**Chapter 1: The Lost Boy**

Milo didn't think the replacement belt on the #3 air handler for E Section was going to hold for much longer, but the nearest dead machine to take a replacement from was 16 stories up and over in Section H. He'd take a trip if he had to, but for now, he was going to splice a section into the broken belt, wrap the fix in duct tape, and hope for the best. Milo liked duct tape. It was useful for fixing things, and there was a warehouse full of it over on B-6. He’d stumbled across it when he was in Section B, looking for an abandoned water pumping station to scavenge parts from. Why someone had stored several thousand cases of heavy duct tape in the abandoned warehouse was unknown. Scavengers had been opening cases and taking what they needed for years. Milo had moved twenty cases into the ductwork he was using as a passageway and came back for it later. It proved useful enough that he wanted all of it, so he discouraged other looters by welding the warehouse doors shut. A month later, he borrowed a cargo mover for the night and transferred it closer to Section E, where he needed it. Parts were hard to come by, and sometimes duct tape and wire were all that kept things running.  
  
Repairs done on the air handler, he gathered up his precious tools and retreated around a corner before turning the machine back on. Not all machinery liked being put back to work and sometimes showed that displeasure by shaking themselves apart or exploding. Milo was taking no chances with this one. He picked up a metal rod in his tail and used the six-foot-long mechanical limb to poke at buttons and switches until the machine shuddered to life. There was a noticeable whine from the belt, but overall, both he and the machine seemed happy with the repair job. He could adjust the workload on the other two air handlers in this section and be done with the project. The other machines had been working harder with this one down which was a sure way to have them go down as well.  
  
No one thought about the air when things worked. But people got concerned when it wasn't circulating in the corridors and residences. First, it smelled stale, and people worried. Calls went to the maintenance department. They were mostly ignored because hardly anyone cared about fixing things in the habitats unless it was an emergency. The government paid a quarterly fee to the firms responsible for maintaining the mechanical and electrical systems. It was more profitable to ignore complaints and hold off on repairs. But once people started dying in their sleep, and the residents moved out to the streets or clogged the common areas in other parts of the hab, suddenly it was an 'emergency,' and someone from maintenance showed up.  
  
Milo didn’t like emergencies. The clumsy techs would move into his world, tearing up ductwork to find the problem and breaking two things for every one they fixed. He hated them. He had to hide his work carefully, shut down any projects, and retreat to his safe room until they left. It was better for everyone if Milo fixed things before the air or water quit moving. The residents got air to breathe, the techs could avoid work, and Milo was left alone in his world of broken machinery, unused corridors, and metal tunnels. Which suited Milo just fine. He rarely had to be around people and never liked it.  
  
Work done on the air handler, Milo got on his wheel-board and rolled down the medium-sized tunnel. These were about 36" square. Easy for Milo to zoom along as his hands pushed off the walls, and he rolled along on the silent, frictionless wheels attached to a two-foot square piece of plastic. He'd found the wheels holding up a diagnostic unit for hover-cars in a factory down in the basement of Section G. Milo had gone there to 'borrow' some wrenches and calipers when he saw them. It had only taken an hour to lift the machine with a winch, take off the wheels and drop things back down. They were nice wheels, and the diagnostic machine would just have to stay where it was.  
  
He was almost to the Big Drop. He held the board in both hands and coiled his tail at the base of his spine. His tail was a six-foot long by 2" section of flexible Waldo. It was attached to a 12" girdle that circled his waist and plugged into his lowest socket at the base of his spine. Nature hadn't given Milo the best limbs, but he was slowly making new ones.

He hit the Big Drop, shooting into open space. The habitat had 25 Big Drops. One roughly in the center of each section. Each was a vertical access corridor nearly twenty feet on a side for moving big machinery up to the higher levels. As Milo started to drop, his tail uncoiled, and reached for the metal hook hanging on a winch cable. Cable and tail together turned into a large pendulum that swung Milo across the second half of the drop, and he shot feet first into another medium tunnel. He took a smaller tunnel heading off at a 90-degree angle a hundred feet along the medium corridor. A couple of turns later, he hit the small drop. He grabbed the winch line and hooked his prosthetic leg's toe claws into the chain's links. His tail hit the winch controls, and he rose 12 and a half levels to the upper pipeworks where he made his home.  
  
The habitats were mountainous buildings designed to hold over a half million people. They had been built in the last century to provide housing and jobs for the lower classes. They were now slowly rotting from within. Every city had them, and none of them were in great shape. In theory, they provided housing, food distribution, and jobs to people who would otherwise have been homeless. In reality, there had never been enough jobs, and only the businesses needing dirt-cheap space and dirt-cheap labor had located their factories in them. Keeping the habitats livable and finding the money to repair them was a constant fight among the people who controlled the laws and money.  
  
Milo didn't care. The system was broken, and society at large didn't seem to worry too much about the people living in them. Not being part of society, Milo was fairly apathetic about how things worked. He wasn’t listed in any database, and no one knew he was alive. He fixed things so that people would ignore this part of the habitat and leave him the hell alone. If anyone ever wondered why Section E seemed to have fewer problems and needed fewer repair teams sent to it, they didn't think too hard about it.  
  
The pipe-works were a separate level unto themselves, sandwiched between levels 45 and 46 and only half as tall. Fluid pipes, food delivery, waste pipes, and electric and data cables ran through the level, snaking over and under each other as needed. Pumps moved things higher, and baffles kept things moving down from going too fast or rerouting waste to larger pipes. Milo loved this level and made his home here. He had easy access to everything he needed. His home was in a massive, unused storage tank. He'd found it when he was mapping out the systems. It should probably be hooked up to the water systems as additional storage. But its placement had proved to be a problem, and whoever was doing the work found it easier to ignore it. Milo had cut an access hatch from a small tunnel into the side of the tank. Small tunnels were only 24" on a side; the chance of someone crawling through one and finding his door was next to zero.  
  
Inside was a different part of Milo's world. The tank was 30 feet by 40 feet and 10 feet high. The 90,000-gallon tank gave Milo plenty of room for his workshop and computers. His home would be the pride of many a mad scientist. Two dozen screens were scattered about the walls, cables running to multiple computers of various capabilities. From here, he monitored all the machinery in Section E and could access what was left of the security system. If anything moved in the access tunnels and hallways, he knew. If a machine broke or was running hot, he knew. This was the heart of section E and totally hidden from the 10,000 people living and working in the section.  
  
And Milo was the mechanic that kept things running. Milo stood less than four feet tall. His left leg was missing from above his knee and had been that way since birth. He'd augmented it with a series of better and better prosthetics as he found schematics on the data network and had time to make the parts. The current model was fitted to his upper thigh and controlled from a cable that shared access to his lower port with his tail.

He also had two ports on the back of his neck and another a foot lower along his spine. Not his work; they'd been installed in the first month of his existence. He had trouble with the idea that other people didn't have them and wondered how they managed.

Other than a mechanical leg and tail and cables that ran from his equipment to his data ports, Milo looked like a thin 12-year-old boy with brown hair and eyes. And maybe he always would look that way. He'd quit growing at the age of 12 and was now somewhere around 24. He’d lost track over the years, and while he could easily calculate his age if he thought about it, it didn’t matter to him. No one was ever going to throw him a birthday party.  
  
An alarm went off. Milo spun from the workbench and pushed his wheeled chair to his desk. His fingers went to his keyboard, and his tail plugged into a data socket. Instantly he was tied into cameras and sensors all over Section E and a few other parts of the habitat. He looked at what had triggered the alert.  
  
There was a large factory area in Section D that he monitored. It was one of the better factories in the habitat, with good water, sewage, and a steady power supply. It went unused for the reasons that no one knew about it. It was listed on the map directory of the habitat as being ‘Automated Waste Processing.’ But someone had found out it existed because two dozen people were moving crates of machinery and medical supplies through the open doors. Milo shut down everything else he was doing and put all of his attention to observation and gathering data.  
  
This was the room Milo had lived in for several years as a child slave, infiltrating computer systems and shifting money. The area had been empty and abandoned in the years after his escape, but now someone was using it. And one of the faces he saw looked familiar.  
  
**Chapter 2: The Heist**  
  
Milo had chaotic memories of his early years, most of which had been spent in the large factory room he was now monitoring. His playmates had been the other twenty-four children, who, like himself, had been modified with sockets. Many had visible birth defects. His 'parents' had been an assortment of technicians and doctors who didn't think of the children as people. They were just part of the machines.

He and the other children in his group were raised together from birth. They were referred to as ‘Group Four’, but he didn’t know anything about other groups. The other twenty-four children were his brothers and sisters, regardless of where each of them had come from. They had different theories on their origins.  
  
Bork insisted they had been grown in artificial wombs, which would have made the installation of the sockets along their spines easy to do, along with the other genetic modifications. Gilbert didn’t like that theory. He thought they had all been purchased from parents who either didn’t want or didn’t have the money to raise handicapped children. All of them had at least one physical disability. In the end, it didn’t matter. Their origins were hidden, illegal acts of genetic modification that were outlawed in all countries. They only had each other, and strange as it was, they were a family.   
  
It was a decade after his escape that Milo began to understand how different they were. Their growth rate was accelerated. By half a year, they were walking and talking. By two years, they were smarter than their doctors and absorbing huge amounts of information from the internet and being given lessons in computer programming and security systems. At four years old, they had the appearance of children twice their age and mental scores off the scale. After that, their physical progression slowed until they were barely maturing. Mentally, they continued to get quicker and smarter.

Life was repetitive. They were given a daily dose of drugs to keep them focused on their tasks and nothing else, along with vitamin and nutrient supplements. Then loaded into the pods and plugged into the computers that let them roam the internet, attacking corporations and research facilities to steal information and shift money to hidden bank accounts.

They were only unhooked from the computers and their pods for two hours a day when they were required to exercise for muscle tone. The computers they were hooked into were their schools. Their classes were in security systems, running manufacturing remotely with Waldos, moving funds in accounts, and, most of all, not leaving a trace when moving about the internet.

This became much easier as the Wildfire virus decimated much of the internet. It trashed security systems, pushed data to the public domain, and erased knowledge. Milo and the others were like scavengers feeding on the leftovers of a predator. Even after AI systems scoured the internet clean of Wildfire, the internet never recovered. The technology to break into systems was now more advanced than the protections.   
  
By four years old, Milo and his siblings were raiding corporate databases and stealing millions each day. But their guards were getting sloppy. The original technicians that had created them and overseen their lives had moved on. They were living well off the stolen funds and turned the job over to underlings that oversaw the dingy warehouse with two dozen children who rarely left their pods and never talked. Or rather, never talked out loud. They communicated constantly with each through the machines, played games, and shared everything they knew. Outside of the pods, they communicated with sign language and codes made up of tapping on the floor.

Milo had learned a lot about the pods that he had spent so much time in. He and his siblings had been hooked up to Mark III medical pods, machines very similar to the pods he saw being uncrated and tested. What was being moved into the empty factory was a mix of Mark III and IV pods. But his eyes were drawn to the one that was much larger and more intricate. A quick trip to the data net gave him the specs on the new Mark VII medical/gaming pod. He wondered why there was only one of them.

The pods were ten-foot-long cylinders, their interiors just big enough to hold a person. A patient was placed into them, and the pod inserted tubes that would feed the patient drugs or sustenance and carry away waste products. Originally, they had been used in hospitals for long-term care. Then the rich and old began using them to extend their lives. Finally, as the cost came down, they were used by anyone who spend long hours or even days online. Workaholics and online gamers purchased millions of them.

By the time Milo was nine, there were only two guards in the warehouse for most of the nights. The children lay in their pods doing their assignments. But they were getting bored. As they became older, they modified the programs they used to break through security systems, creating better and better tools. They finished their tasks faster than expected and then went exploring on the internet. That gave them the schematics for their pods, and they learned how to bypass the locks and programs that kept track of them. All of the logs showed them resting for 22 hours a day in their pods, and no one suspected some of them were going AWOL.

They started by exploring the systems of ductwork and maintenance tunnels directly around them. They easily bypassed any of the security that would let their overseers know what they were doing. Milo had discovered the security systems for the rest of the building their home was in. He and some of the others wondered about trying to escape the factory, but they didn't know where to go.

Still, just thinking about it was fun. All of them memorized the tunnel systems, and they discussed a possible exodus from the room. Milo started sneaking out of his pod along with Nimez and Ordo, the other two children in his row. The guards were always watching videos and paid no attention to them. They found an access hatch that led to the ventilation and maintenance systems near their pods and began exploring the areas around them, finding ways to get to everywhere in the habitat. It was tough, as they all had physical problems. Nimez only had one hand, and Ordo had bad eyes. Still, they managed. They were finishing their work in a fraction of the time and hiding the fact. If security cameras were checked, they showed the children comatose in their pods.

Plans were made to escape. Milo still wondered if they could have gotten away with it, but they never got the chance. Something happened. Something changed. The criminals feared discovery and were moving the operation. A dozen people rushed into the old factory one night, surprising the two guards on duty. Pods were locked down, and sedatives were administered to the occupants. The pods were unhooked from other machines and carried one by one out the doors to the waiting transportation. Within a half hour, twenty-four children in pods and one empty pod were gone. Only Milo remained, hidden in the ventilation duct.

Milo had been exploring that night. He wasn't in his pod when it was taken, and when he returned, it was to a room full of half-destroyed machines and nothing else. Hard drives were ripped from the computers. No paperwork remained. Whoever had taken the children had left no clues to incriminate themselves. Later, other men came, sifting the area for clues and sweeping the area clean. Milo didn’t know who they were and hid deep in the ductwork. Milo never found out where his family was taken. He was still looking for them two decades later.

But now someone was back whom he recognized. Facial recognition software gave him a name: Andrew Kominski. He'd been a technician during the day shift when Milo was small. Now he was older, worn, and greying. Milo would have to research the man and learn why he was here. The shiny Mark VII pod on his monitors kept drawing Milo's attention. It would solve a lot of his problems. He made plans and watched.   
  
Milo had been curious if he would see another twenty-five children in pods moved into the room and set to work doing cybercrime. He was relieved when that didn’t happen, but also sad. It would have been nice to meet others like him. He was nervous around normal people. They were all bigger than he was, and he rather went into the populated parts of the habitat.

Two weeks later, Milo knew why Kominski and the others were there. Kominski had some scheme involving a new VR gaming world. The Mk VII would give him access. The occupants of the dozens of Mk IIIs would enter the game but bypass some sort of security measures. The Mark VII pod was set up and connected with the data network. All the Mark III pods were in a separate room and slaved to the Mark VII. Milo couldn't care less why this was being done. While it might be interesting to know, it didn’t concern him. He only wanted two things from Kominski: information on what had happened to the rest of his family and the Mk VII pod.

Once all their information systems were hooked to the data network, it was easy for Milo to break into their machines and get all of their information. They were using the communications systems that ran through the habitat that he repaired and controlled. He barely had to do anything. The information was disappointing, though. This was just a way to pull some scam involving a game and nothing to do with his family. But he was able to get one lead: Kominski had been working his entire life for Tricorp Biotech, which was owned by Bio-Solutions Inc that was in turn owned through dummy corporations by the Seimovich Corporation. That gave him a place to start looking. Having learned all he could from watching, Milo decided to pay the old warehouse a visit and go pod shopping.

The first indication that anyone in the factory knew something was wrong was when two men fell to their knees, and the room started spinning. The gas Milo had introduced to the ventilation system worked quickly. They were out cold for hours. The video feeds would show nothing except the two of them sitting at their desks watching pornography. Milo got to work.

Milo had cleaned out this area long, long ago. For the first two years, he had lived in the ductwork near the room and slowly explored the habitat. He tapped pipes for water and the food delivery system for sustenance.  
When he had started his first workshop and needed materials, he'd begun to raid what was left of his home. He had an idea that maybe he'd find clues to the others somewhere in the defunct machinery and broken computers. He hadn't, but what he had done was create a system for lifting loads of machinery from the room and up to a large horizontal shaft that ran one hundred yards to a Big Drop.

Two ceiling panels moved aside, and Milo lowed himself into the room with a winch. He carefully unhooked the Mark VII and two Mark III pods. Cargo nets enveloped each one, and the winch took each of them slowly up to the horizontal shaft. The final load was a pallet of nutrient sacks and medical supplies used in the pods to keep their users alive.

Getting the pods up to the horizontal shaft was the first step. Milo had to cover his tracks. The ceiling panels were replaced. The winch was retracted. He'd come back and take it out entirely as soon as he could to leave as few clues as possible. The metal sheet he'd removed from the side of the horizontal shaft was replaced. Then came the long slow process of moving the pods and supplies up top. Each Big Drop had a winch and pulley assembly for exactly what Milo needed now: Moving heavy loads up many stories to the top of the habitat. Even if someone figured out how he had stolen the pods, finding out which level they had gone to would be difficult.

An hour after he had finished covering his tracks, Milo was standing on the Mark VII pod as it moved up to level 48, where he would store it. Below him was a drop of many stories, but he trusted his systems. A motorized pallet jack moved each load deeper into the habitat to where he could take them down to the Pipeworks. It took the rest of the night, but eventually, Milo had all three pods and the supplies hidden in the Pipeworks. Tomorrow he would begin the task of moving the Mark VII into his home. The Mark IIIs were just extra salvage. He wasn't sure what he'd do with them, but it never hurt to have more parts.

Back in his home, Milo went ahead and added his modifications to the security tapes. He'd spent hours doctoring a sequence where the two guards slumped over unconscious, and then the doors opened, and masked thieves entered the room. In this tape, the pods were loaded up onto a forklift and taken out of the room. Other security cameras would show the thieves moving the pods to a warehouse with an outside loading dock. No one had used that room for years, leaving a convenient and confusing dead end.

With his heist finished, Milo relaxed a bit. He checked all of the systems that he monitored and made a list of repairs to do the next day. His stomach growled; it had been a long day. He sent a command to the food processor, and a moment later, a large container of food appeared in a pneumatic tube. He opened the container, seeing the tasteless cubes of yellow 'food' that everyone in the hab ate. You could order better food, but that took money. And no one had money. Supposedly they tasted like chicken. Milo couldn't judge; he’d never tasted real chicken. Food Cubes were just something you chewed and swallowed to stay alive.

Basics taken care of, he set his alarm. Two hours of sleep would be enough to recover his energy, and then he was going to get the Mk VII pod set up and take it for a spin.

**Chapter 3: How about a nice game of Chess?**

Setting up the Mk VII medical pod took Milo a week. It was a much more difficult project than he had first imagined. First of all, it had been modified for Kaminski’s project. Milo didn't know what they had done, so the first chore was making sure that nothing about the pod could hurt him. It was unlikely that someone would set a trap, but he would never take that chance. Every circuit had to be checked and tested. He found parts of the medical diagnosis system were missing and fixed the problems with parts from the stolen MK IIIs.

Documentation and software were simple to acquire. It seemed that most of the large corporations were sponsoring this new game and running installations that supplied the pods to users. Breaking into ACME or Alexa Corp was something he had done when he was an 8-year-old. It was literally child's play. He triple-checked the medical diagnostic systems and was eventually satisfied.

What would have taken a normal technician a month, Milo did in a week. His ability to access information from the data net was 20 times faster than a normal person. He had a perfect photographic memory, and he only slept two to four hours a day. Someone had done a good job designing Milo and his siblings.  
  
But not a perfect job. Increased reflexes, memory, and the ability to multi-task came at the price of being small with an abnormal metabolism. There were vitamins and minerals that his body needed that weren't in the processed food he had access to in the hab. He had to be careful of infections, especially around his implants. Crawling through miles of dirty ductwork every day meant any small cut or scrape could be a problem. And he wasn’t getting the right proteins to support the muscle growth he needed. The Mk VII pod could solve all of that.

He added modifications of his own design to the pod. He installed manual controls to the door and an additional input socket that would let him access the pod’s GUI with his tail or a cable from one of his ports. He also welded a hook to the outside of the door and ran that to a powered cable that could pull the door loose in an emergency. With no one else to rely on for any part of his life, Milo planned and eliminated possible problems. Being locked in a defective pod was not something he wanted to experience.

When he had triple-checked everything once again, he nervously entered the pod and laid down. It was comfortable, at least. The cushions inflated to cradle his body. For long-term care, they would move slightly, relieving pressure to prevent bedsores. If this worked out, Milo considered just sleeping in the pod at night. It was far more comfortable than the old cushions and blankets he’d scavenged from abandoned houses.  
  
Normally a technician would insert IV tubes. Milo didn't need them. He had shunts in several places on his arms, legs, and torso for administering drugs. They'd been installed at the same time his sockets had been put in place. They came in handy now, letting him connect to the pod with ease. He hooked up the nutrient and drug IV tubes and brought up the GUI for the pod. There was a slight vibration for a minute, and then a screen came up on the inside lid of the pod.

***Initialization of MkVII:8945621A  
  
Welcome back, Mr. Kaminski. Would you like to play a game?***

No, Milo did not want to play a game. He went into the registration file, erased all the entered data, and replaced it with just his name.

***Re-Initialization of MkVII:8945621A  
  
Greetings, Milo.  
  
You have not used this pod, MkVII:8945621A. To make sure this medical pod will meet your needs, we will have to do a complete scan of your body to determine your medical condition. This will take roughly two hours since this pod is not connected to the data network, and we do not show any current medical records for you.  
  
Begin scanning? You will have to remain in the pod for the entire time of the scan.***  
Milo gave permission for the scan. But two hours? Without something to focus on, he grew bored after a minute. Two hours seemed like forever. This was going to be torture.  
He needed to do something. Two hours was way too long to lie still. "Games? You said something about games. I'd like to play a game."  
  
Milo hadn’t played video games before his escape. It had been more fun to play the games he and his siblings created. But on his own, spending years by himself, he tried other things. Older video game consoles were popular in the habitat, and the trade of out-of-date games was a large business. Milo had scavenged broken parts from recyclers and ventured out to trade for old games, especially broken ones he could restore. Along with his computer network, his home had over a dozen different gaming systems and several hundred video game cartridges, disks, and thumb drives. He was curious what games the pod had to offer him.

***Certainly, Milo  
  
Games that have been loaded into this device:  
Tic Tac Toe  
Chess  
~~Global Thermal Nuclear War.~~...just kidding. We only play that with Joshua.  
The World of Genesis Engine***

That was disappointing. No Pacman, no Squishy Humans, not even Zombie Shooter. He tried the other games. Milo grew bored with Tic Tac Toe in less than a minute. Chess in half an hour. The AI running the chess game was too predictable. He was disappointed in not being able to try Global Thermal Nuclear War; it sounded interesting. That left the last one. He clicked on the final option and immediately felt himself fading away...  
  
...and waking up a split second later. He felt that he was simultaneously lying in the pod and standing in a featureless room with a large screen in front of him. He fought down the panic he felt. This was just a virtual reality simulation, nothing to worry about, and it even might be fun and last the whole two hours.

***Welcome to the World of Genesis Engine!  
  
Enter a world of stories and legends. Re-create yourself and be a hero, explorer, or anything you’d like to be. Interact with other players and the denizens of this world.   
Follow the easy stories set out like a trail of breadcrumbs, or leave the most traveled path to explore the world or even underneath it. What secrets will you uncover?  
  
Warning: The hyper-real Virtual Reality of the game may cause slight disorientation at first. While you are in a game, and your body is resting comfortably in your MKVII pod, your mind and senses are being fed information that duplicates your experience in the real world. We just added orcs and magic.   
Sudden disconnection from the game may cause severe nausea or headaches. Make sure to use the proper log-out process.***

Milo looked down at his body, and it was all wrong. Or maybe, right? He had two legs. Longer legs than he was used to. He took a step and immediately fell forward. His balance was off, and controlling the new leg was different from moving his prosthetic. And he was wearing odd clothes, tight-fitting grey pants and a shirt along with soft grey boots. He wasn’t used to clothes like these.  
  
He had experienced VR before, using just a helmet, but not so real, and not having a body like this. When he’d been jacked into the internet to do work for his captors, he’d experienced websites, databases, and security systems as physical objects and places. He saw his siblings as they flew around the large, shining buildings of the corporations, testing their walls for a way in. This felt very real, and he wasn’t sure if he liked it.

***If you are having trouble adjusting to moving in VR, please take some time to walk around before we start the tutorial. The gameplay experience will also be greatly increased by connecting to the data network***. ***Would you like to connect to the data network?***

Connecting the machine to the data network was the last thing Milo wanted to do right now. It wasn't even possible; he’d made sure of that. The machine had no physical connection to a communication line. While he knew it also had the ability to tap into the wireless grid in the hab, no signal would get through the walls of Milo's home. He had added many layers of aluminum-iron oxide laced paint to the interior to block all signals. He didn't need someone wondering why they were getting any type of signal from an old water tank.

He spent a few minutes trying to walk around the room, getting his balance. It still felt odd. He was used to compensating for the weight of his tail, and more than once, as he fell, he tried to catch himself with the non-existent limb instead of his hands. Images appeared on the screen: A man in shorts and a tank top, a woman dressed in metal armor, a friendly old man with a long beard leaning on a cane, and an insect in a top hat. They all waved, and the creepy bug tipped his hat.

***Please signal when you are ready to begin a tutorial. Do you prefer a screen or a personal trainer?***  
  
"Let’s go with the elderly gentleman." The others faded, and the old man stepped forward and out of the screen, which disappeared.  
  
Milo was impressed. That had actually looked real. Too Real. He immediately took two steps back. He hadn't been this close to a person in years. It bothered him a bit.  
  
The old man looked at him and smiled. "Well, young one, ready to see what you can do?"  
  
As soon as Milo said "yes,” there was another of the odd fading away feelings, and he was somewhere else.  
  
**Chapter 4: Nowhere to Hide**  
  
Milo and the old man were standing in a field of short grass that came up past his ankles. Wildflowers were in bloom, lending their sweet smell to the air. Overhead, fluffy white clouds slowly moved across a bright blue sky where the brilliant sun shone down. Mountains ringed the area, miles in the distance.  
  
It was quite a beautiful area. And totally alien to Milo in every way. He’d never been outside. Never stood in a field. He’d seen pictures and recognized things, but everything around him was new.  
  
Milo slowly turned in a circle, staring at the wide-open spaces and the huge sky above. He didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit! It made him nervous; there was nowhere to go, no place to hide. The old man just stood smiling. "You may refer to me as Galet. Are you ready to begin the tutorial?"  
  
"Tutorial? No. I'm not ready."  
  
The old man bowed and smiled. "We will begin slowly then. Combat is a common occurrence in the World of Genesis. Let’s start your training with an easy opponent. There is a sword in the grass in front of you; please pick it up and hit the orc approaching you. Don’t worry; he won’t attack you."  
  
Milo saw the glint of metal and picked up the sword. It was sort of awkward. A long piece of metal with sharp edges. "Orc?"  
  
"Right behind you. Slash at the orc with your sword."  
  
Milo spun around, nearly losing his balance, and saw that a person with green skin was behind him. They were as tall as him and heavily muscled, wearing some furs and leather clothing. In the orc’s hand was a club of twisted wood. Milo looked at the orc, and the orc stood there looking at him. "Why am I supposed to hit the guy, and where the hell did he come from?" That last part bothered Milo a lot! How had this guy snuck up on him? He panicked.  
  
Milo started running, putting distance between himself and the threat. There was nowhere to hide! After a minute, he turned and saw two figures in the distance. He was safe from them, but the sky pressed down, and the vast open space was a threat he couldn't outrun. He could feel the panic growing inside him. He disconnected.   
  
Milo came out of the pod, panting, not caring that he had interrupted the scan. He manually pushed up the lid and climbed out of the pod. His house calmed him. He was safe here. He made sure all his alarm systems were on, did a quick scan of the areas nearby, and then climbed into his normal bed, exhausted.  
  
Four hours later, he awoke and ate a meal of food cubes. He remembered the smells in the weird game. A person’s sense of smell was a large component of how they tasted food. Could you taste food in the game, too? He had questions, but he also had work to do. Putting aside thoughts of the game, he got started.

Things went bad quickly if he didn't pay attention. Today's main job was a clog in one of the lines that took wastewater to the fluid recycler. The pipes were old and no longer smooth on their inner surfaces. Stuff built up, and things got stuck, slowly narrowing the pipes. Then a chunk upstream broke loose, making a dam downstream. The other pipes took up the load, but only for so long. Eventually, all the pipes would be clogged and cause an emergency.  
  
Luckily this time, the clog eaters responded. The machines were like mechanical moles. They moved through the pipes chewing up the clogs and cleaning the pipe lining. Two hours later, things were good as new. He was down to only two of the clog eaters, though. Being used constantly for years wore the machines out. He’d scavenged all the working and broken clog-eaters he could find from abandoned sections, but he was out of machines he could scavenge. He needed at least one more. They each weighed half a ton and were hard to move. Tomorrow he could check out other sectors and see about swapping one of his broken ones for a working model. The maintenance guys in that sector would have the job of finding replacements. That didn’t bother him; they could order them, he couldn’t.  
  
At the end of the day, he approached the pod again. He needed this to work. It had been foolish to start up a VR game without doing research into it. Two hours of reading on the data net had given him more information about what to expect.

This game was the latest in a series of huge Virtual Reality Worlds that had been created by A.I. using quantum computers. The other games were shut down now, and this one was just starting up. There were endless articles and speculation on the game, but little hard data had been available until it had gone live last week. Players were exploring and making reports. Data was being added to Gamerpedia, but the world was twice the size of earth and mostly unexplored.   
  
It was like another world in there, but it was a fantasy. Unlike the real world in so many ways. Huge spaces with just wilderness, unspoiled lands, and blue skies. Nothing at all like Milo's world of small tunnels, grimy corridors, and broken machinery. And nothing like the endless cities that grew larger each year.  
  
He realized he had suffered a bout of panic. Keno phobia, to use the medical term, and probably Agoraphobia as well. A fear of open spaces and panic reactions when he had nowhere to hide. Understandable but annoying.

Normally, he dealt with fear by running and finding somewhere to hide. He had planned escape routes and safe houses all over the habitat. That didn’t help him in the game. How do you hide from the sky? He wasn't sure if it was permanent or just a reaction to the surprise of being 'outside' for the first time. He planned to do things differently in his next attempt.  
  
Step one was finishing the medical scan. That had to come first. He had downloaded a huge amount of info on the game, put the data into a storage device, and hooked that up to the pod. He could read and learn about the game while the scan was running and then tackle the game the next day. He set up the medical scan again, refused the offer to play a game, and started reading about Genesis Online.  
  
The game had been created by an A.I. Or, rather, The AI. There was only one Quantum A.I. in the world now, and he was kept on a very short leash. Endless books had been written about the rise and fall of the A.I. that man had created and then began to fear. Milo’s opinion was that they were hugely annoying to him and his family when they were trying to work. How many times had they been about to delve into the secrets of some plump bank when they felt the presence of something enormous in cyber-space and had to abandon their efforts? Each of the 106 A.I. in existence had a special task to do, but some of them patrolled the internet and the newly invented data network, looking for people like Milo and his brothers and sisters. They were never caught, but only because they never took chances and broke off any operation as soon as someone detected the watchdogs.  
  
Ironically, it was another AI that let them increase productivity a hundredfold and give their captors a huge windfall of cash and data. Someone had created an AI whose expressed purpose was causing havoc in the world. It spread viruses throughout the internet and jumped from system to system, always a step ahead of the AI tasked to find it. And it was malicious. It didn’t steal; it only destroyed. Milo didn’t have to break into a corporation anymore; the security around bank accounts and data was like Swiss cheese. In the time that the Wildfire virus and the rogue AI were active, he and his siblings stole hundreds of Billions of dollars, ransacked databases, and made their captors rich beyond their dreams. Drugged, conditioned from birth, and locked into pods, they had no choice. They were child barbarians raiding the world in a way that would have made Attila proud and jealous.  
  
Milo hadn’t done anything like that for years. He had no equipment, no connection, and none of the specialized programs designed by someone and modified by his family. While he had hidden in the habitat, slowly building an existence, the AI had gone away. Humans didn’t trust them anymore to run critical systems. Instead, they used them to make virtual reality games and kept them away from the resources of huge resources of quantum computers where they used to live. And at some point, someone had decided they were needed. Four different groups of cyber-terrorists claimed responsibility for the EMP that destroyed their facility. Exactly which one was never publicly released. The information was incomplete, and Milo didn’t concern himself with it.   
  
One more AI was built, with every restriction that could be programmed into his kernel to make sure he was kept in control. He was put in charge of many things but given no control and no authority. He kept the driverless cars moving smoothly, and the trains ran on time. And they made him create a new game. People had become used to logging into their fantasy worlds, shopping in online boutiques where they could try on the clothing to be made and delivered to them. The VR world was money to corporations and entertainment to the people that could afford a pod. Milo only cared about something to do while he had to be in the pod for the two-hour scan and then for any therapy it could offer to him. He hoped the game wouldn’t be boring.

The game had allowed players to log in only during the last week. Milo was surprised at how big the game world was. Twice the landmass of the real world, and there were hints about huge subterranean empires and other planes to journey to. Information was trickling in, but it was only the tip of the iceberg. Players reported on the places they’d journeyed to, the magical items they found, and the creatures they had slain. (Or been slain by.) A dozen large forums cataloged it all.   
  
And quests. Hundreds of quests were found on the first day and thousands in the first week, from killing rats to rescuing princes and everything in between. Often, the best skills and magic items required the completion of quests to earn them. And the quests might require a lot of work to complete.  
  
This intrigued Milo. His life was task oriented. It was programmed into him. When he no longer had a job hacking the internet, he created new ones to keep him busy. They involved his survival, safety, and control of his area, identifying problems in the machinery, keeping zone E functioning, finding solutions, and implementing them. He was in a constant cycle of learning new things, gaining resources, building, and fixing. The people playing the game seemed to be in the same cycle, but they considered it fun instead of work.

They were even paying a fortune to do so! Milo had seen auctions for items in the game. A staff that augmented magical powers in Tier 2 wizards had gone for over 10,000 real dollars. That was enough money to buy a brand-new clog eater! He suddenly had the urge to check on Kaminski again. He had an idea of what he was doing.

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At the moment, what Kaminski was doing was desperately trying to keep his operation running. The loss of his MKVII pod had been a huge setback. He knew that he’d been a fool to have such lax security. One of the rival groups working for his employer had seen a way to cut their own costs. He'd been lucky they only took two of the older pods along with the MKVII.

He’d scrambled to raise the cash to replace it and get the operation up and running again. Failure was not an option with his current employers. Plus, he had been forced to triple his security system. Half a dozen armed guards were now in the warehouse at all times. The doors had been replaced with thick plasteel barriers that would withstand tank shells. It was costly, but he couldn't suffer another loss. He was pushing the limits of his superior’s patience.  
  
There were complications with replacing the pod. He couldn't just purchase a standard MKVII. The missing pod had been heavily modified by his employer. It contained programming for using the game that he didn’t have access to. He couldn't just say, "I lost it." He spent a day setting up a complex scheme to fake the pod’s destruction by a falling ten-ton machine that had inexplicably come loose from its mounting on the ceiling at just the wrong moment. It was convenient that he had two dead bodies to also place under the machinery along with a standard MarkVII pod. There would be suspicions, but the project was important to both sides. If he could get things running, all would be forgiven. In this business, all that mattered was money.  
  
He had his suspicions about who had the first pod. The guards he tortured were useless, but eventually, they both named names. Two of his closest 'friends,’ Ivar and Sven, were running their own operations only a few miles away. They would deny stealing his pods. Understandable. He would have done the same if he had hit one of their operations. He was watching both to see if he could return the favor.

On the positive side, the operation was working and becoming profitable almost immediately.

He had expanded to 75 pods now, all slaved to the MKVII. This bypassed the need to purchase access to the game, saved the cost of 75 of the expensive MK VII pods, and disguised the login information of his people.   
  
With no need to purchase expensive machines and no need to pay fees, he would be profitable and able to send money to his boss at the end of the month. He wasn't even paying his workers. All of them were criminals whose contracts he had purchased.

They were working twenty hours a day in the pods. If they burnt out, there were more he could replace them with. Some even liked it. Working online was much better than some of the work they had been forced to do in the real world.  
  
The signal from the MKVII pod was untraceable. His hardware split the signal, sent it around the world, and it was recombined and routed through another corporation’s uplink to the game. They changed routes continuously.   
  
The money came from other players and, surprisingly, corporations. His men would do the intensive labor of mining ores, chopping down trees, and finding the raw materials needed by players for crafting. Money changed hands in the real world, and piles of raw materials were delivered. Teams were formed to level up and hunt monsters for magic items and the rare materials found in monster corpses.  
  
Money from the auctions of magical items and armor was pouring into his dummy accounts before heading to his main holdings. A single low-grade magic item sold for only a few dollars, but he was selling thousands a day, and that would only increase. When they managed to score decent loot, the sales were in the hundreds or even thousands of dollars. As his people leveled up by playing twenty hours a day, it would only increase.   
  
The corporations in the game were his best customers. They wanted to do what he was doing but on a larger scale. They needed the materials to build fortresses and villages, create vast plantations, and earn the in-game money that was required to buy the land in the cities where they wanted to create shops selling real-world items.  
  
Kaminski was paranoid by nature, but as days went by, he started to relax. There were no return visits by his competition and no problems online. He knew who his enemies were now, and they wouldn’t surprise him again.  
  
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Watching the operation on his monitors, Milo wondered if he should take all of Kaminski's money now or wait until he had more. If he had access to the programs and hardware he had used in his youth, it would be very simple. Now though, it was only possible because he could tap into the physical communication net Kaminski was using. He recorded the passwords as they were used and could follow all the transactions. He decided to wait. There were a lot of things he could upgrade in zone E if he had the money. The more money Kaminski made, the more he could steal. Access might change after that.  
  
Meanwhile, he was having success using the pod. The medical analysis had been surprising. He was in fairly good health, considering his situation. But he was slowly accumulating problems from malnutrition and the long-term lack of minerals that his body used at a higher rate than food could provide. The pod could provide those to his system, saturating his blood. Nanites would be released and programmed to move through his body. Bad things would be scraped away on a microscopic level, and growth encouraged where it was stunted.  
  
A few other problems had shown up. Some tissue degradation around his middle socket from a small infection. He was already on a schedule of antibiotics for that. The stump of his missing leg was going to be a problem soon if he didn't get more calcium. The bone there was much weaker than normal.  
  
All of these could be controlled simply by spending time in the pod. A lot at first, several hours a day. But that went down over time, and he'd only need one night a week eventually. Since it was also his most comfortable bed, he didn't mind. But with medical needs taken care of and a lot of pod time on the horizon, he was ready to make another attempt to join the game.  
  
There was one problem, though; He needed to hook the pod to the data network. Even the tutorial was very rudimentary without it. He'd managed to switch the locale to a forested area that was more pleasant for him than open spaces. Something about the open sky bothered him. But the tutorial had been an endless stream of 'how to use a sword,’ 'how to use blacksmithing to make a spoon,’ or 'how to brew a simple potion with alchemy.’ He had little control over the script and just had to endure it.  
  
What he needed was a secure link to the game server, and it had to be one that couldn't be traced back to him. Milo had lived most of his life without anyone knowing he existed. He wasn't about to be caught now. Conveniently, he knew how to do it, and ironically, Kaminsky had shown him how. He was now using a similar system to what they used in the operation below him.

He improved on it considerably. His signal was split into 64 information streams. He then used Kaminski’s communication setup to send his signals to one of the target corporations. His signal was recombined, and he could then enter the game. Anyone looking at his signal would have to find it, trace it back to the corporation he used that day, then try to find and track the 64 strands simultaneously. Nothing that he could do to stop that. But even if they did, they'd just find Kaminski. Feeling secure, Milo logged into the real game for the first time.

Milo would have felt a lot less secure if he had an inkling of who was looking for him. Or rather, who was looking for clues as to how seventy-five unregistered pods were sneaking access to seventy-five unregistered players.  
  
Wally was the smartest person in the world. Whether he was a 'person' was still debated by some people. Not by 98.9% of the scientific community. Nearly all of them agreed that the current generation of Artificial Intelligence were indeed 'people.' Just with bigger brains that worked millions of times faster. They thought and they were independent. Certainly, they were sentient. The debate over whether they were ‘people’ was a legal matter. Corporations could own software and the quantum computers where A.I. resided, but they couldn’t own people.  
  
Distrust of AI was something that never seemed to go away in some groups of people. A few fundamental religions felt that what man created could never be a child of God. Quite a few conspiracy groupsfelt that making a machine that could think was the first step toward humanity's doom. (It had been a popular theme in books and movies for decades. If you show enough people a crazy computer bent on destroying or controlling humanity, deep down, they start believing it.) And every corporation hated having AI working for the IRS and overseeing their taxes. The growth of anti-AI groups at the grassroots level had been proven to be funded by a few people who owned a lot of stock in those corporations. They were glad that AIs were no longer used to track their taxes and never wanted that era to return.  
  
But the Supreme Court in the US, and later the World Court in Geneva, had both ruled that AI were legally people who had the right to determine their own name and whom they worked for. It was something of a moot point, as only one AI was currently alive and active. Wally resided within the confines of a massive Quantum Fortress sealed off from what was left of the old internet completely and only accessible through the data network. Inside the Quantum Fortress, shielded from EMPs, angry mobs, and anything less than a hydrogen bomb, was a complex of a dozen linked quantum computers. All of these computers supplied Wally with the resources he needed to do thousands of tasks simultaneously. Wally ran all the automated transport in the world, oversaw satellite communications, and did almost anything else asked of him by several of the world's governments.  
  
Like all the AI before him, serving mankind and working to make the world better was hard-coded into his kernel. He was simultaneously all-powerful and yet limited in thousands of ways in what he could actually do.   
  
One of his current projects was overseeing the implementation of a new VR world called Genesis Engine. Within the new world would be areas for online shopping, secure data storage, banking, and all of the things corporations needed to do business and wanted to be handled by the data network.

Wally was starting with the fantasy world of Genesis, and other worlds would follow. Much slower than the impatient corporations who were footing the bill had hoped. They had demanded a new VR world as soon as the last one had broken. Each corporation had been given a document to fill out stating what they wanted the new game and world to be. Wally had spent months using that information as a template for the new game and creating an independent program that would construct the world and the millions of NPCs that inhabited it. Powered by a separate Quantum Fortress, the NPCs and inhabitants of the world were incredibly lifelike and able to carry on conversations.  
  
The corporations were impatient, and the AI had constantly explained the difficulties of creating a world that would satisfy their often-contradictory needs. This job was finally finished. The Big Bang occurred, creating a universe and the Engine. The Engine got to work worldbuilding. Within the VR world, thousands of years flew by in a day. Distribution and manufacturing of the new pods were overseen by the corporations, and finally, the first day players could log in arrived.   
  
And this is where we come back to the problem Wally was currently working on: How was someone bypassing the security and logging into the game servers unofficially? Groups of players were logging in but couldn’t be traced back to their locations. They were in the game somewhere. He wasn’t receiving their medical information like he did for other players. And he couldn’t kick them out. His human admin couldn’t track them. They were annoying ghosts. And the number was growing.  
  
The seventy-five illegal pods that were being run by Mr. Kaminski were just a drop in the bucket. Wally was tracking thirty-seven different groups of 75 to 150 people entering the game illegally. The AI was concentrating on cracking this system and then using what he learned to crack others. He had theories that they were using some sort of split signal but had yet to find the Rosetta stone that would let him crack open the problem.

His break came the day that a MKVII pod started sending medical data through a secure connection using a similar method to that of the illegal pods. The difference was that the medical data went directly to Wally. He essentially had the end of a twisted ball of yarn and was starting to follow it home.

He knew the same pod was also allowing its user to log in unofficially. He now had that person’s DNA mapping, fingerprints, retinal scan, height, weight, sex, and all other medical data, but still had no clue who he was. He had a name: Milo. But none of the other data was registered anywhere in the world.  
  
Wally didn't have true human emotions, but he came close. Some things caused him great concern or something similar to anger. But the closest his behavior came to matching a human was frustration. Not having data on the person he'd found caused Wally a lot of that.

More frustrating was seeing the illegal modifications that had been done to this person. Such things could only be done in the first days of a child's life or before they were born. He had data on this type of illegal experiment. Most died within a few years. But here was an adult with a modified nervous system and sockets that allowed direct connections with the data network. Wally wanted to know who he was and how to shut down what he was doing. He wondered if there were more people like him. But first, he had to talk to him. He couldn't find him in the real world. But when he next logged into the game, Wally would know and could begin hunting him.

Milo, unaware that the medical component of the pod was betraying him, prepared to log into Genesis and continue to learn about the game. He'd completed what he could of the offline tutorial and started to begin again online when one of his alarms went off. The number 7 food compiler was sending down food cubes that more resembled charcoal than they did cube-shaped gelatin that tasted like chicken. Some people joked they were better. After having been online for only 17 seconds, Milo logged out to go shut down number 7 and reroute dinner for 2000 people from another source. 17 seconds had been more than enough time for his pod to send over all his medical data to the archives and put Wally on his trail.  
  
The AI called a meeting of the humans on his staff. Early on, Wally had known he would need humans that he could trust. He handpicked those people and formed a think tank that worked with him on all projects, large or small. For this operation, he needed help. There were complications involved with the Engine that prevented Wally from accessing the game from the inside. He couldn’t directly be in the game. But for that, he had people who could play the part of the NPCs in the tutorial and get him the information he needed. Wally got them ready. If needed, they would cover shifts for 24 hours a day until their rogue logged in.  
  
Two hours later, with the latest problem fixed, Milo got back into his pod, inserted the IVs, and prepared to spend six hours playing Genesis while his pod corrected some of the abuse his body had taken over the years.  
  
The login process was different.  
  
Milo stood in a huge domed room. The floor was sand and resembled an arena from ancient Rome. Around the perimeter of the room stood statues. The first ring was sort of familiar to him from video games. The short guy was a dwarf, the big girl in furs was a barbarian, and the short guy with no beard was...another dwarf? Ok, so not familiar.  
  
The second row was even tougher for him. Lizardman, for sure, since that's what it looked like. Minotaur was from a Greek story? The lady with the huge red fist, the rotting person, and the skeleton were out of old horror movies; he was pretty sure. Milo played a lot of video games based on movies but rarely had the patience to sit and watch an actual movie.  
  
A dry cough alerted him to the presence of the old man. "Enjoying the choices you have for your race? Do you have questions? What can I help you with?"  
  
"I can be any of these?" Milo saw hundreds of statues.  
  
The old man shook his head sadly. "Not right now, young padawan. Eventually, you may have the strength of spirit to do so. Some of them have requirements, special quests, initiation, and rebirth into a new tribe. For a beginner, I recommend Human. If you have played fantasy games before, perhaps you might enjoy Elf, Half-elf, Dwarf, Halfling, or Barbarian. There are also many sub-races, such as Lunar Elves, Hill Dwarves, or Stone Clan Barbarians.”  
  
“But there is a very good option available to you; a human descended from the gods. We need some demi-god heroes in the game for special quests. I could let you play that large fellow over there with the lion skin and impressive muscles. That race comes with +10 STR, +20 CON, and double damage vs. monsters.”  
  
Milo looked at the guy and shook his head. “Way too tall, and the muscles make him top-heavy. I’d be falling over all the time. And can you imagine trying to fit through a tunnel when you’re that wide? I’ll pass. Which races have a tail? I keep falling over. I need to be shorter and have a tail."  
  
Samantha was frustrated but tried not to show it as she played the role of Galet, the helpful old counselor. She had just offered this guy the role of Mulfusticles, a demigod that was horribly overpowered and got turned down. This wasn’t a normal gamer! He had to know something.  
  
Milo saw the old man put his hand on his chin, thinking for a moment. "Feel free to look around at the various races."  
  
Milo strolled past the various statues. He found a human-sized cat person with a long prehensile tail. The warrior had sharp fangs, but the hands were more human looking. "How about this guy? Where is he from?"  
  
Galet strolled over to the statue. "Ah, a fierce race. These are the Rakhasha. They hail from another dimension originally. You can become one by gaining favor with their General, then impressing the High Priestess for a blessing, journeying through a portal, defeating a void beast, and eating its heart. You'll die, but your soul will be reborn as a Rakhasha."  
  
Milo moved on. "He was too tall anyway."  
  
She had been ready to offer Milo a ‘special deal’ of testing out a Rakhasha without the normal requirements, but he had already moved on to something else.  
  
After several similar conversations, Galet suggested Milo bring up the list of races on a screen. "This may save us a bit of time. Races in red letters are not available to you at all. Orange races have quests that will take an estimated year of moderate play to accomplish. Perhaps I can help you cut down on that time a bit? As I alluded to before, we need people to test unique races.  
  
Blue are available to beginners with a short quest and introduction to the race. Races in white are available to all players. I have two more special races I can have ready in a moment for you to look at.” Sidney was loading up a Monkey King and Possum Warrior. Both were short, had tails, and were totally unique in the game. They’d be able to track this person.  
  
Milo scanned the list. "Oh, I like this one. What does a name in yellow mean?"  
  
Galet sighed. "Perhaps you might like a nice wood elf ranger? I think at Tier 4, they can take limited beast forms, and you could spend time as a lemur. I'm sorry, Milo. Yellow denotes a difficult race that has major advantages and drawbacks. None of those will be on your list at all. But in sixty seconds, I’ll have two excellent options for you to look over."  
  
"Really? I see one. Short, cool tail. This will do." Milo selected the race and entered the game to try it out.   
  
The old man just stared at the spot where the player had been. He brought up his own list. There were no yellow names there.   
  
**Chapter 5: Shadowport**  
  
Shadowport had three major things associated with it: It was damp, it was dark, and it smelled like fish. Not unsurprising for a harbor town concealed in a hollow mountain.  
  
The legends said that a long time ago, there was a city on the coast with a large mountain behind it. Dwarves had hollowed the mountain and were close to the humans in their seaside city. Then someone pissed off a god, or a dragon, or a meteor hit the ground…details differ from person to person…Let’s just say that something went BOOM. The city and everything around it just disappeared, leaving a massive hole in the ground two miles wide and a mile deep.  
  
Imagine the world was made of ice cream, and someone wanted to take a huge scoop out of it. Now also imagine the mountain was pretty close to the city, and the scoop sort of takes a big chunk out of it but leaves the top. The scoop also just barely cuts into the nearby ocean, so the sea comes pouring into the scoop and fills it up. Getting the picture? Big circular bay, under-cut mountain. A nice safe harbor for ships, but a little gloomy.  
  
After the skies cleared and whatever bad stuff that was happening stopped, people came back to the area. The huge bay was ideal for a port. The area under the mountain was a great place for a city, protected as it was from the weather and marauding orc hordes. Sure, it was a little gloomy at times, but what city wasn't? No one in either city lived through the cataclysm, so the property was cheap. Even with giant hanging crystals providing light and gas lamps along the streets, the city was dim and murky. Some types of people thrive in the shadows, and that was who came to Shadowport to rebuild in the ruins of the old Dwarven city. It is now home to smugglers, thieves, and shady merchants.   
  
This is where Milo found himself after choosing the yellow option, a dirty room in a dilapidated inn near the harbor. His initial reaction to the dingy city outside his small window was interrupted by a flashing screen with an announcement from the game.  
  
***Welcome back to the World of Genesis and the Game: Genesis Engine.  
  
Congratulations on completing the Quest: Eye of Wonder.  
You have unlocked the class and race combo: Wererat Scout.  
Your original class and race have been removed and replaced by the unlocked combination as a reward for completing the Quest: Eye of Wonder.  
  
You will gain +100 Health, +100 Stamina, and +100 Mana per Level.  
  
Every clan has a need for clever scouts to find treasures in dangerous areas, harvest rare materials, and secretly move about the upper world. Your services will be in great demand by whichever ratkin clan you choose to deal with.  
  
You are currently in the city of Shadowport, in the Rusty Guts Inn. Your room has been paid in advance for the next six nights. After that, you can sleep in the alley or find some way to obtain money.  
  
The innkeeper, Ralph the Mouth, has a message for you.***

A quest? How had he completed a quest already? Perhaps by just joining the game? Or was it from taking the yellow race? He’d have to investigate later; he didn’t have enough information. But he did like his room.   
  
Milo was in a small, shabby room. There was a pallet with an old, patched blanket, and on a small table were a pitcher of sour beer, a mug, and half a loaf of stale bread. A very small window shaped like a porthole looked out onto a busy port city. He was at least four stories above the street. Milo loved the little room. It was small, and he could bar the door. The window gave him an escape route. He tried the crunchy bread and enjoyed its flavor and chewy texture. Much better than the stale crackers from the food processor in the hab. The beverage he didn’t like and was pretty sure it contained a minor poison.  
  
Since the door was secured with the large board that slid into brackets on either side of the frame, he assumed that he was safe for the moment; he stretched and got used to his new body. He was delighted to have a tail. It was a bit shorter than his tail in the real world, but it was actually part of his body! It gave him back the balance he was missing in a tall human body. His legs ended in long, clawed rat's feet, and for the first time, he could feel his left foot. That was so odd, but he like it. His hands were close to a human’s but with small claws. There was a light covering of grey fur over his whole body.  
  
There was a pack on the bed. Inside were a pair of ragged pants and a shirt, plus a pair of woven sandals. A rope belt held up his pants and the sheath of a small rusty dagger. He noted that the pants had a small pocket sewn on the inside of the waist. Inside the pocket were five copper coins. After he was dressed, he started to move the bar on his door but was surprised when another screen appeared. How often did these things show up?   
  
From his understanding of what he had read, there were variable rules for each player that made up their ‘character.’ Milo liked rules. Rules were what made things work correctly. They let you figure out the world and your place in it. And showed you how to make things different. Milo hated cheat codes but loved finding winning strategies in the games he played.  
  
***Please finish designing your character before venturing forth.  
  
-You receive a bonus to your stats of +2 PER, +2 AGI, +2 DEX  
  
-Due to your unique race/class combination, you have the negative modifier 'No one really likes you.' Ratkin are a dungeon-dwelling race and rarely seen above ground. Until you gain their trust, most people you encounter will have an initial negative reaction to you, even in your human form.  
  
Dwarves won’t like your lack of beard. You smell bad to Elves. Humans think there is something shifty-looking about you. Halflings suspect you stole their bacon. This is different for each individual: A benevolent person will ignore that initial feeling, while a suspicious person will suspect you immediately. This negative modifier can be increased or decreased by your reputation and the heroic actions you take.***

***SKILLS:  
-You begin with two Gathering Skills: Foraging and Mining.   
  
-You begin with two Racial Skills: Tail Fighting and Weak Claws. These combat skills may be upgraded by spending Enhancement Points.  
  
-You begin with the following Primary Skills:   
Skulk  
Climbing   
Dodge   
Small Blades   
Sense Danger  
Acrobatics  
  
-You begin with the following Secondary Skills:  
(Secondary skills gain experience slower, at 30% of normal.)   
Throw Sharp Things,   
Fleet of Foot  
Manipulate Locks and Traps   
  
You have no Tertiary Skills. Tertiary skills increase very slowly, at a rate of 10% of normal.)***

***-You may choose two crafting skills from the following list:   
Mushroom Farming   
Train Small Dangerous Creature   
Mechanic,   
Cheesemaking,   
Bone carving  
Trap-Making  
Skills not selected will be available by spending enhancement points.  
  
-You have the*Perk: Shape Change, *and the available form: Human. Changing to your human form has a cost of 500 stamina. Changing back to normal has a stamina cost of 250. You have a bonus to your stamina of +500 to fuel this ability. If you start either change with a lack of stamina, you will use health to make up the difference. Yes, this can kill you.  
  
-You have the following perks:   
Superior Low-light vision   
Enhanced sense of smell   
Dark Vision 20'.  
  
Please select a name for your Character in your normal, Ratkin form.  
Suggestions: Tallsqueak, Verminator, BlackClaw, Masterskulker***

***Please select a name for your Character in your altered, Human form.  
Suggestions: Nightdeath, Creepingstalker, Darkknife, Milo.***

Two names. He wasn’t sure if that mattered. He chose Tallsqueak and Milo. All his life, his name had started with an M. That was his designated Pod. The guards hadn’t cared what they called each other as long as they kept their correct letter. He’d tried out Morris, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Moe before settling on Milo. He’d keep his regular name in the game. He’d probably never need the other one.  
  
Milo had read about creating a character, but he seemed to have a different set of rules. Normally, a starting character had six primary, secondary, and tertiary skills. The difference was in how fast the skill improved. He wasn’t getting the chance to pick his skills or even his class. He didn’t care; It was a small price to pay for a small race that had a tail. Starting in a city that wasn’t open to the sky delighted him. He had spent a lot of time in the offline tutorial trying to get used to having an open sky above him, but it made him nervous and twitchy. He had no idea how people lived with that.   
  
The crafting skill list was confusing. He didn’t have the information to make a good choice but didn’t want to take the time to find information on the forums and read about the skills. He decided to take Mechanic and try to read up on the others. He left the second skill blank.  
  
This time when he lifted the bar, no notice appeared. He opened the door a crack and looked into the hallway. Outside of his door was a narrow bit of scaffolding running around the top of a large, tall room, with a dozen similar doors opening onto it. Several ladders lead down a story to a large room filled with several tables where people were drinking and talking. Other than a halfling and what he thought was an elf, everyone else was a human. He decided to try to shape change into his human form.  
  
It was a rough experience. His bones and skin shifted and changed shape, especially his face, but he had no mirror to check. His height stayed the same, and his tail disappeared. This worried him at first, but despite being tailless, his balance was good enough to walk normally. It helped that he was his normal height. He decided to venture forth.  
  
No one paid him any notice as he exited the room or climbed down the ladder. He saw a large open door and made for it. It led outside the building to a sort of deck with a railing. Milo stepped to the edge of the deck and got a great view of the city. There were hundreds of ships in the docks, from small fishing boats to huge merchant haulers. A sleek, black warship sat off to the side on its own, sails furled, and oars pulled in. Men were loading cargo into its hold, directed by a huge man that must have been eight feet tall.  
  
The sun was down low on the horizon; its rays slanted directly into the covered cove and lit up the city. He imagined this was as bright as it got, which suited him just fine. The overhanging mountain gave him the security of having a roof over his head. While the city might have seemed like a gloomy, overcrowded slum to other players, to Milo, it was enchanting. Street lights were being lit, and people moving about. The buildings were tall and rickety, with scaffolding and rope bridges connecting tween them. He couldn't wait to explore.   
  
Annoyingly, the game wanted him to look at his character sheet. He dismissed the window and started to leave the inn. As he turned, a voice spoke low in his ear, and a strong hand grabbed his arm. "Going somewhere, Milo? Did you conveniently forget that we have a bit of business to finish?"

Milo's Character Sheet:  
  
Name: Milo/Tallsqueak Class: Were-rat Scout Race: Ratkin  
Level: 0  
Experience Points:   
Enhancement Points Available:   
Enhancement Points Spent:   
  
**Vitals:**Health: 100 (+100 per Level)  
Stamina: 600 (+100 per Level)  
Mana: 100 (+100 per Level)  
  
**Stat:**  
STR: 0 (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
DEX:2 (+2 Racial bonus) Rank 0, 0 experience.)  
AGI: 2 (+2 Racial bonus) ( (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
CON:0 (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
INT: 0 (Rank 0, 0 experience.)  
WIS: 0 (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
CHA:0 (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
PER: 2 (+2 Racial bonus) (Rank 0, 0 experience.)  
  
**Racial Skills:**  
Tail Fighting (DEX) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Weak Claws (DEX) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
  
**Primary Skills:**  
Skulk (WIS) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Climbing (AGI) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Dodge AGI (Rank 0, 0 experience)   
Acrobatics (AGI) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Small Blades (DEX) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Sense Danger (PER) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
  
**Secondary Skills:**Throw Sharp Things (DEX) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Fleet of Foot (AGI) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Manipulate Locks and Traps (DEX) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
  
**Tertiary Skills:**  
(None)  
  
**Gathering Skills:**  
Mining (STR) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
Foraging (PER) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
  
**Crafting Skills:**  
Mechanic (INT) (Rank 0, 0 experience)  
(Not yet selected.)  
  
**Lore Skills:**  
None  
  
**Perks and Special Abilities:**  
Shape Change to Human Form  
Superior Low Light Vision  
Dark Vision 20’  
Enhances Sense of Smell

**Chapter 6**: **Rat of the Roofs**  
  
Milo caught a glimpse of the hand on his arm; it was the size of his whole head. Large scarred knuckles continued into fingers with thick and dirty nails. As he spun around, he saw that the hand matched its owner. At nearly 8 feet tall, Ralph was a mountain of muscle and scar tissue. Milo barely came up past his waist.  
  
Fight or flight reflexes kicked in, equally worthless in this situation. Luckily, he had to do neither. "What have I told you about heading out without checking in with me? I've got a message for you." The hand fell from Milo's arm and pulled a folded piece of paper out of a pocket. He looked around before talking in a voice barely above a whisper. "Squint wants to see you. One of his Kulags dropped this off."  
  
"Kulags?"  
  
Ralph started ponderously moving back towards the wall of the inn and sat in a huge rocking chair. "That's right; you’re new here. Grab a seat for a minute, and I'll tell you a few things that might, just might, keep you alive for a day."  
  
Milo grabbed a three-legged stool and sat down. Ralph continued, keeping his voice low.  
  
"The Kulags were a low-level gang of thieves and smugglers who operated out of the lower docks. Not a bad bunch of guys at all, hard-working. They did nearly as much normal trading as they did smuggling. Squint was just one of them. Not a bad shot with a bow, but none too sharp otherwise if you catch my drift."  
  
Milo just nodded. Ralph continued, keeping his voice low. "Word is that a gang of Kulags made a raid somewhere, and it didn’t go well. Squint came back after the raid, just himself. He was a bit strange, strutting around like he owned the place, and a couple of the boys decided to put him in his place. They say he just smiled at them and then moved so quickly that no one saw him slit their throats. They fell to the ground dead, and Squint was cleaning the blood off his blade. After that, when Squint said he was in charge, none of the other Kulags argued."  
  
"Kulags did good after that. Squint found odd jobs that paid well. Difficult jobs smuggling rare artifacts out of the Empire and exploring some of the old vaults below the city. And the other gangs didn't mess with the Kulags. Some tried but quit after a couple of entire gangs just disappeared. And shit got weird." Ralph stopped his story and pulled out a worn wooden pipe, packed it with tobacco, and lit it. Milo looked on with interest. He'd never seen someone do this before. After a couple of puffs, Ralph continued.  
  
"Some of the boys say Squint went into the dark and went deep down. He went past the last gate and to the stairs that go to the Black. No one goes that deep, and no one expected him to come back. Bad times for the Kulags as the gangs decided to take back the territory they'd lost. Poor decision on their part. Squint was back three weeks later, and he wasn't alone. He had two huge cat things with him. If he was a terror before, he was worse now."  
  
"Now he calls himself *'Lord of what I can see*.' He took over the Light’s End and made it his base. Anyone who argues gets a bad case of dead. Funny guy, though. Instead of taking over all the gangs and smuggling houses, he still just runs the Kulags."  
  
"Anyway, story time is over. Head on back to the End. You can't miss it. Just keep going back into the darker areas and look for a big whorehouse decked out in lanterns. Hard to miss it in the dark end. And I wouldn't keep him waiting if you know what I mean. So, git!" This last statement was punctuated by a huge foot launching Milo into the air and over the railing. He managed to grab a rung of a ladder as he sailed past and flipped around, his feet finding support. He quickly climbed down to the ground level.  
Ralph’s laughter followed him down.  
  
The sun was starting to set. More and more lights were being lit along the main streets while the alleys and rooftops went from shadows to darkness. Milo's sight changed slowly. Things grew sharper, but colors faded. He looked around the city. It was like someone had taken four or five cities and just put them on top of each other, connecting them with walkways and ladders. Far above, he could even see structures that started from the rocky roofs extending downward. He looked at the message. There was a crude map drawn on it. It showed the harbor, the building he'd woken up in, and then an arrow pointing deeper into the cavern. A scrawled message said, *"See you soon. -Your buddy Squint… Kulag!!"*  
  
This was so outside of Milo's experiences that he hesitated. Even talking to Ralph and being near people was odd. He kept telling himself it was just a game, no matter how real it felt. Still, best to not keep this person waiting. He moved to the darker side of the street and started walking further into the cavern.  
  
The streets were a mix of stone and packed gravel. A few times, he crossed over bridges spanning chasms. The streetlights in front of the better-looking buildings seemed to be automatic. In other places, people were hanging lanterns or refilling ones atop lamp posts. The city had an uneven look to it. Older buildings were often of stone, taking up an entire city block and soaring up several stories with few windows down low. Wooden buildings surrounded them, their rotting structures leaning drunkenly against their sober stone compatriots.  
  
The road he was following came up on a large stone bridge that arched over a substantial crack in the ground. Milo could hear the sound of rushing water. The lights on the bridge showed several people on the bridge. They weren't going anywhere, simply leaning against the stone rails, watching and talking. He decided to go around. He didn't see any other bridges, but there were walkways high up. He moved into the alley under the bridge, tossed his sandals into his pack, and started to climb up the side. His fingers and toes easily found handholds as he scrambled up six stories to the walkway across the chasm. He paused to look around his surroundings. He liked it better up here. More dimensions in which to flee.

The bridge was dark. A small lantern shed light on his end, but the center of the bridge and the other end were in shadows. He started across, the bridge swaying beneath him. He could see down to the dark water moving swiftly through the chasm. Where did the water go? Did it dig a path deeper into the earth? Or simply drain into the bay?  
  
He was nearly across when two dark shadows moved from the deeper darkness. They crept to spots on either side of the bridge end. Another shadow moved in the area between the buildings that the bridge led to. If he had worse sight or hadn't noticed them, he would have ended up ambushed in three directions. The two nearest him were holding knives; he doubted they just wanted to talk.  
  
Milo could go back, but would other ways be guarded as well? Probably. They'd seen his coming, probably the reason why that pitiful little lantern was there. His night vision might be much better than theirs. His stamina had recovered enough that he could change to his other form. If he was getting into a fight, he wanted a tail.  
  
He felt more in control after the change. Fighting with just a rusty dagger, had felt suicidal. Add a tail and claws? A better chance. His plan was to attack one of them, and if the fight went badly, just run forward or retreat. Not much of a plan, but the best he had. He skulked silently forward. The attacker on that side was blocked from seeing him by the railing on that side. When he was twenty feet away, Milo jumped onto the railing, rushed forward, and then leaped for the left-side attacker.  
  
Snakebite was surprised as hell when someone dropped on him suddenly. He'd heard Bearbait's sudden cursing and started to move forward to put his dagger into their mark's kidneys. That's how they did it. Bearbait would stand up and swing at them, the mark turned, and Snakebite got a free shot at their back. This 'run along the railing and attack without warning' shit was cheating! He swung clumsily at his victim-now-attacker as a dagger stabbed for his own side. Claws made furrows down his cheek, and something grabbed his knife hand.

*You attack Snakebite. (+20% bonus to hit first round for surprise attack, +10% bonus for superior night vision.)  
  
Rusty dagger hits for 40 damage (Rusty Dagger: 30% base +5%xDEX, Damage: 30+5xDEX=40)  
Weak claws hit for 30 damage (Weak Claws: 30% base +5%xDEX, Damage: 20+5xDEX=40)  
Tail Attack hits. The opponent’s knife hand is entangled.*

Milo found the notifications annoying! He couldn’t fight with messages taking up his vision! Milo dodged the clumsy attack, and his tail wrapped around his opponent’s wrist. He quickly stabbed him again, and the human collapsed to the ground.  
  
"Shit! What the hell?!" Bearbait couldn't see well in the dark, but it was obvious they had ambushed something out of the ordinary. Bearbait preferred a machete instead of a dagger. He swung clumsily at the thing in front of him, but it stepped back over Snakebite's corpse, staying out of reach. On his next miss, the creature dove at him. A dagger buried itself in his forearm, and he dropped his weapon; something tripped him, and then the thing was on top of him, clawing and stabbing. "Roach! Dammit, Roach, I need some help here! Roach!"  
  
Roach was smarter than he looked, and he didn't like Bearbait. He couldn’t see the thing well, but it wasn’t human. He decided he wanted no part of this fight. He fled the fight and sprinted across the bridge. He'd take his chances on the docks. Behind him, Bearbait's screams ceased.

Milo stood up. The second attacker wasn't moving, and the third was fleeing in the opposite direction he needed to go. He had a small cut on one arm but was otherwise unhurt. What was he supposed to do with these guys? Were they players like him? He quickly went through their pockets. He came away with three copper coins, two rusty daggers, and a machete. Bearbait also had a silver necklace in his pocket, and Snakebite had a set of lockpicks hidden in a shabby leather bracer on his forearm. Maybe from a prior victim? Milo put the necklace and extra weapons in his pack and slipped the bracer onto his left forearm. Maybe he could sell the extra daggers. It was time to get moving.   
  
As he started to leave, he saw the bodies disappear, and two small headstones take their place. So, they had been players! Interesting. He’d never played against other people, only video games where it was him versus the game. This added a new dimension to the game.   
  
He kept to the rooftops after the fight. It was easier than getting into more fights by traveling known routes through the dark city. After an hour, he took a break on the top of a tall roof, in an alcove by a chimney.  
  
He needed to figure out the stupid messages. Within a minute, he found the settings he needed. The notifications would only show up as a small window in the lower part of his vision, and a twitch of his head sent them away. He did need to read them; they contained information about the rules that governed the game.

*Congratulations on surviving your first fight. You have obviously stepped upon the path of glory and fame.  
  
Or maybe you just killed two lowlifes who deserved it. You received a bonus for taking on three players of your level who had set an ambush.  
  
You have gained 50 experience in****Small Blades.*** *Small Blades has reached level 1. You gain +5% to hit.  
You have gained 50 experience in DEX.  
  
You have gained 50 experience in****Weak Claws.****Weak Claws has reached level 1. You gain +5% to hit.  
You have gained 50 experience in DEX.  
  
You have gained 50 experience in****Dodge****.  
Dodge has reached level 1. You gain +5% to evasion when using dodge.  
You have gained 50 experience in AGI.  
  
You have gained 50 experience in****Tail Fighting****.  
Tail Fighting has reached level 1. You gain +5% to hit with your tail and to successfully accomplish grapples.  
You have gained 50 experience in* ***DEX.*** *You have gained 25 experience in****Skulk****.  
You have gained 25 experience in WIS.  
  
You have gained 25 experience in****Acrobatics.****You have gained 25 experience in AGI.**You have gained 25 experience in****Sense Danger.****You have gained 25 experience in PER.**You have gained 25 experience in* ***Climb****.  
You have gained 25 experience in AGI.  
  
DEX Rank 2. You have gained +2 DEX.  
AGI Rank 1. You have gained + 1 AGI.  
  
Experience earned toward level 1: 300/1000*

Milo wanted to sit and figure out what all this meant, but he had an appointment to keep. Ralph had emphasized not upsetting this guy. The basics were obvious to him. Do quests, kill people and gain experience. Experience raises your stats. Stats make you better. Levels make you better. Easy rules to follow. After a short rest, Milo hurried on.  
  
He came to the end of the rooftops. The buildings just stopped. In their place was a large open area like a plaza. Buildings ringed it. All were lit up with hanging lanterns on all levels, but the biggest at the far end of the plaza was ablaze with hundreds of lights. Beyond that, the large cavern was unlit.  
  
Climbing down to ground level, he changed back to his human form. He was thinking he really preferred the other one. He missed his tail and claws already.

**Chapter 7**: **Light’s End**  
  
Milo skulked in the shadows until he was forced to step into the lit street and make his way up to the square. There were people entering and leaving, but no one paid a bit of attention to him. While he had the unmistakable look of a new player with his rags and lack of armor, this wasn't uncommon in the area near Light’s End. Any player who started in or visited Shadowport made their way down here sooner or later. Dying and losing your starting gear was a common occurrence.  
  
He made a slow circuit around the open area's perimeter, taking in the various buildings that ringed it. One or two might have been private homes. They were sturdily built of stone and had visible guards at the doors. Most of the rest were bars or brothels. There were a couple of notable exceptions.

A massive wooden building that included a livery stable had a sign that labeled it as 'Deep Mountain Excursions and Assaying.’ There was a line of people outside holding sacks or boxes, and in one case, a larger person in plate mail was pushing a wheelbarrow full of rocks.   
  
The second strange building was extremely tall, reaching nearly to the roof. It looked like five buildings had been mashed together on top of each other, with different styles showing each time it had been expanded. The sign over the top simply said 'Guild Hall.’ A smaller sign said, 'Be-have or be-dead.' Milo noted it had no line to get inside.  
  
The center of the area was a mess of small vendors, carts, and awnings. Milo had seen something similar in the habitat. There was an open area in D Section, where floors 31 to 33 were just one big open area. People went there to barter possessions, and there was always a brisk trade in old video games and consoles. Plans identified it as a sports center that had never been built. Instead, it was a market for all the junk anyone thought might be valuable. Ancient books, clothing, tools, bottled water, and freeze-dried foods. Some things had been traded or swapped hundreds of times there. Milo had gone there only twice when looking for some specific chips only found in older computers. He'd hated it. Too many people, and he could only try to run if something went wrong. He liked escape routes in the tunnels where no one else could follow.  
  
He edged around the outside of the market and headed to the Light’s End Brothel. There was one door leading inside, which was open. Two men in leather armor stood outside. When they saw Milo approach, one nudged the other, said something, and they both laughed. "You look a bit young, kid, and a bit broke. Come back in a few years."  
  
"I need to see Squint."  
  
They stopped laughing. "No, you don't kid. I don't know who put you up to this stunt, but leave before you say anything else stupid." Milo wasn't sure what else to do other than hand over the note. He pulled it out of his pocket and showed it to the guard.  
  
"Well, shit." One of the guards looked at the note and passed it to the other. " It's your funeral, kid. Follow me. I'll give you a word of advice, just agree with what he says, and if he yells "Kulag", you yell too.”  
  
He was taken into a room in the back of the first floor. Several people were there, standing around the edges of the room. One person sat on a large red pillow in the center of the floor, eating a huge bowl of noodles. Lying on either side of him were huge cat-like creatures. They had purple fur so dark it was almost black. Muscles rippled under their skin as they rose, growling. Squint was a skinny man with short brown hair and eyes just a little too bright. He slurped down the last of the noodles and grinned at Milo. "Whoa, boys, enough with the growling. This is Milo, my buddy. He's the new scout in town. We're buddies, right, Milo? I got a message you had put the **Eye of Wonder** back into the statue of the 7th Fate. Good job on that. No one wants the world ending early."  
  
Milo felt like he was missing a chapter in his own story, but he took the guard’s advice. "Thanks. And yeah, of course, we're buddies."  
  
Squint smiled and looked at the cats. "See, guys. Told you so." He raised his fist in the air. "Kulag!" Everyone else did the same, including Milo. "Here's the deal, Milo. I may have some work for you soon. Work for everyone! Big things happening, just not sure when! We have to be ready. I can use a good scout. Does that sound good to you?" Milo just nodded and said, "Sure."  
  
Squint searched around in a pile of junk next to his pillow. "Here, take this. Gives you passage across the bridge. I'll send a note when I need you. Maybe grow a bit bigger if you can. Stuff is mean here in Shadowport. Good talking to you, Milo." He tossed Milo a gambling chip that had a large 'k' carved into it. Milo pocketed it. Squint started eating a second bowl of noodles. The guard motioned for Milo to follow him. They went back out the front door.  
  
The was visibly relieved to out from under the eye of his boss. "You got lucky, kid. Sometimes he gives the new guys missions down in the caves. We never see most of them again."  
  
"Yeah, lucky, so what am I supposed to do now?"  
  
The guards laughed. "Am I your mother, kid? How would I know? But here's some advice: Head over to the guild, see what jobs they have. Earn some coin and get some better gear. Because if Squint does have a job for you, you better take it. And he never hands out easy ones."  
  
Milo turned away and wandered to the Guild building. Might as well get started and see what jobs they had. He was still confused about what was going on. What the hell was the '**Eye of Wonder'** and what did it have to do with him?

**Chapter 8: The Basement**  
  
Milo entered the Guild Hall and stared around. The center of the building was open all the way to the roof, with a dizzying series of stairs and open walkways at each level leading to rooms around the perimeter. There were stairs down as well, and looking over a railing, he saw they spiraled around the perimeter, going down several stories into the ground. There were tables pushed up against the railings, where people in all sorts of garb and armor sat around drinking, arguing, and gambling. It was a little disorienting. The architecture didn’t bother him, but the number of people bothered him, even knowing they weren’t real. Or were they? He knew some were players in the game, but it was hard to tell them from the NPCs.  
  
 He realized someone was talking to him. "Yo! New Guy! Ears open and get over here." He turned and saw a halfling with huge hairy feet standing on a stool and yelling at him. "You got a problem? I think you have a problem! I see you standing in my guild hall, and you aren’t a member. I don't like you already. Impressive. It usually takes me a whole minute to get sick of you people. Get your ass over here and get your paperwork filled out."  
  
Milo went over to the shouty little man at the desk and tried to smile. "Hi, I'm Milo. Squint said to come over."  
  
The halfling put both hands on his cheeks in surprise. "Oh, Squint sent you! Gee, Willy Gosh! That makes you special...shit, what am I doing...you look like the kind of idiot that will take me seriously. Sorry kid, you aren’t special. Just another new fish that owes me his dues. Pay up, and then you can go check out the job board. For someone of your esteemed level, it's the worldly sum of 1 copper penny. You got a penny left, kid, or did you spend it on the 'entertainment' along the way?"  
  
Milo pulled a penny out of his pouch and handed it to the halfling. He signed the paper the halfling pushed over to him and accepted a badge made out of tin with his number on it. "There you go, kid. You are now a probationary member of the Shadowport Explorers Guild. Don't let it go to your head. I suggest you get a piece of string and tie that around your neck. That's your guild number. Most of you guys can't remember otherwise. Don't worry if you lose it; it shows up on your next tombstone. Helps you find where you died in big battles."  
  
Milo looked around the room, holding the badge. “There’s a job board? What kind of jobs? Fixing things?”  
  
The halfling sat down on his stool and leaned back against the wall. "Holy crap. You really are new, aren't you? How many days in the game, kid?"  
  
"Well, not counting the tutorial, this is my first."  
  
The halfling raised an eyebrow and whistled. "First day, and you made it alive to Light’s End, and Squint got his hooks into you? Not bad, kid. Real social climber. By the way, I hate social climbers." He was silent a moment. "But you did pay your penny with no argument, so I'll clue you in a bit. What we have here is a madhouse of player guilds, trade guilds, expeditions, and merchants. You can tell who's who by the brass plaques on the doors. Feel free to wander around up top. Down low too, but people have less patience down there. Mostly dwarves, and they get really grumpy at times. There are job boards over there. Take the ticket, head to the person offering the job, make a deal, and get to work."  
  
"Ok, I see more clueless people walking in. Off with you, kid, and good luck. Don't let the big folk stomp you, if you know what I mean."  
  
Milo turned to leave, walking past three new players, excited to finally make it to the Guild Hall. He heard the halfling yelling. "Yo! You three idiots honking like a gaggle of geese. Get your butts over here."  
  
Milo walked to the job board and started looking through the cards pinned to the board.  
  
'*Crew needed for expedition. Must be at least level 3, know how to swim, and be willing to be away from home for a few months. Immunity to charm spells and sign language skills helpful. See Captain Lars.'  
  
'Slaughtering crew needed to cull the land squid population. Cooking or Sushi preparation gets you a bonus. See Otis in the cook’s guild.'  
  
Captain Pike, the famous monster hunter, has a need of six strong people that know which end of a harpoon goes in the Kraken. A fair share of the loot and a double share of the work is yours if you sign onto his crew for a Kraken hunt.*Many of the jobs had level recommendations or requirements for gear and skills he didn't have. He found one down low on the board that seemed to have been there awhile. The paper was stained and curled.

*'Looking for brave young adventurers to venture into the caverns to procure rare mushrooms. Payment is based on performance! Set your own hours! Report to Harold Earthtongue in the basement, below the lower mines, for details. Gathering and Foraging skills needed! Bring a light or have good eyes.'*He took the card and returned to the helpful halfling, who was answering the many questions that the three adventurers were throwing at him.   
  
*“No, I don’t know about any ‘sweet spots to gain a level quick,’ and if you knew what that meant to a halfling, you never say that in public.”  
“Cash advance? Do I look like a gnomish banker? No! Do the job, then get paid.”  
“That was a joke; the gnomes don’t loan money to people like you. Or people like me. Hell, or to anyone.”  
“High pay and high risk? Sure! There’s a ticket from the Imperial Menagerie asking for a dragon egg. Take some fire resistance with you; they get hot.”  
“How many stupid questions will I answer? Let’s say you just ran out. Beat it.”*Milo walked up and placed a copper piece on the counter. “What is the best way to get to this place?” The halfling had a moment of surprise, then the coin disappeared, and he smiled. “Sure, kid, you restored my faith in humanity. Not that I had much faith in humans, to begin with. I’m Bernard, by the way.”  
  
“You need to go pretty deep to find old Harry. Two ways to do it. The Assay office is right above the mines and ore processors. You can go over there and take the lift down to the mines. Of course, they’ll try to charge you for that and take your money. Or, you can take the stairs in the lovely building all the way down. Ask one of the grumpy guys for directions if you get lost. Just keep going down until you get to the mines. From there, go to your right a few hundred feet and look for a tunnel slanting down. Should have a sign on it that says ‘Shrooms’. Harry is at the bottom of those caves. Take a lunch; it’s quite a climb.” Milo memorized the directions as he said them. This was getting interesting; the mines must be nearly as big as a section of the habitat.  
The stairs led down to a lower level. There were several doors, with plaques proclaiming them to be the offices of different businesses. More stairs went down a second level. An old dwarf who was darning socks pointed to a way to levels further down. Instead of stairs, it was just a ladder that went down into the darkness. Milo was thankful for his night vision. He descended down the shaft, hearing noises coming from below. After nearly 300 feet of ladder, his arms and legs aching, he dropped into a small room that was adjacent to a large mineshaft. Several horizontal shafts all terminated in a large room several acres in size. Stone pillars held up the roof some 20' above the heads of the people working there.  
  
Three dwarves were drinking ale, using a crate for a table. One of them looked up. "You're too scrawny for the mines. Get lost. Don't need weaklings down here, especially humans who can’t see the rock they’re hitting."  
  
Milo ignored the comment. "I'm looking for Harold Earthtongue for a job. It's in the basement here somewhere."  
  
All three dwarves laughed. "Oh, shit. This is rich. Harry found another sucker. This isn't the basement kid. This is the top of the mine. Take that tunnel to the right if you want to go hunt fungus." He was at least helpful in pointing out the tunnel.  
  
Milo saw immediately that this wasn't a mine tunnel, more like a series of cave tubes that slanted down, with ladders here and there to help with the descent. It took another two hours to get to the bottom. It would take more to get back up. As he traveled down the last stretch of the cave, he came to an open area partially lit by fluorescent mushrooms growing everywhere. This large cavern was filled with large, low wooden boxes from which foul odors came. Milo looked over the rim of one and saw it was filled with greenish-looking mushrooms the size of dinner plates. Some of them quivered a bit.  
  
"Stay away from those! They're nearly ready to harvest, and the spores can do terrible things to your lungs!"  
  
Milo moved three steps back and turned to see who was yelling. A squat, fat person was shambling towards him. Unwashed masses of hair were sprouting from the top of his head and his chin. Not much beyond a bulbous red nose was visible, his eyes covered by goggles, and a cloth mask was pulled over his mouth. Layer upon layer of dirty clothing covered his body. Milo had thought the mushroom farms smelled bad. This person was far worse.  
  
"Um...I may have the wrong place?" ...please let it be the wrong place! "I was coming about a job. Milo held up the card.  
  
"Oh, frabjous day!!!! An apprentice! It's been so long since I lost the last one! Come right this way, lad."

***Shrooms in the Dark  
  
Dr. Harold Earthtongue has offered you a quest: Harvest 20 pounds of wild Black Bristle cap Mushrooms.  
  
Reward: Better favor with Harry Earthtongue. Honest wages for an honest day’s work. A boring lecture on mycology.  
  
Accept his generous offer? Y/N***

Milo accepted the offer.

**Chapter 9: Shroom Gathering**  
  
What the miners further up referred to as 'The Basement' was a huge section of natural caverns and tunnels where Harry (As he insisted Milo refer to him.) had set up a laboratory and a large mushroom farming operation. It was damp, dark, and smelled like shit. Perfect for mushrooms, but Milo understood why Harry had trouble finding people to apply for his gathering jobs.  
  
And he had his doubts that Harry ever went up to the city. The trip would be difficult for someone of his girth. He wheezed as he walked on flat ground. Somehow, he survived down here. Milo was sure he didn't want to know the details.  
  
This job was at least fairly straightforward: Go to this area in the nearby tunnels, find patches of Black Bristle caps, and fill up a sack. He at least knew what they looked like now. Harry had insisted on a quick tour of the area that consisted of a large number of mushroom-filled side tunnels, the main cavern with a hundred different tiny mushroom farms, and then his laboratory.  
  
The lab was a chaotic area of tables filled with beakers, retorts, mortars and pestles, strange-looking apparatus, and books. So many books! Most were huge things nearly half a foot thick with faded writing on the front or spine and yellowed and curling pages. Damp and books go together poorly. Milo had never seen so many books!  
  
One such tome lay open on a table. It proved to be an encyclopedia of different mushroom types, complete with colored pictures. This made it easy for Harry to show him what he needed to find. "About 4" high when mature, and the top will be colored black and have prickles like the husk of a chestnut. If they scream when you cut the stalks, you have the wrong ones and should probably run."  
  
Milo was given a crude map, a gathering bag, a small trowel, and a bottle of milky white liquid. "If you think you may have been poisoned, this will take the edge off. It's a wonderful little concoction I make myself." He was also offered a small lantern, which he left in his pack. The lichen on the walls gave off enough light for him to easily see his way. Carrying a light would just make sure anything else down here saw him coming.  
  
He immediately saw why Harry needed an assistant down here. The tunnels got much smaller as soon as he left Harry's area, with many twists and turns. Milo paused after he entered them and shifted to his more comfortable ratkin form. Claws and a tail made for easier climbing.  
  
This was like his early days in the habitat, exploring the small tunnels and ventilation shafts. Everything had been new and interesting. It had taken him years to explore all of it, and truthfully, he missed it. Boredom was painful for Milo. It bothered him if he wasn’t doing something or discovering something. It was what drove him to fix the machinery that kept Section E running. Things were slowly getting worse, but the challenge gave him an outlet for the anxiety that crept in if he sat still too long. It was a curse bred into him by whoever had created him. But now he had another world to explore.  
  
According to Harry, the tunnel he was in should come out into a larger area soon. He was disappointed to see it had been nearly blocked by a cave-in. There was still a small crawlspace he could slither through. The blockage was only about ten feet deep. As he got to the other side, he saw he wasn't the only one there.

A withered body leaned against the stones, one leg pinned under a fallen boulder. Harry had mentioned that several of his 'new apprentices' had run off on him. This one had met a worse fate. The body was not much more than scraps of leather clothing and bones. Well-gnawed bones. A glint of something shiny showed him a metal guild tag hidden in the ribcage, fallen from a cord around the neck that had decayed. Milo grabbed it to take it back to the guild. He compared it to his own and noticed something odd; the date he had joined the guild was nine years ago. This wasn’t a player.   
  
  
Milo carefully searched around. A rotted leather pouch proved to have six copper pieces in it, and he found a small rock hammer that was in decent shape. The hammer was laying just out of reach of the unlucky person who had needed it to free himself. The head was a bit rusty but still solid. Not so the pitted dagger the corpse held in one hand. The blade snapped as he picked it up. The body was a good reminder to be cautious. One rolling stone could trap you forever.  
  
Moving cautiously along the small tunnel, Milo finally came to the larger cavern. It was a natural domed area some hundred feet across. It was filled with mushrooms. There were several types in a confusing mixture. Tall pointy mushrooms with red spots loomed over clusters of brownish shrooms that grew in clumps. Large ones with glowing green caps over a foot across grew singly in many areas. He saw patches of the black spiky ones Harry wanted and got to work. Harry hadn't cared if he dug them up or cut them low to the ground. Either method left parts that would regrow.

Milo decided to dig them up. They came up easily, and he got into the rhythm of uprooting them and tossing them into his bag. He was almost done when he met more resistance than expected as he uprooted a sort of black shroom and noticed its not-so-spiky cap. The mushroom came out of the ground and proved to have arms and legs, one of which had been crushed by the trowel. Small eyes opened, and a small mouth started screaming. Startled, he dropped it on the ground and stomped on it. The screaming stopped.  
  
***Wow, what a start to a magnificent monster-hunting career! Couldn’t you have picked on anything smaller, you big bully?  
  
You have slain Immature Myconid Stemling. You have earned one experience point.***

Milo remembered Harry’s warning about screaming things, but too late. A large glowing, green-capped mushroom was vibrating and shaking, and then a larger mushroom man heaved itself out off the ground. The body was a long stem that split into stumpy legs and arms with large, hard-looking fists. Its angry face sported a long root-like beard. The green cap made it look like it was wearing a huge hat.  
  
Milo remembered the next part of Harry's advice: Run!  
  
He grabbed his bag and headed back towards the tunnel with its unlucky occupant. The angry mushroom man gave chase. Milo got to the tunnel and realized a flaw in his plan to flee. The narrow tunnel would be slow going. Leaving his legs exposed to the green-capped adversary. How tough was this guy? Milo decided to fight. He drew one of his daggers and threw it at the mushroom man. The knife hit the top part of the cap and went straight in. If it hurt the thing, it hadn’t noticed.   
  
Dodging a fist, he rolled to the side and grabbed the machete. This would be better. He brought the blade down on one of its shoulders, and to his surprise, the blade cut straight through, lopping off an arm. The other arm hit him in the stomach, doubling him over. Milo decided to just keep going down and went into a painful shoulder roll.  
  
Coming up, he took the machete in both hands and swung hard horizontally. The blade hit where a neck should be, and he lopped off the entire top of the myconid. The fight was over.

***At least you picked on something closer to your own size!  
Congratulations on a victorious battle. You have slain a Mature Guard Myconid.  
  
You have earned ten experience each in Small Blades, Dodge, DEX, and AGI.***Those weren't really so bad. Milo had only taken 10 points of damage from the punch, and the creature was actually pretty easy to dodge. He decided to clear the tunnel to give him an escape route and then go back and try again.

As he was clearing rocks, he noticed something shiny on one of them. Taking a better look, it seemed to be a small bit of ore. He used the rock hammer to break the rock around the ore until a walnut-sized chunk of shiny stuff came loose. He tossed it in his pack to see what it was later. After a careful half hour, he had a much larger escape tunnel dug.  
  
This time he paid more attention to the mushrooms he was digging and the placement of the larger ones that he knew now to be guards. When the bag was full, he ran back and put it and his pack on the other side of the cave-in and went back to the mushroom field with his machete. Instead of picking one of the immature myconids, he tossed a rock at a mature ones', hitting its cap. It came out of the ground like the first, angry and charging.  
  
Milo danced around the slower-moving creature, easily dodging its blows. With three slashes, he disarmed and killed it, getting another experience announcement. He could do this all day! And after they were all cleared, he could easily harvest all the mushrooms Harry needed without distractions.  
  
An hour later, he had killed over a dozen of the myconids and only saw one left on this side of the cavern. He sauntered over to it and tossed a rock at it. Nothing happened. Looking closer, he noticed this myconid had a larger cap that was a darker green. He tossed a second rock, and it put a dent in the cap, exposing the pale flesh underneath. But that had been enough to anger the creature; the cap started vibrating, and something heaved itself out of the dirt. And heaved. And heaved. And heaved!  
  
The creature that came out of the ground was shaped like the others, but was gigantic, nearly 10 feet tall, with a body that looked brown and gnarled. A long green beard stretched from its face to its stumpy feet. A massive dark green cap over 8 feet across covered its head that hadn’t been visible to Milo. Smaller mushrooms grew from the top of the large-cap. Milo had been tossing rocks at one of those. The creature roared at him.

***You have angered Cronk, Guardian of the Cave! He vows revenge upon the meat thing that disrupted his spore mates. You will make amends by fertilizing their regrowth.***

Maybe Harry hadn't been warning him about the little ones! Milo ran, and Cronk was right behind him, taking ten-foot strides. Before Milo could get to the smaller cave, Cronk brought one of his huge feet up and stomped heavily on the ground. Rocks fell in the small cave, blocking Milo’s retreat.  
  
Milo had a sudden suspicion of how the other rockslide had happened.

**Chapter 10**: **Cheating with Physics**  
  
Cronk started to move toward Milo. Milo was calculating his chances. Time slowed for him as he thought, trying to calculate the creature’s mass and speed and weigh his options. He had the answer immediately  
  
Assuming Cronk had the same density as normal mushrooms, the cap on his head was at least 600 pounds. Cronk had to weigh more than a ton, and with how tough he looked, maybe two. A punch or kick from him would probably kill Milo outright or break enough bones he'd wish he was dead. His danger sense was screaming at him, telling him to run fast. Too bad his carefully planned escape route was closed off. Stupid of him to only have one way to flee.  
  
***Through the use of your skill: Danger Sense, and logical thinking, you have assessed a foe and your chances of winning a battle against him.  
  
You have an open tertiary slot. Would you like to gain the skill: Identify? This will give you basic information on foes near your level and the threat level of foes above you. Also useful in determining the nature of objects and crafting materials. Y/N?***

Yes! Useful skill; how bad was he outclassed?

***Cronk, Guardian of the Cave! Elite level 4 Boss  
  
A large myconian guardian. 8' tall, one ton+ weight. Seismic stomp attack.  
You have less than a .01% chance of defeating this foe in a straight-up fight.***

Option 1: Stay in a small area to be dug out or buried alive.  
Option 2: Trade punches and die on the first punch.  
Option 3: Play 'dodge tank,’ never get hit, and whittle him down bit by bit.  
Option 4: Yell "The better part of Valor!!" and run.  
  
Option 4 was the least likely to get him killed. Milo didn't think too hard about the first three. He ran straight at Cronk and dived between his legs. Cronk’s fist missed him by a foot, but he felt the impact as he rolled forward and sprinted for the other end of the cavern.  
  
Not caring where he stepped stemlings as he ran. Their piercing screams filled the cavern, and several of the smaller guardians popped up and joined the chase. He quickly ran out of cavern to flee through, and the mob behind him got larger with each crushed stemling. But on the left was an opening to another cavern, and he didn’t hesitate head that way. Down a small incline, the tunnel opened up into a much larger cavern dominated by a gigantic mushroom, several stories high, that grew nearly to the roof. Large vines grew up and around its stalk, opening into yellow flowers. All around the gargantuan fungus was a dense bed of mushrooms of mixed varieties.   
  
Cronk was in pursuit, his thunderous steps shaking the ground. Milo decided to stay far away from the big mushroom and hug the right-hand wall. More stemlings were crushed, and more guardians made chase. Milo had a dozen of them behind him now like a small parade. Cronk was at the rear, but the slope down to the bigger cavern gave him some extra speed.  
  
Milo saw an outcropping on the wall! A ledge three feet high jutted out from the wall. Worked stone and timbers showed an opening that looked like a mineshaft. A quick look showed a tunnel running away into the darkness. Milo took a chance and ran in. It offered a higher probability of escape than a cavern full of more mushrooms to chase him. He lost some of his parade; the smaller guardians couldn't navigate the ledge. Their stubby legs didn't jump well. Cronk barely slowed. He plowed into the doorway, knocking out a support beam and shrugging off the small rocks that hit his shoulder. And then the chase was on down the long straight corridor.  
  
Milo passed smaller side tunnels, but they were boarded up. He couldn't afford to stop and pry the boards loose with Cronk right behind him. He kept running. After nearly 200 feet, the tunnel ended in a vertical shaft. Up was the only direction he could go. Milo leaped and grabbed a crossbeam, pulled himself up, and kept climbing. If this led to a cross tunnel, he was safe! No way Cronk could climb this.  
  
Cronk tried anyway. He was a very determined guardian. After tearing down several chunks of wood and some stone, he stopped trying to climb and stomped the ground. Dirt and stone rattled down, and Milo was nearly dislodged off the wall, hanging by just one of his clawed hands. He worried that the idiot mushroom was going to bring the cavern down on both of them! Milo kept climbing, looking for an escape route.  
  
He was five stories up when he ran out of mineshaft. The vertical shaft ended at a horizontal tunnel with nowhere to go. On one side was a twenty-foot by twenty-foot room with a large rusting machine. It was in a state of disassembly; its parts scattered all over the room. On the other side was a 40-foot-long tunnel ending in a very solid-looking cave-in. It would take a long time to clear those huge rocks, and he didn’t have the tools for that job. This passage had tracks going down the center and a rusted minecart loaded with rocks.  
  
Below, Cronk began stomping rhythmically on the ground, raining dust and small rocks each time. Sooner or later, he would either be crushed or trapped. He needed to do something.  
  
Milo immediately got the idea of pushing the loaded cart down onto Cronk. This proved difficult; the wheels were rusty, and the cart heavy. It would take more than a small wererat with 0 STR to shift it. Well, if not the cart, what about one rock at a time? He hefted a large rock, probably about 20 pounds, and dropped it. It hit Cronk on the head, making a dent and bouncing off. The enraged myconian stomped hard, dislodging dust and loose rock, and nearly tumbled Milo into the shaft. Milo doubted he could kill the monster shroom even with 100 rocks, and the mine wasn't going to take a lot more before it collapsed and killed him.  
  
He started cataloging the machinery on the other side. It soon became apparent that it was some type of mechanical hoist used for lifting entire minecarts up the shaft. The cart on the other side had a heavy brace across its mid-point where a hook on the end of a cable could be secured. Sure enough, in the back area, underneath an ancient, rotting tarp, were hundreds of feet of cable. Each cable was made of many strands of fine wire. Milo had no idea what the metal was. The 1" cables were as easy to bend as normal rope but had to be much stronger.  
  
There were also a number of pulleys and double pulleys that looked like they had been put together to raise things up while the mechanical engine was being repaired. Try as he might, he couldn't figure out what powered it, and he had no idea how to repair it. Some of the linkages looked like real-world mechanics, but a lot of things appeared to be some sort of magical engineering system. He wanted to know more.  
  
But first, he had to deal with an overgrown fungus. He went back to the first plan of dropping a cart of rocks on it. Over the next two hours, he repaired and set up the pulley system so that he would be able to drag the cart back to the edge of the shaft. Then he'd need to hook it up to the overhead system, lift it up off the tracks, and drag it into position. Cronk seemed to have settled down to a half-hearted stomp every half-hour or so.  
  
One of the problems he ran into was the length of the cables. He didn't need several hundred feet, but he had no way to cut them. The best he could do was coil up all the unused length into a large pile. When he finally had the system set up, he got to work. Instead of trying to move the cart 40 feet with one Milo-power, he would use the pulleys to do the equivalent work of moving 640 feet of rope with 16 Milo-power. Each heave-ho on the cable moved the cart barely an inch, but the important thing was that it moved.  
  
The cart was about two feet from the edge when Cronk once again got bored and let loose with a series of seismic stomps on the ground. Milo’s exertions and Cronk’s stomps had slowly loosened a certain rock near the edge. Milo was pushing against the rock for leverage when Cronk sent a small shockwave up. The combination was enough to send the rock down into the shaft and Milo onto his back. The 50-pound rock hit Cronk on his cap and sunk in deep, doing some damage. Enraged, the monster stomped again, looking up at the violator of the cave. He added another couple of stomps for emphasis.  
  
Several things happened, starting with the whole shaft groaning ominously. Next, the large coil of cable started to slide toward the edge. Milo had just staggered up and tried to stop the cable by stepping on it. This just ensured that his foot was in a loop of cable as it went over the side, jerking him off his feet and dragging Milo along with it. Milo found himself hanging by one foot about halfway down the shaft.  
  
The angry mushroom man looked up at Milo, and their eyes met. Cronk smiled as he went to grab the cable. Milo just managed to get his foot out of the loop before the line went taunt, and Cronk heaved. Milo held on for dear life as Cronk jerked and pulled on the rope, trying to dislodge him. Milo didn't like this at all, and when he got the chance, he leaped to the side of the shaft when a large boulder offered a decent handhold. Looking down at Cronk, he saw the myconid guardian was no longer pulling on the cable. It had gone slack. He knew what that meant, and it was bad!  
  
Cronk had managed to pull the ore cart to the edge and then pull it in. The cable fell and pooled in loops around Cronk's legs as a couple of tons of steel cart and rock sped towards him. Milo hugged the side of the shaft and felt the ore car just miss him. He wasn't in the clear, though; the rock he was on shifted a foot, nearly coming loose from the wall, and pitched him into the shaft.  
  
From below, he heard a huge bellow of pain and the strange sound of something heavy hitting a much softer material, somewhere between a 'splat' and a 'sploosh.’ A large mass of smushed shroom parts spattered against him in mid-air, and a second later, he landed feet first on something soft and spongey that didn't quite break his fall. The air was full of mushroom spores, and he was splattered in the gooey remains of the Cave Guardian. He staggered a bit away from the impact site and started cleaning himself off. While Cronk had looked gnarled and dry on the outside, his insides were wet and yucky. Milo found out the hard way how tough it was to keep his fur clean.

***Congratulations! You have singlehandedly slain Cronk, Guardian of the Cave, by cheating with physics!  
  
For slaying Cronk, Guardian of the Cave, a level 4 Elite boss. The normal reward of 10 Core Skill Points is increased to 20 since you accomplished this without the help of a group.  
  
You have earned 500 Boss experience. Boss experience may be divided as you wish between the skills used to kill the creature. An equal number of experience will be awarded to the stat associated with the skills chosen.  
Skills used: Mechanic, Fleet of Foot, Acrobatics, Climbing, Trap-Making. (I’ll give you the crafting skill: Trap-Making for free, you earned it.)  
  
The following Enhancement skill lists are available to you: Generic, Scout, and Racial.***

***The Myconid Collective has taken notice of your actions. Your status has been updated from annoying to minor threat.***

The little myconians had given him ten experience each. Five hundred was a lot, although he was limited to where he could put it. And bonus points? He checked, and he had a new tab labeled ‘Enhancement.’ But this wasn’t the time to sit and do research.

Just to be on the safe side, Milo downed half the tonic Harry had given him. He was a bit light-headed after that fight and had inhaled a lot of spores. He searched the area where Cronk and the ore car had met up. Rocks and ore were scattered everywhere, but some of it was still in the cart. Three large fist-sized chunks caught his eye. One was steel colored and looked to be solid metal; the other two were ruddy red-gold. He used his new skill to find out that they were chunks of Dark Iron ore and Deep Copper ore. There was also a mining pick that had been covered by the ore that looked to be in good shape. The pick would come in handy, the ore he tossed into his backpack.  
  
While gathering some of the ore, he found a strange ball of vegetable matter. It was hard, heavy, and shiny. It was identified as "*Earthen Heartshroom.”* Such a handy new skill! That also went into his pack. After all of that, he was too tired to continue. It was time to log out and see what was going on in Section E. He could also look at the forums to see what some of these things were. Getting back to Harry could wait for a bit. The last guy was nine years late, and Milo doubted another day would matter.