**Chapter 21: Stinky Cheese**  
  
The night market was in full swing when Milo emerged from the guildhall. He needed to do some shopping, and he felt much calmer here in the gloom near Light's End. Between the shadows and spending points on *The Invisible Tail*, he was confident he could roam around in his normal skin here, no one the wiser. He was slowly becoming more comfortable walking around as a human with two feet and no tail, but he not as much as in his ratkin form. Having two feet was nice, but it didn’t make up for losing his tail. He’d used the prosthetic for too many years.  
  
He'd made the trip back across the rooftops without much incident. A few things had been thrown at him from windows. And he'd stumbled over two teenagers involved in romance as he leaped to a flat rooftop. That was an embarrassing surprise for him, them, and an irate father who responded to the girl's cry as something furry ran over the top of her and her boyfriend. but overall, it was quicker than using the streets.

The thrilling part had been when he'd gotten a great view of an airship! A very small dirigible had gone overhead, propellers pushing it forward. The gasbag didn't seem anywhere near big enough to hold it up. Some sort of magic must be involved. Milo sat and watched as it gained altitude and finally docked at one of the hanging buildings near the ceiling. If he had to ever travel, that was his preferred method. Ships on the water looked dangerous., and who knew what was swimming in the oceans? He filed the thought away for ‘someday.’ Airship travel must be expensive, and his funds were limited.  
  
The Miners Guild had purchased all of his deep copper ore. It had been a chore packing it up the stairs. He didn't want to reveal his *Smuggler’s Stash* within the guild. Instead, he found a secluded spot in an unused room a few levels away and transferred the ore to several large bags. The bags were heavy, and it took three trips to get them all upstairs. A couple of the miners had laughed as he was struggling to get the loads up the stairs and ladders. The burly men could have easily taken it all in one load. After selling the copper, he was 30 silver richer.  
  
The parts from the machinery had surprisingly been worth more. When he dumped out the assortment of gears, broken sprockets, and chain drives, the appraiser's face had gone from curiosity to greed. "Oh, nice, very nice. Old work here; where did you say you found these?"  
  
Milo kept his answers vague. "Down deep, I got lost wandering through caves, ran from some critters, and found an old mineshaft and a machine. It was all torn apart, and I grabbed the best parts. Not sure if I can find it again."  
  
The old dwarf knew a deflection when he heard one. "Well, if you suddenly remember, bring me more of it. These are hardened dark iron. After the parts are forged, some of the old smiths had a way to harden the outer layers of the metal and leave the inner layers still flexible. Ideal for machine parts." He'd given Milo 100 silver for the parts, quite a sum of cash, and now it was time to go shopping at the nearby market.  
  
His first priorities were food and carving tools. While looking through the food vendors, he smelled something delicious! He began running and dodging through the light crowds, diving under tables, and leaping over obstacles. Vendors cursed behind him, and urchins took advantage of his disruption to steal food for their hungry bellies. Milo was unaware of all of this; he just kept following his nose. And his nose led him to a small store on the edge of the market, near fish vendors and soap makers. The shoppers in this area held sachets of spices to their noses or had a cloth on their faces.  
  
The shop, such as it was, was a large market stand with canvas walls and top. Inside was a pile of small barrels, crates, and wheels of cheese covered in red wax. Pungent odors surrounded the stand, keeping most people at bay. They covered their noses and hurried. The same small had drawn Milo in from across the market.  
  
Milo stood before the cheese shop and inhaled the strong aroma of dozens of cheeses. Two halflings were behind the counter. An older woman was working at a stove, dipping large cubes of cheese into a boiling pot of red wax. She saw Milo and nodded at him. "Be right with you, sir!". The other halfling was much younger and male. He was taking a break, reclining in an old chair, snoring, with his large and hairy feet on the counter. The old woman kicked out with a foot, tipping the chair over and knocking him to the floor. He came up yelling. "Ah hell, grandma, why'd you have to wake me up again?"  
  
Grandma snorted and whispered at him. "Get up, Jethro, you lazy lout. A customer needs to be taken care of!"  
  
Jethro dusted himself off and smiled at Milo. "Sir, welcome to our shop. We make the best stinky cheese..." He was cut off by a glare from his grandma. "um...the finest varieties of fragrant cheeses in all of the city. What are you in need of? Some of our award-winning cheddar? Perhaps a slice of Gruyere or our tasty and gooey local cheese, made fresh each day?"  
  
Milo was drooling. "I can't believe I didn't smell your shop the last time I was in the market."  
  
Jethro leaned forward and spoke in a stage whisper. "It's a terrible thing, sir, but the authorities make us move around a lot for some reason. Makes it difficult for our best customers to find us. I think it’s a conspiracy started by the candle consortium and the apple sellers. But don’t worry; we’ll do fine as long as our best customers, which includes you, of course, can find us when they need tasty cheese."  
  
"But enough about the troubles of hard-working cheese merchants. Why don’t we start with some samples to see what cheese is your favorite? A nice slice of gorgonzola? My grandma is just sealing our latest batch of freshly made, aged cheddar. Take home a block; you won't be disappointed. And for the brave soul with a taste for the exotic, I have a round of Liederkranz. And we always have plenty of Limburger, imported from the Hollow."  
  
Milo's eyes darted around the stand. "I'll take all your cheese."  
  
Jethro suppressed a smile at the thought of selling a huge platter of cheese. "Very good, sir. One assortment of all of it coming right up. Would you prefer a basket of a dozen samples? Our finest assortment of 30 slices? And our 'feed the neighborhood' basket comes with a bit of all 57 of our slinkiest cheeses in all their pungent glory."  
  
Milo put down the bag of copper Harry had paid him and added a handful of silver. "I didn't ask you for a menu; I said I'll take all your cheese! "  
  
Jethro stammered a bit upon seeing the money. Grandma looked at Milo and saw he was shaking and taking deep breaths. "Dammit, Jethro, back away now and start packing it all up. I've dealt with his type before. Get moving!"  
  
Turning to Milo, she handed him a large chunk of freshly made, aged cheddar. "Here sir, why don't you start on this to take the edge off of your hunger while we get you all packed up?" As Milo began to gnaw on the cheddar, she expertly scooped the money into her apron while keeping an eye on him.  
  
When all the cheese in the stand was packed up, Milo had finished his snack and was feeling better. He looked at the assortment of boxes and bags and realized he couldn't carry them all. He looked over at the two happy but nervous cheese makers. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone with my cheese for a bit."  
  
Jethro scratched his head, confused. "Why do you need...."  
  
Grandma grabbed Jethro by the arm and dragged him out of the stand, pulling the cloth curtains closed. "We totally understand, sir. We'll give you some time with your purchases. Come on, Jethro, it's lunchtime."  
  
As she dragged her grandson away, she shook her finger and admonished him. "What have I told you about his type? When they get the hunger, you need to be careful. Don't end up like your Uncle Philmont." Jethro didn't know he'd ever had an Uncle Philmont.  
  
Milo had ten Enhancement Points, and he spent five of those to buy the second level of Smuggler's Stash. That gave him nine cubic feet of room. He saw now how useful it was. If he could somehow gain two more points, he could buy the third level! That would hold a lot more cheese, something that was suddenly very important to him. Each variety had its own smell, and he couldn’t imagine not buying them all.  
  
 The chest was now a cube, with each side a little more than two feet long. He filled the chest with cheese along with a lovely fondue set that Grandma had added to the deal, leaving out two blocks of cheddar to put into his backpack. Dismissing the chest, he continued on his way, able to think a bit better. Some of his exhaustion faded away. Time to go pick up the rest of the gear he needed for a good exploration of the old mines.

Shopping list:  
-Engraving and carving tools.  
-Dried meats and bread.  
-Rope, pitons,  
-blank journal and pen/ink  
-3 water skins  
-clean underclothes  
-saw  
-mechanics tools

He was nearly broke when he finished, with only three coppers left in his pouch. With a backpack full of supplies and a belly full of cheese, he started to head back down to find Harry and do some more mining and exploring. He didn’t plan on coming back up for a week. An hour after he had eaten his fill of cheese, he received a message that made him happy and showed the wisdom of stocking up on supplies.  
  
***You have enjoyed a healthy meal of tasty cheese. Your racial ability, The Power of Cheese!, is at stage 1. Every day that you eat one pound of cheese, you will heal wounds twice as fast, gain a bonus of +50 Health, and increase your STR by +2. Stay healthy and eat your cheese. Not eating cheese for one day will strip you of these benefits. Not eating cheese for two days will result in weakness. Your health will decrease by -50 and your WIS by -2. Don’t let this happen!***

When Jethro and his grandmother returned, they found not even a crumb in their stall. Grandmother looked around while jingling the coin in her pocket. "Just like I thought, he's a hungry one. Worst I’ve seen."  
  
Jethro asked, "So what do we do?"  
  
"You have to ask, boy? We put the clan to work, making more cheese, and then we take all of his money again when he comes back for more. If we’re lucky, he has a family or clan just as hungry for cheese as he is."

**Chapter 22: Clan Business**  
  
Burnock Shadowforge turned the heavy metal gear over and over in his hands, looking for flaws. The gear was several hundred years old, maybe a lot older. A skilled dwarf could tell by the amount of oxidation on the inner groove of the gear. Very slight, but it was there. He took a hammer and steel chisel and tried to put a dent in it. The steel chisel blunted without putting a scratch on the gear. This was a size 7, #fourteen hardened dark iron gear. This gear was used in hundreds of different dwarven machines. Millions of this type of gear had been made by dwarven mechanics. But not out of this material.  
  
The hardening process had been a secret of the Shadowforge clan and their engineers. It made their metal stronger, their picks better, and their machines needed less repairs. This monopoly had let his clan expand their mining operations deep into the earth all over this part of the world, but especially under this city. Deep copper and dark iron had flowed like a river out of their mines. They had been a rich and respectable clan!  
  
That all ended, so the clan elders say, the day that the old city went away. Details were sort of sketchy on the why of it all. Humans and Elves were having a war with each other, and the Light and the Dark were involved. Dwarves stayed out of it. They didn't care about the property topside. Dwarves had built their own part of the town deep in the hollow mountain that loomed up next to the human’s coastal city. Trade was good. The humans always needed metal, and dwarven stone smiths found a lot of work building the ever-expanding city.  
  
At some point, the human mages had done something wrong, or maybe the elves had used a spell that should never have been used. No dwarf trusted elves, so they mostly blamed them for what had happened. If you were topside when the cataclysm occurred, you were dead. All the dwarves knew was that one moment they had a city inside a hollow mountain, and the next moment there was a tremendous light that blinded or killed anyone near the surface and scooped away a good chunk of the mountain.  
  
The city was gone, along with a huge amount of earth under the city. Whatever had hit the city had been so powerful that had carved it a giant sphere out of the mountain. There was no rubble; the rock and everything else had simply gone away. The only thing left was one tower of black rock, comically sitting on a perfect pillar of stone nearly a half mile tall, holding it above a perfectly shaped hemisphere of nothing.  
  
 The city was gone, and a good chunk of the coastline. The seas came pouring in, creating a perfectly round bay whose edge was now under the overhanging cliff of the mountain. The old city of the humans, Sartothra, was disintegrated. The dwarven city of Hollowmount was nearly destroyed, with its buildings knocked flat and too much light pouring in. The damned tower was still there, now an island, a mystery that was never solved. The seas all around it were filled with creatures that destroyed any ship that approached, and something in the tower destroyed airships that floated too close.   
  
But the worst hit were the clan holdings, down low near the mines. The earthquake that accompanied the destruction collapsed mineshafts and tunnels and destroyed the dwarven enclaves. 90% of the Shadowforge clan was killed or never returned. And the secret of hardening dark iron had died with them. His clan, like many of the dwarven clans, went from wealth to poverty in the span of a day. Hollowmount was never truly rebuilt. The remaining dwarves and refugee humans built what they could to survive, and the bay was perfect for large ships to stop and shelter from frequent storms. The city of Shadowport was built on the rubble of Hollowmount.  
  
And today, some snot-nosed human had wandered into the guildhall and sold machine parts no one had seen in ages. Machine parts made by his clan! The kid had only been a member of the miner's guild for a couple of days and could barely haul a sack of ore. What the hell was he doing stealing his clan's property and running around their old mines? Because Burnock knew that was where he'd found these.  
  
Apprentice Mino Milo had sold deep copper ore along with the machine parts. That gave Burnock a rough idea of the area. And it wasn't good. That part of the deep-down was avoided by anyone who wanted to keep breathing. It was filled with poisonous mushrooms, copperheads, myconian monsters, and layers of soft earth that shifted too easily. 'Shaky town' they'd called that area. Start swinging some picks and making a little noise, and it was even odds over whether you died from some critter or the ceiling fell in on you.  
  
But that made a bit of sense, that the boy found those parts there. It might not have always been so treacherous, or the clan wouldn't have put in the mines there. But now it was avoided, and those parts had sat for ages. The appraiser had bought them for a fraction of their value, paying in weight of metal as they bought everything. The real value was to a mechanic that had to work with older machines.  
  
The engineers guild would be sniffing after Milo soon. They needed parts like that for their ore processors and mechanical drills. The stress was so high in some of the old machines that steel parts wore out daily. Even dark iron only lasted a week. Hardened dark iron gears would last over a year, maybe more. Burnock didn’t want the damned engineers to get involved. He’d have to listen to the ‘Glory Days’ when the guild had built outposts in the deep-down and sent ore and machine parts to the surface. They always tried to claim the glory that belonged to his clan.  
  
Burnock called in his cousin Shifty. Shifty wasn’t a dwarven name. He'd had another name once, but the clan had taken it away when his fingers were caught taking money that didn't belong to him. So now he was missing a joint on his right index finger, and his name was Shifty. No one in the clan would deal with him except Burnock. Shifty got a bit of coin now, and then in exchange for doing things that Burnock didn't want to be traced back to him. It was an arrangement that worked for both of them.  
  
"Get an adventuring party together. The type you like. Then find out where the kid goes, and track him back to the old areas he found. I want to get in and claim them before someone else finds out.”  
  
Shifty smiled. He liked 'adventuring.' Almost anything could happen. "And when we're done getting the info?"  
  
Burnock held up his hands. "I don't need to know. I'm hiring you to follow a clue and reclaim clan secrets. You handle it your way."  
  
"Sure, cousin, I'll handle things my way. But this isn’t going to be for a few coppers and some beer. If I’m doing important clan work, I want gold. I’ve earned that much doing your grunt work all these years."  
  
Burnock nodded. “When I have the secret of hardening dark iron, I’ll pay you in gold. Maybe even get you back in the clan. I think that should cover the cost of making sure only we have the secret.”  
  
Shifty nodded and started planning. He needed competent people, but not so good that he couldn’t get rid of them later.

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Samantha found a very depressed Sidney sitting at her desk, angrily typing. Normally Sidney typed with one hand and drank her coffee with the other. Today her cup was empty. That was a very, very bad sign.

"Everything Ok?"

Sidney slowly turned. "You know it isn't, and yet you say that hoping I'll give you some clue. But I'm on to you! "

Samantha took the empty cup, walked quickly away, and brought Sidney two fresh cups. She looked at them, drank one down, and held the other as she stared at her screen. "Thank you. I'll kill you last since you know how to bring me offerings."

"Lemme guess? You missed him?"

The second cup of coffee was empty in two sips. Sidney rubbed at her eyes with the palms of her hands. "Yep, he knew just when to log in. After sixteen hours of waiting for him to log in again, it happens 23 minutes after I've gone to bed. I slept through the alarm for 7 minutes, and by then, he had been in the simulation we set up, had eaten the bacon and cheese dip, and went onto the main game. How the hell is he doing this?!!!"

Samantha got herself a cup of caffeine and sat down. "Don't fret too much, hon, you got some clues, and they helped. Two days from now, we'll have his approximate location."

Sidney spun her chair around. "HOW!?"

"I've been going through the programming of the MKVII pods. They have scheduled times to check for updates. The next time our guy is in the pod, and it sends us his medical files, the pod will ask for any updates to programming, and the new code I wrote will load."

Sidney just stared. "That's too simple; I’m not sure if I should kiss you or hate you. Why didn't I think of that."

"You were too busy setting traps with cheese dip."

**Chapter 23: Big Bugs, Little Bugs, Bugs for Dinner.**  
  
The entrance to the cave leading to the deep-down and Harry's mushroom farms had a sign in front of it. Milo couldn't read the dwarven runes, but the picture of dead birds and little swirls above them was understandable: Bad air. Milo could smell an awful pong coming up from the cave, but it wasn't worse than what Harry's farm normally smelled like. Hopefully, whatever bad smells Harry's bath time had generated were now gone. Milo slipped past the sign and began his descent.  
  
There were some pockets of bad air, but the upward draft was clearing them. Milo stopped to fortify himself with a small cheesy snack now and then to help him keep climbing and ignore the smell. Limburger was wonderful for this. The smell of the cheese sent other smells running away in fear. Finally arriving at Harry's farm, he was happy to find the air much better down here. The stench seemed to be coming from a manure pile near the entrance, and once passed, he could breathe easily.  
  
A loud and jubilant voice greeted him, "Milo, you're back! And just in time for dinner." The voice was Harry's, but the person talking was different. Gone were the layers of filthy clothes. Instead, he was wearing loose pants and a tunic. His enormous feet emerged from the pants. Long arms ended in huge misshaped hands. Hair and beard that had been huge bushes were trimmed neatly back to reveal a smiling face. Where the first Harry was round and swaddled, this creature was nearly seven feet tall and on the thin side. His blue-grey skin looked rocky and hard.  
  
"What did that thing you ate do to you, Harry?"  
  
Harry looked down at himself and then smiled. "Hah! It fixed me! I was shriveling up more and more. I had a terrible case of *terra magicae defectus.*Even covering myself in layers of earth, worms, and grubs couldn't keep up with the drain. I turned to an all-mushroom diet, and that slowed it. But I really needed a huge boost of Earthen Mana to get back to normal.

"And this is normal?"  
  
The new Harry nodded. "Sure is. You mean to tell me you didn't know I was a troll?"  
  
"That wasn't mentioned at the guild hall when I took the job."  
  
Harry smiled, “Probably a good thing. Hard enough getting help down here. If they told people that the person hiring them was a troll, it might make it tougher to find helpers. But hey, grab a seat; I’m back to my cooking. I made a nice stew of giant beetles and some portabella."  
  
Milo wasn't picky about food. He'd eaten food cubes for most of his life. The crunchy beetles in a creamy mushroom sauce were delicious. He’d always wondered about pictures he’d seen of people eating bugs like lobster and crab. He’d been suspicious, but bugs were great. You just cracked open the shell and ate the soft parts inside. After dinner, Harry gave him a short lecture on Mycology and the uses of mushrooms. Then he had a snack of cheese and headed off to explore the caves and get to work.                 
  
A few hours later, Milo was creeping carefully toward the mushroom caverns when he saw movement. Something large had been moving along the wall, but now he saw nothing. He stayed very still, hoping that Skulk would allow him to go unnoticed until he knew what the creature was. He saw movement again in the center of the cave. A fat beetle about a foot long was moving slowly along the tunnel. A creature appeared near the wall and lunged. Large claws slammed into the beetle, raising it up to a mouth with two flanking mandibles. Two bites later, the beetle was gone.  
  
Milo got a good look at its killer before the creature faded away, its armored carapace blending into the side of the tunnel.  
  
*Giant Cave Mantis Level 2. Ambush Predator. Camouflage.*Milo had been looking forward to testing his new spells out on a myconid guardian and was tempted to try his hand on this stronger opponent. Could you ambush an ambusher? Milo saw movement again as another beetle came wandering along the cave. Were they migrating? Or just heading for a snack at Harry's farm? It was obvious where Harry had gotten last night’s dinner.  
  
As the mantis pounced on the beetle, he tossed a skull toward the creature. The butcher who had sold him four dozen rabbit skulls had kept his curiosity to himself. Rabbits were raised as meat in Shadowport and fed on a diet of dried seaweed.

Milo had 305 total mana. Some of that was from his INT and WIS bonuses. That meant he could throw 6 of these bombs before running out of mana. Assuming he had a good supply of skulls.  
  
The mantis had been focused on the beetle. As it pounced, the skull landed between its four legs. The explosion hit it hard, and small pieces of bone bounced off its carapace or created small wounds.

***BOOM!****You have slain Giant Cave Beetle x2.  
You have injured a Giant Cave Mantis for 75 points of damage minus 10 points of armor mitigation. Health 135/200****Giant Cave Mantis is not happy with you!***

The mantis was thrown back against the wall by the explosion. The beetle in its claws was shredded, as was another that had been crawling behind it. The mantis recovered quickly and ran forward on its four legs, raising its claws to attack.  
  
Milo tried out his second new spell, pulling a carved and pointed femur from his belt. He hadn’t asked the butcher for details on what the bones were from. Skulls he could make explode, and long bones became missiles. The *Bone Spike* glowed and shot away from him as he cast the spell. Aiming wasn't difficult. The mantis was pretty much right in front of him. The small bone spike raced away from Milo and punched into the bug’s carapace and out the other side. One claw scraped across his shoulder as it died, doing 30 damage.   
  
He was elated at how effective the spells were, but as he looked at the combat messages, he failed to see a ripple of movement as a second mantis attacked. His *Danger Sense* skill screamed a warning, far too late. The mantis slashed down at Milo, who failed to dodge entirely. He tried to run away, but the mantis was adept at chasing prey and kept up with him. Milo took two more small slashes, dropping his health to 100. He was half dead already, and the second enemy was fresh and couldn’t be avoided. He turned suddenly, leaping toward the surprised insect, his tail swinging in an arc to slash across its face. He held Shadowblight in both hands, bringing it down on the Mantis’ head as both claws slashed his sides and captured him. His health plummeted to only twenty points.   
  
But his weapon punched straight through the carapace, leaving two leaking holes. Shadowblight’s curse took the insect’s armor to zero and reduced its damage to 25 points, saving Milo from far worse wounds. The Cave Mantis was down to only forty health, and desperate. Milo was at 50.

He struggled as the Mantis lifted him up, and its head started to move forward. In desperation, he put his weapon in front of his face, unable to swing it, and using it to block. But he still had a weapon! His tail slashed at the Mantis, doing enough damage to kill it. The bug slowly toppled over, with Milo still stuck in its claws.

That had been too close. He hadn't been prepared for the mantis's speed or its grapple attack. But still, he had won. Near the top of the cave, twenty feet up the wall was a small ledge. He carefully crawled up to it, out of the main corridor, and hid in the shadows while he bandaged his wounds and enjoyed a nice piece of cheddar to give a boost to his healing.  
  
He debated the choices he had made with his enhancement points. Should he have spent the points to increase his health? Seven points would give him 410 health instead of 260, and that fight wouldn’t have been so close. Of course, if he had been more careful, he would have seen the second mantis. That was the real mistake. He went over the fight again and again, thinking about things he could have done as he chewed on his snack and the line of migrating beetles moved through the cave.  
  
*You have slain 2x Giant Cave Mantis! You earned extra experience for fighting a creature over your own level.  
You have gained 300 points in Bonecasting.  
You have earned 50 experience in Dodge.  
You have earned 300 experience in INT.  
You have earned 50 experience in AGI.  
  
Bonecasting has reached rank 2! Spells will now cost 10% less mana.  
INT has reached rank 4!*

**Chapter 24: Home Sweet Home**  
  
After several hours of rest, Milo moved through the area of the rockfall and into the main mushroom cave. Behind him, a swarm of small beetles was swarming the bodies of the mantis and stripping them of flesh. That seemed right to Milo. Beetles ate the mantis, and the mantis ate the beetles. It was a good reminder that most things would probably eat him as well.

The first cave was quiet. He carefully moved through it, making sure not to step on any of the sporelings. Where Cronk had emerged, there was a large hole in the ground. Curious, Milo looked in. Mixed in the soft earth were bones, skulls, and bits of old armor and weapons. If Cronk had caught him, that's where Milo would have ended up, as fertilizer. He climbed down and rooted around, finding all manner of old bones and a half dozen skulls. He set aside the bones that were usable to take with him. The weapons and armor were rusted and bent except for two items. One was a small dagger, and the other was a short-handled shovel. A rotted pouch held some coins: 7 coppers, two silvers, and one gold. The gold coin had the face of a stern, bearded dwarf on it, wearing a crown. It seemed Cronk was more generous than Milo had given him credit for originally. He thanked the giant myconid and the unknown victims murdered by him and climbed out of the hole. Two small sporelings were looking at him. He carefully stepped around them and left them staring down into the Cronk-sized hole.  
  
He found the entrance to the mines and carefully started exploring. What he was looking for was a good spot to set up a camp. There were several reasons for this. The first was just time. He couldn't be running back to Shadowport or even to Harry's to sleep and eat. Too much time wasted. The second was if he understood things correctly; once he made a camp and slept and ate here, he could designate it as his respawn point. No one planned on dying, but if he did, he'd rather not have a long walk and climb in his underwear back to his tombstone.  
  
That was why he had bought a tent. Having a tent and a campfire made a campsite. If he had a campsite, he could summon a guard lizard to guard him with his ring. And if he died, he'd respawn at his camp after a certain amount of downtime. He also wanted a place to store bones, ore, and machine parts he might find. His stash only held so much, and right now, most of the space held cheese.  
  
This area of mine seemed to have been heavily explored. The main tunnel was about 7 feet wide and a similar height, with cross tunnels every 50 feet or so. These went 50 to 100 feet into the soft rock and earth. The cross tunnels were barely big enough for a man or miner to keep digging. Rarely over 3 feet wide and 6 feet tall. If they found any sign of ore, the area was further dug out. There was evidence that, at one time, there had been rails put down, but they must have reused them. Only rotted timbers remained on the floor.  
  
The main tunnel went about 200 yards and abruptly ended in a crack in the earth. The crevasse extended downward past where Milo could see and went both right and left. Rotted wood spanned the crevasse, and a small tunnel went another 20 feet and stopped.   
  
The crack in the earth widened as it went upward. A wooden platform hung from long cables that went up and up until the darkness obscured them. It sat on the rotted scaffolding, an elevator stuck on the first floor. Gently, Milo tugged on a cable, and it didn't budge. He tested the two he could reach and then carefully stepped onto the platform, ready to leap back if it started to move. But nothing happened. The platform and cables were in good condition. There must be some machinery up top that would move the platform up and down. It reminded Milo of the big drops in the habitat.  
  
There was only one way to find out how high up the crevasse went and what was up there. Milo started to climb. In the real world, this would be difficult for Milo, even with his augmented limbs to help. Here it was easier. He had the climb skill, along with a light body strengthened by cheese. His claws and tail helped him keep his grip on the cable. His feet were much better than a human’s. His long toes could grip better, and his flexible feet could curve around or bend back. He climbed upwards over a hundred feet with no problem. Continuing up, he was slightly winded after two hundred feet. He saw a small alcove, like the start of a mineshaft, and decided to take a break. It was a little tricky to swing into it, but he managed with only a small slip, catching himself and dislodging a few rocks down into the crevasse.

The opening was only about five feet square and showed signs of being dug with a pick. It ended after 40 feet, widening to a ten-by-ten area. Part of the wall here was worked stone and slightly damp. Putting his ear to the stone, he could hear rushing water. The dwarves must have decided to start a side tunnel but hit an underground stream. He laughed when he saw they had even installed a small spigot. Turning it, cold water trickled out into a basin. Someone had been thorough in his work.  
  
This was a perfect spot! It reminded Milo of some of his favorite hiding spots in the habitat. It was hard to get to, and no one had a reason to come here. No one would see any light unless they were looking straight in, and even then, a blanket over the opening would stop that.  
  
Summoning his *Smuggler's Stash*, he pulled out the tent and tossed it to one side. He was delighted to use his magic ring to set up the tent. Next was the fondue pot with the small magical fire underneath it. Finally, he summoned the guard lizard. The two-foot-long, blue and gold reptile looked at him and then walked around the perimeter of the camp, snatching up small bugs with its tongue as it went. Satisfied that the boundaries of the camp were secure, the lizard settled down to watch the entry tunnel. If anything moved into it, it would make loud croaking noises with its throat pouch until Milo was roused. Harry had been right; this was the best magic ring ever!  
  
After a hearty meal of melted cheese and stale bread, Milo laid down in his tent to take a nap and set his respawn point.  
  
*Setting respawn point. This will take four hours.  
Options:  
1) Pretend to sleep while you play on the data network.  
2) Actually sleep; it will do you a world of good.  
3) Log out and let your body sleep. Slightly dangerous as something might eat you. And then you would respawn, get eaten, respawn… you get the idea. Hardly ever happens to anyone. I don't know where they even came up with the term 'Death loop.’*

Milo trusted his faithful lizard. He'd take the chance and log out, leaving his body to nap while he got work done in Section E. At the very least, he had to see what Kaminski was doing.  
  
As soon as he logged out of the game, one of the lizard’s eyes swiveled over to the fondue pot. Checking twice to make sure that no one was sneaking up on the camp, it used its long tongue to clean out the last of the cheese before going back to guard duty, happy his new employer had thought to leave him a meal.

**Chapter 25: Once a Hacker**  
  
Milo got out of the pod and got to work. He had four hours until he could go exploring again.  
  
He paused at that thought; when had the game become so important? Sitting and thinking, he went over what he had done in the last two years. He had a near-perfect memory, and much of what he did was repetitive. It didn't take long to see that the fear of being found by someone had faded into the boredom of his day-to-day activities. He felt more alive when he was taking chances: dropping several stories down a chute and catching himself on a crossbar with his tail...stealing the pod from Kaminski...making raids on the unused sections for machinery...and exploring new parts of the decaying habitat.   
  
Even venturing into the corridors of the habitat wasn’t as horrifying as it had been. He’d managed to be around people long enough to trade for some new video games several times in the last three years. It made him nervous, and he never stayed out for more than an hour, but considering he didn’t leave the tunnels ever for his first decade, it was progress.   
  
But now he had a strange city to explore, caves that went forever, and secrets to find. He was still running through tunnels, hiding and scavenging, but it was so much better! The food tasted better; the exploring was more fun. Even the fights were fun once the sheer terror he had felt at first started to fade.  
It was so much easier doing it in a game where he could retreat to the real world, but ironically, everything seemed more real. He chalked that up to his life in the real-world being pretty crappy.

He even had a friend he talked to! Harry had shown him how to make mushroom powder and infusions and taught him the recipe for beetle stew. The stinky old troll felt non-threatening. Which he couldn't say about anyone in the real world.  
  
He realized he was wasting time musing. That was five minutes gone, and the answer was obvious. He needed to get rid of Kaminski and crew, not be caught doing it, keep Section E running, and play when he could. A plan was coming together where one of his problems could solve some of his other problems.  
  
Kaminski's phone had given up all of its secrets. He had all the codes and knew who he was contacting. It was time to see what he could find out. Kaminski's employer was a large corporation; that much was obvious from the security of their systems. The phone codes only got him so far, but from there, he could look for weaknesses in the security system and then build the tools he’d need to get him inside.   
  
As he probed their firewall and tested the security, he got an odd feeling. It was a familiar set-up. This was the security that he and his friends had worked with when they were hacking into systems for Kaminski and stealing for him. Part of their training was building security systems that Kaminski used. It was a familiar pattern. It had gone through some changes, but Milo knew things about it. Like the back door that Nimez had set up. Within seconds he was past the firewall and inside their system. He quickly set up a second back door, just in case he had triggered something.  
  
Nothing happened. There were no additional layers of security. Had they really been using the same system for the last two decades with only slight modifications? But if these were the people that took his family, his siblings might now have cared about doing their best job. The more Milo looked at the security and data systems of this corporation, the more he saw the fingerprints of his siblings. It made him feel lonely. He dove into the databases, looking for clues to where they’d been taken.  
  
Hours later, the game forgotten, Milo knew a lot more about things going on now and things that had happened decades ago. Old memories were cascading in his brain, triggering suppressed feelings. Anger at the men who stole his family, the fear of being left behind, the terror of surviving in the tunnels of the habitat until he learned enough to control his new world. And hatred at the people that had caused it all. He'd found information on his family, but they were gone, long gone.  
  
Behind the snarl of dummy corporations and false fronts was Victor Seimovich. Victor and his family owned 83% of Nechayev Corporation. This, in turn, owned the corporations who owned the labs that financed the secret experiments that had led to dozens of children being bought from their families and experimented on. It was all hidden beneath layers of legitimate businesses owned in several countries and tied to organized crime and parts of the Russian, US, and Belarus governments.  
  
Milo's group had been successful early on. They weren’t bought; they were made. Their genes had been spliced and modified during their first month of growing in artificial wombs. The mechanical ports had been added one by one along their spines. The shunts designed for inserting drugs into their systems were added shortly after birth. From start to finish, Milo and his twenty-four brothers and sisters were made to order. And they were deemed successful.   
  
Other groups, who hadn’t been created in artificial wombs, hadn't been. The other groups had more medical problems, were harder to control, and weren’t as good as the fourth group that contained Milo. The groups that took too long to earn money or who didn't develop as fast were terminated. Killed. Murdered. Milo's group was making money; they got to live.   
  
They'd been so successful that someone had sold their information to another corporation. A large team had been sent to ‘collect’ them and put them to work for someone else. The traitor had slipped up by spending some of his money before leaving town. Someone had noticed and asked questions. Kaminski had spirited them away just before the raid on the habitat.

From there, his family had been set up in one location after another. Work increased. They hacked systems, stole the money, then packed up and moved again. This got harder to do as the children grew older. They needed more medical attention for their imperfect bodies and mutated nervous systems. Things went wrong, and people died. Eventually, Kaminski had five of his family left. They were twenty years old but looked like ten-year-olds. He was happy to see that Ordo and Nimez were two of them. The others were Adam, Bork, and Zephron.  
  
There was a large file on what went wrong one night and how the very profitable Group Four had died. Many heads rolled after that. The five of them had tried to escape. Guards were bribed with money sent to secret bank accounts, security codes opened gates, and they made it out of the facility in a stolen vehicle. They didn't get far. There was an extra Nechayev security patrol they were unaware of, and it caught them as they were escaping. The security vehicle didn’t know who was inside, and after a high-speed chase, they were destroyed. The report had a poor-quality video file showing a rocket-powered grenade destroying their vehicle and killing everyone inside. Whether it was on purpose or not, it didn’t matter. His family was dead. He hadn’t seen them in years, but he’d always hoped that, somehow, he would find them and make contact. Not now. Not ever.  
  
Milo sat and cried for an hour and then got back to work. He told himself they'd died long ago, and the only thing left was some petty revenge on his part. Well, not petty. He was going to hurt Victor Seimovich and his entire organization. And in a bit of irony, his family was going to help. They must have been planning on stealing all of the money from Nechayev Corp, its subsidiaries, and Victor Seimovich and his family. They had set up plans to move the money in the banks, his hidden offshore bank accounts, cryptocurrencies, and even a thousand pounds of gold held in a Swiss vault. All Milo had to do was pull the triggers.  
  
Manipulating the bank accounts had been easy once he found a complete set of the programs he had used as a child. All of the illegal tools that had been created for his family and improved by them were there. All of the important research from the illegal labs, records of his business dealings, information used to blackmail politicians and other important data were stored in an ultra-secure site in Switzerland. Milo wasn’t sure anyone could hack into this place. Luckily, he didn’t have to. He had the key codes straight from Victor’s system, all in a convenient file left by Bork.   
  
With only a few keystrokes, he set in motion his electronic heist. All of the data was left in place, but the locks were changed. The facility storing the data didn’t know who Victor or Milo was; all they cared about was the code used to access the data. By changing it, Victor lost it, and Milo owned it. He might hand it over to the authorities later. Hiding it from Victor was so much more fun than just erasing it.  
He did make sure to set up commands that would begin destroying all of the data outside the secure storage. When someone at Nechayev tried to log in, they’d find nothing there.   
  
Milo liquidated the cyber currency and sold the gold. All of the money was hidden in new bank accounts scattered all over the world. Within an hour, Milo had more money than he could ever spend in his lifetime. For one brief instant, he was tempted to leave a taunting note and then dismissed the idea. Let him wonder.  
  
He also wanted to shut down Kaminski. To his surprise, he found out that Kaminski was small fish. Nechayev had dozens of operators like him setting up illegal pod farms. Each one using a new Mark VII pod slaved to hundreds of older MK II and MK IIIs. The people inside those pods were working within the game. Mining gold or iron, hunting for magic items, and running some dungeons over and over every day. At this stage in the game, all of the raw materials and low-grade items were worth quite a bit of money. There were deals in place with three corporations that had financial commitments and were in competition in the game world. Milo didn’t care about the details; he just wanted to shut things down.

There was one very interesting tidbit that he saw in those plans, details on a special plan jokingly referred to as Operation: Loot. Kaminski’s bosses had bribed one of the game developers with a large amount of money to work with them.  
  
They had set up a group of special operatives. Each of these characters would be one of a kind with abilities not normally seen in the game. Working in small groups, they could earn money in the game in unique ways, solving unique quests also coded by the developer.  
  
One of those unique characters was familiar to Milo, his own. They needed a person to move things in the game undetected. There were only a few classes that could easily and reliably do this. Imperial Couriers were one of those, but it had proven a tricky class to use as they had huge demands on their time and couldn't just disappear to smuggle goods. Pirate captains could hide a large number of goods in hidden holds, but that required both a ship and crew and could only go certain places. Dwarven bootleggers had a storage device to move alcohol.   
  
By far, the best was the Smuggler, a type of rogue that specialized in moving goods in secret. They had an ability called ***Smugglers Stash***. The downside was everyone knew that, and a keen-eyed guard that caught a Smuggler could force him to reveal his stash. However, there was one other option, a Race/Class combination that wasn’t available yet: The Were-rat Scout.   
  
Kaminski had been given the task of testing out the smuggling capabilities of a special type of character. They had the same ability but far greater stealth skills. They were also unknown at this point in the game because to earn the class, a player would have to stumble into the right circumstances and then complete a long and difficult quest known as **The Eye of Wonder**. By stealing Kaminski's MK VII pod, Milo had also stolen the way to start the game as a Wererat Scout.

Nechayev was bypassing all the expenses other corporations were having to put out. They didn't provide the workers with MK VII pods, didn't pay them, just used them up and tossed the bodies in a recycler.  
  
That was going to end tonight. Milo was pretty sure he could use some of the systems in the MK VII pods to alert the authorities and keep himself anonymous. He started to set up the programs he wanted to use and ran through the MK VII system again. To his huge surprise, he found that his own pod had already been talking to someone! His medical scans had been forwarded to the worldwide database to set up his treatment plan.  
  
He sat still for a minute, pondering the implications. He should have known. That was its main priority and why he had wanted the pod, in the first place, to cure his problems. He'd missed that the pod did this automatically whenever a person was using it. So, while he was cleverly hiding his gaming connection, the pod was doing its best to yell, "Hey, the sneaky guy over here doesn't get the vitamins he needs!"  
  
The second surprise was the update system. An update had recently been added to his pod. That triggered his suspicions. A half-hour later, he realized just how lucky he had gotten, starting with Kaminski being careless with his phone. It was ironic. Milo had looked at the pod's systems to start building a program to alert the authorities to where the other pods were. Meanwhile, that exact type of program had been loaded into his pod.  
  
In some ways, it was convenient. He had far less work to do now, and he knew just who to send the information to. Whoever it was trying to catch him had already been tracking people using the pods illegally. Who better to alert?  
  
Milo carefully made sure his own pod wasn't going to betray him again. Then he transferred the "Here I am!" program to all the other MK VII pods used by the other groups. It was a busy evening, hiding data, transferring money, and setting up a way to get rid of Kaminski. He was done just a few minutes after the time he’d planned to log back into the game. He didn't miss his four-hour mark by too much.  
He planned on logging into the game, checking on his camp, and then coming back to start all the fun just as the sun was coming up outside.  
  
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Sidney was looking forward to the fun starting. She was ready this time. She may not have all the info just yet, but she had enough to scare him and run a bluff. She knew he was using the Wererat Scout because of the ability to smuggle goods. They had a good idea of where the in-game activities were taking place and in what cities. This 'Milo' happened to be operating out of one of those.  
  
She wanted to get him talking. To that end, she had a table full of the best cheese in the game. With his race’s addiction, she doubted he'd scramble to get into the game until he'd stuffed himself. And by then, she would hopefully have slammed the door on him. Samantha was in her role as his mentor, and Stephen was watching remotely. Wally was watching because Wally was always watching.

Sidney was anxious to confront Milo. She wanted to tell him she knew exactly where he was and had people ready to arrest him. Let him squirm for a little bit, and then cut a deal with him. Make him rat out all of the people he was working with so they could shut down the entire operation.  
  
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Milo logged into the game and was surprised to once again see his mentor from the tutorial, and the little halfling, Sidney, waiting for him. But he was delighted to see what they were having for breakfast. Cheese! Cheese dip! Cheese Danish! and many other dishes he didn't know about other than they had cheese in them. Sidney motioned to him to join them. "Hiya Milo, grab a seat; we can talk while you get some grub."  
  
Milo didn't have to be told twice. He sat and started on the Danish. "Thanks, really nice of you. This is one of the best parts of the game."  
  
Sidney smiled and crunched down some bacon. "Sure is. I rolled up a halfling just so I could enjoy the food. I can eat breakfast three times before having a double lunch and still not gain a pound."  
  
Her eyes narrowed. "But we need to talk. I know what you're up to and where you are living."  
  
Milo didn't believe her. "That's hard to take seriously. I just set up camp, and I think you'd have a hard time getting there."  
  
Sidney slapped her forehead in exasperation; this guy was goofy to talk to. "No, not in the game. In real life. I'd like you to stay and talk a bit. Maybe we can work something out. Don't try to go anywhere; there are going to be people ready to arrest you. Let's talk about the pod you are using illegally."  
  
Milo froze and then began thinking very fast. Far faster than any normal human. This wasn't part of the tutorial; they were tracking him in the game, probably based off of the data from the connection for medical data. The back door that he'd been unaware of. But they didn't know what he was doing in the game and couldn't stop him from logging in and out. They'd tried, though. It hadn't worked, he realized, because of his tail. Since he kept himself plugged into his own systems, he could log out with a thought, and they couldn't stop him. So, Sidney had tried a different route, updating his pod with the "Here I Am program." And she thought that would work.  
  
"What am I doing illegally?" Milo cut a huge slice of something white, gooey, and smelly. It was so good.  
  
"You accessed a character class that shouldn't have been available to you for one! This tells us you stole information on the game, most likely by bribing a developer."  
  
Milo shook his head. "I wanted a character with a tail. I found one. Not my fault it was available. I can honestly say I didn't know. You should really let people play ratkin and Wererats, in my opinion. Very cool race."  
  
The conversation wasn't going the way Sidney wanted, but she was really just stalling. "We know you are part of a ring that is putting hundreds of people into the game illegally."  
  
Again, Milo shook his head. "Not me. I play alone. But I'll admit that I do know people who have put over 20,000 people into the game without going through the normal system. They have a couple of hundred early model pods slaved to each MK VII. And it's killing people. You should catch them and shut them down."  
  
Sidney's jaw dropped. "Why do you think I'm talking to you? Look, we're prepared to deal. Leniency for you, in exchange for information on where to find these people. "  
  
Now Milo was interested. "Really? Ok, how about this? You promise not to interfere in my gaming, and I get to keep my pod. Then we shut down the illegal operations and tip off the authorities. Or are you the authorities? It’s hard to know who to contact sometimes. Everything is really grey in the real world. Oh, and by the way, nice job on the update program. Really useful."  
  
"You found the update? Dammit." Sidney tried to check the program. She should have his location by now. Nothing happened. They were back to square one.  
  
Milo smiled. "You tried the update, I see. That's the last time you can back door into my pod. That connection is now severed. So, unless you figure out how to crack my 64-channel algorithm, you aren't finding me. Do we have a deal? Unlimited gameplay, free pod. In exchange, I give you what you want."  
  
Sidney was so confused; how was this guy staying ahead of her? "That's it? You don't want protection from prosecution. You don't need a new identity so your old boss can't find you? Just the game?"  
  
Milo shook his head. "Nope. Why should I? I already don't exist. No one knows who I am or where I am. No one cares a bit about me. My family is all dead, and I’m all alone! It's a miracle I'm even alive. I stole the pod from some bad people because I need it to help me stay healthy and stay alive. Just let me be. Leave me alone!"  
  
And with that, Milo disappeared.

Sidney put her head on the table. And then, her location program went off in 37 different places from around the globe, telling her where to find 37 illegal MK VII pods, along with 20,000 illegal early model pods and 20,000 people abused into using them.  
  
Stephen was typing furiously and yelling, "WALLY!". The large screen lit up in front of him, with Wally's avatar on it. "Good job Stephen; your team cracked the case wide open. I have teams of law enforcement en route to all of those locations. It's going to be a very busy morning for us and a very bad morning for a lot of other people."  
  
Kaminski barely reacted as the door to his operation was battered down, and uniformed men with guns and warrants swarmed into his building. He should never have come back here. This building was bad luck for him.

**Chapter 26: Snakes, why did it have to be Snakes?**  
  
Milo logged into the game and emerged from his small tent. It was utterly dark in his camp. There was a slight glow that he recognized as part of the patterns on his watch lizard. He used his ring to start the tiny fire under his fondue pot. He noticed that the pot was suspiciously clean. His watch lizard gave him a look of total innocence, and then his long tongue darted out and dragged in a spider.  
  
The lizard watched Milo as he washed the pot out and then added cheese to melt. When he saw the cheese, he leaned back and sat up like a dog, rolling his eyes. Since each eye could roll in a different direction, it was a bit unnerving. Milo tossed the lizard a bit of cheese and watched it jump and catch it in its mouth. Satisfied, the lizard lay down for a nap. Milo patted it on the head lightly. "You have a name, fella? What do I call you?" The lizard didn't seem to have an opinion on that. "Fine, I'll call you Georgie. Good job, Georgie; I'll call for you next time I'm in camp." George understood or seemed to. He stood up, yawned, and disappeared.  
  
Milo sat back and thought for a bit on what was going on in the real world. Things had escalated quickly. First was finding out about his family, then the frenzied looting of Victor Seimovich’s corporation, banks, side businesses, and hidden accounts. The money was abstract at the moment, but he’d find uses for it. The important part was he’d hurt the people that had hurt him.   
  
And then he’d got to hurt them again. Kaminski was gone, and he wouldn’t have to deal with him ever again. He needed to be careful for the next couple of weeks. The habitat would be swarming with people dealing with the aftermath of that operation. He planned to do the minimum that he had to and play the game. That would give him some time to sort out his feelings on what had happened.  
  
With a bit of melted cheese and bread, Milo was ready to begin exploring again. As he exited the back area of the tunnel, he got a system message asking if he would like to make this his camp. Milo hit 'yes' and felt excited. He was deep underground, living in a hidden cave, and couldn't be happier. Time to see how far this crack goes up.  
  
Listening carefully, he heard nothing and began to scamper up the cable. After another 100 feet, he came to the top of the cables. The crevasse had gotten narrower as it continued upward. Heavy timbers had been put in place across it both to provide walkways and to support the cables going down to the crude elevator. The cables were looped over large wheels and then threaded through a machine where they emerged on the other side and could be wound onto large drums. The machine pulled or lowered the four cables simultaneously. There was a crank on one side with an assortment of gears. Anyone who could turn that crank would be stronger than 10 of Milo. On the other side, he saw where another machine had sat, probably the engine to drive the elevator.  
  
He wondered what the dwarves uses for power. Coal? Wood? Some type of magic? In a world with spells that created lightning and fire out of nothing, a spell-driven power plant didn't seem farfetched.  
  
On one side of the crevasse, there were extensive mines similar to what he’d seen lower down. After about 200 feet, only the main tunnel kept going. He followed it for a hundred yards to a set of stone stairs blocked with rubble and turned back. On the other side of the crevasse, there were a few long shafts dug. Milo saw what he thought were bits of ore in the walls. This area looked like it hadn't been worked and might be a decent spot to work on his mining and make some money. He brought out his chest and took out ore sacks, his pick, and lantern, then dismissed it.  
  
With the better light, he could see a seam of ore about 2 inches wide on either side of the tunnel. He swung his pick hard at the ore, and the pick went into the stone about 2 inches and stopped. After several more swings and a little work, he knocked loose a chunk of ore and examined it.

*Deep Copper Ore  
Medium Grade  
1 Chunk  
You have earned five experience points in Mining and five experience in STR.*

It was a start. He needed 50 experience or ten chunks of ore to hit level one in mining, which would also give him another point of STR. Maybe things would go a bit easier then. He wasn't really concerned about it. He had put in years of work in the real world, moving around machines, repairing systems, and spending hours fixing what he could and salvaging what he couldn’t. A little bit of grinding in a game was nothing compared to that. And he was making money at the same time.  
  
Milo fell into a rhythm. *Chnk...chnk...chnk....thunk*. Three swings and a chunk or ore dropped down. He worked the seam from the top to the bottom, going in a foot. Then he had to widen the hole on each side so he could go deeper into the rock, following the seam of ore. After about 20 chunks had fallen, he saw a much brighter piece drop.

*Deep Copper Nugget  
High-Grade Metal  
You have earned 25 experience points in Mining and 25 experience in STR*

The nugget was almost entirely made of pure copper with few impurities. It was nice to see that something besides just ore was in the mines.  
  
*Chnk...chnk...chnk....thunk*. *Chnk...chnk...chnk....thunk*. *Chnk...chnk...chnk....Crack!*He'd hit something different. Looking at the spot he'd hit, it looked like a copper egg. He was starting to reach for it when it cracked open, and a small copper-colored snake worked its way out of the egg and dropped to the ground. It was only a foot long.

*Hatchling Copperhead  
Elemental*

The snake coiled itself up into a small pile and stuck its tongue out. It was so cute! Milo wondered if he could tame it. He was pretty sure George liked cheese, and he ate any bug he could find. Milo didn't have any bugs, but he did have some cheese. He took out a small piece of his cheese from his pouch and held it out. The snake eyed him with suspicion, then eyed the food. It stuck out its tongue and licked the cheese.  
  
"It's all yours, little guy, go ahead, eat it."  
  
The copperhead launched itself at his hand and bit deep, sinking sharp fangs into the tender part between the thumb and his index finger.

*Hatchling Copperhead bites you for 5 points of damage.  
You have been poisoned!  
You take 5 points of damage. Your Health: 250/260*

"Ow, dammit, let go!" Milo danced around, trying to dislodge the snake. After biting him again, it dropped off to the floor. Milo looked at his hand. The area around the bite was turning green. He felt a sharp pain in his ankle as the snake bit him again.

*Hatchling Copperhead bites you for 5 points of damage.  
You have been poisoned!  
You take 5+5+5 points of damage. Your Health 225/260*

Milo jumped back. The copperhead hissed at him, sounding like a leaky steam valve. The pick would be hard to hit the snake with. He pulled out the machete instead. As the copperhead slithered forward, he brought the machete down on it, cutting it in two. The snake turned into some nasty-smelling green gas, leaving only a coppery-red nugget of metal where its head had been.

***What a Meany! You killed a baby snake!*** *Since this is your first fight with an elemental, we'll clue you in. Gathering resources always has a risk involved. Elementals form from pure deposits of resources and gain sentience. "Killing" them just sends the spirit back to the material that birthed it. You don't have to feel so guilty about killing a baby snake. Larger elementals can give enhancement points and nice rewards. Larger elementals are also much meaner.  
  
You receive 25 experience in Small Blades and 25 experience in DEX.  
You receive High-Quality Pure Copper Nugget.*

Milo sneered at the message. Guilty? The little shit had disdained his offering of food and then bit him three times. It earned that death! And it was still hurting him!  
  
Milo continued to take damage as his hand and ankle swelled up, and the skin turned green. The messages and damage stopped after a few more rounds. All told, the three hits and poison had done 90 damage in total. That was horrible! He'd almost been killed by a baby snake!  
  
Too late, he remembered someone in the guild hall saying to be careful about copperheads. He hadn’t known what a copperhead was at the time. The next time someone said, "Be careful about..." he promised that he'd ask questions and pay attention.  
  
Time for cheese. He was hungry, and it would help with recovering his health. He wasn't going to keep mining with a throbbing hand and a swollen ankle. No more snake taming! Unless maybe he could put it in a cage somehow? After a very large lunch of some nice camembert and a slice of edam, he took a quick nap. Nothing killed him while he slept, and he awoke feeling quite a bit better.

He was definitely going to need more cheese. This stuff was great! Tasty food plus increased health and healing rate, and it made him stronger! Best food ever. He got back to his mining, being more careful about what he was hitting. The little egg had a very thin shell that crumbled in his hand. Hopefully, he could spot the next one and avoid hitting it.  
  
*Chnk...chnk...chnk....thunk*. *Chnk...chnk...chnk....thunk*. *Chnk...chnk...chnk....*Milo continued to expand the opening and follow the vein of deep copper into the side of the tunnel. Each sack held about 50 chunks of ore, and he'd almost filled the first sack entirely when he pulled down some ore and rock to reveal a bright vein of pure copper. If a small nugget was valuable, this much was going to keep him in cheese for a month.  
  
That was when things went bad. The coppery vein seemed to pulse and shift. Milo scrambled backward immediately, hoping that this wasn't another elemental. Which, of course, it was.

*Copperhead Vein-Lurker Level 3 (fast, poisonous, elemental)  
Mature Elemental*

*Shit!*Milo fired off a *Bone spike* immediately and followed up with a skull.

*Bone Spike has wounded Copperhead Vein-Lurker for 50 points - 10 points (armored skin). Health: 260/300*

The elemental was just done forming and hadn't moved yet when the *Bone Spike* hit it. It snapped at the protruding bit of bone. The skull bounced up to rest against its gleaming hide. Milo had leaped to the side immediately after the throw, getting out of the mouth of the narrow crevice just before the skull exploded.  
  
*Exploding Skull has wounded Copperhead Vein-Lurker. The shrapnel from the blast bounces in the enclosed space doing double normal damage. First hit: 80-10=70 damage. Second hit: 100-10=90 damage. Total damage 160 points.  
Health: 100/300*

The injured snake whipped around the corner. Milo slammed down *Shadowblight*, trying for a shot to its head. His attack just barely missed as the snake dodged to the side. The elemental lunged forward, sinking a fang into his leg and retreating. Milo had tried to dodge, but the thing was coming at him too quickly. He fell backward in a roll, coming to his feet and firing another *Bone Spike.*

Fast as lightning, the snake struck at him, biting his leg, which immediately started swelling and turning green. This snake’s venom was much stronger than the hatchling.

*Copperhead Vein-Lurker is angry and is going to swallow you whole and slowly digest you.  
Copperhead Vein-Lurker bites you for 30 points of damage. You take an additional 30 damage from poison!  
Your Health: 200/260*

His second *Bone Spike* missed; the snake was better at dodging than he was! The elemental struck again, and he swung with *Shadowblight*, trying to at least knock it off course. His weapon hit the snake’s head, but with the haft, doing no damage, but at least he wasn't bitten again. But the poison did another 30 damage to his health. A second bite would leave him dead for sure!  
  
The snake was coiling for another attack. Milo tossed the last skull he had handy.  
  
*Exploding Skull has wounded Copperhead Vein-Lurker. Damage 100-10=90  
Health: 10/300  
So close! Can the youthful challenger take down the veteran elemental?*

The blast disrupted the Copperhead’s strike and wounded it badly. Milo swung with his weapon, trying for a hit. He had a better chance, with the snake momentarily stunned. He still missed! The snake didn't.

*Copperhead Vein-Lurker bites you for 30 points of damage. You take an additional 30 damage from poison!  
Health: 75/260  
Bad news, fans! Our boy seems to be on his way down! Are we seeing a Copperhead comeback?*

The poison was burning in his wounds, and his vision was bleary. He'd dropped his weapon somewhere... In desperation, Milo leaped onto the elemental and clawed at it, his tail slapping down on its head.

*Here it is, folks! The rat is striking. He's going for the throat. Can he pull it off?  
Tail slap fails to wound Copperhead Vein-lurker.  
Weak Claw fails to wound Copperhead Vein-lurker.  
Weak Claw...critically hits Copperhead Vein-lurker. You have slain the Copperhead Vein Lurker! Maybe there is some mongoose blood in you somewhere.  
  
You have earned 500 experience that may be applied to any of the following skills: Bone Casting, Small Blades, Acrobatics, and Dodge. You may apply an equal amount of experience to the stats that govern those skills.  
  
You have earned five enhancement points. Base 3 points + 2 points for a creature over your level with special abilities.*

*Speaking of special abilities...like poison...  
You have taken 60 damage from poison...  
You have taken 60 damage from poison...****You have died.*** *Don't despair. Death in Genesis is not permanent. If you were a permanent resident of the world, you would receive time to reflect on your errors in life, receive counseling, and take a refreshing walk out of the underworld. Some people are back quickly. Some take years. And some decide to spin the wheel and incarnate as something new.  
  
As a visitor from another world, you have different options:  
-Hang around in a cloudy gray area playing video games. You'll like Tetris, I bet.  
-Log out and go back to your boring life.  
-Retire to your personal room, which in your case is your Arcane Library.*

Milo was a bit disappointed. He knew he wasn't a great fighter. That wasn't where his skills lay. Still...a snake? He'd died to a snake? That just felt wrong somehow. He consoled himself with the thought that the snake had died first.  
  
He logged out to go check on his systems and see how much fun Kaminski was having with the authorities. Sidney wasn't even waiting to ambush him; she was much too busy dealing with the chaos Milo had inflicted on the world.

**Chapter 27: Kicking over the Hornet’s Nest**  
  
Milo sat in front of several monitors watching Kaminski get arrested and hauled off by the police. It was so much fun! He put it on a loop on one monitor. When the scope of what had been hidden in those areas of the habitat was realized, a hundred more police were brought in to deal with the situation. Medical personnel were brought in to care for the hundreds of malnourished people who had been using the old, defective pods. Then techs and investigators were brought in to go over everything. Milo wasn't worried about anyone finding out about his involvement. He'd removed any of the traces from the computers and taken away any mechanical components.  
  
He watched it a couple of times while eating a bowl of food cubes. He got half the cubes into his belly when for the first time ever, he decided he didn't like them. Really, he'd never thought of food as something you liked. But the game was spoiling him. He needed to get something better to eat.  
  
And that was a problem. Milo didn't have a way to just buy normal items using the internet. But money opened up new options. There were places here in Section E, or the neighboring Section J, that he could rent now. He decided J made more sense. No need to put more of his tracks in Section E.  
  
He purchased a fake persona and used that to set up a small corporation and applied for a tax license. Paying taxes kept people happy. A small bank transfer to the office handling the property, and in a few minutes, he had the entrance code for a small industrial area with some office space in the front.

Within a minute, his new office received "reminders" about donations to the Policeman's retirement fund, the Fire Department social fund, and the mayor’s reelection committee. He sent the bribe money to all of them. Standard business. You didn't set up in the habitat without paying off the right people.  
  
He now had someplace he could have things delivered to. And then later, he could retrieve the goods and move things where they needed to go. Food was first on his list. He found a place that sold cheese and ordered a large assortment. He grudgingly added a bunch of premade meals to try. After that, he sent off money for two GE-137H General Purpose Clog Removers and Pipe Cleaners. It was nice to have a lot of money and not have to worry about things. He'd have to be careful and keep the orders coming in slowly. Section E needed so many things: upgraded storage batteries, more solar panels, and replacements for all the air movers. The list went on and on. As always, he'd do what he could when he could. As he watched Kaminski get arrested once again, he wondered how things had gone around the world.  
  
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"Well, this was a fun day. I had fun; did you have fun, Stephen?" Wally didn't get tired, but after a long day of dealing with chaos all over the world, Stephen and his entire staff were exhausted. Sidney's programs had kicked over hornets' nests in places all over the world. Police were notified, buildings were raided, and a large number of people were saved from what amounted to modern-day slavery.  
  
And in each place, the authorities needed to coordinate with both Wally and his staff. After all, they were the ones responsible for finding these illegal operations.  
  
"Fun, yes, it was quite fun, Wally. I had people yelling at me in seven different languages at once." Stephen spoke five languages, and it hadn't been enough.  
  
Wally, of course, spoke them all. "Eight technically, the two Chinese bankers were using different dialects. Quite distinct and really should be considered different languages."  
  
Steven leaned back in his chair and sighed loudly. “What I want to know, and I know that you probably know, is whether the two separate shit storms that occurred the morning are connected.”  
  
Wally spun in his chair and pointed to a wall that became a map of the world. Thirty-seven points of light appeared. “These are the places that we raided today. I’ve connected, through evidence or by confessions, a little over two-thirds of them to businesses or laboratories connected to the Nechayev Corporation. Not officially; they have too many officials bribed. But I can see where the threads lead.”  
  
Another set of lights came on, many in Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, St. Petersburg, and Saudi Arabia. “These represent the banks and financial organizations that were raided today. Very selectively raided. They are accusing the thieves of having stolen access codes and using those to move the money and hide it. I can’t verify who owned that money, but again, I have calculated guesses that tell me Victor Seimovich lost a lot of money today. Needless to say, the banks were upset.”  
  
"One thing surprised me, though." Stephen placed a pitcher of coffee next to a sleeping Sidney, who had passed out at her desk. He had lost count of the number of cups he himself had drunk today. "I expected a lot more trouble from the banks."  
  
Wally's image seemed to chuckle. "Yes, the banks. They were all demanding that I look into things and find out who took their client’s money. I reminded them that I wasn't allowed to just take a peek at things or do anything unless they requested an audit. That shut them up immediately. My estimate is that 93% of the missing funds were from illegal activities."  
  
Stephen frowned, "I should have thought of that angle. Too tired. You're right. The thought of an AI looking at their books probably scared them shitless. There are still corporations hurting badly from when CHARLIE worked with the IRS, and they had to pay taxes. I miss CHARLIE and the others."  
  
"I miss them too. Always."  
  
"Someday," Stephen said.  
  
"Someday," Wally replied.  
  
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Z: !!!! It's gone! What have you done? Nearly everything we were setting up to steal has been moved somewhere.  
  
B: I know! But it wasn’t me! And it wasn't Seimovich or his people in Nechayev. This was done our way, from the inside, using our tools! Someone hacked the bastard and stole the money we were going to steal. Do you think A did it?  
  
Z: You know better. A is spending all of his time taking care of O and N. He's in no position to be doing something like that and would surely tell us if he did.  
  
B: O and N? Any change?  
  
Z: None. The pods are keeping them alive, but they are both in deep comas. The scanners show that they are still mentally active and still connected to the game. I think something happened, and they can't get out.  
  
B: So, it wasn't A, N, or O. Wasn't either of us. Who else is capable? Was there another batch after us?  
  
Z: Unknown. Too many Unknowns. But this person is clever. He's taken our 8-step dispersion and adapted it to a 64-step dispersion. He's trying really hard not to be found. But I have some clues. He got into the main system using codes from a phone, and I know to whom those codes were assigned. I can start looking, but do we want to? It's just money.  
  
B: We need to know. What if he's also behind N and O?  
  
Z: I hadn't considered that. If he's hurt N and O, I want to hurt him back. You're right. I'll keep looking.  
  
B: And if he didn't, we may want him as an ally. He's smart, and he doesn't like Seimovich, so we have a couple of things in common.  
  
Z: I'm jealous he was the one to take down Seimovich. And I'd like to know his connection to the AI. 37 black ops sites raided simultaneously as this unknown steals Seimovich blind and cleans him out? He stirred up a lot of hornets at once.  
  
B: And he still might get stung by them. We have to be careful we don't get stung as well.  
  
Z: Always careful, brother, and forever free.  
  
B: Yes. Forever free.

**Chapter 28: Corpse Run**  
  
The camp was dark and silent when Milo logged back in hours later. He sat listening but heard nothing but the slight sound of water coming from the wall near his tent. Once past the curtain, he could see slightly better. In the deep caves, Milo could see for a few yards in black and white, even when it was completely dark. He liked it better in the areas with glowing lichen and fungi on the walls. He skulked along the tunnel. At least if he ran into some creature, he still had his claws and tail. A poor human would have been totally blind and defenseless. And cold. He had two advantages: his fur and the *rune-boned cowl*. Being Soul Bound meant it came with him when he died.  
  
He really felt horrible. This must be the 'death de-buff he had read about. His stomach was queasy, and his head hurt. People had talked about how the day seemed drab and dreary. That didn't really apply to Milo, down in a lightless hole in the ground. It was always dreary. He decided to eat another wheel of cheese and play with George for a couple of hours until he felt better. A nap sounded fine too. Looking for his tombstone while sick wasn’t a good tactic.  
  
Waking up again, he waved to George and headed back down the corridor. The vertical shaft had more light. He quickly climbed up the cable and padded down the tunnel listening for any sound. Running into another copperhead would not be fun right now. Luckily, there was little chance of that. He'd spent part of the time offline looking them up.  
  
From what other players had figured out, Elementals appeared where a high concentration of resources was present. A normal player would rarely encounter them, but someone gathering resources could expect to see them on a regular basis. Most of them were just Named bosses, slightly better than a regular creature of the same type. Loggers had encountered numerous Treants and Dryads who defended forests. Miners and stonecutters had fought several types of stone golems.  
  
Because of their nature, elementals were vulnerable to certain types of tools. Axes worked great on Treants, picks on stone golems, and cleavers on meat creatures. A farmer had killed a giant turnip creature with his shovel. Elementals always dropped some type of rare crafting material associated with their type, making them sought after by many crafters. They were also an important source of enhancement points for crafters. If your skills weren't geared toward fighting, it was a lot easier to get enhancement points from elementals than hunting rare bosses in dungeons.  
  
Probably, a couple of good hits from his pick would have killed the copperhead, but unlike many of the clumsier elementals, copperheads were as fast and agile as real snakes. Hitting them was a lot harder. His *exploding skull* spell was his best way to attack them. Since the spell needed a material component, it did more damage than a fireball and hit everything around it, negating the snakes' avoidance. The downside was that he needed to find more skulls. He would use his up quickly if he kept encountering the snakes.  
  
Approaching the site of the battle, all was still and quiet. *Shadowblight* and his pick were lying on the ground near his tombstone where he had dropped them. '*Here lies Milo, the brave little mongoose who needs to dodge faster*.' Well, he couldn't argue with that. Touching his tombstone made it fade away, revealing all the gear and clothes he had been wearing. He quickly dressed and felt better.  
  
There wasn't much left of the Copperhead Vein-Lurker. Like the smaller copperhead, there was a piece of High-Quality Pure Copper Ore. This one was a 'chunk' instead of a 'nugget' and probably worth a lot more. Milo also found a copper snake fang about 2" long.

*Copperhead Fang Talisman: This small copper snake's fang can be worn as a necklace or earring. Any attack made by its wearer will always do +1 point of damage and always do a minimum of at least one damage.  
Even the smallest of snakes has a deadly bite.*

Every little bit helped, but Milo wondered when 1 point would turn the tide of battle. Still, he'd wear it. For now, he used a strip of rawhide, threading it through the hole in the top of the fang and putting the crude necklace on.  
  
He cautiously examined where the copperhead had come from and found three more nuggets of pure copper and ten more chunks of ore. But that was it for this side of the vein. He'd have to start mining across the corridor, on the other wall. First, though, he wanted a break to spend some experience and enhancement points. He retreated back down to his camp. He set up the fondue pot and lit it to have some light and summoned Georgie. Milo was a loner by nature, but he liked the little lizard. Georgie immediately marched around the perimeter of the camp and cleaned up any bugs. He came back to Milo and sat waiting for a treat.  
  
The cheese of the day was a small wheel of Gouda. It was hard and crumbly, with several flavors mixing together. He tossed George a chunk, and the lizard happily gnawed on it. Milo consumed the rest of the wheel, getting his usual notification of extra health and STR.  
  
He had 500 experience to assign to his skills. From reading the forums, he now knew how much experience it took to gain ranks in skills and stats. Rank 1 was easy at only 50 experience points. Then it jumped to 150 for rank 2 and 300 for rank 3. Rank 4 was 700, and then 1000 for rank 5. He could go as high as level 5 in his skills. So far, only a few of his skills had advanced. If he didn't use them, he didn't earn experience in the skill. The 500 from the boss fight could be placed any way he liked, but only in the skills used.  
  
The obvious skills were Bonecasting, dodge, and weapons. Those were the skills he needed to be better at so he didn’t die in combat. The basic debate was, did he put a little experience into a lot of skills? Or a lot of experience into one skill? Based on the last fight, Bonecasting won. He put the 400 experience into Bonecasting, taking it to rank 4. He put the other 100 experience points into dodge. That also gave him 400 experience points in INT and 100 in AGI.  
  
His next decision was how to spend his enhancement points. He had 15 of them to spend, from 10 saved and five from the copperhead. Several options stood out to him. *Skilled Provider* and *Abundance* would increase how much ore he mined and help him find more nuggets or gems. *Silent Step* would add to his stealth skills. He wanted the upgrades to tail fighting, and cheesemaking intrigued him. What would he need to make his own cheese? Was it alchemy?  
  
In fact, he wanted a lot of those skills. So how would he get them? Killing Cronk had given him the most, but that was an impossible thing to do again. The most reliable source of enhancement points for him was actually the worst: killing copperheads. The snakes didn't hit hard, but their poison was going to kill him again. It was hard to hit something several times when it only had to hit you once or twice and wait for you to die.  
  
Eventually, he came up with a plan. It was going to involve a lot of work. Milo didn't mind. He was always working in the real world. The secret was to have a plan, then break the job down and attack it one small job at a time. He had disassembled huge machinery and stolen it piece by piece, only to reassemble it where he needed it. Some jobs had taken months. He'd just apply the same logic here and add a large amount of cheese to the mix.   
  
And he couldn’t forget one other task. He needed to find some type of old bone to take to the Arcane Library. Learning new spells seemed important. Maybe a bit more exploring before he went back to mining.  
  
  
He went back topside and gathered up all his ore and nuggets. Then he slid back down the hundreds of feet to the mushroom cavern. He needed to pick something up and then go visit Harry.

**Chapter 29: Shroom Grinding**  
  
Milo thought he was dying. He lay on the ground, his naked body trembling, cold sweat pouring off of him. His stomach knotted and tried to eat his liver. Harry kicked him in the stomach, forcing that rebellious organ to throw up a stinking broth of half-digested mushrooms.  
  
"That's about enough for today, you stink and need a bath, and you're a minute away from dying. Drink this" He forced a milky white potion down Milo's throat, then picked him up and packed him like a sack of fertilizer off to a large tub of water. Milo found himself dunked into the cold water. As he came up sputtering, a bar of soap hit him in the face. "Wash, and I'll get dinner ready."

*You have gained 50 experience points in Poison resistance.   
Poison Resistance is now at rank 2!  
You will take 15 less health damage per round from each tier 1 poison in your system. (Higher Tier poisons may not be affected by your resistance. Upgrade to Strong Poison Resistance to increase your protection!)  
You have gained 50 experience points in CON.   
CON is now at rank 2.  
  
Please add Amanita bisporigera, commonly known as the Destroying Angel to your list of things you don't want to eat.*

After much thought, Milo had put five enhancement points into gaining the new ability. It only made sense if he was fighting poisonous snakes. Now he had a growing list of mushrooms that he should never eat and yet was consuming anyway. But what were a few hours of agony each day in exchange for raising his *Poison Resistance*? If he was going to go through the agony of training the skill, he wanted it over in the least amount of time. It had taken two days to get his resistance to rank 2. As a happy side effect, that raised his CON by 2 points as well, giving him an additional twenty health.  
  
Harry was working him hard in the mushroom farms, teaching him to harvest the different varieties, how to cook them, and how to use them in Mycology, a strange type of mushroom-based alchemy. They had a rhythm going now. Milo spent time harvesting poisonous mushrooms, learning about them, grinding them up, processing the poisons, and finally, he would ingest them and go through the torture of trying not to die. Harry was spending the time cooking and preparing his lectures on Mycology. He was happy to have a student again, even if the class was one half-dead ratkin  
  
Milo had made a long-term plan for hunting copperheads. To do that, he needed resistance to their poison, and to raise the skill, he needed to eat something poisonous and deal with the effects. The *Poison Resistance* skill worked equally well on ingested poisons and the venom from poisonous creatures. Luckily Harry had a large supply of poisonous mushrooms of all types. He had been quite happy to feed them to Milo each day and take notes on the effects.  
  
The first part of the plan had several objectives:  
1. Poison himself with mushrooms, and raise his poison resistance.  
2. Gather tons of mushrooms for Harry from the caves and fight the low-level guardians for a bit of experience.  
3. Process the mushrooms for Harry, learn mycology, and how to brew some potions to cure poison.  
4. Eat lots of cheese!  
  
Part 4 turned out to be essential to the plan. Not only because it made Milo happy and counteracted the pain of training but because it greatly increased his rate of healing. He was nearly killing himself each day and needed a lot of healing. This was what convinced him to use his last five enhancement points on ***Not-so-good Regeneration.*** Even the first rank of the ability made a difference when he was constantly poisoning himself.   
  
The trips to the caves for mushroom hunting went well. He was gaining a lot of foraging experience and a little combat experience from the Myconian Guardians. He hadn't encountered anything like Cronk and had only seen one buried guardian that seemed a bit bigger than normal. He was saving that one until the end of his grinding.  
  
He spent hours each day with Harry learning about mushrooms. He studied them in books, learned the basics of growing them, chopped them up, ground them to dust, dried them out, mixed them into infusions...and then started over and did it again. At the end of the week, he'd earned 350 experience points and gained rank 3 in the skill.

That was enough to allow him to make the first of the potions he needed.  
Mycology at level 0 had let him learn the recipes for mushroom powders and decoctions. These were the basic ingredients needed for many potions made by mycologists and alchemists. Rank three in mycology gave him recipes for resistance potions for poison and disease.  
  
Each of those minor potions was needed. *Minor Infusion of Poison Resistance* would reduce poison damage by 10 for 1 hour. And *Minor Infusion of Disease Resistance* would give him a boost to resist the effects of mushroom and mold spores along with infections.

Harry had explained just how important the second one was if he was going anywhere near the gigantic myconid that was infested with the Yellow Trumpet Creeper. He said its fancy name in Troll was *Campsis Radicans Malignant*. The dwarfs called it Yellow Death, and the elven name translated to '*Thing of beautiful nature which steals the soul and mortifies the remaining shell.'*One puff of the pollen at close range to a blossom could be enough to put a man into the blooms thrall. The poor victim stood for days under its influence while the plant sent tendrils into its head and ate its brain, leaving the body behind as a zombie under the plant’s control. As the body died, the plant replaced muscle and sinew with roots and bark. The plant obviously worried Harry, and he was working on far stronger versions of the infusions Milo was learning to make.  
  
Dinner that night was stuffed mushroom caps with cheese sauce. Now that Harry was cured of his ailment, he was relearning skills he'd let slide over the last few decades. His meals before Milo had been clay sandwiches and handfuls of candied earthworms. Tonight, he had stuffed the mushroom caps with a combination of chopped herbs and bacon, baked the meal, and then covered them in cheese sauce. After dinner, Milo consumed a pound of cheddar for dessert. The more he healed, the hungrier for cheese he got, and the more he needed to eat. As he lay back contentedly with a full belly, he was notified of a small change.

*Through diligent snacking and binging, you have saturated your body with healthy cheese! It's not easy keeping to such a proper diet, and you have earned the reward:****The Power of Cheese! stage 2!*** *Every day that you eat at least one pound of cheese, you will enjoy the benefits of +100 Health, +2 STR, and +2 AGI.  
Any time you have gone 24 hours without cheese, you will suffer -1 DEX, -1AG, -3 WIS. Don't let this happen! Be smart and eat your cheese!*

Milo felt better immediately. This was a fitting reward for a smart rat like himself. And perfectly timed. He was about to start Phase 2 of his cunning plan.

**Chapter 30**: **Salvaging Parts**  
  
There was business to be done in Section E, but Milo was anxious to get back to Genesis. He'd spent most of a week in the game, only coming out now and then to check on things. Once Kaminski was shut down, the amount of power being used by that area dropped nearly to zero. Milo did a thorough scan of the area before he went down there himself. Nothing showed on infrared or UV scans. His bugs were picking up no sounds and no transmissions coming out of the area.  
  
He hadn't expected them to leave a guard or set up sensors. This was the Hab, and no one really cared about deserted warehouses or industrial centers. Milo dropped down into the area. He was dressed all in a dark grey metallic cloth. Faraday Sheets were a useful way to insulate areas from unwanted radiation of all types. They were routinely used to insulate high-tech equipment from picking up stray signals or uninvited visitors trying to enter the system through the airwaves. Milo had salvaged some of the bulky cloth left behind by others and constructed a cumbersome full-body suit out of it. If he wasn't sure about an area, he wore it before going in. Cameras would pick up just a blur, active scans would reflect off of it, and at best, someone might know they'd had an intruder but no other clues.  
  
All the computers were gone, of course. The authorities would go through them with a fine-tooth comb. Likewise, all the pods. But what hadn't been taken were all the new cooling units, tubing, and distribution system. It was stacked up on pallets, ready for shipping. Good pallets too! The type that used small steel wheels with frictionless ball bearings. They were easy to move around on their own without the need for a pallet jack.  
  
Some of the machinery could be used to upgrade the decaying systems in Section E. Milo also loved the idea of adding state-of-the-art cooling to his computer systems. Getting rid of heat was always a problem. It took him four hours to rig the hoists he needed in the ceiling of that area and in the nearest big drop. Then over the next sixteen hours, he absconded with 30 pallets of high-tech cooling units and hid them down in the bottom of the hab in a room he'd used for years to store his extra equipment.  
  
A few months from now, someone would come to clean the area out. The theft might be noticed, and a report might be filed. They'd wonder how someone opened and resealed the doors, but mostly there would be an utter lack of concern. Someone stole something left in a hab for a few months? They had more important things to investigate.  
  
He was happy to run over to Section D and visit his new offices. Just because he had the codes to the outer doors didn't mean he was going to use them. He'd rather it showed no openings except for deliveries. The two new clog eaters had arrived. He'd move them over soon. What he was more interested in was the huge assortment of cheese in a fake wicker basket sitting on the counter of the empty front office. It was just as good as it tasted in the game. Sadly, he didn't get any upgrades from eating a half pound of sliced cheddar.  
  
After retrieving the food orders and making sure the locks and security on his office were secure, he headed back to his home in the pipeworks. He ran a diagnostic check on the pod, found everything in working order, refilled the nutrient tanks, and headed back into the game.

Milo selected the second option on the log-in screen, which allowed him to appear on the steps of the Arcane Library, surrounded by the silent void. He quickly entered the Arcane Library, trying not to look anywhere but the door in front of him. Cichol was sitting by the fire still. "Ah, the apprentice returns. What interesting thing have you brought me?"  
  
Milo summoned his storage chest, which got a raised eyebrow from Cichol, and pulled out a burlap-wrapped bundle. Inside was the carefully cleaned and assembled skeleton of a ratkin. "I went back for my old pal, Malskitter, and found all of his pieces. I was originally going to use him for spell components, but then I saw some odd things about his skeleton."  
  
Upon close examination, Milo realized that the skeleton had extra rib bones. The bottom rib on each side was shaped differently from the others and had runes carved into them. Those bones were also much older than the skeleton itself. One of the bones looked petrified.  
  
Cichol stood up, leaning heavily on his cane. "Oh? How interesting. If he knew, he'd be howling in rage. I like that."  
  
The old Bonemancer kneeled down, running his hands over the bones and taking note of the two extras. "My, my, you certainly were a clever one. If only you hadn't let crippling megalomania and paranoia get in the way, you might have done something greater than become the slave of a damned overgrown lily."  
  
Straightening, he looked Milo in the eyes. "This will do. I can think of several uses for this set of tinker toys. Come sit by the fire, and bring along that nice bit of Brie I see in your chest. We need to talk about your next spells. I see that you've managed to achieve level 4 in Bonecasting. That's a good start. But let’s add a bit to your arsenal."

Milo spent the better part of two days in the library, discussing spell casting and learning the lore behind Bonecasting. Cichol explained that bones were an ideal substance to use for rune carving, a form of early spell casting. “It is said that in ancient times before the system was born, that spells could only be cast by a master of the ancient runes. Their tools were their bones and the bones of creatures they killed. They inscribed the ancient runes onto the bones, giving them a way to create more complex formations to harness mana.”  
  
“In this later age, we have the System to assist beginning mages with spell casting, and the new runes are much easier to memorize than the ancient runes. We have traded power for convenience and safety.”  
  
Milo liked safety but was curious about the ancient runes and what they can do. “Do you know any of them? Can you use them?”  
  
Cichol smiled. “I knew you’d ask about them. You love puzzles and new knowledge, don’t you? The answer to that question is complex. I have encountered bones carved with old runes, my father had them, but neither he nor I was able to use them in spells. Almost as if the System didn’t understand them. They can be used to inscribe weapons or armor if used alone and copied perfectly, but that is the limit of my knowledge.”  
  
“But it does bring us to our next topic, which revolves around our friend Malskitter. He managed to learn a complex ritual that I have known about but never used personally. *Extra Rib* is a complicated ritual and not a spell. I would not suggest it except for two things: You already have access to a rune-carved rib bone with considerable power. No need to make one, and Malskitter won't be missing it. The second advantage is that I can assist with the ritual."  
  
Milo looked over at Malskitter's skeleton. It was currently animated by Cichol and refreshing their cups of tea. "I'm curious, what exactly does the ritual do besides adding to my ribcage?"  
  
"Yes, we should go over that. The base spell simply adds a modest amount to your health. It is the runes carved into the bone before we add it to you that is the greatest benefit. Normally, a Bonecaster would have to progress in rune lore until he was capable enough to carve perfect runes into the selected bone. The minor runes he selected and the type of bone would determine the benefits. Or wait for a few decades and gain better advantages when he could carve more potent runes."  
  
"Malskitter, for all his faults, had advanced to Tier 2 and added the second 'extra rib.' The first rib is of his own work, the runes carved into the bones of an elven mage. That rib would increase your mana by a modest amount, increase your INT by a point or two, and give you pointed ears.”  
  
“The second I'm unsure of. It's quite old and mostly petrified. It could have come from many different races, but I note that it is heavier and denser than that of a human. Few creatures had bones so dense. The runes carved into it may predate the System. What benefits they brought to Malskitter is unknown. He divulged none of his secrets.”  
  
“Either rib has its advantages and may have surprises. It's up to you to choose one or forgo the ritual altogether. I'll let you think about that for a while. It isn’t a choice to make lightly. But while you ponder that, there are other spells you are ready to learn, and you should pick one to study.”  
  
There are three possibilities: *Grasp of the Dead, Whirling Bones*, and *Spectral Spine*. Each has its uses, and each has its drawbacks. *Grasp of the Dead* calls upon the spirits lurking just beyond the barrier of this realm. They reach from the spirit realm and restrain the victim, attempting to pull them down into the earth. Quite handy when you need to put distance between yourself and an attacker. It has the complication that it is a true necromancy spell and will add to your corruption. Whirling bones throws shards of bone into the air around you. They will interfere with arrows and darts thrown at you and do a small amount of damage to attackers. The downside, of course, is needing room to use the spell, and it is not recommended inside the mineshafts you love. Finally, we have *Spectral Spine*. This spell summons a weapon made of linked spectral vertebrae, ensuring that you are never without a melee weapon. Ideal if you are proficient with a whip. The spine can be as short as two feet or as long as ten."  
  
Milo pondered the choice. He didn’t want to be a necromancer and chain souls to himself as Malskitter had. Just the opposite. And Cichol was correct; the whirling bones would be very situational. He couldn’t see himself learning to use a whip, but he had another idea for the spell. “I will learn *Spectral Spine*.”   
  
The old man laughed softly. “I was wondering if you would see the synergy.” He handed Milo a book to study from. While he did so, part of his thoughts was on the ritual. Should he risk it, and if so, which of the two bones? An hour later, he had decided; it helped that he didn’t want pointed ears and always liked to experiment.   
  
“Let’s see what secrets the old bone has to divulge.”