**CHAPTER 6: SCIENCE LAB**

I awoke on a cool table. I could see my naked reflection on the gloss of the white ceiling. I was lying on a white table by body frozen and head locked in position. I could see the walls by straining my eyes. The walls had screens with images of a humans physiology, my physiology. After a minute I heard a humming sound of a anti grav generator. The only thing I could see on the ceiling’s reflection was a 2 meter round sphere coming toward my head. I could see instruments coming out of the device and felt pain as the machine cut away my scalp! Next a saw action started into my skull and the top of my skull was removed. The robot began playing was literally inside my head. At least there were no pain receptors there. Even at 75% the removal of the top of my head was quite painful. Athena I give up. Please have me revive back in my sheriff’s room. Minutes dragged by and Athena did not respond. Athena? My display was set in passive mode but Athena should still be able to respond. I was getting worried now. The robot finally took a break after I don't know how long and my head started healing. The skull was forming over and scalp growing back. This immediately got the interest of the robot. It was obviously something he had not expected. After I was completely healed the robot repeated his actions and this time I noticed on my passive display it took him about 90 minutes to ‘poke’ around. Trust me when I say the sensation of having your skull removed is unpleasant. To have it down eight times! Now that is extremely unpleasant. I would heal and the robot would repeat.

Instead of going through the skull removal the ninth time the robot unceremoniously snapped my leg. He had probes and small arms keyed on the site as it healed. He repeated this again. A message flashed on my passive display, you have endured 12 hours of continuous torture, +1 to your constitution, 250 experience. Next he cut open my stomach and removed it to study its contents. He proceeded to other organs. Eventually he got to my heart and I was thankful. I would finally die and revive. I saw my heart hovering in a mechanical hand before my eyes and felt myself slipping away. The robot seemed to notice and somehow reconnected my heart with a flash of arms and ‘plastic’ patches. Apparently he didn't want to lose his new toy so quickly. I didn't know what to do laying there. It seemed I was doomed to spend eternity as a dissectible lab rat. I tried to close of the pain as the robot continued to study me and see my limits. In my mind I called him the Mad Doctor or MD for short. MD went to many lengths to see my limits and I lost track of time and the pain became a part of life. I thought about more pleasant things or at least tried too. When hunger become an issue MD injected me with some type of fluid, I guess the game recognized this as a meal. MD did not let me sleep and I think I might go crazy living a life in pain.

You have endured 48 hours of continuous torture, +1 to your constitution, 250 experience. You have endured 7 days of continuous torture, +1 to your constitution, 250 experience. My only hope was for Lina to find me and free me from this nightmare. I had nothing except…maybe my psionics. I learned to use them in the training but had never utilized them. I mentally selected the life detection skill and activated it. It worked! I could ‘sense’ a cow nearby as well as some lizards and some other small indigenous wildlife I had seen during my time on the planet. I didn't notice that MD had snapped his attention to me when I active my psionic ability. He had stopped removing the marrow from my pelvis and was studying me intently. Had MD detected my psionic use? Could a robot detect psionics. Unfortunately this brought out a new enthusiasm in MD. He brought out new devices that were strapped to my head and he tried to repeat what he had just done to my pelvis. He was trying to get me to use my skill again. Well screw him! I would rather suffer than give MD the satisfaction.

It didn't stop there. MD kept trying new devices on my head. Some had electrical currents that tingled. Some had needles that were driven into my brain. I tried to condition MD by activating my psionic ability only when he stopped his testing. It didn't work. The screens had changed from my physiology to graphs and scan waves, which I was beginning to understand were showing my psionic attitude. It seemed the bastard was cataloging my ability. Well I had a surprise for him. I activated my other ability, tactical awareness, which through MD into a tizzy. He began to bombard my brain with different radiation and I think he sent nanites into my brain as well. I don't know how long I lay there being experimented on but I did learn that MD was learning. If I activated my ability he would give me a few minutes of ‘rest’. My life seemed to drag on then a message scrolled. I couldn't remember the last time a message had been on my screen, you have awakened a new psionic ability, technogenesis, reward: +1 to psion ability, +1 intelligence, technogenesis 1, 250 experience, bonus experience for first to unlock skill in game, 1000 experience. Ok so I was probably just imagining this. The date indicated I had been here over three weeks. I was probably insane by now. I do not think this skill existed when I did my training by my life was a blur right now. I tried to activate it. I was able to select it and do so and…nothing. I felt no different, nothing phenomenal happened. I cried, and I am not ashamed to admit it this was not the first time in the last three weeks I had done so. I screamed internally, let me go already! My eyes were closed and tears were sliding down my cheeks. I turned my head to the left and started to turn inward, closing myself off from everything.

My eyes shot eyes and I became instantly alert. I turned my head! It was not locked down. I moved my right arm and it moved! Without thinking I sat up and swung off the table. MD was hovering there. A massive six foot egg shaped monstrosity with dozens of ports for its tools to come out of. I took a step away from him and he closed the same distance. Shit was it going to capture me again. Was this some game to it? What did I do to get free, was it giving up? No it was the thought to let me go. I thought again stay, don't follow. I backed away and MD did not move. Relief flooded through me. The new psion ability would allow me to control MD and get out of here. Your designation will be MD.

My display flashed is a strange yellow text, confirmed my name is MD. It could talk back? With all my mental exhaustion I couldn't stand. FIP players were similar to real world people and needed sleep. I had probably only slept 10 hours in the last three weeks. I collapsed and passed out.

When I awoke I was still on the floor and felt so much better. Jed you have slept for 28 hours. Your health is diminishing, you should eat. Athena! She was back I huge wave of relief spread over me.

Where have you been Athena? I asked somewhat harshly.

I was talking to you the last 32 days but I believe the table you were on nullifies all receiving ability for you. When you collapsed I figured you needed the sleep and did not disturb you. You need sustenance though. So I suggest you eat a ration bar. My pack was in the nearby and I obeyed. I felt better and noticed MD was still standing where I had left him.

I tried thinking again to give him commands, nothing. Athena suggested I activate technogenesis first. Duh. I did so. MD please tell me where am I?

The same yellow lettering from yesterday appeared on my display. This is exploratory vessel A-12 for galaxy 31-C. Well that's progress.

Please explain the vessel’s primary functions. I replied munching on the ration bar, which seemed to taste better than before.

This vessel is assigned to quadrant 387 of galaxy 31-C to catalog and look for advanced life. Planets capable of supporting life are studied for 57 years (the machine translated the time for me). If no higher life is found on the planet the vessel moves to another planet or system.

Good progress. No having to search for answers the machine was pretty direct. How many science vessels are in this galaxy?

I do not know that answer. Perhaps you are asking how many science vessels similar to the one you are currently on? Ah, it was a machine and did not know if any other races had science vessels.

Yes, how many similar to this one.

I do not know the answer. I estimate there are still 11 remaining active including this vessel. Three have been captured by a race calling themselves the Kitsune. Seven have stopped transmitting. I read the message twice to make sure. Twenty-one of these ships had come to this galaxy.

Who built you and how many galaxies are your builders exploring? If this machine was as upfront as I hoped I could be finding a major gem in the games plot.

The First Beings built this vessel 151,234 years ago. I am not sure how many galaxies are being explored but probably all of them. My creators are very thorough. Not a very original name. What else should I learn from this bot…

So if a sentient being can communicate with you it is considered a higher being?

Yes. When you first communicated with me you were unable to form coherent thoughts. I managed to teach you have to utilize your ability. Well that answered a few other questions.

Are there any First Beings in this galaxy now?

MD reported, The time required to travel the expanse between galaxies is great. Six First Beings were on the A-1 vessel in our fleet but they were all dead 12,033 years into the journey.

Whoa! The First Beings had quite a life expectancy. Who commands the remaining vessels in your fleet?

We are automated, function independently but can receive new orders from Homestar. We transmit all our findings back to the First Beings on Homestar but I have not received new orders in 59,456 years. MD reported.

Is this a long time to wait to receive new orders?

Yes, we typically had orders transmitted every 103 years but have not heard from the creators in a long time. Did I sense sorrow? Could I play this robot to give me his ship.

MD could you give me a tour of this vessel? I would like to see the rest of this marvelous ship? He did not respond for a few minutes. Did I stump him into some feedback loop. Perhaps I should have just asked to leave.

Non-crew personal are not allowed outside of cargo room one and exam room one. The scrawled message finally appeared on my display. Perfect now time for the setup.

Can I become a member of the crew MD?

Again a pause, What skills can you contribute to the function of this vessel? Bam homerun. I had him now. I had to think of a good response. Just saying I could be the captain probably would not work.

I have many skills that could help you. I could find other higher beings to expand your crew. I can gain access to maps of other star systems you are programmed to explore and save you time by letting you know if it contains no habitable planets. I could act as you emissary in trade talks beings you are unable to communicate with. Was that enough?

The opportunity to communicate with another being is…pleasurable. Your presence could help our current mission, ‘complete exploration of galaxy 31-C to the best of your ability on your own.’ You designation of ‘crew’ has been recorded in the vessel’s system. You can now access the rest of the vessel. My heart leaped. I am going to make a fortune!

Mission Complete: Crew, become part of a space ships crew: 500 experience, choice of navigation or communications skill book. I selected the navigation skill book.

Athena chimed in, Jed you have communication open. You have 167 new messages from out of game and 17 messages from in game. Would you like to read them now?

I scanned the in game messages. Lina had sent 11, admin sent 4 and 3 from Katrine. Lina was asking for my location initially. The third message said she had found the jeep and was looking for me. The messages came further part away and I learned she had been appointed ‘temporary’ acting sheriff of Mycell. The admin messages were confusing. After 2 weeks of my disappearance in game they started looking for me. They tried to reset my character location, no luck. My persona allocation of 750 terabytes was still active so they knew I existed. The final message stated that since the complaints they had received were not from me directly they would take no further action until I personally put in a ‘ticket’. Well that is nice of them. Maybe this happens all the time? Katrine first message was angry in tone. I had promised to communicate daily with her. The second was one of concern. The third was that she was taking my disappearance to the administrators in the real world. The massive amount of out of game messages were just many attempts to contact me by family, friends and administration. I sent everyone a lengthy message roughly saying I was trapped in a dead zone in the game and that I had corrected the problem. I didn't want to revel my new asset so I was somewhat vague and only indicated to the admins that I was fine. I knew the massive A.I. randomly generated events and objects and I don't think the game administrators realized how awesome this ship was.

That completed I returned and thought to MD. You need to stop taking cattle to experiment on. Mission Complete: Trouble at the Ranch, reward: 500 experience, Gunther has a gift for you, 500 credits. Well that was easy. Just spend a month being tortured and lose your sanity. My in game outlook was definitely looking up if I could control this ship though. I had really stepped quickly through the tutorial for ships because I didn't think I would need it so soon. Now with my display active and my hands free I could select the new ship icon and look at what I had signed on to. The general ship stats come up:

Star Ship Name: A-12

Minimum Crew: 1 (Current Crew Manifest: 2)

Maximum Crew: 245, please note this reflects life support capacity, only 6 cabins are currently available, it represents the vessels ability to supply life support cycling

Ship Class: Science Vessel

Ship Nav Computer: Class X

Atmosphere Capable: Yes, up to 16g

Ship Size: Cruiser, 278.9 meters in length, 48.2 meters in height, 77.4 meters in width

Hull: Class XI

Shield: Class XI

Star Drive: Class XII

Life Support: Class X, fully recycling capable, extend time by 500%, 110,250 person days

Engines: Class XI, 0.9 hours per light year travel time

Cargo:

Bay 1: 30 tons, 25m x 15m x 4m (allocated to samples)

Bay 2: 10 tons, 10m x 20m x 4m (allocated to drones)

Bay 3: 150 tons, 60m x 40m x 6m (allocated to sample preservation)

Flight Bay:

85m x 50m x 20m (no craft currently docked)

Weapons:

Special: First Beings Core Sample Plasma Drill

Special:

Cloaking

Active Hull Holographic Projection

Analysis Lab Class XII

Medical Lab Class XII

Class XI manufacturing lab

Equipment:

5 harvesting drones

1 A.I. operator, designated MD

Please note interface with this ship requires the skill technogenesis

Wow! This ship was more than a gem. It had numerous technology components that were yet to be installed in the game or at least accessible to the general player population. The map of the ship came up. There were three main decks. The middle deck had the six crew quarters some rec rooms, a large dining area and a forward bridge. The aft of the ship was full of engines, fuel storage and the large flight bay spanned all three decks. The lower deck had a lot of engineering rooms, including the housing for the plasma drill, and also contained all three cargo bays and the science labs. The upper deck had rooms for life support, sensors, navigation, ship’s computer and a massive crew rec room that was 40m x 140m x 10m. Some interesting things were the crew quarters were massive, 10m x 8m x 4m, the dining room was twice that size, the upper deck rec room was showing empty, all three cargo bays were showing full capacity, and the outline of the outer hull showed the ship to slightly ovaloid in shape. With the map on the display I had MD show me around. He started on the bridge and his mannerisms showed…excitement? On the way to the bridge a small robot that looked exactly like a soccer ball hovered by. My inquiry had MD relay that this was a cleaning and maintenance robot. The bridge was fantastic. There were six different stations all with a cool gray metallic screen facing forward. There was no sign of any instruments anywhere. MD had me sit in one of the chairs and it was huge! MD gave me the physiology of the First Beings was humanoid but average height was 3 meters! That explained the 4-meter high ceilings throughout the ship and the wide passageways. MD spent the next hour showing me how to utilize my technogenesis skill to activate the screen, adjust it and explore the vessel. He briefly showed me the navigation and ship controls. I knew I could fly this ship, probably a little clumsily but I knew I could do it. He showed me to my quarters next. It was the first door to the right off the bridge. Massive furniture dominated the room. Two ‘couches’ that seemed to hold me suspended in air when I sat and a bed that felt tingly when I lay down on it. MD said the bed was stimulating relaxation and rejuvenation but would need time to adapt to my personal physiology and preferences. There were also six large wardrobes inserted into the wall. Each door was massive and had a strong magnetic lock that required it ‘owners’ hand to open. The doors slide quietly open as my palm touched them. All were empty. A small desk, and by small I mean two meters across and nearly 2 meters in height, with a personal screen was set by a viewport. MD can we change the ship’s name to something other than A-12 and possibly resize some of this furniture? The robot seemed to be considering my request.

Possible. It would require a unanimous vote by the crew to change the name and I will make the necessary changes to the furniture for your frame. Great. What name could I get the robot to approve?

MD, How about Valkyrie? It means warrior maiden.

This is not a vessel of war. I vote not to change the name. Do you have another choice? Ok so I needed something to appease the ships function. This was an explorer and science vessel. I racked my head then set Athena to the task of getting some possible choices. She did not disappoint and came back with three possibilities. Avalon, Prometheus, Minerva. I liked them all. Seems Athena was really into mythology. I think Minerva was another name for Athena though, so I decided not try it just yet.

How about Prometheus, he was a symbol of the bringer of knowledge. I did not want to mention that he also was the one who stole fire to give to man. Which might be apt for my future plans with this vessel.

Crew consensus. This vessel will now be recognized as Prometheus. Excellent!

The tour continued and the best room was the large recreation deck on the top level. Although it was completely empty, MD informed me it was a bio habitat. The space was designed to hold a fully functional eco-system. It was not ‘seeded’ as no First Beings had ever inhabited this vessel. MD informed me he had seeds and animals stored from 429 different eco-systems from the planets he had surveyed so far. MD did not have any bio samples from the home system of the First Beings to my disappointment. After much back and forth with MD it was decided that this space would be utilized to an environment that would be ‘pleasing’ for me to visit since I was now part of the crew. MD had 645,237 plant species and 232,543 animal genetic profiles to utilize. MD assigned 2 reprogrammed harvesting drones to the space to start the seeding process. It was my job to select what was ‘pleasing’ to me from the list or locate new samples to use. The only thing I selected at the moment was soil composition that could support most ‘Earth’ plants. The bots would need about two weeks working non-stop to lay the foundation. Fine by me, let them work.

Cargo bay 1 had a handful of storage boxes dedicated to plant samples. Each sample was stored in a small 2cm box. A crate was about a meter square and contained about 110,000 samples! There were a few larger sample boxes but I was surprised as the room was only about 5% full. Bay 3 on the other hand was closer to 80% full. MD had some ‘life size’ samples stored. Mostly he just stored genetic code electronically in the ship’s computer but sometimes he found a life form that he found ‘interesting’. MD was interested in reviving some animals so I could experience their uniqueness myself. Not a top priority for me now.

The flight bay was also awesome in size with a high ceiling but only about half the size of the recreation deck the bots were preparing above. MD said it was designed to handle 6 personal ‘mini’ shuttlecrafts for the crew. The layout could be altered to fit whatever vessel eventually resided here though. Possibilities floated through my head. I had already spent plenty of time in the lab so we skipped that part of the tour.

The final room on the tour seemed to excite MD the most. It was the replicator room. The room was not large and a furnace chamber was 4m x 5m x 5m. Basically if supplied with raw materials and the proper schematics are available it can create anything! Yes this was the highlight of the tour! Unfortunately my crew status currently only gave me access to repair parts for the Prometheus. I tried a half dozen different ways to get MD to allow me access to the massive database of designs outside ship parts but was denied. This must be some game protection by the programmers. Exhausted I returned to my ‘quarters’ and was surprised to see all my furniture had been resized. A new facility that provided bathroom facilities had also been added. I stripped and took a cold shower and felt alive and clean. The bed had earth green silk-like sheets. I was asleep in no time with dreams of grandeur.