**CHAPTER 2: THE WILD FRONTIER**

The rendering pinwheel was just finishing. A holo message suddenly scrolled across my vision.

Capsulite System Discovered: 100 experience

Bruin IV Discovered: 250 experience

Human Outpost Town of Mycell Discovered: 100 experience

Minor Faction Discovered: Bryant Colonists: 250 experience

Your ability levels and background make you suitable for the role of Sheriff of Mycell. (Skills Required: Admin 1, Gun Combat (any) 2, Streetwise 2, Social Standing 2)Do you wish to take this job? Pay is 50 credits a month and room and board.

I reread the scroll bar. So maybe this was not so bad. I could just work in a boring job for eternity and pay the bills that way. The scroll bar repeated again. I spoke aloud, “Accept job, Sheriff of Mycell.” The scroll bar immediately changed.

New Title Unlocked: Lawman, 50 experience

New Profession Unlocked: Sheriff, 250 experience

Level Gained, you are now Level 2, +1 to stat point, +1 skill point, please note a skill requires training in weeks equal to the sum of your current skills (currently 22) times the level of the new you are training divided by your education bonus (currently 1). If you are learning a new skill you do not already have it will cost two skill points.

New Mission Available: New Sheriff in Town, subdue the local gang, reward: 1500 experience, one common item, 2500 credits, suggest minimum party of two

New Mission Available: Trouble at the Ranch, find out who has been stealing Rancher Gunther’s cattle, reward: 500 experience, one uncommon item, 500 credits, this mission should be done in a group

New Mission Available: Get me off this Rock!, gain passage for Marie Valentine to a more ‘civilized’ planet, reward: favor of Marie Valentine, 250 experience

This game suddenly sounded more like a Western than a space game. The room came into focus and I did a quick walk of the surroundings. It was a large room with gray metallic walls. Two windows let light in bright orange hued sunshine from outside. The heavy looking metallic door had a pane of glass and I could read the flipped backwards lettering of sheriff scrolled on the pane. A corridor led to down to 4 holding cells. A small kitchen area had everything needed to prepare meals. Stairs led upward from the kitchen. Two doors on the second floor were labeled ‘Sheriff’ and ‘Deputy’. My interface said I did not have access to the room for the deputy. The sheriffs room had a bathroom attached, you need a bathroom in VR? It was dominated by a king size bed. Three walls each had windows, the front wall also had a door that led to a balcony overlooking the street. The room was completed with a small terminal desk and large aged oak trunk.

RESPAWN POINT SET: SAFE ROOM, SHERIFF OF MYCELL QUARTERS

The message briefly flashed. Then another flashed.

CAPSULITE SYSTEM NOW ACTIVE IN GAME

A loud knock at the door downstairs stopped my exploration. I stopped my action and returned downstairs to answer the front door. Looking through the glass behind the backwards SHERIFF writing a young auburn haired women stood. The glass was a little dirty but the women was attractive with very light freckles and wearing a light blue blouse with dark beige pants. She obviously noticed me on the other side of the door and seemed to be waiting for me to open the door. I obliged.

The women entered and began to speak immediately, “Sheriff I have come seeking your aide. I have tried to procure transport off this planet for the past three months and Mayor Carnet has blocked my ability to purchase my ticket. Since you are new here I hope you can get obtain a ticket for me and escort me to the transport.” She spook quickly with a hint of desperation in her voice.

I sat the women down and questioned her at length about her problem. I learned her name was Marie Valentine. Apparently Mayor Carnet fancied her and had made numerous advances toward her over the past year. She had no interest in the 55-year-old man. Everything came to a head four months ago when her parents were killed on their farm outside of town by some local wild life. She sold everything and planned to use the funds to relocate to the city of Wellington on the planet Barstow. The game developers were really good at their jobs, she appeared completely human and her distress tugged at me. Before I realized it I had agreed to look into the matter.

A message flashed, ‘MISSION ACCEPTED: GET ME OFF THIS ROCK!’

A smile flashed on her face as she turned to leave. She shyly gave me a peck on the cheek, said thank you, and left through the front door. I had a weird feeling I had just been played by the pretty women in distress.

“Athena?” I announced aloud.

“Yes, do you have a question?” The response came immediately in my head.

“Many questions. I am knew to this game and have never played a VR game before. Can you help get me situated?” It was a very broad question and I hoped the A.I. would fill in the information I needed.

“Jed Knight, I am checking your pre-game prep. I find no records. I am checking your aptitude scores for FIP, none found. Checking your payment information…searching your personal documents. Found relevant information! Your insurance company refused to pay the 5.23 million to have your body cloned and brain transferred. They were willing to ‘compromise’ and pay 100 thousand to have your consciousness transferred to a VR environment game. They paid the minimum amount – giving you four hours in a waiting room to create your avatar. Reviewing your avatar generation…I see you ran out of time and most of the avatar was randomly generated. You apparently did extremely well! You had a 30% chance to start with less than 10 points. You started with 25 point value – in the top 0.5% of possible results! Your intelligence started with 10 points which gave your personal A.I. an upgrade to level 2 to begin game play – lucky me! Skill analysis…you are well suited to your current profession of Sherriff and have a huge advantage with your psionic talents in game play. Starting location analysis…through misfortune you have started well out from the core worlds surrounding the planet Earth. As your A.I. I would suggest heading there immediately as the zone you are currently in is best suited for a group of players level 10 and above.”

Thankful to have some questions answered and get a little grip on things I wandered over to the only pieces of furniture in the room. A large desk with a large leather chair behind it and two worn metallic chairs opposite. I settled into the chair and heard the leather squeak as I made myself comfortable. “Athena, what does a level 2 A.I. do and why did you choose the name Athena?”

“An A.I. is made to aide characters in this realm. Player character’s can upgrade their A.I. one level for every 10 points in intelligence. We can also hardwire into machines in the environment. My external port is located behind your left ear.” I instinctively reached behind my and felt the ¼ inch metal disc with the divot in the center. “The higher level the A.I. the more help that can be given in missions and general assistance. I choose the name Athena from a list of 67,456 prepared A.I. names. Searching the list I looked for a name to best match with your needs. Athena is the name for the Greek goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, strength, mathematics, skill and war strategy, all talents I will provide for you. The feminine persona also seemed to fit your needs for companionship.”

It was good to know I would not have to do a lot of research on my own. Athena seemed capable of accessing the internet and my personal records with ease. “Athena when I was in the waiting room I noticed the FORGOTTEN REALM was more highly subscribed to than ALLSPACE REALM, can you tell me why?”

“Searching…from the news articles over the last 37 years I have just read it appears the game popularity the sword and sorcery genre appears to be due to the fact that leveling is quicker and power is more easily obtained. In ALLSPACE leveling is much slower and long travel distances made many subscribers leave the game. For instance, to travel from Earth the system of Epsilon Seven, 34 light years away, with a Type I star drive it would take 64 hours in real time. Many characters choose to do their adventuring on a single planet with large populations. I have also found reference to the fact the cost of space ships was ‘absurd’ and usually required large groups of players to band together to raise money over many months for a single vessel. An article written 7 months ago shows that the average level of a FIP player in FORGOTTEN REALM was 134 after 6 months of game play, while FIP players in ALLSPACE REALM managed an average level of 13. Both games have unlimited level limits. To balance the lack of quick leveling in ALLSPACE many missions have rewards which increase skills, stats and property.”

Having completely answered my question Athena seemed to be waiting for my next query. However I was still focused on this new information. Had I made an error in my decision to enter ALLSPACE? I also just remembered a few of the guys at the firehouse were players in the FORGOTTEN REALM. I could have probably sought them out for help if I had gone that route.

I leaned back in my chair and began thinking of a course of action. It was 250,000 in game credits to switch realms. I had about 20,000 already and wondered how long it would take to get the additional 230,000 if I decided to switch. My foot caught the drawer and pulled it open a bit. I learned forward and looked inside. A shiny Silver Star badge with the word ‘Sheriff’ lay there. It was sitting on a leather belt holster with Colt .45 resting inside it. A box of ammo was also located in the drawer. The drawer below had black flak vest in it. I remembered my ‘mustering out’ items. It looks like this was everything I currently owned.

I donned the vest, belt holster, which I noted was made for a lefty, which was perfect for me, pinned the star to my vest and decided to explore the town. I headed for the front door into the orange light town.

It took my eyes a second to adapt to the brightness outside. An orange sun beat down on me and I could feel the heat on my exposed skin. The cement sidewalk yielded to a wide paved street that was lined by metallic buildings on either side met me. Directly across from the Sheriff station was ‘Mac’s General Store’. A motorcycle painted in a flat black color sat on the street with the word ‘SHERIFF’ written in white letters. It seemed to be vandalized as the wheels were both turned 90 degrees. I stared at for a second and ‘selected it’, Hover Cycle, Property of the Sheriff’s Department of Mycell.

Suddenly I was excited like a little kid. I stepped quickly to mount the vehicle ignoring the dozen or so stares I received from the populace. I thumbed the ignition and bike rose a foot off the ground. My holo-display flashed a warning:

YOU DO NOT HAVE THE SKILL DRIVE VEHICLE (HOVER), CHANCE OF SUCCESS USING THIS VEHICLE SUCCESSFULLY IS 40% DUE TO OTHER SKILLS DRIVE VEHICLE (LAND) 2

I sighed deeply and thumbed the cycle off. No point in making a fool of myself on my first day. Non-challantely I swung off the cycle and headed to the general store. As I walked with a purpose I tried to mentally utilize Athena by thinking, ‘Athena what should I purchase at this store.’

“Accessing Mac’s General Store available goods…Items to best aide in your current environment and missions. Skill Book: Drive Vehicle (Hover), Complete maps of Capsulite System and habitations, Infrared/Thermo Goggles, 4 10-ammo clips for Colt .45, High Power Binoculars, MedKit I, 2 Combat Knives, Dark Brown Cowboy Hat, Ruck Sack, Filter Mask, 21 days worth of ration bars, total cost 10,970 credits.”

I coughed. That was about half of my available funds. I had to trust the A.I. as she knew more than I did. I walked in and was surprised at the size of the store. There was plenty of gear all over the place. Some weapons were mounted on the wall behind the proprietor. He was a large man with a graying moustache. I gave him my order and he quickly collected my purchases. My account on display dropped to 11,530 credits. The center display flashed again:

Six Mineable Asteroid Fields in Capsulite System Discovered: 1,200 experience

Planet Barstow Discovered: 250 experience

17 Population Centers Discovered on Bruin IV and Barstow: 1,700 experience

Six Uninhabitable Planets Discovered: 600 experience

General Mineral Data for Planets in Capsulite System now Available

Level Gained, you are now Level 3, +1 to stat point, +1 skill point, please note a skill requires training in weeks equal to the sum of your current skills (currently 22) times the level of the new you are training divided by your education bonus (currently 1).

Level Gained, you are now Level 4, +1 to stat point, +1 skill point, please note a skill requires training in weeks equal to the sum of your current skills (currently 22) times the level of the new you are training divided by your education bonus (currently 1).

YOU CURRENTLY HAVE 3 UNASSIGNED STAT POINTS AND 3 UNASSIGNED SKILL POINTS.

My image in the mirror had ‘glowed’ in the mirror behind the counter as I leveled up twice. “Athena,” I announced loudly. “Did you have me purchase the maps just for the experience?” Behind the counter Mac gave me a sideways glance but then ignored me when he realized I was not talking to him.

“Jed, I suggested the purchase for two reasons. The first as you surmised was to get you to quickly level up. The second was this is an unexplored system and therefore you can sell this mining and population data of the Exchange. Usually you need to have an explorer vessel to travel to an unknown system then spend 2-3 weeks scanning all the planetary bodies. A fair price for the data of this system would be a one-time payment of 75,000 credits. If you choose this method you can only sell it once. You can also put it for anyone to purchase for a fixed price and wait for other player characters to purchase the data. You may get more in the long run this way but it will take much more time and currently you are in need of a cash influx. I also suggest you invest all your stat points into Education”

I nodded and smiled. “Proceed and sell the system data.” Almost immediately my account grew by 75,000 credits. I was having a great day. I was level 4 in less than 30 minutes of gameplay and had a sizeable bank balance. This was not so bad. I listened to Athena as I packed my new gear. I selected Education and pumped the stat up to 10, giving me the +1 bonus to learning. One knife went to my belt, the other my boot. I loaded the four spare gun clips and inserted them in the gun belt. I put the cowboy hat on my head an adjusted it in the mirror opposite the counter. I selected the skill book for Drive: Vehicle (Hover) and noticed a timer start counting down from 1,848 hours. The rest of the gear went into the rucksack, which I slung over my shoulder and walked out.