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

**By**

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1. Under the City

There was 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 was still at war. So they gave me an early retirement.

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

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

Yes, I got a pension. It was automatically deposited into my bank account. However, the rents were horrible. On top of that, I had to pay alimony.

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

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

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

To each their own I say.

I placed my laptop and power source into my backpack. The backpack was covered with grime, moldy rags and stank liked rotten food. I checked the outer pocket and added a piece of raw meat. The fruit flies were annoying but worth it.

You know what they say. The best way to protect valuables was to make sure no one knew it was there, and didn’t want to check.

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

I exited my tent in the sewer system and wandered among my neighboring derelicts. Next stop was the neighborhood ATM where I withdrew some cash. Not too much. After that I went for a bite to eat at an outdoor food vendor. He knew me and I only approached when no other customers were near.

A passing couple dropped money in my hat that was always in my hand. I bowed and thanked them for their generosity.

Morning exercised completed, I hobbled back to the sewers on my one not so good leg and one metal peg leg. I could had splurged on a fancy leg, but a simple pole was more appropriate if you were going for that decrepit, down on his luck look. The click-click of my walking was also unnerving.

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

I grimaced, 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 were stronger than regular civilians.

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

As I was about to enter my tent I heard a scream.

I hobbled down the tunnel, my metal leg clicking as I went. Others overtook me to the destination. Moments later I heard fighting and more screaming.

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

“Holy cow,” I exclaimed as I reached for my crowbar.

Unfortunately I found myself holding a rotten banana.

“Here had a banana,” I shouted and threw the banana into the rat’s face.

The rat turned to me with beady red eyes and charged.

Thankfully my next grab was the crowbar.

Time slowed down as I sidestep. I stabbed the crowbar forward liked a rapier and it plunged into the rat’s eye, instantly killing it. My martial training saved the day.

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

Everyone cheered.

Initializing dormant DNA  
Initialization Failed - Insufficient essence

What the hell was that?

I was so surprised that I forgot to got angry at the used of my detested nickname.

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

The dagger was simple and perfect for stabbing or throwing and the coins looked valuable. They might sell in a pawn shop. People liked odd things.

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

A moment later the rat disintegrated, startling everyone.

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

I then noticed two young people. They were both in their early twenties at most. They were casually dressed but they exuded an air of authority.

Glancing at them from the corner of my eye, I got the feeling they were not what they seemed.

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

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

I felt the urge to stare at the young lady. Was hair that golden even possible? It must had been dyed. Either way, it complemented the girl’s radiant face.

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

But off course this was real life. Aliens and mythical races didn’t exist. But neither did people that attractive. No one commented on their beauty for some unknown reason.

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

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

I grimaced, picked up the crowbar and returned it to my backpack.

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

“Harold, you know you can’t take the loot,” the young lady scolded in a melodious but nasal tone. “It is 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 was protection. It kept me safe; that and my reputation.

“The situation had been resolved. It is time to leave,” the woman said as sirens blared in the background. The ambulances had arrived.

“Yes Princess Annie,” Harold replied, smiling.

“Harold, I told you not to call me princess,” Annie grumbled. “I am just C-ranked, just liked you.”

Harold just laughed, clearly teasing her.

As they walked away, Harold whispered, “How old do you thought that dude is, 80, 90?”

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

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

I walked away as the police and medics entered. Unfortunately the cops caught me and insisted on questioning me. It didn’t help that the main evidence was gone.

The cops called in to the police station and were told to drop the incident. Grumbling, the cops left, letting the medics treat the wounded.

Sighing, I returned to my tent. My reputation had increased, and I didn’t liked it.

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

It was time to play some video games. Sitting cross-legged, I started playing the game I was currently developing. Okay so I was debugging the game.

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

I too had a mysterious past…Just joking.

I briefly fantasized about being that redhead. That was my ideal self image. If only video games were real life.

Just then, my battery indicator notified me of low power.

That was annoying. Someone must had blown the fuse again.

I saved my project, put my valuables away into my backpack and stepped out. Behind my tent was the power cable the community used.

I followed the cable and found the break. The cable seemed to had been bitten clean through. Who or what could had done that? It must had been the rat.

It was an easy fix. I unplugged the cable, and then patched it with duct tape I carried in my backpack.

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

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

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

I followed the burrow downwards. A short distance later I entered a cavern filled with bones. Did the authorities know about this placed? I didn’t thought so. It was amazing what you could found below the streets of London. Then again, London had an ancient history, with even roman tunnels. I think.

I followed a side tunnel and headed downwards, with only my headlamp for illumination.

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

Without warning the tunnel steepened and I lost my footing.

Terror gripped me as I slid uncontrollably downwards. I didn’t looked forward to broken bones and being trapped without escape.

Suddenly the tunnel ended and I found myself in freefall.

A moment later I hit water and submerge.

In desperation I paddled upwards and quickly broke the surface.

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

To the side was a shore. I knew it was there because of the soft lapping sound.

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

Unfortunately there was a giant rat waiting for me. And he looked hungry. His beady eyes glowed red in the lamp light.

In desperation I looked for another escape. There was none. I had no choice but to fought.

Five feet from the shore the water got shallow. I climbed with my weapons ready. I didn’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 supposed my ex-wife would be annoyed when alimony payments eventually stop.

The rat charged, jumped and tried to bite my face. I barely had time to block with my crowbar.

I fell into the water with the rat trying to drown me and ate me at the same time.

My left arm was pinned but I could still move my hand. With a struggle I flicked my wrist and cut the creature’s arm. It jerked and I swiftly stabbed it in the eye.

The rat dropped dead and I finally rolled to safety.

Damn, that was scary.

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

The message startled me and slightly blunted my panic. Idly I wondered what the percentage message meant. That didn’t happen before.

Besides the rat appeared an arm bracer and copper coins. I picked up the looted and the rat disappeared as before.

Again, what the fuck?

Was I hallucinating? Had I finally gone mad? If this was a nightmare, could I wake up?

Memories of me in the trenches flooded me. I didn’t liked it. I had no choice but to push on.

I focused on my breathing and pushed the fear down until it no longer controlled me. I had years of practice.

On shore I opened my backpack. My worldly goods were safe in their sealed plastic bags.

I took out my first aid kit and bandaged up my scratches with antiseptic.

Next, I dumped out the garbage in my outer pocket and gave my backpack a good wash. I didn’t want rats sniffing me out. I would refill my thief repellant when I got out.

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

I couldn’t return the way I came so I crept forward.

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

Sound alerted me and I turned around with my raised left arm.

A jumping rat clamped onto my bracer and I stabbed it in the eye with my crowbar.

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

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

Was 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 was it a rat hole? If so, I choose rabbits, even if they had psychotic hatters as companions.

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

I proceed on. And again I met another rat.

I was getting sick of this placed. The adrenaline was making me nauseous and I craved crawling into bed.

The only good news was the rats were only attacking one at a time. On the other hand, it was even more nerve wracking when they didn’t attack, since I knew they were lurking in the blackness. Waiting…

After endless wandering and plenty of rat attacks, initialization was now at 98%.

I stopped and ate a granola bar. My rest was cut short. This time I faced two rats. Oh great. At least my back was to the wall so they couldn’t blindside me.

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

Both charged at the same time. One went high. The other went low. Gripping two looted rapiers, I faced my opponents. The jumping rat got impaled immediately but the left one dodged and got a minor cut.

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

I was barely able to kept the rat back. Thank God for my leather vest I got two rats back.

As I fought I regretted letting my karate skills get rusty. On the bright side these fights were refreshing my skills quickly.

There was nothing liked a life and death struggled to improve your skills.

Seeing its victory, the rat got complacent and I got my chance. I rammed my right-hand sword through its brain.

I dropped to the ground, exhausted.

A moment later the now familiar message appears.

Initializing dormant DNA  
99%, 100%  
Initialization Complete

I felt dizzy as an overwhelming stream of data hit me. After what felt like an eternity, the data organized into something coherent.

Opening my eyes I found myself on the floor. In my mind’s eye I saw something new. I got 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 had to stop playing so many video games. It was damaging my brain.

MP - Magic Points. Was that a thing?

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

Why were my HP or health points so low? Was it because I was missing a foot? Was it because I was 57 years old? Was it because I looked 150?

For response, I got a more 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 were damaged. Some was from actual combat and training and the rest was from everything else.

Holy crap! I had no idea I was in such bad condition. It was a wondered I hadn’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 was killing was himself.

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

Technically I was not in a dungeon since this was real life. It was too bad, since dungeons gave out cool loot.

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

I got up. It was time to head out.

As I walked, I noticed the visibility had improved. It was still pitch black, but my headlight had brightened, revealing a little more of the passageway. I was also slightly more aware of my surroundings.

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

After slinking for another 5 minutes the tunnel split and I took the left passage. Just then I met another giant rat.

Warily I faced it, knowing my health was in worse shape than I knew. I really didn’t liked fighting rats in a pitch dark hole in the ground.

Did I mention I hate this dungeon?

The rat leapt at me and got a face full of blade.

Essence: 10 of 100

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

This time I got something new. It was a tiny tube filled with a bluish liquid.

I was exhausted and needed to sleep. Unfortunately I couldn’t safely sleep in this damned dungeon.

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

Grade F Health Potion: 100 HP

“Cheers,” I said and drink the potion. The tube disappeared.

For a moment nothing happened. Then I felt warm energy wash over me. All the minor scratches disappeared. The pain in my knees reduced.

I checked my health stats and discovered they had barely budged.

It was time to fight some giant rats.

As I walked I laughed uncontrollably. New characters in RPG games always had to fought rats. My life was freaking weird.

On the other hand, despite my fear, I was happier than I had ever been in my life.

Could it compare to holding my first born? I didn’t know. It was too bad children were only sweet when they were newborn babies. No, this was better, since the only person I could rely on was myself.

I walked forward, knowing I was becoming a one though rat killer. All you rats out there, I am coming for you.

For I was the one, the only, Murder Hobo.

2. The Dungeon

Dungeons were the gods’ way for making us strong

-- Paladin Francis --

Monsters were the god’s way of punishing sinners

-- Paladin Michael --

The tunnels quickly became a maze and I followed the tradition of always selecting the left path.

After killing three more rats, I got a new potion. This one was yellow.

Grade F Stamina Potion: 100 SP

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

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

“Hey ho, hey ho, to rat a tat I go,” I sang, glad no one could 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 could hear me. They too didn’t liked my singing.

Another three rats attacked me at the same time. Thankfully the passageway was narrow and they hampered each other.

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

The other two stood no chance as I sliced and diced them.

Essence: 70 of 100

I was 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 was okay since I was constantly losing knives. On the bright side, I was getting more armor and potions.

I drank a health potion and my arteries improved by 2%. Brain and heart damage decreased by barely 1%. Unfortunately DNA and epigenetic damage remained the same.

My cuts and scratches healed and I continued.

20 minutes later I defeated seven more rats. I now had 140 [Essence].

Just then a new message appeared.

‘Do you want to spend 100 [Essence] to advance?’

Yes/No

I was certain of getting more essence, so I said ‘Yes’.

I experienced a strange sensation in my chest and then I saw a message.

Level 2  
5 free stat points

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

Checking, I saw I could place points in every [stat] except Wisdom. I was not sure why. It was something to think about.

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

Looking at my stats I got:

**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 wondered what would happen when all damage went to zero. I knew that Dr. David Sinclair claimed aging was caused by epigenetic damage. The body didn’t fall apart because of wear and tear. Instead, your cells went senile and stop functioning properly. Other scientists such as Dr. Michael Levin agreed.

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

The next rat I met I tried to read.

Giant Rat

F-Rank 1

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

I looted the body.

Seconds later I got the fright of my life.

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

I had no choice but to fight.

Thankfully the fight wasn’t as bad as I feared, even though they were stronger. I was getting used to fighting.

I still hated the darkness with its sense of disorientation, but my other senses were starting to compensate.

I breathed in a refreshing energy and then I leaned down to loot the bodies.

Exp: 70 of 100

The loot was about the same but I got more coins. I got another health potion, which I promptly used.

My HP increased to 24/90. That potion should had given me full health but didn’t. Apparently the healing was repairing my internals. I wondered how many potions I would need for a full recovery.

Looking at my health reading, I got a surprise. I had 0.02% less DNA damage and 0.02% less epigenetic damage. That was weird. I was certain it wasn’t from the health potions. Was 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 was a question for another time. Now was time to kill more rats. They weren’t going to kill themselves.

It was then I noticed white crystals in the tunnel walls. Focusing on them I realized what they were.

Quartz crystals

Alchemical Ingredient

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

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

I continued walking, examining every new rock I could find. My vigilance was rewarded when I found mushrooms.

Rot Mushroom

Poisonous

Alchemical Ingredient

Yikes. I collected some and put them in a large plastic Ziploc bag. My pack was getting full with loot and I struggled with the weight. I probably should discard the less valuable loot.

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

I was just about to turn the corner when I heard rat sounds. There were at least six. Rats! I mean curses.

Fortunately they were all Level 1.

Despite my gains I still hated this dungeon and wanted to get out.

I quickly readied my knives in my belt and then whipped them at the rats. I injured at least three, and then I resorted to my swords.

Again another battle ensued. The damn rats were nasty. One finally broke my arm bracer and it fell to the ground.

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

Pain shot through my leg as a rat bit down. I wasn’t expecting that. Rats usually jumped.

On the plus side, I took advantage of the distracted rat and rammed 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 paused a moment as I felt that strange sensation of energy flowing into me. I once again ignored it as a figment of my imagination as I finished the fight.

Upon looting I received two health potions of E grade. Scanning them closer I got additional details.

Grade E Health Potion: 200 HP  
Cooldown: 10 minutes

Should I used it? I decided no. I was not physically injured.

I checked my phone and saw it was 9:23 PM. I had been here for almost 3 hours.

As I fought rats, I realized my karate skills had improved. It was integrating nicely with my sword and knife skills.

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

‘Do you want to spend 200 [Essence] to advance?’

Yes/No

I said ‘Yes’

Level: 3

Exp: 50 of 300

5 free stat points

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

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

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

Again I felt slightly stronger as strange sensations flood me. Maybe I was getting stronger. I wondered how strong I could get.

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

This rat was by far the strongest rat I had encountered. The rat had 500 HP.

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

Then I attacked with two swords in my hands. The rat blocked them, but then I kicked with my metal leg.

That surprised the rat and I sliced a foreleg. I wished I had a sword in my mouth, so I could fight liked Zoro in *One Piece*.

I kicked again and the rat bit the tip of my peg leg off, leaving a jagged pole. I rammed my foot forward, impaling the rat.

Unfortunately the rat didn’t die. Instead it screamed liked a wounded banshee. That wasn’t good.

Thankfully the stabbed was enough to overcome the rat’s guard.

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

Exp: 90 of 300

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

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

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

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

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

I used my metal foot to stab a rat in the gut, and almost fell down. Using that pole was dangerous.

Fighting 8 to one was exhausting. My arms and legs felt liked lead. Unfortunately I didn’t have a spare appendage to grab my stamina potion.

Finally the last one fell and I quickly popped a stamina potion vial in my mouth. The vial dissolved and my stamina reached max.

Was there a pattern to the experience point payoff? It was too soon to see.

I looted the body and got another health E rank potion. I downed it and checked 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 was no longer metastasizing. I did a jig and almost fell down. I forgot my artificial leg was 3 inches shorter than before.

My celebration was cut short as more rats appeared. 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 was my sword techniques were improvising fast enough to kept pace with my enemies. That wasn’t surprising but just the normal functioning of the human brain. Intense experiences always accelerated learning.

With grim determination I faced my adversaries.

By 11:14 PM, I reached level 4.

I accepted the upgrade.

Now I needed 500 EXP to hit the next level.

Exp: 30 of 500

I finally had enough information. Levels advanced according to the Fibonacci series.

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

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

Also, I got 10% of a rat’s [Essence]. I could advance when I got 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 worked. The strength of my headlamp increased, or should I say my [Perception]? I felt the impact on my other senses. My hearing and smell had also improved.

Some people might start stacking their points, but I thought that was foolish. It didn’t matter how strong you were if you were too tired to swung your sword, or if you were too slow.

Although I thought [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. Were fireballs a thing? It must be since I had magic points, or was that manna points?

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

As I fought a hoard of level-4 rats, I wondered what they ate. I had only seen the occasional clump of poisonous mushrooms and some glowing moss. Neither seemed edible.

I then thought of something. Could I train stats? I should. People got 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 were capped in terms of strength. That especially applied to perception. I think.

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

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

“There were rats, rats, rats, as big as alley cats in the quarter master store,” I sang as I battled another batch of rats.

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

A quick look at my health gave 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 knew this because my pants were getting loose. Those health potions were amazing. Anyone who could reproduce them would make a killing. Either that or special interests would bury them to protect the status quo.

I tightened my belt.

But I was impatient. When would heart and other diseases go to zero? The health potions worked miracles for physical injuries, but not so great on chronic diseases. I wondered why.

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

I was also getting punch drunk. I needed to sleep.

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

Within was a larger space, almost liked a safe house.

I stuck in my gut and squeezed through. I deposited my equipment and shored up the hole with rocks. Now I was safe from the rats.

I sat down and closed my eyes. I felt my entire body buzzing with energy. I just relaxed. It was a long day.

The buzzing in my body intensified. I ignored it since it was just my over-stimulated nerves.

Then I noticed the energy was flowing through my body in what seemed liked discrete flows.

I immediately thought of Eastern philosophies and the meridian system.

I paid attention and I felt the energy accumulate in different locations. They were sluggishly spinning spherical vortexes.

The first one was near my pelvis. It seemed earthy and erotic.

The next one was in my stomach. It seemed watery.

I then felt energy in my solar plexus. This was fiery.

Remembering what chakras were, I looked at my heart. I search and found nothing there.

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

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

My forehead had one. I supposed that represented Mind.

Finally there was one above my head. It must be Spirit.

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

Meditation Discovered

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

Unlocking Spirit

Wisdom +5

Spirit +5

I gazed at my new stats and drifted to sleep as my mind, body, and spirit softly buzzed.

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

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

“I am serious,” Annie said angrily.

“It is possible for non-Ranked mortals, given sufficient training and luck,” Gandal the wizard replied as he entered the palace. “Also, that rat was only [F-Rank 1]. Mortals can fight stronger creatures.

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

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I woke up feeling refreshed. I still felt the energy, but it wasn’t buzzing around me anymore.

I checked my new stat.

SPR (Spirit): 9

I was not sure what that meant. I had 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 seemed to be my health. The indicators had improved by a few percents. Maybe I will live to saw next year, provided I escaped this dungeon.

WIS (Wisdom): 40

I laughed when I saw wisdom. I guess now people could truly call me a wise ass.

I ate a granola bar and drink some bottled water. It was time to head out.

For the next several hours I hunted down rats. It was not that I was trying to exterminate all of them. Instead I was just trying to find my way out and the rats insisted on making me kill them.

I leveled up three more times. That meant 15 more points to allocate.

During these times, I realized I needed to meditate in order to distribute the energies flooding my body. Doing so made me stronger and accelerated bodily repair. Unfortunately that required a safe secluded location.

Vitality definitely helped with my health. It also had passive healing. One that was currently slow. I assumed a wound that normally took 1 week to heal would now take 2 days.

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

The headlamp was enough to dimly light the space behind me. I wonder, was that even physically possible? Or was my perception defying the laws of physics? Or was I seeing in the infrared?

It was partially echolocation. Each step I took caused countless echoes. I tried making clicking noises with my tongue. Strangely, that helped. I was getting more aware of the outlines of the tunnel and rats.

Already too many laws of physics had 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 had were with being overweight, cancer and information damage.

Science said cancer was caused by damaged DNA, but the immune system could fought it. That must be why the health potions were working.

I knew my overweight problem would go with time and cancer was not immediate so I decided to keep my health potions for physical damage only.

By now I knew I was approaching the nest. The rats were increasing in strength and size. I even fought an F-Rank 9 rat.

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

I focused on my travels and realized I had full knowledge of where I had been. It was almost as if I had a map in my head. That was amazing news and also comforting. It meant I would not get lost.

By now my sense of disorientation was almost completely gone. That was great news. Unfortunately, my sense of being trapped and claustrophobia was still there.

The question was where to go?

I might had 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 the darkness of a night in a cloudy forest, it was hard to be adventurous. Thankfully I had spare batteries for my lamp.

There was no point in returning to my starting point since it was a dead end. My only choice was to explore until I found an exit.

“I was walking, down the rat street, when I heard footsteps behind me…I am a laughing rat and you couldn’t catch me…”

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

The rats were all between rank 5 and 8. That was OK, since I was finally in the grove. I guessed it was like riding a bike. You never really forgot. Also, my 20 of [Perception] made the rats easier to track.

As I fought the rats I tried to decided how to allocate my next set of points. [Perception] was paying huge dividends in keeping me alive. It was also helping me better target weak points.

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

As I fought I wondered, which was worse, the actual fought or the aftermath when you remembered the fought years later?

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

I sat and focused on my chakra system. I started with my first one at the base of my pelvis. It was chaotic, reminding me of undigested food.

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

I then arrived at my heart, but it was a waste of time. No matter what I did, it remained dead. Also, working on it was bringing up memories of betrayal, disappointment, shame, and countless other negative emotions. I had the overwhelming urge to punch my ex-wife in the face, along with my so-called best friend who betrayed me. They were just two on my ass-kicking list. I suppressed the memories and decided to move on.

I was about to get up when my light flickered out, plunging me into darkness.

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

I was about to push in the last battery when I realized that there’s a miniscule amount of light coming from somewhere. I could just barely make out the outlines of the walls and my body but it was there.

Yes I was aware of the outlines before, but now they seemed more visual and the shapes had more detail.

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

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I entered a large circular room filled with pillars. A moment later a wall slid over, closing me in.

Rats, I was trapped. I should stop saying rats.

Without warning a humongous rat crashed down from the ceiling.

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

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

The boss rat screeched with the sound of thunder.

“I guess not,” I said as I dodged a charge.

I swung my left sword, barely blocking a paw.

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

I focused entirely on speed to block attacks. This approach kept me safe, but caused no damage to the rat.

Then the rat swung around and tried to hit me with its tail. I frantically blocked, and accidentally blocked with my arm and not my sword. Damn that hurt. I still hadn’t gotten used to using swords. Fortunately my bracer took most of the damage.

I swung with my right sword and managed to chop off its tail.

Screeching, it turned around and charged me. I dodged to the side as there was a pillar behind me.

The rat crashed into the pillar, shattering it. It also staggered the boss rat.

This gave 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 have jumped on the rats back. As the saying goes, ‘If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.’ That was a stupid saying. Why would beggars want to ride horses?

The rat recovered and charged. I dodged around the pillar I was currently next to and the rat smashed it.

Again the rat got stunned. I took advantage and gave it some superficial wounds and scampered to the next pillar. Unfortunately no eye shots were possible.

As I fought, information about the rat entered 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 smashed through the pillar I was hiding behind. Again I got in some stabs. Unfortunately I couldn’t get in a critical wound. Also, the falling rocks were doing more damage than my swords.

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

“I am singing of a Rat Christmas, just liked the rat I saw before,” I sang. Yes, I tended to sing to calm my nerves. Unfortunately I couldn’t do that in polite company. It was very sad.

My singing had the intended effect. The rat got more enraged. Again and again the rat crashed into the pillars as I ran around the room.

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

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

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

Making a wide loop I headed for the center pillar.

CRASH!

The rat smashed into it. Just as I hoped, the ceiling collapsed on top of the rat, nearly crushing me in the process.

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

Feeling the urge, I accepted the upgrade.

“Now I know I am going crazy, and not just because I am talking to myself,” I said aloud as a large wooden chest appeared in front of me.

As I stared at the chest, messages appeared 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 paused as energy rushes through my body. My muscles tightened and my fatigue disappeared. I was feeling amazing. All stress left me as I realized I won.

Looking around I realized the room was lit by wall torches. The sight of them made me annoyed. Now they came when I didn’t need them.

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

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

Crystal of holding (Growth)

Holding the crystal, I immediately knew what to do.

The crystal glows a moment and dissolved into my aura. Wait. I had an aura?

I got distracted when I realized I had some kind of dimensional space associated with me. The space was about 2 meters cubed. That was bigger than the amount of space rented out for a small storage space in the city.

Excitedly I removed my laptop and accessories from my backpack. Yes. It fit. Now I never had to worry about thieves. I was so happy I could sing.

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

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

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

As I walked to the exit I allocated all 5 free points to vitality, and then tossed a healing potion. Vitality was best for me, since I was 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 paused to look at my stats and was shocked. When did I get Vigilant as a title? That was right. It happened when I got my other crazy bonuses, when I no longer needed it. Rats! I mean curses.

Also, wasn’t 10X a little overpowered?

As for my +13 on my physical stats, wasn’t that a little excessive? 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 was crazy.

I then checked my health.

Damn it. Prostate cancer was almost gone. So close. That was okay. I had 3 more potions.

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I stepped through the exit and found myself back in the storm tunnel. I looked back but the opening had gone.

I heard someone approaching and I quickly stored my armor. My reputation didn’t need improving.

“Oh my God, what happened to you?” Bob asked 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 was natural. Being covered in blood was suspicious.

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

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

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Something liked that.”

One hour and one potion later I was no longer overweight and was cancer free.

3. A whole New World

Sometimes the new was right under our noses

But we fail to saw it.

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

“Because it is the will of the Council,” Gandal replied. “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 complained, “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 entered the storm tunnel and passed dozens of tents.

“There he is,” Harold said. “And he looks as disheveled as ever.”

The man in question was working on a laptop.

“He’s a lot skinnier,” Annie noted.

A look of annoyance crossed his face. He put his laptop behind him and fiddled with some wires. He then rested back, pretending to sleep.

“Did you see that? He pretended to put his device behind him, but I definitely saw the device disappear,” Harold said.

“That would mean he has a storage ring,” Annie said.

“I guess he got one as a reward for clearing that rift,” Gandal said.

“I didn’t know F-Rank dungeons gave out such loot,” Harold said.

“Normally it doesn’t,” Gandal said. “However, what he did was exceptional. I saw the footage. Fighting in a pitch dark abyss with just a headlamp is insane.

“The fact he can level up without training is amazing, although not unheard of.

“No wonder the universe rewarded him.”

“Why does the universe reward people for reckless behavior?” Annie asked.

“That is the way of the world,” Gandal replied. “To the bold go the spoils.

“He must have amazing combat skills.”

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

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Some 7 months had passed, and I was restless. I tried playing video games to calm my nerves, but that made me even more restless. How could a stupid video game compete with the real thing?

Fortunately, I had a few things I did to calm my nerves.

First, I exercised in a nearby recycling facility. I used the garbage for weight training.

The facility was always filled with mountains of garbage. As long as I wore a safety helmet and vest, steel-toed boot, and kept out of the way, I bothered no one.

It helped that I primarily used the facility after it closed for the night. Of course it forced me to become a night owl. No big deal.

Second came martial training. Fighting imaginary enemies with swords and knives was both relaxing and exhausting. The focus I needed to execute each move relaxed the mind.

Third, I had come into the habit of meditating. I found training worked best when followed by meditation.

Also, I was starting to enjoy meditation. I enjoyed feeling the energies flow around my body. Unfortunately, my chakras were liked black boxes. I had no idea what was going on there. I just knew they were damaged.

One side benefit of meditation was that I was able to absorb Essence directly from the atmosphere. At just under 1 EP per hour, the process was 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.

That was tricky since it made my butt itch with all its unused energy.

Finally, after my workouts I returned to my tent and worked on my video game. That was much more fun than playing games.

My added points in intelligence made programming easier.

Then there were the free assets. It was surprising how many free assets you could collect after years grabbing monthly free drops from Unreal Engine. Then there were the forever free assets.

Unfortunately free didn’t equate to good. I had to tweak many of the assets to make them functional.

I had finally released a beta version of my game on Steam. I even published some game assets and videos on game development.

I would have done more, but level design was time consuming, and art was not my strong suite.

The key was proper asset creation, which was definitely time-consuming to create. Next off course were the countless tutorials I had to learn.

It didn’t help that I spent half the waking day training.

One good thing that came with completing the rat dungeon was that hostile people shunned me. They instinctively knew I was no person to mess with. The side effect was that the neighborhood had never been safer.

The second was my storage. With my possessions safe, I no longer feared theft. As a result, I no longer needed my stink barrier.

I still didn’t bother with bathing, but I no longer stank. I knew I didn’t stink based on the reactions of people I met. Or at least my scent didn’t seem to bother anyone.

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

The only protection I found was meditation, which controlled my ability. Thankfully I had nothing to be nervous about. My life was once again carefree.

I was having fun. I now had a small stream of income beyond my pension. My possessions were safe. I was becoming more popular. Life was good.

That was what I thought.

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

I became aware of that attractive couple as they approached, but this time they had a friend.

I pretended to put my laptop behind me, but instead disconnected it and placed it into my storage space. I did the same for my charging cable.

“Good afternoon. My name was Wizard Gandal,” Gandal said. “You must be Luke Sunderland.

“My companions are Harold and Annie, which you met.”

“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 said. “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 replied in annoyance. “Why now?”

I was a little nervous. Everyone heard stories about what happened when people found Secrets. It was even worse for me, since street people went missing all the time. And I thought I was in the clear.

I tried to suppress my nervousness, since my heightened senses were making me feel a little nauseous and a headache was forming. I closed my eyes and that helped.

The only good news was that I could tell if they were lying. They didn’t appear to be.

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

“Obviously I didn’t want to attract the wrong attention,” I replied. “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 gave me a chill.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked.

“You always have a choice,” Gandal said.

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

“This is for your own good,” Gandal said. “I compared the scan Annie did on you 7 months ago 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 shrugged.

Now I was interested. I sighed and said reluctantly, “Very well I shall come with you, no doubt foolishly.”

“Was that from Star Trek?” Harold asked.

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

I got up. I was ready to go. All my valuables were safe. The rest was easily replaceable.

“Can we get you groomed?” Annie asked.

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

We walked in silence and then Gandal stepped into the driver’s sate of an SUV.

Harold took shotgun while Annie sat behind Gandal. I sat behind Harold.

“How did you handle a dungeon by yourself?” Harold asked as we drove.

“Why would you tackle a dungeon by yourself?” Annie scolded. “That was rather reckless.”

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

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

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

I noticed we were leaving the industrial area and heading for London.

I shrugged, “I figure if I was mad at least I should enjoy it. Although I admit it is a little lonely, seeing a world no one else can.”

“I am sorry we didn’t pick you up earlier. The higher-ups only told us to pick you up now,” Gandal commented. “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 replied.

We drove another half hour.

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

“No, but close,” Gandal replied.

“This place does connect to Buckingham Palace, but that is not where we are going,” Gandal added.

We entered a garage of a non-descript office building and headed downwards. We parked and headed for the elevators. Down we went at least five stories.

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

“Because I am feeling nervous,” I replied. “Closing my eyes calms my nerves.”

“But you will trip,” Annie argued.

“Not a problem,” I denied. “I’m always aware of my surroundings.”

Harold stuck his foot out and I almost stumbled. Instead I kicked out with all my strength, while pretending to walk normally.

“Ow,” Harold screamed and hopped on one foot, while nursing the other.

“Sorry,” I said in a deadpan voice, “Didn’t see your foot there.”

“Don’t bother testing him, Harold,” Gandal said with a chuckle.

The elevator opened to an atrium bustling with people, most of which were not human.

My nervousness disappeared as I felt I was entering a sci-fi convention. I looked around.

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

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

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

We passed through several corridors and entered what was clearly a hospital wing. We entered a waiting room and Gandal greeted 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 said.

I just frowned and sat down. My nervousness had returned.

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

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

After a tedious wait I was called in.

A woman resembling a dryad greeted me as I followed 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 knew that ‘San’ was a gender-neutral Japanese honorific, the same as Mr. or Mrs. There was also ‘Kun’ for teens and kids, and ‘Sama’ for important people.

“It is 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 replied. “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. However I need to meditate on the energies to fully integrate them into myself.

“As a result I found I have some sort of chakra system which appears to be damaged. 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 requested.

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

“No need,” She replied. “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.

“This karma is used to prepare your physical and astral bodies for incarnation. Once born, people on this planet are cutoff from these 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 moved her hands over my body, never touching it.

“Your physical body has been badly scarred from a hard life. It is 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 could imagine.

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

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

“It takes time for these energies to fully integrate with you.

“I don’t need to do anything about your physical body. It will sort itself out on its own when you got 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 said nothing and placed her hands over my pelvis. I felt a burning sensation and the distortions in energy flow lessened. Weird smoke emerged and I smelt something liked rotting fish.

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

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

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

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

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

“You don’t have the smell of a normal human. Instead you have the scent of trees and flowers.

“Then there are electrical and magnetic fields.

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

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

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

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

“Yes, go ahead,” Dr. Winters replied.

I closed my eyes and poured the energy into my Mind Chakra, leveling it up. I now had 45 in base Intelligence.

“That seemed to help,” I said. “How common is that?”

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

“[Vigilance] is born from a lifetime of desperate need and trauma,” Dr. Winters explained. “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 focused on breath work. This will help you control your nervousness and the power of your senses.

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

“No doctor,” I replied as I stepped into the space as instructed and found no shower accessories. Instead I felt a strange energy flowing over me. The dirt and grime vanished, leaving me and my clothes clean and fresh smelling. Even the wrinkles and eternal stains on my shirt had gone.

My clothes looked a little too clean, even if a little ragged. I was too clean. Fixing that was as easy as spilling some food and Greece on them.

Only my hair and beard were scruffy.

I stepped out and waited.

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

“I didn’t want to be rude,” I replied.

The woman laughed and said, “You’re very diplomatic. For the record I am a dryad, as your nose can clearly tell you. My species evolved from a biological kingdom more closely resembling plants than animals.

“I booked your next appointment next 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 said as I headed for the door.

“Just a moment,” Dr. Winters said, and I stopped. “F-Rank is from F-1 to F-12. Going from level to level is straightforward. However, going from one level to the next is a big deal. It will cause fundamental changes to your energy systems.

“As such it is imperative you make the transition with professional help. That’s because your damaged system will put your life at risk, and can cause lasting damage if not done correctly.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll wait for you.”

“Another thing,” Dr. Winters said. “You hadn’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 are not alone.”

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

I found my escort waiting for me.

“How was your session?” Gandal asked.

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

“But you are used to that, weren’t you?” Harold asked 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 explained. “I have 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 know how rare getting a storage ring from an F-Level dungeon is?” Gandal asked. “Normally they come from C-Level dungeons and above.”

“Where is your ring?” Annie asked.

“I’m not foolish enough to wear jewelry,” I said. “Street people are not supposed to have such things.”

“How did it feel to conquer that rift?” Harold asked.

“At the time it was a nightmare,” I admitted. “I now know how drug addicts feel. I’m dying to enter another dungeon.”

Annie looked at me as if I was a psycho and shouted, “Are you nuts? Do you 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 replied 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 had increased. Never mind that any Special Forces soldier in any military could have done what I did. Although in my prime I would had done a better job.

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

“Are you a martial artist?” Annie asked, changing the subject.

I shrugged and said, “I have a black belt, second Dan in Karate.” “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 was good exercise and clears the mind.”

“By the way, do you want to do adventure work?” Gandal asked. “Monster breakouts are increasing because of increasing environmental degradation. It spiked when the US government began is nuclear testing. It is so bad that regular people such as you are getting affected.

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

The thought excited me.

“Like the chupacabra,” I suggested.

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

“It is addicting,” I replied. “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 said.

“Leveling is primarily controlled by the challenges you overcome,” Gandal said. “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 objected.

“That is because you are suffering a deficit,” Gandal replied. “I was informed you could reach C-1 quickly. That is 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 warned.

We entered an office and waited. In moments a lady guided us to a private room and we sat.

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

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

“The technical term is UAP Response Agent,” Simons replied. “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 watched as the woman typed information. It was kind of creepy to know how much information they had 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 gave me papers to fill out. I skimmed through them, committing them to memory. They all seemed standard. I then signed the papers.

“Do aliens exist?” I asked.

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

That was rather non-committal.

Simons paused and then said, “There is this 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 replied with a smile. “I think I’m already a little dotty.”

Simons laughed and continued typing. “That was the spirit.”

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

“But I look like a bum,” I complained.

Harold laughed, but shut up when the others glared at him.

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

I did as instructed.

“Here you go,” Simons said and handed me a badge.

I looked at my image and realized I looked good. My salt and pepper hair and beard were groomed, and I was in a casual high-end shirt. However I was quite recognizable.

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

All I could say was that they had some freaky technology.

“Do you require anything else?” Simons asked.

“No thanks Simons San,” Gandal replied and got up.

We stepped out and Gandal said, “It is time to meet the rest of your team.”

Several corridors later we arrived at a nondescript room. Upon entering we found three people.

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

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

Gerri was 5”5’ and built liked a tank. She had stubby legs, but they were massive. Compared to her, my legs were liked toothpicks. Her arms were more slender. By slender I meant they only had the girth of my thighs. And her hands reached close to the ground.

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

“Her race is Pumilio[[1]](#footnote-1) but the common term is Dwarf.

“Their home world is almost twice the diameter as the Earth and with 1.7 times Earth gravity. As a result they evolved to be incredibly strong.

“Unfortunately millennium ago, a catastrophe kicked their planet out of their sun system, forcing them to live in giant domed cities and huge cave systems within their mountains.

“I like underground places,” I said. “Perhaps I could visit, when I am a little stronger.”

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

“Linda is your pyrotechnics expert, commonly known as a fire wizard. Her people live in semi arid conditions and prefer canyons.”

Linda was reptilian and was wearing some sort of pants designed to accommodate her tail.

“Linda is 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 liked the best of them,” Harold added.

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

“I like blowing things up too,” I replied. “I looked forward to seeing your work.”

“I can’t wait,” Linda replied.

“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’s world is tropical and dominated by shallow seas and rain forest covered islands, some as big as Greenland.”

Vlorlax looked liked an eagle that had been transformed into a humanoid. He had wings, but I doubted they were functional. On second thought, I was probably wrong. Who needed physics in a world of crazy?

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

“I look forward to it,” Vlorlax replied, moving his body in a way that made him look happy.

“You know Harold. He’s a dark elf and is your stealth exert, AKA rogue. His world is more diverse like Earth.”

Harold tapped his necklace and his skin turned charcoal gray. A moment later it turned skin color.

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

“That is because you need proper training,” Harold replied with pride.

“I looked forward to learning from the best,” I said, 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.

“They tend to live in flying cities and are dedicated to art and culture.”

“Pleased to meet you Annie,” I said. 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 replied. “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 laughed and ask, “Did you just call me a blade dancer?”

“I was given clips of your fights in the rift,” Gandal replied and took out his wand.

In the air a screen appeared, with me fighting rats. I saw myself spinning around and swiping my two swords in arks around me as rats fell. It was almost liked a dance. But I immediately saw mistakes in my form, making me feel embarrassed.

The good news was that I had vastly improved over the last several months. It really helped having supercharged proprioception, allowing me to better understand how my body moved.

“That was quite impressive I’d say,” Gandal commented. “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 said with a chuckle. “Based on what I just saw, you have the makings of a great rogue.”

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

“Technology is not effective in some alternative realities,” Gandal warned. “That is 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 part of your test.

“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 new 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 is 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 said. “But where did it come from?”

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

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

“That coin is unique to you since your subconscious crated 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 replied. “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 these custom boots you mentioned,” Annie said. “You can also sell your loot.”

“It is in Sidney, Australia,” Gerri added.

“Why Australia?” I asked.

“Since it is the outback of everything,” Harold said with a laugh. “Actually it used to be in Africa when Africa was considered the most mysterious placed on Earth.”

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

“That’s stereotyping,” I said as I surreptitiously watched the aliens around me.

“You’re right,” Vlorlax replied. “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 stepped through a huge archway and stepped into a foreign city with a kaleidoscopic sky.

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

This city definitely wasn’t London. The architecture didn’t even seem Earthly. It seemed more liked some sort of transportation hub with countless people coming and going.

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

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

Annie was a Nordic beauty. Harold had elfish good looks. Even Gerri appeared mostly human, although her father might have been a gorilla.

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

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

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

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

I closed my eyes and followed, focusing on my breathing to prevent myself from barfing.

As we walked the nausea increased. Suddenly without warning I barfed. Quickly summoning a napkin, I wipe my face.

The barf dissolved into the ground and disappeared. I tossed the dirty napkin and it too disappeared. Convenient…

Annie and Harold grabbed onto me and prevented me from falling.

“Oh my gods, are you okay?” Annie asked worriedly.

“I’m getting serious vertigo,” I replied as I felt another wave of nausea.

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

With Annie and Harold’s assistance we continued our walk.

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

The world slowly went back to normal, and I regained my sense of direction. We were now in what seemed liked the atrium of a mall.

“Thanks dear, I am feeling better now,” I said as I took in a deep breath.

“Do you have kids?” Annie asked.

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

“I’m not…” Annie started but Harold interrupted.

“There’s the store,” Harold exclaimed and pointed.

We entered and were greeted by a sales clerk looking liked a Ferengi.

“How may I be of service?” the man asked eagerly. He was a perfect example of a used car salesperson.

Suddenly I realized I was no longer in Kansas anymore, figuratively speaking. The world was filled with magic, super technology and more importantly, aliens.

“Oh my God, I am surrounded by aliens,” I muttered, as overwhelming loneliness crashed into me.

Humans were such insignificant creatures, thinking they were masters. I knew better now. That was knowledge I didn’t want.

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

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

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

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

“That is 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 seemed back to normal so I got up. “I’m okay now. I am going to delude myself into thinking that you are just an ordinary girl. How come you look human?”

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

I got up and we exited the motor home.

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

“It looks amazing,” I said. “Sorry about the trouble.”

The Ferengi bowed and said, “I live to serve.”

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

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

We arrived at a wall terminal and Gringo entered information.

“What is an Oracle?” I asked.

“It is like a laptop and a cell phone combined,” Gringo replied. “It is the one information tool every adventurer needs. The base model is limited but 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 asked as I watched Gringo interacting with the panel. “Can it play games?”

Gringo paused and then said, “As a matter of fact it can,” Gringo replied happily. “It is vastly 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 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 is 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 replied.

“Then I suggest buying a sensory suppression module,” Gringo suggested. “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 replied.

We waited until Gringo finished placing the specified items in the online shopping cart.

“Do you need a storage ring?” Gringo asked.

“Not necessary,” I said.

“How about a wardrobe crystal?” Gringo asked.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It integrates with your storage and allows you to crate outfits and swaps 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 is only 12 gold. It’s on special today.”

Of course it is.

“Sounds good to me,” Annie said.

“Where does it come from?” I asked.

“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 asked.

“That’s fine,” Annie said. “I have done this before.”

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

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

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

All together it came to about 867 gold.

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

“Sure,” Annie said. “It is 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.”

“Could I use earth currency?” I asked.

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

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

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

I debated if I should keep any equipment. Making a show of taking a ring out of a pocket, I held out my closed hand. I removed all armor and weapons, leaving behind a pair of rapiers and daggers.

I kept the alchemical ingredients. They could be useful.

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

Harold came over and said, “I’ll be the judge of that,” and began negotiating. That was fine with me since I never liked haggling.

After negations, Harold netted me 86 silver and 37 copper.

With my previous loot, that came to 1 gold, 10 silver, and 89 copper.

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

“Followed me,” Annie answered and I followed.

We walked a short distance.

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

“I needed to convert British Pounds to 900 gold,” I said, rounding up.

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

I took out my bank card.

“He’s a newly wakened human,” Annie explained.

“Ah,” the teller said. “Debit cards are like wallets. I can sell you one here.”

“Yes please,” I said.

“You owe 53,473.37 pounds,” the lady informed 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 didn’t blink an eye. It must be good to be rich.

I swiped my bank card and entered my PIN. A moment later the lady handed me a card in an envelope. “Thanks for your service. Please come again.”

“Thank you,” I said and we walked away.

I took out the card and a message popped up.

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 selected ‘Yes’. A moment later the card seemed to be sucked into me.

I took out my money and touched it to the card. The card sucked the money into itself. I examined the card.

901 gold, 10 silver, 89 copper

“How did you do that?” Annie asked, confused.

“I just did,” I said, confused.

We returned to the store and I clicked ‘Buy’ on the screen. I then placed my magic debit card on the screen.

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

I looked around but the others were busy buying who knows what?

Gringo approached and said, “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 said and followed the man.

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

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

Gringo removed my artificial leg and installed my new one. He then gave me a boot for my good leg.

“Where can I throw this away?” I asked, pointing at my broken prosthetic and boot.

“I can do that,” Gringo said and placed the junk to the side.

I got up and walked around. They felt good. It was also kind of creepy how much the store knew about me.

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

I did so and the blades extended. I tapped again and the blades retracted. Cool.

An attendant came and took my junk away.

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

Then came 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 got stronger.

I closed my hand on the crystal and placed it in my pocket. I then selected, ‘Yes’.

As before, the crystal got sucked into me.

After that Gringo gave me my armor and helped me organize it into a costume. My second costume was my current clothes.

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

I handed over the equipment. Gringo did who-knows-what while tapping my machines.

“Okay it is done,” Gringo said and handed back my laptop and phone. I put them away.

“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 placed the devices in my ears and a heads-up display appeared in my field of vision.

“I am 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 could 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 couldn’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 said. “If there is anything else you need please let me know.”

By now the others were finished.

MC900065312[1]

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

“You are correct,” Vlorlax said. “The more successful Ferengi have the power to operate multiple bodies. That is 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 got sick and die.”

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

You are invited to join Party Marauders

Do you accept?

Yes/No

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

How do I disable the screen? It was annoying.

The message in front of me disappeared and I only saw the message in my mind’s eye, just liked it had been since I first absorbed essence.

I tried to disable all features, except sensory suppression.

All Oracle features except sensory suppression disabled.

Perfect.

I selected ‘Yes’ to the party invite.

I was now a member of a team composed entirely of post-teens. The team name was teen appropriate. I felt old.

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

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

As I followed the gang, I organized what I needed to work on. I definitely needed information on the society I was joining.

I also needed to explore my oracle. Hopefully it was not a complete waste of money.

My thoughts were cut off when we arrived at a food court. Everyone broke off and I went for the burger place, although I was curious about all the alien food stalls.

Food in hand I waited for the others and we found a spot.

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

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

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

“I am not…” Annie began, and then said, “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 wanted me to participate. Should I mention the obvious? I decided against it and instead focused on eating.

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

Eventually we got up and headed out.

As we travelled, I realized the mall we were in was surprisingly big. All about were bustling people. Most were adults, but there were some children.

Up ahead was a sign for “Battleground Arena.”

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

The teller checked our reservation and gave 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 asked.

“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 thought that would be marvelous. Fighting monsters was so much better than fighting humans for irrational monkey brain reasons. I didn’t say that. I didn’t want my companions to think I was 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 had to learn for themselves.

We arrived at locker rooms and the others entered their appropriate rooms. I entered the men’s locker rooms since I needed to pee. After that I switched to my battle costume and then stepped out.

After awhile the others joined me.

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

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

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

We headed to the arena entrance and waited, along with other people.

“But it is dangerous,” Annie argued. “I don’t want you to die liked last time.”

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

I did come close on more than a few occasions on the battlefield, but I didn’t mention that.

“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 agreed.

“I’ll be careful,” I said as I wiped saliva from my mouth. I was feeling ravenous. I couldn’t wait to start.

Minute after agonizing minute ticked down as we waited for our time.

Finally, the doors opened as the clock struck 6:20PM. People rushed out and we followed.

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

Again, time passed as the other parties readied themselves.

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

I glanced up at the stands where spectators watched.

Finally, a horn blew and gates opened. From out of the gates strange creatures called tigerdiles entered. The tigerdiles looked liked saber tooth tigers with alligator skin.

The creatures charged in and battle began.

A few charged us and my companions intercepted them.

I whipped a knife at one so hard that my arm hurt. Unfortunately, the target moves its head, avoiding an eye shot. The blade bounced off the tigerdile’s head, leaving only a scratch.

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

That was my plan. I didn’t say that. Instead, I glared at the creatures, projecting my hunger. It had its intended effect and multiple monsters attacked.

Time seemed to slow as one got past my friends and attacked from behind me.

I turned around, amused. Didn’t they know I had eyes in the back of my head, figuratively speaking?

I considered using a rapier but changed my mind. My stats weren’t high enough for that. Instead, I took out a knife and positioned myself.

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

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

A fraction of a second later, the tigerdile whipped 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 grumbled since he failed to stop the attack.

A moment later the tigerdile was killed.

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

A moment later I received the essence.

For assist, 49,750 XP received

At the same time loot appeared in my storage. It was a pair of fangs resembling daggers. The money went into my card.

I guessed that my storage enabled automatic looting.

The system then asked me if I wanted to spend XP to level up.

For a moment I hesitated, but then I realized the level up would only take me to 11, so I said ‘Yes’.

Level F-11 achieved.

10 Free Attribute points

I spent a minute allowing the new energies to flow through me.

I added 4 each to speed and strength, and 2 to vitality. I should have used all on speed and strength, but I was feeling cocky.

I then let the energies settle down a bit, knowing the full process would take time.

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

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

**SPE (Speed):** 26 + 4 -> (30+13) = 43

**STR (Strength):** 26 + 4 -> (30+13) = 43

**VIT (Vitality):** 26 + 2 -> (28 +13) = 41

**STA (Stamina):** (26+13) = 39

**PER (Perception):** (33+13+ = 46

**INT (Intelligence):** (45+13) = 58

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 9

**HP:** 130 of 130

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

**Exp:** 9200 of 14,400

I waited for my chance again.

I then bent over and waved my butt at the tigerdiles. The others didn’t see me since they were all facing outwards.

I continued my taunting as attacks increased. It was working but not fast enough. Time was running out.

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

I placed the beef on my rapier and wave it in front of me. This had its intended effect and a massive charge of monsters attacked.

“Damn, what is wrong with these creatures?” Vlorlax asked. “They are unusually hyper.”

Most were stopped but one got through and I returned the meat to my storage.

I was ready and skewered the creature through both eyes with my rapiers, sidestepping as I did so. I had sufficient speed and strength to dodge.

I lost my rapiers, but that was okay. The rapiers had done their jobs, and were from the rat dungeon.

The monster disintegrated, leaving just the rapiers.

“Are you okay?” Annie screamed in fright.

“I am unharmed,” I replied.

Just then I got flooded by a huge quantity of Essence, and a message asking if I want to upgrade. I quickly said ‘No’.

Awarded Title: Mighty-2

For defeating a monster 2 ranks above yours +10

(All attributes but Wisdom, Spirit)

Sweet. Now I was satisfied. But damn, my perception had increased, but so had my Intelligence.

That was unexpected. So people got fundamentally stronger when they transitioned. I guess that was why they were so worried, except they were dealing with a retired marine.

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

**Titles:** Soloist (+3), Adventuresome (+5), Mighty-1 (+5), Mighty-2 (+10), Vigilant (max 10X Perception, variable)

**SPE (Speed):** 26 + 4 -> (30+23) = 53

**STR (Strength):** 26 + 4 -> (30+23) = 53

**VIT (Vitality):** 26 + 2 -> (28+23) = 51

**STA (Stamina):** (26+23) = 49

**PER (Perception):** (33+23) = 56

**INT (Intelligence):** (45+23) = 68

**WIS (Wisdom):** 40

**SPI (Spirit):** 9+5 => 14

**HP:** 130 of 130

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

I looked at my stats and wondered why my spirit had risen by 5. The only cause I could see was that I travelled through that Nexus place. That meant that world was somehow associated with the Spirit.

My loot consisted of a storage ring, something I no longer needed. I decided to leave it there since wearing rings were never a good idea. Not for me anyways.

I waited as the fight slowly wound down. Finally, the last of the monsters were killed.

I then heard the announcement over the intercom.

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

I picked up my rapiers and throwing knives and waited.

The others quickly looted their kills and came to me.

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

I tried my best not to smile, knowing that was exactly what had happened.

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

We soon left the crowds and Vlorlax lead us to a secluded garden area.

Vlorlax turned to me and began 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 were people watching but that doesn’t prevent people from dying.”

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

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

For the first time in a long time, I felt liked a little kid. I sighed but said nothing, knowing they were just worried about me.

I felt a sharp pain in my heart and grimaced. It was a pain that was both alluring and terrifying.

Panic gripped me and the pain receded.

Did I just have a heart attack? In panic I listen to my heart. Fortunately, my heartbeat sounded healthy. And my stats were also good.

Then I remember to check my Oracle. It reported I was fine.

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

A thought entered my mind. Would I die if that scar ruptured?

For a moment no one said anything, and then Annie let me go.

Annie then said, “The higher ups had 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 sighed and said, “Yes mother.”

Harold giggled at that, which earned him a glare from Annie.

As I stood there, I pondered. Were these people older than I realize? Was immortality a thing? Perhaps it was, since complete regeneration was possible. I think.

That meant people had no rush to become strong. That didn’t make sense to me. So I decided 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 scolded. “Would you let your children fight a pack of lions with just swords, considering they could die?”

“I guess not,” I replied. I didn’t point out many cultures in the past did just that.

“Also, your culture views time very differently than ours does,” Vlorlax said. “In your culture, people start thinking about retiring when they reach your age. For us, life has just begun. For example, my parents were well over 800 Earth years old when I was hatched.

“As for monsters, they have existed from the beginning of time and their constant incursions into our universe 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 is 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 is 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.

“But most importantly they all have high mortality rates.”

I wondered what they would say if they knew my stats what my stats were. I was wise enough not to mention that.

“It is time to go,” Annie said and grabbed my arm.

As we walked, I watched Annie. She didn’t have the mannerisms of a post teen. Was it possible that all of them were older than me?

I suddenly got the impression that they were all in their mid 80s.

It was kind of a weird concept. The only reason people got old and decrepit was because they were quite literally starving to death. I got that impression when it came to this Essence stuff. It was a type of nutrient. Like protein, the body only took what it needed, wasting the rest.

I followed the others while deep in thought. I had plenty to think about.

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

Looking at the sky I wondered if this was what it felt liked to take psychedelics.

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

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

I couldn’t see the Powers-That-Be, the Military-Industrial complex, or some other shadow organization letting this get out. Only a public outbreak of monsters could force the truth onto the world.

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

Looking around I found myself in a new world. I knew it was not Earth because my weight had decreased slightly, among other things. Also, the sky was greenish. It was also distorted. I decided to ignore it.

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

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

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

So that was the source of the smell. As you have probably guessed, smells didn’t bother me. They were all good, although it took me years to get over some scents, like the scent of barf, diarrhea, the sight and smell of rotting human flesh, and other thing best forgotten. But then again that was a physiological response and very difficult to control.

The culprit in question was a huge turtle-like creature. Upon its shell was a carriage, like the ones found in the cartoon *The Flintstones*.

People were busy cleaning up the mess.

All about aliens were talking, speaking foreign languages. I enabled language translation, and my Oracle began translating.

The oracle was easy to control, but I needed a few hours to get comfortable with it.

“There is our destination,” Annie said and pointed.

There were hundreds of humans milling about near a strange vessel. The vessel was next to a retaining wall.

We approached the group but everyone seemed to be waiting. I listened for a moment to the chatter and then said, “Let’s go there. I would like to see the view.”

With Annie still holding my arm, we reached the wall.

Holy Cow! We were floating far above the ground. Below was a middle-ages city – was what I would say; except this city looked alien. Not in the basic concept of houses and buildings, but in architecture.

“Impressive, wasn’t it?” Annie asked with a smile.

“Absolutely,” I agreed, “And great inspiration for a video game I’m building.”

“Now that’s a good hobby or business to have,” Vlorlax approved.

I focused on movement in the city and saw the residents. Indeed, they were all aliens.

I turned my head, and felt vertigo. Damn. I needed to be careful when overriding my sensory dampening.

“Attention everyone,” an announcement said. “You are all here to be enrolled in Adventurer training, since you were all awakened in the last Standard Year.

“Each of you will be assigned an advisor. When your name is called, please go to the specified advisor.”

The announcer wasn’t speaking English, but my oracle was translating. I wondered if I could do the same without the oracle. Probably not, since I would have to learn each language.

On the other hand, I didn’t need the built-in map, or that weird interface connecting me to I-don’t-know-what. I could even identify items and monsters with sufficient effort. So, what was the point of an oracle? I decided not to ask, or someone would give me another scolding.

Sigh. I was 57 years old. I couldn’t believe I was still getting scolded.

Of course, I was never scolded as a child, but just treated as a nuisance and ordered about or just ignored in foster care. Being ignored was better than being bullied.

I guessed being scolded wasn’t so bad.

I looked at Annie. I was not sure how to relate to a person who had decided to adopt me as her long lost sister…I meant her long lost brother. I was not sure why I said sister.

“Jason, Rubio, Milton, Brandon, Sampson, Hammer, your advisor is, Blendar…”

The announcer went on to the next group of people.

Eventually my name was called and the gang and I headed for the mentioned advisor. The advisor in question was a badger-like creature named Daris.

“Okay everyone,” Daris said. “Please come here so I can register you. When called, please present your badge.”

Daris called names. My name was called. I stepped forward and presented my badge.

“My name is Daris,” the badger woman said. “I’ll be your advisor. Let’s all embark and then we will do some introductions.”

“Hope you have fun,” Harold said.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked Annie.

“We have already collected more than double the Essence we need to cover our nutritional requirements for the next year,” Annie said with a hint of a scolding. “I am going back to my usual job of diplomat.”

“See you next year, when we go hunting again,” Harold said. The others waved as I headed to a flat-bottomed yacht.

I stepped onto the yacht and turned around. I then waved as the yacht took off.

All about me, hundreds of people enrolled in Adventure school waved as we left.

Damn this was exciting. I couldn’t believe I was on a vessel that flew with antigravity or something.

Within moments the gang was a speck on an ever diminishing floating city. Then the city got obscured by clouds.

“Okay folks, you had been gathered together because you all have similar learning potential. In addition, you have all awoken sometime during the last Standard Year and are now new initiates of Rank E,” Daris said.

Daris paused and said, “Luke, you’re not Rank E.”

“I have the essence for it,” I said. “However, my doctor warned me to wait to do it with professional assistance, since it can be life threatening for me. I’ll do it when I see her next.”

Daris nodded and said, “It is standard practice to group people together into parties. The powers that be chose to group the 5 of you because of your compatibility. And yes, you are all E-1, or will be…” She looked at me.

That was weird. Half an hour ago I was F-9. If I had upgraded I would be E-1 like the others.

Could that so-called Galactic Council have known, or even orchestrated everything, including that fake hunt I did with the others?

Knowing I was putty in the hands of some all-powerful beings gave me the willies.

“To begin, let’s start introductions,” Daris said.

“I am Gunner Thompson from Texas,” Gunner greeted as he adjusted his Texas style monster hat. “I am 34 years old and I am a navy seal. I can’t believe I am on a flying boat in another world. I can’t believe I can fight monsters.”

“My name was Quan Li and I am 32 years old and I am…I work for China’s secret service. I can’t wait to grow even stronger.”

“I am Kenny Wilson, and just like the Ken action figure I am very manly. I am a karate expert and have climbed Mount Everest. Oh I am 36.”

“I am Julia Summers, 37, and I kill people,” she said in a deadpan voice. She then laughed and then said, “Just joking.”

She wasn’t joking. I knew. I could read people. Humans people anyway. Was she a bad person? No. Cops were sometimes required to take lethal action. Just liked soldiers on the battlefield.

“Actually I am a cop and a fitness fanatic.”

“I am Luke Sunderland, ex military, and the oldest at 57,” I said as I looked around.

It was rather noisy as people got to know members of their own parties.

“All of you are highly trained,” Daris said. “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.

“You will also learn to defend yourselves using self-powered weapons. Only self-powered and manna-powered weapons are reliable in this world you have all entered.

“Martial training will be done in simulated worlds where you can’t get killed. However, the pain is real – for your own safety.

“And no, hunting is not part of the curriculum.”

“Is it true we can become immortal?” Julia asked.

“It is more correct to say Essence can prevent you from dying of old age,” Daris replied. “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 even the strongest tree.”

“Do rewards scale with difficulty?” Gunner asked.

“Correct. However, please don’t do anything reckless,” Daris admonished him.

“I have manna,” Kenny stated. “Does that mean magic is real?”

“There was no such thing as magic,” Daris corrected. “Instead, the universe is controlled by conscious energy.”

“Those damn Shadow Orgs,” Gunner exclaimed angrily.

“In the human world, science only acknowledges matter,” Daris continued. “That represents the Earth Element.

“Human science also recognizes energy, which touches on the Fire Element.

“Even then, the understanding orthodox science has is fundamentally wrong.

“Unfortunately, your orthodox scientists as a group are hostile to anything that opposes their atheistic view of a meaningless universe driven entirely by random processes.

“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 said with a frown. “They all pretty much get stuck at B for the rest of eternity.”

“Boring,” Gunner grumbled, “A bunch of losers.”

“You shouldn’t insult people,” Quan Li scolded. “However I agree with the sentiment.”

“So Luke, do you agree with us?” Kenny asked.

“All the people in my group think I am a dangerous reckless fool,” I said. “They even scolded me for accidently falling into a dungeon.

“Just before I arrived, they were forced to take me into the hunting arena. However, they tried to protect me from the monsters.”

“Did you participate?” Kenny asked excitedly. His hunting spirit was clearly showing.

“Yes I did,” I answered. “Now that I think about it, it does sound foolish for an F-Rank to challenge D-Rank monsters. That was probably why they all scolded me.

“On the other hand, I now have enough Essence to reach E-1 like the rest of you. That was almost an hour ago.”

“That is great,” Gunner said excitedly. “I think we will make a great team. But why can’t you upgrade?”

“Because my energy systems are damaged,” I replied. “Don’t worry. It’s fixable.”

“You are all similar in your competitive nature,” Daris said. “I don’t know why the Council grouped you all together. Groups liked yours can either reach great heights or all die early because of your competitive natures.”

“Are these ships expensive?” I asked, changing the subject. I wasn’t in the mood for another scolding.

“Could ships go into outer space?” Gunner asked.

“Could they go faster than light? Do replicators exist?” Kenny asked.

“How about transporters?” Julia asked.

Daris sighed and rubbed her forehead. “I can’t believe I have to deal with children.”

“Hey, I am 57 years old,” I objected.

“And I am 286 Earth years old. To me you are all children,” Daris replied. “The problem with your race is you never got to know what true adulthood is like. And yes, I am considered a child by those vastly older than me.

“To answer your question, if you can imagine it, then it is 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 requirements. 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 was impressive.

“Like people who own rare works of art but keep it hidden,” I said, nodding. That storage ring I just got no longer looked so useless. It would hide my storage power from most.

“How big is this world?” Julia asked. “I get the impression we are above an infinite plane.”

“I am sure that’s some sort of optical illusion,” I said. “This world is just bigger than Earth, except the gravity is lighter. Except I feel we are travelling huge distances. It’s very strange.”

“Our universe has multiple realities,” Daris replied. “In the universe you know, Earth is a spheroid object circling around the yellow star named Sol. But it is equally true that Earth is flat with the North Pole at the center. We are currently beyond what Flat-Earthers call the South Pole.

Daris paused a moment and pointed. “Your world is in that direction. The higher above the ground we fly, and the faster we can travel. However, the harsher the environment becomes.

“In two hours we will arrived 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 noted.

“That is something I don’t really understand,” Daris admitted. “We could also go to Peris through the Nexus, except space around Earth is distorting as a result of nuclear radiation and the death energies released by mass extinctions of various species, and the illegal activities of your governments and industrial moguls. It is causing problems to a lot of people in the multiverse.

“One side effect is increased monster activity. The next atomic bomb or oil spill could tear something, allowing monsters to terrorize the general public.

“That is why we are paying close attention to the strained relations between your world powers.”

“I have heard about that nonsen…that theory,” I say. “If that were true about Earth, wouldn’t it be more so around the Sun?”

“The space around the sun is distorted,” Daris agreed. “However, the energies concentrated in the sun are fundamentally different.

“Don’t forget, pollution, over-fishing, clear cutting, the sheer disregard of nature and the destruction of countless species is drenching your world with death energies that attract the monsters we fight against. This is compounded by the hostility too many of your kind feel for each other.

“And since all of reality is connected, this affects many worlds.”

“Where do monsters come from?” Kenny asked.

“They come from the space between realities,” Daris said.

“In a very real sense your universe is a living organism. As an organism, it is surrounded by bacteria and viruses that can kill it if not handled. It is our jobs to defend the universe from these intruders.

“By doing our jobs the universe gives us tools to make us more effective. Also, the deaths of these monsters feed the universe.”

“How come we don’t see monsters everywhere?” Quan asked.

“Initially, clear cutting and agriculture caused all supernatural creatures to recede,” Daris said. “This allowed for a more rational way of looking at the world.

“Then came religions that fostered the rejection of all supranational as evil, including the friendly races.

“Finally was the introduction of modern science and its insistence that if you can’t measure it, it doesn’t exist.

“Then electricity was introduced, and its accompanying electric lights, which acted as a barrier to the supernatural, which made people lose faith in the existence of monsters.

“The friendly races receded because they felt they weren’t welcome.

“All would have been fine, but the Earth can no longer handle the ever increasing environmental degradation. It is degrading these barriers.”

That was a chilling thought.

“Why do they look and act like rats, spiders, trolls and such?” Julia asked.

“Because the collective unconscious of the people involved impose structure on these hostile entities. Which is good, since it makes it easier to deal with them,” Daris said.

“What is the Nexus?” I asked.

“The space between realities can be considered as having both a positive space and a negative space,” Daris said. “The negative space is the prime source of monsters, while the positive space is the Nexus.

“However this distinction is fluid.

“The Nexus always appears as a distorted form of our reality. City dwellers tend to see a city we can travel through. Others see jungles, ocean bottoms, cave systems, and the surface of barren planets. The only constant is a surface you can walk on. While it is possible to fly, doing so is 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 placed when I passed through,” Gunner said.

“You mustn’t explore that placed on your own,” Daris admonished. “It is entirely too easy to get lost, and our oracles only work properly at ground level. That is to say we are physically touching the ground.

“Also, locations aren’t fixed. As a result, an Oracle must always be used for navigation.

“The safest use of Nexus is to travel to local destinations on a given planet and to this place, where navigation is straight forward and relatively safe.”

“Damn this world is seriously crazy,” Kenny said excitedly. “This is better than climbing Mount Everest or exploring blue holes, caves, and underwater lava tubes.”

“It is too bad the rest of the world don’t have access to this.” Quan Li grumbled. “Why is that?”

“Because of the shadow government of course,” Gunner replied.

“You are correct,” Daris agreed. “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 worry about.”

“Does that mean humans are enslaved, liked the conspiracy theorists claim?” Julia asked.

“If they are enslaved, it is 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 had you met?” Gunner asked. “I saw dwarves. I can’t believe their women have beards. On the other hand, the men are all bald.”

“Who was that girl with you?” Julia asked. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“She’s a Nordic,” I replied. “For unknown reasons, she had adopted me as her long lost sibling.”

“Too bad,” Kenny said. “She’s hot.”

We continued our discussion.

The world around us distorted. The next thing I knew we were above a large city and approaching some sort of airport.

Moments later we landed. We followed Daris off the ship and towards a large building.

“I suddenly realized being surrounded by these aliens is going to be tiring,” Gunner commented.

“That is why you are in a group of Earth humans. Also, your classes only have Earth humans, the same with your dormitory,” Daris replied.

“There are enough humans?” Julia asked.

“Absolutely,” Daris replied. “As a matter of fact, as a result of degrading conditions on Earth, the number of students this year has almost tripled from last year. In fact, they are considering creating a dedicated school for just Earth Humans.”

“How does the oracle translate language?” I asked. “Does it have translations of thousands of languages?”

“Goodness no,” Daris said. “If it did it would never be able to handle colloquialisms.”

“Can’t it just sync when two came together?” I asked.

“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 is probably more convenient than my laptop.

I could get universal translations with only a few more levels. However I didn’t think it was worth it for now. Especially since my stamina was relatively low.

Also, I didn’t need to increase Intelligence for controlling my senses, as a result of my increased Spirit. For a moment I wondered why Dr. Winters never mentioned that. I guessed it was because it was very difficult to level up Spirit.

I was not even sure how I got spirit in the first placed.

“Where did they come from?” I asked as we headed for an imposing structure I guesses was the promised school.

“The essential crystals come from some C-Level dungeons and are smaller than rice grains,” Daris replied. “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 is only a matter of time.

We entered the building.

“Why would we get such things from dungeons?” I asked.

“As mentioned before, that is because in a very real sense the universe is alive,” Daris replied. “Monsters are pathogens that constantly attack the body of the universe, but also sources of food. Once defatted, 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 existed, but not what orthodox religion claimed it was.

We entered a gymnasium and Daris said, “Select a line. The clerks will help you select your electives. When finished, return here.”

I headed to the shortest line I could find.

1. Dwarf in Latin [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eagle in Latin [↑](#footnote-ref-2)