The Princess

And The

Player |

LitRPG

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**By**

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[Prolog 1](#_Toc200047970)

[Holoworld – the Playground of the Future 4](#_Toc200047971)

[Let the Incursion (Game) Begin 11](#_Toc200047972)

[Dungeons, Dungeons, Everywhere 101](#_Toc200047973)

[Making new Friends 132](#_Toc200047974)

[Terra Plana 145](#_Toc200047975)

[A whole New World 155](#_Toc200047976)

[The Day the World Changed 175](#_Toc200047977)

Prolog

The past is the past,   
except when it becomes the future.

-- In ancient times --

“My beloved people, our world is close to breaking out of the last tendril of high-density ether. By my estimate this will happen in the next 2-3 years.

“In other words, this planet will soon be free of monsters.”

The king-god sat back and waited for the message to sink into the minds and hearts of all the people of Earth.

“Unfortunately, we high-leveled people will have to leave, leaving you to rule yourselves.

“May you rule wisely, and may your children never know what a monster is.”

The transmission ended, and the king sighed. The Earth would reenter a new high-density ether zone in a future millennium. Such was the way of the universe.

Would his teachings be remembered? Would the pyramid grid still function after tens of thousands of years of dormancy, while surrounded by armies of destructive barbarians?

Deep in meditation, Thoth the Atlantian ascended, along with his beloved city.

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

-- Millennium later --

“Greetings Aristotle,” the gloriously beautiful angel sang. “The dominion of nature only comes about through measurement and study.”

Aristotle woke up a new man.

“All hail ye mighty generals,” Dailion, a greater demon boomed. “Operation kick-start Early Incursion has begun. I have sent subconscious messages to countless humans. One such human has finally responded.”



-- Friday, December 21, 2012 --

Mayan and other prophesies declared,   
On December 21, 2012 the world would change  
- They were right

“When will the incursion program be initiated? I can’t wait to taste some delicious human flesh,” Dalbos, a drooling greater demon asked, sounding like Golem from *The Lord of the Rings*.

“Soon, my greedy associate,” Dailion, now a demon lord, promised as he stared in hidden disgust at his crappy tool.

Dalbos had no brains, but he was somewhat useful. The same couldn’t be said about most of the demons he knew. Some day he would rule them all – including every one of his so-called superiors.

“Today I finally achieved a milestone,” Dailion explained. “I have established a dependable connection to a suitable vessel. Next is to give it the knowledge needed to create a world-spanning empire. Finally, when enough resources are gathered, I shall make the vessel build the portal for our eventual return.

“Yes, it will still take several more decades, but consider this. The Earth would have taken an additional thousand years to enter the high-ether zone on its own. A thousand years.

“You don’t need to thank me.”

Unfortunately for Dailion, thoughts of gratitude never crossed the other demons’ minds. Their only thoughts were how to claim the glory for themselves and raise their own standing in the hierarchy.

Only climbing the hierarchy mattered. And if that meant groveling, then so be it.

“But why give them a chance at getting strong?” Greater Demon Dweeler asked.

“For four reasons,” *my dimwitted buffoon,* Dailion replied with annoyance.

*They should know the answer. Why do I have to spell it out every, single, time? That is why they need someone smart to lead them, someone like me. Yes, Demon King Dailion sounds very nice indeed.*

“First, the **[Essence]** embodied within the humans is the power that will draw the tendrils of ether onto the planet. Making them stronger is an absolute requirement for the next step in our incursion.

“Second, the stronger the humans get, the tastier their **[Essence]** becomes when harvested.

“Third, our mortal enemies will not allow this project to proceed without this clause.

“Finally, we can get some brown nose points by pretending we are helping the humans.”

Holoworld – the Playground of the Future

If the Virtual were real,

Would anyone leave it?

- The present -

“Mum, dad, everyone,” I called, excitedly. “I want you all to see something amazing.”

We just finished Sunday lunch, an important tradition in the Solarsmith household since around 770 BC (Before Computers).

That was around 1200 of the old calendar.

In case you were wondering, 0 MA (Modern age) corresponded to 1970 of the old calendar.

Why did the inventors of modern computers choose January 1, 1970? Not a clue. Don’t care.

I dragged everyone to the living room.

My excitement was so intense; I thought my head would explode. Not literally, of course.

“Calm yourself Luke, you’re 15 years old,” my great grandfather Gigi scolded. He was born in June 7, 2 BC. He loved mentioning his age, since it made him sound older than Jesus.

“Kids today, so impatient,” Gigi grumbled with a smile.

“I want to show you this scientific revolution,” I complained. “It will change the world.”

“Luke, center yourself first,” Mother scolded.

“Yes mum,” I said and turned inwards for a moment.

The family followed me to the living room. I waited for everyone to sit and then started the video.

“Welcome everyone to Next Gen Gaming, a show where we explore the cutting edge of gaming technology. My guest today is Dr. Philip Everworth, CEO of Quantum Entertainment.

“It’s an honor to have you here.”

“I agree,” Dr. Everworth said with a smile.

“What can you tell me about Holoworld?”

“Well Bob, let’s start with history,” Dr. Everworth replied.

“As you know, a milestone was achieved when global companies such as Google finally created fully functioning quantum computers.

“Along with AI, quantum computers are revolutionizing countless fields such as biology, material science and weather forecasts. We can now predict the weather two weeks in advance with high certainty.” The doctor laughed.

“Another milestone was achieved when researchers solved Schrodinger's equations for a bacterium.

“Going off on a tangent, since Einstein’s time we have known that matter is almost 100% empty space.

“Which is more believable; that 0.00001 % of that rock is actual matter or that none of it is actual matter? The answer is that none of it is actual matter and what we call matter is just a standing wave in an infinitely large hologram.

“That is why fundamental particles act as they do. There is always a little fussiness at the limit of resolution.

“This was proven experimentally by Nobel Prize winning Dr. Albert Swizer when she created virtual matter for the first time. Of course it was just a few atoms, but it was still a scientific breakthrough.

“Fast forward to three years ago when Quantum Entertainment created the first holodeck.”

An image of a 3 by 3 meter room appeared with a person in the centered, interacting with objects that were physical to the person but disappeared when the power was turned off.

It was just a proof of concept, since that tiny room was supported by a 12-story warehouse the size of a football field, full of equipment. It also required gigawatts of power.

“Is virtual matter dangerous?” Bob asked. “What if someone eats it?”

“That’s the funny thing, Bob,” Dr. Everworth said. “Tiny quantities of virtual matter seem safe to eat. And yes, animals fed too much will die when removed from the field.

“The only advice I can give to you is don’t eat virtual matter.

“Now that the groundwork is laid, I can talk about Holoworld. Holoworld is a revolution in matter engineering. It is finally out of stealth mode and is being initialized now.”

The camera zooms into Western Australia.

“We secured millions of hectares of barren and desert land throughout the world. This way no one is inconvenienced. Best of all, local governments and people will benefit from the tax revenues generated by the project,” Dr. Everworth orated.

The next view showed robotic crew erecting 100 meter pillars throughout the badlands.

“These emitters draw their power from several multi-terawatt fusion reactors, allowing for a holodeck experience like no other.

“And yes, we have plenty of backup power for emergencies.”

The video fast-forwarded and the pillars lit up with power. The glow expanded to encompass the entire property and then formed a mirrored flattened bubble.

“That was last week,” Dr. Everworth explained. “If you notice the mirror finish that reflects 99.97% of light. This will help reduce the effects of global warming. No thanks are needed. We are just doing our part to protect the planet.

“Unfortunately we can’t allow anyone to see within. After all, where’s the fun in that?

“Don’t worry. Doors will open on the Spring Equinox, 5 months from now.”

“Isn’t it Fall Equinox in Australia?” Bob asked.

“Why yes it is,” Dr. Everworth replied with an evil chuckle and a hungry glint in his eyes. “It’s going to fall alright.”

“Damn that man gives me the creeps,” Gigi said with a shudder. The sentiment was reflected in the rest of my family.

I agreed. The man seemed downright demonic.

“What can you tell us of what’s in that dome?” Bob asked.

“Well Bob, that’s the secret, isn’t it?” Dr. Everworth asked with a chuckle. “We are creating an MMORPG game made flesh. It’s a fantasy world called Incursion. People can play as warriors, rogues and mages, to name just three classes.”

“Can we play as other races such as elves, dwarves, and beast kin?”

“Well Bob, do you really want the system to modify your body using virtual matter?”

Bob swallowed in fright and said, “I guess not. But why is it called Incursion? That sounds like a Sci-Fi RPG.”

“You’ll find out,” Dr. Everworth sang sinisterly as he gave the world a toothy grin.

“Our system connects with the neural implants of people who have them,” Dr. Everworth explained. “It can also create temporary neural implants for people who don’t have then. For legal reasons, they must be at least 18 years old and give written consent.”

“I can’t wait,” Bob exclaimed.

“Isn’t the wait half the fun?” Dr. Everworth asked. “At $95.00 US a day plus tax, it’s not cheap, but definitely worth spending a week or month there.”

“It’s cheaper than Disney,” Bob noted.

“Even better, you can get a yearly membership for only $4,995.00 US,” Dr. Everworth added. “We even have packages for people on government assisted living and retirees. Kids 16 and 17 get a discount of $1,000 US on the yearly membership.

“Unfortunately no one under 16 is allowed.”

“You heard it here first,” Bob said. “I plan on getting a yearly membership, and then will spend a few weeks recording my experiences there. Is that allowed?”

“Absolutely, Bob,” Dr. Everworth affirmed with a smile. “We encourage sharing your experiences with the world. Everyone’s travel in our game world is 100% unique.

“The only exceptions are the tutorial quests in the starter cities.”

“Thank you for being on my show Dr. Everworth.”

“Absolutely Bob,” Dr. Everworth replied with a smile.

“Please see the description below for more details on how to get tickets for what should be the most amazing MMORPG experience in the history of the world.”

I turned off the video with a shudder. Dr. Everworth gave me the shivers, like a predator waiting for its next victim. He didn’t hide his air of superiority.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“You’re too young,” Mother declared, “Besides, what about school?”

“I am hoping to go in the summer after school finishes. I’ll be 16 by then,” I argued.

“That man gives me the willies,” my eldest sister Emily said. “He’s like a demon.”

And yes, I’m second oldest. My other 2 brothers and 2 sisters agreed that man was evil. Including my youngest sister Rainbow, who is a 3 years old. “He’s a bad man.”

“I agree,” Grammy said. “I don’t think you should deal with these people.”

“It doesn’t matter what kind of people they are,” I argued. “There is no way the Australian or any other government would approve it if it weren’t safe.”

No one could deny that.

“I already have a Neurolink and I already saved up enough money for the yearly membership. It’s only until school begins in the fall. What better way to spend the summer than getting firsthand experience on a subject I will be working on for the rest of my life?

“You already know I always get excellent grades in school.”

In case you are wondering, I’m learning how to make games in my spare time. I believe gaming is the future of entertainment. With AI firmly entrenched in life, what else is there for a person to do?

And yes, with the use of AI, games practically write themselves. All I need to do is supply the prompts for what I want the game to be like.

I recently started a channel dedicated to gaming. My fans love it when I play on extreme mode. They also love my banter.

Unfortunately, I’m limited in how much I can play. I can only play 1 hour on weekdays, and 2 hours on weekends. Thank God for my AI trainer, which really helped me sharpen my gaming skills.

“I don’t know,” Mother grumbled. “You already spend too much time with your computers and video games. When will you get regular friends? And I don’t mind you getting a girl or a boy friend as long as it doesn’t interfere with schooling.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem since Luke Solarsmith is a handsome young man,” Gigi declared proudly.

As you can guess I’m not very social. Little babies love me, as well as old people. However, for some reason people my age ignore me.

Or maybe as Mother would say, I don’t make the effort.

“I will be meeting actual people there,” I pointed out. “Also, according to the web site, the system encourages social interaction. Many boss battles are designed for team play.

“Don’t forget, this is physical. That means I will have plenty of exercise,” I said, completing my pitch.

“We’ll think about it,” Was the best I could get.

Let the Incursion (Game) Begin

Invasions start long before a bullet is ever fired.

-- Some military guy --

-- Thursday, June 9, 5:47 AM --

Turned out my parents were reasonable. Who knew?

It also helped that I drove them crazy with my pestering.

Anyway, here I am, sitting in an airplane, watching videos of Incursion on my Neurolink.

“We’ll be landing in ten minutes,” the flight attendant announced. “Please put your seatbelts on and place your trays in their upright and locked positions.”

Off in the distance I got my first glimpse of the ginormous mirrored dome. Officially covering some 66.6 square nautical miles of land, the dome was stupendous.

I liked the 66.6 number. It was very sinister.

But why use nautical miles instead of kilometers?

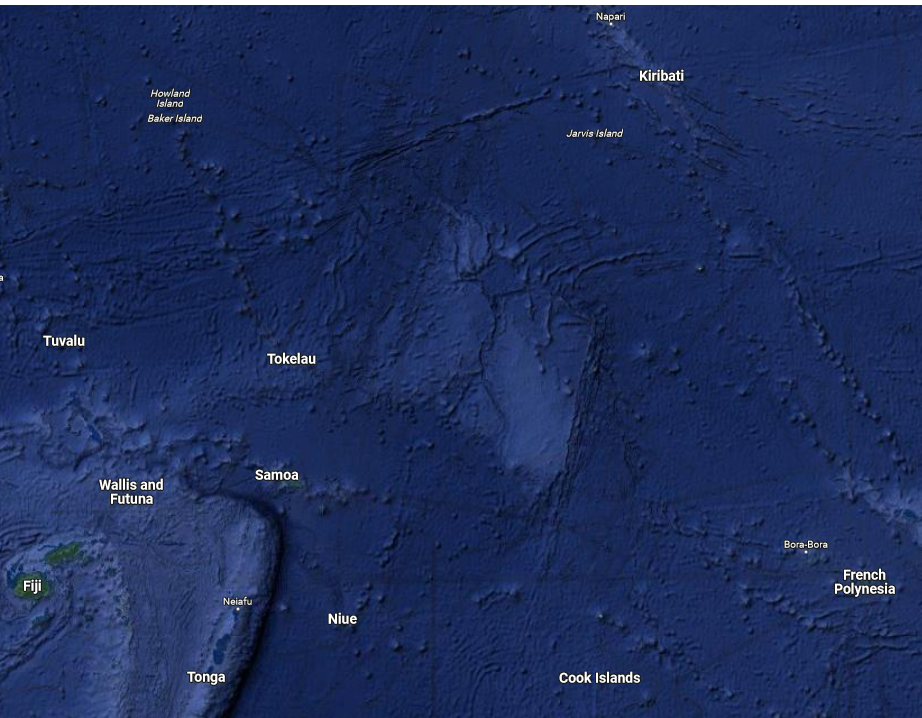
Other domes existed throughout the world.

One of them was on Route 66 in the United States. But that was small.

Strangely, they were almost all situated on the world’s major deserts, away from any population centered. It was speculated they were chosen for the cheapness of the land, or the abundant solar.

I found it surprising that there was a dome in Antarctica. I wondered how they pulled it off, considering no one was supposed to build there. They probably started building without asking the UN for permission. And the UN did nothing.

There was also one in the middle of the ocean. It was situated on a diamond-shaped undersea – would you call it a lost continent? It was probably above water during the last ice age.



Conspiracy theorists have speculated that the world would one day be swallowed by domes. That would be a good plot for a movie, or a video game – Ha, ha.

I sat back and listened as my fellow players talked excitedly about the fun experience they would soon be having.

For whatever reason, all guests were divided by age group. Each group entered the dome via 7 equally spaced entrances.

I was in the 16-17 age-group. The other groups were 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and finally everyone above 66.

And there’s that 66 again.

I wondered why they didn’t join the 16-17 with the 18-25 groups. Then they would have exactly 6 groups.

The noise in the plane increased as teens went wild with excitement and impatience.

The plane started descending.

I started my commentary for my next video. My AI helper would edit the footage before posting.

For the benefit of my viewers, I wondered what it would be like to be in an actual MMORPG. Physically attacking monsters and being splattered with monster guts. Would it be painful? Would it be traumatizing? Countless people have pondered the question, and I will soon know the answer.

Yes I saw plenty of videos, but that’s not the same as being there.

The plane landed and taxied to a halt.

After an agonizing wait the plane door opened and we disembarked. I didn’t bring luggage since everything would be supplied by the game.

I sent my mum a text message, saying I arrived safely. She replied moments later, reminding me to meditate before going to sleep.

With our family, meditation is almost a religion. So for good or bad, I’ve been meditating all my life. That hasn’t made me calmer.

All around me fellow players chatted, excited about our new adventure.

In front of us was a large wooden sailing ship parked next to the dome. To the left of the ship were a stage and a large screen.

A group of teenagers took selfies with the dome and ship as the background.

A man in a middle ages navy uniform called out, sounding like a pirate, “Greetings me maties. You may call me Captain Haddock of the galleon Sturgeon.”

The captain waited as everyone flocked to the stage.

The screen lit up and showed cartoon images. The first image was a roughly circular continent with mountain ranges, lakes, canyons, and forests. Other illustrations showed ancient temples, treacherous gorges, eerie dungeons, draugr-infested swamps, flying palaces, and other wonders.

“Let me tell you a fictional story for your entertainment…” Captain Haddock orated. He put a pipe in his mouth and colorful bubbles drifted out.

In the beginning the world was a peaceful place where all the created races lived in harmony.

“Then the gates of the underworld opened, filling the world with nightmare creatures. These creatures had little intelligence, desiring only the taste of human flesh and the scrams of victims.

“In desperation, the nations of the world banded together to fight. Year after year, decade after decade the war raged. Finally a band of heroes stepped forth and closed the infernal gates.

“For ten thousand years the world has been free of demons and their monster underlings.

“Unfortunately, the portals to the underworld are once again opening.

“Monsters are once again repopulating long-forgotten dungeons and flooding out of nether portals and dimensional riffs.

“Will you go out there and help protect these people from unspeakable evil? Will you become the heroes of legend and bring the peace this land desperately needs?”

An image of me flashed on the screen. I looked amazing with a princely forehead tiara and royal clothes. I was surrounded by cute girls. I was a beloved king.

“Hey that’s me,” a cute girl to my right said. “I look hot.”

“No that’s me,” a guy next to the girl denied.

It seemed everyone saw themselves. I briefly wondered how they pulled that trick off.

“Board the Sturgeon and enter your rooms. Once sorted out, meet me on deck. And welcome to Incursion, the ultimate gaming experience.”

I climbed aboard the Sturgeon as another plane landed. The plane we came on was nowhere to be seen.

There was no question. This attraction was busy. A sailor handed me a rusty iron key with the room number 207. One flight of stairs up, I found my room. I inserted the key and the door creakily opened.

A moment later the key disappeared. What the hell? No one mentioned that on YouTube.

I entered the room and the door slammed shut behind me. Looking around I saw a bed, a trunk, a writing desk and chair. The desk contained a sheet of paper with instructions.

Reading, the instructions said, “Please stow ALL your equipment – yes, even *those* pieces of equipment. Starter equipment will become available once you comply.

“P.s. Those who don’t comply will walk the plank – Ha, ha.”

I undressed and removed even my underwear, making sure I didn’t look at the wall-mounted mirror. I was now naked – corrections, I wasn’t naked. I was wearing bike shorts.

I felt myself and discovered the shorts seemed part of me. Talk about rated PG. Also, what the hell?

A worry entered my mind. How do I go to the toilet?

Then I remembered, the game boards did mention this. People 18 years old and older had a setting that allowed them to not have to go to the washroom if they chose. It was on by default.

For kids 16 and 17, this option was always on for unknown reasons. Perhaps they wanted to preserve the purity of youths, or some such nonsense.

A screen popped up in my Neurolink Display.

The screen asked me if I wanted to customize my undergarments. On the list, I noticed tops were available. Being overly pudgy in all the wrong places I make a selection.

And yes, I always wore T-shirts when going to the beach and the pool. Sure, I could go for surgery, but that always felt embarrassing. I could also exercise, but I never have time for that – and was too lazy.

Speaking of exercising, I should have done some before coming.

I flipped through designs and settled on a black background with the silhouettes of white ravens. I looked in the mirror. My top and shorts were good enough for the beach.

I clicked ‘Next’.

A new Neurolink screen showed starter clothes. I got a choice between male, female, and gender-neutral clothes. There were also choices that indicated different professions, such as warrior or mage.

However, the choices were limited.

In the end I went for the gender neutral dark rogue look and crude cotton clothes appeared on the bed, along with a simple ring.

I put on the clothes and examined the ring. Glowing text appeared above the ring in my visual field.

Minor Ring of Holding (Game bound)

10 Slots, Stacks up to 30

I put on the ring. The next Neurolink Display screen appeared, showing me starter weapons. I could only choose one primary weapon and one minor weapon.

I chose a crude bow and a throwing knife.

The bow appeared on the bed, along with a quiver of 10 arrows and the knife.

Place weapons into storage

As I examined the ring, wondering how to use it, a floating window appears in front of me. It contained ten empty slots.

I held the knife. How do I place it in slot 1?

The intent triggered the action and the knife disappeared. I did the same for the bow and quiver of arrows. I now had 7 free slots left.

Now remove an item and then return it to storage

I tried to reach into the window and take the knife. It worked. I returned the knife.

The next prompt told me how to pull up my stats in my Neurolink Display.

**Base Stats**

**Level:** 1

**Next Level:** 0 of 200 XP

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** 10

**Agility:** 10

**Dexterity:** 10

**Stamina:** 10

**Vitality:** 10

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 10

**Willpower:** 10

**Spiritual Stats**

**Perception:** 10

**Spirit:** 10

**HP (hit points):** 500

**MP (magic points):** 500

**SP (spirit points):** 500

**Unspent Stat Points:** 15

I had 15 free stats. I left the unspent stat points. There was no point spending them until I knew what class to go for.

I looked at a blinking settings icon and clicked it.

It contained difficulty settings:

**Easy**

**Pain:** 0 % (Just a stat reading, no pain)

**Bad smells:** 10 % (Smells mild)

**Annoying:** 0 % (No Bugs present, wet socks won’t be squishy, etc. – all the benefits of camping but with none of the hassle)

**Scary:** 10 % (Cartoon scary, almost funny looking)

**Gore:** 10 % (Just red marks, showing where attacks have landed.)

**Medium**

**Pain:** 20 % (Hurts a bit)

**Bad smells:** 40 % (Smells bad, but you won’t barf)

**Annoying:** 20 % (Bugs are annoying.)

**Scary:** 20 % (A little scarier)

**Gore:** 20 % (Some blood.)

**Hard**

**Pain:** 40 % (Hurts more, feels like a stubbed toe and it’s gone)

**Bad smells:** 80 % (Smells bad, and you might barf)

**Annoying:** 40 % (Bugs occasionally bite. Clothes only get wet while in dampness)

**Scary:** 40 % (More scary, but no dread)

**Gore:** 40 % (More blood, mote guts.)

**No pain, No Gain**

**Pain:** 100 % (Hurts like a b!+@h. Have you ever been stabbed in the guts with a rusty knife? Now is your chance to find out how it feels)

**Bad smells:** 100 % (The real deal. Bring a barf bag)

**Annoying:** 100 % (Bugs will bite, wet feet will stay squishy, your ass will freeze, then burn, then get bitten, then get corroded by poison, the whole 9 yards)

**Scary:** 100 % (Full adrenaline, scary come to life. Extra underwear recommended)

**Gore:** 100 % (All blood, all guts. Death is messy and traumatic)

**NOTE:** No permanent physical damage will come to you should you play with 100% full immersion. No pain, no gain.

**NOTE**: Increasing immersion will increase experience and payoffs. No pain, no gain.

**NOTE**: Hidden rewards are available for those who are brave. No pain, no gain.

Apparently, the system wanted everyone to play on extreme.

The game was currently set at medium.

These settings reminded me of a fundamental of any VR game. How do you balance realism with fun? In other words, how do you keep the fun while making the experience as real as possible?

I hesitated a moment and selected **[No Pain, No Gain]**. I knew my followers expected that from me.

Warning: [No Pain, No Gain] cannot be turned off  
Do you accept  
Yes/No

The message gave me a panic attack.

I breathed deeply and considered things rationally. There’s no way world governments would approve dangerous technologies, especially when involving teenagers.

Also, how bad could it be, if the developers were obsessive about preventing me from seeing myself in the buff?

I selected ‘Yes’.

Choose Leveling Path:

1. XP Allocation (5 free Attribute Points per Level Up)

2. Essence Allocation (No Pain, No Gain)

The first option was straight forward. But what was this second option? Unfortunately, there was no help available.

I checked the Internet. Unfortunately, it was no help.

I contemplated the choices. The second was more in line with the No Pain, No Gain theme. It was in the name.

As Grammy liked saying, “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

After a moment of hesitation I chose option 2.

Warning: Once set, option cannot be changed.

**Automatic skill use:** Off (Must be manually performed)

**Automatic magic use:** Off (Must be manually cast)

Confirm  
Yes/No

Again I hesitated a bit. How do you manually cast a spell? Screw it. This was just a game.

I selected ‘Yes’.

You are required to use our proprietary AI  
for your content streaming

Distribution of Knowledge of Essence Cultivation,   
as well as all activities associated with it  
is strictly forbidden.

You must agree to terms to proceed.

Please read and sign

I skimmed through the 13 pages of legalese. It was all standard stuff, and smaller than the 666-page document for the game I originally signed. Also, it only applied to the beta version of the game, which would end in the spring (March) equinox.

So I signed.

I then clicked on the button to install the required assistant service into my Neurolink.

A popup appeared requesting access to my media channels. I gave permission. I hadn’t realized I had so many channels. Whatever...

Now playing in 100 % immersion (No pain, no gain)

Adjusting stats…Stats adjusted

**Stats**

**Level:** F-Rank 1

**Raw Essence:** 152 EP

**Refined Essence:** 0 of 200 EP

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** 1

**Agility:** 2

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** 2

**Vitality:** 6

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 21

**Willpower:** 23

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 27

**Perception:** 24

**HP (hit points):** 600 of 600

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

My stats had been auto allocated. This raised several questions. First, how did they allocate attribute points?

Second, how come I had so much raw EP? I was just setting my character now.

My physical stats reflected my real-world stats of **[Strength]**, **[Agility]** and **[Stamina]**. They probably came from my Neurolink, since it could track multiple biological markers.

I guessed **[Dexterity]** made sense also. After all, it took a great deal of finger control and hand-eye coordination to play video games. Especially when playing on extreme modes.

And why was everything in **[squared brackets]**?

As for my mental and spiritual stats, apparently the system thought I was smart.

Select Name

I said, “Raven Solarsmith.”

Why Raven Solarsmith? It’s because Solarsmith was an awesome name. As for Raven, it represented the opposite of my last name – a mysterious bird that was slightly sinister. It was a messenger from Beyond.

Then there was the Simpson’s Halloween episode of the Raven.

In short, it was a cool name that I loved using when gaming.

An icon started flashing and I clicked on it.

Money Exchange – Can buy and sell Gold here

Current exchange rate 1 Silver = 1 Dollar US

Service charge of 6.66%

Another icon flashed. It was the Marketplace icon. I clicked on it and it showed the marketplace.

Marketplace – Service fee for all transactions – 6.66%

Additional fees charged when out of town

Additional fees charged when in battle

The final icon was for Auctions.

Auctions – Service fee for all sales – 6.66%

Additional fees charged when out of town

Additional fees charged when in battle

That figures. The best time to charge is when your customer needs something the most.

I quickly scanned through the items and felt the urge to buy equipment. I wasn’t surprised about the pay to win aspect. However, I had it in writing that all quests could be completed without needing to buy special equipment.

Did I want to buy gold? No, I decided. That would ruin the experience.

I closed that tab and the final message showed.

Welcome to the future of your world

Let the Incursion Begin

I dismissed the ominous dialog and the cabin door opened. Apparently setup was complete. For a moment I wondered why I wasn’t asked for a class, but assumed that came later, after fulfilling various quests.

I should Google the answer - Later.

I followed the others and climbed to the ship deck. Instead of the arid lands of Australia’s Outback, I was greeted by a view of the ocean. The air was salty and damp.

Above, birds flew among the clouds and … Were those floating islands in the sky? They looked amazing. I wished I had my own island.

To the ship right (Starboard) was the shore less than 100 m away.

As I admired the view, a notification popped up.

You may now stream your game play

Cool. So I started my commentary, knowing my AI assistant would edit as needed.

A teen girl asked, “Why is it called the poop deck?”

Her friend replied, “Because all those birds love pooping on the deck,” and laughed.

“Can we own a floating island?” I asked, pointing at the island.

“Absolutely,” Captain Haddock replied. “A small, ½ hectare island costs 80 million golds, a 1-hectare island is 100, a 2-hectare island is 120, and so on.

“For the record, 100 copper equals 1 silver and 100 silver equals 1 gold. And of course, 1 silver is pegged at 1 Dollar US.

“In other words, that island costs over 8 billion US Dollars, since it looks small.

“87 islands have already been sold to nameless billionaires and people of power. Many more are on the waiting list.”

Holy cow that was one impressive pay wall. There were 437 billionaires who could afford it. However, why would people spend money on a game asset…Skip that. People have already spent billions on NFTs, or non-fungible tokens. And most of the stuff was crap. This didn’t seem any different.

Actually, this was better, since it would make an excellent retirement home.

“Don’t worry everyone,” the captain added. “Everything can be obtained through adventuring. Then you can sell your gold for Earth currency.”

I sighed. None of this made any sense. Using crypto currency in games wasn’t new, and neither was pay to win. However, could they make a profit with their scheme? Although with the islands, they clearly have.

The other players got excited, and debate started as to how much actual money they could make playing the game.

We continued sailing as more passengers arrived on deck.

Eventually the captain called, “Greetings adventurers. Welcome to the continent of Avaria, where you will start your journey to greatness…”

“How do we pee?” a teenage girl asked. She was cute, which meant she had someone. I was unfortunately right.

“This game is PG for kids 16 and 17,” Haddock replied. “You don’t need to worry about that, even if your settings are on No Pain, No Gain. The technical term is System Fuckery.”

“What happens if we travel too far away?” I asked.

Just then an enormous creature resembling a Dune worm shot out of the ocean and breached like a whale. The ship rocked as the wake hit it.

“That’s the leviathan,” Haddock replied. “It will attack anyone who sails beyond the continental shelf. It can’t reach us here since the water is too shallow. It would just beach.

“The fisher folk will be pleased. It renews life in the ocean every time it breaches, and it hasn’t been seen in years. Then again no one has been foolish enough to sail past the shelf.”

No doubt there were similar flight restrictions. The devs wouldn’t want people crashing out of the sandbox, even if that sandbox was huge. There were many ways to solve the out-of-bounds issue without affecting user experience.

“The world is an amazing place, full of wonders and magic, but also dangers. It’s okay to rely on tutorials from other players. However, if you get wrapped up in the tutorials, you may miss the fun.

“Also, take the time to stop and admire the scenery.” The captain continued talking for another five minutes.

We approached the mouth of a river and began sailing up it. The river was rather wide and slow moving. The banks were steep, treacherous and at least 30 meters high, with land at both cliff bases.

Other ships and boats passed us. They probably held players leaving the dome, and fishing vessels.

“This is called the Wayfarer’s way,” the captain explained. “This river connects what is to what will be.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” A dark-skinned beauty asked. I think she was worth dating.

“That is unfortunately something I can’t tell you now,” Haddock replied with a sad smile. “Get strong. Prepare for…”

Haddock was interrupted by a deafening crash of lighting from out of the blue sky.

I and half the people aboard nearly jumped out of our skins.

“What the hell was that?” someone in the crowd asked.

“Just ignore it,” Haddock advised. Never the less, his face looked pale. “Stuff like that happens all the time. And now back to the matters at hand.

“It’s almost 8:00AM. We will be docking at Newbie City shortly. Explore the city and complete a few quests. Then find an inn, and have fun.”

“But we don’t have money,” a teen complained.

“That’s why you do quests,” the captain replied with a laugh. “This is a game after all.

“Or you can use the currency exchange option. There is no exchange tax aboard this ship. The same is true for the marketplace and auction. You have until disembarking time.”

The captain then explained how to buy gold.

We slowly sailed up the river for another ten minutes. Then we arrived at Newbie City. Impressive stone bridges crossed over the river.

The river flared out into an artificial lagoon. On the right side were docks.

Both banks had 30-meter stone walls, covering the raw cliffs. The opposite wall had a tunnel with draining water.

As I watched, people ran out on the tunnel and along the bank at the base of the wall. They were being chased by some sort of sea reptiles.

A moment later archers began firing arrows at the monsters.

I was so entranced by the sight that I almost didn’t hear Haddock talking.

“For those playing No Pain, No Gain, I have bad news. Upon death, you will lose all equipment that is not soul, or game bound. Second, you will suffer resurrection sickness. Third, you will lose all your raw **[Essence]**.”

“What is resurrection sickness?” A girl asked. I think her name was Pamela. Above her head was the name Viking Lily. That was a cute name, just like her.

“Resurrection sickness will make you feel nauseous, dizzy and weak. Don’t worry. You will respawn at the pier or any cathedral you register with.

“Fourth, for those who chose **[Essence]** Allocation as a leveling strategy, you need to reserve plenty of time for Cultivation.

“Fifth,” the captain began.

“Hold it,” I shouted. “You didn’t explain what Cultivation is.”

“I’m sorry young one but that’s information you must find out on your own,” Captain Haddock said, continuing his speech.

“Fifth, you can use your free XP or Essence as a form of currency.

“It’s also required for advanced quests and for leaving the beginner zone.

“Finally, for those playing No Pain, No Gain, you will not be allowed to create a new character. The only time you will be allowed to turn it off is now.

“I’m required to tell you, if you switch back now you will be given an epic piece of loot.”

The captain stopped speaking, and everyone started speaking at the same time.

Someone named Eric the Red said to his companion, “This sounds suspicious. Why are they bribing us to get off No Pain, No Gain?”

Eric was an attractive Black American-football-player type who looked popular with everyone. By contrast I had pasty vampire-pale skin, which always made me feel self-conscious.

“I would take it,” a cute Indian girl named Artemis said. “I got a paper cut once. I don’t see how feeling that again constitutes fun.”

“That’s true,” teen boy Evelyn agreed. Don’t know what his heritage is. My Neurolink informed me he was Indigenous to North America. “On the other hand, we can always switch if necessary.”

The ship jerked as it came to a halt. Crew let down a gangplank.

The captain called out, silencing the discussion, “I personally play on No Pain, No Gain, but the choice is yours.

“Good luck with your adventuring and above all have fun.”

A white light encompassed the captain and he faded from view. Was he an angel? I got that impression. Cool.

It was time for adventure.

As I got off the ship, I was hit by the stench of raw fish and fish guts.

“Oh man this place stinks,” a girl complained.

“It isn’t bad,” another girl replied.

“That’s because you’re playing on easy,” a boy pointed out. “Increase your settings. It will be more fun.”

“Until you have to deal with mosquitoes and squishy feet,” a third girl grumbled. “No thanks.”

I left the group as they bantered about the value of knowing how smelly fish could get.

All around me people were busy going about their business.

There it was. Elves, Dwarves, Cat People, someone who looked like a green wooly bear in a pair of shorts and a Bermuda shirt, and other non-human races were everywhere.

The Human population was dominated by players, as defined by the [Player] signs above their heads.

I found it odd that the game needed to explicitly add NPC above the heads of locals.

So far I only had glowing reviews for the game.

Then I saw it. In front of me was the Adventurer’s guild hall. This was a huge three-story building with a wooden sign.

Within, the guild was buzzing with activity. And it was loud.

Half the humans were Players. They ranged from teens like me to middle-aged people.

I threaded through tables with people drinking ale and eating large meals.

To the back was a desk with clerks.

For a moment I felt reluctant to approach. Then I remembered these people were NPCs. That’s right. They were all computer-generated characters, designed specifically to entertain me.

I stepped in line and waited. At the same time, I admired a hot serving girl busy cleaning a table. I was sure this game was popular for its adult entertainment. However, I knew that was forbidden to me. I sighed and turned away.

Finally, it was my turn.

“How may I help you sir?” the receptionist asked. She was an attractive young woman with bright green hair and green eyes. She was an elf. Above her head was the name ‘Cybil (NPC)’.

“I would like to register as an adventurer,” I said.

“No problem,” Cybil said. “Just place your hand on this crystal ball.”

I did and the ball glowed with swirling areas of black and white. That was weird. How was it possible for an object to give out black light, one that cast shadows? Then I remembered this was a VR simulation.

“Your two strongest affinities are **[Light]** and **[Darkness]**,” Leah explained. “That is most unusual.”

“Does that mean I am evil?” I asked.

“Darkness and evil is not the same thing,” Cybil said. “Evil is not a fundamental force, but just a perspective onto reality. Darkness is a force, just like Light. Sorry, I’m not the best one to explain. I know only the basics.”

“What defines affinity?” I asked.

“It’s personality,” Leah replied. “It doesn’t mean you can’t use other types of magic. As a matter of fact, you affinity for all magic is rather high. This reading just means that **[Light]** and **[Darkness]** will reflect your path in life.

“Your **[Dexterity]** is quite high. That indicates you are proficient with your hands.

“Your mental and spiritual stats are most impressive. This must be your heritage as a Solarsmith.”

I loved the fact that Leah attributed my stats to my parentage. It made me feel important, even though this was just a game and Leah was just an NPC. This game was awesome.

“Here is your Adventurer’s badge.

“You can find the job boards there. They are organized according to your Rank. You may only accept requests that are your Rank or lower. Just remove the requests from the board and bring them here.

“Also, there is a big difference between a Level-1 quest and a Level-10 quest, even though they are both F-Rank.

“This will become less important as you gain experience and unique abilities.

“Your badge will act as your wallet, so you don’t need to handle money directly.

“It will also manage your quests. Do you have any questions?”

“No Leah and thank you,” I said with a smile and took my badge.

Adventurer’s Badge

Raven Solarsmith, F-Rank 1

Would you like to soul bind

Yes/No

I selected ‘Yes’.

I jerked backwards as I felt as if the badge was getting sucked into me. A moment later the feeling was gone. That was freaky.

I headed for the F-Rank boards. And I discovered there were only F-Rank quests. That was not surprising. This was a tutorial city.

The quests were standard, including killing rats and other vermin, finding cats, harvesting herbs, guard duty, baby sitting, and house cleaning.

The quests were organized according to Level.

I paused to consider what to do. For a person who could barely run half a block, or could barely do 1 pushup, fighting monsters was definitely not an option.

I selected ‘deliver a package’. This was perfect for me since it allowed me to explore, get exercise and make money. 15 silver to be precise.

I also selected ‘harvest herbs’ (5 silver).

Two teens I recognize approached the board. Above the first’s head was the text: Harold.

Harold looked like a basketball player. The other was Barry. He too was athletic.

They selected the rat quest. I wasn’t surprised.

I decided to forego the rat quest, since my **[Strength]** and **[Agility]** were crap. I was not ready to die surrounded by rats the size of Dobermans.

On the other hand, what if I trained my bow and got some throwing knives? With my high **[Dexterity]**, that shouldn’t be a problem, unless, of course, I was too weak to actually throw knives or draw a bow.

I had to remember. The object of this game was to never die.

“Barry, how much is an Inn room for the night?” Harold asked.

“According to GameInsight.com, the Rusty Bucket is 85 silver per night per room,” Barry replied.

That reminded me. I needed at least 200-silver for today, to cover food and lodging, or around 200$ US.

Also, did I have a map?

The thought caused the map to appear in my Neurolink Display. Unfortunately, the map was covered with the Fog of War, except where I just travelled.

I looked at my game-bound storage ring and lamented the fact it was tiny. I would lose everything not in the ring when I died. Everything except the rags I was currently wearing.

That was a funny thing to say. Only gamers talked about dying as a daily occurrence or dying every five minutes.

But off course, the best gamers never died. That was a lie. Perhaps I should recreate my character when I died – except I couldn’t. Not for this game.

I got to the counter and received a map, some quest items, and some last-minute advice.

I stepped out of the guild hall with 5 quest items and 8 hours to complete them, unless I wanted to sleep on the street.

I looked at the paper map. The paper map disintegrated and my mental map updated. I manually plotted a shortest path to all 10 delivery points, even though I could have gotten my AI to do it.

Getting my bearings, I started running.

Holy cow I can run. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. 30 seconds later my lungs were burning.

I pulled up my heart rate and blood pressure stats and tried to push myself. My only reward was a spiked heart rate and blood pressure. Not to mention that now I was just exhausted.

To hell with it, I said. I’m not a health nut. Walking is good enough for me.

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In the Alternate Reality of Plana Terra (Flat Earth)

- There has always been a debate  
 as to whether the world is round or flat.  
 The truth is both worlds exist, and countless more besides. -

“Your Majesty, the people in the Australian Incursion Point have almost all gotten used to their roles as NPCs,” Royal Wizard Baldric announced as he kneeled in front of his king in the royal audience chamber.

“The number of issues has dropped significantly.

“Also, some of the D-rank guests are portalling to our kingdom.”

“Good work Wizard Baldric,” the king boomed happily. “I will make a public announcement next Saturday at 10:00 AM regarding the coming adventurers. Speaking of adventurers, what is my foolish youngest daughter doing?”

“She’s training with the guards, Majesty,” Baldric replied. “She still wants to be an adventurer and collect **[Essence]** like commoners.

“I don’t understand. Why would she put herself in danger, when royalty can absorb **[Essence]** directly from the Royal Cultivation Chambers?”

“That’s why I call her foolish,” the king admitted with a sigh. “Speaking of foolish girls, how are preparations for Annie’s Coming of Age celebration going?”

“Terribly,” the queen complained. “Two years is barely enough time to organize invitations for all our guests from our neighboring countries.”

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I finally finished all my tasks, and was now 185 silvers, and 27 copper richer. That was much less than what I was hoping for. On the other hand, I could now rent a room for the night. And eat. I was so busy I forgot about lunch.

Or should I go to the Adventurer’s guild and find out about training? For a moment I hesitated. I was exhausted and considered postponing training until morning.

Then I remembered I was playing a video game. There was no time for being lazy.

So I headed for the guild hall. Simple inquiries told me there were practice dummies and targets in the back. That’s where I went.

I took my bow and fired, and missed. The arrow hit the ground 5 feet from me. I was not strong enough to reach the target. I tried with my throwing knife and get the same result. The knife landed short of the target.

By now it was getting dark. So, I headed for the nearest inn.

Stepping through the doors I found the usual crowd. Going to the bar, I waited for the tender.

“What can I do for you?” the tender asked.

“I would like a room for the night, as well as dinner and ale,” I replied.

“That will be 95 silvers for the room,” the tender replied. “Just grab a table for the dinner.”

I paid the money and received a key for room 213. Spotting a free table in the corner, I headed for it and sat down.

I sat back and relaxed, allowing the exhaustion of the day to wash over me.

Then I noticed a fine drizzle. It was at the edge of perception[[1]](#footnote-1). That was not surprising. I’ve seen it all my life, especially when my nerves were tired, and I was relaxing.

Then I started seeing more. Around people I saw faint auras hugging their bodies like a second skin. I too had such an aura. The room had swirling colors. Just like the drizzle, the auras and mist were at the edge of perception. I was sure it was meaningless but it was pleasant enough to watch.

I also noticed the NPCs tended to have the brightest auras.

The waitress finally arrived. “What will you have Hun?”

“I’ll have the house special and some ale please,” I replied.

“Right away dear,” she said and left. Moments later she came back with a beer glass filled with beer.

I tasted the beer and discovered that it was…Non-alcoholic. It figured.

So, I sat back and drank my fake beer and listened to people having a good time.

Finally, dinner came. It’s a plate full of meat covered in gravy, potatoes and vegetables.

I idly wondered if I was eating virtual food. I dismissed that idea. There was no way they would do that. Nevertheless, the food was good and filling.

I squared my tab and head up. It was time to go to bed.

But first I needed to go the little boy’s room. Then I remembered. I couldn’t go.

So, I entered my room, locked it and sat on my bed.

What did the captain say about cultivating? He didn’t say anything.

I sat on the bed cross-legged. It was time for my usual meditation. I closed my eyes and focused on my body and began meditating.

Slowly everything became quiet.

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Then I felt a ball of raw untamed energy at the base of my spine, swirling around my tailbone. It resembled a coiled snake ready to strike.

I had the urge to do something with my energy. I then remembered my training. Let your body guide you. I left the energy alone and continued observing.

Next I noticed a churning ball of something around my pelvis. It was earthy and erotic. It was too fine to be called matter and too crude to be called energy. It was the source of my **[Strength]** and it was rather weak.

I was so startled that I pop out of my meditation, and everything disappeared. Apparently, the game system was using the ancient system of Chakras and Meridians.

But how was that even possible? It was not my Neurolink. For some reason my Neurolink was currently disabled.

None of this made any sense. And off course, this was all covered under the **NDA**. So, there was no help available.

That was just weird. Why did my Neurolink auto-disable? That was a question for another time.

Taking a deep breath, I calmed myself down and tried again.

Again, I saw the coiled energy around my tailbone.

Again, I saw my **[Strength]** Chakra.

Knowing where to look, I checked out my stomach. There was a ball of something there as well. This one was watery and was like the sea. This was my **[Agility]** Chakra.

Cursing myself for jumping the gun, I relaxed again and just observed.

The next ball I see was at my solar plexus. Not surprisingly it was fiery. This was my **[Stamina]**.

Of course, I saw another ball at my heart. It pulsed with…It was rather feminine and pulsed with love. It was my **[Vitality]**.

For a moment I enjoyed the feeling.

Then I noticed two balls on the palms of both my hands. There was an illusionary quality to it. This was my **[Dexterity]**. Looking closer, I saw the left was Feminine and the right was Masculine.

The throat was next. This was windy and was my **[Willpower]**. And it was Masculine.

My forehead was my **[Mind]** and it was Masculine.

Centered between my eyes was my **[Perception]**. I saw that it was Feminine. No pun intended.

Finally, I saw an energy ball above my head. It represented my **[Spirit]** attribute and was Feminine.

I continued to observe.

Then I saw pathways flowing throughout my body. They resembled arteries and veins and covered my entire body. More than that, there appeared to be a body double.

The chakras were loosely coupled to this body double. There was a trickle of energy/substance flowing between the two. In a word, the flow seemed anemic.

The Chakras were like the corpus callosum, linking the two bodies.

I focused on my body double and saw it radiating a soft glow that extended slightly outside my physical body.

Slowly as I watched, I started to get a feeling for how strong my chakras were.

Realization came to me. I could strengthen my attributes using my Raw **[Essence]**, currently coiled around my tailbone.

I focused on my raw **[Essence]** at the base of my spine and then my **[Strength]** chakra. Like a snake the energy flowed upwards and slowly entered the chakra.

The chakra absorbed the **[Essence]** like a sponge and intensified.

I felt excited as I realized I just leveled my **[Strength**]. I did it one more with **[Strength]**.

Unfortunately, I had insufficient raw **[Essence]** to do more.

So, I decided to meditate.

I focused my attention on my surroundings. I saw the drizzle and the swirling colors. Ever so slowly my aura seemed to absorb the swirling energies surrounding me, or should I say **[Essence]**?

The **[Essence]** pulsated in time with my breathing.

Breathe in. Absorb **[Essence]**.

Breathe out. Push **[Essence]** downwards to my tailbone.

I watch the coiled serpent that was my raw **[Essence]**.

It was peaceful and I enjoyed the experience.

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-- Friday, June 11, 7:24 AM --

As I Cultivated, I realized I had the intense need to pee.

I opened my eyes and noticed that it was morning.

Looking down, I discovered that I was naked. Why did that happen?

Feeling embarrassed, I got up and headed for the washroom.

As I stepped into the washroom, I discovered that my System-issued underwear was back on. Also, I no longer needed to pee.

Also, my Neurolink was back on again.

I looked up my stats. Yes, my meditation did something. I was able to raise my strength - Freaky.

**Stats**

**Level:** F-Rank 1

**Raw Essence:** 57

**Refined Essence:** 100 of 200

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** 1 => 3

**Agility:** 2

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** 2

**Vitality:** 6

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 17

**Willpower:** 16

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 19

**Perception:** 15

**HP (hit points):** 600 of 600

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

That was freaky. I couldn’t believe I spent the whole night meditating. And I was not tired or sore.

Also, my **[Essence]** Points had increased by 5 during the night.

I considered calling my parents, but it was 10:27PM for them. They were probably sleeping. Instead, I sent them a text message, telling them I was having fun.

I headed downstairs and had a quick breakfast and headed for the training area.

This time my arrow hits the target and fell. There was no damage.

I returned to the main hall and went to one of the clerks.

“Hi. I’m Raven. My stats are rather skewed. Can I get some advice on how to proceed as an adventurer?”

Did you see that? Some men *do* ask for directions. Okay so it took a day for me to do so, but still, I did it.

“Haven’t your parents given you tutors?” the clerk asked, surprised.

That was an odd response.

That was right. The Solarsmith family was mentioned before.

*‘For all my followers, I really encourage you to play this game. Better yet, get the yearly membership. It is unbelievably immersive.*

*‘And thank you Blenda Bloodborn for becoming a premium member. I appreciate it.’*

“When I was 5 years old, something happened to me and I was transported to a faraway land,” I replied. “A loving couple found me and raised me as their own. The only thing I remember is my name.”

“You poor thing,” Jamie the clerk sympathized. “Unfortunately, I can’t help you reunite with your family.

“Please wait here. I’ll speak to the guild master.”

A player approached. I remembered seeing him on the ship. Eric the Red was decked out in leather armor and had a broad sword across his back. It seemed he was busy yesterday.

“How come you have such a cool quest line?” Eric asked, sounding jealous.

“Don’t feel bad,” I said. “I’m sure you will get other amazing quest lines. By the way, I’m playing No Pain, No Gain.”

“I am too,” Eric objected. “How many monsters have you vanquished?”

“None unfortunately,” I replied. “My physical stats are crap. By the way, I have a gaming YouTube channel called Raven Solarsmith. My AI Assistant uploads every night.”

“Okay. I’ll look it up,” Eric replied.

The clerk returned with another person.

“Young Master, we have found a trainer for you,” the clerk said, indicating a wizardly looking elfin man.

“I am Taranis Luftwing,” Taranis said. “Please give me access to your stats Master Solarsmith.”

I said, “OK.”

“Your mental and spiritual stats are impressive for a teenager, especially one raised by strangers,” Taranis said with a twinkle in his eye. “Are you studying wizardry or sorcery?”

“Where I come from, something blocks all forms of magic,” I said. “I know nothing about the subject.”

“Please follow me Master Solarsmith,” the man said.

“Just call me Raven. See you later Eric,” I said and follow the man.

“Wizardry focuses on the physical plane and primarily uses **[Willpower]** and **[Mind]**,” Taranis said as we walk. “Sorcery focuses on the spiritual and uses **[Spirit]** and **[Perception]**.

“To learn Wizardry, you will need to study your own physical body and its chakra system and meridians. As well as Runes and spell arrays.

“This becomes possible when enough Essence is allocated so Mind, Willpower, and Perception become at least 15.”

We arrived at the training grounds.

“Are you familiar with your chakra system?”

“I’ve been meditating all my life,” I replied. “Last night I actually saw these chakras and meridians for the first time. It was so exciting I literally spent all night observing.

“I was even able to raise my **[Strength]** from 1 to 3. Then I discovered I had increased my EP by 5 during the night. I don’t know where I got my previous 152 EP from.”

“You got it from your years of Cultivating and some came from when you were born,” Taranis explained. “Unless you have access to a Cultivation Chamber, you can only absorb tiny quantities of natural **[Essence]** through normal Cultivation. Although that will advance as you progress.

“Within the port city of Newbie, an F-Rank cultivator can expect to gain about 1 EP per hour. What city were you raised in?”

“Dublin, Ireland,” I replied.

“I bet you would be lucky to absorb 1 EP every 6 hours.”

“Now we each have 10 chakras, corresponding to our 9 attributes.”

Taranis pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

|  |
| --- |
| **Chakra Location Element Color** |
| * **Body**   + Strength (M) Pelvis Earth Brown   + Agility (F) Stomach Water Blue   + Dexterity (MF) 2 Hands Illusion Swirling Colors   + Stamina (M) Solar Plexus Fire Red   + Vitality (F) Heart Life Pink * **Mind**   + Willpower (M) Throat Air Green   + Mind (M) Forehead Mind Golden Yellow * **Spirit**   + Perception (F) Eyes Light White   + Spirit (F) Above Head Darkness Black |

This was familiar.

“These are the sources of your abilities. Strengthening these will improve your attributes. This is done through training and the application of **[Essence]**, as you saw last night.

“Here is a cheat sheet for how much **[Essence]** you need to proceed for F-Rank.”

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| **EP cost** | 100 | 200 | 300 | 400 | 500 | 600 | 700 | 800 | 900 | 1000 |
|  | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Attribute Level** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| **Attribute Cost** | 20 | 40 | 60 | 80 | 100 | 120 | 140 | 160 | 180 | 200 |
|  | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Average Essence per Monster** | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 | 80 | 90 | 100 |

“As you see, to get to level 2, you need to have allocated 200 EP to your various Chakras. And to increase an Attribute from 2 to 3, you need 60.

“Killing 10 E-2 monsters will you the 200 EP to level.

“Since you now have the basics, let’s do an exercise.”

Taranis raised his hand, palm up.

“Look at this and tell me what you see. Don’t worry if you see nothing at first. Focus on your Mind Chakra while visualizing.”

Where was my mind chakra? That was right. It was in my forehead. I focused on his hand.

Yup, at first, I saw nothing. Fighting impatience, I focused on my breathing and wrestled with my mind. Slowly my mind calmed down.

Then I saw a multi-dimensional swirling ball. It had an incredible internal structure. Yet I saw immediately that this represented Fire. But there was more.

I saw fire in all its forms, from a candle flame to the fiery blast of a rocket to a volcanic eruption.

“I see it,” I said. “But it seems to more…” I trailed off, not sure what to say.

“Excellent work,” Taranis praised. “This is the archetype for fire. As such, it is only visible to you because of your high **[Mind]** level.

“All things in reality are interconnected. For now, ignore the multitude of connections. They will just confuse you and will not have practical value for now.

“Try to visualize fire in all its aspects. Its heat, its warmth, color, fiery nature and so on. What is fire but an elemental force expressing through matter…”

I tried to reproduce the concept of Fire in my mind. Time seemed to slow as I settled into meditation.

Then the Rune materialized in front of me.

“Good job,” Taranis praised.

“To activate this rune, you need to draw your Manna from your stomach area. This area will look to you like a void. Take your time.”

I focused on my stomach. At first I saw nothing.

I focused on my breathing and paid attention to my stomach. Time passed. Then I saw what appeared to be an emptiness like a void. I meditated on that void.

Then from the void I saw what appeared to be a vortex of pure energy.

“I can see it,” I said excitedly. Immediately the energy disappeared.

“Calm down,” Taranis said with a smile.

I did as instructed and the energy reappeared.

“Energy is infinite. However, our capacity to draw is finite. Our manna pool is defined by our **[Mind]** and regeneration is defined by **[Willpower]**.

“Now visualize the energy flowing through your channels and out of you and into the Rune. Be warned. Drawing too much can have disastrous effects.”

I visualized the energy flowing through my channels. At first nothing happened.

So, I tried to imagine more power flowing through my channels and into the Rune.

Suddenly the Fire Rune exploded with blinding light and heat.

Startled I jerked back, and the light disappeared.

“Good job,” Taranis praised. “As you see, you drew too much power. I would guess at least 300 Manna.

“To launch the fireball, you need the Launch Rune.”

Taranis dispelled his fireball, and another rune appeared.

I focused on the concept of projectiles and pushing, at the same time looking at Taranis’ Rune.

Projectiles were familiar to me, from thrown rocks to bullets to rail guns and rockets. The Rune was the embodiment of the concept of projectiles.

The Rune slowly materialized as I duplicated what I saw.

“Now line up the two Runes,” Taranis said, demonstrating.

Slowly I did as instructed, causing the Runes to line up.

“Now feed manna into the array. When you are finished, let go.”

Taranis’ fireball shot from his hand and hit the target. The target registered 27 HP damage.

I followed suit and got similar results.

“To be practical, you will need to compress the fireball. To do this, you need the Compress Rune. How much you compress is controlled by your intent.”

Again I went through the tedious process of understanding the concept embodied by the Rune.

Taranis slowly formed the three runes and channeled manna into the Runes. This launched the fireball, registering 200 HP of damage.

“To summarize, the trick is to create the array of runes, then feed manna into the array,” Taranis explained.

“Just train on this one spell. When the time came, I will give you more training. As for Wizard training, that will come later.

“Oh, and one more piece of advice, you might want to use a glaive or halberd. It will mesh well with your high **[Dexterity]** and low **[Strength]**, **[Agility]** and **[Stamina]**.”

Taranis smiled at me and then said, “See you next time, Luke Solarsmith.”

Taranis vanished before I could respond. How the hell did he know my real name?

That was freaky. Damn. Was this place real? Were these people real?

Sure the game knew who I was, but why would it break immersion by using my real name?

Just then Eric walked up to me. Apparently, he was watching me the entire time.

“So that is wizard training,” Eric marveled. “I couldn’t follow what you were doing, but the fireballs were amazing.”

“Were you waiting for me?” I asked, surprised. “Weren’t you bored watching?”

“It was less than half an hour,” Eric said, shrugging. “It was entertaining. I saw something few people who played this game ever saw.”

“I need to practice or I’ll forget,” I said. “Fire, Compress and Launch,” I slowly said as I performed each action one at a time.

The fireball hit the target.

“Do you want training?” I asked as I tried again. Fire, Compress, Launch…

“No way,” Eric objected. “It seems like too much trouble, especially when I can just get a wizard to join my team.”

“That was over a minute,” I grumbled. “I need to reduce the formation, charge and launch time, or it will be useless in battle,” I said. “I need to get a glaive and then train with it.”

“Come, I know a good shop,” Eric offered. “The rest of my team is there. I had to come here to get some quests.”

“Lead the way my good man,” I said and follow Eric.

I visual the runes in my mind as we walk, but don’t activate them. Instead I dispersed the runes and tried again.

“How come you told that NPC your real name?” Eric asked.

“I didn’t,” I replied. “I have no idea how he knew my real name is Luke. The more I play this game, the weirder it gets.”

“Like the fact we can’t get naked?” Eric asked with a chuckle.

I did get naked, but I don’t mention that.

“Or the fact that we don’t pee, even though we eat and drink,” I added.

A short walk later and we arrived at an outfitting store.

I stepped in and saw a sign saying, ‘all storage devices are disabled while in the store. To emphasize the fact I got a Neurolink message.

All storage devices disabled

“How may I help you?” the clerk asked.

“I need a glaive or halberd, one that is light,” I replied.

“Please follow me and I’ll show you my selection,” the clerk said.

“Eric, what took you so long?” the Artemis girl I saw previously asked. What was her real name? It was Simone. I looked at the name ‘Artemis One-Shot (Player)’ hovering over her head.

“I was watching a wizard get trained to cast spells,” Eric said. “It was entertaining.”

In the meantime, I looked over the weapons the clerk showed me.

“You can practice in the back to get a feel,” the clerk suggested.

I selected several weapons that I could afford and went to the indicated location.

One by one I practiced with the pole weapons on the training dummy.

As I was spinning a glaive over my head, Eric, Artemis and another teen whose game name was Evelyn Graywaters entered.

“How is it?” The clerk asked.

“I like it,” I replied. “I think I’ll buy this glaive,” I said and handed the clerk the money.

I was now broke – Unless you counted 5 silver and some copper.

“Raven, this is Artemis Everworth. She is our Ranger. This is Evelyn Graywaters. He is our Cleric. I’m our leader and the manliest Barbarian you will ever meet.”

“I can believe that,” I replied with a wry smile.

“Do you belong to a party?” Eric asked.

“Nope,” I replied, wondering what he was getting at.

“The only thing we are missing is a Wizard,” Eric said. “How would you like to join? I just have to warn you. Artemis is my eye candy.”

“In this game, that’s all you get,” Artemis joked.

“Not even that,” Eric said sadly.

“You should be grateful to the System,” Evelyn scolded. “It is protecting you from great sin.”

“I like your group,” I said with a laugh. “You are all into your roles. I must warn you. I only know one spell, and I haven’t mastered it yet. I can’t use it in battle. Also, my physical stats are crap.”

“Everyone knows magic users are all squishy,” Eric said with a booming laugh. “Also, that wizard Taranis who was tutoring you seems to be quite good.

“Artemis, Evelyn, I want you to meet Raven Solarsmith. I met him at the guild hall. According to a wizard name Taranis, Raven is super smart.”

“If you mean Great Wizard Taranis Luftwing, then you are blessed indeed. He only trains high nobility. Are you high nobility?” the clerk asked.

“Sorry,” I said. “I have amnesia. I am currently travelling to find my past.”

“Sweet,” Eric exclaimed. “Now that’s a great back story. Now I definitely want you.”

“I’m happy to join,” I said.

You are invited to Deep Divers

Do you accept?

Yes/No

I selected ‘Yes.’

“Come, let’s have lunch and then we’ll go questing,” Eric suggested, and everyone followed him out of the store.

“You all go eat,” I said. “I’m going to the guild hall to train. I want to make sure I can hit something with my new glaive. And practice my fireball spell.”

That was true. More importantly, I didn’t have enough money for lunch. It didn’t matter. I could definitely lose some weight.

“Okay Raven,” Eric said. “We will see you there.”

I ran off to the guild hall with my glaive in hand. As I ran, I noticed my stamina had definitely improved, a little, or not.

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Wishing I had a stamina potion, I switched back to throwing fireballs.

The gang arrived and I said, “It takes me 20 seconds to shoot a fireball. I figure I can start off with a fireball, and then continue the fight with my glaive.”

“You shouldn’t worry too much about that,” Eric advised with a laugh. “Remember, I am the tank. It’s my job to protect you squishy types.”

“In that case, I’m ready to go,” I said.

“You’re in luck,” Eric said. “We didn’t get to finish the rat quest yesterday. We can do that now.”

We headed out.

“World renowned wizard Raven Solarsmith, conqueror of rats,” I said. “By the way, how did you all get classes?”

“Artemis, Evelyn and I just got to choose, just after setting difficulty,” Eric replied.

“The System already knew Eric was a barbarian. It just acknowledged the truth,” Artemis explained.

“What difficulty did you select?” I asked.

“Artemis and Evelyn are both on Easy,” Eric said. “I’m on No Pain, No Gain, since I’m a barbarian.”

“Did it ask to choose between **[XP]** Allocation and **[Essence]** Allocation?” I asked.

“Nope,” Eric said. “Don’t know what that means.”

An icon appeared, saying that last sentence was censored. Weird…

“I told Eric, but for the record I am a content creator. I use my AI assistant to create daily episodes of approximately 1 hour, as well as snippets of around 1 minute. My channel name is Gaming with Raven,” I explained.

We arrived at massive steel doors built against a stone building.

“It’s time for us to dive deep boys and girls. Woo-Hoo,” Eric screamed.

He touched the door with an item and the doors swung inwards.

“Crap, I don’t have a torch,” I exclaimed. My fears were unfounded, as the interior was well lighted with torches burning every five meters, staggered.

We headed downwards through a well-built tunnel.

As we walked, I asked, “How does this Party thing work?”

“Party members share equally in all XP received, and automatic loot collection,” Eric explained. “We also have a party chat function.”

“XP and loot sharing only works in Newbie City,” Evelyn added.

“How long will you be staying in the game?” Eric asked.

“Until week before Labor Day weekend,” I replied. “I have to go back to school.”

“Same for us,” Eric said.

We arrived at the sewers. This was your standard disgusting sewer with knee deep sewer water.

“It doesn’t smell so bad,” Eric noted.

“If this were real life, the torches would ignite the sewer gas,” I commented. “Maybe in this game, the torches are preventing gas buildup.”

“According to the quest, the rats are just beyond that area,” Eric explained, pointing at a darkened area. “The rats have damaged the magic circuits for the lights, and the crew can’t fix them with the rats in the way.”

As I approached the darkened area, I exclaimed, “Oh my God, this smells like the outhouse of a rustic campground my parents made me go to.”

“Too bad we can’t just burn the gas away,” Eric commented in a nasal voice.

“It doesn’t smell bad,” Artemis replied.

“Easy for you to said,” Eric grumbles. “You’re playing on easy.”

“I’m a little nervous about throwing fireballs here,” I said. “It could cause an explosion.”

“That sounds like fun,” Eric said with a grin.

“As you wish our fearless leader,” I replied. “Step away from the tunnel entrance.”

“Pyro,” I said as I created the Fire Rune. “Mantic,” I said as I created the Compress Rune. “Impetus,” I said as I created the Launch Rune.

I charged the array and then said “Launch,” as I released my spell.

The fireball moved lazily in as I then rushed to the side, out of harm’s way.

“Cover your ears,” I called and did the same.

For a moment all was quiet. Then there was an explosion, causing the ground to shake.

“Dude, that was intense,” Eric exclaimed happily.

I could barely hear Eric, as I was now partially deaf.

We entered the tunnel and discovered the raw sewer smell was mixed with burnt sewer smell.

Focusing on breathing through my mouth, I slowly followed Eric into the tunnel. Glaive in hand I moved through mucky waters. I didn’t want to know what was in this water. I really didn’t.

Evelyn took out a torch, since he was the only one able to fight one-handed.

As I walked **[Essence]** flowed towards us and entered me. “Folks, I just received enough **[Essence]** to level to **[F-Rank 2]**. That blast must have been effective.”

“Good for you,” Eric said happily. “We all leveled Yesterday.”

Just then a hoard of rats charged us. Eric intercepted the first ones while Artemis fired arrows. Even Evelyn was firing light bolts at the rats using his wand.

I moved forward with my glaive.

Just then a rat bypassed Eric and jumped at me. I immediately position my glaive in front of me.

A moment later the rat impaled itself on the glaive.

The weight of the rat forced the glaive’s tip downwards and the rat fell off. I felt **[Essence]** flood me as I readied myself for the next rat.

“Come on everyone, let’s sing,” Eric bellowed.

“Sing what?” Artemis asked.

“There are rats, rats, rats, big as alley cats in the quarter master store,” I sang.

I stop singing as I struggle to fend off rats.

“That’s a good one,” Eric approved, “Although these things look big enough to eat alley cats. How are you faring back there, Raven?”

I was backed into a corner as several rats tried to eat my face.

I screamed as a rat bit my leg. Damn that hurt. The pain was so bad that it paralyzed me for a few seconds.

I then rammed down with my knife. The rat lets go as it dropped dead.

A moment later I felt healing energy as Evelyn cast a healing spell on me.

“Thanks Evelyn,” I said as I swung my glaive like a mad man. A shorter glaive might have been more useful in the cramped quarters of the sewer. Or a glaive with a telescoping handle.

“I’ve played plenty of horror games,” I said. “This game is by far the scariest.”

Can you say Terror boys and girls?

“I agree,” Eric replied. “I just wet myself.”

“That’s impossible,” Evelyn denied.

Again, another rat got the better of me as it clamped on my arm. This time Artemis got it. And again, I got more healing.

“Tell that to my pants dude,” Eric objected.

“Really?” Artemis asked, surprised.

“No,” Eric said. “I’m just joking.”

As we fought my health yo-yoed between full and almost empty. I couldn’t think of anything but stab, scream and stab some more.

My arms felt like lead as time dragged on and we pushed forward.

“Heads up,” Evelyn warned. “I think we are approaching the boss.”

“I believe you are right,” Eric said and charges forward.

“What gave it away, the increased swarms of rats?” I asked, breathing heavily.

“That and the rat eggs,” Evelyn replied and pointed.

“Rats don’t come from eggs,” Artemis objected.

“Maybe so, but I think it would be cruel if we were forced to kill baby rats. This is rated PG after all. I still hate these rats,” I replied. Strangely, the banter reduced my fear.

“Don’t worry buddy,” Eric called. “We are almost done with these rats. Then we can go somewhere where you can throw some fireballs.”

Finally, the rat boss came into view.

“You’re a big beastie, aren’t you?” Eric said and charged.

The fight seemed to increase in intensity. I felt the urge to throw fireballs, but the smell in the air said doing so would get us all killed.

Instead I visualized the launch rune on the rats that were crowding us and fed it manna. It had a small effect of slightly slowing the monster attacks down.

That was enough to allow me to defend myself.

“Got him,” Eric shouted in triumph. Moments later the rest of the rats scurried off.

“I thought my arms were going to fall off,” I complained as healing washed over me. I put my glaive away. “I will be happy when I gain the strength of an average teenager, or ideally at least around 10 for my physical attributes.”

“I am past 20 on all physical stats,” Eric said happily. “And barbarians get a +1 for Strength and Vitality on level up.

“But average on everything else,” Artemis added.

“Who needs brains when you have muscles?” Eric objected. “I already have a college football scholarship and even with AI and robots, we will always need American Football.

“Speaking of American Football, where do you come from Raven?”

“I come from Dublin, Ireland,” I replied.

“In other words, you have the luck of the Irish, and now I have it too,” Eric said. “And sweet, I’m now at level 4.”

The others were the same. I had enough **[Essence]** to go to Level-3. I just needed another 85 **[Essence]** or XP for Level-4.

“I need a bath and sleep,” I grumbled. “I think the smell has seeped into my blood.”

“Yes, but we all have enough coins for rent for a week,” Eric pointed out. That was true.

Eric grabbed me as I almost toppled over. “Damn Raven, you really need some exercise.”

“Thank you everyone,” I said. “I would have been rat chow if it wasn’t for you folks.”

“That’s what teammates are for,” Eric said. “Don’t worry. I didn’t choose you for your brawn, but for your ginormous brain.

“All successful parties have a wizard in the mix,” Artemis agreed.

We finally stepped out of the sewers and I finally breathed a breath of fresh air.

“And a healer and a ranger and a tank,” I agreed.

“Let’s get back to the inn,” Eric suggested. “I need a shower.”

“Evelyn, please book a room for me for the night. I’ll wait outside,” I asked. “How much is it anyway?”

“85 silver a night,” Evelyn replied. “You can split with me.”

I gave him the money and we finally arrived at the inn. I waited outside and Evelyn brought me my key.

I quickly ducked in and headed for my room. I loved the fact that, even though this was supposed to be the Middle-Ages, they still had modern washrooms with modern showers – Although the washrooms were designed to look from the Middle-Ages.

They even had a cleaning service.

I dumped my filthy clothes into a clothes hamper and stepped into the shower. The hot water felt good as I washed the grime from my body.

Shower completed, I dried myself and put my now-clean clothes on.

I then sat on my bed and focused internally. There was tons of **[Essence]** circulating at the base of my spine.

I started the slow process of channeling **[Essence]** into my **[Strength], [Agility]** and **[Stamina]** chakras.

I felt my muscles twitching and rippling as I worked. It was a strange and disturbing feeling.

Didn’t they say our bodies wouldn’t be changed? No, they didn’t, I remembered. And of course, answers weren’t available on the Internet.

**Stats**

**Level:** F-Rank 3

**Raw Essence:** 15

**Refined Essence:** 300 of 400

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** 3 -> 5

**Agility:** 2 -> 5

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** 2 ->5

**Vitality:** 6

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 21

**Willpower:** 23

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 27

**Perception:** 24

**HP (hit points):** 600 of 600

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

Finally, my physical stats no longer sucked.

I slipped out of my meditation and found the others in my shared room waiting for me.

“Sorry for the delay folks,” I said. “**[Essence]** management is rather time consuming. And I didn’t notice you all.”

“No problem,” Eric said. “We were just discussing our next plans. We are thinking of leaving Newbie City after we reach E-Rank. According to the game boards, this city only has F-Rank quests.

“Now we can get rid of our junk and buy some better equipment.”

As we exited the inn, I picked up a pebble.

“What are you doing?” Evelyn asked.

“I have an idea,” I said. “I used the **[Launch]** Rune to slow down the rats, but their bulk was too great. What if I use **[Launch]** on a pebble?”

I applied the Rune and released the energy, aiming it at a nearby tree. The pebble launched and hit the tree with a dull thud, causing wood to fly.

“Sweet,” Eric exclaimed. “Now you have a gun.”

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Princess Annie and her best friend Lady Linda stepped through the portal and into the Perth, Australia outpost.

Annie just had the English language downloaded into her brain and she was still suffering from a headache.

Nevertheless, that didn’t prevent her from admiring her new surroundings. The room she was in wasn’t made of stone or brick or wood. Instead, it was some off-white smooth material. The furniture was strange. The overhead lighting was strange. At least they did have lighting.

“Remember the agreement,” the guide said in English.

“Yes, I know,” Annie grumbled. “I need to attend the first anniversary birthday party for Lady Aspen. After that, I can do as I please.”

The guide, whose name Annie forgot said, “Please follow me.”

As Annie followed, she wondered if this place had proper toilets. After all, they didn’t have magic, so their accommodations must be crude. Thankfully she went just before transferring.

A short walk down a corridor brought them to metal double-doors. The guide pressed a button and the doors opened after half a minute.

They stepped into a tiny room and the doors closed.

Annie and Linda squeaked in fright as the room shook and rattled and noisily zoomed upwards.

“Sorry I forgot to warn you,” the guide said. “Elevators in this world are crude mechanical things. Don’t worry. They are safe. We are ascending over 200 meters to the surface.”

“I need to get used to this new measurement system,” Annie grumbled as she tried to visualize 1 meter.

The doors opened and they stepped into a large room made out of artificial stone.

Surrounding them were odd metallic objects.

“Those things are called cars and are used for transportation,” the guide said. “They are required since they like separating residential homes from everything else.”

The guide opened the door of one of the cars and they entered.

“Here, let me help you with the seatbelts,” the guide said. After getting secured, the guide entered the front seat and the vehicle started moving.

After a few minutes, Annie asked, “Why are there so many roads? The city seems to be dominated by them.”

“It’s the effect of having cars,” the guide said. “It’s part of the culture of this world. One part of society trying to dominate another through the use of cars,” he explained.

“Interesting buildings,” Linda commented. “And so noisy.”

“We are entering highway 95,” the guide said. “It will take a few hours to reach the entrance to the Incursion dome. Sit back and relax. Do you remember what to do when you enter?”

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We were back at the Millie Mollie Pub and Inn.

This day was productive, and I ended up with 1274 total Raw **[Essence]** after two more extermination jobs. Thankfully I could use fireballs for both, as well as Rock Launch. Not surprisingly Rock Launch was faster. It was my preferred attack. Unfortunately, I needed to wear gloves. Launching the rocks kept hurting my hand.

As we sat at a table waiting for the server, I said, “It’s amazing how much a few extra physical stat points can help.”

“I noticed,” Eric replied. “It was well worth waiting for you to level up.”

The waiter arrived and we ordered.

“Please give me your house special and a tankard of ale,” I said.

“We can’t have ale,” Evelyn complained. “We are minors.”

“Of course, we can,” I objected. “This isn’t home. Waitress, please get a tankard for my three companions on my tab.”

“As you wish,” the server said and left.

A minute later the ale arrived.

Eric was the first to try the ale. “Hey. This isn’t alcoholic.”

“What did you expect for a rated PG game?” I asked with a laugh.

“What should we do after dinner?” Eric asked.

“I’m going to watch a sitcom,” Evelyn said. “I’m absolutely addicted to Nosy Neighbors.”

“There’s a new Sci-Fi game called Fractured Space 14,” Artemis replied.

“That’s funny, playing a video game within another video game,” Eric laughed. “I guess I’ll do some training. There is no such thing as being too strong.”

“I need to allocate my raw **[Essence]** so I can level up,” I said.

“Dude, that’s too much trouble,” Eric griped. “However, you play your way I say.”

“I’m also getting a lock pick set and some practice locks,” I said.

“Excellent,” Eric praised. “We certainly need a thief.”

Finally, the food came.

“You know, I think I’m going to gain ten pounds by September,” I complained. “My mum is going to give me an earful.”

“Nonsense,” Artemis replied. “This is just a game. We will be right back to where we started. That’s why I’m not worried about gaining weight.”

The food arrived.

“It’s funny,” I said. “In an actual video game, we can defeat hundreds of monsters in an hour. Yet it took us all day to hunt down less than 150 monsters.”

“It makes sense,” Eric agreed. “It takes forever to actually find these monsters. And killing monsters can be slow.”

“Yes, we can respawn. However, I don’t want to experience that, even if I’m playing on easy. Although those rats, spiders and ants look kind of cute,” Artemis said.

“And Raven and I are playing on No Pain, No Gain,” Eric said. “Dying once for us would probably ruin the entire day. And we would lose all our loot and gains.”

“Don’t forget, in a video game, there is no real cost to dying. At most we waste a few seconds to respawn, and then a few more to return to the fight,” I noted.

“And some games overwhelm you with monsters, making it impossible to win without dying multiple times.

“I think we can play without ever dying, as long as we play smart.”

Our conversation got picked up by the other Players in the room, with each adding their opinion.

“What do you think of the Marketplace and auctions?” Someone called out.

“I think they are great,” a Paladin said. “Getting my upgraded sword saved my bacon.”

“I think it’s cheating,” a fire mage grumbled. “I don’t believe in pay to win.”

“What do you expect?” a Rogue asked. “They have to make up the cost of creating this place. And the companionship is well worth the cost.”

“Is that all you think of?” a Knight asked.

“What’s the big deal?” the Rogue asked. “They are just AIs. They are just following their programming.”

I watched the NPCs, wondering what they were thinking. None commented, but I did see more than a few expressions of annoyance. Was that real annoyance? It had to be, since that would break immersion. It already broke my immersion.

That was enough to make me want to observe more.

“That was a delicious meal,” I said and called the server. The lady came and I squared my bill.

“Okay folks, I’m going to the store,” I said. “After that I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

I went to the general store and looked around.

“May I help you?” a clerk asked.

“Do you sell lock picks?” I asked, “And some practice locks. Also, I would like some steel pellets.”

“Indeed, I do,” the clerk said and guided me.

“This set is designed for the locks you will find in an F-Rank dungeon. Unfortunately, we only cater to people of F-Rank. As for practice locks, I have a special. Get everything for only 87 silvers and 37 coppers.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied and paid the man.

I returned to my room and my AI trained me on lock picking.

I spent the next hour practicing. I even picked my own room lock a few times. I decided to stop for the night and practice the next day.

I was about to undress, but remembered I shared a room. I sat cross-legged and started my Cultivating. I allocated to just my physical stats.

**Level:** F-Rank 6

**Raw Essence:** 320

**Refined Essence:** 40 of 600

**Strength:** 5 -> 8

**Agility:** 5 -> 8

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** 5 -> 7

**Vitality:** 6 -> 7

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“Are you sure we should be here Annie?” Linda asked as she stood on the deck of the Sturgeon.

Annie watched as the Leviathan breached and said, “I want to make my own way in the world. I don’t want to enter some stupid arranged marriage and do things people expect me to.”

“We don’t know what these people from Earth are like. I think it’s freaky that they live on a round world,” Linda objected.

“The only freaky thing is this underwear that can’t come off. On the other hand, I’m glad I don’t need to pee,” Annie replied.

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- June 12 -

NOCK, NOCK

It was morning and I once again spent the night Cultivating.

“One moment,” I call and open the door.

Evelyn and I step out the door, and we greeted Eric and Artemis.

“I have a question,” I said. “How are you allocating points for your stats?”

“That’s easy,” Eric replied. “I put it all in my physical stats. You know what they say. Muscles conquer all.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Artemis scoffed. “I need **[Perception]** since I am a ranger. I also need **[Strength]** to draw my bow, and **[Dexterity]** to aim. **[Agility]** and **[Stamina]** are for close quarters like the sewers. The rest are dump stats.”

“I am focusing on **[Mind]** and **[Willpower]**,” Evelyn replied. “Eric wants me to be at least 10 on all physical stats.”

Evelyn then said, “It’s strange that Spirit can’t be leveled up.”

“I assume you are focusing on your brain stats,” Eric asked.

“I can’t,” I replied. “While I get the equivalent of 5 stat points per level, how I distribute them is different.

“The higher my stats are, the more it costs to upgrade. That won’t be a problem when we start fighting higher level monsters.

“On the bright side, under-level stats are cheap to level up. So, I’m forced to play as a balanced character.”

We entered the inn’s dining room and found a table.

“By the way, all my stats are now at least 7,” I said. “I don’t have to slow any of you down.”

I didn’t need to mention I was level 6, since all party members could see it. On the other hand, everyone else is level 9.

“That was fast,” Artemis said.

The server came and we placed our orders.

“As I said, undervalued stats are easy to level up,” I replied.

Again I observed the behavior of the NPCs, trying to catch off-script behavior.

“A few more days and we will outgrow this town,” Eric said. “We need to decide where to go next.”

“We need to get maps showing the major towns and features,” Evelyn suggested. “And some camping supplies.”

“And a banjo,” Eric added. “This game is missing music.”

“I still haven’t talked to my parents,” I said. “This time difference is a bit of a pain.”

“I quite agree,” Artemis said.

“I wish this place had coffee,” a player two tables away grumbled.

“We do,” a server replied.

“I never liked coffee. I think it’s too bitter. Although strawberry milk would be nice,” I said.

“You’re such a kid,” Eric said, laughing.

I was about to object when the server arrived. He placed our food on the table and left.

“It’s funny they serve Irish food here,” I said.

“I thought this was Middle Ages grub,” Evelyn objects.

“This is traditional Irish food,” I clarified. “Not Americanized Irish food and certainly not WacDougle’s.”

“There seems to be a unique event in front of the Adventurer’s guild,” a player in his early twenties said. His name was Blaze and was wearing red clothes. Apparently, he was playing as a fire wizard.

“What sort of event?” His partner, Ice Queen asked.

“It seems a local lord or something needs an escort,” Blaze answers. “However, the catch is, only a person who can babysit their brat will be accepted.”

“How bad can that be?” Ice Queen asked?

“Very bad indeed,” Blaze replied. “They have been there for the last half hour at least. No one has been able to make the little one stop crying.”

“That’s so sad,” Artemis sympathized.

“This is just a game,” Eric objected. “No actual baby is crying.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said, frowning. “Either way, this is the first event I’ve come across.”

I called the server to square my bill, then I quickly finished breakfast.

I headed for the Guild Hall and found a huge crowd of players trying to get a child to stop crying. The child in question looked less than a year old. I only saw the beginnings of two front teeth.

“At least the line is going fast,” Eric said as the gang joined me.

Slowly the line progresses and it was our turn.

“Hi little baby,” Artemis said and tried to impress the child. The child took one look at her and cried again.

“I guess it’s my turn,” I said.

The child stopped crying and looked in my direction. Immediately she reached her arms towards me, while making baby sounds.

The mother brought the child to me and placed her in my arms.

“Hi little baby. What’s your name sweetheart?” I asked as the little girl giggled.

“Her name is Aspen,” the mother, Brenda**,** answered. She couldn’t be more than 23 years old.

Grumbling, the crowd scattered, now the child has stopped crying.

“I am duke Wallace of Coolamon[[2]](#footnote-2) State,” Wallace said. “This is my wife **Brimley. That is our daughter** Brenda and 11-month-old granddaughter Aspen. I would appreciate it if you and your friends help escort us home. Don’t worry. This should only be an F-Rank guard duty. And we do have high E-Rank guards.”

“We would love to help you,” Eric answered for the gang. “We were planning on leaving town soon anyway. Please lead the way.”

We followed the family through the crowds.

“Wait a minute,” Artemis objected worriedly as she followed. “Raven is only Level 6.”

“No Pain, No Gain,” I said. “And I don’t want little Aspen **crying.”**

**“It is our duty to help those in need,”** Evelyn **declared,** acting like the cleric he was. “Don’t worry about Raven. We can protect him.”

“But higher ranked people are stronger than us,” Artemis objected. “There is a huge difference between 10 and 11 for any specific stat.”

“You are playing on easy mode, and yet you worry too much,” Eric said with a laugh.

“I’m talking about you two, not me,” Artemis objected. “Why must men be such masochists?”

“I’m not a masochist,” Eric objected.

“How many concussions have you suffered as a football player?” Artemis asked.

“I don’t remember,” Eric admitted sheepishly.

“My point exactly,” Artemis grumbled.

We arrived in front of a caravan.

“Seeing as there is no room, you go with the family, and we’ll ride with the escort,” Eric said.

“Okay,” I replied.

I followed the family into the ducal coach.

As we headed off, Brenda **said, “I don’t know how you got Aspen to calm down.** She has always been fussy. But ever since the move it has been worse.”

“For some reason all babies love me,” I replied. “By the way, have you spoken to a healer?”

“Yes, we have,” **Brimley replied. “They all said that Aspen is healthy.”**

The gentle rocking of the carriage put Aspen to sleep.

“By the way, what’s your name young man?” Wallace asked.

“I go by the name Raven,” I replied.

“That’s a mystic name,” **Brimley said. “Some of you rounders have…” Brimley stopped speaking, as if she said something she shouldn’t have.**

We passed the protective Newbie City wall and entered a patchwork of fields. Farmers watched us as we passed them.

“It’s a beautiful day,” I said, changing the subject. “It’s easy to see why Aspen is sleeping. It’s making me feel sleepy too.”

“Indeed,” Brimley agreed, grateful for the change in subject.

“We should arrive tomorrow morning,” Wallace said.

“What do you do to keep busy on long trips?” Brimley asked.

“I Cultivate,” I replied. “There is more to Cultivation than just the absorption of **[Essence]**.”

“I know I should, and my tutors tried and failed to train me as a child,” Wallace said.

“Does that mean you don’t?” I paused and reframed my question.

“Are you using XP allocation for leveling up?”

Wallace nodded. “I am aware of the benefits of **[Essence]** allocation. However, I never had the patience to learn meditation.”

I nodded and said, “And it takes years of training before **[Essence]** allocation became possible.”

“Unfortunately,” Wallace agreed, “Especially now that I’m duke of a newly created state.”

“But that’s precisely why you should do it,” I argued. “It will help you control your emotions, so you can make more rational decisions.”

“Sage advice indeed,” Wallace agreed. “I think I’ll take you up on that.”

*When hell freezes over*, I thought to myself. *People don’t change just like that.* I didn’t say that. I just smiled and looked out the window. The countryside was beautiful and peaceful.

I stared into the sky at a floating island. This one had an impressive looking castle on one side.

<Image>

Near afternoon the road entered the forest.

Looking into the vegetation, I noticed two rabbits with antlers. One was pastel green. The other was pink.

Brenda took the baby and fed her, while I watched squirrels the size of dogs scurrying through the branches. Did that squirrel have two tails, and fangs?

The caravan came to a stop.

“Your Grace, a tree is blocking the road,” a guard on horseback said.

“Be on guard,” Wallace commanded. “This is the perfect opportunity for an ambush.”

“Yes sir,” the man said and left.

“I better check it out,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Brimley asked worriedly. “There could be bandits out there.”

“This is my job,” I replied with a smile. “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything reckless.”

Just then arrows started flying. I heard the thunk, thunk of arrows hitting the coach.

I looked into the forest. Panic gripped me as a bandit stared directly into my eyes.

I reached into my side pouch and pulled out a steel pellet I bought from the store. I charged the pellet as I brought my hand up.

Thankfully the countless hours of training I had with VR games came to my rescue, guiding my aim.

5 seconds later, the spell was ready and I **[Launch]** the pellet at the bandit.

The pellet flew true and slammed into the bandit’s face, punching a hole through and hitting another bandit behind him.

I flinched from the horrid sight.

Both toppled over and I felt the rush of overwhelming **[Essence]**. Holy crap! That was E-Rank **[Essence]**, from 2 bandits.

You have killed an enemy over 10 levels above your own.

This has marked your aura,   
and has given you the title of Giant Killer

Weak willed enemies will be 10% less likely to target you.

Their attacks will be 10% weaker than normal.

Allies will have a 10% morale boost near you.

This title is upgradable.

Did I just kill a person? Am I a murderer?

I didn’t have time to speculate as other bandits rushed in to fill the gap.

I needed to be more conservative with my Manna. That last shot used over 600 MP. My regen was 10 times that of my **[Willpower]** a minute or about 160MP/minute.

At that rate I would be helpless if I was not careful.

Hesitation disappeared as an arrow flew through the coach’s window and out the other side.

Fear was a good way to put aside moral issues.

I pulled out another pellet, charged it with 500 MP and fired. Again, I felt the **[Essence]** enter me.

If I was correct, 300 MP should be sufficient for a clean kill via headshot. I continued firing, tweaking the power level as I went.

“Heads up everyone,” someone who was clearly the leader shouted. “They have a high-powered wizard with them.”

“That’s impossible,” another bandit objects. “I can’t see anyone attacking.

“Besides, that’s too powerful for a player who has just left Newbie City. And we know the duke didn’t bring his wizards with him.”

“Then how do you explain the fact that Brutus just dropped with a hole in his head?” another bandit shouted.

I couldn’t identify them since I couldn’t see them.

“You moron,” the leader screamed. “Never use that word, unless you want *Them* to punish you.”

What word? Did he mean *Player*?

I rushed to the other side of the coach and continued my assault.

The raid continued for the next two minutes or so.

“Retreat everyone,” the leader yelled. “We are taking too much damage.”

We waited a few moments and then the leader of the guard approached. “Your Grace, the bandits have all fled. We will commence to remove the obstruction now.”

“Thank you, Captain Derrick,” Wallace said.

Just then the reality of what I just did hit me. I had killed over a dozen people – Fourteen people, to be precise.

I stepped out of the carriage to take a breath of fresh air. **Brimley followed me out.**

**“Are you okay dear?” Brimley asked worriedly.**

“That was the first time I killed anyone. Where I come from, only criminals kill, and soldiers on the battlefield,” I said. “Even police officers are discouraged from killing.”

I focused on my breathing, trying to control my emotions but failing. I looked at my shaking hands.

“Don’t feel sad,” Wallace consoled me. “They would have killed all our retinue and captured us.”

“That’s right,” **Brimley agreed and wiped away a tear. She gave me a motherly hug. “You don’t need to cry for them.”**

“Damn, this game is never boring, but is a little slow at times,” Artemis said as the gang approached.

I intentionally look away. I don’t want them to see my face. Fortunately, the others were oblivious.

“I wanted to take down some of the bandits,” Eric grumbled. “Unfortunately, the captain said the bandits would easily kill us if we left the carriage.

“Don’t get me wrong. I would have done that. However, I didn’t want to respawn back in the Newbie City Citadel. With the 8-hour respawn time, and the loss of gear and all, I didn’t think it was worth it.”

“I couldn’t do anything,” Artemis complained. “It’s impossible to fire a bow from a carriage.”

“My Light Bolts were useless against the Bandit’s armor,” Evelyn grumbled also.

I grimaced and said, “I suggest you take this world seriously. Also, I suggest you only kill monsters if you can help it.

“Although I’m sure the bandits will respawn…”

“Are you upset?” Artemis asked, surprised. “This is just a game.”

“Just…Just treat the people you meet with respect. That’s all I have to say on the subject,” I said. “Why don’t you three help clear the road?”

“If you said so,” Eric said uncertainly and headed out. A moment later the others followed.

“You know the truth, don’t you?” Wallace asked softly.

“That Quantum Entertainment lied to us,” I said. “Yes, I know. I don’t understand anything about what they are doing with those giant bubbles they created in Australia, or even how they did it. Their explanations seem lubricious.

“All I know is that the cat will eventually come out of the bag, the quantum bag,” I added, thinking about Schrödinger’s cat.

“What about us?” Wallace asked.

“You are real, just like me,” I said. “You aren’t computer generated. I don’t believe so. My body tells me so.

“When I cultivate, my Neurolink shuts off. I’m certain Cultivation is changing me.

“I’m not going to ask you any questions. I’m sure you are restricted to some sort of NDA, just like me.”

For a moment no one said anything, and then Aspen screamed.

I took Aspen in my arms, and she stopped crying.

“Escher, why don’t we prepare lunch? I don’t think the bandits will be bothering us anytime soon,” Brimley suggested.

I kissed Aspen on the cheek as the stress of the day washed away. At the same time, I watched the servants prepare lunch.

If you think people without high technology live a primitive life, you would be wrong.

The servants brought out some sort of portable gas stove and folding tables. They then prepared lunch. No campfire for them.

I sat with the Billbanks ducal family as they discussed internal city matters. I supposed I should do some Cultivation, but I didn’t feel like it.

The others came back with animals they hunted down and handed them to the servants.

“Raven, I was talking to some of the guards,” Eric said. “It seems that there is a spider dungeon within Hiatum City. You can use your fireballs there.”

“I know the place,” Wallace said. “It starts at F-Rank 1 and slowly increases in strength to mid E-Rank.

“The spiders aren’t poisonous, and the magic mushrooms give plenty of light.

“However, I have to warn you. The spider silk in that dungeon is extremely flammable. You could burn yourselves if you’re not careful.”

“I noticed several holes in the ground,” Artemis said. “I also saw an abandoned house.”

“I saw a strange monument with glowing hieroglyphics,” Evelyn added.

Wallace nodded. “This forest is filled with mysteries. Just be careful. Some of them can be dangerous.”

We continued discussing possible quests when a servant announced that lunch was ready.

Lunch comprised of meat, sandwiches, and a cooling drank I couldn’t identify.

“The captain of the guard offered to help me train with sword fighting,” Eric said between mouthfuls.

I had a problem eating with little Aspen in my arms.

“Would you like me to carry Aspen so you may eat?” Brenda asked.

“Not a problem,” I said. “I really need to lose weight.”

Finally, lunch ended, and we returned to the carriage.

Again, we rode through the endless forest.

I closed my eyes and relaxed. The energy around my tailbone felt like a cobra that had drunk too much coffee. It spun wildly, insistent on being used.

I wanted to use it. But at the same time, I felt that I should level-up in private. Also, we weren’t safe here. Who knew what could still attack?

That meant waiting for the night.

So, I focused on my spiritual senses on the environment around me.

The energies of the forest were vastly different than in Hiatum City. I could only guess that I was feeling the **[Nature** **Essence]**.

I then focused my attention on little Aspen.

Just like me, Aspen had energies flowing around her. There was her raw **[Essence]** around her tailbone. There were her chakras and her meridians. I saw her body double.

As I observed I realized that something was seriously wrong.

I continued to focus. What could possibly be wrong?

I was interrupted as the baby was fed and changed.

Once again, I held Aspen in my arms. I again explored the tiny body. There was no question. Aspen was sick.

It couldn’t be a physical disease, since Brimley said healers examined her.

Could it be an energy disease? But what could it be?

If only I knew what a normal baby body should be like.

I knew that babies were supposed to have the most energy. And then it decreased until it all went away, and we died of old age.

And yet, Aspen’s second body seemed dull and lifeless. Again, I looked at her tailbone energy.

“I get it,” I exclaimed aloud as I realized the problem.

“You get what dear?” Brimley asked.

“I think Aspen’s problem is energetic,” I said. “Her energies don’t seem to be flowing. I’m only guessing, since I only received my abilities when I arrived a few days ago. And I’m not certain what I’m seeing.”

“We never considered that,” Brimley mused. “We just assumed Aspen was just fussy.”

“I don’t understand,” Brenda said, confused.

“Mind you, I’ve only examined myself and Aspen,” I said. “I have never examined anyone else before. For me, there is always a trickle of energy flowing up from my tailbone.”

“That’s true for everyone,” Wallace admitted. “However, my **[Perception]** is too low to see it in others. I’ve focused primarily on my physical stats.”

“For Aspen, there is no trickle,” I explained. “And her tailbone energy seems angry. And her second body seems starved.”

“Thank you for explaining this to me,” Wallace said. “We will get an energy healer to look at her.”

The rest of the day passed peacefully.

The caravan stopped at a clearing for the night and formed a circle.

“Other than the raid, this day was boring,” Eric grumbled by way of greeting.

“What do you expect?” I asked. “This is what you get if you go for a full immersion experience.”

“Moments of terror and a lot of boring,” Eric agreed. “I still wish this game had a fast-travel system.”

“I read the comments,” Evelyn said. “The hardcore gamers are happy fast travel doesn’t exist.”

“That makes sense,” Eric agreed. “There are other games out there if you don’t want this level of realism.”

I watched the Billbanks as the others treated this world as fake. They just sat there, pretending they didn’t hear.

I felt the urge to tell my friends that they were being rude.

“Greetings Luke Solarsmith,” a familiar voice called out. “I’m here to give you your next lesson.”

“Teacher,” I said happily and got up. “Please look at little Aspen.”

Taranis walked up to me and looked at the child in my arms. He frowned and said, “Indeed the little one is sick.”

“Your Eminence, my name is Duke Wallace of Coolamon State. This is my wife **Brimley and my daughter Brenda**.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Taranis said with a bow.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Wallace said, returning the bow.

“Is there anything you can do for Aspen?” Brenda pleaded.

“Dude, I’m so jealous,” Eric said, emitting jealousy for everyone to see.

“Young man, you shouldn’t be jealous of your friend,” Taranis scolded. “I assure you, in the time to come you will pity him.”

That was a chilling statement.

Taranis turned to the mother and grandparents and said, “Aspen’s condition is the direct result of transporting to this unstable…” He clears his throat.

“But I thought it was perfectly safe,” Wallace complained, looking guilty.

“I assure you it is safe, for almost everyone,” Taranis assured. “However, your grand daughter has inherited unusually strong gifts. Let’s just say, that has caused some unintended side effects.

“What’s done is done. So, the next best thing is to fix the issue.”

I tried to think of something to distract my friends. Unfortunately, I draw a blank. Then the image of us away from here appeared in my mind.

“Why don’t we go somewhere quiet, so we don’t disturb everyone?” I suggested.

“That’s an excellent idea,” Taranis said happily.

“Is this secret?” Eric asked, frowning.

“Not really,” I said. “Would you like to participate in Cultivating? Meditation is an essential in life.”

“No thank you,” Eric objected. “I think that is a complete waste of time.”

The grandparents, mother, Taranis, and I walked a short distance away.

When we were out of earshot I pressed and held a button at the base of my skull. “I turned off my Neurolink.”

“This is the silence rune,” Taranis said. He slowly formed it and I was engulfed in absolute silence. It was an oppressive thing that crushed down on me.

Taranis eased up and I could hear again.

“Sorry, I should have warned you. Can you try it?”

Drawing on my recent experience, I formed the Rune.

Next he showed me the Bubble rune, which he demonstrated with a multitude of bubbles. Again that was straight-forward, being familiar with bubbles. As a kid, I loved blowing bubbles.

Taranis then combined the runes into an array and a bubble formed around us.

He released the array and said, “Now you try.”

I reviewed the bubble Rune in my mind and created the Rune. I then slowly added the Silence Rune as a modifier to the array.

I fed the array energy.

“Excellent work,” Taranis praised. “Remember to feed in a constant stream of manna or it will collapse. Too much can have negative effects, as you saw.

“Now what do you understand about this place?” Taranis asked me.

“Quantum Entertainment created domes throughout the world. The prevailing belief is that they are some sort of Star Trek Holodeck.

“My own observations contradict this. Why do I see my chakras and energy when my Neurolink is off? How do you know my name is Luke?

“I’ve noticed the people also. Occasionally they would go off script, as if they are actors. Like the bandits. They got scared when one of them mentioned players.

“AI will not make those kinds of mistakes, since that destroys immersion.

“You also mentioned you just immigrated.

“Brimley called me a Rounder. That and several other slips have been deleted from my videos.

“What I’m saying is boggling my mind. I can’t tell if I’m sane or going crazy, although it does mesh with some theories about multidimensional reality.

“One more thing: why is knowledge of Cultivation being blocked?”

Taranis sighed and said, “Our agreements only apply to players who don’t know the truth,” Taranis said. “It seems you know, so I can be candid.

“As I was saying, this newly formed region is still unstable. Unfortunately, full synchronization won’t occur until March next year, Earth calendar.

“Aspen is too sensitive for her own good and too young to handle the forces.

“Fortunately, Luke’s energies are helping her.”

Taranis paused and then said, “The first thing I need to do is deal with some energetic blocks. Luke, hold Aspen’s head securely. I will be releasing energies that will make her convulse. It might be a little painful for her.”

I did as instructed while the family looked worriedly at us.

Taranis placed his fingers near Aspen’s tailbone and slowly moved it in circles. The energies around Aspen started swirling.

At first nothing happened, and then Aspen spasmed. After a few seconds it happened again, and again. I found it hard holding Aspen safely.

Also, Taranis’ actions were causing my barrier to fluctuate as I struggled to control manna output.

Taranis stopped when Aspen’s energy was roiling.

“Luke, we have a unique opportunity,” Taranis said. “Because of where you are in your growth, we can give Aspen a unique present.

“I want you to allocate enough raw **[Essence]** to level to exactly **[E-Rank 1]**. That is to say Level 11, and then stop. Do you understand me?”

“Yes teacher,” I said. “I will allocate sufficient **[Essence]** to my attributes to reach Level 11.

“Have a seat. I don’t want you to lose your balance. Also, disperse your barrier.”

A chair appeared and I sat down.

I dispersed my barrier and a new barrier instantly former. This one was vastly superior to mine.

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing.

Slowly the world seemed to drift away and the energies surrounding me became vibrant and present.

I then focused on the raw energies at the base of my spine.

Slowly I moved my energies through my system and fed them to my chakras. I slowly increase both my level and my attribute strengths.

At the same time, Aspen’s body was twitching. She was definitely responding to me.

“I am now level 11,” I said. “I still have 6270 raw **[Essence]**, as well as 580 refined.”

“That’s perfect,” Taranis said happily. “First describe your entire energetic makeup.”

“I can see 10 chakras in my body,” I said as I got up.

“I can also see the channels flowing through my body. I also see some sort of body double. This is connected directly to my physical body through the Chakras. My second body seems to be glowing, releasing some sort of aura that slightly extends beyond my physical body.”

“Excellent,” Taranis praised. “By the way, your body double is called your Astral body. Now I want you to take your raw **[Essence]** and force it into your astral body through your chakras.

“You will know when the process is complete. Be warned. Initially it will be incredibly difficult, like blowing a balloon.”

I sat down again and resumed my meditation.

I drew my energies and pushed. At first nothing happened.

No. Something did happen. Aspen made a poop.

“I’m the one who needs to push, not you,” I told Aspen.

I struggled and struggled. No matter how much I pushed nothing happened.

“Not with your face,” Taranis admonished gently as he saw my face turn red. “This pushing isn’t physical. It’s energetic. Relax your body. Relax your mind. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on the Kundalini energies swirling around the base of your spine. Allow the energies to move on their own. Just let them flow.”

I tried to follow but still nothing happened.

Then suddenly, like a bursting dam, the energies transferred. It turned out I was doing it wrong.

Suddenly my second body, my astral body was drinking the energy like a sponge.

At the same time, I impulsively bathed Aspen with energy. Her Kundalini increased. It was only a trickle but that was enough for her. Her pathways strengthened and healed. Both her astral body and its connection strengthened. Aspen sucked in a deep breath.

Slowly my astral body altered, seeking out its next level of development. At the same time my aura expanded.

“I’m out of **[Essence]**,” I said as I got up. The chair disappeared as it was no longer needed.

Raven Solarsmith

**Stats**

**Level:** E-Rank 1

**Raw Essence:** 0

**Refined Essence:** 580 of 1100

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** 8 -> 12

**Agility:** 8 -> 12

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** 7 -> 11

**Vitality:** 7 -> 11

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 17

**Willpower:** 16

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 19

**Perception:** 15

**HP (hit points):** 1100 of 1100

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

I was much sturdier now and no one could call me a wimp anymore. Even my stomach went down. My mother would be surprised.

“That’s okay,” Taranis consoled. “You can complete the job at another time. This step will only need to be done when you Rank-Up again.

“The good news is that you have helped Aspen. All her stats have leveled up to 3. She should be able to talk now.”

“Say something Aspen,” I said.

“I made a poop,” Aspen said with a pronounced lisp.

Everyone laughed at the comment.

“I’ll change her diapers,” Brenda said and took the baby.

“You don’t need to stay,” Taranis said. “Aspen is now fully restored.”

“How can we ever thank you?” the grateful mother asked.

“I’m just happy to help. Just remember that she now has the strength of a ten-year-old girl. She can easily hurt other kids much older than her,” Taranis replied.

“I’m now going to give my protégé his next lesson.”

Wallace, **Brimley,** and Brenda left with the baby.

“So, Luke, how was your experience with the Runes I gave you?” Taranis asked.

“I can create and launch a fireball in 17 seconds,” I said. “I used Launch to shove rats. It slowed them down a bit.

“Then I tried using Launch on a pebble and it worked. It even saved us when we were attacked by bandits.”

“Good. Good,” Taranis praised. “Runes are a language, just like your programming languages.

“Runes are powerful enough to create a universe and establish laws. There is no limit to them. They also exist outside time and space, in the realm of archetypes.

“In time you will discover new ones on your own, when your connection to the Universal is sufficient.”

Taranis dispelled his bubble of silence.

“Show me the Silence bubble again.”

Crap. I forgot. I close my eyes and try to visualize. At first nothing happens. Then I saw it. It was the Rune for Bubble.

“Soap bubbles,” I said and thought of blowing bubbles at Aspen. I was sure she would love them.

“Soap is a tricky one,” Taranis said, “Now for Silence.”

Again, I went through the process and finally formed the Rune.

“Excellent,” Taranis praised.

Taranis produced an ornate book and handed it to me.

Basic Grimoire

Would you like to Soul Bind?

Yes/No

I selected ‘Yes’.

Like before, I felt the book being sucked into me.

At the same time the words ‘Grimoire of Luke Solarsmith’ appeared on the book cover.

“A Grimoire is a special type of book. It allows us to record Runes. The one I just gave you is designed to record your learned Runes.

“More pages will be added as needed.

“Now project your Fire Rune onto the first page.”

I opened the book and found only one page. I formed the Rune and projected onto the page. For a moment nothing happened. Then the page accepted the Rune.

In the meantime my silence bubble was doing its thing.

I admired the rune for a moment and said, “It took effort to record the Rune.”

“That’s correct,” Taranis agreed. “It’s only natural to experience some resistance. This is the basis for all runic technology. Flip the page over and project your Compress Rune.”

I recorded my rune and I found a new page. Slowly I recorded Launch, Bubble, and Silence.

After that, Taranis taught me Wind, Harden, Soften, Hover, Light, Spread, and water.

“You asked for soap,” Taranis said. “Soap is a tricky thing. There are many different kinds of soap. In case you are wondering, I spent a few years in your world, traveling from country to country.

“Now what kind of soap do you want?”

“Dish washing soap,” I replied. “When I was young, my mother would dilute it and use it to blow bubbles.”

“I’ll leave that as an exercise,” Taranis said. “Remember to focus on its color, texture, scent, taste and so on. Try to recall the history of the soap, how it is made. Finally, remember soap is an archetype like everything.”

“Damn, for some reason I’m feeling tired,” I said.

Taranis laughed. “Off course,” He said. “We spent almost 4 hours training. It’s past bed time. I’ll contact you later.”

“See you later Teacher,” I said.

“One more thing,” Taranis said. “You’re going to experience a bit of a purge when you finished upgrading your astral body.”

Taranis chuckled and then disappeared.

I dismissed the sound barrier and started practicing the individual Runes.

“You seem happy,” Eric said as he approached. The others were close behind. It seemed they were waiting for my lessons to complete. “You missed dinner by the way.”

“No big deal,” I replied. “I have enough blubber to last a year. If you want, I’ll show you the new Runes Taranis thought me today.”

“Go ahead,” Artemis said. “I love watching magic shows. What’s that book?”

“It’s my grimoire,” I said proudly and opened it.

“It’s empty,” Artemis said.

Slowly I formed the Runes one by one and demonstrate them, except no one could see them. Only when I added manna did they come to life.

“That’s amazing,” Eric said, and the others agreed.

“I still need some crazy practice,” I said. “And I’m just learning the ABCs of Runes. The real fun comes when I compose longer spells from the Runes I know.

“Here’s the funny thing. Taranis claims Runes can create universes with their own laws.”

“I spoke with friends who are playing on Easy,” Artemis said. “It seems all they need to do is just speak the spell or select it from a menu. On the other hand, they have to buy or find spell scrolls.”

“Same with me,” Evelyn said. “There are also equipment with pre-programmed spells.”

“By the way, I can’t contact you,” Eric said. “It said you’re offline.”

“I forgot,” I said. “I turned off my Neurolink.”

I pressed the button at the base of my skull and a moment later Neurolink was back on.

“You can cast spells without your Neurolink?” Evelyn asked, surprised.

“I can,” I said. “I don’t think you can.”

I paused and added with all the seriousness I could muster, “I really think both of you should switch to No Pain, No Gain. Damn. I forgot to ask Taranis. Is the setting Eric is using good enough?”

“I don’t know,” Artemis said doubtfully.

“Turn off your Neurolink and see what happens,” I said. “I’m actually curious.”

Evelyn turns off his Neurolink.

“Okay, try to cast a light spell,” I said.

“I can’t,” Evelyn replied. He immediately turned his Neurolink back on.

“Doesn’t the fact that I can give you the willies?” I asked. “I really think you should both switch. I also think the longer you wait, the harder the change will be.

“Why don’t you both sleep on it? I’m going to spend the next hour training and hit the sack.”

The others left and I continued practicing.

Finally, I headed for bed. This day was long.

That night I dreamt of killing bandits and watching brains splatter.

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-- June 12 --

I got groggily up when I heard the camp bustling.

Next to my bed was a bottle of dishwashing detergent, perfect for making soap bubbles. A present no doubt from Taranis.

The smell of bacon finally woke me. I put some soap on my hand and headed for the line and got food.

“Uncle Luke,” a tiny voice called in her lisping voice. There sitting in her mother’s arms was little Aspen.

“Hi sweetie,” I said and ruffled her hair.

I sat down and ate. However, my attention was on the soap between my fingers. I wanted to finish my homework as soon as possible.

“There’s nothing like the great outdoors to improve the appetite,” I declared.

“Indeed it is,” Brimley agreed and joined me for breakfast.

“Dude, when did you level up?” Eric asked by way of greeting.

I frowned and said, “Let’s just said stuff happened yesterday.”

“How does it feel like to be an E-Rank adventurer?” Artemis asked.

“I feel stronger,” I said. “However, I haven’t completed the process. Taranis said I need to look forward to some sort of purge.”

“That sounds gross,” Eric replied. “Will that happen to me?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Nothing on the forums said you will have an issue.

“Remember, over 427 thousand people have entered this bubble alone since the grand opening in March. Not to mention the other 23 domes. No one has mentioned issues with ranking up. Of course, my path is different than yours, since I have over 15 in both **[Mind]** and **[Willpower]**.”

“Do many people choose you’re your option?” Evelyn asked.

“I have no idea,” I said. “There are no numbers available. That stupid Non-Disclosure Agreement is getting in the way.”

“Everyone, I found an article on the forums,” Evelyn said. “It seems the Australian dome is expanding in size. Current expansion is one acre a day and increasing.

“The official word is they are allowed to do so, since they own the land. However, there are quite a few conspiracy theories.”

I quickly finished breakfast and handed my dishes to the staff.

“What sort of theories?” Eric asked, intrigued.

“The same old things, including alien invasion,” Evelyn said.

“It’s time to go Master Luke,” Wallace said.

“Just call me Raven,” I said. “That’s my in-game name.”

I followed Wallace and we entered the coach.

I once again held Aspen in my arms as we travel. This time Aspen was much livelier as she enjoyed looking out the window and drooling on me.

I, on the other hand, focused on the properties of soap. I figured this would give me greater understanding of Runes.

Although I no longer needed it for Aspen…

Dungeons, Dungeons, Everywhere

How can you call yourself an Adventurer,   
if you never conquered a dungeon?

We arrived at Hiatum City near afternoon.

The city was built on a hill and was surrounded by a security wall. Surrounding it was a patchwork of fields.

We drove through the city gates, and I watched guards play cards.

The cobblestone streets were wide and clean. All around us people were busy with their lives. I couldn’t identify the architecture, but it looked amazing. I couldn’t wait to explore.

Slowly we headed towards the center of the city. The houses looked more expensive, and the people had fancier clothes.

Just like Newbie City, there didn’t appear to be separate residential and commercial areas. People even had crops growing next to their homes.

I recognized the philosophy as the walkable city. This was how it used to be, until the invention of the modern car and gentrification segregated society.

I realized there was a fundamental difference between Players and NPCs. Corrections, residents. Players were always in a rush, trying to wring out every drop of experience they could. After all, it was simply impossible to see every part of any city in the time span available.

The residents were just trying to live their day-to-day lives.

We approached a large palace. It was five stories high and the palace grounds were separated by a wide moat.

As we crossed the moat I looked down and got a surprise. Instead of water I saw a chasm.

The chasm wasn’t empty. I saw cave entrances, vegetation on the walls, and movement. Then we were past it.

Beyond the bridge across the chasm were gardens and sculptures.

“Holy cow, what’s that chasm? It looked spooky,” I asked.

“According to lore, this chasm was created millennium ago in a battle with the demons,” Wallace replied. “It splits the city, and Hiatum literally means chasm in the ancient language.

“Don’t worry. The creatures can’t leave the miasma filling the chasm.”

What would happen if the miasma overflowed? That sounded like an event waiting to happen.

Moments later we arrived at the front of the palace and the caravan stopped.

I stepped out and waited for the others to exit. Moments later my companions arrived.

I passed Aspen over to Brenda and said, “I guess it’s time to leave.”

“But we haven’t rewarded you for healing Aspen,” Wallace objected.

“I got plenty of baby hugs while we were coming here,” I said. “That is enough.”

I turned to the others and said, “Are you ready to get going?”

“Where do you want to go next?” Evelyn asked.

“Not a clue,” I said. “Perhaps we could visit that dungeon. It’s supposed to be a great beginner’s dungeon.”

I messed Aspen’s hair and said, “Be a good girl. See you all later.”

“You’re always welcome Luke,” Brimley assured.

“And Aspen’s birthday is on July 7,” Brenda added.

Attend Aspen’s 1st Year Anniversary (July 7)

Yes/No

“Folks, I just got a quest for that,” I said and selected ‘Yes.’

“Me too,” Artemis said, then Eric and Evelyn.

“I guess we are coming then,” I said.

I waved at the ducal family as I walked towards the chasm.

“How come you’re not staying?” Artemis asked.

“Also, we never got a reward,” Eric points out.

“I didn’t want to stay, because this is getting too real for me, and I am afraid, if I stayed, I would never leave,” I explained. “I promise I will make it up to you folks.

“I should have said, ‘No’ to that quest. However, I hate rejecting quests.”

“I know AI can be indistinguishable from people,” Artemis said. “However, this game takes it to the next level.”

We reached the bridge spanning the chasm and I stepped to the side and look down.

“Damn,” I grumbled. “Why does my willie hurt when I look down from a height?

“Anyways, the duke said this chasm was created during an ancient war. He said the monsters can’t escape the miasma filling the chasm.”

“Those plant things look like coral waving in the currents,” Artemis noted.

“Probably carnivorous,” Evelyn said. “See those motes floating there? It’s eating them.”

“And that tiny creature that came too close,” Eric added.

“That’s no tiny creature,” I said. “I think it’s the size of an elephant. I saw that very same creature in the forests when we were coming here.”

“Spooky, and exciting,” Eric agreed. “Perhaps we can enter if we get protection from the miasma.”

“In the meantime, we should go to the Adventurer’s guild and find out about quests,” Evelyn suggested.

I looked at Evelyn.

“Fine,” Evelyn relented with a sigh. “I will change over. But only if Artemis does the same.”

“Excuse me, but where is the adventurer’s guild hall?” Artemis asked a stranger.

With directions in hand, we started walking.

The architecture was similar to the fishing port city of Newbie City. And like Newbie city, this city had all manner of dark alleys to explore.

We passed a dilapidated building and I jumped when I saw an ominous shadow.

“There is adventure literally under every rock,” I said as I skirted a caved-in part of the street. Barriers were up, protecting the public from falling into the hole.

More inquiries bring us to a Gothic cathedral. Across the street was the adventurer’s guild hall.

“Let’s register our spawn point now,” Eric suggested.

The others agreed and we entered the cathedral.

Do you wish to change your respawn point?

Yes/No

I said ‘yes’.

“We should find a safe secluded place for your update,” I suggested.

“We can ask at the guild,” Artemis said.

We entered and went straight to the front desk.

“Do you have any training rooms we can use?” Artemis asked.

“What sort of training?” Sammi, the assistant asked.

“We need to update our difficulty settings,” Artemis replied.

“The Dogon room is available. Just take the steps to the second floor. It’s the third room on the right,” Sammi replied.

“Thank you Sammi,” Artemis said, and we headed for the stairs.

Artemis just proved something important. Women really could get directions. I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

The room was quickly found and we entered.

The room was small and set up for meditation. We sat on mats on the floor.

After a few moments, Artemis said, “It’s asking me to confirm I want to switch. Now it’s asking me to reallocate my attribute points. I guess it’s rather straightforward.”

“It’s the same for me as well,” Evelyn said.

We waited a bit while they finished up, then Evelyn said, “I didn’t get the option to use **[Essence]** allocation. Is it because my **[Spirit]** is too low?” Evelyn asked.

“I don’t know what all the benefits for **[Essence]** allocation are,” I said. “But it appears that XP allocation is good enough, since the duke uses it. He said meditation was too much trouble for him.”

“Let’s do that dungeon and update to E-Rank,” Eric suggested.

With plan in place, we headed down.

On arriving on the main floor, Eric called out, “Yo Hunter, guys.”

A group of 7 Player Adventurers turned to us. By the way, 7 was the limit to party size.

“Raven, these guys are from our school,” Eric said. “Everyone is from the various sports teams. They are all playing on No Pain, No Gain.

“Also, they are all focused on physical stats.”

“My name is Judge Dredd,” Hunter, aka Dredd said. “Killagin Killmore agreed to be our healer. Annoying game doesn’t have health regen over time.”

Actually it did, if your vitality was high enough. There was no point mentioning that, since stat points were precious.

“Your healer’s name is Killagin Killmore?” Artemis asked, incredulously.

“I wanted to become an assassin,” Killagin explained. “I now bring life to my friends and death to my enemies.”

“There’s nothing like a lady assassin who’s also good in bed…Ouch,” Dredd said as Killagin elbowed him in the ribs.

“Are any of you using **[Essence]** Allocation?” I asked.

“No man,” Judge Dredd replied. “I’m glad I wasn’t offered it, since that sounds like too much trouble.”

“What are your levels now?” I asked.

“We are all E-Rank,” Dredd replied.

“Did you have any issues leveling up to E-Rank?” I asked.

“No,” Dredd replied. “Why would we?”

You are forbidden from   
sharing information on Essence Management details   
with non-party members and non-family.

Accept/Accept

Scary…

“Just curious,” I said. “How did you find the Newbie City quests?”

“They were a cakewalk,” Pummeler replied. “However, that Rat quest was disgusting. I think I still stink. We left the city the first day, then came to this E-Rank city yesterday.”

“We decided to stay since the Rift Breach Raid starts tomorrow,” Dredd said. “And it is rated mid-E-Rank, but it’s considered challenging.”

“What’s that?” Eric asked.

“The event is on the board there,” Dredd said, pointing.

I turned and looked. Sure enough, it was right there for all to see.

“The only problem is that we’ll never be able to finish all those quests,” Prenses Merida, a girl dressed like ranger said. And yes, she was cute.

“We pretty much ranked to E-Rank on the first day. After that the quests became too easy, so we came here,” Baphomet added. “Although all quests are just E-Rank, they are all challenging.”

“How did you get here so fast?” Eric asked.

“We paid extra for a race lizard ride,” Hades explained. “It still took over an hour. I wish this game had fast travel.”

“See you around. We need to head out,” Dredd said.

“Later,” Eric said as the others leave.

We headed for the job boards. After ten minutes of searching we found several quests we decided to do, starting with the dungeon quest.

As we headed for the dungeon I said, “Guys, I got a system message when we were talking to the Marauders. It warned me not to talk about **[Essence]** management details to non-party members and non-family.”

“That’s weird,” Eric said.

“Wait a minute,” Artemis said. “It also said non-family. Does that mean we can tell our relatives?”

“I guess so,” I said. “However, I…Yes. They will also become subject to the NDA agreement.”

“Damn. That is a lot of effort on their part. Why would they not want you to tell anyone so badly?” Evelyn asked. “It’s not as if just anyone can use it.”

“Maybe **[Essence]** management really is a big deal,” Artemis suggested.

“I think so too,” I said. “One more thing; Everyone I see has two bodies. Your physical body and another body, called your Astral body. Taranis told me to pump **[Essence]** into that body. I couldn’t complete it since I ran out of **[Essence]**. But I feel this will double my **[Essence]** requirements.

“Also, I was warned that I will experience some sort of purge.”

“By purge, does that mean you will be making a big poop?” Eric asked.

“How is that possible?” Artemis asked. “Isn’t the System taking care of our bodily needs?”

“My Neurolink auto-disables when I cultivate,” I said. “But why are they so insistent we keep this secret? For instance, I have a blinking icon notifying me that this conversation is being censored.”

“Damn, I just got a gnarly message saying I have to keep **[Essence]** Management secret if I want to continue playing,” Eric said.

“Same here,” Artemis and Evelyn added.

“Sorry about that,” I said sheepishly.

“No problem, Man,” Eric replied. “This just makes the game more fun.”

“Can you help us do the cultivation thing?” Evelyn asked.

“I can,” I replied. “First see if you can increase your **[Spirit]** and **[Perception]**. For me spirit was 27 and Perception was 24. Being able to see those energies flowing through you is amazing. If you are serious, we can do it in the night. Just don’t level up until tonight.”

We arrived at the dungeon.

Spider Queen Lair Dungeon

Instanced Dungeon

“What does instanced dungeon mean?” Artemis asked.

“It means a separate copy of the dungeon will be created for us,” I said. “We must all enter the dungeon at the same time or we will find ourselves by ourselves.”

“Do we need to hold hands?” Artemis asked.

“You and Eric may hold hands,” I replied. “Evelyn and I don’t need to. Eric, care to do the honors? Get ready for an attack.”

Eric took out his sword and stepped through the shimmering curtain. The rest of us followed.

The room was dimly lit by glowing mushrooms. The mushrooms covered the walls and ceiling, but the floor was bare.

As expected, spider webs were everywhere.

We were swarmed by hundreds of spiders. They were all about the size of basket balls.

“Crap,” I exclaimed. “My spells aren’t designed – I don’t have an AOE spell. I guess I’ll use my glaive. Thankfully my strength is now 12.”

“What does AOE mean?” Artemis asked.

“Area of Effect,” I replied. “Like a bomb. Swiping my glaive gives me an AOE of almost 2 meters in radius.”

I demonstrated by swinging my glaive in circles. The blade sliced through spiders, spraying bug guts everywhere. Unfortunately, the spiders were weak, giving only around 5 EP each.

Once we cleared the room, I said, “Just a second. I want to try something.”

I created a fireball and fed it a slow stream of manna. Then I added wind. This generated a 2-meter stream of fire.

“Wait a minute, I also have spread,” I said.

I replaced wind with spread. This generated a circular area of fire.

I then attached fire to my glaive and added wind. I ended up with a small flamethrower.

“I think we have a winner,” I said. “Okay we can go now.”

The next room was about the same, except the spiders were slightly bigger. We quickly cleared this room and moved on.

As we entered the next room, spiders literally dropped from the ceiling.

Artemis screamed in freight as a spider landed on her head. Eric chopped it in half a moment later, giving Artemis a bug shower in the process.

“Raven,” Artemis shouted. “This is your fault. This wouldn’t have happened if I were still on Easy mode.”

“Yes, but this is more fun,” Eric insisted.

“You have a sick sense of fun,” Artemis grumbled as she swatted spiders with her bow.

“Barbeque spiders smell gross,” Evelyn grumbled as I lit up spiders with my glaive. I avoided the flammable webs.

Artemis unstrung her bow, turning it into a passable staff. This made it easier for her to kill bugs.

The next room contained closely separated stone pillars over green smelly liquid.

“Oh great, we have a ‘The floor is lava’ room,” Eric grumbled.

Just then spiders start spitting blobs of goo.

This time Artemis has the advantage and started firing arrows in rapid session.

I focused on burning web blobs. They turn into fiery balls, and so I stopped.

“Damn, I really need a shield,” Eric grumbled. “Come here and fight like real men, you cowards. Real men fight hand-to-hand.”

Not surprisingly the spiders ignored Eric’s taunting.

Slowly we cross the chamber one pillar at a time.

“Guys, we better hurry,” Evelyn suggested in a slightly panicked voice. “The pillars are sinking.”

Sure enough, the pillars are slightly shorter than before.

Worst yet, the entrance was now closed.

“Wait a minute,” Eric said. “The soldiers said this wasn’t hard.”

I blasted wind at a spider, and it fell into the green goo. It struggled in vain before dying.

“This is scary,” Artemis squeaked as we crossed the room.

Finally, we reached the opposite end of the room. Unfortunately, the entrance was too far above our heads.

“Well, that’s just dandy,” Eric grumbled and punched the wall.

A moment later the green goo drained away, and the pillars lower to the ground.

“Huh,” Eric mumbled. “Apparently the goal is to just reach the opposite end.”

Below the exit was now another exposed exit. We passed through to the next room.

This was a tall room with a staircase to the original exit.

I didn’t have time to admire the room, since the next wave of spiders was upon us. These spiders had vicious pincers.

“Aah,” I screamed as a spider bit me. A moment later it was ash as I vaporize it.

That one was Level-10.

“Guys, I am really starting to hate spiders,” Artemis grumbled. “No more spiders from now on. And no more rats. Skip it. Just no more vermin, do you agree?”

“Whatever you say Artemis,” Eric said. “On the bright side, we are getting plenty of loot.”

The next room contained bear-sized spiders with faces on their abdomens.

“Guys, forget about what I said and just level up,” I suggested. “These new monsters are just creeping me out.”

“I quite agree,” Artemis said. “These Rank E-1 monsters are terrifying.”

“And we can expect up to mid-E-Rank,” Evelyn agreed.

Just then the spiders screeched, the sound coming from the fang-filled man-face.

I took out my iron pellets and started firing.

The room was filled with sounds of screeching, splattering bugs and the smell of burnt flesh as Evelyn fired off laser beams.

Slowly we cleared out the room until spider corpses were the only thing left.

“On the bright side, we are getting plenty of XP,” Eric said. “I’m already at E-Rank 3.”

“Same here,” Artemis and Evelyn agree.

“What about you, Raven?” Eric asked.

“Don’t know,” I replied. “I can’t rank up while in battle.”

In front of us were large, closed doors.

“I guess we are at the boss-room,” I said.

Eric strolled forward and kicked the doors open.

This boss room contained a jumble of rocks, making the footing trenchers.

At the far end of the room was the queen. It had the top part of a humanoid creature. The eyes were almond-shaped and pitch black.

The queen screeched and waves of spiders attacked.

Unfortunately, the room was covered with spider webs. I couldn’t use fire.

This didn’t affect Evelyn who fired his laser beams.

Slowly we waded through biting, stinging, gross spiders.

Eventually the spider wave ended.

“Finally,” Artemis said. She spoke too soon.

The queen screeched. A new wave entered.

“Damn, my clothes are shredded,” I grumbled as I kicked off a clingy dead spider.

“These spiders seem endless,” Eric grumbled. “What should we do?”

“We will need to kill the boss,” I said, “Unless you want to farm these creatures.”

“No thank you,” Artemis grumbled.

“Try shooting the queen Artemis,” I suggested.

Artemis fired and the arrow bounced off her furry abdomen. It however enraged the queen, causing it to charge.

Within moments we were fighting not only the queen, but the ads as well.

If only we could create a barrier. Unfortunately, I didn’t know that rune. Perhaps I could fake it.

“I have an idea folks,” I said.

How do I form a barrier? I could use a shaped bubble. It couldn’t be too tall, or we couldn’t fight.

As I swung my glaive I focused on my barrier.

The bubble started as a sphere and then extended into a worm that surrounded us.

That didn’t stop the spiders, but what if I added harden?

It was slow going. I found swinging by glaive and forming Runes at the same time rather tricky.

Suddenly the concept for Barrier formed in my mind.

“BARRIER,” I shouted as I formed the rune.

A few spiders got chopped in half as the barrier formed. The spiders could no longer enter. Some tried to climb the invisible barrier but failed.

“Raven, you gave me a scare,” Arteries complained.

“Sweet, an invisible barrier,” Eric exclaimed happily. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I just found my first new rune. Taranis never thought me the Barrier spell.”

“Woo Hoo,” Eric cheered for me.

With the ads no longer in the way, we could focus on the queen.

It was a tough battle, but slowly the queen’s health went down.

Unfortunately the barrier was temporary. The spiders were climbing over each other, making a ladder.

Without a long range weapon, Eric focused on clearing the spiders.

I took out my pellets and fired them. Unlike the bandits, the queen’s entire body was armored. However, she wasn’t immune. Slowly cracks appear on her flat chest.

“Finally,” Eric shouted as the queen disintegrated.

Moments later the spider ads dissolved onto smoke and disappeared. At the same time, a portal appears next to us.

A wooden chest formed and I dispersed my barrier. Eric opened it.

“Shield of the spider queen,” Eric shouted, “Sweet.”

“A holy staff,” Evelyn said and took his reward.

Artemis got a new bow and I got a new glaive.

“I am now **[E-Rank 4]** now,” Eric gloated.

“I admit conquering this dungeon feels good,” Artemis admitted.

“I made around 457 silvers,” Eric said. “That’s 4 gold, baby. It’s time for lunch.”

We exited and reappeared in the abandoned house of some forgotten noble.

Stepping out we headed to the nearest pub.

The *Sleepy Pub and Inn* was busy, belying its name.

“When will you level up?” Eric asked.

“I’ll do so at night,” I said. “Maybe I should do it in the woods, because of the purge. Taranis gave me dish washing detergent and I can produce water.”

“That’s sounds funny to watch,” Eric said. “Can I watch?”

“Sure, why not?” I said. “Bring nose plugs.”

The server arrived and I asked for ale and the house special. The others order and the server left.

“That’s gross,” Artemis said with a groan. “Why must boys be gross?”

“Gross is part of life,” Eric argued. “I just want to see how gross this game can get.”

“Well, you can count me out,” Artemis declared.

Evelyn hesitated and then said, “I’ll go train.”

“Dude don’t wimp out,” Eric objected. “Do the manly thing and come watch.”

“Don’t corrupt Evelyn,” Artemis scolded.

“I notice that it takes more monsters to level up,” Eric said.

“That’s correct,” I said. “When we were F-Rank, we needed 10 monsters one-level above us. Now we are E-Level. That means we need 50 monsters one level above us. For D-Rank, it is 250. Each is 5 times greater than the previous.”

“That makes sense,” Eric said. “I think. I have no idea what you just said.”

“Long story short, the stronger we get, the tougher the challenges we face,” I simplified.

“That’s cool,” Eric said slowly.

“You really didn’t understand that?” Evelyn asked, surprised.

“Relax,” I said. “Eric is just playing his part. Remember, Eric is a Red-Blooded barbarian from one of the northern tribes. His father, the village chief booted him from the village. Now he has to go forth and prove his right to be village chief when the time comes.”

“Thanks for that back story,” Eric said. “That reminds me. I need to grow a manly beard. Perhaps get a few tattoos. And some fake scars.”

The server came with the food. It smelled delicious.

“So Raven, how do you explain your copper colored hair?” Eric asked.

“I am a Solarsmith, aren’t I?” I asked. “This is the color of the dawn sun at the spring equinox when it rises over Stonehenge in England.”

“Is that true?” Artemis asked.

“No,” I replied. “I’m just joking. Here’s the funny thing. The Irish tend to have large families, although this is changing. I only have 2 brothers and 3 sisters.”

“That’s small?” Evelyn asked, surprised.

“My dad has 8 siblings, and my grandfather has 11,” I said. “However, only my great grandfather, my grandfather, my father, and I have this particular hair color. I know for a fact my first-born son will have this hair color, regardless of who I marry. Genealogists refuse to believe it and said we are just irrational yokels.”

“Oh man, you’re like a rock star,” Eric gushed. “Are you sure you’re not an NPC in this game?”

I laughed.

We finished eating and Eric said, “Why don’t you do that purge thing now?”

“Sure, why not?” I said. “There are plenty of secluded places. But first let’s go to the store.”

We paid and left the inn.

Arriving at the store, we went to the exchange area. This was the only area in the store where we could use our storage.

I quickly took out my looted items and gave it to the clerk. The redemption prices were crap, but I didn’t need the items.

After that I looked around and found some monster soap. The sign claimed the soap could clean any and all dirt and grime. I bought it, along with some sturdier rogue clothes.

I couldn’t think of anything else to buy, so I waited for the others.

Finally we stepped out of the store.

With the help of Artemis, we found a secluded area.

“I’ll be waiting there,” Artemis said and walked away.

“I’ll join you,” Evelyn said and followed her.

I undressed and sat cross-legged. I placed the monster soap next to me. It was time for completing my level up.

I focused on the energy circulating around my spine. I pulled it upwards and tried to pump it into my astral body. At first nothing happens. I knew I did it before, so what was the problem. I persisted until finally there was a give.

The energy flowed and once again my astral soaked the energy.

Suddenly I realized the task was complete.

Vitality + 10

Mind + 5

Willpower + 5

Spirit + 5

Perception + 5

Well that was easy, and the stat boost was a nice bonus. I was about to get up when some sort of damn broke.

From out of every pore in my body disgusting substances came out. Ear wax, nose boogers, eye snot, body slime, it was all there and more. I even barfed out of both ends. That was super embarrassing.

“Dude, that’s nasty?” Eric replied as he half laughed, half gagged.

I got up and formed the water rune over my head. I then grabbed the soap. Slowly I scrubbed myself clean.

For a good ten minutes I cleaned myself. I then stepped away from the slime and did it again.

“How much longer?” Artemis asked. “I can smell some kind of stink monster nearby.”

“Are you in danger?” Evelyn asked worriedly.

Eric laughed hysterically. He stopped when a choking fit overcame him.

“That’s no stink monster,” Eric replied, still laughing. “That’s Raven purging himself out of every opening. I wish I recorded it for America’s funniest videos.

“By the way, Raven was right. His underwear did disappear when he meditated. It was freaky, and incredibly sexy.”

I rolled my eyes and continued cleaning.

“Have you finished leveling up?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m now fully **[E-Rank 1]**. I still have more **[Essence]** to allocate, but I can leave it for tonight.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to do that,” Eric said as I finished up.

Finally, I put my clothes back on and we reunited with the others.

“That was an experience I don’t need,” Evelyn said.

“Did you get anything special?” Eric asked.

“I raised my brain stats by 5 each, and my vitality by 10,” I said.

I paused and then noticed the void in my stomach. It seemed to have expanded. Out of curiosity, I took my new glaive and tried to place it there. To my surprise it entered.

I examined it more and then said, “I did find something new. I can store stuff inside of me. The size is around 1 cubic meter. I can now store stuff without losing it should I get killed.”

“Those are useful gains,” Eric said.

“I suppose,” I said. “I do need double the **[Essence]** or XP as any of you.”

We returned to the main street.

“Is it my imagination, or are there more players?” Evelyn asked.

“That’s probably tomorrow’s event,” Eric said.

“So, what’s our next quest on the list?” I asked.

“No bugs, no vermin,” Artemis said adamantly.

“I would like to add, no bandit killing,” I added. “Although, logically speaking they probably respawn like us.”

“That removes 3 quests from the list. Fine,” Eric said. “We better get more quests.”

After a five-minute walk we arrived at the guild hall.

As we entered, we heard complaining, “What’s the deal? That Spider Queen Lair Dungeon is impossible.”

“You’re telling me,” Someone in the crowd grumbled. “My entire party bit it. So much for my clean streak.”

“Damn,” Eric whistled. “That barrier saved our asses. You’re the boss Raven.”

We reached the boards and started looking for quests.

“You’re embarrassing me,” I complained.

“You found a barrier spell?” a man named Blazer asked. “Did you buy that spell or get it in a quest?”

Blazer was my dad’s age. Perhaps I should use this to convince my parents to come. Unfortunately, except for my eldest sister, all my siblings were too young. But I mustn’t forget my cousins, uncles and aunts.

“That was a hidden quest,” I said.

“Why did you lie?” Eric whispered.

“NDA, remember,” I reminded Eric. “And it’s not a lie. Think of it as a quest chain. Fortunately, that restriction will expire March of next year. I guess they will do some sort of anniversary thing.

“Come, let’s get our new quests.”

Eric retrieved a quest item and asked, “How about this? Local farmers are having trouble with giant ratvargs. These are like aardvarks but much uglier.”

“That’s a good one,” Artemis said. “For some reason I want to kill them. Let’s do it.”

“That’s good, since there are hundreds to deal with,” Eric said.

“That will use up the entire day,” Evelyn noted.

“True,” Eric agreed. “But the mobs are around **[E-Rank 5]**.”

We headed to the counter to register our quest and cancel other quests.

With paperwork done, we headed to the city gates and the farms beyond. I set the pace since I was the slowest.

“We won’t be able to reach D-Rank by tomorrow,” Evelyn noted.

“True,” Eric said. “However, the only way to reach D-Rank is by tackling D-Rank quests. So why not leave it for tomorrow, when we have backup?”

“I wish we had horses or something,” Artemis grumbled.

“Horses are 20 gold each,” Eric reminded us. “Don’t worry. We’ll have it all when we finish.”

“No big deal,” I said. “I’m just enjoying the fact I can run so much without dying.”

We passed the city gates and out into the countryside.

A small but steady stream of people passed us on the main road.

I began running and the others followed. “Man, it feels good to run,” I said. “Hopefully we will arrive soon.”

For the next 47 minutes I jogged and ran with my friends following me.

“There it is,” Eric exclaimed.

Yup, we arrived. The ratvargs were everywhere, chewing up the ground and wrecking the crops. The cows in a nearby field were being turned into hamburger, and the farmers couldn’t do anything about it.

“It’s show time,” I said.

I fired a pellet…and it bounced off the armor of the ratvarg. “Heads up every,” I said. “Their shells are hard as rock.”

“Try flipping them over,” Evelyn suggested. Eric ran to the nearest ratvarg and did that, then stabbed down with his sword.

I was distracted for a moment until a ratvarg charged me.

*‘Calm down’*, I said to myself and focused on slowing my heart. I then took aim at the creature’s eyes and fired.

The shot went true and punched through the monster’s brain. That’s one down for me, over a hundred to go.

Off in the distance a dozen ratvargs charged.

“Luke, can you do some crowd control?” Eric asked.

“I’ll use my barrier,” I said. If only I could see the barrier. Then I noticed the grass was disturbed.

Intuitively I spun the barrier and the grass underneath got mowed, clearly showing where the barrier resided.

The barrier appeared just in time. The leading ratvarg crashed into it and flipped head over tail onto its back. Eric immediately stabbed it in the stomach.

“I’m having a problem penetrating their stupid hides,” Artemis complained.

“This is definitely a bad quest for us,” Evelyn complained.

“I’m trying to add fire, but this will take time. Tell me if you want me to change the barrier height.”

“This is good enough for now,” Eric replied and continued to hack at the monsters.

I idly noted the creatures didn’t seem to feel pain. They just seemed to be an incarnation of raw aggression. Were there other types of monsters that expressed other types of negative emotion?

I shook my head. I was getting distracted.

I visualized a flattened disk outside the barrier. Confident in my image, I formed the fire rune and charged the disk.

At first nothing happened, but then there was a glow in the air.

“It’s working,” Eric exclaimed. “The monster’s health points are dropping.”

True. The monsters were taking damage, but it was painfully slow. I couldn’t increase my energy draw, since that would exceed my regen, and then we would be doomed. On the bright side, my increased stats were coming in handy.

It was a slow process of stab and hack.

“Here use this,” Eric said when Artemis ran out of arrows.

“Perhaps I should get a glaive too for emergencies,” Artemis said. “This sword is hard to use.”

“Here, use mine,” I said and handed over my new glaive. “I’ll just focus on magic.”

We continued battling for what seemed like eternity as a seemingly endless stream of ratvargs attacked.

Almost 2 hours later every monster was defeated. I released my spells and I rested on the ground, exhausted.

“Damn, those creatures were hard,” Eric grumbled. “Sorry guys. I thought it would be easy, since each ratvarg was only about **[E-Rank 5]**. We will need to do more research when selecting quests.”

“The worst is, we only got 2 levels from those monsters,” Evelyn grumbled.

“When we hit D-Rank, we will need even more monsters,” Artemis grumbled.

“And I’ve reached the limits of my spell casting for continuous spells,” I added.

“You said continuous spells,” Evelyn noted.

“That’s correct,” I said. “I can use stronger spells. However, I’ll run out of manna if I’m not careful. But the level-up did help.”

Because of my AOE spells, I actually got over double the **[Essence]** as the others. I decided to use just enough to level up, keeping the rest in reserve for when it was time to transition to D-Rank.

“What should we do now?” Evelyn asked. “It’s almost 6:00PM.”

“Let’s eat dinner, and then I will help you all to learn to meditate,” I suggested.

“If we do that, will we be able to the things you can do?” Evelyn asked.

“I don’t know,” I hedged. I was reluctant to tell them how much time people took to be good at meditating. “I’m just speculating. More importantly, quite a few studies have shown how useful meditation can be in life. In other words, this will benefit you even when you return to real life.”

“Okay, let’s sell our loot first,” Eric suggested.

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Dinner and shopping over, it was time to train. We gathered in Evelyn and my room.

“So, everyone, in theory meditation is the easiest thing in the world. That is because we are not actually doing anything,” I said, beginning my lecture.

I Looked around and then said, “That being said, doing nothing can sometimes be the hardest thing in the world. That’s because of our monkey brains. Its only desire is to indulge in the 7 deadly sins.

“Enough talking and let’s start,” I said and started playing some music.

“How did you do that?”Eric asked, surprised.

“The magic store was selling a display and sound system option for our Cyberlinks,” I replied. “It cost me most of my money and it’s just a quality-of-life thing, but I think it’s worth it.

“Here is the secret to true meditation,” I explained. “While in true meditation we are actually sleeping. That’s non-REM sleep to be precise. But with full conscious awareness.”

“Seriously?” Eric asked, shocked.

“Yup,” I replied. “You don’t have to worry about that now.”

“Do we need to sit cross-legged?” Artemis asked.

“Nope,” I replied. “You just need to be comfortable, so you can forget your body. We will start with a half-hour meditation.”

Taking a deep breath, I began speaking. Slowly the time ticked by and finally the time ran out.

“So how was it?” I asked my friends.

“I had no idea you had such a peaceful voice,” Eric said. “It was easier than I expected.”

“That’s because I used hypnosis techniques on you,” I replied. “Remember I’m just a guide and this is just the beginning.”

“When did you start meditating?” Artemis asked.

“Since before I was 5,” I replied. “My entire family is very religious when it comes to meditation. We spend 1 hour a day in shared meditation. That doesn’t include private meditation.”

“Will we be able to do what you can do if you hypnotize us?” Evelyn asked.

“No,” I replied. “Think of this as learning to paint. It will take hundreds of hours to master. The good news is, once you get over the hump, everything starts to snowball. Then it becomes a joy to meditate.”

“So, anyone can do this?” Artemis asked.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “However, not everyone has the patience to do it. Take Duke Wallace for example. He doesn’t meditate because he thinks it’s too much trouble. And once you switch over, there is no going back.”

I paused and then said, “I would love to train little Aspen. So, do you want to try another half-hour session, or do you want to call it the night?”

“Let’s call it the night,” Eric said, answering for the others. “You said meditation is doing nothing. However, doing nothing is exhausting.”

After Eric and Artemis left, I got comfortable and then entered deep meditation and leveled up.

**Raven Solarsmith**

**Stats**

**Level:** E-Rank 5

**Raw Essence:** 123

**Refined Essence:** 270 of 8,000

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** (12+3) 15

**Agility:** (12+2) 14

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** (11+3) 14

**Vitality:** 21

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 22

**Willpower:** 21

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 24

**Perception:** 20

**HP (hit points):** 600 of 600

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

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“So did you level up last night?” Eric asked as we headed for breakfast.

“I’m at E-5 now,” I replied. “Unfortunately, my lowest attribute level is 14. As a result, I could only raise my total attributes by 8 levels.”

“Shouldn’t it be 10, since you got up 2 levels?” Evelyn asked.

“As I mentioned before, the higher my levels, the more expensive it gets for me. I could level up really fast before because before my physical stats were non-existent.

“I will only be able to raise my brain stats when we start tackling D-Rank monsters.”

“Does that mean XP allocation is better?” Eric asked.

“For the time it seems that way, especially since I require twice the XP as you,” I replied. “On the bright side, that did boost my brain stats by 5 and Vitality by 10. I guess it doesn’t matter as long as we are having fun. It’s time to eat. I’m starving.”

“How did you get so much XP, considering we were always together?” Eric asked.

I sighed and said, “My pellet gun is uniquely suited to taking out bandits.” I shuddered. “It felt like killing real people. This place is going to traumatize a few people.”

“And create a few serial killers,” Artemis added. “Let’s stick to monster hunting.”

Making new Friends

Meeting new friends gives spice to our lives.

Annie stood on top of a pile of monster copses, whipping her two whips around her as hard as she possibly could.

Seemingly with minds of their own, the whips shredded the monsters with their embedded blades and the elemental currents running through them.

Her best friend Linda was using a gun-like weapon to attack monsters. A little over once every second the device would [**Launch]** a tiny iron pellet as Linda charged the spell formation with manna. The marbles were dispensed from a feeder from the top.

Monsters that got too close got kicked from her vicious boots.

The attackers were an assortment of monsters, each requiring a different type of magic to defeat.

Slowly but surely, the tide of monsters streaming from the chasm lessened and then finally stopped.

The blades on Annie’s whips retracted and she put her whips away. “Oh man I’m exhausted.”

“Same here,” Linda sighed. “And the worst part is that I only got enough Essence for 2 levels at most. Low level monsters are annoying.”

“I agree,” Annie agreed. “Come. Let’s sell our loot.” She laughed and added, “I bet Uncle Wally will be surprised to see us.”

They followed the crowd of exhausted adventurers to the nearby shops.

“I heard our troops attacked a demon convoy,” Linda commented.

Annie nodded. “I heard that too. I also heard they were carrying some sort of amazing treasure.”

“I heard it fell in the Lost Lands,” Linda said. “That means we can potentially get it, since we aren’t members of either force.”

They entered the store, and a clerk immediately came to them, to the consternation of several customers.

“How may I help you Highness?” the clerk asked with a bow.

“We are here to sell our loot from today’s raid,” Annie replied.

“Right this way,” the man said and they followed.

As they were leaving the store, Linda said, “Those were better prices than I expected.”

“I agree,” Annie said. “I guess it’s true. They really want to suck as many Rounders in as they can.”

“It’s only a matter of time before hell breaks loose on an unsuspecting world,” Linda said.

“Millions of people are going to die,” Annie said angrily. “And there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We can’t help it,” Linda said. “We both just turned 16 less than a month ago. We have barely a week of actual hunting under our belts.”

“Maybe I should have stayed and absorbed essence…No, that would not have worked,” Annie said, contradicting herself.

They crossed the bridge over the seemingly bottomless chasm. Above them the stars came out as night settled over the city.

The area in front of the duke’s palace was filled with people, celebrating the completion of the raid.

Also in front was Annie’s uncle.

Annie charged forward, forcing her way through the crowd. She suddenly stopped when she noticed that Wally was talking to a boy with distinct hair. She paused to verify the hair. That was the real thing. Only one family had that particular hair color.

Above the boy’s head was displayed “Raven Solarsmith (Player)”.

Annie ignored the “Player” part, since she also had that designation.

“**You**,” Annie shouted and pointed, glaring at Raven. “**What the hell are you doing here?**”

“Annie, kindly speak in English,” Wally scolded.

“**Why should I?**” Annie shouted. “**I’m not speaking to a Rounder.**”

A girl named Artemis asked in English, “Raven, who is that girl? Why is she glaring and shouting at you?”

A large teen named Eric next to Raven asked, “Dude, did you cheat on her, leaving her pregnant? That’s not nice.”

Artemis slapped Eric’s shoulder and said, “Stop talking nonsense.”

“I assure you; I have never seen this girl in my entire life,” Raven said defensively. “I don’t even know what language she is speaking in.”

“A case of mistaken identity,” Evelyn said with a nod.

Annie switched to English and declared, “I assure you there is no mistaking a Solarsmith.

“Let’s make something absolutely clear. I refuse to enter an arranged marriage with you or anyone else,” Annie announced.

Eric leaned backwards and roared in laughter, turning quite a few heads.

“Oh man Raven, life with you is never boring,” Eric declared.

“I’m sorry but I have no clue as to who you are,” Raven said.

“Prove it,” Annie demanded.

“Annie dear, how is he supposed to prove he doesn’t know you?” Wally asked.

“Annie, you claimed you are in an arranged marriage with me. Is that correct?” Raven asked.

“Of course,” Annie declared, still glaring.

“In that case, your parents would have come to some sort of agreement with my parents. Wouldn’t you agree?” Raven asked.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?” Annie asked with a sneer.

“In that case, why don’t you talk to my parents?” Raven asked. “This is Sunday, so they should be home.”

“And how are we going to talk to them?” Annie asked. “They are in Terra Plana, and we are here.”

Before he could say anything, a tiny lisping voice called, “Uncle Luke.”

Aunt Brenda was holding little Aspen. Aspen reached her hands out to Raven and Raven took her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Holy cow,” Annie said, surprised. “Aspen can talk.”

“Hi Cousin Annie, Linda,” Aspen said and gave Annie and Linda big smiles.

For a moment Annie was distracted by the newly arrived Aspen. Then she remembered. “You said you were going to contact your parents,” Annie demanded.

“Just a second,” Raven said and waited a few seconds. Then a rectangular screen appeared in front of them. On the screen was a group of people.

She didn’t recognize anyone. However, she knew the Solarsmith hair. That must be the father and mother.

Annie switched to her native language and asked, “**Majesties, is it true that you have arranged for me to marry your son?”**

“Speak English dear,” Wally scolded. “They cannot understand you.”

“Yes dear, we have no idea what you are saying,” Raven’s mother said.

“I am Annie Von Agate of the country of Agatha, youngest daughter of King Legared and Queen Anarath. Does that ring a bell? My parents told me I was to marry the son of a Solarsmith.”

“I’m sorry dear, but Agatha is no country we know of,” Raven’s mother said. “Also, we don’t believe in arranged marriages. We would never force any of our children into an arranged marriage.”

“More importantly, aren’t you a little too young for marriage?” Raven’s father asked with a frown.

“Why would you think we are forcing Luke to marry you? Luke, what have you been telling this girl?” Raven’s, corrections, Luke’s mother asked sternly.

“Nothing mother,” Luke objected. “I just met her, and she started shouting.”

“Then how do you explain Luke’s hair?” Annie asked. “Only the legitimate king, crown prince and all legitimate first-born sons may have that hair color. That is a quirk of your royal family. His hair is proof. It can’t be faked to those who know.”

“Did you say Luke is a crown prince?” an 11-year-old boy asked as he stuck his head into the screen.

“Did you say our parents are royalty?” a girl asked.

“It is true that our hair has been passed down for hundreds of years,” Luke’s father conceded. “However, I can assure you we are not royalty. Then again, our ancestor claimed he came from a magical land where he was a prince.

“Once again I assure you your parents never contacted us,” Luke’s father declared. “If your parents arranged a marriage with Luke, it’s without our permission, consent or knowledge.”

“I apologize,” Annie said and bowed. “It appears I jumped to conclusions. It’s just that I want to decide on my own fate.”

“We understand dear,” Luke’s mother said. “Our world believes in equality…” Luke’s mother paused and then said in shock, “Oh my God. You’re from another world, aren’t you? You’re from Agatha. Is Borostein also real?”

“Yes ma’am,” Annie answered. “That’s where the Solarsmiths rule.”

“Luke just where are you?” Luke’s father asked.

“I don’t know dad,” Luke said. “I entered that strange bubble in Australia, and the whole world seems to be turning on its head.

“This place feels so real. I can meditate more deeply than you can possibly imagine. I can feel it in my very bones. I wish you would both come here. I would like your opinion on what is happening. This is no game.”

An old man with the same hair as Luke entered the scene. “Maybe going there might be a good idea. I had a feeling in my bones that Quantum Entertainment is run by a bunch of crooks.”

“Please come, all of you,” Luke urged. “Remember to play with the settings ‘No Pain, No Gain’, and then select Essence Allocation as your upgrade strategy. Once you do that you will start to understand.”

“I think we should do as Luke suggests,” the grandfather said.

“You have convinced me,” Luke’s father said. “We will book some vacation time and then come over as soon as possible.”

“Luke, please introduce us to all your friends,” Luke’s mother scolded.

Luke made introductions.

Harold, Brenda’s younger brother and Aspen’s uncle said, “So Emily, will you be coming too? We can be in the same party, and I can teach you our language. Parties have a 7-member team limit.”

Emily twirled her hair around her fingers and said, “I would love to. Well little brother. You convinced me to play this game of yours and meet some of your friends.”

Romance was certainly in the air.

“Bye Luke and please be safe,” the mother said with a worried face. In the background a gaggle of kids waved. A moment later the screen went blank and disappeared.

“Annie, Linda, why don’t you two have some dinner?” Wally asked. “You two must be starving.”

“That’s a good idea,” Eric said as they headed for the food tables.

“But you just ate,” Artemis scolded.

“I can’t help it,” Eric complained. “I’m a growing barbarian.”

“Attention everyone,” Wally announced. “Thank you for protecting our fair city from the monsters lurking just below the surface. I hope you enjoyed the food we have provided.

“By now I’m sure you have realized something important. This domain only contains F-Rank and E-Rank monsters and bandits.

“The base of the cliff behind me contains a passageway to a D-Rank domain. Unfortunately, it is guarded by a demon gate. To pass that gate, you will need to pay the toll.

“For everyone playing on Easy, the toll is 666 XP.

“For medium, the toll is 6,660 XP.

“For hard, the toll 66,600 XP.

“Finally for No Pain, No Gain, the toll is 666,000 XP.”

The crowd erupted into complaints, interrupting Wally. The costs for different players didn’t seem fair. People wanted 666 XP for all players.

Wally waited until the shouting died down and then said, “Yes, I know. The toll is exuberant for elite players. However, I assure all elite players, the costs are well worth it.

“The good news is anyone who pays the toll will get a key. This will allow you to pass freely between here and all advanced zones. Keep in mind; this is just one of many areas you may visit.

“However, I need to give you a warning. Anyone who dies there will respawn in a cathedral in this domain. They will then lose their key.”

This elicited another shouting match from the adventurers.

“It’s a good deal,” Annie said as she ate her food. “The normal cost for respawning is 777,000 XP or Essence Points.”

“I have to warn players playing on Easy, Medium, and Hard mode. If you die in an advanced zone, you will lose all equipment not in a soul-bound or game-bound ring.”

That caused more grumbling.

“I have one final announcement. My granddaughter Aspen will turn one on July 17. I will announce a major event then.

“Enjoy your meal, and above all have fun.”

Wally stepped down from the podium and joined the gang.

“So, what did you think?” Wally asked.

“We are close to D-Rank,” Luke said. “I think we should achieve that, and then work for that key. That will make collecting Essence faster. We still have time before aspen’s birthday.”

“Why don’t you and your party stay with us in the meantime,” Brimley suggested.

“Yes,” Brenda agreed. “It will make Aspen happy.”

Aspen clapped her hands and said, “Yes.”

“Do you have enough space?” Artemis asked.

“Of course,” Wally replied. “The palace has over 500 guest rooms. Right now, most of the rooms are empty.”

“Okay we can do that,” Luke said. “By the way I am helping my friends learn to meditate. I would like you to join us. It’s only for half-hour a night.”

“I guess I can’t say no,” Wally admitted. “However, the last time I mediated was when I was a teenager. I hated it and considered it a colossal waste of time.”

“Excellent, then that’s settled,” Luke said with a smile.

Annie finished eating and put her plate away. A moment later, Linda put her plate away as well.

“I seem the last to finish,” Eric said and gobbled the last of his food.

Annie frowned at Eric and said, “Uncle Wally, do you have work, or can we do our joined meditation now?”

“Come, I’ll take you to our meditation room,” Wally said.

As they headed in, Eric asked, “You are both E-Level, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Annie replied. “E-6 for both of us.”

“What a coincidence. We are at the same level,” Eric said. “By the way, did you experience the purge?”

Annie and Linda both grimaced and both looked nauseous.

“Why was that purge thing so disgusting? I’m guessing 2 to 3 percent of the players experienced that,” Luke said.

“Less than that,” Wally said. “More like 1 in a 1000. And that’s being generous. Just because a person is capable of it, doesn’t mean they will play at the highest possible setting. Real life is hard. Why did you do it?”

Everyone entered a large comfortable room designed for meditation.

“My parents thought me to always go with all I’ve got,” Luke said. “Second, I always play video games on their hardest settings. You gain the maximum experience that way, even if you get your butt handed to you countless times. Also, my followers prefer that.

“Also, at the time I was convinced this world was fake and so could never really get hurt.

“By the way, I led the meditation yesterday for my friends. How do you want to do this now?”

“You may do it,” Wally replied.

“Are you sure?” Luke asked.

“Of course,” Wally said. “Just sit there and we will begin.”

“Okay I’ll start with a half-hour session,” Luke said and placed Aspen on a pillow next to him.

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I completed the session and said, “How was that?”

“That was amazing,” the duke said. “It makes me wondered why I stopped.”

“That was excellent,” Brenda said. “Can we do it again?”

I looked at Aspen, peacefully sleeping next to me.

“It will probably take a month to collect the toll for the gate,” I said. “I guess we can do this every day till then.”

“What kind of martial arts training have you been doing?” Annie asked.

“None,” I replied. “Until now I’ve been a couch potato.”

“We are new to English,” Annie said. “You keep using words I don’t understand. What’s a couch potato, video games, followers?”

“Speaking of language, what was that you were speaking?” I asked.

“The known multiverse has a few languages that are shared by countless species,” Annie explained. “Babel is the most prevalent among the humanoid races in this segment of the multiverse.”

“Does that mean there are other universes out there?” Eric asked excitedly. “That’s so cool.”

“Not quite,” Annie said. “Think of the universe as a giant onion. The universe as you understand it is just the outermost layer. And just like a real onion, it is dry and crusty. It’s a wasteland.

“Just below that layer is another layer containing a little more life force. We come from that layer, and it is vastly different than your layer.”

“I find it strange that your world is round,” Linda commented.

“What’s stranger are all the languages you all have,” Annie said.

“Can you teach us that Babel language of yours?” Evelyn asked.

“No problem,” Linda replied. “Truth be told, Babel is an easier language than English and other Earth languages. For instance, words for things and professions have no gender. And there is only one way to pronounce words, making it easier to understand each other.”

“From now until we get our quota, we will only speak in Babel,” Annie declared.

“Okay,” I said, surprised that she would join our group so quickly. I checked my party list and saw them listed.

“Okay,” Annie scolded.

“Okay,” I repeated.

“It’s time to put Aspen to bed,” Brenda announced, “Good night all of you.”

The duke must have called someone, because the door opened, and a butler-type man entered.

“Yes, your grace?” the man asked.

“Please escort our guests to their VIP suites. They will be staying with us for the next month or so,” the duke said. “Also, inform all staff that they must speak to our guests only in Babel. They need to learn our language.”

“As you wish Your Grace,” the man said. He turned to us and said with a bow, “Please follow me esteemed guests.”

Terra Plana

The world is round, but also flat.

And if you can figure that out, then congratulations

The previous month was exhausting.

First thing in the morning we had breakfast, followed by language lessons. The rest of the morning was spent in martial arts training with the duke’s guards.

Annie found it unimaginable that none of us knew how to fight. She found it even more shocking that the concept of Couch Potato existed, and I was one.

The martial-arts training were exhausting as the soldiers were instructed not to go easy on us, and only speak Babel.

After lunch we hunted monsters till 6:00PM, when we had dinner with the duke’s family.

Finally came an hour of group meditation.

After that I practiced on puzzles. According to player posts, puzzle dungeons were common and we didn’t have access to our Neurolinks.

Following that was magic training in my room or the garden. I then ended the day with private meditation, or should I call it cultivation?

I had asked Annie and Linda about their magic training. To my surprise they said they never learnt. After all, cultivation was required since Annie was a princess. It strengthened a person in a way nothing else did, and as royalty, it was their duty to be strong. Linda practiced too since she was the daughter of a noble, and they were childhood friends.

Few people bothered learning wizardry, since it was easier to just use magic tools. To them, magic was just a tool, not something you do for fun.

In a sense that made sense, since in modern society, most people didn’t build their own electronics and stuff, but just ordered what they needed.

Builders and Do-It-Yourself people normally did it for fun, and enjoyed creating one-of-a-kind items.

All in all, everything went well, and Artemis took up the glaive as her close quarter weapon.

Everyone was now at D-Rank 1. The bad news was that all our Essence users had insufficient Essence to increase our Astral bodies and were still at E-Rank.

Well technically we did have enough. Unfortunately, we needed it for the gate key. We decided leveling up after obtaining the key was more cost effective.

Babel was surprisingly easy to learn. However, one month was not enough to master a foreign language. After all, every language was bound to the culture of the people. So we had to learn a bit of the culture of the countries in Terra Plana.

On the bright side, we met up with Sister Emily, my parents, two grandparents and great grandfather. My parentage was doing surprisingly well considering their age. It was amazing how much ass Gigi could kick, considering he was 102-year-old.

Together with Harold, they had enough people for a full 7-person party.

We, on the other hand, only had 6 people.

We gathered on the front lawn of the ducal palace, waiting for the announcement for the next event. After that we would head for the gate to the next zone.

Little Aspen was sitting in my arms. The air was filled with soap bubbles, as she enjoyed playing with her new bubble blower.

That made her the center of attention, since the toy I created was something the residents had never seen before.

I felt a little sorry for Aspen. Thanks to my intervention, her body was developing too fast. She liked running around like an over-caffeinated toddler and talking in full sentences, while her peers were only starting to crawl. As a result, she could only interact with adults because of the fear she could hurt the other children.

“Hi kids,” Mother said. “We are convincing more and more family members to participate. Governments of the world know something is up, but they don’t know what. However, they are preparing their troops and stockpiling resources.”

“Have they informed their citizens?” Evelyn asked.

“Of course not,” dad replied. “They are trying to downplay what’s happening. However, people aren’t stupid. They know something is happening. Unfortunately, no one knows what. Unfortunately, that means rioting and general bad behavior.”

“What language are you talking in?” someone asked. “I feel I can almost understand what you are saying, but not quite.”

“Good ears,” dad said. “It’s the next stage of this game. If you want to learn it, just befriend any resident of this city and they will teach you. I assure you it is worth it. It’s called Babel.”

“By Babel, do you mean the language everyone spoke, before God punished the human race?” a woman asked.

“Something like that. Learning that language will push this game to 11,” Father replied.

That fired up quite a few people in hearing distance.

“Is it difficult to learn?” another woman asked. “I’m crap at languages.”

“It’s probably the easiest language in the world to learn,” Mother said.

“Not for the native speakers of some languages,” Grandmother objected.

“If someone born 2 BC can do it, then anyone can,” Gigi announced.

“Attention everyone,” Duke Wallace said. “It is time for the announcement you have been waiting for. I shall now read the announcement.

Greetings, vanguard of the human race, you are all privileged to enter realms beyond your imagination.

The gate at the base of the cliff behind you leads to another place. In order to pass you must pay the toll.

As mentioned before, the toll is 666 XP for Easy, 6,660 XP for Medium, 66,600 XP for Hard, and 666,000 XP for Elite. After that, you will receive a key granting you free and limitless passage between realms.

Isn’t our generosity amazing? You don’t need to thank us.

Why would we thank them, I wondered?

Beyond the tunnel is a land called the Shattered Lands. The sky above is where the forces of Light and Darkness wage eternal war. As a result, the land is littered with amazing treasures.

Because of various agreements, people who are not aligned may not be targeted there. Also, aligned people may not scavenge what is in the chasms and crevices below.

Normally only D-Rank and C-Rank people fight here. As a result, almost all treasures are at that level or below.

That is great news for you if you can find those treasures.

But be warned, the Lost Lands are crawling with D-Level monsters, including some C-Level monsters.

And now for some amazing news; A few weeks ago, a cargo ship containing legendary evolutionary equipment was lost there, 7 pieces of equipment, to be precise. They are brand new, and so can all be soul bound. As a result, they need to be leveled up before they can become useful.

Nevertheless, this is a once in a lifetime steal for those who can find them.

So you’re probably wondering. How can you find a tiny crate in an area vastly bigger than Australia?

Being of a generous nature…

“Bullshit,” Annie muttered. I looked at Annie in surprise. I wasn’t expecting such a response. ‘Bullshit’ didn’t seem like a word a princess would use.

We have positioned the entrance less than 10 KM from the treasure. With so many people present, I’m sure one of you will find it quickly.

I do have to give you one warning. You are forbidden from joining parties together or having more than 7 people in your party. If the demonic forces discover you are cheating, they are allowed to kill every one of you.

That warning about parties caused much argument, even though everyone knew that. Parties must never exceed 7 people.

That means, you will spawn back here, and you will lose not only your unbound equipment, but your key for the demon gate as well.

Again, more complaining.

I’m only saying this because your untimely death will cause unnecessary paperwork. Managing the respawning process is after all a huge hassle…

The duke continued reading.

“Demons tend to ramble and use convoluted language,” Annie warned. “A perfect example is their contracts. However, we got the important information.”

Another ten minutes passed.

Finally, we would like to give you a freebie. It is a compass to navigate the Shattered Lands. The location of the portal entrance is preprogrammed. That way you can return safely with your loot.

Why are we so generous? Why not? Again, no thanks are necessary.

“They really like to pretend they are doing people favors,” I said.

Annie nodded and said, “All demons are fundamentally assholes. Unfortunately, too many of them have crazy charisma, since they are all sociopaths.”

Again, more talking…

And then the duke finally put down his papers.

“Now everyone, please enjoy the birthday celebration of my granddaughter, who is now one year old. Eat your fill. The food is delicious.”

“What are you thinking?” mum asked as we walked.

“We can have a contest to see who can find the treasures first,” I suggested.

“That sounds like fun,” dad said. “However, our true goal is to get strong enough to face what is to come.”

“Don’t forget,” Gigi said. “By going there, we might find out more about what’s going on. And we only have till March before beta runs out.”

Off to the side some teenagers started talking. The first asked, “So how did that purge thing go?”

“I took a picture,” another boy declared, and a miniature screen appeared in the air.

Annie took one look at the picture and grimaced.

“You think that’s bad?” Gigi asked. “Luke, show him me.”

As you could see, Gigi was both very wise and also rather childish. However, I indulged him.

My screen showed up, showing Gigi turning into a monster turd. It was mostly shades of brown, but flowed with yellow, green, white and red.

“Is that blood?” Someone asked, shocked.

Annie foolishly took a look and turned green at the gills. By green, I meant her complexion took on a greenish tinge. She closed her eyes and drank some sort of healing potion. Fortunately for her, that worked.

The image elicited laughter and embarrassment from those in the know, and confusion and disgust from everyone else.

“Dude, why so much?” someone asked.

“That’s because he is over 100 years old, while we are just teenagers,” Annie explained while regulating her breath. “Various waste products accumulate over the years. For those who don’t know what we are talking about, Quantum Entertainment will make the announcement in March next year.”

“You’re over 100?” a man in his early forties asked. “How is that even possible? My mother is only in her 70’s and she has Alzheimer’s and can barely move.”

“The answer is simple,” I replied. “A clause in the agreement allows people with mobility issues to enter with mechanical wheelchairs or walkers.

“Remember, in Newbie City you share XP. That means you should bring your mother there and make her play on ‘No-Pain, No-Gain’ setting. She doesn’t need to do anything but just sit while you fight.

“Then with the accumulated XP and healing spells and potions, your mother will regain her health.

“Remember, it has to be on ‘No-Pain, No-Gain’ settings.”

“Just like that?” a woman asked skeptically.

“Well, you should focus on vitality,” I replied. “After all, vitality for your loved ones is close to 0. Also, the higher your vitality, the better healing spells and potions work.”

“What happens when she leaves?” Another person asked.

“Why do you want her to leave?” I asked. “Think of this as her retirement home. And with Internet access, you have all the entertainment you could possibly want. Remember, No Pain, No Gain.”

“How important is Essence allocation?” Someone asked. “It seems kind of gross.”

“It’s the best,” I said. “Take it if the choice becomes available. You will never regret it. This game is awesome, smelly farts and all.

“Once you play at maximum, there is no going back. And since you can convert gold into money, there is no reason to leave.

“With health, wealth and worlds to explore with good friends, what more could you possibly want?”

“But aren’t we just wasting our time here?” a middle-aged man asked. “I’m only here because my son insisted.”

“With AGI, robots, 3-D printing and the rest, can you really say you are actually contributing to society?” I asked. “What will you do with the rest of your life? You spend it with people you love, exploring new worlds and enjoying shared activities.”

For another ten minutes people badgered me with questions. Eventually I was able to satisfy everyone.

Slowly everyone dispersed until we were alone. Half the people headed for the gate while the others headed for inns. It helped that it was now night.

Then we entered the palace and headed for the ducal suites, making sure no one noticed. We didn’t want people thinking the duke was playing favorites.

The family lounged while Aspen played on the carpeted floor with her favorite toys.

“I have a book of possible treasures you might find,” the duke said. “If you could choose, what would it be?”

My friends and I gathered around and perused the catalog.

It was an amazing assortment, ranging from replicator-like devices to weapons, to armor and transportation.

“Mum, dad, everyone, do you want to look?” I asked.

“No dear,” mum replied. “We old folks are going to bed. Tomorrow is going to be a hectic day. Please don’t stay up too late.”

“Okay mum,” I said and gave everyone goodnight hugs.

Once they were gone, we began serious catalog shopping.

A whole New World

When entering a new world, it is best to   
start with a new language.

“Morning everyone,” I greeted in Babel. “My AI created a 20-minute video of my speech yesterday. Guess what? I got over 20 million hits in less than 3 hours. Even now the hit count is ratcheting up like crazy and is currently at 285 million.”

It’s surprising how simple concepts can become complex, when talking to people who don’t know what social media is. Fortunately, my new friends were all caught up.

They even watched a few of my Incursion videos. Annie definitely enjoyed my banter; however I had to explain how it was done.

“That was some great free advertising for them,” dad commented.

“True,” the duke said. “Both the forces of darkness and light can benefit from what you said.”

“How so?” Artemis asked.

“The forces of light want humans to become strong so they can defend themselves,” the duke explained. “The demons want strong humans too, but only because it makes humans more flavorful to them.”

“Ooh gross,” Eric exclaimed.

“Don’t forget, they are always recruiting new members,” Taranis said as he stepped into the dining room. “Only the most rootless and self-serving of people may become demons.”

“Lord Taranis,” the duke greeted. “We are honored by your presence.”

“Hi Uncle Taranis,” Annie greeted and gave Taranis a hug.

“Luke, please introduce me to your family,” Taranis said.

“Teacher, this is my mother \_\_, my father \_\_, grandfather \_\_, grandmother \_\_, great grandfather Joseph, and my eldest sister Emily.

“Everyone, this is Royal Wizard Taranis Luftwing of Borostein.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Taranis said and shook everyone’s hands. “I’m aware of your ancestor that immigrated to your country. I can tell you that trip was far from easy. I’m not at liberty to say more at this time. March equinox will be here before you know it.”

“So you’re Annie’s uncle?” Mum asked.

“Actually no,” Taranis replied. “However, I’ve known her since she was a child.”

Taranis turned to Annie and said, “So Annie, how come you’re here? I heard you were trying to run away from your parent’s heinous demands.” He laughed at his own joke.

“Originally I was angry at meeting Luke,” Annie admitted. “However, I admit I’m having fun here. Then Linda started dating Evelyn. That doesn’t change the fact I want to choose who I marry. No offense Luke.”

“None taken Annie,” I said. “In our society, people don’t consider marriage until well into their 20’s and later.

“Teacher, long time no see,” I said as I stepped in front of him. “I assume you are here to give another lesson before we enter the Shattered Lands.”

“Yes Luke, I have a few spells to teach you, as well as some advice,” Taranis agreed. “But first, what kind of progress have you made?”

“I finally was able to make dishwashing soap,” I replied proudly. “With the use of a metal wire, I created a bubble maker for Aspen.

“I’m starting to get more proficient at combining the runes you gave me. This is giving me a better understanding of properties such as sticky, oily, slippery and so on.”

“Truly marvelous,” Taranis clapped and praised, making me blush. It was a good feeling.

“As I keep saying, wizardry only has a few principles to learn, and yet people make it overly complicated.

“Wizardry is just a manifestation of your life experience.

“Before I give you my final lesson, let’s discuss advancing in this so-called game.

“The good news is the demons don’t want you to die. This is because this whole operation is hugely expensive to them, and they don’t want to incur additional costs.

“Respawning with easy, medium and hard…sorry I can’t talk about that.

“The point is, the demons are a divided people. They can’t kill adventurers without cause. However, that won’t prevent them from tormenting you to the best of their ability.

“Remember, they truly enjoy tormenting people, asserting their perceived superiority over everyone. Tormenting, torturing and killing anyone they can, bossing subordinates around, and plotting the overthrow of superiors while kissing ass are their only pastimes. It’s like a drug to them.

“You will encounter guardians and riddles you must overcome. Don’t rush to solve them, since they want you to get the answers wrong, so they can torment you.”

“We watched the reviews of people who went before,” I said. “As a result, I’ve been spending at least 1 hour a day practicing classic dungeon puzzle solving.”

“Excellent,” Taranis said happily. “The challenges are geared to weeding out the superior from the rest. I will test your knowledge of the ancient legends of your world. Annie’s and Linda’s knowledge will be of limited value here. Also, your Neurolinks will be disabled, prevent you from using its most basic functions.

“As long as you use your logic and reason, and don’t get impatient, you will do well.”

Taranis turned to the duke and said, “My friend, please show us a place where we can train for half an hour,” Taranis said. “Then you may start your adventure.”

“I feel out of place,” Eric muttered. Artemis, Evelyn, and Harold agreed.

“You may switch paths if you are determined enough,” Taranis said. “Your Spirit score is just your emotional intelligence and your ability to remain absolutely calm no matter the circumstances. Meditation is just your first step.

“All knowledge is yours when you calm the mind.

“Never be discouraged. Your hard work will eventually pay off. Maybe not this year or the next, but eventually. Even a point or two in Spirit will improve the quality of your life.”

“How high must it be?” Eric asked.

“The minimum is 20 for Mind and Willpower,” Taranis replied. “Then that path will open up. Believe me the rewards are well worth the effort. That being said, it is amazing that Luke, Annie, and Linda have all reached that Spirit level at only 16.

“I only wish Linda and Annie studied wizardry. However, that is neither necessary nor essential. It’s just a matter of trading flexibility for convenience.”

We arrived in a courtyard and Taranis said, “Okay Luke, show me the spells you have learned.”

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The training with Taranis took longer than expected. I didn’t get any new runes. Instead I got a lecture about the fundamental nature of reality and a stack of books to read.

We watched Taranis disappear and then Wally said, “That Taranis is a hard teacher. He is a professor at the Royal Academy of Wizardry in Borostein. However, everyone fears him, because he expects too much from everyone. His lack of explanations is legendary. I doubt he spent more than 5 hours teaching Luke in total.”

“That’s about right,” I agreed.

Taranis materialized and said, “Magic isn’t something you are taught but something you find deep inside of you. The only reason I thought Luke a few spells, is because they showcase knowledge that can’t be discovered any other way. Likewise, I had to teach him some fundamentals that will be the basis of his growth as a wizard. I also gave him some excellent books.

“Doing more would be stifling to his growth.

“Take Luke’s bubble barrier for example. I would wager the spells he knows are better than his colleagues in the magic academies. That’s the power of a self-discovered spell, and why hand-feeding students is bad.

“After all, there are very few fundamentals. Technically there is just one law and one grand unified field controlling all reality.”

Taranis paused and then said, “I just gave you the secret to mastering wizardry. And people waste their time going to school.

“I do have good news. Collecting the entrance fee took a great deal of self control and discipline. Such discipline will help you immeasurably in your advancement.

Taranis smiled and said, “The only thing Luke is now missing is tens of thousands of hours of practice.”

Again, Taranis disappeared.

“I guess it’s time to go,” dad said. “It’s already noon.”

I rubbed Aspen on the head as she nibbled on a teething ring, and we headed out.

The trip to the gate wasn’t far.

The demon gate was rather plain with simple stone doors, open and ready for visitors.

I stepped through and a message popped up.

Passage through this gate requires a key.

Do you wish to spend 666,000 Essence?

Yes/No

I selected yes, and a message appeared.

1 Portal Key to/from all advanced zones acquired.

1 General Purpose Compass acquired.

I walked forward with the rest of my family and friends.

“That was rather anticlimactic,” Gigi said.

“This tunnel is 666 meters,” Mom said. “What’s with this obsession with the number 666?”

Other parties passed us as we walked. Soon enough, we arrived at the exit.

We were at the base of a cliff, with barren ground in an area 333 meters from the gate. That was the safe zone where people could use to camp and rest.

In other words, the safe zone was 666 meters in diameter.

“Come let’s see what’s at the edge,” I said and ran forward.

“So energetic,” Gigi said as he trotted by my side.

“Look who’s talking,” I said with a laugh.

We finally arrived at the edge and a vista far surpassing the Grand Canyon greeted us. The shattered lands seemed to go on forever.

“Welcome to the Shattered Lands,” Annie said. “I only visited here once on my father’s yacht.”

“What the hell is that?” Eric asked. “It looks like someone sliced the ground with a giant sword.”

“That’s the result of powerful weapons,” Annie said. “Don’t worry. We shouldn’t be facing such powerful enemies.”

“Okay kids, it’s time to get to work,” Mum said and gave me a hug. She and her party headed out.

We too headed into the Shattered Lands.

Soon we were in a canyon with steep walls. I took out the compass and noted it was pointing back from where we came. Good. The compass was working correctly.

We continued walking and the canyon branched. We walked down the left passageway and ran straight into a massive herd of carnivorous bulls.

Hell Bulls  
Rank D-2

They glared beady red eyes at us and charged, flames flowing from their nostrils. The gentle mooing was unnerving, coming from bulls with such bulging muscles.

I raised my bubble barrier and the bulls tripped on it, falling over in a pile.

“Disable automatic looting,” Annie called out. “There is a way to harvest all the meat.”

“I don’t have enough storage…,” I began.

“Won’t be a problem,” Annie said. “Our only danger is getting overwhelmed.

“I’ll cook their…” I started.

“Fire won’t work on them,” Annie said. “Try Ice.”

Eric whipped out a monster club and faced the creatures. The first got up and charged. Eric slammed down with the club and cracked the bull’s skull.

For a moment I wondered how he did that. Then I remembered Eric was already D-1 and he prioritized strength. With spikes on the club, shattering a skull was doable.

I dismissed the original bubble wall and created an orange bubble trellis, lying flat on the ground. Coloring the bubble wall was tricky, and it took me quite awhile to figure out the process. But now it was second nature.

The trellis was another crowd control tool I created while we collecting the demon gate toll. It was easy to step over. However, it made it impossible to run over, and of course the orange was for our benefit.

A bull charged at me. I was able to dodge, but not before I was doused with fire. I screamed in pain and stabbed with my glaive.

Unfortunately the glaive only scratched the monster’s hide.

“Can you use your gun?” Eric asked.

I watched Linda use her gun to shoot bulls.

“Sorry,” I said. “All of my mamma is being used to maintain the trip fence. These guys kick hard. I would rather work on an AOE attack.”

The battle continued as both sides tried to kill each other. The bull’s greatest weapon, their charge was blocked. They would trip every time they tried to charge. But their fire, hide and horns were formidable.

“Oh man this is exhausting,” Artemis grumbled.

“That’s because you don’t have enough muscle on your arms,” Eric said.

“You want muscle? I’ll show you muscle,” Artemis demanded.

“Just joking,” Eric said hastily. “You know I think you are always perfect.”

“On the bright side, the bull copses are creating a barrier,” Evelyn said.

“And tenderizing the meat,” Eric said as he watched the bulls climbing over their fallen comrades.

I wracked my brains, trying to think of a new type of AOE attack. If fire doesn’t work, would ice? No. That would take too long. How about a vacuum or carbon dioxide or poison gas? No. They all needed containment.

Still wracking my head, I continued fighting as best I could.

I glanced at Annie and Linda, wishing they knew magic. Yes they were using magical weapons, but that wasn’t the same.

I continued thinking about AOE attacks. Could we use spikes?

I tried making spikes from the bubble, but the hell bulls just squashed the spikes.

If only I could create iron spikes.

After almost an hour of battling the last bull died.

“I’m pooped,” Evelyn said. “I can’t believe how much healing I had to do.”

“On the bright side I have enough Essence to complete my level transition,” I said.

“Same here,” Laura agreed.

“The first transition purged 40% of our impurities. The second will purge 30%,” Annie said. “The good news is the process will keep monsters away.”

“Seriously?” Eric asked. “I guess even the monsters can’t sand the smell.”

“That’s not why,” Annie said with a frown. “Artemis, can you please guard us?”

“No peaking,” Artemis scolded.

“I assure you, you’re the only person I want to peak at,” Eric said. “Evelyn and I will guard the meat.”

“I’ll go there,” I said and pointed.

Stepping around the corner, I undressed. I then noticed that my undergarments were now just regular clothes, and not part of my body.

Fully undressed, I sat in a lotus position and placed my monster soap next to me. It was time to cultivate. The process was the same as before. I focused on my chakras and began pushing essence through them and into my astral body.

Again I found the resistance as I tried to remember the process. After some experimentation I remembered the process. The process started. The chakras began sucking essence like a sponge, causing my astral body to start expanding.

After the astral body expanded to double its size, it stopped for a moment. Then it began to shrink back down, compressing as it did so.

Then the purge happened. From out of all my pores the disgusting substance exuded. As before, all imaginable and some unimaginable substances came out.

Finally the astral was back to its normal size, but with double its density.

It was now time to wash up with my monster soap. For a moment I wondered how the ladies were doing.

Once shower was complete I dried myself and put my clothes back on.

It was time for me to examine my stats.

Surprisingly, the upgrade gains were double from last time.

Vitality + 20

Mind + 10

Willpower + 10

Spirit + 10

Perception + 10

<>====== TODO – Update stats

**Raven Solarsmith**

**Stats**

**Level:** E-Rank 5

**Raw Essence:** 123

**Refined Essence:** 270 of 8,000

**Physical Stats**

**Strength:** (12+3) 15

**Agility:** (12+2) 14

**Dexterity:** 21

**Stamina:** (11+3) 14

**Vitality:** 21

**Mental Stats**

**Mind:** 22

**Willpower:** 21

**Spiritual Stats**

**Spirit:** 24

**Perception:** 20

**HP (hit points):** 600 of 600

**MP (magic points):** 1700 of 1700

**SP (spirit points):** 1900 of 1900

**Spells**

* Fire Shot
* Rock Launch
* Compress
* Bubble wall
* Trip lattice

<>====== TODO – Update stats

I returned to my friends. “My storage skill has ranked up. Now it can increase by 10m every time I level up…”

I looked at Annie and realized she had leveled up too. By that I meant she had become prettier than before. Her skin was clearer, her hair was richer, her eye’s limbal rings were more pronounced, and she exuded an air of vitality. As for her lips, who wouldn’t want to kiss them?

Eric gave me an evil grin and said, “Linda, Artemis, come here please.” He took them to the side and whispered something.

“What are you whispering about?” Annie asked, confused.

Eric walked to me and whispered, “Isn’t Annie really cute now? And her rated PG undies are gone. I wonder what’s below.”

I felt my face getting hot as inappropriate thoughts went through my head.

“Annie, look at this,” Eric said. Before I could react he yanked my pants down. He then lifted my shirt, exposing everything.

Forewarned, Linda and Artemis closed their eyes.

Annie, on the other hand, saw everything. I pulled my pants up but it was too late. Her face became cherry red. She stepped towards me, then she turned and dashed off.

“Annie, where are you going?” Linda asked, turning to follow.

“Leave her alone,” Eric commanded.

“But there are monsters there,” Linda complained.

“She will be fine,” Eric declared sternly. “Linda, there is something you need to know.”

“What’s that?” Linda asked as Eric walked behind Evelyn.

“This,” Eric said and pants Evelyn.

“Hey!”, Evelyn screamed and pulled his pants back up but the damage was done.

“Sorry I had to do that,” Eric said. “You are all way too stiff.”

However, the effect on Linda was much less pronounced. Apparently she was more worldly.

“Why is Annie moaning?” Linda asked, worriedly. “She’s in trouble.”

“No she’s fine. She’s just making a big poop,” Eric said and pulled out his banjo and started playing loudly. He accompanied himself with terrible singing.

Images appeared in my mind, but I rejected them. Annie didn’t like me that way.

After awhile Eric stopped and said, “I guess it’s time to do that harvesting thing.”

“Just place the carcasses into your storage,” Linda said. “Later a butcher will take apart our catch. This food will be essential in the future, and we essentially have infinite space, or will when we rank up more.”

Linda and I began putting the bulls away. After awhile Annie joined. However her face was still flushed and she was distracted.

When the catch was put away, Annie said, “It’s time to go,” and headed off.

We followed Annie.

As we were walking, a thought came to me. What if I use vibrate on my glaive? Unfortunately I didn’t have that Rune.

As I walked I gently tapped my glaive, feeling the vibration. What was vibration? What was sound? It was everywhere, including light. Vibration was a universal thing touching all of reality.

A roar shook the ground as I contemplated, causing my body to vibrate with the sound.

In front of us was a fanged gorilla towering around 5m tall. In its hand was a massive stone club.

D-7 Hell Gorilla

Special Attacks: Roar, Bash

Defense: Fur

The Gorilla stepped forward and roared again. This time I felt it in my very bones. My teeth started vibrating.

Vibration: Sound, light, music, dissonance, the vibration of a motor, of my electric toothbrush, of electrical appliances, of atoms and so much more.

Suddenly I saw the Rune for [Vibration], along with [Amplitude] and [Frequency]. [Phase] came a moment later as I visioned sounds canceling and amplifying itself.

I quickly applied [Vibration] to my glaive and applied some manna, careful not to put too much. I then adjusted the frequency using the appropriate Rune. I didn’t want to break my weapon. Resonance can shatter the mightiest of stone and metal.

The gorilla stopped roaring and took a breath.

I dashed forward and sliced with my blade. I hit the creature’s side but found resistance, so I slightly increased intensity and frequency.

A fraction of a second later the monster was sliced in two.

Unfortunately the blade of my glaive shattered.

I looked at my companions and discovered that they were all frozen in place.

“Are you all okay?” I asked the others.

“Dude, that was the scariest thing I ever experienced in my life,” Eric said softly. “I was paralyzed and couldn’t move.”

“How come you weren’t paralyzed?” Annie asked, amazed. “There is a reason they are called Hell Apes.”

“I wanted to learn the Rune for Vibrate,” I explained, feeling embarrassed. Rubbing my head, I said, “I was so focused on all aspects of vibration that I wasn’t paying attention to you. Then that gorilla roared and I felt vibration in my bones. It was then that I understood vibration and learnt the Rune.

“I then applied the Rune to my blade. I guess I was lucky. Unfortunately I wrecked my glaive.

“Maybe we should get some hearing protection when we get back, perhaps some eye protection as well.”

I stored my broken weapon and brought out my spare.

“I had no idea wizards could be so powerful,” Eric said.

“Most wizards aren’t,” Annie said. “I guess what Uncle Taranis said really was true and wizard schools are doing students a disservice in how they teach.”

“Or Raven could be a genius,” Evelyn said.

“Either way, there are probably others ahead,” Linda said. “Is there a way to protect us?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I have to think about that.”

How would I do it? I guess it would involve sound cancelling, which would be an active skill. Could it be dangerous? Or I could learn the Silence Rune. Wait a minute. I could use it to silence the monsters.

Now I just need a quiet place to learn the Rune.

We continued walking downwards as the canyon arose upwards about us.

“By the way, when the Hell Apes howl, try to accept the sound into your bones,” I suggested. “Eric, how are you with the sound?”

“I’d rather stand in front of a speaker in a rock concert,” Eric said. “Although I suppose I can learn to tolerate it.”

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The Day the World Changed

It was a day just like any other,

Until the world was plunged into darkness,

And monsters entered the world.

It was an ordinary Friday, although over a billion people celebrated it as Good Friday, the anniversary of the day their lord was crucified.

The last group of people playing on Easy, Medium and Hard exited yesterday.

A week previously the sea surrounding the Avaria Continent disappeared, replaced by terrain. Now people could vacate the dome just by crossing the border.

We now had 7 hours to leave or be forcibly evacuated.

We all stepped through the dome.

As I stepped though, I felt a moment of dizziness. A moment later I was on the other side.

I looked down and I found myself wearing the clothes I wore before entering the dome.

Also present was my flabby body. I checked my arms. They were back to being sticks.

Gigi was now in a wheelchair, with the body of a centennial. My grandparents were now around 75, and my parents were almost 50.

Everyone else looked about the same.

I looked back at the dome and placed my hand on it. The dome was hard as rock.

Annie looked at me in horror and said, “Oh my God. What happened to you? You look like an overweight vampire.”

I frowned at Annie and said, “Thanks a lot. This is what a couch potato looks like. This is the result of too much sitting and junk food, and no sun or exercise.”

Annie had the decency of blushing.

Off in the distance a minivan stood. Mum had ordered the Uber to be ready when we exited.

The Uber drove next to us, and a ramp opened for Gigi’s wheelchair.

We got in and the Uber drove out. It was time to go to the destination Taranis mentioned.

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

My parent’s and my parties were resting over 15 KM away from the Australian dome. Even that far away it was huge.

Taranis asked me to schedule a live stream starting at 11:30 AM, Greenwich Mean Time, although I’m not sure how without a camera. My Neurolink said it was time.

Taranis materialized in front of us, startling us.

“How the hell did you do that?” Eric asked.

“All in good time,” Taranis replied. “Luke, please give me a link so I may stream content on your behalf.”

I did as Taranis instructed and a camera materialized in front of us. Below was a screen showing us and the gray dome in the background.

How the hell did he do that?

“All in good time,” Taranis said, anticipating my question. “Now please start your interview with me.”

I faced the camera and said, “Greeting everyone. This is the Raven, standing in front of the Gray Dome in Australia.

“As you know, last month the dome swallowed Ayer’s Rock, to the consternation of the Indigenous people.

“Today I am interviewing my magic teacher, Royal Wizard Taranis of Borostein.”

I paused as I realized how pompous that made me sound.

“Teacher, what exactly are those domes and why were they created?”

“That is a good question,” Taranis said. He paused and then continued his prepared speech. “To answer that I will need to tell you a story.

“Throughout the universe exists areas of high- and low-density ether. Some 14 thousand years ago the earth was in one such area.”

A translucent blob appeared in front of Taranis. Within the blob was a tiny representation of Earth.

“The world was ruled by a globe-spanning empire whose capital city was named Atlantis. The ruler was the god-king Thoth.

“The empire prospered under the wise rule of Thoth and because of its advanced knowledge and control of ether, the fundamental substance out of which ordinary matter is formed.

“And no, modern science can’t detect it, since it exists below the Plank’s scale.

“Then a little over 13 thousand years ago the Earth exited the last tendril of ether.”

The model of the Earth exited the blob but remained attached by a tendril of substance. Then the strand broke, freeing the Earth.

“The Earth is now in a literal ether desert. As a result, the technology the empire relied on couldn’t function.

“What was worse was that Thoth and his government couldn’t stay. The reason was that they were only partially material.

“The only saving grace was that the monsters and demons couldn’t materialize either.

“Before Thoth left, he prepared his people to take care of themselves, despite no longer having ready access to essence…”

“What is essence?” I asked, interrupting Taranis.

“Essence is the refined substance released when you kill monsters. It has countless applications, which the human race will soon discover.

“Unfortunately, Thoth couldn’t protect humans from the tenacity of demons and their desire to enslave humans and cause mindless mayhem.

“As a result of interference, and because essence had become incredibly scarce, wars broke out throughout the world.

“This caused vast devastation, as the equivalent of mega-ton nuclear bombs exploded through the world. Vast seams of coal and permafrost were vaporized, releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere…”

“The Younger Dryas,” exclaimed my dad.

“That’s correct,” Taranis said. “Sea levels rose over 122 meters over the course of decades, causing biblical flooding.

“With rapidly increasing sea levels, vast areas became uninhabitable. The decimated remains of civilization lost almost all technology and were thrown into the Stone Age.

“Superstitions arose and any knowledge contradicting the official narrative was systematically destroyed. This included all advanced technologies.”

Taranis paused and then said, “If nothing was done, the Earth would reenter a high-ether zone in about a thousand years from now.

“This was not good enough for the demons. They wanted to return to the Earth as soon as possible.

“To that end, one demon devised a scheme. He would force the Earth to enter the ether zone prematurely.”

Taranis’ model showed the Earth approaching a blob. The blob shot out a tendril which engulfed the Earth.

“The demon carefully guided the technology and philosophies of the world to that end. The end result is civilization as you know it now.”

“Are you saying we have demons to thank for modern technology?” Mother asked, surprised.

“In a sense yes,” Taranis replied. “However, without demonic interference, this world would have been a much more peaceful world. Also, the environmental destruction you have would not have existed. So much suffering would have been avoided.”

Taranis paused and then asked, “Where do you think the philosophy of dominating and subduing nature came from? At its very core, the philosophy is demonic. The demons thought humans they had to wage war against nature, even though the death of nature meant the death of humans. And natural prosperity meant human prosperity.

“What exactly are demons?” I asked.

“Demons are beings who have dedicated themselves to the enslavement of people for personal gain. They exist in a hierarchical society where lower ranked demons obey the commands of higher-level demons and feed them essence, at the same time plotting to overthrow those above them.

“The lowest level demons constantly feed on humans for needed essence and recruit new members from the worst of the worst. Higher level demons have all the essence they need to live. However, to a demon there is no such thing as too much.”

Taranis shrugged and said, “Beings of light do exist. Unfortunately, the beings of light can’t prevent demons from whispering into the ears of mortals.

“Eventually the demon’s plans came into fruition in the form of the company Quantum Gaming.

“The purpose of these domes are to act as magnets that will draw tendrils of ether into the earth.

“I shall now read excerpts from the contract you have all signed before you entered the dome.

“Page 47, Paragraph 3 – A standard player is any player who plays on Easy, Medium, or hard.

“Page 85, Paragraph 7 – An elite player is any player who plays on ‘No Pain, No Gain’.

“Page 147, Paragraph 2 – A standard player shall have their bodies preserved, while their consciousness shall inhabit artificial bodies.

“Page 153, Paragraph 4 – Any essence collected by the standard player shall be the property of Quantum Entertainment, although the player may keep any and all loot.

“Page 197, Paragraph 5 – All players gain access to their loot upon project completion.

“Page 287, Paragraph 5 – Elite players may use their own bodies to collect essence. As a result, they are entitled to any essence collected.”

Taranis put down his document and said, “Essence can’t be stolen if you collect essence with your bodies. Also, the reason people may keep loot is because of agreements with the forces of light.”

“Why are these so-called forces of light allowing these demons to do whatever?” dad asked.

“Excellent question,” Taranis said with a smile. “If this demonic plan was stopped, humans would eventually overcome their problems and spread throughout the solar system and beyond.

“In a thousand years from now, the human race would then be over a trillion strong. Then the monsters would come and 90% of the human race would die.

“By allowing the plan, they are saving the lives of hundreds of billions of people. And those who survive will enjoy healthier lives than you can imagine.

“This begs the question. Why don’t the demons wait? After all, waiting would allow the harvest to be vastly greater. The answer is that demons are selfish creatures. They would rather have less, if that means they come out ahead.”

Taranis started reading.

“Page 314, Paragraph 8 – The loot of all players shall be locked, should the players exit the dome before project completion.

“Page 373, Paragraph 6 – Elite players must agree to have their essence suppressed while outside of the domes, and until the domes have served their purpose. This includes locking their internal storage.”

Taranis paused and said, “It is a fallacy that demons can’t lie. Higher level demons like telling their victims their plans, but in a convoluted manner. They genuinely enjoy tricking victims and making victims deceive themselves.

“That is why, on page 476, Paragraph 2 – A player may not discuss their contract with the general public.

“Their plans are detailed here, but in such a convoluted way that only a lawyer may figure it out.”

“Why are you telling us now?” Emily asked.

“Because the contract allows disclosure a few hours before completion time,” Taranis replied. “After all, it’s too late now”

Taranis smiled and said, “In a few minutes, the domes will pop and release all the collected essence into the atmosphere. Therefore I ask Joseph to take off his shirt. I want the world to see an amazing sight.”

The camera showed my parents helping Gigi to remove his shirt.

Gigi sat back in his wheelchair, and we waited.

A geyser of black substance shot into the sky. At the same time, I felt strange energies pass through me.

On impulse I removed my T-shirt as I stood beside Gigi’s chair. On screen I saw my body fat and scrawny arms rippling. In real time my gut shrunk. At the same time my arms expanded with muscles. I also gained a golden tan. I smiled at the camera, no longer looking like an overweight vampire.

The same thing happened to Gigi. First, he was a frail man with paper-thin skin and sagging muscles. Then his skin thickened, and his muscles tightened. In moments he looked like a physically fit 60-year-old man.

My grandparents also had a transformation. They looked as if they were in their 50’s.

My parents were now in their 30’s.

Taranis stood between Gigi and me. “Isn’t that amazing? A pudgy teenager just transformed into a hunk, and a centennial now has the body of someone in his 60’s. And he’s stronger and healthier than people half his age.

“That is the power of essence.”

Taranis frowned at the camera and said, “Ever since Last June, once a day, every day, Luke has been bugging all of you to switch to No Pain, No Gain. That’s millions of people.

“Over 237 million people participated in the game, and yet only 144,000 people played on No Pain, No Gain.

“For all you regular players, if you lost your essence, you have only yourselves to blame.”

Taranis smiled and said, “The good news is, what was lost can be reclaimed. In a few minutes you will regain your loot.

“Do you feel it, that blanket coming over you? That is the world being flooded by new energies.

“Get ready to hunt monsters.”

“Are you saying monsters will be appearing in the real world?” Emily asked. “I know I should be scared, but everything seems so unreal.”

“The darkness now engulfing the world will disappear around Sunday afternoon Greenwich Mean Time, when the tendril of ether engulfs the world and dissipates the [Essence] particles in the atmosphere.”

“Us Solarsmiths have always been involved in global politics,” mother said.

“All of you know, since September, world governments have warned you of increasing terrorist attacks.

“All of you have been informed that every country in the world will be imposing a mandatory lockdown for the next 3 days. Now you know why.

“All countries will deploy troops to handle any monster spawned near civilization.

“In addition, during these 3 days of darkness, the 144,000 elite players will help authorities protect civilians from monsters.”

“Please be calm. Everything will be okay. In addition to government officials, we adventurers will be helping protect civilians from harm.

“So, if you find monsters, contact your local authorities so they may take action.”

“Thank you, Iris, for that important information,” Taranis said. “Don’t worry everyone. The governments of the world are prepared for this.

“Now, those who can cultivate, please show the world a fireball. The rest of you, take out your weapons from your storage rings.”

It was then that I noticed that Eric and the rest had their soul-bound rings.

I conjured a fireball, then two, then three and juggled them. A moment later I dismissed the fireballs.

“Okay Luke, I will be turning off the live stream now. Once I do I want you to start a new live stream. Also, Emily, I want you to start your live stream.”

Taranis’ camera disappeared into his inventory, and I called forth my camera and started streaming. A moment later Emily did the same.

“Okay all of you, the world is in distress right now,” Taranis said. “Your job is to give people hope by live-streaming for the next three days of darkness.

“I will now open portals to New York and Beijing. The *Deep Divers* shall go to New York and the *Wisdom Seekers* shall go to Beijing. These are two places where the local authorities are getting overwhelmed and need assistance.

“Everyone, please attach your adventurer’s badge to your clothes. They will inform the authorities that you are legally recognized adventurers. At a time like this we don’t need misunderstandings.

I took out my badge and was about to put it on my T-shirt, when Taranis said, “Don’t forget your armor.”

I summon my armor and put it on. I then placed my badge on my chest and waited for the others.

Taranis opened the portals, and I waved bye. A moment later I stepped through, followed by the others.

Monsters surrounded us and people were screaming.

We jumped into action and the battle began. The monsters were all F-Rank, but to someone with no combat experience that was terrifying.

Off to the side was a pair of police officers shooting monsters. Off in the distance sirens blared. Overhead in the darkness a helicopter zoomed.

The officers looked at our badges in surprise, and then returned to their work.

We joined the fighting, which was not that difficult. It was over ten minutes later. The monster wave ended.

“I can’t believe monsters exist,” Officer Jerry exclaimed.

“Help us triage the injured,” I call. “Four of us can heal.”

“Okay,” Office Tom said.

Looking around I spotted a person stabbed in the stomach. I pull out my wand and channel manna into it. Selecting the healing spell, I administer to the person.

The injury disappeared, leaving a slight scar. That took 10% of my manna. Fortunately, I was well stocked with manna-restoring potions and my regen was fast.

“Over here,” Tom said, and I rushed over. This time a woman was injured. The injury was life-threatening, but the manna cost was less. Off to another victim I went.

“How does that thing work?” Tom asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “The wand is designed to tap into my manna reserves and use it to perform the healing.”

Finally, everyone was healed, and we gathered everyone together.

“We were told about you special agents,” Officer Jerry said. “I didn’t realize you would be so young.”

“I’m guessing only teenagers tend to play on extreme in Incursion,” I said. “Although, I would have expected governments to have sent in the top people to level up.”

I turned to the terrified people and said, “Please be calm everyone. You need to go to where the authorities told you to go.”

“That’s right,” Officer Tom said. “There is a curfew for a reason.”

“But no one told us about freaking monsters,” an old man shouted.

“Just return home and keep your doors closed,” Officer Tom commanded.

“Yo, mention your channel,” Eric said.

“Right,” I replied. “Everyone, I have a channel called Raven Solarsmith. I am live streaming for the next 3 days. Please return to your homes and watch in safety. And remember to like and subscribe. That will help out the algorithm.”

“My shameless plug seemed to have calmed the people down.

Grumbling, people started to disperse.

Tom looked at me and asked, “Are you the leader?”

“No Eric is,” I said.

“You are now,” Eric objected.

You have been nominated as Deep Diver’s leader.

Do you accept?  
Yes/No

I looked at the others and asked, “Are you sure?”

There was unanimous agreement.

I looked at Annie and she said, “This is your world. I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Very well,” I said and selected ‘Yes’.

“I told headquarters about you special-forces agents,” Tom said. “They said to ask you to go to Central Park.”

I took out my boat, surprising the officers.

“What the hell is that?” Jerry asked as he watched us board.

“It’s a magic boat,” I replied. “Its maximum speed is only 170 km/h, but that’s fast enough. See you later.”

“May I come with you?” Jerry asked.

“Sure,” I said. “You can guide us.”

Everyone boarded and we navigated the streets of downtown New York. All around us were fashion shops.

Suddenly a shop caught my attention and I stopped at it. In the window was a magical princess costume.

“Annie, Artemis, Linda, I want you dress up as magical princesses,” I said. “Officer Jerry, is it okay if we entered? You can make sure we will pay for the merchandise.”

“I can’t,” Linda objected. “I’m only a noble, not a princess.”

“This world rejected royalty long ago,” I stated. “However, the concept of princesses is ingrained in the imagination of all people. By dressing the part, you will encourage all the people of the world.

“Officer, do you object? This is an emergence, and we can’t wait for the store to reopen. Keep in mind; we are being live-streamed to the world.”

Officer Jerry looked conflicted. However, he said, “Very well.”

I parked in front of the store and got off. I took out my lock-picking tools and worked on the lock. Seconds later the door opened.

“There is a silent alarm and a camera. That’s okay since we are recording ourselves,” I noted to my followers.

“Artemis, please help Annie and Linda. You only have 5 minutes. Then we will pay for the merchandise.

“Officer Jerry, while we are waiting, would you like to talk about looting, especially in times like these?”

Jerry nodded and started his spiel.

Eventually Jerry finished and I said, “Officer, you forgot to mention something important. In a few days from now…

“Officer, you defeated multiple monsters. Did you receive any loot?”

“I found coins, this gun, bullets and these vials,” Jerry said and pulled items from his pocket. Headquarters said, if we meet dangerous animals, and if they drop anything, we must collect them. Also, I got this ring.”

I examined the ring and said, “That is a soul-bound ring of holding. Congratulations on your major find. It’s currently limited in storage but will expand. Now put it on your finger.”

Looking skeptical, Jerry did as instructed.

“It’s asking me if I want to soul-bind,” Jerry said.

“Say ‘Yes’, then try to put your loot into your ring. It’s the intention that counts,” I explained.

Jerry brought a handful of coins next to the ring and the coins disappeared. “Yikes,” Jerry screamed in fright.

Eric laughed and said, “It’s just like a video game, isn’t it?”

“As you can see, people with these devices can easily steal,” I said. I then stared at the camera and said, “However, be aware. Just because you can steal, doesn’t mean cops like Jerry can’t find you and throw you in jail.

“Take my camera for example. It’s designed to be visible, so everyone knows they are being recorded. However, officials will have cameras you can’t see, and they can follow you. Therefore, do not steal.

“If you want money, do the legal thing and fight monsters. I personally made over 87 thousand US in less than a year. And we are just beginner adventurers. Don’t forget the value of our items.”

“Isn’t fighting monsters dangerous?” Jerry asked.

“Yes, it is,” I replied. “Who knows how many people will die. However, the authorities will not be able to stop people from risking themselves. The only thing they can do is create adventure schools so people may learn to protect themselves. Now that Incursion is no more, death is real.”

The ladies finally joined us.

“Oh my God, Artemis, you look amazing,” Eric said. Artemis blushed with happiness.

“You look like a sparkling princess in that costume,” Evelyn said.

“Thanks, but this is embarrassing,” Linda grumbled.

“I agree,” Annie said.

“Do how much does all of that cost?” I asked.

“Aren’t you going to compliment your girlfriend?” Jerry asked.

“We aren’t dating,” I said. “Annie is only here because her friend is dating Evelyn. Although I admit, the world is going to fall in love with her. That costume definitely looks good on her.”

Annie blushed at that. Score. It felt good making Annie blush.

“Now what’s the cost?” I ask.

They told me and I calculated.

“I owe the store 287.23$,” I said. “The exchange rate for gold is locked at 1$ for 1 silver and 100$ for 1 gold. 3 gold will cover this.

“Officer, can you ring up the sale?”

“Sure,” Jerry said and tapped on the register. The cash box opened and he placed the gold inside, then closed the box.”

“We paid for the merchandise. It’s time to go,” I said. “I’ll lock up.”

I waited for everyone to exit then locked up.

“Artemis, remember to explain to them how to behave,” I said as I boarded. “Remember, you must always use your wands or staffs with flashy moves. Our audience needs that.”

“Do we really have time for this?” Annie asked, looking at herself.

The gang gathered around me as we zoomed through the empty streets.

“It is essential,” I replied. “The world knows you are acting, but that’s okay.”

“I’m not acting,” Eric said and flexed his muscles. They certainly have increased. “I *am* a northern barbarian and am proud of it.”

Evelyn adjusted his glasses and said, “Pride is a sin. The gods will get angry.”

“What about you?” Jerry asked.

“I’m a long-lost prince from a far away land. Just joking,” I said. “Or am I?”

We arrived at Central-Park and park lights revealed a mound with a tunnel in it. Streaming from the tunnel were hordes of goblins.

“Holy cow,” Eric said. “Aren’t goblins D-Level monsters? The berserkers have bullet-proof skin. And the shamans have shields.”

We parked next to a group of national guards and got off.

A Captain Holden approached and said, “Aren’t you young to be special agents?”

“Can’t help it,” I replied. “It’s the nature of video games to attract teenagers. Although I was told world governments have trained their special agents.

“What’s the status?”

“We can handle the goblins using our machine guns, Special Agent Solarsmith,” Holden said, reading my name on my badge. “However, the giant goblins and those old guys are next to impossible to take down.”

“The grunts are low D-Level, and the berserkers and shamans are low to mid C-Level,” I explained. “Inform your people we will handle the high-level monsters. And yes, this attack was orchestrated.”

“Yes sir,” the officer said, and gave commands.

“Okay everyone, I’m creating multiple cameras. Remember to look good for the camera. Remember to use personal shields. Friendly fire is a possibility, especially since the officers are panicking.”

We headed out. Only Eric didn’t have a shield. But what he lacked in magic he made up in brawn and defense.

Suddenly I notice a message sent by Taranis. I wonder why I didn’t notice it before. No matter.

Portal Map obtained.  
This contains all permanent portals to Terra Plana.

Equip Yes/No

I selected ‘Yes’ and my map displayed the location of the portal in front of me. Thousands of portals existed throughout the world, but I ignored them.

Charging forward, I fired a fireball at the nearest berserker. The rune entered its head and sank into its brain. A moment later it dropped dead. It was time to deal with another berserker.

The problem with using fireballs this way was that they were slower. On the other hand, they couldn’t be stopped by armor. It was a terrible power in the wrong hands, but the good news was only Essence users could use it.

Was that true?

The cardinal rule was, never underestimate human ingenuity. So, the wise thing was to not let anyone know how the spell worked.

I targeted another berserker. This time I make sure the fire encased the berserker’s head. That way people would think a regular fireball was responsible.

I tried to take down a shaman. Unfortunately, my manna got blocked by the shaman’s shield. Bummer. On the other hand, I know I can protect myself. Runes aren’t dangerous unless activated.

I readied a pellet and fired. It bounced. I doubled my manna and fired again. It failed again. The third doubling succeeded.

The shaman fell. I waited a few moments for my manna to replenish and fired again at the next shaman. This was going to be one long battle.

“It’s funny,” I said to the camera. “We’ve been fighting monsters since summer. Yet this is the first-time fighting goblins, a staple in all video games. The shaman shields are tough. Fortunately, they are few in numbers.

“Look at Eric. He’s punching through the shaman’s shields. I bet he could make a hole in the shell of a cybertruck. What a beast.

“Of course the secret is in his gauntlets. It uses stamina to power itself. And off course, stamina is just another type of energy, just like manna.”

I focused exclusively on giving support and taking out berserkers.

To all you elite players, in a few minutes your psychological locks will be released and you will gain access to all your essence.

1. Author’s note: I do see this mist-like drizzle. I think it’s just a visual artifact of my perception system. However it’s strange that I never found any reference to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An Australian aboriginal word for a multi-purpose curved wooden tray. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)