CHAPTER 3: GAME ON

A cement sidewalk bordered the dark gray street. About a dozen metal structures dotted each side of the main road. The buildings ranged from 2 stories up to 4. Large generators and solar panels dotted the roofs that I could see from my vantage point. Two-dozen people were busy walking down the fairway with important things to do. At one end of the street the buildings ended and the road narrowed and went off into the distance. A mountain range was visible dotted with green, orange and blue foliage. At the other of the road a large vehicle stood next to a small 3 story white tower. A sign barely visible from my current position read ‘Mycell Spaceport’. I headed that way.

The spaceport was nothing more than a large paved field about a kilometer across. In addition to the large vehicle on the field a second similar vehicle come into view as I approached. I selected the first vehicle and inquired on my holo-display, System Shuttlecraft, appeared. I approached and found an office on the first floor of the tower. A bored middle aged man sat at the desk taping the air at a holo display. When he noticed me he greeted me, “Hello Sheriff, how can I help our local constable?”

After some though, “I would like a ticket to the largest city in this system.”

He nodded and quickly tapped away on his screen. “One way to Wellington?” I nodded in reply. The holo-screen flipped for me to enter my information. I typed in Marie Valentine as the passenger and put her in 1stClass seating. When I finished with the rest of the information the screen flipped back to the man. He immediately frowned. “Sheriff, unfortunately I can not complete this transaction. Mr. Garnet who owns the two shuttles is refusing to let Ms. Valentine leave before paying her bills.

“How much is owed to Mr. Garnet on Ms. Valentine’s behalf? I will pay that sum right now.” The man immediately got fidgety and started to sweat a little in the air-conditioned office. It took him a while to formulate a response.

Finally he said, “I believe Mr. Garnet would like the sum given to him directly. His offices are up stairs. Do you want me to see if he is available?” I nodded an affirmative. The man seemed nervous as he picked up a comm device and started talking quietly into it away from me. I could not quite make out the conversation other than hearing the word sheriff a lot. After a lengthy conversation the man turned to face me. He looked even more uncomfortable, “Mr. Garnet will be down shortly. You can have a seat.”

I took a seat on an ebony bench and waited patiently preparing my remarks in my head for Mr. Garnet. Time started to bleed forward. The teller at the desk seemed extremely anxious as I waited. After nearly an hour the door in the back opened up and an overweight balding man in an awful orange suit appeared. “Sheriff! So good of you to wait for me. Sorry for the delay, I have quite a lot to do. How can I help our fine sheriff?” The words left his mouth and I could detect the insincerity in them.

I stood, no point in dragging this out, “I am here to settle Ms. Valentine’s account so she can depart for Wellington.” He pursed his lips. A flash of anger appeared behind his eyes.

“Ah, yes. Well it is not so simple as that. As a condition of me purchasing her family’s estate she agreed to marry me.” He quickly added, “She will of course deny this. As you can plainly see I have been severely wronged. I now have property I have no intention of utilizing and no wife.”

“How much did this property cost you?” I replied evenly still studying this toad of a man.

“35,000 credits and I had to make some upgrades to the property as well costing me another 5,000 credits.” He seemed confidant that either I did not have the funds to pay or wouldn’t pay the sum. Maybe I am a sucker for a lady in distress or perhaps a fool and his money are quickly parted. Either way I responded with a slight smile.

“Mr. Garnet. I can see that you have been deeply wronged.” I paced a few steps for dramatic effect then turned and faced the man, “I will purchase this property you have no use of and for all the trouble this Ms. Valentine has put you through I will add another 4,000 credits to the total. I will also save you face in the community by getting Ms. Valentine off planet quickly. So in total I owe you 44,576 credits for the land and the tickets. You can have the deeds for the land sent to my office.” I turned and left as the system deducted to the amount from account balance leaving me with 41,954 credits. Easy come – easy go. My holo-display flashed some messages.

MISSION COMPLETE – GET ME OFF THIS ROCK! REWARDS: 250 Experience, you may call on Ms. Valentine once before she leaves.

BONUS – YOU AVOIDED MAKING MR. GARNET AN ENEMY. REWARD: 250 experience.

BONUS – YOU HAVE GIVEN UP MORE THAN HALF YOUR WEALTH TO SAVE SOMEONE. REWARD: NEW TITLE AVAILABLE, SELFLESS, 50 EXPERIENCE

YOU NOW HAVE PROPERTY. YOU CAN MANAGE THIS PROPERTY THROUGH THE ESTATE MANAGEMENT WINDOW.

The sun was going down and my stomach was doing summersaults and growling like a bear. I commed Marie Valentine and let her know I had her ticket and she was free to leave. I asked her if she wouldn’t mind having dinner with me tonight at the Sheriff Station. Her reply was filled with thank yous and exclamation points. She said she would cook me the best dinner I ever had and would be over in two hours. I returned to office and put my excess gear in the trunk in my room. I set the table with chipped dishes I found in the cabinet and before I knew it she had arrived. I am not sure how the game did this but my urges to hold a beautiful women in my arms was the same as when I was living in the real world. Marie had a low cut royal blue dress on as well as a smile that highlighted her dimples. The dimples never left her face while she prepared a generous cut of steak, a potato salad and some buttered green beans with almonds. We talked while she prepared the food and the smells just made my stomach turn even more.

I found out she had only received 25,000 credits for her family’s farm and she was also to receive lodging in the local hotel and a ticket to Wellington on top of the credits. But Mr. Garnet had failed to give her a ticket of sell one to her. He had just pressured her to marry him. I felt good that I had sided with right, maybe I should buy a white cowboy hat? Dinner was fantastic. The food tasted like a five star restaurant and the conversation was interesting. I learned that her brother had a small bistro in Wellington and he was going to allow her to work there.

I had assumed, ‘call on her favor’, had meant sex but I guess it actually meant a free meal. The evening began to draw out and it was many hours past dinner. Uncertain I said the words, “Well its getting late. Maybe we should wrap things up.” Her smile that was present all night suddenly disappeared.

“Oh, I will clean the dishes before I go.” She stood and seemed hurt. Now understand that I am not the type of guy that is comfortable making the first move but I could definitely tell I had played my cards poorly tonight. I decided I should take my shot, what could it hurt? While she was washing the dishes at sink I walked up behind her and slide my hand around her waist gently to her naval and whispered in her ear, “If you don't want to walk all the way back to the hotel you can stay here tonight.”

It was like electricity had shot through her. She spun in my loose grip and pulled my head toward her lips. After some passionate kissing she slipped her dress and led me to the stairs and eventually to the bedroom. Well I am a gentleman and a gentleman never tells but the next six hours were probably the best sex of my life. I learned things and tried things that completely blew my mind. In between our love making bouts I learned that Marie was a virgin. I couldn't believe it – she was more skilled than the 40 year old professor I had an affair with in college. Apparently she had been so worried about her first time she had studied about the best way to ensure pressure for both partners. The experience was so good for me I was considering travelling with her to Wellington and settling down with her. When I finally fell asleep it was the first time I was happy about being stuck for eternity in a game and my thoughts of changing to the FORGOTTEN REALM had been put to rest.

I awoke the next morning to find myself alone and a note on the pillow next to me, Thank you, my shining knight. I will always remember our night together. I am going to take the shuttle this morning to Wellington. If you are ever in Wellington I will be in Vlad’s Bistro on Market Street. Come see me. Your friend, Marie V.

My heart sunk. New information flashed on my holo-display.

HIDDEN SKILL UNLOCKED: TANTRIC, tantric is the art of being a great lover and skilled in the art of sex. It will allow you influence your lovers disposition toward you and also lends immense pleasure to both parties during sexual acts. REWARD: 500 experience.

THE TANTRIC SKILL BOOK HAS BEEN ADDED TO YOUR INVENTORY

MARIE VALENTINE - STATUS HAS BEEN UPGRADED FROM NEUTRAL TO FRIEND

MARIE VALENTINE - STATUS HAS BEEN UPGRADED FROM FRIEND TO ALLY

This is only a game. I probably would never find love with an NPC. My feelings still felt so real as well as the pain. A massive longing for a relationship welled up in me. If I wanted companionship it would have to be with another PC, preferably a FIP player. My focus should then be to move to Earth.

I dressed and headed outside toward the spaceport. It was noon and I noticed only one of the shuttles was still here. Marie was long gone. I went into the tower and approached the same man I had met yesterday drinking cup of tea. “A ticket to Earth please.”

He coughed on the tea. “Sheriff, let me check availability.” He tapped the hovering screen in front of him, “The next interstellar ship is due to arrive in about 20 months in the capital city of Wellington. It will not get you directly to Earth but can you to the Frieda system and then you can get to the Whitehome system then you can get to the…” I put my hand up to stop his ramblings.

“How long will it take once I leave Wellington?” He kept typing away at the screen.

“I can not be sure as I don't have accurate readings for the layovers and transfers to other interstellar vessels and there are many possible delays. I can best estimate about 14 months and around 60,000 credits to reach Earth.” He looked up at me pleased with himself and the work he had just completed.

“There are no interstellar vessels in this system I can hire?” I asked impatiently.

His look changed to a frown. “No. The only interstellar ship comes from the Frieda system every two years or so. We have twenty-nine cargo shuttles, one old military corvettes, twelve passenger shuttles and two mining ships in system, all owned by Mr. Garnet’s extended family. Mr. Garnet is the nephew of President Bryant, a direct descendant of the founding colonists.”

I thanked him for his time and walked out. My thoughts turned to my A.I. Athena, are there are short cuts to reaching the core systems around Earth.

Athena came back with a response after a very short delay. The shortest possible trip would require you to purchase your own starship. An old small trader vessel is for sale in the Freida system for 2.34 million credits but I must warn you that maintenance on such a vessel would be high. I would suggest saving at least 3 million credits before heading to the Freida system to purchase the ship. There is a chance you could find a closer vessel to purchase once new systems in the celestial arm of the galaxy are discovered. There are currently 13 unexplored star systems within 12 light years. Hiring a PC ship to come pick you up would cost an estimated 1,850,000 credits but you would need to pay in advance and it would take about 10 months to get here. Great, this was going no where fast.

I thought a little and asked Athena to please explain to me drive ratings on star drives. I remember a class X travels a distance of one light year in a real time hour. She went into a long report on Class I to Class X star drives. A class I was the slowest, taking about 5.5 hours to travel one light year but was dirt cheap, around 100,000 credits for a small ship. Each successive drive took about 30 minutes less per light year. Class IV drives were the most common and cost efficient for speed, taking four hours per light year distance and costing around 200,000 for a small ship. The drives become exponentially expensive. Military drives were typically between class VIII and IX. Only rich yachts and courier ships had class X drives which cost close to 10 million credits for a small ship. The drive system was only one of eight major systems needed on a ship as well. There was a navigation computer, life support, weapons, power systems, hull, cargo, bridge, and in-system engines that had to be built in as well. There were also many options you could tack on as well. The Earth Global Research was working on a class XI drive but the power consumption was off the charts essentially meaning a bigger power source needed to be discovered first. An online forum suggested the drive would be available in the next expansion due out in December. After all this information I finally understood all the complaints Athena had mentioned concerning in game travel and star ship cost.

Racked with indecision I asked aloud, “Athena, what do you suggest I should do?”

Thank you for asking me. Jed, you should go through FIP training. Typically a full integration player spends two weeks learning how to utilize the interface, function in the game and learn paths of gameplay advancement. In cases like yours, where the transfer was completed under an emergency, the training typically took place in the waiting room. You waiting room time was limited to four hours and no tutorials were provided. In your training, for example, you would learn to set emotional settings and sensory settings. Yours are currently set to maximum. Making injuries and your ‘feelings’ extremely strong. I hypothesize this is the cause of your extreme mood swings. Athena finished.

Learning how to play this game sounded like the astute path. During the rest of the day I purchased enough food to last two weeks. I had tasted one of the rations I had purchased yesterday and the closest comparison I could draw to its taste and texture would be sawdust mixed with peanut butter. I had a sign created for the door “Sheriff out of town for two weeks, will return April 21st.” Before beginning the training I read the messages from my mother and father. My father’s letter was more of a farewell letter, even after having turned my emotional settings down to 75% (as Athena suggested) I still wept. I knew he didn't believe someone’s soul could be made digital and transferred to a computer and this was his way of saying goodbye to his only child. My mother’s first letter read the same way and was also very hard for me to get through. The second letter however read almost exactly as the one she had sent me my freshman year in college, wishing me well on my new adventure and telling me to make the most of the experience and if I needed to talk to call her anytime.

I left the messages from Katrine alone for now. I would read them after I had completed my training. The training took place in a dream like state. I lay down on the bed, closed my eyes and Athena would create a ‘pocket’ VR settings to teach me. Every 4 hours she would have me eat a little and she also made sure I completed 8 hours of ‘sleep’ each day. It was more of a cram session for me. Athena announced the training complete after only 9 days. The game had massive depth. Most of the training involved changing a setting and then doing tasks to see how the setting affected me during game play. In all there were 82 different settings! Each one typically had a range from 1 to 100. ‘Experiencing’ each range of variance in a single setting took about an hour. After each tutorial I tuned the setting to my personal preference based on my experience. Even though the character generation tutorial was moot I still learned a lot. After statistic generation, typically a player generating a character had 5 random generated events during the 5 steps of development. So if you selected a career in the space navy it would have paths that would help you gain relevant skills. This allowed a player to formulate a player character toward their personal preferences. My automatically generated character just did one random event. Skill training took some time as well. A rank of 10 in a skill was considered mastery and you rarely failed using the skill. However there was no limit to how high a skill could be raised. I got to ‘try’ out each skill in simulation to see its effects. NPC interaction was the most interesting. Each NPC had 42 personality traits that varied on a scale of 1 to 42, giving endless combinations in ethics, behavior and motives. Characters could also form corporations (aka guilds) and work together. This seemed extremely important for some styles of gameplay – namely getting your own starship. A PC could also form their own by hiring NPC characters as companions. Unfortunately you gained a personal ‘NPC’ slot for every 10 levels in social standing or every 10 levels in character development. There were also some quests that could give you a bonus companion slot. Some professions when leveled also gave the bonus slots, for instance Sheriff level 2 gave a bonus slot for your deputy. One of my first goals would be to reach to gain this bonus by completing the sheriff missions. Another massive bonus is the NPC would respawn with the PC. Most NPC characters only had one death and never respawned. In effect by hiring an NPC you could make him/her immortal.

Everyone had a personal A.I. like Athena to help manage in game activities. An A.I. started at level 1 and could be upgraded 1 level for every 10 points of intelligence. However it was considered illegal on most planets to upgrade to level 4 or higher due to the fact the A.I. gains ‘sentient’ status. An A.I. upgraded beyond your intelligence parameter could overwhelm a PC and dictate actions. The example they gave in the tutorial was an A.I. refusing to follow a NPC to her room for a tryst. No matter how much the PC wanted to follow he could not facilitate the action on his own without permission from his/her A.I.. At level 1 the A.I. could just respond to questions and do research on provided subjects. At level 2 an A.I. could determine probable outcomes and chose a valid path of action. At level 3 the A.I. could ‘guess’ their hosts intentions and provide feedback in advance. At level 4 an A.I. functions of its own accord and may not always follow the PCs wishes. A level 4 can even infiltrate other systems through Wi-Fi networks. No information was available for level 5 A.Is and no facility currently offered the upgrade.

Property management was extremely interesting. It was the last phase of the training. Property could be everything from a ship to a station to land to a bank to ground vehicle or a business. I already owned an estate, the Valentine Ranch. Bringing up the property in the display showed its geographic location and outline on the surface. The facility was divided into 4 square miles of potato fields and 11 square miles of wheat, barely and rye fields. The main consumer was a distillery 76 miles away. The equipment listed was 4 automated harvesting/planeting mechs, one transport truck, a warehouse and one homestead. Total value 75,560 credits. I learned that due to current demand on the market though the best I could sell it for was about 40,000 credits. Basically I could break even if I sold it today, guess Mr. Garnet never checked the property he purchased, with a little work he could have made a nice profit. Athena suggested I put it on the market for 60,000 credits and predicated it would sell within the year. I thought better of this. There was a lease option for properties. This allowed you to maintain ownership while an NPC worked the property and you gained a reduced percentage of profit. There were also many options to upgrade the property as well to increase projected earnings. Currently if I just let an NPC run the facility I would generate about 1,500 credits a year in personal income. I paged through the many pages of ‘additions’ for this particular property. With the help of Athena I selected 2 new harvesting/planting mechs, one new transport truck, an upgrade to the homestead and a full shop building for maintaining the mechs and trucks. The total cost was a staggering 37,670 credits! But it would increase the cash flow to about 3,100 credits a month due to higher production, turnaround and reduced maintenance cost. The upgraded homestead would have 5 bedrooms over the current 2. Athena said it would be easier to draw an NPC family to work the grounds. Additionally I purchased the ‘defense’ package since local wildlife was a little violent. This included an assortment of rifles and handguns. Minus another 2,200 credits. A family of 4 from the Wellington immediately responded to the posting. Athena confirmed they were the parents of two twin boys and had the skills in farming and the mechanical to effectively utilize the property. I know these were only NPCs but I have a bleeding heart. Over objections from Athena I slide the property return to 90% meaning my income would only be 2,790 credits a month and the NPC family would keep the rest. The equipment and my new vassals would arrive from the Wellington spaceport in 5 days. I also noticed I was now almost broke with a measly 1,763 credits to my name.

I was pleasantly surprised to find by completing all the tutorials I was given two free stat points and one free auto upgrade to any skill! Athena said she wanted the reward to be a surprise. That seemed a little odd for an A.I. but I let my discomfort slip away from my current focus. As far as allocation Athena did some quick character progression algorithms and suggested both points into constitution if my gameplay was going to be ‘physical’ or split it between intelligence and education for skill development focus. I choose the later. Athena suggested I use the point for leveling up a psion skill or gain a new skill at level 1. My training had exposed me to all general available skills and I knew which one I wanted, Pilot: Spacecraft. I may not get the chance to use it soon but I pictured myself as some interstellar bounty hunter, travelling from star to star, kicking ass and taking names. I may be a few years away from that goal – but I had time. I had alerted Athena to my ultimate character idea and she acknowledged her future suggestions would follow suit to make me into a successful bounty hunter.

In-game missions were randomly generated and the forums only noted a few recurring missions but all of those in the forums were far away in the core systems. Many missions gave bonuses to stats, skills or access to skills outside the general list as I had already learned. Discovering missions involved talking to NPCs and completing the parameters on accepted missions. From the forums there were apparently many ways to complete a mission and the most important part was getting the desired end result.

The ALLSPACE REALM was based on about half a dozen old style role-playing games that the NextGen corporation had purchased rights to. It was constantly changing and updating based on PC actions and NPC actions. My discovery of the Capsulite system had opened new trade routes and ‘awakened’ the 27 million NPCs in the system. All could now have an effect on the overall game by offering new missions. There were six playable races Humans, Gene-Humans (modified humans), Kilrathi (a cat like race), Feyr (elven-like race), Ymir (race of giants), and Orcus (think a cross between a fantasy orc and a Klingon). The Kitsume were a non-playable race of ancient beings. Many missions revolved around obtaining Kitsume artifacts. The exact population of Kitsume is currently unknown but only a handful of PCs have noted in the forum boards of meeting one in person. The six playable races also had their own playable region of systems in the galaxy. Ymir were known for their prowess in battle and the massive mech battlesuits they wore over their 10 foot frames. They were generally a mercenary race and their race controlled a single star system with 7 inhabited planets and vast resources in the form of asteroid belts. In the forums it was noted they were difficult to play as the other races averaged under seven feet so a Ymir travelling on another races space craft was uncomfortable. Fortunately the Ymire had their own space yards. The Gene-humans were a genetically altered human species. These alterations could be anything from appearance to advanced physiology. The Gene-humans controlled twenty-three systems and were constantly at war with the humans and orcus. Humans had perhaps two hundred star systems known but many more undiscovered ones like the Capsulite system. There were many small empires and governments throughout. The explanation in the game for the undiscovered systems was a mass exodus 259 years ago. When the humans discovered the Orcus race at this time a major conflict ensued. The scales appeared to have Orcus headed to conquer humanity before the humans brought in an ally in the Feyr and also created Gene-humans. With the sleek Feyr battleships and the superior Gene-humans the Orcus were pushed back. The Orcus were confined into 5 habitable systems where they have remained for the last 248 years. PCs playing the Orcus race have posted a ‘reckoning is coming’ on the public forum boards. After the bloody war with the Orcus humans tried to stop the Gene-humans from taking complete control of the human race. The Gene-humans were pushed out after another bloody civil war and now a tentative peace exists with many border skirmishes. The only major battle in the last 100 years was the war on Peroxyn. Some unknown Kitsume artifact was discovered buried in the planet and the humans and gene-humans clashed. Thousands of Ymir mercenaries were hired by both sides and millions of humans perished. The planet of Peroxyn is now a wasteland and no one knows if one side or the other managed to collect the artifact. Adventurous PCs travel to the planet in search of artifacts and abandoned military gear. I guess every game needs its elves. The Feyr are a delicate looking race with pointy ears. They only control 3 systems and travel freely among the human and gene-human occupied worlds. They are devotees of technology and have access to unique devices and build spectacular structures. They also guard their technological secrets from other races and it is rumored they are exploring the galaxy for Kitsume artifacts. The last race is the feline looking race of the Kilrathi. They are taller than the most humans standing an average of seven feet. They are traders and have outposts throughout the known galaxy. It is also well known that their cargo vessels are extremely well armed. The hundreds of merchant vessels coming in and out of system feed their home system. These cats are considered also considered extremely greedy. Their organization falls into a clan like structure, which is rumored to be a very cut-throat political environment.

So now that I had familiarized myself with this game it was time to get my game on!