

Intermission

When: After stepping through the portal

Where: The Hub

The familiar sight of the transfer room met Susan's eyes, and the machinery behind her whined down as the portal flickered off.

"Go home she said," Susan remarked, looking around. "Should it scare me that this is feeling more like home than ever?"

"I suppose it's only natural," Sparkle replied. "This is the place that's letting us search for Luna and your dad. And coming here we know a mission is done, that the worst for a time is over."

"I guess. Ifruita, you should go see if they're making any progress on getting that subservience routine inside you taken care of."

"I will, master."

"Let's go then." She stepped towards the door which surprisingly stayed firmly closed. "What the?"

"Your incoming vital parameters do not match your outgoing vital parameters," a pleasant voice announced. "Please wait until you can be scanned so no contagion is spread to the Hub."

"The what now?" Susan looked over at her two companions, who both looked puzzled. A moment later the door opened and an agent stepped into the room. It was a woman in a white robe with a red zigzag design along the hem and sleeves, and she looked the three over. "Susan?" she asked.

"That's me."

"This won't take a second," she promised, waving a device in Susan's general direction. "That's strange."

"What is?"

"Your body temperature is far higher than we last recorded. By all accounts you have a dangerously high fever. In fact you should be unconscious right now according to our understanding of your reality's biology. Or more accurately, a temperature this high would have killed you long before it got this high."

"Baby, if I've got a fever the cure is more cowbell." Susan winked.

The woman looked up from her instrument, confused.

"She's feeling fine," Sparkle said sarcastically.

"Indeed, she seems her usual self," Ifruita agreed.

"Thanks," Susan replied with a scowl.

"I call them like I see them," Sparkle admitted. "And it's been, what, a year since your last? That's got to be weird for you."

"Sparkle!"

The woman laughed. "Seriously though, how are you feeling?"

"Run down from coming back from our last mission. Physically fine."

"Strange. Was there anything that happened that might account for this sudden change?"

"Well yes," Susan brightened. Literally. Her smile literally brightened the room. She didn't notice, but the others did. "The avatars of about two dozen or more suns gave me a gift of some kind for destroying their greatest enemy. Wasn't really processing it at the time." She made her character sheet appear and looked it over. "Odd that I don't seem to have any new backgrounds though. Didn't get hit up for any XP either. I couldn't even tell you what it's doing for me, and usually it's all recorded right here."

"That explains it then!" said the woman, standing a little straighter and snapping the instrument closed. She smiled back.

Was her hair that color before? It looks brighter somehow. And she has such a nice smile. And her eyes are really sparkl- Down Susan. Down! Back!

She went on. "Be sure to note that in your report, and let the boss know of any new abilities you develop. He might want to make sure they're completely compatible with you. Especially if you have a power that should tell you about any powers you have."

"I will."

"You're all free to go! None of you register any sign of contagion. Have a nice day!" She bounced out, humming.

"That was odd," Ifruita remarked, looking Susan over.

"Yeah," Sparkle agreed, looking around. "Something... never mind."

"What was?"

"When you... it's not important. I just could have sworn that..." Ifruita answered.

"Neither of you is making sense. Come on, let me go write my report for the big guy so I can stop thinking about what happened." She singsonged "put it on paper, save it for later. Tomorrow won't seem so bad."

So Susan went to write her report, and Ifruita went to get her code adjusted. When the report was done she went down to the lab, but was told by another agent she wasn't quite up and about yet.

"Is there anything you need done at the moment?"

"No I don't- wait a second." She took off her control crown for the wings. "Now that you mention it, Winry asked me before I got this if I had any internal cybernetics we could hook the wings into. At the time I didn't. But now I do, so could that be done?"

"What sort are they?"

Susan explained she had a dataport in her hand, and a CPU inside her brain.

"May I?" the agent asked, holding out a hand.

Susan handed him the crown, but he smiled and shook his head. "Your hand, actually."

"Oh! Sorry."

He waved a tool over it and brought up the schematic for it.

"Name? I'll want to put it in your file."

"Susan Felton."

"Okay. Oh, there's a note here to see the boss when you get in. Something about some cybernetics you wanted investigated?"

"Oh, the *Lifestream* system. I will, thanks for telling me."

"Sure. Okay, there's no wireless link inside the CPU, which according to this was probably by design. Makes it harder to hack you remotely. You're stuck with the external pickup unless you want to add a wireless module to the CPU."

She took the crown back. "I'll think it over. This seems to be part of the motif after all." She stuck the thing back on her head.

"It does look really good on you!"

"Well thanks!" Susan brightened again, and Sparkle noticed the man sitting a little straighter. *There it is again*, she thought.

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not at the moment. I'll see if the boss is free, hand over my report, and see what he wants."

"See you when your friend is done. I can send you message." He pointed to her watch.

"Yup."

"Ah, Susan," said Silverstreak as she came into the room. He was looking something over on a tablet like device and handed it back to the agent. "Lock it down, I'll see about it later."

"You got it."

"Never a dull moment. How was the Andromeda?"

"Great, up until the point it wasn't."

"I hear you. There was something I wanted to talk to you about... the cybernetics! You didn't give them to anyone, did you?"

"No." She shook her head.

“Good. Because I found...” He turned to look at her directly, and stopped short. “Hey, you look different? Something’s different about you.”

“Yeah, it’s all in the report.” She made a brush off gesture.

“Just a second.” He seemed to look off into the distance, which was a neat trick as he didn’t have visible eyes. “Oh, how about that? Well, have fun figuring out what they gave you, I guess?”

I have an idea, thought Sparkle. Odd as it may sound.

“Thanks. So what did you find?”

“Hidden routines that would allow Darkvoid to take over anyone you installed the system into.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Ah, right, your friend Harper. Glad he’s okay. I’ve taken them out, of course, so they’re safe to use now. I’ll swap you the ones you still have for some clean ones.”

“Fair enough!”

Silverstreak pulled the case out of her *pocket dimension* and grabbed the injectors out.

What the? Oh, right, The Darkness can do that. I keep forgetting this is a being of the same caliber.

“There you go,” he chirped, putting them back. “Six doses. And I can always get you more. We’re exploring the possibility of making it a standard option for less... gifted... applicants into the hub family. Despite my feelings on the matter, it’s been developed. If we can turn it against the being that made it, turn it positive, so much the better. I’ve included a sort of user manual in the system itself. That should help anyone you inject it into use it properly.”

“Hey, that’s great. As for turning it against its creator, I agree. Less gifted.” She shook her head. “How is Merida, anyway?”

“Doing great! Gifted with that bow of hers. She’s been giving lessons, we might have a resurgence in that type of weapon because of her. And she’s soaking up info on technology like it’s going out of style.” *Yeah, I bet she is,* Susan thought with an internal grin. “Want to talk to her?”

“I’ll track her down later. No news of Jenny?”

“Not from my end. Sorry, we are looking though. Her ability seems to make her nearly impossible to track. Dimensional energies and such, though I could go over the math if you really wanted.”

Susan barked a laugh. “With a 10 in *math* and this chip in my head, I might even understand it now! That’s okay though. Pity, I’m off to put the last world behind me. Far, far behind me. I could have used a friendly ear.”

“I don’t recommend booze...”

“No, just... I don’t know. Talking to someone like her, I mean I know every agent here has been through the same but I know her. I guess there’s nothing for it but spending the remainder of the XP I got for the last ‘adventure’ and picking my next world.”

“If you feel that’s best, you know you can stay as long as you need. Or go home for a time if you want. If you do want to talk though, I’m around. Don’t let the million things I have yet to do today stop you.”

“I know. But this is something I have to live with.”

“For what it’s worth, I doubt that race would have even existed if not for the influence of The Abyss, and by extension Darkvoid. You were simply putting the reality back on track. In the end, even with what you did, I think you’ve saved more lives than you’ve taken. In the long run, I mean. There were a lot of them, and they were pretty nasty. So... yeah, not telling you how to feel, just pointing... shutting up now.”

“I know you’re trying to help but I think you realize how small a comfort that is to me,” she replied darkly.

“Yes, but it had to be said.”

“I know. See you around.”

Later that day Susan went to see the newly free Ifruita, and was pleased when she simply smiled and called her by name as she walked up.

"No 'master' this time? I approve!"

"I thought about it, for old time's sake, but thought this was better."

"It is. So, what will you do now?"

"I... thought about it. Now that I can rationally think about it. I... uh..."

"It's okay. If you don't want to follow me around it's totally fine. I wouldn't want to follow me around."

"I'm sorry, I really am. But I want to go home."

"I do understand. You have your own life now, it's better to be honest and happier in the long term than tag around me out of a sense of loyalty but be miserable."

"I wouldn't say miserable. We are friends, right?"

"Of course!" The room seemed to brighten a bit, and the technicians all looked around, wondering what was going on. They shrugged and went back to work, not even noticing they were sitting straighter, and feeling better.

"It means a lot to me. But many of my people are probably still sealed away back home. I want to find them and offer them the same treatment. We should all be able to decide our own destiny."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," Susan said honestly. "It was great to travel with you, and if you ever need anything I'm sure the Hub can get me there. You're part of the family now as far as I'm concerned. The resources here should be made available, after all you put yourself out there fighting The Darkness didn't you?"

She looked pensive. "But I had to because you did. But yes, they gave me a device like yours." She indicated the watch at her wrist.

"You had the option to stay. You wouldn't have shut down or exploded being away from me like that. You chose to follow me."

"I can't really be sure."

"Believe me, I know the feeling." *Where is that guy anyway? Off pouting I guess?*

"Anyway, I wish you luck."

"You too. And you better bring Luna and your father to come meet me."

"I will!" The two embraced, and the pair stepped through a door to the transit room, where the coordinates for her world were put in and after a somewhat tearful goodbye, she stepped through.

Susan made her way back to her room, and sat down heavily on the bed.

"So what now, kitty cat?" she asked.

"How are you really?" asked Sparkle, jumping up on the bed beside her.

"I really don't know," she answered honestly. "I'm coming to accept a bit that I have to do something, possibly something terrible, when I go through that door. That the price of maybe finding Luna is destroying whatever plans The Darkness has, and most certainly the host. And that may get messy."

"And it'll probably only get worse."

"As it tries more and more to get me to do what it wants. Fall into despair, give up, and give myself over to it. Or just use darkness energy until it can take me over that way. Basically losing myself a tiny bit a time, for a hundred logical reasons. The road to Hell, right?"

"Oh yeah, we can use magic again!"

"Tell me about it. It's like I've been only half a person the last year. Still, good practice for when I go to rescue my father right? Proved I can do a lot just with powers. A lot of destructive things, but some good things too."

"If powers even work wherever he is," Sparkle muttered.

"What?"

"I said yes, of course you're right. Are we leaving immediately?"

"Let's see how much more XP I can dump into *gun fu* and take some time off. I need to process the fact I blew up more than a dozen *entire worlds* a few days ago. I mean I knew I could do it, I did it in the practice area. But to do it for real..."

"It's pretty scary, that you have that kind of power."

"But it's a useless power. I want power to help people! Not destroy their planet. Who goes around doing that?"

"I know that!"

"I know you do." She paused, looking down at her hands. "I'm not Vegita. I'm not! I don't know if it's even really hit me yet. All those lives lost, but only in the abstract, you know? From where I was I was just using a technique to blow up some balls of rock. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

"That's an interesting line of thought," Sparkle mused. "What if the reason you could destroy them so easily was because they were empty? I'm sure the sensors on the Andromeda could have been tricked somehow, and you didn't go down and knife each Magog personally. Could The Darkness just be toying with you more? Heck, Harper made her open her doors and move around, he could have planted false records in her memory and while she thought she was scanning those planets, she was really just reading sensor data from a file. Fake sensor data."

"That would explain it, but I have to assume they were teaming with life. To just flippantly say 'oh well they probably were just empty' and move on doesn't feel right."

"No way to know now. I actually do hope they were full, in a way. If they weren't, where did all the Magog go? Could they still be there, poised to strike out anywhere? Were there never more than a few? Was it all a ruse? We can't ever know!"

"I think never knowing, like you said, bugs me more than possibly killing trillions of souls. How messed up is that?"

"Like you said, it's about scale. How do you wrap your head around casually destroying twenty worlds in seconds? On the other hand knowing or not serves to define you; sacrifice these to save those. If that's false, part of you becomes false too." *Plus your curiosity weakness will drive you crazy with not knowing.*

"It's ten times worse if I think I saved that reality from a horde of Magog, feel bad about it, then they pop up later and continue their campaign against all other life forms. I'll have to ask Silverstreak to scan it or something." She shook her head and laughed ironically. "Golden Crash. What a joke. How did the technique come to have such a happy-go-lucky name? And what good is a power that only destroys, and on such a huge scale? What more can these hands do? What more can my powers and my magic do that I haven't even considered yet? Can I really only get better at destroying bigger and bigger things?"

"Only one way to know. Continue on and carefully consider on each world the minimum you have to do, the least loss of life you can manage, to shut down The Darkness. Get lazy, or accept collateral damage because it might be easier, and you really will have started down a path that ends in someone quite different looking out of those eyes. Taken over or not."

Susan looked over at the mirror in the room, and her completely black eyes stared back at her. "True."

Several days later Susan felt ready to tackle the next world, and was looking over the list.

"There must be someplace... easy, on here," she remarked, flipping through the pages. "There's got to be."

"Easy?"

"No giant robots, no hordes of creatures pulled from dimensions of fear and loathing. Someplace not polluted with dozens of reality travelers so that we can just point to the person that feels out of place and say 'yup, he's the one, he's done it all right, I'd recognize him anywhere!'"

"Good luck with that!"

"No, no, I think I found someplace!"

"No."

"Take a look." She showed Sparkle the entry for her next target, and she had to admit it seemed pretty close to what Susan wanted. Apparently there were non-human space travelers with enough technology to destroy a universe, but the likely target was still on Earth for some reason. There was a high level of technology but not too high. There was hardly any magical presence, at least in the open. "But they have all the planets, so at least I could use magic. No giant monsters in the area, no super powers. Seems like I would be able to take the place over in a day or so if I tried. Not that I would," she hastened to add.

“What’s the catch?” Sparkle asked at last, letting her stew a bit with a stare.

“With no major, Earth shattering events to lock onto, we probably won’t be anywhere near the place we need to be when we arrive,” Susan read further. “It’ll be up to us to figure out who The Darkness is and we’ll be in the dark (so to speak) even more than usual. Still, with no restriction on magic, *question* should work just fine.”

“Unless it imports an item like it was using to protect that army base. Then we’ll have a whole world to search and no way to do it.”

“Ah, good point. Well, nothing for it. What do you say?”

“One is as good as another at this point.”

“Too true. Let’s get going then.”

Susan and Sparkle didn’t expect to be screaming in pain as the other side of the portal spat them out, bodies feeling like they were being ripped apart.

But that’s what happened.

Susan, down on one knee, looked over at Sparkle and shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun overhead with one hand. The pain was beginning to subside, and the world was coming back into focus.

"You okay?" she managed.

"Somehow," came the weak reply, as Sparkle struggled to rise. "What was that?"

"I have no idea, but it wasn't pleasant. Something must have happened, something big. So much for this being a cake walk." She shook her head and unsteadily got to her feet, looking around. She seemed to be standing on a beach somewhere, and off in the distance behind her was a fairly modern looking city. In a circle around her people had stopped what they were doing and were looking at her, but none spoke up to ask if she was okay.

(Everyone was waiting for everyone else to speak up. Common phenomenon. Look it up.)

She was starting to feel better, in fact the sun felt amazing on her, almost as if she was drinking that unfiltered starlight into her bones. She found she could look right up at it without even squinting, and stood there transfixed a moment.

Hello little sister! Nice to meet you. It has been far too long since I saw an actual sun.

"What's that noise?" asked Sparkle, finally coming to a sitting position and looking around.

"Noise?" Susan tore her gaze away from the sun and looked around again, seeing that most people were going back to their activities. A few were asking others nearby where that girl had come from, but she was distracted by finding the source of the noise. Her watch was buzzing, that was it! She brought it up to look at.

Warning was printed on the face. Hub connection lost.

"Oh great, we've lost our link to the Hub!" she moaned. "That can't be good!"

"At least we're together this time."

"True." She swiped it and a new message appeared along with the time and her location. It was mid-afternoon and they seemed to have been put down off the coast of Salvador, Brazil. Along with that was a small circle that was spinning with "reconnecting" under it.

"Perhaps we should find someplace a little quieter?" Sparkle asked, as Susan was simply staring at the thing as though she could will it to connect faster. "I just heard someone ask if those were guns you're carrying."

"Yes, we didn't exactly come through where we should have," Susan agreed. She looked around to see a few people backing away from her. *Those must be the ones that noticed the guns.*

"Is that cat talking?" a random person that was nearby finally blurted, unable to take it anymore.

"Oh crap- I mean meow?" *Shoot, I've gotten so used to just talking...*

"What, haven't you seen these new animatronic cats?" Susan hedged, grabbing her up. "That speak preprogramed phrases like they're alive or something?" She tittered. "They're all the rage in Paris." The pair made eye contact, and the man jerked back, startled by what he saw there. *Oh crap, me as well.* "Bye!" She hastily made a beeline for the city, and was relieved when no one followed her.

"Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. I forgot about my eyes, too. Dang. Actually, that would be an interesting spell, now that I think about. Make people ignore what they don't expect to see."

"It would have made us popping out just then overlooked. Would probably cover the eye problem too."

"Of course the smart thing to have done would have been to put *invisibility* on before we came through. But yes, I didn't expect to feel like I was stepping across realities through a cheese grater. So little did I know I would actually need to."

“And we can’t even ask the Hub why that happened.”

“I’m sure it’ll reconnect soon,” Susan countered shakily. “May as well take care of a few things while we wait. There must be a place we can get some privacy for a spell or two.”

Naturally they got a *no* answer to the *question* of Luna being anywhere in this world, and an *unknown* for where The Darkness might be.

“Super, so we’ve got nothing,” Susan grouched. “And we’re still not connected to the Hub.”

Apologies, flashed the watched. Algorithmically compensating for local interference. Connection should be reestablished soon.

“That’s a bit of good news. Didn’t think anything could hit us like that though. I thought this world didn’t have magic or monsters or whatnot.”

“It has something. Why not ask your passenger, a bit of crowing on its part might at least shed some light.”

“Hey, that’s a good point. Hey, emo dude! Yeah you in my head. Anything to say on the matter?”

There was silence.

“What, you go deaf or something?”

I’m having a proper sulk at the moment, do you have to disturb me? Besides, those solar avatars did something to you, it’s not as easy to talk to you as it once was. And your soul was shaken up by the transit just as your body was. So I’m feeling the pain too.

Seriously?

I’ll be fine soon, don’t you worry. It’s kind of you to inquire though.

I meant that the avatars did something that’s messing you up.

Oh, that. You would have found out sooner or later, but yes, I’m a little bit “further” from you right now. If you can imagine that.

No doubt you’ll be back to normal and babbling nonsense in my ear before the day is out. So, any hints? I’m sure you’ve got something bizarre planned for me around here. Our entrance suggests as much.

Indeed. About three months ago something extraordinary happened. Look into it. That should lead you to me.

Okay but did you do something to our transit?

...

Hello?

“Okay, says to look into something that happened like three months ago. And that’s all it’ll say.”

“That narrows it down,” she said sarcastically.

“Hey, it’s better than nothing. And get this- apparently my ‘solar gift’ is giving it a bit of trouble. It says that’s why it’s not talking to me right now. It’s an ‘effort’ apparently and we know how lazy it is.”

“That’s really good news, if true!”

“I know, isn’t it? Come on, I’ve got a good feeling about going... this way! Aww yeah!”

Susan confidently strode out of the alley she had been crouching in and headed down the street. It wasn’t long before she stood in front of a specific building with a look of triumph on her face. Of course, it had taken a quick casting of *literacy* to know for sure, but she was in the right place.

“It does exist, I knew it. Let’s get some answers!”

“Where are we?” asked Sparkle, after making sure no one was nearby.

“Internet cafe,” replied Susan smugly. “Had a feeling I would find one here, and here one is!” She turned around to lean on the front of the building.

“That’s convenient. What is it?”

“Basically a place someone can go and pay to get internet access for an hour or two. But for us,” she pointed to the watch, “a place to get some answers. I assume you have a

clear signal to the local equivalent to the internet even if your Hub connection is not restored? And with my stated approval that you can crack any encryption protecting it?"

"Affirmative," chirped the watch. "Beginning search now."

"Now we just have to—"

"Search completed."

"Never mind. What have you got?"

"Recently, this planet was informed of the existence of extraterrestrial life forms when a human was accidentally killed and resurrected by them. They offered a most sincere apology both for the accidental death of the boy, and the breaking of the non-interference law they follow. They have since departed but rumors of the ship's reappearance have persisted."

"Resurrection?" asked Sparkle, somewhat fearfully. "How?" *I never did tell Susan about that. How can I? Oh, by the way I brought some dead guy back to life. Yeah, no problem, Harper did most of the work and he seemed fine afterwards. Just was screaming about knowing he was dead a moment ago, perfectly normal reaction. I'm sure he got over it.*

"The footage of the explanation was captured from multiple angles as it was broadcast around the globe simultaneously. Would you like to watch it? I have found what I estimate to be the most complete record which has been compiled from all available angles to show the complete narrative as it unfolded on that night."

"How long is it?"

"Ninety two seconds."

"Play it, Sam."

"Affirmative." The watch face changed, and a video appeared of a huge ship silhouetted in front of the moon. "The following message shall be translated into languages that are understandable," played from the tiny speaker. "We are what you people would call unknown beings, or aliens." Suddenly, beams shot out of the ship's sides and a hologram of a person's face could be seen floating in the air. "The reason we came here was to investigate you humans on the fifth stage of evolution. Our ship malfunctioned, and injured this Earthling. Therefore, in accordance with the Law for the Protection of Planetary beings, we apologize for this incident. Furthermore, regarding this Earthling, a complete regeneration has been performed. Except his sex has been reversed. Our deepest apologies."

"What?"

"He has become a girl. A perfect, complete female. The operation cannot be reversed. Regarding this Earthling, we hope that you treat her with all human dignity and civility."

What human dignity and civility? Must not have been studying you all that long.

And there it is. Thought you were out of the picture for the moment.

Figured I would make an effort. Couldn't pass up that opportunity.

Yes, you could have.

The ship then spat her out in a beam of light and was seen leaving again at high speed.

"Did not expect that," Sparkle said at last. *Seems to be a different method than I would have used. That's somewhat of a relief. I should tell her though, it was just so creepy. And wrong. And what if she actually want me to use it? That could get... awkward.*

"No. What in the world? How does this get us closer to The Darkness?"

"Are we sure it just isn't something interesting enough to us because of the novelty, so we go chasing it while The Darkness does things elsewhere?"

"What would a delay of a few days matter? I ask where this person is, and if I don't get an answer I know something's up. If I do I check them out, and see what the situation is."

"Where is this girl?"

"Media reports have centered around Japan," the watch informed them.

"Japan again, huh? Should be like old times, just without sailor guardian transformations." *Ah, Ami. Hope you're doing okay.*

"Hey, you can't just hang around here!" someone shouted to her from the door of the cafe.

Susan slowly turned her head to look over at the man. She glared at him, then made a show of dropping a hand to stroke the gun that hung at her side. "I have had one misfortune

after another since arriving here,” she informed him. “Don’t become yet another. I will stand where I like.”

“Take your time,” he insisted, eyes wide and hands up. He slowly stepped back inside.

Susan sighed. “I’m sure you can get me a picture of this Japan, we’ll head there and see what our next step is.”

The picture on the watch changed. “This is the most widely accepted image of the neighborhood where the individual that was changed lives.”

“Then that’s where we’re headed. Come on, before he calls the police or something.

Ugh, I have to worry about *backfire* again, and casting time. What a hassle. Suppose I could transform...” *But that might speed The Darkness’ recovery somehow.*

“On the plus side my *Accelerate Magic* is useful again if you don’t.”

“Forgot about that!” Susan replied with a snap of her fingers. “You’re the best companion ever!”

“Connection to Hub restored,” affirmed the watch suddenly. “Signal at 29%. I cannot guarantee this level of signal and it may degrade at any time.”

“Susan?” came another voice. “Susan, are you there?”

“I’m here!” she replied, relief plain in her voice. “What happened?”

“Thank the admins you’re all right. You are all right, aren’t you?” Susan looked at the watch and a fuzzy image of an agent appeared. “Looks like there’s still some interference.”

“Physically fine, but shaken. Something happened with our transit, and yeah I’m seeing the interference too. My AI says we might get cut off again.”

“That’s very troubling. As for what happened, some kind of energy hit you as you went through. We’re trying to track it down. But you’re not when you’re supposed to be!”

“When?” *I suppose that’s more important than where, given my capabilities.*

“You’re about three months later than you were set to arrive. Is that reality still okay?”

“Three months?” The two looked at each other.

“Is that significant?”

“I’m not sure, it’s just something interesting happened here. *Three months ago.*”

“Then you’d better hurry, something might be happening there any day! We wanted to give you plenty of time before any *event* happened but now you’re out of time.”

“Tell me something I already haven’t had terrible visions of. But I thought this world didn’t have magic or monsters or anything like that? How can it still have events of magnitude important enough to draw... Darkvoid?”

“Just a single person deciding to turn left or right can be an *event*, Susan. They aren’t all monsters of the old times rising from the deep to enslave humanity.”

“Oh. Good to know. We’ll be in touch if we learn anything.”

“Us too. Be safe, it seems that reality is more dangerous than we thought.”

“I will. Susan out.”

“Hub out.”

The face of the agent blinked out. “Let me know if we lose signal again.”

“Affirmative.”

Suddenly two police cars screeched to a halt before Susan and several uniformed men jumped out, taking cover behind their doors. “Hands in the air!” one of them called. “Drop your weapons!” yelled another. “Turn around and kneel on the ground!” said a third.

“Wow, they got here fast,” Sparkle remarked, somewhat impressed.

“Probably a donut shop right nearby.”

“That’s a stereotype and you know it.”

“Maybe it isn’t here though, how do you know?”

“Get your hands in the air, do it now!”

“Where have we heard that before? Come on.” Susan held out her arms and Sparkle jumped into them.

“What are you planning to do?”

“The Darkness really is off its game, because I’m leaving and not just squishing them like bugs.” Her wings snapped opened and the officer’s jaws dropped as she simply rose into

the air with a gentle beat of the wings and then with a mighty stroke shot away from the scene.

One of the officers made the sign of the cross with his free hand. None would speak of the incident to anyone in the future.

“Can we risk *Teleportal*?” asked Sparkle, now hovering in the air high above the tallest skyscraper in the city.

“I think so. My theory is, The Darkness didn’t want us messing with the alien thing three months ago, so somehow diverted us to this time. Moving about in the here and now should be no problem. They might have been allies in my fight, this way I’ll never meet them and have to deal with whatever it’s doing here alone. Alone with you, I mean.”

“If you’re willing to take the risk... of course I’m forgetting your *overconfidence*.”

“That’s right, it’ll be fine. But this time, how about you maintain *Invisibility* while I do the strongest casting of *teleportal* I can?” She paused, thoughtful. “Not sure how casting it ‘strong’ would help, but it can’t hurt.”

“Fine with me. *Invisibility!*”

“*Teleportal!*”

The pair appeared in the street and Susan immediately shifted her antigravity system to send them in the air again before there was another “Incredibles” incident. She looked around but it was fairly quiet.

“What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to stay out of sight for once,” Susan decided. “We’ll check anyone walking around in this area with *dimensional sense* and simply take them out. I won’t catch them unaware or anything because The Darkness will know I’m around but at least this way no other lives will be changed by my actions.”

“You don’t have to go to that extreme you know.”

“No, it’s like you said. The minimal loss of life, the lightest touch upon the world. Let me try it out, at least.”

“I didn’t exactly say that.”

“It’s what I heard. And I agree. For a world like this with no magic or monsters or super heroes, let’s not rock the boat.”

“Expect for flying away earlier.”

“Worked, didn’t it? Sure, they may doubt their eyes or their sanity but they’re not hurt and there’s no physical evidence I was even there. Now come on, someone’s coming.”

The pair spent about two hours flying over the area and checking anyone walking through it. There was an absence of kids, Susan thought, as it was probably about time for them to be getting home from school. The weather was nice, but she didn’t see any kids of a certain age playing outside. Young kids yes, older kids going home, yes. But no middle school aged kids. Sparkle had gotten bored and was wandering around, her *invisibility* gone as no one would think twice about a cat. Susan had cast it on herself until she left the area, and was wondering if maybe this wasn’t the way to go about it after all.

That’s when she saw the sign. Out on the lawn of one of the houses, two confused people were standing there looking up with a large banner that read, in English, SUSAN.

What?

She became visible and fell out of the sky in front of them, guns out but lowered.

“You really did come!” exclaimed the man.

“An actual angel!” agreed the woman.

“What?” Susan now demanded aloud.

“We found this note about ten minutes ago,” said the man, holding up a sheet of paper. “It’s from our daughter. Hazumu.”

"It said to go outside and unroll this banner," the woman went on "and an angel would drop from the sky. I'm supposed to give her... you... this." She handed something over and Susan unfolded it.

"A piece of purple cloth?"

"That's what the note said," agreed the woman.

"Purple cloth..." On a hunch Susan spent a few seconds sensing it out, and it registered to her dimensional senses like it didn't belong there. "Like from a purple robe?" Susan's face hardened. *Dad!* "Where is your daughter now?"

"School festival. Look, what is this all about?" asked the father.

"Yes, this is all very strange."

"Sparkle, get over here!" Susan called. "We're leaving!"

"Wait, what is this about?" asked the father again.

"Your daughter isn't your daughter. I'm sorry, but you'll probably never see her again."

"What?" the both exclaimed.

"I'm here," said Sparkle, bounding up. "Did you... what in the world?"

"Come on, we have to get to this school. Shouldn't be too hard to find from the air."

Ignoring the cries of the parents to wait she took to the air again in a flurry of wings, and started peering around.

"I'm guessing that way," Sparkle announced, pointing with a paw.

"Why?"

"They both looked in that direction when you said you had to get to the school."

"Knew there was a reason I came with you." She took off in that direction.

The sun was setting as Susan hovered over the festival below. Long shadows obscured details and it seemed like the entire school was milling about below. "How are we going to find her in all this?"

"Switch to *powers mode* and take a lot of *Augment Stat: LUCK* to get an out of this world *perception check*?"

"I guess that's one option. Wait, it told me where to come, could it have given up that warding too? *Question*, where is the avatar of the darkness right now?"

Roof

"The roof? Wait, there!"

Susan pointed.

"She's falling!" Sparkle screamed.

"What?" Susan dove, wings tight against her body and getting an eight on her *wings* check. (Hey, it's not something she can actually put energy into, right?)

They collided, and Susan was at least able to cushion the fall with her own body. She had to let Sparkle go, or rather Sparkle jumped away from her, to make sure she could catch the *two* girls now plummeting to their deaths off the school roof. (Sparkle cast a spell of some kind, Susan didn't pay enough attention to see what it was) It seemed that when one girl fell when the fence around the top gave way, another stupidly jumped after her, like that would help the situation in some way. Another was calling out and crying from the edge, and Susan extracted herself from the two that fell and looked them over. Her wings snapped open and closed again, lighting up with diagnostic energy after the tumble, but they were fine. It seemed the two girls were as well, as the one with shorter hair looked up at her with a big smile. Sparkle was suddenly by her side, having *spirit stepped* over from where she had landed.

"Thanks for saving me, Susan, there was the remote possibility this wouldn't have worked out. But now? Thanks to my girlfriend here you can't even touch me. I'm invincible."

Oh crap what did I just do?

Just Who To Blame

When: Just after the other girl stirred and got up

Where: Outside a school in Japan

“Susan, let me introduce my girlfriend, Tomari-chan. Tomari-chan, this is the girl that heroically dived from the sky to save us! My good friend Felton-san!”

The girl that was introduced had two long strands of hair that were braided at the bottom and both girls were wearing a school uniform of some kind. The Darkness had a boyish haircut, and both had big, expressive eyes and small noses.

“Please take good care of me,” the girl said, giving a bow. She was still a bit unsteady on her feet, and was looking around. “Hazumu, what happened?”

“Something wonderful!” the girl said, clapping her hands together. “Things really came together today, didn’t they Susan?”

“What did you do? What did you mean that I couldn’t touch you anymore?”

“Perhaps alien-san can explain that better,” she gushed. “I know you’re watching, you absolute piece of filth, so you may as well come and join the festivities!” From out of nowhere a man in glasses and a lab coat stepped into view. He was looking... well, somewhat emotionless given the situation, but Susan could feel his spirit energy was quite different from the human type present in the two girls. He adjusted his glasses, looking her over.

“The level of technology on your person bespeaks the fact you are not from around here,” he stated levelly. “What is your purpose currently at this school?”

“And your spirit energy tells me *you* aren’t,” Susan countered. “You must be the one behind the miraculous regeneration I’ve heard tell of. But I heard you left so I could ask you the same question.”

“What is going on?” Tomari yelled. “Is she still in danger?”

“No,” said the man simply. “The transplant was successful. Also I do not understand why you referred to me in that way, Hazumu. Have I not done everything I could to preserve your life?”

“Sure, sure, but you’re too much an emotionless *automaton* to get angry about it. So what difference does it make how I refer to you?” She turned to Susan again. “Imagine it! Having the technology to wipe out all life in the universe in an instant, but is there any single member of their race I can use? No! They all chemically burned out their emotion centers to preserve life in the universe. I couldn’t get a single one of them to press the button no matter what I did. So many wasted years of effort! ‘It was all ‘why would I want to do that?’ or ‘But what purpose would it serve to do so?’ Frustrating. But then this body came along,” she ran her hands over her small frame, “and I knew you would be along soon and so I hatched a plan. And here we all are!” she shouted to the sky. “It worked!”

“What worked?” Susan demanded.

“Is everyone all right?” said a new voice, and a breathless girl with long dark hair, held in place by a hairband, ran up. “Hazumu, are you okay?”

“Ah, my other potential girlfriend. Susan, this is Yasuna-chan. You can have her now, if you want. I’m done with her.”

She is really pretty... “She’s a bit young- *what are you talking about!*”

“Ah, this is really a delight. Sensei, I believe you were about to explain about the transplant?”

“I don’t care about any transplant,” Susan insisted. “You’re The Darkness, you admitted to it. And you’re just standing there!” She pulled the guns out of their holsters. “This is the least amount of harm I can do to this world.” The others all screamed. Well, the man didn’t, he reached into a pocket to pull something out. Susan didn’t give him a chance to stop her, she pulled both triggers.

Nothing happened, because she couldn’t pull the triggers.

“What did you do?” she demanded, still trying to squeeze them.

“Me? Nothing. Your own magic prevents you from harming me. I told you, didn’t I? Oh, the look on your face!”

What? My contract specifically says I can hurt the host of The Darkness. I would be useless otherwise.

The man took his hand off of something and withdrew it, looking between the two girls.

“Something very unexpected is going on here,” he speculated.

“No, you think?” shouted Yasuna. “This woman just tried to shoot Hazumu!”

“Perhaps we should all just calm down and get the explanation out of the way?” suggested The Darkness. “Honestly, it’ll all make sense once he explains.”

Susan lowered the guns. “Fine. Make it quick.”

“Are you certain?” the man asked The Darkness. “This all seems highly irregular, even for this world.”

“Just do it,” she sighed. “Honestly, ikia furniture has more emotional range than you people.”

“Very well. The transplant, yes. When we killed the original boy Hazumu, by complete and total accident, we searched for a new fate that would result in that death never having occurred. That fate was to have been born a girl, meaning she wouldn’t have been in that field and thus, would not have died. However, this fate too was to be short as three months later the girl Hazumu would run out of ‘fate grains’ and once again expire.”

“A fact we knew about, but that she never got around to actually telling us,” grumped the short haired girl.

Hazumu just grinned.

“However, there was one method that could be employed. If another truly wished to be by her side forever, ‘fate grains’ could be shared between the two people and both their lives would continue.”

“But the best part is, what happens to this girl,” she grabbed Tonari by the shoulders, “happens to me! And vice versa. Our fates truly are one now. So you kill me...”

Susan’s eyes were wide, and she had a horrified expression. “She dies too.”

“Correct!” crowed The Darkness. “So go ahead. Get permission from your stupid *cat* to cause harm to this girl, and do it.” She stepped in front of Susan and raised the gun in her left hand. She put it against her chest and leaned into it. “There’s no way, currently, for me to destroy this place so free me and move on. It works out for you, another world cleared. Luna isn’t here as I’m sure you’ve already discovered. And as for your father...”

“Hazumu, what are you doing?” asked Tomari, snapping out of it. She started trying to pull her friend away from the gun. “What are you saying? You don’t even sound like yourself, we need to get you to a hospital.”

Hazumu laughed. “Ah, my love. No need, I feel on top of the world. My greatest enemy must sacrifice either her morals or her energy to get me to leave here, and I’m actually hoping for the morals.”

Of course, the hyperlarcovite. That’s its game here.

“What’s going on?” the dark haired girl asked the man. “Is this a result of what you did? She’s changed.”

“I do not know what has come over her, but given that this being is not human, and is using technology you do not have, and seems quite distraught, I’m betting more is going on here than we currently understand.”

“No, you think?” The Darkness asked sarcastically, unlike Tomari who had just recently asked it so hysterically. She turned to the girl. “Not to worry my love. Once this girl leaves in disgrace, we can begin our lives together. I’ll be by your side forever, just like you wanted.”

“Every time I think you’ve sunk as low as you can go, you just slide deeper,” Susan growled.

“You mean ‘knowing my enemy’ right? There are bands of murder hobos out there calling themselves ‘agents’ that wouldn’t hesitate to gun the both of us down if it meant this world would be safe. For them I have to take a different tack. But for you, it’s cute girls and lots of them!” She jumped away from the gun and hugged both the girls from the sides. “I mean can you really murder this girl in cold blood? She’s innocent! She just wanted to save the love of her life. And here I am, safe and sound. Happy ending!”

Susan looked at her guns, then disgustedly shoved them back into their holsters.

"Giving up?"

"I can't shoot you, that's true for now. Not unless Sparkle lets me. But giving up? No. Susan calling Hub." She brought the watch up but once again *Signal Lost* was showing on the face.

"Ah, ah, ah," scolded The Darkness. "Calling to ask what I might do with the 10,000 energy and a chunk of crystal that large? Or maybe how to reverse this transplant? Nope! You get to decide this all on your own, Susan. Don't worry, I'll give you the crystal back."

"Really?"

"Naturally. How you would fill it up for the next time? I just want the energy. Of course, next time it'll be 20,000."

"That's outrageous!"

"So shoot me, kill us both, and keep it for a more dire situation. I'm sure I can think of one." She winked.

"Susan, maybe we should talk?" Sparkle said. *Maybe if I brought her back to life afterwards... but wouldn't that just resurrect The Darkness too? No, if it left and the barrier went up it couldn't get back. But what would it mean to bring them back? Would they come all the way back? There's just too much I don't know about that ability! Plus The Darkness may have burned out this girl's brain for all I know, and she would come back a vegetable. Is that something I want to put her love through? Her family? But I could at least bring the other girl back, right? But if their fates are tied together... there's just too much I don't know!*

"No, I won't ask permission to kill an innocent life," Susan swore. "So you don't have to worry."

"That's... There's something..."

"Not now."

"O- okay."

"If you're not shooting me, I guess you may as well hand over the crystal," reasoned The Darkness, holding a hand out.

"Oh no, not until I'm satisfied this guy isn't a part of your scheme here!" she countered, knocking her hand away.

"Whatever. I'm not going anywhere and you know where I live."

"Yes I do."

"Then I'll see you later. I've got the rest of this festival to see, with my girlfriend. See you again!"

"Count on it."

The Darkness spun and walked off, Tomari and Yasuna trailing her with uncertain looks on their faces. "Hazumu, are you sure you're okay?" asked Tomari.

"Of course I am."

They passed out of earshot.

"Now, what to do with you," Susan wondered aloud, looking at the man.

"Perhaps we could return to my ship?" he suggested. "I would be most interested to hear the full story behind all this."

"Fine, I need to check you out anyway," Susan admitted, feeling worn down despite not really doing anything in this reality yet.

"This way." An old looking wooden door appeared behind the man, and he stepped through it. Susan and Sparkle went through, entering a dark space with many glowing displays seemingly hanging in air. Before her was a vaguely recognizable piece of equipment, much like the moonputer she had seen the last time she had come to Japan. There was another girl there, somewhat taller and more mature looking than the girls Susan had left behind. She had on a lab coat, just like the man, and her glasses were rather wide with a thin wire frame. *Reminds me of Ami with that short hair. Feels human, too.*

"Is everything all right, Sensei?" asked the girl.

"I believe I may have done wrong in transplanting fate grains between the two girls," he admitted. "Though perhaps not for the reason I would be punished for by my own people."

“What you did couldn’t have been wrong,” she protested. “It was done with the best of intentions.”

“What does that have to do with anything? No, the extent of my guilt depends on the tale told by this young woman here. Please, speak freely in front of Mari.”

“Very well...” And Susan launched into her “everything you know is wrong” speech which caused Mari to go wide eyed but the alien to simply nod and accept what he was being told.

“So that’s it. The Darkness now inhabits the body of that girl, and killing her is the only way to make it leave. If we don’t it’ll somehow put a plan into action to destroy all life on the planet and then eventually, the universe.”

“Do you believe her?” asked Mari.

“Her story does explain certain discrepancies in our own history. Once we gave up emotion there were still those interested in using the weapon to destroy all life everywhere. This would explain why that was.”

“Still, her claims require as much proof as they are unbelievable.”

“I agree. While her wings, guns, watch and armor are vastly superior to any Earth based material science, she could be an alien like myself, simply shape shifted to look human.” He adjusted his glasses. “I’m also reading some sort of cybernetics installed into her brain and nervous system. She seems human on one level, but on others she is not. It is very odd.”

“A consequence of me bouncing around realities,” Susan assured him. “Say I’m not though, for the sake of argument. Why would I come seeking this one insignificant girl who I conveniently wasn’t able to murder earlier, despite no one on this planet possessing the means to stop me?”

“It’s true, I did notice her straining to pull the triggers of the guns she carries. She seemed to desperately attempt the murder of Hazumu for some reason.”

“And my cat can talk,” Susan went on. “That always seems to convince people.”

The two looked down and Sparkle gave a wave. “Hello,” she said up to them. “It’s true what she said. In fact, we can provide materials from other realities. Certainly a science as advanced as yours could scan them and note any molecular differences between them and matter here.”

“Good point,” agreed Susan. “I have picked up some stuff in my travels...”

Susan produced her two shotguns, the moogle doll, her book of magic, both pistols as they came from different realities despite looking similar, various bits of moon rock, the Discord lamp-

“That should be enough!” the alien stopped her.

Good. Magic is slightly harder to do, now that I’ve had the opportunity to do some again. Have to raise my rating a little to compensate.

“If you’ll allow me?” he asked, pulling a strange helmet looking device out from someplace and indicating her head. It was just a half sphere of metal with antenna looking bits sticking out of it. “I would like to run a detailed scan on you, as well.”

“Go ahead,” she replied, taking the control crown for the wings off.

He plopped it in her head and started scanning the other objects.

“What is this even made of?” he asked when it came to the shotguns.

“My powers,” Susan replied simply. “I’ve never actually wondered if it’s metal or not. It was made with, basically, super powers.”

“Like in comic books?” asked the girl. “Piccolo’s clothes beam, for instance?”

“Exactly. Wait, you have Dragon Ball Z here? I met Goku, pretty nice guy.”

“You met...”

“All stories are real. But there’s only so many, and *storytellers* wind up telling the same ones.” *And of course all stories become Dragon Ball Z if they go on long enough...*

She looked a bit distraught. “Even the bad ones?”

Like where people die senselessly for no reason? “I suppose.”

"I must accept her story," said the alien. "If this physical evidence wasn't enough, there is one crucial fact above all others that leaves no doubt." He pulled the helmet off her head. "She has no life grains. I can think of only two possibilities that would be true."

"Oh, right, I'm functionally immortal," Susan remembered. "It happened when I got these." She pointed to her eyes. "As long as I'm not killed outright, I won't die of old age."

"That was the less probable of the two options," admitted the alien.

"What was the other?" asked Mari.

"That she is from another reality that does not have that particular feature."

"Ah."

"So, how can we help?" the alien asked, sinking into a chair that rose up to meet him.

Kill The Darkness so I don't have the death on my conscience?

"I'm not sure," she said aloud. "I think I just have to hand the *hyperlarcovite* over and let it take the energy. I won't kill that innocent girl."

"Still, that would be the preferred strategy in this case," protested the alien. "Two lives for all of ours. The math is sound."

"And how could she destroy all life?" asked Mari. "She's just a person, right?"

"It brings the ability to call down energy from its home dimension," explained Susan. "Or people, or things. Even if it can do nothing, it could bring someone like Doomsday through and let it do the job. It can create energy blasts or shields that I've seen. I don't know how big."

"Why hasn't it?" asked the alien. "Done all these things, I mean."

"It doesn't like to, because that wastes energy it feels is better kept for its ultimate purpose. It tries to use a natural disaster or other phenomenon as the catalyst."

"Perhaps that harms the host in some way," put in Sparkle. "After all, The Darkness may know how to do it, that doesn't mean the body it's in makes it easy."

"True. A regular person trying to channel that power may just burn them up. That's why it always seems to use that as a last resort. As to why not the others, it wants the *hyperlarcovite*. If I had something to fight it would be easier for me. Lives would be in danger, I wouldn't feel as bad about killing her. But she just stood here, daring me to do it. Mocking me with the fact I couldn't because it would kill her friend. So naturally she would want to be alone until she knew I was gone."

"And she can bring things from other realities?" asked Mari. "Like this stuff?"

Susan nodded. "When I first got here I couldn't use magic to find her. That's something it brought, an object that can block scrying magic."

"Then perhaps a disease, some kind of plague?" asked the alien.

Susan palled. "I suppose that's possible."

"I'd better check you right away," he said to Mari, who nodded, also looking a bit pale. He got out the scanner again and went to work. "No, I don't think so," he said at last. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Susan shook her head. "No, it wouldn't do anything to jeopardize getting that crystal. It set this up, knocked me three months off course to make me choose. But it already knows what's in my heart."

"Because of how you've reacted to it in the past?" Mari asked.

"Uh, yes, it's pretty smart," Susan hedged.

"I suppose it would have to be," the alien agreed, not buying it for a second. "Now I know how Hazumu's friends felt. Powerless to stop something they really couldn't understand. But hoping someone else would just wave a wand and fix it for them."

"Don't blame yourself," Mari told him. "We had no way to know."

"Indeed. This unearthly force took us all in, I wonder how much of this situation was caused by it? Could acting as if she could not make up her mind in regard to her two suitors simply be a 'backup' plan so to speak? But no, the life grain transplant would not have worked if the two hearts were not totally in sync."

"So it left enough of her to love," Susan postulated, brushing it off with one hand. "Who cares? It's real, it's here, who cares how? It rode around inside the body of a near god until that consciousness left the vessel and then it took the body over with no resistance. Who knows what it can really do? How much influence it can exert."

“You would know better than I.”

“Exactly. And I don’t know, that’s the point. But one thing I know that you know about- this life grain transplant. What was transplanted could be taken away again, yes?”

The alien shook his head. “I never heard of anyone wanting to. Certainly there is no information about such a thing in the databases of this ship.”

“But maybe elsewhere?” asked Sparkle. “We need to exhaust every possibility.”

“I know. This situation was my fault, and I must do what I can to make it right. Will you accompany me to my homeworld and plead your case? There we may receive access to the archives and look for a way to undo what I have mistakenly caused here.”

Susan held up her fingers in a V. “If you knew me better you would know there was no need to ask.”

There had been no grand ceremony to travel to the planet of the aliens, the man had simply told his ship they were going home, and it seemed they were on their way. Time along the way felt strange, and neither Susan nor Sparkle could have said exactly how long their journey had taken.

The alien, his disguise no longer needed, had reverted to his original state, a humanoid form cloaked in what Susan hoped was some kind of form fitting green jumpsuit, as his entire body was covered by it. From the bobbly antenna thing on his head to his feet, only his face seemed uncovered.

Do they have an even stronger nudity taboo than we do? Or is he completely naked and this is just what he happens to look like?

"And is this what you really look like, or is it another illusion so you don't cause us concern?" Susan had asked.

"Further deception would be pointless," was his only answer.

The ship decelerated, and a cute voice announced they had arrived, and the ship (presumably) plummeted through atmosphere or docked or whatever it was that ships did around these parts. Once again an antique looking door made of wood appeared, and the alien gestured to it. "Shall we go?"

"What... exactly should we expect?" Susan asked, suddenly realizing that if this guy was in on it, she had just allowed herself to be taken perhaps light years away from where The Darkness was.

Not that it would take me more than two actions to get back there, really.

"You will not be harmed," he began. "Of course bringing 'lower' life forms here is almost as large a crime as I have already committed, but once the reasons are known it should be overlooked. I will take us directly to the arbiters of justice so that our case can be heard and acted upon with the greatest speed."

"And what does a planet with a population of people with no emotions need with arbiters of justice?" Sparkle asked.

"Even here, where there may not be the crime your world seems to labor against, things are not always black and white. There will always be the need for a neutral third party."

"Interesting. Very well." The two shared a look, each saying without words to be on their guard. There was a brief understanding between them, and both linked up beside Mari.

He nodded and moved through the door, leaving it open for the others to follow.

Never really been through one of these that wasn't mine. I guess this is how others see me, just waving a hand and stepping from place to place. Weird.

She stepped through the door and found herself on a busy street, where... "What?"

Looking around, she saw what looked like antique cars (from her perspective) pattering down the roads while people spoke into old style rotary telephone headsets and the one kid she saw zoomed by on old metal roller skates.

"About what I expected," Mari remarked. "Given what alien-san has been seen using lately."

"Indeed, antique forms of technology, or at least things that look like them, have recently been seeing a resurgence here," he explained. "Perhaps as a way to recapture the past and regain some of what we have lost."

"Only one child," Mari said, as the boy/girl? skated out of sight. "You really are in trouble, aren't you?"

"Yes." Susan looked at him questioningly. "Our reason for studying cultures not yet advanced to our own levels," he explained. "To find some hint of how to live with our emotions but not give in to them so the weapon will never be used."

"You're dying out?"

"Sadly, that is true."

“Strange. Is it not logical to perpetuate one’s own species? Even without emotion, that desire should remain.”

“I shall mention that in my report,” the alien said dryly. “Come, this way.”

The group crossed the street and walked only a short distance to a rundown looking building. It seemed they had been put down very close to the place they needed to go, either because of general efficiencies of the technology, or to avoid two “aliens” walking around the streets from causing a panic.

If they even can panic, but we are getting some weird looks so it's probably better that we stay in the open as little as possible.

“You almost expect to see futuristic looking buildings,” remarked Mari, “even if people are getting into antiques, buildings are a bit harder to change.”

“Exactly why they do look like this,” he explained. “They’ve been around a long time.”

“Oh, right, they wouldn’t have built them ‘futuristic’ in nature in the beginning.”

“Indeed.”

The group went up the stairs and into the building, and then stepped up to a desk.

“I must see the arbiters as soon as possible,” he said without preamble. “I have interfered in the natural development of lesser species and perhaps unleashed a horror that may destroy the entire world. And then our entire universe.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that,” Susan remarked. “I can make it go away.”

“And are these... witnesses?” asked the person behind the desk.

“Mari, to my left, I consider to be a worthy student and interpreter of various cultural differences I have observed between our two species. I wished to reciprocate the help she has given me with a trip to see my culture. Susan, to my right...” He looked over at her and Susan raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘you’re on your own pal.’ “Susan is an anomaly in space and time, a guardian of life, and should be listened to. She is the enemy of the force I have unleashed.”

“I see,” said the man, looking them all over. “I assume you have not somehow discovered a sense of humor while off planet?”

“I have not.”

“Then I have no choice but to believe you. The arbiters will see you in half an hour.”

“I will wait in the main waiting area.”

“Very well.” The man bent back to his terminal and the group went over to a waiting area they had passed to sit down. He did, Mari and Susan asked if it would be okay if they wandered around and the alien said that was fine, but not to go too far. They went to go look out the window and check the place out.

“That was... efficient,” Mari remarked to Susan, “don’t you think?”

“I suppose he would say there was no reason for it to be any less so.”

“Probably true.” She gave a rueful laugh. “I’m standing on an alien planet. You’re probably used to it or whatever, but this is wild for me. Not that we’ll get to see much of this place, and not that it looks all that different from Earth...”

“Well, physics is probably the same everywhere, at least on the grand scale. And they would have taken a similar path to what we did, building new atop the old. They needed to get places before teleportation, so they built roads. And maybe only their ships are powerful enough to bend space like that so they still need them.”

“They might not be all that advanced either,” added Sparkle. “Okay, they have a lot of knowledge that lets them make ships and teleporters. Can he explain how they work? Could any random member of this society explain, to a scientist on Earth, how to construct a faster than light engine? He may manipulate technology just like we do, but how many people that use it actually understand it at every level?”

“Good point.”

“And without emotions, would they feel the need to expand? The drive to better themselves?” Sparkle wondered. “They may have sacrificed more than they bargained for when they did that. Their society may be old, but maybe they haven’t improved their technology in a long while.”

"Hence needing to come study us."

"He didn't give a name," Susan realized. "How will he know when it's his turn or whatever?"

"Maybe they're telepathic enough to not need to give that sort of information, or they just know each other on sight using senses we don't have," Mari suggested. "I've been watching him when I can, but that doesn't mean I understand anything about his capabilities."

"Maybe his name is a series of eye blinks we all missed," Sparkle put in.

The girls looked down at her and then at each other, blinking furiously. They both burst out laughing, and everyone in the place stopped what they were doing and stared at them. That caused them to laugh all the harder.

A moment later they calmed down, and Mari stuck out her hand. "We were never really formally introduced. I'm Mari, it's nice to meet you."

"I'm Susan, Susan Felton. This is Sparkle, my friend and companion. It's really nice to meet you, sorry it was under these circumstances. Didn't mean to bring news that one of your friends was actually a malevolent force that wants to eat your world."

"But you can fix her, right? Give it what it wants and she'll return to normal?"

Susan shook her head. "That's what it says. I've never tested it, I've always had to kill the host. But I hope so."

Sets a dangerous precedent though, it might want more and more concessions to leave because it knows Susan hates to kill it. And Susan will always go for that option first.

Finally it was time and the alien and his human companions followed him into a room with three beings sitting behind a desk. They were all "dressed" as he was, in a muted brown, and Susan wondered if they were male or female. If such concepts even existed here. All had the single odd antenna sprouting out the top of their heads, and Susan wondered if it was a sense organ of some kind or just something left over from their evolution.

"I'm told you wish to confess to several crimes?" asked the woman in the middle.

"That is correct," agreed the alien. "My ship's database will provide visual records for much of what I'm going to be telling you." He explained how the ship had nearly crashed, flattening a young boy that was wandering around in the forest alone. He recovered the body, regenerated him using the fate system, and returned her to the surface. He then revealed his existence to the planet, apologized, and pretended to leave while putting the cloaking system back in place. He then proceeded to study the interactions of everyone with "her" instead of "him" and how this changed the relationship she had with her friends. "Unfortunately, a higher dimensional being had been "hiding" inside the regenerated human and I have inadvertently allowed it to continue to have access to this dimension."

Or it took him/her over during his rebirth as a girl. We can't know.

"A being from outside our reality?" asked the one to the left.

"That is correct."

"I will make a note in the archives that such beings are now 5% more probable to exist."

"Oh, they're real," Susan assured him. "Believe me."

"You understand them?" asked Mari in surprise.

"What?"

"You taught them our language?" asked the one in the middle. "Not exactly against the letter of the law but somewhat against the spirit of it."

"Actually, I didn't realize she spoke our language. I was going to apologize and tell them your decision after it was made. This is the first time I have not spoken their language in their presence."

"It's just one of my gifts," Susan said without concern. "Pay it no mind."

"And who are you, exactly?" asked the one on the left. "An anomaly in time and space really isn't a suitable explanation for why you were allowed to come here."

Susan gave a sigh and summarized her role of reality police officer, stating she was there to see firsthand if there was a method of undoing the procedure to allow her to kill just

the host. The three shared a look and the middle one gave a curt "one moment," and all three raised an opaque barrier from the edge of the desk they were sitting at.

"Ah, they're deliberating," informed the alien. "I'm sure they won't take long to give us access."

The screens stayed up a moment, and then went down again.

"Do you have any proof of what you're saying?" asked the middle one. "That would allow us to come to a more accurate conclusion."

"Let me think of what might be appropriate."

"Very well. While you do, a question for you. Do you believe this 'entity' actually manipulated you in some way, to achieve this end and become more difficult to destroy?"

"That is something I had not considered," he replied after a moment's thought. "It is suspicious that the boy Hazumu was in that exact place at that exact time, and had an alternate fate of being born female. I do not know what capabilities it possess, to have seen so far ahead into the future, or to have caused the initial accident. It did seem to know she was coming, and was very confident of some sort of victory when Susan did arrive."

"So the possibility is not to be dismissed?" asked the one on the right.

"I do not have enough data."

"I see."

Susan had been thinking about what spells she knew that couldn't easily be replicated by an advanced enough technology. "Am I right in thinking you were reaching for a weapon of some kind when I was going to shoot Hazumu?" she asked the alien.

"We maintain lesser weapons for our own protection," he informed her.

"Excellent. If you wouldn't mind shooting me with it?"

"What?" gasped Mari. "Do you even know what you're asking?"

"Of course. Don't worry about it. As long as it's not supernatural in nature, it won't even scratch me." She stepped back, casting *Invulnerability* as the alien pulled an old ray gun looking thing from somewhere. The three arbiters looked on passively.

"Are you sure about this?" the alien pressed.

"Very sure. Just don't miss and take out whatever's behind me."

"Naturally enough not." He put several bolts into her, which of course had absolutely no effect on her, and she turned to the three. "Does that satisfy?"

"That could have been an advanced energy shield," protested the one on the left.

"Did you register an energy shield?" Susan asked.

"No we did not. Our instruments did not even register that strange energy we saw after your request. Though we all saw it, our sensors registered nothing."

"And the bolts stopped precariously close to her body," added the right one. "If it was an energy shield, and she didn't know the exact capability of our weaponry, she took a great risk."

"So your technology is either in advance of our own, which is highly unlikely, or what you say is true. You are also from outside our reality and the threat to our existence is real."

"Which is more likely?" Susan asked, folding her arms across her body.

"Either is equally unlikely," answered the middle one. "Thus, all things being equal, we will accept your story and allow you to search our archives for an answer. As for you," she looked at the alien beside Susan. "You must continue to aid her in any way you can, and will be assigned a watcher for the next twenty years. They will determine if your thinking process has been modified by this being, or if all the blame is yours. Meanwhile, you will be required to exile yourself from the homeworld."

Twenty years? Do they do things slowly, or just age slowly so that's like a month or two?

"May I remain on Earth to study the lifeforms there?"

"You may."

"Very well. If there is nothing else?"

"This meeting is over," said the three at once, and he inclined his head and started for the door.

"Thank you," Susan said to them, following. Mari and Sparkle took up the rear.

Roughly two hours later, by Susan's reckoning of time, the group had exhausted the history of the fate system and its uses. Very few had chosen to undergo the procedure over the years, in the beginning because of the total dedication the two participants had to share, and later because they had lost the capability to feel that dedication. As no one would willingly risk their lives trying to have the procedure reversed, (after the effort they put in to have it done) and with so few people to experiment on, no method was ever devised.

"I should have known," Susan said disgustedly. "No, it wants the crystal or for me to murder that innocent girl."

"What will you do?" asked Mari, plainly dreading the answer.

"Hand it over," Susan assured her. "What else can I do?"

Mari looked relieved. "Thank you."

"Even with the uncertainty of what this being will do with it?" asked the alien.

"Even so," Susan replied sadly. "It's going to try doing this all the time now isn't it?" she asked Sparkle. "Take some person hostage somehow. And to think I thought the babies thing was the worst it could do."

Well, holding an entire species hostage didn't give you too much pause. I think it was because they weren't cute and cuddly. But this shows you'll cave if they're cute and female. So why wouldn't I do it again?

Because you're better than that?

Good try.

"Probably," agreed Sparkle. "And not just for us. Anyone who wanders would be loath to kill an innocent. I'm pretty sure Silverstreak doesn't employ people like that for long."

Or he employs them for just certain missions. Susan wasn't sure that thought came from her or The Darkness, and shivered a bit.

"Better get back," she announced sadly.

"I agree. If the answer is not to be found here, let us travel back and seek another. Tell me, would it have to be you that kills this Darkness?"

"No, why?"

"This was partially my fault. I would be willing to destroy both, if the world was thus saved. It is the logical choice."

"But the responsibility is mine," Susan countered. "Anyway, we can argue about it on the way back."

"That would be efficient. Come."

Susan, of course, would not be moved despite how much she would have loved to have the alien pull the trigger. But she believed she would feel it didn't matter who did the deed, only that the girl was dead. If she could save her, she must, it was as simple as that. To pawn the matter off would only make her feel worse. She would have allowed it, and thus, might as well be cutting her down herself.

Hazumu was waiting with a smile and an upraised palm when she got back. Her two friends were with her, Tomari-chan hanging onto her arm protectively.

"Not wasting any time, are we?" Susan asked sourly.

"Whatever for? I may be immortal but I've been waiting some time for this."

"Don't suppose you'll tell me what you're doing with it?"

"Nope!" she replied brightly.

"Figured. Here." She dropped the fully charged crystal in the open hand of The Darkness, and waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Yes, most satisfactory," purred The Darkness. "Won't be a moment." The space around her body seemed to shimmer, and suddenly she was being held up by her friends. The crystal was gone.

Hazumu screamed, looking around wildly, and the two at her side tried calming her down.

"What just happened?" she finally was calm enough to ask. "That plane or whatever it was crushed me to death! How am I here? Am I dead? And..." She looked down at herself.

"Why do I have breasts?"

"You don't remember?" Tomari asked, concerned. "You don't remember the last three months?"

"I don't think they happened to her," Yasuna correctly deduced. "They happened to the creature inside her."

"Oh, you know about that?" Susan asked.

"We were told," she said. "In somewhat great detail, so we could tell her once it was gone."

"Creature? What creature? Please, tell me what's going on!" Hazumu pleaded.

"Come on," said Tomari. "Let's go sit down someplace. This is going to take some explaining. We are done, right?" she crossly asked Susan.

"We're done."

"Great. Hope I never see you again." The girls turned and led the unsteady Hazumu off.

Yeah, just saved your entire world. You're welcome.

Hey, stick out your hand. Susan did, and the now empty crystal dropped back into it. *All done. Remember, 20,000 for next time.*

"So it is gone then?" asked the alien.

"Let's find out," she replied, raising her wrist. "Can you reach the Hub again?"

"Affirmative. Signal was restored at 100% as the withdraw event took place. Would you like the transit equipment activated?"

"You have further need of me?" Susan asked the alien.

"Apart from many, many questions about the nature of reality and how we might explore others beyond our own? No. But this has shown me we have very far yet to go. I hope that, one day, having been the one to witness this may spur our technological development again."

"I hope you get there safely. And I know you don't, but if you ever can, don't feel too bad. The Darkness has fooled me many times, and you weren't even expecting it. None of this was really your fault."

"I hope that is true. Go well."

"Thanks. Open it up."

Susan stepped back through the door of light.

Meanwhile, in another reality, a figure of darkness overlooked the procedure of transferring energy from the syphoned off crystal to the body that needed it. The now empowered body blinked several times up at the ceiling and sat up, looking ready for action.

"What is thy bidding, my master?"

The figure smiled.