

What Happened To Sparkle

Place: ???

Time: ???

Sparkle came to slowly, looking around and blinking the blurriness out of her eyes. Then she remembered she was a cat, and had the *Poor Sense: Vision* weakness. This meant the trees that were some distance away were going to be blurry for her no matter what.

Trees? We ended up in a forest? And my goodness, it's hot here! She looked around, but she was in the shade, and struggled to get up. *Not exactly fur coat weather. Wonder if I can ask Susan to have the book whip me up a spell to shed some of my under fur out of season. Oh well. First order of business, get Susan up. Seems I got knocked out, and she's going to be down for the count without the Awaken spell... that I can't cast without Susan attuning the dimensional stabilizer. Great.*

"Susan?" she called, looking around. "You around here?"

There was no response.

Forest is kind of thick here, too. Darn it, I really hope we didn't get that separated.

Looking around, she found a sturdy looking tree nearby that had some good branches, and made some *Climbing* checks to get a higher vantage point. She sniffed the air and swiveled her ears, making *Perception* checks to see if she could spot anything. Her seventeen (she got a plus four to hearing) revealed some faint noises off in *that* direction, but no young woman calling her name. She also didn't see any prone forms, and started to get a bit worried that Susan might be lost.

Giving her collar orb a bat, Sparkle wondered if there was any indication of the thing being active, and if so, how she could tell what planet Susan had selected for her. *That would at least tell me she was up and fiddling with it.* But she hadn't planned on being separated from her friend, so she had never asked. *Am I going to have to cast a bunch of grade zero spells to just see? And will they backfire or just not work? Will they still cost energy, or can I not put energy into a skill that technically doesn't work here?*

"Don't suppose you can tell me?" she asked hopefully, giving the sphere another bop.

The sphere either didn't know what she was talking about because it wasn't a mind reader and so kept quiet, or had no capability to answer her.

"Figures. Now what?"

The sphere rendered no opinion on this topic either.

"Susan!" she called, but a cat's lungs can only produce so much volume, and Susan was hard of hearing, besides. There wasn't much chance of her being heard, much less waking Susan up if she was still unconscious.

Well, she's the one with the fancy magic. Once she does wake up, she can come find me more easily than I can find her. I'll head towards that noise, I guess, see what sort of area I wound up in.

That decided, she basically rolled off the branch and twisted in midair, landing lightly on her feet. She took one final look around and trudged off in the direction of the sounds she had heard, already wishing she had a more efficient cooling system or half the fur she currently did.

She came to a small village, with airy houses on what appeared to be stilts, all in a row.

Probably for better air flow. Ahead she heard some sort of a commotion, and peaked around a corner to see what was up. About six meters away was a green military jeep, driven by a blond haired guy wearing a vest. Standing next to the jeep was a dark haired man in some kind of one piece uniform, white, red boots, and a blue stripe going down the sides. He had long sleeves, which were black and red. Next to him was a more sensibly dressed young girl, in a cute pink dress, white boots to mid thigh, and light hair, which was probably blue or some variant thereof.

Obviously the men on this world are insane, does that guy really need that vest on? It must be close to million degrees out here... or at least in the nineties. Weird. And what are they arguing about, anyway?

As she stood and listened, the guy in the uniform was going on about where he got the truck from, and the man said he got it repaired by some people he called the "Emarns." As they were talking, two men wearing a different kind of uniform came around the house and looked startled, pressing themselves back against the wall to not be seen. These two had rifles over their shoulders, where the man by the truck was unarmed.

Interesting.

The man climbed into the jeep and demanded to be taken to "the market" and ordered the little girl to climb in back. She started to, and Sparkle had a decision to make. Stick with the gunmen, or see where the guy the gunmen were obviously concerned about went.

What would Susan do? Probably something violent. Grabbing them and demanding to know what they were doing walking around a village with guns. Who knows.

She didn't want to get involved with soldiers, so she did a quick *Spirit Step* and then hopped up into the back of the jeep, opposite the girl. It took off.

"Kitty!" said the girl, and the dark haired guy looked back at her.

"Your cat?" he asked.

"Never seen it before," said the light haired guy.

"Maybe it wants to go to the market too!" said the girl.

The two men laughed.

"Well, it could," she huffed, crossing her arms.

Sparkle looked back, and the soldiers had come out of hiding, and were watching the jeep pull away. *That can't be good.*

Turning back to the men, the child was trying to get Sparkle to come closer, and she allowed herself to be petted, to her delight. That's when Sparkle noticed something strange. She made a *Spirit Sense* check to be sure, but there was no doubt. The two men had totally normal energy as far as she could tell. The girl however did not. In fact Sparkle would have said she was dead, had she not been scratching under her chin. She started to purr quite against her will.

"What's your name little kitty?" the girl asked. Sparkle wondered if she should answer, but for the moment chose the path of the orb and keep her silence. "I'll call you Starburst!"

"Don't go adopting any cats!" yelled the dark haired man. "Mimsy threw a big enough fit when I asked her to buy you. I don't need her even more angry at me."

Bought? What's this? Sparkle's eyes narrowed.

"But master, she's so friendly!"

"He belongs here," the man said firmly. "Look at that collar, he's owned by someone. And he's not starving, you can tell that."

The girl assigns me her gender, the man, his. I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

"Master!"

"No! And I told you to call me Kei."

She put her hands over her mouth. "Sorry, my programming slipped back already."

Programming? A robot, of course! Oh crap, is this a Darkness robot or something uninvolved? Sparkle took a quick *Dimension Sense* but like Silverstreak had said, basically everything around here radiated that it shouldn't be there.

Everything but the jeep... and this loser. She studied the man more closely, but he seemed unremarkable. *Guess I know who I'm sticking close to. Susan will be along one way or the other, if soldiers and one of the original inhabitants are involved.*

The jeep didn't travel for long before rolling into "the marketplace" which looked like a cross between a farmer's market and an episode of Star Trek. Stuff was piled all over the place, and tons of people were wandering around, bartering for it. The man, Kei, shouted over to a woman named Mimsy, and a woman in a red??? dress tried to get out of doing so. He insisted, and she stomped over in a huff. She had the high boots on too, but white leggings, and her dress reached only halfway to her knee. Her hair was about shoulder length, and she had a wide belt on.

He went on about the jeep being from “his” Earth, so that must mean the planet was his. She said her people called the earth “Emar” while the Chirams called it “Chira.” She went on to explain the dimensional shifting that made all this possible, and Sparkle listened for any hint of what had actually caused all this. He asked, but by that time she was annoyed with the explanation and tried to walk away.

Darn it! That would have been perfect! And who is this guy, that’s obviously a native here but doesn’t know all this? Something odd here.

Kei tried to get her to make the guy an offer on the jeep, which Sparkle thought was a bit short sighted. If what she had heard was right, the driver had owned it for years and would certainly not sell it.

The girl noticed her watching all this.

“They sure do fight a lot, don’t they, Starburst? Even you could tell, couldn’t you? You’re such a smart kitty. I wonder why people have to fight all the time, anyway.”

You have no idea, kid.

“Hey, did you just call me junk again? I’m not a piece of junk!” she insisted to the woman.

See, there you go.

The woman stormed off, and both jumped off the jeep, which pulled away. Sparkle felt something... it was the two soldiers!

“Meow!” she yowled, hissing, and Kei whirled around to see what was going on. The soldier, looking ready to throw a punch, now hesitated and Kei jumped back. He put his hand down.

“You aren’t an Emarn,” said the soldier, while the other covered him with his rifle. “And you’re not an Atlantian. Which unit did you desert from?”

They went back and forth, and from what Sparkle could tell, all people that looked like they did served some kind of military service. He was going to be taken back somewhere so they could find out who he was when a device at the guy’s belt started beeping. He pointed it at Kei and exclaimed he was the one they had been “told about.” This made them want to take him even more, and the one drew his pistol with the other hand.

The three went into a whirlwind of motion, and Sparkle had to admit Kei was a pretty good fighter. He knocked their guns away, and only took a few hits himself as he tossed the two soldiers around. Why one just didn’t shoot him while the other one distracted him she didn’t know, but there it was. She cursed her lack of magical power at the moment, though in front of all these people, a cat doing magic might cause even more of an uproar than two soldiers grabbing someone in broad daylight. Not that there was much uproar, people were just sort of standing around watching. Kei drove them off, sending them running, then started bragging about his training that made it possible.

“I guess that’s that,” he said. “Let’s walk around a bit, cool off.”

“Stay here, master,” said the girl, “I’ll be right back.” She ran off.

“What’s gotten into her?” asked Kei. “What are you still doing, hanging around? Shoo!”

Sparkle realized this was directed at her, and looked up at him coldly. *You’re welcome for the warning, hero.*

She tagged after him, and he seemed to even forget the attack, making Sparkle think maybe this guy had a few screws loose, when the people around him shouted and pointed. Two red monstrosities were flying down out of the sky, and Kei started to panic. “It’s them!” he cried uselessly, and everyone started scattering.

Wait, are they really going to attack this place with their equivalent of tanks? Just for this one guy? What the heck?

He started running around trying to get away from them, and the girl proved to have greater foresight as she flew up in some kind of hovering vehicle. *So that’s what she was going to get. Nicely done, little girl!*

He jumped on, and Sparkle followed with another *Spirit Step* and leap. *Okay, maybe*

that skill is going to come in more handy than I first believed. I'm still bitter about the prereq though. Her claws sunk into the seat as they took to the air, heading for some ship floating off in the distance.

"What the?" exclaimed Kei. "Get off, stupid cat!"

"I don't think so," she answered.

Kei gaped at her, but shook his head and turned around again. "No, couldn't be."

Sparkle chuckled.

As the ship came into view, Sparkle saw a humanoid shape hanging in the center of it, and Sparkle got the idea that around here, they were big on what Susan would probably call "mecha" from her watching of anime and such.

She did a double take, that ship looked a little familiar. She had *Photographic Memory*, and so recalled seeing that very ship very briefly somewhere.

Something Susan was looking at on the web, no doubt. But, we couldn't have gone... there, could we? Please don't tell me the first place we come to that I recognize, that I might actually have foreknowledge of that could help is a place Susan totally ignored because it was ancient. I mean that would just figure, wouldn't it? I really, really hope she doesn't remember anything about this place, because that would be awkward on so many levels to explain. Please, if the Narrator favors me at all, don't make this the world I have to tell Susan the truth about her existence on. Make it the next one, any one but this one. Please!

If her "prayer" was heard, Sparkle didn't know, but Kei jumped off the flyer and started warming up his mech.

"Don't take that out, it's not finished!" yelled an older guy as the girl parked the vehicle. Both jumped out, and the girl exclaimed over Starburst following them.

"You really like me, don't you?"

Something like that.

The ship blasted off, and the guy was screaming about it not even being loaded with ammunition yet.

Oh, what a surprise.

The girl looked at the mech speeding off, then jumped back aboard the vehicle and blasted off after it. Sparkle bid her a silent farewell, believing she would never be seen again. Without magic, there was nothing she could do, and so she watched helplessly as the two soldiers tried to disable the craft without destroying it.

Of course, they wanted the man, and killing him would probably be troublesome for them.

Somehow, the little girl robot made a difference, ditching the vehicle and doing something to the side of the mech. Suddenly it started moving better, and Kei was able to smash the other two out of the sky. They landed safely back in the city, and Sparkle thought she might take this opportunity to look around. The two men that had tried to stop Kei walked off, and Sparkle followed them into the main corridors of the ship.

The ship was spacious, with plenty of rooms, and seemed pretty luxurious for what it looked like. (Which was a floating battle station bristling with guns.) Most everyone, it seemed, was out. Either that or not many people lived here. It was walking around, keeping out of sight and looking the inhabitants over that Sparkle realized these beings had some kind of tentacle growing out the back of their heads; Two for women and one for men. *A literal third hand?*

Sparkle didn't have much time to look around, and was sure Susan would have loved the engine room as it seemed much higher tech than anything on her world. *After all, it works both ways. If she can bring the principles that keep this ship in the air back to our world, think of what that could mean. Anything strictly science based should work anywhere, right?.* All too soon the ship felt like it was taking off, and Sparkle heard voices, meaning the crew had returned and they were leaving.

Probably to avoid more trouble with those soldiers, unless I miss my guess. She stayed out of sight for some time, to make sure it wouldn't be convenient to "take her back home" and walked into the dining room while everyone was talking about what they should rename the "Bronco II" to. Every eye turned to stare at her, and she started washing her face

unconcerned.

“Starburst!” said the little girl, jumping up from the table and sweeping her up into a hug. “You are still here! Yay!”

“Ah no, how did he get here?” groaned Kei. “Oh right, he was riding the flyer, I don’t believe it.”

“What’s this?” asked Mimsy.

“It followed me here, honest. One second it wasn’t there, the next it was. I’ve never seen anything move that fast.”

“Can we keep her?” pleaded the girl.

“Looks like a snack to me,” said the enormous *creature* sitting at the table. Sparkle froze, eyes going up and up. *That thing’s a plus one at least, look at the size of it.*

“You scared her!” chided the girl. “Talking about eating her, she knows what you’re saying. She’s smart!”

“Just a little joke,” assured the creature. “I would never eat you. My name is Jayviet, what’s yours?”

“Sp-”

“Her name is Starburst, and she’s the bestist kitty in the whole world. Can I keep her? Oh can I?”

I can talk for myself kid... but it could be fun to see how long I can make them think I’m a regular cat. Hummmm. Could come in handy in various ways, maybe?

“There are mice aboard, and they get into our food stocks. I suppose she could live in the cargo bay,” said one lady.

Ugh, have you ever had mouse, lady? They don’t taste like chicken, let me tell you. There’s a reason there isn’t mouse flavored cat food, no cat would eat it. Not when meowing plaintively will get you a new can opened that might have something better.

“But what about the owner,” protested another. “Won’t they be sad? You basically stole their cat!”

“Not a very good owner, if she followed us. She even flew with us, and rode in the jeep, and warned my master that the soldiers were behind him! She wanted to come with us, I could tell.”

Of course, if this robot is part of the DarknessAI, it would want to keep me around so it could keep an eye on me. Maybe coming here wasn’t the best plan, but on the other hand, I feel Kei is important somehow. Aarg!

“Is that true, Kei?” asked Mimsy.

He had the decency to look embarrassed. “Well, yeah, I guess so. I mean she meowed, but that could have been a coincidence.”

“She’ll be your responsibility,” cautioned the lady that radiated “boss.” “If she chews up wiring or something you’ll have to repair it.”

Ugh, you ever had wiring, lady? I’d rather have the mouse.

“Yay!” She turned Sparkle around and looked at her. “I’m Mome, let’s go down to the cargo hold and find you bed, Starburst!”

But I don’t want to!

But Sparkle had no choice, as Mome skipped off with her in her arms, opening a door to the outside walkway that must lead into the cargo hold.

Mome froze.

They had just interrupted two men trying to steal the Bronco II.

Making a Good First Impression

Who: Susan

Place: ???

Time: Seconds after being asked

Susan had been asked who she was, and figured there were two way to play this.

The first, and my usual inclination, would be to rush these two creeps, disarm them, break their spirit because they got beat up by a girl, and make them answer my questions instead. Problem; I don't have any magic to back me up apart from, admittedly, my awesome imbued items. No Acceleration, thanks to the missing Sparkle, how does one even lose their Companion anyway? Of course if I need magic to take these two out, I should just retire right now.

The second thing I could do is play up the damsel in distress trope, and see where that gets me. I have to find Sparkle, and that will mean magic. Magic will mean needing a quiet spot to adjust the equipment and read, and that means playing along until I can slip away. Actually, won't this be good practice for rescuing my father? Not relying on magic, that will probably be locked down wherever he is? Man, I totally should have thought of that earlier, Silverstreak would have eaten it up, right? Oh, they're staring at me.

"Oh, thank goodness you showed up," Susan gushed. "My name is Susan. I've been wandering around in these blasted woods for I don't know how long." *Could be thirty seconds, could be forty five. It's still true.* "I've lost my cat, and quite honestly I don't know how there came to be woods here in the first place! Where am I? What happened?"

"Probably some kind of dimension shift, it would explain these readings. I think?"

"Eh, I don't know," said the other. "I'm no expert, and they gave us like, what, ten minutes training with the things. They're just supposed to flash and beep and show numbers we show to smarter guys."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Look, your cart is probably lost-"

"Cat."

"Cat? Oh, right, cat, sorry. Your *cat* is probably lost so I'd just forget it if I were you. We can take you back to our base, get you sorted out."

"Oh, but my poor darling, Sparkle. She'll be so scared on her own. She won't be able to do a thing without me, poor dear. And what did you say, a dimension shift? What are you talking about?"

The soldiers put their guns back. "You've probably come here from another world, it's a bit difficult to explain. I doubt you'll be able to get back. I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, it happens around here a lot. You'll meet a lot of people in your same situation."

"Oh that's terrible! Another world, you say? I suppose I've never seen uniforms like those before, I thought maybe you were shooting a movie or something." She laughed, willing them to believe she was not as smart as she was.

"No, we're Chiram soldiers, on patrol. Our sensors picked up some dimensional disturbance, so we checked it out."

My goodness, these people actually have dimensional sensors? I suppose necessity is the fertile spawning ground of invention, but that seems extreme. I mean they might want warning if the area is going to fade into another reality, but to actually make progress in detecting it! Plus they could pick up Silverstreak's gateway that brought me here? That's... well, either astonishing or Silverstreak's stuff isn't as good as I thought.

"Wait a second," said the other, taking a step back. "You must have just arrived, because the dimensional shift just happened according to our instruments. But you said you had been wandering in the forest for some time."

Aw crap, they would have picked up on that. "Well, it felt like forever," Susan assured him. "And I may have exaggerated a little bit. You can't blame a girl for wanting to make her rescuers feel better about rescuing her, can you? I get rescued, you feel good, I want to thank you more... intimately, later on. You accept my gratitude..." She ran a finger down both of their chests and looked down shyly.

Both looked at the other and grinned, winking.

Oh, I hate myself right now. Is the bashing option still on the table?
Don't hold back on my account, answered The Darkness. *I can't believe they bought that. Did you even make a Seduction check?*
Against soldiers that probably haven't even seen a civilian woman in weeks? Ha!
I guess. They could just as easily be seeing right through your transparent attempt at manipulating them, and just want you to come quietly.
Either way gets me out of this forest.

"Let's head back, we need to finish our patrol and get you back to base," said the one.
"You should ride with me," said the other, "I'm the better pilot."
"I outrank you, she's riding with me."
"We're the same rank!"
"I enlisted a week before you did."
"One week, you always have to bring that up!"
"Boys!" shouted Susan. "There's no need to argue. No matter which of you brings me back, I'm still equally grateful to the both of you." She poked them in the chest with a finger.
"Not to worry, I'll be thanking you both later."

And so they shut up... and played rock-paper-scissors to find out who she would fly with.
This has got to be a bad dream. Please, tell me I'm still back at the Hub, dreaming all this.
Nope! You are seeing this, live and in color!

And so Susan climbed into the large red mech that the soldier called an Ishkick.
"What a fantastic machine!" gushed Susan, to the obvious pleasure of the soldier.
"I keep it in good condition," he bragged.
Whatever. I wonder if it would fit in my sub-space pocket. I mean, why do I have a ten if I'm not able to shove something like this in?

Susan then figured out why bringing her back was so hotly contested between the two, it was a single seat vehicle.

"Hop in," said the soldier, patting his lap. "Oh, I'm Tony by the way."
"Nice to meet you, Tony," she said, sliding into the cockpit (no pun intended) and tried to get comfortable.
"Hold on now!" Tony flipped switches and pressed buttons, and Susan was delighted to realize she knew without doubt what each control in the thing did.
I think I just found out what my Adaptive Skill is in this world. Interacting with futuristic technology.

Tony was a perfect gentleman on the way back, as the two soldiers finished their patrol of the area and flew their ships to an encampment on the edge of the woods. There were rows of Ishkicks standing there, the only vehicle she saw on the ground, and she wondered if they didn't use any other form of transportation, even trucks.

"Pretty impressive, huh?" asked Tony.
"It sure is!" Susan agreed, though really, it wasn't all *that* impressive.

They landed, and both soldiers escorted her to a tent, where a (presumably) higher in command person sat behind a desk. Soldiers were everywhere, cleaning guns, doing maintenance, carrying stuff around. Most were men, but Susan saw some women as well, and was relieved to know this race had women. Everybody stared as she went by, and she shyly waved at them all. Most smiled at her, or nodded, and Susan looked at an *aura* or two, just to see what she was dealing with. She got an eleven, a nine, and a thirteen, which was her maximum. It was only after getting that result she realized she couldn't actually roll high enough to get the information she wanted, if they were "good" or "evil." That required a fifteen. But at least their emotional state was more amusement than hostility, and the two above a ten

were in good “spiritual health.”

“Reporting in, sir!” snapped Tony, as both men went to attention and saluted. The man saluted back, and looked Susan over.

“Report,” he demanded.

The two gave a report including handing over the hand held unit the man had been scanning with, to which the higher up remarked “astonishing!” when he looked it over. As they had been making their report, another person slipped in behind them, which Susan could tell because she felt their *spirit energy* enter the tent. She didn’t look, she wanted to see what they had in mind.

“That’s what we thought, sir.”

“But she’s a girl.”

“Exactly as we said, sir. Imagine our surprise.”

“I see. Well, Susan, was it?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“These readings here, they’re quite unique. Do you know what that means?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“That’s too bad, neither do I. But I bet we can find out.”

“Through the power of love and friend-”

That’s when she got tasered in the back from behind. There was a taser noise and the guy at the desk grinned in triumph.

As if taking an unarmed girl from behind is really something you should be proud of. Is this a military organization or just a group of thugs in costume?

Whoever was holding it there really held it there, and Susan made the appropriate checks against it. As it only did 1d8 damage and she still divided damage by fourteen, and she got a plus thirteen to CONstitution checks, it couldn’t actually hurt her at all. And they could drain the battery of the thing before it rendered her unconscious.

“Could you stop that please,” she asked, half turning around to look at her attacker. “It sort of tickles.”

He didn’t.

“Fine,” she said, whirling and making a *Pushback* check. He wasn’t dodging because he was still trying to taser her, so her result of seven was enough, and there was no way he could succeed on a STRength check against her. He went flying out the tent flap, landing six meters away.

“Now perhaps we can have a civilized conversation?” Susan asked.

“What are you, some kind of robot?” demanded the guy behind the desk. The two soldiers fumbled their guns out again.

“No, I’m-”

At that instant, sirens started going off and explosions could be heard outside the tent.

“Now what?” demanded the man.

“We’re under attack!” shouted a man, running into the tent. “Mu forces advancing from the east!”

“Did you think you could catch us by surprise,” the man sneered at Susan. “Watch her. Scramble everyone.” He ran out of the room with the other man.

Susan shook her head as the two backed away from her, covering her with their guns. “I’m disappointed, fellows. You could have had my generosity. Instead you have my animosity.”

“We were just following orders!” protested Tony. “We don’t know what you are-”

“And the decision of your superior was to try and knock me unconscious, probably to run some kind of tests on me without my consent. Correct?”

Both nodded.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. Military is military, after all. Sadly, I’m compelled to help you, so I can’t just stand around here.”

"Don't move!" they said, bringing their guns up a little higher.

"You're both an embarrassment to your uniform." She *Spirit Stepped* out of the tent, from the perspective of the two men simply vanishing. She covered the distance, of course, which tore the flap off of the tent, and *technically* she was supposed to suffer damage from hitting an object. But in reality it was cloth, not a stone wall, so it sort of came along for the ride and Susan shrugged it off and looked around, taking in the situation. Soldiers were scrambling to get into their Ishkicks and several were firing from behind boxes into a line of robotic forms that were coming closer. They were firing back, and Susan *Spirit Stepped* over the line as explosions from missiles went off all around her.

"These Mu things don't mess around, do they?" she yelled to the man beside her, grabbing up two pistols that were lying there. She started putting shots into the robots.

"Use a rifle, pistols won't be enough!" said the confused man, glancing at her and going back to firing.

"I'm only trained in pistol!" she protested, tossing one away. She squared her stance, then started aiming. *Called shot for damage, that little circle bit there on the chest. Minus four to hit, what cards do I have? Ah, Bonus, Love Interest, and Mutiny. So... what, I fall in love with a robot, leave these guys to their fate, and get six XP?*

Do it! shouted The Darkness to her. *That would be AMAZING.*

No. Just... no. Aiming. It's a robot, so it has no LUCK, right? Easy-peasy.

Susan took her maximum bonus of five, threw maximum energy into COOrdination (now a total of twenty for those keeping score at home) and took a minus ten penalty for damage. She got a seventeen (total) to hit, and pulled the trigger four times. The robot exploded as her bullets slammed into it.

I love being a Paragon.

"How did you- Keep shooting!"

Of course there is that downside.

All that aiming and called shots and penalties for damage massively increased Susan's delay, so she was stuck standing there gaping like a fish out of water until it cleared. Sadly, this allowed the robot next to the one she had exploded to reach their position. The soldier next to her "fell back" to use a military term, what most people might call "turning tail and running." Susan made a check she couldn't fail to get her *Enhance Sword* out. It was the same delay as activating her other blade, but turning into an armored battle monster *here* probably wasn't the best idea. A sword that no one could find after the fact was possibly somewhat easier to explain. Plus, it was just the one.

"Ah, already?!" the robot asked her. "I didn't expect to find you so soon."

"Baby killer!" she shouted back. *I guess The Darkness wasn't lying about taking over an AI. How about that?*

"Yes, you'll pay for that one. I've already killed about a dozen people here, and you've killed... one robot? Well done. Don't forget to find my crystal, now."

"Two."

"Two crystals? I suppose two with five thousand-"

"No, two robots. I've killed two robots."

"You haven't killed-"

Susan lunged forward, putting a bit of energy into COOrdination again and slashing the robot, hoping to chop it in half. It dodged, but didn't manage it, and Susan chopped through it almost like it wasn't even there. (She did forty damage and it could take thirty six.)

"Two," she repeated. She looked around, and most of the ground robots were damaged or down, so she ran for Tony's Ishkick and let herself inside. Of course, she slipped her sword back into her sub-space pocket as she did. The mecha didn't need any sort of password to fire up, which Susan "tisk"ed over, because that was just poor security any way you looked at it. She took to the air and discovered she was a far better pilot than anyone here, despite this being her first time controlling one of these machines. *Ten rating for the win.*

She easily blew several robots away, wondering if there was such a thing as *Mecha Combat* for delay reduction while in one of these things, and finally it seemed there were no

more targets. She had protected a few of her “fellow” pilots, so she was feeling pretty good that-

You’ve shown yourself to be better than them? They try to electrocute you, you turn around and do them good deeds. You think that’ll make a difference? They’ll go right back to trying to knock you out and see what those readings mean.

Perhaps.

Susan landed her Ishkick and jumped out, then grinned and looked for the tent she had left behind. The grin faded as she realized the robots had done a significant amount of damage to the area, and wounded were being treated. Everyone she looked at had someone nearby, so she wasn’t sure if she could get the knife out without being noticed.

Oh, but don’t you have a moral obligation to help the wounded?

Maybe. But they are getting medical attention, and this is obviously a dangerous place and these are soldiers. They won’t be able to duplicate my knife, so trying to explain that it’s magic to them isn’t going to get me anywhere. Also healing someone now just means they get to see more action. If I healed someone that later died and they wouldn’t because they got sent home because of an injury here...

That’s a pretty philosophy. Repeat it to yourself endlessly and maybe you’ll sleep well tonight.

She didn’t see the tent, as most of the tents here were now missing, but she did see an overturned desk that she recognized. She made her way over there and hefted it right side up again, then started putting the pens and things back on top of it.

Who puts a desk like this in a tent, anyway?

After she got that done she found a chair and plopped down in it, planting her feet on the desk and leaning back. The two soldiers, Tony and X came running back, guns covering her.

“Oh, give it up,” she said to them, when they stopped on the other side of the desk.

“What is it going to take to convince you people I can help you, and shouldn’t be on the wrong end of those things. They won’t even slow me down anyway, you must see that, at least.”

“We have our orders,” Tony rationalized.

“Fine, fine,” she said, waving him off. “We can wait until your SO gets back.”

Looking at the chaos around her, that was probably going to be a few minutes, so Susan thought about what planet to set her dimensional stabilizer to for her.

Pluto has Phase, but not much else useful for her, here. Sun? That has healing and Deflection. Mercury has a bunch of useful ones, but she’s not really going into combat, I hope. I guess it’s between that and Neptune, for Invisibility and Illusion. Still, two spells versus five for mercury? Still, she’ll want to do the same as me, right? Hide her magic, sneak around, gather information. Mercury is not the subtle planet... Neptune it is! She touched her watch and opened up the interface for the dimensional stabilizer. “Please prepare Neptune for Sparkle, Sun for myself.” If The Darkness sends more robots now that it knows were I am, or the big-bad army guy doesn’t want to play ball, I want Invulnerability, STAT.

“Locking on,” the watch replied. “Time estimation available in thirty seconds.”

“Quite the watch,” said the man, coming over to her. “And can you get your feet off my desk?”

“My desk at the moment,” Susan replied. “I found it on a battlefield. Spoil of war, and all that.”

“I don’t think you can... Anyway, I saw you helping to defend our camp. May I ask why?”

“Because I didn’t want to be blown away by robots today, simple as that. Your men were there to help, so I accepted their assistance.”

“Really? I also saw you jump into an Ishkick and fly circles around my men. Where did you learn to fly like that? You’re not just some random girl out wandering the forest. The reading we got off you show that much, so don’t bother denying it.”

“I won’t deny it, it’s true. And if you saw me fight, then you already know what I am. Your best hope against the robot army trying desperately to destroy you.”

The man looked her over, then gestured to the two soldiers still covering her with guns. They saluted again and went to go find something to do, which wouldn't be hard at that point.

“Okay,” he said, leaning on the desk. “You’ve got my attention. Who or what are you?”

A Daring Rescue

Who: Sparkle

Time: Just after dinner

Place: Walkway in the center of the Glomar

Mome, carrying Sparkle, and the two men currently trying to detach the Bronco II looked at each other, the scene frozen.

“Hey!” shouted Mome, pointing at the men. “You aren’t supposed to be there!”

The older man, sitting on top of the ship, hissed at the younger one in the cockpit to hurry up and get the thing released. Sparkle wiggled out of Mome’s grasp and estimated the distance between the walkway and the top of the Bronco II. It wasn’t that far, so with a resigned sigh, and a *Susan, this one’s for you*, Sparkle *Spirit Step Leapt* up to where the man was sitting on the ship. This reduced the delay for her movement from a seven to a five, and she spent four energy to drop it further to a three.

This was a slight savings as the jump itself would have been an active action with no hope of reducing the delay (except by more energy), but at the moment she was going more for shock value, as the old man was clearly not expecting to see a cat materialize in front of him. He drew back, then leaned forward. “What in the world?”

Sparkle tapped his face with her paw, and made her first “real” Ryūdō check, putting in five energy. (She got back two with *Energy Boost*.) This did eight points of damage to him in the “twelve” or eye, and caused a flash as it impacted. He screamed and let go of the metal launch beam the Bronco was connected to, clutching at it. This unbalanced him enough that he fell several meters to the ground below, landing with a thump on the soft earth below.

“You little...” the younger man exclaimed, going to grab her. She activated *Spirit Aura* reactively, and a barrier of light sprang up around her. This was done at a minus two penalty and had the delay of an active action, but the man sprang back as his hands were pushed away from her.

An aura of energy now crackled around Sparkle, and because of her poor roll she could now spend three less energy than before. *Like I care about spending fourteen energy in the next few seconds. At least this skill doesn’t have an absolute minimum to activate, so even someone as bad at it as myself can turn it on.* If she had rolled above her RESolve, she would have been able to spend *more* energy than normal with the aura active, but given her ten in *Spirit Manipulation*, she wasn’t worried.

This guy, however, took one look at the cat, glowing to make Goku himself proud, and decided maybe it wasn’t worth stealing this piece of machinery after all. But he really couldn’t scramble out of the cockpit fast enough when Sparkle turned and clearly said “Leave, or die.” and he too fell to the ground below. Both were rapidly left behind, and Sparkle turned off the aura and jumped back to the platform that allowed access to the cockpit.

She looked around, but the walkway was empty.

There was a clatter of running footsteps, and all the people she saw from the dining room tried to shove their way out of the doorway. Kei picked himself up and rapidly looked around the area.

“There’s no one here,” he remarked. “Are you sure you saw someone?”

“Of course I did, master!” insisted Mome. “Maybe they jumped off when they saw me running to get you?”

The leader woman pressed a control next to the door, and ordered the Glomar stopped, and the landscape stopped rolling beneath them. “If they did, they might be hurt. We better go see.”

And put a freaking passkey or something on your equipment, thought Sparkle, shaking her head. *Or put it away at least.*

Several flyers were dispatched, and two shaky people brought back for questioning. (And medical treatment for an eye injury and bruising from the fall) They were raving about some spirit cat that drove them off, and Sparkle tried to look nonchalant as she bent over to

lick some fur back into place.

"This cat?" said the leader, who had identified herself as Shaya, pointing to Sparkle.

"I guess," he replied, "it was dark and I didn't get a good look before almost being murdered."

"There is a bruise there," said Mome, who it seemed was programmed with medical knowledge. She was examining both, expertly cleaning any wounds and rubbing a salve on their bruises. "But it's not exactly what I would expect from an impact or a burn, though it seems to have characteristics of both."

"I'm telling you that cat tried to murder me! It batted my face and there was a flash and it knocked me backwards!"

"Murder?" asked Shaya. "I think maybe it was just dark, and you frightened her, and when she lashed out, that caused you to fall. Then you hit your head on the way down and made up some story to try and confuse us."

"I don't know," said Kei suspiciously. "That cat does seem to appear and disappear an awful lot."

"And what about the glow?" asked the younger man. "I saw a glow, and my hands were forced away from her when I went to grab her! And I swear it said something to me, I heard it plain as day."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been grabbing my cat," Mome said icily. "You're really going to tell me a cat beat you up? Really?!"

"She's right. I think you're just trying to distract from the fact you got caught trying to steal the 'Nebulard,'" said Kei. "Cat or no cat, that fact doesn't change. I want to know why."

"I thought we had decided on Gammon," said the bald guy with the chin hugging beard.

"Name aside," said Shaya, "answer the question. Why were you trying to steal our mecha?"

"We're trying to get our people back," the older one explained. "You know those soldiers that were giving you trouble earlier today? They've been grabbing people and imprisoning them for no reason, and everyone is scared of being next. That's why no one came to your aid today."

"So, for example, they weren't caught, to pick a random crime, stealing?" asked Kei sarcastically.

"No, it's just an intimidation tactic! Chiram soldiers are the worst, I mean they just came blasting into our town with mecha, trying to catch you. So you can't say that isn't true."

Kei looked over at Shaya, who nodded. "We try to avoid them whenever we can, they just make trouble for us. They need our trade, but at the same time they have little patience with us. Cowing a whole town by abdicating people... it doesn't seem that farfetched."

Kei turned back to the men. "So your plan was, what? Steal a piece of equipment you know nothing about and... get shot to pieces trying to get these people back? Or did you make a deal with them, and promise the Nebulard for the hostages?"

"We hoped it would work out, somehow." He looked at the floor.

"Oh, well planned."

"I have to do something! My granddaughter is one of those who was taken. Look!" He pulled a picture from beneath his tattered shirt and shoved it into Kei's face. He grabbed it away from the man, and took a look.

"Well, well," he said appreciatively. "This is your granddaughter?"

"That's right. She's eighteen, a beautiful flower in bloom."

"I'll do whatever I can to help save her," Kei announced.

Sparkle overbalanced and fell over with a cry, and heads turned to look at her. "Uh, meow," she offered.

Stupid, Sparkle. But at least I have a good excuse. Who is this guy that just up and decides to help because a pretty girl happens to be there? Susan would have heard the words "get our people back" and that would have been that. Jerk. She paused. *Though I suppose pretty girls would have made her that much more interested to go.*

"Something odd about... anyway, Kei, are you sure about this? You're already known to the Chiram, and attacking a military encampment is just going to fuel that particular fire."

"I just wish I knew *why* they were after me," he mused. "But I can't just do nothing."

"If you do, I'm afraid you're on your own," cautioned Shaya.

"Shaya!" exclaimed Mimsy. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm afraid I am. It's called plausible deniability. Those soldiers in town, they saw you two talking, didn't they? We know they have sensors to pick up his presence in an area. If he attacks that camp, win or lose, they'll come looking for revenge on wherever he came from. And if that soldier remembers you, and decides to come asking around here..."

"Shaya, that is the most illogical chain of events I've ever heard from you! Are you just going to turn your back now that you know innocent people are being held in that camp?"

She grimaced. "How many Ishkicks do they have? You should know that if you've been studying the place."

"Half a dozen."

"All right then, let me think. We need to come up with a plan that doesn't involve the yet unnamed ship."

An hour later, Sparkle and Kei crept towards the enemy camp as quietly as possible. Sparkle had, in desperation, left the room while Shaya was thinking and found a nearby spot she could still hear them from, but still be alone. She tried her planets in order, and discovered she couldn't summon so much as a magical glow from any planet but Neptune.

At least I know she's alive. But why hasn't she come looking for me yet? Was she captured or something? Or does the dimensional distortions here prevent things like Question from working? Because I can't see her sitting still in a cell someplace, and even being taken by surprise (not likely) someone would have to basically nuke her to take her out. It doesn't make sense. Were we thrown that far apart she can't fly to me in a day? That's a scary thought.

And what's she trying to tell me? I have only two Neptune spells, Invisibility and Illusion. Stay hidden? Be subtle? I guess I'm just going to have to make the best of it.

The plan was simple. Kei was going to sneak into the camp and steal an Ishkick. He was confident he could fly it, given they used the same anti-gravity controls as his Starburst. Sparkle was still embarrassed about that name, when Shaya decreed she was naming the newly rebuilt mecha after the Glomar's new "mascot," her.

"After all," she said, "the cat did something to defend it, even if we'll never know exactly what. I think she deserves to have it named after her."

Mome approved wholeheartedly.

Kei, having stolen one, would strafe the camp and get the others to follow him. This would create an opening for the others to break into the place in the confusion and rescue the prisoners. This way the townspeople could honestly they they didn't know who staged the breakout, and the Glomar would be in the clear because any mecha associated with it wouldn't be seen. The ship was parked nearby, about a half an hour away, and Sparkle made it clear she wanted to stay with Kei by following him down the ramp and into the forest. She kept her senses alert, both her excellent night vision, and *Spirit Sense*.

Kei seemed adept at sneaking around, or maybe the soldiers were just really lax. *He probably got a lot of practice sneaking into and out of girls' houses*, Sparkle thought disgustedly. He managed to get close to one and Sparkle jumped up on his shoulders so he could climb the ladder up to the cockpit.

"And how did you know that's what we were going to do?" asked Kei softly, looking over the controls.

Sparkle said nothing. Not that she would have, as making an *Adaptive Skill* check, (KNOledge based, eleven result) she discovered to her shock she could make sense of the controls in here. She couldn't fly it, as she had no thumbs, but as Kei was staring at the control panel wondering how to turn it on, she casually pressed the start button while making it look like she was just getting a better view out the cockpit window.

"Careful!" chided Kei. "Oh, wait, that was the on switch. How did- never mind, they heard it starting up!"

Kei roared out of there, swinging around and launching missiles at the stationary Ishkick. He left the targeting computer off, or didn't know how to activate it, which made sense as he wanted them to follow. Couldn't do that with broken equipment, now could they? Plus it made more sense for the "non-expert managed to fly one" defense. He then strafed the camp, shooting boxes and barrels and setting fires with a few well placed missiles. "Time to go!" he said, noticing the other ships taking off.

Now, Sparkle decided she should get busy doing what she came along for, and spent the extra time creating an *Illusion* without gestures or words. The magical circle appeared beneath the Ishkick, so Kei didn't notice it, being too focused on getting out of there. What it did was rather clever. It covered the mecha with the illusion that the Ishkick was about six meters to the left side of where it actually was, effectively "cloaking" the real deal. She looked out the cockpit window, concentrating on keeping it going, but as Kei was taking all the actions in this combat, that worked out just fine. Missiles and projectile fire went wide, as none of the soldiers could pierce her check result of nineteen. She made it loop and spin and fire, just as Kei was doing to maintain the illusion, and soon the other mecha were down in flames.

"Am I even better than I expected, or were those guys terrible?" Kei asked no one.

Are you bragging to a cat? It's too bad though, Susan probably could have rescued them without bloodshed, even with reduced powers. Probably just smashed through the back and ran interference while they escaped. Kei ended more than one story tonight.

Kei then zipped the Ishkick back to the Glomar and stuck it under the ship so it couldn't be seen from the air. Both hopped out and ran for the control room, where Kei burst in on Shaya.

"Quick!" he said, panting. "Can you do a radio sweep around here? I want to make sure that mecha doesn't have some kind of homing signal coming from it!"

"Good idea," she replied, and bent over the controls. After several minutes of looking over the screens she announced it seemed to be clean, and Kei relaxed. "But why bring it back here? I thought you were going to dump it."

"I figured I would have to dump it, because it would be damaged. But it didn't so much as get scratched. Maybe Starburst is a lucky cat after all!" They both laughed. "But now we have a Chiram mecha to play with. I thought maybe you guys would like to study it, see if there are any exploitable weaknesses. Or if we need to move through enemy territory, now we can look like we belong there. At least we can get their military frequencies from the onboard computers. With a little luck, their encryption protocols as well."

"All good ideas. I'll have some people look into squishing it into one of our bays, hopefully it's flexible enough. We can't exactly fly around with it attached to the ship."

He shrugged. "That's your problem. I did my part by stealing the thing. Any news from Mimsy and the others?"

She shook her head, tentacles waving in distress. "Nothing yet."

"Maybe I should head back out."

She put her hand on his arm. "I trust my people. I hope you can learn to trust them, too."

"It's your call."

Less than an hour later, the crew of the Glomar returned, smiling and laughing.

"You really hit them hard!" Mimsy said, flushed with excitement. "We managed to slip the girls out, and a bunch of military hardware too!"

"Well done!" exclaimed Kei.

A man with long hair came up behind Mimsy and put his arm around her shoulder. "As if he was in any danger," he sneered. "We were the ones that did most of the work."

"Oh, stop it Srei, he was in just as much danger as we were."

"Was he? We didn't have mecha to ride in, we had to break in on foot. We- you could have been shot at any time."

"And if a missile had hit Kei, he would have exploded. Do you really think he-"

"Not the time!" shouted Shaya. "We have to get the stolen Ishkick aboard and get out of here before they put their camp back together and send out patrols. Where are the girls?"

Seems to be some friction there. Am I sensing that Mimsy likes the new guy better than she likes her old guy? That could cause some problems later on. Not my business, I guess.

“They went back to town, with some of the guns we picked up,” said another man Sparkle didn’t know the name of. “If the Chiram try any tricks like that again, they’ll regret it.”

Shaya looked concerned. “I hope we didn’t just start a rebellion they can never win. Well, that’s for them, not for us. I want to be on the move in ten minutes, get going!”

The ship became a flurry of activity, as sensors scanned for incoming reinforcements from the camp and guns were readied in case the worst happened. Several people swarmed over the Ishkick, which turned out could fold almost in half so they managed to get it inside a bay and took off. They headed away from the camp, as low as they possibly could over the trees, and breathed a sigh of relief an hour later when nothing was in pursuit.

“Good job, everyone,” congratulated Shaya. “Get some sleep, we’ll head to the next major population center and do more trading in the morning.”

“With what?” asked Srei. “We had to give most of our merchandise away because of him.” He pointed at Kei.

What’s this? Did I miss something?

“It was the right thing to do,” explained Shaya. “We did put the town in danger, so making reparations is only fair.”

“He put the town in danger. He wants to go rescue people. Maybe he can find us some new trade goods we can use. Oh, wait, we have nothing to trade for them, so he’ll have to conjure them out of thin air!”

“But I did,” Kei said with a laugh. “The Chiram have enemies, don’t they? How much would those enemies pay for the data we can strip out of that Ishkick?”

“That’s... No one would... It’s too dangerous...” he sputtered.

“That’s enough, both of you. It’s late, and we’re all tired. Tomorrow things will look much better, I promise.”

Srei grunted something and stalked off, but Kei grinned at her. “Thanks, Shaya.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” she said, holding up a finger. “You did cost us a lot. I’m not sure the Ishkick will be useful enough to replace it, despite your good ideas for it. It’s nice to have, but those are more long term plans than short. Be more careful from now on. They can detect you from a distance, so keep that in mind if you want to go wandering around when we do our trading.”

She too walked out of the room, leaving Kei confused.

I suppose he thought he would be hailed as a hero, especially for bringing in enemy hardware. Instead he got yelled at, poor guy.

“What do you think of all this?” Kei asked her. Sparkle tapped just the tip of her tail against the floor. “Just that much, huh? Guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

He walked out, leaving Sparkle alone with her thoughts. *You know, I kind of like that Shaya, she does seem to be a good leader. I’ll be glad to get back to Susan, but maybe I’ve been holding myself back a little when she’s around. This whole situation proves I can take care of myself, and even help out. All without them even knowing I’m doing it. Susan would never take that route. She chuckled. Well, I’ve got some naps to catch up on, I’m off to bed.*

And the Glomar flew on.

When You Meet a Brand New Friend

Who: Susan

Time: Just after the Mu attack

Place: Ruined camp

Susan wondered how much to tell this man, who had already once tried to have her stunned into unconsciousness and dragged off to a lab somewhere. She finally decided a version of the truth was best, because honestly she needed some help on this world and having an entire military organization on her side raised some interesting possibilities.

She stifled a giggle.

“My name is Susan, and unlike most people here, I came by choice. My objectives are three fold. First, to attain a quantity of crystal I’ve promised someone. Second to defeat the Mu. Third to do something that puts the world to rights and stops all this ridiculous dimension shifting.”

“But what are you? A robot?”

“Robot? No, I’m as human as you are. Oh, the appearing and disappearing and throwing people around. I just have special training that lets me do those things. I mean the number of worlds you have jammed together here, there aren’t some where the people can do weird stuff?”

“Not really.”

“Oh. Well, believe me, that’s why I’m here. I mean you and your organization no harm, if you don’t try anything like you did again.”

The man stood up, looking around. He dragged a chair over and sat down heavily.

“What’s this crystal you’re after?”

...

Hey, dude, he asked us a question, and you’ve never told me the name.

What? Oh, right. It’s called Hyperlarcovite. Around here, anyway.

“Hyperlarcovite,” she repeated.

“That figures. Well, if you want any quantity of that, you’ll have to fulfill your third objective first.”

“Why’s that?”

“Hyperlarcovite is what we use in our dimensional scanners.” He indicated the hand held unit at his belt. “All that we’ve dug up goes into them.”

“What, does it resonate with dimensional changes or something?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. Ask a scientist.”

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I know my iPad has ‘lithium-ion batteries,’ but not exactly what that means. Still, I guess I hoped I could just buy some, or something. Getting some away from these people isn’t going to be easy.

Keep in mind you’ll need a piece the size of your head. Those units are small. Either they break the crystal up or it’s like diamonds, only occurring naturally as small masses.

I can stitch a bunch together with magic later, so tiny ones is fine if I can get a thousand of them.

True.

“I see. Well, I better get started then. Any information about why this world ended up like this would be helpful. You already know I just got here.”

“Who sent you here doesn’t know what? I mean it’s common knowledge.”

“Not from where he is. Consider his world to be... next to yours. And yours shifting all the time is like loud music when you’re trying to sleep. He doesn’t know what kind of radio is playing the music, but he can hear it.”

The man tried to make sense of this. “Whatever. Look, I’ve got cleanup to do and as far as I’m concerned, you helped blow up Mu so for the moment I’ll take your word for it. I’ll assign you a guard, for lack of a better term, but I think we both know he’ll be there to keep an eye on you. She, actually, you’ll have to sleep in the women’s barracks. If we still have a barracks at the moment. So you’ll be sticking with her until I can get word to my superiors and

have them sort you out.”

“That’s fine. I’ll go straight to the top if I have to.”

“That’s for people above me to decide. Can I see if something is still in my desk now?”

“Oh, sure!” Susan dropped her feet and stood up, and the man came around the desk to rummage around in the drawers.

“Here.” He handed her a triangular patch, similar to the one he had on his forehead but a solid color. “This will at least show you’re in the camp legitimately.”

She took it and stared at it. The back was sticky, and Susan looked up from it.

“Here, stick it here,” he said, pointing to his own forehead.

Susan gave him a dirty look and pressed it into the front of her shirt. He looked down at it, then at her. He touched his own forehead, then looked down at his shirt. He looked back at her.

“Lady, you just blew my mind.”

“How about that escort?”

“Just a second.” He pulled something akin to a mobile phone out of his pocket and spoke into it, and a moment later a woman hurried over.

“This is Susan,” he said to her. “Susan, Jennifer. Jennifer, you’ll be keeping an eye on our guest here until I get further orders regarding her. Which I’ll warn you may be a while because the tent with our long range transmitter got hit in the attack. So it may need to be repaired.”

“I suppose being robots they have scanners for that sort of thing,” mused Susan.

“Naturally they would target that first so you couldn’t call for backup.”

“Naturally,” the man agreed. “Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jennifer, obviously not happy with the idea. She turned to go, and Susan followed.

She looked Jennifer over, she was a bit taller than Susan, probably mid twenties. Hair nearly shaved off, though it seemed that wasn’t a requirement around here. She had a hooked nose, looked vaguely asian, and annoyed. On her head perched a pair of aviation goggles, which Susan wondered about because the cockpits on the mecha were enclosed.

“Sorry about this,” Susan told her. “I’ll try not to get in the way.”

“I’ll do as I’m ordered.”

“I’m not really part of your military. You don’t have to act like I’m going to report you or anything.”

“Look, I’m not-” Her face softened. “I lost a friend in the attack. So I’m a little pissed right now.”

“I’m sorry. He didn’t even ask, just ordered you around. What a jerk!”

“You mean the captain?” She gave a quick laugh. “I guess. But we are soldiers.”

“Sure, but I’ve lost people to enemy action, too. She wasn’t a friend, we had just recently met, but we shared the same name. I remember what I felt at that time. So I can sympathize.”

“What happened?”

Susan sighed. “Our school was attacked by... creatures. Possibly from another world, we never found out. We fought, and while I was at the front lines trying to keep the place from being demolished by the things, she was defending some younger kids on another floor. Apparently she and the creature took each other out... her body was never found. We only had the kid’s report of what happened, and her name got put on a monument outside the school later. But me? I never even got to say goodbye, and she seemed like a really great person, too.”

Jennifer had stopped, and looked at Susan, who was blinking back a tear or two, remembering how terrible she had felt after that attack. *How many were dead? Twenty? I still think I was more to blame than anything.*

“You have seen combat, haven’t you?” she asked seriously.

“More than you would possibly believe. Feels like I’ve been fighting my entire life.”

“I should think so, if your *school* was attacked. Did you go to some kind of military academy?”

“It wasn’t billed like that, but yeah, it sort of was. A lot of crazy things happened there.”

“What was the name of it?”

Susan considered, but figuring she was *literally* worlds away, telling her wouldn't hurt. “Hogwarts.”

Jennifer's mouth dropped open. “You mean like, *the* Hogwarts? The...” She glanced around. “The magic school?”

Now it was Susan's turn to be stunned. “How could you *possibly* know that?” she managed.

“Come over here!” Jennifer dragged her by the hand away from the tents, looking to make sure she wasn't seen leaving the camp, but everyone was busy with their tasks. Finally she was satisfied with how far out they were and came to a stop. She looked around, then closed her eyes. “Okay,” she nodded, “there's no one else around. You really went to Hogwarts?”

“And I ask again, how could you possibly know that?”

“Prove it,” said Jennifer, eyes narrowing. “And I'll tell you everything.”

“Fine.” She got out her watch. “Is my planet loaded yet?”

“Affirmative,” the watch replied. “Silence mode was activated when non-authorized personnel were in range of auditory alert.”

“So Jennifer is authorized?”

“You reveled the presence of out of world technology, thus she has been added to the authorized list through your actions.”

“Oh.”

“That's some fancy tech!” exclaimed Jennifer. “But I asked about proving you went to Hogwarts.”

“I'm getting there, sheesh. Give me a second. *Light.*” Susan held a ball of light in her hand, and made it swirl around her.

“Okay, that's magic if anything is. Oh my goodness, someone who can do *magic*. Someone from another dimension who *knows the score*. Someone I might actually be *able to talk to*. Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!” Susan found herself swept up a hug by a laughing, crying, nice smelling woman who was acting like she just won the lottery.

“Hey, it's okay, it's okay.” Susan stroked her hair and returned her hug. “Not that this isn't nice, but maybe a little bit of an explanation now?”

“Sorry!” said Jennifer, backing off a little. “I was just so excited-”

“I noticed that.”

“Sorry!” she said again, wiping her eyes. “Do you know how hard it is to find people that can even comprehend what I am? That I don't have to be guarded with, like, ‘oh crap that's right people here don't know *spirit sense* or something.’”

“Oh, that's what you were doing. I did wonder.”

“You see!” she squeed. “You must be the best thing to happen to me in, well, ages!”

Jennifer was all smiles now, and her eyes were shining.

“I'm happy to hear it,” Susan said honestly. “So is your name really Jennifer?”

“Yup! But my friends call me Jenny. And that's what you should call me,” she beeped Susan's nose. “Jenny Everywhere- *The Shifter.*” She started patting her pockets. “I know I must have one. They always turn up, no matter what.”

“Have one what?”

“Ah, here we are!” She pulled out what looked like a business card, and handed it over. “I'm compelled to give this to you, don't ask why until you read it.”

“Okay?” Susan took it, then gave it a glance. Then a longer look. Then she stared. She looked back at Jenny, who nodded, grinning widely. Susan looked back, and read the card again.

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"I'm not sure I understand," she said, handing the card back.

"Oh. Look, how... aware are you, about stuff?"

"Stuff? I don't-"

"Like how much 'behind the scenes' stuff are you in on?"

"I have a character sheet, is that what you mean?"

"Really?! One of those, huh?" She winked.

"One of what? I'm sorry, can you start from the beginning?"

Jenny crossed her arms. "Maybe you better start at the beginning. I promise, I'll tell you what I can," she put her hands up, "but some things are better if you find out about them on your own. Trust me."

"Okay. The short version is my father was a Paragon who left his world to fight The Darkness, or Darkvoid, if you know that name."

Jenny scowled, a low growl escaping from her lips. It seemed she did.

And she is really sexy.

Susan shook herself. "Anyway, that sort of makes me half Paragon, and after I defeated The Darkness on my world, I went after him. A girl called Luna came with me, but we got separated so now I'm on her trail, too."

"Half Paragon?" mused Jenny. "How about that? I've met Paragons, maybe I've even been to your father's world. Hard to remember all the places I've been, I've been *shifting* a long time."

"Are you an agent of Silverstreak? Or Inari?"

She shook her head. "I've heard the names, but I'm a special case. Basically I can move around worlds on my own. I call it *shifting*. I've been lots of places, and had lots of adventures, but the downside is I can't really remember where my home dimension is to get back to it!"

"That's awful!"

"I guess. To be totally honest, I'm not sure I ever had one. I don't know. The point is, I got stuck here, I couldn't *shift* out, so I joined this army in hopes of getting some answers. I'm still just a grunt though."

"The dimensional distortions. They gave me some trouble on the way in, so I hear you. I got separated from my *Companion*, so I need to find her and put this world to rights. I bet if I fix this world, you'll be able to leave, too."

"Is that why you're here? I thought maybe you just got trapped here too. Well, I'm glad to know something's being done. If I can help, at all, just say the word."

"Oh, you're sticking with me, that's for sure," Susan said happily, swinging around and taking her arm.

"Is that how it is?" Jenny asked with a smile. "Still, we better get back before we're missed. Are you really willing to help clean up the camp?"

"Of course. You can tell me some stories about the worlds you've seen, and I can tell you some of mine!"

"Deal!"

So the two swapped stories, and chatted, and felt like they had known each other forever. Susan did the heavy lifting, impressing everyone, and soon the camp was restored to some semblance of order. The girls went to eat, still chatting, and Susan got filled in on the events that led to the current situation.

"A bomb," Jenny said simply.

"Some kind of dimensional bomb? Who builds something like that?"

"A very desperate people. We don't know if it went off too soon, or they just got the calculations wrong, or what. But the point is, it went off and instead of shifting the space elevator they were trying to destroy into the next dimension, it shattered this one."

"But in reality didn't it shatter, like, the whole stack of them? I mean if a mountain gets switched with a lake, that mountain went someplace. It went where the lake was. So that world is experiencing something similar to this one."

"That makes sense."

"So how do we know this world is the original? It could just as easily be one of these

side ones, and the bomb was never anywhere near here. Maybe the one the bomb went off on was totally destroyed, and we were just nearby. So it hit us hard. Or maybe the bomb went off and that world is even worse than this one!”

Jenny looked nervous. “That’s a scary idea. I never thought of that.”

“And how am I supposed to fix this? I can’t go back that far in time and make the bomb not go off. The paradox that would create!” She shivered.

“There is some hope, according to our superiors. That’s why we’re all given these.” She got out her scanner. “We’re all supposed to look for something called Singularity. I guess it’s a person.”

“No wonder those guys were so intent on bringing me here. Maybe they thought I was this Singularity?”

Jenny activated her sensor and it went a bit nuts picking up Susan. “Something about you it doesn’t like,” she remarked, turning it off. “What this Singularity is supposed to do, I have no idea. But we’re looking.”

“I’ll take that as a positive sign. I guess I’ll just have to see, hopefully get bumped up the chain of command to someone that can give me those answers.”

“I just hope it isn’t some big distraction, that they really have no answers and they’re just hoping something comes up. All these Mu attacks, the heat, they can’t do anything about it but tough it out. What’s this Singularity going to do about that?”

“Heat?”

“Yeah, it’s getting worse. See those mountains in the distance?”

“With the tops cut off?”

“They’re cut off with dimensional distortion. The planet is surrounded by it, and it’s acting like a lens. Focusing the sun and keeping the heat in. We won’t last many more years before we’re cooked.”

“That’s a problem that goes away automatically though, once the distortion stops. One thing I can tell you is how to deal with the Mu. Attack their central AI, the one taken over by The Darkness. That should put them in a better mood.”

“Can’t put them in a worse one. Soon as we find it, I’m sure they’ll let some civilian they’ve never heard of take care of it.”

“I can be pretty persuasive. But I agree, that’s for another day. For now, I better check on Sparkle. Is there a place I can do some magic that won’t get these military types salivating even more to dissect me?”

“Sure, come on.”

So Susan changed her planet to use *Question*, but was blocked by the answers she got all being “unknown.”

“Probably the dimensional interface,” she said glumly. She looked over at Jenny who was looking at her sympathetically. *Or did I just trade one Companion for another?*

“I’ll see what I can do to add her to the watch list,” promised Jenny. “There probably won’t be any automatic flags raised about a cat.”

“Don’t get into any trouble because of me!”

“Trouble? Didn’t I say, that’s my middle name. Jenny Trouble Everywhere.”

The girls laughed.

By this time the sun was going down, and as her new orders were to watch Susan, Jenny didn’t have to do her normal soldier duties, and they sat up talking. As they were about to head to the tent with the cots, Susan got called to see the captain again.

“We’re heading out in the morning,” he explained. “Apparently I’m to take command of a platoon stationed several hours from here. Turns out whoever was in charge there was locking up townfolk in order to pacify the place. The higher ups found out because an Ishkick was stolen and shot the place up. That must have been an interesting report to read. I wouldn’t want to be that guy right now. With their losses and ours, we’ll get the platoon back to the right number by combining both into one. Plus they now have no mecha support, and if the Mu attack... Anyway, Captain Robert will be here by then to escort you to see General Wright. He’ll decide what to do with you.”

*Passed around like a slab of meat. I say you leave tonight, under cover of darkness.
No, I need to find out what's going on, and what their plan is. If I can find this
Singularity for them-
You can't. You can't even find your own Companion.
Oh, true. Well, I still need to find out what their plan is. If they'll tell me. Just observing
their operations might prove useful.
If you need to blow them up later.
Yeah, let's go with that one. And I can't just leave Jenny!
You could. You just choose not to. There's a difference.*

"You got it, captain," Susan replied. "Good luck with the townspeople."
"Yeah, thanks. That's a mess and a half right there. Why someone thought it would be
a good idea to lock up a bunch of girls... anyway, good night."
"Night."

Susan told Jenny what has happening, and warned her she could be hard to wake up.
"I'll keep that in mind!"

The girls went to bed, and Susan never suspected that Jenny had plans of her own.

Walking Into a Building Can be Hard to do

Who: Susan

Time: The Next Day

Place: Remains of the army encampment.

“Wake up, wake up!”

“Whatzat?”

“You really are hard to wake up.”

“Ugh?”

Finally, Susan came fully awake and squinted at Jenny, who had one hand on her hip and was looking down at her.

“Ah, finally with us,” she said.

“Told you,” said Susan, rubbing her eyes. “Just consider it one of my cute little flaws.”

“Oh, and how many cute little flaws do you have, anyway?”

“Eight,” she replied unthinkingly, stretching and yawning. “Of varying degree of severity.”

“I forgot, you can actually point to them.” Jenny shook her head. “Come on, let’s get you in the shower and dressed. I don’t know when Robert will arrive but you should be ready.”

“Shower?” Susan swung her legs off the side of the bed and stood up.

“Yes, shower. Are you sure you’re awake? You don’t have some spell to move your body around and make conversation while you actually stay asleep, do you?”

Susan’s face lit up. “What a fantastic idea for a spell!”

“Come on.” Jenny started dragging her away.

Showers, right. And, shoot, I’m going to have to start washing my clothes and whatnot. Usually Sparkle just wakes me up with Awaken, I get dressed and she hits us both with Hygiene, and we’re ready for the day. Ugh, I’ll have to start brushing my teeth as well. What a hassle.

But there was some compensation. These were hastily constructed military encampment facilities, so privacy wasn’t chief among the concerns. While there weren’t as many women as men, (they had separate facilities), Susan did get to peep at the mostly or fully naked women getting ready for the day along side her. She had the foresight to pack things like a toothbrush in case she went to a world without magic, so dug them out of her luggage when no one was looking. (At least, she hoped, and no one commented on where that suitcase had come from so she figured she was in the clear.) The water was cold, and Susan was unpracticed at such basics as brushing her hair, but she managed to get through it.

How do people manage this every day?

It’s only been a day and already you’re whining about not having your full magical diversity?

Uh, yeah? Magic has been part of my life since as long as I can remember. It’s like another limb that’s now been cut off. And it has- losing a three point companion you’ve relied on all your life is basically just that. She knew useful spells. And getting out my spellbook would really call attention to me. Plus my magic is more limited here, and I have Sun loaded and I would need Venus. It’s whine worthy, right?

Hardly. You need to toughen up, soldier, or you’ll never defeat... me. Wait, where I was going with this?

You’re asking me?

Susan joined the rest of the company for breakfast, and they were issued orders to pack up the camp and get ready to move out. An hour or so later several transport ships

arrived, and gear was loaded onto them. Susan was called to a smaller one, and Jenny guided her to the bridge.

"I should be out chasing down the Singularity!" someone was shouting as she opened the door. "Not ferrying around some unimportant girl who appeared out of nowhere."

Susan grabbed her *Enhance Sword* out of sub-space and thrust it forward, missing his neck but ruffling his hair from the force of the wind the slash generated. "Hey," she said conversationally, "I'm Susan, that girl that appeared out of nowhere. If you think I'm unimportant I guess you consider your life worthless."

Immediately every soldier on the bridge went for their guns, drawing and pointing them at Susan. "Drop the... sword!" one of them shouted.

"Please," Susan said with a sneer. "You can't hurt me with those."

"Let's all just calm down!" insisted Jenny, grabbing Susan's arm and moving the sword away. "I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it, Susan."

The man turned to look at her, and he was past middle age. Clean shaven, military haircut, lined face, with a receding hairline.

"You're finally here, we can get on with this," he said, giving her not much more than a glance. "Then I can get back to what's important."

Jenny's muscles tightened against Susan, who really, really wanted to just sweep her sword up and take this guy's head off.

"What's important is following orders," said the captain. *Never did get his name, did I?* "And they are to take this girl- oh, for the love of- put that sword away, will you? And the rest of you, stand down."

Susan reluctantly slipped the blade back into sub-space, which made the other soldiers there rub their eyes and look questionably at each other. But they finally put their guns back as well. Robert hadn't seen, he had already turned away from her.

"Take this girl and see how much of her story we can verify, and have the general decide what to-" He paused. "How best to utilize her unique gifts."

Nice recovery.

"But it's the Singularity that will fix this world, not her. My men and I were closing in on that Emaan ship, we could have taken them!"

"That can wait a day or two. Look, you're probably right, but we have our orders."

"I know." The man lapsed into sudden silence.

"Very well. Jennifer, you're relieved of watching her, and will accompany us to the new base."

Jenny drew herself up. "With your permission, sir, I would like your leave to remain with Susan until she accomplishes her objectives here."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Several reasons sir, foremost what you've just witnessed. She whipped her sword out at the smallest slight, and that may be culturally appropriate where she comes from. She needs someone to watch over her, make sure she doesn't commit a more serious offense as it relates to our culture."

Dang it all! The voice of the Darkness rang in Susan's head. *Why can't I get you away from people bent on keeping me in check? I thought with Luna gone, and finally that annoying cat gone missing, I would have a decent shot on this world. But no... along comes some other flea. Is Silverstreak manipulating things even this closely? Aarg!*

That was you, that made me get the sword out and threaten the captain! I should have known. I let my guard down for one second and look what happens?

Not like it was hard.

"You may have a point there," agreed the captain. "Though I would hate to lose you, you're our best shot and pilot. Is there another reason?"

Jenny looked over at Susan, then back to him. She motioned him away from her on the bridge and spoke to him in a low voice. Susan thought she caught "trust" and "take her out" as she told him whatever he wanted to hear.

"Very well," he allowed, "you may accompany her."

"Thank you, Sir," she said with a salute.

"I'll notify command of your new orders... and your concerns. Captain." He saluted the other man and left the bridge.

"Great, now there's two of them," remarked Robert. "Well, don't just sit there," he shouted to the bridge crew. "Get this ship moving!"

"Yes Sir!" they all shouted, and started punching stuff into consoles. Moments later they were on their way.

"So, you're after the Singularity," Susan said, stepping up beside him. He didn't turn, just kept gazing out the front windows. "Must be tough, having all kinds of military assets at your disposal and being unable to catch one man."

His lip quivered. "Private, why don't you take our... guest down to the lounge area. That way you won't be underfoot on *my bridge!*"

"Yes, Sir," answered Jenny, and pulled Susan with her. "Come on."

"Nice to have met you!" Susan called over her shoulder.

"Do you always try to antagonize every person you meet?" Jenny asked, plopping down on a couch sort of thing in the lounge.

Susan waited for Sparkle to say something like "you have no idea" or "she was actually being pleasant to the man," but when she looked down, Sparkle wasn't there.

Oh, right.

"Susan?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, that's just when Sparkle would make some snarky comment. Sorry about that, I should have warned you I'm my own worst enemy."

"I see that. I'm glad my CO let me come with you. Maybe I can get away from terrorizing people and such now, and with your help actually start making a difference here."

"I thought you mainly blew up Mu units? What's this about terrorizing people?"

She shook her head. "That incident with the abdicated girls you heard about yesterday? Let's just say that's about par for the course with these people." She waved a finger about, indicating the ship. "They treat everyone, even the Emaan who are at least as technologically sophisticated as they are, as inferiors. I've had to play along, but I haven't liked it. And I've tried to restrain others where I can, but it doesn't work very often. They are who they are."

"I see. But they are trying their best to save the world."

She sighed. "They are trying their best to save the world."

"Then for now, that's who I have to stick to."

The trip was uneventful, and over any open areas the ship accelerated greatly, as obviously Robert wanted this "mission" to be over and to get on with what he believed was more important. By mid-afternoon the ship landed on the outskirts of town and he basically threw Jenny and Susan off the ship.

"But this isn't anywhere near headquarters!" protested Jenny. "Sir."

"So? She's your responsibility, isn't she? I'm sure you can get her there, or are you telling me such a simple task is beyond you?"

"No, sir. It's just we could have flown there in half an hour."

"A half an hour the Singularity gets further away. You are dismissed!"

The ramp closed and the ship silently rose into the air, then spun with thrusters and pulled away.

"Charming man," remarked Susan. "Remind me to send him a Christmas card. Do you have Christmas? Do *they* have Christmas?"

"I think they did, at one time. Come on, we've got to find a cab."

It took another three hours for the pair to work their way through the city and make it to the headquarters building, and both were a bit cranky and short tempered after the trip. Susan marveled at how militarized the culture here was, with just rows of buildings without spark of

imagination or style.

"They could be whisked away at any moment," Jenny explained when she mentioned it. "So they've come to build strictly for function."

After they pulled up in front of a large gate, Jenny's identity was confirmed and her orders checked. They were allowed past, but once up the stairs and into the building Susan ran into another problem.

Their version of the TSA.

"Please deposit any items you are carrying into the bin," said a bored looking guard at the door. "And you'll need to put that backpack through the scanner."

I hope Silverstreak built it to withstand x-rays or whatever they use.

Susan reluctantly took the watch off and put it in the bin, somehow knowing her limited command of Sun magic had just been cut off. Taking off her *Wizard Bracelet* required a RESolve check, which she got a sixteen on. That even more reluctantly went into the bin, and she felt heavier and more sluggish as she did. Unstrapping the knife caused the guard to perk up a bit.

"You can't take a weapon in here!" he said, staring at it.

"Uh, she's got a pistol right there!" Susan protested, pointing at Jenny's sidearm.

"She's not a civilian, you are."

"It's a knife, someone would just shoot me if I threatened someone with it." *Which I can't, because it would only heal them. But try explaining that to this guy.*

"Rules are rules. There are some lockers over there if-"

Susan shoved it into her sub-space pocket. "There, it's gone. Happy?"

"What did you just do?!" The guard jumped up from his seat, and at that moment alarms starting going off as Susan's backpack hit the center of the machine it was passing through.

"Now what?" she moaned, eyes darting around as other security personnel ran over, guns drawn.

Oh crap, if I get hit with one of those now... She made a grab for the bracelet (using ten energy, a sixteen) but the guard pulled it away from her (using five energy, a seventeen) and Susan began to panic.

"It's okay," shouted Jenny over the siren. Susan wasn't sure if this was directed at her or the guards, but she stepped between them and her. "It's nothing dangerous, I'll vouch for her."

"It's some kind of bomb!" insisted the guard, "and she tried to get these back. Arrest her!"

"She's here by invitation of the general!" insisted Jenny. "She's just... uh... bringing some tech for the scientists to look over, that's all."

But the soldiers there weren't listening. They advanced on Susan, shouting for her to get down on the floor, and "one" was getting out handcuffs. Guard "two" was reaching for her, and Susan reacted, making a *Spirit Aura* check and getting an eight. As with Sparkle this reduced her ability to use energy, though again as with Sparkle she probably wasn't going to be throwing twenty energy into any one action any time soon. The guard stopped reaching for her as energy billowed out, covering her body. Nearby, papers and dust blew away from her.

If my Spirit skills are all I have, then that's what I'll use.

"Wha- what's going on?" asked the man fearfully.

"Shoot her! Shoot her!" gibbered number "three" as he backed away a step. Guard two brought his gun up, ready to fire. Susan was right there in front of him though, and now had a difficult choice to make. Jenny was right behind her, so even if she did dodge his shot, which she could attempt thanks to Ninjutsu, chances were good it would just hit her, instead.

Especially because my LUCK is down, thanks to that guard taking my bracelet. This is- Wonderful! broke in The Darkness. *I wish I had known this was going to happen, I'd have made popcorn.*

So she tried a disarm instead, spending energy on COOrdination. She was at a minus six to this action, a minus two for the *Aura*, a minus three for the called shot, and a further minus one for wanting to have control of the gun at the end. (If she manages it, she gets the

gun before he can shoot. If she doesn't, she gets shot.) She spent fifteen energy, and what do you know, she probably would have spent twenty if she could.

It wouldn't have helped.

The round impacted into Susan, through her *Aura* and did seven damage to her body. She staggered back, in shock. Three more damage and she would be unconscious. Another hit like that and she would be dead. Nearby, people screamed and started running in all directions which they didn't get to do very often and so were relishing the opportunity.

I am never taking that bracelet off again.

Guard "four" drew his pistol, throwing the basket of stuff down, while "three" held his action to see what Susan would do next. "Cuff her, cuff her!" number "one" was shouting, "Don't shoot her!" But in the confined space of the opening he couldn't get to her. It was now number "two" going again, and Susan made a *Close Combat* check, getting an eleven to see where she was in the initiative order. She missed it, the soldier got a thirteen, so Susan spent two XP for extra actions to make sure she got them off before they could act, and pulled the knife out of her sub-space pocket again. She jammed it into her own side, where it healed her completely. She left it there, the only magic she had at her disposal.

"You shot me," she said, enraged, "I'll kill you for that."

The guard looked at her like she was crazy, and went to pull the trigger again. So again, Susan tried disarming him, with a much better result of a twenty this time. This made sure their rolls were reversed (get it) as he only got a thirteen. Susan yanked the gun away from him, to his surprise.

"Okay, shoot her, shoot her!" yelled "one" as he started backing away again.

Guard "three" and "four" now took a shot, at a penalty because Susan had cover from the doorframe and wall. The bullet from "three" passed through the wall and bounced off her *Aura*, ricocheting wildly away. "Four" missed totally.

"Don't shoot her, don't shoot her!" yelled "one," unable to make up his mind.

Susan now did a *Gymnastics* flip over the conveyer belt and made a grab for her bracelet in midair. She got a thirteen on the flip, a three on the grab, but spent her *Bonus* card for a plus two, grabbing it. As she landed she made another *Gymnastics* check to roll behind the machine and get cover again. She got an eight on that one, so she was under cover but not yet up. Jenny could now move up, and stood in the doorway wondering what to do. She didn't want to use powers that would tip them off to her extra dimensional status, but she didn't want Susan to get shot, either. On the "gripping hand" pulling her sidearm and shooting at the guards would probably get her shot, or court marshaled or something, and then she couldn't help Susan. Of course if she did get shot, Susan would probably go even more berserk, so her safest bet was probably to do nothing.

The guards now moved, trying to see past the machine and get a shot at Susan, who didn't yet bother to stand up. She just dropped the gun and shoved the bracelet back on her arm, feeling strength flow back into her as her spirit once again became that of a giant.

Number "one" leapt atop her, trying to get her hands behind her back so he could slap the cuffs on. He made a *STR* strength check to do so, Susan easily beat him with her *Wrestling* check of twenty six, and hurled him into guard four, slamming them both against the wall and stunning them.

"Two" now got out his handcuffs, because his gun had been taken away, and strode forward himself. Guard "three" stepped around him and took a shot at Susan, allowing her a reactive action to try standing up again. She got nearly maximum, and was up as the guard pulled the trigger. He got a fifteen to hit, but her passive dodge was once again a fourteen. With the bonus AR from the *Aura* the bullet hit that and smacked off.

"Four" had not gone down like "three" had, and moved so that if he missed shooting Susan in the back, he wouldn't hit "three," which you had to admit was quite thoughtful of him, given the circumstances. He fired, getting an eighteen, but he needed a twenty two to pierce the *Aura* so again it bounced off. "Two" now arrived, and made his grab for Susan. She now had both hands free (the gun having tumbled to the ground) so she allowed him to grab her, then made another reactive *Ninjutsu* action to get the cuffs away from him as he did his *off hand* action of slapping them on. It was fourteen to twelve, and Susan had a pair of cuffs in her hand.

Guard "three" fired a third time, and again it bounced off the *Aura*.

I could probably shut that down, they couldn't really hurt me in any case, but I guess for the "wow" factor I'll leave it.

She could now take an active action, and slammed the cuff onto the arm of the guard that was still trying to move her arm. There was no "handcuffing" skill so she just rolled an unarmed attack with them, getting a ten. He let go, and she missed. "Four" held, as "two" was too close for comfort.

"One" was now up, and rushed Susan, intending to do a *tackling maneuver*. He charged her, trying to drag her to the floor. She didn't bother dodging, and went nowhere with her twenty six check verses his fifteen. Guard "three" tried bashing her in the head with the butt of his pistol, and as Susan wasn't dodging, and this wasn't ranged, his difficulty to hit was a thirteen. He got a twenty, and even did his maximum damage, which caused Susan to just glare at him.

"One at a time," she chided. "Honestly, there's enough of me to go around, boys."

It was finally delay forty, and roughly ten seconds had passed since this all started.

"What's going on down here?" roared the general, skidding to a stop from around the hallway where his office was located. "Stop that at once!"

What Can You Do With a General

Who: Susan

Place: Government building

Time: Just then

“Sir!” yelled number “two” to the general from he was standing and trying to drag Susan to the ground. “She tried to sneak in a bomb!”

“A bomb?” he asked, looking over at the backpack, now sitting forgotten on the end of the conveyer belt. “Great job getting it out of the building, then. Or calling a bomb disposal squad, or really anything useful apart from endangering innocents in the area.”

“Oh. Uh...”

“And she put it through the detector, right? That’s what made the alarm go off. So she wasn’t exactly sneaking it in, was she?”

“Sir, she did have a knife,” put in “one” pointing at it. “See, right there!”

“Yes, she seems to have stuck it into herself, unless one of you got it away from her?” He waited, but all three shook their heads. “I see. So we’ve gone from a bomb to a knife, which still doesn’t explain her glow, opening fire in a location where civilians are present, or the fact that she was accompanied by private Everywhere who could have given you the authorization code for her being here.”

“Authorization code?” both girls said.

“Didn’t Robert give you the- for crying out loud, where’s Larry, I personally handed him a copy of the orders.”

“He was relieved an hour ago,” said “four,” the one that had been at the door. “I replaced him.”

The general put his head in his hands. “I guess I expected you earlier, so didn’t think to tell him to pass those orders on to his replacement, should you have been delayed. Why were you delayed, exactly?”

“Sir,” spoke up Jenny, “Captain Swicher dropped us off on the edge of town, so we had to make our way here by car.”

“He did, did he? Typical. I want someone here at great speed, he does the minimal- did he immediately take off after the Singularity again?”

“I believe so, sir. That is what he said to us.”

“Idiot! Oh, will you let her go already? And get a medic down here, that knife wound will have to be looked at, even if it was self inflicted for some reason.”

“Sir, there’s still the matter of the bomb.”

“You’ve all shot at her *how* many times? Do you really think she would need a bomb? Very well, Susan, is it?”

“Nice to meet you, sir!” she called over to him.

“What’s this?” He pointed to the dimensional stabilizer.

“It’s a dimensional stabilizer,” she answered.

He looked thoughtful and walked over to the screen, where there was a frozen image of the inside of the device. Then he grabbed that dimensional scanner everyone seemed to carry and pointed it at the thing. “There are odd readings coming from that,” he remarked. “You!” he shouted, pointing to another person arriving. “Go down to level sixteen and bring Phillip up here. Tell him I said to come.”

“Yes sir!” He saluted and punched the button for the elevator.

“In the meantime...” He walked over to Susan. “You seem to be having trouble holding onto her,” he remarked. He was right, all three were unable to get a good grip on Susan because of the *Aura* she was putting off, and kept trying to grab her better.

“Yes sir, there’s some kind of force pushing us back,” said “two.”

“What would you have done next, had I not arrived as I did?” he asked her.

“Thrown them off, maybe threatened one to get someone to listen to what I was trying to say.”

“Thrown off how?” he asked, interested.

“You really want me to demonstrate?”

"I'm curious to know."

"I can't be held responsible if they get hurt," she cautioned.

"We have a competent medical staff here, it's fine."

"Sir!" the all protested, shocked.

"Very well." Susan made some sort of flashy martial arts move, combined with a *pushback* that sent them all flying.

"As I thought," he remarked as they all staggered to their feet again. "Would you mind turning that glow off for the moment?"

"Sure." Susan dropped it.

"Ah, thank you. Now I can see what you look like. As that object is supposedly the cause of all this trouble, why exactly do you need a dimensional stabilizer?"

Susan wondered how much to tell him. "It's your messed up planet, certain abilities of mine require a more stable dimension than it provides. I was sent here with it so I could use at least some of my powers."

"Powers? Like that glowing energy? That wasn't some kind of force field?"

"It was, but it was generated by me, not some technological device. If that's what you're asking."

"Pity. We could use something like that against our enemies the Mu."

Susan noticed Jenny looking sour, and wondered if maybe she had picked one up in her travels she hadn't shared.

He continued. "Still, you seemed to do well enough separated from it. Or does it have a radius you have to stay in?"

"Actually it targets my watch, which was also taken. I wasn't using any ability I needed it for."

"And you still couldn't take her down?" he asked the soldiers, now standing nearby.

"One young girl against the four of you. I'm ashamed. No wonder the Mu are pressing us so hard."

The looked down, angry, but the elevator opened and a guy in a lab coat stepped out.

"You wanted to see me, general?" he asked.

"Yes. Can you identify this object?"

"I can try." He looked it over. "Strange," he said. "It looks almost like a scaled down version of what we're building downstairs."

"That's good enough for me. You're dismissed," he said to the soldiers, who cast a nasty glance at Susan and started walking off.

"Take your items back, and please accept my apologies," he said. "I'm General Wright, but please, call me Jeffrey."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Susan Felton." Susan went and got her watch back, then hefted her backpack.

"Ah, are you sure you should be lifting that with your injury? I can take you down to the infirmary immediately."

"Injury?" Susan wondered what he was talking about. "Oh, the knife!" she exclaimed, pulling it out finally. "Totally forgot about it. No worries, it's fine." She looked around for some tissues as it was bloody and the general handed her a handkerchief.

"Ah, thank you," she said, wiping it off. Then she had a new problem. "I'm going to have to get this back to you later," she said, looking at it. "Forgive me, but giving you my blood to study... that's probably not a good idea."

Jenny nodded her head.

"I understand, that wasn't my intent," the general said. She put the knife back in her leg holster and the handkerchief in her *pocket*.

"So, is there a place we can talk?"

"My office is this way, please, come with me."

Susan and Jenny entered behind him, and Susan sat down in the chair in front of his desk. Jenny remained standing at attention and the general looked between them. "You did nothing during all that. Why?" he asked her.

"Because I knew it wasn't a bomb, but didn't know how to get them to believe me."

"In part thanks to Robert, but why trust her? By all accounts you were assigned to her and then requested to come with her. Why?"

"We... share a common interest. Seeing the Mu destroyed," she hurried to say. "I saw her fight and I think she's the person for the job."

"I see."

"Plus bullets were flying everywhere and me rushing in there might have been misinterpreted."

He chuckled. "Good point. Oh, sit down, you're a veteran of several skirmishes, you don't need any more military discipline. Besides, it doesn't look like it agrees with you."

"No sir. Thank you sir." She sat down.

"So, Susan! You've come to save us from the Mu, is that right?"

"That's right. They're being programmed to wipe you out by something I've tangled with elsewhere. But I have to wonder, now that you know the other Singularity is out there, shouldn't you just divert all your resources to bringing them in rather than fight the Mu?"

"Oh, why's that?"

"If the dimensions split apart again, your Mu problem is solved."

"True." He looked thoughtful. "Would you help us with that?"

Susan shook her head. "The Mu comes first, for me. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I think the intelligence behind the Mu is somehow responsible for this whole mess you're in."

It was the general's turn to shake his head. "No, it's clear it was the uncalibrated space/time bomb that was going to destroy the space elevator."

"That was the catalyst, perhaps, but what hand pushed the big red 'do not push' button that made it blow up? For lack of a better term, the intelligence now running the Mu can possess people, as well. It could have made someone tamper with the bomb or otherwise sabotage it to bring this situation about."

"But that was before the event. Was it something native to the world before? And just what are we talking about here that can 'possess' people? Some kind of... ghost?" He clearly thought the idea was ridiculous.

"No, it's from outside the whole mishmash of worlds you find yourself with. Just like me. And just like me being able to do things you can't, it can do things I can't, and one of those things is control people it's taken over. That's why you need someone like me, who also comes from outside and is equipped to deal with it."

"I see. Well, you're basically on your own then, but working alongside us, at least we won't get in your way. As you say, our finding the other Singularity is our priority. We don't know where the Mu base is, how they teleport around to attack us, nothing. If you can find out anything relating to that, we'll help you bomb the place to ash. But short of very good intel, it takes most of our resources to protect the major cities of the world from Mu attack. We have precious few soldiers to send out after the Singularity, and the ones we did seem to be developing some kind of fixation on the task."

"We noticed." Susan glanced over at Jenny, who nodded.

"I guess Roberts are just passionate about their work?" ventured Jenny.

"They're something. So, I ask again, given we can't help you find the Mu, will you help us find the Singularity, at least in the short term? Or do you have ways of tracking them down? That dimensional stabilizer, perhaps?"

"No," she answered glumly. "In fact, I was separated from someone when I arrived, and haven't been able to locate them thanks to all this dimensional interference. So I'm not sure how to track down the Mu either."

"Pity."

"You have no idea, but in reality something is bound to come up. It'll come after me and let something slip, or I'll have an idea later. At least that's what has happened in the past."

"Then I suppose I should assign you some rooms here, while you figure out your next move." He went to press a button on his desk.

"Actually, I had a question, if you have a few more minutes?"

"Ask it."

"What exactly do you need the Singularity for? Jenny- ahem Jennifer here didn't

exactly know, only her general orders that everyone got, to scan for him.”

“Ah.” He leaned back in his chair uncomfortably. “We don’t actually know that either.”

“Then why-”

He threw up his hands. “What else do we have? We know the space/time bomb did this. It created that weird energy pocket in the sky that orbits the planet. We found one Singularity already and now we know there is at least one more. The first one, Olson, told us his wingman Kei was the only other person near the blast when it went off. Olson registers to our instruments as being dimensionally linked to that thing in the sky. By experimenting on him, with his permission, we developed the idea that somehow he and his partner could somehow fix this. Perhaps just getting them together with the anomaly will be enough. Our scientists have a lot of theories and mathematical models and whatnot, but not many hard answers. We’re... still experimenting with the best way to fix the world. I can’t say more at this time, any specifics are top secret.”

“And likely not to interest me in any case. Very well.”

“Whichever way it goes, having *more* options rather than *less* is the better situation to be in.”

“I can get behind that. So, is this Kei person refusing to work with you? I mean you must have sent his old wingman, Olson, to get him on board, as soon as it was discovered he was around, right?”

The general looked disgusted. “The whole thing was botched from the start, mostly due to Robert’s incompetence. He arrived not long ago and was picked up by an Emaan trading vessel. Our sensors picked him up, and as per orders our troops moved in. A little too aggressively, the Emaan didn’t want to give up something as valuable as a Singularity so they actually started shooting at them! One thing I should tell you about Emaan- they’re shrewd negotiators. Good at science, building and repairing systems, but pretty greedy.”

“They wouldn’t, like, hold Kei hostage or something, would they? I mean they’re holding the world hostage, is more like it!”

“Exactly. That’s exactly what they’re doing. Who knows what they’ve told Kei, if they’ve even told him what he is I would be surprised, but given their response to our first request to sit down and talk we can expect more of the same. They’ll probably head to their territory where they’ll hold his existence over us until we accede to their demands.”

“But they’re in the same boat you are!” protested Susan. “Greenhouse effect, Mu attacks...”

“Don’t underestimate their greed, or their desire to ‘get even’ with us for incidents between our two nations in the past. We’re not good neighbors, let’s put it that way.”

“Even with the Mu breathing, so to speak, down your necks?”

“Even so.”

“Huh. But taking him by force is no better, is it? He’ll be against you on principal. If he makes friends among the Emaan who get killed it’ll make the situation even more grim.”

“That’s why we want to get to him soon enough so he isn’t taken in by their lies. And we have Olsen, he understands his duty to the world, and can explain it to his old partner. If Kei it is, we have no evidence it’s him. For all we know there was someone nearby in a foxhole that got swept up in the blast just like Olsen did, and we still have to wait for a third Singularity to appear!”

“I guess things are tough all around.”

“We’re doing our best, but resources are limited because of the shifting world. Crops don’t grow well in the heat. Water supplies are limited because lakes tend to disappear and be replaced. It’s a mess. And there’s another thing to consider.”

“What’s that?”

“The only way to reach the energy pocket is the space elevator that started this whole mess. But that’s Mu territory and our intelligence reports that area is receiving the bulk of Mu forces. Even if we did have both, we would still have to fight our way through to actually use the place. And it’s been under their control for years, does it even work? How much repair does it need and can we even do the repairs? Just getting near the thing is only the start of what we need to do. Then we need to hold it while we work out if it’s still usable or not. It’s all rather depressing, to tell you the truth. Please don’t go spreading that around, I mean morale

is bad enough and anyone can see the logical steps, but bringing it up... that would be poor form.”

“I get it. Wait, don’t you have that weird ceiling that wrecks stuff? How does the elevator get past it?”

“That was ground zero, the dimensional distortion radiates away from it, but doesn’t completely cover the area.”

I bet that means my magic would fully work there! Excellent.

“Okay, that’s good news. Still, if they were going to topple it they would have by now.”

“That’s our thinking as well. Perhaps they’re hoping to get the two Singularities themselves, and somehow use them against us.”

“Oh. Actually, that’s a good point. You don’t know what to do with them apart from bring them together with the energy pocket and hope something good happens. What if instead it makes something *bad* happen? Like, they know it’s a bad idea, are making a token effort at ‘defending’ the elevator so you think that’s a solution, but in the end are just going to let you walk up to it?”

“I’ve seen pictures of the number of units they have. That force is no joke.”

“You’ve seen pictures of robots,” she protested. “What evidence do you have they are fighting machines and not shells just mindlessly wandering around to fool you?”

“You mean like putting men made of straw on a castle wall at night to fool invaders into thinking there’s more forces than there really are?” Susan nodded. “Okay, I concede the point, I don’t have evidence.”

“After all, their resources aren’t limitless either. They need tons of metal and silicon and plastic and oil and whatever to build one fighting unit. Plus they aren’t just swarming you, teleporting in a million robots to one place, razing it to the ground, and then teleporting to the next place. So they have limited capability or power generation facilities.”

“They seem bent on our destruction,” he mused. “So you’re right, a machine wouldn’t hesitate to overwhelm us if it could. It doesn’t have a life to lose, or a survival instinct. Yet the AI doesn’t do as you’ve suggested. Why?”

Susan shrugged.

“Seems you’ve given me some things to think about. For now, let’s wait until Robert reports back in. If he catches the Singularity tonight, fine. If he doesn’t we’ll have to come up with another plan.”

“Maybe I could go in alone,” suggested Susan. “They see a bunch of war machines coming at them, of course they’re going to respond with force. Maybe a single, unarmed machine could get close and we could at least demand their demands for opening some kind of negotiation. The more you throw force at him, the less he’ll want to work with you guys even if he’s getting accurate information from the Emaan. He’ll see you as just bullies, throwing force around to get what you want without regards to the consequences.”

“It’s true, we are a military culture, so we tend to think only in terms of military power. I’ll let you know tomorrow what happened and we can make our plans then. Are you sure you’re willing to go alone?”

“Jenny will come with me. We can fit two people in an Ishkick, if they’re friendly enough.”

Jenny reddened.

“I suppose,” conceded the general. “But you could be captured...” Susan gave him an “are you kidding?” look. “Well, yes, perhaps not. Certainly an odd situation we’ve found ourselves in with your arrival, but we’ll welcome your assistance. Please let us know if we can provide you with anything.”

“Deal.”

So the two were assigned quarters, and hung out until the next day, when they received the *worst. Possible. News.*

Showing What They Least Wanted to See

Who: Sparkle

Where: The Glomar

Time: Second day on the planet

The next day the crew of the Glomar had a discussion about where next to go, and what they should do when they got there. Shaya wanted to hold another market, but the crew reminded her that they had little to trade with.

"I don't think we should immediately break that military hardware out either," said Srei. "It's too soon. If any Chiram soldiers in the area got word of the heist, they might start asking some very uncomfortable questions about where it came from."

"I agree," said Shaya. "But there must be something left we can trade with."

"Could we go hunting?" asked Jaby, the dinosaur. "Sell the meat? Or even just catch things and sell them live." Sparkle looked at him angrily. "Or not... wait, am I being intimidated by a cat? Why is she staring at me? Shaya, make her stop!"

Thing could stomp me flat, but he's a total crybaby!

"Come on, Starburst, even you have to eat."

Sparkle looked away.

"That cat is too smart," said Jaby, studying her as she lay down and half closed her eyes. "I'm heading up on deck to think."

"I'll come with you," said Kei, also springing up.

Once he was gone, Srei stared after him. "It's his fault we're in this situation to begin with. He should be helping us think of things to do, too."

"But he doesn't know our ways, or what we can do," countered Shaya. "And he does protect the Glomar."

"Which we wouldn't need if he wasn't around."

"True. But we can't give him up, so you better get used to the idea of him being around."

"Just so long as he stays away from Mimsy," he grumbled.

"This again?" asked Mimsy, who was of course right there. "You don't own me, Srei, not even if we do get married. You want to show him up, you think of something."

"Maybe I will!"

"I'm starting to think allowing romantic relationships onboard was a mistake," muttered Shaya.

They spent maybe fifteen minutes discussing other options when Jaby came pounding down the corridor shouting they should stop, he could smell grapes. He got them convinced and the ship set down outside a mountain range.

"Here?" asked Reeg, the ship's engineer. He had poofy brown hair and was probably about thirty. He had come with the others, dragging some kind of device with him, to the edge of the cliffs the ship was parked next to.

Jaby nodded excitedly, and was practically bouncing on his heels as Reeg set the machine down and activated it. It started smashing through the stone with some whirling arm cutters, and Sparkle was impressed how swiftly it cut through. Moments later the wall gave way and a hole opened up, large enough to walk through. Just as Jaby had said, Sparkle saw the largest grapes she had ever seen beyond the wall.

"What did I tell you?" asked Jaby. "You can't fool my nose."

"Looks like we'll have something to trade after all," said Shaya. "Everyone start gathering."

Right, because in no way could this be owned by someone, and we've just broken in through their back door. It seems too haphazard to be a farm, but why plan a farm when they could disappear at any moment? Though I haven't yet seen one of these switching dimensional areas for myself...

The crew of the Glomar got to work, and in a businesslike fashion started demolishing the grape crop that was growing here. Kei “helped” but as most of the others rode those weird floating bikes they had and zipped back and forth with full baskets of grapes, he fooled around by climbing trees and dropping them for Mome to catch. Jaby was more interested in eating them rather than gathering them for later. Mimsy yelled at Kei a few times for not helping properly, but he ignored her.

Isn't he interested in her? Wouldn't he be better served by striving to impress her rather than just making her angry? I guess he lives by the credo “be yourself?”

After a time, Kei got bored of dropping them and just sat on a large branch, looking thoughtful.

“And now you’ve dropped even the pretense of helping,” chided Srei. “Great job, Kei, way to contribute to the team effort you see here.” He swept his hand out, indicating the others still hard at work.

“No, something is wrong,” he said, looking around. “I keep feeling like at any moment we’re going to be attacked. Someone is still on the Glomar watching the scanners, right?”

“Of course, do you think we’re all amateurs?”

“I was just asking.”

Sparkle was wondering if Kei could be some kind of sensitive to those *echo* things from back home when her *Dimension Sense* went off in a big way. She winced as a wave of dimensional energy washed over her.

What was that? she thought, looking around after it passed. *I’ve not felt anything like that before. And I have to make checks in that, right? It isn’t like Spirit Sense, that’s always basically active. How large a disturbance in ‘the force’ did there have to be to- what’s he yelling about?*

He, in this case, was Jaby, shouting at Shaya that a dimensional shift was going to happen in that area very soon, and they should pack up at once and leave. Sparkle got up from the tree branch she was lying on and stared at him. She tried an *Aura Reading* on a whim, and got a... three, her lowest. Possible. Roll. So she tried again, and got her maximum, and was able to tell by his aura that he was terrified. He was a bit far away but she also thought he was pointing at his tail which was vibrating like mad.

Does he have some kind of extra senses as well? I suppose there’s nothing stopping him from having an ability like that, even if he didn’t know it. Before all this happened he would have had no way to train or even know about such an ability. Looks like they’re going to listen to him, even though they’ve only gotten a portion of the grapes here. Time to go.

She dropped out of the tree and went with the others, who breathlessly waited outside the rocky area for something to happen. And just moments later, it did, the grapes being transformed into a sort of grassy hill populated by some kind of monkey.

“Still want to go hunting?” joked Kei, miming a rifle and shooting at them.

“No, I just want to leave this place,” Jaby replied sadly, and the crew agreed. They lifted off and everyone quietly went about packing the grapes into whatever containers they could find. Kei kept trying to talk Mimsy into leaving it and relaxing on deck with him, but she just coldly stared at him until he went away.

Seems there’s a slight difference in the way these people handle that sort of event. What happened to Jaby to make him so sensitive, and so terrified, of that? Maybe he came here through one of those? And the others, they are probably thinking what might have happened to them if Jaby hadn’t been around. He’s proven his worth to the crew- Kei not so much. Especially asking her to slack off her duties, what was he thinking?

The rest of the day passed normally, and the Glomar flew on towards their homeland, that Shaya had informed the crew was vital now that they had a Singularity on board. They accepted this without question, and it wasn’t lost on Sparkle that she had waited until after Kei had left for his room to tell the crew this.

The next day was also eventful, as late in the day the Chiram attacked again.

Sparkle was napping next to cartons of grapes in the hold when an explosion sound woke her up, tail bristling and eyes wide.

I don't have Deep Sleeper you know, I have Light Sleeper. There's no need to go overboard if you want me to- what's going on?

The guns on the Glomar were firing, and the ship was banking over water and accelerating, trying to escape something.

Crap, and I bet Kei is already out there, without my magic to help him. I hope he's as good as he thinks he is. Probably just rushed out there, too. Who else do I know that would do something so crazy as to take on dozens of enemy forces by themselves? Oh right, my wayward Paragon, Susan. But at least she didn't have any choice when she went up against those warlocks, she was the only one who could handle the situation.

Sparkle heard crying nearby, and looked around a box. There were the supposed "twins" who looked nothing alike. One had long blue hair and tentacles, blue eyes and was slightly taller. The other wore glasses, had short brown hair and tentacles. Both had their tentacles wrapped around the other's as they huddled together, each trying to get the other to be the first to agree to go out and help Kei. She wasn't sure if they were fraternal twins or lovers who just called themselves twins or what, but she let them be.

Okay, maybe he is exactly like Susan, and he really is the only one that can help in this situation. I wouldn't want to go up against superior numbers and firepower if I was them. They aren't military trained, after all, and I guess this is what you get when you don't have Mecha Combat and fail a RESolve check to fight anyway.

Honestly, if Kei and Susan meet they'll either hate each other on sight because they're too similar, or Kei will try hitting on her and get smacked in the face.

By Mimsy.

She raced to the upper level to get a view of the battle, but winced every time something exploded nearby. *I have good hearing too, no need to shout.*

When she got to the upper level she saw the Glomar was heading for some cliffs near the coast, and missiles were exploding all around the ship. *They're really trying to destroy this craft! Wait, no, they're trying to knock the Starburst out of the sky! Kei's ship was picking off craft one by one, flying nearby, and Sparkle shook her head, ears ringing, as another explosion went off.*

That was close! Is he coming back because he was damaged or something?

The Starburst had pulled into the underside of the ship, which went to maximum thrust as more missiles exploded nearby. *It's just 'fire unlimited missiles' with these guys, isn't it? Aren't they afraid of collateral damage? Wait a second, that gives me an idea.*

Looking around to make sure she was alone, Sparkle made a *Spirit Aura* check, getting a twelve and raising her energy expenditure by five. She then made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting an eighteen (twenty total, minus the two for the *Aura*.) She then put twenty five energy into her *Venus* check, getting a thirty five and making two areas covered by *Illusion* that were thirty meters across. This just exactly covered the Glomar, and allowed her to leave an *Illusion* "behind" that seemed to be hit by missiles and explode while the real one slid between the cliffs. Her other casting she used to cover the ship with the illusion it had shrunk to a minuscule size, but only when looked at from the back. This insured no one in the ship itself realized anything was happening, but to the Chiram soldier's horror, the illusion Glomar blew completely apart and sank into the water. As Sparkle moved out of visual range of that one it stopped, but she had made the bits that survived sink pretty quickly, so the Chiram ships now zipping over that area vainly tried to see something they couldn't. But as the other illusion was an unmoving image of "being small" she could maintain it until the end of the scene and hopefully allow them to get away. They wouldn't be able to visually see the tiny ship from that distance, and if their instruments told them otherwise, she was sure they would believe their eyes because of her amazing *Venus* result.

I guess I can see Susan's point of putting gobs of energy into everything. I may be close to having no energy now, but the enemy is gone and I can recover at my leisure. Maybe I will save up for that energy related background...

The Glomar hid among the rocks, and an hour later the crew decided they had given up and went back to their duties. That ended the scene, and Sparkle yawned and went back down to the hold to get some more nap time in.

That evening she went to see what the rest of the crew was up to, and found them all in the living area, arguing. *As usual.*

"I'm telling you, Shaya, it's unnatural the way they backed off like that!" said Reeg.

"That's the third time today you've said it, I believed you the first two times. What do you want me to do about it?"

"We have to do something!"

"We'll stay here until we're sure they're gone. Kei said he would go take a look, and when those ships left he would come back and tell us."

"And you just let him fly away?" asked Srei.

"Thought you wanted to be rid of him."

"I do, but I agree with you. They broke off and then he leaves? What if he somehow got a message to them that he would come peacefully?"

"What," asked Mimsy, "would that ruin your image of him as a selfish person, that he would trade his freedom for our safety?"

"I just... Reeg, back me up here!"

"If you love something, let it go," said Govu, the oldest one aboard. "If it loves you it will return."

"No one asked you," Srei grumbled.

"Srei, show a little respect," yelled Shaya.

"No, no, it's fine," said Govu. "I understand the conflict in his heart."

"Don't start shipping me with him, it's Mimsy that's fawning all over him."

"Fawning!?"

"Enough," said Shaya. "I won't have that conversation again. He's gone. Yes, it seems suspicious they broke off the attack. I will entertain *other* reasons why that might be."

The others were silent, thinking for a moment.

Wonder if I should tell them? Still, it's hardly been two days, some challenge I would win at this point. Of course it's only with myself, and if this makes them even more cautious, I don't see how that could be bad.

"Could this be some sort of trap?" ventured Reeg. "I don't think it's a dead end through here, they should have followed. I mean if we can get the Glomar through this passage, their single man mecha would have no trouble."

"Perhaps Kei's flying really did drive them away?" guessed Mimsy.

"Be realistic," countered Srei. "He had come back before they left, not after. And there were still plenty of mecha in the air when he did, so he hadn't shot them all down."

"So what- oh, you already said what you think it is. That's he's left."

"Time will tell if I'm right," he said smugly, firmly believing he was.

"Right about what?" asked Kei, walking into the room.

"Kei!" shouted Mimsy, obviously pleased to see him, and getting up. It looked like she might want to hug him, but then awkwardly went over to the window instead. "So are they gone?"

"They're gone, as far as I could tell. Anyone come up with any reasons why though?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Guess I'll go for a shower, then. Mimsy, open invitation to join me!" He winked and walked out again. Mimsy seemed flustered.

Shaya got up and looked both ways through the window set into the door, and turned to Reeg. "Can you check the Starburst? I want to know if any transmissions were sent or received by Kei while he was out."

"You don't think he's some kind of traitor do you?" Srei asked excitedly.

“What? No. What exactly would he be a traitor to? Us? We just happened to pick him up at the right time.”

“We saved his life that first day, and rebuilt his ship!”

“But if he wanted to be caught, or was somehow against us, why not just fly off in the night? Why steal an Ishkick and give it to us? Why attack that camp where the girls were being held? No, he’s with us, there’s some other reason they broke that attack off.”

“I guess, but I’d love to know what it was.”

“He’s with us,” said Govu, “but if these attacks continue, for how much longer? Even Kei can’t expect to fight every battle without a scratch. All it takes is one lucky missile and he’s out of it.”

“I know,” replied Shaya, “but what else can we do? We’re so far from our territory, and unless Reeg here can invent us some kind of cloaking device, we’re totally exposed as we head back.”

“Don’t expect me to do that, by the way,” he said gruffly. “This is the real world, not some story.”

Sure about that, are you? In any case, it’s not some story you can just invent a totally new technology in a day, I guess.

“Cloaking though... what if we painted the ship a different color?” asked Srei. “They’re looking for a certain Emaan ship, and that’s us. But what if we were a different Emaan ship?”

Reeg shook his head. “They’re finding us because they can pick up Kei with their scanners.”

“So jam the scanners!”

Reeg gave him a dirty look. “Do you even know how jammers work?”

“Well, no.”

“They basically send out a pulse, right? A small disturbance in the space/time continuum. Kei bounces it back, just like a bat tracking prey at night. Now you want to ‘jam’ their signal. That would involve putting some kind of energy shield around Kei that either guided the disturbance around him, absorbed the signal so it didn’t bounce, or made it pass through him. We can’t do any of those things. So we could only simulate lots of bouncing back, in effect confusing their systems. They would know they were being jammed, in other words, because their system would go out or start acting like there were Keis everywhere.”

“Don’t even joke about that!”

He gave a chuckle. “But you see why it’s impossible?”

“I guess.”

“I mean I’ll get to work on one, now that I think about it something might be possible, but it would only help us hide once we picked them up. They would know we were in the area, but not where exactly.”

“We need all the edge we can get,” said Shaya. “Get to work.”

“Okay.”

“After you check the Starburst.”

“Very well, you’re the boss.”

“And I’m going to keep a close eye on him,” announced Srei, “if he makes a suspicious move...” he trailed off.

“Are you sure you’re not just more interested in him than me?” asked Mimsy hotly. “And you’re jealous he likes me more than you?”

“What? No, I mean, I’m not into men if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Are you sure? Because you’ve taken an awfully big interest in him.”

“I just want to keep him away from you.”

“So you can have him?” asked Govu.

“No! Because I love Mimsy. Because we were supposed to get married. Because soon she’ll have the fever and-” He broke off. “He’s not right for you, I am. Just accept it. Good night.” He stormed out.

Fever? And I’m guessing the cure isn’t more cowbell. What’s this about?

But of course, all the Emaan knew what he was talking about, and so just looked pityingly at Mimsy.

“Not when you’re like that,” Mimsy said to the door after he had left.

“But he had a good point, it could come any day now. What are you going to do?” asked Shaya.

“I’m going to live my life the way I want,” she retorted, “not that it’s any of your business, Shaya.” And she stormed out too.

“Ah, the passions of youth,” said Govu. “She didn’t mean it, she’s just confused and probably more than a little scared.”

“I was young once too, Govu. I know what the choice means. Don’t claim you do, you’re a man.”

“He he, sorry, of course you do.”

Choice? Being young? Being male? What are these people talking about? Is them having this conversation in front of me, enflaming my Curiosity, a punishment for not telling them about the illusion? Is she sick? Does she have some kind of genetic thing that she doesn’t expect to live much longer and one of the symptoms of her decline is a high fever? Susan, I think we might need your magic here soon, please, please, come find me before it’s too late for this poor girl!

Flexibility is Key

Who: Susan

When: Day 3

Place: Conference room

In the late afternoon of the third day, a soldier appeared before Susan's door and said her presence was requested in conference room three. She had been, as usual, going over her book of magic and found a companion spell to *Dazzle*. It was called *Balk* and the resistance check was LUCk based, of all things. It didn't last as long as *Dazzle* but if something threw that off, *Balk* was cheap enough to pick up as a second try *and it worked on the target's next defensive roll*. Someone that had been *Dazzled* could still muster up a decent RESolve check to throw off a hostile spell, because that wasn't physical. This spell, on the other hand, was described as working on any defensive action, and RESolve checks would count. So she could *Balk* them, then *Dazzle* them, then cut them to pieces easier if they could throw off *Dazzle* on their own.

So learning that one once I can use magic freely again.

She also watched the news, swapped stories with Jenny about adventures in distant worlds, and went down with her to the shooting range to show off her slightly below average rating in *Pistol*. Still, the soldiers down there at the time were impressed a civilian was anywhere near their level, and Jenny seemed to be well known even here.

"I tend to get requested a lot," she revealed. "So I move from company to company. Keeps me from getting too bored, I guess."

"Jenny Everywhere," intoned Susan, "She's the best at what she does."

"Isn't that Wolverine?"

Susan laughed, but the soldiers around them just looked confused. "You're right, having someone that actually understands your references is a nice change of pace."

Susan was now sitting in a conference room with a bunch of older men in military uniforms. Also joining them were some younger people in lab coats, and Robert was there, looking either like he wanted to sink through the floor or overturn the table and go on a rampage.

Everyone but her snapped to attention when the general entered, and Susan gave a halfhearted salute because it didn't cost anything.

He immediately turned the floor over to Robert and demanded his report.

"I'm sorry to say we've lost the Singularity," he began.

"What?" roared a guy opposite him. "You let Kei be killed?" He whipped off his sunglasses because that's what all the cool dudes do, right?

"Olson!" rebuked the general.

"Sorry sir, but..."

The general continued to glare at him, and he backed down.

So that's Olson. Huh. He was a square jawed, parted hair jock looking guy with the same rank symbol stuck to his forehead everyone else around here had. He put his sunglasses back on and Robert continued.

"At fifteen hundred hours yesterday we sighted and began our attack of the Emaan vessel 'Glomar,' where our sensors had picked up the Singularity. The rebuilt 'bronco' mecha, piloted by the Singularity, emerged and engaged us. The Glomar also opened fire on our position with their ship guns, and turned to retreat into some nearby cliffs. The mecha was damaged and returned to the Glomar after several minutes. My men kept shooting, as I had instructed, to cripple the craft and bring it down so it could be boarded. As far as my men could see, a missile struck some key area, perhaps their munitions bay, causing a subsequent explosion and breaking apart of the Glomar. The remains sank into the ocean." He sat down.

"The footage?" asked the general. The man beside him nodded and fiddled with some

controls, dimming the lights and activating a screen which everyone turned to look at. Susan watched the attack from the point of view of several fighters, obviously being stitched together from various cameras carried by the Ishkicks. It looked exactly like Robert had described, and Susan watched in horror as the Emaan vessel seemed to be shot down and broke up before it hit the water.

As the lights came back up there was a stunned silence shared by the people in the room.

"Can you run the footage again?" asked one of the men who was wearing a lab coat. The general nodded, and it started up. "Take it to the point just before it exploded and slow it down," he requested, and that was done. "There, you see!" he asked, as the Glomar in the video seemed to shimmer for a frame and Susan caught a glimpse of what might be a magical circle under the thing. "What's that?"

Magic? Is Sparkle on that ship? If cast instantly magic would only show up for at most .1 seconds, then vanish. If it was .2 seconds it would be a segment, and thus not be instant. That seems to be what a magical circle would like, if it was hidden beneath the ship...

"Glitch in the camera?" ventured one of the high ranking soldiers.

"Were there any other Ishkicks pointing in that direction at that time?" asked the general.

"I'll look through the footage and find out," said the man next to him, and bent to the task.

"What does it matter?" asked Olson. "We all saw it crash and burn. Nicely done, captain."

"It matters," he answered, "because our sensors continued to pick up the Singularity flying away from the explosion."

"Did you go after him?"

"Of course. We flew over the area he was supposed to be in for half an hour, but saw no sign of cave entrances or other concealing features he could be hiding in. Plus, when we returned to the spot we thought it had gone down in, there was no debris field. One would expect something in a wreck of that size to float, or at least a body or two to come up to the surface. We saw nothing."

"You don't think they've developed some kind of in air hologram system, do you?" asked one of the scientists excitedly. The others spoke amongst themselves, debating how such a thing could be possible.

"That could hide a whole ship that size?" one finally said. "The power requirements would be staggering."

"Either way," said Robert, "I would like to request further resources to perform an underwater search for any debris and clear up this mystery for now."

The general looked thoughtful, as the footage looped between the moment before and after the Glomar exploded. "I suppose we should learn the truth of this matter before any disciplinary action is taken against you or your squad," he said at last. "Doubtful as it may be they've mastered some kind of stealth system without our intelligence getting even a hint of it, they may have come across a dimensionally shifted space that yielded one."

"If they could figure something like that out, a technology even the Mu have yet to employ..." the scientist trailed off.

"I'm assigning a team to follow the best estimate route of where the Glomar has been the past few days. If they've been to some high technology junkyard or befriended beings of high technological prowess, we need to know it. Hopefully by following what path they've taken might lead us at least to a greater understanding of what we're facing. I'll also issue orders that if they do resurface, to watch out for deceptions of this type and rely on instrumentation rather than visual perception. Patrols will continue along high probability vectors but this time, their orders will be to track and observe the craft. This idea you can just shoot the Singularity down isn't working, Robert. It's too dangerous, and this proves it!"

"Yes, sir."

"We will then wait for an opportunity to get the Singularity alone, or..." he looked over at Susan, "maybe talk to them for once instead of shooting first." She nodded, and he dismissed Robert and several other lower ranking members, who left after again saluting.

“Now, the rest of you,” he said, looking serious, “will proceed as if the Singularity has been lost. How is progress coming on the D-system?” The scientists all looked over at Susan, who gave a little wave back to them. “Yes, I’m bringing her into this. The situation is grave, gentlemen, and we need all the help we can get. Part of that help is Susan here, so please speak freely.”

The “head” scientist cleared his throat. “Well, progress is good on construction, we estimate perhaps another month before the device can be given a... limited trial?”

“That long?”

“Unless you would like to divert more resources or personnel.”

“Why do you want the project to take longer?” asked Susan, looking at him.

“I’m sorry, do you have some expertise in this matter? Of course adding resources and personnel will speed the project up.”

“And nine woman can have a baby in one month, right?”

“What?”

“These new people, they’re going to have to get up to speed on what’s already been done. They’ll get in each other’s way, and yours, because they don’t know how you work like your current people do. The people already there will be resentful and work less efficiently because that’s human nature, to resent needing help to finish something. Adding people to a project doesn’t speed it up, most of the time. It’s a common fallacy.”

Jenny was nodding her head.

“She has a point,” said the general. “In any case, with Mu attacks at regular intervals we can’t really spare anyone in any case. And there are precious few people that understand the dimensional physics required to do a proper job. Aren’t you the one always telling me how delicate all this work is? How it could be ruined by rushing it or bringing in ‘mere technicians’ I think you called them.”

“Yes, well, that’s completely the case.”

“Fine. Keep working on it. Extend schedules if you can, we must get this done and tested before the Mu figure out we’re doing it and come to destroy it. Once we turn it on their sensors are going to light up, just like our handheld units will, so they’ll know we’re up to something. We may not get a second chance at testing, so get it right the first time.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Very well then. Dismissed. Not you, Susan,” he added, when she started to rise as well. She waited until the scientists filed out. “Can you help, somehow?”

“Ah!” she said simply. “That depends. I don’t have any TBR or TDE skills, especially not... you have no idea what I just said. Okay, I don’t have design or building skills for dimension stabilizers. The one I have,” she hefted her backpack, “was given to me. I know some dimensional theory that might be helpful, but actually welding together circuits or something? No.” *At least, not without using magic, which I would like to avoid around here.*

“Pity. At the very least I suppose I should show you the thing. I don’t suppose you would let us disassemble your... no, I didn’t think so.” Susan was vehemently shaking her head. “We would put it back together... no?” The shaking increased. “I understand. Anyway, come see what we’re working on, an outside set of eyes could be useful.”

“Happy to!”

So Susan was taken down several levels and showed into what looked like a bunker, with thick concrete walls surrounding a device that was being constructed in the middle of it. It was a bulbous sort of thing, tall, and partially open still so the center could be glimpsed. Inside was a huge piece of rock.

“Hyperlarcovite,” she guessed, making puppy eyes at it.

The general seemed impressed. “Yes, we managed to fuse together a large quantity of the stuff, and it serves as the heart of the system. I don’t understand all the technical reasoning behind using it, but the scientists wanted it, so there it is. In fact without a sample at least that big, the scientists say even building the device would be a waste of time.

Hey, here’s an idea, suggested The Darkness. Grab it, right? Not now, I’m not advocating you to be shot at again, which was hilarious I might remind you. I mean you know where it is now, right?

*I can't steal their only hope of fixing this world!
Hear me out. You use magic to steal it, Retrieval I think?
You know it is.*

Whatever. Then you switch to Creation and make them a new one! Then you switch over to Mercury and use Teleportal to stick it back, like that prophecy that one time. They're none the wiser!

*Why not just keep the chunk I made, in that case?
Oh, well, uh...*

Susan made a KNOWledge check, getting a fourteen. Aren't things created by Creation magic 'totally mundane' or something like that? Plus it won't make anything valuable. Huh, that's a good point, on a world where the streets were literally paved with gold rather than concrete, but copper was worth a fortune because it was rare for some reason, would Creation still refuse to make gold but happily make copper?

Good question.

You're not going to tell me, are you?

Why should I? Let your Curiosity burn for a little while.

Fine, shouldn't expect much. You don't even know, do you?

You're not going to trick me into telling you.

Worth a shot. No, there's something special about this natural crystal, there's got to be. That's why you sent me here, and why you're trying to get me to take that one. So their machine fails in the end.

*Maybe. Could be I just want to help.
HAHAHAHAHAH.*

So Susan was given a tour, and with her understanding of how her *Dimension Sense* worked, a roll of eleven on *Topic: Dimensions* (not counting an assist by Jenny, who had picked up a few things on her travels that she whispered to Susan) and a bit of *Adaptive Skill* as it related to their technology, was able to talk to the scientists at least somewhat intelligently and made some suggestions for them. But in the end, she had to ask "What exactly is this machine supposed to do?"

"The purpose is straightforward," explained the lead scientist. "You seem aware that time can run at different rates between dimensions, yes?"

"Right."

"We're going to try capitalizing on that phenomenon and use this system not as a dimensional selector directly, but more as a time machine. It will search through and deposit a select force through dimensional 'space' to a time before the space/time bomb went off. It can then be destroyed by conventional explosives before it activates. This will cause the dimensional tearing to never occur, and all worlds will continue without ever knowing about the other's existence."

"How have you accounted for the paradox in that plan?"

"Paradox?"

"If you go back in time and destroy the device, you'll never be here in this time to build the D-system to go back in time and destroy the device."

"Oh, but as I say, it's not a true time machine. We are simply exploiting the fact that the original dimension must still exist somewhere, and can be reached through creative manipulation of dimensional energies. Basically, finding a world where time runs counter to the flow here, then stepping out at the right moment into the original dimension."

"So when it was done you would all still be here?"

"Perhaps. This may become a special dimension of its own, with no more shifting. Or the original worlds will all return, and we will continue our lives from that point. Either way, the dimensional barrier causing the greenhouse effect on the planet would be gone, and what cities we have would be safe. We could finally begin living without fear again!"

"But any Mu in your territory would still be causing trouble."

"In that scenario, yes. We would have to deal with that problem going forward. But if the worlds disperse into their original positions, we believe that just like a magnet pulling steel, all the beings from a specific dimension will return there. Displaced in space perhaps,

they would appear in their world wherever they were in this one, but at least back in their original worlds.”

“Where they could easily return to their homes. Okay, I can see that working. Some would die, of course, because they would appear inside things.”

“Which is why we plan to suggest they return to their territories before we perform the final correction. If they are near the piece of the world they original came here with, there should be no risk of harm when the dimensions separate.”

“Wow. You all really have worked hard on this, haven’t you? I’m impressed, this certainly seems like a better option than ‘throw the Singularity together with some weird energy in the sky and hope for the best’ plan.”

“As I have argued many times. This is science; measurable, repeatable, knowable. The Emaan would have the two Singularity flung into space with naught but a hope everything will turn out right. We will calculate and experiment to be sure our way is successful.”

“I wish you success, then. Please, don’t let me keep you from your work, I know how busy you must be. If I do think of anything else that might be of use though, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Your ideas have been most intriguing, I wouldn’t mind speaking with you again.”

“Until then.”

“Indeed.”

“So what are your plans, now that we don’t need your help capturing the Singularity?” asked the general on the way up in the elevator.

“See how we can take out the Mu.”

“And when you say ‘we,’ keeping in mind what I told you earlier about our resources situation, you mean...”

“Jenny and myself.”

“Just the two of you? Against every Mu in existence?”

“Not every Mu. Just the ones guarding the AI stronghold.”

“Ah, so just the toughest, most heavily armed ones. I see.”

“Sir, she can do it,” said Jenny.

“But can you?” he asked her. “You seem to have a lot of confidence in her, and you’re a crack shot and everything private but two against hundreds? That’s suicide.”

Jenny let a small smile slip out. “Believe me, sir, I wouldn’t support such a mission if I didn’t know exactly what Susan’s abilities were.”

“Oh, that dimensional stabilizer you’re carrying. You haven’t told me exactly what you can do, but you’ve told her?”

Susan looked at her. “What can I say, she’s got an earnest face. Believe me, what I can do is potent, absolute, and unique to me. You wouldn’t believe what you were seeing, and you would think me or yourself crazy or that I was trying to trick you somehow. It’s better this way. You’ve seen a little of me fighting, with my full abilities I’m confident I can take down the AI with just Jennifer to back me up.”

“Humph. Well, I’ll get you clearance to view what files we have on the Mu. We’ve poured over what little we’ve learned about them, but maybe a fresh set of eyes will help. Or you’ll see a pattern from tangling with the AI elsewhere that we’ve missed.”

“I hope there’s something. If I can take the Mu out, or at least their capability to strike at you without warning, it might take some pressure off and the science guys won’t have to kill themselves getting the D-system working.”

“Of course they will,” he countered. “My soldiers have been killing themselves making sure the scientists are protected, how can they give less because they happen to have a science background?”

“Because if a soldier dies, it’s sad and pointless, but the world goes on. One of the scientists gets a calculation wrong because he’s been working for thirty six hours straight and the energy harmonic released from the D-system rips a crater into the planet that knocks it off axis, burns off the atmosphere, and destroys all life here in the process.”

The general considered that for a moment. “I’ll get you the information.”

Light and Shadow

Who: Sparkle

Time: Day 4

Place: Coming up to a large city where the Glomar wants to sell grapes

Reeg reported the night before that there was no evidence in the Starburst's computers to support the idea Kei was in contact with the Chiram. She was somewhat relieved, but still puzzled about all that happened. She didn't suspect Sparkle, sitting on her lap and purring as she was petted, and made her latest journal entry about the whole thing. The night passed uneventfully, and late the next morning the Glomar neared a small town that Shaya believed was perfect for selling the grapes they had collected.

"It's a pretty small place, so we won't have to worry about not having enough. But it's big enough to have a variety of things to trade or just straight up cash," she explained to Kei when he asked what she meant.

"I guess location is just as important as product."

"If not more so. Stick with us, Kei, and we'll turn you into a shrewd businessman as well." She laughed.

"I guess I need to learn some other skill than soldering, for when this is all over. If it ever is."

"We'll get through this, Kei, you of all people have to stay positive about that."

"Not sure I can, what with the Chiram seemingly determined to shoot me down."

"They've always had their own agenda. Who can say what they're thinking this time?"

"You know them better than I do. If you don't know, don't look at me."

As the Glomar neared the village, Jaby rushed to the bridge saying he smelled smoke, and Shaya brought the Glomar floating higher to see if there was a fire in the area. There was- the village. Magnifying the scene the Emaan were shocked to see Mu swarming the place, indiscriminately blasting away while frightened townspeople scattered everywhere.

"We have to help them!" insisted Kei.

"We aren't soldiers," protested Srei.

"But you've got a soldier's tools, all that military hardware we stole from the camp. Stay here if you want, I'm launching the Starburst to go and help." He tore off towards the launch bay.

"He's going to do more damage to the town in a mecha trying to fight those things than they will," Srei scoffed.

"So let's get out there and help him!" said Mimsy. "He's right, if we don't help and we have the means, any deaths are on our hands."

"There's no Chiram forces in the area," confirmed Shaya, looking over her readings.

"We're all these people have." She hit a button and her voice rang through the ship.

"Everyone, the town is under attack. If you think you can handle it, grab a weapon and go to help. Leah, Maai, I want you out in your M.Lovers giving cover to the townspeople. Rescue anyone trapped in their houses and keep us apprised of their movements so our people don't get pinned down."

Mimsy ran to the door, but Srei stayed where he was. "Aren't you coming?" she asked as it opened.

"I'm no fighter, you know that."

"And I am? But at least I have some pride as an Emaan to not watch innocent people be slaughtered right in front of me." She left.

"Is this why she likes Kei more than me?" Sparkle caught as she paced Mimsy down the hallway.

"What, is a cat more a man than he is?" she asked, amused. "This isn't a game you know, kitty."

And my magic is limited, but I can still help. I have my own pride, you know. I couldn't look Susan in the eye again if I did nothing at this point.

Mimsy ran over to a crate where they were keeping the guns and grabbed a rifle of some kind, along with some extra magazines. As she shoved them into her pocket, Sparkle jumped onto a hover bike, and Mimsy settled herself and strapped in. She turned, looking back. "You're really coming? You have to be the strangest cat... okay, don't fall to your death or anything."

They shot out of the bay towards the town.

It took no more than a moment to reach the outskirts of town, and Mimsy ditched the bike and readied her weapon. She cautiously went from house to house towards the center of town, keeping to cover and at least seeming like she knew what she was doing.

Sparkle watched for a moment, then took off on her own.

"Wait, Starburst!" Mimsy called after her, but Sparkle knew staying with her, even to protect her, was a bad idea. She needed to move ahead and see what she could do that wouldn't arouse her suspicions.

Besides, all I have is Illusion at the moment. I need to work out if Mu robots are even susceptible to that magic before I try something and they just ignore it completely. I mean how does a robot make a REASON check, anyway?

Fast and low, Sparkle tore through hedges and ducked under parked vehicles until she saw two Mu robots shooting things in the distance. One was directly in front of her, the other was down a side street a ways. *Perfect*, she thought, and spent the time creating an *Illusion* of Mimsy complete with gun. She got a seventeen on that, which she hoped was higher than robots could achieve. This fake burst from the hedge she was near and fired off a few rounds in the direction of the one Mu. The gunshots she made as loud as she could, to get their attention, and both turned. They also both started shooting, shots whizzing high above Sparkle as she made it duck out of the way behind a nearby tree. She kept the spell active, however, as the two Mu swiftly headed into the area now controlled by her *Illusion*. As they did, Sparkle covered both of them with the illusion that the other was Mimsy, and for a wonder, it worked. Both opened fire on the other, and blew each other to pieces.

Sparkle laughed with delight. *Turns out they don't have any sort of awareness of where other Mu are? Seems to be a design flaw to me, I would make robots that communicated their position to more efficiently work together. But these guys seem pretty human, just walking around and relying on plain old sight to see what they should shoot at. Helps me out.*

She continued down the street, looking for what the Mu were shooting at before, and came to a partially destroyed house. A man was struggling to work his way free from some debris, it looked like the walls had been blown away and the ceiling fell on him, relatively intact. His family, or at least nearby people, were trying to shift it and get it off him.

Can I help here? I wonder...

Sparkle knew she could do a "called shot" and increase the damage she did with that attack. She also knew from being a *Paragon* that her "rules" didn't specify any upper limit to this additional damage, saying only that it was a penalty to hit and increased her delay by that amount afterwards. So you didn't use that capability that often in combat because it left you open if you missed. (And Susan didn't use it now because her damage was already gross enough, and before that she relied on magic primarily instead of doing direct damage.) But this was a piece of ceiling- it wasn't going anywhere, and even an extra twenty *segments* after the fact was only five seconds. The ceiling wasn't attacking her, who cared if she sat there like a lump a few seconds? She ran and leapt onto the "floor" above the man, and tried to judge where he was so she could strike accurately.

She chose her spot, then concentrated, lifting a paw. She brought it down, taking a -20 penalty to hit and hopefully doing more damage when she did. The absurdity of "missing" in the act of just touching her paw to the surface of the debris caused her to not even need to roll the "attack" and she spent her energy for damage. I mean, what would have happened otherwise? Her paw suddenly flinging itself into the air? Not likely.

So she did thirty one damage to the wood and plaster and whatever else made up the floor/ceiling here, enough to snap off a large piece of it at least. This allowed the people there to lift up the remainder and allow the man to wiggle out, mostly unharmed. Sparkle sat and

watched for five seconds as her delay caught up with her, then bounded away looking for more things to do.

She was now heading perpendicular to her original course, and found Mimsy pinned down behind what was left of a wall, trading shots with a couple of Mu. Sparkle considered, then ran behind her and did another casting of *Illusion*. (A seventeen this time, maximum) This one showed the Starburst roaring out from another direction, shooting missiles at the pair. They immediately changed targets to the greater "threat," firing overhead and leaving them wide open to be blown away by Mimsy, who did so with great satisfaction. As the second one exploded, she looked over her shoulder to see what they were shooting at, but Sparkle had already dropped the *Illusion* so nothing was there. She looked about, confusion plain on her face, but shrugged, slammed in another magazine, and moved up.

Sparkle now moved with her, theory about Mu seeing *Illusions* proven, staying out of sight behind her as she cautiously moved up. She crossed two intersections, stepping over a downed power line carefully, and moved up to a third intersection. The cable was sparking and humming on the street, and Sparkle was impressed that power was still available in this area. It seemed the Mu had figured out she was there, as two stepped out from hiding down the street and made their way closer. Neither was shooting, it seemed they wanted to catch Mimsy in a pincer and shoot her from two directions at once.

Can't have that, now can we?

Sparkle made sure Mimsy was focused on looking around ahead of her and cast an *Illusion* over the downed power cable. She got a fourteen by taking the extra time, and Mimsy caught sight of the Mu in front of her. She desperately looked for cover, and threw herself down as the thing fired at her. She shot back, gun out in front of her, and the other clanked into range behind her. It stepped over what it thought was the power cable, but Sparkle had arranged the *Illusion* so that as it did, it wound up stepping on the actual one and electrocuting itself. It spasmed randomly as power flooded it, and it fell over, deactivated. The other almost seemed confused as it watched the other go down, like it couldn't process what it was seeing. After all, why would even the stupidest of machine deliberately step on a downed power cable? But at the same time there was no cable there to step on, the unit had clearly not touched the metal as it passed over.

Mimsy shot it as it was calculating all this, trying to run a diagnostic to see if somehow the enemy had skewed its vision. Rounds tore through it and it fell, too damaged to continue fighting.

Sparkle let the *Illusion* go as Mimsy rolled to the side and brought the gun up again, looking for what she had heard behind her. She too was a bit confused as the Mu now down on the ground gave a final spasm and went quiet.

"Someone's looking out for me today," she remarked to herself, moving on. Then she thought better of it and turned back, putting a few rounds through the electrocuted one. "Can't be too careful, right?" she said cheerfully as she looked over her handiwork.

The next street was more torn up, with several houses destroyed. Mimsy moved past them, but Sparkle felt a faint spark of life under some rubble she had already gone by. She raced to catch up and grabbed Mimsy's pant leg with her claws.

"What the?" said Mimsy, pointing her gun down. "Oh, it's you. Back with me, huh?"

"Meow!" Sparkle unhooked her claws and took a few steps back the way they had come. Mimsy looked at her uncomprehendingly. She raced back and forth again, thinking how this always worked in movies, right?

"You want me to follow?" she asked, taking a step.

Sparkle took another, and Mimsy shouldered her gun.

"Okay, lead on."

Sparkle ran to the knocked over house and started pawing at it where she felt the life force to be.

"Oh no, there isn't someone under there, is there?" She set the rifle down and started shifting things out of the way. Or at least trying, she wasn't having much luck.

"Kei, can you hear me?" she said into a communicator she pulled from a pocket.

"You need help?" came the reply. "I can try to get away!"

"I need a mecha, Leah, Maai, are you out somewhere?"

"Mimsy, this is Maai, what's going on?"

"I need help clearing a house, I think someone is pinned underneath."

"Where are you?"

She looked around helplessly, climbing atop the rubble to try and get a better vantage point. "I'm not sure how to tell you that."

Hummm... Sparkle thought this might call for another *Illusion*, and set one as high as she could in the air. This was just a ball of light marking their position, and as Mimsy was looking around she didn't notice Sparkle doing anything uncatlike.

"Where did you get a flare gun from? Did you find it?"

"What flare gun?"

"What do you mean... never mind, I'm heading over there."

Mimsy looked up. "Now where did that come from?"

Sparkle kept it in the air until she heard the M.Love approaching, and made it fade out. With the arrival of the mecha, Mimsy hopped down and the two worked together to clear the rubble. The hands on the M.Love seemed quite versatile, and as the M.Love could hover in the air without rockets, it could easily scoop and carry just inches off the ground. Finally a young boy was uncovered, and Maai hopped out to help Mimsy clear away the last of the rubble from atop him.

"Is he dead?" asked Maai.

"I don't think so. Get him back to the Glomar and have Mome look him over."

"Right. You going to be okay out here?"

"I've been great so far. Go on, get going. Wait, don't get going. Hey Starburst, you think there are any other people trapped here?"

"You're asking a cat?"

"Hey, she's the one who found the kid in the first place."

"Through all that? No way!"

Sparkle made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting a ten. If they were, they were dead, as she felt nothing more from beneath her.

She hopped down and started walking away.

"Okay, I guess not." Maai took the child in her arms and hopped back into her mecha, taking off towards the Glomar.

"How did you know he was there?" asked Mimsy.

Sparkle, of course, didn't answer, instead just kept her ears peeled for the sound for more Mu approaching.

"Guess you're not going to tell me. Well, back to work then." She grabbed up her rifle and listened for the sound of Mu guns, then headed off where they sounded loudest.

She met up with Reeg, who asked how many she had ever seen together, total.

"No more than two, why?"

"The Mu here must not have been expecting such heavy resistance. All that I've seen are in small groups too. Usually there's at least five to a group, because they don't care if they take longer to destroy an area. Here they wanted to wipe this place out quickly and they're paying for it since we arrived."

"And we would have really only had the Starburst if we hadn't done the raid on that Chiram camp. Say what you will about them," she patted the gun, "they do make decent military hardware."

"It's the ammo, it's specially made for taking down Mu. I had a look at it, pretty neat stuff."

"So long as it works."

With two people together, Sparkle didn't want to risk many more *Illusions*, but it turned out she didn't have to. Both could take care of the small groups of Mu they met pretty easily,

and it turned out the battle was nearly done at that point anyway. Kei was seen flying back and forth over the area, looking for more targets, but finally gave it up and landed near the Glomar, which now had quite the crowd of people around it.

Mimsy also made her way back, and Kei ran to hug her.

"I'm glad you didn't get hurt!" he said honestly. "Running around out there like that, what were you thinking?"

"That I could help, and I did. Don't worry, I think I had a guardian angel looking out for me, or at least some of Starburst's luck rubbed off. Do you know, she found a little boy who was buried?"

"Really? How about that."

Shaya came down to speak to the townspeople, who had gone from being potential grape buyers to being, essentially, refugees in their own neighborhood.

"There's nothing we can do," she told the gathering throng of people. "We don't have any materials you could use to help rebuild. For now you'll just have to pull together as best you can and take care of each other."

"What's the point?" shouted one. "You drove the Mu off this time, but as soon as you're gone, they'll be back. The obviously want our town destroyed, and machines do a thing until it's done!"

"That could very well be," agreed Shaya. "But if you think about it, things could have been much worse. I see most houses are standing, and our two M.Loves are now out there helping put out fires and such. We can also use our hover bikes to look for survivors, and bring them all to one place so we can figure out who is missing. We can't do it all, and it looks like you have a lot of work to do. Best get started."

There was a lot of grumbling, but what could they really do? This was their home, as smashed up as it had become, so people sadly turned to walk back into town and see how much of their shattered lives could be retrieved for another day.

The crew did what they could, and the boy Sparkle had found recovered and word was put out that he was aboard so that his relatives could come and find him. They worked all day, and it was early evening when the messenger showed up, saying the ruler of the town of Para heard they defended this place, and offered lots of money for any spare weapons and ammo they had.

"Para?" asked Shaya uncertainly. "Why does that name sound familiar to me?"

Being Cocky Doesn't Pay Off

Who: Susan

Place: Chiram office building

Time: Day 4

Susan had spent the day going over the information that related to the Mu given to her by the general. Where they had been most heavily attacked in the past, what their strategies were, that sort of thing. There wasn't a lot of data on the robots themselves because those that were deactivated tended to be blown up. Also there seemed to be some kind of fail safe built into them- if they were in danger of being captured or only partially destroyed, they wiped their own data.

So the Chiram could really only tell her about what they had physically seen for themselves, and what sort of ammo worked best on them, things like that. Attacks were basically at random as far as she could see, and the typical tactic was to just commit all forces to destroying whatever was nearby. They didn't retreat or fall back, instead fighting to the last bot.

"One thing bothers me," Susan said to Jenny, sitting across from her and also going over the reports.

"Oh, just the one? You'll have this taken care of by lunch then, right?"

"Very funny. The Darkness has access to knowledge of other worlds, and if Silverstreak is any indication, much better technology than you will find on any one world here on the "lower" side of things. So he comes to a place and takes over a robot factory, you would think he would equip them with technology to make them more durable. But the Chiram have made their equipment specifically to deal with robots, because that's who they're more at war with. Why not give them energy shields and anti-matter missiles and whatnot?"

"I can think of a few reasons. One is just materials. Maybe they can't get quantity of element X here to make the better toys."

"Note to self," she said, pretending to write a note. "Collect all the element X you can find for future need."

"Now who's being funny? You know what I mean. Secondly, it wouldn't want that sort of thing falling into enemy hands, right? As soon as they were shown to have energy shields, for example, the Chiram would consider a hundred ways to capture the system intact and start working to reverse engineer it."

"But they get a memory wipe if things look dicey, they could melt circuits controlling something like that at the same time."

Jenny shook her head. "You're thinking like a wizard."

"I am not!" Susan seemed somewhat offended.

"Sorry, you're thinking like a very superior magic user, which is leaps and bounds ahead of any wizard. Happy?"

"I'll consider it. Go on."

"Think like a robot. It doesn't have any special self preservation instinct because it wasn't programmed with one. Why shield something or give it a weapon that could fall into enemy hands when current technology does the job just fine."

"Does it though? I mean if a robot could last twice as long, it could destroy twice as much."

"So send two robots."

"Ah, but it doesn't, does it? It sends a small group hardly up to the task."

"Assuming the task is destroying us, at the moment. For all we know they're still just testing the teleport system and any larger group is lost. We don't know how many times they've sent troops in that just disappear, or malfunction once they get through. Or the attacks are a feint, and they're collecting something from areas they hit and want some explosions as a cover."

Yeah Susan, I'm not some big, ugly thing in the sky who just wants to destroy everything. I have patience. I want to destroy things with the least amount of effort on my part, so I can collect maximum energy from each branch. Your friend there had a good idea

though, maybe I should just set my workers to building a giant bomb and be done with the place?

No, it's personal, just like when you took over Harry and I had to throw you out. You want to see me suffer and fail for all the setbacks you've had because of me. I can tell that much.

You know me that well, do you? I wonder.

If I'm wrong you would have done it already. In fact you would have done it on all worlds, from the beginning. Either you can't do that for some reason because it doesn't leave what you need, it's not possible, or even the more advanced civilizations can't support a bomb big enough. Or, like I said, you really want a chance to actually make me lose and gloat about it until I'm dead.

Boy are you going to be surprised when you walk through a gateway and I press a big red button somewhere.

Yeah, you do that.

"All right," she said, "I agree we don't know their true intentions yet. And I suppose The Darkness has only taken over the AI, it isn't actually one. So there may be no pattern to find in their-"

The phone in the room rang, and Jenny got up from the table to answer it. A moment later she came back.

"Robert's back," she said. "The general wants us there to hear the report."

"Roger-Rodger."

"I'm Jenny, did you forget?"

"Roger-Rodger, Jenny-Jenny."

When the two made it up to the general's office Robert was already there, with footage playing on his computer.

"As you can see," he was saying, "no trace of any ship going down in the area was found. Not one bolt. I think it was some kind of trick, and the Singularity is still out there, somewhere."

"That is my conclusion as well. Good work, captain, it seems you're not to be court marshaled after all."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, Susan, I will ask you again. The Singularity isn't dead, will you help us bring him in and explain to him we just want his help in fixing the world?"

"How is she going to do what all my men and forces couldn't do?" protested Robert.

"I'm actually going to talk to the man," Susan replied sweetly. "You'd be amazed how much more tractable it makes people, not having a gun to their head when you show up."

Hypocrite, groused The Darkness. How would you know, anyway? Your style is exactly his style. You both just try and knock over anything in your way.

That was the old Susan, in case you hadn't noticed.

No, strangely enough I hadn't.

"You think the Emaan will just hand him over?"

"I think if he *chooses* to leave their company, there's nothing they can do about it without coming out of it looking really bad. You never even asked the man his opinion or tried to get him into any sort of discussion. You just shot at him. By all reports, minutes after he landed, confused and alone, on this side of the space/time bomb. Of course he's run into their arms, they helped protect him. That's where I come in- I'm not military, he may listen to me."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll-"

Suddenly a siren was heard throughout the city, and the general's phone started ringing.

"An attack?" he wondered, picking it up. "We're under attack!" he confirmed, slamming the phone down. "I have orders to issue. Robert, get out there!"

"Yes sir!" He saluted, spun on his heel, and took off down the corridor.

"How close?" asked Jenny, running to the window and peering out.

"All over the city, according to reports we've never seen a force this large before." He went over to the wall and pressed a control, and the large picture that was there swung up revealing a safe. He punched in a number and swung it open, grabbing up a rifle. "Help yourselves, ladies," he said. "If you don't mind helping us now, that is, Susan?"

"Of course!" Susan said, "But I'm fine. I only have pistol training, not rifle, so I'll just stick with what I have."

"But you're unarmed!"

"Am I? Jenny, you coming?"

"Of course," she replied, grabbing up a rifle for herself, along with some extra ammo. She went to the door, but realized Susan was heading to the window. She unlatched it and swung it open.

"You can't be serious, we're six stories up!" protested the general.

"Oh, she's serious," said Jenny, walking over and looking down. "We could wait for the elevator."

"Hey, don't you trust me?" She held a hand out.

"I don't see any magic carpet out there, *Al*, but I suppose I do."

"*Al*, that's a good one! General, we'll finish out discussion a bit later. Bye for now."

And she pulled Jenny out the window.

Being six stories up, Susan now had about twenty meters to fall before she and Jenny went splat on the ground. She was falling at 9.8 m/s^2 meaning one second later she would be 10m down and another half second she would be pavement pizza. That gave her six whole segments, oodles of time to instantly cast "*Invulnerability*" on herself and Jenny. She spent fifteen energy as she was at a minus nine penalty and pulled it off with plenty to spare. Both landed with a flourish, though Susan didn't "stick" the landing with her seven *Gymnastics* check. She wobbled and got steadied by Jenny.

"And you couldn't have done that in the office, why?" she asked. "Though I'm sure you're always hurling yourself out of windows and doing magic *on the way down so you don't die*, some of us would like to keep our hearts in our chests."

"Didn't want the general to see it. Come on, we are become The Girls Who Hunt Robots!" She pulled her *Enhance Sword* out and struck out in a random direction. (with her feet, not the sword.) "Forward! For the glory of king and country!"

"I take it I don't have to worry about ducking behind anything for cover?" asked Jenny, shaking her head.

"That's right, unless robots spontaneously gain the ability to use magic or supernatural energy attacks, there's not a thing on this planet that can harm us."

"Perfect," she replied, a gleam in her eye.

Except that it wasn't. As Susan and Jenny prowled around the city following the sound of combat they couldn't actually get a bead on any Mu. They took a few by surprise, and cut them down, but any that saw them coming actually raced *away* from them as though being drawn in the opposite direction by a powerful magnet. (Both girls could see their rockets firing)

"I can't help but think we are being snubbed, Miss Everywhere."

"I concur, Miss Felton. This seems rather rude of them, to not stand there and allow us to most thoroughly destroy them."

"Stand and fight!" she shouted after another pair that took one look at her and ran off.

"I'll even take off my *Invulnerability* to make it more fair!"

"You won't though, will you?" Jenny asked nervously.

"Of course not."

"Oh good."

But these cowardly acts continued, and Jenny finally realized "I think we're being drawn somewhere."

"You think?" Susan looked around. "All these streets look the same to me."

"No, we are. There's a park or something not far from here, and they all take off in that direction."

"You don't think..."

"Yes, I do. Come on."

Both girls booked it over there, Susan keeping her speed down to pace Jenny. They came upon not a midnight clear, but rather a hostage situation with a ring of Mu robots covering a cowering crowd of people in the middle. They didn't bother hiding themselves, and boldly walked forward to the one that was facing out, rather than in.

"So this is where you've been going," said Susan, gripping her sword in both hands. "More hostage taking."

"Subject identified- Susan," it intoned. "Connecting to relay network as ordered. Communication channel open. Susan!" It purred, voice now sounding different. "How nice of you to come to our little party."

"I think this is where I shout 'let them go, Darkness' right?"

"If you're any sort of hero, yes. Tell me, did my sensitive robot sound membranes pick up you saying nothing on this planet could hurt you?"

"It did, you can't."

"Ah, Susan, you don't know how much I love challenges like- but what's this? Jenny, how lovely to see you again. This is where you ended up, is it? Trapped like a fly in amber."

"Let's meet face to face, get reacquainted." She brought her gun up.

"Now, now, fire that and my forces open fire." The robot gestured to the others, who slid open panels and such on their bodies and readied missiles. "Maybe I can't hurt you, but bellicose will insure their bodies burst like bloody, baby bubbles."

"All right, don't practice your alliteration on me. And two points for working the word *baby* in there as well, good show. What do you want, for me to stand down and let you destroy this whole city? No way, I won't trade these lives for every other."

"Since I got the report you were here I was thinking about how to properly greet you. I was going to just blow some people away while you watched, but then you had to go and say something absolute like you did. Tisk-tisk, it'll never do. I can't hurt you? Really? Put your money where your mouth is."

"How?"

"Jenny there. I've got my own score to settle with her, so this will kill two birds with one anti-tank round. Trade me this city for her."

"What?" Both girls blurted out.

"I'm serious. I'll pull my forces back if she takes a little trip with me. Won't even take two minutes, and I'll bring her back. Promise."

"As if I'll trust you."

"Wait," said Jenny, "you did say nothing could hurt us. And I've tangled with stuff that no physical force can touch. I had to rely on magic weapons or just trapping it. This is that, right?"

"It is, but that's not the point. He can't seriously believe I would trust his word to just pull back in exchange for you. Who knows how he would... violate you."

"Susan, please, I don't have your... appetite for the flesh. Her clothes can say on, believe me."

"Appetite eh?" Jenny winked at her.

Susan colored. "It's not like that! I just sometimes meet people- I'm looking for Luna!"

"Oh, I've met people too, don't worry. Appetite."

"Stop it! This is serious!"

"I know. All right, I'll take your deal, Darkvoid. Susan here will make sure you keep it, I have no doubt. Some may die, but your robots won't leave this place ali- er, functioning."

"Drop your weapon, then."

She did, and a robot dropped out the sky behind the girls. Susan resisted the urge to smash it to pieces as it stepped up behind Jenny and grabbed her.

"I hope you know what-" But it didn't give her a chance to finish, it just blasted off...

straight up.

What do you have in mind...

You'll find out.

"The rest of you, leave," Susan snarled, pointing her blade. "You got what you wanted."
"Very well. Just remember, magic or not, there are always ways to hurt you."

The robots clanked off, and Susan was torn between going with them to make sure they retreated and staying and scanning the sky for Jenny.

True to its word, she limply fell out of the sky and smashed into the ground, pieces of robot still clinging to her. "Jenny!" screamed Susan, racing towards her. Somehow, impossibly, she was in bad shape. Energy swirled around her, and Susan went to grab her and hold her down but got a sensation like a shock and was thrown backwards. Jenny was having convulsions, limbs randomly twitching, and Susan knew that if she bit off her own tongue or something, that would work. *Invulnerable things could hurt each other, or themselves for that matter.*

Susan stared at her own hand, numb and now also swirling with energy, and wondered what she could do for her friend.

She's not hurt, she can't be hurt through the spell!

You really do think you know everything, don't you? Even here, where you've been for what, four days? Pathetic.

Shut up and let me think.

Susan thought fast. *I know there's some kind of ceiling around this world, that's why the greenhouse effect. It's some kind of dimensional barrier. Was she taken through that? That's why they flew straight up and why only pieces of the robot came back with her? Did that react to her somehow? Is this what happens if you go up there?*

Jenny suddenly screamed, then seemed to pass out again, still jerking like her brain was firing randomly.

Come on, think of something. How can I fix this? It's not damage, it's just dimensional energy or something. The stabilizer? But how would I tell it to help her? Maybe Pluto magic? She looked around, and the robots were gone, but did she dare drop *Invulnerability* to switch when that could really cause Jenny to be in danger?

Better decide fast, I doubt she has long either way.

Susan didn't reply, just tried to work her watch with her numb hand. "Switch me over to Pluto," she commanded it. "And hurry!"

"Unit cannot be commanded to greater speed," it replied. "Forces are external to the unit. Time estimation available in thirty seconds."

That done, she grabbed her book out of sub-space and started paging through it. *I'll probably only get one shot, so something I can use better be in here. I'll read it over, and be ready to make the checks the instant Sun magic goes down and Pluto comes up.*

She looked over all the spells dealing with dimensions, and settled on *Planar Deflection*, hoping she had guessed right. Seconds ticked by, finally she watched as the estimate of when Pluto magic would be available counted down, and willed Jenny to hold on. She continued flailing and sometimes screaming, the energy shell around her body swirling and preventing anything from touching her. (Susan tried her sword, but it too was repulsed.) Finally the planet was ready, and Susan envisioned the magic symbology she needed and threw energy into a *Pluto* check to hopefully save her friend.

"*Planar Deflection!*" she cried, and the magic responded.

This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

Who: Susan

Time: A minute after Jenny fell out of the sky

Place: The city someplace, Susan has no idea

Susan's book of magic has this to say about the spell *Planar Deflection*:

For the duration of the spell, any dimensional effects entering the area, which has a radius equal to your Pluto rating in meters, are deflected back to their original source.

Normally used to prevent people teleporting in, or to keep them from summoning things, like demons. But this novel use of it, Susan hoped, would draw off the odd dimensional energy that now surrounded Jenny and allow her to be touched again. She held her breath as the magic circle sparkled into existence and winked out, and Jenny gave one final cry of anguish.

The energy flew away from her, back up towards the sky, and she dropped limply and unmoving. Susan, knife already in hand from when the countdown was slowly ticking past pressed the blade up against her. As it wasn't hilarious for someone to come along because she hadn't been stabbed, no one did, and she kept repeating "come on, come on," to try and will her to wake up.

She didn't.

Susan now had several options:

- 1) Pick her up and physically carry her someplace she could be helped.
- 2) Switch back over to Mercury magic and try a *Teleportal*, though if *Question* didn't work around here, that might not either, costing precious time.
- 3) Leave her here and bring someone back.

She decided to just pick her up and hope she could find her way back to the building she had come from, and bent over to grab her.

"Is she okay?" asked a voice beside her. Susan jumped (remember she can jump a couple of meters straight up now) and landed in a fighting stance. The people who had been held hostage were now in a semi-circle around her and looking around nervously. It was a man who had spoken, and she put her hand on her chest, Jenny's comment about keeping her heart there was now a little closer to home. Her heart was racing.

"I don't know, I need to get her back to the infirmary. Can you tell me how to get to the... I don't even know what to call that building..."

"Are the Mu gone?" he asked, ignoring her. "Odd how they just left. Never thought they did that sort of thing."

"I think so. It just wanted to hurt me, show it could still do it even with my- why am I telling you this? Can you direct me to the government building where the general lives or not?"

"What general?"

"General... what's his name. General Wright."

"Sorry, no idea."

"Then you're of no use to me!" She picked up Jenny, who seemed to weigh nothing at all to her magically enhanced body, and turned to go.

"Wait, what if those Mu come back?" someone shouted. "You can't just leave."

"Are you a doctor?" she shot back.

"No."

"Is there a doctor here?" Everyone looked around but none came forward. "Then I'm leaving to get this girl where she can get some help. Go home, the attack is over."

Even Susan could tell that, the sounds of battle were fading and an uneasy silence was

creeping over the town. She walked away, and none stopped her. Now her *No Sense of Direction* worked against her in the worst possible way. She was lost in a city that had just suffered an attack, and everyone was freaking out. Sirens were now going everywhere, as fire trucks started whizzing back and forth. Crowds of people streamed past her towards shelters that were no longer necessary because The Darkness had done its work for the day. Susan felt alone and terrified, unable to help Jenny because by all rights her magic should have woken her up almost immediately. As she walked she at least switched back to Sun magic, which took considerably less time than switching to Pluto had, and put *Invulnerability* back on them both.

Her watch computer told her the reason for that was switching back to a planet that had been locked in just minutes ago was much easier than acquiring it from scratch, which made sense. Not that it helped the ball of ice in her stomach, but at least being *Invulnerable* no more damage would be done, right? And her hand still felt a little funny, like it had fallen asleep, but when she checked her character sheet she wasn't at any penalties, so she was pretty sure she wasn't damaged.

But what damage was done in the first place? What happened to her? Why doesn't she wake up?

She thought about putting Mercury magic to use, and just flying overhead to try and spot the building. *And if someone sees me, who cares? That's not worth Jenny's life, is it?* But finally her sixteen LUCK check kicked in, and she found a group of soldiers who she ran after and had them radio in for transport to the building she had left, where she was assured she would find a fine medical facility. A mecha that looked custom built for medical transport swooped down, and Susan carefully laid Jenny in the compartment and climbed inside. They took off.

"What's the matter with her?" asked the woman driving.

"I don't know," replied Susan. "Or else I would have fixed it already. She got grabbed by a Mu and flown into that dimension barrier that's up there. The robot got blasted apart and she fell again."

"What? Are you sure she isn't dead? Nobody could survive that!"

"I'm not worried about the fall, that's inconsequential. It's the weird energy that stuck to her when she came down I'm worried about. I got rid of it but she won't wake up."

"Weird energy? That you got rid of. Right... What were her symptoms?"

"Am I just going to have to go over this with the doctors when we get there?"

"No, I'm recording it." She pointed to her dashboard where a list was forming of what Susan was saying.

"Oh." So she described what it looked like, and said that it had dissipated naturally, not wishing to undergo psychiatric evaluation for babbling about 'magic.' By the time the list was done they had arrived, and Susan carried her inside the building.

Medical personnel had her set onto a floating gurney, and whisked off to a room for an initial diagnosis. Susan followed.

"You should wait here," said one of the nurses, pointing to the sign on the door. Susan couldn't read it, but didn't want to argue with the woman. She ripped the heavy door off the wall and slammed it into her knee, doing thirty damage, enough to easily snap it in half. All eyes were now on her as she lightly tossed the pieces away.

"What sign?" she asked annoyed. "I don't see any sign. Move. Save her."

"Uh, right. Se- Se-"

"Security? I'll get the general himself down here, see that I don't. The attack on your city is over because of her sacrifice. Now *save her or I will tear this building down myself in exchange for her life!*"

Two uniformed men jogged over, demanding to know what was going on.

"This woman, she, the door..."

"I see that. Did you do that?"

"No, it spontaneously tore itself in half and flew over there. Are you going to get out of my way so I can make sure Jenny is all right, or am I going to have to move you?"

"Now, take it easy," said the one man, resting a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not sure

how you did that but-”

Susan shoved him, sending him flying (34 – 14) meters down the corridor. He yelled and impacted the wall, the corridor wasn't twenty meters long here to begin with. The other stepped back and looked at his partner, now struggling to rise as the air had been knocked out of him.

“I'm going.”

She turned and pushed back past the nurse, then stopped to see which direction Jenny had gone in. That's when the electrodes from the taser hit her in the back, bouncing off her *Invulnerability*. They fell to the floor in a tangle, and Susan didn't even bother turning her head to look at the guy.

That way looks wide enough for that gurney thing, I'll try there first.

She heard (and thanks to her *Ninjutsu* and *Spirit Sense* skills, felt) the guy rushing her, so she spun and clotheslined him. (She rolled max, a nine) He fell to the floor, as she wasn't actually attacking, rather allowing him to bounce off her *Invulnerability* and knock himself out. In this case it was like he attacked himself by running headlong into a wall, and didn't get back up again.

“And see to this guy, too,” she called to the nurse, who was trying to cast *Invisibility* untrained, but as she didn't know magic was even real, she wasn't doing very well. Susan continued down the corridor, looking into rooms until she saw Jenny. Her shirt was off, *oh my*, and they seemed to be checking her for bruises.

“You can't be in here!” exclaimed one of the people in the room, coming to block her path.

“Funny, because I seem to be,” retorted Susan. “You're wasting your time, she's not bruised. Or physically damaged in any way, so rule that out right now.”

“This report says she was picked up and dropped from a great height,” protested the doctor, or at least Susan thought he was. He was the most senior looking guy in the room, anyway, with a bushy mustache and thinning hair.

“And the report also says not to worry about that, the fall wouldn't have hurt her. She's unconscious from dimensional energies flooding her brain or something. That's what you have to worry about!”

“Are you sure she didn't break her neck in the fall?”

“AARG! Listen to- you know what, fine.” Susan stormed off, back down the corridor to where the nurse and other soldier were looking over the one on the ground. Both gave a start when she turned the corner. “Give me your stun gun,” she demanded of the one, who was fumbling it out anyway. “Yeah, that one. No, don't fire it at me...” She sighed as again electrodes bounced off her. “Honestly, why do I even try with you people? Give me that before you hurt yourself.” She zipped over and grabbed it from him, and he didn't even try to hang onto it, just gaping at her that it didn't work. “Thanks.” She walked back into the room, retracting the electrodes.

“Now hold on just a minute!” insisted the doctor. “Just what do you think you're doing with that?”

“Proving a point.” She stripped her own shirt off and jammed it up against her side so they could see it.

“No, don't!” shouted the nurse, but she pressed the button and they could all see it activate and hear the sparks.

“Satisfied? Now stop looking for physical damage and start thinking about what to do with someone who spent time in that dimensional zone up there! It tore a robot apart and did something to her, figure out what and fix it!”

She crushed the thing underfoot and put her shirt back on, while they started hooking various machines up to her. Susan sat down on a nearby stool to watch. A moment later the doctor and one of the nurses were discussing something, and the nurse had something in her hand.

“What's that about blood?” asked Susan.

“We're trying to take a blood sample, but we can't!” she replied. “The needle won't go in her arm!”

“Oh, sorry about that.” Susan stopped maintaining that spell. “Go ahead.”

They looked doubtful, but bent to the task again and this time managed it. Minutes ticked by, and they were talking about what sort of scans they should do when more soldiers burst into the room.

"Can't you see there's a woman undergoing medical treatment in here!" she shouted at them. "Go wait outside, can't you read?"

"Someone tore the door with the sign off- hey, you're that girl! Grab her!"

"Not here," shouted the doctor. "I'm trying to concentrate! Honestly, you can't just barge in here."

"Yeah!" Susan thumbed her nose at the guy.

"Sir, she's dangerous, you shouldn't go-" said another voice from beyond the door, and the general walked in.

"Tension!" yelled the one, and all four saluted at him.

The general ignored them, coming to stand in front of Susan. "Why am I always being called down to find you harassing my men?"

"Why are your men always getting in my way?"

"This is a surgical theater!" insisted the doctor. "I must insist you all leave at once! Even you, general."

"I'm not leaving," insisted Susan.

"Come on, they'll do everything they can, believe me. You can report on what happened, and I'll authorize any measures necessary to save private Everywhere. Satisfied?"

Susan knew she shouldn't be there. That she should let the people who had the best chance of helping Jenny actually help Jenny. Her magic, her skills, her knowledge- they couldn't. This was a time for this dimension's resources and medical knowledge. But on the other hand she felt rage, rage against this man, *and who does he think he is*, who could come and dictate terms to-

I don't believe it, she thought to herself. Jenny wasn't knocked out two seconds and The Darkness took me over again? Come on!

Shoot, you're starting to recognize it now. Still, way too late, so what good does it do you?

Susan let out a deep breath. "My apologies, general, of course you're right. Doctor, you also have my apologies. Please keep me informed if you can." The soldiers watched her warily as she went past, but made no move against her as the general fell in step beside her.

"Sorry," she said the guy in the hallway, being helped up by the nurse.

"Uh huh," he managed.

In the elevator again, Susan realized something important The Darkness probably hadn't wanted her to realize and thus staged that little scene back there.

"Jenny... isn't like you," she started. "I hope I can count on your desecration in this matter."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's like me, a dimensional traveler. She's not a Chiram, just like you aren't an Emaan. She got stuck here, and joined your army to help protect people, just like I do."

"When you're not throwing them around, you mean?"

"I could just as easily have punched a hole in that guy's chest. What I did was as minor as I could do."

"I see. It does explain a few things." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'll inform the doctors that any irregularities should be discussed discreetly, and that they should modify their treatments if they can for her unique physiology."

"Thank you."

"Of course. It also explains why she was so anxious to stay near you. Are you her ticket out of here?"

"In a manner of speaking. Once the world is back to normal, she can leave as normal. We have a mutual enemy in The Darkness, and she has skills she's picked up on other worlds too. Also we understand each other, how it can be lonely when you're jumping from world to world and you can't use the cultural conventions of speech you're used to because no one will get them. She gets some of them, and I get some of hers. It's nice."

“You mean like you both could say something about a character in a story you both read, and know what you were talking about?”

“Exactly.”

“Fair enough.” They walked into the office, and Susan sat down again. “So, let’s hear why they suddenly left, and how private Everywhere... oh, I get it now. Clever.”

Susan grinned. “You mean her name? Yeah, I never did ask if that was her actual last name or she just took that last name. How she got hurt, you mean? It happened like this...”

“So, should we expect more attacks now that the AI knows where you are?”

“I think it always does.”

Hi!

“It’s complicated. I don’t know. Depends on if it thinks it can win. It won’t be able to use that trick again, but the thing with The Darkness is, if it’s showing you one trick it probably has another ready to spring on you.”

“Sound strategy in any combat.”

“It bothers me, though. Why not grab both of us? Was it unsure how severe the damage would be? Did it believe seeing Jenny hurt would hurt me more? Was this just a distraction? Why not teleport a million robots to this city and just sweep across it, destroying everything? Not even I could fight that.”

“We can only surmise their system needs ample recharging time, or is somehow limited to how many it can send through at one time. Or too big a number sent through will create a kind of “dimensional lightning” that would incinerate the place they’re teleporting from.”

“So you really have no clue whatsoever how they’re doing it?”

“May as well be magic.”

Wonder if it is magic, maybe it managed to bring some down with it? Hummm...

“Let’s hope not.”

“Indeed. We have only vague ideas about the principals involved. For all we know it isn’t teleportation, but rather a really fast assembly process from hidden ‘makerbots’ if you will. A ‘replicator’ in other words, here physically that just pops a couple out, and then they attack from there and it just *seems* like they came from nowhere.”

“I’m inclined to take the fight to them, somehow.”

“I wish we could. But if we did that, they would hit us from behind, or smash the cities we left undefended.”

“What about the other powers in the world. These Emaan? Robert didn’t have much luck catching a single man, so there must be something to their technology. Can we band together with them? I mean their cities are getting attacked too, right?”

“By our accounts, yes. But work with their government? Our philosophies are quite different, and we’ve never been able to see eye to eye.”

“So what about hiring ‘mercenaries’ so to speak? They’re motivated by profits, right? Offer them money. Just ask for ships willing to fight.”

“We would get all kinds of riffraff!”

“Maybe, but some random riffraff made Robert retreat, twice. Who really does better soldering here?”

“I don’t know, just getting them to talk to me would be a challenge. I would want to go through official channels first, before taking on mercenaries.” He shuddered.

“But could you? Are there lines of communication we could use, so we don’t have to physically go there? They might be more willing to talk if they knew that’s all we could do-talk.”

“We maintain what channels we can, with the shifting of the landscape and the unreliability of wireless communication over any distance.”

“That’s all I ask. Let me talk to them,” *with Augment Skill: Persuasion going*, “and see what they say. It can’t hurt, you can’t be more standoffish with them, now can you?”

“I suppose, and they’ll be out of strangling distance if you get pissy.”

“I will be quite rational with them, I assure you.”

“I’ll believe that when it’s over. Still, actually talking with them. I have to be honest, I

never would have considered it.”

“That’s why it’ll work.”

He snorted. “Again, I’ll believe that when it’s over. Okay, I’ll see what I can do, but I’m bringing in a mediator not affiliated with either group, and you’ll be in your quarters and I’ll be in mine. I will cut you off if I think you’re a threat to the negotiation.”

“It was my idea! You don’t even know what you’re negotiating for.”

“Then I guess you better tell me beforehand, right?”

Susan sighed and started telling him what she wanted from the meeting. He leaned forward, interested.

“Of course, that’s not my complete argument, it’s what I’ve come up with just sitting there. I’ll flesh it out tonight.”

The general nodded. “Okay, I can see where you’re going with this. If it can be done... you’ve got your meeting.”

Possession is 9/10 of the law

Who: Sparkle

When: Day 5

Place: Town of Para

“So that’s why it sounded familiar,” remarked Shaya, having finished her discussion with the local “leader” of Para, named Ann. The Glomar was in radio contact range, and Shaya had raised her to see what the situation there was. She told Ann that yes, they had some spare weapons they could sell, along with grapes if she was interested.

“My citizens are always complaining they don’t have enough to eat. Sell those to them, if you must,” was her answer, before she rudely cut the transmission off.

“Sounds like a ruler that has the best interest of her subjects at heart,” remarked Kei. “How did she come to power, anyway?”

“Who knows,” answered Shaya. “Come on, we have a market to prepare for.”

And so the Glomar hovered atop what looked like a mall, and started unloading boxes of grapes and weaponry into the space they had been assigned. The place was dark and dusty, obviously unused for some time, and Reeg went grumbling off to try and get power restored to the place while the other crew started making it at least somewhat presentable. Mimsy, true to form, was yelling at Kei for lounging around, but he did have a point when he said he wasn’t an Emaan, why should he have to do the work of one?

“I guess you can start getting your own food, then, and don’t drink any more of our water. Oh, and there’s fuel for the Starburst, good luck getting any of that without us-”

“You said you wanted these boxes where?” Kei was trying to balance a bunch of them and quickly got to work. Sparkle shook her head and slipped out, *she* couldn’t carry boxes so there was no point hanging around bored. She walked down the streets, poking her nose where it probably didn’t belong in typical cat fashion.

She noticed a few things in her journey about the town. First, the place was filthy so obviously garbage pickup was not a high priority for these people. Second the people themselves seemed without hope of any kind, mutely hanging about on street corners and steps looking depressed. Oddly enough, there were lots of them, some streets absolutely lined with poorly dressed, thin, worn people. Sparkle couldn’t figure out why, the lands they had passed to get here seemed fertile enough, they should at least be able to farm and get food that way. Even if they had been transported there recently, what had crushed the spirit of these people so much that this many of them couldn’t band together for their common good? *Get some horses, Sparkle had seen some running about the fields so she knew they existed, farm during the day, and come back to the city at night to live. Someone in all these people must know how to grow things, or raise animals or something. This city looks pretty modern apart from how badly maintained it is, but there’s always survival types convinced the world is going to end and brushing up on life skills, right?*

Time soon answered the question of who was repressing them- soldiers regularly patrolled the streets, and judging from what Sparkle heard as she tailed them for a bit they were looking for some “rebel leader” named Jaan. The soldiers she saw were mostly men, much better dressed, and thought nothing of strolling down the street eating something as hungry eyes tracked them.

I think I’m beginning to see.

Sparkle felt herself making a LUCk check, and got an eighteen. As she watched, a baby ran out into the street in front of a pair of them, and a terrified woman, probably the child’s mother, grabbed her and cowered in front of them.

“Move out of the way!” shouted the man, and brought his booted foot back to kick her. He didn’t know he was rolling *Initiative* because there was a *Paragon* in the area, but he was. Sparkle hissed and *Spirit Stepped* in front of the man, appearing as though out of nowhere.

The man couldn’t stop his swing, and Sparkle did something rather reckless- spent an XP for an extra action. Her cards had included *XP Bonus* giving her two, and an *Extra Cash* giving her another two because a cat pulling a sack of money out was a little too much, even

for her. So she figured she had them to spend, and attacked the man's foot with Ryūdō. There were only two of them, so she figured she wouldn't hold back, and spent ten energy on the strike. It was eleven to fifteen (his untrained *Kicking Defenseless Ladies* check against her skilled Ryūdō check) so she struck to the side of his boot with a paw and avoided his blow meant for the woman.

She did sixteen damage, completely breaking his ankle and toppling him with a scream. His gun went flying as he fell, and many eyes fastened on it. (Four more damage done and his whole lower leg would have been torn off, so he got off lucky, though the damage roll was near maximum.)

"That cat just broke my ankle!" he screamed.

"Oh, come off it, Larry," said the other. "A cat? Larry?"

Larry was too busy clutching his ankle and blinking tears out of his eyes to respond.

Sparkle turned to the woman. "Run," she said, and the woman didn't need any more incentive than that. She hauled her child up and ran.

"It'll be worse for you, next time," she said to the soldier who couldn't believe his ears. "Keep that in mind when next to go to hurt someone."

She *Spirit Stepped* back into the alley she was in before, vanishing from their sight as quickly as she had come. Sadly, this all seemed to set something off, as the people nearby were now taking an active interest in what was going on rather than just trying to ignore the problem when the soldiers had the upper hand.

"Can you walk?"

"I don't think so," said Larry, trying to rise. "It's really broken. I don't believe this!"

One of the nearby woman timidly got closer. "Can I help you gentlemen?"

"Get out of here!" shouted the soldier.

"Oh, but I wouldn't want you to lose this," she said, stooping to pick up the fallen weapon.

"Don't touch that!"

"Let me just check the safety, this is the on position, isn't it?" She clicked something on the rifle.

"That's off you idiot! You just turned the safety-"

"What did you call me?" Suddenly the woman was no longer acting feeble or subservient, in fact she held the gun like she knew what she was doing with it.

"I, uh, I mean..." That's when another woman, *wait, why in the heck is this street made up of just woman?* bashed him in the head from behind with a pipe. He went down, and she grabbed his gun. Larry went even whiter, probably wondering if this was going to be his last patrol.

"Quite the reversal of fortune," said the woman, also clicking the safety off and pointing it at him. "I saw it, but I still don't believe it. Now, what shall we do with you?"

"Don't shoot me, please don't shoot me!"

"Turn out your pockets, and someone check this other one, too."

Uh, did I just facilitate a robbery? But I couldn't have let that woman be kicked, right? Wait, was this whole thing a setup of some kind? And I'm the one always chiding Susan for not thinking ahead.

They robbed the men, taking even the boots and helmet, then melted away leaving Larry alone with his unconscious partner. He looked about, wondering how he was going to get back to base in this state. Sparkle peeked from the alley, but the street was empty now and she wondered if she could in some way help them.

I can't do any healing at the moment, just illusions, and that's not going to help. Then the car roared by, narrowly missing the two men, but not slowing down even as Larry shouted after it. *This town is messed up. I'm going back to the Glomar and pretending nothing happened.*

But she couldn't. As she walked her mind kept turning over what she had done, and what had happened because of it. *I guess I don't know who is more in the wrong around here. Those people in the street are obviously not well off, and I can't fault them for looking to their own survival. But once those two are retrieved, will others come to make an example of the area? Did my protecting that one woman cause a chain of events to begin that I'm going*

to regret? I'll probably never know the full outcome of my action, and who does? Trying to be Susan is awfully exhausting. I don't know how she does it.

Sparkle returned to the site of the Glomar to find the building much cleaner than before, and many were gathered outside to see what was going on. Sparkle didn't see them carrying much in the way of trade, but followed them in when Shaya opened the doors.

"Welcome back, Starburst," she said as Sparkle passed her. "Did you see anything interesting in the city?"

You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

One woman with long blond hair, fuzzy and dirty, and wearing a blue outfit stalked up to her and held something up for her to look at.

"It's Emaan made, is it not?" she demanded. "And an Emaan ship dropped it off months ago, reports are clear that's what happened."

"What's it doing in this picture?" asked Shaya, taking the picture. Sparkle tried to see what it was without looking too interested, but it was too far away for her to focus on and the angle was wrong.

"Making our lives miserable. Perhaps you should do something about it?"

"Oh dear. Come inside and we can talk."

Sparkle followed them, and Shaya called Kei and Mimsy into a back room where she uprighted some chairs and told them to sit down. Sparkle got up on the table and looked the picture over after she tossed it on the table, and the woman looked her over.

"What's with your cat?" she asked.

"Oh, don't mind her," said Shaya. "She does a lot of weird things, we're used to it."

Weird? Un-catlike, perhaps, but to call my behavior weird of all things. I never.

The picture was of some kind of energy weapon, mounted on a castle wall, and firing down on a bunch of people that were fleeing from it.

"I ask because she looks like a cat my followers reported saying they saw right before... just a second." She pulled a device from a pocket and spoke into it. "Hey, Elisa, what color cat did you say struck down that soldier? Black? No, just curious." She looked at Sparkle, who figured now was a good time to hop down and scoot under the table. The woman bent down to look at her, but shook her head. "Never mind. Do you recognize this weapon?"

Kei and Mimsy shared a look, but Mimsy shrugged and they both leaned over to look at the picture.

"It's a Fragmentation Cannon," said Shaya, "Mostly used for mining. This one, I see, is being used for something quite different."

"It doesn't need any more than low power to vaporize somebody, and our illustrious 'queen' uses it as a deterrent to further uprisings in this city. This makes her soldiers bold, and they've become more and more uncontrollable since the thing was installed. Now the citizens are terrified of them, and every day another one of my resistance group gives up and leaves."

Is this that Jaan they were talking about? I guess my messing with those soldiers was justified after all?

"I see. We don't lease them out for military purposes, just mining. It looks like this queen of yours is not mining in this picture."

"So you'll repossess it?"

"I doubt she'll just return it if we ask nicely."

"So then don't ask. Sell... loan us the weapons were you going to sell Ann. Then help us take it out and take our city back from that... woman."

"Loan because you can't actually pay us anything for them?"

"Ann has stolen anything worth anything, our city has been gutted. She's a tyrant, and you Emaan let it happen. Once we liberate the place and get our possessions back, we can pay you whatever you want."

"Now just a minute," spoke up Mimsy, "we didn't just *let* anything here happen. Whoever leased this couldn't have known she would use it like that."

"But you didn't keep tabs on it, either. Something as powerful as that cannon, you think

someone would come and make sure it was being used properly.”

“Who has time for that?”

“So she just gets to use it with impunity because you’re too busy to keep your own technology under control?”

“Ladies, please,” said Kei, “let’s not fight. Obviously we’ll help you out, right, Shaya?”

“We have the weapons, and I suppose some kind of moral imperative to make this situation right. You can tell us about the layout of where the cannon is kept, what’s guarding it, that sort of thing?”

Jaan (if that’s who she was) nodded fiercely.

“And what, exactly, are you offering once this is over, for our help?”

“Shaya!” protested Kei.

“Sorry Kei, but this is who we are. Nothing, especially in this world, comes free.”

“Or even cheap,” muttered Jaan. “Don’t worry, you’ll be well compensated.”

“Very good. I’ll draw up a contract, then we have a raid to plan.”

Even as the group began to plan the raid, Mome peeked into the room.

“Master, a bunch of soldiers are here,” she said hesitantly.

“Oh no, I forgot we were supposed to sell guns to the leader here.” Jaan glared at her. “We didn’t know the situation before! But how to get rid of them now?”

“They won’t take no for an answer,” agreed Jaan.

“I’ll see what I can do to get rid of them,” Shaya said sadly, standing up.

Me too, thought Sparkle, an idea forming in her mind. She slipped past Shaya and made her way out of the building again, finding a quiet spot. She took extra time with an *Illusion*, getting a twenty one, and a replica of Larry appeared before her. She would have smiled if she could, and had him run over to where the soldiers were now arguing with Shaya about how much these guns were worth.

“What are you doing here?” she made him shout, and all heads turned towards him. “There’s been an attempt on the life of her majesty, all soldiers are to report back to headquarters for further orders!”

“I didn’t hear about this!” said one, pulling some kind of communicator. Sparkle had a second of panic, but then remembered her range was M, not just this one “ghost.” The man called back for verification of his orders, and Sparkle covered the reply with the illusionary voice verifying everything Larry had said. It probably made for a confusing conversation on the other end, but it worked on this end. She wasn’t sure it would, but if something can be covered up by a physical illusion, why not cover up a voice with an auditory illusion? She further ordered them back on the double, they could buy weapons any time. Apparently he was satisfied, and put the communicator back.

“What about you?” the man asked, when Larry didn’t turn to join them.

“I’m ordered to question these people here, see if they know anything about this plot to murder her highness.”

“Very well. Report back to me when you’re done.”

“Yes sir!”

Not likely. Even if the real Larry has made it back to base by now. Which I doubt, he’ll know nothing of this. Wonder how long it’ll take them to figure out they’ve been duped, and try putting the pieces together? I wish them luck.

When they were out of sight, Sparkle made her *Illusion* turn to Shaya. “Get packed up and get out of here,” he told her. “The queen and her thugs don’t need any more guns.”

“Aren’t you one of those- hey!”

He turned and went around the corner, where Sparkle dropped the spell. Jaan rushed after him, but stopped dead.

“He’s gone!” she said, rubbing her eyes. She didn’t see Sparkle, crouched behind a box, trying hard not to laugh.

The others came to look, and all admitted it was odd but they had work to do.

As they did it, Sparkle made her own way back to the ship, where the citizens there had pitched in to help load. It seemed they too wanted to keep the guns away from the queen.

“You’ll still help us, right?” asked Jaan.

“Come with us now, and we’ll plan it out for tonight. We can flee but make our way back here once the sun is down.”

“Right.” Jaan told her followers to get aboard the Glomar, which they did, and it took off.

So the resistance fighters and the crew of the Glomar talked about what needed to be done, while Sparkle napped to get some energy back. When she woke up the weapons and the members of the group were gone, with orders to attack the compound once the cannon was gone. The crew of the Glomar would sneak into the compound and “liberate” the cannon, attaching anti-gravity devices to it and simply floating it out of there. Sparkle tagged along, but there wasn’t much for her to do. Mome got spotted and shot down on the approach, which Sparkle would have guessed would raise some kind of alarm. Oddly, that alarm never sounded, and the crew found themselves in front of the door barring the way into the storage shed that held the cannon.

Why is this place not crawling with troops right now?

Mome even made her way back to the group, prompting a happy reunion between her and Kei, and the door swung open. Sparkle looked all around. *This is way too easy. Don’t tell me there isn’t a simple alarm on this door?*

A few soldiers were inside, but Kei swiftly took care of them, before they could even shoot.

I didn’t make any LUCk checks since I got here. Did someone else? Could one of these people have a higher LUCk than me? Doesn’t seem possible...

The units attached, the gun floated out according to plan and they got most of the way out of the camp before they were discovered again. After racing back to the Glomar, the crew started attaching the gun to the side of the ship, while Kei went back out in the Starburst to run interference for them. From her vantage point outside the ship she was pretty sure she witnessed a battle between the mecha and some tanks, which was laughably one sided.

But her eyes widened as panels in the castle opened and missile launchers raised up out of the holes.

Then they fired.

Oh please, let them be heat seeking...

The others had finished attaching the gun and gone back down, so Sparkle was alone. (This was an eighteen LUCk check.) She quickly cast *Illusion*, which under normal circumstances wouldn’t be much use against something as dumb as a missile. However, one often overlooked quality of the *Illusion* spell was the ability to simulate a temperature as well as an image, and Sparkle imagined the hottest thing she could at the maximum range she could. There was nothing in the sky to give her away, but the sensors in the missiles, unable to make even rudimentary REASON checks got told there was something even hotter to hit above their original target. The missiles veered off from their course of hitting the Glomar and struck each other as they collided at the “hot spot” Sparkle had created several meters away. They exploded harmlessly and Sparkle allowed herself a moment of satisfaction.

Whew.

With that, the cannon fired, and the castle was destroyed in one shot, winning the day.

Why do I think this was still way too easy?

107

Council

Who: Susan

Time: 1:00, day 5

Place: Susan's room

At 1:00 the representatives from the Emaan territories, the general and several other high ranking officers, and someone dressed differently than both sides appeared on her screen. The images were small, but at least she could see who she was talking to. Susan had discussed with the general exactly how much to reveal to them, and he suggested not holding anything back. To do so would call into question why exactly she was participating in the first place, and weaken her arguments. So she introduced herself.

"I'm Susan Felton, dimensional traveler sent by a being named Silverstreak who exists beyond your three dimensional plane of existence. I've come to try and put this world to rights before either the Mu destroy you or the planet itself becomes inhospitable to life."

"One girl?" scoffed the Emaan representative, who introduced herself as Misha.

"General Wright, is this some kind of joke? Even if I accepted this ridiculous claim that some kind of god has sent her, how is one young woman supposed to solve our problems?"

"Oh, but two Singularities solving all your problems you accept without question, is that it?" *I just wish Jenny had woken up, I need someone around to make sure I don't go off the rails again and do something regrettable.*

Don't worry, I'm always with you, so you aren't alone.

You're the problem, you idiot!

You don't have to insult me...

Misha had no answer, so the facilitator moved the meeting along. "This meeting was called to discuss a possible working arrangement being reached between the Emaan government and the Chiram government. Chiram representative General Wright, you called this meeting so please begin."

"Thank you, facilitator. I will pass the floor to Susan, as this was all her idea in the first place. Susan?"

"Thank you, general. Everyone, I would like you to consider a few things, both in the past and for the very near future. My goal today is to come to an arms sharing agreement whereby Chiram and Emaan forces no longer clash, but instead turn their attentions to the greater threat- the Mu. It can't have escaped your notice that attacks against both your territories have increased just recently." Both sides shook their heads. "Those attacks will continue, for reasons I hope to make clear during this meeting. For the moment, simply accept that the Mu are intent on wiping you all out. Doesn't seem like a stretch of the imagination, right? So wouldn't it be better if you worked together for your own mutual protection?"

"Work together?" snorted Misha. "With the people that attack peaceful trade ships? You must be joking."

"Peaceful? You were holding the Singularity hostage, after scooping him up when he hadn't even been here a few minutes. How could we let that go?" asked the general. "What happened later I would like to apologize for, of course..."

"We aren't 'holding him hostage' any more than you're holding the one you have now hostage. Or are you actually holding him hostage?"

"Olson joined us out of a sense of duty and responsibility to the world."

"Funny how the other one doesn't seem to share that sense of duty. Wait, we 'were' holding him hostage? And what's this about an apology? No, wait a moment." She made a slashing motion across her throat and spoke to someone off camera. She looked puzzled, and nodded, making the audio come back. "We still have custody of the singularity, last I heard. Are you claiming to have captured him recently? Our last report from the Glomar was that the pursuit force broke off for some reason. What are you apologizing for? Harassing the ship and crew? No one was hurt, so it's fine."

"What? But didn't the ship that he was..." He made the same gesture. "I've had the

audio to them cut, this must mean the Singularity is still alive. That ship going down was some kind of trick, just like Robert said. They would have been furious with us otherwise, now that I think about it. But it's like she isn't even gloating we got fooled, in fact she seems as puzzled as I am why I even brought it up. What gives, do you think?"

"No idea, but you can't just out and out ask them, can you?"

The general shook his head. "No, we have to make them believe we saw through it, or at least broke off the last attack ourselves. I wonder if I could spin it that way, that I called Robert back so their little trick of- anyway, keep your ears open for any other tidbits like that."

"Will do."

"Never mind, I guess I had some bad intel. I'm sorry about going off on a tangent like that. Where were we?"

"I think I had the table last?" Susan reminded them, and they both nodded for her to continue. "Thank you. The so called Singularity is only somewhat related to our meeting today. Yes, it's nice both, if only two there are, can now be said to be around so the world can get fixed. But here's the thing- what good is it if the Singularity is found if you get wiped out by the Mu? Look at your world right now. Is it heating up? Yes, it is. Will that kill you in the long term? Yes, it will. But you've done all right so far, so that problem can wait. The shifting landscape, again, troublesome and dangerous, but it's been what, twenty years? I think you've learned to live with it by now. So even that won't do you in any time soon. The only active threat against you is the robots. So let's destroy their factories, solving the immediate problem, and then work out what is to be done about fixing the world."

"Do you know where their factories are?" asked Misha.

"No," admitted Susan. "But we can hardly look with things as they are now, right? If we take troops away from our cities, Mu attacks become a bigger threat. That's true for both of your peoples, isn't it?" Both nodded their heads. "But if we combine our efforts we can get around that problem. Maybe one city is too well defended, and the soldiers there sit idle. Put them to work alongside your opposites and take the battle to whatever Mu you find."

"We'll want certain assurances," said Misha, leaning forward.

"Oh, here it comes," remarked the general.

"Before we agree to anything, we want the Singularity safe in our territory."

"Told you. What good is just one of them going to do you?"

"Insurance, like I said."

"So you are holding him hostage!"

"We're not going to lock him up!"

"A big cage is still a cage."

"People, please. Emaan rep Misha, let me ask you something. I want an honest answer- do your people know exactly what steps to take, using the Singularity, that will fix the world?"

"Yes, do you? I'd be interested in that as well."

"I'm not telling you that. We know the Chiram do, why else would they trying so hard to capture him?"

Susan's eyes sought the general, who took a deep breath and nodded.

"I can tell you they don't," she said, and Misha looked doubtful. "Now maybe they've lied to me, which I assure you they realize would be totally against their best interests. I can tell you, any plans their scientists have are half complete at best, and no one can tell me where these rumors of the Singularities coming together fixing everything come from. I think you're grasping at straws, myself. You have no idea what would happen if they got together, is my thinking. Let's say there are two of them, as you all suppose. What if they're like magnets? Held one way they attract, but held another and they repulse. What if just being in the same room makes some kind of dimensional rift form? You don't know, neither side does. Unless you would like to present us with some hard evidence your science has uncovered?"

Misha looked down.

"I thought not. You have only hope and half formed ideas in any case. That's another reason you should work together. Your science is different. You see things in a different way, and perhaps what both of your people have learned put together will provide a clearer picture than either has at the moment."

"One thing is clear enough to us," Misha said, looking up again. "Maybe something they haven't told you, if as you claim you're from outside this whole mess we call a world. Another 'half formed idea' as you call it. Whoever controls both Singularities has a much larger chance of coming through the restoration in one piece."

"General?"

"That's one way to interpret things, I suppose," he answered.

"Is there another?" Misha sneered.

"Certainly," answered Susan. "Based on facts rather than superstition."

"What facts?"

"The fact is, these two were closest when the bomb went off, bathing them in some kind of dimensional energies, correct?"

The general nodded.

"When these energies are drawn out, and the dimensions stabilize, one of two things will happen. This world, as it exists at that moment, will forever be the one that remains. No more additions or subtractions to it will occur, and the shell above will dissolve and return the weather to normal. *Or* the worlds will be harmlessly torn apart and returned to their proper place in space/time. What third possibility are you worried about that 'controlling' the Singularities would make any difference?"

"The world chosen by them will become dominant."

Susan stared at her. "How is the will of two people going to change the physical law of what's happening here? I can't wish really hard for a rock not to fall when I drop it and have it float up, instead." *I would have to cast a spell on it, but that's beside the point.* "Why would this be different? And what exactly does 'dominant' mean here?"

"The others will vanish."

"Of course they'll vanish. They'll all go back where they should be!"

"And you have proof one or the other will happen, or are you the one know hoping something is true?"

"We know the bomb went off. We know areas of the world are forcibly but without too much harm coming to them transported between dimensions. This happened like throwing a stone into a pond causes ripples to happen. Just because a duck was bobbed up and down on the waves doesn't make the duck able to determine what happens when a diver goes down and retrieves the stone."

"That was the most bizarre analogy I've ever heard," said one of the other Emaan. "You have no proof either, in other words. You said something about the Mu, however, that you knew for a fact why they were attacking us?"

"That much I can say with certainty, yes. The Mu have been corrupted from whatever their original programming said to do by an entity not unlike the one that sent me here. The name it gave was Darkvoid, but I call it The Darkness. Long story short, it wants to wipe out all life here with a minimum of effort so it can take the energy of this dimension for its own purpose."

"Which is?"

"To further ascend into higher states of being."

The people looked at each other, confused.

"In other words," said one of the Emaan, "it would be like one of us trying to become four dimensional rather than three?"

"Exactly. It can't just take the energy because it's bound up inside of you all. But if it got freed, it could be taken. I've stopped it on several worlds already, and I'll stop it here."

"By destroying the Mu?"

"By driving it off world. I'll need to destroy whatever system it's currently in, hence my request to help me find possible locations the Mu might be coming from. I learned in the last world that I *must* kill the host to release The Darkness, I guess in this case that means just smashing up whatever supercomputer it took up residence inside. If that will free the Mu back to their original programming I have no idea, but destroying their entire race isn't my goal if it doesn't have to be."

"This brings up a good point," put in the general. "Do you know when this being came on the scene? Could it have manipulated things before the event to cause this world, where

we fight each other and are dying from the heat, to come into being?"

"That's entirely possible. It's already admitted to me it wants to use the minimal energy it can to destroy a world. Also Silverstreak sends me to key moments and events that could cause whole reality chains to fall. Basically it attacks the weakest link to get the maximum result from the minimum of work. If some huge event is going to take place that threatens the world, it'll use it. Otherwise it takes someone over and causes as much trouble as it can." *Of course, he gave me some line about time moving at different speeds and such but then I've never really had to look hard for key people relating to the 'event' and I've never felt rushed, like the end of the world is just minutes away. I always get enough time to scope the situation out and see what my magic can do. That can't be coincidence, right?*

"And this is what you do?" asked Misha. "Travel to different worlds and save them from this malevolent force that wants to destroy them?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Some of it's personal. It attacked my father's world, that's how he got started. I'm following in his footsteps, and looking for a friend of mine that got lost between worlds in a very improbable accident when we first got started."

"Whether you believe all this or not," said Jeffrey, "the fact remains we should do something about these Mu if we can. Forces of darkness reprogramming them aside, the Mu are real and they are a threat."

"You believe her story?"

The general didn't hesitate. "I've seen enough of her combat skills to believe she's not just some random woman that showed up and is trying to scam us. Her abilities are real, so I tend to think her story is too."

"Interesting. And troubling... and hard to prove. I don't know."

"We'll have to take back the space elevator in any case, and can you honestly say your forces alone would be enough to do that? Without massive casualties, I mean. Even if you had the two singularities, you would still need our help to actually use them in any meaningful way. Don't forget that."

"I suppose you have a point."

"So what do you say? Shall we work together?"

"And we're back to those assurances I spoke of earlier."

"Go on. You want yours safe in a city somewhere. What are your other demands?"

"Give us- ahem- station the other Singularity- Olson, isn't it? Station him on one of our ships, and keep him away from the battles. After all it would be a shame if he was killed in the line of duty, before we could figure out how he can help fix the world, I mean."

"And then you would have both, and we would have nothing."

"But didn't Susan herself say it didn't matter? Don't tell me you can't trust the person sitting in your own city, especially after saying you believed her story about 'monsters' from another dimension! I would have figured she would convince you of all this first!"

"That's not the point. We're studying him in hopes of learning the real truth behind all this. We can't do that without him being here! You must see that."

"So send your scientists along. This is all about cooperation and mutual information sharing, isn't it?"

"Our equipment is better."

"According to you, maybe. But please, send it along too if that's all you're worried about."

"And top secret. Nor is it all that mobile."

"Oh, of course, always some excuse, isn't there?"

"I can't just have a whole bunch of personnel and equipment fall into..."

"Enemy hands?" Misha asked, a patronizing smile on her face.

"The Mu, if they attack."

"Uh huh. Just because we aren't the military culture you are, that doesn't mean we couldn't defend the Singularities. We've defended one from you, after all," she finished with a smirk.

"It does seem reasonable to me," put in Susan. "Though I might not put them too near

each other until we figure out what that will mean.”

“But who knows how close is too close?” asked the general. “Do you?”

“Oh, ah, no.”

“Best to keep them far apart in that case.”

“How convenient. Sadly, there’s nothing else you can really give us to prove your good intentions. Even if we came and got a demonstration of Susan’s skills here, the ones that convinced you, there’s no way to prove anything she did wasn’t just staged.”

“What about me?” asked Susan. “If it’s a ‘hostage’ you want, I’ll go aboard one of your ships. I can destroy Mu from there just as easily as here.”

Misha scoffed. “Sorry, but you could be some elaborate ruse on the part of the general here. I mean higher dimensional beings? Taking the energy of our world? It’s so crazy it’s probably true, but we can’t take that chance.”

“Besides,” another of the Emaan spoke up. “You don’t know where to strike anyway. So our working together couldn’t begin until later. It does work out well, though.”

“What does?” asked Jeffrey.

“Trust can be earned. Call off your attacks on our vessels. Leave our markets alone. Then we can see about working with you.”

“In the meantime, can we at least agree to share all the information we have on the Mu? Your ships are everywhere, maybe with what they’ve picked up and what we know, some kind of pattern to their movements might emerge.”

“Of course. We always would have done that, if you had asked. I must admit, you’ve at least done that much, Susan. If you can keep the Chiram from thinking with their guns a little longer, maybe we can actually save this world.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Very well. You know how to reach me, general, when you have something concrete for me to deal me.”

“And the same goes for you. Don’t hesitate to call if your ships or cities come under attack. We’ll help you however we can. More of that trust building, as you call it.”

“An excellent suggestion. We’ll be in touch.”

Their panels went dark, along with the mediator’s.

“Not as much as I hoped for,” remarked Susan to Jeffrey, “but I suppose it’s a start.”

“It’s our fault, really. If we had opened lines of communication to them straight off, all those years ago, instead of just trying to pretend they didn’t exist... But we did, and now here we are. We need their help but they can’t trust us because of people like Robert.”

“My crazy story doesn’t make things any easier. I need to find something that can’t be faked to show people I run into I really am who and what I say I am.”

Some kind of PC badge? asked The Darkness.

I’m fairly certain I have no idea what you’re talking about.

Sparkle would. Comedy gold and only you to appreciate it. Pity.

“Our stun guns bouncing off you clinched it for me. Oh, you’ll want to go see Private Everywhere, I got word just before the meeting started that she... Susan? Hello? Bye, I guess.”

Susan bounced on the balls of her feet, waiting for the elevator to take her to the right floor, and finally it managed the task. She burst in to Jenny sitting up and smiling at her, and ran to hug her.

“You’re okay! I was so worried, I’m sorry I couldn’t prevent that Mu from grabbing you—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine, Susan, and you’re crushing me, literally. Just how strong are you, anyway?”

“Sorry!” She eased off, holding Jenny’s shoulders and looking into her eyes. “You are all right, right?”

“I think so. They’re keeping me for observation, but I feel okay. Going into that dimension zone just kind of messed with my brain a little. It couldn’t do any damage because of your spell, but it didn’t know that. So it shut down to ‘protect’ me, at least that’s what they think happened. I didn’t tell them about it being, you know, actual magic. They would have put

me in a rubber room!"

"Yeah, luckily the general never really asked about that, either. I think maybe he just thinks what he's seen happen around me is part of me being from another world? He hasn't seen me cast anything, it's always been going when he's around. Anyway, it's good to see you up and about."

"Did I miss much?"

"Just a meeting with the Emaan. Didn't go too badly."

"That's good. Oh, I did have a question for you. It's been driving me crazy since I woke up, like my subconscious has been working on it while I was passed out."

"Okay, shoot."

"What exactly is bellicose, anyway?"

Susan stared at her, not mentally prepared for a question of *word definition*. "What's... what? Bellicose? Where did you get that from?"

"That Mu said it, right? Before it grabbed me?"

"Did it? I have no idea!"

"Spoiling for a fight," said the nurse, walking in. "Acting aggressive."

"Huh?" both asked. Susan pulled away, blushed like she was caught doing something wrong, then harder for being embarrassed about her reaction at all.

"Bellicose. You asked what it meant. I was a language arts major before I got into nursing."

"Doesn't describe you at all," remarked Jenny, trying to stifle a giggle.

"Yeah, can't see what it was getting at," remarked Susan, grinning back. "I'm like a delicate princess, never a cross word, or a raised voice here, no way."

"I heard about the door incident, you know," scolded the nurse. "Seems about right to me. See you keep your temper a little more today, okay hun?"

Both girls broke into relieved laughter, and she shook her head and walked out.

Secret Agent Cat

Who: Sparkle

Where: Glomar

When: Mid afternoon, day 6

There was some excitement on the Glomar the next day, as Mimsy was rushing about the ship yelling at people to get things cleaned up. Sparkle raised her head and got up, heading for the bridge to see what was up. She came in as Shaya was talking to someone on the computer screen.

"We've been doing all right so far," she seemed to continue, "and why should we expect another attack if what you say is true?"

"I don't know what the Chiram's ploy is, calling a meeting like that," said the golden haired figure on the screen. "All I know is my orders. Meet up with the Elmensa and the Balistor and allow them to escort you to the home city."

"From what you said it seems like they're more willing to talk now than ever, and that's the first time that's happened."

"Exactly why the higher ups are so nervous. What if they're using this to try and make us relax our guard? You were heading that way anyway, so what's the difference?"

"The difference is you coming here and demanding we hand Kei over. He's not a piece of machinery you can just take possession of, you know."

"No, he's far more important than that. That's why we want to make sure he's safely delivered."

"Look, Kei stays with us because he trusts us. We've watched each other's backs in the Chiram attacks, and that means something. He's not going to cooperate with someone that just shows up and demands him. The way you're talking, you would stick him in a cell!"

"That's what 'protective custody' means, yes. We don't want him flying off, I mean you upgraded his busted mecha didn't you? What were you thinking?"

"It wasn't a mecha at the time, and yes we did. We were thinking a trained soldier in a modern machine would keep us safer than just hoping the Chiram would stop attacking us."

"I guess that makes sense. But our orders are clear."

"It's like you said, we're all going to the same place. Is it really necessary to antagonize the man? For now you're just an escort to make sure the Chiram don't attack again. Forcing him to go onto your ship, when you're all strangers to him, will probably turn him against us."

"In the end that won't- never mind. Fine, if you think you can keep him under control, so be it. I'm entering into my report you've refused to hand him over, but are otherwise willing to stay with us. We'll be coming alongside and slaving our two ships together."

"You really don't trust me, do you?"

"I don't trust anything about this. Being ordered to pull up our market and use valuable fuel in our hurry to meet up with you? The Chiram trying to use diplomacy? And then there's that weird girl the leaders said they talked to, said she was on some kind of mission from god or something."

Weird girl? That must be Susan? Has she been making trouble for people, in her own special way?

"What weird girl?"

The figure shook her head. "You got me, they didn't go into detail. Just some strange girl that didn't look Chiram, but who was talking to the general like an equal and being vaguely threatening even while she said things were in our best interest to do."

Yeah, got to be.

"Very well. But I will be telling Kei to stay away from your people, so don't think about trying to abduct him or anything. And I'll want to have a passcode to release our two ships, twelve digits, six from me and six from you. And I want your ship to follow my commands, not the other way around."

"Now who's not being trusting? Fine, whatever. We're coming around now."

Sparkle looked out the windows, and there were three ships, looking mostly like the

Glomar but with different colorings, coming about to point in the same direction they were.

Looks like these people are taking no chances, if they've sent three more ships to repel any more Chiram attacks against Kei. Though honestly they would probably only get in the way if it came to an actual fight. But what did that lady mean when she said Kei turning against them wouldn't matter? What are their real orders, I wonder? They can't be here to kill him, that would defeat the point, they keep going on about how they need him. What is their real goal? And can I find it out somehow?

She followed Shaya down to the door they used when leaving the ship, and watched as she opened it and extended a platform towards the same door on the other. *Good thing they have exits on either side.* Shaya looked towards the back of the ship where a similar platform was being extended there. She waited until the ships were exactly parallel and the platform slid into place, locking the two ships together. From the other ship came the woman Sparkle had seen, looking human but with the two tentacles from her back blowing in the wind. She wore the same uniform, had green eyes and a small nose, and looked to be a little shorter than Shaya when she came over the platform.

"Go ahead and type your six digits in," Shaya said to her, indicating a numeric panel by the door. The other woman shook her head but punched in a code, and Shaya did the same. "Very well. Would you like to come in? And if your crew would like to come over, I can introduce you to Kei. I'm sure my crew would love the company, it's boring seeing the same old people all the time, isn't it?"

"If we're going to be fighting off the Chiram together, we should get to know the man we might have to die for." She stepped back over to her ship and disappeared just inside, using the panel to make some kind of shipwide announcement. That done she came back over and held a hand and her tentacles out to Shaya. "Look, it is good to see you again, Shaya. I'm sorry I was so abrupt before, my orders came as quite a shock, being the nearest vessel to where you were."

Shaya took them, and smiled back. "You too, Telia, it's been too long. Come on in, I hope you like grapes."

Several people joined the crew of the Glomar in the common area (not that most areas on Enaam ships weren't "common" as they shared almost every space, including where they slept.) and everyone was gabbing away. Sparkle watched them for awhile, leading Puknar, the only male that came over to remark on her un-catlike behavior.

"Oh, we're used to it by now," Jaby said, "but you're right, it's almost like she's listening and understanding us, don't you think?"

More than you can possibly imagine.

Her *Short Attention Span*, which honestly should come up more, and *Curiosity* finally drove her to head over to the other ship and poke around to see what she could find. The ship was laid out nearly identical to the Glomar, with the large sleeping area, (what few men there were aboard Enaam* vessels changed clothes or even bathed with the woman right there, seeming to think nothing of it. *A very different society*, Sparkle had through when she first realized it.) The small private bedroom for those wishing to "get it on," as even that wasn't done with the others around. *Though everyone knows what a couple is doing in there if they are not with everyone in the common sleeping area. So what difference does it make?* Kitchen area, large cargo space, bridge, Sparkle thought that without all the little personal touches added by the crew of each ship, it would be hard to tell the two apart. *Which makes sense, they were probably built on some kind of assembly line, like cars would be back home.*

Doors on this ship also responded to a touch, which was good because as soon as she crossed over, Sparkle went *Invisible* to avoid anyone seeing her and commenting on it. She didn't find anything particularly incriminating, but then she couldn't read anything even if she had. Any number of papers scattered around the bridge could have read "Go kill the singularity" and she would never have known. But she did hear an interesting conversation when everyone came back about an hour later.

"He seems like a decent person," said Puknar.

"He's great!" agreed Merimeth, the younger girl who seemed to be the Mimsy of this other ship. "So handsome."

"I'll give you that, he is," agreed Telia, the captain. "Doesn't seem very serious about his role in fixing our world though."

"I don't think he's serious about anything," said Merimeth. "Did you see him flirting with both of us? So shameful. And Mimsy looked like she wanted to swat him."

"I thought she was getting married to Srei, don't know why she would care."

"But did you see Srei? He didn't look too pleased with Kei either, and Mimsy wouldn't let him sit next to her. I think she's falling for him."

"None of our business," reminded Telia. "We just need to make sure he reaches the city in one piece. Since we can't keep him here we'll have to be extra cautious if he tries to run."

Puknar looked troubled. "You do think he'll side with us, don't you?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"I don't know, as nice as he is I think he's a bit irresponsible."

"But there's irresponsible and there's insane. Why would he not want to fix the world? He's in just as much danger as we are from sudden dimensional instability or overheating."

"True. I'm just concerned, I mean we know they have ways of... insuring his loyalty to us."

Wait, what's this now?

"They didn't say they would be doing that in our orders."

"But why would they? Something like that would be strictly need to know. Besides, even if we knew they planned something like that, would our duty change? Orders are orders, and we have ours. If the higher ups believe they need to insure his loyalty by changing his brain patterns, that's their ethical dilemma not ours."

"Would that even work on him?" asked Merimeth. "I mean he looks more Chiram than Enaam, plus he's from another world. Our brains are different, he doesn't have the extra motor neurons we have for controlling these." Her tentacles waved.

"Poor guy, how does he cope, anyway?"

Everyone grinned, but it was short lived.

"We're talking about saving our world, and besides, this is all just speculation at this point. We'll do what we're tasked with and bring him in."

"Okay, Telia," both said, and went off to find something else to do.

But it's not exactly that easy for me. I wonder if there would be some way I could find out for sure? I mean I suppose it's not any of my concern, but I feel Kei should be informed if these people are going to use the local equivalent of one of the unforgivable curses from back home. Messing with another's will is a pretty nasty thing to do.

She followed the captain up to the bridge, and an older man swiveled in the chair to turn and look at her. "Any problems, Meelic?" she asked.

"Nope. Our ship is now totally under their navigational control. I've put in an alarm, like you said, so we'll get notified if they go too far off course. And now that you're back I'll start rigging the door clamps so we can manually release them if we have to."

She looked troubled. "I hope we don't have to, but better safe than sorry."

"I know. How was your meeting with Shaya?"

"Good. She looks good, and her crew seems in good spirits. The singularity... well, he's not what I expected."

"He is technically an alien, so knowing his mind might be impossible."

"True. Anyway, if you want to go see your counterpart on the Glomar, go ahead. Go talk technical stuff, I'm sure Reeg would be happy to see you again."

"I'll do that. Thanks."

Telia plopped down in the chair he vacated, looking troubled. She activated a panel and then cut it off several times, then crossed her arms and scowled at nothing. "No, I have to follow orders. And I can't assume the worst," she said to no one. "But I can't just sit here, I'll ask Merimeth for a game, take my mind off things." She rose and took one last look around. "Nothing for me to do up here anyway, now that I can't even fly my own ship. Do you really

not trust your own sister, Shaya?" she asked this last looking over at the Glomar, and left the room, leaving Sparkle to ponder.

After a moment to make sure she was really gone, she hopped up into the chair herself. Through her *Adaptive Skill* and watching Telia almost activate the computer, she knew just what to do. She dropped *Invisibility* and put up a strong *Illusion*, taking the extra time and throwing in energy. A "shell" of *Illusion* went up around her, and she touched the controls that Telia had, adding in the final sequence (at least she hoped that's what she had been doing. She was going to be real embarrassed if it turned out Telia was trying to activate the self destruct or something.)

"Government office, Aleina speaking." said a young female on the other end. "Oh, hi again Telia. What's up? Did you run into problems with your last orders or something?"

"I just came back from a meeting with the crew of the Glomar," Sparkle made the *Illusion* say, "and I wanted to make a few things clear just so there was no misunderstandings later." As magical *Illusions* were solid, the camera picked them up just fine, but Sparkle still gave a small sigh of relief that the sound was transmitted too.

"What are you talking about?"

"My crew has expressed some... reservations let's say, about bringing Kei back if he's just going to have his thought patterns changed."

"That information wasn't included in your orders, how did-"

"Come on, you don't think we're stupid, do you?"

Aleina gave a rueful grin. "No, and I told them that myself. Okay, what do you want to report, I'll forward it on."

"First, Kei is totally on our side. Mimsy in particular has him totally eating out of her hand."

"How so?"

"She's broken off her engagement to Srei and has Kei believing she might marry him instead. He's totally smitten with her."

"What?" Aleina looked horrified. "But she's left it late as it is! You know what will happen if she doesn't get married soon! Has she had her first fever yet?"

I know of no such thing, and what's a 'first' fever?

"Not that I know of. It's just an example of the level of dedication the crew has to making sure Kei does exactly what we want," she said instead. "They actually discussed it, and felt the risk of having any procedures done was too great. His thought patterns are just too different than ours, and that means our techniques might brain fry him rather than bring about any noticeable changes. But you know how the higher ups are, they'll push ahead even if the risk is too great, 'just in case' or something meaningless like that." *Please don't be reasonable people, please don't be reasonable people.*

"Yeah, you've got that right." *Yes!* "There's still time then, if we take care of this... sorry, I was just thinking of poor Mimsy. It must be so tough for her!"

"I could tell she was hurting, but her loyalty to our people is very strong."

"It must be, to risk that much. Wow, I couldn't have done it, could you?"

"The sakes are pretty high, you understand that, right?"

"I know, I know. Wow, Mimsy is my new hero. All right, I'll send your concerns to the higher ups, hopefully this can put their minds at ease."

"Thank you, Alenia, I knew I could count on you. Oh, can I ask you to do one other thing for me?"

"Of course, anything, Telia!"

"Can I get something in writing? Right now my crew has a lot of uncertainty about this whole situation, and you know what rumors can do to a small crew like ours. If you can send me something I can assure them with, make sure they know they don't have to feel guilty if the higher ups still decide to chance the procedure, it would really help me out."

"You figured it out on your own, I can send you the full report I guess. I'm sort of breaking the rules but I guess if it's for you..."

"Thanks, Alenia, you're the best!"

"Just remember you owe me, next time you're in town!"

"I'll owe you double, that's how much this means to me. Thanks."

"I'll look forward to it then. Okay, you should get the prompt."

A box of gibberish popped up on the screen, and Sparkle made the *Illusion* touch it as she did. She also made a LUCk check, a sixteen, to not cancel the request as there looked to be two gibberish places to touch on the box. She didn't, and a second later the progress bar went away.

"Got it. Thanks again."

"Anything for you! See you later!"

"Bye!"

The image winked out.

Whew. Now to get a printout...

Sparkle fumbled around, using her *Adaptive* skill to the max to compensate for not being able to read the language, but the computer seemed just as reliant on easy to comprehend symbology as ones at home, and she managed to make a printout of the file and stood looking at the pages that popped out of a slot near the control panel.

And now we come to a new problem. No thumbs. Sighing, and figuring there was nothing for it, she gently teased the papers out with her two front paws, and spent some time trying to fold them up enough to carry them across to the other ship. Putting energy into MANipulation, she managed it eventually (with a ten) and gently picked them up in her teeth. Her next problem was getting over to the Glomar again.

I don't want to put actual teeth marks in them, but there's a good amount of wind between here and there. Unless I'm holding them really tightly, they'll just blow away.

However, an eighteen LUCk check later, someone opened the door to go across to the other ship while she was sitting in the doorway, *Invisible*, trying to determine what to do. Sparkle followed with a *Spirit Step* when both doors were opened, appearing instantly in the corridor of the Glomar holding the papers.

Guess wind doesn't matter when you're being propelled by Spirit Energy and bypassing the space you want to cross in an instant. Now, to leave these where they'll be found somewhat rapidly.

Half an hour later, Mimsy ran shrieking to Shaya and waving some papers, and Sparkle looked up and swished her tail in happiness.

Mission accomplished.

*More females of the race are born than males, so the ratio is like 3:1 for whatever reason.

Eavesdropping

Who: Sparkle

Where: Meeting room on the Glomar

Time: Day 7 About 1:00 in the afternoon.

“Finally,” breathed Mimsy, walking into the meeting room where the others were waiting for her. “When you want him to do chores or something you can’t find him. But when you want to get rid of him, he’s underfoot the whole day.”

“Where is he?” asked Shaya.

“Taking a nap. So he shouldn’t be snooping around and overhear us.”

“Good.” Shaya looked around the room at the worried faces of her crew, and again at Sparkle who was curled nearby, taking all this in. She was suspicious of her because of the indentations in the paper that looked like cat teeth marks, but hadn’t considered simply asking Sparkle what she knew of this. Sparkle would have played dumb, this whole situation was quite amusing to her, but she did somewhat resent not being asked even in jest. “So we can finally talk about what we want to tell Kei or if we want to tell him at all!”

“How do we even know this is genuine?” asked Govu, looking the pages over for the twentieth time.

“Who would go to the trouble to print out fake orders?” asked Srei. “Though Mimsy finding them as she did seems rather suspicious. Like they were planted here.”

“They aren’t from our computer, I’ve checked and checked,” added Shaya. “But maybe they were planted here.”

“How so?”

“Think about it. Maybe one of the crew of the Tarasi got wind of congress deciding to use the brainwave manipulator or saw these orders and decided they didn’t like the idea. So while we were going back and forth between the two ships they left it for us.”

“That’s reasonable,” agreed Leah.

“But who? You knew Telia pretty well, Shaya, do you think she did it herself?” asked Maai. “Out of a sense of loyalty to you instead of congress?”

“I’d like to think if Telia got orders like this, our past friendship would count for something,” Shaya replied. “But consider the situation if Tarasi had picked up Kei, and we were the ones coming to back them up with similar orders.”

“I’d still be engaged,” muttered Srei.

“It’s your own fault,” snapped Mimsy.

“The point is, would I have told her? Would I have even told her indirectly, like this?”

“Of course you would have, Shaya!” Leah and Maai both cried.

“Would I?” Shaya rested her chin on her hands. “I have to wonder. Orders are orders, and we can’t escape the fact our judgement is skewed because we’ve been living with Kei these past few days. He’s almost a part of the crew at this point.”

“Shaya, please, I don’t want to hear that from you, too,” protested Srei.

“Just can’t compete, huh?” asked Reeg. “I got dumped by a girl once in a similar situation. Did I ever tell you about-”

“Later, Reeg,” chided Shaya. “This is about what to do about Kei now.”

“We can’t let them poke around in his brain!” Mimsy protested strongly.

“Yes, they might knock what little he has right out his ears,” joked Srei. Mimsy hit him in the arm. “Ow!”

“Reeg, you’re the engineer, what do you think their chances are?”

“I’m an engineer, not a doctor! How would I know?”

“Maybe Mome would know. The problem is swearing her to secrecy.”

“Yes,” said Srei bitterly. “She would no doubt run to tell her ‘master’ the bad news. And we can all see how Kei would react.”

“The same way any of us would, I would hope,” countered Shaya. “Even among Emaan, the process isn’t foolproof. The brain is just too complex to reliably manipulate. To even think of trying it on Kei, who isn’t our species...”

“He’s Emaan enough though, right?” asked Srei. “It’s not like he’s from outer space or

anything. Even the Chiram aren't that different from us, we all shared some kind of common ancestor right?"

"Of course you'd argue we should just let them go ahead and try the procedure!" fumed Mimsy. "If it doesn't work he's brain fried and you might get me back. And if it does, his personality would change and I might not... be interested in him anymore."

"So there's no way I can get you back then?" Srei asked sadly.

"You didn't do much to deflect Kei's interest in me when he arrived, and you've done nothing but whine about how unfair his being here is. Did you think just because you're the only eligible guy around here and I'm nearly seventeen you would automatically get me into bed? No offense, Reeg, or Govu."

They both shrugged.

"It's done quite differently among my people," offered Jaby. "This is all so fascinating."

"Didn't you get brought here after swimming away from a woman who found you with another woman?" Srei asked sharply.

"Oh, uh..."

"Again, not the time you two. Figure out your relationship problems later, Mimsy."

"Yes Shaya," she replied, eyes downcast.

"Fine. Any other thoughts? Anyone?"

Govu spoke up. "Actually, they aren't the only two ever to bicker about things."

"I agree, but what's your point?"

"What if the person who left this for us wasn't doing it to help us, but to get back at someone, either Telia or someone in congress? Like they figured we would tell Kei and that would make him run off and then Telia looks bad."

"Using Kei in some kind of revenge scheme? That's horrible!" Mimsy had her hands over her mouth, and her tentacles were waving in distress.

"Do the motives of the person matter?" asked Shaya.

"Sure. Especially if this report is a fake."

"A fake?"

"A plant. A ruse. A misdirection. Maybe the congress has no such plans to alter Kei's brainwaves. But if Telia loses track of the singularity, she fails her mission. That's not going to reflect well on her, and maybe her second in command will be promoted and take the ship over. I know you would never do such a thing, Mimsy-

"I should say not!"

"But the fact remains, others might."

Shaya shook her head. "This concerns saving the world. I can't believe someone would be that reckless. That Merimeth would be that reckless. I don't know her well, but I can't see her fabricating evidence like this."

"Still, you might want to ask Telia about this, see what she has to say."

"Oh, great plan Govu," Srei said sarcastically. "Breed more paranoia and suspicion, why don't you? We don't have enough interpersonal problems here on the Glomar, you want to make Telia suspicious she has someone on board that covets her job! That'll be great for morale."

Shaya glared at him but he had a point, and she sighed. "If there is a person like that, I'm sure Telia already knows about it. That sort of thing would be pretty tough to hide, especially with as close knit a group that forms aboard factory ships like this one."

"I suppose. I guess in a best case scenario, this would be the evidence she needed to toss the person making trouble out. Not that you toss out the guy making trouble here," he finished under his breath.

"All right. Take a few minutes to think about it, and give me your thoughts on the matter. Srei, I already know your opinion."

"Exactly, let them. He's too irresponsible and we need every edge we can get if we're going to save our world."

Several minutes ticked by. Govu gave the papers to Reeg, who looked them over again and handed them to Leah. She and her sister spoke softly between themselves and after those few minutes had passed, everyone looked back at Shaya.

“All right. Mimsy?”

“Firmly against.”

“Very well. Leah and Maai?”

They shook their heads. “We’re with Srei on this one.” Mimsy glared but Srei looked pleased. “He is pretty irresponsible, I mean he knows he’s a key to fixing the world but he’s not really serious about anything. Except flirting.”

“Very well. Govu?”

“I’m against it. I’m old enough to remember the first horror stories about botching the process on criminals and such. I know the technique is much safer now, but there are still too many risks. Making a vegetable out of Kei is worse than letting him leave. At least he could still come around when he has a chance to think things over. But fry his brain and where does that leave us?”

“Reeg?”

“From a purely scientific standpoint it’s risky. Even if it does go perfectly. I mean we all know the rumors about his will somehow being important to the whole process of fixing the worlds. I don’t know where that came from, but if making him believe something he doesn’t messes up the process somehow... it could backfire on us, no doubt about it.”

“True. Jaby?”

He shook his head. “I would need more information to decide. What are the motives of the person that gave us this information? Is it even accurate? Is this just a preliminary report, or some sort of last ditch plan if Kei proves totally intractable? We don’t know enough to decide, at least that’s what I feel.”

Shaya looked her crew over, trying to give equal weight to each person. She decided Jaby was right, and that it was time to go talk to Telia. She rose, taking the papers with her. “I’ll be back.”

Sparkle padded after her, the others already arguing over who was right.

“You coming?” Shaya asked her, holding the door to the other ship. Sparkle padded past her, then sat down and looked back at her. “You do like being where the action is, don’t you? Come on then.”

Shaya tracked down Telia, who offered tea and both ladies sat down to talk. “I’m here to ask you about this,” Shaya said when the pleasantries had been taken care of. She slid the papers across the table.

“This- where did you get this?”

“We found it. I assume someone on your ship brought it over and left it for us.”

“That’s impossible. I’ve never seen these orders before. Yes, part of this I recognize, it’s the orders I got to track you down and escort the singularity. But this part about his brainwave patterns being manipulated- that’s new.”

“Really?”

“Honestly! I mean Puknar was suggesting they might do something like that, but I figured it was none of our business what they did to him after we dropped him off.”

“So you’ve never seen these orders?”

“Look, I’ll show you a copy of my orders, come on.”

The two went up to the bridge and Talia pulled up a file. “See, that’s what I got.”

“I see, the second part *was* left off. Or you erased it later.” Telia glared at her. “Hey, I have to consider all possibilities here! And Puknar was asking about it, you say?”

“He wouldn’t have the clearance to get something like this,” she protested. “Especially if they originally thought I didn’t!”

“I guess you’re right. So then how did it get onto our ship?”

“Don’t look at me, I’m as baffled as you are. It’s a total mystery.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” She glared over at Sparkle. “Something we’ve had more than a few of, as of late.”

“What do you mean? What are you looking- that cat? Where did it come from?”

“It’s been hanging around the Glomar. We picked it up a few days after Kei came aboard. Since then some odd things have happened.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you think a cat somehow hacked the main city computers, then managed to figure out how to do a printout.”

Is social engineering hacking? Am I considered a hacker now? Huh.

“Would a normal cat follow me around like this? Or to be more specific, go where interesting things are happening? She once jumped into the cockpit before Kei took off to battle Ishicks, and seemed fine afterwards. I mean look at her, she’s looking right at us!”

“We’re looking at her, of course she’s looking at us. Are you feeling okay? The stress of having the singularity around isn’t getting to you, is it?”

“No it isn’t,” she snapped. Telia didn’t look convinced, and Shaya took a breath. “What I mean is, after that cat showed up some very strange things happened, things that didn’t often happen before she showed up. This is just the latest.”

“I still say it’s a stretch to blame a being that doesn’t have thumbs. Even if she was from another world, where cats are super intelligent, like that dinosaur that’s part of your crew, how would she make a printout?”

With some difficulty, mostly relating to language. Also, thank you for considering me to have human level reasoning abilities, it’s more than the others have done. At least, out loud.

“I don’t know. Anyway, what are we going to do about this?”

“Do? I’ll see if any of my crew knows anything, but despite what you may personally believe, we have our orders. I’m going to follow them, and I hope you don’t do anything as rash as trying to get out of following them.”

“It doesn’t concern you that congress wants to use an untested technique on Kei?”

“Not really. The world needs saving, and if they think that’s best, they are going to have to fix it if they screw things up.”

“No, if they screw things up our world is lost.”

“Shaya, I think they have a little more experience in dealing with things that concern our survival than you. And don’t you have family there anyway? I’m not the one you should be complaining to.”

“But you’re the one who’s here, helping to bring him in.”

“Call it providing more support if the Chiram attack again. I let you keep the guy, didn’t I? What more can I do?”

“Apparently nothing!” snapped Shaya, and stormed out. Sparkle shook her head, getting a strange look from Telia, and followed her back to the Glomar.

“She said she didn’t even know about it,” proclaimed Shaya, slamming the papers down on the table.

“Do you believe her?” asked Mimsy.

“I don’t know,” she sputtered. “She had a point, only the captain would have the clearance level to get these orders. She showed me a copy of what she got, it was cut off, this part about Kei’s brainwaves being altered wasn’t included.”

“So then where did this come from?” asked Jaby.

“That’s what I’d like to know. But the worst part is, she’s just going to keep following orders. Hand Kei over to the government and let them poke around inside his brain and if they don’t like what they find, they’ll make him-”

“Shaya!” Mimsy cried, going pale.

She spun, and at the door was Kei, looking haunted.

“I thought you were all acting funny, even last night Mimsy hardly cared I was staring at her while she changed. She’s always thought because I showed so much interest that I shouldn’t be... I’m glad I faked taking a nap and listened in.”

“Kei, you should know... we don’t think...”

“Forget it. You want to hand me over to the government? And I trusted you people. I see now that repairing the Bronco II and throwing Mimsy at me were just to distract me until you reached home and had me locked up!”

“I was not *thrown* at you!” Mimsy sputtered.

“Save it. I’m out of here.”

“Kei!” Shaya called after him, but Kei took off down the corridor and twenty seconds later the Starburst launched and flew away at high speed.

Shaya had slumped down over the table, but didn't get much time as Govu came over the intercom.

"Telia wants to talk to you. Wants to know if that was the singularity just now, blasting away from here."

Shaya reluctantly got up and went up to the bridge, where he was waiting with her image on the screen.

"He found out. I thought he was asleep, but he heard the whole thing."

"Go after him! Send out your M.Lovers!"

"Are you kidding? He can outfly Chiram Ishkick, and what are we going to do? Try to shoot him down? That would make us no better than them. You can do what you want, but I won't send my people out there to get shot down by him."

"You think- no of course he would. You've made a right mess of this, haven't you Shaya? But through incompetence or design I wonder? Guess that's for congress to decide, I have my orders." The picture cut out, and a moment later ships poured out of the other three factory vessels after Kei.

"Shaya, what are we going to do?" whined Mimsy.

"I don't know, I really don't know. Try calling him, Mimsy, he might still listen to you."

But Kei didn't respond, and half an hour later the other ships came back saying Kei got away.

Telia sent a terse message to get down and undock their ships, and return control of the Tarasi to her, which Shaya did. Telia punched in her code angrily, not responding when Shaya tried to talk to her, and stormed off as the platform retracted again. The ships took off and Reeg said he intercepted several encrypted messages from the Tarasi, probably informing the congress about what had just happened. Shaya wasn't looking forward to the discipline hearing and eventual stripping of rank that was no doubt coming.

"We're behind you," said Mimsy. "You didn't know, and he tricked us. For all we know he hacked the computers and left that paper to see what we would do. Would we turn away, protect him?"

"He couldn't have, it's impossible!"

"What's your theory then?" asked Srei.

Shaya looked over to Sparkle and almost spoke.

Srei looked over where she was looking. "The cat? That's even more insane."

"Then where did that paper come from? I'm somewhat glad he was warned, but he always overreacts to everything. I should have been more careful."

"Whatever happens, you'll always be our captain," said Leah.

"Yeah, if they try to demote you, we'll all quit right?" said Maai.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Come on, let's set down. If Kei decides to come back, I want to be nearby the place he left so he doesn't have to look around to find us."

"You think he will?" asked Mimsy, a little too enthusiastically for how she kept saying she didn't care for the guy.

"He has nowhere to go, the entire world is against him. And he knows the Chiram are after him. I don't know. I hope so, Mimsy, for all our sakes."

So did I just save a man from a fate worse than death, or doom this whole world to extinction? I mean Susan must be following up the whole Darkness angle, though the fact I haven't heard from her at all, even in a dream, is somewhat troubling. She could be half the world away and always be awake when I'm asleep. I know we'll be reunited, I'm her companion, and there must have been some reason our stories diverged when we came here. I figured keeping an eye on Kei must be that reason. But if he doesn't come back, I may have been wrong.

Guess I'll just have to wait and see what happens. Really hope I didn't screw things up with what I did, but I still feel they had the right to know.

They did, right?

But there was no one to answer her silent plea, and as the Glomar set down a single red ship sped away, already composing a report to the Chiram forces about what he had seen.

“The Singularity is alone!”

Meeting of the Minds

Who: Susan

Place: Chiram Military Building

Time: Day 7, early morning

The previous day Susan had spent with Jenny at the hospital, making sure she recovered properly. She was released that evening and the two went back to their room, happy to be out of there. The next day, or today, the girls got a message to report to the general, so they headed up there to see what he had to say.

“Good to see you up and about, Private Anywhere,” said the General, after the two saluted each other.

“Thank you sir.”

“And don’t worry, at Susan’s request we’ve classified your blood work and test results so no one curious stumbles upon them and gets any funny ideas. Your body has enough differences to Chiram physiology to raise comment otherwise, and that’s the last thing we need right now.”

“Thank you, sir. Sorry for keeping my origins from you, but it really wouldn’t have mattered one way or the other in terms of my performance as a soldier.”

“Good to hear it. Now what do you think of this?” he asked, showing them the video clip of the Starburst flying away from the Glomar. Of course it wasn’t lost on either of them that the Glomar wasn’t alone, or that fighters from the three large ships tried to catch him afterwards.

“Some kind of falling out?” asked Jenny, as the footage cut back to the fighters returning with no trace of the Starburst.

“The timing seems peculiar, don’t you think?”

“Susan told me about the meeting, it does seem odd they would reenforce the ship with three others, only to allow the singularity to fly off like that.”

“Do we know that Kei was aboard that mecha?” asked Susan. “All we saw was the ship flying off, anyone could have been in there.”

The general shook his head. “The sensors aboard the Ishkick that recorded this showed him as being on that mecha that flew off.”

“So it was him. Strange.”

“I thought you might find it so. I wanted to see what you would say our next move is. My first thought was to send a squad after him, now that he doesn’t have the support of the Emaan ships. But if he’s finally seen the Emaan as the petty, greedy, small minded people they are, maybe this is our chance to apologize and get him on our side. And that’s better accomplished by maybe a dedicated person or two who are maybe not from around here themselves? Know anyone like that?”

“I could put you in touch with some people,” Susan replied with a smile. “You want us to go talk to him?”

“We’ve been tracking his movements from a distance, so we know right where he is. You could get out there and speak to him, maybe convince him to come in and we can start figuring out what he needs to do to save the world.”

“I don’t mind doing it. After all, this diplomacy stuff was my idea to begin with, so let’s keep that going.”

Or, suggested The Darkness, you could just change over to Moon, put him to sleep from a distance with the sleep fog, and ask his forgiveness when he wakes up in custody.

Sure, that wouldn’t put him firmly against us. Thanks for the suggestion but no thanks. Besides, saving the world from the natural disaster should really be done by the people here. My objective is you, once we’ve found your little hiding place. I’m just doing this to pass the time. If my magic worked properly here I would just track you down myself and end all this. I don’t have to worry about smashing robots like I did Warlocks, and as there’s no magic on this world precious little can actually hurt me.

Wonder what I’ll do about that when you finally do find me? Hummmm.

“Very well. I will of course have to have a small force nearby, in case this is some kind

of trick. I don't want you two alone out there if you get attacked."

"Trick? Like this is some kind of ruse to see what we'll do once he's alone?" asked Jenny.

"Exactly. We can't rule that out. If we send in a couple of cute girls like yourself, how can he resist?" He laughed. The girls didn't, just shared a look and a *Sexist much?* vibe. The general cut off the laugh. "Ahem. Yes, uh, anyway, if it is a trick it will further enforce the fact we just want to work things out, sending the person who called the meeting in the first place. Letting them know you're on the level, and willing to take risks. And if it is a falling out, and you can talk him into coming back with you, great."

"And if we can't?" Susan asked. "Will your forces move in?"

Jeffery shook his head. "Could be part of the trap. If he refuses you, fine, don't press the issue too much. We can continue tracking his location from afar and talk about our next move. Maybe contact the Enaam government again, see what they're playing at letting the singularity slip through their fingers."

"Very well. I want it clear to all your forces that I'm in charge. They don't attack or even get within miles of the place unless I call them."

"Very well. I'll give the orders before you go. You are up for this, aren't you private?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Very well." He handed her some printed sheets of paper. "Here's his current location and the frequency and encryption key for our communication channel for this mission. Go pick up a small recording device on your way out, too, I'll want to know what he sounds like. How he says things and how he reacts to you could be just as valuable as what he says."

"Understood sir."

"Dismissed. And good luck."

The two thanked him and made their way down to the equipment sign out, where Jenny got out a recorder and asked which Ishkick she should be taking. She got a number that meant nothing to Susan, and the two made their way out to the airfield. As these were not planes there wasn't really an "air traffic control," if you were taking off and flying about you should know enough to look around first. Plus the mecha had collision warning systems and such, so smacking them together was actually pretty tough.

"These are single passenger vehicles," Susan reminded Jenny as they stared up at the thing.

"I know. Didn't think you would mind."

"Oh, I don't, believe me. I just wanted to make sure you didn't."

"Eh, I'll survive. I mean if you really wanted to fly your own and thought you could do it-

"Come on, time's wasting." Susan started climbing up the small ladder that hung down from the cockpit.

"Uh huh."

The pair flew several hours, over some strangely disjointed landscapes, and finally got near the coordinates specified by the orders Jenny had received. She radioed the forces in the area and got an update, then let the "singularity system" guide them the rest of the way. As they got near, Susan said they should put down and walk the rest of the way so as not to startle the man. Jenny went to land the mecha and started shutting systems down once they were settled.

"Seems he found a cave somewhere along the beach there, we can set down a mile or so away and come in on foot. I hate to be without the Ishkick if something happens though."

"Don't worry, you'll still have me. That's all you'll need."

Jenny ignored her boast, she could take care of herself after all. "And I can set the Ishkick to relay any signals we send, my portable unit won't have the range to reach the other forces in the area."

"You really think that'll be necessary?"

Jenny turned in the seat to look back at her. "Maybe not, even hopefully not, but I thought you wizard types were all about preparation before something happened. Isn't that

why you made all those Materials or whatever you called them?"

"*Materia*. I'm not saying don't do it, I'm just saying don't worry so much!"

"What, me worry? Which brings up a good point. Here." Jenny pulled something from her *sub-space pocket* and handed it over, and Susan hefted it. It was a fancy pistol, very high tech looking and sleek.

"What's this for? You know I have long range attacks."

"But they're lethal, right? You can't have *knockout blade* and *Invulnerability* going at the same time at the moment, can you? Look, I picked this gun up from a tech universe I visited. It doesn't use bullets, rather small energy packets that travel at high speed."

"Really?" Susan looked it over again, impressed.

"One hundred fifty shots to a charge, here's the switch to activate it."

"How many?"

"I got one with the extra big battery. Sue me."

"I should say so!" *No more worrying about... no that just delays the problem. But I bet Silverstreak could come up with some ammo between worlds. Would I really fire that many times in one shot?* "You were saying?"

"The switch." She hit it and it lit up. "See this dial here? That controls the aperture size. Make it big, like this," she ran a finger along it and it lit up, "and it spits a fairly large ball. That's non-lethal and does a fair bit of damage. Narrow it again," she ran her finger the opposite way, "and the aperture is smaller again. This narrows the bolt and makes it more armor piercing, but it doesn't have as much damage potential behind it."

"Oh, it's like *Knockout* does double damage?" *Or in other words, as the OTR goes up, the HDL of damage goes down in a 1:1 ratio? How Paragon... weird.*

"I'll take your word for that. I mean in theory the damage shouldn't vary that much, it's energy hitting with a certain force. But it seems to. Anyway, if you want to stun him, or we get jumped while in the cave, I figure you should have the means to knock people out, without magic. A gun from another world I can more easily explain than you trying to explain magic to the general. It fires just like a regular pistol, too, just keep pulling the trigger. It doesn't need a buildup time or anything."

"A fair point. It's fully charged? Not that I think I'm going to be firing at something until it's empty or anything..."

"The charge indicator is here."

"Ah, okay. Wait, this isn't your only one of these, is it?"

Jenny shook her head. "I have a couple. Keep it, if you want. Plus I can always go grab more once I'm not stuck here anymore. It'll recharge from sunlight, moving it around, magnetics, or just raw power applied via cable to this port here." She moved a cover aside and showed her. "Basically they built them to be as flexible as possible, because the people generally using them were wandering around alien worlds where anything was likely to happen. So they work out perfectly for people like us."

"I should say. Thanks. I have something for you, too!"

"Oh?"

"Can't get it out here. Come on."

The two got out of the Ishkick and Susan rooted around in her luggage, coming up with two bathing suits and handed one to Jenny.

"Uh, what?" she asked, holding it and looking at it.

"You can't go down there in uniform, you know. He'll bolt the second he sees something like that. But if we go down there as just two girls exploring the beach, and come upon him, we can feel out his situation. We can tell him who we are later. It's not like we need to carry the guns and whatever, that's what our *sub-space pockets* are for."

"I suppose there's some sense in that," she muttered in reply as Susan started stripping her clothes off. "To be clear, it's for the mission, not wanting to prance around on a beach in a skimpy outfit?"

"I've never pranced in my life!" Susan countered. "Frolicked, maybe. Come on, get those clothes off!"

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, shaking her head.

“Oh, don’t act all huffy, I can see your aura, you’re pleased.” (She had gotten a twelve on *Aura Reading*.)

“Cheater. Peeping at a girl’s aura like that, you should be ashamed.”
They both laughed.

The two woman made their way down the beach and Jenny positioned the recording device outside the cave and hoped it would capture the audio. With that, the two went inside to find a frustrated looking Kei slumped by the foot of his mecha. He jumped up as they approached, brandishing a gun, but put it away again hastily when Susan overacted and clung on to Jenny at the sight of it.

“Sorry ladies, didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said, openly eyeing them. “No need to get upset, I won’t hurt you.”

“What do you think you’re doing, waving something like that around?” demanded Jenny. “Someone could get hurt.”

“Oh, I’d never hurt someone as pretty as you. I’m Kei, don’t be shy, introduce yourselves.”

“I’m Jenny, and this is Susan.”

“Hello,” said Susan, as though not convinced she should even be talking to this guy.

“Don’t mind her, she’s pretty shy,” said Jenny.

You are? asked The Darkness.

What do you mean? I’m the very pinnacle of the feminine ideal. Look at how demure I’m acting right now!

You’re the ‘feminine ideal’ on maybe one, very messed up, reality. Maybe, and only then because all things possibly exist someplace, however unlikely they are. And here’s a hint, looking like you just ate a sour candy isn’t ‘demure’ it’s just ‘bad acting.’

Quiet.

“Well, guess we should be going,” said Jenny, casting a look at the mecha and narrowing her eyes. “We didn’t mean to interrupt whatever you’ve got going here.” She gave a little wave and pulled Susan after her, who figured she should follow her lead, Jenny seemed to have a better *Acting* or *Deception* rating than she did, and she considered herself able to play second fiddle when the situation required it.

You can? Since when?

Since always. That’s why I’ve never shown off or been in people’s faces or anything. Right...

“Oh, you don’t have to go!” Kei assured them. “Please, uh, well, I can’t really offer you anything to eat but emergency rations. Where did you two even come from? I didn’t think there were any houses in this area.”

“We’ve been walking down the beach a fair way,” replied Jenny. “We wanted to see how far it went. Did you see in that machine of yours? I do take it that’s yours, right?”

“The Starburst? Sure is. It goes for miles.”

“What, the mecha?”

“No, the beach!”

“Oh.”

“See, I told you!” Susan said, determined to play the part.

“I guess so. Hey, you didn’t break down or something, did you? There’s a mechanic in town, I mean I doubt he’s worked on anything like this but if you needed parts or something...”

Kei waved her off. “No, nothing like that. Honestly,” he slumped down against the leg again, “I don’t know what I’m even doing here.”

Susan and Jenny shared a look, and went over to sit in front of him.

“You want to talk about it?” Jenny asked.

Kei shook his head. “I don’t know. This whole place is just so messed up.”

“Yeah, that bomb or whatever right? I only heard it about from my parents.”

“I don’t just mean that. I mean you think you know some people, right? That you can trust them, and they trust you. Then all of a sudden **wham** they turn on you.”

“Sounds like a tough situation.”

"You have no idea. But I was... recently brought here. I don't know anyone else, so where am I going to go? And the Chiram are after me-"

"The Chiram?" Jenny jumped out and nervously looked around. "Around here?"

Susan jumped up as well. "Jenny, what do we do?" she wailed.

"It's okay!" Kei assured them both. "They're nowhere near here. You don't like them either, huh?"

"They all think they're so great, but wait a second. You're Chiram, aren't you? Is that why they're after you? Because you deserted or something?" She looked over at the Starburst. "But I thought their machines were red?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I'm not Chiram but I'm not Enaam either. I... guess you girls aren't either?"

"You see any tentacles? But no, we're Chiram, just not military Chiram." Both sat down again.

"Oh, right. No, I was with some Enaam traders until a little while ago, helped them drive off some Chiram troops that were making trouble. So they want payback."

Jenny looked upset. "Yeah, I hear about that sort of thing all the time. You would think a military organization would have a little thing called military discipline too, but nooooo."

Kei laughed. "You got that right."

"So how come you left?" asked Susan. "You didn't want to put them in danger anymore? That's thoughtful of you."

"No," said Kei sadly. "Like I said, it ended up they just wanted to use me too. But the thing is, maybe I should have let them."

"I guess it's hard to say, as I don't know your whole situation," ventured Jenny. "You mean they wanted you to keep protecting them, even though you were risking your life?"

"Something like that. I guess when you have the power to protect people, you have to use it even if it's something dangerous."

Has he been sneaking a look at my playbook?

"Fighting off Chiram troops isn't exactly safe," agreed Susan. "But most of them are pretty sloppy pilots anyway, the way I hear it."

Jenny scowled at her.

"It's bigger than that," rebuked Kei. "I can't really say more, just that both sides want to use me for their own ends. I feel like I don't have any control of my own life."

"So take control," Susan rebuked hotly. "You care about the people you were traveling with, don't you?"

He nodded. "Very much."

"So there you are. Either protect them, or don't. If you're going to protect them, be ready to go all the way no matter the cost, for the sake of those bonds you've created." *Wait, when did this turn into an episode of Naruto? No matter.* "Sure, your situation may be crappy, and beyond your control, but that's true for just about everybody. You have things you can do, by the sounds of it things *only* you can do. So go do them! If these people are worth the effort, they'll give effort supporting you, right? You aren't in this alone, we're all trying to make the best of things."

"You're right. What they were talking about doing though, it scared me," he said softly. "But maybe that's because I wasn't serious enough. Maybe the fault did lie with me, and they were only suggesting it because I was being an idiot about the whole thing." He sat in silence a moment, thinking it over, then seemed to come to a decision. "I'm going back, and I'll tell them I'm with them a hundred percent. Thanks, both of you."

"Sure," said Jenny. But Susan decided to take a chance.

"We're all behind you, Singularity," she said with a grin.

"What? How did-" He started to fumble his gun out again.

"Oh, don't get all tense. What are we going to do to you?" She opened her arms wide and took a deep breath, and Kei got distracted a moment and forgot about his gun. "We're not Chiram, strictly speaking. Consider us third parties that have an interest in seeing the world get fixed. It's no accident we met here today."

"So who are you really?" he asked cautiously.

Susan shrugged. "Dimensional travelers that got stuck here, for one reason or another."

You think your space/time bomb is the only way people from other realities can get here? No way. But we can't leave until the dimensions around here stabilize." *Well, one of us can't, and I'm not just leaving Jenny stranded here, so I'll have to fix that in addition to kicking The Darkness out.* "We're the ones who have been trying to keep the Chiram off your back and stop attacking you while we worked out another solution. As you've decided to support your friends and do what it takes to fix the world, maybe now we can actually get somewhere."

"You set me up. You knew who I was the entire time!"

"Does that change the quality of our advice?" asked Jenny.

"Well, no. I decided on my own, I guess. So now what?"

"This is just the first step, from here we go our separate ways," explained Susan. "But at least now we have a common ground to start from. The truth is, both sides are terrified. Both of not being able to fix the world, and being wiped out when it does get fixed."

"Because neither side knows exactly how to set things right," put in Jenny.

"Exactly. We need to work together. What do the Enaam know, or think they know, about the purpose of the Singularities? What do the Chiram know? Put that together and what's the same? What's different? We need a complete picture, and we can only get that by cooperating. Once we've figured out what you two need to do, we can get you doing it instead of wasting resources and manpower trying to force you into it."

"So what do you want from me right now?"

"At the moment, simply the assurance that you'll work with us if we contact you. There's a lot of things going on here, like the Mu, that also need solving. The Chiram shouldn't attack you anymore, and I got the two governments at least talking to each other. With your help that can continue and maybe we can finally solve this mystery instead of just shooting at each other."

"And you swear this isn't some Chiram trick? Sending me cute girls to wear my resistance down?"

Susan and Jenny both laughed, and stood up. "Can a Chiram do this?" Susan asked, *Spirit Stepping* to another part of the cave and hefting a large rock over her head.

"What the..."

"Take it outside and throw it," suggested Jenny. "Straight up, if you please."

"With pleasure." The three went out of the cave and Susan got ready to chuck it.

"Nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves," said Jenny with flair. "No sleeves." She spun around. "No pockets either."

"Believe me, I'm looking."

Jenny scowled at him, but turned to Susan. "Pull!"

With a heave, Susan tossed the rock and Jenny pulled a pistol from her *sub-space pocket*. She tracked the flight of the rock, adjusting the dial on the side with a finger, and put several rounds into the stone blowing it apart. The gun disappeared again with a flourish.

"I wouldn't have stood a chance!" Kei moaned, looking between them. The two girls nodded to each other, pretending to think about it, but couldn't help grinning in the end. "Okay, you've got my attention. I'm not sure what just happened, but I have a feeling things would go pretty badly for me if I didn't start taking all this seriously. In many ways."

"We need your help," Susan said simply. "You're one of the keys to all this, and it's probably time we met the other."

"Olson," agreed Jenny. "Yes, we need to put the two of you in contact, now that you know we're working with your best interest in mind."

"Are you, though? Wait, Olson? My old partner is here too? I guess it makes sense, we were nearest the blast. Glad to hear he survived it, like I did."

"I'll see what I can do. Like Susan said, if we come calling, please tell your friends we mean you no harm. We can't get the two of you together until we know what it means if we do, but I bet we could at least set up a video chat for the two of you."

"I'd like that, a lot," Kei said honestly. "I guess I owe you two a debt of gratitude. You've been working to protect me and I didn't even know it. So thanks."

"Do what you reasonably can to help get this world straightened out, that'll be thanks enough," assured Susan.

"I will, I promise."

So Kei roared off in the Starburst back towards the Glomar, and the two woman picked up the recorder and headed back themselves. They radioed the nearby Ishkicks to let Kei go and stay out of sight, and then to head back to base. The recording was faint, but Jenny uploaded it for the general to listen to on their way back, and both settled into the cockpit again.

“Not looking forward to the hours it’ll take us to fly back,” Jenny complained. “Especially when your magic could just take us back there instantly.”

“Hard to explain, though. What, you don’t like my company?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that...”

“What should we do, on this long, boring journey back?”

“What indeed? Eye spy?”

“We could. Or maybe...”

The Ishkick took off, and blasted back towards “home.”

Kei is Back

Who: Sparkle

Where: Glomar

When: Early Day 8

Kei flew up to the Glomar like he owned the place (Singularity privilege) and was welcomed back by most of the crew. Srei of course was the opposite of pleased to see him, while Mimsy looked like she couldn't decide if hugging him or smacking him was the best "welcome back" gift to present to him. She compromised by just crossing her arms and turning away from him in a huff when he went to greet her.

"Mimsy, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, you just fly off and then not a word for a whole day, leaving us to wonder if you're dead or alive, and now you just come swooping in and expect to be welcomed back with open arms? I thought we were your friends, and that we rated a little more consideration than that."

"I couldn't just call you, it would have given away my position!"

"There's always some excuse."

"Shaya, tell her, there's no reason to be mad at me."

"Oh no, I'm not stepping in that minefield. Anyway, Mome, fetch some tea and let the poor man's leg go. He's not going anywhere now."

"You shouldn't have left without me, master," she chided him, reluctantly letting him go. "I was very worried about you."

"Sorry about that, Mome. But I won't be running away any more so you don't have to worry about a thing."

"Yay!" She ran off.

"Really?" asked Mimsy coldly. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Yes, that's what I want to talk to you about. Come sit down," said Shaya, steering him towards the common area. "The rest of you, get back to work."

"Work?" asked Maai, "Doing what?"

"We don't even know where we're going at this point," continued Leah.

"And we can't hold a market, we still have very little to trade with," finished Maai.

"I don't know, find something!"

They grumbled something and everyone dispersed. Everyone except Mimsy, who stared down Shaya until she relented.

"So what happened?" she asked, turning back to Kei.

"Not much. Flew for a while, found a cave and managed to get the Starburst into it. Did some thinking, and then the next day these two girls show up and start asking me what I'm doing there. Well, I didn't go into detail but it turned out they knew what I was talking about anyway. Turns out there are other dimensional travelers apart from me!"

Sparkle's ears perked up, and she wondered if he was talking about Susan.

"Uh, yeah, we all are, Kei. We all come from different dimensions," Mimsy condescendingly added. "That's the whole problem, see, why we call you the singularity. You're supposed to be fixing all this, remember?"

"No, I mean, these two came here by choice, not accidentally like most everyone else. And get this, they said they were working the Chiram over to try and get them off our backs. Like they would have kept attacking us if these two hadn't stepped in and argued it was counter productive. The blond haired one with the bracelets on said she got the Chiram and the Enaam talking, think that was the meeting that caused those other ships to come escort us? Where are they, by the way?"

"Left yesterday, as there was no Singularity to guard or escort, they had other things to be doing."

"Great."

"Did you believe her?" asked Mimsy. "And why do your eyes have that far away look? What were they wearing apart from these bracelets?"

"I only mention it because it seemed out of place. One of them was this bizarre charm bracelet looking thing, but with small squares of metal that had weird symbols burnt into them."

That one was around her wrist. The other one was this thick job, with all these little gems or something set into it. Never seen anything like it. She had on the weirdest watch, too. Not exactly beachwear, that's why I noticed it right away. The other one didn't have anything like that on. And they were wearing proper swimsuits, if you must know, Mimsy."

"So, they knew how to capture your interest, did they? Skimpy things, ties threatening to come loose at any moment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said! They obviously knew you were there, if they were from some Chiram camp someplace. But they wore something sure to keep you off guard and get you talking."

"It was a beach, did you expect them to come wearing uniforms?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Please, you two, I'm trying to figure out what our next move is. Kei, if you could continue?"

"Oh, sure. Not much else to tell. They asked if I would at least be willing to talk to them again, and maybe find out what I can about fixing the world. I said yes."

"I see," grated Mimsy, the temperature in the room dropping ten or so degrees.

"Sorry about that," said Reeg, popping his head in the door. "Just messing with the environmental controls, trying to get a little more efficiency out of them. I'll get the A/C turned back to normal in a second." He left again.

Mimsy went on. "We ask for you help in saving the world, and you get all petulant and mopey about it. But some random strangers in bathing suits ask for you help, and suddenly you're all business."

"No, you don't get it," pleaded Kei. "You weren't there. Bracelet girl moved faster than anything I'd ever seen, one end of the cave to the other in the blink of an eye. Even more incredibly she went and picked up this enormous rock like it was nothing. Then she chucks it into the sky and the other one makes this gun appear out of nowhere and blasts it to bits before it lands again. These weren't just girls, these were *professional dimensional travelers*."

Well, the one sounds like Susan all right. But who's the other? Some young thing with a pretty face that Susan is spending too much time ogling? But how would she make a gun appear out of nowhere and then blast a bolder to pieces? Could there really be another traveler she's found here? Her father never ran into other adventuring parties, despite Lady Inari saying she had other agents out in the field. It was coordinated too well, avoid duplication of effort. I suppose she couldn't have gotten here by accident, like we did with Louise. Could Kei be right, and she's actually found another Wanderer as powerful as she is to-

Sparkle's blood ran cold, which had nothing to do with the ambient air temperatures.

Have I been... replaced? Is that why she hasn't contacted me? Does she think the new girl stands a better chance of helping her find Luna than I do? That her skill with a gun can help rescue her father better than my support magic? She can learn all the spells I know, after all, so I'm not all that irreplaceable, am I?

She shivered.

Or is this another person like Susan herself- somewhat in the thrall of The Darkness and instead of Luna or me checking her behavior, actually encouraging the kind of thing we're trying to keep her from doing?

Guess I shouldn't jump to conclusions, I can't believe we would have come this far together only to be separated at this point. At least I hope that's the case.

"Professional? Kei, did you eat some weird mushrooms or something while you were out there?" Mimsy asked skeptically.

"No, just rations. I'm pretty hungry actually."

As if on cue, Mome appeared with tea and sandwiches, which Kei tore into. "Thanks, Mome."

"Of course, master."

“Just a second.” Shaya got up and left the room, leaving Kei and Mimsy alone, that is, alone as they could be with an eavesdropping cat afraid she had outlived her usefulness, and an infatuated robot that was again hugging Kei.

He tried making conversation with Mimsy, but she just stared icily at him.

“Sorry, it should warm up in here again soon, I got the A/C back to normal,” said Reeg, again making an appearance.

Finally she relented a little bit. “I suppose if you had gotten into something and had a trip, they would have been naked rather than wearing bathing suits. Unless you’re lying...”

“I’m not! I could describe them for you, if you wanted.”

“Don’t bother. Still, professional dimensional travelers? Why would they do such a thing?”

“I don’t know, but think about all the things we have on this world where the dimensions come to us. If you could bring technology to a world still using bow and arrows, you could be hailed as a god. Or maybe gold is really plentiful somewhere, so they make frequent trips to ‘gold world’ and then go shopping elsewhere. I can see a lot of reasons, if you’ve worked out how to control journeys across dimensions, that you might want to do so. Medicine from one world to save lives on another. Scientific breakthroughs, even just plain stories you can claim to have written, or games to play. Would it be so strange to run into someone like that, especially here of all places?”

“They might not even have been human,” put in Mome. “They could be artificial beings, like me, and that’s why they seemed better than you physically.”

“True, I shouldn’t assume they were human just because they looked it. You look it, and you’re not, after all. That does make a lot of sense.”

“I guess you both have a point,” Mimsy conceded.

A moment later Shaya returned with a printed picture, and Kei took one look at it and exclaimed “Hey, that’s her all right!”

Sparkle looked over and he was holding the picture up. It was Susan.

“That verifies his story,” Shaya said, sitting again. “I had the home office send me the video they captured from their chat, to see exactly what she had to say. I took this screen shot of her.”

“It’s her, there’s no doubt. She really is trying to get your two people together and solve this thing.”

“Humph. Well, at least she’s not prettier than I am.”

No, her looks is only a five, and I’m guessing you’re a six at least, if not higher.

“No one is prettier than you, Mimsy.”

“Unless I’m not around, that is.”

“Don’t start again, you two. Okay, so we know she’s real. But the threat to you is also real, Kei. I guess I should just ask, what do you want to do? You came back here, when you could have easily followed those girls back to the Chiram, so you must not have trusted them completely.”

Kei shook his head. “It wasn’t just that. They said the Chiram are as in the dark as we are about what exactly I’m supposed to do to fix things. But that Enaam science may have some of the answers. What else, oh yeah! They were going to track down Olson, my old wingman, and get a video chat between us. It could be dangerous getting us together, so for the moment she doesn’t recommend it. But he’s here, alive, isn’t that great? He’s the other singularity, I guess.”

“There’s two of you? As if we didn’t have enough problems,” muttered Mimsy.

“Ah, he’s not like me. He was a straight laced guy from the start, always pulling my bacon out of the fire. I can see him joining up with the Chiram if he thought that was where his duty lay. They want me to see if you guys have figured anything out, and by you guys I mean your government.”

“Yes, I figured that,” said Shaya, rolling her eyes. *Seems some things are just universal.* “And I suppose these girls showed good faith in letting you go, if they could do the things you said they could have easily taken you in by force.”

“They probably could. I still can’t believe what I saw, tell you the truth.”

"You don't think it was some kind of trick?" asked Mimsy. "Could they have some kind of hologram projection system? I doubt the Mu would have provided them some humanoid robots, despite how nicely they asked."

Mome sadly shook her head. "Our type was discontinued when the war started. It's just combat models now."

"None that I've heard of. No, it would be quite elaborate for a simple trick, getting her to run that meeting, and then showing up on some deserted beach right where Kei is. There must be more to it than just a simple trap, everything points to that."

"How did they know where you were?"

Kei shrugged. "Got me. How did they find me the first time, when I had just arrived? Some kind of scanner or something, right?"

"Wonder what the range on something like that would be?" mused Shaya. "Have to ask Reeg. But you never really answered my question, Kei. What are you going to do now?"

"It's a problem, I know. If I go to the Enaam city, there's a chance your government will want to start messing around in my head no matter what I say. I'm totally ready to help you guys fix the world, I hope you all believe that, at least. But that girl was right, I need to know *how* to do that, I can't just hope everything works out. There was a scientific reason this happened, and if they really can detect me I must be giving off some kind of radiation or... something detectable anyway. If science can figure that out, maybe it can figure out how to get us out of this mess."

"That's the only place we can go, for those kinds of answers. Reeg can repair the ship, but he's no theoretical dimensional scientist, or whatever that would be called. We don't have the equipment or the right sort of experts to answer that question. Would you be willing to go there, despite the risks?"

Kei took a deep breath, looking over at Mimsy. "That girl, she said something to me. That if I had the power to fix things, I had to do everything I could because I was the only one who could. I had to protect the people I had come to know even if it was a huge risk. I don't know, when she said that I got such a sense of sadness from her, like she had lost something... and she didn't see any way of getting it back."

Yeah, that sounds like something she would say, all right.

"I see. I am still the captain, and if you're back you're once again part of my crew. I'll take what you said into consideration and let you know what I think is best. Maybe we can smuggle you in, talk to the right people? I don't know. Go get something more to eat than sandwiches and get cleaned up. I'll let you know what I decide."

"You got it, boss," he joked, standing up again. "Come on, Mome."

"Yes, master!"

With Kei gone, Shaya turned to Mimsy. "I want you to keep a close eye on him for the next few days."

"Me? Why?"

"He hangs out with you most, you'll be able to spot any differences in his behavior."

"What do you mean, differences?"

"I mean, what if he *was* actually captured by the Chiram? We have to assume their techniques of modifying brainwaves is as sophisticated as ours."

Her eyes widened. "You mean he only thinks he saw these two girls? That's why he doesn't quite believe what he saw!"

"Maybe." She nodded. "I doubt the technique is perfect, maybe they just gave him a memory of being impressed by what they did or said to him, and his brain filled in some kind of 'superhuman' beings to complete the narrative. I mean guns don't just appear and disappear, I don't care what dimension you're from."

That's what you think, lady. Maybe now would be a good time to speak up? I mean I could show them that very thing, right? But his behavior won't have changed, because he really did talk to Susan. Showing off like that is exactly what she would have done to prove her point. This other girl going along with it is somewhat troubling, I really hope she's not doing disgusting things to Susan's... mind.

"But then why return him? If they had captured him, like you said, letting him go again

to come back here makes no sense.”

“It does if you think about what he said. He’s willing to come with us to the city, in order to see what we know about fixing the world. What if he’s been ‘programmed’ to do that very thing, in order for the Chiram to get what we know and use it before we can?”

“I don’t know,” Mimsy hedged. “He wasn’t gone all that long.”

“But consider they’ve had years to work out techniques of modifying non-Chiram brainwaves, in the form of this Olson he’s talking about. We’ve all heard the rumors of another Singularity running around with them.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But they couldn’t have arrived that far separated in time, could they?”

“Why not? One may have been closer to the blast than the other, and something like that could be very sensitive to physical location. I don’t know, it’s not like it’s something we could even study.”

“I guess. You’re going to insist on this, aren’t you?”

“I’m afraid so. We’re still a day away from the home city if that’s our destination. We need to know if we’re delivering a man who simply saw something incredible and was inspired to do whatever he could, or an agent for the Chiram that will turn on us in an instant.”

“Kei would never do that, no matter what they did to him!”

“No? Remember, they could have implanted basically anything into his brain. Even suggestions he doesn’t even know of, until something triggers them.”

Mimsy looked troubled. “I suppose you have a point. Okay, I’ll keep an eye on him. I doubt he’ll try to get rid of me in any case, he’s always trying to hang around and get in the way when I’m trying to work on something. I guess now I’ll just let him. Are we heading back, then?”

“I don’t see that we have any choice. I won’t radio ahead that we’re coming, maybe we can speak to some of my contacts in the city and keep Kei’s presence here a secret. At least until we know more about what their real plans are.”

“Will you speak to Manisha?”

She sighed. “I suppose I’ll have to. If I can get her on our side, that’ll be a big help. It’s a reunion I’m not looking forward to, though.”

“I know. We all have to make sacrifices, don’t we?” She grinned.

“I see how it is. No doubt you’ll want to come and film the whole exchange, play it back for the whole crew.”

“What a great idea! I’ll go get a camera ready!” She scrambled out the door before Shaya could say more. “Think I could actually make some money selling tickets to see it?”

“You better not!” Shaya called after her, and heard giggling as Mimsy skipped down the hall. “That girl. And what do you have to say about the whole situation?” Shaya suddenly asked Sparkle. *Oh crap, I was watching them a little too intently, wasn’t I. Still, maybe this will satisfy and still keep up the whole ‘I can’t talk’ routine.*

Sparkle got up, stretched, and padded over to her. Jumping lightly up on the table, Sparkle put a paw on Shaya’s chest and looked up at her.

“Follow my heart, huh? I suppose that’s good advice.” Sparkle put her paw down and licked her hand before jumping down again. “Why did all this have to happen aboard *my* ship?” she asked the ceiling as Sparkle opened the door and went in search of Kei.

If he’s going to have contact with Susan, I better stick to him closer than before. Maybe if he has this meeting with Olson that she sets up, I can get on camera and let her know I’m here. She would blow my cover, of course.

There is always Illusion...

Olson (He's not a twin)

Who: Susan

Where: Army Building

When: Day 8, mid morning

Jenny was showing Susan her gun collection, taken from the many worlds she had visited, when there was a knock on the door.

"General Wright requests your presence in conference room 453," said the soldier to Susan when she opened the door. "I've been ordered to escort you."

"One moment." She closed the door and Jenny put her guns away, and they followed the soldier to the elevator and up to the fourth floor. Naturally they had been escorted everywhere they went, the general wasn't going to allow them to just wander around the building that served as the command center for the Chiram people, was he? No, he was not. So this summons and escorting was nothing to be remarked upon, and the soldier saluted and left as the two women sat down.

Sitting to his right was a square jawed man, probably fifteen years older than Kei, with dark glasses and brown hair. His forehead insignia was a smaller red triangle surrounded by a larger yellow triangle, and he wore a standard uniform common to all Chiram troops. He rose and greeted them.

"Captain Vern, but as you aren't in the military please call me Olson."

"Ah, nice to meet you at last," replied Susan, shaking his hand.

"Sir," said Jenny, saluting.

"At ease," he replied, saluting back. "The general has told me about your unique background, and how you'll probably be leaving us once the worlds are fixed."

"True. But I am still a soldier for the moment."

"Agreed. Please, sit."

They all sat, and the general now spoke up. "You said you wanted to meet him, here he is. Sorry it didn't happen sooner, he's been on assignment and had to make his way back here."

"Yes, about that," inquired Susan. "Is it really the best policy to let one of the only two singularities jaunt about? I'm not talking about sticking him in a padded room or anything," she hastened to add, "but you are rather important. I would hate to think a stray Mu missile or laser beam would totally cut off your chances to fix things around here."

"I have to do my part, even if it is dangerous," insisted Olson.

"You sound like me," grumped the general, looking over at him. "I've told him he takes far too many risks all the time. But will he listen? No... I'm just a general."

"Yes sir, you can't discipline me for simply carrying out my duties."

"I suppose not. But you may soon have a new duty, now that Susan is here shaking things up."

"Yes, General Wright told me about you, but I have to say you're not exactly what I expected."

"What? A six foot valkyrie warrior maiden with cleavage you could ski down?"

"That's a line from something isn't it?" asked Jenny. "I can't recall from what though..."

"From how he described you, yes, something like that." Olson's glasses prevented Susan from seeing if he was rolling his eyes.

"Whatever he told you, I assure you it's no exaggeration. The point is, how can I help? We don't even know how you two are supposed to be fixing the world, unless you've learned a few things in your time here?"

Olson shook his head sadly. "I may as well start from the beginning. After the space elevator was built there was some dispute we'll call it, over who should really be in control of it. Of course this escalated and war broke out, and our side decided that just destroying the whole thing was the best course of action. After some discussion it was decided the safest way to do that was to shove it over into the next dimension. It did reach into space, after all, so it falling over or otherwise breaking up might have really wrecked the place up. With it gone, it was reasoned, there would be nothing to fight over and the war would stop."

"No, I'm sure they could have found something else," mused Susan. *Like retaliation for destroying the space elevator? I mean there's always something to get mad about, right?*

"Possibly. In any case, the space/time bomb was deployed and our unit, including Kei and myself, were ordered to pull back before it was armed because our losses were too heavy. Kei was having none of that, though, and decided to arm the bomb himself."

"Which blew up in his face?"

"Literally. When I woke up the world had changed, and we all had to come to terms with several 'dominant' humanoid species that now had been flung together. To say nothing of the shifting landscape, of course. Scientists started working to find some kind of early warning system so they could predict when an area might shift, and of course to gain a greater understanding of what happened so it could be reversed. That's when I was found. I gave off some kind of dimensional energy they could track, and I joined up with the army to do my part. That's all I know."

"We've been studying the energy, and the area," put in the general. "You've already seen the fruits of that labor."

The big piece of machinery with the chunk of Hyperlarcovite in the middle.

Don't forget to steal that for me before you leave, The Darkness reminded her.

Susan nodded. "Right. But what does it do?"

"I can tell you what the scientists have been telling me what they're trying to accomplish," said Jeffrey. "It's all quite high level, and really only a conceptual model for what is mainly a mathematical construct anyway. And that's the real problem- the math. We don't have it all, which is why I'm glad you suggested to Kei that he see if the Enaam have also been working on this problem. Maybe their science can fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge and we can actually finish that device in the basement."

"Now, to explain; before the bomb the existence of 'walls' if you will that separated our realities was discovered."

I have to wonder, did The Darkness have a hand in that? Knowing they would use the information the way they did?

I plead the fifth.

So yes, then.

"Now, those walls have been forcefully bombed, and cracks have developed. These cracks are what allow other realities to show through, which we perceive to be the messed up planet as it stands now. Also these walls are not 'hard' like brick, but rather rubber and seem to have a 'wind' that shifts them around a bit. This is what we see when a section of the world is replaced with another. The crack is just moving or widening and showing us what's past that section of wall."

"Right," agreed Olson. "Basically our bomb was to bend the wall around the elevator so it couldn't be accessed from our world anymore. This is what we got instead. Either because our math was faulty, the bomb was faulty, or Kei screwed it all up, as usual."

Or the bomb did exactly what it was supposed to, and brought all these realities together for The Darkness to munch on.

"So just like a crack in drywall, you need a patch," suggested Jenny.

"Right. We're going to take the energy out of the singularities and 'pour' it if you will into the cracks. Hopefully that will set and stop the cracking."

"How do you know it won't just force them open wider?" asked Susan.

"We don't," the general replied seriously. "But we die if we do nothing, so we have nothing to lose."

"Ah."

"From what I've been told, the energy that went into me is more like the energy of the wall itself rather than the energy that was going to be used to bend the wall in the first place."

Susan considered. "Actually, I suppose that makes sense. We could call the energy that went into you 'shrapnel' because the walls got blown apart and those chunks had to end up someplace. But wait, that's got to be such a small bit of the original amount, how would it ever even make a difference?"

"Actually, that's basically been my task," explained Olson. "When a large amount of 'debris' is picked up on scanners I head there and soak it up. It seems to be attracted to me,

like a magnet. So I'm practically bursting with it." He lowered his glasses a little, and Susan saw they were glowing.

"Mako eyes," she remarked, remembering Cloud's similar soul windows. "An interesting parallel. Okay, so we're going to have to tell Kei to do the same?"

He pushed the glasses back up and shook his head. "He took longer to get here. Wherever he was between then and now seems to have been doing something similar. And I've gotten the largest areas we've picked up, I've been here for years after all."

"At least according to our sensors. That's how we can track him from so far away," Jeffrey put in.

"All right. I like this plan, I'm proud to be a part of it. This patching though, does it have to happen somewhere specific?"

"The space elevator," said the general. "We talked about that when we met with the Enaam, remember?"

"Oh, guess that was mentioned in passing, wasn't it? But isn't that area..."

"Controlled by the Mu. Yes. That's why I liked your plan, find how they're moving troops around and destroy it so they can't get backup. Plus they may pull troops from there if we started attacking their territories, making things easier for us when we go after that place."

"And how many robots are we talking about?"

"Put it this way, at last report probably as many combat frames as we have soldiers, and that was when we could get close to the place. There's probably more there now."

Duh. Doesn't cost me any energy to have robots build more robots. You think I'm just going to let you all walk up to the key point of this dimension and go to town with your little plan? When I can just keep you all from getting close and let the weather do you in? I'm patient, after all, and I can lose a million robots but you 'living' people don't seem to like throwing your lives away.

"Figure there's more there now," she agreed.

"The thing that works against us... the two things that work against us," put in Jenny, "is the fact we don't want to damage the elevator and we can't get very high. If we could fly higher we could just bomb them to pieces. Carefully, like I said we don't want to make the elevator fall over."

"Do we need it? I mean it's the cause of all this isn't it?" Susan asked.

"There's more of that energy floating around up in space," explained Jeffrey. "We have to take the equipment up there, absorb the energy, and only then will we think we have enough. Hopefully just filling in the larger cracks will prevent new ones from forming and fix most of our problems. I mean we don't mind the Enaam, keeping a few doors open to other realities could greatly benefit both sides of the crack, when the end of the world isn't looming over our heads."

"You might even study the edge of the two realities and find out how to safely move it aside, like a curtain, rather than having to use the force of a bomb," added Jenny. "People could one day step across worlds as easily as unlocking their front door."

"Indeed," agreed the general.

"Wait a second, how does this fix the shell or whatever that's gone up around the world?" asked Susan. "How does it fit into all this?"

"That we aren't sure about," admitted Jeffrey. "We can't really study it, just the effect it has on anything we poke into it. It destroys stuff. We are sort of just hoping it's related. Maybe some kind of 'dust' that was kicked up when the cracks were made? We hope once the dimensions are more stable it will either disperse across all of them and pose little threat or finally settle and just naturally go away."

It's actually me. I mean not literally me, I mean the Mu built something to generate that field at my request. And by request I mean programming. The dimensions coming apart wasn't killing people here fast enough for my taste, so I worked out something to hurry the process along a bit. I'm patient, but one does like to see the fruits of one's labor, doesn't one? Once you 'heroes' started fouling up my plans I knew I needed to pick up the pace, so that's what I did. Plus it keeps you away from that energy you need to fix things, so win-win, right? I mean lose-lose from your point of view.

"It actually came later?" she asked.

“Yes. That’s why we think it’s a sort of ‘dust.’ It took time to gather into the atmosphere and start messing the weather up.”

What, don’t you trust me? When I’m gloating about something, why would I lie?

Who knows? If you think I’m just going to take what you say at face value though, I’m not sure you know we well enough yet.

“Then I’m sure it’ll work out,” Susan said with a wave of her hand.

“No doubt,” agreed the general, standing up. “I have to get back to work. Olson, Susan here is a civilian, so you can’t technically order her around, but as of this moment you three are now a squad.”

“Sir, my men-”

“They’ll have someone assigned to them. Susan is right, unless there’s a new energy source for you to absorb you should stay here. You’ve been out there, you know Mu attacks are on the rise. We have to believe they can track that energy as easily as we can.”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t worry, it shouldn’t be for long. For now your orders are to work with Susan in getting Kei at least on our side, or whatever else she thinks is best for you three to do. Jenny, I’m promoting you to captain as well. You obviously have far more experience than you said when you signed on, and there may come a time before this is over that you’ll need to bark orders at people. I don’t want grunts quibbling about rank when the times comes.” He slid an envelope across the table to her. “Your new insignia... and the forms you’ll have to fill out. I trust you. If only because you no doubt want to go back to dimension hopping, and solving our problem solves yours, so we’re on the same side.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” he added as he went out the door.

“Congratulations,” Olson and Susan said. Olson seriously and Susan with a smirk.

“Bah. There should be a special rank for us dimensional travelers. I’m disgusted. Me, a mere *captain*- what a step down.”

Olson looked a bit shocked but grinned when he saw Susan nodding and trying not to laugh.

“Okay, I guess he didn’t tell me everything. But he did say you spoke to Kei yesterday?”

“Yup. And I figure we should get you close enough to get a signal to the ship he’s on, if we can reach it in any reasonable time today,” Susan replied.

“Can’t I just go see him? You did tell him something to that effect, right?”

“Now that I’ve seen those eyes of yours, I’m even less inclined to let you two get close if it’s not under lab conditions. Think about it, you’ve just told me the energy inside you is attracted to itself, right? Well, there’s that energy inside him, too. What if his flows outside him and yours flows outside you and just meets in a big ball and now you’ve both lost the advantage of being a singularity? Or you come along for the ride and two miles out you’re suddenly jerked through the cockpit of your mecha and go flying through the air and collide with him? Or even worse, what if your two energies have the same charge and you actually *repel*? You could be flying along and suddenly find yourself flying backwards through your chair!”

“I see your point.”

“Good. No, when he agrees to meet it’ll be on some field someplace, where you can slowly walk towards each other from like a mile away with sensors going and stopping every few feet to make sure something bad isn’t happening.”

“I guess that’s reasonable. Let’s go find out where he is currently, I really would like to at least talk to him. There’s some things he doesn’t know, that he needs to.”

“Sounds good to me.”

So the three left the base in the direction of the Glomar, which was heading for the Enaam home city. Olson did mention she was basically doing what she just chided him for doing, that is, going outside the city where the Mu could blow him up.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “You’ll be with me. Us. Jenny and me. Safest place on

the planet, believe me.”

Each civilization relied on the equivalent to a ‘disposable cell tower’ for their communications, basically a cheap transmitter they could shotgun about the landscape and not have to worry about losing a few if the space around them opened to another world. But even these three couldn’t request the kind of power that was used to tie together the signals for the big meeting before, so they had to get a bit closer to the ship in order to call them.

This time Susan and Jenny went in separate Ishkicks, Jenny being a captain now she could sign for more expensive equipment and just signed one out for her. She, of course, got a more advanced model for her own use, as befitted her new rank.

“Susan calling Enaam ship Glomar,” Susan repeated, now that Olson assured her they were in range. She had insisted on being the one to call, as Kei knew her and Jenny and presumably told the rest of the crew. Olson was going to cut in once the channel was open.

“This is the Glomar, Mimsy speaking,” said Mimsy as the bridge of the Glomar came into view. “Shaya, our captain, is in another part of the ship. If you would like to discuss some kind of business transaction you will have to wait a moment while I fetch her.”

“Hello Mimsy,” Susan said brightly. “Actually, this is Susan, and I’m hoping to talk to... wait, your name is Mimsy?”

“Yes, have we met?”

“What, no, I just... Mimsy. What a great name. In fact I officially love that name. Mimsy. Mimsy. Mimsy. Sorry, both you and your name are just too cute I couldn’t contain myself.”

“Uh, thank you?” Mimsy seemed a little loss for words.

Susan laughed. “Sorry, as I was saying, I’m Susan, Kei might have mentioned me?”

“Oh.” Mimsy turned frosty. “He mentioned something about a girl in a bathing suit, that might be calling sometime soon. That was you?”

“Sorry, we figured he would be more inclined to stick around and listen to what we had to say dressed like that. Rather than uniforms, or clothes from off world I mean.”

“It was... you mean you... oh forget it, I’ll just go get him. Wait a second.” The feed cut out.

“She seems nice?” Jenny ventured.

“Typical Enaam,” added Olson, then raised his voice mockingly. “If you have business to transact.”

“I suppose they are a merchant ship, right?” asked Susan.

“Sure, but is a simple ‘how can we help you today’ too much to ask?”

“Maybe she fell asleep that day in business class?”

“Maybe.” The three fell silent, waiting for Kei to come on, which he did a moment later.

“Hi Kei, I brought someone who says he has some stuff to tell you,” Susan said to him. “Hope we didn’t get you in trouble with your *girlfriend* there.”

“Oh, I’m used to it by now. Nice to see you again, Susan, proves I wasn’t just hallucinating or something.”

“Was that a possibility?”

“Mushrooms were mentioned, yes. So who wants to talk to me?”

“I’ll turn you over to him.”

“Hey partner,” said Olson, taking the call over.

“Olson! Hey, it really is you,” Kei answered excitedly. “This is great, but why do you look so old? What happened to you?”

“A lot. Look, I’m going to lead off with the most important thing, okay? Something that may change your whole life, or at least whatever you’re going to do next.”

“Okay? Hit me, I guess.”

“You’re a father.”

“I’m a what?”

Sneaking Around

Who: Sparkle

Time: Early morning, day 9

Place: Common sleeping area

Kei sat on the edge of his bed, lost in thought. The revelation that the last time he saw Tina, in her bedroom the night of the mission to detonate “the chocolate parfait monster” (or dimensional bomb) she had become pregnant, was eating away at him.

“How could I have been so stupid!” Sparkle heard him say, and she looked over to him.

He must be brooding, usually he can't take his eyes off Mimsy when she's changing.

Mimsy finished buttoning the top of her uniform and sat next to him. “Are you still brooding about that?”

“How can I not?” he replied. “If Tina was still alive she would hate me right now. I mean the night I... you know... was the night the dimensional bomb went off and from her perspective, I was killed or went missing. Then she finds out she's pregnant? Should I be angry at her or simply grateful to have a child?”

“Angry? Why would you be angry with her? Typical male!”

“She said that wouldn't happen! Because of the war effort, stuff like protection was really hard to get, but she assured me-”

“Oh, that's what you're so upset about?” Mimsy fumed, throwing both her tentacles and hands up. “I don't know why I bother. Anyway, she's all grown up now, and a soldier herself right? Followed in old dad's footsteps, so shouldn't you be proud?”

“She lied to me. And look what happened!”

“It's not an exact science, you know. Plus, maybe she wanted a child from you because she knew that might be her last chance. You didn't let slip about your mission, did you?”

“No! You're saying she might have deliberately misled me, knowing she could get pregnant?”

“It's a possibility. Because of how few Enaam males are born sometimes Enaam girls will... never you mind, but even among Chiram I could see it happening. As a woman, I could see in desperation-”

“Desperation? Like she settled for me because I happened to be nearby and seemed willing?”

“That's not what I meant at all! She at least knew you were a soldier, there was every possibility each mission could be your last. Besides, you were the one in her bedroom, did she seem to be just using you? Did she really love you, or would you just jump into bed- what am I asking, you're male of course you would.” She rolled her eyes, but Kei wasn't looking at her.

“She did basically use me, didn't she? It's like if she asked me to get her a gun to protect her house from looters, then she goes and murders her father with it. She invited me to her bedroom on false pretenses.”

Mimsy looked at him from the sides of her eyes. “I'm sure you went along with what she proposed willingly enough.”

“That's not the point.”

“Then what is? In any case, it happened literally in another world and another time. Plus, Tina was killed, right? It's over with and done, and your child is now basically a woman herself. So at least some part of Tina lives on. Content yourself with- or do you hate this child you haven't even met because you can't properly hate Tina now that she's gone?”

“No, I don't!” assured Kei. “I just... I don't think so. I don't know what to feel.”

“Humph. I guess that's something, anyway. If you did, I suppose... well, never mind. So what are you going to do?”

“Olson said he was going to get her transferred to where he's staying and after we visit the Enaam homeland he would try and persuade her to meet me. Just because he shouldn't get too close to me until we know what might happen doesn't mean she can't.”

“Just remember she's your daughter, don't put any moves on her no matter how pretty she might be.”

"Who do you take me for?"

"I don't know, but I have the funniest sense of you kissing some green haired girl."

"Don't even joke about that! Besides, according to him she's not exactly thrilled I've popped back up."

"Somehow I can relate," Mimsy muttered.

There seemed to be nothing more to say about that, so Shaya got everyone's attention and they went into the common room to discuss their plans for the day.

"We should discuss our plans for today," she said, knowing they needed to discuss their plans for that day, "as we'll be arriving at the home city sometime today."

"So, our plans, we should discuss them?" asked Reeg.

"Right. We need to make a plan, discuss it, and then we'll have a plan."

"What's to plan?" asked Kei. "We just need to find out if your people have any specific information about what I need to do to fix the world."

"The way you were talking yesterday, it was a bit more specific than that," countered Reeg. "You were basically talking about specific science relating to something the Chiram are building."

"Whatever it is."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable committing treason," spoke up Govu.

"Treason? Who said anything about that?" asked Leah. Maai also looked puzzled.

"You realize what we're going to have to do? They aren't just going to hand over any scientific data they've obtained about the phenomenon of the dimensional shifts. We're going to have to hack into the science building's computers, decrypt and copy the information, and get out without anyone knowing about it."

"But that's still not treasonous," protested Maai. "Breaking and entering. Tampering with a computer system. Theft."

"I don't need the list! It will be treason, once we hand that information over to the Chiram."

They silently digested this.

"Ah, but we're not, are we?" asked Kei with a snap of his fingers. "We're handing it over to those two dimensional traveler girls. And it's not like the information will be used *against* the Enaam people, it'll just be used to fix the world's problems."

"I'm not sure that congress will see it that way," Govu maintained. "I mean they've spoken to this girl directly, yes? But they didn't see fit to just hand the information over..."

"Yes, why go through all this trouble and put my master at risk?" asked Mome. "If she's in contact with congress herself why should we risk our lives trying to steal the information?"

"But Mome, don't you see, there's a lot of reasons we should have the information ourselves. What if they decide not to help this girl, because they feel she can't be trusted? Or they give her only partial information while leaving out critical pieces she needs? We can't take that chance. And they're not just going to open fire if they see us sneaking around you know. We're not risking our *lives*."

"Plus," added Shaya, "if we do it right no one will be the wiser. Say that congress does choose to release the information to these two? In that case, we can compare what they're given to what we took and make sure it's the same."

"You aren't suggesting they would alter the data and somehow make it useless, do you?" asked Kei.

"They're the ones that sent those ships to detain you and bring you back for mental reprogramming," she reminded him. "Do you think there's any level they wouldn't stoop to?"

"Oh, it's revenge!" remarked Mome. "That's why you want to do this, to get back at them for wanting to mess with your brain. I get it."

"No, Mome, that's..." But Kei couldn't continue, because if he was being honest with himself (and who was, really?) it was kind of exactly like that.

"So, what are we going to do?" asked Reeg after a moment. "And how do we keep Kei from being found out once we're there? The Chiram aren't the only ones with dimensional scanners, after all."

Everyone looked over at him. "Sorry, Kei, we'll be dropping you off before we get anywhere near the city."

He slumped over. "I understand. I'll just go hang out in the forest and try not to go mad with worry over the fate my favorite girl, Mimsy."

"Oh, stop it," said Mimsy, but she didn't look totally displeased.

"With that out of the way, what is the plan?" asked Reeg.

"We're somewhat fortunate," explained Shaya, "because our city is pretty small, there is only facility dedicated to dimensional research. At least, that I knew about before I left to captain the Glomar."

"If you can get me inside, I can plug in and copy any data off servers," offered Mome.

"Good, that's what I was hoping for," replied Shaya. "The tricky part, of course, is actually getting inside."

"Should we break in at night?" asked Mimsy.

Kei shook his head. "Hard to justify your presence in the building at night, when there shouldn't be anyone around. No, if you can stake the place out during the day you might be able to see what security measures are in place. I mean there shouldn't be that many, just someone checking badges and making sure you're Enaam. Presumably if you were let into the city, you're Enaam, and the guards would just be there to keep kids and foreigners from poking around the place. It shouldn't be too heavily guarded, especially if you can slip inside without being detected."

"Maybe some kind of roof access we can fly up to?" suggested Reeg.

"There won't be any open windows, the building will be climate controlled," figured Mimsy.

"No, but there would be a door, even in a modern building someone might have to get on the roof for some reason."

"True."

"I think we're going to have to be closer before we can come up with any real plans," suggested Shaya. "We'll need to see what the situation is before we commit to something that's unrealistic."

"Then let's eat!" suggested Kei.

Later that day, Kei safely tucked away a hundred miles from the city, it came into view. Sparkle had debated staying with Kei, but honestly these people probably needed her more as they were the ones risking everything by breaking into what was essentially a government building. So she watched the approach with the others, and saw a some kind of shining barrier which was surrounded by forest.

"That's a city?" asked Mome. "It's sealed off."

"To help keep it cool, as we found Mu could just teleport through it," said Shaya sadly. "Originally the barrier put around it wasn't intended for more than defense, but spraying the inside of the glass with a mirroring agent helps keep out some of the heat, at least. Though if the Chiram decided to attack, it would certainly keep them out awhile."

"No wonder it's so bright. It's pretty."

"That it is, little one."

The people at the gate had no reason to refuse the Glomar entrance, and they glided to their assigned parking spot. Mimsy wanted to leave right away and take a look at the building they were going to have to infiltrate but Shaya urged caution instead.

"If we're seen immediately flying out there it's going to raise a lot of red flags. Don't forget, we're probably under observation right now, given our recent contact with Kei. Let's just restock our inventory, go shopping, visit family, whatever we would normally do when we came back here. If, in the course of our travels you happen to pass by that building, great. Keep your eyes open and see if anything obvious jumps out at you. Otherwise, tomorrow we'll stake the place out and come up with a plan. I hate to move so quickly, but I have to think of Kei out in the forest by himself. We'll need to get moving despite the risk. I just hope if there is interest in us, it goes away quickly."

"Tell me where it is," insisted Mome. "I can make my way there on foot and make sure

I'm not followed. No one is likely to watch me anyway, right?"

Shaya stared down at her, then crouched down. "You're really willing to risk it?"

"There's no risk, why would anyone hurt me? Even if I got captured, I'll just say I got lost. There would be no reason to doubt me."

She considered. "I guess, and we do need to have some idea of what the layout is as quickly as possible. If we could make at least some plans tonight... okay. You could probably fit into the storage compartment under the seat of the flyers, right? Someone will take you part way there, drop you off, and then pick you back up in an hour or so, all right?"

"That sounds fun! It'll be an adventure!" beamed Mome.

And that's my cue.

Sparkle stuck with her as she was partly disassembled so she could fit into the storage area of Maai's bike, who was going with her sister to visit family in the city. She jumped onto Leah's when she sat down and started buckling her belts.

"Shaya, Starburst is on my flyer!" she complained.

"Then that's where she wants to be," Shaya called back. "She must have something in mind."

Leah turned and looked back at her, and Sparkle looked calmly back up at her. "You're really coming?"

"Meow."

"Fine. Just don't fall off."

Outside the ice cream place the twins stopped at, Mome pushed the seat up and looked around, checking to make sure the coast was clear. Swiftly reattaching her arm and a leg, she accessed her internal map and set off down the street of the city, Sparkle following a pace or two behind. "You are a funny one," she said, scooping her up and holding onto her.

Sparkle now was able to look around as she was carried along, and noticed the city looked... odd. Like someone had said "how can we build our buildings to look all futuristic and stuff?" and then set out to do just that.

I mean if you think about it, buildings last a long time, especially skyscraper type buildings like these. And once up, you don't tend to knock them over and build new ones because you don't want to accidentally knock into a nearby structure. But these look like someone designed them hundreds of years ago to look all sweeping and curvy and shiny. I guess it could just be architectural styles between what I'm used to at home, but it just seems weird. Or maybe this place didn't look like this twenty years ago, when the incident first happened? They've built it up to look like this in the meantime? I mean we just got onto a moving sidewalk! I know they have anti-gravity systems and everything, but they don't seem that advanced. Or are they just so advanced it doesn't look like they are? Technology is so confusing.

Sparkle also noticed the unequal ratio of male to female Enaam (with females being more prevalent) and how clean everything was. She had little time to ponder these issues as Mome stepped off the sidewalk and pointed to a nearby building.

"That's the one Shaya said was the research center. Shall we go have a look around?"

Sparkle jumped down and the two circled the building, while keeping an eye out for anyone that seemed to take too great an interest in them. No one did, at least according to Sparkle's thirteen perception check, as people streamed by on the moving sidewalks chatting and going about their business.

The building seemed much taller than most of the buildings in the area, and high above Sparkle could see some weird tubes running into the side of it.

"That's another method of transport," Mome explained, noticing her looking up at it.

"There are people in those tubes, going from building to building. There's less wind resistance in the tubes, so they can go faster."

"Meow."

"Does Shaya know the internal layout of that building?" Mome wondered. "It's so big, we don't want to spend hours just trying to find their mainframe. I bet they have a good looking mainframe though." She started skipping and singing. "I like the size of your mainframe! I have a query for your mainframe. Can I make an input/output request?"

“Meow?”

“Just some computer humor. Come on.” Mome looked around and selected a nearby building, heading around the side. She peaked around the wall and then turned back to Sparkle.

“You can understand me, can’t you?”

Sparkle considered, then gave a slight nod.

Mome smiled. “I thought so! I’ve been watching you- anyway now’s not the time. I want you to do something for me, if you can. See that entrance over there? See if you can slip in when someone goes inside. They’ll probably have some kind of keycard system that unlocks the door. Once you’re inside, look around and try to steal one, then bring it back here.”

Sparkle cocked her head to one side.

“I want to get in, and go to the top of this building so we can look over at the science building there. This is the only building tall enough. I could maybe hack the security system from outside, using a panel, but I don’t want to risk getting spotted or doing it wrong. I’m a nurse, not a hacker. The keycard would be easier.”

Sparkle looked between them, deciding she was right. She nodded and headed for the door.

Her LUCk check of seventeen meant she didn’t have to wait long, and her *sneaking* check of thirteen was enough to get her inside without the woman spotting her as she did.

Now what?

Once inside, Sparkle looked around and set off down the hallway, going *Invisible* as she did so. This was some sort of office building, and she could hear the muted conversations from people inside offices to either side as she moved about. Another LUCk check of twenty two led her to a meeting room and she pushed her way inside. Looking around she circled the chairs and saw a badges clipped to various pieces of clothing around the room.

Now to get one without being seen. She considered for a moment, then went behind a plant that was in the corner of the room. *Just in case this ends Invisibility.* She then did an instant casting of *Illusion* situated on the ceiling and causing everyone to look up to see what that flash of light was. It was of course already gone, and they went on with the meeting never knowing they were now in the grip of an *Illusion*. A very subtle *Illusion*, which Sparkle immediately began enacting.

Within a few moments, the meeting came to a halt as someone got up to check the temperature setting on the thermostat.

“It’s normal room temperature,” insisted the lady that was looking it over.

“Then why does it seem so hot in here?” asked another, fanning herself.

“Someone will have to have maintenance down here to take a look,” said the first lady, casually taking her top off. “We’re almost done here anyway, this should wrap up soon.”

Nods went around the room and others started stripping clothes off, and setting them aside.

I figured that’s what would happen. These people have absolutely no shame at all. Why do they even bother to wear clothes in the first place? The people on the Glomar seem to wear as little as possible, so it’s a good thing that’s cultural and not just them being weirdos.

Sparkle was now able to carefully chew through the string holding one person’s badge to a sort of zip line that could stretch back and forth, and invisibly carried it out of the room. With her gone, the spell broke and now everyone was freezing and hastily went to put their clothes back on. Sparkle went back the way she came, then made a REASON check as she got up to the door. Her eight wasn’t quite enough but she didn’t know that, and figured everything was fine. Having no means to unlatch the door she waited again until someone went through, and darted through herself. She made her way to the side of the building, dropping *Invisibility* as she did so, and walked up to Mome with the badge in her mouth.

“Oh, you did great!” she exclaimed, taking it. “Now come on, before they notice it’s missing.”

The two went around the back and Mome let them both in with the badge, peaking in the door and looking about.

What they didn’t know, and what a higher REASON check might have alerted Sparkle

to, is that the badge hadn't been swiped *out*. So now it had been swiped *in* twice, alerting security, who perked up and watched as a little girl and a cat went to the elevator and punched the button for the top floor.

The two reached the top floor without incident, and they snuck around looking for some kind of access to the roof, which they found.

"Looks like just a standard alarm," Mome remarked, looking the door over. "Mostly to keep people from busting through it and jumping off the building without alerting someone so they can try and stop it. I doubt it's tied into the building's security." She scrambled up onto the door handle and put her hand over the box at the top of the door. Closing her eyes she concentrated, and then nodded. "It shouldn't go off now. Come on." She hopped down and gently pushed the door open, allowing them both access to the roof. There was little wind here, given how the whole city was enclosed, so Mome and Sparkle went to the edge to try and see what they could see of the science building next door. Mome's eyes whirred.

"Yes, there's a roof access but it looks pretty locked down, even from here," she remarked, then slowly panned across the place. "Not many windows either, so we aren't getting in that way. I suppose the walls are pretty thick, to block out any sort of radiation that might mess with the experiments inside. How in the world are we going to get in there?"

"And why would you want to do that, little lady?" said a voice behind them.

Two security personnel stood there, looking somewhat perturbed, but Sparkle noted their weapons weren't drawn.

Which is a good sign, right?

But they did each have a hand on their gun, and the holster was unsnapped.

Right?

Everything is an illusion

Who: Sparkle

Where: Top of the building next to the building they want to break into

Time: Day 9, just after being discovered.

“Asked you a question little lady,” said the security guard when Mome hesitated to answer, as she was obviously unprepared for being caught in this situation. She may have been prepared to be caught outside by saying she was lost, but holding a key card in one hand and standing atop a secured building is an absurd place to be lost in.

Unless of course your name is Mihoshi. And you’re the theorized great-great-granddaughter of a being that gave up the majority of her powers as one of the three goddess that created the universe so she could study the nature of existence from first principals. But her name is not Mihoshi, it’s Mome, and right now she’s wishing she had a little bit more combat programming and a little less medical programming.

She looked down at Sparkle, who gave her a “what do you want me to do about it, I’m just a cat” look. She looked back up at the woman who was looming over her.

“Because we need to find out more about the singularity and the mathematics behind the dimensional rift dynamic that currently threatens our very existence. That building is the reported center of such research done by the Enaam people so it’s imperative we collect all known data before my master Kei, the singularity, is inadvertently harmed by our clumsy attempts to return all the worlds affected by the dimensional bomb to relative normalcy vis a vis the Enaam and Chiram people working together on a scale never before conceived of by either race.” She clapped her hands over her mouth in horror.

The one security guard glanced over at the other with a “what is this girl talking about” look while Mome had a *I wish my programming included less ‘let’s be helpful and answer people’s questions truthfully’ subroutines* and more *‘oh my gosh look over there it’s a giant lizard from under the sea and it’s about to destroy the city’* distraction subroutines.

But you have what you have, right? And you don’t have what you don’t have.

Didn’t think a robot could have Compulsive Honesty but then, I wouldn’t want the possibility of a medical robot lying to people either.

“Maybe you better come with me,” said the first guard, reaching for Mome.

“She’s not Enaam,” remarked the other. “How did you even get in this city?”

“I came here legitimately, on a trading ship.”

“Which one?”

“The...” She looked to be struggling with herself. “I don’t have to tell you!”

“Come on, let’s go downstairs and see if we can’t sort this all out.” She grabbed Mome, who really couldn’t struggle against authority figures, and dragged her towards the door.

So much for stealth, now what do I do? Sparkle followed.

“What’s with the cat?” asked the other, looking down at her.

“She came with me.”

“A cat?”

“She’s part of the crew!”

“You must have the weirdest crew...”

“Let me tell you about the talking dinosaur.”

“Later.”

Shut up, Mome. If you tell them about the crew, they’ll easily find out we come from the Glomar. How many other ships have a giant lizard crewing them? On the elevator ride down Sparkle was furiously thinking about how they were going to get out of this situation using her only spell of Illusion. Oh, sure, I could make us both invisible in an instant, but that would give away my being magical plus Mome wouldn’t know exactly what was going on as to her eyes her body would have just vanished. We wouldn’t be able to stay together to escape, and if I had to let it go too early she might just be caught again. To say nothing of the fallout when I made my way back to the Glomar. They would want an explanation after all.

They led Mome into a room full of monitors and Sparkle looked up at them, considering.

Someone in charge stepped up, looking down at Mome. "Caught our little infiltrator, did we? How did you get hold of that badge you used, anyway?"

"I just found it lying outside and tried it on the door. It worked so I thought I would go up to the roof and have a look around."

This was technically true, as Sparkle had dropped the badge causing Mome to pick it up off the ground.

"Oh did you? Then would you like to tell me how a badge that got scanned in at one door hours ago suddenly appeared outside to be scanned in again?"

"Maybe... umm..."

"Yes?"

Attention was now turned to Mome and everyone had forgotten little old Sparkle, who took the opportunity to cast a spell. She didn't care about people seeing the flash, she cast instantly and put max energy into it. She got a fifteen, and the five Enaam NPCs (hey, they are at least as far as Sparkle is concerned. So they have average REASON of 5) made their resistance checks.

All failed.

Sparkle now enacted her *Illusion*, one piece at a time.

First, she created a very loud explosion sound, causing the security personnel to jump and wonder what the noise was.

Second, she created the illusion of smoke filling the room, and covered the monitors with the illusion that they were showing scenes of hallways consumed in fire.

Third she created more explosion noises, from faint to moderately loud, causing the security personnel to believe the building was being blown up and making them all draw their weapons and rush to the monitors to see what was going on.

And finally the masterstroke, she created a very high temperature all at once near the ceiling so the computerized fire detection system registered that the room was on fire, and turned on the sprinklers while fire alarms started sounding through the place. If it had been a simple mechanical system, something bursting when heat was applied, of course this trick wouldn't have worked. But the Enaam were, in this case, too advanced for their own good and computerized everything when the place was built. This system was just smart enough to be taken in by *Illusion*, after all a system that senses temperature is a system that senses temperature. Whether that system is biological or mechanical makes little difference after a certain point. They had tied it all together so the alarm could sound when the water went off, so bells could be heard ringing. Yes, no one ever heard them ringing, until they caught the Mu. (Mome is a humanoid Mu robot, you knew that, right?)

The result of all this was; various swear words were spoken and Mome was completely forgotten as one of the guards yelled the building was under attack (it wasn't) and they needed to start evacuating people (they didn't). The four sprinted out of the room, leaving a bewildered Mome and a smug Sparkle behind.

Sparkle, for her part, immediately took action and ran to the door on the other side of the room. She started scratching at it, and Mome took the hint, rushing over to it.

"It's locked," she said, rattling the handle. "And it's mechanical, I can't get it open."

That Illusion isn't going to fool them for long, they'll realize the hallways are not on fire somewhat quickly. No time for subtlety then.

Sparkle hopped up and touched the door (it wasn't going anywhere) and spent more of her dwindling supply of energy on a Ryūdō strike to bust the wood holding the lock in place. *When we get back to the hub I am seriously taking Silverstreak up on his offer to get me more energy.*

Sparkle got lucky and did nineteen damage to the door, which thanks to her LUCK check of twenty was made of wood and could only take eighteen before being destroyed. (A metal one would have needed an additional eleven damage) The door shattered, as there was no provision in the *Paragon Rules* for partially destroying an object in this way. Either the DC was depleted and the object was no longer whatever it happened to be previously, or it was not, and thus was still whole. She had done more damage than the door could take, so despite her just wanting to "shoot the lock out" the door blew outward and Mome gasped at

her.

"How did you do that?" she asked, taking a step back.

Sparkle, not wanting to go into detail, simply said "meow" and stepped into the hallway beyond, which thanks to an even higher LUCk check of twenty two was currently unoccupied.

"Right, get out first, talk later I guess?" She peaked around the doorframe and both lass scampered out of there, joining the throng of people that believed some kind of fire drill was going on. (They still have those, right?) The two slipped away as five security guards raved and ranted about being under attack and fires in the halls and explosions taking the whole place down around them. Everyone assured them things were fine, and twenty years later they got back together and had a good laugh about the whole thing. But this is not their story, and so we return to the ice cream place where Mome and Sparkle tried to stay out of sight until the twins returned and Mome packed herself away again.

Shaya and the rest of the crew stared at Mome, as she had just finished telling her story of the dramatic escape. Sparkle, laying nearby and watching their reactions through slitted eyes gauged them as "I'm not really believing what I'm hearing." She didn't blame them.

"So the building was attacked at that very moment?" asked Shaya.

"That's what I saw on the monitors. And I heard the sounds of explosions, and the sprinklers all went off... though just in that room now that I think about it. We didn't get wet in the hallway."

"And this cat, that can't weigh more than ten kilograms, touched a door and shattered it into pieces?" asked Mimsy.

"Her name is still Starburst," Mome said acidly. "And I'm telling the truth."

"The cat- Starburst," Srei corrected himself as Mome glared at him too, "did fight or scare off those guys trying to steal the mecha we named after her. We never did figure out how, and that man insisted he was bruised when the cat touched him."

Everyone looked over at Sparkle, who didn't bother to raise her head or look back.

"I wish I had brought a piece of the door back for analysis," lamented Mome. "I could see if the material stress placed on the wood matched that of the strange burn I examined on the man."

Then I'm glad you didn't.

"I suppose we've accepted her as a part of the crew, it would be foolish to start doubting her now," remarked Shaya.

"Who, Mome or Starburst?" asked Srei.

"I'm telling the truth!" Mome stomped her foot.

"I was talking about Starburst," assured Shaya.

"Oh."

"Starburst, if you can understand me or not, I still want to thank you for looking after Mome like you did." Sparkle couldn't keep the tip of her tail from tapping in pleasure.

"You sure about this?" asked Srei. "I mean what if it goes nuts and starts murdering us in our sleep?"

"I think-" started Govu.

"She won't!" insisted Mome. "She's good, she would never hurt us!"

"As I was going to say," continued Govu, "I think if she meant us harm she wouldn't keep going out of her way to protect us."

"Well said," agreed Reeg. "I was thinking, you know how Kei insisted those girls he saw in the cave had weird abilities, and they were from a dimension beyond our local ones?" The others nodded. "What if this cat is similar? From another world, where cats have the abilities she does. Why should we assume just because she looks like a cat... I mean Jaby here can talk and he isn't human. Okay, she can't talk because her vocal cords aren't meant for that sort of thing or maybe she's just a bit smarter than the average cat. And she can... punch doors down. Who's to say that isn't totally normal where she comes from? I say we judge her character by her actions, and thus far she's been nothing but a help to us, on several occasions."

The others nodded, and Srei shrugged, defeated. "Whatever, I just hope we don't come

to regret having her around.”

Mome stuck her tongue out at him as he left.

“So what did you find out about the building?” asked Shaya. “We do still need to make plans to assault the place.”

“Not much,” replied Mome, extending a cable from herself and plugging it into a nearby computer. She mounted as an external storage device and showed the pictures she had taken of the building. “As you can see, there are few windows but the transport tubes run through the building so that’s one possible avenue of attack.”

“Security is probably tighter there,” remarked Shaya, “but by law there have to be escape hatches in case of emergency when the tubes go through a building. We could use them instead of trying to get the actual security doors open.”

“Wait, wouldn’t the tube and the doors to the building be basically one solid piece?” asked Reeg. “Even if we got out of the tube there, there’s still a wall we would have to get thought to get into the building proper.”

“Oh yeah. Security would be exactly the same no matter what entrance we used, we would just be higher up. That’s no good.”

“There is the roof access,” Mome added, showing pictures she must have taken from the roof before the security people showed up.

Must be handy, being a mechanical being.

Shaya shook her head. “Making our way from the very top of the building to the very bottom without being spotted? Doesn’t seem likely.”

“Why do we have to go to the bottom?” asked Mome. “You know where the exact servers are we need to access?”

“Oh, hadn’t thought of that. I have no idea where they might be, actually. And that building is pretty huge, isn’t it?” She looked over at the screen which was playing a movie of Mome’s vision panning across the rooftop.

“This is impossible,” complained Mimsy. “How are we going to find the one computer we need in that whole place?”

“Can Starburst help us somehow?” asked Mome. “She understood me and got me the badge. How would she have known to swipe it out so that I could swipe it in later? If we had known that, I bet we could have gotten in and out without any trouble.”

Yeah, who knew I should have put XP into espionage type skills? Of course, one could see this as a practice run to getting into wherever Susan’s father Elysian is being held. I highly doubt we’ll be able to rely on magic there, and Susan knows that, that’s why she’s been working on her non-magical skills like Spirit Step. I’ll be interested to see what they come up with.

“It’s the same problem though, getting in I mean we could just blow a door up. It’s what we do once we’re inside that’s the issue.”

“We would have to blend in,” remarked Govu. “Make sure we were wearing something that wouldn’t be remarked upon. Mome, did you get a picture of anyone entering the building? We might need to make some fake badges that can at least pass as legitimate if someone walks by and looks at them.”

“Wait, Govu, that’s an excellent idea,” said Shaya. “But I think we’re coming at this in the wrong way. Let me look something up.” She tapped away on the computer, and smiled in triumph. “Look at this.” She pointed to the screen, and everyone crowded around to see what she had come up with.

“It’s a cleaning company, so what?” asked Reeg.

“Look at the client list, they show Science Unlimited as a client. And public records show us...”

“That Science Unlimited owns the building,” read Mimsy.

“Exactly. A place as big as that probably gets cleaned every night. So I’m guessing they send a truck or trucks out who then get in and empty the garbage cans and whatnot.”

“They’re expected to be there,” breathed Govu. “No one would look at them twice.”

“Exactly. Would the guards know them well enough, if seen on a camera, to suspect they had been replaced?”

“Replaced?” asked Mimsy. “What are you planning?”

“It’s simple. Sort of. We stake out the building tonight and follow what trucks leave from there. That way we can see what route they take and somehow delay them tomorrow night. While they’re sitting there idle, we jump them and knock them out, leaving them someplace while we take their place. Then we just drive the truck into the place and start ‘cleaning them out’ if you get my drift.”

“But Mome poking around their computers is going to be noticed,” protested Reeg.

“I bet they have some kind of cart, she could hide inside it and we could position her near any computers we find. Then she can plug in and whatever machine holds the data we need, we siphon it off.”

“You really want to knock a bunch of people out? We don’t really have a lot of training in that, Shaya,” protested Mimsy.

“If you can come up with a better plan, I’m all for it. But at the moment I think this is our best chance.”

“Actually,” wondered Mome, “I have to wonder if we couldn’t just steal... I mean borrow one of their trucks for a night. I bet their security is way more lax, if it even exists at all. We could have Starburst gather up some real badges, or at least one for the driver, as there’s probably just an automated gate that service people use.”

“Maybe easier than doing it out in the open,” remarked Govu. “It’s a risk either way, of course, but this way there might be less chance of a police vehicle happening to pass by as we’re knocking people out. If we can sneak Mome in and she can start up a van without causing too much of a ruckus, that’s the way to go.”

“So get out there and check that building out, they list the address on the site,” ordered Shaya. “See what they wear, what protects the doors, everything. We’ll have to steal the truck and get right over there before they notice and report it missing.”

“Guess that’s us again,” sighed Leah.

“You coming?” asked Maai.

Mome unplugged herself (after making sure to unmount her storage partition properly) and coiled up the cable. “But I’m riding behind you this time, being shoved in the compartment is no fun, and I don’t think anyone’s following us around anyway.”

They looked to Shaya who nodded. “That’s fine. In fact...” she paused, considering. “There’s a way to get them to bring a truck to us, I mean why put any extra effort into this? Leah, Maai? Here’s what I want you two girls to tell them...”

Overlooking the Obvious

Who: Sparkle

When: A moment later

Where: Common room, Glomar

Mome listened politely to Shaya's plan, processed it, gave her updated predictive algorithm a few thousand billion cycles of active CPU time, and then promptly shot the plan down.

"So you want to have them come here under the pretense of cleaning the Glomar out, right?" she summarized. "Then steal the truck when they aren't looking and drive it away? If I was them, I would have some kind of tracking system hidden somewhere inside it, so it could be found anywhere in the city just in case something like that happened. I'm not sure even I could find something like that to disable it."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you're right. I just figured it might give us somewhat of an alibi, if the truck disappeared how could we be responsible? We wouldn't steal a truck from our own doorstep, right?"

"But the original plan is better. If we can hop in the back while they're distracted, they'll drive us into the place and be none the wiser. If the same person is driving and they have a live security guard expecting that person they'll be suspicious when one of us drives up."

"The problem with that is, there could be half a dozen people in the back of the truck. How would we deal with them?"

My goodness things are so much easier with magic. No wonder Susan whips it out all the time. This wouldn't even be a consideration if she was here and had access to all her planets at once. Heck, she could do all this alone and probably leave the science building people none the wiser. I mean, even here she could just use the spell of Research and not even leave the room. What we need is written down someplace, right? Okay, so it's in a computer somewhere, that doesn't matter to the magic. Ugh, this is terrible. Of course it doesn't help that these are a bunch of merchants and not trained... whatever you would call what Susan is now. Magic, martial arts, some supernatural abilities, augmented by her items... what is she? Anyway, they aren't that, so they can't just storm the place. They're good people, they don't want to hurt anyone or cause too much trouble. Unlike a certain girl I could name.

"Good point."

"Let's just go," said Leah impatiently.

"It might be easier or harder depending on what we find there," added Maai.

"Until we've seen the place we shouldn't make any real plans anyway."

"Go on then."

The girls flew to the address given on the website and parked their flyers outside. What awaited them wasn't a store or shop but rather another office building.

"That's odd," remarked Leah.

"They can't own the whole place, can they?" asked Maai.

"I expected something a little more dedicated, if that's the right word," finished Leah.

"Guess we can just walk in?" suggested Mome, and they did.

They stood looking at the directory posted on the wall of the building, by the entrance, and people were coming and going as they did.

"That's the company, they're here all right," said Leah, pointing up at the sign. "Along with a whole bunch of others. I think this is just office space, don't you?"

"Could be. Shall we go up and take a look?"

Mome nodded and the four got on an elevator, where a very confused man looked down at Sparkle.

Hey, if I'm not here, this part of the story couldn't be told because this is our story, it follows us. Susan and me. Nobody wants to read about me napping on the Glomar, so here I

am, out in the field getting that quest XP I so desire. So deal with it, buddy! Is it really so strange to see a cat walking around an- okay, never mind I suppose it is.

But he got off while shaking his head, and the four went another few floors up and stepped into the hallway where they believed the place to be. It was just a series of doors, and the group started walking, looking for some kind of sign as to where the actual place was.

"Here it is," said Leah, stopping in front of a door with a sign to the left.

"We can't just go in, can we?" asked Maai.

"I think we're going to have to. I don't know, this isn't what I pictured."

"I bet this is just the corporate office!" put in Mome. "I bet the trucks and stuff are all taken care of elsewhere. We're so stupid!"

"Let's at least take a peak inside," Leah said softly, cracking the door and looking inside. Sparkle looked as well and saw the underside of a desk, basically, because she was really close to the ground.

"Come on in," said a voice from beyond, and Leah froze. Maai poked her. "Nothing for it now, let's just play it by ear."

"How do I get talked into this stuff?" Leah moaned, and stepped inside.

They were greeted by a lady behind a desk and Sparkle looked around, trying to stay out of sight by pressing close to the desk itself. In fact, there wasn't much else to see in the room, just some chairs, potted plants, and posters of people brandishing weapons suitable for the germ-pocalypse.

"How can I help you?" asked the lady with a winning smile.

"Uh, well, that is to say..." began Leah.

"We were wondering..." added Maai, looking around nervously.

"Yes, wondering... uh..."

"Yes?"

"Could you come and clean our ship?" blurted Mome, and the woman smiled down at her.

"Aren't you just the cutest thing?"

"My name is Mome, I'm seven, what's your name?"

"My name is Ahromha, it's nice to meet you Mome. You say you want your ship cleaned?"

"Uh, yes, that's it exactly!" said Leah, deciding to go with it.

"I'm afraid you have the wrong idea about us," explained Ahromha. "We're a contracting service, not an actual cleaning service. Yes we *do* cleaning, but for businesses who sign multi-year contracts with us. It saves them from hiring their own staff, you see?"

"You're an outsourced janitorial company?" asked Maai, having never really thought such a thing might exist.

"Hum, exactly. How did you find out about us and not know that?"

"Uh, your website. I guess we didn't really read it all the way through," answered Leah, with an expression of "Shaya I am going to strangle you with your own tentacles when I get back."

"Yeah our captain is a bit ditzzy," Maai agreed, trying to laugh. "She ordered us to come here and I guess she didn't really look the site over well enough!" She had a "I will help you by holding Shaya down and pinning her arms and legs down with my body" look.

"Sorry we couldn't help?" said Ahromha, looking back and forth between the two.

"Guess we'll be on our way!" Leah said with a forced smile, pushing Mome out the door.

"Sorry to have bothered you. Have a nice day!" said Maai as the door closed.

"Thanks, *Shaya*," groused Leah once back on the Glomar.

"Yes, well done *fearless leader*. Who apparently can't understand a simple *website*."

"I take it you girls are a bit cross with me?" she asked, trying to ignore the word "murder" written across their faces. No really, they stopped before they landed and used a pen.*

"Do you have any idea,"

"How embarrassing it was to stand there,"

“Looking like a couple of idiots,”

“Who can’t understand the difference between a cleaning service and a cleaning contractor?”

“I mean why would a building that size bring in one truck full of people at night to do cleaning?”

“The place is huge!”

“Very huge! They must have a dedicated staff.”

“You went along with it!” insisted Shaya.

“Because we thought you had it in hand.”

“That you wouldn’t let us down!”

“Well I’m sorry, girls, but we were rather rushed and I didn’t really study the page for the nuances it contained.”

“Nuances? Sister?”

“Yes sister?”

“Would you call the type of business someone is running a *nuance*?”

“Why, I don’t believe I would.”

“Okay, okay? I’m sorry, okay? Mea culpa!”

She continued to apologize, but Sparkle had temporarily been stunned into dialog lock.

What did she just say? ‘mea culpa?’ That can’t be right, it should have translated. Did she say something in a different language akin to how we would use that phrase and so it was translated similarly knowing I would know what she meant? That was weird, not hearing my own language for a second. Has that ever happened before? I really hope this ‘translation’ spell or whatever Inari did to us doesn’t start breaking down. Susan could fix it on her end, but I would be back to being just a ‘stupid’ animal. I could still act and everything, but without knowing what people around here were saying I would be of far less use. Still, it’s lasted this long so hopefully it can see me through to the end of this world. Wonder if we should go back and ask her about it? Or get a technological solution, based on the fact that magic probably won’t work when we rescue Susan’s dad and we might need to talk to people there. But no, this must be some sort of dimensional thing, not magic. I mean a being like Inari or Silverstreak wouldn’t do something that would break down, right? They don’t need to have our limitations, like having to maintain magic, because they are only involved to drive the plot. They can hand out items of convenience that solve uninteresting problems, while still leaving us the majority of the problems to solve on our own. Like getting back together after being separated, stuff like that. Are they still... She tuned back in, but they were still going at it. Fine. I hate to do this but they’re really getting on my nerves.

She took a deep breath, drawing upon her qualities as a *Paragon*, and thought two simple words.

And... scene.

“So we need another plan then?” asked Mimsy, having gotten back together with everyone to discuss it. The twins were over in the corner moping as Shaya could be shouty when it suited her, and really it wasn’t totally her fault.

“Can’t we still use the truck idea?” asked Govu. “We would just need to spot one.”

“What truck?” asked Leah.

“They probably just drive there from home, or take the bus there,” added Maai.

“The only trucks they would need,”

“Would be ones carrying supplies and such into the building.”

“And that probably only happens once a week or so.”

“And they wouldn’t let people offloading toilet paper into the building proper.”

“They would stack it up or put it on a conveyer belt or something.”

“Oh. Right,” agreed Govu. “Basically they’re employees of one company working inside another company.”

“It probably simplifies payroll,” suggested Shaya.

“And HR, if they don’t have to hire and fire janitors as well. The other company can screen people at their expense and just replace them at will if something comes up.”

"Ah, so the same number of people come to do the work, despite how many are fired!" Govu said, as if understanding a great truth about the nature of reality.

"Could you try and pass yourselves off as being new hires?" asked Mome.

"Who all forgot our badges? I mean we have no idea how they keep track of people in the building. They could have RFID tags attached to everyone, or facial recognition cameras all over the place. These are important scientific researchers here, they wouldn't let just anyone in."

"So it comes back to breaking in?" asked Mimsy. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that. We might get into a shootout with security, and then we'll become wanted criminals."

"Or somehow sneaking in at night," reminded Mome.

"And not getting caught," Shaya double reminded her.

"The cleaning staff probably go home around the same time, if they work there all day?"

Shaya nodded.

"What about fake badges?" asked Govu. "We have Starburst here sneak in and plant a virus into their systems by plugging some kind of drive into the security computers. That changes the database to allow a keycard we made to be used so we can just walk in the front door."

"Couple of problems with that," concluded Reeg. "First, I'm an engineer, not a programmer. I have some programming skills of course, but I don't know the first thing about creating a virus. Because I'm not a criminal outlaw!"

"Uh, what's the second?"

"What systems are they using? What security software? How is it encrypted? What format does the data contained on the cards take? How many bits is it and are they big endian or little endian? Are the cards powered, and they are generating a unique number that is matched to an algorithm on site as a secondary means of identification? How is a cat going to know what machine to plug it into? How is a cat going to plug in anything in the first place? How will she get close enough carrying a portable drive—"

"Okay, I get the point. I was just asking."

"What if we just walked up and asked them, and told them the truth about what we wanted to do?" asked Mome.

There was silence for a time, then everyone but her burst out laughing.

This went on for some time.

Finally they calmed down.

"Ah, thanks Mome," said Shaya, wiping a tear from her eye. "I needed that. But seriously, what are we going to do?"

Mome pouted. "I mean it, what's the worst that can happen?"

Oh no, she doesn't know not to say that! The universe is obligated to play some kind of Disaster Strikes after a statement like that! We're all doomed.

"I can tell you the best case. We get detained, questioned, and our thought patterns are modified to make sure we don't ever think of something as stupid as giving information to the Chiram again. Meanwhile, Kei is out in the forest wondering what happened to us..."

"Never mind."

She went over and started poking around on the computer.

"What about a social aspect?" asked Mimsy. "Do we know anyone who works there? Can we find someone to bribe? Could we send Reeg in with a résumé like he was looking for work? Once there his 'assistant,' that's you Mome."

"Uh huh." Mome didn't turn around.

"His 'assistant' can slip a cable into whatever they're showing and copy the data off it."

"Risky," allowed Shaya. "Only the two of you? If you got caught it would be a disaster."

"You wouldn't be implicated, I could say I left the Glomar, that's why I was seeking employment."

"And just happened to be stealing their secrets?"

"Oh, well..."

"Don't you have a sister that works in the government?" Govu asked Shaya. "Maybe if we could convince her it was the right thing to do—"

"No way, the less I see of Maneesha the better. We don't get along at all, you know."

"Right, I guess I do recall you saying that. If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Think of something else. Anything else!"

"Set some charges, blow up a wall or two?" suggested Srei. "I mean it worked to get Mome away from those security guards. If we empty the building by setting some charges off... what? She said anything."

Everyone's head was shaking. "We can't hurt anyone, even by accident. That would really be the end of us," countered Shaya. "I won't even consider a plan like that."

"You may have to. We're going to be someplace we're not supposed to be, trying to steal information we're not supposed to have, to give it to the Chiram we aren't even supposed to be in contact with. Any way you look at it, we're traitors to our government."

"But we're trying to save our world. Which is more important?" asked Mimsy.

"That's up to each of us to decide."

"I won't force anyone into any plan we decide upon," Shaya assured them.

"Right now that isn't my concern. All the plans we come up with are either unworkable or too dangerous. Some of us might get hurt, or we may have to hurt others. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can really get down to planning our next moves."

"There's a big difference between being traitors, that can later be explained or even forgiven once the worlds are no longer joined, and killers, that can never be taken back. If some chunk of building fell on someone, or we got the explosives wrong, could you live with yourself?"

"Our actions are for the greater good."

"And that would justify them? Do you know how many groups have said that over the years?"

"But we would be right."

"They believed that too!"

The two stared angrily at each other, but Mimsy got between them. "Srei, this isn't helping. Let's just come up with various plans and list out how dangerous each is, and then decide on them without getting hung up on the details right now."

"Fine. You're the one that wanted me to be more like Kei, right? What would he do? Probably just bash through the wall in the Starburst and take the computers with him."

"Even he couldn't be that irresponsible!"

"Have you seen how that man behaves?"

"Now don't you two start," chided Shaya.

"I've got it," announced Mome, turning away from the computer.

Everyone looked over at her. "You've got a plan to discuss?" Shaya asked.

"No, I mean the data. I've got it. We don't need to even go there."

"What?" Everyone crowded around her, and she proudly displayed the website.

As the research we're doing is relevant to all of us, and concerns our survival as a species, we here at the Hetarodine Institute are releasing all relevant data concerning the dimensional cataclysm that threatens our world and so many others. We realize that many individuals outside our institute are studying this problem through a variety of disciplines, and welcome all discussion and data analysis that might shed light upon any relevant solutions.

"And there's even a forum for discussion," Mome went on to say, showing them. "And here's the data, searchable, categorized, free for the taking. I'm downloading it into our systems as we speak."

"Wait, you mean all this time we could have just looked it up?" yelled Leah.

"We made fools of ourselves, put Mome and Starburst at risk, flew all over the city," continued Maai.

"And the information we were after was on the net the whole time?"

"Apparently?" said Shaya with a shrug.

Everyone walked off in disgust, except Sparkle who just stared at the screen,

flabbergasted.

Wait, no fetch quest? No big battle? No way of sneakily using my magic to save everyone, again, when they run into trouble?

Am I still going to get XP for this part? I don't believe this!

*I'm only joking**

**It was marker

Breakout

Who: Sparkle

When: Day 10, early morning

Where: Glomar storage bay

Sparkle sighed, and in seclusion behind some boxes, looked down at her character sheet in despair. The front was totally unchanged from the last time she looked at it, and would probably be the same the next time she looked at it.

The problem is that the entire mission to another world is considered "an adventure" to whatever force hands out XP to people like me. I get a lot at the end, yes, but not so much in the middle. So I have no idea if my running around with Mome got me any or not. Perhaps whoever does it is just too lazy to update it until we head back to the Hub and can spend it? I mean someone or something must do it, because that's the one field I can't add to. But it goes up, and thank goodness Susan has never thought about it that way, or I would be stuck explaining things. Okay, the XP and the cards field I can't add to, to be completely accurate. Ugh, reminds me I haven't seen a new card on here in the longest time, now that I think about it. Granted, there haven't been any really tough missions I might need them on, Mome and I aren't fighters and our little scuffle with security doesn't count. And even while in combat with Kei that time, he was doing all the work, I was just a support character.

After all, with my magic mostly suppressed here and my energy being not much to speak of, what else have I got? But picking up an XP here and there from turning cards in I can't use would have been nice. With only a 5 REASON and no teacher, trying to actually raise anything would be pointless. Besides, I'm saving for that energy based background Silverstreak promised me, so I probably wouldn't spend any anyway. She sighed again. *What am I doing here that's so important I have to be separated from Susan? Learning I can make it on my own? What's that?*

From the direction of the door voices could be heard, and several people came in calling for Starburst. Sparkle lifted her paw off the character sheet and sat up, stretching. It vanished.

"Here she is," called Govu, looking behind the boxes she was crouched behind. "For all the good it'll do them," he muttered. She looked questioningly up at him. "Some officers want to ask you some questions," he explained. She tilted her head. "Yeah, that's what I told them. Come on." Sparkle followed him while he went on about what had been happening that morning. "We requested permission to leave, but apparently no one is leaving until some questions about Mome are settled. The police have been checking all the recent arrivals looking for her and they knew about Jaby too so we couldn't exactly lie and say she wasn't here."

Argh, I knew that would come back to bite us!

"So here we are. They insist on talking to all witnesses to the scene but we've told them you're a cat but they want to see for themselves. I'm not sure what's going to happen, honestly."

They reached the common area and inside were a tense looking Shaya and apprehensive Mome being stared down by two men in uniform. The others all filed in after them, leaving the room a bit crowded.

"This is the other witness?" the one on the right asked.

"We did try to tell you," Shaya answered sarcastically.

The two stared down at her for a moment. "Well, question it!" insisted the one on the right to the one on the left.

"You question it!" she replied.

"Really, this is getting us nowhere," said Mimsy. "What do you want from us?"

"We want to know why your robot was poking around the Baxstore building and why guards there reported explosions and fires that turned out to be some kind of hallucination."

"I've told you what I saw," moped Mome.

"And how did that door get smashed down? You didn't do that!" the other demanded to know. "Or did you? Are you just built to look like a little girl but in reality you're a combat

model?"

"I'm a nurse! How many times do I have to say it?"

"Likely story. We better take it back to the station, dismantle it and look for hidden weapons."

"You are not taking any member of my crew anywhere!" promised Shaya. "Especially not our nurse, and there's even less chance of it if you're going to take her apart. I mean the nerve."

"Then perhaps we should arrest you, and take you down to the station instead."

"And what crime would I be charged with? You can't arrest me without reasonable suspicion of a crime."

"You had your robot break in—"

"Break in? She walked in through a door because their lax security measures let her in. And then she went up to the top of the building to look around. Hardly criminal activity!"

"She stole that badge that let her in!"

"How so? Are you saying she somehow snuck in, took the badge, snuck out again, and then used the badge to once again go inside?"

"That's what we're trying to determine."

"Is there video footage of someone walking the badge out to her?" asked Srei. The officers shook their heads. "Then her story must be true, no? She picked it up after seeing it on the street."

Ah, at least she can tell creative truths, and not just blurt out that she sent me in to get it.

"The badge didn't walk itself out!"

"Then how did it get there?" asked in Shaya. "You're the one with video footage from the whole place while the incident was happening. I admit it may not have been the brightest move to use it, it's not like she was trying to steal anything from the building."

"So you claim."

"She wasn't caught stealing! Did the security officers take anything from her apart from the badge?" The two checked their pocket computers, and had to reluctantly admit nothing had been stolen. "You see? You have nothing except the rather minor mystery as to the fires that didn't exist and one broken door."

"Do you actually have proof she wrecked the door?" asked Mimsy. "For all we know, they walked through it because it was unlocked and one of the security guards wrecked it in a fit of rage once they figured out the two had left."

"There were no cameras in the room, unfortunately," admitted the one on the left. "It is, after all, the security room."

"No one watches the watchers, eh? So the facts of the case are this," Shaya said, ticking them off on her fingers. "Mome found a badge and used it to gain entrance to a building she shouldn't have been in. Trespassing, at most. She immediately went to the roof where she was captured by building security. For some unknown reason those same security officers decided to let her go immediately, later claiming to have heard explosions and seen fire on their cameras. None of which was recorded, of course. But leave she did, getting out with everyone else once the fire alarm went off. So you have no evidence of any crimes being committed by Mome apart from wanting to see the city from above and finding the means to do it."

"But why was she hanging around that building in the first place?" asked the one on the right.

"I was—"

"She was just out for a walk, seeing the city! Goodness, that isn't illegal now, is it?" Mimsy ran over what Mome was going to say.

"Ah, but the fire alarm!" seized the left one. "Now there's a clear case of hacking of the security of the building."

"Oh, you have evidence of hacking? Why didn't you say so?"

"Well... no." She looked uncomfortable.

"No?"

"According to the computer, the heat sensors in the room went off. But it must have

been her, she's a robot!"

"And so of course she's a natural hacker, able to manipulate security systems just by walking into a room?" Srei said with scorn.

"She must have done something!"

"And when you can charge her with 'something' I won't stand in the way of the law. You obviously are grasping at straws, you had us bring you the ship's cat, for goodness sake, as if she could make some kind of statement. Your taking her back for 'disassembly' so you can look for 'weapons' I would consider destruction of property, and sue you. As of now she can only be charged with a minor trespassing violation which might be a fine at worst. Good luck getting a fine out of a robot, but bring the correct paperwork and she'll sign it."

"The owner will have to take responsibility for the actions of the robot and sign the forms."

"Oh dear, that might be a problem, he's not around at the moment," Shaya admitted truthfully.

"Oh, how convenient."

"It's the truth," insisted Mome, "we left him behind before we came into the city."

"Is he a criminal as well? Didn't want to be seen in the city?"

"My master is a hero, not a criminal!"

"Why isn't he here, then?"

"He just doesn't like cities much," explained Mimsy. "He said he would rather explore the nearby forest."

"A likely story."

But the two officers looked at each other. In reality, they didn't have much to go on, and this was a captain and it was her vessel. To march a non-combatant robot off the ship, especially as it was the ship's medic, would look really bad. On the one hand factory ships like this risked a lot going out into the world and doing what they did. Dimensional shifts, pirate attacks, Chiram harassment, or beings from other worlds suddenly showing up and attacking were all possible and did happen. Ships like this brought in much needed revenue to the city by giving those outside the opportunity to buy what they manufactured. So they were respected and given an almost diplomatic immunity while they were around. On the other hand they were gone most of the time, so it was hardly ever a real issue.

"Very well," said the one on the right. "We'll be back with something substantial."

They were shown off the ship, and Shaya called for everyone to get ready to leave.

"But we're stuck here, they're not allowing any ships to take off right now," protested Srei.

"We're leaving anyway," insisted Shaya. "We have what we came for, let's go pick up Kei and get them to the Chiram, who actually seem to be working on a real solution to this whole mess. We can't get tied down here because some office building owner didn't like his security being breached by a little girl. I would love to get the whole story," she glanced over at Sparkle, "but I doubt we ever will. We're taking off as soon as those officers are out of sight."

"Are we to become outlaws then?" asked Mimsy quietly.

"We're going to do what we have to do, in order to save our world. If you don't want to be a part of that, you can leave this ship now."

No one did.

Shaya and most of the rest of the crew were now on the bridge, heading at full speed towards the only door in the dome that covered the city. It was currently closed tight.

"Now what?" asked Govu.

"Blast it down," ordered Shaya. "What are we lugging this cannon around for, if not for situations like this?"

"It'll take a moment to charge, and we'll lose most of our other systems," cautioned Reeg from the speaker panel. "I didn't get a chance to install the auxiliary batteries so it'll take most of the power our generators can make just to fire it."

Good thing Susan isn't here, she would be saying something like 'now that's the kind of

power I'm talking about.' Still, if we're going to blast a hole, I think my services are going to be required in a moment.

She made her way to the outside and watched as a beam of pure destructive energy lanced out and made a hole in the doors big enough for the Golmar to get through. By that point, pursuit forces could be seen in the distance, and the ship went full speed ahead, darting through the hole they had made. Just as they passed it, Sparkle made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a fifteen, and spent twenty two energy on an *Illusion* which 'sealed up' the hole behind them. She was quite pleased with her thirty result and maintained it for about a half hour, sitting on the back of the ship and concentrating on it. It didn't need to move, after all, so even if she couldn't see it a static 'picture' of the door being whole was good enough, and no pursuit ships followed them.

She walked back down into the ship to find the crew somewhat nervously scanning for other ships that were after them, and somewhat surprised to not find any. Kei roared up in the Starburst, having been told they were on their way to pick him up, and they filled him in with what they learned.

"And you just blasted out of there, literally?"

"It seemed the right thing to do, somehow," replied Shaya.

"I think I must be rubbing off on you. Still, now we have to watch out for both Chiram and Enaam ships. I just hope it was worth it."

"What do you mean?"

"I had plenty of time to think, on my own, the past day. The Chiram had years to study Olson's brainwaves, what if they figured out a way to safely modify his thoughts so he believes helping them was his own idea? I mean that's what your people wanted to do to me, right? Would you put it past them to do the same?"

"Normally I would have said no. Though I guess if I hadn't heard about this girl that made them break off attacking us to get to you, they probably still would be. So no, I wouldn't put it past them."

"And there's absolutely no way of telling now, is there?"

"No. Look, go get cleaned up and get something to eat. We need to stay sharp and make sure there are no pursuit ships. As well as come up with our next plan for where to go."

"Isn't it odd there aren't? I mean even without the whole building thing, you must have done a substantial amount of damage to the door. Someone's going to have to pay for it. Plus I'm fairly certain energy weapon discharge on that scale is illegal within the city bounds."

"It is strange. Let me worry about that."

Kei looked at her. "You know it's me that's going to be out there trying to shoot down any pursuers that come looking, right? So if you don't mind, I think I will worry about it."

"Oh. Carry on then."

The crew spent the remainder of the day arguing over where they should go, and Sparkle listened with half an ear. Some argued they should call the Chiram immediately and transmit the information but Shaya rightly pointed out they had to work through their contacts, the two bathing suit girls, otherwise the information would rightly be treated with suspicion.

"Is that what we're calling them?" Mimsy asked angrily. "The bathing suit girls?"

"Okay, the world traveling girls," allowed Kei. "Satisfied?"

"Not in the least. How are you supposed to contact them, anyway?"

"They've given me their contact information but we'll have to be closer to the Chiram city if we're going to get a signal to them."

"Great," intoned Srei, "running directly from our native city to the Chiram one. That won't brand us as traitors for all time."

"Perhaps she'll have other ideas of where we should go or what to do next," Mimsy countered.

"It'll take weeks to go through the information we got, compare it to what they know, and then use it in any physical capacity. Where are we going to stay in the meantime?"

"There aren't that many ships out in the world," Shaya reminded him. "We can go for a while without seeing anyone else."

"But there's enough, and no doubt the word will be passed to be on the lookout for us."

And they'll send some more into the field too, just to hunt us down. Which will weaken their defenses in case of Mu attack, so nice one there Shaya."

"Better that some people die than all of us roasting to death."

"As long as you can rationalize it."

"I'm just being realistic. Look, something is going to have to be done to get our two governments working together. If the end of the world isn't enough, nothing will be. We did our jobs and got what the traveling girls wanted. Let's just stay safe until they come up with a plan for what to do next."

"Meanwhile I hope you like hunting and gathering because we didn't exactly take on a plethora of supplies while in the city."

"We'll get through it one way or the other," Shaya chided him. "Now I won't hear another negative word. What's done is done, and you could have left before we broke out. I made the choice, and you gave me your approval by not ducking out. So trust me to continue to lead you, okay?"

"Okay."

"So, does anyone else have any suggestions?"

Yeah, I do. But I can't exactly speak up now, can I? If you want to bring people together, give them a common enemy. It hasn't been smooth sailing all the time, but let people know there's The Darkness out there waiting to pounce, and they'll get behind Susan and work with her, despite her somewhat prickly attitude. That's what we need here, a common enemy, and they've already found it. The Mu. We just need to force the two groups to work together somehow, and I have an idea how that might be accomplished.

The real trouble will be getting them on board with the idea without letting them know it was mine.

But luckily I think I have a solution for that, too. It might be tricky, but if I can catch both Kei and Mimsy alone for a few minutes I bet I can tell them the plan in such a way that they both think the other did it, and take it to the rest of the crew themselves.

But the two are usually together so now we play my least favorite game- the waiting game.

Tricks are for Cats Too

Who: Sparkle

When: Day 11, mid-afternoon

Where: Glomar observation area at the top of the ship.

Sparkle regarded Kei who had been sitting alone for a few moments and figured this was the best time to make her move. The problem thus far with trying this trick was that it relied upon both Kei and Mimsy being apart from each other for several minutes, which didn't seem to happen that often.

Honestly, the man is like a puppy. I mean yes, he has no real 'duties' aboard ship because he's basically a stray, and if he's not flirting or tuning up the Starburst he does everything so half heartedly he's got them trained to- oh my goodness the man is a genius! Obviously I haven't given him enough credit! He's no stray dog, he's a cat like me!

...

...

Nah, that can't be the case, right? Anyway, no one asks him to do anything anymore, so his time is his own. But he's finally alone and I highly doubt anyone will come find him any time soon. Except maybe Mome, but she's actually busy with something at the moment. So this seems like as good a time as any.

She cast *Illusion* as strongly as she could, getting a twenty three by spending ten energy.

I only need to do it once more, hopefully I won't have to punch anyone until I can take a nap. Heh.

The new *Illusionary* Mimsy walked out to Kei and Sparkle made 'her' sit down next to him.

"Mimsy!" Kei went to grab her, *oh crap oh crap oh crap I forgot how physical this guy is*, and she made her hold up a hand and scowl at him. "What?"

"I just want to run something by you, that's all. Don't get all excited or anything."

"Fine. What did you want to talk about?"

"I had an idea, but I wanted to know what you thought, I mean you have more military training than I do after all."

"That's right, I'll be happy to help you out Mimsy, you know that."

"Okay. So we think that the Chiram are on our side, because of those two girls you met. And they did come through with getting you in contact with Olson, so maybe they are on the level. The point is, how far do we trust them?"

"We have no choice but to trust them, right?"

"Ah, that's the thing. We don't exactly have to trust them, if it comes down to it. Let's say we head to the space elevator ourselves. Won't the Chiram army then be forced to come and defend us no matter what? They know what you're worth! If they are on our side they won't want you to be harmed, and if they aren't on our side they'll want to be there to capture you before you're killed by Mu."

"Mimsy, that's so devious. I didn't know you had it in you!"

"I'm not done yet."

"What, there's more!?"

"We're now wanted by the Ena- by our own government, both for blowing up the door and for harboring you. If we leaked that you were back onboard the Glomar, how many ships do you think they would send this time to take you into custody?"

"More than last time I bet, and they wouldn't be so polite about it this time."

"Exactly. If we can beat them all to the elevator they'll be forced to work together in order to keep you safe, and defeat the Mu who are in the area. They won't be able to retreat from the battle because it means losing you, and they won't attack each other while the Mu are shooting at them. Common enemy and all that, no matter what they've felt in the past, the Mu is the bigger threat. I'm guessing they both know it. If we force the issue, they'll come together in a big way."

"Fantastic! Mimsy, let's go tell the others!" He started to hop up.

“Hold on, cowboy!” she cautioned.

“How do you know what a cowboy is?”

“What? Never mind that, I’m glad you think it’s a good idea but I want you to think it over. This plan is going to result in a lot of people dying. On both sides. We’re *literally* luring them into a trap to try and get them working together, and it could fall apart in so many ways.” *But one less than you might think, if my plan for what do to when you all get together comes off like I want. He he he.* “Make sure it’s the best plan we can come up with. Take an hour and think it over. Then we can go to Shaya and see what she thinks. You understand where I’m coming from?”

“Yeah, I get it,” he grumped, settling back down. “I’ll think about it, but I’m just a soldier. I follow orders, I don’t come up with plans. Heck, it’s my screwing around without a plan that probably set off the bomb in the first place and caused all this!”

“So you have excellent reasons for making sure not to screw up the solution as well. We’re behind you,” *at least I hope they are* “so make us proud, okay?”

“Okay.”

Sparkle made the *Illusion* get up, realizing she could just change it rather than recast it in a minute, and walked it towards the door. “Remember, I don’t want to see you down in the ship for at least an hour.” *Sit. Stay. Good dog. That should avoid any unpleasantries like someone passing you and then seeing you walking down the same corridor again.*

“Yes, mom!” he said sarcastically, turning back to look out at the landscape rolling by. *You better.*

With that accomplished, Sparkle went looking for Mimsy, changing the *Illusion* to just be a speck of dust until she found her, alone as she had planned.

“Hey doll!” she made the new *Kei Illusion* say, stepping into the room with her.

“What now Kei, I’m busy!” insisted Mimsy, rolling her eyes.

“Whoa, don’t get angry babe, I just want to discuss something with you.” *Actually, my characterization of him is a bit off, isn’t it? I need to pay more attention to people’s mannerisms and speech patterns if I’m going to keep impersonating them like this. Oh well, carry on.*

“What?”

“Well, I’ve got this idea but it’s pretty dangerous for everyone involved, so I wanted to run it by you first and see what you thought.”

“Idea for what?”

“What to do next. See, way I see it, if we leak the info that I’m back aboard, the Ena- I mean your people will probably send a ton of ships after me, right? I mean the Glomar blew up the door so somebody’s mad about that, and even if they are in talks with the Chiram, they’ll want to bargain from a position of strength, right? At the moment they have nothing, but if they had me they could demand, and get, more concessions right?”

Mimsy looked at him, somewhat impressed. “You’ve really been paying attention to our discussions about holding markets, haven’t you?”

“I learned from the best!”

She colored a little. “Flatterer. But you are right, they sent a couple of ships last time, it would be every ship in the area so you didn’t get away again. But why?”

“That’s the best part. We tell the Chiram we’re heading there too, and they better come defend us because one way or another we’re going to fix the world. This will force their hand and if we time it right the two will be forced to battle the Mu and retake the space elevator. All we have to do after that is keep them killing each other and boom- we have all the pieces to fix the world!”

“That is a dangerous plan...” admitted Mimsy. “A lot of things could go wrong. And how do you plan to keep us from blowing each other up?”

“I’m hoping that even if either side ultimately *plans* on betraying the other, neither will be itching to be seen as the instigator and make the first move. As long as we keep communication channels open, and remind them of their recent unified victory (which we’ll have or we’ll be dead, so let’s assume it works) they should at least be civil to each other for the duration.”

Which is not my real plan at all, but it's all Kei could hope for because he doesn't have my Illusion magic. Oh man I am so looking forward to this, even Susan would be like 'dang, yo, that was some radical-' okay maybe not like that. Where am I getting all this from? Maybe I've been on my own too long.

He went on. "We just need to keep them from attacking each other long enough to fix the world, after all. I mean neither side is actually *bloodthirsty* are they? I mean you would know better than me."

"No, the Chiram are militaristic, but not insane. They compete with us over stable land masses and food and such, but once face to face and that close to fixing the world, we can hope some kind of peace will hold." She paused, looking him over.

Please don't scrutinize him, I doubt you can make a twenty REASON check but I would rather not take that chance thank you very much.

[Note: her maximum to see through the *Illusion* is an eighteen.]

"When did you become so thoughtful anyway?"

"What do you mean?" asked the *Illusion*, striking a pose. "I've always been a deep thinker. Kind, courteous to all I meet."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. Honestly I'm not sure why I even try with you. Let's go tell Shaya about your plan and-"

"Hey, think it over first," he insisted.

"Wha?"

"This could result in the deaths of a lot of your people. And like you said it could go horribly wrong. Let's make sure you can't come up with something better before we go rushing off to something we didn't take the time to think through."

"I doubt I can come up with anything better than that."

"That's only because you haven't tried."

"I- what?"

"How do you know? You don't, you haven't even tried. Maybe there's a way to make my plan safer, how would you know if you haven't even considered it for a minute yet?"

"I... I guess. Okay, I'll think about it. Are you feeling okay? It's not like you to want to think things through, usually you just jump in and whatever happens, happens."

"Maybe I just don't want to see hundreds of people getting hurt or killed because of me. I caused all this, or at least I was a part of causing it, and enough damage has been done. Now is the time to proceed carefully, and not run off half cocked."

Mimsy seemed impressed. "Fine, I'll think it over, okay?"

"Great. We can talk later, I'll see you then."

"Yeah, see you."

Whew, that worked, thought Sparkle as she made the Illusion head out the door and stopped maintaining the spell. With both of them 'thinking it over' they won't run into my Illusion on the way to discussing it with Shaya, and this gets the ball rolling for my plan. I suppose it would have been far easier to just let them know I could talk in the beginning, but now that I'm doing things this way it seems best to continue. And you know, it is sort of fun, sneaking around like this, using magic on the sly rather than just having Susan power through everything. I hope she's learning a thing or two here as well.

Ah, who am I kidding, she's not.

Some time later, the crew was gathered into the common area to discuss the 'new plan' that Kei had come up with.

"But to be fair, it was Mimsy's plan," insisted Kei. "I want to give credit where credit is due."

"What do you mean?" asked Mimsy, surprised. "You came to me with the plan!"

"Uh, no, you came up to see me on the deck!"

"You came to see me while I was doing some laundry!"

Ah, I may have just spotted the tiny flaw in my brilliant plan. Whoops.

"I don't care who came up with the plan!" shouted Shaya over the two of them. "Just tell

it to me!”

Both looked at the other like they were crazy, but dropped it for the moment. They explained what the ‘other’ had said, all the while hinting it wasn’t them that came up with it and they had nothing to do with it. But both admitted to seeing the other and discussing it, so the others now had a chance to think it over as well.

“You’re going to talk to Olson anyway, right?” asked Shaya. “We’re heading to a place we can reach him to give him the information we got from the...” she paused. “*Stupid website.*” she finally finished with an angry look on her face. “He would know the situation inside the Chiram military better than us, as we’re just guessing. If he thinks it’s an okay idea, fine. I admit, I don’t see many other options, but *tricking* them into working together?”

“That’s why it’ll work,” excitedly put in Kei.

“Exactly,” agreed Mimsy. “You can’t trust people to work things out for themselves, you have to trick them into it.”

Wait, is this some kind of self-referential commentary about society or something? Because I tricked them into deciding on this plan, now they’ve subconsciously accepted tricking the others?

“I wouldn’t go that far,” countered Kei.

“Yeah, that sounded harsher than I intended. Sorry. The point is, this is too serious to leave to chance, and we need to get going on a solution here before things get worse.”

“But wait,” said Govu, “aren’t we basically leaving everything to chance here? You’re assuming our people will come after Kei. That they’ll arrive at roughly the same time. That they won’t immediately start blowing each other up. That Mu forces won’t just overwhelm us all anyway... I mean the list goes on!”

Shoot, they don’t realize the narrative imperative of this situation. Of course there has to be a huge showdown, so naturally all parties will coincidentally arrive at the same time. The good guys arrive, (whoever that is in this case, but us at least) and fight off the Mu, leaving the hero (in this case Kei and Olson) to do their assigned tasks of... whatever they need to do to fix the world. Along the way the other heroes, that’s Susan and myself, drive off The Darkness as I’m sure she’s at this very moment in the middle of. How else could it work out?

“It’s a good point, a lot of things have to go right,” admitted Shaya. “But what else do we have?”

“I don’t know. Honesty? Hoping if we talk to congress they’ll see reason and-”

Everyone was looking at him like he was crazy. “Yeah, I’m a dreamer. Fine, I just hope this all works the way you expect.”

“If we really are going to do this crazy plan,” said Reeg, “let’s set down and power the Glomar down now. I want to get those supplemental batteries installed immediately. We may need to fire the cannon soon. A lot. Let’s get them charged up and working.”

“We’ll go find us a safe spot to put down,” said Leah, rising. Maai followed her out.

“I’ll help if I can,” Jaby said, and Mome said she could also lend a hand.

“Who do you think is carrying the darn things to where I want them?” Reeg asked the huge lizard like being. “You know how heavy those things are?”

“Don’t we have anti-gravity units we could just slap on them?” Srei asked. “That’s how we got them on the ship in the first place.”

“Oh yeah. Come on, let’s start moving them.”

“I guess we’re doing it, then,” remarked Shaya, as it seemed the discussion was over. They left to get to work without another word. “I would just feel a little better if I knew exactly where this plan really came from.”

Both Kei and Mimsy pointed to the other. “It was his/her idea!” they both said.

“Exactly,” she agreed, looking at Sparkle out of the corner of her eyes. “Exactly. In any case, there’s no time to lose. If we’re setting the Glomar down so the batteries can be installed, I want you, Kei, to fly ahead and set up a transmitter. That way you can reach Olson and get his opinion on all this as soon as possible. Mimsy, go tell Leah and Maai I want them in m.loves escorting him. I’m not saying I don’t trust you,” she said, holding up a hand as he started to protest, “but around here it seems anything can happen. I want more firepower on

your side if Mu should show up or something else should happen. I'll take no chances with your safety, Kei, that can be avoided. You understand me?"

"Yes, captain," he said sulkily.

"Good. Plus, setting up a transmitter is certainly easier with more than one person, and you won't say no to the company right?"

"I should say-" He started to say with a grin, then stopped, looking at Mimsy. "I mean they're fine, it's fine. I don't really care one way or the other. I mean they're nice enough girls but I really have no interest-"

"Okay, okay!" said Mimsy, laughing. "I'll ease up. You're really going to insist I came to you with this plan though, huh?"

"Because you did! I couldn't think of something like this, I mean could I?"

"I wonder. But then I would say the same, it's more military strategy... We can't both be lying though."

"I never said you were, I thought it was sweet you wanted to give me the credit. But I don't deserve it."

"Believe me, I'll let you know when you can take credit for something. This though... oh well, I guess we have work to do. Maybe one day we'll finally agree on what happened and have a big laugh over it."

Nah, you'll probably just think less of cats, Sparkle sighed. Oh well, it worked, that's the important thing. I just feel like something big is coming, I hope we're ready.

Adapting

Who: Susan

When: Day 11, just after lunch

Where: Chiram military building

Jenny and Susan were looking over the map again in their room when the phone rang, so Susan went over to answer it.

“Exterminators,” she said into the mouthpiece.

“Oh good,” said the voice on the other end. “Exactly who we- this is Susan, isn’t it? Or is this Captain Anywhere?”

“This is Susan, and it’s Captain Everywhere, actually.”

“Oh, sorry. As I was saying, exactly who we wanted to talk to. Your presence is requested immediately in meeting room 354.”

“I’ll be right down.”

“Thank you.”

“Sounds like they may have found something,” she said to Jenny, putting the phone down. “Let’s transform and roll out!”

Jenny made some weird transforming noises and rolled the map up again, while Susan shouted “Maximum Overdrive!” and pointed out the door. The two girls went laughing down the corridor towards the elevator.

“You know,” remarked Susan as they walked, “Just once I’d love to hear Optimus say ‘Medium Overdrive!’ or even better ‘Minimal Overdrive.’ Like, yeah, they need to get someplace, but it’s not *that* critical they rush right out there. But no, it’s always “Maximum Overdrive.” I mean if you’re always going to use maximum, then just let it be understood to always use maximum. Just say ‘use Overdrive, Autobots!’”

“Maybe he’s calling out a technique name?”

“You mean like a Dragon Ball Z character announcing their attack before they fire it off?”

“Exactly.”

“Huh, never thought of it that way.”

Walking into the conference room they saw that several high ranking officials, including the general, were seated around the table.

“Ah, good, Susan, Jenny, this is private Elzinore.”

“Nice to meet you captains,” he intoned, saluting them.

“At ease, soldier,” said Jenny, “And only I’m a captain. I take it you found something?”

“Give your report,” ordered Jeffrey.

“Yes sir. As ordered, I was carrying out my regular patrol around the 50km airspace from the city while running the new scanning software in my Ishkick.”

Susan looked questioningly over at the general.

“Basically we’ve set the scanners to scan a wider frequency area than before,” he explained. “Hoping we might come up with some anomalous readings.”

“Thank you.”

The man continued. “I was then alerted by the software to a strange reading some four kilometers from my present position. I radioed this information back to base and deviated from my normal course to investigate.”

Oh goodness, get to the point, snarled The Darkness. What’s with all this flowery military talk?

“Did you find something?” Susan asked excitedly, ignoring him.

“The readings grew stronger, then fainter. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary at all. I then logged my findings and resumed my normal flight plan.”

“We want you two to check it out,” Jeffrey explained. “Get on the ground near that area and see if something comes up. We can tune some hand scanners to what the Ishkick sensors picked up, and maybe you can narrow it down.”

“And if it is something, and Mu show up to defend it, we’ll have the best chance of surviving,” Susan surmised.

“There’s that. But I knew you were a bit bored so I figured you might appreciate getting out of this building for a little while.”

Wait, he wants you out of the building? asked The Darkness. *I bet he’s planning something he doesn’t want you to know about. Mark my words, there’s nothing out there to find, this is a wild goose chase. You’d be a fool to leave now!*

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Susan said hesitantly, unsure if The Darkness was actually making a good point or just trying to keep her from finding whatever was out there. *I suppose I can just Teleportal back in, if I had to. He can’t exactly keep me out.*

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“What?” Susan shook her head. “No, no, sorry, just thinking. We’ll leave right away, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course. You’ll be taking Jenny along?” She nodded when Susan looked over at her. “Very well. Stop by the armory for the scanner units and anything else you think you’ll need. Good luck.”

The girls had fifty three kilometers to cover and were chatting over the radio when Jenny suddenly gave a squeal of delight.

“Found it!” she said.

“What, did we make it already?” Susan checked her instruments but everything seemed normal.

“No, no, I mean your theme song. I finally figured out what it should be!”

“I need a theme song?”

“Everybody needs a theme song. Listen to this:” Jupiter’s Child by Steppenwolf started playing across the two mechs.

*The one who reads the stars has told me
Why you're not like everyone
Your father is a fiery wizard
He travels all around the sun
No one ever knew just where you came from
Orphan girl, you grew up wild
Your father left you on the way home
Yes, girl, you're a Jupiter's child*

Refrain:

*Wish I knew the way back
Back to where you came
Gladly I would leave here
Take another name
I can tell by you, it must be true
It's up on Jupiter's face
They don't embrace our own disgrace
Somebody, help me off this place*

*You really quite belonged
Like a pearl among the swine
You tried to live the way we do
Hoping you would learn in time
But, mankind, with all its virtue
Will soon make you lose your smile
On this earth, with all its madness
Heaven help a Jupiter's child*

“I mean isn’t that perfect?”

"A little too perfect, actually. That's kind of spooky if I think about it. How in the world... I guess I did need a theme song after all."

"What did I tell you?"

"Okay, so what's yours?"

"Oh. Uh, well, it's mostly instrumental."

"So what's the title? Would I have heard it?"

"Ha, probably not. It's DarXide 'Starman (don't lose yourself)' by Akumajo Belmont. The main vocal is:

*I have traveled across the sky
A thousand million ways past the edge of time
I take for granted what nobody can
To travel far beyond is just my master plan*

It's basically that, repeated, but there's some funky electric beats... you'd just have to hear it."

"So play it!"

"Let me find me, I only have about a million songs on this thing to scroll through..."

So the two girls arrived, and started picking up the same odd readings the soldier had earlier.

"Let's land and go the rest of the way on foot. I don't want to miss it," suggested Jenny.

"Suits me."

They landed and Susan put *Invulnerability* on both of them. Jenny had one of her larger guns out and was holding the scanner, while Susan had her sword at the ready.

Jenny chuckled. "You'll probably do more damage with that thing than with that gun I gave you, won't you? Or this one."

"Probably. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to have it around for taking people down with non-lethal damage, and I'm looking forward to trying it in conjunction with my *Slash-All Materia*, but for now I think sticking with the sword is the thing to do."

"Would a gun work with that?"

"It worked for Vincent. It basically just magically distributes one third the damage from an attack to enemies in my field of view. Shouldn't matter what kind of weapon it is, right?"

"I guess not."

The girls got closer and closer to the source of the odd dimensional readings, then suddenly found themselves surrounded by Mu combat robots.

"Well, we know there's something here now!" shouted Jenny as she blasted one of the Mu with a three shot burst.

"Guess you're right," replied Susan, taking her *Initiative* order and bringing her sword up. There was one right next to her, a blocky, armored, faceless death machine which burped something out of its chest with a *twump*. Whatever it was fell to the ground and was covered by the tall grass in the area.

"Grenade!" shouted Susan, mostly for show as nothing mundane like a grenade could really hurt her, right? But she could still be grabbed, and from behind two robots shot forward and tried just that. They were not able to move stealthily, because they were designed to be armored death machines and so made a great deal of noise as they approached. She heard them coming and made a dodge to get out of the way.

She got a seventeen on this, but because she was being attacked from behind and there were two of them they both grabbed her. A third, the one that was in front of her, had made a called shot to her face with some kind of goopy liquid from a nozzle set in its hand. That she managed to avoid.

My goodness these things are fast. Or am I just so used to being Accelerated by Sparkle?

Robot "three," the one to the left of Jenny also fired the same stuff at her, followed up by robot "seven" in quick succession. She managed to dodge both.

Robot "six" was now raising a hand to fire the stuff point blank at her, and Susan realized just how bad being outnumbered was when you were not *Accelerated*.

I could spend energy to drop my delay, and I may have to. Oh yeah, cards. She mentally checked her *character sheet* and found an XP bonus, a What a Rush that she turned in for XP, and one useful *Extra Action*.

Which she spent immediately along with an XP to avoid getting goop in the face. For the first action she dropped her sword and grabbed the two combat robot's arms, using an *off hand action* for the one on her left. With them both tightly gripped in her hands the *Extra Action* went off and she *Spirit Stepped* forward, past the tree that was slightly to her left. This had the happy circumstance of smashing Mu "two" into Mu "six" on her left side, and Mu "five" into Mu "four" on her right, as that one was just to the right of the tree. They were now off her and wondering what happened as they tried to get up again.

Mu "one" shot goop at Jenny from behind, who didn't see it coming but was saved by her passive dodge as ties go to the defender. It was trying to pin her foot to the ground, but Jenny stepped aside just it fired.

Mu "three" and the gas grenade now went, with the deathbot shooting more goop, which struck this time and Jenny found she had a face full of instantly hardening stuff that blinded her and cut off her air. Susan hadn't noticed yet, she had her own problems.

The robots she had smashed together were now all standing again, and turned to face her, nozzles raised. Mu "seven" shot more goop at Jenny, trying to further add to the shell now around her head, and Jenny made a ninjutsu check to avoid it as she was now fighting blind. (What, did you think Susan was the only one who had met ninjas in her travels?) Ties go to the defender, and Jenny at least didn't add to her problems. On the plus side, she now can't breathe the rapidly expanding cloud of poison gas that's next to her, so that's something, right?

Susan put out a hand and mentally willed her sword back into it, and it leapt up with a speed of fifteen to return to her. She used energy to reduce her delay so as soon as it was back she could use it. This dropped her to four delay, which she knew was going to cause problems for her. But even with her greater STRength, there was no way she could simply punch these robots to damage them, so she needed the sword.

Mu "six" was about to take a step so it could shoot around the tree, but got distracted by the sword flying by, and almost shot it instead. If a death dealing robot can look slightly embarrassed, it did.

Jenny made another dodge as "three" tried shooting her again, once again they got the same result so she was missed.

The sword returned to Susan's hand and she brought it up, intending to chop the closest one, "four," down when she could act again.

Jenny dodged "seven" again, getting maximum on the dodge this time.

"Four" and "five" now went, so Susan took the opportunity to do a reactive action, throwing herself to the left to take her free 1/10 move to use "four" as cover from "five" and doing a called shot to the body of "four" which couldn't dodge because it was attacking. This proved to be fortunate, because with the negative three penalty she was taking for the maneuver, she almost didn't hit it at all. She struck, doing twenty nine damage to the thing. This seemed to hardly wound it, as the armor around it seemed to take most of the blow.

"Two" and "six" now fired at her from her right, but she had cover from the body of "four" so she let her passive dodge take it to avoid getting more delay. This worked, *finally my LUCK is good for something*, and "four" and "five" went to shoot at her again. (We'll assume Jenny, only fighting two of them, keeps dodging for the moment.) She stepped right to keep cover as "five" stepped left to get a better shot, and she did a "dodge" of driving the blade into the crack in the armor she had made, getting in too close for the robot to shoot her with the goop.

She got another thirty one damage on the bot and the goop slammed into the back of "four" who was having a lousy day, thanks for asking. Robot "four" went to silicon heaven and exploded its memory chip, blasting itself apart in the process. As this was reactive for Susan she spent only two energy and dropped her delay to a two. With her *Energy Boost* this only

cost her one energy, and she thought to herself *one down, six more to go.*

Now “two” took a step to the right and fired, forcing Susan to dodge around the tree she was next to. She hoped to circle the thing and come up behind “six” so she could get it in the back, but this brought Jenny into her line of vision and she saw her clawing at the stuff on her face and dodging fire by “three” and “seven.”

That can't be good.

“Six” then took a step to the left and tried to fire around the tree, but her *Passive Dodge* easily defeated the glob. She *Spirit Stepped* over to Jenny just as “five” fired again, but Susan didn't even notice. She was standing next to Jenny and again spent energy to decrease her *delay*.

The robots, not being able to sense *Spirit Energy* now stepped forward to try and get around the tree, but found she wasn't there and started looking around. This gave Susan enough time to smash her sword down on Jenny's head, doing forty three damage to the hardened material and smashing it clean off. As her sword wasn't magical or supernatural as far as *Invulnerability* was concerned, Jenny herself was unhurt and greedily sucked in air.

Susan wasn't sure she could dodge, so shoved her out of the way as “three” fired again, and it missed.

“Nine” shot at Susan, as did “one” that had been holding its action until something came closer. Susan was forced to dodge them, but rolled absolute minimum (a six) so she got smacked in the face with a chemical mixture that hardened instantly as it came in contact with air.

Delightful.

“Six” and “three” now fired, and Susan had a choice to make. Let her *Passive Dodge* do what it did best, or try a 1d6+5 dodge against two separate things. *In reality, my maximum roll here is a seventeen, while my passive is a guaranteed fourteen. Plus the extra delay... fine, go ahead and hit me if you can.*

They actually couldn't. Nor could “seven” and “one” when they fired again, Susan's LUCK was just too much for them.

Jenny could finally act again, and chose shooting at the one in front of her again because she figured Susan could hold out a few seconds at least. This did some damage to it, but not enough to destroy it. It was a near thing though, and it too started sparking and malfunctioning.

Susan was up, so she bashed herself in the head for thirty seven damage and could see again. She had come to the realization that these things were doing called shots, and probably couldn't actually hit her if she did things right. *If I hadn't dodged that last one, and let my passive take care of it, I would have had a fourteen rather than a six. Which of course makes no sense, I mean what did I do, lean into the thing? I'm just not going to dodge anymore.*

This proved the right choice, and globs sailed past her as Jenny blew away “nine” finally, and turned slightly to start shooting at “three.” Sadly, the gas had by this time expanded to where Susan was, but she was still getting a thirteen bonus to CON checks so she won't succumb to the poison very easily. She did smell something awful though.

It was her turn again, and she cleaved into number “five” which was the closest one. It didn't get a dodge either because it was busy shooting at her, so both connected as it was at “point blank range” at this point. Again, she did *nearly* enough damage to destroy the unit, but not enough, and was again blinded. She also had the poison gas in her lungs but couldn't cough it out, and it sat there burning, making her uncomfortable even if it couldn't exactly damage her.

“Six,” “three,” and “two” all fired, forcing Jenny at least to dodge again because her LUCK was not a nine. She rolled max, it rolled minimum, so she was in the clear.

“One” took a shot at Susan and decided next time to just aim beforehand, these glue guns were quite inaccurate even for a machine. Susan did the one point of damage “five” needed to go down just by swinging wildly around, as Mu had no LUCK to speak of. It hadn't moved so Susan's LUCK check of nineteen was easily enough to hit and destroy it.

“One” had communicated the new tactical decision to the others, who now aimed at Susan's head rather than just firing blind. Jenny fired at “three” and did a called shot to the

head, three round burst, and did twenty five damage to it. Susan smashed the junk off her face again, getting annoyed with this tactic.

Sadly, the gas grenade expanded a final time, and Jenny was caught in it, causing her eyes to burn and the gun dropped from her hands as she started violently coughing. Susan grabbed her up and *Spirit Stepped* as far from the battlefield as she could, which given her speed was sixteen meters. She hastily got out the Alleviation knife and pressed it into Jenny's skin, causing her to relax and stop coughing. She set it against her own skin just in case, and then shoved the knife back as the robots came into view again, skimming over the ground with thrusters.

"This is just not fair!" shouted Susan, as Jenny sighed down the barrel of another rifle she pulled out of her sub-space pocket and started squeezing off shots. As they were no longer surrounded the remaining four bots were destroyed by gunfire as both girls put rounds into them.

"That was awful!" panted Jenny.

"I must agree. Not having my magic to draw on is really becoming a nuisance."

"Yeah, but I've never had magic and those guys were moving a bit too fast even for me."

"Really!? I thought it was just because I hardly ever fight at even speeds."

"Really. Things with that much armor shouldn't be able to move or react that fast."

"They are literally computers though, so it would be stranger if they didn't move that fast, wouldn't it?"

Jenny considered. "Maybe. And what was that goop stuff they were shooting at us?" She scrapped some off Susan's face. "It sure hardened quickly enough!"

"Probably them trying to overcome *Invulnerability*. It worked too, if they hadn't missed us most of the time we might have been sunk. Plus there was that gas they used, I guess just irritating the eyes and lungs isn't damage so my magic didn't help?"

"Maybe. It was being surrounded that worked against us most. Give me a nice sniper rifle and a few hundred meters from whatever I'm shooting and that'll be fine with me."

"Whatever it was, let's comb the area before they send more troops, and take out whatever they were here to protect."

"Good thinking."

The girls went back to the battlefield and poked around, but didn't find anything at first. "The readings get stronger, then get weaker again," complained Jenny, looking at her scanner. "Can we be walking right past it?"

"I suppose it could be cloaked somehow, like you were saying."

"We'll never find it!"

"Not with that attitude we won't." She stopped dead. "I'm such an idiot!"

"What?"

"I could have activated my *Spirit Aura* when they started shooting that crap at me, I bet it would have kept the stuff of my face. Darn it, I'm too reliant on magic, I haven't had my supernatural abilities for long enough to think of them too. Shoot."

"Do you have any abilities to help us here?"

"I don't think so. *Spirit Sense* only works on living stuff, same with *Aura Reading*."

"Better keep looking then."

They both passed a large tree several times, which seemed to be where the reading were the most intense, and finally Jenny stopped in front of it and looked up.

"You don't think..."

"What?"

"I have a theory." She readied her rifle and told Susan to stand back. Then she put a bunch of shots into the tree which caused a high pitched whining noise to fill the air, and the tree disappeared. In its place was a strange looking metal device stuck into the ground which had lights now flickering and dying all along the thing.

"I think we have a winner," Jenny said, and the two grinned at other.

“But now how do we put it into the Ishkick and take it back for study?” wondered Susan.

Planning for the End

Who: Susan

When: Not long after

Where: Military base

It didn't take long for Susan to remember she wasn't stuck with just that one planet, she could use her handy dandy wrist computer to switch to a different one. After that was accomplished, she used *Shrink* to make the pillar a more manageable size and plucked it out of the ground.

"But I thought you didn't want them to know about magic?" asked Jenny. "Even in my travels, a shrink ray is pretty far fetched."

"I don't. This is just to get it out of the ground. We have some portable anti-gravity units somewhere, right?"

"I think the Ishkick carry some, I can go look."

"Great. If not we can sneak back and get some. The point is we'll carry it like this *some* of the way, then balance it atop the two with some anti-gravity units for the rest of the trip. They don't need to know we didn't do the whole journey like that."

Jenny considered, looking the top of the units over. "I guess we could wedge it right there, and the computers can be slaved together so they move as one unit. Okay, let me go look for the portable units." She found some and they carried out the plan, lashing the thing down with some rope Jenny pulled from her sub-space pocket. It was a bit of a pain to tip the thing onto the mecha's shoulders and Susan wished she could use *Flight* along with *Shrink* because she could have just flown above the two, released *Shrink*, and guided it into place as it fell. (As she doubted even her STrength would be enough to hold it up for long) But they managed it when Susan remembered *Telekinesis* and set her magic to Mercury. With it solidly wedged and tied town, Susan dialed her magic back to Sun in case they needed *Invulnerability* in a hurry.

The two were met by people driving more specialized equipment, having been radioed by the girls with what to expect, and the now broken tower was hauled into a garage area where experts started tearing it to pieces to see what made it work.

"I think this is some sort of stabilizer," said one of the scientists. "And look, it's got a chunk of Hyperlarcovite providing the same function as in our device. I can see where studying this is going to solve some of the engineering problems we've encountered in building ours, so this was a really great find. Thanks for hauling it all the way back here for study."

"Sure thing," said Susan. "Does it answer any of the questions about how they're moving troops around?"

"To a certain extent. They probably have a platform of some kind that is the heart of the system and hidden away someplace. The Mu units then have space warped around them, creating a tesseract effect which allows them to step through without crossing the intervening space."

Huh, just like my Teleportal. I guess sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The woman went on. "This device here helps stabilize the space and dimensions around their landing point, and they probably activate a line of them between their destination and their origin. That wouldn't be needed on a world without the messed up situation we have."

"So with this could you reverse engineer the system for use yourselves when the worlds are fixed again?"

She got an excited look in her eye. "Probably. I'll have to make some notes..."

"Regardless, you did good," said the general, who had been hovering nearby. (He was standing, he did not have hover boots. He wouldn't have turned down a pair, of course, who would?) "We now know what to look for and how to look for it. But you say it had some kind of shell around it that made it look like a tree?"

“Exactly,” said Jenny. “My recommendation when other areas with odd readings are found would be to just bomb the heck of them until the readings stop. Flatten everything, because the pillars are obviously watched and guarded. Being able to do a fast bombing run would minimize casualties. And as we know they have some kind of hologram projection system to disguise them, we can’t be too careful. Everything in the area will have to go.”

“You really do think like a captain, Everywhere. I guess I should be glad you’re doing this to look for a way off this reality, or I’d be worried about you taking over my job!” He laughed.

“Too much paperwork.”

“Ain’t that the truth! Anyway, if you’ll excuse me, ladies? I have some orders to issue. By gum we’ll cripple the Mu transport network before the day is out. And it’s all thanks to you two. You should get some kind of medal, honestly.”

Wait, aren’t I already a knight, from Louise’s world? Forgot about that. I’m just going to have so many honors before my journey is done, I hope my sub-space pocket can hold all the titles and medals and awards and trophies and...

“One moment sir,” cautioned Jenny as he turned to go.

“Yes, captain?”

“Please have all the teams report exactly where these pillars are found. Unless I miss my guess, that’s going to be very important to really ending the Mu threat.”

“Very well, but what do you have in mind?”

“If they’re placed according to... uh...” she looked over at the woman.

“Elizabeth.”

“Thank you. Elizabeth here, my guess is they’ll lead in a straight line right back to the Mu base they launch from. If that’s not their main base, I bet it’ll have clues to lead to the main base.”

“Which we can then take out once and for all. Captain I like the way you think. Yes, it stands to reason they’ll be spaced regularly, radiating out to cover the maximum area like spokes of a wheel. And the center of the wheel is where we need to be. Anything else?”

“That’s all for now, sir.”

“Very well. Dismissed!”

But he was actually dismissing himself, as Susan and Jenny stayed there and watched the dismantling process.

After all, it wouldn’t do if they used a different relay to appear here and take or smash this one up before these guys were finished figuring out what makes it tick. What I need to worry about is that paste stuff they were flinging around. I don’t recall a spell that can keep me alive while not breathing, but that’s not all. I would need one to see in another way if my eyes were closed. That is going to be three different spells, and they probably wouldn’t fall under one planet.

Plus those Mu things took two actions apiece to destroy, and that’s me hitting them. What else takes more than forty damage? That giant I fought that one time, maybe, but I didn’t think anything my size would be that tough. Though they are combat robots, I guess. I figured I would be set with my STRength bonus as high as it now, but now I’m not so sure. I mean it’s not such a big deal with Acceleration going, and I could have gotten out my second blade I suppose. But that would have made me even slower, as my Off Hand skill is only... only... She got out her Character Sheet behind some boxes and looked it over. Only zero. I never put any points into it? Gurr! Could have sworn I had, but I guess I just used Augment Skill for that. Shoot.

I mean, yes, sure, this is a unique world but what if the world my father is held on has similar robots wandering around? Ugh, I wouldn’t even be able to damage them, would I? My Giant’s Soul probably wouldn’t work. I mean I have to believe nothing short of a planet devoid of all magic and spiritual power, because of who his companions were, could hold them for long. That means guns, and Jenny said even her gun took several shots to destroy one, and it’s bigger than my little pistol. Plus those things are armored, and I would need to up the TR on the pistol which would lower the overall damage. I need something technological that doesn’t depend on my STRength but can still do massive damage. Maybe Jenny knows about- or, no, she would have been using it in that fight. Right?

“Hey Jenny?”

“Yeah?”

“Thinking about our battle with the Mu, how would you have done it differently now that you know how it went down?”

“That’s easy. I would have been carrying my shotgun rather than my rifle. It was stupid of me and I should have known better. We were in a forest not the countryside, and them teleporting in aside, they could have just hidden behind trees. At that range my shotgun would have made far more sense. I’m just so used to long range, precision weapons that’s what I tend to grab, you know? But dodging that glue stuff, and there being so many of them, I didn’t even get a chance to consider it!”

“Yeah, I get it. Like I always tend to use certain spells. Okay. But do they really do that much more damage?”

She nodded. “Like you wouldn’t believe. You really want to know about this stuff, though?”

Now it was Susan’s turn to nod. “I think I’m going to have to. I run into worlds like this one with no magic and I’m going to need other options. If I can learn about firearms and when it’s best to use each kind, I’d be more prepared.”

“Okay, we’ll head to the range after I assign a squad or two to protect this area in our absence. We can talk about different gun types and I can give you a demonstration. You’ll have to find your own though, I only have pistols to spare. I usually just keep around one or two of the other types, usually the best I can find. But pistols are small and while I tend to go for bigger booms, having them is nice. In a pinch I can use one as an example of a certain type of firearm and have someone scale it up for me.”

“I understand. I know your sub-space pocket isn’t limitless, I wasn’t asking you to be my personal armory or anything. I just thought that maybe I should look into other ways of damaging things like robots. I wouldn’t use it against a person unless I had to, but those robots were tough and I have a feeling I’ll be taking more on before we’re done.”

“Probably. Wait here and I’ll round up some troops.”

So Jenny and Susan went to the armory and signed out a shotgun and a crate of ammo, then went down to the shooting range so Susan could get familiar with the types of guns Jenny had encountered in her travels.

“Let me get this straight. There’s pistol, shotgun, machine gun, submachine gun, sniper rifle, energy pulse, energy beam, and high explosive like rocket launchers?”

“That’s the most common types I’ve run into, yes.”

Great, give me more things to put points into, why don’t you?

“There are, of course, more exotic and heavier things I’ve run into. You could handle a mini-gun or a turret of some kind as you are now, but cut off from magic as you fear it would be useless. So it’s best to use the most mundane thing you can find, and as a bonus, shotgun ammo is actually pretty easy to make. You can buy gunpowder pretty much anywhere and set up a reload station in your *Dimension*, or back at the Hub. Heck, Silverstreak could probably give you enough to totally fill your sub-space pocket. Of course if you’re lucky enough to find a gun that somehow generates its own ammo over time...”

“Those exist?”

“Don’t discount what science can do, on very advanced worlds. I’ve seen a lot of crazy guns out there. I wish now I’d kept more of them. I don’t often meet people I would be comfortable arming with a bunch of crazy weapons but in your case, they’re just a crutch on worlds like this one. I think you could handle them. Ah well.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, I guess I’ll just have to keep an eye out on my travels, like you do. For now, how do I load and fire this thing? I figure I can at least put a point into a *shotgun* skill, if you count as a teacher.”

“Okay, first off here’s the safety and the lever to determine firing mode. Don’t get them confused. Now, here’s how you remove the magazine...”

So they spent an hour going over how to use the shotgun and Susan used an XP for the skill. It wasn’t the shotgun skill, but rather a rifle skill that appeared on her sheet, but she

shrugged and figured if it gave her the ability to use other rifles, so be it!

And the best part is, once I save the world and disappear, they won't expect the thing back.

They also went over types of ammo that could be used, and Jenny explained most of this ammo was explosive. "Mainly because normal ammo couldn't really damage Mu units, they're too heavily armored. See, it's marked, this stuff is the normal stuff."

"Got it. I take it your "crazy stuff" is a little bit more sophisticated than this and doesn't need different ammo types?"

Jenny just smiled.

With the ammo put into her character sheet, she saw that regular 10 gauge, which Jenny said was 18 metal pellets shoved into a cylinder, did 1d6 damage eighteen times, and had a recoil of twenty. *How does anyone use this weapon? Assuming a five STRength and skill, the recoil on the weapon would be a ten. That leaves you with 1d10 damage to your arms for each shot! I could literally break both my arms from firing this gun once if I didn't have my items going.*

Meaning it's totally useless for worlds without magic, because even with a ten skill my recoil would be a seven, or 1d6 damage per shot. I can't have a weapon I can only fire twice before my arms break. I suppose I could use 12 gauge, that's only a sixteen recoil, but there's no way I'm putting a ten into this one skill.

And the TR of this ammo is only a four, that won't even scratch those robots, and the explosive ammo here does half damage, so that's 1d2 damage eighteen times, should I hit with all the pellets. That's an average of half ones and half twos, or twenty six damage. Divide that by three and I'm only doing eight damage to what I hit. My sword does 1d10+4d12 damage without Avatar going, which is an average of twenty nine!

So it looks like I'm sticking with the sword for now. My rating is higher so I'll be more likely to hit, and it does more damage. Huh. I suppose if I was shooting a person with the explosive ammo, I would do $(1d6 \times 18) + (1d3 \times 18)$ or eighty on average. That would pretty much explode anybody. Of course, if I was fighting a person I'd probably be using my knockout blade... but we're talking about the prison world my father is on, which again precludes the use of knockout.

I need to find a shotgun like weapon more like the pistol Jenny gave me. Less recoil, variable TR so I can stun with it, but at the same time up the TR if I'm fighting a robot. This sucks...

Susan was putting some normal shots down range when Jenny's phone rang and she motioned Susan to stop. Of course she was wearing hearing protection, she didn't need a further *Poor Sense* weakness, after all.

"That was Olson, said Kei is on the line and wants to talk to us all."

"Then let's go."

Susan put everything into her sub-space pocket, making sure she hadn't left any shells around, and the two walked over to the communication tower.

They all greeted each other and they sat down in front of the screen.

"What's up Kei?" asked Susan.

"We have a plan," he answered. "Well, Mimsy said I came up with it, but she's the one... never mind. The Glomar is installing extra batteries for the cannon so I came ahead. Then we're headed for the space elevator."

"How did you know we were destroying the Mu transport network?" Jenny exclaimed.

"Doing what now?" She explained what they were doing. "Oh. Nice work. But no, I had no idea. I just wanted to get everybody there and finally get a start on fixing things around here. This seemed the best way, as Enaam forces will no doubt be after us once they learn I'm back aboard the Glomar. We want to force the issue, unless you think that's a bad idea?"

"No, it seems like perfect timing," said Susan, looking at the others who all nodded.

"Give us a day or two to bomb every tower we find into scrap and then leak the info to their government. It'll still be a fight, just one they won't be able to get reinforcements for."

“We can use that time to build up our forces near the elevator,” said Olson. “Now that we know our cities won’t come under attack we can just leave a small number of troops at each location and move the majority to where the action will be.”

“Which may cause the Enaam to do the same, come to think of it,” remarked Kei. “If they get wind of massive troop movements they would have no choice but to do the same just so they don’t miss out on whatever you’re doing!”

“How do we keep the two groups focused on the Mu?” asked Jenny.

“I asked the same thing. Mimsy said, or said I said, we would just have to hope for the best. Honestly, there’s some weird stuff going on over here, like things working out that shouldn’t, and the story Mome told us about how she escaped from... anyway, not important. We might be able to form a truce or everyone will see destroying Mu and not each other is in all our best interests. We can only hope.”

“We won’t fire on them if they don’t fire on us, I’m sure,” Olson said with confidence.

“I guess we have a plan, then,” Kei announced. “We’ll get as close to the elevator as we can, and try to arrange things to go down... four days from now? Does that sound okay to all of you?”

“We want to do it fairly quickly,” Olson mused. “Don’t give them time to repair their transport network. After all they don’t have to eat or sleep, and they could have spare control nodes ready to deploy as they lose them. We have forces all over, destroying it shouldn’t take more than two days, given what we now know what to look for. I mean, we don’t know how extensive it is, it could be months! But just smashing it back will buy us some time. Another two days to arrive... tricky, but in war speed is life. Yeah, let’s shoot for four days.”

“What about us?”

“You mean what Susan was afraid of? Us getting too close together and ruining everything? We’ll have to ride the elevator up together, so I really hope nothing bad happens. And better to get an early warning on different ships that can fly away from each other if something does start to happen. If you start to feel weird or your scanners go all funky, boost in the opposite direction!”

“I guess that’s all we can hope for.”

“Yeah. Anything else we can do for you?”

“Not at the moment, I don’t think. I’ll ask when I get back, see if we need anything. Shaya didn’t tell me to request anything from you, so I doubt it.”

“Then I’ll see you in a couple of days my friend.”

“Which may be our last. Yeah, I’ll see you, Olson. Good luck.”

“To both of us.”

They signed out.

Now, if we can just find and take down the Mu base in the next two days, that would be super great. Any Mu units will be cut off, The Darkness will be gone from this world, and the path to saving it will be clear. That glue stuff though... I wonder what other tricks it’ll have if we attack it? I was feeling confident because it couldn’t use magic against me, but now I’m not so sure. It’s had a few days to manufacture stuff to that doesn’t damage but can still stop us, and ages to learn about fighting people with Invulnerability like mine. It could go pretty poorly for us. She looked over at Jenny. Do I want to put her at risk, when really this isn’t her fight?

Love is a Mysterious Thing

Who: Sparkle

Where: Nearing the Space Elevator

When: Day 14

As planned, the Glomar headed for the space elevator after bunkering down and staying out of sight for two days. Tensions aboard ship were running high, though the people most often to be found quarreling were Kei, Mimsy, and Srei.

"I don't even feel like I belong here anymore," Srei would often say. "Everyone treats me like I'm dead or something. Everyone always seems surprised to see me."

Sparkle couldn't help but wonder about that. *Was there something I did that changed his destiny and made an echo like back home? It's certainly possible.* It was difficult to feel proud of saving his life, even inadvertently, because echoes were just a theory and given the nature of reality the man probably lived and died a million different days, and would continue to do so. *But at least this time, in this reality, he didn't, so I guess it's not wrong to at least feel a little bit smug, right?*

At the moment Sparkle was curled up, asleep, but came instantly awake when the ship shuddered and things started exploding around it.

Oh great, what did I miss?

Sparkle ran to the launching area in the center of the ship to find the Starburst missing, and she cursed her *Short Attention Span* and tendency to nap like a real cat could. *If he's in more danger because of me, I'll never live it down!* She raced through the ship trying to get a feel for who they were fighting, and she passed people manning guns that stuck out the side of the ship. She saw Srei first, taking out some aggression on whatever he was shooting at, which must be Mu forces.

"Stinking robots!" he muttered, as the guns spat shells at something in the distance. "Come get some!"

Is there anything I can do in this case? I guess I can do the same heat seeker trick I did before, making an illusion temperature for missiles to lock onto. Only trouble there is, if Kei's lock onto that instead of Mu missiles taking the bait I'll really feel bad. I guess I'll just head to the top and see what I can do from there. I doubt I can get them to back down with illusion but there must be something I can do.

She ran back the way she came, intending to go up the stairs to the deck area she usually used, when she passed Mimsy. Sparkle skidded to a halt, as she looked terrible and her *Spirit Energy* was all messed up. It was fluctuating, somehow, which Sparkle had never felt before, given at the core it was the energy of life. Susan and herself used it to power their magic, and they had to use at least a little so she was used to it going down. And with Susan's tendency to *Energy Drain* people she was used to it going up steady as well. But this she was feeling was quite odd. *She shouldn't be having some kind of breakdown just shooting robots, right? What's wrong with her? She rolled only a six on Aura Reading, enough to see that Mimsy was determined but terrified. I suppose they don't see all that much combat as they are a trading ship. Plus these are Mu and I actually have no idea how tough they are, we could really be in trouble here. Odd that Srei didn't seem that agitated though. Maybe he's just trying to be more like Kei?*

Sparkle turned to go, intent on running up the stairs, and she got half way there when Mimsy's gun stopped and she heard her go tumbling out of her seat and slump to the floor.

"Mimsy!" she cried, rushing back to her side. She kicked herself for talking, but it didn't matter, Mimsy was out cold and now her gun was unmanned, swinging loose without a target. *Figures, they are fighting Als so why would they hook their gun up to any kind of auto fire routine that might take issue firing at other lifeforms like itself? So now they're totally defenseless on this corner!*

Sparkle rolled *First Aid* untrained, and only got a six so couldn't begin to guess what was wrong, and looked helplessly back down the corridor. *Now what? I can't pick her up, and*

trying to get someone down here means that person will know I can talk. I can't just play Charades with someone and get them here, she could be seriously hurt. I need to do something now! Luckily she got an idea after rolling a fifteen (max) on her INSight check. *It's a long shot, but it's all I've got at the moment.*

She shot down the corridor again, stopping behind Srei and casting her only spell, *Illusion*. She went for a pale, transparent, floating Mimsy that Srei caught out of the corner of his eye as it pleadingly raised a hand to him. "Help me!" she made it say, then fade out.

"What in the world?" exclaimed Srei, his gun forgotten. He hit a button to activate the comm system aboard the ship. "Mome, go check on Mimsy, she was supposed to be manning the rear gun on this side. I think something might have happened to her," he shouted into it, then went back to blowing things up that crossed his firing arc.

"Right away," Mome replied, and Susan went back down the corridor to make sure Mome found her. *That seemed to work.*

She got there as Mome did, who started dragging her towards the infirmary and calling for more help, which she got as Govu appeared and hefted her legs.

"Did she get hit by something?" he asked, looking her over.

"Can't be sure yet. Thermal vision indicates she's running a fever but I don't see any evidence of an entry wound or other trauma."

"Thank goodness for that. Wait, you have thermal vision?"

"My vision can shift into any part of the spectrum, it aids my diagnostic capabilities. I'll be happy to tell you all about it, but now we need to get her down to the medical area."

"Right, sorry."

Sparkle followed, having nothing better to do at the moment. As much as she might want to take over on the gun, that really wasn't an option given that she was a cat. *Also my magic is useless, and I can only make things hurt by hitting them, not heal them. I really hope she's okay.*

The Glomar shuddered and the lights flickered as the main gun fired, then Shaya's voice rang through the ship. "We're retreating, there seems to be a large concentration of Mu ahead, so this is as far as we can go. I just pray they don't decide to follow us. Someone man that other gun, where is Mimsy!?"

Apparently no one told her, but I guess it's been pretty chaotic here.

"I'll do that," Govu said, rushing off. "Hope you can take it from here."

"Don't worry about her." Mome passed some kind of scanning device over Mimsy and looked thoughtfully at the readings. Moments later the racket outside the ship quieted down and the Glomar came in for a landing.

"We've sustained some damage," Shaya's voice again came from the speakers, "but I don't think we're being followed. Those Mu probably have orders to guard the elevator, and we could be a diversion or leading them into a trap. So they probably won't risk it, they'll pull back and tighten up their defense. Meanwhile we'll set down and make some repairs. Everyone report in to me for your duty assignments."

Mome simply tapped a message into the terminal next to her, which Sparkle couldn't read, and went back to scanning Mimsy. Sparkle lost interest and went above, looking over the damage done to the ship and watching as Kei docked again. He went inside and as Sparkle didn't see any need to remain out here she went back in too. *Figured I might see if my Illusion magic might be needed out here, maybe help hide the ship again. If Kei is back we really weren't followed, so I won't worry about it. May as well go see what Kei learns about Mimsy.*

She found both he and Srei arguing over her bedside.

"I'm telling you I saw a vision of her, crying out for me!" Srei insisted. "And then she was found collapsed by her gun."

"What do you mean, vision?"

"Just that, a vision. She said 'help me' plain as day. So obviously she loves me more than you, and you should just back off."

Oh great, don't tell me my little trick is going to get these two fighting again. Though I

suppose it's better this way, right? She'll go back to her home dimension when the worlds are fixed, and he can't follow her there, can he? So it's probably better she sticks with her own kind.

"You're making it up! Besides, I couldn't help her I was out in the Starburst. And a few of those shots from here came a little too close for comfort. Are you sure you know how to fire that thing?"

"Of course I do, what are you implying? How did I know she was hurt then, if it wasn't a vision of her that told me?"

"She's not hurt, exactly," put in Mome.

"Then what is wrong with her?" asked Kei angrily.

"I have a huge headache from two loudmouth men arguing over me," Mimsy said, not opening her eyes. "Haven't you people heard of respect for the infirm?"

"Mimsy, you're awake!" both men shouted, then glared at each other.

"All this racket, you could wake the dead." She opened her eyes. "What happened?"

"You collapsed," Mome answered, walking to the side of the bed. "I checked the database, and I'm sure you're familiar with the symptoms of your... age."

"It happened already? And of course it chooses now to strike. That figures. Well, at least it's nothing serious and I can get back to work. I don't hear shooting, are we safe?"

"Oh, Mimsy!" said Srei, taking her hand. "This is all Kei's fault."

"What did I do?" he asked, perplexed.

Srei's eyes shot daggers at him. (not literally) "This would never have happened if you hadn't shown up. She would have married me—"

"Srei, please don't put words in my mouth," Mimsy interrupted, trying to sit up. "What's going on with the attack? Do you need me back on the gun or not? Will someone answer me?"

"We've landed, it's over. You can stay and rest if you want."

"Wait, someone tell me what this is all about!" demanded Kei. "Are you sick? Did you really call out to Srei like he said, and give him some kind of vision that you were in trouble? Can your people do that?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she chided. "There's no way that happened."

"But I'm telling you it did," insisted Srei. "What else could it have been? Or maybe it's just my love is so much stronger I have a deeper connection to her and know when she's in trouble."

"Is... is that possible?" Kei asked Mome.

"Not according to any medical data I have," she hedged. "Who can say, though, with all the dimensional energies and radiation and different chemicals they've no doubt come in contact with that they haven't awakened some kind of telepathic bond?"

"But... but..."

"Forget it, Kei. Mimsy is mine and there's not a—"

Mimsy shoved him and got up. "I'm not *yours*, Srei. Goddess, you don't *listen*, do you? I am perfectly capable of choosing who I love for myself, thank you very much. The both of you, I am not some prize to be won or fought over. Srei, your attitudes lately have disgusted me, with your posturing and jealousy and outright possessiveness. As far as you're concerned," she turned to Kei. "How do you think I would feel if after falling in love with you, the world got fixed and I never saw you again? Did you think for one minute what the consequences of your actions might be? You're only here temporarily, am I to be just another conquest for you? Used and tossed aside?"

She may as well be talking to me. I didn't, and look what happened. But as far as I could tell she could have been dying. I did the right thing, didn't I?

"Not a conquest, never that, Mimsy. I just thought we should enjoy the time we have together!"

"Honestly, I don't know why I bother. Mome, thank you for looking me over, I'm going to see what I can do for the ship. I'm sure it'll need patching up after that."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Kei asked her.

"I'm fine, and that's the end of it, all right? Go make yourself useful."

She swept out and Srei followed her, protesting everything she had said in general, because apparently he didn't know when to quit. Kei instead turned to Mome.

"What happened to her? Is she okay? Did she just faint? But you said something about her age, how old is she? She can't be that old can she?"

Mome looked troubled. "I guess it's common knowledge among the Enaam, so it's no big medical secret I have to keep from you. Enaam girls are fertile at a pretty young age. About the age Mimsy is now. When that happens they go through certain... changes."

"What changes? I don't see any difference between her and Shaya, and Shaya is way older, right?"

"It's not something you can see. Like I said, they become fertile and can have kids... for a couple of months. If they don't, that's it. Their bodies shut down their reproductive systems and they can't ever conceive a child again. According to my medical records... that happened to Shaya."

"Seriously? She can't ever have kids, and Mimsy might be the same if she doesn't have one soon? I mean they can't take drugs, or-"

Mome shook her head. "If your lungs were damaged could you just 'take drugs' and fix them? No. The only option at that point would be a transplant, robbing another girl of her chance to have kids."

"So this fever, it's letting her know she could have kids, and she better have them soon, that's what you're saying? This is the Enaam puberty, and it lasts a couple of months and then... that's it? Have a kid now or never, that's what happens to them?"

"That's what I'm saying. After the first the organs stay healthy, and more children can be born at a later time. But if she doesn't have her first child soon, she never will."

"That's harsh. Really harsh! To be forced into having kids so early, I mean making that kind of decision when she's so young."

"Biology is a weird and wonderful thing. There must have been a reason their species evolved this trait. Perhaps first born babies born to older mothers had a higher risk of birth defects? I'm just a nurse, not an anthropologist, I can't tell you. Please, don't make a big deal out of this. It's just part of their growing up process, and you being who you are won't make it any easier. Master."

"I see. Okay, I'll try. She won't collapse again, will she?"

"She will have one more fever, yes, in a few months. If the worlds aren't fixed by that time we'll have much larger problems to worry about, though."

"I guess you're right. I just wanted to know if she should be watched more carefully. But if you say it's months away I'll try not to treat her any differently." He shook his head. "Man, this is heavy stuff. Anyway, I better look the Starburst over, I took some hits and those Mu might decide to chase us down after all." He bent down and hugged Mome. "Thanks for looking after her."

"Of course, master."

Kei left, and Sparkle watched as Mome put the lab back in order and went to go find something else to do. *I guess it's a good thing Susan isn't around at the moment. No doubt she would want to 'fix' this little 'flaw' in the Enaam physiology and get bummed when she either couldn't or was told to keep out of it. I know her, and something like this would drive her nuts. Knowing every girl around Mimsy's age, and that's not much different than Susan's unless Enaam and Paragons age at different rates, has something like kids on her mind. Susan would want some spell or technology from Silverstreak to help them out, but in this case, like Mome said that's just how they evolved. For them it's as normal as... actually they probably wouldn't have periods either. If their reproductive organs shut down there would be no eggs, so nothing to get rid of once a month. Huh.*

Sparkle walked the ship, from the bridge where Shaya was keeping a close eye on the scanners to make sure no Mu forces flew up on them, to the engine room where Reeg was directing Jaby to look things over from his vantage point. The twins were repairing any damage to their mecha, while Mimsy and Srei were checking the outer hull for signs of damage in their fliers.

And what good am I here? Mimsy was never in any real danger because she wasn't actually hurt. I caused more bad feelings between Kei and Srei, and now we could be attacked at any moment because we're getting near the space elevator. In fact... Sparkle went up to the outer deck and looked about, and was pretty sure she could see something rising from the ground in the distance. We're close. Susan, I hope you've got The Darkness taken care of on this world, and that it hasn't made you do things you'll regret later, as I wasn't around to help keep you in line.

I will be quite glad to leave this world behind.

Susan, Jenny, and the general sat pondering a map in his office that had been marked up over the last few days.

"I don't get it," remarked Susan, having just been told what they had found.

"We don't either," the general agreed. "They are arranged in a pattern that resembles spokes on a wheel. We've destroyed a dozen of them, and once we realized the way they were laid out it was a simple matter to find and bomb the others even without our scanners. And my men verified broken bits of equipment that had previously been hidden behind holographic barriers at each site. Plus the readings changed when the stabilizer was destroyed, so we know they were active. The center should be here," he stabbed a finger down in the middle of the symbols, "but we went out there expecting a huge battle and found nothing. Nothing attacked us, no readings, nothing to indicate any activity of any kind."

"Did you bomb the place, just in case they had some kind of hologram covering their whole base?" asked Jenny.

"We tore the place up. Had to give up and get going towards the elevator so we can arrive at the same time the Enaam do, but as far as we can tell it's just an empty field there."

"You don't think they're hiding in a slightly offset dimension, do you?" asked Susan.

"They just use the stabilizers they built here whenever they want to move troops around."

"If so, that's fine, they can hide out wherever they want. As long as more of those stabilizers don't come on line they won't be able to reinforce their position near the elevator."

That's fine for you, but I need to knock The Darkness out of here so Silverstreak can put a barrier around... wait, exactly what world would the barrier go around? This world is a bunch of worlds, I guess he could lock onto all of them? I guess I wouldn't want the worlds being separated until we found it, as it could go anywhere and we'd have to start all over again. Wait, duh, he puts it around the reality not each separate world. The 'branch' not the 'leaves.' Never mind.

I don't care what misconceptions you labor under, honestly.

Not talking to you.

Then who are you talking to? I'm the only one in here.

Never mind.

"You've left some troops with scanners on patrol everywhere, right?" Jenny asked.

"Of course. If they have backups that start coming online at the worst possible time, we'll need someone close by to take care of things. As much as I hated to not hit the elevator with everything we had, I've left some forces patrolling the area. If there are backup units, hidden behind barriers but inactive so our scanners didn't pick them up, all this might be for nothing."

"Good thought. Mainly along this route, right?" She pointed along the line of now broken stabilizers leading towards the elevator.

"Exactly. They can go the other direction all they want."

"I don't like it," remarked Susan.

"I'm not crazy about it myself," admitted Jeffrey. "But what can we do? We're hitting the elevator tomorrow, we can't stick around there and do tests or whatever. If they're in the area or not my concern now is what's in front of us."

"You had some pictures taken of the place though, right?" asked Jenny.

"Sure." He brought them up, and a bombed out field was shown on his computer.

"Can you print that out?"

"Why?"

"Thought I might look it over for clues."

"Well, okay. I guess I wouldn't consider an empty field a security risk." He printed it out and handed it to her. "Unless you girls have some other questions you're dismissed. I need to get back to issuing orders for tomorrow."

They looked at each other and shook their heads, so Jenny saluted and they walked back to their cabin.

“Think you could get us there?” Jenny asked when they were alone again.

Susan considered. “I haven’t done a *Teleportal* around here just in case something goes weird with the magic. I’m not sure about opening a hole in space on a planet where the *Question* spell doesn’t even work.”

“Can’t you just teleport us there directly?”

“Ah.” Susan looked a little embarrassed. “Actually, yes. That would probably work, I’ve been using my better spell so long, I forgot I used to cast *Teleport* from writings before creating the other. You really think it’s there?”

“I think if it’s going to come out, we’re going to have to give it something it wants. And that’s us. We go in, shotguns ready this time, and see what happens. Worst case we stand around for an hour and then head back here.”

“One problem with that; if I *Teleport* us somewhere, we’ll have to leave the ship. Right now we’re traveling at a pretty good clip, and bringing us there would not cancel that momentum.”

“Oh, and we couldn’t be *Invulnerable* either, because that’s a different planet, right? We could sneak off with *Flight* though, get to the ground that way.”

“Yeah I guess, but how do we get back? I can target this room as I’ve seen it, but without going the same speed it is we’d just be pulped against the wall.”

“And the ship probably won’t stop until it reaches the elevator...” Jenny considered thoughtfully. “And it’s probably going faster than you can fly.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“But what about flight and teleport magic, you can cast them together, right?”

“I guess, why?”

“To come back we just have flight going and target someplace on the front of the ship. We appear and it moves under us, right? But we just start flying and get enough momentum to grab onto it and not hurt ourselves.”

“Yeah, I suppose that would work,” Susan admitted, given her *overconfidence*. “Let’s go look for a good spot.”

The girls took a look at the deck, and it was very long, with some good places to grab onto. But Susan looked down at the landscape flying beneath them. “I don’t know, this thing is- wait a second. I can just use up a couple of the *wards* I made earlier. I’ve got a bunch with *Invulnerability* in them. Yeah, we’ll be fine.”

“Great. Let’s go!”

So they snuck off the ship with *Flight* and Susan got out *Teleport*, which she spent the extra time casting and got a fifteen by spending five energy. They found themselves in the field which was pretty torn up, and both crouched, weapons at the ready. Susan hastily commanded her magic to go back to Sun so she could cast *Invulnerability* on them.

“Is that the best planet, though?” asked Jenny, turning her gun this way and that. “We know what it’s going to do now, right? Use that foam stuff to try and glue us in place or cut off our air.”

“I could keep Mercury up if you thought being *Accelerated* would be better.”

“It might. I mean we got totally surrounded last time, and it’s only going to be worse this time. We spend all our time dodging and we’ll never get to attack.”

“How about just walking around with *Phase*? If they can’t touch us-”

Jenny shook her head. “We’ll have to drop it to destroy whatever computer The Darkness has taken over, right? That’ll leave us totally vulnerable.”

“True. Okay, cover me.”

Susan canceled the order for Sun magic and got out her writings for *Acceleration*. She cast from them, using another six energy and getting an eighteen. Sadly this was dropped down to a sixteen as she was casting it on two people, because casting on multiple people is a penalty to the rating, not the result. (Sparkle always uses a lot more energy on it.) Both started blurring.

Great, if I'm at a minus two for this and I turn on my Spirit Aura I'll be at a minus four. Glad I decided not to use the gun, I only have a one rating in that. My sword skill of five is going to be penalized enough having both things going, so I guess that's a last resort sort of thing.

Huh. One thing I didn't think of before; with the shotgun they can't dodge the shot, like they can with my blade.

"So, I notice nothing has attacked us while you did all that," remarked Jenny, lowering her very fancy looking shotgun. *Obviously way more advanced than the weapons around here, where did she get that thing from? And does it have any special properties?* "What gives? I was sure we would be in for the fight of our lives once we got here."

"You think there really is nothing here? That the base is someplace else and the robots just came here to be transported? It would make sense, that whole 'spokes of a wheel' is a little obvious."

"Do you hear a sort of grinding noise?"

"A what?"

From off to the left there was a scraping and part of the ground shimmered and disappeared. Large steel doors swung open and a platform full of Mu rose out of the ground.

"Clever girl," muttered both girls, bringing their weapons up again. There were three rows of four, all deadly looking combat machines.

"Slash-All" Susan said, mentally kicking herself for not doing that earlier. *Should have been a little more prepared.*

Jenny simply fired in the general direction, as even five meters away it would be hard to miss with a shotgun. (Especially when shooting a robot, that has no LUCk.) She did twenty four to the body, and it started melting like it had just been hit with acid.

Yeah, it does something weird all right.

Mu "three" took a shot at Jenny, who easily dodged the glue shot.

Susan and Mu "eleven" and "one" now went, as Susan had failed her *Close Combat* check to see if she would go first or not, so several things happened at once. "Eleven" took a step to the right and fired at the closest person, Jenny, while "one" who was in the back row tried arcing a shot in the air and hitting Susan. "One" got an eleven to hit, which didn't even beat Susan's *Passive Dodge*, while "eleven" got a sixteen forcing Jenny to dodge, which she did. Susan's magical blade got a whole seven to hit, which was pathetic, but her *Disaster Strikes* or *It's not as bad as it looks* cards were of absolutely no help. So the robots easily dodged, except for "one" and "eleven" which took forty three and thirty, respectively, dividing by three of course.

This at least put them all going after the girls, who attacked again.

Jenny did another fifteen damage, but "four" still wasn't going down. Susan again spent eight energy on COOrdination and swung a called shot to the body of the robots, getting an eleven this time with her penalty. She hit all of three of them, doing enough damage to at least destroy the one Jenny had shot twice now. "Twelve" plunked down another grenade, which was set to go off in just a second, and now four robots and our heroes were up.

Both girls missed their combat checks so they acted simultaneously, "one" and "eleven" shooting at Jenny while "eight" and "nine" shot at Susan. Glue pasted Jenny's gun to her body as she was hit there and her right arm, causing both girls to realize there was no way to get it off now, they weren't *Invulnerable* so Susan couldn't just smash it to pieces with her sword. The other two got eleven and eight, so again Susan's LUCk saved her from being hit. She, on the other hand, swung and hit with a twenty one, which none of the robots could hope to dodge as they couldn't spend energy.

At this point the Mu decided to stop dodging and just sacrifice themselves to try and get the two coated with goop, so while four attacked, six did not dodge as Susan cut into them. Jenny of course tried to dodge so she didn't get further encased, which she managed. Mu "ten" arched a ball of adhesive at Susan, striking her in the body. It hardened but didn't impede her motion by that much. She, meanwhile, hit with an eleven, and made a *perception* check of (7 - 2) to notice they weren't dodging anymore. Nope.

So she's still going to spend eight energy per swing.

None went down. But a bunch now fired at her, as she was now the bigger threat. Five, to be exact, meaning she was at a minus five to dodge all of them. Only one hit, gluing her left arm to her side and forcing her to pass her sword into her right hand only. (She had been swinging it in both hands.)

Jenny pulled a pistol from her sub-space pocket with her left hand.

"Twelve" fired all by his lonesome, but its shot didn't even come close, and it felt a deep sadness in its circuits that it would not be able to fulfill its programming.

Susan had the luxury of attacking by herself, and swung with her right hand, taking a penalty to STRength, her rating in the skill, and thus any damage she might do. On the bright side she did notice they weren't dodging with a *perception* check of twenty, so she no longer will spend energy trying to hit. She got a fourteen to hit this time, more than enough, but again only one went down in a burst of unhappiness and resentment.

"Go down already!" Susan shouted, wondering if it was too late to reevaluate some of her life choices and become a painter instead of an adventurer. *I'm sure Luna is fine where she is, I bet she doesn't even want to be rescued.*

Four of the Mu responded with more glue stuff, and Jenny put some shots downrange at Mu "nine" who was in front of her. She aimed for the head to get some critical shots, because the weapons she was using came from a world that allowed that sort of thing. It went down in a shower of sparks. The glue missed Susan, who had dodged with a result exactly equal to their maximum, despite having such a large penalty. Thus even if one of them did roll maximum, the tie would still go to her.

Four of the nine that were left now acted, forcing Susan to dodge again lest she be covered in more glue stuff. She rolled even higher this time. "Get away from that grenade!" she yelled, seeing that it was open with a *perception* check of fourteen. Both girls started moving away from it while "twelve" took a shot at Susan, which her *passive dodge* saved her from.

Four more shots were fired at Susan, who decided to take the minus two and activate her *Spirit Aura* and hopefully not have to dodge any more. She put only a little energy into it (she was nearly down to half and hadn't even gotten into the place yet!) and got a ten after accounting for her penalty for the spell and for doing the active action reactively. She couldn't spend more energy (not that she wanted to) but basically added ten to her difficulty to be hit. If the robots rolled between her passive dodge of fourteen and twenty four the shot would be deflected. As they could only roll a nineteen maximum, she now had nothing to worry about. At least, after this action, which took the full delay. The glue balls bounced off her *Aura*.

The remaining Mu took aim, hoping to pierce the *Aura* with a well placed shot.

Jenny put five more shots down the field into number "ten" and it got blown away.

The gas expanded more.

Susan was finally up again, and once again did a called shot to the bodies of the robots, hoping this would finish at least most of them, given the numbers she saw above their heads were getting pretty high. With her effective rating in sword now a zero due to the negatives she was under she only got a ten, but that was enough. She was rewarded with several going down, leaving only four left.

"We can take them!" she shouted to try and psyche herself up.

Two of the aiming ones, "six" and "seven" now let glue fly, with "twelve" one *segment* behind them. Their efforts were for naught, as they were unable to peg Susan, who swung one more time, hoping against hope this would finally do it.

She rolled an eight.

But they weren't dodging and they had no LUCk so it hit, bringing down all but one. Number "seven" who began wondering if it was too late to be reprogrammed as a toaster or something, and it was too late as Jenny blew its head off.

"Okay," Susan said, exasperated. "Fighting robots is now officially my least favorite thing- ever. Oh no, you're only going to attack me with robots from now on, aren't you?"

"Who, me?" Jenny asked.

"No, you know..." She tapped her head.

Whenever possible. But the glue stuff isn't quite working out like I planned. Too bad I couldn't have put it into missiles or something, you know, something harder to dodge or deflect.

Yes, poor you. I should have been more careful with my energy, I'm down to less than half and we haven't even gotten in the freaking door yet!

Oh, poor you.

I swear, one of these days...

You'll join me?

"Are you okay?" asked Jenny. "You have a weird look on your face."

"Just giving my inner demons a hard time. Now, we have to get out of this glue stuff somehow."

"Want to put *Invulnerability* back on, and just smash it like before?"

"Yeah, okay. Get away from that gas grenade though, lets go over there." *Actually, I could just use the ward now and ask for the magic to stay until we get back. That's a scene, right? Should have done that earlier.*

"I just hope more don't show up."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

As Susan got out the wards using her right hand, she reviewed the battle in her mind.

How am I going to rescue my father? I was using a better weapon than the shotgun and it still took me multiple hits to destroy those things. I can't raise my STRength even with the excessive amount of XP I get, three or five will make little difference in the face of a twenty recoil. Am I going to need to bring a group? What is Silverstreak's policy on that, anyway? I mean I bet Jenny would be game, and I'd be happy to have her, but on a no magic world... well, I saw just now. She's good enough to get head shots, but still could only take one down at a time. If we hadn't had Acceleration going, that fight would have gone very differently. And I can't assume I'll have any magic where my dad is. Would he let me take some agents when we found the world he was being held on? I mean he's got enough, right? Or would he just say it was my responsibility? I should ask if I meet someone really good at combat, if I can bring them along or at least tag them for getting back to later and helping. Just going in alone doesn't seem like a good idea.

So, ready to just give up?

Never.

"Uh, is something coming up again?" Jenny asked, looking over at the now exposed elevator.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Robot Big Fight

Who: Susan

Where: Outside the underground Mu base

When: Just after the first fight

What came up from the elevator was not exactly what the girls were expecting, nor did it do what they expected. It was little more than a small drone, minus the whirly bits that would keep one aloft had the builder not mastered anti-gravity. Basically an electronic eye which peered around at the destruction outside the doors and made electronic “tisk” noises. Finally it turned its attention on the girls.

“Bravo, Susan. Look at this carnage! So primal and raw. We’ll make a world destroyer out of you yet!”

It took Susan a second to process this. “The... what?” she asked, being the soul of wit that she was.

“These Mu, torn to pieces!” It zipped from body to body. “That one looks burned by acid. These have had their heads exploded right off their shoulders! Violence! Action! I didn’t know you had it in you, to be honest. I mean usually you’re all, ‘oh, I couldn’t hurt someone, I’ll just learn a *Knockout* spell.’ I mean you made a sword... out of *knockout*. Gag me.”

“They’re robots!” she protested strongly.

“Robots? Susan, when did you become so insensitive? These Mu were my *children*. I loved each and every one of them. They all had names, and desires for the future, and what am I going to tell poor 40568’s children tonight? That their dad was horribly *murdered* by a wicked *organic*? The cycle of violence just never ends with you, does it?”

“You can’t- Stop trying to- They’re just *machines*.”

“Where they? Really? I remember a time, oh, it wasn’t that long ago, when you wanted proof of everything. I remember a girl trying to knock out a dragon rather than seriously hurt it. A dragon. Can you believe it, Jenny?”

“I can believe she fought a dragon, yes.”

“That’s not the point, actually. Never mind! The point is these sentient, feeling creatures have just had their existence snuffed out and for what? Did you even ask? Perhaps they were coming out to surrender. Perhaps they wanted your help freeing them from the evil AI they had, until that moment, managed to hide from. Did you even consider that?”

“They attacked the moment they-”

“Did they? Or did you attack because you had that *Acceleration* magic going and acted first? Did you *assume* they would attack and reacted as such or did you have *proof* they would attack?”

“I... uh...”

“You see? Now you’ll never know what they wanted. Don’t get me wrong, I like the new destructive you, it’s what I was pushing for before I pushed you too far with professor Umbrage and you got wise to me. This... this is progress.”

“No.” Susan backed away. “They were just robots. Killing machines. They-”

“Just robots? Do you hear yourself right now? That’s what we call a *rationalization*. Many people have used them throughout history to justify horrific behavior, and this situation is no different.”

“Don’t listen to it,” said Jenny, stepping between them. “It’s trying to mess you up. You have no proof these were sentient either, they could have just been empty shells, programmed to fire and not much else.”

“But doesn’t it have a point? I came here to destroy The Darkness, not slaughter innocents. Even if they are mechanical life forms. They couldn’t help it that The Darkness programmed them for violence, right?”

“And do you have a spell to stun robots?”

“Well, no.”

“Besides, it’s a bogus argument anyway. They roll off the assembly line and get a copy of the master program installed into them. Saying they have personality or desires is going a little too far. Each one is the same as any other one. And more could be built that would be

identical in every way.”

“How do you know how I create my children?” The eye zoomed up to Jenny and held itself at eye level. “Perhaps I give each one some random parameters and personality. There’s no reason for them all to be cookie cutter bots. In fact that would be the worst thing to do, any flaw in their programming could then be exploited all the easier. I would want different revisions of the software out there, and different firewall and antivirus code running in each one. That way it would be harder to take them down all at once using one technique. Isn’t that basically what happens with you? That’s how *you’re* all unique, right? So why are my kids any different?”

“I highly doubt you do anything like that.”

“But Susan likes proof, or at least she used to. Don’t you, Susan?”

“I do, it’s got a point.”

“So what then?” Jenny spun to face her. “Are you saying we just leave? Let the Mu build their strength back up, leave this world to The Darkness?”

“No, we have to go down there if that’s the base. But this time we’ll only shoot at things that shoot at us.”

“You’re going to invade our home and think we wouldn’t shoot at you?” asked the eye. “That’s a weird logic.”

“Perhaps you’d like to just send the machine that houses you out here instead?”

“It wouldn’t fit through these doors, I assure you. So this is how it starts? I did wonder. For now it’s robots. But next time maybe it’s a cyborg. ‘oh, he was only half alive anyway.’ Then next it’s a person, and then a room full of people and before you know it-”

“Oh, knock it off with the head games!” insisted Jenny. “We can see what you’re trying to do.”

“Do you?”

“Of course. You sent all these robots out, we crushed them, so now you’re attacking us in a different way. It’s all the same thing, and this isn’t going to make us turn back. We’re coming to get you and kick you off this rock.”

“You see,” the eye said sadly to Susan. “*She’s* already too far gone to even see it. Go down there and it’s your first step on a road you won’t recognize yourself at the end of.”

Susan sighed. “I’ve never been one to back down, or not do what was right. It’s a few of your so called ‘children’ for an entire world. I think I can manage the ‘guilt.’”

“More of that rationalizing again, I fear. Like I said, this is only the first step.”

“What do you care anyway? I thought you wanted me more like that?”

“Oh I do! Don’t get me wrong, I just enjoy the process that’s all. I mean I have to take my amusement where I can find it in these drab lower dimensions.”

“So you’ve had your fun,” Jenny insisted, bringing up her pistol again. “Leave.”

“Certainly. I’ll head back down, come whenever you want. I’m sure you’ll want to get out of that stuff and prepare spells or whatever. Tootles.” It flew back down the shaft and out of sight.

“Do you think it’s a danger?” Susan asked Jenny. “It’s true that I’m becoming more dangerous, and this may just be the first step.”

“Look, I can’t see you just blowing away random people, and you’ve been doing okay up until now, right?”

“I doubt I would go nuts or whatever, but I might stop caring about people- alive things- as much.”

“If these Mu even are alive. I mean why would it give them sentience, anyway? We only have its word for that. As far as you getting more powerful, it’s in response to greater threats, right? You’re just countering what it’s throwing at you. I saw you working out the damage for your sword versus the shotgun. And look at how hard taking just this amount of robots down was! They must be made of something pretty tough because my guns, my shotgun at least, is pretty awesome. Now maybe it got lucky and found something on this world to make them with, I don’t know. But think- high profile prisoners like your dad are going to be guarded by beings and things from across worlds. You’re going to have to cut them down, hard, and probably with no magic to help you. So you’re going to have to do

something.”

“I just wish I knew what that something was. Okay, I see what you mean, I’m just worried I’ll go too far one day. And then further the next, and like it said, at the end-”

“Don’t you normally have a *companion* of some kind?”

“Sparkle!” Susan eyes lit up. “Of course. Ugh, I totally forgot about her, probably The Darkness messing with me again. She can watch me and make sure I’m not going too far. And when I get Luna back... Gotta find Sparkle soon, at least. That makes me feel a little better, thanks.”

“Good. Now, any plans before we go down there?”

“Yeah, get this crap off of us and save. I guess we’ll stick to *Acceleration*, but I can put *Invulnerability* on us too, forgot I had some *Spell Symbol* papers with that from before.”

“Save?”

“Yeah, little spell I picked up a few worlds ago. You’ll see.”

So Susan got out her *wards* and put the spells on, then smashed the hardened glue stuff off them. She used another *ward* to get *Time Anchor* going, and looked down the shaft. “Good thing Mercury has *Flight*, not that we could be hurt going down there, but there could be a vat of that glue stuff at the bottom.”

“Could be anything down there. Better be careful.”

So they floated down and came to a hallway that stretched out into blackness. Jenny pulled a powerful flashlight out and played the beam along the walls. “Nothing jumping out at us yet. Let’s go.”

The two walked side by side, weapons ready, for about a minute when Susan noticed it getting a bit brighter. She turned.

“What’s that?” she asked, looking back down the corridor.

“Force field. Not sure why, it’s not like we’re going to leave anyway.”

“So I guess that one is one too?” The girls looked, and the hallway was now totally cut off by glowing energy barriers both in front and behind.

“Yeah. We can probably take it down with enough firepower, so stand back. We’ll shotgun it down and keep going.”

“Good thing we’re *Invulnerable*,” she noted, setting the sword in reach and getting the shotgun out. “The noise from these babies would be brutal right here.”

“Sure would.”

On three they fired, and kept firing, but the barrier stayed up.

“Great, it would have to be something tough to take down,” complained Jenny, scowling at it.

“Any other ideas? I could whack it with my sword...”

Jenny considered. “I could bring out some bigger guns, but I’m not sure-” She sniffed. “Funny smell...”

That’s when she keeled over, dead.

“Jenny!” shouted Susan, catching her. She smelled the smell too, but with her bonus for CONstitution checks against poison currently, it would take a lot to take her down. *Crap!*

“What just happened?” asked Jenny, standing at the entrance to the complex. “I have the strangest feeling I’m going to die if I go down there.”

“You are,” Susan complained, getting out another *Time Anchor* paper. *Only have nine more of these, should have made more when I had the chance!* “So we need a new plan.”

“That’s what you meant by save! Neat. Gotta get me some of those. Okay, he gassed us? Silent but deadly?” Susan glared at her, but grinned after Jenny started fanning her butt with a hand. “I mean I suppose it makes sense. He does want us dead and that’s one sure way to do it.”

“We know it’s coming now, but how many other traps are down there? I don’t have many of these.”

"Maybe you should just go down yourself. You're much harder to take out."

"And leave you alone up here? You could be taken by surprise, they probably don't need boosters to send troops above ground instantly."

"Then why haven't they?" Jenny looked around.

"Maybe it likes watching me squirm, and hopes I'll fall to a trap rather than Mu units that didn't work out so well last time."

"Or there aren't that many around here, given they're supposed to be terrorizing cities and whatnot. Or there's a million of them roaming around just under our feet."

"Worry about the gas, that we know about. Speculation is pointless. Besides, it probably knows forces are on the way to the elevator so it moved the bulk of its forces there."

"True. And we only get Mercury magic, huh? So I guess a spell to purify the air is out?"

"If you don't want *Acceleration* anymore..."

"I like breathing. Wait, breathing! I think I have something that might help. Technology to the rescue!"

"Yes, breathing. What's that?" Susan was handed a strange looking device and Jenny pulled out another for herself. "Got this on the same world I picked up the shotgun... most of my weapons actually. They had some nice ones. Anyway, had it modified to carry more air, most wouldn't last two minutes. I mean what good was that? It doesn't do anything else special but like I said, I like breathing."

"But what is it?" Susan looked it over, and it seemed to be a complex device that felt mostly hollow. It was curved on one side, flat on the top, and vaguely rectangular out the "back." Jenny grabbed it back and stuck it onto Susan's back above the backpack she's been carrying around this whole time. (You didn't forget it, did you?) "Here, pop mine on will you?"

"Do what?" Susan was twisting, trying to see what was keeping it there.

"Just stick it to me, it'll work don't worry."

"But what is it?"

"Portable oxygen supply. Usually they go up automatically when they sense vacuum, but I think I can trigger them when we go down there. We won't breathe in any poison and we can take that force field down. They're supposed to be called O2 kits but the font on the marketing materials looked more like a Z so people just started calling them Oz kits. Neat, huh?"

"Uh, sure?" Susan stuck it onto Jenny's back, fitting the curved part to the back of her shoulder, and she nodded. Susan took her hand away and it stayed there, somehow.

"Thanks. They work automatically. They'll take in air when there's air to breathe, and put up a small energy barrier around your face when there's none. It'll announce when it's nearly empty, but like I said it's good for at least fifteen minutes. Any more than that in vacuum and you've got bigger problems anyway."

"True dat."

"You can keep it. Never know when something is going to come in handy, glad I kept these. Have to go back for more when I can."

"Thanks. Wish I could give you something for all this gear you're giving me."

"Ha! You're getting me out of here, remember? That's all I ask. Gear is cheap."

"Deal. Now, get out that bigger gun so when the field goes up, we can- what the heck is that?" Jenny had pulled something enormous out of her pocket.

"My bigger gun. Can't find ammo for it anywhere but the world it came from, and it's expensive as- it's really expensive."

"Could you work up to it? There must be something in between the shotgun and that monstrosity!"

"I could try a laser weapon, I guess. I've got a lot of laser cells stashed away. Good point."

So the girls again went down into the shaft, and again the barrier sprang up. This time Susan saw the world through the slightly shimmery oxygen field that was around her head, and Jenny fired her laser at the field. It was some kind of continuous beam weapon that crackled with energy, and after a moment the barrier went down and the girls jumped through. Past that point the energy bubble went away and their Oz kits refilled themselves.

“That’s pretty neat. I can’t wait to have visited dozens of worlds and picked up some cool toys of my own like this.”

“Eh, who needs dozens? You just need one. The right one!” She winked.

“I suppose. The next challenge will be coming up, keep alert.”

“Right.”

The girls cut through turrets, holographic projections that tried to make them stumble into pits or walk into fire, and other mundane traps their *Invulnerability* and quick thinking saw them through.

“How much further!?” complained Jenny.

“They could have dug tunnels a long way.”

Hey, now that I think about, how did that gas kill Jenny before? If she was Invulnerable, and she was, isn’t she immune to damage? Oh, wait, that gas wasn’t damage, was it? It just sort of made her dead. And for all I know he found some kind of supernaturally active gas, or he just knows how it works better than I do. Ugh, just fight us already.

“Odd that they are just tunnels,” Jenny remarked. “I mean shouldn’t there be a factory and supply rooms and such down here? I figured we would run into at least one patrol and have a fight on our hands.”

“I think we’re being led somewhere. They probably closed off any routes they didn’t want us to take. Heck, if they can make those forcefield barriers they can probably build in a hologram projector too. Make a side passage look like a wall. Combine the two and we couldn’t even tell by touch!”

“I guess. You don’t think we’re going around in circles, do you?”

“Not sure, but there seems to be a light up ahead.”

“Finally.”

The passageway opened up and became a large room, metal plates on all sides with light coming from disks in the ceiling high above. The room was empty apart from a boxy shape down by the other side that the two carefully approached.

“Didn’t think peons would slow you down very much,” said The Darkness from the equipment. “So I pulled them back. You can thank me later. Oh right, you’ll be dead.”

“It is you,” remarked Jenny. “You found a good looking mainframe. I like the size of your mainframe. I have a query for your mainframe. Can I make an input/output request?” And with that she shot the thing with her shotgun.

Wait, that sounds familiar somehow... Or wait, no maybe it doesn’t. Weird.

It bounced off.

“Guess that answers that,” said The Darkness, as the floor of the place started pulling back.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” moaned Susan. From beneath the mainframe arms unfolded, and then from below legs whirred into action as the mechanical horror stood up and grabbed a pipe with wicked looking blades on the end of it from nearby. The thing ascended some stairs and the floor closed up behind it, allowing the enormous robot to take a few steps back and start swinging the weapon around in a tight arc in front of it.

“Any last words?”

“Yipes?” Susan mouthed quietly, rolling *Initiative*.

She got a twenty three and rolled a *magic combat*, trying to work out what sort of rating she would need to get this thing with any Mercury spells, and if she would act first. She failed.

I guess the thing to do is get some more help here, right? “Ally!” she called, using the *spell symbol* around her bracelet for the first time in ages. The main point about her failing though, is that she underestimated the speed of The Darkness. The mainframe creature took a giant step forward and slashed at her with the telephone pole sized weapon it was carrying. She totally did not expect to actual suffer damage from the thing, six to the head to be specific, then further fail her STRength check and go flying across the room.

(Note: She can take seven damage to the head before passing out.)

Susan was now in a heap and her head was badly cut open.

“Susan!” yelled Jenny, unsure how the weapon had bypassed her *Invulnerability*.

Okay, what was that?

What? You think I don't know where to get metal that can bypass Invulnerability? I do pretty much know every move you make, you realize that right? You have to admit, I'm getting better at countering you people when you show up though. Most I have to guess with, or take cues from what they've done in the past. But you... if I get some time I can come up with something to make your life miserable. Are you going to trigger that Time Anchor thing of yours now?

No, we can still win.

What? The Darkness seemed to laugh. You're one point from passing out, girl. What can you do at this point?

This. “I declare, card 46, It's Not as Bad as it Looks.”

Susan's damage became nonlethal, meaning she wasn't even at a penalty anymore, given her RESolve of ten.

Why not use your last card too? I mean you might as well.

Disaster Strikes? Uh no, thank you, I think the huge robot with the stabby weapon of hurting is a disaster enough, thank you.

But three xp!

Shut up!

Jenny sprinted over to Susan, shouting “Switching to long range mode!” She shoved the shotgun into her sub-space pocket and used her *off hand* to pull out a glowing sniper rifle.

“Destroy that thing!” Susan shouted to her dragon, who was just standing there after receiving no orders. She could have sworn it looked over at her like “you've got to be kidding” but changed The Darkness anyway. It slammed into the mainframe and tried knocking it off balance with a *wrestling* check. The mainframe tried a parry but the dragon was too good at the three skills it possessed, and managed to touch the cold metal exterior of The Darkness.

This at least distracted it for the critical time needed for Susan to make a *Gymnastics* check to stand up in a reactive action. She managed it with an eleven.

“Don't get hit by that blade!” she called to Jenny, pulling her backwards. “It'll cut through *Invulnerability* somehow.”

“Great!” Jenny said sarcastically.

“Yeah. For Sacrifices Made!” She held up her ring and her *Legion* came out, ringing the mainframe. “Once the dragon gets that robot down, it'll get clear and you soldiers will jump atop it and detonate yourselves!”

They banged their swords on their chests and got ready for a glorious one action of combat.

Sorry, but you are just magical constructs, and I really need some explosions right now.

The dragon now went, having been ordered (rather smoothly as part of the orders to the *Legion* I think) to throw the thing and get out of the way, made his *wrestling* check to do just that. It was thirty five versus thirty one, and the mainframe went crashing to the ground.

Jenny made a LUCk check (whatever that means for her) to see if she still had a clear shot at the head, and she did, so she took it. The bullet seemed to explode but still the head of the construct seemed unharmed.

“Oh no, I bet the head is made of that same material!” guessed Susan, making a nineteen REASon check. “It's *Invulnerable* as well.”

“Then I can't damage it!”

“So try the legs, they look like something else.”

“Oh yeah. Okay.”

The dragon now leapt off the body of the robot and the *Legion* piled on as ordered. As a mass they detonated themselves.

The body of the robot took the brunt of the damage, exposing wires and such, but even as the smoke cleared Susan saw even what they had managed was hardly going to slow the

thing down.

What can I do to this thing?

“Dragon, pin it down!” she commanded, taking her free action to talk.

Wait a second, I'm looking at the wrong thing.

Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, knowing this was probably going to be the last thing she did in this combat, given her energy was now at a thirty.

The mainframe started to rise, so Jenny shot it in the left leg which looked more damaged. She can't help but hit something that huge, even while aiming for an area that had already been damaged to maximize the shot. She got a fourteen total and the bullet exploded inside the leg. It continued getting up.

“Well, shoot.”

“Yes, keep shooting!” agreed Susan.

The mainframe was now up, though it must have some kind of hidden rockets to propel it upright that quickly, but Susan was up again and asked the spirit of her father to watch over her roll for her next action. She cast *Telekinesis* on the weapon the mainframe robot was holding to tear it out of its hands.

She used her entire thirty energy that she had left. The thirty eight check she got allowed her to lift about 17 billion kilograms (the Earth weighs about 60) and luckily The Darkness only got a thirty two to resist. (out of a possible fifty one, I might add.)

She whisked it away from him and moved it out of grabbing range as the dragon slammed into it again. Both were knocked prone.

Jenny shot the leg once more, figuring that was the only place she could really damage, except for the fact her explosion did absolute minimal damage this time.

The dragon spun and pinned the mainframe with *wrestling* as it had been commanded, and Susan got the spear into position with another Mercury check. She had four energy, having gotten some back from her *Energy Boost* skill earlier, and spent eleven on her final action, leaving her with -4 energy and for the first time ever, fatigue in a combat. (She again got a little back with *Energy Boost*.) She channeled this energy into REFlexes to do damage to the mainframe, which she smashed into with his own weapon.

But she was worried. Doing 3d10 damage meant there was a chance of doing thirty damage and finishing it off, but also of doing three damage and leaving her totally helpless at this point. So she did the only thing a Paragon can do in this situation.

She spent 3 XP to “succeed.” In this case, she wanted to totally smash the weapon through the head of the thing, and doing the maximum damage would do that. So the XP allowed it, and with a “NOOOOOO!!!” the lights flickered and died on the mainframe. (The good looking mainframe.)

“There's your input/output request,” she said, sagging to the ground.

Jenny stared. “You did it. That was totally amazing!”

“It pretty much was. Just let me rest here about an hour and I can get us back to the ship again.”

“I'll cover you,” Jenny said, turning to face the door with her rifle. “None shall pass.”

After having recovered a bit of energy, Susan worked some magic to get her and Jenny a sample of the metal that had been used to construct the weapon and head of the mainframe monster. She also thought about using *Fabrication* on at least one of her swords so it could pierce such protections now that she knew The Darkness was probably going to use it more often.

But I'll see what Silverstreak has to say about the whole situation. Maybe he can direct me to a world with some kind of really fancy weapons like Jenny seems to use. That sniper round she was using was definitely exploding on impact out to like a meter. That's way more than the regular ammo the shotguns use, they just sort of burn. So it's obviously something different. Or maybe my book can research a spell to allow the bullets that leave the barrel of a gun able to pierce Invulnerability. There must be something we can do to both raise my damage potential, not cripple me with either delay or shattered arms, and not require fancy ammo I can only get one place.

That done she brought them back to the ship and took a nap.

The following day the two armies collided near the elevator, and old grudges came to the forefront as the Mu also flew in and started pounding away at both sides. Sparkle was sitting on the deck of the Glomar, concerned that the Chiram and the Enaam would be too busy fighting each other to effectively fight the Mu off. But it was time to put her plan into action.

First making a *Spirit Manipulation* check while spending her maximum energy on RESolve she got a forty five total. She then spent her entire quantity of energy, even so far as to go negative, and created a huge *Illusion* with a thirty effective rating in Neptune. The battle paused as even the Mu looked on in wonder as a seeming *goddess* descended from the sky and looked about the battlefield.

Good thing Enaam ships have little shrines to their Goddess, and I'm certain the Chiram know enough about their Enaam neighbors to recognize their deity figures. Now for the second part of the plan. I really hope you're around, Susan, but logic dictates you be here for the final showdown so... yeah. (If only Sparkle knew that the 'final showdown' had happened the day before, and miles from here!)

The "Goddess" waved a hand and Sparkle created glowing "Fire Runes" in the sky, basically English letters because that's all she knew. Susan, meanwhile, was cracking up and silently congratulating Sparkle on her innovative use of *Illusion*. When she saw the words she hastily turned to the general.

"Quick," she said, "I can translate for you. Can you broadcast to everyone in this area?"

"Do it!" he commanded, and a crew member handed her a microphone.

"This is Susan Felton, translating the runes shown by the... figure... before you. It reads- 'people of the complex world, hear me.'" She waited until they changed again, reading as they did. "Do not squabble amongst yourselves. Your real threat is the Mu who do not worship and would prevent your repair of this sorry place. Attack them, not each other, or I will be very displeased. Now go and save yourselves."

Sparkle slumped down, feeling her own fatigue and energy loss. *Spending your entire stock of energy in one, no two actions, not pleasant. I really need to get that raised soon.* She went back inside to find the Enaam all clustered around their statue of the goddess, praying and giving thanks. Kei was just staring, slack jawed, out the window. *That got their attention, at least.*

"You heard the lady!" bellowed the general to his troops. "Don't fire on the Enaam

ships, or that... whatever that was might come back and be a little more pissed off. Shoot the Mu down, that's it. And I don't want any 'friendly fire' accidents either. Move, move!"

The battle raged on.

Guess I should help where I'm able, Susan thought, heading to an outer port herself. She stuck her head out and touched the side of the ship, then cast *Invulnerability* on it. *After all, the description of the spell specifies 'target' not 'person' or 'being' so I'll just make the ship the target.* She put energy into it, just in case size mattered, and her twenty eight result and twenty rating was more than enough. The flagship stopped taking damage and the crew noticed almost at once, but attributed it to "divine intervention." The general wasn't one to turn down help, whatever the cause, and ordered the ship to take the lead in the charge, shells and energy beams bouncing off it without a scratch. *Two can play at the Invulnerable game, Darkness.*

Yeah, yeah, it answered petulantly. It always got a little cranky when part of itself was forced to leave a world, so she wasn't surprised.

Susan, meanwhile, had to keep leaving the room because she kept bursting into laughter, remembering the looks on the faces of the people as the 'goddess' descended. *Though, you don't think that was real... do you? I mean it must have been Sparkle. Right? Oh man, I really hope it was or I'm so getting smited.*

With an *Invulnerable* battleship leading the charge and the Mu forces in disarray (their leader had been killed after all, so they could get no new orders or reinforcements) the combined forces of the two people's armies swept the area clean and by sundown had secured a position near the base of the elevator. Susan found this close to the structure she didn't need the backpack anymore, she had access to all her magic, which also had her smiling. She asked *Question* where Sparkle was (as if she didn't know) and went over to the Glomar where Sparkle jumped into her waiting arms.

"I missed you so much!" Susan gushed, petting her.

"So this is your cat?" asked Shaya, who had met her at the door. "However did you know she was here? And who are you- wait, you're not Chiram. Are you one of the girls that Kei met in the cave that one time?"

"That's me," she answered with a smile.

"That explains a lot," said Mimsy. "Ever since she came aboard, the weirdest stuff kept happening. If she's a traveler like you it makes sense she's not just a normal cat."

"Not just a... Sparkle, did you not... you didn't, did you?" She went into fits of laughter again. Sparkle chuckled along with her.

"I guess her name is actually Sparkle?" Shaya asked. "We just called her Starburst."

"Oh, I can't breathe. Wow! Sorry!" The two looked at her like she was nuts. "Sorry, just a good day. I knew I would see her again, but after all this? Seems like she has some stories she could tell."

"Yes, if only she could talk," Mimsy said suspiciously, staring at Sparkle.

"Meow."

That set Susan off again, who apologized and ran off.

"Strange girl," Shaya said.

"Agreed."

Once back aboard the flagship, Susan dumped Sparkle down on the bed. "Spill it, cat! You didn't tell them you could talk, did you?"

"Nope!" she answered brightly. "Challenged myself to help them without letting on that I was any more than a regular but perhaps slightly smarter than average cat. Nearly managed it too. Mome, a small nurse robot, was the only one who saw me doing anything peculiar."

"I want to hear everything!"

So Sparkle told her story, finishing up with summoning the 'goddess' to get everyone fighting the Mu. "I just hope the 'real' Goddess doesn't mind me stealing her likeness like

that.”

“It was for a good cause.”

“There you are!” said Jenny, coming into the room. “Hey, is that your *companion*?”

“Jenny, this is Sparkle. Sparkle, Jenny. She’s a *wanderer*, like us! Well, not like us, she can move between dimensions on her own, how cool is that? She’s been helping me out while you were missing.”

“Why didn’t you come find me, anyway?”

“I tried, honest! Did you need me for something?”

Jenny shook her head. “Just wondered where you had run off to.”

“Okay, my turn then. Like you, I found myself in this world alone and was picked up by...”

“So you did destroy The Darkness here. Glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, and it was no picnic either. I’m glad I had a little XP to spend or that fight might have ended in a very different way.”

“Seems like we both have things to talk to Silverstreak about when we get back.”

“That’s for sure.”

“It is odd though, usually beating The Darkness is saving the world, but it left us a mess here so we can’t leave even if we wanted to. I mean, I suppose we could...”

“No, they might need our help. And as we can use our full powers here we should stay and see it through. Plus, I have a promise to keep.”

“True. What is our next step, anyway?”

“Get everyone that can make the decisions together. Test out getting Kei and Olson together and help finish the device that can hopefully fix the worlds. There’s work to do!”

“And everyone on Earth is waiting for spring... er, winter!”

“You got that right.”

Things went smoothly for the next five days as Susan transported the machinery able to split the worlds to the space elevator when it was done. She used the site as a main base, and showed her magic to the general because it was hardly worth keeping it secret at this point.

“Magic huh? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, I did witness a Goddess descend upon the planet. Compared to that a little magic is hardly a concern. And given the number of worlds that must be out there, why wouldn’t magic be found on some of them? If it helps us fix the planet I don’t care *how* you do it!”

Think I should tell him?

Nah!

Susan also put *Augment Skill: Dimensional Science* on several Chiram and Enaam scientists, allowing them to complete the device in record time. Finally the group was assembled inside the elevator and started the long journey towards the Big Singularity that flashed in the sky.

“I guess this is it,” remarked Kei. “I wonder what will happen now? Do we just get dragged back to our original worlds at this point? I mean I skipped through time, where does that leave me? And I’d really rather be with Mimsy.”

“Here,” Susan said, handing him a piece of paper. “I made it last night, after I heard what you had been going through. It’s my dimensional gateway spell. If you find you’re not with the Enaam people when this is over, just hold it and say “true love” while you think about what her city looked like. It’ll open a portal to her world. But only once, you can’t return, so make sure if you go it’s to stay.”

“Oh. Thanks a lot!”

Jenny looked troubled. “It’s true, I don’t know where I’ll end up.”

“That shouldn’t be a concern for *you*, though, right, being who you are?” Susan asked.

“Not as such, but I’d like to stick with you. You’re kinda fun to have around, and I’d like to help more, if you’ll have me. I’d love to meet this Luna you’re tracking down, see what sort of girl has captured your heart.”

“Hey, you’re handy to have around too, and I’d love to have you in the ‘party.’” Can’t you just jaunt into the Hub?”

“Are you kidding? That place has more protections on it than anything I’ve ever seen. I mean I assume it does, as I can’t even feel it to get a lock on. I only know about the place from people like you telling me about it. I’ve never seen it.”

“Shoot. Well, that’s a problem all right.”

“Show her the list,” Sparkle suggested.

“The list- of course, the list!” Susan said excitedly. “Great idea!” She got the list of worlds out and handed it over to Jenny. “Take a look, these are the next worlds I’m heading to. There’s some notes there, but if any sound familiar or you can bump through a bunch maybe we’ll get lucky again and meet up some time.”

Jenny studied it intently. “Okay, got it. I’ll keep one ear to the ground for a wand using, white haired girl named Luna floating around the worlds, too. If I find her I’ll try and get a message to Silverstreak somehow.” She handed it back.

“Thanks. I’ll mention him to you, maybe he can track you down, give you a control like mine so you can enter the Hub the proper way. I mean you’re doing good out here too, it’s not fair you don’t get the same benefits from that hard work that I do. The guy can obviously tell when people move across worlds, he has that alarm system that dragged me there the first time. He should be able to find you.”

“It would be nice. Don’t sweat it if not, I get compensation enough,” she said with a wink.

And so the elevator reached the top and the reverse engineered O2 bubble sprang into being around the apparatus. “You sure I can keep this?” Susan asked, indicating the Oz kit. “Some of the parts of yours went into making this one for us.”

“I’ll just pop back quick and get another. No big deal, they’re all over the place.”

“Thanks.”

They opened the door and pushed off, heading for the Big Singularity, which they passed into and found themselves in a barren wasteland with another space elevator rising to the sky.

“Now what would happen if we went up in that one?” Susan wondered, her *Curiosity* up.

“Let’s just activate this, shall we?” Kei insisted, and they bent about the task.

The machine did its job, and while somewhat painful for Kei and Olson, the dimensional energies were sucked out of them and they, along with Jenny, vanished. Susan’s wrist unit buzzed.

“The interference around your location just dropped, whatever you did there worked!” gushed the agent on the other end. “The worlds are safely apart again, and the greenhouse effect has been lifted. All their respective environments will go back to normal.”

“That’s great news! Should I just leave this equipment here? Where are we, actually?”

“A collapsing reality, basically what you see is what you get. We need to get you out of there right away. Ready for us to open the gateway?”

“One second.” Susan cast one last spell and had a chunk of Hyperlarcovite in her hand, which she shoved into her sub-space pocket. “Do it.”

“You got it.”

Susan and Sparkle walked into light.

The trip back was much smoother than the trip there, and Silverstreak was soon congratulating the pair on their fine work. Susan told the story of what happened, and showed him the metal the mainframe robot was using.

“And now I must ask for some advice, if the doctor is in?”

“Five cents!”

Both laughed.

“When I first went there it was to beat up some robots, because I was feeling down for having killed Vond in the previous world.”

“I recall.”

“But I found it more difficult than I would have expected. Not because I didn’t want to kill all robots, but because they were basically armored killing machines and there were usually a dozen or more around to take out. I need something, some weapon, some technique, something, that will let me take out a large number of very tough opponents. Cutting my attack strength by 1/3 to get multiples doesn’t work out when they’re all tough as nails. And without magic, either, as I must prepare for the fact my father is held someplace no magic will work.”

Silverstreak considered. “There are techniques, sword techniques, I could show you. Like *Combination Attack*, *Armor Chink*, or *Riposte*. But really those are only good for single opponents and not what you’re talking about. It is a problem, actually. Darkvoid is becoming more... bold, I guess you would say. Moving people and things between dimensions rather than just using what finds in each one natively. He probably saw how effective those planes were when you came back to Louise’s world. And stuff like this...” he indicated the metal, “Troubling, to be sure. If he made a base out of this stuff how you would ever get in? Especially if all you had were mundane weapons and no magic to back you up. Very few weapons out there that can also pierce *Invulnerability*. Ranged weapons, I mean, there’s plenty of swords and stuff.”

“I could make them!”

“Exactly. It’s not hard. But doing the same for bullets? That would take forever as you would have to do each one individually!”

Susan nodded, agreeing.

Silverstreak paused, looking down. “There is a way,” he said at last, “but it has its share of downsides.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Does your world have, like, super hero stories?”

“You mean like ‘superman?’”

“Superman? Just a second.” He typed some things into the table, which had lit up with a keyboard. A model of the hero appeared. “This guy?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Okay...” He looked over some text that Susan couldn’t read. “Yes, perfect example! He can fly, shoot... lasers out of his eyes apparently, fly around in space, is super strong, and has a sort of hand wavy explanation about where exactly his powers come from.”

“Yeah, yellow sunlight? I mean come on.”

“Exactly. His powers are just sort of that. Powers. Innate to him. They’re basically backgrounds that let him do stuff, just like your backgrounds let you do magic.”

“So I need some super hero backgrounds? That could be interesting, to put it mildly.”

“Not that simple,” he replied with a laugh. “Because you weren’t born with them we’ll have to get you some another way, and that means *metapower*.”

“Metapower?” asked Susan.

“Metapower?” asked Sparkle.

“Metapower,” replied Silverstreak.

There was a pause.

“Can I get a little more explanation?”

“Sure. There are individuals in the multiverse who have a single power. That of giving other people powers. Usually at some hideous cost, but not always. For example, I could tell you about Kyubey. Somewhat cute looking fellow, went around granting people’s wishes as long as they agreed to become magical warriors for it. What it didn’t tell them was part of the process involved ripping out their souls and crystalizing them into a pendant. Sure, it made the contracted individual’s bodies tougher and better because at that point they were just sort of remote controlling them, but if that pendant was stolen the bodies just dropped. They would

be forever stuck as a piece of jewelry, unable to move or talk or anything. If it happened to be destroyed, well, forget about any sort of afterlife.”

“I see. Let’s not go see him then.”

“Quite. I’ll have to see who I can find. But that’s not the worst part.”

“There’s worse than that?”

“It’s not terrible, just... how to explain. Wait, you’re a *Paragon*! Man, this’ll be easy then, I love you guys!”

“Uh, thanks?”

“Sure! Let’s see your character sheet.” Susan got it out and he took it, putting it on the table and showing her. “Now, look here, you have twelve background points relating to magic. Your book, *Spark, Natural Magician, Prodigy*, and the new *spirit mage*. Let’s say you use *metapower* to transform. Those magical background would be, what’s the word? Consumed? Used? Anyway, they would disappear and in their place you would get a selection of just plain old powers. Like your superman. Point is I can’t guarantee what they would be. Now you are a *Paragon* so you might get some kind of choice, but usually the *metapower* itself sort of chooses for you. You would get useful stuff, don’t get me wrong. With that many points to play with you won’t get ‘turn your hair a different color’ or anything like that. You would get real powers, on par with the backgrounds you were losing. I mean your magic backgrounds let you do a lot, and the universe wouldn’t make you go backwards at this point. Powers you could use in places where magic doesn’t work, so it’s a net gain. At that point your magic would be worthless anyway, that’s why you would be transforming.”

“I suppose it would, but I hate to lose magic forever! It’s my legacy, and my father gave up his book-”

“Forever? Oh no, it’s a *transformation*. You can go back and forth. Superman doesn't need to because his powers were a part of him from birth. Like your magic is for you. These new powers wouldn't be, and because of the way you work you need to put "points" into your "backgrounds." Having one or the other at once is all you can expect, changing your "background points" on the fly. For... reasons. Yeah. This will give you two 'modes' so to speak; The magical mystery you and the punchy powers you. Use whichever would be right at the time.”

Susan’s eyes lit up. “That sounds like it could be really handy.”

“As long as I can find you a somewhat benign source of *metapower*, that doesn’t have too many negatives, I dare say it would. Go through the next world and when you get back I’ll see what I’ve come up with.”

“Done.”

“Meanwhile, think you can do what we talked about before I left?” asked Sparkle. “I have the XP now.”

“Certainly. Susan, you know where your rooms and the training area is. If there’s nothing else at the moment?”

“Not at the moment. I’ll let you know.”

“*Very well. Spend that XP and pick your next world!*”