questions me.

“I mean, he is a wandmaker. If he wants funding to pursue any research, that’s a good way to get it. It’s what other wandmakers did, y’know, before Fred.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Ashley interrupts us. “How come I never read about any of this stuff in history books?”

Elliot answers for me. “If people don’t believe in magic, how do you think they’ll explain a history that’s full of it?”

“Legends and fairy tales.” I guess Ashley was prepared for that answer.

“Pretty much,” Elliot continues. “As for history classes, they care a lot more about wars than culture. The Mymoir records are the other way around.”

I further expand the answer. “Picture with me, if you will, an ancient city in its day. Let’s say… at the peak of the Roman empire. Not a massive city like Rome, but still a walled city, with the gates open for travelers.” I start basically interpreting stuff I read from the Mymoir. “You can tell it’s a thriving city, with new construction on a public theater and some houses underway. There are skilled laborers completing some of the more fancy stonework while summoned monsters move large sculptures into place at the top of the new theater. In the streets, there are many vendors
selling their wares. Some local foods, some from far away; many essentials and some artisan work. Some of the artisans boast that their magically-produced crafts look just as good as those produced without magic, for a fraction of the cost. You can see the local wives of military leaders gathering around the wandmaker’s table; there’s a new wand that gives the user a crocodile tail—as rare a wand as people who have seen a real crocodile, since you’re a very long way from the tropics where they live. For the military or common traveler, there is a messenger store for sending live, instant communication to the capital or to relatives. In the distance, you see what you’ve come for: a wizard is training his students outside of his tower, and you heard that one of them had the ability you’re looking for for your next trip east.”

Time for everyone (but Elliot) to stare at me again. “That’s way too detailed for you to have made that up,” Sarah comments.

“It’s not necessarily a place that ever actually existed. I… coalesced several records. But it provides a good snapshot of a magic society. Note that dragons are extremely rare: if you visited a random town, the chance that they had anything directly associated with any dragon has always been slim. But a global society that knows about magic gives rise to towns much like the one I described.”

Speaking slowly, Susan asks, “Is… that your goal, for your announcement and everything?”

“No… that… specifically…. I mean, I’d like for people to treat magic that way, but I don’t want to get rid of technology or anything. But a society where magic is treated a lot like technology—that is the sort of thing I aim for.”

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The game’s not finished yet, but I managed to go bankrupt. Time to find Nanase. I’ll ask Elliot how Monopoly finished later.

Nanase is still playing Double Dash, but the pairs are now Nanase and Tedd against Ellen and Grace. I think Grace’s team is winning. They’re in first on the current race, at any rate. I wait until they finish the race, then let them know I’m here. “Hey, guys. Mind if I interrupt a bit?”

Ellen turns her head around to face me. “What’s up?”

“I…” How to phrase this? “Nanase, remember how I once said your guardian angel spell is from another magic system? I can explain that a bit, now, if you want to listen. But… only to you and Ellen. Because of the way that magic system works, people are better off the less they know about it.”

Tedd looks intrigued. “It works better the less you know?”

“No. You have greater difficulty getting spells if you know about them. It’s just… how the system works. Probably to keep people from abusing it, since it is the most powerful magic system.”

“Now I want to know more than ever, but since you said it’s a bad idea to look into it… I guess I’ll let you off.”

“Thanks. Ellen, is there somewhere we can talk in private?”

“My bedroom should be good enough. Come on, Nanase.”

“Are you… sure you should tell me about this?” Nanase questions me nervously.
“I’ll just give you the basics, like what it is and what’s special about your spell in particular. I mean, it’s in your spell book, but I probably can give a better explanation. I’m not going to say anything that is likely to have bad effects.”

“Alright.”

Ellen exits multiplayer mode on Mario Kart, then we head up to her bedroom. This is the first time I’ll be in there since I first arrived. I’m just getting all the memories today, huh?

Ellen shuts the door behind us, and she and Nanase sit on Ellen’s bed (the one on the left as you enter the room). I sit on Elliot’s bed across from them. “May as well get started. Are you ready, Nanase? It’s still going to be kind of long, even with everything I’m leaving out.”

Nanase looks at Ellen for reassurance, then nods.

“All-righty then. You already suspected as much, but the guardian angel spell is, in fact, Divine. Specifically, Divine is the name of the magic system. Another name for the system is Soul magic: spells of that sort often directly affect the target, skipping any sort of magic resistance.

“Divine magic is split into two parts, Holy and Evil. I won’t really get into that, but it’s pretty much self-evident where most spells fit. Some are neutral and depend on the caster for motivation. Obviously, the guardian angel spell is Holy. The reason it requires you to burn out for at least a day is that you normally don’t have the sort of magic stored that the spell requires. Instead, the spell converts your available entropy to the correct sort—at a great loss—in order to fuel the spell. The other restriction isn’t exactly what you said it was when you told Ellen about it on New Year’s Eve before the party.”

Nanase grins sheepishly. “Oh. I totally forgot that Kevin would’ve read that.”

“Not a problem. No need to remind you…. Anyway, it’s not as hard of a restriction as it might sound, although I think you figured that out when you cast it that night. You need to have the correct frame of mind in order to cast any Divine spell. Actually, when Ellen used her copy spell, she wasn’t just copying your form. She also essentially cast the guardian angel spell as well, which is why it burned her out and gave her the abilities that come with the spell. Which means that she also had the correct frame of mind to use the spell that night. Basically, you can’t cast the spell unless your motivation matches the intended use of the spell. So while Elliot could cast his superhero spell when he didn’t feel like he needed to save the day, you can only use the guardian angel spell when you feel like it’s necessary to defend someone.”

“Okay. I think that makes more sense than what I read out of my spell book. Is there anything else?”

“Just… about getting Divine spells. You can only get them if you’re presently in the state of mind required to cast them, which makes sense. However, it’s not just that. For Holy spells, at least. For those spells, you have to be in a situation that absolutely requires the spell. Something you can’t possibly get done without the spell. And if you intentionally got into the situation in order to get the spell, your state of mind won’t match, so you won’t get the spell. So basically, Holy magic is what happens when you need divine intervention in order to keep going, but not something that happens when you simply want it to.”

Ellen looks directly at me. “Is it divine intervention? Because that seems like something worth knowing.”

“I think that’s up to your interpretation. The older a dragon gets, the more they conclude based on
their observations, not just what they wish were true. I guess that’s true of non-dragons as well. But most of the older dragons believe it’s divine intervention. I do, too, but I don’t think Elliot does.”

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Nanase, Ellen and I sit there for a little bit, then Ellen speaks up. “Hey, Saphira.”

“Yeah?”

“Remember what you said earlier? About finding out whether this spell stacks with my beams?”

“Yes?”

“You wanna find out now?”

Uh… I mean, I would like to know, but… “I don’t think it’s a terribly good idea to cast that on a group of people and see what happens.” Based on Dan’s sketchbooks, I can’t see that ending well.

“What if I only cast it on one person?”

“Definitely don’t do that to yourself.”

“No, I meant: what if I only cast it on you?”

On the one hand, that would impair my ability to observe from a distance. On the other, it means I’d get to directly see how much it affects a person… I lower my magic resistance. “Sure. Go ahead.”

The words are hardly out of my mouth when I’m blasted with a green beam of light. I wonder if it’s significant that Ellen held both hands toward me. Hitting me twice would just cancel it, right?

Whoah. I… I hold my head a bit. I thought this had form acclimation? Or maybe it’s how much the form messes with my head. There’s an echo in the back of my head that says I shouldn’t have done that, but I really want to know… I lift my head again. Was Ellen always that beautiful? Nnnn– I close my eyes and hug myself to keep from tackling her. It’s not working all that well, though; I can still see her heat signature and smell her half-dragon-ness. Then Elliot opens the door into the room.

I can’t take it anymore—I open my eyes and tackle him headlong.

[At this point, I think the form overrode my ability to think clearly. I couldn’t tell who said what, but I think what they said is a good enough indication.]

“Saphira! Why are you– Get off of me!”

“Ellen! You need to reverse it!”

“They’re too close! I’ll zap Elliot, and that won’t help anything!”

“Our magic resistance would nullify it anyway! … Saphira, stop!” I think Elliot pushed me away, which only works so well when someone’s on top of you.

“What are we supposed to do?!”

“Saphira! YOU NEED TO LOWER YOUR MAGIC RESISTANCE!” someone yells directly into
my ear. “DO IT NOW!”

There’s a bright green flash, and my head clears.

I’m lying on top of Elliot, who’s holding me at arm’s length. I have no idea why I’d be here; I hurriedly stand up, and Elliot gets up after me. “Are you thinking clearly?” he asks.

“I’m FV5’d, so I’m gonna say no.”

“Let’s have Tedd remove that for the remainder of the night. I’m going to talk with Ellen, then tell Sean what you did—I don’t think it’d be good if that happened again.” Joy. I’m fairly certain that means he’ll have me do mental effects training with another dragon. Of what I’ve read on that, it’s generally a fantastic time for all involved. Yay. [I hope I can still tell my sarcasm apart in ten thousand years.]

“Great. Well, I can’t say I don’t deserve it. At least I can still stay here and have fun with everyone.”

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Tedd and Grace have finished with Mario Kart (since they can play that at home) and are watching the rest finish Monopoly. Sarah’s winning—it seems those yellow properties are doing well for her. Elliot and I manage to pull Tedd aside.

“What’s up?” he asks us.

“You need to remove the transformation from me,” I tell him, my eyes looking down.

“I think Saphira needs a clear head,” Elliot further clarifies.

“What happened?”

“I let Ellen zap me. It turns out her spells do stack with this. And… the mental effect was too much for me to handle.” I turn to Elliot. “I don’t think I want to know what I did.”

“You don’t remember?” Elliot asks, confused.

“No. But given what the spell’s stated mental effect is… I think I can guess what I intended. So please don’t enlighten me as to what I did.”

“Good enough for me.” Tedd pulls out a wand. “You’ll have to lower your resistance.”

I do as he says. “Ready.”

There’s no light associated, but I feel my head clear and notice that I’m now back to my original height: nine inches taller than everyone else. “Thanks. I’m not leaving just yet, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea to continue in that form for the rest of the night.” I pause. “That said, I don’t want to just look normal for the rest of the night. Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales.”

Elliot looks me over. “Exactly what is the difference between that and Partial Armor?”

“It replaces my clothes and reduces my breast size. Nothing else.”

Tedd stares at me. “Why would you want a reduction?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “It replaces my clothes. By definition, I can’t wear a bra with the form,
and I made the form for fighting and exercise.”

“Oh. Never mind.” He thinks for a second. “Is it possible to look under the scales?”

No, but I’m not telling him that. “I don’t suggest you try it.”

31 January 2014
8:09 PM CST

I decided to first apologize to Ellen and Nanase, since it wasn’t entirely their fault for what happened. Plus I’m sure they’ll want to see this form, and I do have one more thing to ask them.

They’re still in Ellen’s room, probably recovering from what just happened. I walk upstairs and knock on the door. “It’s Saphira,” I declare.

“Come in,” I hear Nanase say.

I open the door and am met by a pair of gasps. “How is it that you look better like that?” Ellen asks.

I smile and feel my face warm a little. “Thank you. It’s probably that my figure isn’t distorted like this? In case you’re wondering, this is not the same spell I use at the dojo—this one replaces my clothes, so when I end it I’ll be wearing what I was earlier.” Even though I’m not doing any sparring, Sensei has me use Partial Armor under my gi (that I got last week) since the scales weigh a lot.

Ellen looks away. “I wasn’t thinking it was,” she says innocently.

I sit on Elliot’s bed again, taking care to slide back from the edge. My scales prevent me from sliding towards it. “I’m sorry about what I did earlier.”

“Don’t worry,” Ellen begins. “That was mostly my fault.”

“Oh, what? I had to let you do that.”

“No, I mean— if I use both hands at once, the spell has twice the effect. You had three levels active. I… should’ve seen your actions coming.”

“That… certainly explains how I felt, but I still shouldn’t’ve let it overwhelm me like that. I’ll be doing some training in the future to keep anything like that from happening again.” Even if Sean doesn’t demand it, I’m going to suggest it. I really don’t want it to happen again in any form.

“Unrelated… Kevin reads a bunch of media that references songs, so he looks them up to understand the reference. At Grace’s party last year, you sang a song that doesn’t exist in Kevin’s world—he checked pretty thoroughly. I’m not asking you to sing it for me, but could I have the title so I can look it up? I… don’t remember enough of it that I could look it up now.”

“Oh. Sure. It’s just called Open the Door.”

“Thanks!”

Nanase speaks up. “On that note, though, I’m wondering: what song would you pick? If we had karaoke.”

I probably wouldn’t pick a worship song, even with how good they are, since I expect I’m the only one who’d understand. Instead… “Well, I only have one song on my phone, so probably that one.
Even though it’s sung by a guy.”

Ellen looks at me curiously. “Why only one song?”

“Kevin just wanted to see if it worked when he first got his phone. Apparently I’ve managed to keep the contents.” Thankfully, since I don’t think the song—or the singer—exists here. Cross-universe culture exchange!

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“From me or my phone?”

“You have it memorized?”

“Yes. I haven’t had voice lessons, but Kevin did chorus in middle and high school. I can match a tone fairly well.” I tested it a little with other worship songs (such as Voice of Truth) the other day. It’s easier to sing some times than others.

“If you’re going to sing, I think everyone should hear it,” Nanase declares.

“No complaints here. I love the song—there’s a reason Kevin memorized it.”

---

Monopoly finally finished. Ashley managed to choke out Sarah when she landed on the Boardwalk hotel twice in a row. And now everyone is gathered in the family room again, with me in the hot seat. (I’m standing in the place Ellen’s still-invisible chair occupied.) I’m actually a little nervous.

“So what’s this song you’re going to sing for us?” Grace asks. She’s pretty excited.

“Three Wooden Crosses by Randy Travis. I think the song’s pretty good a cappella, which is good since I’m pretty sure Randy Travis isn’t a singer in this universe if he even exists.”

Justin takes that as a challenge, pulling out his phone. A few moments later, he admits defeat.

“How long ago was he a singer?”

“The song on my phone says 2002.”

“Okay, yeah, you got me.”

“Alright, I’m gonna need everyone to be quiet while I pretend I’m just singing this to myself again.” Nothing more nerve wracking than doing a solo of a song no one’s heard before.

I close my eyes and force myself to ignore the senses telling me people are listening. A few breaths…

“A farmer and a teacher…”

I get through the song without losing my cool. It gets easier as I go: like many songs, I know the lyrics better while I’m singing than at any other time.

“There are three wooden crosses on the right side of the highway…” I finish and open my eyes. I notice that everyone’s looking at me and blush a bit. Am I the only person that closes her eyes to listen to music?

Susan is the first to speak. “That was a nice song. Is that what Kevin grew up listening to?”
“That, and other country music. I like country and soft rock, mostly.”

“Do you sing a lot?” Sarah asks.

“Just… well, whatever I look up on YouTube. Not a ton, but I like singing.”

Grace raises her hand. “Do you know any more songs?”

Uh… a bunch of patriotic and worship songs. “I could sing a lot of songs, but I’m not sure any would be good for right now.”

“While we’re here,” Ashley says, “Tedd: could I try using a wand?”

“Sure. I… do best making wands of spells I’ve seen before. So most transform yourself, but I’ve got one that summons a stun hammer.” I guess Susan hammered him one too many times.

“Like the ones Susan uses?” Right, she did that at school a lot.

“Exactly like that.”

“Okay, I’ll try that one.”

Tedd goes to the front door, where he apparently stashed a bag. He comes back with a wand that is in stick form, so I guess an immortal (or his father) gave him a whole bunch. “This one is pretty easy to use. Just picture a hammer of your choice and concentrate on it while intending to use magic. Here, I’ll give an example.” He holds the wand over his shoulder and something like a giant wooden mallet appears, with the wand acting as part of the handle. That’s pretty clever. A few seconds later the hammer vanishes and he gives the wand to Ashley.

Ashley stands still for a bit, a huge smile on her face. Then she closes her eyes with the wand held in front of her with both hands. After a few moments she opens her eyes again and frowns. She closes her eyes for a few moments, then deepens her frown when she sees nothing has happened. She tries one more time before falling to her knees, her knuckles white. “Hey, easy,” Tedd says, trying to calm her. “If you grip it too tightly, you’ll break it.”

“Why won’t it work?!” Ashley cries in frustration.

Elliot gently loosens Ashley’s grip on the wand, then tries it himself with just as much success as Tedd had. “Huh,” he says when his mallet appears. “Here. Saphira, why don’t you try it?”

“You’re the only dragon that can use Common magic. You know that.”

“You’re the only dragon that can use Common magic. You know that.”

“Just try it.”

“Fine.” I take the wand. In spite of my doubt, I would like to be able to use Common wands, so I give it my best shot, picturing the hammer that Amy Rose uses. To no more effect than Ashley had, but I take it better. “Nope, I can’t use it.” I hand the wand back to Tedd.

“Maybe it’s too complicated?” Elliot suggests.

“It’s a full wand,” Tedd explains. “It should be easy for anyone to use. And you and I should be using our own magic more than what’s stored in the wand, even though it should be able to create dozens of hammers per day.”

“Well, there is the one-in-three chance…” I say with a mild frown, “though it’s not like she can’t have stuff cast on her, obviously.” Actually… I wonder if I can make a Partial Armor spell that can
affect someone else? I’d have to put it on a timer… and it’d have to reference the user’s dragon form…
Training

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1 February 2014
9:00 AM CST

The rest of the ‘get-together’ was fun. Nothing eventful, but just hanging out with friends. I was a bit distracted until I convinced myself I could work on spells later, but playing games and just chatting with my friends gave me a nice, relaxing evening. (Yes, everyone ended the FV5 spell before going home.) And then I got to chat with Sean.

Sean: Elliot informed me of your behavior while influenced by a Common spell. I assume you realize that this is not acceptable for a dragon. If you encounter such a spell among a hostile force, you should continue to be able to control your actions.

Saphira: I fully realize the implications. What… what sort of training would help me?

Sean: If Elliot can relay my messages to Tedd, he ought to be able to devise training spells. Elliot in turn will help to train you and monitor your progress.

Saphira: Should Elliot be trained as well?

Sean: He was able to control himself. In addition, his ability to overpower you may be required.

I sure hope not. What sort of spells is he thinking Tedd will make?

Saphira: Understood… I guess. I mean, I know I need to get better… I’ll chat with you later.

And of course, this morning I had flight practice. We’re finally to the point where we’ve got the basics down, including dives and whatnot. Of course, we do the dives very high in the air. (We do everything high in the air to hide Elliot as much as possible, but dives start higher.) I have a feeling I know why my namesake referred to it as ‘break-bone ground.’ But I’m mostly trying to get fit while Elliot and Ellen work on more complex maneuvers. And just having fun.

And since Al and Sean aren’t here to bail me out this week, I get to chat with the news. Thankfully, it’s still only Carol and her cameraman here. I wonder how long that’ll last? Probably as long as Mr. Verres continues to try hiding me.

I touch down near Carol as Elliot and Ellen fly off… somewhere. I don’t actually know where they land. “Do you have time for us this week?” Carol asks.

**Yes. I don’t expect any interruptions today. Should I stay in this form or do you want me to change back?** I’m breathing heavily, but I don’t know if she can tell. My chest doesn’t move so much when I’m not also flapping my wings.

Carol holds her hand to her ear. Either she has Bluetooth or fancy news stuff now. She’s probably more trusted by her bosses, after covering my announcement. I know the stuff she covered before that wasn’t all that interesting to them. “You should change so that you can directly answer my questions.”

**Fair enough.** I shift back. It’s not so cold today, but Fred’s Thermal Regulator will be
welcome for a while yet. I’m now bent over and still breathing heavily. I’m so glad I don’t have to
do Sensei’s exercise in addition to flying on Saturdays.

“Do you need a bit of time to rest?”

“I’ll… be fine. Hold on a moment.” I step back until I can lean against a tree. Probably 30 seconds
later I continue, when I can talk without my breathing interrupting a sentence. “I’m sorry about
this. I have to push myself, or I won’t get any better, but flying for three hours straight is hard.
Thankfully, my dragon form is stronger than my human form. I can’t even run for three hours.”
More like one. Still better than when Kevin started his cross country practice for the first time and
could only run for about ten minutes. He might be a year and change out of practice, but he did do
track for about three years, and I at least inherited that.

Carol walks closer so that I’m in mic range. I guess it’s time for the interview to start. “I thought
you said you had magic assisting your flight?”

“That’s proportional to how much each dragon needs, based on their morphology. And magic is
still tiring. For my form, I need very little, so most of my flight comes from physical effort. Some
dragons have tiny wings compared to their body.” Mostly Asian dragons, who look almost like
snakes. “Most of their flight comes from magic, though they still have to put in some physical
effort. Not to say I’m unhappy with how I look.”

“Can dragons change how they look?”

She’s not asking about the type of thing I talked about yesterday. With how unlikely it is that’ll
affect Elliot or myself, there’s little use talking about it. “Once a dragon awakens, their dragon
form is set for life. It might age a bit, but it won’t really change.”

“On to more serious topics… since that… event two weeks ago—”

“Just call it my announcement. That’s the dragon term for that sort of event.”

“Okay. Since your announcement, nothing much has changed around here, in terms of what you
talked about. Were you expecting more?”

“Not really. Without dragons teaching about magic for the past few centuries, people mostly forgot
about magic. The Enlightenment didn’t help much. For clarification, that’s when people
abandoned magic in favor of technology. I’m not complaining—I like technology—but it’d be nice
if people didn’t completely forget about magic. As for what I’m expecting, that’s really up to
others. I’ll fly around in public and publicly use my own magic, sure, but unless other people use
their magic publicly I don’t expect much to change. And since people still think of magic as
’strange,’ there’s not much incentive to showcase magic in public.”

“Will you or other dragons offer incentives for public magic use?”

“No. It’s their secret to keep or show. I think having more freedom is its own reward, but I
understand wanting to keep private things private. If I had magic that lost nothing for hiding, I
don’t think I’d tell many people about it. But I like being able to fly wherever I like, even if it’s
tiring.”

1 February 2014
9:06 AM CST

“Are dragon announcements frequent?” I guess Carol has a few more questions for me. Likely
every question her station came up with in the last two weeks. Maybe I can overwhelm them with
information again. Although I probably could do that on accident.

“They occur when a dragon awakens, if the dragon wants one. So no. When people knew about magic, it was more of a ‘get to know the new dragon’ sort of event rather than ‘please explain what you’re talking about’ event. I hope people still learned a bit about me, even if that wasn’t the focus.”

“What was it like back then? When people knew about magic.”

“Magic was used in many ways that technology is used today. Not exactly the same, but similar. For example, construction equipment replaces summoned monsters. The ones that Cheerleadra fought last year? The same type were used to build cathedrals. A summoned monster has its own will and nature, sort of, but they’ll obey the one that summoned them.” With a few exceptions, but that’s not relevant unless the caster is insane. Actually, does this world have a theory of quantum copies? “And if a monster would die, it simply ceases to exist until the caster creates them again. So nobody has to be concerned with the wellbeing of a monster except the caster, because the monster does retain memories from every summoning. And they might refuse to serve a cruel master, effectively costing them the spell.”

“…Anything else?”

“Not on that topic, no. I talk about what’s relevant for whoever I’m talking to. At least when I’m doing dragon stuff. My friends might tell you otherwise for when I’m trying to make conversation.”

“You were very technical with some of your answers during your announcement.” She keeps repeating that. Maybe she wants to clarify nothing happened between then and now. “Was there any special reason for that?”

Other than the ‘overwhelm them with information’ strategy… “No. It’s just… the questions were basically ‘how does magic work.’ Which I’ll answer, but it’s much like asking ‘how does physics work.’ The answer is either really vague or really technical, and I answered the questions with how I understand magic—the really technical way. Not to say I love doing a ton of theoretical stuff. I’m more interested in practical applications.”

“How so?”

“Uh… How about… let’s use microwaves as an example. I’ve done a bit of reading on how they work and stuff. But at its most basic, you stick in the food you want heated, press a few buttons, and a bit later your food is hot. You can accomplish the same thing with magic—specifically, with heat magic, which is my element of Draconic magic. To do so, you define the volume and the heat energy you want, and a bit later you have hot food. So you have two methods to do the same thing: one with physics, and one with magic. But here’s where I’m going to get a bit technical, though only in comparison between the methods.

“With microwaves, I’m sure we’ve all experienced this: they leave hot and cold spots in your food. My understanding of microwaves says that’s impossible to avoid. Carousel microwaves mitigate it a bit, but there’s no real way to make it heat your food perfectly evenly. With magic, you’ll have minor variations from having non-homogeneous foods, but it’ll essentially leave you with perfectly evenly heated food. Or whatever it is you’re sticking in your microwave.

“Of course, there are a few issues with magic. Skipping over some of the more technical issues, there’s the power source. With microwaves, you just plug it into the wall. We have a great electrical grid” (most of the time) “covering the nation, and most anywhere you can find a plug to just stick in your microwave to make hot food. It doesn’t matter where the electricity comes from,
whether it’s a coal plant, or hydroelectric, or solar, or nuclear, or even a large battery. Though the last might not work too well, depending on your battery and microwave. For heat magic, if you somehow have a device that can do it, you need entropy that comes from a nuclear source, since it’s Draconic magic. And getting sufficient entropy to the device is another matter entirely. So while I like thinking about practical applications, it'll take a lot of work before we can even begin to use magic to supplement technology.”

“I… think that’s enough information for now. One last question: is there anything you would like to say to people who don’t believe that magic is real?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Meh. Believe what you want. There are people who won’t believe until they see it with their own eyes, and there are people who don’t believe even after they’ve done it themselves, and not just from a lack of understanding. It’s true that magic is slightly more elusive than physics, but it’s still half of how the world works, and like any other truth, it won’t change just because you don’t want it to be true.”

1 February 2014
4:23 PM CST

Carol seemed a bit surprised at my last answer, but she didn’t have any more questions for me. So then I got to walk home and spend some time relaxing (and working on the spell I started last night). Susan had work today, but she should be home soon. Actually, she just entered my range.

I head downstairs and greet her at the front door. “Have a fun time at work?” It’s my typical greeting. I don’t expect that everyone has fun everywhere.

“More of the same, really.” That’s more words than I usually get. “I was wondering: is it possible to learn Draconic magic?”

Eh… “Maybe? Before my awakening, dragons thought they knew nearly everything about Draconic magic. But everything seems impossible until it happens, and there has been a lot of ‘impossible’ lately. But you’re not the first person to ask.”

Susan looks down and away. “I didn’t think I was, but…” she says miserably.

“Not to say I won’t try to teach you. And you don’t have one possible teacher but three, and two can use Common magic as well. You’ve got a better chance than anyone else so far. And even if it’s not possible, you can still learn a lot.”

“…I’ll give it a shot.”

“That’s the spirit! But I don’t know how to teach you just yet. Give me a bit. Maybe I can help more tomorrow.”

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Elliot at least was on board with helping Susan learn Draconic magic. As for my own training of her, I have two ideas: (1) the traditional method and (2) the technology method. The second won’t directly teach her anything about magic, but it’s still a useful skill, even if she can’t use the magic. I guess I’ll ask.

The traditional method is giving a Draconic wand with a simple but well-constrained spell to the trainee, teaching them all about the spell, and letting them work out how to cast it. Coming up with the spell shouldn’t be hard… actually, I think I’ve got an idea already. I don’t know which element Susan will want to try, but I can ask.
May as well ask at dinner. In the meantime I’ll go ahead and make my training spell.

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Saphira’s Beginner Heat Spell (I might come up with a better name later) finished and time for dinner. It’s a shame Ms. Pompoms hasn’t spent significant time in foreign nations or anything—Kevin’s favorite foods are the Japanese dishes our parents make. (Yay for military bases!) Not to say her chili is bad. Though I add a lot of cheese to crank down the heat.

“So, Susan,” I start the conversation.

“Yes?”

“I have some ideas for what you asked about earlier. Y’know, learning about Draconic magic. First up is picking an element for a practice spell. I can make a wand of any element, but I can only really teach heat.” I have told her what all the elements are.

“Heat’s fine. What were you thinking of teaching me?”

“The traditional method is that I give you a wand and an explanation and you try to learn how to cast it. I’ll do that, but I also wanted to try teaching you some spacial reasoning by teaching you CAD.” Kevin’s English course from college says Susan should have a lot easier time now than she would have two years ago. And Susan’s bright.

“What is this CAD?” Ms. Pompoms interjects. There are a lot of people who misinterpret the name, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she was one of them. Or she might have never heard of it. I can’t think of many reasons a businesswoman like her would care about it.

“Computer Aided Design. I wanted to teach Susan how to make 3D models with software. It’s a useful technology for engineering, but it’s also a bit of a foundation for how I understand three-dimensional spaces. And understanding 3D spaces is fundamental to using Draconic magic. But it’s a useful skill and resume-builder even if you can’t use the magic. And Kevin loved filling his free time with making models to fix problems or just decorate.”

Susan lifts her non-eating hand (her left) a little above the table. “Is that anything like the software on Tedd’s computer?” she asks with a look on her face that says “I rather hope not.”

“I’m not familiar with it, but to clarify, the software I plan to teach you gives you a blank canvas and the tools to make geometric shapes.”

“So no, then. Okay, I’ll try it.”

Now to find out what free CAD software exists in this universe.

2 February 2014
2:18 PM CST

Autodesk still exists, but they’re a bit more stingy with their software than I remember. Thankfully, there is open source CAD software. I’m not sure if they exist in Kevin’s world, but I’ll definitely be using one of these. (I picked FreeCAD. Nice name. I hope Sensei can do a bit better.) Every software is a bit different, so I’ll have to learn this one before I can teach it to Susan, but most stuff like this is pretty similar.

I went back to the same church as last week; I think I’ll keep going there for a while yet. I probably should talk with the pastor at some point so that he knows I’m there.
Elliot informed me that Tedd was prepared with the first wand for my mental training. I’m sure this’ll be a joy, but I hope this is the sort of thing that’ll gradually ramp up, rather than throwing me in the deep end like what happened on Friday. So now I’m at Tedd’s place with Elliot and Grace, after changing out of my dress. I think Grace is mostly curious how this will work out, since she’s entirely unaffected by most Common spells with mental effects.

“So what exactly does this training consist of, Elliot?” I know that Tedd is ‘administering’ the training, but Elliot is probably the one who was best-informed as to how this’ll work.

“Sean and the other dragons decide what sorts of mental effects you need to learn to resist, then they decide what order, then I give their ideas—in order—to Tedd, and he makes wands with those effects. Then he casts the spells on you and you figure out how to resist them. The idea is that you’ll be able to think clearly no matter the circumstance, so it’s not just resistance training. But of course you’ll know when they’re cast on you—you just won’t be told what each one is prior to the training. Oh, and you’re not allowed to transform until you figure it out. No cheating.” I swear he was quoting Sean a little there. He’s not an idiot by a long shot, but that was not exactly the type of speech I expect from his mouth.

“Do I get any hints for how to resist the effects?”

“Sean says it’s different for everybody. So just, I dunno, figure out what’s different from normal? Apparently it gets easier once you’ve first recognized the difference.”

“Fantastic. And what about the ‘not allowed to transform’ bit? Do I have to go to school with it active if that happens?”

“If it takes you that long, yes. I asked. But I think Sean expects you to get these done at least before you go to bed every time. Although if that happens, you are allowed to wear a name badge or something that says you’re not yourself that day.”

I think that’s supposed to be extra incentive to get it done, because no way am I going to school with something like that on me. “Joy. Well, let’s get this over with.” I lower my resistance. “Tedd, I’m ready when you are.”

Tedd points the wand he’s holding towards me and that’s all the warning I get. There’s no flash of light or anything.

I don’t… feel any different. These are just mental changes, so it’s not like… I close my eyes and double-check my figure with my heat senses. Just like I remember. I doubt these are so advanced as to modify my memories, but I double-check with my journal in the Mymoir. … Maybe I should’ve given a better description. But I’m pretty sure I still look the same. So externally, I still look the same, so there’s nothing really barring me from going home or to school or anything like this. But I’d like for people to have confidence that I’m stable, and having mental effects constantly applied to me is not going to help that image.

I wonder how many of these Sean has prepared? Am I doing this every week or every day? Probably not every day. I need some time between these to keep my sanity. But every week seems a little spaced out, so maybe it’s like some of those twice-per-week comics Kevin read. Schedules… Monday/Thursday or Tuesday/Friday. I can’t think of any that updated on Sunday that didn’t also update every other day of the week. For the same spacing, I’d have to do this on Wednesday as well, but I have training with Sensei on those days. Of course, mathematically, Sunday and Thursday would also be the same spacing, so maybe it’ll be that way? That makes sense. And it would give me some time for some of the more difficult ones, I guess.
I need to look up One Punch Man so I know how long it’d take to watch it. Probably less time than The Next Generation. I don’t know how many minutes total that show is, but seven seasons of … lots of episodes is a lot of time.

I wonder when my first day of work at Ace will be? The manager—Mr. Kilpatrick—said he’d let me know this Friday. I guess it takes two weeks to get everything sorted out for a new employee. I think that’s how long it took for Kevin’s first job, too. And since it’s retail, the schedule will likely be essentially random. So the schedule for this training will likely be essentially random as well, since there’s no way Sean expects me to go to work a new job with this sort of thing active.

There’s an active spell on me. But that train of thought seemed completely normal. I mean, of course it would, the spell’s still active. Which I completely forgot about. But there wasn’t anything blatantly wrong about my thoughts, so I’m a bit lost as to exactly what this one is. I can smell the active magic on me, so I know it’s not just a placebo. But I have no idea how to resist something that I can’t even tell is there.

2 February 2014
2:22 PM CST

Whee. Active magic I can’t detect. I mean, obviously I can tell it’s active and that it’s Common magic, but I know it alters my thoughts and even a lengthy train of thought can’t tell me what’s wrong. I’m still standing here with my eyes closed. Maybe I’ll get a better idea if I open my eyes.

The other three—Tedd, Grace, and Elliot—are just staring at me. “Well?” I ask. “Say something! You’re kind of creeping me out!” In the comic, Tedd’s glasses were always opaque/mirrored, so it didn’t look so creepy when he was staring at someone. In reality, those fancy specs are just oversized round glasses with normal opacity and a tiny projector mounted to the frame on each side, so they don’t alter his appearance that much. I think the glasses have computer hardware packed into the overly-thick frames, because some of the functions are way better (and more difficult) than the Google Glass functions the company advertises. But him staring at me right now is a little disconcerting.

Grace is the first to speak. “Have you figured it out?”

“No,” I quickly answer. “Do I get to be the only one frustrated with figuring out a spell I can detect but can’t determine the purpose?”

Grace shakes her head. “No, I don’t know what it does either.”

Tedd slightly shifts his stance. “I trust Grace, but Elliot seemed to imply that only he and I should know exactly what’s going on here. It’s probably so that the training is fair.”

“Sean said not to tell anyone besides Tedd exactly what the wands will do,” Elliot clarifies.

I’m starting to get a little frustrated, but I know that’s not going to help any. Just… calmly go back and check my thoughts. How do they compare to normal?... Pretty much the exact same. Or at least the same for when I’m going through a checklist of ‘what to do today.’ I don’t usually go off-topic like that when I’m just trying to figure something out, but I don’t think that’s enough information to draw a conclusion.

It’s good I don’t actually have anything else to do today. I’m slightly better than Kevin at getting homework done early—I did mine Saturday. English and History class are just as boring as I remember, but slightly easier, likely thanks to me having memories of doing them before. History here isn’t that different from in Kevin’s world, even from back when magic had widespread use. I
imagine the fall of the Roman Empire was for an entirely different reason there. Probably one closer to what my history textbook says than to what the Mymoir says.

Apparently, magic was once closely tied to military might. At this point, I don’t think that’s a worry anymore. The Roman Emperor (Caesar) at the time of the fall needed extra strength for his army for some reason, so he asked an immortal to mark his entire army. At the same time, his opponents did the same with their armies. Magic can’t support that much use and has safeguards against it: in this case, a ‘magic reset,’ of sorts. Everyone awakened to Common magic loses it. All wands and artifacts lose their magic. All marks are erased. All immortals reset, and all half-immortals die. If Pandora was still rampantly marking people I’d have to warn her not to do so, but it seems that obsession has passed. I hope today’s world won’t repeat the same mistake, but the fact that it’s only happened twice ever says that’s probably not likely.

Wait, what was I doing again?

Oh, right. Hold on, I think I’ve got it.

I pay attention to my surroundings again: everyone is staring at me once more. I hope they don’t do that every time. “Hey, Grace.”

“Yes?”

“How many Saphiras does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

She looks really confused for a moment. “Uh… how many?”

“Let’s go ride bikes!” I stand still with a smile on my face for a moment, then break out in laughter.

Grace turns to Tedd. “That was a joke, right?”

“I think I’ve heard something like that before…” he says thoughtfully.

I manage to stop laughing. “It’s a joke Kevin read in a magazine. The original joke is ‘How many kids with ADHD…’ Anyway, I’m pretty sure you made me really easy to distract. I can get really distracted on my own, so it’s not that big of a change… but now that I’m aware of it, I’m pretty sure I can beat it.” Staying on-topic that long was a bit harder than normal, though.

“How do we test that you’ve got it?” Elliot asks.

“Oh…” Oh! That’s a good one! “How about I play you in Mario Kart? That game has plenty of distractions. If I can come in not-last between the four of us, I think we can say I’ve got this one.”

“Why not-last?” Tedd questions me.

“I don’t know how good you all are. But Kevin was pretty good at all of the ones since MK Wii. Not like he did tournaments or anything, but among friends he did well. And, ah… I personally haven’t played any of them.”

“It’s a challenge, then!” Grace declares.

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Mario Kart Wii while easily distracted is challenging. As the only gauge I’m used to is myself, I can’t properly say how good the others are, but I found tuning out my opponents’ portions of the screen much harder than usual. Not to say I lost every round. I lost a lot at first, but I got it
eventually, and Elliot let me go outside and transform. Then I kicked their butts, but not a ton more than I was before that, so I guess I was doing pretty well. It just changed from 50% getting second to Grace into 25% getting second to Grace. Elliot called mercy rule and quit playing. I think Grace might practice more in the near future.

5 February 2014
5:30 PM CST

A bunch of things happened between Sunday and today, but none of them were terribly long. First, I learned how to use FreeCAD, which actually took a few tutorials on YouTube to get the hang of. It’s fairly different to any other CAD program I’m familiar with, as far as controls. It actually reminds me a bit of AutoCAD, which my CAD teacher called AutoCrap.

Second, I got Mr. Raven’s permission to give Sensei his contact information, once I made it clear he would just be referred to as a person with lots of experience with magic.

Third, Justin and Elliot attended today’s class with Sensei. I’m not sure that we’ll all have training at the same time when Sensei opens his new dojo, but Justin was thrilled to start it up again. Sensei made it clear that running does not help in the same way as the other exercises—I need to do those at least three days per week (instead of the zero I did last week), in his words. But he taught me about sets and reps, so I feel a bit better about doing those. Apparently there’s still a bunch of paperwork for him getting a place, so it’s just as well he doesn’t have a name or more than five students yet.

And fourth, Susan and I were able to visit Elliot and Ellen at their house (since Ms. Pompoms won’t let Elliot inside her house) so that we can start training Susan (which is where we presently are). I plan to teach her CAD when we get home. Kevin’s taught people CAD before. I think it’ll go best in a one-on-one setting, with Susan using her own computer.

“I think it’ll go best if Elliot or Ellen starts the training, since I’ll be talking about the combination of sensing and casting,” I tell the group.

Ellen half-raises her hand. “In that case, it’s probably best if I start. After all, it’s not like Susan can sense anything anyway, and Elliot said the goal is to understand a spell well enough to possibly cast it. What spell is it, anyway?”

“A bunch of dragons have tutorial spells from when their friends, relatives, or whoever else asked to try to learn Draconic magic. So I made my own, since Susan said she wanted to try heat magic. So while the scale says ‘Saphira’s Heat Tutorial’ on the front, the entire spell is engraved on the back.” I hand Ellen the wand I made Sunday evening, and she reads the back.

“It seems simple enough. At least, a whole lot easier than that ‘Bug Zapper’ spell you made.”

“You read that?”

“Read it. Didn’t really understand it. But I shouldn’t have much trouble with this one.”

From conversations with Ellen when we’ve gone flying, I learned that casting Common magic requires an entirely different way of thinking than casting Draconic magic. If you want to use Common magic, you should have some idea of what you’re trying to do, with a pretty good idea of what the outcome will be. If you want to use Draconic magic, you need to focus a lot more on the process than on the results. (Wands are much easier.) And apparently, that’s just the beginning.

“I think Draconic magic does a great job of making something that’s very simple into something
“It’s my understanding that the universe in general works that way. You need to pull back the curtain to do anything new or innovative. Draconic magic is no harder than designing a bridge, in my opinion. The difficulty comes from the fact that you can’t use magic the same way you use a bridge.”

“I think I’m starting to get why no one has done this before,” Susan replies, her head bowed. She then raises it, a look of fierce determination on her face. “I’m not giving up, though. I’ll get this, one way or another.”

“In that case, let me explain what it’s like to be completely aware of your surroundings,” Elliot taunts her.

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After we all did our sections of teaching, we taught Susan about the Draconic language. I could tell Susan was trying her hardest, but it is a lot of information.

“I think my head is going to explode,” Susan moans while driving us home.

“I guess I should wait to teach you CAD, then?”

“Maybe some other time. How were you going to teach me, anyway?”

“About the same way Kevin taught his friends. Pick a project and we’ll make it. We can go ahead and get it installed on your computer if you like.”

“What do you mean, ‘pick a project’?”

“Pick some concept you want or something that exists or whatever. Assemblies are more difficult, but some of Kevin’s longest projects were making complex single-piece models of video game characters. …Namely Pokémon. But for teaching, one friend picked a sound system, for example. Although I can teach you to make something complicated if you want.”

Susan thinks in silence for a bit. “How about we install it and I think of a project. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

“That works.”

6 February 2014
3:23 PM CST

Elliot let me know there’s another mental training wand waiting for me, so I’m doing everything else I need to do today first. Exercise is done (I’m tired, but I’ll live), and I’ll do homework in a bit, but first I should check in with Magus. I can’t believe it’s only been a little under four weeks since I… came here. But I ought to chat with Magus before I haul her in front of the griffins in two days. Thankfully, there’s no government security or listening device this time. Magus is on her probation and fully moved into her apartment, which I presume either the government is paying for or she is paying for with Sirleck’s cash.

As I knock on the front door, I notice an active Common area spell. Probably one that notifies her of any visitors. If she wants to detect me, she’d need something to detect the other spell not working, or some other convoluted solution. Magus (still in a male form, but with shorter hair)
opens the door. “I guess I should’ve expected it to be you, since I wasn’t notified.”

“I called ahead!”

“No, I mean… never mind. Come in. You wanted to talk about the griffins, right?”

“Among other things, yes,” I confirm as I walk inside.

For being here such a short time (and for an expected short duration), she’s decorated an awful lot. Not as much as Catalina’s room, but certainly more than Susan’s, which is pretty utilitarian. Sure, there’s some exercise equipment, but there are some posters and shelves, tasteful furniture, and an illusion spell that changed the wall color (to light red) and placed some other decorations around the place. Kevin never so much as used a refrigerator magnet. I think his decorations were just 3D prints and a sign hung over his door.

“Well? Take a seat,” Magus offers.

“… You’ve decorated a lot more than I have, not even counting the illusions.”

“I probably have more money than you do.”

“Kevin had plenty of money. His place was bare compared to this.” Not to say he was rich, but his student loans are owed to his dad and he had a bit of money from his summer/winter part-time job.

“… I… spoke with Ellen, if you haven’t heard. She politely refused my offer.” Ellen phrased it more as ‘firmly rejected.’ I wonder what was said? “I don’t think I had the full story there, and I realize I might have been projecting my own feelings. But I feel better, having made the offer.”

“… I really hope you’re not about to make me a similar offer.”

“No, of course not. I’ve thought on what you said last time. Maybe… I hadn’t given the other idea a fair shake.” Magus is the youngest person I’ve heard use that phrase, but her world still has Fred. (If Fred died there, things might go back to normal for dragons. Maybe.) It’s understandable that some things might be a generation or two behind.

“… Back to the main point of me coming here, I wanted to clarify a few things, regarding this Saturday. First up, the griffins know about the vampires you invited here. And since we’re going to report that issue as solved, well…”

“I am prepared to atone for my wrongs. I understand if they don’t wish to help me.” Magus sighs. I mean, I knew she was a good person, but she’s taking this overly well. Although the resigned tone in her voice says she wishes she’d taken another course of action to regain a body.

“Okay, next: the griffins’ world likely has a much more united understanding of magic,” (because griffins still exist there, and as much as I’m trying to fix it, magic communities on this world are fragmented) “and altogether probably knows more about alternate universes and the travel between them than we do here. If they make the offer, would you want to leave and study there, or continue living here?”

“I… I’d have to think about that one. If I leave, I’ll have better resources to return home, but I’ll be abandoning those I owe here…. I guess I’ll get back to you on that.”

“How about… how long is your probation?”

“Five years.”
“Ouch. That’s much longer than I expected.” I mean, it was for kidnapping, but everyone got home safe in a couple of hours… “I was going to ask if you could stay here for the duration, but now that sounds less reasonable. But if you were shunted here, it stands to reason that the path back is also here. And if you leave, the government might be less welcoming if you come back.”

“Are you… trying to force me to stay?” Magus asks accusingly.

“No! I just… I want to get to know you better, and I want you to get to know me better, and, well, I want you to understand dragons better, and not just in terms of biology.”

“If that’s the case, maybe you can start with what all that ‘announcement’ stuff was for.”

“I… okay. Did you watch the news last Saturday morning?”

“No, but you’re going to say you were on it, aren’t you?”

“…Yes. Anyway, historically, a dragon’s announcement is their time to let the surrounding area know they exist and let the people there get to know the dragon. You might note that the latter didn’t really happen with mine. Instead, I had to talk about all the stuff people would already know if dragons had been public knowledge the whole time.”

“Why is that, anyway? I understand the initial hiding from your story. The, ah, whole thing with Fred and all that. But I’d think that people would at least recognize that certain individuals don’t seem to age,” Magus starts counting on her fingers, “or that a flying thing appears periodically, or, well, all sorts of magic stuff happens everywhere!” Magus throws up her hands in frustration.

“I’d think people would notice it, too, but it seems that’s not the case. I’m certain the US government has records of suspected dragons, now that they know dragons live a long time, but half-immortals are the same way… Anyway, the reason my announcement was significant is that I’m the first dragon in recent history to give up a relatively private life in favor of teaching people about magic. The other dragons knew that the first dragon to make an announcement would necessarily be the face of the change, so no one really wanted to do it. They were alright with me doing it because I made it clear I’d rely on them for support, so they’re guiding me on what to say publicly. But for conversations like right now, this is all on me.”

“So I’m hearing that dragons don’t speak up because they value privacy over safety?!” Magus half-shouts.

“Whoa! Stop! Simmer down, there. The world was doing pretty alright without us for a long time. The first thing we would’ve noticeably impacted would be World War II. I don’t know if that happened in your world—”

“It didn’t.” At least her voice is calmer, though I can still hear some anger.

“—but that is what convinced dragons that the world needed us again. Some had been talking about it for a while, reintroducing ourselves that is, but we didn’t have much of a trigger. But when, as we had predicted, Germany retaliated over the treaty from World War I, but in a much more horrific fashion than we expected, well… the talks became more serious. No one stepped up, but part of the talks was finding an appropriate starting location. And I think Moperville is the best they could find.

“So with regard to magic, I’m pretty sure the world is doing alright. Not as great as it could be, but not so bad dragons have to step in, in a more public manner than we’re already involved. But historically, dragons were frequently involved in diplomacy, and that’s one stage that is in
desperate need of help. And with dragons, talking about one requires mentioning the other.”

“I… think I’m starting to follow. I don’t think I need to know all that back home, but it is helping me learn how dragons think, and what things might have been like before dragons seemed nothing more than monsters.”

6 February 2014
5:40 PM CST

If I knew my homework would be that boring, I might’ve put it off until after this mental training thing. Except I have no idea what it is or how long it’ll take for me to get it, and I don’t want my homework to reflect an altered me.

“You up for round two?” Elliot asks me as I walk in the door to Tedd’s house.

“Not really, but I don’t want Sean on my case for refusing. Not that the last one was bad, but I can think of plenty of effects I’d rather not have active on me.” Kevin thought many of the same things as Tedd regarding ‘sexy-awesome,’ and I definitely don’t want any of those active on me. I’m also glad my mind has stopped coming up with fantasies of those.

“I think these are mostly just ones that would be detrimental in combat.”

“Most of the ones I’m thinking of would be that as well.”

“Come on down, you two!” Tedd calls up the stairs from his basement.

It’s the same setup as last time down here, with Grace sitting to Tedd’s left. I hope they don’t stare at me so much every time.

As we reach the base of the stairs, I lower my resistance. “Alright, I’m ready.”

Another wand pointing at me, and I can feel the active magic. However, I don’t immediately start a thought analysis this time.

Tedd must’ve noticed me still looking at him. “Did it work?” he asks.

“Of course it worked!” I snap. He’s a wandmaker! He knows that wands do whatever he wants!

“Hey, no need to get upset!” Grace says, hands up in a placating manner.

“I’m not upset! He should know what the wand did! I have no clue!” I start stepping towards her, and Elliot trips me. I was caught off guard so much I nearly hit the floor. I wheel to face him.

“What was that for?!”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I’m reminded of a page from PS238: “Angry people often make mistakes.” Are they making me mad on purpose? Hold on, does this one exaggerate my temper?

Why can’t Aaron Williams be a comic artist here?

Sufficiently off-topic, my head clears. Yeah, I think these first two were just amplifying some of my more negative traits. I’m… a bit curious how Sean picked up on those. I don’t think I’ve shown them to my friends at all.

“I—sorry about that. I shouldn’t’ve—I should be more pleasant.”
Grace looks at me in a funny way. “Are you sure you’re okay? Not a stressful day or anything?”

“No. I got to explain things to Magus. I love explaining things,” I answer in a sarcastic tone. Math and science, yes, I love to explain, but history, not so much. “But seriously, my day has mostly been boring. I finished some boring homework just before coming here. About the most stress I got was from doing my exercise after school.” And now I know to do my exercise before I get a shower. I did it after the shower today because I thought the water would help loosen up my muscles, and that such a short exercise wouldn’t make me sweat much. I was wrong. “I’m pretty sure I know what this spell does,” I finish, pointing at the wand in Tedd’s hand.

“You want to test this one with Mario Kart, too?” Elliot asks.

“It can’t be a bad test. I know blue shells are a major cause of profanity among many people.”

7 February 2014
4:26 PM CST

Mario Kart was a good test once again. Grace improved, and Elliot used plenty of lightning and blue shells. I held to my record of not cursing, barring when I am precisely quoting something, and I did not quote anything of the sort that day. Although the spell certainly tried its best.

My first day of work is Sunday. I’ll be working alongside some other folks who’ll get to train me. As a consequence of my work schedule, I’ll only do one mental training next week, after my physical training with Sensei. I think my time restriction on Wednesdays is too tight for Mr. Kilpatrick to squeeze a shift out of it.

I finally have time to teach Susan how to use FreeCAD. She’s already got it installed, so it’s time to fire it up and see what she wants to make.

“Alright. Before we start: is the project an existing object or image? Because if it is, a ruler will be your best friend.”

“Why is that?” Susan seems more curious than confused.

“I like to have my models closely match reality. For this exercise, the goal is for you to learn how to match the image in your head with how large a space actually is, so it’s nice to make stuff that’s close to scale. Of course, you’ll make some compromises to speed up the process a bit, but, well…I’d just repeat myself at this point. But if you can accurately picture in your head what sort of thing you want to do, it makes Draconic magic a lot easier.”

“Oh.” Susan stands up and walks over to her backpack, then comes back with a ruler. Still standing, she asks, “So… do you want to see the project I came up with?”

“That would be ideal.” I can work without a reference, but it’s easiest to teach with one.

Susan summons a fairy that… looks like herself. I knew she had different fairies than the Nanase one—I’ve seen them around the house—but I haven’t paid them a lot of attention. “Are you modeling the fairy? Because if it can’t hold still, this might be a little hard. And I don’t know if constantly having to summon the thing might mess with the exercise.”

Susan looks at the fairy for a moment, then cups her hands together. The fairy lands in her hands and goes still. It’s not like what happens when Nanase leaves a doll: the fairy is still lifelike, just not moving. “Is that good enough for you?” Susan asks.

“If you can keep it that way when you need to measure it, sure.” I think she gets some feedback
from the fairy, so I hope it’s not ticklish. At least I have a few ideas for how to make the wings. (Hooray for Kevin modeling Charizard last year!) “At any rate, when modeling stuff like your fairy, I like to start with the feet. You can start anywhere, really. But it might also work better if you pick a pose other than ‘straight as a board.’ I can look up some examples if you want.”

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Susan decided on a more ‘action-hero’ pose for the fairy model and decided that, after this, she’ll model and 3D-print a sword for her fairy. The fairy is so small that the sword shouldn’t cost too much, but I’m a bit curious what she’d use it for besides posing.

I got her started with some of the basics and told her to ask me if she had any questions on how to do something. Especially since there’s often multiple ways to make something in CAD, and there’s often a method that’s much easier and faster than the simplest way. In the meantime, I’ll be learning the program better by pursuing my own project: a model of my dragon form.

8 February 2014
5:16 PM CST

Today was the first day I couldn’t fly, since it’s been raining all day. (Yay for One Punch Man training, I guess. I’ll go flying some other day this week.) Thankfully the rain ended before we had to hike out to meet Tara and Andrea, but it’s still overcast, and therefore very dark. Hooray for phones having flashlight functions!

It turns out there’s a website that can give the time of sunrise and sunset to the nearest minute for any city on any day of almost any year. It also points out the fact that there’s several definitions to ‘twilight.’ So assuming Tara and Andrea meant ‘sunset’ and not ‘the end of twilight,’ they should be here any minute. (The end of twilight can be over an hour from now.) ‘Here’ as in the location we last saw them, according to the pin Elliot stuck on the map on his phone. He couldn’t fly here, but my Partial Skin to Scales (Elliot could use Jorge’s spell if he didn’t have to use his phone) works wonders in that regard. So Nanase is here in fairy form, Magus is here in person (with slightly messed-up clothes and muddied shoes), and Elliot and I are here with clothes that look like we just took them out of our closets.

And I think I sense the griffins a little southeast of our position.

Fred did make some useful spells, including some that resemble illusions. I do have to be careful with them, as they work on much the same principle as neon lights, but if I study how the spells work I might be able to make them better. Or come up with ways to make them more complex. At any rate, Fred’s Floating Lantern creates a small bright purple light from heating air by a lot in my chosen location (in this case, a few feet above my head) and keeping the area around it at the normal temperature. You’d think it’d be some other color, but it turns out air’s emission spectrum yields mostly purple light. I can’t keep it up forever, but it should be good enough for Tara to spot us.

Elliot, Magus and I went over the general contact plan before we came out here. Nanase’s fairy doll is for Magus, since Elliot and I would need prior warning to drop our resistance. However, it seems Nanase wasn’t briefed on the whole plan. “Where’d that light come from?” she asks.

“It’s a heat spell. I figured it’d help the griffins find us. Speaking of which, they’re over there,” I answer her, pointing towards the heat signatures of the two clearly-not-normal figures.

“…How about I go find them. I can follow your light back.”
“Fair enough.” She flits away. The doll doesn’t have a heat signature, so I can’t really follow her past the trees.

And for our final bit of surprising news, Elliot pulled this from Sarah: the ‘energy clog’ was created by Pandora. The other dragons were very surprised to learn that these things were caused by bored immortals. And since they only started after dragons started hiding… maybe we’re needed again for magic, not just diplomacy. Apparently, Pandora tasked Sarah with depleting the entropy buildup using her information spell so that someone (probably Mr. Verres or Mr. Raven) could take down the wall safely, which they should have done by now. While it’s great that Pandora decided to reverse that, I’m still wondering what brought it about. Maybe she’s preparing for her ‘death.’

The Nanase doll flies in from above, then loops back towards the griffins. She probably got lost. About a minute later, the griffins show up. “Greetings,” Tara hails us, with a slight bow, as she enters the small clearing. Then she notices Magus. “I do not believe we have met, young miss.”

Magus whirs to face me. “Miss?!”

“I thought you knew griffins could see through transformations caused by Common magic!” I’ve done a bit more reading on griffins since last time, but as none still exist here, there’s not much information on them.

“Griffins don’t exist in my world!” But Fred does. Griffins were created here after Fred was executed as a replacement for dragons. I suppose the same wizard decided to make something that was more of a weapon in Magus’s world. I just thought that with all of the other magic creatures Magus talked about, they might have griffins, too.

Tara interrupts us. “I apologize if my address for you was incorrect. Could you—”

“Just call me Magus. And you are?”

“My name is Tara,” she answers, turning to her right to face the other griffin, “and this is my wife, Andrea.”

“A pleasure to meet you all once again,” Andrea greets us. She turns to face Elliot. “I am curious. Why is your potential now hidden from me, when it once shone brightly?”

I think Elliot knows this answer. He takes a moment, then replies, “I’m – I’m a dragon now. This guy—” he points his thumb at Magus “—forced me to use an artifact that gave him a body and made me a dragon, at the cost of almost all of my spells.” I guess he’s still not over that yet.

“Again, I’m sorry about that. I believed I only had one course of action open to me,” Magus apologizes. She turns to face the griffins. “And while I’m on the topic, I ask your forgiveness for bribing vampires into Moperville.”

“That was you?!” Tara exclaims.

Before Tara can launch an assault, Andrea holds up her left wing in front of Tara and calmly responds, “I assume this is no longer a problem, then?”

“It is finished,” Magus replies remorsefully.

8 February 2014
5:23 PM CST
Tara glares at Magus for a moment, then returns to facing Elliot. “We noticed the flow of magic resume about one week ago. The flow is still slower than normal, but it is hastening. Were you involved in the fix?”

I clamp down on my response. Just because I know the answer, it doesn’t mean I have to answer. Elliot’s got this.

“No, but we know what caused the block in the first place, and how it was resolved.”

Andrea is taken by surprise for a moment, then leans forward. “And that is?”

“It turns out these things are caused by immortals wanting to make things more ‘interesting’ or otherwise empower a large area.” Elliot’s voice doesn’t carry the annoyed tone that mine would. I guess he doesn’t think of immortals as ‘his problem’ yet. “Immortals can’t fix it themselves, but the one that made this block coached some other people through getting rid of it. But none of us were directly involved.”

“I just wish I knew who removed the block,” Nanase mutters.

“You don’t?” Andrea asks.

“No,” Elliot answers. “We only know about it because one of our friends was tasked with decreasing the amount of magic on this side of the block, since she can access a powerful information spell that she doesn’t have the reserves to use.” I wonder if Sarah can still use that spell? It hasn’t come up in the car ride to school lately.

“If that is the case, then I believe we can conclude our business here,” Tara states.

Magus isn’t saying anything, and her head is still bowed, so I speak up for her. “There is one more thing.” Everyone including Magus looks at me. “Magus is from another world, neither this one nor yours. But he wishes to head home at some point, and Andrea’s speech last time made me think you might have more information for him than we do…”

Andrea is suddenly very interested in the conversation. Not that she wasn’t paying attention earlier, but I feel like I just brought up her favorite subject. “Do you know how you arrived in this world?” she asks Magus.

“I was engaged in a magic sparring match with a friend when I attempted to save my strength by using a device that should have produced a shield. But someone sabotaged it before the fight, and the resulting magic sent me here.”

“Do you still have the artifact?”

“No. I imagine it was consumed by the event.” More like she destroyed it, but it was a spirit device anyway…

“I haven’t read any theories relating to this sort of thing, but if you came home with me, I might find someone who could help. I’d love to learn more about other worlds, as well!”

Now to see how Magus decided. “I…” she starts, a pained expression on her face, “I think it’d work best if I stay here, in this world. Since I ended up here, my ticket home is likely here as well. But I’m sure that anyone who would want to help me would be fine with traveling here, especially because of the work Saphira is doing.”

I blush slightly at her ending statement, although with how dark it is I’m not sure anyone can tell
aside from Elliot. “Before you ask, Magus is talking about my announcement I made three weeks ago. I basically announced that magic exists, so at least in this area, you shouldn’t have to be extremely secretive, although you’d still likely end up on camera. But I’ve gone flying above Moperville a few times and interviewed with a local news station while in dragon form, so you might not be the strangest people in town.”

The griffins stare at me for a few moments before Tara speaks, her voice expressing confusion. “I didn’t notice any sort of panic in the area.”

Nanase answers for me: “I think Moperville kind of expected something like this, honestly. Although there has been an uptick in crazy conspiracy theory tourists lately.” I didn’t notice, but then again, I don’t watch the news. Kind of silly for someone who insists that others watch the news, now that I think about it. I guess I should be less critical of people who still don’t know I’m a dragon.

“That said,” I clarify, “it’s not like magic is something normal yet. It’s just that a griffin flying overhead or talking to people is more likely to cause excitement than fear. And most people will think that you’re transformed humans rather than your own species.” That’s the less insulting version of saying ‘a wizard created your kind.’ Because the actual word for that is ‘monster.’

“…I see,” Andrea responds. “In that case, I may be able to find a scholar willing to help. Although it might not happen for some time.”

Magus looks disappointed for a second before replying. “I get it. At least that’ll give people some more time to get used to magic.”

9 February 2014
1:58 PM CST

Today I managed to be uncomfortably close to late. While that’s something Kevin got down to an art form (he was rarely late, but usually got to work about a minute early), and the time is unlikely to change (since I’m walking), I might want to leave for work a little bit earlier. At least I remembered my uniform—the Ace red shirt accompanied by some form of pants. Susan helped me find jeans that were sort of close to fitting me online. They’re not the greatest, but at least they’re elastic. I like my skirts a lot more, though.

Apparently, a lot of folks do their tool shopping on the weekends. (Not very surprising, honestly.) So today I get to work with two other people—both men, of course, and from their apparent ages I’d guess they’re both in college. I think Mr. Kilpatrick scheduled two people only so that someone could serve customers while the other was teaching me, because it’s still a tool shop. I’ve never seen more than three customers at a time in one of these, and there’s only one when I get there.

Nametags… I knew before I got here that the guys were named Kyle and Luke. It looks like the muscular guy with yellow hair who’d be more at home in a gym is named Kyle, while the, well, average guy with green hair is Luke. I don’t want to judge a book by its cover, but generally speaking, I expect non-gym guys to hit on me less, so I’d rather work with Luke. Because I certainly don’t want to work with someone who wonders why I’m not fawning over them for their muscles. (They’d have to at least be a dragon. But I’d like to put personality first.)

Actually, now that I think about it—wasn’t Luke introduced to the comic just before I got here? He was a recent addition, so… I don’t remember him much. But I do remember that he has a spell that can tell how much magic someone has. And since he could check people other than the intended target… it’s passive and can’t be resisted. I think it just renders entropy as light. Makes sense. I really hope Luke knows better than to use the spell near me, because if Tedd is a flashbang, I burn
with the light of a thousand suns.

Time to introduce myself, at least. If they can read my nametag (or got the same briefing from Mr. Kilpatrick that I did), they’ll know my name is Saphira. But the nametag is a blank one filled out with a labelmaker, and therefore has really small text. “Hello! Um… My name is Saphira. I, um… I actually forgot how to clock in.”

Kyle is the one at the register, currently. “You need to log in, remember?” Right. The computer next to the register has a simple program that counts the time employees are logged in and saves it in the Public folder on the computer. If that time exceeds twelve hours consecutively, it resets, because it assumes you forgot to log out. But multiple employees can be logged in at once. Nice for a small business, not so much for a larger one.

Log in, lock it, and let Kyle back in. “Sorry, I… I don’t know how to do, well, much of anything here.”

“You’re new, we get it,” Kyle says in a bored tone. “Luke, why don’t you take her through the basics?”

“Of course,” Luke replies in a certainly more cheerful voice. He turns to face me. “Here. I’ll walk you through restocking the shelves.”

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A little while later and I think I’ve got most of it down. I took a bunch of notes in the Mymoir to be sure, but from experience, I believe it’ll be some time before I don’t have to reference my notes or ask a bunch of silly questions. On one last trip to the back room, Luke stops me from returning to the storefront. “Saphira—is it true? That you’re a dragon, I mean.”

“Yes.” I’m not sure why he had to do this back here, but I get the feeling he’s about to use his spell on me.

“Oh! That was… rather straightforward.”

“Do people usually dodge questions like that? I mean, obviously you haven’t asked anyone else that specific question, but…”

“No, I—never mind. Say, um… do you mind… standing still for a moment?”

I don’t want to let on that I know what he’s about to do. Nor do I want to act like dragons have more abilities than we actually have. So I guess I have no choice in this matter. I wish I could tell him to turn around before he does this, but we’ll have to do this the hard way. “You going to try using magic on me or something? I can tell you can use Common magic. I can also tell you that Common magic usually doesn’t work on dragons.”

“Oh.” He blushes. “Yes, I was. Can I try anyway?”

“Go right ahead.”

He stands still for a moment, then yells in pain and covers his eyes! “GAAAAH!”

I can’t tell him about the comic, but dragons do have a spell list… “Let me guess. You have a spell that makes magic look like light? Because if you’re going to use that on a dragon, you definitely shouldn’t look directly at them.” Luke continues clutching his face for what seems like a minute, then cautiously lowers his hands and stands up. In the meantime, I read the Mymoir for what little
information it has on spells like his. When he looks like he’s sure on his feet again, I continue: “If you want to use that near me, I suggest you look in the opposite direction. According to the Mymoir, you should still be able to see my magic suffusing everything around me, without destroying your vision.”

“Sorry. I should’ve seen that coming.” I’m amazed he can see much of anything right now.

12 February 2014
5:30 PM CST

Before exhausting me today, Sensei announced his name (and location) for the next dojo, which is apparently opening next week: ‘Shapeless Martial Arts.’ I was… less than enthusiastic about the name, but everyone else seemed to like it, so I guess it’ll do. As Justin pointed out, it fits the idea that he’ll customize the magic training part for each student. Although I think he got the name from a thesaurus, since ‘shapeless’ is sort of a synonym for ‘entropy.’ But at least he’ll have his own dojo so that he can set up mat protectors and so on however he likes.

And now it’s time for part three of my mental training.

“Ready?” Tedd asks.

“Ready,” I confirm, my voice expressing both my exhaustion and boredom. I know this is important, but it’s not like I look forward to these. “Although I don’t think you need to ask every time.”

“I just don’t want to waste the magic if you’ll resist it anyway.” He points the wand at me and I go into self-analysis mode.

Or try to. This feels… odd. I’m trying to focus on myself, but the whole world seems out-of-focus. Like if I had a concussion, at least according to what I’ve heard. Not like the first time, when my thoughts jumped around randomly. My head just feels cloudy, and I’m a little dizzy.

I stand up, my head swirling. When I feel sick to my stomach a few moments later, I sit back down, and Grace leaps to help me. “Saphira are you alright? What did Tedd do to you?” Her voice is higher-pitched than normal, like my brain’s sampling rate has slowed.

“Slow down, Grace. I can hardly tell what you’re saying.”

She looks at me kind of funny for a second, then it passes. Turning to her boyfriend, she asks, “Did you make her sick or something?” Her words are blurring together from the speed.

What was that again about sample rate?

… I didn’t think my knowledge of physics and computers would help with any of these, but here we are. Now how to snap me out of this? Because I don’t think ‘just focus’ is the answer. Or at least not the easiest answer, because I think ‘just focus’ is what Sean eventually wants me to be able to do.

If my brain is slowed, I’m not sure people might really understand what I’m saying. I do know one way to speed it up: an adrenaline rush. But to get one, I need something unexpected to happen. The greatest source of chaos in the room is Grace, but she wouldn’t want to do anything mean to me… but I think she could come up with something. “Grace, can you understand what I’m saying?” She quickly turns around and pauses for a moment, then nods. “I need you to do something unexpected. Give me an adrenaline rush.” She nods again and walks away.
Now, to make her truly difficult to predict, I concentrate on one thing that I usually have little reason to try: ignoring my heat sense. If I can’t tell where she is, she gets a lot more sneaky.

It feels like about a minute passes with nothing happening. As it turns out, ignoring my heat sense is really hard; if I’m trying to ignore it, I also manage to block out sight and sound. (I can only manage it with my eyes squeezed shut.)

Suddenly, I feel a hard shove and my sense of ‘down’ is challenged! My eyes fly open and I see that Grace has decided to go for the full tackle despite my sitting in a chair! I quickly cast **Jorge’s Skin to Scales** to break my fall before I hit the ground!

And a moment after the *CLANG* from the Saphira sandwich (chair, me, Grace) hitting the floor, I notice that I broke the mental spell’s slowing effect. And then I take the opportunity to scold Grace. “What were you thinking?! Kevin had to get stitches in his head for something like that!” Not exactly the same thing, but hardwood, brick, and hard plastic aren’t very forgiving when someone more than twice your size lands on you.

Thanks to the chair I’m lying on, Grace is pretty much right on top of me. My scales must’ve kept her from sliding any when we hit the ground, since her head ends a bit below my chin. When I yell at her, she sits up so that she’s straddling me on top of my stomach (just above the seat of the chair). “I– ah–” Grace is at a loss for words.

Tedd responds in her stead. “Really? She’s never had any trouble with **tackling me**.”

“Did you ever have some kind of corner nearby?” I ask (still a little angry), pointing at the **bookcase** just a few inches beyond my head. I can’t see it, since Grace hasn’t gotten off me yet, but I can still sense its heat energy. “Because sharp corners on hard materials near my head is a very bad thing in my experience.” I don’t remember anything after Kevin’s injury for the next several hours, but everything leading up to it is still pretty clear despite his age at the time (about 5, I think).

Elliot walks over so that both Grace and I can hear him. “You’re talking normally, now, so I think you’re good to go transform,” he tells me. Turning to Grace, he continues, “Mind letting Saphira up?”

Grace stands, Tedd lets out an “Awww,” and I end my active Draconic spell. Three down. I wonder how many to go?

20 February 2014  
2:45 PM CST

My journal has been… rather bare, this past week. More work, more school, more physical training… not much to note really. A few notables, but not much.

First item was Saturday. This week, no one showed up at the landing site, so Elliot and Ellen landed with me. They complimented me on me not collapsing when flying was over, though I was still panting. For their part, Elliot didn’t seem very tired, but they both complained of aching chests and shoulders.

Next item was Monday: Susan has made significant progress on her 3D model, but she started over multiple times because she found better or more accurate ways to do something. I let her know that FreeCAD wasn’t made with models like this in mind, and there’s only so much you can do before you hit diminishing returns. If she wants to make anatomical models, there’s far better software out there.
Then on Wednesday, Sensei had his ‘grand opening,’ of sorts. The words ‘grand opening’ did draw in a few folks, but none of them had magic, so they left after being encouraged to come back either if they awakened or found friends with magic. And I am happy that the location for this dojo is a bit better than the last one. And Elliot remarked after class that he thinks Sensei held onto some of the mat protectors from his last dojo. I guess he did plan to reopen eventually. Additionally, he set up classes with everyone: Monday will be ‘magic day’ and Wednesday ‘martial arts day,’ not that either of those are exclusive to those subjects. No reason to hold more classes when he’s only got five students. I can’t come on Mondays unless I let my boss know, but Sensei said that’s fine, as I’m much less ready than his other students. I’d be offended if it wasn’t Kevin’s fault, not exercising (beyond transportation) for over a year. But I’m getting a lot better, so maybe I can do that soon.

And today, (now,) I get to do another mental training, and I’ll do two next week, assuming I pass each one. I haven’t had to go home with one yet, so I hope I can keep it up. Though I’ve been promised they’re getting tougher.

“Ready?” Tedd asks.

“As much as ever,” I sigh. I have regained my initial reluctance to do this, important as it is. When I asked, Sean said he expects me to finish the initial training this month, though he also wants me to perform some sort of refresher at regular intervals.

A zap and I start analyzing my thoughts. I’m becoming rather familiar with how I think, and as a result, familiar with the differences between myself and Kevin. Obviously I have more confidence than he does, and partly as a consequence, I’m more comfortable in my own skin and less envious of other folks. It’s not all positive, of course. And some of it’s neutral—basically the same except it’s the female equivalent (such as my minor anger issue). So I’m still pretty similar, but I’m sure that’ll change over time; it’s only been a month and a half.

So… no basic changes…. Maybe talking will help me figure it out? I open my eyes. “I got nothin’.”

“I’m still confused how Teddy’s making you think differently. And what that might feel like,” Genetic magic users are prized on monster hunting teams for that very reason: all Common magic mental effects fail outright. Any other effect still works, but mental effects just don’t. “And, um… doesn’t it make you uncomfortable? Knowing you’re not yourself?” Grace finishes.

“Well, knowing it’s active makes this a lot better. But honestly, I feel like I’ve gotten to know myself a lot better. The change isn’t ever the exact same, so it’s not like I’m learning what my altered self is like.” Hmmm. Still nothing. “Sorry, Elliot, I still don’t know what this is.”

“It’s entirely possible you won’t get this one tonight. But I think a good test for this one would be having it active at school anyway, and I don’t think it’ll be that bad for this one.”

“Joy. Altered Saphira at school. I hope I can figure it out quickly.”

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The rest of the night came and went with no revelation on what the mental effect is. First time sleeping with an active effect: not really any change. If even my dreams aren’t weird, this must be a really subtle change. In which case I’m kind of wondering why it’s so late in the training. I let Susan know that the effect is active, but with no idea what it is, there’s only so much that can be done.
First period of History over: I think I’ve got it. An old habit that Kevin broke in high school was to call out answers he thought were obvious. Instead, he raises his hand for every single instance. (Probably still annoying, but less disruptive.) Today I fell back on the old habit. So either this spell is making me more impulsive or have less control. Or that’s redundant. University of Maryland University College. Anyway, Kevin beat his own impulsiveness (or reduced it, anyway), so it shouldn’t be that bad getting through the rest of school with the spell active. I’ll transform later, once I get Elliot’s concurrence.

23 February 2014
5:34 PM CST

I think word got around that there’s a ‘cute girl’ working here, because this place gets busier every shift. (It’ll probably hit a cap soon, but I think most of the local handymen shifted their business to here.) As I don’t know how that word would usually spread, I’ll chalk it up to Google reviews or some such. But at least I have something to do most of the time, rather than being bored out of my mind like Kevin was. But the added business means there’s also someone else working with me on Sundays. Today I got Kyle, who’s actually not as bad as I thought, especially compared to some of the other staff.

*Bzz bzz* Yay, another sales call. Which radio station reroute do I get this time? Whatever, I’ll look at it when I’m done with this customer. At least I’m allowed to have my phone on me, even though I’m not supposed to use it here. It’s mostly for emergencies.

*Ring ring* Kyle answers the store’s phone. About half a minute later, he puts the handset on the counter and walks over to me. “Saphira, it’s an older woman asking specifically for you. She said her last name was Pompoms?” I’m sure Kyle’s confused because I’ve told him my last name is Bjartskular. (“You’ll never guess my name.”) But why would Ms. Pompoms call me at work?

“I’ll take it. Can you handle this? Just looking for the right hex wrench for his project,” I say, pointing at the man behind me.

“Sure, I’ve got it.”

I stand up (I was squatting) and quickly walk over to the phone. “Saphira speaking.”

“Thank God!” Ms. Pompoms practically whisper-shouts. “I can’t find Susan, and there’s a monster in the house, and—”

I stop her. “Wait, slow down. You said there’s a monster in the house?” She wouldn’t have time to call the work phone if it was a vampire, so there’s that, at least.

“I don’t know what else to call it! It’s big and scaly with wings—” which describes a bunch of monsters “-and sleeping on the floor of Susan’s room!” Sleeping? I’m not aware of monsters that sleep.

But if it’s sleeping and she found it, she opened the door without waking it. “I have no idea what to tell you. Can you text a picture of the monster to me?”

“I don’t want to wake it up!”

“I appreciate the urgency, but this’ll go faster if I know what it is. I’m sure you’ll be quieter this time, so I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”
Her end goes silent, but I’m still getting signal noise, so I guess she’s complying. I look around and notice Kyle’s back at the counter. “I’m not sure what this is, but let’s call it a family emergency,” I tell him, my hand over the mic. “I might have to leave early.”

Kyle nods understandingly. “I’ll let Mr. Kilpatrick know.” About a minute later my leg buzzes with a text. I discreetly pull out my phone to look at the picture. That’s… The first thing I think of is ‘Ellen’s dragon form, but blue.’ Not exactly the same, but rather similar. The figure is sprawled on the floor, with its tail caught in Susan’s desk chair. And while it’s blue, it’s not me-blue. More like… Susan’s eye color. And suddenly I think I’ve figured it out.

I didn’t think this would happen if a non-dragon successfully cast Draconic magic. Nor did I think Susan would get it so quickly, especially since, as far as the dragons are aware, no one has ever succeeded before.

I go back to the store phone. “Are you there?”

“Yes.” Ms. Pompoms sounds a lot calmer now.

“I don’t want to alarm you, but I think the ‘monster’ is Susan. I can’t confirm it until I get home, though. Would you be willing to wait until my shift ends?”

“When is that?”

“8:30.”

“I’m not waiting three hours. I’ll explain it to your manager later, but I need you here right now.” Although if my theory is correct, it could be some time before Susan wakes, especially if, like Ellen, she can’t access the Mymoir. Although there’s no telling how long she was out before Ms. Pompoms found her. Ellen and Elliot didn’t fall unconscious when they awakened, but then again, they couldn’t sense anything.

I become aware of my pause. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.” As in I’m flying home. I won’t land in the yard, but the end of the street is close enough. I hang up the phone and get Kyle’s attention.

“I have to go home early. It doesn’t sound all that urgent to me, but if I’m wrong it’s really important that I’m there. And I don’t think Ms. Pompoms is willing to wait.”

“Gotcha. But the next time I see you, you’ll need to explain how you’re related to someone named ‘Pompoms.’”

“Deal.” I quickly log out of the business computer and dash outside, looking for somewhere to shift forms. I’m not worried about secrecy, of course, just property damage. If someone around here doesn’t yet know I’m a dragon, well, they’ll find out today.

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A swift flight later I enter my home’s front door, visibly to Ms. Pompoms’s relief. “I’ll head up. You can come with me or stay here if you like.”

Ms. Pompoms nods and follows me to Susan’s room. Before I even open the door, the smell confirms that something heavily Draconic is on the other side.

23 February 2014
5:45 PM CST

Susan hasn’t budged since her mother took the picture earlier. That can’t be comfortable. I don’t
know if Elliot and Ellen readjusted my position when I awakened, but I’m going to do my best to help her out. First, of course, I need to inform Ms. Pompoms. “Yeah, that’s Susan. I mean, I can’t confirm it’s her until she wakes up, but that’s a Draconic transformation. So at the very least, that’s a person, not a monster.” I’m also certain that she’s a female half-dragon, though I’m not totally certain how I can tell that. I’ve probably spent the most time around the most dragons, proportional to my age.

I’ve certainly gotten stronger in the past month, but Susan is heavy. First point of order is removing her chair, I guess. Most everything around her is scratched, smashed or otherwise damaged. Her computer mostly just looks like she slightly lifted the desk: it’s askew and closer to the back than I remember, but there’s no easily apparent damage. On the other hand, the underside of her desk is scratched, the top drawer is bent, the nearby shelf has collapsed, and her chair back is nearly torn off, tightly gripping her tail. It looks like she was sitting at her computer when she shifted, and like she shifted without warning. Does that happen every time a half-dragon awakens?

It’s probably from the magic rushing to fill their new pool, sort of like how newly-awakened Common casters might have buildups. I wonder what happens if you shove Draconic magic into a full dragon, since that doesn’t happen with them?

Back to the chair. The options are (1) wait for her to wake up, (2) unscrew the back and pull it the rest of the way off, or (3) carefully attempt to slide it off. It’s not like I’m trying to remove a knife someone closed on their fingers, so I’ll start with option 3. Given the design of the chair (with the back attached to the bottom by a single center bar), it ought to get easier to pull the further I go.

Aaaand… off. Not too bad. The chair can be repaired, but it’ll need new cushions; the old ones are torn in several places by the scales that erupted from Susan’s backside. There’s a good reason why many transformations are ‘outdoors only.’

She can’t possibly be injured, but I still want to ask her mother before attempting to move her. “Ma’am?” I try to stick to formal addresses, but ‘Ms. Pompoms’ is a little long.

“Yes?”

“Judging from the pattern of damage, I’m about 90% certain this is Susan.” Possibly higher than that. “Is it alright if I try to move her, or should I leave her there?” I mean, she’s sprawled on the floor with her wings tucked in, but her right one pinched under her shoulder. Not excessively painful, but… think ‘binder clip challenge.’ “If I can, I’d like to move her so she’s sitting up against a wall.”

“Is she sleeping, or is it something else?” Her worry is clear in her voice.

“This is roughly consistent with what happens when a dragon awakens. Not that I’m certain exactly what happened here, but… Well, Susan isn’t a dragon. But if she has some of our senses, that could be enough to knock her out until her brain gets used to it. A dragon is typically out for somewhere between half an hour and two hours.” I highly doubt it’d be like with Elliot. But since she would’ve been trying to cast a heat spell, maybe she’s a half-heat dragon? “So unless you know when this started, we might be waiting a while.”

“I- I don’t. But… Here, I’ll help you move her.”

With much effort and grunting we move her so that she’s leaning against the nearest empty wall. I check her wing for damage, and to my relief find none. Yeah, she’d heal, but I don’t want her to wake up screaming.
Well, I have to admit I never thought I’d help Ms. Pompoms move her unconscious daughter.

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With Susan against the wall, Ms. Pompoms and I spent the next half hour attempting to repair and reorganize her stuff. Without a mass dragon most of the damage is irreversible, but the shelving unit wasn’t too hard to fix. Cleaning up her scattered school supplies was the hardest thing, really.

When putting another book back on the shelf, I hear a croaking sound behind me, reminiscent of the first time Ellen tried to speak in dragon form. I put the book down and turn around. “Hey, Susan! Have a nice nap?”

Another squeak is issued from her mouth before I hold up my hand. “Hold on. Think at me.”

**What?**

“There you go!”

She lifts her arm and moves it around like she’s trying to swat something away. **I… What’s with all these numbers?** She squints at me. **And I have the worst headache.**

“It sounds to me like you’ve awakened as a half-dragon that can sense something. You’re in your dragon form right now. Here—look at the space in front of my hand.” I hold my right hand out and lower the heat of the air in a small sphere in front of it. The temperature drop is probably about 30°F.

**Why did the numbers decrease?**

“I’m pretty sure you can sense heat. I can teach you how to make the numbers into colors or something later, but first, I think you ought to shift back to your human form.” I don’t think she’s noticed that her mother is in here yet, but she should once she shifts back. Draconic senses are easier to ignore in human form if you want to. “To change back, concentrate on how you normally appear and cast the spell.”

She closes her eyes, and a few seconds later the Susan we all know and love is sitting next to the wall. The size difference is enough that she’s no longer propped against it. She sits there for a second, then remembers that her mouth works. “H-how long was I out?” I look at Ms. Pompoms, and Susan notices her for the first time, with a sharp intake of breath. “Mom?! How long have you been there?”

“… I found you about an hour ago. I– I thought you were a monster.”

Susan knows that her mother doesn’t know that’s the proper term for a magic creature, but it gets the point across. She grimaces. “Sorry about that.” Then she looks at the clock by her bed. “I thought you had work today?” she questions me.

“Your mother called me home. She said she couldn’t find you, then at my behest took a picture of you, lying on the floor.” I pull out my phone and show her the picture, which includes some of the disaster that was around her. Her carpet is still a little damaged, but as she slid in the same direction as her scales, they didn’t dig into anything. We’ve removed the chair from her room entirely. “I didn’t know for certain what had happened, so I came home on the off chance that there actually was a monster here, with you nowhere to be found. And I think it soothed her a bit.”

“I… well… I guess I have a lot to talk about. But first…” She gets up and walks over to me. Whispering, she continues: “I know you don’t wear any sort of perfume. So why do you smell
like…”

The scent’s hard to describe. “Kind of like flowers?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what a dragon smells like.”

24 February 2014
5:46 PM CST

So, from Susan’s point of view, the sequence of events yesterday…. First, she finished her 3D model. I looked at it—it’s pretty good, for a beginner. I guess she did spend a lot of time on it. With that closed out, she decided to give the tutorial spell another shot. It was going about as well as usual (that is, no effect) until suddenly, she felt a small burst of magic use and could read the Draconic writing. Not just memorize what it said—she could actually read it. The next thing she knew, she was propped up against the wall and her right wing was sore.

I called up work this afternoon. My early leave yesterday will come out of my paycheck, but Mr. Kilpatrick was mostly relieved that everyone was alright. And of course I assured him that this specific thing wouldn’t happen again. (I’m absolutely certain that Ms. Pompoms won’t even try to understand Draconic magic.)

Today’s mental effect practice is late because Elliot had to get back from his magic training. I could have gone today, but I don’t think it’s worthwhile to only go sometimes.

“So, Elliot, how was training today?”

“Pretty good. Actually, Justin told Nanase about it, and she decided to come back. So now we’ve got the whole Anime-Style Martial Arts crew back, although Greg made it clear that this training would be closer to karate, but with magic.”

“If Susan attends, it might be more like kendo for her.”

Tedd raises his hand. “What is—?”

“Sword martial arts,” I answer.

“Or something like that, anyway,” Elliot clarifies. It’s true, there’s no kicking or punching in kendo. “But if she wants to learn kendo, she might have better luck going to an actual kendo class.” I did tell Elliot about Susan’s awakening—I reported it in the Mymoir—but anyone else will have to get it from Susan.

“I didn’t ask. Just a joke. Are we ready for the next one?”

“If you are,” Tedd answers.

I take a second to lower my resistance. It’s getting easier, but I’m not sure if that’s a good thing. It still takes concentration, though, so it’s not like I’ll do it on accident. “Ready.”

A zap and… Oh. The last one was so subtle I was ready to delve in on this right away. This one is more like ‘I really, really want to ignore it.’ My face turns beet red as I try to hide it.

“What’s she doing?” Grace asks.

“I think she’s figured it out.” Elliot responds. Darn it, Elliot, stop talking! Quit being so cute!
I moan audibly.

This isn’t one I can craftily trick away, like the slowed perception. Nor is it something Kevin’s had to deal with before. Sure, he was attracted to girls, but he never had a girlfriend, nor was he ever super attracted to someone he knew well. Even without magic, Elliot is cute, cool, and all around a great guy, and a dragon. Not Christian, but I’d still seriously consider dating him if I didn’t consider him taken. (Even if he breaks up with Ashley, I’d still say Susan has dibs. I mean, the whole reason Elliot ever considered breaking up with Sarah was that he was attracted to Susan! And although she never confirmed it outright, I’m fairly certain Susan considered dating him around the same time.)

But right now, I get to deal with magically-increased attraction to others, with Elliot in the room. I’m certain Sean knew what he was doing here. Rrrrgh!

Tedd shifts a bit in his seat. “You know, you could go home and—”

“NO!” It’s bad enough with just Elliot here! And it’s not like I’ll be away from him the whole day! And of course there’s the rumors that will fly if I go to school like this. Attracted to anyone and everyone while in a public place? Not happening!

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I sat on that chair for quite a while before I felt like I could function again, and not because I got over myself. If there was one spell that would teach me to power through mental effects, I think Sean found it. And by ‘power through,’ I don’t mean ‘grin and bear it.’ I focused so hard on demolishing the effect that it completely vanished. Not all at once, but it’s like hitting a brick wall with a hammer: you loosen one brick, then another, until the whole thing comes crashing down. I could still smell the active magic, but as long as I maintained a bit of concentration on it, it failed to bother me anymore.

26 February 2014
4:00 PM CST

Wheee. Martial arts practice. Sensei finally judged me ‘fit enough’ to do actual martial arts training. This seems a lot less fun than when Kevin did it in elementary school, but he didn’t have to have scales the whole time. At least I’ve fixed the overheating problem with the spell. Now I think it’s actually cooler than without scales, the way the air flows through them.

Speaking of which, I think I’ve got something worked out that would let me cast the spell on other people. I made it into its own spell, since it necessarily has a time limit (to avoid distance-from-caster limitations, among other problems) and casting on someone else is different to casting on yourself. But if Ashley or someone else wants to give it a shot, I can test it. Although it might be safer to start with Ellen or Susan, since transforming would dispel it.

I have asked Susan whether she wants to come to Shapeless Martial Arts with me. Answer: no. Although she said she might try to ask Mr. Raven for sword lessons. Apparently, he said he knew how to use a sword when they got attacked by vampires last month. And although we don’t know about the longevity of half-dragons, a few thousand years doesn’t seem unreasonable. Actually, Susan and Diane would make an excellent case study for extrapolation by Sahara.

And just as I’m thinking this, the door chimes open and I notice Diane and Rhoda enter.

How would they have heard about this? No, that’s stupid. They go to school with Nanase, Ellen
and Justin, and it’s perfectly reasonable to assume at least one of those three talked with Diane. Well, maybe not Justin. But the other two hang out with Diane on occasion.

I really need to hang out with my friends more.

We’ve all got our assignments, so Sensei pauses his teaching to go chat with the potential new students. It must look… well, at least a little strange. To Sensei’s credit, the martial arts portion of the class is very similar to actual martial arts. The only real difference is that Elliot and I have enough resilience that a lightly-padded us makes for fairly good punching bags for practice. Lightly padded in order to not hurt our ‘opponents.’ (Scales are hard.) Not that I’m about to let Sensei and Justin have at me. But when we’re just punching and kicking the air, the only strangeness is the fact that two of us have scales and one sometimes has fur and/or a tail. (No claws allowed on the mats.)

I think I hear Sensei asking them if they can use magic. Diane’s not going to get any magic training on firearms here, but if she gets some other kinds of spells that can show up. Although pistol-whipping might be a thing for her. As for Rhoda… the Mymoir has detailed a myriad of ways her abilities can be used for many things, including combat. Not that there are articles on how to use Common magic. But there are several articles on people who have famously used Common magic for a wide variety of things. After all, if we’re going to teach people about magic, we’re going to need some sort of history on the subject.

So the thing about running a dojo with zero employees is that, if someone new shows up, either you need students who can compensate for the lack of an instructor, or you need patient new people. Nanase and Elliot knew what was going on with Anime Style Martial Arts, so they were nearly good enough to be instructors there, but according to Elliot, this is decidedly different. Instead of the fairly ridiculous stuff they used to do to train magic they didn’t have, we’re just doing normal martial arts with magic either assisting us or making it more difficult. (Scales are only actually useful when you’re getting hit. At all other times, they’re just heavy. Makes me think of the ‘weighted training clothes’ comment from Dragon Ball Z Abridged.) At least for the Wednesday classes. So in this case, the person who’s most experienced with this sort of thing is actually me, but Kevin did tae-kwon-do so long ago I hardly remember it. (Third to sixth grade is ridiculously far back in my opinion. I remember skills he learned back then. Anything else is very hazy.)

In short, once we finish our assignments, we have to call Sensei back so that he can give us further instruction. Sorry, Diane and Rhoda, but he does have a class to teach. At least he can take breaks, since his entire class is adults. I’m certain teaching children requires more focus, although with this business, children will likely be few and far between. Probably wizards, mostly.

When he next approaches Diane, I hear her ask, “Why do they call you ‘Sensei’?”

“It’s the Japanese word for ‘teacher.’ I just like the word better.”

I’m still a little puzzled as to why Rhoda’s here. She doesn’t strike me as the sort of person that would come, and she didn’t seem too enthused when I asked shortly after my announcement. Although… Diane’s here. It’s possible she forced Rhoda to come, saying she needed a ‘confidence booster.’ Which I could certainly see. I still don’t think she’d make much use of this, but it’s worth a shot, I guess.

26 February 2014
5:15 PM CST

End of class, but Diane and Rhoda are still here. “Saphira?” Diane calls out to me. Elliot looks
back at me—he was going to drive me to my mental training today.

“It’ll just be a minute, Elliot.” He heads out the door. “Hey, Diane. Hi, Rhoda. Sorry it’s been so long since I talked to either of you. I’ve been busy and… I like to keep to myself, mostly.” Never been one for going out of my way to hang out with people. I remember Kevin’s tour guide that said she goes home and huddles in a corner when the tour weekend is over. At least I’m not that bad.

“Did you have scales earlier?” Rhoda asks.

“Yes! Saphira’s Partial Armor!” I keep the scales for a few seconds, then end the spell. I’m tired enough. I don’t want to cast much right now, but I also want my body to feel as light as possible.

“I have to admit I wasn’t expecting that,” Diane states. She was likely a bit bewildered earlier, but she’s been here for an hour.

“Did you read the sign next to the door?” Sensei put up a sign that basically says magic will be in use while class is in session. Ellen doesn’t use hers a whole lot for Wednesday classes, but everyone else has something magic going on at some point. There’s no federal regulations on stuff like that yet, but magic can be dangerous, so a warning is probably a good idea. Plus it brings in people who like magic and get close enough to read the sign. (Elliot said he can convince people that it’s not necessarily him using Draconic magic to get scales, if it’s a problem. And he wasn’t worried about Sensei keeping his secret, since he’d have to explain the power increase somehow.)

“Yes. I just… didn’t expect people would be using magic so openly.”

“Says the person who shoots a magic shotgun at a firing range. This is far more private. How has that been going, by the way?”

“Dad’s been as supportive as he said he would be. And while I didn’t find some of the gun safety classes all that useful for my spell, actually shooting is pretty fun!” That’s good. Nothing worse for a caster than having spells you don’t want to use, especially if they’re your only spells.

“And how do the others at the range react to your glowing firearm?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Well… the first time I summoned it, people were a little alarmed. Now I just get a few odd looks. The instructor still isn’t used to it, but he answers others’ questions for me.”

“That’s about how I expect things to go with magic in general.” I turn to Rhoda. “And for you… there wasn’t anything I really wanted to ask. Except to know if you actually wanted to come here.”

“Um… no.” Rhoda lowers her head, and Diane puts her hand on her shoulder comfortingly. I think she was a little overwhelmed, especially by Sensei. He’s the only person I’ve met that’s taller than me, and compared to Rhoda… he must be the most intimidating friendly guy she’s ever met.

“It’s not like you have to train here to use your magic. So long as it’s used in a not-reckless or evil manner, I’ll be fine with it.”

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The conversation closed with me promising to hang out with the other two more often. I still have school and work, but we all exchanged phone numbers, so I can call them if I have free time and want to hang out. And vice versa.

“So what’s the plan? Drop off Ellen and head over to Tedd’s place?” I ask Elliot as I get in the car.

“Actually, I’m coming along today,” Ellen answers.
“Oh. Okay.” I guess Sean wanted to make me more nervous or something?

We get there and Tedd greets us (Elliot, Ellen, Grace and myself) at the door, then we all head down to Tedd’s lab area (AKA the basement). We’re coming up on the end of February, so I hope this is close to the last time I have to do this, at least in the near future.

Same setup as usual. Ellen’s sitting on the couch behind me, since Tedd doesn’t have enough chairs. “Ready?” he verifies.

“Ready.” But instead of Tedd zapping me, I get blasted from behind!

My head spins as I try to work out what just happened. I… Ellen was behind me. If she’s back there… I look at myself. Yep. FV5’d, and not just one layer. And knowing what the last two effects were… Sean planned this.

The world stops spinning, but now I get the actual effects of the double FV5. And this time, it doesn’t have to overcome Elliot being female. But unlike last time, I’ve actually had a bit of training.

…

Even without heat magic I can feel my face turn red. But I know better than to actually look at Elliot. He’s still here and I can still smell him, and that’s bad enough. But with a bit of time to focus…

…

I think I’ve got it. I open my eyes. “Are you all good?” Elliot asks.

“No! Blocking mental effects also blocks form acclimation!” I know that if I stood up, I’d fall over forwards.

1 March 2014
6:10 AM CST

Elliot and Ellen don’t have to pick me up to head to the park now, since Susan can take me. She took the wakeup alarm about as well as you’d expect. I kept the car at about 60°F to keep her awake, unpleasant as that was. Although if she was actually awake, she could use her magic to counter mine.

Another burst of cold as we get out of the car and she fully wakes up. “W-w-what happened to you heating the air around me?” Susan asks, shivering.

“You can heat it yourself. If you want, I can give you a wand for Fred’s Thermal Regulator.” Susan, like Ellen, can’t access the Mymoir. Beyond that, her abilities are identical to my own, except that her range is about half of average (that is, her range is about 1/12 or 0.083 miles) and her dragon form is smaller. No way to know her power, but I’m guessing it’s about half of average as well. She can use Draconic magic without a wand, but having a wand or written description makes spells easier.

“Please.”

“Alright. Once we’re done here.”

Elliot and Ellen are already at the take-off point. When they enter Susan’s range, she jumps a bit,
then realizes what she’s sensing. As they come into view, I greet them. “Ready to get started?”

“I want to see Susan’s dragon form first,” Elliot calls.

I stop and turn to Susan. “Well? You won’t notice the cold so much.”

“Fine.” She stops and shifts form.

“She’s like a blue Ellen!” Elliot exclaims.

“That’s what I said!” I half-shout back.

“Come on, guys, we’re not that similar.” Ellen shifts her form. **Then again, maybe we are.**

“Hey, Elliot, before you shift, I want to try something!” I hastily call to him.

“Sure. What is it?”

I walk over to him. “Just hold still,” I tell him as I put my right hand on his shoulder.

Similar to when I made wands for Ellen, I begin to force a bunch of magic into him. It’s not complicated, just hard, and I’m not sure I’m doing anything. To his credit, he stands there, but it’s not evident he’s aware of what I’m doing. Until I’ve pushed in about twice the energy required to shift and he shifts to his dragon form.

**W-what did you just do?** he asks, clearly surprised.

“Susan shifted to her dragon form when she awakened, so I wondered what would happen if a bunch of magic was shoved into a full dragon. I basically forced you to shift, right?”

**Yeah, that felt a lot like when I was getting buildups with my Common magic.**

Oh. The depiction in the comic for that **looked unpleasant**, “Ouch. Sorry about that.”

**It’s fine. New discovery, right?**

“Yes.” I’m tired of craning my neck to look at him, so I back up and shift. At this point, we’d normally just take off, but... I don’t think Susan’s voluntarily moved her wings at all yet. **Ellen, could you teach Susan how to fly? Your morphology is the most similar.**

**I’d say it’s the same.** Elliot replies snarkily.

Ellen tosses her head. It’s difficult to roll your eyes in dragon form. **Whatever. Susan, do you know how to flap your wings?**

---

While Ellen is teaching Susan the basics, Elliot and I get to fly alone together. **I was very surprised that you didn’t jump me on Wednesday,** Elliot declares.

**I had a lot of reasons not to. And Monday gave me a lot of practice.**

**What sorts of reasons?**

Awkward time. I’m genuinely attracted to the guy, but now he’s basically asking me ‘why wouldn’t you date me?’ I don’t know how most girls would dodge this question. You know
what… **Do you want** to hear my full answer? Because *I can* answer, if you want.**

He doesn’t **freeze in place**, but he starts gliding. At least he didn’t drop out of the sky. A few moments later he makes his decision: **I probably should hear this.** **Likely either because he knows I’ll be honest or so he doesn’t make an ignorant mistake going forward.**

**Full answer is what you get, then. You’d think the others right there would be the greatest factor against, but… not really. I didn’t hold back for their sake, or even yours, really. The people with the greatest influence there were Ashley and Susan.**

*Now* he **drops about twenty feet**, We’re not right next to each other, but it’s a noticeable drop. **Ashley I understand, but… why Susan?** **Oh, come on. He has to know why.**

**Remember when you first started questioning your relationship with Sarah? What you talked with Tedd about?**

**I don’t see what you’re getting at.**

**Elliot! Stop being dense! … Look: that time was in the comic, and while you were talking with Tedd, Susan was talking with Justin about something similar. If you don’t understand at this point, I don’t know what else to say.**

**…Oh. So… If I hadn’t asked Ashley out…**

**There’s no guarantee Susan would’ve said yes, but I give it a good chance. And at least to me, if you ever stop dating Ashley, for whatever reason…**

**You believe Susan gets priority.**

**You got it.**

Chapter End Notes

There were so many things I wanted Saphira to bring up, but it also had to be a natural conversation, and it’s clear Elliot at least **continued to think about it** after breaking up with Sarah.
School Tuesday morning. Not much to talk about, but we’re all here, so talk we can.

“Anything exciting for anyone?” I ask the group (Tedd, Elliot, Ashley, Sarah and Susan) with a sigh.

“If you’re bringing it up, I’m guessing you’re nervous about something,” Sarah replies.

“Yeah,” I sigh again. “I know I need to hang out with people more, so I called Diane and Rhoda yesterday… and I’ll be meeting with them this afternoon. Specifically, they’re picking me up at home after school. Diane’s deciding what we’re doing.”

“Any ideas?” Ashley asks.

“I don’t know her all that well, so… no.”

“In other news, I noticed your new spell,” Elliot declares.

“It’s not done yet, and it’s a heat spell, so I’m not sure you could use it.”

“What sort of armor spell uses heat?”

“One that tries to determine the locations of solid objects by their specific heat.”

“Aaand you lost me,” Sarah says.

“Why do I get the feeling this will be a wand-only spell?” Susan asks.

“That’s a safe bet.”

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It’s not that complicated, in concept. The spell uses the base I have from earlier that determines objects’ locations from their specific heat, but then calculates trajectory. Then it uses that information to determine whether it’s likely the object will impact the user and where. And then it generates scales at the projected impact site. But doing all of that takes a ton of math and charts, so this is one of the harder spells in the Mymoir. Not that there aren’t harder ones. But most of those are light and sound, and the sort of thing that people now have entire jobs that imitate the spells.

In other news, Susan (begrudgingly) volunteered for my Targeted Armor spell. It worked! Second try. First try didn’t fully remove the scales, so I’m glad I tried it on her, not Ashley, since shifting removed the scales. But it should work now. Interestingly, the scales were Susan’s color, despite the spell specifying that the scales would be based on my dragon form. (Technically the user’s, but I was the user.)

As for how I’m finding the time to work on these spells… work is still a little boring. Entertainment comes in few forms. One is playing games on my phone—a bad idea. Another is making spells, which might leave me too distracted to notice a customer. Not that I’ve failed to notice a customer, but it means I have to leave the heavy math and stuff for home, while I do the easier stuff in other places. And the last is to play around with my heat sensing to try to tell what
the interior of objects looks like. Heated air flows differently, and a differential heat results in flow, letting me see the edges of solid objects within really small things like combination locks and electric motors. It doesn’t tell me what the stuff is, but a quick jaunt through HowStuffWorks when I get home lets me get a great picture. So while I’m just supposed to sell tools and the like, I am getting to learn a lot about how the tools work and what might go wrong. And it lets me know if something’s cracked or broken without opening it up. Maybe I can turn that into a service somehow? So long as I don’t make the problem worse. I know that heat changes can also expand cracks.

My heat-based cooking has (slightly) improved. I am now able to confidently reheat food without a microwave. And preheat stuff like pans and the oven, so I can slightly shorten the cooking time. I still need practice before I stop burning eggs on a pan with the burner off. And if I can’t do eggs, there’s not much point trying something harder. But maybe I’ll be able to have hot meals wherever I am someday. Probably not as great as a full kitchen, but if the food is prepped right, it should be good enough. And I’m sure chefs would cry at that statement.

So lots of little improvements lately. Not a ton, but much better than I was nearly two months ago. Even though I still brought a cold lunch to school today.

2014 (hopefully)
Time: ??? (I’ll check later)

Wh-what?

I pick myself off the floor. No time to think about how nasty the cafeteria floor must be.

How long has it been?

No! No time!

I take a quick look around. Everyone’s collapsed where they were. And this smell…

No doubt about it.

Fast fast FAST! Elliot is… there! I rush over to him and force him to transform, destroying the floor around him and part of the roof in a shower of foam tile and cheap metal. **What?** he thought-mumbles, barely awake.

“No time! Elliot, fly! Head north, out of town! I’ll meet you in a few minutes! Fly until you can’t smell the magic anymore!”

He shakes his head, then widens his eyes as he fully awakens, now aware of the danger around us. He instantly jumps and spreads his wings. The moment he’s out of my range, I head to the same spot and transform, taking off when the shift is complete. However, instead of heading north, I fly towards Moperville South.

No time to think. There’s no thought-out plan here; I’m just acting on instinct. Number one contingency is rapidly heading out of town. I don’t have nearly enough information to act against our foe—I don’t even know who or where they are. Next best plan: get Nanase. Her guardian angel spell ought to help if everything else fails. I don’t doubt she’d be in the right frame of mind to use it. Once Moperville South is sufficiently within my range, I mentally shout, **NANASE!!**

Two pings for response. One, female, out in the soccer fields. Sheesh, gym is outdoors for her in this cold? I hope she doesn’t have frostbite. Second, male, in the actual gymnasium. Keep that in mind for later. Actually, save the memory of his heat signature in the Mymoir. Chances are good
he’s the host.

I land on the soccer field, my front left claw wrapping itself around Nanase’s prone figure. I know that ‘steal the princess from the tower’ is the classic ‘evil dragon’ thing to do, but I think ‘grab the princess-like friend from the soccer field’ shouldn’t be too bad. Especially when I’m facing a foe that’s actually Evil.

I launch myself into the air again, flying north as fast as I’m able. I wasted too much time here—I hope Elliot slowed down once he fled town, or I’ll never catch him.

As I fly north, Nanase wakes and starts beating against my claw. “Let me go!” she shouts over the wind.

I can’t risk speaking to her. It’s clear the master receives input from the slaves, so I wish I could knock her out. Instead, I’ll settle for flying a long way away once we’re out of town.

I really hope Magus wasn’t prepared to actually do battle with dragons.

…

When you’re flying at three miles a minute, you’d think you could flee any area with relative ease. Instead, it takes about five minutes to leave the smell behind. As soon as I leave the area of effect, Nanase collapses again, and I almost drop her. After another minute of flying, Elliot enters my range. Just as I meet up with him, Nanase wakes again. “Elliot?” she asks, clearly confused. “Why are you—” Then she looks down. “AAAAH!” she shrieks, seeing the ground over half a mile below us.

**Calm down,** I finally say. **Elliot, if you could get below me, I’ll drop Nanase. Nanase, get ready to land on Elliot’s back.** Elliot gets in position and Nanase calms down, nodding at my directions and bracing herself. I carefully open my claw when she only has about a five-foot drop, and she shakily lands on Elliot’s back, quickly seating herself behind his neck.

“Wh-what happened here?” Nanase asks impatiently.

**You’re not hurt, right? No frostbite or anything?**

“No!” she exclaims, then checks herself over. “No. Some bruising, but I think that’s from you picking me up. However you did that. How did I get here?”

**First: you have a phone, right? What time is it?**

“Not on me, no. I was at gym, and… the next thing I knew, you were holding me.”

**I’ve got this,** Elliot states. He turns to face a nearby town. There’s a bank sign visible, but not readable at this distance. I wait while he stares at it, then he speaks again: **Today is March 5, 2014. It’s 12:09 PM.** Wait. March 5th?***

5 March 2014
12:09 PM CST

“No!” she exclaims, then checks herself over. “No. Some bruising, but I think that’s from you picking me up. However you did that. How did I get here?”

**First: you have a phone, right? What time is it?**

“Not on me, no. I was at gym, and… the next thing I knew, you were holding me.”

5 March 2014
12:09 PM CST

“Saphira, mind telling us what’s going on?” Nanase complains. I’m getting there!

**Elliot should know. If he doesn’t, he doesn’t read the Mymoir enough. Or he’s more hopeful than I am regarding what he should look at next. For myself, well… a dragon awakening generally says that in the near future, there will be problems they have to solve. However, it’s usually not this
close in time. But we had two dragons, not one, so… I was kind of worried, and looked up what could be the greatest threat to dragons aside from vampires.

“Something tells me that’s what we got.”

**Basically, yeah. Not the worst variety, but…**

**Wait. Hold on. Then that smell was…!**

**Yes. Evil magic. We’ve got a demon in town.** I pause to let it soak in, but we still have some urgency. **That said, they probably know where we are, since we didn’t change direction or anything after fleeing. They just settled into Moperville, but I don’t want them to have the opportunity to come after us if they want. Talk and fly?**

**What direction?**

**From my rudimentary understanding of the distribution of people around here… North. Just a lot. We need a place with very few people for a short bit of time. Because… I want to go back. Just not today.**

We take off—not that we were on the ground, just flying in place—in a northerly direction. Again very fast, but not as fast as before. Probably more like two miles a minute. And at least Nanase is sitting, though in her gym uniform that still can’t be comfortable. I’ve modified Fred’s **Thermal Regulator** a bit so that I can bind the location to someone besides the caster (limitations: they have to stay in my range or it quits), so I cast it on Nanase. Not that it’ll help too much what with the wind, but it’s certainly better than nothing.

“Saphira, you still haven’t explained how we lost an entire day.”

**I’m glad it was only a day. This isn’t a newly-hosted demon.**

“Again with the demon stuff. **Explain,** please.”

**Basically, immortals aren’t the only things that are basically made of magic. Angels and demons are similar, but use much stronger magic—with drawbacks, of course. They’re the same kind of being, between the two, so I’ll talk about what we’ve got back home right now.**

**Demons have some power without a host, but it’s very little. But the most powerful host they can get is someone who invites them in. So what we’re dealing with is a demon with a willing host. On top of that, Evil magic—what they use—cuts through most defenses, and from a demon, often comes with some sort of mass mind control. Lucky for us, the initial stage is unconsciousness for all affected, and it was during that time that I broke through. So I forced Elliot to shift, breaking the demon’s hold on him, then grabbed you and brought you here.**

“How’d you find me?”

**You responded to my mental shout. As did the demon, so I also know the host’s heat signature.**

“So if we know all that, why are we still fleeing?” I think she’s hit the ‘run in and punch something’ mode Ellen had with the griffins. Wow. That feels forever ago.

**I’m not ready to go back. I don’t think Elliot should enter, since he hasn’t had mental training… but I’m not ready yet. And I don’t think one day with a demon like that one will change much, and going when I’m not ready is a really bad idea.**
**I guess you take the ‘retreat’ option seriously,** Elliot remarks.

**I’m *not* giving up. But I need to be ready,** And unlike Kevin would, I’m not stalling, either. But waking up like I did shook me too much to try right now. **At least we know what we’re dealing with, right?**

“What do you mean?”

**Demons… tend to act according to set patterns. Not always, but… have you heard of the *Seven Deadly Sins*? They’re not an actual thing—*not* according to what the name might lead you to believe, anyway—but they’re good descriptors of how a lot of demons act.**

“Oh. That’s a Catholic thing, right?”

**I’m pretty sure, yeah. Anyway… every demon has some set principle they act upon. It’s what strengthens them, and what they encourage. Envy, lust, wrath, pride, greed, gluttony, and sloth. Based on the history recorded in the Mymoir, we got a Greed demon. Easy to find, and if you’re quick, easy to deal with. So we’re on a bit of a schedule. Which is always a lot of fun.**

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We flew on for about two hours, until we came upon a very small town near some woods and a Great Lake. No idea which one. I’m thinking the town is somewhere on the upper peninsula of Michigan. But we landed about a mile outside of the town, in the woods.

None of us are dressed warmly, but Nanase definitely got the short end of the stick with her gym uniform. I’m so glad I’m a heat dragon, and I’m pretty sure the other two are happy for that as well.

I have a good sense of direction, by which I mean I won’t get turned around. I’ll still get lost. But if I’m in the woods trying to head north, tell me where north is *once* and I’ll make my destination. About fifteen minutes of walking and we’re at the edge of town. Good thing we’re all fit, though Elliot and I needed the slower pace more than Nanase did.

Heat signatures… “There’s a truck headed our way.”

“Shouldn’t we avoid being seen?” Nanase asks.

“I want someplace to spend the night. And I think I have an idea for getting some charity.” I’d rather not rely on that, but I don’t think homelessness for a night will raise my confidence any. It’s not like any of us have a ton of cash for a hotel room.

I step to the edge of the road and flag down the truck. Looks like we get a slightly-overweight-but-buff guy. I hope he’s friendly, but it’s not like we couldn’t hike a bit further.

The truck stops and the driver rolls down the passenger side window. “You kids look a bit lost. Car trouble or somethin’?”

“A little more than that. It might sound random, but could you point us to a local church? I think they might have the best shot at helping.” Looking for charity, a church is (historically) often one of the best places to find it. And since it’s Wednesday, there’s a fair chance people will be there, at least in about four hours.

“You’ll be wantin’ First Baptist, then. I ken take you there, but there won’t be much of anyone there for hours. You want me to call the pastor?”
“That’s… not necessary,” I answer sheepishly.

“No, that’d be great,” Nanase butts in. I look at her, but I think she understands what I’m trying to do.

“Tell ya what: I’ll call him up and tell him three kids are askin’ for his advice. Where are you folks from, anyway?”

I look at the other two. I don’t think he’d believe us if we said we traveled 300 miles in two hours, but since he assumed car trouble to start…

“We’re from Moperville,” Elliot answers. “Some local trouble led to a road trip, and, well…”

That’s fair enough, misleading as it is. But I don’t want to give the guy the wrong idea. That sounds like we’re evading law enforcement. “There’s a very bad person in town, but he won’t find us here,” I clarify. None of us look related, so at least he’s not likely to assume the big bad stepdad came home or anything like that.

“I can’t say I’ve heard of the place, but you look like you’ve had a rough time. Hold on, I’ll give Pastor a call.”

5 March 2014
2:45 PM CST

Pastor Josh was very receptive to our plight, even taking us out to lunch at a local deli. He reminds me a lot of Kevin’s youth pastor, though I’m pretty sure he’s not the AU equivalent. Just similar. He’s short but slim, with a youthful and kind face and short, light brown hair.

“I don’t think I need to know exactly what’s happened to you, but I’d like to have some more information. Jimmy said something about car trouble?” Jimmy is the trucker from earlier.

I shake my head. I’m mostly the speaker for the group here; Elliot and Nanase don’t know enough about pastors to feel all that calm right now. But Pastor Josh’s presence has already calmed me considerably. “No cars involved. Just a person who did something very selfish and dumb that put our entire town at risk for a very long time. We fled, but… I want to go back and fix the problem. I’m just not ready yet. In here,” I finish, pointing at my head.

“And since you’re wearing a gym uniform, can I assume this was a sudden occurrence?” he asks Nanase.

“It happened yesterday, with no warning. Saphira grabbed the two of us” (literally, in her case) “and we fled. We couldn’t bring anyone else.” Nanase bows her head. I’m sure she’s worried about Ellen and/or Akiko. She’s holding up remarkably well for having only had two hours to process this. At least I was able to fully explain what’s going on.

Our food arrives and Nanase, Elliot and I dig in. (I say a short prayer of thanks first.) I don’t feel that bad for not having eaten in over a day, but the two-hour flight didn’t help. Keeping in mind what Kevin read in Boy Scouts, I make sure to pace myself to avoid a stomachache.

When we’re finished eating, Josh resumes the conversation. “I still need to prepare for tonight’s service, but is there anything else you would like to ask of me?”

We all look at each other. We discussed possible plans while waiting on the pastor. It’s up to me to decide, but the other two have their own roles.
Honestly… this lunch did a lot of good. I definitely feel calmer. I’ll have an hour or two of flight to work on determined. And it’s not like I really have a choice. The dragons don’t know of any current Holy caster with Smite, the demon-expelling spell. Meaning the next-best solution is for a dragon to kill the host. But… I really don’t want to kill anyone… but… I…

I’ll figure something out. But I’m ready to go. There’s no way I’m letting the demon have its way with Susan.

Or anyone else.

“I’m ready to go.”

“In that case, I’m going with you,” Elliot declares.

“And, if you’ll let me… could I stay with you for tonight?” That was my idea. We need some sort of collateral for if the demon proves stronger than both myself and Elliot, and Nanase would be best, between us already informing the other dragons and her guardian angel spell. She doesn’t have her phone, but I can leave mine here.

“I… clearly, you weren’t prepared for this, but… I’ll need a bit more information on your problem before my wife will let me do that. If you’re not comfortable sharing here, you can all come to my place.”

I don’t want to leave Nanase by herself, but I also don’t want to take her with me. “Sure, let’s do it there.”

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“Let me get this straight: you’re facing a literal demon?” Josh’s wife Linda asks, blanching. Linda is just as short as her husband (both are shorter than Nanase) and thickly built, with blonde hair. She looks too young to have the four kids they shoo’d out when we got here. I can tell that one of the boys is trying to listen at the door while his sisters and younger brother pull him away. They’re all pretty quiet, though.

“Yes, though it’s in everyone’s best interests if you keep that exact thing quiet. If people know that demon possession is real, they’re more likely to prompt it. Historically speaking.” I didn’t have any problem telling the pastor and his wife because I’m pretty sure it’s impossible for a demon to possess a Christian, at least according to the Bible (and recorded history). Also, I have a hard time imagining a Christian inviting one in.

“It’s alright if you don’t believe us,” Nanase says defeatedly.

“No, we believe you. I… didn’t think that sort of thing still happened, but I believe you,” Josh replies. His voice isn’t all that confident, as if he’s afraid of what he’s saying.

“We’ll pray for you,” Linda continues more confidently than her husband.

“I’m not sure—”

“Thank you,” I interrupt Elliot. “That will help immensely.” It’s literally a situation where prayer will be the greatest indirect help possible. And where my state of mind matters a lot. You can’t beat a demon half-heartedly.

“Is there anything else we can do to help?” Josh asks.
We’re outside of Illinois and well outside Moperville. “You can drive us to the edge of town. Anywhere out of sight is good.”

5 March 2014
3:25 PM CST

As a kindness to Pastor Josh for helping us, Elliot and I let him see us transform and take off. I hope he drives home safely.

It’s a long flight back, but it’s time enough to clear my head. **Are you ready for what’s ahead?** Elliot asks.

**Not really. I’m not ready to kill someone. There has to be another way, but I can’t think of anything. But as for letting this last any longer… Not happening.** I feel my eyes burn a bit when I think of what a Greed demon would do with… Moperville.

Now then… what was that song?

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Two hundred and eighty miles later, we’re near the bank Elliot checked the time on. **You’re stopping off here, right?** I confirm with him.

**Yes. Just message me in the Mymoir when you’re done. If that doesn’t happen in the next hour, I’ll call Nanase and come in after you.** I knew the plan, but confirming it is a good idea.

It’s only about a ten-minute flight from here, but I have to start resisting the demon’s magic as soon as I’m within the field so that I don’t fall out of the sky. I still don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there, but the first thing will be finding the demon. It’s only been five hours, so hopefully not too much has happened.

…

As I enter town, I notice that people are up and moving around. The Evil magic is still active, so it’s clear that they’re moving at the whim of the demon. I don’t have too much time, but if it takes more than an hour, I’ve already lost.

As I head towards Moperville South, I note that the gym has an awful lot of girls inside. Safe bet that the demon is there. Quick check: yes, the heat signature I noted earlier is still there. At least it’s a Greed demon, so I don’t have to worry that anyone’s transformed. Although I’m wondering where all the girls came from.

About a mile out, now. I suddenly get a strong smell of Common magic as a fireball meets me in the air! Not that it did much: it’s Common magic and I’m a heat dragon. (A smidge of energy nullifies any temperature difference.) I can’t spare the attention to look for the source, but that doesn’t matter as Magus flies in front of me! “FOUL DRAGON! LEAVE, OR YOU WILL BE SLAIN!” Just because most people don’t remember dragons, it doesn’t mean demons don’t recall us as their enemies. I note that Magus is presently female in terms of her body—I guess the demon’s host wants to be surrounded by women, and it’s not like Magus didn’t have the necessary spell for the shift. (As for how I can tell it’s Magus: she’s a blonde Ellen that smells like a wizard.) I’m a bit more worried now about transformations, but as demons can sense people’s souls, maybe they just wanted the match.

I can’t spare the time to humor Magus’s demand for a fight. I fly past her towards the school gym, and she turns to follow me. How to enter…? I need to stay in dragon form. Landing and running in
is out of the question; the demon already knows I’m here. Fine. Theatrics has its place, and that’s not now, but this has to be finished now. I fly upwards a short distance, directly above where I sense the demon’s host… then parallel the gym roof and pull in my wings, plummeting towards it feet first!

As I predicted, the roof fails to bear my weight and I tear a massive hole through it, spreading my wings for a dive as I pass the sharp edges! As I pass through the roof, I notice many of the girls diving for cover. Nothing like mortal fear for breaking a demon’s control. I extend my left foreleg towards the demon’s host as I approach, coming down to pin him to the ground!

And just as I land on top of him, I notice that the two servant-girls closest by him are… Susan and Diane. They’re so close that they’re still under his control. The looks on their faces aren’t recognition or even fear, but sheer hatred—an extension of the host’s own expression. And as I realize that, I feel something that’s not easy to explain: concern for the host, despise for the demon, and a righteous fury in defense of Susan.

**Fallen angel! How dare you take my city!? How dare you take my family!? This injustice will not stand!! In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I SMITE THEE!!**

I audibly roar as my eyes and chest burn and my left claw glows white. At the same time, sharp black blades sprout from the demon’s host in my claw, cutting deeply through my scales all over my body. None pierce organs, but several of my skeletal muscles are completely severed. I collapse in a heap to the right of the now-unconscious former host, vaguely aware that the local Evil magic is rapidly fading.

5 March 2014
6:03 PM CST

I’m aware that I’m bleeding out, but I don’t feel any pain. I think Kevin read somewhere that too much pain can disable pain sensors to save the brain? But it’s well-known that Smite is often a one-time use spell; demons always retaliate on their way out, usually killing the caster. This ends one of two ways for the Holy caster: either they die, or they gain the Cure Serious Wounds spell. Yes, some of these match Dungeons & Dragons spell names in English.

Something is beating on my sides. I can’t feel my skin, just the dull *thud* as it reverberates through my organs. There shouldn’t be any danger anymore. It’s a school gym. The demon is gone. Greed demons would swiftly wipe out monsters. I should be good to take a short rest. I’m… really… tired…

AAAAAH! My skin feels like it’s on fire! Pain! SO MUCH PAIN! Shift! Shift to human NOW!

My eyes fly open to see Ashley standing right in front of my head. I’ve no idea why she’s there, but my skin and wings hurt so much! I rapidly shift to human form, but the pain lingers. Then Ashley puts her hand on my head and the pain vanishes. And suddenly I’m aware of everything else around me.

“Saphira! Saphira! Are you okay?” Diane is yelling at me from about five feet away. She’s standing next to… a very large pool of blood. Oh. I think that’s even worse than the last time I was injured, even compensating for this not being on grass.

And then I notice Susan. She’s sitting on the ground in the blood, staring at me, tears streaming down her face. Wow. I… “Susan! I’m okay,” I call to her. She stands up and walks out of the pool, then quickly shifts to and from her dragon form. Then she raises her right hand and cautiously rests it on my left shoulder. Once she’s sure I’m real, she removes her hand and shifts back and forth
again. I think the cleaning function of shifting will make it her most-used spell. “It’s okay. I’m fine.” I’m so happy that she’s alright. I don’t know what I’d do if she wasn’t.

“I… what… was that?” Susan is just as lost for words as I am.

“I… I think I cast Smite. But that’s a Holy spell. No dragon has cast that kind of magic before.”

“Well, you’re alive. And whatever happened here, you fixed it. But…” Susan pauses. Then she summons a massive hammer. “If you get yourself killed, I get to kill you a second time,” she says flatly.

I raise my hands innocently. “Okay, okay, deal.” Now then… I have no idea how long it’s been, but first, I need to notify Elliot.

Saphira: Problem is resolved.

There’s a long pause. I hope he’s not flying here.

Elliot: You haven’t been arrested for murder, have you? It’s been about fifty minutes. I was getting worried.

Saphira: No. Actually, the host is alive. I… think I cast Smite.

Elliot: You did what?

From the apparent tone, I think that’s an actual question, not a statement of disbelief.

Saphira: There’s an article. Read it.

I get back to the real world and notice Ashley leaning over me again. “Uh…”

“The pain isn’t back, is it?”

What? Wait… The smell isn’t as strong as earlier, but I’m still getting a Divine magic scent. From… Ashley? “You… Ashley, did you reduce my pain?”

“Yes. I don’t know how I can do it, or how I know I can do it, but when you were lying on the floor, I just… suddenly felt like I could help. And then I did!” Her last sentence has a note of excitement like when Ellen showed her her dragon form.

And I can also tell that this isn’t just a single spell. The smell tells me that she’s a full Holy caster. Just as I’m about to open my mouth, I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to my left.

“Not that I know what happened, but could you tell me where my brother is?” Ellen asks, her face full of concern.

5 March 2014
6:12 PM CST

Upon being told that his sister was looking for him, Elliot flew directly here. And I mean directly. He didn’t come in through the roof, but he landed outside the gym doors and ran inside to give Ellen, Ashley and myself a tight hug.

Thankfully, mass dragons have gotten badly hurt on impermeable surfaces before. And therefore, they have a spell to clean up blood. One for which I promptly made a wand and gave it to Ellen. I’m sure some people will be disappointed they can’t get a vial of dragon’s blood, but I don’t think
it’s a good idea to leave that to dry on the gym floor. But the blood was gone before Elliot arrived. 

Alongside Elliot, we got Magus (still female), and also in the gym and surrounding halls was… well, every non-obese girl in both high schools. Justin and Tedd were… elsewhere. They refused to say where. But once we got the rest of the group together, we called a very relieved Nanase, who promptly appeared in fairy doll form. And then we met a very frustrated Mr. Verres.

“What the **** happened here?” he shouts, staring at the badly-damaged ceiling.

“Would you believe a demon mind-controlled the whole town, I broke free and evacuated Elliot and Nanase, then I came back and removed the demon from its host, shattering its power?”

“…And the roof?”

“It was in my way.”

He looks at me, then the rest of the group, then the roof again, and then sighs. “Where’s this ‘host,’ then?”

“He’s still unconscious, but should be waking up shortly,” I say, pointing at the figure at Ashley’s feet. He’s a middle-aged Asian guy, with red hair and a bit of fat to him.

As if on cue, his eyes flutter open, locking onto Ashley. “You…” he starts, weakly, “your light is so… warm. But you’re not the one who saved me.” His voice has an accent that makes it clear he wasn’t raised in the U.S. He turns his head towards our group. “No… Yes! You!” His voice is suddenly a lot stronger. “With the blue eyes and brown hair!” He gets to his feet, then rushes towards me. On reflex, I put up my guard.

Saphira’s Partial Armor. But when he gets to me, he falls at my feet. “You saved me! My life! It is yours!”

I was… not expecting this. Sure, it’s happened before when people have cast Smite, but most of those folks have angels assisting them. I’m pretty sure the only reason I’m not magically exhausted is that I apparently took half an hour to wake up. I’m thankful the demon focused on deep wounds instead of wide ones and stayed away from my neck and head. But using Smite took all of my magic in the same sort of way Nanase burns out using Guardian Angel. It’s just that half an hour of magic in dragon form is 80% of my human form charge.

“I’m not owning anyone’s life. But you know what you did. And you know what I shouted.” As does everyone else around here, apparently. That’ll be a fun one. “And from being possessed, I’m sure you know who to thank.” I’ve never been one for extended periods of prayer, but today, well… I came in with no plan and just enough strength and experience to get here. I managed to get out with not only the problem solved, but my life as well. I think some thanks are in order.

“When you came back… it was not just the demon controlling me, against you. He said you would kill me. I thought I was fighting for my life.” His eyes light up. “But you did not! And you have freed me!” He turns to the police Mr. Verres brought with him. “I am guilty! Please, blame me!” He’s probably talking about the roof, because for everything else… well, he did invite the demon. But in all previous cases, the human target of Smite became at least an okay person afterwards.

Before walking away, Mr. Verres turns to face me. “Two questions,” he says, holding up two fingers. “One: do you have any character vouching to do here?”

“No. He’s definitely at fault. But he’s been through a lot, and knows he’s in the wrong. Actually, was the government aware of him?” I know this isn’t the place to share secrets, but I’m getting better at lie detection with heat sensing. Still not great, but better.
“Not… as such. We knew cities would go off-the-grid for a few weeks at a time, but the location seemed random—he’s not even from this country—and afterwards, inhabitants were unaware of anything strange from the intervening period. From what you said earlier, can I assume he’s no longer able to do that?”

“No, nor will he ever again.” Divine magic, like Draconic magic, is often permanent. Thankfully, Ashley’s Ease Pain spell isn’t. To wake me, she eased enough pain I could start feeling it again, then she reestablished it after I shifted, but I feel things normally now.

“Second question.” He turns to Nanase. “Where are you?”

“I’m… Well…”

“I’ve got this,” I interrupt her, turning to Mr. Verres. “She’s with a trusted friend in the middle of nowhere in Michigan. I mostly trust him because he’s a pastor with a wife and four young kids. But she can defend herself. As for when she’ll get back: I’ll pick her up tomorrow. Elliot and I are still pretty tired from flying for four hours today. Another four is out of the question.”

5 March 2014
6:20 PM CST

After the police and Mr. Verres leave, I turn to ask Magus why she’s still female when Carol bursts in through the doors Elliot came through earlier! “Am I late?” she calls, panting.

“The police already came and left with the perpetrator, but I guess you could talk with me?” I respond.

“Oh,” she replies dejectedly. Then she recovers her ‘cheerful journalist’ demeanor. “I’ll get ready, okay?”

Thanks to what happens when I shift (and Ashley making me reduce to where my head was, rather than one of my legs or my center of mass), I’m not even dirty or disheveled. I guess I can thank Susan for shifting before touching me. Of course, there are a ton of bystanders for Carol to chat with, so I’m not getting out of this one. But maybe this’ll be the kick to make magic something more recognized, at least.

Carol sets up… and starts talking with bystanders. It probably makes for better TV to have the expert talk last. I wonder what they’re saying, but I can watch it later. Time to talk with Magus.

“Ah… Magus?”

“Yes?” she replies.

“Why are you…” I wave my hand in her general direction.

“Oh. I guess the bad guy made me do it, but as for not changing back… at first, I wanted to see why part of the roof collapsed, but… I woke up on the roof. It took a bit of time to get down without being seen. Now, well, I don’t think I should change in public?”

“That’s fair. But I don’t think people would care much about you flying.”

“I… don’t want to be known as a superhero.”

“Got it.” Not the life for everybody. Not the life for me, either, but I don’t get much choice.
“By the way, Elliot: you make for a great distraction.” Ah. If no one’s seen a brown dragon before… I guess that’s how Magus got down undetected.

“I… guess the secret’s out, then.”

I put my hand on Elliot’s shoulder. “We got two dragons inside of a week in the same town. I don’t think you were going to get to hide that anyway.”

“I suppose not.” Elliot sighs. “Do you think everyone will expect me to do the same things as you?”

“Maybe at first. But if you make it clear that dragons are individuals, I’m sure it’ll sink in. Besides, it’s not like you’re new in town. I think most people you know well won’t act too differently toward you.”

“Most people who know me well are right here.” Fair.

I spend a bit of time explaining exactly what happened to everyone. (“Sorry for attacking you.” “He had you use a fireball on a heat dragon. It wasn’t very effective.”) A little after I finish up, Carol approaches our group. I note that she pretends not to recognize her sister. Very professional of her, but I wonder how Sarah takes it?

“Would you be able to spare some time to talk with me?”

“I’m resting before I have to fly for another four hours tomorrow. I left something important a long way out of town. I think I can chat a bit.”

“And the rest of the group?”

Sarah raises a finger. “Ah... I think I have somewhere to be.” Probably more than a little awkward, to be interviewed on TV by your sister. Sarah and basically everyone besides Elliot makes themselves scarce. I can tell they simply left the room (and are still in their group), but I don’t blame them for leaving. I think Elliot only stayed because he’s certain he’s a topic of the interview.

“Oh, well. I’ve already had plenty of information from other people. Would you care to share your version of the events?”

“Can you share yours with me first?”

“No. That defeats the point of independent views, doesn’t it?”

“Drat.”

I can’t tell Carol everything, for the same reason I couldn’t tell Nanase everything about Divine magic when explaining her version of the Guardian Angel spell. But I can give Carol an abbreviated version of what I did today. I’ll get into motivations when she brings it up. “Basically, I sensed something was very wrong in Moperville, so I fled north, taking a couple of my friends with me. Once I gathered the strength to deal with the problem, I came back and, well, dealt with it. Not to say it wasn’t still difficult.”

“Some of the others I spoke with recalled you referring to the guilty party as a ‘fallen angel.’ What did you mean by that?”
“Exactly what it sounds like. A fallen angel was controlling the man’s actions. Not to say he isn’t to blame for what happened today. But to prevent this sort of thing from happening again, I shouldn’t say any more.”

“Are you implying the man prompted a ‘fallen angel,’ as you call it, to control him?”

“I mean what I said: I shouldn’t say any more.”

She puts on a pouty face, but I can tell she’ll leave it there. “Many of those I spoke with recalled you crashing through the roof of this building. Do you have anything to say on the matter?”

“The same thing I told the police: it was in my way. And if you investigate the roof of the cafeteria at Moperville North, well, that was also in my way. I prefer not to damage property, but for an emergency, safety comes first. And in this case, ‘safety’ meant ‘moving as fast as possible and staying in dragon form.’ But if I can help with repair, I’ll try. I just… well, I don’t exactly have funds to pay for a roof. Or even a floor. And if the guilty party hadn’t prompted the whole thing, there wouldn’t have been a cause for me to damage anything in the first place.”

“How exactly would you help to repair a roof?”

“I can imagine there’s a use in construction for someone who can be 15 feet tall and lift immense weights. And greatly manipulate heat. Think ‘cutting stuff with a lightsaber.’ But I can also imagine there might not be any use for someone as inexperienced as myself, so… we’ll see what happens.” But if we can get a bunch of people to use magic to help, I imagine Jorge’s Antigravity will be of great assistance.

“And the last thing of note: those that recalled the ‘fallen angel’ bit also remembered you mentioning your family. Did you have a history, here?”

“No. I met the man today. But… I didn’t mean my blood family. I get the feeling I won’t see them again for a very long time, regardless of anything that happened here today. Just… since moving here, there’s someone I’ve come to regard as something like a sister. I’ve never had one before. But I can’t imagine losing her, and today… today, I think I came very close. Fallen angels aren’t exactly known to preserve the lives of anyone they come in contact with.”

5 March 2014
6:38 PM CST

Carol seems to have finished talking with me. She’s doing a bit with the camera… oh. “Sir,” she addresses Elliot, “I noticed that you stayed here. Would you be willing to talk with me?”

“I’m sure there’s another reason you wanted to talk with me than ‘just because I’m here.’” Wow, snarky. Not that I wouldn’t reply similarly.

“I’m sure there’s another reason you wanted to talk with me than ‘just because I’m here.’” Wow, snarky. Not that I wouldn’t reply similarly.

Carol dips her head for a moment. “Yes, that is true. First, though: could you introduce yourself?”

She holds her mic towards him.

He leans in to the mic. He… doesn’t have to do that. Those things can pick up sound from a relatively large distance away. Honestly, if you held it at a midway point between the two it’d be good, but traveling newscasters still tilt it each way when the speaker changes. I guess it’s a good visual shortcut for viewers at home. “I’m Elliot Dunkel.” Not the first time he’s on TV with Carol, but the first time he’s not transformed while doing so. At least he gets to be himself.

“Good afternoon, Elliot.” More like evening, but I always think of that phrase like a butler’s saying it, so… meh. “Some of the people I spoke with came from outside of the building and saw what
looked like a brown dragon. They say that when it landed, it turned into a young man matching your description. Actually, one young man specified it as you. Would you care to elaborate?”

“Yes, that was me.” I’m sure he’s actually a little relieved—no obfuscating the truth like he had to do with the whole Cheerleadra thing. Magic’s revealed already, dragons are revealed, and with this, he doesn’t have to worry about people thinking he has other magic. And since his other magic is non-visible augmentation, there shouldn’t be any problems. “No point in dodging it. Actually, as a dragon, I’m not supposed to avoid a question like that.” General dragon policy is ‘don’t lie when asked directly.’ Is magic real? Yes. Can you transform? Yes. Age? Say the real number (and usually get told you’re crazy/lying). You can deflect indirect questions (like ‘did you see a dragon’—“No”) but lying for direct questions is a great way to further degrade our reputation.

Carol turns to face the camera. “Well, you heard it here: Moperville has two dragons.” She turns back. “Elliot, would you like to clarify whether you have been flying with Saphira lately?”

“Yes, I have. There are also other people whose names I won’t share, but if you saw something brown and Saphira-sized, that was me.”

“And I’m sure everyone is wondering: what is your element?”

“All of them and… none of them? I can’t manipulate anything. But I can sense everything. If I actually pay attention, it’s a bit overwhelming. So while Saphira can sense heat and heat or cool stuff, I can sense the heat. I just can’t do anything with it. But… if you want to ask for information on not me, I’d like it if you just asked Saphira. I’m not – I don’t want to be ‘Moperville’s dragon’ like she is. I like it here, and it’s not like I won’t help with big problems, but… she risked her life for everyone today while I sat outside of town. I’m not about to take that from her.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

Elliot’s jaw shifts as he thinks for a second. Then he gets a fierce look on his face. Uh oh. “What Saphira said earlier, about ceilings being in her way? Yeah, that happened. But rather than think about it as a chore to fix, I think it’s a great opportunity. Anyone with magic that can help—lifting things, cleaning up debris, sealing new materials in place—should see what they can do to help. Not getting in anyone’s way, of course, and listening to the construction crew. But I think it’s a great opportunity to show what magic can do in a helpful, productive way. Heck, I was told that my sister cleaned up a huge mess in here less than an hour ago, getting rid of a lot of hazardous liquid safely in only a few minutes by herself. Imagine what even more people could do.” That was a lot better than I expected, or even hoped. I was thinking of inviting Sean (as a handyman) to help with repair work, but now… I think a local effort would be even better.

5 March 2014
6:42 PM CST

Carol asked what ‘hazardous liquid’ Elliot was talking about, and I clarified that for cleanup, blood is referred to as a biohazard. But it sounds better for TV to not say that Ellen cleaned up a massive pool of my blood that resulted from injuries I sustained taking out the bad guy. Humans have a lot of blood in them. Creatures that are 15 feet tall understandably have a lot more.

A little after that, Carol left and Elliot and I could rejoin our friends. “How’d it go?” Tedd asks when we walk into the hall.

I answer his question. “I think we can safely declare magic ‘not a secret anymore,’ at least in Moperville. Also, Ellen.”
“Yes?”

“Elliot just declared on live television that you can use magic.”

“Elliot!” she yells angrily. Well, sort of. She’s not furious, but… I think she just wanted him to ask first. She gives him a firm punch to the shoulder.

“Ah! Hey! It’s not like no one saw you, right?”

“No, but… wait, what brought that up in the first place?”

“Um…” Elliot bites his lips.

“He basically asked as many local magic users as possible to show up and help when the construction crews try repairing the schools.”

“That’s not going to help much, is it?” Justin asks.

“That depends on people seeing whether or not they’re being helpful, and leaving if they aren’t. Kevin helped with a roof once, for his church. They were replacing shingles with metal roofing. He and my other brother were declared helpful. The other teens who showed up, not so much. But they left early, so it wasn’t bad. So for magic users: at least among us, Justin, Ellen, and Susan should be the most helpful. Diane and Rhoda, not so much. No hard feelings.”

“None taken,” Diane answers. “By the way, you missed our night out.”

“We all did. Not making it up tonight, though, and with a hole in the gym here and the cafeteria at Moperville North, I kind of doubt we have school tomorrow. So how about we make it up then, after I bring Nanase back?”

“I guess that’ll be fine,” Diane moans.

“Although, while we’re here like this… Rhoda, could you make me about Nanase’s size?”

“Why?” Diane asks.

“Do I need a reason? I think it’s interesting and fun, and I’d really like to relax. Way too much stress today. But I did want to see if scales formed while shrunk would stay small.” I get the feeling I know what’s next, so I go ahead and lower my resistance.

Rhoda shrugs. “Good enough for me.” She points the palms of her hands at me, and a couple of seconds later I’m about a foot tall and looking up at everyone. I’d be nervous if I didn’t know I’m more resilient like this. Experiment time! **Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales.**

Proportionally, my scales are the same as normal. I pull one off near my ankle. “Tedd, could you hold onto this for me?” I ask, holding it up towards him. The scale fills the palm of my hand, but it’s less than a quarter of an inch across. He pinches it between his thumb and index finger.

Nanase lands near me. She stands there for a moment, hesitantly, then runs over and hugs me! “I thought I’d never see you again!” she cries into my shoulder. She must’ve been holding this in until she could actually hug me.

“It’s okay. I’m alright, and I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell her softly as I hug her firmly. I was worried about me, too, but… it just felt like something I had to do. Something I was made for. I know now, what it’s like being a dragon. You do things that you have to do, because no one else
can. Even if you’re afraid for your life.

Interestingly, it feels like she has actual skin. The doll is room-temperature to my heat sense, but when she actually touches me, it feels like it’s actually her. Even though when she leaves the doll, it reverts to felt.

Nanase and I release each other and step back. “It’s kind of strange,” Nanase says, “seeing someone the same size as me while I’m a fairy doll. It’s almost like I’m not hundreds of miles away.”

“But it’s harder for the rest of us with you two on the ground,” Susan states drily.

Rhoda surprises me, picking me up under my arms and sitting me on her left shoulder. It’s a little challenging to balance like this, but as long as she doesn’t make any sudden movements I should be fine. “Is that better?” Rhoda asks.

“I’m more comfortable on the ground, but if I’m going to make a habit of this… sure.” It’s actually a little fun. Also, knowing there aren’t any mental effects—and that I could resist them if there were—means I can relax.

Diane leans towards me. “I know you look the same, but… this is so cute! This gives me so many ideas for tomorrow!” She looks a little frightening, actually, with her face only slightly smaller than my whole body.

“I thought you had that nailed down?”

“It hasn’t happened yet. I can still make changes!” I swear, if she wants to throw me like a ball…

I’m a bit curious why Catalina hasn’t shown up yet, but maybe it’d be too awkward with Diane here? Whatever. “Rhoda, how long is the size change supposed to last?”

“I think the default was a day?”

“Well, I’ll go get Nanase before then, so that’s fine.”

“Wait,” Susan butts in. “You’re planning to go home while tiny like that?”

“I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Beyond what Mother might say, wouldn’t you be hungry during your flight?” Oh. Good point.

“I’ve changed my mind. Rhoda, could you restore me to normal?”

“Aww. Fine.” I lower my resistance as she points her palms at me. A few seconds later, I’m… not quite fully restored.

“Rhoda, I’m pretty sure I’m not normally shorter than Grace.” I’m about the same height as her, and… well, probably about the same build.

“Sorry. You said ‘normal,’ and when I think ‘normal’ I think of how I look. I’m… not so great with proportions.”

“Fine. Note to self: if I have Rhoda transform me, I have to shift forms to get back to normal.” I sigh as Grace and Sarah giggle. “You can leave it. I’ll be fine. At least I can eat a normal amount of food before I go flying. Shifting will fix any changed or damaged clothes anyway.” I end my active Draconic spell and pleasantly note that my clothes still fit. But my bust now matches hers… I’m
sure Sensei will let me substitute four hours of flight over an hour of pushups, sit-ups and squats.

5 March 2014
7:30 PM CST

Ms. Pompoms was a little surprised at my figure, but mostly just relieved to see we were safe. Not that she didn’t know we were alright. One thing Susan did after I shifted back to human form, while Ellen was cleaning up the mess, was call home. Apparently Ms. Pompoms had called while I was unconscious, but Susan wasn’t willing to stop trying to wake me for even a second.

Also, Channel 4 News has a special broadcast for everything that happened today. They probably won’t get everything right, but it starts about now (as Sarah called to tell us), so the three of us are gathered on the couch.

“Tonight, we have a special broadcast on events from Moperville for the past two days. Even if you’ve never been, this promises to be momentous news to us all.” I am immediately reminded why I quit watching the news on a regular basis. “For those in regular contact with the city, it seemed to suffer a nearly 30-hour communications blackout starting yesterday at noon. Today, not even two hours ago, many high school girls woke to this scene in the Moperville South High School’s gymnasium.” They’re showing… a picture of me, from when I was unconscious. I guess someone gave that to them.

“Thankfully, those cuts were deep, not wide,” I comment queasily.

“Well, yeah, you would have bled out faster,” Susan replies.

“No, I mean I’m not good with gore. I’d faint now if I could actually see anything.”

“Oh. What was cut, anyway? Do you know?”

“Most of my skeletal muscles, ligaments, tendons… Basically, if not for Draconic healing, I never would’ve moved again.”

“Ouch.”

“Actually, there was so much pain I couldn’t feel any of it. Ashley blocked just enough that my brain could process it again. Which is why I woke up screaming. Or roaring, I guess.” Which apparently someone took video of. I couldn’t process the sound at the time, so I’ve never heard myself roar in pain before. It’s safe to say I don’t want to again. And I scared everyone not frantically trying to wake me. To Ashley’s credit, she remained calm and stationary even while I was roaring right in front of her. The camera-holder on the other hand dropped their camera, and the video cuts when I shift.

“After the previous scene, the dragon Saphira became human and had a heartfelt reunion with those who woke her, according to eyewitnesses.” The video switches to interviews Carol held before chatting with myself.

“I thought the earlier stuff was just CGI.” “I don’t really know her, but I’ve seen her around school.” “I didn’t know the Hammer Queen cared about anyone.”

“I have feelings!”

“Susan, everyone in this room knows that.”

“Look at the scale I picked up!” The girl is holding her prize with both hands. That looks pretty
heavy. The cleanup spell Ellen used only removed blood, so there were still a lot of scales on the floor when we left. But the smallest are in excess of five pounds and the largest—scales from my back—could be used as breastplates for bulletproof armor. I’m pretty sure Tedd and Grace grabbed at least one before leaving, not counting the shrunken one.

“According to Saphira, this all occurred in the effort to rid Moperville of some sort of supernatural creature she called a ‘fallen angel.’” Time to play my interview.

They show a picture of the damage at Moperville North when I mention it. Wow. Elliot and I really did a number there. Although the roof of a cafeteria apparently has more to it than the roof of a gym. They stop just before I mention repairs, and pick up the last bit.

“Someone you ‘regard as a sister’?” Susan asks.

“Sister probably isn’t the right word, but… yes. I – I know I’ve only been here for less than two months, but I meant what I said. Nothing romantic about it, but… I can’t imagine losing you.”

6 March 2014
11:50 AM CST

The broadcast finished with Elliot’s declaration and a general announcement that reconstruction isn’t scheduled yet, but will likely occur in the next few days. Afterwards, we had a simple dinner, then Susan talked to me, out of earshot of her mother.

“What did you mean, ‘fallen angels don’t preserve the lives of those they contact’?”

“They don’t tend to. We got off easy, actually. Greed demons are among the easiest for dragons to take down. They’re fairly simple to find, and if you find them quickly, they can’t do much about it. But as for what could’ve happened… I guess it’s up to the host? He seemed to just like being served by hot girls, so it’s entirely possible he would’ve just left in a few months when he got bored. But it’s also possible he would’ve left with you pregnant and none the wiser, or had you do gladiatorial fights, or taken you with him when he left. Fallen angels aren’t something to take lightly.”

Susan looks disgusted. “Okay. I’m starting to see the hurry. What’s the difference between fallen angels and demons?”

“Absolutely nothing. The former is just more accurate terminology. The latter is more common terminology. And shorter.”

And now I’m winging my way to Pastor Josh’s place. I was a bit confused this morning when I woke up with Rhoda’s build, until I remembered that she’d set my form like that. I’d thought for a moment it had become my permanent form or something. Not that I couldn’t take a few weeks to change back, but I still like how I normally look. Although I guess I’m not so averse to having a larger bust now, if I can reduce it at will with Partial Skin to Scales and it’s not tied to mental effects, like with FV5. But I think it’d look weird on normal me, having a bust that big.

I touch down about where I took off yesterday, since I know how to get back to Pastor Josh’s house from there. I didn’t ask for someone to pick me up, because honestly, I need the break between flights. Plus it’ll give me extra time to get my thoughts in order.

About twenty minutes of walking later and I’m at his front door. I called Nanase ahead of time, so they should be ready. All seven of the people I expect are inside; it looks like Nanase is playing with the kids. (They’re homeschooled.) I ring the doorbell.
Pastor Josh gets up from his chair near his kids and opens the door. Good thing about heat sensing: I never have to worry that someone isn’t home or didn’t hear the doorbell. “Saphira, was it? I’m glad to see you’re alright.”

“Yes, that’s me. I’m happy to see that you and Nanase got along. Or at least she and your kids.” I pointedly look in their direction.

“You can see through walls?”

“No. But I can tell where stuff is, if it’s not room-temperature.” It’s amazing how much progress I’ve made in the past two months. “Anyway, I have to thank you for your prayers. God’s power was certainly felt yesterday.” First, I got Smite, allowing the host to live. Then Ashley became a Holy caster, letting me live. A dragon letting the host live has never happened before. (As the demon told its host: in all previous cases, the dragon always kills the host to remove the demon. We’re not happy about it, but it’s a lot like executing a mass murderer to prevent future crimes.) And if the host survives, the Smite caster frequently dies.

“I’m happy to help, and it was great to have her here. Would you like some lunch before returning?”

“Yes, thank you. Flight is exhausting.” I follow him inside. “You didn’t… tell anyone exactly what was going on, did you? Or what I am?”

“No. It seemed like something you wanted to hide, and I respected that.”

“Thanks. I mean, you could tell whoever you want. But I’m not supposed to show people outside of Illinois, my home state. Mostly because we’re trying to keep people from being reckless without any sort of guidance.”

We round the corner to see Nanase playing with the kids with… a doll of herself. They don’t look as realistic when she’s not inhabiting them…. I guess that was the easiest way to explain why she seemed unconscious while chatting with us back home for an hour. Still… eh, it’s a pastor and his family. They should be trustworthy.

“Saphira!” Nanase gives the doll to the older girl, standing up to greet me. She hugged me yesterday, so… ah. She doesn’t run over to me, but it sure looks like she wants to.

“Hey, don’t worry. I won’t try any death-defying stunts for a while.” At least I hope not. Elliot should be able to do something. “You want to relax a bit over lunch? I can give you some news, if you want.”

6 March 2014
12:30 PM CST

We had a simple lunch of quesadillas (probably made more for the kids than for us), and I told Nanase that Mr. Verres’s replacement seems to have quit trying to hide me, since Channel 4 got to do their full broadcast. As of when I left this morning, Elliot was the talk of the town, closely behind me and ‘what the heck happened?’. Susan said that social media for Moperville was abuzz with folks deciding to either show up to help with fixing the schools or show up to watch. No word on when, yet.

A brief farewell and a promise to see them again, and we were on our way. I expect the next time I’ll see them is if I come by to swim while in dragon form and the lake isn’t frozen. But I’ll definitely visit when the five-year trial period is up and I can share knowledge of magic with the
whole nation.

“Say, Saphira?”

**Yes?**

“Josh, Linda, and their children… they have the same religion as you, right?”

**I grew up in a Baptist church, so I’d imagine so. Why?**

“They took me to church with them last night, and afterwards… they tried to talk me into believing the same stuff they do. At least, until I told them I wasn’t interested. But they were still nice to me the whole night. And the kids loved the fairy doll spell.”

**I’m sure any kid would love a real magic show. But for the earlier stuff… that sounds about normal.**

“No, I mean… Why don’t you talk about what you believe? I thought every Christian wouldn’t shut up about it?”

**You want to know why I don’t talk or why I should?**

“We have two hours, right? Will it take that long?”

**No… Alright, fine. Not that I don’t want to talk about my faith… but I don’t want you to think you’re a captive audience, either. I know from experience that it doesn’t accomplish anything to share my faith with someone who doesn’t want to listen. So just let me know if you want me to change the subject, alright?**

“I will.”

**Okay… Where to begin? Uh… Let’s start with… why any Christian should talk about their faith, then why I don’t, then why I really want to. I think that order will make the most sense. Sound good?**

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, so go ahead.”

**Alright, first part: The obvious reason to try and convert people is because Jesus outright asks that of us. I don’t recall the exact verse, but it’s at the end of the book of Matthew, and is called the Great Commission. Jesus tells his disciples to go throughout the whole world and teach other people about himself, then command them to do likewise. But there’s more than just the commandment to make us want to do that. Part of the Christian faith is the belief that there is an afterlife, and that where you go is not based on what you do in this life, but what you believe in. Basically, you can choose to believe in God and follow him, or choose something else. And if you follow him you go to the place that is always in his presence, and if you don’t pick him you go to the place that is without God. In the Bible, these are described as ‘the kingdom of heaven’ and ‘the fiery lake of burning sulfur,’ respectively. I’m pretty sure no one would pick the second, given the option directly.**

“That’s what every Christian believes?”

**Yes. At least, they should. I can’t speak for people who claim to be Christian and yet say that Jesus lied, sometimes. Jesus is truth. He literally can’t lie. So if they believe him on everything else, why would they say he wasn’t telling the truth about life after death?”**
“Okay. Now I’m really wondering why you don’t share this with everyone you come across. You don’t even talk about it with your friends!”

**That is… not totally accurate. I have talked about this with Susan. Just after my announcement, actually. But… she hasn’t said anything about it since then.**

“Really? Okay. I’ll ask her about it. But your thing, first. Why don’t you talk about this?”

**When Kevin was younger—middle school, I think—he wanted to talk about this, just as much as I should. And he knew that his best friend at school wasn’t a Christian. So he did his best to talk about it, when the friend was over at his house one day. It… didn’t work out so well. His friend got angry and wanted to leave, and didn’t want to talk about those things ever again. I still… I still want to talk with him about it. I think that’s the greatest regret that Kevin carries with him—that he was unable to effectively talk with his best friend. And remember what I said about the afterlife, before? No one in either of the two locations will be able to see one another again. And… that’s something I don’t want. It doesn’t matter if I ruin my friendship with him in this life. I don’t want to live forever without him. He was my best friend through all the time I grew up, and… I can’t imagine not seeing him again.** My flight slows as I let out a low whine.

A few minutes later, I recover and speed up again. **I think it shows how much he matters to Kevin, that I’ve never met him and still feel that way. I… He introduced a certain book series to Kevin. I named myself after a character from that series. I don’t think I’d be the same person, if Kevin never met him.**

I fly in silence for a bit. “Sorry,” Nanase apologizes. “I didn’t think I’d bring up something so important.”

**No, it’s alright. This is important. And it’s nice, having someone to share it with. I just… I wish he could hear this.** But I’m not sure how she thought this conversation would be lighthearted.

“So… last part?”

**Of course. The last part… well, it’s a little embarrassing, for the start. I’m sure you’ve been to things where you were supposed to pay attention to the speaker, but you didn’t want to, so your parents gave you something else to do?**

“I can think of once or twice where that happened. Mostly they’d just yell at me later, though.”

**Yeah. Anyway, when Kevin was in… well, probably throughout elementary school. Anyway, at that age, he didn’t pay a ton of attention during the sermon at church. So his parents said that if he wasn’t going to pay attention, he may as well read the Bible. And his favorite part—keep in mind, this is a young boy—was Revelation, the last book that describes the end of the world.**

“Wait. There’s a part of the Bible that predicts the end of the world?”

**Yes, and describes it in detail. Have you ever read C.S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia? The seventh and final book, The Last Battle, is a retelling of the book of Revelation, adjusted for the setting. Actually, that whole series is a retelling of select stories from the Bible.**

“I… never knew that. I guess C.S. Lewis wasn’t that great of an author?”

**Maybe not for fiction, as far as coming up with unique tales. But he’s still a pretty great author. I mean, he’s got tons of people who’ve never read the Bible reading his stuff, right? And his most famous works are all Christian books. I’d say that’s an accomplishment. Anyway, did you ever read the last book?**

"I can’t say I’ve heard of it before. Did they make a movie of it?"

**Not as far as I know. Back to my thing. Towards the end of Revelation, there’s one last battle in the war for heaven and earth. Obviously, the victor’s already determined—God wins. Duh. But at the battle of Armageddon, there’s one last fight between both sides—those who picked God, and those who picked anything else. And while the Bible doesn’t say it explicitly, I believe that that will be the last time to see anyone and everyone I’ve ever met. And I’m a dragon. I’ll meet a lot of people. And… well, it’s the last battle ever. Everyone who picked God will fight with me. And everyone who didn’t will fight against me. And I… I don’t want to fight against my friends.**

“Then you won’t have to, right? God wouldn’t make you fight your friends, would he?”

**That’s not his decision. He left it up to you.**
I flew in silence for a long time after that conversation. Eventually, Nanase brought up something else, and we had a much less serious chat for the rest of the ride. At the end, she asked if she might come to church with me this Sunday, so I gave her the time and location.

About an hour later, I got an update from Mr. Raven (by phone) on what time the construction will happen: tomorrow at 10 AM will be the start time. Needless to say, I told Elliot, and he stuck it on social media… and I think we’ll have a bit of a crowd. It’s only been half an hour since he put it up, but I’m sure the construction crew will make a post about it at some point, just to make things a bit more organized.

And now I’m at Diane’s place with Rhoda so we can get a bit more solidified on what we’re doing this afternoon.

“So… what do you have planned?” I ask Diane. I’m hoping for something tame.

“I was hoping to see what else Rhoda can do, first. She’s got a lot of power, and I don’t want it to go to waste.” I hope she’s not super controlling, but I gave her authority on what we were going to do, so…

“I’m… not sure how to explain it,” Rhoda says nervously.

“I can be your model, if you want. Honestly, it doesn’t really bother me that you can’t restore me on your own, other than letting it wear off. I can always fix it by shifting to dragon form later.”

“Oh! That’ll be great, thanks!” She points her hands at me.

“Hey, hold on a moment! I have to lower my resistance first, or your spells won’t do anything.” I pause for a second. “There. Now you can do whatever you like.” I’ve done this enough now that it’s sort of like an on/off switch. Not that it’ll stay in ‘off mode’ if I’m not careful. But while I’m thinking about it, I don’t have to put in extra effort to keep my resistance down.

“Okay. I’ll start with what I showed off yesterday.” She points her hands at me, and… I’m doll-sized again. Then she makes me normal-sized, without modifications. “I can also make people bigger, but… I’m not really sure how safe that is. But it’s up to about double size.”

“If you make someone smaller, they get proportionally tougher. I won’t be much more hurt if you step on me when I’m tiny versus now. Just that you’ll step on my whole body, not just my foot or something.”

“That’s good to know,” Diane says thoughtfully. “Next?”

“Also, like I did yesterday, I can mess with proportions. And I can make it so clothes fit the new form, or just modify clothes altogether.” My t-shirt is suddenly… I’m not sure what to call it. But a much less modest top. It leaves my midriff bare and is much tighter around my bust. It doesn’t look bad, exactly, but I’m not super familiar with wearing any sort of style beyond ‘whatever is comfy.’
“I’m not *complaining*, but I’m not very comfortable with people seeing me like this. I don’t think it’s grand for my reputation. But if you’re afraid I’ll be cold in anything, remember that I’m a heat dragon. I can maintain my external temperature pretty well, provided air doesn’t flow too quickly around me.”

“Okay!” Why do I get the feeling I just signed up for ‘as skimpy as you can make it’? “Alright, two more things. This first one will have a duration of only a minute, I promise.” Draconic magic is exact for time. Common magic… when she says ‘a minute,’ she probably means ‘a minute, give or take 30 seconds.’ She points her hand at me, and… I’m looking up at them again.

“I thought we already did ‘smaller’?” Hold on. My voice sounds… off. Maybe a tiny bit higher? I look at myself. I… I’m pretty sure she made me a kid. Given that I’ve never experienced life as a little girl, it’s kind of hard to tell. Then I’m back to normal.

“That was so cute!” Diane exclaims. “But probably not what we’re going for. I don’t think we want to look like we’re babysitting anyone.”

“Last thing: I can make myself look completely different, but in random ways. It changes my hair, skin, clothing, face… everything. But I’ve never gotten the same result. If I’m doing it to someone else, though, I can consistently get the same results. Actually, the *exact* same result.” She points her hand at me… wait. She said ‘the same result’? No ‘s’?

And now I’m eye level with Rhoda. Somehow, I think I can guess what this one is…

“And now we have two Rhodas,” Diane sighs. “No, that won’t do.” And then I’m looking up at both of them again… I guess I’m doll-size. “Okay, Rhoda and doll-Rhoda. That’s better.” My shoulders are bare once again, and I get the odd sensation that my shirt is as tight as a bra… I look down. Yay, I’m in a bikini. But since I look like Rhoda… Honestly, I don’t mind it so much. No one will know it’s me. I can just relax and act like I’m Rhoda’s summoned doll or something, and whatever I do won’t reflect on me to anyone besides Rhoda and Diane. You know what, I’m fine with this. Well, fine-ish. I’ll want more comfortable clothing than this.

“Could you maybe make the straps a little wider? I don’t want it to chafe.”

Diane stares at me. “Wait, you’re okay with this?”

“I look like Rhoda. Except to you two, anything I do right now will reflect on her, not me. Honestly… I’ve had *enough* responsibility in the last two days, and I’ll be doing something serious again tomorrow. I could do with some time where I don’t have to really watch what I do or say, but can still hang out with friends. Because otherwise I could accomplish much the same thing sitting in my room at home.”

“Oh. Okay!” Rhoda puts me on her right shoulder and changes my outfit into something a bit more comfortable. It’s still a bikini, but it doesn’t have any razor-thin straps. …It probably looks a little weird, Rhoda having a miniature Rhoda on her shoulder. Though I guess it’s no more strange than when Susan has the Susan fairy summoned.

6 March 2014
4:05 PM CST

“Though while we’re on the subject…” I lean over to touch Rhoda’s neck and cast *Saphira’s Targeted Armor*. The right half of her neck, plus some of her face and shoulder—everything within about four inches of where I touched—sprouts dark brown scales.
Rhoda doesn’t seem to notice, but Diane jumps. “What did you do?”

“I can make people I touch have scales, wherever I want and for however long I want. It’s a spell I wrote. The basic idea was for combat, but I can totally see it being a fashion thing, if possible. These scales will last five minutes. For safety’s sake, I won’t cast any duration longer than 24 hours.” Theoretically, I could make it last years, but it’d take a lot of magic, and in certain locations on the body, that could kill a person. Plus I don’t have an ‘undo’ spell (although I probably could make one), so I don’t want to stick scales somewhere that the person wouldn’t want later. And I’m pretty sure that most human products and structures weren’t made with scales in mind.

Rhoda reaches over to feel the side of her neck, and I firmly grip her shirt to avoid falling off when she also jumps. “Diane, do you have a mirror handy?” she asks. Diane pulls one out of her purse. Before she properly orients it, I can see myself in the mirror, and… yeah. I look like Rhoda. It’s a little strange, how different I look. Even my face and skin tone match perfectly, although my eyes are still their normal dark blue. (You can’t change a dragon’s eye color, no matter what you try. A light dragon or colored contacts can disguise it, but that’s the best you get.) I’m sure my voice matches, too, but how you hear yourself doesn’t exactly match how others hear you. (Biologically, my voice shouldn’t match—because I’m way smaller than her—but this is Common magic we’re talking about.) Rhoda puts me on Diane’s desk and squats so her eyes are level with mine. “Can you make the scales some other color?”

“No. They match your eye color. If that changes, though, they’ll match the new one. I have no idea what they’ll do for someone with heterochromia.” Probably pick one, or give the person marbled scales or something.

Diane walks over. “Can you make them cover less of an area?”

“I can do anything down to a single scale, or up to covering your whole body. That would give you claws, but no tail or wings or anything like that.”

She tilts her head. “Could you make maybe three scales right about… here?” she requests, poking her right cheek.

“Sure. Give me your finger.”

“Wouldn’t that just make my finger scaly?”

“No. I need to touch you so that I target the right person, but beyond that I can affect anywhere on your body. But I’m a little small right now, so putting your finger in front of me will be fine.”

Diane rests her hand on the desk. Her fingernails are long and… to my size, intimidatingly sharp. I approach from the side and touch the back of her hand, casting Saphira’s Targeted Armor as I do so. I remove my hand, and she lifts hers. “Rhoda, can I have that mirror?”

Diane admires my work. It wasn’t terribly hard. I have that spell well-defined. The three light blue scales make a nice accent to her cheek, much like a temporary tattoo. Since she didn’t ask for a duration, I set that one to five minutes as well.

“Okay, now I wish I had a prettier eye color,” Rhoda complains.

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About ten minutes later, we’re all ready for a night out. Diane has a ring of blue scales around her left wrist, much like a bracelet, and I’m wearing more modest clothes. (A… top with no sleeves
that stops just below my bra—no idea what that’s called—and a short flat skirt are still not what I’d normally wear, but more modest than a bikini.) And so that the other two could dress however they wanted (as in, much less warmly), I went ahead and cast Fred’s Thermal Regulator on all of us. I still don’t know what Diane has planned, but whatever it is, it’s clearly in public.

“You know, I’m a little surprised with how well you’re taking this, Saphira,” Diane comments.

“Doing this at all or looking like a Rhoda doll?”

“Both, really.”

“Well… if not for the second, I guess I wouldn’t do the first. I wanted to do this in the first place just to get to know you two better, but yesterday…. I’ve had enough stress for a while. Being like this means I can unwind in public without people swarming me or anything, And I can get to know you two better in the process.”

“I can relate to that,” Rhoda states. I don’t remember what she’s talking about, but… eh, she’ll tell me if it’s important.

“So, what do you have planned, anyway?”

“It’s not super structured, but I was thinking we’d hang out at the mall, and possibly get some boys to buy us stuff. Not that I’m bringing a date or anything,” Diane explains.

“I’m… not exactly on board with the second part, but to everyone else I’m not really a person right now, so…”

“What’s our story for you, anyway?” Rhoda asks.

“If anyone but a friend asks, you ‘summoned’ me. Susan has fairies summoned all the time. I’m sure I can play the part. And if they ask for a name for me, make one up. Don’t call me ‘Saphira.’” It’s not hard, playing the part. Sure, I can’t fly, but being silent and mimicking Rhoda’s responses shouldn’t cause me any trouble.

“Susan can summon fairies?!” Rhoda exclaims, the look of jealousy plain on her face. Of course Diane’s not surprised—she saw them when she came over to our house, and her reaction then implied she’d seen them before.

“Well, if you really want to be able to do that, you just might get the spell. That, or I can see if I might get my hands on a wand for a similar spell.” If Tedd met Dex, that would make that a lot easier.

Diane brings us back on topic. “What if a friend asks?”

“I can talk with them myself.”

6 March 2014
4:35 PM CST

It seems I have underestimated the cuteness factor of having a miniature version of yourself on your shoulder.

“She’s so cute!” exclaims the fifth girl/grown woman (this one’s in college, it looks like) for the last two minutes. “Can I touch her?”
At this point, not even Diane is liking the attention. I hug Rhoda’s neck tighter as she shies away.

“Oh. Okay. Sorry. I guess you didn’t expect people to react like this.” Well, at least she’s reasonable about it.

After our latest catch wanders away, Diane turns to face Rhoda and me. “I don’t think this is working as well as I intended.”

“I’m sure at least one boy will like Cassie.” Yup, that’s the name they came up with for me. Not bad, really.

As Rhoda’s speaking, I see a college-age boy behind Diane turn to face us and start walking over. He seems a bit familiar, but I can’t place it. “Barbie! You have a friend! And… an actual Barbie?”

Ah, right. Someone from the New Year’s party. I can’t recall his name, though.

Upon hearing his voice, Diane’s face instantly goes from disappointed to sour. “Rick is not what I was hoping for.” She turns around. “How many times do I have to tell you that my name is Diane?”

“Sorry. I still like that name, though. But what’s this thing?” He points at me.

“Oh! This is Cassie. I… made her?” That’s basically what summoning does. I gave Diane and Rhoda a rundown in the car for what summons are like and how they work and all that. I also gave them permission to address me as if I actually was Rhoda’s summoned monster. It’s more believable that way, and I know they know the difference. That’s all that matters to me, really. I give him a nervous smile and a little wave. “My name is Rhoda, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you! And I’m sure I know someone who’d like to meet Cassie.” He turns around. “Elijah!” Oh dear. I do remember him. He featured in a Q&A after the New Year’s party storyline.

Elijah ambles over. His hair looks exactly the same as it did for the party. “What is it, Rick?”

“I don’t care that Rhoda doesn’t know what’s coming. Diane does, and as soon as I see him breathe in, I put my fingers in my ears. “SQUEE!” I think that was slightly quieter than the one he gave Ellen and Nanase. Well, at least he got the attention of every person in the mall. Except maybe the people who know him.

“Hey, she even knew to cover her ears!” Rick exclaims.

Rhoda’s still a little stunned, so Diane answers for her. “I think she just mimicked me. She doesn’t really have a mind of her own—it’s shared with Rhoda.” That’s how it is for Susan’s fairies, anyway. Different monsters have different degrees of independence. I’m a little curious how it would feel to actually be someone’s monster for a day, but I’m pretty sure that’s what it feels like to be the victim of certain kinds of demons. Although it’s not like there isn’t Common magic that mimics Divine magic to lesser degrees.

Elijah gets a little closer and bends over towards me. “So if I touch her, do you feel it?” he asks Rhoda.

“No. But Cassie will do what I ask, and will mostly act based on however I feel.” It’s funny: Susan does a great job hiding her reactions to most things, but her fairies inevitably give it away.

“Okay.” He lifts his right hand from his knee to about where I am, palm up and open. I lean forward a bit to look in his hand, but not so much that I’ll overbalance. Then he closes his hand,
using his index finger to scratch under my chin, like I’m some sort of tiny cat. I do my best to react
about the same way a cat would, closing my eyes and smiling. It doesn’t actually feel all that
special.

6 March 2014
5:30 PM CST

Rick and Elijah left shortly after, and despite Elijah’s efforts, we didn’t really get much more
attention. So now we’re at the food court.

Diane’s a little frustrated. “I really thought we’d turn more heads, but I suppose this is alright. At
least I get to pick what I’m eating.” Wait, she doesn’t get to choose that on a date? Or maybe she
doesn’t get to try new stuff. I remember when Kevin tried octopus. His parents said that his
reaction was perfect for ending a relationship.

Meh. “Well, I wanted to just try to get to know you two. I don’t care much what you do on a date, I
don’t think.”

“Well, what do you do on a date?”

“… I’ve… never been on one.”

Even Rhoda’s surprised at this one. “Really? Never?”

“No. Until very recently, I didn’t really consider myself ready to date anyone… and by that time, I
was a dragon. And I think you’ve heard my views on dragons dating non-dragons.” They’re not set
in stone, but like I said: people who don’t mind the aging thing and power discrepancy are a rare
catch. If Elliot can make it work with Ashley, well, all the better for them. Although with her being
a Holy caster, the power discrepancy is almost nil (both of them have a 100% success rate with
using their magic on each other, and Divine casters have effectively infinite magic).

Diane’s face makes it clear what she thinks about dating. “Even with that, there’s got to be
someone you can date.”

“There are two male dragons within two decades of my age: Elliot, and a Brazilian guy named
Manuel. Manuel only speaks Portuguese. The next youngest is a German guy named Al, and while
I’m definitely considering dating him—and he’s already made it clear he’d like to date me—he’s
over a hundred years old. I’d like to be more like half his age before we start dating.”

And there’s the disgust I expected. “Wait, you’re considering dating a guy who’s over a hundred?”

“Like I said, not until I’m at least a hundred years old. Keep in mind the dragon aging thing. He
looks like he’s about 16. In one hundred years, I will still look like I’m 19, and he will still look
like he’s 16. And the next-youngest plausible date is a Native American who’s 500 years old. And
lives in Australia.” (Or at least the next-youngest male electric dragon.)

“I still want to hear the possible merits of dating a guy who’s over a hundred. You said you’re
considering it. Why?”

“Can we discuss this over food? I know I can’t eat much right now, but I am kind of hungry. And
this’ll take a while.”

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Diane got some pasta, while Rhoda got some Asian food. And I acknowledged my miniscule size.
Yeah, eating will take a bit, but about three normal bites worth of food from Rhoda’s plate is all I’ll be able to fit in my stomach. At least she was able to shrink a spork for me.

“Alright. Now let’s hear what’s so great about this German guy.” Impatient much, Diane?

Al lived through both world wars, technically, but he wasn’t a dragon yet during the first. Once he became a dragon, he decided on his major career path: a materials science engineer. He’s one of the fathers of modern electronics, thanks to his work with silicon and other materials presently used. Of course, I’m sure Diane wouldn’t want to hear that sort of stuff, so I’ll go into his other two notables.

“Well, first off… he was a dragon during World War II. In Germany. For most dragons, living in an area in the midst of war is… well, it doesn’t happen. You see it coming and you leave early, or you don’t see it coming and you protect the helpless around you. But he took a much more active role. The ruling powers in Germany weren’t big fans of his, once he made his role there clear.

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“World War II wasn’t exactly something that people didn’t see coming. Any other dragon in Al’s position would’ve simply left. But when the Nazi party came to power, he saw to it that they held no influence in his city. You know how Switzerland is referred to as a neutral power? They maintain that by being surrounded by mountains that it’s not worth it to trek through. Al’s home city is surrounded by flatlands, but he made it not worth trekking through, for any that would threaten its inhabitants. Dragons, as a rule, didn’t make proper use of their power back then, since we were in hiding. But he made sure to properly influence his city. Nothing outside of it, but inside, it was as if dragons never hid.

“When the Nazi party started its extreme anti-Semitism, Al’s city became a home for refugees. Anyone threatening a Jew for no good reason was thrown out of the city. When Germany began ramping up production of weapons of war, Al made sure that the city was able to protect itself from outsiders—including those recruiting for the army. And when German tanks showed up threatening to remove his influence, well… Al’s an electric dragon. He knew how to identify some critical components in those tanks, and effectively disable them. No one could force anyone in his city to participate in the war in any way. Anyone coming in peace was welcome, but anyone coming for war was turned away. Al acted as judge, jury, and executioner, if need be. Not that he ever actually killed anyone. But he was pretty effective at kicking people out.” It’s called ‘a long straight road, and a vehicle set to follow it with zero input from the passengers.’ Not a self-driving car. Just a driver that was happy to get those warmongers out of town.

“At the start of the war, some people weren’t happy and left. Since the city wasn’t doing any war production, it was one of the poorest cities in the country. After the war… it was one of the richest cities in West Germany, thanks to being completely untouched.”

“So, basically, he was something of a precursor for what you’re doing now?” Diane asks thoughtfully.

“Maybe? He was certainly the first dragon in a while to make his presence known. But for anyone that didn’t enter the city, he was entirely unheard of. Soldiers on both sides told stories of ghosts destroying any tanks approaching the city, and voices in their heads telling them to leave the weapons behind. So unless you actually saw him while he was threatening approaching armies, you’d never know that the apparently youthful engineer was a dragon, nor that dragons exist. Most people simply avoided the city altogether, if they weren’t seeking refuge. He wouldn’t even allow evacuations to either side from the city.”

“Not that many people outside of Moperville probably believe you exist.” Wow, she sounds almost like Susan.
“Well, no, maybe not. But I think appearing on TV is a lot more than he ever did. Anyway, the second notable for him might be a bit more interesting to you: he’s the only dragon to ever kill a vampire.”

Rhoda’s eyes widen. “Wait, really? Vampires are real?”

“Yeah, and Diane here has killed a couple. Vampires, in real life, are monsters that eat people to keep living. Nothing as tame as sucking blood. They devour people whole.”

“Oh. Wait. You just said that dragons have only killed one. And Diane’s killed more than that?” She turns to Diane. “Wait, I thought you said you didn’t kill that snake monster using a glowing sword?”

“They’re weak to magic weapons. And I don’t make swords. I make guns.” Diane’s doing that… thing, where she’s trying to look big and tough. And here I thought only guys did that when bragging. “And as Saphira told me earlier, they’ll quickly heal from anything else, and whatever damage a dragon does counts as ‘anything else.’”

“Yeah. If a dragon wants to kill a vampire, they’ll have to find a way to completely destroy them all at once. I can freeze one solid and it won’t die. How Al did it… Well, he wouldn’t have had to if there was someone in his city that could kill one. But the vampire in question was so brazen it was killing people in broad daylight. So Al evacuated a street intersection and lured the vampire there… then essentially turned the vampire into the largest atomic bomb ever. Properly contained, of course, but as it turns out, vampires can’t come back from atomization.”


“You want the nerd answer? Because I just gave you the other one.”

Diane flinches, but Rhoda presses me. “Yes, please.”

“So, basic chemistry: every atom has a positive nucleus and lots of electrons around it. Electric dragons can control electrons: where they are, how fast they’re moving, how they’re moving, and how many there are. In addition to all of this, basic physics has four forces. I described them a bit during my announcement, but one of them is electromagnetic force. Likes repel, opposites attract. So if you take all of the electrons in an object out, the positive nuclei will blast apart with a lot of force. That’s one way to get an atomic bomb. Of course, Al knew this, so when he took out all of the electrons from the vampire, he stuck them in a large sphere around the center, alongside a bunch more electrons, to make sure he caught most of the atoms in the blast. It still did a lot of damage to the street—basically, it took out a thirty-foot sphere—but a little property damage saved a lot of lives.”

7 March 2014
9:45 AM CST

I had a more proper dinner after getting home. No sense going the rest of the day off of what could fit in tiny-Rhoda’s stomach. Of course, I shifted to dragon form first to be sure everything was back to normal.

Once home and no longer hungry, I had an extended exchange with the construction company that’ll be fixing the schools. According to the poll Elliot ran, we’ve got about 20 people supposedly with magic that’ll show up to help today, and lots of people want to watch. I proposed meeting in a central location to split up the total crew, but the company said that everyone should simply meet at the Moperville South site. Well, they’re in charge. Elliot should be doing this anyway, but since
I’m the established public face for dragons…. At any rate, once everyone gets here (by 10), I’ll help the company crew pick who goes where. So far, we’ve got Elliot, myself, Ellen, Magus (still female, for some unstated reason—I’ll ask later), Nanase, Rhoda, Sensei, Justin, Grace (Tedd’s just here to watch), and three other (older) folks I haven’t met before. There’s also a bunch of people I have and haven’t met (and some of my other friends) that are just here to watch.

The crew is mostly from in-town, so at least they likely believe I’m telling the truth about magic. The out-of-towners likely are here either because they’re curious or to determine if Moperville is telling the truth. I hope it’s the latter, honestly. I think that’s the sort of way to spread the word that’d be helpful for dragons.

Amazingly, no one I know of from the government is here. Maybe they’re trying to crush conspiracy theories? But Channel 4 sent multiple reporters—one for each school—so it’s not like this is something that’ll be hidden.

I walk over to a man who is likely a supervisor, as he’s one of two in a dress shirt. He’s still strongly built, though, with a close-cropped beard like a logger. He looks to be the type that both demands and deserves respect from his team. From my conversation last night, I know that one supervisor is from out of town, but his in-town superior told him to work with me. “Hello! I’m Saphira. Are you one of the guys in charge here?”

He looks me over. My muscles are slightly more defined than when I first got here, but I don’t really like the muscular look, so they won’t get very big even if they would normally. “You don’t look very strong. But that was the right name. You’re going to supervise?”

“I was planning on helping, actually. Maybe not lifting anything, though. But yes, Elliot and I will split the ‘in charge’ status between the schools. I’ll be helping with North, and him with South. And you are?” I hold out my hand for a handshake.

He takes it. “Mike. I’m the supervisor for North, so I’ll be working with you. Is your group already split?”

I shake my head. “No. I was expecting that you’d give a good overview of both jobs, then people would pick what suits them. If anyone’s unsure, they can ask me. We can then establish tasks based on what they can do.”

“You don’t know?”

“I know a few, but it’s best if people decide what they want everyone to know.” I gesture towards the news folks. “But if they’re here to help, they’ve got something to share. If you want to start planning, for me, I can heat and cool stuff. If it’s too much, I’ll get tired, but I have perfect control and can isolate the heat. I was thinking I could heat metal to make it easier to cut? Not that I have to help in that way.”

“I’ll have to see what I can do. Let me talk with Chris. We’ll get this started at ten.”

“Okay. I’ll be ready.”

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Ten o’clock. There wasn’t really anything to do. Rhoda asked how she might be helpful. I asked if she could resize inanimate objects. Yes, she can, and it changes their weight accordingly, so… Ellen should go to one site and Rhoda to the other. Ellen will probably go with South, since she can fly and carry stuff in dragon form.
Beyond that, we’ve gathered a bunch more people I haven’t met before. My headcount comes to 28. Age range is senior in high school to… probably about forty. Sensei is one of the older folks. The construction company let people know that if they were under 18, they could not let them help for legal reasons. And of course they’re not liable for any injuries (nor are they paying volunteers), but hopefully we won’t get hurt. On the off chance it’s relevant, Ashley will be watching Elliot’s team. Not that she has a healing spell, but if there’s an injury at either site, it’d probably be worse at South.

Chris (I’m guessing) steps towards the group. “Listen up!” he shouts, quieting both crews and the magic group. “We have two difficult and complicated jobs for today. Normally, these would span several days, but we have more people than normal, and I’ve been informed that not everyone here is ‘normal.’” He makes air quotes as he says it. “My name is Chris. I will lead the job at Moperville South. Small debris has already been removed, but some larger chunks will be disposed of today. Additionally, we have some large machinery in place to restore structures in the roof and lift the replacement metal, as well as remove the shorn metal around the hole. If you are afraid of heights, this is not a job for you.”

There’s a short pause, then Mike steps forward. “I will lead the job at Moperville North. You can call me Mike. The ceiling in the cafeteria has a lot more in it than in a gym. It’s not as high, but we’ll be working with wiring and ventilation overhead. Once the ceiling is repaired, we will remove the damaged flooring and prepare it for our partners over at Stanley’s.” As in ‘Stanley’s Flooring.’ Installing flooring can come after the rougher stuff, I guess.

Elliot steps off to the right of the magic group, closer to the school. Addressing the magic group, he shouts, “If you want to work on Moperville South, gather around me! I’d suggest that anyone that can fly works here!” Ellen, Magus, Nanase, Grace, and about a dozen other folks walk over. I suppose it’s also the more ‘showy’ job of the two.

“If anyone’s still standing with me, that means you’re headed to Moperville North! But if you’re unsure, raise your hand and come talk with me. I’ll make sure to get you somewhere you can help out.” Five people in my group and two in the other group put up their hands and walk towards me. Time to get things sorted.

7 March 2014
10:15 AM CST

Well, at least from the seven people I talked with, we have some more variation. One has a sort of ‘smart-vision’ like how the genius was portrayed on No Ordinary Family. Not… terribly helpful for this job, but I figured he could help keep people safe at Moperville North. Then we had four people that could transform in various ways. One can do something like the Rito in Wind Waker, and actually fly with those pitifully inadequate wings. One person can just give himself bigger muscles (that actually make him stronger) and two have animal-like changes that grant linked abilities: a gorilla (strong) and… something scaly (tough/heat-resistant). Gee, it’s almost like I made two entire Draconic spells to achieve the exact same thing. At least I can use my spell and cast it on others. For the last two, we get basic flight (like what Magus can use) and illusions. The illusions are useful for the ‘measure twice, cut once’ principle, at least. She can model what fills a gap, then project it onto another spot to make sure we get it right. Given the ages of some of these people, I’m pretty sure most of them have a lot more spells than they were willing to tell me.

Anyway, I moved some people around just to have more balanced groups. The illusions woman is going to South, since she gave an effective range such that she can actually cast up against the roof, then communicate it to those on the ground. Basic flight is coming to North in case we need it, and the rest go where they were originally going (Rito to South, the rest North).
As my group piles in cars to head to Moperville North—I’m in a van with Mike and his crew—I look back to see Elliot and Ellen in their dragon forms, already getting started. Or at least showing what they can do. Ellen’s got her trapper-keeper of scales ready to go. Elliot will be checking on the group on the roof and sending them instructions, which can be relayed back down by Ellen. My group thankfully should be all in one spot for most of this.

“Do you have a firmer grasp on this group’s abilities, now?” Mike asks as we start on our way.

“Slightly,” I answer. “I now know what most of the people here can do. We’ve got a few super strong folks—as in, much stronger than their appearances should allow—someone who can make stuff temporarily smaller and lighter, one person that can levitate herself and a small load, a man that can protect himself from injury and a man that can check for errors and make sure we do things safely. And then we’ve got three more people that I didn’t speak with and don’t know what they can do.”

“Right. I’m beginning to get a picture for what everyone will do. I just hope those strong men don’t try to compete with my crew.”

“Well, you’re the man in charge. I’m helping to organize only because you don’t know a lot about magic yet and they might listen to me more readily. Just keep in mind that these aren’t inexhaustible folks. Using too much magic makes you just as tired as exercising too much, and with so many people using the same kind of magic in the same place, they might get tired a little faster than normal.”

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Our last three people are a bit more confident, but…. Well, anyway: we have a girl who gets a muscle boost and a surpassing strength boost. Then we have a man who’s always volunteered with construction projects anyway, but doesn’t particularly have any useful magic. (I asked why he showed up when he told me he could just use magic to tire more slowly—like the air and stamina potions in Skyward Sword, I’m thinking.) And for our last guy… I won’t say he didn’t necessarily make the right call, but… a summoner should be at the other school. There’s a lot more falling danger there, and he’d just have to summon the monster again. Whatever. He’s here, and it’s not like he hasn’t used his earth elemental for construction before. (He said he built his gazebo with the monster helping.) As for why here, he said the monster (“Bob”) is really heavy, and he was afraid it’d just make another hole. I was only able to make the hole because I was purposefully falling and used my claws to pierce the roof. If Bob makes a hole just standing there, it must be very big/dense.

When we arrived, there was already a sizable crowd, despite the fact that most of this will be out of sight. Which is likely why Channel 4 has a large projector and speakers hooked up. According to the reporter we got (Elliot got Carol), her camera and mic will live feed to the projector, as long as Mike is fine with it. He said that although he’s confident in his crew, this will be a learning experience for everybody. And if everyone can see it, it’ll be that much faster for this to become a professional process. (I have a sneaking suspicion that the company is getting paid extra for this, and that they requested the news coverage.)

The work site’s already prepped with the material to be used for reconstruction, but first, we need to cut out the stuff Elliot broke when I made him shift. Everything that wasn’t still attached has been removed already. But to remove the wiring, we needed to cut the power. Meaning we’ll be illuminated only by the hole in the ceiling. (I can’t imagine Fred’s Floating Lantern is safe in here.) Just as the construction crew is walking out to get flashlights, the summoner walks to the middle of the room and… makes four magic lamps. I say ‘lamp,’ but they’re basically glowing
green spheres (about the size of soccer balls) that are marbled with a darker green. They’re pretty bright, actually, and shed white light on everything around them. “I didn’t think this would come in handy, so I didn’t mention it. Sorry about that.”

“I assume that most people won’t tell me everything they can do,” I reply. “Holding stuff back is fine, but if it becomes relevant, I’d appreciate explaining before it slows the job. Can you move those around?”

“Yeah. But I should set them in place so that I can concentrate on other stuff.”

Mike takes charge again. “Set them under some of the electrical lights. I’ll let you know if one needs to move.”

7 March 2014
10:47 AM CST

The crew and ‘Mr. Stamina’ (actually Mr. Taylor) are doing most of the work, since they actually know what they’re doing. I know a bit from all the Eagle projects Kevin did, but none of them made ceilings. Benches, billboards, bridges, bird-watching stations, but no ceilings. Huh. Alliteration.

The ceiling tiles were removed to permit further wiring work, and… Mike said we’re lucky, for the extent of the damage. Elliot easily could have buckled some of the ventilation, but they were only jaggedly shorn. While they’re working with the electricity, I’m working with ‘Mr. Scaly’ (Mr. Probst) to make the ventilation and tile frame safer to handle by dulling the edges. I heat it and he uses scaly hands to bend or grind down any edges. We’re sitting on top of ladders that Justin and Bob are holding in place. Sensei offered, but I was afraid he’d get into a strength contest with Bob and pull down the ladder. Instead, he’s talking about his new business with the other volunteers.

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The ventilation safe and the wiring removal finished, we set about the next task: removing the damaged ventilation and tile framing. “I can heat it to make the cut easier. You probably haven’t handled something quite like this before,” I tell Mike.

“Not exactly, miss. Trees don’t come from the inside of a building.” I’m sure there’s some kind of magic that could make that happen. Probably Divine. “But the damage is similar, so we can definitely handle it. Why don’t you sit back and let us work on it?”

“I concede. But you should have Mr. Aevil (‘Mr. Flight’) help you, at least. He ought to be able to brace the cuts more reliably than a guy on a ladder.”

“So long as he stays safe, sure.”

“I think I can help with that.” I can’t protect his eyes, but… “Mr. Aevil, can you come over here?”

“Yes. What is it?” He floats over. I wonder how much he would walk, if people thought magic was normal?

“I want you to help them remove the damaged metal, but they’ll be making a lot of hot and sharp metal dust, and you don’t have protective clothing. I can protect most of you with a spell similar to what Mr. Probst is using. It’ll last for exactly an hour. Are you willing to let me do that?” It’s not mandatory, but it’s a good reason to use the spell that’s not for a fight. And since he’ll be flying, he won’t be crippled by the scales’ weight.
Mr. Aevil looks over at Mr. Probst. His spell is just as customizable as my Partial Armor, so all it protected for our job earlier was his hands. It was nice chatting with him for a while, anyway.

“And you’re certain it’ll come back off in an hour? I won’t be like that for days?”

“Draconic magic isn’t like Common magic. When I say an hour, I mean exactly an hour. You’ll have scales covering almost everywhere on your body, though.” Everything except his fingertips, feet, head, and groin/buttocks. The first to avoid giving him claws, and the last because I’d like to not have to explain why it makes it so he can’t go to the bathroom.

“Okay.” He waves at me. “Do your thing.”

I walk to his side and put my hand on his upper arm. (I’m trying to do this in the most professional and least sexy way possible.) “Saphira’s Targeted Armor.” His neck and hands (the only visible skin on him) sprout red scales.

“That’s it?”

“Yes, it is. If you need it for another hour, I’ll have to do it again, so I suggest you get to work.”

“Thanks!”

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Saphira the worker wants to help prep the next task, but Saphira the dragon wants to know why people volunteered to help today. Mr. Taylor would have anyway, that much is clear. But I wonder about the rest, and this part promises to last a while.

I walk over to where the not-presently-working group is gathered. They’re just standing around. At a gap in the conversation, I ask, “So, why did everyone want to come today? I mean, you’re letting everyone know that you can use magic, right?”

The group is silent for a few seconds. Eliza (muscle-boost college girl) speaks first: “It’s not like we can just hide it all the time, right? I’ve accidentally used mine at the gym once or twice.”

“I thought this would be a good way for Bob to help people. That fire guy last year didn’t make people want to trust me and Bob so much.”

“Casters are one in a hundred, right?” Mr. Logan (smart-vision) confirms. “That’d be over a thousand casters in just this city. It’s a little surprising how few people turned up today.”

“Not really.” I reply. “You’d need casters that believe their magic is suitable for construction and don’t care enough about people knowing that they’re casters. I’m pretty sure some of the folks in the audience outside are casters. This is the first really positive exposure magic is getting here, and it’s only possible because someone did something really bad with magic and the hero had to wreck stuff with magic to stop them. I wouldn’t be surprised if people thought of magic only as a destructive force. Only people already familiar with magic would believe otherwise, I think.”

Everyone stops to think for a moment. “I guess it’s our job to teach that, then,” Mr. Logan states.

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3:38 PM CST

The rest of the job went without a hitch. Some creative use of magic and construction experience, yes, but no major problems. Heat magic can be used to cool welds faster, but in a controlled manner so they don’t crack. Ventilation is much easier to lift into place when it’s shrunk, but harder to
position correctly. Rhoda can make Bob lighter without reducing its strength. Overall, a fun learning experience that reminded me a lot of the Eagle projects Kevin helped with. (His project wasn’t construction but a much-needed inventory of a local church.)

“I have to say, you rolled with all that pretty well, Mike,” I compliment him while his crew is gathering their tools. Most of the other volunteers have gone home. I’m going to head over to Tedd’s place afterwards to hang out with the Eight. (Justin hung back to drive me there.) Moperville South’s project finished a while ago.

“You don’t get as far as I am without learning how to deal with unexpected complications. But I’d say your volunteers handled themselves pretty well. I can definitely see value in this whole ‘magic’ thing.”

“… I just want to clarify that magic isn’t new. People just didn’t know about it.” Mike nods understandingly. “But I’d certainly like to see magic used on a more regular basis. And definitely not just for fighting.”

“Still… I have been wondering how you managed to cause all that damage.”

“You want a picture? The guy who actually did the damage isn’t here.”

“I thought you said that you did it?”

“Not quite. Dragons can force each other to transform. So… I forced Elliot to shift and do all that damage. I’m still the one who crashed through the roof at Moperville South, though.”

“Huh.” Mike shakes his head. “I’m sure you had a good reason for it. But if you don’t mind, can I see you ‘transform,’ then? Outside, of course.”

“Sure. I’m sure you want to see with your own eyes.” I turn to see Justin chatting with part of the crew. “Justin, you can head off without me. I’ll fly there.” Again, the end of the street is close enough.

I still don’t have my ‘fancy transformation’ spell done yet, but it’s a bit better than before. Once Mike and I get outside, I walk to an empty grassy area. “You can stand about there, Mike,” I tell him when he’s about thirty feet away. Don’t want him too close. I close my eyes. Yeah, this area seems safe for this. Saphira’s Icy Shift. The spell both activates a small heat spell and, a short bit later, triggers my transformation. I stand still as frost forms on the grass around me for twenty feet, then, at the edge of the circle, large blunt spikes of ice appear. When the ice is nearly finished forming, I shift. Upon completion of the shift, the ice sublimates in an ephemeral white mist.

Mike is sprawled on the ground with his mouth gaping, as if he fell over backwards. **Impressed?** **Why did I just picture Midna?** I shake my head. **I’ll be seeing you.** I jump and fly away.

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“And the last two arrive!” Tedd greets me at the door. “Wait, where’s Justin?” He peeks his head out the door and looks around.

“I flew. He should get here shortly.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He closes the door behind us as we head inside. “It’s a little strange, coming here when we’ll all be here again for Grace’s party in just two days,” I comment. Not a big ordeal like the last year: the
party this year will have an optional morph to some form that looks like Grace. Tedd said he has watches and wands with six forms prepped. I feel a bit more confident that his Common magic will work right over the Genetic magic of the TF gun. Which is a little funny to say, given the actual reliability records of each kind.

“Dad’s not going to be here for that,” Tedd replies. “We’re just gathering today so that Dad can tell us how his work is taking all this.” I’m sure there’ve been more than a few changes lately.

Everyone else has gathered in the basement, the formation much like on…. Wow. Day 2 of my existence. Man, that feels like forever ago. Way more than 2 months. I know everyone a lot better than I did back then.

“Are we still waiting on Justin?” Elliot asks.

“Yes. I flew here.”

Mr. Verres looks concerned. “You didn’t land in the front yard, I hope.”

“No, I walked from the street corner.” He doesn’t look very comforted by that, but the idea is to get sort of close without drawing attention directly to my destination. A car comes into range. Check the driver… “I think Justin’s about here.”

“No one can sneak up on you, can they?” Nanase asks.

“You’d be surprised.”

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3:47 PM CST

Justin’s here, so we can get started. “First point of order: Saphira, are your housing arrangements still satisfactory?” Mr. Verres asks.

“Sheesh, and I thought Sean was formal.” That gets a snort out of Elliot. “Yes, I’m fine.” The only real complaint I’d have is that I don’t have any sort of father figure in my life. Kevin’s dad (my dad?) was always great for asking advice. And I could count on him to tell me what I ought to do, if I screwed up. But with Ms. Pompoms how she is, fat chance of that happening at home anytime soon. I know it was a major thing, but to have it affect her life so drastically and for so long…

“Alright. Next: clearly, I’m not trying to hide Saphira or Elliot. In the last few days, there have been some major changes in policy—and in resource allocation. In short, my department grew a lot. Saphira: I know that it wasn’t on your mind as you flew on Wednesday, but you didn’t go unnoticed. Air traffic controllers in Chicago were a bit worried about the strange things on their radar with no radios.”

They’re in Chicago. I can chat with them. It’s not like… Oh, right. Chicago O’Hare is one of the largest airports in the nation. And with dragons flying right next to that… “What did you tell them?”

“I wasn’t available,” (right, it was on Wednesday) “but my department told them that we were aware and looking into it. I assume dragons have some way to handle this?”

“Ah…” I look away sheepishly. “I’d have to ask. At least one of the others probably anticipated this, with a young dragon acting in the test case.”

Saphira: So, there’s a massive international airport right next to Moperville, and it seems some of
the air traffic controllers noticed myself and Elliot flying the other day. Any idea what to say to them? Part of the national government’s in on it.

Sierra: I think this one should go to Jorge and Sean.

Jorge: They don’t know about me, do they?

Saphira: No. The government already knew that Elliot and myself were dragons, but they didn’t exactly tell anyone. I’d honestly be surprised if my Representative knew.

Jorge: If you want to fly hidden, Al would be better to ask. But if you want to move forward with the reveal, that should go to Sean, and I guess I could help him. You said you’re near an airport?

Saphira: O’Hare, to be precise.

Jorge: Crap. That one’s bigger than Atlanta, isn’t it?

Saphira: I’ve never visited either one. Probably?

Jorge: And with all the flights there… Why isn’t Sean in here yet?

Sean: Saphira, would you rather hide?

Saphira: My idea is to just tell the ATC’s and let them know the pilots don’t know about us. I want information to spread as naturally as possible, if we can let it.

Sean: And Elliot?

Oh. Only natural that he’d be reading this.

Elliot: I don’t want to hide it, but… wouldn’t the secret get out if we just told them?

Jorge: If you or Saphira told them, yes, most likely. If the FAA tells them, it’s certain to spread among those in their business, but may not spread any farther.

Sean: This age is one where not only those with magic can fly frequently. It is likely that dragons would not be able to stay concealed for much longer regardless. It is my long-stated opinion that people should be able to draw their own conclusions, without information forced upon them. James, what do you say?

…

It went on from there for a while. Eventually, it came to a debate, followed by a vote. Those present (all but about five dragons) agreed unanimously.

7 March 2014
5:05 PM CST

Elliot and I open our eyes to see that… only Sarah’s still here. “Where is everyone?” Elliot questions her.

I think I can tell (thanks to my watch), but Sarah answers. “Hey! You’re awake! You two were sitting there so long that everyone went to grab dinner. Don’t worry, Ellen and Susan said they’d take care of you two.”

“What about you?” Elliot asks.
“I think Susan can handle my order. I didn’t want to leave you two by yourselves. Did you find your answer?”

Elliot and I look at each other. “I think we just got a crash course in the dragons’ decision-making process,” I respond, still a bit overwhelmed.

“But yes, we got our answer,” Elliot finishes.

“I’m sure Mr. Verres will want to hear it. Why’d it take so long?”

“Because we had to discuss the implications and possible effects of every single plan of action,” I reply, exhausted. “You want to hear the result?”

Sarah shakes her head. “I’m sure I’ll hear it when you tell everyone.” She suddenly widens her eyes. “Oh! I should let everybody know you’re awake!”

“Before they get here, I want to see those airspace maps Jorge was looking at.” Living near Atlanta means he has a good idea where he can and can’t fly. I completely forgot that there’s restricted flight around airports. And since we’re right next to O’Hare… I probably should learn where we are on that.

A few minutes of looking up the map and how to read it later, and it looks like 3600 feet is the ceiling for us around here. We must fly pretty close to that, because I think they noticed us passing through the area with a ceiling of 3000 feet. At least, I don’t think we entered the 1900 feet area. Dragons don’t have altimeters, but I might want someone to carry one on my back when I go flying tomorrow. Actually, now I’m wondering how Carol was allowed to parachute within the town.

Someone arrives at the front door. I can generally guess with most people, but the only person I know well enough to pick out immediately is Susan. I’m going to guess this is the Verres group, though, since there’s two guys and a girl and they’re all about the same height. I head upstairs along with Sarah.

I guessed right! “Glad to see you’re up, Saphira,” Mr. Verres greets me. “Can I assume Elliot is also aware of his surroundings?”

“Yes, he is. Sorry about that. I didn’t think it’d take that long.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s fascinating to watch. If only I could read what you’re saying.” Hey, it looks like he has some of the curiosity of his son. He probably always has. He’s just reached the point in life that he’s familiar with most of what surrounds him. This is something new and different.

“Sorry, I guess that’s for dragons only. Not even Ellen and Susan can read it.” It’s really a shame, especially for Ellen, given how her magic works. “We’ve come to a decision, but it’ll affect everybody, so…”

“Not a problem. I can wait until everyone gets here. Though I would like to know if I would have to do anything?”

I nod. “Yes. Our final decision…. Well, you might need to contact the FAA.”

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The Verres crew got burgers, Susan and Ellen bought Chinese food (to Elliot’s dismay), and Justin and Nanase got burritos. I guess it was too much to ask to just get the same thing for everybody.
(Probably because of Grace’s party in two days.) Whatever. At least I like Asian cuisine and Susan knows not to order something spicy for me.

“I’m sure everyone is wondering what you two were talking about for so long,” Mr. Verres says when he finishes eating. “Saphira, why don’t you get started?”

I’m still eating, but I can talk some. It’s not long, and I’m sure there’ll be questions. “Fine.” I put down my chopsticks. Asian food doesn’t feel right without them. “As is likely obvious, there wasn’t a pre-made decision. So you got to see how long it takes for dragons to decide something that’s important for everyone.”

“Aren’t there a lot of dragons? How many talked about this?” Sarah asks.

There’s probably a lot fewer than you imagine. Let’s see… 5/41 is about 1/8…. “Over 85% of dragons participated in the vote, at least.” I learned a lot of names today. Not enough info to gauge personalities, but names nonetheless. “So it’s a well-agreed position, for the way to go forward. Though we do have a backup if Mr. Verres can’t help us.”

“Still, that’s rather fast for that many people,” Tedd comments.

“It is what it is. I got the feeling it wasn’t unexpected. Anyway, the idea is that we’re doing a less revealing thing than my idea to just tell the air traffic controllers. Instead, well… according to a loose definition of the word ‘aircraft,’ a dragon is an aircraft. As is anyone else flying with magic.”

Mr. Verres narrows his eyes. “You want the FAA to tell them they saw ‘aircraft.’”

“Experimental aircraft, yes. And that we’ve now been informed of the Class B airspace in our area, and will comply with regulations to the best of our ability and to the FAA’s satisfaction.”

“Dragons will have radios?” I’m a little surprised he knew that one.

“No,” I answer, chuckling. “We’ll just stay out of the airspace. I’ll also teach the rules to anyone who decides to fly with us. But for safety’s sake, pilots landing here have to be informed that if they see any ‘experimental aircraft,’ that has right-of-way. Sure, we can dodge quicker, but they’re only flying forward. They’ll probably see us a long time before we see them.”

Elliot raises his hand and swallows. “If a commercial jet enters my range, I have about ten seconds maximum to get out of the way. I don’t want to think about what would happen to a plane that hits me.”

8 March 2014
6:00 AM CST

Wow. That’s… a lot of people.

I knew that locals knew that we fly over the park on Saturday mornings, but that’s a sizable crowd watching from… a few places, actually. A couple of parking lots and at least one coffee shop. As I’m looking around, Magus and Mr. Aevil join us. First time for everything.

I still need to talk with Magus. If she stays for the landing, maybe after that?

Magus flies a little closer. “Could you give me some combat practice?” she shouts at me.

**Maybe, in a bit. Not that I’m familiar with aerial combat at all. The dragon policy for that is “try to make them want to leave without them dying.” I’m not really sure how I’d do that.**
“Then you get to practice, too.” Magus spots Ellen on my back with her phone out. “Wait. Why aren’t you flying?” And suddenly I have a second passenger.

“I’m checking our altitude. Apparently, Moperville has a flight restriction over it, so we’re only allowed to fly so high.” We’re still heading up, even though we’ve passed the ‘high’ altitude for normal flight. About two minutes into my ascent, Ellen cries out, “That’s enough! 3500 feet!”

This is… not as high as I thought, but higher than I’ve ever flown. Only by a little, though. Yeah, we probably passed through the 3000-foot ceiling area. **Magus, Mr. Aevil: If you decide to go flying above Moperville, this is the highest you can go. There is a Class B flight restriction around the O’Hare airport, and this ceiling is lower the closer you are to the airport. If you wish, I can teach you how to read the appropriate airspace map after our flight today. Ellen, are you sure you can do this?**

“Well, if I can’t, Elliot will catch me.” Ouch. I remember how well that turned out for Eragon in *Brisingr*. “But that’s a lot of falling distance to get this right.” She puts her phone in her pocket and jumps off my back!

Elliot dives to follow her, in case she can’t right herself, but she’s already turned facedown with her limbs spread wide. She then shifts to dragon form, keeping her wings tucked in as she turns it into a dive. (Immediately catching herself would hurt, straining her wings like that.) Angled downward, she spreads her wings and pulls out of the dive, still well above the trees, and I watch as she zooms along before angling upward to slow down.

Susan and I drop a bit as she rises to meet us. **That. Was. Awesome!** she exclaims. **I want to do it again, but not today. It’s a little tiring.**

Magus looks on enviously. “I wish I could do that.”

“Hey, we get to fly without tiring,” Mr. Aevil drops in. “Not everyone gets everything.”

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Flying with non-dragons is definitely interesting. Sparring with Magus more so. She’s *way* more agile than I am, and makes great use of it. My initial idea was to form walls of either ice or flame. That didn’t work too well. My new idea is to try to give her either hypothermia or heat exhaustion, by cooling/heating a massive area around her. It’s tiring, though, so I might have to try again next week. At least she can’t do much to affect me, either. Her projectiles cease to exist if they contact me, and while she can try to tear off scales, forming ice next to her is a good deterrent. About the most she’s accomplished is using a shockwave to throw me off course.

“I’m starting to see why fighting dragons doesn’t require additional physical strength,” she pants.

**If it helps any, you’re tiring me out just from dodging so well. If I was specifically trying to attack you, I’d give up and go home.**

“Why don’t you look like you’re breathing hard, then?”

**My lungs are hidden behind the muscles I use to flap my wings. Even if I’m panting, you wouldn’t be able to tell from looking at my chest. And since I don’t need to breath to speak, you won’t be able to tell that way, either.**

“The more you talk, the more what my teachers said makes sense.”

**They said not to get demoralized if it doesn’t look like you’re doing anything?**
“That and some other things.” She’s flying around behind me, but I don’t exactly have to turn to know where she is. She cups her hands together.

**Don’t bother trying.** It’s not the first time she’s done this move, just the first time from behind me. I quickly flap twice, then dive about 50 feet before sharply changing direction to my right. Magus’s shockwave misses below and behind me.

“Hey, you’re getting better at dodging, at least.”

**That I am, thanks. I’d be willing to continue this another time, but at this point I’d just like to glide for a while.**

“Sure. You do that.” And then Magus lands on Elliot. I guess she was tired, too.

**Hey!** Elliot shouts in surprise.

“You’re a big rest spot in the sky. I don’t weigh that much, do I?”

**No…** he moans. Dragons aren’t supposed to be used like that, but if they’re getting along better…

8 March 2014
8:25 AM CST

**Say, Susan: have you heard about the Japan thing yet? I don’t think I’ve mentioned it yet…**
I’m just speaking with her, Elliot and Ellen. Magus is still here, but Mr. Aevil went home once my sparring match ended.

**No. What Japan thing?**

**Do you know about the Fukushima nuclear power plant? It was on the news a couple of years ago.**

**The tsunami, right? Didn’t they get that fixed?**

**No. It takes a lot of effort to fix something like that, and this is worse than most. It hasn’t majorly exploded or anything—yet—but they have to put in a lot of work to keep it that way. And it keeps getting worse.**

**Why are you bringing this up?**

**Because the dragons made a business offer to fix the major problem—the cause of many of the other problems—and will be fulfilling it during Spring Break. I’m going, and I was wondering if you’d like to go? Actually…** I turn to face Elliot and Ellen. **Are you two going?**

Elliot pulls back. **Well…**

Ellen slows down as well. **Yes, we both are… but I’m not sure you’d like the reasons why.**

**Hey, as long as it’s not just for the money, I think it’s great. Especially for Elliot.** He knows perfectly well why on that one.

**Okay,** Ellen continues. **Well, I’m going because Nanase convinced me to go. I was thinking about it anyway, but she thought it’d be great to visit Japan with me.**

**Has she ever actually been to Japan?**
**Um… maybe?**

**In case she hasn’t, please let her know that under no circumstance is she to use magic publicly while she’s there.** I’ve read up a bit since January. I’ve also asked Akiko what it’s like living in a country that uses magic for performance arts. They have… pretty high expectations.

**Why not?**

**In Japan, magic is for performing arts only. There are monsters and aberrations there, but the professional monster hunters make a show of taking them down. If Nanase uses magic, everyone will assume she’s a minor celebrity. Not only will she not have any privacy, but the general public will get pretty nasty if she doesn’t live up to their expectations. If you need more information, Elliot can ask Akiko just as well as I can.** Enough grilling Ellen. **And you, Elliot?**

**Ashley really wants to visit Japan. She’d kill me if I didn’t go and take her with me.**

**Her magic isn’t showy, but the same goes for her. I guess she and Nanase will get some quality time together.**

**Za?** Elliot and Ellen ask at the same time.

**You didn’t think they’d get to come with us to the nuclear power plant, did you?**

Elliot shakes his head. **I guess it sounds dumb when you say it that way.**

**Yeah, we’ll have a few hours to chat each day, but we’ll be working the whole time. If we get it done quickly and on the first try, we might have some time to see the sights. But even though barrier dragons will be making it a lot safer to sit in an irradiated zone for hours at a time, they still don’t trust that it’ll be perfectly safe. The only reason we get to try is because when we shift, we heal any sort of physical damage. There’s no way James and Akiko would let a non-dragon come inside.**

**Couldn’t we use our cell phones to chat with other people?** Susan asks.

**And that brings up another reason why we won the bid to try this: basically, the major problem is that in three of the reactors, they can’t find the core and need to get rid of it. The core is the big blob of radioactive stuff that they use to make usable power. Anyway, the high amount of radiation surrounding the core is such that non-dragons can’t be in the building with it for more than about half an hour, even in heavily-shielded clothing. And the shielded drones that they send in lose their signal when they get too close to the core. So no, no cell phones. Instead, we get to chat for however long it takes for the water they pour in to drain away, with a barrier dragon keeping us safe and a chemical dragon making sure we have breathable air. Or Ellen could do the latter, since it doesn’t take much magic.**

**Different question:** Susan interrupts, **how long will it take us to do this?**

**If we get it on the first try? Two or three days. If not, up to a week.**

**And how long would it take someone else—some cleanup company or something—to do this?**

**The shortest estimate is thirty years. We won’t be as thorough, but the other companies said that if our thing works, it’ll shorten their estimate to about five to ten years.**

**I’m helping.**
8 March 2014
9:00 PM CST

Looks like we’ve got a news crew below. I hope this doesn’t take long; I’m supposed to work in a few hours.

We land—all four of us dragons (Magus took off. I told her I’d call her in a bit)—in front of what’s not just a news crew (with Carol out front) but a whole crowd. I think there are more people here than during the peak crowd of my announcement. (To be fair, it’s about 10 degrees warmer today, and they’ve had a bit of warning this time. I hope this winter ends soon, but if it’s like how it was for Kevin, I’ll still be heating the air around me in May.)

I was a bit surprised that Susan decided to stay, but she made it clear that if things like on Wednesday happen again, she wants to be able to do something without people being shocked afterwards. (She probably also supports what I said about my goal with magic: that eventually, people will think it more special than strange.) That said, aside from flying with us, at present she doesn’t use Draconic magic all that much. I’m sure hammers and fairies are pretty awesome anyway.

“I note that you’re all landing together today. Does this mean you’re ready to say who you are?” Carol calls as soon as our feet touch the ground. Hey, at least she found a clearing large enough for all of us.

**Yes,** Elliot answers. **Although it’s possible you’ve seen all but one—** he looks at Susan **—of us prior to today.** Carol appropriately repeats his statement for the camera.

I’ve never seen Susan with stage fright before, but I don’t know how else to describe her body language. Quite the opposite is Ellen (who looks quite happy with the rapt audience), but she’s done a bit of monster hunting, and that comes with its own brand of attention.

“Before you change back, can you explain why two of you are smaller and more… humanoid?”

I move my head to indicate that I’ll answer. **It’s not that they’re younger dragons, if that’s what you’re thinking. They’re not full dragons. For lack of a good term, I like to call them half-dragons. They awakened different to normal, which somehow resulted in what you see. They also have somewhat different abilities to full dragons, but can’t access the Mymoir. If you forget what that is, it’s the mental link between dragons that lets us communicate and share knowledge and spells.**

**Not that we can’t speak in dragon form,** Ellen clarifies.

“Which of you said that?”

**The brown one,** Ellen answers.

**Are you alright with us shifting back now?** I ask.

“Go ahead.”

I’ve had a good while since sparring with Magus ended, so I’m not too winded. Just much more tired than normal. I go ahead and cast **Fred’s Thermal Regulator** on myself, Elliot and Ellen. Judging by the air temperature around Susan, she already cast it on herself. I guess she keeps the wand in her pocket. (I stuck it on a small scale. All she needs is the **catalyst**, as she can provide the magic herself.)
Carol approaches me to continue the interview. I’m probably her go-to person at this point. Just as well, since I’m supposed to be the dragons’ representative in Moperville. But… Sarah is Susan’s best friend. Has Carol really never met Susan? Before Carol can ask her first question, someone from the crowd calls out, “The Hammer Queen is a dragon?!”

“Half-dragon!” I correct him.

“So, the four of you are…?” Carol prompts.

“I’m Saphira, if anyone didn’t know. Then we’ve got Elliot, Ellen, and Susan.” Susan still looks like she’s trying to hide. I think her mom will give her impromptu lessons on public speaking when we get home. It’s funny how confident she can be when rebelling against the dress code if she’s this nervous when she doesn’t even have to talk.

“No last names?”

“Some dragons are older than surnames. So we generally will go by a first name or nickname, but no surname.”

“Are Elliot and Ellen related?”

“Yes. They’re siblings. No, Susan and I aren’t related.” No reason for telling everyone we live together.

“You said at your announcement that two dragons with the same element have the same scale color.” Nice attention to detail. Either remembering that or picking out a color pair. “Is Susan the same element as you?”

“Yes, but. Not for that reason. Our scales are not the same shade of blue. They would be if the color-element rules applied to half-dragons. Susan’s scales are blue because her eyes have always been that shade of blue. Similarly, Ellen’s scales are brown, but both she and Elliot have always had brown eyes.”

“So what’s the brown element?”

“Everything.”

“How?”

“Brown dragons could also be called rainbow dragons. I think they’re brown because they still have to be monochromatic. But Elliot can sense perfectly every physical aspect of everything around him. I think he does his best to ignore it most of the time. But although he can sense everything, he can’t manipulate anything except himself. Brown dragons come in pairs.” At least, they have with every one in existence so far. “Ellen is his pair. She can’t magically sense anything, but she can cast Draconic spells of any element. You showed video earlier this week of Ellen cleaning up a pool of blood—that was mass-element Draconic magic.”

“Did all that blood come from you?”

“Yes. Don’t remind me.”

“How did you know what was happening on Wednesday? There are rumors that you knew it was coming, or even caused it.”

“On Wednesday? Dragons have records of similar things happening in the past, though usually not
to a dragon. On Tuesday, when it started? I was caught off guard, same as everybody else. I ‘woke up’ on Wednesday, around noon, and took everyone I could with me: Elliot and one of my other friends.”

“How did you ‘wake up’?”

“That’s a complex answer. You want a complex answer?”

“What if you give me enough information to prove you didn’t cause it?”

“Sure. So, remember how I said, during my announcement Q&A, that dragons are immune to Common magic? We can consciously, of our own accord, turn that off. It takes concentration to keep it off, but I can do it. And what we experienced on Tuesday and Wednesday is not the only kind of magic that has mental effects sometimes. I want to clarify: that was not Common magic, but something else. Anyway, not all mental effects are that of total control. Some just make you act drunk or something like that. And Common magic can have mental effects, too, and some of my friends have that sort of magic. So when I was at a social gathering, they cast that on everybody, and I did something dumb, and one of the older dragons had me go through mental effects resistance training so I wouldn’t do that again. And that training just so happened to prepare me for what happened this week. You call it a lucky coincidence, I call it being a dragon. Dragons are nearly always at the right place at the right time with the right preparation, whether we want to be or not. I’d honestly rather not have done the mental training, and I definitely don’t like to risk my life. But I did it, and here we are.”

8 March 2014
9:07 AM CST

“So… you didn’t cause it, right?” Carol asks. Causation is a difficult thing to wrap your head around. I get it.

“There’s no way to prove what caused what. I’m fairly certain that would’ve happened here, whether I was here or not. But dragons like to think that stuff like that being on its way is what causes us to awaken, to be prepared for it.” And if that was my initial problem to fix, I wonder what it will be for Elliot. Well… dragons’ initial major problems can take years to show up. No guarantee I’ll be in his area when it happens. But the fact that these usually don’t happen back-to-back means I’m not terribly worried about taking four dragons, a Holy caster and a pseudo-monster hunter on vacation for a week at the end of next month. It has happened before, that a dragon has been away for a bit when the big bad came to town, but they never came back ‘too late.’ Besides, we have a half-immortal, a weapon summoner, a Genetic magic user, at least two wizards and a wandmaker staying. There’s little that could seriously threaten the town. (Lots of small trouble, but little that needs a dragon or two.)

“Okay. Next topic, I guess. Do you want people to use magic all the time?”

“Yes. What I want and what I get isn’t the same, sure, and I realize that that sort of thing is a huge departure from present-day ‘normal,’ and yes, magic carries some risk… but at the very least, I think Moperville is adequately prepared for any consequences from more use of Common magic. Perhaps not in a legal sense, for criminal activity. But there isn’t much illegal that you can do with Common magic that you can’t do more easily with a gun or knife. But for everyday activities, there are plenty of things you can do all the time that are more interesting, or easier, or just fun. I’m trying to learn how to cook using my magic as the heat source. One person I worked with yesterday said he worked with his summoned monster to build a gazebo. And I know someone else who can transform a bit to have real cat-like ears and a tail. I think it might at least make life more interesting if people could use magic without fear of backlash just because of the magic, not what
they do with it.” I’m thinking of the first church I visited here for that last statement.

“Uh…” Carol blanks.

“I’d be willing to take questions from the audience, if you’ll let me.”

She hesitates for a bit (listening to her station from her earpiece, most likely). “Sure. I’ll call people forward if they have a question. Do you have a time limit?”

“I likely have longer than you do. My flight time means I can’t open on Saturdays, so my shift at work doesn’t start for a few hours.”

“Where do you work?”

“Ehhhh… I’d like to be able to say, but I want to emphasize that when I’m at work, I’ll answer questions relevant to my work. I don’t think actual customers would appreciate loiterers, so I won’t answer questions about magic or anything unless it’s specifically relevant. So no, I won’t say.” I’m fairly certain at least one person in the audience knows. (Kyle.)

One man steps forward from the audience. “Is there a reason that only you are speaking? I see four dragons—or, well, two dragons and two half-dragons. Why can’t they speak for themselves?”

I squint at him. I think Susan perked up a bit. Maybe she wants to hear my answer here? “I volunteered to be the spokesperson for dragons here. Of course, I can’t be that in Germany, or Japan, or even Mexico, but within this town, and later, this country, I’m supposed to be the go-to dragon to answer questions. If you have direct questions for the others, I suppose they can answer, if they want… but unless they indicate that they want to answer a question, I’ll just launch into my answer once I think of it.” That’s not entirely true. I usually don’t phrase everything out in my head before I speak. I just get a general idea of what I want to say. ‘Think before you speak’ is not something I do all that often.

A young man (about my age) comes to the front. “I know you said you don’t want to talk about it that much, but I’m wondering why you didn’t immediately change back after taking down… whatever that was, on Wednesday. My sister said you were lying there for half an hour.”

“I… yes, I was. As for why I didn’t change back, there were a couple of reasons. One is that I was dying. I was numb to the world, and couldn’t gather the will to shift forms. I only changed back when one of my friends used a spell that numbs pain, and she numbed enough that I could feel again, but not so much that I couldn’t feel an immense amount of pain. The second reason… I was shocked that I had done what I did. I didn’t actually think it was possible until I did it. Not that no one had ever taken stuff like that down that way before, but no dragon had, and I was in disbelief that it actually worked.”

“…She also said that your eyes and chest were red when you did it? Except… she said the red patch on your chest was shaped like a plus sign? I thought you said dragons were monochromatic.”

So that’s what that burning sensation means. “By default, yes, we are. Under certain conditions—that is, with the right emotions—we might have other colors, or an altered appearance, for a short period of time. It’s tied to what’s at the core of our personality, though I couldn’t say for certain what my conditions are, just a fair idea.” No reason to go all in on this. Short answer… “At any rate, the appearance change is predictable and always the same for each dragon. Mine manifest as something that sort of matches these two things.” I pull my objects out of my pockets. (Yes, I have skirts with pockets. They’re tiny little things, though, so I will purchase a purse or handbag if I wish to carry more than about four things. So far, I’m getting away with a house key, my phone,
and my objects. My wallet—Kevin’s wallet, repurposed—goes in a cheap drawstring bag or my backpack.)

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The camera guy fiddles with a dial. Good chance he’s zooming in on my objects. “Is there anything special about those, that the changes match them?” Carol asks.

“I don’t really know how to put it. I guess… they’re a part of me? Right now, they’re simply magically bound to me, but when I shift to dragon form, they become part of my body.” I don’t want to say too much. It’s not a secret, really, just personal. There’s no weakness tied to a dragon’s objects.

“What do you mean, magically bound?”

“Here. Take it.” I give Carol the dragon miniature. She holds it delicately. “Don’t worry. You can’t break it permanently.” While she’s eyeing it for the camera, I close my right hand and summon it back. The figure instantly vanishes from her grasp.

“Wait, what? Where’d it go?” she asks. Without a word, I open my hand to show the figure lying on my palm. “Impressive. That wasn’t just sleight of hand, was it?”

“I tried learning that stuff a few years ago. No luck. But to prove it…” I throw my crucifix into the crowd. “Did someone catch that?” I call.

“I got it!” a young woman calls from near the back, holding it up for everyone to see. Then I summon it to my left hand. “It’s gone!” she exclaims.

I hold up the cross. “I don’t think sleight of hand covers that kind of distance, unless there are two of them.” I don’t think it’s possible to duplicate the thing, either. The texture it has is a result of lots of tries with a printer that Kevin used with the wrong settings. Whoops. But I really like it. “These are the only two things I can do that with, though. I can’t teleport or anything, and it’s one-way transit for these. I can’t even tell where they are prior to getting them back, nor will they retain damage or even dirt or scratches.” I pause. “Any other questions?”

An older (late 30’s, most likely) man comes forward. “You said you can share ‘spells’ with other dragons? What do you mean by that?”

“A dragon’s spell is written—or better-described, programmed—by specifying exactly how to use each of our abilities to some end. For example, I’m using a heat magic spell to keep the air around me at a comfortable temperature. The spell specifies exactly what amount of heat energy the air around me should have, in what area, based on the shape of my body and a table of temperature-to-heat values, all recorded in the Mymoir. Written out, it’s a fairly long and complicated spell. I could record it for other people to read, but they wouldn’t really understand—unless they were a heat dragon—what it’s doing when it mentions detecting heat and adding or removing it. Another less-complicated spell lets me do this.” I pause. “Saphira’s Partial Armor!” I just use the default range, but it’s still visible with my t-shirt and skirt. The audience as a whole is surprised, but the inquisitive man is remarkably unfazed. “A Draconic spell works okay if you have the name and description and can cast it, but it works better if you understand it. Generally, we like to name spells using the name of the dragon that initially wrote it and a descriptive title.”

“I think I get it. So that uses part of your dragon form to make that one?” I nod. “How many spells are there? That dragons have written, I mean.”
“Uh… a lot? There’s a new one whenever dragons want to do something new…. Let me check.” There’s got to be a count somewhere. Heck, there’s probably a spell to count them. Aha! “There’s… okay, that’s a meaninglessly large number. But there are well over a million spells. Just… think of how many patents for things there must be, or how many programs for computer stuff. Some spells are more versatile; I hope most of mine are like that. But many are very specific to a single task, like creating white light that shines in a specific direction. These can then be combined in larger spells. So yeah, the fact that I’ve made almost six spells in about two months is not so impressive. And dragons have been around for millennia.”

“Oh. Wow. I was not expecting that answer. The way you described it, I probably should have, though.”

“How many spells can you use? And what haven’t you used?” a slightly younger man shouts.

“One: please come to the front to ask your question. I’m sure Channel 4 would appreciate it. Two, to answer your question: I can use a lot of spells. A tiny fraction of what’s been written, sure, but a lot. There are some I’d rather not tell you what they’re called, but some examples…. Well, the count of spells came from James’s Spell Count. Then there’s a spell for melting swords that Fred made, and the inspiration and information for my Partial Armor spell came from Jorge’s Skin to Scales, and so on.” Notable about Fred’s Sword Eliminator: it works even if the sword is presently moving. I hope the spell is never used for that purpose again, though I could totally see it used to process scrap metal.

Chapter End Notes

If my description of events from World War II sounds off, consider two factors: (1) Events may be slightly different in the EGS-verse, and (2) I might not be the greatest at historical research.
A few more questions asked and answered, but nothing notable, really. When it finally ended, I called up Magus. Long story short, I’m now chatting with her at her apartment.

“I’m sure you saw this coming, but… you’ve had plenty of time to change back to a male form since Wednesday. I’m curious why you haven’t?”

“Ah…” I can tell from Magus’s face that she doesn’t really want to explain. “Well, I’ve been talking with Andrea, and….”

“Oh! So… they have come back?”

“Yes. Never for long, but she’s come here multiple times since then. But not outside of the park yet, nor with any other griffins or anyone else, really. But she’s talked with me about a bunch of things, and one of them…. Well, she’s the one that had the idea for practicing against you today. And I think she had a good point. Terra used to run me ragged just as quickly as you did, today.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call that quick,” I interject.

“It’s faster than expected at my school. Anyway, I’d expected that having a physically stronger form would make a bigger difference. The fact that I’m out of practice and weaker and I couldn’t find any real difference between both forms… well, I might not have given this form a fair shot. Yes, I’m still physically weaker, but I have spells to overcome that, and you showed me today that in the only combat where a better starting point really matters, physical strength matters little.”

“I can’t imagine any person winning combat against any dragon using brute force alone. Heat dragons have fire and ice, chemical dragons can choke them, light and barrier dragons can blind them….”

“Yeah. The more I think about it, the less I’m sure I reached the conclusion I had on my own. Or that it was the right one for me. I’m not saying your view is right. It just… might not be completely wrong.” She has no idea how happy I am to hear her say that.

*Bzz bzz* A phone call? “Excuse me.” I pull out my phone. I don’t recognize the number…

“Hello?” I answer cautiously.

“Hey, Saphira.” I’m struggling to remember the voice.

“Sorry, you’re not in my contacts, and…”

“Oh! Sorry! It’s Ashley.” I swear, if it wasn’t for caller ID I’d never recognize a voice.

“Hey Ashley. What’s this about?”

“Well… ever since Wednesday, I’ve felt… a little odd? Like… indecisiveness, but I’m not sure what about? I only called you because it started on Wednesday and I thought of you. I already
asked my parents, but they didn’t know… so maybe you do?”

Uhh… Maybe it’s because she’s a Holy caster now? But I thought that made folks more sure of themselves, not less. But… wait, she wanted to date Elliot because he could turn into a girl. Meaning she’s not a Christian, or not a very good one, anyway. Despite how kind she is. I mean, I kind of assumed that anyway, but… whatever. MyMoir: mental stuff for unsaved Holy casters.

Got it. Not telling her the whole thing, but what might help her right now, anyway. “Would you mind coming to church with me tomorrow? I mean, I walk there, but I’d be able to explain more on the way, and… well, the MyMoir says it’s relevant.” Having an angel of God bound to you has got to be strange for someone that doesn’t even believe in God. For both the human and the angel.

“And now I’m even more confused.”

“Why is that?”

“Part of me was unsure when you asked, and part leapt at the idea. What really confuses me is that I can tell they’re separate.” And that… almost sounds like being a new Christian. Except it was sort of forced on her, with no explanation. What I know of Holy casters is that the trigger to become one involves intense emotion alongside a strong desire to help others, and some Holy casters described it as “accepting an invitation.” I don’t know what happened for her, but finding out won’t hurt.

“If you come to church, you’ll likely get a better explanation than just asking me. Besides, Nanase said she was coming with me tomorrow, too. I’m pretty sure Wednesday’s events will temporarily drive up church attendance, so I doubt you two will be the only guests.”

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Ashley agreed to come. It was easier to convince her when I let her know that “whatever she thinks looks nice” is the dress code. I’m still wearing a dress, but I managed to get some flats to change into when I get to church. And with all the magic awareness lately, I feel more confident I won’t attract too many eyes when I use Saphira’s Clothing Protection. (Not a real spell. Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales is what I actually use. It keeps any real clothes I’m wearing from getting dirty.) And since the other two’s houses are on my way (with a minor reroute), I’ll be grabbing them as I go.

I don’t want to talk about this, but it just… I feel like I have to do this. I’ve put it off long enough. “Susan,” I call, knocking on her door. “Do you have time to talk?”

“Come in,” she answers through the door.

I walk in to see her sitting on her bed in her sleepwear, with a Susan fairy pulling back the sheets and a Grace fairy doing… something with what’s presumably her gift to Grace for tomorrow’s party. It’s a little odd since her fairies look like herself and her friends, but then again, I spent a night looking like Rhoda and I’m thinking of asking if I can do that again. It was great for me to relax, and I got the feeling she liked the idea of having a fairy, even if that’s not totally accurate to what happened. But being able to not have to act as ‘the responsible dragon’ and helping someone else enjoy their night feels great to me.

“What did you want to talk about?” Susan asks when I close the door.

“I… well…. I pause to muster my courage. “Do I… feel like a burden?”

“What?” Susan says, surprised.
“I… I wasn’t invited to join the group, or to live with you, or anything. I sort of forced my way in. Mr. Verres let me in because I knew too much already, and Elliot and Ellen let me in because I appeared on their bedroom floor, and you let me stay here because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. I feel like I’m preying on your sympathy. I don’t… I want to go to Grace’s party, but I’m not sure I should.” I’m trying to be serious, but my eyes are welling up with tears as I explain myself. I just feel guilty right now. Kevin always wanted a strong group of friends that he knew a lot about, and now I’ve got one, but I don’t feel like I earned it. I just happened upon them, and they had little choice but to let me in.

“I– Saphira, what do you mean?”

“Friendship is… supposed to be a mutual thing. I feel like you’ve become my friend, but… I don’t think I ever gave you the right to refuse.”

I close my eyes as my tears block my vision anyway. I care for her a lot, but… it’s up to her whether she wants to be my friend or not. I weep for a few minutes in silence. Then I feel the touch of a tiny hand on my cheek.

With surprise, I focus my heat sense on the area near my face to see the Susan fairy wiping away my tear. Then I notice that Susan is talking. “I don’t know if you knew this, but Sarah didn’t let me refuse, either.”

I move my mouth to express my confusion, but my throat is closed up.

“After my… father cheated on Mom, I didn’t want to trust anybody. Nothing could cheer me up. That’s when Sarah stepped in.” She pauses for a few seconds, reminiscing. “I didn’t want to hang out with anyone, but Sarah forced me to play with her, with all the cheerfulness in the world at her back.” Another pause. “I know it’s not the same thing with you, but you needed friends. I don’t know about the others, but…. Well, I can’t say your assessment is wrong. You did force yourself on us. But I’m not saying you aren’t my friend now. And I’ll talk to Grace, before the party.”

I want to express my gratitude, but I think it’ll be a while before I can talk clearly.

“Besides, don’t you have a present for her by now?”

The whole answer is “not yet, but I will.” Instead, I just shrug.

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8:30 AM CST

It turns out that scales conserve heated air a lot poorer than a dress. It just means I have to use more magic to compensate, but the occasional gust makes me shiver.

I drop the scales spell briefly to pick up Ashley. “Hey,” I greet her when she opens the door. She’s wearing a winter (AKA long) skirt and a thick down coat. Probably something nice under the coat.

“Wow,” she comments, looking me over.

“I have three outfits: everyday, work, and this.”

“No! I mean, the dress looks great on you! I just wasn’t expecting it. Do you wear that every week?”

“Thanks! And yes, I do. Despite having to walk to church.”
“How far is it, anyway?”

“A few miles. But it’s not close enough to any landing spot for flying to be worth it, and I don’t mind the walk.” Yes, I could fly near there, but it’d save me a net one mile of walking, since the flight would be from the park to the south end of town. The walking route doesn’t even approach the park.

“Oh. Let me put on better shoes. You can come in.”

It’s actually the first time I’ve been inside her house. Last time, Nanase and I only stayed long enough to make sure she got inside. Her parents are… home, but around the corner. Maybe they’re embarrassed?

About a minute later, Ashley is ready and we’re headed out the door. “Mom! Dad! I’ll see you in a bit!” she calls, before shutting the door. “Are you really walking to church in that?” she asks.

“No.” Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales. “I’m walking to church in this. But I don’t see a reason to hide my dress when it won’t get dirty anyway.”

“It is a nice dress. You really like blue, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Sarah had to talk me out of buying a blue jacket.” I pause. “Oh! Don’t think it’s because I’m a blue dragon! I’ve always liked the color. Don’t worry. I don’t think Elliot’s going to start decorating everything in brown.”

“Oh,” she chuckles. “That’s good.”

We walk in silence for a few steps. “So…” begins Ashley, “do you know what’s going on with me?”

“Yes, theologically.”

“Huh?”

“Do you understand the nature of what I dealt with last week? What hurt me?”

Ashley hesitates, then replies. “I was going to say ‘no,’ but then I felt like the answer was ‘yes?’”

“Yeah, uh…. What did it feel like? When you, ah… helped me? I guess?”

“When I knew I could help? I… one moment, I felt completely helpless, like you were going to die and there was nothing I could do, and the next… I felt like… I knew I could help, and what I could do to help, and I was totally calm and just did it. I still don’t know how, really. But now I feel like… there’s a second, calmer me? That just knows what’s going on?” And for someone who spent a few hours yesterday reading up on Holy casters in the Mymoir, none of that is new.

“Do you want the vague magic answer or the specific theological answer?”

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8:35 AM CST

Ashley takes a few steps, thinking. “I want to know what’s happening. I’ll decide if I believe you or not later.”

“Okay. You know stuff about immortals, right?”
“Elliot spent a lot of time explaining that after the whole thing with Magus back in January.”

“Yeah, so there’s a second group of magic beings known as ‘angels.’ They empower Divine casters by binding themselves to the caster’s, uh… spirit? Soul? Not sure what the right word is. But they’re nearly permanently bonded to their ‘host,’ of sorts, and fuel the person’s magic. They also influence the host’s thoughts, though how much depends on the nature of the bond. For the thing I got rid of, it had almost complete control over the man. For yourself, you can sort of tell what it’s thinking? And it might influence your feelings a bit, though as you’ve said, you can tell when it’s doing that. Oh, and unlike the other guy, you can kick it out if you want, but if you do, no more magic for you, and you can’t get it back.”

“Why’s it different for me than for him?”

“Because you’ve bonded with an angel that serves God, and he bonded with one that serves the devil, Lucifer.”

“How can you tell?”

“You smell different. Oh, and you’re not trying to kill or otherwise harm me. Servants of the devil hate dragons.”

“Smell?”

“Dragons can ‘smell’ magic users. Dragons smell… really good. Holy casters—like yourself—are a pleasant smoky smell, like a campfire. The other kind of Divine casters, Evil casters, smell… well, a bit like a bad smoke? Not cigarette smoke, but not great, either. Something like burning food, I guess.”

“Um… Way back, when you first explained magic… you said there were four kinds? Is this the fourth?”

“Yes. Knowing about it tends to make Evil casters more likely to happen and Holy casters less likely. It’s impossible for you to become Evil now, so I don’t feel like I should keep hiding the info. Not that you should share this with many people. But you might want to tell your parents, if you believe me.”

“Well… I don’t know if I believe you, but the ‘angel’ sure does. I’ll get back to you later on my decision.”

It’s nice, having time to just walk and talk with Ashley. It’s not like I don’t see her all the time at school, but lunch once a day (with Tedd and Elliot present) isn’t a ton of bonding time. I think I’m starting to learn the definition of the phrase ‘girl talk.’ Kevin’s conversations tended to have a lot more silence.

I end the scales spell again as we approach Nanase’s house. I don’t know anything of what happened between Nanase and her mother since I talked with her about it, but since she seemed a little less tense after the fact, I assume it went well. I knock on the door and Mrs. Kitsune answers.

She turns around and shouts something in Japanese that includes “Nanase.” Oh, how I took language for granted. “Sorry, neither of us knows what you said,” Ashley replies. “Unless you know Japanese?” she asks me.

“Nope. Really basic Spanish and about four words in Japanese.” ‘Domo’ is ‘very,’ ‘arigato’ is ‘thank you,’ ‘ichi, ni, san’ is ‘one, two, three.’ I’m not even sure whether ‘konichiwa’ is ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye.’
"You’re friends of Nanase?"

I wouldn’t describe that between her and Ashley, but meh. “Yeah. Is she ready to go?”

“She should be.” She turns to shout again, but Nanase comes down the stairs just then, Akiko on her back. (Not literally.)

“Oh! Miss Saphira!”

I don’t know if Mrs. Kitsune knows that I’ve met both of her daughters, but Nanase can explain for me later. “Akiko! Nice to see you again! How’d you like that movie? I never got to ask.”

“It was great! Is there really an actress with my name?”

“It’s an old name. She’s a dragon, actually. The one shown in the movie.”

“Wow!”

Mrs. Kitsune mumbles something in Japanese. I’ll ask Nanase about it in a bit.

A brief silence and Nanase’s Japanese goodbye later and we’re on our way. “You’re not going to change again?” Ashley asks.

“If I picked a living location for the church proximity, I would have taken this one. It’s only a ten-minute walk from here.”

9 March 2014
12:15 PM CST

According to Nanase, even Mrs. Kitsune knows about Akiko the dragon. She just thought (like most Japanese residents) that Akiko was a family name used for the ‘family’s’ acting and special effects jobs, rather than the actual credit for one person’s work.

Apparently I forgot to inform Nanase that Ashley was coming, too. She was surprised and acted a little betrayed when she first noticed Ashley, until I pointed out that, as the two of them had both been invited along for spring break, they’ll be spending a lot of time together while Elliot and Ellen are working. Then Nanase treated it more as an opportunity to learn more about Ashley.

As I suspected, there were a lot of guests today. The pastor called for members to introduce guests. I pointed out to Nanase that I count as a guest, since I’m not a member yet, and she sighed in relief.

The two did a fair job paying attention in church. Nanase had a lot of questions for me, while Ashley looked like she was trying to puzzle it out on her own. Maybe having a conversation with her angel?

And now the service has ended and I get to wait/listen in while Nanase and Ashley talk with church staff. Nanase is mostly just curious what exactly the church stands for and how accurate my statements on Thursday were. The staff confirmed the accuracy, but noted it may focus too much on the next life over this one. Although they also said that “whoever told you all this clearly cares about you.” I blushed when they said that and swapped to checking in on Ashley. For her part…

“I’m sorry: I’m having trouble understanding what you’re saying,” the church lady is apologizing.

Ashley looks around. “Where’s… Oh! Perfect timing! Saphira, can you join us?”

“Sure. What do you need?” I walk over and sit on the pew next to Ashley. The other woman is on a
folding chair in front of the podium.

“Ashley says that part of her believes everything I read out of the Bible, but another part of her struggles to understand it, and she needs me to explain to that second part what I’m talking about?” Ouch. Well, she’s church staff, so I think I can assume she’ll get it if I explain properly…

“Ashley is a special person with a very special gift: she’ll never have to doubt what God wants for her, because she knows an angel personally. By which I mean it’s here, constantly communicating with her in her head, almost as if it was another part of her mind. So if you’re trying to share the Gospel with her, the angel will affirm it as true, but she is still confused and unsure. I think that’s it?” I finish, facing Ashley.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Both parts agree, at least.”

“Wait. You know an angel of the Lord? Can… can I speak with them?”

Ashley shakes her head. “I don’t think it works that way. They’re happy that I’m talking with you, at least.”

“Ma’am, angels won’t take direct control over anyone, and if it wanted to speak with you, it would have to irreparably break its bond with Ashley.”

“O-oh! Sorry! Okay, now that I know what is going on, let’s try this again.”

…

Nanase has confirmed that at least I was telling the truth last week, and due to her curiosity, she “might come back at some point.” Better than I could’ve hoped for, especially when I first met her. Ashley, on the other hand, is now a new Christian, and like all new Christians, the most excited person ever and absolutely insufferable to non-Christians. Nanase congratulated me on making her not look forward to her visit to Japan. I think six weeks will be enough time for Ashley to learn that no matter how ‘good news’ the Gospel is, not everyone wants to hear it. I’m hesitant to warn Elliot, though.

9 March 2014
5:00 PM CST

Grace’s party starts early because we all have school tomorrow. Yes, she confirmed that she wanted me here. I thanked her a lot when I arrived. And then I got another surprise.

“Wh– Magus!?” I exclaim when I walk around the corner to see [a blonde Ellen that smells like a wizard] standing next to Elliot and Ellen.

She doesn’t say anything; she just smiles and chokes with laughter. “So that’s what a surprised Saphira looks like,” Ellen remarks.

“Not funny! Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I only asked Mr. Verres, Elliot and Ellen if it was alright,” Grace says behind me. “I guess they didn’t tell anyone?”

“I spoke with you yesterday!” I half-shout at Magus.

“I didn’t see a reason to mention it.”
“Changed my mind. You act more like a guy.”

No Ashley because Grace doesn’t know her, but she went out of her way to befriend Magus shortly after her apartment and everything was set up. I’d be more surprised, except that Ashley and Grace are the sweetest girls I know. By contrast, Susan and I are probably the most guarded, which seems a little odd for someone like myself. (No real trauma in my past, just middle school mocking and few real friends.)

I think we’ve got parties down to a formula of sorts. Order food, prep everything, then eat/presents. It’s Grace’s birthday, and she decided that this year, instead of an awkward party, she’d have a confusing one. As in everyone looks like her. No need for a booth or anything. Aside from Tedd, Elliot and Justin, we’re all girls to start with, so Tedd figured a wand with a Grace form spell mixed with one that resizes clothes to fit would be good enough. (It was.) Magus was surprisingly (in my view, at least) okay with the whole thing. Not everyone looks exactly the same: Grace has green eyes, and mine and Elliot’s are color-locked. Ellen’s and Susan’s still changed, interestingly.

“This is… kind of weird,” Sarah notes.

“You call it weird,” Susan retorts. “I’m in a room full of Graces that I can only tell apart by clothing and smell.” I’m glad I normally tell new people apart by clothing. It typically doesn’t work so well, but that’s my default mental shortcut.

“Smell?” Grace asks.

“Different kinds of magic users smell differently to dragons,” Elliot clarifies. “Everyone in here can use magic, so…”

“Well, there are some groups we still have to check by clothing alone,” I continue. “Susan, Elliot and Ellen smell the same, then Sarah, Justin, and Nanase are the same. So Susan has the easiest time, since Elliot’s eyes are still brown and Ellen can’t smell the same way dragons normally can.”

“Or we can do it the fun way and not care who is who!” Grace pouts. I guess trying to keep track of people goes against the spirit of the party.

“Then I can get all your presents?” one of the Common casters (probably Justin) says.

“No!”

Oh… right. Nanase’s going to have to get zapped again, huh.

I raise my hand. “If it would help, though… I can give the original Grace a temporary mark so that we can tell who she is?” It would be very interesting to see if she could morph Draconic magic away. I’ll make it last 20 minutes, just in case.

“What do you mean?” Grace asks.

“I can form scales on other people, for a set time. A single scale on your cheek, just for a short time?”

She cocks her head. “Eh… why not?” I walk over and touch her left cheek (Saphira’s Targeted Armor), leaving a brilliant green scale behind as I drop my hand.

“That’s really pretty!” another Common caster (probably Sarah) declares.

Come to think of it, how long has she been a caster?
Grace stands still for a moment, and… the scale is gone. “Uh, that was supposed to last for twenty minutes,” I remark. “Now I’m wondering what the spell will do when the scale isn’t there.”

“Huh?”

“If you want a Draconic spell like that to end, you need to put in a method to restore what was originally there. It’s supposed to remove the scale and thicken your skin at that location when the spell ends, in addition to restoring hair follicles, sweat glands, and so on, and removing the hole that the scale would leave behind. Making scales is hard. But if you just do that yourself, I’m not sure what the spell will do when it gets to that point.”

“Maybe it won’t do anything?”

“Can you put the scale back? I mean, that was a dragon scale. If you just morph it back, it probably won’t have the same properties. But now I’m curious if you can have a scale there whenever you want.”

“Uh…” And the scale is back. Question answered.

Tedd raises his hand, but puts it down quickly. “Party now, science later,” he clarifies.

9 March 2014
5:22 PM CST

Time for presents. We’re all gathered around the dinner table, likely in much the same way as it was for Grace’s party last year. (It’s impossible to tell when nearly everyone looks exactly like Grace.) To avoid confusion as much as possible, we’ve agreed to not try using names unless we want to talk to someone in particular. Otherwise, everyone is someone, but we don’t need to know or care who. My guess is that this is a confusing night for Nanase and Ellen and a conflicting time for Tedd. I’m debating on whether to attempt a ‘doll imitation’ for Grace. (Perhaps I will, just to mess with people. I’d tell Grace first, I think.)

“So who’s first?” Grace asks from the head of the table.

Someone gets up and… oh, that’s Susan. Or her present, at least: I recognize the wrapping from last night. It’s more difficult to tell who’s who because Nanase used a spell to do a bunch of clothing swaps with people. I think I’m wearing Nanase’s shirt (? It’s that same sleeveless top thing Rhoda had me wear) and Grace’s shorts. Hooray for heat magic!

Grace doesn’t preserve the paper as well as last year, but she doesn’t tear into it, either. “If you’re going to do that, maybe I should get you a puzzle box next year,” I comment. [Someone] glares at me and I get the feeling I guessed their present.

“Are we all even going to be here next year?” [probably Susan] asks. “I know there are pretty good colleges around here, but I applied for out-of-state colleges, too.”

“I don’t have so much as a report card yet to apply with, but I’ll be going to the community college. It’s cheaper that way.” I’m not looking forward to student loans, but at least if it takes 40 years to pay them off, I’ve still got plenty of life ahead of me. “Besides, I probably should stick around at least a year if I declare myself Moperville’s dragon.”

We continued around while Grace politely stopped unwrapping her gift. Nobody expects Magus to stick around the moment she has a way home, though if it’s two-way she might come back to visit. Elliot and Ellen are unsure of what they want to do, so they’ll explore a bit this summer and, if it comes to it, at community college. Sarah wants to study art (and I wasn’t the first person to tell her
to do that as inexpensively as possible), Justin is also a bit lost, Nanase will go out-of-state (but hasn’t decided on what for, yet), Grace doesn’t care much and Tedd just wants to study magic. He said that any college degree will let him do that (in his father’s old department), so he was thinking of getting a quick associate’s degree in computer programming. So most of us are actually staying here for the next year or two, but it’s a little sad, that I just got to know these guys and they’ll be leaving soon. That’s life, I guess, especially as a dragon: you stay constant as the world changes around you, so you make the most of every moment you get with others.

And in total, the pizza arrived before Grace finished unwrapping the first gift.

“Sorry. I can finish later, I guess.”

“It’s fine, Grace.”

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We made sure to only have one person answer the door, because it’d be kind of odd for the delivery boy to see ten of the same person. Judging by the leftover pizza, Nanase has figured out how to eat normally again. Of course, four people with dragon forms means we still had to order a bunch of pizza, but those four ate for six people instead of one girl eating for three. “Back to presents, if that’s alright?” Grace asks.

“Go ahead.”

First up, the box with the wrapping paper already removed: an oversized mallet with a telescoping handle. “Ellen’s, uh, get-together reminded me that this might come in handy for you, at work or school or wherever.” [Maybe-Susan] grabs her left elbow uncertainly. “Uh…”

“Thanks! I don’t think my boss will let me hit customers, but I’ve seen teachers hit stuff near students before.” I can’t help but smile as I remember the time Kevin’s teacher used a rubber mallet on the leg of a sleeping student’s desk.

“Me next, before I feel bad.” [Someone] stands up and gives something card-sized to Grace. She carefully tears it open to reveal a membership card for Nostalgia Games (this universe’s equivalent for GameStop). Not as easy to spell, but at least no gamer forgets how to spell it. “I didn’t know what to get you, but I figured you’d use this.”

“Thank you, Sarah!” She stands up and hugs her. Ah, right. Grace can perfectly tell who is who.

“Okay, Justin and I worked together on this one. We had trouble picking it out, there’s so many.” Elliot gives Grace a box that, by her reaction, has some heft to it. She pulls off the wrapping to show… a puzzle box.

She turns it over multiple times. The outside is covered in slats, but I get the feeling only one or two move initially. “I don’t get it. You got me a box?”

“It’s a puzzle box. You have to figure out how to open it. We looked up the directions so we could put a smaller puzzle box inside that one. I remember Tedd saying you were smart, so I thought you might like the challenge?” The whole time he’s talking, Grace is turning over the box and trying to push and pull slats. Eventually, one shifts by about three millimeters.

“Aha!”

“How long does it take to open?” [probably-Tedd] asks. I’m making an effort to ignore who is who unless it matters.
“With directions, it took Justin and I about half an hour, and just as long to close it again. The smaller one was more like five minutes.”

Grace puts down the box. Despite her continued efforts, only the one slat has moved. “Okay. I’ll work with that more later. What else do we have?”

“Does Tedd want to finish, or do we want the long one last?” [likely-Ellen] asks.

“Long one?”

I let my eyelids droop. “Because I’m a cheapskate who couldn’t think of anything, so we’re using magic to make the thing while we’re here because making it requires Grace, and it’ll take a bit. But it’s the present from myself, Ellen, and Nanase.”

“Did Magus bring anything?”

“I… didn’t know her well enough, so I asked if she wanted anything, and she said me showing up was enough…”

“And it is. Don’t worry. You getting time to get to know everyone is good enough for me.”

“I’ll go last, then. I’m sure everyone is wondering what this magic gift is.”

Fine. “I’ll explain while Ellen and Nanase go make it.”

Flashback!
22 February 2014
9:03 AM CST

I think I’m finally getting the hang of flying for three hours straight. Maybe I can try fancier stuff next week.

“Hey, Saphira,” Ellen calls, “can I try something before you shift back?”

**Sure. What is it??**

“Hold still.” Ellen runs over, pulling a hair tie from her pocket and… putting it over one of my scales? What? Then she backs up. “Can you lower your resistance?”

**Uh… sure.**

Ellen stretches her arm towards me and suddenly starts growing! Her skin turns blue and her clothes shrink off her—ah! Her Copy spell works on the dragon form? That explains the hair tie. Wouldn’t want to damage her clothes.

**Neat! But I kind of doubt you can fly with that.**

Ellen stares at me for a bit. Then she shakes her head. “Right, forgot I was dealing with Common magic,” she somehow says aloud.

**So the form can’t fly, but it can speak, which is definitely not something the biology supports.**

“Apparently.”

**Is there a way you can stick the form on someone else??**
“Yeah. What were you thinking?”

**I was wondering what Nanase’s fairy doll spell might do with it.**

A shift back (Ellen’s), a scan from Ellen, and a short phone call later, and Nanase is here to test a theory. I’ve taken the liberty to shift back as well. The hair band fell off when the scale it was on ceased to exist.

“So let me get this straight: you want me to make a doll for you after Ellen transforms me into a copy of your dragon form?”

“Yes. I’m wondering how that’ll work for a number of things. But if your spell adds fairy wings and a fuzzy tail, I might have to burn the abomination.”

“I can see that,” Nanase giggles. “Alright, let’s try it.” A zap later... “Wow. This form is huge!”

“One of the acceptable combat tactics for dragons is ‘step on your foe, but don’t squish them.’”

Ellen laughs. “I can’t see myself using that tactic, but I’m pretty sure you’ve used that one already. I’d say it was effective.”

“Saphira, can you let me make a doll?”

“Right, sure.”

Nanase carefully curls up on the ground so she won’t collapse, then closes her eyes. A moment later, a ‘miniature’ version of me appears about ten feet away. I think she said these are always 1/6 scale, so... that makes the ‘doll’ two and a half feet tall. I note that Nanase’s figure is unmolested (unchanged), but she’s somehow flying without flapping her wings.

“Well, I won’t have to burn it. Now let’s see what it’s like when you end the spell. Let me hold you, first, so it doesn’t hit the ground.” Nanase hovers over to my hands, and I grab her sides between her front and back legs. The scales kind of feel like fingernails, and collectively like sandpaper. When I nod, the realistic imitation of myself becomes a... really cute plush dragon!

“Sheesh, Saphira, you don’t have to hug it so hard,” Ellen comments.

“But it’s so cute!”

“The way you’re acting, you’d think it’s your first plushie.”

“It is. I’m not kidding when I say I’m trying to save up cash. I mean, Kevin had some, but this is my first.”

Once Ellen ends the spell on Nanase, the two approach me. I’ve loosened my grip a little. “Wow. That is cute,” Nanase remarks. The scales are replaced with a realistic shading pattern on the outer fabric, the wings are thicker and rounder, and the head is less pointed with large, sapphire eyes.

I hold it out to look it over. “I’ve been thinking about what to get Grace for her birthday. You think she’d want one of these?” The other two look at the doll in silence. “I mean, not because it looks like me or anything. I’m just stumped on what to get her.”

“No, I think she’d like it,” Nanase replies.

“I can’t think of any reason she wouldn’t,” Ellen continues. “I wasn’t thinking as far ahead as you, but maybe this could be a gift from the three of us?”
“Okay! I’m keeping this one, though.”

“Nobody thought you wouldn’t.”

9 March 2014
5:38 PM CST

Just before I finish explaining, Nanase comes into the room as a miniature dragon. “Grace, can you hold onto me?”

“I’ve gotcha. Now what?” And Nanase leaves the doll. “Awww! It’s so cute!”

“You have one of these, Saphira? I haven’t seen it.”

“I don’t parade around the house with it, but it’s gotten plenty of love.” It’s a little big to keep anywhere besides my bedroom floor or my closet.

“Now I wish I’d been there to see it the first time.”

Nanase and Ellen walk back in. If she’s going to match everyone else, Nanase will have to get zapped again. “I think it was my first confirmation that Saphira’s a girl,” she comments, and I glare at her. “Seriously, though, I wonder what your childhood would’ve been like.”

“I do, too, but there’s no real way to find out now unless I run into the right kind of demon.” Everyone stares at me. “You really thought there wasn’t magic that could turn people into children? There’s Common magic for it, too, but that’s temporary and doesn’t lock memories away.”

“Too soon, Saphira.”

“Oh. Sorry. The chance I’ll face another one is pretty high, given the lifespan of a dragon, but the average occurrence rate gives me at least a decade before I have to worry about it again.”

“…Anyway, Tedd, could you zap me again?” Nanase asks.

“Sure. Just a second.”

While they’re gone, I turn to see everyone huddled around [someone] with their phone out. “What’re you looking at?”

They hold up the phone to show me. “I figured you’d be as serious as ever, so I took video to show as an example of when you should be more expressive,” Ellen explains. “I didn’t see it coming.”

The short clip just shows me holding Nanase with a curious expression on my face that quickly changes to excitement when she leaves the doll. The audio captures my shriek of delight and ends with Ellen’s “Sheesh.”

“I… don’t remember squealing.”

“Well, I think that’s cute. And I think anyone who sees something like this is more inclined to believe you’re a real person and not a robot.”

“I’m serious when discussing serious topics!” Wait. “This is not going on YouTube.”

“Okay.”
“Or social media or anything else. You want to show that side of me, tell me before hitting ‘record.’”

“But then you’ll never show it!”

“Yes, I w–! Okay, yeah, I won’t. Fine.” Eh, better that than some things.

“Well! Now that we’ve learned Saphira understands the word ‘adorable,’ I believe Grace has one more present to open.”

I spin around. “How long have you been standing there!?.”

“I thought people couldn’t sneak up on you?”

“It’s a lot easier when I’m distracted or if I have to count people to know who’s here.”

We’re all gathered around the table again for Tedd’s gift to Grace. It… probably isn’t as over-the-top as all his gifts last year. Tedd’s gift apparently fits in a small jeweler’s box. (I have no other way to describe the box.) “Tedd, I think you’re supposed to hold the box when you propose,” [someone] remarks sarcastically.

“Ha ha.”

“He’s not allowed to propose until he’s graduated from high school,” Grace answers matter-of-factly.

“I… didn’t think you’d heard that.” I wonder if he asked his dad or if Mr. Verres told him that preemptively?

Grace open the box to find a paper resting on top of whatever is in there. It’s printed with a massive STOP sign and “DO NOT TOUCH” in large letters. “What’s this about?”

Tedd scratches the back of his head. “I actually worked with Elliot and Nanase on this one, but… do you know about Nanase’s clone spell?”

“The ‘Fox’ thing, right?”

“Yeah. Anyway, I remembered what you said about wanting to have another ‘you’ to hug, so I figured that even if I couldn’t be physically present—I know I’ll have to be away at some point, and might not always be there when you need me, no matter how hard I try—you should have something. So I asked Elliot, and, well…. I made something like what I did with the muffins in January?” He carefully removes the paper to show one of Elliot’s scales sitting in the box. “It should work for most people, and it activates on touch, although it can only make one copy at a time.”

“Uh…” Grace hesitates, her right hand in the air.

“It won’t hurt. You can end it by touching the scale again while the spell is active, and you don’t need to have Common magic to use it.”

“Okay.” Grace touches the scale, and suddenly there are eleven Graces in the room.

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“Why’s she just standing there?”
“Her personality is based on how Grace was feeling when she touched the scale.”

Ah. “And since she was apprehensive…”

“Exactly.”

The eleventh Grace vanishes. “Let’s try that again.” It reappears and promptly hugs Tedd. Grace also stands and hugs him. “Thank you!” A little bit later, she touches the scale again. “It’ll be a bit much during this party, though. Moving on!” Grace claps her hands. “If you don’t want to stay transformed, you can chat with Tedd. That doesn’t mean you have to leave, but if you leave without changing, you might still look like me tomorrow morning. Not that I have a problem with that as long as it ends before school starts.”

“The forms are set to last six hours, but I’ve personally extended forms like this to last thirty times as long…”

“And if you want your clothes back, you’ll have to let me—or the person wearing them—know.” I think Susan is slightly better about germs and stuff since obtaining the means to perfectly cleanse her entire body, but Nanase left Susan’s clothes alone.

“But I don’t have anything special for this party. There’s karaoke, video games, just hanging out…”

“Not a problem. I’m sure we’ll find something.”

Not too long later, the conversation I was part of lulled, so I took Grace aside. “What’s this about?” she asks.

“I’m not saying I’m bored, but I wanted to try something I happened across recently: acting like I’m someone’s summoned monster. The last time I did it, it was a lot of fun.”

“Someone’s… monster?”

“Like the clone you summoned with the scale. Or like one of Susan’s fairies. Something with the goal of making their creator happy, with actions that reflect what the summoner is thinking. Obviously it’d just be an act, but if you let me, I’ll follow you around, do whatever you tell me, try and interpret what you’re thinking and act it out…. I think it’s a great way for me to get to know you, basically being your servant for as long as you’ll let me. If you’re okay with it.”

“You’ve done this for someone before?”

“Rhoda, once, last week. And she made me doll-sized first.”

“I don’t think Tedd can do that, but I’m okay with you trying, I guess. You’re fine with this?”

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t bring it up. But while I’ll do most things you want or ask me to do, I won’t kiss anyone. Hug, sure, kiss, no. I’m saving my first kiss for my eventual husband.”

“I don’t blame you for that one, nor would I ask you to do that.”

It’s a little harder to do this when I’m person-sized, but I know Grace slightly better than I did Rhoda. Following one person around helps quite a bit for learning about them, but now I’m almost completely lost as to who else is whom. Oh well.

Grace has a name for clone-her: Anne. Thankfully, I only have to remember one of these fake
names at a time. I’m sure Grace and Rhoda will remind me if I do this again for them.

It took Grace a bit of time to get used to the fact that I’m silent while doing this and, lacking other directions, will basically just follow her around like a nervous kitten. (Speaking of which, Jeremy has retreated in confusion.) Not to say the plan hasn’t had a few hiccups.

“Grace, why is Saphira following you around like that?” Elliot asks.

I pout and widen my eyes.

“Za?”

“She wants to act like she’s my clone. I’m… not sure why, but she said she liked doing that? And from Nanase’s description, I think this’ll be a little less awkward. Though I think she’s mostly okay with it because she wasn’t ever really affected last Wednesday.” I shrug. That’s a fair assessment, I suppose. I’ll stop if there’s something I really want to do, but for now I like being passive. I just wish I could ride on her shoulder like I did with Rhoda.

“Huh. I guess I can ask her about it later. How are you enjoying your party?”

I watch Grace for a moment, then hug her midsection. “I think it’s going better than last year’s theme, if that’s what you’re asking. If we want, I guess we could try karaoke again, but since everyone will sound like me I’m not sure how well that’ll go over.”

“That’s great that you like it!” Tedd exclaims. “Hey, uh, why is she…?” He points his thumb at me.

“Treat her like she’s the clone. Anne will do whatever I ask.”

“Really…” Tedd says with a mischievous look on his face. “Kiss me, Anne.”

I cross my arms and glare at him, as does Grace. “Whatever I say, not what someone who looks like me says.” Her posture straightens and I mimic her. “Anne, could you nuzzle Tedd?” I cock my head to think of what she means by that, then walk over to Tedd and hug him from his right, my eyes closed and my face in his hair. At the same time, Grace does the same from his left. “Thank you for everything.”

“Awww. You’re welcome.” He turns his head and kisses her, and I mimic Grace by hugging Tedd a little tighter.

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6:18 PM CST

As always, I am surprised how much time can be filled just talking. Then again, I think that was the majority of what happened at Grace’s last party. Speaking of which, since we’re here, someone pulled out the karaoke machine again.

I tug on Grace’s shirt. “I’d like to participate in this.”

“That’s alright with me. You’re done being Anne?”

“Yeah, for a while. I think I got to know you better, at least.”

“And I think your acting improved.” Grace lets out a small laugh. “Really, though, thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.”
As everyone here sounds like Grace, it’s time to see how well people can adjust to a different range of tones than normal. Her voice is deeper than mine for some reason. I… don’t know enough about biology to have any idea why. But I don’t think Ellen’s getting 100 again this year.

“Don’t worry, Susan. You don’t have to sing if you don’t want to,” [someone] tells her.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, Tedd?” I call. “Can this thing connect to the internet or anything?”

“Why do you ask?”

“There’s a song I want to sing, but I sort of doubt you have it already.”

“If that’s the case, it must be really obscure. But yes, it can. What do you want?”

“‘Stained Glass Masquerade’ by Casting Crowns.” I checked. Casting Crowns has the same songs here that Kevin listened to for study music. Not that I have this one memorized.

“Yeah, never heard of that before. Hang on, let me get it.” He squats in front of the machine to fiddle with it. “Why that song in particular?”

“I like singing contextually appropriate music. The setting doesn’t match, but it’s the first song I thought of for what I’d want to sing.”

“What are Casting Crowns like?” [someone else] asks. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“They’re a Christian rock band. Soft rock, I mean. Something like the Eagles? But the music is all Christian stuff. Don’t worry: they make it so that even non-Christians can understand what they’re talking about.” Definitely better than Newsboys. I still don’t get where all their references are from.

“I must say that you’re very good at making us anticipate what comes next. Are you going first?” [someone] says rather formally. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume Al was here.

“…No. I’m pretty sure my song will cause some conversation, to say the least. But I won’t demand to go last.”

“I guess we get to enjoy ourselves while we wait on Saphira, then.”

Ellen’s still really good, but she only got a 93. And she picked a song I knew a little from Susan’s radio. (Not an important one.)

My turn. The song’s sung by a duet, so I’m not sure how the thing will score the male parts. But I’ve adjusted once already for a different voice range, so I don’t think I’ll do too bad. Not that that really matters. I take a moment to concentrate on the relevant feelings, and hit the start button.

A long music intro, then, “Is there anyone that fails? …”

“A long music intro, then, “Is there anyone that fails? …”

“Am I the only one in church today, feelin’ so small?” 87. Not bad.

Everyone stares at me in silence. It’s a little… odd, with everyone looking like Grace.

“Uh… how was that ‘contextually appropriate’? Do I want to know?”
I squint at them. “That’s what the song was asking, wasn’t it? *Do* you want to know?”

“… And now I feel like I’m a bad friend if I don’t say ‘yes.’”

“Don’t feel obliged.”

“No, really.” They dip their head and close their eyes. “Go ahead.”

My turn to close my eyes. I take a deep breath. “I… I know you all think I’m so serious all the time. Maybe *too* serious. But… that’s more of… a conditioned response? Not to say I can’t be serious, or that I’m normally carefree. But… I don’t want people to *not* take me seriously when I want them to, so…. Anyway, I… want to know if… if I can act how I want? With you guys? I’d be lying if I said there’s no toll for how I act in public.”

“Wait. You— I thought you said you wanted people to get to know you? That’s the point of an announcement, right?”

I start shaking from tension. “Yes, but—”

“Does this mean you *wouldn’t* have saved us last week?” [someone] asks sincerely. There’s no accusation in their tone.

“If it was anywhere else, *anyone* else… I might have spent the time to find a substitute. A Holy caster, or another, more experienced dragon. But no, I couldn’t leave you all like that.” I look at Susan, and she gets it. (Yes, I can pick people out if I want.) My shivering becomes more visible as the conversation continues. “And, well…”

“Well what?”

“Um…” I bite my lip.

Elliot jumps from his *thinking pose*. “Saphira! You—” He breathes in sharply. “You aren’t trying to manage the *entire* reputation of dragons by *yourself*?”

“…Yes,” I squeak out.

“Saphira!” he shouts. “You don’t have to do this! – You *can’t* do this! That’s not a task for *one* person!”

“If the rest of the dragons want a good reputation, they can make it for themselves!” Ellen yells.

“But I’m the only dragon the public sees,” I whimper.

“I’m here now! I can help! You’re not on your own!”

Susan walks forward and stops in front of me. “Saphira,” she whispers. “Is this… Is this why most of your spells are armor?”

“I – I don’t want to lose anyone. I… *need* to protect everyone.” I wipe my eye. “There’s too much! I can’t see it all coming! If I only prepare for the *worst* threats, there’s plenty that will slip through the cracks! And if I tell people, it’ll just make things worse! I – I—” My throat closes as I break down sobbing.

…

Something… warm covers my eyes. I check with my heat sense to see that it’s… Susan’s shoulder?
She’s… hugging me? And back to her normal form.

“Saphira, it’s alright. No one expects you to do that. And think about who you’re talking to. No one in this room is powerless, and we won’t leave others to fend for themselves, either. I don’t expect you’re going to quit what you’re doing, but… you can share it.”

Susan continues to hold me until I push her away. “Thanks,” I manage, then sit on the floor. Susan stands still for a second, then shifts twice again, cleaning her clothes.

A few seconds later, [someone] comments, “Wow. I think that’s the longest time Susan’s had physical contact with another person since she was born.”

“I’ve hugged my mom before!” Susan snaps back, and I give a shallow smile.

9 March 2014
6:31 PM CST

Susan sat down next to me, but aside from turning off the karaoke machine, everyone left me alone while I gathered myself. When I’m ready, I look at Susan. “Thank you. I… You’re right, that I won’t quit protecting people. I… did you read that part? In Eldest?” Tears still fill my eyes.

“‘Be a shield from misfortune’? Is that how you feel?”

“Sometimes, yes. I’ve read… I’ve read histories, of dragons protecting their towns from grave threats, of the many things that can and have gone wrong. I don’t want anything bad happening, so I spend my free time preparing. And—”

“Saphira.” Her soothing voice is back. “I know I can’t keep you from reading that, and I can’t even read it myself. But that’s not how the other dragons were all the time. Have you looked for the boring stuff?”

“… You’re right. It’s probably not something they made an article about. But… even an action hero has days off.”

“You don’t have to be an action hero. Not saying you can’t, if you want to be. But I’m sure you can find some way to do this without overstressing yourself.” Susan pauses. “And I meant what I said about sharing it. I know I can’t read the Mymoir, but if you want help making a spell or something, give it to me. I’m sure the only person ever to learn Draconic can do something.”

I smile.

“Alright, get up. We can go home if you want, but you should get changed back first.”

I shake my head. “No. I’d like to stay a little longer. But I would like to have my own body and clothes back.”

A short conversation with Tedd and Nanase later, and I’m back to my normal form and clothes.

“So does this mean we’ll get more of you like in Ellen’s video?”

“Maybe. You’d have to show me something really cute, first. The dragon doll is adorable.” [The person I’m talking with] looks over at Grace’s new doll and nods. “But it’s not like I won’t be serious when I need to be. I just… might learn to… try to care less what others think of me? And how that reflects on others like me. I don’t want a bad reputation, but maybe I was trying to be too dependable.” A short pause. “Oh. But don’t go thinking my wardrobe is going to change. I wear
this because it’s comfortable and I like the way it looks. I might expand my wardrobe or have more style than ‘plain,’ but you’d have yourself a battle convincing me to wear something else for more than a day or two.”

“What about at the beach?”

“A two-piece is only likely because I don’t think they plan on girls being over six feet tall when designing clothing.”

“Fair enough.”

We did a little more karaoke, with a little less serious talk. To make it more fair, everyone’s changed back from the enchanted form. We all got higher scores except Grace. I got a 96 singing “Temporary Home.” (I only picked it because I like the song and it’s sung by a woman, unlike a lot of country music I like. I plan on sticking around for a while.) “Wow. I wish Kevin did that well for chorus class.”

“He did chorus? Why are you taking art?” Sarah questions me.

“Because I didn’t get to pick. I first saw my schedule on my first day of school, and besides, I don’t think it’s fair to the rest of the class for me to join halfway through. But years of chorus gave me pretty okay tone mimicry, if nothing else. And I just like to sing. But he never had voice lessons or anything.”

“Oh. Who’s next?” she asks, looking around.

I raise my hand. “Uh, first, I have a question I’d like to ask everybody. Because although I think I know the answer, it’s only fair if I ask.”

Silence. “… And that is?” Magus asks.

I grab my left elbow nervously. “I… sort of forced myself on everyone. I know it’s not usually straightforward, but… if you were given the option, would you all have chosen to be my friends? Instead of, you know, how it happened.”

Magus looks around. “I sort of deserved what you did with me. And… I’m grateful to you, for what you did. Not that you needed to take care of Sirleck—I could have done that myself, once he left Ellen—but I doubt talking with the police would have gone as well if not for you. And what you told me, a little while later… I’m glad I could be there for you. But now I’m wondering what you mean for everyone else.”

Elliot is the first to start speaking. “Saphira sort of… appeared in my bedroom. Ellen and I didn’t really know what to do, so we set up a meeting with Mr. Verres and everyone else.”

Ellen’s next. “Saphira, if I didn’t want to be your friend, I wouldn’t have taken you with me that first night. And you saved Diane’s life.”

“That’s not really fair. She saved my life. And her own.”

“From what I heard, you gave her the chance to do that.”

“Saphira, none of us would walk away from you,” Sarah answers my question. “If we started over… I guess it would depend on the circumstances. But knowing you like we do, I’m sure we all want to be your friends.” Everyone nods in agreement and Susan narrowly dodges the group hug.

“Alright. Now who’s next up?” I ask.
Note: I think of Ashley as the ‘token Christian character’ in canon EGS, despite her not actually being Christian. In the long run, her becoming a Christian here will have almost zero impact on her personality. (Even her becoming a Holy caster won’t impact her much.) Not to say she’ll be static in spite of anything that might come her way.
I don’t know how so many people found this place, but we got a lot of watchers today and at least one new student (Magus). Actually, Magus started on Monday, but this is my first time seeing her here. I imagine her coming is going to be one of the best ways for her to get new combat spells, but also a fair substitute for her missing the last two years of her schooling. Not that I think they’ll let her skip, but at least she’ll be back in practice, though we won’t be doing anything likely to shunt someone to another universe here.

Sensei is no stranger to showmanship, but that’s not really the point of our training. Not to say intimidation has nothing to do with magic fights. But I think people will be a little disappointed watching us today.

“You mean to say this is a normal class for you?” one spectator asks Sensei.

“Yes. If you want more demonstration-friendly classes, come back on Monday. But I haven’t been teaching this long enough to say I’m confident that my students will stick to the karate-with-magic format I’m using, nor have I run any sparring matches yet. But yes, I am certified to teach karate.” I imagine he got that certification while teaching at the other dojo. The training is pretty similar to taekwondo, but the scales make it a lot harder. I can’t say whether being a girl makes it harder, since I don’t think male physiology really plays into it before puberty. But I do like feeling like I can actually do physical activities.

My friends have told me that magic has a lot more exposure now. I guess people can ignore stuff that a lot of people saw, or that appeared on the news, but not something that affected them directly. But there’s a mix of positive and negative reactions. Some people think that all magic is Evil, and some think I caused the demon to come here, while others think of magic as neutral (which is closest to the truth) and still others worship me as a hero. And while I like that there are people who appreciate what I did, I definitely don’t deserve or want any worship. And of course there are people who think magic is from space or foreign or superhuman or whatever strikes their fancy. (I’m not about to go confirm that Genetic magic is from space. But the rest is naturally found on Earth.)

Susan has decided to make use of her passport regarding the trip to Japan. Elliot and I still need to finish everything with ours, but we’re in a waiting phase, so I hope they get done on time. Nanase had Ellen get one last year. And of course Ashley already has one and can’t wait.

Speaking of Ashley, she’s still going strong on sharing her new faith, but Elliot’s told me (through the Mymoir) that he’s a little sick of it, even though he only hears about it at lunch (so far). I let him know that I’m sure James would be happy to talk with him if he has questions on anything deeper than Ashley knows. After all, he met Jesus during his ministry. (James was present for one of the miraculous feedings. He’s a barrier dragon, so eating is already a little strange to his senses, but more food appearing from nothing is especially strange. Mass magic plays a lot nicer than Holy magic in that regard.)

And at work, I get more “just browsing” folks than ever. I did take off from out front when Susan
awakened, but a lot of these folks ask me to use magic. So many in fact that I now have a sign I wrote on card stock with a marker: “I only use magic at work when the store is empty.” Not denying that I use magic at work, but it’s not very useful if I want to pay attention to work stuff. Just if I want to stay awake.

So overall, we’ve got more people interested in magic than ever (in recent memory), with on average a neutral if slightly negative reaction. Which is just as well. Dragons want people to be cautious, just not hostile. Hostility to a neutral power can help prevent problems, but causes more of its own. Too positive, and a budding problem might get worse, like what happened with Fred. Caution to report problems before they’re too bad but encourage neutrality or heroism is the target. Not that we’re there, and the test group isn’t a massive population: a city, not a state or country. (It seems the rest of Illinois is taking this about the same way as the last few events.) But the other dragons at least like the way it’s going here in Moperville.

17 March 2014
4:01 PM CST

A rare day when neither Susan nor myself have something to do beyond school stuff.

“Hey, Saphira?” Susan asks, knocking on my door.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think it’d be a good idea to talk about magic at the club meeting this week?”

I wonder what brought this on? Or maybe she was waiting for things to die down a bit. I walk over and open the door, then go back to my chair. Susan lightly sits on my bed. “It might go over better if you have some practical demonstrations. Could you convince Tedd to make some simple wands, maybe? I’m sure Nanase’s hair spell would be well-received. And… well… if it goes over well, it could be a good demo for Tedd. If he wants to sell wands, I mean.”

“You’ve been thinking about it, too?”

“Probably not in the same context. I’ve been thinking about how to give people practical demonstrations of magic, like what Tedd tried with Ashley at the end of January. Me using it in front of everyone probably doesn’t help as much as people experiencing it, and I don’t want people’s only exposure to magic to be forced on them. A magic demo, sort of like a tech demo, would probably go over better. There’s a reason new products today often have demos for either end users or media members to try out, and I think Tedd giving away simple wands for hairstyle changes or summoned lights or something might be helpful.”

“Summoned lights?”

“One of the people I worked with on the repair job could summon what was basically balls of light. We used them like lamps when we had to repair the lighting wires.”

“I could see that being useful during a power outage.”

“Or just when you’re out camping. I can tell you from experience: Propane lamps aren’t very heavy, but the propane itself is.”

“Kevin went camping a lot?”

“Well, he is an Eagle Scout.” I laugh briefly at my next thought. “They’re going to need rules on what sort of magic you’re allowed to use while camping. I’m sure a lot of the goals are to learn
survival skills and teamwork, but if you can summon a monster to help you out…” Susan laughs, too. “Oh! That reminds me! Fred made a spell that pretty much lights air on fire to make light, but when I was looking into why it’s purple light, I found out that using the spell probably makes ozone.”

“How do you know?”

“One: it’s on the Wikipedia page for ionized air glow. Two: I asked Elliot to check the chemical composition of the air near the location of the spell, and he at least confirmed it was changing. Not that I think it’s all that bad for the scale of the thing—since I bet lightning makes a lot more—but I’d like to avoid that. You asked if you could help with making spells. Could you help me make a spell for generating light in a customizable configuration and color? I imagine the final spell will use a reference table, much like the table for Fred’s Thermal Regulator, but probably a lot more complicated.”

“You don’t do things halfway, do you?” Susan chuckles.

“I figure it’ll be useful, and I can use it for other spells down the line if this one’s done well.”

Susan sighs. “I asked, and you gave me an answer. Alright. I’ll help.”

21 March 2014
2:30 PM CST

I didn’t follow up with Susan on the feminist club thing, but her bag this morning smelled so much of Common magic that either it was stuffed with fairies or she got wands from Tedd. I wonder what he used as the catalyst? I hope it wasn’t Susan’s scales. I already told him that strips of sheet metal work just as well as stick-wands.

As for what we do in the feminist club: every month, each club gets to write an article for the school newspaper, which has about as much prestige as the town newspaper: fairly reliable, but useless to anyone beyond the immediate audience. Today is supposed to be article research and writing day, but I’m sure Susan has some way to make that a bit more fun today.

Susan stands at the front of the room and calls for everyone’s attention. “Before we get started on brainstorming article subjects, I’d like to do something a little different.” She walks to her backpack and pulls out… a large box of four-inch nails. That works, I guess. Better than Tedd using dragon scales for everything, and pretty cheap, too. “I know they just look like nails, but these are actually magic wands: objects that have the necessary magic in them to cast specific spells. And if you’re wondering how that’s relevant, I think it’s part of our job to look at how new developments can affect the balance of power and influence. Anyway, I have three boxes of wands today that a friend of mine made for me. I’ll show you what the first does.” She takes out a nail and closes her eyes. A few seconds later, her hair is the same length as Sarah’s. “You can change hair length and style with the wands from this box. I’ve marked their heads with the letter H. If you want one, well, go ahead and grab one.” Susan opens the box and sets it on a desk in front of her.

Everyone just sort of sits there, not sure how to react. There’s zero point in me grabbing a wand. Then Catalina gets up. “Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I think this is neat.” She grabs a wand and sits on a desk near the box. Then her hair changes to match Susan’s normal length and style, though it’s still orange. “Oh, wow!” she exclaims, running her hand through her hair.

“These are still nails, but I dulled the points a bit so people wouldn’t hurt themselves on them,” Susan explains. “Metals apparently work better than the wood of popular fiction.” Take that, Elder.
Wand. “And if you want, you can take these home with you. They’re not exactly expensive to make, but to my understanding it’s a little difficult and time-consuming. But Tedd Verres is looking forward to selling wands, if this goes well.” She turns her head. “He said I had to mention his name when I did this,” she mumbles.

“How much would these cost?” Julia (a yellow-haired skinny girl) asks. Good thing I went over this with Tedd already.

“He said most would closely match the non-magic equivalent price, even though you can use these forever. So a hairstyle wand would be $15. A flashlight wand—” she pulls another box from her backpack “—would be $5.”

“Flashlight?”

Susan pulls one out, and a second later its tip is glowing rather brightly. I raise my hand. “Does it get brighter if you say ‘Lumos’?”

“No, but you can still say it if it makes you feel better,” Susan laughs. I think she’s relaxed a lot since I got to know her, but I don’t think I can take credit for all of that. Maybe she’s just less stiff when near people she knows?

“So what’s the last one?” Sarah asks. “You said you had three.”

“A simple strength boost. I’m sure it’s useful for a lot of things.”

21 March 2014
2:38 PM CST

And now we have a feminist club playing with nails. Not something you’d expect.

I sidle up next to Susan. “Did Tedd come up with the nail idea?”

Susan narrows her eyes at me. “What do you think?”

“No.”

“I came prepared with those boxes. He complained, but I told him that if he’s only going to stick one spell in each wand, this is probably the cheapest and easiest route.” I imagine that he took a lot more convincing than that, but then again, his other option was asking Susan for scales. He told me at lunch that Grace’s scales are like regular lizard scales. “Once he did his thing, I filed down the points with sandpaper and heat.”

“We have sandpaper?”

“I bought it with the nails.”

Liz (a green-haired girl that I think is friends with Ashley) walks over holding a nail. “I thought you’d be all over this, Saphira. What’s up?”

“I can’t use the wands.” I wish I could, but it’s not happening. Oh well.

“Aren’t you a dragon? Magic should be your thing.”

“Exactly. Dragon. Those wands use Common magic, which is not a sort I can use.”

“Oh. I thought you might be able to cast this on me or something?” She’s holding a strength boost
wand. And from her phrasing, I guess she’s about as gifted with Common magic as I am.

“I can’t use them, either,” Sandi (a blonde-haired girl) complains from next to the wand table. I’m not sure if she can’t use the wands or if Susan’s explanation wasn’t enough for her. She’s not exactly the brightest girl in the room.

Well, I did come up with that spell for this reason.

Liz isn’t exactly the most cheerful sort of girl (the opposite of Sandi, really), so I’m not giving her a scale on the cheek. One on the back of her hand should do well, though. The rest of the group now has alternate hairstyles, so I guess they can all use the wands.


Since I’m trying to stick scales on two people at once, I hold my hand against the respective locations: the back of Liz’s right hand and Sandi’s left cheek. Saphira’s Targeted Armor. I remove my hands when the spell is cast. I set the scales to last for three hours, in case they wanted to show anybody else.

Neither really reacts, until Liz looks at Sandi. “Why are there green scales on your cheek?”

“Huh?” Sandi reaches up to feel her face. “You’re right! Did you do this, Saphira?”

“Yeah. I can’t use Common magic, but I made a spell that can put semi-permanent scales on other people. Semi-permanent as in they act like they’ve always been there until the time limit runs out, at which point you’ll change back. Your scales will last for three hours.”

“Oh? Oh! Selfie time!” Sandi pulls out her phone. “Oh! I’m so cute! Thank you! Oh! I’ve got to show Tony!” The scales are cute on her.

Liz reaches up to feel her own face. “There aren’t any scales on me,” she states.

“Check where my hand was.”

Liz looks at her right hand to see the large diamond-shaped clump of brown scales on its back, then lifts her hand in front of her face, turning it a few times. “Very interesting. You said these last for three hours?”

“I can set the time however I like, but I thought you might like to show some people. So yes, three hours from when I cast the spell. If you remove a scale—which is painful to do, by the way—it ought to last for about a month, while your hand will still change back at the three-hour mark.”

She flexes her hand a few times, watching the light in the room bounce off the scales. “I might have to ask you to do this again. How long can you make it last?”

“Uh… if I really wanted to, I could get rid of the time limit and make it actually permanent. But without doing that, probably a few days to a month? Depending on the surface area the scales would cover. Scales aren’t all that comfortable over a longer period when they’re not covering your whole body, though, and I’m not sure how your body would treat scales over a long period of time. My general rule of thumb is ‘no more than 24 hours.’” The skin that’s not meant to be next to scales tends to wrinkle up next to them, and that aggravates the nearby nerves like an itch you can’t scratch.

“I won’t ask you to make it permanent, but thank you. I guess this meeting wasn’t so boring after all.” She says it like that, but she’s one of the best article writers in the group. I tend to just be a
The wands didn’t detract from the productivity of last week’s meeting. Actually, I think some girls were more engaged than ever. Our article isn’t on magic, but those who could use the wands wanted to show them to their families and friends, and we talked about how magic might affect society in the future. It was also a great way for me to gauge how I’m doing, and I think it’s going about as well as I could hope.

I think Diane’s quit dating random boys or something, because she’s been hanging out with me more frequently than her previous dating life would have the time for. Of course, if she’s planning to jump on Elliot the moment he stops dating Ashley, she has to be available… or maybe she’s tired of dating people who won’t take it seriously. I doubt people who know her number of previous boyfriends would think she wants a committed relationship— which is something she’s complained about on previous nights out. But I’ve gotten to spend a bunch of time with her (mostly just talking while walking wherever), so that’s one less complaint for me. And it wasn’t with just Rhoda every time. Today’s actually only the third time with both of them, despite it being the fourth night spent in Diane’s company this month. But since Rhoda’s here, I get to be Cassie again, and we’re getting ready in Rhoda’s place.

“Um, Rhoda, before you change Saphira… could you sit down, please?” Diane starts nervously. We both sit obediently. “I… I thought you might be able to help me process this. Um… I… agh, this is awkward. I learned this week who my… who my biological father is, and… Saphira, have you heard of Mr. Raven?”

Rhoda falls out of her chair. “Wh– Diane, are you serious? That old man is your father?”

I recall the comic where Raven made an illusion over Grace to make her seem to be his niece, and everyone commented that she looked like Susan. Since I already know he can’t be Susan’s father (since the guy was married for a significant period of time), this is a lot more believable. I guess that explains her casting ability. She’s already gotten spells for a pistol and a rifle, both with the same properties as the shotgun. She said she’s enjoying her time at the firing range.

“Saphira, do you know him? You don’t look all that surprised.”

“No, I know him. It just makes too much sense for me to be surprised. I mean, he sorta looks like you, and without disguising himself” (like when I spoke with him before my announcement) “he’s kind of attractive…” Rhoda looks at me in disgust. “He’s disguised when you see him at school, Rhoda. By birth, he’s half-immortal, and he quit aging at about twenty-five. He probably chose to teach history because he’s about 800 years old… which I’m only aware of because he doesn’t have the most pleasant history with dragons.” I turn to face Diane. “What I’m wondering is why he told you now.”

“He… he said he didn’t know. That I’m his daughter. That he could have a daughter. Was he lying?” She’s on the verge of tears, and I can sense a silent anger in her voice.

“More likely, someone lied to him, and only recently corrected it.” For some reason immortals like to tell their kids that they can’t have kids, but dragons are perfectly aware of that falsehood. And if he knows now, I guess his mother figured out he had a daughter. I’ll have to find her, when she next appears. I’m sure Diane would like a word. “And if he told you now… we’re coming up on Spring Break. I bet he wanted you to have some stress-free time to process this, without ruining your break. He’s lived for a while. I’m sure the timing was deliberate.”
And now Diane is actually crying, but she has a smile on her face. “Thank you.”

“I can do you one better.” I hug her, and Rhoda joins me.

“Alright, Rhoda, a challenge:” I whisper, “can you make me match Diane for tonight?”

“Huh?” she whispers back. Diane’s cleaning her face in Rhoda’s bathroom.

“I think she needs some support, so I’d like to be her doll, if I can.”

“Oh. I can try, I guess. Let me make the match first, then I’ll shrink you.”

“Go ahead.”

…

Diane walks back in the room, her face clean and dry. “I guess Saphira’s ready, since I don’t see her,” she comments.

“Not entirely,” I reply from Rhoda’s desk. “I still need to get on the right shoulder.”

Diane looks at me. “Wh– Why do you look like me?” Rhoda didn’t do a perfect job: I still sound like myself, and the skin color is off, but it’s very close.

“We thought you might need it more. Is it a problem?”

“No!” She shakes her head. “Thank you!” Diane plucks me off the desk and sets me on her left shoulder. “So are you still Cassie, or do you need a new name?”

“Call me whatever you like. Just let me know what it is so I can respond appropriately. It’s not like I’ll be talking.”

1 April 2014
6:43 AM CST

April Fools day. I don’t have plans to participate, but the internet ads from major companies (such as Google) are always good. I look forward to this every year since I found out.

Mymoir PM notification. I check, but… there’s nothing there.

“April Fools!” Susan exclaims when I open my eyes. We’re in the parking lot outside of school.

“Uh… wait, did you do that?” I ask.

“I noticed that flare a couple of times, so I mimicked it. What’s it tell you?”

“That another dragon wants to chat with me urgently. It’s not a big deal. And hey, you got me!”

“I wish I could do that,” Sarah complains.

“Sarah, you’re a Common caster with information magic,” I retort. “You have plenty you can do already.” Apparently, the promise Pandora talked about was awakening Sarah. She fulfilled that promise last month, said a temporary goodbye to Tedd, and did her reset. At least, that’s what she told Sarah. I haven’t seen her since that one time I spoke with her.

We walk inside the school. As predicted, it’s still really cold outside, but cold has less impact when
you can magically warm the air. “Hey, guys,” I greet Tedd and Elliot when they show up. “Any pranks yet?”

“I’m gonna get Elliot. I just haven’t done it yet,” Tedd replies mischievously.

“Not if I get you first!”

“Susan already got Saphira,” Sarah tells them.

“Woah, really?” Tedd says incredulously. “What with?”

“She mimicked my MyMoir private message notification. Since it’s just a burst of heat in a specific spot.”

“Oh. Not really something I could surprise you with. Hey, did you see the Google Cloud ad yet?”

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New idea for a new spell: a half-dragon-like form. Just as a sort of costume. Skin to Scales is great for protection, but if I want something that really captures the idea of the original spell, I’ll want wings and a tail. Tedd can do it with Common and Genetic magic, so I’m sure there’s a way to pull it from the dragon form… but I’m gonna need help if I want it done this year.

Saphira: Jorge, can you help me on a spell? I want to make a better ‘Halloweeny Disguise.’


Saphira: No. I mean, yeah, it’s great for that, but I do see the costume potential. I like costumes, but I’m not so great with costume materials. For a spell, though, I just want something that’s both more and less complete than your previous one at the same time.

Jorge: Alright, lay it on me.

I give him the details of what I want.

Jorge: Difficult, yes. I think I know why you came to me.

Saphira: Because you’re the one that originally figured out how to make partial transformation spells. And I thought you’d want in on it.

Jorge: You thought right.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is really a full chapter. I’m experimenting with shorter chapters, and I don’t want the next one to stretch too long (like Chapter 4).
I’d hate to be our pilots today. International trips are usually long, but Akiko managed to find an early one so that we could be well-rested by Monday. (We’re flying with the sun, but Japan is over the international date line. It’ll be Sunday afternoon when we arrive.) And it’s a 13-hour direct flight. Still better than the free transit version where we fly ourselves there over the course of a few days. Since we might not fly for the next week, we went and did that last night. Night flying is interesting, if only for the different look of everything. “Are you all ready for our trip?”

Everyone gives their affirmations. Elliot’s and my passports came in a while ago. Nanase gave us all some behavior training she got from her mom. Lucky [for the rest of us] that we don’t look Japanese: they won’t expect much of us. And even less when we speak English. But we know what to avoid and how to show politeness and respect now, and that we’re not supposed to say hello to everyone we pass. A week-long trip to Japan is something Kevin always wanted to try, especially since his parents used to live on Okinawa at the US military base. But now I get to actually do it, at the cost of spending a couple of days exhausting myself.

The TSA had a ton of fun with the dragon scales in our bags. (I brought four that are each the size of my hand. Elliot, Ellen and Susan each brought a few of their own as well, and Ellen brought her binder.) I’m sure customs will have even more fun. When asked for an explanation, we used what Jorge told us: it’s equipment for our business, and further explanation is ‘proprietary information.’ After all, this whole trip is for a ‘business transaction,’ so we may as well milk it for all it’s worth. Akiko gave us a different excuse for Japanese customs officials.

“I still can’t believe I get to visit Japan with my friends!” Ashley exclaims. She’s been excited this whole week. Elliot told me there was no point trying to get her to do anything other than help him to pack for the trip.

“Just remember to sleep during the flight,” Nanase reminds us. Another advantage of this being a business trip: better seats. Unfortunately, the tickets were booked too late for us to all sit together, but it’s all business class. Ashley with Elliot, me by myself, and the other three together. (We traded tickets with each other to get those groups.) Kevin’s been on enough Southwest flights for me to know how to sit with strangers. Friendly to start, and adjust by reactions. I just hope I get non-Japanese folks to sit beside, because thirteen hours of silence does not appeal to me.

This is actually the first time I’ve been on a plane since becoming a dragon. It’s pretty interesting knowing exactly how heat is moving in the engines, and if I heat the air ahead of the wings I can actually track the airflow a bit. The engineer inside me is ecstatic to be able to study exactly how these things work. Of course, I still need to sleep at some point, and first, I have to explain to my neighbor how a 19-year-old girl who hasn’t even finished high school can afford business class on a direct flight to Tokyo.

“I did not order a business-class ticket expecting to sit next to some brat,” the overly rude middle-aged man tells the flight attendant. Middle seat for me (what else do you expect?), but the man on the other side of me is a young (twenties, probably) and skinny Japanese man in a suit who has been completely silent the whole time I’ve been here (about 2 minutes).

“She paid for her ticket,” the flight attendant replies professionally. “If you would like to be seated somewhere else, we can attempt to find someone willing to swap seats with you.”
“Fine, I’ll handle it myself.” I don’t know what his deal is, but he is not having this.

…

Nope, no seats available for him. He tried—I could hear him offering cash at one point—but by then people figured that if he was that desperate to get out of it, there wasn’t anything he could offer to make them take it. Personally, I’m just curious what sort of business he has in Japan. Beyond asking that, I’m fine with letting him sit in silence the whole ride, even if he refuses to answer. It’s not like I can be very specific in return anyway.

Grumbling, he begrudgingly sits next to me. “You had better not keep me awake the whole flight,” he growls at me.

I shake my head. “I need my sleep, too. I’m starting a new project on Monday, and my coworkers say it’ll take all my energy—and if I can’t do it, there could be serious consequences for a lot of people.”

He squints at me. “What sort of company puts a kid in charge of something that important?”

“One that recognizes the unique talents of every person. I’m not exaggerating when I say that no one else could do my job.”

“I saw a bunch of other kids when I was up—they all with you?”

“Yes. Three of them will be working with me. The other two are just along for the ride.”

“What sort of project is this, anyway?”

“Well—do you know anything about the ongoing cleanup of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant?”

12 April 2014
10:01 AM CST

My neighbor squints at me again. “I knew they were sending in young people, but I wasn’t expecting people this young.”

I shake my head. “No. Not for the traditional cleanup. DragonCorps” (Akiko came up with the name) “does special projects for special circumstances. We don’t get much work, but when we do, it’s work that no one else can complete in quite the same way as we can.” Akiko was in charge of doing the ‘marketing’ for our ‘company’ this time around, as it’s the first time dragons have worked publicly in Japan in recent years. This isn’t the first time dragons have worked as a larger group, however, and each time it’s in a new area after a hundred years or so of inactivity, the local dragon gets to come up with the name, motto, etc. I wonder if that’ll be more unified once dragons are public knowledge again?

“Wait. DragonCorps? You work for them? For the job they said they’d pull, I was expecting workers with more experience.”

“You go to war with the army you have. How much do you know?”

“I’m heading over there to monitor and inspect your results for the IAEA. You’re supposed to pull out the reactor cores in all three plants in only a week. We need to be sure that they’re safely transported and that you perform to contract.”
“We’ll perform to contract, but I don’t think you’ll have any transportation to look after. But I can’t really say any more without asking a ‘supervisor.’” And when he meets them, he’ll be even more surprised. And possibly grumpy. Aging-wise, I’m the oldest of the lot, though I’m not far ahead of Sean and James.

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Rusty and I had a nice, long conversation before we both got some rest. He wondered how someone who knew so little about reactors could be working this job, and I responded that I don’t need to know how they work, but what I can do to help remove a problematic rock. But he was happy to answer my questions about how they do work, and the current situation with the reactors. And I think what I told him about my job for this week is about what he’d be told by Sean anyway. (Sean will be working as a translator for everyone involved, rather than doing the mass dragon job.) Basically, my job is to locate the area with the greatest concentration of heat and move the heat somewhere else.

Once we landed, Susan got to learn what it’s like to be in a truly crowded place. (Yes, we know about pickpockets and adequately protected our wallets.) I don’t think her aversion to being touched will work correctly here. We’ve got hotel rooms well outside Tokyo for both transportation and price reasons—there aren’t any trains to Fukushima at this time, and anything within the city costs about as much as you’d expect for Manhattan. Since Iwaki is closer to the power plant and outfitted for tourism (as it hosts a festival every August), we’ll be staying there. Meaning we’ve still got a brief train trip ahead of us. Thankfully, Sean sent another dragon to meet us at the airport, to help us out a bit. I think he said her name was Betty?

Elliot tugs on my shirt and points towards the end of the baggage claim. “I think we’ve found our guide.” I follow his finger to find a particularly out-of-place little Pacific Island girl with brown hair and purple eyes. She’s clearly in shape, but she doesn’t look much older than Nanase’s sister. Yet she holds herself with much more confidence than most children would in a place like this.


As we approach, the dragon smell coming from her gets a lot stronger, confirming our theory. I squat a little in front of her. “Are you Betty?” I ask.

“That’s me!” she enthusiastically answers with an obvious Australian accent. “Is everyone ready to go?”

I look back to see everyone nodding.

13 April 2014
2:08 PM JST (CST +14)

“I feel a bit ridiculous following you,” Ellen comments to Betty as we’re walking to the train station.

“I’ll have you know, I’m over 300 years old,” Betty pouts.

“Yeah, but you look like you’re ten.”

“You’ll get old and gray before me, so there.”

“Hey, Betty?” I change the subject. “You’re a barrier dragon, right? Which group will you be working with?”
“Yours. That’s you, Ellen, Susan, and Luntian. Ellen will start out helping me, then swap if anyone gets tired. Thanks to your Partial Armor spell, we can make wands for her for whatever needs doing.”

“Who’s Luntian?” Ashley asks.

“A Filipino chemical dragon. His name means ‘green,’” Elliot answers, and Ashley cracks up.

“What do you need a chemical dragon for?” Nanase asks. “I thought there’d be a barrier up the whole time?”

I answer her. “Yes, exactly. But the barrier isn’t selective to different chemicals by radioactivity, at least not when they’re part of solids like the floor. Plus, Betty will need to let the table and chairs inside it, so we’ll need any dangerous stuff cleared off before we sit down. And afterwards, we’ll need clean air.”

“Of course, we can’t be completely sure it’s safe,” Betty continues. “Which is why we’re bringing Geiger counters and such, and only dragons can come along. When we’re all done, Akiko will take us somewhere remote and we’ll fly together. You two can come along then,” she finishes, nodding at Nanase and Ashley.

“Oh, wow!” Ashley exclaims. “How many dragons will be there?”

“Counting Ellen and Susan here, thirteen,” Betty answers. “It’ll be a rainbow explosion,” she laughs.

“Notably missing the colors yellow and black,” I remark drily.

“Saphira, don’t be such a killjoy,” Betty replies, and Susan laughs at my expense.

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Hotel checked in, time to get to know the place we’re staying in. Betty’s still acting as a bit of a guide: apparently, she’s visited a few times (thanks to living so close) and even learned Japanese from Sean. It’s still kind of odd to talk with her, given her apparent age. And the hotel staff were very confused by the youngest-looking leading the group.

“It should be obvious that I don’t know anything about adults-only attractions, so I can’t help you there,” Betty is explaining, “but there’s plenty that’s appropriate for all ages around here, even not during the festival. Although if you want more city or rural stuff, you’ll have to take the train. That’s the main mode of transportation in this country.”

“How about where to get food?” Ellen asks. The plane food was alright, but still, plane food.

“I don’t know what sushi costs in the United States, but it’s very expensive here for the high-quality pieces. I’d discourage you from buying any of that until you can all eat together. There are still places you can have less-expensive pieces and rolls.” I guess she knew what came to a tourist’s mind on Japanese cuisine.

“Six dollars per roll, for the cheaper stuff,” I answer, and Nanase nods to confirm. “Expensive ones are closer to fifteen?”

“Oh. That’s more expensive. Anyway, you’re better off looking for ramen.”

“Can’t you get that for a quarter at the grocery?” Susan asks. “Why—”
“No, not that,” Nanase cuts her off. “Yes, *instant* ramen is bad, but the Japanese dish is ‘noodles and something.’ Pork, beef, vegetables, tofu, and so on, and it can be with or without broth. Saying ‘ramen’ is almost like saying ‘sandwich.’”


“I thought you liked Japanese food?”

“Only what Kevin’s parents got at restaurants and made themselves. They made *yakisoba* and lived near a port city, but there were no ramen restaurants nearby.”

“Yes, well, if you’re hungry now, we can find a ramen place, and I’ll teach you about groceries later,” Betty offers.

“That sounds great,” Ellen, Elliot, Ashley and I say in unison.

We all bought groceries (stuff you can eat without cooking it) and split into our rooms. To keep it cheap and try to make it *slightly* less awkward, we got two rooms: Elliot, Ashley and myself in one room, and the other three together. Susan and I didn’t really like *either* option open to us, so it came down to Ashley picking which of us to have in her room. (No matter what, it’s awkward city.) I hope the angel in Ashley will keep her interactions with Elliot *tame*.

“Kevin traveled a lot, but the largest time difference was to Hawaii. He never traveled half a *day* away. Never had jet lag.”

“You’re tired?” Ashley yawns.

“And frustrated for it.” I sigh. “Have you figured out what you’re doing tomorrow? Elliot gets most of the day off if he likes.” Team 1 (my group) will head in tomorrow morning, and after a short briefing, will proceed to sit in a meeting room in the reactor building while water drains out the bottom of the building and evaporates from the top. Susan, Ellen and I will keep the radioactive rock cool while this goes on. When the rock is nearly exposed, Team 2 (a barrier, two mass, a chemical and a force dragon, and Elliot) will go in and remove it from existence, and the chemical dragon (Hui) will do her best to get rid of poisons in the remaining water. When they’re done, which *should* be obvious (due to the lack of new heat), they’ll come fetch Team 1. My job will take much longer than Elliot’s, while his job is far more dangerous, thanks to his proximity to the radiation source.

“I figured we’d just explore here,” Elliot answers. I’m sure they’ll have a blast, though it might be *a smidge* awkward for Nanase. And in the meantime, I’ll get some more bonding time with Ellen, at least once we have spells written and running.

“You need rest anyway, don’t you?” Ashley asks.

“Yeah. I just wish I could do more tonight. I guess I’ll get to bed, then. If we get them all done the first time, we get three whole days to do other things together.”

14 April 2014
9:00 AM JST

Rested as I was, I woke to my alarm the first time, and was completely ready when Betty came to gather Team 1. We then took a cab to the edge of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant site, and walked the rest of the way for a punctual arrival.

Akiko came up with the brilliant idea of using scales with “I am a dragon” written on them in
Draconic as our ‘company badges.’ Elliot made a scale for Ellen for that purpose, since she can’t form them herself. It’d be rather difficult for a non-dragon to mimic the badge anyway, so it serves its purpose. But I had a hard time trying to stop laughing when I heard what the ‘badge’ would be.

You’d think we’d be unable to stand where we are (in a planning building set up a few hundred feet from the third reactor building) without any sort of gear, yet it’s apparently perfectly fine. This is where most workers suit up. For us, ‘suiting up’ just means Betty casts her barrier spell after we let the power company give us the gear they want us to have just to be sure we’re safe with what we have. Or in other words, they gave us some fancy electronic gadgets that can count how much radiation a person receives and report it on a little screen, and they clipped them to our shirts. Betty’s goal is to keep them reading 0.0 the whole time. We’re supposed to leave if the number gets too high (in the hundreds) or rises too fast. I’m pretty confident that Betty will meet her goal, if Luntian can get the table and chairs clean.

Luntian is, well… Filipino. He’s got dark skin and tightly-cropped jet black hair to go with the bright green eyes marking him as a chemical dragon. His build sort of matches Al’s—thickly built, short and stocky, etc.—except that he looks like he’s twelve and it’s clear that his musculature was built from his jobs in various kinds of construction. He has a beard of similar length to his hair that serves to make his face less childlike.

“Is everyone ready?” Betty asks the group. We all give our affirmations, and it’s off to Building 1. We’ve got one extra person: a guide who’s a company representative for the power company, who’s probably just here to make sure we don’t go somewhere we’re not supposed to be. He’s all suited up in the normal gear for this sort of work, since he’s outside Betty’s barrier, and I’m really glad we don’t have to wear that. He’s basically wearing a spacesuit, while we’re just carrying backpacks with a bunch of scales and our lunches inside. (I’m not willing to heat something today, so we packed cold lunches with ice packs.)

We trudge in silence to the first site. Right: not America. Small talk with strangers isn’t a thing here. A short distance from the building, I stop in my tracks as something white-hot enters my range, a long way underground.

“What is it, Saphira?” Ellen asks.

“That is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” I reply, my eyes wide in shock.

“Za?”

“H-how cool do I need to keep it?”

Betty turns around. “About the same as it is now. It just needs to not burn through the floor.”

“O-oh. Good.” I’m still a bit overwhelmed. Our guide looks at us curiously, but we ignore him.

When we arrive at the building housing the first reactor, our guide unlocks the door and takes us to a room with a meeting table and a dozen fancy chairs. Betty prompts a brief exchange (in Japanese) with the power plant employee. “What did he say?” Susan asks when they finish.

“This is a meeting room from when the power plant was operational. They’ve done their best to clean everything in here, but I think Luntian should still clean it up. We’re to stay here unless we need to go to the bathroom. They’ve got shielded cables for the security cameras here, so he’s going to leave soon.” Then Betty turns to Luntian and explains something in Japanese. It turns out he only knows Spanish and Japanese and a tiny bit of English. I expect his English will improve a little over the next few days, sitting in a room with four English-speakers for hours at a time.
A few minutes pass in silence before Luntian signals that he’s finished, and Betty lets us know we can sit down and drop our bags on the table. The power plant employee has another exchange with Betty. “They’ll be checking us and our stuff over afterwards to make sure we’re safe, but he’s leaving now and will return with the second team when they’re ready.” We all nod and a few minutes later he’s outside of my range.

“Now then,” I start, “I’d better get to work before the water gets too hot.” I delve into the situation for the building. There’s an upper, partially-shielded spot that we’re in that used to house plant workers. It used to have a lot better shielding, but some is blown inward by the hydrogen explosion that occurred after the tsunami. For the area that’s supposed to hold the reactor and its stuff, there’s a submerged and very hot section and a less-so-but-still-hot area above the water. This area is also covered with movable plastic and metal sheeting that they peel back to pour in water. Overall, I’ve got some space to move heat into within the building, but it won’t move out without additional effort. Which is where Susan comes in.

Mentally, it’s easier to make or unmake heat energy, but magically it’s more efficient to move it around. I’ve already discussed my initial plan with Susan: I move the heat to a large and cooler area, and she eliminates or further moves any heat in areas that become too hot. We’ll both make spells for this, which is why Susan brought a notebook. One of the full dragons here can turn Susan’s or my spells into wands, which Susan and Ellen can then use.

So without further ado, I move the first batch of energy from the core to a large area in the partially-shielded section of the building.

“Ah!” Susan exclaims. “Did all that come just from the core?”

“Yeah.” I guess the core is outside her range. “It’s making that much heat about every… minute? But I want to make this a constant heat transfer.”

“How long is this going to take?” Ellen asks.

Betty answers. “Al’s calculations said about seven hours per plant, so we’re only doing one per day.”

“…We can’t actually go to the bathroom during that time, can we?” Susan guesses.

“This isn’t the first time dragons had to work without a break,” Betty confirms. “Normally, we’d need a mass dragon, but with Ellen here…” She giggles.

“…There’s a spell to remove human waste directly from a person, isn’t there?” Susan asks, visibly disgusted.

“Yep. If you need it, here’s the wand for it,” Betty replies while pulling a marked scale from her bag and giving it to Ellen.

“Can you work on the heat situation, Susan?” I request. I’d been moving heat the whole time they were talking, and some of the space is getting kind of warm by comparison.

“Oh! Right.”

14 April 2014
12:14 PM JST

Three hours in, and Susan and I now have working spells for heat transfer and removal. Mine takes heat from the hottest parts of the underwater section and moves it above the water, in a spread-out
area that excludes solids, liquids, and the room we’re sitting in. Susan’s spell then seeks out the hottest areas above the water and reduces the temperature to about the same as it is outside without my influence. Any non-submerged areas that I’m affecting that are outside Susan’s range are outdoors. Ellen’s using her available magic to help Susan, but she’s not going through scales as quickly as the two of us, myself especially. Not that we’re in danger of running out. This is only a third of the scales available, but I think we’ll be alright, assuming the lack of water as the level drops won’t mean the rate of heat transfer has to increase. (It hasn’t dropped half of the distance yet, but Al says the evaporation rate will increase as the level drops.)

“It’s a shame we can’t have an all-girl group,” Ellen complains. “I mean, I could fix that.” She points her right hand at Luntian.

No real alarm since she knows he’d have to consent for that to do anything, but I reach over and close her hand. “Remember what I said about magic use here?”

“They wouldn’t know!” I wordlessly point at the security camera. “Oh. Right.”

“You know, we could ask Hui to switch with Luntian if you want that,” Betty supplies. “She wanted to work with her husband, but asking can’t hurt. Not that her English is much better than Luntian’s.” He hasn’t said much at all, either from nerves or because he doesn’t know what we’re saying. His heat signature doesn’t suggest that he’s nervous from being near a bunch of girls, but then again, he’s a lot older than all of us. I’m sure he’s seen his fair share of pretty girls over the centuries.

Ellen thinks for a moment. “What if I zap him before we come here?”

… “While that would work, it’s a moot point if he doesn’t want that,” I reply.

Betty nods and starts talking in Japanese with Luntian. I’ve already told the dragons what Ellen’s base spell is. Betty turns back. “He’s willing to give it a shot if it’ll only last a day and it won’t affect anyone else. He says it’d be interesting to see how it feels to be a girl for a day.”

“Can you be there when I do this tonight, then?” Ellen asks. “I don’t want to get up super early for that, but there’s a lot of customization I can do, like height, hair length, measurements… and I’d like him to know the options.” Unlike with Rhoda, who’d rather make a person look however she likes. (I’ve had some interesting forms and outfits, hanging out with her.) I’m guessing that he’s had some sort of mental training so he can handle the other effects of her magic, because I doubt he doesn’t know about them after what I did.

Betty chats with Luntian again. “Actually, he said he’d rather not put much thought into it. The default will be fine.”

“That’s probably for the best,” I assent.

“How do they not know that we’re using magic?” Susan questions aloud. We’re about five hours in and I’m starting to feel the strain from using this much magic. I’ll probably take a nap when we get back to our hotel. Having a spell means I can keep going without thinking about it, but it’s still sapping my energy as if I’ve been jogging for hours. Susan, Ellen and I are being careful to maintain a constant energy drain from the scales to avoid mental effects from bursts of energy. That’s how people get addicted to stuff.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “Akiko must be telling them something, but I don’t know what would work.”
“These people think that magic is just for show business, right?” Betty muses. “They must have some information magic users, but they might be treated differently. Maybe we’re being treated like that.”

“That could work,” Ellen says. Then she sighs heavily. “I’m bored. And tired. Mostly tired. When does Team 2 get here?”

“From Al and Lei’s calculations, we’ve got another half hour,” I answer. I’ve been doing my best to track the water level as it falls, and those two have been working to guess when Team 2 ought to get to work. They’ll be here 30 minutes to an hour early in case the water next to the hot rock boils off really quickly. “They’re probably arriving at the gate about now.”

14 April 2014
3:23 PM JST

If someone had told me I’d get tired sitting in a comfy chair for six hours, I don’t think I’d have believed them. Kevin was out of shape and spent 10+ hours making 3D models in one sitting for fun. I’m more winded than the first time I went flying, and I can tell by looking around that Ellen and Susan are feeling the same way. The conversation really dropped off as the day wore on. And we have two more days of this.

Suddenly, a large group of people enters my range. “Finally!” I exclaim.

“They’re here?” Ellen looks around, as if she could sense them.

“They’re not in the building yet, but they should be soon.”

About ten minutes later, our guide in the space suit escorts Team 2 into the meeting room. Team 2 is much more diverse than Team 1. Their mass dragons are Lei and… someone I don’t recognize; he looks Russian, maybe? Then they’ve got Hui, James, a force dragon I don’t recognize (she might be from India or somewhere around there) and Elliot. I probably should look up who the unnamed two are later.

As soon as Elliot rounds the corner, Ellen stands up, her chair stopping at the edge of Betty’s barrier. A second later, I hear a loud *smack* as Ellen hits the barrier face-first. Then her face gets hot. “I sort of forgot that the barrier was trapping me inside,” she explains.

James laughs, a deep, hearty laugh. “I am sure Akiko will be disappointed that she missed that.” His voice is deeper than what matches his appearance, but I can see why he’s such a good historian and counselor. He’s naturally calming to hear, and, well… he’s handsome, with his dark (Middle Eastern) skin and purple hair that matches his eyes, and a rugged build that I doubt has changed much since his shepherding days. It’s strange to think that he doesn’t look much older than me, yet he’s the oldest human on earth. (Technically, immortals may be older, but they’re not human.)

“Are you guys okay?” Elliot asks.

I’m too tired to speak. “We’re fine, but exhausted,” Susan answers for me.

Luntian checks his radioactivity monitor thingy—I think Betty said it was a ‘dosimeter’—and nudges Betty. “Oh. I guess something went wrong with our setup: it says 0.2,” she tells everyone, then repeats it in Japanese for the benefit of our guide. Based on what the power company expects for this building, I think 0.2 millirem in six hours is pretty good. It’s likely also harmless. I trust Betty’s shield did its job, so something probably slipped by Luntian. He had a lot to check.

Our guide responds to Betty and she has a short conversation with him. “He says he’ll escort us all
to their stuff that will check that we’re okay, then we’ll be good to go. He’s cleared to wait here until the job is finished.” And if that’s the case, then I suppose the water’s low enough for Team 2, who accordingly move towards the opening into the previously-flooded room.

Betty and Luntian converse with our guide while Team 2 drops below the floor of the people area. Not that there are no ladders there, but it’s just easier to have a force dragon float them down (by mostly nullifying gravity) instead of cleaning ladders or forming complex barriers to cover the ladders. Betty could’ve done a strangely-shaped barrier for the table, but she said the chairs wouldn’t be soft if she just stretched her barrier over them. And apparently there’s a spell to make a ‘floor’ barrier that has friction.

About a minute later, I notice the group approaching the ball of heat as it starts to shrink. Not thirty seconds later it’s gone completely and I dismiss Saphira’s Heat Removal. Not the best name ever, but I couldn’t think of anything shorter. Susan’s Heat Removal is a far better name for her spell. (The names demonstrate nicely why we credit the dragon who writes it.) And her spell is much more complicated than mine. She used at least a quarter of her notebook writing it. (Writing in Draconic is a lot faster than with a pen, so the notes are engraved in the pages.)

“They’re done with the primary job,” I announce. They’ll stay there a bit longer for Hui to try clearing out some radioactive stuff in the water, but the big job is over and done with, so Susan, Ellen and I can finally relax.

“I don’t care what plans Ashley and Nanase came up with,” Susan pants. “I’m taking a nap when we get back.”

“Agreed,” Ellen and I moan.

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The power company was happy with our performance, their scans of us said we weren’t carrying radioactive stuff, and we all got to nap for a while before heading out for some touristy stuff. Today’s exercise: the six of us get to check out gift shops and the like. Nanase gets to be the guide because she’s the only one of us who speaks Japanese, but we still get a bunch of stares from the locals. I wonder who among us stands out the most? I sure hope Elliot’s presence doesn’t make people think he has a harem or something.

It’s been a rather long while since Kevin traveled anywhere new, but this is far less structured than any vacation that Dad planned. Not that there’s any real problem with it; Susan, Ellen and I wouldn’t want any stress right now. There’s just a little pressure associated with ‘if I screw up, the building I’m in might explode.’ There’s more uranium in each plant than was in the bombs dropped at the end of WWII.

14 April 2014
9:00 PM JST

A nice, relaxing afternoon later, and Ellen’s all set to get Luntian ready for his day as a girl. She’s even got a bag with a day’s outfit (including underwear) set out for him. The three of us are gathered in her room, and Luntian and I are chatting through the Mymoir so that he knows what’s going on.

Saphira: I’m still surprised that you’re going for this.

Luntian: It’s only for a day. And I’m well aware that it’s a cosmetic change—nothing substantial. I’ve read some of Sean’s reports on how women are treated here, but it’s a lot more difficult to
disguise myself than him.

That it would be. When Sean travels, he likes to see how both men and women are treated. He has a slightly harder time pretending to be a girl than Tedd would without magic (although a dragon’s ability to alter our own appearance helps), but a muscular guy like Luntian wouldn’t blend in no matter what he wore or acted like.

Saphira: And the mental effects?

Luntian: I haven’t had to use it, really, but I do have the training.

Luntian and I open our eyes as he nods at Ellen. I guess he’s ready. Since he’s a guy, there’s little mystery to the future shape of his body, so the most interesting change will be to his face, given his beard and extremely short hair.

There’s a green blast of light, and now we have two people with very similar builds. I have to say, the spell did its best. His face is feminine, and no one looking at him would guess he’s a guy… but his hair was so short to begin with that it doesn’t even match Catalina’s hair for length. And the style isn’t all that good for straight hair. He heads to the bathroom.

“Me parezco a mi hermana!” we hear echo as soon as he rounds the corner to look at the mirror. I think I know some of what he said?

“¿Za?” Ellen asks.

“Something about his sister, I think.” I walk towards him, but back up when I notice his tears.

Saphira: How is it? Ellen can just change you back, if you want.

Luntian: No, I’m fine. I just… I haven’t seen my family in so long, and now I look just like my sister did when she was sixteen…

I suppose Tedd didn’t account for younger targets when he made the spell. Luntian normally looks like a bearded, muscular twelve-year-old, but he’s right: he definitely looks older than twelve right now.

Saphira: I didn’t consider that angle. My family is in another world, but in this world, I’m closest with Susan, and now she’s a half-dragon anyway…. Are you going to be okay? I- I don’t know what to say.

Luntian: Just give me some time. I would like an escort back to my room, just in case. But I’ll be ready by the morning.

Saphira: Of course. And, if you want… Ellen brought her cosmetics?

She told me about the offer earlier.

Luntian: You think they had that when I was growing up? No thanks.

But when I open my eyes, I see a smile on his face.

…

Luntian back in his room, time to chat with Ellen.

“What was all that about?” she asks when I walk into her room. Susan and Nanase are back in here
as well, getting ready for bed.

“Most dragons… well, most outlive their families. By a lot. Luntian probably keeps up with his siblings’ descendants, but what he said was that he looks like his own sister, who he hasn’t seen in a very long time.”

“Oh. So…”

“That’s so sad!” Nanase exclaims. “Is he alright?”

“Yes… or, at least, he said he’d be good by morning. And he’s not sad, he said. Losing her hit him hard, but time eases all wounds, and he was happy to at least see her likeness again after all these years. Personally, I’m wondering how much time he’ll spend staring at the mirror tonight.”

“Wait, he decided to stay transformed?” Susan asks.

“Yeah. He said he’s still doing this. He just needs some time to himself.”

“Oh. Then, um…”

Nanase chimes in. “Then why are you calling her ‘him’?”

“Uh… you haven’t noticed yet? I’m… rather confused on who people are talking about if they shift the pronoun with the form, so I just call people according to their original base form. So Tedd is always ‘he,’ Grace is ‘she,’ and so on. It’s less confusing, for me at least. And based on how Kevin felt about himself… well, I think it’s healthier for a person’s mental state, to call them by what they normally are over what they want to be.”

Everyone stares at me like I just spoke another language. One that no one else here speaks, anyway.

Nanase is the first to say something. “Explain.” Her voice is rather hostile. I hesitate a moment… then sigh and give them a less-wordy (to my memory, at least) version of what I told Magus about Kevin just under three months ago. (With fewer tears, of course.)

14 April 2014
9:18 PM JST

“So let me get this straight:” Nanase says, “Kevin is transgender, but you think it’s fine to be intolerant of other trans people because of that?”

“Were you listening? I’m not intolerant. I’m doing my best to help. Kevin was kept sane because he was reminded that reality wouldn’t let him act on how he felt. If it did… I don’t want to think about where he’d be, but somehow I think I know.” He came up with more than enough ‘what if’ stories. “And if he’s had the same revelation I did, I doubt it’s even still a problem for him. And… well, I’m grateful for the end of those sorts of thoughts. If I could help in any way, I’d love to help people with that sort of thing. So I’m doing what I think most helped Kevin.”

“So what was that about confusion earlier?” Ellen asks.

“That still applies, but… even if I’m more confident now, it’s still awkward to share that story. I like to avoid it if I can.” Susan is still just staring at me. “What?” I ask her.

“Nothing, I just… I’ve lived with you for three months, and I’d never guessed… I thought no Christians had ever been trans? They sure act that way in public, anyway.”
“It’s both a less- and more-common problem than you’d think. Christians come from all walks of life. Logically, any sort of against-the-Bible attitude anyone could ever have has been had by Christians. Kevin… well, I’ve already explained. Paul, in the Bible, was a religious zealot who at the very least approved of the murder of Christians right in front of him, yet he became one of the greatest missionaries. I’m sure rapists and mass murderers and all other sorts have become Christians over the years. But part of being a Christian is learning to quit your sinful life. Kevin still had more to learn, last I know. While Romans has a list of condemned actions, I’m sure there’s a Christian who’s learned to abandon each one of them, and done their best to help others with the same struggles. So if a Christian sounds intolerant, well… I can’t claim they all aren’t. But if you ask, maybe they’re just doing their best to help, and it might not be the best way to help who they’re talking about or to.”

Annnd I talked too long again, didn’t I. I need to work on my explanations. Brevity compared to Susan shouldn’t be a goal.

“Oh, and, uh, one last thing. I… while I know what term best describes Kevin… I still cringe at the term. So… please don’t call it that, at least around me? Thanks.”

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That probably could’ve gone better last night, but I think I got my ideas across. I can almost guarantee that if I hadn’t explained, Susan and Ellen wouldn’t be speaking with me. One or both would be glaring. Instead, Susan is actively avoiding the subject and Ellen seems friendlier than ever.

On another note, Luntian is enjoying his time as a girl, to all appearances anyway. He looks so different that I don’t think the power company realizes he’s the same person, but I don’t think they care so long as the job gets done. But he’s been smiling all morning, and not the sad smile he had last night. And he’s one of those people that knows a language and doesn’t usually let on, so he’ll be able to tell if they’re rude or whatever. (Kevin took Spanish in high school, but I don’t understand any Japanese. I think I can tell the difference between the languages.)

Now set up in the building housing plant number two, we get to have our seven-hour chat after activating our respective spells.

“Okay, what happened last night?” Betty asks. “I can tell things are different between you three, but I don’t think it’s just from Luntian’s form change or our conversation all of yesterday.”

Really? What was her occu– oh, right. She’s the apprentice of the therapist dragon. I guess her training shows, anyway.

Susan looks away while Ellen stares at me. “Uh… I… shared something personal with them. If you don’t mind?”

Betty leans back. “No, that’s fine. You don’t have to tell me. But that you’re getting along with each other is always great to hear. You are, aren’t you?”

“Of course!” Ellen confirms energetically.

“Yeah, we are,” Susan also confirms. “I just– I feel like I don’t know Saphira as well as I thought.”

“Hey, look: I brought it up the first time it was relevant!” I soothe her. “And I don’t think I have any more bombshells like that one. Sure, you didn’t know me growing up, but most of that is pretty easy to guess, I think. I had a whole and supportive family, I grew up in the church, I went to
“I notice that you’re using ‘I’ and not ‘Kevin,’” Susan interrupts.

“Well, I mean… you know as well as I do that they’re not really my memories, but they’re all I have. And it’s not like they have no impact on who I am.”

“No, I get that. It’s just…” Susan smiles at me. “You sound like you have an identity of your own? Not one based on someone else. It sounds much better.”

“Before you go saying that, I want to clarify:” I deadpan, “my identity is based in who God says I am. And as a Christian, I am one of his daughters. I’m certainly not Kevin. But I’m not doing anything on my own, either.”

“I think you proved that last month,” Betty comments.

15 April 2014
10:24 PM JST

It’s amazing, the conversations you have when you’re stuck in a room with a few others and no cell phones allowed. (Even if we had signal, it’s apparently against Japanese law to bring one here.) And we just now got around to Luntian and his odd day today. To facilitate communication, he’s writing in Draconic on a notepad (because we all can read that), and Betty repeats stuff to him through the Mymoir.

“So, how do you feel today?” Susan asks.

A moment’s delay, and he moves his hand off the paper. The table isn’t white—it’s a polished wooden table—so he just etches through the paper and we can read it easily. “Saphira didn’t exaggerate the effect of the mental changes. But the main difference in myself is that I’m taller and less nervous. I wish I’d learned English so I could speak with you all.” For some reason, I think my inner accent is changing how I read his ideas.

My turn. “How does your experience match Sean’s notes?”

Luntian: “The plant workers this morning didn’t seem to care that a ‘different person’ is doing my job today, but they were fairly rude. They said that if not for our performance yesterday, they wouldn’t trust a group of ‘little girls’ to get the job done. Or something like that. I should work on my Japanese.”

Susan turns to face me. “Actually, I’ve been wondering: you said that about two-thirds of Common magic users are girls, right? Does that apply to other types of magic as well?”

I can see how she’d think that, but I think we just have an overly-female friend group. I shake my head. “No. Dragons are about fifty-fifty, and the other types don’t have much to do with that. Obviously, all Genetic users are at least part space alien, and then you have Divine casters that are determined by their state of mind. So while most of the violent magic goes to men, that’s just because of the difference between men and women. There’s plenty of terrible or wonderful stuff that both can do.”

“Like what?” Ellen asks.

“The most-famous Holy caster was a guy who hunted demons. It… should be kind of obvious that he had the same Smite spell I used last month. But he also had a ton of healing magic that he used on both himself and the former victims of the demons he smote. He was probably more famous for
his healing than his hunting.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Eh…” I scrunch up my face. “Yes, but… most Holy casters—and most magic users in general, really—aren’t famous much past their time. So while this guy was well-known at the time, today, his brother is much more famous for his literature than this guy ever was for his magic. But his name was Ronald, and he was the brother of Thomas Aquinas. No, I’d never heard of either of them before reading about him.” I think Ronald never would have been nearly as famous if not for two things: one, Thomas converting him to Christianity, and two, the timing of his birth. Since he just so happened to grow up in the time immediately following Fred’s betrayal and demise, demand for those who could replace the heroic efforts of dragons was… rather high. So while dragons had previously taken care of violent demon-possessed folks (alongside many other hazards), in their absence a multitude of demon-hunters and monster-hunters sprang up. And died in droves. They kept the evil at bay, but at a much greater cost than when dragons had helped. (There have always been monster hunters, but for millennia it was the dragons that took care of the more lethal threats.) Ronald was one of the lucky few who died of old age.

Ellen hesitates. “Should we tell Ashley about this?”

“Uh… I mean, it’s up to you? I haven’t told her simply because she hasn’t asked. Holy casters aren’t like dragons. They don’t have any sort of collective memory or whatever you want to call the Mymoir. She’s writing her own chapter in the history of Holy casters, and whether she needs to learn history or not is a controversial topic. James would say yes, but he’s known as the Historian. Other dragons would say no, because it might be a bit discouraging.”

“Discouraging how?” Susan asks.

“Dragons and Holy casters are targeted by demons for about the same reason vampires target you. They’re usually a little less lethal about it, though.” Susan’s eyes widen, and I preemptively answer her question. “What attacked me last month was a cornered demon. It’s more common that they just try to discredit us or whatnot. I’m pretty sure they’re largely responsible for Fred’s betrayal having such drastic consequences.”

“I think we still would have lost a lot of goodwill,” Betty butts in. “Without their influence, it might have been that we simply had to regain people’s trust instead of hiding. But I wouldn’t underestimate the influence of a single dragon in such a small group.”

“How small?” Ellen asks. I haven’t told her because she can’t read it, so I’m unsure if I should. Betty looks like she’s debating it, too.

Luntian moves his hand off of another sheet of paper. “I don’t know if we should tell you the exact number, but the dragons here for this project are over a quarter of the total.”

15 April 2014
6:00 PM JST

Aaand that’s my alarm. You’d think sitting next to a source of Draconic magic all day would be invigorating, not draining. A lot of the scales we have are Akiko’s, since, well… Fukushima isn’t the only fairly recent nuclear event in Japan. But I don’t plan on farming empowered scales by visiting Nagasaki.

We’ve decided not to travel too far before everything is done and we can go flying. On that day, we’ll be traveling an awful long way out of town. The consensus is that a nearly full rainbow of
dragons meets the ‘entertainment’ factor for magic in Japan, and besides, Akiko said she’s ready to handle Japan if need be. Apparently, the US government’s ability to control information about magic is rapidly corroding—far more rapidly than Sean expected. Maybe my handling of the event last month had something to do with it? But while magic is still mostly known by rumor, video of magic being used to help rebuild schools is surfacing online. (Elliot says a lot of the comments ask what film studio is doing this.) I guess this isn’t known as the Information Age for nothing.

I wonder if, when this is all sorted, someone might make a documentary of it?

Day 2 tourism is seeing the sights just outside of town. As discussed with the others, day 3 will be exhausting the stuff around here, alongside some more rest, before day 4 (flying & nature) and day 5 (the city). Obviously, the cheapest and most-open tickets home were on Easter Sunday, so day 6, instead of tourism, will be a very international early Easter celebration. Spending Easter with someone who met Jesus while he was on Earth (James) and someone else who shares their body with an angel… well, I doubt Kevin would have ever expected something like that. And I’m thrilled at the prospect.

“Saphira?” Nanase knocks on my door. Elliot uses so little magic for his job that he’s been making more scales for my team when he goes in. We definitely don’t want him being forced to shift here. But I’m the only one in my room that needs to rest after getting back.

I walk over and open the door. “I’m ready. The rest are already outside?”

“Yeah. Um, before we go… about yesterday? I – I didn’t mean to, um, to be so accusatory.”

I think this is the first time I’ve heard her stumble over her words. “I didn’t expect—”

“Nanase,” I interrupt, “I don’t expect anyone to think I’ve had anything like a troubled past. I’m not one to dwell on that sort of thing. Kevin’s life was far from sunshine and rainbows, but I don’t let it affect me beyond personal growth.” Not to say it was overly traumatic. But even though I can’t personally relate to problems like Susan has had, I hope that, someday, she’ll treat it much the same as I treat my past. “Much like anything else, I try my best to only share relevant information about Kevin, but I’ll talk about it if I feel comfortable. So don’t worry about yesterday. Just… know that I’m doing my best to help others. Even if it might sound mean. A harsh correction by a friend is always preferred over a correction by anyone else, and I don’t think that treating stuff like Kevin’s experience as ‘good’ will help anyone. Mental self-torture is something I think most people would rather avoid or escape.”

Nanase hugs herself around her waist. “Is that the same way you feel about things like me dating Ellen?” I had a feeling this would come up. Honestly, this is later than I expected.

“Ah… sort of? I don’t think dating is the right term, in my mind. I just think of you hanging out with your best friend, the same way Kevin hung out with his best friend. For them, that involved video games, books, board games, and a bunch of activities with other people around: camping, sports, laser tag…” Time spent with him forms many of Kevin’s fondest memories. “I know you and Ellen go a bit beyond just hanging out, but that’s basically how my mind processes it. The Bible expressly forbids homosexuality because that’s not the way God designed humans. But I can’t say no to a strong bond of friendship.” I’m still working on that, myself. Kevin and his friend bonded in a completely different way to how girls bond.

“So you have some experience with some stuff—”

“That I wish I didn’t understand, and will do my best to help others out of,” I interrupt.

“—but for other things, you refuse to understand?”
“I wish I could help you, but I don’t get it, nor do I want to. There are things I’d be happier not knowing, and Kevin’s struggle is one of them. But I won’t fail to use that experience where it will help others.”

“I can work with that. You’re not going to ditch us over anything like that, are you?”

“Nanase. Please. I knew about all that going in. And it’s not like I can expect people to not have any struggles. Every dragon does, even James… though his might be fewer and farther between thanks to the sheer number of problems he’s already dealt with. Old current age doesn’t mean they were any better a person at your age.”

17 April 2014
8:00 AM JST

Day 3, same as previous days. (Luntian went back to his normal shape.) Thankfully the fourth plant didn’t have as many problems as the first three, so the core there has already been removed. Akiko and Sean have some more meetings this afternoon, but right now we’re on a train to the flying location alongside all the other dragons. It’s interesting, seeing so many dragons in one spot for something as casual as flying, especially when I know a few of them through the Mymoir. (This is probably what a convention feels like when you meet online friends in person.) Akiko had the time of her life chatting (by written Draconic) with all the dragons that speak English while Elliot introduced them.

The locals have given us all a wide berth, likely due to the wide range of nationalities on display here. Out of our group, the people who stand out the most are Nanase and Akiko for looking the most Japanese—I mean, they are. And the two are having a quiet chat. I wonder if that’s of Nanase’s own accord or if her sister put her up to it. Either way, those two are still given a wide berth, since Akiko is a very minor celebrity for her roles in live-action films and the occasional live show. (Needless to say, she doesn’t use her really fancy magic in live shows.)

“I have heard of your latest exploits, Saphira,” Sean whispers to me. “They are talking about you even in Canada. Perhaps it is best that you volunteered to end the secrecy.”

“Don’t you live somewhere in Ontario?” It’s the closest province to Illinois. “That’s not terribly far, right?”

Sean squints at me. “Perhaps you should study geography.” I guess I was a bit off in my estimation. “Those near my current residence spoke of your flights, and more recently, of your apparent demise. Opinions on you are rather mixed, but entirely based on passive observations. Some even believe that you are dead and it is a second blue dragon flying in your place.” And I bet they think Susan is my kid. I’m specific when I can be for a reason.

“If I had to keep it a secret, I’d certainly try a little harder for that result. But magic made the news in Moperville before I awakened. And again before I ever shifted. The fact that the current news shows that things are reasonably under control is pretty good. Or if not under control, there’s still an authority of sorts to talk with. I’m fairly sure that the government would all but condemn the city if they were able.” Freedom of the press means they can’t keep Channel 4 away, but they can offer incentives to not report on Moperville.

“I was not criticizing your methods, but simply stating your effect. Anyway, I should thank you for your help this week. Lei and Dayan were especially grateful for the afforded proximity to their targets.”

“You’re welcome. And from this, I know what it feels like to be magically exhausted apart from
anything physical.” Not too different from what I get training with Sensei, except that nothing feels sore. I get tired without sleep deprivation or exercise.

I watch the scenery pass by outside the window. Kevin’s only train rides were subways and metros. While the Washington, D. C. ones sometimes leave the underground, they’re still not as pretty as this. A few minutes later, Akiko signals that we’ve arrived at our destination: a small farming village near some mountains. Nanase and Ashley still aren’t allowed to use magic, but they’ve been given the okay to ‘mount up’ on myself and Elliot respectively once everyone has shifted.

17 April 2014
8:34 AM JST

I’ve heard that Japan prides itself on the punctuality of its trains, but telling us to the nearest second when we’ll arrive is a bit much. They were three seconds off, and according to Nanase, apologized for it. I don’t think anyone living in or visiting this place cares very much about that. In a big city, sure, but not out here. I can probably sense the whole place while in dragon form and not even in the center of town.

A brief hike uphill leads us to a large clearing that isn’t being farmed, likely due to the extreme slope. Sure, it’s grassy, but it’s also about 30° from horizontal. Reminds me of the hike to Lookout Valley that Kevin did at Philmont. Everyone spreads out before Akiko kicks off the shifts to dragon form. Within a minute the grassy hillside is ablaze with color in all sorts of shapes.

It’s a pretty stark difference in form between everyone—especially between the US dragons and the East Asian dragons. East Asia = serpentine, with tiny little limbs, and in Akiko’s case, no wings whatsoever. Her brilliant white form has something of a mane (like a horse’s), also white of course, starting at her head and traveling all the way to her midsection. Meanwhile, Lei and Hui each have four tiny wings, while James and Rashma (the force dragon from Nepal) have larger and very skinny, razor-like wings that exceed my own wingspan, although with less area. And then we have Dayan. I don’t know what’s up with Siberian myths, but he is starkly different to anyone else here—so different that I’m not sure my Partial Armor spells would work for him. While Elliot and myself are intimidating and Akiko is majestic, the best way to describe Dayan’s form is ‘cute,’ to a much greater extent than any other dragon. He’s covered in an orange mix of scales and fur, with large feathered wings. (By mix, I mean that he has scales on his face and feet, and fur everywhere else.) He’s like a mix of dragon, bird, and long-haired wolf, with short, pointed horns angled back from the top of his head and scaly spikes along the ridge of his fur-covered back and tail. It’s the sort of thing I have to see to believe.

“Can I take pictures?” Ashley asks, her phone already out.

**Of course,** James answers her.

**Don’t drop it in the air,** I warn her, **or you’re not getting it back. I’m pretty sure Elliot is the only one here who can reliably track that thing.** Electric dragons are probably the best for tracking a phone after it hits the ground.

“I’ve got it, don’t worry.” I notice she has a wrist strap plugged into the charging port. That’s probably the most-secure spot for it.

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We all had to spread out so we wouldn’t knock each other out of the air. Akiko flies like a snake through water, twisting and coiling through the air. Nanase is having a blast. Not as much as
Ashley, but this is the first time in a long time that dragons have been able to do this, and she’s been asking me a lot about all the dragons here.

**Now, I’ve got one I want to speak with myself,** I tell her, as I fly towards Dayan.

**You cannot tear your eyes away, can you?** he asks as I approach.

**You speak English?**

Dayan grants me a mental laugh. **I need some language in common with the others here, do I not? And as a teacher, I am expected to know what my students are learning, so that I can help them in all of their subjects.**

Uh… oh, okay. He’s taught a bunch of things at all levels over the millennia of his life. He’s not teaching foreign languages right now, but he knows a few. **What are you teaching now?**

**Economic history for ‘high school’ students. I think it’s important for youth today to have an accurate account of the past in order to avoid those mistakes.**

**It doesn’t bother them that you look the same age as they are? Or younger: he looks 16.**

**I believe that they assume I am a substitute for a traveling instructor. But they cannot refute my mastery of the topic.** He pauses. **Is there another reason you wished to speak with me?**

**I’m pretty sure every dragon has asked you at some point…**

Another mental laugh, and something of a smile on his face. **You beat out Elliot and Miguel. Legends are formed by our history and our surroundings. Aside from Sean, no dragon had ever visited my homeland, and reptiles are scarce in that place. I suppose that I myself have helped to shape the legends since that time. Today, dragons are believed to be benevolent creatures similar to my own appearance, while those of your appearance are the opposite of dragons.**

**So you’re the one dragon that never had to hide, but it does a fat lot of good for the rest of us?**

**Essentially. And I never really understood that phrase.**

**It’s no worse than how ‘I could care less’ is used.**

17 April 2014
12:00 PM JST

Since they could, the other dragons took some time evaluating my, and the other three’s, flight skills. We’ve all gotten better recently from Magus sparring with us, though Susan didn’t take it very seriously until I told her that some vampires can fly. It’s unreasonable to think that she’ll never face another one, but she’s basically invincible against them in her dragon form, between the scaly armor, magic immunity, and the fact that she can actually fight back. But she’s learned some evasive maneuvers and offensive skills. And Ellen was thrilled at the thought of fighting something in the air when not in a Guardian Angel form.

Back to their evaluation: we’re pretty good for beginners with no formal instruction. We got some of that today. Just like running, there are subtle differences in style that can make big differences in performance regarding speed and endurance. My glides lose more height now, but my average speed has increased, including the flapping sections. James said Jorge would likely be a better coach, thanks to his similar morphology.
After we all landed, Ashley had us line up for a group photo. Thirteen youthful folks of all walks of life from several different countries, lined up with the oldest in the middle, Elliot and Ellen on the left end, and myself and Susan on the right. Ashley sent the photo to Sean, who then got it to everyone else. A nice ‘family’ photo for my room when we get home.

“How do you feel, Saphira?” Susan asks me while we’re on our way to lunch.

“I don’t know. It’s almost… surreal. I hadn’t heard of most of these folks until that decision regarding flight near Moperville, and even then… Kevin went a lot of places, but aside from a week-long trip to Hawaii he never crossed an ocean. Being in Japan is strange enough, being paid for it more so, and seeing all these dragons is like I’m not here, but having a coma dream after the start of March.”

“Yeah, that’s about how I feel, too.”

“I only know it’s real because of Dayan. I don’t think my wildest dreams could’ve invented a dragon like him.” Susan just laughs.

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I don’t think anyone can appreciate the outdoors quite the way a dragon, or group of dragons, can. We all decided to go for a short hike thanks to our relatively small group size and good fitness. (Susan and I are the weakest in the group. I only beat her out thanks to my month-and-a-half head start. I think her skin has darkened a shade since she started exercising outside.) And it takes a lot for us to hold back from noticing every animal or natural process we can sense.

I knew that light magic illusions would be hard, but I never thought about replicating reality. Akiko has a spell for live holograms of stuff elsewhere in her range, and it works so well that it’s almost as if the subject was actually relocated, visually. So despite wildlife staying off the trail, we’ve gotten to see the images of a lot of different animals.

“Oh, wow!” Ashley exclaims when the image of a brownish-green snake slithers onto the trail. Akiko is really practiced at this. Sometimes there are strangely dark spots in the image when the animal travels under a leaf or something, but otherwise it’s as if the thing is actually present, to my sight anyway. “What’s this one called?”

“That’s a hibakari,” Nanase answers. Her mother decided to teach her all about stuff she might see here. Very thorough, that woman. “The name refers to the potent venom that people thought it had, but it’s actually harmless. And if there’s one near here, that means we’re near water, since the snake eats aquatic species.”

Akiko: Yep! We’re nearly there!

The dragons are all using the Mymoir chat room, since that way we don’t have to repeat everything in three or four languages. I’m getting used to using the thing while doing other stuff. At least I’ve stopped stumbling when hiking while reading short sections.

About seven more minutes of hiking, and we arrive at the destination that slowly creeped into all of our senses: a small waterfall and its basin. Akiko said it’s a great swimming hole for a small group, especially since not many people come to this one, as out-of-the-way as it is. (Just as there are plenty of mountains in Japan, there are also plenty of waterfalls.) It’s not a particularly impressive waterfall, but it’s still great for a bit of fun for our group.

Akiko shouts something in Japanese as her skin is covered over by white scales, then jumps in the
waterfall basin with a shriek of delight. Nanase responds to her, and her hiking outfit is replaced with a one-piece swimsuit before she, too, jumps in. A few moments later, only Ashley, Susan and myself are still standing on the rocky edge of the pool.

“Come on in!” Ellen shouts at us. She didn’t even bother changing and jumped in after taking off her shoes and socks. I guess she’ll shift when she gets out.

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit!” Ashley replies.

“Oh, if that’s all, I can give you the same sort of treatment Akiko got,” I tell her. “Is that fine with you?” She used Partial Skin to Scales, but it’s not like Ashley can’t take off her clothes after Targeted Armor. I’ll just quickly make a pair of spells (do and undo) for a version with an indefinite duration, and… done. It’d take a lot longer to test converting it to a Targeted Skin to Scales.

“Uh…” Ashley hesitates.

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit!” Ashley replies.

“Susan, are you fine with me testing a new spell on you real quick?” It’s not like I didn’t test the first version on her.

“Go ahead.”

I touch her shoulder lightly. “Saphira’s Long Targeted Armor.” Susan’s skin looks like she just used Partial Armor with the default area.

“What’s special about this one?”

“There’s no timer or undo section. It’s effectively permanent. That’s why I made the other spell. Saphira’s Armor Removal.” Susan’s skin reverts to normal. I eliminated the ability to set a custom area for these two spells, as I don’t yet have a way to detect the active area for the removal.

“I think it worked right.” Susan pats a few places that are harder for the spell to make the conversion. You’d think it’d be harder to do this, but I’m not kidding when I say Jorge laid a fantastic foundation for these sorts of spells. “Yeah, it’s good.”

“Won’t my clothes still get wet?” Ashley asks hesitantly.

“‘It’s not nudity if no naughty bits are showing.’” I giggle at the reference only I would get. “You can take them off. That’s why I made this spell pair—there’s no timer. Seriously, though, you’ll be showing just as much skin as Akiko is right now.”

“And only everyone here could remove it.” She’s being uncharacteristically cautious.

“The only one you need to worry about is Akiko, and I think James’s presence is enough to deter her.” And everyone else. Prankster is all well and good, but that’s the sort of thing she’d only do in private, or possibly between her, Ashley and Elliot, although Japanese standards are higher that the US’s in this case.

“Okay. Do it!” I put my hand on her shoulder.

“Saphira’s Long Targeted Armor!” Ashley’s skin sprouts glittering bronze scales as she looks at herself in fascination. “Honestly, I’m a bit surprised I haven’t used any variation on that spell on you yet. Has Elliot?”

“Done what?”
“Used Targeted Armor on you before now.”

“No. But I’m definitely asking for something like it later.” Ashley takes off her clothes and hangs them on a nearby tree—while the boys look away, though as I had pointed out, she’s showing less skin than Nanase—and jumps in.

“Well?” I motion to Susan, who then shifts to her dragon form and walks in. Not what I expected, but oh well. I do the same as most of the other dragons, using Partial Skin to Scales before wading in.

18 April 2014
8:34 AM JST

A day outdoors followed by a day in the city. I think we did it in that order so that we could all get used to each other before trying to explore the megalopolis known as Tokyo, because not even Akiko can sufficiently keep track of us all in this place. But from Kevin’s one trip to New York City, the only major difference between the cities that I can immediately pick out is the lack in variety among the locals. Tourists are embarrassingly easy to pick out, and our group sticks out like a sore thumb. As she pointed out, not even Akiko will be allowed into some places with a group like ours in tow. (There are a small number of locals-only shops in Japan, mostly in cities.)

Susan told me that Akiko picked out a special place for dinner, but it was to be kept secret. Although she knew what it was because Akiko needed her approval first? Knowing the two as I do, it just makes me more confused than if Akiko had just told me that herself. A prankster and… Susan?

I can’t say I’m a city girl. I don’t quite have Susan’s touch aversion, but while I can acclimate to a crowded place, it happens slower for myself than others, or at least most of the people I’m here with. So while I was able to rush through this place earlier when we were headed quickly out of town… I spent the first twenty minutes or so today on a bench with my head between my legs. I only sat up when Ellen sat down on my left.

“Are you ready to go now?” she whispers when I sit up. Or says just loud enough to be heard, anyway. It’s kind of loud, even in this spot. There’s no impatience in her voice, just concern.

“Yeah, I guess,” I answer her hesitantly. “Sorry. I guess I’m just a bit overwhelmed. I should be good for a while. Kevin’s visited cities, but I don’t remember him ever having this much trouble with a crowd.”

“You’ve done such a good job with public speaking, I don’t think it occurred to anyone that you might have trouble with crowds,” Susan comments, crouching near the bench to my right.

“I can talk with a small audience. Or a great big one, I guess, so long as I know what I’m talking about. It’s different. When I’m talking about stuff I know, I can get lost in the topic, but in a crowd like this…” I shrug, then bow my head and shake it. “I should be okay for the day, but while a large group of people I know is fine, I’ll need time for crowds like this one.”

“Oh,” Susan says. “Oh, then… do you still—”

“Yes. I still want to go to the convention,” I interrupt her. She asked all the way back in January, actually, since she knew that Kevin liked comics and she and Sarah were preregistering. Kevin’s been to massive game conventions and even participated in the largest event at said conventions: the Pokémon TCG national championships. 1600 people in one room is quite the crowd, but it was still more spread-out than the folks in Tokyo. I think Japan might need its own word for its crowds.
This is tighter than the engineering career fair at Virginia Tech.

Heh. Unlike Kevin, I get some ability to stand out with what I wear to a career fair.

“Okay. I’m good to go,” I tell everyone.

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We arrive outside our destination, and I suddenly get why Akiko wanted to come here, and why she needed Susan’s okay. Vampire Cafe. Totally in line with the culture around us, yet unexpected and slightly poorly-named.

It’s a restaurant themed around the Gothic vampire legend, like Dracula. High-class-style dress for the staff, fancy food made to match the theme, and plenty of theme-appropriate decor. I’m sure Akiko loves the acting, and it’s definitely a unique place. And thanks to having two chemical dragons, I don’t think we have to worry if they serve food that somehow is “inedible” for our entire party in spite of our wide range of diets.

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The staff spoke both Japanese and English, so we only had a little bit of translation in the chat room, such as a recreation of the menu and those that relied on such conveying what they’d like to order. Since it’s an Eastern Europe-themed restaurant, most of the food was European and therefore not hard for the American group to stomach. The lighting made it a bit difficult to make out what some things were, but it was all pretty great, and Akiko’s infectious enthusiasm made the night fantastic.

19 April 2014
2:14 PM JST

I know Easter Sunday is tomorrow, but that’s when we’re leaving. Instead, we’re eating an Easter dinner at Akiko’s place and spending some time talking about the past and our plans for the future. Not everyone here is Christian, but it’s a Christian holiday and most of those present are Christians (of 15 people, all but Elliot, Ellen, Nanase and Susan), so we’re getting a bit of a history lesson from James. (The same history you can read in the Bible, just from his point of view. He somehow escaped mention in its pages, but he met a few of the major actors in their times.) James has truly mastered the art of using the Mymoir, and his words appear in the chat room as he speaks them aloud.

Our history lesson ends with the reasons we celebrate today. “Good Friday, as it has come to be known, is a commemoration of the day of the Christ’s crucifixion, when he bore our sin to the grave on that terrible night. Easter Sunday is then a celebration of his resurrection, and the hope that comes with it—that one day, the Resurrection will come to all who believe in him and his power to defeat even death itself. I was among the many who saw him after his death before he returned to heaven, and was exceedingly glad for it.” James finishes his speech with a wide and joyful smile.

Nanase raises her hand. “If so many people saw him, why don’t we know about that today?”

“Why is magic unknown today? After all, even more people saw and used it, even after dragons vanished only 800 years ago.”

“Well, part of my uncle’s job was suppressing knowledge of magic…” Nanase shrugs. “He made up rumors and arrested people who did dangerous stuff connected with magic.”
“And even in two millennia, nothing has changed,” James replies nonchalantly. He leans toward Ellen. “When the Christ rose from the dead, authorities crafted rumors that his followers had robbed his grave, to cover for the missing body. And for hundreds of years after, Christians were taken as prisoners and executed simply on the basis of their faith. In many places, that still happens to this day. Therefore, if magic is unknown because the major actors have left the stage, I believe you can tell me why other recorded history may not be believed.” I didn’t expect James to be so fierce on this, but I’m probably the most-relaxed Christian here on that issue, and I perfectly understand why on both sides.

“Changing the topic!” Ellen exclaims. It’s not like she can say, ‘that’s not why we’re here.’ It clearly is. “What’s the plan for Moperville? I think Saphira said it’s not going at the same pace as expected?”

Sean nods before speaking. “We could hardly anticipate the actions of a demon. Its arrival—and subsequent dismissal—greatly advanced the timeline. Afterwards, however, Moperville seems to have fallen back to the expected pace. While the town’s acceptance of magic seems to have reached third-year levels, it lacks the expected infrastructure: training, wands, experienced dragons, and so on. Therefore, Jorge and myself may assist with the town if needed, and both Saphira and Elliot should travel to gain knowledge and experience elsewhere. Of course, other dragons are allowed to directly assist with emergencies in their own areas if doing so will aid both our and magic’s reputation.”

Ellen looks completely lost. “Simpler terms?”

“Saphira and I can travel and use magic out of town, and other dragons might come to Moperville if we need them,” Elliot answers. Based on how he said the word ‘travel,’ I’m guessing he still doesn’t want to do so. “They’re also free to let people know that they’re dragons, if they think it’ll help.”

“In other words, we’re pretty sure using magic in public won’t be a major problem for the time being?” I continue questioningly, looking to Sean. He nods. “But it still shouldn’t be used in a way that would confuse people or cause problems. So for how it affects us, you can fight real monsters outside of town, and we might hear international news saying dragons have been spotted around the world, particularly with natural disaster cleanup and such. Right?” Sean nods again.

Akiko’s doorbell buzzes as the ordered food arrives.

20 April 2014
4:19 PM JST

I think there might have been slightly fewer people in the airport today than last week. Even with how much we relaxed for the last three days, I’m exhausted. I think traveling just does that to me. I managed to sleep for the first few hours on the flight, but I’m awake now and get to chat with Nanase a bit.

“How was your nap?” she asks as I raise my head from the seat-back tray. I’m certain my forehead is red at the very least. I have zero ability to sleep upright, but apparently a hard surface against my face is fine.

“Dreamless. My back and neck are sore, but I’m more alert now, anyway.” I sit up and massage my neck while stretching as much as I’m able. “You’d think I’d have more energy. Akiko can’t have used everything floating around in the area.” I can’t be too specific thanks to our neighbor, but I think I can get my point across.
“What do you mean?”

“Okay. You remember the whole thing with that barrier, back when I first moved in? It’s been down for a couple of months now. Do you get tired more easily?”

“Uh… sometimes, I guess. I hadn’t really noticed.”

“Well, nuclear stuff makes what I need the same way chemical stuff makes what you need. Sitting near a nuclear power plant should energize me the same way sitting near a coal-fired plant or a bunch of cars would help you. Normally, it takes six hours to recharge. I used so much energy that it exceeded my natural recharge plus the power plant plus all the batteries we had.” I think we had about a dozen scales left after the third plant.

“Oh. Susan’s similarly drained, isn’t she?”

“And Ellen, too, probably. I don’t know for sure. But I think I’ll go to bed early tonight.”

Nanase sits still for a moment, looking forward. “Do cars really boost me?”

“Chemical energy conversions are your source. Burning stuff is a basic chemical energy conversion, so yes. Although if you get an electric car, I think that’d just boost Ashley. I don’t think there’s a Mr. Fusion around the corner, so I’m probably a long way off from having some portable source, myself.” Come to think of it, the rather large amount of electric conversions in the average household nowadays probably makes an abundance of Divine magic. Which could explain the increased rate of Divine magic use among modern populations, though that’s just a theory. And in terms of Ashley… um, I hope she doesn’t get buildups. She only has the one spell. I guess I’ll have to ask.
I’m still kinda tired from our flight back, but I’m sure I’ll get back in rhythm soon. Tedd invited me over to his place this afternoon, but first, I get a short chat with Susan. Now’s the first time since our trip home that we’re both fully awake and we’re alone together.

“So… how’d you like the trip?” I ask her. “Overall.”

“Eh… I mean, I liked the last three days. The Easter stuff was interesting.” Not a traditional American dinner for said occasion, but it was more about spending time chatting with other dragons in person, in addition to the nominal holiday. Akiko got to show off the reason for her nickname of Trickster, and I learned a bunch of history. “But the first three days were boring and tiring. Although I think you knew that already.” I smile and roll my eyes.

“Was it at least better than your last international trip?”

“Saphira, it would take a lot to be worse.” I mean, she learned about magic existing on that one. Though probably in the worst possible way.

“That’s good. Since… if half-dragons have anything like the fortune of dragons, you’ll have plenty of contenders.”

“Saphira.” She glares at me. “Quit it with the pessimism.”

“I’m just being realistic! … And probably annoying you. Sorry.” I look at my feet.

“No, I— Look, I like how you’re so optimistic about most things, but then you go and say things like this. Haven’t you already had your big thing?”

“Elliot hasn’t.”

“And that’s his problem. You might get dragged into it, sure, but that one is his. And for anything else, you have plenty of friends to count on. Even if things go terribly.”

“…Okay. Um, I probably should get going.”

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A short walk to Tedd’s place, and I’m greeted at the door by Sarah. Tedd and Grace appear to be in the basement, and Tedd said his dad would speak with me later. “Hey!” she greets me with a smile. “I would’ve told you all about this in the car, but Tedd wanted to be the one to tell you. I’m sure you know where he is?”

“Basement.”

“You win!” I think Mr. Verres has a policy of testing the identity of people entering his house, because it’s rare that I get in without something like the exercise Sarah just pulled. “Come on. I’m pretty excited to show you, too.” She certainly sounds as much, and that smile hasn’t lessened yet. I follow her through the door and down to the basement.

As I head down the stairs, I look to my right to see Tedd and Grace holding a stack of… packages?
Like you’d have for a commercial product. Nothing fancy, just colorful cardboard stapled to plastic bags, like I’ve seen at farmers’ markets. But inside… it looks like each has a small *Harry Potter*-esque wand. “You– you made wands. To sell?”

“Yes!” Tedd excitedly confirms. “Dad made sure it’d all be a legitimate business. I even got a spot at the local farmers’ market!” I didn’t know we had one. Then again, Blacksburg had a space reserved for such, and even held at least one every week. I remember seeing magazines and vinyl records sold at the one I went to there, so I guess real wands aren’t too far off. And that’s not a bad spot to start a business. “Not until the 17th, but still!” he declares happily.

I pick up one of the packages from the desk. It’s heavier than it looks, though in large text on the cardboard, it declares its contents as an “Iron-Core Wand.” In slightly smaller text below, it says “Hair Length,” and there are a pair of illustrations on the sides that I can identify as *Sarah’s work* that show a person with very short and very long hair. The upper left corner has “Tedd’s Authentic Magic Wands” printed in black Calibri font on two lines. It’s probably a placeholder for a logo. I turn it over to see some familiar instructions on the back. There’s a green *dot sticker* on the bag labeling the price of the wand as $15.

The wand itself isn’t all that much to look at. To me, it looks like someone sanded down a half-inch dowel rod, though there’s one ring of slightly thicker wood next to a crack that was clearly wood-glued shut, about 2 inches from the base. (The wand is about 6 inches long.) “Did you seal nails inside of all of these?” I ask.

“Yes!” Grace answers. “Justin helped a bunch, too! He taught me how to use the power tools to make all the holes.”

“The wood can work as an interface between the person and the nail. It can’t hold enough magic, but that’s what the nail is for. I’ve got a few varieties prepared.” Tedd points at the three other stacks. I glance over them, seeing “Hairstyle,” “Flashlight,” and “Minor Size Change,” each with illustrations for their effects. The wands also have colored bands hand-painted on each, with a different set of colors for each effect. “This was our Spring Break. I can’t wait to start selling them!” He’s got about twenty of each kind of wand prepared and packaged, though I can see several others on the computer desk behind him in various stages of construction. He notices me looking. “I don’t turn them into wands until they’re painted, just to be safe.”

“It looks great! I can tell you all put a lot of work in.” Now I’m smiling just as much as the other three. “I’ll admit that I don’t know how well they’ll sell, but I find myself looking forward to it, too.”

“The nice thing is how cheap the materials are. It didn’t take too much of my spending money to make this, just a lot of work.” I bet he saved a bunch on his gift to Grace this year, especially compared to last year.

“Just one question: I know your dad was very opposed to this idea when you brought it up before I got here. Something about black market wands becoming more common. What changed?” Sarah looks at Tedd. Clearly, she wasn’t a part of this conversation.

“His position on me selling wands didn’t really change until he asked Elliot how common wandmakers are.” Ah, right. Not a part of my initial speech on how common magic users are, but probably useful to know. If Common casters are 1% of the world population, wandmakers are about 0.005% of the Common magic user population. Which doesn’t sound like much until you consider large populations: in the US, with ~350 million people, we should have about 50 wandmakers—more of those in one country than dragons in the whole world. “There are wands that can make more wands, and wizards can make other magic stuff, but when he found out how
small of a population can possibly contribute to a black market… he said that if magic is going public anyway, the first public wands may as well come from me.”

I get it. “Oh. This was a recent thing, then.”

“Just last month, actually. Right after Grace’s party.” Makes sense, given the way people have treated magic around here since the schools were repaired: neutral-to-positive with little doubt it exists. “Sarah, Grace and I have been working on this since I made those wands for the feminist club, though we did most of the real work last week.”

22 April 2014
5:34 PM CST

Tedd ran me through the group’s business plan while we were waiting for his dad to get home. I’d say it’s pretty solid, but I don’t know much about business, so I made a short article in the Mymoir about it and asked some other dragons to take a look. We still had some time, so we played a bit of Mario Kart as well. Sarah’s better at it than Elliot.

“Your father’s here,” I tell Tedd a few seconds before Mr. Verres opens the front door. I can’t really be sure who people are until they perform actions I can match with the person, and I’m still reliably good at identifying only Susan. We finish our last race as Mr. Verres walks into the room.

“I suppose you’ve seen their work?” he asks me.

“Yeah! They did a great job, I think!”

“What do the other dragons think?” I guess he knows by now that I run a lot of stuff by them.

“The business ones haven’t had the time to look at the business plan, but on the magic side of things, it’s about in line with expectations. There are a few places that had stuff like Tedd’s planned market shop, even only a thousand years ago. Wands are usually expensive and hard-to-get, though, so I can’t imagine that Tedd will be able to keep up with demand for his current wands once the whole nation knows about magic. Of course, if he simply inspires the other 49 wandmakers to start their own businesses, that makes things rather easier.”

“And so long as they’re above the board, I suppose that makes things on my end easier, as well,” he responds, his hand on his chin. “And if not… I suppose we could pursue laws against them.”

“That’s not the dragons’ job. On a personal level, I’d rather the federal government left it to the states… but that’s me saying my own politics, not me as a dragon. Me as a dragon just says ‘don’t try to form a registry of magic users.’ It both won’t work and is counterproductive, and it’s basically a guarantee that every dragon in the country will leave.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Any country to do so thus far has then gone on to try controlling the lives of people with magic, such as by pressing them into service or declaring magic illegal and following people on the registry as ‘persons of interest.’” I start putting up fingers for each item on my list. “It won’t work, it dissolves trust in the government, it breeds resentment, magic buildups are a thing, and no dragon will live under those conditions when they can easily find a country that will welcome them.” I put down my hand and relax it. “In the past, we’ve had countries on a ‘banned travel list.’ Most of those collapsed in short order. Please don’t do that to a country I love.”

Mr. Verres looks at me seriously while the rest of the group is alarmed. “It’s not… entirely up to me. But I’ll see what I can do.” A few moments pass in silence while everyone relaxes and Grace
starts breathing again.

I turn to face her. “I’m not about to go hitting Mr. Verres. Unless he personally puts in efforts that cause the collapse of the country, but then that’s a personal thing. Most dragons outlive their country.”

“You wouldn’t… talk it out?” She looks at me like she’s still a little worried I’d stand up right now and punch someone.

“I think if someone collapses the country I grew up in we’re rather past the point of talking it out. But I wouldn’t use magic on them. I think a square hit to the jaw would make my point.” Grace and Sarah look confused, but both Tedd and Mr. Verres nod in agreement. I guess that’s mostly a guy thing, though I think Nanase would also understand. “That’s just in theory, of course. It hasn’t happened yet and I hope it won’t ever.” There’s some more silence as my words sink in.

“Anyway,” Mr. Verres starts, clearing his throat, “do you have any news for me from your trip last week?”

I knew this was coming and talked it over with the others during our Easter celebration. “Within Moperville, we planned to start pushing stuff like Tedd’s wands and Sensei’s training more into public view. Only with volunteers, of course, but the current level of public acceptance of magic doesn’t have the backing of knowledge and services that should exist at this stage. Outside of Moperville, Elliot and I are encouraged to travel, and are allowed to use magic while out of town.”

“You’re… not about to go flying around outside of town, are you?” Mr. Verres asks nervously.

“Ah, no. Our personalities were accounted for in the plan. Elliot still isn’t likely to travel, and if I do head out of town, any flying will be at great height, landing in secluded spots. The only magic I’ll really use in public is the same Thermal Regulator spell I use almost every time I head outside —though I hope to cut back on that once it finally warms up.”

“Winter’s been really long this year, hasn’t it?” Sarah remarks. “Is that a magic thing?”

“I can guarantee it isn’t,” I reply drily. “Did I ever tell you about the time offset between Kevin’s universe and this one?”

Grace shakes her head as Sarah replies hesitantly. “I think Elliot might have said something?”

“It was the end of October 2014, as of my last memory from him. He didn’t pay much attention to sports, but I’m pretty sure he saw a different pair of teams at the Super Bowl this year. Anyway, the weather so far has been consistent with his memory—the whole polar vortex thing meant it didn’t warm up until the middle of May, at least in Blacksburg, Virginia.”

“You knew!?” Sarah exclaims. She’s been complaining about the cold since the end of February.

“Well, sort of? Like I said, not everything is the same. But it appears that even though if a butterfly flaps its wings once, it’ll change the forecast a few months in the future, a bunch of dragons flying around for millennia won’t really change how long winter lasts this year.”

“Oh, sorry, never mind.” Trivia master Saphira wins again.

“Back on topic,” Mr. Verres states, “you were saying that you can travel and use magic, but it’s not likely to be visible?”

“Correct. It might not seem like it here, but I don’t really like being the center of attention. The
only reason I’d flaunt my magic in public is if either it wouldn’t stand out or it’s really necessary. I like traveling a little more than Elliot does, but I don’t plan to start spreading knowledge of magic and dragons anytime soon. I’m happy to just do things here and let word spread on its own. The only reason I’ll spread word of wands and proper training is so that immortals don’t make a nuisance of themselves.” ‘Empower and Guide’ has a little less influence when you can get the same sort of thing from humans.

“I can work with that.”

26 April 2014
4:56 PM CST

Al let me know that a better name for the spell I made at the power plant is “Saphira’s Heat Dispersal,” so I went ahead and changed it. Nothing special this week for flying except a fairly large group wondering why no dragons went flying for the last two weeks. (They were standing at the landing site.) They specified ‘no dragons’ because Magus and Mr. Aevil went flying anyway. When we spoke in the air today, it was apparent that Magus had trained Mr. Aevil at least a little over the past two weeks. Like I thought, no problems had come up in our absence, though even with the heaviest hitters gone, we still would’ve had Magus, Tedd, Grace, Mr. Raven, Diane, and a small number of other magic users. The goal of a dragon is for their community to not need them. They want their time at home to be one of relaxation.

As for what I’m doing right now, Rhoda asked me to spend some time with her today after work, so I’m at her house.

*Ding-dong.* A few seconds later, Rhoda opens her front door. “Oh, hey, you’re here.” She seems almost nervous. “We don’t have much time. Come in!”

I hurry with her up to her room, but once the door is closed I stand in the doorway. “What’s the hurry?”

“I thought you’d get here earlier. I have to head out soon to meet Catalina, but I wanted to show her Cassie…”

Oh. I’ve spent time with both Rhoda and Diane like that, and with just Rhoda, but not with Rhoda and Catalina yet. Made slightly more awkward by the fact that I know they’re dating, but I’m still fine with it. Especially since they’ll both know who Cassie really is. I lower my resistance.

“Alright, I’m ready.”

Rhoda raises her hands at me and… that was… a decidedly strange sensation. I’ve done this a bunch of times before, but…

*I feel surprised and look at myself. I look exactly as I should, so I’m a bit confused as to why Master is surprised.*

Why do I have wings and a tail this time? It’s… almost like Nanase’s fairy dolls.

“What happened?” Master asks me. I shrug. She’s the one who summoned me. I fly over to where I know her magic book is sitting and fetch it for her as soon as she thinks to read it.

Ah! That’s not… I don’t think I’m in control. It’s like a dream before I figure out it’s a dream, except I’m aware of it whenever I’m not doing anything in particular.

*Master takes the book from me and starts flipping through its pages. She stops at one she recognizes as a new spell and begins reading the confusing text. I massage her head, attempting to*
comfort her and help her understand. The words she’s reading are also passed on to me.

Ah, I get it! A substitution spell! Those are pretty magic-hungry and rare. I doubt she could cast it more than a few times per day.

Master commands me to fly in front of her and land on the ground. I hope she’ll summon me again soon.

I’m a bit disoriented as I rapidly grow to my original size and shape. I sit down to avoid collapsing, then black out.

26 April 2014
5:08 PM CST

“…be a little late, okay?” I wake up to hear Rhoda say as I sit up from her bed. Whew, that was strange. Kevin blacked out once from getting a shot (he’s afraid of needles), but I didn’t think I’d black out from getting transformed. I’m not at all nervous about that sort of thing. I mean, I can just shift and fix whatever it is.

I wonder how long I was out, until I look at my watch. Wow, ten minutes? Kevin’s doctor said he was only out for a minute for the needle thing.

Rhoda looks at me and sighs in relief. “See you in a bit,” she says before hanging up her phone. “Oh, good, you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“A little confused at why I fainted, but other than that I’m fine. What happened?”

“I think I used a different spell on you this time. Do you remember anything?”

I close my eyes to think. Mmm… no, not really. “Nothing past you pointing your hands at me after telling me we’re meeting Catalina shortly. Is that who was on the phone?”

“Yeah. Hey, could you read this?” She hands me her magic book, already open to a spell I don’t think I’ve seen her use. Let’s see…

“I think this is a substitution spell. In which case, let me say congratulations, because that’s about as rare as the superhero spell Cheerleadra uses.”

“Really?” Her expression rapidly changes from confused to excited. “Can you tell me any more? I don’t really get what the book is saying.”

I lean over the book and cross-reference it with the Mymoir. “Sure. A substitution spell is a combination transformation-summoning spell. In this case, you can substitute a fairy for any human besides yourself. The fairy can’t use any magic aside from basic flight and is just as strong as you. I think it will look like you, except with fuzzy wings and a tail. Obviously, you can use your own magic on it to alter its appearance if you like.

“Anyway, specifics on substitution spells: it might look like you’re transforming the target, but you aren’t, really. You’re swapping them out for your own summoned monster. The target will be aware of what’s going on with the monster, but unless the monster takes lethal damage, the target will forget everything when the spell ends.” Which explains the blackout.

“Lethal damage?”

“With few exceptions—” as in, except for aberrations “—summoned monsters can’t actually die. If
they would, the spell just ends early. I think the reason that the target of your substitution won’t forget things from that is so that they’re not debilitated during combat. But in all other cases, while they’re aware of what’s going on, at the spell’s conclusion the target will have a harder time remembering it than recalling a dream.”

“Will it hurt if the summon is, uh, ended?”

“By force? Um… no. The target will recall the ending blow, but no associated sensations. Or any other pain from that time. It’s not their body that’s being damaged, so…” I scan the book. Ah. “They can tell what the fairy is thinking and feeling, but more like they’re hearing it described to them than experiencing it themselves.” I close the book. “These spells are very useful. For stuff like you, right now, it’s basically like you have a summoning spell as long as you have a friend that’s willing to lose a few hours of memory. Or however long you make the spell last. In history, this sort of spell was used to sneak people into or out of dangerous situations, or to protect a more-vulnerable member of a combat group, since the target is guaranteed immunity from damage for the spell’s duration, anyway.”

“Oh. Neat! So…” I can tell what she wants to ask.

“I’m fine with you using on me tonight, and possibly on future occasions, if you want. Just a warning and two conditions, first. For the warning, this sort of spell hasn’t been used on a dragon, before now. I might be able to shift to dismiss the spell if I want, and you know what goes with a shift. As for the conditions, first, you’ll take my cell phone and keep it with you, and answer any call it receives.”

“I think I can do that. And the second?”

“If I’m really needed, you’ll let me go by destroying the fairy.”

“Um…”

Clarification is needed, I guess. “How long was I out after you ended the spell?”

“About five minutes.”

“If I’m really needed, I don’t think the person who needs me will have five minutes to spare.”

Rhoda’s face goes dark. “Oh. Yes, I can do that.”

26 April 2014
5:12 PM CST

I put my hands in my pockets and summon my objects, then leave the objects there and pull out my phone. “Alright, then. You have my permission to substitute me with a fairy for tonight.”

Rhoda looks at my phone. “Really?” she asks incredulously.

“Really. I don’t mind, I don’t have anything better to do, and I’d like you to be comfortable with using your magic. Just, you know, ask people before using this spell on them. I don’t think most people would be happy with losing memory without any explanation. I’m not, either—it’s just that I can accept that as the price of helping you with this spell. You just might get into a situation where it’s actually necessary, and I don’t want that to be met with apprehension from not knowing what your magic does.” And since I’m aware for the duration of the spell, there might be something I can do that the Common magic book didn’t anticipate. I might lose my memory, but...
Rhoda moves, then freezes and lets her hand hover over my phone for a bit. Then she makes her decision and grabs my phone from me. “Okay. Thank you!” She smiles and puts my phone in her purse.

“Ready,” I tell her, and then I feel a strange sensation as she casts the spell on me.

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I can’t tell why Master is nervous. Is it because I’m new? This is far from her first date with Girlfriend! Catalina. I massage her neck as she gets out of the car in front of Girlfriend! Catalina’s house, then go ring the doorbell for her. I feel it as Master shivers from the cold, thinking that she’s normally warmer when with Dragon! Saphira.

Huh. I can tell her immediate associations for people? And she thinks of me as a dragon! How nice.

The door opens just as Master walks up the steps, and I hug Girlfriend! Catalina around her neck. “Wah!” she exclaims as Master cracks up.

“I guess Cassie couldn’t wait to meet you,” Master states. I have a name! I cuddle Girlfriend! Catalina as Master walks inside. “Are you all ready to go?”

“Sure. Just a second.” I float back a short distance, but Girlfriend! Catalina reaches forwards to scratch under my chin, and I let her. It feels nice, and Master blushes as she feels the scratching by extension. “This is Cassie, you said? What is she?”

Master thinks about concealing my true nature, then thinks better of it. “Saphira said she’s a ‘substitution fairy.’ When I summon her, she has to… sort of take the place of a person.” Master feels a bit embarrassed for my nature. “For tonight, that’s Saphira. She gave me her permission.”

Girlfriend! Catalina stops scratching my chin and takes a step back. “This is Saphira?” she asks, pointing at me. I shake my head.

“Not the way she explained it. Cassie is a fairy—my fairy—but she has to take the place of someone for me to cast the spell. When the spell ends, the target won’t remember what the fairy did. Saphira said the spell is mostly useful for sneaking people around where they shouldn’t be.” I get the feeling she’s simplifying her description for Girlfriend! Catalina’s understanding.

I note she didn’t give the conditions for me remembering what happens here tonight, but I sort of doubt that will come up anytime soon. Especially if she’s just using this spell during dates and whatnot. Speaking of which, time to try accessing the Mymoir with this active.

“So… how much is Cassie her own person?”

“She isn’t truly independent, as Saphira explained it. She sort of acts on her own, but it’s tied to how I feel and what I want?” I shrug. “The two of us can sort of tell what the other is thinking and feeling. When you scratched her chin, I could feel it, and you noticed how she acted when she saw you.” Master giggles as I smile and tap Girlfriend! Catalina’s nose with my own.

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I wake up on Rhoda’s bed again. No memory of what happened between handing her my phone and now, but I can tell by the current time that she kept me that way for the duration of her date. And once I get home, I can check my notes in the Mymoir to see if I was able to access it during that time. There’s no precedent for trying it with that specific kind of substitution, but if Common or Divine magic gives a dragon a second personality, they’re able to give up trying to beat the
magic personality for control of their actions in exchange for completely clear thoughts and plenty of use of the Mymoir. It’s typically only used in the most dire of circumstances, but it’s how we have so much information on what demons do to their victims (and therefore the sort of time limit we’re on for taking them down), so I’m in favor of getting some practice in if Rhoda’s spell will let me.

“S-sorry for keeping you that way for so long!” Rhoda apologizes, standing at the foot of her bed. She’s clearly just about ready to go to bed as soon as I leave. “Are you hungry or anything?”

“I’m fine. I told you that you could do that, didn’t I?” Even if I didn’t trust her, it’s not like she could keep me that way for multiple days, since most spells end when the caster becomes unconscious. She’d need some sort of magic artifact to keep it going through her sleep, and I’d smell that. “I am a little hungry, though. I’ll take food if it’s offered.”

28 April 2014
4:00 PM CST

My memory is still blank for Saturday evening—in fact, it’s not even like the memory of sleep. My memory simply jumps the time gap, as if the intervening period never happened. However, a whole bunch of notes appeared in my personal journal section of the Mymoir, so it appears that I was both aware and mentally unaltered for the duration of the spell. That’s nice to know, anyway. There are gaps in the notes, but given the situation the fairy found itself in (bonded to a person on a date), I think I know the sort of things I didn’t want to take notes on. Either way, it’s something to keep up so that I don’t completely lose the time I spend as Rhoda’s fairy, but it’s not something I’m about to tell Rhoda about because she’ll likely take it the wrong way. (I am taking notes on things that interest me, but not on anything personal that I wouldn’t already know, mostly. I already knew she thought of Catalina as her girlfriend. I was flattered to learn her primary association for myself was as a dragon, though I wish I knew what she thought of dragons, now.)

I know I don’t normally have class on Mondays with Sensei, but I don’t have work today, so I decided I ought to at least check it out. Especially since this is the ‘magic training’ class, and we’re looking for something good enough that neither dragons nor immortals are the best source for training (even though immortals don’t ask for money—typically, they ask for favors.) I’ll probably have to train some people eventually, but the goal with Sensei is for Mr. Raven and Sean to not have to help too much. But who knows, Mr. Raven might want to help with some more-advanced training.

“Saphira!” Sensei’s voice booms happily as I walk in. “What made you decide to come today?”

“I don’t have work, and I’d like to see how you’re doing. And if it’d be worth it to come on Mondays.” His Wednesday training has definitely been worth it. I don’t think Kevin was this fit since he quit martial arts, but I know he was still better than I am now.

I look around at my classmates and smile. I don’t know how Sensei feels about teaching this class versus his Anime Style Martial Arts, but he can’t be disappointed with the turnout. Elliot, Nanase and Justin are all here, but on top of that we’ve got Ellen, Grace, Magus, Eliza (from the school repair), and two younger students (both boys) that look like they’re about to start middle school. They’re probably the strongest case he has for starting another set of classes, just for younger students, but even Kevin’s class at an established school wasn’t split that way.

“While I like that you’re here, I’d also like a little warning so that I can prepare something.” Whoops. I blush a little. “Instead, I’ll run you through some of the basics I formed for Elliot. Warmups first for every class.”
Warmups done, it’s time to see how this works. “We have an even number today, so pair up, everyone. Saphira, you’re with Chris.” I’ve seen the younger boys in class before, but I’ve never been paired with them, probably because it’d be unfair or difficult to do that in the martial arts part of the class. The Asian-looking boy with short jet-black hair and bright green eyes looks at me with a wide grin on his face as Sensei announces the remaining pairs.

If Sensei stuck me with this boy, then I suppose he has magic that is relevant to the goals I stated when starting this whole thing: fighting multiple foes at once, or fending off blows from a myriad of angles. After we all put on our sparring gear, I approach my partner on the mats with a smile.

He’s… a great deal shorter than I am (probably about 4’6”), but it’s the magic practice day. Size doesn’t mean much. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ve seen you use magic before?” I know he’s a Common caster, but whatever he has, I don’t think it’s transformation, or Sensei would have had him use it during exercises. Speaking of whom, he walks over to give us a short explanation.

“I’ve found a number of tricks that are helpful in learning your own magic that work no matter what you can actually do. One is pairing up for sparring using either repetition or creativity. Today’s focus is creativity.” Sensei points out an area he’s marked off with white tape. He’s segmented the dojo for sparring before, but he must have an awful lot of that tape, because I’ve seen several layouts for it over the past few months. Maybe he’s hoping he’ll get an illusion spell for it or something, but it’d probably be easier to ask Tedd to try making a wand for it. “I don’t want you two pushing to exhaustion, because you have ten minutes before we change pairings.”

“Yes, sir!” we both reply, bowing before making our way to our corner.

28 April 2014
4:21 PM CST

I still don’t know what Chris can do, so I stick up a Conditional Armor before we face each other and bow. And then he vanishes.

I barely have time to think it’s some sort of illusion before I’m shoved forward! Then I realize it’s not simple invisibility: his heat signature is gone, too! I recognize that the white tape doesn’t specify a vertical bound, so I look up, expecting to see Chris flying or something. He’s not there, but it doesn’t keep me from being punched in the gut! Hold on, why isn’t my armor triggering?

I think for a second and realize he appeared for a moment when he punched me. I suppose his active magic cancels on contact with a dragon. The fact that he wasn’t surprised by that means he’s sparred with Elliot before today. Then I notice that the air around me is heating up to about normal body temperature. Oh. I cancel Conditional Armor and cast Partial Armor instead before working on a solution. I think he’s got some sort of super speed thing going, so to shut it down I either need to figure out where he is and grab him or find some way to slow him down. He’s probably not moving in a predictable pattern and I’m getting a little tired of him hitting me while I think.

He’s not an opponent I want to injure, so… ah. When we finish sparring for the martial arts classes, Ellen uses a wand to remove sweat from the mats so that people don’t slip. I don’t need it to be sweat, though. If I can just cause condensation on the floor enough to make it slippery… Gah! Would he stop hitting me like that already! My shins hurt enough; you can stop kicking them! Or whatever he’s doing to try to bruise them behind the scales!

I fight through the annoyance and pain and cool the mat about like a cold soda can or something. I
can see droplets form for a moment before spreading below unseen feet and eventually… there! Chris careens across the mat before rolling to a stop at Eliza’s feet. “I think you need to stay in your square,” I hear her say as he picks himself up and slowly walks back. He looks really tired.

“That took you long enough,” he says as he enters our square and I promptly grab his left arm. “Wah?” He flinches.

“You had to re-cast every time you hit me. If I hold you, you can’t go anywhere.” I smile in victory.

“Agh, you got me,” Chris groans, trying to squirm away. Kevin learned how to break a grip in his martial arts, but Sensei hasn’t gotten that far yet with us. He tries to tickle my side. My grip stays firm.

“I’ve got scales there, too.”

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Close to the ten-minute mark, Sensei makes his way over to Chris and myself. “Have you been holding him the whole time, Saphira?”

“Ever since I sent him across the floor, yes. I think he quit trying to break my grasp a minute or two ago.” As I say it, he yanks his arm back, but I keep my grip on him.

“It’s not fair!” Chris complains.

Sensei looks at Chris. “Saphira is a dragon. You are a Common caster. She expects to win. Make it difficult.” He pauses and says the next part to the whole class. “Part of basic self-defense is breaking the grip of an attacker. We’ll cover that soon.” He turns back to the two of us. “Chris, you’re with Jimmy next. Saphira, Grace.” Oh. Oh, boy. Elliot’s told me about his matches with Grace for this class. Ellen’s had to use the blood cleanup spell a few times. He said she was getting better, but… I hope we don’t have more bloody scales on the ground today. I’m not as experienced as Elliot with sparring against her.

“Sensei?” I ask Sensei as I release Chris. “Can I have a spell active before the match?”

“Yes, Saphira,” he answers me before returning to announcing pairs.

“Thank you, sir.” I dismissed my previous scales a while ago, but… I close my eyes. The default probably isn’t enough; I picture the necessary area as I whisper “Saphira’s Partial Armor,” covering my body from the top of my head all the way to my fingers and toes: everything that doesn’t give me claws. Then I make my way over to Grace’s square.

Her eyes widen at my figure. The starkest difference is that my scales cover where my hair comes from, so my hair that normally rivals Susan’s is nowhere to be found. “I guess you’ve heard about my matches with Elliot?”

“I’ve heard that you don’t pull your punches and frequently use claws, so yes.” She’s slightly gentler with Ellen. I think she uses Ellen as a gauge for the maximum power she’s supposed to put into a fight against someone who’s unarmored, since Ellen can’t use Partial Armor but can heal if Grace hurts her.

“I’m getting better about technique,” she says appeasingly while looking away. “Ellen doesn’t have to clean us up as often.”
“While it’s great that you can practice this in a somewhat safe environment, I’d be more comfortable if I knew the worst I’d get from this is light bruising. At least it’ll be more of a martial arts sparring match than it was against Chris, anyway.” I move to the start position, and we bow to begin the match.

28 April 2014
4:31 PM CST

Genetic magic is different to other magics in that a change in body structure is directly related to a change in physical abilities. Common magic lets either work without the other. Draconic lets appearance change magically without affecting strength, or strength change naturally without affecting appearance. Divine magic generally disregards appearance altogether. But when Grace bulks up before the match is underway, she’s actually getting a lot stronger. And I know that if she needs it, she can rebalance her strength and agility whenever she wants.

Something Ellen found out about the Uryuom suit from matches between Grace and Elliot is that while it’s durable, it’s not immune to damage and doesn’t have any sort of self-repair. However, Draconic magic repairs clothes just as much as the dragon when they shift… so Ellen’s worn the suit herself on occasion, shifting to fix it. We doubt that Mr. Verres would be able to get more than the three he has for quite some time, even if Grace really needed them. So while I don’t have to feel too bad if I make a hole or two in the suit, there has to be enough of the suit left that Ellen’s shift can detect and repair the suit. Which is part of the reason I forwent claws, unlike Grace, who is now standing before me in her three-tailed form.

I’m starting to think Elliot pulled a mass-based repair spell from the Mymoir for Ellen so that she could repair mats. Teaching magic usually has a high monetary cost unless there’s a mass dragon in residence, but I hope Sensei isn’t taking too much advantage of Ellen. I’ll suggest he holds these matches in the park once it warms up. (No way am I heating the required area when not in dragon form.)

While I’m standing still thinking about this, that and the other thing, Grace finishes her preparation and goes for the first strike, kicking at my left side! I move my arm to block it with my wrist and feel my scales slide a little, dissipating the force of the impact. It’s an entirely different sensation to the single-point force that humans are used to: I still feel the point force beneath the blow, but the scales slide and twist as well, causing my skin to be slightly pulled at their bases. It’s a ripple of displacement that means I am less likely to be hurt, but the injury will be more complex in the event that I am hurt.

With hardly any down time between blows, Grace spins and attempts to rake her left hand’s claws across my front, to little effect. I try to grab her wrist, but fail—my grip is too loose as she leaves my arm’s reach. She takes advantage of my stooped posture to bring down a kick on my back. I hardly feel the contact, but I’m knocked to the floor, turning my head and spreading out according to the falls we’ve practiced on Wednesdays. I rely on my heat sense to tell me when and how she’s striking next, rolling to my left to avoid her gravity-assisted stomp where my waist used to be. Now on my back, I spin on my butt to try to sweep Grace’s legs out from under her, but she flies over my legs and I clamber to my feet.

We’re only a minute or two in, but we’re both breathing hard despite me failing to land a hit on Grace and her only shoving me around a bit. A dragon against a Genetic user is a pretty even fight, magic-wise. It only tips in the dragon’s favor thanks to the amount of experience we can amass, but I have less experience than Grace, and it’s showing.

She’s constantly flying, so I’m less likely to knock her off balance than tire her out. My magic isn’t
tiring me in any way beyond the scales’ extra weight, so I have a small advantage there. Given how well attacking worked for her, it looks like Grace is giving me the chance to make the first move. Strength of being a heat dragon: unlike Elliot, I don’t have to move to fight. I recall what happened when I used Partial Skin to Scales for gym class and work on giving Grace some mild heat exhaustion. Her fur may be fireproof, but it retains heat a lot better than her human-form skin.

Grace apparently notices that she’s getting warmer and lands, attacking me again with a sweeping kick I jump over, throwing off my concentration. It wasn’t a spell, so the heat part of my magic ends as the fight resumes. This time, I go on the offensive, punching towards her center of mass. She doesn’t attempt to move as my fist stops dead in the air, a few inches from her stomach. I fail to hide my surpr— wait. “So it’s a super cool shield if you stand perfectly still like a target on a shooting range?” Well, she’s getting better at using it on reflex. While I’m distracted, Grace decks me and I lay on the ground, dazed and tired. I’m not defeated, but at this point I’d like a break. Judging by Grace’s breathing, I think she would, too.

I sit up. “Match?” I ask, my arms holding me up against my knees.

Grace takes a few deep breaths before replying. “Match.”

Sensei makes his way over to the two of us. “Good job! You two might want to work on your endurance, but that’s what the repetition days are for.” I notice that most matches had stopped to watch ours and are just now getting back underway. I bet Sensei is happy my magic doesn’t have the same effect on Grace that Ellen’s does. “Saphira, are you feeling dizzy?”

“Concerned I might have a concussion?” Grace did punch my face pretty hard. I shake my head. “I think I’m fine, but I can go shift if it’ll make you feel better.”

“There’s still some time before the next set. If you can, please do.” He’s got a designated spot behind the dojo for Elliot and I to shift if we need it. It stinks back there because most stores in the strip use it for their dumpsters, but it’s out of the way and, if necessary, Ellen can repair the asphalt. I think that’s happened twice so far. Dragon form shifts aren’t kind to solid surfaces, and it hurts our feet. Chinese courtyards were designed for both everyday practicality and visiting dragons. They were traditionally made with modular materials, such as brick or stone, because you could replace a small part of the floor if it was damaged without having to tear out more of it. Asphalt works, but it doesn’t have the advantage of simply sliding out of the way of a dragon’s claws like stone would.

28 April 2014
4:36 PM CST

With my head fully cleared from shifting—I’m not sure, but I might’ve had a concussion—I walk back inside to my square, where Grace is still standing. “You might want to hit people a smidge lighter, if you’re going for their head, Grace.”

She winces. “Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m fine now. But I’ve heard that concussions can kill people or give them permanent brain damage, and I think anyone attacking you outside of practice is already dumb enough.” Grace just nods. Eh, that’s not really a joke you laugh at anyway. “Nice job with your shield, by the way.”

“Thanks! I’ve had a lot of practice. You didn’t seem to expect it…?” The way she ends her sentence implies I didn’t know about it before today.
“I knew about it. I just didn’t expect you to pull it out with so little warning, and at close range.” Previous examples Kevin read gave her plenty of warning, generally with ranged attacks. I open my mouth to ask her if Sensei is a better teacher than where she grew up, then think better of it. On that note, though… “Come to think of it, have you spoken with your brothers recently?”

Grace looks a little shocked. Not by my question so much as how tangential it seems, I think. “Yeah, I guess? They called me up for my birthday again, but I don’t see them all that often. Is that a problem, you think?”

I smile. “Nah. I was just thinking, I haven’t met them. I wonder if they even know about me?”

“I told them about you, but I guess they don’t know about Tedd’s wands or anything. Would you like to meet them? They said they’re allowed to leave, now, but they can’t transform in public, so they stay, um, inside a lot.”

“That’d be nice. The way things are going here, they might be able to transform outside soon, at least around here. Well, maybe not Vlad.”

“I don’t think she wants to,” Grace answers skeptically.

“Couldn’t Tedd make a clone form for him? I don’t know if he’d want it, but…”

“I could ask.” Come to think, she knew about clone forms last year, before the whole ‘Vladia’ thing. I guess it just slipped her mind. “Before or after we start at the farmers’ market?”

“Before is probably best, so that you’re not too busy making wands, but I’m not making the schedule.”

Everyone else wraps up their matches, and Sensei announces the next pairs. To my relief, he also states it’ll be our last for today. On to facing Justin. I think he’ll be in for a bit of a surprise, if he hasn’t sparred with Elliot yet.

One Conditional Armor active and I’m ready to go. “Not going for the full armor?” he taunts me. “I hit harder than Grace.”

“I don’t know how well my Conditional Armor works against claws. I should be fine against traditional martial arts.”

Taunts done, we bow and start the match. I take a ready stance and carefully watch Justin as he starts glowing orange. If a part of him glows brighter, he’s about to use that to strike, but he’s good enough that I can’t really tell how he’ll strike. I dodge his punches and miss my counters, staying about par for how I did against Grace. Then his left foot glows and I prepare to block the kick, but he changes it into a knee strike to my side, throwing off my timing. And it fails to hit hard enough to knock me off balance.

“What!? That totally should’ve knocked you over!” Justin exclaims, his mouth gaping.

“Are you familiar with the expression, ‘My right to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose’?” Kevin heard that a lot from our father.

“Wh—”

“Your spell is constant-cast, so you probably didn’t notice, but you stopped glowing for the duration of your contact with me.” It was only a fraction of a second. You’d have to pay attention to notice. “You only have boosted strength while you aren’t touching me.” And his boosted
strength… eh, let’s put it in Smash Bros. terms. He doesn’t hit faster. He just does more damage and knockback. There’s no change in momentum or anything, just his target’s reaction to the hit. Unlike Elliot and Eliza, his magic isn’t true augmentation. He’s not altering his own capabilities, just changing how he affects the world around him.

“Gotcha.” There’s a noticeable immediate change to his style, and our match proceeds about the same as in the Wednesday classes, though he’s still glowing. “Hey. Why aren’t you using magic?” he asks between strikes. “Beyond your armor, I mean.”

“I don’t have to. I suppose I could try.” I alter my style so I don’t move around so much and start chilling the floor under Justin, a la my fight with Chris.

“Har de har. ‘Cold feet,’ I get it.”

“Were you watching my first match?”

“No. Sparring with Nanase is hard.”

“Then you might be surprised.”

As I say it, Justin overreaches for a kick. Instead of sticking to the mat, he slips on the condensation and falls with an “Ah!”

“You want me to keep using magic or no?” I ask somewhat seriously.

“Me? No. But that would violate the exercise, so keep it up. I’m ready.” Justin grins defiance at me, and I’m reminded of the comic where Elliot first defended Justin.

9 May 2014
6:35 AM CST

Today is special for a couple of reasons, though the first was a long time coming. The second is that Grace managed to convince her family—that is, her grandfather and ‘brothers’—to come visit this afternoon. The first… took a lot more planning and permissions.

Instead of riding with Susan and Sarah to school today, I flew to Moperville South. Why there? Because that’s where Rhoda goes to school. Speaking of whom, she’s noticed me and started walking over to my position near the sports fields.

“I have to admit, I didn’t think your teachers would let you do this. Are you sure it’s alright?” she asks when she’s close enough to chat without shouting.

**Yep! I’ve even got special stuff lined up for art and gym classes. I’m ready when you are. But… it’s a long flight, so…**

Rhoda raises her hands towards me… and a few moments later, I’m looking up at her from just above her knees. The perspective is familiar thanks to all the time I spent as a Rhoda doll prior to her gaining her substitution spell, but the form with the perspective is a little odd.

“Aww! You’re so cute!” Rhoda squeaks in delight, bending over to pat me on the head. I close my eyes for a moment and let her pet me.

**Rawr. I’m a ferocious dragon,** I respond when I open my eyes, humor evident in my voice. I close my eyes and dip my head, then look at her a bit more seriously. **I don’t think I can fly as fast like this, so I’d better get going. I’ll see you later!**
Rhoda backs up a bit and watches me take off. “Bye!” she waves.

I was right about my flight speed. The air feels like it’s passing around me at the same speed as normal, but my sensing range is undiminished and I can tell I’m flying past stuff at a much slower rate than normal. Thankfully, I accounted for this, and I arrive at Moperville North about five minutes before the bell rings for us to head off to class, judging by the clocks on the walls. It’s a bit strange for me to be at school without a watch. I look at my left wrist and just see scales.

I glide down to land at the school entrance, which is thankfully propped open. One downside about miniaturized dragon form: I still can’t open doors. Fit through them, sure. I’m only about two feet tall. I have to tuck in my wings, but it’s perfectly alright. If I want to get through a door, however, I need someone to prop it open for me.

Sarah spots me as I walk inside and over to the table where my friends are seated. Almost everyone else who notices me doesn’t really take note of my appearance and scoots out of the way. “Aww! You’re adorable!” she says, bending over to pet me, the same way Rhoda did less than half an hour ago. I get the feeling this’ll be happening a lot.

Her compulsion to pet me satisfied, I leap onto the table like a reptilian cat, slightly spreading my wings out of reflex. **Having fun without me?** I ask.

“Aww!” both Ashley and Tedd exclaim.

“More like waiting for you to get here,” Susan replies drily, a hint of a smile on her face.

“You know, I never thought scales could be cute,” Tedd remarks. He looks like he’s just barely holding back from petting me.

**It’s exactly the same form as when I’m fifteen feet tall, you know.**

Elliot nods. “True. Size does make a big difference, though. Your dragon form only looks cute to me when I’m the same size.”

**Aww, thanks.**

Elliot turns red when he realizes what he said, and Ashley glares at him. He puts up his hands in surrender. “I- I didn’t mean it that way!” Everyone shares a laugh.

9 May 2014
7:05 AM CST

Getting into art class was easy, since Tedd could just hold the door open for me. Traversing the crowded halls is a little harder. I’ve settled for doing my best to stay out of people’s way, though I wish the tops of the lockers were flat like at Kevin’s high school. Sure, they were dusty, but I could deal with the dust and light myself on fire between hall jaunts. I’m sure I could control the flame when it’s just whatever decided to stick to my scales. As it is, I’ve been kicked more than once, but I think it hurts the kicker’s foot a lot more than it hurts me.

“Sir?” someone asks, raising his hand. I’m so terrible with names. Nearly a semester in the same class as these people, and I still don’t know many people Kevin didn’t read about. “How is Saphira going to participate today?” I’ve gotten a number of comments on my appearance, ranging from ‘cute!’ to ‘how?’

“She showed me an art style a few weeks ago that she assured me she could perform, even while in her current state. I decided that, if she went through with this, we could use it for a project. As for
the style: art using words and symbols as the focus.” Jorge has a fairly famous painting (for him, anyway—he’s not well-known in the world at large, but my art teacher was familiar with a few of his paintings, though he couldn’t recall the artist) depicting his feelings for his homeland of France. Except, it’s not exactly a landscape, or a scene from the Revolution, or anything like that: it’s an artistic map of the country with Draconic words and phrases covering the whole thing. While it’s true that non-dragons can’t read the script, the way he painted them still conveys the emotion, somehow. Most critics just assume that he made up the symbols himself. And beyond Jorge, there are several other artists that have done the same sort of thing in their own languages.

As for how I can do this in dragon form, I can still write in Draconic just fine. I asked if it was okay if I just made a stencil at most during this class, and the teacher was alright with that.

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In my four normal classes, participating as normal is pretty easy. I made sure that either I wouldn’t have written homework due today, or I got it done and turned in a day early. Taking notes: stick it in my journal in the Mymoir. I do that anyway normally. Copying Mymoir notes to written paper is most of how I study. Obviously, I can’t hold a pencil, but for group assignments, other students can write for me, and my ability to participate verbally is just as good as normal.

Time for lunch. Or, as it’ll be for me, sit and chat time. Of course, there’s no eating in dragon form—to make up for it, I had a very large breakfast. I make my way over to my usual spot and crouch on my seat, my head just over the top of the table and my tail hanging close to the floor.

Ashley sits down across from me with a chuckle. “You know, you look kind of like a puppy, doing that.”

**It’s just what I feel like doing. I’m not having lunch, so I’m basically just here to chat with you all. So, how are you doing?**

“Pretty well. Hey, actually…” She stops eating and leans towards me. “I know you’re not a doctor, but Elliot mentioned that one of the dragons is? I’ve been feeling numb, lately, in bursts. Could you ask about it?”

**I’m going to guess you’ve already been to a regular doctor about this?** Because if she has, I don’t think I have to ask Sahara.

“Yeah. They said they’d look into it, but they couldn’t find any pinched nerves or anything.”

**About when did this start?**

“I… think it was the day we visited Tokyo? You know, after the power plant stuff.”

**Yeah… Do you remember what I said about the different sources of magic? On the day I made my announcement.**

“This is a magic thing? And no, sorry. I was a little busy trying to calm my parents down.”

**I’ve… never read of any Divine casters having magic buildups, but the source for Divine magic is electrical energy conversions. Anything powered by electricity produces Divine magic as a byproduct. I’d bet your angel can hold a lot of magic, but visiting a place like Tokyo might’ve overloaded them, and… you only have one spell, don’t you?**

“Buildups? Oh, like when Elliot…” Ashley looks away thoughtfully as Elliot and Tedd come and sit down.
“Hey, you two. Having a nice chat?” Tedd says as he sits to my right.

**Just trying to figure something out. My day has been pretty interesting and annoying. Yours?**

“Annoying?” Elliot asks.

**Almost every girl that notices me says I’m cute, and some of the guys do, too. While I can agree with them, it gets a little old, especially with how many people have tried to pet me. Friends, I will oblige. Random people that I never learned their names? It’s a little harder.**

“Yeah,” Jeremy doesn’t really like it when too many people come over,” Tedd comments. “I can see that being annoying.”

“Hey, Elliot?” Ashley queries. “Do you think it’s possible I could get buildups?”

“Um. I dunno. I guess? Probably only if you’re close to a sufficient source for a while, though. I mean, I made a bunch of battery scales when I was doing my job so it wouldn’t make me shift… Why?”

**Elliot, do you recall the source for Divine magic?**

“No.” He closes his eyes for a moment. “Oh. Drat. Uh… Ashley, how many spells do you have?”

“Still just the one, as far as I can tell.” She’d know if she had another one.

“Hmm.” Elliot makes the thinking face I recognize from when Sarah asked him to pick a restaurant. Let’s not let him just freeze up.

**Elliot, just ask the other dragons for a recommendation. I can think of a couple of things right off the bat. Though… I’d suggest against going to a hospital. That might be a bit depressing.** If only because then she’d want to do that as often as possible, and there’s only so much you can do with relieving pain. And I looked into it. No Holy caster has ever gotten a healing spell while helping at any equivalent of a hospital.

9 May 2014
2:30 PM CST

My “special thing” for gym was basically acting as a referee for a second game at the same time. Not super special, beyond Coach having me fly laps instead of running them. Tripling the number of laps made me take longer, but I still fly a lot more than that on a weekly basis.

I’ve got one last activity before I can call this day done and shift back: feminist club. And given how all the girls have been treating me today, I’m sure it’ll be a joy.

There are few enough people in the club that the door isn’t automatically propped open for me. Susan’s already inside… **Hey, Susan, could you get the door for me?**

I can see her freeze up before realizing what I said, then walk over to the door. I’m a little surprised that she didn’t notice me. A miniaturized dragon is pretty different to anything else she could sense.

“Saphira! Glad to see you could make it,” she greets me as she opens the door. Her face drops back to the default. “Sorry. It’s hard to not treat you like a kid or small animal right now.”

**I think it’s the same for everybody on that count. The goal for today was for people to not**
mentally separate my human and dragon forms as though they were two different people. I think I failed, there.**

As I walk into the classroom, a couple of curious girls stand to see who Susan is talking with, completely missing me at first before Catalina looks down. “Eeeh!” she squeals in delight, rushing over to pet me. She’s in such a hurry that she knocks over the desk she was sitting at. Sarah rights it as Catalina pets me. “You’re adorable!”

**Rar.** I spread my wings slightly as she pushes down on my head. You can’t exactly scratch under a reptile’s chin.

Having righted the desk, Sarah walks over to me and Catalina and laughs. “Alright, I think Grace needs to see this.”

**I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast. She can see it if Rhoda shrinks me some other time.** Sarah laughs again.

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When we got home, I shifted back to human form and immediately went to the bathroom. Then I assuaged my hunger with a large snack before calling Grace to figure out where and when to meet her.

“Hi, Grace.” I don’t really use my phone as a phone all that often, but then again, I don’t think many people do that anymore. They’re pocket computers.

“Hi Saphira,” Grace whispers. “Are you ready to meet us, or would you rather do it tomorrow?”

“They’re staying another day?”

“Yeah. Vladia said she could wait to see what Tedd could make. I think it might make Hedge more comfortable, at least.” I hardly remember the group. Names and basic appearances, sure, but I don’t know if Guineas ever even showed his human form in the comic. The group was only on-panel in two sections.

“That’s nice. You know, it might not be so rushed if we just did this tomorrow. You have a nice time. I can meet up with you after my flight in the morning.”

“I think we’ll come watch towards the end. See you then!”

“Well, I guess that’s that, then.

10 May 2014
8:58 AM CST

**Do we have our group, Elliot?** I ask as we near the end of our flight time. In February and March, it was easy to pick people out. Now that it’s getting warm, there are more people in the park than just the hardcore joggers and dragon-watchers.

**Yep. Just follow me when we’re landing.**

We continue flying for a few more minutes before following Elliot down to land, only a short distance from Mr. Verres, Tedd, Grace, and her family. After Mr. Aevil and Magus leave, we shift
to human form as Mr. Verres strides out of the trees. “Sheesh. Don’t draw attention to us,” he scolds our group of dragons.

“We’re allowed to have friends,” Ellen retorts.

“I’ve landed near Ashley before,” Elliot adds with a nod.

“Nng.” Mr. Verres grits his teeth. “Fine.” I don’t want to antagonize him, but I don’t think anyone that might be paying attention to us thinks of the rest of the group as more than just friends. We’re seen with Tedd and Grace at school every day already. Mr. Verres turns around and huffs, and we follow him back to the group that everyone but Ellen could easily pick out from the trees by now.

Huh. I remember the comment that Guineas is supposed to be attractive in his human form, and it’s definitely better than the half-animal form I remember. But… maybe it’s his clothes, but he doesn’t seem anything special. He reminds me of Kyle, if anything. And I guess that either Tedd hasn’t finished his clone form for Vlad, or he didn’t like it.

“I can’t believe we’re only allowed to transform indoors while Grace lives in a place with dragons flying overhead every weekend,” Hedge comments. None of the group is all that hard to place, really. Hedge still has hedgehog spines for hair, and Vlad’s hair is somehow still two-tone.

“It’s new for this place, too,” I clarify. “This only started when I became a dragon and decided Moperville was probably as good a place as any to try revealing magic. Um, someone’s told you all what dragons are, right?”

Hedge nods as Dr. Sciuridae answers. “We found out a while ago, when you showed up on the news. You sort of threw the place we work into chaos.”

“I can’t really say I’m sorry about that, because it had to be done. I don’t want to know what would’ve happened in March if I hadn’t done any of that.”

“Probably nothing,” Vlad remarks humorlessly.

Mr. Verres holds up his hand in a ‘stop’ sign. “While ‘nothing’ could be accurate, we’ve determined that Saphira’s presence was not an influence on Mr. Wu’s decision to come to Moperville.” Mr. Wu is the name of the guy who was demon-possessed. I haven’t spoken with him since then, but I bet he’d be grateful for the chance. Perhaps I ought to visit him, if I can. Now that he’s magic-less, he’s in a normal prison. “If Saphira was prepared but hadn’t revealed her presence to Moperville…”

“I would’ve taken basically the same actions. I didn’t really care about the damage I did, because people’s lives matter a lot more.”

Mr. Verres nods. “Thank you. And if you were not prepared?”

“Either we’d still be stuck, or a bunch of dragons would’ve noticed my and Elliot’s absence from the Mymoir chat and performed either plan B or plan C. Plan B” (bring in a Holy caster, with backup) “would’ve had the same sort of conclusion, but slower and one or two people might’ve died. Plan C” (raid the place with about 5-6 dragons) “would have had a lot more death, including Mr. Wu and anyone he forced into battle.” Plan D is to just wait for him to get bored and move on. Dragons only tried that a couple of times before they realized that even plan C has fewer deaths and ruined lives, though we might feel a little worse about our personal involvement. But we’ve seen the outcome of plan D a few more times than that, thanks to demons that escaped our attention altogether. There’s a reason we know the ultimate outcome of any demon’s abilities.
“Then although there’s no way you could have seen it coming, I’m glad you did what you did.” I think that’s the first time Mr. Verres has openly appreciated me making his job a lot harder.

Tedd shakes his head. “Sorry, I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around how things went so well by comparison.”

I chuckle. “That’s just what it means to be a dragon. You’re always prepared, even if you’d rather not be.”

“Hey, Saphira: would you happen to have any special insight on whether Tedd’s stuff will work on Vladia?” Grace abruptly changes the subject.

I do, but not really? “Um… no?” I answer hesitantly.

Elliot looks over at me. “That sounded an awful lot like a ‘yes.’”

“Alright, fine. It won’t help, though. As Kevin read it, transformation is convenient, unless your name is Vlad. At the same time, I’m pretty sure that a clone form will pull off a form without antennae, so it should work?”

Vlad looks at me in shock. “Wh- ‘unless your name is Vlad’? Who’s this ‘Kevin’?”

I sigh, and Grace begins explaining.

10 May 2014
10:25 AM CST

Guess what: it worked, without any complications. Vlad’s new male form is something of a cross between Mr. Raven and Guineas. The two-tone hair is gone, too. It’s just black now. Hedge visibly relaxed when he saw that it had worked, and Guineas commented that some people at their workplace would be disappointed. Vlad decked him.

Susan couldn’t come (she had work), but my shift doesn’t start until later today. I think I finally hit peak business for my shift, as most of the men coming in now are actually there for tools and hardware for projects, and not just looking for an excuse to come see a pretty girl. Though I still think someone is leaking my schedule online, because I’ve maintained a busier shift than any of my coworkers. Anyway, Elliot and Ellen tagged along.

“Seriously, great job, Tedd,” Elliot compliments him. “You only made it in a day?”

“I laid out a template after Grace brought it up to me. It just took a day to finish up with what Vlad wanted.”

“Still, thank you,” Vlad tells him. “I’m glad my sis met someone like you.” His voice is a more gravelly version of Guineas’s.

“Aww, thanks. I’m happy to help.”

“It’s just a shame you can’t do that for everyone,” Grace pouts.

Mr. Verres and I glare at her as I respond. “I’ve already told you why that’s a bad idea, beyond any of Mr. Verres’s concerns. Not even talking about souls, here.”

“Souls?” Hedge asks.

I scratch the back of my head. “Oh, uh… I don’t believe it’s right for people to use magic or other
means to make their gender not match the one they were born with, because it’s not good for their souls. It’s confusing and not the way God made them. But before we even get to that, you can’t sell wands that would just let people change their own gender, because that would lead to a lot of, um… bad crimes.” Hedge’s eyes widen as he gets the point.

“Oh. Yeah, no, I get it.”

Guineas pulls himself to his feet. “So what now?” he asks.

“I dunno,” Grace answers. “I just thought it’d be nice for everybody to meet. I didn’t think past that point.”

“Well, it’s warming up, finally,” Tedd answers. “What do people do when it’s warm?”

That’s a good question, actually. I’ve made an effort to play fewer video games and use the internet less than Kevin, but even then my time outside is limited to exercise and transportation. I just spend more time studying and making spells than I would otherwise. And I have work, and I spend time with friends, since I have a lot more friends than Kevin ever had at once… but that’s still an indoor thing. I shrug.

“Well, I’ve been playing basketball with Noah despite the cold,” Elliot replies, “but we could do that, or throw a frisbee, or something.”

“If Tedd’s playing, we have eight!” Grace says excitedly. “Or ten, if—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Dr. Sciuridae interrupts. “Ed may be able to keep up with you—”

“Nope.”

“—but.” He pauses, processing Mr. Verres’s response. “Yeah. I don’t think my bones will like me if I try. I’m happy to just watch, though.”

Tedd sighs, then stands up straight. “Alright, I’ll play, if you’re alright with me not keeping up all the time.”

I laugh with a few of the others. “It’s alright, Tedd. I don’t even know all the rules.”

Nearly everyone stares at me. “How have you not played basketball!?” Elliot exclaims.

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In every gym class I’ve taken, it was always a partial game—3 vs. 3 or similar. Beyond that, my dragon form lets me jump a lot higher than my human form. In high school, Kevin tried out for high jump simply because they had every sprinter try out for all the field events. At 6’4” tall, he hit the bar at about 3’. A guy who was less than five feet tall beat that. (Jumping in basketball uses a different measure but the same muscles.) So while you’d think anyone over six feet tall could dunk… Kevin and I can touch the net. And Kevin can almost reach the bottom of the net without leaving the ground.

“So, how are we gonna work this?” Elliot asks. We stopped by his place for a basketball, first, but now we’re standing in the middle of the basketball court. It’s a little chilly, but for once since I came to town, I don’t need Thermal Regulator. I’m fine with slightly shivering in the breeze. I mean, I didn’t use it the whole time we were in Japan, but I’m at home and don’t need it. Yes!

The warmer weather brought out a few folks, but no one was using the basketball court. Just the
nearby tennis courts.

“We could start with an easy division,” I reply, raising an eyebrow. “Genetic magic users against everyone else. Shirts versus scales.”

“Yeah, we could—” Hedge starts. “Wait, scales?”

**Saphira’s Partial Skin to Scales.** Blue scales neck to ankle, no clothes (other than shoes), reduced chest. Hedge’s jaw drops.

“I can’t do that,” Ellen states.

“Ye of little faith. You think I didn’t make a spell for that since the trip to the waterfall?” It wasn’t all that hard, really. The same spell even works on both guys and girls, since the reduced chest is just from a slightly-closer-to-dragon-form partial shift. But now we have a non-customizable indefinite-length ‘Targeted’ version for both of my basic armor spells.

“Hold on. Why *can* you do that?” Hedge asks.

“Everyone knows the dragons here. I’ve done this stuff in public. Pretty often, actually. If they just saw one of you guys with fur or whatever, it’d be strange, but me, or someone in my presence, covered in scales? Interesting, maybe, but still kind of normal. Here. If you’re outside of Moperville… there probably aren’t many places where that wouldn’t draw attention.”

“Huh.” I can tell he’s seriously considering moving here. Or something like that, anyway. I only met him *today*, so I’m basing my assumption on Grace’s expressions.

“Enough chitchat,” Vlad says tersely. “Shirts versus scales? Let’s see how well you play it on the court!”

13 May 2014
6:24 PM CST

Our first matchup was *alright*, but Tedd and I didn’t help enough over the teamwork the Sciuridaes displayed. And this was a game *without* magic, aside from the scales. As Ellen told me later, she didn’t like the chest reduction in *concept*, but for a sport, it helped a bunch. I mean, I did it for practical reasons in the first place. Tedd certainly wouldn’t have thought of it. We also had a few more matchups after the first. As a precaution, Vlad was always on team Shirts. Hedge and Guineas were able to morph away scales, but couldn’t replicate them again later.

As for work, I’m seeing what I can do about going to Monday sessions at Shapeless Martial Arts. (I still think the name is silly.) It’s looking like that won’t work until after school lets out, but I can still go on *some* days. Despite the fact that I haven’t had a full two semesters of school in a row, I find myself looking forward to it. I’ve had a lot more work in the past third of a year than I could’ve reasonably expected… er, well, before I existed. Or something. The things I learned about myself in that first night kinda put things in perspective. Though I still didn’t see myself risking my life nearly so soon, or even twice within two months.

Back to work, back to work.

It’s Tuesday, so things are reasonably slow and I’m working alone. I’ve gotten the hang of things now, really, and on weekdays I’m fine by myself even though, as Kyle put it, things are ramping up for outdoor projects. Apparently hardware stores are hectic when it’s warm outside. (Gee, never would’ve guessed.) I’ve had more than a few customers ask me if I kept things cold on purpose.

“No, I’m not Elsa. Heat dragons don’t have *nearly* so wide an effect.” I mean, five miles is a large
diameter. But I can’t turn summer into winter in that area for longer than about a second at most, and Elsa probably affected at least twenty miles for a few days. I don’t think any magic in the whole world is that powerful. Maybe if you had a large number of Divine casters try it? Or a few really old immortals, although I don’t think their magic can do that sort of thing.

Oh, hold on, that guy looks sort of lost. He just sorta wandered in the door and is standing in the middle of the open area in front of the counter. “Can I help you find anything?” I ask.

The kid (I say *kid* because he can’t be more than 16 years old. Probably more like 14) looks around wildly, startled by my question. Then he visibly steels himself and rotates on his heels to face my three other customers. He takes a deep breath before shouting, “EVERYONE STOP! THIS IS A HOLDUP!”

Okay, two things: (1) the store isn’t that big. That was entirely too loud. (2) What?

The guy isn’t even wearing a *mask*.

Alright, well, we have security cameras, but I may as well mark his description. Very white guy, a mop of red hair like would be normal in Kevin’s universe (as in, light orange), freckles, about five and a half feet tall. Thin and gaunt and wearing a green hoodie. Both his hands are in his pockets, and… the shape of his right hand is worrying.

I don’t exactly have any training beyond what Kevin got in martial arts: hand over your wallet before your life. But… no. I’m a *dragon*. I don’t care if he has an AK-47 up that hoodie, he’s not winning.

Our overly loud and careless assailant turns around to face me. “Open the register.” His voice is shaking.

“No,” I reply firmly. The other customers stare at me. One, a burly man, pulls out his phone discreetly.

“Did you hear me? Open the register!” the boy asks, his voice *slightly* more confident.

“No,” I reply again, a little louder.

The kid hesitates for a second, then pulls out his right hand. Like I thought, it’s wrapped around a pistol, his finger on the trigger. However, his hand is shaking so mightily that I doubt he could hit me, even though there’s only ten feet between us.

Eh, no sense being careless. **Jorge’s Skin to Scales.** I *know* these would stop a knife and seriously dampen a bullet’s impact. And if that’s not enough…. It’s been said that *any guy with a gun can take down a wizard*. Not a dragon, though, especially if we see it coming. Every dragon has their own way to completely render a firearm useless, and for heat…. I freeze the barr– no, wait, the action. I’m not sure the barrel would matter, but if the space between the firing pin and the bullet is frozen solid, the bullet’s not going anywhere even if this kid *does* pull the trigger.

And upon seeing my scales, the kid completely loses it, just as the burly man in the back raises his phone to his ear. “What–?” he whimpers as he drops the gun to the floor. The customers *not* on the phone duck behind displays, but as I’ve frozen a critical section, it just hits with a loud clatter, not a bang. As I thought, *probably* not a guy from in-town. I mean, my name tag says “Saphira.” How common of a name can that be? The kid just sort of stands there with his mouth hanging open as I walk over to him (with a few *clack*s, since my feet are now clawed) and grab both of his wrists tightly, careful of my claws.
“Now then. You wanna fill me in on why you thought this was a good idea while we wait for the police?” I ask gently.

The boy breaks down in tears.

13 May 2014
6:34 PM CST

I’ve got to hand it to the cops on their response time. And respect. The kid (“Zach Greenspan”) still had a knife in his hoodie when they arrived, but even though they handcuffed him, they were pretty gentle about the whole thing, relatively speaking. Forceful, but gentle.

According to Zach, he’s got a rough home life. Frequent absentee dad, mother doesn’t care for him as much as she should. He said that he was put up to this by some other boys in his neighborhood (back in Chicago). They even gave him the knife, although the gun is his mother’s. He said he came to Moperville because he knew the cops back home would be harder and he thought we were all crazy; what’s one more? I had to assure him that my scales were real and he wasn’t going off the deep end from stress. And of course, one of the patrons went and snapped a few photos of me holding Zack in place. Still with Skin to Scales active, too, since I wasn’t taking any chances until the police arrived. (I promptly dropped the spell after they handcuffed Zach. My shoes are a lot more comfortable than standing on two clawed feet.) And after the police left, we got the press.

Not Carol this time. She does oddities and social stuff. Nope, this time I get Hunter, the criminal case guy.

“Hunter here, Channel 4 News,” he says to the camera barely after I asked where Carol was. The guy’s fairly nondescript. A photogenic face peppered with black stubble, sure, but I look at him and think “Dick Gumshoe.” Actually, the Ace Attorney character of that name has a pretty similar appearance, though this guy dresses a lot better than ‘a trench coat that is green but started khaki, and jeans.’ He’s here in a button-down plaid shirt and khaki pants. “Here’s the employee that police said halted a robbery in progress. Could you give me your name?”

I already don’t like this guy. I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to do anything that would interfere with a case, but this one is so open-and-shut I doubt it’ll be an issue. Still, I’ll try to keep this as vague as possible, for Zach’s sake. The kid deserves better. Actually, after the hearing, I think I’ll see about visiting him, wherever he ends up. Given how quickly he lost his nerve today, I doubt he’ll get much of a sentence.

“For the few people who’ve never seen me before, my name is Saphira.” My eyes are half-shut in annoyance. This is not the sort of publicity I want.

“And where might people have seen you before, Saphira?”

“On a small number of interviews with Carol, starting with your hour-long special on me in January.” I use my left index finger to pull out fingers on my right hand, counting. “Then videos of me going flying every Saturday, and my martial arts lessons over at Shapeless Martial Arts, and that whole thing in March with damage and reconstruction of both Moperville high schools.” I open my right hand all the way, palm towards myself. “And since then, more video of my flight and sparring with other locals in the air around here. Sure, none of it was the same sort of thing as today, but I’m a known factor in Moperville.”

Hunter is making a face like he’s listening and wants to look like he believes me, but I can tell by his eyes that he’s not local and thinks, like Zach did, that this entire town has gone off the deep end. “Alright. Can you describe what happened here today?”
“A guy came in and declared that he was holding up the store without wearing a mask, pulling out a weapon, or anything you’d expect from watching police dramas. Then he shakily asked me to open the register, and I told him no.”

“Shakily?” Hunter asks.

“He clearly didn’t want to do this. I think he tried to get caught. I mean, he only pulled out a firearm after I denied him twice.”

“And what did you do then?”

“This.” Jorge’s Skin to Scales. Ha! Hunter has about the same look on his face as Zach did not too long ago. I can’t help but grin at his flabbergasted mug.

“I-I see,” he stutters. I end the spell.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m still the only person working the register. Buy something or get out of the way, please.” The three customers who’ve been here the whole time have now formed a line behind the cameraman, though I can see at least one was amused by my exchange with Hunter.

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An appearance on the news for an unplanned event = meetings in my head with other dragons and in person with Mr. Verres. The dragons were a lot less mad. “Try not to say so much during an interview for the news. You might get the case thrown out.” “Alright. I’ll keep that in mind.” The therapist dragons agreed that it would probably help more if I visited Zach than if he was put in a juvenile detention center.

At the Verres household, on a chair in the living room, I’m getting a talking-to similar to what Justin went through the first time Elliot used his superhero spell.

“What were you thinking!?” Mr. Verres almost-shouts at me. “He had a gun!”

“Well, yes, but…” I reply weakly. He hasn’t nearly the same build as Dad, but he’s got the same knack for father-type scolding.

“Explain yourself.”

“I… even if my scales didn’t stop the bullet, he couldn’t have fired the gun anyway. Not with the action frozen stiff.”

“What?” Still an angry tone, but he seemed a bit surprised.

“I know how guns work, roughly,” I continue, still with a bit of a whimper in my voice, and not looking directly at him. “When you pull the trigger, the firing pin slams into the bullet, igniting the propellant. I froze the space between the pin and the bullet solid. If he pulled the trigger, the pin couldn’t move anyway.”

Mr. Verres takes a short break to think. “Alright. It’s still not the safest approach, but I can see your reasoning.” His voice is calmer but keeps the hard edge. “At least you had the sense to keep the scales until the police arrived. Which leads us to the next part. Why did you tell the news so much?”

“Because I thought it was better for it to come from me than the kid. I think he’s been through enough. And… on the legal side, the other dragons have already scolded me for it. I know I
shouldn’t say so much.”

“You’re already defending him?” I still can’t bring myself to look at him, but I can hear the incredulity.

“Yeah, I guess. I… don’t know as much about him as I did Magus, I guess. But I find myself wanting to be more involved than I am. Maybe visit his home or something.”

My eyes aren’t meeting his, but I can still ‘see’ him shake his head via my heat sense. “I can talk to you about that later. I’m sure you realize the danger. One more thing. Why did you form the scales again for the news?”

“That was a personal thing. Sorry. I could tell that Hunter didn’t believe me, so I just sorta… ‘in-your-face’d him.”

“I think you can tell why that was wrong.”

“Yes, sir. Magic should have a good reputation. And I shouldn’t act like a jerk.”

“Remember that, please. The immortals in this area are hard enough to corral, and you’re still my responsibility.”

17 May 2014
11:00 AM CST

I’ve been informed that the farmers’ market doesn’t really get going until about noon, but I have work then, so I’m visiting early. Besides, it opens at ten.

Sarah gave a plug for her booth yesterday at the feminist club meeting. “We’re only selling two kinds of wands that we didn’t give out here, but they look a lot nicer. If you’d like to support our business, feel free to come out to our stand and bring friends and family!”

There’s actually a fair amount of interesting stuff here. International foods, specialty items (such as duck eggs), and all sorts of crafts that probably sell better in person than online: charms, bracelets, artwork, and the newcomer—Tedd’s Authentic Magic Wands. They’ve got a basic folding table with a white tablecloth over it and a yellow cloth banner decorating the front with the business name. As for the trio, Tedd is sitting behind the table with Grace while Sarah gives demonstrations for the curious.

I amble on over once I finish my lunch I bought at a German foods booth. I can see why they sell well here. The schnitzel was great.

“Oh, hey, Saphira!” Grace greets me, waving.

“Hey! How’s business?”

“Pretty good, actually,” Sarah answers.

Tedd takes the next response after finishing up with a customer. The guy bought a flashlight wand. “I’ve had a few older guys ask if the size change wand could just change their stomach. No, unfortunately.” He laughs. “Seriously, though, we’ve already beaten the cost of materials, though I didn’t ask my father what this space cost him.”

“Sandi even convinced Tony to buy a flashlight, after he found out he couldn’t use the wands,” Sarah remarks.
“That was such a relief,” I hear Tedd say under his breath. I don’t know if he’s referring to Tony not mocking him or the fact that Tony can’t use magic.

“What is a dragon doing at a wand shop?” I hear someone ask behind me as Grace’s eyes widen. I turn to find Mr. Raven standing behind me, wearing a somewhat-formal sweater vest and button-down shirt. I note he’s disguised with the ‘old man’ look, but I don’t expect him to change that anytime soon.

“Just checking in with my friends. And you?”

“I’ve always supported this market.” He turns to face Tedd. Given how he acted in the past regarding Tedd, I’m surprised he approached the booth at all. “I assume your father is aware of this?”

“He helped set it up! I mean, we spent our break making all these wands at my home, and he got us the space here.”

Mr. Raven picks up a demo flashlight wand, effortlessly activating it. “Solid craftsmanship. Why is there a seam?”

“It’s easier to buy nails and dowel rods than to ask immortals for supplies.”

“Oh, an ‘iron-core wand,’ I see. Good idea!”

“It was Susan’s, actually,” Sarah clarifies. “Tedd just came up with sealing the nails in wood, and Justin worked out how.”

“A solid group effort. How much for one of these?” he asks, setting the wand back on the table. He looks genuinely impressed.

“$5 for a flashlight, $15 for hair length or size change and $20 for hairstyle,” Grace rattles off. I guess she’s been answering that question for the past hour.

“I’ll take a flashlight and a size change,” he says, pulling out a 20-dollar bill. “Good work. You know, I’m starting to like dragons.” I’m thrown off balance as he actually flashes a smile at me.
Connections

30 May 2018
7:00 AM CST

Just like at Kevin’s graduation, we’re not at the school today, but at the basketball courts for the local community college. Unlike his graduation, it’s on a weekday and everyone else gets the day off. (Also like his high school, seniors finish up before the school year ends for everyone else.) Even Moperville South gets the day off, although their graduation is tomorrow. I can spot Mr. Raven in the crowd, adjacent to some other people I assume are Moperville South teachers, and all of my friends from that school are here as well, even if their families aren’t.

Kevin wasn’t all that excited for his graduation—more like relieved—and it’s about the same for me. Tedd’s annoyed that he can’t sell more wands tomorrow, since that would overlap with Grace’s graduation, even though his spot is reserved every other week. I think he’d rather be at Grace’s graduation, but it’s a tougher decision than he would’ve liked. As for the rest, I think only Sarah, Grace and Nanase are truly excited. Susan brought a Partial Armor scale and plenty of hand sanitizer so that she could actually shake the administrators’ hands, and I can tell she’s not comfortable, even with how far apart we’re seated. (Hooray for alphabetical seating. I’m a row off from Sarah and in the opposite corner from Tedd.)

The only thing I’m nervous about here is the marker this sets in our lives. After this, we’ve only got a couple of months before it’s a lot harder to get back together. I might even never see some friends again, although it might be alright with others. Susan leaving for college very far away doesn’t mean much when I can fly there in a day. It’s still in the country, just not the same time zone. And I’ve got a short trip lined up with her and Nanase for a couple of weeks out. Just some time to spend together.

Ah, they’re starting. Time to look like I’m paying attention.

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I was necessarily ineligible from valedictorian thanks to only attending the school for one semester, but I completed everything necessary for graduation between the initial tests and my assortment of classes, so I got to graduate anyway. Nanase is valedictorian for her class, though, so at least I’ll get to hear her speech. I wonder how that will go? The person who spoke for our class (Matt Cohen) wasn’t all that interesting. Just some stuff about friendship and college and jobs and whatnot.

Someone who knew Kevin from high school might wonder how on Earth I was able to finish English and history classes so strongly. The answer is twofold. One, Kevin had an English class at college that actually taught him how to write an essay prior to the cutoff in his memories. None of his middle or high school classes did that. “Write more and you’ll get better.” Not according to the C’s he kept getting. The second part is… Rhoda. Not as a tutor, no. More like… well, for the time I spent as Cassie, I didn’t want it to go to waste. So I’d copy essay prompts and other homework questions into my notes in the Mymoir, and then while Rhoda had Cassie, I’d have two options on what to do: homework, or pay attention to Cassie. Normally, I’m crap at paying attention to something I don’t want to do, but when the choices are so narrow, I’d much rather do homework. Plus it’s a great way to do second drafts, when you actually don’t remember the first and are just reading it as if someone else wrote it.

They made us hold our claps to the end, so I couldn’t cheer for my friends, really. I still gave Elliot
a congrats through the Mymoir when he walked across the stage. High school can be a lot of hard work, in a much different way to college, from my brief experience. So to more than make up for not being able to cheer for each other as we walked, we’ve got a small bit of a party tomorrow after the Moperville South ceremony. Bowling, since that’s one thing we could all agree on that didn’t necessarily involve someone having to host the whole group. Mr. Verres was happy with that, at least. It means no whacky transformation shenanigans, but it’s not like we can’t use any magic while we’re out. If no one else does, I’m challenging Nanase to have Fox bowl for her at least once.

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Moperville South’s ceremony is… very similar to North’s. I think the key difference is who is speaking as valedictorian. Speaking of which…

“My fellow classmates. We are gathered here today to celebrate our achievements. Whether you are graduating with honors and headed off to one of the finest universities or trade schools, or preparing to enter the work force directly, or simply celebrating the end of one part of life’s journey, you all have completed the first step to the rest of your lives. We all have.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting many of you. I’m not about to pretend I met all of you—we all know our school is just too big for that.” Nanase pauses as quite a few of her classmates laugh. “We’ve made many memories here together, and I hope that many of those will be cherished for all time. Let’s not forget the fantastic efforts of Moperville South’s faculty and staff guiding us through this critical time in our development, especially with these changing times.” Nanase pauses again, giving a few claps to start a round of applause. If I gave a speech for something like this, I’d have help, but she’s really good on her own. Zero guesses as to what ‘these changing times’ refers.

“I know there are diverse feelings in this room today when we think on these past four years. Rejoicing, relief, regret… I’ve got some of my own in every category, too. And when we look to the future, is it confidence or uncertainty? A little of both, I’d expect. You have the right to be confident—after all, you’ve just completed a twelve-year project! You’re all set for the next step, whatever it may be. As for what it will be, and where that will lead, well, there’s the uncertainty. But don’t worry! Even if you have no idea where you’re going next. After all, nobody knows what the future holds. We may have the best intentions, or the most data, or the best predictions, but the future is always uncertain. The only certainty you can really grasp is through your own actions. So if we do our best to make the world a better place, it will progress toward that end, at least within our own spheres of influence, however large or small those might be. Every step counts. Let’s make the best of it, starting with our steps across this stage!”

I’d say her classmates appreciated the speech, but she got just as much applause as Matt did yesterday. I definitely paid more attention to this one, though. She did a great job covering all the bases, including where the world is headed for magic stuff. At least, it sure sounded like she was talking about that to me. Maybe that’s just where my head is.

Okay, yeah, thinking on her words, she managed to make it so that they sounded personal no matter who you are. Which… might be even better, really.

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31 May 2014
3:01 PM CST

Graduation ceremonies over and done with (finally!), so now it’s time to party! The bowling alley is surprisingly crowded, considering how much warmer it is outside than it was just a few weeks ago. I don’t think it’ll be truly nice weather until the middle of summer, but 55°F is much better than 25°F.
Since this party is just bowling, possibly with a little magic thrown in, we’ve got our expanded
group of reasonably close friends. As in, we’ve got the core nine, of course, plus Magus, Ashley,
Diane, Catalina, Rhoda, and Luke. (It is a little odd for me to see Luke outside of work. He’s never
hung out with us all before, but then again, neither has Rhoda. Of course, he’s here on Justin’s
invite… but I still group my friends by where I see them most often, and ‘at work’ = ‘probably
won’t see them anywhere else.’) With a total of fifteen people, we’re bowling three lanes for two
hours.

As we’re setting up the lanes, with me bowling with Susan, Catalina, Rhoda, and Diane, Catalina
and Rhoda come up right next to me. “Hey, Saphira?” Rhoda whispers. “Could you let me try having Cassie
bowling at some point?”

“No,” I answer. “I’d rather like to keep my memories of today. If you want that, you can go bowling some other time.”

“Why do you think there’s a memory wipe anyway?” Catalina asks. “None of her other spells have anything like
that.”

“Probably because of the way the spell works. It makes a fairy that’s connected to Rhoda’s mind and the target’s mind.
Having your mind connected to someone else’s can… have some odd side effects, if it goes untreated. The memory wipe
is then the spell’s effort to erase that connection. Or maybe it’s a side effect of removing said connection? I’m not aware
of any Common magic that can fully treat stuff like that without memory loss, but any use of multiple kinds of magic will
interfere at least somewhat with each system. A Draconic form shift will remove any active spells from any system, for
example.”

“So… I shouldn’t use this on anyone besides a dragon, then,” Rhoda pouts.

“I didn’t say that. But you should be careful. I think it’d be fine to use it on someone like Ashley, though, as her magic
makes her fully immune to any sort of mental effects from any magic system.” I wonder if she knows that? It’s
probably come up at some point.

Our conversation is interrupted by Tedd’s arrival. He’s the last to arrive, with Grace carrying… a
sheet cake! “Sorry for my lateness, everyone,” he says sheepishly. “I wanted to be careful with the
cake.”

Bearing in mind the conversation I just had, I approach Tedd. “It’s just a normal cake, right?
Nothing ‘special’?”

He laughs and shakes his head vigorously. “No, no. I was aware that this would be in public. The
only ‘special’ thing about it is that the left side is chocolate while the right is lemon.”

“Lemon for me, then, I guess.”

“I thought girls liked chocolate?” I’m guessing he made the left side a lot bigger than the right,
then.

“Chocolates, yes. Anything with baker’s chocolate, not as much, especially chocolate cake and ice
cream. Not for me, anyway. How’d you split it, though?”

“It’s actually three cakes, side by side. I just iced them together. The left two are chocolate.”

Diane walks over. “What’d you mean by ‘special’?” she asks me. “I mean, the way he reacted…”

“Oh, ah… with the right materials, it’s possible to make edible stuff act like wands, sort of. As in
it’ll enchant the person who eats it with whatever spell it’s been made to hold.”
“Oh! Like my cookie!” Rhoda says. I have no idea what she’s referring to.

“Um… sure, whatever. At any rate… you know Ellen’s base spell?” I know she knows what it is. “He used that with a bunch of muffins for a small private party. Great fun in a private party, but not the sort of thing to do in public.”

Susan glares at Tedd. “Just to be clear, what were you going to do if it was private?”

He scratches the back of his head nervously. “Eh-heh… Nothing bad. I didn’t think about it much, since I knew it’d be a public party from the start. If you really must know, I’ll tell you later.”

31 May 2014
3:26 PM CST

“… How do you think most people would react if they found out that dragons go bowling with their friends?” Diane asks, walking back from a spare.

“Worldwide? They’d probably have a lot of trouble picturing it.” I laugh at the image of me trying to bowl in dragon form. Maybe tiny-dragon-me could, though it’d still require bumpers.

“How about around here?” Susan asks.

Rhoda shrugs. “They might still have trouble picturing it with Saphira. With Ellen it’s probably expected.”

I glare at her with a mock anger. “What? Why me?”

Catalina comes back from her turn to hug Rhoda’s shoulder defensively. “You just seem a lot more serious in public than the others.”

I act shocked. “Is this not ‘in public?’”

Susan smiles slightly at my acting. “You know what she means. And it’s not really a bad thing that you seem more dependable than most people.”

“Yes, that would be an important quality for dragons. Wait, ‘seem?’”

Diane’s turn to giggle. “Yes, seem. And you are, too—you’ve proved it.”

My turn. I pick up my ball and walk—

“Still using a 13, Saphira?” Nanase jeers.

We’re having a bit of a competition on who can use the heaviest ball.

“I’m not ashamed of losing on that front!” I call back. Nanase and Elliot are both bowling with 15-pound balls. Grace is noticeably bulkier while using a 16, and Justin’s aura flares every turn as he swings an 18. I have no idea why this alley has an 18, but nobody is beating Justin, since that’s the heaviest ball they have. I don’t think Kevin ever saw anything higher than 15. I’m just happy to be doing better than Kevin’s 11. At the low end, Ashley and Rhoda are using 9s.

“Spare! Yes!” I exclaim. The muscle memory on this that I got from Kevin doesn’t work, but my record is about on par with his so far: I can consistently get at least 7 pins, but the back corners seem down to luck.

“I’ll still win!” Diane states confidently. She’s three points ahead, but it’s only the fourth frame.
“Just you try!”

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Somehow, the conversation has worked its way around to our plans for the summer.

“And you?” Elliot asks me.

“Well, I was going to fly out to Kevin’s hometown in a couple of weeks. With Susan and Nanase tagging along on my back.”

“Couldn’t Susan fly on her own?” Grace asks.

“Yeah! Why just her and Nanase? I want to learn more about you, too!” Sarah complains.

I hold up my hand. “One, it’s more than twice as far to get there than to where Elliot and I fled in March.”

“I don’t exactly feel like flying about 700 miles, even for this,” Susan states. Ellen widens her eyes, then nods in agreement.

“Two, I’m pretty sure I can only carry two people comfortably for that long.” Yes, we’ve checked that out. Three is getting too close to the base of my wings. “So yeah, it’s four hours one-way for just me. We’re getting a hotel room. It’ll be a two-day trip.” It’s not exactly a large place. My nostalgia says we could spend more time there, but even after three days I think we’d exhaust basically everything.

“I guess with Elliot, we could expand the group to six…” Tedd muses.

Elliot puts his hand behind his head. “Eh, I mean, don’t you think Saphira just wanted it to be a small group?” Either it’s his hate of traveling showing or he gets me, but I’ll choose to believe the latter. I send him a “Thank you” through the Mymoir, and he blushes slightly.

Tedd thinks for a second before Grace whispers something to him. She probably noticed my closed eyes and Elliot’s blush, because he drops the subject. “What about after that trip? You’ve still got a while left for the summer.”

“Well, in July, I’ve got that convention trip with Susan and Sarah, and I guess I’d spend the last month-and-a-half just hanging out with you guys.” We already went over the convention. It’s the second week of the month, and we’re going for the whole week. I’ve got a bunch I want to get done before then, but I should have the time to do it.

“Sounds a bit boring, but I’m sure we can find a way to fill that time,” Diane comments.

31 May 2014
6:00 PM CST

The options for today, given the graduation ceremony time, were ‘get up really early’ or ‘go flying a lot later.’ Guess what we picked.

**You’re really going out of state for college, Susan?** Ellen asks after pulling out of a dive. She’s done her ‘skydiving’ a bunch since the first time, and gotten pretty good at it.

**Yes. I applied before I even met Saphira. I imagine it will be a challenge to continue flying every week there, but I’ll find a spot. I’ve got a car, at least. Saphira, how do you plan to make it to your
I’m going to continue to live at the Pompoms residence while attending community college, so it’s a valid question. I was going to ask the college if I could have a landing spot or something. So that I could just fly most of the way, before I have to walk.

You think they’ll go for it? Elliot asks. After all, he’s attending the same place.

I dunno. I haven’t asked yet. But it’s that or walk, so I hope they will. I’ll ask after I get in. I couldn’t exactly apply without a GPA.

How will you carry your stuff? Ellen asks.

That’s one of my projects for this summer. I’m thinking a fancy duffel, possibly using a spell to help me mount it like saddlebags.

Summary of everyone’s college plans: Elliot and Ellen are going to the community college to major in Undeclared. Tedd, Grace and Sarah want to focus on the wand business, but as fallback, Tedd and Grace will take classes at the community college (for Entrepreneurship and Accounting, respectively) while Sarah attends a nearby university for an Art degree. Susan wants a political science degree from her California university, while Nanase is getting a teaching (foreign language) degree in Wisconsin. Justin will go for a business management degree at the community college, and I’ll be attending the place to set up for a Mechanical Engineering degree that I hope to finish at Virginia Tech. (Hey, Kevin liked it there. I know it’s out of state, but I can afford it, eventually, and it’s not like Elliot’s likely to leave Moperville while I’m gone.) Rounding out the group with the last six from the party, Magus is just going straight into a job for as long as she can’t go home, Luke’s already attending college, Ashley will also major in Undeclared at the college, Diane will go into fashion at the local university, Rhoda will do history at the local college, and Catalina is looking at political science at the community college. So in total, the only people leaving town by more than a day’s drive are Susan and Nanase, at least in the near future. That’s actually pretty surprising, given how Kevin’s group scattered to the winds.

Actually, Saphira, I was wondering, Susan continues, what would happen if I didn’t go flying every week?

Same thing as if I didn’t exercise all the time. You’d get weaker and have about as much trouble sustaining flight as you did at the beginning.

No exceptions?

Well, one exception. If you get pregnant, your body accounts for it. You can’t exactly shift and maintain a pregnancy.

Susan makes a face of disgust, sticking out her tongue and screwing up her face as much as she’s able. Then it changes to confusion. Wait, how do you know that? I thought there weren’t any kids born to dragons?

Elliot and I look to each other. We’ve both read the tale, but it’s not really our story to tell…

Um… it’s kinda… private. Maybe I can copy the Draconic for you later?

I’ll ask Meriam, Elliot offers. She’s one dragon that still doesn’t trust me simply because I’m blue. Of course, Fred affected her in a much more personal way than he did most…
The first of my two planned visits to people I should really keep up with is today. In other words, I’m rather surprised that this is the second time I’ve spoken with Abraham, given his importance in world history and the fact that he’s been un-stoned since Magus broke the Diamond all the way back in January. Yes, he’s still in jail—for assault against a minor (Ellen), battery against a minor (Nanase) and assault and battery against Mr. Raven. Given his age, he may well die in jail, though I hope that isn’t the case. I can’t help but hope for the best for everyone, no matter their crimes, especially if they repent.

“Let me get this straight: you’re telling me that you’re teaching this city about magic, hoping to restore it to how it worked in my own time? Why did it even change?” He looks considerably more haggard than the last time I saw him, with his beard unkempt and bags under his eyes indicating a low amount of sleep. Since he’s still a wizard, we’re at a somewhat-secure location apart from a normal prison. Mr. Verres said they had to designate one of their anti-magic prisons for visiting once it was clear that I wasn’t just going to go away.

“Magic didn’t change. People’s perception of it did, partly due to your own actions. Of course, you weren’t able to witness the consequences, so I can see where you’re confused.”

“From my own actions?”

“What was the general knowledge level for magic, prior to you first casting the sealing spell that encased you in stone between uses of the diamond?”

“I don’t—I had been an apprentice to a wizard,” he relinquishes. “Most people had daily interactions with magic, though some still thought it was a myth. Immortals were everywhere, in those days, and I heard tell on the streets of dragons in the neighboring nations. Though when we gained a dragon of our own, he was nothing like the tales.” He looks straight at me. “And you’re a blue dragon, right?”

“Yes. The second blue dragon. Your story concerns the first, that is, Frederick, the Tyrant of England.” I’m well-aware that whatever I say here is being recorded. The important thing, though, is not necessarily the dragon history, but that the dragons learned from it.

“How am I responsible for that monster?”

“You remember the first thing your Diamond created, right?”

Abraham gets a far-away look in his eyes. “The unwaking wolf.”

“Which then went on to kill a man named Blaike Raven.”

He bows his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know the name.”

“A husband to an immortal, and the father of Adrian Raven. The very same man you encountered in Moperville South last year.”

Abraham’s eyes widen.

“Blake also happened to be his town’s monster hunter, and Adrian best friends with the son of the town’s nobles—a young boy by the name of Frederick.”

Abraham starts to shake, so I pause to let him calm down before he has a heart attack. “S-so you’re
saying,” he says, quaking, “I—”

I hold up my hand. “Calm down, old man. It was a long time ago. But I want you to understand the nature of my repairs. That’s why I’m here today, in addition to just checking in on you.” I smile at him pleasantly and wait for him to still before I continue. “Indirectly, yes: you are responsible for the initial manner and mindset by which Frederick awakened. However, he wasn’t the Tyrant until twenty years later, so I can’t imagine it’s all your fault. But he earned the title of Tyrant, and he earned the lawful execution that ended his reign of terror. Tell me, then, the difference in the view of dragons between your first and second problem with the Diamond?”

Abraham breathes deeply, then sighs. “I… suppose it makes sense, now. When I first slept, dragons were viewed almost as myths, yet always in a positive light. They were helpers, instructors, protectors… They were also elusive, but respected greatly. Frederick was different, but viewed as an exception, not the rule. When I next rose, it was almost as if I had been moved to another world. Dragons were no longer myths, but terrible monsters to be hunted, driven away for fear that they might reap destruction. I assumed something cataclysmic had occurred, but as it wasn’t relevant to my mission, I paid it little mind. I suppose I should have investigated the events more closely.”

“We don’t have nearly as much information on that period—the first few decades after Fred’s death—as for any other period in time. Once another dragon awakened, we could use them to gather information, but any dragons known before that point had a very hard time blending in to learn about the world. A lot of them swapped locations to do their best to learn something, but we couldn’t continue to help people until their lust for vengeance against the people who resembled Frederick faded. The dragons that had shielded people for millennia were hunted by the same people they had fought so hard to protect, as all around the masses, their kin died fighting the villains that dragons had so long guarded the populace against. In simpler terms, the dragons were forced to watch as their assistance was refused, even as many people who could have lived died for lack of help.” I try and fail to maintain my serious tone as my eyes well up with tears and my voice cracks. I wasn’t there, but if there’s one thing the Mymoir conveys better than a book, it’s the emotion of a moment or a time. The rage, the despair—the raw feelings of dragons as they recorded our fall from grace—it’s hard to read without feeling them too. It’s not a memory from my past, but I feel like I was actually there.

I look to Abraham and realize his hand is on my… scaly arm. I… I’d cast Partial Armor without even thinking. I inhale shakily before ending the spell and putting my head on the table we’re sitting at.

A few moments pass in silence, and Abraham bows his head. When I lift my own, I can see that he’s crying, too, slightly. “Unfortunately, I have all too personal an experience with the same sort of mindset that led to such a thing. I know you agree when I say that it never should have happened, but that saying that won’t fix anything. And I can see why you’re doing something about it.” He pauses and takes a deep, but shaky, breath, exhaling with force. “Now then, I’m a little curious. You spoke as though you were there, yet you say you are the second blue dragon, and Frederick was the first. How old are you, actually?”

“I’m only 19. I became a dragon only a week before the Diamond shattered. But dragons can share memories, sort of, and since the legacy I get to ride on is from Fred, I viewed every memory that dragons had concerning him. It’s…” I shake my head, tears welling up again. “It’s very painful. To know that you can help, that you have helped, and yet these same people hate you. For your friends and neighbors to be calling for you to be lynched simply because one member of your family stepped too far out of line. A member that you had to kill, for your friends’ and neighbors’ sake. As a dragon, I share a lot of my thoughts and feelings with the other dragons. I’ve known
them for less than half a year, and yet, it feels as though I’ve known them my whole life.” Yes, the argument can be made that I have, but I feel like I know them almost as well as I know Kevin. Or at least that part of my family. “I… They felt the same about Fred, before he died. Afterwards, they found that they didn’t know him nearly as well as they thought, but… the memories were still there. And I’ve seen those, too. It’s hard enough to have to part with family, to part with friends… but to then have your friends hate you by association? I – I’m the first dragon to even try to repair our relationship with the general public. There were others who made small efforts, tried to continue fulfilling our promise to protect… And—”

I’m happy that it’s going so well, but the memories. What I’ve seen, I remember as my own. More real than any film, or even a first-person game. My throat closes. It’s just—too much.

6 June 2014
1:14 PM CST

I’ve calmed down once more, but it took me a while.

“Why me?” I hear Abraham ask, once my thoughts have sufficiently cleared. I still feel the sadness, but I can function again.

“Because I knew you’d understand. It was important that you learned about this, sure… but I knew you’d understand. I’m friends with Nanase, after all.” My voice is still cracking, but at least I can speak now.

“I… Are they… alright? Nanase and Ellen? I’ve been thinking about them since I rose again, and they never told me the outcome of the Diamond being used, beyond it being destroyed.”

“Really? Uh… they’ve been fine for a while now. Nanase was distressed at the time the Diamond was destroyed, sure, but fine. Ellen was… in much worse shape. But she’s fine now.” I don’t know if he knows about half dragons—probably not—but it hardly matters right this second.

“Oh. Well, that’s good,” he says with a sigh of relief. “And… Adrian? I… I never should have attacked him. Is he alright?”

“Yes, he’s fine. He spent some time in the hospital after you defeated him, but the last I saw him, he was watching his daughter graduate from high school.” I can’t imagine how he feels about Diane, but he certainly looked happy last Saturday.

“His… he has a daughter?” Abraham looks even more crushed over his past behavior.

“It’s complicated. But yes, he does. I… wouldn’t advise you to try talking to him, though.”

“I won’t. Just… thank you.”

I stand, bracing myself against the table, before holding out my hand to shake his. “Thank you for listening. I’ll see about coming back to visit, sometime.” He shakes my hand, and I unsteadily walk out before flying home.

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I walk in the front door to find Susan bent over the kitchen table with a lot of paper. At a glance, it’s a bunch of printouts, with equations, charts, graphics, and so on… and a few pages of notes in Draconic. I’d seen some of this stuff on her desk on occasion, but I wasn’t aware just how much she had. “Susan, is all this just for the heat-based light spell?”
“Huh?” She looks at me, startled. “Oh, yeah, it is. I thought it might be easier to understand if I could see it all at once, but I’m still having trouble.”

“Well, I’m all in on the complex math and physics. Let me take a look. If I can’t explain it to you, we could try asking Grace, but I think we have enough for a basic spell, here.”

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Five hours later, and we’ve got a new spell! Or, well, a working framework, but it uses heat to make light and maybe doesn’t burn the air. I’ll still have to ask Elliot on that one.

“Ready?” I ask Susan.

“Are you sure I should be the one to test it? I mean, I can’t even use the Mymoir…”

“It’s your spell. The color settings should work well enough for a basic test, even without direct Mymoir access. The honor should go to you.” We’re still trying this in the backyard, though, for safety reasons.

“Um… okay. Susan’s Variable Light!” she shouts with a lot more force than she needed, clutching her scale-wand tightly. A vibrant green glow quickly fades into being about two feet above and one foot forward of her head. I look up at it with a smile, and she follows my gaze. “It worked!” Susan exclaims.

“Alright! Now try it with the other colors!”

Susan nods as the green glow vanishes. “Susan’s Variable Light!” This time, the light is a bright red. She quickly cycles through the other four colors, ending with a gentle blue light. At least, in the visible sense it’s a gentle blue. To my heat sense, it’s rapidly fluctuating between red and purple—that is, very hot and very cold.

For Fred’s Floating Lantern, the air is heated to the point that excited particles will lose their heat in a visible loss of energy, releasing light of a certain wavelength. The air glows for the same reason that toaster coils or molten rock/metal glows. For Susan’s Variable Light, we force the air to heat and cool at a certain temperature and frequency. The physics of what that does is pretty complicated, but it basically forces the air to release the frequency, or color, of light that we want, based on the temperatures and rate of change that the spell uses. It’s not exactly magic-efficient, but it works and we both have enough magic to keep it going for a few hours on its own.

“I can’t believe it works!” Susan exclaims once more. Her smile is brighter than her light.

“This is the sort of thing I’ll be going to school for. You see why I like it so much?”

“No. The end result, yes, but I wouldn’t want to do all that on my own.”

“Engineering is a team effort. A remarkably small number of influential things were invented by a single person, even if the work is only credited to the lead designer. So would you take the time to work on something like this again, given that you can work with me? And others, if you want.”

“Oh. Uh, yeah, I would. I might want a bit of a break first, though.” She smiles briefly before we share a laugh.

10 June 2014
10:00 AM CST
I’ve finally got my schedule worked out so that I can attend Monday classes at Shapeless Martial Arts, so now I get to practice using magic in combat. The class is also growing a bit, according to Sensei: he said he had half a dozen people “applying” to start taking classes. If it’s about the same as when we started at the new dojo, the application is basically a liability waiver (‘this is a martial art. It’s possible you’ll get some bruises. Further injuries will be avoided to the best of the instructor’s abilities’) and something asking for a description of what the new student can do, both physically and magically. And of course, a promise to pay for avoidable property damage. I suppose that if the weather is nice, we might be able to have some outdoor classes with some of our more destructive talents. Or ones that just aren’t friendly to enclosed spaces.

Anyway, my current setting: visit two to a person that’s out of the way but I should take the time to meet them. For today, I’m at the Illinois Youth Center – St. Charles location. Or in other words, the juvie hall that Zach was sent to after pleading guilty to trying to rob the store. Police said he was lucky he lost his nerve, because if he had actually tried to hurt me he’d have been tried as an adult. I managed to get on his approved visitor list, though I still had to walk a considerable distance from the nearest landing spot. (Mr. Verres said they’d be more than a bit nervous if a dragon landed on the property. It’s a shame, since the front of the place is so pretty and open. I could land here easily.) At any rate, I pull out my passport—I need a photo ID, and I don’t see much point in getting a driver’s license—and show it to the guard.

“This says you were born this year.” Ha-ha, Mr. Verres. I have no idea how or why he did that, but although my official story is that I’m 19, my citizenship papers, birth certificate, passport and so on say I was born the day I arrived in Moperville. I don’t know if it was to spite me or keep track of me, but I have to get people to call Mr. Verres’s office anytime I use any of that stuff. I bet they wouldn’t be so happy about that decision if I used my ID more often.

I roll my eyes in annoyance and pull out a business card. “Yep, it does. Prank from the guys that made my papers, I think. Here’s their number.” Thanks to the specific department Mr. Verres works for—and how secret it is—the card is mostly blank, with just “Office of Mr. Edward Verres” and a phone number in black print on a white background.

A few minutes pass, and the guard hands me back my passport and the business card, pointing me to the appropriate desk inside. Now I get the thrill of waiting on the government to process what I set up two weeks ago. It’s like the DMV, but with a lot fewer people.

Wait. Crap. I don’t plan on drinking alcohol, but I can’t even walk into a bar past a certain hour until I’m forty. I… suppose I’ll have to find some way around that.

I sit down in a place by myself and close my eyes, checking out the place by my heat sense, particularly the spots beyond the walls. Understandably, it’s similar to a prison in some ways, but the doors are normal rather than bars, though there are security cameras in every room. Twin size beds, two to a room…and as expected, everyone I can sense outside of the visiting areas is male. Housing boys all together like this is probably a good idea, especially if they’re already delinquents. I read up on this place before coming. I’ll admit that I don’t know a ton, but it certainly seems like a good place. I guess I’ll have to ask Zach—he’s been here for nearly a month, now.

“Here for your boyfriend?” I hear from behind me. I open my eyes and turn to look over the curious man. He must be a father to someone here—a spindly little man, sporting a peach fuzz beard and nearly-bald head. He looks like he’s seen better days, and is far too physically weak to try punishing most of the boys I sense beyond the walls.

“No, actually. I only know him because he tried to rob the store I was working. I just felt sorry for
him and wanted to see how he’s doing.”

“I should’ve guessed. You look too nice to be dating someone here.” The man makes his way around to sit in a seat beside me, leaving one seat between us. “How long has he been here?”

“It hasn’t even been a month since he entered the store.” I remember his confused look when I asked if I could help him. “I doubt his family is likely to visit or try to help him, given what he said about them. Someone has to care. I met him for a reason, and I’m not about to leave him by the wayside.”

“Mmm. I wish my son had someone like you. I couldn’t care for him when he was young, and as he grew older, well… he even overpowered his old man. I did my best, but it wasn’t enough.” He looks away wistfully. “This place has helped him, I really think so. I just wish I could be the one to teach him.”

“I wish I could work at a hardware store in peace, but I guess God had other plans,” I chuckle, shaking my head. “When I learned what being a dragon entailed, I never expected to have to halt a mundane crime. You’d think dragons would only deal with magic.”

“Huh?” he says as I stand and walk to the window that had called my number.

10 June 2014
10:40 AM CST

“…This room has been searched prior to your entry and will be searched again after you leave. You are not to give anything to Zach. Understand?” The guard scrutinizes my face.

“Yes.” That certainly took long enough. I walk into the room to see Zach… and his counselor, both sitting at a table on the side opposite the room’s entrance. I’d hoped for at least as private a chat as I’d had with Abraham, but I guess this is a whole different ball game. I smile at the two anyway.

The counselor is a buff black man who honestly reminds me a lot of one of Kevin’s friends from the church he grew up in. A kind but firm face, and a build rather like Luntian’s, though likely formed from physical training over labor.

“Miss Bjartskular. Welcome,” the counselor greets me, holding out his hand. I take it and he gives a single firm shake before releasing. I’m rather more impressed at his skill with my last name.

“Thank you. I’m… not very well-acquainted with Zach, but I wanted to see how he was faring after the, um, the incident. I just… everything happens for a reason, right?” I pause. “Oh, hey, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Smith.” Huh. I wonder… eh, it’s a common enough name. “You can have a seat.” Oh, right. I sit in the hard, barely-cushioned metal chair. It builds good posture, I suppose.

Zach looks to Mr. Smith, then turns to face me when the latter nods. “Thanks again, Miss Saphira,” he starts.

“Saphira is fine and formal enough.”

“Formal? But, it’s—”

“I don’t have a title or nickname yet.” Al’s pushing for ‘Demon-slayer,’ but I’d rather not be known for that. “Some dragons don’t have last names, though, so while a personal name might seem informal, it’s also sorta my title, as a dragon.”
Mr. Smith leans forward. “If you can, Miss Bjartskular, I’d like you to avoid fiction during this visit. The judge in Moperville may have believed him, but the other boys here are mocking him.”

Can’t bring anything in here, can’t give Zach anything… but I can give stuff to Mr. Smith. “If you’ll excuse me, sir,” I request, standing up. I then turn around and put my hand up the back of my shirt, and after forming a scale, pull the scale out and put it on the table in front of Mr. Smith, once I wipe it off and sit down. “I can’t give it to Zach, but I think you can still take this.”

“What is it?” He refuses to move towards it.

“A dragon scale. I didn’t sneak it in. I made it just now.” As I speak the last sentence, I cast Partial Skin to Scales again, but with the default range this time. Mr. Smith’s eyes widen in disbelief.

“See? I didn’t make it up!” Zach exclaims, pointing at me.

Mr. Smith doesn’t speak again until I let the spell end. “W-what are you?” His voice is shaking.

“A dragon. Like I said already. Um…” Time for the magic of point clouds and, well, magic. I spread out my arms on the table before me, defining a safe boundary. Saphira’s Variable Image. A gentle blue light forms in the shape of my dragon form. I posed for Elliot before he saved the point cloud. My wings are spread for takeoff, but I’m standing fully upright. The image I’ve formed is about half the size of my shrunken self that went to school that one day, and for safety, floating three inches above the table. “This is an image of me. Don’t try to touch it.”

“How are you making that?” Zach asks, curious.

“It’s complicated and uses a lot of math. I’ve got a point cloud saved that says the color and location of every point on the image, and that’s cross-referenced with a table from another spell that describes how to make light of specific colors using heat.” Guess where all my free time went between Friday and now.

“I… don’t get any of that.”

“It took a lot of work for me to understand, too. If you take up computer modeling and physics, maybe one day you’ll understand, too.” Probably not like Susan does, but everything in this spell could be understood on a physics-and-math level by super-nerds. “In simpler terms, I’m using magic to heat the air and make an image. The air isn’t burning, but I don’t want to find out what happens if someone sticks their hand in the affected area.” I let the image fade. “I have a picture on my phone, but since I can’t bring that in here, a magic image is a good substitute.”

Mr. Smith leans back and closes his eyes for a few seconds before opening them again, a much calmer look on his face. “Alright, I believe Zach’s tale now. I can’t imagine it will win him any points around here still, but I can at least back him up when his parents ask. This… scale doesn’t do anything, does it?”

“It was formed with my magic, so it’ll fade from existence in about a month unless someone does another magic thing with it. Beyond that, it’s just a reptile scale with unusual properties—high hardness and toughness, for example.”

“That’s not what I studied in school, but I’ll take your word for it. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about today?”

“Yes.” I look to Zach. “I’d like to hear more about you, now that you’re not in distress.”

Zach nods enthusiastically.
“I… I want to tell you, but I don’t know where to start,” Zach says after a few seconds of silence.

“Well, what did your parents think of you being sent here?” I ask. If he’s going to talk about his home life, that should get him started.

“My mum was happy I was still alive, after she discovered that I was missing along with her gun. My father was disappointed that I didn’t kill you for standing in my way.” That’s not exactly surprising on either part, given what he said about them at Ace, but it still says a lot about the pair. And it’s why I’m kind of okay that he’s here instead of at home.

“You see, my dad was part of… some sort of paramilitary group back in Ireland. I’ve always lived in Chicago, but Mum said she married Father while they still lived across the Atlantic. He fought for their country’s independence, just like this country did a bit over 200 years ago, but… well, he didn’t win. In his words, his leaders caved to the enemy. He moved here in frustration.

“I think he’s been trying to raise me to take up the same fight he did, but I don’t want any part in it. I didn’t grow up there, so I don’t know what the fight’s all about, beyond what my parents say. I tried running away when I was younger, but the cops just found me and took me home every time. So this time, I tried another tactic, but I didn’t look up laws and penalties first. I just figured armed robbery would get me out.”

Mr. Smith raises his hand beside his face before speaking. “Legally, attempted armed robbery is what brought you here. Successful armed robbery would take you to adult jail. And I think the judge had a hard enough time justifying not sending you to jail anyway.”

“My father wanted me to go to jail. He said it’d toughen me up for next time.” Ah. The goal of a correctional system is for there to not be a ‘next time,’ so I can see the judge’s decision process pretty easily here. “I want to stay here until I can stay away from home permanently.”

“They say the best way to defeat bullies is to live, and live well,” I reply. “I’d call your father a bully, at least to you. But… I wouldn’t say that it’d be good to never see your parents again. Maybe just… not until you have something to show. A good family of your own, perhaps, or a good job. Or a strong church. Dragons live a lot of their lives without their families, since we outlive everyone except each other. Even the ones with the worst upbringings still miss their families from time to time.”

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A nice farewell, a long checkout process, and a short walk and flight before I’m finally home. People probably know by now that I live on the street I land at the end of, but they might not yet realize that I live with the Pompoms.

“Hey, Saphira!” Susan calls as soon as I enter the door.

“Hi! Have a nice day without me?” She has work this afternoon, but this morning was free.

“Yeah. Diane called and said she wanted to talk with you? But that it wasn’t urgent.” Huh. Well, I guess that’s what I get for going somewhere without a phone. If it was urgent, people could still contact me through Elliot.

“Thanks!” I head upstairs and pick up my phone. Four calls and a message on the last one. I’ll listen to it if she doesn’t pick up—I generally assume it’s easier to just ask the person directly.
“Ring, ring…*”

“Saphira?” No noise in the background, so I guess she’s at home. It’s pretty windy today, which threw off my flight a little.

“Speaking.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” I’ve gotten her to tone down her speech a little, at least when talking with me. One of my Cassie notes is that she doesn’t bother with not cursing when I’m not really there.

“Where were you?”

“Busy being the only girl in an all-male complex.”

“Huh?”

“I visited someone at a detention center. They’re segregated by gender, with good reason, but beyond the security escort I’ve plenty of reason to not really worry about that sort of thing.”

“Oh, yeah, I can see that,” Diane laughs. “Headlines: dragon fights off would-be rapist. Discussion: should she have stepped on him?”

“I can step on people without hurting them. Ask Ellen!”

We share a laugh before Diane abruptly stops. “Anyway, the reason I called you today… You know how I told you that Mr. Raven said he’s my dad?”

“Yes.” It’s a lot more believable when you know what he really looks like.

“He’s been visiting my house lately. Getting to know me and my family.”

“Well, that’s good. I think.”

“Without his disguise. I knew what he looked like without it, but my parents were surprised. And, uh, they’ve been very accommodating.” She pauses, and I barely hear the next part. “I think I actually like his visits.” Her voice picks up again. “Anyway, I called because, um… he… Mr. Raven said that Susan is also part of his family, and he’d like to get to know her, too.” Oooo, awkward.

“I know he’s not her father. That guy was aware that he could have kids. I mean, he was married, for a while.”

“Yes.”

“The dragons don’t have a word for it? This can’t be the first time for something like this.”

“‘Distant cousins.’ I don’t think there’s a word for it.”

“I’d say Sarah gets that spot. But how do you feel? Are you happier knowing your relationship with Mr. Raven and Susan, versus not knowing?”
There’s a pause while she thinks. “Mmm. Yes. Alright, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I answer with a smile she can hear. “Just a reminder: you don’t have to keep me in the loop on this in the future. I may think of Susan as something like family, but I’m not part of your biological family. I’d be happier knowing things are less odd with me not around. It’s not like Susan won’t tell me about it if I ask.”

Diane laughs again. “Okay, thanks, and noted.”

11 June 2014
8:34 AM CST

“Why’d we have to get up so early?” Susan asks me. We’re seated at our kitchen table with Nanase.

“We need to do this before Saturday, and it was the only time we all had nothing going on,” I answer.

“Isn’t flying pretty simple?” Nanase questions.

“Nope.” I pull out a stack of papers from the chair beside me and spread them across the table in two rows. Well, more like diagonal lines. “The light green map,” I point to the top one from my view, “is the aeronautical map. It gives all the flight rules for our route. The dark green map,” I point to the bottom row, “is the Google Earth view. I need to know what stuff looks like to keep me on track.”

“Oh. That’s a lot more trees than I thought.”

“Sean said there are more trees in the US than before the European explorers came here. I’ll have to fly near populated areas just to get my bearings.”

“Isn’t there some sort of GPS thingy for this?” Nanase says, as if I’m some sort of expert.

“Um… I didn’t look, because my dad just had a special GPS built into his plane… um…” I stammer as I pull out my phone to look at the app store. Oh. Huh. “Well, whadayaknow. This looks like something. And it’s free.”

“Well, get it, then.”

“Uh, no. Nanase, do you have unlimited data?”

“Yeah, who doesn’t?”

“Us,” Susan and I answer in unison.

“We found our navigator, then,” I continue. “Just search for Flight Plan Go. Me downloading it wouldn’t do any good anyway. It’s not like I can use my phone while I’m carrying you two.”

“Well, can we put all the paper away, then?” Susan asks.

“No. We still have to plan our route, and it’s not like it’d be bad for me to try remembering it. Especially if you want a break at some point. I think I can manage back-to-back days of five hours of flight, now, but I don’t have the facilities of a commercial jet.”

“How are we carrying our stuff, anyway?” Nanase asks.
“Backpacking stores are your friend,” I answer.

“Also magic,” Susan adds drily.

“I got a pair of duffels we can strap together at the same spot you’ll be occupying. That’ll carry my and Susan’s stuff, and any non-clothing items you want to bring.”

“What about my clothes?” Nanase complains.

“You don’t use your clothing swap spell much, do you?” Susan asks.

14 June 2014
6:00 AM CST

“I’d complain about the early takeoff if I didn’t wake up at this time to go flying anyway,” Susan moans.

“I’ll do it for you, then,” Nanase whines.

**You two don’t have to even do much. You just sit on my back and hold on. I guess Nanase has to watch her phone, but I’m even providing heat, if you want it.**

“Yeah, yeah.” Nanase swings the duffel bags over my neck and she and Susan adjust them so they won’t move around much but still leave room for their legs. Then the pair climbs aboard before I launch myself up and southeast, dodging the first of many airport flight restriction circles.

We bought two external batteries for Nanase, just in case, but one should really be enough. She also brought a bunch of hair ties in case she needs more garments at any point. The next worrying part is altitude.

“How high are we, exactly?” Susan asks, somewhat shouting over the wind. It’s a good thing I’m parting the air with my neck and head. The two are basically hugging right behind my neck while wearing winter clothing. I guess it’s also a good thing that Susan has largely gotten over her touch aversion, on the condition that she can shift later to clean herself.

“The app says about 2950 feet.”

**Ha! Right on!**

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**Ha! Right on!**

“About?”

“You wouldn’t think it, but I fly faster when I glide than when I flap. And what’s wrong with the altitude?”

“I can still see cars. Which means people can still see you. That’s not a problem?”

**First, you’re more likely to look straight down than for most people to look straight up. Second, I’m moving at three miles a minute.**

“Two and a half.”

**Maybe Jorge can teach me how to move faster. Anyway, I’ll still be a lot further away by the time people do their double take. And if they believe what they see or somehow manage a photo or
video, I’m *allowed* to do this. You know what I’m not allowed to do? Fly in restricted air space without a radio. Besides, it’s warmer and easier to breathe at a lower altitude, and I really need the air.**

“Did you at least tell my uncle that you were doing this?”

**Before I ever asked if you wanted to come.**

“Alright.”

---

**Hey, Susan, how did your meeting with Diane go?** Susan met up with Diane and Mr. Raven on Thursday afternoon, which, per my request, I only knew about because Susan told me where she was going.

“Pretty well! After the, ah, awkwardness, of course.”

“What’s this about? I know you’ve spoken with her at least a few times.” I suppose Nanase wouldn’t really have any details.

“Oh. It… turns out that we *are* related. Very distantly? I think?”

**Half-immortals can have children, and Mr. Raven has had at least two. One is Susan’s distant ancestor, from, uh…**

**At least 750 years ago.**

**Right. And the other would be Diane.**

“Oh. I can see the awkward. It wasn’t just you and Diane meeting, was it?”

“No. Mr. Raven was there, too. We met at his house, actually. And then with all of us in one place… the new Pandora decided to show up.”

I drop a bit in surprise. **Pandora?**

“Whoa, turbulence!” Susan jokes. “She said she hadn’t decided on a name yet. But she looks a lot younger and… sort of like a light-skinned Grace, I guess? Apparently she lost almost all of her knowledge that wasn’t tied to her family, so she said she learned a lot by basically stalking you and Elliot.”

**I thought** I had felt something whenever I went flying recently. It just didn’t feel very powerful, so I guessed someone was using magic to watch me fly. I guess I’ll have to call out to her next time.**

“Huh?” Nanase questions.

**I can feel if an immortal is nearby, so long as I’m in dragon form. Apparently, I can also tell their relative power, though not very clearly. With that sense, I can talk with a hidden immortal and even hurt them if I want, like I threatened that one immortal the day after I met you. It just doesn’t happen very often, because they *usually* don’t do anything to warrant it. In this case, I’d just like to meet the new Mrs. Raven.**

“She sounded pretty nervous about that, actually. I guess you have a bit of a reputation among immortals.”
**Or she watched me take on a demon. I’d rather not do anything like that again, but for anyone watching from the ‘possible adversary’ point of view, it probably looked pretty scary.**

“Or that, I guess,” Nanase laughs.

**Did anything else happen?**

“No? Were you expecting something?”

“I dunno. The last time you were near Mr. Raven and Diane at the same time, a bunch of vampires attacked.”

“Those two were also at our graduation.”

**Oh, right. And I guess we had even more of his family then, with Tedd there.**

“Tedd?” Nanase says.

**You didn’t—oh, whoops. Um, Mr. Raven is Tedd’s godfather. I don’t really know why, but Mr. Raven has only had one normal interaction with Tedd: when he bought a wand on Tedd’s first day with the shop. I think he avoids him on purpose, but again, I don’t know why.**

“Should we know this?” Susan asks.

**Usually, I don’t think things like this are any of my business, but if the guy is already making an effort to connect with his family, it might be a good idea to bring it up. Still, I’ll leave it up to you what to do with it. My suggestion is to ask Tedd if he’d be open to meeting his godfather, then talking with Mr. Raven if Tedd’s okay with it. I wouldn’t spring it on either of them, but I think now’s the time to try.**

14 June 2014
11:47 AM EST

**We’re pretty close to the red circle now, aren’t we?** Unfortunately, there’s a big fat circle around Washington, D.C. called the Special Flight Rules Area where you can’t fly at all without a radio, and it covers our destination. Fortunately, dragons show up on radar about as well as large flocks of birds: they can tell we’re there, but not really what we are. So if we dip inside the circle a bit, it’s not really a problem, since they’ll probably treat us about like the wildlife that frequently shows up.

“Just about!” Nanase answers.

Another fun part: getting to our landing point involves flying under the flight restrictions surrounding the BWI airport. The closest route around the red circle takes us through the zone for BWI that goes from the ground up, so we’re taking the next closest and getting down to 1500 feet. And Nanase was concerned about people seeing me at twice that altitude. **You’ll need to tell me each ring we approach as well as the altitude limit, and maybe what we’re at, okay?**


**I think the radio bot for the weather sounds more human than that,** I laugh.
“Sandy Point State Park is now below us,” Nanase calls.

**Going down, then.**

“Finally!” Susan rejoices.

I look for a good landing spot; it’s not terribly hard. I remember running here for cross country picnics, and there are some flat areas that aren’t visible from most of the park despite their proximity to the entrance. Once my feet are on solid ground and my passengers have disembarked, I finally shift back to human form and the bags that were on my neck pin me to the grass. “A little help?” I ask weakly.

“Oh, right!” Susan splits the bags, and Nanase swings one over her shoulder while pulling up Uber on her phone. The place is close to Kevin’s home, but we’ll be using taxi-type services for any distances we can’t just walk. Thankfully, we’re all fit enough to walk a few miles each day, in addition to all the flying I have to do. Hence my not having to carry a bag.

I get up and rub my shoulders while Susan and Nanase flex their legs. “I don’t care about secrecy that much,” Susan moans. “We’re not doing the return trip in one leg.”

“Fine by me,” I pant. “Hotel before lunch, I guess. I can’t believe there aren’t any even close to in-town, but then again, I don’t remember ever seeing any.”

“How small of a town is this?” Susan asks.

“Smaller than Moperville, but not by much. Just a different style, really.”

We hike the short distance to the entrance in order to save $5 on the drive (as it costs that much to enter the park), then hail down our driver: a short, fit, light-skinned man in a silver sedan. “George,” he greets us as we load our stuff and ourselves into his car. “I guess you just like the sunrises here? I don’t blame ya.”

Having just flown towards the sun for five hours, I can honestly say the opposite. “No, just some morning exercise before we can check in,” I answer. It’s true enough. Hotels usually don’t let you check in until noon at the earliest.

14 June 2014
1:15 PM EST

“So, what’s for lunch?” Susan asks me, once we’ve set up our room and are sitting on the beds. We’re getting a cot for Nanase, specifically because she’s the shortest. “I’m sure you’re hungry, at least.”

“You’re not?” Nanase says.

“I am, but Saphira knows here a lot better than we do.”

“Oh, the places I know are generally split into four sections: neighborhood, middle school, B&A Trail and ‘too far to walk.’ I figured we’d cover the first two tomorrow and the third today. Of course, the last section is a miscellaneous set that includes the park we landed in, along with a bunch of places Kevin went with Boy Scouts. Although the place I plan to have breakfast tomorrow is also in the last group.”

“Neither of us have any idea what the other three have,” Susan comments, her eyes half-shut in annoyance.
“Oh, right. Sorry. Okay, I don’t have anything in mind for lunch. My family didn’t eat out very often…? But dinner is cheesesteaks, so we can keep that in mind.”

“I thought that was a Pennsylvania thing,” Nanase replies.

“Yeah, but this place does it really well. And there’s dessert right nearby. But for lunch…” I shrug.

“Well, we should probably just look it up, then,” Susan suggests, and we do just that.

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We did sorta just pick a random place for lunch, but it’s still close to the areas I want to walk around. “Alright, first on the tour: that over there was the last exclusive video store in this area. I don’t think it’s been closed for too long, but it’s been a few years.” I point to a Blockbuster on the main road for the area that hasn’t opened its doors for some time.

“Saphira, are we just here for a nostalgia trip?” Nanase asks.

I turn around to face her. “No.” I shake my head. “That’s just the furthest point on this section of what I know. Everything else should still be in business. I looked it up.”

“Okay. That’s good.”

I lead my friends down the side street that I remember goes to the local high schools. “On the right, we’ve got the local farmers’ market, and on the left…the public library! I read a lot of books here. Or, well, I took them home, first. I also spent a lot of quarters on late returns.” We start walking up the hill to enter—the area is a little hilly, and left of the road is a particularly large hill with the library, a bank, and a church at the top.

“Should we go inside?” Susan asks. “It’s not like we’re taking any books out.”

“No, but I want to see it!” Nanase exclaims. “We came to see where Saphira comes from, right?”

“Yeah.”

The library is the same as I recall, with a circular spread of bookshelves made to look like the sun’s rays around the tables at the center. The information and checkout desk is to the right of the entrance, nearest the children’s section, with topics increasing in typical age of the readers as you circle counter-clockwise.

“What was your favorite book, Saphira?” Nanase asks. Quietly, since we’re in a library.

“I already know that one,” Susan answers. “Where do you think she got her name?”

“Oh, right, I remember now. That… you said it on the night we met, didn’t you?”

“Um, maybe? I don’t have the best memory. Ignoring Eragon, though, my other favorite series should be over here…” I scan the first bookshelf in the Young Adult section. I can’t imagine there’s no equivalent, and the series is massive… Yes! “Redwall! It’s the first major series I read, before Eragon or Lord of the Rings.”

“Wow,” Nanase notes. “How many books are there?”

“A little under thirty, I think. They’re all about 300 pages, too. Perfect for weeks on end of entertaining tales, and a bit of a puzzle, since the publishing order doesn’t match the timeline. But if you pick out which characters know each other, and how they’re related, you can eventually
work out a sequence.”

“Do you remember it?” Susan whispers.

“Only a little. I do know that The Legend of Luke is first, in terms of having the oldest content, though only because the majority of the book is a flashback. If you don’t count that, it’s the second book in the timeline.” As I talk, memories of the year of Redwall books come back to me. I know they’re not really mine, but they still have an impact.

“I guess I can check that out when we get home, then,” Susan comments. She finished Inheritance a while ago, but there’s a lot of Star Trek to watch.

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“Is this where Kevin went to church?” Nanase asks. We’re standing in the parking lot beside the Presbyterian church on top of the hill beside the library.

“No. We’re going there tomorrow. This is where he had Boy Scouts meetings, and he worked on a few Eagle projects.” I look towards the community center at the bottom of the hill. No rain garden on the side, so maybe that lesson hasn’t been learned yet in this universe. (Don’t dig without knowing where the utilities are, even if you have the right permissions. We were lucky it was a drainage line.) “Some were for improving the lot around here.”

“It’s still neat. I guess you have a lot of memories here?”

“I think Scouting is a big part of who I am. It’s a shame I can’t really do it, but I still remember it. ‘A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent. On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, to obey the Scout Law, to help other people at all times, and to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.’”

Susan realized when I started reciting from memory and began analyzing my words. “You know what, if every man lived by that, I could see the world being a much better place. What’s the Scout Law?”

“The list of twelve attributes that I started with.”

“Oh. If he keeps to it, I guess Kevin sounds alright.”

“Well, you know me. Am I alright?”


14 June 2014
2:23 PM EST

We’ve continued along the road from earlier, to the point where it intersects the B&A trail. “Remember how I split up sections earlier? This is the B&A trail. It’s part of the Rails to Trails project that converts unused railroads into paved trails. This trail is so named for running from Baltimore to Annapolis… kind of. It actually goes from the BWI airport we flew around earlier to a little past halfway to Annapolis.”

“So… it doesn’t actually reach either city,” Susan states.

“Nope. Then again, the local highway is Interstate 97, and it doesn’t even cross half of the state, so
this trail is a bit better from that point of view. At any rate, there’s a train museum on the left, and we’ll have dinner at the strip mall on the right later.” The barber shop beside the museum is where Kevin got his hair cut until high school. He spent a lot of time there.

Susan looks to our left. South, by the trail markers. “Museum? It’s one room.”

“It’s made from a train-related building, and they have a bunch of model trains and stuff at certain times throughout the year. It’s the closest thing to a museum within this town, I guess.”

We continue down the road. Severn High School comes into view on our left as we walk along the now-crowded neighborhood street. “Is that the high school Kevin attended?” Nanase asks.

“No,” I chuckle. “We always joked that it was filled with the kids of pretentious rich folks, since it’s a private school that’s not any better than the public school down the road. And when I say ‘down the road…’ Well, you’ll see what I mean.” We continue along the street as it follows a shallow bend. It’s probably about a 120-degree angle, and definitely the worst traffic in the area. And on the straight section past that…

We reach the traffic light at the end of the road. A parking lot stretches out in front of us. To the left is a bunch of construction equipment covering what used to be sports fields. I guess they started early in this universe. To the right: Severna Park High School.

“Wh–” Nanase whirls about. “I can still see the other one!”

I fall to my knees laughing. “Yep! This is where Kevin went to high school. He graduated class of 2013. I still think ‘No Repeats’ should’ve been his year’s phrase.”

“No repeats?” Susan looks at me quizzically.

“It’s the first year since 1987 with no repeating digits. In his case, it would then also be the first year in his life without repeating digits.”

“Oh. That’s neat.” As said everyone he mentioned that to.

“Wow. And I thought Moperville’s high schools were close together.” I guess Nanase is stuck on that.

“Is there anything else around here?” Susan asks.

“Not particularly. I can just talk about stuff that’s over here for a while. Memories of high school and Boy Scouts. Why I specifically picked the name I have, I guess.” I think over all that I have to talk about. Fond memories, mostly.

“Sure. Is there anywhere we can sit?”

“There are park benches around the bus loop and near the cafeteria,” I tell her, pointing.

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“I can see why you wanted to eat here,” Nanase comments, already halfway through her cheesesteak. She eats fast.

“My family ate at home a lot. Eating out was a special occasion, and generally only happened when Mom was too busy to cook something. This was a favorite.” I pause for a second. “Um… you don’t still have to eat a ton, do you?”
“No. I just eat fast. Especially compared to you.” I was the last to finish lunch by a few minutes.

“Yeah… That was never a strong suit of mine.”

“So… I was wondering: why did you bring us here?” Nanase asks.

“Why here, or why you two specifically?”

“I think I know why here. And… I suppose bringing Susan is obvious.”

Susan gets a little color in her cheeks. “Yeah, I suppose. But then why not Elliot and Ellen?”

“Just because I fly with them every week, it doesn’t mean I wanted to bring them.”

Susan nods. “You made it pretty clear at the graduation party that you just wanted us two.”

“I still don’t know why me, though.”

“Nanase…” I lay my head in my hands. “I’ll run you through my decision process, I guess. First, I started planning this back in March. That’s when I figured out that I could carry two people, and started looking into which two.

“At first, I just sorta picked the two of you on a whim, but then I started thinking seriously about it, and, well… For Susan…” I look right at her. “I think of you as family. I’m… not sure what family, as Kevin never had any sisters… but you’re more than just a friend to me. I guess… sort of like Kevin’s best friend is to him. I want to really know you, and you to really know me.”

Susan looks like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t know what. “Um… thanks.” She gives a genuine smile.

“Nanase…” I look into her eyes. “You’re a good friend. I want to hang out with you more, and even if you don’t understand, you listen to what I have to say. You ask good questions. I brought you because I knew you’d be interested, and I wanted you to understand me.”

“How is that different from anyone else?”

“Do you really think Tedd would want to listen to what I talked about today?”

“…No.”

“Nanase, you are the first and only person that listened when I explained the things I did on our trip home from Michigan. Anyone else stopped me in the middle and said they didn’t care.”

“… Saphira, how many times have you tried?”

“Um… Kevin tried twice… I… only tried with you.”

Susan sticks her hand in front of my face, then pulls it back when I look at her. “You can always talk to me. Why wouldn’t you try?”

“I didn’t think it was necessary. Most people don’t require a reason for you to care about them personally. The only reason I tried then was because Nanase asked and it was related to why I got Smite instead of killing the poor guy.”

“Okay, now I want to hear this.”
“Can it wait for the hotel room?” Nanase interrupts. “I wanted to check out that cake shop.”

“Alright,” I assent. “But I’m getting gelato there.”

15 June 2014
10:30 AM EST

“I can’t believe you ate that entire backpacker’s pie, Saphira,” Susan comments as our ride drives away, leaving us in front of Anchor Baptist Church. Nanase is wearing the same thing she’s worn on previous visits to my church: a nice, yellow summer dress. I think it’s one of the most conservative things she owns. Susan and I are more dressed for the amount of walking we’ll be doing before heading home, with Susan in jeans and a light, long-sleeved shirt and myself in my normal pastel-colored skirt and t-shirt. It’s not what I’d normally wear to church, but I don’t really have the luxury of changing after church or walking around in scales. We’re actually going to have to leave our bags somewhere during the service, since we had to check out before breakfast today and don’t have a car.

“Nanase helped.”

“Only a little,” she claims. “Anyway, this is where Kevin went to church?”

“Yes!” The building is formed from smaller additions that were built over time. Towards the back of the L-shaped parking lot is the original building—a rectangular single-room auditorium now labeled the Fellowship Hall. Then a roughly T-shaped set of halls connects it to a few classrooms and the main office, leading around the inside of the parking lot’s bend over to the new front: a lobby attached to a huge octagonal room where the main services are held (the Sanctuary). Back over at the base of the L, on the other side of the lot, is a separate building that consists of a garage topped with a parsonage for hosting guest speakers. I remember when the place served as the home for Kevin’s youth pastor, too. “When they had the shingle roofing replaced, Kevin helped to take off the shingles and attach the metal sheeting!”

“Why is it sky blue?” Susan asks.

“Um… it was donated. How many people do you think want that color roof on their home?”

“Good point.”

We walk up to the pair of teens greeting people at the entrance. “Welcome to Anchor!” the slender girl greets us. I… I’m pretty sure I recognize her as part of the church’s largest family. Like in Kevin’s universe, they drive the same sort of vehicle used for church vans, and their license plate reads “QUIVER.” When my parents asked the oldest son (a year older than Kevin), he said it’s because the Bible says to “send out your children like arrows. What do you hold arrows in?”

“Hello! Um… is there anywhere we can keep our stuff for the service?” Again, since I have to carry everything later, I’m the only one not holding anything right now. It’s not like Susan and Nanase can’t carry the stuff anyway—the bags are barely holding anything compared to their capacity and probably weigh ten to twenty pounds each.

“I was wondering about that,” the boy I’m pretty sure is her brother comments. “Are you traveling?”

“Yes. We checked out today, but I thought we should still go to a service.” I thought a lot about how to phrase this last night.

“Okay. Thanks for coming here! Just follow me. I’m Jonathan.” He holds the door open for us
until we’re all inside, then takes the lead again. I find it funny that he’s leading me, considering how well I know the building. Kevin’s Eagle Scout project was an inventory of the building; I know where every last one of the greater than 600 different kinds of items in here are stored, to say nothing of simple navigation.

“Saphira. Nice to meet you.”

He guides us over to the coat rack area. “Do you need help putting those up top?”

“Nope,” Nanase answers as she casually swings her load up and onto the shelf. Susan puts hers up a little more carefully, holding it from underneath. “I’m Nanase, by the way.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you.” He steps out to the side—the coat area is just around the corner from the lobby—and points to the Sanctuary doors. “Service will start through there in a few minutes. Have a nice day, if I don’t see you again!”

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“That was a very different service to the usual one,” Nanase notes after we’re dismissed, though we’re still in our pew.

“It’s what I grew up with, so I was actually a lot more comfortable with it than normal. I didn’t know about the type we have in Moperville until I went to that one.”

Susan leans in close to me. “Saphira, do you smell…”

I nod. “Yes. There’s a Divine caster in here, certainly. And since it’s rare for an Evil caster to fly under the radar due to subtlety,” (as compared to mental effects that mask their presence) “it’s pretty likely they’re a Holy caster. Do you want to try finding them?” Yes, there’s a difference between how Holy and Evil casters smell, but it’s really subtle and difficult to tell at a distance.

“Is it really our business?” Nanase probes.

“Mmm… maybe?” I’m not completely sure. “Personally, no… but as a dragon, it’s a good idea to know who can be on-hand in an emergency.”

“Do you really think there’ll be an emergency today?”

“No. But Holy casters can be rare. It’s not uncommon to call one in from some distance away, if they’re really needed. So if I can, I’d like to know who it is. If for some reason a dragon needs a Holy caster over here, it’d be better than calling Ashley.”

“Okay. If Susan is fine with it.”

“The reasoning is sound. We should get started before they leave.”

I close my eyes. Directional sense of magic smell go! Um… they’re toward the podium… I follow my nose, and my friends follow me.

About three rows back from the front I can tell we’ve passed our target. I turn to look, and—oh boy. I can’t say I’m terribly surprised, given what Kevin knows of the family—they’re a kind and godly bunch—but I guess I get to be more familiar with the Heron family in this universe, too. But first, I get some awkwardness.
Okay, the first bit of awkwardness is that the only difference in appearance for the family between universes is that they have dark blue hair here instead of brown. But for the rest, it’s exactly as I recall, meaning I sort of feel like I know them already. At least I met Jonathan earlier.

“Excuse me?” I ask Mrs. Heron at the end of the row towards the outside. At least, I think that’s her last name. I haven’t asked yet.

“Can I help you?” she responds. It’s probably not her, but it’s hard to tell. They say that a person or animal’s musk rubs off on who/whatever they’re around all the time. For some odd reason, it’s true of magic as well. Likely because, in the case of magic that doesn’t target the user, those people and things are often targets of whatever magic is in play.

“I…” I shake my head. “Do you know of anything… odd, in your family? Someone often in the middle of things that might feel… miraculous?” It’s easier to phrase this for talking about Common magic, despite the greater range of possibilities, simply because that magic tends to be more visible. And you’d normally only do this if you already knew who it was and what they did, and you were just trying to convince their family that it’s real.

“You wanted to talk with me?” I hear from my left. I’d noticed the oldest son leave the pew and come down the one in front (in other words, to my left), but I thought nothing of it.

“Um… maybe?” I do a quick Mymoir search. Oh, right. This is a Holy spell written in the Bible—an ability to tell who you’re supposed to speak with. “I think someone in your family might be connected with an angel…” The smell is certainly stronger for him than for his mother.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I definitely feel like I should talk with you. And your friends. Do you want to sit down?” He points to a pew in the leftmost section, facing the podium. “Josh Heron, by the way.”

“Saphira. Um, if it’s alright with you two?” I turn to face my friends.

Susan nods. “Could I grab our stuff first?” Nanase asks. “I feel like it’ll go missing if I can’t see it.” I shrug. “Sure. It’s not like I can’t see it, but I don’t think that’d be a problem.”

“Josh, how long will you be?” Mr. Heron calls.

“Not long,” he responds. He faces me again. “Let me go grab a chair,” he says, heading into the room at the left side of the Sanctuary that I know serves as a Sunday School classroom.

15 June 2014
12:15 PM EST

Josh came back with his chair not long before Nanase returned with our bags. “So, what’s going on with you?” Josh asks.

Susan and Nanase just look at me. “We’re… traveling? We didn’t come here to see you or anything, but once we were here… well, I noticed that someone in your family was, eh, special? So I wanted to speak with whoever it was.” This is so much harder than it’d be in Moperville.

“Oh. That didn’t sound like…” Oh, I get it. This isn’t the first time he’s felt like he should talk with someone. I can make one thing clear pretty easily, though. I stick my hand in my pocket and wordlessly pull out my crucifix object that wasn’t there a second ago. “Oh! That’s great!”

“Why do you think I dragged these two here?” I point at my friends on my left and right with my
thumbs. “But, that’s not the point. I have an ability such that I can tell if people are ‘special.’ Can you think of anything that’s happened to you that can only really be explained as miraculous? Like, I dunno, just somehow knowing exactly what to say, or a minor wound healing way faster than it should’ve.” The first isn’t only possible with Holy magic, but it fits with what I’ve seen so far. The second is likely to come up if he’s been a Holy caster for a significant length of time, since I think his youngest sibling is still in elementary school, and I know he acts as a babysitter for his siblings sometimes.

“Um… oh, right! There was one time when Matthew skinned his knee playing basketball, so I picked him up and took him inside to clean up and dress his knee. But when I cleaned off the blood, his knee wasn’t hurt at all!”

I nod. “That sounds about right.”

“Really? Mother didn’t believe us when we told her…”

“It’s not the only time something like that happened, right?”

He thinks for a few seconds. “No. The second time, Shannon cried of a paper cut, but when I took her hand she couldn’t find the cut anymore.”

“And there we have it. You’re a Holy caster: a person bound to an angel, capable of performing miracles with far fewer restrictions than anyone else. Of course, I wouldn’t let it go to your head, if I were you.” I smile at him knowingly.

He seems pretty startled by the revelation. “H-how would you make such a claim? I mean, just because my family heals quickly…”

“You knew I wanted to talk with you, and you claim two healing miracles, and I can strongly sense that someone in your family is a Holy caster—so it’s probably you. Knowing what you are doesn’t change anything. Knowing what I am might change something, if you’re willing to help if the need arises.”

He raises his left hand hesitantly, his index pointing up. “Normally I’d just say ‘of course,’ but something tells me to wait.”

“Your abilities are rare. I represent an international group that does its level best to help people in need, especially those in very special circumstances. On the off chance that we need help like yours and you’re nearby, I’d like to have your contact information.” I hope we’ll never call him, but history says these sorts of encounters are usually preparation for something. Given the location, though, I hope this one goes to Jorge. Atlanta is a bit closer to here than Moperville is.

“What group?”

I sigh internally. We do have our name. I know it was supposed to be an inside joke, but right now I wish it was a little different. “DragonCorps.”

“… I’ve never heard of them.”

“I don’t expect you to. The group is old, but the name is new and we only have it because we needed one. The thing is, I don’t expect we’ll ever have to call you, but if we do, it’s something dangerous or specific to what you can help with. Even then, it’s still voluntary and we can try to find help elsewhere.” Both Nanase and Susan are staring at me at this point. It’s not like I walked them through this ahead of time, although I found plenty of precedent in the Mymoir.
Josh notices my friends. “Neither of you are part of this, are you?”

Susan shakes her head. “No.”

“No, although I expected she’d ask if our help was needed,” Nanase elaborates. “We’ve met part of the group, if it helps. They mean well.”

I pick the conversation back up. “Listen, I can’t be very specific because I can’t see the future or anything. I don’t know what you’d be called for or if you’d ever be called. I just want to know if you’d be willing to help.”

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

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“What was all that about?” Susan asks me. “You’ve never done that before.”

We’re walking to our next destination: the neighborhood I grew up in. This whole area is so familiar to me I could draw a map. Leave the church, turn right at the road, take the next right and turn left on East-West Blvd. Then either take the next left or the one after, depending on whether you want to go by the elementary school or walk through the neighborhood. We’re taking the second.

“I’ve never happened across a Holy caster before. I’d have done the same with Ashley if she wasn’t dating Elliot already. Common casters are, well, a bit more common.”

“Oh. I guess that’s true.”

“I haven’t seen any casters here!” Nanase exclaims.

“What are you talking about?” Susan says. “People don’t showcase magic here. Our waitress at breakfast was a caster!”

“…She was?”

“Yeah,” I verify. “I wouldn’t expect you to know, but we’ve seen several casters while here. One in two hundred is more common than you’d think. Did you know there’s over a hundred thousand people in Moperville?”

“…No. Oh. If it’s one percent of people as casters there, then we’ve got over a thousand in our town alone.”

“Yeah. Compare that to wandmakers and Holy casters, of which there are probably fifty each in the country.”

“And then dragons, with less than a hundred in the world,” Nanase finishes. Good memory. I almost forgot what figure I’d given her. “I get it. I can’t expect most people to know what magic is, but I can expect to find someone who’s used magic almost anywhere I go.”

“Yep.”

We turn the corner onto the main road through Shipley’s Choice. It’s a middle-class neighborhood, with slightly-customized 2-story homes each on 1/3-acre plots and underground wiring for the whole place. Since it’s summer, the whole place is green, with bushes and trees lining the hilly, meandering main road and peppered across yards, and an assortment of flowers and other
decorations adding color, depending on the owner of each house. It’s very different to the feel of Moperville, but it still feels like home.

“This is where Kevin grew up?” Nanase asks.

“Yep! I didn’t see this end of the neighborhood too often, since I lived at the other end, but we’ll pass by the pool this way and I can show you the elementary school. And then we should probably get a ride for the last bit before we head home, since it’s a couple of miles away.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Susan confirms.

15 June 2014
1:07 PM EST

The driver let us out in the parking lot by the middle school. We would’ve skipped it if it wasn’t so close to the actual final destination for the tour.

“Well, now you’ve seen every grade school Kevin attended. Is it like you expected?” I ask.

“Why does the middle school have more sports field space than the high school?” Susan asks in return. There’s less space in one spot, but the front of the school houses four baseball diamonds and about eight soccer fields, with another five soccer fields behind the school. The fields out front are level, but in a sort of pit about two stories below the ground level for the school and parking lot. It’s not so fun to play there when it rains.

“I dunno,” I shrug. “They use this space for all the club sports. There are an awful lot around here. You wanna head over to the last stop?”

“Sure,” my friends reply in unison.

It’s only a short walk—probably half a mile—to Kinder Farm Park. There are a bunch of entrances, and this side mostly houses some soccer fields that Kevin ran by for cross country and used once or twice for soccer. Following the path that circles the park, though, we come to the much more familiar section with, at the top of the large hill, the main entrance. As we walk the road down the face of the hill, there’s a garden on our right and a large playground set on our left. “I have a lot of fond memories of using that playground,” I comment.

“This is a beautiful place,” Nanase responds.

“… I couldn’t ever use playgrounds,” Susan shudders. “It does look like fun, though.” There’s a few kids using it, with their parents watching carefully. I don’t think three-tiered playgrounds are all that common, but they really took advantage of the hillside. There are slides running between levels, and I remember walking up the border bricks (that hold in the mulch) that circle the set as if they were stairs. I don’t know how much time Kevin spent here, but it was probably a lot.

“You’re getting over that, right?” I ask.

“Only because I can perfectly cleanse my whole body whenever I like. It’s freeing, though. Not having to think about it anymore.” I think that’s the largest smile I’ve seen on Susan while outdoors. Her skin has gained considerable color since becoming a half-dragon, too, likely more from her time outside than any sort of magic effect.

“Anyway, this wraps up the tour. I’ve been to this park more times than I can count. Not just for the playground here, but for sports, picnics, bike rides, and even fishing, once.”
“Fishing?” Nanase questions. There isn’t any sort of body of water in sight.

I point. “There’s a small pond in the woods back there. The fishing isn’t great, but it’s better than nothing and local. The biggest catch was when one boy miscast and caught another boy.”

Nanase winces. “In his mouth?”

“No, his back.”

“Stop!” Susan exclaims. “Okay, I think we’re done here, if we’re going to get home before sunset.”

“Alright,” I relent. “Let me just… commit this to memory.” There’s a way to store memories of experiences in the Mymoir using information from all of your senses. I read the tutorial before coming and tried it once. Now it’s time to take a real memory—traveling with my own friends, not Kevin’s—and keep it forever.
28 June 2014
3:30 PM CST

I’d say Moperville is progressing nicely, as far as magic acceptance goes. I mean, dragons flying over town weekly and several major magic events even *before* that probably helps a lot, but Tedd’s actually making money with his business (though still paying back the deposit his dad put in for the spot) and some people are even using their own magic in public. Susan took a picture of a cat-girl with blue hair that rented a movie earlier this week. (“I bet Saphira will want to see this.” Yes, I did.)

I’ve been going to the Monday practices at Shapeless, and I can tell that they’ll be pretty useful. It’s not the sort of stuff I’ll make spells for, really. Just thinking on my feet to come up with creative uses of my magic, and figure out what other people are doing. There’s a lot more sparring in those sessions than on Wednesdays, and it actually draws a bit of a crowd in front of the glass storefront. Sensei has certainly been enjoying the increase in magic’s popularity.

But none of that is why I’m sitting at home on my bed.

“Pandora.”

Wait…

“Pandora.”

There’s no *pop* or anything, but she suddenly appears in front of me. Like Susan described, she looks somewhere between Diane and Grace on appearance, with Grace’s hairstyle and Diane’s figure. She’s also floating a few inches above the floor and wearing a yellow chemise (I’ve learned what it’s called now!). “How’d you know I was here?” she asks, suspicion visible on her face.

“I didn’t. That’s about the fifth time I tried it.”

“Oh. You know, that’s not my name anymore.”

“Then what is?”

“…” Not-Pandora squeezes her eyes shut and sticks her tongue out at me. *Real* mature. “Fine. Only until I decide on a new one.”

“How much exactly do you remember from your previous life?”

“I remember my relationships. I… *probably* recall them differently to how Pandora had in the moment… but I actually remember my interactions with my family, and how they made me—*her* feel. Other than that, well, you’ve been teaching me a lot about magic and dragons.” I guess she really *has* been stalking me.

“Do you remember how your previous self could tell that Susan and Mr. Raven are related?”

Not-Pandora thinks for a moment. “Nno. But I can pick it out, if I look for it. A similarity in the feeling of their magic, more than just a family resemblance.”

“Alright. Then I have a question for you. Does Ms. Pompoms feel the same way? As in, like she’s
one of your descendants.”

Not-Pandora looks towards where I know Ms. Pompoms is sitting, reading a book. “Um… no.”

“Then I have a favor to ask. Not from me as a dragon, but from me as Susan’s friend.”

4 July 2014
6:00 PM CST

Family is weird.

The week before I head down to Maryland with my friends, one of them finds out that she’s part of the extended family—by great ancestry—of two other people I know, who are actually father and daughter and only found out recently by an immortal’s version of a paternity test. Which then makes the extended version of the Raven family include Pandora (deceased, kinda), Mr. Raven, Diane, and Susan. Then if you really want to bring in extended family, you include Diane’s adoptive parents and sister and Ms. Pompoms, and of course, Tedd and Grace and Mr. Verres because Mr. Raven is Tedd’s godfather. (Susan invited Tedd when Mr. Raven acquiesced.) And Noah, because apparently Mr. Raven has officially adopted him. And since they had everyone else, they invited me along because I live with Susan for one big awkward sorta-family get-together Independence Day celebration. I asked Grace, and she said her direct family couldn’t come. I think it’s more that the Woods house can’t support a larger party, and Ms. Pompoms didn’t open up her home for this.

That also makes this one of the smallest gatherings possible for the widest variety in magic abilities. An immortal, a half-immortal, two casters, a caster/half-dragon, a dragon, a wizard, a wandmaker, a Genetic caster, and four people that have no magic ability whatsoever. Well, four if Ms. Pompos had decided to come. I don’t get her—besides Tedd and Noah, the only men here are all parents, and they all at least kind of have daughters (kind of for Mr. Verres), and they’ve stuck around through the end of high school. They should at least have more responsibility than her husband had, in her mind. And Noah is probably crazy stressed out by being near all these girls that are his age. I know Kevin would be. Tedd’s probably fine, since he’s dating Grace—well, actually, he proposed. Shocking, I know. Totally didn’t see that coming after Grace’s comment at her birthday party. Since almost everyone he’d want to invite lives in-town anyway and the pair doesn’t care so much about expensive stuff, they’re planning to have the wedding on the last week that everyone is here before college starts, which I suppose is as good a time as any.

“So, which of you is going to wear the dress?” Susan asks Tedd, and the latter flushes white as a sheet. (Not as white as in the comic.) I guess she still has that ability to thoroughly embarrass him with a single sentence.

“Me, of course,” Grace answers. “For the ceremony, anyway. Tedd can wear it afterwards if he wants.”

“I d-don’t cross-dress in women’s clothing!” Tedd stammers. I note that he specifies ‘women’s clothing,’ since if he swaps sex while wearing something, he’s technically cross-dressing.

“Anyway, we can stop harassing my fiancé. This is a Fourth of July party, right? What do you normally do for those?”

“Well, what’d you do last year?” I ask.

“We watched Independence Day.” Somehow, I knew she’d have an answer like that. I sigh and look over to where Mr. Woods is teaching the rest of the men, including Noah, how to work a grill.
Susan let him know that she and I could get that heated up faster, but he said he trusts the charcoal more because he “knows it.” It’s not like we offered to cook the food.

“I do something more like that.” I point where I’m looking. “And fireworks, of course.”

“Mr. Raven made it clear that he didn’t want fireworks, I thought,” Susan states. “The veteran thing, right?”

“Yeah, and Dad wasn’t having it,” Diane replies. “He insisted on fireworks. We got some quieter ones.”

“Veterans?” I question.

“Veterans with PTSD have trouble with loud explosions.”

“Huh. Well, I know plenty of veterans who’d be downright offended if people didn’t have fireworks for Independence Day. In fact, the local army base in Maryland had a fireworks show every year that we attended a few times, and that always had a large crowd populated entirely by veterans and their families. So I guess it’s up to individuals. And if it’s for something like today, it’s pretty predictable. They probably have earplugs in already.”

“That sounds likely, I suppose,” Susan replies.

“Hey!” Rhea shouts from the porch. “We could use some help in the kitchen!”

4 July 2014
6:31 PM CST

This is quite a different gathering than I’m used to. I think this is the first time I’ve met Rhea and only the third time seeing Noah. Not-Pandora (or whatever her name is) still hasn’t shown herself, but she’s probably nearby.

“Hey!” Speak of the devil. “If you organize a party, invite me!” She’s still wearing that chemise and floating above the center of the table, facing Mr. Raven. If she angles herself a bit further, Tedd will probably turn bright red due to being able to see up the dress.

“In case you didn’t notice, Mother, you’re still difficult to contact,” Mr. Raven responds.

‘Not-Pandora’ flinches at the address. “Sorry. I’m still getting used to all this. Oh! I’ve decided on a name!” She definitely seems like a more cheerful version of her past self. More impulsive, too, so at least I can take solace that she has a lot less power. “You can call me Ruth!”

Huh. I know immortals tend to take their names from myths and legends, so I wonder why she picked that name. “Where did you find that name?” Mr. Verres asks.

“I didn’t pick my family, but I couldn’t ask for a better one!” Wait… if she’s been tailing me… Oh.

“You followed me to church?” I ask her.

“Yes!!”

“Then wouldn’t Naomi be a better name? Ruth was the faithful daughter-in-law that had a choice. I think that role better fits your son, since it’s his choices that led to all this.” I don’t normally keep a great deal of memory on that story, but that was the sermon last Sunday.

“Okay, fine. Naomi it is. I’m changing it if people don’t get the reference, though.” She sticks out
her tongue at me. From a human perspective, I think Naomi sounds like a ‘younger’ name, anyway, and a better fit. “Anyway!” She spins to face her son again. “I’m happy to see you with the whole family! What made you decide to actually meet your godson?”

“… I met him at the farmers’ market,” Mr. Raven responds flatly. You can see the tension in his eyes that just isn’t reflected in Naomi’s: memories of a strained relationship that Naomi remembers in a very different light.

Naomi looks at her son sadly. “Relationships aren’t repaired in a day,” she sighs. “I’ll be here now.” She gently floats over her son’s head to land on the ground behind him, resting her left hand on his left shoulder. Golly. She looks pretty young next to him, and he’s not even disguised right now. Mr. Raven closes his eyes and bows his head until she steps away.

We sit in silence for a bit before Grace speaks up. “We’ve still got a while before it’s dark enough for fireworks. What’s next?” she asks Mr. Woods.

Mrs. Woods answers her. “We can start by getting all this inside. After that, I’m sure you all have plenty you can talk about. And we have cornhole in the garage, so we can get that set up.” I suppose they wouldn’t exactly have a football, with their two daughters. I never cared for football anyway.

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“Hey, Tedd?” I call to him after the cornhole is set up. Neither of us are playing the first round.

“Yeah?” He turns to face me as I approach.

“I just remembered, I never asked you what spell you would’ve stuck in the cake if we weren’t going bowling after graduation.”

He turns pink as he scratches the back of his head. “Oh, not much. I would’ve just put in my mark’s spell. The chocolate side would’ve made people ‘girly,’ the lemon ‘manly.’”

I’ve had a basic explanation from him on this spell, but it’s been a while and I’ve never actually seen him use it. “What exactly does ‘girly’ mean for your spell, anyway?”

“I don’t actually know for certain. I can’t. It’s affected by what I think as well as what the target thinks, so for you, I guess you probably know better than I do.”

I muse for a few seconds. “Mmmm… no? I have a pretty clear picture for ‘manly,’ but I don’t really have a solid idea on what makes a person ‘girly.’” The words themselves probably form most of my opinion. ‘Manly,’ to me, is basically muscular and macho, maybe with facial hair. The opposite of Kevin. ‘Girly’ seems to imply that the person is similar to a little girl. Not a grown woman, really. Just small and cutesy.

“… If you want, I can try it on you?”

“Girly, please. Does it have mental effects?”

“No. Well, only as much as you let it—it doesn’t mess with your head, but your speech patterns and mannerisms might change, if you don’t carefully control yourself.”

“I can work with that. How long does it last?”

“Based on my experiments, 24 hours.” Then I guess I’m shifting before I get on my flight
tomorrow. It’s not like I wasn’t going to go flying in the morning, anyway. “Is all that alright?”

“Sure. Have at it.”

He gently places his hand on my shoulder and I close my eyes, doing my best to picture ‘girly.’ I wonder how it’d be different if I didn’t know it was coming? When he steps back, I open my eyes and look at myself. My clothes have turned light pink and combined into a chemise much like the one Pand-er, Naomi is wearing. I suppose she’s pretty ‘girly’ to me. I guess Tedd won out a bit, because I’m pretty certain my bust is slightly bigger, but I’m also definitely shorter, matching Noah for height. … My modified clothes even have the top of my bust showing. I’m not totally comfortable with that. “Here’s a mirror,” Tedd offers, holding out his phone in selfie mode. My face is largely the same, but my eyelashes are now set as though I was using makeup or something. People associate longer lashes with girls, but in practice, mine seem about the same length as Kevin’s always were. Then again, I never wear any sort of makeup and have no idea how to do such things. I also find myself naturally posing differently, with a cute smile and my hips to one side.

“I thought girly meant ‘cute,’ and I think I got it.” Um, wow. I thought my voice was already high, but I definitely sound younger now. “You can have your phone back.”

“Is that really Saphira?” I hear Diane ask behind me.

4 July 2014
8:25 PM CST

I suppose I’ve grown a bit fonder of this form over the past hour or so, since I’ve gotten more used to it, but I still wish my clothes covered a bit more skin. Actually, aside from the clothes, I’m perfectly fine with the form, though I still like my default more.

“Time for the most interesting part of the night,” I declare when I spot Mr. Woods pulling out the fireworks. It looks like he’s got some sparklers, alongside a few towers and a bunch of things I recognize as simple bright lights in different colors.

“The most interesting?” Noah asks. Based on how he’s acted towards me since Tedd used his spell on me (that is, he’s distanced himself considerably and blushed a lot), I’m very sure he finds me cute like this. I might ask Tedd if he can save a morph of this form after the party. Would it be cruel to show it to Elliot? Although if I don’t undo it tonight, I guess Elliot will see it tomorrow morning anyway. Maybe I’ll be able to show Al, just to tease him.

“In terms of physics. When I watched these while not a dragon, I always wondered what was going on inside the firework towers. Now that I have a heat sense, I can finally find out!” I pull my arms up to my sides, my hands in excited fists. That’s not how I normally express excitement, so I guess it’s the spell.

Noah looks away and blushes again. “I suppose that that does sound intriguing.”

“Yay! Fireworks!” Naomi exclaims. Wow. I don’t know how much her personality changed from Pandora’s, but that is a major attitude shift.

It’s a little funny how used I am to the way that Dad did fireworks that I’m more surprised by the shape of the plywood that Mr. Woods puts on the street than the fact that he’s setting it up at all. You don’t want the city coming to your door about the scorch marks on the street, and for smaller fireworks, it helps to keep them upright. It’s just that the plywood doesn’t have the same cuts out of it, and the same degree of warp, as the one that Dad always used.
I walk up to Mr. Woods with an offer in mind. “If you don’t want to mess with the lighter, sir, I could try a safer method of lighting the fireworks.”

“You mean lighting them from a distance?”

I nod. “I’ll pinch the wick first to set the position in my mind, but it shouldn’t take much effort to get them started, and I don’t have to stand next to them to get them going.”

“Do you want to try that with a sparkler first?”

“Sure,” I smile. He pulls one out of the pack and sets the rest on the ground, and I firmly pinch the tip to warm it a bit before backing up. I close my eyes and concentrate on heating the point until it starts rapidly warming on its own as it ignites.

“One can only hope for the day we can all do this without worrying about lighter fluid,” he comments, handing me the sparkler and pulling out another to light with my already-burning one. “Alright! Come and get your sparklers!” he calls to the rest of the group.

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“That was a lot better than the movie,” Grace remarks. She, Tedd, Susan and I are standing in the Verres basement, where Tedd’s doing his best to make a spell that’ll just copy this result in the future, as the spell he used is dynamic and won’t always have the same result on the same person. I don’t know how his Wii Balance Board is helping, but I’m standing on it anyway.

“I’d like to think most things you do are better than a crappy movie about a hostile alien invasion,” Susan replies.

“I think the film was mostly made for military nuts, which to be fair, is a big part of our culture,” I state. I don’t think the spell has affected my speech at all, but not a lot of what I say can really be twisted in a ‘cute’ way. By contrast, my expressions have changed a lot. “Susan, could you get another picture of me? One for Al this time.” We already had a lot of photos taken throughout the party.

“I thought you weren’t going to date him?” Tedd says.

“Not yet. He did ask me out in no uncertain terms after graduation. I told him I still don’t feel like we’d really be equal, although I might be open to moving up the timetable a bit.”

“What’d you tell him the first time?” Tedd asks.

“Not until I pass 100 years old.”

“That still gives you a large window, but I guess that was on purpose.”

“Yes!”

“Okay, Saphira, I’m ready.” Susan has her phone out and Tedd backs up, out of frame. I lean towards the camera slightly and put my right index to my lips, widening my eyes. I hear the photo snap and drop back to my default position.

“That’s quite the pose for someone who’s not dating,” Tedd remarks.

“Just ‘cause I’m not dating him, it doesn’t mean I can’t be a huge tease,” I laugh. “I’m serious when I say I might date him at some point in the future, but even the married dragons had a few
centuries under their belts before they took that step. And if we did get married, where would we live? I don’t think America needs a fourth dragon, but I don’t want to move, either.”

“I think it’s safe to say that the world might be a very different place when you get that far,” Susan replies flatly.

“I guess. It is a long way off.”

5 July 2014
1:01 PM CST

As predicted, Elliot was very flustered by my looks this morning. I suppose it didn’t help that I put the chemise back on, but I wanted those clothes to revert when the rest of me did. I will admit that the clothing was comfortable, but it’s still more revealing than I think is appropriate. Maybe I can moderate it a bit with Partial Armor, if I decide to expand my style in the future.

“Are you all packed?” Susan asks me when I take my bag downstairs. “Ready for TSA?”

“Yep. Clothing, backpack, laptop in the rare case I want to use it.” Clothing takes up a lot more space for me than for Kevin, but only really because of the extra articles that guys don’t have to wear (bras). That said, I still know how to pack relatively light. Since I had it already, I used one of the duffels from my last trip to carry my stuff for this one.

“Swimsuit and towel for the hotel pool?”

“Check, if for some reason I decide to use it.” In keeping with my style, I’d rather have a one-piece. Unfortunately, they don’t make those standard for girls over six feet tall, so I had Diane help me pick out a two-piece. It’s still relatively modest. “Do you have your wand?”

“Yes.” Last year, Sarah and Susan made a note to get transformed by Ellen prior to the convention, but I pointed out that they still have to make it through security, which might be hard if they don’t match their ID’s. Instead, they’re bringing wands for FV5 with changing clothing to fit. I have something different in mind for myself. “We should get going, then.”

“Don’t want to miss our flight.”

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It’s stupid expensive to find lodging close to the convention for its duration, so we’re still far enough away to have to take a shuttle. That said, this hotel also has a lower proportion of overweight geeks than I feared, so I’ll live. A cursory inspection says that the people lodging here are only 3/4 male. That’s more favorable than I expected for the convention, so I bet there’s a bunch here not for that.

There aren’t many hotel rooms set up for triples that insist on separate beds, so we’ve got a cot we’ll use on rotation. Sarah gets night 1. I’m just thankful that I’m shorter than Kevin, minimizing my contact with the frame bars, as the cot’s only six feet long.

“Saphira, before we go to bed, I’ve got a question,” Sarah says, sitting on the cot.

“Yes?”

“You said you had something special planned for this. Can you tell us?”

Oh, right. I’ve sorta been hinting at this for weeks. Not that I had anything to show until about a
week ago, and I still can’t really call it finished. Good enough for the convention, though.

“Sure.” I stand up and move to the middle of the room, spreading my arms wide. “Saphira’s Half-Dragon Form.” Jorge insisted on giving me credit for the idea, even though he did most of the hard work. I just tweaked it to my liking.

The spell is, at its base, very similar to Partial Skin to Scales. The area covered includes my feet all the way to my neck, but only goes to my wrists, leaving me able to grab things as normal. In addition to all that, though, I’ve got the parts that I really needed Jorge’s help with: wings and a tail. Because it’s made for crowded spaces, the tail ends just above the floor, but it’s a really thick tail like the dragon form has, unlike any of the dog or cat forms Tedd made. And the wingspan is only about twice my arm span, and I can’t fly with them, but the wings and tail are just as much a part of me as when I’m fully transformed. For the final version of the spell, I’m thinking of making a flight-enabled variant (with larger wings and a longer tail), if Jorge and I can figure out how to do that.

“Um, wow,” Susan says as Sarah gapes at me.

A few seconds pass in silence as I move my wings and tail around, testing their mobility a bit. “How do you plan to pass that off?” Sarah finally asks. “It’s pretty clear it’s magic.”

“Two ways. One, you might’ve noticed last year, but there are a number of people who use magic for costumes at these things.”

“… No, not really,” Sarah replies.

“Really? Jorge has been to one or two. Of course, he also said that people usually used magic just for more difficult parts of a costume, not like this. Maybe it was just hard to notice.”

“I guess I’ll take your word for it. What’s the second?”

I end the spell and pull out my backpack. It’s got some clothes in it just to make it look not empty. After putting it on, I re-cast Half-Dragon Form. My wings fit nicely through the arm straps, still able to stretch out fully, but the bag hides their base and sits at the top of my tail.

“Oh, I think I get it,” Susan comments.

“Most people with articulated extra limbs would hide electronics someplace. The tail is thick enough to claim that, but to be extra sure, I can wear my backpack as if it had all the batteries and fancy controls and stuff inside. I also know enough about robotics that I can talk shop with anyone who wonders how I’d make this with that method, but as Jorge did most of the hard parts for this, I can plausibly claim that someone else made it for me if they start asking really hard questions. Of course, if I use this spell back home, I won’t need the backpack, but I’d probably have something to carry stuff. The most inconvenient part about the backpack is that I physically can’t take it off with the spell active.” My wings can’t pull in far enough to let me do that, and they won’t fit back through the straps.

“Can anyone use the spell?” Susan asks.

“In theory, all dragons and half-dragons should be able to. There’s no ‘targeted’ version. Sorry, Sarah.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ll need a wand, though, and did you bring a backpack?”
“Yes, actually,” Susan replies.

“Then maybe you can use this instead of your FV5 at some point. For now, I’m tired,” I yawn. I end the spell and put down my backpack, unceremoniously going to bed.

6 July 2014
8:36 AM PST

I got a lot of stares on the shuttle this morning, but I guess that’s sorta what I was going for. At least the guys aren’t staring at my chest. Just everywhere else.

“How do you use the bathroom in that?” one man in his twenties asks me. We’re in line to get our badges and everything.

“I don’t. It’s easier to remove than you’d think.” Actually, I’ve set a timer to remind me to use the restroom every six hours so that I don’t have any problems, since my current state includes a digestive tract but not any exits. I can’t tell when I need to use the restroom, but I’ll know when I change back.

“I don’t see any zippers…” The man cranes his neck to look at my side.

“Scales tend to hide details.”

“Is it heavy?”

“I’m used to it.” I remember one blog/comic Kevin read where the author’s husband made his own medieval suit of armor. He wore it a bunch, and while it was hot, he eventually became used to the weight. When he took it off, he felt a lot more agile. That’s about how I feel if I do exercise without scales, like I did this morning. (Just because I’m on vacation, it doesn’t mean I can put my exercise on the wayside. But unless I’m working out in my room, I can’t exactly do it with scales like normal.)

The man turns around to talk with someone else just as I overhear some overweight guy around my age talking with Sarah and Susan: “…friend overcompensating for something?” Ahhh-ha-ha. The two are FV5’d, so they’ve got a much more ‘bombshell’-like figure than I do. Little does he know that I’m the only one of the three that looks close to my normal figure.

“No, I think she’d wear that anyway,” Sarah replies.

“Yeah I would,” I tell him, resting my hands on Sarah’s shoulders. “If you had a costume this awesome, wouldn’t you wear it?”

The guy barely looks at me. “I’m no scalie.” I… don’t actually know what that means. Based on context, probably something like ‘furry.’

“Nor am I. I’m a dragon! Rawr!” I growl cutely. I don’t see any harm in doing that bit, even if it makes me seem a little nuts. It’s clearly in keeping with my ‘costume.’ The guy just shakes his head and walks to his place at the back of the line.

Susan turns to face me. “That doesn’t bother you at all?”

I lift my hands for a shrug. “No? I didn’t do this for others. Like Sarah said, I’d wear this anyway. It’s perfect for any sort of costume party. Much better than Jorge’s original attempt.”

“Um, I think I’m missing something,” Susan comments.
Huh? Oh, wait, I never... “Oh. I renamed Jorge’s Skin to Scales. He called it ‘Jorge’s Halloweeny Disguise.’” Sarah bursts out laughing.

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Unlike last year, Susan had the correct name on her badge the first time, so the only hassle we have to deal with is the person checking my backpack, since I can’t actually take it off.

“Miss, you need to remove the bag.” The security detail is dressed as a Star Wars Stormtrooper. I can’t see his face without my heat sense, but I can tell he’s acting professionally, and I can hear his voice clearly in spite of the helmet.

“Sir, I’d be happy to comply if that was physically possible while still wearing my costume.” My wings are folded along my back and clearly longer than the space allowed to fit through the straps. “You’re free to open it up and look through it, but I can’t take it off.”

“I’ll need to call my supervisor.”

“Go ahead. I’m sure I’ve complied with the regulations. I just can’t actually take off the bag.”

“Saphira, do you mind if we have a look around?” Susan asks.

“Sure. You’re cleared, and I suspected this would take a bit the first time. I just hope they’ll be ready for the rest of the days.” The pair walk off. It’s not like I can’t find them if I want; I can just follow Susan’s scent of Draconic magic, beyond just waiting for them to come back here. And Susan can find me the same way.

The security officer comes back from using his radio. “He’ll be over promptly.”

“Can I sit down while I’m waiting? I’m probably too tall for you to look in the bag while I’m standing anyway.”

“Of course.” He pulls out a metal folding chair. I sit on it sideways, with the back to my right, and curl my tail around under me so that people won’t step on it. Then I stretch out my arms and wings at the same time. I want to at least make it look like I’ve got some sort of controller thingy going on with my extra limbs, because it would be very awkward to explain otherwise.

I only have to wait for a minute or two before the aforementioned supervisor appears. He’s wearing a normal security outfit: all black with some gold bars and other highlights, such as the badge in his breast pocket. As far as his build goes, it’s fairly typical for a security guard: clearly muscular and a little overweight, with black hair and some stubble peppering his chin. “This is the dragon-girl you called me over for, Smith?”

“Yes, sir,” he responds, saluting.

“Alright. Now, then.” He looks at my badge. “Saphira. I understand you are not able to remove the bag?”

“The bag is locked in place, sir. I have to mostly remove my costume to remove the bag, and as you can see, I’m not wearing much under it.” Not anything, actually, because of how the magic works, but if I could fit something under the scales, it’d just be really thin underwear. As it is, I’ll just be wearing my normal outfit if I dismiss the spell. And the “mostly” is true if you count the bag as part of the costume. “However, it still works as a normal backpack, so you’re free to search it while it’s on me.”
“How did you plan to use it?” It’s obvious I can’t reach around to operate any of the zippers.

“I came with a pair of friends. They’ve already been cleared and are wandering the convention.”

“Okay. I have your permission to search the bag?”

“Yes. I’m certain there isn’t anything in there that violates the convention’s policies.” I made sure the only things in there are on the approved list: a notebook (for sketches/autographs), three empty water bottles (as you can fill them up at the many water fountains in the convention center), a few pens, and my wallet and phone.

The guard supervisor walks around behind me and searches my bag. “Hold on. Where are the controls for your costume?” I guess he’s seen this sort of thing before.

“Not in there,” I answer somewhat quietly. I don’t want a lot of people overhearing this, because it’ll make me seem either super rich (for top-notch robotics) or suspicious for the people that either know about or suspect magic’s existence. Which, of course, is not the sort of attention I want. “It’s just a bag. Which may or may not hold things in place.”

“Huh. Well, you’re free to go.” He walks around to my front to look at my badge again. “You’re coming for the whole week? I’ll make a note for you, so that my team can look through your bag as I just did.”

“Thank you!” I unwrap my tail from the chair and get up. “Now, then, to find my friends.” I don’t exactly get a stellar signal in here even if I could reach my cell phone, so it’s up to my smell, heat sensing, and detective skills.

Where’s Teague when you need him?

6 July 2014
10:23 AM PST

I’ve passed a bunch of stuff I’ll need to check out later, but for now, I’m just having a lot of trouble tracking down my friends. I’ve also been interrupted more than a few times by people asking me about my costume or just wanting a picture. For those, I’ve worked out a few subtle gestures that make it look like I’m controlling the wings or tail with my hands while still being able to pose basically any way I want. Thankfully, there are enough people here that I don’t have to worry about being all that consistent—I’m not likely to see any particular person again.

Ah, there we go. It looks like some people have been taking pictures of those two as well. I suppose a figure like FV5 gives them isn’t all that likely to find on a girl at a comic convention unless she’s a model for a company. (Yes, Marvel and DC are here presenting on their upcoming films and so on. Or, well, not yet. They’ll show up tomorrow.) I make a burst of heat over Susan’s head to let her know I’ve arrived. She looks around a bit before spotting me.

“You two couldn’t have stayed a little closer to the entrance?” I ask them when I’m close enough to be heard.

“We sorta were shoved along,” Sarah responds sheepishly.

“Uh-huh, sure you were.”

“Believe us or don’t, your choice, but how did it take you so long to get here?” Susan asks. “Was security really bad?”
“No. My costume just attracts a lot of attention. I’m *almost* an exhibit, but then again, some other people get even more attention.” I saw someone with a *really* good *Spider-Man* costume getting *loads* of pictures. That’s probably one of the easiest to pull off, alongside *Deadpool* and the like, because it’s a full-body skintight suit. Other than being thin, you don’t really need the figure or face for it, especially since you can buy sculpted suits (as in, false abs and the like) at some costume shops.

“So, what do you want to check out first?” Sarah asks.

“Eh, Kevin read *a lot* of comics, but I don’t think I spotted any of them. They weren’t exactly mainstream, so if the authors are here, they might just be guests.”

“I’m sure we’ll find something you’ll enjoy,” Susan says, brushing off the small crowd that’s gathered near us. It’s like that *pirate-lady* said last year: the men are treating Sarah and Susan like minor celebrities, almost, and back off when Susan motions for them to go.

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Okay, yeah, there are interesting things here, even on the first day of the convention. I think the only real mistake we made today was wandering by a *certain* booth of a furry comic. I… caught the attention of everyone there. They were *very* hard to shake. Note to self: when partially shifted, avoid furries like the plague. They will not leave you alone.

Now back in our hotel room, I’ve finally gotten to shift all the way back to human form while not in a bathroom. My feet are pretty sore. Would it kill them to have rugs or carpet in there?

Sarah sits up on her bed (as it’s Susan’s turn on the cot). “I *was* looking today, but I still didn’t notice anyone using magic for costumes.”

Susan and I look at each other. “Really?” we ask in unison.

“Not even at the furry booth?” Susan continues.

Sarah glances to the side. “…No?”

“You didn’t notice the guy with a real wolf tail,” I state.

“That was real?”

“Yes,” Susan answers. “And there was a girl with real cat ears, and at another spot, there was a guy who was actually as muscular as he appeared for his *Thor* costume.”

“I thought that was a body suit!”

“And a bunch of other things like that. I mean, there *were* people using non-magical means for their costumes,” I clarify. “The vast majority were that way. It’s just that we weren’t the only ones with magic costumes today.”

“Oh. How could you two even tell?”

“A combination of the people smelling like casters, and our heat sense telling us what’s what.”

“Oh. I guess it’d be easy to pick out a real tail from a cloth one, then.”

“Or even a robotic one, really.”
“Hey, Saphira?” Susan calls to me as I’m getting ready for the trip back to the convention hall.

“Yeah?”

“Could you give me a wand for your half-dragon form spell? I was thinking I could just use my own dragon form, but then I realized that I’d have to think at people, and they’d probably notice.”

“Beyond the simple shape of your head, you mean.”

Susan’s lips turn up in a small smile. “Well, yes.”

“Alright. I made one Sunday morning, since you asked the previous night. Let me dig it out.” I walk over to my duffel and pull out the sapphire scale marked as a Half-Dragon Form wand. “Here you go. Remember to put on your backpack first. And you’ll need to go to the bathroom when I do, because you can’t exactly go while using the spell.” I speak quietly to avoid Sarah overhearing, since I don’t think she should know that about the dragon form.

“Right.” Susan takes the wand and puts on her backpack, then activates the spell. It looks… almost the same as the effect the spell has on me. Of course, her scales are lighter in color, and it’s not like we look the same normally. Just similar.

“Want me to run down the list of how to talk about the costume?”

“You can do that on the bus.”

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As with any convention, there’s some time where nothing you want to do or see is going on. For some reason, that always seems to be Tuesday for me. So right now, we decided to check out the hotel pool.

“I’m kind of surprised you’re wearing a two-piece, Saphira,” Sarah comments.

“I’d be surprised if clothing companies planned on girls being over six feet tall. I bet Susan is wearing just about the tallest size they make.”

“You’d be right,” Susan chimes in.

We’re in a coastal city, so you’d think we’d be in the bay or ocean, but Susan’s dirt reaction won’t really let her swim in an area where she can’t shift or take a real shower when she’s done. Instead, we basically have the pool to ourselves. I’m fine with it, really, since I can’t stand all the places sand gets stuck, like in between my toes.

“So, how’d you like the dragon costume today?” I ask.

“I like the lack of mental effects. I’m surprised at how well I’ve kept my composure this week.”

“Yeah, I could do without those, too,” Sarah remarks.

“It was a little inconvenient when I wanted to sit, but I think I like it better, overall.”

“I’d bet not running into over-enthusiastic furries today helped.”
Susan laughs. “Yes. You could say that.”

“Is the convention living up to your expectations?” Sarah asks me.

“Roughly. What Kevin read of last year’s only covered about half of Day 1, so I didn’t know what to expect.”

Susan and Sarah tread water in silence for a few moments. “I could see how that day would be funny, from a certain point of view,” Sarah says.

“Remember the pirate woman?”

“Of course! She’s the whole reason we brought those wands!”

“Do you regret it?” I ask.

“No,” Sarah replies. “But I might decide to spend a day not in costume.”

“How about Thursday?” That’s when the major presentations are planned. I don’t think they’d let me inside the rooms with my costume on, since it’d take up space and possibly block people’s view.

“Sure. Thursday it is.”

10 July 2014
1:00 PM PST

Walking around without a costume today is a decidedly different experience. Obviously, no one has stopped us for pictures, and furries are no longer barring areas for me. Of course, it also means guys are a bit more rude than normal, especially to my companions. I guess I get a pass due to my height.

“Welcome, everyone, to—” *BEEEEP!* That’s a fire alarm. A few people scream before security starts filing everyone out of the main doors. Before we have to start moving, I grab my friends and make a huddle.

“I don’t sense any sort of fire, but I do think I know where the alarm came from. Wanna check it out?” There was a mass exodus from a room past the edge of my range starting about a minute ago. I thought it was just the end of a presentation, but now that I think about it, the room is an exhibit hall. (I memorized the map.) Why would people flee the shopping area?

“Do you know why they’d pull the fire alarm?” Sarah whispers.

“No. I can’t sense the room itself, but a lot of people left in a hurry, and it’s an exhibit hall.”

“And if it is a fire?”

“Would it be a bad thing for a pair with heat magic to run towards a fire?”

“I guess not. What if it’s a shooter?” Worst-case scenario, I guess.

“That’s what you’re for. You can check the room without us even entering.”

“Okay,” Sarah relents. “Susan?”

“Sure. I feel like something bad might happen if we don’t go.” I really hope it’s not a vampire, but I
guess Susan can help if that’s it.

Once security sends us out of the presentation room, we sneak out the side of the crowd towards the exhibit hall. I guess it’s a good thing we’re not in costume today. We hurry without running in a way that moves quickly without drawing attention to ourselves.

I keep my focus on the room that’s coming into range. When it’s about halfway across, I feel something that definitely shouldn’t be there. “Status report,” I announce softly as we rush towards the room. “It’s a monster or person. Humanoid and large. Large as in dragon-sized. They appear to be mimicking Wreck-it Ralph.” I’ve never actually seen the movie, but it’s not hard to imagine how a character would smash buildings with their fists. In this case, I’d bet a number of booths have been trashed, the way the thing is flailing around.

“Saphira, do you want to take it down?” Susan asks.

“If it’s a person, I guess that’s why I’ve been sparring with Eliza this summer. If it’s a monster, that still helps, but you two might need to look for the caster that summoned it while I distract it.”

“Why look for the caster?” Sarah replies.

“Because I doubt my ability to do a lethal takedown on something of that size. Plus, they’re the one responsible for the damage to exhibits.”

“That’s fair.”

Most of the place has been deserted in response to the fire alarm, but we occasionally pass confused crowds between our starting point and destination. Finally, we come upon the room that’s the source of the chaos. “Sarah? Mind checking inside?” I ask. It’d be best to know what to expect before charging in, especially since security is blocking the doors.

She stops and closes her eyes for a second. “Someone summoned the Hulk.”

Crap. “You’re sure it’s a summon?”

“I checked with Susan and Nanase. I can take control of people, but not summoned monsters.” That’s useful.

“Alright. Susan, would you rather search for someone hidden out of the way, or a caster in a crowd?”

“A hidden person.”

“Then I guess Sarah gets the crowd. Can you do that?”

“Sure,” they both reply, and Sarah closes her eyes again. Susan and I walk to the guard at the nearest exhibit hall door.

“C-can I help you girls?”

“We need to get inside,” I answer curtly.

“I can’t let you in there! Can’t you hear it?”

As if on cue, we hear a muffled “HULK SMASH!” and a *BOOM!* from the other side of the door. The thing was in the middle of the room, but it’s now approaching the main doors at an alarming rate.
“Listen, if you let us in, I can buy you a lot of time. I’ll take responsibility if I get hurt, but if we stay out here, that thing’s coming through the wall in less than three minutes.” I can guarantee I’m not getting permanently hurt so long as I can shift, anyway.

“Three minutes?”

Susan loses her patience and summons a glowing, golden sword. She’s not going to use it, but it makes our point.

“R-right this way,” he stutters, opening the door behind him just enough for us to head inside.

10 July 2014
1:05 PM PST

Yep, that’s the Hulk, alright.

The green monstrosity towers above the booths surrounding him, occasionally slamming his fists into stuff in his way. From info in the Mymoir, certain kinds of summons will have the same attributes while appearing however the caster wishes. In this case, I think it’s an ogre-type summon: strength, size and invulnerability, but not all that bright. Plus side: I can repeatedly use the same tactics with the same success. Minus side: I definitely can’t un-summon it without shifting.

“Go, Susan,” I whisper. She’s staring at the Hulk like a deer in the headlights. “I’ve got this.”

“Right.” She heads towards the back of the room.

I follow her until I’m behind the Hulk, then cut across until I’m only about a hundred feet away, with nothing but wreckage between me and it. Thankfully, this Hulk doesn’t have any sort of genitals, on the off chance those purple shorts come off completely. “HEY! UGLY!” I shout at it.

It turns around. “HULK MAD! YOU NO LIKE ME WHEN I ANGRY!” I wonder how much the caster is controlling it? Or maybe they trained it with a voice chip from an action figure.

I don’t waste time. A trick I figured out for making the floor slick quickly with less magic is to move the heat from the floor into the space above it. This place has a high ceiling, so I don’t have to worry about causing any heat buildup problems.

“HULK —” *WHAM!* Hulk slipped, is what he did. He’s also certainly no balloon animal—the ground quaked when he fell, and his form was obscured by flying papers. He writhes on his back for a few seconds before he figures out how to flip over and stand up. “HULK VERY ANGRY!” he shouts, before taking a step forward and—*WHAM!*—sprawling on his back again. This is much more hilarious than fighting Eliza. I wish I could take a video, but I gave my stuff to Susan.

“Show me what you’re made of, ugly!” I taunt him, freezing more of the floor near him.

He stands in place and leans over to pick up a folding table. “HULK THROW!” Oh. Whoops. Good thing he telegraphs his attacks so well. I dodge easily to the side as the table lands with a *Clang!* and clatters on other tables behind me. Maybe I’ll do better at close range.

I move heat from the floor under the Hulk into the floor surrounding him about 1.5 of his steps away, so that I can safely dodge at a small distance while he’s still likely to fall on his back. Just in case, I go ahead and cast Partial Armor, since I’ll be in fist range and this thing has crushed a few tables already. I know it seems reckless, but I’ve confirmed with Eliza and Grace that it takes quite a lot of damage to make me unable to shift to heal it. (As in, they couldn’t inflict enough.) In
theory, everything but my head could be a splatter on the floor and I could still heal it.

“Let’s settle this face to face!”

“HULK SMASH!” I dodge to the side, and the recoil from him hitting the floor flips him on his back again.

“You’re too slow!” Ugh, I hated Sonic in Smash Bros. Brawl. Then again, this is almost Squirtle versus Donkey Kong. And now I’m thinking of Kevin’s jerk friend who played as Squirtle on huge stages and suicided every two minutes, even if you never touched him. “Little Dude” was the most infuriating opponent.

“Any progress, Susan?” I call while waiting on the Hulk to figure out how to stand up again.

“There’s someone under the stage, but I can’t find the entrance!” she calls back.

“HULK SMASH!” I dodge again. Eliza is much harder to dodge, and her fist isn’t the size of my torso.

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Alright, I can probably keep this up for another ten minutes, but I’m starting to get a little winded. Keeping the floor frozen is easy, but repeatedly dodging is tiring after a few minutes. It’s a good thing I get breaks when the Hulk slips. I hope Susan and Sarah hurry it up a bit.

I dodge again, but step a little too close to the Hulk and slip on my own ice. “Ah!” And then the Hulk notices his opening.

It slams an open hand on top of me and wraps its meaty mitt around me, hoisting me in the air. “Susan!?” I call as its grip tightens.

“Found the entrance!”

“It grabbed me! You’ve got ten seconds!”

“I don’t think I can do this in ten seconds!”

“You know what’s next then!” It’s getting hard to breathe.

“Go ahead!”

10 July 2014
1:14 PM PST

I summon my objects to my hands and shift. In less than ten seconds, the Hulk is on the ground, pinned under my right fore-claw. **I still suggest you hurry up. They’re going to notice the lack of noise and take a peek.**

I don’t get a response, so I look over towards the stage. Ah. Susan’s under there, and it looks like she’s talking with… another girl? I wonder what this whole thing was about?

Maybe thirty seconds after I pinned the Hulk, it vanishes and my claw smacks the floor, leaving a small gash. Oh well; it’s not like the floor doesn’t have huge chunks taken out already. The threat removed, I shift back to human form.

Just in time for a middle-aged Indian guy in a suit to walk in from the entrance opposite the one I
“Bravo! Bra-vo!” he calls as he walks towards me. I’m stuck in place, stiff from fear. I really messed up this time. I never checked to see if anyone was watching. He could’ve been there since we entered the room. Or even before that. “That was quite the show. It looked like you were actually fighting!”

Okay, that comment is a little insulting. “I was.”

“Oh? Color me impressed! From where did the creature come, and to where did it return? Straight out of a comic’s pages?”

I look to the side of the stage where Susan is emerging with a mousey little girl. She looks like she might be 16 years old, but she’s about Rhoda’s height and less feminine than Tedd’s default female form. A tomboy, most certainly. She runs over to me.

“He was fighting you!? I’m so sorry!” she apologizes while clambering over the wreckage. Her voice is deeper than mine—actually, it sounds a lot like Susan’s.

“Thanks, but would you mind explaining that to Mr. Executive here?” I’m way more scared of the outcome of this than my fight against the monster. Injuries I can shrug off. Public opinion—well, that’s why things are how they are, isn’t it?

“Patel, actually. Mohan Patel.” He tugs on his lapels as he introduces himself. “And I am no executive. Simply a screenwriter. The only reason I’m here—as in, speaking with yourselves—is that I was on break, and the nearest person associated with Marvel when it was reported that a prop of ours was running rampant in an exhibit hall.” Ooooh crap. “Now then, would you mind explaining what happened here? If you make it good enough, I might be able to help you out of this situation.” Translation: he’s going to give us a crappy deal, hoping we’ll think we owe him. Now, since I know the total sum I’ll be paid for my work over Spring Break, I’m fairly confident that I could pay for any damages here, were I held liable. That said, I’m far more worried about what Mr. Patel will say about what happened since I entered the room. Public image is a lot more important than money.

I raise my hand. “For my end, my friend—” I point to Susan, who’s still picking her way across the… arena, as it became “—and I are the reason there isn’t more damage. I kept that thing from rampaging through a wall, and mostly kept it in place.” The only thing I’m likely to really get out of any deal is him keeping his mouth shut. It just depends how highly he views the value of that on whether I’ll agree. At a certain point, the other dragons and I will just weather the storm. It’s not like I was the bad guy here.

“I viewed your performance, but I’m not convinced that you’re innocent. When I arrived, you were already fighting the copyright-protected creature.” Makes sense that people would call Marvel, really. “I believe it threw a table at you?” So… he saw the whole thing, then.

“Sorry!” the excitable tomboy blurts out. “Sorry! That was me! Some boys were jeering at me, so I thought I’d show them, but I lost control and hid!” Lost cont—she can just end the summon! That’s what she eventually did!

I glare at her. “You do know you can just end it, right? Get rid of it as easily as you made it?” Depending on how her spell works, there might be a minor explosion, but that would still be a lot less damaging than the summon itself was.

“I do now,” she whimpers.
“She said she’d never tried that before,” Susan explains. I guess her summons are the sort that would explode. The Hulk was probably running on fumes when it vanished.

“Ladies,” Mr. Patel brings the focus back to himself. “I’ve given you my name. Can you provide yours?” Susan and I facepalm.

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“So the person that made a monster that infringed on my company’s trademark is Alex, the person that found her is Susan, and the person that fought the creature and, at one point, turned into a dragon is Saphira?” I guess he’s explaining what he saw, because I definitely never said anything about that last part.

“A dragon!!?” Alex exclaims.

“Indeed.” Mr. Patel… pulls out his phone. Crap. Double crap. After fiddling with it a bit, he turns it to face Alex, and I peer over her head at the screen.

“HULK SMASH!” I hear from the green figure on the screen. Only its upper chest and head are visible over the booths between it and the camera, and I’m completely invisible from this angle. He must’ve ducked for cover, if this was his angle while he knew the monster was actually fighting me. On the screen, I’m lifted up in the beast’s grasp, and I can see myself turn my head to shout at Susan. What I say isn’t captured. What happens after I say it is.

“Oh, wow!” Alex says, stars in her eyes.

“Satisfactory?” Mr. Patel asks. “I’m much better with a pen than a camera.”

“Good enough to give me a headache,” I respond. This isn’t something I’ll be able to settle on my own.

He ignores my comment and puts his phone away. “Now then. None of you look like you can afford to pay for repairs and damaged merchandise, so I’m willing to cover that if you can help me out with a few things.” I smile inwardly. Both Susan and I could afford it if we had to pay it, strengthening our negotiating position considerably (because I can guess that we’re looking at $10k+ in damages, which is a lot, but also a tiny fraction of our net worth at the moment. Not to say I’d be happy paying it). “One, you’ve already covered: an idea for my next film.” He’s going to have the Hulk fight a dragon. Given how well the first Hulk film went over (i.e. poorly), it wouldn’t be the worst film. So long as the dragon either doesn’t look like me or isn’t a villain. “The remainder, we can go over at another time. First, we had best get our stories straight before leaving this room.” I bet he told security not to let anyone else in, after I soundly concluded the fight. I’m not fooled: this is also part of the negotiations. If he tries to make it sound like I was working for him or owe him in any way, I will deny it. I lose nothing for telling the truth about my motives. I just don’t want the wrong picture.

“Mr. Patel,” I reply, “would you mind me taking a moment to think? I’ll stay right here.”

“Of course.”

And so I tell the other dragons what’s going on.

10 July 2014
1:26 PM PST

I open my eyes. I’ll continue to chat with the dragons while talking with Mr. Patel, but I’m at a
I can’t say I liked Mr. Verres’s version of events, but it was still good enough for the police and fire department while not making it seem like I owed anybody. That said, dragons weren’t mentioned and I wasn’t noted as a hero. No one was. Liability is… still in the air. I’m pretty certain it won’t land on my and Susan’s shoulders, at least.

One thing I didn’t manage to get off of Mr. Patel is that video of his and the corresponding film
idea. I still need to make sure that he doesn’t go giving dragons a terrible reputation when he’s met a real one, so I’ve arranged a meeting with him for tomorrow morning in the relative privacy of the ‘sponsor break room.’ He told me it couldn’t get more private without a hotel room, and I’ve heard pretty terrible things about meeting with important film industry folks in places like that. He might not have been the most pleasant to talk with about our damage excuse, but he seemed a lot happier to talk about screenwriting. I suppose I’m about the same when talking about physics and engineering.

“I can’t help but feel like I got left out of everything,” Sarah complains once we shut the door to our hotel room.

“Sarah, if the culprit hadn’t been in the room, you’re the one that would’ve found them,” I remind her.

“I know. I just wish I could’ve seen your fight.” Sarah bows her head.

“I didn’t see it, either,” Susan clarifies. “They sure know how to hide a maintenance door. The booth in front of it didn’t help.”

“And really, if you want to see something similar, you could come to one of the Monday sessions at Shapeless. Really, it was like a more boring fight against an oversized Eliza.”

Sarah looks up. “Oh. Um, who is Eliza, again?”

“The college girl that can make herself as muscular as Sensei.”

“R-right.” She doesn’t remember. I suppose, if you don’t see people all the time, you won’t remember them as easily. “Are you sure you want to meet with that director guy? Patel?”

“Patel, the screenwriter. And no, I don’t want to meet with him, but I probably should. For the good of both the dragons and his next film. Because I don’t want him hurting our reputation, and if dragons are popular by the time the film actually releases, I bet it’ll hurt the film. At least, that’s the angle I’m going with.”

“Would something fictional actually hurt dragons? I mean, people know it’s fiction.”

“There’s plenty of stuff in public life that people know is fiction, and it still hurts reputations. But it can’t hurt to be on the safe side. And I’d like to see a quality film with a dragon that doesn’t have them as a villain.”

“Why’d you specify ‘quality’ film?”

Susan groans. “You do not want to watch Eragon.”

11 July 2014
10:45 AM PST

True to his word, Mr. Patel is here and let me inside the break room for the meeting. There are a couple of other people here, but it’s not really lunch time yet, so it’s just people having a snack between showcases. The refreshments on display look nice, but they’re not for me.

“Would you like something to eat?” Mr. Patel asks anyway.

“No, thanks. I have water, and I can get lunch later.” I pull out my water bottle from my bag. I don’t want to be rude, but I also don’t want to appear to owe him anything.
“Your loss.” He picks out a small sandwich and a bottle of orange juice before taking a seat at one of the folding tables set up in the room. I take the seat across from him, interview-style. “Before we begin, I would like to ‘set the table,’ so to speak. Ensure that we are talking about the same thing.”

“Alright.” Business mode. “I wanted to meet with you to discuss the ‘film idea’ you brought up yesterday. Given the context of the event, I wanted to ensure the broad strokes of your plot would more closely align with reality, since I have knowledge of events-in-progress that might affect your film’s reception.”

“What sorts of events?”

“The sorts that are tied up in things like what happened yesterday.” I’ve attracted a few glances by this point, but probably from people wondering who I am more than what I’m talking about. None of the glances have lingered.

Mr. Patel stares at me for a few long seconds as I return his gaze. Then he breaks the contact. “Argh. I had hoped that you weren’t serious. That yesterday had just been a bad fever dream. Even with my video, nobody takes me seriously when I talk about what I saw. What happened? Are you some sort of superhero? And if you are, why does nobody know about it?”

Oh. That would explain the glances. People in here think he went off the deep end. Probably while looking for inspiration for his next film. I can see why he wants to make one using what he saw. I lower my voice. “No, I’m not a superhero. Superheroes aren’t real. But magic is.”

Mr. Patel stares at me for a few moments. “… Were you at the showcase in Theater F yesterday at one?” he whispers.

“That’s where I was before the fire alarm went off. I didn’t get to see anything, though, and I didn’t get to go back afterwards.” Marvel also said it was a “surprise” as to what they were showing, so I wonder why he brought it up?

“Alright. I am sure the footage is online by now, so you should search it after this. What do you mean by ‘magic’?”

“Depending on the person, lots of things. Scientifically, it’s any sort of process that reduces entropy in the universe—in other words, almost anything that can’t be accomplished with physics can be with magic. As for yesterday, that other girl created a creature that was made of magic and would take nearly any form she liked. I guess she just likes the Hulk. And for myself… I’m a dragon. The best comparison I can make from popular culture is the manaketes from Fire Emblem.”

“I am not familiar with the series.” Drat. They really are a good comparison.

“Okay. I have a sort of dragon form that I can shift to whenever I feel like it. Like all transformation magic, it takes priority over anything in my way, so in an enclosed space, it causes a lot of damage. That form has its own magic besides, and it’s not the only thing I can do, which is why I could hold my own before shifting. And as for why nobody knows about this, well… they’re learning.

“A long, long time ago someone did something bad that ruined the dragons’ reputation for being protectors, teachers and so on. It was so bad that we had to hide until people forgot about us. Apparently, that meant forgetting about magic, too. Some people retained this knowledge, but it’s a lot more scattered and fragmented than it once was. Much more recently—as in, within the past year—events lined up such that I was able to reintroduce dragons in my hometown, and within the next few years, we’re planning to reintroduce dragons around the world. Which means that the public will eventually learn that magic is real, and they’ll learn what dragons are, and everything.”

I bring my voice back up to a normal level. “Which leads me back to that film idea you talked
about. Depending on the timing, you could have major problems if you stick dragons in there as villains.’’

Mr. Patel looks like he’s having a very hard time processing what I said. I wait in silence while he sorts it out, which takes a few minutes. “How will I have the hero fight a dragon, then?’’

“Misunderstood third party.” It took Akiko two seconds to come up with that one. “The Hulk isn’t very discerning in opponents either, so you’ve got that, too.” I mean, he basically whacks whatever is in front of him.

His gears are turning now. “Mmmm. Yes, yes. That works. Mmm. Actually—it’s not really my place to decide, but if I continue with this idea, I could put in a word for you with the director and producer. Perhaps have you along to help with production.”

Okay. *That* was not something I expected. “What sort of role?”

“Advisor, or, perhaps, actress. Can you act, in that, ah, *dragon form* of yours? I’m not in finances, but I’m certain it would save resources over animating one.”

While I know it’s *possible* (because Akiko does it a bunch), I don’t know if *I* can. Or if I even *should.* “Can I have a moment to think?”

“Of course.”

Saphira: He likes what I said. So much, in fact, that he’s offering to put in word for me being an actress instead of them using a computer model for a dragon. Is… Is that a *good* idea?

James: What is the time to the release of said film?

Saphira: Good question.

“How long does it typically take for your new ideas to become released films?” Probably several years, but I’m curious now.

“Oh! *Quite some time.* It’ll likely be at least a year before we finish casting, and filming takes about the same time.” Less than I thought.

Saphira: Probably at least two years, if not longer.

James: Then I fail to see why you should not. Jorge and Akiko, what do you think?

Jorge: It’s only a movie. With *how secret* a lot of things are kept regarding films in production, you should be alright, and the computer model quality is so high that even Akiko’s roles in her dragon form aren’t questioned when her films are translated.

Akiko: Do you *want* to do it?

Saphira: Um… maybe? It’s not really where my interests lie…

Akiko: You’re a *dragon.* None of us have only one career. Well, maybe Al.

Al: I might branch out at some point.

Elliot: Didn’t you tell me to try lots of things?

O-oh. Al and Elliot are reading this? I can feel my face get hot.
Saphira: Okay. You got me. I’ll leave the door open.

“Alright. I don’t have any sort of acting experience, so if that’s how it goes, they’d have to train me. But I’ll put in my best effort, if they want me along.”

Mr. Patel grins. “I cannot say I expected any different of you. You were not just thinking, were you? The color on your cheeks suits you.”

H-hey! “I-I can speak with the other dragons whenever I like,” I answer with a hushed voice. “I-is there anything else?” I ask, flustered, my cheeks redder than before.

“I’ll need your full name, if I’m going to put in a word for you.”

“R-right.” I fish a pen out of my bag while he pulls out a business card. “Saphira Bjartskular,” I tell him while recording it on the back of the card. “I live in Moperville, Illinois. Do you need anything else?” I repeat.

“No. I see no need to keep you here.” He hands me another business card, and I hurry out of the room before slumping against the wall. Whew!
“So, how was your trip?” Elliot asks me as I walk into the dojo.

“You know perfectly well how it went.”

Elliot smiles just shy of laughter. “Aside from when I had to call Mr. Verres, how did it go?”

“Very well, thank you. And I’m glad I’ve been coming to these practices, now. I don’t want to know what it feels like to have a flat leg.” Some of those blows would’ve definitely hit me, had I only been keeping up with the Wednesday sessions.

I did look up what I’d missed, and it seems pretty obvious why Mr. Patel brought it up: Marvel was supposed to premier the announcement trailer for *Doctor Strange* at that time. It’s actually a little ironic how I went from a fictional magic showcase to a real magic fight, but I guess that’s what it is to be me.

“Have you gone flying since then? Since I know you missed Saturday.”

“No. I’ll be sure to make up for it at some point. I’ll do it… tomorrow morning.”

“Saphira! Elliot!” Sensei calls us out. “Class has started!”

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“Class dismissed!”

“Sir!” We bow, then start meandering back to the entrance.

“Hey, Saphira!” Elliot calls to me. “Before you go home, there’s something I’d like to talk with you about.”

I turn around. “Sure. What is it?”

“Just grab your stuff and a seat.” There are chairs in the section up front, for parents and anyone else watching to occupy. Sarah’s there today, too, though I didn’t end up facing Eliza for sparring today. “Sarah! Can you stay, too?”

“Sure!”

I wonder what this is about? I head to the back and swap my gi for a t-shirt and skirt, then return to the front. I take a seat next to Sarah and put on my shoes, and by the time I’m done Elliot’s been there and waiting for a bit. The only other person still here is Sensei, and he’s in his office.

“Alright, I’m ready. What’s this about?”

Elliot takes a deep breath. “Remember when Tedd was sending out wedding invitations?”

“Yeah,” Sarah and I reply. I can’t really say they were strictly necessary, but that’s probably why they weren’t all that fancy. Custom cards with the time, date and event on them, plus the RSVP number, but that’s it.
“Saphira, remember what I asked you about around then?”

“Oh. Yes?” He had asked me if it was alright to use other dragons for a personal favor. I told him to just ask, and the dragons he asked said they expected us to ask for personal favors from time to time. Good to know. I wasn’t sure at the time why he was asking dragons from Europe, but in context I’m pretty sure I know now.

“About that.” He scratches the back of his head. “I’ve… already told everyone else, but I didn’t say anything to you two or Susan because I didn’t want to ruin your trip. Tedd wanted to invite his mom, and, well…”

“Out with it already,” Sarah demands.

He sighs. “The reason she hasn’t called lately, even for holidays—well, we’re not certain, but it’s still something that needs cleaning up. Saphira, have you heard of ‘anomalies,’ as in, in the Mymoir?”

“No.” I close my eyes.

Search: Anomalies. “Magic anomalies refer to ongoing events of unknown origin. The origin is typically unknown because the nature of the anomaly prevents information from leaving the area. Many anomalies are caused by demons and recently-activated artifacts. In most cases, local casters and others of the ‘adventuring’ sort can remove anomalies, but when an event stretches for ten years, a dragon will be requested to remove the anomaly. If the dragon cannot remove the anomaly by themselves or with additional requested help on the first attempt, several dragons can simultaneously storm said location with the goal of ending the event. However, on all previous occasions, this has resulted in an excessive loss of human life, so it is left as a final effort. Below is the list of ongoing anomalies that have been reported.” There’s a list of around thirty or so events. True to the description, none of them have hit ten years, but a few are very close.

I open my eyes. “That seems like the more unpleasant part of being a dragon.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.”

Sarah glares at me. “Can someone please explain?”

I raise my hand slightly and respond. “Essentially, it’s a magic event that is, as yet, unexplained in nature. As in, we don’t know what’s going on, but we know it’s bad. That’s sort of what would’ve happened to Moperville if I couldn’t escape back in March, and if I hadn’t ended it.”

“Oh. Yeah, that sounds bad. So what’s this about anomalies and wedding invitations?”

Elliot continues his explanation. “I can’t be certain, but there’s an anomaly close to where Tedd’s mom was last headed, the last she was seen, about two years ago. I asked Mr. Verres just to be sure —” he grimaces “— and she hasn’t been heard from in the past two years. So I was thinking that we’d put together a group to go take care of it, and hopefully come across Tedd’s mom in the process. I mean, I hope she’s not in it, but we’ll see.”

That’s a… lot to process. I knew Tedd’s mother wouldn’t visit him even for holidays, but I didn’t think it was because she was trapped somewhere against her will. “What sort of anomaly is it?”

Elliot grimaces again. “Um…”

“Out with it!” Sarah demands again.
“It’s… well, what we know is that, about ten years ago, someone decided that the Sahara Desert would be the perfect place for his new vacation home. We got this information from the locals—because, for some odd reason, there are towns in the middle of the desert—but only once Sahara stumbled across the anomaly about five years ago. Anyway, the mansion went up, and maybe a month later, women from nearby towns started disappearing.” Why do I feel like I know where this is going? “From further investigations, we also know that there’s an invisible barrier about 30 miles in diameter—centered on the mansion—that only lets women through, and once they’re through, they don’t come back. If a man is transformed and crosses the barrier, he doesn’t come back, either, even if the transformation is supposed to only last a few seconds. If someone is standing near the barrier as someone else crosses, the local area becomes opaque, but not impenetrable, for several minutes afterwards—so we don’t even know if the transformed men changed back, because by the time the barrier is clear again, the man is gone. And that’s all we know.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes while Sarah and I process it.

“So…” Sarah begins, “there’s a pervert in a house in the desert, and women have been disappearing into it for years, and nobody’s done anything about it?”

“Actually, a lot of people have tried,” Elliot replies. “Just no successes, and no dragons. I figured our group could probably pull it off, though.”

“Our group as in who?” I ask.

“Anyone we know that’d like to help. I figure the more the better, to a certain point, so I’m sticking to just asking the people that were at our graduation party. I haven’t asked Susan, Catalina or Rhoda yet, though. And, um, you two.”

“Of course we’ll help!” Sarah exclaims. “Right, Saphira?”

“Definitely. I can ask Catalina and Rhoda tomorrow, too; I was planning on spending the afternoon with them.” As Cassie, but no one needs to know that. “Has anyone said no?”

“Justin, Luke, and Diane. Diane said she’d go if Susan doesn’t, just in case the guy in the desert is a vampire, but she thought guns inside a house would be a bad idea.”

“Okay, that’s fair. I’m pretty sure Susan will say yes when I explain it to her, though.”

“I thought so, too.”

“Prepare Team Overkill,” I laugh, and the other two join in.

15 July 2014
7:56 PM CST

Elliot wasn’t kidding when he said he’d talked with everyone already. Sean’s even coming down tomorrow to give us some training for a few weeks to make sure we’re prepared. I don’t think it’s strictly necessary for myself and Elliot, but Sarah, Rhoda and Catalina (yes, they’re helping) sure will.

Master walks through the woods in the park while I cling to her shoulder. Today has been a relaxing and fun day, after that whole ‘rescue’ bit Dragon!Saphira talked about. “Alright. You can try it, now.”

Since it’s relevant to our ‘rescue’ efforts, I asked Rhoda if I could try shifting out of the Cassie
form. I guess that’s why we’re at the park, after saying goodbye to Catalina.

*I flit out into the clearing ahead of Master as she wills it, then turn to face her.*

Here goes nothing! My objects are in the pockets of my own body, so…

*Whoa! Wait, what?*

Success! Ooooh, I’m dizzy.

“Saphira! Are you alright?” Rhoda calls.

**Yes, I’m fine! Just a bit dizzy from the size change!** Despite saying I’d practice it, I haven’t.

“You didn’t even fall asleep!”

**Yep! That’s useful!** Although I also remember what happened tonight. *Ergh.* I’d stick out my tongue in disgust if Rhoda wasn’t right here.

“Why don’t you shift so that we can check that it worked?” Rhoda requests.

**Sure,** I shift back to human form and… huh. I know this is how I’ve always looked, but for some reason, something just seems off. And I have a headache. Maybe I’m just tired: it’s been a long day. “Sorry.” I shake my head. “I think I’m a bit out of it. I’ll be heading home, now.”

“Okay. We’re meeting at the park tomorrow morning, right?”

“At the bell tower at nine.”

“See you then!”

“Yes. I’ll be sure to get plenty of sleep.”

16 July 2014
8:58 AM CST

Well, I’m awake and well-rested, but last night, I had some of the strangest dreams. They weren’t all nightmares, per se, but definitely different to the usual fare. It’s probably mostly because I can actually remember what Rhoda and Catalina did together, which is… not the sort of way I’d normally like to spend my night. Not even close.

Most of the people here, I expected to see. Elliot, Ellen, Tedd, Grace, Susan, Sarah, Nanase, Magus, Ashley, Catalina, Rhoda, and of course, Sean. Some, I did not. Mr. Verres, Mr. Raven, Noah, and Sensei. I wonder why they’re here?

“As Elliot has informed me, everyone is here because they are either part of the team that will attempt to end the anomaly or part of the support for the training of that team. Is this correct?”

Sean receives a chorus of nods and yeses.

“Then this training will consist of three parts. The first is to verify that all of you know the basics. Second, I will give you the speculation on the part of the dragons as to what sort of situation in which you will likely find yourselves. Third, over the course of the next month, I, and your other mentors, will train you for your excursion. This will be both physical and mental training, as I will explain in part two. On the part of the dragons, we want this team to succeed, as our next attempt will not fail, but may—and very likely will—result in the death of innocent victims or bystanders.”
He gives us a moment to back out if we want. A few people look around, but everyone stays quiet. “Excellent. Part one: Elliot tells me that he has given you all details on everything we know about this anomaly. Catalina, could you deliver a brief summary?” I note that he doesn’t look at Catalina directly. Elliot probably gave him names without descriptions.

“Me?” Catalina asks.

“Yes, you.” Sean turns to face her. “A simple description, please.”

“U-um.” Catalina’s face warms from all the eyes on her. She takes a deep breath to remember what I told her yesterday. “Some jackass built a house in the desert and trapped a bunch of women inside. Nobody knows a bunch, but we do know the guy’s a jackass and needs to be taken down.” Not the way I would’ve phrased it, but I can’t bring myself to correct her.

“That is not completely accurate, but I suppose it will suffice. Does that sound familiar to everyone?”

Sean gets another chorus.

“Then I can call part one concluded. Part two, again, is speculation. It is based on historical events where something similar occurred, but it is still possible that I will not have all of the details correct, and I could also be very inaccurate. That said, part three will be based on the most likely scenario, with some additions to account for variations on details.

“Given that the house is in the desert and that the surrounding field has not grown or moved since it began, I believe we can safely rule out that an Evil caster lives in said house. Even a Greed caster would not be satisfied with the slow trickle of additional women over the course of the past few years, as the only incoming groups have been the sort attempting to remove the anomaly. Of those, however, none were as extensively trained on the specific matter as you will be, and not nearly so diverse as to include either a Holy caster or a dragon. Those two, specifically, should give you the necessary advantage to overcome whatever lies within the field.

“The most likely scenario, instead, is that there is a Common caster or wizard living in this house with the correct combination of spells and artifacts to enable the barrier and any other active spells.”

“Question!” Grace interrupts, raising her hand. “What’s an artifact?”

Sean continues without losing momentum. “Artifacts are, at their simplest, the result of Common casters or wizards attempting to create wands without the correct equipment. Wandmakers can create wands on their own and can create equipment for crafting more wands. Without this equipment, Common magic users aside from wandmakers cannot create wands of their own, but can still create artifacts that will have various magic effects, depending on how they were created and the intent of the creator.”

“Like the Dewitchery Diamond,” Ellen whispers to Grace, maybe a bit too loud.

“Yes, exactly,” Sean responds. “In this case, the owner of the mansion likely has the right combination of empowering and prolonging artifacts to keep spells active over the wide range covered by the barrier. Empowering, for obvious reasons. Prolonging, because most spells fail when the caster falls asleep, yet these spells have remained active continuously for nearly a decade.”

“So… are you ever going to say what sort of effects might be active?” Rhoda asks. I was thinking
16 July 2014
9:04 AM CST

Sean looks away. He tries to be professional all the time, but I can tell this is an uncomfortable subject. “Yes. In all likelihood, the active magic, in addition to the exclusion barrier, is some sort of seduction magic. Those within the barrier are likely enthralled with the owner of the mansion and compelled to stay.” Susan’s face turns crimson as she contorts it in anger. “If they should encounter opposition to the owner of this house, then, they will likely attack. Many are more skilled and experienced than you. It is for this reason that you will be sparring with your mentors in the time leading up to your excursion. I will also have Tedd prepare wands to test your ability to resist mental effects.” He turns to face Tedd. “Do not worry. I have already obtained a wand for the seduction magic training—indeed, it remains from the previous team I trained on this scenario.” Oh. I guess he really is the best trainer for the subject, then. “Finally, for both Tedd and Elliot: in the course of this training, I will require that you maintain female forms. Even if Elliot can resist the barrier and simply cross it as he is, it is likely best to attempt to match the expected state prior to locating the owner of the mansion. To this end, I will also be training you, to a minor degree, how to act. It is not necessary to act well—merely well enough.”

Susan’s face is still twisted from anger as she puts her hand on Tedd’s shoulder from in front. “We will end this, I swear,” she declares.

Sean moves to stand behind Tedd, facing Susan from behind Tedd’s shoulder. (It’s a little silly, really: in spite of his authority, he’s still shorter than Tedd.) “While your fury is justified, I suggest you either leave it behind or channel it productively. I cannot imagine that unbridled fury will serve you well in the fight ahead, or in your life as a half-dragon.”

Susan stares at Sean for a few moments before dropping her hand to her side and quickly shifting twice to cleanse it. “I—apologize. Thank you.”

“Now!” Sean raises his voice again. “If any of you would still like to leave, or to join the support group, this is the time. Beyond this moment, I will train you with your mission in mind. Training will be every day, beginning at the same time as this meeting was held today, and lasting until I am satisfied with your performance.” He waits a few moments for people to think or to back out. “This concludes part two of your training. I will allow you the remainder of the day to rearrange any obligations that might interfere with this training.”

Every day? … I suppose I’ll be attending evening church.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that he didn’t ask what we could do, magic-wise?” Catalina asks me as we’re leaving. I’m walking off with her and Rhoda, as my only thing I really have to move around is my work schedule, and they’re traveling in the same direction as Ace.

“Nah. Elliot probably told him the basics of what everyone in the group can do,” I reply.

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Rhoda asks. “Does he know about my substitution spell?”

I shake my head. “No. You can tell Sean, though. It might be useful for Ashley, since she’s the most defenseless of the group.” I’ve no idea how that’d work with her immunity to mental effects, but she’s still definitely the most squishy.
“That sounds good. Do you want to hang out, later? I mean, without the fairy thing.”

“Sure. I don’t have a whole lot to do today.”

17 July 2014
9:00 AM CST

Reorganizing my schedule was hard, especially since my explanation for ‘why’ was basically, “You don’t want to know. It’s a dragon thing, for a friend. Think of it as training to be a lifeguard, only a lot harder.” But Mr. Kilpatrick was still able to move things around for me, even on the short notice. Best boss ever. Best coworkers, too, for swapping shifts.

“Good morning!” Sean greets us when the last person arrives on time. We’re all here, the same group from yesterday. True to what Sean asked, Tedd and Elliot are in female forms—it looks like Tedd used his mark spell, while Elliot used the wand of his original base spell. So now we have three Ellens. “The fact that you are all here means that you are all willing to take risks for each other! Take heart, for I will push you to your limits and out the other side, stronger than when you began!” That’s probably the longest encouraging speech he’s willing to give us. I bet he got that from one of the psychiatrist dragons. “The first order of business is physical fitness. Before you enter the house, you must walk fifteen miles through the desert. I have no doubt that it was this hike that resulted in more than a few women losing the fight within and becoming trapped. I have verified that Greg is an able physical trainer. Therefore, he will run the physical training part of this. We will start with that on most days. After that, we may have some mental training through various effects up to and including sparring while under an active spell. We may also hold practice for using your various abilities, and will later include tactics in this practice.” He pauses for a few seconds to let us process his words. I gotta say, he’s good with the pauses. “Greg, it is now your turn.” He steps aside as Sensei takes his spot.

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Why does this feel so much harder than normal? I know I’ve done harder training before this. Heck, my flight to Maryland was more tiring, but I feel like my muscles have been complaining the whole time today.

“That’s all I can do today,” Sensei declares. “If I push further, you won’t recover before tomorrow.”

“Satisfactory,” Sean states. “These will not always be group training, of course. Each member of this team has their own unique talents to practice, and will split up to practice these abilities. I believe that an appropriate start date for that training would be this Saturday. For the remainder of today, you are dismissed.”

Elliot walks over to me. I can tell him apart from his sister only because the dragon smell is stronger on him. “That wasn’t too bad, huh?” he comments.

“Are you kidding me? It was awful!”

“Za? I’m pretty sure Monday’s sparring was a lot worse.”

“It was more tiring, sure, but this felt like it put a lot more strain on me.” I stand up straight to stretch a bit. “I’m not really sure why, though.”

“Huh. Maybe I just didn’t notice the difference. I don’t think it was anything unusual today…”

“I suppose we could just ask Sensei, but I don’t really feel like it.”
“It’s probably just that we’re having this so soon after our lesson yesterday. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes! Oh, and we’ll have to plan what time we’re going flying on Saturday. I’d rather not start
with that, then go into this as soon as we finish flying.”

“Right.”

19 July 2014
9:00 AM CST

Susan, Elliot, Ellen and I agreed that we’d go flying a few hours after our training today. The last
couple of days of training have given me a strange reaction: I’m not really tired, but my muscles
feel like they did when I first started exercising. Susan said she’s feeling just as sore, but the only
exercise she really does anyway is when we go flying, so it’d be odd if she wasn’t sore.

Sean stands in the same spot as usual to start our training. “I am already aware of the abilities of
those of you learning under Greg. He also has vouched for your progress. Therefore, I will not
focus as much on your training. You are free to spar with each other or consult with Greg. As for
the remainder: first, I am unaware as to many specifics on what sort of spells you have available.
When I am finished speaking, I will request that you give me additional information on your
abilities if I have not assigned you to another mentor for your training.

“First, I am aware that Susan is able to summon swords and other melee weapons, yet has no skill
with any of them.” Sean looks at Susan. “You will be training with Adrian, as he has had real
training in the use of a sword. Sarah will train with Edward on information gathering and puzzle
solving.” Sarah, Tedd and Grace widen their eyes. Knowing Sean and James, though… “Do not
worry. I have made absolutely certain that neither Edward, nor any member of the US government,
will exploit your abilities.” I can imagine that the threat included many of the measures dragons
take against nations that create registries of casters. All dragons leave the nation, none will enter,
we’ll take a bunch of other casters with us when we leave… After all, forcing people into
government work just because of their magic is nearly the same thing as creating a magic registry.

Mr. Verres looks directly at Sarah. “Sean made me… an offer I couldn’t refuse. I have not
informed anyone I work with of your abilities, nor will I ever, as I am certain that he will
act on the terms he has laid out.”

“You do not live as long as I have, nor travel as much as I do, without learning how to barter
fairly.” And by ‘fairly,’ he means that he knows exactly what to say to get what he wants. Not to
say he’s manipulative when he’s not making deals like he just described with Mr. Verres. And it is
a fair trade: forcing Sarah to do government work just because of her magic is downright cruel,
especially since she’s already working with Tedd to help the world learn about magic. A cruel
punishment in return would be deserved. And while Sarah’s abilities are to remain secret, I’m
certain Sean told Mr. Verres to give anyone who asked the exact results of telling them about what
Sarah can do. In fact, dragons abandoning the country might be the least of their worries.

The worried trio still look uneasy, but Elliot and I are relaxed enough about it that they calm down
a little. I imagine they’ll still have an angry talk with Sean later.

“Magus and Tedd will train with Noah. I would imagine that wizards and wandmakers have much
to learn in the way of flexibility. When available, you will also train with Adrian. I would like if
the last three of you could please inform me of your spells.”

More sparring, then, I guess. Although I’m pretty sure that this won’t keep to ordinary sparring for
Training has been getting progressively harder. No mental effects while sparring yet, but Sean used the seduction wand on all of us just to show us how bad it would be. It affected me more than I’d like to admit (since he told me to drop my resistance), but I was still able to fight through it and not do anything he told me to do. Grace, as with everything, mastered it very quickly. Whereas for Susan, Rhoda, and Catalina… well, they need a lot of work. Susan was furious at her performance. (Not at the magic. She wasn’t first and knew it was coming.) I mean, when Sean goes and tells you to do stuff you wouldn’t normally do for any reason—such as, say, hugging and kissing him in a very suggestive manner—and you do it, you’re a little mad afterwards. I could tell that he wasn’t enjoying it in the least, which placated Susan a little when she saw how he acted with Rhoda and Catalina. Older dragons tend to care a lot more about a full relationship over silly stuff like that, and in his mind, his students were failing, hard.

“Saphira, are you certain there’s nothing going on?” Susan’s been giving me odd looks all week. “You’re shorter than me.”

“I am?” I do a quick comparison. “Huh, I guess I am.” That’s strange. I mean, I can tell—by how my clothes fit—that my measurements have been changing lately, but I’m not really sure what I have in mind as my new ‘ideal self,’ for the gradual form shift to take effect. Or when it happened. But my underwear is getting a little tight.

“You didn’t notice? But I thought you said this sort of thing had to be deliberate?”

“Yes, I did say that, but I’m not sure when I changed.” I frown. “Or what my final appearance will be. I do know it can’t happen because of active magic, but I’m not really sure why my ideal appearance would change.”

“Huh. I… guess I could ask Elliot. See you later?”

“Of course!” I mean, we do live together.

Susan walks off, and Rhoda taps my shoulder. I almost hadn’t noticed her nearby: she’d been eavesdropping behind the trees. “You know, it’s rude to spy,” I tell her.

“Please let me off?” she begs me.

“I wouldn’t do anything. Just know Susan probably knew you were there.”

“Oh, right.” She blushes. “Anyway, you said your appearance is changing?”

“It’s something dragons can do if they want it enough. It takes a few weeks, but we can completely change the way we look, so long as it keeps to gradual changes—nothing like the wand that Elliot’s using for our training.”

“And you said you’re not at the final result yet?”

“That’d be correct. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s definitely different to how I looked before.”

“Then, um… uh, this is awkward.” Her face turns a slight shade of pink, and I blush in return because I’m pretty sure I know what she’s about to ask. “I noticed that your, um, measurements… You can borrow some of my underwear, if you want.”
“Thanks! I’ll owe you one.”

“A-alright. Do you want to come by my place?”

“Sure. I have work soon, but I can suffer a little longer before you help me out.”

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Work over; time to get something that fits me a little better. It’s not awful, but it could be a lot better. Rhoda lets me in, and I head up to her room.

“I’m sorry,” she blushes fiercely. “I didn’t really know what sort you’d want, and, well…” She’s got a whole bunch of underwear—tops and bottoms—laid out on her bed. This is pretty awkward, but it’s only temporary. I’ll get more when I know what size I’ll be, and if this doesn’t work, it’s not like Rhoda can’t resize my clothes every day if I need her to.

“It’s fine. Really, I’ll take whatever you want me to have. It’s not like this is a permanent arrangement.”

“Oh. Then, um, how about this?” She holds up a sports bra. I mean, I’ll need it for training…

“Sure! Do you want me to try it on?”

“Um—I mean, go ahead.”

I take it into the bathroom and swap it for my current top, not bothering to put my shirt back on before returning. “It’s great! Thanks! Still a little loose, but much better than too tight.” Rhoda blushes again, and I return the embarrassment.

“D-do you want to keep going?”

“If you want.” I mean, this whole thing is up to her.

“Okay.”

26 July 2014
3:04 PM CST

**Saphira??** Susan calls to me. We’re doing our weekly flight. It’s a lot later than normal, sure, but we still have to do it. **I asked you what you’re doing to prep for college.**

**Huh? Oh, sorry. I’ve been a bit out of it, lately.**

**I’ve noticed. Are you sure you’ll be okay for the mission?**

**Of course! I can’t very well sit at home while you’re all out there, can I? Besides, Elliot alone won’t be enough transportation for everyone to get there in a timely manner.** Thanks to Rhoda’s size-changing magic, we’ve come up with a plan to move everyone a bit faster: shrink everyone except one dragon to fit in a travel bag (that is, the duffels I bought for the Maryland trip) and then have that dragon fly until they’re tired. Even if each dragon only flies once a day, it’ll still double our travel distance per day. We’ve even set up stopping points so that we can stay with local dragons along the flight route.

**We just don’t want you to be distracted once we’re there,** Ellen clarifies, concerned.

**I’ve been doing fine in training, haven’t I?**
**That’s true,** Ellen agrees.

**So can you answer my question?** Susan brings us back on track. **I’ve been setting up my stuff for my room and everything. What have you been doing?**

**Just normal stuff, mostly. Setting up my schedule, checking course requirements, and all that. The same sort of things Kevin did for his college.**

**Didn’t you say something about getting a landing spot?** Elliot asks.

**Right, yeah. I did that before the trip to the convention. At least, I asked. They said they’d work on it, and I haven’t heard back since.**

**You probably should ask again at some point. Maybe before we head off on our rescue.**

**Of course, Mom.**

---

Once I’m back home, I give Rhoda a call. “Rhoda?” I ask when she picks up.

“Yes, Saphira?”

“Would you like to hang out tonight? I was thinking about what to do, and I felt like you might want to hang out…”

“I was thinking the same thing! Could you start heading over to my place in a bit?”

“Certainly.” I grab a few things before putting my shoes on at the door.

“Are you headed out already?” Susan asks me. “We just got home!”

I shrug. “I just wanted to spend some time with my friends. You know, when not training.”

Susan glances to the side before staring at me for a few seconds in silence. “I thought you kept a journal?”

“I hadn’t noticed. I mean, I spend a bunch of time with all of my friends, but I didn’t think I was singling anyone out.”

Susan’s expression changes to one of concern. “I thought you kept a journal?”

“That… doesn’t mean I read it back all the time.” And I might have been a smidge lax on it lately. Not much has gone on since the third day after the convention.

“Maybe you should. I know you spent a bunch of time with her before our training started, but I’ve kept a journal for this time, and it seems like it’s been almost exclusively her that you’ve spent extra time with. I don’t want to be suspicious of my friends, but it just seems strange. Along with the fact that you’re still getting shorter.” Susan’s a couple of inches taller than me, now. I never thought of myself as short, before, so I’ll admit I’m a little curious as to what’s going on. At least I know it’s safe, whatever it is.
“It’s gradual for the whole course of the change. It doesn’t do one element and then the next. I haven’t been worrying about it, though, since I know it won’t happen for any time where I’m under a mental effect. I’m rather just curious what my subconscious came up with.”

“Alright. Well, I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

31 July 2014
12:45 PM CST

The training has kept escalating. First we were sparring alone, then in pairs or small groups (against Sensei, Mr. Raven, Noah, and/or Sean), then solo with mental effects (such as being easily distracted), and today, in pairs with mental effects. We’ve finally gotten to a point where I really struggle. Solo with a mental effect didn’t mess with me all that much, really, nor fighting in a group, though that did make me think a bit more for cooperating with my teammates. I did so well coordinating with M-er, Rhoda, that I tried today’s training alongside her first. That was a mistake. We were both horribly distracted throughout the match, and I did a lot better separated from her.

I’m really confused about my changing dimensions for a few reasons. Not worried, just confused. The first is that, on further review of the Mymoir text, I’m pretty sure that this is usually more deliberate. Sean does it all the time, so I’ll ask him at the end of today’s session. Second, I don’t really have a clear picture in mind for ‘myself’ right now, so I don’t think I should be changing. And third, I don’t know what part of me likes my new measurements. I’m shorter than most of my friends, now, and other dimensions I normally think of as ‘inconvenient’ are becoming less convenient.

“That will be all for today!” Sean dismisses us.

I nervously approach him. “Um, Sean?”

“Yes?”

“Has your body ever changed without you having a clear picture of what you want?”

“Not recently. And not in a magic fashion.” Oh. No, that’s not what I meant. “Listen, Saphira.” He stares at me intensely.

“I’m listening.”

“Have you recently done any experiments with magic outside of training?”

I think back. “No?”

“Nothing before I came here?”


“You were successful?” Sean verifies.

“Yes. I didn’t even lose my memory!”

“Have you been subject to the substitution spell since that time? And was it ended normally?”

“Yes, twice, and yes.”

“Have you kept your memories on either occasion?”
“Both, actually.”

“And you never kept these memories prior to shifting out of the fairy form?”

“Correct. Um, why are you asking all these questions?” I don’t get what he’s getting at.

Sean’s expression changes from investigative to concerned. “I am… simply curious. Let me think.” He walks away, and I head home to get ready for work. I’m sure it’ll be fine.

---

I’m relieving Luke at work today. It’s actually a little odd how little I’ve seen of him, lately; we usually work similar shifts, but I haven’t seen him since I came back from Maryland. “Huh? Rhoda?” he says, startled, as I walk in the door.

“Yes?” I absentmindedly answer him.

“Wait.” He squints at my nametag. “No, sorry, Saphira. I’ve only seen Rhoda once or twice, but I swear, you look a lot like Rhoda. Not like how you usually look, anyway.”

“Oh!” I exclaim, suddenly fully awake. “Oh, sorry. Yes. Dragons can change appearance if they want it enough. It’s gradual, but it can happen.”

“And it’s happening to you. Won’t people have trouble recognizing you?”

“Maybe. I guess. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“How are people going to recognize the person that’s supposed to save the day if they don’t look the same?”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.” I close my eyes, lost in thought for a few seconds. “Oh, right. Sorry. Is there… anything I need to know, starting my shift today?”

“No. Just try paying a bit more attention to the customers.” He packs up his stuff. As he walks out the door, I hear him mutter, “I wonder why she answered to ‘Rhoda’?”

It’s what Master would do, right?

2 August 2014
12:03 PM CST

I have to admit, I never thought I’d be ordered to spend more time with my best friend.

Sean informed Susan and me after today’s training that I am to spend as much time as possible in her presence and as little time as possible with Master—I mean, Rhoda. Which is to say, he arranged my suspension from work and told me to spend all of my free time around Susan, and I’m not allowed near Rhoda at all outside of training. He also spoke with my pastor and told him that, for my church’s sake and my own, I will not be attending for a while. I asked what this was all about, and he said it was “an emergency procedure.” I don’t know what emergency he’s talking about. I feel fine!

So now I’m stuck at home with Susan. At least we have a lot of Star Trek to watch. I wish I could spend more time with Rhoda—and I can tell that she feels the same—but not disobeying Sean is a little higher on my priorities.

“How’d you even get into this mess?” Susan asks me.
“Don’t ask me. I don’t even know what’s wrong.”

“You can’t tell?” she asks incredulously.

I shake my head. “Sean said I was acting differently, but I feel like I’m the same as I’ve always been.”

Susan definitely doesn’t believe me. “Listen, Saphira: you’ve been constantly changing ever since I met you. But you also had some things that stayed constant, and right now even those are changing. I know that people change all the time, but this time just… doesn’t feel natural. Something is forcing you to change. Sean and I are doing our best to help. Can you try to help yourself?”

“I can… do my best? I don’t think I’ll get much done if I don’t know what my goal is. But I’ll do what you say, okay? I trust you.”

---

I spent the last week away from Master, but it looks like Serious!Sean decided to finally let me spend time with her. At present, he’s speaking with myself, Master, Hot!Susan and Ms. Pompoms in front of the Pompoms residence.

“As you can see, our measures have failed,” he tells Ms. Pompoms. “Due to the nature of the problem, I believe that, until a solution is found, it would be best if Saphira lived with Rhoda. Will you grant your permission?”

Ms. Pompoms looks to her daughter. Hot!Susan is crying, as she has been since Serious!Sean arranged this meeting. I want to help her, but I don’t know what’s wrong or what I could do to help. “This seems an awful lot like you’re just giving up,” Ms. Pompoms replies harshly.

“Madam, please trust me when I say that the dragons are doing everything they can to find a solution. What we attempted last week did not so much as slow the corruption. At the present moment, we cannot imagine that the problem will be made any worse by allowing Saphira and Rhoda to act as they would without our interference. But we do take this very seriously. In four millennia, we have only lost one of our own. We will do everything in our power to keep it at one.”

Ms. Pompoms glares at Serious!Sean. “I don’t know what other argument I was expecting from a man. Fine. You can take her. You had better fix this.”

“Madam, please. Saphira is part of my family. I will not fail.” I don’t really get what they’re talking about, but I think I see tears in Serious!Sean’s eyes.

---

It’s only a few days until we start flying out for the rescue mission. I think everyone’s ready. Master has improved a lot since we started. At the present moment, Serious!Sean is talking with us at our kitchen table.

“You can still stay here, Rhoda,” he offers.

“No,” Master answers. I shake my head. “If I stay, how is everyone going to get there on time? Besides, I think Saphira can still contribute.”

“Yes. About that.” Serious!Sean looks at Master, well, seriously. At least he’s not giant. His stare is already scary enough. “It pains me to say this, but I have come to the conclusion that, until such
a time as a solution is found, Saphira will be treated as a part of you, much as any summoned monster would be. It is simply the most accurate statement of her condition.”

“But she’s her own person!” Master protests. “I can’t own a person!”

Serious!Sean gives a heavy, labored sigh. “That is just it. She has given no sign that she is capable of independent thought. Her mind, will and body are wholly dependent on you.”

Master turns to face me, a worried look marring her visage. My face mirrors her own. “Is that right?” she asks me. We both know that it is.

“I’ll act however you want, Master,” I answer her.

Master watches my face for a few more seconds, then returns to Serious!Sean. “Alright. I’m still going with everyone.”

“So long as you understand.” He stands up and leaves, and I comb Master’s hair to soothe her.
"As you all know, today is your departure," Serious!Sean greets us at the training grounds in the park. "I trust that you will be able to overcome the trials ahead by virtue of the training you endured here. Elliot, are you able to fly first?"

“I’d rather save my energy,” Diane’sCrush!Elliot answers. “How long can Saphira fly? She’s had more experience with long flights.”

“I will fly for as long as Master wills it,” I declare.

“S-sorry,” Master apologizes. “I’m not too good at recognizing when she’s tired, yet.”

“Then I guess we can bet that she’s Elliot’s equal,” Strong!Grace decides. “If we time how long Elliot can fly, Saphira should be alright for the same amount.”

“Doesn’t anyone else think it’s reckless to let Rhoda shrink us!?” Cute!Sarah questions the group. “I mean, Saphira looks like a second Rhoda!”

“And you only brought it up now?!” Girlfriend!Catalina asks.

“I assure you, it was an action on Saphira’s part that resulted in her condition,” Serious!Sean asserts. “Only a dragon can make the same action, and all dragons and half-dragons have been appropriately warned.”

“…Okay,” Cute!Sarah sighs.

Diane’sCrush!Elliot shifts to his dragon form. **We should get started. It’s a long flight.**

---

For this flight, we have a set of four bags secured to the back of whichever dragon is carrying everybody. Three bags carry equipment (mostly clothes), and one bag has pouches and other graspable surfaces for the people inside to move around in and on. Master and I have spent most of our time cuddling with Girlfriend!Catalina in one of the pouches.

**You’re Elliot, I’m guessing?? I hear after we’ve been in the air for a few hours. Master isn’t familiar with the masculine voice. A few seconds pass. **Yes, you can land at my place. It’s in the middle of the Appalachians, so not many people see me come and go.** Our heading remains level for a couple more minutes before taking on a steep downward angle.

Our ride finally lands. I think the steady up-and-down motion is best compared to a ship, but Master is glad to be on the ground, if only for a little while. The second dragon outside of the bag
opens its top and pulls down the side so that we can climb out. Once we’re all spread out, Master restores everyone to their normal size.

The dragon that opened the bag looks clearly younger than our team, as if he were a freshman in high school. His red eyes cast a sharp contrast with the rest of his gentle if not effeminate features. The best comparison would be Tedd, except fully European, with brown hair and a soft face. And yet he’s still taller than me.

“Oh, I think I see the ‘condition’ that Sean mentioned,” he says, watching me. I cling to Master for her security. “You don’t know who I am?” he asks as though I’d know.

I shake my head. “You haven’t introduced yourself yet,” Master clarifies.

“I’m Jorge,” he says, as though that would clear everything up.

“I still don’t know you,” I answer.

“But you worked on spells with me for months! Don’t you remember the costume?”

“What costume?” I ask, visibly confused.

Jorge shakes his head and looks to the rest of the group. “Anyway, you should come inside and have some lunch. Dig in—I can afford this a lot better than Manuel.” He motions to his house, which looks rather like he originally owned a log cabin and simply upgraded it over the years. It’s still a house made for a small number of occupants, but the space inside is able to snugly fit our group. It’s a good thing that it’s summer and we can eat outside.

Inside, the first room we enter has a large table with a picnic spread: crackers, meat and cheese slices, fruit and pasta. Not the fanciest lunch, but certainly enough to feed us. “You didn’t have to do so much,” Sweet!Ashley thanks him.

“I mean it when I say Manuel can’t really afford to help you. Cholena is paying for his end.”

“Cholena?”

“The other dragon in Brazil. She’s been around a lot longer than I have.”

I grab food for Master first, then with her help, for myself. It all looks really tasty.

“What is she doing?” Jorge asks Master of me. I’m trying to follow Master’s instructions, but I’ve never eaten something like this.

“Oh, sorry,” Master apologizes, and I blush. “I have to teach her how to do certain things. This is one of them.”

“She forgot how to eat?”

“She can eat. Once it’s in her mouth.” I’ve mostly eaten sandwiches.

MagicalGirl!Nanase looks over at Master and myself. “Are you sure? Fox is better than that, if I hold her hand less. How did Saphira fly last Saturday?”

“I just… let her? Um…” Suddenly, Master’s instructions reduce to just ‘eat,’ and I have an easier time, using skills I somehow remember from somewhere.

“That looks better,” MagicalGirl!Nanase comments.
I’ve been flying along the path that Master has given me for the past few hours. I’m starting to get a little tired, but I’ll continue to fly for as long as Master requires it. From the distance, an orange dragon approaches me. Unlike Diane’s Crush! Elliot and myself, the form has somewhat-longer wings and the tail ends with spikes. There are also short, sharp horns straight back from the base of their head.

**Master? What do I do about the orange dragon?** I ask her. There’s a few moments of silence before she tells me to simply continue flying.

**You… Saphira, sim?** It’s another male voice that Master doesn’t recognize. I don’t respond. **Ah. Sim.** The dragon circles around so that he’s flying somewhat close to me and in the same direction, but doesn’t say anything else for over a minute. **Follow me,** he directs me, before moving ahead of myself.

**Master?** Master tells me to do what he says, so I follow him.

About an hour later, he turns sharply downward and I follow him to the landing point. There’s a sedan waiting for us. Upon landing, he shifts to his human form, so I follow suit, the bags gently landing on the ground before he picks up one pair. (Neither of his two bags holds the team.)

The dragon is very young. He looks like he just left elementary school, at a few inches shorter than myself and with a skinny, lightly-muscled build. His light green hair is buzzed short (a military cut), and he’s wearing shorts and a t-shirt. I carefully pick up the last gear bag with the one that holds Master and the rest of the team, and place the gear bag in the trunk with the others before opening the team bag.

“Finally!” Cute! Sarah shouts when she can see the night sky. It’s cloudy and very dark.

“That is, um, strange. No, interesting, ” the orange dragon comments. “Oh, sim. I call myself Manuel,” he introduces himself. “Wait until house for remaining.” He stands in place, holding the rear door open for a second before Master instructs me to enter and sit. I blush with her embarrassment at my behavior.

I buckle my seatbelt after setting down the team bag on the middle seat. Manuel sits in the opposite rear seat, behind the driver. “Pereira,” the lady introduces herself. “My surname, I intend.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Pereira,” Diane’s Crush! Elliot calls from the bag. Master doesn’t tell me how to respond, so I sit in silence, blushing slightly.

---

Dinner consisted of a variety of beans over rice. We had to wake up early today, too, since the remainder of our flight will take us across the Atlantic Ocean and then a large distance over a desert. Master is glad that we get to sleep some more while we’re over the ocean, but she had me voice her complaints about the early breakfast.

I must say, I sleep much better than the rest of my companions, likely because my dreams are only some of Master’s own. Sometimes, I think I may have others, but I forget them before I can ask Master. My ability to sleep is probably helped by the fact that I always pass out as soon as she orders it. I wonder what it would be like if Master acted on her dream and gained more servants like myself? She berates herself for the dream, though.
**Keep going,** we hear (from a feminine voice this time). **You’re nearly there.** Today’s first flight leg was much longer than yesterday’s. Maybe half an hour later, the air suddenly grows a lot warmer and we touch down. **Let’s take that weight off.** Our bag is unceremoniously lifted and plonked on the hot ground. Not so hard that anyone was hurt, but it was jarring.

“Anyone care to let us out?” Sexy!Ellen calls. A few seconds later, Diane’sCrush!Elliot opens the bag and pulls out the insert holding us all, and Master returns us to normal size.

The dragon that met us this time is a girl that looks like a high school freshman. She’s very fit and the same height as me, and her yellow blouse and white skirt strike a sharp contrast with her otherwise dark features: dark skin, black hair, and yes, black is an eye color. Her hair is thinly braided—I don’t think it’s all that long.

The dragon approaches Odd!Magus. “So you’re the one who recklessly used a substitution spell?” the dragon asks.

Odd!Magus shakes her head and points at Master. “Wrong pair.” Master supposes that a pair of a half-dragon and their AU counterpart wizard might seem similar to our pair.

“Oh. Forgive me.” The dragon walks over to stand in front of Master. I nervously hug her waist from her side. “You’re the reckless pair.”

“Saphira told me it was safe,” Master clarifies. I hug more firmly.

The scary dragon sighs. “She couldn’t have known she was wrong. At least I don’t have to worry about her for now.” She faces the rest of the team. “If you don’t know, my name is Meriam. We still have a long flight ahead of us, so we’ll eat lunch before we leave.”

18 August 2014
4:30 AM GMT+1

Before our trek across fifteen miles of desert, we stayed in a version of an inn in the local village. None of the locals speak English, so Meriam interpreted for us. She’s kind, when you get to know her. She kept giving me strange glances, though, and our ‘conversation’ during our flight together was awkward thanks to the pauses for Master to tell me what to say. I can answer simple questions, but hers were harder. She makes good bread, at least. (She brought a variety of bread for our breakfast for this morning. I hope she doesn’t worry about us too much while we’re gone.)

“I guess we’re at the barrier,” Nerd!Tedd comments, his hand pressed on something unseen in front of him. He transforms to his girl form. Diane’sCrush!Elliot is already a girl that looks rather similar to both her sister and Odd!Magus. Hot!Susan commented that our villain will think he’s getting triplets.

“Is everybody ready?” Diane’sCrush!Elliot asks, her back to the barrier.

“Yes,” we all answer in unison.

“Then in we go.” She turns around and walks through, and the rest of us follow, with myself, Master, and Sweet!Ashley pulling up the rear. For this, Master used her substitution spell on Sweet!Ashley, but I didn’t gain a sister, because her magic keeps her separated from Master. She gains the form and abilities of the fairy, but she still has full control over her actions. Whenever Master ended the spell in training, Sweet!Ashley kept her memories, too, with no time unconscious.

As soon as Master crosses the barrier, I notice a change in her thoughts. Girlfriend!Catalina had
flinched, but Master hadn’t noticed. Now, I’m driven to make my way towards the center of the area—the spot containing the mansion. It’s only thanks to Master’s overriding influence that I’m not running there as fast as I can.

“Is everyone still alright?” Diane’sCrush!Elliot calls. She receives a chorus of yeses from everyone except Master. “Rhoda?”

“This is stronger than in training,” Master replies. “Holding Saphira back is difficult.”

“You know, you can go back,” Girlfriend!Catalina suggests.

“No, I can do it,” Master responds. “If I go back, Ashley is a lot more vulnerable, and we don’t know if we’ll need her.”

“Scales help a bunch,” Sexy!Ellen responds. Everyone except Sweet!Ashley and Strong!Grace presently has scales covering all but their extremities. Diane’sCrush!Elliot added them to Nerd!Tedd after the latter transformed. I wish Master and I had the same color scales.

“I’ll be fine.”

---

Diane’sCrush!Elliot checked on everyone every fifteen minutes for the remainder of the hike. Fifteen miles takes a long time, but flying there would give away the game. Still, the initial cold and the later intense heat didn’t help matters. Hot!Susan wasn’t able to keep a static temperature for everyone.

When the mansion comes into view, I’m struck with a feeling like it’s the best house I’ve ever laid eyes on. It’s the sort of place I could spend my entire life. Master’s confusion tells me that this is magic, but it doesn’t lessen the feeling that it’s the best place in the world.

“Are you still alright, Rhoda?” Girlfriend!Catalina asks Master. “That’s a strange house, having that effect.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Master replies, wincing slightly. “I can control myself.”

It’s only another fifteen minutes before we arrive at the front doors. They swing open seemingly on their own, but I can tell that there are a few women opening them before us. There are a lot of women in here, actually. But right in front of us, in the middle of the entrance hall, is the most handsome man in the whole world.

18 August 2014
9:03 AM GMT+1

Master staggers back as the remainder of the team, aside from Sweet!Ashley, gasps and braces themselves. I run forward and fall to my knees a few feet in front of Grandmaster. His perfect skin, his perfect beard, his perfect face… I hope I can spend the rest of my days in his embrace.

“Well, you got me to roll out the carpet for you,” he addresses the girls behind me. “Why aren’t you as obedient as this one… Oh, I see.” His voice is sweet as honey, and my heart leaps as he looks at me. “You all prepared for this, didn’t you? And as for you…” He glances behind me, at Master. “Ah. And yet, you don’t seem like a summon… Oh-ho!” He smiles—a perfect smile—then looks back at me. “I believe I understand.”

A command comes to my mind, from Grandmaster. I stand up and hug him, nuzzling my head into
his shoulder.

“See?” Grandmaster addresses the group again. “We don’t have to fight. I might even have something special for you, if you come quietly.” I can tell what he means by ‘special,’ and I can’t wait!

“How dare you!” Hot!Susan shouts! I look to her and see a massive, flaming sword in her right hand. I’ve never seen that effect before.

“You think we’ll just give up?” Nerd!Tedd questions Grandmaster. She’s holding a wand I recognize as a strength augment combined with Tall!Justin’s aura spell.

“JACKASS!” Girlfriend!Catalina shouts, baring claws and fangs.

Grandmaster orders the women who opened the door to attack! He told me to get out of the way, so I pick a corner and hide, curled into a ball. The fight is too chaotic to focus on any one group.

“SLEEP!” Odd!Magus commands. Most of Grandmaster’s team immediately collapses. I don’t panic, as Grandmaster is still standing.

“How amusing!” Grandmaster exclaims. “You’ve managed to take out most of my best group! I’ve a powerful one in reserve, though. I am curious why you won’t just give up. It’s not like you can take the moral high ground.” I notice that he uses the pause in the fighting to call in the powerful woman he mentioned.

“Not like—!” Cute!Sarah wonders. “What do you mean!?”

“You’ve already dominated one of your own!” He glances in my direction, and my heart leaps again.

“No, we haven’t!” Sweet!Ashley claims. “That’s nothing like you!”

“It’s exactly like me!” Grandmaster pauses, examining Sweet!Ashley’s face. She clearly doesn’t comprehend Grandmaster’s evaluation. “Oh! And you didn’t even tell her? You’re worse than I thought!” He beams at the team. Master cringes. “Just face it! You’re better off with me in charge!”

Strong!Grace leaps at him from behind, narrowly missing his head with her fist! “NO!”

MagicalGirl!Nanase takes the chance to dive at his feet! “WE!”

Sexy!Ellen blinds Grandmaster with an intense flash of light. “ARE!”

Hot!Susan explodes a fairy behind Grandmaster, before knocking him to the floor with a stun hammer! “NOT!”

Diane’s Crush!Elliot winds up, before slamming her fist into Grandmaster’s back. “And stay down!” she shouts. I can tell by heat that Grandmaster is no longer well enough to stand or even speak for a long time, thanks to his newly-broken ribs. He’s also unconscious, likely from pain.

18 August 2014
9:08 AM GMT+1

The powerful woman has slowed in her arrival. I’m not certain she’s still coming, since it looks like she’s resumed her guarding stance from before the call.

“Maybe for this fight,” Diane’s Crush!Elliot replies. “A few spells are still active.”

“Was he… telling the truth?” Sweet!Ashley asks Master. Master hesitates before slowly nodding. Sweet!Ashley flits over to Hot!Susan. “I thought Saphira was still herself! Are you saying you lied?”

Hot!Susan shakes her head. “I didn’t lie. I just… you never asked.” I hang my head with Master’s shame.

Sweet!Ashley darts in front of me. “Saphira! Are you—!” She shakes her head. “No. Saphira, who is your master?”

I point at Master. Grandmaster lost his position.

“No. Who controls your life?”

I continue to point at Master.

Sweet!Ashley stares at me for a few more seconds, before whirling to face Master. “Rhoda!” she cries. “End the spell now!”

“I can’t!” Master sobs.

“Not that one! The substitution! On me!” Sweet!Ashley is starting to tear up. Master points her hands at Sweet!Ashley, and she regains her normal form. Then she spins around to face me, kneeling. “Saphira! You told me that God is the one who controls your life. Your only, true master.” I don’t recall what she claims, and sit against the wall blankly. Her eyes fill with tears as she grabs my shoulders. “RESTORE!”

…

“Aaaaa!” I scream. My—what did I—why did I—? “No!” I pound the floor. “No! No! No!...” I continue pounding the floor before grabbing my head. “WHY!” I shriek. My eyes fill with tears until I can’t see anything. “Why, oh, God, why.” I sob into my knees. I knew the dragon form shift wasn’t infallible! Meriam is living proof! Why did I think it was alright to just try stuff?!

“Saphira?” I hear Susan ask, muffled behind my knees. “Saphira!” My heat sense tells me that she’s running to me, but I can’t respond. My throat is too full of tears—for time wasted, for time lost—for what I did to myself, and most importantly, for what I did to Susan. Susan’s scales rub roughly on my thighs as she surrounds me in a tight hug.

We sit there for what feels like a lifetime: myself against the wall, with my best friend in the whole world hugging me, both of us crying uncontrollably. Eventually, I manage to pull myself back together, slowly. “I’m sorry, Susan,” I apologize.

“I’m just glad you’re back.”


I look at myself. I’m the same as normal, right? Then I notice the long, light blue hair hanging over my arms. What?
Oh. I smile, then start laughing. “Really? All this time, I’ve always had active magic on my appearance?”

“It seems so,” Elliot remarks.

“I thought her natural hair color was brown,” Tedd says.

“Nope!” I giggle. “Looks like it’s cyan!” Susan starts snickering, too.

A few seconds later, Magus’s voice cuts in. “I hate to remind you all, but we’re still in the middle of a rescue mission. One rescue isn’t the end of it.” I stand up to see her smiling at me. “You can look in a mirror later. Are you ready?”


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“Do you even know what our strategy is?” Nanase asks me. We’re getting ready to pick a door. There’s a number of them that lead out of this room.

“Yes. ‘Restore’ let me keep my memories. I can regret the decisions I made—or that people made for me—later. First, do you recall what the guy said about a ‘powerful’ person kept in reserve?”

“Do you… um…” Tedd starts.

“Think she’s your mother? Maybe. That’s irrelevant at this point: I’m pretty sure the women that were under the jerk’s control still are, just on standby. When he talked about the woman, she started heading here. Since then, she’s gone back to ‘standby,’ but the important part is that I know where she is.”

“And we’ll go rescue her?” Catalina asks.

“No,” Elliot answers, seeing my point. “We’ll avoid her as much as we can until all of the control spells go down.”

“Exactly,” I confirm.

“We still need to look for the artifacts,” Magus states. “Which door leads to this ‘powerful’ person?” I point. “Sarah, Tedd, scouting time. Check the other doors first.” And since Sarah used her spell a bunch of times in Tedd and Magus’s presence, Tedd pulls out a set of wands that mimic Sarah’s spell and Magus closes her eyes. It’s Grace’s and my job to keep everyone safe while they’re doing that. Ashley, at this point, is just conversation material.

Hmm. We probably shouldn’t let that guy just lie on the floor, even if he is out cold.

“Grace?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you think we should take care of the jerkface? I mean, we can’t just leave him sitting there.” Someone else might pick him up. He might even escape.

Grace mulls it over. “If Rhoda shrinks him, could we just carry him around in a pocket?”

I check the Mymoir. Oh, right. I should definitely tell the other dragons that I’m alright now. How
about as soon as we leave the building? I set a notification up to remind me. Back to what I was talking about… “No, probably not. Common transformations aren’t exactly safe for injured people. She might even kill the guy. And while he’s definitely a massive jerk who deserves a whole bunch of life sentences, he did, indirectly, save my life.”

“That’s true,” Ashley says.

We stand in silence for a bit longer. Sarah does have one variation on her spell since she awakened: she can sort of extend the range of her spell in one direction. As in, change the sphere into an ellipsoid, with her at one of the foci. As such, Sarah’s moved around a bit since she started, re-casting the spell every ten or twenty seconds.

“What if someone uses the augmented strength wand to carry him?” Grace suggests.

“Who would do that?” I ask.

“Sarah could,” Ashley offers. “Unless she’s scouting, she’s not really doing a bunch.”

“Actually, are we sure he’s going to stay unconscious?” I wonder aloud.

Grace nods. “Magus used sleep magic on him. He should be out for a couple of hours.”

“Got one!” Sarah exclaims. She’s standing in front of a door on the first floor, directly below the one that leads to the powerful opponent. In response, I walk around to the rest of the group, tapping them on the shoulder. It works just as well at ending this spell as it does when I spar with Chris.

“You’re sure?” Tedd asks, opening his eyes.

“If it’s not, he put a lot of effort into guarding a specific gemstone in a house with plenty of them,” Sarah asserts.

“Yeah, I think she’s right,” Rhoda says. “There’s definitely something back there.”

“Then let’s get going,” Elliot prompts, opening Sarah’s door.

“Oh! First!” Grace stops him. “Sarah, do you think you could use the strength augment wand to carry that guy around? We don’t want someone else to find him while we’re gone.”

…

“Why do I have to carry this guy?” Sarah complains as we walk down the hall. Magus puts most of our opponents out with Sleep, but we’ve had two that needed a bit of persuasion. Thankfully, the man Sarah’s carrying is the only person we’ve given more than a concussion.

“Because you’re almost useless in a fight,” Nanase says plainly. “No offense.”

“So is Tedd!”

“I have to be able to get at my wands.” Tedd’s wearing a pair of hip bags filled with boxes of nails. The nails are, in turn, painted with identifying stripes. All of the Common magic users are carrying a wand of their choice, but Tedd can make them on the fly and is the only one who can keep track of them all.

“Okay,” Sarah sighs.

“Actually, I’ve been wondering:” Catalina notes, “did this jackass have any children?”
Elliot winces. “You… didn’t look at any other areas, did you?”

“Just this hall. Why?”

I ready a question as well, but Susan stops me. “Whoever designed this place made it so that there are four branches of halls. All rooms and halls along each branch only connect at the entrance to the building,” she whispers quickly.

“Thanks.”

Elliot is still looking at Catalina like he’d rather not answer her question. Ellen steps up instead. “There are children. And pregnancies. Just, not in this area.”

Catalina gives the jerk a hardened stare. “Oh,” she scowls.

“What did you think he meant when he offered a special reward for giving up?” I ask. I’m very glad that Restore only preserves experiences without emotion. Rhoda’s thoughts on the other girls are… odd, and I’ve grown to hate seduction magic just as much as Susan already did. Susan makes a disgusted face at my comment.

“I didn’t pay that much attention,” Catalina replies. “I’m glad I didn’t.”

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“Behind this door?” Elliot asks Sarah, his hand ready to turn the handle. We’re outside the room Sarah claimed contains at least one artifact.

“Yeah. Are we sure it’s not booby-trapped? I mean, it’s back there, but my simulation doesn’t exactly mimic traps well.”

“That’s why I’m opening it. My senses aren’t detecting any physical trap, and I can walk right through almost any magic trap.”

“And if he comes to physical harm, he has a dragon form shift, and now we have Restore for any mental effects,” I chip in.

“Wait,” Ashley interjects. “That sounds like dragons already knew about the spell.”

“Yes, they did. I can tell you more about it when the others are scouting the next location. Right now, we’re at a door.”

Ashley looks like she’s going to insist before she thinks better of it. “I’ll hold you to it. Go ahead, Elliot.” He turns the doorknob.

And… nothing happens. He opens the door to reveal a completely normal bedroom. Granted, the person opening the door is a ‘girl’ in every non-Divine manner of detection, and I can hardly imagine this is the first time that such a ‘girl’ entered this room. At a guess, this is the owner’s bedroom. There’s a king-size bed with white sheets and a light red comforter in the middle, with some vanity cabinets and a bookshelf on the walls to the sides of the bed. If this guy was a pimp, you’d expect some horrid decoration or whatnot, but the walls are painted a tasteful light green and there are a couple of pictures of landscapes adorning the otherwise empty wall space. I suppose that when you completely dominate a woman’s mind, you can get her to do some interior decoration for you as well.
“Are we good to enter?” Tedd asks.

“I’ll go next, just in case,” I volunteer, stepping inside. As before, nothing happens. “Okay, we’re good.” Assuming there’s no limit to the number of girls inside. That’s sort of a rare trap, though, and I think this guy’s spells are mostly single-target in nature. Only artifacts would allow this sort of domination on a large group. Well, that, or lots of people doing something dumb like I did.

“Can you see it?” Grace asks Tedd when he enters the bedroom.

“Just a second.” Tedd looks around, then opens a vanity cabinet. His ability to “sort of see magic” is invaluable in tracking down artifacts, especially when they’re active. We don’t really care about inactive ones, since Sahara or some other dragon will be taking a thorough look at this place once we leave. Tedd looks over the contents in front of him, then motions Elliot over. “That one,” he tells Elliot, pointing.

Elliot reaches in and pulls out a large sapphire pendant. “This?” he asks, and Tedd nods. Then Elliot’s scales vanish before his right hand becomes scaled and clawed in exchange. “Brace yourselves,” he warns us, before crushing the pendant in his hand.

… Nothing happens. No traps. That’s good. “What did that one do?” I ask Tedd. I can still smell active magic, so there’s definitely others.

“It gave his spells more range.” He looks back at the cabinet. “Oh! Another one!” He points, and Elliot grabs and crushes the gem. “And that one made his spells persist while he’s sleeping.” He squints and points once more. Elliot destroys the indicated gold pendant. “And that made transformations permanent. Just Common magic ones, though.”

“Draconic ones are already. I just have an ‘undo’ section in the spell.”

“Any more?” Elliot asks.

Tedd squints and looks at the cabinet. “Not there…” He looks to his right like he’s following a vapor trail. Tedd slowly makes his way over to the bookshelf, then picks out a large book. “This one.”


“This guy, apparently,” Nanase answers drily, pointing at the man Sarah is carrying.

Elliot pulls it out and leafs through it. “It’s a magic book. I don’t think it’s that man’s, though. The spells are all multi-target or area effects, and none have any sort of mental changes.”

“Then it’s the book of whoever made the artifact,” I guess. “A shame we can’t preserve it. I mean, the book is the artifact, right, Tedd?”

“Yep. It makes single-target spells cover areas.”

I walk over to Elliot, my hands outstretched to take the book. “Wait, Saphira,” Ellen interrupts. “It doesn’t need to be totally destroyed, right?”

“Maybe.”

“If I cut it in half, do you think it’d cause problems?”

“Nothing we couldn’t fix by burning the thing.” Ellen pulls out an orange scale. Ooooh.
“Lei’s Universal Splitter,” she casts, motioning her hand as though it was cutting the book, splitting the whole thing horizontally: every page and the binding and cover is split across the middle.

“That’s it,” Tedd declares. “It’s not working anymore.”

I look around. “But… we’re still in a magic field.” The smell is pretty clear.

“Then there are some more elsewhere,” Susan deduces. “If we’re done here, we should head back to the main hall.”

“Yes, we are,” Tedd says, looking around one more time. “Saphira: care to tell us what the dragons know about the spell Ashley used on you?”

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Ellen put the remains of the book in her wand bag—that is, a small duffel with a secure shoulder strap that’s holding a bunch of Draconic wands. I guess we can read it later. For now, we get to trek back to the entrance and try again. At least everyone between us and the entrance is magically sleeping.

“The first thing I’m wondering is when you had the time to look up Restore,” Susan prompts me. “You haven’t exactly had down time since Ashley used it.”

“I looked at a lot of Holy spells when we worked out that Ashley had awakened. I knew the spells were powerful, but I figured it’d be nice to know what Ashley’s spells did when she got one.”

“Are there more I should have right now?” Ashley asks.

“Um…” Elliot says sheepishly. “That’s not the right question. Answering that is an almost surefire way to bar you from whatever we answer with.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ashley apologizes. “I guess that’s why no one told me what was going on with Saphira?”

If Ashley thought about what just happened for her to get Restore, she’d know that statement was wrong.

“Ashley…” Susan begins.

“No,” Elliot interrupts. “We didn’t tell you because you never asked.” That’s probably not a tone he usually uses with his girlfriend. The dominant tone is the hurt from nearly losing me forever, and beneath that is a mix of annoyance and anger.

“Sean discussed it with us,” Ellen explains. “You had to ask on your own. If we just told you, it’s possible that you would’ve been barred from the spell.”

“Ashley, I love how polite you are,” Elliot continues, “but sometimes, you need to be a little more proactive.”

We reach the entrance in silence, and the scouting party moves over to the last two doors and casts.

“So, what does Restore do?” Ashley asks me.

“It removes all active magic and any other non-physical deviations from the target’s mind and
body. In other words, it restores a person’s physical and mental form to exactly what it would be if they’d never interacted with magic, with a few exceptions. Exceptions like how my eyes are still blue. Restore won’t heal physical wounds. It won’t undo a person’s status as a magic user, and it won’t drive out demons, either. But how I look right now is how I’d look if I wasn’t a dragon and exercised the same as I do now, aside from my eye color, of course.”

“Your magic… kept you from being muscular?”

“Yes. I didn’t like the idea of the look, so I willed myself to not become more muscular, even as I grew stronger from exercise. Dragons can sorta do that. It’s why I changed to look like Rhoda when I believed I was her servant. I wanted to look exactly like my ‘master.’” I shudder at the memory.

“I was wondering about that,” Grace comments from the floor above. My goodness, her hearing is as good as Kevin’s little brother’s.

“So… if you could summarize what Restore does…?” Ashley says.

“It’s a catch-all healing spell that works on any magical condition. If you play Final Fantasy games, think ‘Esuna.’”

“Okay.” Her smile says she understands.

Despite the sped-up experience for the scouting spell, it’s still a few more minutes before Tedd claims a find. “Finally!” he says as he opens his eyes.

“You got it?” Grace asks.

“Yes. It’s not in an end room.” I start waking up the rest of our crew in response. Grace is carrying the jerk for Sarah right now, since she can be stronger than Ashley or myself.

“Really?” I ask as I head up the stairs.

“I guess he thought it’d be dumb to stick them in predictable spots,” Tedd replies.

“Where are they?” Nanase asks.

“In a room about 2/3 of the way down the wing.”

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As we head down the hall, Elliot stops us just before a turn. “Ashley? Please don’t judge us too harshly for what’s next,” he requests.

“Huh?”

Magus rounds the corner. “Sleep,” she casts on the girls she finds there, before the rest of us follow.

“Wha—!” Ashley squeaks. “I know you’d said there were children, but I didn’t think we’d be fighting them!” The girls now passed out on the ground are probably six years old at the most. This hallway is populated by mostly younger girls, I think. They’re all at least elementary school age, anyway, based on their heights, but some have at least hit puberty.

“Everyone I saw in this hall is younger than us,” Nanase informs us. “I mean, they probably go all
the way to eighteen. But as long as the jerk is controlling them, we’ll still have to take them down, the same as anyone else.”

Ashley stares at the girls on the floor. “I hope we find the last artifact soon. I can’t wait.” The righteous anger in her voice is clear.

“I can,” I admit.

Rhoda squints at me. “Why?”

“Think about ages. This has been going for nearly a decade, right? So almost any girl here under the age of ten was probably born here.”

“And they’ll finally be free,” Catalina asserts. “Why would you want to delay that?”

“Not delay their freedom, no. But… if they were born here, that means they’ve never made a decision for themselves in their entire lives. How do you think they’ll act?”

“Oh,” I get from a few people. We stand in silence for a few seconds, trying to imagine it.

“I guess we’ll know when we finish this,” Elliot pushes us. “Let’s go.”

“Artifact room?” Elliot asks Tedd outside of the one locked door we’ve come across. Actually, it’s the only closed door we’ve seen in this hall.

“Yep. I guess he’s not that smart.”

“How do we get it open, though?” Susan asks. “We don’t have the key.”

“We have better,” I declare. “Ellen? You know what I mean, right?”

She looks at me curiously before widening her eyes. “Oh!” She pulls out the orange scale from before and moves in front of the lock. “Lei’s Universal Splitter.” We hear a *chunk* and the door opens a crack.

“What did you—” Catalina asks, opening the door and peering at the lock. Both the bolt and the normal lock are cleanly severed, flush with the door. “Oh. He’s gonna need a new door.”

“I don’t think that’ll be his primary concern for a long time,” Elliot responds, walking inside. Still no traps, so the rest of us follow, Magus guarding the door. We need a guard this time since we didn’t take out everyone in the branch first. “Tedd?”

“Just a second.” He starts looking around the room that’s definitely acting as storage space. It’s almost entirely filled with boxes, with just a lamp, a comfy chair and a book sitting out. The title reads, *Let’s Learn About Elephants!* One guess as to what it really is. “The book. It’s a casting power boost.”

“Got it,” Ellen replies shortly before slicing it in half.

“Oh, wow,” Sarah gasps. “That’s so much better.”

“Huh?” I ask.

“Oh. I guess you’ve just had your resistance up ever since Ashley did her thing.”

“Yes.” I pause. “Oh, I get it.” The jerk just lost a bunch of casting power. He can’t overcome
anyone with real magic resistance anymore. I suppose my friends were still struggling with it a bit, even if they didn’t appear that way.

“Have you got the next, Tedd?” Elliot asks. Tedd’s been digging through a box.

“Yep. Are you… sure we should break this one first?” He’s holding a steel lamp stand. “It’s another persistence artifact. If it’s the last, everything else will deactivate.”

“Won’t another dragon be going through this after we leave?” Nanase asks. “If they deactivate, it shouldn’t be a problem then, right?”

“Oh. True.” Tedd hands the stand to Elliot, who snaps it in half. The air immediately clears of the smell of the Common magic field.

“Prepare for chaos,” I warn everyone.

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Good news: the girls we ran into on the way to the back tended to be the younger ones in the hall. Bad news: it wasn’t all of them, and those below elementary school age are in the hall below us. And without the jerk controlling their every whim, they all started crying at once. Not to say the more-mature girls aren’t letting out a similar wail.

“Magus, does magic sleep work anything like normal sleep?” I ask.

“As in, will this guy wake up from noise? Thankfully, no.”

“Still, I’ll call in Meriam to pick this guy up,” Elliot offers.

“She’s not going to be there tonight?” Catalina asks.

“No, she’ll be back by the time we finish the hike. I figure this guy should be as far from here as possible, for his own sake.”

Grace grimaces. “Yeah, I can imagine a few people want revenge.” Elliot momentarily closes his eyes, then takes the jerk off Sarah’s shoulder and walks outside. Nanase goes with him to keep away anyone that already made a break for the exit.

“So with our leader gone, what do we do now?” Sarah asks.

“Awkward time?” I suggest. “First, I think it’d be good to gather everyone at the entrance, including the people we knocked out. I don’t know about other sections—pick among yourselves—but I wanted to take Tedd over to that spot we avoided earlier.”

Tedd lifts his head and looks at me. I notice he’s reverted to his male form. “Do you think it’s my mom?”

“I hope so. It’d be really awkward if she’s in the floor below the last hall with the pregnant and nursing women.”

Tedd stares at me. “…Yes, it would be.”

“So. Who wants that hall?” Rhoda asks as Tedd and I leave the room.

“What do I even say to her? I haven’t seen her in eighteen years!” Tedd panics as I somewhat push
him across the entryway. No one else has arrived, so I’ll take that as a good sign. I can sense Meriam outside, though.

“Hi, Mom, I’m here to rescue you”? That’s why Elliot decided we’d do this, right?”

“But—Pandora said—” He takes a deep breath. “She said my mother left to protect me from her enemies.”

“And you just beat one.” I stop pushing and stand in front of Tedd. “Tedd, we couldn’t have done this without you. It’s pretty clear that I wasn’t strictly necessary. But you were a critical component in our victory. Own it. We won. And when we meet her, you can finally assuage her fears. You’re not helpless. It’s true that for the last two years, it wasn’t her fault that she couldn’t call you. But she had sixteen years before that. She needs to see the wonderful, strong young man her son’s become.”

I watch as Ashley, Grace and Sarah make their way to the lower floor on the other side. I’m really glad I’m not with them. I’m not exactly good with kids. Better than Kevin, but that’s a very low bar.

Tedd takes a few deep breaths. “You’re right. Let’s go.” There’s a fire in his eyes that wasn’t there before. Let’s do this. I let him take the lead as we pass through the previously forbidden door.

Smack into someone that looks like a marginally older Nanase wearing much skimpier clothing.

“Wh– Nanase!?” Tedd exclaims.

Nope. ‘You are the spitting image of your dear aunt Noriko.’ “I’m pretty sure that’s wrong, Tedd.”

The ‘stranger’ is taken aback. “Nanase?” She looks at Tedd. “Tedd?” It takes her another moment. “Verres?”

Then Tedd gets it. “Mom!” He leaps forward and hugs her, shoving his face into her shoulder. I can already see the tears streaming down his face.

Noriko is stunned for a few moments, even though she instinctively hugs Tedd in return. Tears start welling up in her eyes, too, as she looks at me. “All I knew was that I was free again, so I started to make my way back to the entrance…. I suppose I have you to thank for this? What’s Tedd doing here, anyway?”

“Rescuing you. And no, not me. I hardly did anything. Tedd’s the one you should thank.” I’m just stating simple facts. I was almost literally dragged here and helped in zero fights. Just about the only thing I’ve done so far is given Tedd a pep talk.

She squints at me. “Thank Tedd? What could he even do?”

“Miss Noriko, your son is one of the most-powerful Common magic users on the planet. He was able to pinpoint every last active artifact in this mansion and tell us what it did, in addition to providing a number of wands to assist our entire operation. Which used a team much larger than just him and myself, by the way. If your wand failed to tell you about his magic, it’s because he’s so strong that he resisted the detection in the first place.”

Noriko just stares at me. “But… that’s… impossible…” It is a lot to take in. She based a lot of her life on a faulty wand output.

Tedd pulls himself away and wipes his tears. “Mom, Saphira’s right. I’m a wandmaker. I came
here with my friends to rescue you. We can explain it later, but for now, it might be best if we gathered everyone and went outside. Or at least to the entryway.”

And just as he says that, we get a message in our heads. **Team, I suggest you get the ladies to the entry space. I’m only sending this to you because I don’t think the rest of the occupants would react all that well to my voice.** **That’s probably a safe bet, Elliot.**

“Entryway it is,” I confirm. “Let’s get the rest of this hall, shall we?”

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That took a lot longer than I expected, but then again, only the women who first attacked us have woken up so far. I bet hallway 1 will start getting back up in short order. Elliot is also back inside and in his default form, making him one of two men in the whole place (the other being Tedd). He’s… getting a lot of nasty looks, though no one has outright confronted him yet. I think he mostly just has pity on the people that were trapped here.

I walk over to Ashley. “Did everything go alright?” she asks as I approach.

“Eventually. I think you can imagine how confusing things were.”

“Tell me about it. Actually, I was wondering…”

“Whether Restore would work? Not on someone who’s pregnant, but I think you know why on that one.”

Ashley glances away. “Yeah. I wouldn’t want to try that one. But on the others?”

“Only if they’ve been transformed. Which your angel ought to be able to detect. Think about it, and give it a go.”

Ashley shuts her eyes tightly, then relaxes. Her eyes still shut, she turns and walks until she’s face-to-face with a young girl—probably around five years old—and her mother. I follow a short distance behind. Close enough to listen, but not really close enough to contribute. I’ll step in only if I think I’m needed.

“Can I help you?” the mother asks.

Ashley opens her eyes, then cocks her head and leans towards the mother before inspecting the child. Then she stands up straight. “Um… Neither of you are actually girls, are you?”

“Wh— what?”

“What’s she talking about, Mommy?”

Ashley awkwardly grabs her left elbow from in front. “Neither of you were born girls, were you? I—I can fix it, if you want.” She then backs up and raises her hands innocently. “I-I mean, only if you want it. I wouldn’t do it if you don’t.”

I had wondered what the jerk did with male children. Since some of the women in here were originally men, I suppose it stands to reason that someone would have male-to-female targeted transformation. And that the jerk would then use it on all baby boys. Better than killing them, I guess.
The ‘mother’ stares at Ashley. “You’re not joking, are you?”

Ashley stands firm. “No. I wouldn’t offer a false hope. Do you want it?”

The ‘mother’ considers it. Then he looks to his kid, and back to Ashley. “Yes. For both me and my son.”

Ashley nods, then grabs the ‘woman’s’ shoulders. “**Restore.**” Considering the previous form was essentially **FV1**, it’s not all that startling of a change, but the man is still shocked. And ecstatic. He pats himself down, *including* his crotch.

“**YES! I’m me again!**” he shouts.

Ashley wasted no time moving on to his son. “**Restore.**” The little girl becomes a very similar little boy. More masculine than Tedd, though. He *also* pats himself down, but it’s just a mimic of what his father/mother (it’s very confusing in the same sort of way as debated on Elliot’s **relationship** with Ellen) just did. He doesn’t say anything and just sort of looks at his dad. Right. This is one of the children that’s never made a decision before today.

A lot of the crowd is now staring at the man and Ashley. She starts to shrink away, so I walk to her side. “Do you want to keep going?” I whisper.

“Yeah. It’s wrong to leave people like that, but…”

“I’ll handle it.” I stand up straight. Cyan hair isn’t as rare as brown hair, but I still only see two other instances of it in the crowd of about fifty, not including our team. Combined with my stature, though, I stand out pretty well. (Yes, I dismissed the scales after the last artifact was destroyed. My clothes don’t really fit, but I can deal with that. I’m using Ellen as a mirror as soon as it’s practical, though.) “If any of you transformed to enter this area, or had sons that are now transformed, come over here,” I announce. “Ashley has a spell that can right those wrongs. Please be aware that it will *only* work if you’re transformed. We can’t give you back lost time.”

People shuffle around until we’re left with a line of about half of the children (I mean, I expected that), plus their mothers and three of the four pregnant women. I go to the last group first. “I’m sorry. The spell doesn’t work on pregnant women, for obvious reasons,” I tell them as pleasantly as possible.

“What!?” one of them half-shouts at me. Sheesh. I hope I’m not so temperamental when I eventually have a kid.

“The spell doesn’t work on pregnant women,” I repeat calmly. “If you want it fixed, you’ll have to contact me *after* you deliver. We’ll be handing out contact information when we return to town, okay?” For dragons local to their area, I mean. Ashley isn’t the *only* Holy caster with Restore right now. Just the nearest one. (As for why the other dragons didn’t fly one with Restore over to me, like Elliot said, they expected Ashley to get the spell. I asked Elliot, and he said that was the next thing they’d do if Ashley *didn’t* get Restore for some odd reason. As with Josh Heron, the other Holy casters that dragons know aren’t exactly obligated to help out just because we ask.)

“What if I don’t want a kid?”

I—what? “Adoption is a thing. Barring that, foster care.”

“No, I meant—”

I put my index finger on his upper chest, just below his throat. “**Listen, sir. I know** what you meant.
And I meant what I said. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t bring that subject up in front of myself, or Elliot, or any other dragon. We share each other’s pain, and the loss of a child is a rather sore subject.” I’m practically hissing at the guy, but tears are coming to my eyes all the same.

One of the other pregnant ladies turns to the first. “Jeff, I think you should drop it.”

“Okay, okay, settle down,” Jeff says, backing off. It’s kind of silly, actually: a guy named Jeff that looks like he’s always been a woman and is about 7 months pregnant.

I sigh and move back to Ashley’s side. “Are you ready?” I ask her.

“Yeah. I probably should do this quickly, right?”

“Only in the interest of getting back to town soon. But it’s the heat of the day. We should be alright if we don’t start for a while.”

“You can help with that, right?”

“Only so much. Susan and I can make it bearable, but it still won’t be fun. And the dragon form isn’t meant for walking.”

“I think you can get away with flying, as long as you stick around the area.” She pauses. “Well, I’m ready.”

“Alrighty.” I turn to face the line. “First up?”

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11:45 AM GMT+1

Hey, the guy was a jerk, but at least he had plenty of good, healthy food.

One of the areas we didn’t explore in the hall with younger children and pregnancies included a kitchen large enough to feed this entire group and then some. He sent some of the stronger women out to get food from time to time, but he apparently set up air drops with the food somehow. Best guess is that he’s really, really rich. And probably used the bank accounts of a few of these girls.

Right now, we’re setting up for a bit of a feast to freedom. Meriam has already picked up Jeff, and Sahara took another of the pregnant ladies. I figured it’d be the most direct fury if Jeff tried to make the same statement to Meriam as he’d tried with me. I don’t know what she’d do, but it’s probably an appropriate punishment.

One of the men that was in line earlier walks over to me. Aside from locals, everyone here is still fairly young, since they’re all monster hunters or at least were monster hunters before coming here. The man in question is in his late twenties and rather fit, despite the years of slavery in a house. He was probably extremely muscular before all this. “You said something about dragons earlier, right?” Based on how everyone that was here for an extended period talks, I think the jerk was an American. His accent and manner of speech rubbed off on the rest.

“Where did you think Jeff went?”

He chuckles. “I knew she hadn’t just vanished. I’m wondering what you meant by that, though.”

“About dragons? What do you know of them?”
“They’re an extremely powerful summon that I hope to never face again. I mean, I have, and I’ve won, but it hasn’t ever been fun.”

“That’s not a dragon. It’s dragon-like, but not a dragon. My name is Saphira, and I’m a dragon.”

“Chuck.” Or maybe this guy is just an American himself. “Nice to meet you. So, what’s a dragon?”

“You’re a wizard, right?”

“Yep.”

“You can use a type of magic known as Common magic. I use an entirely different type of magic. It’s called Draconic, for obvious reasons. I don’t know how I’m able to use it, but I can, and it lends itself to a different sort of uses. It’s how we’re going to make the trek across the desert in relative comfort, for example: I can alter the temperature of my surroundings.”

“That’s definitely useful. I’ll give you that.”

“I also have a dragon form, which you’ll see when we start our trek. You might not have heard of dragons either because we’re rare or because we mostly only show ourselves for extreme cases like this one. I’m trying to change that, but it’ll still be a while.”

“I thought magic didn’t like exposure.”

“Eh…” I wobble my open right hand. “There’s good and bad things about it. I think the good outweighs the bad, really, and the system is more stable than some people think. It just appears to be unstable right now because so few people use it. If more people use Common magic, it gets harder to use because there’s less ambient energy.”

“Oh. That makes sense. So, when are we going to set out?”

“After lunch, I think. It’s up to Elliot.” He’s led the whole thing so far. I don’t know if this is his trial, but I definitely didn’t have much to do with this.

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For obvious reasons, Elliot’s already told the other dragons that I’m fine now, as well as how it happened. However, I told him first that I didn’t want to be bombarded with communication until I was ready, and that I’d say something in the Mymoir when I was. He passed that along as well, so now I get to gear up for that as we’re all headed outside.

“Everybody, listen up!” Elliot commands our attention. We’ve finished lunch and cleaned up remarkably well for such a large group. “We’re about to start the trek back to the town that my team came here from! It’s the nearest town, although I’m sure you’re aware that that’s not by much.” There are two other towns nearly equidistant from this spot. “If you need transportation, we will be sure to provide it in the coming days.” Not our team, though. We’re headed home. The rescued get Meriam and other dragons that are not Sahara to set up transport—although Tedd and Grace will pitch an offer to Noriko for her to come back with us. I know she’s got people around her home in Europe that would like to see her again, but the wedding is this Saturday.

“Won’t it be hot?” one man calls in reply. “There are still a few hours of sunlight left, yes?”

“We’ve got something for that. Be ready to start in five minutes.” There’s a mild rush for the few who are still eating, but it’s not like anyone here has any stuff to gather, really. I make my way to the door, where Elliot is waiting. “Are you ready?” he asks me.
“Yeah. You need me to prep the area?”

“That’d be nice. I’ll see you in a few minutes, alright?”

“Yep. I’m prepared to enjoy this.”

Elliot opens the door for me, and I walk outside onto the sands that are so hot that they might melt my shoes. I cool a large area—the space I’ll fill when I shift—and walk to the center of it. I’m fully aware that there are a number of people watching at the windows. Since the last time, I’ve worked on something a little fancier. (It’s made a bit easier thanks to Susan’s Variable Light.)

**Saphira’s Heat Shift.** The sand around me glimmers with frost before flames spring up at the edge of the twenty-foot circle. Spikes of ice suddenly form as though they’d erupted from the ground at random spots within the circle, before I shift to dragon form with the ice and fire surrounding me. The flames die as the ice sublimates, and I turn my head to face my audience. **How’d you like that one?** I ask Elliot as I watch him clapping.

Elliot: It was great! I wish I could do something like that.

Saphira: You’ll just have to find other ways to set the stage. I’m sure your Common magic could be used for something.

Elliot: Are you ready, then?

Saphira: Give me a moment to cool a larger area. And I’ll contact the others when I take off.

Elliot: Gotcha.
“Alright!” Elliot shouts from in front of the open door. “Everybody out!” He moves to near my belly—I’m curled up on the ground—as the rest of the team follows him. I’ve cooled the ground and surrounding air to near-room temperature, which is still a little hot, but much cooler than the sands beyond that range.

The people at the entrance hesitate.

“Come on! We need to get going!” Susan urges them.

“But… that’s a dragon…” one woman says.

**Oh, for the love of– I’m Saphira! The tall girl with light blue hair! I know Elliot wasn’t the only one watching earlier!**

One of the local girls who looks to be in her early teens pushes through the crowd at the door to come outside. Like the locals, she wears woefully inadequate shoes, but the cooler sand means that doesn’t matter as much to her callused feet. She stops coming forward about halfway between the door and myself, then slowly creeps towards my head. The team inches out of her way until she carefully rests her hand on my snout.

After she’s kept it there for a few seconds, I address her. **See? I don’t bite. My job is to keep people safe.**

She flinches and pulls away her hand, then lays it back on my snout. Then she calls something in the local language to the group still inside the house, and most of the local girls come rushing out at varying paces. Maybe a dozen start petting me at different spots all over my body: one girl even hefts the tip of my tail over her shoulder. They’re like the little kids in Moperville. Huh. To be fair, that’s the age they were when they last thought for themselves.

With all the teens gathered around me, the rest start making their way outside. “It’s… not hot?” I hear Noriko say.

**I’m a heat dragon,** I answer her. She looks straight at me as I speak. **I can freely change how hot or cold something is. That’s just what my magic does.**

“Huh. Is this your true form, then?”

**No more true than what you saw earlier. Dragons have two forms.**

“I have a lot of questions, but I think they can wait.”

The last person within the mansion leaves. Parents of young children have some creative uses of clothing shielding them from the sun, but no one is in danger of heat stroke. I carefully stand up, and the playing girls back off as I spread my wings.
“If this is everyone, we’ll get started,” Elliot declares. “It’s a long hike.” He sets off toward the town we left this morning, and I launch myself into the air, careful to continue cooling the path ahead of Elliot. Thankfully, he can sense exactly what pace to set based on the heat in the sands ahead.

…

Saphira: I apologize for my time away.

Al: Welcome back!

Sean: I’ve informed your friends back home.

And on down the line. Tears start to form in my eyes from the emotion I read.

Meriam: I apologize for how I’ve treated you. We’ll have a real conversation when you arrive in town.

Saphira: Speaking of which, is it alright to land there?

Meriam: Yes. Sahara and I did the same when we carried the pregnant women into town.

Saphira: How was Jeff?

Meriam: He still lives only because of his child.

I snort.

Saphira: I’ll see you in a few hours. Is there a cell phone signal in town?

Meriam: No, why?

Elliot: Because we have more than a few people that want to contact their families. For now, can I have a dragon contact Noriko’s home?

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It’s a bit harder to enjoy a view when there’s little to see aside from sand, but at least I was able to tell Elliot how far he had left to go. The caravan finally reaches the edge of town, and I land behind it, somewhat blinded by the setting sun before I shift.

Wow. I think the entire village is here to welcome us. Girls that haven’t seen their families in nearly a decade run to them, a chorus of relief and joy erupting from the group. The remainder of the rescued look on, reminded of their own waiting families. I’m glad I had so many of my friends with me when I was rescued, but I still have to speak with Ms. Pompoms, and Noah, and Sensei.

After most people clear out, Meriam walks over to our team. I instinctively shrink back, remembering her usual attitude towards myself. “Easy, Saphira. It’s nice to see how you truly appear.”

“I haven’t seen it yet,” I complain. “I’m waiting to get to our room so Ellen can Copy me.”

“Let’s go, then!” Ellen declares.

18 August 2014

7:24 PM GMT+1
“Just a little enthusiastic, are we?” Nanase comments. We’re all gathered in a large room. I guess everyone wanted to see my reaction.

“She deserves to know what she looks like!” Ellen replies. “Are you ready?” she asks me.

“Resistance down.” Without another word, she points her hand at me and morphs into… “Is that what I really look like?”

“Yes,” Grace confirms.

Ellen has long, cyan hair that flows down her head and sort of covers her face… I’m gonna need a hair band. Sarah can teach me how to use it. The face I recognize as my own, but the body is much more toned than I recall. The muscles reflect my being in-shape, but it’s thankfully far from bodybuilder type. Still, I have a six-pack comparable to Nanase, and my bust is tight enough that I don’t think I really need a bra—which is great right now, because Rhoda’s clothes really don’t fit me. Overall, I’m happy: with the right ensemble, I’d be right at home in a Fire Emblem game.

“Wow. That’s… wow.” I’m speechless.

“Do you like it?” Susan asks.

“If I didn’t, I could change it. I think I’m still going to do the ‘hairless’ change with my arms and legs, but I… just wow.”

“Hairless?” Ellen asks. My voice is lower than it used to be—more ‘mature’—but still rather high.

“I’d rather not shave my arms and legs. Instead, I make the hair there blonde and effectively invisible.”

“I wish I could do that,” Sarah complains, and Ellen and Grace laugh.

“Oh, right: Grace, am I shorter than I was before? I think I am, but it’s hard to tell.”

Grace thinks for a moment. “Um… yeah, I think you’re right.”

“I believe that there is a light spell you can use to measure,” Meriam offers. She closes her eyes. “Ah, yes.” Ellen pulls out one of the blank brown scales she prepared but didn’t use for the mission and hands it to Meriam. Meriam makes it into a wand and hands it back.

Ellen studies the wand for a moment before aiming at me. “Sahara’s Scale!” Unlike what I thought, the spell forms a golden, glowing ruler of sorts next to me. I say ‘of sorts’ because only markings are showing, and the labels are in Draconic. Ellen walks over and reads the markings. “It says… about 180 centimeters.”

“I’m good at math, but I’m not a calculator,” I respond.

“That’s just shy of six feet”—“That’s about six feet,” Grace and Nanase answer, respectively.

“Um, thanks. I guess I’m an inch or two shorter, but it’d take an awfully specific circumstance for that to matter.”

“So you like how you look?” Rhoda asks.

“Definitely. If I knew I normally looked like this, I would’ve picked it from the start. And, um, I’d be posing a bit if I was in front of a mirror.”
Ellen laughs at my last statement, and I blush slightly as I pull my hair out of my face.

Magus takes a half-step forward. “Restore is a Holy spell, isn't it?” she asks. “Can wizards pick up Holy spells the same as normal?”

“No. Divine spells are locked to individuals that earn them.”

“Okay.” She turns to face Ashley. “Could you… use Restore on me? I want to know for certain who I really am.”

Ashley looks at her, confused. “But… I thought that’s what you look like now…?”

“No? Maybe? This body was formed by the Dewitchery Diamond and Elliot. After that, I used further magic to make myself female… but this body is still not the one I started in. I can’t just ‘undo.’ But the way Saphira’s explained it, your magic works based on my soul, not my body.”

“That’s right,” I confirm.

“Yes,” Meriam backs me up.

Ashley continues to stare at Magus.

“Ashley, your angel should know if you can use it,” I reassure her. “Can you?”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “Yes.” Then she puts her hands on Magus’s shoulders. “Restore.”

And… not much changes. It’s worth noting that Ellen’s appearance is defined by Tedd’s FV5, and besides being blonde, Magus used to match it perfectly. Now, she has a slightly more realistic figure for her amount of exercise: a little shorter (maybe an inch), a slimmer figure, and visible musculature. Otherwise, she’s still nearly identical to Ellen. Well, as she normally looks. Ellen hasn’t dropped Copy yet.

“Huh,” Magus says, looking herself over. “I thought for sure… well, I guess Terra will be happy.”

“Has Andrea made any progress, there?”

“Not really. Maybe this’ll help.”

“I know we had a big lunch, but that was hours ago,” Catalina notes. “Is anyone up for dinner?”

Yeses all around.

18 August 2014
9:00 PM GMT+1

Meriam promised a conversation. We’ve finally found a private space to have it. (Nanase gave me a hair tie, so I get to have a ponytail until we get home. Sarah put it on for me.) Everyone else is either getting ready for bed or chatting with people they found interesting—Grace wasn’t the only Genetic magic user at the mansion, so she’s getting tales of monster hunting from the second woman of Uryuom birth I’ve ever met. I’m sure it’s interesting, but this is a lot more important to me.

“Let me start with just how nervous I am to be talking with you,” I tell Meriam.

“I… realize that you are not Frederick. You are far more connected with those around you, and you
have shown that you will lay your life on the line for the sake of peace. He most certainly would
not have allowed the demon-possessed man to keep his life.” Even Fred wouldn’t employ an Evil
caster.

“I keep screwing things up, though.”

“Mistakes help to make us who we are. You’re still young, even if you don’t appear as such. And
at least you ask for help when you realize your mistake.”

That’s certainly true. I could do with fewer mistakes, though. Property damage is something I’d
like to avoid, and I definitely don’t want to put my friends through something like last month again.

“There is one thing I’d like to know: why did you decide to reveal yourself as a dragon? Even if it
initially made things easier for yourself, you realized that it would become much more difficult in
short order.”

“I just… thought it’d help others the most. I’ve always thought that my main mission in life is to
help as many people as possible. And I read the records. My goal as an engineer is to work for the
common good, and my goal as a dragon is the same. I just might do it in a slightly different way.
And I knew that other dragons were looking for a time, a place, and a dragon to start the process,
and I knew a lot about Moperville, so I thought, ‘Why not me?’”

Meriam laughs—a far more mature laugh than her apparent age. “That’s much simpler than it
would be for most dragons. I believe that only Al would think the same way. I see what he sees in
you—and he doesn’t even know what you truly look like.”

“Hey! He’s like, five times my age!”

“And that gap will close faster than you think. I look forward to another couple joining the ranks.”

Oh, she’s just mocking me, now. “Just so long as I’m not the first dragon to have a kid. Seriously,
it’s been, what, 800 years? Almost?”

Meriam glares at me for a second before her expression softens. “Ah… I know you didn’t mean
any harm in it.”

“You did hear from Jeff what I said, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. And I suppose you’re right—maybe, when things settle again, I’ll beat you to it.”

“If something does come up, I rather think Paz could take your job this time. Analyzing animals by
sound only has got to help in the scouting realm.” I mean, she’s a blind sound dragon that decided
to work as a biologist.

“I suppose you’re right. I… could ask Femi about it.”

I stick out my tongue in disgust at the mental image. “Just because I’m willing to taunt you about it
doesn’t mean I’m ready for all the stuff that comes with marriage.”

“You’ll get there.”

19 August 2014
7:03 AM GMT

Grace filled me in on what’s happening for our ride back and everything with Noriko: first off, yes,
she’s coming home with us, and she’ll stick around for the wedding. Second, (the first awkward part,) she has a family in England. Yes, Tedd has a step-father and even a half-brother. Isn’t that a joy. And the third and most awkward part, Tedd and Grace told Noriko that she could invite them along to the wedding. And she did. And they’re coming. My goodness, and here I was thinking that having the Raven family along would be awkward.

I have no idea how they found airline tickets with that short of a notice, but it happened.

Meriam is still escorting us out to her husband’s house in southern Mauritania, but she’ll be heading right back to the village we left this morning once Elliot lands. He wasn’t home when we had lunch there two days ago, but I’ll get to meet him today. It’s for the best, really. The dragons we met on our way down have politely let me know that they were thoroughly creeped out by my attitude while I was bonded to Rhoda. I don’t blame them.

“You know, as a monster hunter, I did not expect to stay for two years in a mansion living out someone else’s fantasy, then be confined to a small bag for ten hours a day as soon as I was freed,” Noriko comments.

“It’s only for two days, Aunt,” Nanase replies.

“Historically speaking, you’re lucky you aren’t dead,” I answer.

“Hey!” Rhoda responds. “Keep the mood up!”

“It’s the truth, though. Dragons have failed those before, and some people that do that have a habit of discarding women over time. Especially the dangerous ones.”

“Saphira, please,” Grace requests. “My wedding is this Saturday.”

“Well, we got through it with a better outcome than an optimist would give. Ashley earned Restore, I was released, no one died and Noriko was actually in that one instead of one of the other three dozen active anomalies.”

“Three dozen!?” Noriko replies.

“Dragons keep a list. Most don’t last long enough for us to take action: people like yourself clear them for us.”

“If you know about them, why do you let them keep going at all?” Remember how Meriam said things would get harder? This is it.

“In times past, we would post the list in much the same way as is described for roleplaying games: adventure or bounty posts for monster hunters. Today, how do you think most monster hunters would react if there was an online message board for these things?”

Noriko actually takes a few minutes to think. The bag thankfully isn’t totally dark, since people have flashlights and Ellen has a flashlight spell. And Tedd made a floating lights wand, like what that one guy used while we fixed the lights at Moperville North. I’ve taken up a small pouch akin to a sleeping bag—or in other words, a pocket that has a seam splitting it in half. Sarah is in the one next to me. Scaling transformation magic is a funny thing at size extremes.

“I think most of us wouldn’t question it,” Noriko finally says. “Some of the older ones would get suspicious, and start investigating… and they’d probably do rash things if they found the dragons posting it. I don’t think the word ‘dragon’ is associated with ‘trust’ in the world of magic. Things might be different after what you just pulled, though.”
“Maybe among some people. Others will get Jeff’s report first. And a lot just won’t believe it,” I reply.

“Well, Jeff’s a jackass,” Catalina states. “I heard what she said, after you walked away. You’d think you wanted her trapped again.”

“What did Jeff say?” I ask. “I was too busy with Ashley to worry about some jerk.”

“She said you wanted her to be enslaved for the rest of her life. Among other things.”

“For suggesting giving the kid to foster care or for adoption?”

“Well, what did she want?” Rhoda asks.

“Jeff wanted to suggest killing the kid. Because he decided to try taking on someone out of his league and would rather commit murder than live with any consequences. Because taking two months to give birth before being Restored is too much to ask.” I’m starting to cry again. Sarah notices this time.

“H-hey, why are you crying? Saphira?”

“I-it’s… It’s not my story.”

“It’s another dragon’s though, right?” Magus asks. “I remember this from the graduation party.”

“Yeah… you know what, I’ll ask.”

Saphira: Meriam, another thing you can thank Jeff for.

Meriam: What is it?

I can tell she’s annoyed already.

Saphira: My friends want to know why dragons don’t like abortions.

Meriam: Wait a moment. I’ll tell them.

Huh?

**It was bound to come up eventually. Let me speak.** I’m startled by the voice before remembering that we’re on Elliot’s back while Meriam escorts him. This is probably the most convenient time ever to ask. We’ve even still got a couple of hours for lingering questions.

“Za?” Magus exclaims.

“It’s Meriam’s story. I don’t know if Elliot told you, but Fred did more to dragons than simply making us frighteningly unpopular.”

“Let’s hear it, then.”

Saphira: They’re ready.

Meriam: Are you?

Saphira: You’re almost 800 years past it. I can’t imagine it’s worse than what you wrote only a week past it.
**Can I assume that everyone is familiar with the tale regarding Frederick?** Meriam asks.


Saphira: Everyone except Noriko. We can tell her later, right?

Meriam: Carefully, of course, but yes.

**I’ll make this story clear to everybody, then. Long ago, dragons were known not as terrors or unknowns, but as protectors, teachers, and so on. Nearly 800 years ago, one dragon violated that trust, leading to the view of today. His violation ran so far that we had to track him, and my role among the dragons is best described as ‘scout.’**

**In the time just prior to this, Frederick had finished his training and started to serve his country as their dragon. Or, so we thought at the time. The rest of us were relieved that that rowdy country finally had a dragon of its own that could prevent further problems that had crossed the sea from there: monsters, body snatchers, lycanthropy, and more. With the world seemingly at peace, my husband and I decided to try having a child. We succeeded.**

**Now, it is plainly obvious that not all of a dragon’s muscles and innards exist in both forms. The dragon form needs a different circulatory system, to say the least. It also lacks a reproductive system.**

“Oh.” Noriko says. I think she can follow where this is going.

**When I had borne my child—my son—for four months, we heard what Frederick was actually doing. By five months, he was sentenced to death. At seven months, we couldn’t find him—and we were running out of time. All this time, I had refrained from flying, knowing that it was possible that the magic would not play nice with my son. When we needed to find Frederick, one mile of range was not enough. We needed my ten miles. So for the sake of the world, I shifted.**

**I was optimistic in spite of the suddenly ceased sounds from my womb. Maybe they would return when I shifted back!** Something that doesn’t come across with thought-speech is the cracking of a person’s voice in sadness. I hate that I asked her to relive this, but she said she would. **He… he wasn’t there. My body was the same as it had been eight months prior. And after we had finished—** She cuts off.

**After they had finished, the dragons’ reputation was still ruined,** Elliot continues. **Nobody that wasn’t a dragon learned of Olufemi and Meriam’s loss. Nobody cared.**

“That’s horrible!” Grace exclaims. Her face—I think that’s the saddest frown I’ve ever seen on anyone.

**I recorded my experience only a week after my scouting mission. That is what Elliot and Saphira have read.**

“Most languages have a limited ability to communicate emotion,” I note. “Draconic—the language of the Mymoir—doesn’t.”

There’s silence for a few seconds before Elliot continues. **Fred killed a lot of people. Him killing
Meriam’s son wasn’t special. The special part was the number of people who knew—who cared to know.**

“Oh my god,” Rhoda gasps.

“So when Jeff said—”

**When Jeff suggested that she would kill her baby girl,** Meriam cuts off Susan, **I think you can understand how I felt.** I think Meriam is using her Eavesdropping spell to hear inside the bag. **Jeff acted as though no one would care about a nameless life being snuffed out before it could take a breath. As if it’s alright to kill someone just because only sound dragons can hear them. If there’s one thing dragons could change about the world—I suppose you know my goal.**

19 August 2014
8:48 AM GMT-1

What good is a sound/light pair of dragons if you can’t just land at their house while completely unnoticed?

Meriam and Olufemi’s house is… well, it looks about the same as the typical African home that I see in videos from people visiting the continent. It has a few upgrades: the floor is wood instead of dirt, and the roof neither leaks nor has dirt hanging from it. Of course, it’s a brick house—not red brick, but the same sort of mud-brick that people have made for millennia—much like most of the other homes in the area. Still, there’s not much in the way of vehicles in the area, so it’s a good thing that we could land right behind their house. They have one of the fanciest homes in the area, but it’s not out of place. I think most dragons live like this: not richly, but slightly above par for their area. Jorge probably has one of the most-expensive setups.

“Meriam!” Olufemi declares as we walk inside. “Could you not find a group that seemed more conspicuous?”

**They are only staying for lunch. They don’t need to leave.** I suppose this is one of the dynamics that this pair is used to. She’s probably always listening to him, and he’s watching in return.

“Just keep the northerners away!” I don’t know what he’s talking about, but there must be some sort of geopolitical divide in the country. There’s no response, so I guess Meriam is out of range.

At first glance, Olufemi basically looks like a younger version of Sean, which is fair because he’s less than half of Sean’s age. He’s built on a thicker frame, though, and has a thin beard instead of a bare chin. And he’s got the slightly-strange white irises that plague all light dragons. Akiko wears colored contacts, but they’d probably just be dirty and dry all the time around here.

He smiles at our group. “I assume you have had a pleasant trip, considering the circumstances?”

“Mostly, I wish I could see more of it,” Noriko replies, slightly annoyed.

“There is little to see for today’s journey. Perhaps Elliot and Saphira will allow you to ride tomorrow?” He nods at us both.

“Um, maybe?” Elliot answers. “It’ll slow me down…”

“I’ll see how I feel,” I respond. “He’s right, though. Today, you’re just missing a desert and an ocean.”
“It’s still more than I’ve seen in years, but I guess I can spend some more time in the bag.”

“Besides, if you’re outside the bag, you won’t be able to hear anyone else,” Ellen points out. “Elliot might talk with you, but Saphira’s not much of a conversationalist.”

“I can find things to talk about,” I shoot back. “I just don’t, usually. And I have to slow down a bit to hear my riders.” Elliot might not be able to cast an eavesdropping spell, but I know he’s had coaching on recognizing speech.

“I’ll need a bit more training before I can tell what people are saying. Or some kind of Common spell for it.” Oh, yeah. Better hearing is an augmentation spell.

Noriko stares at him blankly. “I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around this whole ‘dragon’ thing.”

I shake my head. “I can explain over lunch. Olufemi, do you have any more of Meriam’s breads?” She gave us a variety of breads with fruits and nuts embedded in them. I’ll have to ask for the recipes, once I start really learning how to cook.

Olufemi looks at me confusedly. “Yes? Meriam said that you didn’t care for them, though.”

“Well, I like breads a lot more than Rhoda does.”

“I can confirm,” Susan states. Kevin was always the “bread boy” whenever rolls were served. I’m not really any different, there.

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When I was flying at Rhoda’s behest, I still got tired, but I didn’t notice it as much because Rhoda didn’t know I was tired. Flying over the Atlantic Ocean is both a very long flight and very tiring. I mean, Elliot did it last time, but it’s still the longest flight by far. Having a featureless ocean to navigate by (thankfully, I can also use the position of the sun) doesn’t help matters. I can see the fish near the surface thanks to my heat sense, but fish are a lot less interesting when you’re only seeing their body heat, not their colors.

And thanks to the fact that I’m flying with the sun, it’s still barely past noon by the time Manuel meets up with us. I foresee missing most of the night, tonight.

**Please tell me that we’re nearly there,** I request of him once he’s in range.

Manuel: Could you repeat that?

Right. His parents speak a lot more English than he does.

Saphira: Please tell me that we’re nearly to the pickup point. I’m tired. The only redeeming quality for the flight right now is that there’s something to see.

Manuel: Yes. I’m happy. Even if I can’t understand you, I’m glad that I’m able to hear your voice.

Saphira: As am I, but I’ll be more happy when I can land.

Manuel: Um, yes. Follow me.

I didn’t really take note of it last time, but Manuel’s house is barely large enough that there’s space for everyone to sleep: they have enough cushioning and blankets, but a few people have to sleep on the floor. Good thing Grace takes up so little space as a squirrel.
“You did not say that there would be *two* new people, Manuel!” his mother exclaims when she sees the group. She’s been making our early dinner (and her own family’s lunch), so it was her husband in the car this time. They *are* a fairly young family. Manuel has only been a dragon for eight years, so while his peers are rather confused by his appearance, his family is still at a reasonable age for that. Aside from his *clearly* older brother that wasn’t here two days ago. (Carlos is only two years older than Manuel, but as he’s not a dragon, he actually looks his age. Beyond that, they’re pretty similar.)

“Only one,” I reply before plopping myself on the nearest chair. “You might notice that Rhoda no longer has a double. Thankfully.”

“This is a very full house,” Carlos notes through a thick accent. He clearly knows English, but it’s a little hard to get what he’s saying. “How can we even afford this?” he asks his brother accusingly. Manuel *said* that Carlos bore a bit of a grudge because it was the younger brother that became the dragon, but I didn’t know how that would play out. I mean, it’s a bit of a burden to have so much magic power. He’s also one of only two dragons in the whole nation, so he’s got a ton of people who’ll be depending on him if they really need it.

Manuel responds to his brother in Portuguese. I hear something similar to “dragon” in his response, and Carlos seems to get even madder at that word. Their exchange continues beyond my comprehension until Carlos storms out the front door, his father following. Manuel stares after his brother for a few seconds before sighing and sitting next to me. “You are lucky that you do not have siblings,” he mutters to me.

“I sort of *do*,” I answer. “Just not here.”

“Ah!” he remembers. “Forgive me!”

“It’s fine.” I’m almost certain that Kevin would be jealous, at least initially. I also know that he’s always wanted a sister, so he’d probably have a complex response. Our younger brother would probably see me as yet another sibling to beat in every category. It doesn’t matter if it’s a physical or mental competition: Kevin always loses.

Saphira: You are right, that I don’t know what it’s like.

Manuel: Sometimes, I wish that he and I really did swap positions. But I know that he wouldn’t like giving up his life for my own. It’s not his kind of life. I’m sure his fiancé is happier this way, too. I just wish I could meet her.

I feel like talking about Tedd’s upcoming wedding, but I know that’d be a tangent.

Saphira: I don’t know what to say. I guess… I’ll pray for your family.

Manuel: Thank you.

I’m not one to delay. If I do, I’m likely to forget. So as soon as I’m sure the conversation is finished, I bow my head and pray aloud, quietly. Ashley hears my whispers and joins in.

20 August 2014
10:24 AM EST

The remainder of the afternoon and evening went… okay-ish. Carlos came back, but the silence was thick. The tension reminded me of the Independence Day party, between Naomi and Mr. Raven, even though it’s for a very different reason. Still, Manuel’s parents were hospitable, and our group was able to get plenty of rest before our dawn takeoff this morning.
Noriko insisted on riding outside of the bag. The slowdown was noticeable; I think the flight took an entire extra hour, and Elliot passed on to me her request for warm air. Nanase gave her some warm clothes, too. They’re nearly the same clothing size, so it wasn’t too hard for her.

“What’s up with the blue hair?” Jorge asks me when we all regain our sizes.

“It’s my natural hair color, apparently. I think I like it.”

“It’s nice. You just might want to wear less blue with it. From an artistic perspective.”

“I’ll wear what I want,” I pout.

Susan shakes her head. “You should follow his advice, there. A bit of variety in color looks nice.”

“Fine,” I sigh. “I’ll look into buying another color of dress.”

“You’ll need it for Saturday anyway, right?” Tedd asks. The dress color they decided on was green, like Grace’s eyes. They hadn’t decided on a color before we started training, and then I was constantly changing until I could’ve worn something from Rhoda. Thankfully, the Pompoms kept all my stuff… but I still only have the set of clothes I bought all the way back in January. I’m gonna need new (shorter) pants for work anyway, so now’s as good a time as any to re-evaluate my fashion. And buy a green dress.

“I was sorta hoping that someone had magic that could change the color of my dress, but sure. I still won’t dress fancy, but I have enough money to buy clothes.”

“So long as it’s in stock,” Ellen points out.

“I might be shorter, but I’m still the tallest in the group. You all couldn’t have bought out the clothes in my size.”

Noriko clears her throat loudly. “Could we talk over lunch?” she asks in the silence that follows.

“Oh, um, yes,” I reply, slightly embarrassed.

Lunch is the same as last time at Jorge’s place, but I don’t really mind. At least I get to pick what I’ll eat this time. “Saphira,” Jorge starts as I swallow a cracker sandwich, “have you taken a look at my spells recently?”

“As in, in the past two days? It wasn’t high on my priorities.” Did he discover something?

“As in, in the past two days? It wasn’t high on my priorities.” Did he discover something?

“I have something to show you, then.” He stands up and walks a short distance away. We’re eating outside, but his house must be as close to park land as possible: the entire area is heavily wooded, and you’d lose track of someone within 30 feet if you were only relying on your eyes. He stops and turns to face us. “Saphira’s Half-Dragon Form.” The familiar form renders itself on him, his body covered in brilliant red scales. His full dragon form includes horns and a rather spiky sort of shape: while the horns aren’t reflected in this form, his joints have extra-large scales jutting towards the bases of his limbs, and his spine is barbed with scales if you ran your hand up his back instead of down. “Jorge’s Half-Dragon Flight.” Nothing appears to happen, until he flaps his wings and lifts up, the same as I’ve seen from Ellen and Susan all the time. He moves up and down for a few beats before landing again and dismissing the Half-Dragon Form spell.

It’s difficult for me to hide my excitement. “Whoa!” I exclaim when he first lifts off. When he
lands, I run over to him. “Did you figure it out!?” I ask, my hands on his shoulders.

“Not really,” he laughs. “That’s a force spell. I’m just mimicking the flight. But if I can mimic it, then maybe we can figure out what the dragon form actually does for flight.”

I lower my hands and take a step back. “Yes, that’s true. I think I’ve figured out what the heat element of the dragon form does…”

20 August 2014
12:15 PM EST

I think Jorge and I spent a solid hour nerding out over lunch. We’re so close, I just know it. A form with maneuverability and defense while able to stay indoors—and also really nice for parties, if we want. But right now, I need to focus more on keeping my heading and making the flight not terrible for Noriko.

“Why are you flying so close to the ground?” she asks over the wind.

**I’m dodging flight restrictions.**

“Flight restrictions?”

**Airports have a bunch of right-of-way style flight restrictions around them. For example, if you want to fly above around three thousand feet over Moperville, you need a radio so that you can communicate with the air traffic controllers at the Chicago O’Hare International Airport. Otherwise, you risk an airplane hitting you, which is bad. Or you could cause the airplane to have to dodge you, causing flight delays, which is also bad. So I just stay out of the flight restrictive areas, just to be safe.**

“I never thought that dragons would have to comply with flight restrictions.”

**Neither did I. But it’s not just dragons: I’ve instructed everyone flying with magic in the Moperville area to stay below 3000 feet. Whether or not they do isn’t up to me to enforce, but it’s safer to just stay low, even if it means I’m easier to spot.**

“Why are you still concerned about people spotting you?”

**Within Moperville, I’ve personally spoken with a number of residents, and I’ve appeared on the local news, and people can see me flying every Saturday—so long as the weather is clear—so I’m not really an unknown factor. People know what’s going on. Outside of Moperville, not many people know who I am or what a dragon is. Even if our mythology is wrong, it still says, generally, that dragons are creatures to be feared. And if people don’t have anything else to go by, that’s what they’ll go with. I don’t think people are really ready yet across the nation to deal with magic and dragons and everything else existing, at least not on an impersonal level, so… I still try to generally keep out of sight, when I’m out of town. You’ll have to judge for yourself how well I do in-town.**

“Japan does alright.”

**Japan has an entirely different culture. And although magic is certainly useful in entertainment, I’d rather people see it for the very diverse nature it has. I think there’s plenty of use for magic that we can tap into, if only we’ll look into the less-showy bits of how it all comes together. As a really basic example, Susan and I are learning how to cook using our magic.**

“I could see that being nice.”
I continue flying in relative silence for another hour or so. It’s a nice day, and it’s not like there’s nothing to watch, even as I pass it apace and at altitude.

“Saphira,” Noriko requests.

**Yes?**

“Do you believe that I made the right decision? Returning to Moperville with you?”

**I’m probably not the person to ask. In terms of Tedd’s mental health, yes. As for the rest of your family, I’m not sure how they’ll take it. I know that your sister has disowned you, and that Mr. Verres has been excessively cautious with Tedd. It took a lot of convincing to get him to let Tedd even come along this week.**

“Could you have won without him?”

**If we brought the wands he’d prepped ahead of time? Maybe. It’s hard to identify artifacts without a wandmaker present. We could’ve removed the villain, sure, but I don’t know how long the artifacts would continue to work, and getting everybody out would’ve taken a very long time.**

Noriko keeps silent. After a few moments, I continue.

**Look, I… I don’t know what your motivation was, for leaving. Pandora Raven, as Tedd told me, postulated that you were trying to protect Tedd from your enemies because you got the same magic response from him as you would a couch. There’s no way you could’ve known that he was resisting the wand. At the same time, you know now that he’s not defenseless. I’m not going to claim that I know what’s best for your family, but I do know that Tedd really wants to connect with you. So my request, just as his friend, is that you at least try.**

“I think I can do that.” A beat passes. “As a couch?”

**Or someone without magic, or a dragon, or any other inanimate object. Or whatever other comparison you want to make. That’s just what came to my mind.**

“Dragons don’t show up, either?”

**We resist Common magic 100% of the time unless we let it affect us. Elliot let Mr. Verres test that wand on him again after he became a dragon. And just to see what’d happen, I lowered my resistance for Mr. Verres to check it on me. It’s not exactly made for other forms of magic, but it can still detect them. He said I showed up about the same as an immortal would: awakened, with a lot more magic than even the most powerful of wizards, though it had no idea what I could do.**

“And Tedd?”

**When he finally calmed down, it just said he was a very strong wizard with only one spell. His magic mark, actually. He can’t get other spells, despite being able to see and shape the Common magic around himself.**

She’s silent again, and I let her think.

20 August 2014
5:52 PM CST

It’s not like Sean left while we were gone, so I easily notice him standing at the usual landing spot with the rest of the people who trained us for a month—plus Mrs. Kitsune. Oh, boy. (You’d
wonder how I recognized her, except that I don’t really know any other woman with her build."

**Coming in tired,** I call to Sean, and he steps to the side before I land harder than usual. Noriko throws off the gear bags and grabs the people bag before jumping off, and I finally get to shift back to human form. Once I’ve shifted, I just sorta lay on the ground while everyone climbs out of the team bag and everything.

“Saphira?” Susan asks, standing over me. “Are you going to stand up?”

“I think I’m going to relish this feeling a bit longer,” I reply, hugging the cool, soft grass. I know it’s filthy and I’ll need a shower, but my shoulders, back and stomach are so sore.

“You get to wear scales in the car, then.”

“I don’t mind.”

I pay more attention to my ability to relax than to anyone else for the next few minutes. Sometimes, that’s all a person needs. Eventually, I decide to roll over and sit up, my arms wrapped around my knees. Noriko and Mrs. Kitsune are still shooting daggers at each other, and a few people have already headed off. Mr. Verres approaches me, phone in hand. “Do you mind if I took a picture?” From his phrasing, I guess he already did.

“What for?”

“Well, there’s the missing person search…” Oh, right. He did try to find out if I was a missing person/amnesiac just after I arrived. His search had proved fruitless, not that I’d honestly expected otherwise.

“My eye color might still be off. But do you really think you’ll find anything, at this point?”

“No: you don’t look different enough. But it’s my legal obligation to try.”

“Alright.” I wave my left hand dismissively. “Is there anything else you’d like to say to me?”

“Try to be more careful?” he frowns.

“I will. I don’t want to put people through that again. Although it’s true that Ashley can fix it now… but I still wouldn’t want to do it.” I slowly stand up. “Anyway, I probably should get going. I haven’t been home in quite some time.”

Mr. Verres nods as I return to Susan’s side.

Part of my time flying in silence today was spent making notes on everything I have to get done in the next two days before the wedding. I’ve got to get clothes, check in with the community college, speak with my boss… and Grace decided to have a bachelorette party on Friday night, as well. I almost feel bad for Tedd: most of his friends are girls, so his party the night before will have a lot fewer people. Then again, I think most guys are happier with smaller gatherings than most girls.

I don’t think a wandmaker has ever married someone who’s part space alien. I wonder what sort of magic their kids will have? And on a more personal note, I wonder when? I mean, they’re only planning on attending college for two years…

“Saphira?” Susan snaps me out of my reverie as we pull onto our street.

“Yeah?”
“Does my mother even know that you’re alright?”

“Sean said he’d tried to pass on the message, but didn’t hear back…” It’s hard to contact Ms. Pompoms when you’re a guy and don’t have any direct connections in town.

“So maybe not, then.”

“Do you think she’ll have a problem? I’m pretty sure I’m still recognizable.”

Susan laughs. “I don’t think a change in fitness and hair color is *that* much of a change, no. I was more worried about what she’ll say about not contacting her.”

“Well, we tried as hard as we could. Jorge’s house doesn’t have cell service or a landline,” and I’m not sure how he gets by, “and our phone coverage is zilch outside of the US. And Sean tried to contact her, but she wouldn’t let him.”

Susan sighs while shutting off the car. “Well, she’s home. Let’s find out.”

“Thank you for keeping my stuff here, by the way.” The last thing I’d want at the moment is a trip to Rhoda’s house.

“I don’t think Mom would’ve let anyone take it.”

I ring the doorbell. It’s probably best if I’m the first thing she sees, so Susan is standing behind me. I watch and wait as she makes her way to the door, and take a small step back as she turns the handle.

Ms. Pompoms appears to have slept little over the past few days at *least*. Susan said that her mother had been stressed out thanks to me, but sending Susan off with no real communications home had to be hard, too. “Who-?” Ms. Pompoms starts before recognizing me. I guess she was distracted by my hair. And the fact that I’m *still* in Rhoda’s clothes, because all of my clothing is here.

“Saphira!?” She hugs me fiercely, and Susan winces and looks away. A partial shift doesn’t actually clean me.

“Yes, it’s me, and I’m glad to be myself again, too. That said, I *was* lying on the ground not too long ago…” She’s pinned my arms to my sides, but I lightly tug away and she lets me go.

“Go get a shower, then. Susan and I can talk while you do.”

21 August 2014
9:45 AM CST

Rhoda agreed to meet me at the mall entrance so that I could give her her clothes back. That’s where I’m standing now, prepared clothing bag in hand. I’ve still got a bit of shopping to do afterwards. A hair band or two *first*, so that I can fix my hair, and then I need new underwear, a green dress, new pants, and I’m thinking of getting some clothes in a slightly-different style than t-shirt and skirt. I’ve looked at enough styles while out with Diane and Rhoda that I think I know what to get. And I called Mr. Kilpatrick earlier to let him know that I can work again. He sounded relieved, but it’ll probably be clearer to him when he can see me in person.

“Hey, Saphira!” Rhoda calls as she enters conversation range. “Feeling better?”

“Well-rested, at any rate. I’ll still need more sleep before I’m ready to spend loads of time with people.” There’s no hiding that I’m an introvert, though it might not seem it sometimes. However, the stress from the last few days was such that I spent a good chunk of time just curled up against
the wall in my room yesterday. I know that at least some other girls are like that, thankfully: Kevin’s tour guide for a college campus tour said that she has a nervous breakdown after every open house. Thinking back, it’s a little odd that she admitted as such to an incoming freshman, even if it was on-topic. I hand Rhoda the bag. “Thanks for taking care of me when I needed it.”

“Oh. Um…” Rhoda blushes strongly. “It would’ve been hard not to. But you’re welcome.”

“And I know you won’t take it the wrong way when I say I honestly hope that never happens to anyone again. Although better you in charge than some people.”

Rhoda turns away. “Thanks. N-now, um…”

I’d best just end it quick. “Alright, I have a lot of stuff to do, and not a lot of time. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Bye!” Rhoda gives a half-hearted wave while backing away, before turning fully around and half-sprinting back to her car. I know that she’s intimidated by tall people, but that was just an awkward conversation all around. With it behind us, though, I’ll do my best to not bring it up again.

Now to the department stores.

I’m not one to take Pokémon for any sort of moral authority, but the most recent games had a fair idea for what is and is not appropriate for a young lady to wear. I still like loose-fitting clothing, so aside from my jeans that fit my 5’11” stature, the rest is consistent with my general style, although less focused. Also helpful: my fitness has made me certainly fit into the category of “only needs a sports bra.” Any additional ones don’t do much more than cover taboo skin areas. I think FV1 Tedd is bigger than me.

“How are you going to get around without me?” Susan asks as I get into the car. She dropped me off at the mall earlier, and it didn’t take her all that long to get here.

“Walk or fly.”

“And carry stuff when you fly?”

“I didn’t have any reason to show it off, but I did make a spell since June. Saphira’s Ice Sculpture makes a custom structure on the ground, and… well, I can show off one of the standard shapes when we get home.”

“Or you can draw it in heat in the car.”

I grin sheepishly. “Oh, right.” I heat a small area in the backseat in the same shape as I intend to use a whole lot.

“That’s… a pair of arches? With grooves?” Susan says while still watching the road. I did wait until a red light to make it. Splitting my attention like that is still hard.

“Channels, more like. I can hang a pair of bags over the arches, and the channels will hold the straps in place.”

“Oh! And then you shift while lying under the arches, and the bags end up on your back.”

“Exactly. You’re learning how I think!”
“You don’t make it difficult,” Susan smiles thinly.

“So, how’d your last episode go?” With Susan heading off to college out of the area, she and Elliot can’t exactly continue the review show.

“I think it was a good one. Not our best, but the movie was divisive. Maybe we can do bonus episodes over breaks.”

“Maybe. I’ll have to watch it later!” We ride in silence for a minute or two. “It’s hard to believe it’s almost time for college. And that I won’t see you for a few months.”

“I’m late heading off, actually. My classes start on Tuesday. I’d planned around the wedding, so at least I knew it’d be like this.”

“How long is the car trip?”

“Two days.” Ouch. My classes don’t start until the following Monday, and I’m not going anywhere. “I don’t know if you remember me saying, but my roommate got there early, so I sent along some of my larger things. I spent a bunch of time last night telling her how I wanted the room arranged.”

“At least it sounds like you got a good roommate.” Kevin’s first roommate was almost never around, though he was friendly enough. The second was a jerk.

“I’ll manage.”

“And going flying every week?”

“… I’m taking the car for a reason.”

22 August 2014
5:00 PM CST

Yes, Elliot and I can land at the community college. They gave us a designated spot just beyond the parking lots. It’s a good thing, because I honestly don’t know how I’d get to class if I wasn’t allowed to land there. I guess I’d just walk a whole lot.

I don’t think Grace really knows what to do for a bachelorette party, but then again, I don’t think anyone else here does, either. Our group consists of everyone that was at the graduation party, minus the guys. (Noriko isn’t invited because she’s not a bachelorette.) And since it’d just be weird to do all our magic stuff in public… guess who finally opened her home? At the same time, it is an all-female group.

And while this does satisfy Nanase’s criteria for drinking alcohol, most of us thought that wouldn’t be a wise idea, being hungover for Grace’s wedding. If you get past the point that none of us are old enough to drink in the first place. And dragons not in full control of their actions is probably a really bad idea.

Not to say tonight won’t be any fun. We all have magic, it’s a sleepover, and Grace’s bag smells heavily of Common magic.

“Is everyone here?” Grace asks.

I look around. “Looks like.” Grace, myself, Susan, Sarah, Magus, Ellen, Nanase, Catalina, Rhoda, Diane, Ashley. I’ll ask about Diane’s hair when she asks about mine.
“Let’s get this party started!” Grace exclaims.

“Um,” Magus raises her hand. “Are we really staying here the whole night? I mean, that’s not exactly typical of this kind of party…”

“No, it’s not,” Grace replies. “But my wedding is tomorrow, and it’s really the last time we could do this, and I think we all can have a fun enough time without doing things that are normal.”

“And you’re saving money,” Sarah comments.

“Well, yes,” Grace answers with a tight smile. “I’d be lying if I said that finances weren’t part of the decision.” Tedd’s having a similarly-frugal party tonight, from Elliot’s report. “But it’s still a nice time, and Daddy said that this is about how people did this in his day.”

“Isn’t he going to be your father-in-law?” Susan asks.

“Yes. I still think of him as my father.”

“At least she doesn’t have to worry about her father-in-law not liking her,” I note with a smile.

“Anyway, I brought Mario Kart, and Susan said she picked up movies?”

“I got what you asked. Plus a few I like.” Susan has watched a lot of movies at this point. I watched a few with her, but she watched most with just Elliot. I wonder if Ashley is jealous? And if she is, how does her angel feel about it?

Ellen points at Grace’s bag. “That’s not all that’s in there, is it?”

Grace glances away. “Um. No. I… did ask Tedd for a few wands…”

“Why don’t you go over them, too?” Magus asks.

The wands are only for spells the group doesn’t already have on its own. Tedd’s mark spell (namely, becoming ‘girly’), targeted hairstyle changes, clothing alterations, half-animal forms. Grace has multiples of each in case we want to use them a whole lot.

“Saphira, are you sure there won’t be any problems with these?” Rhoda asks.

“One: we have Ashley.”

Ashley blushes. “Point,” Rhoda responds.

“Two: most of the time, magic from different systems ignores the other in a person. It’s only in artifacts that they frequently interact.”

“How do they get in artifacts in the first place?” Magus asks. “You said Common casters and wizards made those.”

“You can tell when I use magic, can’t you?” I ask her.

“Yeah, why?”

“Wizards can pick up Draconic magic and spells. They just can’t use it. I’m sure you’ve picked up a spell or two off me by now. You could stick it in an artifact even if you can’t use it, but that usually gives chaotic results.”
“Like what?”

“Um… how much do you know about the contents of the Paranormal… blah Storage Facility?” I know the name. It’s just way too long to bother saying, and besides, there are a few people here that don’t know about it.

“They don’t do much. How is that relevant?”

“Almost every last item in there has both Common and Draconic magic in it. For example, there’s one artifact that turns round objects into balloons, sort of, and another that glows with ultraviolet light when activated, and so on.”

“Wait. How do you know what’s in there?” Ellen asks.

“Dragons have a list of known artifacts. I picked out the twenty most-useless and asked Mr. Verres if any of them were in there, in exchange for telling him what they did, according to the dragons’ knowledge. I mean, they’re still useful if you have the right application… and it’s nice to keep track of things.” He had to run the information exchange by some other people first, but now he knows that he can ask what something does if the government doesn’t care that we know where it is. I think someone in his old department is looking to have Eliot or myself take a tour through the place, just so they can know what the stuff does.

“How do dragons know what the artifacts do?” Magus asks.

“Because the people who made them tended to ask dragons to take a look. Most of the artifacts we know about are really old, but they still show up from time to time. And dragons only hold onto the really dangerous ones, like what we destroyed on Monday. Not to say that dragons don’t get robbed on occasion.” It’s still rarer than for most people. Risk management, you know.

22 August 2014
5:07 PM CST

“Any theme for this party, or are we just hanging out?” I ask Grace.

“Just hanging out,” she smiles. “Although if you want a theme, we could all use the half-form wands or something…”

“I’m all for that,” I respond. “Anyone else?”

“I was thinking of doing Fusion Paste of Grace on everyone,” Ellen answers.

“Fusion Paste?” Ashley asks.

“It’s—” Ellen and I both start. I need to kick that habit. I motion to Ellen to let her continue. “It’s a spell that makes the target a mixture of themselves and whoever I copied. It’s almost like we could see what your kid together would look like.”

“Or in this case, what Grace’s kid would look like if Tedd was transformed before, well…” Nanase motions with her hand.

“Ew, and no,” I grimace. “Genetic magic works that way, sure, but Common magic doesn’t. Even if Grace was transformed and Tedd was in Grace’s form and had the kid, it’d use Tedd’s own genetics. Also, did I say ew?”

“Changing the topic:” Catalina assists me, “Grace, you said there was a half-cat wand? How is it
different from my own spell?”

“It gives you fur,” Sarah answers immediately. “And claws, and I think it messes with your teeth a little.” I guess she’s used the wand a lot.

“And these are all that thorough?” Ashley wonders.

“Yeah,” Sarah informs her. Ashley’s face really lights up then.

“How they stack?”

“No.” Ashley’s smile dims a little, but only for a moment before Sarah continues. “The others will work together with it, though, so you could be girly and half-cat, for example.”

“Oooo.” I can just see Ashley playing through the possibilities in her head.

“Can I try half-squirrel?” I request. I’m mostly just curious about how it feels.

“First, I wanna see that costume that you and the red dragon obsessed over,” Catalina demands.

“But… mine’s basically the same, just blue.”

“I still want to see it.”

“Show us! Show us!” Magus, Rhoda and Diane start chanting. Diane didn’t even see Jorge use it.

“Fine. I’ll have to change it a bit first, though. It gives me claws on my feet, and I actually care about these floors.”

“How long will that take?” Diane asks.

“A few minutes.” I close my eyes and sit, then start messing with the spell.

By the time I’ve finished and open my eyes, most of the group is transformed in some way. Grace is half-squirrel, Diane and Sarah are half-cat, Catalina used her spell on herself and Rhoda, Nanase is using her fairy doll spell, Ashley is Rhoda’s fairy, and Ellen is some strangely cute mixture of Grace and Sarah. “You all got started without me?” I complain.

“You didn’t miss much,” Susan says drily.

“Except that we’re definitely making Ellen’s current form into a clone form wand!” Sarah exclaims, almost purring.

“Wow,” I reply, a bit overwhelmed. “Uh, I mean, it’s cute, yeah, but that’s a bit much. Something to do in your free time in the lab, though. Anyway, my spell is ready.” I just made an option where the scales end about an inch above my ankles, like they do for my wrists. I’d prefer the original, but again, I care about the floors here.

“Can you fly with it?” Rhoda asks.

I squint at her. “No? I never… oh. Jorge used force magic. I can’t use that. What we talked about was trying to accomplish the same thing without force magic.” I think for a second, then realize why she asked. “You wanted to make me the same size as Ashley and Nanase, didn’t you?”

Rhoda looks to her left. “Mayyybeeee…”

Somehow, I don’t think this is what she was hoping for.
“They could carry me, but it wouldn’t be the same.” I stand up and move to a more open area.
“Ready?”

“Sure!” Grace replies.

**Saphira’s Half-Dragon Form.** *Clatter* I turn my head to look: my tail knocked over a chair. Whoops. “Um, if I’m going to stay in this form, I wouldn’t mind being a little smaller. Maybe half size.” At just under three feet tall, I wouldn’t really have maneuverability issues or space issues.

“Your wish is my command,” Rhoda replies, and I quickly drop my resistance for her as she raises her hands. She makes me exactly half size.

“I mean, you could’ve left me a little taller,” I tell her. Looking up from this angle is a little odd. At least I can stretch out my wings with as much care as I usually stretch my arms, I guess.

“Hey, wouldn’t this be a good time to show off the miniature dragon thing?” Ashley asks.

“The what?” Diane asks, finally moving from her spot. She’s been staring at me silently since I used my spell.

“Oh,” I recall. “In May, I had Rhoda shrink me while I was in dragon form, so I went to school as a 2-foot-tall dragon. It didn’t do what I’d hoped for my image, but it was still fun. I could do it again tonight, but I’d like to have dinner first. Eating and sleeping are a couple of things that are a bad idea in dragon form.”

“We can wait,” Grace assents. “You’re cute enough as-is.”

“Rawr,” I growl in reply.

22 August 2014
6:51 PM CST

Watching a movie while at half size and with a tail and wings is interesting. Not as interesting as nearly anything else I could’ve done in the last 90 minutes, but it let the pizza get here and we all learned that I instinctively use my wings in my expressions. (I might’ve smacked someone with a wing once or twice.)

“Rhoda, is it too much to ask to be full size while I eat?” I request.

“You wouldn’t rather stay that way?” I know she likes it when people are shorter than her, but at present, that’s just myself and Ashley, and the latter can’t eat as a fairy.

“I can’t eat as much like this. Do I have to go shift?”

*Or I could Restore you,*” Ashley offers.

I look at her askance. “Why?” I’d rather like to work on hiding my body hair via color change, but it’s not a huge deal if it’s visible.

“I get magic from electrical energy conversions and I finally have a spell that uses a lot of magic. Magic overflows feel weird and I want to avoid them.” Sensible.

“She gets buildups?” Grace asks.

“We live in a modern society, and her magic is like she said,” I explain. “Her angel can hold a surplus greater than anything even a dragon can have, but she doesn’t use magic nearly as often as
anyone else here.” I turn to Ashley. “Did you even feel remotely tired after you finished casting
Restore all those times on Monday?”

Ashley shakes her head. “Actually, I felt like I could finally relax. It’s like I’d been holding my
breath for months. I wasn’t tired.”

“Okay. I’ll let you Restore me, but let me end my spell, first.” I lose the wings and tail. I think I’m
used to the weight, but I still feel lighter without them.

Then Ashley regains her form and stature, and then I regain my stature. The smell of Holy magic is
intense when she uses it, but the only difference between myself now and two hours ago is that my
body hair is a shade darker.

“Okay, I didn’t bring it up earlier, but what’s with the blue hair?” Diane questions. “And your
figure? I know I haven’t seen you in a few weeks, but people don’t change that quickly.”

Diane never saw me at the peak of Rhoda’s control, thankfully. Actually, I think the last time she
saw me was only a week into that. I would’ve been… a couple of inches shorter than now, and a
lot more doughy. Much less muscular. And I was still mostly my own person at that point.

I really hope that doesn’t happen to anyone ever again. At the same time, it’s awfully similar to the
effect that Not-Tengu had on the New Year’s party, only more permanent. So it’ll probably happen
again through a different process. Different wish: I hope it’s not Ashley that has to Restore the
victims.

“Dragons do. It only takes three weeks to completely change my appearance by simply wanting it
to happen. In this case, though, you’re seeing what I look like with no active magic at all.”

“So… your hair is naturally blue?”

“Yes, and this shade. And if I don’t force myself to be less fit-looking, this is what you get.”

“A reed with muscles.”

Susan glares at Diane, and I laugh at her face. “Hey, it’s true! You don’t have to defend me,
Susan.”

“So why was your hair brown?” Diane asks.

“Because my brother’s hair is brown, I think. I just thought of myself as looking that way. It never
occurred to me that I might like this better.” Especially because I’d never seen it.

“Is that why you’re wearing something other than your usual?” I picked a light green chemise
instead of a t-shirt today.

“Not entirely. I bought clothes yesterday to fit my new figure. But spending time with you is how I
picked out the other styles for my wardrobe.” The chemise is less-revealing than the one I had on
July 4, partly because of the style and partly because my chest is smaller than it was then. But I
have a few different styles of clothes, now.

“Oh! Thanks!”

“And you?”

Diane doesn’t appear to register my question.
“Diane!” I call to her.

“Huh?”

“What about you? I did notice that your hair doesn’t rival mine for length.”

“Oh. Uh… I… don’t think I need to try so hard anymore. To get boys to notice me.”

Is that all? “That’s… good? I don’t think many girls would need to try hardly at all, but it’s good to not rely on others’ opinions.”

Diane shrugs. “I just don’t want the same reputation at college. I’m starting a career, not randomly searching for a busy weekend.”

Magus opens up pizza #1 from the stack that she and Susan had carried in. “Grace, would you care to explain why you asked for pineapple on pizza?” Because I asked and she agreed, that’s why. I can see a heated debate in the near future.

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The pizza was good, but Grace said she didn’t want dessert tonight thanks to all she can have tomorrow. Tradition for a wedding demands a huge cake, and Vlad saw to it that it was delivered. Noriko actually fussed over Grace a bunch once she sorted everything out in her head. According to Grace, you’d think she was the mother of the bride, not the groom. The only problem we can see right now is the forecast of rain for the outdoor wedding, but I’m sure there’s some magic our group can whip up to help with that. I mean, we’ve got every type of magic on our side.

Since I’ll be flying to classes every day starting less than two weeks from now, I’ve figured out a spot nearby the house that is okay for repeated takeoff and landing. I’m over there now because Grace wanted to see tiny dragon Saphira.

**Ready,** I tell Rhoda once I’ve shifted, and in a few seconds, I’ve got that 2-foot-tall perspective again.

“You’ll be fine for the rest of the night?”

**I’ll shift back to human before I go to sleep, but I went to the bathroom before this for a reason.**

“Come to think of it, do dragons ever need to use the restroom while transformed?”

**Dragons technically always have both forms active. It’s complicated. But what I just ate is much more in my human body than this one, from how I understand it.** Besides, I’ve no idea how lizards pee in the first place…

“Um… I’ll see you back at the house.”

**Yep!** The flight isn’t exactly a long one, so I’m back home within a minute. **Susan, can you let me in?** I ask her from the front steps. She was inside the kitchen, so it only takes her a few seconds to open the door for me.

“So, you’ll be spending the rest of the night like that?” she verifies.

**Everything before heading off to bed. I’m perfectly comfortable like this. Just small.**

“Definitely small.”
“Squee!” Grace squeals upon seeing me as a tiny dragon. “You’re like a small version of the plushie you got me for my birthday!”

**Considering how it was made, that’s entirely accurate.** And then Nanase flits down the stairs… as the dragon fairy doll. She lands next to me, matching my pose. Thanks to the way the scaling works for Rhoda and Nanase’s spells, Nanase is actually a little bit bigger than I am. Comparing us to something nearby that I know the size of… I think she’s about four inches taller.

**Rhoda’s back,** I let everyone know a second before she knocks.

Once Rhoda’s back inside, Magus wastes no time in asking me a question. “Can you fly normally like that?”

**Of course. How do you think I got back?** I take off vertically and stay at chest level. **I don’t fly as fast like this, but it feels the same.**

Magus is looking at me with a strange expression. “You’re using magic to fly. I never really noticed before, but you are.”

**Yes, that’s what Jorge and I talked about.**

“And I think I can learn the magic.”

**Yes. You can’t use it, but yes. That’s what I was saying about the artifacts. Actually, I think that’s how the balloon artifact works.**

“Isn’t this what you’d call force magic? How does it work for you?”

**All eight elements are part of the dragon form. It naturally works for all dragons. All of my armor spells are using a partial dragon shift as the basis, including more or less of the form depending on what I want. Jorge made the first version of the spell, and it’s his notes I used to make the rest. So we’re working together to see just how much we can get out of a partial dragon shift—and at present, the result is the Half-Dragon Form spell.**

“Why don’t you spend more time with Tedd?” Grace asks me as I land.

**I… haven’t had a reason to? I mean, yeah, what we work on is pretty similar, but it’s from different systems of magic…**

“And you two sound almost the same right now. That’s it. After classes start, I’m going to force you two to do lab work together.”

I drop my head and cover it with my wings. **Wh—?** My wings flare out as she picks me up! **Sarah!**

She hurriedly puts me down. “Oh! Sorry! You just looked really cute, peeking out through your wings like that.”
“Really? I didn’t even think about what I was doing. It was just natural body language, I think.”

“That’s not something you see in my world,” Magus remarks.

“Are you okay with being held?” Catalina asks.

“Um... yes?” I lift my right wing a little, then consciously pull out both wings from my sides as she grabs me around my middle. I squirm a bit. “Sorry, this isn’t very comfortable.”

“And you’re heavy. How much do you weigh?”

“I dunno. Scales weigh a lot. There are probably lizards around my size that are comparable.”

“Well, you fit on a bathroom scale, so let’s find out,” Susan suggests before promptly heading off to grab one.

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Fifty-two pounds. Heavy, but not that heavy. Grace found out that the Savannah Monitor lizard is a good comparison at roughly 80 pounds, so while I’m not exactly light, I’m lighter than a lizard that some people keep as a pet. While shrunken, anyway. If the weight is exactly by scale, I’d be closer to nine tons at full size. No wonder I weighed down the Hulk. I weigh more than an elephant. (To be fair, I’m bigger than an elephant.)

“No picking up dragons, no matter how small, I guess,” Rhoda remarks.

“Frankly, I’m surprised how well Sarah handled me.”

“I only held you for a second,” Sarah clarifies. “And I more put you down for your weight than your surprise. Sorry.”

“It’s not a problem. I don’t think I have much control over how much this form weighs.”

“Is there anything else special that you’d like to do tonight?” Magus asks Grace.

“Not really. It’s one last time to spend time together, but I’m fine with watching a movie or anything else we think of.”

23 August 2014
10:30 AM CST

Rain. Of all things, it’s pouring rain for Tedd and Grace’s wedding in the park. True to my prediction, there’s a spell to help (Emil’s Anchored Umbrella, cast over the seating and altar), but the ground is still wet and it’ll take either a lot of work or a dragon shift to get Grace’s dress clean after this.

Another blessing in the weather was heat. It’s not enough that it’s raining—it has to be a heat wave, too. Susan cast Targeted Thermal Regulator on Grace, and I modified Heat Dispersal to keep the seating area and altar cool. Heat and humidity is a terrible combination for any event, and adding in formal wear is just too much. (That said, my dress breathes a lot better than any suit Kevin ever wore.)

Sean was going to leave on Thursday, as he views his association with Grace as purely professional and his job complete, but she invited him to stay and attend her wedding, so here he is. Then we’ve got her whole friend group, plus Sensei, plus her grandfather and her brothers. And on Tedd’s side
we’ve got his father, Mr. Raven, Noah, Naomi, Noriko, and… Tedd’s half-brother and Noriko’s husband. Who he just met this morning. I don’t even know their names yet. At least it seems like Noriko didn’t remarry too quickly, because Tedd’s half-brother is probably seven at most.

And ordaining it is my pastor. Tedd asked if I knew someone who might do it just after he sent out invitations (and I assume he had a backup plan), so I asked my pastor, and he said yes when I explained who. I honestly expected a no just because of how strange the union is, but since it is between a man and a woman, he had no problem with it. Even though Grace is in her half-squirrel form, with antennae. Grace was actually excited to use magic in public, but the rain dampened her excitement a bit. In her words, “No one will watch!” I mean, even if Mr. Verres says “Don’t talk about space aliens,” I’ve given the explanation “Genetic magic” with zero specification on who exactly gets it (as in, only space aliens). Grace could very easily use magic in public if she likes. When I informed her this morning, I got the feeling she’ll be using magic all the time now.

Elliot is the best man, and Sarah is the maid of honor. In spite of the various peculiar parts of the union, it’s overall very traditional, and even plain. Not that I’m complaining. Sometimes, it’s nice to have some idea what my friends will do next. The fact that everyone could be here and nothing got in the way isn’t an accident: we all worked hard for it. And though I wish things were easier sometimes, I can’t complain about a result like this.

“… You may now kiss the bride.”

Tedd lifts Grace’s veil and kisses her, to the claps and cheers of the audience, and the *snap* of the photographer. Meriam said that the arrangements reminded her of her own wedding, though of course there weren’t photographers back then. Not to say that a certain light dragon didn’t capture an image or two. Tedd and Grace aren’t as young-looking as the dragon pair, but they’re certainly just as beautiful.

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Sarah reserved a space at a nearby community center for the reception after the wedding. Grace has changed out of her wedding dress and morphed away her antennae, but she’s equally beautiful in her green evening gown next to Tedd. My pastor wisely chose not to stick around. I mean, he doesn’t really know the couple, and besides, it’s a large gathering of (mostly) magic users. The occasion such as it is, I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of people started transforming around now. (Thankfully, the cake doesn’t smell of magic.)

“You two were amazing,” I greet Tedd and Grace. “You know, you’ve set a hard act to follow.”

“Really?” Tedd scratches the back of his head with the hand not holding onto Grace. “With something so simple?”

“Sometimes, it’s the simple things that work the best,” Mr. Sciuridae notes, clapping his hand on Tedd’s shoulder from behind before sliding around in front of the pair. “I’m happy that my granddaughter found someone like you.”

“Grandpa!” Grace exclaims.

“It’s true.” He turns around to face me. “Saphira, was it? It’s good to see that you’re feeling better.”

I frown. “To clarify, I felt fine.” Then my face resumes its neutral-to-pleasant default for today. “But I’m certainly happy that it’s over.” I shake my head. “You know, I once heard somewhere that the difference between Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies was that the latter usually ended in a wedding. Not to say this is the end of our tale, but I think it’s the end of a tale.”
“The end of one, and the beginning of another,” Mr. Sciuridae says with a faraway look in his eyes. Then he brightens back up. “A toast to Tedd and Grace Verres!” he says loud enough for a few people nearby to hear.

“A toast!” we reply, with a sip of various drinks. Mostly fruit juice or soda—there’s no way Mr. Verres would let anyone underage near alcohol.

23 August 2014
1:03 PM CST

I’ve put it off long enough. It’s time to figure out who Tedd’s half-family (or whatever the term is) is.

The man is clearly English, with curly, light yellow hair in a sort of a mop on his head. Other than that, it’s almost like he’s a taller, kinder-looking Mr. Verres. He’s probably not a monster hunter—actually, he looks more like a stay-at-home dad. Not that there’s a problem with that. He also seems to be a wizard, while his son is a wandmaker. Boy, this must be confusing for the kid.

The kid (strangely) has two-tone hair, by which I mean the front half is his father’s yellow, while the rear is his mother’s red. He almost looks like Yugi from the Yu-Gi-Oh! anime.

“Excuse me,” I greet the pair. I don’t see Noriko, but I don’t know if that’s good or bad. “I don’t actually know you, but I figured I’d like to meet you?”

“Oh,” the man replies, startled. “Ah… were you part of the party that rescued my wife? I need to thank you.”

“Yes, and you’re welcome, and I would’ve done it anyway. Or some dragon would have, pretty soon. I might be a little young to be called on terribly often.”

“Dragon?” the boy wonders. “Oh! That’s what that was! I get it!” He looks up at me. “Were you the one picking stuff out of the air during the wedding?”

“Um…” I was just moving heat from hotter areas to cooler ones without regard for convection… “Maybe? Is that what it looked like to you?” Tedd hasn’t described my magic as such to me, though he can tell when I’m using it.

“I think it was you. You had the same sort of glow then, but it’s gone now.”

“You’ll have to excuse Van,” his father says. “H—”

“Oh, it’s not a problem.” I move a small amount of heat upwards for demonstration purposes.

“It was you!” Van exclaims. “How do you do that?”

“I woke up one day with the ability to sense the heat around me and move it as I liked. I’ve learned a lot since then.”

The man before me is now staring at me, his mouth agape. I hold out my hand. “Sorry. I’m Saphira. And you are?”

He just stands there. “Dad!” Van scolds him.

“Does—Does Noriko know?” he stammers.

“What? That I’m a dragon? Yes.”
“No—I mean, that you’re a dragon… with blue eyes… that controls heat…”

Oh. This guy must actually be from England. Most of the specifics on Fred were lost to other nations over time, but I probably sound like the blue-eyed terror of bedtime stories to someone from England. Even then, this guy must have a long family history of magic use in England to know that there’s any truth to those stories at all. And the fact that Van didn’t pick up on it either means that he didn’t teach his son yet or the kid’s just distracted by learning a new thing.

“To my knowledge, every dragon with blue eyes controls heat. Becoming a dragon actually changed my eye color.”

“But—”

“I’m not going to claim I know what stories you’re acting on, but if that description is familiar at all, I can say there’s truth to the tale. Not every dragon in history was a good person. However, the rest since then have put in a lot of work to make sure nothing like that ever happens again.”

The man relents. “Bill.”

Wait, what’s he talking about? “What?”

“My name is Bill. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Saphira.” He holds out his hand. After a moment of confusion, I shake it.

At that moment, Noriko walks over from my left. “Oh! Good! I was afraid you two wouldn’t get along, what with those old stories of yours.”

I release Bill’s hand. “Actually, there’s some truth to them. I haven’t heard them, but yes, there was a blue pyromaniac dragon at one point.” I don’t think Fred liked fire for the sake of fire, but he sure did burn a lot of things. “There are a lot of dragons making sure that that won’t repeat, and a few focusing on myself in particular.”

“That’s—” Noriko points at me, then forces her hand to her side. “That’s not what I expected to hear. But at least you’re getting along. Is Van playing nice?”

“Yes. I’m fine with teaching: it’s a large part of my duty as Moperville’s dragon, after all.”

“She was pulling stuff out of the air during the wedding!” Van exclaims to his mother.

“Specifically, I was making sure the space didn’t get too hot. I moved heat from the space under the umbrella out.”

“Who made this ‘umbrella,’ anyway?” Noriko asks.

“Ellen. A barrier dragon made a spell for events like today’s, and Ellen can use Draconic spells so long as she has a wand for them. I can’t use barrier magic, but I can make Draconic wands for Ellen.”

“So you’re a wandmaker just like Tedd?” Van asks.

“No, I’m a dragon. I can’t use Common magic. You’re a wandmaker like Tedd. You get the same feedback on magic that he does, and you can make more custom and more perfect wands than anything your parents could make.”

“He is?” Noriko asks.
“Yes,” I confirm. “You’ve had two sons, both wandmakers. Your country doesn’t have a dragon, so Van and the rest of you will be instrumental in teaching about magic there, if you want to take it up.”

“But I’m a monster hunter.”

“And that’s important! Dragons can’t take care of every problem. It’s just something to consider. Knowledge of magic and its nature won’t be confined to Moperville for much longer. People will have questions, and having someone local answer them will help a bunch.”

“And if I don’t have the answers?” Bill queries.

“Um…”

Saphira: Would any dragons be willing to help out Noriko’s family with teaching about magic in England?

Al: I don’t have a problem. I’ll take it, if that’s alright.

Saphira: Do you have a phone number for them to call?

Al: Sure.

“I’ve got a dragon you can call that might have a better idea on how to phrase things. And might even show up in person, if you need it.”

Bill thinks for a second. “What color?”

“Yellow.”

“I think I can work with that.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was the original location for the planned event alluded to in the Chapter 5 end notes. Needless to say, the plot has changed a fair amount since then. Chapter 17 was initially much less eventful.
Visitors

24 August 2014
6:01 AM CST

“I don’t want to believe that this is the last time I’ll see you for several months,” I tell Susan. I think I’m actually tearing up, which doesn’t happen too often.

I’m standing outside with Ms. Pompoms and Susan just before dawn, the car behind the latter packed with all of the remaining things she wanted to bring along to college: clothes, her computer, toiletries, and so on. Her university is more than a day’s drive away, and further than I’d normally like to fly in a day. I mean, it’s a top-notch school, and I’m happy for her, but I only like to travel marginally more than Elliot does.

“But you do believe it?” Susan replies.

“I’ve done it before and I can do it again. But I still don’t like the feeling of not being able to see other people that I know so well.” I lower and shake my head. “You’ve got to get going. You’re late enough as it is.”

“Do well in your classes, alright?” Ms. Pompoms requests. “I don’t want to hear that you wasted all the time and money you put in.” Because, thanks to our job over Spring Break, we can actually pay for our college ourselves. I asked Ms. Pompoms if I had to move out (since I can afford it now and that was the condition for me leaving), and she said I was welcome to stay. In return, I help out a lot and treat her as I would my own mother.

“I’ll be sure to call.” Susan opens the car door, but hesitates to get in, quivering slightly.

“Well?” I question.

Then Susan turns around and wraps her arms around myself and her mother. “I’ll miss you two.”

I—Who is this, and what has she done with Susan?

“And we’ll miss you,” Ms. Pompoms replies. “But you do need to be on your way, to avoid traffic.”

Susan releases us, then steps to the side to cleanse herself via shifting. “Alright. I’ll be sure to call when I stop for the night.” Then she gets in the car, and I watch as she drives away.

I don’t think I’ll be getting any more sleep before church.

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It’s strange to think that my friend group has effectively shrunk. I mean, it was the same when Kevin started college, but he didn’t have many friends in the first place. His Bible study group at college is a larger group. For myself, though, Susan’s gone, Nanase’s gone, and Sarah and Diane aren’t close enough to see regularly.

*Bzz* I pull my phone out of my pocket as I walk through the front door. Huh. I pick up the call. “Ellen?”

“Hey, Saphira. Guess who finally showed up?”
I… I wasn’t looking forward to anything that could be led in with that… “No idea? Can I have a hint?”

“Dreams.” Dreams? How is that – Oh. She knows me too well.

“Noi?”

“No, actually. Just Kaoli. But she was curious about developments here and said that she couldn’t see the cause from the other universe, so I figured I’d call you. Since you’re the cause.”

“Just curious. Did the group across universes also lose track of Elliot?”

There’s silence on the line for a couple of seconds. “Yes. How did you know?”

“Magic theory. Special stuff about dragons. I’d like to chat with her, though, and did you call Magus?”

There’s some more silence. “I’ll call her after you hang up. How soon can you meet me at my house?”

How in the world did Kaoli get in Ellen’s house? I guess Ellen could vouch for her at the door. “An hour? I just got home from church and’ll have to change.”

“I’ll see you in an hour, then.”

24 August 2014
3:15 PM CST

I decided to go ahead and run here, so I’m a little early. Ellen is visibly startled when I ring the doorbell. Elliot is home and Magus is already here, but the Dunkel couple is out of my range.

After about a minute, Ellen opens the door, Kaoli at her side. The pink-skinned (and pink-furred) girl of… clearly strange birth is easily recognizable, even though she didn’t appear in the comic after the birthday party. I can also tell that she’s both a Genetic magic user and a wizard. Now there’s an interesting combination of parents. Although, it’s entirely possible that Tedd and Grace could have a kid with the same magic abilities. “Um. You didn’t walk around town like that, did you?” I question her. Her clothes don’t exactly hide her unusual features.

“I can hide my appearance.” She waves her hands, and her tail is gone, her ears are human, and her skin is a normal, pale color. To my sight, anyway. My heat sense on her didn’t change.

“That’s good, but could you end that, please? I can tell it’s only changing your light-based appearance, and the mismatch in my senses is confusing.”

“You can?” Kaoli ends the spell.

“Probably,” Ellen answers for me. “Kaoli, Saphira. Saphira, Kaoli. Can we continue inside?”

“Sure,” I answer, and step across the threshold. I take off my shoes when I’m inside, then stand up and face Kaoli. “I’m happy to meet you, finally. Are you aware that you missed everything?”

“Everything?”

“Let’s see…” I start counting on my fingers. “Magus got a body, a demon attacked Moperville, we all finished high school, we rescued Noriko from a trap in Africa, and Tedd and Grace got married. And other miscellaneous developments.”
“Where is Tedd, anyway? He’s out of my range.” Of her spying thing, no doubt. She didn’t seem surprised by what I said, so she’s probably been watching this Moperville the whole time.

“Traveling to New York with his wife. The wedding was yesterday, after all, and we’ve got another week before school starts.”

“Oh.” She hugs her side. “I thought that coming at the point where the dreams left off would be a good idea, but I suppose I could’ve come sooner. Can we talk over the rest upstairs?” The other two look to be on the couch in the guest room. I nod and follow Ellen.

“Alrighty! Saphira and the Dewitchery Diamond Crew!” I announce when we enter. “Let’s get this show on the road!” I look around for a place to sit and notice something blue and familiar: a doll of myself. “Wait.” I point at it. “I thought only Grace and I had one of those?”

Ellen blushes and scratches the back of her head. “Oh, um, well…”

“It’s no problem. I’m flattered, really.”

“Is it really you?” Kaoli asks. “These three were telling me that you’re a dragon, but I’ve never heard of magic like they described.”

I furrow my brow. “What are dragons in your world? I mean, if your Dewitchery Diamond does the same thing, you probably have dragons…”

“They are creatures of myth and legend. None have been spotted in recent times—at least, not by reliable sources—and while older myths describe them as benevolent creatures, the most recent legends have them as unstoppable beasts of destruction. I haven’t looked into them very much, myself; I only know what came up in my research of artifacts.” That’s fair. I wouldn’t expect most people to look into it unless they really want to know about dragons.

“Then your world sounds much like this one. Here, one famously destructive and cruel dragon ruined our reputation so much that we had to hide from people who would try to hunt us down. After we took down the ruiner, of course.” I motion towards Magus. “And in her world, the elder dragons lost to the destroyer. Dragons there are known only for their terrifying actions.”

“Then how have dragons had an impact here?”

“Because we decided to reveal ourselves again. I thought Moperville was a great place to start, and the others agreed, so I taught the people here about myself, and about dragons, and about magic in general. My role here is a mimic of the ancient role of dragons: teacher and guardian. Of course, I’m pretty young myself, so I’m learning, too.”

Kaoli stands and thinks for a second. “Then why were you concerned about my appearance?”

“Because it’s an unknown. I don’t know what people will say about it, and I’d really like to not have to talk about a multiverse yet. Genetic magic, fine. If you were here all the time, that’d be one thing, but… we’re just getting to the point where people being transformed in public is sort of okay. We’ve got a couple of cat-girls, and I walk around in scales, but your appearance is clearly not human.”

“Genetic magic?”

“What Grace uses. It’s the dragons’ term for it.”

“Okay. Scales?”
“And you say *my* appearance is strange?”

“People know I’m a dragon. I transform and go flying every week, and I’ve appeared on the news several times. Yes, scales are odd, but they’re a known odd.”

We sit in silence for a bit, having reached the end of the topic. “Any ideas on how to get me home?” Magus breaks the silence.

“Do you have anything from there?” Kaoli asks.

“Um… no.” It’d all be in spirit form anyway.

“Well, your *soul* is from there,” I offer. “You’ve kept some of the magic you had.”

“That’s true…” The Dunkels might not take me seriously on religious stuff, but they at least accept what I say on the soul being the part of a person responsible for their magic.

“Oh!” Elliot exclaims, and we all look at him. “Could you—!” He stops himself and looks away. “No, that’s a bad idea.”

Saphira: What’s a bad idea?

Elliot: Do you know why we learned about Lord Tedd in the first place?

Saphira: He was trying to kill off all of his alternates? Oh! I get it! You were going to ask about looking through Lord Tedd’s records for Terra, right?

Elliot: Yeah. Any match would at least be a good starting point. And if Nioi or Kaoli can take Magus along while checking those universes, she might find her home.

Saphira: It’s not a bad plan. You can at least ask. Of course, this relies on Nioi or Kaoli accessing those records in the first place, so it’s risky, but certainly a better lead than we have now. And if Kaoli can talk with the griffins, even better.

Elliot: I didn’t think about them. Alright. I’ll ask.

24 August 2014
3:36 PM CST

We’ve got a plan: Kaoli will travel home tonight (after spending more time with Ellen) and come back on Saturday, when Andrea and Cora (the researcher that Andrea found to help) next come by to chat with Magus. They’ve still been meeting in the woods, but it’s not terribly hard to find them if you’re a dragon. Or if you’ve been following Magus around, I guess. In the meantime, Kaoli will look into having her sister access Lord Tedd’s records, and she’ll do a little research on dragons herself. After all, Nioi first came to this world looking for a way to defeat General Shade Tail, and Magus and I could vouch for dragons’ overwhelming power. (Not the most secretive way to beat someone, but Genetic and Draconic magic bypass each other’s defenses, and a couple of dragons working together ought to be able to take down any non-dragon. Even demons at full-scale power lose that fight.)

Elliot: It’s a shame I can’t just bust up the guy myself.

Saphira: Even if we weren’t dimension-locked, can you say you have the full picture?
Elliot: No, but I could get it. Or at least chat with the dragons in that world.

Saphira: As interesting as it would be, I’m very glad that the dragons from Magus’s world can’t come here.

Elliot: Okay, yes, that would be terrifying. See you later?

Saphira: Sure.

I agreed to help him with college stuff, even though it’ll probably be a different ball game from Virginia Tech. Not completely different, but enough. More importantly, I promised that we’d be study buddies for our physics classes. We have an entirely different understanding of it than most people. Even with how well Kevin could picture stuff in his head, he dodged trying to learn fluid and heat flow. Now, that’s my best-understood area. But we still have to learn the math, and as Elliot put it, he doesn’t really have a head for numbers. (Which is especially ironic given the default format for our Draconic senses.)

You know, of all the times that I could’ve screwed up my head from a magic experiment, I managed to get a pretty convenient one. Yes, I basically missed my last month of summer with a bunch of friends who are leaving town for college, but the rest of my time-sensitive stuff either had already finished or was after the wedding. The only really terrible thing about the timing is that I didn’t learn as much from Sean’s lessons as I should have.

My question right now is: what do I do with the remaining week before my classes start?

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And so I spent the whole day planning. When I normally spend about five minutes deciding what to do, this felt really long. I guess the distractions didn’t help much: making notes for spell ideas, calling people to organize stuff, and so on, but I usually think of planning as a quick little endeavor, not an all-day activity. That’s what I do when I’m walking everywhere.

The first thing I thought was that I want to tag along this Saturday with the extra-dimensional crew. Not that I have much to contribute, but more that I want to see Andrea again. It’s been a while, and I’d like to know how things are going with her.

Next, I decided that this week would be alright for another visit with Zach, so I went through the hurdles to set that up, and then I decided that it’d be alright to finally check in with Mr. Wu. It’s funny how many people I know that are in prison, but then again, I don’t think many people decide to keep up with their assailants. I wonder if it’s more that I’m a Christian or a dragon that makes me willing to do this? (The nice thing about meeting with Mr. Wu is that he’s behaving well, so I’ll actually be able to meet him on one of his escorted trips outside of the prison. It’s still not a great area of town, but like Diane said, I don’t have much to fear from attacks of opportunity.)

And for my remaining time… I still couldn’t come up with anything. That’s the sort of time Kevin would fill with video games, but I’ve been serious about breaking that habit and haven’t really gotten into any games. I guess there’s no harm in just taking a stroll around town.

27 August 2014
5:55 PM CST

Part of the difficulty in setting up today’s trip was the prison security, and part was simply because of the restrictions on why an inmate is allowed a trip, period. (Medical, educational, religious and work-related only.) Plus, I had to schedule around martial arts class. The state prison, in the
Chicago outskirts, is one of the most community-oriented I’ve heard of: they have a partnership with the nearby church where a church member regularly preaches to inmates that want to listen, and the prison occasionally organizes trips to the church itself. This also means that the church semi-regularly has a section of inmates and prison staff sitting in on their services, and anyone attending the church has to expect it (with warning, of course). Still, it’s probably a great rehab method: inmates learn about Christ and end up with connections to the society around them. People are less likely to commit crimes against people they know than complete strangers. I don’t know how well it works in practice, but it’s definitely a theory I can back.

All that means that my trip today has me landing sorta close (within 2 miles) to the church in question and walking to the service, so that I can chat with Mr. Wu after the Wednesday evening service. Unlike normal, I can’t walk there in scales, so I’m wearing slightly less-fancy clothes than a dress, both to stay clean and for self-defense purposes. I can kick the crap out of most assailants, but moving around is a lot harder in my more-restrictive dresses. Also for self-defense, I went with Diane to a gun range yesterday and tested out my “freeze the firing pin” method with a few guns (operated by staff). None of the guns fired while I maintained the seal, but all worked normally a few seconds after I stopped. The staff confirmed a lack of damage to the firearms, so, safe method! The method didn’t work on Diane’s guns, but none of those actually have a firing pin, as far as I can tell. She just pulls the trigger and the projectile leaves the barrel with a similar report to a non-magical weapon.

My walk to the church had no incidents aside from people staring at me—not because I’m pretty, but out of place. At least, I don’t think women and children would stare at me just because I’m pretty. The church staff were nice and pointed out the reserved space for the prison inmates and staff—not that it was hard to tell once they arrived. Orange jumpsuits on folks in handcuffs will do that, especially when they’re next to a few guards in bulletproof vests. (Lawfully, the inmates have to be handcuffed while outside the prison.) And aside from just the overall different atmosphere to my own church, thanks to the run-down part of town we’re in, the only strange thing I have to deal with is the wizard usher whose eyes are boring into the back of my head. I guess I’ll work out his deal later.

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The service ends with a prayer, much like any other church service I’ve attended. I noted that the guards did not bow their heads, but they’re almost certainly not allowed to take their eyes off of the convicts.

I pick my way through the crowd to the nearest guard to Mr. Wu. The young man is easy to pick out: he’s much scrrawnier than the rest of his crowd, especially since he’s in jail for the felony version of grand larceny. Plus he’s Asian. Of the remaining five inmates and seven guards, none are Asian and three are light-skinned (two of them guards), and most look like they could hit pretty hard. Dodging is a key part to martial arts.

Mr. Wu notices me before the guard does. “Oh!” His eyes light up and he attempts a shallow bow, trembling slightly. “Miss, um, Byat-sku-la?” he stumbles over my name. He didn’t have much of a trial and I wasn’t asked to attend, but he must’ve got my name somehow.

“Yes,” I respond to him before addressing his guard. “I called the office on Sunday and asked about chatting with Wu?”

“Did you? Can you confirm your name?” He pulls out a notepad, holding it so that I can’t see the writing.

“Bjartskular, Saphira,” I respond, pulling out my passport. The prison thankfully already cleared
the unusual birthdate.

“Born…?” the guard mumbles while leafing through the booklet. “Ah, right. Yes, that matches,” he confirms with his notepad. “When were you born?” he asks me for a third check.


“Alright, you’re on the list.” From what I gathered earlier, members of this church are also on the list. I guess you still need security regarding who the inmates meet. He turns and gestures to Mr. Wu, who in turn carefully makes his way towards me. I wouldn’t blame the guards for being on edge. It’s their job, after all.

“Right off, I can tell that you can’t use magic, so that’s nice,” I start our conversation. “Can you tell me how things are working for you? Keeping former criminals former is nice and all, but seeing you in a place like this puts me in a good mood.” The magic involved in Smite helped him a bunch, but it still didn’t save his soul. It just put him in a position where it’s a decision he can actually make, like nearly everyone else in the world.

28 August 2014
12:15 PM CST

As it turns out, the US’s policies regarding international criminals is… rather strange. The reason that Mr. Wu (who’s from China, actually) is able to stay is due to some interesting laws. I don’t know how he managed to get a visa, but he’s got one that somehow hasn’t been revoked since he was arrested. And federal law only says that international folks who commit crimes in the US aren’t automatically transferred home, but only if they apply to serve their sentence in their home country. Given that Wu’s larceny here is only matched by his larceny and murder in China, I doubt he’s looking forward to the trip even if he has turned his life around. (Yes, he turned over all of his unlawful gains already.) I imagine he plans to stay in the US for as long as he possibly can, which is probably as long as China doesn’t realize who stole all that stuff and where the perpetrator is residing. Personally, I’d prefer if he actually went home and took responsibility, but other than urging him yesterday, I don’t think I could really do anything about it.

And I totally forgot to talk with that wizard! Crud! Um… when would I—

*Do-do-do-ding!* Text message? (Spending ten bucks on a Pokémon soundtrack on iTunes was well worth it.) I check my phone.

Tedd (to group of 9+ members): Check the news on channel 18!
Sarah: I’m in class.
Elliot: What network?
Grace: ANN. TTYL Sarah.

America News Network. Joy. I bet I’ll be telling Susan, too. She’s likely a smidge more devoted to her studies and has her phone on silent. Actually…

Saphira: Why are you watching the news on your honeymoon?
Tedd: It’s on in the store. Just check it!

Fair enough. I make my way from the kitchen to the couch and navigate through the directory. I don’t exactly watch TV all that much, so my struggles with the remote take a minute.
And… commercial. I check my messages again. Nothing new. Maybe the store is a bit ahead? I hope I didn’t miss what Tedd was talking about.

“Wellcome back,” the ANN host starts after the last commercial ends. “As I was saying before the break, we’ve had some interesting reports in the last two weeks. At this point, they’re mostly rumor, but some of our more on-the-ball viewers in Tennessee and Florida managed to get a few pictures. Before we show them, let’s check in with our field reporter in Florida. Dave?”

And if Tedd texted our group… Darn it. Stupid flight restrictions. Tennessee and Florida included some of the most populous places we had to fly over to get to Africa while avoiding the tropical storm development path. Tropical storms would also tend to be why news networks would have reporters in Florida, given the current time of year. Add that up, and I’m pretty sure I know what’ll be in the pictures. That said, between the show time for the news (AKA in the middle of the work day and not during lunch for most viewers) and what the newscaster said, the pictures probably aren’t all that good. At least Mr. Verres has little to complain about. He helped make the flight plan.

The image shows a man in a light jacket standing in some mostly-flat and green area. “Thank you, Gina. Last Wednesday, some of the residents here in Lakeland noticed an odd-looking bird flying overhead. According to eyewitnesses, it seemed to glimmer in the sunlight and didn’t appear to have the normal fan-like tail.”

The image swaps back to the newscasting station. “Yes. Here’s one of the better pictures posted to Twitter at the time, which was around 9:30 AM local.” Seriously, who’s up and not at work at that time? Then I see the picture. Yep, that’s pretty terrible. I know that it’s Elliot in the image, but if I didn’t, I’m not really sure what I’d think. Cameras in phones are pretty good these days, but you’re still not going to get a good image on something so far away, even for the size of our dragon forms. I mean… half a mile isn’t all that far, really, but… Anyway, the picture clearly doesn’t show a bird, but Elliot is probably ten pixels tall. If they took pictures in Tennessee, I hope it’s just as bad of an image showing myself.

“As you can see, the figure doesn’t appear to be a bird, but it’s either too small or too far from the camera for us to pick out any details beyond its brown coloration. Before we give theories from wildlife experts, we have another photo to show you—this one taken by a birdwatching enthusiast from Nashville, Tennessee.”

This image isn’t much clearer, but it’s not pixelated—just blurry. My color actually works in my favor here, and it’s difficult to pick the edges of my form out from the blue sky, but the photo is definitely from a better camera than a phone. “The photographer sends his apologies with the photo. According to him, the figure in the image is too far away for a proper focus with the lenses he had prepared, which were only for birds up to a thousand feet away.” The way the image is blurred indicates that he uses film instead of a digital camera, which means I’m really lucky he didn’t have the right lenses, or else Sean would have to guide me on pushing up the timetable again. Still, Tedd said such a thing was likely. I mean, the first time Dex summoned monsters in Moperville, half a dozen people got video of Justin and Elliot fighting them. A dragon flying over half of the country isn’t exactly going to go unnoticed. Actually, why wasn’t there anything from my flight to Maryland?

“…puzzling as to why nothing similar has been spotted before now. Our first indication that such a thing existed was when a similar figure was spotted flying over Pennsylvania about two and a half months ago.” Oh. “Another expert theorizes that this is an instance of spontaneous evolution, while some believe that it’s not an animal at all, but some sort of advanced spy aircraft. All we know for now is that, if we want to solve this mystery, we’ll need to keep our eyes on the skies.
Next up, we’ve got…” The host moves onto a political topic and I turn off the TV. Time to see if it’s a problem. I check the general chat in the Mymoir.

Elliot: The pictures aren’t all that clear.

Oh dear. He’s panicking again. I look at earlier messages.

Elliot: And they got my picture and everything!

Yep, panicking. Back to present.

Sean: How clear?

Saphira: The one showing Elliot is maybe ten pixels tall, and when they showed myself, I blended in with the background.

Sean: Why then are you distressed, Elliot?

Elliot: But they definitely show dragons!

Saphira: That’s if you already know what a dragon looks like. I’m sure a few people already jumped to that conclusion, but the news program notably didn’t. All they said was that they didn’t know what it was in the pictures. They even guessed it was a spy plane. Although I don’t know of any spy aircraft that fly so low.

There’s a pause for a few seconds.

Elliot: Alright, fine. Does this change anything, though?

Sean: If found, you are not to lie. If not found, do not say anything. This is on Saphira.

Saphira: I know how to answer evasively. Besides, the idea that we’re just peacefully flying over spots isn’t all that bad.

Elliot: But what if they come here?

Saphira: Isn’t it a bit late for that? If they ask anyone in Moperville, they’ll say it’s a dragon. They can probably name us. That said, it’s a far cry between what they’ve got and believing that response, or even going to the right place.

Sean: Precisely.

Elliot: But—!

Saphira: You’d rather drive six hours a week to go flying where we first learned? And Tedd not have his shop, and everything else?

Elliot: I get it. You win.

Saphira: Talk it over with Ellen, okay?

30 August 2014
5:47 AM CST

I haven’t done any extended flights in over a week, but I was absolutely exhausted after the five extremely long flights the previous week. That said, I’m still not sure why Kaoli is here. Does she
even have flight magic?

Wait. She can use Genetic magic. She can fly the same way Grace does, I bet.

Still, she’s not even wearing a cloak… At least the only people here are those that know who she is.

“Before you fly with us today, can you tell me whether it’s going to be a recurring thing?” I request from Kaoli.

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I’m Moperville’s dragon, so if people are wondering who you are, it falls to me to answer. If this is a one-off thing, I can tell them that I don’t really know you, which deflects the question on where you’re from. If you’re going to do this a lot, I’d rather keep from having to answer questions on you in future weeks and just say right off that you use Genetic magic, which might keep people from recognizing you. The difference in the answers is going to matter a little for Grace, I think, but both dodge the multiverse subject that’s still not exactly something I want to touch yet. Magic first, then space aliens, then the multiverse. And magic’s got a few years left before I’m comfortable with it, I think.”

Kaoli stares at me in confusion. “Again?”

“I’m still explaining magic. I don’t want to talk about more complicated stuff with the public, so I’d like to know whether you want to keep flying with us so that I know how to answer questions.”

“Oh.” Kaoli looks at Ellen for a few seconds before answering. “Yes, I’ll do this again, I think.”

“Then Grace has an excuse to fly around town without further explanation on my part. Let’s get started.” Ellen shifts before I even finish talking, and it doesn’t take long for everyone to join her in the air.

“I think I’ll actually miss this place,” Magus notes about half an hour into our flight.

**Why wouldn’t you?** Elliot asks.

“Za—?” That clearly wasn’t the answer she expected. “I – I mean, I spent three of my three and a half years here trapped and powerless, and all I wanted to do was find a way home. But now that I’m close to actually getting that, all I can think of is how well you’ve all treated me. I did terrible things, yet you’ve treated me as a friend, and even taught me how to fight, and everything.”

**I can’t actually help you once you’re gone,** I answer her. **Any world where Fred is corrupted and still lives is one I’d do my best to correct, but dragons can’t cross dimensions. Besides, even with all I knew, I’d be in a similar position if Elliot and Ellen had thrown me out.**

**And if we had, what would’ve happened that first night?** Ellen responds. **You saved Diane’s life!**

**Based on what Andrea said, she probably would’ve stepped in,** I comment.

Ellen shakes her head. **Would she have even gotten there in time?**

**That’s a good question,** I note. **Still, I’m grateful to my friends, and a good turn just keeps going. You know what to do about dragons in your world now, right?** I turn the conversation back to Magus.
“Yeah. Territorial ones might just be trying to do the right thing. I’ll do my best to talk with ones that don’t attack without provocation.”

**And if they do?**

“Beat them down, then try to find out why. Knowing that they’re people helps a lot, really.”

**I don’t know how well you’ll be accepted by your peers and superiors, but talking down just one dragon ought to prove your point and pave the way forward.**

**Will you visit us again?** Elliot asks.

“Maybe. Probably, if it’s easy enough. I might even bring a friend.”

“I might need Nioi’s help to move that many people,” Kaoli joins in, “but once we know where you came from, return trips shouldn’t be more difficult than escaping Lord Tedd’s notice.”

**Which is how hard, exactly?** I ask.

“Not very. I’m not sure he knows that I exist, and my sister takes trips all the time.”

**Speaking of which, how’d your research go?**

“It’ll take some time. No dragons have shown up yet in my world. On my sister’s end, though, we do have a few worlds to check. Ones with known dragons and female Tedds. She should be checking one right now, actually.”


**How’s your legal status here?** I remember to ask.

“Verres just informed me: I’ve finished my probation with no sign of relapse. I’m free to stay or go, and if I go I’m fully under his jurisdiction if I come back.”

**Watch out for pranks from his office, then,** I warn her.

“Like what?”

**They set my date of birth for this year. If I need to use my ID for anything, it has to go through them.**

**Ouch,** Ellen responds. **They didn’t do anything like that with me.**

**Probably because you have blood family that’s known to be good people. I’m more of an ‘unknown factor.’ They probably thought that the other dragons would destabilize me rather than do their absolute best to keep me stable. No more Freds.**

**I can see why they might think that,** Elliot comments, **but that’s still mean. How are you supposed to get a driver’s license?**

**Either I’m not or it goes through Mr. Verres’s office. Remember our Japan trip? It wasn’t just because of dragon scales that the TSA detained me. We went super early because I knew they’d think I was using a fake passport. As has literally every other place I’ve used it. If I ever got so much as pulled over for a burnt out tail light I’d be charged with use of a fake ID if the cop refused to call Mr. Verres.**
“That seems a little over the top on the side of caution,” Magus says. “Got it. If I come back to visit, I’ll be on my best behavior. Still, I wonder if Terra will believe me on everything I learned and did here.”

**If she’s anything like Tedd, she probably will,** Elliot laughs. **And she’ll want to visit us herself to test whatever else she comes up with.**

“I was planning on it. Saphira, are you up for another sparring match?”

**Why wouldn’t I be?**

30 August 2014
7:30 PM CST

The forest is getting crowded.

It’s not exactly a great big clearing, but the meeting spot now contains two griffins, Magus, myself (with Partial Skin to Scales active), Nioi, Kaoli, and an Ellen that had to shift to remove the thorns she stumbled though on the way here. The last is a little irritated at her own navigation failure, but it’s still a really important meeting and we’re all upbeat. At least, I think so. Griffins are hard to read.

I’m sure I’m missing details, but Cora looks a lot like Andrea. The former is a leopard griffin with shorter… hair? Head feathers? The structure of the material is strange. Beyond that, I’m struggling to come up with differences. And they’re both researchers on the multiverse, so this will likely be the nerdiest conversation that Ellen has ever had the misfortune to endure. Granted, if I succeed in getting Elliot into an applied physics lab, she might have more nerdy stuff to hear from him…

“From Andrea’s description, can I assume that you are the dragon?” Cora asks, looking at me.

“Yes. Although I can’t imagine that’s from a physical description.”

“No, it isn’t. However, you’re clearly using magic when you have no aura. That should be an impossibility, and yet, I see no other explanation.”

“I think my aura or lack thereof is entirely dependent on the sensing method. A caster I know was temporarily blinded by my aura, once, similar to observing the sun directly. That’s not the point of the meeting, though.”

“No, it is not. I am wondering, however, if we might be able to have such meetings in the daylight anytime soon?”

I wince. ‘I went over that this morning with Kaoli. I don’t want to have to explain anything more complex than magic right now. A multiverse is a bit much. You can be seen, sure, but sentient created species might still be a bit much for most people. So… appearing in the open, in the daylight? You can. You’d make things a lot harder for me, but you can.’

“We’ll work on that, then,” Andrea concludes. “As for the primary concern today?” She faces Nioi, arguably the expert here.

“I’ve looked into each of your different theories on worlds, observed your travel, and compared it with my own. My guess, from all of that, is that we live in something of a ranked multiverse. Some worlds share magic, such as between the griffins’ world and this one. From the perspective of magic, it’s essentially the same world, and travel between them is very easy, requiring only the right knowledge and a small amount of correctly-applied Common magic. If magic changes in one
world, it does so in all such worlds.

“Next, we have worlds that have similarities in inhabitants and magic and physics function. My world and Magus’s are in this set. We have shared major events, but large discrepancies may exist and magic doesn’t always work exactly the same way. Moving between these worlds requires the right spells or spell sets, and it’s pretty tiring.

“Lastly, we have worlds that share stories but might not share anything else. With rare exceptions, travel between these is impossible. Even with the exceptions, it’s always one-way.”

Something about that last section bugs me. “Hold on. I’m *not* the only case of travel outside of our multiverse set?” I clarify.

“No. The world I checked today had a dragon of its own from outside. *He* came over a few hundred years ago. When I asked, they’d never heard of a dragon called Frederick.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Wow.”

“That’s… pretty important,” Ellen says, impressed.

“Anyway, I don’t think I’ve found Magus’s home yet, but I should find it soon. Do you have any objections to traveling with me?” she asks Magus.

“Should I?” Magus asks Ellen.

“Well… she serves Lord Tedd, who did his best to kill all of the other Tedds a year and a half ago,” Ellen admits.

“That was at Shade Tail’s instruction,” Nioi claims, gritting her teeth. “He said that Tedd should *assert his dominance.*” The smell of Common magic on her intensifies briefly, and she reminds me of Susan before it passes.

“Okay. Um…” Magus hesitates. “How about… I’ll stay here until Nioi is sure that she has a match for my home, and then I’ll go? How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Only a week or two, actually. Between my list and Andrea’s notes on your magic, there aren’t many places to check. The real limiting factor is how much time and energy I have available for inter-world travel.” I suppose Nioi spoke with the griffins for a bit before the rest of us arrived.

“Oh,” Magus says. She looks completely at a loss for words, in a good way. “Then… I guess I’ll get ready to return?”

“You can stay longer if you want,” I remind her.

“No, I should go back. I’m sure Terra and my family will want to see me again.”

“How well did the *goo monsters* do, anyway?” I ask Nioi.

“All Tedds with strong friends survived, as did all of the non-wandmaker Tedds. The remainder perished in four out of five cases,” she informs us mournfully.

“Well, Terra is a wizard, not a wandmaker, so that’s good,” Magus notes. “I can’t wait to see her again. And smash Troy’s face in.”

“Troy?” Ellen asks.
“The caster who sold me the faulty shield device. He probably thought I’d be gone for good.” And based on this description and my comic knowledge… I bet Troy is an alternate of **Tony**.

“While I can’t recommend smashing people’s faces, I’ll be happy for you and look forward to any visits you might make,” I smile.

“I’m not going anywhere yet. Save the goodbyes for then.”
Renewal

1 September 2014
8:00 AM CST

Yay. College classes. More stuff I already know! I can’t wait until the new stuff starts, but I guess I’ll get good grades before then.

My flight to the campus this morning was met with a large number of stares. As I heard from at least one of my classmates, a lot of students here haven’t seen my weekly flights and quite a few are from out of town. More than half of the students here thought that magic was bogus. A couple of out-of-town residents were thinking of parking in the reserved “Dragon Landing Pad,” as the sign labeling it says, just to prove that the administration was crazy. Thankfully they hadn’t this morning, or I guess I’d have had to explain the claw marks next to the reserved grassy patch as opposed to in it. I mean, the spot is grassy and surrounded by traffic cones, but it’s not going to deter someone who’s really determined to violate policy.

No, I’m not about to land on some random jerk’s car.

Just as Kevin did, I set my classes for as early in the day as possible because I like having the afternoon to myself for whatever I want to do. Elliot isn’t the same way and set up his classes to be at similar times to Ellen while avoiding being in the same classes, so that they could drive to and from classes together without either having to fly much. (I mean, they’re taking the same set, just not necessarily sitting in the same classroom at the same time.) The only one where he couldn’t do that was a class specifically for people in an undeclared major, where your class and time is dictated by your last name. Kevin had one like that for General Engineering, but he didn’t have a twin. For their sake, I hope their seating isn’t also dictated by alphabetical order.

No matter the circumstances, though, I think you can always count on the first day of classes covering “what to expect for the rest of the semester” instead of actual material. My laptop is fine for taking notes. I just hope I don’t get a class that bans laptops.

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Two of my classes ban laptops. Now I need to buy notebooks instead of using OneNote. Honestly, that software saves a ton of paper and headache (from lost notebooks). I’m not buying anything until after my classes tomorrow, though, because I’d like to buy it all in one trip.

As I heard from Elliot (through the Mymoir), a lot of people don’t recognize him or Ellen and were talking about me today. A few of them hadn’t seen me after landing, and a large number more hadn’t seen me at all but heard about my landing secondhand. Time to head home and—

That. That is a car. In the takeoff zone.

Why is there a car in the takeoff zone? Didn’t I land here this morning?

I sigh and pull out my phone. The administration isn’t stupid and saw something like this coming, and gave me a number to call if this happened. I also read through the policy they set up for the “Dragon Landing Pad” since they emailed it to all enrolled students: it’s a tow-away zone for any car that’s parked there, and any defacing of the space (by, say, removing all of the grass or spray-painting over the sign) is subject to disciplinary action up to a fine equal to twice the cost of repairs. I don’t think I’m that important that they need to go through all that effort, but I appreciate
It only takes ten minutes for the tow truck to show up. I’ve never seen one in action, so I’m interested to watch. “I got the call. You need this car removed?” the driver asks.

“I’m not staff. I just read the policy and reported the violation.”

“And you stuck around?” I suppose most students would just call and leave, but it’s kinda blocking the whole space…

“I can’t exactly make my way home while the car is there,” I clarify, shrugging.

He raises an eyebrow at me, looking between myself and the sign before he connects the dots. “You’re the dragon in question, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Blue or brown?” Hey! Better than most of the students I met today!

“Blue,” I answer with a smile.

“I don’t know how much you’ve done that impacted me directly, but my daughter loves using her magic in public now. She’s even helped me on a job or two. So, thanks for that.” He walks over to the sedan whose driver chose a poor spot and starts hitching it up with the tow hook.

“You’re welcome.” I wonder what his daughter can do?

Just as the tow truck driver is about to head off, a little twig of a man comes running towards us, waving his arms and shouting. “… my car!” Huh. Not the sort of person I was expecting. The truck driver shuts off his truck and rolls down the window, and the guy runs up to the driver’s side. He’s maybe an inch taller than Rhoda, and while it looks like he’s in shape he’s not very muscular and his skin is only a shade darker than Susan’s. His short blonde hair and clean-shaven face aren’t doing him any favors in the tough looks department. “Why are you taking my car?”

The driver frowns at him. “Look, bud, I don’t make the rules, but you violated ’em and I got a call. My job is to take the car away and get paid for it. I’ll let you take the car yourself, but you’re still getting the bill, same as you would if you picked it up at the lot.”

“That’s hardly fair!” Oh, come on. You broke the rules and got caught. You’re getting exactly what you were warned about.

“Fair or not, it’s my job and I’m doing it,” he sighs with a look that says this isn’t the first time. “I’ll let your car off the hook now if you sign the bill, but it still needs to be moved either way.”

The boy stares down the man for a few seconds before turning away. “Fine,” he huffs, and the driver calmly picks up an invoice book and a pocket scanner from his passenger seat. As he’s pulling out his wallet, the boy finally notices me standing next to the Landing Pad. “What? You think it’s funny?”

“No. You did read your email, didn’t you? Why else would you decide to park on the grass?” I point to the numerous open spots nearby.

“You’re just mocking me now, aren’t you?” he snarls.

“No,” I shake my head, but I can’t help but smile. “I’m just waiting to go home. I may as well wait
here.”

“Oh, it’s on.”

He starts marching towards me before the tow truck driver calls to him. “Young man, do you want your car or not?” The boy freezes, then glares at me before obediently returning to the driver and pulling out his card.

The transaction goes through without any further problems, and the truck driver gets back in his truck. “Hey!” The student shouts. “I thought you said I’d get my car back!”

“You will,” the driver responds. “Be a little patient.” He revs the engine and drives forward maybe a dozen feet—just enough for the sedan’s rear bumper to leave the Landing Pad—before shutting off the truck again and getting out to unhook the car. “There you go, miss,” he nods to me.

“Thank you,” I reply before setting up my bag arch with Saphira’s Ice Sculpture. The student stares as I place my bags across the arch and then lie face down on the ground just behind the center of the arch. Without any further ceremony, I shift and let the ice sublimate before taking off towards home with my bags over my neck.

3 September 2014
7:10 PM CST

Normally, I wouldn’t return to this Chicago church. It’s really out of my way and not exactly the style I’m comfortable with. Not that there’s anything objectively wrong with the style—it’s just nothing like I’m used to. But I had to return so that I could speak with that usher from last week. He’s a young-looking black man—early twenties, probably—thickly built and a couple of inches taller than me. He looks kind, strong, and dependable, at a first impression.

After the service concludes, I hang around for a bit before making my way over to the weak-smelling wizard. “Have a good evening,” he greets me, expecting me to walk out the door behind him.


“Um—what?”

“You were staring at me last week, but I forgot to talk to you then, so I came back. You’ve been staring at me today, too.”

“O-oh.” His face flushes. “I’m sorry. I just thought you looked familiar, or that something was odd, or—”

I hold up my hand. “Save it.” I stare at him as though studying his face. In reality, I’m just watching the other people around us through my heat sense. I don’t want to get the guy in trouble if this is over a magic thing. Most of the non-church staff have left, but the pastor and a woman that I think is the usher’s wife are interested in the exchange. The other ushers appear to be doing their best to ignore us.

How best to continue? Um… I take a step back and hold out my right hand, palm upwards, and start to heat the air over it in a raindrop shape, like a ball of flame from a video game. “What do you see?” I ask.

“You’re doing… something to the air. I feel like I should know how to do the same, somehow? I don’t have any idea what it is, or how I can tell that you’re doing anything.” The guy’s look of utter
confusion says it all. He doesn’t know he’s a wizard.

The air is now hot enough that it’s making heat waves, although I’m containing the heat to avoid problems. One of the nearby ushers can’t ignore me anymore. “Why is the air shimmering?”

I close my hand and return the air to its normal energy level. “Because it’s hot. As for you,” I address the wizard, “you might want to pay more attention to Moperville. What’s going on there affects everyone, but especially people like yourself.”

“Affects Tony how?” the woman who’d been watching us asks. Tony? Then I notice the name tag on the usher. Okay.

“In that he’s special because his parents were special, but none of them might’ve known anything about it.” I’m avoiding any “magic” key words because dragons have found that using those tends to drop believability hard while sometimes increasing prejudice. Another thing that I hope changes with what I’m doing. “Again, just pay some attention to Moperville. We’ve been on the news for some major things. You might learn something.”

6 September 2014
11:03 AM CST

No word yet from Nioi, so I’m checking out Tedd’s wand shop. I think he has some new wands?

There’s not exactly a crowd around his table, but I wouldn’t expect that from any one spot at a farmer’s market unless they’re making their products to order (e.g. food). That said, he’s got two more stacks since I last saw him. Sarah is still helping, so I guess she drove home for this. She’s only about two hours away anyway. Far enough that it’s inconvenient to live at home, but not too far to visit frequently.

“How’s it going?” I greet Sarah as I approach. She’s still the one doing demonstrations in front.

“Pretty well. I think customers are more willing to try the wands themselves now than when we started. I’m less exhausted, at least.”

I check the Mymoir before responding. “Well, using wands apparently helps with increasing your magic pool. Not nearly as much as using your own spells, but if you’re getting tired, it’s helping.”

“Really?” Tedd asks. “That’s nice to know.”

“It’s like exercise. It doesn’t work like that for other magic types, but Common responds well to using it a lot.” I think for a second. “You could think of using your own spells as having a good diet, and using wands as nutritional supplements. Casters won’t get more spells from wands, but they can still improve. Of course, people with no magic who awaken as casters will get their last-used spell as a base, so it’s a good idea to keep that in mind with the wands you sell.”

Tedd grimaces. “Dad told me that last part already. It’s why I didn’t try to make a wand to light fireworks.”

A young man nearby turns to face us. “You’re telling me that you can make fire with magic?”

“Yes,” Tedd answers. “It’s also not something most people need, especially violent people. And the way Common magic works, it’d mostly be violent people that get those sorts of spells.”

I nod. “While I’ll admit that lighting stuff on fire can be interesting, most people with fire magic aren’t the most peaceful. Fire tends to deal collateral damage, so the people who have offensive
magic that they use to protect tend to have other sorts of spells.”

The man thinks for a few seconds, then nods. “I can see that. So… if I wanted magic to protect people, what sort of spells would I want?”

I look at Tedd, who shrugs at me. “There’s all sorts?” I answer hesitantly. “Common magic can do a lot of things. Depending on the danger, any number of things might be appropriate. That’s why most cities and towns had guards with a wide variety of skills and abilities before magic was mostly forgotten. Even today, law enforcement doesn’t just consist of the police that everyone sees on the road.”

“If you want something basic, we do have our strength boost wand,” Grace offers, pointing to the stack.

Strength boost? That seems… ah. Tedd’s going for utility spells here. Defending people, sure, but there are a number of everyday things people could want that for, including moving furniture, opening jars… and sports.

“How much of a boost?” the man asks. He’s built about like Kyle or Elliot.

“Arm wrestle me,” Sarah responds. Ah. That explains the chairs at the end of the sale table. She sits in the one behind the table while picking up the sample strength wand with her left hand.

“You?” The guy says incredulously. “Alright, you got me,” he grins. He takes the seat across from Sarah.

“First, I’ll give you something to compare against,” Sarah states. “The wand’s inactive.” She puts up her hand and the guy takes it. She looks tiny compared to him. Training for a month with Sean gave her some light muscle toning, but nothing like myself or Nanase.

“On three,” Grace says. The man’s grip clearly strengthens, and Sarah grits her teeth. “One, two, three!” The pair struggle for a bit in the center, but I think the guy’s just gauging Sarah’s strength. After about five seconds, he slams her hand against the table.

“You’re stronger than I thought,” the guy says, “but I don’t think many guys would lose to you.”

“Kevin would,” I remark. Sarah stares at me. “He really doesn’t exercise.”

“Alright. With the wand?” he asks Sarah.

She holds it up. Looking at the wand, nothing appears to happen. In fact, the only place that something seems to happen is the large red arm band that appears on both her arms, just above the elbow. On closer inspection, they’re illusions. “What’s the band for?” I ask Tedd.

“Elliot pointed out that people could cheat at sports with the wand, so I made a marker for other people to know what’s going on.”

“Good forethought.” Sarah and the young man have already taken each other’s hands. This time, the man looks a little less confident, but more determined.

“One, two, three!” Grace announces as a small crowd of about five people gather behind me. The two struggle in the middle again, but it’s clear that Sarah’s winning. She slowly brings his hand down for the victory.

“Wow,” the young man says. “Alright, how much?”
“Fifty dollars,” Grace tells him.

“Fifty?” he replies. “That’s pretty expensive.”

Tedd nods. “It’s pretty useful, and you can use it forever. I’ve used it to rearrange furniture. The effect lasts for an hour and you can renew it by using the wand, but wanting it to last can make it last longer anyway.”

“Huh.” The guy muses for a few seconds. “I’ll take two. One for my sis.” Grace gets the ‘register’ ready—it’s just a locked money drawer. “Actually, do you have any other wands?”

“A few,” Grace replies. She runs down the list. “… and fan.”

“Fan?” I ask.

“A small breeze in the direction the wand points, starting from its tip,” Tedd explains. “You can do a narrow air stream or a wide one, and it’s only five bucks.” If I had to guess, he got the basic form of the spell from Magus’s shockwave. He might’ve gotten the illusion for the other wand from his dad or godfather.

“I’ll take a fan wand!” a girl behind me exclaims, and I smile and step out of the way.

8 September 2014
4:59 PM CST

“Class dismissed!”

“Sir!”

While most people head to the back to change, I notice Magus walking up to Sensei and stick around. “Sir?” she greets him.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for teaching me.”

“I… what?” Sensei asks.

“You’ve done a good job. I don’t know if it ever came up, but… I’m from another universe. And today, I heard that someone found my way home.” Oh! That explains her behavior today!

“You’re leaving?” Sensei replies, scratching the back of his head.

“Yes. I’ve enjoyed my past few months here, but I really should be getting home. I’m not headed home right away, but I’ll be gone by Wednesday.” I’d call that fast, but she can’t exactly take much with her, and we did have warning. And it’s been three and a half years for her. I’m sure Terra would remember, but I wouldn’t be surprised if nearly everyone else forgot her or moved on. And… I wonder who took the blame for her disappearance?

“Oh.” It doesn’t look like Sensei gets it for a moment before his eyes light up. “Oh! Like that time when—”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t get your references,” Magus stops him, smiling. “But I was shoved into this universe, and a lot of people worked together and found me a way back.”

“Right. Congratulations.” Sensei stands up straight and puts his fists on his hips. “I’m sad to see
you go, but that’s the nature of being a teacher. Don’t disappoint me.” He scratches his head again. “Although I’m not sure how I’d hear about you anyway… but I’m sure you’ll do fine.” He turns to face me. Whoops. “Do you have anything to add, Saphira?”

I feel my face get hot. “No,” I shake my head. “I’ll be able to see Magus later. I’ll… just be going, now….” I turn around and head into the changing room, where everyone else is nearly finished. From Ellen’s look, I can tell that she knew this was coming.

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I shake my head. “It’s hard to believe you’ll be gone soon.”

Nioi had to rest from jumping worlds yesterday, so we took the opportunity to have a bit of a farewell party for Magus today at the Dunkel residence. Tedd made cookies. Susan couldn’t come, so she had a long phone call with Magus, but Nanase’s fairy doll spell came in handy for her. Now Nioi is all rested up and ready to go.

“How do you navigate between worlds, anyway?” Tedd asks Nioi.

“I set anchors,” Nioi shrugs. “Finding a world without anchors is hard, but magical or emotional connections make anchors. If I can’t do that, physical anchors work, but they don’t help as much.”

“So, to find my home—” Magus starts.

“I used your magic as the anchor,” Nioi finishes. “It didn’t work as well as normal because of the magic interaction you’ve had here, but I met your Terra and gave her a physical anchor. Making my way back with you should be simple enough. And for returning here, Ellen is a very good anchor.”

“So you could ask Lord Tedd to teach you, but the chances are low until General Shade Tail is out of the picture. No, Kaoli or I will check in with you on occasion. How’s that?”

“Just so long as ‘on occasion’ isn’t every year and a half.”

Nioi smiles and shakes her head. “Kaoli just wanted Ellen to have some time to develop herself. I was thinking once per month.”

I raise my hand. “Speaking of development, I’m rather surprised that you haven’t said anything about me yet.”

Nioi squints at me. “I don’t know how you came to this world, but you seem to be alright. Do you know about the Divine magic, Restore?”

“I used it on her,” Ashley says. “Twice.”

“Then you are as you should be. Besides, I don’t know of any alternate you that I could use.” Fair enough. She turns to Magus. “Are you ready?”

Magus grins. “As I’ll ever be. Is Terra alright?”

“She was happy to hear of you. You’ll see her soon.” Nioi holds out her hand, and Magus takes it. Everyone around me gasps except Elliot. I guess the gate opened. The fact that Ellen can see it
means she’s not dimension-locked, which is interesting to know. Over the course of about three seconds, Nioi and Magus walk towards the back wall while turning transparent and instantly vanish from all my senses upon reaching said wall.

“That was amazing,” Tedd declares.

“What was?” Elliot asks.

13 September 2014
9:03 AM CST

“I have to say, it’s a little strange to not go flying with Susan and Magus,” Elliot remarks after shifting after our flight.

**I know,** I respond just before shifting. “Susan said she found a place to fly, but I wonder how Magus is doing. In the comic, the last Terra saw of her, she used a strong spell against her in a sparring match and it burnt the ground. Nobody else was around. I don’t think Terra saw Magus vanish, and I’m not sure whether she thought she’d killed her friend.”

Ellen widens her eyes. “Ouch.”

Kaoli said she’d fly with us every other week if she could, and true to her word, she’s here today. I still haven’t seen Grace out here for this, though. “I didn’t ask my sister, but she didn’t say anything to indicate that that’s the case. Terra probably knew that her spell wasn’t powerful enough to completely erase her friend like that.”

Elliot frowns. “Still, I can’t imagine that Tedd would be alright if I suddenly vanished without a trace, especially if it happened three years ago. He didn’t really have any other friends at that point.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I know that, as a dragon, if you hadn’t been friends to me the other dragons would try to help me. And while Kevin never had many friends, there were always people that would accept him. That’s one of the great things about going to a church. But for someone in Tedd’s position before Grace entered his life, losing their best friend when no one else witnessed it… I can’t imagine.”

Kaoli shakes her head. “You don’t know that it’s exactly the same. In this world, Tedd’s mother left because she thought he had no magic, right? That wouldn’t be the case for Terra.”

“True,” Ellen admits. “Either way, Magus is home now. She can work on it, and there’s not really anything we can do about it.”

I raise a half-open fist. “That’s not… strictly true.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the dimension lock on dragons might not apply to you, since you could perceive Nioi’s portal on Tuesday. Neither Elliot or myself could go, but it’s certainly possible that Kaoli could take you there.”

Ellen furrows her brow. “Aren’t I Nioi’s way back here?”

“You are,” Kaoli answers. “But if I had you with me, I could look for your other friends. Elliot wouldn’t work since he’s a dragon and blocks me, but Grace works.”
Ellen considers the option. “I think I’ll give Magus some more time, first. Besides, I don’t know how her world would treat a half-dragon.”

I chuckle. “They don’t know that dragons are human, and the dragons there haven’t been culling monster populations. They’d probably have no idea what to make of you.”

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Homework done. What to do…?

You know what? Why not. I pull out my phone and call Ellen.

“How long will it take you to get back?” she asks a few seconds later.

“Hey, Ellen. Is your homework taking you a long time?”

“No much longer than in high school. Why?”

“I was thinking about stuff I could stand to learn, and what my friends know, and I realized that if you can still sing really well, you probably have some idea how to give me the basics for voice lessons. If you want.”

“You want voice lessons?” I can tell that she’s having a hard time picturing it.

“Yeah. I love singing. It’d be nice if people wanted to hear me sing, too.”

Ellen pauses. “Why wouldn’t you just hire a voice trainer? I know you could afford it.”

It occurred to me, yes. But I’m also now living in this huge house almost by myself, and I’m not as much of a loner as Kevin. “Because I wanted to spend more time with you. I know we’re part of a big friend group, but it also sorta had smaller groups in it. You and Nanase; Susan, Sarah and myself.”

“Oh, I get it.” I think I’m reminding her a bit of when Grace asked if they could play together.

“Yes. I’ll give it a shot, at least with the basics like breathing and posture. You’ll need an actual trainer for the rest.”

“Good enough for me! Thanks!”

“You’re welcome!” *Click*

I completely forgot to discuss a schedule with her. I text her about it.

20 September 2014
7:06 AM CST

**It’s so much harder to want to learn evasive maneuvers without Magus attacking me,** I complain.

**You could always try learning my skydiving,** Ellen offers.

**I imagine that would hurt a lot more thanks to my increased mass. No thanks.**

**Your loss,** Ellen lands on Elliot’s back and shifts before taking another dive. It does look like fun, but I’m deathly afraid of risks like that. And pain. Lots of pain, if I mess up.

Flying around like this every week has other benefits besides exercise. I’ve memorized something
of a heat map of the city, and it has happened that there was a building on fire while I was in range. The fire department arrived to a lot less fire than they expected, though there was still plenty of damage. Knowing that it was most likely me that put it out (based on eyewitness reports that the fire just sort of ended as the building cooled rapidly), the fire chief chatted with me after I landed, and now I’m on-call to help with larger fires when I’m in town. It hasn’t happened yet, but it’s nice to know that there’s some minor way I can help. He also cautioned me to not do that without talking with someone at the site of the fire first, because rapid cooling can further damage a building. Good to know.

“Sorry I’m late!” I hear from behind. I’d noticed Grace approaching—her three-tailed form tends to stand out—but hadn’t said anything or acknowledged her. I figure I should let people announce themselves.

**Late?** I ask, wheeling about. **I didn’t expect to see you at all!**

**What changed your mind?** Elliot asks her.

“Well…” she hesitates. “Saphira said a while ago that people are more comfortable with heroes if they’ve seen them before, and I’m pretty sure that only Dex and Greg have seen this. And then Dad didn’t want me to make aliens known, but he said Saphira did well enough with Kaoli, so he let me do this.”

I tilt my head. **Did you ever think to ask me to talk about you that way? I talked about Genetic magic on day one.**

“You were vague enough that Dad wasn’t sure who that’s restricted to.”

He wasn’t? **One hundred percent of that is from aliens. Not just Uryuoms, but no Genetic magic user is 100% from Earth. All dragons are, though.**

“What about the other two?”

**Common magic is for humans and immortals and their lineage, and Divine goes to any sentient species,** Elliot answers for me.

**Common magic is only common on Earth, really,** I clarify. **If you spoke with an alien that just arrived here, they’d probably only know about Genetic and Divine magic. That said, aliens have been on Earth long enough that you’re far from the only human-form person with Genetic magic. Remember, one of the people we rescued last month could use Genetic magic.**

“Right,” Grace nods. She looks around below us. “Um… I know that I saw Ellen going down earlier…”

“Don’t drop me!” I hear a girl shriek.

**For the last time, I’ve got you!** Ellen says frantically. **Stop flailing! We’re almost there!** I rise a bit to see Ellen carrying a female and panicked Tedd in her arms just behind Elliot. **Elliot, could you glide for a second?** she asks him.

**How in the world did you carry Tedd all the way up here?** I ask as Elliot complies.

**Very carefully,** Ellen responds, seating Tedd on Elliot’s back.

**Not—**
**I know what you meant.** Ellen lands on Elliot and shifts. Then she sits behind Tedd, her back to him. She’s visibly panting. “Tedd’s not the heaviest person ever, and I knew I could carry her weight. And she wanted to be up here with Grace.”

“That’s why I made a flight wand!” Tedd declares while still audibly tired from the flight up. “I told you I could handle it!”

“Sure you could. Then I guess you wouldn’t still be only two feet off the ground, if I hadn’t picked you up?” I suppose an active flight wand would also make Tedd lighter.

“Um…”

Grace floats towards Elliot. “It’s okay, Teddy. That’s not why I married you. We don’t have to have the same skills.”

“What kind of wandmaker am I, if I can’t copy what I see?”

I stare at Tedd. **Tedd, you copied the spell into a wand fine. You don’t have to actually use the wand. And it’s not like you can make Draconic wands, either.**

“No, but…” He hugs Elliot’s neck with his left arm as he pulls a wand out of his right sock—and turns himself back into a man. “Here. Watch.” I can tell that he activated the wand, and he rises off of Elliot’s back. His sudden absence makes Ellen fall over backwards and off of Elliot, and Grace moves to catch her before Ellen spreads her arms wide and shifts, pulling out of the dive. Tedd watches Ellen while hovering in the air. “See! I wish I could do that!”

**Well, at least you’re hovering higher than before,** Elliot remarks.

“I am, aren’t I?” Tedd looks straight down, wobbles in the air and rapidly moves to land on my back. “Y-You know what, never mind,” he stutters. “I’ll just – I’ll just be along for the ride.”

**You’re still doing better than Saphira did for her first flight,** Ellen notes.

**Thank you,** I respond, and Elliot and Ellen laugh.

30 September 2014
12:30 PM CST

Another day, another easy set of classes. I could tell from Elliot’s expression that he’ll need an in-depth physics study session soon, though. Maybe I can get Ellen to help with demonstrations.

It’s silly, but the first time I saw my physics professor, I thought he was cosplaying as the Doctor from Doctor Who just to catch people’s attention. It’s a striking resemblance, but either he keeps up the cosplay all the time or he just looks like that. There’s no problem with it; Kevin’s physics teacher was really into Star Trek and even had a custom school staff badge for Captain Kirk. I wonder if anyone has asked my professor if they could be his companion.

“Saphira?” I turn around to see Charlotte right behind me. I’m thrown off guard for a moment before I remember that she goes to school here, too. “Do you have a moment?”

Given that my only thing today is voice lessons with Ellen, yes. “Sure. I just finished my classes for today.”

Charlotte nods. “I don’t want to assume, but are you aware that there’s a club for magic users here?”
There is? “No. My role as Moperville’s dragon means I should try to teach people about magic, but because of the current situation around magic, I want to see how people act without dragon oversight, too. If the club has questions, I’d be happy to answer them.”

Charlotte isn’t very expressive, but her eyebrows rise slightly. “One would think that you knew what I was going to ask. Our meetings are Thursdays at five. Can you come? I wouldn’t ask, but I let on that I knew you and the others pushed me to invite you to teach us.”

I look through my schedule notes in my Mymoir journal. “I can’t do this Thursday, but I can do the next one. How’s that?” In spite of my otherwise regular items, my work schedule remains erratic. At the same time, my free time is rapidly shrinking. If my classes get much harder or something big happens, I’ll have to quit my job, or at least put it on hold and only work over breaks. I don’t need the money, but I still need the work experience.

“It works. Some might not be happy, but they can’t force you to come.” I think she actually looks a little pleased to be spiting them. “I’ll let them know.”

“And you’ll tell me where?”

“Oh, yes.” She gives me directions to the lecture hall they meet in. I don’t know how they got the larger room, but Charlotte says they need it for some people’s magic.
9 October 2014
4:57 PM CST

Normally, I show up 5-10 minutes late to club meetings unless it’s a convenient location, but I figured I should show up early to this one. I don’t want the magic community to think I don’t value them. I just like to get as much done as I can with my time. Whatever. I can still observe the people here.

From attendance so far, we’ve got almost two dozen people, which is actually an impressive turnout. Let’s see… none of my usual friends are here, but we’ve got a wizard, two or three people with marks, about five people (including Charlotte) who don’t have any magic, and the rest are Common casters. This club probably contains almost every caster among the student body here. Given that I haven’t seen anyone I know aside from Charlotte, it can’t have every caster, but certainly most.

Oh! Thought slightly disproven: Rhoda and Catalina just walked in. I’d wonder why they hadn’t told me if not for the fact that I’ve been avoiding them. I know that I had no control over my thoughts and actions, but Rhoda made me think of Catalina as my girlfriend… and I acted accordingly. I choose to say that I still have my first kiss, as it doesn’t count when I don’t look, act, or think like myself.

Still… I should try to repair our relationship. Kaoli said that Magus will be visiting us this weekend (likely with Terra), so not right away, but soon. I do have more free time, now that I’ve suspended my job (or, at least, I will once the two weeks kicks in), but all of my other activities still take time. And I guess I should use some of that extra time to actually meet with Tedd so that Grace quits glaring at me when we go flying. Studying and homework doesn’t take me terribly long, but doing it with Elliot more than doubles the time. We’ve learned how to share notes in the Mymoir, which lets us teach each other how we think, but it still takes a while. At least I feel like I’m learning something.

I, um, also feel like I’m learning more of why dragons tend to only marry each other. Elliot is still dating Ashley, and I still think Susan has priority, but I have to be careful to keep my relationship with Elliot at just friends.

And… wait, how did I miss Luke earlier? He didn’t walk in just now. I just glazed over him somehow. I guess I should’ve assumed he’d be here: he can scout people for their magic ability. I shake my head and take a seat near the rear of the attendants, which is still close to the middle.

A skinny blonde guy who looks like he’s either crazy or drunk waltzes up to the front of the room. “Luke!” he shouts. “Did our guest show?” Gee, I wonder who he means.

“Yes, your honor,” Luke replies after a moment’s pause. The tone hints at friendly derision, so they’re probably familiar with each other.

“Could you please point her out?”

“No without blinding myself, Camdin.” Camdin? Not Cadmin? The only name like that I’ve heard is the Camden Yards stadium. I didn’t think people named their kids that.

I roll my eyes and stand up. “I heard that a bunch of people wanted to learn about magic, so I came.
You don’t need to be dodgy.” And since they were so kind as to give me so much notice, I brought a witness who might decide to help, too. It’s up to her, though.

“You’re the real deal?” Camdin asks.

“You haven’t said who you’re expecting, but I’m the blue dragon that flies to campus every day, yes.”

Camdin looks me up and down. “Pop quiz! What are the beings that give magic marks called?”

I squint at him. “I guess you never watched my announcement? They’re ‘immortals.’”

He doesn’t look satisfied with my answer. “No! Not the name you give clueless people! What are they really called?” Oh, dear.

“You want a history lesson?” I start reading aloud from the Mymoir, paraphrasing as I go. “Their original name, or at least, the first one known to dragons, translates to something like ‘fairy.’ Of course, the word is in ancient Hebrew and carries a few other bits of context, but the closest English phrase is ‘immortal floating creature of magic.’ They decided that they’d shorten their species name to ‘immortal,’ at least in English. It also avoids confusion with the typical summoned monster called a ‘fairy.’ I don’t speak any other languages, so I can’t really say what they’re called around the world.”

“What are they called in ancient Hebrew, then?” a girl with pale skin and light green hair near the front asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. The information I just told you is written in Draconic, which is a language without a pronunciation. It gave me the Draconic version of the term, which I could write out, but it wouldn’t really help you any.”

“What do you mean, no pronunciation? You can read it, can’t you?”

“I—” I stop myself, rolling my eyes and sighing. There’s a white board at the front of the room.

“Let me write it for you.” If I concentrate on just seeing the symbol and not the meaning, I can write it out without engraving it, though it’s harder. I walk to the white board and find a thick black marker, then carefully replicate the symbol for ‘immortal’ on the board. Most Draconic symbols make heavy use of curves and circles, and this one’s no different. The symbol consists of three concentric circles with a straight stroke running from the center to the outermost circle. It’s an older symbol, so it’s one of the simpler ones, but with my knowledge of immortals, I think it also makes a lot of sense for why it looks the way it does.

I turn around and point my thumb back at the board. “There you go. The Draconic symbol for an ‘immortal’ or ‘fairy.’ It’s a magic language, so it has a symbol for everything, but although I can read it, I can’t tell you how to pronounce any of it. Do you get it now?” The girl nods, as do a few other people. I can see Charlotte taking notes.

Back to Camdin. “You said that these ‘immortals’ named themselves?”

“Of course. They’re sentient. Are you saying humans didn’t name themselves?”

Camdin puts out his right hand towards me, palm up. “Fair enough. Would you kindly take the floor?” He steps to his left, out from behind the podium. I nod, and he joins the audience.

Once I’m at the podium, I notice that the speaker system is off, according to the lack of heat in the wiring. Strange. I could’ve sworn it sounded like it was on. Oh, right: I’m in a room full of
Common magic users. One probably has magic to mimic either technology or sound magic. After all, Elliot’s enhanced sight spell isn’t much different from a light spell, and the superhero spell interfaces with handheld tech.

I can see Camdin whispering with another guy—strong build, red hair, light skin, and likely average height—who’s looking increasingly frustrated. Finally, he bursts out, “I don’t know! When I look at her, all I can see is a black wall! I can’t show you a black wall!” His voice is gravelly in the sort that I wouldn’t want to tick him off, and he sounds more angry than frantic.

I dunno what his magic is, but… description…. The Mymoir says it’s probably some form of truesight. I know the risk, but I want these people to trust me, and I think I can count on my friends in the room. I drop my resistance. “Try again,” I direct the young man. “It should be easier now.”

9 October 2014
5:04 PM CST

Depending on the method and magic type, truesight can be very interesting when used on dragons—or really, any creature with more than one base form. Divine casters can definitely pick out each base form, but Common magic might blend them or try to show all of them at once. I’ve almost certainly consigned the poor guy a headache, but at least he’ll get more than ‘a black wall’—or, in other words, my magic resistance almost completely blocking his spell.

The man looks at me, and… I can tell, based on the other’s reactions, that he’s casting some sort of illusion that I can’t see. Actually… there’s a mirror on the back wall so that the professor can see students’ laptop screens. I squint at it to see a somewhat-transparent version of my dragon form that appears to be radiating blue energy like wisps of flame. At its center is myself, glowing so intensely that I can’t pick out a color. That’s some powerful truesight: it’s picking out the same sort of details that Luke gets with his spell. I suppose the downside is that it shows the result to everyone except the target, so it’s not as private as most information magic.

I let my resistance resume its duties and the marvelous image of myself is rapidly replaced with a featureless black wall in front of me that’s roughly the size of my dragon form. I wonder if that’s what I look like to the griffins? No, they would’ve said something. The illusion drops as quickly as it changed.

“Now do you trust me?” I ask Camdin. I’d really like to get to the part where I answer the group’s questions.

“I believe that you are who you say you are,” he answers strongly. “We’ll judge for ourselves whether what you say is true.” He’d been visibly impressed by the truesight illusion; I think he’s just trying to save face.

“Alright. Is there anything in particular that’s been weighing on you?” I question the audience before me.

Camdin opens his mouth before Luke shoots him an icy glare and answers my question himself. “A few of us didn’t become casters on our own, but had an immortal put a magic mark on us. Whoever it was, though, never told us when or why or anything. Since they live so long, we didn’t know what sort of reason they might do so?” Camdin likely would’ve asked the same question with less tact.

Given what Pandora said last year, and what I know of her activities since then, I think I can confidently answer the question… but there’s also the white immortal to think of, and I know that there are a few other immortals in town. I’ve just never bothered speaking with them. Still, given a
timeline, I can guess. And if it was Pandora, I probably have the next-best person to answer questions in the room right now.

“Would you happen to know when most of you noticed your marks or first cast a spell without a wand? In the context of this question, of course.”

Luke rubs the back of his head. “I noticed mine about when Cheerleadra fought that fire dude—”

“Summon,” I correct him.

“Wha—?”

“Last year, the only things Cheerleadra fought were summoned monsters, or ‘summons’ for short. Like the ‘earth elemental’ called Bob that helped out with repairs on Moperville North this past March, the beings are made of magic and can’t be properly killed, though they do have a continuous consciousness while summoned and can forge a relationship with their summoner much like between a dog and its owner. They’ll also vanish if the summoner ends the spell or falls asleep.”

“Oh.”

The same green-haired girl from earlier raises her hand. “What about this year? There was that griffin at the mall, right?”

“Griffins are created monsters. Created monsters are harder to make—normally, only wizards make them—since they are permanent magical beings and have to have some manner of doing all the normal biological functions of any animal. Griffins in particular are sentient, so I will treat them as such in any interactions. They’ve also been around for centuries, which is more than I can say for most created monsters. The especially destructive created monsters are usually wiped out fairly quickly, often with help from dragons. Created monsters are also much less common today than from any time before the Enlightenment period.”

I’m about to put Mr. Verres out of a title.

“Back to the question,” Camdin prompts, “most of us noticed between April last year and this January.” I bet he’s the club president. I wonder how they all put up with him?

The time fits. March was Sister II—I mean, when Abraham did his thing. And Pandora found out the problem with what she was doing around when she spoke with Sarah in January, though I still don’t know how she found out. I never told her about magic resets. She wasn’t the only immortal around here, but most certainly the best candidate for this. Hey, at least I can answer the question.

“Then it’s most likely—and the ‘most’ is important—that the immortal who marked you was doing so in an effort to bring attention to magic. Also boredom, but her stated purpose was to make this world one that would allow for more open use of magic. I don’t have a problem with her reasoning, but her method had several problems. One of which being that she enabled the use of that dragon-like summon that attacked the bridge last year.”

“Which would explain why they stopped in January, after your whole thing with the news,” Charlotte comments.

I nod. “That might not be the only reason she stopped, but it probably contributed.”

“You keep saying ‘she,’” a male student with a build that can only be described as ‘Asian’ notes. He’s got short black hair and is skinny and short himself. “Do you know the immortal?”
I wince. “It’s more correct to say I knew her, or knew of her. I only spoke with her once. She’s dead, now.”

“Doesn’t ‘immortal’ mean that they live forever?”

I breathe a chuckle. “They’re not undying. Immortals don’t necessarily live one life forever, but are instead reborn whenever they die, keeping choice knowledge or memories. Their new self will otherwise be similar to their previous self, but a new consciousness. So for this one, well… if you asked her why she marked you, all she knows is what other people told her about it. She didn’t keep ahold of that knowledge.”

The strong smell of Common magic that suddenly starts behind me tells me why the people in front of me widened their eyes. “I think you’re leaving something out,” Naomi pouts.

I turn around to face her. Naomi is standing on the ground, but the fact that she suddenly manifested is probably surprising to anyone that wasn’t aware that she was here. “I was getting to it! I know they’re college students, but I don’t think they wanted a lecture!” I shake my head and turn back around. Holding my hands out towards Naomi in introduction, I state, “Well, it was up to her if she showed herself, but here you go. This is Naomi, an immortal that I’m well-acquainted with. I’m the one who told her about this meeting, because I knew immortals would be interested. Dragons and immortals share the responsibility for teaching about magic, anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Camdin demands.

9 October 2014
5:10 PM CST

Complicated subject is complicated. Dragons and immortals are the two longest-lived sentients that are fallible and make a habit of talking with people directly. In other words, we’re personal, but not all-powerful, but we also tend to amass vast quantities of knowledge. Wisdom is another thing entirely.

But it was agreed, long ago, that dragons and immortals would teach humans about magic, and we’d share that responsibility. This directly led to the immortal laws and the moral bounds for dragons, as well as guidances for our interactions. I didn’t just invite Naomi because I knew she’d be interested: I was also obligated to invite an immortal if I found one before the appointed time. I didn’t know about that guideline when I had my announcement, but I did tell that one immortal, so I guess it was okay.

Now then, how to explain it?

I swallow before answering Camdin. “Dragons and immortals both have a lot of magic power and a lot of knowledge, so we agreed that we’d teach humans about magic, and include each other in the process.” I let Naomi know beforehand that she is not to mention space aliens. “It’s a mutually beneficial agreement that avoids people getting bored or running rampant.”

Naomi nods. “Immortal law states that when interacting with those on the physical plane, we’re only supposed empower and guide them. Magic marks and awakening people is part of ‘empower,’ and ‘guide’ includes teaching them. It doesn’t mean I can’t ask for favors, or spend time with people, but it does mean I can’t directly act for or against someone. That’s for dragons to do, and I can complain to them as much as I like.”

“And as much as I like, I can’t shut them up.” I smile at Naomi jokingly. “Dragons can’t really do anything to power up people even if we wanted, but we do our best to keep power in the hands of
people who will act morally. We take care of punishment if someone steps too far out of line, though to our best ability, we go for rehab. This applies to immortals, too, but it’s rarer than you might think. Immortal law curbs a lot of potential problems, since violation is automagically followed by death.”

“What if a dragon steps out of line?” the truesight caster asks.

“Good question,” I reply, “to which I refer you back to the punishment line. Rehab if possible. Only one time was it not, and, well… we have a better idea on how to catch warning signs, now. That one time, by the way, is why the world is as it is today. It’s why dragons disappeared from daily life, and why magic was largely forgotten. And immortals got bored, and we got a lot more problems to clean up. And one thing led to another, and here we are: a young dragon and a younger immortal, teaching college students the sort of stuff that, a thousand years ago, was something most people knew before they turned ten.”

The room is silent for a minute while our audience processes what I said. One (large) boy with orange hair raises his hand, and I point at him. “I know I’m not supposed to ask girls this, but how old are you?”

For myself, I guess it depends on who you ask, but I think Kevin’s memories apply here. Besides, Restore kept my approximate age the same. “Nineteen. Any dragon will answer that question honestly. Whether you believe them is another question altogether.”

Naomi nods. “I’m actually less than a year old, but immortals start with some knowledge. And I kept my previous self’s memories of her family—my family.” She pauses while the orange-haired boy stares at her. “Keep staring and I will have Saphira slap you,” she threatens.

“Sorry!” he apologizes while averting his gaze.

“How do you two know each other, anyway?” Camdin asks.

Avoiding my knowledge of Pandora, since, after all, that was a different person, it’s not actually all that hard. Although I do want to hear Naomi’s side of it. I look to her.

After a few seconds of me watching her, Naomi gets what I want. “Saphira’s interesting, so I watched her for a while after I was reborn. Beyond that, she’s part of my extended family.”

I widen my eyes at her. I mostly thought of her the same way I do Noah: important, but I don’t see them often enough to really know them. Of course, she sees me more often than I can tell she’s there…

“How can an immortal be related to a dragon?” Charlotte asks.

I answer this time. “Immortals can have kids, and those kids can have kids… but I’m not sure how that makes me part of her family.”

Naomi slides around in front of me. “You live with Susan, and to me, you seem almost like her sister. That’s close enough for me. Besides, I think she feels the same way.”

I know what she says is true, and I’m honest enough with myself that it’s made its way into my journal. Not that anyone else could read it. Still, I feel my face warm to hearing someone else say it. “L-Let’s keep it on-topic.” I look back to the audience. “Is there anything else you want explained?”

10 October 2014
Magus and Terra have actually been in town for a few hours now, but they said they spent a lot of that time with the Verres clan. I’m sure Tedd and Terra had a lot to talk about. Nioi and Kaoli went back to their world, although Kaoli will be back tomorrow for her regular flight with us. So the first time I get to meet Terra is while we’re out to dinner as a larger group with Magus, Terra, and the friends still in town: Tedd, Grace, Elliot, Ellen, Justin, and myself.

“This place is incredible!” Terra tells me when I walk in the door. “You really get electric power from out of town?”

“Most places do,” Justin replies. “I’m sure the restaurant has a backup generator for if the power goes out, but I don’t think many people would tolerate a coal-fired plant in town. What’s it like, you know… where you’re from?”

“For one, power is local only. A lot of houses and buildings have generators, but we usually use magic for lighting and cooking and most other things. What are those colored rectangles that I keep seeing?” She gestures at a girl using a smartphone in a pink case.

I think Justin is just starting to get an idea how much better we have it here. “It’s, um… do you know what a cell phone is?”

“No.” Terra is bewildered by the new term.

“Before you ask,” Magus jumps in, “it’s not a difference of terms. We don’t have the concept back home.” I guess she learned a lot about this place the hard way.

Justin is thoroughly confounded. “Then, um… what?” He turns to me. “You’ve been good at explaining things.”

How do you explain a smartphone to people without cell phones? I guess… like to a child. At its base concept. The same as I’ve been doing for magic. Um…

“You said you had computers, right?” Grace asks before I can respond.

“Yeah. They’re bigger than the ones you have here, and it takes magic to network them, but—”

*Bzz* goes the red device in Tedd’s hand. “Oh!” he exclaims. “We can continue when we’re seated?”

We all nod and make our way to the host’s station, then follow our waitress to the table. It’s a large party, so we just picked a halfway-decent pizza place, but it’s still private enough in here that we can chat as long as we don’t directly say where Magus and Terra are from. Terra looks like she’s Tedd’s tough sister, but they don’t actually look like alternates, unlike Ellen and Magus. The fighting lifestyle of the other world probably has something to do with it.

After making our drink orders (water for Terra and Magus), we get to go back to our chat. “What were we talking about?” Ellen asks.

“Smartphones,” I recall, pulling out my own. “It’s like a computer in your pocket. It automatically networks with other devices on the worldwide web, which is mostly connected with super thick electric cables. In particular, this device uses invisible light to network with special focal points.” I pause and look at Terra, who doesn’t look like she’s struggling. “Am I doing alright?”

“I think I get it. Why is it called, well…?”
“A smartphone? The first telephone transmitted a voice or sound through electric wires to a receiver. If your technology is all local, I guess you never had that?”

Magus shakes her head. “Magic does the job just fine.” It probably does. Information magic can be powerful. You don’t even need the fairy doll spell for just transmitting a message like a letter.

“Anyway, after the telephone was the cell phone, which does the thing with light so that you don’t have to have electric cables the whole way, and then smartphones just added a bunch of computing power.”

“That’s it?” I nod. “Okay. I guess it’s not so different, if you know what things do.”

“Do you guys have pizza places?” Elliot asks. It’s a legitimate question.

“Yeah,” Magus answers. “Not as many restaurants as here, but I don’t think any of our cities are so big. I think we have less people in the world, actually.”

Tedd shrugs. “That’s an easy test. We have a little over seven billion. How many are where you live?”

Terra rolls her eyes. “We don’t know. We have information networks, but nothing like good enough to count everyone. The most I hear about other continents is when they make discoveries or are attacked by major monsters. Speaking of which, what sort of defense do you have here? I know Magus talked about the martial arts classes she took.”

I grimace slightly. “I helped set up Shapeless from the get-go, but that’s it as far as organized stuff goes. I know we’ll need more eventually, but between the group, I think we’ve only faced four or five serious threats here, and Magus was involved for at least one of those.” In chronological order, Abraham, Dex, Not-Tengu, vampire, body snatcher, more vampires, Wu. “Okay, more than five, but less than ten. I’ll be involved with making something more substantial, but again, I don’t think we need it while most people don’t know about magic. As for unorganized stuff, I know of a dozen people in town that aren’t my friends and are willing to help out, and then I’ve got my larger friend group. And for anything really serious, we’ve got two dragons.”

Terra’s eyes widen a bit at that last part. “That’s a lot of trust in your dragons. I know Magus said that yours are friendly, but I’ve fought one a couple of times. It took our entire defense to drive it off.”

10 October 2014
5:56 PM CST

Elliot and I look at each other, and he messages me in the Mymoir.

Elliot: Do you think Magus told her that we’re dragons?

Saphira: Sounds like no. Maybe she wanted Terra to get to know us as people before tomorrow?

Elliot: Okay. I’ll leave it out.

“What was that about?” Terra asks me when I look back at her. I’ve learned how to use the Mymoir without shutting my eyes.

I shake my head quickly. “You said you fought a dragon? What did it say?”

Terra’s brow furrows. “Say?”
“Your dragons don’t ever talk?” Grace chips in.

Terra slowly shakes her head. “No. They’re clearly not common monsters, and they show intelligence, but they’ve never given any indication that they can talk.” Huh. I wonder if that’s part of why Magus was so astonished when we first met. And that’s almost certainly why she didn’t tell Terra about me being a dragon.

Our pizza arrives, and our conversation is put on hold while we dig in. I already ate a lot thanks to being a dragon plus all my exercise, but now that I fly to school and back I have to eat even more. It reminds me of that fun fact about Michael Phelps: he eats 12,000 calories per day, but he also burns it all every day since he’s an athlete for a living. I don’t think I use that much, but flying takes a lot of energy.

Finally, Justin opens the conversation back up: “I think I speak for everyone when I ask how things are going back home, Magus?”

Magus finishes her bite and puts down the slice. Meat lover’s: something full of calories, but with too little flavor variety for me. (That’s what pineapple is for! To a couple of my friends’ disgust.) “I don’t think anyone here will be surprised to learn that my parents were ecstatic. Troy made a play at being pleasantly shocked, but he was more shocked when I gave him a lighting fist to the gut.” I didn’t know that Magus had such a spell, actually. Tedd bursts out laughing, and Magus pounces on the opportunity. “‘Oh! Man, I’m glad to see you’re back. I gave that shield charm supplier a piece of my mind, you know,’” she mimics in a goofy and mocking ‘tough guy’ voice. “‘Sure you did,’” she resumes in her normal voice. “‘Have some of mine!’” She slams her right fist into her open left hand, and we all can’t help but crack up at the charade.

Terra continues the explanation. “From Magus’s tale, Troy was stuck on latrine duty for a month, and I got a raise. They were paying me less because I was a liability for possibly killing my friend—and honestly, I thought they were right—but no one had gone to jail for an unproven crime, and now I’m making more than enough to make up for the last year of lower pay.”

Magus nods. “Of course, I still have to finish school, so I’m behind everyone my age, but everyone wants to hear about this place. I don’t have a whole lot I can say that they’ll believe, though.”

“A world at peace, sure,” Terra states. “Friendly dragons is a bit beyond our imagination.”

Grace stares at Magus. “They’d believe world peace over that?”

“I never said world peace!” Magus raises her hands innocently. “Just no monster attacks. We didn’t have either of your world wars because more people die from monsters than petty international conflicts.”

I breathe out heavily. “Dragons might’ve been hidden here, but at least they still did that job. The only self-sustainable evil monsters that survive here are the ones that either hide well or are immune to dragons.”

Justin squints at me. “Like…?”

“Vampires.”

“Oh, right.” His face turns slightly pink when he smiles.

11 October 2014
6:00 AM CST
“They know we can sense them, right?” Elliot bends over to ask me. We’re in the park for our weekly flight, but instead of meeting us here, it appears that Magus and Terra decided to hide in the nearby trees.

“Magus, certainly. Terra, probably not,” I reply before heading out to my usual shifting spot.

When I shift, I actually hear Terra fall over into the bush behind her. **Are you alright?** I ask Terra when my change finishes. She doesn’t respond, but Elliot and Ellen shift, too. Kaoli is probably her only point of relative familiarity from our group, as Grace changes into her omega-form once the dragons are set.

**Are you alright?** I repeat my question, this time to both Terra and Magus.

“We’re fine!” I hear Magus call, though neither of them move.

**Okay. You settle down, and we’ll meet you in the sky.** Without further ado, I take off like any other week, though I keep track of their general location.

“What was Magus responding to?” Grace asks the group after we’re reasonably high—probably around 2000 feet.

**You didn’t notice that Terra was back there?** Ellen asks.

Elliot’s head swings to face Ellen. **How could you tell?**

**I don’t need special senses to be observant. It wasn’t Magus that was surprised by Saphira’s transformation.**

**Fair enough,** I note. **I also asked if the two were alright. We’ll see them again when Terra’s ready, I guess.**

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In total, I think it took about half an hour for Terra to join us. I dunno why Mr. Aevil stopped coming, but I guess it’s a personal reason. I don’t mind his absence, really; so long as I have someone to talk with, it’ll be more than just another exercise to me, and I’ll feel less like I’m wasting my time.

Magus and Terra have that same general flight spell, so it’s not like it’s anything special, really. **Are you feeling better?** I ask Terra when she’s nearly level with me. Given the fierce downdrafts from dragon flight (in addition to other fluid dynamics problems), we don’t stick together the whole time. I was on my own until Magus and Terra joined me.

“Yeah,” Terra replies, still a little unsteady. “Magus didn’t tell me that dragons had human forms. I wasn’t expecting anything like that for today. I mean, I knew I’d be flying with dragons, but I didn’t think they’d be people I had dinner with last night.”

**What did you think dragons ate?**

“I guess I never thought about it. I was taught that they ate humans and large creatures, but while they certainly killed enough of us, they did always leave the bodies behind…”

**Dragons are humans. Elliot and I were born human, as were all the other dragons. You’re not just dealing with human-level intelligence when facing a dragon: you’re facing another human, albeit a powerful one. The dragon form transformation is a critical part of our abilities, but it’s an**
“You’re saying that I should go after dragons in their human forms?”

I glare at her. **I’m saying that you can probably talk things through. If a dragon expressly came to attack you, defend yourself, but maybe try to talk to them. If they just happen to be flying nearby, I’d request that you talk before attacking. Even if they’ve done horrible things, they’re still people. Treat them as such, and you might get through to them.**

Terra thinks for a few seconds before responding. “How do I know that it’s the same kind of dragon? Maybe things work differently in my world.”

**If they’re monochromatic, come in all sorts of shapes but nearly the same size, don’t have any sort of breath weapon and generally act on a wide area around themselves… they’re probably the same kind.**

Terra looks away. “Okay. Maybe it’s the same. But why wouldn’t they talk ever? You seem to be chatting with me just fine.”

**That’s probably more on your society than on what they’re physically capable of doing. If they spoke, what do you think would happen?** **From my limited knowledge, they’d probably do things that might actually drive the dragons insane. Or if they guessed that dragons are human, they might follow them… and do something like what we did to Fred in this universe. If I’d been around back then, either I’d have spent as much time as possible trying to talk Fred back around, or died trying, I guess. Or the other dragons would’ve done whatever they could to keep me away. I’m just not the sort of person that would go for any death penalty.**

“I guess I see your point. And, if I do talk things through with them—”

“We might get a dragon for an ally,” Magus interrupts her. “And if we have a dragon for an ally, then we might even turn things around, eventually.”

**I don’t know how much good it’ll do, but if your world is truly the same as this one if you go back 900 years, then the Sean that trained us in August would look the same in your world, at least in his dragon form. If he’s still alive, and if you can find him, he’d probably be a great ally. His habit-turned-job is to blend in with various societies and study them by getting to know a small area personally. His nickname here is the Wanderer, so he might be anywhere—and he might take advantage of transformation magic to look like anyone. But a dragon form is set, and I can’t imagine Sean being a bad guy. At the same time, I could totally see people painting him as a bad guy, especially since it happened in this world, too.**

“I’ll keep a lookout, then,” Magus grants me. “Now, then: where’s the rest of the group?”

12 October 2014
12:32 PM CST

I’m not entirely certain why Magus and Terra agreed to come to church with myself and Ashley, since I know that Christian churches exist in their world, but this was clearly not the sort of experience they expected. I suppose our relative lack of monsters might change what preachers talk about.

“I know I’m going back home today, but I still can hardly believe that a world like this one exists,” Terra is saying. “Few monsters, dragons that I can chat with—that are protectors, even—and technology like I’ve never dreamed.”
“To be fair,” I respond, “a lot of the technology came about from people that didn’t know magic existed. Dragons aren’t exactly responsible for a lot when it comes to technology. Mostly, just some chemistry and materials science, or maybe facilitating communication.”

“Such as?” Magus asks.

“Gunpowder was discovered by a pair of Chinese dragons—mass and chemical—that were paid to mix stuff together and see what happened. Their magic helped them make as much as they wanted of whatever compounds they liked, which made their work easier, faster, and cheaper than for most people. And for modern electronics, there’s a German materials engineer that’s an electric dragon. He found compounds that have particularly useful electrical properties for computing.” I pause to check the Mymoir for stuff not off the top of my head. “That’s about it for the highlights reel.” There’s other stuff, but it doesn’t really stand out in history.

“When was the German engineer born?” Terra asks after a few steps.

“He’s a hundred and six, as he likes telling people. If he’s a dragon in your world, he’s probably in hiding.”

“Or he might be part of the problem.”

Ashley shakes her head. “I don’t know a lot about this stuff, but I did meet the guy. I think he’s more likely not a dragon than an evil one. He’s a lot more obnoxious than he is selfish.”

We take another break from conversation. Maybe half a mile later, I ask a question that I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t know the answer: “Are you ever coming back to visit? Dragons can’t move between universes, or even observe rifts…”

Terra and Magus walk in silence for a bit longer. “I wouldn’t mind,” Magus finally says.

“Maybe when we have something to tell you,” Terra clarifies. “Even if I back up Magus on the dragon thing, I don’t know if they’ll let us act on it.”

I nod. “I can see how that might be dangerous. But if it works…”

“That’d definitely be good,” Terra admits.

There’s a bit more silence. “Saphira?” Ashley asks, startling me a bit. She doesn’t exactly talk a lot, usually.

“Yes?”

“I remember, from Japan: there was that one dragon that looked really different. How old is he?”

“Dayan?” She nods. Right: he never had to hide, did he? And if he’s still around in the other world…! “He’s a little under 2200 years old—much older than Fred would be. You took a picture of him, right?”

Ashley pulls out her phone. “Yeah, alongside a bunch of other dragons. Hold on… there!” She shows the picture to Magus and Terra.

Terra and Magus exchange glances. “That’s a dragon?” Terra asks Ashley.

“Yeah. His name is Dayan, and he’s from… um…”

“Siberia,” I supply. “Eastern Russia.”
“Do you think *that’s* the ‘friendly chimera’ we heard about?” Magus asks Terra.

“Could be. That’s a much better lead than we got on the ‘Sean’ character.” Terra turns around and starts floating backwards, a grin plastered across her face. “Alright. I think we can make real progress with this. Now I know we’ll have something to tell you when we next meet.”

“I’ll be praying for you,” I smile back. “The God I know doesn’t seem to be bound by the edge of a universe.”

23 October 2014
2:03 PM CST

Now, I know I *said* I’d have more free time, and I *do*, but I’ve still got plans on nearly every day of the week. Monday and Wednesday are martial arts, Tuesday is voice lessons with Ellen, and I’ve got plans for tomorrow and spend most Saturdays studying with Elliot and/or Ellen. (Elliot needs it more.) So today was actually the only day I could realistically try to meet with Tedd, and he thankfully had some time open.

Of course, now that I’m here, neither of us know what to talk about. Grace is nearby, but she’s playing a video game.

“So…” Tedd starts.

“Um…” I respond.

“Why exactly did Grace want you here?” Tedd asks after yet another awkward silence.

I shrug. “The invite was literally to ‘talk shop.’”

“Like what? I can’t exactly copy your magic. It doesn’t work the same way.”

I think about that for a second. “Well, neither does Genetic magic, but you’ve still got a wand for FV5, right?” I mean, Sarah and Susan used them at the convention.

Tedd scratches his head. “Yeah, but that was based on Ellen’s spell. It has a similar effect, but I can tell that it works differently.”

“Grace can still mimic the scales I put on her, right?”

Tedd looks down. “Well, yes, but neither of those are Common magic.”

“Still, from comparisons…”

Another silence. Tedd breaks it: “You mean, compare the TF gun to my FV5 wand to try to make the scales thing into a wand?”

I shrug again. “It’s an idea. And it’s something you could sell, too.”

Tedd frowns. “Scales aren’t exactly **comfortable**.”

“Really? I guess it’s just my experience, then, but I find them perfectly natural. In a bunch of cases, I even prefer them to clothes.” The major things holding me back from just wearing scales in public all the time are that (a) the airflow through them can feel odd and (b) I can’t have any color variation. They cover me better than clothes do, so I’ve gotten over the idea that I’m “naked.” It, uh, still took some time.
Tedd looks over at Grace for a second before returning to me. “I guess I could… try your thing? And I suppose that if it sells, it’s not my problem if it feels odd.”

“We might want to let people try it first, though,” Grace notes.

“We have demo wands for a reason,” Tedd answers. “But how would you even price something like that?”

I think for a bit. I looked up “scalie” after that first day at the convention, when that one man used the term at me. While furries usually have mammalian costumes, there are a few reptiles. I pull out my phone and browse for price points—although I make sure to use “private” windows. I don’t like how ads change when I look up reference material.

Oof. That’s… expensive. I’m reminded of why it was nobles that bought transformation wands back in the day. I don’t think people would be willing to pay quite that much, even for a fantastic spell.

I’m at a loss, so I just show the page I’m viewing to Tedd. “Well, I don’t think I’ll have any trouble beating that price,” he remarks. “But that’s a bit much for just selling at a farmer’s market.”

“How much?” Grace asks and pauses the game, and I show her. “Ouch. Something with your spell would be ridiculous. What if we just made a limited wand?”

“Like the bracers?” Tedd clarifies.

“Or the necklace, maybe.”

Hmm. “Your next shop date is this Saturday, right?” I guess, and the two nod. “What if I go with you then? Do some sort of poll, on what people would want?”

“How would you do that?” Grace asks.

I smile. “Targeted Armor is time-limited, and I can set the time for whatever I like. I can demo 5-minute spells on people for whatever area they ask. You can note the areas that they want or like the most, and use that to decide on your spell.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Tedd verifies.

24 October 2014
5:03 PM CST

After that meeting with the magic club at college, I spoke with Catalina and Rhoda about trying to spend some time together, maybe with a larger group. They were a bit surprised, and Catalina commented that she thought Susan was the only reason we’d hung out in the first place. I pointed out that Susan wasn’t ever there anyway—they’d approached me after my announcement.

Fast forward a few weeks, and I’m walking to Catalina’s house to begin a longer night with her, Rhoda, Diane, and some girl named Lucy. I know she appears in the comic, but not often and definitely not as a primary character, so I don’t remember much about her. Not even what she looks like. Hey, a somewhat-normal introduction for once!

Catalina opens the front door before I even knock. “You’re laa-ate,” Rhoda chimes beside her.

“Walking takes a while!” I respond with mock anger. “I had homework to do, and the last problem took longer than I thought it would.” I ran a small portion of the distance.
“You can come in,” Catalina tells me, and Rhoda stops blocking my way.

“And what of the other two?” I ask as Catalina closes the door.

“We’re meeting them at the mall.” Fair enough. But I don’t want to do this there, so…

“Well, then, you two get to see my Halloween costume a smidge earlier than they do.” I take a look around the entryway and make sure there’s plenty of room behind me. “Jorge’s Flying Half-Dragon.” I told him to shorten the name, and that’s what he made. It’s the same as the form I used at the convention except that (a) Jorge figured out the flight portion of the dragon form, so this flies the same, and (b) the wings and tail are larger and longer. (At present, the wings are folded along my back.) I spent some time adjusting the dimensions for flight, so I have wings that are roughly triple my arm span and a tail the same length as the rest of my body. It’s a massive tail, and there’s no way I could sit on a chair normally like this. Not one with a back, anyway.

Catalina just gapes at me. “Haven’t we seen that before?” Rhoda asks.

I nod. “Jorge showed you the previous version when we were on our way back from Africa. I can fly with this one, but…” I motion with my arms to my sides. There’s not nearly enough room in here to spread my wings.

“Why are you showing this off now?” Catalina notes.

“While I didn’t really like the doll form, I like being tiny when I’m out with you guys. What I didn’t like was the lack of mobility, and this fixes it.”

“Won’t that be tiring?”

“I flew for six hours with our gear on my back. It’s the same muscles.” I pause. “That said, I don’t plan to fly the whole night. If I want to rest and there’s nothing nearby, could I land on your shoulder, Catalina?”

Catalina looks like she’s about to say yes, but then she changes her mind. “Could we try it with you shrunken, first?”

“Sure. We were about to head out anyway, right?”

“Yeah,” Rhoda confirms. “Ready?”

I nod and drop my resistance. “Minimum size, please. And to scale, of course.”

Rhoda pulls back. “I think my minimum scale might’ve gotten smaller, actually. Not including clothes, but you aren’t wearing any.”

Huh. “Then I’m curious to see it.” Rhoda raises her hands again, and I rapidly shrink to the set minimum size. Comparing myself to stuff using my heat sense (which preserves my sense of scale), I think I’m at one-twelfth size: just under six inches tall. I was expecting just over ten inches, but this is even more radical of a change. Hey: if she does this with my dragon form, I’d be only fifteen inches tall! Much closer to carry-able pet size. Weight… At present, I’m probably … screw it, I need a calculator.

I wonder if I can still fly the same? Common magic probably fixes it so that I can. I spread my wings and fly up to be level with the other two’s heads. “How’s it feel?” Rhoda asks.

“Like any other time. I’m tiny, but I don’t really feel the difference in myself. Just everything else
around me.” Surfaces feel more jagged and rough if not outright bumpy, and despite my knowledge of how the spell protects me, I feel like I might get squished by other people. Flying should help with that a lot, though. As our test run, I land on Catalina’s right shoulder and fold in my wings. My tail helps a lot with balance, now that I think about it.

Catalina turns her head. “Wow. You’re really light. I feel like I have a hamster on my shoulder.”

“I think hamsters weigh less than I do. Is this alright?”

“Sure!”

“Let’s go!” Rhoda smiles at us.

24 October 2014
5:25 PM CST

Parking was rather difficult. I mean, it’s the Friday before Halloween, so I can sorta expect that, but I didn’t seriously think that malls would be so busy at this time of year. It’s not Christmas.

“They know where to meet us, right?” I ask my duo.

“Yeah,” Rhoda answers. “I picked an entrance, and they said they’d meet us there. I purposefully parked over here.”

“Isn’t this the less busy side anyway?”

Rhoda scratches her head. “Well, yes. That’s why I picked it.”

I opt to fly beside my companions as we head for the entrance. After a minute or so of walking, we finally make it inside. Thanks to my small size, I think a lot fewer people will notice my… rather strange costume, but I’m also able to fly around almost as freely as if I were outside. I just have to look out for ceiling decorations and any booths showing off RC quadcopters.

“There you are,” I hear Diane say below and behind me. I notice I’ve wandered off and head back. “Where’s Saphira?”

“Right behind you,” I say while doing my best to stay immediately behind her head.

She whips her head around—and I’m thankful for her shorter hair—then falls over backwards when she comes face-to-face with me. “H-hey! I thought you weren’t doing the fairy thing anymore!” she protests.

“Right,” I confirm. “Not a fairy. See?” I don’t know how you could confuse me with fairy-Rhoda, except by size. We don’t really look alike at all, especially since my primary color right now is blue.

“Huh,” an unfamiliar person remarks, looking me over. Since the others look like they know this person, I’ll guess that she’s Lucy. She’s… well, she’s taller than Diane. From scale, probably close to my normal height. And she’s considerably more, uh, endowed than the rest of my companions, except maybe Rhoda. And she doesn’t have any magic at all. Is that the only reason I haven’t met her, or was it just never convenient?

“Um… I’m Saphira. Nice to meet you?” I greet the stranger.

“Oh, sorry,” Diane apologizes, picking herself off the floor. “Saphira, Lucy. Lucy, Saphira.”
Lucy smiles at me. “Right, nice to meet you.” She holds up her right hand uncertainly.

“Thanks, but I think I can only grab a finger right now,” I laugh. “I’d be full size, but I wanted to show this off, and it’s not great for walking. And I don’t think there are many disadvantages to being tiny and flight-enabled in a mall.”

“You can’t carry anything you buy,” she replies automatically.

“I can’t buy anything anyway. I wasn’t planning on it. Either Rhoda can unshrink me, or I can just have dinner later.” Eating out is nice sometimes, but I wouldn’t be all that put out if I had to heat up a frozen pizza when I get home. I even have a spell for that now (though I still put the pizza in the oven for safety reasons).

“Rhoda did this?” Whoops. Rhoda’s face is bright red.

“Sh-she did the scaly thing herself!” Rhoda quickly corrects Lucy. “All I did was make her small!”


“The spell is Jorge’s Flying Half-Dragon. It basically puts me between my human form and my dragon form. I’m still mostly human, but I can fly and stuff.” And I have most of the extra muscles of the dragon form, yet I retained most of my organs… I’m not sure how it all still fits in my body. I think the muscles are thinner than they should be, for their strength.

“So, where do we want to go first?” Diane asks.

24 October 2014
6:32 PM CST

I know they’re doing their best to just make it a girls’ night out, but I can pick up on subtleties, despite having never dated someone myself. Diane is, maybe not outright, dating Lucy, and Rhoda and Catalina almost view this as a double-date. I’d comment on Diane’s sudden change in dating partners if not for the fact that a friendly punch would send me a thirty-second flight away.

Either way, we’ve decided to take a seat at the food court while I decide whether to quit standing on the table and eat with the rest of the group.

“Rhoda can just shrink you again afterwards,” Catalina argues.

“Yeah, but with how Common magic works, I’d be losing my meal,” I reply. “If I went outside, she could shrink my dragon form for a similar effect without me losing my meal, but honestly, I’d rather just spend the rest of the night at full size at that point.”

“Then it’s decided, right?” Lucy chips in. “You’ll eat with us?”

“Um… Can I—” A sudden, sharp smell of Common magic washes over us, then is gone as quick as it came. “—think… um…” My speech slows as I look at my companions. Catalina was not using her magic a second ago.

“Saphira?” Catalina asks.

I don’t respond. My heat sense…
I look around. That’s… exactly what I’d expect, from my senses… but…

“Saphira?” Catalina repeats.


“What?” Lucy asks.

“Look at yourself.” She looks down. That’s not likely to tell her anything.

“Not that.” I take off and grab ahold of her fluffy tail (seriously, what animals besides squirrels have those?) and squeeze.


I land back on the table and motion to our surroundings. In addition to my four buddies now being catgirls (and Diane and Catalina at roughly three-quarters size), everyone that I can see and sense is a catgirl. Everyone. I know that you can have a strangely high proportion of a room be a single sex at random, but I don’t think that all 500-plus people in my range should be female. And have cat ears and a fluffy tail. And be shrunken to various degrees, and roughly half have FV5-style figures and strange outfits that look like they’re from “adult magazines,” and…

Somebody used a Common spell with a modifier, I bet. Mymoir time.

“Spell Modifiers. Modifiers can do any number of things to change the effects of a spell, but most change how they target objects or people. For example, an area explosion with a Wall modifier will only cause an explosion when the targeted object is attacked.”

I skip ahead in the article.

“See the table below…” Here we go. Um… “Blast: Changes a single- or multi-target spell to affect an area. This modifier usually affects a small- to mid-size area, such as the interior of a room or building, and will generally either lessen the effect or leave the caster near-burned out.” Could be. Is there another?

Oh. I… really hope it was Blast.

“Saphira?” Rhoda asks when I open my eyes.

“Yes?”

“I can’t undo it!” Catalina bursts. “I’m stuck!”

“Then I guess we can safely conclude that it wasn’t you. Are you tired?” She’s not burned out, I can tell that much.

“No. Why can’t I fix it?”

“At a guess… someone else around here has similar magic. Hold on a second.” Elliot should be nearby, but not at the mall.

Saphira: Elliot, I’ve got a somewhat-urgent question for you.

Elliot: Does it have anything to do with the fact that Ellen is now half-cat?

Saphira: Probably. Where are you?
Elliot: At home, studying. Or, I was, until Ellen came and asked me to call Tedd.

Uh-oh.

Saphira: What’d Tedd say?

Elliot: I haven’t called him yet. You’re at the mall, right? He should be there with Grace.

Saphira: Can you take a look at the Spell Modifiers section in the Mymoir?

There’s about a minute wait before he says anything else.

Elliot: Is everyone around you half-cat, too?

Saphira: Cat-girls, specifically.

Elliot: Are you telling me that someone used Nova in peacetime!?  

24 October 2014  
6:37 PM CST

Nova is the sort of spell modifier that no one hopes to encounter. Usually, the people who use it die shortly afterwards, either from the spell they used with the modifier or from it using so much of their magic that they die. I really hope that wasn’t the case, here.

“Saphira?” Diane almost meows at me. “What happened?”

I roll my eyes. “We have a burnt-out caster to catch.”

“Burnt out?” Lucy asks.

“As in, they used all of their magic and then some in a single spell. Best guess, we just got a combination of a catgirl spell with the modifier Nova.”


I sigh. “Because it is really bad. It’s the sort of modifier that’s typically used to end wars in a single use. It changes a single- or multi-target spell into one that affects everyone within a few miles of the caster, including the caster. It also tends to have a strengthening effect on one or more of the original spell’s other effects, such as piercing resistances, increasing duration, increasing strength of an effect, and so on. It clearly didn’t get past my resistance, but that would just leave another effect to be boosted, so I’m hoping for a mild one.”

“When has this sort of spell been used in the past?” Diane questions.

“Most famously?” I search the Mymoir. “A pair of casters, both with the Nova spell, traveled to a border town nearest the approaching army. In the dead of night, one caster that had drawn the short straw made his way into the center of the enemy camp, while the other sat in the middle of town. When the moon hit its peak, the casters both used Nova: the one in the enemy camp boosted their mouse-transformation spell, and the one in town boosted their hawk-transformation spell. The next day, the entire invading army was gone. It was a month before the hawks regained their human forms, and longer still before the damage to the town was repaired.”

“Ouch. I’m kinda glad it’s just catgirls,” Catalina comments.
“Don’t say that yet. Let’s track down our caster first. And if they don’t have a magic book, they’d better hope we can get them one soon.” Because if Ellen was changed by the spell, Mr. Verres almost certainly was, if he’s at home. And if that’s the case, he won’t rest until everything possible is undone. (If he’s out of town, that doesn’t mean I won’t contact him to try and fix this faster. I barred Tedd from gender transformations for a reason.)

Elliot’s calling Tedd and telling him to head for the food court, so… Eh, I don’t want to have unforeseen difficulties due to my size. I move to the floor and end my spell. “Rhoda, can you undo the shrink?” I ask.

“Sure.” She’s gotten better since she first did this to me, and now knows how to just end the spell early. A few seconds later, I’m back to my normal stature. Which… actually towers over most of the people around me, now. Lucy is still full size, though.

“Okay, you’re pretty tall,” Lucy comments. “I can see why Rhoda would shrink you.”

I grin. “I’m taller than you, but only just. You want Rhoda to shrink you?”

Lucy glares at Rhoda, who has her hands raised. “No! Bad kitty!”

Diane gets up from her seat. Due to her size change, she only barely gets taller. “Are we going to do any actual finding, or are we just going to mess around?”

I answer her. “I’m waiting on Tedd, who was apparently already at the mall. Although, now that I think about it…”

Saphira: You can tell, with your senses, who around you is a catgirl, right?

Elliot: Yeah. It’s not exactly hard. You want me to fly around to find the edge?

Saphira: Yep. It should be a circle centered on the caster. If you can give me a building to look in or something, that’d help a bunch.

Elliot: I’ll be looking, too. And knowing how many people were changed might help.

Saphira: As long as it didn’t cover the whole city, we should be able to take care of it in a reasonable amount of time.

Elliot: I sure hope so.

“And now Elliot should be looking for the edge of the effect, which would then tell him the center. So long as the culprit wasn’t and isn’t in a car, we should be able to track them down.” I sigh. “At least I can tell by the effect that it was likely just someone not thinking things through rather than an actual bad person.”

Catalina looks around, then back to me. “What sort of person gets Nova, anyway?”

I shake my head. “It’s Common magic, so… people who like stuff like this. Or have a pressing desire to cause destruction on a wide scale, I suppose. If I were to guess, I’d assume that whoever did this really likes catgirls and fantasizes about them all the time.” And people say that anime doesn’t do any harm.

24 October 2014
6:52 PM CST
“Sorry about my lateness,” Tedd apologizes when he finally arrives. Neither he nor Grace are catgirls, but he probably resisted it, and Grace would’ve morphed back to normal like she can with any enchantment. “It was a little tough to get around all the people between us and here.”

“Hang on,” Diane stops him. “Why aren’t you two transformed?”

“Haven’t I seen you selling wands?” Lucy asks.

“Yep!” Grace smiles. “That’s probably why Elliot called us.” She looks at Diane. “As for your question, I use Genetic magic and am practically immune to transformation. Teddy can resist almost any magic without trying, ’cause he’s a wandmaker.”

“ Elliot called you because, first, Ellen thought Tedd did it,” I correct Grace. “I—”

“Liking catgirls doesn’t mean I’d do something this mean!” Tedd interrupts me.

“I know that,” I tell him with a smile, trying not to laugh. “I told him to tell you to come over here, because I figured you might be able to pick out a burnt-out caster.”

“Burnt out?” Tedd verifies.

“They used a crazy powerful spell. Ellen was—” Mymoir PM. “Hold on.”

Elliot: The center is in the mall, and it’s about four miles across.

Crap. That’s a lot of people to search through here. At least it stopped at a small range, but that probably means a greater strengthening effect.

Saphira: That’s a really small range, for Nova at least. Can you narrow the search area?

Elliot: I think it’s the north end?

Saphira: Opposite the food court?

Elliot: Yeah, that.

I open my eyes. “We’ve got a spot. Time to hike.”

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The good part is that it happened in Moperville. People are taking this remarkably well, at least right now. I don’t see any panic, and though Diane said it’s not impacting her thoughts, we’ve noticed a few people acting like playful kittens. (That’s why Diane commented on the lack of mental effects in the first place.) The catgirls seem to range from about one-quarter to full size, and a little under half have exaggerated figures and girly outfits. The rest just look like normal girls, except cat-ified. Given the people I came here with, it’s a fair bet that the really altered people weren’t girls in the first place.

Hey, that catgirl looks familiar. I pull out my phone and call Susan. *Ring…*

“Saphira?” She sounds fine. Calm, normal.

“When I tell you what happened, you’re going to be real happy you aren’t here right now.”

“So why are you calling me?” I guess she suspects what’s coming, but I can’t imagine she knows the nature.
“That catgirl with dark blue hair that you met at work: was she a caster?”

“Where’s this coming from?” Susan’s voice tells me she’s definitely startled.

“I’ll tell you later, but I need to know now. Do you remember?”

“No.” Pause. “I mean, I remember that she wasn’t.”

“Okay. Thanks! Hopefully, I’ll just be telling you with pictures.” Because I can guarantee that people took photos, even if I didn’t. *Click*

I walk over to the blue-haired catgirl that matches the photo Susan showed me. She’s chatting with another girl who seems to be originally female, though the former is full-size and the latter is half-size. I tap on her shoulder. “Who—” she starts before recognizing me. “Oh! You’re the dragon, right? Saphira?” At least she seems happy to see me. I’ll try to mask my irritation.

“Yeah. I’m curious, and I thought you might know the answer: do you know anyone that can turn other people into catgirls?” I’m not a police investigator. I’m a dragon. Straightforward is the way.

“That’d be me,” she hesitates.

“That’d be me,” the other girl volunteers. That was easy. I should’ve guessed, really: she’s wearing a hoodie that’s meant to make the wearer look like they have a tail and cat ears. It looks a little strange on her with her current form: her white hair, tail and ears don’t mesh with the yellow-brown of her outfit. White is also a really strange hair color for people who aren’t burnt out, but I don’t want to assume.

“Tedd?” I call him over. When he’s next to me, I continue. “Is she burnt out, you think?”

He squints at her. “Looks like it.”

“Why aren’t you catgirls?” the white-haired girl asks.

“We resisted it. As for you… do you have a magic book?” I’m doing my best to stay calm, but she’s caused lots of problems with a single spell. And as Moperville’s dragon, it’s my responsibility to fix it, to the maximum extent possible. Elliot got lucky.

“Like something from *Harry Potter*?”

I don’t recall the books well enough to answer. “A book that tells you what all of your spells are and what they do.”

“Oh. Those exist?”

I roll my eyes and turn around. “Naomi!” I call, looking slightly upwards and hoping she decided to follow me tonight. “Are you there?” I can feel all the eyes on me thanks to my apparently nonsensical act. No answer, and no such luck.

Mymoir PM.

Elliot: Ashley called me about what happened, and I sent her to you. Is that alright?

Saphira: Sure. Have you called Mr. Verres?

Elliot: Why?
Saphira: We might be lucky enough that the government has an undo wand. In the meantime, I’ve found the culprit—a teenage girl—and am talking with her now. I’ll do my best to avoid panicking the people around me.

Elliot: Will do.

I open my eyes to see an… enthusiastically-dressed short girl floating in front of me. By smell, she’s an immortal. Not Naomi, but I’ll take what I can get.

“Are you back with us?” she asks with an obviously false Japanese accent.

“Yes. Are you willing to help me?”

The girl nods energetically, a huge grin on her face. “Naomi said that immortals aren’t at your beck and call, you know.”

“That’s grand.” I bet she’s laughing her butt off at the predicament I’m in. “I’m sure you know me, but I’m Saphira. And you are?” I hold out my hand.

“Hanma.” She shakes my hand with just as much energy as she nodded. “What you’re asking is legal, right?”

“Just for a magic book for this girl.” I point at… the white-haired girl. I need a name, I think. I turn around and tap the girl and her friend on their shoulders. “Can I have your names? I think I missed that question.”

The blue-haired one answers first. “Felix, sorry. Who’s that behind you?”

“I’m Hanma!” the immortal responds excitedly. “And you, the caster?”

“Kitty. Um… Am I in trouble?” I think she’s starting to get it.

“Not with me. See?” And now Hanma is a catgirl. It’s not so big of a deal for her, though. I think the main problem here is that, while stronger immortals might have the magic power to change everyone back, it’s illegal for them to do that. That, and I don’t think I know any immortals that would want to do that if they could. “Now, you don’t have a magic book, and I’m all for people learning things, so here you go!” She reaches behind her back and somehow pulls a book that wasn’t there from under her superhero cape. (Her garments make me think of electric superheroes: goggles on her forehead, oversized rubber gloves…)

“A History of Rubber?” Kitty asks, looking at the cover.

“The books are made to look uninteresting,” I clarify. “Can you open it up and look for any sort of area blast?” The book isn’t terribly thick (maybe thirty pages), so it shouldn’t take long. It looks massive in her hands, though, shrunken as she is.

Kitty nods and starts skimming. “Here it is!” I move around beside her and skim the page. That’s Nova, alright, though it’s not called the same. Let’s see… wide blast… strong spell… burns out… oh boy.


“Please don’t tell other people what’s in there,” I answer quietly. “If you do, I’m not responsible for what happens next.” I put my hand over my face and think. Why me? Why’d I have to get someone whose Nova
We’re approaching an hour into the crisis, and people are starting to realize that something probably should’ve happened by now. No panic, but with what I read, it’ll happen at some point.

Okay. Breathe, Saphira. The spell isn’t completely permanent. It’s still an enchantment, even if it’s a base form modifier with an unlimited duration. If Tedd can make a wand that removes active enchantments, the target will change back. And obviously, Ashley can fix it, although we don’t have any record of a Mass Restore spell and Restore is already pretty powerful. I don’t know how to prioritize this.

If Ashley starts fixing people, she’ll be quickly overwhelmed. I don’t want her to fix our friends first, because I know they can handle it. I guess she should start with people that were originally guys, but…

Saphira: Elliot, have you—

Elliot: Stop.

Saphira: What?

Elliot: You’re short-circuiting, aren’t you? I’ve told the other dragons. Mr. Verres says he doesn’t have anything, but he can certainly arrest the girl responsible.

Saphira: No.

Elliot: Za?

Saphira: That’s not what dragons do. We don’t arrest people, even if they do something wrong. We teach. It’s clear that this girl didn’t know what she was doing, and she definitely did something terrible as a result. But she will learn, as will anybody else. I thank you for stepping in for me, and I do want to know what the other dragons think for how best to go about fixing it. But I’ll be protecting Kitty from any angry mob that might form, though she’ll most certainly see the consequences of her actions.

Elliot: … Okay. I get it. Did you see her magic book?

Saphira: There’s no mental effects, but… the spell… is essentially permanent. It’s a base modification of unlimited duration. It’ll read as an active enchantment and be removed the same way, but no additional enchantment will remove it, and simply waiting won’t help, either.

Elliot: That sounds like Ashley is a quick fix for the most dire and Tedd has a good goal for his next wand at the shop.

Saphira: It might be a bit too powerful of a spell to just stick in a nail. He might need a railroad spike for that one.

Elliot: Ha! Okay. You chat with Tedd, and I’ll reroute Ashley. From the other dragons, I think emergency services get dibs. They estimate maybe forty uses of Restore from full charge, and another three to four per day.

Ouch. Okay, I’m glad Elliot took that from me.
Elliot: If you check the main chat, I think Sean has something of a speech for you, too. I’ll tell him about the spell first, so give him a minute or two.

Saphira: Thank you. I really mean it.

Elliot: I can tell.

I take a deep breath. Well, then. I look over at my friends—Grace is clearly worried for me—and give them a pained smile. Then I turn back to Kitty and Felix, who are chatting with Hanma in hushed tones.

“Did you read it?” I whisper in Kitty’s ear. It’s a lot easier with her cat ears.

“Huh?” She whirls to face me. “Oh, yeah. I know I wanted that, but Hanma let me know why you’d be kinda mad.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “I’m not mad. Just frustrated. My job as Moperville’s dragon is to try to prevent people from doing dumb stuff, and barring that, fix it when it happens. You just so happened to do a dumb thing that I can’t fix.”

“You can’t?” Felix asks.

“I can do my level best to put us on the track to reversing it, but for the moment, the vast majority of the people changed are stuck. Here; let me introduce you to the person who’ll be able to do the most to reverse it.” Tedd had returned to the group with the rest of my friends when I called for Naomi, so I gesture in that direction. Half-size Kitty is short, and I almost feel like I’m dealing with a little kid.

The trio starts moving in the indicated direction, and I amble back to the group a little faster than them. A small number of people have noticed the three non-catgirl people in the area, but they’ve taken to staring more than crowding, so I can deal with that. “Saphira? Are you alright?” Catalina asks when I’m close enough to hear.

“I’ll manage,” I grimace. “Elliot is helping out a ton, so I’ll just deal with some of the more direct stuff—the stuff that I should do as Moperville’s dragon.”

“What does that mean, anyway?” Lucy responds.

“It means that I’m supposed to teach and protect the town. In this case, I’m supposed to do my best to prevent and/or fix stuff like this, and keep people calm while stuff that takes time goes on. A dragon is something of a shield between a society and magic, sometimes literally.” Especially for barrier dragons. Kitty finally picks her way through the crowd to our group. Hanma naturally has no issue, and Felix isn’t trailing by much. (Susan said that I’m second only to her on picking my way through a crowd.) “Tedd, may I introduce Kitty, Felix, and Hanma?” I point to each in turn.

Rhoda and Catalina stare at Hanma with wide eyes. “Are you an immortal, or a cosplayer?” Catalina asks.

“Both!” Hanma answers happily.

Before Catalina can bolt, I grab her shoulder. “Hanma is just helping. Although, honestly, I don’t see anything else she can help with… but I guess this is just a load of fun for you?” I aim the last bit at Hanma.

“Yep! I mean, I feel bad that you have to deal with the fallout of it, but if there weren’t any
consequences, I’d be all for this.” Classic display of the morality of immortals. At least she considers my feelings—that’s a step up from what Pandora might’ve done.

“Back on target,” I prompt, “Kitty is the one who did this, so it looks like she’s burnt out for a few months at least. Based on the details in her magic book, this all is an active enchantment on each target of the spell—that is, it’ll have to be dismissed individually. As for the duration… infinite.”

Grace wraps her hands around Catalina’s mouth to keep her from shouting. “Infinite?” Tedd verifies quietly.

“It’ll last as long as it’s not dismissed. It’s a base form modification, so other enchantments will just stack with it instead of overwriting it. That’s why Catalina can’t undo it: her magic can’t find the enchantment. Tedd, could you work on a wand to remove such enchantments?”

He squints and looks around, then puts his hand on his chin thoughtfully. “I could certainly try. Can’t Ashley use that Restore spell, though?”

“That’s a powerful spell. It uses a lot of magic, because it’s meant to undo stuff like how she first used it, as far as dragons can tell. It’s a huge waste of energy taking off this spell, and from the other dragons’ estimation, she might have enough magic to fix fifty people by the end of the weekend.”

Tedd tilts his head back. “…I don’t imagine the numbers get better with time?”

“Three or four people per day, once she’s out of magic.”

“Gotcha. I’ll get right to work, then. Grace? Science time!” Grace groans slightly, but she’s smiling. “And you—Kitty, was it? I’m gonna need to look at your magic book extensively. Can I have it?”

She just got it, and that’s reflected in her clutching it to her chest. “I’ll get it back to you when he’s done with it, okay?” I offer. “It’s not like you can use magic again until you’re not burned out anymore.”

“What’s ‘burned out’ mean?” Felix asks, and I explain.

24 October 2014
7:39 PM CST

It’s getting late, and I really want food. Just a bit longer. Hopefully.

My companions have accepted (mostly: Diane’s still complaining, though she knows it won’t do any good) that they’re stuck as catgirls for the time being, Sean’s prepared my speech, and of course, Channel 4 News showed up. Joy upon joy. At least someone managed to direct Carol over to me after she started filming, and she can get my words out to the people that aren’t here and are still affected. Also, both Carol and her cameraperson are catgirls. I think the cameraperson was a guy, but they’re still full-size, while Carol is just over half-size. Good news for Carol: at least for the duration of the interview, Rhoda made her full size so I don’t have to squat to be in the picture with her. (To keep Rhoda’s abilities a secret, she did so in the bathroom.)

“In case you don’t remember or can’t recognize me, I’m Carol of Channel 4 News,” she introduces herself to me and the camera. “I assure you that neither myself nor the rest of the people here are wearing costumes: somehow, we’ve all become catgirls.”

“Yes. If you don’t recognize me, I’m Saphira, the dragon of Moperville. I’m not a catgirl because
the spell that transformed everyone could be resisted, though it would be difficult.” I look directly at Carol instead of slightly towards the camera. “I have something of a speech prepared to try and keep people calm. Is it alright if I launch into that, or do you need more time to set the stage?” Thankfully, people noticed the news camera and started watching and listening to me.

I think Carol has gotten a bit more training since I last saw her, because she looks like she’s doing the two-location conference call news thing. Eventually, she replies. “I believe we’re set. Go right ahead.”

She holds the mike towards me, and I take a deep breath before beginning. I speak at a volume such that the people around me can still hear: “I would first like to clarify that this is a speech meant for people directly or indirectly affected by what happened today. For anyone else, I’d like you to pay attention so that we can avoid stuff like this in the future.

“Today, around 6:30 PM, nearly everyone within about two miles of the Moperville City Center Mall was transformed into a catgirl, irrespective of their original sex. I fully realize the sorts of consequences of such a change, but it appears that the caster who did it was not aware of the problems. In the hour since that time, I’ve assessed the damage, acted on potential immediate solutions, discovered the origin of the problem, discerned the nature of the spell, and initiated long-term solutions.” A reminder that Sean wrote this. I’m interpreting his ideas, but his ideas have a large vocabulary. ‘In short, I’ve done everything that can possibly be done to begin work on reversing the change.

“You might notice that I said I’m beginning the work. The truth is, there aren’t any feasible immediate solutions. The spell is an active enchantment on each target that modified their base form. For people not versed in magic, it’s a spell that can be removed, but can’t be overwritten, and must be removed from each individual that’s affected. I know of exactly one person who can remove such a spell at the current time, but she can only help an extremely limited number of people. As such, she will be helping emergency service workers and other vital professionals if and when they show up to work with their badge or uniform and cannot work their job as-is. This is not a preference item.

“However, I know of at least one individual with the ability to develop a solution that will work on everyone affected. They have been notified and have already begun their work.” Tedd and Grace went home after chatting with Kitty a bit longer. Kitty and Felix actually stuck around, chatting with my friends, while I braced myself for this. “Unfortunately, I do not have an estimate on the time to such a solution, and unlike most enchantments, this one has no duration limit: if not removed, it will not end. Rest assured that everything in my power is being done to solve this issue as soon as humanly possible.”

Carol waits a few beats before continuing the interview. “That’s all?”

“I don’t have anything else to say, really. I can answer questions, but I don’t think you’ll get much from them.”

“One from me: do you know who did this?”

I sigh. “Yes. I know who cast the spell. It’s how I know exactly what the spell does. I did not know them prior to their use of the spell, and for their safety, I will not reveal their identity.” And Elliot already reviewed this with Mr. Verres. The legal ramifications for Kitty essentially boil down to a warning that the appropriate government agent will deliver directly to both Kitty and her parents (as she’s a senior in high school right now). Doing something like this again will result in serious fines or jail time (from interruption of emergency services) but “I didn’t know” is actually a valid defense here.
“You won’t?” Carol actually looks a little disappointed.

“Mob justice isn’t just. I know who did it, and the appropriate people in law enforcement know who did it, and that’s all you need to know.”

Carol nods. “Okay. I can take that.” She pauses. “What did you mean by ‘no estimate’ on how long a solution will take?”

“Exactly that. If I give an estimate, people will extrapolate, and they’ll blame me for any issues if I’m off by even a tiny bit. The person working on it is talented and can be trusted with the task. My general advice is that it’ll probably take a while, but it’s extremely unlikely to be totally permanent. Dragons know, historically, of a Common spell that would remove this one, but we don’t presently know anyone with the spell. The person who can remove this spell right now isn’t using Common magic.”

“How limited is this person in removing the ‘catgirl’ spell?”

“Fewer than five people per day, once she runs through her built-up magic pool. I believe she normally refills the whole thing in a week or two, to give you an idea.”

Carol’s eyes widen at my response. There’s no use in hiding the number, really: people in emergency services will soon find out, and at least those types of people are less likely to complain about minor inconveniences when others actually need help. “Aren’t there a lot of catgirls right now?”

“Yes. Probably thousands. I literally can’t help everyone right now. The only reason I’m not breaking down from stress is that I have friends who care about me.” I start to visibly shiver as I reach the end of my calmness capacity. “I didn’t even write my speech: I gave the information to another dragon who does that sort of stuff a lot better and isn’t freaking out.”

“Okay.” Carol looks like she’s about to wrap up the interview, then my stomach rumbles loudly. “Maybe you should eat?” she comments, doing a poor job of hiding her smile.

“I was just about to buy dinner when all this happened,” I laugh sheepishly. “I’m sure my friends are just as hungry.”

24 October 2014
7:45 PM CST

With my interview over, I walk back to my friends. Rhoda waves, and Carol resumes her base form’s current size. A little awkward, but she’s still taller than a fair number of people. “Ready for food?” I ask.

“Well, everyone knows you are,” Diane replies snidely.

“Yes, please,” Catalina answers with a grimace. “I’m not sure how much I can fit like this, but I was hungry before all this.”

Kitty moves in front of me and purrs. “Thanks for not, y’know…”

“You’re welcome. Dragons teach and protect. I don’t think it’d be right.”

Catalina sighs and looks around. “It’s funny. When I first got my magic, I did whatever I could to try to prevent something like this from happening, even though I wanted to see it. And now it happens, and I wasn’t even part of it.”
“When you got magic?” Kitty questions her.

“I can make myself and others into… cat-people? I think that’s the word.”

I shake my head. “I think I’ve heard ‘cat-folk.’”

“She just adds the features,” Rhoda clarifies hastily. “Ears and tail. Boys stay boys, and no size change.”

“Oh,” Kitty says. “I think catgirls are better, but I guess not everyone does.”

“Well, you’re stuck for as long as you’re burnt out,” I comment. “Using Common magic on a burnt-out caster is a bad idea, so I guess you’ll learn the ins and outs of being a small catgirl with no magic.”

“How long is that, anyway?” Lucy asks.

“At least six months,” Kitty moans. I think she’s more put out for not being able to change anyone else than for being stuck.

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Kitty and Felix left with a promise to chat some more later, and the rest of us got food. “Hey, do you think I need to eat as much like this?” Diane asks as she sits next to Lucy.

“Dragons’ knowledge plus math equals 42% as much food, roughly,” I answer.

“How do you figure?”

“Common magic is interesting. The smaller you are, the less you need to eat, and it’s proportional to the volumetric scale. My phone’s calculator says 3/4 scale in one dimension is about 42% by volume.”

Diane looks back to her meal. “Awesome! Leftovers for tomorrow, I guess.”

“Hey, Saphira,” Catalina starts, “would you want to be a catgirl? Just to blend in, I mean.”

I shrug. “I’m personally fine with it, but I just appeared on the news without the change, and people don’t know about your magic. If Tedd was selling catfolk wands, I’d let you, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea until this is over and done with.”

“Do you think people would want catfolk wands?” Lucy asks. “This was forced on people.”

“Eh…” I wobble my hand.

“Actually, they might,” Rhoda responds. “Kind of like shaving your head for a cancer victim.”

My eyes widen. “I’d rather you not compare this to a deadly disease, please. Your bodies can function perfectly fine as they are, almost as though they’d always been that way. I do get your point, though. I’ll pass it along, although he’d need to look at Catalina’s magic to make the wand.”

Catalina nods. “I’m fine with that.”

We take a few bites in relative silence. “This sucks,” Diane complains again. “I’m gonna be the only catgirl at my school, and they’re not from around here. How will I even drive there?”
“Only?” I verify. “Sarah’s not here?”

“No. She said she’s coming by tomorrow.” Oh, the irony.

I raise my eyebrows. “Has anyone even told her what happened?” No one answers. “I guess she’ll find out soon,” I chuckle. “Back to driving there, I think your parents live far enough from this spot that they’re fine. They probably can drive you.”

“Yeah, they said they could pick me up from Lucy’s place,” Diane sighs. I don’t blame her, but at least she’s not traveling too far. Nanase would really be stuck. It’s especially nice that Diane is still in the state. She can just tell people to watch Carol’s segment.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow?” Rhoda asks me.

“After flying, I have a combination of homework and checking in on Ashley.” I’ll see about meeting with Tedd for that scales poll. “I’m sure she’ll be exhausted, and Elliot was supposed to be studying instead of dealing with catgirl stuff, so it’s my turn to keep Ashley healthy tomorrow. I hope she’ll be alright, but unexpected crises tend to put people on edge.”

And I thought the most I’d learn while attending community college would be Statics.
One thing I didn’t think about was the proximity of the Pompoms residence to the mall. Long story short, Ms. Pompoms is a catgirl. Full size and no aging difference, but a catgirl all the same. She said she had to adjust how she sits in a chair, but thankfully, she saw Carol’s segment and was understanding with me.

Elliot said that he and Ashley first went by the fire department (in range of Nova) and the police station (out of range). Ashley still had a bit left, so they decided to go to the hospital (out of range, thankfully), and she went back there today, just in case more surgeons need her. As a dragon, I’ll never need to go to a hospital for myself, as I can just shift and be well, but I’m surprised that I had to look up the location today. People getting injured is sort of normal for magic training and whatnot.

With the directions Elliot gave me, I make my way over to the waiting area outside of the intensive care ward. Not the most pleasant place to sit and wait for hours. My bag just has some homework and my phone in it, but the idea is to keep Ashley company while she waits for her magic to recharge.

Oh. Wow. I thought she already seemed small and helpless, but as a catgirl, she’s only about two and a half feet tall. I don’t think her compassion will let her fix herself while others are stuck, so she’s waiting on Tedd just as much as the rest of the crowd.

“…can’t treat my patients like this!” one catgirl in a white lab coat is screeching at Ashley. There’s a line behind her, but they seem either purposefully disengaged or only vaguely interested in what’s happening. She towers over Ashley and her clothes don’t exactly fit well, nor are they the sort of attire I’d expect from an on-duty doctor. Maybe she didn’t have anything that fit her hyper-sexualized and smaller figure? (I only read Nova, not the catgirl spell. I don’t know if the overblown figures are actually guys or just a random consequence of Kitty’s spell.)

“I told you, I’m out!” Ashley is nearly crying. Nope. I cannot have that.

“Cut it out!” I shout at the ‘doctor.’ “Show some professionalism! Stressing her out will not help!” It helps in getting spells. It does not help in recharging magic. In fact, I think it makes things worse.

I didn’t honestly expect the doctor to calm down, so I’m not surprised when she turns on me. I can take it, though; flying is great for relaxing and sorting through my thoughts and feelings. “I am the head surgeon at this institution, and I will not be insulted! Tell this girl to heal me at once!” And judging by the line, Ashley just ran out.

I suppress my desire to roll my eyes and instead walk straight up to the head surgeon. “Sir,” I address her. (To my knowledge, that’s the preferred address for a superior in the military, regardless of gender.) “I don’t know what happened before I walked in, but I can tell you this: the Ashley I know wouldn’t keep from healing someone if she was able, no matter how they treated her. Everyone with magic has a finite pool that refills over time. Using lots of spells or particularly powerful spells like Restore can drain that pool very quickly. Ashley will know when she can use her spell again, but in the meantime, yelling at her is only stressing her out, and stress can reduce magic recharge rates.”
“This is absurd! I should—”

“You’re already speaking with the highest authority on the matter. And sir—you’re at a hospital. How would you feel if a patient demanded a free surgery and started threatening you when you refused, because what they demanded was something you simply didn’t have the resources to give?” I back up a couple of steps and sit to Ashley’s left, my right hand on her chair for support. She wraps her hand around two of my fingers. “Ashley is here of her own free will. She’s not obligated to help anyone, yet she’s run out of magic without even helping herself. I’m certain the head surgeon can delegate a little, no?”

The head surgeon goes to yell some more, but catches herself and takes a step back, sharply dropping her hands to her sides. She takes a deep breath. “Fine. Can you tell me why you’re here?”

“To keep Ashley company while she waits for her magic to recharge. Her boyfriend would be here, but the fire department and police station visits last night tuckered him out. The fact that Ashley is still going is amazing, I have to say.” Elliot said they were at it past midnight. I was surprised he could fly today, but he said he was going home for a real rest afterwards. I still haven’t seen Sarah, but maybe I’ll head over to the wand shop stand at some point. If I can persuade Ashley to get some rest. “Before you ask, no, I didn’t know she was out. I certainly suspected that she’d run out soon, but I was surprised that she had any left after last night.”

The surgeon raises her right hand with two fingers up, then drops it again and storms off as the line disperses. One girl waits a few seconds, hugging herself nervously, then walks in front of us stopping a few feet away. “Can I help you?” I ask.

The girl shakes her head vigorously. “No—I mean, I wanted to thank you. It felt really nice seeing her denied like that.” She pauses before my blank look urges her on. “I—She’s my boss.”

My expression moves back to neutral. “Oh, I get it. Not the best boss, huh?”

The girl laughs quietly. “You could say that. She’s really demanding of her nurses. I mean, I get the importance, but she could be gentler about it.” Another pause. “I’d better get going. Are you staying here?”

I look to Ashley, who answers right away. “I’m not actually at empty, but I don’t have enough to cast Restore again. I’ll stay until I can cast one more time. Then I think my friends would be happier if I went home and got some rest.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, we would. Did you sleep at all last night?”

Ashley looks away. “No.”

“I don’t know about this magic stuff, but you need your rest!” the nurse admonishes her. “I don’t care if one person has to wait a few extra hours! Go home!”

The two of us are astonished by the sudden outburst from the otherwise-shy nurse. Ashley laughs first between us. “You’re sure your boss won’t mind?” I ask.

“She can afford to wait. This really isn’t as bad as she makes it out to be.” The nurse doesn’t seem as altered as her boss (slight figure), but I shrug.

I look at Ashley for a few seconds before she relents with a sleepy nod. She had certainly looked tired, but managed to avoid acting it until now. “Okay. Can you fly me home?”

“I don’t have a way to strap you to my back, but I think I could carry you normally if you can’t
make the walk.” She’s normally light, but most humans aren’t very heavy at 1/8 mass.

“That’s good enough.”

25 October 2014
10:45 AM CST

I ended up carrying Ashley simply because she couldn’t keep up with someone so much taller than herself, although I had to wake her once I knocked on her front door. Her parents were also changed—actually, in a pretty similar way. They’re all tiny. Though I did finally get confirmation from her dad that the exaggerated figures belong to men. Still, the pair seemed to be taking it well, considering how well they took Ashley’s first few dates with Elliot.

It’s probably better that she’s part of the solution instead of knowing the source of the problem.

Ashley’s sleeping. Elliot’s sleeping. I don’t have too much homework… I guess I should go check in with the irony squad at the market. Kitty should be getting her legal warning around now, so it’s just as well that Tedd is procuring funds. (Not to say the government isn’t willing to help him a bit for this specific project.) Once at a takeoff point, I shift and fly on my way.

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It’s a town-wide market, so only about a third of the people here are catgirls. Still, it’s a significant number, and I’m happy to see that it’s not bothering people so much that they’d abandon their weekly habits over something major like this. Then again, the fact that so many people were changed might have something to do with that: people don’t have much to hide. Tedd’s booth doesn’t exactly move around a lot, so I make my way over to where I know it’ll be. (Besides, the smell of magic is a little hard to hide.)

The very first thing I notice is that Grace is in a catgirl form. Sarah isn’t, so I guess Grace just used her own magic for that. “Hello!” I greet the trio. “How’s business?” They seem a little less busy than other times I’ve come by.

“It could be better,” Grace answers. “I’ve found this form helps, though a bunch of people ask how come I’m transformed when Tedd is not.”

Sarah waves goodbye to the person she was helping, then turns to me. “Before you ask, yes, I appreciate the irony. Although I’m really just glad I came in today. I think it’d be sweeter revenge if Tedd hadn’t resisted it.”

Grace simply nods at Sarah before continuing. “For the record, the spell did transform me. This is the form I got. I just changed back immediately.”

I nod back. “I figured as much. And Tedd can drop enchantments on himself more easily than dragons can. The trick is sticking that ability in a wand.”

“Touching people doesn’t work? I know you do that when you spar with Chris and Justin, and it drops their enchantments,” Grace notes.

I shake my head. “That only works for certain kinds of enchantments. Not for Eliza, nor for this. I held Ashley’s hand today to no effect.”

“How is she, anyway?”

“She ran out of magic, a nurse scolded her for not sleeping and I took her home. Carried her,
actually, so it’s definitely a no on dropping the change that way.”

Tedd finishes his restocking of the table from the box next to him. “You’ve got all of those spells that use part of the dragon form, right? And you can use them on other people?” he asks.

“Yes and sometimes and why?”

“What about the part that ends enchantments?”

I cock my head. I never thought of that.

Let’s see what a search says. Um… first result is Restore. Nope. Using Draconic magic? Oh!

Saphira: Jorge? What sort of energy requirement does Sean’s Enchantment Vanquisher carry?

Jorge: You can’t cast it.

Saphira: It’s a mass spell?

Jorge: No. It just takes way more than any dragon has. I was happy that my Halloweeny Disguise I based on it took so little. We had to figure out storing magic in scales and gems before we could ever cast the spell.

Oh. I don’t think I have any of those right now.

Saphira: What if Elliot helped?

Jorge: Maybe. It’d take all of both of your magic pools.

Saphira: And Ellen?

Jorge: Then almost certainly. But it’d still take most or all of your magic.

Saphira: So choose wisely, then. Thanks!

Jorge: No problem.

“Any results?” Tedd asks.

“One. It’s more costly than Restore and doesn’t work as well. It should be able to drop this, but… well, it takes two and a half dragons’ worth of magic.”


I blush and scratch the back of my head. “You know me that well, huh?”

“Well, I knew you wouldn’t just let it sit, and it’d be good research for me. Who did you plan to use it on?”

“Diane. She’s the only non-local person I’m aware of, and it’ll save her a lot of trouble.”

“Ask first,” Sarah interjects. “I can cart her around if she needs it.” My phone vibrates and I start to pull it out. “We’re not roommates, but we are in the same dorm.”

“Okay. I’ll let her know.” Let’s see… fire department!?

25 October 2014
“Hello!” I answer frantically. “Saphira speaking!”

“Oh, good!” I’m not familiar with the high voice on the other end. “We’re setting up a blockade in front of a blazing restaurant near Main and Van Buren. Too much of our day crew is still changed, so can you get there soon?”

“Oh of course!” Honestly, I should have expected as much. Elliot and Ashley would’ve only gotten the night crew, and it’s too soon for them to have changed their schedule. I’ve already told Grace about my arrangement with the fire department, so I just tell her “Restaurant on fire” and rush to the nearest takeoff point.

I’m not actually all that far from the fire, according to what the caller said, but I need as much magic as possible so I may as well start up my higher magic recharge rate. It’s not the first fire I’ve put out, but this time the department actually called for me so I’ll be as professional as possible. As soon as I shift I can detect the fire, so I just take off in that direction.

It’s not too large of a blaze, but it’s more than one story, which is a problem. Those buildings have first-floor fast food and upper-floor offices. At least it’s more likely that I’ll just be putting out the fire than actually carrying anyone out.

The cordon isn’t hard to spot, and there’s a nice open spot for me to land, so I go ahead and take it. One shrunken (and busty) catgirl rushes towards me, so I guess they’re in charge. No uniform, but they’re holding a radio. **What can I do to help?**

They don’t waste any time. “Can you tell where the fire is?” she? shouts. It’s sorta loud here, not just from the fire and the water hose.

**Yes. I can cool any part of it, to any temperature. Where should I focus?**

She? uses the radio before responding. “See if you can just keep the fire from spreading. If you cool the burning parts, the whole building might go down.”

**Yessir. I’ll see what I can do.** Defining the area to cool is a lot easier when it’s not just the edges, but I thankfully have a fair amount of practice at this point. It’s not the sort of task I could’ve taken on ten months ago. Still, I’ll definitely need to make a spell to actually do that at all of the edges at once.

About a minute later, **Saphira’s Fire Prevention** is written and active. All it does is define the edges of the fire and lower that area to normal room temperature, but the blaze is large enough that the spell significantly exceeds my recharge rate for magic use. Good thing I barely use any magic while flying, so I’ve still got a nearly-full charge.

With the spell running, I can spare the effort to evaluate its effect. The fire didn’t seem to be spreading much in the first place, but it’s definitely not moving much at all anymore. I think the only places it continues to spread are where something with a low burning point catches fire. **I’ve got a spell for it, now.**

She chats with her radio for a bit. “Is there anything you can do about the smoke?” she eventually shouts.

**No. That’s not really a heat thing.** Condensing moisture from the air is one thing, but smoke is solid particles.
“Can you locate survivors, then?”

**Sure. I can’t tell them apart from your crew, though.**

“Not a problem. Just describe the floor and location, and we’ll do our job.”

25 October 2014
11:43 AM CST

I never knew how long it took to deal with a fire, but I’m happy with the results. Today being a Saturday probably helped a lot, but the office building also held the sorts of businesses that are open on weekends, so we’ve got a small crowd of survivors gathered next to the medical staff. And of course there’s a couple of news stations at the cordon plus a slightly larger crowd. I don’t think people usually watch firefighting, but the people there might also be family and friends of the people that were in the building. And of course it’s my first time doing this, too.

It turns out that the person with the radio is actually not the chief or anything. He said to just call him John. It was his first time leading a job—the chief told him to lead since he couldn’t pull the hose. I guess that explains why he was almost constantly on the radio, but he still seemed confident enough to me.

“You’re alright to change back, you know,” the chief informs me.

**I know. But I’m fine in either form, so unless the media really want to chat with me, I figured I could stay like this for a bit and regain some magic.** It’ll help for when I go to cast that “Enchantment Vanquisher” spell.

“Are you tired?”

**Not really. I might’ve used… a quarter of my magic? The detection of the boundaries probably cost more than actually cooling them.**

He nods, looks at the media, then turns back to me. “I’ll fetch John and have a little chat with them. You’re welcome to come along if you want.”

I bow my head. **I probably should. I’ll be there in a minute.** I take my minute to calm down and prepare myself. I think Channel 4 made Carol the designated reporter for all things magic, because she’s here today, too. Of course, the cameraman isn’t a catgirl this time and Carol is standing on a folding chair to make up for her height. I don’t recognize the other channel. It’s not a national one, I don’t think, but they have a logo on the side instead of a number. Hopefully, they’re as understanding of Moperville as Channel 4 has become. At the very least, they just watched a dragon stand around near a fire and not do anything bad. And the firefighters can vouch for me.

It looks like John and the fire chief are giving preference to Carol. The other network seems to be trying to ask a ton of questions, but Carol is better about letting people talk. As I get close enough to hear, I can tell that several people are trying to talk over the chief, who’s speaking loudly into Carol’s mic.

“…performed admirably and we were able to confine the fire to a relatively small area on the first four floors of the building.” It’s a six-story building, so that doesn’t sound all that great, but I guess fires like that usually damage more than one-eighth (by volume) of a building. “We were also able to locate and evacuate victims with greater accuracy and speed than the normal systematic search.” That’s not to say they didn’t follow up with said search, but they didn’t find anyone with it.

“How, though?” the second reporter asks.
The chief motions to John, who answers the question calmly. The pressure of a reporter is probably nothing compared to walking around in burning buildings. “I called Saphira—Moperville’s dragon—and told her to cool the edges of the fire. Once she was doing that, I had her tell us where the fire victims were, and I relayed it to the team over the radio.” I’m right behind the pair, now. Carol notices me, but the other reporter just seems to miss my presence entirely.

“And where is this dragon now?”

I open my mouth to answer, but Carol does it for me. “Right here!” she exclaims, pointing. Battle of the news stations! I smile. “Saphira: any opening statements for the camera?” Carol points her mic at me once again. She interviews me often enough that I’m getting kind of used to it. Today is truly a different age from when dragons were last well-known.

I hadn’t prepared anything, but my response comes naturally. “I’d like to thank the brave men and women of the Moperville Fire Department for their everyday service. Emergencies are stressful enough when you’re dealing with a small group once or twice every few months—I can’t imagine making something like this my job.”

John and the chief thank me in return before the pushy reporter asks his first question of me. “Who are you?” Fair enough, if you paid no attention.

“Saphira. I’m Moperville’s dragon.”

“What does that mean—‘Moperville’s dragon’?”

“It means that I’m a dragon that lives in Moperville and will protect and serve the place, particularly for magic things. Helping out—”

“You’re a dragon,” he cuts me off.

“Yes.” I use the same Variable Illusion model of myself as I did with Zach, with a five-inch-tall image over my outstretched hand. “This is an image of me. Please don’t try to touch it.” I’m not stupid: I used the sensing part of Conditional Armor so that Variable Illusion will end by itself if something bigger than a small marble tries to touch the thing. Variable Illusion is only for use in unobstructed air.

“What if I try?” he challenges.

“It’ll end on its own so you don’t burn yourself. The image is made of science and math and something like fire.”

He reaches out anyway and, true to my word (and testing with Ellen), the spell ends, the image vanishing instantly. “How did you make that?”

“Magic. Like I said, I’m a dragon.”

He scowls. “I want real explanations, not hocus-pocus.”

“My friend and I spent hours doing the sort of math you’d find in applied physics labs to come up with that. I’m rapidly heating and cooling the air in specific ways to make the image, and I’m using magic to do so. And I find it hard to believe that you don’t believe in magic even slightly.” I gesture at Carol standing on the chair next to him.

His scowl deepens as Carol asks the next question. “Could you tell us what happened here, from your perspective?”
Carol seems alright with my response—she’s more used to me telling her *what* but not *how*. The other guy is just getting annoyed. Before he can cut in with a question, Carol asks, “Do you have any updates on the situation from last night?”

I shrug. “Not really. As I said then, I know of one person that can remove the spell.” I’m not going to include a spell that takes three dragons six-plus hours to cast as a solution. “She ran out of magic this morning, so the rest will be on recharge, which helps two or three people per day, although she can store enough magic for upwards of fifty spell removals. As for helping everyone, I’m hoping that our resident wandmaker will be able to figure out a removal spell that uses Common magic. I know they exist, but I don’t know of anyone with such a spell that’s still alive.”

Mymoir message. I’ll read it in a bit.

“Will you be explaining all of those terms?” the male reporter asks.

I turn to face him directly, as he’s starting to annoy me. “Sir, you are ten months behind the curve in Moperville. Many people here are familiar with most if not all of the terms I used. While I’m fine with explaining new concepts or teaching new people, I don’t want to do that when also explaining what’s going on.” … Is what I want to say, but I still don’t recognize the logo on his van, and I don’t watch enough news to say for sure what this guy’s audience is.

So instead, I catch myself at “Sir” and take a deep breath. “I’m aware that you haven’t been here for most of the news in the past year, and I’m sorry to say I don’t recognize the logo on your van. I’m sure you’ve already told your audience, but could you tell me who you are?”

The man returns a sigh. “I’m Steve Wen, reporting for Chicago Today. Our station prides itself on being more grounded in reality than Channel 4.”

I nod. Okay. I can admit that Channel 4 can seem over-the-top at times, and with all the reports solely on Moperville, I bet other people would gain reputation simply for not reporting here.

“Alright. I can see why you’re asking all the questions, then, but that means I’m talking with two very different groups of people. I’ll be happy to interview with you later, but for now, can I simply talk about recent events?”

“No. I’ll allow it.”

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It didn’t take terribly much longer to finish up at the fire site. Just a couple of questions on if I’ll do it again (“if I’m called”) and if anyone else could help that way (“I’ll teach/give wands if I can”). And Steve scheduled an interview for about three hours from now (as I still have to do the poll thing with Tedd) in a more private venue.

Time to read that Mymoir message.

Sean: Have you attempted my Enchantment Vanquisher already?

Saphira: No. I don’t think Elliot’s even *awake*.

Sean: Good. Why was there such a delay in your response?

Saphira: I was chatting with the news after helping to put out a fire. A restaurant under an office
caught fire, and a bunch of the fire crew is still transformed.

Sean: I see. Only chemical and barrier dragons tend to do that. I suppose your magic was helpful?

Saphira: According to the crew, they could stand next to the flames and not feel the heat. I apparently severely limited the destruction.

Sean: That is good. On the topic which I initiated, I did not believe that it would be useful to record with the spell, but are you aware of the consequences of a failed Draconic spell?

Saphira: It doesn’t work, but consumes the magic anyway.

Sean: There is more to it than that. What occurs when a summoner ends their spell early?

Saphira: The summon usually gives off a small explosion as the magic expends itself.

Sean: Exactly. And I should not have to clarify that the intensity is proportional to the remaining energy.

Saphira: That happens with failed Draconic spells?

Sean: Yes. I did not record it outside of my journal, but when I first attempted use of my Enchantment Vanquisher, I did not have enough magic. The resulting explosion killed the target. I strongly suggest taking any possible precautions, such as placing the focus of the spell as far as possible from the target.

Oh. I… don’t think this enchantment is that important…

Saphira: I think, in this case, it’d be much better to simply not take the risk. Thanks for the warning.

Sean: You are welcome. The spell is certainly possible to cast, but I agree that the current situation does not call for its use.

Well. I… guess I’d better talk with Tedd.

25 October 2014
1:13 PM CST

Walking back to the market took a lot longer than flying away. It looks to me like this is the truly busy hour for the market, based on the crowd. It’s actually a little difficult to make my way over to Tedd’s stand, although the fact that about a fourth of the people are shrunken catgirls makes it a bit easier.

“Is everything alright?” Sarah asks when I approach the table.

I nod. “They said I helped a bunch.” I wait a bit for Tedd, then get his attention when customers step away for a bit.

“You wanted to do the poll thing?” he preemptively asks.

I tilt my head. “Well, if you want, sure, I still can. I also wanted to say that I’m not going to try using Draconic magic to heal Diane.”

“Why not?”
“Sean let me know that—well, you know how Susan can make her fairies explode?”

“By dismissing them early, yeah. But that’s Common.”

“Yeah, but, same principle. If I don’t have enough magic for a spell, boom. For a really big spell —”

“Big boom. How dangerous?”

I lower my voice. “Sean said he killed the first person he tried to heal.”

“Oooo. Gotcha.” He pauses. “Do you have enough to try the poll?”

“It’s not that strong of a spell,” I chuckle. “I could probably do it all day.”

“Alright. Let me get out the sign.” I guess he was prepared.

He pulls out a small whiteboard with a stand. Written on it is a message in exaggeratedly neat handwriting: “POLL: Reptilian Scales and Features.”

And features? I don’t know if that’s even possible for my spells. Although I guess people could still request it. Maybe he can figure it out enough to make wands on the spot.

Hey, that reminds me. “Two things about the sign, Tedd.” I hold up two fingers.

“Yeah?”

“One, I don’t have spells for dragon features on others.”

“You can still do claws, right?” Oh. Yes. I nod. “And Grace pointed out that I could make wands with tails. What’s the second?”

“I spoke with Catalina yesterday, and she said that if you like, you could watch her to put a catfolk spell in a wand. Maybe as a sympathy wand, at least until this is solved.”

“I already have watches with that.” Oh. Right; he does. “Sarah?” he calls her over.

“Yes?”

“Could you make art for catfolk wands? In addition to maybe something lizard-y.”

“Sure. You decided to go ahead with it?”

“I’m thinking yes. Saphira, how much did these actually cost, when they were last popular?”

I take a look through the Mymoir. When transformation wands were last fashion, nails weren’t sold quite so cheaply. You couldn’t get fifty for a dollar or two. Materials cost a lot more then, but that’s not to diminish the effort these three put in to make their products look really nice. Exotic forms—mimicry of distant animals—cost quite a lot. A full transformation would cost the equivalent of thousands of dollars, and even “half-forms” would be similarly expensive. But half-forms for local or very popular creatures were a fraction of the cost. If the form gave no real augmentation—no speed or strength increases or anything like that—then… probably around $50. That’s surprisingly cheap, actually. Then again, it was more than just three people working on it. The wandmaker made a lot for his contributions, but did basically nothing aside from adding the magic.
“If you had half-cat wands back then, you’d price it at an equivalent to about fifty bucks. But you’d also have more than three people working on it, and possibly more than one wandmaker. Or wizard with a wandmaking tool. For the amount of work you three put in, a higher price would be justified.”

“So… seventy-five?” Grace suggests.

I shrug. “If you find it’s not selling, you could try lowering the price. That’s how most products are priced. Houses are a prominent example.” In that people are actually aware of the pricing process. HGTV taught me more economics than I learned in school.

“Alright,” Grace confirms. “Now, are you gonna pay attention?”

I wonder what she means until she points behind me. Whoops. Looks like Tedd’s sign attracted a few people who like reptiles.

25 October 2014
3:00 PM CST

That was a decently wide variety of requests. I got a lot of asks for large areas such as forearms, plus a few for claws and tails. (I couldn’t find a way to do that last one.) And I also got a number of creative people asking for stripes of scales or whatnot. Tedd said he might set up “custom wands” as a service once he finishes his enchantment removal wand. That’s still a higher priority.

The “more private” venue for the interview with Steve Wen is actually just a side room in the Moperville community center. I made sure to get lunch, so I should be good for a while.

I really don’t like to eat out alone. It’s not something I ever really do, so it just makes me feel intensely lonely for the duration. Getting food from a college cafeteria is entirely different. At least then I feel like I can chat with anyone around me.

“You are… Saphira, right?” Steve greets me at the door. “I looked into Channel 4’s reporting a little more. It seems I picked the right person.”

“You are correct, and that’s not arrogance: I volunteered for the position of teaching this stuff. If you’d picked the wrong dragon, they would’ve directed you to me anyway.”

He shifts his smile to one side and squints. “Yes. And I’ll need you to explain those things. But before we film, I’d like to get to know you a bit better.”

I nod. “And I you. And your station, likewise, since I want things to be as clear as possible.”

“As do I.” He ushers me through the door. It’s already set up in interview style, with chairs facing each other and slightly angled towards the camera. He motions towards a seat that I accept, putting the water I picked up at the restaurant on the floor beside me, before he sits across from me. “Can you start by explaining to me your goal in all this…?” He ends the question waving his hand vaguely.

“Teaching about magic? Really, I want the world to be a better, safer place. People fear the unknown, and the populace not understanding magic is a good way for bad people to get away with stuff. Plus, magic is really useful for everyday tasks like cooking and cleaning, if you know what you’re doing.”

“How much does the average person need to ‘know what they’re doing’?”
“Not much at all, really. If you have a wand that makes yourself stronger, all you really need to know is how to use the wand and how long the magic lasts. I’m told that using wands isn’t difficult for most people.”

“I suppose you mean that it’s hardly a noticeable effort for yourself.”

I giggle slightly. “Nnno. There are four kinds of magic. I use a different one from most people, and can’t use what I was talking about at all.”

“Okay. To get back to what I want to talk about, most of our viewers do not believe in magic. What could you say in its defense?”

“Physics defines a system with either constant or increasing entropy, but not a decreasing amount of entropy—at least, not when you consider the whole universe as the system. You can move entropy out of a small system, but it has to go somewhere. Magic is essentially the opposite. While in physics you spend energy and gain entropy, in magic you spend entropy and gain energy.” I pick up my water bottle. “Let’s use this as an example. Naturally, with physics, the water in the bottle will gain or lose heat to match the temperature of its surroundings, right?”

“Yes,” Steve nods. “And it gets that heat from its surroundings. If a cold bottle is placed in a warm room, the bottle will eventually match the room at a temperature between the starting temperatures. Heat moves from hot to cold.”

“Right. And with magic, heat can move from cold to hot.”

“Don’t refrigerators do that already?”

“Not quite. It’s more complicated than most people would understand, but essentially, refrigerators have heat exchangers that make favorable hot-to-cold trades in stages. I’m saying that I can set this bottle on a table and use magic to move the heat in the water into the table without spending energy, in complete violation of the physical laws as they’re traditionally understood.”

“Can you do that now?”

I nod and stand up, placing the bottle on the table he moved out of the camera’s view. Then I decide to show that I’m not tricking him. “I know you’ve seen me drink from it, but do you want to check for yourself that it’s a normal bottle?”

He stares at me. It’s just a normal cheap water bottle. “I should think that’s patently obvious. I’ll check the temperature, though.” He picks up the water bottle and puts his hand where it was sitting. The water is lukewarm because I like it better that way, as opposed to chilled. Satisfied, he puts it back. “Alright. Prove to me you’re not just talking pretty.”

To be safe, I uncap the bottle before I start. It’s not exactly a difficult task—I just need to target things a bit more carefully than when I’m sparring and wet the floor. A few seconds later, the water in the bottle audibly pops as it freezes. Steve touches the bottle and decides that it’s not just an illusion. “You can stop now,” he notes. I don’t put the heat back; I just heat my water so that I can take a sip. “You can get water out of that?” he asks after I cap it again.

“Yes. It’s back to room temperature. I guess you believe me now.”

He grabs his chin. “It certainly seemed real enough.”

This is back to that first day with Ellen, huh? What was her comment, again? “If you’ll let me, I have something more direct, I guess,” I tell Steve. “With lots of research, dragons have found a
way to apply parts of our transformation to other people. I can do the same for you.”

He cocks his head. “What does that mean?”

I cover my right arm in scales. “The same as this, except on you.”

He widens his eyes. “Is it safe?”

“Perfectly. … I mean, I’ve tested it a lot. It wasn’t at first, but that’s why I tried it on people like myself who could fix it and any related problems. It’s been safe and removable for months now. I’ve used it fairly often.” Diane and Catalina frequently ask for it even when we’re not going to be spending time together, although for them it’s usually a bracelet or something like a temporary tattoo, not a gauntlet like I have now.

He considers for a moment before confirming. “Alright. How long does it last?”

“As long as I want. For this demonstration, a minute.” I tap his outstretched hand with a claw, casting **Targeted Partial Skin to Scales**.

But nothing happens.

“… Am I supposed to feel something?” Steve asks.

I don’t know what’s going on. I definitely have enough magic. I cast it again and pay attention: yes, the spell is being cast, though still, nothing happens. I revert my arm and change it back normally, no problem.

“What’s up?” Steve asks again.

Oh.

“You, sir, have defied the odds. Most people have zero resistance to Draconic magic. It seems I’ve just discovered your generation’s Dragon Immune.”

He pulls back his hand. “What?”

“We don’t have an exact frequency, but it seems that roughly one person every twenty or thirty years is completely immune to Draconic magic. They’re also completely unable to use magic of any kind, so… unless something happens, you’re just like the about two-thirds of men worldwide who can’t use magic, either. Nothing special besides the fact that you’re the perfect counter to any bad person using Draconic magic—which, by the way, has only happened once.”

“So… I’m important, but not in a way that’s usually necessary?” He sighs.

“Yes. If it makes you feel any better, there’s a very famous person in English history that helped shape world history for the better thanks to abilities like yours. He’s not King Arthur, but his name was Arthur and he’s responsible for some of the legends about the actual King Arthur.”

“Which ones?”

“Excalibur, for example.” I am not mentioning dragon-slaying. “The sword in the stone.”

“Interesting. How do you know?”

“Another ability of dragons is essentially perfect record retention, among other related things.” I pause. “What happened to your skepticism?”
“It’s harder to disbelieve when it’s right in front of you like this. But let me get back in the frame of mind I’ll need for the camera.”

25 October 2014
3:30 PM CST

Steve’s frame of mind for the camera is best summed up as “Doubting Thomas.” As he’s immune to Draconic magic, I’ll just have to put scales on myself. Hmm… I think claws would be hard to claim as on-the-spot CGI, for viewers at home. Especially if I can get him to touch the claws.

From my conversation with the other dragons, I think I can conclude that this is a sort of practice match for doing a wider region—practice, as in, it’s the same region as before, but a different audience. If I can do this one well, then I should have something to fall back on when I eventually have to speak with the whole country. That’s the goal, of course. Before then, a whole lot of things have to happen, and I’m not totally sure how, what, or how fast. But I don’t have to worry about that right now. Today, I just have to address Illinois from a different angle than I’ve already done.

“Hello, again! This is Steve Wen, coming to you live from a community center in Moperville!” He holds up his hands placatingly towards the camera. “Yes, you heard that right, but before you change the channel, I’d like to introduce my guest. By all accounts, she’s responsible for—or at least connected to—most if not all of the strange events in the town this year, and she’s agreed to give me some answers. You know that I’m not going to accept any nonsense, so today we’ll find out once and for all exactly how insane Chicago’s suburbs can be.”

Not the most glowing introduction, but it’s not the in-house perspective that Carol grants me. At least he’s doing slightly better than the boy who parked in the Dragon Landing Pad. (I still laugh at the name.)

“Will you all please tolerate with me, Miss Saphira Bjartskular.” Looks like he did his research, because I never gave him my last name. I give him a pained smile. At least I’m getting a better idea of his studio’s bent. He holds out his hand, and I shake it. Claws will come later.

“Thank you for the introduction.” I try to keep my voice as pleasant as possible, since I know he’s just acting for the camera. “I’d prefer if you only used my first name, though—surnames aren’t a part of a dragon’s identity, and you invited me here today because of my role as Moperville’s dragon.”

Steve narrows his eyes at me. I know that I just put out at least three concepts that invited questions, but they’re ones that I can answer pretty easily, at least without so many details that most people would just turn off the TV. (I heard that my announcement wasn’t well-viewed until at least March, when things were suddenly relevant to a lot more people.) “Before you start spouting crazy, let’s start with how exactly you’re important. Lately, we’ve heard reports of everything from monsters to mind control. The locals I spoke with all pointed to you. Why would they do that?”

I shrug. “Because I’m Moperville’s dragon. Anyone wanting to know about magic here should talk with me at some point. I’m not saying that I have to speak with everybody, but my job, when it comes to magic, is to teach and protect the general populace. So even if a person isn’t speaking with me, I’ve probably spoken to whoever is teaching them.”

Steve nods. “Alright. Let’s say I believe you on this whole ‘magic’ thing for the moment. You look pretty young. How did you get this position of overseeing the whole city?”

“By being a dragon.” I know that doesn’t explain anything. But I want to establish that being a dragon isn’t a position you’re appointed to or whatever. You can’t just stop being a dragon one
day. “And I’m not the mayor or anything. I just teach and protect people.”

“You’re not doing a lot of teaching right now.”

I smile. “I’d say I am. I’m teaching you, right? And your audience. Um… Let’s put this another way. It’s not the same, but similar, I guess: you went to college for journalism, right?”

Steve nods.

“But even after you got your degree, and even though you knew all that stuff, you weren’t guaranteed a job. Right?”

“Where are you going with this?”

“Well, you got hired because of your degree, but also because of other things too. Probably your personality, or your connections, or a bunch of other reasons. You earned it. Being a dragon is… not exactly earned. To get your journalism job, you had to go to school, forge connections, and establish yourself as worthy of hire.

“I didn’t have any of that. I just… became a dragon. I don’t know who or what picked me—not for certain, anyway—but when I became one, I had the knowledge and connections and whatnot thrust on me. I didn’t get to deny it. It’s just there. And although it’s my choice what to do with it, I took the traditional route: using my knowledge, and my connections, and my power to teach and protect the people around me. I didn’t earn any of it. But I have it, and it’s a part of who I am, and I think it’s best put to work on helping people. Just like your journalism degree is best put to work getting information out to people, no matter where the information is found.”

Steve squints at me. “You’re saying that a dragon is a thing, not a position? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

I nod energetically. “Yep! A dragon is a descriptor for a person. Like ‘journalist’ or ‘engineer.’ The difference is that you don’t work to become a dragon. It just sorta happens, like having a parent that’s a senator or a CEO or something. I had no input in gaining the descriptor, but I have plenty of input on what I do with it.”

“So… ‘Moperville’s dragon’—?”

“—Is a descriptor for what I’m doing as a dragon. As I said in my original announcement, Moperville is my city, and I’m its dragon. I’ve designated this city as my primary residence, and as the place that I will protect and serve to the best of my ability. I’m not saying I’m a cop or anything, but if there’s any sort of thing going on where I can help, I’ll do the best I can. Like with that fire today: I’m no firefighter, but I have abilities as a dragon that help with firefighting. The fire department needed help, so they called me up and asked for my assistance, and I gave it.”

He looks away. “We’ll get into these ‘abilities’ later, I suppose.”

25 October 2014
3:35 PM CST

It seems to be going alright, I guess. I’m wondering where he plans to go from here.

“Is there any particular reason you’re called a ‘dragon’?” My eyes widen. He just lobbed that one over the plate.

“Because… that’s a good description for what my other form looks like?” And then I see his smirk.
Right. The audience thinks magic is for the weak-minded.

“Uh-huh. Do you have any evidence for this… other form?”

I take a deep breath and pull out my phone. Thank you, Sarah. I pull up the picture she took of me all the way back when we first met. It’s actually a little embarrassing, now: I didn’t know very well how my body moved at the time. That pose is super awkward. “This is a picture of me, standing in my friend’s back yard,” I tell Steve, showing him the picture.

“Care to show it to the camera?”

I frown. “Wouldn’t it be better if I just sent the raw image to your studio? I mean, I can hold up my phone in front of the camera now, but in my experience, cameras don’t do well with other electronic devices. The pixels tend to misalign and leave lines across the whole image.”

“So, you’re willing to show me, but not the audience?”

I can’t help but get annoyed at his smirk. I toss my phone on my chair and stand in the middle of the interview space. “Saphira’s Half-Dragon Form!” I half-shout with my arms crossed.

Steve clearly wasn’t expecting this. He loses his composure and pulls his feet onto the chair with him, squatting in his seat. I lean over him. “You can tell that the wings and tail are real, can’t you?” My tail is long and flexible enough that I poke his shin with its tip.

“A-ah, um…” he stammers. Balancing this and his usual persona for TV must be hard. “Probably.”

I roll my eyes and back off, ending the spell before sitting down. “I guess that’s as good as I’m going to get. Any more questions for me?”

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The rest of the interview went alright, I guess. I didn’t get to talk much about magic in general, but at least I was able to give him some answers on more major events, such as griffins and Cheerleadra. I wonder if Moperville misses ‘her’ yet? But it’s not like ‘she’ can go flying with me at the usual times, because Elliot’s absence would be rather glaring.

Elliot’s up again, and he let me know that Ashley wanted to go back to the hospital, but she wanted me to take her. Probably because I’m more willing to stand up for her to that surgeon. I mean, Elliot would defend her, but he isn’t already familiar with the situation, and it’s awkward enough. And his helpful nature might not actually be terribly helpful in this particular instance.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask Ashley when she opens the door to my knock.

She nods. “I think I have enough for one or two. Maybe the nurse we spoke with…?”

I shrug. “She didn’t seem to think it was a big deal, so maybe not her. But I’m sure we can find someone.” I pick her up and start the walk to the hospital.

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“Hmph! Finally!” a woman shouts as we enter. Looking in, I identify the voice as belonging to the head surgeon… who is presently sitting behind the receptionist desk. Wow. I didn’t think she’d be sitting there. Maybe all doctors take turns at the desk? “Are you ready to fix this?”

And I’m already getting annoyed again. “It’s not her mistake, and it’s not mine, either. Your tone
seems to imply otherwise.”

“It is her fault that I couldn’t do my job today!” the head surgeon huffs. She moves from behind the desk to right in front of myself and Ashley faster than I thought possible. “Fix it!” she demands of Ashley.

Ashley looks up at her, then tugs on my sleeve. I bend down. “I… can’t,” she whispers.

“You what?”

“Um. I think my angel says she’s lying.”

I think about what that might mean. Maybe… “Does anyone here have a picture of what our head surgeon normally looks like?”

No one answers for a few seconds. Then one young man in scrubs shouts, “I do!”

“Craig! Why do you have my picture?” The head surgeon glares at him.

He smiles and shuts his eyes as he hands his phone to me. “I don’t have to answer that,” he says, his head held high and turned away.

I look between the photo and the woman before me. Oh. I get it now.

She normally looks like this. Literally the only change is the ears and tail. I suppose she’s defying tropes, being so attractive and yet having a good job that only smart people can get. It’s just a shame she doesn’t have a personality to match. (One guess why Craig has a picture of her on his phone.) I show the picture to Ashley, who squints at the surgeon. Then I give the phone back to its owner.

Ashley moves to stand on a chair. “I’m sorry, but there are people who actually need this. Even if they’re not at the hospital. Saphira had to help put out a fire today because of this problem.” How did she hear about that? Elliot wasn’t awake at the time… “I know that people might not take you as seriously when you look like that, but it’s more than just your problem. I promise I’ll Restore you when the emergency workers are all able to do their jobs, alright?”

The surgeon glares at Ashley for a bit before stomping back behind the desk. Not the greatest response, but at least the matter is settled.

25 October 2014
6:00 PM CST

I have one last task for this very long day: tell Susan what’s going on. After all, I did say I’d tell her about it, when I called her last night. And probably the best way to let her know is by video conference with Ms. Pompoms present. That way, she can see exactly what I’m talking about. (I still haven’t taken any photos of the chaos.)

“Saphira?” Susan’s voice comes through. The image shows black, though.

“Right here,” I reply. “Did you notice that it’s a video call?”

Now I can see her face. “Whoops. Why a video?” And then her mother moves into frame. “… Mom?” Her eyes are wider than I think I’ve seen them before.

“Saphira can explain,” is all she gets from her mother.
I exhale. “You know how Ellen has that contagion spell modifier?” We’ve discussed it a bit. “There are a whole bunch of spell modifiers. Someone that has a catgirl spell used it with a wide-area explosion modifier.”

“Catalina did this?” If only.

“If Catalina was the one who did it, it wouldn’t be so big of a deal. At least her spell would leave some catboys.” I let that sink in. “Then you add the range of the modifier, and you’ll know why your mom’s transformed when she was at home and the caster was at the mall. And then the modifier went and made it almost permanent.”

“Permanent!?” Pause. “Wait, ‘almost’?”

“There’s no duration limit and you can’t overwrite it with another enchantment. But Ellen was able to remove her change by shifting, and Tedd’s working on a removal wand. And of course Ashley’s Restore spell works, but so many people were changed that it’s like spitting in a bonfire. At least most of the emergency workers are back to normal, thanks to her.”

Susan facepalms. “I don’t think I know anyone with that little foresight. You know who did it?”

“A friend of that blue-haired catgirl I called you about. She admitted to it when I asked the blue-haired one.” I give a wry smile. “She didn’t seem to see the issue with a third of the city being catgirls. At least she can’t change anyone else until she gets her magic back. The spell modifier burns out the caster for at least six months.”

Susan bites her lip. “Oh. Um, wow. If Nanase’s… That must be pretty powerful.”

“Just a bit.”

Susan falls quiet for a bit. “Wait. Sarah said she’d still visit for the shop days. Is she—”

“She came today. She’s fine.”

Susan is visibly relieved. “Good. Anything else?”

“Well… nobody will have trouble telling you apart from Diane for now.”

“She was in town?”

“At the mall with me, actually. We were having a night out with Rhoda and Catalina and another friend of Diane’s. Loads of fun when everyone but me transformed.”

“I’ll bet.”

End of that topic, really. But I don’t exactly hear from her very often now, and I’m missing her a lot. “Is everything going fine with you? You found a place to fly?”

“Well, I haven’t been on the news.” I smile. “I wish I could go flying with someone, but being able to smell casters isn’t enough to find one that can fly. At least I have people I can talk with. Oh, and my roommate doesn’t know about magic, but she’s still a good one.”

“That’s good.” I still abhor Kevin’s last roommate. “Any plans coming up?”

Susan shrugs. “I’m looking at flying home for Thanksgiving if the weather’s nice. I’m taking an actual plane for Winter Break.”
“Alright. I’m looking forward to it.”
Unfortunately, it rained the whole Thanksgiving week. Talk about poor timing. I’m used to Thanksgiving being the main holiday where the entire extended family gets together, but I guess that’s Christmas for this family? I mean, I know travel is a whole lot easier for me now, but it wasn’t ever really hard for Kevin, what with his dad being a pilot with his own small plane and all. Christmas was a holiday spent with just close family. Extended family was still represented with their gifts, and we would frequently see them for Easter…

What was I thinking about, again?

Right. So Thanksgiving was basically just myself and Ms. Pompoms. With just the two of us, I didn’t really get to continue any of Kevin’s family traditions, but it was still a great opportunity for a heartfelt “Thank You.” I don’t want to know what my life would be like if she hadn’t taken me in. And of course it’d be silly to have all of the traditional dishes—that’s way too much food—but at least I was able to learn how to cook a turkey. By watching it in the oven, I mean. Always cook something traditionally before trying it with heat magic. I don’t want to undercook something, even if I can still finish the cooking at a later time.

I wonder if Ms. Pompoms’s consumption of turkey was influenced by her catness? Yes, that’s still active. Tedd said he’s “working on it.” In the meantime, he’s put out catfolk and lizarkin wands—the latter not being quite like my spells, but based on settings from the TF gun—with the former outselling the latter by a mile. So now Moperville is comprised of roughly half catfolk, most of the rest human, and a tiny fraction lizarkin. Not to say that his wands are permanent forms, but since they last 24 hours by default, most people with them simply don’t let them run out.

Catalina decided to see what happened if she both used Tedd’s catfolk wand and her own magic on herself, for a triple-catgirl effect. Except that Tedd’s wand wouldn’t stack with her own magic, so double-catgirl Catalina just has fur and claws in addition to the ears and tail. Although I’m pretty sure she could do that even without the active catgirl form.

And all this adds up to today being the first time I’ll get to see Susan in months, but… even though I’m meeting her at the airport, I’ll need to fly her luggage back home, since I don’t have a driver’s license and Ms. Pompoms is still too short to drive. Tedd offered a wand to make Ms. Pompoms full-size, but it turns out that she can’t use wands, so it’d be rather inconvenient to get it cast on her again when the spell runs out. Oh well; this is faster anyway. I’m just glad that Susan is landing at the Midway airport, since it’s a lot smaller than O’Hare. Taking off from near there is a lot easier, though I still took a cab for part of the way here. Yes, I’m totally violating the airspace, but I do it carefully and fly definitely lower to the ground than Mr. Verres would like. Too bad for him. It’s still Illinois, and they’re going to need to learn eventually.

I open my eyes when I notice someone radiating a lot more heat than most everyone else. I mean, it’s winter and we’re near a Great Lake. Chicago is cold, even indoors. I’m putting off a bunch of heat myself, and the pattern near her is almost exactly the same. She rounds the corner, and I smile as I make my way towards her.
“Saphira!” Susan exclaims when I’m twenty feet away. She doesn’t exactly run to meet me, but when I am right in front of her, she catches me with a surprise hug.

…”You’ve… um… changed,” is all I can think to say.

She releases me and backs up. Wow, she hasn’t even shifted! “You know how I’d learned to mostly cope with it before I left, since I could easily clean myself?”

I think back to when I last saw her. “Yes?”

“College wasn’t so gentle.” I chuckle when I picture people dogpiling on her, and she laughs a bit in response. “How are things back home?”

“Still a lot of cats.” I point to the empty duffels/saddlebags I’m carrying. We’ll move most of her stuff into those once she picks up her checked bags. I guess she can sit on my back and hold onto the empty suitcases. “And you?”

“The campus rumor forum is curious about flying lizards. That’s as much attention as I’ve caught, thankfully.”

17 December 2014
3:42 PM CST

If I thought Susan’s greeting for myself was friendly, the one for her mother was enthusiastic. She lifted her mother off the floor—which is easier to do, since she’s shorter now, but still not even close to what I expected of Susan. Even Ms. Pompoms was thrown off by her daughter’s behavior.

“Don’t worry; I haven’t changed that much,” Susan clarifies. “That was special for just you two. Although Sarah might get something better than an arm’s-length pat.” She knows I wasn’t there for that, but she’s learned that I laugh when I remember Kevin reading things like that. Then she looks her mother over. “I guess this change is here to stay?”

“I hope not,” I moan. “That would—um, can I talk about this with you in private?”

Susan starts to say no before she looks at my face. This topic is super uncomfortable. “Sure. My room? We can talk while I unpack.”

“That sounds good,” I nod.

We make our way upstairs with the hastily-packed duffels. Once I drop mine, I launch right into the previous subject.

“The catgirl thing staying would justify Tedd selling wands with sex changes on them, which I again don’t think is good for his brand. He can do that eventually, if he likes, but I feel like doing it so soon would tend to drive people away from his store.”

Susan frowns for a minute. “Are you… using religion to hold Tedd back?”

I lower my head into my hands. “Yes, but probably not why most people would assume.” I lift my head again as I sit on Susan’s bed. ‘People will look for excuses to dismiss things that are new or different as ‘bad.’ Magic isn’t—it’s just another part of the world we live in—but to people who don’t know that, having their first exposure to it be something that’s contrary to their morals can color their opinion of the whole thing. Like if the first you hear of martial arts masters is that
they’re perverts—how would you judge Sensei Greg before meeting him?” I have gradually trained myself to use his first name, occasionally. “There is a religion that has always believed that dragons are terrible because they hate Jews and the first dragon is, essentially, Jewish. Even though a few of their own have become dragons. I don’t want churches to say that all magic is terrible simply because the first they hear of it is Tedd selling sex change wands. And you can bet that him selling those would make the news.”

“So how long will you hold him back, then?”

“Until I’m speaking to the nation, not just the city or state. I wish I didn’t have to hold him back at all, really, but I don’t want magic condemned wholesale by people who don’t know what it is. I want people’s first exposure to magic to be flight or flashlights or some other utility that is difficult to call ‘bad’ by any strongly-held beliefs. Heat magic is perfect A/C and microwaving—I don’t want people to hear about it and think ‘arson.’” I pause for a moment. “Tedd’s Wands is not my store—it’s his, of course—but shaping the way people think about magic is my job. And while I wish I didn’t have to tell him what he can and can’t sell, it does have an impact on what people think. A lot more now than it will once the nation already knows about magic. I’ve told him and Grace as much, and he’s reluctantly agreed. I’m more afraid of giving Grace or Sarah justification to overrule me.” Thankfully, Mr. Verres agreed with me, though I’m not sure how much weight his words carry with the business.

Susan sighs. “I – want to say you’re wrong, but that sounds exactly like how I used to think of men. Do you think it’d help if Nanase and I taught about magic a bit at our schools?”

I think for a few seconds. “Not Nanase, because she can’t tell easily who can and can’t use magic. Obviously, you can’t use the Mymoir, so it’d be harder, but… well, the community college has a magic user’s club. Maybe you could see if your university has one?”

“It doesn’t. I checked.”

“Oh. Then, uh, tell people who already have magic? If you’re comfortable. A good first step would be avoiding misinformation. I think we should wait on spreading the word. I’ll ask Sean about it, okay?”

24 December 2014
1:00 PM CST

Sean’s answer was, essentially, “Let me think about it.” He’s in Canada right now, but he’s coming up on the end of his rotation in that place, and the next nation is the US. As such, he has a good idea what would and would not be fine, but he still does plenty of research before forming plans. And apparently, Susan’s proposition wasn’t one he saw coming.

Tomorrow will be my first Christmas not spent in a Christian household. And it’ll be Ashley’s first Christmas as a Christian, and more uniquely, as a Holy caster. So we’re planning on spending some time together, if we can. Ashley’s description of her experience for the Cantata last Sunday was definitely different from how I felt, at any rate. To me, they’re always nice, but I’d almost swear she got magic from stuff like that and not from electrical energy conversions. Christmas is certain to be special for her.

“So, I know you have cousins…” I state to Susan—we’re sitting on the TV couch, but the TV isn’t on— “but only because Kevin read it. But I don’t know how many, or how old, or –”

“Three, all girls,” she answers bluntly. “They’re five, six, and eight, this year. And yes, Mom’s told their parents that you exist, but I’m not sure that they’d believe her about the dragon thing.”
I roll my eyes. “Fair enough. That’s a… really small number.”

“How many cousins do you have?”

I take a deep breath. “Well, Mom is the youngest of four. And each of them had at least two kids, and some of those kids have kids of their own, so… when the whole extended family on just Mom’s side gets together, it’s approaching thirty or so people. And in a house about half the size of this one. On my dad’s side, he’s the eldest of two, and his sister only had two kids.”

Susan’s eyes gradually widened until I mentioned my dad’s side of the family. She might be more comfortable with physical contact now, but crowds still don’t seem to be much of her thing. “I’m happy to know at least someone in your family was sane.”

“You don’t want kids someday?”

Judging by Susan’s face, that day is a long way off. Well, she has a few centuries. “Maybe by adoption. I’m sure I could do better than a few parents out there. I guess the answer for you is ‘yes,’ then?”

I glance away. “Wellll… I mean, I want a kid, but I have enough responsibility already. Besides, I’d have to find a husband, first.”

“Maybe by the time that happens, it’d be acceptable for me to wear pants to your wedding,” she jokes.

“Dress or scales,” I threaten back.

“Scales, then,” Susan laughs.

25 December 2014
7:08 AM CST

Christmas morning!

I will admit that I tend to get sick of Christmas music long before Christmas, but that’s more the fault of the mall that’s been using it since Halloween (if even waiting that long). However, I do enjoy the music on occasion, and I missed the “Christmas in July” that the music director from Anchor Baptist usually does. Ms. Pompoms doesn’t enjoy much of it (probably because of the heavy overtones of “love” that are very common), but I’ve caught her listening to at least a bit on a radio app. Still, I shouldn’t expect today to be a whole lot like the Christmases I remember from Kevin. Dad always put on a music channel that played Christmas music and hymns while we unwrapped presents and cleaned up afterwards. And maybe put a puzzle together.

Susan’s cousins will be here in about three hours, so it’s time to eat breakfast and get the last bits ready before they come. I don’t enjoy cleaning, and with a house this big I was grateful for Susan’s help after she came home. And we got to chat some more, so there’s that. I’m thankful that I have the Mymoir for notes, because although the lot only has to remember one new name, I’ve got seven to recall. (Ms. Pompoms has two sisters. Talk about families of women. But I suppose that there are some men that Ms. Pompoms will allow in the house, because Susan’s uncles are coming, too.)

The plan for today is actually a surprise for me—Susan said she thought I’d better appreciate it if I didn’t see it coming. But since I can tell I’m up before her, I’ve decided to take a seat in the kitchen and think about cooking via magic.
If Susan and I are going to keep using heat magic to cook, maybe we should make some sort of Draconic cookbook. Draconic generally takes more room on a page than typed English, but recording the spells for heating that way would be pretty useful. The only problem would be making the Draconic text legible. I suppose I could do the same thing as I did for Ellen’s gift and painstakingly write it, but if it’s more than a one-time thing I’d like to have something easier.

I’m still lost in thought when Susan taps me on the shoulder. “Ah!” I don’t quite fall out of my chair, but I still have to grab the counter when I spin. A beat passes before I greet her with a “Good morning.”

“Merry Christmas,” Susan replies. I feel silly and repeat the same to her. “What are you waiting for?” she asks.

“Mom and Dad always prepared a special Christmas breakfast. I don’t know how you do it here.”

Susan smiles thinly as she pulls out a bowl and cereal. “Oh. No special meal for breakfast. Mom ordered something special for an early dinner, but the rest is normal.”

‘Ordered something special,’ huh? Probably like the catering meals that Kevin helped deliver for holidays at his job. All of those always looked fantastic, so that’s something to look forward to, anyway.

Well, if it’s nothing special, I suppose I can just do my normal healthy-ish breakfast of scrambled eggs with cheese. Kevin learned how to make an omelet for his food class in seventh grade, but I’ve apparently forgotten and am awful at it now. It’s the same ingredients for this, though. And the eggs are always perfectly cooked, now that I’ve learned how to do it with just magic. (I still do it in a pan. I’m not sure the ceramic plates would work as well as the nonstick pan, especially for handling the heat.)

Susan looks at my meal with envy. “What?” I ask. “You can make this yourself.”

“I know. But they banned microwaves in dorms this semester, so I couldn’t even pretend I used that to heat up something.”

That’s not the first I’ve heard of such a practice, but… “Why just this semester?”

Susan grimaces. “Apparently, someone decided to do ‘science’ with one.” She pauses for effect. “I guess chemistry students get bored sometimes. I’m just glad he made a noxious gas and not a poisonous one. His dorm was evacuated for three days while poison control cleaned up the ‘rotten eggs’ smell.”

I think for a second before I remember what smells like that. “They made a gas with sulfur?”

Susan shrugs. “I don’t know. They did a good job not saying what he mixed together. Even with no microwaves, it’s probably better to prevent others from trying it.”

I don’t know enough about chemistry to say whether the microwave was even necessary for the ‘science,’ but I nod in agreement. Thinking forward to when I’ll be at a four-year university, I’m rather hoping that I have a roommate that knows about magic.

Chapter End Notes
And the winner is...

Full disclosure, my priorities are terrible when I'm writing two stories at once. (The other is not fanfiction, and I tend to write whichever I want to write at the moment.) Updates for this chapter will be slow.

End Notes

Throughout the story, there will be several instances of Saphira taking questions from the general public. If you want your question answered in this way, I suggest asking it in the comments and marking it as such. Note that Saphira will not answer all questions, and not all are plausible to be answered in-universe; I can still answer some questions in the comments section. Also note that I have some questions prepared if you do not ask enough questions (or the right questions) for the story. The cutoff time for each section where Saphira will answer questions will be posted when available.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!