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.

However, those who crossed couldn’t return until the game left beta.

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.

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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.