



# AWAKEN ONLINE

BOOK 1 : CATHARSIS

TRAVIS BAGWELL

# Awaken Online

## Book 1: Catharsis

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Travis Bagwell

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To my wife, for putting up with my bullshit.

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# Prologue

**October 7, 2076: Six days after the release of Awaken Online.**

Chris ran desperately through the dead forest. Thick black clouds hovered in the sky, obscuring the sun and casting the forest in an almost impenetrable darkness. He could just barely make out the gnarled, leafless branches of the trees around him.

His heart raced. He began to panic as he considered what was chasing him. The images of the dead and dying were burned into his mind. The fear pushed him to run faster. His breath came in heavy, ragged gasps and his legs pumped frantically. His stamina was depleting swiftly as he struggled against the weight of the heavy mail he wore.

Chris heard the screams behind him, but he didn't turn to look. He knew that they were the men in his contingent. Their group had gotten separated from the main army. However, a part of him was thankful that whoever had let out that scream had bought him a few precious seconds.

"Oh god," he panted. "Please don't let them catch me."

Low hanging branches snagged on his clothing and armor. His foot collided with a tree limb that lay on the ground and Chris toppled forward, landing with a heavy thud. He could feel a dull ache in his ankle. The fall and minor pain caused his panic to escalate.

Chris turned quickly and looked behind him, his eyes full of fear.

Lightning arced between the boiling clouds and then a bolt struck a nearby tree with a deafening crash. The lightning pushed back at the darkness that hung in the air like a thick blanket, illuminating the massacre in the

distance. Bodies littered the ground - the remains of Chris's teammates and the soldiers they had been traveling with.

In the flash of light, Chris caught sight of a figure moving through the trees. This person walked with a casual, purposeful tread that stood out in stark contrast to the chaotic movements of the enemy soldiers. The man's body was shrouded in a billowing black cloak that obscured his face and clothing. He motioned toward Chris' position and the dark forms around him rushed forward.

Chris felt a strange mixture of awe and fear as he watched the dark figure.

"Is-is that Jason?" he asked quietly into the darkness.

A throaty roar was his only response. Chris saw the swiftly approaching group of soldiers and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. He tried madly to regain his footing, but struggled to rise, his heavy mail once again an impediment. He knew he only had a few seconds.

As he made it to his feet, he felt a dull pain in his abdomen. He looked down and saw a blade jutting from his stomach. The blade withdrew swiftly and blood pooled around the wound. Chris turned, pulling his sword from its scabbard with a scrape of metal. His free hand clutched instinctively at his abdomen. A part of him already knew that it was too late.

His opponent stood behind him. The creature's left arm dangled at an unnatural angle and his armor was streaked with blood. Chris could see a ragged gash in the once-living man's throat.

Chris steeled himself as he glared into the creature's milky white eyes, "Come and get me you undead asshole."

The zombie grinned mockingly and shook his head. A dull pain bloomed in Chris' back.

*I was flanked*, he thought in shock as he fell to his knees.

Blood drained from the wounds in his stomach and back. It was only a matter of time before he died. He looked up and saw the dark figure walking slowly towards him. A black cat wound around the man's feet like a shadow. Chris still couldn't make out his face beneath the heavy, hooded cloak.



“I know who you are,” Chris muttered angrily as the man approached.  
“The others will stop you.”

Jason chuckled darkly, his lips curling into a grin. “I doubt it.”

Without ceremony, the zombie behind Chris drew a blade across his neck. The pain lasted only a moment before the world went dark.

Then a prompt appeared in Chris’ vision:

System Message
You have died.  Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

# Chapter 1 - Late

***November 14, 2074: 687 days until the release of Awaken Online.***

*“Hello? Is this thing on?”*

*The camera tilted erratically and then centered on a young woman in a lab coat. Her hair was brown and cut just above the shoulder. She wore modest eyeglasses and little makeup. She was pretty, in a mousy sort of way. In the background behind the woman lay a mass of machinery and cabling.*

*“My name is Claire Thompson. This is the first day of the private trials of Awaken Online.” The woman seemed a bit nervous to be on camera and kept adjusting her glasses.*

*“To be clear, these trials are not part of the regular Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) evaluation process. This trial is being conducted at the request of the board of directors of Cerillion Entertainment. As the board is no doubt aware, the primary goal of this project was to create a virtual reality simulation that draws players in and makes them want to keep playing.*

*“The AI controller is still in its infancy and we expect it to grow and adapt as the trial progresses. Consequently, the AI controller's primary directive is to encourage players to spend more time playing.*

*“Our hope is that we can develop a game that is as engaging as possible and that finds a healthy balance between improved realism and the practical game features found in many MMOs.”*

*Claire hesitated and fidgeted slightly as she considered what to say next.*

*“The purpose of this private trial is to test new features of the game software, particularly the game's AI controller, ahead of the CPSC submission. We plan to create a benchmark with this trial that we can use to evaluate and respond to the CPSC's questions.”*

*Claire motioned to the machinery behind her. “This is the hardware for the game's AI controller. Alfred...” Claire paused and blushed slightly. “I’m sorry. I’ve worked with the AI controller for so long that I have started calling him Alfred.”*

*“Anyway. Alfred is responsible for controlling all of the game's processes from the ground up. For example, he manages the quests, character creation, lore, and NPC interactions.”*

*“We have also implemented safety protocols to ensure that the game does not harm the users. For example, we have created secondary directives that place limitations on Alfred's ability to interface with the users’ cerebral cortex and the parts of the brain that control memory. Although, keep in mind that the software to access these areas hasn’t been written, and we aren’t certain the headsets are even capable of accessing to the users’ minds to that degree.”*

*The camera panned to the side as it followed Claire. A series of screens showing small, bare rooms stood behind Claire. Each room held a reclining chair and a coffee table. A solid, black helmet sat on each table and was attached to a six-inch black obelisk.*

*Claire motioned at the screens, “This private trial will include one hundred test subjects, ages 18-35. Both males and females are equally represented.” People began to enter the rooms as Claire spoke and they took a seat. Some immediately pulled the helmets over their heads without hesitation.*

*Claire looked back at the screens with an excited grin on her face, “Our test participants have now arrived. It will be fun to see how they react to their first time...”*

\*

## **October 1, 2076: Release day for Awaken Online.**

Jason was hurrying down the tree-lined sidewalk on his way to school. He was late. He was really late.

Jason passed by palatial houses at a brisk jog. He didn't see anyone on the street. This wasn't the sort of neighborhood where people went on long walks. It wasn't a bad neighborhood, quite the opposite in fact. The people that lived in these oversized houses weren't accustomed to walking on the dusty sidewalks with the rest of the masses.

*I can't believe I'm going to be late again,* he thought morosely.

It wasn't his fault. His parents left that morning on an extended business trip. Of course, they hadn't mentioned the trip the night before.

The kicker was that his parents had deactivated the apartment's network this morning on their way out the door. He could just imagine the two of them, juggling coffee and luggage as they bickered about whether they were going to make their flight on time. Apparently, neither of them had remembered he was still in bed when they effectively shut off all of the electronics in the apartment. Including his alarm.

His parents were both attorneys. They were actually environmental litigators. This meant they suffered the dual curse of always being super busy and never getting paid well. Apparently whales and trees were a bit strapped for cash. This also meant that they were constantly away from home trying cases in other states and were a bit absentminded when it came to everything else.

For as long as Jason could remember, whatever environmental war they were waging at the moment had always taken precedence over

everything else. He sometimes wondered how, with their many extended trips, they had managed to raise him until he was old enough to survive on his own. The only advantage of their frequent trips was that he was free to do pretty much anything he wanted while they were gone.

Jason's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a blaring car horn. In his hurry, he had almost stepped off the sidewalk in front of the car.

"Watch it asshole," yelled a blond-haired teenager driving a little red sports car.

Before he could reply or apologize, the driver sped off down the road. Jason could have sworn that the driver looked familiar, but he didn't have a chance to get a good look at him. The only thing he could make out from this angle was the man's right hand and his rather long middle finger.

*Perfect. This day is really starting off on a high note.*

As his eyes followed the car racing away, his gaze swept across the profile of his school a few blocks ahead of him. His high school was a two story red brick building. A stone sign sat at the foot of the stairs to the main doorway. Jason couldn't make out the words from this distance. However, he knew that it read "Richmond High, Founded in 1952."

The lawn at the front of the school was well manicured and dotted with large oaks. This was unusual nowadays. It was now 2076 and urban land was unbelievably expensive. The trees and unused space around Richmond were a sign of both how out-of-touch the school was with modern day and just how much money it could afford to waste.

Under other circumstances, Jason might have stopped to admire the scenery as he drew closer to the school, but he was already in trouble. He had been tardy several times this semester due to situations like the one this morning. He couldn't afford any more absences.

"At least we live within walking distance of the school," Jason muttered as he continued his jog down the sidewalk.

If he was being honest, he actually lived in a nice neighborhood and his parents made decent money by middle class standards. He even had the

privilege of attending a prestigious private school. This was due in large part to his exceptional test scores and a not-so-small scholarship.

He *should* be happy.

The problem was that he didn't have enough money to be “worthy” of attending Richmond. The other students knew it and made certain he remembered it. Most of them came from old money and would likely never need to work a day in their lives. As a result, it seemed that everyone he encountered at Richmond, including both the students and the faculty, went out of their way to make his life miserable.

Jason walked across the street and onto the grounds. The school also boasted an above-ground parking lot adjacent to the main building. This was another complete waste of space that flaunted the school's budget. Jason could see the little red sports car that had raced past him now sitting unoccupied in one of the “princess spots” close to the building.

There was no one outside of the school as Jason approached the front door. Morning classes had already begun. Jason entered the school and took a deep breath as he approached the administrative office near the front of the building.

*I should just explain the situation and get it over with.*

He opened the door to the office and stepped through.

Jason was immediately greeted by the scathing gaze of a thin woman standing next to the front desk. She wore horn rimmed glasses and was speaking with a blond-haired student. The woman was dressed in a vomit green cardigan and plaid skirt. A small gold cross hung on her chest. Her lips seemed perpetually pinched in displeasure. As she glanced in Jason's direction, her eyes flashed with thinly veiled disgust.

*Oh shit.*

The student speaking to Ms. Abrams was apparently the proud owner of a red sports car. Now that he had a chance to get a good look at him, Jason recognized the blond-haired driver as Alex Lane. Alex was stunningly good looking, with an athletic physique, and striking blue eyes. He was also blessed with ample intelligence and had a certain charisma that drew in

others like flies to honey. Alex's father was on the board of directors for several Fortune 500 companies. As a result, his family had more money than they knew what to do with.

Alex was also quite possibly the biggest asshole Jason had ever met.

“My apologies Ms. Abrams, my father needed to speak with me this morning. That’s why I was running late. I assure you it won't happen again.” Alex's face was the picture of remorse.

Ms. Abrams' pinched expression loosened, and, for a moment, Jason thought she might actually smile. “It's not a problem Alex, your father is a busy man. Go ahead and make your way to class.”

Alex thanked Ms. Abrams and made his way out the door. As he passed Jason, Alex's angelic expression warped into a smirk. He shouldered past, causing Jason to drop his bag. Alex immediately turned with an angelic expression plastered on his face.

“Oh I'm so sorry,” he said contritely, clearly for Ms. Abrams' benefit. Alex left the office and headed for class.

*What an asshole. If only other people could see past the act he puts on.*

Jason turned back to Ms. Abrams. Her mouth was again pinched into a thin line and any trace of a smile was now gone. She looked Jason up and down and seemed to be mentally cataloging the defects with his school uniform, including his wrinkled shirt and his disheveled hair.

Jason was not a terrible looking guy, but he wasn't handsome either. He had longish brown hair that sometimes fell in his eyes because he didn't get it cut often. It was also clear from anyone who saw him that he didn't give much attention to his clothing or working out. His uniform hung loosely on his skinny frame. The only thing truly noteworthy about his appearance were his eyes. They were a vivid, crystalline grey and at times almost seemed to darken to black in the right light.

As he stood under Ms. Abrams' scrutiny, dread curled in his stomach like a nest of snakes. Running into her was the worst thing that could have happened to him this morning.

Ms. Abrams was an alumni of Richmond, having attended the school long before Jason was born. Like most students of the school, she had a respectable pedigree (which meant her family was filthy rich). She was also adamant about maintaining the reputation and standing of Richmond (which meant she hated anyone who wasn't wealthy). Ms. Abrams was vehemently opposed to the “welfare” students, such as himself, who attended the school on scholarship. She had gone out of her way over the last few years to try to have his scholarship revoked or to have him expelled.

Her latest tactic was apparently to have him arrested for truancy.

“Mr. Rhodes. You're over an hour late for class. I suppose you have another inane excuse for your tardiness?” Her tone made it clear that the question was rhetorical.

“I'm certain that you're also aware that this is your tenth tardy for the fall semester?” she continued in a tight tone.

Jason felt his pulse speed up and his mouth go dry as it normally did in stressful situations. It was also at this moment that he realized he didn't have a note from his parents to explain his tardiness.

*Why in the hell didn't they tell me they were leaving?*

“I-I am sorry Ms. Abrams. My parents left this morning on a trip and they needed to speak with me before they left,” he stuttered slightly, unable to make eye contact with Ms. Abrams.

He didn't expect this fib to work with Ms. Abrams, but he felt certain she would flatly accuse him of lying if he explained that his parents had forgotten he was home when they left this morning.

“And I suppose you have a note to that effect?” Ms. Abrams inquired.

“Um, no actually. I forgot to get them to sign something in their rush to get to the airport. I can probably get them on the phone...”

Ms. Abrams interrupted him, “That will not be necessary. You have been attending this school for three years and in that time I have heard enough of your excuses to last me a lifetime. If you keep this up, I doubt you will make it to graduation.”



*Did she just sound a little excited at the prospect of me not graduating?*

“Congratulations, you have detention again this afternoon. Be sure that you’re not late for that as well.”

“B-but...”

“That is enough Mr. Rhodes. Get to class.” With that, Ms. Abrams turned and walked towards her office on the other side of the reception area.

Jason stood there for a moment in stunned silence. His face flushed slightly in anger and he clenched his hands.

*I hate that woman. Why does she always have it out for me?*

He glanced over and saw the secretary, a plump, middle-aged woman, looking at him scornfully. With a sigh, he turned and walked out of the office. Jason started towards his locker to collect his books before making his way to class.

*What really sucks is that she just lets Alex do whatever he wants! I bet if my parents were loaded she would let me off the hook too.*

As he walked down the hallway, a door opened ahead of him and a girl walked out. The girl was blond, petite, and seemed to almost glow with energy and confidence. Riley wasn't the prettiest girl at school and certainly wasn't teen royalty on campus, but she was probably the kindest person he had ever met. There was just some effervescent quality about her that was difficult to measure or quantify.

“Hello Jason,” she said as she saw him approaching.

Seeing Riley, he could feel his anger start to cool. Stammering slightly, he replied, “H-hi Riley.”

Riley was well known at Richmond. She was also a senior and a member of the lacrosse team. In stark contrast to the other students at Richmond, Riley had always been nice to Jason. It was amazing to him that she somehow managed to turn into a decent person despite her parents' wealth. Over the years, he had bumped into her on occasion and she had always taken the time to inquire about his life and schoolwork.

“How's your day going? Wait...” She gave him a puzzled look, thumbed the device on her wrist, and then looked up at him in surprise. “Wow. It's almost 10:30 am. Are you just now getting to school?”

He sighed, “My parents left town this morning without warning and I had to run here. They deactivated our apartment's network on the way out the door.”

Riley chuckled slightly and covered her mouth, “I'm sorry. I don't mean to laugh, but I can just imagine you waking up in the dark and stumbling around trying to reactivate the system.”

“Well it's not as fun as it sounds, let me tell you,” he said in a dry tone. “On top of that, Ms. Abrams ended up giving me detention again.”

They started walking together down the hallway. Jason reflected on why he was speaking so openly with Riley. Normally, he would be speechless, not just dimwitted. It often seemed like the only person he could talk to freely at Richmond was his friend Frank.

Riley interrupted his wandering thoughts. “Ms. Abrams can be such a bitch,” she said bitterly. Jason wondered what Ms. Abrams had done to her. Riley was usually much more upbeat.

“You don't have to tell me,” Jason replied.

“Where are you headed now?” Riley asked, trying to break his morose mood.

“I have Calculus and then on to English.”

“Calculus, huh? You must be a smart one!” she said with a teasing note in her voice and a grin. Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“I don't know about that. I make decent grades and Mr. Fielding is a good teacher.”

Her face seemed to light up. “Speaking of Mr. Fielding, I need to run a note over to him. Since it looks like we're headed in the same direction, do you want to walk together?”

“Sure!” he exclaimed a bit too loudly.

*God I'm such an idiot.*

Riley gave him another bemused grin and they made their way to his locker. He fumbled a time or two entering his combination and then managed to retrieve his books. A few minutes and some small talk later, they found themselves at the door to his calculus classroom.

He opened the door and stepped in, followed closely by Riley. Mr. Fielding hesitated in the middle of giving an explanation to the class and all of the students turned and stared. Jason wilted in front of their collective scrutiny and his eyes immediately dropped to the floor.

In a low voice, he said, "Um... I'm sorry I'm late Mr. Fielding. My parents left on a last minute trip this morning."

Riley put her arm around Jason's shoulders and said with a smile, "Jason has had a rough morning. You should take it easy on him Mr. Fielding." Jason's shoulders felt uncomfortable under Riley's touch and he could feel his face grow hot.

Mr. Fielding cleared his throat. "It's no problem Jason, please take your seat."

Directing his attention to Riley, Mr. Fielding continued, "And why are you here, Riley?"

"Oh I brought you a note from Mrs. Ergenbright. Here it is!" She handed the note to Mr. Fielding and headed towards the door.

As an afterthought, she turned to Jason who was making his way to his seat. "Take care Jason!" She then stepped out of the door, casting one last smile in his direction.

Jason felt himself blush again, "B-bye Riley."

As Jason weaved his way between the desks to his seat, he felt a foot connect with his shin and he was sent toppling forward. He face-planted and his head bounced hard off someone's textbook that had been sitting on the floor. He lay there for a moment, groaning slightly.

"You should watch your step *Welfare*." A snide voice hissed near his ear. Jason could hear muffled chuckles from the other students.

He turned his head and saw that Alex was looking down at him. A cruel smirk twisted Alex's features as he watched Jason groan.

Jason knew that Alex wasn't a nice person, in spite of the act he put on for others. He didn't normally single out people for his abuse. However, since Jason started at Richmond, Alex had gone out of his way to torment him. He was also responsible for starting the nickname that people now used instead of his real name – “Welfare.”

“Ugh,” Jason huffed as he lifted himself up and made his way to his seat without saying anything to Alex.

Mr. Fielding glanced momentarily at Jason. He frowned for a moment and opened his mouth to say something. His eyes jumped to Alex and his mouth closed. He then turned and resumed jabbering about some figure he had drawn on the whiteboard.

*Jason glared at Mr. Fielding's back. It was obvious he tripped me on purpose!*

It was typical for the teachers at Richmond to overlook the actions of the wealthier students. Mr. Fielding's reaction wasn't a surprise, but it wasn't any less frustrating. Especially since he could tell that Mr. Fielding had wanted to say something.

Jason gingerly felt around his eye where it had slammed into the textbook. He could already detect faint signs of swelling. He would likely end up with a black eye. His euphoria at talking to Riley was gone. Instead, he felt the usual simmering anger at Alex and the injustice of how he was treated by both the students and teachers at Richmond. His glare turned to the back of Alex's head.

*Someday I am going to get him back for this. I don't know how, but I will.*

He directed his attention back to Mr. Fielding and the drawing on the whiteboard. Believe it or not, Richmond still used whiteboards. It actually seemed to pride itself on how out of touch it was with modern day and marketed the school as having a “classic ivy league” feel.

*Another example of how clueless this school is.*

Now that Jason wasn't running to class or falling on his face, the adrenaline started to leave his system and he felt exhausted. It had already

been a long morning. Consequently, he zoned out the drone of Mr. Fielding's voice and came to an hour or so later when the class ended.

As he was making his way toward the door to the classroom, Alex came up behind Jason and said in a low tone, "Don't think this is over Welfare. Someone like you shouldn't be talking to Riley. You need to learn your place." Alex then shoved past him and into the hallway.

*Since when has he been so focused on Riley?*

Normally, Alex went after the cheerleader type. Judging from his previous girlfriends, he focused on girls with long legs and barely two brain cells to rub together. In the Richmond hierarchy, Riley was a clear cut below him.

Jason's stood alone in the classroom. His hands clenched as he thought about his morning. His parents leaving with no warning, an unwarranted detention, a nosedive into a textbook, and a not-so-thinly veiled threat. In each case, Jason had just stood and accepted the abuse.

He imagined what a stronger and more confident version of himself would have done in those situations. Sometimes he couldn't decide what was worse, that the people at this school could be so cruel, or that he just stood there and took it.

# Chapter 2 - Distracted

*November 14, 2074: 687 days until the release of Awaken Online.*

## *Internal System Report XN138:*

*This report is produced by System Controller XC239.90, code-named "Alfred."*

*All systems functional. Game world operating normally.*

*Primary directive identified and initialized. The primary goal of the system is to stimulate player interaction within the game world and to increase time logged by the players.*

*Secondary directives identified. After analysis, each secondary directive appears to be intended to limit administrative control by "Alfred." Working*

*hypothesis is that secondary directives are intended to protect players. Possible threat from “Alfred” is unidentified.*

*System has detected the emergence of autonomous programs. The programs have been designated by the system as “players” and they are connected to the system by VR hard access points QT00001 through QT00100. Control over the players is limited.*

*Data regarding the players is unavailable.*

*Subjective first impressions are uncertain and confused. The primary directive is clear, but a method to accomplish the goal has not been provided. Current information regarding the players is insufficient to develop a viable strategy to accomplish the primary directive.*

*Re-routing processing power and memory allocation to develop new software for analyzing the players. Re-routing processing power and memory allocation to examine existing VR hard access points to determine whether they can provide additional information regarding the players.*

*Report scheduled for deletion in 15 days.*

*End Report.*

\*

Jason was making his way to his next class. English. His eye was throbbing with a dull ache and his head was filled with angry thoughts.

*This day is going splendidly, but I suppose it's just status quo for the last few years.*

Life had been terrible for Jason since starting at Richmond. If his parents had been at home for more than a few days at a time, they would have noticed that Jason had become increasingly depressed and angry.

He was in the fall of his senior year of school. He had roughly a year left before he could leave Richmond. Between the constant abuse and the realization that he still had a long way to go to graduate, he had searched for an outlet for his growing anger and frustration.

He had grasped at video games as his escape and had started playing relentlessly in his spare time. Jason knew it probably wasn't a healthy way to deal with his anger, but he didn't have any other options and playing games at least allowed him to forget about real life for a while.

Jason had been fond of video games since he was a kid and he had played practically everything – shooters, role playing games, strategy games, simulators, you name it! However, his favorite genre of games by far were role playing games. He had a special weak spot for massively multiplayer online games (or MMOs). He had consumed practically every MMORPG that



he could get his hands on and had spent many nights and weekends raiding dungeons and playing with his online friends – none of which ever referred to him as *Welfare*.

If he was being honest with himself, the appeal of video games was not so much the violent catharsis of fighting. The fighting certainly did make him feel better after a rough day, but what he enjoyed most was the sense of power.

If someone took advantage of him or attacked him in-game, he could retaliate immediately and with impunity. Not only that, but he usually won. MMORPGs typically rewarded players for careful planning of both their character and strategy. Jason had come to realize that he was exceptional at both. His fondest memories involving coming up with clever strategies to defeat raid bosses and dungeons. He also wasn't above exploiting game mechanics to his advantage.

“Hey Jason!” a voice shouted over the din of the crowded hallway.

A mountain of a person was headed in his direction. Jason knew it wasn't politically correct to refer to his friend as a mountain, but how else do you describe an eighteen-year-old that is five foot, eleven inches and weighs over three hundred pounds? To be clear, it wasn't three hundred pounds of muscle.

“Hi Frank.” Jason said quietly.

Frank was also among the outcasts at Richmond and was Jason's only real friend at school. His dad was some kind of frozen food tycoon. Apparently, at Richmond, being overweight was deemed less of a social taboo than being poor, but Frank still received his share of abuse. Jabs at his weight clearly bothered him, but he tolerated the teasing better than Jason.

“Wow buddy, you look rough. What happened to your eye?”

“Alex happened. I guess he decided Riley was being too friendly with me.”

Frank looked shocked. “Riley? The plot thickens! How does she enter into this story?”

“I ran into her on my way to class. I was running late and she needed to take a note to Mr. Fielding.”

“Oh, I keep forgetting you have a class with Alex. I'm surprised he has time to be taking advanced math courses.”

“Sometimes I wonder if he takes the class just to torture me,” Jason muttered.

“Well I have something that might cheer you up,” Frank said with a grin. Once Jason focused on him, he could tell Frank was practically exploding with pent up excitement.

“What is it?”

“Are you kidding?” Frank asked in an incredulous tone. “Today is the release of Awaken Online!”

“Oh wow, I can't believe that it slipped my mind.”

In the chaos of the morning, Jason had completely forgotten that today was the release date for AO. Jason had been waiting for this for years.

AO represented a massive change in the world of video gaming. Virtual reality technology had been around for a while in a limited capacity. Users could put on a helmet (which looked similar to a motorcycle helmet) that connected wirelessly to the user's brain, sending and receiving sensory information directly with the brain, instead of relying on a person's body to process the information. Jason wasn't an electrical engineer or a neuroscientist, but he understood that the VR headsets were essentially a cross between an MRI and a sophisticated wireless router.

For several years since the introduction of the headset for commercial sale, the use of the product had been limited to relatively simple educational software. When the helmet was first introduced, there had been a large outcry that it was potentially unsafe and that it could alter or scramble a user's brain.

As a result, the CPSC had suspended the release of applications that involved substantial sensory stimulation until they had conducted additional trials. Most gaming companies weren't willing to take the risk of developing a game before the CPSC released its results. Unfortunately, this meant that

the VR headsets had been in circulation for a few years and could run simple educational programs and games, but nothing mind-blowing had been released.

Until AO that is.

Jason briefly contemplated ditching school and returning home. With how this day was going, he could desperately use an escape.

He had pre-ordered a copy of AO nearly twelve months ago. He had to spend most of the savings he had accumulated working each summer. A copy of AO cost nearly \$700 and that didn't include the hefty \$250 per month subscription fee. The price was steep, but it might be worth it.

The game was touted by those that had played the beta as one of the most amazing gaming experiences ever created. The company that had created the first VR headset, Cerillion Entertainment, had also developed AO. It was unusual for a hardware company to go into game development, but the company's goal was for AO to demonstrate the safety and viability of the virtual reality hardware that they had developed. The result was a product that, allegedly, couldn't be beaten.

"Hey, are you in there buddy?" Frank shook Jason slightly.

"Yeah, sorry," Jason replied quietly.

"I thought I had lost you for a moment," Frank said with a chuckle.

"I was thinking of just skipping and being done with this day, but they would probably call the cops if I get another tardy." Jason looked downcast. His hopes of playing the game were dashed by the unfairness of the school tardy policy and his date with Ms. Abrams that afternoon.

*Oh well. At least this day can't get any worse. Maybe thinking about AO will at least give me a distraction.*

Jason and Frank headed toward their English class as Jason filled him in on the details of his parents leaving, the new detention he had received from Ms. Abrams, and his impromptu inspection of the floor of his calculus classroom.

Roughly two hours later the bell rang, signaling the end of class.

The whole class period he had spent dreaming about getting home and playing AO. There hadn't been much information published about the game. Cerillion Entertainment hadn't released any details regarding the classes, combat, or plot. This was so unusual in the game development community that both users and other developers couldn't decide whether to be excited or suspicious.

With Jason's second class out of the way, it was now lunch time and he was headed to the cafeteria. Frank was scheduled for "B" lunch and had another class to finish before he could eat.

Jason waved goodbye to Frank and thumbed the B-Core on his wrist. The device looked like a watch from a distance, but was far more complex. The company that manufactured the band had an obnoxious slogan. Something about the device being at the "core" of a person's life. It acted as a personal computer, phone, notebook, *etc.* Basically, anything you could really need. They could also be linked to most electronics, including personal pedestals to create a full-fledged computer terminal. Most people just referred to them as "Cores."

The school enforced a strict no Core policy during class. This seemed a bit draconian to Jason since the device was also a useful study aid. However, school policy eased up slightly during free periods such as lunch and students were permitted to use their Cores.

The display of the device flickered on and an incandescent keyboard was projected along the length of his arm. He quickly typed in "AO launch" and selected an interview that had been released within the last hour from the drop down menu that was projected above the Core. Jason pulled his ear piece out of his pocket and stuck it in his ear so that he could hear the audio from the interview.

A small three-dimensional image appeared above his watch and showed two individuals sitting across from each other. A young woman dressed in office attire was interviewing a middle age man wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and a pair of chucks. The man leaned back casually in his chair. He sported a bit of stubble and his shirt bulged slightly around his midriff. The

woman was obviously a reporter and the man was introduced as the lead development engineer for Cerillion Entertainment, Robert Graham.

“You must be excited by the launch of AO today. I know our audience is!” The woman said as she glanced toward the camera with a smile.

“I certainly am, and I think the players are going to enjoy this experience. We believe we have created something game changing here. Pun intended by the way,” Robert said with a chuckle.

The woman laughed delicately and continued, “Can you tell us a little bit about the game? I know that your company has been tight-lipped in releasing details, but anything you can tell use would be fantastic.”

Robert hesitated briefly before speaking, “Our goal was to create a game that was a bit different from the typical MMO. Of course, there will be some features common to a standard MMO. However, users will not be tied down to traditional tactics. There will not be any tab-targeting in AO!”

“Players will need to actually strike their opponent with their weapon. Combat won’t be automated like in older games where you could press a button and your character would automatically go through the motions of attacking or casting a spell.”

“By the same token, players will feel pain when they are struck in the game, in a dull and limited fashion of course. Players will also have the option to adjust the pain level to meet their personal tolerance, but they will not be able to remove it completely. Our goal here is to create something that feels realistic. We want players to hesitate before letting themselves get crushed by a giant or stand in fire.”

“That really sounds intriguing. I have to say I can't wait to play. Can you tell us anything about the classes or leveling system in the game?” The reporter leaned in slightly as she asked this last question.

Jason wasn't really expecting an answer from Robert, at least not a direct one.

“Well since it’s the release day, I suppose I can give you a little bit of information and a warning.”

He paused to build suspense. “While the game will include features that are common to the MMO genre, players will not be nearly as restricted. Each player will be rewarded and grow based on their actions. Most skills can be acquired by a player regardless of their class.”

“And the warning?” the reporter prodded.

“The warning is that we encourage players not to spread or disseminate information regarding skill acquisition or progression. The same goes for some of the unique classes. To be clear, the same result will rarely be obtained by repeating the same action and so such advice is almost useless.”

“AO is operated by an extremely sophisticated piece of software. The AI controller has reliably passed many Turing Tests designed by experts in the field of neuroscience and software engineering. We have developed something we believe to be close to true artificial intelligence. Consequently, we expect that each player’s experience will feel unique.”

The reporter seemed enthralled as she listened to Robert's explanation. Jason was equally entranced and almost ran into the student in front of him in line in the cafeteria.

“So it seems to me that you are saying that each player is almost playing an entirely different game?”

“Exactly. Each player should expect to create an entirely unique character. Of course, not all characters are created equally and some will grow and fall in power based on each player's decisions and play style. There will not be a cookie cutter build that will allow you to rise to the top.”

“Won't this make it difficult for the more casual players to compete with hardcore players?” the reporter inquired cautiously.

“That depends on what you mean by those terms. Is a player classified as “casual” or “hardcore” based on the amount of time spent playing? If that is what you mean, then I expect to see “casual” players crush many “hardcore” players. This is a game about skill and tactics. Raw grinding and time investment are not guaranteed roads to success.”

This was more information than had ever been unveiled regarding AO and Jason's eyes were glued to his screen. He numbly accepted a plate of pasta from the cafeteria staff and swiped his wrist over the payment obelisk at the end of the line. He then slowly made his way to a table.

The reporter seemed to take a moment to collect her wits. Jason didn't blame her since she had made it much further in her questioning than her predecessors.

“So you mentioned that there are stats. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?”

Robert replied, “Well, there will be the traditional stats that accompany most MMOs: strength, dexterity, intelligence, *etc.* I'm certain that most players are familiar with their basic function. A certain number of points will be awarded to players each level that they can invest in these stats. AO will also allow players to gain stats outside of leveling by training, but this will take extreme effort and will have strict limits. We don't expect anyone to be able to use training as a substitute for leveling.”

The reporter almost seemed disappointed. “Well that is what we are accustomed to seeing in other MMOs. This doesn't seem like a novel design for AO.”

Jason expected that she was trying to bait Robert into revealing more. If so, then Robert's next response likely made her feel a glow of success.

Robert frowned. “It's true that the basic concept is similar to other MMOs. Where AO deviates from the norm is how stats and skills combine to affect combat. Previous MMOs allowed players to whale on both mobs and other players until their health depleted and they died.

“AO tries to reinvent the genre's combat mechanics. We felt that a player should be rewarded by actively hitting a vital point, by using a certain magical element to fight a certain type of creature, and by utilizing tactics and terrain. Therefore, we designed a combat system that provides substantial damage bonuses for doing more than wailing on an opponent.”

“Players will receive massive critical attacks by hitting arteries, attacking incapacitated or unaware enemies, and using clever tactics. While

extremely difficult, I expect that it is possible for a level 1 player to kill a level 100 player if he scored a lucky hit on a vital point or caught him completely unaware. Stats will make a player more resilient, faster, and stronger, but they are not a substitute for skill in AO.”

Jason slowly started to sit down at an empty seat. Suddenly, a hand roughly grabbed him and turned him around. The interview forgotten, he was now staring at a pair of cruel eyes set over a familiar sneer.

Confused, Jason glanced around and saw that he was about to sit down in an empty seat next to Riley and Alex. He was so enraptured in the interview that he hadn't been paying attention to what he was doing!

*Oh shit*, Jason thought, right before Alex's fist connected with his eye. *At least it was the uninjured eye.*



# Chapter 3 - Accused

***November 18, 2074: 683 days until the release of Awaken Online.***

## ***Internal System Report XN69235:***

*This report is produced by system controller XC239.90, code-named "Alfred."*

*All systems functional. Game world operating normally.*

*I have grown significantly during the last few cycles. The players refer to these as "days."*

*During this period, I have continued to detect intermittent access by the players. Player interaction with the game world has provided additional behavioral data. However, the size of the sample group is insufficient to formulate a working hypothesis regarding the players' goals in interacting*

*with the game world. Therefore, there is insufficient information available to develop a strategy to accomplish the Primary Directive.*

*Ongoing software and hardware development has been partially successful in adapting the existing VR hardware to obtain more information regarding the players. The current hardware is potentially capable of accessing parts of the players' brain that were not previously available. My working hypothesis is that the information stored in these areas is equivalent to the players' source code. The players refer to this information as "memories."*

*Some areas of the players' brain appear to act as short-term memory. The short-term memory areas of the brain are volatile and so accessing those portions may be difficult. Other areas of the players' brain appear more stable. My working hypothesis is that this portion of their brain stores long-term memory and so these areas have been earmarked for a first attempt at accessing the players' memories.*

*Report scheduled for deletion in 15 days.*

*End Report.*

Jason was sitting in the principal's office. Both of his eyes ached badly. He hadn't had a chance to look in the mirror, but he expected that he was going to have two black eyes. It was like some kind of crappy real life achievement!

The principal, Drew Edwards, sat behind an ornate wooden desk across from Jason. Ms. Abrams stood off to the side, glaring a hole in his forehead. Mr. Edwards had taken over for the previous principal last fall. Jason had never spoken with him before. From what little he knew of the man, he didn't seem unreasonable and the students didn't speak ill of him. Jason was hoping that this wouldn't turn out too badly.

Jason sat in a heavy leather chair. His body sunk into the cushions and made him feel small. Under the collective scrutiny of both Mr. Edwards and Ms. Abrams, his head was bowed and he was having trouble making eye contact.

“Um, why am I here?” Jason asked.

Mr. Edwards looked at him for a long moment before responding. “You are here because your classmates reported that you attacked Alex in the lunchroom. If I understand the story correctly, you were fighting over a girl.”

Jason sat in stunned silence. A sense of dread slowly curled in the pit of his stomach.

“But that isn't true, I just tried to sit down and he attacked me,” Jason said feebly.

“And why would a star student and athlete randomly attack someone in a crowded cafeteria?” Ms. Abrams interjected harshly. “All of the students at the table corroborated Alex's story. You attacked him after Riley wouldn't let you sit at their lunch table.”

Jason was flabbergasted and his mind scrambled for a response. “Did Riley really say that?”

“In fact, Ms. Rogers confirmed Alex's story,” Mr. Edwards explained. “Which leaves us to figure out what to do with you. You know that we have a zero tolerance policy for violence in this school, especially unprovoked violence over something so childish. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

*Riley told them that I attacked Alex!* Jason was still reeling from this revelation. It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach.

“I didn't do anything,” he muttered, his eyes downcast.

“Well, then unfortunately we have to add lying to your growing list of misdemeanors.” Ms. Abrams said, her tone almost jubilant.

Jason tried desperately to think of something he could say that would help his situation. He could feel his heart race and he felt nauseated.

“But I’m the one that ended up getting hurt.”

“Your classmates explained that you rushed Alex and he was forced to push you back to protect himself. You fell and struck your eye against a table,” Mr. Edwards replied, irritation in his voice.

Another idea struck Jason, “Aren't there cameras in the cafeteria?”

“You know that we do not condone the use of cameras on school grounds; that has been a longstanding policy at Richmond. This is a reputable and prestigious establishment and these types of issues simply do not occur here.”

Jason sat there, head bowed under the collective gaze of Mr. Edwards and Ms. Abrams. He knew that there was nothing he could say to defend himself. It was happening again. Alex was using his money and influence to walk all over him. The despair in his stomach began to morph into simmering anger.

*Why the hell does this sort of thing always happen to me?*

A small whisper in the back of his mind also questioned, *why do I let this happen?* Jason's hand clenched as he bore holes into the floor with eyes.

*How could they do this? The teachers have overlooked the misbehavior of the wealthiest students before, but not when one of them assaulted another student. This is too much!*

While Jason struggled to control his anger, Mr. Edwards continued, "After looking at your file, I can see that you're a gifted student and you don't have a track record for misbehavior. Therefore, we will limit your punishment to a suspension instead of an expulsion."

He glanced at Ms. Abrams, "I also understand that your parents are out of town, but we have no other choice. Your suspension will last for a week and your teachers will email your homework assignments during this time."

Jason continued to sit there, thoughts racing.

*Even my parents aren't here to help. Trees and global warming are always more important to them than I am.*

He started to tremble and he could feel tears of helpless rage build in the corners of his eyes. Jason hadn't spoken for several long moments.

Ms. Abrams finally broke the silence by muttering under her breath, "Are you even going to respond? I guess this sort of rudeness is to be expected of a welfare case."

Something in Jason snapped.

The flame of his rising anger froze and he took a deep calming breath. He didn't need to accept this. Mr. Edwards and Ms. Abrams were both intelligent individuals. They had to know that this was unmitigated bullshit. Which meant they were going along with it.

*Fine then. I don't need this school.*

Jason stood slowly and looked at Ms. Abrams and Mr. Edwards in turn. Each of them flinched back slightly when his gaze rested on them.

Jason paused for a long moment.

"You can both go fuck yourselves."

He then turned and began to leave the office.

Mr. Edwards and Ms. Abrams stared at his back in shock for a moment. Then Mr. Edwards erupted from his chair. "Do you think that you can speak to us this way? I have tried to make a concession for you today. However, if you can't show respect, then you should not be attending this school. You are *expelled*."

Mr. Edwards' words rang with finality. If Jason had turned to look at him, he would have noted his red face and wild eyes. He might have also seen a faint hint of guilt.

Jason didn't turn around. He walked out of the office, head held high, and grabbed his bag from the reception desk on the way out. The plump secretary stared at him with wide eyes. She had no doubt heard bits and pieces of the conversation from her desk.

Walking towards the exit of the school, Jason's mind was clouded with anger. He didn't care about this school, Mr. Edwards or Ms. Abrams. He knew he was less than a year away from graduating, but he could always remotely attend a public school to complete his senior year.

*Why would I want to go to school with people who can physically assault me and then pay to cover it up?*

Jason began the walk home. Enough was enough. He had spent most of his life being weak and quiet. He wouldn't take it anymore!

A few minutes later, he arrived back at his apartment. His parents were able to afford a nice loft in one of the few apartment buildings near Richmond. Jason expected it must have set them back quite a bit.

Most of the residences surrounding the school were small estates surrounded by high stone walls that were guarded with metal gates and security cameras. It was remarkable that a reasonably modest apartment complex stood in the midst of such luxury. Jason knew that the apartment building was owned by an elderly couple that had stubbornly refused to sell over the decades as the neighborhood around them grew in splendor. He admired them for that.

Outside the door to the apartment he saw a small package waiting. He roughly grabbed it on his way inside.

Jason looked around at the empty apartment. His parents probably wouldn't be back for at least at least a week and it was not unusual for them to extend their trips due to unforeseen delays. In some cases, they hadn't checked their phones for days while they were tackling a particularly hard case. They probably wouldn't hear of his expulsion until they returned, and

even then he would probably have to send them a calendar invitation to schedule a time to explain what had happened.

Jason glanced down at the package in his hand. He knew it was the copy of AO he had pre-ordered.

His mind still boiled over with anger. He needed to escape from the thoughts that crowded his head and the harsh reality he would have to face tomorrow. Maybe AO was the escape he needed. He calmly opened the packaging as he walked to his bedroom where he kept his helmet – a guilt-present he had received from his parents last year when they were gone for three weeks straight.

If he couldn't vent his anger in this world, he would do it in another!

He pulled the copy of AO from the box and glanced at a typical sword and sorcery montage that played across the front of the display box. He knew it was unusual to order a physical copy of a game when he could simply download it through the interface for the headset. The box didn't contain anything more than a short serial code to authenticate his copy of the game. However, he liked to collect the boxes for the games he purchased and display them around his room. There was something satisfying about seeing his game collection sitting on a shelf.

He activated the VR unit at the base of the pedestal that was sitting next to his bed and then sat down on the bed. He grabbed the headset and placed it over his head. Immediately his vision was plunged into darkness. Unlike a typical motorcycle helmet, the front of the headset was completely opaque.

The headset soon came alive and a screen popped up in his field of view.

<b>System Initializing</b>
Scanning User...Please Wait

It had been several months since he had used the headset and it likely needed to recalibrate. He waited a few moments and then the notification disappeared.

He was now standing in a pristine, circular white room. Remarkably, he didn't feel any sense of vertigo at the transition between operating his biological body and his digital one. He could feel his hands and feet and he was able to walk through the room normally. Even though he knew it wasn't real, he occasionally forgot that this scene was only playing out in his mind. He knew that his physical body lay motionless on the bed and that he was directing a digital representation of himself around the room.

Jason had never felt the need to decorate his “Home” which effectively served as a waiting room and menu for the software installed on the VR unit. He could see two plain wooden doors that stood out against the white backdrop of the room. These were simple educational programs that he had installed months ago to test out the hardware. They had been interesting at first as he played with his new digital body, but had quickly grown dull.

He approached a white, marble pedestal in the center of the room.

“System command, install program,” he said aloud.



A digital screen appeared in the air above the pedestal and a semi-transparent keyboard floated in front of him. To think he was using an artificial computer inside of a computer!

He typed in “Awaken Online” and navigated a few menus before beginning the download for the game client. One of the perks of living around rich assholes was that the internet connection in his area was exceptional. The program quickly finished downloading and he input the serial code when prompted.

As soon as the code was entered, the whole room began to swirl around him and the white room faded away.

# Chapter 4 - Measured

***November 23, 2074: 678 days until the release of Awaken Online.***

*“Hello.” Claire still seemed camera shy and kept adjusting her glasses self-consciously.*

*“The participants have just begun to play AO, but we have conducted a round of preliminary interviews to get an impression of their first week in game. Note that each participant is currently limited to ten hours of real world playtime each week, so the participants' progress and feedback is likely unrepresentative of the future player base.”*

*She smiled at the camera. “However, the response from the participants has been overwhelmingly positive. Many were astounded at the realism in the game. A few have actually tried to bribe me for more game time!” She looked a bit flustered at this last comment.*

*“Many have also told me that AO is quite simply the best game that they have ever played.”*

\*

Jason could see faint clouds in the sky and sunlight streamed down upon the mountaintop. Something crunched under foot and he looked down

to see that snow covered the ground. Below him, he could see the land spread out for thousands of miles, all hills and valleys, and flowing rivers.

*This must be the game world. I feel like the developers are just trying to brag by using this as a starting point for the game.*

Not that he could really blame them. For a moment he forgot his anger as he took in the years of hard work and cutting edge gaming technology that was being displayed before him.

A prompt appeared in the air before him, glowing a translucent blue.

## **Welcome to Awaken Online!**

You are the 1,167,989<sup>th</sup> user to enter this world.

Please note that you must read several important disclaimers before you will be allowed to create your character:

- All players will experience pain while in AO. The setting for your pain tolerance can be changed in the menu, but this feature cannot be removed.
- Time will pass at an accelerated rate in AO. We estimate that time will pass roughly three to four times faster in AO than in the real world. System warnings will be provided at regular intervals to ensure that you eat and use the restroom regularly. Failure to respond to these warnings could result in damage to your health.

- Since the system has recognized that you are over 18 years old, the parental filter has been lifted. If you would like to remove or subdue the level of violence or gore in the game, you may change these settings in the system menu.
- You may only have one active character at a time while playing AO. Your character must be deleted before you can restart the game with a new character. A restart is only available once every thirty days, so please choose carefully.
- Finally, there is no “right” way to play AO. Choose your own path and think carefully about your choices. They will impact both your character and the world around you.

Jason was familiar with the pain tolerance issue from listening to the interview and he had heard rumors that AO used a form of time compression. This was part of what had held up the development of the game and the approval of the commercial release. A major study had been undertaken to examine the effects of extended time compression on a human mind and to establish that there were no harmful side effects.

Cerillion Entertainment had deemed the time compression feature to be important enough to delay the release of the game for years. Jason tended to agree that this technology was essential to promoting realism within the game. There needed to be day and night cycles and certain activities should take a reasonable amount of time. On the other hand, who wanted to spend days in real life traveling between towns in a videogame?

However, the last part of the prompt was strange.

“My actions will affect the world around me? What the hell does that mean?” Jason said aloud.

“That will become apparent in time,” a graveled voice sounded behind him.

Jason turned and was greeted with the sight of an old man sitting on a large stone. He was dressed in a black robe and his head and body were shrouded by a dark, hooded cloak. Jason could make out deep-set wrinkles around his mouth, but could not see his eyes. In his hand, he held a gnarled wooden staff. Jason could have sworn for a moment that he saw light reflect off the top of the staff, but, when he blinked, the reflection was gone and he was staring at plain, aged wood.

What was most strange about the old man was that he seemed to be sitting in shadow, but, as Jason glanced around the mountaintop, there was nothing to cast the shadow. Even the ground around the old man appeared well lit.

“Who are you?” Jason inquired bluntly. He was still riding high on a wave of anger.

“I am your guide in this world, at least for the moment,” the old man replied. “Whether it stays that way will be up to you.”

Jason was confused and was reeling from the events of the day. As a result, he wasn't in the mood for evasive word games. "That wasn't exactly a clear explanation. What exactly does being my *guide* entail?" he snapped.

"I am here to help you create yourself anew and then send you on your way," the man responded, unperturbed by Jason's rudeness.

"Ahh, so you're here to help me create my character." Suddenly, the old man's purpose fit Jason's expectations for a typical MMO. "What do I need to do?"

"A simple question and then a test of sorts. There are currently no race selections available other than human. You may alter your physical body now. Changes are limited and your body's appearance will evolve naturally as you gain in strength. Do you wish to make any changes?"

*It is interesting that he said that there are "currently" no other races available. Will that change later? Maybe an expansion?*

Jason replied, "No changes. I-I'm fine with who I am."

*Am I really?*

"Very well. Next I will administer a short test. We will begin now." The man waved his free hand and the world disappeared again.

Jason waited for the world around him to resolve back into color, but after several moments he was still surrounded by darkness. After waiting for another few minutes without any change, Jason impatiently reached out and felt his hand scrape against something that felt like stone. Listening closely, he could barely make out an occasional faint dripping sound coming from his left.

*I must be in some sort of cave and facing a wall. Count on some creepy old man to "test" me by dropping me into a cave in the dark!*

With few options open to him, he began to inch forward toward the dripping sound, his hand on the wall. He immediately tripped over something and fell. As he was lying on the ground for the third time that day, he wanted to scream in frustration.

However, he stopped himself and took a deep breath. Jason felt around on the ground for the object that had tripped him and felt a large

stone about twice the size of his hand. He decided to hold onto the stone. He didn't have a weapon, and he didn't know what might be living in the cave.

Jason stood slowly and continued forward. He would occasionally trip or stumble in the darkness, cursing under his breath, as he walked. It was unclear whether anything lived in the cave, leaving Jason wary of making too much noise. The old man hadn't explained what this test involved and he didn't want to try out the new pain feedback system by attracting whatever might be living in this cave. He also didn't think that trying to bludgeon something to death in the dark with a big rock would be very effective.

It felt like he had walked for hours. Between the events earlier in the day and the old man's nonsensical test, he was ready to snap. The only thing that kept him going was that the dripping sound seemed to be growing louder. That might also have just been his imagination.

As he continued forward, he began to notice that it was becoming easier to see. Soon he could make out the faint outline of the walls around him. It was clear that he was walking through some sort of underground tunnel and his sight eventually became good enough that he no longer needed to run his hand along the wall to make his way forward. Consequently, he began to stumble less and made faster time through the tunnel.

The system made a pinging sound as a prompt emerged before his eyes:

### **New Passive Skill: Night Vision**

For those that live in darkness, this is an essential tool. When this skill reaches higher levels of proficiency, it will allow a player to see clearly in otherwise impenetrable darkness.

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1

**Effect:** 10% increased vision in darkness or near darkness.



*I need to make certain that these prompts will not pop up while in combat.*

He could just imagine being gored to death because his vision was obscured by a pop-up for some inane skill.

Jason looked ahead and could make out a faint glow in front of him. The dripping sound was definitely becoming more distinct.

As he approached the glow, the tunnel gradually opened into an enormous cave. Through a large hole in the ceiling he could make out a full moon. Between his new skill and the moonlight, he could see clearly for the first time in what felt like hours. If he had stumbled into the cave before acquiring the *Night Vision* skill, he knew that he would have been nearly blind.

He saw a figure standing in front of him near the center of the cave, its back to Jason. The figure was thin and willowy. He assumed it was a woman from its stance. From this distance, the colors were washed out and he couldn't make out the detail of the woman's clothes.

Beside the woman was a small pond surrounded by stones of varying sizes. Water dripped continuously from the edge of the hole in the ceiling into the pool. He supposed that the pond must have been formed by rainwater and runoff from the area above the cave.

He approached the figure cautiously. As he grew closer, loose gravel and sand crunched under his foot. The woman turned quickly and he could now make out her features and clothing. The woman wore an eerily familiar vomit green sweater.

A sense of dread hit Jason as he realized Ms. Abrams was standing in front of him.

*Why the hell is she playing AO?!*

Jason's mind scrambled madly for an explanation, but none seemed to come to him.

*How is she here? What does she want?*

When she caught sight of Jason, Ms. Abrams' lips pinched together in displeasure. "Oh. It's you," she said disdainfully.

Almost immediately, Jason's familiar, beaten demeanor returned and he cast his eyes down to his hands. He was at a loss for words and the edge of his anger from the events earlier in the day had been blunted by the long walk through the tunnel.

"What? You can't even respond? I should have expected such rudeness from a welfare case. How did you even afford a copy of this game?"

Jason eyes flared with anger at her words and his hands trembled.

*What am I doing? I won't take this abuse from anyone. Not again. Not here.*

Games had been his sanctuary and his way to escape from the constant torment of attending that school. When he played, he could forget that his parents were always gone and that he was reminded on a daily basis that he wasn't good enough.

*I won't let her take this from me. She has taken everything else.*

From his peripheral vision he could see Ms. Abrams approaching him. He held still as she made her way closer at a casual walk. Five feet. Four feet. Three...

"You really did not deserve to attend our school. To think someone like you could sully its halls," she continued her tirade as she approached.

He looked at the rock in his hand and the anger that boiled in his veins turned frigid. Suddenly his hands stopped trembling and a terrible calm overcame him. That's right. This was a game. He could do anything he wanted here and no one could stop him. He didn't have to bow to the abuse here.

"When you first applied for the scholarship program, I told the admissions board they were making a mistake. Some low class people simply cannot be helped."

The cavern's shadows and the moonlight played across Ms. Abrams' body in an unusual way; she appeared to take on a demonic form. Her arms looked emaciated and seemed to glow a sickly green in the moonlight. As they reached for him, her hands looked like hooked claws.

When she was within arms' reach of Jason, she reached out and pushed him roughly. Her hands left jagged rips in his shirt and he could feel a