The Princess and the Murder Hobo:   
 Multiverse 1:   
Lit RPG

**By**

**Trevy Burgess**

[1. Under the City 1](#_Toc173686109)

[2. The Dungeon 15](#_Toc173686110)

[3. A whole New World 39](#_Toc173686111)

1. Under the City

There is a mysterious world,

A world of tunnels, natural/artificial caves, and relics

All under your feet

Colonel Luke Sunderland, decorated war veteran and army grunt for 30 years.

And then came the bomb that changed my life.

At first all went well as a desk jockey in the army. Unfortunately, PTSD and other things kept causing issues.

Like the time I accidentally broke a coworker’s nose when he taped me on the shoulder.

Or the time someone dropped a heavy object and I jumped under cover, wrecking quite a few pieces of computer equipment.

Or the time…You get the picture.

They gave me therapy but that never worked. In my mind I’m still at war. So they gave me an early retirement.

So here I am, living on the streets of London.

You may be wondering, don’t I have a government pension or something?

Yes, I get a pension. It’s automatically deposited into my bank account. However, the rents are horrible. On top of that, I have to pay alimony.

In other words, I have to choose between shelter and the necessities of life, such as food.

The only good thing about living on the streets is that you have extra spending money, which most people use for boozing, betting, binging, banging, bonking (drugs), and other b-related escapist activities.

I prefer spending my money on my overpriced gaming laptop, playing and making video games. Both are equally addicting.

To each their own I say.

I placed my laptop and power source into my backpack. The backpack is covered with grime, moldy rags and stinks like rotten food. I checked the outer pocket and add a piece of raw meat. The fruit flies are annoying but worth it.

You know what they say. The best way to protect valuables is to make sure no one knows it’s there, and don’t want to check.

Theft is a serious problem. Turn your back a moment and your stuff is gone. So I only keep bedding in my tent, and underwear – two things no sane people would want. And a large cinder block I use as a table.

I exit my tent in the sewer system and wander among my neighboring derelicts. Next stop is the neighborhood ATM where I withdraw some cash. Not too much. After that I go get a bite to eat at an outdoor food vendor. He knows me and I only approach when no other customers are near.

A passing couple drops money in my hat that is always in my hand. I bow and thank them for their generosity.

Morning exercise complete, I hobble back to the sewers on my one not so good leg and one metal peg leg. I could have splurged on a fancy leg, but a simple pole is more appropriate if you are going for that decrepit, down on his luck look. The click-click of my walking is also unnerving.

On my way a couple crosses the street to avoid me. The woman not so softly whispers, “Isn’t that the murder hobo? He’s scary.”

I grimace, remembering what happened three months ago.

A man was raping a woman on the streets and I intervened. Things went out of hand and I accidentally killed the man. Technically the wall he slammed his head against killed him – after I punched him.

The judge declared I was not guilty and let me off with required community service, and a warning to control my strength. War veterans are stronger than regular civilians.

The good news is my neck of the neighborhood is safer on my watch. The bad news is I have a terrible nickname.

As I am about to enter my tent I hear a scream.

I hobble down the tunnel, my metal leg clicking as I go. Others overtake me to the destination. Moments later I hear fighting and more screaming.

Finally on arriving I am confronted with a rat the size of a German shepherd.

“Holy cow,” I exclaim as I reach for my crowbar.

Unfortunately I find myself holding a rotten banana.

“Here have a banana,” I shout and throw the banana into the rat’s face.

The rat turns to me with beady red eyes and charges.

Thankfully my next grab is the crowbar.

Time slows down as I sidestep. I stab the crowbar forward like a rapier and it plunges into the rat’s eye, instantly killing it. My martial training saved the day.

“The murder hobo did it,” a badly injured woman cries happily. “He saved us all.”

Everyone cheers.

Initializing dormant DNA  
Initialization Failed - Insufficient essence

What the hell was that?

I’m so surprised that I forget to get angry at the use of my detested nickname.

“Someone call emergency,” I command as I examine the dead rat. Next to the rat are a dagger and a stack of 5 strange copper-like coins.

The dagger is simple and perfect for stabbing or throwing and the coins look valuable. They might sell in a pawn shop. People like odd things.

No one noticed the loot and so I casually lean down to collect, while pretending to tie my shoelace.

A moment later the rat disintegrates, startling everyone.

“Damn it,” Bob, a fellow hobo, complains. “Now no one will believe me.”

I then notice two young people. They are both in their early twenties at most. They are casually dressed but they exude an air of authority.

Glancing at them from the corner of my eye, I get the feeling they are not what they seem.

One is a handsome young man with dusty blond hair and greenish eyes. He resembles a classic elf. Unfortunately he’s wearing over-ear headphones, so I can’t see his ears.

The other is a beautiful young woman with hair golden like sunshine, sparkling blue eyes, peaches and cream skin and plump kissable cheeks. She is my height. That’s surprising, since I’m six foot, three inches tall.

I feel the urge to stare at the young lady. Is hair that golden even possible? It must have been dyed. Either way, it complements the girl’s radiant face.

If this was an anime, then she would definitely be an alien princess in disguise.

But off course this is real life. Aliens and mythical races don’t exist. But neither do people that attractive. No one comments on their beauty for some unknown reason.

“Who killed the beast?” the young man asks.

“The murder hobo,” Gerri, an old man with false teeth says, and points at me.

I grimace, pick up the crowbar and return it to my backpack.

The boy looks at me in disgust and asks, “Did you pick up any loot?”

“Harold, you know you can’t take the loot,” the young lady scolds in a melodious but nasal tone. “It’s his by right of kill.”

Apparently my smell wasn’t appealing to the woman. She was struggling not to gag. I didn’t care. Smell is protection. It keeps me safe; that and my reputation.

“The situation has been resolved. It’s time to leave,” the woman says as sirens blare in the background. The ambulances have arrived.

“Yes Princess Annie,” Harold replies.

“Harold, I told you not to call me princess,” Annie grumbles. “I’m just a C-ranked adventurer, just like you.”

As they walk away, Harold whispers, “How old do you think that dude is, 80, 90?”

“Probably at least 150,” Annie replies. “For an uninitiated human, that is amazing.”

How rude. I’m only 57. Also, isn’t 115 the absolute limit of human age? No one has ever exceeded that to my knowledge.

I walk away as the police and medics enter. Unfortunately the cops catch me and insist on questioning me. It doesn’t help that the main evidence is gone.

The cops call in to the police station and are told to drop the incident. Grumbling, the cops leave, letting the medics treat the wounded.

Sighing, I return to my tent. My reputation has increased, and I don’t like it.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

It is time to play some video games. Sitting cross-legged, I start up the game I’m currently developing. Okay so I was debugging the game.

I’m playing as an attractive human with flaming red hair, a humongous red scythe, and a mysterious past. The hero must always have a mysterious past. It gives flavor to any game or story. And who wouldn’t want to *be* a hot boy or girl if that’s your thing?

I too have a mysterious past…Just joking.

I briefly fantasize about being that redhead. That’s my ideal self image. If only video games were real life.

My battery indicator notifies me of low power.

That’s annoying. Someone must have blown the fuse again.

I save the project, put my valuables away into my backpack and step out. Behind my tent is the power cable the community uses.

I follow the cable and find the break. The cable seems to have been bitten clean through. Who or what could have done that? It must have been the rat.

It is an easy fix. I unplug the cable, and then patch it with duct tape I carry in my backpack.

Having nothing better to do I head deep into the storm tunnel.

I soon discover a hole in the concrete wall. Was this where the rat came from?

I mount my head-mounted LED light and withdraw my crowbar and looted knife.

I follow the burrow downwards. A short distance later I enter a cavern filled with bones. Did the authorities know about this place? I don’t think so. It is amazing what you can find below the streets of London. Then again, London has an ancient history, with even roman tunnels. I think.

I follow a side tunnel and head downwards, with only my headlamp for illumination.

A thought crosses my mind. Walking down unlit mysterious tunnels alone might not be safe.

Without warning the tunnel steepens and I lose my footing.

Terror grips me as I slide uncontrollably downwards. I don’t look forward to broken bones and being trapped without escape.

Suddenly the tunnel ends and I find myself in freefall.

A moment later I hit water and submerge.

In desperation I paddle upwards and quickly break the surface.

I am now in a pitch dark cavern with a ceiling so high my headlamp can’t reach.

To the side is a shore. I know it’s there because of the soft lapping sound.

I paddle for shore, with only a tiny beam for guidance.

Unfortunately there is a giant rat waiting for me. And he looks hungry. His beady eyes glow red in the lamp light.

In desperation I look for another escape. There is none. I have no choice but to fight.

Five feet from the shore the water gets shallow. I climb with my weapons ready. I don’t have time to curse myself for being stupid enough to go caving without precautions. I should have told someone at the least - Too late now.

I suppose my ex-wife would be annoyed when alimony payments eventually stop.

The rat charges, jumps and tries to bite my face. I barely have time to block with my crowbar.

I fall into the water with the rat trying to drown me and eat me at the same time.

My left arm is pinned but I can still move my hand. With a struggle I flick my wrist and cut the creature’s arm. It jerks and I swiftly stab it in the eye.

The rat drops dead and I finally roll to safety.

Damn, that was scary.

Initializing dormant DNA  
1%, 2%, 3%  
Initialization Failed - Insufficient essence

The message startles me and slightly blunts my panic. Idly I wonder what the percentage message means. That didn’t happen before.

Besides the rat appear an arm bracer and copper coins. I pick up the loot and the rat disappears as before.

Again, what the fuck?

Am I hallucinating? Had I finally gone mad? If this is a nightmare, can I wake up?

Memories of me in the trenches flood me. I don’t like it. I have no choice but to push on.

I focus on my breathing and push the fear down until it no longer controls me. I have years of practice.

On shore I open my backpack. My worldly goods are safe in their sealed plastic bags.

I take out my first aid kit and bandage up my scratches with antiseptic.

Next, I dump out the garbage in my outer pocket and give my backpack a good wash. I don’t want rats sniffing me out. I will refill my thief repellant when I get out.

I put the bracer on my left arm and decide what to do.

I can’t return the way I came so I creep forward.

I am on high alert, knowing this place is crawling with rats. Giant, terrifying, eat your face rats.

Sound alerts me and I turn around with my raised left arm.

A jumping rat clamps onto my bracer and I stab it in the eye with my crowbar.

Breathing heavily, I thank God for surviving that close call.

Initializing dormant DNA  
4 %, 5%, 6%  
Initialization Failed - Insufficient essence

Am I getting some sort of energy from killing these stupid rats? What the fuck?

Maybe I should call myself Alice, since I definitely fell down the preverbal rabbit hole. Or is it a rat hole? If so, I choose rabbits, even if they have psychotic hatters as companions.

The loot this time consists of another knife and more coins.

I proceed on. And again I meet another rat.

I’m getting sick of this place. The adrenaline is making me nauseous and I crave crawling into bed.

The only good news is the rats are only attacking one at a time. On the other hand, it’s even more nerve wracking when they don’t attack, since I know they are lurking in the blackness. Waiting…

After two hours and multiple rat attacks, initialization is now at 98%.

I stop and eat a granola bar. My rest is cut short. This time I face two rats. Oh great. At least my back is to the wall so they can’t blindside me.

The good news is I’m blinding them with my head lamp. Well only one at a time.

Both charge at the same time. One goes high. The other goes low. Gripping two looted rapiers, I face my opponents. The jumping rat gets impaled immediately but the left one dodges and gets a minor cut.

The surviving rat tries to scratch me with its claws. So far I had been lucky. Now my luck has run out.

I’m barely able to keep the rat back. Thank God for my leather vest I got two rats back.

As I fight I regret letting my karate skills get rusty. On the bright side these fights are refreshing my skills quickly.

There’s nothing like a life and death struggle to improve your skills.

Seeing its victory, the rat gets complacent and I get my chance. I ram my right-hand sword through its brain.

I drop to the ground, exhausted.

A moment later the now familiar message appears.

Initializing dormant DNA  
99%, 100%  
Initialization Complete

I feel dizzy as an overwhelming stream of data hits me. After what feels like an eternity, the data organizes into something coherent.

Opening my eyes I find myself on the floor. In my mind’s eye I see something new. I get a quantitative view of my stats.

**Luke Sunderland (Rank 1 Initiate)**

**SPE (Speed):** 9

**STR (Strength):** 12

**VIT (Vitality):** 4

**STA (Stamina):** 6

**INT (Intelligence):** 27

**WIS (Wisdom):** 35

**PER (Perception):** 14

**HP:** 7 of 40

**STA:** 18 of 60  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Level:** 1

**Exp:** 0 of 100

Damn. I have to stop playing so many video games. It’s damaging my brain.

MP - Magic Points. Is that a thing?

Stamina makes sense. I’m exhausted and my stamina had gone down since I was in the army. I’m going to really feel that tomorrow after I get some sleep.

Why are my HP or health points so low? Is it because I’m missing a leg? Is it because I’m 57 years old? Is it because I look 150?

For response, I get a detailed description.

Conditions:

Overweight 53%

Clogged arteries 21%

Heart damage 14%

Brain damage 27%

DNA damage 2.50%

Epigenetic damage 35.54%

Prostate Cancer 75%, metastasizing …

The list went on. All my organs are damaged. Some from actual combat and training and the rest are from everything else.

Holy crap! I had no idea I was in such bad condition. It’s a wonder I haven’t dropped dead yet. When did I have a heart attack? The brain damage must be from one too many conks to the head. The only person this murder hobo is killing is himself.

I vow immediately to see the doctor – as soon as I can get out of this dungeon, and take a shower.

Technically I’m not in a dungeon since this is real life. It’s too bad, since dungeons give out cool loot.

Wait. I am getting loot, even if it is cheap armor, daggers and weird coins. The biggest reward is knowledge of my stats. Perhaps I won’t die of a heart attack this year.

I get up. It is time to head out.

As I walk, I notice the visibility has improved. It’s still pitch black, but my headlight has brightened, revealing a little more of the passageway. I’m also slightly more aware of my surroundings.

Unfortunately, heightened senses only make this hell hole more terrifying.

After slinking for another 5 minutes the tunnel splits and I take the left passage. Just then I meet another giant rat.

Warily I face it, knowing my health is in worse shape than I knew. I really don’t like fighting rats in a pitch dark hole in the ground.

Did I mention I hate this dungeon?

The rat leaps at me and gets a face full of blade.

Essence: 10 of 100

That is interesting. I got 10 experience points for killing the creature.

This time I get something new. It is a tiny tube filled with a bluish liquid.

I am exhausted and need to sleep. Unfortunately I can’t safely sleep in this damned dungeon.

So for the next ten minutes I just stare at the contents of the tube, trying to figure out what it is. Suddenly I get a description.

Grade F Health Potion: 100 HP

“Cheers,” I say and drink the potion. The tube disappears.

For a moment nothing happens. Then I feel warm energy wash over me. All the minor scratches disappear. The pain in my knees reduces.

I check my health stats and discover they have barely budged.

It is time to fight some giant rats.

As I walk I laugh uncontrollably. New characters in RPG games always have to fight rats. My life is freaking weird.

On the other hand, despite my fear, I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

Could it compare to holding my first born? I don’t know. It’s too bad children are only sweet when they are newborn babies. No, this is better, since the only person I can rely on is myself.

I walk forward, knowing I’m becoming a one though rat killer. All you rats out there, I’m coming for you.

For I’m the one, the only, Murder Hobo.

2. The Dungeon

Dungeons are the gods’ way for making us strong

-- Paladin Francis --

Monsters are the god’s way of punishing sinners

-- Paladin Michael --

The tunnels quickly become a maze and I follow the tradition of always selecting the left one.

After killing three more rats, I get a new potion. This one is yellow.

Grade F Stamina Potion: 100 HP

That seems useful to me. On more than one occasion the fights exhausted me. On the other hand I’m sure it has a cost. Thankfully I never had to fight more than 2 rats at a time.

Putting the tube in my shirt pocket, I head out.

“Hey ho, hey ho, to rat a tat I go,” I sing, glad no one can hear me.

My wife loved me, or claimed to, until she cheated on me and ran away with the kids. She and everyone else I met thought I had a terrible singing voice.

Now only the rats can hear me. They too don’t like my singing.

Another three rats attack me at the same time. Thankfully the passageway is narrow and they hamper each other.

I take out a knife and whip it at the closest rat. It flies true into the rat’s eye. Darts in the army really paid off this time.

The other two stand no chance as I slice and dice them.

Essence: 70 of 100

I am loading up with too many knives and small pieces of armor. I put as many as possible in my belt and the rest in a reusable grocery bag. That’s okay since I’m constantly losing knives. On the bright side, I am getting more armor and potions.

I drink a health potion and my arteries improve by 2%. Brain and heart damage decreases by barely 1%. Unfortunately DNA and epigenetic damage remains the same.

My cuts and scratches heal and I continue.

20 minutes later I defeat seven more rats. I now have 140 [Essence].

I receive a notice. It says, *‘Do you want to spend 100 [Essence] to advance?’*

I’m certain of getting more essence, so I say ‘Yes’.

I experience a strange sensation in my chest and then I see a message.

Level 2  
5 free stat points

I had no doubts in my mind. I had finally gone insane.

Checking, I see I can place points in every [stat] except Wisdom. I’m not sure why. It’s something to think about.

I put all my points into vitality. Why vitality? Give me a break. I’m dying here.

Looking at my stats I get:

**Luke Sunderland (F-Rank 2)**

**SPE (Speed):** 9

**STR (Strength):** 12

**VIT (Vitality):** 4 -> 9

**STA (Stamina):** 6

**INT (Intelligence):** 27

**PER (Perception):** 14

**WIS (Wisdom):** 35

**HP:** 7 of 90

**STA:** 38 of 60  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Level:** 2

**Exp:** 20 of 200

I wonder what will happen when all damage goes to zero. I know that Dr. David Sinclair believes aging is caused by epigenetic damage. The body doesn’t fall apart because of wear and tear. Instead, your cells go senile and stop functioning properly. Other scientists such as Dr. Michael Levin agree.

I contemplate the possibilities. Would it be a good thing to live a longer, healthier life? Not if you live on the streets.

The next rat I meet I try to get a read.

Giant Rat

F-Rank 1

I attack it. Yes. That rat was easier to kill. It must be my greater vitality. No. Vitality doesn’t make you faster or stronger, bit it affects endurance. Or it could be my imagination.

I loot the body.

Seconds later I get the fright of my life.

The next two rats are level 2. Seriously? Did they evolve because of me, or am I approaching the nest?

I had no choice but to fight.

Thankfully the fight isn’t as bad as I feared, even though they are stronger. I’m starting to get used to fighting.

I still hate the darkness, but my other senses are starting to compensate.

I breathe in a refreshing energy and then I lean down to loot the bodies.

Exp: 70 of 100

The loot is about the same but I get more coins. I get another health potion, which I promptly use.

My HP increases to 24/90. That potion should have given me full health but didn’t. Apparently the healing is repairing my internals. I wonder how many potions I would need for a full recovery, and how many units of [Essence].

Looking at my health reading, I get a surprise. I have 0.02% less DNA damage and 0.02% less epigenetic damage. That is weird. I’m certain it isn’t from the health potions. Is it because of the level up? Who knew, possibly that boy and girl adventure team?

Conditions:

Overweight 49.43%

Clogged arteries 18.46%

Heart damage 13.34%

Brain damage 26.18%

DNA damage 2.48%

Epigenetic damage 35.52%

Prostate Cancer 62%, metastasizing …

That is a question for another time. Now is time to kill more rats. They aren’t going to kill themselves.

It is then I notice white crystals in the tunnel walls. Focusing on them I realize what they are.

Quartz crystals

Alchemical Ingredient

That is weird. I didn’t know alchemy was a thing. I always assumed those guys were delusional.

On the other hand I have been drinking healing potions every hour or so. That reminds me, is there a cooldown for the potions? In all RPGs there were.

I continue walking, examining every new rock I could find. My vigilance is rewarded when I find mushrooms.

Rot Mushroom

Poisonous

Alchemical Ingredient

Yikes. I collect some and put them in a plastic Ziploc bag. My pack is getting full with loot and I struggle with the weight. I probably should discard the less valuable loot.

I hit a dead-end and backtrack. Since I took the left, I take the right path.

I’m just about to turn the corner when I hear rat sounds. There are at least six. Rats! I mean curses.

Fortunately they are all Level 1.

Despite my gains I still hate this dungeon and want to get out.

I quickly ready my knives in my belt and then whip them at the rats. I injure at least three, and then I resort to my swords.

Again another battle ensues. The damn rats are nasty. One finally breaks my arm bracer and it falls to the ground.

Thankfully the bracer did its job and I stab the rat in its eye.

Pain shoots through my leg as a rat bites down. I wasn’t expecting that. Rats usually jump.

On the plus side, I take advantage of the distracted rat and ram my left-hand sword into the rat’s back, while punching my right-hand sword into the last rat’s throat.

That was a rough fight. I pause a moment as I feel that strange sensation of energy flowing into me. I once again ignore it as a figment of my imagination as I finish the fight.

Upon looting I receive two health potions of E grade. Scanning them closer I get additional details.

Grade E Health Potion: 200 HP  
Cooldown: 10 minutes

Should I take it? I decide no. I’m not physically injured.

I check my phone and see it is 9:23 PM. I’ve been here for almost 3 hours.

As I fight rats, I realize my karate skills have improved. It is integrating nicely with my sword and knife skills.

I think I created a new martial arts technique. I shall call it blade-foo.

Level: 3

Exp: 50 of 300

5 free stat points

As I look at my free points, I contemplated the age-old question. How do I allocate points?

After some thought, I put 3 on Stamina, 1 on Vitality and 1 on Speed. I know some people like to min-max. However I currently don’t see the value. Especially since all my stats are so low.

I check my health again. I am right. My DNA and epigenetic data is repaired by 0.03%. That is almost nothing, but the gains appear proportional to level.

Again I feel slightly stronger as strange sensations flood me. Maybe I am getting stronger. I wonder how strong I can get.

A moment later the Universe punishes me for my arrogance by sending a level 5 rat at me.

This rat is by far the strongest rat I have encounter. The rat has 500 HP.

I hastily throw two knives. That only lost the rat 57 HP.

Then I attack with two swords in my hands. The rat blocks them, but then I kick with my metal leg.

That surprises the rat and I slice a foreleg. I wish I had a sword in my mouth, so I can fight like Zoro in *One Piece*.

I kick again and the rat bites the tip of my peg leg off, leaving a jagged pole. I ram my foot forward, impaling the rat.

Unfortunately the rat doesn’t die. Instead it screams like a wounded banshee. That isn’t good.

Thankfully the stab is enough to overcome the rat’s guard.

One final slice with my sword and it’s down for the count.

Exp: 90 of 300

A moment later I feel [Essence] flow into my body through my pores. Pausing a moment to catch my breath, I realize this had been going on every time I killed a rat, but didn’t notice before. The only difference is the quantity. Higher leveled rats give both more and higher quality [Essence].

Why did I think of the word [Essence]? That’s right. The initialization message mentioned it. What was its function? It helps with healing and this leveling up thing.

No time to think. That screech had attracted a hoard of rats, and I only have one foot to stand on. Fortunately my balance has improved.

The next ten minutes are hectic as I get assaulted by 8 [F-Rank 1] rats.

Spinning on my good leg I start jabbing and slashing. Thanks to the previous rat I now have an additional weapon.

I use my metal foot to stab a rat in the gut, and almost fall down. Using that pole is dangerous.

Fighting 8 to one is exhausting. My arms and legs feel like lead. Unfortunately I don’t have a spare appendage to grab my stamina potion.

Finally the last one falls and I quickly pop a stamina potion vial in my mouth. The vial dissolves and my stamina reaches max.

Is there a pattern to the experience point payoff? It is too soon to see.

I loot the body and get another health E rank potion. I down it and check my health.

Conditions:

Overweight 44%

Clogged arteries 13.7%

Heart damage 11.7%

Brain damage 22.6%

DNA damage 2.45%

Epigenetic damage 35.49%

Prostate Cancer 42.8 % …

Exp: 170 of 300

My cancer is no longer metastasizing. I do a jig and almost fall down. I forgot my artificial leg is 3 inches shorter than before.

My celebration is cut short as more rats appear. When will this end? As they say in the military, a few moments of terror and endless stressful waiting; except this terror wasn’t ending.

The good news is my sword techniques are improvising fast enough to keep pace with my enemies. That isn’t surprising but just the normal functioning of the human brain. Intense experiences always accelerate learning.

With grim determination I face my adversaries.

By 11:14 PM, I reach level 4.

Now I need 500 EXP to hit the next level.

Exp: 30 of 500

I finally have enough information. Levels advance according to the Fibonacci series.

I need 100 XP to initialize my DNA. And yes, that doesn’t make any sense.

Then 100 to get to Level 2, then 200 for Level 3, then 300 for Level 4.

Also, I get 10% of a rat’s [Essence]. I can advance when I get enough [Essence].

I put 2 upgrade points on [Stamina], 1 on [Vitality], and 1 on [Speed]. On a hunch I put 1 point on [Perception].

It did work. The strength of my headlamp increased, or should I say my [Perception]? I feel the impact on my other senses. My hearing and smell has also improved.

Some people might start stacking their points, but I think that’s foolish. It doesn’t matter how strong you are if you’re too tired to swing your sword, or if you’re too slow.

Although I think [Perception], [Intelligence] and [Wisdom] might be dump stats for melee fighters. On the other hand, magic users would probably neglect the physical stats. Why run when you can fly? You don’t need muscles to throw fireballs. Are fireballs a thing? It must be since I have magic points, or is that manna points?

Unfortunately I am now out of backpack space. So I keep items in multiple grocery bags. Carrying them is a pain. On the other hand armor breaks too fast, so that is necessary.

As I fight a hoard of level-4 rats, I wonder what they eat. I’ve only seen the occasional clump of poisonous mushrooms and some glowing moss. Neither seems edible.

I then think of something. Can I train stats? I should. People get stronger by training. Presumably I did the same to get my wisdom and intelligence so high. Or was I born that way? Who knew?

And yet normal people are capped in terms of strength. That especially applies to perception. I think.

I do know that people who over-exercise shorten their lifespan. It must be this essence thing.

That does it. I’ll start exercising when I get out of this dungeon. My level should dictate my max stats. Or am I talking nonsense?

“There are rats, rats, rats, as big as alley cats in the quarter master store,” I sing as I charge another batch of rats.

I chug a healing potion as I wait for my stamina to regenerate.

A quick look at my health gives me a surprise.

Conditions:

Overweight 37%

Clogged arteries 12%

Heart damage 8.5%

Brain damage 17.7%

DNA damage 2.41%

Epigenetic damage 35.45%

Prostate Cancer 29.2 % …

I definitely lost a few pounds. I know this because my pants are getting loose. Those health potions are amazing. Anyone who can reproduce them will make a killing. Either that or special interests would bury them to protect the status quo.

But I’m impatient. When will heart and other diseases go to zero? The health potions work miracles for physical injuries, but not so great on chronic diseases. I wonder why.

At the same time, I badly want to escape the dungeon.

I’m also getting punch drunk. I need to sleep.

Looking to the left I see a godsend. It is a crack in the wall barely big enough for me to squeeze through.

Within is a larger space, almost like a safe house.

I stick in my gut and squeeze through. I deposit my equipment and shore up the hole with rocks. Now I’m safe from the rats.

I sit down and close my eyes. I feel my entire body buzzing with energy. I just relax. It was a long day.

The buzzing in my body intensifies. I ignore it since it’s just my over-stimulated nerves.

Then I notice the energy is flowing through my body in what seems like discrete flows.

I immediately think of Eastern philosophies and the meridian system.

I pay attention and I feel the energy accumulate in different locations. They are sluggishly spinning spherical vortexes.

The first one is near my pelvis. It seems earthy and erotic.

The next one is in my stomach. It seems watery.

I then feel energy in my solar plexus. This is fiery.

I remember what chakras are, so I look at my heart. I search and find nothing there.

In fright I focus again on my heart and discover there is something there. It is dead and rotting. My heart chakra is dead and rotting. That knowledge is both terrifying and not unexpected. Life has given it an ass kicking.

The fifth spinning ball of energy is at my throat. It is airy.

My forehead has one. I suppose that represents Mind.

Finally there is on above my head. It must be Spirit.

My Mind chakra is the strongest. And off course my Heart is the weakest.

Meditation Discovered

Ability to use essence to enhance  
mind/body/spirit unlocked

Unlocking Spirit

Wisdom +5

Spirit +5

I gaze at my new stats and drift to sleep as my mind, body, and spirit softly buzz.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

“How did that old dude kill that rat so effortlessly?” Annie asks, remembering the fight.

“Would you believe by his body odor?” Harold asks.

“I’m serious,” Annie scolds angrily.

“It is possible for non-Ranked mortals, given sufficient training and luck,” Gandal the wizard replies as he enters the palace. “Also, that rat was only [F-Rank 1].

“We need to put him on our watch list, now that he has absorbed [Essence]. There is no rush. Finding one rat is not the same as finding a dungeon.”

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

I wake up feeling refreshed. I still feel the energy, but it isn’t buzzing around me anymore.

I check my new stat.

SPR (Spirit): 9

I’m not sure what that means. I’ve tried mediation but it never did anything for me. Apparently what I really needed was this mysterious [Essence].

Other than finding those Meridians and Charkas, the biggest change seems to be my health. The indicators have improved by a few percents. Maybe I will live to see next year, provided I escape this dungeon.

WIS (Wisdom): 40

I laugh when I see wisdom. I guess now people can truly call me a wise ass.

I eat a granola bar and drink some bottled water. It is time to head out.

For the next several hours I hunt down rats. It’s not that I’m trying to exterminate all of them. Instead I’m just trying to find my way out and the rats insist on making me kill them.

I level up three more times. That means 15 more points to allocate.

During these times, I realize I need to meditate in order to distribute the energies flooding my body. Doing so makes me stronger and accelerates bodily repair. Unfortunately that requires a safe secluded location.

Vitality definitely helps with my health. It also has passive healing. One that is currently slow. I assume a wound that normally takes 1 week to heal will now take 2 days.

Additionally, I’m getting sick and tired of being in pitch darkness, so I allocate 5 points there. I pause a moment to enjoy my increased vision, hearing, smell and sense of place. This is making this nightmare of a dungeon a little less scary.

The headlamp is enough to dimly light the space behind me. I wonder, is that even physically possible? Or is my perception defying the laws of physics? Or am I seeing in the infrared? It’s partially echolocation. But that doesn’t fully explain things.

Already too many laws of physics have already been broken, so why not one more?

**Luke Sunderland (F-Rank 7)**

**STR (Strength):** 13

**SPD (Speed):** 13

**VIT (Vitality):** 13

**STA (Stamina):** 13

**PER (Perception):** 20

**INT (Intelligence):** 27

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 9

**HP:** 130 of 130

**STA:** 38 of 130  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Level:** 7

**Exp:** 80 of 2100

Conditions:

Overweight 18%

DNA damage 2.21%

Epigenetic damage 35.24%

Prostate Cancer 17.4 % …

Now the only health issues I have are with being overweight, cancer and information damage.

Science says cancer is caused by damaged DNA, but the immune system can fight it. That must be why the health potions are working.

I know my overweight problem will go with time and cancer is not immediate so I decide to keep my health potions for physical damage only.

By now I know I am approaching the nest. The rats are increasing in strength and size. I even fought an F-Rank 9 rat.

A thought enters my mind. How powerful would the king rat be? That is not something I want to find out, especially since my goal is to escape.

I focus on my travels and realize I have full knowledge of where I have been. It’s almost as if I have a map in my head. That’s amazing news and also comforting. It means I will not get lost.

The question is where to go?

I might have searched out the boss if I was younger and more foolish, and had my missing foot.

However, with a broken prostatic leg and surrounded by darkness of a night in a cloudy forest, it’s hard to be adventurous. Thankfully I have spare batteries for my lamp.

There’s no point in returning to my starting point since it is a dead end. My only choice is to explore until I find an exit.

“I am walking, down the rat street, when I hear footsteps behind me…I’m a laughing rat and you can’t catch me…”

I get interrupted by a group of rats charging me. They seem enraged. Were they enraged by my singing? How rude.

The rats are all between rank 5 and 8. That was OK, since I am finally in the grove. I guess it’s like riding a bike. You never really forget. Also, my 20 of [Perception] makes the rats easier to track.

As I fight the rats I try to decide how to allocate my next set of points. [Perception] is paying huge dividends in keeping me alive. It’s also helping me better target weak points.

However these fights are very stamina-draining. Putting points on strength would speed up the fight, especially since the higher-level rats have tough fur. Speed would improve eye shots.

As I fight I wonder, which is worse, the actual fight or the aftermath when you remember the fight years later?

The good news about this fight is that I came out of it almost completely uninjured. I decide to use a healing potion, since the scratches and bites are killing me.

I sit and focus on my chakra system. I start with my first one at the base of my pelvis. It is chaotic, reminding me of undigested food.

As I focus on the chakra, the energies seem to smooth out and flow more smoothly. Then I focus on my next one.

I then arrive at my heart, but it’s a waste of time. No matter what I do, it remains dead. Also, working on it is bringing up memories of betrayal, disappointment, shame, and countless other negative emotions. I have the overwhelming urge to punch my ex-wife in the face, along with my so-called best friend who betrayed me. They are just the top two on my ass-kicking list. I suppress the memories and decide to move on.

I’m about to get up when my light flickers out, plunging me into darkness.

In panic I pop out the dead batteries and reach into my pocket for fresh batteries. That’s easier said than done in pitch darkness.

I’m about to push in the last battery when I realize that there’s a miniscule amount of light coming from somewhere. I can just barely make out the outlines of the walls and my body but it’s there. It must be my heightened senses.

My lamp turns on as the last battery slips into place. It was time to head out.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

I enter a large circular room filled with pillars. A moment later the wall slides over, closing me in.

Rats, I’m trapped. I should stop saying rats.

Without warning a humongous rat crashes down from the ceiling.

As a rule elephants don’t fear rats, unless that rat is the size of an elephant.

“I don’t suppose we could be friends over a nice yummy bowl of Ratatouille, can we?” I ask.

The boss rat screeches with the sound of thunder.

“I guess not,” I say as I dodge a charge.

I swing my left sword, barely blocking a paw.

My greatest defense is my headlight, blinding the rat. Unfortunately that is also enraging the creature.

I focus entirely on speed to block attacks. This approach keeps me safe, but causes no damage to the rat.

Then the rat swings around and tries to hit me with its tail. I frantically block, and accidentally block with my arm and not my sword. Damn that hurt. I still haven’t gotten used to using swords. Fortunately my bracer takes most of the damage.

I swing with my right sword and manage to chop off its tail.

Screeching, it turns around and charges me. I dodge to the side as there is a pillar behind me.

The rat crashes into the pillar, shattering it. It also staggers the boss rat.

This gives me enough time to go to the edge of the room. It was time to implement a crazy idea.

If only I had two functional legs, then I could jump on the rats back. As the saying goes, ‘If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.’ That is a stupid saying. Why would beggars want to ride horses?

The rat recovers and charges. I dodge around the pillar I’m currently next to and the rat smashes it.

Again the rat gets stunned. I take advantage and give it some superficial wounds and scamper to the next pillar.

As I fight, information about the rat enters my mind.

King Rat, E-Rank 3

This creature is one of many

That tries to invade the mortal world

This dungeon has started to break out

That was disturbing news. How far above me was the surface?

Also, was the rat I fought in the storm drain the forerunner of this breaking out? Was the Yeti real? How about sea monsters?

Again the rat smashes through the pillar I’m hiding behind. Again I get in some stabs. Unfortunately I can’t get in a critical wound. Also, the falling rocks are doing more damage than my swords.

Completely engrossed in the fight I scurry to the next pillar near the wall of the immense room.

“I’m singing of a Rat Christmas, just like the one I’ve seen before,” I sing. Yes, I tend to sing to calm my nerves. Unfortunately I can’t do that in polite company. It’s very sad.

My singing has the intended effect. The rat gets more enraged. Again and again the rat crashes into the pillars as I run around the room.

Thankfully the rat is stupid, or I would be dead by now.

Finally all outer pillars are destroyed and I bait the rat into the next ring of pillars. The good news is the repeated crashes are in fact taking a toll on the rat, but not enough.

Finally the last pillar in the center remains. At this point the rat is sluggish and as slow as me.

Making a wide loop I head for the center pillar.

CRASH!

The rat smashes into it. Just as I hope, the ceiling collapses on top of the rat, nearly crushing me in the process.

I feel essence rush into me and I stop to catch my breath. Damn that was a tough fight. One mistake and I would be dead.

“Now I know I’m going crazy, and not just because I’m talking to myself,” I say aloud as a large wooden chest appears in front of me.

As I stare at the chest, messages appear in my mind.

Awarded Title: Soloist

For soloing your first dungeon +3

(All attributes but Wisdom, Spirit)

Awarded Title: Adventuresome

For soloing your first dungeon before awakening +5

(All attributes but Wisdom, Spirit)

Awarded Title: Mighty

For defeating a boss monster over 1 rank above yours +5

(All attributes but Wisdom, Spirit)

Awarded Title: Vigilant

(Max 10X Perception, variable)

I pause as energy rushes through my body. My muscles tighten and my fatigue disappears. I am feeling amazing. All stress leaves me as I realize I won.

Looking around I realize the room is lit by wall torches. The sight of them makes me annoyed. Now they come when I don’t need them.

I check my absorbed essence. I have enough for one level. Damn! I’m 20 EP shy of having enough for a second level. I decided to wait before allocating the points. In theory the challenge is over, and so I should be free to leave.

I open the chest and find the expected copper and silver coins. In addition I find a strange diamond shaped crystal of stygian blackness.

Crystal of holding (Growth)

Holding the crystal, I immediately know what to do.

The crystal glows a moment and dissolves into my aura. Wait. I have an aura?

I get distracted when I realize I have some kind of dimensional space associated with me. The space is about 2 meters cubed. That’s about the amount of space rented out for a small storage space in the city.

Excitedly I remove my laptop and accessories from my backpack. Yes. It fits. Now I never have to worry about thieves. I’m so happy I could sing.

Just then the rat disintegrates, telling me in no uncertain terms not to sing.

I add my cell phone, wallet and the rest of my essentials. Finally I add all my loot.

Looking around I spot an exit. It was time to leave this dump.

As I walk to the exit I allocate all 5 free points to vitality, and then toss a healing potion. Vitality is best for me, since I’m no longer fighting.

**Luke Sunderland (F-Rank 8)**

**Titles:** Soloist (+3), Adventuresome (+5), Mighty (+5), Vigilant (max 10X Perception, variable)

**STR (Strength):** 26

**SPE (Speed):** 26

**VIT (Vitality):** 26

**STA (Stamina):** 26

**PER (Perception):** 33

**INT (Intelligence):** 40

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 9

**HP:** 130 of 130

**STA:** 38 of 130  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Level:** 8

**Exp:** 3200 of 3400

**Copper:** 3573, Silver: 57

Conditions:

Overweight 12%

DNA damage 2.13%

Epigenetic damage 35.16%

Prostate Cancer 4.2 % …

I pause to look at my stats and am shocked. When did I get Vigilant as a title? That’s right. It happened when I got my other crazy bonuses, when I no longer needed it. Rats! I mean curses.

Also, isn’t 10X a little overpowered?

As for my +13 on my physical stats, wasn’t that a lot too? Then again, my base stats were low to begin with. But still, I should currently have the stats of someone one level above me. That is crazy.

I then check my health.

Damn it. Prostate cancer is almost gone. So close. That’s okay. I have 3 more potions.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

I step through the exit and find myself back in the storm tunnel. I look back but the opening has gone.

I hear someone approaching and I quickly store my armor. My reputation doesn’t need improving.

“Oh my God, what happened to you?” Bob asks worriedly. “You’re covered in blood and your clothes are shredded.”

“Rats,” I say with a shrug. “I’m fine. The rat problem is solved. I need to take a shower.”

Being dirty is natural. Being covered in blood is suspicious.

As I walk I realize my broken off prostatic is not as short as I realized. I was only walking with a slight hobble.

“Are you sure you’re fine? You’re skinny as a rod. Do you have cancer or something?” Bob asks worriedly.

I can’t help but laugh. “Something like that.”

One hour and one potion later I’m no longer overweight and am cancer free.

3. A whole New World

Sometimes the new is right under our noses

But we fail to see it.

“Why do we need him again?” Harold asks.

“Because it is the will of the Council,” Gandal replies. “Also, you two made first contact and we need to formally induct Sunderland San into our society.”

“But we were told to come here the first time.” Harold complains, “By the elders.”

“Never the less, you two have just broken into the C ranks. Helping those who are just starting will be good for you.”

They enter the storm tunnel and pass dozens of tents.

“There he is,” Harold says. “And he seems as disheveled as ever.”

The man in question is working on a laptop. He puts his laptop down behind him and fiddles with some wires. He then sits quietly, waiting for them but pretends not to.

“He’s a lot skinnier,” Annie notices. “Also, did he just use a dimensional storage space?” Annie asks.

“I do believe he did,” Gandal replies. “That’s most unusual. They are only given out as rewards for exceptional performances in dungeons.

“He must have amazing combat skills.”

“Okay now I’m getting interested,” Harold admits. “By the way, why did we wait so long to contact him?”

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

Some 7 months have passed, and I am restless. I try to play video games to calm my nerves, but that makes me even more restless. How can a stupid video game compete with the real thing?

Fortunately, I have a few things I do to calm my nerves.

First, I exercise in a nearby recycling facility. I use the garbage for weight training.

The facility is always filled with mountains of garbage. As long as I wear a safety helmet and vest, steel-toed boot, and keep out of the way, I bother no one.

Second comes martial training. Fighting imaginary enemies with swords and knives is both relaxing and exhausting. The focus I need to execute each move relaxes the mind.

And of course, the night is the best time, since the facility shuts down then.

Third, I have come into the habit of meditating. I can feel energies flow around my body. Unfortunately, my chakras are like black boxes. I have no idea what’s going on there. I just know they are damaged.

One side benefit of meditation is that I am able to absorb Essence directly from the atmosphere. At just under 1 EP per hour, the process is less than efficient. On the other hand, I was able to rack up around 235 EP.

Since I only needed 200 EP for the next level, I achieved that goal. What did I do with the 5 free stat points. I decided to leave them for an emergency.

Finally, after my workouts I return to my tent and work on my video game.

It’s surprising how many free assets you can collect after years grabbing monthly free drops from Unreal Engine. Then there are the forever free assets.

I have finally implemented the basic game mechanics, along with the first level. I would have done more, but level design is time consuming, and art is not my strong suite.

One good thing that came with completing the rat dungeon is that hostile people shun me. They instinctively know I am no person to mess with. The side effect is that the neighborhood has never been safer.

The second is my storage. With my possessions safe, I no longer fear theft. As a result, I no longer need my stink barrier.

I still don’t bother with bathing, but I no longer stink. I know I don’t stink by the reactions of people I meet. Or at least my scent doesn’t seem to bother anyone.

Finally, I discovered my [Vigilant] title is a bit of a pain. Any little nervousness on my part ramps up my senses, overloading me with data and increasing my stress. It’s a vicious cycle.

The only protection I found was meditation, which controls my ability. And I have nothing to be nervous about. My life is once again carefree.

That’s what I thought.

I am sitting on a broken-down grungy lawn chair, working on my game when my senses unexpectedly ramp up.

I become aware of that attractive couple as they approach, but this time they have a friend.

I pretend to put my laptop behind me, but instead disconnect it and place it into my storage space. I do the same for my charging cable.

“Good afternoon. My name is Wizard Gandal,” Gandal says. “You must be Luke Sunderland.

“My companions are Harold and Annie.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be Gandalf the Grey?” I ask. “Besides, how do you know my name?”

“You are confusing me with my great, great grandfather,” Gandal says. “You entered our RADAR when you killed that monster rat. Congratulations on reaching [F-Rank 9], and on conquering that dungeon. Quite frankly we didn’t know it was there.”

“That was over 7 months ago,” I reply in annoyance. “Why now?”

I’m a little nervous. Everyone hears stories about what happens when people find Secrets. It’s even worse for me, since street people go missing all the time. And I thought I was in the clear.

I try to suppress my nervousness, since my heightened senses are making me feel a little nauseous and a headache. I close my eyes and that helps.

The only good news is that I can tell if they are lying.

“There is no need to be scared,” Gandal says. “We will not harm you. We kept you under surveillance, so we know you can keep a secret.”

“Obviously I didn’t want to attract the wrong attention,” I reply. “Now that I think of it, I should have told people. That truly would have made people think I was nuts, giving me another line of defense. Too late now.”

“We would like for you to come with us.”

That gives me a chill.

“Do I have a choice?” I ask.

“You always have a choice,” Gandal says.

“The choice between coming voluntarily and involuntarily isn’t a choice,” I reply.

“I think this is for your own good,” Gandal says. “I compared the scan Annie did on you and the scan I just did. Your health has vastly improved since conquering that dungeon. But your DNA and epigenetic codes are still crap. Also, your chakra system is badly damaged. You need medical treatment.”

Gandal shrugs.

Now I’m interested. I sigh and say reluctantly, “Very well I shall come with you, no doubt foolishly.”

“Was that from Star Trek?” Harold asks.

“That’s right,” I reply with a smile. “Ferengi are funny characters, especially in the movie. In the series they get boring.”

I get up. I’m ready to go. All my valuables are safe. The rest is easily replaceable.

“Can we get you groomed?” Annie asks.

“No way,” I reply. “I have to keep up appearances.”

We walk in silence and then Gandal steps into the driver’s seat of an SUV.

Harold takes shotgun while Annie sits behind Gandal. I sit behind Harold.

“How did you handle a dungeon by yourself?” Harold asks as we drive.

“Why would you tackle a dungeon by yourself?” Annie scolds. “That’s rather reckless.”

“Couldn’t help it,” I reply with a shrug. “I found a hole in the storm tunnel and investigated. I then fell into a subterranean chamber and couldn’t get out.

“Fortunately I had a headlamp, a crowbar and a knife or I would have died,” I reply. “I also have both military and martial arts training.”

“You don’t seem surprised to find this world that ordinary people know nothing about,” Annie comments.

I notice we are leaving the industrial area and heading for London.

I shrug, “I figure if I’m mad at least I should enjoy it. Although I admit it’s a little lonely, seeing a world no one else can.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t pick you up earlier. The higher-ups only told us to pick you up now,” Gandal comments. “You mentioned the military.”

“Yes, but the training I found most useful was karate. The military trained me to deal with battle, and the stress of being surrounded by enemies,” I reply.

We drive another half hour.

“Are we going to Buckingham Palace?” I ask.

“No, but close,” Gandal replies.

“This place does connect to Buckingham Palace, but that’s not where we are going,” Gandal adds.

We enter a garage of a non-descript office building and head downwards. We park and head for the elevators. Down we go at least five stories.

“Why are you walking around with your eyes closed?” Annie asked.

“Because I’m feeling nervous,” I reply. “Closing my eyes calms my nerves.”

“But you will trip,” Annie argues.

“Not a problem,” I deny.

The elevator opens to an atrium bustling with people, most of which are not human.

My nervousness disappears as I feel I’m entering a sci-fi convention. I look around.

There are elves, dwarves, creatures like Jar-Jar and Chewbacca, and even grey aliens with their humongous eyes. It is a real live mix-up between Star Wars, Star Trek, Lord of the Rings, and several other sci-fi genres.

In my mind they are all otaku nuts, trying their best to make themselves believable.

I imagine myself swaggering around like a teenager, with fire-engine-red hair, red-themed clothes, and mighty swords across my back.

We pass through several corridors and enter what is clearly a hospital wing. We enter a waiting room and Gandal greets the receptionist. “Awakened human Luke Sunderland is here for an appointment with Dr. Graham Winters.”

“Please sit down and I’ll call you when she’s ready,” the receptionist said.

“Luke, this is a standard medical exam. There is nothing to worry about. We do need the results to properly register you,” Gandal says.

I just frown and sit down. My nervousness has returned.

“We’ll return here when the doctor is done,” Gandal said and leaves with the others.

While waiting I ponder the size of the underground complex I am now in. There was no telling how big it is, but the part we explored is huge.

After a tedious wait I am called in.

A woman resembling a dryad greets me as I follow her to the clinic.

“Good morning Sunderland San. My name is Dr. Graham Winters. I specialize in xeno-medicine, psychology, Reiki and energy healing.

I know that ‘San’ is a gender-neutral Japanese honorific, the same as Mr. or Mrs. There’s also ‘Kun’ for teens and kids, and ‘Sama’ for important people.

“It’s unusual for a person to spontaneously awaken at your age. People in our community get awakened by their parents in a controlled environment and only after years of extensive training.

“They also fight monsters in teams to ensure no one dies. The downside is of course less essence gained, as well as less experience. You do know what essence is, don’t you?”

“No,” I reply. “I only know I accumulate it when I kill monsters and while meditating. When enough accumulates, I can suck it into me and – something happens, causing me to level up. The effects seem to take only seconds. I found I have some sort of chakra system which is broken. I don’t fully understand what happens when I allocate attribute points.”

“Your damaged system is preventing you from obtaining this knowledge. And without that knowledge you can’t heal yourself.

“Please lie down on the bench so I can examine you,” Dr. Winters requests.

“Don’t you want to know my medical history?” I ask the doctor as I comply.

“No need,” She replies. “I can see everything I need to know.

“Did you know everyone has something called an ethereal body? This body stores all your memories, wants, needs, desires and habits. That is what you could call your karma, since it defines who you are.

“These impulses are used to prepare your physical and astral bodies for incarnation. Once born, people on this planet are cutoff from those memories, but they still affect you.

“Day-to-day memories are stored in the astral and physical bodies, which you do have access to. And at death you shed your astral and physical bodies, keeping only your ethereal body.

“As incarnated beings, our job is to perfect our physical and astral bodies. Only then can we make the ascension into higher planes of existence.

“Our world has conquered old age. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Living long doesn’t necessarily make us wise. Since there is never a rush to advance spiritually, mortals can become wiser than us.”

The doctor moves her hands over my body, never touching it.

“Your physical body had been badly scarred from a hard life. It’s reflected in your astral body. Some of it is a carryover from previous lives. If you hadn’t awakened, you would have died by now.

“Don’t worry. With proper care, you will live a healthier life than you can imagine.

“One of several reasons we reframed from bringing you in before is because I have a long wait list. Don’t worry. Your future appointments are already booked in.

Another is that you needed time alone to adjust. Our scans show this wait was a wise decision.

“I don’t need to do anything about your physical body. It will sort itself out on its own when you get more essence.

“I can’t say the same for your astral body. As you mentioned, your chakra system is damaged.

“This is especially true for your heart chakra. It is shattered and covered with a thick layer of scar tissue.

“Unless we fix them, your lifespan will still be less than ten years. The good news is this is all fixable.

“Now relax.”

For a moment she says nothing and placed her hands over my pelvis. I feel a burning sensation and the distortions in energy flow lessens. Weird smoke emerges and I smell something like rotting fish.

“You have heightened **[Perception]**. How does the world look to you now?”

“I can see into the ultraviolet now,” I reply. “Flowers look vastly different when that sense turns on. I also seem to see more colors. I hear some women have a forth vision receptor. I feel I have it too but that’s impossible.”

“How about your other senses?” Dr. Winters asks.

“I can hear infrasound like elephants and ultrasound like bats. Yes, I can hear their clicks and the echoes. It’s like a strobe light,” I reply. “I’m convinced my sense of smell rivals wolves.

“It’s amazing how many scents there are. I discovered I can recognize people by scent alone.

“Then there are electrical and magnetic fields.

“And my sense of direction…I literally I have a map in my head, which I can see with my imagination.”

I pause and then say, “I have a title called Vigilant. It causes my senses to ramp up whenever I feel nervous. Unfortunately I’m struggling to handle the overwhelming data it is unleashing.”

“And that makes you more nervous. It’s a vicious cycle,” Dr. Winters says with a nod. “Allocating more points to **[Intelligence]** will help with that, since you’re lacking data processing.”

“I’ll do that. I have 5 free points. Should I do it now?”

“Yes, go ahead,” Dr. Winters replies.

I do as instructed, and now I have 45 in base Intelligence.

“That seems to help,” I say. “How common is that?”

As we talk Dr. Winters moves her hand from center to center. Every time, this process releases disgusting liquids from my body, accompanied by nasty smells.

“[Vigilance] is born from a lifetime of desperate need and trauma,” Dr. Winters explains. “As such, very few people have that gift. And some people consider it to be a curse. Others find it creepy. Best keep that secret.

“The best advice I can give you is to learn to meditate and focus on breath work. This will help you control your nervousness and the power of your senses.

“That’s our session for today,” Dr. Winters says. “Step into that shower area. It will clean you up. No need to remove your clothes. Do you have any questions?”

“No doctor,” I reply as I step into the space as instructed and find no shower accessories. Instead I feel a strange energy flowing over me. The dirt and grime vanish, leaving me and my clothes clean and fresh smelling. Even the wrinkles and eternal stains on my shirt have gone.

I will have to switch shirts when I return to the tunnels. My clothes look a little too new. I’m too clean.

I step out and wait.

“I noticed you never asked me about my race,” Dr. Winters comments as she finishes up her paperwork.

“I didn’t want to be rude,” I reply.

The woman laughs and says, “You’re very diplomatic. For the record I am a dryad. My species evolved from a biological kingdom more closely resembling plants than animals. I booked your next appointment for Tuesday, September 17 at 11:00 AM. The type of damage you have takes time to heal. But I assure you it will heal.”

“Thank you doctor,” I say as I head for the door.

“Just a moment,” Dr. Winters says, and I stop. “You haven’t processed the fact that you now live in an expanded world. You still think of me and the others as funny looking humans.

“Your new team has been warned and can help you. You’re not alone.”

“Thank you Dr. Winters,” I say with a smile and step out of the office.

I find my escort waiting for me.

“How was your session?” Gandal asked.

“The doctor extracted some disgusting liquids out of me,” I reply.

“But you’re used to that, aren’t you?” Harold asks with a frown.

“For your information smell is a great protection from thieves. It tells people, this person doesn’t have anything to steal,” I explain. “I’ve never been robbed. Unlike most of the people I know. Fun fact, even thieves get stolen from. Thankfully I don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Do you have any idea how rare storage abilities are?” Gandal asks. “Normal people use storage rings.”

“Just solo a dungeon and fight a boss one rank above you. Although soloing a pitch-black rat dungeon with just a headlamp and a crowbar is not my idea of fun. It gave me nightmares,” I reply with a shrug. “I assume that’s how I got my storage crystal. You’ve all done that, haven’t you?”

Annie looks at me as if I’m a psycho and says, “No we aren’t all crazy. And I don’t have a death wish.”

“This isn’t a video game, or a LitRPG novel where people fight and win against outlandish odds. This is real life,” Gandal replies with a frown. “A team would have been sent into that rat-themed rift if we had found it.”

Oh great. The reputation of the Murder Hobo has increased. Never mind that any Special Forces soldier in any military could have done what I did. Although in my prime I would have done a better job.

“I didn’t tackle that dungeon because I was macho,” I refute. “In my world, monsters and dungeons don’t exist. Just like Allice, I just fell down the rabbit hole.”

“Are you a blade master?” Annie asks, changing the subject.

“No, but I have a black belt, second Dan in Karate,” I reply. “Unfortunately I stopped when I left the military. My forms synergized well with the swords, at least good enough to handle the rats.

“I resumed training after the dungeon. It’s good exercise and clears the mind.”

“By the way, do you want to do adventure work?” Gandal asks. “Monster breakouts are increasing because of increasing environmental degradation. It spiked when world governments started nuclear testing. It’s so bad that regular people are starting to notice.

“Certain groups want to inform the public, but the people in power are afraid of the consequences.”

The thought excites me.

“Like the chupacabra,” I suggest.

“Exactly,” Gandal agrees. “Will you help us?”

“It’s addicting,” I reply. “My body craves it.”

“When a person kills a monster, they absorb essence and collect it like fat. It can be used as an alchemical ingredient and as a form of currency…”

“And for leveling up,” I say.

“Leveling is primarily controlled by the challenges you overcome,” Gandal says. “A person will never advance no matter how much essence they absorb, if they don’t challenge themselves.”

“But that hasn’t been a problem for me,” I object.

“That’s because you are suffering a deficit,” Gandal replies. “I am informed you can reach C rank quickly. That’s the same level as the rest of your team. After that your progress will be like a normal person.

“However I must warn you. Too many people take it too far, and end up dying when they overestimate their skills in a dungeon,” Gandal warns.

We enter an office and wait. In moments a lady guides us to a private room and we sit.

“Hi Simons San,” Gandal greets. “Sunderland San has agreed to become an adventurer.”

“Do you actually use the term Adventurer?” I ask.

“The technical term is UAP Response Agent,” Simons replies. “UAP stands for Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena. Adventurer is just slang. The UAP Response Agency is an international organization dealing with phenomena best kept secret. It isn’t officially associated with the UN, since Anomalous Phenomena don’t officially exist.”

I watch as the woman types information. It’s kind of creepy to know how much information they have on me.

“Please read and sign these non-disclosure papers. We know you have security clearance from your army days. This will extend that.”

Simons gives me papers to fill out. I skim through them, committing them to memory. They all seem standard. I then sign the papers.

“Do aliens exist?” I ask.

“Yes and no,” Simons replies. “However the vast amounts of global sightings aren’t what observers think they are. The world is vast beyond belief.”

Simons pauses and then says, “There is this great argument about whether the world is flat or round. The simple answer is both answers are correct and also incorrect. Don’t think too deeply about such things or you will go crazy.

“That’s okay,” I reply with a smile. “I think I’m already a little dotty.”

Simons laughs and continues typing. “That’s the spirit.”

“Sunderland San, please stand there for your photo,” Simons instructs.

“But I look like a bum,” I complain.

Harold laughs, but shuts up when the others glare at him.

“That’s okay Sunderland San,” Simons replies. “We can clean up the photo.”

I do as instructed and return to my seat.

“Here you go,” Simons says and hands me a badge.

I look at my image and realize I look good. My salt and pepper hair and beard are groomed, and I’m in a casual high-end shirt. However I’m quite recognizable.

My information is written as *Special Agent Luke Sunderland, F-Rank 9 Initiate*.

All I can say is that they have some freaky technology.

“Do you require anything else?” Simons asks.

“No thanks Simons San,” Gandal replies and gets up.

We step out and Gandal says, “It’s time to meet the rest of your team.”

Several corridors later we arrive at a nondescript room. Upon entering we find three people.

“Luke, I would like you to meet Team Marauders.

“This is Gerri. She is your melee fighter.”

Gerri is 5”5’ and built like a tank. She has stubby legs, but they are massive. Compared to her, my legs are like toothpicks. Her arms are more slender. By slender I mean they only have the girth of my thighs. And her hands reached close to the ground.

She looks like the stereotypical dwarf, especially with her impressive beard that comes down to almost her waist. The beard is intricately braided with numerous ornate rings, just like a stereotypical dwarf.

“Her race is Pumilio[[1]](#footnote-1) but the common term is Dwarf. Millennium ago their star system entered a region of space with excessive cosmic radiation. As a result they were forced to live in vast underground settlements and domed cities. Their gravity is also 1.7 G, so naturally they are strong. They have a strength and endurance multiplier of 1.7 compared to humans.

“I like underground places,” I say. “Perhaps I can visit, when I’m a little stronger.”

“It would be an honor to show you around,” Gerri replies with a deep growly voice and a smile. She is definitely feminine, despite the beard. I guess it’s true about dwarfs and beards.

“Linda is your pyrotechnics expert, commonly known as a fire wizard.” Linda is reptilian and is wearing some sort of pants designed to accommodate her tail.

“I like blowing things up,” Linda greets with a toothy grin.

“She’s a dragonoid, not to be confused with reptilian. Unlike reptilians, her kind nurtures their young and they are both social and friendly.”

“She also kicks ass like the best of them,” Harold adds.

“I like blowing things up too,” I reply. “I look forward to seeing your work.”

“I can’t wait,” Linda replies.

“This is Vlorlax. He belongs to the aquilae[[2]](#footnote-2) race, which hatch from eggs, are warm-blooded, and they mate for life. They have excellent vision. Not surprising, Vlorlax is your sniper. Or ranger if you prefer.”

Vlorlax looks like an eagle that has been transformed into a humanoid. He has wings, but I doubt they are functional. On second thought, I’m probably wrong. Who needs physics in a world of crazy?

“I did some sniper work in the army,” I say. “Perhaps we can practice together.”

“I look forward to it,” Vlorlax replies.

“You know Harold. He’s a dark elf and is your stealth exert, AKA rogue.”

Harold taps his necklace and his skin turns charcoal gray. A moment later it turns skin color.

“I tried being stealthy in that dungeon,” I comment. “It didn’t work out that well.”

“That’s because you need proper training,” Harold replies with pride.

“I look forward to learning from the best,” I say, making Harold’s day.

“Finally we have Annie. She’s a Nordic and the seventh daughter of the royal family of Agatha. She’s the current team leader.”

“Pleased to meet you Annie,” I say. I was about to say, Princess, but remembered how angry she got when Harold said it. “But I must ask. Why would they assign me to this group, especially when they are several levels above me? I don’t want to be a burden.”

“The Galactic Council made the decision,” Gandal replies. “We rarely know the reasons they do what they do. Rest assured their decisions have never been wrong in recorded memory.

“Anyway, team; I would like you to meet Luke Sunderland, your blade dancer and jack of all trades.”

I laugh and ask, “Did you just call me a blade dancer?”

“I was given clips of your fight in the rift,” Gandal replies and takes out his wand.

In the air a screen appears, with me fighting rats. I see myself spinning around and swiping my two swords in arks around me as rats fall. It’s almost like a dance. But I immediately see mistakes in my form, making me feel embarrassed.

The good news is that I have vastly improved over the last several months. It really helps having supercharged proprioception, allowing me to better understand how my body moves.

“That’s quite impressive I’d say,” Gandal comments. “I can’t wait to find out how your skills will improve with actual sword training.”

“I can’t believe you are using your peg leg as a third sword,” Harold says with a chuckle.

“I desperately wished I had a retractable sword in my boot,” I grumble. “Or better yet, a machine gun.”

“Technology is not effective in some alternative realities,” Gandal warns. “That’s why we train on the tried and true tools. And yes, you did slip into an alternative space when you entered that rift.

“It was lucky your light could work, or maybe it was fate.

“A rule we follow is only use tech appropriate to a world’s culture. As an Initiate, you do not need to worry about that until C-Rank at least.

“By the way, each rank has a name and there are 7 ranks. Once we pass the 7th, we enter a world none of us can imagine.

“You are at Initiate rank F, while you regular friends are at mortal rank.

“Next for you is Rank-E Rookie.

“That’s enough lecturing. Your team will show you where to spend your loot.”

“I have over 1300 copper coins and 65 silver coins, plus an assortment of weapons, armor and potions,” I say. “But where did it come from?”

“Those aren’t actual copper and silver coins,” Gandal replies. “They are concentrated forms of manna. It is used as both currency and an alchemical resource. All in all, it’s a rather advanced topic.”

“Why do they look like coins? What’s this symbol and who is this red-head guy?” I ask and hand Gandal a copper coin.

“That coin is unique to you since your subconscious created it. The Phi ϕ symbol, the words *Radical Silence*, and the image of the redhead boy on the other side reflect you.

“It has everything to with archetypes and the essence of things,” Gandal replies. “Soon you will be thought everything you need to know.

“In the meantime I want you to get to know your teammates. So I’ll leave you now.”

“Come, we’ll take you to the shop where you can order those custom boots you mentioned,” Annie said. “You can also sell your loot.”

“It’s in Sidney, Australia,” Gerri added.

“Why Australia?” I ask.

“Since it’s the outback of everything,” Harold says with a laugh. “Actually it used to be in Africa when Africa was considered the most mysterious place on Earth.”

“For a dark elf, you talk lot,” Vlorlax scolds.

“That’s stereotyping,” I say as I surreptitiously watch the aliens around me.

“You’re right,” Vlorlax replies. “Members of all races, except those with hive minds are unique individuals.

“However, members of all races are shaped by their environment, mating habits, biology, and karma.”

We step through a huge archway and step into a foreign city with a kaleidoscopic sky.

That is weird. I was certain I was underground in a massive underground complex.

This city definitely isn’t London. The architecture doesn’t even seem earthly. It’s more like some sort of transportation hub with countless people coming and going.

This new area feels straight out of the *Men in Black* movies. Where the hell are we?

Ever since I met my new companions I felt this strange otherworldliness. At first it was easy to ignore.

Annie is a Nordic beauty. Harold has elfish good looks. Even Gerri appears mostly human, although her father might have been a gorilla.

The same couldn’t be said about my other two companions.

I realize Annie and Harold are intentionally walking besides me, with Gerri in front. The other two are behind me.

Unfortunately for me, I’m feeling disoriented. My sense of direction is completely screwed up. I can’t tell left from right, and up from down. The world seems to be spinning.

All this was made worse by the strange crawling sensations on my skin and eerie sounds.

I close my eyes and follow, focusing my breathing to prevent myself from barfing.

As we walk the nausea increases. I can’t take it anymore. I stop and barf. Quickly summoning a napkin, I wipe my face.

The barf dissolves into the ground and disappears.

Annie and Harold grab onto me and guide me forward. I close my eyes, cover my ears and follow.

“It will be okay,” Annie says worriedly like an overprotective granddaughter worried about her addled grandfather.

After an eternity of walking through a barf-inducing funhouse I step through another portal.

The world slowly goes back to normal, and I regain my sense of direction. We are now in what seems like the atrium of a mall.

“Thanks dear, I’m feeling better now,” I say as I take in a deep breath.

“Do you have kids?” Annie asked.

“Yes,” I reply. “My eldest is younger than you at around 16, I think. I assume you’re older. Anyways, I haven’t seen her in years.”

“I’m not…” Annie starts but Harold interrupts.

“There’s the store,” Harold exclaims and points.

We enter and are greeted by a sales clerk looking like a Ferengi.

“How may I be of service?” the man asks eagerly.

Suddenly I realize I’m no longer in Kansas anymore, figuratively speaking. The world is filled with magic, super technology and more importantly, aliens.

“Oh my God, I’m surrounded by aliens,” I mutter, as overwhelming loneliness crashes into me.

Humans are such insignificant creatures, thinking they are masters. I know better now. That is knowledge I don’t want.

“Oh, oh,” the clerk says worriedly as everything goes dim.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

I wake up in a bed in what looks like a motor home. Annie is sitting there, waiting.

“Are you okay?” Annie asks worriedly. “Dr. Winters warned us of this. She said this was expected for regular people when they are first exposed to the multiverse.

“That’s one reason why Earth governments are reluctant to reveal the presence of aliens to their citizens.

“She also told me to keep an eye on you since I look the most human. Waking up to me should be the least traumatic.

“However, she also said you have unusually high intelligence and wisdom. You will adapt quickly.”

Everything seems back to normal so I get up. “I’m okay now. I’m going to delude myself into thinking that you are just an ordinary girl. How come you look human?”

“That’s because Humans, Nordics, Elves, Dwarves, and several other races are child races of a more ancient race. We can even mate,” Annie said. “And yes, your race is vastly older than your scientists can imagine, as well as your civilization.”

I get up and we exit the motor home.

“I hope you’re okay,” the Ferengi said worriedly. “Also, what did you think of the bed? This transport is perfectly suited for a standard team of 7 up-and-coming adventurers. It even has great trade-in value. I also have other choices.”

“Actually we just need some starter gear for Luke, as he is our newest team member,” Annie says. “Also, he wants custom boots with retractable blades.”

“Excellent choice,” the Ferengi says happily. “Please follow me to our catalog terminal. By the way my name is Gringo. For your Oracle, do you have any requirements?”

We arrive at a wall terminal and Gringo starts entering information.

“What’s an Oracle?” I ask.

“It’s like a laptop and a cell phone combined,” Gringo replies. “It’s the one information tool every adventurer needs. The base model is limited but it is infinitely extendable with the use of modules.

“More importantly, it works in most places in the multiverse, except in certain high-level dungeons. It comes with instructions and warnings.”

“Does it run Windows?” I ask as I watch Gringo interacting with the panel. “Can it play games?”

Gringo pauses and then says, “As a matter of fact it does,” Gringo replies happily. “It’s a lot faster than anything you can buy in the Human world. And yes, it can play all Human games from all Human gaming platforms.

“I just selected the Earth OS package and the Earth Gaming package for you. I also recommend the communications package, the basic mapping package, and the identification package. Are there any other packages you need? Remember you can always come back later.”

“That’s good enough for now,” Annie said.

“Your companion mentioned the problems you had going through Nexus,” Gringo said. “I assume you have Vigilance as a title.”

“Correct,” I reply.

“Then I suggest buying a sensory suppression module,” Gringo suggests. “It also has a feature that modulates nervousness if necessary. Keep in mind, artificially suppressing nervousness can cause a person to become cocky.”

“Understood,” I reply.

We wait until Gringo finishes placing the specified items in the online shopping cart.

“I notice you have a storage power. I recommend a wardrobe crystal,” Gringo suggests. “They are incredibly convenient.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“It integrates with your storage and allows you to create outfits and swap them as needed. It starts off with space for 2 costumes. However, with essence it will increase. Therefore the best time to buy it is now. It’s only 12 gold. It’s on special today.”

Of course it is.

“Sounds good to me,” Annie says.

“Where does it come from?” I ask.

“From some C-Level dungeons,” Gringo replied. “There seems to be a glut of them, hence the discount.

“For your new armor and weapons, do you need assistance?” Gringo asks.

“That’s fine,” Annie says. “I’ve done this before.”

“In that case I will leave you in peace. I am always available should you need help,” Gringo replies and walks away.

“I suggest you get D-Rank armor and weapons,” Annie says. “Everything in the C-Rank and beyond is magical and will place too much stress on your body.”

With Annie’s help I select weapons, armor, and custom footwear.

All together it comes to about 867 gold.

“What’s the conversion rate for copper, silver, gold, etc.? Also you said I can sell my junk,” I say.

“Sure,” Annie said. “It’s 100 coppers to a silver, 100 silver to a gold, 100 gold to a diamond, and so on. You can sell your loot there. This place has a good reputation and prices.”

“Can I use earth currency?” I ask.

“There is a currency exchange office in this mall. After all this is still Earth, despite us passing through Nexus,” Annie replies.

We approach a Ferengi clerk at a desk and Annie says, “We have merchandise to sell.”

“We are happy to buy,” the clerk replies happily.

I debate if I should keep any equipment, but decide to go with just the D-Rank equipment. I place my loot on the table. I keep the alchemical ingredients. They could be useful.

“Loot from an F-Rank dungeon isn’t that valuable,” the clerk notes.

Harold comes over and says, “I’ll be the judge of that,” and begins negotiating. That is fine with me since I never liked haggling.

After negations Harold nets me 87 silver and 37 copper.

“You mentioned an exchange,” I say to Annie.

“Follow me,” Annie answers and I follow.

We walk a short distance.

“How may I help you,” the teller asks.

“I need to convert British Pounds to 867 gold,” I say.

The lady asks, “Do you have a debit card?”

Is she asking for my bank card? I doubt it. It’s always best to ask.

“No,” I answer. “What’s that?”

“It’s a card that synchronizes with a storage space or storage ring,” the lady explains.

“I would like to buy one,” I request. “And please deposit the money.”

The lady hands me a card. “Please soul-bind this.”

Blank Debit Card Discovered

Will regenerate if destroyed

Cannot be lost or stolen

Cannot be used without permission

Do you wish to soul bind?

Yes/No

I select ‘Yes’ and hand the card back to the lady.

“You owe 43,473.37 pounds,” the lady informs me.

Yikes. That was more than I was expecting. I could get a luxury car for that price. It also wiped out most of my savings. Annie doesn’t blink an eye. It must be good to be rich.

I swipe my bank card and enter my PIN. A moment later the lady hands me my card back. “Thanks for your service. Please come again.”

We return to the store and I click ‘Buy’ on the screen. I then place my magic debit card on the screen.

A message appears on the screen saying a clerk will be back shortly.

I look around but the others are busy buying who knows what?

Gringo approaches and says, “I apologize for the delay. Please follow me and I will get you your merchandise. If you wish, I can set up your equipment free of charge. At Gringo’s emporium, service is a given.”

“Yes please,” I say and follow the man.

“Please sit down,” Gringo says, and I do as instructed. “This booth will adjust to any changes to your leg. Just remove these inserts as needed to accommodate any growth in your leg.”

Did he say growth in my leg, as in regeneration?

Gringo removes my artificial leg and installs my new one. He then gives me a boot for my good leg.

I get up and walk around. They feel good. It’s also kind of creepy how much the store knows about me.

“Tap your heels together to extend the blades,” Gringo instructs.

I do so and the blades extend. I tap again and the blades retreat. Cool.

Next are my rapiers and throwing knives. I put them away.

Then comes the wardrobe crystal…

Wardrobe Crystal Discovered

Will organize costumes.

New slots 1500 EP each

Do you wish to soul bind?

Yes/No

The requirements for new slots were high. However, that should be nothing when I get stronger.

I select, ‘Yes’.

After that Gringo gives me my armor and helps me organize it into a costume. My second costume is my current clothes.

“And now for your final purchase,” Gringo says. “If you have your computer and cell with you I can transfer the data, free of charge.”

I hand over the equipment. Gringo does who-knows-what while tapping my machines.

“Okay it’s done,” Gringo says. “You no longer need your old devices. Let me show you how to use your new equipment and connect to earth technology as needed.

“Place these devices in your ears. They will interact directly with your brain. You can control it with your thoughts.”

I place the devices in my ears and a heads-up display appears in my field of vision.

“I’m calibrating the device now. Eventually you will be able to interact with it as if it were part of your body. However, for now, use those icons. For instance, you can modulate the intensity of your senses using that icon. I set it to 5% above human normal. Be warned. This will be unable to clamp your senses to current levels, should your base perception increase above 50.

“If that happens, you can forcibly suppress your nervousness. The better solution is to increase Intelligence and just get used to it.

“After all, suppressing your nervousness can cause cockiness.”

After that came instructions on how to use my PC, cell phone, map, identification and other programs.

35 minutes later it was done.

I can’t wait to explore my new device and continue working on my video game.

Should I use the device to identify things and for directions? Better not. Using it would ruin my natural instincts. I’ll use it only if necessary.

“That completes our transactions,” Gringo says. “If there is anything else you need please let me know.”

By now the others are finished.

MC900065312[1]

We head out and I say, “I get the impression the store has multiple clones of one person and not many employees.”

“You are correct,” Vlorlax says. “The more successful Ferengi have the power to operate multiple bodies. That’s how he can offer superior customer service and still turn a profit.

“In case you are wondering, the drive for profit is part of their lifecycle. After maturity, those who can’t turn a profit quite literally get sick and die.”

“That sounds harsh,” I say. “Now what do we do?”

You are invited to join Party Marauders

Do you accept?

Yes/No

I’m startled because the message echoes in my mind and in front of me. Why was my oracle reflecting what I had naturally?

How do I disable the screen? It’s annoying.

The message in front of me disappears and I only see the message in my mind’s eye. Just like it has been since I first absorbed essence.

Let’s disable all features, except sensory suppression.

All Oracle features except sensory suppression disabled.

Perfect.

I selected ‘Yes’ to the party invite.

I am now a member of a team composed entirely of post-teens. The team name is teen appropriate. I feel old.

“Let’s eat lunch first,” Annie suggests.

I definitely want to fight monsters and absorb essence. I haven’t been this excited in years.

As I follow the gang, I organize what I need to work on. I definitely need information on the society I’m joining.

I also need to explore my oracle. Hopefully it’s not a complete waste of money.

My thoughts are cut off when we arrive at a food court. Everyone breaks off and I go for the burger place, although I’m curious about all the alien food stalls.

Food in hand I wait for the others and we find a spot.

“I can’t wait to enter another dungeon,” I say excitedly.

“You’re such a kid,” Annie said with a giggle.

I look at Annie in surprise and say, “That’s a strange thing to say to someone double your age, or is it triple?”

“I’m not…” Annie begins, and then says, “I almost forgot to mention. Once a year we hunt monsters. For whatever reason, the higher-ups insisted on booking it today in less than an hour from now.”

In other words, the higher ups want me to participate. Should I mention the obvious? I decide against it and instead focus on eating.

In the meantime, the others talk about nothing in particular.

Eventually we get up and head out.

As we travel, I realize the mall we are in is surprisingly big. All about are bustling people. Most are adults, but there are some children.

Up ahead is a sign for “Battleground Arena”.

We walk up to the teller and Annie says, “Marauders have an appointment for 6:20PM.”

The teller checks our reservation and gives us directions.

“There are three riffs in the area,” Vlorlax explained. “By allowing monsters to controllably exit, we reduce the pressure on the rest of the planet.”

“What if this and other places were to shut down?” I ask.

“If terrorists did that, inside of a month, riffs would show up throughout the world,” Vlorlax replied. “They would first show up in regions of highest conflict and division.”

You know, I think that would be marvelous. Fighting monsters is so much better than fighting humans for irrational monkey brain reasons. I don’t say that. I don’t want my companions to think I am an asshole.

Over the years, I realized that it was just better to keep my mouth shut. You can’t teach an old monkey new tricks. They have to learn for themselves.

We arrive at locker rooms and the others enter their appropriate rooms. I enter the men’s locker rooms since I need to pee. After that I switch to my battle costume and then step out.

After awhile the others join me.

“Why don’t you stay here?” Annie suggests. “We’ll do our annual hunt quickly. It’s only 10 minutes. The monsters are D-Rank after all.”

“Wouldn’t you get into trouble with the higher ups?” I ask. “They did schedule this now on purpose. And I’m officially part of your party.”

“He has a point,” Harold points out, amused at the reply.

We head to the arena entrance and wait, along with other people.

“But it’s dangerous,” Annie argues. “I don’t want you to die like last time.”

“Like last time?” I ask, confused. “I haven’t died in over 57 years.”

“Sorry,” Annie said. “I recently got nightmares of you dying.”

“Don’t you think you and the others can protect me from D-Rank monsters? You are all C-Rank, aren’t you.”

“Luke has a point,” Vlorlax agrees.

“I’ll be careful,” I say as I wipe saliva from my mouth. I am feeling ravenous. I can’t wait to start.

Minute after agonizing minute ticks down as we wait for our time.

Finally, the doors open as the clock strikes 6:20PM. People rush out and we follow.

After walking a bit, my party positions themselves around me, determined to protect me.

Again, time passes as the other parties ready themselves.

An announcer calls, “Doors will open in 1 minute.”

I glance up at the stands where spectators watch.

Finally, a horn blows and gates open. From out of the gates strange creatures called tigerdile enter. The tigerdiles look like saber tooth tigers with alligator skin.

The creatures charge in and battle begins.

A few charge us and my companions intercept them.

I whip a knife at one so hard that my arm hurts. Unfortunately, the target moves its head, avoiding an eye shot. The blade bounces off the tigerdile’s head harmlessly.

“What are you doing?” Vlorlax demands. “You’re increasing agro.”

That was my plan. I don’t say that. Instead, I glare at the creatures. It has its intended effect and multiple monsters attack.

Time seems to slow as one gets past my friends and attack from behind me.

I turn around, amused. Don’t they know I have eyes in the back of my head, figuratively speaking?

I consider using a rapier but change my mind. Instead, I take out a knife and position myself.

I slam my right arm against the tigerdile’s head and stab the dagger into its eye with all my might at the same time.

I am unable to divert the tigerdile’s charge. However, my move allows me to jump to the side.

A fraction of a second later, the tigerdile whips past me with a knife in its eye and a scrambled brain.

That critical hit was insufficient to kill it, although it did lose over 1/3 of its HP.

“Damn,” Harold grumbles since he failed to stop the attack.

A moment later the tigerdile is killed.

‘Damn,’ I curse under my breath. I wanted to take the creature down.

For assist, 49,750 XP received

Level F-11 achieved.

10 Free Attribute points

That was a surprise. I was expecting to reach Level E, since I rose by 2 levels. Then I realize each level goes to 12, not 10…12 as in the dodecahedron.

I add 4 each to speed and strength, and 2 to vitality. I should have used all on speed and strength, but I’m feeling cocky.

**Luke Sunderland (F-Rank 11)**

**Titles:** Soloist (+3), Adventuresome (+5), Mighty (+5), Vigilant (max 10X Perception, variable)

**SPE (Speed):** 26 + 4 -> 30

**STR (Strength):** 26 + 4 -> 30

**VIT (Vitality):** 26 + 2 -> 28

**STA (Stamina):** 26

**PER (Perception):** 33

**INT (Intelligence):** 45

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 9

**HP:** 130 of 130

**STA:** 38 of 130  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Exp:** 9200 of 14,400

I feel my muscles rippling as I absorb the attribute energy.

I wait for my chance again.

I then bend over and wave my butt at the tigerdiles. The others don’t see me since they are all facing outwards.

I continue my taunting as attacks increase. It is working but not fast enough. Time is running out.

Suddenly deeper knowledge of the monsters flashes in my mind. I take out a piece of beef I bought last week.

I place the beef on my rapier and wave it in front of me. This has its intended effect and a massive charge of monsters attack.

“Damn, what’s wrong with these creatures?” Vlorlax asks. “They are unusually hyper.”

Most are stopped but one gets through.

I am ready and skewer the creature through both eyes with my rapiers. I have sufficient speed and strength to dodge. I return the meat to my storage as the tigerdile zooms past me.

I have lost my rapiers, but that’s okay. The rapiers have done their jobs, and were from the rat dungeon.

The monster disintegrates, leaving just the rapiers.

“Are you okay?” Annie screams in fright.

“I am unharmed,” I reply.

Just then I get flooded by a huge quantity of Essence.

Awarded Title: Mighty-2

For defeating a monster 2 ranks above yours +10

(All attributes but Wisdom, Spirit)

10 Free attribute points

Sweet. Now I’m satisfied. But damn, my perception has increased. I leave the 10 free points for later. I’ll decide later if I want it for intelligence or vitality.

**Luke Sunderland (E-Rank 1)**

**Titles:** Soloist (+3), Adventuresome (+5), Mighty (+5), Mighty-2 (+10) Vigilant (max 10X Perception, variable)

**SPE (Speed):** 40

**STR (Strength):** 40

**VIT (Vitality):** 38

**STA (Stamina):** 36

**PER (Perception):** 43

**INT (Intelligence):** 55

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 16

**HP:** 130 of 130

**STA:** 38 of 130  
**MP:** 270 of 270

**Exp:** 359,000 of 377,000

I look at my stats and wonder why my spirit has risen. The only cause I can see is that I travelled through that Nexus place, causing me to go into a deficit. Then I ranked up after killing the monster.

Conditions:

DNA damage 0.57%

Epigenetic damage 21.73%

I’m so close to repairing all genetic damage that I feel a little impatient.

Storage Space: 27 meters cubed.

Holy cow. That’s the size of a good-sized house. I no longer have any storage woes.

I wait as the fight slowly winds down. Finally, the last of the monsters are killed.

I then hear the announcement over the intercom.

Attention everyone. Please loot your kills and exit in an orderly fashion.

I loot my one full kill and the loot enters my space. I then pick up my rapiers and thrown knives.

The others quickly loot their kills and come to me.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t protect you properly,” Vlorlax apologizes. Regret is written in his behavior. “Their behavior was vastly more aggressive than normal, as if they were being taunted.”

I try my best not to smile, knowing that’s exactly what had happened.

As we are walking away, Vlorlax accuses me, “You taunted them, didn’t you. I smelt raw meat.”

We soon leave the crowds and Vlorlax leads us to a secluded garden area.

Vlorlax turns to me and begins lecturing.

“This is not war or some video game. Putting ourselves at unnecessary risk makes no sense. Even humans who hunt do so in complete safety, unless they are trill junkies. I should have prevented you from joining this battle. And I don’t care what the elders say. An F-Rank hunting a D-Rank makes no sense whatsoever.

“Yes, there are people watching but that doesn’t prevent people from dying.”

The others look disapprovingly at me, except for Harold who looks amused.

Annie hugs me and almost cries, saying, “I don’t want you to die.”

For the first time in a long time, I feel like a little kid. I sigh but say nothing, knowing they were just worried about me.

I feel a sharp pain in my heart, and I grimace. Did I just have a heart attack? In panic I listen to my heart. Fortunately, my heartbeat sounds healthy. And my stats are also good.

Then I remember to check my Oracle. It reports I’m fine.

Then I realize what happened. The scar tissue around my heart chakra cracked. But now it was okay.

A thought enters my mind. Would I die if that scar ruptures?

For a moment no one says anything, and then Annie lets me go.

Annie then says, “The higher ups have arranged for you to go to adventuring school. This is necessary for all people newly initiated into our world.

“We have plenty of time. The transport is scheduled to leave in around two hours. Please don’t be reckless there.”

I sigh and say, “Yes mother.”

Harold giggles at that, which earns him a glare from Annie.

As I stand there, I ponder. Are these people older than I realize? Is immortality a thing? Perhaps it is, since complete regeneration is possible. I think.

That means people have no rush to becoming strong. That doesn’t make sense to me. So I decide to ask the question.

“When do people in your culture start hunting monsters, and how long does it take to reach C like you guys?”

“I think you still don’t understand,” Vlorlax scolds. “Would you let your children fight a pack of lions with just swords, considering they could die?”

“I guess not,” I reply.

“Also, your culture views time very differently than ours does,” Vlorlax says. “In your culture, people start thinking about retiring when they reach your age. For us, life is just beginning. For example, my parents are well over 800 Earth years old.

“As for monsters, they have existed from the beginning of time and their constant incursions will never end. They just wax and wane like the algae in the ocean. And they have just as much awareness as those algae.

“I have played your multiplayer games. In those games, monsters constantly re-spawn. It’s like that in the real world. They can’t be wiped out, and there’s no real danger from them, as long as we treat them with respect. They are just a resource we use.

“In fact, the average person just spends a day or two a year hunting, to fulfill their energy needs. Then they return to everyday life. Our time was just scheduled for now.

“People can even buy essence at various outlets, so they don’t need to bother.

“You on the other hand have the mentality of a mortal, who needs to rush before it’s too late.

“Of course, there are around 10% of the populations who enjoys the hunt and so are impossibly strong. They make up the main forces when the cyclic emergencies arrive, including the occasional war.”

I wonder what they would say if they knew my stats are that of D-Rank, instead of the E-Rank I now am. I’m wise enough not to mention that.

“It’s time to go,” Annie says and grabs my arm.

As we walk, I watch Annie. She doesn’t have the mannerisms of a post teen. Is it possible that all of them are older than me?

I suddenly get the impression that they are all in their mid 80s.

It’s kind of a weird concept. The only reason people get old and decrepit is because they are quite literally starving to death. I guess that impression when it comes to this Essence stuff.

I follow the others while deep in thought. I have plenty to think about.

Soon enough we are back in that freaky city. This time the trip is much more comfortable. I guess that increase in Spirit helped. And as a result, the sky is just a pretty kaleidoscope of colors.

Looking at the sky I wonder if this is what it feels like to take psychedelics.

Getting back to the subject at hand, I wonder how this knowledge would affect the world.

1. Humans are not alone in the universe.
2. All religion is wrong. Modern day religion, orthodox religion anyways.
3. All of science – no, just fundamental science is wrong.
4. We could all be immortal, but this information has been suppressed.

I can’t see the Powers-That-Be, the Military-Industrial complex, or some other shadow organization letting this get out.

Before I know it we are exiting that freaky city. The key to passing safely is to keep yourself distracted. And keeping your senses clamped to human levels.

Looking around I find myself in a new world. I know it’s not Earth because my weight has decreased slightly, among other things. Also, the sky is greenish.

I take a moment to smell the alien aromas. One of them has quite the kick. I take a deep breath, trying to get to know it.

However, the other members of my team don’t appreciate a good scent.

“Holy cow that stinks,” Harold grumbles. “Kilogons make for excellent rides but their poop is disgusting.”

So that was the source of the smell. As you have probably guessed, smells don’t bother me. They are all good, although I do have a problem with the smell of barf. I’ve spent years getting used to it. But then again that is a physiological response and very difficult to control.

The culprit in question is a huge turtle-like creature. Upon its shell is a carriage, like the ones found in the cartoon *The Flintstones*.

People are busy cleaning up the mess.

All about people are talking, speaking foreign languages. I enable language translation, and my Oracle begins translating.

The oracle is easy to control, but I need a few hours to get comfortable with it.

“There is our destination,” Annie says and points.

There are a bunch of young people – scratch that. There are a bunch of people near a strange vessel. The vessel is next to a retaining wall.

We approach the group but everyone seems to be waiting. I listen for a moment to the chatter and then say, “Let’s go there. I would like to see the view.”

With Annie still holding my arm, we reach the wall.

Holy Cow! We are floating far above the ground. Below is a middle-ages city – is what I would say; except this city looks alien. Not in the basic concept of houses and buildings, but in architecture.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Annie asked with a smile.

“Only in a video game,” I agree.

I focus on movement in the city and see the residents. Indeed, they are all aliens.

I turn my head, and feel vertigo. Damn. I need to be careful when overriding my sensory dampening.

“Okay everyone,” a female badger-like creature calls. “The last member of the group has arrived.”

She isn’t speaking English, but my oracle is translating. I wonder if I can do the same without the oracle. Probably not, since I would have to learn each language.

On the other hand, I don’t need the built-in map, or that weird interface connecting me to I-don’t-know-what. I can even identify items and monsters with sufficient effort. So, what’s the point of an oracle? I better not ask, or someone will give me another scolding.

Sigh. I am 57 years old. I can’t believe I’m still getting scolded.

Of course, I was never scolded as a child, but just sneered at and ordered about or just ignored.

I guess being scolded isn’t so bad.

I look at Annie. I’m not sure how to relate to a person who has decided to adopt me as her long lost sister…I mean her long lost brother. I’m not sure why I said sister.

“My name is Daris,” the badger woman said. “Let’s all embark and then we will do some introductions.”

“Hope you have fun,” Harold says.

“What are you going to do now?” I ask Annie.

“We have already collected more than enough Essence to last the year, and cover any possible accidents,” Annie says. “I’m going back to my usual job of diplomat.”

“See you next year, when we go hunting again,” Harold says. The others wave as I head to a flat-bottomed yacht.

I step onto the yacht and turn around. I then wave as the yacht takes off.

Damn this is exciting. I can’t believe I’m on a vessel that flies with antigravity or something.

Within moments the gang is a speck on an ever diminishing floating city. Then the city gets obscured by clouds.

“Okay folks, you have been gathered together because you all have similar learning potential. In addition, you have all awoken sometime during the year and are now new initiates of Rank E,” Daris says. “The 5 of you are humans from earth. Being together will make it easier for you to get familiar with this expanded new world.”

That was weird. Half an hour ago I was 4 levels weaker. Could that so-called Galactic Council have known, or even orchestrated everything, including that fake hunt I did with the others?

Knowing I’m putty in the hands of some all-powerful beings gives me the willies.

“To begin, let’s start introductions,” Daris says.

“I’m Gunner Thompson from Texas,” Gunner greets as he adjusts his Texas style monster hat. “I’m 34 years old and I’m a navy seal. I can’t believe I’m on a flying boat in another world. I can’t believe I can fight monsters.”

“My name is Quan Li and I’m 32 years old and I’m…I work for China’s secret service. I can’t wait to grow even stronger.”

“I’m Kenny Wilson, and just like the Ken action figure I’m very manly. I’m a karate expert and have climbed Mount Everest. Oh I’m 36.”

“I’m Julia Summers, 37, and I kill people,” she says in a deadpan voice. She then laughs and then says, “Just joking.”

She wasn’t joking. I know. I can read people. Humans people anyway. Was she a bad person? No. Cops are sometimes required to take lethal action. Just like soldiers on the battlefield.

“Actually I’m a cop and a fitness fanatic.”

“I’m Luke Sunderland, ex military, and the oldest at 57,” I say.

“All of you are highly trained,” Daris says. “However, you now face a world brand new to you, which is why you have been enrolled in this school. This is the beginning of the school year.

“You will learn about monsters, sentient races and how to navigate this new reality.

“At the same time, you will tackle monsters appropriate to your level.”

“Is it true we can become immortal?” Julia asks.

“It is more correct to say you will not die of old age,” Daris replies. “Even those who have entered A-rank can still be killed. Just don’t overestimate your skills and you should be fine. Remember, accidents can topple the strongest tree.”

“Do rewards scale with difficulty?” Gunner asks.

“Correct. However, please don’t do anything reckless,” Daris admonishes him.

“I have manna,” Kenny states. “Does that mean magic is real?”

“There is no such thing as magic,” Daris replies. “Instead, the universe is controlled by conscious energy.”

“Those damn Shadow Orgs,” Gunner exclaimed angrily.

“In the human world, science only acknowledges matter,” Daris continues. “That represents the Earth Element.

“Human science also recognizes energy, which is the Fire Element.

“Even then, the understanding orthodox science has is fundamentally wrong.

“Unfortunately, orthodox scientists as a group are hostile to anything that opposes their atheistic view of a meaningless universe driven entirely by random chance.

“The third element is water. This represents the emotions and feeling.

“The forth element is Air. This represents Mind.

“Finally is Quintessence. This is the source of all elements and all creation.

“Once you reach Rank C, you will be able to directly manipulate these energies. By the time you reach Rank B, you will be able to directly absorb enough ambient essence to meet your daily needs.

“At this point, most people stop hunting, since that is no longer a requirement. They then spend the rest of their lives pursuing their passions.”

“Let me guess,” Julia says with a frown. “They all pretty much gets stuck at B for the rest of eternity.”

“Boring,” Gunner grumbles, “A bunch of losers.”

“You shouldn’t insult people,” Quan Li scolds. “However I agree with the sentiment.”

“So Luke, do you agree with us?” Kenny asks.

“All the people in my group think I’m a dangerous reckless fool,” I say. “They were forced to take me into the hunting arena but tried to protect me from the monsters.”

“Did you participate?” Kenny asked excitedly. His hunting spirit was clearly showing.

“Yes I did,” I answer. “Now that I think about it, it does sound foolish for an F-Rank to challenge D-Rank monsters. That’s probably why they all scolded me.”

I pause and study my companions. They are all my rank, so I say, “On the other hand I did reach E-1 as a result. That was almost an hour ago.”

“That’s great,” Gunner says excitedly. “I think we will make a great team.”

“You were all initiated less than a year ago and are all rather competitive,” Daris says. “I don’t know why the Council grouped you all together. Groups like yours can either reach great heights or all die early because of your competitive natures.”

“Are these ships expensive?” I ask, changing the subject. I wasn’t in the mood for another scolding.

“Can ships go into outer space?” Gunner asks.

“Can they go faster than light? Do replicators exist?” Kenny asks.

“How about transporters?” Julia asks.

Daris sighs and rubs her forehead. “I can’t believe I have to deal with children.”

“Hey, I’m 57 years old,” I object.

“And I’m 286 Earth years old. To me you are all children,” Daris replies. “The problem with your race is you never get to know what true adulthood is like. And yes, I’m considered a child by those vastly older than me.

“To answer your question, if you can imagine it, then it’s possible. But only as long as you don’t restrict the possibilities or assume you know best.

“Star Trek type ships can be bought. You can sometimes get evolving ships from particularly challenging bosses. Unfortunately they require stringent requirement. And no, I don’t know how many people have them. People with special equipment tend to be secretive about what they own. The same is true with special abilities.”

I know Daris didn’t say Star Trek. The oracle really is impressive.

“Like people who own rare works of art but keep it hidden,” I say, nodding. Maybe I should get a storage ring, so people don’t guess I have a storage ability.

“How big is this world?” Julia asks. “I get the impression we are above an infinite plane.”

“I’m sure that’s some sort of optical illusion,” I say. “This world is just bigger than Earth, except the gravity is lighter. It’s very strange.”

“Our universe has multiple realities,” Daris replies. “In the universe you know, Earth is a spheroid object circling around the yellow star named Sol. But it’s equally true that Earth is flat with the North Pole at the center.”

Daris pauses a moment and points. “Your world is in that direction. The higher above the ground we fly, the faster we can travel. However, the harsher the environment becomes.

“In two hours we will arrive at our destination. Peris is a world around 47 light years away from earth. Technically we aren’t travelling faster than the speed of light, since the speed of light increases linearly with altitude.”

“Looking at the ground, we don’t seem to be travelling very fast,” Kenny notes.

“That’s something I don’t really understand,” Daris replies. “We could also go to Peris through the Nexus, except space around Earth is distorting as a result of nuclear radiation and death energies released by your governments and industrial moguls. It’s causing problems to a lot of people in the multiverse.

“One side effect is increased monster activity. The next bomb could tear something, allowing monsters to terrorize the general public.

“That’s why we are paying close attention to the strained relations between your world powers.”

“I’ve heard about that nonsen…that theory,” I say. “If that’s true about Earth, wouldn’t it be more so around the Sun?”

“The space around the sun is distorted,” Daris agrees. “However, the sun is in balance. The people there are able to handle the environment. Also, it doesn’t have the death energies that is currently polluting the Earth. Planets are not designed for such things; which is why people are getting inconvenienced.”

“Did monsters exist on Earth?” Kenny asked.

“Yes,” Daris said. “Environmental destruction caused by deforestation, monocultures and overhunting caused a drop in the population of monsters and drove all helpful races away.

“That is why your people have stopped believing in such thing.

“However, such things are reversing. Your people are killing your planet.”

“What is the Nexus?” I ask.

“It’s the space between realities,” Daris replies. “It always appears as a distorted form of our reality. For us city dwellers, we tend to see a city we can travel through. Others see jungles, ocean bottoms, and the surface of barren planets. The only constant is a surface you can walk on. While it’s possible to fly, doing so can be dangerous as distortions in reality increase with height. As a result, even avians have to walk or stay near the ground.”

“I saw walkways in that place when I passed through,” Gunner says.

“You mustn’t explore that place on your own,” Daris admonishes. “It’s entirely too easy to get lost, and our oracles have limited utility there. As a result we only use Nexus to travel to local destinations and to this place, which is much safer to travel.”

“Damn this world is seriously crazy,” Kenny says excitedly. “This is better than climbing Mount Everest or exploring blue holes and underwater lava tubes.”

“It’s too bad the rest of the world doesn’t have access to this.” Quan Li grumbles. “Why is that?”

“Because of the shadow government of course,” Gunner replies.

“You are correct,” Daris agrees. “There are countless demonic organizations out there. They exist only to enslave sentients and use them for personal gain. This is an eternal battle none of you need to worry about.”

“Does that mean humans are enslaved, like the conspiracy theorists claim?” Julia asks.

“If they are enslaved, it’s by other humans and by their own chains. As a result, the council can’t interfere,” Daris explains. “Just because hostile entities are behind the scene doesn’t change the fact humans can free themselves if they choose. You will eventually be thought the true history of your world.”

For awhile no one spoke.

“What kind of aliens have you met?” Gunner asked. “I saw dwarves. I can’t believe their women have beards. On the other hand, men are all bald.”

“Who was that girl with you?” Julia asked. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“She’s a Nordic,” I reply. “For unknown reasons, she has adopted me as her long lost sibling.”

We continued our discussion.

The world around us distorts. The next think I know we are above a large city and approaching some sort of airport.

Moments later we land.

Surrounding us are bustling aliens.

“I suddenly realize being surrounded by these aliens is going to be tiring,” Gunner comments.

“That’s why you are in a group of humans. Also, your class only has humans. Your dormitory only has humans,” Daris replies. “Please follow me.”

“There’s enough humans?” Julia asks.

“Absolutely,” Daris replies. “As a matter of fact, as a result of degrading conditions on Earth, the number of students this year is almost a thousand.”

“How does the oracle translate language?” I ask. “Does it have translations of thousands of languages?”

“Goodness no,” Daris says. “If it did it would never be able to handle colloquialisms.”

“Can’t it just sync when two come together?” I ask.

“In theory yes,” Daris replied. “However, it does something vastly simpler. It connects to the Akashic records for translations, using its user’s brain as a receiving device.

“And yes, in principle a person doesn’t need it. However, the process is intelligence restricted. The higher your intelligence, the better it works, until your intelligence reaches 85. As you can see, these devices are just more convenient.”

In other words, the oracles are just useful for playing video games, and goofing around on the internet, although it’s probably more convenient than my laptop.

I could get it for the cost of 2 rank ups, however I don’t think it’s worth it for now. Especially since my stamina is relatively low at 36.

And I don’t need Intelligence for controlling my senses, if I can increase my spirit. For a moment I wonder why Dr. Winters never mentioned that. I’m guessing it’s because that’s very difficult to level up Spirit.

I’m not even sure how I got spirit in the first place.

“Where do they come from?” I ask as we head for an imposing structure. I’m guessing that’s the promised school.

“The essential crystals come from some C-Level dungeons and are smaller than rice grains,” Daris replies. “These dungeons are usually connected to arenas, to ensure a plentiful supply. There’s one on your planet. Your governments are hoarding them for when this information is eventually exposed to the public. It’s only a matter of time.

We enter the building.

“Why would we get such things from dungeons?” I ask.

“That’s because in a very real sense the universe is alive,” Daris replies. “Monsters are pathogens that constantly attack the body of the universe. Once defeated, the universe then converts the carcasses into what we need to better protect the universe.”

“As a result, all our needs can be met, as long as we have the right frame of mind. And yes, you are all here because the time for you is ripe.”

In other words God exists, although orthodox religion is probably dead wrong on countless issues.

We arrive at offices and enter.

1. Dwarf in Latin [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eagle in Latin [↑](#footnote-ref-2)