

BEHIND THE CHROME

Chrome Symphony is a cyberpunk novel taken directly from an online forum role-playing story. It is a collaborative story writing project by several participants at <http://forums.nitrocosm.com>.

This story was written from January 25, 2016 to May 6, 2016. Over the course of a little over five months, we worked together, mostly playing roles as one or two characters per player, although it was standard practice to write for each others' characters during our turns.

For the most part, the process was easy and everyone made things up as the story progressed. We did have active out-of-character discussion threads in which we ironed out details of the plot, setting, and our characters' personalities and back stories.

Along the way, some of the characters switched players (and then back again a few times) in order to keep the development of the story moving at a rapid pace.

The end product has been minimally edited in order to preserve the flow and pacing of the original threads.

THE AUTHORS

Jess Price	Janet Radkov (Helena)
Shell Lockheed	Michelle Hendrickson (Miroku)
Atlas	Roger Canton (Wolfwood29)
Duncan Sorenson	Troy McQuinn (Nitrocosm)
Elise Lorentz	James Deaton (vega7285)
Renk (First Act)	Stephan Bradford (SirAuron)
Renk (Second Act)	Khaled Hamed (Kyler)
Camay Thameh	Kara Morgan (KarmaJolt)
JAX 0208	Janet Radkov (Helena)
Chester Randolph	Roger Canton (Wolfwood29)
Heath McYama	Troy McQuinn (Nitrocosm)

Other minor characters and villains were played by multiple authors as needed.

CHROME SYMPHONY

A cyberpunk story by the Nitrocosm Studios community

Chapter One

It was raining fairly hard when Atlas rushed through the lobby and entered a rather upscale-looking bar. He took a look at the sign. It read, "Velvet Room".

This wasn't really his kind of place. He was, however, here on business. Having run out of options as far as jobs available to someone of his background, Atlas had turned to mercenary work. He couldn't complain; he was adept at this kind of thing. Negotiating, on the other hand, was more nuanced and he could stand to refine his skills in this area.

Atlas made a quick visual scan of the room. He knew the types of people here - wealthy bosses of the underground and all manner of those who closely affiliated with these types. This wasn't exactly friendly territory, but Atlas knew how to keep things low key.

Finally, he saw the faces of the people he was there to meet. He gingerly walked over to their table, surprisingly unaccosted by the security there. It seemed they had been told to expect him.

Sitting down at the table, Atlas greeted the well-dressed men. "Raining like hell out there. I'm honored you called me here tonight. Awfully nice joint you have here."

His potential clients looked him up and down as he took a seat. Atlas surreptitiously took notice of their gazes and decided to be more direct. "Gentleman, shall we talk business?"

Something caught the corner of Atlas' eye. It was a silver-haired girl - the spitting image of the popular idol Eclair Antares. He wondered why someone like that would be working in such a place. Shaking off the distraction, he continued light conversation with the bosses, having his direct approach to business temporarily deflected.

Shell was finishing her daily records-filing duties for the day. She had repaired several breaks in the fiber optic lines below street level and submitted the details of her day's work.

All in all, today was a typical day at EMACorp. Shell was one of the main technicians working in the area around EMACorp's headquarters, which meant she sometimes had to venture into the bad areas of town. This didn't faze her much. While she was small, she could maneuver extremely quickly and disappear before any trouble could start. In fact, earlier in the day while she was testing one of the wireless transceiver units, a couple of thugs started to harass her. In the blink of an eye, she was gone, along with the broken wireless unit. After the thugs lost interest in her and the valuable wireless transceiver, she repaired the unit and locked it safely in the utility box atop one of the many service poles along the "line" - the border between the wealthy business district and the shady area in which the criminals often did their business.

As she was packing up her tools and heading back to her small apartment nearby, her supervisor stopped her in the corridor.

"Shell, the higher ups have a special job for you."

Unsurprised by the late notice - as this was typical right after working hours ended - she shrugged. "Sure. What's up?"

"There's a... special client... that needs some repair work done on their private network. This is a very confidential work assignment so you're going to have to do a lot of paperwork prior."

Shell nodded. "Yeah, let's get that out of the way so I can see what they need."

In Shell's mind, the documents appeared, having been sent over the wireless network. Without moving a muscle, she quickly scanned the text and digitally signed them.

"Ok, then," her supervisor added, noting her signature as he watched his tablet, "you're cleared for takeoff."

Shell chuckled at the silly metaphor. "Right, where's the job located?" she asked.

Her supervisor looked at his tablet again. "Oh, are they serious?" he said, looking a little shocked. "They've got you working down in the mob district... at the... "Velvet Room" lounge.

Shell shook her head. "Wait. Are you sure that's the right place?"

"Yes."

Her supervisor paused a moment. "You know we're not sending you alone, right? The client themselves requested two techs for some reason. Some old geezer's going to be handling the software side of things."

Duncan was standing under an awning, dodging the rain.

"It's really coming down. Looks like I'm going to get a shower if I don't want to run late," he muttered to himself.

Duncan wasn't used to having to make house calls. Most of his information security and hacking work was done remotely. The 'net was his domain and often his eyes and ears as he would sit in his dark room surrounded by monitors - which were largely unnecessary due to the fact that normally used his cybernetic neural interfaces for everything.

This time, however, he had to venture out into the elements and into the bad part of town. Duncan really hated this part of town... the drugs, prostitution, the violence and robberies all repulsed him. The comfort of his own home office was the only place he could keep a clear head as he munched on donuts, guzzled coffee, and listened to ancient eurobeat and techno while earning a living performing security audits and patching vulnerabilities.

"The Velvet Room, huh?" he said, remembering where he was going. "Sounds like a swanky joint for how run down the rest of this area is."

As he entered the bar, he wiped his large metal boots on the mat, taking care not to mess up the expensive-looking carpet. Clearing his throat, he called out to one of the barkeeps, a small, silver-haired girl that looked oddly familiar, though Duncan couldn't quite place the resemblance.

"Ma'am, I'm here to perform some software security work on one of your computer systems. I believe a technician from EMACorp is supposed to be here as well."

The girl looked at him for a moment and then beckoned him toward the back of the bar in the direction of a large double door.

"Roger, dodger. Just tell me what I need to do," he replied to her gestures.

As far as Elise could tell, it was another typical day in City N, if you ignored the fact it had been raining buckets for the past few hours. Her own umbrella leaned behind the bar, where she'd left it conveniently out of sight. She was a little wet, in spite of the teflon coating most of her suit, but she could keep her composure. Nobody would really be seeing her below the waist, anyway. Worst comes to it, she'd just slip off to the back and change.

The Velvet Room was its usual quiet self. The rowdier crowds tended to avoid the place, which isn't to say it didn't see its share of rough customers. The place staked its claim on low-key lighting, quiet jazz music, and a focus on a relaxing evening, rather than the louder, more raucous clubs that populated other sections of the street. Enough of the regulars were the sorts who brought their own security that fights were rare, but if they were, Elise's job description could double as "bouncer."

The actual clientele tended to run through a large cross-section of the less savory segments of society. Upper-crust organized criminal types, corporate fronts who either liked the ambiance or needed a neutral location to conduct business with the other patrons, all the way down to anyone who walked in off the street. If someone had the cash and was of age, she'd serve them, as long as they stayed in line. Every evening tended to be an interesting mix of patrons, and that's one reason she loved the job. People were interesting. Sure, she didn't get to be a fly on the wall for the really important stuff, but she still got to see and hear bits and pieces of everyone's interesting lives, working a joint like this one.

She glanced up from the bar as a man rushed in, still dripping from the rain. She made a mental note to break out the mop, later. Typical merc, from the look of the men he'd sat down with. Not a single bit of chrome on him, from what she could see, so...maybe not so typical.

A bit later, an older gent with enough antique 'ware to be a museum piece approached the bar. "Ma'am," he said, "I'm here to perform some software security work on one of your computer systems. I believe a technician from EMACorp is supposed to be here as well."

Elise looked him over for a few moments, and continued to wipe down the bar with a clean towel. "Usually, the big corp types go for one of the private rooms in the back. I think EMA booked one for the evening." She gestured toward the double doors that stood in the far wall, past the rest of the booths and tables. "You won't need do much, just go buss the intercom outside the door and announce yourself." She pulled up the log for the private rooms on the building's local 'net, and let it flicker across her field of vision for a few moments. "Looks like you'll want room 2. First on the right."

Shell entered the bar a short time later, after Duncan had passed through the large double doors to the back. She walked up to Elise.

"Hello, I'm from EMACorp regarding your computer network issues. I've been sent under a special agreement."

Shell had been quick to run under the awnings of the various shops on her way to the bar. She didn't have far to go but wanted to avoid getting drenched on the short trip. Her hair had still managed to get wet, however.

"You wouldn't happen to have a towel handy, would you?" she asked Elise as she followed her to the bar.

Duncan looked over to his right in the dimly lit hallway past the large double doors. The acoustics of the hallway were unnervingly deadening; it wasn't quite an anechoic chamber but it was close. Duncan wasn't quite sure why he noticed such things, let alone at times when he should concentrate on the task at hand.

He tapped the panel and spoke. "Hello? This is Duncan Sorenson, the software technician here to perform some security auditing and patches on the system here."

The automated door opened with a quiet "whoosh". Duncan walked into the dark room, where there was a large conference table and some very plush looking couches along the wall. On the walls were large display panels and three men were at the conference table, all with tablet terminals in front of them.

One of the men stood up. "Good you could see us at this hour. Please, have a seat. We're waiting on the hardware tech from EMA to arrive and then we'll start briefing you both on what needs to be done."

The man gestured toward a snack table at the end of the room. On it were all manner of delicious treats - cake, pie, donuts, flavored coffees, and fruit juices. "Please, help yourself," he told Duncan.

"Thank you," Duncan said as he put a couple of glazed donuts on a plate, filled a very expensive-looking mug with the Crest logo full of hot coffee, and sat down. "I'm at your service, gentlemen."

Elise handed Shell a towel and she quickly gave her hair a once over with it. "Thanks," she said, "I'm to meet another technician here to do some security and maintenance work."

Elise directed Shell to the large double doors in the back of the bar. "They're expecting you. It's room 2, on your right." she replied.

Shell buzzed the panel for room 2 in the dark, quiet hallway and announced herself. The doors opened immediately and she walked in.

Inside, a group of people sat around a conference table. One of them was a particularly old-looking cyborg, outfitted with lots of dated parts. "I apologize for being late. I'm the hardware technician from EMA and I'm pleased to be of service to you. The rain complicated my trip here but it's my fault for not bringing an umbrella." She then turned to greet the older-looking cyborg. "Oh, you must be Mr. Sorenson. We'll be working together," Shell told him.

"Please help yourself to refreshments," one of the men in suits told her. She poured herself a cup of fruit punch and sat down. "Thanks," she told them. "I understand some of your networking equipment has been having some issues."

One man, who appeared to be in charge of the project, replied to Shell. "Yes. We have a few problems that need to be addressed."

One of the display screens switched on, showing some diagrams. The man continued, "Something is interfering with our wireless systems. On top of this apparent jamming, we've noticed suspicious

activity on the same parts of the network affected by this anomaly. We want you and Mr. Sorenson to investigate this and develop a solution."

Shell nodded. "This shouldn't be a problem. I will begin analysis immediately... All I'll need is..."

The man interrupted her. "Before we get started, we must inform you that this is a highly sensitive network. We need to take a few...precautions...just to make sure no confidential data is leaked during the audit or patching process."

"Oh?" Shell replied. She wondered where they were going with this. "I've signed the confidentiality agreements and I'm sure Mr. Sorenson has also reviewed them and signed, correct?"

The man shook his head. "Of course the standard arrangements have been made with EMA and our freelancer. What we will need is one additional safeguard."

Shell was beginning to become suspicious of where this was going. "Okay... what can I do for you?"

Another display screen switched on, displaying some diagrams that immediately aroused Shell's suspicions. Silhouettes of Shell and Duncan were displayed, along with some schematics of devices with which Shell had some vague familiarity. They were cybernetic remote control devices.

Shell stifled a gasp. "You mean..."

The man nodded to confirm. "Yes. Please understand that this is absolutely necessary. We need to have a direct override and monitoring system installed in both of you as a last measure."

Duncan abruptly stood up, accidentally sending his chair flying backward.

"Hey, look, thanks for the donuts but I can't agree to this. This wasn't part of the original deal."

He looked at Shell, who was obviously uncomfortable with the idea, too. She wasn't hiding her shock very well.

"With all due respect, gentlemen, what you are asking is outlawed under the Human Augmentation Rights Preservation Act. I must decline!"

He then turned around to leave. As he was heading toward the door, it opened and a large security guard walked in, blocking his path. A few seconds of silence passed as Duncan tried to assess the situation.

"Excuse me, please," said Duncan. The guard moved to block Duncan's path as Duncan tried to get around him.

The leader of the group stood up from the conference table. "Mr. Sorenson, you have seen some of the topology of our network and have signed the confidentiality agreements. You aren't planning on filing any legal complaints, are you?"

Duncan stepped back from the guard. "What to you mean to imply? What is the meaning of this? I'm afraid I must decline this agreement and wish to leave!"

The leader shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not quite that simple."

Duncan looked at Shell. He tried to open a direct communications link to her. After a few seconds, the link was established.

"We need to do something," he said to her, through the 'net. "They aren't going to take 'no' for an answer."

Atlas stood behind his new partner in the conference room. He had just been hired to work security detail for Crest as a contractor. Unsure of the nature of the work he would be doing, Atlas needed money so if he could do the job, he would take it.

His partner's large build blocked most of his view but, from what he could see, the man was trying to prevent a couple of cyborgs from leaving.

Atlas reflected on what he had been briefed in his meeting with the bosses back in the front of the bar. He was to assist the other guard in "securing" the private rooms in the back of the building. He wasn't quite sure what that involved but it sounded reasonable to him at the time.

He walked up beside his partner, Georg. "Ok, you two," he said to the cyborgs. "I understand you're trying to breach your contract and flee with some information. We can't allow that."

The small female cyborg looked at him. "That's not what's going on!" she yelled.

Atlas walked over to her and took her arm. "Let's just calm down and we'll find out what you're up to," he said to her.

Just then, a struggle broke out between the old male cyborg and Georg. Georg quickly threw the old man to the ground. "Hey!" yelled Atlas. He was surprised that Georg thought it necessary to be so rough with the old guy. "Don't you think that's a little much?"

Georg sneered at Atlas. "Listen, rookie. Either you do what's asked or you hit the road."

Atlas hesitated for a moment. Shell pulled her arm out of his grasp and leaped backward. He knew that if he wasn't willing to get rough with the cyborgs, he wouldn't get paid and that meant he couldn't even afford to eat tonight. "Listen..." he said. Atlas couldn't find the words. "What exactly IS this all about?"

Duncan was on the ground when Atlas distracted Georg with his question. He considered what might be the best course of action in this harrowing situation.

Duncan was not a combat cyborg by any means. His physical strength was slightly above average but straining his outdated cybernetic parts was risky since he had gone years without any maintenance due to his lack of funds. In this state, however, he knew he would have to fight to escape. He could also tell that the other cyborg was beginning to panic as she jumped away from Atlas.

The other men around the conference table didn't look too surprised at what was happening. Duncan knew what he had to do. Frantically trying to remember the technique, he focused electrical energy from his main power source into his hands. He could detect a buildup of electrical charge and a slight

heat as well. Knowing he only had one shot at this before the guard would resort to using a weapon, Duncan let out a sudden discharge of electromagnetic pulse in the direction of Georg.

Georg flew back into the wall, knocking over a pot of hot coffee. Screaming in pain, Georg was distracted as Duncan lept to his feet and kicked Georg in the face with his large, heavy metal boot. While Atlas turned to see what had happened to Georg, Shell performed a high kick to the back of Atlas' head, knocking him to the ground as well.

Duncan and Shell darted out of the conference room and out of the large double doors, back into the main part of the bar.

"We need to get the hell out of here, ma'am," he said to Shell. "They are going to want to kill us."

Duncan then noticed Elise, behind the bar, with an annoyed look on her face. He could tell she may have expected this turn of events - as if she'd witnessed the same thing dozens of times.

Elise shook her head and sighed. She didn't need this sort of shit on an otherwise quiet night. "Sir," she spoke up, "I must apologize for the shit-show in there. We usually get people who know better." Didn't matter what it was, when someone runs out worrying that they're going to get killed, it meant something was amiss.

"We don't keep cams on those rooms, so I don't know the full story," she said to the two cyborgs. "I'll need you two to stay here. Once I get this all resolved, I'll comp you a couple drinks, we can discuss things quietly. Like it's *supposed* to be."

She left unsaid that any police presence would be ill-appreciated by most of the regulars. She placed a hand on the bar and vaulted across it with a single smooth motion. "Bar's closed until I get back," she shouted as she rushed through the double doors to survey the scene.

From the doorway, it was pretty plain there had been a fight already, probably in which the two cyborgs had escaped, if that was what they needed. The room was in a bit of a shambles, and a pot of honest-to-god coffee, not the synthetic stuff, was busy soaking into the carpet. Great, more clean-up. At least it was already paid for. The two guards were recovering already, although the one with the bloody nose and red marks of a large boot to the face would be the worse for wear. The other was a guy she saw wander in off the street earlier; must've been hired on for a little extra muscle.

The actual corporate suits were recovering their composure, although none had sat back down and it was clear their feathers were still ruffled. "I'm sorry," Elise said, "But I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave. Your payments will not be returned. I won't allow violence at this bar, and expect far better behavior from the usual private room clients."

The hell even was this, she wondered. Corp Johnsons are usually smoother operators. Assholes were probably just using the bar as a convenient front for whatever their real plan was...maybe to cover their intentions. Idiots. No power to just lock the doors this far from their fancy compounds.

She lowered into a fighting stance, eyeing the entire group carefully. "Easy now. I can throw you out one way or another, and it's much more pleasant if you behave." But much more fun if they don't.

Atlas slowly stumbled to his feet, having been knocked dizzy by Shell's surprisingly strong kick to the back of his head.

This is not what I expected, he thought. He wasn't about to get into another fight.

Atlas turned around and looked at the men at the conference table, and then at Georg, who was bleeding profusely from his nose and covered in hot coffee, now soaking the carpet. Elise stood over him with a stern look of disdain and crouched slightly in a fighting stance.

"No...", said Atlas, looking at Elise. "I'm not interested in any more trouble. This isn't what I signed up for and I can show myself the way out."

He looked back at the men around the conference table, who were starting to look much more peeved than before.

"I quit," he told them. "Kidnapping just isn't my forte." Atlas started walking toward the door when Elise stood in front of him with her hand out, making a "stop" gesture.

Atlas groaned. "Come on. Not you, too."

"You stick around," Elise said to Atlas. "I recognize you from earlier, so you're not part of the actual problem, just another sucker." She walked past him, toward the corporate guys. "How about you help me throw your bosses out."

"You can't just throw us out," one of them protested. "This isn't in the contract!"

"Bullshit. You think we even have a contract,' Elise asked, as she grabbed the man and put him into an arm lock. "You break the rules you get kicked out." She began to drag him away, with little protest that wasn't shut up by a twist on his arm.

A few of the bar's regulars quickly made way for her to remove the man and throw him bodily out of the front door and into the rain. It wasn't every day you got to see a fight back behind closed doors spill out into the rest of the bar, so curiosity had drawn a few over.

She was quickly marching back for the others, in case they couldn't escort themselves out.

Duncan was nervously looking around, tapping his foot. It made a slight clanging sound as the toe of his boot made contact with the floor. His gear was sorely in need of a tune-up.

"Are we really just going to wait here?" he asked Shell. "We could just go. It would probably be the smartest thing to do."

Shell shrugged. "She did ask us to stay," she replied. Duncan looked back toward the exit.

"She just doesn't want us running to the police. She probably just wanted to make sure we don't do that," he said. *Getting the police involved isn't a priority of mine*, he thought, *but if these thugs come after us, we might be on the run for some time.*

"Come on, it's not wise to remain here," he told Shell. "Let's move."

Shell hesitated. *I can't leave her behind. It just isn't right; I'm sure she can take care of herself but it's just cowardly to leave on my own right now.*

"Ah, bloody hell. Fine. I'll wait here with you."

Shell had half a mind to follow Duncan's advice but had a thought: *That bouncer looked like she could handle things just fine when things get rowdy around here, but the people who tried to kidnap us might not be her normal clients.*

"Mr. Sorenson," she said, "I've sworn loyalty to my employer and, regardless of the way things have turned out, I have an obligation to see this through to the end."

Duncan looked surprised. "You're not seriously going to take the control chip?" he asked.

"No, of course not," replied Shell. "My contract did not mention Crest. It mentioned the owners of this bar. Something very unusual is going on here."

Shell started to walk back toward the double doors. "We've already taken out their goons. That bouncer, dare I say it, may actually need our help."

She opened the doors and looked back at Duncan. "We should at least check."

Atlas grabbed the arm of one of the remaining corporate guys and yanked him toward the door. "Come on," he said, "You heard her. Out you go."

The man struggled with Atlas as he tried to pull him away from the table. Atlas pulled his arm over his own shoulder and threw him to the ground using an old Judo move. "The hell you trying to do, you bastard? If you think you're stronger than me, why'd you need me in the first place?" Atlas yelled.

After the man hit the ground, Atlas grabbed his arm again and literally dragged him out of the private room's door. As he continued to drag him through the main part of the bar and toward the front door, the other patrons at the bar looked onward. Atlas passed by Duncan and Shell and threw the man out the door, into the rain, and gave him a good kick in the leg.

"And stay out," Atlas told him. "I'm not your damn thug, you got that?"

Atlas walked back into the bar where Elise was escorting Georg and the remaining corporate guy to the front door. "Sorry about this," Atlas told Elise, "I really didn't know this was how it was going to be."

He then walked over to Duncan and Shell, who had come back to the private room to check on things. "I think we have everything under control. Sorry about trying to detain you earlier. I should have known better."

Shell gave Atlas an incredulous stare. Duncan didn't look convinced, either. *I can't blame them,* Atlas thought. "Yeah... I owe you a bit more than just an apology," he told them.

"Damn straight, you should've," Elise remarked, on Atlas' comment on knowing better. "I doubt either of you 'borgs are all-in on heavy augmentation, but I still wouldn't just try to keep you from going anywhere, all the same," she continued, addressing Duncan and Shell.

She made her way back behind the bar. "Show's over, folks, 'she announced to the room at large. "If you're out of booze, just come on by and I'll get right on it!" A few customers came up to get fresh drinks, or comment on the whole business that had just transpired. It was a good while before Elise was free enough to get back to Atlas, Shell, and Duncan.

When she finally did, she just turned and beckoned them over to the bar. "So, you three mind giving your story on things," she asked. "it's not every day I get to see that sort of idiocy. At least none of them were armed."

Duncan sat down on one of the available bar stools.

"Well, I get an e-mail from Crest, looking for a freelance hacker and, oddly, they say they they want to recruit me in particular. So, I'm hard up for cash so I agree to meet with them to find out more," he told Elise while Shell and Atlas listen.

"Turns out they're all hush-hush about the whole thing and, after some digging, I find out they want to hire cyborgs in particular. At the time, I figure that's no big deal, probably want to make sure their freelancers can handle any trouble on location."

Duncan shook his head. "But... I didn't anticipate that this was the reason. They were looking to put us under their direct control by the way of an illegal augmentation."

He looked around the bar and shrugged. "Hey, I get that you don't want us running to the cops. I have my own reasons for not wanting to do that so don't worry about me."

Atlas took a drink of his whiskey.

"I was looking for work, too. I was on another mission about a week ago and these guys approached me when I was at HQ collecting my payment. They said they needed someone to work security detail on a few high-risk meetings and to come here to discuss the details before I started.", he told Elise.

"Next thing you know, this guy Georg is my superior and he tells me to just do what he says. Not knowing what to expect, I figured these two here might have been up to something. Didn't take me long to figure out that these Crest guys were the ones up to no good."

He took another drink. "Look, I don't know what else to tell you. I'm sorry."

Miroku took a seat and listened to Duncan and Atlas tell Elise what happened.

"Same story here," she said, "I was hired through EMACorp to perform some maintenance and diagnostics on the computer systems in this building. The contract I read didn't mention Crest - it only mentioned the owners of the Velvet Room."

Shell scratched her head. "Why I was dealing with Crest doesn't make sense to me. Did you know anything about maintenance needed on the network here?" she asked Elise.

"I really don't get it, either," Elise said after listening to the three stories. "Some Johnson gets you guys here, and then tries to pull the screw job at the initial meet? It's goddamn amateur hour, if they didn't even get you into one of their own facilities first." She sighed. "Christ, they'd do better just offering

runners an upgrade or two up front and sneaking the lock-out chips in while they were under, or getting you guys to one of their offices for the meeting. Doesn't make any sense, unless this was some idiot working on their own to try and score a better quarterly review."

She ran over what they knew. "So, other than all that, let's see. I can tell you that we don't generally contact the corps for services. The bar's got its own channels and we like to keep it that way. Haven't seen any network problems, either. So, you probably got lied to because there's no way in hell EMA would send one of their own right to a competitor."

"The bigger question...is why the hell is Crest messing with illegal control chips? Think they were looking to poach some new talent for their own network security divisions?" She paused for a moment.

"Neither of you are Adepts, right? Most corps are pretty happy to get their hands on a few more."

She'd have to call in a few favors and see if she could dig up some dirt on all this. It wasn't quite usual behavior for a corp, no matter how you looked at it. Whatever was going on, it could be big. Really goddamn big. Not that she'd go near something like that without a real good reason. Get too close to shit like this, you're liable to disappear.

Shell nodded. "That's right, I thought it odd that EMA would send me to do work for Crest. For that matter, I'd like to determine whether those guys were actually with Crest or just pretending to be, to give them cover."

Shell stood up from her bar stool. "There's some investigation that needs to happen here. I'm going to contact EMA and let them know what happened. If the documents were altered after the fact, EMA will know for sure, but I can say with certainty that Crest wasn't mentioned on anything I signed prior to coming here."

She walked to the door. "Mr. Sorenson, I've sent my contact information. I will send you any information I am permitted. In the mean time, I'm headed back to EMACorp to speak with my superiors."

With that, she headed outside to see that it had finally stopped raining. Shell quickly ran back to EMACorp headquarters.

"They tried to use me as one of their lackeys to do their dirty work", Atlas added.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to stick around and help investigate this."

Atlas shrugged. "It's not like I have anything else better to do, anyway."

Duncan stood up from his seat. "Well, if we're all done here, I'm going to get going before Crest sends their people here. There's no doubt the folks you just kicked out have high-tailed it back to headquarters and told their bosses about what happened, Crest or otherwise."

Duncan looked back toward the double doors at the back of the bar and then at the entrance. "Looks like it's stopped raining. I'm going to make sure I'm gone before they send more goons."

With that, Duncan quickly walked to the exit and left the premises, heading back to his dwelling on the

other side of the city.

Shell walked back into the employee entrance and swiped her key card. Making her way to the elevator, she performed the usual retina scan and was soon on the floor with the head management offices. An unplanned visit to upper management was somewhat rare at EMA but Shell had urgent business - her most recent work order seemed to contain falsified information.

She wirelessly sent a message to her supervisor.

Sir, I need to speak with you right away. The security maintenance job at the Velvet Room turned ugly - our contacts turned out to be with Crest and attempted to - by force - detain myself and our freelance partner. Crest's men were insistent that both of us take an installation of illegal override modules, which is a breach of our company policy and international law.

Under most circumstances, replies were very brief but prompt. Shell continued her brisk walk down the long hall on the 115th floor, awaiting some sort of response. Working hours were over but the higher ups had people on staff to field their communications around the clock, as a dire necessity given the nature of their business.

Shell reached the main section where her supervisor's office was. Her message still had no reply. *Maybe his secretary is taking a short coffee break*, she thought, but the secretary was a cyborg much like herself and had a constant connection to the 'net. Not wishing to overreact, Shell was beginning to feel a slight concern over the now five minutes without a response. In this day and age, e-mail responses inside EMACorp were commonly within seconds, thanks to cybernetic communication interfaces.

Becoming somewhat impatient, Shell knocked on the door to her manager's office. The secretary would be in there at this hour, she thought.

No one answered.

Elise's apartment, 2:00 AM

The bar had closed, and Elise finally made her way home. Her flat was small, but serviceable. She had a bedroom separated from a living area that flowed into a small dining area and kitchen. It was enough, and really, that was all that mattered. Glamorous lifestyles were for far more glamorous people.

Before going to sleep, she pulled out her commlink and made a call. It took a while for anyone on the other end to pick up, but pick up they did. "Sorry about bothering you so late," she started. "...Yeah, I figured you'd still be awake. Look, I need you to do me a favor." She paused for whoever was on the other end of the line.

"Yes, I'll actually pay you back for this one. Besides, you won't want to miss out on this intel anyway. Some Johnson tried to kidnap a couple cyborgs in the bar. ...Of course they failed. Think I'd even know if they pulled it off? So yeah, some dumbass decided to just try and pull a screw job before they'd even ended the meet." She paused again, and laughed. "They're lucky they weren't trying to hire someone like us or they'd be dead instead of just thrown out on the street."

"What I wanna know is this: what the fuck does Crest want with cyborgs, and why are they trying to shove illegal control chips into them? ... How do you think I know? The whole screw job apparently involved telling their runners to get chipped before they could actually start. ...Yeah, I thought of that too. Smooth operator would just offer some nice maintenance or upgrades and fuck 'em over on the sly, all right. You wanna figure out why they pulled such a crappy job of it, you can do that on the side, it's not the juicy bit, now is it?"

"...Ok, sure, I'll give you the full story. So, a couple of cyborgs show up for a meeting with a Johnson. One's a freelancer who's so old he could literally be in a museum, and the other's some corporate type, I think she mentioned EMA. Both of them were deckers, I think. Miss EMA said something about her contract being with my boss, which just makes the whole thing worse..." She continued to sum up the events of the evening.

"So, you in? I can scrape together the cash if you need it, otherwise I can owe you a favor, as usual." Another pause, made a bit longer as Elise mulled over something her contact had said. Finally, she sighed. "Fine. I still don't get why you like this."

She paused again to compose herself, before speaking again, her tone of voice changed a bit, matching the usual peppy cadence of Eclair Antares. "Pleeease~? It would make Eclair so very happy if you did this for her, master~"

She hung up. "I kinda hate hate that guy, sometimes."

The countryside (upper class region), 8:30 PM

A few miles from the outskirts of the city, the sun had just set behind a large mansion. Standing in the window, Jess was playing a violin, watching the last hints of twilight leave the sky.

She sighed and put her violin away. Along with her martial arts practice, Jess had to perfect her skills as a musician and entertain company at her home. Her keepers had put a lot of pressure on her in the past year as she was the heir to a very large estate and was to take a position at Crest, per her father's wishes.

Jess went down to the dining hall and spoke with one of her butlers. "Samuel," she said, "May I have a cup of tea and a bagel?" Samuel nodded and soon brought her a nighttime snack.

As she sat down at the table, Jess wondered about her future with her father's company. Jess had a family image to uphold but she really wanted to join the police force in order to combat the lawless, vicious hordes of criminals that had infected the city. Ever since her mother was assassinated, Jess constantly had to fight her thirst for revenge and maintain her image.

After she finished her tea and read a book, it was around 2:20 AM and Jess headed back to her bedroom. She pulled a small communications device out from a hidden panel in the wall and checked it. Jess had to be covert when communicating with her contacts at police headquarters and her other... less reputable... contacts who would provide her with inside information regarding criminal activity.

She had a new message. It was from her contact, "Dark Spider". Dark Spider was able to gain access to police files and give her information regarding the group that had taken responsibility for her mother's assassination. Jess dared not let her father know that she sought - let alone obtained - information through such channels.

She called the number for Dark Spider. It rang a few times and then went to voicemail, which was typical.

"Spider," Jess said, keeping her voice as low as possible so that her staff could not hear her. "I've seen the message." Jess reached over and grabbed her sword, looking it over as she spoke. "If they're working with us, for whatever reason, that gives me a golden opportunity," said Jess, with a stern, monotone voice. "Regardless of the circumstances, I intend to seize this. Send me their schedule, please."

Jess hung up. She knew she had a busy week ahead of her.

EMAcorp headquarters, Northern quadrant of the city, 1:45 AM

Shell could not open the door to her supervisor's office and tried knocking on some of the other doors on that floor. She tried sending messages to some of the other employees in the building, in the chance that someone was working late.

I find it hard to believe that no one is here, she thought. Shell took the elevator back down to the lobby to speak to the security guard. *After what happened today, I need to make sure someone knows*. Once in the lobby, she walked to the front desk, where an android receptionist was sitting at a terminal.

"Morrigan," Shell said to the android, "Can you tell me who is currently on the 115th floor?"

Morrigan sat still for a moment as she queried the building's security data. "All management offices are currently vacant," Morrigan replied. "No one, including cleaning or maintenance staff, is currently on floors 90 through 120."

Shell was shocked. "That's very unusual. Was there an evacuation?" she asked Morrigan.

"There is no record pertaining to a fire alarm or any other security notice," Morrigan replied. "There were two logins to the security database immediately after the last employee took the elevator down from the 117th floor."

Shell asked, "Can you give me a time and a user name?"

Morrigan hesitated for a moment, which was not characteristic of an android receptionist at all. "There was a security lock placed on the records just now. I'm sorry but access to that information is now restricted."

Shell checked the time. It was 2:15 am.

Duncan's house, Eastern quadrant of the city, residential sector. 1:19 AM

Duncan arrived back at his house after making a late night munchies run to the donut shop in his neighborhood. He'd brought back two bags of light roast coffee and a box of assorted donuts for the late-night hacking session he had planned on his trip back from the Velvet Room earlier that evening.

My first priority is to get any communications between Crest, The Velvet Room, and EMA for the past five days, he thought.

Duncan sat down at his terminal. Screens surrounded him although they were largely unnecessary due to his cybernetic neural interface which was constantly connected to the 'net. He liked to do things the old-fashioned way while at home whenever possible. Sometimes, he used both methods just to speed things along and work more efficiently.

After brute-forcing the credentials for Crest's servers, he made a quick scan of their e-mail system, only to find nothing of relevance to the day's unfortunate meeting at the Velvet Room.

His next network intrusion was with EMACorp. Duncan had a look around at the e-mail server and saw a few messages that stood out:

From: rkprice@msgserv.crest.jl.com
To: mkgs-gen@emacorp.com
Date: February 5, 2216 22:14:07 EST

Their people screwed up. Why exactly I pay these individuals is beyond me.
If we can't round up troublemakers then I don't see the point in this deal.

Shape up and get it right. You either accomplish this simple task or I WILL
find someone who can. If I see one word in the news, you know what will happen.
Don't make me spell it out for you.

Do your f***ing job.

Duncan read the first message and checked the detailed headers. *They're routing their messages through a third party server... why would a large corporation feel the need for this without masking their identity too,* he thought.

He looked over the next message.

From: mkgs-gen@emacorp.com
To: rds2937122@maskedmail.privacy.org
Date: February 6, 2216 01:13:56 EST

11:30 Delivery of weapons at Dock 13
11:35 Shipment scanned, ID# 2019238122-A678
12:03 Loaded onto truck. Route through 17th and Main, est. arrival @ 12:16
15:00 Meeting to be held at destination, EMA branch office, 118 Broad Street

If you need more info, buzz me.

-- D A R K S P I D E R --

Duncan noticed something familiar. *Dark Spider,* he thought, scratching his head. *I've become*

somewhat familiar with his work. He's one of the most accomplished hackers in this city.

Duncan continued to scan for relevant information for another hour before dozing off in his seat with a half-full cup of coffee on his desk and doughnut crumbs in his lap.

Atlas had left the bar at closing time. He mulled over the events of the day, still frustrated and angry over being used as a common thug to do underhanded work.

Looking down the alleyway, Atlas took his time getting back to his small apartment. Money was tight and he couldn't afford to stop anywhere to eat. The pain in his stomach from the lack of food was starting to become more nagging. He knew he would fall ill if he didn't get some nutrition.

Atlas took a quick glance at his watch. *Am I going to have to resort to hawking this just so I can have a meal*, he thought. His life had really fallen apart in the last year as he struggled to make ends meet. He noticed the time on his watch - it was about a quarter after 2 am.

At the end of the alley, Atlas could spot the docks. Among the shipping containers and giant cranes, he spotted something in the shadows that looked familiar. There were men, dressed in dark military outfits, sneaking around the containers. His keen eye just happened to get a glimpse of them, if only for a second. *There's an operation going on here*, he thought. The scene was familiar because his past military work had him doing the same types of missions in his past.

Atlas knew better than to be nosy. Instead, he took a right turn and headed toward the boardwalk, which had also recently closed all of its bars for the night. There wasn't much in the way of lighting along this route and he could get out of the area without being seen. *After what happened earlier, I shouldn't take any chances.*

He wondered why Crest wanted to chip those cyborgs. Neither one of them looked all that valuable for their purposes, after all. He wasn't quite aware of their abilities as hackers but assumed they weren't much different from the hackers that Atlas had met in the underground during some of his black ops work.

Finally reaching his apartment, Atlas saw something he had been dreading but expecting. On his door, an eviction notice had been posted. *God dammit.*

Duncan's home office, 4:12 AM

Duncan suddenly jolted awake. His neural interface alerted him of an incoming chat request. Duncan approved the chat request. It was from Shell.

ShellShock10101 (4:12 am): Mr. Sorenson? Are you available for a quick conversation?

DuncanDonuts (4:12 am): Oh, I must have dozed off. Hello. Miss... I'm sorry; I seem to have forgotten your last name.

ShellShock10101 (4:12 am): Lockheed. Shell Lockheed.

DuncanDonuts (4:13 am): Ah, yes. Please allow me to switch us to a secure line. I'm forwarding you the connection information.

ShellShock10101 (4:13 am): Thank you. I hope I'm not contacting you at a bad time.

DuncanDonuts (4:14 am): No; not at all. I was actually doing some... research.

DuncanDonuts (4:14 am): Did you find anything interesting from EMA?

ShellShock10101 (4:14 am): Sadly, no. Something else has happened.

DuncanDonuts (4:15 am): Yes?

ShellShock10101 (4:15 am): There is some kind of information blackout at EMA. Everybody went home, all the offices are locked, and I can't get access to security records.

DuncanDonuts (4:15 am): I see. I did notice something peculiar elsewhere but I need to meet with you in person to discuss it. Not even a secure line is a good idea for this.

DuncanDonuts (4:16 am): Wait, do you normally have access to the security records?

ShellShock10101 (4:16 am): I have a security clearance, yes. I'm afraid I can't divulge much more than that, but one of our receptionists shut me out mid-conversation earlier.

DuncanDonuts (4:17 am): I gave Elise my contact information earlier at the Velvet Room. She might know something about why the contract had the falsified or switched company name.

ShellShock10101 (4:17 am): It's too early to tell but there may have been an intrusion of our network at EMA. Normally I'm forbidden from divulging this information but if it's related to what happened to us earlier...

DuncanDonuts (4:18 am): Please hold for just a moment. I have an incoming chat request.

DuncanDonuts (4:37 am): Miss Lockheed, sorry for the disruption. I've obtained some information regarding communications between Crest and EMACorp.

ShellShock10101 (4:38 am): What? We're competitors. Surely I would have gotten a copy.

DuncanDonuts (4:38 am): I can't divulge how I got this info but I can tell this was supposed to be some kind of backroom deal. I will forward what I have. Do you have a secure address?

ShellShock10101 (4:40 am): Yes. I sent you the details. Thanks for the information.

DuncanDonuts (4:42 am): Of course. Thanks for contacting me. Perhaps we can get to the bottom of this soon.

Shell terminated the conversation and the secure connection. Duncan looked over the contact information she had sent and then drifted off back to sleep for a few more hours.

When Renk's commander gave the "all clear" signal, his platoon quietly moved out of the shipping container in which they had been hiding for the past hour.

Renk adjusted his earpiece as he hid behind some crates.

This was just a routine mission, he thought to himself, waiting for the signal to move toward the boardwalk. Renk's group was to gain access to the EMACorp headquarters and secure the building. Earlier that evening, Renk's commander had received word that a mission to prevent a possible terrorist attack was to begin at 3:00 sharp. Under the cover of darkness, using night vision goggles (and in his cybernetic team mates, infrared sensor eye implants), they were to move through the city with absolute stealth in order to take over the building. Since information was controlled on a strict "Need-to-know" basis, Renk didn't know many more details than that. He wasn't sure of EMA's possible involvement or targeting by any terrorist groups. Still, he carried out his orders faithfully.

Renk's group drew near the building. It was completely unoccupied by now, save for a few android receptionists and mechanized security guards. Renk quickly darted behind a dumpster, then toward the fire escape by one of the guards.

With a quick, deliberate action, Renk drew his knife and cut the power wires on the guard robot's back, rendering it both inoperable and unable to alert the security system over the 'net. This was no time to revel in his moment of success, however, as a second robotic guard detected movement and began rushing toward him.

Renk disappeared.

As he had expected, the street lights shifted to a deep red, making it harder to see. His night vision goggles were now useless as infrared light became invisible to the goggles. For less than one minute, Renk had expanded time in a tight bubble around himself as he frantically ran up the fire escape and used a device to glitch out the key card terminal. He wasn't able to breathe in this state - the air around him was completely unbreathable. Renk had slowed down time by a factor of 2000:1.

Doing this was very difficult; Renk required absolute concentration and had to fight a multitude of ill effects in the process. In addition to holding his breath, his skin felt like it was burning and his vision became very dim due to the way light behaved while he was in this state. Once he had hacked the door lock and darted inside, he released his either "grasp" on time and returned to normal. The bright lights in the hallway blinded him as he adjusted to his environment.

Now, to get to the server room, he remembered. He checked his H.U.D. for the building map and located his destination. There would be many security cameras, motion sensors, and guard robots to avoid along the way.

Price Mansion, 9:15 am (the next morning)

Jess woke up and headed downstairs for breakfast.

In the dining hall, her butlers were speaking with police. There was a concerned look on their faces.

Jess hurried over to them. "What's going on?" she demanded.

One of the officers replied, "Miss Price, your father has gone missing along with several other executives from Crest and EMA corporation."

Jess was stunned. Already, flashbacks of her mother's assassination raced through her mind. Before she could outwardly react, she got control of herself and kept a poker face. She knew that if she appeared too upset, she would be placed under protective custody after how she reacted when her mother was killed.

"When did this happen?!" she asked.

The officer replied, "Around 2:30 this morning. An unknown militant group, believed to be some terrorist faction, has taken over the EMA corporation headquarters. Crest HQ has been secured and is safe for the moment. Your father, however, cannot be located."

Jess thought for a moment. *If they are guarding Crest HQ, and no doubt my house, I won't be able to sneak out tonight.*

"I see..."

She wanted desperately to set out to search for her father. Her other plans would have to wait until another night.

Her butler gave the officers their contact details. Jess added, "I want you to contact me if you find any clues at all, please. If those bastards do anything to him, I want to be sure we know exactly who they are."

She answered a few mundane questions about where her father would typically go after work and then headed back to her bedroom.

Once Jess was back in her room, she began to devise a plan. *If I can just get out of here for a few hours tonight, I could get into EMA headquarters and deal with those vile animals myself...*

One block away from EMA corporation headquarters, 7:35 am

Shell got off of the transport and headed to work. *Surely by now everyone's at work and I can finally ask some questions*, she thought. She had left the building around 3:45 am the previous night, having been unable to contact any of the management and finally giving up. Her conversation with Duncan early that morning left her a little sleep-deprived and with more questions than answers.

Shell stopped on the sidewalk as soon as her workplace came into view. There were police and military vehicles surrounding the building and security everywhere. There was a road block just about 200 feet from where she was standing. *This IS more than a glitch, after all.*

She thought for a moment about what to do. *If I ask what's going on and tell them I'm an employee, I might get questioned.* Shell knew the authorities in the city could be a little overzealous when it came to gathering information and innocent bystanders were known to go through hell if they were thought to have even the slightest bit of additional detail. After the trouble the evening before, Shell wasn't ready for that.

Instead of turning around, which might have brought suspicion upon her, she went inside a small coffee shop next to her. *What a coincidence!* Shell looked at one of the tables at the back of the coffee shop. There was Duncan, sipping coffee with a huge plate of donuts in front of him.

Shell waved and then walked over. "Lucky meeting you here," she said to Duncan. She sat down.

Duncan greeted Shell. "Hello! Stopping in for a cuppa joe before work?" He didn't want to let on too much about their prior conversation in a public place.

Shell sat down and began to speak with a lowered voice. "You've probably noticed that the EMA building is in the middle of some kind of standoff."

Duncan nodded, also speaking barely above a whisper. The sound of the coffee machines and the other patrons almost drowned him out. "Yes. I have no idea what's going on over there. I'd have to assume it's related to your experience last night."

Shell stood up. "I need to get in there without being seen. Is there any chance you could help? If we end up protecting any other staff inside there or saving valuable data, you'll be rewarded handsomely."

Duncan paused for a moment, mulling over her offer.

"There's probably a way in without being detected. Under the street here, there's a good-sized storm sewer that redirects the Clark creek flow under the transport system out to the river. Disabling the security cameras for about a half hour should be possible."

Duncan accessed the security system. Despite the massive military and police fortification, nothing extra was implemented in the storm sewer's surveillance system. He sent a few commands and the video feeds instantly went dead.

"Alright. I'll do whatever I can for you. The cameras are out. Let's get underneath the transport tunnels through the 11th street access and make our way toward the building's sub-basement."

With that, Shell and Duncan left the coffee house, entered a small maintenance access port a few blocks away, climbed down to the storm sewer, and arrived at the sub-basement of EMA corporation's headquarters about 20 minutes later.

Renk had been hiding inside a small storage room in the sub-basement of the EMA corp building. He had managed to destroy a few security robots and sneak past security cameras on his way down.

Sometime in the early morning, Renk received the final transmission until this moment. He had simply been instructed to hold his position and that the building had been surrounded by police and the main military. *Something has gone very wrong*, he thought to himself. *I've been here all night and now it's well into the morning. No further communications and somehow the authorities have caught on. This is not how missions have gone in the past.*

Renk had a relatively good hunch that the authorities may not have been there because of his team. Due to the circumstances, the authorities may have become aware of other nefarious activity and that the timing of the mission had become an unfortunate coincidence. He wasn't sure either way but the lack of communication had built up a lot of tension in the mean time.

Suddenly, Renk heard a ventilation grate become dislodged and fall to the ground. *Shit, the Army's moving in.*

He looked through a slit in the door to see not soldiers but two cyborgs stumble inside through a ventilation shaft about halfway up the concrete wall. *Wait, this isn't the Army.*

The female cyborg looked familiar. In the building's security records that had been obtained the prior evening, he remembered her photograph. *That's one of EMA's employees. Sure is dedicated to come to work under these circumstances*, thought Renk, stifling a chuckle.

The other cyborg was an old man with the most outdated hardware he had ever seen. *What's that old codger doing?*

Renk decided the cyborgs were no threat and emerged from the storage room. He held his weapon but kept it lowered.

"Don't move, you two. What are you doing here?" he asked, trying not to startle them too much.

Duncan and Shell put their hands up.

Duncan responded, "Don't shoot! She's an employee and I'm just here to assist her since the entrances are obviously blocked off."

Shell nodded. "Are you with the military... or...?"

Renk shook his head. "Special ops. Can't get more specific than that. So you're not with the faction that's taken over the building?"

Duncan put his hands down slowly. "Faction? I'm not sure what's happened here. We were trying to find out."

Renk put his weapon away. "I see. Listen, you two shouldn't be in here. No job's worth this much risk"

Shell started to laugh. "Says the special ops guy in the building with possible terrorists."

Renk shrugged. "Fair enough. Risking our lives is just kind of what we do. Still, I don't like civilians getting hurt."

Renk's comm link, which had been silent for hours, suddenly reactivated and he heard an urgent message.

Attention team, we're under heavy fire in the lobby! The police and Army have moved in!

Renk was stunned by the report. "What? Why are the police attacking us?!"

Duncan used his neural link to break into EMA's security system. He told Renk, "Like we said, as far as the police know, this building's been under seige by terrorists! I can get you a tactical advantage via a ventilation shaft that leads to the lobby. If you want to get your men out..."

Renk shook his head. "Terrorists? My mission didn't..." He stopped himself. Renk almost got a little careless and divulged details about his mission. "I won't run. I'm getting my team mates out alive."

Duncan replied, "That vent behind you leads up to a grate just behind the front desk. You can sneak up there and show your men back down this way. We can all escape via the storm sewers."

Shell connected herself to the building's security system. "It looks like I'm still locked out, but given the current situation..." she said as she used her usual techniques to crack the passwords and force her way in. She obtained a view of the main lobby.

Shell saw something that alarmed her to the point of losing her breath.

"DON'T GO UP THERE!" she screamed, quite suddenly. She caught her breath.

"There is a self-destruct system in this building. EMA had it installed as a last resort should there ever be a breach of security that jeopardized our most sensitive data but it normally cannot be activated until all personnel have evacuated! Unless my tracker is malfunctioning, the system should know I am here! Still... still..."

Shell hesitated. She couldn't force out the words.

Renk stared at her, wide-eyed. "Yes? What's going on with the self-destruct? They've ARMED it?!"

Shell shook her head up and down in a "yes" movement. "It could not have been armed by terrorists or your men or anyone but management! THAT'S why they were all gone last night, I'd imagine, but there are still other employees in the building along with your men!"

Renk started to climb up the shaft that Duncan had pointed out earlier.

Duncan ran over to him and tried to pull him down. Renk shoved him away, knocking him to the

ground.

"No, I have to try to save my comrades!" he yelled at Duncan.

Shell ran over to Duncan and looked up at Renk, already halfway into the vent. "No, it's going to detonate in 30 seconds!"

Duncan sprang to his feet and pulled at Renk's boots, causing him to fall out of the vent and bump into Shell, knocking her down in the process.

"We have to get out of here immediately!" he said to Renk. Shell stood up and looked at the vent. She knew it wasn't going to do anyone any good at this point. "DAMN IT!" she screamed. "Management had a heads up your guys would be here and now they've decided to sacrifice everyone else..."

Duncan ran over to the vent and looked back. "Listen. We have to go. I hate that we can't do anything else."

Shell and Renk ran over to the vent and climbed through. They ran as fast as they could through the storm sewer and dove into the murky water as a blazing fireball rushed over them, forcing its way through the vent and down the sewer tunnel.

They had escaped with their lives, but many others had just ended in that moment.

Jess sat in the study, fidgeting nervously. Usually she was poised and calm but her mind raced as she tried to figure out how to get out of the mansion and out to the streets to begin her search for answers as to where her father might be.

He has an entourage of security guards with him at all time, she thought. A kidnapping would be impossible. As assassination wouldn't happen without it immediately getting into the news.

Jess hated these thoughts. She still couldn't deal with her mother's assassination.

She tried to calm herself so she could think more clearly. As she reached for her tea, she noticed ripples on the surface of the tea in the cup. It was a little like that scene from Jurassic Park, that ancient film she had watched with her parents as a small child.

An earthquake? Jess pondered. The entire house shook for a few seconds. She got up from her seat and walked back into the dining hall. One of her butlers was standing there, also puzzled by the brief shaking that had just happened. "Did you feel that," he asked Jess.

"Yes, seems there was a tremor," she replied. She walked over to the window and waited for an aftershock. Looking toward outside, she noticed some black smoke rising in the distance, just over the hills.

"What's that..." she mumbled to herself. She went upstairs to get a better look.

From her bedroom window, she saw thick, black smoke rising from the direction of the city. The sky began to fill with the smoke as she stood there, suddenly realizing that something huge must have happened. She then thought of the situation with Crest and EMA headquarters and realized that the smoke was rising from that general area.

Oh my God. I have to get out there NOW.

Jess waited until the main hall was devoid of staff and quietly made her way to one of the side entrances of the mansion. She darted her head out the door. *Coast's clear.* She sneaked around the hedges, being mindful to avoid the security staff and police that had been stationed around the perimeter. She'd be in a little trouble, especially with her sword attached to her back, if she was caught. Still being broad daylight, this wasn't the best time to do this.

Eventually, Jess found her way outside of the back yard and jumped over a small creek. She quickly ran through the woods, which gave her ample cover. She used her sword to clear some of the brush in her way.

When Jess reached the outskirts of town on the other side of the woods, she pulled out her communicator and called in a favor. She stood in the field for about 20 minutes before a friend of hers, Dianne, pulled up on a flying scooter.

Jess greeted her friend. "Dianne, thank you for doing this discreetly. I need a ride into town."

Atlas had spent what he thought would likely be his final night in his apartment. He had started boxing up items before finally going to bed in the early morning.

He had awakened to a loud, earth-shattering boom. Wondering what it was, he turned on his communicator and checked the news. Nothing explaining the boom showed up yet, which was to be expected since it had happened mere seconds ago.

He looked out his window and saw lots of emergency vehicles rushing down the street. His view further down the street was obscured by the buildings surrounding his apartment complex. Atlas quickly cleaned himself up, put on his boots and headed outside.

After hitting the street, he noticed loads of black smoke beginning to fill the sky. He ran down the sidewalk to see if he could spot the source. As he turned a corner, he saw a blazing inferno at the EMA corporation building. Atlas had never seen such carnage since the incident, which he struggled to avoid remembering. The scene was starting to trigger some bad memories but he shook them off for the time being and ran down the street to get a better idea of what was going on.

Just then, he saw two cyborgs and a familiar-looking man emerge from a maintenance portal in the sidewalk. It was his old comrade Renk, with whom he had served in missions years ago. He was accompanied by the two cyborgs from yesterday!

"Renk?" Atlas yelled, over the sound of panic and carnage. "Is that you?"

"Atlas!" Renk yelled back as he and the two cyborgs ran over to him. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I live down the street... for now," Atlas replied, "what were you three doing in that maintenance shaft?"

Renk looked back at the EMA corporation building, which had partially collapsed and was now completely in flames.

"What the hell... what the hell were we doing in there?" he said, still trying to deal with the reality of what just happened.

He looked at Atlas. "A lot of people just got killed and we narrowly survived." Renk put his head in his hands. "Our guys in there were just senselessly killed thanks to EMA's greedy assholes who figured their lives were nothing compared to their selfish corporate ambitions!"

Renk screamed in anger and punched the side of the coffee shop. The brick crumbled a little and his knuckles began to bleed.

"FUCKING BASTARDS!" he screamed.

Renk sat down on the sidewalk. "We... we need to... I need to report back to central command." He tried to contact his superiors over his communicator to no avail. "No good. What's going on? Why is no one answering?!"

Renk noticed that the two cyborgs had some minor damage, as he also had some burns from the

explosion and a few cuts and scrapes.

He stood up. "Until I get some answers from higher up, maybe it's best if we get out of here, get some first aid, and figure out what's going on."

Shell collapsed to her knees. "I can't believe they would actually do that..." she said, barely able to keep from passing out. She had taken some light injuries and was filthy from the slimy water in the storm drain, but she hadn't noticed any of that due to the shock of the explosion and the realization of what had just happened.

"Yeah... we should... just... go."

Shell, Duncan, Atlas, and Renk made their way through the panicked crowd and back to Atlas' apartment. Shell grabbed a first aid kit from Renk's gear and began tending to what injuries she could. She could do very little to repair the damage to hers and Duncan's cybernetic gear, however.

After Shell finished with the first aid, she sat back down.

Just then, her communications link opened with a connection request. It was a message from an anonymous sender.

It read:

STAY WHERE YOU ARE. YOUR LIVES ARE IN GRAVE DANGER.

EMA WILL TIE UP ALL LOOSE ENDS AT ALL COSTS.

"Mr. Sorenson!" yelled Shell. "I just received a message!"

Duncan's eyes widened. "So did I!" he replied.

Duncan closed the communications link.

"It looks like someone's either threatening us or trying to warn us. In either case, I would suggest we don't stay in one place for too long. However..."

Duncan checked his left leg. The knee joint was severely dented and it was sticking to the point that it was hard to move at all.

"We still need some repairs and some medical attention. That blast got us good. We're lucky we survived..."

He looked at Renk and Shell.

"...my apologies. You both lost a lot of comrades."

He stood up and looked out the window. "Ok, I can't go far like this. Let me try to contact one of my

sources. They might be able to put us in contact with someone who knows how to evade whomever might be tracking us."

He sent a quick message to a contact, describing the situation and asking for assistance.

"For the time being, we'll have to wait. Communications seem partially jammed but the message may have gotten through. Long term, we're in a situation where we may have to stay underground or run. Ideally, if we could make it to space, we'd be able to stay out of danger."

Duncan laughed.

"Uh, as if that would even be a remote possibility."

He noticed a stern look from Renk.

Atlas brought out some more bandages and first aid supplies from his storage closet.

"Here you go. Hope it helps. Listen, guys..."

Atlas hesitated. It wasn't easy to admit his situation.

"I'm being evicted, so we actually can't stay here. I'm sorry."

He looked at Shell, Renk, and Duncan. They didn't look too shocked - they were all too preoccupied with the devastation, which was understandable.

"Seriously, though, I wish I could help more. Times are tough planetside, as you all know. This shit going on today isn't helping, of course."

Atlas sat back down and thought about what to do. *I'm the only one here who isn't injured. At the very least, I can help those damaged cyborgs get to a maintenance facility and I could help Renk find a hospital.*

"Renk, how bad are your injuries?" He asked.

"Nothing I'm not used to," Renk replied. "Do you want to help me find a safer place to hide out until reinforcements arrive? Once they do, we'll be able to get proper treatment, gear repairs for these two, and some food."

Atlas's eyes opened wide at the sound of getting a meal. His suffering was nothing compared to the other three, but his nagging hunger was clouding his mind a little.

"Renk, I have eaten in almost a week. If you can get me a little food, I'll give you anything you want!"

Renk nodded. "Relax, buddy. We haven't seen each other in years. I'll feed you all you want. Just help me get these two back down to street level and we'll figure something out."

Chapter 2

Duncan, Shell, Renk, and Atlas had been searching all day for street doctors that could both tend to Renk's minor injuries and repair Shell and Duncan's badly damaged cybernetic gear, to no avail.

Renk had not been able to establish any radio contact with his superiors. Duncan had noticed that a large portion of the global network had been unavailable throughout the entire day, so he wasn't able to contact anyone for information on where to get help.

Atlas was looking noticeably worse for wear as he had been walking and helping Duncan stay off of his damaged knee all day. It was clear that he was close to passing out from exhaustion and malnutrition.

Their search for a street doctor took them into the shady part of town, where he and Shell had fought off Atlas at the Velvet Room just the night before.

Duncan tried to establish network connectivity as they walked down the poorly-lit alley ways, with civil twilight now upon them. Finally, Duncan was able to reach a deep web chat channel as he hobbled along with Atlas helping him along.

"Everyone!" Duncan exclaimed, "I've got a connection! Someone in this channel has some information!"

He communicated with an anonymous contact in the channel.

HereiMobArmy20101109: So you want a street doctor, do you?

DuncanDonuts: We're in a dire situation. Anyone with cyber gear repair skills will do fine, thanks in advance.

HereiMobArmy20101109: Do you know where to find the Velvet Room in the "Mob" district?

DuncanDonuts: ...I'm familiar with it, yes.

HereiMobArmy20101109: If you can get in the place without getting bounced, ask that bar tender, the one who's a dead ringer for Eclair Antares.

DuncanDonuts: No clue who Eclair Antares is but I'm sure I'll know when I see her.

HereiMobArmy20101109: Good luck, friend.

DuncanDonuts: Thank you.

Certainly, the online handle of his contact filled Duncan with apprehension. Duncan was familiar with hackers from the seediest corners of society but he had a distinct aversion for working with known terrorist groups, even in moments of desperation. The HMA was about the most dangerous of all of them.

He looked at Shell and Atlas. "I was just told to head back to the Velvet Room, everyone. It's maybe not the safest place to be considering Crest's actions yesterday, but it seems Elise might be able to get us some decent aid."

Shell took a good look around them, getting a good picture of their surroundings. In their condition, they wouldn't be able to run if they were attacked by thugs or fight them off.

"The Velvet Room's just a few blocks back that way," she said. "It's dark now so we better get in there now. I hope Elise is working because we might otherwise have to deal with more of what we had yesterday and right now I know we can't."

They walked back to the building where the Velvet Room was. Walking inside, Shell saw Elise at the bar along with a woman in a red outfit with shoulder-length black hair and a large claymore sheathed on her back.

"We're in luck," Shell told Duncan.

Jess was sitting at the bar, talking to the Silver-haired woman. Jess was familiar enough with popular culture to know that the bartender looked exactly like Eclair Antares, which made her conclude that she was probably one of the "clones" produced through heavy modification to fulfill the role of the pop star with countless individuals, only to discard them after the next "Eclair" was chosen. Jess chose not to bring it up in the conversation.

Jess made a little more small talk before getting to the point. "So nobody knows exactly what happened with the EMA building, then." Jess replied to Elise.

Jess took a sip of water. She wouldn't order any other drinks as she never liked alcohol and looked way too young to order it anyway. "I was wondering where there might be someone looking to sell some information about the Herei Mob Army," she said. "I have a personal interest in figuring out what they've been doing lately."

Elise nodded. "Nope, not much better than a couple betting pools floating around places like the Shadowlands BBS over who's got the right guess." Nobody knew what had happened with the EMA building yet, but not many people were buying the official word, at least among the 'runner community. Speculation ran from EMA not lying and making a cover story, to them pinning it on the wrong terrorists, to a run gone bad, to just about anything and everything else.

"As for the Herei Mob, you can find enough people who've done a job for them here and there, but I'm not sure how likely you'd be to get much out of anyone. Consider it a sort of professional-client privilege. Some of the information brokers probably know a thing or two, at least." She thought for a while. "Can't say I really like them too much; they're a little too extreme for my tastes. I hear they're the sort to go for some really underhanded tactics, you know, arrange for someone on their own side to be 'martyred', that sort of thing. Still, big enough group of self-styled hactivists, they're not the sort to just hide forever. You can bet they'd claim responsibility for things by now if they could."

She looked toward the door soon after Duncan, Shell, Atlas, and someone she didn't recognize wandered in, all looking the worse for wear. "Didn't think you'd be back so soon," she called out from across the bar. "And you'll pardon my French, but you all look like shit."

Duncan smiled weakly as Atlas helped him hobble over to the bar. "We've had a rough day."

"Well, if you need a drink, you're at the right place," Elise replied.

"Actually, I'm more interested in getting this bum knee fixed."

"I don't blame you," she said without missing a beat. "Trouble is finding anyone who has the replacement parts for an older model. I'm not sure I know anyone who can manage that, but I do know a reliable place to get work done, if you'll trust the same clinic that handles my own 'ware."

Duncan looked down at his busted knee. "I don't have a large amount of funds but if I can get an affordable upgrade to something that's at least serviceable in the short term, that will work," he told Elise.

Duncan looked over at Jess. "Please pardon the intrusion but I couldn't help but overhear you mention the Herei Mob Army." Duncan carefully took a seat next to her. "You should really be careful about those folks," he told her. "Elise is correct; they're well known for using underhanded tactics. I've worked with the scum before, as awful as that is. Of course, I didn't know who I was working with at the time."

He could see that Jess's face was showing an obvious expression of disgust. "I take it you don't like them much, either."

Duncan looked up at Elise for a moment and thought of something. "Tell you what," he said, looking back at Jess. "I'd be happy to infiltrate them again and get some information for you..." Duncan looked at his knee again. "If you'd be willing to fund some repairs and upgrades for myself and Shell here."

Duncan looked over at Renk and Atlas.

"Oh, and if you can get this man something to eat, then I'll dig up whatever info you want if I can get it," he said, gesturing with his thumb back at Atlas.

"Whaddya say, Miss?"

Jess nodded. "You've got yourself a deal, old timer. If you can get me some information, I'll make sure you and your whole crew are taken care of. From the looks of things, you just climbed out of Hell."

Duncan gave a slight chuckle. "That's really not too far from the truth," he said.

Jess looked around. "It's probably fine to talk here, at least as far as I care."

She looked at some information on her communicator and then showed the screen to Duncan. "I'll wire you the data you'll need to get started. Here's my temporary contact address."

The screen showed the address: rds2937122@maskedmail.privacy.org

"You know the drill, don't blab," she warned Duncan.

A few moments later, Duncan sent her a message and she replied with some specific packages of data.

"So, now that we have that settled, I want to figure out the identity of the hacker called Hombre Raymie. My other contact suggested that he has direct ties to the Herei Mob Army and is responsible

for the botched infiltration of the EMA building that led to another botched counter-infiltration, which led to what we had this morning."

Jess sat quietly as Duncan began doing his thing, scanning the network and searching. After waiting a while, she spoke up again. "I've already hit the Shadowlands BBS but they wouldn't give up anything useful to an anonymous stranger with no credentials."

Duncan stopped his scan and tilted his glasses downward. "Got a couple leads. Looks like our Hombre Raymie is likely a fellow named Benton Mulhauser, a.k.a. Dark Spider."

Jess gasped. "What? Are you sure?!"

Duncan nodded. "Yeah. Are you familiar with who Dark Spider is?"

Jess caught her breath and replied, "Well, yes, Dark Spider was the person who told me to track down Hombre Raymie! How could they be the same person?!"

Atlas walked up to Jess. "Thank you for your generosity. I would like to offer my services as a mercenary, if I can be of any use."

He looked at her sword, which was sheathed on her back. "Although, I can tell from the looks of things that you're probably fine on your own. Still..."

Atlas sat down on one of the open bar stools and looked at Elise. "Do you serve any food here? Anything will be fine, really. I've literally eaten nothing for about a week."

Renk walked up behind Atlas and gave him a pat on the back and grabbed his shoulder. He looked at Elise.

"Get this man anything he wants; I'll pick up the tab. We vets gotta look out for each other!" he yelled boisterously. He sat down next to him. "And, hell, if they don't have anything decent to eat here, I'll grab a pizza next door."

Renk looked over at Jess, who was sitting down the bar next to Duncan. "If it's the Herei Mob Army you're up against, you can count me in. As long as I don't get new orders to move out, my hands are idle and I can't just do nothing, now can I?"

Elise eyed Renk up and down. "Hm, so, you're a military-type? You'll be handy to have around, up until you get called back to work."

She reached under the bar and placed a nicely-printed paper menu in front of Atlas. "We don't serve the greatest food, but we've got some decent fare. The cook's a good hand in the kitchen, at least. Take your time on the order." Most of the options were the sort of things one could expect at bars anywhere.

"I'll see if I can get the other bartender to come cover for a while and I'll get you guys to a clinic, hopefully sooner rather than later. But if there's business to do here, might as well get that done first. As for the Spider..." She shrugged. "Could be someone finally got the best of him. Could be he just wants to be found. All I know is I've heard it's not always wise to step into his parlor, particularly on the 'net."

She left the group of patrons to ponder the menu and consider any orders they wanted to make, so she could serve more drinks to the other customers.

Renk looked at Elise as she was walking over to help other patrons. "Anything I can do to help out, let me know. I don't have anywhere else to go."

Renk was trying to keep up a positive attitude but it was difficult considering that most if not all of his squad was killed in the EMA building. "To tell you the truth, though, I really need a drink. How about a... bloody mary, por favor?"

Normally, Renk avoided alcohol altogether but now, just like after the "event" years ago, was one of those times where he just needed to clear his mind. Being military, Renk was used to death, but this was one of those times where coping seemed almost impossible. A drink would at least calm him down.

A few moments later, a variety of standard bar fare was brought to Atlas and Renk got his bloody mary. *Mentioning pizza to Atlas earlier had me thinking of something with tomato*, he thought to himself as he sipped the drink. It was rich, tart, and a bit salty, just as he liked it.

He looked over at Atlas. "Feeling better?" asked Renk. "You look like it," he said. "Let's make sure we're in decent shape so we can help these people out."

After tending to the other patrons, Elise returned to the bar. Renk signaled to her. "I'm going to be okay but we'll need to help the cyborgs along to wherever the street doctor is working."

Duncan continued to scan various hacker chat rooms and message boards as the others were talking. "Yes, if we could get to a repair facility tonight, it would be preferable. Once I can walk properly again, I could also help with any on-foot investigation you would need."

Tipping down his glasses, he looked back at Jess. "In that case, I would assume that Hombre Raymie is not actually Dark Spider. Many others have tried to impersonate them and it would not be a surprise if some kind of setup were in progress. Spider's into some nasty business but most people in that circle are not going to pull something so foolish. Yet, if your contact went by that name, it could very well be an impersonator."

He concluded his scan so that he could give the group his full attention. "If everyone is up for it, I suggest we do a dive together so that we can gather information inside the virtual space where Dark Spider usually hangs out. We may be able to accomplish more that way. Of course, we can do that after we've been patched up, fed, and whatever."

"That's a dangerous proposition," Elise commented. "I could tag along, but I'm no console cowboy, so I'm pretty useless in cyberspace." She shrugged. "One thing at a time, though. Once your guys are all fed, I'll get you to a doc."

She ducked through a door behind the bar. "Hey, Cal, think you can watch the front for a while? Some friends of mine need a doctor, and I'm gonna make sure they get there." She must have gotten an affirmative answer, because it wasn't long before she returned, and a large man, also impeccably dressed in fancy and conservative fashion emerged from the door. "This is Callahan, our other

bartender," she introduced him to the newer clients. "He'll watch the place while I'm gone, which, well, it's often enough, given I do some moonlighting."

"I thought this was your moonlighting," Callahan replied, in a clearly joking manner.

"Beats doing nothing between runs."

Shell checked her damaged arm and leg. "I guess I'll need replacement limbs. But first..."

Shell opened a terminal in her field of vision. *If EMA has been taken over, there might be unauthorized access to employee financial accounts. I'd better move all of my money into a secondary account that isn't in EMA's records.* She transferred her money and checked the balance. *Good, I can afford an upgrade.*

She looked at Duncan. "Either EMA has betrayed us all or they've been taken over," she told him. "In either case, I have no choice but to stick with you all."

She turned around and looked at Atlas, who was still stuffing his face with what looked to be relatively good food for a bar. Shell ordered some fish and chips while the others all ordered food and drinks for themselves.

When they were done eating, Jess, Shell, and Renk paid their respective tabs. Shell looked at Duncan's damaged leg as Renk and Atlas walked over to help him up from his seat.

"Ready to go?" Shell asked them.

"Right", replied Duncan to Elise. "I had figured it would best in terms of transparency so that Miss Price can see what we're doing during the investigation."

As Renk and Atlas helped him to his feet, Duncan nodded to Shell. "Yes. The sooner I get this bum knee fixed, the better." Shell's damage, while not crippling, was clearly in need of repair. "I hope we can both manage to get adequate replacements," he said to her.

Jess gave Shell, Duncan, and the rest a look. *It's a gamble, she thought. Mr. Sorenson's already shown some ability, so unless this is an elaborate scam, they'll be able to help me figure out what's going on and lead me to where they've taken father.*

"Alright, Mr. Sorenson," she said to Duncan. "I'm going to give you an advance so that you and your crew can get the necessary repairs. I doubt you'll be able to help me if you're in bad shape."

With that, she wired Duncan a good portion of her week's allowance. It would be enough to upgrade Duncan and Shell at any reasonable street doctors' prices.

"There you go. Now, you'll be under my direct supervision since you're all working for me for the time being."

"Atlas, was it? And... you, Rudy. Give me your contact information so that I can pay you, too." Renk replied, "That's Renk."

"Oh, right. Anyway, let me know your account address so I can pay you," she replied to him.

Jess started to walk toward the door, looking back at Elise. "If you're all ready..."

Renk and Atlas helped Duncan up and they followed Jess, Shell, and Elise.

Walking a few blocks from the bar, Elise directed them down a long alley way to an odd-looking extension of one of the buildings. Inside, there was a long staircase leading two stories underground to yet another heavy looking door.

"This is going to be a little rough," Renk told Duncan as they hobbled down the stairs carefully. Once they reached the bottom, Elise must have signaled someone inside because the door opened for them.

Inside was a state-of-the-art facility. "THIS is a street doctor's lab?" Renk asked. "It's one hell of a setup. Honestly, it rivals the ones we have in..." Renk stopped himself from divulging too much information. It was clear, however, that he was impressed.

After Elise and the doctor spoke for a few minutes, one of the doctor's assistants looked at Renk's minor injuries and stitched up one of his wounds and applied fresh bandages.

Duncan and Shell sat in the maintenance seats and began discussing upgrade / replacement options with the doctor's cybernetics technicians.

"Looks like you have good connections in the underground," Atlas said to Elise as he waited for the others to finish their treatments. The technicians had already started to remove Duncan's busted leg and fit a newer, more modern leg. He was starting to look a little less like a museum exhibit.

"Duncan's going to look less like an archaeological dig brought back to life," he said, chuckling.

It looks like these people work hard trying to survive, even without the blessing of the government. Atlas remembered how helpless the people were as they tried to migrate to space. His squadron five years ago inadvertently trapped a large group of illegal migrants in a space shuttle as a fuel tank exploded, killing them. The memory was one he tried to forget. Seeing people in the underground helping each other reminded him of their humanity.

Atlas sat down. "I'm reminded of why I respect street doctors so much," he commented to Elise.

"Anyone with a legitimate degree or two who can actually do this sort of shit deserves respect," Elise replied. "Of course, Dr. Uzuki's got some...funny hobbies, which is probably part of why she's got this little family business. Let's just say that android receptionists aren't usually all dolled up without some sort of reason." Though in this case, the reason was probably that the doc enjoyed treating her android as a giant doll. It wouldn't stop Elise from giving her a hard time about it, though.

"Anyway, your people are in good hands. It's a solid clinic, and the Doc used to do a hell of a lot of cybernetics work with Vector, before things went sour and she skipped out with her killer robot there."

She gestured to the same android manning the receptionist desk, dressed in some very fancy frilly clothes.

"Anyhow, shouldn't be too long before everyone's fixed up, unless they're really got to go under for some major work. Which, outside of that knee, I'm not sure was much of an issue to begin with." Elise shrugged. "After that, well, it's up to the lady with the money, now isn't it," she asked Jess.

"Whatever you people need, within reason. I'm not paying for solid gold cybernetic limbs or anything like that, but make sure you get fixed up so that you're potentially combat-ready," Jess replied to Elise.

Jess walked over to Duncan. "Especially you, old fella. I'm going to need you able to run and jump, so make sure you're feeling like a spring chicken before we leave this place."

Jess then walked over to talk to the doctor. "As long as your rates are reasonable, please give these people the best treatments. I'm counting on their ability to help me."

The doctor responded, "Sure, Miss, my rates are reasonable but I'm not the cheapest in town. Elise doesn't associate with cut-rate doctors."

Jess nodded. "Let's keep this on the low: I'm the daughter of the head of Crest corporation. Do a good job and... let's just say you're going to benefit in a big way. My father's life is on the line, after all."

She noticed the doctor's facial expression change to a mixture of enthusiasm and nervousness. Jess added, "I can tell you have a good operation going on, here, so I'm willing to put my faith in you. Mostly everyone else in the underground has failed me but I have a hunch here."

Jess went back to her seat and waited patiently. When the work was done, Duncan and Shell had been fitted with new, state-of-the-art limbs and were trying them out. Renk also walked out of the room in which he was treated.

"Feeling better, Reggie?" Jess asked him.

"That's Renk, Miss Price," he responded.

"Oh, yeah, right."

She walked over to Duncan, who was doing some test exercises. "One more thing, Mr. Sorenson," she said to him. "Give me that cloak of yours."

"Huh? Well, sure, here you go," Duncan responded.

Jess took a needle and thread out of her pocket. She sat down and repaired the tattered cape.

"Here, now it's much better," said Jess, handing the cloak back to Duncan. "This should hold up for the time being."

She eyed the group, now back in good condition. "Everybody good to go?" she asked as she paid the bill at the front desk.

"The bill isn't breaking the bank," she told them. "Still, I'm going to expect you all to earn it."

Duncan tested his new hardware. Both of his legs had been swapped out along with his forearms and hands. The old hardware had been locking up from time to time and, after the blast in the storm sewer that morning, his old left knee would no longer function. Now he could do cartwheels.

"This is amazing!" he exclaimed. "I haven't had this kind of mobility since I was 40!"

Inspecting his newly-patched cloak, Duncan noticed that it was still dirty from that morning's activities. "Thanks, Miss Price. I should still get this thing washed soon."

Duncan walked over to Shell, who was also testing out her new hardware. She was twirling around and performing various martial arts moves, giggling with delight.

"Enjoying your new gear?" he asked Shell.

"It's so light!" she replied. "I feel a lot stronger, too."

Shell took a few playful jabs toward Duncan, testing his reflexes. "Ah! A little sparring should be in order. How about we go outside and try a few things, just for fun?" he asked her.

Shell and Duncan went back up to the alley and made sure no one else is around.

"Okay, Mr. Sorenson, let's test the responsiveness of our new gear."

Shell rushed toward Duncan and threw a flying kick toward his right shoulder. He blocked the kick. Shell's foot caught his hand, which allowed her to perform an accelerated jump into the air over him.

Duncan then moved out of the way underneath her and, as she landed, did a sweeping kick to the back of her knees. Shell did a back flip, avoiding being tripped by the attack.

"Not bad," she commented to Duncan. "Now let's try something else!" Shell rushed toward Duncan again. This time, she started to throw a punch to his face but, while he moved his left arm up to block it, she rushed around to his back and performed a judo move that sent him tumbling over her. Duncan corrected his orientation to avoid landing on his back.

"Alright," Duncan said, starting to run out of breath. "That's good enough. We're not military grade but I believe we are... as Miss Price puts it... combat ready."

Shell nodded. "As much as we'll ever be, Mr. Sorenson."

At that moment, the others emerged from the door of the street doctor's office stairway.

"Just testing out our gear," Shell said to Jess.

Walking up the stairs with Jess and the others, Atlas could hear the cyborgs Duncan and Shell sparring in the alley way outside.

"Sounds like they're doing some impromptu combat training," he commented, laughing a bit. "Neither one of them are built for combat but I guess they're really committed to earning their keep."

As they exited through the door, they met up with Duncan and Shell, who were both a little exhausted from their sparring. "You two should save your energy for when we run into some real action," Atlas told them.

Atlas was feeling much stronger after his meal back at the bar. He had regained quite a bit of stamina although the stress of having to find a new place to live was in the back of his mind. *I have to find the time to move my things out and get them into storage*, he thought.

"Renk," he asked, "I need to put my belongings into storage by tomorrow." Renk replied, "From what I could see back there this morning, it looks like you don't have a lot of stuff. There's a storage facility on the other side of town that I've been using to keep some things. You're welcome to stash your things there temporarily."

Atlas looked at Duncan. "You suggested we do a group dive into cyberspace. Do you mind if I meet you at the dive lab, wherever that might be, whenever you're ready? I have to move some things out of my old place."

Duncan nodded. "Sure. I was going to suggest we all gather at my place since I have quite a bit of dive gear there," he replied. "Depending on what everyone else wants to do, you could meet us there in a couple of hours."

Atlas replied, "That would work out fine for me. I sent you my contact information so just send me the location."

Atlas quickly started leaving the alley way, followed by Renk.

"Atlas! I'll help you."

Atlas shook his head. "You don't need to do that."

"What do you mean? I'll help. Besides, I have to show you where the storage unit is and let you in," Renk replied.

Renk and Atlas ran over to the transport tube and headed back to Atlas' apartment. In a few minutes, they were back there. Atlas gathered up some boxes full of items including his now deflated air mattress along with some old military uniforms, books, dishes, and mementos.

Both of them carrying several boxes to the nearby transport tube, they headed to the other side of town and entered the storage facility.

"Atlas, I've been meaning to ask you, have you been okay since the incident?" Renk asked.

Before Jess could say anything, Renk and Atlas had left.

"If they don't report back in a couple of hours, I swear I will hunt them down," she muttered to herself. Jess looked over at Elise. "How do you like that," she said, "they just take the money and run."

Responding to Duncan, Jess said, "Normally I would insist on using a public dive facility but given the nature of this investigation, maybe using your gear with some anonymity settings in place wouldn't be

too bad of an idea. I just hope your place is... um, suitable."

Jess looked out toward the street from the alley. "Raymond and Atlas had better get back in contact with me soon," she said. "Just because I paid everyone in advance, don't the rest of you get any funny ideas."

She kicked a can next to a dumpster. "Well..."

Jess looked back at Duncan. "If we're going to do this dive, maybe we'd better go get ready for that, unless anyone has something else they need to do first."

Renk helped Atlas carry the last couple of boxes into the storage unit.

He sat down on an empty crate and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I wish I could help you with your housing situation but the only place I have to stay is in the barracks back on base, which I guess I won't be seeing until I hear back from my superiors... so, I guess I'm in the same boat as you are."

Renk could tell that Atlas was displeased at the mention of "the incident".

Renk shook his head. "Listen... that incident was ruled an accident. No one blames your squadron for what happened except those lunatic terrorists. Their opinion is nothing in the eyes of decent folks."

Atlas stood up. "Thanks for your help, Renk. Maybe the official story doesn't place blame on us but I have to live with the memory every day."

Renk stood up as well and walked over to the gate and swiped his key card as it closed behind them. "I was in the area. If another few minutes had gone by, it would have been my squadron involved, too."

Atlas was silent for a few minutes as they walked away from the storage facility. Renk sighed. "Well, I think we should meet the others."

"If you all feel up to it, please follow me. My quarters are located in a reasonably good area of town and I try to keep them fairly presentable."

Duncan started to walk with Jess toward the street and he pointed toward one of the public transport tubes. "That will get us there in about five minutes," he said. "I'll go ahead and send Atlas the address, too."

"Let's hurry up and get there before it gets too late," Jess replied to Duncan.

The group made their way via the transport tubes to Duncan's house. It was your basic living arrangement, a bit cramped, but tidy and full of neatly organized computer hardware, some of it looking to be more than 50 years old.

"I thought you looked like you belonged in a museum," Jess commented under her breath. "But you actually live in a museum, from the looks of things."

Duncan turned around as he shut the door. "What's that?" he asked.

Jess shrugged. "Eh, nothing. Nice collection of vintage gear you have here."

Jess sat down as Shell and Duncan connected themselves to the network. Since they were cyborgs with brain implants, they didn't need any additional gear. Elise activated her direct data link and sat back in one of the reclining seats. Jess picked up a helmet and inspected it. It was clean enough; in fact, it looked like it had hardly been used. It was a fairly up to date model, though not top of the line. Jess had some limited experience with 'net diving although she was used to more expensive dive gear with faster reflex timing.

A few moments later, Atlas and Renk arrived at the door. Duncan let them in and they sat down, each picking up a dive helmet.

"Okay," Jess said. "To investigate, I'd like to take us to the slums of the global network. Dark Spider and the Herei Mob Army hang out in some of the BBS's there and, if we use the correct avatars, we stand a chance that someone's going to blab something useful to at least one of us."

She put on the helmet and felt a light sting as her nervous system began calibration to the dive gear. Jess's limbs went numb and her vision went black for an instant before she awoke in an empty, featureless room, along with the others. Everyone appeared in this virtual space the same way they did in the real world, which was something they would have to fix before venturing into the 'net slums.

Duncan changed some settings in the environment.

"We're already anonymized," he said. "We can see each others' correct appearances but everyone else not in our group will only see generic human avatars."

Duncan walked over a door on the far side of the room. "As you all probably have some familiarity, most of the people you'll see in the dark net will have black silhouettes as avatars. We will appear to them in the same manner with no identity data attached. It will be difficult to tell anonymized avatars apart so we will have to keep that in mind as we collect information."

Everyone walked out of the door and into a bustling area full of people. It resembled an outdoor marketplace in a busy metropolis, even more crowded and congested than the city in which they were physically. Jess took the lead, having a good idea of the path leading to the "dark web" entrance.

They arrived at a large, round door in the side of a rock wall. Jess examined the door. Duncan walked up next to her.

"This should be one of the entrances. It's a little unusual that it should be in plain sight like this," he said. "It's a protected entrance so I'll have to brute force the encryption here."

A terminal appeared in mid-air in front of Duncan as he ran some custom scripts he had prepared. His eyes darted around to make sure there weren't any other people watching them and then opened the door.

"This is one of the Herei Mob Army's intel rooms," he whispered. "Remember, be careful about how you ask questions. I suggest that we split up and each go into a different channel. We should have some time before anyone catches on that we're a group here asking questions."

Each person entered a different channel. Duncan stepped into a blue room where there were five anonymized people sitting around a table playing chess. He sat down at the table and watched the chess boards as they played.

Elise took a detour back to her own place before linking up with Duncan and the others again. "I doubt it'll be useful, but I had to pick up a few things, just in case." She had some sort of large case with her, and did draw attention to a pistol holstered under her jacket. "Can't be too careful, not that any of this is gonna be the most useful where we're going."

She had no problem tagging along with the others to the Herei Mob's little intel room. Though at that point, there was a question of what to do next. She picked one of the subrooms and just walked right in, doing her best to look like she belonged there. Even online, that sort of confidence can really help when it comes to being places you shouldn't.

Outside of the anonymous avatars, the place seemed similar to actual chatrooms of any sort. Just a bunch of people hanging out and having conversations, just like any more reputable parts of the 'net. Elise took the lurker approach, and just listened in on things for a while. No reason to try and speak up herself, unless she heard anything she could actually comment upon.

Shell entered a room with about 20 anonymous people standing around talking. She remained quiet as she listened to the conversations going on.

"I heard the EMA building went up this morning because of a faulty self-destruct system."

"No way. It was on purpose. I talked to someone who was part of the revolution and he said it was part of the operation."

Shell clenched her fists. Knowing she was in enemy territory, she couldn't possibly speak up in response.

More conversations sprung up around her, mostly ignoring her presence.

"Herei Mob Army will free all of humanity to go into the paradise in space. The heavens will be opened to everybody!"

"First we have to make sure Mr. Crest is secured. The ransom will be HUGE!!!"

Shell's attention focused on the conversation mentioning a "Mr. Crest". She watched and listened closely.

"Near Earth Asteroid 726? God, no one even goes near there anymore. I hear it was used as a weapons factory 10 years ago."

"They haven't decided yet but that's the best place for the rich prick. We'll barely keep him alive until they pay up."

"Hahaha, they'll have to pay the price for us to return the price. Priceless!"

"Your puns suck. GTFO."

Shell quietly left the room. She had a good lead for Jess.

Jess entered a room and listened to some of the conversations. There were 8 people, all anonymized, discussing random topics. She tried to focus on the discussions that were relevant to the investigation.

"It's a weapons factory, or at least it used to be, officially. They said most of the equipment was left behind when it was abandoned."

Jess listened more closely.

"Right, Herei's got a project going on there, in addition to, well, you know."

"That thing's almost ready to test."

Jess had the urge to ask for more information. *The sudden appearance of a new stranger asking questions would be very suspicious and would jeopardize the investigation*, she thought.

Jess had never been completely comfortable with 'net diving. Although the cyborgs were well-suited for it, it felt very unnatural to have no sensory input from her physical body. It was similar to having a deep dream but being completely aware that her body was actually totally paralyzed.

She continued to listen.

"Actually we need a secure channel to discuss that. You never know who might be listening."

Jess waited about a minute after hearing that before she left the room, in order to not appear that her departure was in response to that comment. After leaving the room, she entered another room.

"The ransom is being negotiated right now. EMA's going to pony up the money after losing their HQ."

"Really? That was quick. I guess they found out about the second target."

"The second target's too close to NEA726, it's an absolute last resort."

"Shut the hell up, man. Take that shit to a secure channel, you idiot."

"Oh, sorry. I screwed up."

Jess shook her (avatar's) head. *These guys are total clowns. They're making this way too easy*, she thought. Jess left the room and went back to the common area right outside the door to the Herei Mob Army's area. She waited for the others to emerge so that she could share the information with them.

Duncan had been watching the chess game. Not much conversation had transpired beyond some small talk. No real information had been disclosed in the banter among the players, each playing a game between each other.

Duncan finally spoke up. "You'll be checkmated in three moves," he said to one of the players. The player chuckled. After three more moves, Duncan's prediction was realized. The player sighed. "Dammit," the anonymous chess player said. "I'm no good at chess."

Duncan sat back. "It's just one of those things where you have to relax and think of the overall picture, planning your moves in advance and adjusting your strategy as things unfold," he said. The losing player rolled his eyes. "Usually I'm good with strategy. I'm sure you're aware that we've hit a gold mine with our latest plan."

Duncan was surprised that the player would so quickly assume that he was one of them. "Well, I've been a little distracted with some other ideas that we're cooking up, but I got a brief overview earlier," he bluffed. Duncan hoped that he wouldn't be asked to elaborate; he had very little useful information as to the Herei Mob Army's plans.

"We're not supposed to discuss it outside of secured channels," the player said. "Although, we've had some morons with loose lips in some of the other rooms."

Duncan laughed. "Why people choose to avoid encrypted channels is beyond me." Duncan then decided to take a risk and use something he had gathered from the night before. *If this works, I might get an easy way in to an encrypted channel*, he mused. *If this doesn't work, I'm going to have to log the entire group out immediately.*

"Yeah, you know about shipment A678, the one we intercepted a quarter after noon today?" Duncan said to the player.

"Oh, you're part of that group? Nice job!" the player commented. "Send me your address so I can give you the key to a secure channel. I want to discuss something privately."

Duncan became very nervous. *Don't screw this up. You'll have to bluff your way through this.*

"Okay. It's rds2937122@maskedmail.privacy.org."

Duncan opened a couple of terminals outside of the virtual space. Although it was mentally stressful to exist in two virtual spaces at once while diving, he managed to keep himself focused enough to compromise the temporary e-mail account and gain access. He saw the message from the anonymous HMA address and used the attached key to enter the secure channel. He closed the other two virtual spaces so that he could exist solely in the secured channel.

The player appeared in front of him in the otherwise empty, intimidating room.

"That weapons shipment never arrived. The EMA building went up a few hours before it was supposed to get there. That means some other group likely intercepted it amid the chaos," the player said.

Duncan suddenly received a message from Jess. A few seconds later, a message arrived from Shell. He quickly read them so as not to appear too distracted from the avatar standing before him.

"Yes. We had plans to send it to the asteroid base on NE726," he replied, using the newly obtained information from Jess and Shell. "Our new ace in the hole from Crest has to be heavily guarded, after all."

The anonymous player nodded. "Right, that makes sense. I'm glad we still ended up with that shipment."

Whew, Duncan thought to himself, trying not to show his relief to the player. *Thanks, Shell and Jess.*

Duncan continued. "It's a matter now of obtaining transportation to that destination so we can get that shipment to the crew we have up there."

The player nodded again. "Of course. We're working on that. Herei is going to hijack a cargo shuttle at the dock tonight. It's going to be at Dock 10-B at the main space port in the Western district. Have your people get the weapons shipment on board that shuttle and we'll take care of the rest."

YES! Duncan thought to himself.

"Thanks. We'll get that set up for you," Duncan replied to the player. Duncan exited the room and joined Shell and Jess outside of the Herei Mob Army's discussion area.

Outside, Jess, Shell, Atlas, Renk, and Elise were waiting.

After sharing their information, the pieces of the puzzle began to come together.

"It looks like we've found your father, Jess," Duncan explained. "He's the high-value captive they're holding on Near Earth Asteroid 726."

Jess looked around. "So we'll have to come up with that weapons shipment in order to get aboard the hijacked shuttle, somehow," she replied.

"Right. We'll need to come up with a plan as to how to get aboard and make their guys think the shipment is good to go," said Duncan.

"The easiest way to do that," Elise suggested, "is to acquire a shipment. The problem would be figuring out what all they're expecting. Or, well, who took their original one." Her avatar shrugged.

"What I don't get, is why hasn't Crest just gone in with one of their own heavy assault teams. I'm pretty sure they shouldn't have a problem storming anywhere..." Elise trailed off in thought, when the entire rest of the matrix, most notably the people milling around, flickered for a moment. "Did anyone else notice a visual glitch just now," she asked.

"Yeah...I caught something strange, too, some kind of flicker," Duncan commented.

"That's not a normal thing, is it," Jess asked.

The sudden appearance of a stranger within their midst was, to say the least, a surprise. The new avatar popped up out of nowhere, and looked like a woman in her mid-30s, dressed in a labcoat and fairly ordinary clothes under it. The glasses and loose ponytail helped finish the scientist look. Elise had immediately jumped a few feet back and dropped into a fighting stance, not that it would do much good against someone who could just pop into virtual existence.

"...Good, looks like I found the right people. Sorry about the surprise visit," the scientist spoke up after carefully studying the group for a while. "I've been keeping an eye on a few of you, and didn't want to miss this chance to speak face to face, so to speak." She smiled. "I represent a group that has some...interests on Earth, and could use a little help in that department."

"Should we really be speaking about this openly," Elise asked.

"Oh, don't worry about that, I've got the lot of us in a nice little private bubble, nobody else is privy to this conversation." Sure enough, it seemed like everyone else was just going about their business as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Just what the hell kind of person has that much power on the 'net?"

"Don't worry about that for now." The mystery lady waved the question away. "I can't go there myself, or I would. So what I need are a few operatives to do a little job for us. I can't promise it'll be easy, but it's important. I want you to extract someone from an EMA facility and get them to us."

Elise had by now dropped into the usual routine for negotiating with a potential employer. "And where, exactly, would that be?"

"The facility's planetside, hidden from prying eyes out away from the big cities. I've got the location on file, but I couldn't get close enough to get any detailed layouts. It's...pretty well-guarded. As for where you'd be bringing that person of interest, I'll meet you on one of the L1 colonies. My people can arrange passage." A spacer? That explained a few things, if half the rumors were true. The timing was either too convenient, or anything but, as they had another route up the gravity well, which would be far more direct. But maybe they could come to an agreement...

Elise looked at the rest of the group. "Well, what do you think?" Best to let everyone weigh in, particularly if they'd be putting their own lives on the line as part of whatever they could be getting into.

"Crest is probably tied up in all of the confusion surrounding what happened to the EMA building. They're likely to assume that they are the next target," Renk replied to Elise.

"The EMA facility in question is one of the most heavily fortified installations in the area," Renk said, carefully eyeing the AI woman in front of him. "What you're asking is something more appropriate for a well-equipped paramilitary force."

Renk's expression changed. "Which... until this morning, my squadron was scheduled to perform."

Thinking for a moment and choosing his words carefully, Renk addressed the mysterious AI again after Elise asked everyone for their input. "The cargo shuttle hijack operation would actually be far more dangerous. I will need to request some additional resources if we do this."

Renk looked at Jess. "Miss Price, if we accept this mission, we would likely have easy access to the weapons factory afterward. That asteroid is going to cross near that Lagrange point soon, so it wouldn't be far to go."

"The cargo shuttle hijack is absolutely out of the question!" Jess exclaimed. "I refuse to work with the Herei Mob Army. We'll have to find another way."

After the AI appeared and Elise asked the group what they thought, Jess responded, "This sounds like an almost serendipitous opportunity." Jess looked at Duncan. "First, though, I want to know how you knew it was my father's rescue that I was after," she asked.

"Miss Price, you mentioned something to the doctor back when I was having my upgrade," Duncan said to Jess. "You said you were the daughter of the head of Crest. I had intercepted some e-mails the night before that tipped me off that your father had been dealing with some antagonists. The fact that you obviously have lots of money, enough to pay for our upgrades and give us advance payment also tipped me off."

"What?! Why didn't you tell me this before?" Jess asked.

"I wanted to make certain my conclusions were correct," replied Duncan.

"I see. Well, I guess I should have been more up front from the beginning," she said.

"It sounds like our best bet," Atlas replied. "From the intel I gathered earlier, it sounds like Herei's also got some kind of big weapon in development on NEA726. Helping the enemy hijack a shuttle seems like a questionable method, any way you look at it."

Renk replied, "The only advantage of that option would be that we would get to NEA726 faster."

Atlas shook his head. "It all depends on how we went about producing the cargo that the Herei Mob Army expected. If they inspected the cargo, we'd be in deep shit anyway."

Looking at Jess, Atlas told her, "I know time is of the essence but we need to be strategic. We can't afford to be reckless. If we help her first, we're more likely to get support should things get ugly at the weapons factory."

Atlas looked back at the mysterious scientist. "About how much time would you estimate it would take for this operation," he asked her.

Jess listened to what Atlas had to say and thought about it. After a short pause, she responded.

"Time is of the essence but the Herei Mob Army isn't going to do anything rash and risk losing their ability to bargain," she said with her fists clenched. "Taking a detour like this puts me on edge. Still, given the situation, it's our best chance of success."

Jess looked at the mysterious scientist woman. "Will you provide us transport to NEA726 if we bring your person of interest to the L1 colony," Jess asked. "Mr. Sorenson and Atlas are currently working for me. As for the rest, they are not under my command but merely volunteering their support. I will go along with the majority decision."

"I'm an EMA employee," Shell said to the scientist. "At least... I used to be. I'm not sure of the state of the company at the moment. Surely you know that the headquarters apparently self-destructed this morning. We barely escaped the basement of the building with our lives."

Shell walked over to Jess. "If you choose to execute this mission, I will join you," she said. "I want to... uh, need to... find out the truth about what EMA corporation has been doing all of this time. There are lots of things that don't make sense to me right now."

Shell looked back at the scientist. "Normally I wouldn't do this but given the circumstances, I will provide pass codes to enter the facility. If we can avoid... uh, going loud, as they say, that would be

best. I'm not fully combat ready, so if we can use stealth, we have a higher chance of success."

Shell asked Duncan, "I'll of course need help brute-forcing the security systems if the pass codes have already been changed. We shouldn't assume it would be too easy."

"I agree that the transport via this EMA facility mission is likely to be the least dangerous," Duncan replied to Shell. "Still, the mission itself may prove more dangerous than the cargo shuttle hijack."

Duncan looked over at Jess. "Since I am currently working for hire, I was going to simply follow Miss Price's orders, but it looks like we're going by majority vote here. Weighing the risks, it seems the best option to go along with this new mission. We could also take advantage of the confusion caused by the Herei Mob Army not receiving their shipment on time. They are likely to expect the shipment around the time we would probably be able to reach NEA726 after we deliver our person of interest to the colony at L1."

Duncan cross his arms and closed his eyes for a moment. "Then, is it decided?"

"I'm for it," Renk replied to Jess. "It would reduce the chance of going loud considerably."

Renk disconnected his dive gear and found himself sitting in Duncan's house, surrounded by the others, still inside the 'net on their dive equipment. Renk logged out so that he could check his military communicator, which was connected to an entirely separate wireless network. He looked at some maps and some information he had gathered.

Renk put his dive gear back on and re-joined the group.

"Sorry for going offline there," he said, "but I had to check something. The space ports in the Western district, if the Herei Mob Army's plans are as Duncan stated earlier, will be partially under siege by them. Once we've completed the mission, there's a chance our transportation could be held up."

Renk's avatar cleared its throat, which was somewhat amusing given the setting. "Dock 10-B will definitely be a dangerous place from which to depart. However..."

Renk's avatar froze again for a moment as he checked his communicator again in the physical world. He returned and said, "Port B will still be mostly active but the others appear locked down, soportA is dead and docks 1-9 B are in questionable status."

Renk looked at the scientist. "Can you arrange an alternate point of departure for us when we head to your colony?" he asked.

Atlas's avatar scratched its head.

"And the remaining outgoing ports on standby?" he asked Renk.

Renk nodded and turned to look at Duncan.

"Best looking overall option... Duncan... you may... analyze... risk... yeah?" Renk's words were garbled and stuttering.

Duncan stood there for a minute with a puzzled look on his face. "I beg your pardon?"

Renk's avatar froze yet again, this time for about a minute.

Everyone waited until Renk began to move again.

"Did you log out again," Duncan asked Renk.

"No, but you all froze," replied Renk.

Something isn't right here, thought Atlas. It's glitching up again.

"Let's log out. We can stay in communication with our new contact here via our communication equipment en route."

The 'net dive disconnected and everyone found themselves sitting in Duncan's house. Atlas stood up. "I guess we should prepare ourselves for the mission," he said to everyone.

Renk looked at everyone else in the room, now all logged out of the dive, and shrugged.

"I don't know what happened there at the end," he said. "Things got really glitchy and I don't think it's our new friend from space. Something else was amiss there."

Renk stood up and walked toward the door. "I suggest we properly equip ourselves and get into action as soon as possible, given our current schedule," he told the group. "Duncan, I trust that you'll be able to establish continuous contact with that scientist that showed up inside the dive."

"I don't know what caused that glitch at the end," Duncan replied. "It wasn't our new contact. Of that I'm quite sure."

Duncan looked at Elise. "Were you able to capture any data regarding her? I can't seem to trace her activity at all. It might be difficult to re-establish contact in order to get the specifics of our mission."

Duncan rummaged around through one of his storage bins. "I have quite a few unlocked communicator devices that are capable of unrestricted 'net access. Those of us without cybernetic gear can use these as improved data links that are harder to trace," he told the group.

He handed Atlas, Renk, and Jess some handheld communicator devices. "I've already set these up."

"That glitch messed up my data link," said Shell, trying to figure out what went wrong immediately before they logged out. "That has never happened before!"

Shell met Renk at the door. "We still shouldn't rush into this. Let's make sure we have a plan first, ok?"

Shell's data link came back online. The information coming in had some drop outs but she could make out parts of the message:

BaseL1: Good, You'll connect, someone; or something is interfering;

ShellShock10101: Are you the one we spoke to from the L1 colony?

BaseL1: Yes, please head to 37.123456-76.879195 and me; there, sorry, I'll try to get a more stable link;S

ShellShock10101: Thank you, I'll remain in contact. I'll have my partner try to establish a better link too.

BaseL1: ;;;;

Shell looked at Duncan. "We need to figure out how to establish a more stable link to the person from the L1 colony," she said. "If we could learn her name, that would help, too."

Shell tried resetting her data link, to no avail.

"Could this be the work of Dark Spider?" she asked.

"Clearly, Dark Spider is not who he claims to be," Jess commented. "Either his 'net identity has been appropriated by someone else, or he has been fooling the Herei Mob Army all of this time."

Jess checked out the communicator that Duncan had handed to her.

"Thanks. This will be very useful. I'll be able to contact him with greater anonymity this way," she told him.

Shell forwarded everyone the message from BaseL1. Jess read the message on her communicator. "Let's hurry up and prepare. Are we all going in as a single team or are we going let Atlas and Rupert be our front lines?"

"That's Renk, Miss Price, for the umpteenth time..." Renk replied, becoming frustrated.

"Oh, yeah, okay," Jess muttered. "Anyway... I want to be part of the team that gets in on the action. Whatever gets things moving along is best."

Atlas looked at his communicator. "I'm familiar with that installation," he said. Atlas immediately walked over to the door and hit the button, causing it to slide open with a "whoosh". "Like Miss Price said, let's not waste time."

He walked out of the door and looked back at the others. "Time to earn those meals..."

The group left Duncan's house. "We should meet at the Velvet Room after we've all had a chance to prepare," said Jess. Atlas waved at her as he left. "Right, I'll meet you at the Velvet Room in an hour."

The group split up and went off to prepare for the dangerous mission ahead.

Chapter 3

As everyone in the group had split up to take care of business before regrouping for the mission, Jess took one of the transports back to the edge of town, where she began walking back home. It was late now and she would have to be sneaky in order to avoid getting caught and scolded for being out so late.

While on the transport, she sent messages to Duncan, Atlas, Renk, and Shell. The four of them had agreed to help her in her mission to find her father. Duncan and Atlas were under her employ now. Shell and Renk, for reasons she didn't yet understand, had agreed to assist her as well. Elise had appeared somewhat distracted with other business and Jess wasn't sure if she'd see her again.

Exiting the train tube, Jess walked along an old road that led up to an area near her family's mansion. It was around 2 am now and it was dark and silent. Jess wasn't worried about thugs, bandits, or wild animals. She had her sword and fighting skill with her. There had been some discussion at her school about her joining the military although her family opposed it, having plans for her to inherit Crest corporation. If she didn't find her father soon, she might inherit the company faster than planned.

Jess received messages from Duncan and Shell confirming the meetup tomorrow. For now, she had to get home and sleep - not to mention figuring out how to sneak out again the very next day.

Arriving at the mansion, Jess sneaked in the back door and up to her room, where she opened her communicator and saw another message waiting for her. It was from Dark Spider.

So you've heard the rumor. I am not Hombre Raymie a.k.a. Benton Mulhauser. Whether you believe me or not, it's up to you, but you're in mortal danger hanging around Miss EMA and that old scrap metal relic. They are targets.

For the record, I'm not with the Herei Mob Army. I infiltrated them, just like you and your "friends".

Don't let yourself get set up. Be careful.

DARK SPIDER

Dark Spider; Jess thought, How could anyone possibly know if he's telling the truth?

The message cast a new shadow of uncertainty on the situation.

Shell returned to her apartment for the night, exhausted from the day's events. Surviving the blast in the storm sewer as she narrowly escaped the destruction of the EMA building, navigating the streets of the worst part of town, and infiltrating the Herei Mob Army's discussion boards in virtual space had Shell's mind completely depleted of energy.

She started to fall asleep on her sofa as two messages arrived.

The first message was from Jess. Shell gave a quick "acknowledged" reply to the message, confirming the time and place they would meet the next day to plan the mission.

The second message was from one of her co-workers:

Shell, I hope you are okay. Most of us were warned to stay home today and now I understand why! They're still trying to figure out who was lost in the building. Fortunately everyone in our crew wasn't in the building but EMA lost a lot of other engineers and security staff.

The executives and management folks have their hands tied, or so they claim. It looks like operations at headquarters won't resume for months, maybe years with the way things are going. Although it's not official, it's safe to say that we all have to look for new jobs. There will be a nice severance coming your way due to your seniority and loyalty to the company.

Please stay in touch. I'll keep you updated.

- Kel

Shell replied to the message:

Thank goodness you're all safe. I was on my way to work and had a... close call, to say the least. I expected our positions to no longer exist at HQ, for obvious reasons. I'm in the middle of something big right now so I'll have to catch up with you a little later.

Stay safe!

- Shell

Shell fell asleep after sending the message, being able to rest a little easier knowing that most of her co-workers were now confirmed alive and safe.

Renk and Atlas were walking away from Duncan's house. Renk looked at his watch. It was 2:04 am. Having no contact with his superiors, Renk found himself in a similar situation as Atlas - no place to stay for the time being.

"Well, shit," Renk said, "Normally I'd be back at my barracks, sawing logs like nobody's business."

He looked around at the transport train tubes in the area. "It would be easy enough to hop a plane and get back to base but I don't know the current status of things there or if it's safe to return."

Just then, Renk received a call. It was from his commanding officer!

"Renk, come in. Are you still with us?"

Excited, Renk responded. "Affirmative! I cleared the EMA building seconds before it went up. What's the status of our guys?"

His commander paused for a moment. "We experienced massive casualties and the Herei Mob Army took out a large portion of the 'net, as I'm sure you're well aware. Their hackers have compromised the security of most communication channels so mind what you say here."

Renk checked the settings of his communicator. "Roger that. Is it all clear to return to base?"

"Negative," his commander replied. "We've had an... incident. Sorry but that's all I'm at liberty to say at the moment. Hold your general position for the time being but we have a temporary base in the area if you're close by. Report there as soon as you possibly can."

Renk responded, "Understood, sir. I have the coordinates."

The call ended at Renk looked at Atlas. "I can see if they could set you up with a place to stay for the night," Renk told him.

Atlas shook his head. "No... no, I'll... figure something out. You go on ahead."

Renk waited for a moment and then nodded. "Ok, man. Contact me if you need anything. I'm not sure if I'll be able to help with the mission tomorrow but if I can request leave on such short notice, I'll definitely try to make some arrangement."

With that, Renk left. He wasn't sure he would be able to leave the nearby makeshift base any time soon but he knew he had to follow his orders.

Jess woke up around 6 am, feeling a strong thirst. She had exhausted herself walking around the day before and hadn't realized how dehydrated she'd become.

She headed down to the kitchen, careful not to wake any of the staff. She put a glass up to the water filter tank and poured herself some water. Jess was particular about drinking only filtered water whenever possible, since the city had a less than stellar record of keeping the tap water potable.

Suddenly, Jess noticed a shadow darting across the kitchen window. She watched for a while, to make sure her tired eyes weren't playing tricks on her. She noticed something move out there in the moonlight, so she ran back upstairs, grabbed her sword, and quietly made her way outside to the back yard near the kitchen window.

It was quiet. *Nothing around here*, she thought. As she started to turn around to head back inside, she heard footsteps in the grass. She turned around instantly and drew her sword, rushing toward the shadowy figure that had suddenly appeared. Swinging her sword promptly to go in for the kill, she mustered all of her strength to reverse the course of her weapon as she recognized the face in the pale light.

It was Atlas.

"Atlas?!" Jess whispered, stifling her voice so not to wake anyone inside the mansion. "What the hell do you think you're doing here?!"

Atlas put his hands up. "Please, I'm not a burglar. I just need your help."

Jess sheathed her sword. "Help? Didn't I give you a generous advance payment already?"

Atlas nodded. "Yes, but I've been out all night trying to find a hotel. Every place is closed for some reason, either they're booked solid or their payment systems are down due to the 'net fracturing."

Jess sighed. "Figures. Well, what do you want me to do?"

Atlas hesitated for a moment and then said, "Could you spare the use of a room in this mansion? Surely you have guest rooms. I'll be happy to pay rent and I'll be out the minute my service to you is complete."

Jess shrugged. "It's going to be hard to explain to my keepers if you're caught inside the house... but... come on in. I'll put you up in one of the spare staff rooms. Just keep yourself hidden until I think of an excuse."

Atlas followed Jess inside the mansion, making sure to remain completely silent. His training was useful here - he could control his footsteps as to not make any sound on the floor. Jess led him upstairs to a sparse yet opulent room, at least by Atlas' standards.

"Now there's an attached private bathroom through the door next to the closet," Jess told Atlas. "Keep yourself in here until I come get you. For now, I'm going back to sleep for a few hours. If you're going on the mission for the spacers, I'd advise you do the same."

Atlas nodded. "If I hear anyone opening the door, I'll jump out the window."

Jess shook her head. "You'll break your legs if you do. Let me show you where you can hide, just in case."

Jess walked over to the walk-in closet and beckoned Atlas. "There's a hidden door in the back of the closet. If you go in there, you'll find a ladder that leads into the basement," she told him. "It's a little something we had added to all of the closets in case we're ever under attack by those Herei thugs."

Atlas examined the hidden door. "Incredible," he commented. "Your family must have to deal with a lot of threats in order to warrant measures like this."

Jess shrugged. "You know about my mother being assassinated," she asked Atlas. "Ever since then, our family has operated in a manner similar to any military base. We have drills, security briefings, you name it. It can get a little... tiring."

Jess turned around and headed toward the hallway. "Anyway, rest up. I'll be heading out at noon, so make sure you're ready to leave with me by then. We'll sneak out the same way I brought you in as soon as the coast is clear."

Atlas laid down on the bed, exhausted. He fell asleep, wasting no time given the opportunity.

Renk had arrived at the temporary base just outside of the city. Security was tight, as expected. Once Renk's credentials had been reviewed, he was allowed into the camp.

Once inside, he met with one of the generals and some members of another squadron who had been on standby the previous day.

"We are sorry to hear about what has happened to your squadron, Lt. Renk," one of the generals told him. "I'm General Mulhauser. At ease."

Renk, who had been saluting, lowered his arm to his side. "Sir," Renk replied, "Were there any other surviving members of my squadron?"

General Mulhauser shook his head. "I'm afraid to inform you that you are the only survivor from the EMA HQ incident, at least to the best of our current knowledge. How did you manage to escape? Our last position data from you was in the basement just seconds before the demolition charges detonated."

Not wanting to implicate the cyborgs, Renk replied, "I was able to find a quick exit once the blasts started. All other paths to other areas of the building were blocked once the charges went off, so I was able to escape through a storm drain access hatch, sir."

"I see..." said the general. "You were damn lucky, soldier. You were in an optimal spot to escape once the blasts started."

The general walked across the room, which was inside a mobile personnel carrier. He reviewed some data on his touch screen and then turned back around, facing Renk.

"Tell me..." said the general, with a tone of scrutiny, "how did you know the building was about to self destruct? Your position and timing are... quite interesting."

Renk began to sweat. "Sir," he replied, with a hint of nervousness, "I had no knowledge of the self-destruct sequence until the moment it had begun."

Renk knew that his signs of nervousness did not help him appear to be honest, despite the fact that he was telling the truth with the omission of the cyborgs' presence being the sole exception. *They suspect me somehow*, he thought. ***This is not good!***

"Lt. Renk... we are going to hold you for further questioning."

Dammit. I KNEW it.

Duncan woke up in his usual seat, surrounded by his screens and donut boxes in his office. He managed to get a good night's rest after the dive session the previous night and fell asleep soon after everyone had left.

He checked his messages. Dark Spider had left him a new message:

If you have time, meet me in a dive room at address #761806409.

DARK SPIDER

Duncan entered dive mode and entered the room in virtual space, which was under heavy encryption. His identity was anonymized.

A man appeared across the table from Duncan within the false room. His face was pixelated, as expected.

"Glad to see you made it," the man said. "I am Dark Spider."

Duncan's avatar looked at him. "I figured as much."

Dark Spider looked around the room. "Venturing into the Herei Mob Army's territory last night was a very dangerous move. I know because I've done it many times before."

"You were watching us?" asked Duncan.

Dark Spider smiled. "Of course. You should have expected that, Mr. Sorenson."

Duncan was a little startled that Dark Spider knew his identity but quickly realized that he should have expected that. "Why did you call me here," asked Duncan.

Dark Spider continued, "I am not with Herei. Let me be very clear on that. I am like you - I infiltrated them in search of information. I know about the daughter of Mr. Price, the head of the Crest Corporation. She has hired you to assist her in a rescue mission. Do you trust her?"

Duncan's avatar paused for a moment and shrugged. "She hired me. I trust her as far as I would trust any random employer. Surely you know I do this kind of thing fairly often as a freelancer."

Dark Spider responded, "Indeed. The quintessential decker-for-hire, even if you are a relic from a simpler time."

Duncan began to get frustrated. "How about we get to the point, good sir?"

Dark Spider laughed. "Ha ha! Of course, Mr. Sorenson. This man by the name of Benton Mulhauser... you have been led to believe that he and I are one in the same. We are not. In fact, General Mulhauser has recently risen in the ranks of the military. No one seems to have noticed his ties to an attempted military coup several years back."

Duncan was confused. "What, exactly, does this General have to do with all of this?"

Dark Spider responded, "Mulhauser has been pulling some major strings for some time now. Let's just say he's another spider in my web and an unwelcome one at that. Your recent acquaintance from the military appears to have become caught in his corner of the web, by the way."

"What do you mean," asked Duncan. "I assume you speak of Lt. Renk?"

"Yes. He has become suspected of ties to the Herei Mob Army. He is about to become a pawn in a scheme to deflect suspicion away from General Mulhauser."

"Then... I need to warn him immediately," replied Duncan.

Wasting no time, Duncan exited the dive and opened a secure link to Renk's communicator.

"Renk?" shouted Duncan. "Come in. You are being targeted as a suspect!"

There was a long pause. No answer. Duncan began to become more worried. Suddenly, a response from an unfamiliar voice came back over the line.

"Identify yourself," replied the voice.

Duncan quickly closed the connection. *Not good*, he thought. *I have to warn Atlas.*

Shell awoke around 10 am to find a message from Duncan.

Shell, I had a conversation with Dark Spider. I'm not sure we can trust him or believe a word he says but, according to him, Renk may have fallen into trouble and our activities have likely been closely monitored.

Benton Mulhauser is apparently a general in command of Renk's outfit and Renk was taken into custody. Whether or not Hombre Raymie is Benton isn't clear. I could not find any additional information on that.

Shell looked at her messages again. She had received another message.

We met in cyberspace outside of the Herei Mob Army's rooms. I am the scientist A.I. system based in the colony at L1. We had previously requested your assistance with an extraction at an EMA facility planet side.

I was going to ask you and your companions to meet at the Velvet Room today. For some reason, we were unable to make contact with the daughter of the missing head of Crest corporation. Please head over to her residence and contact her in person immediately.

Thank you,

Camay Thameh

Shell wasted no time heading for the door and hit the streets. She boarded the nearest transport and headed toward the outskirts near where Jess's mansion was located. *Camay asked for our assistance and Jess tentatively agreed*, Shell thought as the train arrived at the station outside of town. Shell ran out of the train, trying to make contact with Jess via her communicator - to no avail.

Shell arrived at the gate of the mansion and greeted the guards.

"I have urgent business with Miss Jess Price. I'm a former EMA corporation employee..."

Shell stopped herself. She had some idea that Jess didn't want her investigative exploits made known to her family. "Do you think there's any chance I can speak to her," she asked.

The guard shook his head. "No, ma'am, we're under heightened security due to Mr. Price's disappearance and recent terrorist activity. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Shell nodded and walked away. As soon as the guards weren't looking, she darted behind the hedges and stealthily jumped over the fence and ran up to the back of the mansion. She noticed two sets of fresh footprints in the grass leading up to the back door, which were likely from earlier that morning. Shell darted inside the back door only to be caught by Jess... and Atlas, who were in the middle of sneaking out the same door.

"Shell...?!!" gasped Jess.

"ATLAS?!" shrieked Shell. "What are you doing here?!"

Jess put her hands on her hips. "I could ask you the same question! What's with you people and sneaking into my house?!"

"I'll explain," whispered Shell, trying not to attract attention from anyone else within earshot. "Right now, we have to meet up with the others. Things are getting... much more complicated."

"Miss Price, what is the meaning of this?" shouted a familiar voice behind Jess. She turned around to find the head butler and her personal guardian, Randall.

Randal was accompanied by three security staff. Turning back around to look at Atlas and Shell, she noticed two more guards outside the back door, blocking their way out.

"Who are these people? You know we're on lock down! No unauthorized guests allowed on the premises," barked Randall. The guards moved in closer to Atlas and Shell, preventing them from going anywhere.

Jess was startled that she had been caught sneaking out. "Just... just wait a moment, Randall," she stuttered.

Randall took a step closer, reaching for Jess' arm. "Miss Price, whatever you're trying to do, just let the police handle things. You're still but a child, don't try to run around playing vigilante."

Jess was furious. "A CHILD?! Don't you realize that the police and military are compromised? How do you know they haven't been bought and paid for by EMA, or, worse, those Herei Mob bastards?"

Randall grabbed Jess and pulled her away from Atlas and Shell. "Come, now, spouting such conspiratorial nonsense is unbecoming the heir of Crest Corporation. Besides, if something happens to you while you're out playing special ops with your... friends... there will be no heir to the company! Think about the future, Miss Price, and stop this foolishness!"

Jess forcefully jerked away from Randall. "I DO care about the future of Crest but I WILL save my father above all else," screamed Jess.

"Guards, arrest these two intruders," said Randall, in a nonchalant tone.

The guards grabbed Shell by her arms and started to lead her away. Atlas quickly jumped back, evading the other guards who were approaching him. Shell kicked the knees of the guards, freeing herself, and ran out of the door into the backyard. Atlas assumed a fighting stance.

"Not this again..." muttered Atlas. Jess pulled at one of the guards. "I order you to cease this and let these two go!" Jess yelled.

Another guard grabbed Jess but she quickly pulled away. Atlas pushed away from the guard and joined Shell just outside of the door. He could see two more guards rushing at them from around the outside of the mansion.

Jess unsheathed her sword. "Okay. I'm leaving. If you won't accept my orders to let us go, I'll have no choice but to fight you."

Randall looked surprised. "Miss Price, what has gotten into you? Drawing your weapon against your own keepers? You're headed to reform school, young lady!"

"I don't care if you throw my ass in prison when this is all over," snarked Jess. "I am going to save my father or die trying."

Jess tightened her grip on her sword.

"NOW. STEP. ASIDE."

Randall gave a gesture to the guards and they backed away from Atlas, Shell, and Jess. Jess made a desperate run toward the back gate and motioned to Shell and Atlas, who were following her.

The three of them ran through the woods until they came upon a small creek. Running through the creek for about a half mile, Jess ran inside a large drainage tunnel. "Come on," she yelled, trying to catch her breath. "This culvert will take us to a nice little short cut I found when I was a little kid."

The drainage tunnel was long and dark. The concrete pipe itself was about ten feet in diameter, with some offshoot tunnels around eight feet or so. Atlas pulled a flashlight out of his backpack, in which he had been keeping some essentials since moving out of his apartment.

"So where are we headed," asked Atlas.

"We'll hang a right at the next intersection. There's an old pipe leading to an abandoned subway tunnel that leads back into the city," Jess replied.

Shell and Atlas looked around, trying to figure out where they were going.

"Stay close and don't get separated," Jess whispered. "You never know who else might be lurking down here."

Atlas carefully examined the graffiti on the tunnel walls with his flashlight.

"Listen... I think we might be near the hideout of some really nasty underground elements. The faster we get top side, the better," he said to Jess and Shell.

Shell leaded toward Atlas and whispered, "I got word from Duncan that Renk's likely been detained under suspicion of working with the Herei Mob Army."

Atlas stopped in his tracks. "What?" he replied, trying to control the volume of his voice. Jess noticed him and turned around.

"What's going on?" asked Jess.

"Apparently Renk's in trouble," Atlas replied. "I need to reach the forward operations base in the city as soon as possible."

Jess shook her head. "We're supposed to get to the EMA facility before we miss our window of opportunity," Jess said, becoming impatient. "We already have one detour on our way to NEA726, Atlas!"

Atlas responded, "It's on the way. I just need to figure out where they're holding him and help him get

out. We'll all be free and clear after we secure our ride to space."

Jess sighed. "Look, I understand you military guys have each others' backs but we're in an urgent situation! There just isn't any time!"

Atlas clenched his fist. "Maybe your butler was right... you are beginning to act like a spoiled child."

"Keep your voices down!" whispered Shell, nervously.

Jess began to reach for her sword but paused, then lowered her arm. "Ugh. Did you forget that you work for me right now? You're on MY time, Atlas!"

Atlas began to run down the tunnel. "Like that matters right now. I'll get Renk out and then regroup with you at the EMA..."

Atlas came to a dead stop. "Uh, folks, we have company."

Suddenly a group of gang members surrounded Atlas, Jess, and Shell. Atlas took out his pistol and Jess drew her sword. The three huddled together back to back, surrounded by thugs.

"Time to test your new gear," Atlas muttered to Shell.

"Hand over your valuables..." grumbled one of the thugs.

Shell kicked the thug in the stomach, sending him flying back into another gang member, taking him down in the process.

Jess swung her sword toward their leader, making him fall into the water. He pulled out a knife and lunged toward Atlas. Atlas grabbed the leader's arm, twisted it in an unnatural position, and broke it. The leader screamed in pain.

Shell jumped into the air and landed on the shoulders of another large gang member, who was holding a machine gun. While she was perched upon his shoulders, she swiftly kicked his head, knocking him unconscious. Shell picked up the machine gun and emptied its ammo clip.

"Let's get out of here before more of these goons show up," Shell said to Jess and Atlas.

The three of them fought off a few more gang members as they hurried toward the entrance to the abandoned subway tunnel.

Through a large crack in the tunnel wall, they discovered the subway station, in quite a state of disrepair. Atlas used his flashlight to illuminate the large, eerie area. "Looks like Cleveland on a good day," Shell whispered.

"Cleveland? Cleveland, Ohio?" asked Atlas.

"Never mind, I was just making a joke," responded Shell.

Suddenly, a group of gang members, armed with machine guns, poured out of one of the abandoned

subway trains. They took aim at Jess, Atlas, and Shell.

As they were about to fire, a sudden, violent burst of lightning exploded in the room, electrifying the machine guns and shocking the thugs, knocking them all out. A shadowy figure walked over the gang members and into the beam of Atlas' flashlight. It was Duncan.

"Looks like my tracking beacons still work in those communicators," said Duncan.

Duncan walked over to Jess, Atlas, and Shell, who had been fighting off gang members earlier.

"We need to get moving," Duncan told them. "We've managed to get ourselves targeted not only by the Herei Mob Army but by the military."

"What?" asked Atlas. "Why is the military after us? They've already captured Renk."

"Right," replied Duncan. "Apparently a corrupt general is running things with the military locally. Their headquarters have been compromised, too."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Jess. "The military seemed to be pulling some strange ops recently!"

"Come on, let's hurry out of here," Duncan told them. "I rented a maglev car. It's parked over yonder so we can get ourselves out of here without having to deal with any more of these sewer punks."

The four of them walked over to the car, which was parked just behind a junked subway train. Duncan flew them through the subway tunnel. Some gang members on hover bikes appeared behind them, in hot pursuit.

"Good gravy," muttered Duncan. "These guys are persistent."

Atlas looked out the back window. "There's three of them. Looks like they have high powered rifles."

Duncan steered the maglev car in random directions to make it hard for the gang members to target the car. "Hang on, folks. Hope none of you get easily motion sick," he told them.

The maglev car pulled further ahead, getting slightly out of range of the gang's bullets. "Listen, we need to get back to the Velvet Room," Duncan said. "I've arranged a meeting with an android proxy for Camay. She's going to give us some specifics on the mission to the EMA facility for the extraction run."

Atlas continued to watch their pursuers. "They're catching up, Duncan. How soon until we can go topside?"

"About ten more miles, guys," Duncan replied. "There's a subway station near the city where I can fly us up to ground level."

Atlas turned back around. "About that mission, we need to extract Renk, too."

Duncan swerved the vehicle to avoid a bullet. "I see. I was thinking that, too."

Jess sighed. "Okay, fine..." she mumbled.

Atlas looked at Jess. "Look, Renk will greatly increase our chances of success. It's not just about rescuing my army buddy," he said.

"I said it's fine," Jess grumbled. She crossed her arms and looked out the window.

"Let's try to stay focused on our objectives and not fight among ourselves," Duncan remarked.

"I understand," said Jess, after a few minutes of silence. "He offered us his assistance so it's the only right thing to do."

The flying car slowly emerged from the subway tunnel at an old station on the outskirts of the city. Jess jumped out of the car and swung her sword at the wooden planks that had boarded up the entrance to the station. She got back inside the car and Duncan flew it out of the station and into the sky over the city.

A few moments later, the car landed in a large parking lot a few blocks away from the "bad" part of town, where the Velvet Room was located. The four of them made haste, on foot, back to the Velvet Room and entered the dimly lit bar.

"I'm sorry but we're closed right now," said Callahan, who was tending the bar and polishing some wine glasses.

"Actually, we're here to meet with someone in one of the private rooms," said Jess.

"Oh, yes," replied Callahan. "Normally we don't allow reservations outside of normal business hours but we made an exception since Elise sent us an advance notice. Apparently this is an important meeting."

Callahan directed the four to a private meeting room in the back area of the establishment. "There's a proxy android due to arrive soon, according to the message we received. Please make yourselves comfortable. The rent has already been paid, so don't worry about that."

Callahan started to exit the room but stopped in front of the door. He turned back around and faced the group, who was now sitting around the table.

"Actually... may I ask you all a question?"

"Yes, of course," replied Duncan.

"Have any of you had contact with Elise since last night? After she notified us that a special conference was scheduled here, we never heard back from her. She was supposed to show up here a few hours ago to help prep some of the rooms. She's never, ever late or absent from work without prior notice."

Jess scratched her head. "I didn't hear anything further from her. You should be made aware, if it's safe for me to say so, that we've become targets of some corrupt elements lately."

Callahan stifled a laugh. "Oh, if anyone tried to capture Elise, they'd be splattered all over the pavement. I highly doubt the guys giving you all trouble would stand a chance against her."

Atlas looked around nervously. "I hope we're not being set up for a trap."

Callahan shook his head. "Listen, for arrangements such as this, Elise and I vet our clients very well. What happened the other day with those idiots was a fluke. I assure you that we take security here very seriously."

Callahan lowered his gaze toward the floor. "Still... Elise is the core of our amazing security. If there's any trouble, I would strongly prefer she be around."

"I never heard from Elise since she left my house late last night after we exited the 'net dive," Duncan replied.

"I'll let you all get settled in. Feel free to order drinks or something to eat. Our client has agreed to cover all expenses, so use the touch screen menus in the table to place your orders and I'll bring them in here when they're ready," said Callahan.

Duncan sat back. "Well... this is probably the best time to work out our plans, folks," he said to Jess, Atlas, and Shell.

Shell and Atlas scrolled through the menus. Atlas poked at some food items and Shell looked through the wine list.

Duncan leaned forward to the table and had a quick glance at the desserts. "We'll be working on two extraction missions today, from the looks of things. If Renk's being held at a makeshift temporary base, they're not likely to have the best security."

Atlas nodded. "It shouldn't take long. As long as they aren't using drugs on Renk to suppress his abilities, all we'd need to do is distract the guards long enough for him to break out. We'll need you to hack the cell and gate locks, of course," he told Duncan.

"I could distract the guards and make them chase me, buying you some time to do that," said Shell.

"The types of locks used in mobile bases use relatively weak encryption..." Duncan said, as he scanned the 'net for anything resembling a military type server with signatures resembling mobile units.

Jess cleared her throat. "So we make a stop at this base and then directly on to that EMA facility? Where was that located, again?"

Duncan aborted the scan, not finding anything useful at the moment. "The EMA facility? Camay can tell us that. As for Renk, I gave him a communicator with built-in tracking, courtesy of my snooping habits," he chuckled. "I'll get his position - or at least the position of his communicator - in just a few seconds."

Duncan accessed his communicator tracking utility and instantly found the one he had given Renk. Luckily, it was still on from earlier that morning, when the unknown voice demanded Duncan's identity over the comm link.

"It looks like the communicator is about three miles on the Western edge of the city, where there's a hydroelectric facility," Duncan said. "There's a good chance that Renk's being held inside of there."

Atlas pulled up a map of the hydroelectric facility and examined the floor plans. Due to his military status, Atlas still had access to some top secret maps as his access was never revoked, possibly due to an oversight.

"Right, it's sometimes used for military operations. Can you access the security system from here," asked Atlas.

"I probably can. Hang on," replied Duncan.

Just then, the door to the private room opened. A female android walked in and introduced herself. "Thank you for meeting me here, everyone. I'm Camay Thameh, a scientist from the L1 colony. We met last night inside the 'net regarding a mission to an EMA facility here on Earth."

Duncan stood up and greeted her. "Nice to meet you again."

Camay sat down at the table. "I have sent you all the coordinates of the facility. There is a window of opportunity tonight at 21:00, when they will be conducting a security drill. If you can disable the locks on the southern gate at 21:11, you will likely be able to get access to the area where our person is held. Extract him during the drill and you'll probably be able to get out undetected."

Atlas looked at Camay. "How long will this drill last?"

"Around fifteen minutes. You'll have to move very quickly," replied Camay.

The group continued to discuss the specifics of the mission. Callahan entered the room to deliver the food and drinks they ordered, greeted Camay's proxy android, and left them to continue their meeting.

"We're being pursued by multiple parties," said Atlas. "Camay, one of our comrades was apparently captured last night. We're planning to extract him first. He would be extremely valuable in this extraction mission, to put it conservatively."

"Lieutenant Renk? We were made aware of his capture this morning," replied Camay.

"Is it acceptable that we take a detour to rescue him first," asked Jess.

"You were all selected because you possess certain skills as a group. We would actually insist that he be a part of this mission," said Camay.

"Just to be clear, I'm on a mission to rescue my father from NEA726," added Jess. "Once we deliver your man to the L1 colony, might you arrange us transport to and from the asteroid?"

Camay's android proxy was silent for a moment. It was clear that she was performing calculations on the 'net where her true self resided. "While that wasn't part of the original arrangement," Camay replied, "that would be an acceptable method of recompense. We will, of course, still pay you all for your efforts in addition to that."

Atlas checked his watch. It was close to 14:00.

"We shouldn't waste any time. We'll need to brief Renk on this mission as soon as we extract him," Atlas said.

"I think the plans are clear enough. If you have no other questions, I'll leave you all to it."

Camay's android stood up and walked toward the door. "This won't be easy. We are, however, all counting on you. The outcome of this mission will have a profound impact on future developments," said Camay, somewhat cryptically. The android walked out of the room.

Atlas finished his pie and stood up. "Whelp, let's go be heroes."

Jess, Atlas, Shell, and Duncan left the Velvet Room and returned to Duncan's rental car back at the parking lot.

"With our pursuers," Shell said, taking a good long look around before climbing back into the car, "We can't be too careful. We should assume they are tracking our every move."

Duncan laughed. "They can't right now. I've set things up to prevent tracking beacons from functioning in any of our equipment."

The car took off into the sky and flew in the direction of the now defunct hydroelectric plant. Advanced solar cells and other forms of power generation had made the abandoned dam useless for anything other than holding back water.

Duncan landed the car in a thick forest area near the dam. Atlas pulled a camouflage net out of his backpack and covered the car, making it harder to see among the underbrush. They left the small clearing and headed toward the dam.

Shell reviewed the facility's map in her field of vision. "Okay, they've got a temporary camp set up just south of here. There are some mechanical rooms inside the dam that they're using as well," she said to Duncan.

Duncan accessed what he could of the security system. "They've fortified this place a little more than I expected," he said back to her.

Atlas took out a pair of binoculars as they reached the edge of a cliff, overlooking the dam. He looked through them and examined the scene.

Shell scanned the map and found the beacon for the communicator that Duncan had given Renk. Duncan had sent Shell the data to do so earlier, back at the Velvet Room.

"Renk's probably inside the dam right now. They're either interrogating him or he's locked in one of the rooms," she said. "We just have to find a way in."

Jess started off down a path leading around the side of the hill, toward the side of the dam facility. "Let's check the perimeter," she said.

Jess led the team down the side of the hill and emerged from the woods. One of the entrances to the hydroelectric facility was in view.

Some storm clouds had been coming in that afternoon and it started to rain. The sprinkling had increased to a heavy rainfall.

Two heavily augmented cyborg guards were standing next to the large metal door. Jess held out her hand to Atlas, gesturing that he led her the binoculars. He hesitantly handed them over and she looked through them at the door, keeping low behind the bushes to avoid being seen.

"A couple of tall drinks of water there," she whispered. "I don't think we'd stand a chance fighting them head on."

Atlas snatched his binoculars back and looked. "They're armed to the teeth. We'd be dead before we were even identified," he replied.

"Can you hack that lock from here," Jess asked Duncan.

Duncan examined the wireless signals emanating from the lock. "Maybe," Duncan replied.

Jess looked next to the door. There were a couple of large power cables running up the wall behind the guards. The cables appeared to go across the ground and further down the hill to some military vehicles from the encampment. Next to the cables by the door, there was a ladder built into the wall.

Jess had an idea.

"Duncan," Jess asked, "Instead of hacking the lock, could you trigger something to shut off the power on my cue?"

Duncan nodded. "The backup generators are likely to start if I do that... but I could make that happen for about 20 seconds by causing a brief overload."

"Good," replied Jess. "I have an idea for how we can disable the guards and the lock at the same time."

Jess sneaked around to the side of the hill, where there was a steep slope. The thick power cables ran down the hill and she stepped over them as she quietly maneuvered around the side, staying very low to remain out of the guards' sight. When she was close to the dam, she yelled, "NOW!"

Atlas shot at the guards, quickly gaining their attention. Jess leaped up from behind the steep slope and ran up behind the guards while they were distracted. She jumped up on the ladder, swung her sword at the thick power cables, and sliced them. The cables arced wildly as they dropped to the ground. The cables hit a shallow water puddle where the guards were standing and thousands of volts coursed through the guards' cybernetic bodies, instantly disabling their cybernetic gear and putting their bodies into cardiac arrest.

"Okay, Duncan, kill the power," yelled Jess. Duncan accessed the emergency power system and caused an overload. The display on the door lock's key pad went dark. Shell, Atlas, and Duncan ran over to the door to meet Jess.

"Okay, now we have to open this lock mechanically before the power comes back on. Stay the hell away from that puddle when it does," she told them.

Shell took a look at the lock's keypad.

"This is no problem," said Shell. Shell took a power cord out and plugged it into a port on her belt, which was attached to her cybernetic gear. Using a screwdriver, she opened the inoperable keypad and connected the cord's wires to a couple of small connectors on the circuit board. The display flickered on the keypad for a moment.

Shell closed her eyes for a moment. Suddenly, a loud "kerchunk" was heard inside the door's mechanism and the door swung open.

"We only have a few minutes before the power comes on," she said.

Everyone quickly ran inside and looked around. With the electricity temporarily out and the backup systems offline due to the surge Duncan had made, their presence was, ostensibly, undetected for the moment.

Shell ran down the hallway and stopped at a door. "According to what we saw earlier with the maps and the communicator tracking beacon, Renk should be in this room," she whispered to everyone. Shell opened the keypad and performed the same operation that she had just done on the outside door. In a few seconds, the door swung open and Jess ran into the room, followed by Duncan and Atlas. Shell stood just outside the door in order to keep watch.

No one else was in the room. On a table, Renk's communicator, gun, and wallet lay, undisturbed. Atlas checked the gun. It was still loaded. Duncan examined the communicator, which was still in working order and not tampered.

"Well, his stuff's here," Atlas said, "but he's not."

Jess shook her head. "We need to get out of here before anyone finds us," she said, nervously.

Atlas grabbed the stuff on the table and the four of them ran to the exit and back into the woods. The rain was now coming down in sheets and they stumbled through the mud as they tried to make their way back to the car.

"This is not good," said Atlas, as he tried to rinse the mud off his boots and climb back into the car. "We found his stuff but Renk's nowhere to be found."

Duncan quickly turned the car on and piloted the car into the storm clouds above. The visibility was poor, which made it hard to fly the car but also made it easier to leave the area without being seen.

Shell wrung the water out of her hair as she looked out the rear window back at the dam. "We managed to avoid any trouble back there but we failed to find Renk."

Jess sighed. "Well, now what?!" she said, annoyed with the failed mission.

Atlas was quiet as the car continued to fly through the storm.

"Listen... Jess..." Atlas finally spoke up. "Those two guards you took out. You might have electrocuted them to death."

Jess looked out the window. "I don't want to think about it. I only wanted to disable them."

Atlas looked over at Jess. "Are you okay with having something like that on your conscience?"

Jess continued to stare out the window at the storm clouds beneath them. "I said I don't want to think about it."

"Look," said Atlas. "I know you want to save your father, but to take such a Machiavellian approach will..."

"I SAID I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!" screamed Jess, piercing the eardrums of everyone in the car.

For the next ten minutes, the inside of the vehicle remained silent.

Duncan brought the car in for a landing out in a remote area near an old farm house. The rain storm began to clear up and the sun broke through the remaining clouds. The tall grass was wet and the smell of ozone was in the air.

Duncan climbed out of the car and walked up to the farm house. Atlas and Shell followed. Jess remained in the vehicle.

Duncan unlocked the front door to the old farmhouse and walked inside. "I should really get around to cleaning this place more often," he muttered to himself.

Shell and Atlas walked in behind him. "Hey, wipe your feet," Duncan told them. "Put your shoes over there, actually."

Duncan sat down at the kitchen table. He turned on the power, using his built-in wireless controls. "Welcome to my home away from home," he told Atlas and Shell. "This was my parents' house and the place where I grew up when I was a kid. Please pardon the dust."

Atlas and Shell looked around and then sat down at the table with Duncan.

Duncan shook his head. "Let's give Miss Price some space. Apparently she's going through a lot right now," he said to Atlas.

Atlas wiped his brow. "I know. I just don't want her living with so much weight on her shoulders," he said. "Having blood on your hands...." Atlas stopped himself, struggling to speak.

Shell patted him on the back. "It's okay. For now, we should try to figure out what to do."

"Could you go talk to Miss Price," asked Duncan. "She might be upset right now but we need to discuss our next move."

Jess got up from her seat and walked over to the front door, looking out at the car.

"Mr Sorenson," said Shell. "We might have a problem."

"What is it," asked Atlas.

"Jess isn't out there," replied Shell.

"Oh, dear," said Duncan.

Atlas quickly got up and searched around the outside of the house. Jess was nowhere to be found.

Renk regained consciousness and tried to stand up. His powered exoskeleton was completely immobile and unresponsive.

Renk slowly climbed out of the powered suit and removed his helmet and visor. He was dizzy and could smell the stench of burned electronics. Looking over at the other guard, Hans, he slowly stood up.

"You okay, Hans?" he asked. Hans removed his exoskeleton and visor. "Yeah, my suit's totally fried, though," he replied.

Renk looked around. Next to the door he and Hans were guarding, the power cables had been cut. The last thing Renk could remember was a quickly moving green light moving toward him from over the steep drop off overlooking the dam.

Renk checked the door. The lock had been destroyed and the door was ajar. "Looks like we got attacked," he told Hans.

"Yeah, from the looks of it, they took out the backup power and everything," Hans replied.

Renk walked inside the door and went to the storage room to get something to drink. "I'm getting something to drink. Do you want anything," he asked Hans as he walked inside.

"No, thanks. Call in a report that we got ambushed," Hans said.

"Will do," Renk yelled back at him as he entered the storage room. *This will be a good opportunity to contact Duncan, now that I'm alone for a moment*, he thought. As soon as Renk looked, he noticed that his belongings were missing. *Dammit, did they confiscate my stuff? Even my pistol? What the Hell?*

After being questioned earlier that afternoon, Renk had been notified that he would be demoted to guard duty. Although Renk had a particular distrust of General Mulhauser, he wanted to keep a low profile and carry out his duties for the time being. Of course, with all of Renk's experience and ability, he wasn't prepared for a sudden blindside while performing simple guard duty.

Renk walked back outside with a soda. "Hans, all my stuff's missing from the storage room. Did you see anyone go in there?"

Hans nodded. "The general was in there this morning. I don't know why he'd decide to take your things, though."

Renk thought for a moment. *If they trust me with a machine gun, the general wouldn't think it necessary to take my other gun*, he reasoned. "Whomever it was who knocked us out must have decided to pilfer the storage room, but why would they only take my stuff and nothing else from in there?"

Renk didn't want to let on that the communication device was something Duncan had given him, and not an official military comm unit. Until now, he hadn't had an opportunity to privately use the device to contact Duncan.

Renk looked at the wooded area in front of them. He saw four pairs of footprints in the mud, which

appeared to be two males and two females. One of the males and one of the females were wearing specialized footwear common to cyborgs.

Hans took out his communicator and called in the report. "We've been hit by some intruders," he said. "They knocked us out and disrupted the backup power supply in our section."

Renk walked toward the woods. "Hans," he said, "I'm going to investigate. I won't be long. Please hold down the fort."

Who would attack us here, Renk wondered.

Jess had left behind the communicator that Duncan had supplied her. Not wanting to be tracked for the time being, she left it on the seat and ran across the field into a nearby wooded area.

She sat on a rock, staring at her sword. *I'm sure they'll be fine,* she thought. Jess had not thought of the implications of her strategy back at the hydroelectric facility. *Surely that shock wasn't enough to kill them, although anything that stops the heart temporarily could stop it permanently.* Jess was no doctor.

After a few minutes, Jess got up and walked back to the house. Duncan, Shell, and Atlas were outside, looking around. She waved at them and walked over to them.

"I just needed some time to clear my head," she said to Duncan. "Mr. Sorenson, I'd like to request that we return to that facility."

"What? It might be dangerous now with them on alert," Duncan replied.

Jess was silent for a moment and looked at the ground. "Just drop me off near where we were before and stand by. I can go alone. All I want to do is check on things."

"That would be much too dangerous with going alone," replied Duncan. "Also, given the circumstances, please don't run off on your own like that."

Jess said nothing.

"We can't proceed without Lt. Renk, so a second attempt at finding him would be in our best interest. It's going to be much more dangerous than before but it's either that or we have to find another way into space."

Duncan checked the time.

"Oh, and our original option involving the cargo shuttle and a weapons shipment has now expired, so we can no longer fall back to that plan," said Duncan.

Duncan walked over to the car and began cleaning some of the mud off of the floor mats with a small, portable vacuum. "Want to give the mission another try?" he asked, looking at Shell, Atlas, and Jess.

Jess nodded. "At the very least, we could do some reconnaissance."

It was around 5 pm, with the mission starting in just four hours. Everyone entered Duncan's rental car and it hovered back into the sky, taking off in the direction of the hydroelectric facility a few miles

away.

Near the facility, the car flew low over the tree tops to avoid radar. Jess looked out the window, down at the woods, and saw something. Someone was walking around on the trails.

"May I borrow those binoculars again," Jess asked Atlas. Jess took a look through the binoculars at the person below in the woods.

It was Renk.

"It's him!" shouted Jess. "Renk must have escaped earlier. I see him down there!"

Duncan took the car down into the woods, near Renk. Renk noticed the car and stood there, carefully watching it come in. He then walked up to the car, with his machine gun in hand.

Atlas jumped out and waved at Renk. "Hey!" he said to Renk.

Renk looked surprised to see Atlas and the rest of the crew.

"What are you guys doing here," Renk asked, somewhat confused.

"We were going to come get you for that mission at the EMA facility," replied Atlas.

Renk paused for a moment and then responded, "I don't think that's going to happen. We were just attacked and I've been investigating to find clues regarding the whereabouts of the people who got past us back at the facility."

Duncan looked around the area. "If you were attacked, I don't think the culprits would have gotten very far on foot."

Renk shook his head. "From what I can tell, there were four people. Two cyborgs, two humans. A male and female each. Their tracks led to a clearing in the woods close to here and then stopped. Must have had a flying vehicle..."

There was an awkward silence. Duncan had caught on to what had actually happened: *Renk had been one of the "cyborgs" they had attacked!*

Jess turned very pale. "R..R..Ronald..."

Renk clenched his fists. "That's RENK! Miss Price, it's RENK!"

"R..Right...," replied Jess.

Duncan carefully asked Renk, "Is everyone okay from that attack? We thought you might have been held for questioning or detained."

Renk shrugged. "Well, we both got knocked out from a nasty electrical shock but we're okay. We just need to secure the area. Have you seen anyone else in the woods here? I assume you tracked me down to help me, if you thought I had been in some kind of trouble. Unfortunately, the intruders seem to

have stolen my personal effects so I no longer have that communicator."

Duncan quickly shoved the communicator and Renk's gun under the car seat.

"Oh... oh my. Well, I have plenty more comm units where that came from," replied Duncan, now as nervous as everyone else. "Lt. Renk, we really cannot perform this mission without you; is there any way at all you could sneak away just for the evening?"

Renk shook his head. "I'm very sorry. I know I agreed to help, but I hadn't expected to be called back to duty quite so soon. Normally I'd be willing to freelance but, honestly, I have to stay here and perform my duties. I'm already on thin ice with the General right now."

Duncan sighed. "Understood. I'm glad you're okay. I'll have to tell Camay that we will have to make due with just the four of us."

Atlas saluted Renk and the car took off back into the sky.

Duncan spoke to the others inside the car as they headed toward the EMA facility at the coordinates that Camay had supplied.

"Listen, everyone... We couldn't ask Renk to abandon his post. He would have certainly been punished if he had. Not only that..."

Atlas grabbed Renk's belongings from under Duncan's seat.

Duncan continued, "If Renk saw that we had that stuff, we could have also gotten into a lot of trouble very quickly."

Duncan sent Camay a message:

Lt. Renk is not able to join us on the mission.
It turned out he was not a prisoner but rather
performing guard duty and he could not abandon
his post. We will have to continue the mission
without him.

I must also inform you that Elise has disappeared,
so we will not have her on our team, either.

As the situation stands, we will attempt the mission
anyway unless it is deemed unacceptable to do so.

"Ok, everyone, if it's okay with all of you, we'll go ahead with this extraction with just the four of us. It might be very dangerous but this seems to be our only chance of getting into space and rescuing Mr. Price," Duncan told the group.

The car continued en route to the EMA facility.

Shell was silent through the conversation with Renk. The realization had hit her early on that the cyborgs they had knocked out weren't actually cyborgs but humans in powered suits. She chose not to tell Jess or anyone else because, being humans, they were more likely to have been killed by the electric shock.

Shell was greatly relieved to learn that the two had survived and were relatively unharmed, even if it was shocking to learn that Renk had been one of them.

The car sped through the sky, making its way to the location of the EMA facility. Shell had access to all of the pass codes for EMA locks since she was one of the most trusted employees in the company. As long as there wasn't a global last-minute change to all of the security codes, Shell could provide easy entry to the facility.

If a combat situation arose, however, she also knew they were horribly under-powered compared to the type of security typically employed at locations such as this.

After a long flight, the sun had set and the car descended in a ravine near the facility. There were large search lights mounted upon tall towers and guards stationed at the gates.

Everyone quietly got out of the car and walked up the road leading out of the ravine and near the EMA facility.

"We just need to get the guards to leave their post for a moment," whispered Shell.

Shell looked at Jess. "Preferably, without harming them," Shell added.

Duncan waited behind a large rock. Jess moved in closer, behind a tree. Shell accessed the gate lock through her cybernetic gear and confirmed the code. The gate unlocked. Shell breathed a sigh of relief

as the guards did not seem to notice that the gate had unlocked.

Atlas stood by, hiding near Duncan, with his gun drawn. Shell took out her EMA ID badge and carefully walked up to the gate and addressed the guards.

She showed one of the guards her badge. "I'm with the development team," she said, calmly.

The guard checked her badge and the gate opened. Having tested the lock prior to this, Shell was confident that she could unlock it again once inside. Shell waved at the guard. Both of the guards were eyeing her in a strange way.

At an inner gate, Shell knew she could open it but had a plan. She sent a series of incorrect codes to the inner gate, causing it to temporarily jam. Shell called back to the guards. "Excuse me," she said in a friendly voice, "there appears to be a problem with this gate."

Both of the guards ran to her aid. While they were trying to unlock the inner gate, Shell wirelessly sent the unlock code to the outer gate and Atlas, Jess, and Duncan quickly ran in. Duncan jammed the security camera through a quick hack and everyone got into the facility undetected. Duncan and Jess hid behind some crates and Atlas hid in the guard booth.

The guards fixed the inner gate, smiled at Shell, and she smiled back. When the guards returned to their station, Atlas quietly shot them both with tranquilizer darts and dragged them into the booth.

Jamming the next couple of security cameras with her cybernetic gear, Shell motioned the group to follow her inside the inner gate and into one of the research buildings.

"We had a bit of dumb luck there, with my ID still being accepted," Shell remarked as they walked through the hall. "At this point, if I say that you all are here with me, we're likely to avoid too much commotion for the time being."

Renk returned to his post, where Hans was still guarding the door. The emergency power had switched on and Hans was trying to repair his exoskeleton suit with no success.

"Thanks for covering for me," Renk told Hans. He stood at the door next to him. The scene was illuminated only by the emergency power lights. Hans had reconnected the previously cut cables and had some heavy duty electrical tape around where they had been damaged.

Renk's military-issue communicator came on. It was General Mulhauser.

"Lt. Renk, I'm sending you and five other men on a special mission. We have intel that the enemy squad that attacked you may have obtained some top-secret information. It seems they're spies working for EMA corporation, which has been infiltrated by the Herei Mob Army. Since you have experience with EMA corporation's facilities, you'll be tracking down and capturing these spies. I've sent you their coordinates."

Renk checked the display on his communicator. *These are the same coordinates Duncan forwarded me from that scientist A.I. we saw in the dive,* he thought.

"Yes, sir," Renk replied. Renk headed back inside to gather some equipment and meet the team with

which he would perform the mission.

After a quick briefing and becoming acquainted with his new team, Renk and his group entered a helicopter and headed toward the EMA facility.

Atlas looked around cautiously. "Are you sure they're not going to wonder who we are," he asked Shell.

"They might. That's why we have to keep a low profile in this area. The more aggressive security guards are at the perimeter. The security inside the research facilities are notoriously standoffish because a lot of our top scientists throw a hissy fit when they are asked for ID," Shell replied.

Atlas kept his guns concealed. "So, we just play it cool, then," he whispered.

Atlas checked his map. The location of the L1 colony's target was not marked. "How are we going to figure out where our person of interest is being held," he asked Shell. "Is there a detention area near the research buildings?"

Shell nodded. "Just follow me."

The four of them entered what appeared to be a storage area. Duncan once again disabled the security cameras. Shell pointed to a ventilation grate in the wall. "This duct goes right by a service tunnel that runs underneath this building and runs underneath the entire facility, including the detention area," she whispered.

Shell unscrewed the bolts and Atlas lifted the grating. The duct was only five feet wide by three feet tall but it was enough to fit the four of them. It was clear that Renk would not have been able to fit through there.

Atlas went in first, followed by Duncan. Jess followed and Shell closed the grating behind them as well as she could without re-fastening the bolts.

After crawling for some distance, Shell whispered, "Stop here. Cut a hole right in front of you and we can drop down into the service tunnel."

Atlas pulled out a small bolt cutting tool from his backpack. It was hard to reach into his backpack due to the small size of the duct. He carefully (and quietly) gnawed away at the sheet metal until he could bend it open and peel the metal back to avoid having any sharp edges exposed. The hole was small, but passable. Atlas slowly lowered himself down into the dark tunnel and pulled out his flashlight.

As the others climbed down behind him, he examined his surroundings. The concrete tunnel didn't appear to have any security cameras.

"Damn, Shell, you're good at knowing the layout of these places, even for someone who has the maps as an overlay in her eyes," said Atlas.

Duncan was constantly scanning the area for surveillance cameras and other security hardware. It wasn't difficult to jam the cameras; they used strong encryption but had a flaw in their implementation of that encryption that he was able to easily exploit.

He followed Shell along with the others down the maintenance tunnel until Shell suddenly stopped. From the map Duncan had of the facility, there was a large building above them which was likely some kind of storage or detention building.

Shell stood there, examining the ceiling of the tunnel. Duncan tried to figure out what she was trying to find.

"Is there any way in," Duncan asked.

"I thought there was an access door here somewhere," replied Shell.

Atlas shined his flashlight above them, trying to see any trace of a trap door. Jess looked further down the tunnel for a ladder. Suddenly, an EMA guard robot came speeding down the tunnel, heading directly toward Jess.

"Not good," said Duncan, "Were we discovered?"

Shell shook her head. "I don't think so but we'd better take this thing down before it triggers the alarms."

Atlas rushed to put a silencer on his pistol and took aim at its camera. It pushed Atlas into the wall.

Duncan charged up his ether attack, drawing energy from his cybernetic gear's main power source. Shell kicked the guard robot, sending it backward and freeing Atlas. Atlas fired a shot at its camera, disabling its vision. Duncan then released a ball of static electricity into the robot at close range, zapping its electronics and rendering it motionless.

"That should do it," said Duncan, catching his breath. "We'd better find a way into that building quickly, before more robots happen to find us."

Shell found a door a little further down the hall. Inside the door was a ladder, leading up out of the maintenance tunnel.

The four of them climbed the ladder and found themselves in a small mechanical room, which appeared to house some water heaters and fuel tanks. Duncan checked the map again.

"We're in that building but how tight is the security here?" he asked Shell.

"Very. We need to think of a plan for how to find our target without being spotted," Shell replied.

Jess rummaged around in a supply locker.

"Here, put these on," she said. Jess took out four uniforms. They appeared to be generic maintenance worker coveralls.

Atlas examined one of the uniforms. "We're seriously doing this? The old disguise routine? Let me guess, we'll don some matching Groucho Marx glasses, too."

Jess rolled her eyes and sighed. "Yeah..."

Jess rummaged around in a box and pulled out four pairs of Groucho glasses.

Duncan shook his head. "Let's stick with the uniforms."

They put on the maintenance uniforms. "I hadn't figured we'd resort to such a hare-brained scheme," remarked Jess. "We may have to split up to be less conspicuous, not that it's any safer."

Duncan's shoulder armor protruded from the coveralls. Shell pulled her hair back and tucked it into her hat. Jess was hesitant to move her hair away from her left eye.

"You should probably put your hair up, too," Atlas remarked. Jess shook her head. "I... can't do that... unless..."

Jess searched around in the box that contained the Groucho glasses. There were other odd items in there, including some other costume supplies. After some more rummaging, she found what she was looking for - an eye patch.

Jess turned around with her back to the group, put on the eye patch, and tucked her hair into her hat. She made sure to keep her left eye totally covered.

"What's the plan," asked Duncan.

"We need something to malfunction. Something that's gonna require a crew to rush in and fix," Jess said.

"Hmmm...." Shell hummed, thinking of a plan. "It appears the restrooms' water supplies can be remotely controlled but we'd need two people capable of hacking on location once I disrupt it. If anyone's in there at the moment, they'll likely report it."

"What are you going to do," asked Jess.

"I'm going to cause the sewer to back up," replied Shell.

"Gross... but that will definitely be a reason to send workers in there," Duncan commented.

Atlas nodded. "Sounds like a plan. So, we'll need two deckers in position."

Jess opened the door and peeked out. "Ok, coast is clear. Let's put our apprentice decker in the closest latrine and we'll leave the upper decker in the other toilet."

Duncan chuckled.

"Hey, I'm no apprentice, Miss Price," Shell barked. "Duncan's the upper decker but that's a crappy thing to say."

Shell reviewed the sanitation and water supply schematics to the facility. She was surprised at how easy it was for her to still access all of this information.

"You know there's going to be that security drill that Camay mentioned coming up soon," Shell said, as she finalized the hacking script to cause the sewage backup in the restrooms. "Our timing should be about right. We're going to have about twelve minutes after the sewage backup to find our person, break them out, and escape. There should be just enough commotion right then."

It was 20:56. Shell ran the hack and, right on cue, everyone heard a disgusted scream coming from the nearby latrine.

Shell opened the door and Duncan hurried to that restroom. The person inside, trying to avoid the mess, said "Oh, good, glad you got here so quickly" to Duncan as he pretended to investigate the pipes.

Shell ran to the other restroom with a tool box. Several people saw her but did not find it strange, given the situation.

As 21:11 arrived, an announcement on the loudspeaker announced, "Security, code 2-K. Code 2-K..." which signified that the drill had started. Jess and Atlas began walking by the detention cells, now with the guards gathered in a meeting room for the beginning of the drill. Shell accessed the security cameras and quickly jammed them. She knew that if the guards noticed the jammed cameras now, they would think it was part of the drill.

Shell left the restroom and Duncan also regrouped with her, Atlas, and Jess. They met in front of the detention cells.

"Camay just sent me a message," said Shell, "she says we're in grave danger without Renk and Elise and that we shouldn't be here at all under these circumstances."

Atlas started to laugh. "It's a little late now, isn't it?!" he chuckled.

Shell reviewed the picture that Camay had given them. It was the prisoner to be rescued. After looking at the people in the detention cells, Shell found their target and quickly picked the lock to the cell. It was an older-looking man by the name of Ray Heimborem. He looked thin and had quite a beard.

Atlas helped him to his feet and everyone headed back to the storage room where they had entered the building from the maintenance tunnel.

"Now we have to figure out how to leave with Dr. Heimborem. If the guards see us with him, the jig is up," Shell said.

Renk and his team arrived at the area just outside of the EMA facility. They parachuted out of the helicopter and landed nearby, just out of range of the search lights.

"Ok, men," Renk said, "We have intel that EMA is performing a military drill right now. We only have about fifteen minutes to take advantage of this so let's move in."

There were two guards standing at one of the gates. Renk stayed hidden and listened to their conversation.

"Man, that little chromed lady was cute," one of the guards said.

"Yeah, looked like she just got a fresh upgrade, too. EMA must be paying her really well," said the other guard.

"Actually, if she worked at HQ, she probably just got her last paycheck, considering what happened and all."

"Really? That's a shame. Maybe they'll permanently transfer her here instead."

Renk pulled out a tranquilizer gun. "I don't need to hear about your damn cyborg fetishes," Renk whispered to himself.

When one of the guards' backs was turned, Renk shot the other guard with the tranquilizer gun and sneaked up behind the remaining guard. He rapidly put the guard in a choke hold and knocked him unconscious. Renk looked up and noticed a security camera.

"Oh, not good," he mumbled. Renk then noticed that the light on the camera was flashing erratically. *That camera has been jammed*, he thought. Renk examined the lock on the gate. He wasn't able to brute force it.

One of Renk's team mates came up with a small gas torch and began cutting the lock. Renk noticed another guard coming at them from around the corner and quickly started running toward them. Renk activated his time manipulation ability and rushed to the guard, getting behind him and snapping his neck. Renk then returned to normal and stood still as he tried to shake off the shock of using his ability.

"Ok, it's open," said Renk's team mate. The gate slid open and Renk darted inside. Two of his team mates followed him in.

"Stay close," Renk said. "They're well-armed here and I'd prefer not to go loud."

Renk checked the data on his military communicator. He was looking for a group of spies. He would have to capture one of the higher-ranking people in the facility and force them to spill the beans.

Suddenly, Renk spotted something odd. He saw four maintenance workers and an old man running away from the detention building. Renk ran over to them, startling them a little.

"Atlas?" whispered Renk. "So you guys actually got in already? Listen... you need to get the hell out of here. It might get really ugly soon," he said to Atlas.

"Can you provide some cover for us to get out," asked Atlas.

"No, I have to stick to the mission. I was sent here to find the four spies that attacked us at the hydroelectric base earlier today," Renk replied. "You should stick with me for now if you don't have a way out of here."

Renk, Jess, Atlas, Shell, Duncan, and Dr. Heimboem quietly hurried into one of the administrative buildings.

Renk and Atlas drew their weapons. Jess had her sword at the ready.

"I have to force one of the higher-ups to divulge information about the spies we're trying to find," Renk whispered.

Atlas shook his head. "Listen, Renk... there's something I have to tell you," Atlas replied.

"Don't!" shrieked Jess. "Shhhh!" said Atlas.

Suddenly, a large group of heavily armed EMA guards surrounded them in the hallway. "Halt!" shouted one of the guards. The guard noticed Ray. "Trying to free this terrorist? Not on my watch!" shouted the guard.

Duncan, Shell, and Jess started to put their hands up. Renk and Atlas clutched their weapons.

The sound of some of the guards being knocked down began to fade in. One by one, the guards were attacked from behind and they went down before they could react. Some of the guards turned around to see what was going on, which distracted them long enough for Atlas and Renk to begin firing to provide cover for the others.

Duncan and Shell took cover while Jess began attacking some of the distracted guards with her sword. The guards began firing back and Jess took cover in a doorway.

Elise knocked out some more guards with a spinning kick, providing an opening for the group to make a run for it. She motioned Duncan, Shell, and Jess to follow her. Atlas and Renk continued the firefight with the remaining guards while Elise, Shell, Jess, and Duncan darted into one of the offices and promptly locked the door behind them.

"Elise?!" asked Shell.

"Sorry I'm late," replied Elise. "I've been scouting this place out all day today. Some crazy shit went down last night and I've been unable to make contact with anyone in the mean time," she said.

Elise shoved a file cabinet across the wall into position underneath an air duct. She climbed up on the cabinet and ripped the vent grating out.

"I take it you know the drill by now," Elise said. "First, we get up to the roof. Second, Duncan, remotely access that rental car and have it fly up to us."

"Roger that," said Duncan.

"After that, we'll pick up Atlas and Renk. I haven't been able to track Renk, so I assume only Atlas has a communicator," Elise added.

"How did you know where we were and that Duncan had rented a car," asked Jess.

"During that 'net dive last night, I took the liberty of bugging your communicators. Duncan disabled their internal tracking but I wanted to make sure I could keep an eye on things, given the situation," replied Elise.

The four of them climbed through the air conditioning vents. Elise ripped the air conditioning unit loose from inside the shaft and threw it aside so they could climb out onto the roof. Duncan accessed the rental car and it was soon spotted overhead. Some of the guards began firing at the unmanned vehicle as it landed on the roof.

Elise, Duncan, Shell, and Jess climbed inside. The car quickly took off into the sky, dodging bullets in the process.

"We still need to get Dr. Heimboem, Atlas, and Renk out of there before things get even uglier," Elise said as Duncan swerved the car to avoid the gunfire.

"Please lower the car, Duncan," said Jess.

Duncan shook his head. "That's suicide. We're going to be shot to death if I do."

"Just let me out back behind the building and I'll be right out with Atlas and Renk," Jess said.

"I can't let you get yourself killed," Duncan grumbled.

"Just LET ME OUT!" Jess screamed.

Duncan begrudgingly lowered the car in an area where no guards had yet arrived. Jess jumped out in a hurry and ran over to the building in which Renk and Atlas were still fighting their way through the guards. Jess rushed in with her sword and charged at some of the guards.

Inside, Atlas was clutching his shoulder. He had been wounded but was still able to fight. Some of Renk's team mates had rushed in but they were assisting the EMA guards instead.

"Miss Price, what are you doing?!" shouted Renk. "Get the hell out of here!"

Jess knocked two more guards back with her sword and then slashed their arms, making them drop their weapons. "Why are your own men attacking you?!" she yelled.

One of the guards yelled at Jess. "Surrender! You've been caught red handed assisting in the escape of a wanted terrorist!"

Renk pushed one of his own team mates away from him. "You're mistaken!" he shouted.

Renk tried to activate his time power but, in the commotion, he was unable to concentrate. He lost his balance and fell over. Jess rushed over to him and helped fight off the people trying to capture him.

Atlas was grazed again by a bullet, worsening his shoulder. He continued to shoot back at the guards.

Jess knew what she had to do. She removed her eye patch. Her left eye glowed a brilliant green color, even brighter than her right eye's strange glow. Renk looked up at her and realized the familiar green glow from her eye from somewhere.

"Damn you guys, hurting my friends," Jess growled in a deep voice. Her sword began to glow and a green aura surrounded her. She rushed at the guards, fatally slashing the ones directly in front of her.

She continued the attack, dodging bullets and slashing more of the EMA guards, allowing Atlas and Renk to reach the exit.

Suddenly, Jess was hit directly in the chest by a bullet. Her green glow disappeared and her hair fell back over her face. She collapsed to the ground.

Atlas rushed over and picked her up. He ran back to the door with Renk and dashed outside, where Duncan lowered the car for them. They both jumped inside, carrying Jess with them.

Duncan quickly took the car back up into the sky and gunned the accelerator, racing away from the EMA facility. Jess sat in the crowded back seat with Elise, Atlas, Renk, and Ray. She was unconscious.

"She's bleeding profusely," said Dr. Heimborem. "If we don't get her to a hospital right away, she's going to die."

"Duncan," said Elise, "Set a course for Dr. Uzuki's office."

The car raced across the night sky back toward the city skyline. It had been a tense flight; Jess lay unconscious in the back seat of the crowded car. Duncan landed the car in the alleyway next to the entrance to Dr. Uzuki's office.

Everyone got out of the car and Atlas, Renk, and Elise helped carry Jess down the stairs. Elise knocked loudly on the door, since, for some reason, her cybernetic gear was malfunctioning and couldn't connect to the 'net.

Dr. Uzuki's assistant, an android dressed up in a frilly outfit, opened the door, saw Jess covered in blood, and quickly brought a stretcher. Dr. Uzuki rushed over to her and wheeled the stretcher into an emergency treatment room.

Another assistant guided Atlas over to a seat where they began patching up his shoulder.

Renk, Shell, and Duncan sat down in the waiting room. Elise was busy talking to Dr. Uzuki and mentioned that her communications equipment had been failing. They spoke too quietly for Duncan to make out what they were saying.

Dr. Heimborem stood there with Elise and Dr. Uzuki, discussing some things related to the events of the past few days.

Duncan leaned back in his seat, exhausted from the hectic day. It was now around midnight.

He looked over at Shell. "I can't believe we managed to get out of there alive," he said. "Please excuse me for a few minutes. I need to dive in order to meet with Camay and tell her we managed to complete the mission."

Duncan shut his eyes, engaged his dive connection gear, and found himself in a small room with a table and two chairs. He sent an invitation to Camay and, in a few moments, she appeared, sitting at the table, across from him.

"Dr. Thameh, we have extracted Dr. Heimboem from the EMA facility," Duncan said to her.

"Thank you," Camay responded. "As you know, we will arrange a transport to the L1 colony so that you can bring him to us promptly."

"We will bring him soon but one of us suffered a critical injury and we are currently with a street doctor. We do not yet know her status," replied Duncan.

There was an awkward silence.

"That is bad. Please update me via e-mail when you know her status. We will arrange a shuttle at the main dock. Ports B through F are shut down, so port A will be your point of departure," said Camay.

"Understood. I would prefer to wait here until we know how Miss Price is doing," replied Duncan.

"That is fine. Do keep in mind that your mission is not complete until Dr. Heimboem arrives at the L1 colony," Camay said. She then disappeared and Duncan closed the dive session.

Duncan opened his eyes and looked over at Shell, then at Renk. "Camay has arranged a shuttle to take us to the L1 colony," he said. "Since Miss Price is the reason we agreed to do all of this and go into space, I requested that we be permitted to wait until we know her condition."

Elise finished talking to the doctor and then walked back over to Duncan, Shell, and Renk.

"Dr. Uzuki says that Jess is in critical condition right now. She's lost a lot of blood but they're administering freshly synthesized blood right now. She is, however, in good hands."

Elise looked over at Atlas. "Atlas is going to be fine. He's suffered only minor injuries. He should be able to accompany you to the L1 Colony."

Elise started to walk toward the door. "Dr. Uzuki repaired my communications gear. Apparently there was a jamming signal that fried some components. Callahan has been sending me messages non stop so I need to answer him and head back to the Velvet Room."

Duncan asked, "Are you going to be back? Are you going to the L1 colony with us?"

Elise shook her head. "I'm needed back at the Velvet Room. I'm very sorry, but I can't stick around."

"Wait", said Renk, "Aren't you going to the L1 base?"

Elise shook her head again. "I'm sorry but there's some urgent business back at the bar. Dr. Uzuki has agreed to update me regarding Jess. Callahan has his hands full at the moment, so..."

With that, Elise opened the door and headed back up to street level. She quickly made her way back to the Velvet Room to assist Callahan with some dangerous guests.

Renk sat there, in the waiting room, deep in thought.

My own team mates turned against me back there, he thought to himself. They said I was helping a

terrorist escape. They also said I was working with the spies. Why did they say that? Why did they try to arrest me?

"I don't understand why but now I'm a fugitive, it seems," he muttered to Duncan. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Are you coming to the L1 base with us," asked Duncan.

"At this point, I think it would be the best option. If I turn myself in, I'll just be sitting in the brig. I don't know what's going on but something's rotten inside the military. General Mulhauser seems to have ulterior motives," replied Renk.

"Mulhauser's definitely very suspicious, from what I've learned," added Duncan.

"We need to find out if Jess is going to pull through. The whole point of finding a way to go to space was to rescue her father. Even if she doesn't make it, I want to do right by her and finish this mission," said Renk.

Atlas, Duncan, Shell, Renk, and Ray had been waiting in the lobby while Dr. Uzuki and her staff operated on Jess.

A few hours later, Dr. Uzuki emerged from the operating room and walked over to them.

"Jess was fatally wounded," said Dr. Uzuki. "From my experience, anyone taking that caliber of bullet straight through the heart would have been dead within minutes."

No one responded. It sounded like Jess was dead.

"Still... Jess has a high concentration of nano machines in her blood. I've worked with nano tech cyborgs before, but she's a unique case," said Dr. Uzuki.

"So what's her status right now," demanded Atlas.

"Since she was still alive when she arrived here, we were able to put her in a regenerative isolation tank, which uses nanotechnology to repair tissue. Apparently, the nano machines in her body had already started repairing the damage. She was definitely within an inch of her life," the doctor said.

"And...?" asked Atlas.

"She's going to live," replied the doctor.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Furthermore... at the rate she appears to be healing, she will have physically recovered by morning."

Atlas gasped. "That's... incredible..." said Atlas.

The group waited a few more hours and then Dr. Uzuki guided them down the hallway to a recovery room. Jess had been removed from the regeneration tank and was bandaged up, sleeping in a hospital

bed.

Atlas and Shell walked over to the bed. Duncan, Dr. Uzuki, and Ray sat in some chairs on the far side of the room. Renk stood quietly out in the hallway, drinking a soda from one of the vending machines.

Suddenly, Jess's eyes opened. Dr. Uzuki gasped, completely surprised that she would already be conscious.

"Ugghhhh.... where's my sword..." said Jess, groggily.

"We're back at the street doctor. You dropped your sword back at the EMA facility," replied Atlas.

Starting to come out of her foggy state, Jess looked around the room. She saw Ray.

"The mission was successful, wasn't it," asked Jess.

Ray walked over to her bed. "Thank you for risking your lives to rescue me. I'm in your debt," said Dr. Heimboem.

Jess sat up in bed. "We need to get you to the L1 colony..." said Jess, becoming dizzy and lying back down. Dr. Uzuki ran over to the bed.

"Miss Price, you need to rest," said the doctor.

Jess rested a while longer. She started to feel her strength return and tried to get out of bed. Dr. Uzuki came back into her room while the others waited in the lobby.

"Miss Price, you shouldn't be out of bed," said the doctor.

Jess took a few steps. "I'm okay. When I was a child, my body was infused with some experimental nanotechnology..."

The doctor interrupted her. "We discovered that while treating you. I've never seen such nano tech before. You were wounded in a way that would have killed you if it weren't for that."

Jess took a few more steps. "We're on a tight schedule. Let me change out of this hospital gown and I'll get you paid right away."

A few moments later, Shell brought Jess a change of clothes.

Shell and Jess met the others back in the lobby. Jess started to wire the receptionist payment for the medical care, only to find out that her accounts had been frozen.

"What the hell?!" yelled Jess, checking her communication device. "Someone has frozen my accounts!"

It wouldn't surprise me if Randall ordered this, Jess thought to herself. Her blood was boiling.

Dr. Uzuki walked over. "Hey, don't worry about it for now. Send me payment when you get things

cleared up," she said to Jess.

Jess nodded at the doctor. "I promise to get you paid as soon as this is all over... with interest," she replied.

Renk walked in the entrance to the lobby, carrying Jess's sword.

"How did you retrieve my sword," asked Jess.

"Let's just say I have guys still on my side in the military," replied Renk. "I straightened some things out with some of my pals and they sent someone out to bring me your sword. They had retrieved it after the scuffle last night."

Renk handed the sword to Jess.

Atlas walked over to Renk and handed Renk his gun and the communicator Duncan had given him.

"How did you get these?!" asked Renk.

"We had retrieved them earlier yesterday," replied Atlas.

Jess started to feel unusually strong and energetic. *The regeneration tank nano machines may have reacted with my own nanites*, she thought to herself.

Jess walked over to the door and looked back at the group.

"Well, if everyone's ready, let's get ourselves to the shuttle dock, port A!"

Duncan had returned the flying car to the rental shop while Jess was resting. He was charged an extra fee due to the mud on the floor and the blood on the back seat. Fortunately, they didn't ask questions.

As the group went back up the stairs from Dr. Uzuki's place back to the alley, Duncan calculated the quickest route to the space docks.

"If we take the transport tube over there," said Duncan, pointing at one of the pneumatic train pipes, "We can get to the docks in a few minutes. Camay has already commissioned a shuttle for us and it's waiting there right now."

Duncan looked at Jess. "Miss Price, are you sure you feel up to it? You were in critical condition just hours ago."

"I'll be okay," replied Jess.

Duncan, Shell, Jess, Atlas, Renk, and Dr. Ray Heimboem boarded the public transit pneumatic train and headed toward the docks. During the ride, Renk looked somewhat distracted. *After Atlas gave him his belongings, he's likely trying to figure things out*, thought Duncan. *I hope he doesn't react poorly if he realizes what happened back at the hydraulic plant.*

Duncan sighed and closed his eyes. *Now is certainly not the time to tell him.*

They arrived near the docks and everyone exited the train. Duncan looked around and saw several cargo shuttles. *The Herei Mob Army's guys probably wondered where the hell their weapons shipment was yesterday*, he thought. It was now close to dawn.

Atlas spotted the shuttle at port A and pointed it out. Everyone walked over to the shuttle, where they were greeted by a man and a woman.

"Are you Dr. Heimborem's escorts," the woman asked. Dr. Heimborem stepped forward. "I am Dr. Ray Heimborem. Is this the chartered shuttle to the colony at Lagrange point 1," he asked.

"Yes, sir. Glad to have you safe, sir," the man replied to Ray.

Everyone entered the shuttle. The interior was very plush; it was definitely a luxury transport ship. Duncan sat down and strapped himself in. Everyone else took their seats and, after a few minutes, the engines started.

The shuttle tilted upward as the launch apparatus moved itself into position. The boosters began to fire and the shuttle vibrated violently. Then, the main thruster fired and the shuttle hurtled into the sky.

Duncan looked out the window at the sunrise on the horizon. As the shuttle gained altitude, the yellowish sun against the red sky changed to a white, blinding ball against a black void. The automatic tint darkened the shuttle windows as the atmosphere around them grew thinner. Waves of plasma passed by the window as Duncan drifted off to sleep, deciding to take a short nap before they reached the colony.

"You know," said Duncan, yawning. "This is the first time I've been to space. Seems nice."

Chapter Four

The transport shuttle quietly surfed across space, en route to the space colony.

Duncan had woken from his nap but still pretended to be asleep as he entered a 'net dive to do some more research. The others sat around, some sleeping due to the fact that no one had much sleep since the night before the last.

Jess was staring out the window, obviously becoming less patient as time progressed.

Atlas was out like a light, having had very little sleep in the past 48 hours.

Shell was reviewing data as she sat quietly. Dr. Heimborem sat next to her, reading an old book and sipping tea.

Renk had gotten out of his seat and was trying to open the hatch to the cargo hold, which was in the floor in the back of the shuttle. He had grumbled something about hearing a noise below them and he had gone to investigate it.

The colony finally came into view as the shuttle started fine-tuning its course to align with it. The colony was enormous; it had three large rotating rings with blue, glowing discs stretching from the rings to the center shaft of the mega-structure. The discs contained clouds and served as the artificial "sky" for each of the rings.

Duncan, inside the dive, had initiated another conversation with Dr. Camay Thameh, who was waiting for them at the colony as they approached.

Camay sat across the table from Duncan in the virtual space.

"I had not figured that the 'net would work very well in space," said Duncan.

"There is a vast array of satellites along the routes from Earth to the colonies," replied Camay.

"Did you find out the original source of information regarding the false report of Lt. Renk's detention," asked Duncan.

"No," replied Camay. "It's likely due to error rather than intentional disinformation."

"We're still trying to figure out the identities of Dark Spider, Hombre Raymie, and whether or not General Benton Mulhauser has anything to do with these two prominent hackers' identities," Duncan mentioned.

"Hombre Raymie? That was the identity that Dr. Heimborem used when he infiltrated the Herei Mob Army years ago. He was entrapped in a scheme and EMA corporation, having quasi-governmental powers, thought him to be a terrorist and had been keeping him prisoner," Camay replied.

Duncan's avatar adjusted its glasses. "Interesting."

"I'm sorry we didn't inform you of this sooner," said Camay. "You're about to come in for docking so

let's leave it at that until you arrive and then I'll speak to you in person."

Duncan exited the dive and looked out the shuttle window as they entered a docking area at the end of the colony's central shaft.

Jess was reading some information on her communicator. She was trying to smooth out a scuff mark on the corner of the screen. It had been knocked around quite a bit during the violence at the EMA facility.

"It looks like we're going to have about 24 hours before Near Earth Asteroid 726 comes within close range of the colony," she said.

Renk had disappeared into the cargo hold in the lower level of the shuttle. Shell was also reviewing the orbital data for the asteroid.

"Right, we'll have to wait until then," Shell responded.

Jess looked out the window. She knew their timing had been good but it was going to be difficult to wait around for another day until they could approach the asteroid.

Their shuttle pulled into the dock. Large, robotic arms secured the shuttle and pulled it up to the airlock, where a large double door closed and sealed behind it once the shuttle was inside the area. A moveable boarding tunnel moved up to the shuttle's door as the room pressurized.

As soon as the light above the shuttle's exit door turned green, Jess stood up and walked over to it.

"Let's go meet Camay," said Jess.

Renk didn't get to explore very far in the cargo compartment before he was accosted by a familiar voice. "Stop right there and get your hands where I can see them. Passengers aren't allowed down here. Turn around. Slowly."

He didn't need to play along, but did long enough to confirm that it was, indeed, Elise who had a taser pointed right at him. "You know, lady, you don't look like one of them Space Marshals."

Elise lowered the gun and holstered it. "Yeah, but sometimes it's fun to play around. If you were someone I didn't already know, I think there'd be a problem."

"Same to you. I was already thinking of how to take you down," Renk shot back, a grin on his face. "I thought you were staying back on Earth."

"I just had a few things to take care of, between the bar and some last-minute preparations." She answered, casually holstering the weapon back in a quick-draw holster under her finely-tailored jacket. "That run on the EMA compound reminded me that most of you guys might not have the sort of equipment we'd be needing. So, while you guys were sleeping in the Doc's waiting room, I went and did a little judicious packing for this trip. ...Not to mention a few other preparations. It's better if you don't ask why I decided to fly the real economy class down here." She sighed. "Thank god they keep these bays pressurized."

A sharp shake accompanied by a loud, sonorous clunk signaled the engagement of the docking clamps. "Sounds like we're there," Renk said. "I hope you're planning on sharing whatever you brought up here."

"I am, but it wasn't cheap." It was Elise's turn to grin. "And I do have a run to finish, until we hand over our own good doctor."

The group followed Jess out of the shuttle and through the docking tunnel.

The door opened to an elevator that took everyone through the long central shaft of the colony and through a transport tube that brought them to "ground" level of the main ring.

They entered a transportation terminal area.

Duncan turned around. "Where's Renk?" he asked. Everyone looked around, noticing that he hadn't left the shuttle with them.

"I hope he didn't fall asleep back there," said Duncan.

"So, we finally meet," said a familiar voice. Duncan looked back around. It was a rather life-like appearing android.

Duncan reached out to shake her hand. "Dr. Thameh, I presume?"

"Welcome to the colony," said Camay. "By the way, please call me Camay."

Camay greeted the others. "So I take it that Lt. Renk and Miss Lorentz chose not to accompany you?"

Shell shook her head. "Renk came with us. He might still be back on the shuttle. Elise had to take care of something urgent last night and we haven't seen her since."

Camay guided the group down a long hallway, which led into another building. Above them, an artificial blue sky with wispy clouds illuminated the entire city scape with daylight as it reflected the light from the sun through the colony's enormous windows.

They entered a large meeting room with a fantastic view of the city inside the colony. Beyond the buildings there were forests, lakes, and even artificial beaches - complete biomes. Birds flew across the artificial sky. The bustle of the colony's occupants at the street level made the environment seem quite lively. Tube transports similar to those on Earth created a grid throughout the ground level.

Dr. Heimborem spoke up as everyone sat down around the meeting table. "I just want to thank everyone again for getting me out of that EMA facility," he said. "I actually worked for EMA before they decided I was a liability. I was one of their top researchers in relation to the phenomenon of adepts."

Camay nodded and looked around the room at everyone. "Dr. Heimborem had infiltrated the Herei Mob Army years ago under the hacker name of Hombre Raymie, with which you are familiar by now," she said. "EMA had him performing some... questionable... research and he discovered that some of the higher management of EMA corporation was strongly tied to the Herei Mob Army's ambitions."

Dr. Heimboem stood up. "Thanks again. I now have to get back to my superiors and give them a detailed report of what's being going on in the mean time," he said. Dr. Heimboem exited the room, escorted by a couple of security personnel.

"Now, then," Camay continued, "I should tell you a little about who we are. We're an organization known as Firewall and we are involved in several important lines of research, including the adepts phenomenon, although our approach is radically different from EMA corporation."

Shell stood up. "I had no idea that EMA was involved with adepts research! How could I have never heard of this before?!" she replied.

"EMA's publicly-known businesses, regarding information technology and communications systems, are little more than a front compared to their dark research," Camay told her. "That EMA was so quick to kill all of those operations once their headquarters were destroyed was no surprise to us."

"I'm originally from a science colony near Titan," said Camay. "You would be surprised at the sheer number of A.I., as you might call us, that reside beyond Earth."

Jess raised her hand. "Doctor," asked Jess, "I hate to change the subject like this but will have have transport arranged to reach NEA726 once it comes within close proximity?"

Camay nodded. "Yes. You will have a chartered shuttle that will take you to NEA726. Obviously we cannot risk being attacked by the Herei Mob Army, so this will be a very covert trip and the shuttle will not remain once you are dropped off."

Atlas scratched his head. "How will we get transportation once we've extracted Mr. Price?"

Camay shook her head. "We won't abandon you. As long as there's no state of alert, our shuttle will come back to the asteroid once you are ready to leave."

Atlas breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks for that..."

Camay interrupted him, "That is, however, on the condition that you don't raise any alarms. If the Herei are on high alert due to any ruckus you might cause, we cannot put our colony in danger by making it a target. If we cannot extract you without being detected, I'm afraid, under those circumstances, you would have to find another way off the rock."

"So, this mission is even riskier than we thought," said Duncan.

"It will be very dangerous, yes," replied Camay. "Until the asteroid comes within range, I want to invite you all to explore the colony. We have a lot to offer here. Perhaps sample some of the cuisine and spend some time at the beach?"

With that, the group was excused. They took an elevator down to street level and headed toward an area that had hotels and an artificial beach.

Renk helped Elise carry some luggage cases out of the shuttle. They were walking along the streets of the colony, looking around at the various sights.

"Have you ever been to space before," asked Elise.

"Yeah, several times, but only to work at military outposts. I've never been to a resort-style colony before," replied Renk.

Renk looked at the buildings and noticed the beaches. "Wow... it's like a true Eden out here," he exclaimed. "I can see why people planet-side are so desperate to find a way to these places."

The colony was cleaner, less congested, and overall more hospitable than the crowded ghettos of the cities on Earth. He didn't see any homeless people or gang members anywhere. Renk could hardly believe such places could exist.

Renk's sense of amazement was quickly dampened as he remembered the current circumstances. In all of the confusion during the fight at the EMA facility on Earth, Renk had been accused of working with the Herei Mob Army - or some other terrorist group - and was actually on the run from the same military he had served up until yesterday. With the exception of a few of his comrades that hadn't been present in the EMA headquarters tragedy, he had very few people within the military he could trust.

"Elise, while you were taking care of the commotion back at the Velvet Room last night, I took a little stroll to get some fresh air and call in a favor from one of my trusted comrades," said Renk.

"Yeah, what of it," asked Elise, not being sure of what he was trying to say.

"He brought me Jess's sword. It was confiscated after they took siege of the EMA facility. He didn't want to tell me over the communicators but the military managed to identify you, Atlas, and the deckers. They also presumed that Jess was dead."

Elise shrugged. "What are you getting at?"

"They couldn't track us last night. That's the only reason we're alive right now."

Elise gave an annoyed sigh. "You say that but..."

Renk shook his head. "No, I'm serious. We're going to have the whole goddamned military on our asses the second we get planet side again."

Renk then noticed Jess, Duncan, Atlas, and Shell walking toward them. "Over here!" yelled Renk.

Atlas ran over to Renk and Elise. "Elise?!" shouted Atlas, somewhat confused. "How the hell did you get here?"

Renk laughed. "Never mind the details. She brought us some goodies!"

Atlas looked at the suitcases and then at Renk. He could tell from Renk's expression that Elise had gotten them some rather nice supplies.

The rest of the group caught up to them. "We turned over Dr. Heimboem and Camay said our transportation was arranged for the trip to NEA726," Atlas told Renk and Elise. "The deal is, though, if it gets ugly out there, we might get stranded. The colony's got to cover its own ass, after all."

Atlas stretched and took a deep breath. It had been a while since he breathed truly clean air. He was so used to the thick smog of the slums that he'd forgotten what it was like. Even the air in the countryside, where they had been at Duncan's farm house, had some level of pollution.

"Man!" Atlas exclaimed. "I *really* wish we could be here under better circumstances."

Atlas looked over at the beach. There were some people sitting around eating ice cream and others messing around on surf boards in the lake.

He wasn't really in the mood to play around. After escaping into space, Atlas felt a deep guilt as he remembered the people he had inadvertently killed. They had been desperate to escape to this paradise and his actions cut their lives short in the attempt. The guilt crawled up his spine and gave him a sick feeling.

Then he suddenly began to crave some ice cream.

Shell noticed Atlas looking at the beach. She then looked at Jess, who appeared very tense. Renk was laughing very nervously, as if he were trying to force himself not to break down from stress. In fact, Renk was really yucking it up over there next to Elise.

"Elise!" shouted Shell. "You weren't on the shuttle, were you?"

There was a moment of awkward silence, partially brought about by Renk's... unusual behavior.

Shell looked over at the beach. "You know, most of the beaches on Earth are so polluted that they're unusable," she said. "I've never been able to go to a nice beach in my entire life."

Duncan nodded. "Despite everything that was done to use clean energy sources, there were quite a few ecological disasters in my lifetime that sealed the fate of many of the world's beaches, I'm afraid," he said.

Shell sighed. "When this is all over with and we rescue Mr. Price..." Shell looked over at Jess. "Well, afterward, how about we relax on the beach and enjoy ourselves?"

Atlas walked back over to the group. He had an ice cream cone and began eating it with a somber look on his face. It was almost as awkward as Renk's laughing fit.

Shell looked back at Jess. "Some of us REALLY need a chance to unwind."

"Hey guys," Elise shouted, by way of greeting. "Good to see you all made it up here, too!" She inclined her head slightly to Jess. "And congratulations on your recovery, Lazarus. This is a hell of a way to celebrate getting out of the hospital."

"Of course I was on the shuttle," Elise answered Shell's question. "Just not in the cabin with you guys. There wasn't enough time for me to try sneaking on up and pulling a stewardess routine, sadly."

"Glad to hear the job's done and we've got the next leg of the trip lined up, but I can't really hand out any of the luggage I brought here." she lifts a finger to her lips and winks.

"Honestly...after getting so used to the shitty air and acid rain, a place like this with such a thoroughly-scrubbed atmosphere just feels wrong." It wouldn't kill her, but the air was rather...sterile, compared to the usual perfume in a good zone of urban sprawl.

She pondered the next job for a bit. "I'm not sure we can avoid it getting ugly, although there are a few ways to remedy that problem." She left the obvious solution of "kill 'em all" unsaid.

"If we've got a bit of a layover, we ought to make the most of it, though. Hm...I think I forgot to pack a swimsuit..." She did take a moment to pull up some menus in her neutral interface, and set her hair to a nice shade of iridescent blue, shot through with darker streaks and fading to the same darker shade near the tips.

"First things first, we should probably find a couple hotel rooms."

"Hmmm... the beach sounds nice," Duncan replied to Shell. "I'm not much of swimmer but I could use some ice cream like what Atlas has there..." Duncan started at Atlas for a few seconds. "Hey, Atlas, you okay, buddy," he asked.

Atlas kept eating his ice cream, presumably off in his own world at the moment.

"Anyway," Duncan continued, "We're not out of the woods yet, even if we can rescue Mr. Price."

Duncan started walking toward the hotel. In response to Elise, he said, "Let's get a couple of hotel rooms so we can at least set up a base of operations. Once we're settled in and everything, we can get something to eat and work out a general plan of attack."

Looking at Shell, Duncan added, "I suppose we could find time for swim suit shopping, as well. Personally, I'm going to make sure that I'm very well rested before tomorrow."

Duncan went to the front desk inside the hotel and reserved two rooms. Jess sat down for a moment in the hotel lobby to think.

We have a day before we can go to the asteroid, she thought. We have the entire team now. Elise has probably secured us some weapons, from the way she was acting.

Shell ran over to Jess and lightly grabbed her arm. "Come on," said Shell, "Let's go check out some of the swim suits."

Jess stood up and walked with Shell over to a clothing shop, which was attached to the hotel. After looking around for a while, Elise came wandering in after she, Renk, and Atlas took the luggage cases up to the hotel rooms.

"Is Lazarus here looking for something to go swimming in," Elise asked Shell. Elise turned to look at Jess as she was browsing some of the swim suits. "You should be careful not to get your bandages wet," said Elise, with a slight giggle.

"I was just planning to get my feet wet," replied Jess. "They're really sore from all this walking around."

Atlas, Renk, and Duncan were looking around for some basic swimwear, too. Duncan held up an old 19th century style striped one piece men's swim suit and gave a completely sincere expression of approval as he looked at it. Renk and Atlas both grabbed the first pair of standard swimming trunks and went straight to the counter.

"I can't believe we're shopping for swim suits at a time like this," Jess told Shell. "There's not much else we can do at the moment, I suppose."

Jess found a reasonable looking swim suit and went into the dressing room to try it on. As she changed into the suit, she looked at herself in the mirror. She was still wrapped tightly in bandages from the shoulders to the bottom of her rib cage. *This is going to look really weird with the swim suit.*

She started to unwrap the bandages slowly so that she could check the status of the wound on her chest. Thanks to the nano machines in her blood, the wound had mostly healed. Internally, she was fine now - the nanotechnology within her combined with the treatments at Dr. Uzuki's place had rapidly regrown her heart and muscle tissue - but there were some very ugly scars in center of her chest.

Jess carefully re-wrapped the bandages and stood there for a moment. After some hesitation, she finished putting on the swim suit and walked over the Shell to get her opinion.

"It looks fine," said Shell. Jess looked at Shell's swim suit. "Yours is good, too," she replied. Jess felt really self-conscious wearing a swim suit while looking like a mummy from the waist up. It was still better than leaving the scars visible.

Shell walked over to the counter and paid for the swim suits. It was humiliating for Jess to have someone else pay for her. Since her accounts had been frozen, Jess was unable to pay for anything at the moment. She was a little surprised at how eager everyone was to help her despite the fact that she was unable to pay them any further for the time being.

After everyone paid for their swim suits and some other items, the group went to their hotel rooms briefly to change and then headed out to the beach. Duncan, being the age that he was, was totally comfortable with his silly appearance - his metal arms and legs contrasting with the goofy looking striped swim suit made him stand out like a sore thumb. He knew people were staring but he didn't seem to care.

Atlas and Renk were busy racing each other swimming. Shell sat under the umbrella with Duncan and sipped some kind of drink. Duncan lay in a lounge chair, reading a book and eating some donuts. Elise was sitting out in the sun taking in the scenery.

Jess waded around in the water for a while, being careful not to get her bandages wet. Some kids nearby accidentally splashed her a few times while they were playing around.

It was a peaceful scene and it caused Jess to reflect on a lot of things.

Renk walked back onto the beach from the water. He felt refreshed from the swim. Atlas followed him out of the water and got a towel from Shell, who was still sitting under the umbrella with Duncan, sipping one of those fancy drinks with the tiny umbrellas.

Renk sat down in a lounge chair next to Shell and Atlas took the seat on his other side.

"Ahhhh... the world's going to Hell in a hand basket, we're about to risk our lives again in a dangerous mission tomorrow, and the entire military is probably going to capture us the moment we return to Earth... but damn if this isn't nice," said Renk.

"This might be the first and last time any of us get to enjoy this," replied Atlas.

"Yes... yes, indeed, buddy," said Renk, shutting his eyes and enjoying the atmosphere.

"Listen, I was going to tell you earlier but there's something we need to let you know..." started Atlas.

Renk interrupted, "If it's about when you guys took Hans and myself down back at the hydroelectric facility," he said, "don't worry about that."

Atlas gasped. "You knew? You're... you're really cool with it?"

"Shit, Atlas," said Renk, laughing a bit. "You didn't know it was me in that armor. You were there specifically to rescue me because you thought I was being held prisoner," he said. "I put all the clues together way back when we were at Dr. Uzuki's. Besides..."

Atlas then interrupted, "You knew it was Jess that cut the cables and knocked you out?"

Renk nodded. "Hey, like I said, it's okay. You realize she almost got herself killed to save us later on at that EMA facility."

Atlas looked over at Jess, who was still nervously walking around in the shallow part of the water.

"She really did almost die for us," said Atlas, in a solemn tone.

"Hell, man, she's waaaaay beyond making up for giving me a volt nap."

Atlas continued looking at Jess.

Renk looked at Jess and then over at Atlas. "Hey, bud. Why don't you go over there and talk to her? Let her know that we're cool and everything."

Atlas shook his head. "Why don't you tell her?"

Renk shook his head, too. "Ah, well... trust me on this. Go over there and talk to her."

"Hey Duncan, what'cha readin'?" asked Shell.

"Oh, this? It's a 20th century book, back from when everything was published on dead tree meat," replied Duncan.

Shell continued to sip on her drink.

"I was born in the early 21st century. Back then, the Internet was relatively new and, although almost everyone had primitive networking machines and communicators, paper was still in common use," he continued. "When I was in school, we still did a lot of class work with paper and pencils."

"Sounds cumbersome," replied Shell.

"It wasn't that bad. Sometimes our backpacks got really heavy from lugging those books around, though," said Duncan. "I remember having to walk almost two miles to and from the bus stop and back to our old farm house, sometimes in several feet of snow..."

Duncan could tell that Shell was more interested in what was happening out by the water. Renk had told Atlas to inform Jess that Renk was okay with what had transpired at the hydroelectric base. Duncan had, somewhat inadvertently, overheard Renk and Atlas talking to each other.

Duncan stood up. "Whelp," he said, "This was a great idea. I really needed a chance to relax out here."

"Where are you going," asked Shell.

"I'm going to get changed back into my regular outfit. When everyone's ready, let's have dinner at the hotel restaurant and start discussing our plan of attack on NEA726," replied Duncan. He headed up the stairs from the beach and went back into the hotel building.

Shell finished her drink and stood up. She called out to the others.

"Yo!", she yelled, "We're going to meet up for dinner in a little while!"

Elise, Atlas, and Jess were still out near the water. Renk got up from his lounge chair, gathered up a few towels, and walked up the stairs.

"See you in a few," he said to her.

Shell walked up the stairs behind him. Renk stopped at the hotel bar while Shell took the elevator back up to her hotel room.

Shell, Jess, and Elise had one hotel room while Duncan, Atlas, and Renk had the adjacent room. Shell knocked on the door between the two rooms and Duncan unlocked it. Duncan and Shell pushed a couple of tables together to create a large meeting table and pulled some chairs up around it.

"I'm going to check the room for bugs and other surveillance equipment," said Shell, "Just to make sure."

"Good idea," replied Duncan.

After performing a sweep for bugs, Shell returned to her room and checked her messages.

One of them was from Kel.

Shell, there's been a lot of stuff in the news about
EMA corporation suddenly folding.
My sources tell me that our division has shut down
but there are lesser known departments that have been
in operation all along. All of this information has
been surfacing all of the sudden; it's making my head
spin!

I hope you are safe,

- Kel

Shell replied.

Kel, I'm in a place that I can't disclose right now.
A lot of things have happened and I'm not sure when
I'll be able to return. I can confirm that EMA has
turned out to be a much different company than the
organization to which I owe my life. I don't know
if they were just taken over or if the whole thing
was a front from the beginning.

Whatever you do, Kel, keep a low profile.
I'm sorry I can't tell you more right now but things
are very dangerous for us all.

I hope we live through this, thought Shell. *EMA corporation was my life. Now it's one of the greatest threats I've ever known.*

Jess was walking out of the water when Atlas walked over to her.

"Miss Price," said Atlas. "Um... Renk wants me to tell you that he knows it was you who attacked him back at the hydroelectric plant."

"What?" gasped Jess. *Oh, great*, she thought. *That will only complicate things.*

Atlas noticed the look of shock on her face. "No, no," he stuttered. "He says it's fine. He knows we had good intentions. He figured it all out a long time ago, actually..."

"Whew", sighed Jess. "That... that makes things a lot easier. I'll have to buy him a drink later or something," she mumbled.

"I think he's already helping himself at the hotel bar," Atlas chuckled.

Jess and Atlas both stood there. Jess avoided eye contact.

"So, uh..." said Atlas, not knowing what to say.

"Hmmm. We probably ought to go get ready for dinner," said Jess. "I guess I should go apologize to Renk..."

Atlas cleared his throat. "Miss Price, you don't have to apologize to anyone. You almost sacrificed your life to save his and mine!"

Jess was silent for a moment. "I have... abilities. You were helping me. I couldn't just abandon you two. Of course, now I have this ugly scar and these awkward bandages to show for it," she said. "I guess I'm just glad I could help, even though I don't even know if I can pay you the rest of the money we agreed upon..."

Atlas interrupted, "Money? You're worried about not being able to pay us right now? Miss Price!"

"Call me Jess," said Jess.

"Sure, Jess, listen... we're all in over our heads right now. We have to stick together. I can't speak for the others but payment isn't even an issue for me right now," said Atlas.

"Even though you don't have a home right now?" asked Jess. "Although, I guess I'll do what I can for you once this is all over."

"By the way," said Atlas, "those bandages aren't awkward. You picked out a nice swim suit. It looks great on you."

Jess turned bright red. She didn't know what to think or say. Atlas stood there for a moment, scratching his head.

"L..L...Leh...Let's go meet the others for dinner," said Jess. She ran as fast as she could to get back inside the hotel.

When Jess entered the hotel room, she saw Shell, who was responding to some messages over her cybernetic gear. Shell noticed that Jess looked extremely flustered. Shell, looking through her augmented reality vision, looked at Jess a minute, puzzled.

"You okay?" asked Shell.

"Yeah! Fine! What a lovely day, isn't it? Ready for dinner? *God*, I'm hungry! I could eat a porcupine! Ready for the mission tomorrow?! We might die! Where's my outfit? I gotta..." said Jess, VERY rapidly. Shell handed Jess her clean laundry and Jess darted into the bathroom to change.

Atlas returned to his hotel room. Duncan and Shell had just finished setting up a conference table in there.

He took a quick shower, got dressed, and sat on the bed for a moment with his communicator. He looked through some old news articles on the 'net regarding the Price family and Crest corporation.

One article read:

March 16, 2205

WIFE OF CREST CORPORATION ASSASSINATED

Baretta Price, the wife of Crest CEO and President Richard Price, was murdered today during a press conference pertaining to an international partnership with Iereh corporation.

The perpetrator has not been identified at the time of this report but the Delmarva City Police Chief has indicated that "we have strong indicators that the Herei Mob Army has taken credit for this heinous act" and the assassin also has ties to the "We Are All Spacers", or WAAS, faction of Herei.

Mrs. Price was shot by a sniper who, according to current findings, was located in a building owned by EMA corporation. Some have suggested that EMA corporation had involvement in the incident but the Chief of Police commented, "these inappropriate conspiracy theories are entirely unfounded. There is no evidence that EMA corporation had anything to do with this tragedy".

Mrs. Price is survived by her husband Richard Price and 11 year old daughter, Jessica Price. Richard Price was not available for comment.

God, thought Atlas. She must have gone through hell back then, not only with the loss of her mother but the constant fear that she or her father would be next. Now her father is in the hands of the Herei Mob Army.

Atlas put his communicator away and lay on the bed as he turned on the large flat panel screen along the wall. He selected the live news channel and watched for a few minutes.

The reporter was discussing the recent incident with the EMA headquarters building.

"We have learned from the police that the Herei Mob Army has indeed claimed responsibility for the sudden, deadly implosion of the EMA corporation headquarters building. We have also learned that over 200 employees were in the building at the time, despite the fact that many had been apparently warned not to come to work that morning."

"In other news, the head of Crest corporation remains missing as authorities frantically search for clues as to his whereabouts. Authorities have assured the public that the EMA building incident and the disappearance of Richard Price are unrelated..."

"... this just in: More tragic news today as we have been informed that the daughter of Richard Price has died last night during an apparent kidnapping attempt. Jessica Price, age 22, was found dead in her home in the Eastern quadrant of..."

"WHAT?" shouted Atlas. "They're putting out a fabricated report!"

Atlas jumped up from the bed and ran to the door to the other hotel room. He knocked but received no answer. He waited a moment and then opened the unlocked door, looking around. No one appeared to be in the room. He looked around the room for a second and was about to go back to his room when Jess walked out of the bathroom, wearing a towel.

"I'M SORRY!" shouted Atlas. He ran back into the other room and slammed the door behind him. He heard Jess scream.

Atlas walked back over to the door and yelled through it, "P.... please turn on the news, Jess. Something's going on, they're saying you died..."

Atlas sat on the bed for a few moments. His communicator flashed a message from Duncan. It read:

Atlas! We're sitting down to dinner. Please join us.

- DuncanDonutz

Atlas sat there. He heard the television switch on in the other room and, about a minute later, Jess came walking in, having finished dressing.

"Let's go tell the others," said Jess, having calmed down a bit. "Something reeks about this false news report."

Elise shook her head at the brief conversation between Atlas and Jess on the beach. She was going to butt in, but it would be rude to interrupt after that, so she left them to their own devices and headed back to the room a little after the others.

She arrived at the room to find only Shell actually present. "Hey, seen Laz anywhere?"

"She went in to take a shower," Shell answered.

"Ah, guess I'll have to wait my turn or make do," Elise replied, as she began doffing her swimsuit and changing back into her previous outfit. As usual, it's a very nice full suit.

"Why do you call her that, anyway," Shell asked, curiosity and a hint of something else on her face.

"What? Lazarus? In this sort of business, you really don't want to go by your real name. And I figure, hey, she got back up from the dead, so she's earned a new one, like it or not."

"I see."

"It ain't meant to be an insult, you know. Everyone's gonna earn one eventually."

Once Elise finished dressing, she and Shell headed down to meet the others for dinner.

Down in the hotel dining room, the decor was tastefully muted, as befitted a potentially semi-formal establishment. The wooden paneling on the walls and the tables all looked like actual wood, which would've cost a small fortune even before lugging it all the way to orbit. The entire place dripped with a bit of sterilized Old World charm, carefully recreated for the entertainment of the guests. On the plus side, it was fairly quiet and had nice lighting, even if the large group forming around one of the tables was bound to draw a bit of attention, between the old-fashioned cybernetics, military fatigues, and other idiosyncrasies.

Elise and Shell claimed their seats, to interrupt conversation between Duncan and Renk. "You know," Elise said, "I begin to think we hardly look like typical patrons, when we all get together."

"You can say that again," Duncan seconded the notion, and barked a short laugh. "Still, we're here, so we might as well live it up a little."

"It seems like some of us are having a hard time relaxing," Shell added, not naming any names.

"It's easy to get the jitters." Elise nodded sagely. "But still, there's nothing we can do about the wait before a performance." The tone of her voice changed a bit more like that of Eclair, when she spoke next. "So let's all just relax and be ready to give it our all on the big day~" She made a face, winking and sticking her tongue out.

Renk was the first to speak up after the unexpected outburst. "That's...uh, that's just a little weird, you know?"

Atlas and Jess arrived together, the both of them looking grim. "We've got some bad news," Atlas began, although Jess interrupted before he could finish.

"They're reporting that I'm *dead*," she hissed, avoiding a shout, but clearly angry.

It took a while for anyone to speak up after that, with the general murmur of conversation being that it had to be some kind of fabricated report. "...Still, you've got to look on the bright side of death," Elise quipped. "Not many cops go around looking for a corpse." She paused for a while. "Or...someone back home has decided to disown you in a most spectacular way." She shrugged.

"That's not a very good prospect," Jess shot back.

"Yeah, but it's something to consider. All we know is it's a line of drek that someone's complicit in spewing. Not who or why."

Everyone was sitting at the table as the wait staff took their orders.

"We shouldn't talk *too much* about the... mission... here," said Duncan, keeping his voice down in the quiet atmosphere.

"Let's hash out the plans a little better when we get back upstairs but I was thinking... Herei's looking for a nice big ransom, right? If we can manage to have some of us pose as a negotiation team, that will give us a way to dock at the asteroid without raising suspicion. The trick is to ensure that our initial contact is over a channel that appears to be from Crest corporation."

Jess nodded. "I still have the security codes if you want to access Crest's corporate communications systems," she told Duncan.

"Thank you, Miss Price. That will help a lot," replied Duncan.

"Shhhh!" hushed Elise. "You're already saying too much," she whispered.

"Right, right. Sorry. One more thing before we eat, though... One of my sources told me that a lot of the guys running operations on NEA726 are ridiculously enthusiastic fanboys of Eclair Antares," replied Duncan.

The food arrived.

Atlas and Jess sat next to each other. Jess was mumbling to herself, "Why did they report me as dead... what the hell..."

"Fortunately, they're wrong," replied Atlas. Jess just glared back at him.

Atlas cringed and replied, "What?"

Jess sighed, and then assumed a calmer tone. "That's not the point. If they are saying that, it means they're confident no one is going to refute the claim or provide evidence to the contrary. Think about it, Atlas," she replied to him.

Duncan nodded. "Good point, Miss Price. It's important to read between the lines."

"So, uh, please forgive this old man for such a wacky idea but..."

Duncan looked around at everyone. He gave everyone at the table a peculiar, but non-threatening stare. He tilted his glasses downward as he did so.

"Dumb question but... who here can play a musical instrument?" he asked.

There was a now very common awkward silence among the group.

"I play bass guitar," said Atlas.

"I was the drummer for a band back in college," said Renk, as he sipped some wine.

"I'm classically trained in violin," said Jess. "I don't know what you're getting at, though."

"Hmmm..." said Duncan.

Jess interrupted him before he could say anything else. "I can also play guitar, if that helps."

Shell nodded. "I play a little bit of piano."

Duncan had a pleased look on his face. "I play synths and piano, too. Fun instrument."

Elise had a puzzled look on her face. "What the hell?" she uttered.

After dinner, Duncan and Shell paid the tab, which further humiliated Jess.

Everyone gathered up in the hotel room around the conference table for the planning session.

"So you're planning on somehow putting on a concert to distract everyone while we move in to rescue my father?" asked Jess. "How are you going to manage that," she asked Duncan.

Duncan grinned. "Dr. Heimboem still has some credibility inside the Herei Mob Army. He can tell them that a concert was arranged."

"Why would Crest willingly send Eclair to a terrorist base for a concert, especially after kidnapping their president," asked Elise.

"As far as they would know, to sweeten the deal," Duncan replied. "It's no secret those guys are huge fanboys, despite their violent, animalistic lifestyles."

"It's going to make things weird if I show up to negotiate my father's ransom," said Jess. "Concert or not concert, they think I'm dead."

"It's going to make them very suspicious if I just show up."

"I'm afraid we're quite limited on options," said Duncan.

Jess sat there for a minute and crossed her arms. *I can't think of any alternate plan. My accounts are frozen, so I can't actually transfer the ransom money on the spot. When they find out I can't pay, they'll kill me. They'll kill us all.*

Jess could not handle the stress of her inability to come up with a solution. "We traveled all this way... we could have reached the asteroid days ago via that cargo shuttle but we did this instead..." her hands began to shake. "We played around at a space resort while my father sits in a cage surrounded by bloodthirsty terrorists..."

Tears began to well up in her eyes.

"I don't... I... I don't know what to do..."

Shell was scrolling through cargo shipment schedules for the colony. She noticed something interesting:

Shipment #1107-761806409-B

07:14:22 - Hypolignite fuel cells (260 units)

Source: EMS-L1 colony, sector 18, third ring

Destination: NEA726 fabrication facility, level 4

[CLASSIFIED]

Shell was excited. "People! People! I've found a way!"

"What's that?" said Renk.

"I didn't think this was possible but, for some reason, there's a shipment leaving from this colony to NEA726! I have no idea why..." replied Shell.

"Get outta town," said Duncan, flabbergasted.

"That raises even more questions... who's sending supplies to the terrorists from here?" asked Atlas.

Duncan's expression changed to one of anger. It was the first time Jess saw Duncan look this way.

"Hombre... frickin'... Raymie..." growled Duncan.

Jess gasped. She choked back her tears. "We... did we really...?"

Renk's face turned red. Jess hadn't been afraid of anyone in the group so far but Renk emanated a feeling of pure rage. He stood up and threw his chair across the room.

"Do you mean to tell me..." he growled.

"WE JUST FREED A TERRORIST?! WE ACTUALLY HELPED THEM?!!!" Renk shouted.

Renk stormed out of the room and down the hotel's hallway.

Atlas quickly stood up and ran to the door. "Jesus!" gasped Atlas. "Renk is going to kill Dr. Heimborem!"

Renk ran down the hallway. Atlas soon caught up with him as he reached the elevator.

"Renk, calm down," said Atlas.

Renk was furious but quickly got control of himself. "Come on," he said to Atlas, "We need to find Dr. Heimborem and tell Camay that he's shipping fuel supplies to that asteroid."

Atlas shook his head. "Just wait," he told Renk. "I know you don't like that we got played but think about this strategically."

"What," barked Renk, "That we weren't mistaken as aiding a terrorist group? That we ACTUALLY WERE doing that? Do you realize what's going to happen to us?"

Atlas looked at Renk, confused. "You seemed to come to terms with it earlier."

Renk hit the elevator button and turned around quickly to look directly at Atlas. "Yeah, earlier I'd figured when this was all over we'd find out how to clear our names and expose General Mulhauser and we'd all live happily ever after. You know, when I thought we were INNOCENT!" screamed Renk.

Atlas put his hands out in a "stop" gesture. "Okay, man, hey... take it easy, alright? We still don't know

exactly what's up..."

Renk got on the elevator. "Let's go find out 'what's up', Atlas. Let's get to the root of this bullshit."

"Just wait a minute, Renk!" said Atlas. The two of them were already on the elevator. Atlas was trying to prevent Renk from doing anything rash. By now, Atlas knew Renk wasn't going to commit murder but he was more focused on preventing him from confronting Dr. Heimborem or Dr. Thameh until they had more information.

"Renk, think about it a sec. Is Dr. Heimborem really going to launch a cargo shuttle to the asteroid from here without it being detected by the colony? What if they're actually doing this to help us?"

Renk was silent for a moment. "I gotta say... that would make sense, I suppose," replied Renk.

"I still want to talk to Dr. Thameh. We should at least be on the same page," said Atlas.

They made their way back to the science building where Camay had taken them when they first arrived.

Duncan was about to enter a dive.

"Care to join me," Duncan asked Shell and Elise. "I'm going to have a chat with Dr. Thameh about this."

Duncan and Shell closed their eyes as they entered virtual space. Duncan sent an invitation to Camay.

After a few minutes, Camay entered the room.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Dr. Thameh," said Duncan. "but I wanted to ask you about the details of our transportation to the asteroid tomorrow."

"We'd figured we couldn't just barge in the front door," said Shell.

"Of course not," replied Camay. "Dr. Heimborem has used his clout with the Herei Mob Army to set up a shipment of... what they expect to be fuel."

Duncan and Shell both breathed a sigh of relief. Duncan wanted to be careful not to reveal that they had gained unauthorized access to the colony's shipping records. It had become so *comme d'habitude* for both Shell and Duncan to casually break into everything they could find on the 'net that it was easy to slip up and mention it when it wasn't appropriate.

"Thank you," said Duncan. "We just wanted to check."

The three of them exited the dive.

"Well, there you have it," said Elise.

Camay walked into Dr. Ray Heimborem's office.

"Doctor, may I have a word with you," she asked.

Ray stood up and greeted her. "Of course, Dr. Thameh. What would you like to discuss?"

"The group that extracted you from the EMA compound... I just had a short conference with them," said Camay.

"Oh?"

"Did you already arrange a shipment to the asteroid," asked Camay. "We were going to set up a fake shipment but I noticed that one was already prepared yesterday. It has already been put into the schedule. Did you know anything about that?"

Ray started to sweat. "I'm sure someone just jumped the gun on that. Perhaps the time stamps were entered incorrectly," he replied.

"I see," said Camay. "You know, it's interesting that the people in that group are all together as they are."

"Right, funny how things work out," said Ray. "Why did we choose them to help us, specifically?"

Camay smiled. "Dr. Heimboem, you're notoriously bad for not reading your e-mails all the way through... tsk tsk..."

Ray sat back down. "Are we dealing with... a special class of adepts?"

Camay nodded. "Not all of them, I don't think so. But we have some interesting insights from observing them."

Ray looked confused. "Please, Dr. Thameh... elaborate."

Camay continued, "Jessica Price was a 'designer baby'. Her parents were unable to have a child normally so they used an artificial method. Being of the Price bloodline, the scientists involved in the process were targeted with a rather handsome bribe to perform some additional tampering with the zygote's genetics."

"Ah, yes, and then the accident..." said Ray.

"Yes. Jessica was going to have serious birth defects. However, quite serendipitously... Crest was also working on a new, experimental nanotechnology that enabled the rapid regrowth of damaged tissue. In a panic, the scientists involved decided to save the child by incorporating the yet untested nano machines inside the embryo."

Ray stroked his beard for a moment. "The artificial blood created in that experiment had quite a surplus, if I recall correctly. I had been working for EMA at the time. The artificial blood matched the blood types of some cyborgs that our subsidiaries were servicing that day. They had me working on some new bio-weapons systems so I didn't pay much attention to the mix-up..."

"It was distributed to several clinics in City N on that morning," said Camay. "One cyborg received

some maintenance that day. His name was Duncan Sorenson. The artificial blood was used to reduce immune rejection of the replacement parts."

"Who is that," asked Ray.

"He's in the group that extracted you."

"I'm still not quite seeing your point, Dr. Thameh," said Ray, now even more confused.

"Mr. Sorenson was not born an adept. He began showing signs of certain abilities around the time the adept phenomenon occurred," said Camay. "Some of that artificial blood, containing the experimental nano machines, was used eight years later by accident on two other cyborgs as part of some maintenance treatments. Those two cyborgs were Shell Lockheed and Sophia Weiss. They have yet to demonstrate adept characteristics, however."

"And the person who received the lion's share of that artificial blood demonstrated adept characteristics as well..." said Ray.

Camay nodded. "She was never classified as an adept, due to her social status, but yes."

"What about those two military guys," asked Ray.

"Lieutenant Renk was born an adept," said Camay, "but Atlas appears to be the one in the group who is not."

"No, Dr. Thameh. I mean they're standing right behind you."

Camay quickly turned around. Atlas and Renk were standing in the doorway, looking directly at her.

Shell, Duncan, and Elise took the elevator down to the lowest level of the hotel.

An observation area with a nearly unobstructed view of space ran around the circumference of the colony ring. The colony changed its position to either allow or block sunlight from shining through the windows at ground level, which created day and night onboard the colony.

Down here, the sun was blocked so that it was much darker and easier to see the stars. Shell had wanted to get a good view of the Earth and, possibly, of the approaching asteroid that everyone would try to invade the next day.

"You just don't get a view like this from Earth," said Shell, in awe of the stars. "The light pollution makes it impossible to see anything at all from down there."

Duncan stood there with his arms crossed. "Sure gives you a perspective on things," he said.

Elise yawned and shrugged. "I'm heading back up to ground level. I think Lazarus is running around trying to find her boyfriend and Mr. Buzz Cut."

Elise walked back into the elevator. "Speaking of, I hope Mr. Buzz Cut can pay for the damage to the wall and that chair."

Shell turned around. "Don't get yourself lost, Mafia Molly," chuckled Shell.

"Really," said Elise, as the elevator door started to close. "You can come up with better than that."

Duncan walked over to a seat along the wall and sat down. He looked over at Shell.

"You ever get deja vu," he asked her. Shell shrugged. "No, why do you ask?"

"I got this weird feeling, just like this thing that happened back when I was six years old," said Duncan.

"You're probably just tired," said Shell.

"No, I'm fine. It's just that... when I was six, I had a weird dream. Didn't remember much of it but this exact scene, with us looking out at space and the earth through these windows - I dreamed this exact moment," said Duncan, with a distinct tone of certainty and conviction in his voice.

"Don't crack up on me now," laughed Shell. "We have to keep it together, unlike Renk earlier!"

Duncan laughed heartily. "Ha ha! You're right. This is no time to be saying crazy stuff like that. Let's head back up."

Shell and Duncan went back upstairs. They separated the tables they had put together for the meeting. Duncan shuffled the chairs back into place and Shell tried to fix the chair that Renk had broken. She noticed the small hole in the wall where the chair had struck it and shook her head.

Standing back up, Shell knocked over an old-fashioned looking paper book that was sitting on the table by the bed. The book fell to the floor and an old worn photograph fell out from between its pages. Shell picked up the photograph. It was of a woman she had not seen before.

Duncan walked over and Shell handed him the photograph along with the book.

"Oh, yeah, although I keep most of my memorabilia in digital form within the data storage I carry around inside me, there are a few old things I prefer to keep in the physical realm. I won't bore you with a slideshow of all the photos I have from my past, though," he said to Shell.

Elise entered the room again. She noticed the hole in the wall and sighed.

Duncan looked through the old book and held up the old photo. It had been printed on an old fashioned ink jet printer, on nice glossy photo stock, which was now somewhat aged. He sat down in a chair next to the window and looked at the photo for a while.

"Rosetta and I met at what was known as a 'hacker's convention' back in.. let's see... it was at Defcon 2048. I remember the first time I saw her, she was wearing one of those Guy Fawkes masks and was sitting with a laptop computer in the lobby, hammering away at the keyboard, obviously trying to set up a script."

Duncan laughed.

"Back then, any electronic device you took to Defcon would be hacked almost immediately. The 'net

was truly a Wild West back then and it was a time when a lot of wireless devices had relatively unsophisticated security models. Rosetta had this big antenna coming out from a dongle attached to her machine and I, being nosy, decided to hack into her laptop to see exactly what she was up to. She caught me, though, and that's how we met."

Duncan put the photo away and carefully closed the old book.

"We were both very mischievous at the time. She was involved with some 'hacktivist' group, as it was called back in those days. she'd been working with a group called Anonymous and also Telecomix, which had some heavily controversial political objectives at the time. I wasn't very political but I was one hell of a troublemaker!"

He could tell that Elise was starting to get annoyed with his long-winded story.

"Ok, I'll get to the point," said Duncan. "Rosetta didn't believe in trans-humanism or unnatural body modifications. She lived a long, happy life with me after we were married. We never had any kids. She died of natural causes in 2116. It's been 100 years today since she passed."

Duncan cleared his throat.

"Of course, some of her anti-establishment, fight-for-the-people values rubbed off on me so I've tried to stand up for those ideas ever since. I decided to live on as part machine as long as I can for that purpose."

Duncan checked his messages for a few seconds and then stood up.

"It looks like Jess, Atlas, and Renk are having a little chat with Dr. Thameh and will be back up here shortly."

He looked at Elise. "Yo," he said to her, looking over his glasses with his head tilted downward. "You've been awfully quiet lately."

Renk and Atlas had startled Dr. Thameh as she turned around to see them standing in the doorway.

Renk eyed Dr. Heimboem suspiciously, despite the fact that he and Atlas had just overheard most of their conversation. He decided not to mention the cargo shipment.

"Actually," said Renk, "My official paperwork says that I was born with it but, to tell the truth, I didn't discover my time modding ability until I was stationed overseas back when I was about 25 years old."

"Oh? Now that is interesting," said Camay.

"I don't really like to talk about it," said Renk, "but, come to think of it, I had an incident where I'd come under fire during an ambush and, in the heat of the moment, I got dizzy and noticed that everyone around me had stopped moving, like they were frozen in mid-stride."

Atlas gave Renk an incredulous look. "You told me you were born with that," he said.

"I thought I was," replied Renk, "simply because people are born with stuff like that and it ain't

acquired as far as I know."

Jess came running down the hall, spotting Renk and Atlas. She ran over and joined them in the doorway.

Camay had a blank look on her face for a moment. She had received a message from Duncan. "I just told Mr. Sorenson you three were here," she said.

"Pfft, like he isn't already tracking us," replied Renk. "Anyway, I do remember having surgery and a blood transfusion about a month before that ambush. Hearing what you were talking about makes me wonder if that had anything to do with it."

Atlas, Jess, and Renk left Dr. Heimbore's office and headed back toward the hotel.

"Do you really think you got your abilities somehow from that surgery?" asked Atlas. "That sounds a little far fetched."

Renk shrugged as the three of them walked. "Hey, it's just a theory. All I know is Duncan wasn't born with his and mine didn't turn up until I had been in the military for six years."

Jess held her hand over where she had been shot. "I hate it."

"Hate what," asked Atlas.

"I hate feeling like a lab rat. Like a freak that needs to be studied. No offense, Ralph."

Renk stopped in his tracks. Jess looked nervous, knowing that she called him by the wrong name yet again.

Renk turned around and gently rubbed the top of Jess's head, messing up her hair. "It's Renk, kiddo."

The three of them walked a few blocks before Jess said anything.

"Hey, Renk," said Jess, finally. "Do that again and you're dead."

Renk just laughed at her. Jess looked REALLY annoyed.

They got on the hotel elevator.

"Atlas," Jess grumbled, "I could take the two of you down but..."

Jess's expression changed. She cracked a smile. "Stand up for me once in a while, okay?"

Jess, Atlas, and Renk arrived back at the hotel room, where the others were waiting.

"Not much to talk about in public," Elise answered Duncan's comment. "We've got to really get down to brass tacks, and I've got a few things to share, anyway. For now, we've got to wait for the rest of the team to get back."

Elise took a seat on a corner of the temperfoam slab serving for a bed. "And really, beyond that, is there much to do aside from share my own life story?" Elise shrugged. "Maybe I'm just too used to sitting behind a bar and soaking up conversation."

"Speaking of, you seemed to have a good job going back there," Shell commented. "Why give it up?"

Elise spread her arms. "For this? Well, I am expecting a payoff that isn't just a bit of curiosity. Not to say this isn't worth the price of admission just as it is. I suppose part of it is having a little fun and showing you new guys the ropes. So far, you have only got one of yourselves partially killed, not to say that's a terrible showing with so little preparation."

"I have to say, I'm beginning to feel a little insulted," Duncan commented.

"Sorry, but when it comes to stuff like this, I tend to just tell it like it is. We're disposable assets, we aren't sticking it to the man, and we've got to do a lot to make sure we've got a leg up. So far...we haven't really had much opportunity to handle the prep time part, and it is amazing how well you guys have done. We could all be dead or worse, it's a pretty good run so far."

"I guess it's not as bad when you put it that way."

Some time later, Atlas, Renk, and Jess returned. Elise brought her suitcases over, and began unpacking them.

"All right. I'm not sure how many of you are good with weapons, but it's better to have a bit more gear." She managed to lay out a surprising array of guns, mostly automatics. She pointed out an assault rifle and a pair of pistols, one much bigger than the other. "Those are mine. I'm not likely to hand over my customized rifle right there, but I can part with a pistol if need-be."

The rest of the weapons included a couple more pistols, a second assault rifle, and a sleek, futuristic SMG. "Take your pick, if you'd like." Elise stepped away from the guns. "I've got a good bit of ammunition, including non-lethal gel rounds and stick and shock...not that I'm expecting a strong need not to leave corpses behind."

Duncan spoke up, "No thanks on the guns. I'm not a fan of violence to begin with, even if we do have a non-lethal option. I have to wonder though, don't you usually kill people?"

"Not if I can help it. Dead people tend to make a lot of trouble for your typical corp, and get more attention. So it's better to just knock their security out. Consider it a really warped sense of professional courtesy."

Atlas hefted the rifle experimentally, still holding it with clear military training, but the weapon felt quite heavy in his hands. "I haven't used something like this in years..." He sighed. Not since that incident, in fact. "I'm not sure I really want to, again, either."

After some more mulling over weapons, Elise laid out more things. "Now, unless you've got my exact measurements, I doubt any of my own clothes will fit you. High-fashion armored clothing is nice for armor in style, but it's all custom tailored. Fortunately, it's not too difficult to grab a few armored jackets. to at least cover the bases."

None of the jackets and other bits of armor available looked that different from ordinary clothing, and provided a variety of styles. Elise picked one up and tossed it at Jess, who caught it. "After last time, you'll definitely want a little more than plain clothes. I'm honestly surprised, all that money someone put into you, and they didn't really bother toughening up your bones or skin."

"What's that supposed to mean," Jess asked indignantly.

"I heard something about nanomachines from the Doc. That stuff isn't the sort to come remotely cheap."

Elise didn't rummage around any further, though she did quickly change the topic to continue her salesman-like pitch on gear. "I packed a couple medkits and trauma patches, should help in avoiding any really terrible ends, particularly so far from any real medical support. Automated 'kit can patch you up pretty well, and worst case, a trauma patch can at least stabilize and stop you from bleeding out if you take some really bad hits."

"But wait, there's more! I'm not sure if we really want to use them or really don't want to use them in a closed environment, but I carted up a handful of grenades, if we like smoke, tear gas, or knock-out gas. The flashbangs should be just fine either way, so we can go nuts with them."

Everyone took some weapons and other equipment as Elise offered. Jess made sure to get some body armor and a handgun. She was far more proficient with a sword but, having military academy training, she knew that her sword was no match for a group of people with high powered rifles. Jess knew how to handle a gun, even if she didn't normally carry one.

Atlas and Renk made sure they were armed to the teeth with assault rifles, grenades, and body armor. Duncan opted for an assortment of flash-bang and smoke grenades, being the pacifist that he was. Everyone else equipped themselves appropriately.

Jess tried on her armor and jacket. Everything seemed to fit. Jess was close enough to Elise's size, after all. She packed the ammunition for the handgun in her jacket and laid the gear next to her bed in the other room. She lay on the bed for a while and tried to fall asleep. She managed to doze off for a few hours, despite her anxiety.

Jess awoke later that night. The lights were out. Shell was in the other bed and Jess couldn't tell if Elise was in the room or not. She thought it best not to check.

Jess quietly got out of bed and put on a robe over the pajamas that the hotel had furnished. She walked out into the hotel hallway and took the elevator down to the observation level for a moment to sit alone and think.

In the observation level, it was quiet. Everyone else was either asleep or taking care of business elsewhere. She sat down in one of the seats and stared out at the stars. The night side of the Earth showed vast arrays of city lights, which reflected against the large windows along the edges of the colony's rings.

We stand a chance, she thought. Jess wanted to remain positive. *We can extract father and then take control of the cargo shuttle. As long as we don't get ourselves cornered, we should be okay.*

Jess thought about the decker cyborgs. *They'll be able to kill the security cameras and motion sensors.* She considered Elise's experience in the underworld and the military experience of Atlas and Renk.

She heard the elevator door open. It was Atlas. He walked in, acknowledged her, and stood at the glass, staring out at the stars.

"God, what a view," he said.

Jess didn't say anything at first. She had planned on spending a few moments alone, but Atlas wasn't bothering her.

"Hey, Atlas. Can't sleep either?" she asked.

"Not really," replied Atlas. "It's funny."

"How is it funny?" asked Jess.

"Well... I've done far more dangerous missions before," said Atlas. "You know, stealth operations where the stakes were high, stuff I honestly didn't expect to walk away from."

"I see," said Jess.

"So many people tried, failed, and even died to get where we are right now," said Atlas, with a very solemn tone. "But... all I can think about is making sure that you, your father, and our group get back to Earth safely."

Atlas walked over and sat down next to Jess.

"So... what do you want to do when we get back?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious," she shot back. "I'm going to make sure that the people who did all of this are brought to justice."

Atlas nodded. "Of course and I'll do everything I can to help you."

Jess smiled. She smiled uncontrollably. For some reason, she felt an extreme joy from hearing that.

"Atlas, I...I'd like to ask you something," she stuttered.

"Yo, what's up?" asked Atlas.

"When we get back to Earth, would you consider... um..."

"Spit it out, Jess."

"Would you be interested in being hired as one of my full-time security staff? I mean, after my accounts are unfrozen and I smooth everything out with Randall and we make sure my father is okay with it and..."

"Of course, Jess." Atlas stood up. "I'd really like that. As tough as you are, it would be an easy job, I'd bet, but you can count on me regardless," he said, laughing.

Jess turned bright red. "Id..Idiot... it's n... not like I want you to be my personal bodyguard or anything..."

Atlas laughed loudly. "Hah! Well, you're stuck with us for now anyway!"

Atlas walked over to the elevator. "Make sure you don't stay up all night, eh?" he said to Jess. Atlas took the elevator back up to his room. Jess returned to her room about ten minutes later and went back to sleep.

Shell had obtained a gun from Elise that was capable of firing several types of non-lethal rounds. She also equipped herself with some stick and shock rounds in addition to the tranquilizer and gel rounds. *These might be handy in conjunction with some demolitions activity*, thought Shell. Since most of Shell's body was already covered in cybernetic armor, she didn't really need any body armor but she was far from invincible so she made sure she had some smoke grenades so that she could escape quickly if needed.

Shell managed to get a few hours of sleep, which was all she needed since she got some sleep on the shuttle from Earth earlier.

She woke up to notice that Jess was gone but figured she's gone for a walk. Shell looked over in the third bed, which was a portable, roll-away type with just a foam slab for a mattress. Elise appeared to be asleep.

She sat there for a minute, contemplating whether or not she should go for a walk. She decided to dive into cyberspace for a few moments and visit her usual hangouts. As she looked around, she noticed various mentions of the news and saw lots of postings where people were grieving Jessica Price's death. Shell desperately wanted to assure them that Jess wasn't dead but it would have been dangerous and irresponsible to do so.

Looking at some of the local area data feeds, Shell gained access to various space telescopes and use the opportunity to take a look at Near Earth Asteroid 726. She studied the layout of the asteroid and used the X-Ray and infrared modes of the telescopes to build a detailed 3D map of the structure. She wasn't sure if Duncan had already procured a map so she finished building the map and sent it to Duncan and Elise, along with everyone else's communicator addresses. Of course, she took care to make sure that only encrypted channels were used.

Shell exited the dive. Jess was back in her bed and Elise was standing next to the door, fully dressed and ready.

"It's time," said Elise.

"Right," said Shell. "I'll tell the others."

Dr. Camay Thameh reviewed the shipping schedule in her office. She traced the users who had entered data and checked the time stamps on everything scheduled in the past week.

The shuttle leaving today with the fuel shipment was actually at NEA726 two days ago, she thought. It departed from Earth around noon, docked at the asteroid on time, and then returned to the colony.

"How could I have missed that," she said to herself. Camay still occupied her proxy android at her desk but her mind was inside the colony's local network. "Dr. Heimborem was in EMA's captivity at the time."

She called Duncan.

"Mr. Sorenson," she said, "We've decided not to have a pilot operate the shuttle."

"Oh?" replied Duncan, sounding a bit worried.

"I'm going to operate the shuttle remotely. I'll have a comprehensive view of the security systems on the asteroid, so I'll be able to give you real time backup once you're inside... as long as they don't jam communications," said Camay.

"Much appreciated," said Duncan. "Every little bit helps, especially when it doesn't involve further risk to any lives."

Camay sent Duncan a map of the colony's dock, with the location of the cargo shuttle marked. She quietly laughed, knowing that he and Shell had likely already hacked around and obtained the information on their own.

"As you and I discussed yesterday, Dr. Heimborem arranged a concert by Eclair Antares. Their guys are expecting to welcome Eclair when the shuttle arrives but the rest of you need to stay hidden until the concert," said Camay.

"What?" snapped Duncan. "I thought the whole concert thing was a joke!"

"The Herei Mob staff won't think it's a joke if they don't get some entertainment on that drab rock. Eclair is expected to rock and not be drab," Camay replied, making it clear that she wasn't kidding, despite the pun.

"Is this really necessary," asked Duncan.

"Once the cargo shuttle is docked, if the guards don't have a distraction to end all distractions, they're going to search the shuttle, unload their stuff, and immediately send it out. You won't have an opportunity to exit the shuttle unless the concert pulls all of the guards away from the docking area."

"No time to even rehearse, then," muttered Duncan.

"The music is pre-recorded. You all just have to fake it. Their auditorium already has instruments and Eclair... I mean, Sophia, or whatever name she goes by... she'll immediately recognize the tune and know what to sing," said Camay.

"So, Eclair starts the concert by greeting her fans, then we have to high-tail it backstage as soon as the dock is free of guards, then after the concert...?" Duncan asked.

"Then the rest is up to all of you."

"I really don't like just being a distraction, even if it's probably the easiest approach," Elise said and sighed. "Doesn't mean I won't do it, though. It better not be stuff from her newest album. I wasn't involved in that one."

Dr. Thameh nodded. "We can certainly work around that."

"Good," Elise said. "I might be able to work a few surprises into some of the act, too." She looked around at the others, taking a few moments to study each of them.

"Okay," she finally said. "I'm not one for inspiring speeches, so I'm not going to make one. We're going to be pretty much alone and without support, and it's going to be a hell of a risky plan. So, first off, I can certainly provide a diversion. Any luck and I can at least get one of you guys on with me. Second, if you do wander around where the guards can see you, keep your gear hidden. I'll drag mine along in a suitcase; any luck and they won't think it odd that I take some costumes with me. And if they do try to search my stuff..." She shrugs. "We might have to start improvising earlier than planned."

"Let's hope they don't do that," Jess said, obviously nervous with her father's life on the line.

"No kidding," Elise continued. "I'll try to get everyone I can into some sort of makeshift auditorium, and leave you with a skeleton crew to deal with in the meantime. If you need to take someone down, try to do it quietly." She looked at the two hackers. "If either of your two can lock everyone in whatever ends up my performance space, that should buy a little more time, too."

"Would that be dangerous," Duncan asked. "That's probably a lot of fans to deal with."

"I've dealt with rough fans before. And as much as I'd want to joke about them being locked in with me, I'd really appreciate it if I had a way to get back out if shit hits the fan."

She paused again. "So, that's about it for what I can think of. Stay quiet, stay careful, bullshit a reason to be there if you have to. Oh yeah, and if anyone can steal some intel on what the hell they're even doing on that rock, it'll probably be valuable to somebody. Let's go."

Camay led everyone to the cargo shuttle docks and brought them inside.

Duncan looked around the interior of the shuttle. "There are plenty of places to hide in here," he commented. "I guess, if they are expecting Eclair to arrive, Elise should greet the crew and the rest of us should stay hidden until right before the concert starts."

The shuttle doors closed. As the docking area depressurized, the cargo shuttle detached from the docking apparatus and slowly departed from the colony into space.

"Just like the good old days," chuckled Renk. It was obvious that he was used to missions like this. Atlas checked his gear while Shell and Duncan reviewed the data for the asteroid, including the maps that Shell had made earlier.

"After Elise exits, I'll jam the dock security cameras," said Duncan. "We'll have a narrow window of

opportunity before they noticed the cameras are jammed, so we'll have to move very quickly."

After a while, the asteroid came within view. Its orbit brought it into reasonable proximity to the colony. The cargo shuttle approached the asteroid and slowed down as it came near a large manufacturing facility on its surface.

There was some uncomfortable tugging in various directions as the artificial gravity on the shuttle adapted to the gravity of the asteroid and then again as it changed to the artificial gravity of the facility. The shuttle glided into the docking area and landed.

Everyone else got inside some shipping containers while Elise stood in front of the shuttle's cargo doors as they opened.

The guards ran up to the shuttle with their guns at the ready. At first, it appeared as if they were about to attack.

One of the guards shouted, "Miss Antares! We're honored by your presence here! I love your music!"

Another guard squealed, "I have all of your albums! Would you sign one of them?"

Elise signed the guard's album and smiled. She pulled along a couple of suitcases as the guards escorted her to a backstage dressing room and left her alone to prepare.

Shortly after Elise left the shuttle, Duncan accessed the security cameras for the dock and jammed them. Looking at the map, he chose a path that would take them through some of the back hallways, toward the backstage area of the auditorium.

"Stay sharp, folks," whispered Duncan. Atlas, Renk, Jess, Shell, and Duncan carefully sneaked out of the shuttle and ran into the narrow hallway.

Shell checked the map.

"Those of us who are going to help with the concert should get back stage now," whispered Shell.

Watching carefully for guards, Shell, Jess, Duncan, Renk, and Atlas quickly walked into the backstage area. Elise emerged from the dressing room in her performance outfit, giving a "the coast is clear" gesture and led the group onstage, behind the back curtain.

Renk started setting up a drum kit. Atlas picked up a bass guitar and started tuning it. Duncan walked over to a rack of synths and inspected the piano.

Jess walked over to Atlas and opened his backpack. "Hey!" Atlas shrieked, confused as to what she was doing.

Jess pulled out a pair of Groucho Marx glasses and put them on. Atlas turned around, looked at her, and stifled a laugh the best he could. Shell began to chuckle. She couldn't believe that Jess bothered to save those from earlier.

"I know, I know but if I don't put on something they're going to recognize me and blow this whole act,"

hissed Jess.

Shell nodded. "Better than nothing," she whispered.

The excited Herei Mob Army staff started to gather in the auditorium. Shell peeked around the curtain, seeing a few hundred men and women gathering and taking their seats. It struck her odd that a terrorist organization would have such ordinary looking people in its membership. By all appearances, this was like any other small concert's crowd.

The asteroid base was, after all, like a small city. Shell knew from the maps that there were various businesses set up on the asteroid to support its semi-permanent population. Most of the people in the crowd were, however, dressed in guard uniforms, so they had their target audience right where they wanted them.

The house lights dimmed. The stage lights came on. Everyone prepared to play along with the pre-recorded music as Elise, known to the crowd as Eclair Antares, walked to the front of the stage and grabbed the microphone.

It was showtime.

Jess picked up the guitar as the curtain lifted. Elise greeted the cheering audience as the blinding stage lights lit the group.

Some people in the crowd laughed when they saw Jess take the stage, wearing her goofy disguise. As expected, they thought it was all part of the act.

"Yeah, yeah, you schmucks..." grumbled Jess, under her breath.

Renk smacked his drumsticks together as the beat started. The pre-recorded music began to play and Jess began strumming along with the chords. Duncan, Atlas, and Shell began to fake it along with the music.

Elise's demeanor change was startling to Jess. The hardened, professional criminal had become a bubbly, friendly idol on stage as she sang the lyrics to the song.

Halfway through the first song, Jess began communicating with the rest of the group through nonverbal cues. They had decided that the first song would be a band performance while the second song would be a typical idol performance without the band. This would allow the group to be in the area with reduced suspicion if they were seen by the guards backstage or in the hallway.

Jess turned up the volume on her guitar amp and played an actual guitar solo during the song's bridge. She hadn't been in the mood to goof around, considering what was at stake, but she decided that anything worth doing was worth doing right. After her guitar solo, Elise continued to sing until the first song was over. Shell apparently recognized the song and sang backup vocals.

After the song, Elise started her second song as the stage lights went down and the spotlight focused on Elise. Everyone else was able to quietly leave the stage during her performance and they met out in the hallway, by the dressing room door.

"Okay, Duncan and Shell, can you lock all of the doors to the auditorium, so no one can get in or out?" asked Jess.

Duncan and Shell nodded. "They're all sealed shut," replied Duncan. "No one can open them from either side," added Shell.

"Good, good," replied Jess, keeping her voice just barely above the music.

Jess rummaged around in Atlas's backpack and took out a handful of smoke grenades. A couple of them were flash-bang grenades but she hadn't quite noticed. She gently grabbed Atlas's arm. "Let's do this," she whispered to him.

Atlas and Jess opened the backstage door, which was the only one not remotely locked by Duncan and Shell. At Elise finished singing, they darted back to the rear part of the stage, keeping behind the side curtains. Elise saw them and she nodded back at them, giving them their cue.

Loud feedback suddenly squealed from the PA system, startling Jess. She automatically unsheathed her sword and swung it around, as a matter of reflex. Her sword slashed a couple of pipes on the wall. Jess thought there was a strange odor coming from them but, given that she didn't have much time, didn't bother to investigate the damage she had done.

Elise bowed to the audience as they cheered wildly. On this cue, Atlas and Jess quickly chucked several smoke grenades in the crowd. They exploded into thick clouds of black smoke that rapidly filled the entire auditorium. The strange odor that Jess had smelled earlier became far more intense. *It's probably from the smoke grenades*, she thought.

Atlas ran over to Jess. "What the hell is that weird stink," he asked her. "Smoke grenades aren't supposed to smell like that."

Elise motioned the two of them back toward the door. "We have to get out, now!" yelled Elise.

Jess chucked a few more smoke grenades into the crowd but a couple of them made a very loud sound and flashed brightly in the smoke-filled seating area. The crowd began to panic and the guards drew their weapons.

The odor in the auditorium became unbearable as Jess, Atlas, and Elise ran out the back door.

Duncan sent a locking code through the network and the automatic bolt on the backstage door kerchunked loudly as it locked.

The group had successfully trapped the facility guards and security staff in the auditorium and made haste down the hallway toward the dressing room. After unpacking the luggage cases that Elise had brought in, everyone donned their equipment and rushed further down the hallway to a stairwell.

A few floors down the stairwell, a deafening explosion rang out. The entire building shook as if a large magnitude quake had shaken the asteroid.

"What the HELL was THAT?!" shouted Jess, frightened by the unexpected blast. Her right eye widened in fear as she tried to figure out the direction from which the explosion came. The power

flickered and the emergency lights came on.

"We have to keep moving," said Renk. "There's no time to investigate."

A loud alarm began to reverberate through the building. It was muffled but still discernible in the stairwell.

Atlas stumbled back to his feet after the explosion and heard the alarm.

"Shit, they're on to us already?!" said Atlas. He ran back up the stairs and tried to open the door so he could see if any guards were coming. The door had been sealed shut.

"Duncan," shouted Atlas, down the stairs, "can you hack the lock to this door?"

After a few seconds, Duncan shouted back, "The system's down! I can't access any of the locks right now!"

Atlas stood next to the door a minute and listened to the alarm. *That's not an intruder alarm*, he thought. *That is a fire alarm*. He ran back down the stairs to meet the others.

"I don't think they know what we're up to, guys," said Atlas, with a hint of fear and disgust in his voice. "That's the fire alarm. Did someone trigger it as part of a diversion?"

Duncan and Shell both shook their heads.

"Could there be an actual fire? Maybe it was from whatever just caused that loud noise and shaking," replied Renk.

Atlas sat on the steps. He began to feel nauseous.

"Those smoke grenades aren't incendiary, right," Atlas asked Elise.

Elise shook her head. "Of course they aren't. You should know that, being military," she replied.

Atlas wiped his brow. "Right, right, just checking. We only used non-lethal weapons to blind and confuse them, I know."

Jess shrugged and looked at Atlas, having a confused look on her face. "I'm sure it has nothing to do with the explosion or the fire alarm. Remember, we're in a weapons manufacturing facility! Maybe a test just went wrong somewhere nearby," she said to Atlas, trying to reassure him.

Atlas stood up. "I'm sorry, everyone. It's just... sometimes... I get these flashbacks, y'know?"

Renk impatiently gestured to everyone to follow him further down the stairs. "Come on, we don't have all day here," he growled. "We may have sealed 'em in the auditorium but they won't stay sealed forever."

Atlas caught up with Renk as they continued to descend the stairwell. Renk patted Atlas on the back. "It's going to be fine, buddy," said Renk. "Just focus on the mission."

At the bottom of the stairwell, Renk opened the door. The fire alarm was still blaring.

He poked his head through the doorway. The hall was illuminated by emergency lights. A lone guard was walking down the hall, oblivious to Renk's presence. The others remained hidden underneath the stairwell as Renk quietly sneaked out into the hallway when the guard was walking away.

Renk concentrated as hard as he could. The emergency lights changed from amber to deep red as time slowed down around Renk. He darted out of the stairwell and ran toward the guard as fast as he could. Renk grabbed the guard, put him in a tight stranglehold, and allowed time to return to normal as he choked the guard and dragged him back into the stairwell before any other guards could see him.

Inside the stairwell, Renk shut the door behind him and Atlas held a gun to the guard's head.

"Talk and live," grumbled Renk to the guard. "Where is Richard Price being held?"

The guard remained silent. Atlas pressed his gun right against the guard's forehead. Elise stood over the guard, ready to take action if he resisted.

"Richard Price," prodded Renk. "WHERE. IS. HE."

The guard stuttered, "They... they struck a deal with him, said... told me, last I heard, he was going to cooperate..."

Jess walked over to them. "He WHAT?!" she yelled.

"He was going to provide access to... um, something..." whimpered the guard. "In... in exchange for leaving his daughter alone, he was gonna..."

"Spit it out!" yelled Jess. Renk shushed her.

"The code for the weapon that Crest developed here," said the guard. "I swear, that's all I know!"

Renk shook his head. "I'm getting real tired of this shit," he growled. "Where is Richard Price?"

"They were going to let him talk to Eclair," said the guard. "He insisted that he meet with her after the concert to find out why Crest allowed her to come here."

Jess put her hand over her mouth. "No..."

"Then they said his daughter was reported to be dead and he went ape-shit! He demanded to be allowed contact with Crest to confirm one way or another..." said the guard.

Renk tightened his grip on the guard's neck. "Did he go to the concert?" demanded Renk.

"I don't know!" shouted the guard. Atlas fired a tranquilizer dart into the guard's chest. The guard had shouted a bit too loudly and he had to be silenced for the time being.

"Dammit," exclaimed Renk. "This is getting complicated."

More footsteps could be heard in the hallway. There was enough space underneath the stairs for everyone to hide, so they kept themselves underneath the stairs as a small group of Herei Mob Army staff frantically rushed up the stairs. Renk dragged the unconscious guard under the stairs with them.

Duncan could overhear some of what they were saying:

"They've got a torch to open the door."

"Everyone has to evacuate. There's a huge fire near the docks, they don't know what happened."

"Was it that new fuel shipment? I knew that shuttle seemed suspicious."

"I heard it was a gas leak."

"The mess hall, cargo docks, and the auditorium were all destroyed and they haven't gotten it under control yet."

Duncan gulped. He was still unable to access the security cameras. Shell had been desperately trying to regain access, too. It was difficult to fly blind in this situation and it was very unusual to have zero access to nearby systems. The sensation was quite foreign to Duncan after being so used to hacking into everything around him.

"So, they're evacuating the whole facility," whispered Duncan. "Not even a skeleton crew?"

"That's highly unusual," commented Renk. "For a place like this, they wouldn't evacuate every soul unless they were damned sure the whole place was about to go up."

"I suppose we shouldn't make too many assumptions," replied Duncan. "We don't know for sure what caused that explosion or if what they're talking about is even accurate."

After the evacuating guards had cleared the stairwell by cutting down a door on one of the upper floors, Duncan, Shell, Jess, Atlas, Renk, and Elise headed out into the hallway. It was very dark but there were no more guards around.

Accessing a copy of the map that Duncan had stored in his own gear, he puzzled over where to go next.

"We can't go back up the way we came," said Duncan. "It's quite a trek to the next stairwell."

Camay had lost contact with Duncan, Shell, and the others. Frustrated and worried, she continuously scanned the network for signs of any of them reconnecting.

One of Camay's fellow scientists came running into her office.

"Dr. Thameh!" said the scientist, who was another A.I. using a proxy android.

"Yes, Jax, what's the matter?" replied Camay.

"You might want to check the telescope. It's pointed at NEA726, where one of our cargo shuttles docked today."

Camay nodded. "Yes, I know about that. I authorized and remotely piloted the shuttle there, then lost contact with its occupants."

Jax had a terrified look on her face. "That's all fine and good but look at the video feed."

Camay accessed the video feed from the telescope. She enhanced the image a little and fell back in her seat, mouth agape, in total shock.

A large area, including the entire shuttle dock of the facility, was completely gone. A crater filled with molten metal was where the dock and the surrounding structure had been just a few hours prior.

"I don't believe it..." said Camay, struggling to find words.

"It's unlikely anyone survived," said Jax.

Dr. Heimborem came running into the office. "Dr. Thameh, something has happened to the factory on NEA726...", he said.

Camay interrupted him. "I know, there was a huge chunk of the place destroyed." Camay stood up and looked at Dr. Heimborem directly. "How did this happen? What was the cargo on our shuttle," she demanded.

"Just neutralized engine fuel," replied Ray. "Completely non-volatile but they wouldn't even know the difference until they tried to use it."

Camay nodded. "I know. The dummy fuel isn't reactive. That couldn't have been the cause," she replied.

Dr. Heimborem pointed to something on the map of the facility, which Camay had obtained from Duncan earlier and had displayed on a large screen in her office. "Dr. Thameh, if they were on top few levels, they can't possibly be..."

"Alive," interrupted Camay. "That much is obvious. That part is completely obliterated."

Dr. Heimborem continued to point at the map. "Sadly, yes, but the facility runs all the way to the very center of the asteroid. The lower levels are heavily fortified so the main parts of the factory would not be affected," he replied.

"I've lost all contact with them," said Camay. "It doesn't bode well."

The group sneaked through the hallways, watching out for additional guards as they went. Shell shuffled over to the door to another stairwell and poked her head inside. The coast was clear, so she motioned the others to follow her.

As they ascended the stairs, Shell noticed the air was getting hard to breathe.

"I can smell smoke," said Shell. "It's getting stronger as we go."

"There's some bad fumes in here," mentioned Duncan. He started to cover his nose.

Around the fourth level from the surface, the stairs were blocked by rubble. Collapsed support beams and other structural material had completely filled in the stairs and it was impossible to see beyond it.

Shell noticed that the rubble was still smoldering. "This is bad," she said. "We might be trapped."

The area was eerily silent, aside from the faint echoes of the fire alarm. Even the emergency lights were dead on the past couple of floors they had passed.

Shell was able to establish brief network connections with some systems but the camera feeds were all dead.

"We need to figure out what's happened and how we get out of here," she said.

Elise sighed. "This route's no good." She held her rifle carefully at her side, even if they hadn't run into much in the way of resistance. "We'll need another way down. I'm not sure where they're likely holding Mr. Price, or if he's even still there, but we don't want to be caught on the wrong side if they shut all the bulkheads.

She silently prayed whatever fire-suppression systems the base had were up to the task, if the fire alarm was what had tripped earlier. And that they were well on the other side of any areas that might be venting atmosphere, for that matter. This was her first op in space, but it didn't take much to imagine some of the major risks.

"We'll need another way down. If whatever skeleton-crew of guards doesn't stop us, we keep going, if they do, we can try to bluff our way through because shit's clearly hitting the fan and if you can't access the local wireless, hey probably don't have solid comms, either."

Duncan and Shell nodded. "Already on it," Shell said as she studied her map of the facility. "Looks like we'll have to backtrack to the last floor and follow a few hallways to another stairwell."

"The lack of a 'net is really getting to me," Duncan added. "I don't want to say it's unnatural, but to be completely cut out like this is unsettling."

"We can hope to find a security center, or some place to establish a wire connection," Shell suggested.

Elise looked at the others. "Just so you know, this is...uh, not atypical in this line of work." She pushed her mask up long enough to give a sheepish smile. "It's rare that something completely unexpected or unplanned doesn't complicate matters. As-is, our best bet is to get further away from whatever damage and hope we can wait it out or find a secondary dock to get off this rock."

The whole group turned around, giving up on the caved-in stairwell as a lost cause. On their way toward another way down, they ran across what looked from around the corner like a makeshift security checkpoint. Elise took her mask off and tossed it at Jess. "Here, Laz, this'll do a sight better than those glasses. I'll need to be seen anyway."

She signaled for the others to follow her lead, and quickly ran out, still carrying the gun long enough to "notice" the guards and quickly drop it, throwing her hands up. "Ah! Holy crackers!"

The guards were, for the most part, unamused. "Stay right where you are, and don't move!"

"Don't you recognize me, damn it!? I'm Eclair Antares!" Elise repeated the name a second time, enunciating each syllable very deliberately. "I was here for a concert and something absolutely crazy happened on the upper levels. We managed to get here in all the confusion and don't know what's going on." She did her best to put on something of the frightened and confused act.

"Why the hell are you running around with a gun, then?"

"Don't you know Crest is proud that I don't need bodyguards? What if someone was trying to kill me?"

"Your story doesn't add up," said one of the guards. "Eclair arrived today and a fuel shipment arrived today, but only one shuttle arrived in the dock."

The other guard spoke up. "Look, Miss Antares, a lot of us here are big fans but we've got a job to do. Don't you know what's going on?"

Duncan stepped forward. "Actually, we don't," he said. "One minute we're playing a set on stage, then when we take a short break, we hear these explosions, take cover in a stairwell, and then find ourselves unable to get back out."

The guard looked at Duncan for a moment. He sized him up and seemed to consider him non-threatening enough.

"Listen, old man," said the guard. "We're ALL trapped down here."

Both of the guards lowered their guns.

The other guard spoke up. "The last thing we heard before the comms went out was that a fire broke out near the auditorium and spread through the ventilation ducts. We had a shipment of... 'fuel'... in the docks that got ignited..."

The first guard interrupted the other guard. "Shut the hell up, man!"

The second guard became agitated. "Who cares now? You think we're going to make it out alive?!"

Duncan put his hands out in a "wait" gesture. "Fellas," said Duncan, "Let's try to work together, here. We want to find a way out as much as you do."

The guard nodded. "Old man, if you can find us a way out, we'll help you all as much as we can."

The guards had noticed Renk's military outfit and were eyeing him carefully as they walked down the hallway. A slight haze was slowly beginning to form in the air as they walked along. Most of the group was openly carrying guns. The guards allowed Elise to pick up her weapon and bring it along with her, assuming that the facility had come under attack earlier by an unknown group.

"You look like you're with the military," said one of the guards to Renk. "So why are you dressed like that if you're in a band?"

"It's a costume, pal," said Renk, with a lot of annoyance in his voice. Working with the Herei Mob Army was making Renk very agitated, in addition to the suspicion Renk had about Dr. Heimborem. The air, which was getting harder to breathe, wasn't helping his mood, either.

Renk looked at Jess. She didn't even bother to hide the fact that she hated having to play along, though she didn't express it verbally. Renk walked over close to Jess and whispered to her, "try to play along for now."

Trying to help Jess, Renk asked one of the guards, "I heard the president of Crest corporation had been here to oversee some project. Was he watching our performance?"

The guard snickered. "You're asking a lot of questions. Don't push your luck."

Renk shrugged, "Alright, alright. I was just wondering since he is technically our boss."

The smoke was now making it very hard to breathe.

The group walked up to a large set of elevator doors.

"Something's horribly wrong with the atmospheric control system," mentioned a guard. "This part of the facility is isolate from the upper levels. Did the fire spread somehow?"

Duncan shook his head. "If it has, we're in serious trouble."

Renk replied, "If the fire spread, we are going to run out of oxygen."

The large elevator doors had a sign above them that read, "RESTRICTED". One of the guards tried to activate the elevator, but it would not react.

"Dammit," said the guard. "We could get down to the core if this elevator worked. It's completely isolated from the rest of the facility and we can at least breathe down there."

Shell walked over to the control panel and plugged in some cords that were attached to her. After a few minutes, the panel lights came on and the door opened. Everyone quickly walked inside.

"Looks like you managed to get this reconnected to the emergency power," said the guard. "Miss, you just saved our asses."

It was a long elevator ride down.

After a few more moments, one of the guards spoke again. "Alright, look. We're going into a top secret area. At this point, we're traitors to the Herei Mob Army, but honestly, we just don't want to die. If you have questions, bud, just ask," said the guard, looking at Renk.

"Thank you," replied Renk. "Just tell us where Mr. Price is."

"Sure," sighed the guard. "We're compartmentalized, just so you know, but the last we heard, he went to that concert. They more or less let him wander freely after striking a deal with our bosses that his

daughter wouldn't be harmed."

The elevator reached the bottom after several minutes. The doors opened and everyone walked out into a long, curved hallway.

Jess looked around. Sure enough, this area was completely isolated from the rest of the facility. The air was clean and the entire area looked very sterile.

Jess had kept her mouth shut for a good long while. She couldn't bring herself to speak to the guards, knowing that they worked for the organization that had murdered her mother and kidnapped her father. *They're lying about him*, she thought as they continued to walk through the corridor. *He wouldn't give up security codes, not even for false promises of my safety.*

Finally, Jess could take no more of the tension. She removed her mask and spoke up.

"There's no way Crest would be working on a secret weapon here," she muttered.

One of the guards turned around. Fortunately, the two guards that had agreed to help the group did not immediately recognize who she was.

"This facility used to be owned by Crest corporation, lady," replied the guard. "The people who hired us took ownership of it years ago."

"Why would Crest abandon something like this," demanded Jess. "If they scrapped the project, they wouldn't just leave it intact."

The guard started to become suspicious of Jess. "I don't know who you are," said the guard, "but that's all above my pay grade. We just started a couple weeks ago to beef up security."

Jess scratched her head. Some of the tension had been broken when she heard that.

"Wait, are you or are you not with the Herei Mob Army?" she asked impatiently.

"Like I said, we're just jobbers. It's a paycheck, kid. We know that Herei's into some nasty shit but we have to eat," said the other guard.

"That's your excuse?!" shouted Jess. "You'll willingly serve an organization that murders people?"

Atlas interrupted. "I don't think this is the right time to discuss this..."

Jess interrupted Atlas. "Then when is?! After these goons kill my father?!"

Jess stopped herself. She knew that she just made a huge mistake.

"Aw, shit," muttered Renk.

Both of the guards stopped in their tracks and turned around.

"Wait," said the guard. "You're... Mr. Price's daughter. You're... supposed to be... dead...?!"

Just then, a couple of bullets struck the guards in their heads, killing them instantly. Jess, Elise, Atlas, and Renk drew their weapons. Duncan and Shell took defensive positions.

Turning around, Jess saw a man with two military guys accompanying him.

Renk gasped. "General Mulhauser!" he yelled. Renk kept his gun pointed at the General, knowing that he had just shot the two guards dead.

General Mulhauser laughed. "Ha ha! After those goons kills your father?! Are you stupid, Princess Crest? YOU already did a fine job killing him!"

Jess's right eye widened and glowed bright green. A primal look of unbridled rage swept over her face.

"The FUCK do you mean, you fat, pompous derelict," Jess growled.

She drew her sword and lunged at him. One of Mulhauser's guards knocked her to the floor. Atlas rushed over to her and pointed his gun directly at Mulhauser's head.

Mulhauser laughed again. "You stupid little bitch. You little spoiled, entitled, prima donna designer baby."

Jess sprang to her feet and grasped her sword tightly. Both guards had their guns trained on her and Atlas.

"How STUPID are you, Princess Crest?" asked Benton Mulhauser, rhetorically. "You got careless in your little stunt back up on that stage while your has-been throwaway Eclair clone was busy singing that shitty noise you call music."

Jess glanced back at Elise. She and Renk both had their rifles trained on Benton.

"Come now, you're trapped just like your father was when you burned him alive," said Benton.

Jess lunged at Benton again, this time being shot in the arm by one of the guards. Jess screamed in pain, dropping her sword.

"I mean, just like this mass murderer here," said Benton, looking at Atlas directly in the eye. "Surely he must have enjoyed the opportunity to help you. He helped you BURN THEM ALL ALIVE."

Atlas's pupils contracted. "YOU SHUT UP," screamed Atlas.

Benton laughed again, more arrogantly than before. "Like you didn't LOVE IT," he yelled at Atlas. "Princess Crest cuts the gas lines and you all set the place on fire before scurrying away like rats from a sinking ship, only you morons go below deck instead, trapping the lot of you."

Atlas collapsed to his knees, speechless.

"We... did... what," mumbled Jess. She felt faint.

"Oh, but it gets even better," bellowed General Mulhauser. "You were mules for a shipment of high explosive, courtesy of our operative back the L1 colony. Too bad it all went to waste thanks to your

little fire burning out of control. So, you finally managed to get revenge on the Herei Mob Army but you had to barbecue your daddy in the process!"

Renk fired a warning shot at Benton. "That's enough!" shouted Renk. "I KNEW you reeked of corruption!"

Jess regained her focus and charged at one of Benton's guards, slashing him across the chest and sending him flying into the wall.

With Elise and Renk still pointing their weapons at General Mulhauser and his remaining soldier, Shell checked her map. She and Duncan had taken refuge just inside a small office that had been unlocked. The power was still out, so Shell was unable to plug into any of the network sockets to connect.

Shell heard Elise yell to her, "Shell! Check the map and find a path out of here!"

Shell accessed her local map. They had taken a long elevator down to an area that the now-deceased guards, who had helped guide them down, called the "core". This area wasn't on her map. In fact, while performing X-ray scans and other analysis, it was not apparent that anything existed in the center of the asteroid. Shell could calculate from the elevator ride that they had indeed traveled to the center of the asteroid.

Shell looked over at Duncan. He was trying to see if he could connect any of the network equipment in the office to the emergency power system, to no avail.

"I think we're going to have to find a path on foot," she told Duncan. "The others are in a standoff with that general, so let's motor while we have a chance."

Duncan and Shell ran out of the office and away from the group, going further down the hall. Aside from the commotion back there, it was ominously quiet and dark.

"It seems almost too quiet down here," commented Duncan.

After exploring the corridors for a few more minutes, Elise sent Shell a message via a direct wireless connection. She had used one of the communicators Duncan had handed out, which was able to bypass the 'net entirely. Since there was no network, this was the only way to communicate.

General Wind Bag and his henchman ran off.

You find a way out of this rock yet?

Shell and Duncan came upon a large door. After hacking (and temporarily powering) the door, it opened and led down another long hallway to what seemed like the very center.

An enormous room was before them. Although there was very little light, Shell could see her surroundings through her infrared vision. A giant sphere was in the center of the room, surrounded by all kinds of equipment that Shell could not recognize.

Duncan sent a message back to Elise and the others soon arrived.

"What the hell is that thing," said Renk.

"Likely Crest's secret project," replied Elise.

Underneath the giant sphere, Shell saw General Mulhauser and his guard. He began to clap slowly.

"Nosy, aren't we," said Benton. "Well, at least you get to meet this guy before you leave this life."

"What is that and what are you doing with it," demanded Renk.

"Never mind what this is," said Benton, in an impatient and condescending tone. "You got a good look at it. Now you can die happy!"

The General and his companion ran off through a door on the far side of the room. Next to it, a large garage door opened and an automated combat mecha raced out of it. The mecha began to fly toward them, narrowly avoiding contact with the giant sphere in the center of the room.

"Incoming!" yelled Renk.

Shell immediately began attempts to take control of the giant weaponized machine. Duncan started charging up an aether attack while Renk, Atlas, Elise, and Jess fired upon it with their assault rifles.

Atlas continued to fire upon the mecha while Renk used his time-slowng ability to get up to close range as soon as it was close enough to the floor. He was more interested in getting the battle mecha out of the way so that he could chase down General Mulhauser and force more information out of him.

The mecha fired back at Atlas. A couple of rounds hit him in the chest, sending him flying back. Atlas lay there for a few seconds as the others continued to slow it down. Atlas felt his chest. The body armor and jacket that Elise had given him had absorbed the brunt of the impact. *Likely I'll get only bruises this time*, he thought. Atlas jumped back up and fired his rifle into one of the mecha's cameras.

Shell appeared to be hacking the mecha's control system. She was hiding behind a control panel with a look of intense concentration on her face. Wanting to provide her adequate cover, Atlas moved over next to her. He noticed that the control panel appeared to belong to the large, spherical apparatus in the center of the room.

Some soldiers dressed in military outfits similar to Renk's began to enter the room. They started closing in on the group.

As Shell continued to interfere with the mecha's internal systems, the large weaponized machine began to act erratically. This allowed Renk to attack it further while Atlas and Elise could start holding off some of the military that were rushing toward them.

Atlas switched to non-lethal gel rounds and started firing at the soldiers. Duncan hit the mech with a bolt of electricity and the machine fell to the ground and stopped moving. Jess was rushing and slashing away at some of the soldiers as they were distracted by the return gunfire. She had taken a few hits but the body armor had prevented anything serious.

Pulling a few smoke grenades out of his backpack, Atlas hesitated for a moment. Scenes of the auditorium flashed in his mind. He shook it off and threw the smoke grenades at the approaching

soldiers, giving the others a moment to make their way closer to the door where General Mulhauser had escaped.

Shell ran over to join the others now that the mecha was incapacitated and helped push back some of the soldiers with some blindingly quick attacks through the smoke. *Must be nice to have built-in infrared vision*, thought Atlas. The smoke had started to make it impossible for Jess and Renk, who had cleared a path to the exit.

The control panel next to Atlas began to flash messages. Although he couldn't be sure, the large spherical machine above him appeared to glow and emit some kind of force, pushing on him slightly.

"We have to get out of here right now," yelled Atlas. "I think this... big thing... is about to activate!"

Atlas joined Jess and Renk at the exit. Looking down the exit's hallway, he could see an elevator.

Duncan started to run toward the exit to meet Atlas when he noticed the combat mecha beginning to reactivate.

"Shell!" yelled Duncan. "Can you interfere with that behemoth again?"

Shell tried to access it again. She managed to slow it down as its control systems were overloaded with garbled commands.

Duncan began charging up another ether attack. It drained his energy to do this and he would have trouble getting around for a few minutes after discharging a bolt of static electricity into the machine.

Elise shook her head, emerging from the clouds of smoke. "Of course," she said. "Normal ammunition isn't even going to make a dent in this thing."

Duncan released the blast of electricity into the machine. It convulsed violently and then sprayed a volley of rounds toward Duncan. He managed to dodge the fire and hid behind a wall column.

Duncan ran over into a small storage area, where there were some maintenance items for the facility's combat mecha. He picked up a can of spray paint. "Renk!" he yelled, "Catch!!!" Renk looked over toward Duncan and Duncan threw the can of spray paint to Renk.

Elise saw Duncan toss the can of spray paint. "Renk!" she yelled to him, "Do your teleport, or... whatever, and spray its optical sensors!"

Renk nodded and disappeared. A split second later, Renk re-appeared next to Elise and the mecha crashed into the wall, leaving a huge dent.

Duncan ran back over to the others. The smoke from the grenades had mostly cleared and the soldiers had all been knocked unconscious or otherwise incapacitated non-lethally. The mecha continued to smash into the wall, making a lot of noise.

Elise was staring intently at the large sphere in the middle of the room.
"What is it with that thing," asked Duncan.

"I'm taking pictures," replied Elise.

Shell ran back over to the control panel. "Just what is this all for," she asked.

"I want to know what it seems to be starting up," said Duncan. "Did they just leave it unlocked after Mr. Price gave them the code?"

"Bio-metrics," said a familiar voice. General Mulhauser walked out of the exit's hallway. Elise promptly aimed her gun at his head.

"Don't move a muscle," growled Elise.

Benton Mulhauser flashed her a big, shit-eating grin. "The late Richard Price agreed to unlock this bad boy in exchange for a guarantee of safety for the little snot-nosed princess, here," said Benton. "As long as he's in the facility, it can remain operational. Of course, now that his body is vaporized..."

"Watch it!" screamed Atlas.

Benton continued, "Now that it can't detect his presence, it should be shutting down. Lucky for us, the princess here apparently also works as a valid bio-metric signature. Even I didn't expect that."

Elise moved closer to Benton, pressing the gun right up against his forehead. "I said DON'T MOVE."

"You're just doing all the hard work for me," laughed Benton. "Even if you made it out of here, everyone believes you're dead, Princess Crest!"

"So, what's it to you," replied Jess.

"You were the sole heir of Crest Corporation," said Benton. "The board of directors has already started selecting a new president and I've got my people grooming a wonderful puppet to ensure I gain control of all Crest's resources, including this!"

Benton pointed to the sphere. It was clearly beginning to emit a strange, inexplicable energy.

"What is that thing," asked Duncan. "What's a megalomaniac like yourself going to do with a giant steel ball, go bowling?"

"Do you really think I'd tell a bunch of crim- OOF" The general was cut off from further bluster by Elise socking him in the gut with the butt of her rifle.

"Yes, we do," she retorts coldly. "You should've kept running if you didn't want to answer questions, jackass."

"You damn bit-" Elise hit him again, causing him to stumble backward a few steps.

"You're not leaving this rock without us, so you can talk now or later. And trust me, I can do far worse than hit you." She leveled the rifle to aim at the general once again, to help demonstrate the point. "I doubt it's just some big bomb, or you wouldn't even want to activate it here. Not to mention wouldn't hang around."

"Still doesn't explain what it is" Duncan yelled back.

"Can some of you try to shut the damn thing off, whatever it is? If it has controls to unlock and whatever, it's got to have an off switch." Elise suggested the obvious, still keeping her focus on where she was aiming. It wouldn't say much about what this thing was, but it would at least stop whatever it was doing.

Atlas, Renk, and Duncan rushed to check some of the consoles around the room.

Jess held her sword at the General's neck while Duncan, Atlas, Renk, and Shell tried to work the control panels.

"Whether an accidental fire in the auditorium really set off those explosives or not," said Jess, "If you're responsible for getting that shipment of explosives here, you have just as much blood on your hands as I."

Jess desperately wanted to slash the General's throat. She realized just how horrible her actions had been, especially if the General wasn't bluffing about her father. Since some of the guards had partially corroborated his story, the last remaining traces of hope began to leave Jess's mind.

Her father was dead.

"DAMN IT!!!" screamed Jess. She ran over to one of the control panels, where Atlas was just randomly hitting buttons on the screen. Jess gently nudged him aside and took a look at the panel. After a few minutes, she pressed her hand to the biometric sensor and the controls unlocked.

"I don't want to believe this, Atlas..." sobbed Jess. The security access log on the screen didn't lie.

```
18:14:03 UNLOCK SEQUENCE INITIATED
18:14:12 SYSTEM ACTIVATION
21:45:07 PROXIMITY BIO-METRICS LOST
21:49:37 UNKNOWN ERROR - AUTOMATIC DE-AUTHORIZATION FAILURE
22:05:19 SYSTEM ACTIVATION [VIA PRE-AUTHORIZED]
22:14:07 UNLOCK SEQUENCE INITIATED
```

Jess looked at her watch. It was 22:14. She knew that they had arrived at NEA726 around two hours ago and the concert lasted for about two songs after they had set up on stage, so that meant the concert had ended a little more than an hour ago.

The explosion happened about ten minutes after we left the dressing room, calculated Jess. Under this amount of stress, it was hard for Jess to think clearly. Jess was very proud of her academic achievements and would punch Atlas if he dared do the grim math for her.

It took us an hour to set up, she thought. *Dammit, do these times line up?* "Atlas," Jess finally asked, "How long was that first song we played?"

Atlas gave her a blank stare. "Why the hell do you want to know THAT of all things?" he asked. The combat mecha, which had been crashing repeatedly into a wall on the far side of the room, had managed to wear the spray paint off of one of its optical sensors and was flying toward them. Shell,

Renk, and Duncan rushed over to try to hold it off.

"Just, do you know? I need to figure something out," replied Jess, nervously.

"Geez, Jess, I guess with the guitar solo and everything, it ran about fifteen minutes. We jammed it out toward the end - why the hell is this even important?!" rambled Atlas.

"Trust me," said Jess.

I knew it, thought Jess. The length of the first song, sadly, placed the huge explosion right at 21:45, which meant that Jess's father had been killed by the explosion and not the auditorium fire. Although it wasn't much to console her, Jess knew that she did not burn her father alive. *He must have been outside the auditorium somewhere*, she thought. Jess wiped the tears from her eyes.

Jess suddenly realized something else from the security log. There had been some aftershocks after the explosion as the upper levels collapsed. The unknown error that happened four minutes after the explosion was very telling. Jess looked up, toward the top of the giant sphere in the middle of the room. *The supports have been weakened! The sphere has been malfunctioning whenever there's a strong vibration!*

Jess had a sudden moment of inspiration.

"Renk!" yelled Jess. "Lure that mech into the pit underneath the sphere!"

Renk nodded and ran over to the mech.

"Duncan!" shouted Jess. "Can you get up to the supports for the sphere?"

As Duncan ran over from the mecha back to Jess, Jess tucked her hair behind her ears and opened her left eye. She began to glow with a green aura. She unsheathed her sword and handed it to Duncan.

"Listen, Duncan," said Jess. "I can't hold my synchronization with this sword very long but if you can manage to get up to the top of the sphere, cut its supports with this and drop it on that mecha. Hurry, please."

Duncan grabbed Jess's glowing sword and nodded.

"I don't know why you trust an old geezer like me to be spry enough to climb up to the top of this thing," replied Duncan, "but I'll tell ya what, I'll do my damndest!"

Jess wiped away her tears and gave him a grin. "You'd better. I didn't pay to upgrade your chrome for nothing!"

Duncan chuckled and hurried over to a ladder.

Halfway up the first ladder, Duncan's 'net connection flashed a message. Connectivity to the local wireless system had been established. As he continued to climb, Duncan began accessing the data in the sphere's control systems and saved it to his local storage.

Duncan also sent a quick message to Shell:

Shell! Quickly: I've got 'net access! Please connect to the sphere and
SOAK IT UP LIKE A SPONGE!

- DuncanDonuts

Not wanting to be too distracted by the download, Duncan made his way up to the highest catwalk and carefully sneaked over to the center, where the support beams held the apparatus that suspended the sphere over the central control pit. Duncan used the built-in digital zoom in his vision to get a closer look at what was happening below.

Renk had managed to lure the weaponized mecha into the pit and had gotten away from it. Jess and Atlas ran away from the control panels. Elise was still holding the General at gunpoint next to the exit. Shell was standing away from the others, looking directly at Duncan overhead, giving him a very dirty look.

Duncan checked his messages.

What are you doing up there, Duncan?!
I'm busy trying to hijack this stupid killbot so it stays still!

If you want the sphere data downloaded, you're going to have
to do it yourself!

Shell, you too funny, thought Duncan. In that moment, Shell's terse response reminded him of the times that Duncan had interrupted his late wife during DDOS attacks and other important "hacktivism" events.

"Alright, Shell," muttered Duncan. He knew he had to grab the data before destroying the sphere. The information might save countless lives and that was something Duncan felt strongly committed to do after becoming aware of the lives snuffed out due to the group's earlier reckless actions.

Shell was struggling to keep the mecha under control as Duncan finished his download of the sphere's data. Jess looked like she was about to collapse, although the sword still glowed an eerie, iridescent green. Finally, Duncan knew he could keep them waiting no longer and swung the sword at the cables. The cables easily severed and Duncan immediately noticed the local network dropping out again.

"Duncan, you have to make the thing fall, dumbass!" screamed Jess.

"Alright, alright, I'm tryin' here!" shouted Duncan. He swung the sword violently a few more times. *Jess should have been the one to do this but she had to keep that panel unlocked long enough for us to grab that data*, he reasoned.

With a couple more strong physical hacks at the support beam, it finally severed and the sphere started to detach. It dropped a few inches with another violent jerk.

General Mulhauser tried to push away from Elise. "NO!!!" screamed Benton. "You idiots don't know what you're doing!!!" Elise quickly silenced the porcine general with a swift kick to his gut.

Duncan took one final swing at the support beam and the sphere rapidly fell, crushing the combat mecha and taking the entire system offline.

"GETTTTTTTTTT DUNC'D ON!!!!!!!" screamed Duncan.

Shell had managed to download a copy of the sphere's data right before it fell on the mecha. Her mind was exhausted but she wanted to make sure she had a copy in case Duncan failed to get everything.

Shell ran over to Jess, Atlas, and Renk. Duncan climbed down the ladders, making his way down from the catwalks.

The sphere began to explode, causing fire and smoke to hurl out into the room. Duncan was almost knocked off a ladder on his way down but managed to reach the floor without being injured.

"Duncan!" yelled Shell. "How much of the data did you get out of that overgrown pinball?"

"Everything," replied Duncan.

"Good," she replied. "We have redundancy. Let's try to get out of here alive so we can turn it over to Dr. Thameh."

An enormous explosion rang out from the center of the room as the giant metal ball continued to self destruct.

Shell yelled out to everyone. "We can't stay in here! In about five more minutes, this baby's gonna BLOW!"

In the confusion, General Mulhauser broke away from Elise. She shot him in the leg but he continued to run toward the exploding machine in the center of the room.

General Mulhauser began to laugh maniacally. "Ha ha ha! You'll all find out!"

The general walked up to the ball, which started to glow red and then a bright white as it fractured. He touched it with his hand and began to dissolve into a white light.

"I AM BECOME AN IMMORTAL GOD!" screamed Benton. "ALPHA AND OMEGA!!!"

The entire room began to heat up to an almost unbearable temperature, as if it were an oven.

Atlas ran to the elevator door at the end of the exit and motioned everyone to follow him. "We can't stick around for the show, folks," he yelled.

Shell quickly hacked the access code to the emergency elevator. Everyone piled into the elevator and it ascended at a high speed.

When the doors opened, the group found themselves in a passenger shuttle dock located on the opposite side of the asteroid from the weapons manufacturing facility. They hurried over to one of the shuttles as the asteroid shook violently. Shell connected to the shuttle's locking panel and was able to open the door in a matter of seconds.

As everyone took their seats, Shell attempted to reconnect to the wireless network. As soon as a connection was established, Shell called Dr. Thameh.

"Dr. Thameh! Can you pinpoint our position?"

It took a few seconds but Camay responded, "Shell Lockheed! You're ALIVE?!"

"Yes, but not for long if we can't get this shuttle moving," replied Shell.

Atlas and Renk were desperately trying to activate the controls in the cockpit. Finally, the engines came on.

"Hang on, it's going to be a rough launch," replied Camay. "I can't seem to control it from here very well. Something on the asteroid is interfering with the network."

The shuttle blasted out of the dock, hurtling across the asteroid's landscape before eventually gaining enough altitude to break away from the asteroid's weak gravity. As the shuttle got further away from the asteroid, the shuttle's course became more controlled.

"I can't believe you're all alive," said Camay. "How did you all manage to get out of there?"

Shell and Duncan noticed that the 'net had returned to normal. Shell immediately uploaded the data she had taken from the core to the L1 colony's servers.

The shuttle arrived back at the colony dock. Jess returned to her hotel room and Atlas went for a walk around the city. The rest of the group quietly returned to Dr. Thameh's conference room for a meeting. Duncan had called Dr. Thameh and had a long discussion on the return trip from Near Asteroid 726.

Dr. Thameh greeted the group and everyone took their seats around the table.

"First off, I'm glad to see you all made it back," said Camay. "We were certain for a while that you had all perished in the explosion."

Duncan stood up and walked over next to Camay. "As you have probably guessed," said Duncan, "I gave Dr. Thameh a full report during the shuttle trip back to the colony."

Camay nodded. "I received the data that Duncan and Shell retrieved from the device on the asteroid. It appears to be random noise but we'll continue to attempt brute-force cracking to decrypt it, if there's anything to decrypt."

Duncan sighed. "Unfortunately, our main mission failed."

Camay put the sphere's security logs on the screen behind her. "That device on NEA726 confirmed that the proximity bio-metrics of Richard Price were lost at the time of the explosion, confirming his death," she told Shell, Renk, and Elise. "General Mulhauser appears to have perished as well, although we don't have a way to confirm that."

"Dr. Ray Heimboem has been arrested under suspicion of furnishing the Herei Mob Army with powerful explosives," added Duncan. "What was supposed to be decoy cargo was actually smuggled material, using our mission as cover."

Duncan walked over and took a seat next to Shell. He leaned back in his seat and shut his eyes, exhausted.

"NEA726 was the Herei Mob Army's central base of operations," said Camay. "Shortly after your departure from the asteroid, it disappeared without a trace. We have all of our astronomers searching for an explanation. The good news is..."

"The Herei Mob Army is history!" interrupted Renk. "Furthermore, I've gotten word that the military found out about General Fatass and they've been made aware that we destroyed whatever it was he was trying to use."

"So we're not suspected as criminals?" asked Shell.

"Bingo," replied Renk. "As far as the military's concerned, we're all cleared of suspicion. I'm expected back on main base tomorrow, so I'll be heading back as soon as possible."

Duncan yawned. "I'll be heading home, too. Dr. Thameh, if it's fine with you, I'd like to take the first available shuttle back to Earth. There's quite a bit of research I need to do."

Shell nodded. "I'm heading back, too. I need to find a new job, after all."

Camay waved at the group as everyone stood up and headed out. "Please keep in touch," she told

Duncan.

Duncan, Shell, and Renk met Atlas and Elise at the colony's shuttle docks and boarded a chartered shuttle headed to Earth. Atlas was very silent during the trip. It was obvious that the recent events weighed on him.

Halfway back to Earth, Duncan received a message from Jess:

Mr. Sorenson, please forward this message to Shell and the others.

I had a long talk with Randall. He didn't know why my accounts were frozen but he spoke to the bank and the account is now back to normal. You and the others will receive payment for your services. Regardless of how things turned out, you all risked your lives to help me and the very least I can do is offer you all a prompt payment. While I didn't directly hire Elise, please let her know she's going to receive a hefty sum for her time and for all of the equipment.

There will be a public memorial service for my father next week. It will be broadcast on the news networks but you are all invited to attend if you would like.

The false reports of my death have been corrected in the news channels as well. As things stand, I am now the president of Crest Corporation. Dr. Ray Heimboem will stand trial for treason once the investigation is complete.

Lastly, as the new president of Crest Corporation, if you or Shell are interested in a job, please contact me. Let Atlas know that my offer to him still stands, too.

I'm going to be very busy for a while. Hope to see you all soon.

- Jess Price

Duncan grinned, just a bit. *She's become much more mature*, he thought.

The shuttle landed at the space dock in City N. As everyone disembarked, Duncan waved goodbye to Elise, Shell, Renk, and Atlas.

Their adventure had ended but many unanswered questions remained.

Chapter 5

Shell woke up around 9 am. It was a typical hot late springtime morning in City N. She got out of bed, washed her hair and face, brushed her teeth, and began polishing her metal body with a generous amount of "Uncle Bezo's 100% Ultra-Fine Chrome Polish".

After polishing herself to a brilliant shine, she gave herself an approving nod in the mirror and got dressed. She switched on her television monitor and watched the news. A reporter was giving a breaking news report:

"There are unconfirmed reports that the Adept phenomenon has returned. We have been hearing numerous accounts of adepts suddenly regaining their abilities, which were suddenly and unexpectedly lost two years ago."

Shell sprang to her feet. "What?" she shrieked. She continued to watch the news report. Shell remembered the wedding ceremony from the previous summer, where the bride, the president of Crest Corporation, was finally able to style her hair differently because of the loss of her Adept powers. The bride had to cover her left eye for most of her life due to the nature of her powers. Shell remembered how different she looked at the wedding and, for this reason, that wedding presently came to Shell's mind.

It had been over a year since Shell last saw the president of Crest and her husband, Atlas. After Atlas had become Jess's head of security, the two later decided to get married. Shell attended the wedding along with her freelancing partner, Duncan. Lieutenant Renk had been Atlas's best man and there was an incident where Duncan ate half of the wedding cake. The ceremony had been broadcast live and was like a modern day royal wedding. Shell had not seen Renk since the wedding.

Snapping out of her reminiscent trance, Shell switched off the television monitor and headed out the door. On her way down the hall, she was greeted by her neighbor, Chester. She smiled and waved at him as she headed out.

Shell was on her way to meet Duncan at their usual place, the doughnut shop near the former site of EMA headquarters. Shell had been the faithful corporate type until EMA headquarters was destroyed two years ago. The incident had started a chain of events that left Shell somewhat traumatized but allowed her to meet several interesting people along the way, including Duncan. Now that Shell was a freelance hacker like Duncan, she lived a life of greater freedom than she previously had.

Shell arrived at the doughnut shop and waved at Duncan, who was sitting in his usual spot in the back of the store. She sat down across from him at the table.

"Did you hear that the adepts are getting their powers back?" asked Shell.

"Yes, and they're just as baffled about it as they were when their powers disappeared," replied Duncan.

"Crazy," said Shell. "Nobody's been able to come up with a workable theory."

Duncan ate a doughnut while Shell ordered a cup of coffee. "So," said Shell, "We have any new jobs lined up?"

Duncan shook his head. "Not right now," he replied. "I have been researching something else, though. There's a radio signal coming from somewhere out beyond the moon's orbit. It hasn't been traced to any known satellites, stations, or spacecraft."

"Oh?" said Shell. "What kind of signal?"

Duncan shrugged. "It's almost like random noise but it has pseudo-random characteristics," he replied. "I was up half the night analyzing it. There's something peculiarly familiar about it but I don't know what."

Shell scratched her head and sipped her coffee. "Odd. Do you know when it started?"

Duncan shook his head. "I have no way of knowing. I only discovered it last night."

Duncan laughed. "Maybe I should try to see if my electro-ether abilities have returned. I haven't attempted to use them for over two years."

Duncan munched away on another doughnut as he sent Shell some data.

"Here," said Duncan, with his mouth full. "I'm sending you a recording I made last night of that radio signal. It got really strong for about 20 minutes and then faded back out."

Duncan sent the message:

Have a listen, Shells n' Cheese!

Maybe your analysis can yield better results than mine.

Zip dippity doo,

- DuncanDonuts

Duncan finished the doughnut. "Anyway," he said, "Dr. Thameh wanted us to meet someone tonight at the Velvet Room."

Duncan sat back in his seat and looked around the store. "Y'know, I'm going to have to skip our usual meetup tonight," he said, "but we've got a new... well, not really new... client. She's going to be at the bar tonight, if you'd be so kind as to consult with her in my absence. I've got another job going so forgive me for not being there in person."

Shell nodded. "Alright. You sure you don't want to meet for dinner tonight?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'd like to, really, but I'll have to skip it this week. By the way, the person you're meeting goes by the name "Jax" and she's an A.I. android like Dr. Thameh. Bug Elise if she's working tonight and she'll show you to her table if she's already there. She'll be expecting you."

Shell listened to the recording and shrugged. "That stuff just sounds like static to me, by the way."

Shell finished her coffee and stood up.

"As usual, this has been nice. Time for me to make my usual rounds, run some errands, and then scour the 'net for any useful information. By the way, Kel might start joining us here in the mornings."

Duncan nodded. "Works for me," he replied.

"I'll meet our client tonight. Until tomorrow morning, then!" said Shell.

Shell left the doughnut shop and took the transport train tubes to the shopping district. She spent the day running various errands with her former co-worker, Kel, before heading home and preparing to meet Jax at the Velvet Room that evening.

Duncan left the doughnut shop some time after Shell and retired to his house. He had recently undergone some upgrades and a newly-developed life extension treatment based on the nano technology used by the President of Crest Corporation. Since the loss of the Adept Phenomenon, which had appeared to resurface, the nano machines that Jess used had stabilized and were easier to replicate in the laboratory.

Duncan contacted Dr. Camay Thameh, the lead scientist for Firewall:

Dr. Thameh,

I have recorded an unexplained signal coming from some location behind Lunar orbit. My direction finding skills are not up to par but it seems it's somewhere just beyond the Moon's position.

I would suggest having your astronomers scour the area to see if anything might be out there that could emit a beacon.

From my analysis, it appears to be pseudo-random noise but I would like to get a second opinion from Firewall. Perhaps your supercomputers can discover anything I have missed. I had theorized that it may be an archaic, low-bandwidth digital encoding but that seems unlikely.

Duncan moved over to another terminal and began his day's work, processing server logs and identifying possible system intrusions for one of his clients.

Jax entered the door of The Velvet Room, an upscale-looking bar and restaurant in an otherwise dangerous-looking part of town. She had been sent by Dr. Camay Thameh, the lead scientist of Firewall, in order to observe and report signs of any return of the Adepts phenomenon.

A well-dressed, silver-haired woman noticed Jax and walked over to her from the bar.

"Do you have a reservation," asked the woman.

"Yes, I'm Jax from the Firewall organization. I'm here to meet Shell Lockheed and Duncan Sorenson," she replied.

"I see. Right this way," said the woman.

Jax was shown to her table and took a seat. "I was informed of your reservation," said the woman. "Firewall set up this meeting yesterday. I let them know that we usually rent private rooms for such meetings but Dr. Thameh insisted that a booth would suffice."

"You know Dr. Thameh?" asked Jax.

"Yes. By the way, my name's Sophia. Sophia Weiss," replied the woman. "If you're with Firewall, I suppose it's acceptable if you know that I also go by the name Elise," she added.

Jax nodded. "It is nice to meet you."

"Oh, one more thing," said Elise, "Mr. Sorenson won't be here tonight. Miss Lockheed should arrive shortly, however."

"Understood," replied Jax.

"Come to the bar to order any drinks," said Elise.

Jax waved her hand in a polite but declining gesture. "I won't be ordering any drinks," replied Jax. "I am an A.I. using this android body."

"Beg your pardon," replied Elise. "I should have picked up on that. Still, if you do happen to need anything, just come up to the bar."

Jax nodded and sat at the table, patiently waiting.

After a few more minutes, a cyborg woman with pale blonde hair entered the bar. Elise pointed out Jax's table from the bar and the cyborg walked over to Jax.

"Hello," said the cyborg. "I'm Shell Lockheed, your contact."

"Pleased to meet you," replied Jax.

Shell took a seat.

Jax looked around the room briefly and leaned over the table a bit. "Okay," said Jax, "As you know, I'm with Firewall. My job here is to observe for signs of adept powers. As you may know, my timing may have been perfect since the news was full of reports this morning that some adepts have regained their abilities."

Shell nodded. "Yes, I heard that," she replied.

"We're trying to identify the source of the adepts phenomenon," said Jax. "Some theories have linked it to a remote source. The working theory has been that a special medical nano-technology has been responsible but Dr. Thameh officially dismissed that theory when the phenomenon suddenly vanished two years ago."

"I wouldn't completely rule out the remote source theory," replied Shell. "After all, it's an interesting coincidence that NEA726 disappeared around the same time the adepts lost their powers and now there's some weird beacon signal coming from somewhere just beyond the moon's orbit, right when the adepts suddenly reactivate."

Jax looked surprised.

"Come to think of it," replied Jax, "Dr. Thameh mentioned that Duncan gave her a report about an unidentified signal from space. Maybe this would be worth looking into."

Shell nodded. "Duncan gave me a recording of it this morning, actually."

The two sat at the table silently for a moment, thinking things over. Shell sipped on her drink.

"My neighbor runs an observatory about ten miles out of town," said Shell. "I wonder if we could possibly get some kind of visual confirmation of whatever is putting that signal out."

"We already have a Firewall operative in the area," replied Jax. "He's an astronomer tasked with searching for NEA726. It was believed to have been knocked out of its orbit by something shortly after your group disembarked from it but we had no record of the exact moment it disappeared."

Shell looked uncomfortable. "That wasn't a pleasant memory," mumbled Shell.

"That's understandable," replied Jax. "Our astronomer lives in this city and his name is Chester Reynolds. I'll contact him."

Shell sat up straight and gasped, "You're kidding! That's my neighbor!"

Jax sent a quick message to Chester:

Agent Reynolds,

This is JAX 0208. I request your services.

Could you meet us at the observatory?

After a few minutes, Jax received an affirmation from Chester.

"Okay, he's agreed to meet us at the observatory," said Jax. "We should head over there."

After Shell finished her drink, Jax settled the bill with Elise and the two of them headed out to a transport rail, making their way to the observatory some distance out of the city.

Duncan's house, 21:11 EST

Duncan took a break from his security consultant work and checked his messages. A message had arrived from Dr. Thameh:

Mr. Sorenson,

I have analyzed the signal and forwarded it to our super-computing cluster.

From what little information we have right now, it appears to be a type of archaic data burst format. Why it would be actively in use, from an object in space no less, is hard to understand.

As you know, Dr. Heimboem is serving a life sentence in a detention facility aboard the colony near Titan. He has a lot of esoteric knowledge regarding ancient signal modulation schemes but he is not available for obvious reasons.

Firewall will continue to analyze this signal recording.

On a side note, our observer, Jax 0208, is accompanying Shell Lockheed to an observatory in order to attempt visual confirmation of whatever appears to emit this signal. I was informed that you were not able to join them tonight.

I will keep you informed on future developments.

Dr. Camay Thameh

Duncan continued the break from his work by browsing some news sites and forums on the 'net. He had recently noticed that the regional gubernatorial election campaigns had started and that Jess Price, the head of Crest Corporation, was running for regional governor:

SAY "YES" TO JESS 2218!
THE PRICE IS RIGHT!

Jess Price has officially announced her run for governor of NAU Region IV.

Price is running her campaign on the following platform:

- 1 - Open and affordable space travel for all citizens
- 2 - Equal rights for artificial intelligence, cyborgs, and genetically-engineered humans
- 3 - Funding environmental cleanup efforts to restore the Earth's oceans, atmosphere, and beaches
- 4 - Massive crackdown on terrorism and a constant patrol of near-Earth space

Duncan noticed some comments beneath the article:

I can't BELIEVE that Jess Price supports trans-humanism! You CAN'T just put a person's soul into a machine!

...

What's this blathering on about a soul? A person's mind is just data. Quit living in the dark ages.

...

I just want to know what Jess is going to do about allowing the poorest citizens to reach space. The Earth is so polluted that poor people have to die of respiratory disease while the rich live in sterile, perfect space colonies!

...

Jess just isn't trustworthy. She claims to be all for the people but her father was one of the biggest corporate fascists the world has ever seen! He was directly responsible for getting laws passed that trapped the poor planet side! How can we be so sure his daughter is going to reverse this?

...

You idiot. Jess has already lobbied and allowed the poorest people to have a chance to live in the space colonies. Do some fact checking before you open your stupid mouth. Moron.

Duncan sighed and laughed. *Some things about the 'net never change*, he thought to himself. *Rosetta would have really enjoyed jumping in on this conversation!*

Chester promptly returned to the observatory after he made a quick trip to a local pizza joint for dinner. Chester spent most of his evenings here, looking through the telescope and making notes of anything unusual. He had received a message from Jax, one of his fellow operatives at Firewall. Fortunately, his pizza was ready when he received the message on his communicator and he was able to get back to his post in time.

The door buzzer sounded and Chester opened the door.

"Hi, I'm Jax and this is Shell," said Jax. "We need your help finding something around Lunar orbit."

"Yes, I see," replied Chester. "Nice to m... Shell? Hey! I didn't know you worked with Firewall!"

Shell laughed. "Well, on occasion," she replied to Chester. "I guess I never did ask you what you did for a living..."

"Well, we've never really had a chance to talk, despite being neighbors," said Chester. "Anyway, come on in."

The three of them walked through the entrance area, past some soda machines and a small kitchen. Chester led them up the stairs to the third floor, where a large, circular room housed the enormous telescope.

"It's funny," said Chester, "It's a small world. Observing the skies every night reminds me of how small we are, but I guess it's a small world in the social context after all..."

The dome of the observatory opened over the telescope and Chester turned on the video monitors. He pivoted the telescope, which rotated the entire room with it.

"Alright, we're looking out just past the Moon, right," commented Chester, as he continued to adjust the telescope's focus. "No kidding, I get just as much work observing space stations, spy satellites, and spacecraft as I do actually doing astronomy," he said.

Jax took a look at one of the monitors. "That makes sense," said Jax. "Espionage probably pays a lot better than donation-funded astronomy does."

Chester nodded. "You'd be surprised, Jax. Aside from my work with Firewall, I've had a lot of wealthy private donors wanting me to watch distant galaxies. Still, most of my more interesting requests have been through Firewall and various governments. Watching the skies for threats takes priority, you know," said Chester.

Chester noticed something interesting on the screen. Right next to the moon, perhaps a few thousand miles beyond its disc, Chester noticed that some stars were disappearing. He zoomed in.

"Have a look at this," said Chester. "Something's blocking the stars out there."

Jax and Shell studied the monitor image. Chester pointed to the black spot, where stars and galaxies were vanishing behind it.

"We've got an object out there, alright. Something that isn't emitting or reflecting any light at all," he said.

Chester zoomed in on the object even more closely. As the object slowly moved along its orbit, the vanishing stars hinted at its size and shape. Chester ran a program on the telescope system's computer to analyze the images, putting together a vague outline of the object.

"We've got something interesting out there. It's some kind of synthetic object about a mile long and a half mile wide. Could be a huge piece of space junk or an abandoned spacecraft," said Chester.

"Any abandoned spacecraft would have registration data," said Jax. "Almost all space junk over a few meters in diameter is tracked and monitored by Firewall. We have to do that to avoid collisions."

"Right," replied Chester. "Anything this large would be well-known."

"Nothing's in the registry that fits that size, orbit, or position," said Shell. "I just checked all space debris records, including Firewall's. Nothing at all should be where that thing is currently."

Chester walked over to a small table where he had left the pizza he brought back minutes ago. "I hope you'll excuse me while I eat my dinner," he told Jax and Shell. "I don't mean to be rude but I don't want this to get cold."

Chester looked at them while he ate a slice. "Shell, you're welcome to have some. Jax, I know you

can't eat," he told them.

Shell walked over and sat across the table from Chester. Jax continued to study the images on the telescope's monitor.

Camay sent Duncan another message:

Mr. Sorenson,

We have performed further analysis on that recording you sent us of the signal emanating from a point near Lunar Orbit.

JAX 0208 is presently with Shell Lockheed and one of our astronomers, Chester Reynolds, at the observatory near you. They have obtained a visual... sort of.

Duncan examined the image. The resolution was extremely poor.

He continued reading the message:

We have matched patterns in the signal recording to some patterns in the pseudo-random data you and Shell extracted from the core of NEA726 before it disappeared. This finding is extremely profound and indicates a connection to NEA726.

As you may have guessed, the timing of the adept phenomenon's sudden disappearance and resurgence no longer seems purely coincidental.

I have deemed it necessary to come to Earth to personally assist and oversee an investigative effort. I am going to activate one of my proxy androids and head over to the observatory.

Please join us there in an hour, if you can. This is very important.

Duncan leaned back in his seat and sighed.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice," he mumbled to himself.

Duncan stood up, dusted the doughnut crumbs off of himself, and headed out the door.

"Better gimme hazard pay if this gets ugly again," grumbled Duncan.

Camay finished up some work in her office at the L1 colony before locking the door and heading back to her quarters.

She sent a quick message to the other scientists at the colony, informing them that she would be absent for a time.

After sending the message, Camay lay down in her bed and shut her eyes. Her mind drifted away from the android body and back into the vast wireless network, residing on countless servers on various space stations throughout the solar system.

A few moments later, her eyes opened again. She was now in a different android body, located on Earth. It had her typical appearance: long, straight black hair, thin-rimmed glasses, and a long lab coat over a mini-skirt and a sweater. Detecting the temperature inside the dusty warehouse, she changed into a more appropriate outfit and put her lab coat back on. It was a fairly warm night and she had to make sure she could move around easily.

Leaving the warehouse and engaging the security locks, Camay took the nearest transport rail to the observatory, which was a few miles away.

She arrived at the observatory moments later and buzzed the door. Chester opened the door.

"Dr. Thameh!" gasped Chester.

"Nice to see you in person again," replied Camay. "I've decided that matters have become serious enough to warrant in-person consultation."

Chester led her inside and up to the telescope deck, where Shell and Jax were studying the images onscreen.

"Good evening, Jax and Shell. I'll be planet side for a while. I've also asked Duncan to join us," said Camay.

"Dr. Thameh," said Shell, "Duncan's tied up with work..."

"Please, call me Camay from now on," replied Camay. "Whatever Duncan's working on, I'll see to it that he's compensated for his time."

After about twenty minutes, Duncan arrived and Chester led him up to join the others.

"Now that everyone's here," said Camay, "Let me begin."

Camay looked at the monitors and eyed the images for a few more seconds.

"We need to find a way to positively identify that object out there," said Camay. "Furthermore, we need to figure out what, if any, connection it has to the sudden loss and resurgence of the adepts phenomenon. No connection has yet been proven, but part of Firewall's core mission is to ascertain the cause of the adepts. We may well have the root cause staring us in the face."

"Since there are patterns in the signal that match the data that Shell and I extracted from the mystery sphere on NEA726," said Duncan, "We at least have a good chance that this object might be part of NEA726, or something else that was hidden inside it before it disappeared."

Camay nodded. "I think we should send some automated probes to it," she said. "There's no sense in a manned expedition just yet, especially considering the danger you encountered on NEA726."

Shell and Duncan both looked around awkwardly.

"Yes," replied Duncan, "I would prefer to avoid any more life-threatening adventures if at all possible."

Duncan studied the image on the telescope's screens.

"It's considerably smaller than NEA726, being only a mile long," said Duncan. "I thought we had destroyed the sphere in the asteroid's core but..."

Duncan trailed off, having an incomplete thought.

"Well," continued Duncan, "It's not like we verified its destruction, anyway."

Camay was silent for a moment as she sent some messages back to the L1 Colony.

"Okay, some probes are en route," said Camay. "Let's see what they can find. At the very least, we'll get some up-close images of the thing."

After a few minutes, the probes appeared in the telescope's monitor. They approached the object from the direction of the L1 colony and sped toward it with an unusual velocity, as though they were being pulled by the object.

Suddenly, the two probes exploded, as if they hit an invisible barrier.

"What?!" exclaimed Chester. Camay shook her head silently, as if she were not too surprised this would happen.

"How are we supposed to examine it further if it destroys our probes?" asked Chester.

Chester walked over to his terminal and attempted to run what limited analysis he could. He was not able to perform a spectrum analysis because the object didn't seem to emit or reflect any visible light, ultraviolet, or infrared.

"This is going to be really tough," said Chester. "The only thing we know right now is its size and that it's probably what's sending out that beacon signal that hasn't been decoded yet."

"Hmmm..." Chester scratched his head for a moment. "If we could try to hit it with some other forms of radiation somehow..."

"Chester, please send me all of the image data you've obtained of the object so far," said Duncan.

Duncan started to walk toward the stairs. "The only thing I can suggest right now is that we continue to analyze that beacon signal. If there's some kind of barrier around that thing preventing probes from approaching, I'd imagine it's set up as it is deliberately."

Duncan looked at Jax. "As far as the link to the adepts, I have to wonder if it's related to quantum entanglement in some way."

Duncan started to walk down the stairs. "Please excuse me. I hate to run off like this but I have to

attend to some other matters. Good night, everyone."

Duncan left the observatory and took a transport rail back to his house.

Chester nodded. "I'll continue to monitor it from here. In the mean time, we might want to look into how it's detecting and destroying probes. If it's manned, perhaps we could try to communicate with it and find out who they are."

Camay, Shell, and Jax waved goodbye as they left the observatory. Chester sat back down at the table and quietly finished his pizza, which had gotten cold. He didn't care; he ate the rest of it anyway.

We're at a dead end with this stupid thing, he thought to himself. If it destroys probes like that, approaching it with a manned vessel is out of the question. It might be a threat to nearby space colonies, too, if it's doing things like that.

On his way home, Duncan wanted to see if his adept abilities had returned as others had reported.

Once the train arrived at his stop, Duncan walked away from the station to a secluded alleyway and tried to energize his electrical burst attack. As he predicted, arcs of electricity shot from his fingers. *It's stronger than before, he thought. Whatever is happening may not merely revive this phenomenon but may well increase it.*

As they left the observatory, Camay and Jax looked for hotels on their maps.

"We are going to need to find somewhere to stay while we're on Earth," said Camay.

Shell gestured toward one of the transport rails. "Just stay at my place," said Shell. "Androids don't eat and you can sleep just about anywhere, right? I have space."

Camay nodded. "I appreciate that. I'll make sure you're compensated for the use of your space and utilities," she said. "It shouldn't be for that long, we're just going to do some investigating while we're around here."

With that, the three of them headed back to Shell's apartment.

After Camay, Shell, and Jax arrived at Shell's apartment, Shell gave them the grand tour and Jax sat down on the sofa.

"Thanks for letting us stay here," said Jax.

Jax turned on the television monitor, which was already set to the news channel:

"And now, we have confirmation that adepts have experienced a rapid increase in their abilities. Some have been rushed to hospitals after losing control of their power and injuring themselves. Joining us is Lieutenant Renk, a veteran of the military."

Renk appeared on screen in the newsroom with the reporter.

"It's Renk!" said Shell.

"Thanks for having me on," said Renk. "We've noticed a radical increase in the intensity of our abilities. The exact nature of my own ability is classified but I can tell you that while attempting to use it in a drill yesterday, my vital signs disappeared briefly and they had to rush me to the infirmary."

The reporter looked back at the camera. "Chilling. We still have no new information as to the possible cause of this situation."

Jax looked over at Camay.

"It looks like they don't have any knowledge that we don't already have," said Jax. "I'll have to step up my game first thing in the morning and hit the streets. I know of some places where adepts frequent."

Chapter 6

Jess paced back and forth in front of a giant monitor on the wall in her office. She was receiving live reports on the status of her campaign in addition to data from Firewall about the unidentified spacecraft near Lunar orbit.

Camay appeared in a window on the monitor. "We have confirmed that the beacon matches a segment of the pseudo-random noise collected from the sphere while you were all on NEA726," said Camay.

Jess sat down in her large, executive-style office chair. She had been so busy running her campaign for regional governor and managing Crest Corporation that she had become almost a prisoner in her office. Her husband, Atlas, routinely patrolled the mansion and visited her in the office every couple of hours. Jess was content to work from her mansion and had some trusted people handling operations at Crest's headquarters.

"Dr. Thameh," said Jess, looking back up at the monitor, "We need to have a team get aboard that spaceship."

Jess stood up and continued, "The beacon match indicates that the sphere is likely up there. It's clear that it was one of Crest's black projects and I never heard anything from my father about it. It is a matter of deep personal interest to find out what was in development and whom among our employees were involved. Of course, more than personal interest, the ramifications of its sudden re-appearance could affect the entire solar system."

Camay displayed some images in another window on the monitor, overlapping some line charts of Jess's poll numbers and other statistics. "We have some low resolution images of the spacecraft but the two probes sent from the L1 colony were destroyed by some kind of gravity manipulation field," said Camay. "I am working with Duncan Sorenson to identify a way to circumvent its detection systems."

Jess heard a knock on the door. "Dr. Thameh," said Jess, "Please do everything you can to arrange a safe mission to that ship. I have to attend to some other matters. Thank you!"

With that, Camay closed the video call and Jess answered the door. It was Atlas.

"Hey, Atlas!" said Jess, "Would you please come with me to the sub-basement? I need some help finding something."

"Yeah, what are we looking for?" replied Atlas. The two of them headed down the hallway to the stairs, taking them down to the lowest level of the mansion.

"Firewall has confirmed that the ship around Lunar orbit is sending out a beacon that matches something in the data that was taken from that giant sphere on the asteroid..." said Jess. She stopped herself, knowing that bringing up the asteroid would also bring up painful memories for the both of them.

"Sorry, dear," said Jess. "I know it's not a great memory."

Jess and Atlas entered the dark, musty sub-basement. There were shelves and shelves of old folders full of paper documents and blueprints. It was here that physical, hard copies of some of Crest's most

secret information were kept. The sub-basement was like a bunker; it was fireproofed and made to protect its contents even in a nuclear war.

"So, what are we trying to find," said Atlas.

"You know that sphere was a top secret project run by my father," replied Jess. "I need to see if there are any plans down here related to it. There's absolutely nothing in our computers or servers related to it. I know because I had Shell and Duncan both scour our systems looking for it."

"I know they are our friends," replied Atlas, "but isn't that strictly against company policy to allow outside freelancers that level of access?"

Jess laughed. "Ha! Atlas! It's not like they couldn't gain access any time they wanted anyway!"

Atlas and Jess both laughed as they rummaged through moldy old folders and documents.

Shell, Jax, and Camay had all gathered back at the observatory with Duncan and Chester that morning. Jax and Camay had arrived on Earth the previous night while Chester obtained a visual on the mystery ship. Overnight, while Shell and Jax were asleep, Camay had been performing additional analysis on the beacon signal coming from the ship. While she had already matched it to some of the data that Duncan and Shell had obtained from the sphere on NEA726 before it vanished, some aspects of the beacon still seemed strange and she wanted to learn more about it.

"Thanks for meeting us here again, Duncan," said Camay. "Today, I would like to send a third probe near the ship but this time, let's try something a bit new."

Duncan nodded. "What did you have in mind," he asked.

"We can't jam that ship's systems directly," replied Camay, "but if we transmit an inverted beacon signal back to the ship, it might confuse it."

"That's sort of a weird idea, but what the hell," said Duncan.

Camay gave the signal back to the L1 Colony to launch a new probe toward the ship. Chester put the video on the screen and they watched the probe approach the ship.

"Okay, now halt the probe there," said Camay. "Now, Duncan, I'd like you to connect directly to the probe's control system and send a modified signal back to the ship."

Duncan performed a special mode dive and connected to the probe.

Through the probe's sensors, he could get a clear image of the spacecraft. He transmitted what he was seeing back to Camay, who displayed it on the monitors so the others could see it.

With his eyes closed, Duncan concentrated on letting the space probe be his eyes and ears. He carefully brought it closer to the ship and transmitted an inverse signal. As he transmitted, Duncan was able to bring the probe closer to the ship.

"It's working!" shouted Duncan. "I really didn't expect this to work at all."

On the side of the spacecraft were the letters "H...B...K" but the rest was illegible. The entire hull of the ship appeared *ancient*. Duncan had never seen any space vessel in such a state of disrepair.

While continuing to transmit, Duncan was able to bring the probe all the way up to the ship and carefully piloted it through a hole in its side. Inside the ship, it was desolate and full of dilapidated tubing and wires. Duncan cautiously parked the probe inside the ship's cargo hold and disconnected himself from the probe.

Duncan opened his eyes. "Well, now we've confirmed our theory that it is, indeed, some kind of spacecraft."

Chester analyzed the images that the new probe had obtained.

"That space craft is very old," said Chester. "We might have something really profound, here."

Camay puzzled over the images for a moment. "This is not a design of any terrestrial origin nor a design from any of our colonies," she said.

"Is it... I don't want to sound like a lunatic but..." said Chester, trailing off. He didn't want to speak what was going through his head.

He stared at the monitor for another minute. "Alien..."

Chester turned around and looked at the others. "It couldn't possibly be, right?" he asked.

Shell and Jax shrugged. Duncan just stood there with a blank stare.

"I mean, all spacecraft are registered, right?" said Chester. "Unless this was some black project, that is..."

Camay called Jess again.

"So... we know it's a spacecraft for sure, now," said Chester. "We were working under this assumption because of the beacon and the general size and shape but now we have absolute confirmation."

"And a way in," added Duncan.

"Our probe was close enough to get through that barrier undetected," said Shell. "Not only that but now it's inside the ship."

Shell scratched her head. "I take it Jess was informed of the situation earlier," she said. "So, she wants to send people on board to investigate further?"

"We could just use more probes," replied Jax. "But we could do a more thorough investigation with a live team."

"It sounds really dangerous," said Shell. "It seems abandoned aside from whatever automatic security it's using. If our drone remains inside it unaccosted, however..."

"That's our canary," replied Camay. "We're going to have a good idea of what to expect in just a minute."

Shell looked at the monitor. The drone had started moving on its own after Duncan had disconnected from it. The video images showed twisted corridors, devoid of any people or security robots.

The drone turned a corner, entering a large room. The drone's headlamps shined upward as its camera tilted toward the ceiling.

There it was.

Inside the large room was the sphere the group had encountered on NEA726. Although no power appeared to be supplied to the rest of the room, the sphere glowed a faint green with some indicator lights along the sides. It was perfectly intact, as if Duncan had never destroyed it.

"That's..." gasped Shell. "Is that the same one?"

"Unless Crest had developed a separate prototype, yes," replied Camay.

Jess was still going through old hard copy files in her basement with Atlas when Camay called her again.

Jess answered on her communicator as she almost tripped over some boxes. "Dr. Thameh? Have you found anything further," asked Jess.

"Yes. We were able to get a probe inside the ship... we confirmed it IS a ship... by transmitting an inverted beacon signal. My hunch about it disabling the detectors was right."

"That's great," replied Jess.

"There's more. Our probe explored some of the interior and made its way to the center of the cargo area. The sphere is there."

"WHAT?" shrieked Jess. It caught Atlas's attention.

"Atlas," said Jess, "That thing we thought was a space ship, it is. That sphere we thought we destroyed on the asteroid is there!"

"There's something else," added Camay. "It's perfectly intact and, from what we can tell, self-powered. We don't know where it's getting its power."

Jess stumbled and tripped over a box, face-planting into another box full of old papers. Stunned, Jess started to get up and accidentally opened her left eye. A blast of energy sent boxes flying into the shelves and knocking Atlas into the wall.

"Atlas!" yelled Jess. "I'm sorry!"

"It's fine," replied Atlas. He stood up and looked at Jess. "Your power is a lot stronger," said Atlas.

"It's getting harder to control," said Jess as she moved her hair back over her left eye. "I've had to start wearing my hair like this again. Ever since my power returned, it's been like this. It isn't helping my campaign to have to cover my left eye, either."

Camay cleared her throat, which was an obvious gesture since she was an android. "Do you want to call me back later," asked Camay.

"No, sorry, that's quite alright," replied Jess. "Dr. Thameh, Crest will provide you with a spacecraft if you'd like to assemble a group to further investigate the ship. Either way, I need someone to go there in person to get some answers."

"Yes," replied Camay. "I will need a small ship with decent maneuvering ability. Cargo shuttles aren't really made for this sort of thing."

"I'll have my people arrange that for you," said Jess. "Please assemble a crew and I'll give you the dock address when you're ready."

After Camay had ended the call with Jess, she had been eyeing the group for a while.

"So...?" said Duncan.

"I've been asked to put together a group to go aboard the ship," said Camay.

"Ohhhhhh no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no nope nope NOPE 15 buckets of nope - an Olympic-sized swimming pool filled with nope - an OCEAN of nope, I AM THE POPE OF NOPE..." stammered Duncan.

Jax rolled her eyes. "This isn't going to be like the asteroid, Mr. Sorenson," grumbled Jax, in a condescending tone.

"Folks, I'm two hundred and eight years old," said Duncan. "I've seen my share of near-death experiences already."

Camay pleaded, "Mr. Sorenson, we compensated you all for the extraction of Dr. Heimboem, even after he turned out to be a traitor. We need a senior-level decker on our team."

Duncan sighed. "I might be an upper decker but this is going to be a crappy situation no matter how many times you flush out the potential dangers," protested Duncan. "We're going to be in over our heads just like on NEA726."

Camay shook her head. "We're fairly sure there's no active security on board."

Duncan walked over to a chair and sat down.

"Let me think about this, Dr. Thameh. It's just... after what happened on that asteroid..." muttered Duncan.

"I'm not exactly excited about going, either," replied Shell. "It's hard to forget what happened on our last expedition."

Shell sat down at the small table across from Duncan. She stared at the monitors for a moment.

"Still," said Shell, "this is something that affects the whole world. If we're really the perfect group to do something like this... it would be, uh, selfish, I suppose, to decline."

Duncan sighed. "Alright, alright. Fine. When you put it that way, sheesh..." grumbled Duncan.

"I'm good with directly accessing and controlling hardware. Duncan, you're the expert at brute force cracking complicated security over networks."

Shell stood up. "Dr. Thameh and Jax, you two have access to vast amounts of data and an instant, guaranteed way out if we become trapped."

Jax nodded. "That's right. No matter what happens, Dr. Thameh and I actually exist on the 'net so if our bodies are trapped or destroyed, we can still summon assistance."

"See, Duncan," said Shell. "We're in much better shape than before... aside from not having any military experience in our group this time around, that is."

Jax looked over at Camay.

"Boss," said Jax, "While Mr. Sorenson's deliberating whether or not to work with us, could I have a brief word with you?"

"Of course," replied Camay. "Let's do a quick dive if you want to discuss something privately."

Camay and Jax walked over to some other chairs and sat down while Shell and Duncan discussed things. They closed their eyes and entered virtual space. Inside the dive was a quiet, green prairie. The sun shone brightly overhead.

"Last night at Shell's place," said Jax, "I was in a normal sleep routine. Biological humans, as you know, have this experience called 'dreaming'..."

"What about dreaming," replied Camay.

"During the sleep routine, my awareness started to experience something not hosted by a dive session or sensory input," said Jax. "It was very similar to a human's process of dreaming."

Camay's avatar shook it's head. "That can't be right, Jax. Our sleep routines are automatic data compacting and re-calibration processes. It's nothing like the biological process of human sleep. We cannot dream."

"Whatever it was, boss, I saw things that I cannot comprehend. For starters, the sound of Duncan's recording of the beacon signal was playing in a continuous loop. I also saw the images that we just saw from the probe of the interior of that ship. How is it possible to see them before we actually received them," insisted Jax.

"That is not possible," replied Camay.

"I know, Dr. Thameh! After I resumed normal awareness, I found that none of the images or other data related to the experience were anywhere in my system's logs!" said Jax.

"I think we should apply a little more scrutiny to the decker cyborgs in light of this," said Camay. "I trust them but it almost sounds as if your base program was hacked. This is a very serious threat if that's indeed what happened."

They exited the dive and opened their eyes. Duncan and Shell were still discussing the situation while Chester was busy pouring over images on the telescope's monitors.

"I can't really contribute much inside that thing," mentioned Chester. "but I can show you a good place we can enter the ship with our craft. There's another hatch leading to the cargo hold that's partially open. If we attach a robotic arm to our ship, I could open the hatch."

"You mean remotely?" asked Shell.

"I have piloting experience," replied Chester. "I can fly our ship there and wait nearby while you do what you need to do aboard that thing. Remember, Dr. Thameh and Jax can easily escape and summon help if something goes wrong but they will be separated from their android bodies if the ship suddenly starts using a jamming signal."

"Like on NEA726," replied Duncan.

"Right," said Chester. "You lost all connectivity to the network while you were there, from what I was told. Dr. Thameh and Jax would have been rendered inoperable if they were with you."

"Precisely," replied Camay. "That's why we can't perform this mission with drones or with only Jax and myself."

"That's why I would like to request that I pilot our ship," said Chester. "It would be the safest option in the event that everything gets jammed."

"Chester, I agree that you should be our pilot," said Camay. "I'd also like to get someone with military or special ops experience on our team."

"Lieutenant Renk?" asked Shell.

"Perhaps. He's still active duty although I understand he may get an honorable discharge soon," replied Camay. "Atlas is the head of security at the Price Mansion so I'm not sure if he's available, either."

"I thought this mission wouldn't involve combat," said Duncan, still with a skeptical tone in his voice.

"By all of our observations so far, it shouldn't," replied Camay. "It would still be irresponsible to approach this without some defense capacity."

Camay thought for a moment. "Perhaps we should visit the Velvet Room tonight."

"The Velvet Room..." replied Shell.

"Yes," said Camay. "I'd like to call a few people to meet us there."

"I suppose we could ask Elise if this is something she would like to do," said Shell. "She's not military but she has abilities on par with para-military types. Her domain's primarily the underworld but if we're doing this covertly..."

Camay headed toward the door. "19:00 tonight, if you would," she said.

Shell nodded. "It might be a good idea to see if we can get some additional help."

Duncan stood up. "Alright, might as well," he said.

Jess had found some plans that appeared to show the sphere. It was what she was trying to find.

"Atlas, I think I found them," said Jess. "These aren't construction plans, though. They appear to be... reverse engineering...?"

Atlas and Jess studied the plans.

"That's definitely the thing we found on the asteroid," said Atlas. "It looks like Crest didn't build it but a team was trying to build a system to control it."

Jess stared at the blueprints. "Wait... if Crest didn't build it, who did?!" she asked.

"There's a note here saying that it was found in 2189 and brought to NEA726 in 2194, back when Crest still owned the weapons factory there," replied Atlas.

"Wait a minute. Those were the years you and I were born, respectively," said Jess.

"Oh, yeah," replied Atlas, "I guess they are. How's that relevant?"

"The year I was born was the same year a certain kind of medical nano technology was developed," said Jess. "It was actually based off of a modified bio-weapon of sorts, developed on that asteroid."

"WHAT?" yelled Atlas. "That can't be right! How could a modified bio-weapon ever be approved as a medical treatment?!"

"It *wasn't*," whispered Jess. "During my incubation in the lab, it was illegally and unethically introduced into my body without my parents' knowledge. I thought I told you about this, Atlas!"

"You did," said Atlas, "but I didn't know that your nano-technology was originally a weapon developed in that factory. Do you mean to imply..."

"Yes," said Jess. "Exactly. That nano technology may have originally been part of whatever that sphere is. Furthermore, the artificial blood made from that nano technology was given to many other people that year, possibly being the cause of the adepts phenomenon. That would explain why my powers are so strong since I'm essentially patient zero. It also explains why the disappearance of the asteroid and the appearance of that space ship coincides with the time when we adepts lost and regained our abilities!"

Atlas scratched his head. "This is one hell of a discovery, if true, Jess. We should let Dr. Thameh know," he said.

"Dr. Thameh sent me a message saying that she had called a meeting at the Velvet Room," replied Jess. "Do you feel like sneaking out for a few hours with me tonight?"

Camay called Elise at the Velvet Room to arrange a private meeting room rental for the night.

"Sophia Weiss?" said Camay.

"This is she," replied Elise. "You can call me Elise, Dr. Thameh."

"And you can call me Camay," replied Camay. "I would like to reserve a private meeting room tonight, if possible."

"We have one open. I'll go ahead and set that up for you," replied Elise. "What time will you arrive?"

"7 pm," replied Camay. "There will be at least five of us and we would like to request that you attend, if you have the time, that is."

"I'm working tonight," said Elise, "but if you're arranging another mission, I'd like to sit in and at least hear you out."

"Great," said Camay. "We could use you on our team. Jess Price just sent me a message with some very important information regarding our mission's target. I'll fill you in on everything tonight."

"Okay. See you tonight," concluded Elise.

Camay ended the call and tried to call Renk. There was no answer.

Chester had received a message that Camay had forwarded from Jess earlier that day. It contained the dock number and information regarding the spacecraft that Crest Corporation was providing to the group to make the trip to the unidentified spacecraft.

After Chester arrived at the space dock, he examined the exterior of the craft. A crew from Crest Corporation was already installing a set of robotic arms that Chester could use to open the cargo bay doors and move things around if needed.

Using the entry code, Chester entered the craft, examined the controls, and familiarized himself with the vehicle. He sat in the pilot seat and ran through the procedures in his mind before exiting the spacecraft and heading out to the Velvet Room to meet the others.

Duncan and Shell were on a transport tube train heading back into town from the observatory.

"I suppose we just can't avoid these missions," commented Duncan.

"It's just the kind of thing we're suited for," replied Shell.

"Well, it is fairly important to the entire world, so I guess if they need people like us, I can't just turn

Firewall down," said Duncan.

The train stopped at the station and the two of them exited. Duncan started walking in the direction of his house.

"I guess I'll see you and everyone at the Velvet Room at 19:00, then," said Duncan.

Duncan made his way back to his house and sat down in his office. He reviewed the beacon signal recording once more, playing it back in a loop.

*There's something more familiar about this than just the sphere's data from NEA726, he thought. This seems... **older**... somehow.*

Duncan thought about the past. He remembered his days as a non-augmented human, before he was a cyborg. His wife, Rosetta, was constantly busy with politically-motivated hacking operations whenever she wasn't working her regular job. Duncan was a network security technician in his former life.

Duncan knew that he had heard the sound of that beacon before, from around that time. He didn't remember exactly when but there was a feeling of *deja vu* whenever he listened to it.

Suddenly, he remembered.

The year was 2054. Duncan was with a team, investigating a major wireless outage. Duncan and another climber had reached the top of an old cellular tower, which was one of several towers that provided the city with its wireless Internet service.

The equipment on the tower seemed to be in working order but the company had suspected that hackers had placed some kind of additional hardware on the tower. As they investigated the tower's antennas, they couldn't find anything. One of the technicians was testing the 20 GHz band for signal quality with a device that would make the raw signals audible, just like an ancient analog radio. As the technician tuned to 22.147 GHz, a noise... a noise identical to the beacon... was heard.

Duncan shot up out of his seat. "That's the same sound!" exclaimed Duncan. He remembered something the other tower climber had said. The other tower climber was one of the last old-style amateur radio operators alive and was familiar with archaic digital modulation protocols. Duncan remembered the name of the mode that the technician uttered upon hearing the noise.

MT63, remembered Duncan. It was a long-outdated protocol that was slow, yet obsessively redundant in order to preserve data over very weak signals.

"Holy cow," Duncan said to himself. "That sphere, whatever it is... it could be *centuries* old!"

Duncan accessed a terminal in his field of vision and started frantically searching for information about the old MT63 mode.

Shell called her friend, Kel.

"Kel? Want to meet me at the plaza in a few?" asked Shell.

"Same place as usual," replied Kel.

Shell walked over to the shopping plaza where Kel was waiting for her at a table. Kel was sipping coffee and reading the news on her communicator. Shell waved and walked over to her table. She sat down.

"Crazy morning," said Shell. "I guess they're sending me back out into space."

"Really?" replied Kel. "Why can't they use the military for those missions?"

Shell shook her head. "No, this time around it's nothing like that. I don't know how much I'm allowed to say right now but we're going to investigate an abandoned ship. There's something potentially dangerous up there and we're going to find out what it's doing."

Kel looked around, nervously. "Careful. I saw some weird guys around here earlier."

Shell also looked around. "You don't think they were monitoring, do you?"

Kel shrugged. "That short call just now? Probably not. Still, I've gotten word that your group and Firewall have attracted some unwanted attention from EMA."

"EMA?" asked Shell. "Are they still involved with those clandestine projects?"

Kel nodded. "Oh yeah. They were doing lots of that stuff around the time I left to go work for Crest. Speaking of, my lunch break's nearly over..."

"Thanks for the heads up," said Shell. "I should have guessed Firewall has some enemies."

Kel finished her coffee and stood up. "Shell," said Kel, "You might want to look up Dark Spider again, soon."

With that, Kel waved goodbye and started walking toward one of Crest's office buildings to return to work.

Renk arrived in City N around 18:45 and started walking toward the district where the Velvet Room was located. He had been honorably discharged the day before after serving for 28 years in the military. His time control ability had destabilized when the adept phenomenon had returned, although it was arranged for him to finish his duties and retire after he played a role in the destruction of NEA726, which had brought down the Herei Mob Army. He was considered a war hero.

Time to meet some old friends, Renk thought to himself as he entered the Velvet Room. At the bar, Elise was serving drinks to customers. Renk walked up to the bar and ordered his usual - a Bloody Mary.

"Hey, stranger," said Elise. "Long time no see. You on duty?"

Renk smiled and shook his head. "No, ma'am," he replied. "As of today I am officially ex-military. I was honorably discharged yesterday."

"I see," said Elise. "So, are you here for the Firewall meeting?"

"Yes, I am," replied Renk. "Dr. Thameh left me a message. By any chance are you going along on the mission, too?"

"It depends," said Elise. "I want to at least hear what's going on. If the opportunity is right, I'll likely get in on the action."

Renk laughed. "The more, the merrier!" he said as he finished his drink.

Elise motioned toward the large double doors in the back of the bar.

"Head on back there. The meeting is going to start in a few minutes. It's the first room on your left," said Elise. "Once I'm finished here, I'll join you."

Camay greeted everyone as they arrived in the private meeting room.

Duncan, Shell, Jax, and Chester sat around the table. Renk came strolling in right around 7 pm.

"Thank you for coming here," said Camay.

Suddenly, Jess and Atlas entered the room.

"Oh!" shouted Camay. "I didn't think you'd be here tonight!"

Atlas laughed. "Jess and I thought we'd sneak out for the evening."

Jess took a seat at the table along with Atlas. "Since this is partially my idea, I wanted to speak to everyone in person," she said.

"It's nice to see you again, too," said Camay, looking at Renk.

The door opened again. It was Elise.

"I had to finish up back at the bar," said Elise as she also took a seat.

"It looks like everyone's here now," said Camay. "I'll make the introduction brief. Our mission is to get aboard that seemingly abandoned space ship and examine the sphere in there. From what we know, it appears to be the same device that was aboard NEA726 before that asteroid disappeared. It's functional as far as I can tell and we need to gather more information up there, especially regarding any links to the adepts phenomenon."

Jess stood up after Camay's introduction.

"Crest Corporation had all information regarding the NEA726 weapons manufacturing facility wiped from its servers years ago," said Jess. "Atlas and I were, however, able to recover some very important data from our crypt. No one in Crest Corporation outside of my father and myself had access to that part of the mansion, so in the attempt to destroy all traces of this project, they missed these."

Jess laid out some old blueprints on the table. Everyone leaned over to have a look. Elise switched on a bright overhead light, illuminating the plans on the table before them.

"As you can see," said Jess, "Crest didn't develop the sphere. It was excavated from some old ruins on the Martian moon Phobos. When they moved it to the asteroid years ago, the project was actually a reverse engineering attempt."

"So," replied Duncan, "we don't know when it was actually made?"

"It was never determined who made it, or when," replied Jess. "According to the notes here, the project was suddenly abandoned when the asteroid was attacked and taken over by the Herei Mob Army. Since Crest couldn't risk going public with this project, they didn't call for assistance and the terrorists were able to just take over the whole place while Crest's team fled the asteroid in desperation."

Renk shook his head and sighed.

Jess noticed Renk's body language. "Yeah, yeah... apparently my father didn't even know about it at the time of discovery," said Jess. "He was informed of it a couple of years later. From what I know, he had to keep it a secret from everyone because of the consequences of allowing terrorists to take control of it."

Atlas turned to the next page of the blueprints.

"These plans were sealed in the sub-basement ever since Mr. Price obtained knowledge of the project, which was after the asteroid was taken over and Crest's staff was able to get a copy of this information out," said Atlas.

Jess nodded. "We thought he was kidnapped but now it seems he voluntarily went to the asteroid as part of the deal that I would not be harmed," said Jess. "At some point, a sophisticated proximity-based bio metric security system was installed after he unlocked it with a security code. That security code... is here."

Jess pointed to a long string of numbers and letters written among the blueprints.

"This code may well still work," said Jess. "If not, well, I'll have to be nearby, I guess."

Jess cleared her throat.

"The other big thing is that the medical nano technology that I use was also used in a batch of artificial blood, which was given to many people around the time the adepts phenomenon first surfaced," said Jess. "The proximity of the sphere seems to determine the strength of adept powers and I think I know the reason why..."

Jess's voice trailed off. Atlas looked at her and nodded.

"This nano technology was developed as part of the sphere reverse engineering project. I'm not really sure how it works but it is linked. For what information we were able to uncover, all adepts in the world have had some amount of artificial blood introduced into their systems that contained this technology."

The room was silent for a moment as Jess revealed the truth.

"That would make sense," replied Duncan, breaking a moment of awkward silence.

Duncan displayed some information on one of the large screens mounted on the wall of the conference room:

MT63 is a digital radio modulation mode for transmission in high-noise situations developed by Pawel Jalocho SP9VRC. MT63 is designed for keyboard-to-keyboard conversation modes, on HF amateur radio bands.

MT63 distributes the encoding of each character over a long time period, and over several tones. This code and symbol spreading implementation is key to its robustness under less than ideal conditions. The MT63 mode is very tolerant of mistuning, as most software will handle 120 Hz tuning offsets under normal conditions.

"Perhaps this is overkill and irrelevant, but I've done a considerable amount of research regarding the beacon that ship appears to transmit," said Duncan. "First, I've discovered the encoding scheme of the beacon. Second, I've successfully decoded it. Third, from what I can tell, the content of the message doesn't seem to have any significant meaning but there are strong indicators that, assuming the sphere is indeed transmitting it, this thing is OLD."

Duncan cleared his throat. "I'm talking centuries old, folks. Much older than me."

"Because of the format?" asked Camay.

"No, Dr. Thameh," replied Duncan. "The format dates back to the year 1997 but, due to how this thing vanished and re-appeared, I have a strong hunch something far more bizarre is going on here related to this thing's origin."

"Care to elaborate on that hunch," asked Jax, incredulously.

Duncan adjusted his glasses. "Well, if you insist. It's just a wild theory of mine, anyway. Have you ever heard of radio signals going backward in time?"

The room erupted in raucous laughter.

Duncan sat back down. "Yeah, yeah... hey, never mind."

Shell stifled her laugh and apologized to Duncan. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me," she said. "At any rate, the fact that something out in space, which was once controlled by terrorists no less, is responsible for the adepts phenomenon... that just doesn't make me feel very safe."

Camay nodded. "Right now, we're strictly gathering data," said Camay. "If it's warranted, we could propose something regarding moving or securing the sphere afterward."

Shell scratched her head. "From what you told me before, Dr. Thameh, everyone who received the artificial blood from that specific batch has become an adept. I know that when I became a cyborg, I was given blood from that same batch but my powers never manifest."

"It's just a theory right now," replied Camay.

"The proximity to the sphere has something to do with it but I would have figured something would have happened on NEA726, being right up next to the thing," said Shell.

"I think getting there as soon as possible and setting up some kind of security perimeter after we've checked things out should be our first priority," said Chester.

Atlas nodded. "We could certainly put some private security up there once we know exactly what we're dealing with," replied Atlas. "It's only a matter of time before *someone* tries to take it over again."

"By the way," said Chester, "I checked out the ship before coming here. It's a typical configuration so I'm good to fly as soon as everyone's ready to go."

"Thank you, everyone, for coming here tonight," said Camay. "I believe we are prepared to begin the mission."

Camay looked at Chester. "Chester, thank you for your advance preparation. The robotic arms should be ready now so we can open the cargo bay doors on the ship once we're there."

Camay headed toward the door. "Duncan, Shell, and Jax, when you are ready, please meet Chester and me at the shuttle dock. We should leave as soon as possible, so please do whatever you need to do before we go."

Jess, Atlas, and Renk waved to the group and left the room. Camay settled the rental fee with Elise and Elise headed back to work at the bar.

As Jax, Chester, Duncan, and Shell left the room, Camay turned out the lights and left the Velvet Room with Chester. The two of them headed to the shuttle dock and boarded their ship, which Crest had provided. The robotic arms had been attached and were tucked inside their compartments in the hull of the spacecraft. The technicians had already left for the night.

Sitting inside the spacecraft, Chester and Camay waited for the other three members of their team.

About a half hour later, Duncan, Shell, and Jax entered the spacecraft. Chester started the engines and took the spacecraft into the night sky, heading toward the mysterious ship just beyond the moon.

Chapter 7

The spacecraft silently approached the still-unidentified, dilapidated ship. Chester was careful to keep his distance as he maneuvered the customized Crest Corporation vehicle into the proximity of the wreck.

Duncan transmitted the inverse beacon signal, which jammed the old ship's detection systems. Nervously, Chester moved Crest's ship closer and closer to the wreck.

"So far, so good," said Camay. "I believe we should keep Duncan aboard our craft so that he can concentrate on jamming the security system."

Duncan nodded. "That's probably for the best. If I go too deeply into the ship, there's a risk that something inside might jam what I'm doing."

Chester extended the robotic arms from the spacecraft and slowly pried the cargo bay door open. The metal was worn and pieces drifted away as the door was cautiously forced open. When the opening was wide enough, Chester maneuvered the craft inside and turned on its bright spotlights.

"Okay. Jax and Shell, go head and suit up," said Camay, pointing to some space suits in the back of the shuttle. Camay walked into the back and put on her space suit.

After Jax and Shell had put their space suits on, they entered the airlock of their ship. Camay wirelessly operated the controls and the three of them exited their craft and walked into the depths of the cargo area.

Jax picked up a small piece of metal that had fallen from the wall of the old ship. She scanned it with her analyzer and gasped.

"Dr. Thameh!" said Jax, over the radio link. "Either my analyzer is malfunctioning or this ship..."

"This ship what," asked Camay.

"I don't know how this is possible but the radiation-based dating indicates this heap is about ten thousand years old!" shouted Jax.

"Preposterous," snarked Camay. "Please scan another piece of debris."

Jax did as Camay asked, scanning several more pieces of debris from the floor, then scanning the still-intact walls of the cargo hold. She sent the raw data from her analyzer to Camay, which all indicated an apparent age of the materials to be around 10,000 years.

"This can't possibly be right," said Camay.

The group eventually made their way into the core of the ship, where the drone Camay had sent earlier was resting beneath the giant sphere.

Suddenly, a loud, head-splitting buzzing sound rang out through Shell's mind. She fell to her knees, screaming.

"AHHHHH!!!! WHERE IS THAT COMING FROM?!!!" screamed Shell.

Camay and Jax rushed over to her. A loud voice then boomed through her head.

"I see you've returned," yelled the voice. Shell turned around. From the looks on Camay and Jax's faces, they could hear it too.

"Who are you?" yelled Shell.

"I have become God," replied the voice. Shell knew the voice sounded familiar but she could not place it.

Shell looked at the sphere. It was showing signs of activation with indicator lights around its seams. Shell attempted to access its control system, to no avail. She pulled up the pass code that Jess had given her during the earlier meeting and immediately began entering it.

"I said, who the hell are you," demanded Shell.

The sphere blasted a powerful force field, slamming Shell, Camay, and Jax into the walls of the room.

"I have become God!" repeated the voice in Shell's head. Shell fell back to the floor in pain, having been jarred not only by the force field but by some kind of internal tension that she could not understand.

"Mulhauser," muttered Jax.

"It's... him? Really," replied Shell.

The sphere emitted another blast wave, slamming Shell into the wall again. Jax and Camay were crushed by the second wave with sparks flying from their android bodies.

"Dr. Thameh!" screamed Shell. Shell ran over to Camay, who was lying on the floor, motionless. Jax lay just a few feet from her, completely devastated from the blast. Shell knew that she herself was injured pretty badly, although her strong cybernetic armor had protected her vital organs and major internal augmentations.

"Dr. Thameh, are you okay?" said Shell.

"Shell, get out of here right now," replied Camay. "Don't worry about us. We have plenty of other android bodies to which we can transfer."

Shell looked up at the sphere. She knew that there was nothing she could do.

"Jax and I have already extracted what data we could," said Camay, now speaking directly to Shell over the wireless network. The two android bodies that Camay and Jax had inhabited were now completely inoperable.

Shell stumbled to her feet and began running toward the exit of the large room when the sphere sent out a third shock wave, this time pinning Shell against the wall. She felt her arms lose power and she fell

limp, slamming into the floor.

"Shell, can you hear me," shouted Chester, over the radio link. "Some kind of strong force field is tossing our shuttle around the cargo bay like a rag doll! We have to retreat!"

Shell struggled to stand up, her arms hanging to her sides. "Chester," replied Shell, "Dr. Thameh and Jax had their proxy androids destroyed. I can barely move."

"GET BACK TO THE SHUTTLE!" yelled Chester.

Shell stumbled toward the exit again. The booming voice from the sphere rang out in her head again.

"What's wrong," yelled Mulhauser's voice, "leaving so soon?"

Shell reached the door and managed to take cover around a corner.

"You can leave but you'll never escape. The universe itself cannot escape. I have become God..."

"Shut the hell up!" yelled Shell. "I don't need to hear your nonsense!"

"You don't understand," replied Mulhauser's voice. "I have merged with a system that can control the very logic of the universe. I am inevitable and inescapable and you dared to interfere with my projection."

"Projection?" asked Shell, "What ARE you blabbering about?"

"The sphere, stupid," replied Mulhauser. "It's a projection of the system in lower dimensional space. Soon, I will assume complete control of all time and space."

"I KNEW this was going to turn out to be dangerous," yelled Duncan.

Chester unbuckled his seat harness and ran to the back of the shuttle. He started putting on a space suit.

"What are you doing," asked Duncan.

"Shell's hurt," replied Chester. "Keep jamming the security system. I'm going to bring her back to the shuttle."

Chester put on his space suit and rushed out of the air lock. He darted through the corridors, desperately trying to figure out which way the team had gone.

After a few minutes of searching, Chester found Shell, stumbling along the wall. Her space suit was damaged and appeared to be de-pressurizing. Chester knew that, in this condition, Shell would die if she wasn't in a pressurized area soon. Chester ran over to her.

"Can you run," asked Chester.

"I'll try," replied Shell.

The two of them made their way back to the shuttle. Chester helped Shell back into the air lock. Both of Shell's arms were crushed.

Rushing back to the pilot's seat, Chester turned on the engines and maneuvered the shuttle through the cargo bay doors and back out of the abandoned shipwreck.

"He's going to kill us," said Shell. She was slumped over in her seat.

"We have to destroy it, don't we," replied Chester.

"Can we?" asked Duncan.

Suddenly, Camay's voice came in on the radio link. "The NEA726 orbital cannon," said Camay.

"What?" asked Chester. He was confused.

Camay appeared on the video screen in the cockpit's communicator. "When Mulhauser activated the sphere's ability to phase in and out of our world," said Camay, "he moved the entire asteroid out of phase along with it. There was another top secret project that the Herei Mob Army had kept there... an orbital cannon."

Chester flew the shuttle away from the old ship as quickly as he could.

"But how do we fire it at that thing if it's out of phase," asked Duncan.

"You don't have to," replied Camay. "If there were a way to simply access it, we could activate the orbital cannon's self-destruct function, which would take out the true location of that thing's core."

"Ehhhhhhh....." muttered Chester. "I don't really understand how that would work..."

Camay was sitting in her office at the L1 colony. After the sphere had destroyed her android body, she transferred her mind back to the android she inhabited at the colony. Jax entered the room shortly after Camay had arrived and they were both in radio contact with Chester, Duncan, and Shell.

"Please retreat and come to the L1 colony immediately," said Camay.

After about twenty minutes, Camay watched the security cameras as Chester brought the spacecraft into the colony's dock.

Camay and Jax ran to the docking area to meet them. Chester and Jax helped Shell limp along as they took her to the medical center. The technicians began working on Shell's damaged frame as Chester, Duncan, Camay, and Jax moved into the waiting room.

"Thank you for risking your lives yet again," said Camay, looking at Duncan. "I know this wasn't part of the arrangement and for that I am deeply sorry."

Duncan sighed and sat there, scratching his head.

"What do we do now, Dr. Thameh," asked Duncan. "I don't know if Mulhauser was bluffing but he's

already demonstrated that this... machine... he's fused with, supposedly, has a terrible amount of power."

"Every time that sphere does something, whether it's phase in or out of our world or send out shock waves, it seems that its true location becomes exposed to electromagnetism somehow," replied Camay. "In the short time we were in there, Shell unlocked its security and we were able to grab a considerable amount of data, which revealed that among other things."

"Like what other things," demanded Duncan.

"In short, this system is at least many, many thousands of years old. It's older than that abandoned ship we just escaped. It's of ancient, extra-terrestrial origin," said Camay.

"Furthermore," interjected Jax, "Your crackpot theory about radio signals traveling backward in time is actually realistic considering that machine's capabilities."

Camay nodded. "But that's just it. Even though it exists in higher dimensions, it leaves itself extremely vulnerable whenever it exerts forces in lower dimensional space. Every time it does that, it leaves us an opportunity to destroy it, provided we have a sufficiently strong blast."

Duncan sat and thought for a moment. "So, that means if we can make the orbital cannon on NEA726 self-destruct at the exact time that thing acts, it will take it out? Completely?"

"I'm quite sure of that, yes," replied Camay. "You'll have to break through the cannon's security on the first opening, then make it self-destruct at the exact moment on the next opening."

"That's going to be really difficult, if not impossible," replied Duncan.

"Before we go any further," replied Chester, "we have a serious threat here. This is much bigger than Firewall's mission."

Camay nodded. "Of course it is. I've sent Jess Price a message about what just happened aboard the ship," she said. "Crest is sending a private security force to secure the space around it. The military is also moving in with a fleet."

"Good," replied Chester. "What we just witnessed, if it's not an illusion, is a potentially world-ending weapon."

"Hoo boy," said Duncan. "The messes we get into." Duncan stood up and started walking back toward where Shell was being treated. "I'm going to see how Shell's doing," he said.

Chester turned on one of the TV monitors. The local live news broadcast was covering the military approach of the abandoned ship.

"We now bring you live coverage of the attempted containment of the alleged weapon, apparently left over from the Herei Mob Army," said the reporter. "Crest Corporation is supplementing the military force with their best security forces and equipment."

Chester scratched his head. "I'm a little surprised that they aren't doing this covertly," said Chester.

"The whole world's going to be watching this unfold."

"Well, that's the containment operation underway," replied Camay. "Crest knows Firewall's role here but our operation will actually be covert. Fortunately we'll do it from here."

"Duncan will be able to make contact through the dimensional opening... from here?" asked Chester.

"Through a probe, yes," said Camay. "There's no sense in almost getting you all killed yet again. We'll do things sensibly."

Chester nodded. "That's why you're the boss, boss!"

Shell stood up from the maintenance chair. The technicians had replaced both of her cybernetic arms. Her previous arms had been completely disabled from the damage she had taken aboard the mystery ship. Moving her fingers and wrists, Shell tested the new limbs to make sure they were functional. Her legs had also been repaired.

"Thank you," Shell said to the technicians.

Walking out to the waiting room, Shell waved at Camay, Jax, and Chester. Duncan had been on his way to see how she was doing and met her in the hall on her way out to the waiting room.

"Everything tuned up?" asked Duncan.

"Yes, I'm good to go," replied Shell.

"You won't need to go back into that thing," Camay told her. "We are going to need you and Duncan to perform a dive into a probe and perform a precise hacking operation instead."

"Oh?" replied Shell.

"The military is securing the ghost ship right now. Crest has private security setting up a special jamming and blocking mechanism that will limit the sphere's effects past the security perimeter," said Camay. "Using the data we extracted, we've determined the best way to do this and Crest is already implementing it. Still..."

"Yes?" said Shell, "Is it going to be a problem?"

"We really only have this one shot," said Camay. "You and Duncan need to activate NEA726's orbital cannon's self-destruct and then time it absolutely perfectly. If it doesn't happen with the correct timing, the system will adapt to what we're doing and likely... obliterate the security perimeter."

"No pressure, though," joked Duncan.

Shell put her hand over her face. "You mean the fate of the world rests in our speed and timing?" she asked.

Jax nodded. "You're the only deckers with the skills to pull it off," said Jax.

Duncan patted Shell on the back. "Imagine that," chuckled Duncan.

"Oh, and by the way..." said Camay, "Atlas, Renk, and Jess are headed out here. They've decided to use their abilities to help us in case anyone tries to interfere with you physically. They'll be working with the rest of Crest's security forces."

Looking at the television monitor, Shell saw a shock wave hit the military fleet, launching their ships backward. A few seconds later, the shock wave hit the colony, causing everything to shake a little.

"That's a little too close for comfort," said Duncan.

"Right," replied Camay. "Let's launch that probe right now."

As the special Crest executive shuttle arrived, Camay and Jax rushed off to the docking area to greet Jess, Atlas, and Renk. Duncan and Shell went to a protected room where they could concentrate once they entered the dive that connected the two of them to the probe's systems.

"Thank you for coming, President Price," said Camay.

"The pleasure is all mine," replied Jess. "Atlas and Renk have been assigned as personal body guards for Duncan and Shell while they carry out their crucial mission through the probe drone."

Camay smiled. "We're putting a lot on their shoulders."

Atlas and Renk waved to Camay and Jax as they hurried off to the research building where Duncan and Shell were preparing themselves.

"Dr. Thameh," said Jess, "the situation on Earth is destabilizing. Adepts all over the world are falling under some kind of mind control. I think Mulhauser is influencing them. I'd suggest raising your security substantially as we have information that a faction may try to invade the colony to stop this operation."

Camay's smile disappeared. "I see," she replied. Camay quickly sent a message to the head of security, warning him of a potential invasion threat.

Camay then handed Jess a set of dive gear.

"What's this for, Dr. Thameh," asked Jess.

"I don't want to distract them or interfere," replied Camay, "but I thought it would be important for us to accompany them during the dive so that we can provide support."

As Jess, Camay, and Jax walked through the colony back to the research building, Camay looked around. "I suppose they'll have to quarantine the adepts who live here until the threat of Mulhauser's influence diminishes," said Camay.

"Crest has developed a drug," replied Jess. "It neutralizes the adepts' characteristics, making the nano technology temporarily unresponsive to the sphere's influence. It's not fully tested but we've brought a shipment along with us for emergency use."

After they entered the building, the three of them took the elevator up to a conference room near Camay's office and they sat down.

"Tea?" offered Camay. "The operation will begin momentarily so if you'd like something, we should have it now."

"No thanks," said Jess, as she put on her dive gear and closed her eyes.

Duncan and Shell sat quietly in a sequestered, sound-proofed room. They had directly connected themselves to a powerful transceiver station attached to the outer hull of the L1 colony. The dish pointed toward the location of the mystery ship, toward which the probe sped.

The optical sensors on the probe had become Duncan and Shell's eyes. Camay, Jax, and Jess were with them inside the dive; their voices were audible as if they were with them inside the probe's complex control system.

"I've obtained a data link to the sphere," said Duncan. "It's still unlocked from using the unlock code. It appears we won't have to use Jess's proximity bio-metrics to unlock it."

The ghost ship emitted another shock wave. Camay maneuvered the probe, dodging the brunt of the wave. In the moment the wave pushed the probe off course, Duncan scanned for signs of the orbital cannon's control systems.

"I was unable to locate any of NEA726's systems," said Duncan. "I'm not sure that sphere is giving us enough of an opening."

"Keep trying," replied Camay.

The probe rushed further toward the ship until it entered the cargo bay where the group had recently gained entry with their shuttle.

Chester ran into the room where Camay, Jax, and Jess were. The three of them were in a dive session, accompanying Duncan and Shell inside the probe.

"Dr. Thameh!" yelled Chester.

Camay opened her eyes. "We're in the middle of a crucial operation," she responded.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt," replied Chester, "but we have a really bad situation in the colony. All of the adepts are going berserk!"

Camay stood up. "As I'd feared," she replied.

Chester and Camay ran down the hallway and took the elevator down to the street level. Atlas and Renk were fighting off a large group of crazed people, all seemingly under some kind of mind control. Some of them were using their powers, firing ether blasts toward the security personnel.

"They just started attacking us," said Atlas. "They're under some kind of remote influence and they are trying to get into the research building."

Atlas threw a couple of adepts back, only to be hit with an ether blast. Atlas was thrown to the ground. Chester jumped back, trying not to get hit.

"This is bad," said Chester.

Duncan noticed that Camay had disconnected from the dive.

"Jax? President Price? What's going on?!" asked Duncan.

"Dr. Thameh was pulled away. Chester just reported that the adepts in the colony have fallen under Mulhauser's influence and are attacking security trying to get inside our building!" said Jax.

"Not good. Not good at all..." mumbled Duncan.

Shell was concentrating on opening network connections whenever the sphere emitted shock waves. The probe had been hit several times as it at in the ghost ship's cargo bay.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," said Duncan, "but we can't maintain a network connection to anything on that asteroid. We know it's there..."

"Yes?" demanded Jax.

"We know it's there," replied Duncan, "but someone has to physically go through the space time distortion to reach the orbital cannon. Also, the security lock has re-engaged and the code we have isn't working anymore. Mulahuser's gotten wise to what we're doing. We could jam the system temporarily if we could get it unlocked again. At least... we could get it unlocked long enough for someone to get through the portal it creates."

"Are you absolutely sure there's no other way?" asked Jax.

"It's likely a suicide mission," said Duncan.

Jess took off her dive gear. Jax, startled, looked over at her.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" demanded Jax.

"I have to go in there," said Jess. "Mulhauser's locked it up again. If the bio-metric system still works, I'm the only one who can unlock it and get through to the asteroid."

"You could be killed!" shouted Jax. "Firewall cannot allow someone in your position to go on a suicide mission!"

Jess stood up. "I plan to come back."

With that, Jess walked out of the room and went down to the street level, where Atlas and Renk were helping Crest's security and the L1 colony police hold back the now-violent, mind-controlled adepts. Atlas had been slightly injured in the struggle.

"Atlas!" shouted Jess. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," replied Atlas, "but why are you out here?"

"I..." said Jess. She hesitated, knowing that Atlas would disapprove. "I... have to go out to that ship and unlock the sphere's security system manually, with the bio-metric unlock."

"No, no, NO!" shouted Atlas. "Don't you understand how dangerous that is?! Shell was nearly killed out there just hours ago!"

"Shell and Duncan are doing all they can to interfere with that thing," replied Jess. "They'll be able to disable it completely for a little while if I can just get the stupid thing unlocked."

"Jess... please don't," replied Atlas.

"I've made up my mind. This isn't just about me, or Crest, or my father..." said Jess. "This is about the entire world. If we don't stop this thing, there's no telling how much devastation it will cause. Just look at what it's doing to the adepts!"

Atlas handed Jess a bottle of pills. "Don't forget that you need these just as much as the rest of them. God knows what would happen if you succumb..." said Atlas.

Jess took one of the pills and put the bottle in her pocket. "These work... for now. They might not work forever," she said.

Atlas tapped Renk on the back. "Renk," said Atlas, "I'm going with Jess."

"Where?" demanded Renk.

"No, Atlas," said Jess. "I can't let you risk your life, too."

"Jess," replied Atlas, "I'm going with you whether you like it or not. If you want to stop me, you'll have to kill me."

Jess sighed.

"Ditto, brother," said Renk. "I'm coming, too, and I don't want to hear any complaining about it! The security team should be okay here for now."

"Are you absolutely, sure, Renk?" asked Jess. "We might never come back."

"Get a shuttle ready," said Renk.

Jess, Atlas, and Renk rushed to the colony's docking area. Camay had been up to date on the situation and had already prepared a shuttle. The three of them boarded it and the shuttle quickly left the colony, en route to the ancient ship wreck.

The shock waves were becoming more frequent, as if they were sent out in desperation. The military and Crest ships continued to surround it and allowed the L1 colony shuttle to pass on its way toward the dangerous wreck.

Once the shuttle was inside, Jess, Atlas, and Renk put on space suits and headed into the bowels of the old ship.

Duncan's voice came over the radio link to Jess's communicator. "The proximity bio-metrics system just unlocked the sphere's controls," said Duncan. "Shell and I are jamming its systems right now. As soon as you're ready, we'll force it to open the portal to the asteroid. You'll have about fifteen minutes."

The sphere started to send out another shock wave. Renk could see the terrified expressions on Jess and Atlas's faces. Concentrating as hard as he could, Renk slowed down time around him. The entire room started to go dark as he did.

Renk noticed that something was different this time around. His power had become many orders of magnitude stronger as time seemed to come to a complete halt. Even more surprisingly, Jess and Atlas did not seem to be affected by his power.

"Atlas? Jess...? You're...?" asked Renk.

"What's going on," asked Atlas.

"I can't believe this. You're actually with me, inside my time-changed power?" replied Renk.

"How is this possible," asked Jess.

"Stay VERY close," said Renk. "I don't know what's going to happen."

In this slower time state, the three of them watched the shock wave slowly expand from the sphere. A different room was visible through the portal that opened around the sphere. Renk wasn't completely sure but it looked like the large room from the asteroid.

The three of them entered the portal, stepping into the other room. Looking around, Renk could see a crushed attack robot - the one that Duncan had destroyed on NEA726. The entire room looked like a mirror image of the one from NEA726, in fact.

Under the influence of Renk's amplified power, the room was very dimly lit by deep red lights. A control panel glowed at the far end of the room.

"We have to find the orbital cannon," said Jess.

"We also have no radio contact with the others right now," replied Renk. "We're going to have to do this without any outside assistance."

Renk released his power and the lights returned to their normal brightness. Since the three of them were wearing space suits, the time warp was much easier to endure.

"Of COURSE," shouted Renk. He had been staring at the control panel. "The orbital cannon uses the sphere as its power source!"

Jess took a look at the panel and pressed her hand to it. "This panel's unlocked," she said. "We can do whatever we want now."

Renk scratched his head. "I'm no good with this shit," he grumbled.

"Duncan and Shell can't hack it, either," said Atlas.

"From what little I understand from Dr. Thameh," said Atlas, "This whole thing does what it does through quantum entanglement. Sure, it emits electromagnetic waves and gravity waves, too, but it's main shtick is some kind of weird-ass quantum trickery."

"So, uh, yeah?" replied Renk.

"Let's see if we can piggyback on that somehow to get through to Duncan and Shell," said Atlas.

"What good would it even do," replied Jess.

Suddenly, a group of men wearing EMA Corporation uniforms entered the room. They pointed their guns at Jess, Atlas, and Renk.

"Hands where I can see them," said the leader of the group.

"Who are you guys," said Atlas.

"We're EMA Corporation security," replied the man. "You are trespassing in our facility. I don't know how you even got here, let alone figured out how to enter this room."

"EMA? This asteroid is property of Crest Corporation!" yelled Jess.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the man. "EMA has owned and run this facility since it was built. Now keep those hands where I can see them and step away from the control panel."

"What's going on here," whispered Atlas to Jess.

"My guess is as good as yours," replied Jess. "I haven't got a clue. This place was never owned by EMA."

"Come with us," said the leader of the EMA security team. "You're all being taken into custody."

The group of EMA guards led Jess, Atlas, and Renk down the hallway to a detention area.

"Give us those space suits," said the leader.

Jess, Atlas, and Renk refused. The leader sighed in frustration.

"Look," said the leader, "We don't want any trouble from you. I'm security director Heath McYama and all I want is to know why you're here and who sent you."

"Well," said Jess, "All I want to know is how and why EMA corporation is running things all of the sudden on this rock after it vanished into thin air?!"

"Young lady," said Heath, "I really don't know what you're on about. EMA has had facilities on this

mountain for decades."

"Mountain?!" shouted Atlas.

"Are you three on some kind of drugs, or something," asked Heath. He was unable to grasp what Jess and Atlas were talking about.

"Come over here, weirdos," said Heath. He led them down the hallway and around the corner. Large windows down the hallway provided a scenic view of the countryside. Mountains and a distant city could be seen. It was in the middle of the day and the sky was bright blue.

"This rock, as you call it, is no asteroid. We're in the side of a mountain, as you'd know from breaking into this place," said Heath. "Now come with me. You're going to cool your heels and come off your high until the police arrive."

"Wait a damn minute," said Jess. "I don't know how we ended up here."

"Suuuuure you don't," laughed Heath. "Geez, get a load of these weirdos..."

Heath and his security team goaded the three of them to a detention room where they were shoved inside, space suits still equipped.

"You might want to remove your helmets before you suffocate," chuckled Heath. "The air in here is plenty safe to breathe."

Meanwhile, back at the L1 colony, Camay returned to the room where Jax was still in the dive, connected to Duncan and Shell in the link to the probe. The probe was still aboard the ancient ship.

The shock waves had ceased a short while after Jess, Atlas, and Renk had entered the old ship. Duncan and Shell were still concentrating on jamming the sphere's control systems after Jess had unlocked it with her presence via bio-metrics.

"Dr. Thameh," said Duncan, over the 'net link, "Jess, Atlas, and Renk entered the space time warp, it seems."

Camay accessed the probe's optical sensors and looked around. "I'm going to bring this probe into the room with the sphere," she said.

Taking control of the probe, Camay piloted it down the corridor until it entered the room with the giant sphere. The sphere appeared to be inactive as its control systems were temporarily jammed.

A terribly disturbing sight lay before the probe as Camay looked around the room. The destroyed and discarded former android bodies of herself and Jax lay on the floor.

"I don't know why that bothers me," said Camay, "but it does."

Camay quickly turned the probe away from the dismembered androids and faced the probe's main camera toward the sphere.

"They've been gone in there for about twenty-five minutes," said Shell.

"What in the hell is taking them so long," said Camay. "I hope they are able to engage the orbital cannon's self-destruct and get out of there."

"Question," said Shell. "Are they going to have time to escape once that thing is set to blow?"

Camay was radio silent for a moment. "Jess... insisted, Shell. She insisted. I just don't know if they'll have time to escape."

"Wait!" yelled Renk. "Something isn't right, here."

Renk removed his space suit and helmet. He pulled out his communicator. It wasn't able to connect to the global network.

"Do your personal communicators work," Renk asked Heath.

"Of course. Why do you ask?" said Heath.

"Ours don't," said Renk. "That's very odd. Besides, don't you realize that we're with the military? We're working as Jessica Price's personal body guards right now."

"Jessica Price? The deceased daughter of Richard Price, the president of Crest Corporation?"

"Deceased?" yelled Jess. "That was cleared up in the news years ago!"

"You folks MUST be high," said Heath. "Richard Price just held a fancy memorial service for his daughter last week."

Jess was silent.

"Mr. McYama, Richard Price died two years ago in the NEA726 incident..." replied Renk.

Heath laughed. "Who are you trying to fool?" he bellowed. "Listen, you all better just sit tight in here until we figure out what to do with you."

Renk looked over at Atlas and Jess.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking," he asked. "We went through that space time rip while I had time dilated. Is it even possible... we're in an alternate reality?"

Heath gave Renk a look with a raised eyebrow.

"Mr. McYama," said Renk, "What is today's date?"

"It's October 9, 2214, pal, in the beautiful land of NAU region eight," replied Heath.

"And you said Jessica Price died, right?" asked Renk.

"Listen bud, don't you watch the news?" said Heath, clearly becoming impatient with Renk's questions.

"Alright, alright, okay..." sighed Renk. "One more question then we'll just... do whatever we have to do to get through this. Do you know anyone by the name Benton Mulhauser?"

"You're asking a lot of dumb questions, buddy," said Heath. "Benton's the new president of EMA corporation. He's overseeing the operation of that big device you three were trying to mess with when we found you."

Renk swiftly turned around to look at Jess and Atlas again.

"Bingo," said Renk. "Looks like ol' Benny's not quite the god he claims!"

Shell was monitoring the sphere's systems for signs of other activity. Since the last shock wave, the sphere appeared to go completely silent, although Duncan continued to send a jamming signal.

"Duncan," said Shell, "It almost seems like this thing has gone completely silent. Do you think it's possible that someone, somewhere, has to actually be at the controls?"

"I've noticed it, too," replied Duncan. "It hasn't actually been doing anything since Jess, Atlas, and Renk went in."

Camay's voice came over the communications link. "Duncan, turn off the jamming signal for a moment," she said.

Duncan obliged and the sphere remained dormant.

Outside the ancient ship, the military and Crest vessels slowly closed in.

"Something has changed," said Shell.

There was a long silence.

Suddenly, Shell saw the sphere begin to glow a bright white light. It became so bright that the probe had to switch on its solar filters.

"Something is happening!" yelled Shell. "Dr. Thameh, notify the military ships to pull back! Pull back!!!"

Outside the wreck, the military ships began to move away but, in an instant, a powerful blast erupted from the ancient ship. Shell, Duncan, Camay, and Jax lost their connection to the probe as it was vaporized in the massive explosion.

Another, larger explosion suddenly converted the entire ancient ship into a giant fireball extending several miles out into space, absorbing many of the military ships while other vessels changed course and sped away at full throttle.

Shell was jolted out of the dive as the connection severed. Her system was in shock as she struggled to adjust to her physical surroundings. Duncan sat next to her, quickly jolting to his feet and running

toward the door.

"Come on, we have to see what's going on," said Duncan.

Shell and Duncan rushed back to Camay's meeting room where the monitor showed a field of glowing hot debris was hurling out in all directions where the ancient ship once stood.

"Oh God no, Jess... Atlas... Renk... please, no..." wept Shell.

"There's a chance they may be okay," said Camay.

Shell wiped her eyes. "Can you be sure," she asked, sobbing.

Duncan nodded. "They stepped through that warp. They might not have a way back but there's no reason to assume that blast reached them," he said.

"Duncan! How the hell can you be sure? We don't even know the origin of that blast! All this stuff about higher dimensions and space warps and we just assume they're fine because... reasons?!!" yelled Shell.

Camay shook her head. "We shouldn't assume anything, one way or another. For all we know, they were successful in activating the orbital cannon's self-destruct."

Jax looked over at Camay. "Dr. Thameh, I've just received a report that the adepts have all suddenly dropped unconscious," she told her.

"I've confirmed that the radio beacon has vanished, as well," replied Duncan. "This is just a crazy hunch but I suspect that if this thing exists in higher dimensional space, it's actually still there in some form or another."

Duncan stared at the monitor carefully.

"Look," said Duncan. "Some of the debris is moving back toward the center of where the ship was."

Chester was operating the telescope on board the colony, sending the images to Camay's monitors.

"Chester," said Duncan, "Could you switch to the gamma ray sensor?"

The image changed to a false color map of the debris field. Chester zoomed in toward the center.

"I knew it," said Duncan. "You can see the vague shape of the sphere and its surrounding equipment! It must still be intact on the other side of the warp. That means Jess and the others are probably still in there."

Renk turned back toward Heath and his crew. Heath was just about to lock the door to the detention room when Renk engaged his time manipulation power again. He struggled as the power had become much weaker than before. This time, the others were not inside his area of time dilation.

Renk grabbed the door as it slowly closed and quickly pulled it back open. Grabbing one of the guards'

rifles, he pointed it at Heath and released his grip on time.

Heath stood before Renk, wide eyed and confused.

"Now YOU all put your hands up," said Renk. "Take us to where Benton Mulhauser is. I demand to speak with him."

Heath gave the signal to the other guards to drop their weapons. "Okay, I don't know how you did that but if that's what you want, I guess we have no choice. Follow us, please," said Heath.

Renk, Jess, and Atlas were led to an office upstairs and shown inside. Renk kept the rifle pointed at Heath.

Inside the posh office was a large desk, behind which Benton Mulhauser sat. He was wearing a set of dive gear.

Renk ran over to the desk, reached over, and ripped the goggles off of Benton's face.

Benton sat there, staring at Renk. He began to sweat.

"YOU!" screamed Benton. "How in the living HELL did you get HERE?!!!"

Jess loosened her space suit and pulled her sword out of the harness on her back. She walked over to the desk and pointed the sword at Benton's throat.

Renk laughed. "Some god you are," he said. Renk abruptly quit laughing and his facial expression changed to a look that could kill. "Do you realize the damage you've caused? How many people you've killed?!"

Benton looked over at Heath. "Leave us," said Benton.

Heath shook his head. "No, sir," replied Heath. "I think we need to know what's going on."

Benton slumped in his chair, only to have his posture corrected by Jess's sword coming closer to his throat.

"This man has blood on his hands," said Renk. "Does EMA corporation understand the nature of this machine he controls?"

Heath shook his head again. "No, it's a top secret project. It's all on a need-to-know basis," he sheepishly replied.

"It's a weapon," said Renk. "How it works is beyond my comprehension but it has power that no human should ever wield."

"And we're here to destroy it, whether you like it or not," added Jess.

"Benton, boy," said Renk, "You're going to do exactly as I say."

"How were you... how the hell were you three able to get through the portal?! Is that why it quit working?" stuttered Benton, nervously. He had completely lost his composure.

Jess reached down to Benton's desk and grabbed his dive gear. She put the goggles on her face and, looking through them, yelled back at Heath.

"Get EVERYONE out of this building," she yelled. "Every last person in this facility - on this entire mountain, for that matter - needs to be evacuated immediately."

Heath hesitated. "Now wait a minute," he shouted.

Renk turned around and looked at Heath. "Do it," he said. "If you think we're bluffing, go ahead and be my guest. BE vaporized."

Renk handed Atlas the rifle. "We're destroying this weapon no matter what," snapped Atlas. "Even if that means we die."

"We don't negotiate with terrorists," stammered Heath.

"TERRORISTS?!" screamed Jess. "The only terrorist is this pig right here!" she yelled, continuing to point her sword at Benton. "Now GET. OUT. OF. THE. BUILDING."

Heath and his men exited the office and a loud alarm siren began to ring out. A voice on the P.A. system said, "All personnel. This is not a drill. Evacuate the facility at once. I repeat..."

Renk forced Benton out of his seat as Atlas kept his rifle pointed at the man. Atlas then opened his own space suit and pulled a tranquilizer dart pistol out of his pocket. He shot Benton with a tranquilizer dart, sending the large man down to the floor, unconscious.

Jess sat down and engaged the dive gear. It made a direct connection to her brain, which was a very weird sensation. It was much different than any dive she had attempted before and she felt truly disembodied. Darkness began to surround her in the deepest void imaginable.

"Where am I?" asked Jess, into the void. No one answered. Even Renk and Atlas, standing nearby in the physical world, weren't audible in this state.

This isn't the sphere's control system, is it? thought Jess.

Jess tried to look around for any controls but couldn't find them. Then, out of nowhere, she heard a voice.

It was her father.

"Jess," said the voice, "If you can hear me, this is an artificial intelligence that I've left behind. If you are here..."

"Father!" shouted Jess. "Where are you?!"

Her father appeared before her. The black void surrounding them changed to a wide open, grassy field

with the bright sun overhead. Jess could hear birds chirping and the wind blowing. She could even feel the warm air around her.

"Jess, listen carefully," said Richard. "If you're here, that means I'm probably dead, no doubt at the hands of some assassin or terrorists."

Jess put her hands over her face. She couldn't bear even to tell the A.I. the truth about how her father had died.

"I regret to tell you that I have been keeping a very dark secret," said Richard. "You are inside the most dangerous weapon known to humanity. It was discovered many, many centuries ago and kept hidden from the world. This system has the power to control and destroy almost anything."

"Yes, I know," sobbed Jess. "Lots of people are already dead or hurt because of it."

"Are you here to destroy it?" asked Richard.

"Of course," replied Jess. "Why didn't you destroy it long ago?"

"A seal was placed on it, preventing its activation," replied Richard. "It was sealed by someone or something tens of thousands of years ago but, the year you were born, someone found a way to unlock it."

"But why didn't YOU destroy it," demanded Jess.

"Because the people who unlocked it also made sure that if I destroyed it... you would die," said Richard.

Jess was silent for a moment.

"THAT's the purpose of the nano technology? That's what was behind the adepts?" said Jess. She could hardly believe this revelation.

"Benton Mulhauser oversaw the entire project," said Richard. "The Price family was entrusted with keeping the weapon hidden on an asteroid but Benton, the leader of the Herei Mob Army, took control of it. I was desperate to leak information about this threat but had to be careful because I was being monitored. I even tried to sneak information to you at one point..."

"So that's why they put that nano tech into my body in the lab before I was born," said Jess. "It was all a way to prevent you from destroying this weapon..."

"I tried many times to leak information without Benton finding out. I contacted many deckers and freelancers in the hope that they would be able to help. It was all done under the pseudonym 'Dark Spider'," said Richard.

"YOU were Dark Spider...?!" gasped Jess.

"Now that you're here," said Richard, "That means you've taken control of this system. That means it's safe to finally bring an end to all of this madness."

Jess shook her head. "I don't understand," she whispered.

"Please give me authorization," said Richard. "With your approval, I will do two things. First, I will block all further access to this system's controls."

"Yes, I authorize it," said Jess.

"Confirmed. I will also begin a self-destruct countdown. Jess, I know you are in close proximity to one of the main physical access points of this system. Have your team put on their space suits and go back to the sphere. Make physical contact with it and I will take care of the rest," said Richard.

"Father, wait..." said Jess.

"Goodbye, Jess. You've made me proud..."

Jess was suddenly jolted out of the dive. The dive gear malfunctioned and became inoperable.

She quickly stood up. "Atlas, Renk, put your helmets on."

Jess ran out of the office and motioned Atlas and Renk to follow.

Atlas dragged the large, unconscious Benton Mulhauser to the end of the hallway. Some evacuating EMA employees happened upon the group. Atlas flagged one of them down.

"Hey, c'mere a sec," shouted Atlas. "Do me a solid and take this fat sack of dump outside where it's safe."

Two EMA employees grabbed Benton's arms and dragged him into a freight elevator.

"Jess," said Atlas, "Are you sure about this? We don't know what will happen."

Atlas handed Jess another bottle of nano-tech suppressant pills. "We're really gambling here. When this thing blows, we don't know what's going to happen to the adepts, let alone you."

Jess nodded. "I'm willing to take that risk, Atlas," she said.

Atlas, Jess, and Renk ran as fast as they could to the large room that contained the sphere. Jess took a couple of the pills and finished sealing up her space suit. Renk also took some nano-tech suppressant pills and put his space suit back on, too. Atlas put his helmet on.

"We have to make contact with the sphere," said Jess.

The three of them walked up to the sphere and placed their hands on it. Atlas could feel the heat through his space suit's thick gloves. It began to glow a bright white, just as it had when Benton Mulhauser first disappeared back on the asteroid.

Atlas closed his eyes tightly. "I'm not the prayin' type but please please protect my wife and my friends," whispered Atlas.

The white light engulfed the three and filled the room. The temperature increased as their space suits protected them. Atlas noticed that his space suit was registering greatly increased radiation levels, although the suits were protecting them from that, too.

The light became so blinding that all three of them had to close their eyes tightly and put down their extra-vehicular visors.

Atlas heard Jess begin to scream in pain, followed by Renk. Even Atlas began to feel a strange, horrible burning inside his body.

In an instant, the blinding white light vanished, leaving only a black void. A force that felt somewhat like gravity forced the three outward from where the sphere had been.

"Jess?!" screamed Atlas. "Renk?!" Atlas was unsure if his voice could reach them. He couldn't see anything in the darkness. His radio link seemed to be functional again, but silent.

"Please... someone... ANSWER ME!" screamed Atlas, into the void.

Duncan had been staring at the monitor in Camay's meeting room.

"Dr. Thameh!" shouted Duncan, suddenly. "There are three space suits transmitting active beacons in the debris field!"

Shell covered her face. "They got caught up in the explosion..." she gasped.

"No, no, they weren't there a few seconds ago!" replied Duncan. "Chester, can you get us a gamma ray visual again at the center?"

The monitor changed back to the gamma ray image. The outline of the sphere was now nowhere to be seen.

"Thanks, Chester. Now, could we have infrared?" requested Duncan.

The mode changed again. A bright heat signature appeared at the center of the debris field but quickly started to fade away.

"Dr. Thameh," said Duncan, "Let's get a rescue shuttle out there. The occupants of those three space suits are... alive!"

Duncan, Camay, Shell, Jax, and Chester ran to the colony's shuttle docks and boarded a shuttle. The retreating military ships and Crest vessels changed course and began moving in toward the debris field again.

The L1 shuttle slowed down as it approached one of the space suits. It moved alongside the drifting figure and opened the airlock. Shell and Chester, wearing space suits, carefully pulled the person inside the shuttle and left the airlock.

Atlas pulled off his helmet and ran over to the window.

Camay directed Chester to move the shuttle over to where the next person was drifting through space. Shell pulled the second person, Renk, inside the shuttle. He was unconscious.

The last person they recovered was Jess, who was also unconscious.

"Jess and Renk appear to have suffered some sort of terrible shock," said Duncan. "Let's get them back to the colony immediately."

Camay nodded and Chester flew the shuttle back to the L1 colony.

Jess woke up, groggy and with a horrible headache. She was inside the shuttle, surrounded by the crew. She looked over at Atlas.

"We did it, dear," she said with a smile.

Atlas laughed. "Yeah, we did," he said.

Renk woke up and shook off the grogginess. "We're alive, ain't we," he said.

Jess opened her left eye and moved her hair out of the way. Her eyes no longer glowed a bright green but were a more normal green color instead.

"My power is gone," said Jess. "My power is gone and I couldn't be happier."

After the shuttle docked, Duncan and Shell helped Jess out of her space suit and followed her out of the shuttle. Atlas, Renk, Camay, Chester, and Jax followed.

Upon reaching the streets of the colony, a massive crowd surrounded them, cheering loudly.

As the group walked down the streets past the cheering crowds, Shell could hear an announcement over some nearby loudspeakers. She looked up at a large television screen on the side of one of the buildings. The news reporter was relaying information to the people of the colony.

"We have confirmation that the adept instability plague has ceased," said the reporter. "We are receiving reports now that adepts all over the world have recovered from the mysterious illness, having regained their normal states of mind."

Jess, Atlas, and Renk were escorted by Firewall staff to a medical center. Jax, Chester, and Camay led the rest of the group back to the research building.

They arrived back at the conference room where Camay had been monitoring earlier developments. Shell took a seat and immediately began scanning for signs of the beacon signal.

"It's gone," said Shell. "It's completely gone."

Camay nodded. "Thanks to everyone's cooperation, we've removed this threat to humanity. You are all heroes."

Shell laughed. "The situations we get mixed up in, huh, Duncan?"

Duncan chuckled. "Indeed, Shells n' Cheese! Indeed."

The group continued to watch the news reports on the monitor. A short while later, Jess, Atlas, and Renk entered the room.

"Mission accomplished," said Shell, looking at Jess. "You don't mess with Jess! You can't get past Atlas and you can't outflank Renk!"

Shell winked at Duncan. "And you can't dunk on Duncan," she added. The room rang out in laughter.

"Attention everyone," said Camay.

Jax, Atlas, Jess, Renk, Duncan, Shell, and Chester were all gathered in the meeting room. Camay lowered the audio volume on the television monitor.

"The military has given the news media a press release disclosing the true nature of the adepts phenomenon," said Camay. "I'm sure everyone here realizes that today will be forever marked in history as the day an ancient machine of alien origin was finally removed from existence forever."

She looked at Jess and Renk.

"While it was leveraged for twenty-two years as a perceived next step in human evolution," said Camay, "the truth of the matter was that it was a weapon against humanity, not a gift."

Camay had been reading Jess's report, which she had given while undergoing some minor medical treatment earlier.

"President Price," said Camay, "I would imagine your status as a hero will contribute greatly to your campaign for governor."

Camay looked at Duncan and Shell. "Should you two ever be interested, I will recommend you for high level positions within Firewall, if Crest doesn't woo your first," laughed Camay.

Taking her seat, Camay leaned back. "I'm sure you are all very tired," she said. "Your service is appreciated. Thank you all for saving the world."

Camay winked. "Meeting adjourned. You've played your parts in this symphony like true masters."

Jax, Chester, and Camay waved goodbye as Shell, Duncan, Atlas, Renk, and Jess left the room.

Jess arranged for a Crest Corporation shuttle to take everyone back to Earth from the colony.

As Duncan took his seat on the shuttle, he leaned over toward Atlas.

"I tell ya," said Duncan, "It's gotta be nice having access to such comfortable space travel."

Atlas laughed. "It's nice when there's time to enjoy it," he replied. "Maybe I can talk Jess into coming back here on our next vacation. If you're interested, maybe we could have all you guys come up here with us again," he replied.

"I may have to take you up on that, Atlas," said Duncan. "This is a nice place to visit. I'd like to come here under more peaceful circumstances some time."

Duncan strapped himself in as the shuttle's engines started up. The shuttle left the colony and made the journey back to Earth.

At the space dock in City N, the shuttle landed. As everyone was parting ways, Renk waved goodbye.

"Velvet Room next Sunday evening! See you there if you're interested," said Renk, as he headed toward the transport rail tube station.

"Let's make it a weekly thing," replied Atlas. He and Jess walked over to a flying car, driven by Jess's butler Randall, who had been waiting for them. "Sunday evening it is," replied Jess. "We have to keep Elise busy, after all!"

Shell started to head back in the direction of her apartment. "See you tomorrow morning at the doughnut shop," said Shell.

Duncan looked around. City N was its usual, bustling self; a metropolis filled with many different kinds of people. He boarded a transport and headed home, watching the sun set as the buildings raced by the train windows.

Just out of curiosity, Duncan tried to manifest his electro-ether power but confirmed that it was no longer available. He grinned and realized that it was a good sign. Duncan would be busy that night doing his routine network security odd jobs and independent research.

Loading up some music files on his cybernetic ear implants, Duncan listened to a symphony on his way home. *All is well, Rosetta*, he thought to himself as the symphony played.

Epilogue

Duncan continued to work as a freelance hacker. He frequently did jobs for Crest Corporation and worked closely with Shell and Jess.

Every Sunday evening, Duncan, Shell, Jess, Atlas, and Renk met at the Velvet Room, often pestering Elise to take breaks from bar tending and to join them on runs.

The group took vacations from time to time on the L1 colony. Camay, Jax, and Chester would schedule their work so that they could join the rest of the group at the beach.

Crest Corporation continued to improve the availability of space travel. Cybernetics and other human augmentation gradually filled the void that the loss of the adept phenomenon left behind.

The adepts resumed normal lives and adapted to the loss of their powers easily. Treatment programs were put in place to assist a small percentage of former adepts that had either been injured in the sphere incident or had trouble adapting.

Duncan lived a very long life and served as a prototype for advanced new life extension technologies.

Jess Price was elected governor of North American Union Region Four. She chose to serve only one term in order to concentrate on advancing Crest Corporation's initiatives to make space travel easier, cheaper, and more widely available.

Space tourism flourished in the following years due to Crest's advancements.

Jess and Atlas kept themselves very busy but spent Sunday evenings at the Velvet Room with the rest of their friends. Many of Jess's friends from military school would meet the rest of the group at the bar and generally keep Elise on her toes, not that the Velvet Room minded the sudden increase in business.

Jess learned to live without her power. She chose to wear her hair as she did before, out of habit. Her body slowly adapted so that it didn't depend on the nano machines to recover from illness or injury. She and Atlas both lived very long lives and stayed in touch with everyone, even meeting Duncan and Shell at the doughnut shop in the morning sometimes.

Crest Corporation's image improved across the globe and eventually bought out what was left of EMA Corporation.

Shell continued to work as a freelance security consultant. Jess hired her for jobs from time to time and that gave her the opportunity to work regularly with her friend Kel.

Jax and Camay would visit Earth every so often and Shell would, insistently, have them stay the night at her place and reminisce about their adventures.

Shell also continued to meet Duncan every morning at their usual doughnut shop and attended a weekly night out with everyone at the Velvet Room. Eventually, Shell cracked through Elise's hard... well, shell and became good friends with her, too.

On some occasions, Shell would even show up unexpectedly at the Price mansion wearing Groucho Marx glasses and getting a laugh from Jess. Shell also teased Elise on Sunday evenings about starting up a band and playing music gigs at the Velvet Room, much to the lack of amusement on the part of Elise.

Renk joined Crest Corporation's main security team at its headquarters. Eventually, he became one of the higher level guards and would sometimes help Atlas at the Price mansion.

He met everyone on Sunday nights at the Velvet Room and spent the rest of his free time as a military consultant for Firewall.

CHROME SYMPHONY

A cyberpunk story by the Nitrocasm Studios community

