

## CHAPTER 1

Sitting in the center of a great stone hall—lit aglow by an abundance of torches—an old man leans back, worn and decrepit, on an upraised throne. He's draped in elegant robes of aged purple cloth, finely embroidered with an odd, but matching, pointed cap. Cobwebs cling to him where he sits, unperturbed, and camouflage his thin white hair and beard. His sedentary posture suggests that he has not moved in a very long time. He seems more dead than alive.

The old man stirs and wheezes, producing dry sounds not far from the rattles of death. After a moment, the harsh rasping of parched, unused vocal chords settles into a hoarse voice.

“What if...”

While the old one slowly speaks, he centers himself in his seat and pulls himself up to stand through great effort. The creaking of old bones and ancient wood echo through the hall. The wispily-bearded man's hunched back straightens as he meets the challenge of the stairs downward. Each step he takes seems to invigorate him. His withered body begins to grow fuller and his hair darkens by shades as he moves toward the viewer.

At the bottom of the stairs, his body is now that of a powerful forty-something. A new glint in his eyes accompanies his mischievously upturned lips.

“What if, at your leisure,” the man exclaims while raising his left arm with measured slowness, “you could transport yourself to another world as real as your own? A world where landscapes are breathtaking, wilds are untamed, and nothing is beyond your reach?”

The man closes his fingers in front of him, as if grasping the very world of which he speaks. His arm is revived—his form young and imposing. His voice is loud and bold.

“...A world filled with mystery and adventure? A world where you can tailor your own adventure and forge your own destiny? A world where you can leave behind an old, frail body and any malady that curtails you?”

The man casts up both of his hands and the scene of him standing in the hall erupts in a torrent of light which fades into several short glimpses of adventurous life. The man’s shadowy form, backlit by an enormous moon, stands atop a great cliffside overlooking the world beneath. Next, he is shown reading in a great library surrounded by stacks, piles, and shelves filled with hundreds of thousands of books. Then, at a celebration of insane scale, he’s drinking outside at a table of honor amid a massive feast. Finally, the man arcs

electricity from his upturned left hand while hurling a ball of flame towards a crowd of charging, bloodthirsty adversaries.

The man's visage fills the screen again. With a wide smile he asks, "What if simply being there could give you extra time?" The vivid recording then fades starkly to black where the frosty text 'Chronicle' appears in an operational link.

The link in that advertisement would bring you to a website selling Chronicle pods. The advertisement quickly circulated through news outlets and social media networks. Within three months, everyone in the world had seen it. That advertising wildfire was thanks in no small part to heavy media attention focused on showing off the brand-new technology that hundreds of famous online personalities simultaneously beta tested for a full, 168-hour, week. One full week. All contained within the span of only 21 hours.

Reporters, critics, streamers, and their ilk sang nothing save praises of the experience they had undertaken. Editorials, blogs, vlogs, and live streamed chats boasted of how they had stepped into a funny little pod, sat through a few diagnostics, tweaked a few character settings, and then found themselves standing in a complete and beautiful new world. The testers could do whatever they wanted. Some

simply relaxed, found the spare time to read a book or two, and watched a few movies. Some drank wildly, fought vigorously, and partied continuously. Some heroically protected innocents from fiends and felons, while others robbed them and fled. The testers could act entirely without inhibitions. The one thing every tester did without fail, however, was log out after hours of playtime to discover that they had only been in the pod for minutes. That was the haymaker that would leave the testers floored and the world reeling.

The game that would change the world was released in 2062. At the time, there was nothing particularly groundbreaking about an immersive virtual reality world or even fully fledged artificial intelligence, but what Chronicle brought to the table was technology that felt significantly more advanced and incredibly more polished. When playing in a Chron pod you felt and sensed everything. Pain was limited to certain thresholds and filters could eliminate some undesired effects—but overall, sensations seemed real and, often, better. The crippled could walk, the deaf could hear, the blind could see, and those unable to smell could experience the scent of limburger cheese, to their own boon or folly.

A Non-Player Character, an artificially intelligent game denizen of Chronicle, was found to be indistinguishable from another player in a pod, except for a lack of name hovering above their head within a city and a complete lack of knowledge relating to the real world. NPCs had it all: ambitions, insecurities, and lineages that could be traced back generations. Alone, that was already an incredible feat for a virtual world, but Chronicle's second biggest trick was that the world would evolve naturally on its own. The hierarchical AI of Chronicle created new content, quests, and narratives as the game was played. Content was created almost instantly and checked by a command chain of separate AI entities, just as quickly, to ensure that the additions were thematic and were not entirely game breaking.

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"Today is the day! I'm getting my very own Chron pod!"

Corbin Landrick, an exhilarated 24-year-old mischief-prone man, couldn't have slept the night before even if he had given it a real try. He hopped out of bed and thought about his recent reversal of fortune. The best game in the

world—if one could truly call it a game—was going to be delivered to and made playable for him within the next hour.

Chronicle had been released nearly half a year ago and Corbin, living dollar-to-dollar despite an age of government-provided allowances, couldn't dream of affording a gaming pod without taking out a loan that would ruin him. Corbin wasn't dull, nor was he a bad judge of the state of things and, despite the state of his finances, some might even call Corbin good with money. His problem was a terrible run of misfortune.

Corbin was ambitious within his means. He had many ideas which were certainly clever if not profitable. He worked hard, chased his ambitions when he had accumulated any sum of extra money, and played games or reread a book when he was completely exhausted of resources. For the last half year, he'd put his projects aside in order to save up enough money for a Chron pod. He was still a considerable way off from his target goal when a rare offer for a refurbished pod awoke him from a post-work nap the day before—thanks to an alert from a program he had set up to monitor second-hand retailers. The purchase had nearly drained his funds dry, but he was so happy about it that he had been jittering in anticipation through the night. Now

with a brand-new toy, he'd have to dine with utmost frugality if he wanted to pay his rent on time.

Corbin, along with the rest of the world, had had his eye on Chronicle since its announcement and wanted to play the game for fun every bit as much as he wanted the extra time and opportunities that it would provide him. At this point, the most hardcore players in game would have had nearly four years of playtime more than he had.

*"Unacceptable,"* Corbin thought. His mood soured and his excited quivering ceased. It was completely unacceptable for him to have missed out on so much time. *"It's like losing four years of my life for nothing."*

Despite sounding a bit dramatic to himself, Corbin wasn't entirely wrong. Over the last half year, using standard time, most services had become available within the game world of Chronicle. As advertised, anyone in the game could watch full movies, read books, and even watch in-game live streamed content. Scores of businesses had transferred their operations into Chronicle for the same reason students studied there: eight times as much time just for being logged in.

When players step into and strap themselves into pods, they're scanned then automatically fitted with biometric sensors which not only monitor the players' conditions but

allow for continuous fine tuning to ensure a seamless immersive experience. Then, the players accept that they're ready to log in and are put into a sleep-like trance which they'll remain in until they choose to leave or are ejected in the case of an emergency. All capsules are easily upgradable for long term use, should a player wish to remain in the game for more than the suggested maximum 12 real hours at a time. Upgrades include haptic electrodes which stimulate muscles, feeding tubes for nourishment, and a waste disposal tube for just that. There isn't an upgrade for a standard pod which keeps the user washed, and the in-and-out tubes have earned a reputation for being a less than wholly pleasant experience to fit and remove.

Corbin worked for a construction group as a 'construction apprentice.' In short, he did all the jobs that needed doing but no one would volunteer for, and he received little pay for his trouble. The day was Friday, and he was taking a rare day off to receive and set-up his new, refurbished Chron pod.

Corbin checked to make sure he had a beef Pacquet brand food packet connected to his Pacquet brand Print-n-Grille and said the activation phrase, "Pack it!"

"What would you like me to cook for you? If you'd like a list of op—" the meal fabricator was cut off by Corbin.

"Make me roast beef on a biscuit," Corbin demanded.



“Right away! You are currently low on Roa—”

“Just make it already,” snapped Corbin impatiently.

“Right away! Your roast beef on biscuit will be ready in five minutes. While you wait, check out this amazing deal for—”

“Print-n-Grille volume mute,” Corbin said, silencing the upcoming advertisement, as well as the upcoming alert which would tell him precisely when his food was ready to eat.

As Corbin waited for his food, he decided to feed his anticipation by browsing some websites for general information about Chronicle. He’d already checked various forums and wikis for information on classes, leveling guides, and exploits in the game but the information was sparse considering how much time players had had to update it.

In Chronicle, in-game copper, silver, gold, and platinum coins could be exchanged for real world currency. Both were about as tangible as the other, but to make the exchange you’d have to visit money changers in game or install third-party software on your ChronPod. These NPCs could typically be found in banks and act as the in-game faces of various large banking conglomerates. Because players have the ability to exchange in-game currency for credits and the other way around, those who made good money in game could earn a respectable living from the virtual world.

Before Corbin had gleaned any useful information, a delivery drone requested access into the apartment to drop off a parcel.

“Please come in!” Corbin yelled, ecstatically.

The drone wheeled its way into the apartment and, upon determining that the room was too cluttered for an easy delivery, opened its large, reusable shipping container and left the massive Chronicle pod right beyond the threshold before speeding off.

“Come on!” Corbin wailed before clearing a path and pushing the massive pod toward the closest universal utility port to plug in his brand-new hardware.

After plugging in the pod and before getting both legs in, Corbin remembered to grab his then-cold roast beef biscuit and devour it along with as much water as he could drink over a five second period. It was time for him to get in the game.

Corbin stripped down to his boxer briefs, climbed into the upright pod, and leaned back.

“Power on,” Corbin said with the welling excitement of a six-year-old on Christmas morning.

The pod whirred briefly as the lid automatically slid shut and the pods orientation leaned Corbin back at a 30-degree angle.

A dispassionate female voice filled the capsule. "Please place your hands on the acclimatization handles, if able. Since this is your first time using this Chronicle pod, you must allow a short diagnostic to take place. Please read over the terms of service while you wait."

The pod began whirring once again after Corbin gripped the two handles in front of his hands, which set his body in the position that the pod was waiting for. A prompt appeared in front of Corbin's face with an incredibly long end-user agreement that Corbin skimmed only briefly then accepted with a voice command.

The interior of the pod began to feel tighter as sturdy airbags inflated around him, lightly pinning sensors over the entirety of Corbin's body. The experience was surprising, but once it was done the pressure turned out to be rather comfortable.

The pod began to revolve slowly in the manner of a concrete mixer as the diagnostic came to its end.

"To begin playing Chronicle, please say 'engage,'" the voice stated, coolly.

"Engage!" Corbin happily obliged right before a puff of air carrying some familiar sweet scent which he couldn't quite place encouraged him to close his eyes.

And then, about 10 seconds later, there he was... or rather wasn't. Corbin was disembodied in a well-lit, empty space. There was nothing as far as the eye could see except for a meter-wide pedestal with the word 'Create' chiseled in its stone base.

"Create," Corbin said, having no other method to interact.

Then, there before him, stood his carbon copy: a somewhat small height for the era—5'8"—man, with disheveled brown hair, brown eyes, and just enough even facial stubble to avoid 'babyface' comments at his work. He'd be easy to lose in a crowd.

"You may only have one avatar. If you wish to change your avatar, you must delete your existing one and will lose all progress. Your vitals have been scanned and appropriate statistics have been determined. You may now customize this avatar to your heart's desire. Your avatar is the way in which all other players and game residents perceive you. When you have finished customizing your avatar, say or select 'Finalize.' If you choose not to customize your avatar, you will be awarded a large number of stat points that will automatically be distributed to your character based on your scanned vitals."

To the sides of the pedestal where his carbon copy stood, Corbin could see two plinths. One was labeled 'Customize'

and the other 'Finalize.' Corbin knew that if he selected 'Customize' he could spend hours, even days, customizing his character's appearance and statistics down to the most minute details—but he was way more interested in the bonus stats he would receive from accepting his appearance and statistics as they were relegated by the AI.

"Finalize," Corbin said.

"Please select a name for your avatar. The name you choose is how other players and game residents will address you. Names are not unique."

"Dakkon," Corbin said firmly. It was a comfortable name which he had been using for years as an alias online. "D-a-k-k-o-n."

"Dakkon. Is this correct?" The name appeared in large floating gray letters.

"Yes. Confirm. Affirmative—let's get this show on the road," Corbin said from his disembodied state.

"Close your eyes and be reborn," a new, powerful male voice thundered. Corbin thought he had heard the voice before, but from where he did not know.

As the world around him faded to black, Corbin closed his eyes.