



*Innocent
charade,
or deadly
masked ball?*

DARK SIREN

Clifford Wycliffe

Prologue & Chapter 1

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'And, after all, what is a lie?
'Tis but the truth in masquerade.'
Don Juan by Lord Byron

Virtual Worlds: '...a mass escape-route into a seductive shared hallucination of wishful thinking, anonymous vice, routine murder, commercial genius, micropayment surveillance, and whatever the Hackers from Hell want to throw into the mix.

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Clifford Wycliffe, July 2009

Disclaimer

Dark Siren is a work of fiction. Characters and organisations are either the product of the author's imagination, or if real, have been used fictitiously without any intent to describe or portray their actual conduct. Although the protocols, mechanisms and routines of the virtual episodes are similar to those of *Second Life*®, the personnel, offices and policies of *Avataria* bear no intentional resemblance to those of Linden Labs Inc. and any similiarity is completely coincidental.

Glossary, Acronyms and Conventions,

Glossary

AO	The default avatar animation is walking/running/ flying/sitting. For other movements, e.g. hugging, reading, reclining, etc, an AO or animation override is used.
avatar	A three-dimensional computer-generated (usually) human figure controlled by the game player.
BDSM	Variously Bondage/Domination or Discipline/ Submission or Sadism/Masochism
IM	Instant Message
lol	Laugh out loud; expression of humour
LM	Landmark: Inventory assets that enable teleportation to a precise location
omg	Oh my God! (favourite American expression)
rofl	Roll on the floor laughing
TP	Teleport
wb	Welcome back

Acronyms

AHTCC	Australian Hi-Tech Crime Centre. Based in Canberra and closely linked to the Federal Police.
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Aus.)
DSD	Defence Signals Directorate (Aus.) Rough equivalent to the NSA (U.S.) and GCHQ (U.K.)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.)
NSA	National Security Agency (U.S.)
UCLA	University College Los Angeles
SWAT	Special Weapons and Tactics (TOU in NSW)

Conventions

Roughly half of the action in the novel takes place in the virtual world of *Avataria*. To assist the reader in distinguishing between conversations taking place in real life and those in *Avataria*, italics are used to denote virtual world dialogue, and each speaker's name appears before his/her speech. If '**IM**' appears before an avatar's name, the conversation is private and cannot be read by other avatars. In the real life sections, normal conventions prevail.

Introduction

I first got the idea for *Dark Siren* after playing the online virtual reality game *Second Life*[®] back in 2007. At the time there were lurid accounts in the press of Russian gangs utilising it to launder money, Islamic terrorists exploiting virtual scenarios to practice attacks, and spouses leaving their real life partners for secret virtual friends. But the clincher was a 2007 UK *Sunday Times* article claiming that the FBI, Europol and the Australian Hi-tech crime agency AHTCC were taking the crime aspects seriously.

I had the genesis of a plot.

Second Life is one of many Internet-based virtual worlds that have been inspired by the cyberpunk literary movement, and in particular by the novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. The *Avataria* of the novel is a thinly disguised version of this virtual world, and follows its rules and conventions; indeed they are indispensable to the plot. The forensic investigation of Kyrylo's laptop computer has to observe the constraints of a *Second Life* viewer, and the plot's denouement hinges on the unauthorised use of what hackers would call an 'exploit' of it. The game is fictionalised as *Avataria* since my plot required involvement of the game's management; consequently I would emphasise that its offices, policies, and personnel bear no intentional resemblance to those of Linden Labs Inc.

Readers who have never immersed themselves in virtual environments like *Second Life* may find it difficult to believe the amount of emotional power that interaction between avatars is able to generate. The nature of the virtual world tends to accelerate and intensify emotional experiences, and because of the distancing effect of the computer interface, participants are less inhibited by social norms. Fertile ground then for the novelist.

Enterprising readers will find that the author and some of the characters of *Dark Siren* exist as avatars in *Second Life*. Please feel free to contact them.

Clifford Wycliffe, May 2009

*Second Life is a trademark of Linden Research, Inc.

Prologue

Cold Finger Bar, Avataria. 16 January 2008 : 3am PST

At 3am the Cold Finger Bar was almost deserted. On both sides of the dance floor, a bored pole dancer in a sparkly lurex costume gyrated ritualistically on a podium, each surrounded by an almost empty semicircle of seats. To achieve good search engine rankings in *Avataria* demanded a high throughput of visitors, so avatars with outgoing personalities were hired to make the place look busy. That didn't fool anybody in the Cold Finger Bar, least of all the rent boys who made up the bulk of the customers.

Ginger Stallion settled back against the cushions in one of the snugs and tried to look as cool and desirable as he could, given the limitations of the animation override on his avatar. Hanging around was a tiresome aspect of the job. The clients were another. Boorish college dropouts looking to liven up their onanistic fantasies or shy beginners unsure of their true sexual orientation. Give it another ten minutes, he thought.

Whitney Houston's *I Wanna Dance With Somebody* stuttered intermittently in his headphones thanks to a slow Internet connection. His friend Blow Dailey seemed engrossed in the gyrations of one particular dancer, a flashy looking shemale called Sugar Plumb whose costume emitted a shower of sparks each time she twirled around the dance pole in front of him.

Sugar Plumb: *Like my dancing, Blow?*

Blow Dailey: *Sure. It's cute. And so are you, Sugar.*

Sugar Plumb: *Why thank you... would you like me to strip for you?*

Blow Dailey: *How much that gonna cost?*

Sugar Plumb: *Whatever you think I'm worth, darlin'*

Blow clicked on Sugar Plumb's tip jar and donated AV\$20. An automated message lit up on the bottom left of his laptop screen: Sugar Plumb thanks you for the kind donation. Sugar's avatar started to shed garments piecemeal. Like taking a blowtorch to plastic, he thought idly. Gypsy Rose Lee she wasn't, that was for sure.

Sugar Plumb: *So where are you boys from?*

This time it was Ginger who answered.

Ginger Stallion: *L.A.*

Sugar Plumb: *Lookin' for a nice girl?*

Ginger Stallion: *Lol... not exactly. We work out of here... except it's been kinda dead tonight.*

Sugar Plumb: *Omg... sorry... I thought you were customers. I'm new here... guess that's why I haven't seen you before.*

Ginger Stallion: *And where are you from, hon?*

An incoming message flashed up in Ginger's viewer before Sugar had a chance to reply. The caller's name was unfamiliar and the grammar stilted.

IM: Joss Guest: *Hello Ginger. I am friend of Ariana... she recommend you*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *do I know you?*

The caller ignored the question, which faded off the screen.

IM: Joss Guest: *you are gay escort, yes?*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *yes... amongst other things...*

IM: Joss Guest: *I may have job for you. What are your charges?*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *Depends... basic AV\$2500 per hour plus extras...*

IM: Joss Guest: *Extras?*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *Yeab... like room hire*

IM: Joss Guest: *don't worry... I have room... dungeon actually*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *you into S&M?*

IM: Joss Guest: *if you've have suitable friend, I pay you \$AV2500 each for one hour's work... all included*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *Together?*

IM: Joss Guest: *Yes, together*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *AV\$3000 each upfront and you've got a deal*

There was a pause before the text resumed.

IM: Joss Guest: *You drive hard bargain Mister Stallion*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *That's 'cos we're good*

IM: Joss Guest: *You'd better be. My client is very... how do you say?
- very particular*

IM: Ginger Stallion: *You won't be disappointed*

IM: Joss Guest: *I hope not. Very well... it's a deal. I contact you later to arrange time and place.*

IM: *Ginger Stallion: any particular likes and dislikes?*

The text slowly faded leaving a blank screen. The caller was gone.

Joss Guest? The name didn't ring any bells. Ginger called over to his friend, who by this time was deep in conversation with the shemale

dancer: *Blow... d'ya know anyone by the name of Guest... Joss Guest? I've just had an IM from this dude about a job... friend of Ariana's, think he was foreign...*

No reply.

bey, Blow...

Still no reply.

Never mind... forget it. I'm outa here... I'll see you tomorrow.

And with that, Kyle Martinez, aka Ginger Stallion, second year student of the Computer Science Dept. UCLA, logged out of *Avataria*, switched off his laptop and went to bed.

Chapter 1

Alexandria, Sydney, Australia : 23 January 2008 : 4am AEDT

Lit only by sidelights the black van hissed silently past on the wet road and came to a stop in front of Simon Austin's parked car. Pools of water from an early morning shower sat in depressions in the asphalt as he quietly got out of the vehicle and walked towards the van. As he approached, the back door opened and heavily armed police in body armour piled out silently and conferred with three local officers waiting in the shadows. Simon shook hands with the Inspector, who introduced him to the leader of the Tactical Operations squad.

"Sergeant Blake - this is Simon Austin, AHTCC Canberra. We've been through all the details, is there anything you want to discuss before we go in?"

"No, sir. We know the guy's armed and dangerous, and we're prepared. How many do you think are in there?"

One of the younger constables from the NSW police stepped forward.

"I've been watching the place since yesterday arvo, sir. Kyrlo went in around lunchtime, and his two blokes turned up around half past five. No one's come or gone since."

"So three then?"

"Yep."

The team set off at a jog across the car park towards the two storey office block, dark except for the patchy reflected light of a few street lamps behind the trees. Keeping in single file, they moved soundlessly behind a low wall until they were up against the building, heading for the main entrance. Simon and the three regular police followed at a safe distance, trying not to make any noise.

The Senior Sergeant looked round to check that the team were in place, then producing a ram, swung it forward hitting the grey security door with enormous force. The echo of the crash reverberated in the silence and a flock of startled birds flew up from the trees lining the

road. The impact bent the frame, but the reinforced panel refused to budge. A squad member forced a long metal bar into the crack that had appeared and with the combined leverage of two men finally snapped the locks. Black-clad figures carrying assault rifles swarmed through the gap and up the concrete stairs; another crash, then shouts and banging could be heard coming from the first floor. A moment later the sound of a shot rang out, followed by a short burst of automatic fire, shouts and a door slamming. More confusion: noise of boots on concrete, a stifled curse, and from the other end of the building, the distant clatter of footsteps on a metal staircase. Then silence, broken only by the crackling of a voice over a police radio: "Clear! Officer down! Call the ambos! Now!"

The Inspector shone his torch into the stairwell, and ran up the stairs two at a time to the first floor with Simon following. Someone had found the light switches and a line of fluorescents flickered into life as they reached the landing. They passed through a splintered door into an anteroom, where police were pointing their weapons at the figure of a man lying face down on the floor clad only in underpants and T-shirt. Two camp beds with sleeping bags lined a wall decorated with pictures of Jessica Alba torn from *Ralph* magazine; the only table was littered with empty beer cans and the remains of a takeaway meal. A few discarded clothes lay on the floor and the room stank of stale sweat and pizza.

"Not exactly the Ritz, is it?"

The Inspector ignored Simon's comment and led the way into a large shabby office painted an incongruous purple. There were four foldaway tables butted together; on them sat a laptop, several electronic components, two mobile phones and what looked like boxes of credit card blanks. Along the back wall were stacked unopened cartons of brand new plasma TVs, iPhones, digital cameras and various other electronic goods.

The leader of the police squad was lying on the floor, his head in a widening pool of blood that was already seeping into the grubby floor

tiles. A colleague kneeling over him turned as the Inspector approached.

“Senior Sergeant Blake’s been hit, sir.” he said. “It’s serious.”

“An ambulance is on its way. Can you can do anything for him?”

“No sir. He’s been shot in the face.”

“Is he still breathing?”

“Yes sir, but his pulse is very weak.”

Simon turned away in shock, suddenly feeling sick and queasy. By the window a unshaven young man in jeans and singlet sat looking terrified, handcuffed to a battered office chair, a young constable’s assault weapon jammed in his ear.

“The bastard got Vince.” The policeman was almost crying, and spat the words out in a thick Scottish accent, kicking the chair for good measure.

“What happened?”

“It was dark. There was a shot and Vince went down. I let off a few rounds but must’ve missed. He got away through the door at the back.”

“You knew he was ex-Ukrainian special forces?”

“Of course we bloody did.”

“I’m sorry about Sergeant Blake. You did all you could.”

Kyrylo’s FBI mugshot didn’t match either of the two captives. Simon walked over to the Inspector who was talking into a mobile phone.

“Can you get some men to look for Kyrylo? He got out the back way. And check for blood stains – he might have been hit.”

“Taken care of. They’re doing it now. Just don’t hold your breath.”

“I am so sorry. About the sergeant, I mean. Will you keep me informed?”

“Of course. But don’t beat yourself up about it. He was doing his job and he knew the risks.”

“Even so... it looked pretty bad.”

“What do you want us to do with all this stuff?”

“We don’t need the TVs and the iPods, just all the gear on the tables.”

“OK. I’ll get it all bagged up for you.”

“I’ll need to take the computer back to Canberra with me.”

“No worries.”

“I’m going catch a few hours sleep, but I’d like to interview those guys first thing. Eight o’clock OK?”

The Inspector was already making another phone call.

“Inspector?”

“Sure.”

Simon was privately seething. The two arrested men were small fry and one of their own was badly hurt. The target of the raid had got away. The FBI had given them good information and Whitman would not be impressed. They had screwed up bigtime.

“Just make sure you take bloody good care of that laptop.”

He left the office and headed downstairs. From behind him came some muffled cries and what he knew to be the sound of someone being kicked. As he walked across the car park an ambulance was backing up against the front door, now hanging forlornly on one hinge. By the time he got to his car, the paramedics were going inside with a stretcher, the scene lit by the ghostly flashing of the blue lights on a parked patrol car. Shaking his head, he turned the ignition key, pulled out from behind the black van and headed back to his hotel.