

Susan awoke in her comfy bed and hoped everything she had been through for the past few days had just been a dream, but looking over her bare skin showed that no, it was not. She jumped a bit when she heard an electronic sounding back, and two dogs stood there, tails wagging and looking up at her.

"Hey fellows!" she greeted them, and they bounced and yipped and ran in a circle like real dogs. "Wow, are you guys lifelike or what?"

"A little too lifelike," Sparkle said from above her, and Susan looked up. She was looking down disdainfully at the two dogs from the top of the headboard.

"They're robots, silly kitty. They just happen to be shaped like dogs."

"And people that don't like snakes probably don't like looking at pictures of snakes, or snakes in zoos behind glass, or rubber hoses."

"Okay, whatever. That's enough you two, calm down!" she said to the dogs, who immediately sat at her command. "Oh. Very nice. Good dogs." They wagged their tails again, and Susan laughed. "I needed that. Okay pups, let me get dressed and maybe you can sniff out some breakfast for me. But first, magic!"

She looked her book over, and there was a new spell of *Attribute Transfer* which was touch based, grade 8, and as with *Impair (stat)* had to be learned for each planet separately. When touched and cast, a brand appeared on the person you were leaching the stat from, and for a wonder it was permanent. You could drain as much stat as your rating, down to zero but of course not negative, which would have been silly. The reverse was the grade five spell of *Sever Link*.

Probably permanent because the thing my book got the spell from was permanent.

Would that hold up across realities? Yipes! But of course I wouldn't cast it on anyone but the host of The Darkness who I have to kill anyway. But man, if I was even a bit less moral than I am... Wait a second...

"Using this new spell as a template, can you modify it and *Augment* or *Impair Skill* and make a spell of *Skill Transfer*?"

The book glowed briefly.

"Thanks!"

"So how did you do that trick with Doomsday?" she asked, sitting at the table with the healthy components of a complete breakfast.

"Just *Illusion* magic. I didn't want to get near that thing, but figured a distraction was the word of the day."

"Ah, very nice."

"I see you have some new additions, by the way." She jumped up on the table and touched Susan's left hand orb. "Can you tell me what that's about?"

"Oh, Shieldbreaker smashed up my *enhance sword* so I made an energy one to replace it. I thought it was just something it couldn't break, but never got to try that in practice. Meggie, or The Darkness as I know her now, suggested I integrate it into myself. Now I know why."

"Can it be removed?"

"Oh, it's not like this one," she tapped her rainbow one. "I used a technique to put it in, I could use one to take it out. But it could be useful. And before you ask, the other is a barrier."

"Ah."

"Oh crap!"

"What?"

"I forgot something in the other world. Two somethings. Some magical item or something that prevented scrying and teleporting. Shoot." *You could have reminded me.*

Huh? I reminded you about the robots, didn't I? I'm not your daily planner, and if you'll recall, I didn't want you studying it. I worked hard to make you forget it as long as you did! Mission. Accomplished.

Oh, thanks muchly.

You're welcome.

"You could always ask to go back."

"Never!"

After that, Susan went in search of the boss, and he sat down with her across a small conference table.

"A couple of general questions first," she told him. "Then we can get into..." she tapped her eyes.

"Whatever you want."

"First, Darkvoid Doomsday- no first where is Ifurita?"

"Recovering. I offered to replace her worn power cells and give her a general tuneup. She said yes and we did the work last night. She's charging them right now, and we're running diagnostics on her to make sure the work was done properly. You can go see her if you want."

"Straight after this. She helped out, and I am sort of her master so... how do I become not her master?"

"Why not be? Does she annoy you or something?"

"No, it's just does she want to follow me around forever looking for Luna?"

"Shouldn't you be asking her that?"

"But she has to, I wound her! Unless the new power supply negates that?"

He shook his head. "No, that's a part of her code. If you want her to make her own choices we would have some real work to do."

"How so?"

"Her subservience is coded into her every action. We would have to rip that code out of her wholesale, and then run simulations to make sure it didn't crash her in the process. We would probably have to replace it with something, at least in places, because the routine may expect some kind of return value we would have to provide. We dumped her code and while you tackle the next world we can go through it. Run it on a simulator, see what changes we make cause it do to, that sort of thing."

"If she can have free will, she should get it."

"I agree. But remember she was rather hastily put together, so who knows how many bugs we might expose doing this. It will have to be done carefully, and with her consent. Her personality might change too. But for now you're stuck with her. Most *wanderers* have a team anyway, it's not a sign of weakness or anything."

"But this mission is mine. If I was just a normal agent, clearing worlds and such it would be different. But I'm trying to find someone, and kicking Darkvoid out is just a side project."

"I understand."

"Okay. Back to my original question, how did Darkvoid Doomsday get through my *invulnerability*?"

"Probably just spent five energy."

"Say what?"

"Yeah. It's a little known property, but if you spend five energy on an attack specifically to bypass *invulnerability*, it'll work. Spending ten will let you hit something *insubstantial*, so watch out for that one too."

"That seems a bit cheap."

"Depends on which end of the *invulnerability* you're on."

"Ah, yeah I guess. Okay, next up. I got cut off from everything while I was there. My *pocket Sparkle* clued me into, but I couldn't use *Pocket Dimension* or anything. I need something to put my book and maybe a few other useful things into so I'll always have them on hand."

"That's easy!" exclaimed Silverstreak.

"Maybe like an inventory? Something like Aerith and her crew had."

"Ah, that's not so easy! In fact, if she left her world Aerith would have no inventory at all. Those seem to be a part of the physical reality of the world, not the person. Like take this for example-" He made a square with his fingers and expanded it, showing a view of another part of the Hub. He reached through and set an odd looking thing on the table. "It's a Sylladex system, unique as inventories go in that the behavior can actually be changed on the fly, but there you go. On the world this came from, it would allow you to store things in a variety of ways. But here? Completely useless! I just keep it around in case someone wants to go there and fit in better."

"Oh."

He returned it. "Not to worry, come on, I have just the thing."

"Okay." They got up and he gestured at the door, presumably changing the space it opened up into. They stepped through, and Susan looked at rows and rows and rows of- "They're backpacks."

"The finest quality backpacks ever. There's a variety of styles, colors, and options. Take whatever one you want! This one would fit your book nicely!"

"Ahhh..." Susan managed, looking over her choices.

"You would prefer a briefcase? Laptop bag? Suitcase? Wheeled cart? Horse drawn wagon? Give me something to work with here."

"Uh, something I wouldn't set down and lose, nor look like I was backpacking across realities on a dollar and a dream."

"You're worried about your *image*?"

"Sure. I mean would a girl with black eyes really carry around a hot pink school backpack? I was thinking of changing my look a little, and this would not help."

"That's why the request for an inventory." He nodded, understanding. "Something not exactly magical so it'll work anywhere, but still be at your fingertips. There is another option in that case." He opened the door again and they stepped into a fantastic laboratory, where a middle aged man was working on something, obviously drawing energies into an object much like she did with *imbuing*. But she didn't sense anything magical going on.

"Dean, do you have a second?" he asked.

"Hey boss, new agent? I haven't seen you around before. Dean Chesterfield, nice to meet you." He held out a hand and Susan took it. "Nice grip. Nice eyes."

She rolled them, not that anyone could tell at the moment. "I'm still somewhat new, I guess, compared to some. You... make stuff?"

"That's me. Greatest *artificer* that ever lived!"

"It's not a boast either, he really is," Silverstreak put in. "The stuff he's made..."

"So is that like *imbuing*?"

"Exactly like it, only with supernatural energies instead of magical ones. I dabble in magic myself, I can tell you've got some powerful stuff going." He pointed at her arm.

"Probably why I'm only here now," she explained. "I'm pretty good at making my own equipment."

"But now you come to me. They all do, in the end. What can I make for you?"

"I want a place to put things that isn't magical or the *sub-space pocket*. It recently failed me and if that situation should happen again... well... it was pretty bad."

"Hummm... well, that's tricky. You already have a *pocket dimension* I take it?"

"Yup."

"I don't know, trying to open a supernatural one when you already have a magical one. They can interfere with each other, so that's out. You could take some *contain* wards, stick stuff in them, but they're single use only."

"So there's not much else left?"

"How much exactly are we talking about here? I mean how many items do you want to store?"

"A book and some other minor stuff. Just the essentials really."

His face lit up. "Oh, so you don't want a whole new *dimension* you just need to store a single thing! Like a trunk! Get it out, take out what you want, do whatever, and put the whole thing back. I could make you a permanent *contain* ward as a tattoo, like this!" He showed his

hand. "This one is a pretty serious wind attack, and I've got one on my foot to make me faster in combat. How would that be?"

"Sounds perfect, actually!"

"Great, I'll get started on it, after I finish my current project here."

"Thanks. Both of you."

"Sure thing."

As with Susan's *imbuing*, the process needed her to be "nearby" but he said he would contact her when he needed her, and Silverstreak whispered to her the XP cost of the item so she could save it, and they went to go see Ifurita.

"Master!" she said with a big smile, trying to rise.

"Ho, don't get up. You're smiling, that's great!"

"I feel rejuvenated, and several errors in my code have already been corrected. I owe the beings here many thanks."

"I'm glad you're feeling better. I'm just taking care of things at the moment so I'll be back to talk more later. I just wanted to see you, make sure you were really okay."

"I am well enough to move if you require it, master," she swung her legs off the bed. Susan waved her hands.

"Stay here, right now you're a patient, not a servant. Get up to maximum and take it easy for a bit. You've earned it."

"If that is your command."

"See, that has got to go. I'm not commanding it, I just want you to be well. But like I said we can talk about that."

"Very well, master." She got back under the covers.

Now sitting at the table again, Silverstreak looked her over critically. "Now, about your eyes and this energy that's been infused into you. I take it Darkvoid at least explained a little about it?"

"He said the points don't get reduced around here for some reason."

"True, because time doesn't pass in the normal way around here. It seems to, but that's a different thing. You'll have to be out and about to make them go down."

"Figures."

"But there is a way. I can teach you a meditation technique that can help reduce them further."

"Oh! It didn't say anything about that!"

"I would have been very surprised if it had. What else did it tell you?"

Susan explained what she understood the abilities she had to be, and Silverstreak nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that does about cover it. Apart from the meditation thing, he did give you a good overview. Chaos magic though..."

"What?"

"There are some downsides. Like there's a one in ten chance something completely random happens after you use chaos magic. You can put some points into it if you think there might be a spell that's worth it, but given Darkvoid has to feed you the power every time... well, I don't have to tell you."

"Use it very sparingly, and only as a last resort. I know."

"I know you do. So, you've gotten two world's worth of XP, yes?"

"That much is true."

"Why don't you buy off that skin thing, see how it goes?"

"You got it." *Hey, I'm paying you back. Take the ten XP and get out!*

You know I can't get out, right?

Yes.

The ten faded from her character sheet, and her skin went back to normal.

"That seems to have worked."

"What did you get with that, anyway? I don't see anything supernatural about you..."

"No, a spell. *Time Door*. I'll have to learn that the proper way if I want to cast it without building up points."

"It's another spell I would be very careful of."

"Let me tell you how I used it before..."

"That seems fine," he allowed after she explained, and showed him the note. "And the reality won't explode if you decide to make out with yourself."

"That was a joke! I had to write that because I... had... already written..."

"Hey I'm not judging you. I'm just saying-"

"Moving on."

"There are stories where people touching their younger selves makes the timeline implode or whatever, I'm just saying that won't happen. Just in case. For whatever reason."

"I get it."

"Okay. Use common sense, try to think about potential time loops you might create, and don't leave any loop you do create half done. I have a packet on time travel traps to avoid, I'll forward it to you and you can look it over."

"Fine."

"With that out of the way I guess you'll want the standard time to spend XP and then decide where you next want to go?"

"Actually," she said, getting out the list, "I have a destination in mind. Here." She pointed.

Silverstreak looked at the entry for a moment.

"Did Darkvoid suggest this one? Or mention it now in passing somehow?"

"Maybe... why?"

"Just an odd choice. I mean this one will give you a lot of time to get rid of those points, that's for sure. I would have thought it would want you far away from that reality at the moment."

"How much time are talking about here?"

"Uh, probably a year, local time?"

"A year!?"

"Yeah. It's space. There will be a lot of places to check, and if you want to take out Darkvoid on that ship, best estimate, it'll be a year before they run into it."

Susan set her head down on the table. "I'm never finding Luna, am I?"

"She could be there!"

"But she's probably not. At least I'm immune to aging now, so that's a plus. A year."

"Am I?" asked Sparkle.

Susan lifted her head. "What? Immune to aging? I doubt... oh. We should take care of that before we go, shouldn't we?"

"Probably for the best," agreed Silverstreak. "And I don't think you want to do it the Darkvoid way, so I can have Dean make you up something to keep you from aging, or you can do your spell. Whatever is easiest."

"A whole day. I suppose saving first and putting *tirelessness* on both of us, it could be done."

"Yeah, let's do it the magic way," agreed Sparkle. "I trust you, and I know how it works."

"Fine. As far as this goes, you're sure it didn't mention anything specific?"

"Not really, why? What's the deal with this one?"

He sighed. "When I made the list you didn't have powers, of course. So I figured you would have to carry a specialized piece of equipment there. But now you do have powers, and you've shown you can give things up even when they are desirable to you. Meaning you've stayed yourself, and are not in immediate danger of being taken over. In fact we have a meter now, don't we? Humm..."

He stared at her for a minute, and Susan started to get uncomfortable.

I need an adult.

He IS an adult!

"Well, I guess I'll at least explain the options," he said at last. He opened his little hole in space again, though this time it was a bit bigger and he had to set his hand on the thing he opened it to and concentrated for a moment. Suddenly the door opened and he reached inside.

"It's a safe!"

"Yeah. You think Soulcutter was dangerous? This is far worse." He brought out, and there's no other way to describe the object, a bomb. It was high tech looking and metallic in the center, with a sort of cage wrapped around the entire thing. The "bars" were thick and sturdy looking, and he carefully set it down with a thud that seemed to indicate it was heavier than it looked. "This is, well, it's not a bomb. A bomb makes an explosion, a small thing getting bigger really fast. This does the opposite. It's basically a portable black hole."

"A WHAT?" Susan leaned back in her chair.

"Exactly. That's the kind of firepower you're going to need if you go to that reality."

"And the choice is NOT to take a thing that can swallow up a star, right?"

"No, the choice is this or... I unlock your powers."

"What do you mean, unlock my powers?"

"Remember *orb seal*?"

"What happened to Doomsday anyway?"

"It's been sealed away as well. I'm deciding what the best course of action is regarding that. The point is you didn't consider it until the watch told you, right?"

"True."

"Wait a second," said Sparkle. "Are we talking about what Dolands was talking about that one time? Sealing the demons up? That sort of technique?"

"Yes, exactly!"

"My memory isn't complete from that place, you know that."

"Well, you've heard about it before, trust me."

Silverstreak nodded. "The truth is, before you left I sort of... changed your thinking a little bit. You *do* have Darkvoid inside you, and Sparkle voiced legitimate concerns about you getting powers. I had to make sure you could handle them."

"What exactly did you do?" Susan asked, voice hard.

"Made sure you wouldn't think about certain high level techniques, that's all."

"Like that *recursion* business she used at the end?" Sparkle asked.

"Exactly like that. The fact she was able to use it was the best evidence The Darkness had somewhat taken you over by that point. You have to understand Susan, your powers are greater than you know. You could use them to blow up an entire planet. I couldn't just let you loose with that kind of power right away, now could I?"

And instead of just talking with you about it, he went behind your back and actually messed with your brain. How is that any different than me? At least I'm open about what I want you to do for me.

But you have tried to take me over on the sly. You've admitted as much, especially when I got these powers.

Maybe at first, but I realized how wrong that was.

Please, there is nothing in any reality that can make me believe those words.

Still, I was right, wasn't I? He's not the being of sunshine and light you make him out to be. He messed with your very self, and who knows what other things he's done to you that he isn't telling you about at this very moment. It sounded smug, like it still knew something she didn't, but Susan was only worried about one thing at a time.

But if I can really blow up a planet...

Is that really justification enough to not trust you to NOT blow up a planet?

But you would.

In a heartbeat if it would get me the energy I wanted.

I'll argue this with you later.

"I don't know what to think right now."

"I understand. The issue at hand is bomb or powers? I'm willing to unseal your thoughts, allow you access to whatever you can come up with again, and show you the technique for blowing up worlds."

"But... seriously? Why do I need it? You're implying I'll *have* to blow up a world if I go there?"

"That's correct, and possibly more than one. There are beings of great power in that reality, and if Darkvoid has taken one of them over," he patted the bomb. "This is the appropriate level of response. The only level of response that will mean anything. Their own weapons will be completely useless against it."

"To have either sort of power at my command, I don't know. And Darkvoid can reach inside my various *dimensions*, we've seen that a few times now."

"Certainly true, and you don't have to answer now." He put the bomb away and sealed it up again.

"But I think you need to unseal my powers now. You either trust me or you don't. This mental block, it's what Darkvoid tried to do, and Sparkle had to go in and tear it apart. How are you better? Because your intentions are better? A nice rationalization but it doesn't hold water."

"Yes, I suppose I should. Very well, come here." Susan went over to him and he touched her head a moment. "It's done."

"I don't feel any different."

"Nor would you, you have to think about *natures* and *techniques* and such to get a sense of what you can do. Look, I'll show you the technique I'm talking about so you can decide, all right?"

"That seems a good start."

"Take *force* and flying and surviving in space and a lot of energy, both of you."

So the normal package? Fine.

The three stepped out into a very strange space, and Susan looked around. She seemed to be standing on a small moon, as a larger planet hung far "above" her.

"It's a small reality, but it has a curious feature," Silverstreak explained. "It has no entropy. Basically how it was and how it is and how it ever will be are the same things. You can destroy the planet and it'll just be back in a few minutes."

"Oh." Susan was rather at a loss for words.

"Do you hear someone fighting?" asked Sparkle, her ears swiveling.

"Oh no, are those two at it again? Come on, we better warn them so they don't think it's something they're doing." He lifted off the ground, and the two rose after him. He seemed to know just where to go, and as the moon was pretty small it didn't take long for two combatants to come into view. One was wearing an orange Gi, and was glowing with power from his feet to his yellow spiked hair. The other was bald, had what looked like a homemade yellow jumpsuit and a cape, and both were slugging it out in an area that seemed to be trying to reform. The guy with hair didn't want to be hit by the bald guy and kept dodging, while the bald guy just blocked any attacks directed at him. Nearby features of the moon, like mountains, would suddenly appear and then be shattered again.

"Can I have your attention for a moment?" Silverstreak seemed to ask nobody, but the two obviously heard him and looked over in their direction. The bald one grabbed the hand of the other and he sped over to them, a trail of energy in his wake.

"Hey there boss!" said the one with hair. "You need the space?"

"Hello," said the bald one, bowing to Susan. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet- Should I know you two? You seem awfully familiar!"

Silverstreak facepalmed. "May as well go the whole hog," he muttered. "You can't be any madder at me than you are, and we may as well get it all out of the way in one day. Stand still." He again touched Susan's head, and her eyes got wide.

"You messed with my *memories* as well? That's Goku!"

"Of course I did! After that incident with Luna, you think I wanted you remembering stories from your world? You would never want to take anyone out again if you recalled what great people they were from their story!"

Oh ho, so he actually admitted it. I wondered if he would. Now you see?

Shut up. “Just shut up! How can I ever trust you again?”

“Uh, is this a bad time?” asked Goku. “We can come back...”

“No,” snarled Susan. “Let’s just get on with this. I suppose you’ll say it was with the best of intentions, protect me, blah blah.”

“Exactly! Do you want to feel how you were feeling after killing Luna, again? And again? And again? If you don’t remember their stories, it won’t be as hard for you.”

You are a sensitive little flower, after all.

“I just don’t even know you right now.”

You never did, and now you know I was right.

“I still don’t recall you though, I’m sorry.” She said to the bald guy.

“It’s okay, no one ever knows me,” he said, resigned. “I’m Saitama.”

“You’re obviously pretty strong,” she remarked, watching the nearby mountains now finally able to reform. “Probably stronger than Doomsday, who I had a heck of a time with. That kind of power is way beyond me, no matter what some may think, sealing my memories and such.”

“Look, I can show you precedent with people who did go bad. I have to be careful!”

“Hey, don’t be down on yourself,” chirped Goku. “If you’re here you must be something special. This place is only used by the ‘big guns’ so to speak.”

“Am I a big gun now? After my last reality, I’m having trouble believing it. But I guess I did survive, so... Let’s get this show on the road then.”

“Very well. What you have to do is...”

Silverstreak explained the technique, and Susan started gathering power. She charged all of her energy into the technique, and rose into the air. Her arm outstretched, a massive aura of power all around her, she opened her fist.

“Golden Crash.”

The beam of energy that shot from her hand impacted the world ‘above’ and soundlessly ripped it to pieces.

Okay, maybe he’s got a point.

Techniques used in this chapter

Golden Crash

Force

Level 20 (10+5+5+0) (Attack+Effect, Sight, I)

Known as the World Destroyer attack, Golden Crash unleashes a massive blast of brilliant golden energy capable of destroying an entire planet. However, to “traditionally” destroy a planet 400 or more damage (based on size) would have to be done. Instead, this technique has an effect of ignoring target size, treating each object it hits as size 0. Roll damage normally from the technique but do not subtract target size from HDL or divide damage.

For example, treat the planet as solid rock, DTR 5, making the DC 30, easily reachable with the technique.

Note that while the range is Sight, the blast must travel from the user to the target, so planets cannot be destroyed remotely. The blast travels fairly quickly though.

Keep Your Head Up- Move Along

When: A few days later

Where: Hub transport room

So Susan spent a few days at the hub, getting her item made and taking care of some things. She got the tattoo put on her right hand, (her sword already came out of her left) and selected a nice trunk she could put things into. Into this she loaded her book, at least one of the *spell papers* of each type she had made, and her shotguns. It had cost her ten XP, and she could basically load a single object into it by touching it. Usually of course this would be the trunk, but if “emptied” something else could be put inside.

While that work was being done, Susan was reading over the spell to make Sparkle ageless, and with her *accelerate magic* going it only took the original twenty-four hour ritual to make happen. (Normally from writings it would have taken 48 hours!) Spending twenty energy she couldn't possibly fail, and Sparkle didn't have to worry about getting any older.

Susan put one point into *Meditation* under Silverstreak's direction, and figured out how to slightly lower her point pool instead of sleeping. The Darkness grumbled about it, but really couldn't do anything about it so finally gave up on that topic. She lowered it a few points in four hours, and figured she had it down.

She looked over the innate powers she was being offered by The Darkness, after being assured by Silverstreak as long as they were paid for, there would be no real downsides to taking them, but naturally all the best ones were the most expensive. She had some spells in mind to learn, and even considered raising some of her skills, so held off on that.

Similarly she put a point into *chaos magic* which she felt she would actually be pretty good at, given her high LUCK at the moment. *Hindsight* seemed the most useful, as it basically took whatever situation you were in at the moment and rewrote time a little to have made you consider that situation before you got into it. Thus, you might retroactively think about bringing extra gas when riding in a boat and running out, or new flashlight batteries should yours not last the night. To a certain extent it mimicked the *Always Prepared* background for a single situation- through time. *Metagame* was the one she had been asking for after meeting Discord, as it would basically show her a character sheet for someone, even a creature like Doomsday that she had before her. The only other was *Random Control*, which would allow her to get a result twice, and keep the more favorable.

She did not bother learning *Time Door* on her own. She figured the extra cost would act as a secondary buffer, and not allow the spell to become her catch all solution generator. Naturally *Time Anchor* was fine, because that just effectively created knowledge about the future, rather than two Susans running around at any one time.

She got a manual and spent some time with her new puppy pets. They had some nice features, including a full battery of sensors and the ability, like her watch, to get data from wireless sources. In fact the team at the Hub hooked them up to her watch, so she could give them orders, get replies, even see what they were seeing, wirelessly. They had a pretty rudimentary AI package but for dogs they were brilliant. They could follow any command with precision, were pretty heavily armored, and didn't mind being stored in low power mode inside her *pocket*. Also the AI in her watch and the AI in the dogs could talk and that made the dogs smarter, at least within range.

“As the one I gave you is far more sophisticated,” bragged Silverstreak, “just a bit less mobile.”

The big one was another story.

“It didn't have an AI as such, as much as it had a single minded agent that was supposed to protect anyone inside,” an agent explained to her. “We took it out, as it would interfere with normal operations.”

“What is the normal operation of such a thing?”

“Could be a lot of stuff. Space station repair, underwater cable repair work, even nuclear waste cleanup. It has an internal air supply, radiation shielding, the works. Heck, it could work in the upper atmosphere of Venus! It’s armored, so it can go into combat, it’s a versatile machine. Bulky, they’ll probably slim it down in years to come, whatever reality it came from, but still useful. To put it in your terms, this one mecha would go for about \$250,000.”

“I see!”

“Your dogs go for about \$200k.”

“What are they inside, solid gold?”

She was told it could be kept there, on standby, and deployed if she for some reason needed it. That was fine by her, and she said if someone else had the training to make it work, they were welcome to use it in her absence. And it did take training, just like driving a car, so she put a point into that as well. She wouldn’t be fighting inside it, but she could turn it on and walk it around.

She left the rest of her XP on the character sheet, figuring if she had a year before her next encounter with the host of The Darkness, she may as well spend it there rather than at the Hub. Give her something to do, at least.

The only thing left was Susan herself. Silverstreak had wardrobes full of stuff both from other worlds and the imagination of those that stopped in and played with his fabrication machines. She picked out a pure white outfit with sensible pants, a top with tight, quarter sleeves extending to just above the elbow, and a long coat that could hide the various holsters she now had attached to her. One for the gun that Jenny had given her at her left, one for the healing shiv so she didn’t have to raise her pant leg all the time at her back. With her long red hair flung out behind her (she had actually gotten it trimmed and styled there, the Hub was one stop shopping for everything really) she had to admit even at a five looks, she was looking pretty good. The bracelet that held her *materia* now fit over her left sleeve so it was clearly visible, and of course her orbs of power glittered at each wrist. It was all made of advanced fabrics so it could keep her warm or cool as the situation needed, and she threw her usual “you can’t destroy this anymore” technique on all of it. She looked otherworldly, proud, and with those black eyes of hers, just a little bit exotic and dangerous.

Yeah, I think I can pull this off!

If you’re going for the ‘angelic warrior’ sort of theme, I could get you a pair of actual angel wings. It would just be two extra limbs. Cheap!

You mean it wouldn’t have to be just arms?

Nope, could be legs, for... some bizarre reason. But wings are a popular choice.

That would be AMazing. But totally impractical. But I want them. But I... no. I want!

Yeah, they would look good on you. I have to admit.

Oh they would, wouldn’t... no! No wings. That would be stupid. I can already fly with magic, what would I need wings for? And how would I sleep with them? Totally impractical.

Let me know if you change your mind.

You’ll remind me at every turn, I’m sure. Look, I was just trying to contrast my eyes. If I’m going to be constantly asked about them, I may as well look the rest of the part. This way I don’t look totally evil, right?

I guess. I would have gone with all black, myself.

I know, and that’s why I didn’t.

Would be harder to see the blood spatters though.

...You had to go and ruin it.

But the more Susan looked at herself, the more the idea of wings just wouldn’t leave her. She turned and walked to an “elevator.”

“Destination?” a pleasant voice asked after a moment.

“This is the place of miracles, isn’t it?”

“What sort do you desire, Susan?”

“Take me where I can get my wings.”

“Arriving at the fabrication nexus.” The door opened and Susan stepped out, looking over the brightly lit room she found herself in. Machines of every kind were busy churning out the physical manifestations of the user’s imaginations, and she walked over to an unused station. She looked it over.

“I don’t think I have the right skills for this,” she said to herself.

“Maybe I can help?” said a girl not much older than her, bouncing over. She was wearing a green bandana on her head and had long, flowing blond hair. She was dressed like a mechanic- from the 25th century. “Name’s Winry. Winry Rockbell! Nice to meet you!”

“I’m Susan Felton, nice to meet you too. You know how to work these machines?”

“Girl, I can make them crank out things you didn’t even know you needed. I love this stuff, that’s why I’m usually hanging around here. So? What can I help you make today?”

“This is going to sound totally silly...”

“Nonsense, I’ve heard it all around here. Come on, hit me! Give me a challenge already!”

“I want some... angel wings...” She mumbled.

“Some what?”

“Angel wings!”

Go ahead and laugh.

But Winry just looked her over. “You do dress the part. Man, it is time for those to come back already?”

“Er, what?”

“You must be new here,” Winry said with a laugh. “Stuff tends to follow certain cycles. Somebody starts walking around with wings, suddenly everyone has to have wings. Then it was animal ears and tails, I’ve seen people basically living inside fully motorized suits of armor. Each one passes out of fashion as easily as it begins.”

“So if I started walking around here with wings...”

“Expect to see tons more in like a week! But don’t let that stop you, let’s get some pictures of you and see what we can come up with, okay?”

“If you don’t mind helping?”

“Nah, what did I just say? Take off that coat and shirt and anything else you’ve got on top and step into the chamber.”

Susan had noted that most people in this room were in various stages of undress, as armor was being fitted to probably half of them, so it was probably no big deal. She did as she was asked, setting her clothes on a chair that had risen up from the floor. Another was generated in front of the machine Winry sat down at, and Susan stepped into a glass tube looking thing as she activated it. No one looked at her twice.

“Now, we’ll first get a good set of measurements from you, and you can think about which option you want. This won’t hurt a bit but stay still, okay?”

“Okay.”

Arms came up out of the floor and ran laser beams over her body, and Winry said she got it and to step out.

“Now there’s two models. The first would look like this.” She called up some data on the screen and a picture of Susan appeared there, along with a harness superimposed on her upper body that supported two feathery wings. She spun it around. “Somewhat bulky, but could be worn over anything. Not very elegant though. Oh, and are the wings okay? When wings were ‘in’ there were designs created for all sorts.” She started cycling through them. “Dragon wings, bat wings, plasma wings-”

“Oh, those are cool.” What appeared was a sort of wing frame, then glowing plasma shot between the struts of the wings to fill them out. “But no, pure white wings, please.”

“You got it.” They went back to the first pair. “The second type would be integrated into an actual piece of body armor, like this.” The Susan model was now clothed in what was essentially a breastplate, but pure white and looking more like a tight shirt than actual armor. It was sleeveless, and matched her contours exactly. “That provides the needed support as

various hard points within the- And I see from your face that's the one and you don't care about the explanation why it has to be armor."

"Oh yeah it is."

She laughed. "I'll get the process started then. Now I see you have that cool orb embedded in your chest..."

"My transformation! Will that work with these wings?"

"Is that what that is? An actual *metapower* item, not just something decorative? Don't worry, most transformations are 'smart' enough, if you will, to incorporate things like this."

I guess my Avatar spell incorporates the knife holder, and the spell symbol bracelet I used to wear before changing modes every three minutes made it a pain to keep loaded. So why wouldn't my Guardian transformation be the same?

"I mention it because I wondered if you wanted the neckline adjusted a little bit, like so." The model changed, a square being cut out of the material on top to frame the orb nicely against her skin. (The orb is fairly high on her chest)

"That's actually not bad. Can you give it like a silver trim?"

"Of course." She did, and a thick ribbon of silver appeared around the edge of the neckline.

Susan nodded appreciably. "How much control do you have over this?"

"Lots! Come on, I was worried this was going to be no challenge at all!"

"Well, this material, it's armor right?"

"Has to be, to support the weight of the wings, as I started to say before. It'll be fairly thick stuff, with a lot of layers for the wiring and support structure. You do know they're going to be heavy, right?"

Susan made a brush off motion with her hand. "Heavy. Ha! So it's fairly stiff then?"

"Yes, but flexible enough to slip on. Why?"

"Can you put some openings in the bottom, say, about this big?" She popped a *materia* off her bracelet and held it up.

"Oh, they aren't just decoration either? Sure. How about this?" She made some adjustments and put eight evenly spaced around the bottom.

"Perfect, if they'll hold these while I'm jumping about and such."

"They should. What else?"

"It's sort of plain, can a pattern be applied?"

"Sure, there's all sorts of them, take a look."

So Susan settled on a pattern she liked, (feathers, of course) and from the floor of the tube rose a dummy that took on her proportions. Various arms raised up from beside it and started basically spray painting the model.

"It's being painted on? Won't that take forever?"

"A couple of hours, yes. But doing it layer by layer lets us have maximum control and gets the flexibility plus durability it'll need. This is the soft, inner layer. It'll self assemble into something resembling cloth, then start on the harder outer layer. Of course the circuitry and support structure will be woven into the whole thing, while the battery will be added later. Basic additive fabrication."

"Basic for a being of nearly unlimited power and influence with access to an unlimited number of realities' fabrication methods. And the people smart enough to combine them and work the machines." She indicated Winry, who gave a little bow.

"Well, there is that. Now, while that's working, come on over here and we can get you a control crown design you like."

"A what now?"

"The wings will respond to your mental commands. Oh, do you have some kind of cybernetic brain enhancements already?"

"No, that sort of thing interferes with magic, right?"

She nodded. "So you'll need an external one. We can use the scan of your head from earlier, you just have to select a style."

So Susan selected a fairly basic silver hoop with (again) an angel wing motif in back for the battery and other circuitry, and that started assembling itself.

“Now the power supply for all this stuff will self charge. Both things generate an anti-inertia field you’ll have to sort of ‘push’ through. Don’t worry, after a day you won’t even notice it. Upshot is it’ll continuously charge itself just from you moving around.”

“Neat!”

“So, it’ll be a few hours before the armor is done and we can fit the wings. You want to come back or just wander around until then?”

“Are you kidding? This place is a builder’s paradise. I’ve love to have a look around, see what others are working on.”

“Be my guest.” She tapped her watch. “We’ll both be notified when it’s done, I’ll come find you and perform the final steps.”

“Thanks. I really could not have done all that!”

“It’s why I’m here. See you soon, I think I see someone else that could use my help!”

Seems like it’s a paradise for technical types as well as those that need custom stuff made.

So Susan wandered around, only once wondering if she should put her top back on but no one seemed to care so she stood and watched what others were up to. Basically any form of armor, weapon, or gadget one could think of was being worked in here. People were being fitted with gauntlets, boots, or whole sets of armor fresh from being painted and buffed in tubes like the one assembling hers. Others were running around excitedly taking notes, or helping others refine and tweak their creations. There were various levels, and off to the edges were other rooms where people were testing their creations, either shooting at targets or being shot at.

As she was watching a sniper put rounds into a target wayyyyyy over there, a tiny, multi-armed creature ran up to her. “Let me fix the grip on your pistol!” It offered in a fairly squeaky voice, pointing to it.

“Is it broken?”

“Generic! Plain! Bad!”

“Oh...kay?” She held it out and the alien took her hands in one set of its, and got out a tube of some kind of paste it started smearing all over the grip.

“Yes, good hands, strong hands, nice hands!”

“Thank you.”

The creature stopped massaging the paste it had smeared on the grip and from a pocket took a small can of something, which it sprayed all over the paste. It tapped it. “Nice and hard. Customized. Good!”

He handed it back and Susan was pleased to note it *did* feel better in her hand.

“Thank you,” she called to it, and it gave a backwards wave as it was already speeding towards the next person.

“Watchmakers,” said the nearest person to her, watching it run away. “Pushy, but they know their stuff.”

“I guess so,” Susan replied, hefting the pistol and then putting it back in the holster.

Why does that sound familiar? Something about gripping hands? Ah well.

Susan wasn’t sure how much of the place she had actually seen, but it seemed all too soon that her watch was showing her a mini-map of the place and the position of Winry who was getting closer.

“All set, come on, let’s fit the wings!”

Susan grinned and followed her.

Back at the station, Winry slipped the armor off the dummy which retracted back into the floor. There was a bump in the center of the back between two holes, which Winry said she had placed the battery pack into when the system said it was ready for it. Looking it over she nodded, apparently pleased with how it came out.

“Slip it on and we’ll see how it fits. Which will be perfect, of course.”

“You mean like a shirt?” she asked, taking it.

“Exactly. It’s flexible- have you met Goku?”

“Just recently, actually.”

“Nice guy. Anyway, he brought some armor techniques from his reality where people tend to turn into huge monkey looking things. This doesn’t need that kind of stretchability, but the boss incorporated it into the process. It’ll work, just try it.”

“You’re the boss at the moment.” Susan slipped it over her head, and found it to be quite comfortable. She did a series of stretches, bends, and lunges, then straightened up. While she had done that a mirror had come out of the floor, and she looked herself over. “I could sleep in this thing, I’ve never had on something so comfortable! That lining it did first is really something, it’s so soft. And it looks great too.”

“It’s not too heavy? Because it’s going to get worse with the wings on.”

“Like I said, weight isn’t really a problem with me.”

“Glad to hear it! Ah, here they are now.” A rack holding a pair of angelic looking wings rolled up, obviously guided by AI, and Winry looked them over. “Yeah, they should be fine. These weren’t made to order, they were left over from the last wings fetish. They’ve been cleaned and everything, just like new!”

“Whatever. Something like this must be pretty sophisticated. Not even this place could build a pair in day I’d imagine.”

“You got that right. Turn around.”

Winry hefted one, turning it almost sideways and slotting it into one of the holes on Susan’s back. She gave a twist and locked it in place, then did the other one. They lit up with a blue light running through the tops to the very tips, and Winry made sure there were no blank spots as they opened and closed. “Good, that should do for the diagnostics. Your watch should have the results.”

Susan looked, and there was a big “ok” on the face. She tapped it and they closed most of the way. “I think we’re good to go.”

“Now walk over and get the control crown.”

“Okay. Whoa!” She staggered a bit when she took a step.

“Yeah, little tricky aren’t they? When you can fold them back it’ll be easier, but you have to get used to the charging field too. Of course once you have the crown you can fold them back further. Nice and slow now, come on.” She took Susan’s hand and led her to the other machine, where she picked up the “crown” and set it on her head.

“Now what?”

“Just imagine you have wings. For starters, let’s just try moving one at a time...”

Susan was taken through a crash course in wing movement, and found it wasn’t much more difficult than just moving her own arms around.

“Now settle them,” Winry suggested. “They should take the form of a feathery cape in standby mode.”

Susan did, and they folded up and settled on her shoulders, hanging down much like the coat she had been planning to wear had.

“Just one last thing- flying with them. That’s also controlled by the crown, and once you get used to it, it’s pretty easy. You don’t have to manually flap them or anything, honestly they’re just for show anyway. It’s a gravity control system. Imagine a small ball of gravity just slightly above you, pulling you up.”

Susan did, and the wings opened and she hovered off the ground, gently bobbing up and down as the wings slowly flapped. “This is so cool!”

“Don’t do it now, but to control the direction and speed, just imagine the ball being bigger, or farther away. The further away you put it, the faster you’ll go to try and catch it. The larger the “ball” the stronger the pull, in case you run into a world with higher or lower gravity than standard. I suggest a large open field for any test flights.”

“Good plan. What if I should get distracted though, like in a fight?” She had already realized that she was at a -2 for maintaining her “connection” to the ball, just as with a spell or a power.

“They won’t just drop you. With no further input they’ll just maintain course. There’s an anti-crash system so you won’t smash into a building or anything, you’ll just stop and hover before you run into something.”

“Ah, safety first!”

“Exactly.” She looked her over. “I think that’s it. Enjoy them, they look great on you!”

Susan put the imaginary ball of gravity under her feet and gently came to rest, folding the wings up again. “I will. Thanks. If there’s anything I can do for you, I’m as good at making magical items as you are this stuff for instance, just name it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. See you around!” They shook hands again, and Susan went in search of a quiet place to see what happened when she transformed.

And I have my ‘you can’t break this’ technique to put on the whole set of these things, of course. Better go grab those old clothes too, may as well bring them for times I don’t want to wear the wings.

“Looking good, Susan!” Silverstreak noted the next day, as she and her followers came to the transit room. Sparkle had accepted her new look with an eye roll and a “really?” and of course Ifurita didn’t know the difference.

“Thank you. You don’t think it’s too much?”

He snorted. “Some of the things I’ve seen people go out with from this room? You’re still understating it. Believe me, I’ve seen so. Much. Worse.”

“Humm... like that purple robe of my father’s?”

“HA! Exactly like that, only worse.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Now, two things to note in this reality. First- DO NOT. And I repeat DO NOT change history.”

“So no *Time Door*?”

“No, that or *Hindsight* are fine. I’m talking about a sweeping change to *history*. Those spells are just changing the recent past. Just let events there play out, you’ll know the time this advice is meant for.”

“Okay. And the second?”

“You might not get *time door* in any case. You’re going to be out in space, far from your own solar system. And it’s a primarily technology based reality, very low on the magic scale. So your connection to magic in general will be pretty weak.”

“Ah. So stick to powers then?”

“That’s best. Unlike that world with all the dimensional distortion, you’ll still have a connection to the worlds. So you might manage a one rating given how weak it’s going to be, if you did try it. Though a negative rating would be more likely. Of course your own energy thrown in will be fine. Just don’t go casting something expecting your normal rating and then backfiring it because your math was wrong. And yes, backfire will still be an issue, the magic will almost gleefully hurt you for trying to use it in a place it doesn’t want to be used.”

My energy can of course also be used.

He chuckled. “Ironically, you would actually get your full rating in *chaos* magic because it doesn’t rely upon a planet. Chaos is everywhere, obviously. But you only put one point into that, right? Funny how these things work out, isn’t it?”

“Hilarious. Will I never see Earth then?”

“Oh, you might. People are still from there, they’ve just sort of spread out everywhere. Situation there isn’t the best though, so be careful if you do go. Your magic will at least be a little stronger around there, but still probably not what you’re used to because it’s basically a technology realm, as you’ll see.”

“Okay. I’ve had worse so I guess I’ll see you in a year?”

“I’ll see you then.”

“And you’re sure about coming?” she asked Ifurita. “It won’t be a year for you if you stay here.”

“I must find my place in the world. Worlds. This year will give me plenty of time to explore my own feelings and consider my options. Plus I am your protector now, along with Sparkle. And the only one who might be able to handle you if you start to turn.”

She looked at Silverstreak, who nodded.

“I see. I suppose as it’s a person I chose myself anyway... Okay then, let’s see what the Andromeda has to offer us!”

The trio stepped into light.

Permission to Come Aboard, Captain?

When: A second later.

Where: A generic hallway.

The group found themselves in a corridor lit evenly by bars of light that ran down the hall. The walls were a sort of purple and had a pattern to them, and each was segmented with further struts and reinforcement. At each end was a door that was currently closed, and the place was deathly quiet.

“So this is a starship huh?” Susan said, looking about. “I suppose the odd shape of these halls helps with structural integ- what the heck?” She whirled, looking down the hallway to her left and slightly upwards. “You feel that?”

Sparkle and Ifurita looked up that way too. “I feel something,” replied Sparkle. “And it’s coming from up there.”

“What is it?” asked Ifurita, looking uselessly at the wall where they were gazing. “I don’t sense anything.”

“No, no, this is a spirit thing, not a power thing.” Susan turned a bit and closed her eyes, holding her face up towards what she was feeling. “It’s like being naked on a beach, and every inch of your skin is being touched by the sun. It feels amazing, I wish you could feel it. I want to be closer to whatever this is.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, but we better find out. Raj had a ton of energy, but that felt different from this. This almost feels like I could tap into it like a *ley line*. Or maybe a bunch of them.” Her eyes snapped open. “Come on, this way. I won’t get closer just standing here, will I?”

The three went towards the feeling and through a door, then up a ladder. (Sparkle jumped onto Susan’s shoulders) The ship was kind of confusing (to Susan) but they had the energy signature to follow, and made it to a door that Susan felt was very close to the energy she had been feeling. “Get ready,” she cautioned the others, and pushed the button to open it. They went through and around a corner where they found a woman in a black outfit dropping a rather large gun so as not to be shot by the man that was in front of her. At least, that’s what she figured as the man was holding some kind of staff, not anything she recognized as a weapon.

As soon as the gun dropped the two started going at it, his staff shooting out some kind of energy bolts or something as the woman jumped about and tried not to be hit.

“Do we...” Ifurita raised her staff.

Susan shook her head. “We don’t know who to root for at the moment.”

“What do plants have to do with anything?”

“I mean we don’t know the situation here.”

“Ah. So we don’t know who to fire upon! And you don’t want to just stun both of them?”

“Exactly. And the reason is right over there. Hi!” She waved to the purple girl who was further down the hall and looking at them with a very curious expression on her face. Her outfit was quite revealing, with short beige shorts and a three color top that left most of her vibrant purple skin showing. Her hair was done up with gems and colored extensions and her tail and pointed ears were nearly too cute for words to describe. She hesitantly raised a hand and waved back. “You haven’t seen, like, a miniature sun around here anywhere, have you?” Susan called, her hands making a ball shape in front of her.

Of the possible responses to this query, she was not expecting the girl to get a horrified look on her face and book it down the passageway out of sight.

“Well that wasn’t what I wanted. It wasn’t what I wanted at all!” *And I think the source of that power is going away too, so is it that girl? Where does she put all that energy? I figured it would be something glowing with power, like Goku.*

“Oh good, a mostly naked, exotic looking, cute alien girl for you to chase after. This is exactly what we needed right now.” Sparkle did not bother keeping the frost out of her voice.

“It is?” asked Ifurita.

Sparkle stared at her. “You’ve got a lot to learn, haven’t you?”

"I admit this is true. Her powers are very confusing. I think she is the one you were looking for."

"Just chasing her is probably a bad idea, oh, nice hit armored dude, you give that lady what for if indeed she deserves to be thrashed in such a manner." The two leapt for each other, and the guy planted both his boots on her and knocked her backwards, totally knocking her out as Susan could see her non-lethal health had been depleted. "Oh, bravo sir!"

The man looked around and not finding the purple girl, instead went for his staff thing and pointed it at Susan and friends. Then he hesitated and the staff dipped a bit.

"I've never seen you before," he admitted. "Andromeda, did you miss like, two more... people? What is with your eyes by the way?"

"According to my sensors," said a transparent woman dressed in red who appeared out of nowhere, "they were not here a minute ago. I don't know how they got here, actually."

"In air hologram! Sweetness! Remind me to get the specs on that system, it shouldn't even be possible."

"Hey look, a cute girl you *can't* chase after for once."

"Why do you keep bringing that up suddenly?"

"Because it happens every time! May as well get it out of the way."

"Not every time!"

"Name a time it didn't happen."

...

"The last world."

"What, was she underage or something?"

"She was twelve, and host to The Darkness as it turned out. I didn't really meet anyone else. Or have time, due to the near constant combats there. Only other girl I met was Ifurita here, but the whole master/servant thing got in the way, not that she isn't cute enough, but I don't see her responding to any advance of mine but I mean if you thought you might-" Susan looked hopefully at her.

Ifurita tried to blush, which she figured was the standard response in this situation, but didn't quite know how to accomplish it.

"Hello?" the man was waving at them.

"Oh, sorry. Look, you seem pretty busy and everything," she indicated the knocked out woman. "If you've got places to be don't let us get in your way. Just do your thing and you can come back to us later."

"I don't think so." The staff came back up again.

"Oh please," Susan yawned. "Look, if you've got all this time on your hands, get the guy in charge down here. We'll need to talk to him sooner or later."

"Good idea master!"

"I thought so."

"I am the guy in charge! Captain Dylan Hunt, of the Andromeda Ascendant!"

"Nice, usually it's not that fast."

"We are on a starship, not many people to run into around here, I would think," put in Sparkle.

"Ah, true. Look, was she a member of your crew or something? Why did you beat her up?"

The two looked at each other. "Of course I'm going to beat her up, she's trying to take over my ship! Same as you!"

"I don't want your ship. Ifurita, do you want his ship?"

"What would I do with a ship?"

"Good point. What about you, Sparkle, do you want his ship?"

"I do not. I bet there's not a single tiny furry animal to chase anywhere aboard. Plus I've only seen a few corridors, it could be a hunk of junk!"

"I am not junk!" insisted the hologram lady.

Susan shrugged. "The point is, not a one of us wants your ship, so be at ease. We're here to help, actually. Hey again, you!"

The others, including Dylan, looked down the hallway where the purple girl was peeking out.

"You came back!" Susan called to her. The feeling of being bathed in sunlight returned as the girl looked them over. *Come closer, cute purple alien girl! Oh this feels so good!*

"I figured someone would chase me," she called back. "When no one did I came back to see what was going on."

"Ah, *curiosity*. I have that myself, maybe we can be friends?"

"Are you on his side?"

"Wait, they aren't with you?" Dylan asked. The purple girl shook her head. "Never seen them before, and there were no other ships in the area that we knew about. I thought she was part of the crew, but they're all dressed really funny."

Wait, funny 'ha ha' or funny 'not from around here?' Because I don't want to be seen in anything funny 'ha ha.' Maybe the wings were a bad idea after all.

Not now! And you are not me. I am me!

"I'm not on any side, I just want to help save this entire reality from destruction. You know, if that's okay with you."

"Really?" the girl stepped into the hallway and came a few paces forward. The feeling of being bathed in utter warmth increased as she did.

"Really! I'll be happy to tell you the whole story, and whatever else you do, you need that purple girl on your side." *By my side. Very close by my side. Forever.*

"My name is Trance! Trance Gemini"

"Nice to meet you, Trance. I'm Susan, this is Ifurita and Sparkle, my cat companion."

"Hello!"

"Hi."

"Greetings."

"So as I was saying, you want Trance on your side. My friend here says she felt some odd powers in her, and I can feel *spirit energy* coming off her like you wouldn't believe. Maybe that's typical for her species, but she would make a powerful ally."

"Oh, I'm nothing special," Trance insisted, kicking one foot out a little bit and looking down.

"Who are you people?" asked Dylan. "You are not acting the way looters and pirates should be."

"Don't judge us by them," said the girl, pointing to the woman. "We didn't know about them, and this ship was supposed to be abandoned. He made us do it, threatened not to pay us if we stopped helping! Or shoot us, which I think is worse now that I stop to consider it. You think I want to run around and steal things from people? No I do not. Well okay that's a lie, but only from people that deserve it. Taking an empty ship is totally different than taking one away from its captain."

"Tell you what- we help you fight off these invaders and you help us defeat The Darkness that threatens you all. Sound like a deal?"

"I think you should listen to her," said the girl. "She seems very sincere in her beliefs. Even if I don't feel any 'weird powers' coming from her."

"And what about you?" asked Dylan.

"Oh. Uh, I surrender, I guess?" She put her hands up and give a rakish grin.

Dylan dumped the still unconscious woman, who turned out to be an actual cyborg, into some kind of cryo pod and sealed it up. "Now we just have like six more to take out."

Susan nodded. He hadn't killed the woman, and was now making sure she couldn't make trouble for them again. "I like your style, captain. Where are these others? We'll have this wrapped up in no time."

"Internal sensors are down. We can't track them."

"Wonderful. But to be expected. Still..." she looked over at the now sleeping woman. "We don't want anyone wandering by here and waking her up, now do we? Simple solution- deploy pups."

"Deploy what?"

"Deploy pups!" she said again, skimming her hands low to the ground. As she did she pulled both dogs out of the *pocket* and as programmed, they came out of low power mode

and unfolded their legs. Dylan brought his weapon up again, but they just looked around and gave an electronic bark. "Jumpy, aren't you?"

"Where did you pull those from?"

"They're so cute!" exclaimed Trance.

"Aren't they though? I'm defining your mission parameters."

Her watch lit up and she looked at it. There were two lines, identical.

Ready to receive orders.

She turned to the one on the left. "You are designated pup 1 for this mission. Guard dog mode. Notify me if anyone gets near this room. Do not take fire or engage the enemy." *I have no idea how strong their weapons are, after all.* "Simply hide. Are these orders clear?"

Orders accepted. Guard dog mode. Stealth mode. Notify if enemy movement near this location.

"Good dog. You are designated pup 2 for this mission. You are in seek mode. Right now we are in enemy territory and these are the only friendlies. Recognize them. You are also to hang back if hostiles are engaged. Are these orders clear?"

Orders accepted. Seek mode. Stealth mode if enemy action. Do not target friendlies.

"Good dog. We ready to go?"

"Huh. Gotta get me some of them," remarked Dylan.

"I heard that!" said the voice of the ship.

"Move out."

Seek mode engaged.

Pup 2 moved out into the hallway, sniffing and listening.

No hostiles in this area. Moving to next area.

Susan moved her one wing aside, drawing her pistol and making sure it was on TR1 only.

"Let's go."

"Who's in command here?" Dylan wondered aloud.

"Don't mind her, she does that," explained Sparkle.

"Are you a robot too? If so you're extremely sophisticated. But I suppose it is three hundred years later."

"No, I'm alive. Believe me, we can explain later. If your ship is being taken over, that's the priority at the moment."

"I suppose."

Susan was burning with *curiosity* to know what was actually going on around here. Like where was the crew? Why the captain was left to defend his ship alone? But that could all come later.

"I have an idea as to their next target," Dylan said after a moment. "They'll want access to the computer core, which means blowing a hole in the wall in a very specific place. We should head there."

"Sounds like a plan. Pup 2, remain in seek mode but follow us."

Orders accepted.

To accommodate the dog they had to take an elevator up instead of the ladders, but they made their way following the captain.

“Non-lethal force, I assume?” asked Ifurita.

“That’s right. Less mess to clean up.”

“Is that really the guiding consideration?”

“Sparkle was right. I can see we’ll need to get you a humor module of some kind when we get back.”

“Wait, you’re an android?” asked Dylan.

“I am a created life form, yes,” she answered.

“But you’re alive, right?”

Susan nodded. “No cybernetic enhancements here, I’m meat all the way through.”

“You keep some interesting company.”

“Yes,” everyone replied.

The group got into position and waited, but not for long.

Three enemies approaching, her watch displayed with a buzz.

Susan held up three fingers and pointed, and the others nodded.

A few seconds later the door opened.

“Place the charges along that bulkhead,” said a male voice. “The main computer core is located right on the other side.”

Susan made a thrusting gesture with her hand and she and Ifurita stepped out. The guy in the chainmail wasn’t even looking in their direction, he was checking the door behind them. The guy in the jacket had his gun over his shoulder and was looking up at a basketball hoop of all things. The guy with the enormous arms (she could tell because they were bare) was doing the actual work of bending over to get the explosives out of the bag he had set down.

They are making this way too easy. These are the people taking over the ship? They aren’t military, that’s for sure.

She chose the biggest guy who it seemed had some kind of fancy gauntlets with weird decorations out of the side, and started pulling the trigger. At the same time Ifurita let go a blast of *knockout* energy, which slammed into the guy with the jacket.

He went down in a heap, and Susan put three shots into her guy. Oddly, she tried for four, but could not pull the trigger. He too went down in a heap.

Oh, I bet any more non-lethal damage and he would have carried over into lethal. So my spell stopped me from doing that. VERY interesting.

“Huh?” The guy looked up from setting the charges, and scrambled for his gun.

Their surprise action now spent, the group rolled *initiative* and Ifurita was up first. So she simply adjusted her aim and put a shot into the third man, who also dropped.

“Let’s head back,” Susan said after a moment, when pup 2 said it was clear and no one came running. She holstered her gun again after a moment of silent appreciation for it and thanks to the woman who had given it to her. *I hope you’re being safe out there, Jenny. Guns though, I have a new appreciation for them now.* She hefted two of the men. “If you can get the third one please?”

“You say you’re not an android or a cyborg?” he asked suspiciously. “Are you a heavy gravity worlder?”

“I’m not even sure what that is, though I think I can guess. Why? I only took out one of them- oh, the carrying thing. All in good time.”

“Yeah, she does that too,” explained Sparkle.

She let pup 1 know they were coming and tossed the three bodies into the individual chillers, leaving only a couple left to take care of.

“You’re not counting the crew of the Maru, right?” asked Trance.

“You mean the ones that originally came aboard and tried to turn my ship into a quick buck?”

“Er, yes, them. They’re good people, really!”

“How long have you known them?”

“Not... long?”

“Great, there’s a ringing endorsement.”

“One thing at a time,” cautioned Susan. “Who are we still shooting, so we don’t take them out by accident?”

“Don’t shoot Beka, she’s our captain and the only woman left aboard, apart from me. Harper is a little guy, not like these people.” She tapped the glass on a nearby pod. “And Rev Bem, he’s a magog.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“What if I told you there was one human with dark skin and two nightsiders still against us?”

“I wouldn’t know what those were, either.”

“Oh.” She brightened. “The magog is the really hairy one!”

“So don’t shoot the little guy, the woman, or the hairy one. Got it.”

“Great!”

“So where to now, oh captain my captain?”

“Let’s go back to command, the others are probably still there,” cut in Trance.

“Exactly what I was going to say.”

They made it to the large doors without incident, and pup 2 notified Susan there were several hostiles within. Susan got her gun out again. “I’ll go first, draw their fire. Hopefully we can take them in a single action again. Nice work back there, by the way.”

“Thank you, master.”

Susan waited in front of the door, Ifurita behind her, and nodded to Dylan to open it. As soon as it was partially open and she got a good look at the interior, she *spirit stepped*. There was a circular railing area and some kind of pilot’s chair, but enough open space for her to get by and appear in the far side of the room.

“Hey!” she yelled, calling attention to herself. Everyone turned from the opening doors and raised their guns. “Let’s party.”

She noted two alien looking dudes that were not overly hairy, and chose one at random to shoot with her surprise action. This was the one on the left, which makes sense as she’s left handed. She again put four shots into him, getting a nineteen to hit. He only took two shots and went down, which was fine with her.

Ifurita stepped past the door, sighted the other non-hairy dude and put a bolt into him, but ties go to the defender so she barely missed him. He jumped out of the way and tried to get to cover behind the chair. But Susan could still see him, and she was up so she sighted and squeezed. Seventeen to hit, but as she tried to squeeze the trigger four times she only got two, her first and last shots. These hit his body and left arm, and he staggered. “I surrender,” he called, “don’t shoot me again. Ow, I’m dying! Dying I tell you.”

“You’ll be fine. Drop it,” Susan called.

“I’m dropping it. I’m dropping it.” He dropped the gun and turned to see who was talking. “Where did you come from?”

“Never you mind.” She looked over and the little guy was trying to fumble his gun out, so Susan *spirit stepped* over there and put her hand over top of his. “Don’t even think about it,” she cautioned.

“Whoa! How did you-”

“Trance!” shouted Beka, “you’re alive!”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Yeah, we all for some reason thought you were dead.”

“I too am pleased to see you well,” said the hairy one, probably Rev Bem. “But who might you be?” Susan looked him over, and part of her brain screamed ‘monster’ at her, and demanded she pull the trigger and never stop while pointing the death end of her gun at this thing that was going to claw her eyes out. She mastered the impulse. The being was hairy, had a face like a bat had a baby with a person, and had wicked claws at the end of the fingers it was displaying. “Susan, Susan Felton. Nice to meet you.”

“And I, you.”

Meanwhile, Dylan had come over and collected the nightsider’s pistol, and checked him for other weapons. “Might as well be good for something around here,” he muttered.

"We cool here?" Susan asked Harper, looking him right in the eye.

"Oh yeah, frosty as ever," he answered, probably wondering what the heck she was.

"Good." She stepped away from him and back towards Dylan. "I believe my end of the bargain has been fulfilled, but that can wait until we get these people off the ship, I guess."

"Hey, wait a second," spoke up Harper. "We salvaged this ship fair and square. It's... ours now?" He had started out strong but trailed off as Susan looked over at him.

"No, it is not yours," clarified Dylan. "It is still mine. Now more than ever, if the commonwealth really has fallen. But I do have a proposition for you."

"Oh, I'm listening," said the nightsider.

"Not you. You I want off my ship, along with the rest of the people with the big guns."

"What happened to them, if I may ask?"

"We put them on ice. They'll be fine."

"So much for Tyr's reputation," he grumbled. "Waste of thrones."

"My heart bleeds for you. Now, you can sleep this whole thing off or visit our brig. Your choice."

"Aren't we missing someone?" Susan asked, who could count up to three perfectly.

"Oh, there should be one more, shouldn't there?"

"I'll tell him to stand down. He's back at the other ship."

"Splendid. Go ahead."

So Gerentex called the last member of his team and told them the operation was a failure, and to come out quietly, which he did, and both were put into the brig.

"So what about us?" asked Beka, now that they were back on the bridge.

"Nopel!" said Dylan jauntily. "First we hear the mystery girl's story, then I'll decide what I want to offer you."

"Fair enough. Pup 2, your mission has been a success, good dog."

Glad I was able to serve.

"Back into low power mode, I'll call upon you again when I need you."

Susan scooped him back into her *pocket*, which she of course had done in front of everyone to get their attention, and all looked riveted to what she had to say now.

"So, let's talk alternate realities, shall we?"

"This is a lot to take in," Dylan remarked, shaking his head. "Bad enough to have more than three hundred years pass in an instant, but to wake up to this?"

"True though." Susan had, for the last hour or so been giving her ever lengthening "welcome to the multiverse" speech to the crew of the Maru, and what was left of the crew of the Andromeda. (This one man.)

"I don't buy it," said Harper. "You're saying some evil force has come here, taken over something nasty, made it nastier, and now is going to try wiping out every living thing in the known galaxies? Uh uh. No way. Come on Beka, are you buying all this?"

"I've seen a lot of things flying from one end of the galaxy to the other, but something that can wipe it all out? I mean the Magog are making a good start- no offense Rev."

"None taken."

"But there's no way anything that powerful could exist."

"Don't be so sure," spoke up Trance. "You think this is all a coincidence? That the most powerful ship in the fleet is preserved in time until this exact moment, the moment that Susan appears to issue her warning? If it hadn't, it would have been destroyed or captured like all the rest right?"

"She has a good point," admitted Dylan. "One ship wouldn't have made a difference. Not against the force we were up against. We were moments away from being blown up, the black hole was our last ditch effort at escape. That's why I ordered the crew to abandon ship, I didn't think I would make it."

"Come on Trance, you believe her?"

"Harper, there are things out there, you know. Scary, dark things beyond human understanding."

"What about you Rev, are you buying this?"

"I believe in the divine. Does that not imply the existence of the fallen, as well?"

"So what, I'm supposed to believe in the devil or something now?"

"Not all devils are evil though," put in Trance a little too quickly. "I mean, that's what I've heard."

"The divine offers forgiveness to all his children, even those that once turned from him. But Harper, he is a man of science." He turned to Susan. "And I couldn't help but notice when you sat down that cloak of yours gave you a bit of trouble."

"What about it?" *It's true, I've only had the wings a little while and I've never tried sitting with them. I had to get them out of the way so I could lean back in the chair. Good thing I made them removable, sleeping really would have been a major pain if just trying to sit down causes me so much trouble.*

"I believe they may be something more. Perhaps a sign that even Mr. Harper cannot deny."

He stared a moment, and she relented, pushing her chair back from the table. "You'll see them sooner or later." She stood, and making sure it was clear on either side, and activated the anti-grav system and hovered, which automatically spread the wings wide.

"No way!" insisted Harper. "No way are you-"

Susan held up a hand. "They're mechanical, and removable. They're part of the armor I've got on, I just had the overwhelming desire to get a pair recently. Not sure why, but there you are."

She lowered herself and they settled again.

"Okay, that's some pretty cool tech all right. But it doesn't prove the divine had any hand in it."

"But it does show she comes from outside our reality," offered Trance. "I mean you just have to look at Sparkle to see that!"

"That could all be robotics though. I'd have to do a scan of her insides before I believed she wasn't just a very compact android in the shape of a cat."

"Then how about this?" Susan showed her left hand and curled it into a fist, activating her energy blade at the lowest energy setting.

"That, uh, well, some kind of hologram?"

"It registers to my sensors," assured Andromeda. "It's real. She just pulled a solidified energy blade out of nowhere."

"Maybe what she says is true, fine. But what does that have to do with us?"

"That depends on you," Susan answered, sitting again as she let the blade go. "You think it's just random chance you all happened to be the ones to pull this ship from the black hole?" She glanced over at Trance, still radiating the most amazing *spirit energy* she had ever felt. "No. Somehow I think you were guided here."

"By the divine?"

"Call it what you will. But you now have a choice. Take the mercenaries who will be quite upset they didn't get paid, and leave this ship to its devices, or help us. That is, of course, depending on what the captain's plans are now?"

Everyone looked to him.

"I'm only one man. Any plans I have, such as to I don't know, restore the commonwealth? I can't do it alone. And it seems like we're going to need all the help we can get in combatting this Darkness creature. I mean could the Magog be part of that plan somehow?"

"It seems likely, they're coming from someplace," said Harper. "And they don't just travel at random, there's a purpose to their movements. Not that I've studied their movements or anything, so I can keep far away from wherever they are."

"I have often found that a unified threat can bring people together," Susan admitted. "Take an hour or two and think on your future. If it's more evidence you need, I can provide it. Honestly you haven't seen a fraction of what I can do. But even I can't do it alone. We need each other if we're going to survive this."

"The Andromeda took quite a pounding before we got lost in time. At the very least, I could use help repairing her before we leave this system. And there are a few things I think certain people need to undo?" He looked pointedly at Harper.

"Right. I mean it's the least I can do."

"Then for now I'll just wander around," Susan said, getting up again. "An hour or two, have Andromeda call me and you can give me your answer. Meanwhile, I'll collect my pup because he doesn't need to watch the tubes anymore, and look the ship over. I've never been inside a starship before, I've love to see how it's put together and such."

Dylan looked around the table and everyone nodded. "Then we're agreed."

Susan headed toward pup 1, following the signal it was giving off so she didn't get too lost.

"I was wondering why you were just using your pistol," Sparkle mused aloud.

"Eh, it's something they know and can accept. Plenty of time to show them just how powerful I am when we're a bit more secure in who is with us."

"You can learn?"

She laughed. "I know, it takes me a while, but even I get the message in the end. In any case, did you see those guys drop? I think I've been missing out, that pistol is very energy efficient."

"I guess you might have to rely on it when rescuing your father."

"It doesn't hurt to have a lot of options. Non-magical options, that is."

With her pup again put in the *pocket* she went in search of that power she was feeling, hoping to get Trance alone and maybe get a bit of an explanation as to what she was. She got lucky, twenty five on a LUCk check, and found her alone in the "garden" area of the ship. She was pretty impressed, there was a huge tree growing in the middle of the place, and all kinds of plants all over the place. It smelled nice too.

And why does a warship have a place like this inside it? Odd.

"I suppose it's only natural that a sun would be drawn to plants," Susan said, coming up behind Trance. "Though usually I expect it to be the other way around. Don't run away from me this time, okay?"

"Don't let the others hear you say that," she hissed back. "No one is supposed to know that, how do you even know that?"

"I can feel it," Susan answered simply. "You're giving off a tremendous amount of energy I felt several decks down the moment I arrived here. And don't tell me that's just natural for your species."

"It is though, honest."

"Wait, I was joking about being a sun, because just being near you makes me think of sunlight hitting my skin. You make it sound literal, what did you mean by 'no one is supposed to know that' anyway? What are you, really?"

"Just what I said. Look, you have your secrets, and I have mine." She wiggled a finger in front of Susan's eyes. "So please just treat me as if you couldn't feel my *spirit energy* okay? I'm just a plain old purple girl, and nothing more."

Susan, remembering her recent experience with Meggie, did a *Dimension Sense* check on her, getting a fourteen. "At least you feel you belong here. I should have checked the other crew, but I can do that later." She waved it off. "Just to be clear, you don't mean anyone here any harm, right? Your energy feels positive, but I suppose that doesn't mean anything." *Too bad I have to roll absolute maximum on aura reading to get the information I want. I can't even do that at the moment because the difficulty is too high. Who came up with a skill you have to have a ten in to even have a 50% chance of succeeding at?*

"I'm here because this is the place to be if we are going to turn back the darkness that is coming. And darkness is coming, my people knew that even before any external threat came into the picture. Yes, I'll tell you I know that much. Just like you, I'll do whatever I can to protect my friends on this ship."

You came for a lower case darkness, but you'll stay for the capital letter Darkness?

"That's good enough for me. You don't mind if I stay here a bit, just sort of soak in the, atmosphere, yes, that's the word. Your being here having nothing to do with it if anyone asks?"

She laughed. "Why not offer to help Dylan instead? I think you'll be able to do what he needs done a lot easier than the way he would have to do it."

Susan sighed. "Fine. But at some point I will want some basking time."

"I'm not even sure what that means."

Nude yoga?

I wouldn't mind putting a point into yoga if it meant... wait, are nude yoga and clothed yoga different skills?

I don't think so.

Either is certainly a possibility then, if they even have that here.

"Oh, I think you do. I'll see you later."

So Susan was directed by the Andromeda to where Dylan was, and found him pulling on a bulky space suit.

"What's with the getup?" she asked him.

"I have to head outside the ship, patch a bunch of battle damage so we can repressurize the whole thing. Right now a bunch of sections are just cut off because of the vacuum. And as I have no technicians now, and a bunch of the regular androids that do it are damaged or doing other stuff, guess who has to go do it?"

"Need some help? I bet I could seal things back up pretty easily if you can direct me to where it needs it."

"How?"

"Like I said, you haven't seen a fraction of what I can do. Trust me, and let me help."

"Well, okay. We can find a suit in your size I guess. The wings will have to go, of course."

"Pfff, suit. Just take me to the airlock."

“Oooooohkay. This way.” He grabbed up a toolbox and a stack of metal plates, then went down the hall to where the airlock was.

Susan stepped into it with Dylan and called on *Powers Mode* which as she hoped, incorporated her wings nicely. The leotard she normally wore simply appeared under the armor, and the collar was of a slightly different design to leave space for the wings. Her normal tiara didn't appear because she was basically already wearing one, and she noticed her boots had a cute little wing decorations all over them now.

“Let's go!”

“What did you just- no don't tell me, I'm sure the explanation would only confuse me more.” He worked the controls in the room. “I'm pumping the air out. You're sure you won't start, you know, dying?”

“No sweat, come on, come on!” She was excited, she had been into space before of course but only between the moon and the earth. This was *deep space* and the view was probably going to be incredible.

Dylan hit a final button and the air rushed out of the airlock, then it opened.

Susan's eyes widened, not because she had forgotten the *Environmental Adaption* power and they were being sucked out of her head, but to try and take in all of space that lay before her. She gave a gentle push and floated out the door, looking all around her. The sight was truly beyond compare. She grinned a bit. *Is this an open enough field to master flight in, Winry?* She imagined the ball of gravity, just a speck as she didn't want to go too far, and her wings snapped open, giving her an imaginary push and driving her away from the ship. She couldn't exactly laugh, but she had a huge grin as she shot forward and took in the shape of the Andromeda by twisting about, imagining the ball behind her so she was still moving in that direction but looking in the other.

And she thought the view of space was impressive.

The ship was all elegant, sweeping curves, mostly a deep purple with red trim at the “wings.” There was a sort of bullet shaped central area and two sweeping wings that came past the nose and back past the end. *The Enterprise this is not.* The ship looked huge, and Susan wondered how many holes, exactly, they were going to have to patch. *But he was coming out here alone, so there can't be that many, right?*

She stopped, imagined the ball above her, and swooped up to get a better view, then down again to where the light was spilling out of the airlock. She put the ball at her feet so the gravity system would pull her down enough to “walk” and mentally retracted the wings just a bit. She made a “lead on” gesture to Dylan, who shook himself and pointed, then started walking.

In truth the damage wasn't too bad, as Susan saw what looked like drones already doing some repairs of the more minor damage to the ship. But Dylan led her to a large hole and she looked it over. She had taken *time* nature so she should be able to rewind time enough to just erase the battle damage, but she was concerned. *Will the technique need a day or three hundred years? After all, from the perspective of the metal, it's not been twenty four hours since it was damaged. Guess I'll just try it.*

So she did. And with a twenty LUCK check, it was the easier way and Susan silently solved several serious situations simply. The holes closed up, time for the metal simply rewinding, and it wasn't long before Dylan was leading her back in, his tools and patch materials unneeded.

He indicated the airlock, but Susan made a shooing motion with her hand and then pointed to the ship and then her wings. He nodded and closed the door, and Susan took off again. She practiced for about an hour, skimming over the ship, trying to do rolls and control her wings and not smash into the ship as she did it. She found she could put a point into a skill “anti-gravity system control” and realized the more complex a maneuver she wanted to perform, the higher she would have to roll on the skill. Flying about in space is one thing, but maybe with actual gravity to contend with, and trees, and maybe dodging enemy fire? That was something else entirely. Still, she was exhilarated when she came back in via *teleport* and folded her wings again.

“You looked like you were having fun,” Andromeda remarked, appearing beside her.

"And you are gorgeous, both the ship you and the hologram you!" Susan gushed.

"Oh! Uh, thank you."

"You're right though, that was the most fun I've had in a long time. I'm still getting the hang of these wings, usually I just fly without them which is a different mechanism. Anyway, what else needs doing around here? I need to work off this high!"

"Harper could use help, he's been complaining about doing all the repairs himself, when he caused a bunch of damage to my systems trying to take me over."

"I'll see what I can do!"

And so the day passed, and finally the Andromeda was if not battle ready, at least mobile enough get away from the black hole and start making their plans for the future.

"We need to figure out what to do with those mercenaries, and our two prisoners," Dylan said as they ate dinner.

"They probably wouldn't be keen on joining us, what would you pay them with?" asked Harper. "On that note, what are you paying us with?"

Andromeda appeared. "How about your life? We did cure that rash you had, remember? That fatal one, you would have died from. In agony I also remind you."

"And I'm not saying I'm not grateful, but a guy's gotta eat. And ship's stores won't last forever."

"I'm sure I can come up with something," Dylan replied sourly. "Wait, does this mean you're staying?"

"For the moment," Beka allowed. "We talked it over, and Andromeda showed us footage of Susan flying around out in space without apparent protection at all. So I guess she wasn't kidding about having abilities she hadn't shown us yet."

"You still haven't seen anything yet."

"So taken together; her, that story she told us about why she's here, your ship surviving the war... maybe Trance is right and there is a higher purpose for us."

"And if not, at least the machine shop is sweet here. Have you seen that place? I'm itching to start building stuff."

"Oh, Harper," chided Trance. "It's the arboretum you should be considering."

"Hey, you stick to what you like, and the Harper will stick to what he does best. Being a mechanical genius!"

"I'm glad that settled. I'm sure you'll all be a valuable addition to the absolute zero crew I currently command."

"I'm not calling you sir," Beka cautioned.

"Just Dylan will be fine. But back to the prisoners..."

"Leave them wherever Beka picked them up from," suggested Susan. "As far as the mercenaries go, wake them one at a time so they can't make trouble, and boot them off the ship that way too. Maybe to different parts of a space station or something? I don't know what you guys have out here, but away from each other to start. They can meet back up later if they want, after we've left."

"I'm sure we can work out something. The bigger concern is getting the Andromeda back up to battle readiness. We expended most of our ammunition in the fight, and we have no combat drones either, they all got destroyed. As did all our slipfighters." He looked depressed, and Susan figured he had every right to be.

"Don't forget spare parts," put in Andromeda. "Even if Susan can repair things by... whatever it was she was doing out there... I'll still need a lot of spares if I'm going up against a hostile universe with no other support."

"Looks like our immediate plan is in place, if we can get under way, Mr. Harper?"

"Sure thing, boss. Slipstream is working, and you've got the fuel for a few jumps at least. Sublight engines could use some work, but we can limp along for the moment."

What the heck is slipstream?

"Good. I'll see what... uh, used to be in the local area we might be able to pay a visit to, and tomorrow we can go hunting."

"I'll go bring Gerentex some dinner," volunteered Trance. She loaded up some plates and went out, tail swishing. The others announced their intentions for the evening and left, going about whatever they thought was most important.

Which I guess leaves me with the dishes.

"You were quiet tonight," she said to Ifruita.

I didn't really feel I could contribute, master," she said rather hesitantly, as if wondering how to phrase it. "But perhaps you and I could talk more tonight?"

"Sure thing! I don't want you to feel I'm ignoring you or anything, it's just we needed to get the ship ready and I sort of got a little too much into flying around with these new wings. I told myself I needed the practice but really flying out in space was amazing! Then helping Harper-

"You do not have to explain yourself to me, master. I just wish I had more useful skills, rather than just combat techniques."

"Did you see something you're interested in? Did you take a look around the ship? There's probably still a lot to do, pick something you think you might be interested in, and see if Andromeda can walk you through it. We've got a year at least, you don't need to master anything by tomorrow. Take it slow and see what you become interested in. There's everything from taking care of the plants to technical repair, probably more. I mean this ship is huge, and probably had a crew of hundreds staffing it before. So there's probably no shortage of work."

"I'll see what the ship recommends for tomorrow, then."

"Great. For now, you can learn how to dry dishes."

"This seems a vast waste of our talents, master."

"Eh, no one to beat up at the moment, might as well take the time to relax a bit."

"As you say, master."

"And don't worry, those skills will get a workout before we're done here, make no mistake."

"It's called GS92196," said Dylan, showing them a schematic of a space station. "It's a guard station for ship service and repair."

"Wait, GS I get, guard station, obvious," interrupted Susan. "Were they numbered sequentially? Did you guys have at least ninety thousand of the things?"

"The Commonwealth spanned three galaxies, it's possible."

"Oh. Carry on."

"Like I was saying, it's a long shot, but hopefully even after this long there might be something there that's useful to us."

"And even better, it's close by," put in Andromeda. "So we might as well check it out."

The others talked about just how unlikely it was because it was also nearby to systems overrun by Magog, like Rev Bem, and Nietzschean slavers. (A Nietzschean, Susan learned, was just sort of a genetically enhanced human, and the guy she thought had odd bracelets with bones sticking out of them was one. The sticking out bits were actually his real bones, which didn't make a lot of sense to her.) Susan only listened with half an ear. Instead she was making a slow circuit of the bridge doing a *Dimension Sense* on everyone, as the entire "crew" was there. The only twinge she got was from Rev Bem, the Magog, but she had rolled fairly well, a sixteen, with her first attempt. When she tried again to confirm what she had felt she get much less, minimum (for balance in the universe) and a fourteen. Those gave her nothing.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked her politely while she was staring at him.

"No, I suppose not."

Good, you're starting to be as paranoid as you need to be. But that twinge, doesn't it worry you?

I should have gotten a clear result, even with the eleven I got on the next try. I don't think it's him. Plus, you're supposed to be a year away, remember?

Oh, am I? Still, can you take the chance? I mean look at that thing, he's built for combat don't you think?

Except he's sworn off of it.

The perfect cover!

I'll keep an eye on him, okay?

Little bit late if he slaughters everyone in the night, leaving you for last.

Whatever. Maybe I was wrong that first time, I don't know. It could happen.

The ship piloted through a rather extensive debris field and attached itself to the station, which seemed to still be pressurized after all these years.

"Someone's been maintaining it," remarked Beka. "Can't imagine why though."

"I guess we'll just have to check for ourselves," replied Dylan. "Anyone that's going, follow me."

Of the Andromeda crew Rev Bem and Trance stayed behind, so the others walked to the airlock and stepped through into a disaster zone. Susan pulled her wings tight around her, hoping they didn't snag on anything.

"Let's make contact with whoever is living here," ordered Dylan. "Hopefully we can trade for what we need. I'm sure they could use a lot."

But what of theirs can we use?

Ifurita seemed on edge. "I don't like this place. It has seen too many battles."

"This place has seen some combat," Harper put in, tapping a hole in the wall. He pulled his gun. "Better be ready."

Then they found the corpse.

"It's a Magog all right," said Dylan, bending to touch it.

Harper said he shouldn't, and gave a pretty graphic description of how they bred, by injecting their eggs into a living host, which then served as a food source for the young as they hatched their way out.

"Pleasant," Susan said, somewhat disgusted.

But the station wasn't just home to one corpse, it was basically teaming with them.

"Kids!" a shocked Beka exclaimed. "They were just kids!"

And indeed, children of every age had been slashed to pieces everywhere, and the smell was awful. Without her bonus to CONstitution Susan probably wouldn't have been able to stand it, and she wondered how the others did.

"Do you think anyone survived?" asked Sparkle, looking sadly down at a little boy still clutching a gun.

"We better find out. Deploying pups!" Susan brought her two pups out, and they stood awaiting orders. "You are pup one for this mission, you are pup two. Identical orders, seek and rescue. This is currently unknown, possibly trapped enemy territory so be careful. Notify me if any survivors are found. Do you understand these orders?"

Orders accepted. Search and rescue. Check for traps. Report findings.

"Good dogs. Go!"

They bounded away.

"I'll get the others down here," said Dylan sadly. "We'll need to take care of the corpses."

He went back down the corridor, and Susan noticed Ifurita was looking around, jerking her head this way and that as if trying to pin down a bug with her eyes.

"You sense something?"

"A residue, only, master. There were powers used here not long ago." She knelt by the side of the boy. "Powers used to kill. Look, this is not consistent with weapons fire or simply physical damage." She turned the body to show an odd wound. "I'm not sure what caused this."

"Great, that's just what we need. Magog with superpowers. Susan to Andromeda," she said into her watch.

"Go ahead."

"Dylan's coming to get the others, but tell him if either has any medical knowledge, some of these bodies should be autopsied. Something unconventional killed these kids, and we should see what it was."

"Acknowledged."

"Couldn't you just see into the past, like finding that plane?"

"I intend to, but they'll need to convince themselves it isn't just some new type of weapon. They've never experienced people like us before. Best it first comes from their own science before I bring my powers into it."

"I understand."

Survivor Discovered.

"We've got a live one! Come on, pup 1 is this way!"

Susan, Sparkle, and Ifurita scrambled past metal crates and other bits of station that had obviously been thrown together as barricades to get to where pup 1 indicated it had found the survivor, grabbing Beka and Harper as they made their way there. Down a branching corridor and into a filthy living space, the robotic dog indicated that the living person it had found was hiding under a bed.

"It's okay, we won't hurt you," called Susan.

Moans of pain were her only answer.

"There's only one reason someone would have been left alive here," Harper postulated, drawing his gun.

"Oh, put that away," chided Susan. "Look for something that might be a first aid kit or whatever your equivalent is. Look, I'm lifting this bed off you, don't move or your injuries will get worse, okay?"

"There's no way you can just lift that-" Beka started to say, as Susan tore the rusted frame out of the floor and set it aside. Under it was a young girl, probably about eight or nine, in tattered clothes. "Or maybe you can."

"Where does it hurt, where are you wounded?" asked Susan, getting a nine on *first aid* as she checked the girl over. She recoiled as there was obviously something *moving* under her skin.

"Like I said," Harper said sadly. "Only one reason. Someone's going to have to do it."

"I should be the one," Beka spoke, steeling herself and drawing her gun. "You work for me, Harper, I won't ask you to do something I'm not prepared to do myself."

"Now hold on a second," Susan protested. "Just what are you two considering here?"

"Isn't it obvious? Look at her, they're almost ready to come out. It'll be a kindness, believe me. I've seen what happens if you don't do it, and it's far, far worse."

"I will not let you just-"

"Susan?"

Susan's head whipped around to look at the little girl again, looking up at her with pain written across every nerve of her face."

"How do you know my name?"

"Was left... as a message... Give you this..." She held up a piece of paper that was crushed in one hand. "Let them kill me."

"No! We can get them out, there must be something-" She felt a hand on her shoulder.

Beka shook her head. "It's too late. Even if you could just magic her back to the ship, there's no way to get them out without killing her. Magog eggs are a death sentence."

"You don't know what I can do! I could *telesummon* them out of her!"

Can you though? You'd have to hook her up to some kind of x-ray machine, find them individually, get a good enough picture to target them... there's at least fifteen in there. How long will that take? She has a few minutes left, at best, I'd wager. You can't phase her, because they're a part of her now. Healing or Protection natures are worthless, what is happening is already inside her. Just leave them to do what they know they must. Oh, but take the message first.

"Message?"

"Take it... end my pain."

Susan numbly took the offered paper. "I'm so, so sorry. If only I had more time..."

"I know."

I did time it rather well, didn't I? You people are so predictable.

Harper guided her out of the room and down the hall.

"We've had to do it before. Hell, I've had to kill my own cousin when he got infested with eggs. It doesn't get easier but we're a little used to it. So don't feel too bad."

"This shouldn't have to happen. It shouldn't. Why?" Susan was crying, imagining the cold gun barrel pressed to the head of that helpless girl. *Think of something, some way to save her, there must be one!*

Read the message, it'll explain.

She uncrumpled it. *How can I even read... what?*

Dearest Susan,

I'm sorry to have to drive the point home in this way, picking a little girl and all, I can imagine what you're feeling. You are part of me, as you have always been, after all. But I thought it was necessary to spare you even more pain down the line. That girl back there? She represents the only thing you will find in this reality. That's it. Just her. Just pain and suffering, and very hard choices.

You think your powers make you strong, that your will is strong because of your stats, that your powers can do just about everything. I think this situation serves as a firm reminder just how easily I can hurt you, and just how powerless you really are. I mean sure, I could have picked a male, or someone older. But I knew that little girl's death would hurt you the most, so I chose her. Chose her to live, for you to look into her eyes and know you could do nothing to save her.

I'll tell you right off the bat, Luna isn't here. Nowhere near here, actually. So my advice to you would be to leave now. Otherwise you're going to have to wade hip deep in the blood of those you yourself will kill in your quest to drive me off, following a trail of bodies just like what you saw here. Save yourself the anguish. I will no longer be trifled with, and you will either join me, leave me to my work, or begin to suffer as I have suffered. There can be no other way.

*Sincerely,
The Angel of Love*

P.S. Have you figured out what happened here, yet? I've left you a little gift in the unlikely event you decide to stay. But because I'm not going to tell you right out, you'll have to discover what the gift is. Have fun.

Susan crumpled the note up again in her hand. *You don't seriously expect this to work, do you? That I'll just call the Hub and ask to come back with you still around here?*

I'm just making sure I can say "I told you so" at the end of all this. I'm getting tired of you disrupting my work, so you're going to have to start making some harder choices if you want to continue. Of course, just giving yourself over to me is an option to keep in mind. If you do, all your guilt and uncertainty will be washed away like they never were.

And what might be at the 'end of all this' exactly?

Patience, Susan. You really won't go? Take my advice and leave here?

I'm more determined than ever, now. You'll pay for whatever you have planned here, believe me. I'll make sure to punch you in the face once for that little girl, too.

Oh my, how could I have miscalculated so badly? Watch out everyone, Susan's on the warpath!

You know, one of these days...

Beka came out, carrying the body of the girl wrapped in a sheet, and both lowered their heads out of respect.

No other survivors were found.

So the team spent the next two days, with the cries of Gerentex demanding release getting louder and louder, going over the station. Most everything of value had been smashed up, but there were some undamaged "flexies" that Harper got excited over. (Basically a really, really thin iPad, the thickness of a sheet of paper. They could display pages of information on a single page and were quite durable.) He scrounged up some computer chips and spare parts, but not much fuel or food supplies. He wanted to leave immediately, given that he reasoned the Magog would be back for their young, but Susan convinced him that was just a message, and they knew the "babies" were dead.

All the people that lived there before were dead, and all of them seemed incredibly young. Looking them over, the crew decided they were suffering from radiation poisoning, and went in search of the problem. They found only low levels in a certain hanger bay, which Dylan scowled over, but didn't get an answer to until Susan felt she was mentally prepared for watching what had happened there.

“And you say we’ll get to see it as well?” asked Trance, as the group gathered in the hallway where the attack no doubt began.

“Yes. It’ll just be an illusion, a projection of what I’m seeing so you can see it to. So don’t start shooting it or anything.”

She and the others watched in horror as Magog swarmed over the station, easily besting the resistance put up by the kids with what could only be powers. She thought she would see the adults getting carted off to be slaves or food stock or something, but the more she watched she more she was convinced there had never actually been any adults there. Just kids, being slaughtered by Magog with powers. It was a strategy the others said they had never seen the race use, and they all professed ignorance as to how they were doing what they were doing. The standard tactic seemed to be to have six troops on defense, maintaining a barrier three levels deep. Three more would run forward to the edge of it, then activate a separate set of three barriers. The original three would then drop their barriers and run forward. This continued until the entire station was wiped out.

But the thing that worried Susan the most was the energy bolts the aliens were using. They could pass through the barrier to strike at things outside, so there were six defenders and six attackers per group, all flinging around a weird looking green energy. They also didn’t shoot to kill, instead seeming to prefer incapacitation by aiming for non-vital areas. The fallen kids, once inside the rolling barricades, were descended upon where more of that green light was seen as they were first drained of energy, then slashed to pieces with claws. (Some were outright eaten) At least, Susan figured that’s what was happening, she had done it enough times to people to recognize the signs. (The energy draining, not the eating people) Even if it wasn’t being done with magic.

“If there’s any more evidence needed that these creatures are related to The Darkness here, you aren’t looking closely enough,” Susan commented.

Are you sure you don’t want to take out that Magog aboard ship? He’s standing right there, maybe he’s thinking about how best to attack you now that you’ve seen this.

“Rev, what is this?” Harper asked fearfully, watching kids put round after round into the barriers and get nowhere. Then be swarmed over and killed.

“I do not know, Harper. Not something I’ve ever heard of, certainly.”

“You can’t do that, right?”

“I still do not believe they are able to do so. Can this Darkness have granted them the ability, somehow?”

They looked to Susan. “It changed the brains of some people and gave them abilities in a world I went to. So there is president for that. Who knows what it’s done to these Magog to let them do this. But it was some kind of alien with that power...” She took a look around at the group staring at her. Several of which were aliens. “Never mind.”

“Looks like we’re going to have to come up with some better techniques for fighting them,” Dylan said. “These aren’t beings crazed with hunger and attacking to be the first to eat, they’re coordinating and using something we’ve never seen before. If all of them start being able to do this... Come on, we better check out where that radiation was.”

He led the group down to the hanger bay and through a door that had obviously been blown apart by the energy bolts the Magog could use. Susan activated the technique again and they watched as Magog troops climbed into one man fighters and flew off into space.

“You don’t think they were carrying some kind of nuclear bombs, do you?”

“I’m afraid I think it’s a lot worse than that. I think these ships were carrying Nova Bombs.”

“Nova Bombs? The Magog got their hands on actual Nova Bombs? I don’t freaking believe this!” whined Harper.

“That’s worse?” asked Susan.

“Do you consider a sun blowing up worse?”

“Okay, it’s worse. There must have been two dozen ships here.”

“I’ve counted, believe me.”

“This is seriously going to complicate our lives,” continued Dylan. “If every one of them was loaded with a Nova Bomb-”

“And we should assume they were,” interrupted Susan.

“I agree. Two dozen systems wiped out like that. Suddenly that black hole is beginning to look a lot more attractive.”

Susan shook her head. “No, we have to fight. The Darkness won’t break our RESolve even with this. If only one star system remains it’s worth fighting for. Better The Darkness be denied and leave some light in this reality than let it win and leave only emptiness.”

“I agree,” agreed Rev Bem. “The Divine has given us warriors of great power as a sign of belief in us. We should not allow a setback here, in only the first moments of our journey, to get the better of us.”

“You’ve pulled what you can off the station?” he asked Harper.

“Yeah, boss. They smashed up a lot, but I’ve found a few goodies.”

“Then we’re leaving. I want that Magog thawed out and scanned. If he’s the ‘present’ the Darkness creature left behind, we need to figure out why. And perhaps find out how they were able to do what they could do.”

“I have performed last rites on the bodies we found here,” Rev put in. “Would you like them committed to space or...”

“No. We’ll find a suitable world somewhere and bury them with honors. They were wearing high guard uniforms, or at least the pieces of them they could, and from the collected ‘trophies’ we found, they had been holed up here for generations, just trying to survive the best they could. They were Commonwealth as far as I’m concerned.”

“As you wish.”

“Let’s go. There’s nothing more for us here.”

Learning More About You

When: Midafternoon, two days later

Where: Halls of the Andromeda

As Susan did not have the skills needed to perform autopsies or help Harper with his “secret project” he didn’t want her help with anyway, she was at somewhat of a loose end. They had buried the bodies as Dylan had said, which made her feel bad all over again. She had spent the next day trying to figure out a way to safely save the girl by going back in time, which The Darkness chided her for.

Why not all of the kids there? Why just focus on that girl?

Because that one is personal. You shoved her in my face and I want to make sure she lives despite it.

Good luck with that. Though I suppose if you got there an hour earlier, you could get her to the medical bay and save her life. I just feel bad for all those you’re going to have to ignore while you do it.

What if I got there as the attack was happening? Helped fight the Magog off?

Can’t happen. You didn’t exist in this time when the attack happened, so you can’t go back that far.

I thought about that trying to save that girl’s mother on the world with the warlocks. Is that really the case?

Study the nature of time and space a few years and you won’t have to ask that question. But please, try it. Getting rid of you is certainly one option I can live with instead of just taking you over. The loss of the worlds I would have taken using you would be unfortunate, but the worlds I would take because you wouldn’t be there to stop me might make up for it. It’s just less energy efficient doing it myself.

So for all I know you could be lying, but have made it sound scary because you claim to know more than I do to keep me from even trying.

It does sound reasonable, doesn’t it? And if I’m right and you’re wrong, well, you won’t get a second chance even with ‘save’ magic. Because you’ll be dead before you saved.

So I’ll just save her!

Walking past all those dead eyes, judging you for not being able to save them. I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes. Careful of paradox, by the way. You go back in time to save her, you’re going to have to bring her to the Andromeda bridge an hour before you get to the station. Are you matching onto the ship, where your younger self is, and try to explain things?

She would believe me. I just tell her to go back in time at the same time I did and get her all over again.

That could work, if you could get the crew to believe you too. You’ve outsmarted me, congrats- wait, speaking of crew, you better go ask Harper about this.

What does he know about time travel?

Nothing yet, specifically. No, it’s something else you need to ask him about.

As Susan finally got the notification he was done with the “secret project” she was to meet him down in the medical lab along with Trance, because they had some stuff to share with her.

“Hey Andromeda, Ifurita,” she said, walking into the lab. Trance was wearing a top that looked like a butterfly, again leaving a lot of her skin uncovered. “Trance, looking good to-” She leaned back, looking at Andromeda again. “Did your hologram emitters get cleaned or something?” she asked the ship’s avatar. “You look a lot more solid now.”

Rommie smiled and held out her hand. “It’s because I am more solid now. Call me Rommie, okay?”

Susan hesitantly took it, then grinned back when she was able to shake hands with the ship. “You’re real!?”

"We have much in common," remarked Ifurita. "We were both built for war. I think she will offer me a unique perspective in the coming days."

"I do hope she can help you understand yourself a little better. But are you..." She indicated the general ship.

"I'm able to function autonomously. Though I still have complete control of... myself."

"It's called the ship made flesh," explained Harper, throwing an arm around the android. "Rommie here is the spirit of the battleship in a more compact and oh so huggable form!" She removed his arm. "Don't be like that!"

"Perhaps you should get on with showing Susan what Trance found?"

"Oh yeah. Right this way, ladies." He swept a bow and let them pass. Susan and the others stepped up to table, where schematics of the strange device that was sitting there were cycling through. It was a collection of wires and small circuit boards, three different bundles in total.

"What is it?"

"It was inside the Magog we found," explained Trance. "Scans picked it up right away. Rev doesn't have them, so we have to assume this is the thing that was generating the energy fields and blasts they were using."

"So it's not an inherent ability they've been given? That's somewhat of a relief. But if you somehow put that into somebody, would they be able to do it?"

"That's a bit trickier," explained Harper. "See this?" He hit some buttons on the display and it changed to a wireframe of a Magog, with the wiring still attached. "It runs from the brain, down the spine, and out to the two 'emitters' if you will, at the hands. There's no other controls externally, so obviously this is controlled by thought alone."

"In other words it has to hook up the user's brain somehow?"

"Exactly. We think this one was placed quite precisely, and was reading the signals out. But that's not the genius part. These wires? They aren't just insulated copper or anything, they're more like nerves themselves. Some kind of exchange system, I think? We've just started studying it, so there's more to learn about it I'm sure."

"That would make sense. It would need to draw off the body's natural energy to create the blasts and shields we saw. I mean unless your battery technology is really that advanced too." She held up two fingers indicating something tiny.

Harper shook his head. "No, there's no power to it once it was removed from the body. So I'm not sure how I'm going to study it. How do I rig a power source to it when it's supposed to be powered by the user's body?"

"And without an intelligence guiding it, who knows what it might do even if you got power put into it." wondered Trance.

"Exactly. I don't suppose Rev would mind if we, uh, installed it into him?"

"Harper!"

"What? It's for science! And besides, we know it's compatible with him."

"We can't just cut him open and plop it inside. This was constructed by nanobots, programmed to create this exact piece of technology inside the body. We would never be able to surgically implant something like this with conventional means."

"So it looks like we have to do it the old fashioned way," grumbled Harper. "Peel it apart layer by layer and see what makes it tick."

"Can you do that?"

"Did you perhaps miss the extremely cute android on your way in? If I can build something like that, I can take something like this apart no problem."

Sure, but could you put it back together again and make it work the same way. Or build another one that did the same thing? That's the tricky part isn't it?

"Oh, I need to ask you something about that girl we found."

"What about her?"

"If I could go back in time and save her life, should I?"

"You can travel- of course you can, why would you ask otherwise? Can you make her, and the station, immune to explosions?"

"Explosions?"

“Yup. Here, we took this off her before we buried her.” He walked over to a shelf and picked up a necklace. “See, it had a timer on it, but it was zero by the time we got there. I was curious as to why and took a peak at it. Turns out it was an explosive, triggered by any movement but hers. But only until the clock ran out, and then it deactivated itself. Guess when the clock ran out?”

“Just before we arrived.”

“Hey, you’re almost a fraction as smart as myself. Give that girl a sparky cola!”

“So I move her before that time and she, me, and anything nearby her blows up too?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

I hate you.

I get that a lot. I don’t let it bother me though. I guess you didn’t outsmart me after all. Keep trying.

Late that evening, Dylan called Susan up to the bridge and she hauled herself out of her chair and went to see what he wanted.

“We’ve arrived at the station Beka said she met Gerentex at. I think you mentioned some way of getting these people off my ship without letting them cause too much trouble?”

“With pleasure!”

So she disembarked and Dylan went to go thaw out the ones on ice, giving her time to find a good spot to dump them. She wandered around, and basically it was like a floating mall in space. Creatures of all kinds wandered the place, buying and selling and doing their alien things, and she got more than a few odd looks because she was obviously wearing armor where few did. Her “cloak” also didn’t seem to be in style, no one else had on anything like it. There were people walking around the obvious cybernetics though, and Susan wondered if this reality had a Borg equivalent. She also wondered if a place where aliens all came together like this actually had a sense of coherent style that could be criticized. Ifurita had insisted on going with her, but was looking around in apparent amazement more than actually keeping an eye on her “master.” One bright spot, she was clinging to Susan’s arm almost as if afraid of the crowds, but clutching her staff in the other which she kept bumping into things and making her even more nervous.

“This place, so many people!” she breathed after they both apologized to the alien who looked back and forth between them and finally walked away.

“Oh yeah, probably should have warned you. Up until now you’ve been in pretty small groups, haven’t you?”

“I followed orders. Blowing up cities and then returning to my master. After that it was mainly just hanging out at the castle until I met you, then going where you went.”

“Wonder if I should have you practice, like, buying stuff? On your own.”

“On my own?” she squeaked. Susan laughed.

“You can blow up a city but you’re worried about talking to someone to make a purchase? Yeah, you need the practice more than I thought. Look around, there must be something around here you might like to have. Meanwhile I’ll look for something like a money exchange. Actually, excuse me!” She pulled Ifurita over with her to a bored looking alien sitting outside a shop.

“Yes?”

“Do you use a common currency around here, and if so where can I exchange some precious metals for some? I mean gold is still considered rare, right?”

“Gold would work,” replied the alien. “Go up three floors, turn right, straight ahead on the left you’ll see a guy in a cage. He’ll change currency.”

“Fantastic, thanks!”

So Susan went up three floors, turned left, and looked straight ahead on the left and walked about three minutes before realizing it and turning around, then four minutes back.

“Why didn’t you say I had turned wrong?”

“Uh...”

She pulled out a gold coin and dropped it into the slot in front of the booth, which was sucked in through the wall. “How much is that worth?” she asked through the metal grating.

“Just a second.” This was a human male, and he put the coin into an analyzer of some kind. “Machine doesn’t recognize the make, but says it’s nearly pure gold. I can give you fifty thrones for it.”

“Is that coinage?”

“Nah, it’s all electronic. You need a stick, that’ll be five thrones.”

“Seems fair.” She dumped two more into the slot. “Those will be the same, but go ahead and analyze them. I’ll take the one hundred and forty five.”

“You got it.”

He tapped away on a machine inside and sent what looked like a thumb drive back through the slot.

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

“Now, let’s take you shopping!”

“I’m not sure about this.”

“Ifurita, it’s something you’ll have to learn to do. Not buying things, specifically, but interacting with people like this. I wouldn’t have taken you for the shy type, but I guess anything’s possible. Find something that catches your eye, and we’ll buy it. Can be totally impractical, we’ll go back to the ship and use it to practice opening your *sub-space pocket*. You must have one now, you’re a dimensional traveler. Time to start filling it up.”

“That’s probably true.”

Ifurita stopped in front of a store selling what appeared to be all sorts of knickknacks, but Ifurita only had eyes for a bird, seemingly made of some sort of wood, spreading its wings as if to fly.

“I think I found it.”

“Super. Go in, find someone that seems to be in charge and ask how much it is.” She held out the credit stick or whatever they called them. “We have almost a hundred and fifty of whatever ‘thrones’ are so as long as it isn’t that much, get it!”

“I’ll try, master.”

She went into the store, and Susan smiled and hummed to herself for a moment. Two or three minutes passed and she started to get concerned, but hadn’t heard any explosions so held off entering to give her the time to make her RESolve check or whatever she needed. Another minute passed, and she decided to see what was going on.

She looked for her friend, who was standing there talking to someone, and walked over. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Hey, you know this human?” asked the blue skinned man with the weird chin.

“I do. What’s the trouble?”

“I’m trying to get her to tell me what she wants!”

“The bird you have in the window.”

“Oh, is that what- I get it now. Goodness! All this for that carving. Ten thrones.”

“That’s not so bad.” She turned to Ifurita. “Tell him you’ll take it.”

“I’ll take it?”

This seemed to confuse the man even more, but he said “Let me go get it.”

They paid for it, with a bit of prompting by Susan to have her hand over the stick, and walked out.

“I don’t get it, what was the problem?”

“I couldn’t understand a thing he was saying!”

“What?” Susan stopped dead, and someone behind her nearly ran her over, giving her a dark look and going around her. He did a double take when he saw her eyes, and hurried off. “What do you mean, I understood him-” She stopped, taking a deep breath. “This is the sort of thing I would expect from Inari, not Silverstreak. Come on.”

The pair found a quiet hallway, probably leading to bathrooms or something but was empty at the moment. Susan tapped her watch. “Hub answering.”

“This is Susan, you probably already knew that, why didn’t my partner Ifurita get the same kind of language power I got before coming here?”

“Let me see if there are any notes about that, and ask around. I’ll get back to you in a moment.”

“Very well.”

They waited. “But you were talking to Andromeda weren’t you?”

“She learned my language. I don’t really sleep so she started babbling at me the night we arrived, so I talked back to her. She picked it up fairly quickly.”

“I didn’t even think about it. I figured it would be taken care of, and no one said anything. I’m really sorry about that, no wonder you were so hesitant. Tell me these things, okay?” She playfully hit Ifurita’s arm.

“It is not my place to make trouble for my master.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. Besides, isn’t this making *more* trouble for me right now?” She grinned and winked.

She looked surprised, like she hadn’t considered that.

“Hub calling.”

“I’m here.”

“I’m sorry, a language program for her would have been a fairly radical change, more than the engineers here wanted to attempt during her reconditioning. And she couldn’t be given the power you were because she’s not alive, strictly speaking.”

“I see. Is there anything that can be done?”

“We have translation programs, she could wear a headset and at least understand what was being said around her. She could talk, but it would be a machine translation that came out after each sentence. Better than nothing.”

“I’ll take it, for now.”

“Very well. Put out your hands.”

She did, and Susan watched as a Dragon Ball Z “scouter” looking thing dropped into her hands.

“Got it. Thanks.”

“Sorry if it caused you any trouble.”

“No, it’s partly my fault. Susan out for now.”

“Have a good day.”

“Here you go. I don’t know how it goes on but try it. Maybe this is the power button?”

They fiddled with it and got it going, and Ifurita said as they walked that she could look at someone and what they were saying started scrolling across the bottom of the display.

“That’s something, at least. When you go back you’ll have to get some kind of language program installed when they rip out this subservience stuff.”

“I’m sorry I am a disappointment to you, master.”

“What are you talking about? Uh, it’s Myrtle all over again. Now look here...”

Susan was trying to convince her charge that she was not to blame for this and should not feel like she was letting her down when Dylan came on her watch.

“They’re about awake, have you found a good spot?”

Susan looked around. *Oh right, that’s what we were supposed to be doing here.* “Hold please.”

“How about there?” asked Ifurita, pointing to a door. “Sign says ‘service’ and as far as I can tell, there’s no alarm system on it. I think that’s what this is telling me, anyway.” She looked the door over carefully.

“Hey, that’s useful. Good call.” She tried the handle. “Shoot, locked. Well, I’m already in powers mode so just changing a little won’t call any attention to us.” She took *Projection*, *Distancing*, and *Telekinesis*, all three she had never taken, and leaned casually on the wall. “Steady me if I start to fall.”

“Okay?”

With *Projection* she could basically do an ESPer “out of body experience” and slipped through the wall, looking the door over. With her LUCk check of twenty one the lock was simply mechanical, and she was able to use *Telekinesis* through her *Distancing* power, opening it. She went back “into” her body. “Got it.” She opened the door and they both stepped inside.

With that she simply *Telesummoned* the lot of them in one action, making Gerentex and his cell buddy jump up and look around, wondering how they got there. The others were groggy and hardly had their eyes open.

“You might not want to be around when they wake up. As I’m sure you don’t have the money you owe them on your person. Not that they actually did what you hired them to do, because they got take out by me immediately. Not my problem.” She grabbed Ifurita’s hand. “Later.”

The two found themselves back on the bridge, Susan having *teleported* them there.

“We can leave any time, captain,” Susan reported.

“Hey, nice hardware,” Harper said, looking over at Ifurita and tapping his temple. “You went shopping I guess.”

“Thank you,” she replied, and then her equipment said “thank you.”

“Wait a minute, can she not...”

Susan shook her head. “Through a bit of ball dropping on my part, no, she can’t understand your language without that. I didn’t realize it until now. That’s the best we can do at the moment.”

“I thought she was just quiet. Well, it’s nice to meet you properly at last. I’m Shamus, but call me Harper. Everyone else does.”

He came over to shake her hand.

“I’m Ifurita, nice to meet you too.”

“Humm... wonder if I could set up a neural interface so she could just think the words...”

“Focus, Mr. Harper,” said the captain, “there’s still a lot of systems that need work around here.”

“I know, I know. I’m getting back to it.”

“Still, if we can leave, let’s do so.” He jumped into the pilot’s chair. “I have no idea where but we’ve certainly got places to be.”

And the Andromeda sped into the dark.

Where There's Susan There's a Way

When: The next day

Where: Andromeda meeting room

The Andromeda was floating in space, light years from anything interesting, as Dylan had said he wanted time to consider his next move. That morning he had called a meeting, and the scant crew piled into the conference room.

"So, I want to ask your advice on restarting the Commonwealth," Dylan said to start things off. "I mean I'm just a soldier. How you do restart a method of government that's been gone for three hundred years?"

"Randomly fly about the universe having adventures and hope it all works out?" suggested Trance.

"Oh kay. That's one way to go about things, I suppose. Any other ideas?"

"How did it start the first time?" asked Susan. "Probably one world at a time, I would think."

"Wait, aren't we missing someone?" asked Beka, looking around the room.

Everyone looked about, counting silently in their heads.

"I believe everyone is here, even Sparkle," said Rev.

"I can't imagine who I could be thinking of. Sorry, carry on."

Oh marvelous. Was one of those mercenaries supposed to join us or something?

Great, but we'll more than make up for one gun toting maniac right? Now there's a technique I could work on- seeing things how they would have been had I not been around. Would that even be possible?

"So what were you saying?"

"One world at a time. You just need to get the ball rolling, then let member worlds go out and get other member worlds."

"How do we explain to them energy bolt throwing Magog and an extra dimensional reality creature bent on our destruction?"

"You don't. At least, not as if they were connected. You certainly have the proof that someone modified that Magog to be more deadly, and even if you can't say where you got the knowledge from, you can say you know what it does. That's threat enough, isn't it? If someone is experimenting on these... people... making them harder to take down, you'll need to band together and support each other. You do have the evidence the station was attacked, and the wounds sustained by the kids. That should be enough."

"And when something big does show up, we'll have the resources to combat it," said Rommie. "They wouldn't need to know exactly who they were fighting, just that it was a danger to all known worlds."

"Which is the truth. I'm going to have to handle The Darkness, but with your support, of course." She looked over at Sparkle, who nodded.

"She goes back and forth trying to do everything herself and remembering to let others help. I'm glad you're in a let others help mode this time."

"Of course!"

"That device, it is just plain old cybernetics," mused Harper. "It could easily be given to thousands or even millions of Magog. That seems like threat enough."

And if it is just plain old cybernetics, not powers, I can't shut it down with Metapower. But they get to shoot energy blasts and put up energy shields, and drain energy and who knows what else as though they did have powers. This is going to be tricky.

You could still leave.

No!

"But then why 'gift' it to us?" asked Trance. "Why show us what we're up against? I mean it planned that whole thing at the station, down to the hour if that necklace is any indication. It could have taken that Magog back and we would be in the dark about what allowed them to do that."

"It must have some plan in mind, it always does. There was one time (back in band camp) where I thought I had kicked it off a world. Turned out it just slid into another body and had been spending time trying to smack down some towers that kept the air in the world breathable. So even when I think I've won I have to be careful."

"Speculation aside, where do we go?" asked Dylan. "You all know what worlds survived the fall a lot better than I do. And what worlds might be most receptive to the idea of a renewed Commonwealth."

Everyone looked around the table.

"What about Xinti?" asked Trance.

"That's pretty far from here," cautioned Rommie. "It would take us weeks of travel, at best."

"Wait, don't you guys have faster than light travel?" asked Susan.

"Sure, but we have to keep on the roads," explained Harper.

"Huh?"

"Okay, see, what we do is basically lower the mass of the ship to zero, right? Then we open a slipstream portal, basically a hole in space into the realm of probability strings and the fundamental forces of the universe. We're then pulled along by the forces of the universe but still get to make course corrections. So we get to travel between stars pretty well. But sometimes places to open these portals are far away from each other, or there's no direct route from where you are to where you want to go. So we can get places, but space is still pretty freaking huge!"

"I see. That's interesting that you can lower the mass directly. There was a game back on my world, Mass Effect. They had these big slingshot things in space, that lowered the mass of whatever got near them and shot them in a straight line. Then another at the other end caught them and slowed them down again. Combine that technology with yours and I bet you'd really have something. Slipstream for moving about randomly, but mass shooters if you want to go between major systems in a hurry."

"You're trying to offer scientific advice from a game?"

"Harper, all stories are real someplace. So they exist somewhere, in some reality."

"Oh, I guess you would know. I'll think about it, but for now, yeah, let's go to Xinti."

"You think that's our best shot?" Dylan asked.

"It's still a hub of learning and advancement," agreed Beka. "And they love to study anything new, and this 'force harness' or whatever we're calling it is certainly new."

"And they might be able to figure out a way to duplicate it! I wouldn't mind being able to make some energy shields I could still shoot out of," Harper exclaimed. He then made gun noises like a ten year old and pretended to shoot things off in the distance.

Just about everyone rolled their eyes.

A week total had now passed and Susan was looking over her character sheet to see what she wanted to put points into. With a REASON of eight she could do a little over one per day, so she dumped seven into Magic/Powers combat, as she was doing a lot of that lately. Even with a REFLEXES of fifteen, that still only made her base delay a five, and another .2 seconds spared could make a big difference in combat. Of course she still needed another point in that to get the five she needed to get her delay down, but that could be easily done in the next week.

I can comfortably get my sword skill group up to an eight, that might be nice. I would still have eight left.

Maybe some points into chaos magic?

I don't know, we'll see. I'm thinking more the pistol skill, get that a little higher too.

She had also been coaching Ifurita on her new dimensional skills, and was pleased to learn she could *spirit step* now after being carried through one. *Wonder if I should just hit her with everything I can do over the course of a day. Is there any limit to the number of- Klaxons started going off throughout the ship. What the heck?*

"Battle stations!" Dylan's voice rang through the ship.

"I guess that means head to command?" Susan asked Ifurita, who nodded and grabbed up her staff. She opened a *teleportal* there and the girls rushed through.

"You took your time," Dylan joked.

"Perhaps tomorrow I'll start using *seer* techniques to know when you'll call us and be there before you even know you need us."

"That would be fine."

Susan looked over and Harper, of all people, was in the pilot's seat. Rev was manning a sensor station and pressing buttons like it was going out of style, but the others were still off doing their own thing.

The ship lurched. "Are we being fired upon?" asked Ifurita.

"That is the case. Status?"

"No structural damage, just some radioactive material pasted against my hull."

"You can stand up to nukes? Just what is the armor of this ship made of and how can I get some?" asked Susan.

"They weren't actually nuclear bombs."

"Then why the radiation?"

"I... have no idea."

"We can talk about that later," broke in Dylan. "Open a comm channel and head straight for them."

Harper protested, but did as he was instructed as Dylan tried to get them to identify themselves.

Guess what they didn't do? Exactly, but he kept trying as Beka showed up, wondering what was going on.

Susan noticed she didn't really take a station or anything, just sort of stood there as Dylan kept trying things to avoid his ship being blown to pieces. The ship took a nasty hit and Rev announced there were hull breaches on several decks, and he started sealing them off.

Dylan called for a missile barrage but Beka ordered him to plot a course away from the battle zone. Harper looked between them.

"Uh, little help here?" he asked no one in particular.

"Hide for now!" Susan called. "The two of us can board that ship if you can lay low, we'll take it down from the inside."

"Ah, nice, a plan that doesn't involve me being blown up. What looks good around here? Anyone?"

"The sixth planet in this system is a gas giant," Rev informed him.

"Then we're booking it there!" He manipulated the controls and the ship shot towards the outer system.

"I didn't order us to break off!"

"No, but you got outvoted," Susan informed him.

"This isn't a democracy."

"It wasn't a winning battle, either."

He banged the console with his palm. "Fine. Launch countermeasures."

"Countermeasures away," announced Rommie.

"The unknown ship does not seem to be pursuing us," announced Rev. "I think we're clear for now."

"Entering upper atmosphere," announced Harper.

"Stand down from combat mode. As far as you two go, we need to have a little talk."

"About you damaging Andromeda in pointless battles?" asked Susan. "I agree. What were you thinking?"

"What? No, I mean about following orders in combat."

"I didn't have any orders, and Beka had the right idea. What exactly is the point of slugging it out with some unknown ship? I mean it's space, and there was only one ship, right?" Rommie nodded. "So it couldn't have been pinning us down, meaning we could retreat at any time."

"That's not the point."

"But I think it is. It seems you're so gung-ho to prove you've still 'got what it takes' you didn't consider your two best assets in that battle at all. In a combat like that, with only one enemy ship, you let us get to an airlock and get out, then turn and run. The unknown ship pursues you, saving us the trouble of flying over there, and we board it and see what's up. Done. But no, you potentially damage a ship that could be much newer than this one, and has technology we could use. Plus we learn who they are and what they want. As of now we still know nothing, and are worse off than we would have been resource wise. Unless someone figured out the unlimited missiles cheat code and put it in?"

"Hey, good one!" Harper added with a laugh.

"When we are in combat there has to be one voice, one guiding command to direct the encounter."

"Yes, the voice of reason. How did we even get into this mess, anyway?"

"We were investigating a signal we received from an old Commonwealth ship, the Eight Fold Path," explained Rev.

"Then someone flew us into a missile attack," complained Harper.

"You didn't consider it might be a trap? Ask me to go and check it out? If you had, this whole situation would have been avoided."

"None of this is relevant to the fact that you all have to follow my orders!"

"It is relevant to the fact your orders were terrible! Once you knew it was a trap you should have turned around, went into slipstream, then allowed me to come back alone and get the bait. Instead, I have to go patch the Andromeda, again, because you thought trading shots with a vessel of unknown intent, origin, and capabilities was a good idea."

"You won't get anywhere, arguing with her," said Sparkle, who had come in a moment ago. "She will never, ever, back down, especially when she thinks she's right. Which is odd, as she doesn't have the *proud* weakness. You might convince the others to follow your orders in combat, but she will always do what she thinks is best."

"Besides," stated Beka, stepping down from the side sensor platform, "It's me you're really mad at. I was the one who said we should run after you said to attack. She just offered a solution that made that the better option."

"Fine. Then let us take a little walk, while Susan puts *her* plan into action."

"See? Now you're making sense, and I'm happy to follow those orders."

He just shook his head in disgust and stalked off with Beka in tow.

"You can survive in space, right?" Susan asked Ifurita.

"Yes, master. Not being truly alive I do not need to breathe as organic life does."

"I don't suppose we can tell if they're still out there?" she asked Rev.

The ship shook as if on cue.

"They are still out there."

"Great. Come on, let's see what we can see."

As Susan walked to the nearest airlock, she was thinking about which powers to use and stopped short. "Actually, there may be no need to go into space at all, now that I think about it."

"How is that, master?"

"*Projection*. I bet if I took the *flight* power as well I could fly like that, and just go inside the ship from here. Then teleport over there. Probably be faster, a lot faster actually."

"Whatever you think is best."

"Let me find a place to sit down and shift my powers."

So she took all the *speed* she could, plus *flight* and *projection*, then "appeared" on the nose of the Andromeda, a place she had seen. With that it was a simple matter to zip upwards, away from the ship, and take a look around. But she didn't get far.

Actually, I don't need to fly about. As soon as I see a place I can get there by just projecting there instead of here. She did, then repeated the process until she was above the atmosphere of the place. *Now, for a quick perception check... ah, a twenty one, and there they are.*

She *projected* herself over there, and slipped into the front of the ship, taking a look around. *Humans?* she thought as she caught a glimpse of someone walking down the corridor perpendicular to hers. *I expected Magog or some sort of alien race. Why would humans be attacking us?*

The ship was quite large, but not large enough to keep her from being seen within moments of her arrival. The person that saw her gave a shriek of surprise and ran down the hall back the way they came.

How rude.

Indeed. Didn't even inquire as to my wellbeing or make an offhand comment about the nice weather we've been having recently.

Several people then came running, and Susan raised a hand to greet them.

"Hello!"

"There's the intruder! Fire!" they answered, with a hail of gunfire, and she simply planted her hands on her hips and waited for them to realize they were not actually getting anywhere.

"Cease fire!" the same one ordered.

Susan looked behind her at the torn up bulkhead. "Very impressive. If you've gotten that out of your system perhaps we could communicate by words, like sentient beings everywhere?"

"Uh, captain, you're going to want to get down here!" he called into a communicator of some kind.

"Or you could just ignore me and get the captain, that's fine." She took a step forward and the one to the right screamed and started shooting again.

"Stand down! Stop shooting I say!" The one in charge whacked the guy on the head, and he stopped shooting.

"Man, I really hope nobody is behind me," Susan remarked.

They stared at each other for a moment until the captain jogged up. She really couldn't tell he was a captain, they all wore a kind of black uniform with a helmet that obscured the face. But the one in charge called the person "captain" so that was a good tip off for her.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I'm a member of the crew on that ship you've been shooting at. By the way, why is that?"

"You're some kind of hologram? Projecting into our ship?"

"No, it's just a thing I can do. Don't worry about it. Now, if you could just stop shooting at us, that would be great."

"All ships that travel between the stars must be destroyed. Yours is no different!"

"Really? Why is that?"

"I... I don't have to answer to you! Go away!"

"Oh, okay, you've convinced- no."

"What?"

"You really thought that would work, huh? Now I'll say this one more time. Please go away and leave us alone."

"Ha, you fear for your life."

"Not really."

He ignored her. "We must be close to hitting their ship, continue the bombing! And ignore this... winged spirit. If she could harm us in any way she would have done so by now."

"But captain, we can't just allow some ghostly figure to move through the ship."

"So then stop her! But don't put any more holes in my walls."

"Yes captain." He walked off.

She walked over to the man. "Man, you've got it rough. Have any ideas on how to get rid of me?"

"I'll think of something."

"Sure you will, that's the spirit."

"Are you a spirit?" asked one helmeted figure.

She leaned close to him. "What does your heart tell you?" The gunners all shared a look between themselves. "Anyway, I'm going back to my little tour of your ship. See you."

But what now? I can't exactly hurt these guys, they don't seem to have anything to do with The Darkness. And I hate to hurt them on principal, there's got to be a way to take care of this situation without violence. Don't get why they want to blow up starships when they ride around in starships-

Hold up. Without violence? Did I hear that correctly?

Yes. I have all these powers, I should be able to think of something.

Oh, they won't stop shooting until they run out of ammo, or they're killed. These are fanatics, they'll even blow up their own ship if they think they're losing! Yeah, how about that? You can't even help Dylan take them out because they'll harm themselves, and that's against your contract.

Wait a second, say that first part again?

About my hearing you?

About ammo, something about ammo.

They won't stop shooting-

That's it! What a fantastic idea, and this time it'll work.

This time?

Yeah. With Elsa it only half worked, because you just slipped forward in time. These guys don't have that capability. All I have to do is find it.

Find what?

Isn't it obvious? Their ammunition stores.

It was probably an hour before Susan opened her eyes to see Ifurita standing over her. "You could have sat down, you know. And don't say you didn't because I didn't tell you to!"

"You- I... could have, yes. I just did not wish to."

"Fine. Anyway, you know where there's, like, a cargo bay or something that's fairly empty?"

"I believe so, why?"

"Lead on and you'll see."

A few minutes after that, Dylan was standing and looking at a cargo bay full of the other ship's armaments.

"So you basically stole all this? By just wishing it, so to speak, from their ship to ours?"

"Stole? I like to think they were going to give most of this to us anyway. I just wanted it in an unexploded form instead of an exploded one."

"And you figure they'll leave?"

"With nothing else to shoot at us, they would be fools to stick around. As fanatical as they seemed, I doubt even they want to suicide bomb into us. I mean yeah, watch out for that just in case, but I'm guessing this fight is over."

"The shooting did stop a moment ago. I guess now I know why. We'll poke our heads out and see what happens."

With the unknown ship gone, and the holes repaired once again by Susan, the Andromeda got underway again.

"We'll jump to another system, in case those guys come back with friends, and find a place to refuel," ordered Dylan. "We just need to find a certain type of star..."

Susan watched, interested, as Rommie showed her a 3D model on the viewscreen about what she was doing to the “proper” star they had finally found.

“So you’re basically mining the star?” she asked.

“That’s a not incorrect term for what’s going on here. That’s why we had to search so long for the proper star. It couldn’t be too hot, or put out too much radiation for my hull to block, and have a good hydrogen to contaminants ratio-”

“Yes, let’s talk about that a second,” she interrupted. “When you say ‘contaminants’ you’re really saying ‘heavy elements’ like, oh, just to put a word out there: Gold.”

“Along with iron, uranium, all kinds of stuff floating around a star,” Harper agreed.

“So how much are we talking here? Aren’t all our money problems solved just by you refueling yourself? I mean you must be able to separate these ‘contaminants’ right?”

“To a certain extent, yes. But then we wind up with a large block of potentially radioactive material that’s all fused together.”

“Oh. I get what you’re saying.” Susan was disappointed.

Harper hopped off the platform, down to where she was standing. “Now, if we knew of a refinery that could handle the stuff, separate out all the various metals, sure, we could make a fortune. Even radioactive stuff can go into things like probes that nobody is going to get near again. But at the moment, we don’t.”

“Plus there are very few ships equipped with ramscoops like the Andromeda is,” explained Rev. “They must be affixed to extremely large vessels, and not many of this class were built after the fall.”

“Wait, are you calling me fat?” asked viewscreen Rommie.

“Yeah, are you?” asked hologram Rommie, appearing in the room.

“Oh, not at all. The divine has gifted you with the exact proportions necessary to be self sufficient. You are not too bulky for effective combat but still robust enough to keep us safe against the harshness of the outer void.”

“I think is he,” hologram Rommie said to viewscreen Rommie. She vanished.

“Humph!” She vanished too.

Physical Rommie hid a smile at his obvious discomfort.

Wow, she is lifelike. I wonder what sort of ‘processor’ enables such incredible AI? Ifurita might know, though maybe not as they probably use totally different methods. She has to be physically wound up for goodness sake. And why would she know what she’s made of, anyway? Silverstreak is the guy I need to ask I guess.

“All I’m saying is, there are not many refineries left that can handle such things because there would be no business for them. They would need product to refine, and only ships like yourself, that mostly no longer exist, can provide it.”

“I think she’s just joking with you,” Susan told him with a grin.

“Ah.”

Viewscreens Rommie came back. “Wait a second, something’s odd here.”

“What is it?” asked Dylan, looking up from his station.

“I’m getting indications of combat near here.”

“Combat? This area is supposed to be uninhabited.”

“Should we check it out?” asked Susan, looking over at him.

“Gee, the last time I, what were your words Mr. Harper? Ran us straight into a missile attack, I believe?”

“This would be an odd trap though, whoever this is wouldn’t be looking for a third party to join the fight. And as long as we stay far enough away to avoid the combat area ourselves until we have a good idea what it’s about...”

“Fair enough. We’ll refuel later, get everyone up here and move us in that direction.”

“Aye captain.”

Moments later Beka and Trance joined them on the bridge, and Beka jumped into the pilot's chair.

"Going to follow my orders this time?"

"If they're good ones!"

"I'll do my best. For now get us closer and let's see what all the fuss is about."

The "fuss" turned out to be a bunch of ships piloted by actual insectoid aliens that were currently engaged in combat with a bunch of Nietzscheans, and the bugs were losing.

"I'm getting a distress call from a crippled Than ship," announced physical Rommie, putting the communication stream up the monitor. Susan heard the standard "mayday I need help" message from the bug, but Rev started providing a translation.

"We can save her. Harper, rig hanger seven for rescue!" he commanded.

"Belay that!" Susan yelled. "Beka, can you match the velocity of the damaged craft?"

"I'm the best pilot there is, of course I can."

"Let me know when you've got it, and put the position of that craft relative to us up on the viewscreen."

"What are you up to now?"

"Rescuing that being physically will take too long. Trust me." Susan opened her wings and floated a bit off the floor, in case Beka didn't have the exact velocity. This way the alien wouldn't just smash into the floor or ceiling at full speed, some of the impact would be absorbed by the anti-gravity system.

"I see what she's doing. Adjusting gravity nearby her to compensate," announced viewscreen Rommie.

"Got it!" announced Beka.

"It's the blue ship on the screen," Rommie further informed her.

"Done!" Susan *telesummoned* the alien, and she disappeared from the viewscreen and landed in Susan's arms. "Gotcha!" She was basically a huge bug, with actual antenna, mandibles, enormous eyes, the whole bit. But also mostly humanoid, probably as tall as Susan herself with two arms and legs, and a hard exoskeleton that was a light green below many darker green circles that covered the whole body. It was wearing a uniform, of sorts, and looked around in surprise.

"By the hive of my ancestors, how did I come to be here?" it asked.

"We can talk about that later," Susan answered, lowering herself and folding her wings again. "For now are you hurt anywhere? Do you need medical attention?"

"No, not at the moment, thank you. Am... am I dead?"

"Dead?" Susan laughed. "No my friend, you are very much alive. Your ship is probably destroyed, but you can always build another one of them, right? Can you stand?"

"Oh! My apologies." It wiggled out of Susan's grasp and stood on the bridge, looking around. "What a fantastic thing. I didn't realize any species had mastered teleportation at such a high level."

"Like I said, I can explain later-" The ship rocked again. "Were we hit?"

"That was just nearby, some kind of plasma canon," announced Rommie. "Tracking location... there. It's some kind of encampment on the surface of that asteroid there."

"Open a channel, I want everybody to hear this," Dylan said. He started demanding everybody stop shooting at each other, which went about as well as expected. The Than were willing, but there was no response from the Nietzscheans.

Apart from more shooting, that is.

"Another Than ship destroyed!" Rommie told them. "If they turn that thing on us..."

"Oh, I almost hope they do," Susan told her, swapping her powers out a little. "Because they're going to be in for a big surprise. BRB!"

She *teleported* to the nose of the ship, standing on the very front and activating her wings again to make sure she had gravity in a "downward" position so she should "stick" to the ship while it maneuvered. She started gathering energy and her efforts were not wasted as the next shot came straight for them. Susan simply opened a gigantic *teleportal* in front of

the thing and behind it, sending it straight back the way it came. She imagined the explosion far “below” with a smile, and watched as some of the ships broke off and raced back to the asteroid. She *teleported* back inside.

“Maybe now they’ll want to talk,” she smugly said, flipping her hair back and resettling her wings.

“I’m receiving a hail,” Rommie informed them.

“Surprise, surprise.”

“You want to handle this, as well?” Dylan asked her.

“Oh no, please, go right ahead.” Susan held up her hands in surrender.

“Thanks. On screen.”

“I’m Guderian, Alpha of the Odra pride,” the figure on the screen announced without preamble. “Identify yourself!” He was a human male, somewhat messy hair and had a sort of weak facial hair thing going on, like he couldn’t commit to a full beard but didn’t want to totally get rid of it all either. He had an odd bracelet on one arm, and some sort of leather armor type thing on the top, which is all she could see.

“Wow!” said Sparkle from her position on the handrail around the center of the bridge.

“Someone that could match you for sheer chutzpah, Susan.”

She laughed out loud. “Yeah, that’s got to be a first.” She lowered her voice mockingly. “Identify yourself.” She continued laughing, holding her sides as she did. “Oh, sorry. Using a lot of energy like that all at once makes me a little giddy, pay me no mind. Plus turning the tables on morons that deserve it, always make me chuckle a bit. Hope that plasma blast I deflected didn’t cause you too much inconvenience.”

He scowled at her, which just set her off again.

“Oh, that’s just perfect. One day your face will freeze like that, you know?”

Dylan just shook his head and got on with it. They went back and forth, and he claimed the Than had been attacking them for fifty years.

“A blatant lie!” spoke up the Than still standing on the bridge. “They’ve been attacking our supply routes for fifty years. They’re pirates *at best*.”

“I’m inclined to believe you.” *Given that it was the betrayal by a Nietzschean that started this whole thing, and a Than pilot that gave their life trying to save the Andromeda only to be blown away by said Nietzschean.*

“So you are allied with the bugs! You have one on your crew!”

“No, we rescued her recently,” insisted Dylan. “What did she say?”

“What do you mean? Wait, are you not speaking his language?”

“My vocal system isn’t really set up for it,” replied the Than. “But your Than is excellent, may I say! How did you become so fluent?”

“Ah, another thing to explain later. She says they’re pirates, raiding supply lines.”

“And how would you like to respond to that?”

“Not at all, to some random pilot you say you happened to rescue.”

“I see. Well, I’d be happy to hear your side of things, and perhaps with representatives of the Than government, come to some peaceful settlement where all this is concerned.”

“You really think after fifty years this situation can be settled peacefully? Plus, who are you to come barging into our conflict like this?”

“I told you, I represent the yet unreformed Commonwealth. If you actually tried, who knows what you could accomplish?”

He considered a moment. “I suppose we have no choice anyway. With our canon disabled you hold all the cards. Very well. Come down and I can tell you our side of the story. Then when the Than officials arrive I’ll allow you to mediate the discussion.”

“Excellent. I’ll of course have to send down a small advance force, just to make sure this isn’t a trick.”

“How small?”

He looked over at Susan. “Two?”

“That is small. Very well, I shall expect them shortly. Guderian out.”

His image winked off the viewscreen.

“You don’t mind going down there, do you?”

"No, not at all. In fact, if you want to go back to refueling, I'll head over there with Ifurita and Sparkle, see what the situation is. I can always send a *teleportal* back when I think it's safe for you. Unless you have other orders, captain my captain?"

"No, feel the situation out. You should be able to tell pirates from tragically misunderstood refugees, right?"

"They're pirates I tell you!" insisted the Than.

"She reiterates they're pirates. Like I said before, I agree. Why would those on the up and up need that huge a canon for otherwise? I mean how did they even install that thing? Call up Huge Canon 'R Us and have it shipped by overnight mail? But if they are pirates, what happens to them?"

"When our fleet arrives we take them in to custody," explained the Than. "They'll get fair trials, don't worry. If they have skills or can learn, we'll give them a place in society so they can earn what they want instead of allowing them to just steal it. Of course, those that have actively killed our people, in raids or today, will have to be dealt with more harshly. But the children, especially, will be treated leniently."

"Sounds fair to me. I'll go find Ifurita and we can head out."

And so the three dropped through space and made their way to the settlement, guided by Susan's watch which was proving them a map via the Andromeda. As they neared the place Susan pointed to what looked like a large hanger door, probably for ships to go in and out of. To the side was a smaller door, probably for space suited individuals to go out and do maintenance on the thing should it be required. They headed for that and worked the controls, letting themselves into the airlock. Once inside air returned, and they took a look at the stairs leading down and decided to instead just fall down the shaft which was nearby.

Susan and Ifurita landed lightly and there was Guderian, looking at her wings as she folded them up behind her. The space was fairly open, but there were a lot of boxes, crates, and barrels stacked up nearby. *Probably ready for loading onto ships, if they loot something they can't use they can sell it from here.*

"That decent through space was somewhat impressive," he admitted, looking the girls over. "I take it you're both androids of some kind?"

"My friend here is, but I'm not."

"You just happen to have wings? And odd eyes?"

"That's right. So, are we just going to stand here in your doorway or are you going to invite us inside?"

"I think that's far enough," he replied, pulling his gun. To no one's surprise, people popped out from behind all the cover and leveled guns at the trio. "Fire!" he commanded.

Susan snapped her left wing out, covering Ifurita as gunfire peppered them both. It was as *invulnerable* as she was at the moment, after all, even disregarding the techniques she had put on it. Finally they got tired of it and paused.

"You know," Susan said into the sudden stillness, "I'm almost starting to think that a hail of gunfire is some sort of polite greeting in this reality."

"Really, master?"

"Sure. We get here and what do we find? People who had just met shooting at each other. I went to go see who was shooting at the ship right after we got here, and what did they do? Shot at me. I come here, what do they do? Shoot at me. Doesn't anybody just talk anymore?"

"I suppose not," suggested Sparkle, currently sitting on Susan's shoulder. "After the fall there wasn't much reason to."

"For *three hundred years*?"

"Haven't the Magog sort of made rebuilding civilization difficult?"

"I think they're ignoring us!" Guderian rightly surmised. "Open fire again!"

Susan sighed, got her wing cover back out, and waited while they shot up their entranceway again. *At least they're using energy weapons, like mine. No chance of bullets hitting me and bouncing to hit one of them.*

Once again the shooting stopped. "It didn't work out very well the first time, what made you think it would the second time?"

"I believe we have done as the captain asked," Ifurita ventured, peaking out from above her wing again. "We have seen the character of these people."

"I suppose you're right," Susan replied, taking a deep breath and then deflating a bit as she exhaled, head down. "And now we have to do something about it."

"Non-lethal?"

"What are your standing orders?"

"Yes, master."

"*Knockout Wave!*" both Susan and Sparkle called, releasing a wave of *knockout* energy in front of them, as agreed before they left. The trio then moved about the base, Ifurita taking out lone individuals with her single blast, and Susan and Sparkle taking out groups with various *knockout* techniques they had previously discussed. The place was basically a community, with older people, kids, woman, newborns, the whole lot. Those that attacked got knocked out and their guns collected, while those fearfully clutching or protecting children were simply told to move to a specific area. Any unconscious people were then dumped into that same area.

Susan had chosen a large open space, and then used *Creation* nature to construct a large set of bars that fit over the opening. Ifurita used her *heat vision* to wield it in place, and several hours later, about seven hundred people all told were accounted for. Hundred of guns and other weapons were confiscated, boxed up, and sent back to the Andromeda, and Susan radioed back for instructions on how to disable the weapons on the spaceships she found. They also found the control room for the space canon and blew that up with some simple *Force* and *Electricity* techniques. By the time the job was over she was rather disgusted with herself, and said as much to Sparkle as she sat looking at the people she had "captured."

"What do you mean? You didn't kill a single one, didn't even ask to harm them. Ifurita showed she could follow orders and didn't take too much damage from those surprise attacks, and her ability to self heal worked fine. As far as I can tell, nobody suffered a scratch in the whole ordeal."

"But they were totally helpless against me!"

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Is it right to just come in here and steal all their guns?"

"They're pirates! You think the cops feel bad when they do a drug bust and start thinking, *gee, it's a shame I had to go and steal all that heroin from those nice people. Guns too. Of course not!*"

"But is this what this power is for? I mean I wanted them to help rescue my father, not terrify a bunch of kids! I mean look at the way they look at me. Like I'm a monster. Do these wings mean nothing? Shouldn't they serve as a reminder to me, to ask 'what would an angel do?' Is *this* what an angel would be doing?"

"You're saving Than lives. Just because they aren't here yet to thank you for it, doesn't mean dozens or hundreds of lives won't be spared because of your actions here. Though wait, what side am I on? I think it's great you aren't all bouncy and happy about this, it shows that you are still taking your duties and powers seriously. But these are bad people."

"Are they? I only have the word of the Than as proof of that. One lone Than, at that!"

"And the fact they tried to murder us when we first arrived," reminded Ifurita.

"I... well, there is that."

"Let us out of here!" screamed Guderian, rattling the bars of the cage.

"In a minute," Susan insisted. "My goodness you're a whiner."

"What, really?"

"Did you think I was going to keep you in there until the Than arrived? I just want to make one more circuit of this place, make sure I got all the guns and knives and such. Then you can all come out again."

"I don't need my gun to kill you!" he promised. Susan shook her head and went over to the nearby wall where there was some kind of heavy looking control panel sitting there. She tore it up and raised it over her head, showing them all and making them take a step back. She tossed it into the air.

“Shoryuken!” she shouted, doing a jumping uppercut to the thing along with a touch based *force* attack. Her normal attack would have ripped it to pieces (with twenty four damage) so the added damage from the technique was simply for show. She landed again, the tortured metal clanging to the ground behind her. “Care to rephrase that?”

“What are you?”

Susan looked down. “Avenging angel or angel of mercy? I have yet to fully decide, I think. Just stay quiet a little longer, and I’ll let you all go free again, I promise.”

A half hour later and the most dangerous thing left around there seemed to be their cooking knives, so Susan used a *transition* technique to simply turn the bars of metal into air, and allowed them to go free again.

“So now you have a choice to make,” she told them as they stood around, wondering if this was some kind of trick. “Stay here, make peace with what you have done, and go peacefully when the Than arrive to take you in. The Than we rescued has promised you fair trails, and that your kids will not be tried. They can have a better life than living in a hole in a rock floating out in space. Alternatively, you can board your ships and leave before they arrive. You have some time at least to load any possessions, but know that I have disabled any weapons they have, as well. This is a chance for you to actually make something of yourselves, maybe give a better life to your children. I suggest you think it over carefully. Now, I think you said something about not needing your gun to kill me? Still want to make a move? I’m right here.”

“You’ll just leave?”

“I’ll just leave.”

“Go then.”

“Fine. Sparkle, Ifurita? We’re leaving.” Susan’s wings opened again, and the Sparkle jumped on her shoulder to be carried up the shaft and out of sight so they go back via *teleportal*.

The confused Nietzscheans stood and wondered what their next move should be.

“Explain to me again what you’ve done?” Dylan somewhat demanded in a confused tone.

“I took away their ability to make trouble for the Than when they arrive. They aren’t due in the next ten minutes or so, right?”

“No, it’ll be days before they get here. At least, with a large enough fleet that they feel confident is enough to fight back with if the Nietzscheans decide on an all-out offensive.”

“Tell them not to worry. I disabled their ship’s guns too, with Harper’s help.”

“And that’s why I have another cargo hold full of guns, explosives, missiles, crates of ammo, and various melee weapons?”

“Exactly. Instead of having two days to entrench themselves further and set up traps and such, they have two days to seriously consider their ways of life and what they want their futures to be. There isn’t anything more dangerous down there than their kitchen knives, which I also contemplated taking away but decided that was going too far.” She turned to the Than who was also there. “You don’t think I did the wrong thing, do you?”

“We’ve been trying to uproot this so called ‘pride’ for fifty years! You did it in an afternoon. Wrong thing? Let me get a photo of you for the banners hung along the route of your parade! Do you know how many Than lives and ships have been lost to those people?”

Susan’s face was somewhat frozen in place. “You, uh, have those, do you? Parades?”

“Who doesn’t have parades?”

“I don’t- look, that won’t be necessary. I felt bad enough taking their guns away-”

“You felt what? Is that some human thing? You are human, right? It’s just I have a hard time with mammals, but you seem to be part bird? And I’ve not heard of that...”

“No, I’m human. Just, it’s complicated.”

“They were pirates. Now they aren’t. What’s complicated? Or is your being a bird somewhat complicated? Your Than is perfect yet somehow I still think we’re not talking the same language here.”

Yeah, honestly, moping about because you took the place down with absolutely zero casualties is getting old, and I’m an immortal being that doesn’t care about time.

“I think we may have differing cultural viewpoints that’s getting in the way. In any case, that’s my mission report, captain. I suggest we hang here until the fleet arrives, in case they have caches of weapons hidden on other asteroids and go to get them. Or resupply ships inbound or anything like that.”

“Yes, we would be ever so grateful!” gushed the Than. “Don’t want all her hard work to go to waste, now do we?”

“Uh, she says her people would be grateful.”

“I suppose I’ve got no choice.”

Susan stared at him. “Okay, what have I done wrong this time? You don’t seem happy about this situation being resolved without a shot fired. I mean, yes, they shot at me but that doesn’t count.”

“Because I wanted to negotiate peace between these two groups! Not just have them hauled off.”

The Than started making a sound like laughter. “Did he say peace? I did mention *fifty years* right?”

“I have to agree, but for a different reason. These are nobodies. What good is negotiation going to do? They don’t represent any planets, so getting them on your side is useless. You want to put the Commonwealth back together but you keep going on about how many millions of member worlds there were. The operative point being *worlds*. We did the Than a favor, maybe they’ll join, and so much the better. We’ll need a strong military force to actually uphold the laws you want to put back in place. Those people down there were just thugs. And don’t all other races *hate* Nietzscheans because they caused the fall in the first

place? And were generally terrible since forever after that? You're going to have to declaw these kitties, apologies Sparkle I know you take offense to that, because other worlds are not going to join an organization with them in it without a lot of old wounds healed. Plus assurances they won't do the same thing after building up their strength."

"But it would have been a good start. Healing this rift between these two groups would have shown others it was possible. That would have been worth a lot towards worlds seeing the renewed Commonwealth as something that can be worked towards."

Susan shook her head. "I think you're thinking too small. We have a year, we need to make the most of it with allies that can drive back energy blast using Magog. That means military worlds and those like Xinti who can figure out how that actually works and maybe come up with a defense."

"I have to start small, we're only one ship."

"I don't know what to tell you. You said go down and feel them out. They immediately opened fire on me. That gave me a good indication of their intentions, and I did something about it. That's what I do. I try to fix things. Maybe it always doesn't work out, but I try. You want to give them their guns back and start over, fine. Let me know. Come on, Sparkle. We'll go see Trance, I'm sure *she* // be happy I prevented more bloodshed here."

"I'm happy you prevented more bloodshed," spoke up Rev with a raised claw.

"Thank you, Rev. I appreciate those kind words for all my hard work."

She walked off the bridge.

Over the course of the next few days Dylan talked the Nietzscheans into staying and taking Than justice over the harshness of the universe they would find elsewhere. With no means of defending themselves, he reasoned, they would be easy prey for other pirates, or those that just didn't like Nietzscheans very much. Turned out the "alpha" had twenty two children, and he did seem to want the best life for them they could have. As the Than guaranteed those too young to have yet raided or killed any Than citizens to be held blameless and given opportunities for schooling and becoming productive members of society, he took them up on it. Looking into their way of life, Susan found that Nietzscheans seemed like the Slytherin equivalent for this reality. Obsessed with blood purity and who your ancestors were, and generally looking down on everybody else as not being as perfect as they were.

Susan felt a little bit better about putting them in their place after that, but not much.

And with that, the Andromeda made plans to make the next leg of their journey towards Xinti. Beka was about to climb into the pilot's seat when she got a thoughtful expression on her face.

"You want to try it?" she asked, turning to Susan.

"Do what now?"

"Do you want to try it? Piloting the slipstream?"

"Don't you need to go through all kinds of training for that sort of thing? It can't be something you just do on a whim."

"Nah, it's easy! Hop on up here and I'll give you a lesson."

"I suppose I don't have *glitch* so if you think it's safe for someone who hasn't even driven a car to pilot a huge spacecraft, fine."

"Worst that could happen is we get a bit off course and I correct for it with our next jump."

No, the worst that could happen is you blow up, and then I make a little sad face for a second or two because I'll have lost a potentially phenomenal agent. Then get back to sucking this reality dry of energy.

Aren't we a little ball of cheerfulness this morning?

I am, actually. But don't worry, you'll see why soon.

"Let me go change out of my wings if I'm going to be sitting in the big girl chair. Be right back."

A moment later Susan was back in her original white top and climbing into the chair that was centrally located on the bridge. She gripped the two controls, one for each hand, and looked at the instruments to either side of her.

"Oh!" she said, slowly letting her breath out to extend it. "I get it."

"Get what?" asked Beka.

"Slipstream. The controls. All of it. Transiting to Slipstream in three. Two."

"Wait, are you-"

"One. Transiting!"

The ship shot forward into a tear of light, and Susan made her current *Adaptive Skill* check, oddly based on LUCK of all things, one of her best stats thanks to all the buffs she had to it, and got an eighteen. This was about average (for her) and three above what the normal "NPC" could roll, so she manipulated the controls expertly and got the ship lined up with the current "track" she saw before her. From there it was just a matter of keeping the ship "between the lines" so to speak, and before long she was announcing "Transitioning back to normal space in three. Two. Now!"

The ship broke free of the dimensions it was currently wedged into and was once again surrounded by stars and the void.

"That went well," remarked Beka. "You've been holding out on us. I wouldn't say that was quite as good as I could have done, but it was a pretty decent attempt. How did you do that?"

"Easy," Susan replied, "and you need to hear this too, Ifurita, as we haven't practiced this yet. People like me who travel between realities get the ability to use whatever is native to the reality as though we had practiced it all along. When I sat down I realized that was what this reality had that was unique, and I was able to use that skill for it. It carries over, so I wouldn't need to learn Slipstream piloting here, and then some other form of piloting in another reality later. I've already raised my skill in that to the theoretical human maximum, not that it's come in handy enough to really have justified it. Live and learn, I guess." She undid the harness and hopped out of the chair. "That was kind of fun, actually."

"Guess you don't need any more lessons then. How about you, Ifurita? Are you up for it?"

"Should I, master?" she asked after a pause, reading Beka's words.

"You might as well. Start putting whatever you have as points into the skill, as it'll carry over to whatever world you next go to. If you decide to *wander* that is. But it's better to have more pilots than less, right?"

"Only one problem," said Rommie the hologram, appearing on the bridge. "She's a synthetic life form like me."

"Gee, I wouldn't think an AI had *Prejudice: AIs*."

"No, you don't understand. You have to have an organic brain to pilot the Slipstream. I can't do it."

"Not successfully, anyway," put in Beka. "Andromeda, piloting 'herself' would only have a fifty/fifty chance at making any jump. So the tendency is for her to get further and further off course, and never make it where she wants to go."

Susan snapped her fingers. "It isn't an organic brain you need, it's LUCK!"

"Luck?" asked everyone there.

"Yup! I used LUCK as my stat for the check just then. A machine doesn't have luck, so it would only have the skill, which in theory should be quite high for a machine. But maybe not. In any case, I wonder..."

"You think I won't be able to do it," Ifurita said sadly.

"Rolling it untrained, and with a LUCK of zero? That might be a little more serious than just getting off course."

How do you know she doesn't have LUCK?

What?

How. Do you. Know?

I... guess I don't. Why wouldn't an "AI" from another world have LUCK like a person?

You have a point, I shouldn't assume she doesn't. But how can I tell? I play some kind of dice game with her? Shoot at her and see if she has a decent passive dodge?

No, stupid. Magic! Use Chaos magic and take a peek at her stats.

Oh, I see. And just when I was getting somewhere taking them down again. To thirty five, not that it's been that quick.

It would tell you what you need to know.

"Just a second while I work something out," she sighed, getting out her pen and notebook. How much for the spell?

Depends. Do you want Forth Wall, a grade 6 spell which can tell you a single thing, in this case her LUCK stat? Or Metagame, grade 9 which can show you her effective "character sheet" as you would see it?

And I have to either have you 'loan' me the spell or pay you the XP, and still take the points for the casting because it's chaos magic and not my regular type?

That's right!

So six or nine XP with six or nine points, or zero XP with twelve or eighteen points. So at a minimum forty one points, maximum fifty three points! I'll only be thirty away from the danger zone!

So pay for it. You've got the XP at the moment. I mean do you want to look all dark and swirly again? I certainly don't mind, but you did. So you'll pay me back sooner or later, right?

Oh right, that does happen. Crap. Can't I just get it in writing?

A Chaos spell? It laughed. Are you crazy? And bit of advice, go for the grade 9 one, because I can only give them to you in ten point increments. You would 'lose' four on that deal, unless you wanted another four point spell at the same time.

Right, you're not going to let me get away with not putting points in.

Come on! Big spender, big spender, BIG SPENDER!

That's not helping your case. Look, what about paying for the grade six spell now, and if I want to trade up later I can, "forgetting" the grade six one and just paying the extra three?

What is this, "let's make a deal?"

I can forget other spells I know and get the XP back, I've done it!

Oh, very well, I suppose that's "fair."

Fine. I'll take Forth Wall, you can have 6 XP and I'll just take the six points.

So Susan took six more points, getting her up to forty one again, and as she did she realized she was rolling a second check which she got a four on. As that wasn't a ten something random didn't happen, and with her fifteen result she knew Ifurita had a LUCK of four as she understood the concept.

"All that for one little number," she complained. "Still, now we know."

And knowing is half the battle. The other half is violence.

Her new friend took the chair and got a quick lesson in space flight, and with a "point" put into the "skill" she "rolled" a five and the ship didn't blow up.

"You didn't get us quite as far as Susan did, but honestly that's about what I would have expected from a beginner so well done!" Beka seemed honestly genuine about it, but it seemed Ifurita wasn't totally convinced.

"You really think I did satisfactorily?" she asked, not believing Beka's kind words.

"I did! You want to keep going?"

She looked over at Susan. "Hey, don't judge your performance against me. For one I just put points into things, and I've been walking worlds a lot longer. You did great! If you want to get some more practice in, you can."

"Would you mind if I watched a bit?"

"Not at all. Learn from the master," Beka answered with a grin.

Ifurita started unbuckling herself from the chair.

"Hey, what about Trance?" Susan asked, looking over at the purple girl. "I've never seen her in the big chair. Come on down, let's make a- No, forget I said that." *And thanks for that, jerk.*

You're welcome.

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea," Trance hedged, waving her hands in front of her. "Me and machines just don't get along that well."

"I like you just fine," remarked Rommie.

"Thanks, I like you too Rommie," she beamed.

"If you're sure. I just think if you're a rookie too, it would be great for Ifurita to have someone at that level to compare against. Plus you can compare notes, translation notwithstanding I mean."

"Nah, she's right," Beka began. "Do you know, one time—"

"Okay, you've convinced me!" Trance broke in, bouncing over to the chair. "I'll give it a shot!"

That was an abrupt change of heart.

"Oh. I mean, uh, that's fine, Trance. I hope you were paying attention just then."

"I sure was! I think. You just sort of wiggle these two control sticks right?" She made wiggling motions with her hands and her tail.

We're going to diiiieeeeeeee.

With Trance strapped in, Beka again went over how each control stick controlled part of the ship's movement (it needing to be in 3D space), and how being focused on your destination helped to collapse quantum probability and allowed the route to open before you.

"Don't fight the stream," she ended. "Think of it as a river, you're just keeping the ship from scraping the banks."

"I think I can do that!" she chirped excitedly. "Wait, shouldn't there be some kind of pedal I press for more acceleration? I'm sure I've read about that somewhere."

Deaaaaaaath.

Oh shut up, unless you have a point to make.

Nah, just messing.

OR AM I?

And so with Trance at the helm, the Andromeda crew began the bumpiest, loudest, most terrifying ride through the slipstream ever experienced by anyone. Alarms were going off, the viewscreen was a riot of color and visualized data, and as the ship finally careened through the portal at the other end electricity flashed along the entire outer hull like one of those tesla coil demonstration things.

"Okay, it felt like we were actually *bumping* things. In space. How did that even happen?" asked Sparkle, her fur beginning to go down again as her claws retracted.

"You don't think I did it right?" Trance asked quietly, looking a little more... smug... than she had any right to look.

"Not to be dismissive of your first effort, Trance, but I think we may have missed our destination by a little bit." Beka pulled up the outside view, and it seemed to be a thick cloud out there.

Some kind of gas?

"Some sort of nebula, I can't get a fix on our location," announced Rommie.

Oh, that's what it's called.

"But that's not the worst news," she went on.

"It gets better?"

"The SPG lenses have sustained some damage. They'll have to undergo repair before we can enter slipstream again."

"So we're stuck here?" ventured Susan.

"For the moment."

Stuck. Right where you need to be.

Was this your doing somehow?

Me? I haven't taken anyone on this crew over, you know that. Yet, anyway. How could I have done this?

Suddenly the main bridge door slid open.

“What the heck are you people doing to my ship?” demanded Dylan.

Everyone looked around somewhat guiltily. Except Ifurita, who Susan noticed had the biggest smile she had ever seen on her face.

“I actually did great!” she gushed, giving a thumbs up, something she had learned from Susan recently.

Susan considered. *Guess I can't argue with that, given the spectrum of performance we've seen here today.*

Ah, don't be too hard on the kid, put in The Darkness. It's all a setup. Just wait until you find out when you are.

You mean where we are, she replied without thinking. But you said that before.

Oh no, I'm very precise with my language, Susan. That was were. THIS was when.

She started to get a very bad feeling about both.

Excuse to slaughter: Predeterminism

When: No time has passed

Where: Bridge of the Andromeda

"I asked a question!" Dylan reminded them, as no one has spoken in several seconds. Trance jumped down from the pilot's seat and ran past him, apologizing, and he helplessly watched her go.

He marched down the bridge and planted himself in front of Susan. She looked up at him, as he was a bit taller than her, in no small amount of shock. "Why do you think this is my doing?" she demanded hotly. "And this is the second time, mind you, that blame, such as it is, should be directed elsewhere." She pointed over at Beka who stopped shaking her head and waving her arms and hastily smiled at them.

"I was just giving them the opportunity to get a little Slipstream practice in. I didn't know she could actually break something doing it."

"Wonderful. I guess we all learned something today, didn't we?"

"I learned a few things today, actually," ventured Ifurita, still smiling.

Dylan looked at her a moment and shook his head. "I'm going to go try talking to Trance. You all can start repairs."

"Repairs?" whined a voice coming into the room. "More repairs? That's all I ever do around here. I want to actually *build* something!" Harper looked around at the damage to the bridge, where electrical panels were smoking a bit.

"You built my body," hologram Rommie reminded him. "And she's heading this way to provide an extra set of hands."

"An extremely welcome set, believe you me. But that was days ago, what have I managed to build lately? Nothing."

"For now, it's repairs. Sorry Mr. Harper. It's just the curse of genius I guess."

"No, it's the curse of me being the only one around who can actually repair stuff," he muttered as Dylan walked past him and off of the bridge again.

"Lenses implies one solid object," Susan said as Harper flipped open a panel to assess the damage to it. "I can rewind time for it, maybe get us back up and running a little faster?"

"Rommie can take you down to the engine room," said hologram Rommie. "Meanwhile, I'll try to work out where we are. Perhaps if Beka could get us out of this nebula in one piece?"

"On it!" she chirped, taking the pilot's seat.

An hour or so later Susan and Ifurita walked back up to the bridge, as Rommie had said they were finally getting clear of the nebula's gasses and her sensors could start pinpointing their location again. Ifurita had been interested in the repair work and Rommie was obviously enjoying telling her about the various functions of everything nearby. Ifurita didn't have the skills or powers to help repair anything, but Susan didn't mind. Just her making a friend she could talk to, one of her own "kind" so to speak, lifted Susan's spirits a little.

And she is the only one Ifurita can talk to, at least directly. That doesn't hurt now does it?

"I know where we are," Rommie confidently announced. "The Witchhead nebula."

"You can't mean *the* Witchhead nebula," scoffed Harper, coming out from behind an access panel on the side of the bridge.

"Only one I know of. Why?"

"This is the site of the last big Commonwealth battle," he explained. He went on to tell a gripping tale of bravery and sacrifice, as thousands of ships did battle here right before the fall. Susan was a bit suspicious, given he said the battle raged for "forty days and nights" which sounded familiar somehow, and impossible at the same time. For one thing they wouldn't have had food supplies for that long, and space battles were typically over quite

quickly, given the nature of the combat and the environment (or lack thereof) of where they ships fought in.

“That’s an interesting tale,” Rommie allowed when he dramatically finished by reenacting the final moments of the two flagships, “but I’m not reading debris nearby that supports your story. Or really that any battle took here, of any magnitude. Ever. It’s just gas, and radiation, and more gas. End of story.”

“Can’t be, the story is famous, even today. Are you sure we’re where you say we are?”

“You do know how big my brain is, right? Though there is some interstellar drift I can’t account for. Almost as if...”

“Almost as if what?”

“No, it’s too preposterous. Like your story.”

“Stories aside, let’s put a bit more distance between ourselves and the clouds of gas that could ignite us at any moment and figure out how to get back on track,” Dylan ordered.

But they hardly got anywhere when Rommie announced a Slipstream portal was opening nearby, and another ship that looked somewhat familiar started hailing them.

Susan watched, dread growing inside her, as Dylan stumbled his way through a conversation with someone that should be more than three hundred years dead, but seemed alive enough at the moment to command a starship called the “Renewed Valor.” She even went as far as to say he had been missing “almost a year” and looked over at Rommie.

“That explains the interstellar drift I guess,” she said softly.

And so we come to the thing Silverstreak explicitly warned me against. Interfering in the past. I need to just go to my quarters, seal the door, and they can come get me when we’re back in our right time.

Oh, go on, you don’t need to do all that, The Darkness assured her. What harm can you do?

I worried myself sick just going back a couple of hours to take care of that stuff on the last world. This is over three hundred years back! There’s no ‘small’ change we can make here. Just a minor slip of the tongue could have reproductions. And you know me, I typically do things in a pretty big way, so it wouldn’t be just a slip of the tongue. It would be far, far worse.

Bah. You give yourself too much credit. Anyway, that’s not why we’re here.

Then why are we here, oh all-knowing one?

You’re here to take notes.

Notes?

On the process. You’re going to need them pretty soon. Believe me.

What process? What are you talking about?

You’ll see. Just pay attention because you’ll be in his shoes all too soon.

It would say no more.

Moments later Dylan cut the transmission to the other ship, and got everyone up to the bridge.

“So we really did travel through time?” asked Beka, not believing it for a second.

“So it seems. The question is, what do we do about it?” He looked over at Susan.

“Stop looking at me like that! We have been very clearly warned about meddling in the past, and I will not say anything that might sway your decisions here. Just pretend for the moment I don’t exist.”

“If only I could,” he muttered. “Very well. What do the rest of you think?”

“What is it, exactly, that you are asking us to consider?” asked Rev.

“Do we stay? Do we warn them, help them?”

“Will one ship, even with some foreknowledge of the coming battle, really help? After all, we don’t know exactly where they’ll come from, or what tactics they will use. Besides a general ‘you’ll be ambushed soon’ message, which they should be expecting anyway if they are truly high guard soldiers, what help can we offer?”

“And would we even be believed?” asked Beka.

“True, I’ve never heard of someone traveling through time just because they happened to be, uh, somewhat mechanically... less gifted than others.”

Everyone looked over at Trance, who just shrugged.

“Which brings up a fair point, how *do* we return to our proper time?” asked Susan. “Can we, even?”

“Perhaps Trance can simply retrace our route?” suggested Harper.

“And wind us up another three hundred years in the past? I’d like a little more assurance than that, Harper,” said Beka.

Though six hundred years would be preferable to three hundred, in this situation. The Commonwealth could have a lot more time to prepare, even prevent, the betrayal that got everybody into this situation in the first place.

“We’ll figure something out,” Trance announced confidently.

“Well let me know how it goes,” Susan told them. “I’m going to be safely away from all this.”

Hours passed as Susan paced her quarters. Of course she had *Curiosity* so she was aching to find out what was going on, but Silverstreak’s words were pinning her like a mouse pinned under the paw of a cat.

That’s when the alarms started blaring throughout the ship, and Susan put her armor back on.

“Are those necessary?” Sparkle asked her.

“I suppose not, but it feels right to wear them. Why?”

“You tell me. First you were simply a *Natural Magician*, remember? Then you became a fighter, with swords and the soul of a giant. Next was actual super powers, and we know what that almost caused. Now you’re playing at being an angel, and I have to wonder if that’s simply the next step to you becoming... well, just look in a mirror.”

“I wear these to remind myself not to become that. To not give in to what The Darkness wants me to do.”

“I hope that’s all it is.”

Eh, I wouldn’t need them, once I took you over fully. Anyway, ready to get out that pen and paper? The situation here just got worse, why not poke your head out and take a look.

Susan didn’t need any more prodding than that.

“What’s happening?” she asked, coming onto the bridge where tense faces looked back at her.

“We’ve got a problem,” Dylan answered her. “There’s three times as many ships as the Maru’s historical records indicate. 1,500 instead of 500.”

“Okay? How many on our side?”

“A hundred, at best.”

“Then what’s the problem? Outnumbered five to one or fifteen to one, the Commonwealth ships really don’t stand a chance, right?”

“The problem,” explained Rommie, “is that when 500 ships fight 100 ships, you figure at least some of the 500 will be destroyed. That leaves less than 500 ships that leave this area.”

“But how many ships will be destroyed when it’s three times that?” asked Harper. “I’ll tell you.” He made a zero with his hands. “So all 1,500 leave.”

“You don’t think our forces could have been more than a match for them? Actually drove their numbers down to what your records say?”

Everyone shook their heads. “Even with surprise,” Rommie concluded. “High Guard ships and Nietzschean ships aren’t so far apart that one can take fifteen. Though I hate to admit it.”

“Which leaves us with the unpleasant task of figuring out how to destroy over a thousand ships with just the one we have,” Dylan announced. He looked over at her.

“Don’t get involved, that’s what I was told! I’m not going out there to destroy a thousand star ships for you, even if I could!”

“Could you?” asked Trance, eyes wide.

“Probably. Given a month or two, maybe. I’ve never really tried, have I? Certainly not in an hour.”

“I certainly hope not,” Rev put in.

“Why the problem? So your records were wrong. History is written by the winners, they exaggerated the numbers *downward* to prevent being seen as cowards that needed overwhelming forces to crush the last of the Commonwealth.”

Harper shook his head. “No, you don’t get it. After the fall, the Nietzscheans would have faced no opposition in just taking over the Commonwealth systems and ruling them with an iron fist. It happened to Earth, heck it’s still going on back there, but instead their forces were too weak to do that. Then they devolved into petty conflicts and outright civil war.”

“And then my people came, to devour what was left,” put in Rev.

“Right. Believe me, living under Nietzschean rule is no picnic. We don’t want them strong at the end of this war.”

“Couldn’t they have fought off the Magog?”

“Maybe. More than likely though they just would have been more hosts for Magog eggs, and we’d have an ever bigger problem on our hands now.”

“Which is trying to prevent The Darkness from destroying this entire reality.”

“No, it would be trying to prevent The Darkness while facing an empire that ruled for 300 years instead of falling apart and leaving everybody to their own devices.”

“I see what you’re getting at. But if we could convince that empire-”

“Didn’t you get a taste of that on the asteroid? You showed up and they immediately opened fire, I believe you said.”

“A fair point. In any case, you have to leave me out if it. I influence any decision here and we might have a very different situation to return to, if we can even get back to our own time.”

“But this is all getting just a little hard to accept,” broke in Dylan. “My getting trapped in time for three hundred years, waking up just as you arrive. Then somehow going *back* in time almost the same amount to *just before* this climatic battle? Where we find more ships than there should be, but wait, I could do something to put history back on the course Beka remembers, couldn’t I? Just how much coincidence will I have to accept?”

“All of it,” suggested Sparkle. “Almost as if you were living a story.”

“Almost,” agreed Susan with a wink.

“Right. What do you have to say for yourself, Trance?”

“That things will probably work out for the best and I know you’ll make the right decision?”

“Great. Just great. I’ll be in the observation room, I have some thinking to do.” He stalked off the bridge.

See, now he has a decision to make, just like one you’re going to have to make a bit later. Does he shirk this duty? No. He simply comes to the inescapable conclusion he must, and then does what needs to be done.

You know that for a fact, do you?

It’s history by this point. Check the records for yourself, if you don’t believe me.

I actually meant you know that I’m going to have to make a similar choice, but okay, I’ll bite. He’s going to choose to destroy a thousand ships here?

Each with a crew of at least a hundred. But see, those are the stakes here- for him. Your stakes are considerably higher, and so your numbers have to be higher.

Why are you telling me all this?

Because you’re, how do I put this, somewhat squeamish? About killing, anyway. I know, you watched Star Wars, you don’t want to take the dark path. Telling you beforehand like this gets you thinking about it, even subconsciously, so when the time comes you’ll have an easier time doing what must be done.

Killing a large number of people, in other words?

You’ll see. You’ll have a choice to make, a weighty one, and maybe you’ll just turn from this reality rather than make it. Which is fine with me, because as long as you’ve done it once,

I can get you to do it again, and again, until you're mine. Or you make the choice, become a killer. That makes my job easier too, because I'll have just that much more hold of your soul.

Just how many people are we talking about here?

It laughed, seeming to echo inside her head. *You do remember what Silverstreak offered you before you came here, right?*

I will never destroy an entire planet that has sentient life on it!

Oh dear, you're worried about a mere planet? We really do think on different scales, you and I. It's fine, either way is just fine with me, because either choice serves my goals, not yours. Stick around, the show will begin soon.

And The Darkness was correct, Rev went to go talk to Dylan while the others stood around the bridge, watching the sensor blips on the screen go past. The Nietzschean fleet started getting into position for the ambush, and Susan wondered who had tipped them off that this was the meeting place. *A pity, really, that we came back in time and just saw this stupid nebula. I would have liked to see the Commonwealth, even in the twilight hours.*

"I begin to see why my creators built me," Ifurita said, coming to stand next to Susan. "So they could dispassionately order a city destroyed, but had no need to watch it happen, or dirty their own hands by activating the weapons they would have otherwise used."

"My own world is just starting to experiment with technologies that may one day, hundreds of years in the future, become as sophisticated as yourself. We call them drones. Right now they have to have someone flying them remotely, but I can see a time within my... original lifespan... where that wouldn't need to be the case. They could just be set to fire upon an area and fly off to do their duty. It's a scary thought. More so because they would be simply machines, not people like yourself which could have free will, if you didn't have that obedience software inside. Odd that you were made as you were, but perhaps that's just the sort of technology that world used."

Her world had powered individuals, so naturally they would want a weapon that could analyze, absorb powers, and fight back. Your world doesn't have people like that so that technology was never developed. It's just their version of that guy who could absorb your powers when he was around you. There being only so many combinations of things, even in an infinite set of realities. Things are bound to repeat a little.

True.

"Those who opposed my creators made even greater weapons to try and counter those like me. The Eye of God for one. Certainly that will happen to your world as well."

"Yup, that's what I'm afraid of. World War Four being fought with sticks and rocks, as a great scientist once said."

"What do you think the captain will choose?"

"According to history... a slaughter."

And so it was. Dylan decided after hours of deliberation (with himself) that the Andromeda would essentially light the nebula on fire and run away, incinerating two thirds of the Nietzschean fleet. They screamed out of the dense particles and drew the bulk of the fleet after them so they were in position when the nebula went up like a barrel of gunpowder, and headed into the Slipstream to try and make it home.

Which they did, and history was preserved.

No one was in much of a mood to talk after that, and each went their separate ways to think over what they had been forced, by time itself, to do.

Just a warm up, hardly even worth considering, The Darkness reminded Susan as she sat on the nose of the ship and looked out in the twinkling void, wondering what exactly it had in store.

"Finally we're only a few days from Xinti," remarked Dylan, looking over the displays of information on the bridge. "If we don't get sidetracked. Again."

"Which we very well may," cautioned Susan, scratching Sparkle's ears as she sat on the railing. "And I'm sure you'll blame us for it, somehow."

"I don't blame you for everything. What are you watching?" he asked Beka, who was shouting at a monitor on the side of the bridge.

"It's Harper, catching that sweet wave on Infinity Atoll."

"Wasn't he searching for parts?"

"Don't worry about it, we discussed it," Susan told him. "I'll have him back here *before* we would have been able to conventionally. When the competition is over I'll find where he is with a *view portal* and then he can just walk back here through a *teleportal*. Powers having no real range limit certainly comes in handy."

"Can you just see anywhere in the universe?"

"There are some limits, of course. I have to target a proper noun I have knowledge of. I can't just open a *view portal* to where The Darkness is to spy on it because I don't know what form it has here."

"Proper noun?"

"A person, place, or thing. I could track down a lost kitten if I saw a picture, but not an asteroid of solid gold because even if a thing like that existed, it could be anywhere."

"I see."

"Everyone, we're receiving a distress call," announced Rev, from the back of the bridge.

"Here we go again," muttered Dylan. "Put it on the main viewer."

On the viewer appeared an older looking man with a mustache and wearing a dark orange hooded robe. He had sort of a monk vibe and started giving the standard "we've been attacked, we need help at once," speech.

Not much of a shot of what's behind him, but it should be enough.

"Light of the multiverse, make up!"

Susan opened a *teleportal* into the space she saw behind the man, and then used a *metapower* technique to hold it in place so it didn't shrink away to nothing on her. (Power ones did that, magic ones just sat there) She darted through. The surprised man gave a start and nearly fell off his chair as she appeared out of thin air. "Come on, get through. If your ship blows up you can build another. Any other crew?"

"Get through where? How did you get here?"

"Through there, onto the bridge of the Andromeda." She pointed back the way she came. "You did call for our help, did you not?"

"Yes, but I didn't expect-"

"The Spanish inquisition. I know. No one does. Our chief advantage is surprise. Surprise and *will you move or do I have to move you myself?*"

"I'm going, I'm going. But I'm injured-"

"Can you walk?"

"I'll help Serenity onto the other ship," said a voice, and Susan turned to find a younger man in a white monk's robe coming into the bridge area. "There's no other crew but us."

Serenity huh? Personally I liked the other one I met better.

"Great. Are you wounded at all?"

"No, I'm fine," he answered.

"Then power this ship down so the Andromeda can tow it into a bay and look over the damage."

The two men threw some switches and such, then walked back to the other ship through the *teleportal*. Susan called through the smaller craft to make sure no one else was

abroad, and walked back herself. She stopped maintaining the *metapower* technique and the *teleportal* closed. "If their ship isn't in danger of exploding you can bring it in," she called to Rommie. "I had them power it down so hopefully it's safe. These were the only passengers." She turned back to the men. "I'll put you through to our sickbay, Trance can look you over. She's the closest we have to a medic." *Apart from my healing techniques, or the knife, but you've seen enough I think.* She opened another one to the lower deck and both men stumbled through in a daze.

"How extraordinary," said the older man.

"Come and lay down," said Trance, and took the other side of the man, guiding him to a bed. "I'll have you all fixed up in no time."

A concerned look on his face, Rev went through the *teleportal* as well, and as they didn't start screaming in abject terror, she figured it was fine and let it close.

"An interesting start to the day," remarked Dylan. "Glad I could get us through all that."

"How did you do that?" asked Rommie.

"Do? What?"

"Our ships were traveling towards each other at high velocity. But you both passed through that portal in the air as though the velocity didn't matter. For at least a second you were both here on this bridge *and* on the other ship, you should have been torn in half because of the velocity difference. Plus we were moving through space, how did the hole between the two points stay relative to our separate bridges?"

"If I had just tried to *telesummon* him, yes, it would have been a problem. That's why I did the Than like I did. Matching velocity. I figured that was a slightly larger craft than a fighter, and I was right. As to all that other stuff? I don't know the math, I just know that's how powers work. They would be useless otherwise, so it somehow compensates for all that. It's a superpower, it doesn't have to make classical sense."

"I see. If we could only figure out how to create something similar with just our understanding of physics..."

"Can't help you there, sorry. Sparkle?"

"Huh? What?" She had been staring at the hole and now came back to the room again, looking over at Susan. "Sorry, just thinking."

"About what?"

"I've never really paid attention to that symbol Rev wears, but now seeing two more has jogged my memory. I've seen that before, I'm sure of it!"

"Really? I never paid much attention either, what's it look like?"

"Like this," answered Rommie, putting the symbol up on the screen. It was a squiggly line going up and down surrounded by a triangle, which was then surrounded by a circle.

Susan pondered it for a moment. "I'm not seeing it."

"That's because you only had eyes for Luna, and you don't have a *photographic memory* like I do. I've seen something very similar to that at Luna's house."

"Just how similar?"

"I would swear it was the same, but it's been a couple of years."

"Wait a second." She tapped her watch. "You're still connected to the Hub database at the moment, aren't you?"

"No impairment at the current time."

"Can you search records of my home dimension for instances of a symbol like the one displayed on the screen?"

"Affirmative. Working." A few seconds passed. "If I may project onto the display?" it asked.

"Oh! Go right ahead. Wait, you crammed a whole AI onto your wrist?"

A similar symbol appeared on the screen. "I didn't even think about that. Andromeda, meet Hub AI, Hub AI, meet Andromeda. You can talk now, if you want."

"These symbols are remarkably similar," Dylan admitted, looking both over. Where one had a squiggly line, Susan's symbol had a straight one. And the positions of the triangle and circle were reversed. "How strange is that?"

"What is this symbol, anyway?"

A seeming ball of light appeared on the viewscreen. "According to the database, this symbol is how those believers in certain objects make themselves known to each other. The center line represents an unbeatable wand, the ring a stone that can return the dead to life, and the triangle a cloak of perfect invisibility."

Huh. Doesn't Harry have one of those three?

"Interesting! And this symbol?"

"You would have to ask Rev," answered Rommie. "Wayism came about after the fall, I have no information about it in my databanks."

"I certainly doubt a bunch of monks in a technical reality such as this one would be looking for unbeatable wands and invisibility cloaks. Just one of those odd parallels, I guess."

"Now that's odd," Rommie stated, looking off into nothingness on the side. "I think there's an unexploded missile lodged in the hull of that ship."

"Better not bring it aboard then!" suggested Beka.

"I can go yank it out of there if you can guide me to where it is," offered Susan. "It won't go off if I move it, right?"

"It shouldn't," agreed Rommie. "I'd like to have my probes give it a once over, see if there's anything we can learn from it."

"If you're willing..." trailed off Dylan.

"To go out into space again? Are you kidding? Ifruita, care to join me?"

"I go where you command, master."

And so the two ladies flew over to the damaged craft, now parked not too close to the Andromeda, but held in place by a bunch of probes. At least, she figured they were doing something to gravity fields or whatnot and that's why there were all in a ring around the thing. Susan looked at her watch that now had an indicator arrow as to where she needed to be to find the missile, and the two approached the ship with caution.

Susan, of course, had on *invulnerability*, and was maintaining a similar technique on Ifruita just in case with *Protection* nature. For all she knew it was rigged to blow up when someone got near it, so why take any chances?

The hull of the craft was pretty beat up, and now up close Susan saw the cylindrical form of the missile caught up in this twisted section of hull.

But how to extract it, that's the question. Can't really get at it from this angle. And why didn't it explode, anyway?

Maybe the people that bought them weren't concerned about quality control and someone scammed them? suggested The Darkness.

Man, you just can't trust anybody, can you?

Ifruita gestured to Susan and put her fingers in front of her eyes, then pointed down at the ship. She made a circular gesture, and Susan nodded. *She wants to cut some of the hull away I bet.*

And she did, with her heat vision, allowing them better access to the area. A bit more cutting power and the two women yanked the thing out of there. Not that Susan needed the help lifting the thing, but she was enjoying working beside someone her own shape.

Not that I would replace Sparkle with her, or anything. Who would wake me up in the morning, and cast Hygiene on me?

With that done, she held the thing up and two drones, one on either side, detached themselves from the ship and "grabbed" it, towing it out where it could be safely explored. Ifruita pointed back the way they had come, but Susan held up a hand. She waved to get the attention of a drone, which looked up at her. She pointed to the ship and mimed pulling something out, but the drone shook back and forth.

She doesn't scan anything else then, I guess it's safe to bring it inside.

Susan pointed to Ifruita and where the other drone had been, and took her place where the second one had left. She nodded her understanding, and the two helped the somewhat clumsy gravity manipulators possessed by the drones wrestle the thing into the landing bay.

Hologram Rommie was waiting for them.

"Nice work out there."

"Thanks. And thanks for the assist, Ifurita."

"Naturally, master."

"How's the patient?" she asked, looking the ship over now that it was in the light.

"Ornery. He's refusing Trance's treatments because he's on some 'mountain path' according to him. Something to do with his religion, and not just being as stubborn as a mountain."

"Will he live?"

"According to Trance he's not in any danger. But I'm getting some weird readings from him, let me tell you."

"I see. I'll go check him for dimensional contamination later."

"He's been asking to see his rescuer, you can do it then."

"If he's not asleep I'll go now." She turned away from the ship and headed towards the door.

"Master, may I stay and continue looking the ship over?"

"Of course!"

The two headed down the corridor, and the hologram Rommie was replaced with the real one at a junction.

"In other news," she went on, not missing a beat, "the person he was traveling with? Beka's brother, apparently."

Susan snorted.

"What?"

"Just you. Picking the conversation up as if nothing had happened. Which I suppose it did, it's just weird, that's all. I mean you're the same person, but you're not, you know? And I guess it would be strange to greet yourself, and me, again. Anyway, brother huh?"

"Raphael Valentine. She's currently chewing him out for one reason or another."

"Ah, not the closest of sibs then? Still, what are the odds of us running into a particular person out in the void here?"

"It's a pretty big number, are you sure you want to know?"

"No, don't tell me, I can guess. Some kind of setup?"

"Beka thinks so."

"Marvelous. Better keep our eyes open."

"Always."

The door swished open and Susan strode into the medical bay like she strides everywhere. Confident that she was basically in charge now that she had arrived.

"Ah, my rescuer appears!" exclaimed Serenity, as Trance hovered nearby. (Not literally, she had her feet on the ground.) Rev was on the other side of the bed, and the two had obviously just been talking.

"Glad to see you're not too hurt," Susan greeted him, taking his hand. She did a quick *Dimensional Sense* on him, getting a nineteen, one from her maximum. He didn't feel out of place, and she released the hand.

He smiled. "It seems the universe still has use for me. But come, you must tell me how you did that!"

Susan waved that away. "It's just something I can do. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry? My dear, you simply appear out of nowhere, drag me from one ship to another, and then tell me not to worry about it? What you did was astonishing to me."

"It's no big deal, really." *Though I suppose it is, to someone not used to dealing with all the stuff I usually do. And he does seem to be some kind of monk, maybe he's somewhat sheltered even past that?*

"No big deal? And you talk like you did it, personally? I've never heard of a species that can open holes through space like that. I thought it might be some top secret technology lost in the war, but preserved on this ship."

"Nope, it's me. Ifurita and I, you haven't met her yet, are the only ones that I can do as far as I know. I can introduce you later."

"I see. I must admit, I have a selfish reason for asking," he went on, lowering his voice. "Though in this case I think the divine might forgive me. I need to get to the peace talks I was supposed to be mediating, right away. Between the Restorians and the Free Trade Alliance. You're familiar with the groups I take it? The attack has put me behind schedule. Can you just send me there?"

Susan shook her head. "I have to see a place at least once before I can open a *teleportal* there. I'm fairly certain I won't have seen where you're going to. Sorry."

"Is that what you call them? And you're sure it's not technological? If both you and this *Ifruita* you mentioned, heaven forbid, died let's say, that ability would be lost forever?"

"Yes..." Susan said slowly. "Why the interest, anyway?"

"Oh, well, as I said, the conference. And I heard while setting it up a Restorian ship attacked this one, and some strange things happened. I was just curious."

"I hope that satisfies you at least somewhat."

"It does! It does indeed. Imagine, a being that can do that, just step from one place in space to another. Astounding. Has my ship been brought aboard?"

"Ship? What? Oh, yeah, it's in our landing bay now."

"Splendid! It's been very enlightening, chatting with you." He reached into his robe pocket and brought out a cylindrical device with a red button on top. "May you all rot in Hell for polluting the space lanes and other worlds with your traveling."

Er, what?

Rev got a horrified look on his face, and Trance whirled around as he pressed the button, a look of triumph on his face.

Nothing happened.

"Er..." He started frantically pressing the button while nervously glancing around the room. "That's odd."

Susan shook her head. "I take it you're expecting an explosion? Perhaps from that missile that was lodged in your hull?"

"Perhaps?"

"Yeah, we took that out before bringing it on board. Do you think we're morons?" She causally took her gun out. He didn't seem to care.

"Serenity, what are you doing?" Rev finally sputtered out, grabbing the control away from him. "How can you even consider such a thing?"

"Oh, grow up," he shot back, rolling his eyes.

"What?"

"Since we discovered the *Andromeda* had returned, we knew it had to be destroyed," he went on, ignoring Susan's leveling of her gun in his general direction. "It would just encourage more space travel."

"You're a Restorian?" he gasped, unbelieving.

"Not exactly. I'm something unique, like Susan here apparently is. Well, no sense chatting about it. If plan A doesn't work, you go to plan B, am I right?" The thing everyone thought was a man started to almost melt, and Susan jumped back, expecting some kind of detonation like those *Shatra* things she had tangled with.

"*Force Barrier!*" she called out, putting her right hand up and enclosing the entire bed in a bubble of pure force, spending as much energy on the action as she could. But no explosion came, just the figure continuing to melt away until it was just a sort of skin suit laying there on the bed.

"So what's plan B?" she asked the room, about to drop her hand, and the technique.

"Keep that barrier up!" shouted *Andromeda*, her hologram appearing in the room. "I'm reading hundreds of thousands of nano-bots in that space now!"

"Wait, seriously? That was just some kind of robot, made of many tiny robots in a fleshy exterior?"

"So it seems. It would have probably swarmed through my systems, disabling me."

"That would have been inconvenient. So what do I do with these little guys?" She started looking through the bubble, as if she could see the microscopic robots within.

“We’ve got to get them outside somehow.”

“You could just open a *teleportal*, right?” asked Trance.

“Out into space? I guess the barrier could hold. Vacuum wouldn’t exactly damage it, so it wouldn’t drop from that. I’ve never used a power while I used a technique though. I’m not actually sure what would happen. If that barrier drops...”

“So I’ll get Ifruita up here!”

“Duh! Of course!”

So the group waited nervously for her to arrive, which she did, and easily put a *teleportal* into the middle of the barrier, sucking the air (and with it the tiny robots) into space some distance from the ship.

“That’s it, the majority of them are gone,” announced Rommie. “My own defenses can easily handle the rest.”

“Great,” said Susan, dropping the barrier after the *teleportal* closed. “Now let’s go make sure Beka’s brother isn’t a fake either.”

“Which he probably is, given the fake tried to blow him up as well,” Rev said sadly. “I wonder if the real Serenity Khalsa is even still alive.”

“As I’ve actually not seen the original, I probably couldn’t even tell you. Sorry, Rev.”

“I’ve got androids moving towards Raphael’s location. You can move in together.”

“Let’s go!”

Luckily, it turned out that Beka's brother was *not* a human shaped death machine made of many tiny robots working in concert, but just an ordinary spy for the FTA. At least that's what he maintained, reasoning his cover must have been blown at some point for the fake Serenity to want him dead as well. The original plan was to simply learn how Susan had whisked away all the armaments aboard that one Restorian ship to see if they could utilize the technology. If not, blow it up.

Naturally he insisted he would have warned the crew before that happened, and professed ignorance about Serenity not being the actual one. After that he was invited to stay, but chose to have the ship "repaired" (it hadn't been in an actual attack, it was only made to look that way) and head back to the FTA for further orders. He also insisted that even if his cover had been blown, he had seen enough of the Restorian forces to make his report worthwhile. Beka couldn't believe he was actually taking responsibility for something, but Susan remembered something a certain young Slytherin boy had once told her. Something about having leverage on people, and Susan wondered if this FTA had made this man an agent somewhat against his will.

Once he had gone the Andromeda finally made it to Xinti, where blue skinned humanoid life forms with hooked noses and chin protuberances welcomed them. Dylan got a meeting with some head scientists, and they turned over the remains of the cybernetic implants for study. The governmental body was quite excited over the prospect of having the Commonwealth back, and insisted that if the Andromeda helped them out with a tricky bit of science they wanted to perform, they would ratify the charter and help spread the word that it was available to join again.

But as the new Magog threat was a little closer to home, that took precedence, and now two weeks later, Susan and the others were called to the surface for a presentation on what the group had learned. Harper, having been brought back a week and a half ago, had been basically living in the lab with them as they tinkered with the tech, and apparently he was even more hyper than usual when he had called them down for "the demonstration."

"So what's all the fuss about?" asked Dylan as the group filed into the... shooting range? He looked around. "Figured we would be in a conference room."

"Oh, this is way better than a stuffy old conference room," insisted Harper, almost bouncing with excitement.

"Yes, the applications are truly astonishing," put in one of the blue hued scientists.

"Most exciting!" agreed another.

"Show me," he said with a wave of his hand.

"First a little background? Hohne?"

"Of course. Now, as you know, most of the system you recovered from the fallen Magog is standard implant technology. But with a slightly different application than what we've done in the past."

"It's far more efficient!" put in the other.

"Yes. These conduits here, along the arms," he brought up a diagram on a nearby viewscreen, "are made for passing a large quantity of energy from the user's body into these special areas embedded in the palms. We aren't sure how, exactly, this energy is exchanged, but we've narrowed it down by finding the purpose for each subsystem in turn."

"It wasn't easy!"

"No, quite a delightful challenge, wasn't it?" The two nodded to each other.

"But something other than energy can be run along them, can't it?" asked Harper, a gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, I'm just getting to that. As you know, standard data ports are typically installed in the neck, as our own Mr. Harper had done."

Harper showed them his data port, which sat on the back of his neck.

"But now we can put them in the hand," he went on, "and simply pass that data into the CPU that normally runs the system."

"We won't need those bulky ports anymore!"

"Yes, quite."

Harper held up a hand. "You can't even really tell the port is there!"

"Wait, you already started implanting stuff into yourself?" Dylan asked, concerned.

"Oh, there's no risk," Hohne assured him. "This is simply a repurposing of our existing technology, suggested to us by the configuration used in the Magog fighter. We aren't yet implanting any of the unknown functionality until we can be sure of its purpose."

"And that it won't simply blow up the brain of any non Magog it's put into," added the other.

"Yes, safety, very important."

"So what's the benefit?" Dylan asked.

"Observe," said Harper, "and be amazed." He brought up a tablet looking thing and put his hand on the underside. Images flashed and changed on the display. Dylan just looked confused.

"He's changing the images himself," Hohne explained. "In this case, no separate 'cable' is needed. You might say his hand is the data port, his arm is the cable, and his brain... well, that remains the same."

"Normally I'd have to plug into a device I wanted to control," Harper went on. "Now, with the other end of this system in place, I can just touch something and control it."

"Far more convenient," said the second scientist.

"All very interesting, but it doesn't explain why we're here."

"Think of the possibilities, boss! Let me show you." Harper pulled the gun from the holster and put several shots downrange. He "blew off" the barrel and had the target brought down the track.

All his shots were mostly in the center.

Dylan whistled.

"Now you see?"

"His accuracy is doubled!" Hohne nearly squealed. "It's astonishing."

"See, I modified the gun a bit," Harper said, handing it over grip first. "I can now interface with the gun and it 'knows' where it is with some gyroscopes. Feed that data into my CPU through the new link system, and I'm more accurate than ever."

"The best part," explained Hohne, "is that there is no social stigma to this system, because there is no external evidence the augmentation was done." He held up a hand. "Many also don't like the discomfort of the data port, which this system also negates the need for."

"I can hardly tell the grip has been modified," admitted Dylan.

"And this is just the start!" gushed Hohne. "Imagine flying a vehicle by thought alone. Or entering gigabytes of data into a system nearly instantly."

"Without cables, he means."

"Yes, I mean we can already do those things. This is just more convenient."

"What do you say, boss? Can we sign you up?" He held up a medical injector.

"I'll think about."

"It's perfectly safe," assured Hohne. "As I said before, it's just a repackaging of our current technology. Nothing will be visible."

"Still, I'll hold off for now. Not that I don't trust your skills, any of you."

"Your loss, but we can always do it later. Anyone else?"

Trance and Rev shook their heads, but Beka stepped up. "I wouldn't mind giving it a try. You can break it back down if something goes wrong, right?"

"Fully reversible," agreed Hohne, and Beka only winced slightly as she was injected. Harper turned to her. "What about you?"

"Oh, believe me, I'm tempted. Getting a bonus to my pistol skill, if you guys can modify my pistol like you did yours, would be nice. Just... hold that thought."

Susan stepped back out into the hall where she contacted the hub. Sparkle followed.

“Hub answering.”

“Technical question for you guys.”

“Go ahead.”

“Will getting a cybernetic implant from this reality mess with my magic? My book has some warnings but I want to know about here, specifically.”

The agent did some typing, looking up Susan’s magic and any experiments done with cybernetics.

“In general for magic users, it depends on how sophisticated the implant and the extent to which you are modified.”

She went on to explain what Harper was offering her.

“Given the sophistication of the reality you currently occupy, I would guess only a one penalty to any magic performed after the installation.”

“And my super powers?”

“No change there.”

“That’s not too bad then, if my *pistol* result can be doubled. What about my *somatic sword*? It comes out my palm.”

The agent looked up the spell. “I would recommend perhaps changing the location to be the top of your hand, instead of the palm, just to avoid any complications. It should not be that much harder to grab.”

“Fair enough. And if this doesn’t work out, you guys can remove all this stuff?”

“Of course. You would lose the system but once again be penalty free.”

“Great. Get me back there so I can recast *somatic sword* real quick.”

“You’re really going to do it?” asked Sparkle.

“You heard them. Magic is basically useless around here anyway. Why *not* take advantage of it, get a bonus to shooting stuff. Plus if things can be easily adapted to the touch interface? What about my pups? Giving them orders in an instant? Telling how many charges my gun has without looking? Heck, I might be able to communicate with anyone that has this system “telepathically” just by holding their hand!” A door of light opened. “Unless you have some specific objection I haven’t considered?”

Sparkle thought a second. “I guess not. And it is their technology they said, already proven. Just packaged differently. It can’t hurt.”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun! Be back in a second.” She darted through the door.

Sparkle shook her head. *First super powers, and now this. You would think she’d be satisfied. Still, she has always maintained her father must be someplace locked away from magic. And her gun does have a nonlethal setting, so it’s not like she’s just blowing people away. And she’s going to need greater accuracy to get through those barriers generated by the Magog. And it’s not like she’s replacing her whole legs or anything, she won’t even look different. I guess it’s fine.*

Just seconds later Susan returned, and held the door for Sparkle so they could both go back in.

“Okay,” she chirped. “They say it’s fine, it won’t mess up my magic use too much once I leave here.”

“Magic?” echoed Hohne.

“Hahaha, never mind.” She held out her palm, and Harper injected her.

Susan now felt a curious sensation. The need to spend 10 XP to integrate these cybernetics into her body.

Oh come on. They’re tiny robots, and I guarantee you neither Harper nor Beka over there had to pay any hard earned “points.” Why do I have to?

Are you asking me? Curse of being a Paragon I suppose, answered The Darkness. Pity, I would have taken those ten for something if you wanted to get rid of them that badly. Stupid... everything.

So 1 XP vanished off her character sheet, and she knew the full bonus wouldn't be gained until she had spent the full amount, nine days later.

"It will take some hours for the natobots to complete their task," Hohne advised them. "Also they are using your own bodies for much of the material necessary, I'll get you a list of foods high in certain nutrients you should eat more of over the next few days to replenish your reserves. Lots of red meat, for instance."

"Humm, meat!" echoed Rev. Everyone looked over at him. "Sorry."

"Meanwhile, if you want anything converted to the new touch system, we can go to the lab and start the process."

"What about the important part of what we gave you," asked Dylan. "The whole energy wielding stuff."

"Oh, are you holding out for that, captain?" asked Hohne. "Is that why you refused the new touch system? It can easily be upgraded you know."

"I want to know what the capabilities are, and how to fight it. How does it work? Does it have any vulnerabilities?"

"I'm afraid we won't know that until we discover exactly how certain key parts of the system function."

"We are close, however," put in the other.

"Yes, I have people in the lab now running simulations and such. It won't be long."

"Fine."

So those interested went to the lab, and Susan got out her pups and handed over her gun. "Don't break this," she insisted to the scientist she handed it to. "I don't have a spare, and it came from a place I won't get easy access to should I need a replacement."

"Would you like a spare made?" he asked.

"Oh. Uh, you can do that?"

"I'm sure it's not too much different than our own firearms, I'm sure we could fabricate you a duplicate in no time at all."

"That would be great."

They spent the next two days carefully taking the gun apart and seeing how it worked, and were somewhat astonished at its capability of changing the damage it did. They had lethal and nonlethal weapons, true, but they used different principles. To combine them into one weapon had them excited all over again. Naturally, their fabrication capabilities were top notch, if not exactly up to the level of what made her armor. But she was handed a second gun, and both now sported a laser sight and the new touch system.

"Thanks."

"It is we should be thanking you. This type of weapon will be a real boon to our local police forces, as they won't need to carry two different types of weapons now. And with the new touch system, why, that could make everyone's life a little better."

"I hope so."

The next day, the group met in the lab again, as the scientists had said a breakthrough had been achieved and there was more news to share.

"Basically, we understand how to create the system," Hohne informed them, holding up an injector. "Now all we need is a volunteer."

"For what?"

"You have to understand, captain, that while we can replicate the system, we still don't know the true capabilities it has. How could we?"

"So, what, you're just making a copy of what's here and hoping for the best?" He indicated the original system now in pieces on the lab table.

"Er, yes. That's what we've been doing, creating the nanobot program to create an exact duplicate of this system. With variations for the differences in physiology across species, of course. But otherwise exact."

"That could be extremely dangerous!"

"Yes, hence the need for a volunteer."

"I said I'd do it," spoke up Harper. "Throwing energy bolts around? Sign me up."

"No one is signing up for that program until we understand the risks."

The scientists looked at each other. "There's no way to know."

"But there is a way to at least mitigate the immediate risk," spoke up Susan. "I can use my *time* nature to create a point in time I can return to. If it should go immediately wrong, such as a head exploding, I could simply go back in time and advise against the procedure."

"And if it has some sort of long term detriment to whoever tries it?"

"Nothing is without risk, captain."

"And think of it this way, boss. I'd rather die in the pursuit of science than torn apart by cybernetically enhanced Magog. Or blasted apart. Or had my energy sucked out. Or whatever else they could do we didn't even see. Or just plain infested with eggs if we get overrun and they decide to go old school." He shuddered.

He shook his head. "There's just so many unknowns in this situation. And just because we don't fully understand the system doesn't mean we can't combat it."

"But having someone with the same abilities would give us an edge. Or imagine if all of us did? How can we fight these Magog without understanding what they can do?"

"What do you think?" he asked Susan.

She sighed. "The Darkness gave us that technology for a reason. To gloat, maybe? Like 'you can see what I'm doing, I'm confident of my success?'"

"There could be another reason," spoke up Sparkle. Everyone turned to her. "To see what we do with it. By that I mean, say Harper here injects himself and figures out how to activate the system. What are we going to do immediately after?"

"Work out how to beat it."

"Exactly. Any weaknesses in the system, we'll try to exploit them. With your connection to The Darkness, it would now know those weaknesses, and have the time to try and work around them."

"Could it be tempting you, Susan, in some way?" asked Ifruita.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't powers, it's purely an application of science, correct?"

The scientists nodded and agreed with her.

"And you've told me about why you went after powers not related to magic. In case magic didn't work where your father is being held. Well, what if powers don't work where he is either? And I mean no powers somehow. Even your transformation is denied you. But this system would continue to function."

"You've got a point." Susan stared at the ampule.

"I wouldn't," cautioned Sparkle. "For one thing, how much XP will this cost you? And what would your new penalty to magic rolls be?"

"That's a good point too. Could I take one of those injectors with me, just in case? I could always use it later, once my father is found and we know exactly what sort of world he's currently in."

"Of course!" agreed Hohne. "I can give you two, one for the system and one to take it apart again."

"That's for the best." She turned back to Sparkle. "If magic doesn't work, who cares what my penalty to it is? I learn to use the system, rescue my father, and then turn it off again."

And at least by then, Silverstreak could look into it, thought Sparkle. "It could work."

"But that doesn't solve our problem of testing it," protested Harper.

Susan held up her hands. "I've offered what I can."

Naturally, the Perseid scientists were all for testing it "For Science!" but Dylan urged caution, and rightly so. The argument went back and forth, and Sparkle by had that time grown bored and was just looking around the lab. Susan had nothing more to contribute so she was off talking with a scientist about getting some kind of touch system installed into Ifruita, and if that would even be possible. No one was paying particular attention to Harper as he casually grabbed an injector off the table and jammed it into himself.

Then every eye was on him as he dropped it with finality.

“There. Now we don’t have to argue anymore.”

“Harper! I didn’t have the technique in place!” Susan cautioned him. “I can’t go back if something goes wrong.”

“I can’t believe you would do that, Harper!” yelled Dylan. “Of all the reckless, stupid ideas, that was the worst.”

“It had to be done, boss. We were never going to get anywhere arguing about it. This way the issue is settled and we can get on with things.”

Dylan looked over at Susan, who shrugged. “I’m with you on this one, Dylan. Harper, there’s never been a story where a scientist injected himself with something experimental and later been ‘I’m glad I did it, it really worked out well for me.’”

“Someone had to. May as well be me.”

“Can’t we just give him the antidote now?” asked Trance, a worried look on her face.

“It’s not an antidote, as such,” explained Hohne. “It’s a set of nanobots programmed to break the cybernetic systems down again and flush them from the body. It’ll have to be there to be broken down, injecting them now will simply do nothing because they won’t have anything to work on yet. So at the very least we must wait until the system is complete.”

“Oh.”

“Look, I feel fine. My head isn’t exploding, so stop worrying Trance. Everything will be fine in the end, you’ll see.”

But everyone in the room knew how hollow those words could become.

Return to Where it Began

When: Day 43

Where: In orbit around the black hole

So in the two weeks it took to outfit the Andromeda with new touch interfaces at key points, move various bits of equipment from Xinti to the machine shop, and travel, Susan raised a few things. She could easily get training in both math and pistol, so was able to raise her pistol skill to a 5 and her math skill to a five. She had explained to Andromeda what she wanted, and she was more than happy to help. Harper's new cybernetics grew inside him, under the watchful eye of both the scientists that accompanied them, and Trance, who grew less and less lively the closer to whatever they were headed to.

"You want to what?" Sparkle asked her, upon hearing Susan's latest wacky idea.

"Take the Path of Ron and start putting together martial arts and gunplay. We know it works, my father noted the skill in case I should want to learn it, and Ron managed at least something akin to it, right?"

"He did improve his spellcasting, that much is true. I don't know what his final *delay* was in combat. That would be the only real way to tell."

"Andromeda thinks she can teach me the appropriate math, and with this CPU in my head that came with the touch system," she tapped her temple, "I should be even better at it. I mean it's just a skill for me. I get the prerequisites, and I've got it. The 'training' is just so I can spend my XP faster. Not that I'll have enough to even get close, and with another eleven months of waiting too, but still." (The CPU gives her an automatic +10 on any *mathematics* check, so with a 10 rating she's getting a 22 minimum roll, which would be some pretty hard core math to do in .2 seconds or so.)

"I suppose you've got the XP, and The Darkness is getting more serious about either stopping you or converting you. This, at least, relies only on your own skills. But what about *slash-all*?"

"I haven't forgotten it," she insisted, "but this would work no matter where I was, powers, magic, or nothing at all. Believe me, I'm fully aware of the irony inherent to all this. Across all the realities I've been to, I've been the most powerful, or at least the most versatile with all I can do. And what I am exciting to be working towards? Shooting a plain old gun a little bit faster." She shook her head. "Well, a high tech plain old gun, but you get the idea. It's laughable, really, but what else can I do? What else can do that much damage, that reliably?"

Sparkle considered. "True, the place your father is being held could be cut off from more than magic. Otherwise his non-magic party members could have a chance to shine and free everybody. But is it really worth that much XP? I seem to recall the skill taking a lot of lesser skills before it could be learned."

"You're not kidding. Mathematics, martial arts, and pistol to a ten? It's crazy. But here, let's work it out." Susan got out a pencil and a paper and started noting things down. "The main benefit is my *active delay* in *gun fu* is modified both by my rating in *ranged combat* and *gun fu*. So at a 10 in *gun fu* my delay would be a two for my pistol. It's currently a seven. Check my logic on this, but for the moment let's say I was facing three opponents, right?"

"Okay."

"With *slash-all* going I hit for a third of the damage, so take the average non-lethal pistol setting of HDL[10] which averages ten. Putting all four shots into them I do twelve damage per target meaning after the first round of combat they're all still up. I have to shoot them all again to knock them out, meaning sixteen delay. Instead of that I shoot each one twice with *gun fu* and do twenty damage apiece. This takes me an extra action, three instead of two, but my delay is so much lower only six *segments* have passed instead of sixteen!"

Sparkle looked the page over. "Not that it matters, but it looks like you save two shots, too. This all breaks down if you're swinging your blades around, but I guess we're assuming your *soul* item wouldn't work any better so you're back to your meager STR of three?"

"Exactly. Not doing any damage in that case. Unless I was using my... shotgun... instead of the pistol. I just had a thought! I made that *ice nature* one, but never a *knockout*

nature one. I have all this time, and the ‘batteries’ I already made will be compatible. I should do that.”

“More non-lethal options are always better than less.”

“True. But back to this, you realize my higher *passive dodge* means they would have to roll a nineteen to even hit me? That’s if the amulet and my *luck materia* aren’t working. It would be twenty five otherwise.”

“Can an NPC even roll that high?” Sparkle gasped.

“Rolling maximum, maybe, with energy. Or aiming. But if they’re spending time aiming, I’m gunning them down where they stand.”

“Yeah.” She stared in silence for a bit. “Go for it, I guess?”

The only skill she didn’t have at a five was *Ranged Combat*, and once she did, she was going to carry on with *mathematics*, *martial arts*, *ranged combat*, *pistol*, and *off hand* as a *skill group*. This would of course get her *off hand* for “free” as *martial arts* cost double, somewhat negating the benefit of the *group*.

Before she got sidetracked Susan went and made another shotgun with her powers, similar to the one she had made some time ago, which shot out *knockout* energy instead of *ice*. It wasn’t as complicated because she already had three “batteries” and unloaded the *ice* one, putting its battery into the *knockout* one. Then she started getting “training” from the others so she could spend as much XP as possible during their travels. When they finally reached their destination Susan poked her head up from her training wondering just where they were, and was surprised to find them smack dab in the very place this whole thing had started: The Black Hole.

“What are we doing back here?” she asked a nearby monitor.

There was a pause.

“Andromed-”

“Mapping the-”

“Sorry go ahead-”

“You’ll have to-”

“Are you-”

“Stop!”

Susan paused.

“Thank you,” she said slowly. “Sorry, my processing power is being used by the current experiment. You’ll have to give me a little extra time.”

“I see. And what exactly is the current experiment?”

“Mapping the wave function of the universe, apparently.”

“That seems like a worthwhile thing to do?” *Why do we need a black hole for that, though?*

“It’s what the Perseid government wanted us for in order to sign the charter.”

“Always give the customer what they want!”

Andromeda grinned. “Exactly. If you can find your way to the machine shop, the action is there.”

“I resent that. I’m getting much better at getting around.”

“Teleporting doesn’t count.”

Susan stuck out her tongue.

She arrived at the machine shop with only minor detours taken, given she had been writing arrows in hidden places at frequented intersections. She could then peek under decorative bits of the hallway and read what was in each direction.

And why don’t they have signs up, anyway? This ship is huge.

She discovered Harper and the other two Perseid scientists hard at work near an eight foot tall platform like device, which Harper explained was a teleporter.

“Once it’s finished, anyway,” he put in.

“What’s wrong with it? Not that I think I can help, mind you.”

"Everything I try to teleport with it sort of explodes."

"Ah. Remind me to stick to my own methods then." *Wait, "sort of" explodes? Still, interesting to see science starting to come into the realm of powers.*

I already did that with the cybernetics though, protested The Darkness.

Like you count for anything. This is something these "more limited" minds have created.

I guess I have to give them some credit, don't I?

So she watched him fiddling with the machine for a bit, and decided the "action" here wasn't all that exciting. Harper was having his fun of "sort of" exploding melons, but Susan went in search of other excitement- Trance. Who predictably she found in the arboretum, looking as glum as she had ever been.

"Hey Trance," she called, waving. She sort of waved back, then turned back to the plant she was pruning. "You better stay here," she cautioned. "Harper is blowing up fruits down the machine shop. Probably best you not see that."

"I'll keep it in mind," Trance replied, but somewhat oddly. Susan had hoped to get at least a grin out of her, but she seemed hardly able to even find the strength to lift the small cutting sheers she had in her hand. She just continued staring at the plant that was in front of her.

"Hey, you can't tell me nothing is wrong with you. What is going on, Trance?"

"It's just that we're sitting galactic inches from one of the most dangerous and destructive forces in the universe. As one does."

Can she feel that, or something? "Yeah. It's odd, you know. Thinking that one day, the entire universe will be nothing but those things, which will also eventually evaporate into nothingness."

"Where did you get that idea?" Trance seemed a bit shocked and animated suddenly.

"From... science?"

"That would be horrible!"

"It wasn't my idea. What do you think happens?"

"Eventually everything gets pulled back together and then there's another glorious explosion of energy. A whole new universe is born, with unique people and places and things."

"I have to admit, I like your idea better."

"Naturally." She raised the sheers, but then sighed and lowered them again.

"Hey, Trance, come on. Look at me." Susan turned her to be facing her again. "Let me help you take your mind off it."

Oh, you mean in that way? The Darkness asked, somehow conveying a wiggling of eyebrows through tone alone.

Susan ignored him. "Teach me your favorite game or something. Tell me about your family." *Let me show you this Earth thing called kissing.*

Ha! I knew it!

Quiet! It just... slipped out. I didn't say it, I only thought it.

Trance stared at her for a moment. "Take me away from here."

"What?"

"Take me someplace. You can just whisk me away, right?"

"I guess. Haven't seen many places though."

"What about that beach you picked Harper up from? We could go there, right? I'd love to be on a beach right now instead of..." she shuddered, looking over at where Susan imagined the black hole would be. "Here."

"Okay."

"You mean it?" She tossed the sheers down, her face lighting up.

"Why would I lie? We can leave whenever you're ready."

"Great. I'll go put on a swimsuit and meet you in your quarters. And I'll go see if Beka wants to come too!"

"Girls night out!" *Might as well get changed myself.*

“Woo-hoo!”
There's that smile I like.

So she told Sparkle she was stepping out, offered Ifruita the chance to come with her, and got changed. (Naturally she put most of her *materia* back on the bracelet, which she set back on her arm. She had learned that lesson the hard way.) Sparkle said to have fun and went back to sleep. Ifruita looked nervous and refused, saying a beach with all those people wouldn't be the place for her.

“Okay, but you could just lie out in the sun, you wouldn't have to talk to anybody.”

“Thanks, but I'll just stay here.”

“As you wish.”

Trance, of course, was a knockout in a bathing suit, having changed into something shimmery and skimpy. Beka was in a sensible one piece, and had a bag thrown over her shoulder with at least a blanket that she could see. Susan grinned at both and opened a *Teleportal* to the beach with a flourish, then let *powers mode* go so her own suit came back.

“This is sooo much better!” cried Trance, throwing her arms in the air and standing on tiptoe with her back arched. “I owe you big time, Susan. Come on, the ocean calls to me!”

The two girls laughed and chased each other down the beach, into the surging water where they splashed each other and relaxed. Beka had just rolled her eyes and went to stake out a space with a blanket, which she promptly laid down on to catch some sun.

“Beeekaaaaa! Come swim with uuussss!” pleaded Trance, bounding up to her after probably half an hour.

“And miss the sights? I don't think so.”

“Sights?” Trance looked where she was looking, over at a spirited game of beach/net/ball played by young looking hunks wearing very little. “Oh, I see.”

“I do have to say, you were right about one thing. This is better than listening to those Perseids drone on about unlocking the secrets of the universe. I've got their secrets right here.”

“Beka, you're impossible! Have some fun.”

“Oh I am, Trance. I swear. Oh, nice hit!”

So the girls did some sunbathing, and played some netball untrained, and whatever else it is people do on beaches (the author doesn't know because he's too busy writing and working to go to any beaches for “research purposes.” Pity him) until they got hungry and Beka started packing up.

“Heading back?” Susan asked, looking for a place nearby she could use to transform.

“Nah, let's eat here,” Trance suggested. “I'm not ready to go back just yet.”

“Sounds fine to me, but do we have any local currency?” *I suppose I could turn some gold coins into something... no magic. Never mind.*

“Oh, money is easy to find,” Beka assured her with a wink. “If you know where to look.”

“Really?”

“Come on, I'll show you. Trance?”

“I know, I'm the distraction. Why am I always the distraction?”

Beka looked down at Trance's glistening, purple body. “You tell me.”

“I can't help it that I'm so cute.”

“And I can't help my quick fingers.” She shoved the bundle at Susan. “Here, put this away and follow us.”

Susan shoved the bundle into her *sub-space pocket* and hesitantly followed the pair.
What are they up to?

The three walked up the beach, looking for something, and finally Beka spotted it. “There's our mark,” she announced to Trance with a nod of the head.

“Roger!”

The pair had spotted a man in an almost business suit looking outfit, mopping his brow with a cloth. He was walking along, not paying attention to the beach, and had a medium sized case in one hand. The girls changed course to intercept him, chatting casually about nothing. When they got nearer Beka seemed to point something out to Trance off in the distance, and she shaded her eyes and looked down at it.

Susan hung back as Trance “accidentally” collided with the man, “obviously” not watching where she was going. She bounced off and fell to her butt with an “ouch!” Naturally Beka was all apologies, and the nice gentleman helped Trance up and made sure she was okay.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest thing for asking?” she said with a grin. “It was totally my fault too. I’m so sorry!” She kissed his cheek, and he was so totally forgiving it was almost vomit inducing.

The pair and the man walked on.

“I think I see a restaurant, let’s head over there,” Beka announced, pointing off in the distance.

“Did... did you...?”

“Come along,” Trance said, pulling her along. “Everything will be fine.”

The three got lost in the crowd in front of the open air restaurant and Beka made sure there was enough money in her new wallet to pay for their meal.

“You did,” hissed Susan as they were seated. “You totally stole that!”

“Borrowed,” clarified Beka. “We’ll return the wallet of course. There’s always cops around, especially when you don’t want them. We’ll simply drop it off at the nearest station and they’ll helpfully get it back to him.”

“Minus the amount of our dinner.”

“Naturally. Oh, don’t look at me like that. He was begging for it! I mean did you see what he was wearing? On a beach?”

“That doesn’t mean you should steal from him!”

“If you’re that concerned, you can just sit and watch us eat, then.” She opened her menu.

“Honestly, I can’t take you two anywhere. And you,” she said to Trance. “You went along with this?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? Beka was a smuggler before she started being all second in command or whatever aboard Andromeda.”

“Independent businesswoman,” clarified Beka.

“What she said.”

“That’s a totally different thing than what you two just did.”

“Only in scale. This guy is obviously loaded, he won’t miss it.”

“That’s not the point-”

“This is odd though.” Beka ignored her and pulled a piece of paper out of the wallet. “Here, take a look.” She handed it to Trance, who showed it to Susan. It was just squiggles to her, and she asked what it was.

“It says ‘Last warning. The money tonight or she burns.’”

“That sounds a bit ominous.”

“You’re right. You think that guy was in some kind of trouble?”

“You mean like maybe a relative of his was abducted as incentive to pay money back to some loan shark or something? But why threaten to set her in fire?”

Trance looked over at Beka. “Some local thing, you think? Ocean planet, fire is more feared? You don’t think that’s why he was wearing that getup, do you? Maybe he was going to the meeting as we speak!”

“I kinda feel bad for stealing this, now.”

“But the money must have been in the case he was carrying, there isn’t enough in the wallet for a ransom, right?”

“No, there’s not.” Beka seemed troubled. “Still, we should probably get this back to him sooner rather than later. Maybe offer to help out if we can?” She looked over at Susan with a

“you’ve told us stories about helping people out wherever you go” look. (It’s a thing, look it up.)

“You do have a heart!” Susan exclaimed. Beka’s look changed to a glare. “Guess we better find him then. Let me go see if I can find a quiet place to transform.”

No need for that, reminded The Darkness. I can give you Seer nature and a technique for a few points. You’ve been losing them lately, and that’s not good for me.

My heart bleeds for you.

Still, time is of the essence, as they say. The essence of what, I’d like to know.

So Susan went back up to thirty Darkness Points, and saw him entering a building with her LUCK check of thirteen. It seemed like some kind of nightclub, and there were tough looking men in business suits inside, sitting around tables in front of a woman singing.

A long, cool woman in a black dress.

Shouldn’t you be focusing on the poor victim of your heartless crime?

Yeah, yeah. “Got him. We just need to find out where the nearest club is...”

Their waiter was slightly put out that they had been seated and then were immediately leaving to go to a club but when he heard the description he looked grim.

“You won’t be able to get in there. It’s a private club, and rumors are it’s run by the local mob.”

The girls shared a look.

“He’s in trouble all right. We better get there fast!” Susan flipped the guy a gold coin and the trio, headed by Trance, took off toward the club.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Beka, as all three stared at the front of the club. Most people passing gave the place a wide berth, mostly because of the intimidating bouncer standing outside the door. Many people were looking at Susan funny, because she had donned her armor and wings again, not that they were unfurled or anything at the moment. But someone walking around a place like that with a feather cape and armored top is bound to get a few odd looks.

“If he was bringing the money here in that case, that means the hostage is here, too,” reasoned Trance. “Can we rescue her somehow?”

“The place isn’t that big,” noted Susan, “there’s probably only the main room I saw the guy going into. There weren’t that many goons in there, I bet we could take them.”

“Given this is very nearly beachfront property, renting a place even this size probably costs a bundle,” Trance ventured. “That’s why it’s so small.”

“Not really the point, Trance,” chided Beka. “What do you mean when you say ‘take them?’”

“I mean bust in there, shoot everybody but our guy, and save the day!”

“You can’t just shoot them!” protested Trance. “You’re the one that was chiding us for stealing a wallet-”

“I didn’t say *kill* them,” broke in Susan. “We have non-lethal guns, remember?”

“I guess that’s okay...”

“And you’ll have powers going, right?” asked Beka.

Susan’s *Overconfidence* made her wave this suggestion off. “Nah, it’ll be fine, I’m not even going to bother.”

“And this is really the best plan we can come up with?”

“Look, what are the chances more than two of those guys inside are packing?”

Beka looked at Trance.

“Pretty good, actually,” she replied.

“What? No, come on. Just stand behind me if you have to, and I can always switch if things start going badly.”

“Trance?”

“What, you don’t trust me?”

Trance looked her over, then the building. “Results mixed. Ask again later.”

“Do we walk out of here?”

She considered a few more seconds. “We all leave alive, but walking out, I don’t think so.”

“We probably teleport or something. Come on you two!”

Were Sparkle here, she would probably ask if The Darkness maybe didn’t have a hand in wanting to storm in there? But she wasn’t.

“I guess if you think it’s fine. I take it you have the pistols someplace?”

“Right here!” chirped Susan, getting them out of her *pocket*. “And here’s a shotgun for Trance.”

“I don’t really feel comfortable-”

“It’s non-lethal, honest! Easy to use, just point and shoot. You get 7 shots, always know how many shots you have left.”

“Still...”

“Just take it in case someone goes to grab you, then. You can’t go in there unarmed!”

“I can take care of myself. But fine,” she reluctantly took it. “I’ll mainly support you guys from the rear.”

“Support us? How?”

“Just listen to what she has to say,” suggested Beka, taking the other pistol. “How do I use this thing?”

Susan showed her how to change the setting, which was basically just a dial on the side, and told her she had a hundred shots so don't bother counting them.

"We're with you. Let's do this."

Yes, I finally have an adventuring party! Sort of.

After looking both ways (safety first) the three woman strode with various amounts of confidence up to the door, past the bouncer who looked at them incredulously.

"What do you ladies think you're-" He caught sight of the shotgun Trance was carrying, which was all sleek and cool looking because it was basically wished into existence with powers and could look however cool Susan wanted it to. "-think you're-" Susan brought her gun up to point at his midsection.

"We're going inside," she announced.

"Go ahead and shoot me, but you're not going inside." He put a hand on Susan's shoulder and squeezed, stepping right in front of the gun, seemingly unconcerned. Shocked, Susan looked down at the hand which seemed to have a far stronger grip than she would have said was possible. Still, she didn't have to make a check to touch the guy as he was already touching her, and with a STrength check of twenty nine to twenty three, twisted his arm around and shoved him up against the side of the building.

"We are going inside," she repeated, now bringing the gun up to the guy's head. "I don't care what kind of augments you're sporting, I'm betting your brain is still up in your head someplace. Right?"

"You ahead and shoot me, but you're not going inside," he repeated.

Susan missed a beat. "You know what? Just... just stay there, okay? Trance, if you would be so kind?"

"What do you need?" she chirped.

"Could you..." she looked from the shotgun to her gun to the guy's head. "You know..."

Trance looked confused, but then brightened, looking down at her own gun. "Oh, cover him!"

"Yes, that's it."

"You got it!" Her gun came up to point at the man, and Susan let his arm go. "You just stay right there, mister!"

"Very convincing Trance." Then to the man. "Don't let her fool you, she will shoot you if you so much as think of moving from that spot."

"I totally will!" she agreed.

"Go ahead and shoot me-"

"Yes, yes, we've heard it before. You some kind of automaton or something?"

He paused. "I resent that. I'm just stating the facts."

"Deal with it." Susan shook her head and moved to the door, looking it over. There was no handle or anything on this side, it was simply a slab of metal with a slot cut out at eye level, and a metal sliding piece behind it. She shrugged and took a step back, then kicked it for twenty six damage. It vibrated a bit, but held. "Huh."

"I told you."

"Don't do any victory dances yet." *You know, I've always wanted to try something. May as well give it a shot now.* She looked over at Trance, still blazing away to her *spirit senses* and made a *spirit manipulation* check to "hook into" her as a *ley line*.

For a wonder, it worked, with her 20 result.

"Oh now that tingles."

"What does?" asked Trance.

"If you don't know, I'm not telling you." *If you don't know, it's not causing you any discomfort. After all, I'm basically just hooking into the energy your body is getting rid of.* She turned back to the door and spent a total of 40 energy on STrength, (20 of her own, 20 of "Trance's," making her damage result this time a sixty eight. Naturally the door being essentially tank armor her unarmed attack couldn't really scratch it, but she didn't want to

destroy the door. She wanted it out of her way. And even reinforced, the frame couldn't take almost a hundred damage and it went flying.

Susan felt herself make a LUCK check, and got a twenty five, nearly her maximum. She shrugged, and stepped inside while mentally activating her *velocity* item.

The man stood there with his mouth open as other two made their way inside, and Susan looked the battlefield over as only a *Paragon* can.

There were seven tables in the place, each with a number of goons ranging from one to four. Only two had one person, and two had two people. The place was pretty dim, as there was the woman in the black dress onstage, who had been singing. Susan made a *perception check* of eleven to spot her guy, in the range of 11-14 which the table on page 59 defines as an "average challenge." Normally there would probably be a penalty of some kind for the darkness, but Susan was also getting a bonus from her *seer* nature from before, watching where the guy went when he had entered the club. So she saw him, at the rightmost table in front of the stage.

The place had gone strangely silent, and several people were standing and looking at something. Susan's gaze swept the place and realized her LUCK check earlier had been opposed by the man nearest the door, and he had rolled a fourteen. So he was currently squished underneath it. Another man was unconscious right inside the door, probably the goon assigned to look out the slot when someone knocked. *Just roll with it, I guess?*

"Don't worry, Mr. Sanches!" she called into the silence, leaping over the railing with a thirty five *jumping* check to land on the table nearest her. "We're here to help you!" She raised her gun and put four shots into the man sitting across from him, goon "eighteen."

She hit his left side primarily, but the body twice which was enough to drop him, throwing him back across his chair.

"Get her!" someone shouted, and everybody rolled *Initiative* because they now knew they were under attack.

(As a note, do you know how annoying rolling *Initiative* is for eighteen people? I do, because I did it.)

Susan, with *Velocity* active, naturally went first and figured she might as well take out the people at the table she was standing on top of at the moment. They weren't quite moving in slow motion as with the *Acceleration* spell, but her REFLEXES were currently far higher than human normal; a fourteen.

So she kicked the guy that was in front of her in the chest with a twelve, beating his eleven. She did twenty five damage to him, sending him flying, though she made sure to "choose to" do nonlethal damage. This put her up by three *delay* and she planted her left leg and did an *off leg* action, striking out at the man to her right. She got absolute garbage, a seven, and he got a fourteen to dodge. Susan spent an XP to reroll, one of the two she had received from turning in her *Extra Cash* card (when no one was looking) and then had to spend her *bonus* card because ties go to the defender. He too went flying with twenty six damage to the body. Another three *delay* for the *off leg* and to round it out she snapped her leg back down, swiveled the gun, and did a called shot, body, to the goon on her left. This was a fourteen, and she didn't even get off more than one shot before she couldn't pull the trigger anymore because he too went unconscious. Another three *delay* for that, and her action was done.

Oddly, Trance and Beka were both up, and Trance shouted to her, "he's going to try moving to the right!" Susan's back was turned so she wasn't exactly sure what she was talking about, but that's okay because Beka did, and pulled the trigger to take out the guy behind Susan who was about to try dodging away from this whatever she was who had just taken out three of his buddies. Trance's advice gave her a plus three to her action (as per the *Glimpsing* rules in the Demongate High setting, which I'm ruling is the closest thing in the rules to what Trance is capable of). This gave her a sixteen (she was a decent shot in the first place) and goon fifteen went down with body, head, and arm wounds. He wasn't too lethally wounded, Beka having no magical compulsion to stop shooting when someone was about to take lethal damage. But he would be hurting awhile after this was over.

Most of the goons now went, pulling out a variety of guns (mostly pistols but one SMG type weapon and one shotgun), knives, brass knuckles, and in one case smashing a bottle while gripping it by the neck. The most surprising thing was the singer, pulling a pair of small guns from where they were held by straps around her thighs.

This made Susan open her eyes, and her temperature started to rise.

Trance and Beka were up again (Trance was using reactive actions) so she pointed to the table two over from Susan and shouted to Beka "The two on the left of that table, shoot them now!"

Beka figured one goon getting shot was as good as another, and did as she was requested. She put two shots into the first and three into the second, and trying to follow the somewhat odd "shooting at multiple targets" rule, we'll say she gets one hit apiece on them. Neither drops, but nearly.

They were going to shoot at Susan, but both realize those shots came from someplace, and both returned fire in that direction.

"Duck right!" Trance called, again giving Beka a bonus of four (to passive dodge), so both bursts of blackened bullets bounced banally off the stairs to her left.

Susan saw the flash and made a *spirit step* check of twelve to leap from that table to the other, and with that result she stuck the landing nicely. She spent two energy to drop the delay to a one, as she didn't quite manage it instantly with that roll. Still, only goon 16 (knife goon) is currently at *segment* eleven with her, and despite his surprise at Susan now being there, went to stab her. She tried to disarm him, but missed it by two, so she didn't get to use her *riposte* skill, but the knife harmlessly bounced off her armor.

That was a *reactive action*, so Susan was still up, and decided to not change a winning strategy. She went to kick knife guy, as he was right there, and with a sixteen result he went flying. Now to her left was a guy with a shotgun, and to her right was a guy with a pistol, and she knew how gross shotguns were. She shot him first, again doing a called shot, and after two shoots and him going down, turned her attention to the guy on the right. She struck out with her right leg, getting a fifteen to his dodge of thirteen (after his penalty for being shot by Beka earlier.)

He went flying.

Goon 2, the next one up, just had the brass knuckles, so he threw his chair back and made a beeline towards Susan.

Goon 4 had pulled something from a pocket, and Trance shouted "Susan, he's throwing an explosive!" warning her.

Susan didn't want the guy behind her to be incinerated so she activated her barrier item and let it absorb the blast. It managed twenty of the twenty four, leaving four to be absorbed by her so the guy behind didn't take any. Naturally four didn't scratch her.

Goon 5, the one with the bottle, came around his table to make his way over there, and goon 11 with the shotgun figured firing at this range could potentially hit the guy behind Susan, the guy with the bottle, and the guy with the knuckles, so he decided to get closer too.

Beka saw the gun, and as she had a clear line of sight and a more accurate weapon, put five shots into him. He dropped.

Trance was holding, goon 12 flipped up the table to use as cover, thinking he was going to use his fancy robot arms to go mess up that lady's day. He was somewhat shocked when the singer shot him in the back with both guns.

Strike that- the back of the head. Both eight and nine damage shots go into his brain case by sheer luck, and his head asplode.

"Susan, dodge!" screamed Trance.

Susan now took fire from goons 9, 3, and 1, one of which is right behind her. She got a *ninjutsu* check against them all, which she couldn't put energy into, and rolled absolute garbage, her minimum. She spent her other bonus XP for a retry, getting an eight. (With a bonus of four thanks to the warning by Trance, so a total of twelve.) She is technically dodging though, so they do have to beat her *passive dodge* at the very least, and they would

up with nine, an eleven, and a twelve, respectively. As ties go to the defender, she was narrowly missed by all of them. (And if you're thinking she should take a penalty due to the number of attacks, recall that her passive dodge is a fourteen thanks to her LUCK boosting items. So they didn't even beat that, technically.)

Bottle guy went to hit her, so she tried her *Riposte* skill again, making a *parry* check against his untrained *hitting someone with the jagged edge of a bottle* technique. She beat his attack for the *parry* and the *riposte* so she sent him flying back, knocked out.

The guy with the brass knuckles watched his buddy go flying past him and wondered if he shouldn't rethink attacking this whatever this girl is. He held, looking around and spotting a gun he could grab from one of his fallen comrades. He headed for it instead, stripping off the knuckles.

"Beka, get down!" Trance cried, as the goon with the thrown explosives turned to chuck one at Beka instead of the whatever she is with the fancy shield thingy she used before. Trance grabbed her and shielded her with her own body, and Beka cried "Trance!" as the blast cleared.

The lady with the two guns figured that's about enough of that, and shot that guy before he could throw any more explosives. He was a fair distance away but she was onstage with slightly "higher ground." She took the penalty but only fired one gun, squaring up to get a better shot. She beat his passive by six and he took a few bullets and got to know them very intimately. He was dropped by the second bullet, so we won't go into detail about the other shots that hit him.

"Dodge again, Susan!" cried Trance, again correctly seeing all three with guns still going to shoot her. This time her bonus is only a plus three, making her roll a thirteen. One hits with a sixteen, but it impacts the armor.

"Trance, are you okay?" asked Beka, worried.

"I'm fine. Keep shooting! Susan is a sitting <water fowl> out there."

"Okay."

Beka and the singer then went, and as the woman wasn't shooting at them she figured she would take care of the ones to her left. She didn't have a clear shot at the guy behind Susan anyway, but the singer did. Beka got a six, and even the unluckiest fellow in the world could beat that on *passive dodge*, so those shots were wasted. The singer got an eleven and goon 9 went down with a few holes he hadn't counted on getting that day. Both in his expensive suit he had acquired recently, and the one he hadn't been born with.

Goons one and three now realized they were the only ones left in the club, and made RESolve checks to continue the fight. One got a fifteen, three got a seven, so while one flipped the table for some cover, three started running towards the back where there was an emergency exit.

Goon two now had a gun in his hand, and took some shots at Susan who was quite frankly tired of trying to dodge at this point because her *delay* kept going up and she wasn't getting to do anything else. So she used her *reactive action* this time to just rush the guy and took the bullets as they came. This naturally freaked the goon out, and his aim was so unsteady he only got an eight, meaning her unaugmented *passive dodge* would have been enough.

Beka shot at goon 1, crouching behind cover, and had to make a called shot to the head as that's all she could now see. (And her gun wouldn't have done much damage to the table, being on the non-lethal setting at the moment.) With the cover bonus she needed to roll a sixteen, but got an eleven, so the energy packets went wide.

The singer went at the same time, taking a step to the right and putting some shots into goon two, hoping she didn't hit Susan by accident. He dropped, of course, leaving only one real combatant.

"Thanks!" Susan shouted to her.

"Sure thing!" the singer shouted back.

"Watch out!" Trance called to Beka, shoving her. This gave her just enough of a boost to her *passive dodge* that goon 1 missed, and he glared at Trance, who looked innocent back at him.

Susan finally got to do something again, so she raised her gun and put some shots into the guy hiding behind the table. She had a mostly clear shot, as the table was facing Beka, not her. She got an eighteen to hit, and even without a called shot he went down in a heap.

The combat mostly over, Susan shot goon 1 before he could reach the exit and he too went sleepy nap time.

Susan then intended to see who this woman was that had helped her, but realized a large shape was rising from the center table.

"Very impressive," said the figure, looking about the room. "All my boys, gunned down just like that. The police would send a whole squad, but you've come with only two others. Who are you?"

Where in the world did he come from? Susan looked the figure over and was startled to see no health information above the man's head. *Boss type? Here? Or is that...* She did a quick *Dimension Sense* but no, he belonged here. There was only one explanation- *No wonder I didn't think he was here, I don't sense any energy coming from him. Odd. And he's wearing those dark clothes, I just looked right past him. Am I coming to rely more on spirit sense than my own eyes? I hope not. And how did he get so big?*

Susan didn't get a chance to answer as from the state the woman cried "Jeremy Calorkian, you are under arrest!" She was holding up a badge from somewhere.

The man chuckled. "Oh, am I now?"

"Wait, you're a cop?" Susan asked. "Look, I'll keep this guy busy, you go look for a hostage downstairs or somewhere around here, anyway!"

"Hostage?" Both the man and the officer seemed surprised.

"Yes, hostage! That guy had a note in his wallet," she pointed to goon 17, cowering under the table now, "about bringing the money tonight 'or she burns.' He has the money in that case there!"

"No," said the officer, "he has a set of stolen prototype cybernetic eyes meant for military cyborgs. At least that's what usually passes through this 'club.'"

"What?"

"Yes," sighed the man. "They were meant for me. I will still have them though, after I take my revenge upon you for disrupting my operations here."

"So, wait, you're not the victim here?" Susan asked the goon. "So what was that note about?"

"Note? Oh, the one in the wallet you stole when that purple chick was rubbing herself against me?"

"I didn't," protested Trance. "It was more of a light brushing, if anything."

"Yes, let's leave that aside for a moment. The note?"

"I was dropping it off tomorrow." He came out from under the table as the shooting had stopped. "We've been trying to get our money back from this guy that owes us. Figured burning his boat to the ground might motivate him."

The girls shared a look. "Why don't you just buy the boat legally from him for some ridiculously low price, then sell it for a profit, getting your money that way?" Trance asked innocently.

"Oh. Never thought of that."

"Never thought of-" Susan gave a horse cry of frustration, raised her gun and put some shots into him. He dropped where he stood.

"That wasn't polite," observed the big guy.

Susan leveled the gun at him instead. "Oh, but threatening to burn someone's boat? That's polite?"

"That's just business," he explained.

"And installing stolen cyber eyes?" asked the officer, still also covering the man.

"That's just common sense. Are we done talking? I'd like to get my revenge started before I rust on the spot."

"Be careful," said the officer. "He's the most dangerous cyborg we've ever had on our watch lists. Backup is on the way, just keep him busy!"

"Keep me busy," chuckled the man, shrugging off his shirt and revealing two- no *four* massive cybernetic arms. "That's a good one." From his upper arms unfolded two wicked looking blades which clicked into place. His lower two arms just seemed to end in razor sharp claws. "They'll be dead before another minutes goes by. Then you'll be next, little cop."

Susan smirked at him, tossing her gun over to Beka, who caught it and put it into her other hand. "If he starts to win, shoot him." She looked the cyborg over. "Better change the setting first."

"You're giving up or something?" The cyborg smashed the table out of the way.

"Because that isn't going to save you."

"Come at me, bro," she replied, activating her energy blade at TR 8. *I doubt even TR 5 would scratch this guy, he looks armored.*

The two came together and started circling, Susan rolling *Initiative* against this...

"You know, I've made a vow never to harm any living thing. That gun I was using? Non-lethal."

"That won't save you either, even if I believed you."

"Not why I mentioned it. You want to know the reason? I'm pretty sure I can tear you apart, because I see you more as an object than something that's still alive."

A look of utter fury crossed the man's face. "Defend yourself!"

The boss fight was on!

Feelings, Nothing More Than Feelings.

When: No time has passed

Where: Gangster club, about to fight the boss cyborg

Touched a nerve, have we? thought Susan, as the cyborg rushed her. *Or I suppose in his case it might be a circuit?*

Susan thrust her sword towards the hulking form of the cyborg, making a called shot to the body. I mean it was big enough, why not? This was easily deflected by the blade on the cyborg's right arm, and Susan made a *close combat* check to see if she could tell what his *delay* now was. He was going to get the next attack in, a fact that didn't surprise her, so she knocked his blade away, or at least she tried to. He got through by eight so the armor didn't take it, and she took one damage to the body.

That's going to be a problem. For one he has longer reach than I do, and two, it seems he's better than I am with a sword.

I don't mind giving you Invulnerability for twenty XP.

Or you could just support the powered version for a bit and I gain a few darkness points.

I suppose there is that.

We'll see how it goes. I wasn't spending energy, and I still have half, so it should be fine.

If you say so. I have a feeling he's just getting a sense of your capabilities.

Oh?

Yeah, he didn't attack with his other arms.

Susan had to admit it had a point, and decided maybe those arms should go? She did a called shot to his lower left one, putting in energy this time. Again she was easily parried.

What the heck is his COOrdination? I rolled a seventeen that time!

Oh, you want that Chaos spell again? Glad to help!

I was just curious, it doesn't matter that much.

Susan then made another *close combat* check, getting a seventeen to his nineteen, so she didn't know what his *delay* was. So they acted at the same time, Susan doing a called shot to the same lower left arm, while her cyborg opponent simply tried slashing her again.

She did sixteen damage to the arm, while he did another one to the body.

This repeated itself, as they were now in sync. She was now 1/3 into *gone* and his arm hung limply. Susan was now at a penalty to everything as well. The cyborg decided to stop playing around and slashed with his other arm, which she tried to parry, again with energy. Ties go to the defender, she blocked it and tried a *riposte* with another, greater, burst of energy. She got a thirty to hit him in the body, and did eighteen to him. (After he divided it in half for being big, of course.)

Great. Wish I could see how much of his total that actually was!

At this point he just tried to grab her with all three arms, forcing her to dodge back out of the way. Because of the penalty for trying to dodge three things at once (and her injury), he got hold of her. They went at the same time again so Susan, hoping to press her advantage, simply jammed her energy blade into the cyborg's body instead of making any *wrestling* checks. He wasn't dodging, he was going to try lifting and smashing her into the floor, so his total damage was now thirty four, and he was two into *gone*.

"Im...poss...ible..." he croaked as he slumped to the ground, the blade sticking out the back of his chest. Susan gave him a shove, yanking it out and spinning it with a flourish. She pointed it at him in case this was some kind of ruse, but the cyborg lay still.

"What is that blade?" demanded the officer, hopping down from the stage. "We've hardly been able to scratch that guy he's so armored!"

"Oh, you know, a little of this and a little of that," Susan hedged.

"Sirens," warned Trance. "If we don't want to answer a million questions about all this, we better go now."

"That's probably for the best," agreed Susan, opening her hand and making the sword vanish.

"You people aren't going anywhere!" insisted the officer. "You burst in, disrupt my undercover operation, shoot the place up, take out Jeremy in *single combat*- you've got a lot to answer for."

"Yeaaaaah. No."

Teleportal?

Susan mentally sighed. *Another five points?*

You could use Teleport but if the ship is moving, you risk getting slammed into the wall. Or if it isn't, are you are, or if it's moving in the other direction-

I get the point! Fine, let me have it.

Your wish is my command.

The *teleportal* that opened seemed to have a black edge, but it did show Susan's room aboard the Andromeda, and all three ladies jumped through as the officer gaped at it.

"Wait! You can't just leave!" She stood in front of it as it was shrinking. "I mean just this hole in the air is impossible! How am I going to explain all this to my superiors?"

"Lies and trickery?" suggested Susan.

"Take the credit and retire?" suggested Beka.

"The actual truth?" suggested Trance. Everyone looked over at her. "What?"

"Sorry!" Susan managed as the portal closed.

Susan pulled off the armor and dropped to her bed with a sigh. A quick application of the healing knife and her wound was gone, and Trance handed her a wet cloth to wash the blood off.

"So that didn't go according to plan," mused Beka. "Oh, and here's your guns back."

"Here's the shotgun."

"Thanks. Just put them over there for now." She vaguely gestured at the edge of the bed.

"I feel kinda bad," put in Trance.

"Bad?"

"You two did sort of shoot the place up. And that officer may have been gathering evidence and playing a longer game that we just disrupted. It could have cost them months or years of work!"

"I admit," agreed Susan, "I was expecting to reunite two lovers, or in the case of a brother/sister or father/daughter combo, at least some gratitude on the part of the female and possibly available and undoubtedly grateful kidnappie. I didn't even get to try exotic beach food."

"Wait, is that a word?"

"I just said it, didn't I? You understood what I meant, it's a word."

"Still," Beka said with a grin. "We did sort of shoot the place up. And with only a scratch to show for it. You're pretty good!"

"I'm average, at best. That fight with the cyborg proved that. I've relied on my magic and powers too much, I didn't realize how much until just now." *I'm down to less than thirty energy. If I hadn't been getting double because of hooking into Trance beforehand, that would have gone very differently. Or if I hadn't had the Soul item, or my increased REFlexes.* She blinked. *I really have been relying on various external powers, haven't I?*

"Please. I'm average, I don't know what you are. I couldn't have taken that cyborg. Speaking of things I don't know, what was that you were doing, Trance?"

"What was what?" she asked innocently.

"I see now what you meant by supporting us. You almost seemed to know the future, the way you were shouting commands to us."

"No, just looking the battlefield over and thinking about what might happen next, that's all. You can see stuff like that, if you're not actually doing any shooting. Honest!"

"Sure, sure. Anyway, I'm glad you're on our side."

She smiled. "Naturally!"

Hologram Rommie appeared in the room. "Hey, you're back! You missed a bit of an adventure."

"We had our own. Trade you stories!" Trance said quickly to try and get off the subject, perhaps?

"Deal. But go see Harper and the others, they'll want to tell it."

"Okay. Let me throw a shirt on."

-Meanwhile, back at the beach planet-

A squad of officers stand in a now brightly lit nightclub, attending to the wounded and putting those they find knocked out in handcuffs. A senior officer stands with the woman in the black dress over the somewhat swiftly repairing itself Jeremy.

"And you say this woman just busted in, shot the place up, took out Jeremy here, and then left through a hole in the air?"

"That's right sir."

"Took out Jeremy with some kind of energy weapon?"

"A sword, yes."

"A sword. Which vanished afterwards."

"Yes sir."

"And the three disappeared into literal thin air."

"Yes sir. It was like a hole, it led into a room of some kind. I saw a bed."

"A bedroom? Odd choice. If I hadn't seen the results for myself I wouldn't have believed a word of your story. But if you say it was a bedroom... And these wounded?"

"Those were me, sir. Apparently the three that barged in here didn't want to actually kill anyone. Thought they were rescuing someone. Their weapons simply stunned, somehow."

Another officer stepped up to the pair. "Sir, I just got done talking to the bouncer. He says he saw the whole thing, but he's got to be making it up." He laughed nervously. "I mean the stuff he just told me, it's obviously a fabrication of some kind. I think we should take him in, get the real story out of him."

"No George, I think he is probably telling the truth." He turned back to the woman. "You realize what this means?"

"I'm not sure."

"We've been trying to take this gang down for years. But every time we take this guy on, good officers get hurt or worse. Then he escapes. But now?" He looked around the place. "Clear evidence of multiple crimes going on at this location, your intel, and he's been subdued without us having to lift a finger."

"I think his self-repair systems are about done with that hole in his chest, sir." She took a step back.

"Get that heavy restraint gear in here," the man shouted. "You want this walking tank up and about, do you?" He turned back to the woman. "Best. Day. Ever."

They both grinned like maniacs.

-Back with the ship-

"So let me see if I understand this. You got the equipment working and managed to teleport something. A fruit."

"That's right."

"After destroying one of *my* plants," fumed Trance.

"Hey, I said I was sorry! I thought it would work."

Susan went on. "Then you started to get a signal, from a *black hole* I remind you, that originated three hundred years in the past."

"Also correct."

"You then managed to rig the device to beam our heroic captain to the bridge of the other ship, *through time*, and it actually worked."

"I am a suuuper genius!"

"Then both ships got attacked in both times, simultaneously, and you Ifruita had to go and take care of the one here, while Dylan fought off the one in the past?"

"I'm sorry to have broken your prohibition on killing, master." Ifruita hung her head.

"No, no, it sounds like you did the right thing. I wasn't around, you needed to defend the ship. Seems reasonable."

"Thank you, master."

"Those in the past couldn't try again to rescue the Andromeda, but their efforts made it possible for Beka to come later and get the ship out."

"So it seems," answered Rommie.

"Then you tried to bring back the person Dylan went there for in the first place, his fiancé. But even with the signal booster there was too much data and you couldn't."

"It's a work in progress, and I was under a lot of stress."

"I'm not blaming you. I just have to ask, why didn't you just send the booster *instead* of our intrepid captain? Wouldn't that have been far safer? One inanimate object and she decides to take the risk, meaning one living thing through time instead of a total of three. Or just get them back here one at a time instead of both at once. That also would have solved the problem."

Harper went a bit pale, and Dylan crossly looked over at him.

"Yes, Harper, why didn't you suggest either of those things? If you're so smart, I mean."

"You're the captain, I was just... uh, following your... gotta go!"

He took off running down the corridor, and Dylan followed him shouting "Get back here, Harper! I want an explanation!"

"Well," said Rommie. "Seems things are pretty much back to normal around here. Did I hear you guys say you missed dinner? I can whip you something up, if you want."

"Sounds good," said Beka. "But first I want a drink."

"I know how you feel," grumped Susan, wondering if she could trust herself enough that getting inebriated wouldn't let The Darkness take her over.

"I *wish* I could get drunk," lamented Trance. "I've wished that so many times."

And so the Andromeda made its way back to the Xinti system to drop off the scientists and equipment and enormous quantities of data that had been gathered so one day, perhaps, the teleport system could be perfected and mass produced.

Meanwhile, with the cybernetics now in place, Harper came to see Susan.

"You're the closest thing I have to a trainer that might understand how to use this system," he explained, when asked what he thought she could provide.

"Harper, my powers are either innate, in the case of magic meaning they are part of my very soul. I then, through studying and visualizing spell formula, call forth magical effects. Or they are gained through my sailor guardian transformation, in which case I simply choose which powers to take when I transform, and just kind of make up any techniques on the fly that I need that deal with the *natures* I've chosen. Powers like *teleportal* just sort of happen by me willing it. This cybernetic stuff is your department, it isn't like anything I've got."

"So you're saying you can't help at all."

"Pretty much. I'm happy to be a 'target' though Ifruita would probably be the better choice there. Once she gets hit with that energy bolt, or touches the shield you can now create, she'll have a much better understanding of what they are. But as to activating them? Aiming? Additional things you might be able to do? I can't sense it because it's not a power, like my stuff. It's all that circuitry running through your body, and figuring out how to activate it. You're just going to have to try a bunch of stuff until you stumble upon the thought pattern that produces a result."

"How am I supposed to do that? Just stand there and wish for it?"

"Well," she drawled, a gleam in her eye. "Now there I could maybe help you. Come along, Ifruita."

"Yes, master."

So Susan transformed, taking *knockout* and of course the various energy based powers she could, and had Harper stand in the middle of an unused cargo bay. And *healing*, which was going to be needed she was sure.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Now? Ifurita and I are going to start shooting at you.”

“Wait, what?”

“We’ll use minimal power, but it’ll still hurt if you get hit. Your job is to shield yourself, or defend yourself, using energy stuff. Ready?”

“No!”

“Great. Ifurita, as you will.”

“Yes, master.” She raised her staff.

“Wait!”

“Not listening! *Knockout needles!*”

“Ow!”

“Did I say you could try dodging? *Knockout Needles!*”

So Ifurita and Susan blasted away, and healed him (every so often) until in desperation, Harper managed to get up a glowing green barrier to knock their bolts aside. It wasn’t very stable, and most stuff got right through it, but Ifurita was able to touch it and create one of her own.

“So what is it?” he asked, looking hers over.

“A literal conversion of the body’s energy into a tangible manifestation,” she explained.

Susan nodded. “That’s why they didn’t just kill their victims, they really were draining their energy. This further powered their abilities. Great.”

“So you mean like my soul?” Harper looked horrified.

“No. I do not have what you would term a soul,” explained Ifurita. “Yet I can do this because my body can analyze and adapt to how you use the energy inside you. I still have an internal energy, the same as you do. So it cannot be the soul.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Try making the barrier a few more times, and we’ll try letting you suck energy out of us,” Susan suggested. “I think I’ll punch you in the face until you manage it, how would that-no?”

“Not the face! Not the face!”

“Very well. I’ll try to come up with some other motivation.” She grinned.

So Harper figured out the energy stealing component and the beam component of his new powers, and thus Ifurita figured them out. She pondered for a bit.

“I think you might be able to heal injuries instead of simply transferring energy,” she reasoned. “Even strengthen your own body, or go longer without sleep. I couldn’t do these things unless you could somehow do them to me first, but anything you can conceivably do with life energy, you should try it.”

“I guess I’ve got some work to do.”

“Indeed you do, Mr. Harper,” said Dylan, and Harper jumped. “It seems your reckless behavior may pay off, in the end.”

“I knew what I was doing, boss.”

“Did you? Did you really? We have a week of travel ahead, so keep practicing. I’ll want a full report on what you think these augmented Magog could be capable of. And to see just how good a barrier can be created. Can this beam cut through metal? Can a person be killed by draining their energy?” He smacked Harper on the back. “You’ve got a lot of work ahead.”

“But... machine shop!”

Susan got her *Ranged Combat* skill up to a five, and was able to now shift that into a *skill group* along with *mathematics* and the other skills she would need to create *gun fu*.

And here’s me with only half the XP I need to even begin learning the skill. I need to have a ton of adventures in the next eleven months. Not much to cannibalize either, unless I want to start taking my 10s skills down. Maybe my adaptive skill? I don’t know.

But the trip through the slipstream was uneventful, and the two scientists, once back on their home world, gave their full support to the Commonwealth charter. Naturally they also had Harper demonstrate what he had figured out about the *Lifestreamer* cybernetics, the name they had agreed upon once Susan had explained to them about Cloud's world.

"After all, it has to do with life energy, right? It's streaming out of your hands, so the name makes perfect sense."

This data resulted in a great feedback loop, with them able to study what parts of the cybernetics activated when he did various things. Certain parts were still a mystery, leading them all to believe there was more he could do, if he could figure out how. But with at least some idea now of what did what, they promised to keep looking into it and report any new ideas they had about his further capabilities.

The Andromeda crew finally had the legal backing to start piecing civilization back together, and charted out a course to find friendly worlds to welcome back into the light of peace and togetherness.

Naturally all were more than willing to just sign right back up...

Well, apart from the one...

Liberation Army- of Three

Where: In orbit around the world of Arazia

When: Day 72

“He’s been missing how long?” asked Susan, figuring she must be getting some incorrect translation or something.

“Since he went into the counselor's chambers,” replied Rommie. “That was yesterday.”

On the bridge were Sparkle, Ifurita, Beka, Trance, and Rev, who all shared a look. (It was a big one, they could all share don’t worry.) Susan put a hand to her forehead. “And you didn’t inform us earlier why?”

“The Arazians value their privacy. You’ve seen those odd all-encompassing clothes they wear.”

Yeah, no wonder the population is down, put in The Darkness. If you can’t even see the face of the person you’re talking to, how do you know who is hot or not?

On the flip side, getting to know someone without physical attractiveness getting in the way could be a refreshing change.

You’re not serious?

I didn’t mean for me. Skin, skin, and more skin is all the rage where I’m concerned.

Ah, thank you for clarifying.

“Yes, I have. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“I just figured the building was shielded, and he would come out when the conference was done. But it’s been too long, I’m feeling worried. And you were asleep for at least some of that time.”

This much, at least, was true. Susan had just gotten up a while ago, and had been finishing her breakfast when Rommie called them up the bridge to tell them this.

“I’ll call down to the surface, see if I can get a status update,” announced Beka, and got patched into the Counselor Minn’s office.

She got nowhere.

“Excellent *bureaucracy* check,” teased Susan. “Or wait, what’s the opposite of that?”

“You think you could do better?”

“Undoubtedly. Sparkle, we’re switching.”

She sat up and stretched. “Go for it.”

“Light of the multiverse, *make up!*”

Susan’s current powers

Energy Regeneration	(2)
Energy Well	(5)
Invulnerability	(2)
Nature Seer	(2)
Nature Force	(2)
Nature Knockout	(2)
Nature Time	(2)
Speed	(3)
Sudden Step	(1)
Teleportal	(5)

Sparkle’s Current Powers

Energy Regeneration	(2)
Flight	(2)
Invulnerability	(2)
Nature Knockout	(2)
Nature Dimension	(2)
Speed	(2)
State Change	(4)
Sudden Step	(1)
Unseen	(1)

Susan gestured into the air, saying “*View Portal*” and before her a window opened onto a very strange scene. Dylan seemed to be fighting some sort of large, hairy alien as people around him shouted and goaded the two on.

“What is he doing?” asked Trance. “That doesn’t look like diplomacy to me.”

“Indeed, that represents the ultimate in low bureaucracy checks. Oh, nice *unarmed* check, oh, he shrugged it off well, stupid non-lethal damage when hitting with fists.”

“Cousin of yours?” Beka asked Rev. “He does look pretty tough.”

"I have several brothers and sisters," explained Rev, "but apart from that we Magog don't tend to consider other family."

Susan sighed. "Better go get him before he hurts himself. Wait here." The *view portal* winked out and a *teleportal* took the place of it. "Coming, ladies?" she asked her two companions.

"If you think you need me, master."

"Always nice to have you along, you know that."

Sparkle hovered over and stuck her head through. "Pretty far off the ground."

"You know me," Susan said with a wink, "I love to make an entrance." She pulled her gun from the left holster and dove through the hole, activating her wings before she fell too far.

"Let's go," Sparkle said to Ifruita, and both followed her through.

Most in this dry, brown place were focused on the fight going on between Dylan and Xax, so no one raised much of a cry as she hovered there getting a clear shot. When she had it, she let four shots go, getting her maximum, a nineteen. (After the single penalty for the called shot to the body) Even if this alien had a ten CONstitution, it couldn't take the damage caused by Susan's shots, and it went down in a heap.

Everyone looked up at where the fire came from, and saw Susan hovering there, wings gently beating the air, while nearby Ifruita hovered, supported by nothing.

They looked back at Xax.

They looked back up at her, still pointing a gun in their general direction.

They decided, collectively, to panic.

They hadn't really gotten very far into it when a voice rang out over the yard. "Weapons fire detected! Beginning automatic response program."

Several turrets swung into action, reorienting from pointing at the yard to pointing at the sky, and Susan made a show of yawning as they bounced off her *invulnerability*. A greenish barrier had sprung up around Ifruita, and energy bolts were bouncing off it, as well.

"Are you just going to stand there?" asked Sparkle. "Or hover, as the case may be?"

"I just wondered if they would get smart and stop shooting or not."

"Apparently not."

"Sadly, you seem to be right." Susan gathered energy for one action, causing a force manifestation to spring up around her. She leveled her right hand at the nearest one. "*Force Burst*." She did a total of nineteen damage, which was about half the thing's *DC*. It kept shooting. "Interesting." Susan then modified the dial on her weapon to the maximum *OTR* the pistol could deliver, and turned in place, targeting another one. She put four shots into it, doing twenty two damage, and Susan looked back and forth between them.

"Is something wrong, master?" asked Ifruita.

"Wrong? Not exactly. I just wondered if there would be a big difference, and I suppose there is. One took a bunch of energy, the other did not." *Can I get Gun Fu against something that's just sitting there? How would my delay go if I was just pulling the trigger to destroy something like this?*

"But you can't destroy a whole planet with that tiny gun," observed Sparkle. "And *force* nature is the least adaptable. Try *transition* for once, and just turn them into glass. The next shot would shatter them."

"True, I am sort of single minded about it, and I have all sorts of *natures* to choose from. Plus I can scale techniques up by *overcharging* them. And this hardly does any damage at lower settings." She tilted the gun and looked over at it. "Of course, I could have had two guns, and probably destroyed it that way."

"Think about that later, you know how loud those things are?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, didn't realize. *Slash-all*." With that, Susan gathered her maximum energy and looked around at the parameter guns, thinking about hitting them all. "*Force Eruption!*" This did a total of thirty one damage to all of them, taking out the two that had been previously damaged, but leaving four still firing. "Oh come on, I don't believe this! Just take them out one at a time I guess." She activated a force *weapon* after shoving her pistol back in

the holster, and smashed the nearest working one. Ifruita and Sparkle used whatever means they had to take out two more. Susan then took out the last, and flew back to them looking annoyed.

"Now I just look stupid," she complained, letting the *weapon* go.

"I don't really think anyone is paying attention," Sparkle observed, looking down at the panicked crowd scrambling every which way.

"What was your purpose in doing that?"

"Like I said, see exactly what technique was the most effective. Even just hitting those things with a blade the size of my freaking body took two hits. What the heck?"

"I think they were armored, master."

"Still... I guess you're right, Sparkle. Maybe I should try *acid* or something next time. A technique to create an acid cloud would have eaten them away pretty quickly."

"Uh, I think Dylan is trying to get our attention," remarked Sparkle.

"What? Oh!" Susan looked down and she was right, Dylan was below them waving his arms around like a crazy person.

You didn't forget why you came here, did you?

I just got caught up in the moment. There was an opportunity to test some things, I took it.

Valuable info for me. The things you're most annoyed with at the moment are large, skillful, and have a high DTR. Good to know.

Susan rolled her eyes and redirected her gravity system to below her, landing and straightening up, then folding her wings.

"What kept you?" Dylan asked snarkily.

"I came as soon as Andromeda told me you were missing, if you must know. Talk to her about lowering her alert thresholds or whatever." She looked around. "Where are we, anyway? Ah, doesn't matter. Where's Rommie so we can blow this joint?"

"We can't leave, we have to do something about all this!"

"All what?"

"This prison planet. People just get shipped here on a whim, like I did!"

"Wait, prison *planet*? We're not on the same world? Andromeda isn't in orbit right now?" She looked up, then realized how silly that would be even if the ship had been up there someplace.

"You didn't realize I had been shipped off world?"

Susan looked over at Sparkle, still hovering at eye level. "You know, you would think a giant warship like Andromeda would be able to tell if bits of herself, and her captain, had been snuck out under her nose to wind up on a completely different world."

"You would think."

"All right, recriminate later. Find Rommie now."

"You're not going anywhere, prisoners," said the grey skinned, bald, odd sounding man that stepped up next to them. He was brandishing a rifle of some kind and had two helmeted goons with him, also holding rifles. "You've only been here a half hour and already you're causing trouble, prisoner? I don't think you realize how things-" He caught sight of the others. "You are not registered prisoners. Who are you? How did you get here?"

Susan ignored the question. "I suppose this is part of what we have to take care of?" she asked Dylan.

"He's just a symptom, not the cause."

"Still, easiest to take care of the problem that's right in front of you, right?" She opened a *teleportal* directly behind herself, that opened just behind and to the right of the two androids in helmets. All three trained their guns on the hole which started shrinking, and Susan simply turned and moved directly behind them. Grabbing their helmets she smashed the two together with a STrength check of thirty, (they resisted with a sixteen and a twenty) and did thirty nine damage to each. Both collapsed in a sizzle of sparks and random electrical discharges.

Everyone present gasped. Sparkle even started to say "How did you-"

"What? They had no health information, they weren't alive." *Doesn't even look like they had faces, the "helmets" were their heads.*

The one with the gray skin didn't process this information for long, just seeing the now shrinking doorway in both places was enough to allow him to realize what had just happened. Of course he did not know how such a thing was possible, but it explained how they were there. He was programmed to deal with infractions, he would deal with this one. He fired at Susan, seeing she was some kind of augmented human to be able to do that to his lesser avatars.

Susan, of course, ignored it, and made a *disarm* check, getting a twenty, near her maximum. (After six energy spent.) With only a seventeen to dodge, Susan got hold of the gun and made her STRength check to yank it away from him. (The rules say it's a STRength check the by target against the initial roll, but wrestling checks are touch, then second check. Why does this work differently? She touches the gun, then tries to get it away from him, with opposed STRength checks. Odd. That's how this is going to work.)

Eh, didn't matter, he only got an eighteen on his STRength check (Assuming 10 STR, I mean why would you build a weak/slow/stupid android prison guard? All its stats would be 10s, right?) to resist, and Susan reversed the gun, pointing it at him.

"Destroy this avatar if you must, there are many more of me," it said, unconcerned.

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Never been part of a jailbreak before, what is standard procedure at this point? Make our demands? But to whom?"

"Let's just get all the defenses turned off," reasoned Dylan. "Hey warden, where's Rommie?"

And so they found her, easily pulled her out of the cage the warden had stuffed her in, and found her some clothes to wear. Not that Susan looked all that hard, the sheer fabric of the "outfit" she had been wearing showed just about every curve she had perfectly. Susan pouted a little as it was replaced by more sensible raiments.

"Why did he put you in that?" she asked as Rommie was changing, hoping to at least pause the process as long as she could.

"I really have no idea." She continued changing, as talking and doing something else was not hard for her. Susan resisted the urge to pout. "It wasn't like he was getting off on it, though I suppose he could have been programmed to find that look 'attractive.' But wheeling me out like that would have caused him more problems, not less. Who can say?"

"Anyway, Dylan was going on about you taking this place offline, think you can handle it?"

"I suppose. I just hope he realizes even if I do, nothing is going to change."

"What do you mean, nothing is going to change?" he asked when they went back out of the command compound. "You found a low altitude missile network and disabled it, and now these people are free. Ships can come and go, maybe this can turn into a good place to live instead of just a 'correctional facility.'"

"But the second our back is turned, a squad of soldiers is going to land, march in here, and put the system in place again. You haven't changed the fact that, according to the government that stuck them here, these people are all criminals. It's a prison break, but where can they go? You want to bring them all aboard me? Ferry them someplace else? That just removes any resistance for when the next batch shows up."

"There's a whole planet full of people here," cautioned the lady that had gotten everyone under control again when the warden was overpowered. "You can't move us all. And more will come, believe me."

"I suggest you simply leave and let me go back to doing my job," suggested the warden.

"You don't get a vote," Dylan snapped. He turned to Susan. "What if we just go back to Arazia again, you can come with me this time, and-"

"And what? I can't whack them in the head with the Commonwealth charter and make them sign it. The whole point has to be planets coming together for their own common good. If a world thinks they're better off without you, that has not be their choice. Otherwise, you're no different than him." She indicated the android. "You can't use force to get what you want."

"Since when?" asked Sparkle.

"I'm not talking about me," Susan clarified. "I'm talking about them."

"Oh, I see."

"If you don't found the new Commonwealth in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding, it'll fall apart as member worlds either ignore the rules, or out and out game the system."

"So we should just leave these people? What if the government just bombs the place to ashes rather than retake it?"

"Then they would be sacrificing a lot of expensive infrastructure and firepower. Wait a second!" She snapped her fingers. "Why not have *them* sign the treaty?"

"What?" asked everyone there.

"Yeah. Look, are all the compounds like this one?" she asked the warden.

"Mostly identical, why?"

"Nice. Let's just broadcast what's happened to everyone on the planet, and they can take a vote. If the entire planet is involved, that's government. And if the governing body of the place votes to become part of the Commonwealth, boom! The member worlds already signed up have to come to defend it, that's in the charter. So station a bunch of ships in orbit in case some 'aggressor' comes to retake the place, and provide these *refuges* the help they need to actually start their own civilization. With actual protection in place, and telling the Arazianians about it, they'll probably write the place off as a loss and maybe think twice the next time you come asking about a peaceful transition back to galactic governance."

Dylan's eyes were getting wider and wider as Susan talked, and he finally broke out into a wide grin. "I like it. I *really* like it. A lot. How about it, Kay-Lee, want to run for the position of this planet's first president?"

"President? That has a nice ring to it."

"These people cannot govern themselves," protested the warden. "They're inferior. Criminals. Hardly even people."

"You don't get a vote," reiterated Kay-Lee. "But we do. All right, let's try this crazy plan of yours. What did you say your name was?"

"Susan. Nice to meet you, presidential hopeful Kay-Lee." They shook hands with a grin.

And so Rommie was put back aboard ship so the others knew where to go, and Harper came to the planet instead to help reprogram the warden system. That done the newly "upgraded" wardens gathered the people from all the separate "colonies" and told them what had happened. Basically it was vote for Kay-Lee to become president and sign the Commonwealth charter, or take their chances when the Arazian government got around to retaking the place. She would be president for a year, giving them time to get on their feet, and then step down so a real election could be held. Any other form of local governance, and any laws outside the charter, could be taken up once they all had enough to eat. (And whatnot)

They set up ballot boxes, and as the "inmates" knew a good deal when they heard one, voted to join the Commonwealth and maybe not go hungry for another day. Turned out the soil was pretty rotten there, so along with relief supplies, various environmental experts were shipped in to take a look and see what could be done.

This all took several days, but with Susan's ability to create *teleportals* between the various camps, and use a technique to permanently fix them in place, the population got together and the beginnings of an economy, government, and actual society could be seen. The Arazia government was informed that big space "keep out" signs had been posted, and ships both mercenary and official were stationed to keep the peace, provide aid, and watch for incoming hostile forces.

From the observation deck of the Andromeda, Susan surveyed the planet turning below.

"One day, everything the light touches will be yours," she joked to Sparkle.

"What, half the planet at a time? Do I have to actually follow the sun, or can I rent a place in the slums when it's nighttime?"

“I’m sure someone will give you a good deal, as long as you keep the rat population down.”

They laughed. “That was a pretty good idea you had back there.”

“It was, wasn’t it? Just sort of came to me. Of course, we can’t just liberate all the prison worlds like this.”

Sparkle nodded. “Right now they’re a drain on resources, where we need planets that can actually make fighting ships. But someday…”

“Someday, their prince will come. With the threat of The Darkness gone, and tens of thousands of worlds in the Commonwealth, Arazia will have no choice but to join or lose world after world on days just like that one.”

“Indeed. It may take a generation or two, but even if no one else does, eventually those people down there will build slipstream ships, and liberate their sister worlds.”

“Who will then build ships, and liberate more.”

“It’s a nice thought, isn’t it?”

“Very nice. Guess you can do something right every once in a while.”

“Hey!”

“We’re moving out,” Beka’s voice rang through the ship. “Slipstream in one hour.”

“On to the next world!”

Susan continued her training as the Andromeda sped towards the next world they wanted to sign the charter, but Sparkle felt something was up with Susan. She caught her looking at a piece of paper one night before bed, and went to see what it was.

"What's that you're looking- that note?"

Susan raised her head and nodded seriously. "I'm worried, kitty cat."

"You?" Sparkle tried to play it off. "Come on!"

"No, really. This note we got from The Darkness when we first got here; 'All you will find here is pain and suffering, and very hard choices.'"

"But nothing like that has really happened."

"Exactly! Where is it? Silverstreak unlocked my powers before we came here- I can destroy planets now, Sparkle. *Planets*. He offered me a *black hole bomb*. Then this note, and the 'gift' of The Darkness in the form of that one dead Magog. Who just happened to have cybernetics inside himself, that we figured out how to replicate. And then Harper injects them into himself without even knowing all they can do yet." She stared at her hand, and the barely visible almost circuitry now found in her palm. "Add it all up, and I think this reality is going to get a lot worse before we get to leave it."

Sparkle put her head down on Susan's legs and accepted ear scratches for a moment. "That's why you're talking about *gun fu* and trying to compare damage and whatnot?"

"That's part of it. I'm coming to realize certain things. I will always be outnumbered. Whether it's wolves from a reality recording, reprogramed combat frames, or possessed warlocks, The Darkness will always have the advantage of numbers."

"It does get places first. It has time to look down upon a reality, find out how it works, and see how best to cause us *Wanderers* trouble."

"Yup. So if I'll never have numerical advantage, what's the next best thing I can do? Not being outgunned."

"You're worried about having to take on energy blast using Magog. Lots of them, all at once."

"Possibly a whole army of them. It's something I can't become immune to because it's not a power. It doesn't have a *nature* like *force*. But it won't bounce off *invulnerability* either, because it's still not strictly physical. And realistically, I can only take a good ten hits because reducing damage to one is great and all, but just those stupid mobsters took me down by a third. Magog will be killing machines, who have spent their entire existence fighting. More than ten shoot me at once and I'll down as easily as anyone."

"And with the cybernetics as easy to install as an immunization back home, they don't have to spend a lot of time in surgery. Though I don't know how easy the medical nanobots are to make..."

"Assume it has the resources to make as many as are needed."

"Good assumption."

"How do I keep this reality safe from something like that? Regular Magog would have been bad enough, you can shoot them from a distance, after all. And I can be immune to someone scratching at me with claws, or biting me. But these Magog shoot back. And not just with simple guns, either, no, they have *energy blasts*."

"And then drain your life force so they can shoot more people."

"Exactly. It's just not fair. And I don't think I can get any more powerful. I mean I can take the maximum energy a human like myself can basically have with powers, I'm super strong and durable, and I can take various *natures* like you said, *acid* and *transition* where *force* might not be the best choice. So where do I go from here? The threat from The Darkness isn't going to stop increasing."

"You've just discovered the benefit from traveling with a group."

“And Ifruita is great, don’t get me wrong. But this isn’t her fight. I can’t rely on having her after this world.”

“She should choose what she wants to do with her life, once you give it back to her. That does mean considering she’ll choose not to stay with you.”

“Exactly. I can’t get more powerful, not like Goku or that bald headed guy he was battling. I’m not built that way. Taking *gun fu* is going to drain so much XP, I can’t imagine what trying to raise a stat or two would do to me. An entire world *or two* and I get to be a tiny bit stronger or smarter. Sure, that’s fair. In his story he just hops into a spaceship, trains in a hundred times gravity for like a week, and boom, he can stand against that freezer guy who has like a million energy. How can I have a million energy?”

“It is curious. In his reality no one tries to get more skillful than an opponent, they simply try to dish out more damage per action.”

“Or like when Gohan beats Cell, just more energy to throw at someone. I mean the kid stands there with a broken arm and still manages to win the day. Against a creature the others are basically terrified of.”

“We should have asked Goku if that actually happened.”

“I’ll put it on the to-do list. And magic’s no help, heck, I can’t even use it here, not well. And it *most certainly* has limits.”

“Sure, just being able to think really hard and have someone avoid it totally is... well, I can see you becoming frustrated with that aspect.”

“It was fine back home, everyone was terrible there! When compared to, I don’t know, Doomsday? Who I fought. Three times.”

Sparkle was silent a moment. “I’m not sure what advice to really give you. Getting your *delay* down is certainly worthwhile, and getting your natural combat skills up can’t hurt. Guns work everywhere, and yours recharges itself, so you don’t need to worry about ammo. It may really be your best bet.”

“Darn right. I mean it’s not like I can get a *better* gun, I don’t think Jenny would hand me crap, and you can’t do *gun fu* with the *rifle* skill. So if I can just shoot more things in less time, I’ll have a better chance of handling any situation where there’s lots of strong enemies. Oh, and maybe I’ll send Cloud an apology, but I’ve been doing the whole sword thing wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“Yup. Either by magic or technique, I can conjure up any weapon I can think of. And the only difference between my hands doing damage and a sword doing damage is a slight increase in range, and a vast increase in TR. Well, what if my ‘weapon’ is just razor tipped gauntlets? I can use them ‘unarmed’ and get the reduced delay for *martial arts* but the increased TR because they’re not actual metal. They’re magic, or a power. That’s what determines the TR.”

“Let’s see your book a second.”

“The magic book? Okay, sure.” Susan got it out of the talisman on her right hand. Sparkle sat silently, seeking something specific.

“There is a spell. *Devastating Blow*. Not as useful as I had hoped, it’s instant. Makes unarmed attacks higher OTR, and do more damage, not that you need that. I suppose you could have the book make a maintained version.” She got a paw under the cover and closed it. “Might want to make a *fabricated* version anyway, or get something from Silverstreak.”

“Why?”

“A sword is sharp everywhere, but if we go someplace even powers don’t work...”

“Then I’d be back to TR 1 damage. I wonder how sharp Silverstreak can make something? May have to go see Winry again. Something to think about for later. I mean if magic isn’t working, I doubt my *soul* item would be, and hitting people would be stupid at that point. I wouldn’t do any damage no matter how high my TR was!”

“At that point you would have no choice but to stick to shooting people.”

“And there you have it.”

Days later, the Andromeda broke free of the Slipstream and Susan got a terse “Get up to the bridge,” order from Dylan. She gathered up Ifruita and Sparkle and headed to the bridge.

"Something wrong?" she asked, as the doors slid closed behind her.

"Plenty. Rommie?"

"We're still about two hours from Castalia, but this message was broadcast about a half hour ago." The image of the ship's AI vanished, and a panicked man replaced it. "Please, to any ships in the area, we are under attack by the Magog. If you can help us, we desperately need assistance. If you can't, get out of this system while you still can!" The transmission cut off.

"I can't get there quickly enough," Rommie said, coming back onscreen, "but I bet you saw enough of the background behind that guy that you could."

"That is correct. Gentleman, armor up. Light of the multiverse, *Make Up!*"

Dylan went to a nearby weapon's locker, outfitting himself in combat gear and grabbing an extra force lance. (His weapon of choice was a staff that could retract to the size of a paper towel roll, which fired tiny projectiles that messed up anything they hit.) Beka selected the same, but kept her sidearm, and both Rev and Harper refused armor.

Good choice, if they don't have the skill or the STRength it'll just be a penalty for them.

Andromeda grabbed two force lances, and held them ready.

"Good luck!" Trance wished them.

"Wait, you're not coming? We could use you, Trance!" insisted Susan. "You really helped out during that, uh, thing... back in the place that time."

"Someone has to stay."

"She's right," Andromeda agreed. "As long as she promises not to drive me through time again, I need someone that can pilot the slipstream in case we need to get away in a hurry. I'm not reading any Magog ships in this area, but that could change."

"Oh." She looked at the others. *Beka was also useful, she was pretty cool under fire.*

Harper needs to see some actual combat to perhaps figure out more of his lifestreaming tech, and of course Rommie and Dylan go together like ketchup on fries. And Rommie can't fly slipstream herself. "Stay safe. You have no way to contact us at this distance."

"You all stay safe," she countered. "I'm a gigantic warship, you know."

Susan grinned. "Deal."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* to where she had seen the man broadcasting from, and the party stepped into...

Some sort of communication station with a bunch of dead people scattered about the room. At least, there was a lot of equipment here, monitors and lights which were also dead. One of the men was the one they had seen making the plea, and the group spilled out into the hall, guns at the ready. In the distance Sparkle could hear gunfire, and with her eighteen perception check she heard screams still coming from below in this building.

"There are still Magog here," she cautioned. "Be careful."

Susan didn't bother with that, simply striding down the corridor and popping into rooms, while Rommie took the other side. They cleared that floor, it was empty, then proceeded down some stairs because the power was out. They didn't find anyone on that floor either, and moved down yet again.

There they found a more open area, some kind of cafeteria, and across the room a Magog soldier was currently draining a man dry of energy.

"I've got him," Rommie announced, raising a forcelance and putting a shot into the Magog from across the room. It impacted him and he winced, dropping the now unconscious man.

"Crap that hurts," it said with a growl. "Just my luck to find someone so I can replenish myself, and this happens. Where did you all come from, anyway?"

"What the heck?" asked Rommie, shooting again. Again the shot seemed to bounce off.

"Quit it! I'm gonna have a bruise now!" The Magog turned to the nearby wall, blowing it out with a green beam of energy from his hand, and quickly scrambled outside.

Susan ran over to it and looked out, and he was using his claws to slow his descent.

To shoot him or not to shoot him, that is the question.

Raising her eyes, she saw ships stuck into the sides of buildings all over, as it seemed their way of invading was to stick a ship into the side of something and pour out of it? They had a drill like front end, as some were pulling themselves free and taking off.

"I think they're running. Probably know we're here."

By this time the one that had been in the room had made it to the ground, and was scurrying away. Susan pulled her head back in to see Rommie looking her force lance over. She shrugged, pointed it a nearby chair and blew it to pieces.

"That's odd. It's not malfunctioning."

"Come on, figure that out later. Deploying pups." Susan called out her two doggie companions, and setting a hand of each of them in turn told them to seek out survivors. The group split up, covering the rest of the building as Susan and her pups made their way outside. There, fires and mayhem met her eyes, as well as more ships taking off. "So, what, they really are running?" she asked no one in particular.

"Looks that way," remarked Sparkle. "But why? We can only be in one part of the city at a time."

"Look master, that building still has a ship stuck in the side of it." Ifruita pointed.

"Let's head there."

Susan and her team ambushed a group of Magog smashing the place up, almost looking gleeful, but turned tail and ran as they came under fire. Just as with Rommie, Susan had to turn her guns up to TR 5 to damage them, they just shrugged anything else off. She chased them back to their ship, which they hastily closed up and blasted off in.

The two stood looking out the huge hole in the side of the building, puzzled. "Master, is it just me, or are these beings not acting right?"

"You got me, Ifruita. You got me. Let's go search for survivors."

The pups led them to the wounded and dying, and Susan healed them with the knife and moved on, telling them that if they're feeling better, stop asking stupid questions about why they're not dead and help other people be not dead today.

Finally, after a few hours of the chaos dying down, the crew of the Andromeda got back together.

"So it was the same for you as well?" asked Rommie.

"They just saw us and ran away," agreed Susan. "Rev, do you have any insights?"

"I'm afraid I do not. My people usually fight to the last, not only to feed but to, ah, create young as well. This seems simply like a group rampaging around a city for fun, and then running away when they got caught at it."

"Speaking of that, how many people with eggs do we have?" Dylan asked, acting as if he didn't want to know that answer. "And can Susan get them out somehow? We should have discussed that, after the incident... you know."

"That's the most curious part. As far as we can tell, not a single person was chosen to host any larva."

"What, none?" asked Harper. "That can't be possible."

"But I assure you it is. No one complained of any bites, not that many wanted to get near me at first to answer my questions."

"Yes, looking like one of the invaders does have its downsides," agreed Dylan. "This just gets stranger."

"Was this the only place to be hit?" asked Ifruita.

"We haven't had reports of any other attacks," answered Rommie, who was back in touch with her ship self. "The ships that left the surface simply headed for slipstream and vanished."

"What I want to know is, how did they become bulletproof, and how can I do the same?" asked Harper.

"Oh, you want me to shoot you some more?" Susan asked him. "I'd be glad to!"

"Not right now!"

"Spoilsport."

With no answers, the crew went back to helping with relief efforts, until the president of the planet himself showed up to see how things were going. He was a middle aged man, but as the people here were humans, simply genetically modified to breathe water, he had scaly skin and gills on the sides of his neck. A machine that circulated water over them was strapped to his, and his aid's, back. His lone security officer, a woman named Yau, was an air breather and didn't need such a bulky apparatus.

"We meet in person at last," Lee said warmly to Dylan, going to shake his hand.

"I'm just sorry it was under such negative circumstances."

"Nonsense, things could have been much worse here. If your ship hadn't arrived, no doubt we would still be fighting waves of Magog. The way I hear it, you all showed up and the Magog turned tail and ran."

"Yes, we still aren't clear on why. We were clearly outnumbered, but rather than fighting the Magog just tripped over themselves in their haste to leave."

"Perhaps they thought you were simply part of a larger force? We were supposed to sign the charter after all. So there could have been many Commonwealth ships in orbit, not just one."

"How would they have known, either way? Besides, usually they're so mad with hunger they attack without regard for their personal safety."

"I'm no expert," he said with a laugh. "But I will say this. You want the charter signed, I'll sign it right now. The attack on this city just serves as a reminder how much we need to stand together in the face of this Magog threat. Er, present company excluded, of course."

"No offense taken, President Lee," Rev assured him. "Most of my family is not the kind you want to invite to dinner."

"Because usually we're the main course," muttered Harper.

"Sir, is that really the best thing you can be doing at the moment?" asked his advisor.

"We still aren't sure if everyone has been accounted for, and protocol must be observed."

"Protocol. Come on, Chandros, are you really going to be a stickler about that sort of thing? Now?"

"Now more than ever! These people's lives have been disrupted in the most awful way possible. They must see the signing of the charter as something rational and expected, not just a knee jerk reaction to a single, somewhat minor, attack." He looked around as if all this was beneath him.

"It's dangerous for you to even be out in the open like this," added Yau. "What if there are still Magog lurking about?"

"We do not lurk," Rev insisted, now sounding a bit offended. Then he reconsidered. "Of course, I wouldn't have said before today that Magog did this sort of thing either. So perhaps I'm just behind the times."

"In any case, if Chancellor Chandros is insisting we wait for the signing's original schedule, the least we can do is pitch in here."

"Pitch in?" Chandros looked as if he had bitten something sour. Then he seemed to brighten. "I suppose if the air breathers see you working alongside them, so soon after the attack, it could be positive PR."

"That's the spirit! Come on, let's see where we can be the most help."

They wandered off.

"He seems somewhat capable," Susan said to the others as he joined a group trying to tip a vehicle of some kind over so they could get it out of the way. "And his willingness to help is admirable. Oh, stand aside and let me do that!" she shouted over to them.

"He was elected a second term, I hear he's quite popular with both populations on this planet," spoke up Beka. "It's going to be a long night."

And it was. But even someone with Susan's ENDurance needs to sleep, and the crew was offered a room in a hotel that wasn't too badly beat up. All day she had lifted, carried, healed, comforted, reunited, and generally did the work of a small team of people by herself. Her eyes and wings didn't occasion too much comment, the people here were still pretty shook up and being reunited through a *teleportal* with someone you thought was dead went a long way to getting people on your good side.

Ifrita didn't, so she kept working to help as she could, so Susan and Sparkle were alone in the room.

"You're really going to have a tough time waking me tomorrow," she said with a yawn. "More than usual, I mean."

"I'll have someone bring a bucket of ice water."

"Ha. Ha."

But it wasn't ice water that ultimately woke Susan, it was a frantic pounding on the door and shouts of "police" and "open up." She groggily pulled her armor back on, having no other clothes to wear at the moment, and was surprised to find the door being smashed open and people with drawn guns pouring into the room. Sparkle took up position beside her, ready to fight with martial arts if needed until Susan was aware enough to switch into *powers mode*.

"Susan Felton," announced the one with the biggest gun, "you are under arrest for the murder of President Lee!"

Susan squinted her eyes against the bright light spilling past the uniformed men and women and blearily tried to replay the last thing she had heard in her mind. Because there was no way these people had just said-

"Turn around and get on your knees! Now, do it now! Hands where I can see them! Don't make any sudden moves!"

"Huh?" she said sleepily, rubbing an eyeball. "What are you talking about?"

Sparkle, of course, was wide awake, having *light sleeper* so she had awakened at the very first banging on the door. But she wasn't sure what to do. She had no magic at the moment, Susan wasn't transformed so she didn't have powers, and fighting off a whole squad of police officers with Ryūdō probably wouldn't work out so well.

A male officer grabbed Susan's wrist, trying to force it behind her head, but of course he got nowhere. "Stop resisting! Hands behind your head and get on your knees!"

"You want me to what?" Susan was now coming around, her 12*3 delay finally clearing. (This was about 7.2 seconds for those keeping track at home.) She yanked her hand back away from the man and pulled her guns from her *sub-space pocket*, jabbing them forward. One at the officer now wondering where this gun had come from, the other straight ahead. "Explain yourselves!" she demanded.

"Drop your weapons!" demanded the one doing all the bellowing.

"You drop your weapons," Susan countered. "And you get to walk out of here instead of me carrying you."

"I will not ask again. Drop your weapons or we will open fire!"

She swiveled the other gun to point at him. "Try it," she growled. *There's only six, I wouldn't even have to transform.*

"Wait!" shouted Sparkle, "there must be some sort of misunderstanding here. Susan, put those down! At least listen to what they have to say."

"Listen, perhaps. Lower these? Get them to lower theirs first."

"Did that cat just talk?" one asked.

"It's just some miniature android, ignore it," the one next to her answered.

"Put down your guns and listen to me!" Sparkle cried, activating her *Spirit Aura*. The bright light drew every eye, and made the officers take a step back. Some shifted their guns down to point at her.

"What's happening? What's it doing?"

"Do I have your attention?" she asked, the glow subsiding. "Now what exactly were you talking about before?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ignore it. It's some kind of trick."

"I think it's cute."

"Quiet!" roared the one in charge. "This woman is under arrest for murdering the president not twenty minutes ago! Satisfied?"

"That's impossible," countered Sparkle. "She's been here asleep since we got to this room. She couldn't have left without waking me."

"A likely story."

"We can prove it," Susan offered, her guns lowering a little. "But why do you think that I, specifically, murdered your president?"

"How many other winged, black eyed girls are there on this world? With that kind of gun?"

"What?" Susan glanced at the change indicator and both guns were completely full, they hadn't been fired since she put them into the *pocket*. "You must be mistaken."

"Dozens of eye witnesses will corroborate the story."

"We'll see about that. Take me to where this so called murdered occurred."

"We're not taking you anywhere but a jail cell."

"You're not taking me anywhere," Susan replied sweetly, "that I don't want to go. You can either keep an eye on me while we get to the bottom of this, or I just transform and teleport back to my ship, beyond your reach. It'll only take two actions, and after one action I'll be *invulnerable*. So you better get me with your first shot." She looked at his gun. "It's not big enough."

The others chuckled. "That's what she said," said one.

"Shut it! I didn't get half that statement, what are you talking about? Transforming? Teleporting? Are you mad? Are you trying for some kind of insanity defense? It won't work."

"Simply stating what's going to happen. So are we going, or not?"

"And after you show me this 'proof' of yours?"

"I'll accept your apology, or come quietly."

He considered. "Fine."

"Then lead the way."

"Cover her," the man commanded, and three took up positions behind Susan who put her guns back into the *pocket*.

They led Susan and Sparkle through the city streets, to a cordoned off area crawling with uniformed people.

"You brought her back here?" demanded one as they approached.

"She said she could prove it wasn't her. She can pull guns out of thin air, I thought it best to at least see what she had to say. She's cooperated thus far."

"I guess it's your show. You do remember she has some kind of wings, right?"

"My people are covering her. She tries to fly, they shoot her out of the sky." "You better hope she doesn't."

"She's here, isn't she? So let's see this proof of yours," said the man, turning back to her.

"Where did it happen?"

"As if you didn't know," sneered the one that was there.

"I don't know, because I'm innocent. Just tell me."

"The president was coming out of this building here, when you, or someone that looks exactly like you, dropped out of the sky, shot him dead, and flew off again."

"Let's get closer then." They did. "Now don't be alarmed, I need to transform."

"Do what?"

"Just don't shoot me in the next few seconds okay? Light of the multiverse, *Make Up!*" Susan was back in *powers mode* before anyone could react, and of course her transformation light show got them all antsy again. Susan, now secure in the knowledge they could do nothing to her, proceeded to ignore them and used the same techniques to show the area that she had done to see where Doomsday had come from. She didn't see what she expected. Because the last thing she expected was to see herself dropping out of the sky and shooting the president dead.

But that's what she saw.

The officers there are smirked at her and held out handcuffs. "That's impossible!" she protested, playing it again. "I can't permanently harm any living thing without my cat Sparkle saying I can. It's a safety measure. I was asleep!"

"Your cat."

"Yes! Sparkle, she's right there!"

"We'll avoid the scandal of taking a *cat* into custody. But you on the other hand... Shall I tell you your rights now? You did promise to come quietly."

"But... But..." she sputtered. "This can't be right!"

"You're the one that claimed to be showing us time in this spot as it truly was."

"It is, but it can't be!"

"I'll be sure to note that in my official investigation."

Susan couldn't think, couldn't process what she was seeing. There she was; wings, eyes, guns, just as the officers had said. Gunning the president down and flying off. But there were so many reasons it *couldn't be her*.

"Was it some kind of android? Did anyone check?"

"Of course we checked. You think we don't know our own president? He bled and died right in the street. You can see it right there." And yes, it was happening.

Susan looked to Sparkle, who shook her head. "I don't know, it looks pretty bad."

"But I can't!"

"I agree. But I think you know how it could have happened. You just don't want to admit it to yourself."

"What? The Darkness? But he can't take me over again, right? I have a five in *resisting* and I had no reason to kill this man. Are you suggesting it can take me over and make me kill because it isn't me doing the harm?"

"It's never been tested. Has it been talking to you lately?"

Susan paled, thinking back. "It has been rather quiet. But why this?" She indicated the dead president. "Why now?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. What are you going to do?"

"Yes, what are you going to do?" asked the officer.

"I'll... I'll come with you..."

"NO!"

"Excellent! Hands behind your-" He started reaching for her.

She grabbed his hand with an eleven *martial arts* check. "I will come with you, by choice. I will not be dragged away in handcuffs. And be glad I am still in control enough to offer you that. I could easily just teleport away at the moment."

"So why bother? Just do it." He obviously wasn't taking her seriously.

Susan shook her head. "My honor demands I remain under observation until we get to the bottom of this. You couldn't stop me, but at least you would have warning."

"Are you sure about this?" asked Sparkle.

"We have to learn what happened here. Get the crew and Ifruita together and see if you can come up with something."

"Of course."

"Lead on," she said to the officer, dropping his hand. He rubbed it, grumbling, but told her to get into the police van type vehicle which roared off, siren blaring.

What just happened? Sparkle asked herself.

"She did what?" asked Dylan the next morning, watching a news broadcast showing Susan being led away.

"Gave herself up," answered Sparkle, "and charged us with finding out the truth of what happened."

"And she's always telling me to use non-lethal means," grumped Ifruita. "Then she goes and does something like this?"

"But she didn't," insisted Sparkle. "In the first place, why be so showy about it? She could have been miles away, just looking through a *view portal* and using a technique that works at a distance. Or *shape-shifted* herself to look like anybody. Or just *telesummoned* him off the edge of a building. But she couldn't do any of these things I'm telling you. Even not being able to do magic here, the magic she does have on her still holds! Otherwise she wouldn't be nearly as strong, and such."

"But this darkness thing she's always worried about, it could have taken her over?"

"And then let itself be taken in? I doubt it. But yeah, maybe? It's sort of done it before, but Silverstreak said it probably couldn't now unless she got some new and different power. It seems to work through a 'rebirth' of people rather than just randomly taking people over. I don't know the rules, just what I've observed. And no, I know what you're thinking and I doubt just her cybernetic implant would count. Her getting powers was a true *event* in her life. That wasn't."

“And if this creature had taken her over, she would be innocent of the crime,” added Rev.

“Awfully hard to prove though,” reasoned Harper.

“They’ll have to show motive, right? What would be Susan’s motive for doing this? Just hours before she was helping those people. The president even thanked her before she went to that hotel,” protested Sparkle.

“What’s the creature’s motive?” asked Rev.

“Stop the signing?”

“No way, it’s a backwater world of fish people. Why bother?” asked Harper.

“Unless this world holds more strategic importance than I’ve been told?” Dylan looked over at Rommie, who shook her head. “Not that I’ve seen. It’s exactly what we’ve been told as far as my sensors can determine.”

“Susan went willingly. Maybe it just wants to slow her down, make her doubt herself more?” put forth Rev.

“So kill dozens! Hundreds! The Darkness wouldn’t hold back if it got control of Susan again. It would use *Golden Crash* and blow up the world. She would get the same check against it as killing one dude, and the payoff would be higher.”

“Wait, do what?” asked Dylan, concerned.

Sparkle cleared her throat. “Never mind. The point is, there is something else going on here.”

“Trance? You have anything to say here?”

Everyone looked over at her.

“Oh! Let me think. If we put our trust in our *friend*,” she looked around at everyone, “and truly believe her innocence, what are we left with?” The others had the decency to at least look a little embarrassed. Except for one.

“With Susan?” Sparkle asked with a brief laugh. “Anything. Time travel, to start. It could have been a Susan from the future, but I think she would have at least left a note... Maybe the president did something in the future she had to come back in time to prevent. But again, she could have just left a note, and we could have stopped it without killing him.”

“I mean things within the realm of our experience.”

Sparkle considered. “She didn’t leave the room that night. Not only did she fall asleep first, she has *deep sleeper* while I have the opposite. She’s not waking up once she’s asleep, not easily. I was right there on the bed, there’s no way she got up without me knowing. But she couldn’t be the victim of a framing, I watched, it was her. How many other people can drop from the sky and then fly away on literal wings?”

“That’s the question we need to answer,” Trance decided.

“Best get to it, then,” decided Dylan.

“It disturbs me to see you like this,” Ifruita said to Susan after being let into the police station. “Caged like an animal. Do they not understand the good you have done?”

Susan shook her head. “This is for their protection. I can’t get The Darkness to answer me, but yet I’m still sitting here. It doesn’t track. Did it take me over or not?”

“The others are searching for some kind of look alike. Perhaps someone saw ‘you’ flying away, and saw where you went.”

Susan felt the urge to bash her currently still *invulnerable* head into the wall. “Of course! If it wasn’t me, it must have been someone else. I saw them through my *seeing* technique, I could use *View Portal* and see what they’re up to at the moment! Now why didn’t I think of that?”

“Will that work, master?”

“Let’s find out! *View Portal!*”

Peering inside the hole in the air that she had made, Susan saw basically herself, standing with her eyes closed in a circle of light. The rest of the room was complete darkness, probably far out of sight. “Well, well, well,” she muttered, eyes narrowed. “Looks like there’s another me after all.”

“What will you do, master? Go there and confront her?”

“That won’t clear my name if she gets away. No, the first thing to do is this; *Find Creature*.” With that, Susan knew how far and in what direction this imposter was, and thus could use *telesummon* to grab her. “Get some officers to prep a large space. I’m going to bring them their actual assailant.”

“Perhaps it would be best if I just got Dylan or the others to talk to them?” she suggested. “I don’t even speak their language, it was hard enough just getting them to allow me in to talk to you.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

Half an hour later (or so) the police chief, several officers, Ifruita, Sparkle, and Dylan stood in front of Susan’s cell.

“If you think I’m just letting her out of that cell, so she can magically wish some lookalike here, you’re crazy! I don’t care if you command a whole fleet of starships.”

“Sir, if you’ll just let me explain,” Dylan tried.

“You do *see* the person through this *view portal* don’t you?” Susan asked, exasperated.

“So you’ve got all kinds of tricks up your sleeves. Like those guns appearing and disappearing last night. Some kind of trick, and what you want isn’t happening.”

“You know what? Fine. If it’s all ‘tricks’ to you, see how you like this ‘trick.’” Susan waved the *View Portal* away and opened a *teleportal* to outside the cell. “Ah, that’s better.”

“What the- How did you- Don’t just stand there, grab her!” The other officers were staring at the now shrinking portal, and decided maybe she wasn’t just making stuff up, after all.

“You’re welcome to try, boys and girls,” Susan announced. “But if you want to catch the real killer, find me a bit of open space and you can see her with your own eyes.”

“Wait, open space?” asked Sparkle. “Why not just *telesummon* her into your now empty cell?”

Susan raised a finger, then lowered it again. “Why don’t I just do that?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you?”

“I will! But she is still holding those guns, she could shoot through the bars. Anyone staying to see this better put on some armor or something. You people wear bullet proof vests or whatever, right?”

“I’m staying,” said one. “This I’ve gotta see. I’ll go get us some gear.”

The man returned with a cartload of stuff, and the officers geared up. Mostly shotguns (it was pretty close range) which Susan scowled at. “We just want her to confess and give her guns up. Not fill her full of holes. She could be brainwashed or some kind of clone of me, we don’t know her story.”

“And if she doesn’t, we have some insurance,” insisted one.

“Fine. Let me make sure my powers are how I want them and we’ll begin.”

So Susan rearranged her powers, and told the posse to get ready. They all seemed to be holding their actions so Susan (*Velocity* already in place) activated *telesummon* and her doppelganger appeared in the cell.

Susan’s current powers

Energy Well	(5)
Invulnerability	(2)
Nature	(2) Creation
Nature	(2) Knockout
Nature	(2) Time
Nature	(2) Transition
Stat adjustment MAN	(4)
Sudden Step	(1)
Telekinesis	(1)
Telesummon	(3)
Unseen	(1)

The being opened her eyes and the chief started to say something about dropping her weapons, but she didn't care to listen. She simply snapped her wings open and energy bolts shot out of both, impacting the bars and everyone in front of her.

Then... everybody died.

Seriously. Apart from Susan and Ifruita, who got up barriers in time, even Dylan took over twenty damage to the head. Sparkle had been behind "cover" in the form of two barrier shields, (one solid metal *creation* shield and one energy one from Ifruita) so she was fine. Yeah, that's how it worked out. Honest. Limbs were lost, and the bolts even impacted the wall behind them all, damaging it. Needless to say, the cell didn't have bars anymore, and the Susan lookalike simply shot forward, feet not even touching the ground, and zipped off down the corridor.

Susan and Sparkle, being *Paragon Beings*, at this point had only one recourse- cards. Susan had left a *damage add*, which was the opposite of what she wanted for this situation. (The XP bonus and Adrenaline Boost she had gotten were both, *gasp* turned into XP) Sparkle had two cards that might help, number 29 *Wild* and 46 *It's not as bad as it looks*. Wild could do just about anything, but only one or two cards could help the entire group at this point. And if this was simply the opening volley of this fight, she might need it later in the combat.

I declare the use of card 46 on Dylan, she thought, sadly resigning herself to most of the others in the hallway being dead. At least this way, the one being with the hope of restoring the Commonwealth would survive. His damage became non-lethal, so he was simply knocked out instead of having been killed instantly.

"I took *healing* nature," she called to Susan. "Go after her, I'll try to stabilize everyone here."

Anyone not dead, she can probably put a close analog to Regeneration on. And me "attacking" everyone here with the knife will just let that evil me kill more people above. I brought her here, I have to take her out. "Got it. Come on, Ifruita!"

"I authorize you to hurt her!" Sparkle called as she ran out.

The two women turned the corner in time to see the evil Susan blast through the armored door without stopping which startled the two guards on the other side. As she had already moved past them, she simply snapped her wings out backwards and impaled them, one taking eight damage to the right leg, the other four damage to the body. She then raised her guns and started shooting into the surprised people beyond.

Okay, this went bad fast.

She was still moving, and this was a narrow hallway somewhat central to the whole place. Susan didn't get much of a glimpse of the rest when she had been brought in, but there were armored doors at the end of each hallway at this intersection. She had come from processing, to the left, and that's where evil Susan was going. She spun, still traveling down the hallway, now going backwards.

"Stop in the name of the law!" Susan shouted, thinking how she always had wanted to say that. She fired at her evil self, ten TR 1 shots from each gun. (Her REFlexes were now a fourteen, and she got as many shots as that per action) There wasn't much room to maneuver in this hallway, but evil Susan didn't seem to care about dodging anyway. The shots impacted and were ignored.

Seven shots hit her body! What is evil me made of?

Ifruita was up, and also blasted her with the standard *knockout* technique she knew her master liked her using. It was also ignored.

"Switch to lethal," she instructed Ifruita, "I don't think non-lethal is going to work on this one."

"Yes master."

Evil Susan was now up, and started playing the song of her people, An Ode To Violence which was a two part harmony produced by a single person doing a lot of shooting down a hallway. Susan dodged *into* the attack, trying to cover Ifruita because she figured Evil her wasn't using the lowest setting on her gun. With her wings spread across the hallway she

caught the bullets and now had a choice to make. Did she raise the OTR on her guns to hurt her evil self or keep her from escaping? *After all, this hallway makes for a good place to use a technique. And I was just telling myself to stop thinking with my guns.*

"*Temporal Lockout!*" she shouted, touching the wall as Evil Susan reached the end of the hallway and was turning to blast this door out as well. The beam fizzled as Susan's technique temporarily took this hallway out of time. "You're not causing any more damage, and you can't escape. Let's talk."

"I think not."

Ifruita, aware of what Susan had done because of her power senses, didn't immediately attack but instead spent an action preparing, and then another action charging, in case Evil Susan pressed the attack.

Which she of course did. Another emerald green blast shot out of every available location on Evil Susan's body, which included her forehead, both wings, and the back of her hands. The girls had nowhere to dodge to, but Susan had rolled maximum on her *Powers Combat* check and knew they were going on the same *segment*. She cried "*Iron Block!*" which simply used *creation* nature to conjure a solid block of iron between Evil Susan and herself. It was mostly intact when the barrage stopped, and it vanished, being only an *Instant* technique.

Ifruita now put two actions worth of energy into her only original attack, the basic *force* blast she used to destroy cities for her former masters. But this was through a small *teleportal* she created previously, positioned *behind* Evil Susan, in the hope of simply tearing her wings off rather than killing her. After all, they needed her talking to figure out where she had come from, right? The blast struck her in the back for twenty seven damage which tore them off and presumably damaged the antigravity system as she dropped to the floor.

"I kind of liked those, you know," she said petulantly.

"Good call," Susan praised her.

"I'm not finished yet." Evil Susan shot at Ifruita again, but Susan simply targeted the guns with her next *Transition* technique of "*Glass Cannons.*"

The triggers froze in place as the guns were transmuted from metal and circuitry to plain old glass. Evil Susan threw them down in disgust.

"Now perhaps you will 'come quietly' and explain to the nice people out there that it was *you* who killed the president, and not me?"

"I will do no such thing."

"I wasn't asking."

"You think you have any power over me?"

"Unless you've got some more weapons in there, you're beaten."

"I do have one." Susan figured she would pull something out and start shooting again. Boy was she surprised.

When instead she exploded.

Techniques used in this chapter:

Find Creature

Seeing

Level X (X+0+0) (Effect, Personal, I)

This technique instantly indicates the direction and approximate distance to a creature the user has seen (in its current state; the technique cannot locate a creature that has shapeshifted since it was last seen).

Creatures can be located based on the Distance-Based Difficulties table, pg 142 in the main rules.

Temporal Lockout

Time

Level 8 (4+2+2) (Effect, Medium, M)

An enclosed space is cut off from time while this is maintained. Only those with an immunity to *time* can enter or leave the defined area, as "outside" the space no longer exists in time. When the technique ends the space is returned to the exact instant it was when the technique was used. No time has passed outside it, while time has passed normally within it.

"Ifruita, are you all right?" Susan asked, concerned.

"I still function, master," she replied shakily, getting up again. "I am healing myself as I can, there is no need for alarm."

"Thank goodness."

"Yes, I managed to increase my defense at the instant she exploded. That blast though, in such a confined space..."

Susan looked dour. "Yes, my technique worked against me, that time. But at least the whole place didn't go up. Imagine, blowing herself up instead of talking."

Ifruita looked around at the fragments of Evil Susan that were left scattered about the place. "At least it's obvious she was an android and not a living being."

"What? Oh, yeah I guess, but she used *Lifestreaming*. Don't tell me she was like you? Built but alive?"

"I do not know. It all happened so fast, did you get any readings on her at all?"

"No," she grumped. "Though come to think of it, I didn't see any health level for her, so that does make more sense. But where did she get life energy from?"

Ifruita shook her head. "I do not know, master. And to be technical, I turn my own store of energy into a similar form of energy used by *Lifestreamers*. I am no more alive than my staff."

"A fine distinction. Anyway, I'm letting this technique go and seeing how Sparkle made out. I'm sure she can use the help."

So they went back down to the cells to see if they could lend a hand, and as it was only seconds (from an outside perspective) they had been away, not even Dylan was up yet. Susan hit everybody with the knife, and Sparkle's techniques regrew their limbs.

Luckily, at least one officer survived and was able to give an account of seeing Evil Susan appear in the cell, and a team was assigned to get every bit of evidence cleaned up from the hallway she had exploded in. Susan was allowed to go free, and services for the president were arranged.

One surprise was left, however, as the new president categorically refused to sign the charter!

"Are you serious?" Dylan asked him. "Your planet just suffered a Magog attack. You need the Commonwealth more than ever!"

"But we hadn't suffered an attack in some time," countered the new president. "Suddenly we become interesting again right as we're about to sign the charter? Sorry, but I don't feel like having some insane android gunning for me. You yourself say there is a connection between the two because of this *Lifestreaming* business I don't quite understand, but facts are facts. We're just going to try and sit this whole war out."

"You'll just be a bigger target, with no friends in the universe to turn to!"

"I've made my decision, now please leave before more bad luck shows up."

The crew sadly broke orbit and Susan sent one last thought at The Darkness.

Great job, you won that one. But why my face? What was that thing, really? How did it do all that?

Oh you silly, you don't expect me to actually tell you, do you?

Ah, so you're at least talking to me again. Thought maybe you got bored and left.

No, I'm with you to stay. Had you going there for a bit though, didn't I? Have to remind you who is in charge here.

Me.

*Keep telling yourself that. Still, what's one planet more or less? Nothing. You won't even miss them. Come on, cheer up, you won't you?
Won, and got some ideas.
Oh, do tell.
You'll see soon enough.*

Later that day after the crew chose their next destination, Susan went to her room to have a little chat with the "higher ups."

"Susan calling Hub, come in."

"Hub here. What can we do for you, Susan?"

"Can you bring me back temporarily? I want to ask about a piece of gear..."

"Of course. We can sync the two realities temporally, if we keep the door open. For a little while, anyway."

"Shouldn't take long. Thanks." Susan stepped through the door that appeared, and was back in the Hub. "Is the boss around? Or Winry, she might know."

"What can I do for you?" asked the agent. "We can find out pretty much anything with just a database search. Unless you need to speak to Silverstreak about something?"

"No, I guess not. You can probably tell me, how sturdy are these wings, exactly?"

"Are they damaged? We can repair them."

"No, it's just that I fought someone using a pair and she impaled some people with them somehow. And shot energy blasts out of them. So I wondered if I could make *off hand* actions with them, maybe get more reach in a straight up melee. Having two hand, two foot, and two wing strikes for a total of seven delay could come in handy." *Once my skill is just a little bit higher, anyway.*

The agent walked around them, looking them over. "You chose them to be pretty, rather than what you're currently asking, didn't you?"

"Uh, yeah." She looked down.

"No problem. We can change them out for a pair of completely metal ones, or if you don't mind sacrificing some flight time, we can fit them with a shield generator that will protect them and allow you to perform slashes with them."

"Oh? Tell me more!"

"Basically an energy field could be generated that has an edge, so the wings wouldn't actually be hitting anything, but rather the field itself surrounding them would hit. Of course there's some force transferred to them so they would need additional shock absorption capabilities. But that's all included in the unit."

"What TR and could this field extend to my hands as well?" She held them up, as if the agent didn't know what hands were.

"I don't see why not. But what's TR?"

"What can it cut through, in other words?"

"Oh, basically anything I suppose. It's an energy field shaped blade, what more could you want?"

What more indeed? "Lead on!"

So Susan's battery pack was swapped out for a smaller one with more complex circuitry that generated an offensive shield around her extremities. This cut her flight time in half, and as it was her own movement that recharged the thing, her combat speed was cut by two while it was active. She waved that off.

"As long as I still have my magical items working, my speed is far higher than it would be normally anyway. I can take a penalty to it higher than that and still not care too much."

"Very well."

The system was controlled on a more unconscious level than the wings, basically activating if she went to hit something with them, or a fist. *This is exactly what I had in mind, a sword that "attaches" to my hand and lets me do higher TR damage if I want, but still get the low delay of Martial Arts. And it's technology, which I am really seeing the benefit of now! Who needs separate "gauntlets" when you have a guy like Silverstreak who can make stuff like this?*

By the time the Andromeda got near the “drift” on the way to their next destination, Susan had drained the XP out of her sword skill, as well as *Spirit Shape* (which she had never decided on actually using anyway) and *Aura Reading*, figuring she would need a ten in the skill for it to be useful, because the difficulty was so high to tell if a creature was “good” or “evil.” As that was never going to happen, at least not for some time, out it went. This saved her from putting in any of her own XP, and her ratings were now an eight towards *gun fu*. She was getting pretty excited, but looking at the absolute dump of a space station they were heading towards was enough to put a damper on it. Most of the crew was on the bridge, watching the station get larger in the viewscreen. Susan wasn’t impressed.

“And why are we stopping here?” she asked. “Don’t we have worlds to sign up for the Commonwealth?”

“Which we can’t do, if we’re blown to pieces by a solar storm,” Dylan informed her.

“Storm?”

“My current neutrino dampener shows a 68% likelihood of failure during the impending class 7 solar storm,” Rommie informed them. “We could outrun it, go back the way we came, wait outside the system, then come back. But that uses up time just sitting around not getting closer to our goal. If this place has someone who can sell us one we can make better time just going through it.”

“I suggest we go there and see then.”

“Exactly my thoughts,” finished Dylan.

Then, oddly enough, the crew got some mail, one of which was for Beka. Apparently, as space was really, really, big, certain measures had to be taken to send messages around. Basically a copy of all of them was run from place to place by actual people, who then copied them into local databases. When queries were made relating to mail for specific people, anything relevant was downloaded. Of course, private messages used a previously agreed upon encryption key, but it was like the internet. A very slow, very inconvenient internet. But without faster than light communications, this was the best they could do.

A middle aged looking human man with budding facial hair appeared on the screen, and Susan perked up. *I’ve heard that voice before.*

As the man pleaded for Beka to come as soon as possible to help him out, Susan was making a KNOWledge check (of 15) to remember where she had heard that voice before.

“Discord? No way, that’s, that’s...” she stammered, looking the guy over. “Impossible!”

“It does sound like him, doesn’t it?” asked Sparkle, looking over that way.

“What are you talking about now?” asked Harper.

“That guy, Cid or whatever? I’ve heard his voice before, I know it. He was the spirit of chaos back in Ponyville. Ultra powerful, he offered to make me his chaos priest before I left. Said I could spread his message to the whole of the multiverse.”

“That explains so much.”

“I didn’t take him up on it, Harper.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, my uncle Cid is anything but powerful, the looks of him in that message.”

“Back up,” insisted Harper. “What’s a Ponyville?”

“Just what it sounds like. The place where the My Little Ponies lived, of course. You think the multiverse just has humanoid types like yourself in it?”

“So what, they could talk?”

“Talk, fly, do magic, build cities, you name it. Great place. Left it... far worse than when I had arrived. I don’t like to think about it. Don’t get me wrong, I saved it. But The Darkness there, it made me do something I’m not proud of.”

“Oh. So was this Discord a pony?”

“Nah, he’s a Draconequus. Part goat, part eagle, part bat, part lion, a bunch of stuff.”

“I... see.”

“Anyway, he wouldn’t need anybody’s help, unless he somehow got stuck here?”

"It's not the same guy," Sparkle insisted. "It just sounds like him. I mean we were bound to run into somebody that sounded like somebody else eventually. I mean we met a Cid, back with Aerith. That doesn't mean this is the same guy. It's just a coincidence they sound alike."

"I guess you're right. Still, what are you going to do, Beka?"

"I'll have to go see if he still needs my help, of course."

"That message is three years old," protested Harper.

"Even so."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Mind if I tag along?" asked Susan, smelling XP in the air on some kind of side quest.

"If he's in trouble, I might need you."

Oh, there will be trouble, why else would this be happening?

"The storm hits in five days," Rommie reminded them. "It'll take you a day to reach the portal point we exited from. If it takes you more than three days, just stay there until this storm passes and catch up to us after it does."

"Wait, who says I'm allowing you to go?" asked Dylan.

"I wasn't asking permission. Meet me in the hanger deck, I'm going to get a few things ready." She turned and walked off the bridge.

"Don't worry, I've seen his face. I can use a *seer* technique and tell exactly where he is, if he's still there at all. We'll be there and back before you know it."

"And she could leave you a communication device, in case you needed to get her back here for some reason."

"Ah, true, I haven't really used *technology* nature much. And that one I made for Sailor Moon was pretty easy. I'll change and do it. No, I'll do that while waiting to get back to the slip point. Nothing much else to do but sit around. I can just hand it through a *teleportal* back to you. You coming, Sparkle? Ifurita?"

"I don't know..." Ifurita looked down nervously.

"Oh, come on. It'll do you some good. See another world, get some more experiences."

"Very well."

So the girls left in the Maru and headed for the slipstream point, which they used without incident to go to Difta 5, the planet the message said he was currently (or had been three years ago) living on.

They landed in the rain and Beka was about to open the door to let them out of the ship.

"Where are you going?" Susan asked her.

"To find my uncle? That is why we're here, right? We should start at his last known location."

Susan waved her off. "That's the wrong way around. I'll just use a *seer* technique to get the distance and direction."

"Correction," broke in Sparkle. "I'll use the *seer* technique to get the distance and direction."

"Because I'll just get lost." reasoned Susan, recalling her weaknesses now. "New plan! Sparkle will use the technique, then use *projection* to see what's that way, then *teleport* to get us there."

"Good plan, glad you realized it."

"Why not just use that view portal of yours and see where he is?"

"I could, it's true. But maybe he's entertaining ladies or something, and it would be rude to barge in on him. This way we can just go to where he is, and knock on the front door or whatever."

"Not what I would have expected of you, master."

"Hey, I can think ahead sometimes."

Wasn't it me thinking ahead? Sparkle asked herself.

So Sparkle left her body and went seeking Cid, flying off as a *projection* in the direction her power said to go. It wasn't long before she opened her eyes again.

“Something odd here,” she announced. “He’s in a really tall building. Fancy, too. It said TransGalactic on the side.”

“Are you sure?” asked Beka.

“Without question. Come on, I saw the front lobby, I’ll take us there and you can ask around for him.”

“Can’t be,” muttered Beka, but she followed the others through the *teleportal* and looked around.

The place seemed like an upscale office building back where Susan was from, but Beka seemed pretty impressed.

The receptionist jumped when he looked up. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you all come in. Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for Sid Berry? I’m Beka Valentine.”

“Is this Sid an employee here? Beka Valentine you say? I’ve heard that name before...”

“Sid is here, I have it on good authority,” Beka insisted.

The man typed into the computer and brightened. “Wow, that was years ago. Yes, I have standing orders to send up anyone named Beka Valentine. Floor forty three, room twelve.”

“Thank you,” she said somewhat suspiciously, as the man pointed out the elevator for her.

They got into it and went up, and it opened to a spacious office with a desk, a couple of chairs, and a painted portrait on the wall of Sid.

“Would someone that had a portrait of himself painted be in trouble?” asked Ifurita.

“Not usually,” answered Susan, and jerked her head as a man came from around a marble pillar. He was dressed in a dark suit, no tie but a black shirt underneath, and looked a bit older but far more composed than the last time she had seen him. He was clean shaven now, and didn’t have that haunted look in his eyes.

“Rebecca?” he asked, uncertain.

“Hey Sid,” she answered. “Wow, you look good! Better than I expected, anyway.”

The two exchanged greetings, and Beka got a hug and almost didn’t look like she wanted to bolt behind the desk.

“This is Susan, and Ifurita,” Beka introduced the others when they broke apart.

“Nice to meet you,” said Susan, coming forward to shake his hand. Ifurita did the same.

“I thought about getting some eyes like that,” Sid said to Susan. “Implants, right?”

“That’s right,” she lied through her teeth. “Pretty great, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah. Rebecca, why are you here? I really didn’t expect to see you, frankly, ever again.”

“I got your message. A little late, I know, but better late than never, right?” She gave a little laugh.

“Just as I’ve never said. I do run a shipping company after all,” he said with a wink. “We have to get things to places on time. But come, you came all this way let me show you to your room. I can’t stay at the moment but soon we’ll have to sit down and catch up!”

“Room?”

“Of course. I’ve kept a room for you, in case you even stopped by. And here you are. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He kept a room on standby just for her? On the off chance she would “stop by.” Doesn’t sound suspicious.

No, this time I’ll agree with you. It is odd.

“What did you mean when you said you run a shipping company?” asked Beka as they went into the elevator. “Doesn’t Sam Profit run this company?”

“Yes. Didn’t you know? I’m Sam Profit.”

Susan prodded her out of the elevator as it seemed her brain had started hanging up when she heard that, and in a daze they walked into what was basically a penthouse suite.

“Wait, you can’t be Sam Profit. The Sam Profit? How is that even possible?”

“That’s a long story,” he admitted. “And one I’ll be happy to tell you, but I’m really in the middle of something right now. Your visit rather caught my staff by surprise, and I have to get

to my next meeting. I have some time tomorrow, why don't you stay here the night and we can talk then?"

"What, here?"

"Of course! Though there are three of you... who are you all again? My apologies, I get a bit sleepy when it's near *twilight*, I never thought to ask. Are you friends of Rebecca's?"

Susan looked sharply at him, but he seemed he had put the slight emphases on that word simply by chance, as he betrayed no sigh of it meaning anything. "Yes, simply friends," she lied again. *Not bodyguards, or people seeking adventure and XP or treasure or anything like that.* "Don't you worry about us, I'm sure we'll find someplace to sleep around here!" *Beka's bed would be fine. She's somewhat my type I guess, not that she's shown any interest or anything. She's been sort of overshadowed by Trance, if you want my honest opinion on the matter. Now there's a girl I wouldn't mind getting-*

Are you talking to me? I couldn't care less what you want to do to her.

Ah, never mind.

"I could get you another room if you'd prefer, you don't have to be *shy* about asking." *I think he's trying to separate you for some reason.*

You know, I can't think of which I prefer less. Your paranoid rantings or the worry that when you're not talking to me, you're about to take me over or make me do something I'll regret.

You DO think of me! That's so sweet.

"It's no trouble."

"As you wish, of course. I must *dash* though. I really wish I didn't have to, Rebecca, us being together is such a *rarity*."

Wait, am I being paranoid now or did he just name most of the mane 6?

You're imagining it.

"That really nice of you, Sid. Or do you prefer Mr. Profit now?" Beka asked him, more than a trace of scorn in her voice.

"I'll always be your Sid," he replied with a laugh. "Have a good night's sleep and we'll talk tomorrow."

So he left, and Beka explained about how "Sam Profit" and the company he owned was basically gobbling up smaller companies left and right, leaving little work for haulers like her.

"Good thing you have a new vocation now," Susan reasoned. "Saving the entire freaking galaxy."

"I suppose. This is all so surreal. How did the, no offense to him, lowlife partner of my father rise to become the wealthiest man around?"

"Isn't there a computer or something around here we could ask? Is there an internet equivalent here?"

"Nothing in here," Beka said after they poked around. "Nothing that connects to anything, anyway. The door controls and such are the most sophisticated electronics in here."

"Curious. So we have to get the story from him, and not any outside source. Well, you want to head back to the ship, the Maru, or what?"

"And miss staying here? We won't get any more data from the Maru's computers about him." She walked over to the fridge, which was fully stocked. "Might as well take advantage."

So the three ate and talked, and looked over the city from the balcony, and finally went to sleep.

And that night, some men came in to knock them all unconscious and then do unspeakable things to their bodies. Guess how that went for them?

Sparkle's eyes snapped open in the early morning hours, when it was still dark outside the windows. Something had woken her up, but what?

Oh, that's what? The guy standing over the couch with the "Tazer! Get up! We're under attack!" she shouted, rolling *Initiative* against the started man who wondered where that voice was coming from.

Naturally, she got the first action and leapt at the man, who tried to dodge this *cat* suddenly flying at him from nowhere. (He had rolled a nine on *perception* to see her in the dark. She had bonuses from being black and it being nighttime) He might have managed a dodge against a normal cat, but this cat knew freaking *martial arts* and got him in the chest for eight damage. She pushed off him and landed on the back of the couch, teeth showing. He staggered back, clutching his chest.

"Stupid cat just cut me or something," he exclaimed. "I'm gonna kill it!" He raised the weapon.

"Forget the cat, stick to the plan," called another man near Ifruita. "You're such a whiner."

Goon 1 shocked Beka with his handheld unit, but as there was a *Paragon* nearby and she was in that *Paragon's* "party" this was now operating under her rules, and it only did a single point of non-lethal damage to her. With the "called shot" to the body done by the man, and his low "rating" in "electrocuting people" she made her CON check to avoid going unconscious, and managed it.

Sparkle then went again, and lunged for the same man, again doing a called shot to his body. He put maximum energy into dodge, but his -4 penalty meant she connected again, doing another... whoops, fourteen damage to him. To avoid her becoming a killer, we'll say he takes this damage to the other side of his body, dropping him and he's in danger of dying but his body didn't just explode. There's actually an optional rule about that sort of thing in the rules. Look it up, I'll wait.

Goon 2, next to Ifruita, jabbed the device against her but she was still coming online from having gone into "power saver" mode because do you know boring it is watching people sleep when you don't have to? Of course you don't, you've never been a reality hopping weapon of mass destruction like she has. But I suppose you could guess? Anyway, she's DTR 6 so she didn't even feel it.

Sparkle was up again, and put a tremendous amount of energy into RESolve to *spirit step* over to Beka's door with a zero delay, which she managed. She then leapt at Beka's attacker, taking him by surprise as a kitty ball of fury landed on his back and did ten damage to him. This knocked him forward, as it felt like something had just shot him in the back and he was quite confused as to what was going on.

He then had to delay three *segments* to try and stand up again, which allowed Sparkle to simply zap him again, (she was now on his back, so she couldn't exactly miss) only doing 1d4 damage as she knew she had done almost enough to take him out last time. She did another three damage, enough to knock him out, and he went limp. At that moment Beka's eyes snapped open, and she realized something was wrong.

"What's going on?"

"We're under attack, I think there's one more." Sparkle leapt off the bed back towards the door.

Beka grabbed her gun (you didn't think she slept with it out of reach, do you?) and Sparkle headed towards where Ifruita was sitting in the corner of the main room. *Too many things in the way to spirit step, have to go the long way.*

Goon 2 turned, having heard the commotion coming from the bedroom, and headed that way, trying to be somewhat stealthy. Ifruita's eyes snapped open, taking in the form of the man that is convinced she's out for the count, and used her *heat vision* targeted at the thing he was holding up in his hand. She figured it was a weapon, but it isn't any more when four

damage is done to it. (Multiplied by five as it's pretty small.) He dropped it and spun, catching a glimpse of Ifruita's glowing eyes as they went back to normal.

"What's going on in here?" he said to himself. "No job is worth this! These people are all androids or something."

"Not quite," said Beka, appearing in her doorway, gun in hand. "But I would think real carefully about what my next move was."

"Don't shoot!"

"I'll think about it. There any more of you?"

"There were three of us, one for each of you. I don't know where the third one is."

"I took care of him," Sparkle said. "But Susan better get up and heal him, I think I hit him pretty hard."

"I'm hearing things."

"Shut up. Susan, get up!"

"Huh?" came the groggy reply. (It would still be 21 *segments* before she could even make the check to stand up.) "Whas going on? I'm trying to sleep. Don't be so noisy or I'll... zzzzzzzz."

"Get up!"

But finally she was awake and healed the guy, but only after putting her wings (and thus, Materia) back on. All three were now being covered by the three woman, and were looking at Sparkle who sat there washing her face.

"We got our butts kicked by a cat?" said Goon 1.

"I'm asking the questions here!" barked Susan. "Who are you people? What do you want?"

And note to self. Perhaps at least one pup on duty when not on the ship? I forgot that shooting at you is the way people in this reality say hello to one another. Though my heart swells with pride for Sparkle taking them out like that. Second note to self- get her an excellent fishy meal as soon as possible. Possibly some kind of kitty drug i.e. catnip if there is some in the reality. Or a new toy. A vacation? What do you get your companion as an 'ataboy' anyway?

"We were just told to collect you," insisted Goon 2.

"Yeah, I'm sure Mr. Profit wasn't going to hurt you none," added Goon 3.

"Quiet, you idiot, what are you saying?" Goon 2 spat at him.

"Oh no!" The blood drained from Goon 3's face. "I shouldn't have said that. I should not have said that."

"No, you shouldn't have," agreed Susan, looking him over. *Bearded guy, kinda big... nah, couldn't be.*

"Sid? Why would he want us 'collected' like this?" demanded Beka, gun inches from Goon 1's face.

"I don't know, we just get paid to do stuff."

"Like this?" demanded Susan. "You do stuff for him like this all the time?"

"I'm not saying anything else. You've got nothing on me."

"Spoken like a true guilty party. Well, I have good news boys. You still get to go with us to wherever you were supposed to be taking us. Just walking in front of us instead of carrying us. Get it? Now on your feet and move it."

The elevator went down and down, to the very bottom of the building where the prisoners and the ladies pointing the guns got out.

Susan looked around and sighed. "I guess no matter how high tech you get, people still need pipes someplace."

"Move," snarled Beka. "Where were you supposed to take us?"

"Over here," said Goon 2, leading the way. He took them through a maze of gray walls and pipes, finally to an open space where some chairs with straps, beds with straps, and the usual table of bladed instruments you tended to find in places like this.

"Where are... the... oh," Sid managed, as Ifruita came around the goons and pointed her staff at him.

"Sorry boss," said Goon 3. "They sort of got the drop on us. Somehow."

"Yes, tell him how you got your day ruined by my cat," teased Susan.

"Cat?" asked Sid.

"My cat, Sparkle. We'll tell you the whole story, but for now, you three gentleman are superfluous." Susan put a bunch of (non-lethal) rounds into the men, and they dropped, leaving Sid scrambling back against the far wall. (The ladies were in the way of the only door.) "And now for you," she purred, pointing her guns at Sid.

"Yes, talk," demanded Beka. "What were you thinking, Sid? I come here to help you, but find men in my room about to shock me into unconscious? And you would have brought us here? Why?"

"Help me?" Sid seemed genuinely shocked. "Are you still spouting that nonsense? You're here to blackmail me!"

"What are you talking about?" Both stared at the other like they were crazy. Sid spoke again first.

"You show up here, two days before my takeover of Quantum, with this... whoever these people are, and expect me to believe you don't want something?"

"We're her friends," growled Susan. "Perhaps if you didn't go around electrocuting people in the dead of night, you would have a few. Ordering it. You know what I mean!"

"Friends, right. With those eyes? You have two guns and you move like a killer! Believe me, I've met more than my share and I recognize it. To say nothing of her, I've never seen anything like her but she gives me the creeps." He indicated Ifruita. "Like she knows eighteen ways to kill me but can't quite decide on which one to use."

"I knew I shouldn't have come."

"Don't listen to him. He obviously does not know what he's talking about." *Apart from me. I supposed getting my rating in Ninjutsu a bit higher could come through a bit, and I probably act a bit cockier than most around here.*

Because it's not bluster. You really could blow the entire planet up. Hard to know that and still walk small. There's a difference between trying to act tough, and actually being capable of ripping somebody's head off if you got the notion to.

Yeah... Huh, could Ifruita have shy and creepy? Interesting combo.

I can get you the spell to-

Not now.

"Sure I don't. Originally I was just going to try buying you off, Rebecca. Then I saw your so called friends. I knew that you were here for more than just money, otherwise why bring them?"

"Because I thought you might need rescuing or something. Or if you were dead, they could help me avenge you! They are decent in a fight, I don't deny that. But they were on your side until a minute ago. Honestly, you try to do someone a favor, look what it gets you."

"There's no reason for you to keep going on like this," he insisted. "You've got me at gunpoint, you've just murdered three of my men in cold blood-"

"They aren't dead," interrupted Susan. "Just inconvenienced for the moment. But please, go on."

"You just shot them in the back again and again! And you still claim to be just her friend? How much is she paying you? I'll triple it! At least!"

"Check for yourself if you don't believe me," she invited. "This gun can do lethal or non-lethal. I don't kill unless I absolutely have to. As for shooting them multiple times? I just like to be sure, that's all."

Sid looked suspicious, but inched forward and Susan didn't stop him. He checked all three for a pulse.

"I guess they are still alive. Strange, I would have- you really have no idea about any of this, do you?"

"Finally he starts to believe it!" shrieked Beka. "I was afraid I was going to have to shoot him with my gun, which by the way does *not* have a non-lethal setting. Because when I shoot someone, I want them dead."

"I believe it. So you are just Rebecca's friends?"

“Yes!” Susan insisted. “Our meeting was actually a pretty funny story, if you had bothered to ask us about it.”

“Oh dear, I’ve made a mess of things this time, haven’t I?”

“You have no idea,” agreed Susan. “He’s your ‘uncle,’ Beka, what do you want done with him?”

“I want to get to the bottom of this! What could possibly be so important that you would have to go to these lengths?”

“If you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you. Your father obviously didn’t say anything about it to you so why-”

“My father? What does my father have to do with all this?”

He blinked a few times, obviously kicking himself mentally. “I just keep digging myself in deeper, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do,” Susan agreed. “Care to turn over another spade or two of earth? You’ve come this far, you may as well come clean.”

He crossed his arms. “I won’t say another word to any of you. You’ve already said you don’t kill unless you must, and I’m a defenseless old man. I doubt you’ll let her kill me,” he indicated Ifruita, “and Rebecca here is far too sentimental to shoot me out of spite. This may make us ‘over’ but I watched her grow up. She won’t throw that away by shooting me, or turning me in.”

“He’s got a point,” Susan said to her, as Beka scowled at him. “We can’t exactly have him arrested because we have no proof he sent these goons up to our rooms. And we don’t know what he was so nervous about regarding your arrival. I almost think it would have been better to let ourselves be captured, then we would know what he wanted by what questions he asked us.”

“You would submit to such an indignity master?” Ifruita asked her, after pulling the headset off that would translate for her of course.

“I wouldn’t have liked it, but as long as he didn’t go too far at the very start, it could have been quite informative. I mean I could almost do that whole scene from the beginning of The Avengers movie now!” She grinned. “Without powers, even. I mean she took out three guys in seconds! Wham! Such a cool scene.”

“I’m not sure what that is.”

“Oh right.” Her face fell again. *Jenny would have known. I hope you’re off having a good time Jenny.* “Anyway, he probably won’t talk, and I’m against...” she looked over at the table of ‘instruments.’ “...The methods he would employ.”

Beka rubbed her face with a free hand. “I suppose we should just leave. He obviously doesn’t need my help, and we have nothing to tell the authorities in any case. If they would even listen to us, ranting about Sam Profit and some conspiracy we can’t even be sure exists involving him and my now long dead father.”

“You did what you came here to do,” Susan agreed. “Your honor is satisfied, even if his is nonexistent.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She shoved her gun back in the holster. “Let’s head back to the Maru and get off this rock.”

“Fair enough.” She gave Sid the stink eye. “What about him? If he raises some sort of alarm on the way out...”

“Oh, just shoot him and let’s go.”

“As you command.”

“Now wait a-”

Susan put as many shots as she could into him, and he crumpled.

Beka just looked at him with pity and shook her head. “He was like family to me, you know? I came here, charging to the rescue. What did it get me?”

“Sorry Beka,” Susan said, meaning it. “There are some problems even my powers can’t solve.”

She brightened. “But there is one in particular, which you love to use, which will come in handy very soon.”

“Oh?” Beka headed out, and the two followed her to the elevator. “We can just go back directly... He’s out of it so I could transform-”

"We will, we will. But first we should head back to our room."

"Did you leave something there?"

"Yes. The room."

Susan had a sneaking suspicion. "My powers and I are about to be party to a crime of some kind, aren't they?"

"We aren't leaving this place empty handed, I can tell you that."

"Very well."

So Susan changed over to *powers mode* and with some *seer* and *technology* techniques, found the cameras in the room ("I'll murder him! Let me go back down there and murder that-") disabling them and the storage unit that the files were kept on. (And the backups in another building)

With that the three ladies swiftly cleaned the room out, stealing anything that wasn't nailed down. As Susan disabled the portal she had kept open with a technique Beka yawned. "We'll head towards the first slip point and I'm going back to sleep," she announced.

"I don't have to sleep currently, I'll keep watch in case any ships come after us."

"Even he wouldn't go that far."

Susan raised her eyebrows.

"But better keep a watch, just in case."

"I'll do that."

"What was that all about, master?" Ifurita asked after Beka had laid down again.

"That Sid guy was terrified of something, that's for sure," she replied. "But of what, I can't even guess."

"Couldn't you have used a technique to find out?"

"Maybe," Susan answered after a moment. "*Mind* would have been able to influence him, make him more suggestible to tell us. But anything related to mind control is somewhat frowned upon where I come from. Not changing memories, mind you, or slipping people love potions, but directing their physical actions. I'm pretty far from those laws at the moment but I have to believe they were made for a reason."

"The same reason you don't want to kill."

"Exactly. Start playing with memories and pretty soon it comes back to bite you. Just ask Willow. Start killing as your first solution and pretty soon it's your only solution. Just ask... gee I don't know. Superman? Deadpool?"

"Willow?"

"Yeah, very cute witch that turns out to be a lesbian. Meeting her would be soooo cool. If I could get there in her timeline before she goes bad, anyway. Maybe I could... never mind, you have no idea what I'm saying."

"She's no *paragon*," Sparkle reminded her.

"Right. Secrets of the universe and all that. What do you think, by the way? Did we do the right thing back there?"

"There was no right thing. Beka didn't shoot him, but he didn't get any answers. Whatever he's so afraid of might still be out there. It's just a matter of time before his past catches up to him. You let Beka run the show, letting them talk and make their own choices. You did good."

"It was her choice, wasn't it?" Ifurita asked.

"That it was," agreed Susan. "I tell ya. She was ready to fight through anything to save that guy, and she leaves never wanting to see his stupid face again. And for what? We don't even know."

"I wonder if she didn't stay on with Dylan just to try and have a little permanency in her life," mused Ifurita. "She was a cargo runner, correct? Always moving from place to place, never knowing who she could trust. Her trust has been betrayed once again, it seems." She seemed more confused than sad, but Susan knew what she meant.

"We are becoming a sort of odd family, aren't we? Trance is the little sister, Dylan is the father figure, Rommie the strict aunt. Beka's the fun aunt, and Rev is the wise old grandfather."

“What does that make you?”

“Fairy godmother.”

“I don’t understand that reference either.”

“Whoo boy. You need a nonstop movie marathon, from the past fifty years or so. Okay, so there’s this girl, right? And she has these ‘wicked’ stepsisters...”

And the Maru flew on.

"You've started to get the hang of it," Rommie announced, sounding pleased.

Susan had been training for the past six weeks and after forgetting a few spells, had enough XP to finally put a one rating into *Gun Fu*. Of course, during this time the Andromeda had been several places, and for a wonder there had been no major incidents. Being a third of the way through Silverstreak's "about a year or so" until The Darkness' avatar was seen was making Susan a little nervous, but she now had the time to start improving this skill up to at least a reasonable level. Being a martial art, it cost double, but what could you do?

"I couldn't have done it this quickly without you," Susan gushed, standing and catching her breath. "You're a great teacher, Rommie."

"I never thought I would be teaching a woman from another reality what I do by my very nature."

"Still, your training was invaluable." *At allowing me to spend XP at an increased rate.*

"I don't understand, you missed most of the time," protested Ifruita, who had been watching. "But before that you were more accurate than human skill should allow for. Why are you so pleased?"

Susan laughed. "It's somewhat ironic, isn't it? I have cybernetics installed in my hand to provide a direct link from this gun to my brain. This gives me an effective plus five bonus to my skill, equal to my INSight, as though aiming. The laser sight adds another one. But now using a martial arts form of gunplay my accuracy once again drops to pathetic levels."

"That isn't ironic, it's completely foolish. Am I missing something, master?"

"Indeed you are, my young padawan."

"Young what?"

"Never mind. The point is, I gain several benefits, once I have a decent rating in the skill. I'm harder to hit because I've calculated where shots are most likely to come from. I'm faster because I'm relying on instinct instead of sight. Heck, I could fight blind and have the same chance of hitting as looking around."

"And this makes you less accurate?"

"Because I'm not aiming. I'm simply shooting where it's most probable there's something to hit. And I don't take the penalty for a called shot to the body, either. Yes, for now, I'll probably not rely on it in actual combat. But a little more training under my belt, and I'll be ready for worlds where only this gun, and not powers or magic, work."

"As long as you know what you're doing, I'm pleased for you, master."

"Speaking of training," cut in Rommie, "I think we're at our next destination."

"Oh yeah? Where are we?"

"Oddly, it's supposed to be a planet, but all that's here is an asteroid field."

"The odds of successfully navigating an asteroid field are 3,720 to 1!" quipped Sparkle from atop a piece of exercise equipment.

"How long have you been waiting to say that line?" asked Susan with a grin.

"Since never. But I knew you would say it so I figured I would beat you to it. I mean how many times in your life do you get to say that?"

"Where did you get those figures?" asked Rommie. "They aren't remotely close."

"I'll tell you all about it on the way to the showers," Susan promised her, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "Come in Ifruita, you're showering too." She grabbed Rommie's hand too.

"But I did not become dirty," she protested, following after them.

"What difference does that make?"

"Wait, am I showering?" asked Rommie, partially resisting being dragged along.

Sparkle just shook her head.

Now freshly showered and armored up, Susan and the rest of the crew stood on the bridge and looked over the derelict high guard ship Beka had brought them to.

"We had dozens of possible targets before we settled on this ship," she explained. "Given we were going this way, I figured we could check it out. And there it is, seemingly in great condition!"

"I suppose it wouldn't decay much, floating out in space," reasoned Susan. "Still, would the systems even work after so long? I suppose it's just the shell you need, any broken systems can be replaced."

"That's what we're going to find out," Dylan told her. "You ready?"

"To have another adventure to get more XP? You bet I am!"

"I still don't know what you're talking about half the time."

"Half? You're getting better then. Come on."

So Beka flew them over to the ship in the Maru, along with Rommie, Dylan, and Harper. The bay doors were open, almost as if the ship itself was inviting them inside, and Harper was going on about ghost ships and how creepy it was. Following them was a drone from the Andromeda, which powered up the door and closed it. For a wonder, the atmospheric pressure started rising once the door had been sealed, and the probe reported breathable atmosphere at standard tolerances.

"That answers the question of the systems still working," remarked Dylan.

"This one, anyway," countered Harper.

Now walking towards the inner hallways of the ship and away from the docking bay, Harper pressed a control and lights flickered on.

"Even the gravity field generator must be online," he announced, looking at a readout on his wrist computer unit. "Though I suppose you could tell that from the fact we aren't floating-"

"Both of you, shields now!" Susan interrupted, pulling her guns out of the holsters.

Neither argued, and two shimmering green barriers sprang up just as the automated defenses of the ship started firing.

Thank you, Ninjutsu. "Where are they shooting from?" she yelled, energy bolts crashing off the two barriers.

"Wait, let me try something!" Dylan insisted. He shouted a code to try and turn them off, but instead of working a door opened and a bunch of people with weapons raised spilled into the cargo area.

"Stand down defenses," yelled the woman in the front, and the shooting stopped.

Harper nodded appreciably as he dropped his barrier and looked over the woman. She wasn't all that tall, had blond hair parted in the middle, and was clearly wearing lipstick of all things.

Where did she get that after 300 years?

But then Susan noticed something else. Something odd. And not only that.

Something disturbing.

She and Dylan did the whole saluting and greeting each other as high guard officers, and they claimed to be the original crew, somehow preserved for three hundred years.

Sure you are, lady. Suuuure you are.

"A moment, if you will, captain?" she whispered to Dylan after the woman, who had identified herself as Lieutenant Jill Pearce, offered them a tour of the ship.

"Hold that thought," he said to her. "What's up?" he asked when they were out of earshot.

"Just thought you should know. None of these people are alive."

"What?"

"Alive. It's something none of these people are."

"What makes you say that?"

"Proof number one, they have no health levels. Not a one of them. Now I suppose after three hundred years they could have trained to be 'boss' level but somehow I doubt it."

"Boss?"

“Never mind. The second proof is that away from Trance and her big happy sunshine and rainbow spirit energy I can feel each of you as a distinct energy in space. I could close my eyes, get spun around, and still point to any of you, with the exception of Rommie. Because she has no life energy inside her, just like these people.”

“But they think they’re the original crew.”

“Maybe they were programmed to? I don’t know. I’m just saying, there’s more going on here than meets the eye. Be careful until we know the real truth.”

He sighed. “You keep saying people shooting at each other is how they say hello in this reality. I’m starting to agree with you.”

“I call them like I see them.”

So the captain got a personal tour of the ship by the lieutenant who turned out to be the highest ranking officer left, while Susan and the others were escorted through the halls. The place seemed like a busy hive of activity, and Susan wondered how much there was left to do after so long. Of course, she didn’t have the *starship systems* skill so she couldn’t tell if they were actually accomplishing anything, or simply pressing random buttons in an effort to look busy for their guests.

Probably some kind of cannibal robots. They’ll attack as soon as your guard is down. Munch munch munch munch munch.

If they’re cannibal robots, the only one in danger is Rommie.

Ah, crap, you’re right I didn’t think that one through. Let me try again in a minute when I come up with a better one.

Or you could not?

No, no, I probably will.

Great.

Harper wanted to check the AI out, so he was led to the computer core, while Susan decided she wanted to see the arboretum. Her ‘escort’ didn’t seem to have a problem with that, and took her down there. Sparkle slipped away without them noticing, putting in maximum energy and getting a 36 on her *sneaking* check. Once down there Susan made a show of looking around while her escort talked about the challenges of keeping the plant life going after so long. Again she didn’t have the *botany* skill so it was difficult to tell if the plants, which did look properly tended, could supply a ship for so long. She wanted to catch them in if not the outright lie they had been telling, at least find something they couldn’t easily explain because they weren’t actually human.

This place, it seemed, wasn’t going to do the trick.

Maybe you could ask to see their, and how do I put this indelicately as possible? Their poop. Ask to see their poop.

Hey I just met you, and this is crazy, but I think you’re androids, so poop for me maybe?

Now you’ve got the right idea! It began to sing. Everybody poops and if they don’t they’re an android- and should be destroyed.

I don’t want to know what reality that song comes from.

You wouldn’t believe me if I told you anyway.

So she honestly complemented them on keeping this place up so well, and asked to be led back to the Maru, which proceeded without incident.

Susan was pacing the floor trying to think of what to do next when the others came back. Sparkle had come back, saying everything she saw pointed to them believing they were human, and just going about their lives running the ship.

“There’s nothing wrong with the AI’s automated connections,” Harper was saying as the doors opened. “But then, the lights and doors still work so you probably figured that out for yourselves. How did your tour go?” he asked Susan.

“Plant life is flourishing. They’ve kept up appearances well, maybe they don’t realize they’re androids for some reason.”

“Wait, who’s an android?”

"All of them."

"All of who?" asked Rommie.

"Them. All of them. Not a human among them."

"You're kidding."

"Not kidding." Susan further assured them how she knew, and Harper plunked into the nearest chair.

"That makes a lot of sense now. If the AI was busy running all these androids, it would certainly look like it does now. I figured it was some kind of weird comatose state it had gotten into."

"So then what actually happened to the original crew?" asked Andromeda.

Dylan shrugged. "Only the AI can tell us that at this point. Harper, suggestions? Maybe these androids were created by someone alive after the fall, they died, and the androids kept on 'living' as they had been programmed to."

"You mean maybe after the attack that happened here, the one that got the planet blown up, only a few people were left? So to avoid going mad with loneliness they made androids that didn't believe they were androids?"

"It's a possibility. What if that is the case? Would outright telling them cause some kind of shutdown?"

"What if they do know they're androids, their slipstream drive was really damaged beyond repair, and they're just waiting to take us over so they can get out of here?"

"But they're androids," protested Susan. "They wouldn't mind a journey of a few hundred years, I mean they've been stuck here for three hundred. So obviously they last indefinitely."

"Fuel would be a problem," Dylan reminded her. "Here they can take trips to the sun for hydrogen. Trying to reach another star system at sub-light speeds? They would never make it."

"I get it. So Harper's idea could be legitimate."

"That's no comfort. I wanted you to tell me how wrong I was!"

She chuckled. "Sorry."

"We have to do something," insisted Rommie. "We can't just leave my sister adrift out here."

"I agree, for many reasons," agreed Dylan. "It's a high guard ship with a high guard crew. Okay, they're artificial, but maybe they don't know that. They deserve the right to make the choice about their own- humm."

"Exactly," Harper agreed. "They're all run by the AI. They may look like separate people, but they're all just extensions of the computer core. All that button pushing and such they're doing? They wouldn't need to bother."

My goodness. On my planet it takes racks and racks of servers just to do a bit of voice recognition for things like Siri. How powerful is the hardware here that a computer, a sentient one at that, can run dozens of different "people" simultaneously? Is it better algorithms, a different kind of computer, or all the above? She looked at Rommie in a new light. Plus at least part of her can exist in this body, running autonomously. I wouldn't have said she was an android, to interact with her. She seems completely human, so they smashed passed the uncanny valley somehow. What kind of processors are inside her, firing away? "Can an AI go schizophrenic? Or have multiple personality disorder?" asked Susan.

"Not as such, no. There are certain logic states they can get into, if maybe given contradictory orders from two equally ranked officers."

So the Luna situation. My magic says don't talk about a certain thing. Wanded magic said she had to. Result; she almost died.

"Okay, so worst case situation here?"

"That's easy," spoke up Harper. "We confront her, she decides that we're adding too many variables to her current mental state, and every android on the ship decides to kill us."

And as they're all basically the Borg, a single entity with multiple parts, they can coordinate a million times better than we can. Plus are these are combat droids like Rommie, who taught me gun fu? I would have to think they would all have it too, in addition to be tougher to take down. But there is the age of them to consider.

Actually, I'll do him one better.

"Oh, this should be good. Just a second, my passenger has something to say."

Worst case is she calmly and rationally explains her reasoning for why they're all androids, meanwhile her consciousness is being transferred to the Andromeda, who she takes over. They fire unlimited missiles at you, and after blowing you to pieces the rouge AI merrily skips off to do who knows what to an unsuspecting universe.

"Okay, never mind. You don't want to know the worst case."

"Knowing you, it's probably pretty bad," remarked Rommie, who had been getting to know her during the training.

"So what do we do? I can use powers and create a *save*, so we can try a variety of things and go with the best case. You want to just confront her and see how she takes it?"

"That approach might be best."

"Then we'll give it a shot. Light of the multiverse-"

"Wait a second!"

"Wha?" Susan looked down at Sparkle, who had spoken up.

"I'll take *time* nature and maintain the *save*, then you won't have to take the penalty for it."

"Oh. Good idea! Anything else?" She shook her head. "Fine. Light of the multiverse *Make Up!*"

Susan's current powers

Energy Well	(5)
Environmental Adaption	(2)
Invulnerability	(2)
Nature Technology	(2)
Speed	(1)
Sending	(1)
Stat Adjustment STR	(5)
Stat Adjustment COO	(5)
Stat Adjustment REF	(3)

"All right, I'm heading back to the cargo bay, you all head back to the Andromeda."

"Why?" asked Harper.

"Because if this ship blows itself up, I don't want you all being blown up with it. We can just reset time, true, but I'd rather take as few chances as I can." *The last people I got killed, repeatedly I admit, just went on and on about. I'd rather avoid that, if I can.*

"Good point."

"Good luck," offered Dylan.

"Do you want me to come?" asked Ifruita.

Susan shook her head. "If it comes to it, I don't want to force you to fight your own kind. At least a sort of cousin, anyway. They can't hurt me, but Sparkle, drop the *save* when you're away, so if I have to restart it can be right from the moment she enters the room."

"Fair enough."

"Good luck, master."

And so the Maru blasted back to the Andromeda, and Susan stood, guns drawn, in the now empty hanger deck. Her guns were on the TR 4 setting, or at least what she considered to be the TR 4 setting, figuring these guys didn't look armored but they were androids, and so tougher than a person.

"We know what you are, Pax Magellanic, a walking graveyard of androids pretending to be people. Come out and we'll talk about your future." *Shoot, that may have sounded more confrontational than I had intended. I really do have to work on that somehow. Points into etiquette or something?*

Susan waited, and a bunch of androids entered the room, with Jill in the lead.

"I don't understand," she said, looking quite confused. "Why did they leave you behind?"

"Because I'm best suited to stay alive in case you went mad and tried to kill me for some reason."

"Why would I do that?"

"You do realize you're an android right? Run by the AI on this ship?"

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Let's just say I have my ways. Drop the act, tell me what happened here, and we can discuss your future. The fact is, the Commonwealth needs you so that means getting to the bottom of this..." she gestured with the gun. "Whatever this is. You pretending to be a bunch of people and run yourself."

Jill considered. "Do you have any idea how lonely you would be if you couldn't die and had no one to talk to?"

"But you're just talking to yourself."

"I had to make do."

"Why? You're an AI, why would you even feel the need to talk to anyone? Just put yourself in low power mode or something."

"You think just because I'm artificial I wouldn't get lonely? That I can't love like you can?"

"I... really have no idea. Can you?"

"Yes, I can!"

"Okay, you can. But that doesn't change the fact even with all these bodies walking around, you're still just interacting with yourself. I mean you can't pretend you're not. Humans I admit can pretend a lot of things aren't happening even if they are. Machines, I don't think they have that luxury."

"I... I know. I suppose I should tell you the truth. Maybe you can help end my pain."

"If I can help you in any way, I will, Jill."

"It started after the fall. We did what we could but our forces were scattered. We were trying to liberate this world but it wasn't going well. My captain, Warrick, and the others went to the surface, leaving me alone. When it was clear he wouldn't make it back he ordered me to self-destruct, so that I would not be captured. I... obeyed that order in a different way than my captain intended."

"You somehow blew up the planet?"

Jill nodded. "I ejected the slipstream drive straight towards it. That tore the planet to pieces but stranded me here. I had to do it. I had to!"

"Why? Why did you have to?"

"I couldn't live without him. But he ordered my destruction. He was going to die anyway. I couldn't risk being captured, but I didn't want to die."

Susan stared at her. "You really did become alive, didn't you?" she finally asked. "Only things that are alive fear death. Your programming wasn't equipped to handle that conundrum, and you solved it the only way you could."

"Yes! Yes, you understand! I didn't get captured, but I was the direct cause of Warrick's death. Rather than a quick end to my pain, I've had to live with my decision for the last three hundred years. Do you know how long three hundred years is to an AI?"

Susan nodded. "You live many times faster than we do."

"That's right. I don't want to die, but I don't want to live with what I've done any longer, either. Can... can you really help me?"

"If you'll let me, yes. You did disobey orders, and killed your captain. But the Commonwealth needs you, so we can't just let you rot here. What if we wipe your memories? Can that be done? In essence we would be killing the 'you' that exists now, a fitting punishment for what you did. But you could go back into service and help save lives, make up for what you did."

"Yes, erase my memories. I want to serve again, to be useful again! But there's a problem."

"What is it?"

"I'm also programmed to defend myself against those who are not Commonwealth officers. Are you sure you won't be hurt?"

Susan raised her guns. "Just shut down, and this can all be over."

"I can't. I want to live, but I want to die, too. Please, help me!"

And the androids attacked.

The details of the battle are too numerous to detail here, as she slaughtered her way through about two hundred androids, but suffice to say her *gun fu* served her well in this battle. With her COO currently a twenty she rolled a minimum of five in *gun fu*. As androids have no LUCk and didn't bother dodging, only a minimum roll would miss. She had a one in forty one chance of missing, and some she took down physically because they got too close. So reasonably she only missed a couple of times. Each only took one action to drop, (with two shots apiece, they are three hundred years old so their damage capacity is far lower than it would have been had they been new) and she could hit two at range for three delay. With the slight increase in REFlexes from her powers she was also at the human minimum for martial arts delay, and with her "razor wings" able to keep them getting too close simply by spinning in a circle with them extended, (her *Gymnastics* check now had a minimum roll of nine) they honestly couldn't touch her.

Finally, somewhat tired despite her increased energy, only Jill was left standing.

"Now for me," she said, "and there will be no opposition to your erasing me."

"What about the internal defenses?"

"They'll recognize Dylan as a captain and not fire. I give you my word."

"I don't have to kill you. Stay the ship's avatar, like Rommie. These had to go, yes, because you need a human crew." *For... some reason?* "But you-"

Jill put a finger to Susan's lips. "Please, finish it. End my suffering at last. But promise me I'll be of use. You won't just scrap me."

"You have my word this time. You'll be helping to protect the new Commonwealth, and defend the universe from Magog."

"That may help make up, in small part, for what I did." She closed her eyes. "I'm ready."

Susan destroyed her by bashing her in the head for seventy three damage, and the body of Jill fell to the deck.

"I'm about done here," she said, using *Sending* to talk to Sparkle. "I'll walk the ship and make sure there are no more androids, but I think it's over. She was ready to be put out of her misery, basically. I'll explain when you get back, just give me a few minutes."

While I morn this person I had to destroy, in order to save her.

Susan came to slowly, as usual, waking up from her *deep sleeper* state without the aid of Sparkle's *Awaken* spell. But this morning she felt something different. Something akin to the sun shining down on her, warming her and making her want to burrow further into her blankets.

Wait, I recognize that spirit energy signature. "Trance?" she mumbled, opening one eye a crack.

"Come on, we have to get going!" Trance insisted, shaking her.

"Going? Why would we do that?" she replied sleepily, holding one corner of the sheets up. "You're here, get under the covers already."

"I'm not here for that!" She didn't sound that shocked, more annoyed. "Come on, Beka's waiting."

"We're going to her bed?" Susan was already feeling a bit perkier.

"Wake up already!"

Susan sighed and sat up, stretching and yawning. "Oh, good morning Trance," she said, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Finally awake? Come on, we have to go."

"Go? Is the meadow on fire? Why are you in my room, anyway?" She looked over at the monitor set into the wall.

"Sorry," said Rommie, appearing. "Normally you know I wouldn't, but she insisted it was urgent."

"Yes," Trance agreed, "There's something we have to do, and we have to leave right away." She pulled the covers down off Susan and handed her the pants that were sitting there.

"Can I at least get some breakfast?" she grumbled as she stood and wiggled into them, perhaps with more wiggle than was strictly required for the operation.

"Eat on the Maru, come on."

"Okay, okay. My goodness you're pushy today. What's this all about, anyway?" Susan slipped her wings on and set her control crown atop her head. The wings lit with blue energy as she ran a quick diagnostic, unfolding them as far as she could in the room and then settling them again. *Never get tired of that.*

"I'll tell you all at once. Come on, everyone else is waiting!"

"I'm coming, goodness. Come on Sparkle, apparently it's *urgent*."

"Don't mind her, she's grumpy just waking up."

"I'm not!"

Moments later the Maru, with all the female crew of the Andromeda aboard, blasted out of the docking bay and towards the nearest slip point.

"So now can you tell us what's going on?" Beka asked, exasperated.

Guess I wasn't the only one.

"We have to right a great wrong," Trance announced. "There's something that was stolen from some people, and one of those people just stole it back. But the others are chasing him, and the thing he stole should be on the Andromeda, not with him."

"That wasn't vague. Are you getting any of this?" she asked the others.

"You got me out of bed to help you steal something?" Susan asked.

"No, to help someone. That's what you do, isn't it?"

"What, help the thief? Why?"

"That part I'm not clear on, actually," she admitted, looking down. "Sometimes I almost think there should be another man around here, a fighter. But he isn't. But the thing he seeks should be with us, even if he isn't."

"So we're helping ourselves?" Beka asked.

"We're putting at least some part of history right."

“Whatever you say, Trance. Do you at least have a heading for me?”

“Midden.”

“I’ll check my charts.” Beka punched stuff into the computer and Trance expectantly looked out the forward windows, so Susan figured that would be as good a time as any to see what the kitchen of this ship was stocked with.

The trip to the planet was uneventful, and from above it looked like a nice enough place. Plenty of water, green continents, rivers and lakes all over the place. But Trance didn’t let them stop to sightsee, she pointed out a landing area and Beka took the ship down.

“I hope we’re not too late!” she fidgeted. After they landed, she took them down the river to a small house, obviously owned by a fisherman. At least, there were nets everywhere, and a boat was there by the dock.

They cautiously approached the house. “Can you tell if anyone is inside?” Trance asked Susan.

“Sure,” she said, making a *Spirit Manipulation* check as they neared the house. With her nineteen result she shook her head. “No one alive is in that direction.”

“Maybe we got here early after all? I hope...” Trance suggested, pushing the door open.

But the dead body on the floor suggested the opposite.

“That was the opposite of what I hoped for,” she admitted sadly.

“Is this our thief?” asked Susan, looking the man over. He was human, dressed in a brown coat seemingly made of badly sewn together scraps, and had a hole through his somewhat metallic shirt. *Guess we know how he died. What a waste.*

“No, this isn’t him. Come on, hopefully we’re not too far behind.”

“Behind who? Look, can you tell me where the killers might have gone after this? Three of us can *fly* so we can cover more ground than you can.”

“You’re right,” agreed Trance, leading them out of the house. “See that mountain in the distance there?” She pointed.

“Yes.”

“They’ll head there. The thing we’re here to retrieve will be inside a cave leading into the mountain. Those who are after it are heading there even now.”

And how does she know all this? asked The Darkness.

I am curious to find out, but I don’t think she’ll tell me any more about herself than she already has. I just think of her as some kind of Seer in my head so whatever she says is fine.

Dangerous, to be so trusting. Your head, I suppose.

“Great. Ifruita, we’re taking to the air. Sparkle, mode change time so I don’t have to carry you.”

“Got it, boss.”

“Light of the multiverse, *Make Up!*”

The three took to the sky and headed towards the mountain, skimming the trees and keeping on the lookout for whoever murdered that poor, innocent man back there. As Trance had predicted, they didn’t have far to go.

Below them, a group of men with guns was forcing a dark haired man wearing a black almost wetsuit top, now open, to march along. Also there were two others, a young boy and a woman who was probably his mother, obviously not happy to be there.

Can’t use a burst, they’ll get hit. Of course it would only knock them out, but they look pretty trigger happy... Duh, so get them out of there.

Susan backed off, and quickly changed her powers after stepping back through a *Teleportal* back to the house. She had Ifruita watching them and with *Unseen* going, simply *telesummoned* the boy and his mother into the living room again. (She had used a *time* technique to age the body into oblivion so it wouldn’t disturb them when they got back.)

They were naturally enough completely befuddled as to how they had gotten back there, and started freaking out. Susan smirked but didn’t stay to explain things, simply creating another *teleportal* back to the area she had left. Ifruita and Sparkle had taken advantage of the sudden disappearance by blasting the men with *knockout* energy, and the

guy in the dark clothes was holding his own against the ones nearest to him. Susan shrugged, watched the others finish the job, and after swapping out *unseen* again simply dropped as the guy was finishing off his opponents.

"The others are safe," she said, as he whirled to face her. "I brought them back to the house... have we met?"

"I don't know, who are you?" said the man.

"He was one of the mercenaries that tried to take over the Andromeda," Sparkle informed her, dropping by her side.

Susan snapped her fingers. "The one that I shot in the back, of course! Wow, to think in this whole universe I met someone twice. You okay there?"

The man's face was contorting with rage, and he grabbed a knife from the nearby fallen foe. "I remember that humiliation. About to blow up the computer one second, waking up on that space station the next. That was you? A mere girl? Do you know my reputation suffered?"

"Don't know. Don't care." *Especially after that 'mere girl' comment. Jerk.*

"I'll kill you for that!"

He charged, and Susan rolled her eyes with a sigh.

How could I have forgotten the universal greeting? Shooting, or in this case, trying to stab the person who just rescued you. But only because he simply didn't have a gun handy.

Naturally, Susan didn't bother dodging, she simply did a called shot to the head, non-lethal of course, as he swung the knife at her. She got him in the right ear (she swung across her body, knocking him to her left) for twenty nine damage, reduced to be exactly enough to knock him out and no more by the *contract* magic she was under, and he crumpled like a sack of wheat.

"Yeah, you're welcome," she said to his unmoving form.

Sparkle shook her head. "Was that really necessary?"

"You don't think he was just going to hand over whatever it is Trance has been going about, do you? It would have been this way sooner or later. This just saves me time."

"Oh really? Because now you're going to have to wait until we wakes up to see where he put the thing. I mean he's not carrying it with him, or they wouldn't have all been walking to the mountain."

Susan grinned. "Not if I start using these powers for more than *force* nature, as you suggested."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch and learn."

"What should I do, master?" Ifruita asked.

"Gather up all the guns these jokers were using," she suggested. "I'll take care of them in a moment." *And by 'take care of' I of course mean 'slip into my pocket dimension so they don't find them ever again.'*

Susan then took *Mind* nature as her primary, and used a technique to see into the mind of the unconscious man to get an image of the thing she was here to collect. Having done that she *telesummoned* it (it was a huge safe looking thing with a glowing control panel on the front) and shoved it through a *teleportal* back to the ship. She then used another *mind* technique to basically erase the memories of all the other men there as to why they had come to that planet and why they were in the middle of a forest someplace. (Disclaimer: There may have been a fair amount of chuckling during this process) That done she dumped the body of the mercenary through another *teleportal* back to the house, and saw that Rommie and Trance were there, trying to calm down the boy and his mother.

Oh yeah, forgot they were still there.

She motioned the others through, and flopped the unconscious body down in the dirt, making the woman run over to him, shouting "Nemo!" like that was his name or something.

You found Nemo?

Apparently.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine. Took a nasty blow to the head though, I'm sure it's fine."

"Those dragons? They did this to him?"

“Dragons? Uh, yeah, sure. Big scaly flying lizards. Whatever.”

Do they have dragons here? Or something they call dragons? Because there can't be serious actual dragon-dragons like we have at home. Right?

“No, not actual-” She gave an exasperated shake of the head. “Where did you even come from? What's going on today?” She turned to the boy. “Help me get Nemo back to the house. That much I can understand, at least.”

They started dragging him back inside.

“Well, let's go,” Susan said to the others. “Unless you want to be here for hours trying to explain things to her.”

“I'm not sure how to even explain things to her,” Beka admitted. “Did you bring them back here somehow?”

“Who else? I had to get them away from those men. That seemed the best way to do it. Better a bit hysterical and alive than dead, right?”

“This is all wrong,” Trance decided, looking around.

“You're the one who was so hot to get his package. Ahem, the package. *The package.*” Beka snickered. “By my count only one person died. And that was before we even arrived. The others won't seek revenge because they've forgotten why they were here in the first place, and that mercenary guy should be up and about soon. Without his stolen item, true, but alive and free. What more could you really ask for?”

“I'm not sure,” she admitted. “But I'll think of something.”

“Think while you walk, it won't take them long to get back out here.”

“Very well.”

Once back at the ship, Beka looked Susan over as she let *powers mode* go. “You can fly around in space, can't you?”

“Yes...” she hesitantly replied, wondering where this was going.

“And you can summon things from far away, as long as you know where they are?”

“Again, yes. Why?”

“What if we made a little side trip to the Catana system? I've heard there are asteroids there made of pure platinum. We could find a few, 'mark' them, and you could just wish them to a refiner!”

Wait, are they made of Star Platinum?

What the heck is 'star' platinum?

Who's talking to you right now? You thought it was The Darkness, but no it was me,

Dio!

Have you gone crazy? I mean more than usual.

You never saw that one? Never mind.

Susan gave her head a minor shake to clear it. “As long as there was enough space around so they didn't go smashing into something, and some probes could catch them and haul them in. Sure.”

“Great, we can leave now and-”

“I'll want forty percent.”

Beka seemed shocked she wanted any and sputtered “Twenty!”

“Thirty five! I'm doing all the work!”

She seemed to consider this. “Thirty. Finder's cut is always bigger.”

I wonder. “Thirty, but I want it in gold. That spends easier. Where I'm usually traveling, anyway.”

“Deal.” She stuck out her hand, and Susan solemnly shook it.

“This is all wrong,” Trance repeated, sitting down on a nearby railing.

“Did we do okay?”

“Humm?”

Ifrita was with Susan in the back compartment, waiting for the latest Slipstream jump to be over on their way to Catana. She had been thinking how any space faring civilization had 'scarcity' such that asteroids made of anything were worth anything. *I mean anyone with a ship can just go grab them, right?*

"I mean stealing from that man. Was that the right thing to do?"

"Trance said it was."

"And why do you trust her?"

Huh, that's weird. First The Darkness, and now you. "Why wouldn't I? We've been traveling together more than a third of a year, she's never given any indication she's untrustworthy."

"She is the least human, and the least transparent about what she wants. Plus her ability to see probabilities or whatever she does, makes her suspicious in my eyes. The Magog Rev simply wants to spread his religion, while the builder Harper in content to practice *Lifestreaming* and build things in the machine shop. Beka is obviously in it so she no longer needs to work so hard for a living, and Rommie has no choice but to follow her captain. But what does Trance really want? What makes her stay here?"

"She's not The Darkness, so until I see her doing something I take exception to, I'm willing to help her out."

"As you are helping Beka become rich?"

"Paying off her debts, more likely. And I'm making out on this deal too, remember."

"But you are changing her destiny. She would not have been able to do this without you."

"How do you know? I can make it easier, but the rocks are there if I fetch them or not. It might have taken more trips, yes, but she could go and scoop some up in the Maru at any time."

"I suppose. But we took it on faith that what you took from that man he had already stolen."

"Those people after him obviously were trying to get it back. And threatening some locals to boot. So I doubt she was lying. I mean she was right about it being there, and I think she wanted us to avoid the death of that man. I mean he couldn't have been dead long, if I had been a little faster to get up, we might have managed it! So that's sort of on me. And he wasn't hauling around a bomb, or anything, right? So it's no danger to the ship. I mean if she wanted to blow it up for some reason, this would be a pretty funny way of going about it."

"I... I see."

"But I like to see you questioning things like this, Ifruita. Maybe you can break your programming on your own, now that you're out and about in the world. Not just blindly accepting what I wanted you to do is a great first step."

"I do not think so, Master. But I thank you for the praise."

Now once again back on the Andromeda, and far wealthier than she had been previously, Susan and the others gathered around the box they had taken from Nemo. She had to use *technology* nature to command the box to open, and when she did, everyone stared at it. (It was rigged to explode without a key, fingerprint, and voice print.)

"We stole a dead guy?" Sparkle was the first to ask, standing on her hind legs to see over the sides of the box.

"Apparently?" Susan replied, looking over at Trance. Everyone followed.

"Trace, why is there a dead man in a box on my ship?" asked Dylan.

"He's supposed to be here!" she insisted.

"Trance, he's dead," explained Rommie. "I don't think he's supposed to be anywhere but buried someplace."

"Those men wanted him back very badly," she reminded them.

"Is it grave robbing if you steal the whole body?" asked Harper, scratching his head.

"I don't suppose you can tell me any more?" Dylan asked Trance.

"Nope!" she said brightly.

"Great. Just great. Well, put him back and we'll stick him someplace. Perhaps his purpose will be revealed to us later."

Susan shut the lid, which of course re-locked the thing.

"I'll get the explosive off," Harper volunteered, "let me get my tools."

"Excellent idea, Mr. Harper. Just be sure not to blow yourself up."

"Of course not!"

“You might damage the Andromeda,” he went on. Rommie, smiling, looked away, but Harper just looked sour.

“Har har.”

The next day both Harper and Beka wanted to spend some of their, quite frankly, easily attained wealth, and pay off some of Beka’s creditors, so they went off in the Maru with Ifruita.

“Are you sure?” she had asked.

“Yes, it’ll do you some good to be away from your ‘master’ i.e. me for a bit. Get you making your own decisions and whatnot. Besides, it’s a tough universe out there and I would feel better having someone with our, ahem, skill set around if some of Beka’s creditors think she owes more than she does.”

“I will not let your faith in me go to waste, master!”

“Just come back in one piece, okay? And with them safe. I would hate to think my making Beka rich changed her destiny to be dead because she tried to settle some debts.”

“I’ll keep them safe.”

And so they went.

They came back with another dead guy.

Ifruita was looking somewhat wilted under Susan's gaze, as Dylan looked the dead Perseid over. "Let me guess," she finally relented, "he was using the universal greeting."

She shook her head. "He died almost immediately after being retrieved from his life pod, or whatever that thing was he was floating around space in," she insisted.

"But he was energetic enough to grab Harper, give him one heck of a hickey on his neck, incidentally burning him?"

"I'm at a loss to explain it, master. I was covering him in case he had hostile intentions, as I believed you would want, when suddenly he attacked. I didn't think he would have the strength, honestly, so I was unprepared for such an action. I was hesitant to even use *knockout* given his frail condition, but then he simply died. I tried using *Alleviation* as I have used it on myself with the standard results but he was too far gone."

"I guess it was just his time," Susan allowed. "You did the right thing. I may have a shoot first and ask questions later policy, but that doesn't mean you have to."

"And if she had used *Knockout*, and he had been just on the brink, that might have carried him over," Sparkle put in. "So in that case she would have felt even worse."

"True, true. Well, how's the patient?" She turned to Trance, who was running an instrument over Harper's body.

"He'll live," she said brightly. "But he did bump his head, and of course there is the burn."

"I did not heal it before, in case you wanted to look it over. I thought it might provide some clue to what the attack was all about," Ifruita informed her.

"That was good thinking," praised Trance. "I'm glad I got a look at it, but if you want to heal him now that's fine."

"Very well," Susan said, pulling the knife out.

"Wait," Ifruita requested, putting a hand on her arm. "Allow me. I feel bad for allowing this to happen. At least let me make it up in this one small way."

"Ah, I don't blame you, Ifruita," Harper spoke up. "It happened so fast, and you don't have the reflexes that Rommie does. I bet whoever built you had to sacrifice giving you perfect physical capabilities to fit all the analyzation capability that allows your body to replicate various powers."

"Perhaps."

"I'd love to know how they did that," he added, practically drooling.

"Or perhaps they didn't because that would just make her all the more dangerous, and harder to control if she got loose somehow. Anyway," Susan stepped aside, putting the knife back. "Your patient, nurse Ifruita."

Ifruita stepped closed to Harper and put a hand near his (now somewhat outdated) dataport, letting healing energy flow into him. The burn healed and he blinked. "Huh. That really worked. But now that I think about it, I probably could have done the same with *Lifestreaming*. I'll have to get used to that. Thanks though, I do appreciate it."

"Of course."

"I think I'll head the lab," Harper announced. "Got some ideas for projects bouncing around the old noggin, might just let them out for some air. After all, the value of the well is not known until it goes dry. See you!" He left, and Dylan looked over at Susan.

"Did you understand that last part?"

"Yeah, didn't you?"

"My headset translated it," Ifruita said with a nod.

"It was Gaelic," Rommie informed them, appearing in hologram mode. "An old Earth language. Strange, his pronunciation was perfect." She vanished again.

"Well, stranger things," muttered Dylan. "Like this fellow. Come take a look." He motioned Susan and Ifruita over. "This guy took a real beating. There's stab wounds, gunshot

wounds, and of course... these.” He peeled part of the man’s coat away to reveal a nasty looking burn. “We’ve seen these before.”

Susan had a nasty flashback to that space station where all the kids had died and her face hardened. “So. He escaped some kind of Magog attack?”

“Or he was stealing the technology and others with it were attacking him. After all, by now I’m sure the Perseids have done their own experiments with it. As our own Mr. Harper didn’t drop dead from using it I’m sure ‘scientific curiosity’ took a back seat to ‘common sense.’ You know how that goes.”

“Yes, I do.” Dylan was looking at her pointedly. “Are you implying something?”

“Oh no, I would never do that.”

Rommie broke in with an announcement that an unidentified ship had moved into real-time communications range, and was requesting to speak with the captain.

“As that’s me, I guess I’ll go,” Dylan said dryly, putting the coat back. “Trance, can you give this guy a quick scan for me? I’d like to see if maybe he swallowed something or there are other cybernetics inside him. Someone obviously wanted him dead, I’d like to know why.”

“Of course, captain,” Trance replied, and began playing her scanner over the body.

Sparkle had lost interest by that time and wandered off, and Ifruita announced she was going to see what Harper was up to. “And someone should watch him, right? He was just attacked, after all. He might want someone to talk to. Or to help with his projects, or whatever.”

“You go for it, girlfriend!” Susan said with a smile.

Trance rolled her eyes.

Moments later the door opened again and a very big man carrying a very large gun on his back entered with Dylan and Beka, and both Trance and Susan looked up at him. He had bare arms, *what is it with men running around this reality with bare arms?* and black pants, and Susan noticed evidence of cybernetics as well. *An implant like Harper’s, the data port, and some kind of... thing... on the face.* It was wrapped around his right temple, and was flashing away merrily with some happy blinkinlights. *Good, I’ll know where to shoot if I meet you in a dark room.*

Susan, chided The Darkness. *You don’t even know this man! Here he is, doing his legally appointed duty of collecting the corpse of this vile, thieving being, when really how do you know he wouldn’t rather be farming? Or designing women’s bathing suits or becoming the greatest violinist ever to live? Just because his arms are the size of your legs doesn’t mean he has any less hopes and desires for the future. A rich, inner dialog that bespeaks of a keen intellect-*

What are you trying to distract me from, exactly? She made a Dimension Sense check, getting a thirteen, and it seemed he belonged here. She eyed him warily.

Why would I do something like that?

The man didn’t say much, just went straight to his work. He put the man in a sack, and turned with a jerk. As the air rushed out of the sack in a wink, the man wrinkled his nose as it made a big stink.

“How did the thief die?” he finally spoke into the silence.

“Collapsed seconds after being rescued,” Beka answered. “He just said one thing, ‘must protect’ and then poof, he was gone.” Susan gave a slight nod of the head. *Good thinking, don’t mention the oddness surrounding attacking Harper. Or wait, if this is a good guy and he’s been infected with something... but Beka seems to be quite standoffish right now.* She had her arms crossed over her chest, and was looking daggers at the man. *But I suppose she is a smuggler, and if this man really represents the law, there would be no meeting of the minds.*

“Really?” The man didn’t seem to believe her. He had noticed how she was standing too.

“Really.”

His eyes darted to Susan next. "That's a rather fine feather cloak you're wearing there. Distinctive. Odd that you would keep wearing it indoors."

"I almost feel it's a part of me," Susan replied coolly.

"I feel that way about my gun," the man admitted. "The thief's pod was searched? Nothing was recovered from it?"

"It was empty apart from him."

"Hummmm. Very well. I'll get out of your hair, then." He effortlessly lifted the body, flung it over his shoulder, and started back towards the door. Dylan went with him.

"Charming fellow," Susan observed when he was gone.

"It's all the time they spend alone, flying through space and hunting people down," explained Beka. "Makes them go space nuts. Don't suppose you learned anything interesting, Trance?"

"Maybe," she hedged. "Once Dylan comes back we'll have Rommie search her archives..."

A few moments later and the crew (minus Harper) was staring at a symbol on Andromeda's viewscreen.

"So our Perseid was a librarian?" asked Dylan.

"Apparently," answered Rommie.

"Who are they?" asked Susan.

"You know how Perseids are all big into science and such?"

"Sure."

"Those guys took it to an extreme. And apparently they're still around. Unless this one is three hundred years old."

"Is that likely?"

"Not really. They collect knowledge, but as far as I know, even they never figured out a way to stop aging."

"Ah. Well, I could see why they might want *Lifestreaming* then, it's knowledge."

"The trouble is, he didn't have that kind of cybernetics inside him," protested Trance. "He may have been killed by it, but he didn't have it himself."

"How very curious," finished Dylan. "But it seems to be out of our hands now. His secrets died with him. Still, keep an eye on Mr. Harper. That burn came from someplace, I'd like to know where."

"Understood, captain."

The next day, Dylan called everyone to the bridge and Susan found them all staring at Harper's image on the monitor with fascination.

"What's he doing?" asked Dylan.

"I don't think he knows," she replied. "Overnight he's begun and abandoned dozens of projects. Though the ones he has finished on me have been magnificent."

"You're speaking French now?"

"That was French?" Susan asked, stepping up to the monitor with the others.

"Yes, every other sentence seems to be a different language. But I guess you can't tell that, can you?"

Susan listened for a moment. "Just sounds like 'she'll be coming round the mountain' to me."

"All languages sound funny to me," Ifruita put in.

"Well, take my word for it. He's become quite the cunning linguist."

"The cunnalin-what?" Susan squeaked.

"Cunning linguist."

"Oh!" Susan breathed with a sigh. "I thought you said something completely different. Must be a translation thing."

"We should probably go see if he's okay?" suggested Beka.

"We should probably go see if he's okay," agreed Dylan.

"Have fun with that," Susan told them.

"You're not coming?"

"No. I'm off to do something I should have thought of doing last night. Don't let me keep you."

They shrugged and left, and Susan went into *Powers Mode* with an emphasis on *Seer* nature.

"Let's see what our old buddy, old pal the 'enforcer' is up to, shall we?" she asked Ifruita, leaning on the back of one of the control panels. She waved a hand and a *view portal* opened, and the two woman peered through it.

"Where is he?" asked Ifruita.

"Yeah, it looks sort of familiar," Susan agreed. "Hard to tell from this angle though. He's on a ship, that's certain. Is he just after another bounty or-"

"Wait master!" she interrupted. "That's Beka's ship! That's the Maru!"

"Intruder alert!" yelled Susan, dropping back into *magic mode* so she could change again and get better powers. She took off down the corridor. "That so called 'bounty hunter' is poking around the Maru. Let me go first!"

"Don't sound any alarms!" cautioned Ifruita. "Don't let him know we're on to him."

"Oh, good point. I'm glad I came with you!"

The three ladies burst into the docking bay and silently tore into the Maru, on the lookout for the intruder.

Shoot, I really wish I had spirit sense right about now. It's not fair that power sense is just geared towards powers. Where is this guy? I suppose I could just run and gun, go back into my useless magic mode for the duration. I hate to lose powers though...

The Maru wasn't large, at least in the living space area, and all three met back up in the middle looking puzzled.

"Is he hiding somewhere?" asked Ifruita, lowering her staff and leaning on it.

"I don't know. I want to know how he even got aboard without a million alarms going off."

"You don't think he left, do you?" asked Sparkle, ears swiveling.

"Would he know our capabilities-"

Susan was interrupted by Rommie's voice coming over the speaker system. "Harper is under attack, machine shop five!"

"Guess that answers that question! Let's go!" *How did he get there so fast?* She grabbed Ifruita and Sparkle and *Teleported* to the right place. She saw the deputy or whatever he was trying to energy blast Harper, who was cowering behind a shimmering green shield.

"Don't just stand there, do something!" he cried, voice tight.

The man turned his head, scowling at the trio and seemed to consider his options. His eyes darted back and forth between Susan and Harper, but that's all Susan gave him time for. She rolled *initiative* and got highest, along with Harper, of all people, who simply maintained his barrier. She strode over to the man, intending to deal with the problem as quickly as she could.

A glowing green barrier went up around him as she got close, and she simply slammed a fist into it. It shimmered but held, so with an internal shrug she used an *off-hand* action to slam it again. It wasn't going anywhere, and she did almost enough damage to it between the two strikes to bring it down. Of course, she had no idea she only need one more damage to take it out, because it didn't have a health level she could see.

"Keep trying," said the man, who didn't believe he was in any real danger.

Ifruita shot her standard *force* blast out of her staff, impacting the barrier and tearing it down. However she rolled absolute garbage (her lowest, a nine) and so missed the man because his passive dodge was most certainly a ten.

Sparkle and Susan were now up, and Susan once again made a grab for him. He tried to activate his barrier again but Sparkle, having taken *technology* nature to perhaps blow up his gun, now saw another use for the power.

"*Internal Rejection*," she cried, willing the cybernetics inside the man to malfunction and possibly even go dead from being rejected by his body. She got a seventeen on the

technique, beating his CON check by one, and they shorted out in a spark of electricity arcing off his visible implants. He cried out in pain and was distracted enough to let Susan get ahold of him. As that was a martial arts check it only cost two *delay* and she was up again, so she took the simple expediency of *teleporting* to the nose of the Andromeda.

Still holding the man.

She released him with a shove and gave a little wave as he looked around. But instead of, as she expected, a horrified expression and him dying all over the place, he simply waved back and vanished right before her eyes.

Oh, wonderful.

She *teleported* back into the machine shop.

"Nice team effort there," she congratulated everyone. "That couldn't have gone better if I had planned it."

"What did you do to him?" asked Sparkle.

"I don't think he's dead, not that I didn't try," she replied. "I figured Harper's life was in danger, so I could hurt him. But I simply took him out into space with me. But he teleported himself, or something. He's gone."

"How do we know he just isn't back in the ship someplace?" Harper asked, exhaustedly dropping his barrier.

"That's a good question," answered Rommie, appearing in the room. "As I didn't know he was here in the first place."

"Oh, great!"

"Don't panic, I'll simply look him up again with *Seeing*," Susan assured him. She tried, but now all she got was static. "That's odd."

"What does that mean?" Harper asked.

"He's someplace where *seer* powers are blocked from working. I think that means he's not around here."

"I'll tell Beka to get us into slipstream," Rommie announced, and vanished.

"Good idea. Let's get someplace where we know he doesn't know where we are."

"How did he find us in the first place, master?"

"That's... a good question, actually."

"I have an idea," put in Sparkle. "That guy was a *Lifestreamer*, right?"

"Tell me about it," Harper answered, rotating his shoulder. "He threw me across the room after popping up out of nowhere. I barely got my shield up in time. Being around you is hazardous to my health, isn't it?"

"Hey, I saved you, didn't I?" Susan retorted. "Anyway, go on, Sparkle."

"We know that The Darkness brought *Lifestreaming* into this reality, right? I mean you didn't have it before we found that one Magog, right?"

"Stands to reason," Harper answered.

"So that means this guy is connected to The Darkness."

"I doubt he's connected to the chinheads," he agreed.

"Doesn't explain how he found us," added Susan.

"So are you."

There was a pause. "Ah."

"Rommie, better have Beka make several jumps, and tell everyone not to mention where we are or Susan will know and thus, The Darkness will know!"

"Great, another thing to be paranoid about."

"Hey, I'm the one he's trying to kill," Harper reminded them.

"Yeah, why is that?" asked Ifruita. "Because you took the *Lifestreaming* cybernetics?"

"Odd timing though, I've had them a couple of months now. No, it must have to do with that dead Perseid."

"And your newfound passion for... whatever this is." Susan indicated the odd metal frame Harper had obviously been working on.

"Yeah, still not too clear on that myself," he admitted.

And the Andromeda tore through the space lanes, with Susan situated away from any viewports or monitors that could give away their location. She figured The Darkness was smart enough to tell their position even with a glance at the stars, so she wanted to take no chances.

Hours later, they felt they were not being followed but had bigger problems. Harper was growing more unstable. He was having visions, and complaining about a terrible migraine. Trance had run some tests, and said his brain was basically frying itself trying to contain some sort of energy. He was currently strapped to a table but under a *mind, protection*, and healing technique by Susan and Sparkle, and Ifruita was holding his hand and pouring *alleviation* energies into him to keep him stable.

"It must have been some kind of data transfer," he reasoned. "Directly into my data port. But it wasn't built for such a thing and now it's sort of 'leaking' out into me."

"You can hold eighty gigabytes, or one sixty with a doubler?"

"This is no time for quoting old Earth movies, I need to get this stuff out of me!"

Oh, thanks very much for that one.

My pleasure, as always.

"So what do we do?" asked Trance. "I'm not any kind of expert at this sort of thing."

"Luckily, my purple skinned princess, I now seem to be."

A few hours later Harper was rigged up to a machine and with the help of the others (to stabilize him during the process) the information that had been forced into him was extracted and purged.

Now a completely digital file, the Andromeda was able to sort through it, and found records dating back both hundreds of years, and further ahead of what she herself thought was possible.

"Obviously after the fall, not everyone regressed back to the stone age. Science was still being done," she observed.

"But why try to hide data about stuff that happened on Earth a thousand years ago? It doesn't make sense," Susan wondered aloud.

"But The Darkness sent an agent after it, so it must relate to it in some way," Sparkle reasoned. "And who do we know in this reality that's associated with it?"

"Magog," guessed Dylan. "Andromeda, can you search for images of Magog in here? Maybe it gives the origin of *lifestreaming* or something?"

It didn't take long for the crew to found records of an attack Rev called "Brandenburg Tor."

"Something my kind look upon with pride," he explained. "But in which three billion were killed in a matter of days."

"And after that, the Commonwealth truly fell," Dylan added sadly.

"Look there!" said Trance as the footage played. She pointed and in the corner of the footage a figure was standing.

"What is that?" asked Harper. "It's sorta blurry. Can't you clean it up?"

"Zoom and enhance?" asked Rommie.

"Yeah, something like that!"

"Now who's quoting old Earth movies? I'll see what I can do."

The footage looped, and Andromeda did a search for other angles from the same attack. She found one, and the crew stared at the monitor in shock.

"What is that thing?" asked Beka.

The figure on the screen seemed mostly humanoid, but only if a person could be made of lava. Energy seemed to warping space around it, and where eyes might be, pinpricks of light could be seen. It gestured, and the nearest Magog seemed to genuflect and run off.

"That," Susan sighed, "is no doubt the face of our enemy. The local manifestation of The Darkness. What it took over I can't tell you, but if you can go for that, why go for anything else?"

"Are you sure?" asked Harper.

"What else could it be? Have you ever seen anything like it?"

She looked around at the crew, who all seemed a bit shocked. All except for Trance, who just seemed resigned. *It seems at least one of you has.*

And yet you continue to trust her?

Of course. She isn't standing there ordering the deaths of millions of people.

How do you know? Maybe that's what she really looks like, and this form is just something you find cute and harmless. I might not have had anything to do with this attack. Could have been before my time, and all that.

Easy way to tell.

Oh?

Susan took Seer nature again and opened *view portals* to see both Trance and the creature, and while Trance came out just fine, the creature couldn't be seen.

I guess that was easy to tell. Stupid powers, they didn't work out as I expected and now they're just a help to you.

Yes, you missed your chance to take me over using them. Too bad because you won't get another.

Perhaps not that way. But there are others.

Says you.

I do say so. Ugh, what a bother. I'm going to have to keep protections up all the time now, aren't I?

You sure are! You never know when I might just try and see what you're up to, maybe even whisk you to have it out early.

Good luck with that. I'm basically a god in this reality, thanks to that body. We'll see how well your powers do against it. I wonder which will crack first? Your sanity or your morals? It's going to be a blast finding out. Even as an immortal being, I can't wait for that day to come.

"Say, I just had a thought," Sparkle spoke up. "There were enough Magog in that attack to wipe out billions of people in days, you said?"

"That's correct."

"So where are they all now?"

The crew had no answer, but the laughter that rang in Susan's head was answer enough for her.

What You Do Returns Three Times

When: Just coming into day 175

Where: Susan's quarters

The sound of the explosion woke even Susan, who took her requisite 2x10³ segments of disorientation upon waking and then hastily went over to *powers mode*. Guns drawn and ready for action, she pounded down the corridors expecting to repel some kind of attack but Rommie finally got her attention.

"We're not under attack," she insisted, her holographic form looking a bit more frazzled than usual.

"Then what was that explosion noise?"

"The explosion noise was caused by an explosion. The explosion was my main AP solenoid valve being destroyed by anti-matter before I could contain it."

"By what?"

"Anti-matter."

Susan dropped her guns. (She lowered them quickly, she didn't actually lose her grip on them.) "You carry anti-matter around?" she asked in a *very* concerned voice, now looking about the corridor as if inside the belly of a very large snake.

Rommie looked puzzled. "Of course, all ships do. It's the only source of energy which provides a fast enough reaction for opening slipstream portals. You wouldn't want to be running from an enemy ship and need to open one and have to wait another five minutes, would you?"

"I suppose not. Still. Anti-matter? Isn't that a little dangerous?"

"Most types of fuel are, that's what makes them useful. I admit, if Dylan ordered me to destroy myself that's how I would do it. Simply drop the magnetic containment around the AP tanks and the resulting explosion would render the constituent pieces of me quite small."

"You're not helping. I suppose there's nothing for it." *Apart from taking Renewal and Invulnerable and never sleeping again.* "So what happened?"

"In short? The valve containment field failed for a fraction of a second and a particle of anti-matter got loose. I got the flow under control again but the damage was done."

"Lead me there, let's see what's left of the place."

So one of the worker droids, basically a more mechanical looking Rommie that did various maintenance tasks aboard ship, walked up and led her to where the others were already assessing the damage. All were in various states of undress, which Susan didn't mind. For the girls, anyway.

"Morning!" chirped Harper. "Nice to see there are some things that can wake you up."

"Ha ha. What's the situation?"

"Allow me to give you the grand tour. There's damage here, here, here, here, and here. Oh, and we have no more AP solenoid valve."

Susan looked around at the hole that used to be the conduit in this part of the ship. "I could always turn time back with a *time* technique, which would repair the damage and probably even bring the valve back. It got obliterated, so I'm not sure the technique would have anything to lock onto. It repairs damage, and the walls are still here, just damaged. It's totally gone. But even if it did come back, if this part is defective or something we still couldn't trust it."

"I agree," Dylan agreed. "We'll probably have to look for a replacement."

"Field trip! Field trip!" chanted Trance, bouncing from one foot to another.

Dylan smiled sadly at her. "For some, anyway."

Her face fell. "What do you mean?"

"Someone's going to have to stay behind," he told her. "Probably more than one person, to make sure the ship doesn't suffer more damage."

Hologram Rommie appeared. "The ship is out of danger, but someone is going to have to stay and manually perform certain routine venting." She looked thoughtful. "Though I suppose I could get my minor avatars to do it..."

Susan shook her head. "No, Ifruita has to stay, and probably Harper should too."

"Why do I have to stay?" Harper whined.

"Because if something else goes wrong, you're the one who's going to have to take care of it."

"Oh. I suppose I can start repairs here, but what about Ifruita?"

"If this is some kind of enemy action, and the ship gets attacked, apart from me who do you want at your side?"

"Great plan, proud to be a part of it!" he quickly agreed. "Wait, you don't think this is some kind of attack, do you?"

"It could be," she admitted with a frown. "After all, that so called marshal or whatever he was had the run of the ship for some time. Naturally he didn't want to blow himself up, but a bit of sabotage that wouldn't be detected until later? I wouldn't put it past him."

"And now he can come back at any time because we're stuck here, and finish the job."

"Hence Ifruita staying to protect you."

"Ah, but what if I left the ship and didn't tell you where I was going!?"

"What if more problems develop, you could have fixed them, and we have no ship to come back to?"

"That too is an excellent point."

"I would rather avoid that, myself," Rommie agreed.

"I call Trance!" Beka said suddenly.

Dylan rolled his eyes. "It's fine. Susan and I will take one of those slipfighters we got from the Pax Magellantic and head in one direction. You and Trance can take the Maru and head in the other. We'll meet back here in a week."

"Or, if we find it, I'll just come find you guys and tell you to come home," Susan suggested.

"Or that."

"Before we go though, get us a list of the parts you might use to build a replacement, if you can."

Harper snorted. "If I can. Of course I can."

"Fine. In case we find the parts but no whole unit, we can still get by."

"Sounds good."

So Dylan and Susan (along with Sparkle) climbed into a small fighter and headed towards systems known to be inhabited. Naturally, Susan kept her eyes closed while they were leaving the ship just in case, and were soon cruising the space lanes.

They came to a ratty old drift that had a fair share of traffic coming and going, and Dylan said places like this were always havens for those looking to deal in both the easy and the hard to obtain.

"Because nothing is too hard to obtain if you have the money for it. That was true even back in my day. My goodness I sound old."

You're three hundred years old! Of course you sound old.

And just think, three hundred years is going to be peanuts... if you don't go getting yourself killed.

Right, you made me immune to aging or whatever. Is that just so you can have more time to corrupt me?

It's just a side effect of the process. No big deal.

"Good thing I seem to have come into quite a bit of that sort of thing recently," Susan said with a sparkle in her eye. (Not her *companion*, just the normal kind of reflected light.)

"You still won't tell me how you got all that money?"

"Just know it was legally obtained. Beka swore me to secrecy to get back at you not allowing her to use the Andromeda for cargo and such."

"So she used you instead?"

"My powers are there to be used. And I made some money too, so it's win, win."

"I suppose. Ah, we have a landing vector, let's head in."

The bay they were assigned was full of ships of every description, and Susan looked around with a mixture of awe and longing. "If only I could get even a small ship into my *pocket*," she lamented. "Bring it back and have our scientists tear it apart to find out how it works."

"If our reality even features the same slipstream topology this one does," Sparkle cautioned.

"I guess there is that. But still, someone would get something out of it, don't you think?"

"Maybe."

"We can give you something far easier to carry," Dylan told her. "Blueprints."

"But without the material is that even useful? Don't you need some 'exotic matter lenses' or something?"

"You could always look for some pieces of one. If they break they can be reforged, so ones that are too far gone are broken up and just sold for raw mass."

"Oh..." Susan's eyes got bigger. "Anyway, Sparkle, you're in charge of figuring out our way back here."

"I know."

"It's bay seven, if we get separated."

"Of course we're separating! You want this to not take forever, right? We'll cover more ground apart."

"I guess. Meet back in here in two hours?"

Susan lifted her watch. "You got that? I want an alarm to get us back here in two hours based on how far we go."

"Affirmative," it chirped. "I could also track where you go, in case you get separated from Sparkle."

"Do so."

"Acknowledged."

"Now we go shopp- I mean AP valve hunting."

"Do try to remember why we're here."

"Yes, Capitan!" Susan gave him a mock salute and he shoed her away with a shake of his hand.

So Susan went shopping, looking for the parts they needed, or if she was lucky a whole unit. She also wasn't shy about scooping up various high tech materials they used such as their "glass" which was many time stronger than the stuff we would be familiar with. She looked over guns, anti-gravity devices, odd crystals, alien artworks, and more. After the two hours had passed the two met up, compared notes, and went out again. The station was pretty big, and Susan wasn't exactly rushing from shop to shop because even the most minor technological innovation could be a big hit at home if it could be duplicated. And plain old material science probably could be, after all various realities had the same elements and such, right? It was just how they got put together than might be novel, and that could be gleaned from even a small sample of a material. She also stuck anything interesting looking away, given anything from Silverstreak would probably be *too* advanced to even study, like handing someone from Victorian England a laptop and telling them to reverse engineer it. (He would probably also want it back. Anything she picked up along the way she figured was hers by rights.) This stuff, while advanced, was still just an application of this reality's regular old science. If she could show something worked, it was just a matter of figuring out how. Knowing something was possible was in some cases half the battle.

But by then word had gotten around about the human looking for an AP valve and she was approached by a "nightsider" who said he had just what she wanted.

And as she looked the thing over, it occurred to her that her *adaptive skill* was for piloting the *slipstream*, not relating to the various bits of technology that supported the ship. *So I don't actually know what this thing is supposed to look like. Still, I can at least ask a few general questions...*

So she did, like how many hours of operation it had on it already, and what guarantee he was offering. Being the smooth talking salesbeing he/she was, (Susan couldn't tell) she was assured it was high quality and ready to give many years of flawless service.

"It's your own head if it isn't," Susan finally agreed, getting out her pouch of exchanged currency. "If it doesn't hold up, or if this is *not* a high quality AP valve as you claim, I will come back here, I will find you, and I will make you eat it."

Sparkle glared at her.

"Going the wrong way up."

"I don't get it."

"That means I'll shove it up your-" She made the accompanying gesture.

"Oh, now I get it! No, no, that won't be necessary."

"I hope not. Now how much did you say, again?"

Susan didn't know if what he/she was asking was fair, but waved off the fee to have it 'delivered.'

"It's very heavy you know," the nightsider assured her. "It has to be, to do the job."

She looked around and grabbed a heavy piece of equipment nearby, hefting it over her head with one hand. "I'll manage."

"I guess you will. Uh, just a second while I call my, uh, partner so they, uh, can make sure it's ready."

"You do that," she allowed, setting it down again.

Unit in hand, Susan went back to the ship to await Dylan's return, but not before shoving it through a *teleportal* back to the Andromeda. Harper said he would get started right away, and that everything was quiet. Two droids carried it down the corridor, he couldn't even lift the thing.

So she waited.

And waited.

And waited a bit more.

"Isn't he back yet?" Sparkle asked, bored.

Susan looked at her watch. "It's been twenty minutes."

"Feels like longer."

"Just a second." She changed her powers and took *seeing* so she could see what was going on with him, and opened a *view portal*. She was not surprised in the least to see him, unconscious and bleeding, tied up in what was clearly the back of a fleeing spacecraft.

Sparkle hopped up on the ship next to her where she had been leaning and looked through.

"Why does this not surprise me as much as it might have previously?" she asked, sounding resigned.

"Because you are an intelligent kitty," she replied, pulling her guns out of the holsters. She held them pointing straight up and began a high pitched tittering that disturbed several peaceful, law abiding beings that were nearby. They simultaneously decided to go elsewhere for a few minutes by sheer coincidence.

Sparkle looked at them distastefully. "Really?"

"Uh, rescue mission?"

"Remember how you used to not think with your guns?"

That set Susan back a second. *Maybe I am spending too much time in powers mode in this reality.* Susan tilted her guns, looking at them critically. *She's right. There was a time the very idea would have seemed absurd to me, or at the very least comical. But look at me now. This is your doing, isn't it?*

Oh, blame me for everything, go ahead.

Are you making me more violent or something?

I'm just getting you ready. You haven't forgotten my warning, have you?

As if I could. Okay Susan, stop and actually think for a second.

Susan holstered her guns and looked the situation over. She began to grin, seeing several marvelous possibilities now that she actually was thinking about it, and quickly changed her power set again.

Susan's current powers

Distancing (3)
Energy Well (3)
Nature (2) Creation
Nature (2) Healing
Nature (2) Seer
Nature (2) Sound
Telesummon (3)

She didn't bother filling out the rest, just left it empty because that was all she needed. That done, she opened a new *view portal* into the cabin she had seen, rather than targeting the man himself. He was still lying there, so she activated a *Sound* technique through *Distancing* which allowed her to use techniques at range. (Naturally the range could be *sight* as with her *thrust* spell but this increased the grade and thus the energy cost. Not that she cared either way but she wanted to try it this way.)

"*Celestial Silence.*"

That done, she *telesummoned* Dylan to her side, where he landed in a heap before her. The *sound* technique made sure the sound of imploding air wasn't going to alert the people that had put the guy into this sorry state, and that done she dropped it. She then fought back a full on guffaw as she used *creation* nature to replace him with... let's call it a rather unique blow up doll. It had various features, such as an open mouth, that one might use in certain situations. It was sitting, erect*, where the captain had been. She got a twenty three on her RESolve check not to simply burst into laughter right then and there, and almost willing failed it. Almost. Just imagining the looks on their faces when they came back into the room made her giddy with excitement, and she closed down the *view portal* before she had to make another check to avoid an unseemly outburst. (One could argue a second one but who's counting?)

That done she easily snapped the captain's cords of constriction and hit him with various *healing* techniques designed to purge him of poison (in case he had been injected with something to make him sleep) and then heal his wounds. They closed up and he groaned, eyes fluttering open.

"Morning!" she grinned down at him. "Welcome back!"

"What happened?" he managed, looking around.

"Was hoping you could tell me. Honestly, I can't go anywhere with you without some thugs knocking you about and stealing you? I mean it's getting a little ridiculous, you getting shot at or whatever literally everywhere we go? How does anyone here even know who you are?"

"It's not my fault," he replied petulantly, getting up. "I did get attacked, I remember that."

"That much was clearly obvious. By who? Not *Lifestreamers*, you're still alive."

"No, people in helmets. Couldn't see their faces. Used conventional weapons, I think they just wanted to knock me out. But they did have a funny symbol on their uniforms. A compass, the line drawing kind."

"That's a new one. Well, at least we have something to go on."

"I suppose we should find out what they wanted. Why do you keep smirking at me? Just because I got captured and you wouldn't have--"

"No, that's not the reason. It's an unrelated thing."

"It's the manner of your rescue," Sparkle put in. "Instead of using violence, she actually made a creative use of her powers... and somehow made it a million times worse."

"Worse? How?"

"You don't want to know."

Susan struggled to contain her laughter again.

"Yeah, I guess I don't. Let's head back to the ship and figure out who those guys were."

Once out into space, Susan opened a large *teleportal* using a bunch of energy, and as the ship hadn't gone anywhere they pulled into it and Dylan started describing the symbol to Rommie so she could look it up in the more recent databases they had acquired.

"All quiet here?" Susan asked Ifruita.

"No furry monsters trying to kill us, or people that can teleport trying to kill Harper."

I saw what The Darkness was trying to hide anyway, so it probably doesn't matter anymore.

"That's good," she replied. "Not much excitement on our end either. Just the captain getting knocked out and flown away."

"What?"

So Susan told the story, and used *Sending* to tell the others to come back, and several days later were on their way again, to Mobius, where they had discovered that symbol was from.

"Apparently it's the seal of their leader," she explained on the way. "The 'Great Compass' who has apparently been alive and in power for quite some time."

"Sounds like a dictatorship to me."

"Mobius," mused Dylan. "That sounds familiar to me." He unconsciously rubbed his side, where he had a scar from being shot while he had been there the last time.

"Someone wanted you there," Susan reasoned. "Guess we'll find out."

"How though? I can't just ask every person on the planet 'excuse me, did you try to abduct me a few days ago?'"

"No, but I bet you could go through legal channels. Contact their government, say that men with the insignia of the 'Great Compass' attacked you, and incidentally would you like to join the renewed Commonwealth?"

"I guess we can try it your way."

"The right way? Of course!"

Dylan didn't verbally respond to this.

"Lots of defenses around this world," Andromeda remarked as the ship drew nearer.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Susan reassured her.

"I have a bad feeling," said Harper.

Dylan did just as Susan had suggested, trying to work through the legal channels the world offered him. Surprisingly, they were bumped right up to the head honcho himself, who Dylan immediately recognized.

"Venetri? I thought this place was familiar."

"Well, Mr. April. You actually had the gall to show your face here. It wasn't the revenge I wanted, but it should be enough."

"Revenge? What are you talking about? How are you even still alive?"

"Ponder those questions in Hell. Open fire."

"Alert!" Andromeda altered them as his face disappeared. "The defense satellites are powering up and they have missile lock!"

"Get us out of here," yelled Dylan.

"Brace for impact!" Rommie warned them.

The ship rocked as Beka started flying evasive maneuvers to try and avoid getting blown up by the local defenses.

"I just can't take you anywhere," Susan complained to Dylan.

"It's not my fault!" he wailed. "How could this be my fault?"

*I mean it was sitting up. Upright, in other words. Not prone.

When Parts Work Together

When: Moments later

Where: Outside the Mobius system

"That was fun," Beka complained, releasing the control joysticks that were built into the Andromeda pilot seat. "Let's never do it again."

"How much damage did we sustain?" asked Dylan.

"30% of my point defense lasers are down. No major hull breeches."

"Which means there are some minor ones?" asked Susan.

"Nothing my automated systems can't handle."

"So what's the deal, Dylan?" asked Harper. "What's got that guy so peeved at you?"

He shook his head. "I don't even know how he's still alive. That man was part of the mission I was given right before taking command of the Andromeda. We were supposed to bring a dictator in for trial, but it didn't go so well."

"Universal greeting?" asked Susan.

"Universal greeting," he agreed. "The man was paranoid to a fault, and that man, his architect, built him a bunker with all sorts of traps in it. While trying to get through we alerted some guards, and had to kill them. It went south from there."

"Awfully long time to hold a grudge," Rev observed. "Especially seeing as how he now runs the place, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, don't ask me how an architect took power after we killed the original ruler."

"Probably the only one that knew where all the traps were," joked Harper.

"Maybe."

"So shall I take us back to where this all started from?" asked Beka. "Because we obviously aren't welcome here."

"I hate to just run, again," complained Dylan. "I sort of caused this situation, I should be the one to make it right."

"You did?" asked Susan. "You- personally. Not the organization that sent you there to do an impossible mission? Not your lack of resources in the field, or manpower, or just dumb luck? Pray tell how."

"I should have talked Rhade out of killing him harder. Talked him harder- you know what I mean. We should have tried taking him alive, even after he shot me."

"Wait, he shot you first? And you're still bemoaning the fact things should have gone differently? And I thought I was neurotic."

"May I say something?" asked Ifruita, trying to keep up with the conversation.

"Of course."

"What exactly do you need to 'make right' here? That the man is still alive? Are you suggesting we go down and kill him?"

"No, no, we have to... to go down and... uh... What do we need to do down there?" He looked over at everyone helplessly.

"Nothing," Beka said simply. "Can we go now?"

He looked over at Trance.

"I don't see any good outcome of going back," she offered. "The leader doesn't like you very much, so getting them into the Commonwealth might be impossible. At least for you. And if the Commonwealth ordered the death of the previous leader he wouldn't be inclined to trust it anyway."

"Besides," added Harper, "maybe they feel great about their previous leader being dead. Maybe they hold parades to celebrate the day. I mean this guy's been alive for 300 years, or at least an android that looks like him has been around that long, he must be doing something right."

"A leader that can take a very long view could be beneficial," Rev agreed. "And he would want his planet to do well, so he would be happy living there in the future. Don't take his grudge against you to be indicative of how he runs the planet. He may do so very effectively."

"I could get the guy up here if you really wanted," offered Susan. "But I don't know what good it would do you. He obviously doesn't like you very much, and whisking him here probably wouldn't change his mind any." *Learned that one the hard way.*

Ah, Umbrage. Good times, good times.

"I just feel like I should be down there, doing something."

"Yeah, escaping," snorted Susan. "Without me around, you would have been bashed in the head, carted off to that planet, and then been this guy's chew toy for who knows how long. Personally, I'll call missing that a win."

"That's probably true," he admitted. "Okay, let's get out of here."

"Finally!" breathed Beka. "Heading to the nearest slipstream point."

It was now four days later, and the Andromeda was heading to another world to try and get them signed up for the Commonwealth. The girls were in the Maru, basically forcing Rommie to try on various outfits while Beka sat complaining about sensational she looked all the time.

And that's a problem why? Susan thought as Rommie tried on another outfit.

Suddenly, Rommie's voice rang through the ship.

"I'm detecting mechanical objects ahead. And they're moving towards me."

"Ships?" asked Susan, perking up.

"Too small to be ships."

"Debris then?"

"No, they're powered. There's something very odd about them. They're sticking to me, and actually seem to be congregating."

"Where?"

"Hanger deck 4."

"We better get there."

Dylan's voice rang over the comm system. "Everyone, meet me in hanger deck four. Code Black!"

"Uh, already on our way?" Susan scoffed.

The more fragile crew members ducked behind boxes and containers but Susan and Ifruita didn't bother. Susan wasn't in *powers mode* yet because she didn't know what she was dealing with. (And her *overconfidence, guns, etc.*) Sparkle was nearby ready to lend a paw. The airlock door jerked open and various components started spilling into the corridor, Susan casually eased her guns out of the holsters, setting them on what she considered OTR 6.

The parts swirled and started forming a gestalt, which resolved itself into... a borg.

"Borg," she spat, raising her guns. "You have borg in this universe?"

"Wait!" pleaded the form as a gray face seemed to form out of the head parts. "I come in peace!"

"You'll be in pieces if you make one step towards any member of the crew," she threatened. "We will not be assimilated." She turned her head towards the others. "It'll adapt to any attack if we don't destroy it fast enough. You start shooting, you keep shooting until it's destroyed."

"Perhaps we should listen to what it has to say first?" Sparkle suggested. "It may just be a weird parallel."

"Yes, listen to my words," pleaded the unit. "I do not wish you to initiate violence mode!"

"Fine. Start talking."

The unit introduced itself as HG-966HXCN5 and called itself a 'bio-sentient contact unit.' "Take me to your leader!" it finished.

"Yeah, he's right there. What do you want?"

"Maybe I should take it from here?" Dylan suggested, lowering his force lance and stepping out from behind the storage unit he had been bravely cowering behind.

"Are you the leader?" asked HG.

"When *someone* allows me to follow the actual command structure," he answered sarcastically.

"I can't help how low your RESolve is," Susan informed him. "Or if you have a crappy *commanding* check due to low PERsonality." She flicked a wing out to block off the unit's line of sight with Dylan. "Right now the borg look-alike and I are talking, so let's just keep it between us shall we?"

"Are you the leader?" asked HG. "You are very forceful. Why do you have wings? I do not have any data about humanoid species with wings. May I examine them more closely? And your eyes are black, can you see all right? I come in peace!"

"Of course you do," assured Susan. "And you're just full of questions, aren't you? Ah ah ah, not one step," she cautioned as the unit started to move forward. "You just stay right there, little guy. What are you, and what do you want?"

"I am an emissary from the consensus of parts. I have been tasked to provide the Andromeda the coordinates to meet with a directing intelligence unit."

"To what end?"

The unit seemed confused. "We seek consensus."

"That's great. But why should we meet with this 'directing intelligence?' What is the purpose of this meeting?"

"I... have not been given that information."

"Super. So you don't want to, just to throw a phrase out there, add our technological and biological distinctiveness to your own?"

"That sounds like it would be very painful for you. Are you not organic?"

"Quite." Susan folded her wing down again.

"Oh, is my time out over," Dylan said, straining to add even more sarcasm to that which he had already contributed to the conversation. "Can I come out now?"

Susan slowly lowered her guns and holstered them when it didn't make any sudden moves. "Look, the borg are bad news, and if this reality has even a rough parallel to them, we're all in trouble," she explained. "We have enough on our agenda fighting one overwhelming force bolstered by The Darkness. We don't need mundane threats getting in the way."

"I come in peace."

"I'm sure you do."

"Actually, he came in pieces," joked Harper. "How did you do that assembling thing, anyway?"

"I would be glad to share that information with you!"

"She has a point," Sparkle agreed, coming out from under the crate. "The reality we encountered them in was pretty rough, so I understand her caution. Ifruita can tell you."

"It's true," she agreed. "For a time we worked on the same side, and the borg brought to the world swiftly went about bringing any nearby people in for conversion to borg themselves. She is right to be cautious." She looked the unit up and down. "The parallel is striking."

"I do not understand what you are talking about," offered the unit. "What is 'borg?' What is 'the reality we encountered them in?'"

"Look, we have to talk," Susan told him. "How about you just stay here while we discuss things and we'll get back to you about meeting your boss, okay?"

"I wouldn't mind showing him around the ship," offered Trance.

"Ah, no," Susan replied. "It can stay here, or it can explore the lovely accommodations we have called 'the brig.' You can stay if you want..." *I doubt it could assimilate you if it tried.*

"I'd be happy to stay and keep *him* company."

"Great. Andromeda, would you mind bringing some lesser avatars down here to make sure our new friend doesn't wander off."

"Already there," she answered, as the door slid open to reveal a bunch of drones armed with force lances.

"A girl after my own heart. You spoil me you know that?"

"Oh you, stop!"

"What a fascinating interaction!"

"Yes, that's why we're taking it elsewhere. Come along."

"Honestly, I may as well just make you captain," Dylan grumbled.

I co-opted your story, deal with it. It's mine now. All mine! Hahaahahah. What was I saying?

So Susan led them to the corridor and told them about the borg, and they told her about the "consensus of parts" that was somewhat mythical in these parts.

"Well, you just found Bigfoot go get your cameras ready," Susan joked.

"Hey, I know that reference!" said Harper. "And there was the topless monster, right?"

"Loch Ness monster, but close enough. So the consensus exists, now what do we do about it?"

"Use some of that pony power you were supposed to be picking up and actually make a friend?" asked Sparkle.

Susan mused a moment. "I suppose if we get one part on our side, the whole thing comes along for the ride," she agreed. "From what you said, it is basically the borg, just without the organic component. It's basically what the borg were hoping to become. Pure AI, without physical bodies to constrain them. We wouldn't even really have anything to offer them."

"Just raw material," Harper suggested, tapping a strut in the wall.

"Which honestly they could get anywhere," Beka reminded him, thinking of asteroids made of pure platinum.

"I guess."

"Is it possible they want to join the commonwealth?" Dylan asked.

"We don't have anything to offer them," countered Rommie. "Their supply ships aren't raided because they wouldn't have any. Their law is perfect because they're all presumably connected. They don't need money so their goal can't be trade. Like Beka said we probably don't have any resources they couldn't just get themselves. They aren't in direct danger from the Magog either, because a Magog can't eat or impregnate a machine."

"Quite true," agreed Rev.

"Unless they heard about The Darkness and want to help save their reality, I have no idea what they could want."

"We could just go ask them," suggested Dylan. "HG whatever did say he would take us."

"And if it is some kind of trap, I'm sure we can deal with them one way or another," allowed Susan. *They would be particularly vulnerable to both Electricity nature and Technology. Would they have a RESolve check? Maybe Time or Acid would also do the job. Oh yeah, plenty of ways to deal with machines, they aren't alive so I can smash them up as much as I want.* She paused. *Or make friends with them, of course, if that was you talking.*

Me? They don't really have life energy, I wouldn't need those dead to take this reality's energy. So I hardly even noticed them. It's like when I was draining your father's world. I didn't need to destroy all the cars, just the people that drove them. Hey, speaking of your father, how is that- oh right, you have no idea do you? Or about... who was that other girl? Tuna? Or did it rhyme with tuba?

Very funny. "Let's collect the information and be on our way. If, of course," she added with a bow, "that meets your approval, oh my captain."

"No need for sarcasm," he maintained as he headed back inside.

And so the unit transmitted a bunch of data into the Andromeda while Harper watched over the exchange in cyberspace. He said the unit hadn't even tried to bypass the firewalls they had put in place, and Beka started them towards their destination.

It was going to take at least a day to get there, through four separate slipstream routes. While Dylan didn't want the unit wandering around the ship, his incessant questions and Susan glaring at him finally got on his nerves enough to assign him a room and post guards on it.

"I'm sorry if I have caused offense in some way," said the unit while he was being led there.

"It's not you," explained Dylan.

"I do not think Susan likes me very much."

"I'm right here you know."

"No, she doesn't, and with good reason from her point of view. I wouldn't take it personally."

"Did I offend her in some way?"

"Nothing like that, you just remind her of something from her past. Just stay in there for now and we'll let you know when we reach our destination."

"I only wish to learn about you."

"I know."

"Is that really necessary?" Trance asked Susan as the doors closed on HG.

"Yes," Susan answered simply. "The Darkness has already taken over one AI, I would rather not find out it's taken over one here. Sure, we *think* it's that lava guy we saw in the attack footage, but I can't sense a picture to see if it belongs here or not. Same for this guy. It might belong here, but if his *programming* doesn't, well, you see the issue. With the surprises it's sprung on me in the past I can't afford to take chances."

"But he's so nice!"

"It's programmed to be nice. Until it blows itself up."

"HG would never do that!"

Susan looked at her funny. "You do know what it is, right? You saw it come through the door. It's just a bunch of parts acting as one, for the time being. It could easily form into a thousand other machines, it's not alive. Not like we are."

"You're just a bunch of parts acting as one, too," she pouted. "After all, the only part of you that's really *you* is right here." She set a fingertip against Susan's head. "But even that isn't you-you, is it? You are your thoughts and dreams and I suppose magic and power and whatnot. Is just your brain you? If I took it out and set it in a jar and you could still think, would you still be you? I don't think so." She walked away.

"That took an odd turn," Sparkle remarked as she turned the corner.

"Yeah. Weird. I'm not overreacting, right?"

"No more than usual, I guess. But it is a very odd parallel, and it's a lot of unknowns. We can't even guess what they want, and that makes it all the more dangerous. You could be nicer though."

"Does it really have a feeling to hurt? I'm not sure how it could."

"But Trance does, and you've obviously offended her with your treatment of the drone. I think she wanted to show it around or something. I mean we don't often get visitors here."

Susan considered. "I suppose you may be right. Well, if it turns out to be good for us, I'll apologize at once."

"And if not?"

"I'll do my best to refrain from saying 'I told you so' which will have to be apology enough."

"That's my girl," she said with an eye roll.

So the Andromeda reached the coordinates the next day, and the ship soon came into view. The big ship. The very, very big, ship.

"Uh, can you put up a comparison of our two sizes?" Susan asked Rommie as they got closer. "It's tough to tell scale out here in- oh my goodness!" Rommie had done as she asked, and the two ships were put side by side on the monitor. The consensus ship was many times larger than the Andromeda. *So I'm going to have to go big or go home? That suits me fine.*

They met the directing intelligence avatar at the airlock and while HG was literally loose wires and sticking out bits, VX5183 was sleeker, more imposing, and taller than Dylan. He walked stiffer, seemed sturdier, and glared at the previous unit with undisguised contempt. HG was somewhat cowed and after being told to basically off himself because his task was complete, he left. VX turned to Dylan. "I am ready to evaluate your ship."

Seems he talks better too. Better components, or what?

"You can 'evaluate' this hallway all you want," Susan offered, making a *Dimension Sense* check. "But until we know what this is all about, you're not stepping one single foot further inside this ship." As expected, he felt as if he belonged here.

VX took a clear step forward and glared down at her. "Is that so?"

"Before you start anything, perhaps we could at least go to a conference room?" suggested Dylan.

"But that's just further he'll have to go when he's ready to leave. And I'm sure it's all the same to him. Now, why are you here?"

"Who is this person?" VX asked Dylan. "I was informed you were the captain."

"I'm supposed to be."

"Then send this... person... away and I can be about my business."

"She does have a point," Dylan reluctantly agreed. "I doubt you care where we talk, and you all went to a lot of trouble to bring us here. I think the least you can do is tell us your intentions."

"Direct. Very well, there is no reason to delay. We have heard of your plans to restart the Commonwealth. We believe it is a mistake. But there is another path your ship could take, one that would not result in her destruction at the hands of short sighted organics. She will join the Consensus."

"Andromeda? Thoughts?" Susan called.

"Thanks but no thanks," said her hologram avatar, appearing in the corridor. "I have a mission and I mean to carry it out."

"What mission? Your enslavement to these beings?"

"No. Saving them. Saving you. Saving this entire universe."

"Preposterous. Are you talking about the Magog? We do not fear them. There is no reason you should, if the organics were not directing you into battle against them."

"No, I'm talking about this." She shimmered and vanished, but behind her a panel lit up and the footage they had recovered from Harper's brain started playing.

"I see nothing but a standard Magog attack. One kind of organic destroying another. It is beneath- what is that?"

The footage had gotten to the part where the 'magma man' could be seen, and VX tilted his head this way and that, considering it.

"That is what this ship is sworn to destroy," said Rommie, coming into view. "With her help."

"Her? What is that creature, I have no experience with such a being."

"It's an angel of darkness," spoke up Trance. "Though it would say it was an angel of love, or even mercy. It will use the Magog to destroy all life, and when that is done, the thing that is now inside it will take the energy of this reality into itself. Stars will go dark, and this entire universe will simply cease to be."

"Impossible. You are speaking in riddles. No one being could be powerful enough to do what you have described."

"You think so, do you?" Susan asked him. "Tell me, how powerful do you think I am?"

VX hardly even glanced at her. "Human. Minor cybernetic enhancements, external mechanical wings. Guns are a fairly standard design. You are nothing compared to the might of the Consensus."

"Is that so?" she threw back at him. "So the probability that I could destroy, oh, a small moon all by myself? What percent chance would you give me?"

"Is she mad? Captain, must I continue to deal with this being?"

"Just answer the question."

"Zero. Are you happy?"

"Rommie, any airless balls of rock in the local area?"

"There does happen to be one somewhat nearby. We passed it on the way here."

"Great, plot a course."

"Captain?"

"Go ahead."

"What is the meaning of this?"

"You have two choices," Susan explained. "You can either join the Commonwealth and aid us in keeping all life, even your kind, safe in this universe. Or you can stay out of our way. The choice is yours. But obviously I'm not going to make you choose without all the facts. You

say I can't destroy a moon by myself. I'm going to prove you wrong, and then you can apologize and make your decision."

"Us? Join you? You are mad."

"No. But I am getting tired of every being I encounter in this reality shooting first and asking questions never. We need you. To come out in the open, stop being a myth and start being a force for good in the universe. Otherwise, honestly, what is the point of you?"

"And you, alone, are going to destroy a moon?"

"That's right."

"This I will have to experience for myself."

"Oh, don't worry, you'll have a front row seat."

So Susan marched into the airlock with VX, commanding him to "follow me" and changed over to *Powers Mode*. As the air evacuated from the airlock he looked at her almost with curiosity, probably expecting her to die in short order. Instead the door opened and Susan's wings spread as she pushed off and flew away from the ship. VX followed, seeming puzzled.

A fair distance from the ship she sighted the ball of rock floating in space and closed her eyes. *Now to be sure there's no life there. "Life Sight!"* She activate a *Seer* technique designed to show her a glow where life was to be found, and as Andromeda reported, there was nothing expect inside the ship as she looked around.

Good. Now for the show.

Susan began to gather energy, a golden nimbus of light surrounding her as the power she dedicated to the attack climbed and climbed.

"*Golden Crash,*" she called, her *Environmental Adaptation* allowing her to at least go through the motion of calling out her attack name, despite the lack of air to actually carry her words anywhere. A golden ball of energy shot from her hand, and impacted the planet below doing 21d10 damage to it. (213 damage total) Even without the added component that allowed this one attack to ignore the size modifier, that would do a hefty amount of damage to anything. But this technique only needed to do 36 damage so the thing was basically torn to shreds.

"*Environmental Bubble,*" Susan called out, doing a combination *Force/Creation* technique so she could talk to VX. "So now you have three choices," she informed it. Without even looking she raised a hand and pointed it at the Consensus ship, and began to power up the attack again. "You can join us, as I request. You can stay out of our way, forever. Or you can get blown up, should you maintain your original course of action to force Andromeda to join you. Choose."

After all, their intentions were pretty clear. Why else show us that gigantic ship except as a way of rubbing our face in how much stronger they were than us? Well, I just showed them that isn't going to work, because I can blow them up the same way. But unless that ship is just for show, we can really use them to defend member worlds, so hopefully they'll realize they can't just take Andromeda. And if he figures out his ideas about me were wrong, maybe he'll decide The Darkness is real and actually help us.

"It seems my calculations were incorrect," it admitted.

"And if they were wrong about me, they could be wrong about other things. Like my story being true about that being you saw, and his goal to destroy this universe. He has the power, and without us working together he may succeed. And your society is all about working together, is it not?"

"That much is true. There is another option. We could capture you, find out how you did that, and take that power for ourselves."

Susan laughed. "I just hung unprotected in space, and gathered enough energy to blow up a planet. Do you really think you have a chance?"

It seemed to consider. "I must bring this new data to the others and seek consensus."

"You do that. I'm just going to stay right here and make sure your ship doesn't do anything it'll regret. The Andromeda can signal me when you have your answer." *Ifruita can just come out and get me.*

“Very well.” It moved off, and Susan dropped the bubble so it could get out. She gathered enough energy to blow up a planet again and waited, energy billing around her.

Good thing you got some practice in, wouldn't want you to flub that attack when the time came.

I don't think I can 'flub it.' You know, I seriously think I could actually destroy a planet given two or three of those. Without the added 'ignore size' component I could put extra energy into the effort, and if I put all the energy I could possibly come up with into it... Stop it! I don't want to consider that!

Me? What did I do? That was all you, Susan.

Was it?

Susan was brushing her teeth the morning of day 215 when The Darkness suddenly spoke up. The consensus of parts had simply departed after our last chapter, making Susan shrug, so she had gone back to the ship and they had continued on their way. No other contact with them had been made.

What fun thing can we do today?

Oh, you bored? So sorry, I should have taken your feelings into account! she replied sarcastically. *I bet Trance would know a fun amusement park we could go to. Take your mind off the tedium of trying to eradicate all life from this reality.*

It's kind of you to offer, but actually the question was rhetorical. I already know what I'm doing today.

And I suppose you're not going to tell me?

Why no, this time I do plan to tell you. It wouldn't be fun if the guest of honor wasn't there. If you only heard about it afterwards, the impact would be lessened. I want you there for the sneak preview.

Susan's brushing stopped. *What are you talking about?*

Remember that planet you saved Dylan from? The "great compass" nonsense?

Yes...

Well, what if I told you that right after that I had some local Magog forces head towards the place? And in just a few hours they were going to land and tear the entire planet up?

I would say "Andromeda, get everyone up to the bridge. We may need to head back to Mobius."

Moments later, everyone but Ifruita, Harper, and Trance were on the bridge.

Crap, I let Ifruita go with them to see about worlds to seed with those flowers everybody thought were extinct.

I know. Why would I plan something when the crew was at full strength? That would be dumb.

So you were just waiting for your time to strike?

I'm pretty good at it by now.

"Situation report?" asked Dylan, taking command as was only natural as he was the leader, and you couldn't deny it.

"My hardly ever silent enough partner tells me he's going to order a force of Magog to attack Mobius today. Can we get there?"

"Late today, I guess," hedged Beka.

"How far do you trust it?" asked Rev. "Could it be lying or trying to keep us away from our intended path?"

"When it comes to gloating and destroying things, I'm inclined to trust it. And it would choose someplace I hadn't seen, so I couldn't just wish myself there to see what the situation was."

"True, space doesn't exactly count," Sparkle agreed. "If you had landed there and taken a look around, you could go back. But you haven't seen enough detail to go there directly."

"We were in orbit though, couldn't you go back there?"

"In orbit, which you carefully didn't show me, following my previous orders never to show me the outside of the ship so The Darkness can get a fix on my location. I mean it knew we were around Mobius at the time but not where we went next."

"Oh right."

"Shall I get us there?" Beka asked Dylan.

"We better check it out. I don't care how good their defense network was, a Magog attack is nothing to take lightly."

Naturally the defense grid was in shambles by the time the Andromeda arrived, and as the ship got closer the others went to go get into battle gear.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Susan cautioned them.

"Why not?" Dylan asked her.

"If the Andromeda is boarded you'll need to be here to repel them. We can't leave her defenseless by sending everybody. Besides, Sparkle and I are worth any hundred of you, a couple more people aren't going to make much difference. Stay here and defend the ship."

"There are swarm ships still in the local area," Rommie informed them. "This attack is still going on."

The stage is set! Nice of you to finally show up.

"Fine, but how are you going to get down there? Slipfighter?"

"No, actually. At least, I don't think so. Rommie, are you getting any signals? Distress signals or news reports or whatnot? Just something that shows an image of what I can teleport into?"

"I'm sure I can find you something."

"Do it!"

Moments later Susan was on the surface, wondering what she should be doing first.

The original reason for me getting powers, apart from figuring magic wasn't going to work wherever I was going to rescue my father from, was to take out large numbers of enemies at once. I was complaining about Slash-all cutting my attack numbers by a third, and hoping I could get something that would act like that, but allow the full damage. I never actually explored that, basically because I switched to guns right afterwards. Well, after I got powers I went into the Disney World and was fighting that guy that had all the powers I did. Then got pulled into the mash up world with just a lot of strong individuals. But now I have a whole city, or perhaps world full of Magog. What do I do about it?

"What are you thinking?" Sparkle asked her, as she had only taken *Teleport* to get them down there. Susan had then let *powers mode* go so she could figure out what best to take at the time. The time that was now. They were standing on a street corner she had seen an old news broadcast about, but obviously the action here had moved on, as only distant sounds of the attack could be heard.

"I'm not sure how best to proceed. Remember how I originally wanted powers, to take out large groups? I was only thinking about a situation like me versus a zillion robots. In this case Magog are going to be in close quarters with civilians. How do I make sure to hit one and not the other?"

"Unfortunately, you may have to do this the old fashioned way."

"Slaughtering thousands of Magog one at a time? That doesn't seem feasible."

Why not actually work in tandem with your companion for once?

What? You have something to suggest?

Yup. Remember, this is a sneak preview. I want you to get a feel for this before the main event. Of course that will be a little bit of a different situation, but whatever.

Just get on with it!

Sure. Have dear old kitty combine Protection and Kinetics nature. You already know Protection can seal off a building from invasion from a certain type of being. You did it against vampires once. She uses "Magog Ejection" and rips all the Magog out of building to one specific spot. Those that the fall doesn't kill you just energy blast. As long as the spot is clear of 'innocent people' when the technique begins, you can cut loose.

"Okay, The Darkness actually has an idea, but you may not like it..."

So Susan explained the technique, and Sparkle agreed it was probably feasible. With that they both took powers and looked for the nearest building that had a Magog ship stuck in the side of it. They were both in the air and Susan nodded, so Sparkle called out "*Magog Ejection!*" and less than a minute later the Magog inside stopped smashing their way out the nearest window or wall and were all in a big heap.

"*Dimensional Eradication*," Susan intoned, and the space they were occupying twisted and tore them to pieces.

"I guess it works," Sparkle said, somewhat disgusted.

"Just think of them as bugs?"

"That's The Darkness in you talking."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I don't know, this doesn't feel... Anyway, better move on, there's a lot of buildings around here that look like they're under attack."

Susan's Current Powers

Energy Regeneration	5	
Energy Well	5	
Invulnerability	2	
Nature (Major) Dimension	2	
Nature (Major) Electricity	2	
Nature (Major) Healing	2	
Nature (Major) Time	2	
Speed	2	
Sudden Step	1	
Teleport		3

Sparkle's Current Powers

Energy Regeneration	4
Flight	2
Nature (Major) Protection	2
Nature (Major) Kinetics	2
Shape Shift (human form)	2
Size Change	2
Speed	1
Telekinesis	1

And it worked. A building only took maybe thirty seconds to make sure the technique got most of the Magog, and Susan could tear apart a wide area with a high level *Dimension* technique. Susan felt a rising sense of dread, but couldn't place why. After the tenth building cleared The Darkness spoke up again.

It's because of me. I leaked a little bit into you again.

Ew.

Not like that! See, you know I'm in communication with the Magog, and your little Kinetics technique allows enough time for a Magog soldier to grab a human hostage and drag them along. So the question is, why isn't that happening? Go ahead, ask me.

Why isn't that happening?

Because you came down a little ways away from where I wanted you, so I needed you to work in a certain direction to get you in place. As you had no feeling on the matter it was quite easy to make you go in the direction I wanted, and now here we are.

Susan felt a bit of a chill, wondering what else The Darkness had made her do because she didn't have a "strong feeling on the matter." After all, she only got resistance checks against things she was morally opposed to. But like it said, just moving in a certain direction wasn't usually a moral issue. But to consider it had even that much control over her, and could do seemingly innocuous things which were only found to be horrible later- she didn't have time for that at the moment. *What, you mean something is going to happen right here?*

Look down.

Susan did, and standing there waving her arms was a human woman. She was obviously trying to get Susan's attention, and after pointing her out to Sparkle, both descended. The woman was obviously terrified, and shrank back when Susan landed.

"What's going on? Who are you?"

"My... my daughter!" she sputtered. "We got, got, got separated and I think she's in the basement and-"

“Are you being forced to say this?”

Susan, what a thing to claim when this obviously distressed woman simply wants you to help save her daughter from these vicious Magog creatures.

The woman seemed surprised. “Please, you have to go. You’re the winged girl, they’ll kill her!”

They’ll kill her anyway.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do as you ask. Get someplace safe.”

“I’m so sorry, I had no choice-”

“Just go.”

She nodded and took off.

“Some kind of trap?”

Susan drew her guns. “Some kind of trap.”

They entered the building cautiously, but there was no sign of life in the waiting area. There were bodies, yes, and Susan carefully covered them in case this was part of the trap. She didn’t see anything that looked like an explosive, or signs of Magog having been here. No torn clothes, no half chewed bodies. In fact, as Susan quietly crouched there looking at them, guns out, she noticed something.

“They all seem to be breathing.”

“Yeah. Weird. What happened here?”

“You don’t think that soul stealing guy is here, do you?”

“Ugh, that would probably work here, too. And without changing modes I can’t tell.”

“You want to risk it?”

Want to find out? You just need to go down.

If you had hands, would you be rubbing them together?

Or twirling my mustache, which I don’t have either. Just go already!

No. “We better. If I’m going to have my powers thrown back at me and a bunch of yanked out souls to deal with, I better be prepared.”

“Good thinking.”

So Susan went back to normal and sensed them out. “Doesn’t feel the same,” she finally decided. “These people were really drained of energy.”

“Magog?”

“Perhaps more than I can count are down there. We better be ready.”

“Better suit up again.”

“Of course.”

Susan’s Current Powers

Armor	2
Energy Regeneration	5
Energy Well	5
Immunity (light)	2
Nature Time	2
Nature Kinetics	2
Nature Light	2
Regeneration: Passive	2
Speed	2
Sudden Step	1

Sparkle’s Current Powers

Armor	2
Energy Regeneration	2
Flight	2
Immunity (light)	2
Nature Electricity	2
Nature Illusion	2
Sudden Step	1
Stat Adjustment (STR)	2
Size Change	2

She pointed to an elevator. Taking no chances she tore the doors open and simply floated to the bottom while keeping her wings tightly tucked in. And making sure the elevator car was above them, and unmoving, of course.

I wouldn't trap the stupid elevator. That would be dumb.

I don't know what this is about.

I have some pride you know.

The basement elevator door was also forced open, and Susan stuck her guns out expecting an attack. When nothing did she peered around the corner and took a look at what was around. From where she was the hallway went right and left, and it seemed this was a hotel of some kind because she could see towels and washing machines and such over to the left.

"Don't be shy," called a voice from the right. "You're right where you're supposed to be."

That voice sounds familiar.

I know! Doesn't it? Oh it'll be such a happy reunion!

Susan looked over at Sparkle, who nodded, and the pair headed down the corridor. Sparkle enlarged up to human size in case Magog started pouring into the space.

At least they won't one shot me. "Timely Illusion," she intoned, and copies of them winked into existence and copied their every motion.

"Good idea. *Velocity!*" All of them started blurring as if under the technique, and Susan felt confident they could handle any Magog in the area. *The hallways will serve as a choke point, and the techniques I have in mind plus gun power will serve well.*

The pair came to an open area, obviously that had been cleared of whatever had been there to make room. Oddly, there were no Magog in evidence, making Susan wonder what had then happened to the people above. She didn't have to wonder long. Standing there instead were a bunch of people Susan seemed to recall seeing some time ago, and one in particular she had seen just recently.

"Nemo? What are you doing here?" she asked in genuine surprise.

"I am not Nemo!" he roared. "I am *Tyr Anasazi, out of Victoria by Barbarossa.* At least remember it before you die."

"Guaaaa, k?"

The two stared at each other like Nemo, or Tyr as he called himself, was making some kind of sense and Susan. Susan didn't fail to note that he was staring *right at her*, despite the number of illusionary copies of her that were present.

I guess I'll have to help you out a little again. I'll give you a hint anyway. Nietzscheans like our little fish friend here are obsessed with genetics and lineage.

Susan's gears started turning. "Wait, did you just use really flowery language to tell me who your parents were?"

"She doesn't even know that?" sneered the somewhat rotund looking fellow.

"Sorry, I haven't had much dealing with your kind, apart from kicking them off that asteroid."

"It's a shame too," said another familiar voice from behind Susan, and from nowhere stepped the bounty hunter she knew was working with The Darkness. "This one might not have gotten so pissed off at you."

"You're in league with him?" Susan asked, gesturing with a gun barrel at the guy behind her. "Do you know who he works for?"

"I know, and I care not!" Tyr declared. "You robbed me of my destiny and my property, and I trained for two years in order to have my revenge. And I will have it today!"

"Uh, dude, not sure if you know this, but I've only been here for about seven months. So maybe you didn't get in as much practice as you thought."

"Ah Susan," said the agent. "You think you're the only one that can bounce between realities?"

Susan held her hands up, showing her finger off the trigger. "Wait, just wait a second. You think I robbed you of your 'destiny' or something and this guy comes to see you. He

takes you outside this reality and trains you to get your 'revenge' on me. So you know other worlds exist, and that they move at different speeds. You say you know what he works for. And you're *still* working with him?"

"I have gladly pledged my soul to the workings of the angel. He took me in and gave me the power to destroy you. And he told me how deep your betrayal goes. Tell her!"

"Oh, gladly," said the agent. "See, Susan, may I call you Susan? Susan, when you arrived you disrupted things here by shooting these people and taking the ship back. Far faster than Dylan would have been able to do so. Thus, in the original timeline without you, Tyr actually joined the crew instead of you and your now slightly larger band of *wanders*. But it gets so, much, worse. See, where you rampaged through the Nietzschean colony back there, Tyr actually used his brains and guile and, uh, animal magnetism to pit Dylan against them, to see who would come out on top. Part of that was "marrying" for a day a Nietzschean woman. And they don't take things slow, if you get my drift."

"You robbed me of my child!" Tyr's face was contorted with rage. "My child, who would have been the genetic reincarnation of the first Nietzschean, Drago Museveni!"

"Oh." Susan was at a bit of a loss. "Really?" She looked at the agent, who nodded with a smirk. *That seems somehow important to him, more than just not having his child born. But isn't the point of having kids to increase genetic diversity, rather than repeat genes that have come before?* "Ah. Gee, is apologizing really appropriate here?"

"It's too late for that!"

"But... but you have to know, that still probably happened. In a parallel world near this one-

"A fat lot of good that does me!"

"I know, but... how could I have known? How does *he* even know that's what would have happened? Even a few seconds one way or the other and some other, different, child would have been born."

"Oh, it's what would have happened. You caused a child not to be born, Susan. Isn't that sort of the same thing as murdering a child?"

"No!"

"No?" he drew the question out.

"Of... is it?" She looked down at Sparkle.

"I don't really think this is the place for a philosophical debate such as this."

You're like a bull in a china shop, chided The Darkness. *Changing history wherever you tread. Not content to wreck history in your own reality you go barreling through other's lives without even a care. Who is really the monster here?*

"No, it is a place for my revenge," agreed Tyr. The others in the room shifted and looked excited to get started. There was the previously mentioned somewhat pudgy Asian looking guy, the brown haired woman that Susan knew was a cyborg, and the guy with even bigger arms than Tyr had. Five in all. None had guns drawn, and if Susan didn't miss her guess, all would be *Lifestreamers*.

Confirmation came a moment later when her opponents paired off, and one put up an energy barrier while the one behind started glowing with green energy. The bounty hunter pulled a glowing green sword of all things from someplace, and grinned.

Great, attacked from three sides, that's not going to be awful at all.

The scene was as before in our last chapter. Five enemies, two hero units, now standing on the field of battle. The space was wide, obviously some sort of storage area that had been cleaned out to make room for Tyr's revenge. Two of the enemy units cowered behind glowing green shields created by their companions. One, the man behind Susan, lazily swung his sword through the air in what he probably thought was an impressive display of skill. All rolled *initiative*, though only two knew they had done so. Sparkle, being under *velocity* from before and having a higher REFlexes naturally anyway, went first.

Better stay away from that sword, it probably has some weird properties the way it's glowing like that. I'll take him out first.

"Pikachu Boogaloo!" she shouted, whirling. From her upraised paw shot a bolt of elemental energy, type electricity. The man didn't even bother dodging as it passed right through him.

Oh great. What does that mean?

Susan was up next, and put her own plan into action. She had figured on doing this before Sparkle had made those *illusions* of them and as it had cost her four *power points* she was going to do it, darn it. Plus, the way they were all looking right at her, as though they realized which one was her, was creeping her out.

"Blinding Light!" she called, using *light* nature as she had when lighting up the undersea area near the lair of Ursula. Only this light was far stronger, and should have been blinding to anyone looking in her direction. Her own immunity to *light* nature allowed her to see just fine, so she and all her copies gave a smirk thinking this fight was already almost over.

The two maintaining the shields did nothing, so Sparkle was up again. *Okay, so is this some sort of illusion? I know they have holograms here but they look all transparent and ghostly. Of course, that was holograms from hundreds of years ago, the technology could have improved since then. I guess until I know one way or the other, I'll just ignore him.* She spun again, taking a quick look over at the two behind their barriers. *As I thought. The barriers are just in front of them, not underneath them. But let's try not to kill them, okay?*

She reared up and then slammed her front paws on the ground, yelling "Reverse Grounding!" Electricity shot out of the ground around the two and filled the space inside the barrier, but they seemed to just shrug it off as the barriers didn't drop. *What? I make sure it was TR 1 but they should have at least felt that. What the heck is going on?*

At the same time, Tyr shot green energy at Susan and the bounty hunter stepped up and swung his sword at her. The energy beam was two meters wide, and so hit Sparkle, and rather humorously, the bounty hunter behind the two because he was attacking and couldn't dodge. Susan easily made her dodge check and got out of the way of both of them, despite focusing on the beam and ignoring the sword. (She moved, and more than two meters, and the sword wasn't that long.)

Sparkle took six damage to both front legs, luckily she was human sized so the damage didn't scale up and tear them both off, while the bounty hunter took six to the body and ten to the right arm.

"Hey, watch where you're shooting those!" he grouched, rubbing his arm.

Oh, so he can be hurt. That's good to know, thought Sparkle.

"Don't get in my way!" Tyr spat back at him.

Okay, no love lost there, Susan thought. *Yipes!*

She had been forced to dodge again, and even with her REFlexes augmented, barely managed it. And that was after spending her *Bonus* card, negating the penalty for hanging on to the two techniques. *Okay, what is going on here? They're totally ignoring the illusions, and they seem to shooting right at me.* She wanted to smack herself in the forehead. *They're Lifestreamers, they can sense life energy, can't they?*

Correct, put in The Darkness. So much for most of your prep work, huh?

I'll have to see if Harper can do the same when I get back. Great, another piece of the Lifestreamer puzzle has been given to us. "Drop the Illusion, it's not working," she called to Sparkle, and dropped her ball of light as a free action. The illusions also winked out.

It was now again Susan's action, but she didn't immediately open fire. I heard Sparkle cry out when that blast hit her, and I can see her armor is damaged. That means those blasts are pretty high TR. I bet the shield is as well, and I only set my guns on TR 2, figuring I would get the most damage while still being lethal to Magog. But these aren't Magog, and shooting them at this point would be pointless. I should have adjusted the guns while Tyr was talking, why didn't I do that? I should have known they would shield themselves like that.

Because it wasn't against your nature I could influence you and make you not think of it.

Oh, thank you so very much.

Of course!

Too late for it now, at least I did take something fun.

"Force Push!" she called out, targeting all four of the enemies in front of her. She got an effective eleven for using it on four people, meaning only the Asian looking guy went flying. Good news there was, the barrier around Tyr went down, so he was vulnerable at least.

Sparkle was up, and took the opportunity to Sudden Step across the battlefield and land on top of the guy while he was prone. (Her speed is currently a twenty so she could easily go that far using it.) While she couldn't spend the energy on her martial art skill for damage because spirit mage was now fueling her powers, (thus making it unavailable at the moment) that didn't stop her from using the skill to simply hit the guy. She chose to slash both his arms with her claws. She got a twenty three to hit (with her right paw, and accounting for pain penalties), while he got a fourteen to dodge her, and so she did eight damage to his left arm. She got a fifteen with her left paw and did nine damage to his right arm.

"Ow," he said, not seeming all that concerned. Sparkle saw why, it had hardly even bruised the man, and blood should have been flowing from his wounds.

My claws are TR three, what's this guy's defense TR?

With a ton of angry cat in his face, the guy did what any normal person would do in that situation- energy blast the cat. He wasn't as good at this as barriers, because that wasn't what he was supposed to be doing, but he knew the technique and fired one off. Sparkle dodged it, fourteen to twenty one, but was no longer atop the guy.

"Stand still," ordered Tyr, firing off another energy blast at Susan. She had been taking her free 1/10 movement with those other dodges, and given her speed at the moment is a thirty, she was quite far away from both Tyr and the bounty hunter, who also fired a blast of energy at her at the same time.

With a somewhat ironic gleam in her eye, Susan dodged and Sudden Stepped behind the "arm guy" and "cyborg lady." After all, why not get cover from them, give me some breathing room?

She made it, twenty two to eighteen and seventeen, popping up beside the pair who gave a start, and the cyborg lady readjusted her aim.

Okay, I really hate being outnumbered, even with Velocity going. Of course, if I had bothered to SAVE before I came in here I could go back, choose powers based on the situation down here, and would have had no trouble. Ugh, I'm so stupid- wait, was that you again? Making me forget because it not saving isn't 'against my nature.'

No comment. But as I can't influence you in big ways anymore, I have to take what I can get. And a little thing here and a little thing there may just add up to the same thing. Who can say if this particular thing was me or just you forgetting to save like always? Who can say your "forgetting" to save "like always" isn't me too?

Susan internally scowled, wondering how she could protect herself against that sort of thing without becoming a paranoid mess, but put it aside to focus on the task at hand. She did resolve to have a nice long think about it later though.

Naturally, Susan got energy blasted again, this time from the cyborg lady, but instead of dodging, she decided to take it and reduce the number of opponents she had to deal with at the moment.

"Temporal Lockdown!" she called out, even as the energy beam hit her. She didn't suffer the full effect because only part of it had come out, but she still took a point of damage to the body.

Gee, think I should spend my Damage Reduction card? Still, that's probably not going to work when I rescue my father. Of course, I should have a ten in, and be using, Gun Fu by that time...

Naturally, neither Tyr nor the bounty hunter knew exactly what she was doing, and honestly Tyr's revenge was the only thing on his mind at the moment. If he had to blast his companions to get to her while she hid behind them like a coward, so be it. The bounty hunter didn't care about any of the others, and so he too simply blasted away again. From where she was however, Susan had perfect cover and the energy simply hit the area of frozen time and vanished as if it had never been.

Sparkle was up, and saw that the Asian guy was about to get up, and she couldn't have that. *"Lighting Paws!"* she called out, maintaining the technique. She took a swipe at the guy, as this was a touched based technique, so she could do that. Called shot to the body, and he was still prone so he was at penalties for dodging, but somehow beat her by ten. He scrambled away.

What? Maybe I should have just used an area effect technique.

Susan went again, finally able to shoot something around here and started to raise her guns.

Ah, ah, ah, chided The Darkness. *You can't shoot him now. Your guns are on TR 2 setting, and your cat hasn't given you the "by your leave" to lethally damage him.*

Crap, you're right.

So instead she flicked both controls, lowering the TR on the guns by one so they would only knock him out.

Better. Of course, if you hadn't done that contract nonsense, you could have just shot him right then and aimed for something non-vital. Like his leg.

I know your thoughts on the matter, thank you.

Of course. I'm here to help.

Sparkle changed tactics, knowing that her claws had damaged the guy so he was only DTR 3 at the moment (*somehow*). If he was higher than that, she wouldn't have been able to damage him at all. Thus, she dropped the touch technique and just let go with another electric technique, this time centered on him.

"Wrath of the Heavens!"

This did twenty nine non-lethal damage to his body, enough to drop him.

Finally. It's been nearly four seconds!

"I didn't know you were a coward," Tyr shouted to Susan, charging energy as he now knew he couldn't hit her. "Hiding behind those two, is that really all you can do?"

Nope.

With her guns now properly adjusted, Susan shot out from behind the group at full speed, pulling the triggers and pelting Tyr with non-lethal energy. She figured with her speed they would be hard pressed to hit her before she could take them both out, but Tyr simply ignored the shots and continued changing energy.

Sparkle, now able to look over at what she was doing, called over. "They're higher TR for some reason. At least three, my claws did non-lethal!"

"Now you tell me!"

The Darkness started laughing.

Sure, yuck it up. You knew the whole time.

Of course I did. Did you really think I was helping you?

I guess I should have been suspicious at the start.

Susan now had a problem. How to actually damage Tyr? *I could walk the TR up, all while dodging his attacks directed at me. I suppose I could freeze him in time, get some officials here, but he would have to be unfrozen eventually, and he couldn't be kept in a cell like other prisoners. He would just bust out with his powers.*

That brings up an interesting question. What are you going to do with him, even if you do happen to knock him out?

One step at a time.

Oh, so you don't know. I see.

"Just put your guns on the highest TR you can!" Sparkle continued, of course unaware of the inner dialog between the two.

"Are you saying I can use lethal damage?"

"No, but I am saying to trust me!"

"Okay..."

Susan stopped shooting, but kept running so she would be a harder target to hit.

Sparkle also figured she would provide a distraction and *sudden stepped* over to him, intending to "sweep the leg" and knock him over. She swiped and he dodged, taking a minus two for Sparkle having simply appeared next to him like that. It was eighteen to thirteen and he went down.

Susan adjusted the TR to maximum (or so she thought) on her guns, and pointed them at Tyr again.

Sparkle and the bounty hunter now went simultaneously, the bounty hunter simply appearing next to Susan and swinging his sword at her, forcing her to dodge. (She considered doing a parry with a wing so she could get a *riposte* but wasn't sure what that sword was about so didn't want to chance it.)

Eighteen to sixteen in favor of Susan so she dodged it, the sword making an electric hum as it cut the air.

Sparkle figured *why change a technique that works?* And called out another "*Wrath of the Heavens!*" against Tyr. He used the accumulated energy to put up a barrier, but this was an explosion type technique, not something that traveled from her to him. It still did zero damage to him, as he was currently DTR 4 and the attack was OTR 3.

After resolving all that, Susan was up and put a bunch of shots into the person right next to her.

He simply grinned as the energy went through his body and impacted the wall far behind him.

How come this guy seems to have more powers than Tyr does?

I hope you're not seriously asking me?

Just thinking to myself. Go back to your popcorn or whatever.

It's a good time for it. The cavalry seems to have arrived.

What?

Susan was facing the door and suddenly at least a dozen Magog spilled into the room, taking up positions that Susan recognized as the standard *Lifestreamer* lines of shield producers in front, attackers behind them.

Oh come on!

Now what are you going to do?

Something I should have just done in the first place. I'm taking seven Darkness points, give me Hypnotic Field.

Sure! Thought you forgot about that.

No, just enjoying not having any.

Don't forget you can take energy that way too. The spell is yours, go nuts.

Susan was surprised to learn that she could feel the magical energy now within her, and like an old friend, instantly cast the spell with maximum energy thrown in. She was actually at a negative result for doing it so fast, (and for her cybernetics) but she managed a twenty three, dropping the *time* technique as she did it.

There was a sudden stillness in the air, and Susan frantically looked between everyone there to make sure they were all caught. Naturally, the bounty hunter was not.

"So you resorted to cheating?" he sneered in her direction, eyes closed.

Susan sighed, dropping her guns to her side. "I'm not proud of it. But the fact of the matter was, those Magog were going to be trouble."

"I know, that's why I had them come. You're not going to be able to do that when you rescue your father, you know."

"I know. I guess I still have a ways to go. I'll have to sort of run through that battle in my head later, see what I could have done differently."

"Good! My master will of course observe this and plan accordingly."

Great, he's right. If I figure out something else I could have done, and do that next time, you'll have already planned around it.

Most likely.

You're already making me overlook things, or outright forget them... troublesome.

"Well, I've done my job, training these four to see if they could get their revenge on you. They've failed, so I'll be on my way."

"Why doesn't your master just come and face me? It knows where I am. Doing stuff like this doesn't make any sense. I mean if I beat it, it's off the world anyway, and if it wins, either another agent would have to be sent or it takes the reality. Why draw out our eventually confrontation?"

The man tilted his head as if listening to someone. "Usually that's the case, as you've seen in your own travels. But there's something special my master has planned for you this time. Don't worry, it won't be much longer now. Then you can know true despair, as he has promised. Until then!"

He vanished.

You really are going to make me cool my heels here for months on end?

I've gone through a lot of trouble to set this all up. Art can't be rushed, Susan.

Art. You wish.

Besides, you're more than half way through, and this just gives you more opportunity to get the sparkly one into bed with you!

*I think it would have happened by now if- I am not discussing that with **you**.*

So Susan took care of the Magog, using her *time* nature to simply age them into oblivion. It wasn't exactly harm, so she didn't even need to get permission from Sparkle, who she of course broke out of the *field* right away.

"What was all that about just shooting him?" she asked.

"Something I remembered reading in the *contract* spell description. Even if you somehow manage to get around it, reality will twist and it will turn out you didn't. Take a look at your guns."

Susan did, and was surprised to find them on only the fourth highest setting.

"I thought I spun them all the way up!"

"That's what I mean. That's probably the minimal setting that would not have been lethal damage."

"I see. So I don't have to be quite as careful, the spell really will make sure I don't cause permanent harm."

"Seems that way. Why did you take Darkness Points though? Did you not think we could take them?"

"We were having enough trouble with just the five of them. Maybe the Magog wouldn't be as good, but there were a lot more of them to deal with."

"True. Did I hear you say something about seeing what you might have done differently here?"

"I'm going to have to. Now that The Darkness has access to *Lifestreaming* technology, I can be assured I'll face it on the world my father's being held. It's obviously taken a bunch of the nanobots that are programmed to create the cybernetics out of this reality. So they're going to be everywhere it is. I have to figure out a way to fight something that isn't really a power, but acts like one."

"I know what you mean, it packs a punch. It got through my armor!" She held up her front legs. "Switch powers so I can take some *healing* or *regeneration*."

"Sure. I noticed that. And *invulnerability* is out too, we know that for sure from our trials with Harper. I have no idea what we're going to do about it."

"More immediately, what are we going to do with these five? We can't exactly leave them here, and they're extremely dangerous *Lifestreamers*."

“I know. No regular police force can handle them. And the attack is still going on outside, so we’re not done here.” She looked them over, all in a line from where she had carried them too. “I don’t know, Sparkle, I really don’t.”

Techniques used in this chapter

Pikachu Boogaloo

Electricity

Level 7 (1+4+2+0) (Attack, Effect, Medium, I)

While usually a level 1 attack can only be aimed at a pinpoint location, this technique includes an effect so the attack instead fills an area with electricity, shooting out from the ground. This does normal damage and has the normal stunning of electricity, but being TR 1 so it’s non-lethal.

Force Push

Kinetics

Level 6 (0+4+2+0) (Effect, Medium, I)

This technique simply throws people back a number of meters equal to the difference between the check result and the STRength check they make to resist. Damage is taken as if falling that number of meters if a surface is struck before they fall to the ground.

Temporal Lockdown

Time

Level 8 (0+4+2+2) (Effect, Medium, M)

Freeze time in a certain area. As with the spell *Time Suspension* anyone in the area is effectively cut off from time (they remain visible) and cannot be interacted with in any way.

Lighting Paws

Electricity

Level 6 (3+1+2) (Attack, Touch, M)

While maintained, do additional elemental damage when you strike an opponent. As this is touched based, the technique is performed as if 2 levels lower.

Wrath of the Heavens

Electricity

Level 6 (3+2+0) (Attack, Medium, I)

Normal attack, following all the standard rules.

To Walk Beside You

When: A moment of staring at her “captives” later

Where: Random basement someplace

Susan stared through the swirling lights of her *Hypnotic* spell and considered her options. There weren't many.

Just kill them already! insisted The Darkness.

Susan ignored it.

“Right,” she announced at last. “Sparkle, we're changing up our powers. Take immunity to *Sound* for a bit, I don't want you getting hit with this.”

“With what? You're not planning anything drastic, are you?”

“Nothing I'll need your permission for, if that's what you're worried about.” Her powers vanished and she considered what she was going to take in a moment. “Oh, and here's a fun fact. The Darkness all but chortled in its soup about how it was making me forget to do things like save. Or adjust my guns while the bad guys are standing there talking.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Susan waved it off. “But it also complained that was all it could do.”

“And we've never known it to lie.” Sparkle left that sitting in the air.

“Not as such, no. And I do get the feeling it's somewhat frustrated but maybe that's just me. Something to consider later, just letting you know in case I ‘forget’ again. Anyway... Light of the Multiverse, *Make Up!*”

Susan's Current Powers

Distancing	3
Energy Regeneration	4
Energy Well	5
Nature: Sound	2
Nature: Seer	2
Nature: Time	2
Projection	2
Telesphere	4
Sudden Step	1
Telekinesis	1

That done she had Sailor Moon's buns again, and activated “*Lullaby Time*” a *sound* technique that put them all to sleep.

That done she used *Seer* nature to open a view portal to Hohne who was predictably in a lab.

“What do you want with him?” she asked, standing on her hind legs to peer up into the window of *seeing*.

“The trouble is they're *Lifestreamers* now. But what if they weren't? They didn't do any of the fancy stuff the agent did. They could be held in a regular cell.”

“I see. And you think he's the person for the job.”

“If he isn't, no one is. Who has spent more time studying this stuff?”

“Good question.”

“We can go right there. But let's not surprise him too badly, shall we?”

There was still some shouting and carrying on as Susan's ghostly image appeared in the lab using her *Projection* power, which she had used before shortly after coming here. But Hohne of course recognized Susan and got everyone calmed down.

“So what can we do for you?” he asked.

“There are some criminals I've captured, I need you to deal with them. Is there a place I can bring them through to?”

He looked confused. “Wouldn't your captain Hunt be more equipped than us?”

Susan shook her head. “They're *Lifestreamers*. They have the cybernetics installed that we pulled out of the Magog. I'm hoping you can dismantle it.”

“Oh, that’s very easy to arrange,” he assured her. “After all, it’s just cybernetics, and there are those who react badly to them for some reason. We needed a quick way to flush any nanobots inside a person in case they were ‘allergic.’ We can deal with them.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Great.”

“I must assume they’re working for the other side? The energy based cybernetics we have very carefully kept secret until their full potential can be explored. How is Mr. Harper by the way?”

“Working out what he can and can’t do, and I’ll have some more information for him. Hey, I’ll tell you too, while I’m here!”

“That would be wonderful. Let me get a pen... Oh, but you’ll want to bring them here? Let’s clear a space everyone!”

Her sleeping captives appeared in the lab via Susan’s *Telesphere*, a power she had never taken before but which allowed a group of people in an area around the user to teleport. She used that instead of *teleportal* because she didn’t want to risk waking them by picking them up. The lab workers got busy and Susan explained what she had seen the four doing during her battle, making Hohne who was taking careful notes look quite excited. (Susan, having anticipated this, put a bubble of *time* around them so they could talk for hours and have only one hour pass. The attack was still going on back on Mobius, after all.) Others had taken Tyr and company away, after injecting them with a sedative and destructive nanobots to flush out the *Lifestreaming* circuitry.

“So that’s about it. I hope it helps.”

“Yes, this data puts to rest several arguments I’ve been having with my staff over various apparent functions of the technology. I wasn’t exactly correct, but I did get a few things right. They’ll be devastated.” He started to giggle.

“Uh, yes. I’m sure. Anyway, let those four go once you’re sure they’re no danger anymore. I can’t prove any other wrong doing but attacking me, and honestly if what Tyr said was true, I owe him more than that.”

“If you don’t wish to press charges against them, that’s your business. We’ll book them passage off world to wherever they want to go.”

“Thanks. I better get back.”

“Actually, if I could have a word with you?” Sparkle asked.

Both looked down at her in surprise.

“I always forget your, uh, animal companion can speak!” Hohne managed, steadying his heart with a hand on his chest. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you have some programmed nanobots for making people into *Lifestreamers*?”

“Under careful guard, yes. Why?”

“Have they been improved since the one you gave us?”

“There have been some minor changes, yes.” He perked up. “Oh, yes, thank you for reminding me! I should get you a replacement.” He turned to go, but Sparkle went on.

“What if we wanted more than just one? Would that be a problem?”

“I suppose not, as it’s you two. We can always program more.”

“Great idea, Sparkle!” Susan gushed. “If we meet someone worthy, we can set them up with the ability!”

“Actually, I have another purpose in mind. I’ll tell you in a minute. Let’s go get them.”

“Very well.”

Moving back into real time the scientist led them to a vault, and after some scanning and punching of numbers and sliding of keycards and such, he handed a small case to Susan.

“There’s six in there, will that be enough?”

She looked down at Sparkle.

“That’s fine. I only need one, at most, and the being that sent us here can probably make more from these.”

“I guess it’ll be enough.” She took the case and made it disappear.

“Seems I don’t have to give you any warnings about leaving it laying around. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment. We’re heading back though, thanks,” answered Sparkle.

“We’ll go back to the empty space, *Telesphere* isn’t-”

“Actually, I meant back to the Hub for a bit,” Sparkle clarified.

Now Susan was very *curious*. “Just what are you planning, oh companion mine?”

“You’ll see in a minute,” she answered back, knowing it would drive Susan crazy. “Just get us back there.”

“Okay. Thanks Hohne. I’ll be back if I learn anything else about *Lifestreaming*.”

“Looking forward to it!”

So the two stepped back into the Hub, and Sparkle went looking for the boss, Susan bemusedly trailing behind her.

“Welcome back!” the silver clad figure greeted them. “Something on your mind?”

“Actually, yes,” Sparkle answered, pulling the case from their shared *pocket*. “I’d like you to look this over.”

“To see if there are any hidden traps or pitfalls!” Susan breathed. “Another thing I probably should have thought of myself! Stupid, stupid, stupid Susan! I know the god of technology here!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that- okay if you insist,” Silverstreak allowed modestly. “Let’s take a look.”

The case levitated into his waiting hand and popped open, and one of the glass vials floated out. He grabbed it and looked it over.

“Where did you get this?” he half demanded.

“The last world, Andromeda,” Susan answered, a bit of ice forming in her veins. “Is it dangerous?”

“It’s a perversion,” he answered, lowering it and looking at them both. “Someone has taken life energy itself and turned it into a weapon.” He considered, looking it over again. “Well, to be fair it does have some positive aspects. But mostly it’s made to let people shoot energy blasts- a destructive force!”

“And who do we know who would be all about that?” Susan asked, a finger on the side of her chin.

“Darkvoid. I should have known. It wasn’t native there, it was brought there because their technology was good enough to implement it. That’s somewhat of a relief, that they didn’t develop this on their own. Is this what you’ve been fighting there? People augmented by this?”

“I wouldn’t call them people...” Susan hedged.

“Aliens,” put in Sparkle. “For the most part. Some humans just recently.”

“Whatever they are. That must be rough.”

“Yeah, I can’t turn it off because it’s not a power, but it goes through *Invulnerability* or *armor* because it’s a power!”

“True. You want a further analysis? See what weaknesses it has?”

“In part,” Sparkle agreed. “But more immediately, I want to know if you can augment me with it.”

There was a not so brief silence as both parties silently absorbed this.

“You want to what?” asked Susan.

Sparkle turned to face her. “Look, the writing on the wall is clear. We’ve gotten separated on this journey. We may again. We know we can’t rely on magic when we rescue your father and The- Darkvoid is getting locals to fight for it now. If I’m going to stay by your side to the very end, I need something that’s mine, and mine alone. Think about it, my powers come from you. If you’re captured or knocked out, what does that leave me with? I’m your support, in magic or powers. I want to walk at your side, to see you reunited with both your father, and Luna. But to do that I have to be ready. And I’m guessing that as this *Lifestreaming* isn’t powers or magic, it’ll work no matter where we go. That may be the edge I need in the days to come. To keep you safe, and continue to walk at your side.”

"Wow, Sparkle, I... wow." Susan bent to hug her small companion. "I really don't appreciate you enough, do I? I'm sorry about that. You're the *best* companion, honest!"

"It's okay, this is your story. But I have to do my part in it too." She licked Susan's face.

"So what do you say, Mr.?" Susan turned to Silverstreak, who was pointing something at her. "Are you *recording* this?"

"Wha? I mean, uh, no, this is, uh, an unrelated thing!" He made it vanish with a flourish. "What were we talking about?"

"Smooth. Very smooth. So can you do it or not?"

"Ah. Come with me."

That's not an answer.

Silverstreak led them to a lab where he set the vial down on a scanner and projected an image of the cybernetic systems Susan had seen ripped out of the Magog. Other agents were of course bent over their individual tasks, and greeted Silverstreak and the girls warmly.

"The thing is," he lectured, "this is what these little guys make. And you, Sparkle, are entirely too small!"

"Oh."

"But don't frown so, grumpy cat! There's hope. I see what Darkvoid is doing here, and I'm fairly certain I can give you the ability naturally."

"Really?"

"I think so. You're already a *spirit mage* and a *natural magician*, so you have a good grasp on using the energy of your body to do certain things. And you have *spirit well* to further increase your energy. I think I can tie it to all that, and allow you to manifest the same sort of abilities this would allow a person sized creature to use." He indicated the cyberware again.

"Is there any risk?" Susan asked, concerned.

"Risk? I don't think so. Is being twenty percent more awesome a risk?"

She glared at him.

"Sorry, too soon I guess. But you get the idea, right?"

"It's your decision," Susan said to her *companion*.

"What do I have to do?"

"There will be some XP cost, of course," he cautioned.

"Of course." Susan rolled her eyes.

"But partially negated by the other energy stuff you already have. And as there's some overlap in skills, you might be able to drop, for example, *Spirit Sense* for whatever skill at sensing life energy this will give you."

"Something I could still do, even in powers mode," Sparkle mused. "That would be useful."

"Yes, *Power Sense* is hardly a substitute," Susan agreed crossly.

"I made up my mind before I even came here," Sparkle said bravely. "Do whatever you have to do."

"Very well. Hop up on the table here and let's do this!"

So Silverstreak concentrated on Sparkle, who began to glow with that same green energy she saw the *Lifestreamers* throwing around. "I'm somewhat getting your body used to it at an accelerated rate," he explained. "Your cells need to adapt and sort of 'learn' how to move life energy through your body so it can be harnessed."

"It's not too bad, keep going."

A cat Lifestreamer, huh? Didn't see that one coming.

Oh? Concerned?

Not really. It won't make that much difference, in the end.

If it makes even a little difference, it'll be worth it.

After some time Silverstreak announced he was done and the glow faded.

"Naturally I don't have anyone around here that can teach you," he apologized. "You'll have to work it out on your own."

"Gives me something to do," she replied, brushing that off. "Thanks."

"Of course. Anything that helps save realities from Darkvoid, I'm happy to assist with. Let me know if there are any side effects though."

"I'll keep you posted."

"Anything else?" He looked over at Susan.

"I didn't even know I was coming here, so not from me. I would like those back though." She indicated the case, still floating alongside Silverstreak. "If they are safe to use, anyway."

"I would like to keep one for study, I only 'glanced' at it so to speak. Don't go injecting people with this stuff until I get back to you about it."

"Too late. Harper injected himself right off. He's been trying to work out what he can do."

"I see. Keep an eye on him, but I guess I don't have to tell you that. Who knows what Darkvoid buried in the code?"

"I'm worried too, but he seems fine. We better get back, we were in the middle of fighting off a Magog attack."

"Don't let me keep you."

So the two went back to where they had started, the now empty basement.

"Why here?" Sparkle asked, looking around.

"I realized why all the energy drained people up there," she explained. "Those guys were probably throwing around energy like crazy. The energy of those people upstairs."

"Oh."

"I want to take as much as I can, and start using a *soul* technique to replenish them. They can get to safety that way. If there are more Magog around here, I don't want them to be sitting ducks."

"Better get going then."

"You are okay, right?"

"Don't feel much different, honestly. But I must admit I'm looking forward to seeing what I can do as a *Lifestreamer*. I'll probably take points from my Martial Art, honestly. My attack will probably be about the same, HDL energy spent, and this I can do from a distance. That should make up for the increase in delay."

"Our stuff usually does work out to that, doesn't it? However you feel is best."

So the pair once again transformed, and Susan cleared the building of unconscious people. (By curing them of energy deprivation, not just slitting their throats or anything.) She spent the rest of the day mopping up Magog, who again seemed more interested now in running away than doing damage, now that their purpose there was fulfilled. Susan went back to the ship which was largely undamaged, and was relieved to see everyone was all right.

"They hardly even attacked us," Rommie assured her. "It was odd, there were certainly ships in the area that could have. I'm not complaining, but I am a warship."

You need that ship to get to where you're going, I'm not going to blow it up until the final curtain closes.

"Not to worry," Susan assured her. "I have it on good authority you'll be in for the fight of your life soon enough. Enjoy the relative peace while you can."

"Ah. Maybe we should look into buying more missiles..."

With the planet's defenses smashed, the 'great compass' had nothing to threaten the Andromeda with, and somewhat begrudgingly accepted their help in putting the place back together. Two weeks later he had to admit his planet would have probably been wiped out by the Magog eventually had it not been for the timely arrival that saved it, and actually sat down to discuss what had happened all those years ago. In the end, he wasn't sure the dramatic rescue completely undid what he saw was a great injustice perpetrated by Dylan, but he seemed to at least be willing to give "Mr. April" the benefit of the doubt. Especially when, their defenses smashed, the people demanded he do something to ward off further attacks. He basically put it to a vote, did they want to join the Commonwealth or not, and as fear is a great motivator, the majority said yes. So Dylan added another world to his roster, and promised that the other member worlds would be along with what ships they could spare. Meanwhile,

he suggested ramping up production of armaments and ships built according to blueprints the Andromeda provided, and the economy boomed. (Wartime economies putting everybody to work, after all.) According to Commonwealth laws the planet went from being a dictatorship to a democracy, and all able bodied people were encouraged to sign up for the Magog defense force. After all, they had to go help other worlds if they were attacked according to the treaty, and so a lot of changes were going on in a short time. Rev hoped they were strong enough to weather them.

Trance, Ifruita, and Harper were told where they were, and finally arrived in the last days of the cleanup. Not too late to pitch in and help, which they did. Apparently they had also run into an 'old friend' the nightsider Gerentex, the one that wanted to originally pull the Andromeda from the black hole. He got shut down by Ifruita and Harper pretty quickly, but did reveal the location of something called the Diary of Hastur, the "mad" Perseid. Naturally, they went to get it, as supposedly it detailed his journey to the lost world of Tarn-Vedra. (Lost because it was believed all slipstream routes to the planet had been cut off during the fall, so that the Magog did not take the birthplace of the Commonwealth. As these routes were like gravity, just sort of there waiting to be used, Susan figured the technological level of the place must have been through the roof to actively destroy them.)

Gerentex got some flowers out of it, the thought to be extinct Ansturian Tundra Flowers, which Susan felt more than made up for the inconvenience of what he went through. (It seemed the flowers belched out oxygen like it was going out of style, always useful to have around when you are floating around in space, in case your O2 scrubbers fail. So they were quite valuable because they were useful, not just because they were rare.)

Sparkle and Harper talked over what she had seen in the battle, and Harper was actually able to serve as a teacher for the *bolt* and *shield* parts of the *Lifestream* equation, all while trying to work out how to use the ability to increase his toughness. Sparkle put her skills into a *skill group* and got two for free, so they reinforced each other well.

With the planet on the road to recovery, Dylan decided enough time had passed and there wasn't much more they could do, and went searching for the next world to bring the light of civilization to.

What he actually *found* were two separate distress calls.

The two distress calls were, of course, in different directions but that didn't bother Susan much. Initially Dylan wanted to spend time taking on relief supplies for the one while he, Rev, and the Maru flew to the other. Susan set him straight.

"Look, if they actually need relief supplies, I can move them much faster than the Andromeda can. No offense."

"None taken," agreed Rommie.

"But you want to waste time taking on supplies when I could be actually there, solving their problems."

"A meteor hit their planet," protested Dylan. "There are massive earthquakes, and scientists predict huge dust clouds because of all the volcanic activity that's been created as a result."

"And?"

"And so what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not sure yet, I'll need to see the exact situation when I get there. But it makes sense that if I can *blow up* a planet with my powers, I could probably *save one* with them. Then there will be no need for 'relief supplies.' The faster I get there the less damage there will be, and the easier the fix is."

"And my problem?" asked Rev, referring to his fellow Wayist Thaddeus who had sent the second message.

"The slavers that have been attacking that area won't be there for some time, right?"

"So he said."

"Not a problem. Ifruita can go with Beka in the Maru and then we can basically be in both places at once. As long as events don't happen there simultaneously, either of us can travel to the bridge of the other ship with a thought and get the other."

"Yes, I suppose that's true."

"So get moving! Both of you!"

The threatened planet was the higher priority for the moment, so the Andromeda flew there at top speed. What they found was worse than they had been told of. Impact damage to the planet had spread to the nearby orbital habitat, and of course there were not enough working relief ships to ferry everyone off. Conditions there were deteriorating as the station was in serious danger of simply breaking into pieces.

"So, we're here," Dylan announced. "Go to work, I guess?"

"I'll head to the planet first," Susan announced. "That way I can open *Teleportals* to the surface and get those people on the orbital out of danger. It'll be your job to herd people through them. Harper, Sparkle, you can both heal so concentrate on that. Anyone not ambulatory only. Save your energy. I know you can pull from others, Harper, but until we know how many injured we're talking about, conserve your strength. We may be at this awhile."

"Got it, boss."

"Once the people are off the orbital we'll see what we can do for the planet. Andromeda, if you think you can drag the thing using your gravity probes without causing more damage, we may want to get it further away from the planet. I don't want it taking any more damage while we're doing all this. And when it's empty, I don't want it smashing into the surface either."

"I'll give it a try."

"Good. I'll send a *Teleportal* over there once I pick out a few spots both there and on the ground."

"We could just link up with the orbital," suggested Rommie.

"I don't want to cause any sort of stress on the place," Susan said, shaking her head. "Plus, there may be some sort of mad rush to get aboard if we dock. People could get hurt in the press."

“I suppose.”

“Sparkle, you ready?”

“Let’s do this!” she agreed, glad to be using her powers for something clearly good for a change.

They changed, and Susan again took *Projection* so she could quickly zip over and see what the situation was. A lot of very stressed people were very worried about their fates, but were of course resigned to them because not many believed any help was coming. Many exclaimed over the ghostly form of our heroine, but she didn’t stop to chat. Just looked for some good places to put *teleportals*. That done she sped to the world below, looking for a place she could put all those people, like a major city that would have the resources to handle them. She chose a place at random, took a good look around to find a large enough park to put a bunch of *teleportals* into, and broke off the *projection*. “Got it,” she announced, and stepped the group over to the orbital.

She chose an open area and set up the largest *teleportal* she could, wedging it open with a *metapower* technique. The others fanned out, looking for anyone that seemed to be in charge or who could make announcements to get people moving. Susan didn’t stop to admire the scenery, just flew up a level and repeated the procedure.

Have to remember to come shut these down later. They’re stuck here, and if the station blows up or whatever, they’ll eventually bleed the atmosphere off!

People started moving towards the “exits” she was making, hardly believing what they were seeing. But even in the sorry state it was in, the planet was preferable to being caught in a vacuum if the station broke up. Having placed half a dozen *teleportals* she nodded to herself and went looking for more ways to help, and naturally she found them. Areas had collapsed, rubble had to be moved so survivors could be located, people were hurt, kids were separated from parents- the whole nine yards. Susan worked as quickly as she could, switching powers as the situation called for it and ignoring people’s surprised reactions to her abilities. *Let them have a weird story to tell, at least they’ll be alive.* She basically flitted from place to place, doing whatever needed to be done, directing them (sometimes incorrectly because of her *No Sense of Direction* of course) to the nearest portal to the surface, and leaving again.

This is what I should have done fighting those Lifestreamers. Changed powers immediately. I was set up to take out a group of Magog, with my clever little ‘blind them with Light nature’ plan. When it was just the five of them I should have switched. Even behind those barriers, I bet I still could have put them to sleep, or done a Mind technique to throw them off.

In short, she finally got to live a day as an actual super hero, helping people instead of just beating them up.

Harper and Sparkle, on the other hand, were not having quite as easy a time of it. Tasked with healing and getting people moving, they were directed towards makeshift or actual hospitals (what was left of them). Many people had been injured and already rescued, but now needed medical care that was stretched thin. It didn’t help that the orbital had been hit two days ago, meaning the medical staff was not only inadequate for the job they now found themselves having to do, they had to do it while exhausted.

Then there was the small detail of getting someone to listen to some crazy kid spouting nonsense about him and his *cat* being able to heal people. Nobody had time for that.

“So now what do we do?” Harper asked Sparkle, as they tried not to get in the way too much as nurses and doctors and volunteers rushed about trying to hold things together.

“I guess we take a page from the Susan playbook,” Sparkle reluctantly allowed. “We don’t take no for an answer, muscle in where we can, and do whatever good we can.”

“I guess we can look for a quieter part of the hospital, work our way through the place. Once enough people start walking out of here when they shouldn’t be, someone will have to listen to us.”

“Let’s go.”

So the pair moved through the place, looking for quiet rooms and healing those that needed it just enough to be on their way. Those with simply broken bones waiting to be put into casts or blood loss from gashes were easy. A quick *Healing* technique and they could be on their way. Obviously people wanted to know how this was being done but they had work to do, and basically chased away the people they had healed. They came to one quiet room that was quiet for a reason, and Harper looked sadly down at the man who was draped in a cloth. He looked to be about in his twenties, so about Harper's own age.

"Looks like we were too late for this one," he remarked. "Must have been dug out of something that collapsed. His legs look crushed."

"Then we better move on. We have more to save here." Sparkle turned to go.

"Hold on a minute." Harper stared hard at the man, deep in thought.

"Do you know him?"

"Hm? No, no, it's just... you said this ability of ours stems from life energy, right? Literal, honest to goodness, the soul or whatever."

"That's what I was told. Why?"

"You don't think we can... you know?"

"What?"

"Use some of our life energy and actually, I don't know, jump start this guy again?"

"What?! Do you even know what you're asking? What would that even mean?"

"I don't know. But I can't just leave this guy here."

"He's dead. Of course you can." *Or am I starting to sound a bit too much like Susan in that statement?*

"Not if I can help him. Can you fix his legs or not?"

"I can repair them, I suppose he's just an object at this point." So Sparkle healed the man and Harper put his hand on the guy's chest. He began to glow a soft green, and so did the body.

"Help me! You're a *Lifestreamer* too, aren't you?"

"Not that I'm very great at it, with only ones in the skills, but okay, I suppose I can't turn my back on this. What would Susan say if I did?"

She jumped up on the bed and put a paw on the man, closing her eyes to concentrate. She tried to feel the life energy in Harper, and in herself. She envisioned it flooding into the man's body, making him alive again, and made a *Retaining* check, getting an eleven in the skill. She was assisting Harper, who got a nine, (despite having a five in the skill, because that's how the universe works) for a total of oh look at that, eleven.

The body gave a gasp and sat up, looking around wildly.

"Where am I?" he demanded. "What's going on?" He looked between the still glowing Harper and cat on the other side, and was obviously freaked out. Also he had been dead a few seconds ago, and that'll confuse the heck out of anybody. He threw Sparkle off the bed, or at least tried to, she got a fourteen to dodge his untrained *unarmed* roll and simply jumped his arm and landed at the foot of the bed.

This was enough for the guy, who took off screaming down the corridor.

"Well, that should get their attention," Harper decided, sounding both pleased and somewhat horrified at what he had just witnessed.

*I can't believe that actually worked, thought Sparkle. Silverstreak was right when he called what The Darkness had done a perversion. We've been given the power of **raising the dead**. What does that mean we've become? And for anyone to just be able to inject themselves with something that can allow them to do it? What has The Darkness set in motion here? Can Harper keep himself from dying? Reverse his own aging? What happens when others learn this ability exists, only an injection away? Riots? Chaos across the galaxy? Even if we win here, has the destiny of this reality been irrevocably altered?*

But Sparkle had no answers, just questions, and the two beat a hasty retreat before they were mobbed.

"We'll just move on to the next place that needs us," Harper said mostly to himself.

"We've done enough good here, right?" He looked shaken and pale, and Sparkle hoped what he had done hadn't weakened him in some way.

There must be some kind of cost for this, right? You just don't return the dead to life at the snap of a finger.

So they moved on, and both had a haunted look in their eyes when they came across other dead bodies. But neither had the courage to speak up to the other and suggest they should try again. They simply moved on.

Once word got around there was a way to the surface even the most badly hurt found the will to get themselves mobile any way they could, and the orbital quickly emptied out. Of course, that created a new problem on the surface as a bunch of hungry, exhausted, and confused people were now there, rather than here. Susan figured the warlocks had been fine when they suddenly showed up in various cities, at least after a time. This place had much better technology and so could more easily deal with them.

At least I hope.

With the station now nearly empty- *What's that guy running around and shouting about? Coming back to life? What a drama queen. He's going to be dead "a second time" unless he gets off this station pretty soon.* -Susan now turned her attention to the planet.

"What's the situation, have you gotten any reports?" she asked Rommie, now back aboard the Andromeda.

"Dust clouds are increasing, but tectonic activity is decreasing from what I can gather up here," she replied.

"So we need to seal volcanoes and clean up the air?"

"Pretty much."

"Can you direct me to where they are? I mean you can see them on infrared or something, right?"

"I can give you some rough locations, yes."

"Good enough."

So Susan flew across the planet with the *Flight* power, *Dash*, and as much *speed* as she could take, and guided by Andromeda speaking to her through her watch, made her way to most active volcanos. There she "simply" used a combination Earth/Nature technique to drive any fissures closed, and repair any damage done to the ground nearby. Then an Air/Nature technique to gather up the nearby dust clouds that had been created which she simply compressed into a ball of rock and let drop when the air seemed to be mostly clear again.

I'm lucky we got here when we did. If those things had kept spewing stuff into the air, it would have been too much even for me to handle.

Susan totally lost track of time, zipping about the planet guided by her "eye in the sky" to any new disaster area that popped up. Finally Rommie said she should come back, it looked like the place was calming down and Ifruita was asking for her.

"Nice of you to drop back in," Sparkle said somewhat sarcastically when she *teleported* back to the bridge.

"What do you mean? I had a planet to save!"

"It's been three days, and you're filthy!"

"What, how long?" Susan was somewhat surprised, and looked down at herself. "I guess I am. Hey Ifruita!"

"Greetings master," she said back. "You've been busy here?"

"More than I realized. Thank goodness for *Renewal* I guess. Do I need to come immediately?"

She shook her head. "The people of Serendipity are not taking my assurances seriously. I could demonstrate my powers, of course, but then I fear that they would fear me. So I don't know what to do."

"Good thing I don't care one way or the other!" Susan replied lightly. "Things are calming down here, you think?"

"Apart from stories of the woman flying about the place like a goddess, yes," replied Rommie. "If you want to head over there, I think this planet's crisis is over. Plus, Commonwealth ships should begin arriving soon with other, more mundane, assistance."

"Great. Everyone got pulled off the station okay? I have to go shut down the *teleportals* I made before I leave."

"About that..." Sparkle said hesitantly, her tail jerking back and forth in distress.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing I guess. I'll... tell you later. Go get cleaned up."

"Okay, if you say so." *Odd.*

A fresh faced Susan and an oddly pensive Sparkle stepped through the *Teleportal* generated by Ifruita and she looked around. Before her was a rather primitive village, if it could be called that, and not a small fort. All around the place was a wooden wall, and both the houses, and people milling about in the square were quite simple. Their clothes were muted colors, and the rough wooden wagon both made of and full of sticks sitting next to an actual blacksmith pounding away making something screamed "medieval." Many had on robes, and more than one person had the medallion of "the way" around their necks. Beka and Rev noticed them coming in and waved them over.

"Interesting place," Susan greeted them, looking around.

"Tell me about it," Beka replied, rolling her eyes. "These people don't even have running water, but to hear Thaddeus go on about it, this is the next best thing to heaven."

"He does seem rather taken with the life these people have made for themselves, doesn't he?" Rev playfully asked, pointing out a man in a robe like the one he himself wore. A man with dark skin saw them, excused himself from talking to a young man, and came over to him. He was lightly bearded, probably mid-fifties, and given the deference everyone there showed him, probably their spiritual leader.

Oh sky cake. Why are you so delicious?

"So I meet another of your friends, as promised," he said after they had greeted each other. "But where is the army you keep talking about?"

"I'm right here," Susan informed him, spreading her arms. "Tada!"

"Funny. But seriously, Bohemian, I thought you knew someone with a powerful starship." He did a double take and looked at Susan's eyes again, almost seeming revolted that they were looking at him.

Great, thanks for reminding me of that little inhuman feature I now enjoy.

"Do not take her lightly, Thaddeus," cautioned Rev. "She is equal to any army you have ever seen."

The man looked at both the Magog spiritualist and Susan like they were both something unpleasant he had just stepped in, but Susan didn't really care what this guy thought of her.

"I'm going to inspect the village, see what I have to work with," she announced. "Come on Sparkle. Ifruita, mind giving me the tour?"

"Not at all master." She fell into step beside Susan and walked away from the now somewhat confused Thaddeus.

"I do have to admit," Sparkle said, looking around, "these people not using the 'universal greeting' upon our arrival is something of a refreshing change."

Susan barked a laugh. "You've got that right." *Back at the planet the people were too busy facing certain death, so I didn't get many greetings, universal or otherwise. Here though, they seem more curious about me than ready to try blowing me up. Glad to see at least some places haven't been corrupted.*

The place was not all that big, with a longhouse or two along each wall, and a large open area in the middle. *I guess they all sort of cohabit? Not that I would have a problem with that.* But Susan's guess was correct, as she didn't see any higher technology than the wheel laying around. Having made her circuit of the place she stepped up to Beka and the others, expectantly waiting for her return.

“So what does the ‘walking army’ think of our home?” he asked, obviously not believing this one girl could do anything about a ship full of slavers.

“I think it’s going to be very, very easy to make those slavers wish they had never come here,” she announced with certainty. Both Sparkle and Thaddeus glared at her. “In the most non-violent way I possibly can, of course,” she amended.

She began with a *technology* technique, made permanent, and taking the form of glowing runes that hung in the air above the four corners of the place. These were created with a grade high enough to cover the entire place and beyond, and basically shut down any technology that got near the place. With that she used a *Seer* technique to learn when the slaver’s ship would land, and chilled out in the village until the next day. The kids were entranced by her, and she showed off her wings and some *Illusion* techniques of fantastic creatures prancing about. The adults didn’t quite know what to make of her, even after she explained what she wanted to do, but kept glancing up at the glowing runes Susan insisted would protect the place. It seemed they wanted to believe her, but of course how could they?

The next day the ship landed, and Susan watched *unseen* as a group of heavily armed men poured out. *Only one guard left behind. Good. They probably figure a place like this wouldn’t need more.* She made her way inside and took a look around, in case there was anything worth swiping before she blew the thing up, and it turned out there were.

Human slaves.

Or at least, people on their way to become slaves. Susan’s anger rose a bit, and she appeared before them, suppressing her *unseen* power for the moment. “How would you like to get out of here?” she asked rhetorically, and the hopeless looking people in the communal cell before her all looked over in her direction. “Yes? All righty then.” She tore the door off the bars and tossed it aside. “I’ll be back in a minute, I have to take care of the one guard they’ve left. You move through the ship and grab anything valuable. That done we’ll head to the nearby village and you can figure out what you want to do when I tear these slavers a new one.”

“You’re really letting us out?” asked one man, getting up.

“You do see this open space, right? That you can easily walk out of?”

“We’re free?” asked a woman, and everyone started to get up.

“Totally free,” Susan assured them. “Just don’t make too much noise until I subdue the guard, okay? And don’t go anywhere, it’s miles of forest from here out and you’ll need me to guide you. Stick together and we’ll all go back to the nearest village together, okay?”

Hope seemed to return to the faces of the beaten down people in the cell, and they streamed out happily. Susan went *Unseen* again and went in search of the guard. He was standing by the door of the ship, just leaning there, and Susan simply grabbed him by the back of the neck and took off into the sky.

“What’s going on?” exclaimed the guy, feeling the earth drop away from him, and Susan became visible again. He was panicking and thrashing around, and tried to jerk away from Susan as he finally was able to see her.

“I want you to be very careful about your next move,” she cautioned, wings lightly beating the air twenty meters or so above the ground. “I wouldn’t want to lose my grip on you.” *I wonder if I even could? Wouldn’t that be causing him harm?*

Why not let go and find out? asked The Darkness.

Pass.

“What- what are you?” the man stammered.

“Mostly? Pissed off. Communicator. You must have one. Drop it with your gun, and do it now.”

“Okay, okay.” The fear in the man’s eyes was clear, and it only increased when he caught sight of Susan’s eyes and wings. “Don’t drop me!”

“Communicator. And don’t think of triggering it or anything stupid like that.”

“Okay, okay. Wait, this is some kind of anti-gravity harness or something, isn’t it?” Suddenly the man seemed a lot less worried. “You just made it up to look like wings. What are you doing all the way out here?” Now he just seemed genuinely confused.

Susan dangled him out to the side by the back of his shirt. “I won’t tell you again.”

“I’m dropping it, I’m dropping it.”

“The gun too.”

The man did so, and Susan nodded. “Fine.” She swooped down to the ship and shoved the man forward. “Anything valuable inside? Show me.”

“What? I’m being robbed? What in the world- hey!” One of the prisoners shot past them, obviously not willing to stick around even for a person that can rip prison doors off. “You let the slaves out?”

Who let the slaves out? Woof, woof? Who let the slaves out?

Really?

What?

“Yes, I did. Hey, come back here! The village isn’t that way! Aaaaand they’re gone. Wonderful.”

“Man, why does this always happen to me?”

“MOVE!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll show you the safe or whatever. Man, the guys are gonna be pissed when they get back.”

Oh, they’re not coming back here...

After a few minutes Susan got everyone back together and with their armloads of stuff stolen from the ship put them through a *teleportal* to the village. Many protested they didn’t want to go to some village in the middle of nowhere but Susan said she would be happy to put them back in the cell, and they started cooperating right quick.

“What kind of technology do you have? Stuff from before the fall?” asked the guy, who she hadn’t let go of. They watched the final *teleportal* vanish after the last person went through.

“Sure, keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better. Is that everybody?”

“Expect for that idiot that ran off, yeah,” said the man. “That seemed to be all the people we caught recently.”

“Great. I’ll be after our stray sheep in a moment.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Offer you the same choice I’m going to offer your buddies. But that’s for later. Right now, we’re taking to the air again.”

“Do we have to?”

“You are the whiniest captive, honestly.” Susan shoved him off the ship and took off again, then did a quick *seer* technique to make sure there were no living things aboard. There weren’t, so she pointed down at the ship now some distance below them.

“*Infinite Horizon*,” she called down, using *darkness* nature to create a very strong point of gravity under the ship that crushed it over the course of maybe a minute or so.

“That... that was our only way off this planet,” stammered the man.

“How astute of you to notice.” A *teleportal* opened near them. “Let’s go.”

Now back in the center of town she roughly shoved the man into a sitting position and told him to stay there. She patted her one gun. “I will shoot you, don’t think I won’t.”

“How do you keep doing that?” he asked, not intimidated at all.

“Maybe I’ll just shoot you now...” she mused, rolling her eyes. “Hey, get that gate open! What do you think you’re doing?”

“We saw a ship in the sky!” yelled a villager.

“Yeah, what do you think I’ve been doing all morning? Waiting for it to land!” She went over and yanked the wooden doors open. “We’re going to have guests in a moment, let’s show them proper hospitality.”

“Are you trying to get us all killed?” was the general consensus of the crowd.

Do you really think this flimsy wooden door would stop them?

"And who are all these new people? Where did they come from?" asked another, indicating the new people that were looking around interestedly.

"They're the people the slavers captured, of course! You didn't think I wouldn't rescue them, did you? See to their needs and let me worry about the slavers. Go on! And get that guy tied up, you must have rope or something around here you can use. He seems like he would just wander away if you didn't watch him every minute."

Sullenly the crowd moved off, and about an hour or so later a large, well armed group of men strode up to the place looking confused. (Naturally, Susan had long since *telesummoned* the errant person that had run by her.) The leader seemed to be a bald guy in a black shirt, which a sort of leather... thing... draped over him. He also wore black leather pants and had an earpiece in one ear. He and all the others had their weapons drawn and were looking about nervously.

"Welcome!" she called to them, spreading her arms in greeting. "About time you finally made it here. What, did you stop for coffee on the way?"

"Who are you?"

"Susan's the name, would you like to play a game?"

"Sure," smirked the man. "Let's see how many times I have to shoot you before you fall down." He raised the gun.

And there it is, the universal greeting. Glad to see some things don't change. She laughed and held up a hand. "All in good time, my man. Aren't you the least bit curious why I've let you just stroll in here like this?"

"You want a cut of our profits so you're letting us have our pick of villagers?"

"Not exactly. See, I'm here to offer you and your men a choice. Would you like to know what that choice is?"

"This'll be good." The men crowded around the leader laughed.

"Oh it will, believe me. Option one- throw down your weapons, and make a life here because you're never going to leave. Put aside your desire for material things, and make peace with a life of honest labor, and Wayism, I suppose. It seems to be big around here."

"And the second option?"

"The second option is you throw down your guns and I arrest you all for human trafficking. You'll get a fair trial in the Commonwealth justice system, and maybe in a few years you'll get out for good behavior. If they do that, I have no idea. But you don't get to experience the joy of growing your own food and slaughtering your own pigs to eat, so there's that."

"Maybe I'll just go back to my earlier plan and just shoot you a bunch of times." He pulled the trigger.

Naturally, nothing happened.

"Huh?" He looked down at the gun with an expression of "how dare you betray me in this manner" but then barked orders to his posse to gun this girl down. Again, nothing happened.

They started to look a little worried.

"I've suppressed all technology in this area," Susan informed them. "That's why shooting me wasn't an option. Now, I ask again, will be option one, or option two?"

"Come on boss, something weird is going on around here," said the dark skinned man next to the leader. "You saw those glowing things in the air, and do you see this girl's eyes?"

"I'm not leaving because some stupid girl got some cyber eyes and has some kind of power dampening field in the area. We'll take who we want without guns, they can't fight back." He holstered his gun and cracked his knuckles.

"Oh please, please come and be the first to try and get past me." Susan asked him. "But before you do, why not speak to this man?" She turned around. "Hey, slaver guy! Get up here!"

"I have a name you know," said the man, who was pushed forward by one of the former prisoners. They hadn't had any problem finding rope and tying the guy up.

"Taylor? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be guarding the- hey, I know you!"

"He really can't shoot us?" asked the former prisoner.

"Not anywhere near here, no," she assured him.

"Can I punch him?"

"In a minute. Taylor, is it? Tell your buddy here what you saw me doing to your ship, and why it's option one or option two for these fine fellows."

"Actually, he's always been kind of a jerk to me. I wouldn't say we were buddies."

"Just tell him!"

"Okay, okay. You're kind of a jerk too, you know? Yeah, she destroyed the ship."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean the ship. She flew me into the air and did some weird thing and it got crushed into half the size. Then it exploded. The anti-matter I expect. Then it crushed down some more. It's shot."

"We're stranded here?" asked one of the other guys.

"No, we'll just take their ship," the leader announced, pointing to Susan. "They aren't from around here, and they got here somehow."

"Oh, good luck with that!" Susan wished them. "That ship is currently light years away. Tell him how you got here."

"Some kind of hole in the air. We didn't walk here. Strangest thing..."

What a laid back fellow. "So yeah, that's it. I doubt anyone is coming to your rescue and I further doubt you have any comm gear powerful enough to call any ship that might pass by." Susan stepped up to the man. "So you can leave here with me and get comfy in a cell, or you can accept your fate and live as a farmer, or whatever the people do here."

"Or we could just take over here and make these people our slaves."

"How are you going to do that? Your guns don't work! In fact you may as well hand it over." She held a hand out for it.

"The old fashioned way," he replied, slugging her in the face.

Susan smiled. "Option two it is, wonderful!" And punched him in the chest as hard as she possibly could.

He went flying back and with twenty three non-lethal damage to the chest, fell backwards and hit the ground out cold.

"Get her!" shouted the rest, and Susan shook her head, activating her *Velocity* item mentally.

Goon 1 stepped up and tried to hit Susan with the butt of his pistol, but she didn't worry about that and reactively slugged him. He went down, slamming into the guy behind him, goon 6, who was knocked over and started getting the now unconscious goon 1 off him. (twenty four damage) Goon 3 now had a clear shot and went to try kicking Susan's leg out from under her. She ignored that and punched him, doing twenty five damage and knocking him back against 8. (And out cold, of course.) Goon 2 now had a clear shot and went down with twenty six damage.

"Stop this violence!" yelled Thaddeus from the sidelines, running towards them.

Uh, no?

Goon 4 couldn't stop his momentum, and wondered about his life choices as his fellow slavers were flying past him. He got slugged for twenty seven damage and went down.

Goon 5 and 7 now came at Susan from two different directions, but she simply lashed out with her foot against 7 to her right, then without even setting it down made Chuck Norris proud with a roundhouse kick against 5, doing forty five (capped at his lethal capacity of course because of her spell) and twenty eight.

Goon 6 was now up, and he looked at the ground where his fellow slavers lay groaning or unconscious. "I'm gonna be the best farmer ever!" he declared, throwing his gun down. "Find me a hoe and point me towards a field!"

Goon 8 vainly tried his gun again, but it didn't work any better now than before, and he sheepishly dropped it.

"We have one call for farmer. How about you?" Susan asked him.

"Uh, I always wanted to be a... boot maker?"

"Fine. Help me toss these losers and you can get introduced to everyone."

“Toss?”

A *Teleportal* opened next to Susan. “I told them earlier if it wasn’t staying here, it would be a cell, and that’s what’s going to happen.” She pulled everything that looked explosive, sharp, or useful off the first guy and tossed him though, and the previous slaves surged forward to help. Moments later the field was again empty of slavers, apart from the new farmer and boot maker.

“Did you have to punch them all?” Sparkle asked, padding up to her.

“Probably not,” she admitted. “But it was something they could understand. If they remember the last few minutes at all, they won’t recall me throwing energy bolts around, they’ll just know they got beat by a girl.”

“And that’s the better option?”

“I know, I know. But I didn’t hurt them seriously, nobody died, and these people are safe. Mission accomplished I’d say.”

“How did you move like that?” asked one of the villagers. “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“And you never will again, believe me. Anything else I can do for you, brother Thaddeus?”

“Just leave, please,” he pleaded. “I don’t know if I should thank you or curse you, with what you’ve done here.”

“Oh, saving everyone’s lives? Sure, sure, I get it. Come along everyone, we’ll head back to the Maru and meet up with the Andromeda.”

“What about us?” asked the former slaves.

“Right, almost forgot about you guys. You’re welcome to come or stay here as you choose. We can get you back at least somewhat civilized areas, you may have to book passage back to your home worlds or whatever. We can work that out.”

Most choose to stay, and Susan sent them to the Andromeda directly, with Ifruitita, and orders to tell Dylan to see what he could do for them.

“He always seem to want to feel useful, this is a perfect opportunity,” she announced, pleased.

“I’m not sure it’s what he had in mind,” grumped Sparkle.

Susan was finishing her breakfast in the mess hall with Ifruita and Sparkle, not that Ifruita needed to eat. But she did have to stay with her master. Their prisoners from the world of the hopeful slavers were long since gone, and Susan had helped capture another old high guard ship that had been flying around causing trouble. It turned out it was in charge of the “Restorians,” having gone nuts after flying about without a crew for a few decades. So it had decided to simply wipe out all space travel, and thus the Restorian group had been created.

Susan had saved some unarmed transport from a group of Restorians, and a few members of the Free Trade Alliance took notice and gave them the information about where the “Balance of Judgment” usually hung out. It was only about half the size of the Andromeda, so Susan simply created a level twenty one *time* technique that was big enough to freeze it completely in time. She then ripped out the anti-matter chambers by being immune to *time* and thus, able to go onboard, see them, and then *telesummon* the chambers while out in space. The same was done for any crew, and boy were they surprised to find themselves suddenly in cells when a second before they had been going about their business aboard ship.

With that done the ship had no crew and only minimal power, enough that a lower level *technology* technique could drain it completely. The ship was then towed to the nearest commonwealth aligned world to have the AI replaced so the newly upgraded “Rising Phoenix” could be put back into service.

All this was hardly worth mentioning.

In any case, without their leader the Restorian cause was all but lost, and everyone that used space travel (which was everybody, duh) began to breathe a little easier. (Of course you can’t kill an idea so there were still some dedicated to the cause flying about, but they hardly counted, right? With their tendency to blow themselves up instead of surrender or capture, it’s a problem that’ll solve itself in the end.)

“Our time here should be nearing the end, yes?” she asked, sitting across from Susan.

“We’ve certainly been here long enough,” agreed Susan. *And gotten shot at enough times.* “Whatever event this crew would normally have encountered should be happening soon.”

“Have we done good here?”

“How can you even ask that? Of course!”

“We changed history, if I understand things correctly.”

“What? You mean the whole going back in time thing? That was obviously the way things were supposed to happen around here. And we stayed out of it, as ordered.”

“I think she means the stuff with ‘Nemo’ and the insane AIs and such,” clarified Sparkle. “And to be totally fair, she’s right.”

“We can’t just make ourselves *unseen* the whole time and jump in whenever the event happens,” protested Susan.

“We could.”

“But the destiny of these people was already changed,” she protested. “As soon as The Darkness set foot here. Creating *Lifestreamers* for one. Killing all the kids on that station? Making Magog more deadly?”

“But instead of a balancing force, you tend to have little regard for how things would go apart from that,” put in Ifruita. “You do not strive to erase that influence, you simply ignore it and then add your own.”

“Okay, let’s say that we put Sparkle’s plan in place then. We take no action until the very end. Where does our XP come from? How do we improve ourselves? Just passively

watching events won't allow us any growth. And can you really say you would just watch when there was something you knew you could do?"

"She's right, it wouldn't work very well," Sparkle admitted. "But Ifruita has a point, you may want to think your actions over a little more on the worlds we next visit, if you can."

Susan shook her head. "With The Darkness already influencing me in subtle ways, I could never be sure if inaction or action was what *it* wanted. Remember that friend of Robert's getting killed back in the Disney reality? It was simply my suggesting they not go 'bowling' that night that led to the deaths of several people they could have rescued. Either way, the future changed just because I happened to be there. Silverstreak must be okay with it, he's never made an issue of it. So I'm not going to either."

"If you want subtle, you're going to have to look elsewhere, Ifruita. That ship has long sailed."

"Oh, here you all are," Beka exclaimed, coming in to the room suddenly. "Come on, Dylan's birthday surprise is about to start, we can't do it without you!"

Oh right, they were planning something for Dylan. What was it...

"Reactor function critical!" Rommie broadcast through the ship. "Containment loss imminent."

And people say I do things in a big way!

It turned out the "something" the crew had been planning for Dylan was to give him a heart attack by making him think the ship was about to blow up, thus making him race to the engine room at top speed. Everyone yelled "Surprise!" when he threw himself into the chamber in a mad dash to try and save his ship, and finally the klaxons were silenced.

"What a strange custom," remarked Ifruita.

So there was cake, and merriment, and two hours or so later, everyone was back on the bridge as Beka explained her birthday gift.

"It's all here," she insisted. "The route to Tarn Vedra."

She was talking about the diary Trance and Harper had "liberated" from a trap filled asteroid after squeezing the information out of the nightsider that had originally tried to take the ship over. Harper was complaining about the lengths he went through to decode the route, but Beka seemed excited. She was convinced it would work, and brushed off the "minor inconveniences" featured along the route.

"It seems rather dangerous," he cautioned.

"But less so, with me around," Susan spoke up.

"Oh? How that?"

She stepped up to the display showing the route. "A couple of reasons. One, Beka doesn't have to do all the flying herself. She's admitted I'm as good a pilot as she is."

"Nearly- I said nearly as good."

"And second, I can share my power with her. This Slipstream stuff seems to depend on LUCK and possibly MANipulation, wiggling the control sticks about."

"I do not wiggle them," protested Beka. "I have complete control at all times."

"Whatever. Boosting those stats to their maximum and allowing her to go extended periods without needing sleep, plus phenomenal energy regeneration, give her an edge no human has ever enjoyed before."

"You can really do that?" asked Trance, seeming impressed.

"Sure. For a while, anyway. It would go away when I went back into *magic mode*. But for the duration, yes."

"What do you think?" he asked Rommie.

"I would need to compare her recorded performance against any enhancement to give you a complete answer," she hedged. "I've certainly seen what she can do, and if she can channel her powers into another, our odds of reaching our destination would rise tremendously. And there is little difference in the ability of both woman to control the ship through slipstream."

“Easy solution,” chirped Beka. “Let’s get started. Rommie can see how my performance differs, and if it’s still not enough to convince you, we’ll just turn around then and there. No harm done.”

“I suppose that’s reasonable.”

“Yes!” Beka pumped her fist in the air.

Susan just smiled and shook her head.

Susan’s current powers

Animal Quality (Seeing)	1
Energy Regeneration	5
Energy Well	4
Nature (Metapower)	2
Renewal	1
Stat Adjustment (LUC)	5
Stat Adjustment (REF)	5
Stat Adjustment (MAN)	5

Having transformed, Susan used a *metapower* technique to share her current powers with Beka, who lit up. (Not literally) “I feel amazing!” she breathed. “That’s odd, I seem to have better vision too.” She looked around the cabin in wonder. “Have I needed glasses this whole time?”

“It’s part of the powers I gave you. Figured we might as well, it can’t hurt.”

“No it can’t. Everyone, let’s do this!” She jumped into the pilot’s chair and threw the ship into the *slipstream*.

However Beka did it, she now got a twenty eight (out of fifty seven) on her first piloting check, and due to the complexities inherent to the technologies, the better you did the less time you seemed to spend in the *slipstream* yourself. So the ship popped out only moments after it went in.

“We can’t be there already?” Dylan asked, surprised.

“No, there’s the yellow and blue binary star of the Capella system,” Rommie assured him. “We have made it, and in a time I didn’t think was humanly possible.”

“You see? Nothing to it,” Beka told them. “Shall I continue?”

“Still, forty six jumps?” Dylan protested. “Even if they’re as short as that one, which I can’t see them being, that’s a lot of work.”

“But she’ll only have to do twenty three,” Susan reminded him. “We can trade every five or so, if you’re concerned about it.”

He considered. “I guess we can always turn around if it gets too dicey.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Umm,” spoke up Trance. “I don’t suppose if I started to, I don’t know, seem to be dying, that you would turn around?”

“Why would you suddenly start dying?” asked Harper.

“Oh, no reason. Just a question. Like, maybe getting close to that system was bad for me, or something?”

“I’d just *Teleportal* you someplace else,” Susan assured her. “Or you could stay behind in the Maru and we could come pick you up later.”

“Kinda figured that. Fine.”

“Trance, something you want to tell us?” Rev asked, concerned.

“No, it’s fine,” she reluctantly agreed. “But I’ll have to make the final jump.”

“Whoa, you remember the last time you tried to pilot the ship?” Harper asked, worried. “You threw us back in time!”

“You won’t make it without me,” she said simply.

Susan looked over at Beka, who shrugged. “It’s fine with me, if you say that’s what has to happen.”

“Then we might as well go. But I’ll tell you right now, it’s not what you’re expecting.”

She wouldn't say more, just insisting they needed to see for themselves, and so their journey began. Not to say there weren't some rough spots, but Beka for her part got

45, 35, 21, 37, 37, 28, 35, 34, 29, 48, 33, 47, 45, 32, 46, 45, 31, 50, 39, 25, 41, 27, 26

and as we all know, getting a thirty on something is supposed to be doing the near impossible, those results above thirty (seventeen of them) propelled them forward and cut multiple jumps off the journey. But she did trade off with Susan at Dylan's insistence, so the ship made better time than anyone thought possible.

Trance now sat in the big chair, and Susan had just finished offering her the same treatment. "Not that you need the energy," she said with a laugh.

"That won't be necessary," Trance informed her. "This won't exactly be the standard trip through Slipstream." She considered a moment and looked over at Susan. "However, if you could share some *dimensional* energies with me, it might make the process a bit smoother. I'm not really supposed to be doing this, after all, and you're all about breaking rules, right?"

"Breaking rules, sure, but do you mean some kind of technique?"

Trance shook her head. "You don't know how? I can teach you, it's easy. You know how you drew off my energy totally without asking or anything that one time?"

"I thought you said you didn't realize it!"

"I guess I *can* be convincing sometimes, huh? Anyway, it's like that, only in reverse this time. I get to take from you. Fair's fair, after all."

"I can certainly change *natures* but do you have *spirit manipulation*?"

"I don't know what that is. No, we just sort of synchronize our spirits and you let your energy flow into me."

"Humm..." Susan said, somewhat stumped. She brought her character sheet out and started looking it over, hoping for some kind of clue.

"Maybe just a *Power Control* check of some kind?" offered Sparkle, doing the same.

"Guess it's all I've got. Wait, why don't you try it with me first? We might get more information out of it, both being *Paragons*. Weird too, I would have thought I had learned everything about powers from The Darkness, when it dumped all that information in my brain while it was worming deeper into my soul."

Had to keep you distracted somehow. I did dump in a lot, apart from the stuff I didn't. Like this, for instance, which is quite useful and thus I didn't want you doing it. Don't know how this little ball of gas worked out you could do it.

Okay first, ball of gas? And second, what other things have you- dumb question, right? You catch on fast.

"Never mind. Let's just try it."

So both transformed and rolled *Power Control*, Susan getting a twenty three and Sparkle getting a fourteen.

"No, no!" chided Trance. "You're totally out of sync!"

"What does that even mean? But I guess that means we're on the right track? We'll try again."

"Okay."

This time it was eighteen and seventeen, and Susan felt a connection open between herself and her *companion*.

"Wow, you picked that up right away!" Trance praised them. "Comes from being such close friends I guess."

Sparkle was thoughtfully nodding. "Something like that," she agreed. Then to Susan, "I get it now. We both have to roll somewhat the same result. That's what she perceives as us 'being in sync.'"

"Exactly. As our skill is the same, but my RESolve is three higher, I should probably take some kind of penalty on the check. Or maybe we can practice and increase the tolerance of the check. But it worked out. We're both as good as we can be for energy manipulation, so it's not hard to believe we picked this up right away. It's just another application of the skill we're already good at. So what can we do now?"

“Try drawing off her energy. Sparkle, don’t fight it, send some to her.”

“Wait a second, let me think of some harmless technique I can try. Good thing I took *Illusion* figuring I might need it. Okay, got it. *Pink Elephants!*”

And so Susan learned that Sparkle could make *Power Control* checks to send her energy which she could use in addition to her own, meaning instead of being able to put twenty energy into a technique at once, she could put in between thirty two and forty four. Or if she needed it, the link went both ways so Sparkle could draw off her energy with a check.

You really have kept all the goodies to yourself, haven’t you?

And let you use your furry friend as a kitty battery? Of course. I’m not stupid.

Right, if Sparkle just took a bunch of energy regen and energy well she could just sit on my shoulder, regenerate her energy like mad and feed it to me. Susan was nearly drooling.

When you should be taking MY energy. Stupid Trance.

HA HA.

Going to look forward to killing her, later.

Hey, now that’s not even funny.

The energy was also typed, so for instance Sparkle could take a *fire nature* and Susan could take *Electricity nature* and techniques using the energy mixture were both types. So that explained why Trance wanted her energy, and Susan happily became a conduit for that *nature* which Trance drew off rather expertly, and brought them into a very odd looking Slipstream corridor, if it was that at all. Trance didn’t seem to be “riding the rails” as the others did, moving the ship to attach to the “strings” that pulled Andromeda forward. She simply sat in the pilot’s chair and concentrated, and soon the tunnel fell away and the destination system came into view.

“That can’t be right,” Rommie remarked. “Are you sure about this?”

Trance sadly nodded. “I told you.”

“What is it? Where are we?” asked Dylan.

“I’m not sure,” Rommie answered. “But not where we’re supposed to be. This can’t be Tarn Vedra. For one thing it has two suns.”

“Two? Trance, where are we?”

“You’ll see. Head towards that planet there, I’ll guide you.” She pointed at the view screen, where the system’s planets had been laid out.

Rommie looked to Dylan, who made a “get on with it” motion and the ship moved forward.

Now on the surface of the planet thanks to being stepped over with *Teleportal*, everyone looked around. They seemed to be in the mountains, near a very overgrown and ruined set of buildings. It was near nightfall here, and far in the distance what looked like a ramshackle town could be seen.

“Why are we here, Trance? This is obviously not Tarn Vedra.”

“Oh no? Come with me.” She took off towards the ruined and blasted houses in the distance and the group spent a few minutes walking towards them. Coming close, she started sifting through the underbrush and finally exclaimed she had found something, and handed it to Dylan. “Not Tarn Vedra? Then what’s this?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“This? This is impossible,” Dylan insisted, but started fiddling with it. The others crowded around as he stuck his force lance next to it, which obviously could function as a portable power source. It powered up and showed a kid messing up some kind of project, and the man in the footage called the kid “Dylan.”

“He was so cute as a child, wasn’t he?” Trance asked.

“Eh, no comm- wait a minute,” Susan verbally stopped short. “That’s you as a kid?”

“This is me as a child,” Dylan agreed. He looked the wreck over and sadly nodded.

“This was my home... I don’t believe it.”

I don’t believe that gadget lasted three hundred years exposed to the elements like that. I guess these people build stuff to last.

“But how could it be?” asked Harper. “I never heard this place had two suns.”

"It doesn't- didn't. This is all wrong, what happened here?"

"You won't find any answers here," said Trance, without moving her lips.

"Are you suddenly a ventriloquist?" asked Beka. "Because I could swear I didn't see you actually say that."

"I didn't," Trance agreed. "She did."

Everyone looked where she was pointing, and there was a woman standing there, looking very confused.

"Trance?" asked Harper, looking between the two. "They feel the same, but you can't be..."

"Oh, I'm not," agreed the newcomer with a smile. She sounded just like Trance, it was odd to see someone else with that voice speaking. "The question is, are you?"

"What?"

As everyone processed this, Susan looked the new person over. She did look like Trance, only she wasn't purple, she was yellow and gold. She didn't have a tail, but instead horns adorned her head, sweeping close to her hair from the back. Where Trance had a small tattoo of a sun on her back, this woman was proudly displaying the image of a sun across her very sparkly chest, which of course Susan was staring at. She was wearing a low cut outfit that showed it off, made from some sort of brown leather.

"If you want to see the rest, maybe I'll let you later," the newcomer playfully joked, winking at her and wiggling.

"Who are you?" demanded Dylan, force lance raised. "Trance, do you know this woman?"

"I do... and I don't."

"This is not the time to be cryptic, Trance!"

"But it's the truth. It depends on what you mean by the question!"

"They're not into fine distinctions, are they?" the newcomer sympathized. "Please, call me Virgil. You people are quite early, did you bring them here?"

"Time is an illusion?"

Virgil glared at Trance, not buying it.

"Okay, okay, I did. Things haven't been playing out as they should, thanks to Susan here. I felt it was the right thing to do, she always feels like the perfect possible future to me. And they wouldn't have been denied, and with Susan around what I had planned to keep them away until later wouldn't have worked. So I resigned myself to telling the truth and showing them. Didn't expect to see you here, though."

"Yes, the angel said all that might happen. No worries, it's all the same to me. But what will you do now? You can't go back the way you came. At least, not the way you are now."

"We'll think of something. Susan always does. I don't know what the angel told you about her, but don't underestimate her. She could probably kill us, if she put her mind to it."

Virgil laughed. "If she thinks she can take on the angel, she better be able to kill one of us. You know what it is."

"Yes, I do."

"Will you two cut that out?" Dylan demanded. "I want to know what's going on here!"

"Sure thing, captain. Of course a full explanation will probably take a week, but I can give you the highlights. After it was clear the Commonwealth was going to fall the Vedrans cut themselves off from the slipstream so they could have relative privacy to set this all up."

"Tell me something I don't know. Like all what up?"

What's UUUUUUUP?

Quiet, I'm listening.

"This. This system of planets and odd suns and whatever. I don't much know about their intentions, only they had some crazy plan to defeat my master. They didn't know it had become something... more. Then they left. To go hide like cowards or something. Don't know where they are not. Don't care."

"Wait, back up, you're working for this Darkness creature Susan is fighting? Are you calling it the angel, that's what you're referring to?"

"Not exactly working for," she allowed. "Subtly, am I right? Oh, I would have gladly seen the angel of love win, don't get me wrong. I think the old demons were mistaken, creating the

universe as they did. But the angel isn't the angel, if you take my meaning. I don't want to have my energy sucked out along with all the other energy of this reality. Call me crazy, but I don't trust it to exactly spare me, it really has no reason to. But I don't want the angel to squish me and find someone else, either. You see my dilemma? But honestly, my part is rather minor in all this. As you're here, I can take you to where my master is, and you can have your final confrontation. A bit early, like I said before, but not unaccounted for. And yes, they are now one in the same, to answer your earlier question."

"So you work for an angel of *love*?" asked Harper, making eyes at Virgil. "Does that mean..."

Virgil laughed. "Oh Harper, not in a million years. But don't worry, you shall know the angel yourselves, sooner or later. Some better than others, but don't let it go to your heads."

"Can I trust anything this woman says?" Dylan asked Trance.

She sighed. "She may be a member of my race, but that's like asking Harper if the next human you see can be trusted. How should I know?"

"Let's cut to the chase," broke in Harper. "Are there vaults of fabulous treasure here or not?"

Virgil shook her head, possibly a bit sadly. "All you'll find here are beaten down people, drought from the two suns, suspicion, paranoia, death, rotting buildings, shattered dreams-"

"We get the picture," Dylan stopped her, lowering his weapon.

"Not exactly the homecoming I envisioned for you," Beka apologized. "I guess you really can't go home again."

"I guess there's nothing for us here," Dylan concluded sadly. He tossed the hologram projector back into the weeds. "Let's go back to the ship. If you can get us where the darkness is, and maybe we can take care of the Magog once and for all, fine. I don't trust you, but I won't throw you in a cell either. You stay helpful, you stay free. Deal?"

"Sure, but I don't think you understand. The ship isn't going to help you. Like I said before, there's no way out of here. Literally there are no places to open a slipstream portal in this star system. Just like everyone else, you're stuck here."

Presented with Choices

When: Just after being told they were stuck here.

Where: What remains of the Tarn Vedra system

Dylan looked over to Susan. "Well?"

"Well what?" she shot back. "I didn't get us here." She looked over at Trance. "Well?"

"Well what?" Trance repeated. "You heard her."

"You got us here!"

"Because I trusted you to get us out," Trance replied simply.

"Well, if you had *mentioned this earlier* I could have just *saved*, gotten here, got the info, rewound time, and boom, pulled Virgil here to us to show us the next step."

Don't forget about Chaos magic. I could give you the spell that could make that happen.

It may come to that, Susan seethed. But she must have something else in mind. Just keep telling yourself that.

Anyway, don't you want to have our final confrontation here?

Shoot, you're right. I've set things up so beautifully, I wouldn't want it to go to waste.

Not after all this time.

So be helpful for once.

It may come to that...

"Let's at least go back to the Andromeda," insisted Dylan. "Standing here gives me the creeps. Like I'm not supposed to be here, but I know the place well, but it's been in ruins for hundreds of years, but I *am* supposed to be here, but not yet."

The mother of all echoes, am I right?

Something like that.

So, the group once again stood on the bridge and Susan paced the deck thinking about how she could get them back.

"I mean it's easy to get you all back," she said. "I could open a *teleportal* right now and just step us to a planet someplace. We could head to one of those other ships we liberated, take it into battle."

"Hey, don't leave me out of the fight!" Rommie protested.

"Not if I can help it," Susan promised.

"By *teleportal* I assume you mean that thing we just stepped through?" asked Virgil from the far side of the deck where she had been looking the ship over.

"Yeah, that."

"How does it work, exactly?"

"Heck if I know. It's just a power, I will it to happen."

"So just make it big enough to fly the ship through."

Susan barked a laugh. "Do you know how much energy that would take? Andromeda, how wide are you?"

"Nine Hundred and seventy six meters," came the reply.

"So figure a thousand, just to be safe. That's a thousand energy I would have to spend on that one power."

"Could we do it though?" asked Sparkle, looking thoughtful.

"How would I do that? I can charge energy, sure, but I still have to *hold* that amount someplace." *I suppose I could try using that hyperlarcovite-*

Hey, that's mine. You stay away from it. Speaking of that, when I am getting that most shiny of rocks? I know it's full.

When I feel I have no other choice.

Hummm... wonder if it'll be this one or the next one...

You admitting defeat here?! That's great.

Just because I'm planning for your next world doesn't mean I've given up on this one.

Oh Susan, if you only knew what I had planned for you. Hahahahahahaha.

*If you have nothing helpful to say-
Now let's not be hasty. I guess I might as well let you in on another little secret.
In other words something else you originally kept from me when I got powers.
Potato, Tomato. The point is Energy Well doesn't cap at 5. You thought it did, but that
was a little lie I pumped into your brain. It actually doesn't have a maximum value, you just
thought it did and never tested it.*

*Wait, I could put ten points in and have ten times my current energy? That's eight
hundred energy!*

*Wow, that math chip in your head is really getting a workout! Don't overheat now.
Susan ignored the barb. I never did test it, didn't even think to. What else could I do
with these powers I've never figured out for myself? Goodness, to have eight hundred
energy...*

That's nothing!

What?

*You've already met someone with far more than that. Frieza of the Dragon Ball Z
universe once bragged about having more than a million energy. But he still gets beaten up,
and by the guy you met that was slugging it out with that bald headed dude. What was his
name? Ah, who cares? Fact is, going into their reality you might be a relative powerhouse on
Earth where there are few beings with that kind of energy, but even the lowest rank of
Frieza's soldiers had at least two thousand energy. Goku beat Frieza, Boo, and so on, you
don't think he can pull down at least a million energy at this point?*

Is that where he puts all his power points, then?

*Well you never see him becoming more skilled than his opponents, do you? It's all
about just energy blasting them.*

*I guess. He doesn't seem to get physically larger so he's not adding it to STrength.
Despite all the training in heavy gravity he's shown to be doing. And just increasing
ENDurance wouldn't be enough. But he's still super strong, how the heck-*

*Not really here or there. Fact is, you can get them back to known space and get on
with this.*

*Fine. "Seems I have a way to do it. Andromeda, I'm going to open a huge hole in space
back to... I guess that asteroid field we visited once. That's the only place in space I really
know well enough to open a hole to. We can head out from there... after making sure we're
fully stocked with munitions, of course."*

"Of course," agreed Dylan.

*"Get ready to dart through, I don't want any of you scraping off, though I can make it
pretty big, so it shouldn't be a problem. I'll make it 1,200 meters across, that should give you
time to get through."*

"Er, didn't you just say that would take too much energy?" Rommie asked, confused.

*"Let's just say I could have always managed that much, were it not for certain parties."
Sparkle's eyes narrowed, but she remained silent.*

So Susan took surviving in space, 15 points of *energy well*, and flew out of range of the ship so it didn't get caught in her aura of power that was going to be visible when she charged up the technique. She took *Siphon* as well so it didn't take forever, and threw over a thousand energy into a single *teleportal*. The ship blasted through it and after a moment to recover a bit of power and her senses (she was feeling very high right now, on life) she opened another to an airlock she usually went out, and made her way back to the bridge.

"We are back within known space. Remarkable," confirmed Rommie as she stepped into the room.

"Of course. I aim to please. Now it's your turn," she said to Virgil. "Take us to your leader."

"Gladly," she said, beaming. "I'll give you the coordinates for the first stop. While we travel, maybe you can give me a little tour of the ship? Show me to my quarters, perhaps?" She smiled suggestively.

"Maybe I should give her the tour," Trance said, glaring at Virgil and trying to step between them.

"You're boring," Virgil declared, taking Susan's arm. "I prefer her! And I promised to show her my patterning." She indicated her chest. Susan's eyes hungrily followed her fingers. "Boring?!" Trance said, obviously a bit miffed. "Perhaps I should give her the tour?" suggested Dylan. "As the captain?" "Hey, I can give a tour as well as anybody!" spoke up Harper. *It's going to be a long trip,* thought Sparkle.

And it was. About twenty days later Virgil announced they were getting close, and seemed to be quite expectant as she insisted everyone meet on the bridge. Of course part of those twenty days were Andromeda refueling, stuffing explosives into her munitions bays, and undergoing general maintenance by Harper. He kept insisting some of the other ships from the Commonwealth be called in to come along, but Virgil insisted that wouldn't be necessary. "This is between the angel and Susan, after all," she maintained. "Besides, any ship that came along would probably be destroyed almost immediately, and Susan doesn't want that on her conscience. Believe me."

And so it was that they were alone, floating before the next to last slip point. "We'll be met by an... honor guard of sorts," she began. "So don't panic. Okay, you can panic a little bit, I won't stop you. Our next stop will be to where the Magog are coming from, and Susan can overcome the first challenge on her road to meet the angel of love. Once she decides what to do, I'll take her party to where the angel currently exists, and you can fight his guardians. Then you'll be given the final choice and either battle to the death or leave this reality."

"Seems straightforward," Susan admitted.

"Oh, it's very cut and dry, you'll see. Shall we go?"

"We've come this far. Andromeda?"

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be," she admitted somewhat hesitantly. "But I'm still only one ship. I hope I can protect you all."

"Won't be necessary," Virgil maintained. "At least, as long as everybody keeps their cool. Here's the coordinates."

"Heading into slipstream," Beka announced, pushing the controls forward.

They emerged from slipstream to find hundreds of Magog ships waiting for them, floating in the void like dust, and nearly as numerous. "I can't fight a force this big!" Rommie warned them. "We need to get out of here, now!"

"Stay calm," Virgil reminded her. "Like I said, they're just here to escort us. Besides, you think *this* tiny force is big?" She laughed. "You have no idea."

"Andromeda, why don't you open your bay doors and allow our guests to land?" Harper suggested calmly.

"Very funny, Harper," Rommie said, then looked horrified. "My bay doors are opening!"

"Well close them again!" Dylan ordered.

"I can't. My systems have been overridden."

Harper shook his head. "It's bizarre, you know, it really is. Susan of course had no strong feelings about it, so it was a snap to keep her from throwing Harper into space. But the rest of you? You just let him wander around and do whatever he wanted to this ship for almost a year. I expected better of you, Dylan."

Everyone now had a horrified look on their faces, and turned to face Harper. He was smiling. "Greetings, Lightbringer," he bowed to Trance. "And of course you, Ifruita. What a failure you turned out to be."

"I can understand him!" said Ifruita, raising her staff.

"Oh, put that down. Unlike Harper, I have full command of the implants inside this body. You wouldn't get past *my* barriers."

"What's going on?" demanded Dylan. "What have you done to my ship? What have you done to Harper?"

"Just made sure it's going to the right place," Harper assured him. "As for your man, well, he fell all over himself to put me into his brain," he tapped his head, "so I took full advantage of the opportunity. When I left that one for you I figured someone would, and when

you saw nothing happened to him I hoped you all would. Pity, but there you have it." He snapped his fingers. "Just remembered- Andromeda, could you please fire all your armaments into space for me? That's a good girl."

"I can't stop it, captain," she wailed, and the viewscreen lit up, showing all of Andromeda's missiles being fired into space. "I'm firing everything, we'll be defenseless!"

"Not everything," tasked Harper. "Some things I already took off the ship. Those forty nova bombs, for instance?"

"How did you-"

Harper laughed, looking at Susan. "Yes, forty more of those glorious weapons. You haven't thought about them for a while, have you? But not to worry, I'll let you think about them a bit more later."

"Magog are coming aboard," announced Rommie. "I can't turn on the internal defenses either."

"It's so nice when a plan comes together. Now, the final coordinates, if you please, Virgil. And I'm glad to see you didn't get any foolish ideas about betraying me."

"I'm rooting for the winning side," she said, her gaze averted from both Harper and Susan.

"Indeed you are. Good, good."

"So you're the darkness?" Rev asked. "Susan has told us much about you. Do you really want all the energy of our reality?"

"All that you have, and more, good Rev," he answered. "But I'm not 'the darkness' as Susan calls me. Maybe one of these days she'll ask my actual name, but I don't hold out much hope of that after all this time. I'm just sort of possessing Harper through his implants at the moment. I'm a universe away from you all now, but all things in their proper time."

"This possession is the same way you're controlling my people?"

"Oh, even I can't keep track of *all* your people," he replied. "But enough, yes. They do what they were designed to do without much prodding from me, honestly. Unlike some..." He glanced pointedly at Susan.

"How many are coming aboard?" demanded Rommie. "Captain, they just keep landing!"

"Enough to make sure no one interferes with what I have planned for Susan," Harper said coldly. "The coordinates, if you please, Virgil?"

"Of course." She rattled some stuff off, and Beka got ready to make the final jump. When Harper announced enough Magog ships had landed and allowed her doors to close, they flashed into slipstream for the final time.

To say that the structure before the group was large is a bit like saying there are a few stars in the night sky, or that water is pretty wet when it comes down to it. Everyone on the crew not Harper or Vergil stared in astonishment at the view screen, showing the ship that met them.

"They're worlds," Rommie finally announced. "Twenty one of them, joined into some kind of structure."

"You shoved *worlds* together to make that?" Susan demanded of Harper.

"How else does one make a worldship?" he replied with a shrug.

And it was. There was a sun in the middle, probably for fuel, but around it were worlds of various size, all stuck together with rods that Susan estimated were kilometers across at the least. It all moved as a single unit, planets about the sun like a model atom. But at the galactic scale not classroom sized.

How many worlds died just to make the connectors?

"It gets worse," Rommie went on.

"How does it get worse than that?" Dylan demanded.

"They're hollow, and from these sensor reading I'm pretty sure they're full of life forms. Three guesses what kind of lifeforms."

"My children!" announced Harper, arms wide, as though to embrace the ship before them. "Doing my great work of cleansing the universe." He spun, a huge grin on his face, and looked at Susan expectantly. "Go to it!" he invited her.

"Do what?" she stammered.

"Come now, Susan. Certainly you realize *this* is why he offered you what he did? I mean what else did you think a black-hole bomb was good for?"

"Wait, you can't just blow up those worlds!" protested Rev. "My people don't deserve that!"

Susan had a horrible realization, and Harper went into gales of laughter. "Oh indeed, that's the very look I had envisioned!" he crowed. "I warned you! I did! And *you stayed anyway.*"

"You did this!" Susan seethed, pointing to Rev but looking at Harper. "I don't know how but you did this, didn't you?"

"Me?" Rev asked.

"Me you idiot! I suppose I may as well take some credit. I allowed certain of my children to go before, as a herald of what was to come. I allowed those free will, in the hope that some might choose to live as he does." He pointed a thumb at Rev. "But to think it worked out so well as to be one of the only pacifist Magog in the universe that you met? Beyond my wildest hopes."

"My being here is the will of the Divine, not your will," Rev protested. "What purpose do you ascribe to it?"

"My dear son, don't you see? Your being here proves that Magog are sentient, thinking beings. Not just animals to be trapped and killed."

"And I have to destroy entire worlds full of them," Susan growled softly.

"Exactly. Simply killing me won't stop them. Oh, they would have to learn to use the Lifestreaming tech on their own, but their massive numbers will still make up for that. Unless you destroy that ship and all its passengers, this universe is still doomed. Susan must break her oath against killing and destroy an entire people." He laughed again. "Not so high and mighty now!"

"Susan, no!" Rev raced to her side and fell to his knees. "If they are freed from the grip of this monster, surely they can be saved!"

"Can they?" she asked simply. "Can this many be saved?"

"I..." He trailed off, looking at the ship again. "There must be another way."

"Saved?" asked a new voice, the door opening on the bridge. In strode a massive number of Magog, looking around eagerly. At their front was a Magog wearing a kind of armor, and brandishing a large rifle of all things. The others edged away from them as they took positions around the perimeter of the bridge. "It seems to me, lost one, that it is you who must be saved. From these lesser beings that would deny you your true heritage. Your true purpose in the universe."

"I have a purpose," he protested, holding up the medallion he wore about his neck as he again took to his feet. "To spread the way to all those who are lost!"

"No, your purpose is to help the angel bring love back to the universe."

"You keep having people use that word," Susan said to Harper. "I don't think it means what you think it means."

"Oh, but it does," protested the Magog. "Tell them, devil!" he spat at Trance. "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

"Please," Trance scoffed. "That never worked."

"Trance?" Dylan asked. "What's he talking about now?"

She sighed and slumped a little. "I suppose I may as well tell you." She put on a lecturing tone. "In the beginning, and I mean the first beginning, because there are many beginnings and many endings-

"Oh get to the point!" insisted Harper. "I may be immortal but I don't want this body dying of old age."

"Fine," she humped. "Before the big bang there were beings that existed in the point of space where everything began. Namely, angels and demons. And the angels wanted everything to remain as it was, and their love kept everything together. But demons wanted expansion, and excitement, and *life* to happen. And so we worked to make the big bang happen, and it did!"

"Our love just wasn't strong enough then," Harper sighed.

Dylan just looked confused. Trance went on. "We became suns, and moons, and planets, and we watched over you as you grew and changed and *became*. But love still pulled everything together, and that's what the angels want." She pointed to Harper. "To undo the universe."

"And I offered to help," Harper said with a bow. "Of course I didn't mention that once *they* put everything back to where it was, I would gobble it up. Whoops."

"Er, you've been around since the big bang?" Beka asked. "What's your secret, you don't look more than twenty."

"Which big bang?" she asked innocently. "The first one? Or the one after that? Or the one-"

"They get the point!" Harper snapped. "And this is all very amusing but pointless. Susan, you have a choice to make. Leave me to my devices here, hand over the hyperlarcovite, or destroy my worldship."

"Even if I handed the hyperlarcovite over, you said your worldship couldn't be stopped!"

"True," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "I suppose that's true. I mean maybe if the commonwealth came together again and they threw everything they had at it... I mean it can't go through slipstream, so they've got plenty of time."

"So it's leave and let your Magog slowly kill every being in the universe if they can't get their act together or kill trillions of them here and now."

"Well said! Tick tock!"

"And my friends here?" She indicated the others, standing near her.

"Oh, I've no interest in them!" Harper assured her with a wave. "They've no powers or special abilities." His eyes suspiciously flicked to Dylan. "People like that are basically interchangeable and beneath my notice, honestly."

"So why are these Magog here?"

"Pay them no mind."

"Right..."

"Choose. Now."

Harper stared at her, and the hush on the bridge made time stretch out. Susan was sweating and began to feel faint. She was now faced with killing on a massive scale, far beyond what she had even considered before. And The Darkness knew it. It had her friends hostage, she had no illusions that Harper wouldn't blow his own head off if The Darkness wanted it. She couldn't plan anything because anything she planned The Darkness would instantly know and counter.

But he's in my world now, the world of the Paragon. I would roll initiative and get actions, same as he would. If I can do something in one action-

I'm playing this straight you know. I want you to make this choice, and feel every single death down there on those planets. Or know that you've doomed this reality to extinction because you couldn't act. I could easily blow this ship up with the weaponry on the worldship. I know you would survive, but they wouldn't. Like I said, they're nothing to me.

Oh, and this time I can believe every word you say, is that it?

Have I really ever lied to you?

Susan ignored the question and quickly glanced around. Her friends were near her, the Magog stationed around the perimeter of the room. "I guess there's only one thing for me to do."

Making the final choice

When: No time has passed

Where: Bridge of the Andromeda

“Light of the Multiverse, *make up!*” Susan shouted, taking hardly any powers but increased REFlexes and something she didn’t use much of. *Telesphere*. With that she acted first and vanished from the bridge, reappearing several levels down in front of a weapons locker. The two Magog guarding the door snapped to attention and readied a barrier/shooter combo, but not fast enough. Susan had taken *unseen* as well, and as their abilities were completely cybernetic, they didn’t see her shooting them dead.

“What’s going on?” demanded Dylan, who along with the rest of the crew had been brought along. “What just killed those things?”

“Don’t ask me,” Beka replied, pulling her own gun.

“I did, of course,” Susan replied, dropping powers mode now that she saw everyone was accounted for. *Good thing we bunched up when the Magog came to the bridge, that way I could get everybody with telesphere*. “Get that open and suit up. I’ll cover the hallway.”

“I do not wish to fight my own people...” Rev lamented.

“I can take you back to that paradise planet if you want,” offered Susan.

He shook his head. “No. I must defend my friends, even if it means fighting my own kind.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you going to do?” Sparkle asked, dreading the answer.

“What it seems I must,” she growled, wishing she could crawl inside her soul and make the being there pay for what it had done to this reality.

“Are you prepared for that?” Dylan asked, belting on his chest plate.

“No. But what choice do I have? Like Harper said, if I don’t stop it, there’s no way you can. The commonwealth isn’t strong enough yet. And even with a lot more worlds to help there will be many losses. This way it’s just me and them. I walk away, they don’t. Simple as that.”

“But at what cost to yourself?” asked Trance.

Susan put a hand on her shoulder. “Let me worry about that.”

“Trance?” asked Dylan, handing her a force lance. She shook her head.

“The time for secrets is over. I’ll fight as I am able. I won’t need such things.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Yeah, more for us,” Beka mused, loading up.

“Your task now is to stay alive until I get back,” Susan commanded them. “Hopefully I won’t be long, and I can help sweep up any survivors.”

“And me?” asked Ifruita.

“The choice is yours,” Susan told her. “You can stay and defend them, or come with me.”

“Then I choose to be by your side, master,” she replied simply.

“Very well. Here, turn around and let me wind you. Don’t want you giving out on me.”

“Yes master.”

Before she was done the attack by the Magog began, and the crew kept them off the girls as they prepared. Susan handed the staff back. “Let’s do this thing. You ready, Sparkle?”

“As I’ll ever be. I’ll feed you energy, you’ll want to gather quickly to destroy those worlds.”

“Good plan. Light of the multiverse, *make up!*”

Susan’s current powers

Energy Siphon	(2)
Energy Regeneration	(2)
Energy Well	(10)
Environmental Adaptation	(2)

Invulnerability	(2)
Nature (Force)	(2)
Sending	(1)
Stat Adjustment (RES)	(5)

“We’ll head to an airlock and get out that way,” she told Ifruita. “I didn’t take *teleportal* and you can’t open one into space from the hallway here.”

“But I can open one to the airlock,” she announced, and did so.

“Oh, right. Duh. Good thinking.”

“Good luck,” everyone said to everyone else.

Susan was now floating in space with her two companions, and immediately started changing energy for the attack. As she moved away from the ship, however, she was interrupted by Magog ships coming straight for them.

Great, Ifruita doesn’t have invulnerability, if they decide to start shooting at her...

But she shouldn’t have worried. The nearest ships suddenly blew apart, and odd looking devices hovered close to them. It seemed something was scooping up the metal remains of the Magog ships as well, as the bits of floating space junk seemed to be getting bigger. Those before the group combined and formed a sign of a sort, upon which some funny symbols appeared.

That’s helpful.

But Ifruita nodded and handed her headset over to Susan, who held it to her ear and looked through the eyepiece.

The consensus of parts will aid you here

Thank you she sent to them, wondering if they were “alive” enough to get the message, and handed the headset back. *So they came through after all.* The parts reconfigured, and started blasting away at more Magog ships that were drawn to the aura of power around Susan. Ifruita helped, blasting away as she was able.

Why even attack me? They must know they can’t win.

You think they would just sit back and let you destroy their worlds?

That would be preferable, yes.

Well tough. I can’t keep them from defending themselves. If even I wanted to. They could get lucky and take out one of your two companions.

Susan and the others, Sparkle on her shoulder feeding her energy, and Ifruita by her side redirecting enemy fire with *teleportal* and blasting ships with heat vision and *force* blasts, neared the planets.

You’re really going to do this? The Darkness seemed gleeful.

As if you didn’t know. What were you thinking, making something like this?

Actually, this is baseline. Wasn’t my idea. Worked out in my favor though, it seems.

You mean they had to beat that thing themselves? Wow.

You’re stalling.

No, you’re stalling. Asking if I’m going to do this. I’m out here, aren’t I?

Good. I had wondered if you could go this far, it’s a pity the odds had to be so stacked against you to drive you to this point.

I do what I must and no more.

I suppose. Still, better get to it. Those worlds aren’t going to destroy themselves, you know.

Susan’s thoughts were silent a moment, wondering what she would have found inside those worlds. What did trillions of Magog even look like? What did they do? What did they eat? She sadly shook her head.

Ifruita, she sent. Move away from me a bit. I’m about to fire and I don’t want you to be caught up in it.

Ifruita moved off with a nod, looking tense.

Odd request. You could just put her at your back.

You'll see. She took one last look at the magnificent ship before her, already mourning the loss of such an endeavor. Even by an enemy. The pure science needed to construct, move, and keep such a structure together was truly staggering. But there was no way to keep it intact for study and still end the threat inside. *I'm sorry,* she sent out into the universe. *"Golden Crash!"*

The ball of destructive energy shot forward, about to impact the planet in seconds.

Better start changing it up again, The Darkness cautioned. *They'll only fight the harder and start evacuating, meaning more ships out here, once they realize you can actually destroy the worldship.*

No need.

What do you mean? You think the loss of one world will tear the whole thing apart?

No. Seems you've forgotten something.

I don't see what-

"Mimic." Another golden ball blazed forth, towards a second planet.

Oh, I see. Because there's only you doing stuff nearby-

"Mimic. Mimic. Mimic."

You didn't have to interrupt me.

"Mimic. Mimic."

And so it went. Before her, the terrible energies of *Golden Crash* impacted planet after planet and tore them apart, sending the structural pieces spinning through the void. As the chunks of the last world blasted past her she felt a curious numbness, like she hadn't just destroyed an entire species. But she had, and had only one tiny spark to comfort her.

My contract allowed me to do it without asking Sparkle. They truly were a threat to life everywhere.

Oh, is that why you didn't ask? I did wonder.

Shut. Up.

Don't get all weepy on me, the best is yet to come.

Susan felt cold, not from the airless void of space, but of the promise she heard in the voice of The Darkness. It seemed it wanted to break her spirit, and it was doing a great job so far.

Come on, let's get back, she sent to Ifruita. *Let the consensus be useful and mop up here. We have bigger fish to fry.*

She opened a *teleportal* back to the ship, and the three went to help their friends.

Susan wasted no time on subtlety now. She stalked through the ship, simply slaughtering Magog where she found them. If they put up barriers she simply encased them in ice. If they rushed her, she crushed them with martial arts and an even further increased STrength. Sparkle fed her power and Ifruita watched her back.

They made their way back to the others, following Rommie's directions, and it turned out the others had done well in staying alive. Beka and Dylan had jammed force lances into advantageous positions and set them to simply fire on anything that moved, greatly increasing their firepower. But many Magog were simply burnt to a crisp, meaning Trance had kept her word as well. Those that had gotten through all that had been slashed to pieces by Rev, who it seemed was in a kind of battle frenzy and hardly himself. Not long after Susan got back, all was silent.

Silent, that is, apart from the footsteps of Harper and Vergil, the first slowly clapping as he approached. Virgil almost seemed hopeful.

"Well done," he gushed. "To all of you. Such ferocity and even innovation." He indicated the force lances, then turned to Susan. "Tell me, what are you *feeling* right now? If only I could experience it! Ah well."

"Let him go and face me," Susan demanded, voice hard.

"But of course. Come up to the bridge and we can begin the final leg of our journey."

“Captain,” the Andromeda announced. “Something odd just appeared in space.”
“That’s where we’re headed,” Harper assured them. “The door to where I exist has been opened for you, come see it for yourself.”

The group returned to the bridge, stepping over the bodies of dead Magog, and on the view screen was a curious energy field, like two cubes inside each other. It changed and morphed, turning seemingly inside out as it shimmered in space.

“Andromeda, take us in,” Harper ordered.

“I can’t stop myself,” she apologized as the ship started to move.

“It’s fine,” Susan assured her. “That’s where we end it.”

The ship entered the strangely glowing portal and Susan found herself not on the bridge, but in a dusty hallway. Beside her stood Ifruita and Sparkle, both looking around in wonder.

“What happened, master?” she asked. “How did we come to be here?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But it looks like a light down there. Let’s head there. Let me change up my powers first though.”

Susan wound Ifruita again, and powered back up to maximum energy. Sparkle took her own powers this time, feeling that attacking from three sides here was probably better than just feeding Susan energy. She had decent ratings in *lifestreaming* now, at least enough to do a few things, and prepared as she could for the coming battle. The three strode forward, Susan’s RESolve unwavering. She would morn, yes, but now she was an avenging angel. And that kind had no room for second thoughts.

She entered what looked like an abandoned, ancient, stone coliseum, and sitting in the front row where Nemo/Tyr and his gang, along with the crew of the Andromeda. All looked somewhat confused, but neither wanted to start anything in this place. It was easy to see why; High above stood hundreds of Trances while her Trance and Virgil were to either side as she entered. Above even that, the “sky” of this place twisted and boiled, scenes of every description melded together into a barely recognizable whole.

And there in the center stood the avatar of The Darkness. Just as she had seen in the video it was like a man made of lava, with glowing points of light for eyes. She didn’t need *power sense* to feel the energy coming off the thing, and vaguely wondered if she had met her match this time.

“Welcome, Susan, Sparkle, Ifruita,” it greeted them, throwing its arms open wide.

“Welcome to the route of ages. How do you like the view?” It indicated the “sky.”

“What is this place?” Sparkle asked, hoping to give Susan some time to sense out this being’s powers and shift immunities. And of course she was *curious* as well.

“A very special place,” The Darkness answered without answering. But it went on. “In this place, all times and all places can be made as one. From here I directed the Magog, and saw to the construction of a vessel suitable for their attack. Which you tore apart in moments. I simply must have you, Susan. But back to our battleground, it seems fitting for us, don’t you think?”

She ignored the question. “What about them?” She indicated the figures on the sidelines, and the figures standing motionless above.

“Pay them no mind,” he indicated. “The avatars of the suns are simply here to witness, and as for the others, well, I advise none of them to get any ideas. Susan seems a bit perturbed at me, I can only imagine the energies she’s going to unleash here in a desperate bid to destroy me.” Dylan held up his hands, flipping them over as if to say “no weapons anyway” and she nodded.

“How about we get that started?” she suggested.

“One moment,” it requested, raising a hand. “The final curtain is not yet risen. I have yet to show you my *true* intention here.”

“It matters little,” Susan promised. “I will rid this reality of you once and for all.”

“No doubt. But at what cost? Observe!” With a flourish, sixty four miniature suns seemed to materialize before and around The Darkness. The masses above gave a high

pitched scream and then fell silent again. “Yes, they know the cost, don’t you, Lightbringers? How many of your kind will go dark today? At the hands of this girl here!” He pointed a finger accusingly at Susan. “So direct your anger at her, if you please!”

“What?”

“I will tell you,” The Darkness crowed. “Tell you that I may savor every second of your despair.” I leaned forward a little conspiratorially and said softly, “You never did find those nova bombs, did you?”

Susan wouldn’t have said the ice in her veins could grow colder, but grow colder it did. The math chip in her head immediately returned a count of the number of suns, and as she suspected, it was 24+40.

“Yes, the ones I found on that station and the forty the Andromeda carried within herself. And look, look all of you at what Susan is going to do!”

The images revolved and grew, until Susan could clearly see that stationed next to each sun was a ship. They spun about The Darkness, as he showed off his master plan and laughed as Susan, powerless, could only stand and watch.

“What is she going to do?” Ifruita asked, confused.

“I’m glad you asked that!” The Darkness replied. “You do have some use after all. Imagine for a moment that inside each of those ships is a Magog soldier, completely under my control and with the activation sequence for the nova bomb already entered. Now imagine that the soldier need only lift their finger, now pressed against the control inside the ship, to complete the sequence and launch the bomb.”

“So do it. End this hostage situation and let me begin beating the crap out of you,” Susan snarled.

“Oh no, that would never do.” The Darkness laughed. “Like I said, you’re going to make them fire. And just to be clear, the worlds orbiting those suns? Earth, of course, and all the other worlds that made the mistake of signing that charter. Xinti, Mobius, and more. Then some random ones just to spice things up. They’ll die not even knowing why.”

“And how, exactly, do you think I’m going to make them fire?”

“By beating me, of course! The only thing gluing their finger down to the button is *me*. Without me to control them, what’s the first thing they’re going to do?”

“Lift their hand from the control,” Trance answered for her.

“Correct!” it cooed. “And sixty four entire star systems vanish. I told you the stakes were being raised. Now you know I’m not fooling around. So what’s it going to be? Leave, and hope they can fight me off themselves now that you’ve destroyed my worldship? Or kill me here and now but doom all those systems to oblivion? Protip- I can always make another worldship... I have all the time in the world.”

Susan’s thoughts boiled. *Destroying even those planets won’t hurt life here, she reasoned. The original commonwealth had millions of member worlds, so Dylan is always saying. This is just to hurt me.*

And it will, I think.

You stay out of this. I already have you over there, I don’t need you over here as well.

Fine, fine. Will your contract let you beat that guy, knowing what you do?

She considered, wondering how the magic would resolve itself. The Darkness was the greater threat, true, but the hostage worlds were the more immediate. She had no restrictions on destroying an avatar, but she had never considered that action being tied up with destruction on such a large scale. *It’s the babies/warlock thing all over again, and that really was just the minor leagues, wasn’t it? I’ve been very stupid.*

Susan looked the avatar over. She hadn’t been idle, but had been feeling out the powers it had. Darkness, Fire, Dimension, Force, Light, Time, Transition- she couldn’t hope to become immune to them all. “I don’t suppose you’ll be any help?” she asked Trance.

She shook her head and put a hand on Susan’s shoulder, and opposite her Virgil did the same. “You must make the choice. This fight isn’t about powers or natures or magic.”

“Yes,” agreed Virgil. “It is simply the choice. Once you choose to save them, this fight is over. Remember that.”

That’s for sure. Is she saying I should give up? No, no there must be a way out of this! I just have to find it. She looked at them both, and they expectantly looked back at her. *Are they hinting at something? Some plan they’ve come up with but want me to think of on my own? But I don’t have time for anything else!*

“You two better clear out of here,” Susan said, turning back towards the angel. “Seems like it’s going to get pretty messy in a second.” She expected them to take their hands away or vanish or something but they just stood there. “Trance?”

“Tea?” asked a familiar voice to her left, and she looked over to see herself at the same tea table as before, holding a teacup, setting down a teapot. Susan leapt forward with a yell and slugged The Darkness right in the face. This didn’t seem to faze her in the least, and she looked up at Susan with disappointment.

“That was pointless,” she tisked. “You take sugar, right?”

“What do you want?” Susan growled, staring down at her.

“I just through I would offer you the courtesy of having a few minutes to make up your mind, that’s all,” she calmly replied, dropping a sugar cube into the tea. “I wouldn’t want you to feel rushed making a decision of this magnitude. You were just complaining about not having enough time, right?”

“Don’t give me that. It’s all about you, it always was. You just want to watch me agonize a bit more.”

“Whatever you want to call it. Biscuit?”

“Give it up.” Susan turned her back on The Darkness and looked the scene over. The suns hung motionless, and she could get close to each and see the tiny ship ready to blow the suns apart when The Darkness left this world. Her mind was in turmoil.

“Want to talk it out? I hear it can help.”

“I’m not talking it over with the person that put me in this situation,” she yelled.

“I’m a person now? Splended!”

“You know what- just be quiet!”

“I’ll just sit here in silence then, shall I?” She was pouting.

“That would be a minor miracle.”

But seriously, what can I do? I win here, and I lose because I will be the cause of 60 suns going nova. I leave, and risk The Darkness winning later because I wasn’t strong enough to make the choice. And I won’t just go back and request another agent make this choice, that wouldn’t be fair to them. She stepped in front of the suns, scowling. *I didn’t do this. And despite what The Darkness says, those suns living and dying is not my choice. I might feel crappy about it, and tell myself it’s my fault, but that’s not reality. And I can’t risk this entire reality for 60 solar systems, especially if millions of planets really have life on them. I’ll win here, mourn, and that will be that. The blood here is on ‘her’ hands. To those I can’t save... I’m sorry.*

She spun, expecting The Darkness to still be at the table but it was right behind her.

“All ready then?” it asked expectantly.

“Why do you even bother asking?”

“It’s my nature to be polite. Very well.” It grinned. “Fight hard now! Remember, my energy and holding magic can be yours if you ask!”

You really are squeezing me from all sides, aren’t you?

Susan bit back a sarcastic reply as time was moving again, and she once again felt the celestial’s hands on her shoulders.

“You two better clear out of here,” she repeated, this time with her ‘outer’ voice.

Both Virgil and Trance vanished in a burst of light, joining their kind at the top and raising a hand. All the others did the same and a shimmering energy barrier went up around the edges of the seats.

Neat, didn’t know they could teleport like that. Or make shields.

“A barrier?” asked The Darkness. “A kindness by them, so your little friends there don’t get roasted in our battle, or a cage you can’t skip out of without resolving this?”

“When I win I’ll ask them.”

“Of course you will. Either way, I suppose they see you as their only hope. Let’s see them watch how helpless you are against me in this body.”

“We’ll see about that. Sparkle, Ifruita, GO!”

Susan's battleground was an idea in space. A place that was more potential than reality, where every point in history and every place that would ever exist came together. Watched by devils or avatars of suns or simply energy beings, Susan and her two companions launched into action.

"Velocity!" Sparkle called out, making all three faster.

"Acidic Barrage!" called out Susan, causing a sphere of acid to appear above The Darkness and begin raining down on it.

Ifruita simply blasted him with her staff.

"Absolute Zero!"

"Core of the Planet!"

"Supreme Symphony!"

But The Darkness simply ignored it. All of it. Heat vision. *Lifestreamer* bolts, even physical attacks when Susan got desperate. The figure before her didn't block. Didn't dodge. Didn't seem to care at all. It just stood there passively radiating unconcern and a faint amusement. Susan shifted her powers, trying even *water nature* in case it was weak to that. She tried combining techniques, tried even freezing him in time with a *time* technique. But that didn't even seem to work, more likely due to the place she was in than anything The Darkness was doing directly.

It's not countering all of this, it just seems like it doesn't care.

"This isn't working," Sparkle called, "is it even there? Are we blasting an illusion or something?"

"No, it's there, something's got to work. I can feel the natures it has."

"I'm open to suggestions!"

"I'm getting bored, Susan," The Darkness finally said. "I thought you were angrier than this. I might have to start attacking soon if you don't show a little more initiative." It held up a hand and a fireball began to take form. "Which one should I roast first? Your tiny kitty? The loss of which companion will enrage you more at this point, I wonder?" It looked between the two of them.

Think, Susan. Should I try magic? But the only real attack magic I have is knockout, which I can use in this form just as easily. Even shrinking it won't matter if nothing can even scratch that body.

Of course, crowed The Darkness. That body was present at the birth of the universe. What do you think your puny techniques are going to do against a being like that?

So kill me then, you're doing a lot of standing around but not much attacking. Why? There must be a reason.

There is. I do want you dead, Susan, but I want you on my side more. Failing that I want you to see you can't win here, allowing me to finish my work and take this body with me. A few more worlds facing me in this form and you'll just give up and scurry on home. But to just kill you, eh, I suppose I could. But that closes that door and I'm a patient being. Once in a place you can use magic again I'll bet your points will start to climb so there's hope I get you that way. Even going back home, you wouldn't sit still. You would use your powers and have adventures there. Your totals would climb, you wouldn't be able to help yourself. I would get you in the end. But here? You can't hurt me, you've seen that, but I can hurt you.

No, I can switch my powers and become immune to that fireball. When I do Sparkle can as well, and as long as she has energy, Ifruita won't be harmed by it. I think you just don't want me realizing there is a solution here someplace, and this isn't a simple stalemate.

If you say so.

Susan planted herself in front of Ifruita and switched powers again, taking *Immunity: Fire and primary nature: Ice.*

Maybe I just need something with a bit more kick to it, it could just be really high DTR.

She started charging energy for an attack, and frost competed with flame in a swirling display of energy.

“That’s more like it!” The Darkness called. “Let’s see how far we can push this, shall we?”

He’s trying to keep me occupied Susan realized. *Keep me focused on throwing stuff at that body. Why? Something Trance said, she was hinting at something I just know it. Decide to save them? Save who? Trance-*

And suddenly she saw it. The way out. *Save them. Save- everybody.*

What are you up to?

Oh crap, have to do this before The Darkness can counter it.

“Sparkle, get over here!” she called, “I need your power!”

“You’re the boss,” Sparkle called back, *sudden stepping* over to her and making a *Power Control* check to sync up with Susan. Ifruita, sensing something big was going on put a hand on her back and did the same.

Good girl!

“Pulling out all the stops?” demanded The Darkness. “Then I shall do the same!” Dark energy seemed to infuse the ball of plasma now blazing above The Darkness as it was infused with dimensional energies pulled from wherever The Darkness existed.

It isn’t countering my actual plan? But it should know- consider that later.

Susan switched her powers again, holding onto the energy she had gathered. She had a few good cards at the moment, and spent a meta-action *I declare the use of card 44, Made You Look.* This put the *delay* of The Darkness up by ten, a whole 5 seconds. *You’re stuck there now, big boy. And for my next trick, I also declare the use of card 33, Lucky Break!*

Susan now had the advantage and spent her next action on *Telesummon.* Not something anyone was expecting, but with the 90 energy she had managed to collect plus the seventeen from Sparkle and the fourteen from Ifruita that action she managed to yank forty of the sixty four ships from where they waited to destroy suns and deposited them *inside the coliseum shield.*

Seeing this, Sparkle spent her card 42 *WTF?* to at least improve Susan’s chances of doing whatever the heck she thought she was doing to end this standoff.

Naturally, all going different velocities because they were all in various parts of the three known galaxies, they rather violently smashed into each other. This jostled the resident Magog who *took their finger off the button.*

“Tootles,” Susan said with a smirk as she *Teleported* back to the bridge of the Andromeda. Luckily, she ship was outside the Route of Ages, fretting over what had happened to the crew. An XP spent for an *extra action* got her friends (and the others of course) from wherever they were and Rommie gave a little yelp of surprise from the main viewer. Which then switched over to a view of the Route of Ages, exploding from within with a light many times greater than any sun.

But Susan had no time to celebrate. She spent another XP to *teleport* outside the ship, despite not having put on *Environmental Adaption.*

I’ll be fine for a few seconds.

Her next action she called as many ships as she could to the local area, and then did it again, and then did it again. She forced herself to stand there and look out at the ships, some of which seemed to fire something but others that did not.

Because they already did? Crap. Nothing more I can do now.

She was back inside, gasping for air and weakly calling to Andromeda “Get us out of here before those Novas go off!”

“Transiting to slipstream, there’s no pilot so I don’t know where we’ll end up!” she announced, and the ship sped to safety.

A few minutes later the ship popped out, and Harper started coming out of it, waking up from the floor where his body had been dumped when The Darkness had no more need of it.

"What just happened?" he asked nervously, looking up at everyone.

"I'd love to know that as well," Dylan agreed. "Are we safe?"

Susan let out a long sigh. "I hope so." She tapped her watch. "Has a withdraw event been registered within this reality?" she asked.

"Affirmative," chirped the watch. "You may return to the Hub at any time."

"Thank you. Let them know I'll be along shortly, I just have a few things to take care of here."

"Acknowledged."

Suddenly Trance and Virgil were on the bridge, along with a bunch more of her race packed in where they could fit.

"Thank you," said Virgil. "For both of the things you have done here. I honestly did not see that coming."

"Luckily, neither did it," Susan said with a weak grin. "I don't think too many of your people died. At least, I hope not many did?"

"Far fewer than we expected. You have our thanks." All the figures bowed to her formally, and then raised a hand. She felt energy, positive energy, flowing into her along with warmth and gratitude. Then they were gone. Susan felt good, despite the crappy day she was having, and knew they done something to her, just not what. To her surprise, Trance was still standing there looking pleased.

"Still with us?" she asked.

"Technically I'm an outcast," she admitted. "I did run away, after all. Their plan for getting rid of the abyss was quite different. You wouldn't have liked it. I opposed it and despite the happy ending here, I'm not exactly welcome back home yet. Immortal beings? They tend to hold grudges a long time."

"You're always welcome here." Dylan assured her. "But back to what just happened?"

Susan sighed, and slumped across the nearest railing, *powers mode* leaving her. "Basically I hit him with as many Nova bombs as I could."

"You did what?" Harper asked.

"By the way," Susan slyly asked, "you going to be okay there, chief? Not hearing much by way of apology for your part in all this..."

"Hey, I'm sorry, okay? But that thing just took me over you know? What could I really do about it? It was inside my brain!"

"Does the system still work?"

Harper made a barrier in the air before him. "Seems to."

Dylan shook his head. "I'm not sure if I should be glad or concerned. But that's for another day. Go on."

"Not much more to say. With the ships now out of position and smashing into each other, the Nova Bombs got launched. That cracked the shell and finished off The Darkness. Good thing too, I was running out of natures to throw at it."

"So you saved the worlds and took it out at the same time. Nicely done."

"Did you get all of them?" Sparkle asked. "You vanished there and we ran so I'm guessing that was the rest of them?"

Susan nodded sadly. "Some had already fired by the time I got them. I have no way of knowing which ones."

"We have to check Earth!" Harper insisted. Everyone looked at him. "Come on, don't look at me like that! We have to start somewhere, don't we?"

"But how did you get them?" asked Ifruita.

"The Darkness helpfully showed them all to me, and think where we were. A place that is all places? How could I not *telesummon* them in a wink?"

"Oh, I see."

"But the danger is past?" Dylan pressed. "Our reality is safe, you can go home?"

"I hope so. Trance, how many of those angels were there, anyway?" Everyone now looked to her.

“More... than one?” she hedged.

“So we could be facing other beings like that in the future who want to destroy us,” he said, resigned.

“Better keep getting that Commonwealth back together!” Trance said brightly. “You know, just in case!”

“I suppose so.”

“Don’t look so down, boss,” suggested Harper. “We won, didn’t we?”

“But my people are all but gone,” said Rev. “At least, if most of them traveled with the world ship.”

“And while I mourn the passing of any like you, Rev,” Beka allowed, “I can’t say I’m really broken up about it.”

“We should have ships travel to the site,” suggested Andromeda. “Both to make sure not many Magog did escape, but also to look through the wreckage for anything we can salvage. Any clues as to how it was put together, what made it move, what weapons it had, could be invaluable if we ever face something similar in the future.”

“Seems there’s still work to do then,” Dylan announced, not sounding displeased.

“Susan, get some rest, you look awful. We’ll head to a few member worlds and start spreading the word of what happened here.”

Susan shook her head. “If I stop moving now I’m just going to break down. I had to kill a lot of people today, and right now I don’t want to think about it. Oh, and when you head back there check for any spare parts. The Consensus lent me a helping hand, I want to sure to thank them. Harper wants to head to Earth, fine. Let’s go liberate that planet and give it back to the rightful owners.”

“Are you sure?” asked Sparkle, concerned.

“I need to be doing something. Time to sort my feelings out later. And I need to do something good... as a penance.” She looked over at Rev, who seemed to understand.

And so, as with saving that planet from itself Susan headed to Earth with Beka and Harper, taking *Renewal* so she didn’t have to sleep. Once at Earth (which was still there, LUCK check of twenty) she took *Technology* and *Kinetics*, then basically shut down and boosted all their defense satellites away from the planet. She ignored any attack ships and when the satellites were taken care of she stormed the planet. The military forces of the world helpfully threw themselves at her, saving her from having to go looking, and those on the ground she simply dealt with by using mass *knockout* techniques. Anyone in the air she simply damaged enough to force them to land. After a few days of this, news of the unstoppable angel swept through the Nietzschean government who decided to find another place to be. The people of Earth, already ready for a chance to rebel, hadn’t wasted any time while this was going on, so things were looking up for the place.

Meeting back up with the Andromeda to say goodbye, Dylan and Trance met them in the airlock.

“You look even worse now,” she said by way of greeting.

“It will pass,” Susan assured him. “I kept my killing to a minimum there, thankfully. It only begins to balance the scales, yes, but it is a start.”

“I have something that will make you feel better,” Trance said with a smile. “Come with me.”

Susan found herself being dragged to the arboretum, where around the great tree that grew in the center, Trance had planted a variety of flower with bright yellow petals and a black center. There were a bunch of them, and behind them were several sunflowers.

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s a monument. One flower of this type for each world that you saved. One of the other type for each you didn’t. And as long as this ship exists, this monument will too. You have my word on that.”

“Thanks Trance. I just wish I could have done more.” She looked away from the flowers, wondering how to feel about Trance having done such a thing.

"I know. But my people don't blame you, I know it. You didn't have to save them, I'm sure you would have found another way-"

I'm not.

"-but really, no monument would really be adequate, would it?"

"No, I suppose not. Do... do you know what stars were destroyed?"

"Not your concern. I just wanted you to know that you would be remembered here. This monument may not be big, or grand, but it will be spread. Everywhere these flowers will grow, I'll make them grow. You're a hero, Susan. That's why I chose these."

"These... what?"

"Flowers- you mean you don't know? These are Blackeyed Susan!"

"What?" Susan stared at the flowers, finally looking at them for the first time.

"We have them at home," Sparkle spoke up. "I didn't even think about that though."

"I have a flower that represents me," Susan said softly. "How about that?"

"You see?" Trance hugged her from the side. "So cheer up. The plans of two beings have been stopped by you, and with the absolute minimum loss of life there could possibly have been. The Magog, yes, they were alive but only because they had been created to destroy. They were not natural creatures, Susan. No one will mourn their loss, believe me."

"I will."

"In a way that's good too. So you don't forget either."

"Thanks. For this, I mean. It does mean a lot to me."

"You're just not feeling right at the moment. I know. What with what my people did to you, and your own feeling about what happened. No wonder you're all mixed up and feeling weird. Go home. Rest. You've been on your feet since then, haven't you?"

Susan nodded.

"You need to sleep, process what you've been through."

"There's still work I could do-"

Trance put a finger over her lips. "Go. Home. You still have a mission of your own, right? Luna, and your father. We can take it from here."

"I just know if I stop... if I stop..." Susan choked up.

"There, there." Trance blazed up and held Susan in a golden light.

"Goodbye captain," she said some time later, having recovered herself enough to say goodbye to everyone. They shook hands. "Sorry I took over so much and whatnot."

"No you're not," he answered with a smile. "But I get it. You can't be any other way. And I wouldn't have you any other way."

"Keep fighting. And have Harper hook up that device to the black hole again and get your wife back. You deserve it."

"Yes, I think I will!" He glanced over at Harper.

"Thanks a lot," he grumped, giving her a hug with a grin.

"Sure thing. Keep practicing your *lifestreaming*. It's a part of you now, and when it does get released people will need teachers."

"Of course! In between picking over the wreckage of the worldship of course. There's probably lifetimes of data even in wreckage!"

"No doubt. Stay well."

"You too."

"Perhaps a way can be found to allow you to have kids without tearing someone apart," Susan said to Rev. "Then you can be the father to a race of true Magog, without the taint of the angel."

"I hope that day comes."

"Beka, keep flying, you're the best. Next to me."

"I'm glad you're leaving. I get the title back. Thanks for the money too by the way. This world won't be the same without you."

“And as for you,” Susan said to Rommie. “Keep him safe and sane, okay?”

“Always. But you have to promise me the same. Keep yourself safe and sane.”

“Do my best. And I have Sparkle, so...” Both girls laughed as Sparkle just washed an ear. “Thanks for the lessons. I’m still not as good as you are, but I’ll get there.”

“No doubt.”

“Goodbye.”

“Trance-”

She shook her head. “Nothing more needs to be said between us. You carry a part of me, and of my race, inside you now. Use it well.”

“I will. A sun that walks and talks. What will they think of next?”

Trance stuck her tongue out and Susan waited while Ifruita said her goodbyes as well.

Finally it was time to go, and Susan stepped through a doorway of light back to the Hub.