

VR Interactive Game Worlds

Book 2: Worlds Apart

Copyright © 1998-1999 Christopher J. Holz

Contents

VR INTERACTIVE GAME WORLDS 1

BOOK 2: WORLDS APART 1

Contents 2

Chapter 1: Nicola’s ending, and new beginning 3

Chapter 2: Marina celebrates a new age 5

Chapter 3: Sharyn’s new direction in life 7

Chapter 4: The game begins 9

Chapter 5: Sides are formed 13

Chapter 6: Mission impossible 16

Chapter 7: Fortress of doom 17

Chapter 8: The great escape 21

Chapter 9: Agents and players 23

Chapter 10: Spiderman 25

Chapter 11: The Space League 29

Chapter 12: The milk run 31

Chapter 13: Welcome aboard 32

Chapter 14: A real mess of things 34

Chapter 15: Some real action 36

Chapter 16: David and Goliath 38

Chapter 17: Lost in space 41

Chapter 18: Life threatening dilemmas 43

Chapter 19: Parting of friends 45

Chapter 20: The way of things 48

Chapter 21: A new friend 50

Chapter 22: The armoury 52

Chapter 23: Pain and pleasure 54

Chapter 24: Room by room 57

Chapter 25: Hard packed 59

Chapter 26: Packaged but not delivered 61

Chapter 27: You’re under arrest! 63

Chapter 28: More time for play 65

Chapter 29: Returning from the dead 67

Chapter 30: A problem of honour 69

Chapter 31: Tight fit 71

Chapter 32: Sweating it for a while 73

Chapter 33: Truth and acceptance 75

Chapter 34: Psychotic episodes 79

Chapter 35: To Hell and back 84

Chapter 36: Explanation 87

Chapter 1: Nicola's ending, and new beginning

What could she say? She'd been duped by the biggest liar around. Not that she didn't half expect it. She'd spent enough time with plenty of guys now, to know what to expect.

Almost. She never considered that he'd end up been this hacker, trying to make humanity pay for its sins, and then try to make his message best known by blowing up lots of people in a game, and then irradiating whoever was left.

She got the message, but not the one he had sent. She was sick and tired of been played the fool. All the players had been wiped out, and as promised, player files had been restored back to near original condition afterwards. The only variations, were with those directly involved with the hacker. Namely seven people, herself included. Her character never felt the same, when she went back into the game after, to find out what happened to everything.

It didn't feel the same any more. Thanks to him, she'd already had a sneak peek at what was coming ahead in the game, and didn't feel challenged any more. She'd bid her gaming partners, those that she could find, a fond farewell, and thanks for the fun, but it was time to find something with more challenge.

She didn't have any of that at home, as her father was a rich business man. And living Mexico didn't give her the opportunities like other girls her age. She was almost 19, and she saw no girls or boys anywhere near her age, unless they came to fix the electric's or clean the house.

She had gotten used to living in Delaware until her father made her family move to Mexico because of legal problems. He never talked about it in front of her, so she never knew what had happened. So her high school was cut short, and instead of continuing in another school, he had her enrolled on an on-line college, and let her do all of her school work on a computer linked to the States.

So she never saw or talked to any other students. Her father didn't have any problem with her seeing other kids, just that he was just over protective.

It was just as well when she turned 18, that he'd had one of the new VR4 computers sent from a friend in the States just for her.

It was a whole new world for her in VR. She found lots of people she could talk to, and get involved with in many ways.

She soon found though, that when some people found out who her father was, they hassled her. So she started using an old friend's address in Delaware and a different name, so she didn't have any more problems.

More and more she found herself getting more involved with the games and having fun, until recently.

He father had taught her one thing right at least. If it wasn't fun any more, then walk away from it.

Well, she had walked away. And after a few weeks doing nothing but school work, she was desperate enough to go into town herself, and find something new to play.

One of her dad's chauffeurs drove her in, and played escort in the department store. He was in his thirties, but she still flirted with him, spinning about in her dress and flashing her bare legs.

He knew his place, and appreciated only what she showed him. Only ever touching her hands to help her from the car, and never making any other contact.

Walking through the small electronics section, she caught the attention of both salesmen. They were young, as they all were, full of the energy to make the sale for their small bonus commissions.

Both were well trained, as one kept the counter occupied as the other approached.

"May I help you miss... ?" He asked.

She heard the question correctly, as he probed for her name. She avoided it easily, redirecting it back to what he should have been asking for.

"Yes, I'm looking for your new VR4 titles." she said.

He was cool in accepting the change, "We have most of our stock in VR4 items on the shelf over here." He said, directing her over to the head height glass shelves, filled with many slim line cases.

"Some items may not be on display, as there is more titles currently available then shelf space I'm sorry to say." He said, "If you are looking for something in particular, it may be listed in our current stocks."

"I think I'll just look for the moment." She said, dismissing him.

"Just call if you need assistance." He said, before departing back to the counter.

She wasn't sure what she wanted, as she didn't have any idea what sort of things were available.

The titles on display were as various as the dresses she had at home. Interactive stories from most of the recent movies and books. Many games from sports, Olympics, warfare, strategies, and the more common platform games. She either hated them or they bored her. There were the education titles of course, but she stayed right away from those.

It was like there wasn't anything to keep her interest in anything here. Not even the restricted titles across the top. They were of the pornographic nature, and mostly directed to males.

She felt almost fed up, and was ready to leave as she took one last look across the top shelf, and realised there were posters above them which she hadn't seen.

Large game advertisements, with holograms printed with photo realistic images that sprang out from the wall.

There was one from Scavengers of the Mutant world, depicting a fight between players and huge arachnids. She'd seen that shot before, and seen the actual spiders up close, but it no longer excited her.

The other posters were just as ostentatious in promoting gaming excitement. One did catch her attention, more with its wording then with the pictures. "Sick of leading a life bound only on one planet? Join the Corps, and be

someone. The Corps guards society. A galaxy without the Corps is nothing. Find excitement around every corner, wrongdoers under every rock, and evil in every shadow. The galaxy is just a step away for the Corps.”

Well, it did sound kind of lame, but it didn't sound like all the other games she had seen. And the image of the woman in a uniform, leaning over the door of some craft and shooting at a running figure, fit her perception.

She hadn't seen the box on any of the shelves, and hoped they had a copy. It took only a glance towards the counter, and the other salesman came over.

“Have you found what you are looking for?” He asked.

“That game up there.” She said, pointing at the poster, and added “Troubled Realms.”

“Yes, I believe we do have a copy left in stock.” He said, squatting down at the bottom of the shelves, and pulling open some doors.

It took a moment, of sorting through a box, before he found the case, and stood up handing it to her.

“It was released just after Scavengers of the Mutant world.” He said. “And only now gaining popularity since the, um recent problems.”

She paid with her credit card, that her dad paid the bill for.

“Enjoy your game Miss Dubonis.” He said smiling, having read it off the card.

“Thankyou.” She replied, relieved to have found something, then took the game box in hand and walked out the store with the chauffeur.

Chapter 2: Marina celebrates a new age

It was an innocuous title. Troubled Realms.

If the game was anything like the title, it was going to be dead boring. But she put on her best smile, and thanked her grandparents for the birthday present, kissing them both.

Marina was fifteen today. Legally allowed in some countries to get married and have children. To drink alcohol you had to be 21 in Britain, and smoking tobacco is actually outlawed in Switzerland, as well as many other European countries. In New Zealand it was still quite legal, if you were old enough to buy the horrible things.

But what never changed, was the age for a driver's licence. She had a whole year yet, before she was even allowed to drive, let alone even think about owning a car.

She could dream. That and play the Cannonball Run on VR. It was the coolest thing around. All the cars were real, from dashboards down to the smallest screw in the engines, from companies all over the world.

From the popular manufactures like Ferrari, Porsche, McLaren, Chrysler, Ford, Mercedes, as well as test production vehicles that never reached the public. Vehicles that made the humble station wagon look like a chariot.

It was only after her family had finally left her alone, that she got on the computer, and shoved in the disc in.

A minute later, she was pushing past 200 kilometres per hour, along the Death Valley Highway.

She'd learnt how to stick shift with a six and seven speed gearboxes, but she always loved the tip tronix. A short flick, and the engine shifted from a scream to a low roar. The gearbox was still a new thing to her, which she used as an automatic on those tracks with tight corners.

Unfortunately she had to play this in a different body than her own, as she couldn't reach all the controls in a fourteen... no make that a fifteen year old body. She had adapted a body she'd ripped from one of her brother's games. Some type of archaeologist adventurer that he liked playing. She looked ok, even if the proportions didn't look quite realistic. These she adjusted to something realistic, and was able to map her own face and adjust other characteristics like hair colour so it looked like herself with the help of the VR programs.

Whilst the game had no traffic along this section of the road for the moment, there were still other cars racing her.

The McLaren F1 was catching in her mirror, as there was no way she could outrun it in the Mitsubishi HSR5. It handled well, in it's low slung cabin, and accelerated so fast, that Marina couldn't breath. But it lacked the top speed of the new F1.

She would have chosen the F1 to race in, except for a few advances in the HSR design made it more preferable under the current conditions. The zero light levels made the infrared overlay on the windscreen technical marvel. The road would have been pitch black ahead otherwise, and taking the long curves now meant she could see when the road straightened out without having to overcorrect.

The F1 had no such advantage, and it stayed back with only its headlights to say it was still there.

A small bleep from her radar and laser designator got her attention, indicating a police presence somewhere up ahead. Nothing visible for kilometres ahead yet, so they had to have a laser pointed down the highway just waiting for something.

The cop car looked like a speck in the distance first, its headlights growing larger very fast, as it was on the road travelling in the opposite direction.

It's blue and red lights started flashing before she even reached it, and passed it mere seconds later with the sirens whining past rapidly.

The police side band radio crackled into life as an officer spoke to dispatch, "This is X-ray four nineteen, in pursuit of multiple vehicles headed west on Death Valley Highway."

"Roger that four nineteen." dispatch replied.

At just over 300 kph now, they would have no chance at catching her, unless they called in other pursuit cars.

"Assistance will be required. Recommend road block and spike strips set up at I90 turn off."

"Roger that, units two ten, fourteen and three eleven are on route to I90 turn off. Bird dog is on its way."

The voices clicked off, as she concentrated on the road ahead.

The pursuit car was well past now, having missed all the racing cars on the road, but it was still following the group of six sports cars, doing its best to stay up.

In the sky above the highway, she noticed a blinking light approaching. Bird dog. A small twin engine Cessna spotter plane. The well lit headlights of six cars, with the flashing of the pursuit cars were like a beacon, drawing it in.

As the lead car, she could see when it banked about in front, and switched its spot lights on. It slowed a little, to move its lights one at a time over each of the cars.

"Bird dog in position. We have six sports cars, Mitsubishi, McLaren, Lamborghini, Mercedes, Ferrari and a Porsche. Speed of lead car in excess of 300 KPH."

"Roger that Bird Dog. Four nineteen, road block is set up on I90 turn off. Awaiting your packages."

"Roger dispatch. Rounding up the bandits now."

The radio calls were a lot more jovial, as they presumed to catch the six cars on the Run.

"This is two fourteen. We have visual now on bandits."

Marina strained her eyes ahead, making out the tiny blips on either side of the road, and one in the centre. It was guaranteed that spike strips were laid out between the cars, and off the road onto the dirt.

She didn't have much time until her ride came to an end, unless she did something. Now she relaxed off the accelerator, dropping back on purpose, and letting the F1 and the Diablo both pass her. She killed her headlights, as she didn't need them with the infrared, and the lights of the two cars in front of her.

Approaching the road block now, she manoeuvred the car up behind the Diablo, keeping it dangerously close. Close enough to read the small badge work on the back.

The AI controlled cars wouldn't stop, they'd run right through the spike strips. If she'd been playing against other players, she'd have to try something else. The F1 headed toward the right side for the supposed opening between the stopped pursuit vehicles.

Before the Diablo could move, she headed left, kicking in enough acceleration to bring her car next to it. The Diablo shifted across, thumping her car, but moved back, not wanting to risk sliding out. Its space was running out, and it tried again.

She had to counter steer to stop from running off the road, forcing the Diablo into the centre of the road straight for the pursuit car.

As soon as she freed her car, she pressed hard on the brakes, slewing in behind the Diablo as it hit the pursuit car. The F1 had already run across the spike strip, ripping out its tires, its speed carrying it past the pursuit cars on its four rims.

Diablo made a loud crunching sound as it impacted, but passed enough of its momentum across to the pursuit car to cause it to overcome the locked brakes and slide down the road with the entangled Diablo.

There was enough space now as she pulled between the two spike strips, both hands turning the steering wheel right then left, then right again to avoid the wreckage. She had to pull the wheel left again, to miss the F1 which had come to a rest further up the road near the side.

The Mercedes following her, saw the opening, but was going too fast to take it, and ran two tires across a spike strip, then slewing off the road. The Porsche and Ferrari had a bit more time, and took the opening at speed, bringing up the rear, leaving only three cars.

The race played hell like that on the leaders, giving the advantages on the cars following. But with no more obstacles in front, Marina floored the accelerator, pulling away from her companions.

All she could hear from the police band scanner was aircraft reporting two cars had made it through, and the one was missing.

She still had her head lights off, so they would never see her in the dark until she hit the street lights of the next town where the current leg finished. The three of them made it to the finish without any more problems. The F1 and the Mercedes that had lost their tyres would be back in the race for the next leg, losing time and points for tires. The Diablo however was out completely, because the car was now a wreck.

Fast and furious, just how she liked her racing. The tracks weren't real unfortunately, but it provided a more intense race feeling for the driver.

The Troubled Realms game got lost in all her other presents until a few days later, when she decided to finally look at it. She pulled out the leaflet and started to read.

Chapter 3: Sharyn's new direction in life

"But I'm innocent!" She jumped up, yelling at the judge, then pleading to the jury who had just passed the verdict. "I'm innocent."

Two uniformed bailiffs came over to grasp her arms.

"You will be remanded in custody." The Judge intoned, "Where upon you will be transferred to the Avero medium security prison to serve a sentence of nine years, with a minimum of 4 years with probation."

He banged down the gavel. It seemed over, as everyone stood up as the Judge left.

"We'll appeal Sharyn." Her lawyer said, as the bailiffs slowly took her away.

"Where the hell is Avero?" She called.

Her lawyer answered, trying keep her calm, "It's a new mixed prison, but without the usual manual labour, instead they adhere to the original principle of re-educating inmates."

"That's good, but I'm innocent." She called as the door closed separating them. She knew he'd tried his best, but the evidence seemed insanely true.

A security video had captured a shop clerk beaten half to death by a woman, before the shop was cleaned out. The clerk lived, but wasn't able to identify his attacker. The only evidence was the computer enhanced security video, which showed the face of Sharyn Shiels clear enough.

Sharyn did have an alibi for the night, having slept with him. But he couldn't confirm that she'd been with during at the time.

And the fact that she did have a previous record, from when she stole from a shop when she was sixteen threw it for her.

She hadn't understood how it had happened herself, having seen the video. A look-a-like? No it didn't make any sense.

She still couldn't half believe it after they clamped cuffs around her legs and wrists, and led her to the waiting van. Like a ridiculous dream, she hoped to wake up from soon.

But she didn't. She arrived at Avero, and was talked to personally by the warden.

"Your record shows a history violent behaviour." He said, leaning across the sparse desk.

Sharyn would have snorted at the comment. A history? What a load of crap. One bloody conviction, and it's a history.

The warden went on, "This is one thing we will teach you here, and that is violence gets you nothing. Here at Avero, we will teach you what is right. And what is wrong." His eyes seemed to bore into her, like he was trying to beat it directly into her brain with a simple stare.

It almost seemed that way, when Sharyn did find out how education was performed. Inmate's brains were hooked up to computers, and they were taught literally what was right and what was wrong. Both punishment and rewards came quickly.

Do wrong, and you received a reprimand. Pain was sometimes used, like an electric jolt, or a heat, or something else. It always changed so a person couldn't get used to it.

And do it right, you were given rewards, like the feeling of pleasure. This always changed positions on the body, as well as the pleasure, so it didn't become addictive for the inmates when they were finally released into society.

These were only some of the punishment and rewards inmates received, as Sharyn found out.

One woman was a convicted murder, who had cut her husband up into small pieces before feeding them to fish in a lake. She'd been caught, sitting on a pier, all covered in blood, throwing one piece at a time into the water.

Her re-education included visions of her husband. Every time she had them, she always killed him again, and again. Soon, whenever she wasn't been re-educated, she was locked away in solitary confinement.

Sharyn was at the prison long enough before her lawyer visited, to find out for herself what rewards were available. Playing any of the small selection of authorised games on the computers, and if they were extremely good inmates, they were allowed to go on-line with people outside the prison.

She finally met with her lawyer in a closed room.

"I'm sorry but the appeal has failed." He said, watching for her reaction. "The court dismissed it, as not having enough new evidence."

She sat there unresponsive, thinking about why this had happened. Nothing came to mind. She'd been a great kid before her mother died, which was why was caught stealing that first time. She'd just lost her mother, and her father had his own pain to deal with.

They both got over it, and lived their lives. He father had retired to some trailer park in California, and was happy. She'd done ok for herself for the 10 years, a steady job which paid the bills, until this.

Maybe it was time for a change, and this was the way. Four years if she was on good behaviour, and she'd be out.

"Thanks Marcus, you did your best." She said.

"I can try to appeal again with another court." He said.

"No. It's not necessary. It's not so bad here. Maybe I'll learn something." She said, with a smile.

"Ok, if you're absolutely sure." He asked.

"Absolutely." She agreed. "Just make sure you get a good price for my things. I don't want you not getting paid."

"It's been taken care of." He said, trying to read her expression.

"Ok. I guess I'll see you some time, between 4 to 9 years." She said.

After he left, she returned to her re-education. It was several months before she had been allowed use of the computers for recreation on-line. She'd been playing one game off-line when she was allowed, and was really thrilled to go on-line for the first time.

The attendant in the sealed booth, loaded the disc into her connection. Sharyn blinked her eyes, and entered Troubled Realms.

Chapter 4: The game begins

Nicola didn't bother to read the documentation, she wanted to do someone now, and not have to waste her time reading.

So she pushed the game disc in, and started it up. She blinked her eyes to initiate the connection, and nothing happened. Well, nothing seemed to have happened. She was still lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. So nothing had happened. She blinked again, thinking that the computer had somehow missed the controlled response, but still nothing happened. She sat up, and took the headset off thinking that maybe it had broken. It looked ok, but she was an expert on computers. She only used it.

Maybe it was something in the manual. She looked about on the large bed, but it wasn't there. No box either. She stood up, and walked around, thinking they'd fallen onto the floor, even checking under the bed, but nothing. Like she hadn't brought them into her room with her.

She thought through what she did before. Left the chauffeur outside with the car, entered the house. Father wasn't home at this time of day. Didn't see any of the maids that continually kept the house clean. Straight up the long stairs, along the hallway and left into her bedroom.

She'd kicked off her shoes, and dropped onto the bed as she unpacked the game. It didn't make sense. Game packages didn't just disappear did they? A new form of environment friendly packaging? She laughed aloud at the thought.

She couldn't find the box, and the computer didn't work. She was stuffed if she was going to do any school work today.

As boring as it seemed, she decided to go swimming just to waste time. Maybe she'd come back as soon as her skin had gone all wrinkly. She pulled the door closed, in case one of the male help happened to be inside, and dumped her clothes there on bed and started to change into her swimming costume, then changed her mind and dropped the bathers on the floor.

She was in one of those moods now, frustrated at everything and just wanting some excitement to relive the depression. She'd gone skinny dipping in the pool dozens of times, and it sometimes helped her mood. All she grabbed was her towel, which she wrapped around herself so she wouldn't frighten the help by wondering through the house naked.

She pulled open the door, stepping through before she realised something was wrong. About her was a dark and seedy alley. The pavement under her feet was dirty and wet. As she turned about, she found the door she had stepped through, close shut with bang. On this side it was a plain steel door, without a handle to open it.

She rapped finger around the edges to no avail, as it was set back within the wall, and a lock adorning it.

She reverted to bashing on the door with her fists, and calling for help from the house staff. "Can anybody hear me?"

Not a sound came from the door, but something rattled down the alley. She turned about, holding the towel up from slipping. "Who's there?" she called too loudly in the alleyway.

A scuffling sound followed this time.

"Come out, or I'll..." Nicola started to say, but she had nothing to back it up, unless it was hidden under her towel. "I'll have to shoot!"

A garbage can tipped over near the wall, and a figure emerged. "Please don't shoot says I." the figure said, holding up both hands to indicate he was friendly. "James I be. James be but a resident within this refuse. James also be not watching yonder door from which you emerged your gracious one."

He had a light voice with a stilted English accent. But his words were strange, like he was speaking of himself as a third person. Nicola didn't know if he was dangerous, but he hadn't shown any indications so far.

"Then return to your dwelling, and don't disturb me with those sounds." She said, waving her free hand.

"James be thanking you." He said, returning to the trash. "I be but fortunate to have your presence in this here alley." he mumbled once more before the alley was silent again.

Other sounds now filtered through the dark alley. The common street sounds of cars and people. Both ends of the alley showed lights of cars passing back and forth.

She had to go somewhere, rather than stay standing here in the cold all night. More by choice, she headed in the opposite direction of the alley's resident.

The paved road surface was nothing but cold and wet on Nicola's feet. Approaching the end, she could see both cars and numerous pedestrians passing back and forth in under street lamps. Music and other things could now be heard clearly.

Maybe she could get some help from a passer by, and she could get a lift home, or somewhere and get some clothes.

Now at the end, at the corner of the wall, she got a good look at the people walking by, and they got a look at her.

Some seemed not to notice the half naked girl with a towel, while others stared openly, and even pointing as they passed.

"Excuse me?" Nicola called, to a couple. They looked her way, then actually hurried past.

Several more people did the same thing as she asked for help. Each one she looked at, all had a dark complexion. As if they were part Africans.

"Can you help me?" She called to two guys.

These acted a little different, but the effect was the same as they first stared. One started to move over towards her, but the other looked around, then pulled his partner away as they continued along the street.

She wasn't getting any help from any of these people.

"What's this, an albi?"

The voice caught her attention, like a whining child. The voice was one amongst a group of people who'd come from the other side, whilst Nicola's attention was on the two guys.

"Oh, jeez I like albis. She's a pretty one too." Another guy said.

Unlike the other people, this group had taken notice, but it wasn't the attention she wanted. More then likely they were interested in amusing themselves then helping her.

"All wrapped up just for us she is." One sniggered.

"Let's just grab the albi and go huh?"

Two of them started to approach. Nicola's only avenue of escape lay either back down the alley, or into the crowded streets. She picked the street, moving sideways away from the group.

"Ohh, playing hard to get heh? Let's get her."

The group, moved forward in a rush at her. She turned and ran, trying to keep the towel up with one hand, to push between surprised people with the other.

It was a mad rush, pushing between groups of people. She saw an opening of ahead, and made towards it. Almost there, she ran into two of the group waiting for her.

"Dumb albi doesn't know it's easier to go round crowds." One said, as the other grabbed her arms.

"Let go." Nicola called, "My father's got connections."

"She's got a pretty voice too. Let's see what the rest of her is like."

The towel was ripped from her hands before she could react to the comment. With her hands free now, she reacted physically to her tormentors.

The first got her knee to where it hurt most, sending him to the pavement clutching his crotch. The other she slammed her fist into his face, hearing a crunching sound. She followed this with leg kick into the stomach, a friend had taught her.

Voices behind her called out. "There's the albi!"

She turned to see some of the group had followed her through the crowd, trying to surround her.

"She's ours now." One said, drawing out a knife which seemed to spring out of his sleeve.

He lunged at her with the knife out thrust, and she reacted unnaturally now, grabbing the knife hand, and spinning the guy about to twist his hand, forcing him to drop it. As it clattered to the ground, she raised her arm, slamming her fist into his face, and elbowed him as she let go.

Three more were approaching as flashing lights appeared through the crowd. Seeing the lights, the three quickly disappeared into the crowd.

The second guy she had hit came lunging at her, and swept her leg out, hitting him in the face.

"That's enough!" A voice called. Two figures, one male and one female, also dark complexioned, approached wearing strange uniforms clearly marked police.

"Thank god you're here." Nicola said, walking towards them and bringing her hands up as she approached.

Without her knowing it, the first one slapped cuffs on her wrists. "You're under arrest." He said. "Get those others too." he added, and the female cuffed the three guys, drawing them together.

"What am I under arrest for? They were going to rape me!" Nicola said, forgetting her hands were cuffed as she tried to point.

"Assault, disturbing the peace, Albino without a licence, soliciting..." He reeled off charges which she shook her head at. "And indecent exposure."

She had forgotten loosing her towel in the attack. It only took a quick glimpse to confirm she was as naked as they day she was born.

Crowds had gathered close to watch, and Nicola felt sure their eyes were on her. She tried to cover herself with her bound hands, but the policeman grabbed the cuffs to haul her through the crowd.

Another pair of cops arrived to take the other three away. She felt relieved as they hustled her into the back of a car. Neither offered her any clothing. But it did make her feel better that the guy drove, and the female sat next to her in the back.

The car pushed through the crowds, and into the clear.

"It was self defence." Nicola said.

"Save it for the station." the female next to her said, and didn't say another word.

So she kept her mouth shut all the way. At the station, they took her inside just the same. Almost no words. The station entrance was crowded with people, and cops alike, talking and yelling to make words head.

Hardly anyone paid her attention. Those that did, stared obviously.

They stopped at the desk, and the male listed the same charges as before to the female attendant. "Assault, disturbing the peace, Albino without a licence, soliciting, and indecent exposure."

"Uh, huh. And what's your designation honey?" the desk lady asked.

"Nicola Dubonis."

"Sure, and I'm King of the Free Worlds." She said, and then repeated. "What's your designation?"

Nicola had no other answer for her. It was her real name, not the concocted ones she'd used on-line, so she said it again. "Nicola Dubonis."

"All, right." The lady typed at the desk, "Alpha-Jane-One. Put her in lockup twelve, away from everyone else."

"Move along." A hand her back pushed her hard toward an open doorway. She barley avoided falling over, and kept going forward.

Near the doorway the desk lady called out. "Hold a minute. Bring the Albi back."

She was hustled back to the desk, just as roughly.

"Turn around." She said.

Nicola didn't know what was happening, but a thump on the arm made her accept the command, and turned about.

"Stop!" came another command, and Nicola did just that. Now facing away from the desk at the milling people and police. She was able to cover herself somewhat with her bound hands as she stood there.

She could hear the lowered voices behind her. "Can't quite see it. Get her to bend over further."

Nicola started bending before she heard the command, bending over enough to touch her feet with her hands.

"Bloody hell. She's one of them." A male voice said. The cop who had brought her in.

"Yeah, but she's got the authority to do what she wants." The desk lady said.

"And we can't do jack if she destroys the whole city." The other said.

Nicola was still bending over, with the blood rushing to her face.

"Nicky? Did you say your name was Nicky? You can stand up now." The desk lady again.

Nicola stood, up and turned about to face the desk cop. "What's going on?"

The female cop pulled up her hands, and released the cuffs from her wrists as the desk lady said, "I'm sorry, but we didn't know you were operating in our district. We apologise for any inconvenience. If you told the arresting officer's you were from the Corps, we'd have let it go at that."

Nicola was confused now. Having somehow ended up in a strange city at night from her bedroom door. Been attacked by thugs, arrested, and now the cops were sorry?

One word stuck. "Corps?" Nicola asked.

"If you like, we can get someone from your office to bring a car by." She said. "We don't have the personal at the moment to take you back out and the arresting officers that brought you in, will be writing reports for the rest of the night." A short glare at the two, sent them walking away to another doorway.

The car sounded fine to Nicola. "Sure, get a car." Maybe then, she could get home.

The desk lady got on a phone right there, calling a long number.

"Hello? This is police quarters in district eight. We've accidentally picked up one of your people. Could you send a car round to get her? Good, thanks."

She hung up, "One of your car's is in the area, and will be here in less then 5 minutes. If you want to take a seat." She pointed towards a set of benches against the wall.

Courtesy obviously didn't extend far enough for coffee or some clothes. Not that they seemed to care much about either before.

Since the conversation, the atmosphere in the people around her had changed subtly. People didn't stare any more. They now make quick glances, as if checking she was still there.

Nicola sat on the bench, which had miraculously cleared itself. Concerned about her exposure, she crossed her legs, holding her hands on her lap.

Whist she waited, she watched the desk lady, who occasionally glanced up at her from the desk, and sometimes at a digital clock on the wall.

When a well dressed Caucasian man entered the police station, attention seemed to focus on him for a moment before it suddenly evaporated.

Almost by instinct, he came towards her. That, and the fact she was the only other Caucasian person in the room.

The man came up, and stopped a metre away. Nicola slowly rose to meet him standing up.

"Agent. We were worried when you didn't arrive at planetary headquarters. It is nice to see you, unharmed of course."

"Just get me out of here." she said, walking for the entrance.

He matched her pace, as they exited the building. A strange looking car was parked directly in front of the police station. All by itself, the doors opened a their approach, swinging up.

She was still confused at her surroundings, and having gotten around for several minutes, plainly forgot to ask for some clothes.

Only as she strapped herself into the seat did she remember her lack of clothes. Before she could ask, the guy had pulled from the curb, accelerating quickly away from the station.

"The fact that you are ok, seems to indicate that your Corps inducting training was successful."

There was that word again. Corps. She'd heard it earlier today. Thinking backwards, she surprised herself.

"I'm in the bloody game!" She yelled, half relieved that she wasn't lost in an unknown city. She covered her face with her hands, and wanted to cry but instead all she could do was laugh as she considered what she had been through.

"Is anything wrong?" the agent asked, glancing at her momentarily.

She pulled the face from hands as she looked at the agent. She was sure that he wasn't another player. He wasn't even vaguely interested in her body. "No, nothing is wrong. I just didn't know this was my training." She said.

"Everyone is put through a training mission before coming to Corps headquarters. Surely you read your handbook before starting the mission. Its required reading material, as it explains everything."

"Can you give me a short run down on the handbook?" Nicola asked.

"Sure." He said, and explained in short detail what she had failed to read. "So before starting you should have selected your primary appearance and uniform for all missions."

She'd done a stupid thing, not only that she'd forgotten clothing, but she hadn't even changed her appearance. She was as she was real-life. Her face, her fingers. Not a single change. She didn't consider if anyone should recognise her, but rather her lack of clothing.

"So I can't get any other clothing?" She asked.

"Not usually. You can be assigned new weapons for missions and things. If you lose any of your original uniform, it can be replaced." He said.

"What is your name?" Nicola asked, feeling awkward.

"Name? We don't use names, we have designations." He said, "Yours should be on your identification. But mine is Tango Hotel Mike X-ray One. But everyone uses a nickname which sounds similar to their designation. I'm called Thomas."

"What's this identification?" Nicola asked.

"Your identification? It should look like a tattoo on your right buttock, with an implant underneath. It makes identifying bodies easier. The police would have identified you by it also."

As Nicola thought about having to bend over in the police station, she put a hand down her seat, and felt for the texture of the tattoo. She found the rough texture with a small bump underneath her she pressed her fingers against the cheek of her bottom.

"Thomas, can you check my designation for me?" she asked.

"Sure, just a moment?" he said. He flicked a few switches, then released the steering wheel. It seemed to turn left and right, on its own violation. Thomas turned to her now. "Turn around and let me look."

Nicola had to twist in her seat to face the door, before Thomas could see the tattoo, and make and to the letters.

"A-T-E-P-3" He read out.

Thomas resumed control of the vehicle as he asked, "So what do you want to call yourself?"

Nicola thought on this. She was quite a fan on Greek mythology

The characters ATEP seemed to match closely with the last player name she used, Athena. She really didn't want to use that particular name in a long while. It took her a long while to rack her memory for another Greek goddess that was somewhat similar. In her current appearance, it seemed to match. The goddess of beauty, as well as love.

"Aphrodite." She said.

"Agent Aphrodite." Thomas reminded her.

She didn't have much time to consider her new name, as Thomas said "We'll be arriving shortly. All the other agents should be waiting when we get there."

To Nicola, that meant other on-line players.

"Can I get my clothes replaced when we arrive?" she asked.

"There should be replacement items waiting for you." He said, making a turn into a well lit underground car park.

Chapter 5: Sides are formed

"Welcome to the Corps. You are all new here, having just completed your initiation into the Corps."

Marina listened to the drone of the agent in charge from her position in the line of new recruits. There wasn't many, only five actually. But the agent yelled like he was talking to hundreds.

"By now, you will all have been told your agent designations. These are permanently marked on your arse, so if you lose that arse, we can tell who's it is."

The guy to her left sniggered at the comment.

The agent homed in on him, yelling his next words to his face. "That way we know whose next of kin gets notified." He pulled his face away now, "I don't have to mention the sub-dermal implant either, as you should have been briefed on its use before training."

Marina remembered most of the aspects of the small implant under the tattoo. It functioned as an electronic identification, also to keep track of her location, monitor biochemical functions, and some other things which she couldn't remember just at that moment.

The agent continued, "Having been told your designation, you should have all chosen a suitable name for yourselves, so we don't confuse you all. I'm going to do a roll call, and I want you to reply with your names for the record."

He read from an electronic tablet, starting with the first recruit, calling out each letter of the designation as a word "Tango-Delta-Yankee-Victor-One"

"Toady." The first recruit called out.

The stepped up to him, half yelling "That's Agent, and Sir to you. Say it again."

"Agent Toady, Sir!" The recruit repeated.

"Better. Romeo-India-Delta..."

The sound of running feet interrupted the agent, and he turned about to face the intrusion. All eyes watched as a girl came to a stop in front of the Agent. It wasn't that she was intruding, but the fact she only appeared to be wearing a towel got everyone's attention.

Someone let off a whistle, but the Agent ignored it as he questioned the intruder. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Sorry I'm late Sir, but I just arrived. Agent Thomas directed me to come here straight away." The newcomer said.

"Agent Thomas was out on patrol." The agent stated.

"He was called away to bring me in after the local police tried to take me in." She added.

"Yes that's all very well. We've had to begin without you. Join at the end of the line, and answer when your designation is called." He said, pointing to the far end of the line next to Marina.

The Agent resumed his roll call, "Romeo-India-Delta-Echo-Two."

"Agent Rayden sir!" The next recruit replied.

"Beta-Beta-India-Yankee-Three."

"Agent Barbie, Sir!" The third recruit called.

"Alpha-Victor-Echo-Romeo-Two."

"Agent Vader, Sir!" the recruit next to her replied.

"Lima-Alpha-Romeo-Charlie-Two."

Marina called out her name now, "Agent Lara, Sir!"

The agent took a moment to touch the screen of the tablet a few times, before calling out, "Alpha-Tango-Echo-Papa-Three."

The new girl, with only the towel, called out a name Marina wouldn't forget for a while, "Agent Aphrodite, Sir!"

"Good." The agent said. "Now that you are all identified with the Corps computers. You will all be given your first assignments."

"As per regulations, all of you have been paired off and will join a more experienced agent as a group of three for all team assignments hereafter.

Marina heard a whispered comment from the second recruit Rayden "Hope I get Aphrodite."

"Agents Toad and Rayden. You are assigned to Agent Dread. Proceed to conference room S2284 where he is waiting."

Marina didn't hear the muttered comment as they walked off, but saw them turn about to look back before leaving the room.

"Agents Barbie and Vader. You are assigned to Agent Friday. Proceed to conference room S2476 where he is waiting."

Marina watched them walk off, knowing she was stuck with Aphrodite herself.

"Agents Lara and Aphrodite. You are assigned to agent Magnum. Proceed to conference room S2120 where she is waiting."

That was it. Marina had thought they'd get a male agent when she heard the name Magnum. But it was definitely female.

Without a word, she led off towards the main corridor for the lifts. The slapping of bare feet, following on the floor. She pressed the call button for a lift. When it came, she didn't speak a word to Aphrodite, but took a measuring look, trying to understand why she had a towel on.

There wasn't any time to think on it as they reached sub level 21. The corridors twisted as they followed the signs, finding room 20 only a short distance away.

By custom, she knocked once on the door, before opening it. Inside sat a young woman in a comfortable blue jumpsuit.

"Come in, I'm agent Magnum." She said, standing up from behind a table.

"Agents Lara and..." Marina started.

"Aphrodite." the girl finished as she came round next to Marina.

Magnum obviously saw the towel clad Aphrodite. "Another one that F-T-R-T-F-M?" She said, saying the letters quickly.

"Huh?" Marina said.

"Forgot to read the fraking manual." Magnum said.

"Yeah." Aphrodite agreed.

"I must say, you're the worst one I've seen." Magnum said. "Don't just stand there. Close the door and sit down."

Marina pushed the door shut, and took an empty seat near Magnum. Aphrodite sat in the chair opposite.

"Aphrodite, that's your real body?"

Aphrodite only nodded back in response. Marina was astounded that this person had come in with an untouched body. Everyone she knew of made use of bodies they'd either made up or copied. The one she was using now was the same one she'd been using in the Cannonball Run, as she was most comfortable with it.

Magnum continued, "Don't worry too much. You're not the first to have done this, and most likely not the last. I heard from someone else that one particular male recruit turned up naked with only with soap suds."

Aphrodite cut in, "Well actually I didn't have the towel until I got to headquarters."

"But you started with a towel right?" Magnum asked.

"Yes, but I didn't get to keep it long."

"Ok, I'll explain it. Whatever appearance and clothing you choose when you started the game, is the appearance you use for the entire game, and the clothing for any missions where you cannot be assigned clothing especially for the mission. You don't get to keep anything from a mission. If you used your initial clothes for a mission, and they become damaged or lost, the Corps replaces its. No problem there. But you cannot change your initial clothes." Magnum said. "You don't want to go wondering about in just a towel now do you?"

"No not really." Aphrodite replied.

"I only know of one way to fix this." Magnum said, pushing back her chair and pulled off her boots. She started unzipping her overalls next. "Someone has to donate you clothing, and we just claim it as lost so it gets replaced."

Magnum slipped out of her overalls, standing in a plain t-shirt and underpants. She pulled off the t-shirt off revealing a bra, and tossed the t-shirt to Aphrodite.

"This should cover your top." She said, then pulled off her bra.

Marina had never seen so flagrant nudity anywhere before. She was astounded, as she watched Magnum pass over her bra and then her underpants to Aphrodite. When Magnum was finished, she pulled her jumpsuit back on, not looking any different than before.

"Are you sure about this?" Aphrodite asked, slipping the underwear on.

"Absolutely. This is the way the game works strangely. Stuff can be requisitioned for missions, but it is only temporary. You'll get to wear all sorts of cool stuff." Magnum said.

She turned to Marina now, who was a little slack jawed. "You look a little surprised. You are female aren't you?"

Aphrodite looked to Marina as she jerked the t-shirt down over her head. But Marina only nodded in response to the question.

"I sometimes forget that." Magnum said. "Sometimes a player chooses a gender opposite body. The way you just reacted, I just had to ask. Would you be able to donate any clothing to Aphrodite?"

Marina had to look down at herself and think. The clothing she'd chosen was limited somewhat. She had on a halter top and shorts over the usual underwear. Nothing she didn't need herself. "Not really." She replied.

"It'll be ok. I'll use the towel as a makeshift skirt." Aphrodite said, wrapping it around her hips. When it was firmly secured, she sat down.

"There doesn't seem to be any particular format for running these meetings." Magnum began. "But I'm going to conduct it the same way as when I started in another group. I'm going to introduce myself, so we go get to know each other better, then both of you. Then you can ask any questions. My name is Sharyn Shiels, I'm 27, and I live in the United States. Currently I live in the Avero woman's prison."

"Prison?" Marina said.

"Your turn Lara." Sharyn said.

"Oh, um. I'm Marina Zheppa. I'm 15, and I live in New Zealand with my Mother." She said.

Sharyn turned to Aphrodite now. "And you."

"I don't usually give my real name, but since you see the real me, my name shouldn't be too hard to guess." She started. "I'm Nicola Dubonis. 18 years old. And I live in Mexico with my father."

"Dubonis?" Sharyn asked.

"Yes. That Dubonis." Nicola agreed.

"Your father is a real wanted man here. Occasionally we hear news about his avoiding authorities." Sharyn said.

"You don't have a clean record yourself." Nicola shot back, protecting her father.

"Well your half right there." Sharyn said, avoiding eye contact, and looking down at the overalls, cum prison uniform that she thought was appropriate for the game. "I'm doing a prison term for something I didn't do. Somehow I was identified from a security video. Aggravated assault and robbery. I was fortunate not to get attempted murder too. So now I'm surviving the sentence." Sharyn said, before adding "And this is my good behaviour." She waved her hand about at her surrounding, indicating the game itself.

"And Lara? You're 15?" Nicola asked.

"Y.. Yes." She replied, feeling both sets of eyes on her now.

"It's no wonder you reacted." Sharyn said, "How long have you been playing on-line games?"

"Um, this is my first time." Marina confessed a little shyly. "I'm been playing some games already on my brother's computer, but I got this game for my birthday."

"I've been on-line for about a month. And only in this game." Sharyn said. "Which is why I have some experience. Aphrodite?"

"Oh, I've been playing on-line since the system was released. Seven months ago now?"

"So we have a mix of game experience. Aphrodite, you'll have to read the introduction booklet later, right now we have to get into things."

Sharyn touched a few buttons of tabletop, and the lights dimmed down as a three-dimensional display appeared above the table.

"It's like this, the Corps are a law enforcement agency, that enforces galactic law. We as agents of the Corps, enforce this law. We undertake missions as directed by Corps administration, and do our best to complete them."

"For our first mission we are given a specific task to complete. Later on we will be able to pick and choose from a variety of available missions. Each mission can lead us anywhere within the galaxy. Each planet has its own society, commerce, and population." Sharyn said, "I'll just let the mission profile run so we can find out what we're doing." She pressed another button on the table and the display lit up.

Chapter 6: Mission impossible

A computer rendered head appeared, and began to speak, "Good evening, and good afternoon ladies. Magnum, is your team prepared for its first mission?"

"We are Central.," replied Sharyn.

"Ok, for your first mission if you decide to accept it, will require your team to infiltrate a maximum security prison on the planet Epsilon Draconis Three. Where you will have to break out a political prisoner, by the name of Dr. Alfred Kelly. Kelly has been incarcerated there by the planetary government because of Kelly's views on the dumping of radioactive materials into space. Because this is a male prison, you'll be required to go in by stealth, and only use direct force when necessary. What follows are the mission details." Central finished, as the diagrams appeared over the table.

"A ship will bring you in low orbital approach, for a high gee entry into the atmosphere. The ship will make a dust off near the prison at night, and return into orbit to await your recall. From there you will have to plan your entry into the prison, locate Kelly, and exit from the prison with Kelly alive."

"If there's nothing else ladies, I'm going to return to my database now." Central said.

"Thanks Central." Sharyn said.

"You know, you girls remind me of Charlie's Angels. I haven't seen that since..." Central's face faded from the screen.

"That was the Corps main computer." Sharyn said. "Central is as close to a fully sentient computer that I know."

Sharyn hit a key, and the prison blueprints appeared in detail. "Here's where we need to plan. If either of you have any ideas, no matter how absurd, speak up. We have to work together on this, and cooperation is the only way we can do it."

Chapter 7: Fortress of doom

With the three of them, it took 10 minutes to formulate a plan, and another 5 to sort out the details.

Sharyn requisitioned their gear from the terminal, before they left the conference room.

The lift took them to the stores, where they collected stealth suits, climbing gear, pneumatic stun pistols, and general infiltration toolkits. Several other teams were there also, returning or collecting gear. They stopped to watch a team in front collect large packs with formidable looking weapons.

After collecting their gear, Sharyn directed them to the change rooms. "Ok, get changed and be back here in five."

For convenience of not losing the loaned clothing, Nicola changed out them then entirely, and slipped into the stealth suit. When activated, the suit became jet black, absorbing radar and light on a wide spectrum from infrared into ultraviolet. And with hood drawn over with a mask over her face, she would become a black shadow.

Right now with the suit de-activated, it looked just like a skin tight leather suit, both showing and enhancing her figure.

Nicola used a band to tie her hair back, so she could use the hood without difficulty. The infiltration toolkit attached under a flap of material in front of her torso, so it was out of the way, but still easily accessible. The stun pistol remained in a holster which could be attached to a leg, or as Nicola did, to her left wrist.

She found Sharyn already waiting with the climbing gear. In a moment, Marina came out, with her suit fitting her too perfectly. "What do we do with our clothes?" She asked, holding her bundled clothes and boots.

"They go into stores until we get back." Sharyn said. "They'll hold it safely until then. That's when you get to request replacements for loses."

Nicola deposited her bundled towel and clothes with Marina, before returning to Sharyn.

"These climbing grips are called molecular bonders." Sharyn said. "They'll stick to anything you press it against." Just to demonstrate, Sharyn attached the grippers to her legs via knee pads. One pad to each leg, attached via a thin strap to each gripper. Then stuck one gripper on a nearby wall. Then putting her weight on the leg attached by the strap, she raised the other leg and stuck the other gripper against the wall. Twice she detached the lower gripper, and raised it further up the wall, in effect crawling up the wall.

"Going down is easier, but it's also easier to misjudge and fall." She brought herself down a lot quicker, lowering one foot to the floor before detaching completely from the wall. "An expert with four of these could climb across the ceiling like Spiderman. Just make sure what ever you attach it to can support you. Otherwise you'll fall."

Just for effect, Sharyn slapped one grip against a specially marked wall, and pulled. The paint on the wall pulled right off, leaving a mark the same shape of the gripper. She pressed the release stud and the paint slipped off, to brake in pieces on the floor.

Sharyn handed the gear out to them. "Let's find our transport."

The three of them, took the lift up to the surface, and exited an entrance at the space port. An agent was waiting for them at the lift.

"Agents Magnum, Lara and Aphrodite. Your craft is waiting for you on pad 26. I've got a cart to take you there now." She directed them to a small cart like a golf buggy. The agent took the wheel, and Sharyn sat next to her, while Nicola and Marina sat on the back. The cart took off quickly that they both had to hang onto their seats, or slip off onto the hard pavement.

They wound around a variety of craft, from small one person yachts to large assault craft. Across the port, Nicola saw several craft lifting off or landing on plumes of flame.

The cart jolted to a stop in front of a small sleek craft. Together they hopped off the cart and proceeded towards the craft.

"Good luck agents." The driver called, before wheeling about and heading back.

When they reached the boarding ramp, someone was waiting at the top for them. "Bout time. When you ladies are ready, we'll lift off this dust ball."

"And you are?" Sharyn asked.

"I'm Cowboy. I'll be your pilot to your little rendezvous." The man answered with a strong Texan accent. "So, you'll want to get those pretty little asses up here, so I can do my job."

Before Sharyn could question him further, he turned about and disappeared into the craft. She turned about to face Nicola and Marina. "I must warn you that as soon as we left the lift, which is part of Corps HQ, we have technically started the mission. It is entirely possible that a mission can be subverted before we even get there. I've heard reports from other Agents, of teams that have been lost here at the space port before lifting off. This guy seems on the level, but just keep your eye's open."

"Maybe we should pilot the ship ourselves then." Marina said.

"That is an option, but I'm sure none of use know how to pilot this thing. Do you?" Sharyn asked.

"No." Marina replied.

Cowboy's voice could be heard from inside. "You girls gonna natter all day, or are ya coming on board?"

Sharyn gave one last look, before turning back up the ramp. "We're coming." She yelled.

Inside they found seats, and strapped in as the engines started up. A couple of shudders ran through the ship as the engines ceased. Nicola could hear Cowboy's swearing real four letter words before the engines restarted.

"Did he just say what I thought he said?" Marina asked over the rising hum.

"You mean, the stupid fucking shit heap of a ship?" Sharyn said coolly. "Try to get used to it Lara. Some of the characters we meet have even worse vocabulary. That and most of them will try to kill you."

"Unless we kill them first." Nicola added.

Cowboy's voice came through a speaker, "Hope your asses are strapped down. I'm initiating launch now."

Nicola felt the sudden acceleration grip her, and pull her down into her seat. The straps on her front, kept her from doubling over. It actually seemed to build, and she thought she could feel the framework under the seat before it started to let up.

"We've cleared the atmosphere, and I'm initiating jump coordinates. It's three quick hops. So hold onto your lunch, or whatever you ate last."

It was the weirdest sensation Nicola had ever felt. Like her entire body was being sucked through a small pipe, in-side-out, and spat out again. Except she had a clear sense of everything around her. Marina looked like she wanted to throw up, and Sharyn was smiling in her direction. It happened twice more, lasting about ten seconds each.

"I wanted to tell you." Sharyn said. "But it is a little hard to explain, isn't it?"

"Really strange." Nicola said. "We'll have to do it on the way back?"

"Back!" Marina complained. "I'll rather hit a brick wall."

Sharyn tried to console her. "Don't worry. It wears off quickly."

The voice of Cowboy returned. "I'm not cleaning any messes you girls leave behind. We are now descending towards the dark side of Epsilon Draconis Three. We'll be entering the atmosphere in a few seconds. So make sure you're strapped in, cause we're gonna shake so hard, you're going to feel it in your tits."

"Damn he's nauseating." Nicola said.

"Most pilots are better." Sharyn had time to say, before the ship started to shake.

It was as bad as Cowboy said. The ship shook like a baby rattle. The only things keeping them from being turned into a bloody pulp on the inside, was the seat straps. The craft settled into a half stable flight, as it kept a rapid descent to the surface.

"30 seconds to LZ." Cowboy said. "Here's where I say goodbye and hope to see you later."

"Get your gear ready." Sharyn said, pulling her hood up, and fixing it around her face.

Nicola did the same, readying the mask to drop down onto her face. The masks collected both low light and infrared sources to produce a reasonable image at any light level.

"Touch down in 10 seconds." Cowboy called. "Don't forget the call back comm unit in the basket by the door. I'd hate not to hear from you girls again. We've had such a swell time and all."

A thump sounded through the hull, as the servo's from the ramp sounded. "Touch down. Ground floor ladies."

They released the straps quickly. Sharyn grabbed the comm unit for the ship before they descended the ramp into the dark. Nicola activated her suit as she pulled her mask down, and the landscape lit up.

She ran away from the ship as the engines ignited, and it lifted from the ground. She turned about to see only the dwindling speck of the ship in the sky.

"Aphrodite, Lara." Sharyn called on the suit comm. "Over here."

"Where's here?" Nicola called.

"Look for the black shape. These masks only allow us to see one another as black shapes."

Nicola turned about looking. She saw the small black shape that seemed to change in shape as she watched. "That you?" She asked.

"Yeah." Sharyn said. "Lara, turn left a bit. That's it. Over here."

They came together now. "The suit's comm will help us stay in touch. Just don't get lost."

The prison was a short distance, perhaps a kilometre away. Together they approached. Seeing the prison the first time, Nicola thought it looked more like a fortress with its double walls, and stone brick buttresses.

In the dark, it looked formidable indeed.

At the exterior wall, they made use of the climbing gear, ascending it straight up. Nicola's molecular bonders lost grip twice on the loose surface of the old masonry. She got the knack of testing the adhesion before putting her weight on it. With only two climbing grips, she had to get it right.

They mounted the wall, almost to the top where razor wire was stretched across edge.

Nicola waited patiently hanging against the wall, as Sharyn used wire cutters from her intrusion kit to cut an opening. Once it was cleared, they crawled up to the top, one at a time. No guards were visible on the narrow walkway above, but it was still some distance from the actual prison itself. It was a good 30 metre drop down the inside. Instead of climbing back down, a set of stairs was found a short distance away by Marina.

The night was very quiet as she got to the main prison itself, and started ascending.

Two floors up, they encountered barred windows. These had to be the lower floor cells. Their target was the well guarded section near the roof, as they eased around the windows to continue up.

At the top, Nicola's arms felt dead tired. Because she hadn't had the chance to make an appropriate body, she didn't have a strong physical body, not that she didn't exercise this body regularly. Sure there were added game characteristics which she'd used against that gang, but a better body would have been more useful than clothes right now. She'd be ok if they didn't have to do any more climbing. Their plan didn't count on doing any more, but you never could tell.

Several figures were evident on the rooftop. Guards with weapons slung over their backs, moved about the roof. Spot lights were mounted on the corners of the building, but were turned off. They seemed to be on duty, but some of them were just standing about chatting.

Quietly, they moved across the roof, and crouched at the door that led back into the building. The silent footwear of their suits, never making a sound. Sharyn tested the door, and found it locked. Added security in case prisoners breaking out, made for the roof in hope of a rescue.

Sharyn directed them to watch the guards, as she attempted to pick the old lock.

Nicola heard the snick as the door unlocked, and saw a guard take notice. With seemingly practised ease, Sharyn had the door open, and pulled them both in, before re-locking the door.

They moved down a few steps and waited silently. The door rattled once, but nothing more happened.

Nicola now took the lead down the circular stairwell to the first landing, the political prisoner wing. A closed door bared their entrance, but unlike the first door, this could be unlocked from their side with the twist of a knob.

Nicola eased the door open slowly, but stopped dead still when she saw a guard just inside, leaning back in a chair. She tensed, thinking the guard would see her, until she realised that he was sound asleep.

She opened the door ever so slowly, keeping an eye on the guard, and taking brief glances to check if there were any more.

Nicola moving inside a little further so the others could see the problem. She wasn't sure what to do. If they disturbed him, an alarm could be raised. And if they left him, he could wake up and still raise an alarm.

She watched as Sharyn dealt with the problem, by firing her pneumatic stun pistol into the rising chest of the guard. At almost point blank range, the pistol made almost no sound, and the guard wasn't going to wake up for a while.

Once clear of the doorway, Marina closed the door, so it wouldn't be noticed if another guard inspected it.

This guard had a ring of keys attached to a belt which Nicola removed whilst holding the keys so it wouldn't rattle.

Now they had to locate Kelly from all the other prisoners. With their mission information, was a profile on Dr. Kelly, complete with the latest pictures of him.

They all went down the corridor, looking through the bared openings in each door to check if Kelly was there.

Nicola was lucky enough to recognise him lying face up in his cell. It took her a few more moments to signal Marina and Sharyn by waving an arm about.

Finding the right key took some time, but they got the door open with only a few tinkles of keys touching.

Sharyn drew them all into the cell, and had them close the door and stand in front of it to muffle any sounds. This portion of the plan, they'd had trouble deciding on. Whilst an unconscious Kelly would make less sound, it would be too difficult for all of them to carry him out. They'd agreed to wake Kelly up, and have him walk out.

Sharyn detached one of the climbing grips from her leg, to hold it ready as she gave Kelly a gentle touch on the shoulder. "Dr. Kelly?" Sharyn said quietly. It took two more tries before Kelly woke up suddenly. She slapped the grip down on his mouth, turning the adhesion on to keep his mouth shut as she held him down. "Please be quiet Dr. Kelly. We're here to rescue you."

He seemed to relax now, and stop struggling with her.

"I'm going to take this off your mouth now. And I want you not make any noise, or say anything. No one knows we are here, and we'd like to keep it that way."

She released the grip, and lifted it away.

"Who are you?" Kelly said, a little too loudly.

"Shhh. We are from Corps. Please, don't say anything else."

"Where are you, I can't see you." Kelly said, making an effort to keep his voice down.

"Here's my hand." Sharyn said, gripping his hand. "Just hold on. This mission can be jeopardised, if you talk any more. We will stun you if necessary and carry you out."

Kelly took Sharyn's word, and kept his mouth shut as they led him out of the cell.

He wasn't as quiet as they were, but in bare feet the noise wasn't noticeable.

Marina led the way back to the way they came in, as Nicola closed Kelly's cell door again. She didn't lock it, but did reattach the keys to the guard. If he did wake up soon, he wouldn't notice anything unless he searched all the cells.

Here's where their planning became sketchy. Sharyn lead Kelly down the stairs slowly so he wouldn't slip or make a sound, whilst Marina stayed back so they weren't followed, and Nicola went ahead to find any obstacles in their path.

The idea was to exit at the ground floor, and steal a vehicle from the prison garage to make their escape in. They passed through three floors, reaching the ground before Nicola had to call a halt. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairway, and passing through another locked door, she entered a corridor that led directly outside. Ahead of Nicola on her left, stood a wide open doorway, spilling light and the sounds of many voices.

The others kept back behind the stairway door with Kelly, as she advanced up to the open doorway, and peeked around the corner. Inside was a guard post, but instead of guarding, there were seven guards, sitting about playing cards. There was laughing and guffaws as one or another player won the hand, scraping a pile of tokens their way.

After taking a good look at the room, Nicola backed away to consult with the others at the end of the corridor. The sound of the guards masked their words as they spoke quietly.

"Seven guards, all playing cards round a table." Nicola said.

"Weapons?" Sharyn asked.

"They look like pistols and shotguns. All within easy reach of them."

"This is a backwater planet, so they probably are."

"We can't get past without them noticing Kelly and three black shadows." Nicola said.

"So we need a diversion then?" Marina suggested.

"This place is mirrored remember. There should be an exact same corridor on the other side." Sharyn said.

"Someone should go back upstairs, and come down the other side."

"Who?" Maria asked.

"It should be me." Nicola said.

"Why?" Sharyn conjectured "Neither of you are experienced in this game. If something should happen, I can handle myself."

"No so." Nicola said. "I've had experience, not necessarily in this game. And you don't have an idea on how to get their attention do you?"

"And you do?" Sharyn said.

"Yes." Nicola replied.

Sharyn relinquished. "Ok, go. When you get to the other side, tell us when you're ready."

Nicola, turned about, and dashed up the stairs. Actually she didn't have any idea, but she knew she'd have one by the time she got to the other side. She slowed her pace up the stairs, so she wouldn't wear herself out, or make too much noise.

She wanted to cut across at level one, but there was no guarantee that the guard would be asleep there also, so she had to go back up to level 4, where they had stunned the guard. He should be asleep for a while yet, so she had some leeway in making noise.

The guard was still there, sleeping as soundly as she had discovered him. Across the corridor and past the cells, she opened the other door, and locked it shut again.

She took her time down the stairs to think now, and an idea slowly formed. Actually she'd seen it in an old movie once, except she'd have to make a few changes to the script.

She got through the ground floor door and prepared herself before informing Sharyn and Marina to get ready.

Chapter 8: The great escape

"Magnum, Lara. I'm in position." Nicola's voice came through.

"Ok, what do you need." Sharyn said.

"I'm going to get their attention. When you hear the signal, you and Lara come around the corner and fire at anything close to you. I'll get the rest."

"Ok. Give a moment, and then move in." Sharyn said. She turned to Kelly now. "Kelly, I'm going to let go of you now, I want you to stay right here. We'll be back in a minute."

Kelly nodded understanding.

"Lara, keep close." Sharyn said.

Marina followed until they reach the doorway. They both waited there for a moment, until they heard wolf whistles and men calling "hey babe!"

Sharyn took it for the signal, and moved across the doorway enough for Maria to get a view inside. All she could see were the backs of the seven guards, all standing up from their chairs. Some were further away.

Together Maria and Sharyn drew their pistols and took careful aim, firing at the closest two. They dropped quickly, but the noise of the gun and the dropping guards got the attention of the rest of them. They fired twice more in succession, but Marina missed her third shot.

Without any help from Sharyn, her guard dropped suddenly, and then the last one. The only person left standing in the room was Nicola, standing there naked with her pistol in her hand.

Marina understood how she got their attention now, without having an alarm sounded. She followed Sharyn into the room, as she checked all the bodies, to make sure they were all stunned, and not faking.

Looking at Nicola, Marina had to ask, "Where did you hide the gun?"

Nicola turned about, to show one of the climbing grips stuck to the centre of her back. "Had it attached to the strap." Nicola reached up to the handle, but couldn't release it. She looked over at Marina. "Give me hand can you? I can't get this off."

Maria, stepped around the bodies, and pulled the release. It came off easily, leaving only a red mark on the skin.

"Here." She said, handing it back to Nicola.

"Thanks." Nicola replied.

"You said, you had experience." Sharyn said, standing up from the last guard. "But now I wonder what you have experience in."

"Only in games. It's not my fault I have a good body." Nicola said, releasing the strap on the grip. "I'll go get back into my suit. You'd better get Kelly."

Marina stood and waited as Nicola ducked back out and Sharyn went out the other way to fetch Kelly. In a moment, both came back. Nicola fully dressed again, looking like a black wraith in the full light compared to her heavenly appearance to the guards, and Sharyn leading Dr. Kelly.

Marina and Nicola met Sharyn at the doorway.

Kelly broke his silence now. "Are they all dead?" he asked.

"No, merely stunned." Sharyn said.

"How?" he asked.

"I'm a real Medusa." Nicola said, "I just looked at them with my uncovered eyes."

"Yeah, it stuns men on sight." Marina added getting into the swing of Nicola's tale.

"And you said you might have to stun me." Kelly said, surprised now.

Sharyn led them all down the passage to the exit. "Best be quiet now. We haven't gotten out the prison yet."

Marina stayed as tail, as Nicola took the door. This one wasn't locked like the others, considering the guards were supposed to have free access.

Nicola went outside for a moment, then waved them outside into attached compound. On entering the prison, they'd come in from the side, and hadn't seen it. In the front now, she could see the entire compound as it had been on the map. Closing the door behind her, she followed the others across to a shed where the vehicles were supposed to be kept.

Guards patrolled the area around them, and they did their best to avoid been seen. One did see them, or Kelly rather, and Nicola was already on him before he could open his mouth, and eased him to the ground beside the shed after stunning him with her pistol.

The shed was a simple metal walled building, with a high roof. The door they found was unlocked, but as soon as Nicola started to open it, it squealed loudly. Shouts could be heard almost instantly to locate the noise.

"In quickly." Sharyn called.

A small variety of vehicles presented themselves. From a small industrial bulldozer, to open back trucks. In between however was an open sided rugged terrain jeep, looking much like a twentieth century hummer. Whilst Sharyn led Kelly over, Marina rushed over, and jumped into the driver's seat. The key was in the ignition, she pushed the clutch in, and ignited the engine.

She waited long enough for Sharyn to get into the back with Kelly, and Nicola jump in beside her before throttling it. The gear range was different than the average sports car, and she shift it up to second as she ran through the sheet metal door, tearing it half off its hinges, and bashing the rest out of the way before shifting up to third.

Spot lights were on, searching the ground for the intruders.

Marina didn't even think about the head lights, as her mask showed the road clear enough to navigate towards the front gate.

There was a roar of gun fire now, as the guards realised a vehicle was making an unscheduled exit from the prison.

Nicola returned fire at some of the guards, putting some of them down.

Posted at the gate ahead, were several guards, who could hear the jeep approaching at high speed. Having heard the gunfire already, they opened up on the approaching jeep without hesitation.

The windscreen took some of the rain of shotgun pellets and bullets, before finally breaking up into little pieces in front of Marina. "Keep your heads down." She called to her passengers, shifting past fourth gear now. She hoped it did have a 5th gear, and not a second reverse. The engine caught, pushing the speed up as she kept her head down.

The gates were two sets of wooden frames with cyclone fencing, between the mammoth stone walls, which broke apart on impact with the high speed jeep. The gun fire died down behind them as they made their escape from the compound.

"Is everyone all right?" Sharyn asked.

"Ok, here." Marina said, keeping the jeep on the dirt road.

"Fine here." Nicola said.

"Dr. Kelly?" Sharyn asked.

"I'm fine. That was quite a rush." He said.

"Yes. Good driving Lara." Sharyn said. "Where'd you learn to drive like that, at your age?"

"As I said before. I've been using my brother's computer for quite a while."

"You'll be a good asset to our team." Sharyn said.

"Well, you want to call down our ride, before I tip us into one of these potholes?" Marina complained.

"Sure." Sharyn pulled out the comm unit for the ship. "Hey bird eye. You want to come down and pick us up now?"

The Texan's voice came though, mingled with comm static. "So you girls made it through heh? I'll be down in a jiffy." His voice went away for a moment, then came back. "You girls are moving right?"

"Yep. We're putting a little distance between us and the prison, in case of pursuit." Sharyn said.

"Ok, stop in about five minutes near a clear area. I should be dropping on you by then. Cowboy out."

"Can you keep this bucket on the road for another five minutes?" Sharyn called to Marina.

"Sure." She replied, dodging a hole big enough to swallow a person whole.

Less than five minutes passed, and a bright light appeared above them, of glowing flames stretching out every few seconds as the ship above, descended towards them. Marina pulled the jeep to a stop at the edge of the road, killing the engine.

As soon as the ship landed, they hurried over, storming up the ramp before it had lowered to the ground completely.

"Let's get strapped in." Sharyn called, making sure Kelly was secured in a seat before getting one herself.

Seeing everyone settled, she called out "Punch it Cowboy."

The ship started to lift, although not as quickly as last time, but still fairly fast.

Marina saw Sharyn turn her stealth suit off, and did the same, removing her mask and hood.

"I thought you stunned men on sight." Kelly said, now seeing their uncovered faces.

"Only when she takes her suit off." Marina said, making an effort to lift her arm and point to Nicola.

She saw Kelly's eye's move down Nicola, "Oh." He said, seeing Nicola's form under the suit. He turned to look at Sharyn and Marina in turn. "I must say, you would all look stunning."

Marina didn't know what to say.

Sharyn replied for her, "Thanks Doc."

"How the ride back there." Cowboy's voice came over the speaker. "I tried to make it a little smoother for our passenger."

"Just great." Nicola said.

"Good, 'cause we're about to jump. You know the drill now. Just don't make too much of a mess of my hold."

The folding sensation in her stomach passed easier than last time, and Marina didn't want to throw up this time. It felt like mild dizziness which disappeared quickly after the third jump.

"Not so bad heh?" Came Cowboy's voice, "How's the passenger?"

Marina looked over, at Kelly. A stench wafted over her face, as she saw the contents of meal down his front.

"Not so good." Sharyn replied. "Looks like prison food doesn't do too well in jump."

The ship started to shake, as it entered the atmosphere. "You had better clean it you when we land. Scraping shit out of my ship isn't how I like to spend my down time, if you know what I mean." Cowboy said.

Sharyn wasn't able to form a reply, as the shaking reached its worst point during descent. Kelly was looking better now. He must be one of the many who suffered severely from hyperspace jumps. The ride slowly smoothed out, with only some jarring.

Chapter 9: Agents and players

"In approach to planet Wayside spaceport now." Cowboy's voice said.

Not much was said much on the way down, not until they landed safely at the port.

"There's a small party approaching for your guest." Cowboy said, as the engines wound down.

"Thanks." Sharyn replied. "It's time to leave." she told everyone as they got up from their seats.

"Aphrodite, stay with Kelly on the ship for a moment." Sharyn said. "Lara, come with me."

The both descended the bottom of the ramp to meet their reception party. Two men and a women. They looked like a team of players. After dismounting their cart, they approached Sharyn and Marina.

"Agents, we've come to take custody of the prisoner." The front one said, as they stopped a few metres away.

Sharyn understood who they wanted. But why was he asked for as a Prisoner? They'd freed Kelly from a prison, so no longer could be called a prisoner. Was he to be put back into a prison? "I'm sorry, but we don't have any prisoner with us, as you can see." Sharyn pointed to Marina and then herself. "We've finished our mission, now we'd like to return to HQ." Sharyn said, taking a few steps forward.

"Not so fast." The second male said, putting up a hand to stop her. "You don't mind if we search the ship do you?"

"Not at all." Sharyn replied, "It isn't our ship."

"Cunningham." The first one turned about to the female now. "Go make sure no one else is on board."

She moved off without any comment, and walked around them to the boarding ramp and on up. There was a silent staring match for about a minute between the four of them, until a crash sounded from inside the ship.

Cunningham came flying out of the hold, crashing down the ramp half way down, to slide the rest of the way to the ground.

Cowboy stepped out, and walked down the ramp smoothly as if he hadn't done a thing. "Agent Magnum, I'd appreciate it if you didn't leave any trash on my ship. You know I hate having to clean up."

"I'm sorry Cowboy, but these people believe a prisoner is aboard your ship." Sharyn said.

"No prisoners." Cowboy said. "Just this..." Cunningham was halfway up from the ground, when he pushed her over with a foot on her bottom, sending her sprawling to the ground again. "trash who was ripping my ship apart. Now I've got to clean it up."

"We're looking for prisoner, that was retrieved by this team." The first guy said, indicating Sharyn and Marina. He looked at them both, then realised something was wrong. "Where is the other member of your team?"

"Who?" Marina said.

The second guy, helped Cunningham off the ground as the first guy replied "The third person of your team. Three of you were reported to have boarded this ship."

"Does it look like three of us got off?" Sharyn interjected. When the guy shook his head, she raised her voice as she continued "That's because she died, and we couldn't complete our mission. You happy?"

"I apologise. We must have been misinformed that you were returning with the prisoner." He turned away with the other two without another word, and returned to their cart. In a moment they sped off.

Sharyn stood there and watched until after she couldn't see the cart any more, before turning back to the ship.

"What was that all about?" Marina asked. "Weren't we supposed to turn Kelly over to them?"

"Maybe..." Sharyn said stepping back up the ramp, "But I just didn't like how they kept referring to the *Prisoner*."

The main hold looked like someone had been pilfering through the lockers, with items strewn across the deck. Cowboy in behind them, and started throwing the loose item back into any locker.

"Aphrodite? It's clear now." Sharyn called.

No answer came back for a moment, until Cowboy spoke up. "They can't hear you, because they're in a storage locker under this deck. Give me a hand to get them out."

They both joined in, shifting the items into lockers, until the deck was clear. Cowboy pressed on a small panel, which popped up to reveal a keypad. He punched in a few digits until the pad lit up, then he stepped back. A small section of deck around the pad lifted up to reveal a double deck plate, and underneath that, a small cargo space where Nicola and Kelly were lying close together in the small space.

Without the side walls for support, they fell apart onto the deck proper.

"I must say, that's the most comfortable confinement I've ever suffered." Kelly said, picking himself up.

"Well your bones need some more flesh on them." Nicola complained.

Cowboy gave the displaced edge of the deck a push down, and it started to drop back down of its own accord, until it was perfectly flush again. Finally he kicked over the panel, coving up the keypad again.

"Well, my services are finished here." Cowboy said. "From here, you're own your own."

"Did I say thanks before?" Sharyn said, "Well I'm saying it again. Thanks for the help Cowboy."

"It's just my job." He replied. "Now get your asses out of here before I throw them out myself." turning back to the cockpit, he added once last comment "Though I might actually enjoy that."

They filed out the ship now, all four of them. No one waited for them this time, and neither was there a cart. The walk back to the nearest mag lift was some distance. Once in, they returned to Corps Local HQ directly.

An Official agent was waiting for them, to take Dr. Kelly into protection. They gave a short debrief to this agent, before they were by themselves again. Sharyn led them to the lift to return the equipment to stores.

"So those three people waiting for us were bogus agents?" Marina asked.

“Something like that.” Sharyn replied. “They were agents yes. But not from Corps. From what I know, there agents they go about pretending to be Corps agents, but they have their own agenda.”

“Cowboy seemed to know what was going on.” Nicola said.

“Yeah. Beneath that Womanising attitude, and Texan accent, there was a real player.” Sharyn revealed.

“An agent?” Marina asked.

“Not necessarily. Some people get to play as single player, with specialised missions. Cowboy got to be a pilot.”

The lift doors opened on the stores level. At the stores desk, a clerk returned their clothes, and took their equipment back after they changed.

“So we might see Cowboy again?” Nicola asked.

“That’s a possibility.” Sharyn replied.

Chapter 10: Spiderman

When Nicola logged off, she was still lying on the bed, in her dress. The same one she had worn out earlier that day. That was today? She thought. It seemed more like a week ago to her.

Time just seemed completely unreal in VR sometimes, that you can think you've been in there for a week, and really be only half a day.

That was probably why it was such a popular and growing form of entertainment. Just five minutes in a VR spa, and you feel like a new person.

It wasn't quite the same thing, but Nicola did feel like relaxing after the stress of the mission. It had been an intense experience.

She found the case and the manual there on the bed next to her. She stared at them, lying there, thinking that this was reality now.

After a moment, she picked up the manual and flicked through the first few pages on starting up.

It stated that *"To then initiate entry into the training mission, you need a physical door, one that can be opened. If the door is already open, close it, and then open it. If there is no door within your environment, just instruct your computer to 'Initiate training mission'."*

She flicked back a few pages, to read about creating a game character. *"The starting area is replicated off the player's current environment when they enter. This increases the sense of reality within the game, as the player enters it directly from what they consider to be real. The first time a player enters the starting area, they are given the opportunity to create their player character. This would be commonly done by using a body editor to create or load a character suitable for the gaming environment. It should be noted, that player characteristics are permanent. The body cannot be altered during game play, and neither in the event that a character dies. This is the same with character clothing, though some game areas will make available alternate clothes, depending on the circumstance. So please, pick your character appearance wisely."*

Nicola put the book down, wishing she'd read it earlier. Nobody had mentioned the dying part either. If she died, she still couldn't change her appearance? What does it mean to die in the game then?

She needed to relax a while, before her father came home. That is if he was coming home this evening. Sometimes he didn't.

The easiest form, was the spa. This time she decided to use the swimming costume. As she was about to step out of her room with towel in hand, she looked at the manual. Sitting in the spa was pretty boring by herself, so she grabbed the book for something to read as she soaked up the warm water.

Nicola spent the previous night reading the thin manual all the way through almost twice, so she understood it perfectly. Parts of it made sense, and other parts didn't.

One she hadn't realised, was that if she logged on again, she wouldn't necessarily play in a team with Sharyn and Marina again. It came with the need to form game teams, even when people from all over the world logged on from varying time zones. But there was the provision for requesting to be assigned to the same team as previously.

It made good sense to be able to play with your friends. But currently, she knew that Sharyn and Marina wouldn't be logged on. Sharyn had said she didn't get on-line access too often, but when she did, it was always at the same time each week.

And Marina's only problem was computer access. It was her brother's computer she was using, and he wasn't too happy if she hogged it all the time. So Marina had agreed to try to log on when Sharyn was on, so they could continue playing together.

Nicola had agreed to this also, but it left her bored meanwhile. Unless she tried the off-line training. She'd already completed her language tutorial for the day, as it's not that difficult to speak Spanish when living in Mexico, just her writing skills needed improving.

She jumped on her bed, and loaded up Troubled Realms, initiating the game. This time, she knew she was in the game, as her bedroom didn't change, but her clothing did. From the skirt and pink t-shirt she'd been wearing, to the towel and white t-shirt.

The game play automatically progressed from wherever she left off, unless directed otherwise. Nicola spoke her command now, to change this routine. "Load off-line training."

Nothing seemed to physically change, but she went and closed the bedroom door, and opened it again. Looking through she found a large open area room, decorated with various objects. A sign posted just inside, had *Training Centre* printed in large letters.

This was it, she told herself as she stepped inside. It looked like a large gymnasium, with various equipment, both strange and familiar covering walls, floor and ceiling. There were also additional doors on some of the walls, with words printed across them.

Before she could even read these, an image formed in the middle of the room, taking the appearance of a female face. "Hello, I'm Trinity, and welcome to the Corps training area."

To Nicola, she looked vaguely like Central.

"Do you wish to do some Corps training Aphrodite?" Trinity asked.

"Um, yes." Nicola said, unsure what she could do. "What sort of training areas do you have?"

"Main training areas consist of combat, vehicles, intelligence gathering, gymnastic control and specialist tools."

The first one sounded interesting enough, "What's in combat training?" she asked.

"Combat training consists of weapons familiarisation, and the use and defence against particular weapons."

"What in the vehicle training?" She asked.

"This consists of familiarisation and instruction in utilising any vehicles that you may come across."

"What's gymnastic control?"

"Training to increase body control for physical activities such as unarmed combat, assisted vertical ascent and close confines movement."

This was more like she wanted. Some physical challenges. "Let's do some vertical ascent." She asked.

"It is recommended you start assisted vertical ascent at the easiest level, and progress to harder levels as you successfully complete each."

"Sure, just show me where to start." Nicola said, waving a hand about.

"Initiating training protocols." Trinity said. The face hung there for a moment before it shifted towards one of the walls, and Nicola followed.

Nicola found herself standing at the base of a masonry wall. Its foundation stood further out than the rest of the training area, showing that it wasn't totally vertical like every other wall.

"First stage is bare rock face climbing. Ascent is made up a bare rough broken surface, at near vertical. This is done without any tools."

"Can I have a demonstration?" Nicola asked, not totally understanding.

"Running training model." Trinity said, and a figure appeared on the floor next to her, slightly muscular looking man as if he worked out often. Wearing only shorts, and some sort of shoes.

Nicola watched as the man walked up to the wall, and first hooked fingers up high into a narrow crack, then reached for another spot with the other hand. Then he brought up a foot, wedging the toe of a foot into another crack. From here, she watched as he climbed up the surface, finding holes in the wall to either wedge fingers or toes in, to hang from the wall. He didn't move fast up the wall, and sometimes moved down a step as he sought out a different place to get a hand hold. But eventually reached the ceiling, where he vanished on contact.

"Training model finished." Trinity reported.

"Ok, I've got the idea." Nicola said. "Give me some of those shoes, and I can start."

A set of shoes appeared on the ground next to her. These she pulled them onto her bare feet, finding they fitted her perfectly.

She followed the route of the model initially, getting her hand and foot holds between the rocks, and started up. A few times a foot slipped, but she held on with her hands as she regained her footing. Once or twice she looked down, and wondered what would happen if she slipped. She locked up at these points, but found she had to start moving again unless her arms became tired.

As she approached the ceiling, she didn't touch it until her head was almost against it. When she tried to, it disappeared, and reappeared 10 metres above her. Nicola was surprised, finding no ceiling all of a sudden, and lost her grip on the wall. Thoughts of falling to her death rushed through her mind as she toppled backwards, expecting to fall dozens of meters onto her head. Instead she hit the floor before she could let out a yelp of astonishment, finding her self on her back looking up at the ceiling. Falling off, she realised that the floor had caught up to her when she reached the ceiling, and all she had done was fall over.

Slowly she sat up, and looked over at the wall. She could half make out the last foot and hand holds she had been using as she tried to touch the ceiling. Seeing this, she understood now that the ceiling and floor had moved up with her progress. The ceiling had been a goal for her to reach, whilst the floor still presented the effect of getting further away. When she had achieved her goal it, a new one had been set. A person could probably do this all day, if they didn't tire first.

Nicola felt her arms, feeling the sore elbows from hitting the floor unprotected. Luckily that was all that she had hurt apart from her dignity.

"Next stage thanks." She asked.

Trinity explained the next part now, "Second stage is bare rock face climbing, progressing to a smooth brick face, with climbing grips. Running training model."

This time the demo guy appeared without Nicola asking. He was fitted with legs straps attached to little hand grips. These Nicola recognised right off, as she watched him stick a grip against the wall on a smooth part of a rock, then follow up with the other grip, higher than the last.

It was exactly the same as she had used during the last mission. This time she was able to watch the casual grace of the demo, as he went up the wall without too much effort.

Now that it wasn't black night, she wanted to do it again. "Ok, give me the climbing gear." She asked, before the demo finished.

She affixed the padded wraps about each knee with the velcro straps. These wrapped about two times, one strap above the knee, and one below. To each wrap, the grippers were attached by thin straps.

Knowing how to do this, and seeing what she was doing helped immensely. Up the wall she went one grip at a time, until she reached the ceiling. This time as the ceiling disappeared to appear further above, she took a look at the floor.

Whilst the ceiling had shifted, the floor was still getting further away. She decided to continue up, and saw the wall changing as she progressed.

The rocks were getting closer together and smoother as her feet didn't slip into the cracks any more. Further up she hit the ceiling again, and stopped to look down. The floor was even further away now. If she fell off a real building at this height, she knew she would die. It gave her some comfort that this wasn't real, and continued up.

The rocks now looked like large bricks, that fitted perfectly together, providing a smooth brickwork surface. She had no difficulty in placing the grips anywhere, including over the joins. When she reached the next ceiling, she'd had enough. Without looking down, so as not to frighten herself, she simply disengaged a grip and stepped off. The floor felt solid as she put her foot down, and then disengaged the other grip, and stood on both feet before asserting with her eyes that the floor was actually there.

She felt relieved as she let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Ok next stage." Nicola called.

"Third stage is smooth brick face climbing, with multi limb grips." Trinity explained, "Running training model."

This time Nicola looked closely at the grips on the demo man. He had a grip on each hand, affixed in a sort of glove. In addition to this, were two grips attached directly to each knee. A thin black cable ran from each knee grip, under the man's shorts, and crossing through a small harness on the man's shoulder's and down to each glove.

Nicola stood close to the wall and watched, as the man first attached one hand, and then the opposite knee to the wall. Next followed the other hand and knee further up.

Nicola was unable to see what the guy did with the glove, but the first hand and knee detached, and gripped further up the wall.

Nicola stood back to watch his progress up the wall. Looking at his out stretched arms and legs, she thought he was a little spread eagled. But this seemed to make it easier to stretch up higher every time he moved up.

This time, instead of heading straight to the ceiling, he turned about on the wall. Nicola marvelled as he started across the wall, and then turned down head first, back towards the floor. When he was close to the floor, both of his knees disengaged from the wall, and he tipped over, crossing his arms to land on the floor, where he then his disengaged his gloves. Stepping away from the wall, he disappeared.

"Training model finished." Trinity reported.

"Cool." Nicola commented. She was willing to give it a try. "Equipment please." she called.

Nicola had to remove the old grips and pads and left them on the floor near by as she first attached the knee grips. These attached by straps as the same as the other ones, except for the long cable coming out of each.

She took a look at the grip, which seemed a little different then the other grips. Experimentally she touched the grip surface, and she found out why. The grip rotated under her finger. This was why it was so simple to turn about. Both the gloved grips had the same ability to rotate as she looked at them each.

Continuing, to attach the gear, she pulled on the shoulder harness, and threaded the cables through, crossing them over her shoulders like the demo and but skipping around her makeshift skirt. Last on were the gloves. The fingers stuck out the ends of the open fingers, making it easy to snap the cables into sockets on the back of each glove. Looking the gloves over, she found two buttons on the side of each forefinger, labelled with "knees" and "hands".

She found she could press these with her thumbs, either individually or together.

This was new to her, so she decided just to experiment on the lower part of the wall first. Stepping up to the wall, she found that all the grippers stuck to the wall on contact. She depressed one button on her right hand, and found her left knee detached. When she released the button, it gripped against wall again. Pressing the other button, released her right hand, which gripped again when she released the button.

Now she pressed both buttons together, releasing hand and knee together. Stretching up, she released the buttons, and re-attached them to the wall. It was a little uncomfortable, with two limbs stretched out, so she pressed the buttons on the other hand, releasing that hand, and the opposite knee from the wall.

She had the idea now, as two diagonally opposite limbs always maintained contact with the wall, as she moved the other two up. It wasn't as easy as using only two grippers and she didn't move as fast, but Nicola found it was less tiring. When she hit the ceiling and it shifted up to it's higher position, she stopped to take a break. Actually she found it was easier to relax, and not feel like she was going to fall off.

Now she concentrated on turning. Whilst the demo man had made this look easy, she found it the most difficult part, as it felt like she was hanging only from the two limbs that were uppermost on the wall. Sometimes it was only one limb, as she shifted that forward.

She gave up on this after less than a metre, and turned towards the floor. This was the strangest of all, hanging upside down from her knees.

Looking down gave her vertigo, as around her hair she could see the floor as if it was the ceiling. Each time she detached the upped knee, she felt the jolt as she dropped down to where the other knee held her up, pulling on the straps holding the molecular bonders to her knee.

She didn't like hanging this way too long, and decided to turn around again, shifting one limb at a time around. She'd only turned a portion of the way, before deciding to try and swing around. She positioned her hands first, so they were already crossed. When she released her knees together, she found herself regretting the decision, closing her eyes and screaming as her body swung about to pendulum a few times before settling.

When Nicola found the motion had stopped, she opened her eye's to find her knees reattached to the wall below her. It was only a few metres now, which she descended carefully before disengaging from the wall.

The floor seemed like the appropriate place to settle as she sat down, then lay down, and stared up at the wall and ceiling.

"That was an experience like no other." She said, more to herself. "What could possibly come after this?"

Trinity interpreted as a request for the next stage, and started to speak "Forth stage is multi surface, with full limb grips. Running training model."

As Nicola watched the wall and ceiling changed, to become one surface, curving up and out from the wall in an arc, to become the ceiling in one smooth surface.

The demonstration man became visible at the bottom of the wall, so Nicola propped herself up on her elbows to watch. Instead of having just four grippers, he had additional grips on special boots.

She watched with intrigue as part way up the wall, he detached the hand grips, and proceeded up with just the knee and toe grips keeping him attached to the wall.

He did this for a few metres, demonstrating that climbing could still be done with your hands free, but still having to operate the gripper controls. After this, he continued up the wall using all grips, then up the curve to the ceiling.

Nicola could only lay back and watch as he crawled across the ceiling like a literal spiderman. After one circuit, he did the most amazing thing, which got Nicola to her feet instantly.

She watched intently as he detached both the knee and foot on one side, and reattached with just the sole of the foot, then followed with the other leg. Then the best part was when both he detached both hand grips, to hang from the ceiling by only his feet. Slowly, he made several steps along the ceiling, advancing to the opposite wall. Upon reaching it he disappeared.

"Training model finished." Trinity reported, as the words interrupted Nicola's thoughts on ceiling walking.

"I don't think I'll be doing that anytime soon." Nicola said, dropping her view from the ceiling. She began removing the climbing grips from her hands and knees, "What was that other training, unarmed combat wasn't it?"

Chapter 11: The Space League

Marina by chance, got the opportunity to do some training also, and ended up in favourite area, with the vehicles.

"Familiarisation, and basic instruction with air, land, sea and space transport." Trinity said.

"Give me a list of the main groups." Marina asked.

A display popped up, and a list of items appeared one at a time as Trinity read them off. "Air, fixed wing aircraft, rotary aircraft, subsonic jet aircraft, supersonic jet aircraft, commercial airliner and container jet aircraft, zero lift aircraft. Land, civilian, buses, b-double rig, towing semi trailers, half tracked and tracked vehicles, all terrain, multi terrain, and rail vehicles. Sea, speed boats, jet boats, hydro foils, high speed catamaran, luxury liner, commercial ships and submersible. Space, multi environment dropships, cargo lifters and haulers, single seat interceptors, space platforms, deep space probes, and capital warships."

The list was impressive, and some of the items surprised her. "Capital warships?"

Trinity interpreted her question as a command, and the room around her changed until it resembled a ship's bridge.

"Only two of the three known bridge designs of Capital warships are currently on file. The Wessex Class Monitor, as depicted here, and the Samurai Class Frigate. The third known ship is the Aries Class Battleship, which is mostly in use by the O.H.C.A."

Marina understood what she heard, but didn't know what the last thing was. "What's the O.H.C.A.?"

"The Orange High Church Assembly. The O.H.C.A. order was created in 2130, after the then Ordained Bishop Soma Tanto was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. Soma Tanto felt the churches of the time, no longer had their focus directed on the human population of Earth, and that their ethos was severely outdated.

The new order was conceived by Soma Tanto out of the need to focus on humanity itself and the growing environmental problems on Earth. The O.H.C.A. became one of the major contributors towards colonisation towards the end 21st century, developing the techniques and bringing together the resources for launching humankind towards the stars."

Marina was stunned by the amount of information. Since she had become involved with cars, she'd been reading what she could to find out more, including reading all sort of novels. But the Troubled Realms game, presented a clear underlying storyline to her. One that she was sure most players didn't know about, because they were only interested in been entertained by the game.

"Can I find out more on the history?" Marina asked.

"Off-line references contain over 180,000 articles, including images. More information resides on the Corps Global network." Marina knew this as the Troubled Realms Internet sites and VR4 networks. She wanted to find out more on it, but she was here now to do some training.

"Give me an introduction to uh..." She had to think for a moment. The last vehicle she'd seen in game was the ship they'd used to get off planet. "Dropships." she said finally. Some of the other seemed important also, like an aircraft, and a boat also. But right now, she felt that space craft were more important to know about.

"Multi environment dropships, come in many forms." Trinity said, as the scene around Marina changed to that of a space port, with dozens of drops ships arrayed around her. "From a civilian orbital skip, to an assault transport for fast entry and departures from planets. Most dropships like the assault transport come equipped with their own hyperspace jump engines, making interstellar travel a trivial thing for most people. All Corps controlled dropships are armed with varying weapons for self defence."

Marina waited a moment, making sure Trinity was finished. She'd already picked out a craft that was similar to the one she was in earlier. "Let's have a look at that one." She said, pointing out the sleek looking craft.

Marina returned to the training sessions between the weekly missions with Nicola and Sharyn, several times. Learning all about the different vehicles in Troubled Realms, and even how to operate a few of them.

Learning to do it right, came with patience, as she learnt when she tried to drive an advanced anti gravity tank. She'd had to borrow it when Nicola and Sharyn had been caught during a mission, and instead of driving it into the holding area, she'd left the place with a several new open fields, after levelling the surrounding buildings completely.

It had been almost as fun as jet skiing down some long dark tunnels, in chase of a mutant snake that had attacked a city in another mission.

Marina dwelled on the fun she'd had since starting the game that her Grandparents had bought her. She'd have to call and thank them.

How many missions has she played now?

She counted them, the first one to break out the doctor from the prison. Escorting a VIP on a tour of a new complex. Then the stealing of information from a corporation where she used the tank. After that was a search and rescue of a family on some perpetually dark planet, and then the search and destroy of the huge killer snake. It was just lucky that they'd led it towards an oil tanker that had run aground, and toasted the snake.

That was five, and last week the sixth mission. It had been a strain on her stomach. Nicola had puked a fake lunch when they found the remains of several people whilst helping to recover a ship that had crashed.

It had given her a bad dream the other night, making her wake up in a sweat. The dream had only shown her the bodies again, in the decomposed state. She had put it behind her, reminding herself it was only a game, and no one had actually died.

But her mother must have heard her during the night and asked her about it the next morning, demanding that Marina tell her what happens in the next game.

Well, she'd get the chance to tell her all about it soon, as her brother told her about the message from Sharyn.

Chapter 12: The milk run

Sharyn had been waiting in the conference room for about five minutes before the first of them showed up. It was Nicola.

"Glad you could make it Aphrodite." Sharyn said.

"It was that, or find someone else to play with." Nicola replied, taking a seat. "But some people seem to lose all self control around me, and nothing gets done." Nicola looked about the room now. "Lara not here yet?"

"I sent a message for her first." Sharyn replied.

There was a short silence between them. Sharyn felt uncomfortable, so broke it by questioning Nicola "I haven't ask you before, but what sort of games have you played on-line?"

"Um, there's been several. Some free access stuff on the VR4 networks, but some commercial releases too. The usual type interactive adventure games." Nicola replied.

"Could you tell me a bit more?" Sharyn asked. Nicola gave her a strange look, like a caged animal. "I don't get to play any on-line stuff, except for this, so enlighten me."

Nicola seemed to relax a bit at the added comment, and started to rattle off game names, and short explanations of what they involved.

She must have listed almost a dozen games before the door swung open as Maria arrived.

Marina's explanation was a little rushed, as she took a seat "Sorry, but my brother was in the middle of a game, and I had to wait until he'd finished. He was a little angry, but he'd promised that I could have access now."

"That's ok. Aphrodite was explaining to me some of the other great games she's played on-line." Sharyn said. "So let's find out what we are doing today."

Sharyn pressed buttons on the table, and simultaneously the room dimmed as the centre display lit up with the face of Central.

"Good evening ladies. Nice to see your lovely faces again. I trust you are well rested from your last mission?"

"We are." Sharyn said.

"Raring to go." Nicola added.

"Ok then, I have good news and bad news." Central said.

"Who hasn't had that problem before?" Nicola said.

"Well, I don't really know." Central said, "But I have to tell you the bad news first. There is only one mission available at the moment."

"So what's the good part?" Marina asked, hopeful.

"It's a simple escort mission. A milk run, they used to call it. Does milk run? Or do they pour it down hills to make it run?"

Sharyn interrupted the computer's dialogue, "Just tell us about the mission Central!"

"Oh, well you have transport an important Corps data core. Part of me actually, and some other information also. You'll take it up to a Samurai Class Frigate called the Flux Point. Weird name. Pity they don't call them after important dead people any more. Getting back, you'll mind the data core during transit, but make use of time on board to familiarise yourself with the workings of the Capital warships. The Flux Point will make several stops before you have to disembark with the data core at the new Corps headquarters on planet Farside. You can re-station yourselves there permanently, or return here on the next available ship."

"Where do we pick up this data core?" Sharyn asked.

"It should be arriving there any moment." Central said. "When you take it topside, a military dropship from the Flux Point should be waiting for you."

The doors to the room opened then, spilling light into the dark room. "Here's the data core." Central said, before adding "Remember, it must make it to the Corps HQ."

Two guys marched in, and placed a large crate on the table, and left again without a word.

"Here's the mission specs now. I'll leave you to it." Central said, and signed off.

They all read through the details, which said little more than what Central told them, except for details on the Flux Point, and their eventual destination, complete with grid coordinates.

Chapter 13: Welcome aboard

"So this Frigate is a big space ship." Nicola stated, as she carried the crate with the data core. It wasn't very heavy, only bulky, with its size slightly impeding her movement as she held it in front of her by its handles..

"Yeah, it's this huge ship with lots of guns and stuff. It's the second largest known design." Marina said, from her position beside Nicola.

Sharyn led the way through the corridors to the lift.

"What the biggest then?" Nicola asked.

"The Aries Class Battleship." Marina replied. "But it's only used by this church crowd."

"A church with a battleship. How wonderful." Nicola said flatly.

"Not just a Battleship, but a fleet of them." Sharyn added.

"Have you seen one?" Nicola asked.

"Only in the training modules, not in the game environment." Sharyn said. "So far I haven't been involved with missions with the High Church."

"So this is one of those missions we don't get any equipment?" Nicola asked, diverting the topic from churches and religions.

"Usually we get some sort of equipment, but this time it looks like we don't get anything." Sharyn replied, then added "Except that crate. We'll be on a fully manned frigate though, with hundreds of people, so equipment doesn't seem necessary. You know, if you hadn't been donated some clothes, you'd be doing this mission with only a towel and a crate to cover you."

The lift came to a stop as the doors opened up. They stepped out, and were quickly surrounded by heavily armed soldiers.

"I can see your point now." Nicola said to Sharyn.

The one with slightly more markings on his shoulders stepped forward, "Marine Sergeant Graham from the Flux Point to escort you and your equipment aboard our ship, Agents."

"Thankyou." Sharyn said, "Lead the way Sergeant."

The Marines fanned out around them, keeping well apart as the Sergeant led the way at a brisk march across the port's marked surface to a nearby craft.

It wasn't like the sleek craft Nicola remembered from the rescue mission, or any of the other dropships they'd used, but a large squat shaped ovoid, with an odd surface.

They were led up the boarding ramp by the Sergeant, before the rest of the squad followed up with the sound of many feet in step.

Sharyn helped Nicola strap down the crate on a free seat, before taking a seat on each side and strapping in.

Not a word was said from either the Marines, or the dropship crew as the ship lifted up from the space port at a steady rate.

"Could we get a look at the ship before we arrive?" Nicola asked.

"I'm afraid that's not possible ma'am." The Sergeant replied, "We're on a tight schedule, and the Flux Point can't wait for us to sight see."

"I just want to have a look as we approach." Nicola added in argument.

"The pilot's screen will be only vantage, but the cabin is off limits to everyone during flight, except flight personnel. That includes me." He replied.

"That's ok then. Maybe I'll get to see it another time." Nicola said.

"Sorry ma'am." The sergeant added.

The ascent was longer than usual, as the dropship had to leave planetary orbit to reach the Frigate.

All of them kept quiet until after the dropship landed in the main hanger. Stepping down the ramp, they were greeted with the sight of the planet through an atmospheric shield. The shield trapped air within the hanger, preventing it from depressurising, but still allowing large objects such as the dropship, to pass through.

"We welcome you onto the Flux Point, Agents." Said a small man in a Naval dress uniform as he walked up to them.

Nicola had to put the crate down as he shook each of their hands. "I'm Commander Lygetta. Captain Anthorp apologises that she couldn't welcome you personally aboard, but she does have a ship to get under way."

"Thankyou Commander for having us." Sharyn said, "These are Agent's Lara, Aphrodite, and I'm Agent Magnum."

"If you could follow me, I'll take you to your temporary quarters." Lygetta said, leading the way. "We don't often have visitors on board, but it is a pleasure to meet such beautiful women, especially Agents."

Lygetta led them down a main corridor, with its oddly surfaced wall, and various pipes along the ceiling. They ducked through pressure doors every so often before turning off into a few side passages and finally into a cabin.

"Since you won't be on board long, I won't give you the extended tour, but the head is in here if you wish to freshen up." Lygetta indicated through an open doorway, "One shift will be rotating off after the next jump for meals. If you wish to join us, we would be honoured by your presence in the mess hall which is fifty metres aft of here." He pointed back down the side passage towards the rear of the ship, "And if you need anything else, you can use the ship communications here to ask for assistance. If there isn't anything else, I'll return to the bridge now."

"No thanks Commander." Sharyn replied.

After Lygetta closed the hatch behind him, Nicola put the crate down on the floor, and slumped down on a bed.

The cabin was small, with two single beds, and no chairs. Not exactly guest quarters, but it was an operational war ship and not a pleasure yacht.

"So who's up for some exploring?" Marina asked.

"Not me." Nicola said, "I'm going to sit here and relax for a while. I've been carrying this crate." Nicola kicked the box in question.

"Don't damage it." Sharyn snapped, bending over to check the crate.

"Can't." Nicola replied. "It's a solid state data core, impact rated to 242 Newtons." She gave it another kick, just for emphasis, "Says so on the top."

A siren cut in then, with a thin wailing, pitching higher and lower before been replaced by a voice, "Initiating jump procedures in one minute. Secure for transit."

A jump through hyperspace was about to be made. Nicola just sat there as Marina and Sharyn sat on the other bed.

When a minute had gone by, the siren sounded again and then they jumped. The whole ship seemed to compress around them at first before the effect caught up with them, dragging them through into another area of space.

A different siren sounded now, signalling completion of jump.

"Well, that was different." Marina said.

"This is the first time I've done it on a big ship." Sharyn said. "It feels differently depending on the size of the ship, and how far we jump."

"What happens when we jump further?" Nicola asked.

"It seems to happen longer, and it makes me feel intensely more queasy in the stomach."

"So we didn't jump very far." Marina said.

"I don't think so. But we will be here for a short while, so let's have a look around."

"What about this." Nicola said, reaching for the crate with her foot, which was now slightly out range.

"It should be safe enough in here, with a ship load of Marines." Sharyn said, "And I don't want to baby sit it when we visit the mess hall."

Chapter 14: A real mess of things

Together they ventured into the mess hall, finding many people, both Marines and Navy personnel alike, but there was some division between the Marines and Navy personnel, as each stuck to their own tables.

A line was steadily growing in front of the servery, which they joined by grabbing some empty trays and stepping in behind a short Marine. As they passed through, they were automatically served by the staff, having half recognisable food dumped in the small hollows in the tray.

Nicola having been served first, lead the way over to an empty table, where they set their trays down to eat.

"Reasonable food." Sharyn commented after a couple of bites.

"Would you believe this actually tastes like chicken?" Nicola said, holding up a forkful of unidentifiable meat.

They'd been eating for less than a minute, when a voice interrupted their meal. "Look what we got out our table boys!"

Marina could see the "boys" approaching in the edge of her vision, and turned to look. The boys, all eight of them, weren't young, and neither were they all men, as three were women.

"Well, look here what we got out our table." One woman said. "Some carrion."

"Nah, they're called dead carcasses aren't they?" One guy objected.

"No it was more like cadaver, or corpse." Another said, as they surrounded the trio.

"Just ignore them." Sharyn said, trying to eat her food.

"Damn corpse people are weak as pigs." A woman said.

"These here corpse squatters are worst. They as soon as piss themselves screaming when someone starts shooting at them."

One Marine leaned down on the edge of Sharyn's tray with his hand, sending her food flying across the table, as another poured a drink down Marina's front, soaking straight through her clothing to her skin.

Marina had listened to all jibes and derogatory comments, trying to ignore them, but this was the last straw. At school she had to put up with other kids calling her names behind the teacher's back, but she couldn't put up with this from adults.

She reacted to the wet drink by standing up, forcing the fluid to splash to the table and floor, and the chair she had been sitting on to fly back into the Marine who'd poured the drink on her.

"Hey!" The Marine called, dropping his tray as the chair smashed into his legs. This was all the Marine's needed to start a fight. He kicked the chair to the side, and with both hands now empty, grappled with Marina's back.

The muscled arms wrapped around her neck and stomach, lifting her off the deck. Marina struggled with the arm around her neck trying to pull it away, as she fought for breath. She couldn't see what either Nicola or Sharyn were doing, but she could hear the loud crashing of furniture that was slowly drowned out by the drumming of the blood in her head.

She stopped her struggles, relaxing her body. After a moment, she felt herself slipping to the floor as she was released from the Marine's grip.

When she was down, she let herself drop all the way to her hands, before turning about to see her attacker.

He looked a little surprised to see her still conscious, and was even more surprised when she lashed out with one leg, striking at his groin.

He moved a little faster, and all she hit as his thigh. But already she had her other leg sweeping out, sending him crashing to the floor.

Using the table, Marina got to her feet a little unsteady, as the blood started flowing again.

Her attacker was back on his feet again also, staring at her with rage in his eyes as he approached.

The body Marina had acquired for game playing, had characteristics which she had left in from its original creators. Some she had thought might be useful later. These came into play now, as she held onto the edge of the table behind her and with gymnastic grace, swung both feet up over her head. With precision, she smashed the heel of her leading foot into the Marine's face on the way up, and used the trailing foot to swing the rest of the way up on to the table top.

From here she commanded a better position. She didn't have time to look around as the Marine came forward again. This time he avoided her leg, and grabbed it in mid arc, holding her up on one foot. The table rattled as she dropped down, and swung her other booted foot out.

The Marine ducked to avoid it, but lost his grip on her leg as he went underneath the table.

Marina got back up, unable to see where he went. She looked about now, and saw Sharyn and Nicola been held by four of the Marines, with their arms jammed behind their backs.

"He's under the table!" She heard Sharyn call out, before the surface she stood on, suddenly heaved up.

It came naturally to want to stay on top, as she scrambled up the ascending table, past spilt food and trays, as it rose towards the ceiling. As she reached the ceiling, just as unexpectedly as it rose, the table dropped back to the floor, shuddering through her.

The table continued to tremble under her, and only when an alarm started and the lights in the mess hall changed to a red hue, did she realise something was wrong.

The Marine attacking her, as well as the ones holding Sharyn and Nicola, suddenly dispersed, as with almost everyone else in the mess hall.

"What's happening?" Marina called.

"I don't know!" Sharyn replied over the alarms.

Marina got down off the table, and found the deck was also trembling. Very quickly, the mess hall was almost vacated now, with the last few personnel almost out the doors.

"Was it something we did?" She asked.

"Let's find out." Sharyn said, leading towards the way they came in.

The hallway outside was a hive of activity, as people went left and right. Troops of Marines poured past in groups, all weighted down by combat gear.

Sharyn was able to get the attention of a Naval guy who was hurrying past, "What's happening?"

"We're at battle alert." He said, "You should return to your quarters." he added before hurrying off.

They could only stare at each other for a moment, then entered the rush of people, heading back to their assigned cabin.

Chapter 15: Some real action

Sharyn finally pushed her way free of the chaos in the narrow passageways, opened their cabin door for Nicola and Marina to enter behind her.

The trembling in the deck was still evident. If it wasn't for the battle alert, she'd swear it was all the moving people causing the trembling.

Marina stood about, letting her clothing dry off, as there wasn't anything else to put on. "So what now?" she asked.

"Let's try to call the commander." Nicola offered. "He said to call for any assistance."

"He did." Sharyn said. "But what do we need?"

"Explanations." Nicola replied.

"Yeah, like what's going on." Marina added.

"I'll call then." Sharyn said, pushing a button on the device on the wall.

A voice came through, "This is the comms station, Lieutenant Hornly speaking."

"This is Agent Magnum, I'm after Commander Lygetta or the Captain." Sharyn said.

"I'm sorry but the Captain and the Commander are busy at the moment." Hornly said. His voice came back again, "Did you say Agent?"

"Yes, Agent Magnum. I'm with Agent's Lara and Aphrodite." Sharyn replied.

"Agents, could you please stay in your cabin for the moment, as the Commander has sent someone down to escort you up to the bridge." Hornly said.

"Ok, but could you tell us what this battle alert is, and why the deck is shaking?" Sharyn asked.

"Apparently another ship entered orbit on the opposite side of the planet, and attacked major installations on the surface below." Hornly said.

"And the deck?" Sharyn asked again.

"We've had to break orbit to manoeuvre around the planet, using our main engines. They tend to shake the ship a fair amount." Hornly said. "Your escort should be there soon, so just sit put until then."

"Ok, thanks." Sharyn said, turning off the comm device. "You hear all that?" She said, turning about.

"So we get to watch a firefight from the bridge." Marina commented.

"Seems that way." Sharyn said.

"You sure put up a good fight." Nicola said to Marina.

Sharyn dropped on one of the beds. "We didn't have a chance. Two of those muscled freaks grabbed me before I could move from my chair."

"You're telling me." Nicola said. "My arms still feel like they're attached to my back."

"But Lara sure made a mess of that guy's face." Sharyn said.

"The boots did help." Marina said.

"Uh huh, and some of those fancy moves too." Sharyn said.

"Wish I had some boots, I could have given the two on me, some really sore legs." Nicola said.

"It'll teach to you to read manuals, won't it?" Sharyn said.

"Yes ma'am!" Nicola gave a neat salute, then jumped up to land on her back next to Sharyn, making the whole bed bounce for a moment.

"This mission has been pretty boring so far." Nicola said, staring at the ceiling.

"I wouldn't speak too soon, it's liable to get nasty." Sharyn replied.

"Like what?" Marina asked.

"Oh, I don't know, since this is my first time on one of these war ships too."

"Well, if something doesn't happen soon, other than a fist fight, I'm gonna find something to do." Nicola said.

Sharyn was going to repeat Marina's question "Like what?", but the clanging on the cabin door interrupted them.

"Speak of the devil." Marina said.

Sharyn gave a small laugh, figuring her question had already been answered, "Come on in, were all decent." She yelled.

"Speak for yourself." Nicola said adjusting her makeshift skirt, as the latches opened, and the door swung open.

A cute looking navy guy stood in the hatchway. "I'm Lieutenant Foxstone. Sorry to disturb you, but the Captain requested that I should escort you all up to the bridge."

"Some action at last." Nicola said, sitting up and turning about, to look at the Lieutenant the right way up.

"Lead the way." Sharyn said, getting up off the bed.

"What about the data core?" Marina asked.

"It should be safe enough, we're only going to the bridge." Sharyn said. She turned to the Lieutenant, "We are only just going to the bridge aren't we?"

"I've only been instructed to escort to the bridge. That is where my orders end." He replied.

"Doesn't sound like much fun." Nicola said crossing her arms, trying to look annoyed.

"We'll leave it here then." Sharyn said, approaching the doorway.

The Lieutenant stepped out of the way, and verified they were all following before turning about and leading the way to a lift.

"So what's happening at the moment?" Sharyn asked.

"We've had to break orbit to advance on the attacking ship. We hope to come around one of the poles before identifying it."

"Why can't you jump straight there?" Nicola asked.

"The distance is too short to make a successful jump." Foxstone said, "And the planet is also in the way."

"What about jumping out system, and back in again?" Sharyn asked.

"That is a good idea, except the shortest jump we could make, would put us outside of sensor range." Foxstone said. "So we wouldn't know what the attacking ship is until we jumped right on top of it. By coming around the planet, we will be able to identify it and form a plan of attack before getting in weapons range."

They reached a lifts now. One was ready when Foxstone pressed a call button, and the doors swished open immediately. Once they were all inside, he pressed the button for the bridge and the lift rose quickly.

"I thought the Frigate was the biggest war ship available." Marina said. "How much planning do you need?"

Foxstone turned to reply, "The Samurai Class Frigate's aren't the biggest, as there is the Aries Class Battleship. But we can encounter all sorts of other ships, from smaller gun ships, to ships modified to carry fighters. The ship we detected, could actually be a group of smaller ships, a real match for the Flux Point. So we have to know what it is to know how to deal with it."

The lift doors swished open as they reached the bridge. Lieutenant Foxstone led them onto the bridge, to a well built woman sitting amongst dozens of screens.

He came to attention, "Captain, The Corps Agents are all here as requested."

Captain Anthorp broke her attention away from the screens. "Thankyou Lieutenant, you're dismissed."

He turned about, giving them one last look before retreating to another part of the bridge.

Anthorp lifted herself from the chair. "Agent's, I'm sorry I could not see you earlier, but I did have a few things to take care of, and there is a small period of quiet right now." She said.

"There always is a quiet before the storm." Sharyn replied.

"Quite right." The Captain said, extending her hand, "Agent?"

"Magnum." Sharyn replied.

Anthorp turned to each of the others in turn, shaking their hands.

"Agent Aphrodite." Nicola said.

"Agent Lara." Marina said.

"I heard of a little incident in the mess hall with one of my Marines. Which one of you gave him the broken jaw?"

"Broken jaw?" Marina said.

"Yes, broken. But don't worry, I've heard the whole story in the mist of all this, and he and his accomplices will be severely punished. I don't run this ship to have my crew picking fights with guests."

"You won't punish them too bad?" Marina asked.

"I guess you were the one that gave him the new jaw?" Anthorp said. "No I won't punish them too bad. They'll be put on repair detail, so if we get any damage, they'll be first outside the ship to repair any hull breaches. The Marines are trained for all environments, but zero gee work still takes a lot of muscle."

Anthorp led them over to the main view screen. The bridge, unlike water borne vessels, was placed in the centre of the ship's superstructure, where it was well protected from outside attack. So the main view screen wasn't a physical screen to the outside of the ship, but a big image from array's of sensors placed all over the ship's hull, to crate a real interpretation of what was in front and around the ship.

Taking up most of the screen, was a blackness filled only with stars. On the bottom edge, was a milky grey and blue planet, half lit, covered in swirls of dark clouds.

"I thought you should be here when we caught sight of our prey." Anthorp said. "To have another vessel jump into orbit and attack a planet with us nearby, is just inviting us to have it out. We should almost be in sensor range." She turned to an officer at some controls, "Bring up the overlay."

Grid lines appeared over the planet surface, providing reference points. In view was the northern pole of the planet. Also on the planet, was a red cube pictured inside, but near the edge of the planet with the simple label "Enemy ship/s" attached.

Sharyn watched as the cube crept closer and closer to the edge of the planet, and then over the edge. It was still a cube for a few more seconds as the ship's computers identified it, and changed the shape into the outline of a large vessel. The label also changed, identifying the vessel to those who didn't recognise the outline, as an Aries Class Battleship.

Chapter 16: David and Goliath

"Christ!" Someone said at one of the consoles.

"Get an ID on it, I want to know who's it is." The captain said, leaving her guests alone to return to her seat.

"No response on ship Ident signal, they're running unmarked." a console operator said. "I can only confirm that it's a standard Aries Class Battleship, with twice as many weapons as us, and no fighter escort."

"Then get me a visual Ident, markings, serial number, anything!" Anthrop said.

"Not picking up anything on high res scanners." The hull has been scrubbed clean."

"Damn!" Anthrop exclaimed, "Ok then, hail them."

A few seconds passed, before a response came back from one of the operators, "We're getting no response. Trying alternate frequencies and side channels. Still no response."

"Captain!" Another operator yelled out, "They're breaking orbit."

"Plot their trajectory, I want to know where they're headed." Anthrop replied calmly.

The operator came back almost instantly, "Uh, captain, they're headed this way."

"Picking up energy signatures consistent with weapons charging." Another operator cut in. "Forward weapons ports have opened on the Battleship."

"Sound the red alert, and go to battle stations." Anthrop said. The lights in the bridge dimmed down, to a reddish glow. The sound of warning klaxons could be heard through the hull of the ship.

"Launch the ready fives." Anthrop commanded, "Then get every other fighter we have space borne as soon as possible."

"Yes ma'am!" The Air Group Commander replied, and started speaking to his console.

"Helm, plot us a course away from the planet, and broadside to the battleship. I want to open up with most of our weapons at long range."

"Aye captain!"

The trembling under their feet changed in pitch, as the Flux Point turned from its course, angling up from the planet surface.

The trembling turned to a violent shaking for a moment, as some alarms went off on consoles.

"What was that!" Anthrop yelled.

"Missiles captain!" One of the operators said. "They must have been dumb fired, with no target lock."

"Do a full spectral sweep, I don't want any more missiles hitting us." Anthrop ordered.

"More missiles inbound." The operator said.

"Take them out at short range. I want them to think they're hitting us." Anthrop said.

"Engaging missile defence systems at 100 metres." The ship seemed to rumble under their feet. "Successful destruction of missiles. None impacted on the hull."

"Open fire with all weapons at optimum range." Anthrop ordered.

"Ship approaching optimum range in 10 seconds. All weapons at the ready."

The operator counted down, until he reached zero, when various weapons systems opened up, firing everything from phased particle projectors, high velocity depleted uranium slugs, and long range guided missiles.

All hit the target. On the big screen, was an enhanced image of the prow of the battleship, taking most of the damage. When the image cleared enough, everyone saw that the damage done was nothing but some black scoring on the hull of the approaching ship.

"Send a data packet to HQ." Anthrop said. "Inform them that we have encountered an Aries Class Battleship bearing no significant markings, and have engaged it. And that I request for reinforcements. Attach our coordinates before you send it."

"Data packet sent Captain!" an operator responded.

"Good, keep those weapons firing!" Anthrop said.

"I've got power spikes! It's going to fire!"

"Helm! Evasive manoeuvres!" Anthrop yelled, as beams of energy lanced out from the Battleship, hitting all over the Frigate.

The crew on the Battleship wasn't as accurate, as some shots missed their mark, but others scored directly, shaking the ship violently.

"Damage report!"

"We've got minor hull damage, and one ventral gauss cannon damaged."

"CAG, how's our fighter cover?" Anthrop called.

"All fighters reporting in, and fully deployed." He responded.

"Good, it's time to bring it in up close and personal. Helm bring us about, and line up our main weapon on the Battleship. They are going to regret mixing it with a more advanced ship."

The rattling and whining of the ships weapons continued to sound, as they cycled over as fast as possible before firing again, and again. This was dispersed with the pounding they received back as the Battleship returned fire.

"Redirect the power systems to the main weapon." Anthrop ordered.

"Main weapon charged and ready Captain!"

"Find a good soft spot on the front, and fire!" Anthrop called.

As the weapon discharged, it made a long screeching sound as terra watts of energy was released across space, to impact on the Battleship. The effect was instantaneous, boiling off the heavy armour and creating a blackened rip in the front.

"Focus all our weapons into that hole, and let's make sure they feel it."

The two ships were closing now, and firing the main weapon a second time became impossible as the Flux Point had to change course, or risk ramming the immense Battleship.

"Remember people, while they may have more guns, ours are better. Helm, if any armour look like it's weakening, roll it away. It'll also give some of the weapons a chance to cool off. CAG, send your fighters in."

Sharyn, Nicola and Marina had stood at the back of the bridge as the battle started, but as the two ships opened fire at one another now, at close quarters, they could sense the foreboding from the crew.

They could hear the reports coming back to the Captain from the rest of the ship, as one thing or another was damaged or destroyed.

"This isn't looking good." Nicola said, as the ship shuddered under her feet.

"It sounds like the engines have been hit." Sharyn said. Between the violent shaking, she could no longer feel the deck vibrating with its usual hum from the engines.

"Oh, shit!" Nicola yelled, as her feet rose off the floor. "Where's the gravity." She waved her arms in an attempt to return to the deck, but the lack of gravity made arms swing up quickly, causing Nicola to float towards the ceiling where she found a handle to grab.

"Cool." was all Marina said, as she grabbed one of the hand holds on the wall.

"All hands, prepare for boarding parties!" The Captain's voice boomed throughout the ship.

"Agent Magnum." Captain Anthrop said, turning in her chair as she rechecked her belt. "I suggest you take one of our drop ships, and leave the Flux Point before it becomes impossible. Your cargo is of importance, and more so not to fall into the hands of these pirates."

"Will do Captain." Sharyn said, reorientating herself towards the lift. "It's been a real experience."

"I hope we meet again under better circumstances." Anthrop said.

"So do I, Captain." Sharyn replied, with due concern.

The lift door opened, and they pulled themselves into the lift, drifting into each other's way.

"Which floor did we come from?" Marina asked, looking at the buttons over her head.

"We came from Level 12." Nicola said. "I saw it before what's his name..."

"Foxstone" Sharyn supplied.

"Yeah him, I saw it on that display where it has bridge right now."

Marina looked at the buttons a bit longer.

"It's the right level, go on press it!" Nicola said.

Marina hesitated for another moment in the free fall, then pressed the button.

They all regretted it, as the lift moved downward in the zero gee of the ship, all of them hit the ceiling. It took a few moments to untangle themselves with the upside down perspective.

"I thought so!" Was all Marina could say.

"Everyone, grab onto something." Sharyn said, as the lift reached its maximum speed and they went weightless again. Inevitably the lift slowed, causing them all to be pulled towards the floor.

The handholds within the lift proved valuable in stopping them from impacting onto the floor of the lift when it came to a halt.

"Can we get out of this tin can now?" Nicola said, bumping into Sharyn as she turned about inside the lift.

"We're here now. No more lifts." Sharyn said, as the doors pulled open.

"Good, cause my towel is slipping." Nicola said. "Gravity is so useful sometimes."

Sharyn led off, pushing off deck and ceiling, back towards their guest room to get the data core.

Nicola looked at the walls, seeing the strange surface makes sense from her new perspective.

"Magnum?" Nicola asked.

"Yeah?"

"The walls, they're handholds." She said, grabbing them, and pulling herself along.

Sharyn stopped, to drift in the middle of the corridor, and watched as Nicola pulled herself past, with Marina following closely behind, imitating her.

Sharyn joined in, climbing instead along the opposite wall. She took the lead from Nicola at the first intersection, picking the correct corridors back towards their room.

The reason for two walls with handholds became evident when some of the ship's crew came from the opposite direction. Sharyn had to move to the other wall, to allow passage, as it was a two way corridor.

They were almost there, when they heard, more then felt the thump through the ship.

"What was that?" Nicola asked. "They're sealing the hatches!"

"No, we've been boarded." Marina said.

"Let's not waste time then." Sharyn said, picking up the pace. The passing crew showed the fastest way to move, by only touching the wall now to give a boost, and correct drift, otherwise they almost flew along.

Sharyn got to their door first.

"Wait here, I'll get the crate." Sharyn said, pulling herself in.

Nicola turned about, propping herself in the doorway, and fixing her towel yet again. It was almost impossible to keep it on now without the gravity.

She was thinking that maybe she should take it off, and just tie it around herself so she wouldn't lose it, when Sharyn called to her. "Head's up!"

Nicola reacted in time to catch the crate, but the momentum caught her, sending her flying back into the opposite wall.

"Ouch!" Nicola pulled herself from the wall, checking for broken bones. "Watch where you throw that thing!"

"Sorry." Sharyn said, appearing at the doorway, "But we are expecting company."

"Yeah, and I expect to know where we're going." Nicola said, collecting the crate which had come to a near standstill.

"This way." Marina said, pushing off one wall and back up the corridor they just came down, and turning off down one side part of the way.

Sharyn came next with Nicola following with the crate.

Nicola started moving with the crate, pushing it ahead of her as she moved to catch up. Initially it started ok, until first the crate started bouncing off the ceiling and floor, and then she couldn't catch it as it moved too fast.

She kicked hard off the walls, using both her legs and arms to catch it before it hit something, or hit Sharyn.

"Magnum!" She called out, seeing the inevitable.

"Got it!" Sharyn called back, catching the crate as she held on the wall. Sharyn waited until Nicola caught up.

"You've lost your towel."

"Bugger." Nicola said, realising it now. She turned about to see the towel far back down the corridor where the chase had started with the crate.

Nicola wanted to get the towel back, when the familiar sound of weapons echoed through the corridor.

"No time now." Sharyn said, pushing off the wall to follow Marina. "I'll stop the crate, just pass it along."

Nicola did just that, pushing the crate ahead of herself, and letting Sharyn stop it. As she caught up to the crate, Sharyn moved ahead to stop the crate again.

The sound of weapons continued to echo from other locations within the ship. If it was on their level, they didn't know.

Sharyn came to a stop next to Marina, who waited at the end of the corridor at a set of closed doors. Next came the crate, and then Nicola.

"You lost your towel." Marina commented.

"Yeah, I know. I ditched it." Nicola replied.

"Whatever for?" Marina asked.

"Maybe I like this look!" Nicola said, haughtily.

"Knock it off. We need a ship." Sharyn said. She looked from Nicola to Marina. "Well?"

"Oh, we're at the hanger now. I wanted you both here before I opened the door." Marina said, working the controls. "It's a big room, and I didn't think you wanted to drift about in it."

The doors triggered, and slid apart to reveal an almost empty hanger. Inside they found only two dropships, with hanger doors closed.

"Let's take that one." Sharyn said, pointing towards the closer of the two. She pulled herself inside the doorway, positioning her feet on the wall, and then pushed off. She drifted across the empty floor for almost half a minute, before catching herself on the hull with her hands.

"Lara, come across. We'll have to catch the crate when Aphrodite throws it."

Marina copied Sharyn's manoeuvre, directing herself off to one side of Sharyn. Marina came to a quick halt, and spun about. She locked her feet on either side of something on the hull, to look up towards Nicola at the ready.

Nicola had moved herself into the hanger carefully with the crate. She used to play Netball at her old school back in the States. Goal Attack was always the position she wanted to play, but her position was on the wing. Ball skills were still important, as she lined up her shot now, and gave a carefully shove.

She never did play much, and the crate was no ball, but zero gee made predicting the flight path much easier for Sharyn to move into position to catch the crate as it passed a few metres off to one side.

Nicola's skill at jumping the gap was less so, as she came close to the floor in the last few metres, and only stopped herself by grabbing one of the landing struts of the ship that was secured it to the deck.

By the time she had figured herself out, Marina had the docking hatch on the dropship open.

Nicola was able to help Sharyn pull the crate into the dropship, finding the smaller hull much easier to navigate than the large corridors of the Frigate.

"Might be a little late to ask, if either of you know how to pilot this thing?" Sharyn said, holding onto one of the seats in the cockpit.

"No problem." Marina said, pressing a few buttons.

The hatch closed with an audible clunk, and hiss as the ship re-pressurised.

A few more buttons, brought lights on inside the cockpit and cabin areas, and all the displays lit up, showing the external view of the hanger bay.

"Let's get some seats then." Sharyn said, pulling herself into one, and strapping in.

Nicola moved to a back seat, "I've always got the flipping crate." she mumbled as she strapped it in, then found herself a seat.

Chapter 17: Lost in space

Marina got herself settled in, then did her best to remember everything she recently learnt about flying one of these things.

Step by step, she went through, starting the ships systems in sequence. She started up the engines, as the ran diagnostic, she checked through the life support, sensors, and turned on the dropship's artificial gravity generators.

"The gravity's back!" Nicola yelled.

"It's just the dropship." Sharyn said. "Isn't it Lara?" She queried, just to make sure.

Marina couldn't distract herself, as she went through the steps, so only gave a short "Yes" to answer Sharyn.

With the lack of gravity in the hanger, Marina skipped a few steps, and unlocked the deck clamps, retracting the landing gear.

The engines were all ready, and the ship's limited shields were all charged. It did have weapons, but Marina left them charged but unarmed, as they weren't going to fight.

"Ok, the only thing I'm stuck on is the hanger doors." Marina said, speaking up now.

"No switch for them?" Sharyn asked.

"None. It's like a garage door, except we don't have any garage door opener."

"Shoot it out then." Nicola offered.

"I don't think the Captain would like that." Marina replied.

"Then Captain had better open the doors then." Nicola shot back.

"Good idea, I'll ask her." Marina said, switching on the comm system. Hopefully it was preset to the right frequencies. "This is Agent Lara on a dropship in the Flux Point's hanger bay, we need to speak to Captain Anthrop."

There was no reply for a moment, until a strong signal came through. "This is Lieutenant Brooke of the Flux Point, please restate your position."

Marina repeated herself, making sure her words were clear. "This is Agent Lara on a dropship in the Flux Point's hanger bay, we need to speak to Captain Anthrop, to have the hanger doors opened." She added the last part on, in case the Captain heard it.

"I'm sorry, but the Captain is busy right now, so we aren't opening the hanger doors for you to come in." The voice said. "Nice try, Flux Point out."

"Those bastards." Nicola said.

"Let me try." Sharyn said, leaning over.

"Lieutenant Brooke, this is Agent Magnum in the hanger bay. Captain Anthrop has authorised us to use a dropship and leave the Flux Point. If you don't believe us, check with the Captain herself. If not, check your internal scanners or whatever you have for the hanger bay. We request that the hanger doors be opened. If not, we will be forced to shoot them out. I hope I make myself clear. Dropship out."

"Power up the weapons, and takes us towards the doors very slowly." Sharyn said to Marina.

Marina brought the weapons on-line. A set of weapons controls lit up in front of Sharyn, with targeting scanners. Sharyn brought the weapons around, lining them up on the centre of the doors, as Marina touched the manoeuvring thrusters briefly, giving the large dropship forward momentum.

The ship edged forward, no more than a metre every few seconds towards the massive doors that were only 20 metres away.

No reply came back, and the doors didn't budge, so Sharyn played with the targeting controls, moving the target scope all over the doors, and then around the hanger itself.

Off to one side in the hanger, were pellets of containers tied down to the deck. "Lara, give me minimal power." Sharyn said.

"You've already got it." Marina replied.

"No wonder they aren't paying attention." Sharyn said. She took aim, at the containers, and squeezed off one shot. In the scope, the containers blew apart, scattering their contents of machine parts, all over the hanger.

"Ok, now pump the weapons up to full power." Sharyn said.

Marina hit some controls, "At full power now."

Sharyn turned the scope back to the hanger doors. She held her breath, wondering if the doors would open before they reached them. Just as she let her breath go a black line appeared as the doors separated. The black line grew wider, expanding out to show space outside.

As soon as it looked wide enough, Marina punched the thrusters, pushing them out through the atmospheric shield into space.

"Jeez that was good." Nicola commented.

"Well someone got the hint." Sharyn said, turning the scope back towards the ship to see the hanger doors start to close.

The comm came on as a voice came through, "You're clear to leave dropship Yeager. Good luck. Flux Point out."

Marina recognised the voice as Captain Anthrop's "Or someone was listening." She said, as she punched in the main drives, putting some distance between themselves and the two Capital warships

Warning lights blinked on the display in front of Sharyn. "What are these?" she asked.

Marina leaned over to get a look. "Missile warning. Someone has launched missiles at us."

"Can we lose them?" Nicola asked.

"I've been travelling in a straight line so far." Marina said, "If we turn now, those missiles will catch us. Try shooting them."

Sharyn looked at the sensor display, picking out the three blinking red dots. She turned the target scope about, lining up with the dots. In the background, she could see part of the battleship, slowly shrinking in the view.

Marina leaned over to Sharyn's console and hit a few buttons, and some sort of target control came on, lighting up the positions of the missiles with little boxes in the scope. Range markers also appeared, showing the missiles getting closer.

Sharyn rotated the scope, lining up with the closest of the missiles, and fired a few shots. They all seemed to bleed off before reaching it.

"It's out of range."

"We ain't going to slow down for it." Nicola said.

Sharyn waited patiently until it was in range, and tried again. She scored a hit on the Missile, and watched it explode. The other two were just as easy, disappearing in quick fiery flashes.

Sharyn double checked the displays, "No more missiles, we can jump out of here now."

"That's good." Marina said, "But to jump, we need jump coordinates."

"Why didn't you say so." Nicola said, unstrapping her belt and getting up from the seat. "We were given our destination coordinates during the briefing. I doubt you could remember them, but they are also printed on the crate."

Nicola leaned over as she turned the seat around, finding the side with the details printed on. "Ok, try these." She said, repeating a long string of letters and numbers.

"Jump coordinates locked in." Marina said. "We have three jumps to make."

"Well, I'm ready." Nicola said, strapping herself back into her seat.

Marina pressed down the control lever, initiating the computer sequence for jump.

The computer needed to realign its calculations minutely because of the ship's forward movement, as soon as it reached synchronous with the ship's position, it jumped the ship once, twice, and then a third time.

"Are we there yet?" Nicola asked.

"Absolutely." Marina replied, turning the ship about. On the main screen, a large planet came into view. A little like Earth with its swirling white on blue and green masses. "What's this planet called."

"Farside." Nicola replied.

Chapter 18: Life threatening dilemmas

Marina brought the dropship down with some expected difficulty. The planetary security had trouble authorising their request to land at first. And then Marina had to find the auto pilot, so the ship's computer could make the tricky descent through the planet's atmosphere, down to the navigation marker at the space port.

It was a nervous experience all round, as the ship descended by itself into a rain storm at night, and landed just off its marker by a few metres.

"I believe we've made it." Sharyn said, unstrapping herself.

"Don't tell me I'm gonna get wet too!" Nicola complained.

"It's not over yet." Marina said, "We've got company."

"Friend or foe?" Nicola asked, leaning over the back of Marina's seat.

"I can't tell. The rain is obscuring the scanners." Marina replied.

"They're under the boarding ramp now." Sharyn added. "Some one has to find out who they are."

"Wait a moment." Marina said, trying switches on one of the panels. After a dozen switches, the speakers came alive with a hissing sound.

"What's that?" Nicola asked.

"Exterior microphones. That's the rain you hear."

"Can we find out who they are?" Sharyn asked.

Marina activated the comm unit, "Who are you, and what do you want?" she said, before releasing the switch.

"You could have been a bit more civil." Nicola complained.

"Sorry, but Magnum did ask." Marina said.

One of the people under the ship, looked about the ship for a moment, before replying. "We're here to escort the package back to HQ, to see that it arrives safely."

"Notice how he avoided answering who they are?" Nicola said.

"Yeah." Sharyn replied.

Marina pressed the switch again, "I repeat, who are you?"

This time an appropriate answer was forthcoming, "We are Agents Rourke, Paks and Jade of the local Corps HQ, here on Farside."

"They answered it this time." Nicola said.

"I still don't trust it." Sharyn said, "Like those people coming for the doctor last time. We need some more proof."

Marina used the comm again, "Can you prove you are Corps Agents?"

"Yes." Rourke said, "But you'll have to come out to see our tattoos."

"Proof?" Nicola questioned.

"What choice do we have. Someone has to check if they are." Sharyn said.

"I'll go." Marina said, getting up from the seat.

"Why you, and not me?" Nicola asked, holding her back.

"They already know my voice, and Magnum here can operate the ship's guns." Marina said. "Besides, I'm sure that Marina would agree that I can look after myself."

"She's right." Sharyn said.

"Well gee whiz." Nicola said, stepping aside.

"Before you go, show Aphrodite the secondary controls for the access ramp." Sharyn said. "I'll stay on the guns."

She sat back down, re-checking the ship's weapons so she didn't fire them by accident. Behind her, she heard the ramp lowering. One the main screen she watched as the ramp touched the rough surface of the port, and saw Marina walk down.

"Ok, who's gonna show me their Agent's tattoos?" Marina asked.

"Paks!" Rourke said, waving one of the women forward.

"Sure, like you won't drop your pants." Paks complained. She took a moment to undo the belt on her trousers. She had the fly undone as she turned about, dropping her the back of her pants down a little to show her panties, and hooking her thumbs in to slide these down also.

Sharyn had been so intent on making out any markings on the backside of Paks, that she didn't see what Rourke was doing, until he had a pistol out, aimed at Marina's head.

Sharyn reacted instantly, hitting the primary controls for the ramp, raising it up before she could reorient the ship's guns at the uninvited guests, and at Marina.

"Hey what's up!" Nicola said, coming back into the cockpit, "The ramp... Oh shit!" She shut up there, seeing what was on the screen.

"Not that I mind dropping my trousers for you." Paks said. She made a show of dropping them, and flashing a moon at the ship before pulling them back up, and securing them.

Sharyn still couldn't make out any markings, but Marina verified this for her.

"You're not Agents." Marina said.

"Well, we're not Corps Agents at any rate." Rourke said. "But we are after your package."

"Blow them to bits." Nicola said.

"They're too close, I'll hit Lara." Sharyn said, shifting the scope about trying to think of what to do.

"You Agents on the ships." Rourke called out, unnecessarily too loud. "I'll trade this Agent of yours for the package."

"I wouldn't trust him." Nicola said.

"If not, I'll do unkindly things to her." Rourke continued. "The worst would be to kill her, but then you could kill us. So I'm thinking I'll only shoot her in the arms and legs."

Sharyn almost pulled down on the firing studs, as Rourke pulled the trigger, sending a spark of energy sizzling past Marina, into the pavement.

"Don't bother, they'll kill me anyhow!" Marina called out.

"This is foolish." Jade said. "They're not going to give us the package. How about we strip her down, and let her bleed a little in this rain."

"Hey, that's an idea." Paks said.

"I don't know. I'll toss you for it." Rourke said, pulling a coin out of his pocket.

"Tails and she's mine." Jade called.

Sharyn couldn't see the coin, but the toss was called, "Tails it is." Rourke said. "I can still kill her later if need be."

"What do we do?" Nicola said, watching as Jade yelled at Marina.

"I don't know!" Sharyn said, thumping the console. "I've never had this before. These are players, and they're going to torture her out there." Sharyn was quite for a moment, until Jade hit Marina. "I'm going out there!" She said, jumping up.

"No!" Nicola said, holding her down. "Then they'll have most of the control. Let me see if I can try something."

"Like what?" Sharyn said.

"This ship has a dorsal hatch right?" Nicola started, making it half up as she went. "I can sneak out it, and down the other side of the ship out of their sight. Then I can go around them in the dark, and grab Rourke."

"And what can I do?" Sharyn asked, realising Nicola had something more than she did.

"You can keep on the ship's guns, and let us back in if we're in a hurry." Nicola said.

"Ok." Sharyn said, hitting the controls for the topside hatch. She watched the screen to make sure no one below the ship noticed the sound of the hatch in the rain. "Go quickly. I'm counting on you."

"So is she." Nicola said, pointing to the screen with Jade tearing Marina's clothing off.

Chapter 19: Parting of friends

Nicola pulled herself up the ladder onto the top of the ship. The rain was a little cool but constant, quickly soaking through her hair and clothing as she reached the edge of the ship.

The metal hull of the ship was slippery, but hand holds could be found easily on the side, almost to the ground.

She had to drop the last bit, right at the edge of the landing lights under the ship. The rain seemed to cover all the noise from the small group at the other end, as she moved away from the ship.

Nicola circled about a fair distance away, using the lights as her only reference in the dark rain.

She was half glad she had lost the towel, as it would be a sodden weight by now. But the wet towel might have been a useful weapon to wrap around the throat of Rourke, she was thinking.

Nicola made it round to the other side, edging in a little as the rain made it hard to see where everyone was.

Paks was still under the ship, but Rourke and Jade were at the edge of the light with Marina. He was still holding his pistol, but Jade was holding Marina up by her hair, and was now cutting off her clothing with a knife.

Nicola wanted to dash in right now, but the knife was a new variable to the equation. The pistol could kill anyone, but the knife was only short range. Somehow, the knife had to go elsewhere before she could take on Rourke.

There was no choice, but to wait for an opportunity. She used the chance to move around behind Rourke's position at the ready, and closer so she could hear what was been said.

"I'm sorry if I cut you a little, but you shouldn't move around so much, when someone has a knife against your breast, literally." Jade was saying.

"It'll stop." Marina said. "After your head has been cauterised from your body."

"Harsh words from such a beautiful looking wench." Jade said, running the knife down Marina's stomach. "I wonder how the rest of you looks. Hey Rourke, you want to see the rest of her?"

"I am kinda waiting for the package!" He yelled, then resumed a normal voice, "But I guess I can entertain myself for a while."

"Good, you hold her hair, in case she tries something." Jade said, turning her hold over to Rourke.

"Oh, real buttons. What a joy." Jade said. "This little piggy went to the market." With the knife, she sliced off the top button from Marina's shorts, sending it flying into the rain.

"This little piggy stayed home." she said, picking off the next button. "This little piggy had roast turkey." she said, with the third button. "This little piggy had none, and what a shame." taking off the forth button.

"And this little piggy..." Jade dwelled around the last button for a moment longer, "lost her pants." she added as the button came off.

Marina didn't resist as Jade held the knife to her stomach, as she pulled her shorts down.

"Oh, rats!" Rourke complained, "I was hoping for sexy lingerie."

"Underpants are always functional, Rourke." Jade said. "But I guess I'll have to cut these off."

She put the knife under the left side, sliding up the hip slowly. "Don't twitch, cause I don't want to make you bleed just yet." Jade said, drawing the knife out, and sawing the side off.

Jade carefully moved around Marina's legs, and repeated the same on the other side, letting the last scraps of Marina's clothes fall to the ground.

"Oh, you're going to enjoy this Rourke." Jade said, moving around to Marina's head.

Nicola made sure Jade put the knife away in her boot, before moving again as Rourke moved around to Marina's side.

It was now or never, as Nicola moved quietly forward until she thought the light would give her away, then sprinted up to the back of Rourke.

In one move, she pulled him around by his gun hand, throwing him to the ground behind her. The gun left his hand, and went flying out into the darkness.

She could hear the scream of "You bitch!" behind her, as she drove her heel into Rourke's back.

She felt like killing him, but she didn't have the know how of doing it bare handed. So she did the next best thing, and grabbed Rourke's hair, thumping his head into the pavement a few times.

She had no time to do more, except check that he wasn't moving as she turned back to help Marina.

Nicola only half noticed Paks still standing under the ship with her hands raised up in the air, as she moved towards Marina.

Somehow she'd gotten her shorts up, but as Nicola approached, she saw Jade back away from Marina, with her knife in her hand.

"Told you not to move so much." Jade sneered.

Nicola didn't so much as react, but walk straight towards Jade.

"Want to wear my knife too?" Jade asked, waving it about.

Nicola didn't reply, as she stepped around Jade's lunge, locking her hands around Jade's knife hand. With a snap, the knife fell to the ground, and she rammed her elbow into Jade's face before she could complain about the hand, and followed up with a punch to the jaw, sending Jade to the ground.

Nicola turned back now, to find Marina sitting on the ground, holding her chest. She rushed to Marina's side. "Bugger, I thought the knife was out of the way."

"Not your fault." Marina said.

"Bull shit." Nicola said, pulling off her t-shirt, and pressing it onto the wound. "I should have come in behind her, and kicked her out of the way first, and then tackled him."

"No, I shouldn't have grabbed my shorts. If I hadn't have been worried about them she wouldn't got me." Marina said.

"Don't talk, you'll only make it worse."

"It's too late." Marina said, "I can feel my body dying."

"No, you're not going to die." Nicola said, holding Marina's hands down on the wound. She wouldn't admit it to herself, that the knife had probably hit a lung, and was filling up quickly. She knew bugger all about first aid, except to apply pressure onto a wound, and it wasn't helping.

"It's over Aphrodite. Just promise me, that you'll take my clothing, or what's left of it. You need it more than I do now."

"What, take your clothes?" Nicola said.

"It's my dying wish you fool." Marina coughed involuntarily. "Just promise me."

"Sure ok." Nicola agreed. "But it won't matter. If you die, you'll just come back. No problem."

"Good." Marina said, her voice fading. "Cause with boots, you can kick their heads in next time."

"Yeah next time." Nicola said, "I'll do more than smash their faces in."

At that moment, Marina hands went still. Nicola couldn't bare it, as she checked Marina's face, she started crying.

Something was happening behind her, so she laid Marina down carefully. Standing up, she found Jade getting slowly up from where she dropped her. She felt vehemence as she walked over, "You bitch!"

"Aphrodite!", Sharyn's voice came over the ship's speakers, "Keep back, I can't vaporise her if you get in the way."

Nicola came to a stop, "You see what she did?" Nicola yelled.

"I saw it." Sharyn replied. "I wish I'd been me down there, and Lara was up here."

Nicola could hear Sharyn sniffing, possibly crying.

"We need to get rid of these... vermin." Nicola said.

"You, Jade." Sharyn called, "Move towards the ship, and join your friend there."

"Why should I?" Jade yelled.

"Because I'll do this." Sharyn said. A bright beam was fired out from the ship, shooting out through the rain, to hit the pavement about ten metres to the side. The sound of sizzling rain could be heard until it was slowly drowned out. "The next shot won't be so wide, so I suggest you move."

Jade complied, walking up to the ship, and joining Paks who was still there. "You didn't move your ass." Jade complained.

"I've gotten attached to it." Paks replied.

"Shut up!" Sharyn called, "Or you'll both lose your asses. At this range I'll toast both of you."

Nicola paused by Marina's body, wondering what to do. She looked at her still figure, half naked in the rain. Words couldn't describe what she wanted to do. She closed her eye's to blot out the rain and the tears, and took a few breaths, resolving to equal the initial claim.

"You two bitch's, strip down!" Nicola called, moving towards the ship.

"What?" Paks called.

"You heard me! Strip down, all of your clothes, now!"

"Do it!" Sharyn repeated.

Jade unzipped her body suit, peeling the top down. Paks had to undo her belt again, dropping her trousers and taking off her jacket.

Jade paused at her feet. "All of it!" Nicola called, "Boots, socks and underwear."

Jade dropped her footwear, onto the ground with the body suit. She followed these with her underwear. Paks piled hers next to it, taking off her push top, and underpants last.

They both stood in the rain now. Paks was holding a hand over her breasts, and over her groin, but Jade was less shy about herself, leaving her arms at her side.

Nicola moved from her position, over to Rourke's form, still lying where she had left it. She checked his pulse, finding him still alive.

"Good, now you can drag his body over to the ship." Nicola called, pointing towards his form on the ground.

Nicola moved out of the way, as they complied, and walked over to his still form.

"His still alive." Nicola assured them, "But he's going to wish I'd killed him."

Paks bent down taking his legs, while Jade took his arms. They moved slowly, carrying his limp form back to the ship.

"Good." Nicola said, "Now strip him down the same."

Jade turned to her to complain, but Nicola only pointed back towards the ship, with it's weapons still pointed at them.

Methodically and together, they removed his black jacket, and t-shirt. Each took off a boot and sock, then Jade held his arms as Paks pulled his jeans off. Last were his underpants.

There was no comment between them, as they piled all the clothing together.

"That is very good." Nicola called. "Now, you are to pick up Rourke, and carry him back to wherever you came from. We know your names, and what you look like, especially without clothes. Corps authorities will be notified, and if any other Agent sees you, you will be shot on site."

There was some grumbling from Jade, but more from trying to pick up Rourke's wet naked body.

Nicola stood her ground until they entered the dark outside the ship's lights, and she couldn't see them any more. "They still going?" Nicola called.

"They're still moving. Got them on night scope." Sharyn replied.

"Can you direct me to the gun and knife then? I don't want to leave them out there." Nicola asked.

"Sure." Sharyn said. Nicola was able to locate both in the darkness with Sharyn's directions.

She returned to the pile, and dropped them there, "They still going?"

"Yes, they're moving between some ships now." Sharyn replied.

Nicola picked out some clothes. She wasn't going to leave Marina's body half naked. What really happens with a dead player's body? Nicola certainly wasn't leaving it here. She left Marina's shorts on, strapping a belt on since it didn't have any buttons to hold them up. The knife wound had stopped bleeding as her heart had stopped, so Nicola pulled the clothes straight over, dressing her in a t-shirt and the jacket taken from Paks.

She look presentable now, as Nicola squatted down and picked her up, carrying Marina back under the ship, out of the rain.

She sat down, beside one of the landing gear, holding onto Marina. She looked up, when she heard the ramp lowering down.

"They're gone." Sharyn said, stepping out onto the ground.

"Good. I hope never to see them again." Nicola said.

"Get some clothes for yourself, I'll handle Lara." Sharyn said, leaning down to pick Marina's form up.

Nicola pulled on the jeans, push top, and the leather jacket. They all seemed to fit, as with Jade's shoes. She tucked the gun into the belt. The knife had a scabbard, which Jade had also left. Nicola sheathed it, but didn't take it. It was something that had killed Marina, and she didn't want to keep it.

It went with the remaining clothes, which she bundled up in the body suit, zipping it closed, and tying the arms and legs together to form a bag.

Sharyn waited on the ramp with Marina. "I'll carry her." Sharyn said. "I should have been down here, and not in the ship."

"Um, I'll get the data core." Nicola said, throwing the makeshift bag over a shoulder, and walking into the ship.

She found the crate where she had left it, still strapped into the seat. In a moment she had it out, and carried it back down the ramp.

"Let's go." Nicola said, as Sharyn lifted up Marina, and rolling her over her shoulder.

The walk through the rain was solemn, and quiet. The mag lift entrance was well lit in the dark, making their walk shorter than necessary.

"Corps HQ." Nicola said.

They were still dripping water when they entered the main foyer. Immediately several people came over to assist.

"She's dead!", one guy said, taking a pulse.

"We know." Sharyn said.

"We'll take her then." As three of them, lifted Marina. "You completed your mission?" He asked.

"Yes, here's the data core." Nicola answered.

"We'll take it directly to core processing then." He said.

Nicola wasn't about to object at getting rid of the crate, but the guy had already agreed to take Marina's body.

It became clear as a trolley was wheeled in, and Marina was laid carefully down on it. One guy split with the crate, another took Marina away.

The first Agent talked to them longer, getting details of the Agent's who had intercepted them at the ship.

"This is disturbing indeed. But when we get the local Central computer up, we should be able to track these problems, and fix them before it happens again."

"That explains why the lack of reception." Nicola said.

"Yes, that'll be fixed with Central. So Agent Lara made a last request?"

"Yes." Nicola answered. "She wanted me to have her clothes."

"If that's her wish, we should certainly be able to make the transfer of property."

"This can be done?" Sharyn asked, with interest.

"When a Agent dies, her, or his last request is taken seriously. And if possible, carried out. Agent's Lara's clothes will now be made available to Agent Aphrodite, in her size of course, whenever she requests replacement clothes."

Nicola wanted to cry again, blinking back a few tears. Marina had done such a wonderful thing for her. Hopefully she would be able to see her friend again.

Chapter 20: The way of things

"No, you are not going to play that game again Marina!" She yelled.

"But..." Marina started to reply.

"No buts. If that's the sort of thing that happens, your won't be playing that game until you're 18." Her mother said, taking the disc in its case.

"Grandma and Grandpa gave it to me." Marina whimpered.

"I know, and they should know better. Maybe they can get their money back, and get you something more suited to a young girl."

"I'm fifteen." Marina objected.

"Then act your age. You sound like a two year old, with that snivelling."

Marina just didn't understand what her mother was thinking sometimes, when she acted like this. Usually she was kind and caring, for months on end. But all of a sudden, it would get set off by something, and nothing Marina did would be right. If her father, her real father was here, then maybe.

"I wish dad was here!" Marina yelled at her mother, and ran from the room.

It didn't feel right at all to yell at her. Pretty soon, her step father would come in, and say that she shouldn't speak to her mother like that.

Only one word came to Marina's mind when that happened. Hypocrite. Her mother had just yelled at her, and they yelled at each other. The first time she had mentioned that word, he broke out in a rage, and thumped a hole in her bedroom wall, almost through to the other side.

Her brother usually took off at such moments on his trail bike. The last thing Marina would hear would be the high pitched scream of the two stroke engine echoing up the street. The neighbour's would surely know that something was happening.

Marina didn't have her own escape when it happened. But she had learnt to be very quiet, and cover her ears so she couldn't hear what happened.

She wanted so badly to do this now, but her brother had provided a much better form of silence.

She sat in her brother's chair, an old bucket seat from a real race car. Not one of the expensive European ones, but something that was raced locally. It still gave the feel of a racing vehicle whenever she sat in it.

But the seat was merely the mid point of her destination, as she slipped on the headset.

Her brother had changed the command set, so nobody else could use the computer, except him and Marina. It was a phrase, half spoken, and half thought which plunged her into VR.

Marina sat there in the silence of the entry chamber, sitting on a replica seat of the one in the bedroom.

To totally escape her emotions, she wanted to escape into some reality, and do something to clear her mind of the thoughts and feelings running through her.

But there was no doubt she would be interrupted, thus extending her need to disassociate herself.

No, she really wanted to get back into Troubled Realms. But that couldn't be done without the disc. Marina thought about possible way to get back in, but they all lead to disaster, one way or another. It was inevitable. She wouldn't be going back in, ever.

By the time she turns eighteen, as her mother said, the game would have run it's course, and finished. They'd probably have Troubled Realms 2, or 3 running by then.

And she felt most bad, for Nicola and Sharyn. She'd left the game the worst way possible, by dying.

They'd think she had a problem with dying in the game. Marina shook her head. No, that wasn't a problem with her. She hadn't even get around to mentioning it to her mother.

When her mother asked about the game, she'd done her best to explain the last mission to her mother. She'd only just gotten past having her t-shirt cut off, when her mother lost it.

Her ranting had been half right, in leading to losing her clothes. And rape was surly in the mind of that guy. But Marina had been hopeful it wouldn't get that far. The game did have censorship rules, and she knew something was bound to stop it.

When she glimpsed Nicola's running form, she was ready. She'd kicked up both feet, hitting the woman who'd had been holding her hair. square in the face.

Her shorts had been around her ankles, and she had felt the need to pull them up and cover herself. Thinking about it now, she realised it had been the wrong thing. Those extra seconds to bend over, and pull them up, and then wriggle her butt in. Instead she could have kicked them off one foot, to free herself, but she wasted valuable time.

Time enough for the woman to swear and come back at her with her knife drawn. By the time Marina had stood up, she was too late, and found the knife buried in her chest.

It had been an odd feeling, of some pain and a numbing sensation. She had realised her mistake with her shorts then, with a sense of loss and release when she found herself on the ground with Nicola leaning over her.

She didn't know why, but she saw Nicola wearing just her underwear. Maybe that was why she promised her clothes to her. So she didn't have to go around in just that towel any more.

But now that she thought about it, Nicola couldn't have taken much, except her shorts and boots. All the rest had been cut up.

As soon as she had died, she faded into blackness, and then into some sort of debriefing room.

Marina had found herself back in her clothes, and a courteous gentleman told her that her game character had died. Her last request as a dying player had been fully granted, giving another player the same clothes that she had, but the game had taken into account, her body size, adjusting them for Nicola.

Just as efficiently, she was informed her character form wouldn't change, but in dying, she would start over as a trainee, and be assigned a new designation, and would have to choose a new player name.

Marina accepted the changes, as it was part of the game. Since she couldn't do any more with the mission, she logged out after that.

But now, now Marina pulled open the voice mail, starting up a recording.

"Hiya Magnum, and Aphrodite. I'm sorry if I made such a bad exit from our last game. I feel bad about it, but dying wasn't too bad actually. I still don't recommend it though. I'm writing, well I'm saying that I'm ok. I hope the mission turned out ok, and you got that data core in. Ok, I'm going to tell you the bad part now. I can't play Troubled Realms any more. My mother has banned me from playing it, for the next few years. It's not your fault. Possibly mine, as she wanted to know what the game was like, and well, I told her about the last mission. Maybe I should have tried to tell it differently, but I'm horrible at lying. So now, I'm off the air permanently. It's back to car racing for me. I thought it best to let both of you know now, before you wondered where I was next week, in case I didn't respond."

Chapter 21: A new friend

"So thanks for the fun time. Marina." Sharyn said.

"Yeah, I got the same message." Nicola said.

They both sat quietly in the conference room.

"I wish she didn't have to leave like that." Nicola said.

"Yes, I wish it to." Sharyn said, "But she said she felt ok about it."

"That's good I suppose." Nicola said.

"I see you're making use of your new clothes." Sharyn said.

"It's better than wandering around in those oversized pants. My feet feel much better in some boots, and her underpants fit better than yours too."

"You kept the jacket." Sharyn pointed out.

"It's the only thing I liked from their wardrobe. It also helps to hide the gun." Nicola said, pulling it out from the back of her waistband.

"As long as you don't get too attached to them."

"I know." Nicola said, "So, we're getting someone new to join our team?"

"Yes. We always operate as a three person team." Sharyn said.

"So, we have to do anything?"

"I've already informed Central, and a new recruit is been sent."

"Any idea who we're getting?" Nicola asked.

"Not until she walks through that door."

"So we're getting another girl then?"

"Um, I don't know." Sharyn said.

There was a light rapping on the door.

"Come in!" Sharyn called.

The door opened, and in stepped a man. Young, good looking, cute even. He had black swept back hair, on a clean narrow face that could have passed for a younger version of a one of the recent US Presidents. Sharyn noted his attire, thinking of Nicola when she first walked in. He'd been careful in his clothes selection, choosing between comfortable and reasonable looking khaki slacks, shirt and a sports jacket. He had reasonable footwear, and a set of mirrored sunglasses which he pocketed in his jacket.

"Welcome." Sharyn said, standing up. "I'm agent Magnum, and this is..."

"Agent Aphrodite." Nicola finished without standing up. "And you are?"

"Oh, Agent Knight."

"As in late night?" Nicola asked.

"No, as in Knight Rider 2010. I'm sort of a fan." He confessed.

"Well, come in." Sharyn said, "and close the door."

Knight closed the door, and pulled up a chair opposite Nicola.

"Ok." Sharyn started, "I've got this sort of policy with new recruits, from when I first started out."

Sharyn noted his reaction, of flicking his eye's to Nicola and then back to her. Maybe a nervous twitch, or something.

"We introduce ourselves once to each other the first time with our real names and ages, and what we do. Its so we can better familiarise ourselves with how each other thinks. Ok?"

"Uh, sure." Knight replied.

"Aphrodite, you can go first, and then Knight." Sharyn said.

"Sure, I haven't much to hide." Nicola said.

Sharyn gave a small laugh.

"I'm Nicola Dubonis. I'm 18 years old, and I live in Mexico with my father."

Knight raised his eye brows, hearing the familiar name.

"Yes, one in the same." Nicola said. "Your turn."

"Well, I'm James Lambert. I'm 29, and I work in a legal office in Utah. United States." He said.

Sharyn explained herself now, "I'm Sharyn Shiels, 27, and I live in the Avero prison in the US."

Sharyn saw the strangest of reactions from James. His eyes went from Nicola back to Sharyn again, with a shifting of his eyebrows. "Prison?" he asked.

"It's a long story, but I'll give you the short of it. I've been imprisoned for aggravated assault and robbery. I still consider myself to be innocent. But I feel fortunate enough to get into this new prison. With good behaviour, I'm allowed to play certain on-line games, like this right now."

"I think I understand, sort of." James said.

"It's just a fact of life." Sharyn said. "Like her father." Sharyn pointed to Nicola.

"It's your father." James said.

"Yeah. So you're a lawyer?" Nicola said.

"No, I haven't passed my bar exam." James said. "I'm thinking of giving it away to do something else. Not sure yet."

"Not sure on giving it away, or on what to do?" Sharyn asked.

"Both." He replied.

"Well, It's time to give you the presentation as a new Agent." Sharyn said, touching a button on the table top.

The lights dimmed down, "Welcome new Agents." The display began. "The Corps, is a privately owned law enforcement agency, operating all over the galaxy. The Corps is a well renowned company for working with planetary governments, and the Galactic Federation. The Corps undertake work for the lawful planets within the Federation, in fixing problems their governments usually can't cope with. These are usually done by Corps Agents, working in teams of three. Sometimes the Corps requires the services of outside agencies, and individuals, which are all screened for bad elements. Missions that are made available to teams of agents depend somewhat on the experience of the agents. These missions are delegated by the Corps administration, so there is no question of the mission's authenticity."

The dialog came to a finish.

"Well, that's an improvement." Sharyn said, "Usually I have to make the spiel myself."

"Central is improving himself." Nicola said.

"Who is Central?" James asked.

"Central is the Corps main computer, with AI. Artificial Intelligence." Sharyn said. "He seems to have various copies of himself on different planets where the Corps Headquarters are located."

"We helped transport the new one here on our last mission." Nicola said.

"Wow." James said.

"Wait till he really speaks, this was only just a recording." Sharyn said, pressing a button.

The rendered head of Central appeared on the display. "Good evening, ladies, and whoa a gentleman! What happened to the other chick?"

"She had to leave, Central." Sharyn said.

"Permanently." Nicola added.

They looked at one another, momentarily. "Oh, I'm sorry." Central said, interrupting them, "I didn't know. I've got the data file here somewhere, I just haven't got around to processing it yet. Processing new missions, and such. Here it is, your team transported my data core here and, oh... I am sorry, I didn't know."

"It's ok Central." Sharyn said. "We've learned a few things."

"Well, I'll try to keep my local references more up to date from now on." Central said. "I suppose you want to know your mission now."

"Yes please." Nicola answered.

"I've got some good news here. There are two missions available for you to choose from."

"What are they?" Sharyn asked.

"The first, you have to capture a criminal." Central said.

"And the second?" Nicola prompted.

"You have to capture a criminal."

"Isn't that the same mission?" James asked.

"Actually, no." Central said. "The first one, is to capture a known criminal leader, located locally, on this planet. Some young hot shot, trying to start his own criminal empire."

"So what's the second one?" Sharyn said.

"It's to capture this woman, off planet. Apparently she's this old lady, who used to be a big space pirate in these parts. She's settled down on some old space station, ripe for arresting."

"Can we get any more information before we choose?" Nicola asked.

"No. The secured files can only be released when you make a decision." Central said. "Personally, I'd try to get the old lady. She seems like a easy target."

"This has to be a democratic decision." Sharyn said. "If you have any arguments, say them now."

"Grabbing an old woman is going to be much easier than some young guy." Nicola said.

"But she was a pirate." James said, "She bound to have used her booty to make her space station into a fortress."

"Compared to a criminal empire, who's probably got hundreds of hired guns?" She argued back.

"Maybe, but that old woman won't be alone on her space station." James said.

"Well, I can see what sides you two want." Sharyn said. "I guess my vote tips the scales." She looked at them both. "Before I tell you, I'm going to explain something about Central. While Central is the main artificial intelligence for Corps, he is primarily a data base. Just a repository of information. I've come to find that whenever he makes his opinion known, he's usually made it on the basis of how much data he has. The more data, the more favourable it is to his circuits. Just before, he said that he'd rather get the old lady. This means he has more information on her. That he said she is an easy target, I go so far as to say he knows a great many things about her."

"So?" Nicola said, "It'll provide a better background on catching her."

"Not necessarily." Sharyn interjected. "I think this is because she has many more defences then we're allowed to know at this point. And to attack a space station with such defences, would be suicide. Which is why I'd rather tackle this crime lord."

"Sure, ok." Nicola said, relenting. "It's not as if I wanted to go back into space."

"My feeling exactly." Sharyn said. "Central, we're taking the mission to capture the crime lord."

"I'm bringing up the mission briefing now." Central said. "You're right. That old woman seems to have heaps of defences. I hope the other team who takes that mission can handle it."

Chapter 22: The armoury

Central outlined the mission parameters. "The arrest warrant is made out for one Rocko Vladimir." Central brought up a rotating 3D image of Rocko. "He is located somewhere within the east port district of Kochi City. The precise location of Rocko is not known."

"So how do we find this Rocko Vladimir." Nicola said.

Central continued with the details, "Rocko has a number of men directly under his control, who we can on occasion find easily. One such man is Brandon Walker." Central brought up a picture of him now. "Brandon regularly visits his girlfriend."

"So we can get him to tell us where Rocko is." Sharyn said.

"From there you will have to locate and extract Rocko from the city." Central said. "Local authorities will not be available to assist, as much of the local police force are paid to look the other way. That is why Corps has been brought in."

"So where did the warrant come from?" James asked.

"The warrant was issued by Farside's planetary government." Central said, "So the authority comes from the top, but they cannot use any other planet based forces because of conflicts in interest. So Corps agents must go in."

"Won't the local police try to stop us then", Nicola asked.

"The fortunate part is, that they are so afraid of him, that they will not interfere."

"That's good." James said.

"There are no more details, except that you can reach Kochi City via the Mag train from the Corps underground station. Mission equipment is freely available for this mission, because of its nature, and that you are working from the same planet as Corps HQ."

"We have free range on equipment" Nicola exclaimed.

"Within limit." Central said, "Some items may not be available because another team will be using them, and stores does not hold certain types of equipment like heavy anti-ship weapons, planet buster bombs, or robotic infantry."

"But they exist?" James asked.

"Yes, but from other sources." Central said.

"That's nice to know." Nicola said.

"So, what's usually available?" James asked.

Central brought up a detailed display of equipment. "Standard equipment for deployment into a semi-hazardous environment. Weapons, normal and concealed, personal armour, intrusion kits, and extras."

They each selected various things to take with them, different weapons, body armour, and few extras.

Finishing their selections, Central terminated the briefing. Sharyn was glad to get the mission under way, and led them down to stores.

"So, you played many VR games Knight?" Nicola asked.

"A few. I didn't start playing until a few weeks ago. I had to review some VR programs for work, and I sort of got hooked." James said as he smiled. "And this is my first serious on-line game."

"Becoming a VR junkie then?" Nicola said.

James laughed. "Not quite!"

"Well we don't play together often." Sharyn said. "Only once a week at the moment, because I don't get much time on-line."

"That's too bad." James said, a little downcast. "I was hoping for more action."

"Don't speak too soon." Nicola said, "This mission may give you all the action you need for a week."

"That is for sure." Sharyn agreed.

They arrived at stores, and suited up. Nicola traded in the leather jacket for a special armour coat. A long trench coat that was inlaid with a silicate and kevlar weave, making the coat impervious to many forms of attack.

Inside the jacket she hung a small arsenal of weapons. Just a few, but varying enough to keep her happy. She also stashed various tools that could be useful, into the pockets of the coat.

Nicola noted that James stripped off his jacket and shirt to put on an armour vest underneath. He did this quite openly, as a man could, and showing off his physique. He wasn't spectacularly muscled like a body builder, but more so than average man. A good range of bulge's that showed that he did work out, occasionally.

Nicola reminded herself, that his body wasn't real anyhow. Unlike her own body that is, but imagining that his was real, did help.

Sharyn likewise, opened up her coveralls, but only peeled down the top half, and pulling on an armour vest over her t-shirt, and pulling the coveralls back up.

"Comm check, one, two." Nicola said, tapping the microphone she'd attached to her jacket.

"I read you." Sharyn's voice came back in her ear piece.

"Five by five." James said.

"I'm ready to go bring us in a criminal." Nicola said, doing a few buttons on her coat up to cover the large weapon hanging inside.

"Two things." James said. "The warrant."

"Right here." Sharyn said, tapping a deep pocket on the front of her overalls.

"And the second?" Nicola asked.

James pulled out his sunglasses, and flicked out he arms, slipping them onto his face. "Now I'm ready." He said.

The lift took them down to a subway tunnel, with a private Mag train station for the Corps HQ. The Corps had a few Mag trains, which ran along the public lines, making use at peak times difficult sometimes, but still better than most other forms of intercontinental traffic.

"Now I wish we really did have one of these back home." Nicola said, sitting back in the recliner chair. "To travel wherever I want."

"Back in Mexico, or the USA?" James asked.

Sharyn coughed for a moment, then abruptly Nicola pulled her chair up, almost tipping herself off.

"Did I say something wrong?" James asked, looking to Sharyn for an answer.

"No." Nicola said, "I was leaning too far back, and showing a few things."

"It's a Corps train." James said. "I wouldn't worry about your weapons until we get off."

"That wasn't what I meant." Nicola said.

"Oh." Was all James could reply, confused about what had just happened.

It was quiet for moment as the train hurtled along the track.

"I'm worried about the other end." James said.

"Why?" Sharyn asked.

"If we get off at a public platform, someone is bound to notice us getting off a Corps train."

"And word would get to Rocko." Nicola finished.

"Exactly." James said.

"I don't know of any other way around it." Sharyn said. She pointed up at the electronic mapping system on the wall. "There aren't any other stations, except for public ones in Kochi City."

Nicola thought about it for a moment. She got an idea, but didn't know if it would work. "Be back in a moment." She said, getting up from her chair, and walking to the front of the train.

The train was mostly automated, but still had a human operator for safety requirements. She talked to him for a minute, and he agreed with her idea. Nicola returned to her seat, getting odd looks from James and Sharyn.

"What was that about?" Sharyn asked.

"I've solved our problem, we won't be getting off at a platform." Nicola replied.

"You want to explain that?" James asked.

"Simple, the train is going to stop before it reaches the platform. We'll get off and hop it the rest of the way down the tunnel to the platform." Nicola said. "The train can then return to HQ with ever been seen."

"Won't we get run over by other trains?" Sharyn asked.

"It's cool." Nicola said. "The Corps train has priority in the tunnel. The driver will stick around long enough for us to get onto the platform."

"Sounds good enough." James commented.

"As long as we don't get run over." Sharyn said.

Chapter 23: Pain and pleasure

James pulled himself up onto the platform, surprising the waiting people. They were all watching for the regular 17:30 train, which had been delayed.

He ignored them for the moment, as he turned around and first helped Sharyn and then Nicola up. They stood there for a moment, to dust themselves off, and making sure their weapons weren't visible. When they were ready, they strode off, making for the exit.

"Hey, buddy! What you doing down there!" One of the waiting people called.

James wanted to ignore them, but doing so would arouse suspicion, so he gave them an answer, "The train's stuck down the tunnel and we're in a hurry. So we thought we'd walk. It hasn't come by yet has it?"

The guy who had questioned him answered, "Uh, no."

"Good." James said, "Then it's still possible to beat the public transport system."

The people around them gave them odd stares until they reach the escalators, and disappeared from their view. Together they stepped off at the top, and disappeared into the moving crowds of people.

"Do we know where we're headed?" Nicola asked.

"Knight and I have GPS Automap's." Sharyn said.

James only pulled his out of his jacket pocket occasionally, to make sure they were headed in the right direction.

It helped to keep a nondescript profile in this neighbourhood. They were bound to attract attention with the clothing they were wearing, but acting out of place would draw attention as a street parade.

The walk for James was interesting, seeing a new city for the first time in ages. He didn't get away from his work very often, but he did his best to enjoy himself when he did. This wasn't exactly a holiday, but James still tried to relax into his role.

"This is the place." Sharyn said, stopping in front of an apartment building.

James was a little surprised at its appearance. It looked like a modern apartment building, except the cement and glass was dull and dirty, like it was run down, or not well maintained.

"Well let's pay a visit on our new friend then." Nicola said.

"Eighth floor." James said.

Nicola went in ahead of him. Inside she pressed a button for the lifts, but nothing happened.

James looked around for a moment, and found the sign, having fallen behind a pot plant. "Lift's out of order. Department of Health and Safety."

"Looks like we take the stairs." Sharyn said.

They trudged up the stairs slowly. "These stair's don't look safe either." Nicola said, kicking a chunk of concrete out of her way, that had fallen from the stairs above her.

"They aren't healthy, that's for sure." James said, stepping around another pile of excrement.

"Ewww!." Sharyn complained, seeing the unidentified droppings.

James was labouring a little when he reached the eighth floor. But they took a moment to get their bearings, and find the apartment that belonged to Brandon's girlfriend.

"So how do you want to do this?" Nicola asked. "Knock or break in?"

"Let's do it the quiet way." James said.

"And pick our way in." Sharyn finished, flourishing the electronic lock pick already in her hand.

The little device was quiet as it decoded the door lock, and the lock sprung open.

James pushed the door fully open, and waved Nicola in. Sharyn followed as she tucked the lock pick away. James closed the door, and cautiously the spread out, searching the apartment.

Nicola's waving hand's got both of their attention, and they joined her at a closed door. She had a finger to her lips, to James listened carefully.

He took a moment, trying to focus out the sound of their breathing, until he realised it wasn't any of them. The sound was coming from the closed door, a regular and loud breathing.

Nicola gave him a look before carefully opening the door, allowing them into the room.

Inside was the girlfriend's bedroom, with the lady of the house present in her own bed. The reason of the heavy breathing was apparent, as her bare back moved up and down over barely visible legs under the edge of the bed covers. A set of hands was visible on the side of her ribs, gripping her enthusiastically.

Brandon was most definitely here, and making good use of his time with his girlfriend.

James cleared his throat to get their attention. It didn't work, as they seemed very preoccupied, so he did it again, quite loudly.

This time it worked, as Brandon's girl stopped dead, and turned her head around to look at them. "Hey!" she said, making an effort to cover her breasts. Another head came into view from around her torso, recognisable as Brandon.

"Beat it sister." Nicola said, "We need to speak with your boy friend."

She turned back to Brandon. James could half understand Brandon's position as he weighted up the problem associated with been interrupted during intercourse. Brandon gave her a wave off with a hand, and she obliged in getting up off him, apparently not having completed the deed.

Most of the bedding came up with her as she got off the bed, falling onto the floor. James only watched her long enough to note that she grabbed a kimono to cover herself as she left the room.

It was just them and Brandon now, sitting back in the bed, naked with some of the sheets piled about his feet.

He didn't move to cover himself. "What do ya want?" Brandon demanded, with the voice of someone who didn't like been interrupted when he was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Brandon Walker." Sharyn started, "We need to know a few things, like where your boss Rocko Vladimir is hiding out."

Brandon seemed to stare at her for a moment, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"We know you work for Rocko." James said, "So you're just going to have to tell us where he is."

Brandon seemed to come to some sort of decision. He edged a foot down to the sheets as he spoke, "Let me get something on, and then maybe I'll talk."

James' attention had been taken by his foot, but looked up again quickly, and noticed one of Brandon's hands slipping under a pillow.

James moved quickly, drawing the pistol holstered inside his jacket and pointing it at Brandon. "Don't move that hand any further."

Brandon stopped dead still, swallowing convulsively.

"Can one of you search him." James asked of Nicola and Sharyn.

"I'll do it." Nicola agreed, stepping forward. She drew a wicked looking pistol, small of size but with a long protruding barrel.

Nicola switched the pistol to her left hand as she approached, and pointed it at Brandon's crotch. "Move and it'll never be stiff again." She said, pulling the sheets down to make sure there wasn't anything hidden around his feet.

Next she switched the pistol back to her right hand, as she pulled the pillows out one at a time, patting them down before tossing them aside.

Nicola pulled the pillow with Brandon's hand under it, to find a pistol of sorts. She grabbed this, before checking over the bed head, to make sure there wasn't anything hidden behind a rail.

Happy that there wasn't anything else, she stepped back with a weapon in each hand now.

"Now, we're going to discuss where your boss is." James said.

"I'm not going to tell you anything." Brandon replied.

"Then we're just going to have to make you." Sharyn said, with a slight smile.

"I'm going to enjoy this." Nicola said, undoing her coat and slipping it off so it was out of the way. She had two sets of hand cuffs in her hands as she approached him. She put one on each of his wrists, and locked them to the bed head.

She had two more which she pulled from the back of her shorts. With a good yank, she pulled one of Brandon's legs, making him lie down flat on the bed as she locked one, and then the other leg to the end of the bed.

Brandon watched all this with interest, especially as Nicola stepped up onto the bed, kneeling down on either side of his legs. "What are you going to do, suck me off until I tell you." He gave a laugh, "Go ahead, I'm going to enjoy this."

Nicola did no such thing. Instead she pulled out one of the things she had brought along in her coat. The small device, she turned about, and held it down against the skin of Brandon's thigh.

"What's that." Brandon asked with some nervousness now.

Nicola only smiled back, depressing the small button on the end.

Brandon jumped with the jolt, twitching in pain with the continued release of energy. When Nicola released the button, he was able to feel his leg again.

"What the fuck was that!" Brandon called.

"Nerve stimulator." Nicola said. "Press against the skin, and press this little button, and it gives the nerves a working over."

"Pah, is that all?" Brandon said, getting his confidence back now that the pain was gone.

"Really." Nicola said, adjusting something on the device, "What if I use it here?" She said, pressing the device between the balls of his scrotum.

Brandon looked a little nervous now, but he didn't feel any lasting effects on his leg, and figured the pain would only be momentarily. "I won't tell you anything." he said.

Nicola simply pressed the button, and held her position as Brandon body shifted about under her.

"Ohhhh!" Brandon called out. Nicola held the device for a few more seconds, before pulling it off. It switched off automatically as it left the skin.

Brandon seemed to be a daze this time, taking what seemed like half a minute to return to normal.

When Nicola saw she had his attention now, she spoke. "It doesn't have to give pain of course. That was pure pleasure. But you would have noticed the lasting effects this time."

Brandon nodded, still trying to remember the feeling which was fading away now.

"This can be done with pain also. I can set this so high, that it feels like your leg has been burned off." Nicola said easily. She adjusted a few settings on it. "How about I try this on your neck next?" She asked.

Brandon relented with this, telling them what they wanted. "If he's not there, then he'll be in the plant itself. It's a big place."

"That's good." James said, plotting the place on his Automap.

"Can I keep that thing?" Brandon asked, looking at the device.

"Maybe." James said, "What sort of guards and defences does Rocko have with him?"

"Um, well usually he has a group of guys to do his bidding, armed with the usual weapons, you know." Brandon explained. "But I'd heard Rocko recently saying that he's going to get some real people in to protect him. I haven't heard anything more since. That's about it."

Nicola stepped off Brandon now, on the floor as the girlfriend came back in. "I've called the police, so you'd better leave before they come." She said.

"The police won't interfere." James said. "But we're finished here anyhow."

"Maybe I'll tell some of my friends." She argued.

"Maybe, and maybe not." Sharyn said. She indicated to Nicola, and they both grabbed an arm each.

"Heh!" She yelled, twisting about, "What are you doing?"

Nicola stepped onto the bed, and over Brandon's prostrate form as she pulled the girl up onto the bed. In a moment, Sharyn had cuffed the girl's wrist onto the same bar as Brandon's, and tossed another cuff to Nicola. She did the same thing, securing her face down over Brandon.

"So you don't go telling anyone else." Sharyn said.

"Just enjoy yourselves." Nicola said. "Like you were when we came in."

Nicola pulled on her coat, as she watched the girl give in, and finally lie down on Brandon.

"Hey! What about that device?" Brandon called from under the girl.

"Sorry, we can't leaving things like that behind." James said. The last sound he heard as they left the apartment, was a loud "Oh!" from the girl.

Chapter 24: Room by room

Sharyn listened to the banter between Nicola and James as they walked along. It seemed sort of wrong somehow, not to have Marina with them, but that was the way the game worked.

It was how real life worked also. When someone had to leave, someone new came in to replace them. Sharyn had made friends with some of the guards in prison, but a month ago one of them had to leave because of family problems. And so a new guard came in, to replace him.

It seemed peculiar, to miss that familiar face. The one you always expected to see when you turned that corner.

She heard Nicola talking, "I fully expected him to burst out talking when I held it to his balls."

But instead of the light voice of Marina's character Lara, she heard James reply. "Maybe he thought you were bluffing. A guy doesn't expect to get hurt there by a girl, unless he's done something to deserve it."

"And he would have been right." Nicola said.

Sharyn knew that Marina would have been put out by the gross nudity, but she had done her best to work with it. Not as blatant as Nicola perhaps. Sharyn didn't even know why she was thinking about Marina now. Maybe it was a something to distract her mind from the similarity of the device Nicola has used, compared to her re-education in prison.

"So why didn't we leave that thing behind?" Sharyn asked.

"Oh, because I might use it later." Nicola said.

"Not on yourself, surely!" James complained.

"No way!" Nicola said. "It's got this sticker on it that says, 'Warning: This device when used for prolonged periods, may become addictive.' And anyway, did you think about how we're going to subdue Rocko on our trip back?"

"Good point." James said. "We can zap him until he melts in your arms."

"Or give him enough juice that he'll jump at my every command." Nicola said, laughing.

Sharyn cut in on this talk, "How much further do we need to go?"

James consulted his Automap, "Just across the street." He said, "It's the entire building in front of us."

Sharyn looked at the large structure, that doubled as a packaging and transit plant for a personal computer distributor, and its offices.

"The offices are round the other side, so I guess we get to check the plant first." James said.

They passed several large doors for the trucks, as they were all secured from the inside, until they found a pedestrian entrance.

Sharyn put her game skills to use, in picking the tumblers on the old style lock. It clicked over, and eased the door open on its unused hinges.

"You're getting good at that." James said.

"Only in the game." Sharyn replied. "I couldn't do this for real to save a life."

"Not even your own?" He asked.

Sharyn looked at him, wondering. "Not even mine."

The plant was dark with all the people gone home already. Only the night security lights remained on, so the place could be patrolled by security. But evidently there wasn't any security this evening.

Slowly, the three of them worked their way through the large open space of the packaging plant, finding nobody.

"He'll be in the offices then, as Brandon told us." Nicola said.

"That's if he's here at all." James added.

"He'll be here." Sharyn said, as they headed towards the offices.

From inside the plant, they could see the offices only took up two floors, with space inside the plant's structure for another two floors above. It showed the utilitarian nature of the plant, with only enough floor space created as necessary.

The office door James tried was unlocked, yielding to his hand. "Ladies first."

"Thanks." Sharyn said, entering first in front of Nicola.

The office space like the packaging plant, had minimal lights on. It wasn't constructed temporarily, as it had full walls separating the offices, with plasterboard, that would no doubt be insulated from the cold plant.

They moved through the rooms, one at a time, checking from the back, to the windows at the front of the building.

They searched all along the ground floor, without finding a single person.

"Nothing." Nicola reported.

"Then he must be on the first floor." Sharyn said.

"We hope." James said.

"If not, then we make a return visit to Brandon." Nicola said, smiling.

Together they marched up the main stairs in the foyer entrance.

They were only metres away from the stairs when they heard the first sounds not made by them.

Sharyn came to a standstill, looking ahead at the light spilling from the open offices ahead. Nicola and James came to the same conclusion, that they were ahead, at least two of them.

Sharyn didn't make a sound as she motioned to Nicola, pointing first at her ear, and then at her Nicola's coat. Nicola understood, reaching in and pulling out a small device.

She handed it to Sharyn, who moved cautiously forward to the open doorway. The device was already activated as she approached and planted it on the top of the door frame.

Just as cautiously she backed away to the stairs, and returned to the ground floor with Nicola and James. Sharyn tapped the device in her ear, activating it to receive the transmission from the listening device.

"This is stupid." One male voice said. "I hire you people to guard me, and nothing happens."

"I'm sorry if you feel that our protection isn't helping you." a second voice said. "But we do have reliable information that an attempt will be made to grab you tonight. Which is why we have set up here, instead of at your home."

"Yeah, that trash dump." The first one said, "I at least would have been comfortable."

"Complaining won't get you anything." The second voice said.

"He is right." Another voice said. "It seems stupid just sitting here waiting."

"Well, by all means, go out and guard the empty factory." The second voice said, "I'm sure they'll do better with your attention. While you're at it, invite those Corps agents in here too, so it can be a real even fight, of two against three."

Nicola gasped, thinking they'd been sprung.

"Shhh!" James said, "He's knows someone is coming, not that we're already here."

Nicola covered her mouth, so she wouldn't make any more outbursts.

"Well, we've been here so long, I'm getting hungry." the third said.

"Sit down and relax." A new voice said. It was quiet, and hard to hear. "We have to wait patiently. Eventually someone is going to come. If not, we succeed in our mission anyhow."

"That's good for you, but I've got to do something." The first voice said.

"Why don't you have another coffee." The second voice said.

"Because I'm already shaking too much." He replied. "First the threats, and now the government want me put away."

"I wouldn't worry too much Mr Vladimir." The quiet one said. "Your life is in good hands."

"The first voice is Rocko." Sharyn said.

"And three body guards." James added.

"Yes, that's what I paid your employer for." Rocko said, "Good hands."

"We don't care about the money Mr Vladimir. We work for the good of the League, and all it's Agents."

"If it wasn't for those bloody Corps people, we'd be doing alright for ourselves." The third one said. A loud sound echoed through their ears for a moment.

"Patience. No need to damage Mr Vladimir's property." The quiet one said, then added "Yet."

"They're probably already in the building." The second one said.

"And they will have to come here, where everyone of us is." The quiet one said. "They don't stand a chance."

"Wearing all this crap, I reckon I could take on the entire LAPD." The third one said.

"Just do not say that too loud." The quiet one said. "They will no doubt find us soon enough, and try to listen in on our conversation."

"Oh, that thing you dragged along." The third one said. "The sound generator."

Chapter 25: Hard packed

"Quick, turn them off." James said, turning his ear piece off.

Sharyn had it off in a moment, but before Nicola could turn her own off, it shrieked loudly in her ear. The loudness surprised her so much she pulled it out of her ear, dropping it onto the floor, and ground it under her boot to shut it up as she tried to shake the sound out of her head.

"Aphrodite?" Sharyn said.

"I can still hear you in this ear." Nicola said, pointing to her left ear.

"A high frequency generator." James said. "Simple but effective."

"Simply deafening." Nicola commented.

"They don't know we're here yet, do they?" Sharyn said.

"No." James replied, "That was only a test. I think."

"Let's get them now, while I can still hear." Nicola said.

"Not a good idea." Sharyn said, "You heard they were well armed. Maybe more so than us."

"A head to head confrontation won't help us." James supplied.

"Then what do we do?" Nicola asked.

"Good question." James said.

"I wish we could just immobilise them." Nicola said.

"Maybe we can." Sharyn said. When she had both of their attention, she went on. "Remember all that foam packing we saw in the plant?"

"That's sprayed in, isn't it!" Nicola said, catching on.

"They just spray that foam into the plastic bags, and pack those computers straight in." Sharyn explained. "It hardens quickly."

James still didn't get what they were on about, "So how does that help us?"

"We can use the foam extractors on them." Sharyn said, pointing upstairs.

"But we want Rocko alive, not embalmed." James said.

"So we still need to get them out of the office." Sharyn said. "At least we don't have to have a shoot out."

"To lure them out." Nicola said.

Sharyn looked over at her. "You'd better not be thinking of what you did last time."

"Who me?" Nicola said. "Would I do something like that hear?"

"Do what?" James asked.

"It doesn't matter." Nicola said, "I wasn't thinking of that, I was thinking of setting off a fire alarm, or something."

James shook his head, trying to concentrate on the mission, rather than what his two female partners may have been talking about. "How about we blow something up out the front." They both looked at him. "It always gets someone's attention, and they'll have to leave the office to look out the front windows."

"A reasonable plan." Nicola agreed.

"Let's get ready then." Sharyn said. "It'll be quicker if we split up. Two of us to grab the foam packing extractor, one can lay the explosives on remote."

"I'll lay the explosives." Nicola offered.

"You don't have a comm unit now." Sharyn said. "You won't know what's going on."

"She can have mine." James offered, pulling his out of his ear. "We only need the one between us."

"Thanks." Nicola said, plugging it into her left ear. "I think I've got some hearing back in my right ear now."

"We'll meet back here then." Sharyn said, leading Knight back towards the packing area in the plant.

Nicola walked through the dark passageways by herself, locating a locked door on the front of the building. It wasn't alarmed, and it didn't have a complicated lock, so she was able to get outside easily.

She walked up the street a bit, looking for something useful to blow up. The street was quite bare, providing her with little to pick from. There were a few parked cars, which she obligingly laid charges under.

She tapped her communicator once, "This is Aphrodite, explosives placed."

"Ok." Sharyn replied.

Nicola took one last look around the street, before moving back inside. She had to wait by herself in the darkness of the ground floor until Sharyn and James showed up, pushing a trolley with tanks on.

"This the best we can do." James said, "Two tanks of compressed foam packing filler."

"It sticks to just about anything." Sharyn said, showing one of her legs covered in white.

"So do we carry these upstairs or what?" Nicola asked.

"I think we'll set up here." Sharyn replied. "And hope this works."

The main reception area was a small round raised desk, with stairs raising from either side, up round the back of the desk, where both joined, and continued up towards the first floor. Sharyn and James arranged themselves on the floor with a tank each, in front each set of stairs, pointed the end of their tanks at the top of the stairs.

"Whenever you're ready Aphrodite." James called.

Nicola had arranged herself back from the reception desk, making sure her weapons were all accessible. "You know," she said, "There's a bit too much light in here."

"Can you fix that?" Sharyn asked.

"Sure." Nicola replied. "Let me blow the explosives first." She said, first arming the remote trigger, then pressing the detonation button.

The blast was quite loud where they were standing. The flames from the blast lit up the inside of the reception as Nicola used a pneumatic pistol to shoot out the lights.

The only lights left on, were at the top of the stair, plunging the reception area into total darkness as the flames died down outside.

"I think I heard that one." Nicola said.

"Good, then you can risk checking the comm bug." Sharyn said.

Nicola tapped the ear device with a finger.

"Randolf and I will check it out." A quiet voice said, "Igor, you stay here with Rocko in case this is actually it."

"I'll be waiting." A calm voice said. Nicola assumed it was Igor.

The sound of footsteps could be heard for a moment, before fading.

"Two are coming to have a look." Nicola reported. "One's staying with Rocko."

"Let's deal with them first." James said.

They waited there for less than a minute, when two silhouettes appeared at the top of the stairs.

"What happened to the lights?" One asked.

"It appears we've got company." The soft voiced one said.

Nicola held her breath, as the two silhouettes paused at the top of the stairs, out of range of the compressed foam. When they slowly descended the stairs, she released it quietly.

They had come prepared for night operations but weren't exactly ready for the sudden need for working in the dark, so made do by relying on sound to tell them when the two men had gotten close enough.

It was almost instantaneous, when Sharyn opened up the valve on her tank, and James his. Nicola could hear as they struggled to hold onto the tanks as they spewed out their compressed contents, all over the stairs and the two men.

The men swore as the foam hit them, sticking all over. Both tried to raise the weapons in their hands, but the stream of foam knocked them off their feet, and helped them slide down the stairs, into the rail around the back of the reception desk. The foam continued to pour around them and over them, as it hardened.

"Hold it." Nicola called, not hearing the struggles of the two men any more. She pulled out a compact lantern, lighting up the centre of the room as Sharyn and James shut off the valves on the tanks.

"Well?" James asked, as Nicola picked her way up the stairs, to the large white forms on the stairs. Some of the foam crunched under her boots, but the large mass of foam was hard as she tapped it experimentally.

She risked knocking on it with her hand, and it was quite firm, sounding hollow underneath.

"I think we've got them." Nicola said excitedly.

"That's good, cause we're almost out of foam." Sharyn said, dropping the tank to the floor. It did sound light and empty as it fell over.

"Two ready packed, one to go." James said, arranging his weapons.

Chapter 26: Packaged but not delivered

Sharyn and James moved up the stair around Nicola.

"Are we just going to leave them like this?" she asked.

"Why not?" Sharyn said.

"Well, they're going to suffocate, shouldn't we poke some holes for them to breath?"

James walked over, "We'd like to, except." He thumbed his foot down on one of the bodies, and it echoed hollow but didn't so much as crumble. "It's hard as rock now."

Nicola looked horrified now, thinking about dying slowly by suffocation.

"Don't worry." Sharyn said. "The foam material is porous. If they breathe real slowly they won't suffocate."

That didn't alleviate all of Nicola's concern, "How will they get out then?"

"That's the good bit." James said. "According to the tanks, this material is supposed to degenerate after 180 minutes. It should become brittle but still remain solid as a packing material. So they should be able to break out in a few hours."

"That's good." Nicola commented, stepping back from the trapped Agents. "I'd hate to feel confined like that forever."

Together they returned up the stairs, moving cautiously towards the open office.

"So how are we going to get this last guy?" James asked.

"I wish I had a stun grenade like that other mission." Sharyn commented.

"Maybe we could bluff him out." Nicola said.

"Or seduce him." Sharyn replied.

Nicola smiled back at her, remembering what she'd done during the first mission. She hadn't done anything so outrageous since, except possibly for the one in the water with the jet skis, but wanted to try something again, but she looked at James, seeing his gaze shift about and declined for the moment, unsure about him.

"We'll have to do it the old fashioned way." Nicola said.

"What, lead them astray, and blow them away." James commented.

"No, nuke them till they glow, and shoot them in the dark."

James started repeating the word "nuke", trying to figure out where they'd get a bomb from, but Sharyn got the idea, "Right, cut the power. I think the main switches were near the reception."

Nicola started pulling out the night vision goggles. "Who'll go, me or you." She asked.

"Neither." James cut in, "I'll go, since I don't have any night vision goggles. Just give me a comm piece so I can switch it back on when you're ready."

Nicola returned the one James had leant her.

"I'll tell you when I'm at the switch." James said, "Just give me a signal when you want the lights off, and on again." He turned about and went back down the stairs.

Sharyn had a set of night vision goggles, which she pulled out of one of her pockets, placing it on her head, ready to drop over her eyes.

Nicola made sure her weapon was ready as she moved forward, towards the doorway. It was quiet inside now, making her half believe there was no one in there.

In a moment, she felt Sharyn's hand on her shoulder. As she put one hand up to the goggles, the lights went out. She had them down quickly, giving her a strange green coloured view of the corridor as she looked around the corner into the office. Nobody was visible, so she stepped around and into the office, with her weapon at the ready.

She swept through the room, and into the back office, finding nothing. Sharyn was right behind her as she turned about. "Nothing." She replied.

Sharyn continued to look about the room.

"Welcome Agents." A voice sounded. "It was nice of you to make your presence known. If I had known you were going to be so industrious in detaining my comrades, I would have left you a bigger surprise."

Nicola immediately grabbed Sharyn by the arm, knowing where the dialogue was headed and pulled her at a run out of the office, and down the corridor. She could hear the voice for a moment more, saying that they would have to look harder, when the office exploded behind them.

Only then did Nicola stop and turn around. She had to lift up the goggles, as the light flared brightly in the goggles. Flames poured out of the office, covering some of the debris that had been blown into the corridor.

Nicola was astonished as the flames started dying down by themselves, but realised why as she felt the water from the sprinkler system run down her face.

"Damn I hate getting wet." Sharyn said.

"They've got to be inside still." Nicola commented.

"Except the surprise has worn off." Sharyn said. She tapped her comm piece, and told James to turn the lights back on. "They're gone from the office, and know we're here." She said.

Nicola didn't catch the reply, but heard Sharyn say "It'll make it easier to find them, and we could always turn it off again."

The lights came back on, showing the wet carpet. Nicola pulled the goggles down her face, and let them hang about her neck.

"How to find them." Nicola said quietly, wandering back to the burnt office as she thought. The sprinklers cut out automatically as the fire went out. The office was black and charred, as the lights had been blown out. Much of the explosion had centred upon a desk in the front room, which was now in small splinters all over the office, and in the corridor.

Nicola walked out again, stepping down the corridor a few paces. "Hey Igor!" She called out.

Nothing came back for a moment, except Sharyn's sudden footsteps approaching her.

"So, it's a dame." A voice came back, somewhere ahead. She moved forward slowly and quietly.

"Yeah." Nicola called back.

"What do you want!" He called, and then added, "Except the obvious that is, because you ain't getting him."

"I just want to talk." Nicola called.

"Talk all you want. But I know what you're doing, trying to find me by my voice." He replied. "I'm no dumb fool, cause I can also hear your companion following you."

Nicola stopped dead still, and turned about to see Sharyn already past the blackened office. Nicola wanted to get closer to find where Igor and Rocko were, but doing so would reveal where she was, and put her in risk. She relented, and stepped back towards Sharyn.

Nicola put on finger to her lips as she approached Sharyn, then waved her to follow as they returned to the main stairs.

"What were you doing?" Sharyn demanded.

"Trying to locate him."

"By revealing yourself?" Sharyn said.

"Well, it worked, because he's still here, and Rocko has to be nearby."

"That's good, but now what?"

Nicola tried to explain to her quietly, an idea. "You and Knight try to locate him from the ground floor, as I engage him in conversation."

"And then?" Sharyn asked.

Nicola opened her coat up, and pulled two items out. "Your choice. Blow the floor out from under them, or use the portal maker."

She watched as Sharyn thought for a moment, then grabbed the portal maker. "That's what I thought." Nicola said, pocketing the unarmed explosive in her coat again.

"Take this, so we can keep in touch." Sharyn said, handing her the comm piece.

"I should have been more careful." Nicola said, putting in her ear.

"Absolutely." Sharyn said, as she went back down the stairs.

Nicola walked slowly back down the corridor, and on impulse, picked up some of the small bits of debris.

She moved a few more steps, from the office, near to where she had gotten before. "So, can we talk now Igor?"

"Sure." He replied, "But where's your friend gone?"

Nicola tossed one of the chips from the destroyed desk back down the corridor, hearing it hit the carpet. "Oh, she's waiting further down the corridor. Do you want her to move back further?"

"No, she's ok there, as long as she doesn't get any closer." Igor said.

Nicola only hoped Igor was taken in by her ruse, and not pretending to go along.

"So Igor, where's Rocko?" Nicola called.

"Wouldn't you like to know." He called back.

"Oh, I just want to know if he's safe, and not hurt in any way."

"My, you are the caring type."

"Well." Nicola said, "Is he ok?"

"He's perfectly fine."

Nicola heard through her comm piece from James, that they'd found Igor's location, and were setting up. On impulse, she tossed another chip of debris down the corridor, near the last piece.

"So I can't get him to confirm this?" Nicola asked.

"Sorry, but you aren't going to find out where he is." Igor replied.

"Well, I tried." Nicola said, shuffling about. "What's the League thing he mentioned."

"So you were listening in." Igor said. "I hope you enjoyed it."

"It wasn't so bad. Almost as good as cocooning your two friends in packing material." Nicola replied. She added with real concern, "I do hope they can breath in that stuff."

"You'd better not have hurt them!" he shouted loudly.

Chapter 27: You're under arrest!

"What's she doing up there?" James whispered, as he watched the portal maker slowly cut a big hole into the ceiling.

"Keeping him occupied." Sharyn replied.

"At least he hasn't moved." James added.

They watched a groove slowly appear in the ceiling, as it turned about, using some strange device to cut into the concrete ceiling. A fine powder of concrete fell from the cutter, as it turned around and around.

They'd set it up, almost directly under the sound of Igor, extending the cutting arm out as far as it could go to cut a big hole in the ceiling of an office underneath.

He'd shut the door, making the room completely dark, except for the electric orange light from the cutter, as it went around the ceiling.

He stood next to Sharyn against the wall, out from underneath the portal that was been created.

He thought about Sharyn now, as they waited in the dark, with her breath barely audible. She wasn't half what he'd expected, but that was because of the different body she was using for the game. The fact that she was actually using a prison overall, even with its changes, showed that she had accepted her imprisonment.

But he'd personally seen the reports on Avero prison, and the results of how prisoners were re-educated. With his Mormon heritage, computer re-education wasn't something he was fond of, but it had seemed to work on those who had already been released.

James didn't feel personally assured that the Avero program was, as it was made out to be. But that wasn't why he was here.

Sharyn interrupted him now, "It's breaking through." She whispered.

James could see light faintly shining through one part as the cutter passed over it. It wasn't too long, before the whole ceiling gave way, and crashed down onto the ground floor and letting light from the first floor in.

"Don't move Igor!" Sharyn called, pointing her weapon at the man, trying to stand up again.

"Drop your weapons." James called.

Igor relented, and dropped the weapon in his hand.

"Now face down on the floor, hands and behind you!" James directed.

Igor saw no other option, and complied with the request.

James stood over him, as Sharyn used a wrist clamp.

"I found Rocko." Nicola called down through the hole.

"What have you done to my offices?" A voice wailed from above.

"I'll meet you at the stairs." Nicola called.

"Ok." Sharyn yelled back.

"Leave him, or bring him?" James asked.

"Leave him." Sharyn said, "We don't have a warrant for him, and bringing him back will only mean trouble for us."

"I'll just take this then." James said, picking up the weapon Igor had dropped. "As a memento."

Sharyn stepped out of the office, letting James secure the door before rejoining with Nicola.

James stood back as Sharyn pulled out the warrant. "Rocko Vladimir, this is an arrest warrant from the planetary government." She read out the details, but Rocko didn't argue once as they hauled him back through the plant, and to the Mag Train platform.

Sharyn called Corps HQ for a train on the comm piece, which she retrieved from Nicola.

It was a short wait, as idle people on the platform stared at the foursome as they got onto the Corps Train as it pulled up.

"Another successful mission." James said, sitting back in his seat next to Rocko.

"Not yet." Sharyn said. "Not until we're physically in HQ."

James didn't understand, as the ride was smooth all the way, only stopping when they reached the platform in HQ.

James hustled Rocko along, into the lift. It was when he'd been secured by Corps personnel that Sharyn said, "Now, it's a successful mission."

James looked to Nicola in question.

"Don't ask, it's just how the game works." She replied, as they returned to the stores level.

The store man, took in all the borrowed gear. "Where is item EM-PM-21, the portal maker?" He asked.

"It was destroyed." Sharyn said.

"When the ceiling it was cutting through dropped on it." James added.

"You people sure know how to look after equipment don't ya, but it did its job didn't it?" He asked as he handed back their personal gear.

"Absolutely." James said, "Made a nice big hole in the concrete ceiling."

They walked away from the desk, "So when do we play again?" James asked.

"You want to continue playing with us?" Nicola asked.

"Sure, why the hell not." He replied. "This is the best game I've played yet, and you two are teaching me things I've never known before."

“I guess we'll be playing in a week then.” Sharyn said. “Same time as this.”
“Ok, I'll be here.” James said, pulling on his sunglasses, and entering the lift by himself.

Chapter 28: More time for play

"Strange, but he seems quite good for a lawyer." Sharyn said.

"A little too good, if you ask me." Nicola said.

"The first mission is always a little easy for the new Agents." Sharyn said, "Consider how easy it was for your mission."

"Except for the getaway, a walk in the park." Nicola said. "Though it was a bit chilly."

"If I remember correctly, it was your plan to distract then. Lara and I had no idea what you were up to." Sharyn commented. "If I'd done that mission without you, I'd probably gone in that room shooting."

"And have the alarm raised." Nicola argued.

"Not necessarily." Sharyn said, "But we'll never know unless we get another mission there."

"No chance there I think. But I guess I'll be seeing you then." Nicola said.

"Next week." Sharyn replied, before logging off.

Sharyn returned the headset to its moulded compartment, and waited until the attendant released her from the booth. It was close to dinner time, but she was on the roster for KP tonight.

The inmates of the prison, both male and female, flowed towards the kitchen area. Sharyn hadn't known about mixed prisons before this. Since this prison was fairly new in the technology, they'd adopted the equal opportunity policy, re-educating both men and women in the same facility. In practice it was more difficult, but the prison policy of keeping an equal balance of female and male inmates helped, and strict segregation during lock down. All men resided on the lower floors of the prison wings, whilst women resided in the upper floor. So areas could still be maintained for more violent crimes, separating them from the softer ones, making re-education easier to administer.

Sharyn passed through the checkpoint, into the kitchen area. She didn't mind Kitchen Patrol, as it reminded her of the work she used to do, before the *incident*.

What else could she call the crime that she was blamed for, but not involved in? It was now the big turning point in her life, followed distantly by the guy she almost married when she was 22. He was long gone now, most likely living it up in Berlin, or one of the other big cities in Europe.

It was a big what if. If he'd committed himself to marriage, and taken her with him. Then maybe she wouldn't be here. She wouldn't have met all the people she'd met in VR.

She tried thinking about what if, that still got her the friend's in VR, without the unpleasant stay in prison.

The memories, both good and bad were a burden on her mind as she served the meals that were brought up on the screen, as individual prisoners made their selections from the separated meal area.

It was just another form of security that was part of Aver0. Like the device under the skin on the back of her skull. A subtle reminder every time she went to bed, that she couldn't willingly leave this place. Rumours abounded throughout the prison population about its functions, that it told the Warden what they were thinking, or the guards had video monitors hooked in, to watch their dreams as they slept. One prisoner had the bright notion that it was a mind control device, and led a small part of the prison on a riot to prove his point, but it took the guards to quell the riot, and the VR simulators to re-educate them.

One thing they knew for sure, was that their whereabouts could be traced within the prison all the time.

Sharyn has seen this happen on a few occasions, and wasn't totally surprised the next day, when she went to get lunch, that the touch screen in front of her changed from the lunch menu, to reveal the face of the Warden, who called her specifically by name.

There were some moans behind her, as other prisoners saw their lunches been delayed by the Warden, but not totally worried, as only one monitor had changed, so it wasn't a general address.

"Sharyn Shiels, it has come to my attention that your progress here in Aver0 is going better than expected. You have been granted extra time for out of prison pursuits."

Sharyn knew this was the title the Warden gave for any authorised VR programs, that could be played on-line with people outside the prison.

"As such, you now have eight hours per week for O.O.P.P, which you may accumulate during any one month. That is all."

His face disappeared, to be replaced by the lunch menu.

Sharyn stood there a moment, considering her fortune until the prisoner behind her told her to hurry up. She made her selection on reflex, having seen it briefly before the Warden showed his face, then took her time eating, as she thought it over.

Eight hours. That meant she could go on-line with Troubled Realms almost twice a week, depending on her re-education schedule.

It took some talking with the O.O.P.P manager first, to find out that she could use the time however she wanted, as the scheduling was quite flexible. But hours wouldn't be available until next week, as she had to accumulate them from this week onwards.

Sharyn told James and Nicola after they completed the next mission.

"So I've got more time on-line now, thanks to the prison system." she said.

"The tax payer's money at work." Nicola said jovially, "Entertaining the criminally insane."

"Thanks a lot." Sharyn said.

"Oh not you, you're innocent." Nicola replied, keeping her voice light. "It's all those other's I was talking about." James opened his mouth now, "So we get to play together more often?"

"If you want to." Sharyn said.

"Well I sure want to." Nicola said, looking back at James for her answer.

"Can we make it a weeknight, as I have to work during the day, unlike Aphrodite." He said.

"Wednesday evening ok, say about 7 Central Time?" Sharyn asked.

"Sure." Nicola answered.

"Good." James said.

Chapter 29: Returning from the dead

"Lara?!" Nicola called, and ran forward to the figure stepping down the ramp from the ship.

She heard Sharyn right behind her, as they met with the familiar figure. "Lara?" Sharyn said.

"Sure is guys!" Marina replied.

Both Nicola and Sharyn dropped their bags, and hugged her together.

"What are you doing here?" Nicola said, stepping back to look over the very familiar clothing, "I thought you weren't allow to play any more."

"It's a short story." Marina said, looking Nicola over in the almost identical clothes. "My mom took the game back to my grandparents, who had bought the game for my birthday. But she came back after some talking with them, and said I could play it, as long it was the single player access, not the team play."

"So here you are." Sharyn said.

"Yeah, I thought I'd come on-line now, and possibly catch you two for a mission, and I got lucky." Marina said. "Who's the new player?" She asked.

Nicola dragged James forward by the sleeve, "This is Knight, who replaced you when you left four missions ago."

"Nice to meet you Lara." James said, extending his hand.

Marina took it, and shook it smiling.

"Come, you must be in a hurry to get to your mission." Marina said, turning about to move back up the ramp.

"Not if we have to leave you again so soon." Sharyn said, following with the big bag in one hand.

Marina sealed the ramp personally, as they all filled inside. "So you got some real clothes now?" Marina asked.

"Yep." Nicola answered. "The last wish of a dying Agent is always respected, so they gave me the whole kit, with modifications of course."

"Of course." Marina agreed. "You aren't exactly my size." She brought them into the front of the ship, showing them where to store the bags.

"You might as well sit up front with me." Marina said, "Instead of the usual cargo space."

"We appreciate it." Nicola said.

"So what is this single player access?" James asked.

"Oh." Marina said, sitting down, "You won't know cowboy, since, well. I'll start over. The single player mode allows you to play some missions, just like the team play, except it's more difficult with longer play hours for each mission. Or you can specify to assist in a team mission, to become a temporary member of the mission under certain conditions. So at the moment, I'm operating as a pilot for the ship which will be available for you use during the entire mission."

Marina had started up the ship systems as she spoke, and used the ship communications to request for take off clearance.

"Roger flight Alpha-Romeo-Romeo-Alpha-Four, you are cleared for take off. Skies are clear for direct assent."

"Thanks tower, Aurora out." Marina said, then brought the engines to life, to lift the ship slowly from the ground.

"Aurora?" Sharyn asked.

"It's my new name." Marina said, manipulating the controls to make a completely manual take-off. "Because I died, I got a new designation, so I had to choose a new name. Aurora."

"It's good." Nicola said, "Not as good as the last one."

"It's suited so far." Marina said, as the screen in front showed them ascending quickly now, up though the atmosphere. "I'm getting better, don't you think?"

"Not a single bump." Sharyn said, as she watched the blue sky fade into the black starry sky.

"Um, Knight, have you been though a jump yet?" Marina asked.

"What's a jump?" James asked.

"It's our fourth mission with Knight." Nicola said, "And we haven't gone out of the solar system yet."

"A hyperspace jump." Marina explained, as she turned about in her seat. "Ever been in an aircraft?" She asked.

"Yes." He replied.

"Do you get air sick?"

"No so far." He said.

"Ever been in one, when the aircraft did a sudden dive, and when it pulled up, and you wanted to hurl?" She described.

"No, never happened." James said.

"Well its worse than that, so it feels like you entire body, gets squashed around your stomach, to squeeze you through an artificially generated hole in space. Not a black hole, but similar."

"Is it safe?" James asked.

"Entirely." Marina said, turning about. "If you throw up, do it on the floor, and not the chairs or instruments."

James looked to Nicola in query, wondering if this was such a good idea.

He didn't have any time to wonder, as Nicola watched him as they jumped. He became quite green when they got through, but he didn't throw up.

"So how was it?" Nicola asked him.

Only after his colour returned, did he speak. "Very strange."

"That about describes it." Nicola said.

"We have to do that again?" he asked.

"On the way back to HQ." Sharyn answered.

"Did anyone see that?" Marina asked, suddenly active on the console.

"What?" Sharyn said, turning about.

"Probably nothing." Marina said, "I'm still getting used to all these things, radar, sensors, or whatever they're called."

"As long as it's nothing important." Sharyn said, looking at the consoles to understand what Marina was looking at, but giving up, and looking out the view screen.

"I'll check it out later, once you're on the planet." Marina said.

The view shifted round, as the planet came into view. "Planet Prime." Marina said, "A backwater planet, with only a small population in the mining colony."

"That's where we're headed." Nicola said.

Marina set in an approach down to the planet. There was no navigation marker for the ship to approach on auto pilot, so Marina had to wrestle with the controls to bring the ship down manually.

Nicola watched the screen, as they approached the planet, the swirling white clouds passing by, as they approached the green carpeted surface.

It wasn't fields of plants or grass that Nicola was seeing, but endless acres of forests.

As Marina brought the ship down towards the big pyramid like structures of the mining facility, the size of the forest became apparent. Individual trees were visible at some distance, with their huge canopies dwarfing the buildings, as Marina directed the ship towards a flat open area between the four pyramid structures.

The tops of the trees went past as the ship dropped slowly down, to come to a rest some 100 metres below the tree tops.

"Welcome to Prime people." Marina said, shutting down main ship systems. She had the boarding ramp already lowering by the time she made it aft.

Nicola was close behind with a large bag on her shoulder.

"Thankyou for flying Aurora space lines, please fly again." Marina said, as they all filed past her down the ramp.

"Cute." Nicola said as Marina joined them on the bare ground. "You going back up?" She asked, pointing towards the sky.

"No need." Marina said, "I can stay here. I'll use the time to check some of the ships systems, and find out what that blip was."

"Sure you don't want to join us?" Sharyn asked.

"Can't." Marina said, "I not supposed to interfere in your mission, only assist in my role. In this case, as a ship pilot."

"Makes sense." James said, "Might be called cheating with four people doing the mission."

"What's the mission anyhow?" Marian asked.

"We've got a civil insurrection by some of the mining crew." Sharyn explained, "They think that the gas they're mining called Belthan, is been used for weapons, and have staged a strike by locking down most of the facility."

"So we have to go in, and resolve the situation." James added.

"Using whatever means necessary." Nicola added.

"What're you waiting here for then?" Marina asked.

"The Mining Operations Manager." James said. "He's supposed to meet us on the landing platform, and give us a site report since Central couldn't tell us everything. If this is the landing platform."

"It was the only flat place to land." Marina said, "So don't complain if it's the wrong place."

Nicola laughed, "Gee, you're sounding almost like Cowboy."

"Here comes someone now." Sharyn said.

"I'll leave you to it then." Marina said, stepping back up the ramp quickly.

"Thanks... Aurora!" Sharyn called.

Chapter 30: A problem of honour

James watched as the single man approached.

"You are from the Corps?" he asked, stopping a few metres short.

"Yes." Sharyn said, "Agent Magnum, Knight and Aphrodite." She added, pointing out each of them.

"I welcome you to the only Nagami Mining operation here on Prime." He said, making a slight bow, "I am Yukio Tokugawa, the Mining Operations Manager, but most of the employees call me MOM for short."

"Thankyou Tokugawa." Sharyn said, using his family name, and giving a slight bow in return.

James felt obliged and gave a show bow also, seeing Nicola doing the same thing out of the corner of his eye.

"Please follow me." Tokugawa said, "And I will explain what has happened."

James picked up his equipment bag, and followed behind both Nicola and Sharyn. He took one last look at the open ship behind him, that contained Sharyn's previous playing partner Aurora, before entering the dark entrance into the mining complex.

Tokugawa explained some of his mining operation as they walked along, "The Nagami Mining complex is made up of four modules, as you may have seen as you approached. These modules are designed to be easy to transport and convert, depending on the mining operations been carried out by Nagami Mining. Currently the Module 4 is outfitted to pressurise the Belthan gas and packing in containers ready to be picked up. Modules 2 and 3 are set up for processing. With a gas mining operation, it is necessary to use half of the facilities for processing, as the Belthan gas comes up with many impurities, from water to any number of other gasses. This gets removed by a dozen processes, which scrubs the gas clean."

Together they entered the operations centre, with large windows that overlook a small part of the complex.

"This is Module 1." Tokugawa continued, "The main module for mining the Belthan gas itself. There are several parts to this module, which make up the mining operation itself. This is the operations centre, where everything for Module 1 is supposed to be controlled from. That is until six hours ago, when some of the mining crew found out what we were mining here."

"How did they find out?" James asked.

"Oh, it is no secret." Tokugawa said, "Just that most of us don't really care what it is we are mining, so long as we get a full day's pay. But in this case, an office worker in Module 4 who does our filing, read the about Belthan gas in some report from the military, that the gas was used in their weapons. So word spread, and most of the mining crew shut down the mine itself. Since then, some of the crews joined them here in module 1, and they sealed themselves into the central area."

"Can't you open it up from here?" Sharyn asked.

"Not since an engineer joined them and disconnected all the power and control lines. We do not even have a video feed from the central area now. They could possibly still have the line for receiving signals, but they haven't replied. As soon as that happened, I contacted Nagami Mining Corporate for assistance."

"And they contacted us." Nicola said.

"Yes, I was informed that they had called Corps for a group of Agents to come and assist me. But how the three of you will get the employees back to work, I do not know."

"That's the good bit." James said. "We did a little research before coming over. The sole use of Belthan gas, is in the manufacturing process of engines for ships."

"Yes." Tokugawa agreed, "And weapons."

"This is not technically correct." James explained. "The main weapons used today, conform to energy, projectile and missiles. Belthan gas is never used in any process for building energy or projectile weapons."

"Ah, but they are in missiles!" Tokugawa exclaimed, like he'd won a game.

"Actually no they aren't." James said.

"How so?"

"The missiles contain warheads made from some substance, which we have no idea since it's classified, but it's a highly reactive substance, that heats up very fast. Belthan gas I understand isn't a reactive substance, right?"

"Yes." Tokugawa said, "Very safe to mine."

"Exactly, so it can't be used in a warhead of any known missile."

"Then how is it used?" Tokugawa asked, perplexed.

"Simply." James said, "Missiles have engines just like ships. These are made by the same process."

"Ah!" Tokugawa said, slapping his forehead. "If those fools had known this, they would not have stopped working."

James looked to Sharyn, trying to understand what the difference was. The missiles still needed Belthan gas to work.

Tokugawa saw the looks on all their faces. "We are honourable workers. Most would feel dishonoured if what we mined for the company was used to make weapons, but engines are just engines. Not matter what they are used for. It is not our fault that someone else attaches these engines to warheads."

James still couldn't understand, be accepted it none the less.

"Tokugawa." James asked, "Where are the rest of the employees currently?"

"I've sent them off to their quarters in Module 2, since we cannot get any more work done currently." Tokugawa said.

"So how do we tell the locked up masses." Nicola asked.

"Let me try the internal communications first, Aphrodite-Mi" Tokugawa said.

He talked into the microphone for a several minutes, first trying to contact anyone, then giving up and just talking, hoping that someone will hear his explanation of how the Belthan gas is really used.

"It is useless." Tokugawa said, slumping in his seat. "They must have disconnected all the main lines."

"Is there any other way to talk to them?" Sharyn asked.

"None. The loud address system is part of the communications, it would have been disconnected also."

"Then how about yelling it though the walls." Nicola asked.

"Not possible either. The walls are designed to be sound proof, to reduce noise from the mining. We would not hear a ship crash, unless we had all the doors open."

"Is there any other way of getting in and telling them?" James asked.

"All doors are sealed." Tokugawa said. "The only other way in, would be the air shafts. They are completely controlled from here, so if any gas escapes, it can be contained or diverted away."

"They lead all the way in to the centre?" Sharyn asked.

"All the way." Tokugawa said. "I could cut off the air supply down there, except they would probably suffocate and collapse before they realised there was no air."

"That won't be necessary." Sharyn said. "One of us will go in via the air shafts, and tell them."

"But will they listen to you?" He asked.

"Then we'll just have to open up a door, for you to speak to them." James said.

"Who will go?" Nicola asked.

"Tokugawa, how big are these air shafts?" James asked.

"Oh, this big." He said, indicating towards a vent in the ceiling, that was approximately half a metre square.

Chapter 31: Tight fit

"Small." Sharyn commented, "Anyone want to volunteer?"

They all looked at one another, but none of them said a thing.

"Straws." Nicola said at last.

"No straws, Stone Paper and Scissors." Sharyn said.

"Ok." James said.

"How does that go again?" Nicola asked.

"Stone takes scissors, scissors takes paper and paper takes stone." Sharyn explained, showing the hand symbols for each. "Loser goes in. If there is a draw, those go again."

Nicola nodded, understanding.

"Mr Tokugawa?" James asked, "Could you please count from four down to zero."

"Sure." He agreed.

They all stuck a fist out as Tokugawa counted backwards, "Four...Three...Two...One...Zero."

Sharyn and James by chance had a draw with scissors. But Nicola had opted for paper, and lost.

"My lucky day." Nicola said.

"Tokugawa, where is the shortest air shaft into the central area?" Sharyn asked.

"It is in the area out there." He said, pointing out the window towards the ceiling. "Short it is, but it isn't the easiest as it has to go up several metres before coming down again."

"And the easiest?" Nicola asked.

"It is shaft from outside, used for direct ventilation. It will lead you straight there, almost." Tokugawa used one of the displays to bring up a map of the airshaft leading from outside, all the way into the building, complete with cross shafts, some sections that sloped down, and a couple that dropped straight down, but they weren't very high.

Sharyn grabbed an electronic pad from her bag, and turned on the capture feature, taking a picture of the screen, and passed it over Nicola who saved it, and turned on the tamper protection as she examined the smaller diagram.

"It should get you out near the secondary controller access door." Tokugawa said, "It doesn't have an electronic seal, so it is probably only jammed closed."

"This seems ok." Nicola said, putting the pad down to open up her bag. "Torch and comm gear." She said, picking them out. "Anything else I need?"

"Let me do a comm check." Sharyn said, pulling out a headset and saying a few choice words. "Don't get stuck."

"Thanks for advice." Nicola replied. "Now show me where to get in this shaft." She directed Tokugawa outside. James let out a small laugh.

Nicola turned and looked at him, before she realised what she had said, realising the sexual nature of shaft's and what they went in. Sometimes her mind did strange things like relating words like that, she thought about it as she followed Tokugawa.

Sharyn and James followed, to see where Nicola had to go in. Outside, where the ship was, Tokugawa mounted a ladder that went up the angled wall of the module. It must have been halfway up the slope of the building, where the ladder ended temporarily at an indented recess in the flat angled exterior. The horizontal surface was about a metre wide, enough to walk along safely without falling off.

Tokugawa found a vent mounted in the vertical surface, towards the corner edge of the building. The cover was attached by some clips, which turned upwards, so the cover could swing down on hinges. "Here it is." He said, stepping back.

Nicola bent down, and shone her torch in. "It's a bit bigger here."

"Yes, but it narrows down a few metres in." Tokugawa said.

"If you say so." Nicola said, halfway in.

"You going to be ok?" Sharyn called at Nicola's legs.

A muffled reply came back, which Sharyn didn't understand. She turned on the headset, and asked again. "You going to be ok?"

Nicola's voice came back, "It's a bit late to ask that isn't it?"

"Just thought I'd ask." Sharyn said, turning to smile at James. "We're just going to wait down stairs for you."

"Thanks a lot." Nicola replied. "Now stop interrupting me!"

"I'll close this up now." Tokugawa said, lifting the cover back over the vent.

"Ah, Tokugawa, how will Aphrodite open the vent from the other side if it's closed like that?" James asked.

"Ah, good question." He replied. "Vents not closed like this inside. They have snap seals, and pop out easily."

"That's ok then." James said, turning about, as he was closest to the ladder now.

"Ah, Jesus!", Sharyn heard Nicola call over the headset.

"What happened?" Sharyn asked, as she followed James to the ladder.

There was only heavy breathing for a moment, before Sharyn heard Nicola speak "Give me a moment."

It was quiet whilst Sharyn waited for Nicola to get back, "I was just crawling over the first vent, and it fell out underneath me. I almost fell through head first, towards a floor that's over 20 metres away."

"Sorry." Sharyn said.

"For what?" Nicola asked. "You knew didn't you?"

"Tokugawa just told us." Sharyn said. "Those vents just pop out, so don't put too much weight on them."

"Thanks a lot for the warning." Nicola said. "You want to ask Tokugawa if there isn't anything else I should know?"

Sharyn turned from the ladder for a moment, "Tokugawa, is there anything else in the vents that Aphrodite should know about?"

"No nothing." He said, "Except that the main fans are located in the main vertical shafts. She should be careful when crossing them."

"Aphrodite?" Sharyn called, "Take care when crossing the main vertical shafts, as that's where the fans are."

"Ok, thanks." Nicola said.

Chapter 32: *Sweating it for a while*

The air shaft was very cramped, as Nicola shuffled along. It had already narrowed down to the size Tokugawa had described, causing her to bump her head a few times, until she got used to it. She'd frightened herself when the vent collapsed as she put both hands on it.

The narrow confines of the shaft saved her as she'd pushed her legs against the walls of the air shaft, to stop herself from falling right on through, to a floor some distance below.

After getting rid of Sharyn, she had to free her hands of the torch and pad which she held on to, by stuffing them into the only place available, into her top. Only then did she reach up to grab the back edge of the vent, and wriggle herself back up.

It had been a frightening experience, but she was happier now to be in the shaft, and not hanging halfway out. Once she no longer over the vent, and had explained the situation to Sharyn, Nicola kept moving with the torch and pad back in each hand.

Up ahead now, was one of the vertical shafts that Sharyn had warned her of. Just like the vent, it spanned the entire width of the shaft, but the side shafts gave her an intermediate place to place her hands as she moved across.

She could see the fan some distance below, as it blew air up like a mini tornado, trying to blow her up into the shaft above, and blowing her hair all over the place.

It was a relief to get across, and continue down the passage.

"Aphrodite, how are you going?" Sharyn's voice came through the headset.

"Slowly." Nicola replied. "Just got past the first vertical shaft, but it wasn't too dangerous, as it was trying to blow me up."

"Just look out for one's above up, try to suck you up then." Sharyn said.

"I should mention, that it's warm in here." Nicola said, "And I'm sweating like a, well, like a Cuban tobacco worker."

"Would it help if said I wish I was with you?" Sharyn said.

"Sure would." Nicola replied. "You can come and join me."

Nicola came to the first section which angled downwards. She half slid down this, with the angle of the shaft and her hands wet with perspiration. At the bottom, where it levelled off, Nicola stopped to check the electronic pad.

Here she noted the special icons, indicating a turn she had to take in the shaft, that couldn't be shown on the two dimensional map.

A few metres forward, she found it, above a vertical shaft. This was more difficult to traverse, as she had to take the shaft to the right.

As she stuck her head out she noted the fan below, as the air rushed past, whipping her hair away. This time, she turned her head about, to look up wards, and see between her waving hair, another fan sucking air.

She could do no less other than note their existence, and hope she didn't loose anything as she went over the shaft. Going around the corner, was difficult, as she had to turn sideways to physically bend around the corner. Once through, she was fine.

Sharyn called again, for an update, "How are you going?"

Nicola consulted her map, "About a quarter of the way there." she replied.

"That far?" She said.

"Don't complain." Nicola huffed, as she descended another shaft that angled downwards.

"Am I complaining?" Sharyn said, "Maybe you'd rather listen to Knight."

"Maybe I would, if you were down here." Nicola said.

Sharyn didn't answer back, but James did. "Don't mind Magnum, she's only worried."

"About what?" Nicola asked.

"Why this mission needed the three of us, with a possible forth with Aurora, when one people seems to be all that's necessary."

Nicola was quiet for a moment, as she thought about what he said, and so she could cross another vertical shaft.

"I get the point." Nicola said. "Maybe you want to talk to Lara. I mean Aurora, and find out if she got any more information on that blip of hers."

"Good idea." James replied. "I'll go out there now."

Nicola ignored the silence as the headset went dead, forging ahead, and down.

Ahead was the first real tricky part. She had to descend a short vertical shaft, down three metres to a solid based horizontal shaft.

It was to be the easiest one to approach, as there was a continuing passage above, giving her the chance look down it first to confirm it was the right passage, and then move across it so she could back herself down the hole feet first.

Halfway in, she realised her predicament. "Bloody hell." She complained, pulling herself up again.

"What's wrong now?" Sharyn asked.

"Sorry, didn't know I said anything." Nicola said.

"Your swearing could do with some improvement." Sharyn said.

"You want it in Spanish?" Nicola said.

"No, it'll probably get translated back to English." Sharyn replied, "Just tell me what the problem is."

"Oh, nothing much." Nicola said, "Just trying to get down this first vertical shaft. With the torch and map."

"Just stuff them down your top." Sharyn suggested.

"I've just tried that, but have you ever tried to slip over the edge of something with a torch jammed in your breast?"

"Um, not that I know of." Sharyn answered.

"That's what I thought." Nicola said, trying something else. "Here I go again!"

This time she eased down the edge, hearing the torch rattle off the back wall of the shaft she lowered herself to a fingertip position in the dark.

It's only one and a half metres, Nicola told herself with her eye's closed, and then released her grip.

It was a short plunge, with a loud jarring stop as she bent her knees to take the impact, only to bash them into the shaft wall.

"Fuck!" Nicola yelled, squeezing down in the shaft to hold her knees.

"Your swearing is improving." Sharyn said.

"That bloody hurt!" Nicola called back.

"What did you do?" Sharyn asked.

"Oh, I got the torch and the pad in the back pockets of the shorts." Nicola explained, "Thank Aurora for the shorts would you. But, dropping down this shaft is loco."

Nicola took the chance to drop her body down into the horizontal shaft, pressing on her knees for a moment, and then rolling on her side to grab the pad and torch to see the damage to her knees.

"They don't look too bad, only bruised." Nicola said.

"Going to keep going?" Sharyn asked.

"I'm not going anywhere else." Nicola said. "Fortunately, Mr Tokugawa only marked two of these vertical drops."

"Don't mind me, I'll just be here listing to your woeful swearing." Sharyn said.

"Oh, just shut your trap." Nicola said, and she didn't hear anything back from Sharyn, for a while.

She was almost to the next vertical drop when she heard Sharyn again. "Knight is back with some news."

"He couldn't tell me himself?" Nicola asked.

"Well, I had to re-confirm with Aurora the details." Sharyn said.

"Wait a minute can you." Nicola said, as she entered a cross shaft. She didn't hear the reply over the rush of air, as she contorted herself around the corner, and then rolled over, to push her feet up the shaft she'd been facing up a moment before. It was difficult now, to back into the shaft completely blind, trusting herself completely to the map on the pad.

"Ok, you want to say that all again?" Nicola asked.

"I had to talk to Aurora, over her ship comm, and confirm what she got." Sharyn said. "She's been able to get the ship to play back its record, and identify that blip as another ship."

Nicola didn't say a word, as she wormed her way backwards.

"The ship was towards the other side of the planet, and disappeared around the edge when Aurora picked it up. It's probably still on the other side right now. It could well mean, that we have visitors."

"That's all nice, but where are they?" Nicola asked, as she felt for the vertical shaft somewhere behind her.

"I've been in here for how long now? Almost three quarters the way there, and they haven't shown themselves yet."

"Knight and I are preparing, and making sure Aurora is ready." Sharyn said. "Just be careful."

"Will do." Nicola said, as her foot found where the horizontal shaft stopped and the vertical shaft began.

This one was a doozey, as the shaft was supposed to continue dropping down past where she had to get off.

She placed the torch and pad in the back pockets of shorts, as before, and edged herself over, and down the shaft. This time however, Nicola pushed her feet against the wall in front, forcing her back against the wall.

The torch was in the way, but she released one hand, finding she had enough pressure to hold herself in place, and worked the torch out towards the side. With no where else to put it, she shoved it down the centre of her halter top, hoping it wouldn't fall out.

Slowly, with experimentation, and pushing against the wall with both hands, she lowered herself down the shaft, until her feet missed the wall, finding the horizontal shaft to plant her feet on.

After switching which side of the shaft her feet were on, Nicola squirmed into the passage, leading towards her intended destination.

As Nicola descended another sloping passage, she was startled by the different voice that came over the comm headset.

"Attention to the Corps Agents within the Nagami mine. Do not attempt in any way to enter the central mining area of Module 1. We have taken possession of this area, including all the employees that reside there. If you enter, we will be forced to kill you."

Chapter 33: Truth and acceptance

"Did you guys hear that?" Nicola's voice came across the communications headset.

"We heard it." James replied. "On our communications and the loud address system."

"Aphrodite." Sharyn called, "Maybe you should stop where you are for a moment."

"Yeah, yeah." Nicola complained. "Here is just as good as any other place to lie down."

"I think we should take this seriously." James interrupted.

"That bad?" Nicola replied.

"Well, we have no idea what is in there beside the employees." James said. "It's your life at risk, against any number of people."

"And you aren't armed are you?" Sharyn asked. "You didn't take your pistol."

"No." Nicola replied. "I didn't think it would be useful, and dragging it through this shaft would have been hell."

"Maybe you should have taken it." James said.

"Maybe." Sharyn agreed, "But it's too late for it now."

"Next time, I'll get a leg holster for it." Nicola said.

"Maybe it's best to get you out, while we can." James told Nicola.

"Can't you get something to me?" Nicola asked, "Like toss it up to the next vent I cross?"

"Those vents are pretty high up." Sharyn said.

"Aphrodite?" It was Marina's voice, James heard cutting across the comm.

"Aurora?" Nicola asked.

"Yeah, sorry but I had to bust in." Marina said. "I heard that broadcast all around the landing site, and I just had to tell you."

James listened as Nicola replied. "I heard the whole thing."

"I know, I heard you arguing about not going in. But, did you recognise the voice?" Marina asked.

"What do you mean?" Nicola replied.

"It took me a moment, because last time she was pretty intense, but it's hard not to forget her voice." Marina said.

The signal was quiet for a moment, before Nicola came back. "God, no. It can't be."

"Who?" James asked, looking at Sharyn who seemed to be thinking.

"Jade." Marina replied.

"That bitch." Sharyn said, almost instantly.

James still didn't know who they were talking about, but as Sharyn saw his furrowed brow, she explained. "I'm not sure if we explained this to you, but Aurora was our last partner for our threesome as Agent Lara, before you came along. Our last mission together went well, up until the end where we encountered three people impersonating Agents at the spaceport. To shorten my story, Lara was killed, by Jade, after the three of them tried to torture her."

James saw her pause, with a glitter in her eyes before she continued. "She's only 15 years old, and some player treated her like dirt." Sharyn said between breaths.

"And this was the same person we just heard." James said, concluding the explanation.

"Yes." Was all Sharyn said.

"I'm going in." Nicola's voice came over.

"What do you mean you're going in?" Sharyn said, with a suddenly full voice. "You are not going in there!"

"It's a bit late." Nicola replied. "I'm out of the vent now, and in the central area."

"Damn it Aphrodite!" Sharyn said, pulling off her headset.

James moved quickly, opening up his bag and grabbing several weapons. "Aphrodite, you at that door yet?" he asked.

"I'm looking for it now." Nicola replied, "What's his name didn't show us a map for this part."

"Tokugawa. And where is he?" James replied, looking around. The Japanese man wasn't in the controller room, and he didn't reply as James called his name out.

"This is not good." Sharyn said. "They must have someone out here."

"Aphrodite, Tokugawa has disappeared." James relayed. "We don't know where the door is to meet you there."

"Don't waste your time." Nicola replied. "I've found it."

"Well?" James asked.

"It's welded shut."

"Are you sure?" James asked.

"I'm no engineer, but these marks all around the edge of the door look like welds." Nicola said. "It's completely sealed. If I could get the hinges out, it still wouldn't move, let alone open."

"I told you not to go in there." Sharyn said, with her headset back on.

"What's done is done." James said, "We have to get in there somehow."

"And meanwhile, Aphrodite gets tortured and killed?" Sharyn said.

"She hasn't been caught. And if she's real careful, she won't be." James argued. "You're going to be careful aren't you Aphrodite?" James directed to Nicola.

"Extremely." Nicola replied.

"And we're going to look for Tokugawa, and any other way in that he may have missed." James said.

"Maybe I'll find some of these employees, and they'll get me out." Nicola said.

"Sure, just don't get lost." Sharyn replied.

"Not with your pad, I won't." Nicola said, "See you soon. Out." She added, cutting the link.

"How are you with computers?" James asked Sharyn.

"Lousy." She replied.

"Then I'll take a look at this, and see if we can get a map of this place." James said, tapping at the display Tokugawa used to retrieve the map of the ventilation shafts.

Using the menu system, he found blueprints of the major systems of the base, before finally locating the area maps. It was a complicated mess, as it had several overlays, showing how the map would look when changed into different configurations. One at a time, James removed the overlays, leaving only the mining configuration of Module 1.

"Here's the map. We should be able to work our way into the central area now." James said, moving the map up to show the area in question.

"Uh, what central area?" Sharyn asked, looking at the map beside him.

"That is weird." James replied, shifting the map around, but only finding several large contained areas for the Module.

"What's that icon there?" Sharyn said, pointing at the display.

James didn't know, so pressed it anyhow. A secondary display opened up, above the map, showing a view of Module 1.

"Security camera." James said, as the view shifted left and right automatically.

"Try that one there." Sharyn asked, pointing to another icon on the map.

"Be my guest." James asked. "I'm just as confused."

Sharyn pressed on the map, and the security camera view changed, to show the inside of that section Sharyn choose.

"This looks right." Sharyn said, seeing the similarity between the security camera and the map.

Sharyn flicked through several more images of Module 1, when James interrupted. "Hold it right there." He said, leaning over the security view.

"You see that?" He asked.

"What?" Sharyn replied.

James pressed on the left of the screen, and the camera tracked across to the left. James saw the movement, and shifted his finger to the right, and up. The camera followed this, following until James had it focused on what he wanted. With a tap, the camera zoomed in on the windows of the operations centre.

"There." James said, with satisfaction.

"The control centre." Sharyn said, unsure what James was driving at.

"And what don't you see?" He asked.

It took Sharyn a few moments to answer, "Oh, Jeez."

"Yeah, we aren't in there." James said.

"Security failure?" Sharyn commented.

"Maybe." James said, playing with the other controls. "But maybe we're not in the mining Module."

James had to go back through the main menus, to access each separate Module, and then find the camera closest to the operations centre, and zoom in, before confirming it wasn't the right one. He went through Module 2, then 3, and finally Module 4.

"So we're in the wrong module." Sharyn said, seeing an image of themselves leaning over a display. "What's Module 4 really set up for?" She asked.

James read it off the map screen, "Packing and shipping."

"See if you can find Aphrodite on that thing, and just make sure." Sharyn asked.

James played around with the controls more, finding the so called central area. He flicked through the security cameras slowly, until they found Nicola. She was in a corridor, slowly creeping up to a corner.

The camera tracked her approach, as she peeked around the corner to find an empty corridor, with more doors down its side.

"Aphrodite?" Sharyn called, "We've found a map of the place, but we've got a discrepancy."

Nicola stopped where she was to answer, "What's the problem?"

"The isn't the mining module." James answered.

He moved the map, bringing up the central packing area. "Ahead of you should be some doors, and the second on the right, opens into the packing area."

He checked the area with a security camera first, just before Nicola reached the doors. "It's all clear to enter."

"There's nobody here." Nicola said, looking about the multi level area, with all sorts of equipment for handling the large tanks of gas that were stacked all over the place.

"That's what we've found." Sharyn said. "There ain't nobody here."

"So what's the big deal with a strike then, if there isn't anybody here?" Nicola asked.

"I don't know, until we ask Tokugawa and find out." Sharyn said. "The best thing for you to do now, is to get out."

"That's a good suggestion." Nicola said, "Can you give me a direction?"

"Aphrodite, there are two main channels into the packing area." James said, "One looks like a trucking area, for shifting the tanks outside through a set of huge doors to any ships. It's on the lowest level, headed to your right."

"Sound's easy enough." Nicola said.

"Well, it might be blocked." James said, "So there is another way, which is up above you. It's via an access shaft which runs along next to the pipes that bring in the Belthan gas from the adjacent modules."

"I'll try the doors to the ship first then." Nicola said. "Maybe I'll beat you outside."

"Sure, we'll see you there. Out." Sharyn said.

"Let's see if we can find Tokugawa now." James said, reorienting the map, and searching through the cameras.

"Nothing." James said, irritated at the lack progress.

"Let's get a look at the real module one." Sharyn suggested. "Maybe we'll find something there, like where the employee's are."

James took her suggestion winningly, bringing up the plans for Module 1 that was set up as the mining module. Some of the camera shots brought up nothing at first, until he focused on one of the central areas.

"There's some one." He said, zooming the camera in.

"He looks familiar." Sharyn said, staring at the screen.

James was able to get another camera shot, from a different angle. "That's, yeah that's... Oh damn, I can't remember his name." Sharyn said, rubbing her forehead. She switched on her comm, and started speaking. "Aphrodite? You remember the name of that guy that was with Jade?"

"Rourke." Nicola replied. "I've still got his jacket remember."

"Aphrodite, it looks like he's got a new jacket." James said.

"What!" Nicola voice screamed over the comm, that James had to lift it off his head.

"Yeah, he's in the real mining module." Sharyn said, after a moment.

"I'll try not to take to long then." Nicola said, "Aphrodite out."

"What's he doing?" James said, and started playing with the camera controls. He was able to get external sound activated.

"This should be the last one in here, and then the drill last." Rourke said. "How much longer will you be?"

There was a pause, before he spoke again, "Ok, just make sure you and Paks finish laying that stuff, then we'll get out of here."

"It sounds like he's using a communicator." James said.

"Shhh, I'm trying to listen." Sharyn said.

"No, they can stay there." Rourke said, "It'll be interesting to watch the whole thing blow up around them. Should be a real thrill." There was another pause before, "Ok, I'll see you outside when you're finished. Out."

James tracked Rourke with the camera, until he was out of its view.

"Should I track him?" He asked.

"No, zoom back to where he standing." Sharyn said.

James did so.

"There." Sharyn pointed at the display, "See if you can improve the image."

Subtly, the detail cleared to reveal what Sharyn feared.

"Explosives." James said, "High grade plastique, or possibly Cataclysmite or Simtex."

"You know all that from looking at it?" Sharyn asked, staring at the screen.

"I did some research into explosives for a case." James replied.

"Thought you said you weren't a lawyer." Sharyn said.

"Doesn't mean I don't help out." James said, trying to avoid the question.

"Well, any idea how many more they may have brought along?" Sharyn asked, "Or how long until they go off?"

"I can't tell from this picture." James said. "Could be a timer on there, but it could also be remotely detonated. As to how many more there are."

James stood back from the display. "Stuffed if I know."

"Then we're in deep shit, unless we find those employees soon."

"I've think I've got this search routine figured out." James said.

"Good, let it rip." Sharyn said.

James punched in the commands, and the sensors in the complex did a general search for any personnel with in the base. It showed a percentage bar as it did a search through each Module, one at time.

"Only three in Module 4." Sharyn said, as the figures lit up.

"Module 3 has..." James said, staring at the zero, just waiting for it to change. "One person." he said as it completed its search.

"And Module 2 has one person." Sharyn said.

"That leaves Module one." James said, watching the figure jump up to one, as it continued searching. It finished, and did a search of the base surrounds. "One." Sharyn said, "And only one outside."

"That's you, me and Aphrodite in Module 4." James said. "With our three guests. Who's outside?"

"Aurora." Sharyn said. "She's still outside in the ship."

"Oh, I forgot."

"No employees." Sharyn said.

"And where is Tokugawa?" James asked.

They stood there for a minute thinking it over, until Sharyn opened her mouth first. "We've been duped, and set up!" She said, thumping the console. She went on to explain her thoughts, "Central couldn't tell us much on this mission, because it was fed to him. All the mission details came from Tokugawa. And where is he? He is one of our guests. Some sort of disguise."

"They're blowing this place up, so why lure us here in the first place?" James asked.

"Revenge, retribution. I don't know." Sharyn said, walking about. "Maybe it was added to their mission. 'A group of Corps Agent will arrive. Give them this fake mission briefing, and blow up the place around them.' It's just something they're supposed to do."

"Doesn't mean they have to enjoy it." James said.

"I wouldn't put it past this group, to enjoy it. They seemed to get pleasure from our last encounter, until we cut it short."

"What now then. We try to stop them?" James asked.

Sharyn turned to him, raising her eye brows. "Why not?"

Chapter 34: Psychotic episodes

They both rushed over to their bags, grabbing different items they'd been allowed to take on the mission, as Central hasn't known what was required.

"Smoke grenades." James said, pulling a strap of half a dozen grenades over his head.

"Motion tracker." Sharyn called out, pulling the small scanning device out.

"Infra red goggles." James added, pulling a pair onto his head, to hang around his neck.

"Some restraints." Sharyn called.

"And last of all, some weapons." James said.

"These bags can go back in the ship." Sharyn said, picking up Nicola's and her own in one hand each.

Together they worked their way back towards the entrance.

"Aphrodite." Sharyn called, activating the comm link by voice. "We've discovered a few more things that you need to know."

"What's new." Nicola complained, "Other than been locked in this place."

"Our mission is completely faked."

"What about the employees?" Nicola asked.

"They don't exist." Sharyn reported. There isn't anybody here except us, and the other three agents. Which we all know. And the best bit is this place is set to explode."

"How much time do we have?" Nicola asked, excitedly.

"We don't know, but Knight and I are going to find out."

"I don't want to blow up." Nicola complained.

"We'll give you some warning." Sharyn said, "Just get your ass out of there."

"Thanks a lot." Nicola said. "Out."

They were outside now, approaching the ship.

"Aurora!" James called out.

Marina's feet appeared on the ramp, as she descended to the ground.

"Leaving?" She asked.

"Not yet." James answered. "We're going hunting."

"That would have been my second guess." Marina said.

"We're bringing our things back to the ship." Sharyn said, dumping the bags at the bottom of the ramp. "And we need you to be ready to lift at a moment's notice."

"Sure, no problem." Marina said, picking up a bag. "Anything else?"

"Yeah." James said, with a furrowed brow. "Have you seen anyone else out here, like that guy who came to meet us?"

"The Asian looking guy?" Marina asked.

"That's him." Sharyn said.

"Ages ago, just after that broadcast. When I was checking the ship systems, I noticed him briefly outside, entering that building there." Marina said, point out the Module to their right.

"Nobody else?" James asked.

Marina shook her head. "Nobody, but I wasn't looking outside all the time."

"It's enough." James said, looking towards the other module.

"Time to find out who Tokugawa really is." Sharyn said.

To all appearances, the other Module looked just like the first one. The exterior entrance was exactly the same, the interior was the same bland colour scheme with pipes crossing the ceiling at various intervals. The only difference was in the layout.

"Which way?" Sharyn asked.

"Why do I have to choose?" James said.

"Male intuition." Sharyn answered without much emotion.

He took a moment, before pointing to the left.

"Let's go this way then." Sharyn said, leading to the right.

James caught up with her, "If we're going this way, then why did you ask me?"

"Female intuition." Sharyn answered, without another word to explain.

"Oh, so male initiation will pick the wrong way, and female initiation will know it's the wrong way." James said, trying to explain it.

"Something like that." Sharyn said. "That, and I'm getting something on the motion tracker."

Sharyn heard James complaining quietly to himself, "Why am I doing this, I'm too gullible."

She ignored him to concentrate on the tracker, and on the best way to find the source.

They wound around half a dozen corners, until Sharyn picked up a range reading. "45 metres and steady."

"Tell me one thing." James said, "We both agree this Tokugawa is one of the enemy agents right?"

"Absolutely." Sharyn said, "But we don't have to tell him that when we see him."

"We'll just pretend everything is fine and dandy." James said. "What do we tell him." James said seriously all of a sudden.

"Umm, that we can't get Aphrodite out of the shafts, and we need his help." Sharyn suggested.

"Pretty basic." James said.

"You're welcome to change it, if you want."

It was through several rooms of machinery before they came within 20 metres.

"Ok, I'll call for Tokugawa." James said.

"Can you make yourself sound a bit worried?" Sharyn asked.

"Worried?" James repeated.

"I'll call." Sharyn said, then bellowed out, "Tokugawa! Where are you?"

"Gee, that sounds like you're worried." James said.

"Hey, look." Sharyn said, pointing to the tracker, "It's moving this way."

"Put it away." James suggested.

Sharyn did, then called out again. "Tokugawa! Where the hell is he?"

Sharyn saw the look that James gave her, just before they heard Tokugawa's voice. "Hello, Agent?"

"There you are Mr. Tokugawa." James said, excitedly. A little too much, in Sharyn's opinion. "We've been looking all over for you."

"I am here." Tokugawa said, "I have been informing other employees about mistake in use of Belthan gas by military."

"That's good." Sharyn said, half falling for Tokugawa's tail, and then re-evaluating her opinion for whoever was playing Tokugawa.

"But we have this problem." James said, "You heard the broadcast from the trapped employees?"

Sharyn knew it was a stupid idea to let James make up the details, but the message had been just as stupid.

"Yes, I was concerned about what the other employees would think when they heard the broadcast. Which was why I left you so abruptly. I must apologise for this failure in serving you to help free my trapped colleagues."

Sharyn decided to move the conversation along, as a means of getting up close to Tokugawa. "We need your help now. Our friend has taken a wrong turning in the shafts, and has gotten lost." Sharyn said, pulling out an electronic pad, "I was wondering if you could show us how to get her out."

Sharyn was deeply suspicious of the smile which Tokugawa showed at the mention of been lost. "I would be happy to help to in any way possible." He said, approaching to take the pad from her hand.

It was a crude effort on her part, as James grabbed Tokugawa by the arms, while she pressed a restraint over his wrists.

"Help, Help!" Tokugawa called too loudly, then in a more natural voice "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?"

"To get a little cooperation, *Mr Tokugawa*." James said, emphasising the name.

Sharyn leaned in closely, unsure how the Agent was disguised, she pressed a finger on the nose, but if felt real.

"So who are you?" Sharyn asked, staring into the eyes, hoping for recognition, even though she hadn't seen any of the Agents face to face before.

"Why are you asking me these questions?" He answered. "I am Yukio Tokugawa, the Operations Manager."

"Please don't put up the pretence any longer." Sharyn said, "We know there isn't any employee strike, or even employee's to strike. There's just the three of you."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Tokugawa said, a little strained as James pulled back on his arms.

"You should know. Which are you, Rourke?" Sharyn demanded, "Or is it Jade? I've got a little score to fix with Jade." Sharyn was saying to Tokugawa face.

"Ok!" Tokugawa said, "I'll stop the acting, but I'm not Jade."

"Then who are you?" James asked, pulling on his arms again.

Tokugawa let out a yowl of pain, which changed into a light scream as the Tokugawa's image disappeared to be replaced by Paks.

James let go quickly, realising it was a woman. Feeling foolish, he put one hand back on her shoulder, as a token restraint.

"Paks." Sharyn stated.

"Yes, I'm sorry for the subterfuge." Paks said, "But we had to complete our mission without your interruption this time."

"How did you change like that?" Sharyn asked.

"It's a clone shield." Paks explained. "Some sort of personal cloaking device been experimented with."

"So it's the only one?" James asked.

"The only one we have, yes." Paks admitted. "Rourke wanted to use it when you came, but he wasn't very convincing when he tried it on. So I got the job of... well, wasting your time."

"And a good job too, but we know all about the explosives." James said.

Sharyn saw the realistic expression of surprise on Paks' face.

"You thought we didn't know, did you?" Sharyn asked.

"No." Paks replied, holding her head down,

"How are you going to blow it up, if the gas is stable?" Sharyn asked.

"That is what I told you to believe." Paks said. "It will still ignite and explode when mixed with certain chemicals within the facility."

"So you release a bit, and blow it up." James said.

"You have done very good. You beat us well and good last time." Paks said.

"About last time." Sharyn started, "Why the hell did you and Rourke try raping Lara?"

Paks looked up at Sharyn's face, "I... I didn't do anything. Rourke was doing it all by himself."

"Then why didn't you try to stop him?" Sharyn demanded, grasping Paks' shoulders.

"I thought he was only playing about. Pretending to do it for the mission." Pak's explained.

"And what about Jade? Was she playing with that knife of hers?" Sharyn said, shaking Paks' shoulders.

"No, I had no idea." Paks' called, "She's not usually like that. I'd seen her shoot people, but not..." Paks swallowed.

Sharyn was half yelling into Pak's face now, shaking her shoulders, "Why didn't you stop her?"

Paks was immobile, as she stared back at Sharyn, unable to answer.

"Why?" Sharyn yelled again, releasing one hand and drawing it back.

It must have been several seconds holding her hand back, before she realised what she was going to do.

"You going to hit her or not?" James asked.

Sharyn looked up at his face, wondering what was going on.

"She's not gong to tell you unless you beat it out of her." James said.

Sharyn stared at him, as she brought her hand forward again, resting it back on Pak's other shoulder.

"You going to beat her or, should I?" James demanded now.

"What's it to you?" Sharyn asked.

"You going to hit her like that other guy?" James half sneered, "Belt her up a bit, and let her bleed a little."

"What's he talking about?" Paks' asked wide eyed.

"What are you going on about?" Sharyn asked.

"Oh, maybe you need to do it by yourself." James said, releasing Paks, and stepping to the side. "It'll make it more fun that way to hit her around."

"What the fuck are you going on about?" Sharyn demanded now.

"I want to watch you beat her up like the shop clerk you almost killed." James said, with satisfaction.

Sharyn finally understood what he was going on about. Why she was in prison in the first place. "Is that what this is all about?" Sharyn asked, looking about her, "Is this one big test to find out if I'm really cured?"

"Uh, nope. This is the real thing." James said, "She and I aren't in the prison, where you are rotting, from bashing that Clerk."

"What's going on?" Paks' asked.

"I think you had better go." Sharyn said, releasing Paks, "One thing, when is the explosive set to detonate?"

"About 10 minutes after the last charge is placed." Paks called, as she backed away from both of them, and darted around the first corner.

"Why'd you let her go?" James asked, "You could have beaten more information out of her. Unless, you're after bigger fish to beat, like Jade?"

"Would you shut up!" Sharyn said, "I've never hit anyone, unless it's been in self defence."

"Is that what you'd call it?" James said, "The clerk tried to attack you with his charm, and you nail him over the head with a crowbar, then used your feet to finish it off."

"And how do you know about my case anyhow?" Sharyn asked.

"Oh, I know everything about you Sharyn Shiels, at one time engaged to Albert Farrier who left you for a real career."

"Look, I don't give a shit what your problem is, but we're getting out of here, now." Sharyn said, moving around him, back towards the way they came in.

She'd gotten around the corner, without another comment from James, but found another problem.

"You're not going anywhere sister." Jade said, standing there in her body hugging suit, pointing a deadly looking pistol towards Sharyn.

"Fuck." Sharyn said.

"Yeah, that's a wonderful idea." Jade said. "I'll give you to the count of ten for you partner to appear, or you're going to get it where the sun don't shine." Jade said, then added as an afterthought "Except when you're on your back."

"Ah, so this is the infamous Jade." James said, stepping around behind Sharyn. "Glad to meet you." He said, extending his hand out as he stepped forward in front of Sharyn.

"Don't move any further assole." Jade called, waving the weapon side to side.

Sharyn watched as Jade tapped her ear, "Paks, why don't you come on out now? I've got these two birdies covered."

Sharyn saw her opportunity as Jade focused on the conversation. Some of the grenades James had, were attached to his back. With one hand hidden from Jade's view, she pulled one off carefully. It was just a smoke grenade, so Sharyn just released the catch, and counted to three before dropping it to the floor.

Jade must have been half surprised by the grenade dropping to the floor, as she didn't fire as the grenade blossomed out.

Sharyn held her breath and ducked as the smoke enveloped her, and moved back around the corner before standing again.

There was a shuffling sound as James followed her, followed by the whine of a firing weapon.

Instinctively, Sharyn drew her own, and let off a few shots around the corner, before retreating out of the smoke.

James was there, coughing his lungs clear.

"It's time to leave this place." Sharyn said, "Got your goggles ready?"

James nodded, half coughing as he drew them up over his eyes.

Sharyn aimed her weapon at the unprotected wiring on the ceiling, that carried the power for the lights, and pulled the trigger. The energy pulse fused into the plastic conduit surrounding the wires, melting a huge chunk instantly, and vaporising the copper conductor inside.

The corridor became pitch black, without the lights. Sharyn drew her own goggles up, finding a new source of illumination to guide her, from the heat of the surrounding building, and their own bodies.

"Let's go." Sharyn called, leading back around the corner.

Jade was no longer there, but Sharyn didn't care much, as she'd left a clear heat trail, marking the way back. Sharyn followed this, until the trail diverged.

Sharyn was thinking of a possible trap, when James opened his mouth. "There's light here."

Sharyn pulled her goggles down, seeing the damaged power cable had only taken out some of the lights.

Sharyn thought about going after Jade, when the ground underneath them, suddenly shook, as the lights flickered.

"Earthquake?" Sharyn asked, as the everything settled quickly.

"I don't think so." James said.

"Magnum, Knight?" A voice came through on their comms.

"Go ahead Aphrodite." Sharyn said.

"Where was that warning you promised, I almost got toasted by a fireball." Nicola said.

"You almost out yet?" Sharyn asked.

"Those ship doors wouldn't move." Nicola reported, "It's like they've been jammed, on purpose. So I'm on my way up to the walkway."

"We're on our way out now also, baring further complications." Sharyn said.

"See you topside." Nicola said, "Out."

The ground shook again, under their feet. This time the lights dimmed down, before returning to their brightness.

"It looks like it's time to leave." James said.

"Looks that way." Sharyn agreed, following the marking painted on the walls, showing the way out.

"How much further?" James asked.

"This corner looks familiar." Sharyn said, "It shouldn't be too far."

Sharyn stepped around, only to step back in time from getting shot.

"You're not getting out of here alive." Sharyn heard Jade's voice call out.

"How are your shooting skills?" James asked, more like his usual self.

"Not that good." Sharyn admitted.

"Ok, then you'll have to draw her fire." James said, squatting down. "Just get her attention."

Sharyn thought she understood, so fired a few shots around the corner at first, to have Jade reply with several shots hitting the back wall.

It seemed ludicrous, as she poked her head around the corner, then removed it quickly, as she saw Jade open fire right at her.

The sound of two weapons firing, echoed briefly inside the corridor, before it halted with loud swearing from down the other end.

Sharyn looked down, to see James sitting up from his position on the floor.

"I think I only winged her." He said. "But she won't be trying to shoot at us again."

The lights flickered ominously, as a slight rumble went through the floor.

"If that's all she tries." Sharyn said, grabbing James' arm, and helping him up.

"After you." He gestured politely.

Sharyn took the point again, moving swiftly until they were outside. Jade wasn't to be seen anywhere.

Instinctively, Sharyn headed towards the ship. Barely out of the building, an explosion knocked them off their feet, hurling them ground.

Sharyn turned back to see a fireball erupt from the side of the Module they had just exited.

"We've outlived our welcome." James called, pulling himself up from the ground.

"They detonated that one to try and kill us." Sharyn called, over the continuing explosions.

Bits of concrete and metal rained down as they ran for the ship now.

"Aurora?" Sharyn called, hoping she had her communications on, "It's time to get that ship ready to lift."

"Already on it Magnum." Marina's voice replied.

James slammed up the ramp first, rattling the metal ramp as Sharyn following him up.

"Where's Aphrodite?" Marina asked, as they entered the cockpit area.

Sharyn couldn't risk themselves at the moment, "Just get us off the ground. I don't want to risk the ship until she's outside."

"You're the boss." Marina said, winding the engine up to a roar as it lifted off the ground.

One of the displays lit up, with a bleeping sound. "We've got a ship coming in." Marina said, "Looks like the one that evaded us when we arrived."

"Give it some space." Sharyn said, "Take us back over that Module, I don't want a fire fight."

Slowly Marina brought the ship forward, leaving the landing field for the other ship. With newfound skill, Marina let the ship drift over the Module that Sharyn had pointed at, the first one they had entered.

This one looked untouched yet by the explosions, but Sharyn didn't want to hold her breath for long, as the Module Nicola was still trapped in lit up like an erupting volcano.

Chapter 35: To Hell and back

Nicola had felt several more explosions since talking the Sharyn, some more distant than others.

Her climb up the maintenance stairway that was attached to the inside of one of the packing bays, was shaky at best. Each explosion sent the metal framework shaking under her feet. Sometimes with the larger movements, she could hear it squealing as the metal shifted under the stress.

"This was a lame idea, coming into this hell hole, to do what? Nothing!" Nicola said to herself.

She was following one of the main pipelines, which she could see attached to the ceiling, and crossing over the stairway into the wall.

The stairway led all the way up to the ceiling, where led into a passage which paralleled the pipes. She thought it was a simple matter of following the pipes, to lead her out when a nearby explosion shook her about, and plunged the passage into darkness.

"Just my luck." Nicola complained. She fumbled about in the darkness, then remembered the torch in her pocket. It lit up the passage, making progress easier. Small pipes had become dislodged from the walls and ceiling, leaving some bare wires hanging at intervals which Nicola ducked under, or stepped around even though they were dead.

She thought she would soon be out, until the passage ended in a dead end. The pipes and wires stopped also, showing that she couldn't go any further, unless she could walk through walls.

The walls showed no passages or vents that led towards the pipes Nicola had been following. She was thinking of going back, and searching the walls, when the very floor underneath her shook violently from a nearby explosion.

She fumbled the torch, accidentally dropping it. As it hit the ground the light switched off, plunging her back into darkness.

"Tonto idiota." Nicola murmured, as she fumbled about to find the torch.

As she searched about on the floor with her hands, she noticed an increase in light from back up the passageway.

A glow of sorts, bringing enough light to see the ground by. She found the torch another foot in front of her outstretched hand, and grabbed it. By then, the glow was very noticeable in the darkness.

It wasn't something she wanted to go back and find out. The torch sprang on, lighting up the passage, and damping out the glow. The walls had no way out for her, and Nicola looked up at the ceiling, finding a solution.

"Of all the things I've had to do." Nicola said, jamming the torch back in between her breasts, so it shone upwards as she hung off pipes, and pulled the vent out of the way.

It popped off and swung back, hanging from its hinges. Nicola grabbed the inside edge of the shaft, finding it travelling crosswise from the passage.

Figuring that the pipes are the way out, she moved around to the edge headed in that direction. It took a lot of effort to swing her body up, and climb up into the air shaft.

Once in, she headed off towards the pipes. She came to an intersection not far away, that led both forward and to the left, in the direction the passage was originally headed.

Not even thinking about it, Nicola turned left. It seemed to go on and on, as she heard rumblings in the shaft, and strange sucking sounds from behind her.

The shaft suddenly widened out, giving her more room, as light became visible ahead.

Then she came up against the external cover, with daylight clearly visible through the grating. Nicola pushed against with her free hand, but it didn't move.

"Damn it." She said, twisting about in the shaft with barely enough space. The torch became a forgotten object as she braced her hands against the side of the shaft, and kicked against the grating.

It rattled as she kicked, not budging. Nicola then raised her feet higher, to kick directly against the clips that held it closed. Two more attempts, and the cover sprang open.

"Hey Magnum, I'm gonna need a ride." Nicola called, as she climbed out of the shaft.

"We were getting worried." Sharyn's voice came back, "Where about are you?"

Nicola looked down the slope, towards the ground far below. Trees lined the ground, as their trunks stretched up past her a long distance away.

"I'm on a ledge, a fair distance up facing some trees..." Nicola started to say, as a sound caught her attention. It was coming from the shaft. Fearing the worst, Nicola moved away along the narrow walkway.

"Anytime you're ready guys." Nicola asked.

The air shaft erupted into a long hot flame licking out into the air. She kept her head down, moving further away from the heated air, as the flame died back suddenly.

"If you saw that flame, that's about where I am." Nicola reported.

"We've got you now Aphrodite." Marina's voice came through.

Nicola looked about the sky above her, holding on the surface next to her so she didn't fall.

"I don't see where." Nicola said, as the ship rose up into her view from below.

"Don't just stand there!" James called out.

Nicola saw him standing on top of the ship, arms stretched out ready for her. The ship seemed to bobble in the shifting air, making Nicola worry that it wouldn't stay there too long. With one foot back against the small wall behind her, she pushed against it with both hands, taking one step to the edge, and jumped.

The narrow gap below yawned for a moment as she ship shifted slightly, as the stored gas within the structure exploded, superheating the air and causing it to expand dramatically.

Nicola landed roughly on the surface of the ship and fell forward as it tipped back from the building as the heated air forced its way past the floating craft to make its escape.

There weren't any handholds as Nicola slid across the ship surface, grabbing at the odd protrusions to stop herself falling off the other side.

The opposite edge seemed to approach rapidly, but came to a quick stop as she felt a hand grab her ankle. With James pulling on her leg, she backed away from the view that seemed to drop almost half a kilometre now.

"You just can't jump straight, can you?" James called, as he pulled her back to the dorsal hatch.

"Next time you can do it!" Nicola said, as she clambered down the hatch first.

Nicola checked herself over as James secured the hatch, and came down from the ladder. The torch was missing, but it was a small loss, whilst the pad was still in her back pocket.

"Aphrodite?" Sharyn called from the cockpit. Her voice came through the headset also, so Nicola switched it off.

"I'm safe." Nicola said, as she entered the forward part of the ship.

"That's all nice, but you'd better take a seat, cause we aren't out of trouble yet." Sharyn said.

Nicola took a seat behind Marina, as James entered the cabin and took the seat behind Sharyn.

"What's happening?" Nicola asked.

"The other ship finally showed up," Marina said, "And recovered the other Agents. Since then we've been pacing each other."

"What about the mining centre?" Nicola asked.

"We're too far above it now to be hit." Marina said, "But every time I change course or speed, they match us."

"We going to shoot back?" James asked.

"I don't like our chances." Sharyn asked, "It looks evenly matched."

"There goes the rest of the mine now." Marina reported.

"Looks like we got out in time then." Sharyn said.

"Some of the mine has collapsed, and it looks like some of the forest is on fire." Marina said.

"We can't do anything for it?" Nicola asked.

"Not for a fire." Sharyn said.

"So what about the ship?" James asked.

"I don't think we want to shoot each other.", Sharyn said. "Let's try contacting them."

"This is the Aurora to unidentified vessel." Marina called, "Please state your intentions."

The channel came alive with a picture and voice response, "Yo, this is Cowboy of the Lone Ranger. I was raring for a little space race. Not often I git the chance to race another spacer."

"Cowboy?" Nicola said awed.

"Of all the people." Sharyn said.

"Hey Cowboy!" Marina called, making sure her face was visible "You might remember me and some of my passengers. The three girls you gave a lift to a few months ago, to grab a doctor."

"Who, nannie!" The gutted Texan accent came back, "It's you three lovelies? You're flying that crate?"

"Sure am." Marina said. "I'd love to race you, but I want to find out about your passengers first."

"Oh, they got nothing to do with my piloting." Cowboy said, "They just sit back there for the ride. I ain't disturbing them, and they don't bother me."

"You've got yourself a race then." Marina said. She turned about, "Everybody strapped in?"

There was a murmur of affirmative responses. "Where's the finish line?" Marina asked Cowboy.

"I'm real stoked." Cowboy said, "Ok, round that first moon, then it's first past the second moon. Got it?"

"Yep!" Marina replied, seeing the two moons up above.

"On zero." Cowboy said. "Three.. Two.. One.. Zero!"

Marina ignited the main engines, pushing the throttles to the maximum as she pulled the craft up into the sky.

"He gave us a head start!" Nicola called, looking at the console tracking the Lone Ranger.

"I see." Marina replied, as the craft shook as it pushed it way up out of the atmosphere.

Marina oriented on the first moon, boosting the small ship even more by diverting non-essential energy to the engines. "Are we loosing him?"

"Nope." Nicola answered, "In fact, it looks like he's catching."

"Jeez, he's pumped all his power into the engines." Marina said. "Weapons, shields, even some of the life support."

"That moon is coming up pretty fast." James said, interrupting.

"I see it." Marina said, stating the obvious as the moon had grown fast in the main screen as they continued to accelerate towards the planetoid.

"You going to shift the shields into the engines?" Nicola asked.

"I could." Marina stated.

"Don't." Sharyn said.

"Why not?" Nicola asked.

"We're still in the mission, and if something happens now, we die." Sharyn explained.

"You're afraid they might still do something?" Marina asked, as the ship came up to the moon's surface now, rushing by it at a reasonable distance above.

"That, or we could hit something." Sharyn said, "The shields stay, but you can use anything else."

"My pleasure." Marina said, hitting some of the controls. The main lights in the cabin went dark, and the gravity disappeared. Nicola could now feel some of the acceleration, as the two ships continued thrusting around past the first moon.

"Just about everything's in the engine now." Marina said, "But it looks like he's still going to pass us."

The second moon approached even more rapidly, but the other small ship pulled in front before they reached it.

A loud *yeeahah* came through the communications from Cowboy as they passed the second moon. "Thanks for the race gals, I guess I'll be see y'all about now."

"See ya Cowboy!" Marina replied, as the Lone Ranger simply disappeared from her sensors as it jumped from normal space.

Marina killed the thrust, and let the ship drift on its own inertia.

"Guess we'll going too now." Sharyn said.

"Can you turn the gravity back on please?" James said sounding uneasy.

"Sure." Marina replied, kicking the artificial gravity generators back on-line. She returned the rest of the systems back normal, bringing the interior lights back on. "Next stop, Corps HQ." Marina said engaging the jump drives.

Nicola felt the familiar twisting sensation in her body, joined by the sound of James throwing up.

"I'm glad I don't have to clean this ship." Marina said, turning the now stationary ship towards the planet below.

"Now that's interesting." Nicola said, taking a brief look at the colourful mess James had brought up.

"What?" Sharyn said, turning her chair about, "Ugh, I see what you mean."

"What's going on?" Marina asked.

"Knight threw up fresh peas, carrots and corn." Nicola said, laughing.

Chapter 36: Explanation

"Thanks guys!" Marina called, as they walked from the ship.

Sharyn waved her free hand once more, as they proceeded to the mag lift.

"A reasonable mission." Nicola commented. "Even if we didn't find the employees."

"At least it wasn't our fault." James said, "Its hard to get a satisfactory win if you objective doesn't exist."

"That's true." Sharyn said, "But we did let the mine blow up. That won't go over too well with Central."

As they approached, a mag lift was waiting for them. James squeezed in last, with his bag.

"Corps HQ." Sharyn called, and lift moved off.

"We're alive aren't we?" Nicola said, "Any mission you can walk away from is a good mission right?"

"That's right." James said.

The doors opened behind him, and he stepped out into the main entrance to Headquarters.

A character at the main desk debriefed them quickly, recording details of the mission's failure into Central.

"That was one hell of a mission." Nicola commented, as they dropped down to the stores level in the Mag lift.

"I guess you got the roughest part Aphrodite." Sharyn said.

"Next time we have to use an air shaft, someone else can go in." Nicola said, exiting the lift.

"That's if we ever need to." Sharyn said.

"Personally, I don't think I would have fit." James added.

Nicola dumped the bag of items onto the store desk, turning back to James. "A few feet shorter, wider hips, and bigger bust, and then let's see you crawl through a vent that sucks hard enough to re-define the meaning of a blow job."

Sharyn could only laugh at Nicola's humour. James stood there stunned, until the clerk requested the bag from him.

He turned to watch as Nicola left.

"See you all soon." She said, headed for the lift.

"Bye Aphrodite." Sharyn said.

"Más tarde amigos." Nicola replied, as she entered the lift.

Sharyn had her bag up on the table, before the clerk gave her the all clear.

James was still standing there, gazing at the now closed lift.

"I need to talk to you." Sharyn said, moving in front of James.

"Yes, I bet you do." James replied, "Is there a seat around here?"

"Probably back upstairs in the entrance." Sharyn said, "But I have the feeling we need a bit more privacy than that."

"You're right there." James said, "I've got some important things to tell you."

Sharyn guided him into lift with her. She thought for a moment, before deciding on a destination. "Conference rooms, sub level 16."

The lift moved off, heading directly for the specified level. The doors opened as the lift came to a halt, with the clear signs for sub level 16. Without a word, Sharyn headed for the nearest room. The door was open, showing it's current lack of occupation.

"This'll do fine." Sharyn said, taking a seat near the closest end.

James closed the door, and took the seat opposite.

"Now, you want to explain your behaviour on the mission?" Sharyn asked, "Why you had this... this compulsion to have me bash Paks? And before I forget, how come you know so much about why I'm in prison if you're not apart of the prison system?"

"I might as well start at the beginning." James explained.

"I'm listening."

James took a breath, "Ok. For a start, everything I told you about myself is true, except for the fact I didn't tell you the whole truth."

"Which is?" Sharyn asked.

"Let me explain." James said, trying to stop her interrupting "Ok, I said I work in a legal firm, actually it a big legal firm. To be precise, they enforce the law."

"The police?" Sharyn asked.

"No, not the police." James said, "Give me a chance, and I'll tell you everything I'm allowed to tell you."

"Ok." Sharyn said, crossing her arms to listen.

"I work for the F.B.I." James held up a hand to forestall Sharyn interrupting, "I never said I was a lawyer, just that I hadn't passed the bar exam. Which is the truth. I know so much about you because I've had to familiarise myself with your case to review one that I'm involved in."

"What's it got to with me?" Sharyn asked, "The case has been closed, and I'm in prison now. If it'd been re-opened, my lawyer would have told me."

"It hasn't been re-opened." James said, "Yet. The point is, a few weeks ago a security camera recorded a burglary at a gas station. The attendant was left half frightened to death, after the security booth was doused in petrol from the pumps. Fortunately, the attendant had hit the silent alarm, but police sirens warned the attacker away before anything serious happened. The security video got clear pictures of the attacker, even though finger prints couldn't be

recovered. The thing is, the picture was run through the computers, and the best match on record, by a long shot, was of a woman already in prison.”

“This would be me.” Sharyn said.

“Yes. Suffice it to say, the police put a man hunt for this person. Other than a few sightings, there wasn't anything to prove this person existed.”

“That doesn't explain why you're here now.” Sharyn said.

James sat back, pressing his fingers against each other, “The police didn't have access to the details from your case, this comes from bureaucracy between states. So they've treated this as a separate case, but without any further leads they've come to a complete halt in their investigation. The FBI were then alerted to this case, because they believed this person had fled to another state. So when we looked at it, when found striking similarities to your case, and a few others.”

“There were others?” Sharyn asked, shocked.

“A few minor ones from out west, but nothing as substantial as the security footage from the last two offences.”, James said, “So upon checking out the current case, we had to review yours. It seemed almost cut and dried, except for small things, like your continued claim to innocence.”

“I am.” Sharyn said, almost forceful.

“Yes, well we're trying to clear that up once and for all.” James said, “With the other details, it seemed a good idea re-examine the case from the beginning, and to find out if you were capable of the crime committed. Emotionally, Psychologically. Someone had to profile you.”

“You're a profiler?” Sharyn asked.

“Not quite.” James explained, “A profiler was initially requested to be sent into the prison, to interview you, but some of the higher ups saw a better way of having someone profile you in a natural environment, and not like an interrogation. It was a good idea to send someone in to the game to do this, but most profilers aren't good field operatives, so they needed someone a bit more savvy with the game environment, and still capable of giving a reasonable profile.”

“That explains it better.” Sharyn said.

“Yes. I'm not qualified in profiling, but I've had tuition in the area. It's not something that can be picked up easy. But when that opportunity came up in the mission, I got ahead of myself, and tried to force you into doing it, or backing off. To see if you were capable, under the conditions.”

“And I didn't do it.” Sharyn said, feeling a little better for it.

“Yes, and the way you acted over the previous four missions, has giving me a lot of insight. Not many people are going to happy when I submit my report, and recommendation, but I seriously don't believe you haven't even seen that clerk, let alone hit him.”

Sharyn was silent for moment, having heard his words, and understanding the meaning.

“You got me the extra time in VR?” Sharyn asked.

“Yes. It was necessary to expedite the investigation.” James replied.

“Then you could get me out of here?” Sharyn asked, “Out of Avero?”

“It's not up to me, but up to a court to decide in a review. But my words will have a lot of influence.”

“I could get out of here!” Sharyn said, more joyful at the possibility now.

“It won't be tomorrow.” James said, “But it could be soon. Depending on the courts. You'll have to be there of course.”

“I could get out of here!” Sharyn said, as she jumped out of her seat, and danced about the room. She stopped for moment, “What about all my things and money that was spent on my lawyer and my case?”

“If your sentence is overturned, you could easily claim for damages. I'm sure they'd rule in your favour.”

“Oh, to be out of here.” Sharyn said, raising her arms, “Aphrodite won't be too happy, but I guess she won't find it difficult to find a new team to play with.”

“That's all I can really tell you. I should be going now.” James said, stranding up from the chair, “I've got a long report to write.”

“I should be going too.” Sharyn said, “Otherwise they'll come and drag me out.”

“Someone should come and contact you about you case been reopened. Probably your lawyer.” James explained, opening the door. “I'd expect you'll be here for at least another week before then.”

“I think I can wait that long.” Sharyn said.

“I won't be here next week, since I've technically finished my work with you.” James said, “It was actually fun pretending I was an Agent of an agency bigger than the F.B.I. But you'll have to find yourself a new team member for your game.”

“We'll find someone.” Sharyn said, “You can count on that.”