The Princess

And The

Rogue

**By**

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Today I died

Death is not the end,

But just the beginning of another adventure

“Do not go gently into that Goodnight,” Frank said with a sigh and a hint of resentment, reading the famous quote on the plaque on the wall of his hospital bed.

Next to the quote was a picture of a smiling anime teenage boy with Chinese-red hair and sparkling emerald green eyes, Frank’s idealized form.

In Frank’s hand he held a vial containing murky liquid of a dubious nature. It was the culmination of decades of work, both as a medical doctor and a researcher.

Research carried out in secret. Why secret? It’s because its formulation flew in the face of all orthodox science. When young he read research claiming a certain strong acid could dissolve and reconstitute cells. Research no one followed up on.

This formula was married to a carrier, allowing it to enter cells before delivering the payload.

Frank got random successes with cell cultures, but mostly failures. Worse, other labs couldn’t replicate the results.

Unfortunately, cancer stopped the research.

He spent the next two years in the hospital. His only companion was his laptop and stacks of books, which he used to keep up to date in all forms of medicine, from Eastern to Western to Indigenous to everything in between.

The doctor entered while Frank was meditating. “I have the results Dr. Stein,” the doctor said. “The cancer has reached every organ in your body. It’s a wonder you’re still alive.”

“Not for long,” Frank said. “Tell everyone I want to say goodbye.”

“Yes doctor,” the doctor said and left.

A moment later his grownup kids and grandchildren entered.

“It appears my life’s work was just a fool’s errand,” Frank said sadly. “Be good children and be gentle with each other. Remember, family is the most important thing in the world.

“Remember, embalming is unnatural. I want to be placed in my tomb in my natural state, so the cycle of life can complete.”

Frank waited quietly as his family gave him hugs.

“Everyone, please allow Dr. Stein to rest. He’s exhausted,” the doctor said.

Reluctantly, everyone followed the doctor out of the room.

Finally alone, Frank took out his deathly vial. He had a choice. He could wait two days and die a natural death, or he could leave on his terms.

Frank took a deep breath and said, “Okay Dr. Frank N. Stein, it is time to see if you can resurrect the dead.”

He laughed at his joke and then swallowed his concoction. It went down smoothly and he closed his eyes, dropping the empty vial into the nearby medical waste disposal box.

Then Frank’s bodies exploded with excruciating pain, pain so great it prevented him from breathing.

Then the pain disappeared as silence and darkness enveloped him.

His last thought was, “You failed, Dr. Frank N. Stein.”

Not the last thought. There was one more. “I refuse to go gently into that goodnight. Refuse.”

Isakied

Sooner or later, we will all be isakied   
into another world –   
whether rebirth, oblivion or something else

Emperor’s Night – Year 384, Jasmine Calendar

Frank opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying in bed in a strange dormitory. Surrounding him were teenage boys.

“Good morning everyone,” an attractive young lady with long pure-white hair and white furry rabbit ears called from the doorway.

As he enjoyed the sight of the beautiful woman, he realized he wasn’t in pain. Then a frightening thought hit him.

“Where am I?” Frank asked no one as he sat up in bed. *More importantly, why am I in a boys’ dorm? I don’t belong here.*

Frank paused, realizing his voice had changed. It was younger. It sounded like a teenager. Did his experiment work?

That didn’t make sense. If successful, he should have awoken in his tomb, specially prepared for him. There he had everything he needed for a new life.

“Your dormitory room is B27-172. Remember what your bed number is. Please pick up the keys from your chest of drawers and meet outside,” the nurse or whoever said. “All will be explained.”

Frank looked at his hands and got a surprise. His hands were young and beautiful. He had the urge to kiss them.

That was when he felt something he thought he lost. He pulled the blankets back. It was there, the missing parts were there.

Frank grabbed his foot and pressed it against his face. He then examined his other foot. They were both beautiful and healthy.

Frank jumped out of his bed and fell on his face. His body was so light that he used too much force to get up. It was almost like being on the Moon.

Once again he asked himself, *why the hell am I surrounded by teenage boys?*

Frank got flashbacks of being in the military, surrounded by his army mates. Most of them would end up dead.

For a moment Frank considered the possibility he was in hell.

Sighing, Frank picked the key from his chest of drawers and noted a mirror. Staring back from the mirror above his night stand was a cute, handsome teenage boy with Chinese-red hair, sparkling emerald green eyes and perfect skin.

The eyes were at least 10% bigger than a normal adult, making him look like a Japanese anime character come to life.

Frank glanced at his roommates. His eyes were bigger. He couldn’t believe it. He had achieved his ideal form. How was that even possible? There was no question. This was the afterlife.

“Stop delaying,” the rabbit girl chided.

Feeling annoyed, Frank slipped on boots situated next to his bed. Standing up, he stepped to the foot of the bed and saw his bed was #16.

Taking stock, Frank saw he had a bed, a chest of drawers and a wall-mounted mirror. This was just like the non-commissioned army barracks. Other than his clothes, that was it.

Having nothing better to do, Frank stepped outside and followed a stream of people walking down a huge corridor. Everyone was dressed in the same drab clothes.

The hallway was over 3 meters high by 3 meters wide, and stretched a city block.

They walked to an elevator and Frank waited for his turn.

After a wait, Frank stepped in. The doors closed and reopened.

“What happened to the people?” a teen asked, surprised.

“What people?” an attendant with antlers asked. “We are at the ground floor. Please exit.”

That just highlighted the unreality of the place. Only in dreams could you ignore pesky things like gravity and inertia, except Frank had too much body control for a dream.

In dreams you don’t have fine control of your body, and you aren’t fully awake. This wasn’t the case.

Frank followed the others out the elevator, deciding to enjoy the experience.

Attendants directed traffic down a hallway and into an outdoor arena filled with people.

The sky above the arena looked like the winter Alaskan sky filled with an intense aurora. An aurora that was so bright that it looked like noon.

“What the hell kind of afterlife is this place?” Frank muttered to himself. It felt like some sort of weird dream.

Looking around, Frank noted the people in the arena ranged in age from teens to people in their mid 30s.

The mood ranged from excited to confused to terrified.

One thing did stand out.

Most people had ordinary hair colors, while a few had anime hair colors like his. Exotic colors included blue, green, red, yellow and even purple. Some even had multi-colored hair. However, the dyed hair was almost exclusive to the teenagers and some post teens.

Frank also noted the unusual eye colors. This was more widespread.

A group of teens, looking like football players were yapping.

“I can’t believe I died,” one of them said.

“Yes,” another teen said sadly. “I’ll never see Pam again.”

“But not all of us on the bus are here,” a third teen said. “Why is that?”

Throughout the room, people talked, trying to figure out what happened. Frank walked around and just listened. He was still feeling disoriented.

Then a voice called out.

Turning, Luke found a handsome young man with elf ears and an arrogant face looking at them from a stage.

The elf spoke and filled the stadium with his voice.

“Greeting everyone,” the man said. “My name is Lord Endol.

“For the record you are no longer on Earth. And yes, you have all died.”

Endol paused, waiting for his words to settle in. The room filled with arguing.

Endol waited and then interrupted the debate.

“This land or domain is called Terrin. It is a parallel domain linked to Earth. The country you are now in is called Asoral,” Endol said. “Upon death, the fate of a soul is determined by its karma. Most are recycled into new baby bodies and returned to Earth according to their karma, keeping no conscious memories. The rest have other fates. You are here because of your strong desires that only this domain can fulfill.

“Once a year, on the Emperor’s Night, people like you are brought here. And yes, the year, gravity, air and day/night cycles are synced to the Earth’s bellybutton.”

*Where was the Earth’s bellybutton?* Frank wondered. *Was it Ayer’s Rock? And what’s with the Emperor’s Night?*

“But I was a paraplegic,” a man in his 30s exclaimed. “And now I’m in full health.”

“You have your own positive body image to thank for that,” Endol explained.

“Every one of you discarded your former bodies upon death. New bodies were created based on your positive self-image.

“Those with negative self-images cannot spawn here. Other fates await them. And no, you will not be permitted to know about the fates of anyone not present.

“What about appearance?” Frank asked.

“How did I get green hair? Although I admit it suites me perfectly,” a teenage girl asked. She was cute, but too young for Frank.

“I answered that,” Endol replied in disdain. “I said it was your self-image that did that. And yes, if you have a younger, healthier body, it’s also because of that.”

That didn’t explain biologically impossible hair colors.

Looking around, Frank wondered how many people regained their youth like him. Less than 1% he figured. He never met anyone who wanted to turn back into a teenager, although on the Internet there was plenty - plenty as in a few thousand in a sea of billions. Most even opposed it, arguing eternal youth was 1) the work of the devil 2) unnatural 3) immoral 4) bad for the environment and 5) a living hell of eternal boredom, or 6) being eternally bedridden and in chronic pain, to name a few senseless arguments.

“Getting back to the topic at hand, this world isn’t as peaceful as you may imagine. In fact it is threatened by creatures of nightmares.

“That is why people like you have been summoned here to this world from time immortal.

“You will be a line of defense in this eternal war.”

“You mean we have to fight monsters?” a girl screeched.

“Obviously not all of you are qualified,” Endol said with even more disdain. “As a result, you will be separated into two groups. The first group will become regular townspeople and will eventually be shipped to various cities in the empire.”

To Frank, Endol made the word Townspeople sound like an insult.

“The rest will become adventurers. They too will be shipped to various locations where they are most needed. Don’t worry. We have a ranking system, as well as training, so you will not be thrown into a situation you’re not qualified to handle.

“The good news is all abilities are infinitely trainable. Unfortunately, early on it will be easy, but will get progressively harder as your abilities improve. That is a law of nature no one, not even elves can avoid.

“So, every one of you future adventurers has the potential of becoming S-Rank adventurers. That’s theoretical. Even C-Rank is extremely challenging. As a result, I will personally congratulate any one of you who can achieve C-Rank. And if you really can achieve B-Rank, the emperor will personally congratulate you and make you a lord.

“Strive to achieve D-Rank at the very least. That will make each of you a respected part of society. That equates to upper middle-class in your previous world.

Endol paused to let the message sink in.

“For you future adventurers, you can earn great rewards for fighting monsters and closing riffs or what some of you call dungeons.”

Endol paused to let that piece of good news sink in, then he said, “For some reason the number of people this year is triple the usual amount, at 6,475 people, implying something big is about to occur in the next few years.

“Or it could be because of the contest for the princess’ hand in four years.

“That’s not relevant for today.”

“Did you say princess?” a few people called.

“The youngest daughter of the royal family will be coming of age a little over four years from now. As I said that is not relevant to you, since it’s impossible for non-elves to win.”

“What kind of competition?” Frank asked, curious.

“Is it a fight to the death?” someone asked.

“Nothing as vulgar as that,” Endol declared.

“The competition always involves conquering a specially created dungeon. Points are rewarded based on how well you do. You need great speed, strength, endurance, magic, intelligence, knowledge, luck and ability to succeed. And yes, strategy is essential.

“As you can see, mere humans can’t hope to compete. Especially ones newly come here.”

Frank walked up to the football players and said softly, “I wonder if all elves are arrogant.”

“Elves aren’t arrogant,” Endol declared. “We are just superior to all you lesser creatures. In time you will learn elves are the highest of the races most of you will ever encounter, subservient only to the gods. Then again, our elders do eventually become gods.”

That got a great deal of grumbling.

“Stop that nonsense,” Endol demanded.

“We will now reveal your abilities, the ones you are fundamentally aligned to, as well as your class,” Endol said. “After that you will socialize.”

A woman next to Endol said, “You will gain 7 special abilities. They are determined solely by the guiding principles in your life. You are not required to reveal these abilities. It is recommended you do not. Only your name, rank, and class are public.

“Although some think class is a little too much information, since that reveals much about you.

Just then dozens of pedestals appeared around the perimeter of the stadium. Sitting on each pedestal was a 20cm crystal sphere, resting on red silk pillows.

“Okay everyone line up,” Endol said.

Frank was in no rush and as a result ended up at the end of one of the lines. That was fine with him. He wanted to know what was going on first.

The football players were at the beginning of the line.

The first player touched the sphere and the sphere glowed. Above the sphere appeared the crest of the warrior, with the name Ripper Bones and Rank F-1.

“Sweet,” the teen said. “Oh, my name is Ripper Bones. I am a tank and my physical stats are awesome. I also have an inventory, like in any video game, and the ability to restore and enhance my equipment.”

Frank paid attention to the others. It was surprising how chatty people could get even though they were warned. Frank decided not to tell anyone his abilities, even if they were crap. Some secrets were best kept hidden.

Frank stepped up to the pedestal and placed his hand on the crystal.

Rank: F-0, Rogue

Abilities gained

1. Personal extra-dimensional space F-0
2. Identification ability F-0
3. Mapping ability F-0
4. Mind F-0
5. Internal magic F-0
6. Shadow meld F-0
7. Luck F-0

The storage, Identification and Mapping abilities were standard RPG abilities. No surprise there, although Personal Extra-dimensional Space seemed odd.

Mind probably came because Frank focused so much on research, education, training, and personal growth.

Internal Magic seemed like an Eastern ability. It probably came from Frank’s desire to master his own biology and to internalize evolution.

Shadow Meld and Luck seemed to be rogue abilities. He was always drawn to fictional rogue characters such as Loki. It embodied his rebellious side that he was never able to express.

Defy the heavens and open up a new path. That was what it meant to be a rogue. Although Frank admitted most rogues just became petty thugs who just preyed on others.

Perhaps in this new life that would change. Freedom to be anything was what Frank wanted.

Frank contemplated his new abilities and body. Again he wondered. Was he dreaming? These abilities definitely broke the Newtonian laws of physics. He thought of the elevators that seemed more like teleporters than standard elevators. It moved 27 floors in the time it took for the doors to close and open. They did say reality was a dream. Or was it a video game? Definitely a video game and the previous one was crap.

Frank considered his pre-assigned class.

The Rogue was a mischievous person who loved exploring the dark recesses of the unknown, teasing/tormenting deserving people (all people were deserving), and just plain having fun. In general they went contrary to expectations, and established norms. Unlike a thief, they didn’t necessarily steal. Although on occasion they did.

Rogues didn’t fight on the front lines. Instead they focused on assassination techniques, stealing, exploration, and some light shenanigans.

This was fine with Frank. After all, excessive damage would reduce his lifespan. That was simple biology and the information theory of aging.

Select your name

Frank paused a moment and said, *‘Fineous Bogg.’*

Time suddenly resumed. Startled, Frank…corrections, Fineous looked up and saw his name, rank and profession. He hadn’t realized time had stopped for everyone in the room.

Fineous Bogg

Rogue

Rank F-0

Fineous walked back into the crowd and resumed eavesdropping. Perhaps 80% of the people had combat related abilities, if you included elemental magic abilities such as fire, wind and water. Then there were support abilities such as healing, crafting, and cooking and the like. Finishing out were some universal skills such as fitness and inventory. In short, the abilities were rather eclectic. However, they all seemed good for any video game character.

The last person obtained their class and Endol finally called for everyone to be quiet.

In that silence Fineous called out. “I notice no one has generalized magic.”

“That’s because you belong to a lesser race,” Endol explained with his usual air of superiority. “Only elves and other higher being have limitless magic, not to mention the brain power and discipline to reach the heights.”

“What an asshole,” someone next to me whispered.

“I heard that,” Endol scolded.

“Your task for today is to get to know each other. Orientation will start tomorrow. You will have until spring to adapt to this world. I pray that even mere mortals such as you can do that. That is all.”

Endol walked away.

Fineous walked among the people, gathering intel on all abilities. He suddenly stopped and mused at his current state. Most dreams would have ended by now. It didn’t matter. He was going to enjoy it to the end, until he entered the final oblivion.

“Lunch is served,” someone announced over the intercom. Fineous paused to admire the fidelity of the speaker system. It felt as if the person was next to him.

Doors near the end of the stadium opened and people streamed through.

On the other side was an enormous dining room. It was the size of a hockey rink stadium with spectator stands. Was everything humongous, Fineous wondered? That was typical in dreams. Too bad he couldn’t fly.

Fineous went to a buffet line and waited.

*‘Why are buffet lines so slow?*’ Fineous wondered. But of course he knew. People liked contemplating their navels instead of hurrying up and filling their plates. People were by nature inconsiderate.

Fineous’ time came and he filled his plate as quickly as possible, but had to wait for people ahead of him, who were figuratively picking their collective noses.

Fineous finally exited the line and found a table to sit on. As he ate he contemplated his personal space. It would be nice to store this food for later.

As Fineous ate, knowledge flooded his brain. “Of course,” he said aloud. He knew what to do to operate his space.

With a mental push, Fineous grabbed a chicken leg and shoved. The chicken leg disappeared and entered his space. The operation was a success. Furthermore, he knew the food would stay fresh indefinitely, begging all kinds of scientific questions.

“I really am a rogue, stealing food from a buffet,” Fineous snickered. After storing food and eating the rest he rejoined the food line. He was determined to collect food for emergencies.

*‘But how big was my space?’* Fineous wondered. He couldn’t detect the limits of the space. Its only known limitation was the effort it took to use his personal space. But that would improve with practice.

As Fineous was working on his fourth plate, Endol stepped up to the stage. He stared directly at Fineous and said, “I see some of you are learning to use your personal storage spaces. You may save food for later if you wish, since this is good training, and this isn’t a restaurant.

“However, remember to always pay for things or you WILL get prosecuted. That is all.”

Feeling in the spotlight, Fineous suddenly felt as if he was pressed against a misty curtain and stepped through.

The other side was dark, smoggy, and disorienting. There was movement, giving Fineous the willies.

Monsters! There were monsters there, things that only wanted to devour him.

Panicking, Fineous stepped back. The feeling of the misty curtain disappeared, along with the monsters.

“Scary,” Fineous muttered and watched the buffet table. “We should never waste food. That would be a crime,” he declared and headed for the line again. More importantly, he didn’t want to feel intimidated.

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“Did you find any interesting candidates yet?” a person in a cloak and muffled voice asked.

“A few,” Endol replied. “Take Fineous there for instance. He acts like a clown and an idiot, but he’s paying close attention to everyone. Also, he is the first to use his personal space. Yes, he was stealing food, but then again he is a Rogue. Then when I mentioned that, he intuitively activated his shadow meld ability and disappeared from normal vision for a brief moment.”

Endol snickered and then said, “I bet being surrounded by monsters gave him quite a surprise.”

The cloaked figure watched as Fineous strutted around with a goofy grin. “He really thinks he’s hot stuff, doesn’t he? As if he is the most handsome person in the domain,” the figure said.

“I won’t deny he’s attractive even by elfin standards. However, he’s still just a mere mortal, inferior to even the lowliest elf. I still think you are wasting your time coming here,” Endol said. “Excuse me. I have an announcement to make.”

Endol left the hooded figure and headed for the stage. Onstage, he said to the audience, “Once you finish eating, exit through the doors to the right. There you will find a training area where you can get comfortable with your new abilities.”

The cloaked figure stared at Fineous. Fineous turned, looked directly at the figure, smiled and winked. He stored the last of his food and headed for the doors.

“Definitely worth watching,” the figure mused, and then focused on the others.

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Fineous returned from the buffet line and sat down. He suddenly realized he was stuffed. Not wanting to waste food, he began feeding his storage.

“Once you finish eating, exit through the doors to the right. There you will find a training area where you can get comfortable with your new abilities,” Endol called out.

Fineous turned and noticed a cloaked figure hidden in a corner of the great dining hall. The figure seemed feminine and she was staring at him. Staring directly at the figure, he grinned and winked at her. Quickly storing the last of his food, he headed for the doors.

“Man I’m stuffed,” Fineous declared to all in the vicinity. “I certainly ate like an orc.”

Stepping out of the doors, Fineous found himself in front of a huge sports field. To the left were practice dummies. To the right was a large wall of trees.

Above, an intense aurora raged in a night sky.

Far in the distance was a mountain range rivaling the Himalayas. Strangely there was no snow.

Fineous ran ahead a hundred meters and turned back to the building he came from, and found himself staring at a 10 story building seemingly made of granite and marble. Some apartment buildings and hotels and hospitals were bigger, but this one seemed vastly bulkier.

If his sense of direction was correct, his own room was above what he could see. Apparently the rest of the building was hidden.

The building was covered with a trellis, seeming part of the design. It looked easy enough to climb to the top. The trellis only ran a hundred meters left and right.

Beyond was a different kind of trellis, which was more difficult to climb. Beyond that was trickier climbing, until the end of the building had no supports.

“A training wall,” Fineous exclaimed excitedly. This would definitely give him a bird’s eye view of the entire area.

Since this was his first time, Fineous decided to use the easiest trellis. Walking up to it, he began climbing.

After the third floor, Fineous found himself getting tired. He paused a moment and admired the mountain range in front of the building. The aurora made the mountains shine with eerie colors.

Why wasn’t there snow at the top? That didn’t make sense. Was global warming affecting this world, just like Earth?

Regaining his stamina, Fineous resumed climbing. One more pause and he arrived at the top.

The top was not the top. Instead, there was a 30m deep terrace, and then the building resumed climbing another twenty stories.

“Pretty impressive, isn’t it?” a voice called.

Fineous looked at the young man next to him. The man looked around 19, was tall, handsome, well built, and had long golden yellow wavy hair, the type the god Apollo possessed. No human back on Earth had that hair color, but it looked completely natural. He also had deep blue eyes that almost glowed, but with flecks of green. In short, he was a movie star waiting to be discovered.

Fineous said, “It sure is. I’m going to enjoy the afterlife.”

Fineous’ ability identified the man as Ranger Aragorn Earthsworn.

“You really think this is the afterlife?” Aragorn asked. “By the way my name is Aragorn Earthsworn.”

“First I died in bed from cancer. Then I woke up to a cute bunny girl nurse. Then I discovered I now have my idealized body. I’m fit like in my marine days, and everything seems larger than life.”

Fineous squinted at specks in the sky, silhouetted by the aurora.

“Look at that,” Fineous said, pointing. “What do you see?”

Aragorn looked and said, “Those look like dragons.”

“Precisely my point,” Fineous said excitedly, almost hopping up and down with excitement. “By the way, my name is Frank. No. My name is Fineous. I will have to get used to that. Fineous Bogg at your service,” he said and made a sweeping bow with an imaginary hat.

“It comes from Fineous Fingers from a retro video game. But I’m not a thief, so I took Bogg from Phineas Bogg from the time-travelling Voyagers.”

“Frank reminds me of a famous doctor and researcher that died a few months ago, named Dr. Frank N. Stein. Everyone called him Dr. Frankenstein. I heard he died after taking some sort of toxic substance. Mad scientist to the end, everyone says.”

Aragorn looked at Fineous grimacing and asked, “What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

“That mad scientist was me. Dr. Frankenstein, in the flesh,” Fineous said. “I failed in my mission to find the secret to immortality. And now I truly am dead. On the bright side, this is not the oblivion I was expecting.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. You were 90-something, weren’t you? How come you look so different?” Aragorn asked.

Fineous waved his hand and said, “As Endol said, we take on our ideal self image when we come here. I love anime characters with red hair, and when I was a child, I dreamed of being 16. Since 16 is 4 raise to the second power and 2 raised to the fourth power. Silly I know.”

“If we really are dead, how come we need to eat?” Aragorn asked.

“Good point,” Fineous said. “So what brings you up here?”

Aragorn said, “I wanted a bird’s eye view of the area. Later I’ll look for some party members.”

“How many members are there in a party, do you suppose?” Fineous asked.

“It has to be a prime number,” Aragorn said. “3 is too small. 11 is probably too big. That leaves 5 or 7.”

“Why prime?” Fineous asked.

“I read somewhere that it contributes to stability,” Aragorn said.

“By the way, I am a ranger with skills like Dead Eye, Archery and Projectile Mastery,” Aragon said.

“Remind me never to get into a fight with you. And good luck becoming a king,” Fineous said. “Forgive me if I don’t bow. You are still an unknown ranger.”

“Great movie, wasn’t it?” Aragorn said. “I always imagined being just like him; someone to rival an elf in strength and beauty.”

“Did someone say strength?” a voice called. He was massive like a gorilla and with a battle-hardened face and hairy hands. He had waste-length green hair that looked like a fur coat, scraggly beard, thick unibrow, and red eyes.

Fineous briefly wondered if Demonbane had a furry back.

“I’m Demonbane Deathclaw and I’m 19,” Demonbane said. “I am a barbarian, as you can guess. I’m glad I didn’t get a lame class.”

“I see you dyed your hair in the blood of demons,” Fineous said. “And your presence literally breaks bones. What brings you up here?”

“Good one,” Demonbane said, laughing. “I saw the both of you climbing here and I was curious. I certainly don’t want to be in just any party. I want strong members. Are you strong?”

“Sorry,” Fineous replied. “You got us beat in that department. Aragon is just a ranger with princely good looks and I’m just a guy who is roguishly handsome. By that I mean I’m Fineous the rogue.”

“I’ll keep you two in mind,” Demonbane said. “I can’t wait to start fighting monsters.”

Fineous walked to the ledge and looked down. The others followed.

“That’s interesting,” Fineous said. “I hadn’t realized that wall of vegetation was a giant maze. What a huge training area.”

“If you’re a rogue, can you do any ninja tricks?” Demonbane asked.

“I can shadow meld,” Fineous said. He demonstrated and added, “Although I haven’t properly explored that yet, since the shadows contain monsters. The others are just standard RPG stuff, like mapping.”

“I got camping and a skill to restore and enhance my equipment,” Demonbane said. “Everything else is warrior related, such as enhanced healing and toughness.”

“In other words, you are the perfect tank,” Aragon said.

“Damn straight,” Demonbane agreed. “What we need is a wizard.”

Just then someone jumped down from the top of a patio awning. She was covered in flames. “Did you say wizard?”

Demonbane nearly jumped out of his skin and turned around. “Where the hell did you come from? Is that fire?”

The newcomer was a short 18 year old girl with sky blue hair and sparkly eyes of unknown metallic color. And yes, she was on fire. “I’m Erza Scarlet. And just like Erza of Fairy Tale, I can create and manage costumes. I also have fire control which Erza never had.”

“That’s quite a jump,” Fineous said. “Did you reduce gravity on yourself or something? You almost looked as if you were floating.”

Erza smiled and said, “That was telekinesis. I trained it to 9kg quickly. After that I seem to have hit a brick wall. To train it more I decided to climb that trellis. All that work, and I only got it to 17kg.”

Fineous contemplated Erza’s words. That would definitely affect training.

“This is actually a good place to meet strong people,” Aragon said. “All we need is three more to make a full party, I believe.”

“Then we can go monster hunting,” Demonbane said with an evil grin. “I wonder if there are any dragons.”

“There are a few there,” Erza said, pointing.

“Are you sure?” Demonbane asked, squinting. “I can’t see anything.”

“Right,” Erza said. “I have enhanced senses. That includes ultraviolet, infrared and sonar.”

“By the way, since we all have cool hair, I think the remaining party members should also have cool hair too,” Demonbane suggested. “I can’t believe most of us who came here have ordinary human hair.”

“Probably because they weren’t otakus obsessed with video games and anime,” Erza said, smiling.

“What should the other three be?” Demonbane asked.

“Probably a healer,” Aragon suggested, “One with offensive magic like a paladin, ideally.”

“The remaining should be warriors,” Fineous suggested. “I don’t know how I can help in battle. On second thought, we can train together. Then decide later if we want to make a party.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Erza admonished. “Rogues are part of any well-rounded party. Does anyone recall if there are many rogues?”

“I only counted 87 out of 6475,” Fineous said. “That a little over 1%. But there has to be more, considering how many people we are.”

“In that case, having a rogue is our lucky day,” Demonbane said.

Changing the subject, Fineous asked, “How big do you think that range is? They seem like towering mountains, but there is no snow at the top.”

“The range appears to be over 100 km away,” Aragon said. “We can’t go there anytime soon. And yes, they do appear to rival the Himalayan range.”

Demonbane pointed above the mountains and asked, “Wouldn’t it be funny if those clouds that look like mountains really were mountains?”

“I can’t rule anything out at this point. Everything seems to be ridiculously big,” Fineous said. “I guess it’s time to train. That parkour area looks like a great place for me.”

“I don’t see it,” Demonbane said.

“It’s next to that dragon statue over there,” Fineous said. “Do you see those walls facing each other at odd angles?”

“I wish I had enhanced senses too,” Demonbane said. “All I have are big muscles.”

“You don’t need telescopic vision since you’re not a ranger or a rogue,” Erza said.

“I don’t have enhanced vision,” Fineous denied. “I’m just squinting real hard. And it’s giving me eye strain.

“And don’t forget. Muscles conquer all.”

“That’s true,” Demonbane agreed happily.

“Where can we meet up later?” Erza asked.

“This place can be our main hangout area,” Aragon said. “And we can meet again for dinner.”

“When can we hunt?” Demonbane asked, looking impatient.

“What’s the rush?” Aragon asked. “We don’t even know where the monsters are.”

“The first step is to get used to your new body,” Fineous said. “I assume you didn’t have that manly body back on earth.”

“No,” Demonbane admitted. “My previous body was embarrassing.”

“Then practice some basic fighting techniques. Right now we don’t have weapons,” Fineous advised. “Those practice dummies there can be your training partners.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Demonbane said with a grin.

Fineous sat on the retaining wall of the roof. “Damn. Going down seems scarier than coming up. See you later,” Fineous said and swung onto the trellis.

Fineous climbed down, careful of his footing. The trip down was definitely scarier.

Finally at ground level, Fineous felt the strange urge to kiss the ground. He then examined his body but discovered he wasn’t the least bit tired. That was strange. In his old life he would have been tired, even in his marine days. Contrary to public belief, marines get tired. They just knew how to work through the pain.

The only effect that climbing had on him was that Internal magic seemed to have increased. Also, he was hungry.

He took out some of his stored food and nibbled on it.

Taking a deep breath, Fineous ran towards the parkour course.

While running, Fineous looked at the people. Some were training like him, while most just lounged and socialized. He passed a group of women and he waved at them and gave them a big grin. They waved back.

Finally arriving, Fineous began his parkour training.

“Time for some wall running,” Fineous said. He tried to jump on a rough wall and only got one step. He tries several more times and got two steps.

There was no mistake. Wall running took skill, as well as speed, strength and flexibility.

A dozen tries allowed for three steps. But it was getting ever more difficult. Three was now his limit. That wasn’t surprising. He wasn’t Spider Man and didn’t have abilities to ignore gravity. Better shoes would go a long way.

Fineous then went to two climbing walls next to each other. They were stepped so that the closest distance a little less than 50cm, then 100cm, until the final distance was over 10m.

Fineous started with the 50cm separation. He grabbed one hand-hold and jumped to the opposite wall, grabbing another hand hold. Then he reversed and jumped back.

After a few tries he tried the 100cm foot gap one but this was harder. The 150cm gap proved his current limit.

Next was jumping between with just legs. That was vastly harder. Fineous wasn’t discouraged. People in real life took years to master these abilities, and he thought he was doing a great job.

“Attention everyone,” the intercom called. Again the sound was crisp, like someone was talking next to him. “It is now 4:55PM. Dinner will be served in 5 minutes at the dining hall.”

Fineous stopped in surprise. He had just barely started training.

“Damn, we didn’t select a place to meet,” Fineous said and turned towards his destination.

It was then that Fineous saw the building he climbed in all its glory. The structure was absolutely gigantic, seemingly piercing the heavens.

Fineous paused a moment to admire and then ran back.

On his way back he passed a hedge filled with roses. He snipped one and continued.

Arriving at the main doors, he climbed the trellis one story up and waited as people streamed in.

“Yo Fineous, hanging out I see,” Demonbane called.

“We should have selected a meeting spot,” Aragon said as he approached. “This place is huge, including the dining room.”

“Fineous was easy to see with his red hair,” Erza said, also approaching.

Fineous got down and they headed in.

Within, the dining room was filled with a cacophony of talking. They headed to a relatively short line and Fineous waited his turn.

With a grin on his face, Fineous observed the people around him. Everyone who looked at him got a wave and a grin.

Some people didn’t respond or looked at him in annoyance. In his previous life being snubbed bothered him when he was young. After decades, he learnt to handle rejection. Now it no longer stirred his emotions. After all, it was never personal.

Fineous finally arrived at the counter. As he picked up a plate he realized he should have been exercising his Identification ability.

While waiting, Fineous looked at an item. It was just a rice dish with chicken and a few vegetables. He looked again. It wasn’t chicken. The vegetables and rice were also strange, but very similar to earth foods.

Fineous continued through the line piling on foods he didn’t recognize. He exited the line and waited for his friends. They headed for a free table and sat down. He continued his identification training and then got a hit.

Carrageen Snapping Trupe

More information to ponder…

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Aragon asked.

“I was training my Identification ability,” Fineous said.

“Where did that fish go?” Erza asked.

“I’m a rogue, aren’t I?” Fineous asked with a grin. “I’m stealing food.”

“But where did you put it? Did you put it into your inventory?” Erza asked.

“Yup,” Fineous replied. “You should try it. We all need the practice. And I need to work on bigger items. Small items are getting easy. It’s time to get more food.”

“I have both an inventory and a costume management system,” Erza said.

“I’m guessing you really liked that Erza, didn’t you?” Fineous asked, visualizing the ability.

Conversation continued until Fineous felt he stole enough food for the day. More importantly he was starting to feel guilty for staling so much food.

“Attention everyone,” Endol said and the room quieted.

“Some of you have started forming parties. Taking initiative is essential. No one will be holding your hand,” Endol said. “The ideal is 7 members, since it has great internal balance. Anymore and the team will develop a disproportionate amount of agro. Five is also a great number with great balance, like our fingers.”

“You were right,” Fineous told Aragon.

“Just outside is the armory. There you may borrow a status ring. This ring will allow you to see your stats and the stats of your party members, after you formally create parties.

“At the end of the school year, you will be required to either buy it or return it.

“Those with Identification don’t need it and shouldn’t use them, since that will hamper their growth.

“Just outside the training area you will find F-Rank monsters you can hunt. They are relatively harmless, but good practice for you. You may borrow practice weapons at the armory.

“There is another area with E-Rank monsters on campus, but that’s for later. They aren’t recommended for F-Rankers. On the other hand, reaching E-Rank should take only a few days of intense training…”

Endol’s companion Arielle interrupted him and said, “Lord Endol. These are human.”

“I apologize,” Endol said. “It will take you at least a month to reach E-Rank, since you are all mere humans.

“You might be wondering, what is the value of killing monsters?

“Monsters are formed from untamed magic, which by the way is correctly described as the substance of possibilities. This raw substance can only be used by the gods and does not concern you.

“The only way to utilize this substance is by killing monsters. This slightly increases your available essence.”

Fineous nodded in understanding, but most of the people expressed confusion.

Endol sighed, knowing how stupid humans were and said, “In your world you are physically limited by how fast you can run. Training only brings you closer to that limit. However, these limits remain.

“Here, if you defeat enough monsters, your essence increases. This gives you the fuel needed to increase your limits. However, if you don’t train, you will not reach that new limit.

“Long story short, fight monsters and train hard and don’t worry about the mechanics.

“When a monster is destroyed, its essence will unravel. As a rule of thumb, around 10% is absorbed by the adventurer and used for their growth cycle. Another 10% is converted into various items.

“The nature of the items is determined by the collective unconsciousness of the adventurer’s species, their class and Abilities. Other factors include the monster fought, the difficulty of the fight, the needs of the adventurer, and so on.

“Another 10% is converted to coins. These coins are our formal currency. They are also an alchemical ingredient. As a result, they is always a need for them.

“The rest of the essence is absorbed by the domain, thereby increasing it and forcing the Onn Mountains to recede.

“One final warning,” Endol said. “Don’t kill nature spirits. Killing them will weaken you and erode the world. Too much of that and you will die.”

Endol walked away and Endol’s companion Arielle said, “Nature spirits, also known as fairies, are created in the same way as monsters. Unlike monsters, they are friendly, and will not attack unless provoked.

“If left alone, both monsters and nature spirits will unravel. Monsters increase the land and the mineral riches of the earth, while nature spirits increase the fertility of the land. It’s like falling snow that melts.

“And off course, monsters should be killed since they are destructive like hailstones.” She too exited the stage.

People resumed talking.

“That makes sense,” Fineous said.

“You understood what that meant?” someone from a table next to them asked.

“Nope,” Fineous replied with a grin. “I was only trying to sound smart. Did I succeed?”

“Idiot,” the man mumbled, annoyed, and turned away.

“You know, if we can find someone that can control nature spirits, that would be amazing,” Fineous said.

“Isn’t that cruel?” Erza asked.

Fineous focused and took a deep breath. “Are monsters and nature spirits conscious and do they feel pain?” he bellowed, momentarily drowning out the room. He felt his Internal Magic increase slightly.

“Ow my ears,” a few people grumbled as the hall momentarily quieted down.

“No,” Endol replied into his microphone. “Monsters and nature spirits are just the raw energies of creation taking on momentary form. As Lady Arielle said, they are like snow that eventually melts. You may use them as you see fit. Just don’t break any laws.”

After a few moments, conversation resumed throughout the room.

“Let’s begin recruiting before they are all gone,” Fineous confided. “For instance they could…” He paused, unsure what to say.

“What could they do?” a woman at another table asked. She was around 23, had sky blue eyes, and long pink hair, turning into purple at the tips.

*‘Were those clouds in her eyes? Damn, she’s cute,’* Fineous mused, feeling his luck increasing. *‘She could even make for a great sheep girl.’*

Her name was Rose Evergreen and her class was Caretaker. She had a need to know look.

“Are you in a party?” Fineous asked.

“No,” Rose replied. “I’m not a fighter.”

“In that case, why don’t you join us for dinner?” Fineous asked with a grin. “We are three thorns and Erza. We need a Rose.”

“You’re too young for me,” Rose objected.

“Don’t you know that illicit relations are the best? Don’t worry. We will keep this platonic. However, I will not promise not to flirt.” Fineous promised.

“No thanks,” Rose said. “I don’t want to be an adventurer. Adventuring is too scary.” Clearly she had rejected other offers.

Fineous walked up to Rose and squatted.

“Rose, Rose, Rose, that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends,” Fineous said sweetly and handed her a rose.

“If we get stationed in the same city, then we can have you heal up our boo-boos when we return to the town after a long hard day at the office.”

“Do you have charisma?” Aragon asked. “That would be a great rogue ability.”

“Nope,” Fineous denied. “But I do have luck. And I think this is our lucky day.”

“No promises,” Rose said.

“No promises,” Fineous agreed.

Rose got up and joined their table.

“Yes I have the Spirit Whisperer ability, but I don’t know what that means,” Rose said.

“I’ll explain everything when we are in private,” Fineous promised. “My brother hated it when I made statements as if I knew, when I’m just guessing.”

“You don’t know?” Rose asked, surprised.

“No one knows, except them,” Fineous said, pointing, “Fineous Bogg at your service. I wish I had a hat. That princely looking guy is ranger Aragon Earthsworn. Demonbane Deathclaw is our tank and is there to protect us from monsters and demons. Erza Scarlet is our fiery beauty who is just as fierce as the one in the anime Fairy Tale.”

There were introductions.

“You don’t need to join our party,” Fineous said. “But we can still hang out and have fun while we train, can’t we?”

“I suppose so,” Rose said reluctantly. “I don’t know anyone.”

“In that case, you have Erza,” Fineous said. “You can both do girl stuff together. And you can think of me as your big brother.”

“Don’t you mean little brother?” Rose asked with a giggle as tension broke. A few colorful fireflies buzzed around Rose’s head, which Rose failed to notice.

“Big brother, little brother, what’s the difference as long as we have fun?” Fineous asked.

“What should we do for the rest of the day?” Demonbane asked.

“This is Emperor’s Night,” Fineous said. “Let’s explore the grounds. I’ll show you the garden I plucked the rose from. It’s close by.”

The team got up and they headed out. Fineous led them to a building with the words Armory.

“Let’s grab some weapons,” Fineous said. “That way we thorns and Erza can protect our rose.”

Rose giggled like bells and said, “Your really are a smooth talker.”

“What are those lights?” Demonbane asked.

“They are nature spirits,” Rose said. “This is the first time they have approached.”

They approached the building and stepped in.

The armory was filled with every imaginable weapon, including swords, pole weapons, bows, hammers, and axes. There were even pitch forks, pickaxes and shovels among the assortments.

“How may I help you?” a man built like a wrestler asked. He was so bulky that he looked short, despite being almost 2 meters tall. He also had the stereotypical beard braded with beads.

“We would like to borrow some practice weapons,” Fineous said.

“You may borrow a primary weapon such as a sword, pole weapon, bow, riffle, or whatever, including 2 throwing knives or daggers,” Brad the Dwarf said, pointing.

Fineous chose the knives. The others also chose, leaving Rose without weapons.

Fineous noted Demonbane, Aragon and Erza borrowed status rings, while Rose did not.

Brad took out a tablet-like device and entered information. He then instructed Fineous to place his signature. *F. Bogg.*

“What’s that thing?” Fineous asked.

“We have technology that is similar to what you know on Earth,” Cragstone said. “However, the principles are fundamentally different. Think of this as a quantum computer. However unlike your dead technology, this requires manna to operate.”

“Does that mean only certain people can use it?” Fineous asked.

“Thankfully no,” Cragstone said. “Everyone has manna, even if only some elves can freely manipulate it. However, everyone can use these devices. Ranking up will grant you greater manna resources, allowing the use of more powerful devices.”

“Did you say some elves?” Fineous asked.

“Only a minority of elves have the ability to directly control magic,” Cragstone explained. “Even though they like to pretend they all do. Their only claim to fame is that magic is almost exclusive to elves, and non-elves don’t live long enough to master the power.”

That last comment sent a shiver down Fineous’ spine. He definitely needed to keep his Internal Magic secret. Otherwise, he too would not live long.

“Thank you for that information,” Fineous said. “That was really helpful.

“Wait a minute. By more powerful, do you mean guns and stuff?”

“Actually yes,” Cragstone replied. “We have equivalent equipment that uses your manna to work.”

“Why not regular guns?” Aragon asked.

“Only losers use that crap,” Cragstone sneered. “Real people fight with their own power.”

“Thanks for the info,” Fineous said.

“Glad to oblige,” Cragstone said.

They stepped out of the armory and Fineous placed the knives into his space.

“Can we go there?” Fineous asked, pointing towards the Onn foothills. “There is a stream there with wild flowers. Rose will like it. It’s very pretty.”

“Fineous, can you escort Rose there?” Aragon asked. “I need to go to the washroom.”

“I need to train,” Demonbane said.

“Same here,” Erza said.

All three left, leaving Fineous and Rose alone.

“See you,” Fineous said. “Let’s go.”

Fineous and Rose headed out. Soon they passed beyond the inner training grounds and into the outer training grounds.

“That guy is quite the sweet talker,” Aragon said as he watched the two leave. “I’m surprised he doesn’t have charisma as an ability.”

“Let’s follow. I want to see what they do,” Erza suggested.

“That’s stalking,” Aragon noted as he followed.

“There are monsters there,” Demonbane argued. “We need to be ready to protect Rose.”

Aragon laughed.

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“I wonder how my family is doing,” Rose said sadly. “I feel I don’t miss them as much as I should.”

“They obviously miss you,” Fineous said. “But eventually you will meet. After all, we are proof there is no death.”

“I hope so,” Rose said and motes of light gathered.

“You really are loved by the spirits,” Fineous said. “There is the stream.”

“So many flowers,” Rose said, marveling.

Fineous picked up a small stone and pushed it into his space. He then chose a larger rock and did the same. The next larger one was impossible.

“What are you doing?” Rose asked.

“I’m exercising my storage space,” Fineous said.

“Why don’t you sit on that rock while I exercise?” Fineous suggested.

“Did you hear that sound?” Rose asked.

Instantly on his guard, Fineous took out his knives.

“There might be a few animals here, but they shouldn’t be dangerous,” Fineous said.

A rat-like creature the size of a badger leaped at Rose. Rose screamed and covered her face.

The lights zoomed ahead and attacked. One cast a weak wind spell while another zapped the monster with an electrical spark. The rat dropped to the ground, stunned by the attack.

Fineous stepped forward, aimed, and stabbed downwards, killing the creature.

A moment later he felt energy coursing through him.

The monster disintegrated and a few copper coins appeared in Fineous’ inventory.

“What just happened? I just got zapped,” Rose asked. “I also got some loot in my inventory.”

“I do believe we defeated our first monster together,” Fineous said.

“But I didn’t do anything,” Rose objected.

“Not true,” Fineous denied. “You summoned the spirits and they protected you. It’s your win and your loot. You are the master of spirits. They will protect you and obey you.”

Fineous paused and then said, “I was expecting to travel much further before encountering monsters. It must have been a stray.

“While I was on the main building there, I saw a waterfall there,” Fineous said. “Would you like to go? It’s still bright as noon.”

“I don’t know,” Rose said nervously. “I’m scared.”

“Keep in mind, monsters are everywhere in this world,” Fineous said and extended his hand. “You will encounter them every day of your life from now on. Cities probably contain only weak monsters, but learning to protect yourself is important. And I can help.”

Rose took Fineous’ hand and the spirits gathered.

A 5 minute walk took them to the waterfall. It was a series of waterfalls around 150cm high but the last was over 2m.

They weren’t the only ones there. A hoard of rats was present.

Fineous stepped into action and a moment later was joined by the others.

Focusing on his martial training, Fineous faced the first rat and prepared. The rat jumped and Fineous met it with a knife.

The collision was jarring as knife and rat collided. The monster disintegrated and another monster took its place.

This time Fineous used his left hand. Rogues were ambidextrous, which was his goal.

In his previous life, he was born left-handed. As a result, he was more ambidextrous than most. Even so, some tasks were easier with one hand over the other. However, this time he needed to take it to the next level.

Attacks increased and one got through. Fineous screamed as the rat bit his leg. A moment later Fineous stabbed the monster.

Frightened, Rose stayed behind. That was okay since her spirits were attacking.

For the next 10 minutes the fighting was fierce. Finally they defeated the last one, and ended up with quite a few scratches and minor bites.

“Oh my god, you’re all bleeding,” Rose exclaimed.

“It’s just scratches,” Fineous objected. “My clothes are the real victim here. Then again they probably cost 5$ for everything.”

She grabbed Fineous’ arm and held her hand over the scratch. She focused for half a minute and Fineous said, “That’s good enough for now. Help the others. Demonbane can heal himself.”

Rose tried her best but was having problems.

“Don’t expect miracles,” Fineous said. “It takes time to develop the skill. Rest and then try again,” Fineous suggested.

“I got 5 Silver and 37 Copper,” Demonbane said.

“I think we all got something similar. Although Demonbane probably got the most,” Fineous said.

“Let’s head back,” Erza said. “I think Rose has had enough excitement for today.”

“And my Inventory is full,” Demonbane grumbled. He was the only one carrying items. “Stupid Inventory levels up too slowly.”

“What level is it?” Fineous asked.

“F-9,” Demonbane replied. “It says it’s overloaded to E-2, whatever that means.”

They turned around and Demonbane exclaimed, “Holy cow! That building is huge.”

“Does something like that exit on Earth?” Aragon asked.

“Only in architect’s dreams,” Fibrous replied.

They headed back, arriving at 6:55PM.

Near the main building Rose tried healing again. She succeeded after the third try.

“This is so slow,” Rose grumbled.

“No big deal,” Aragon denied. “You’re just learning.”

“Now that we have some cash, I wonder where we can spend it,” Erza said.

“I know,” Rose said. “I can’t stand what I’m wearing. It looks like prison clothes.”

“Why don’t you two go searching?” Fineous suggested with a grin.

“Okay,” Rose said happily and Rose and Erza walked away.

“You rascal,” Aragon said when they left. “Now Rose will want more, if only for shopping.”

“I’m so evil, aren’t I?” Fineous said with a grin. “I think I’ll go exploring.”

“Where should we meet tomorrow?” Demonbane asked.

“You know the entrance we first used to enter the dining hall? We could use that as our muster spot,” Fineous suggested.

“Muster spot,” Aragon said. “Did you serve in the military?”

“Vietnam,” Fineous said. “But that was long ago. See you later.”

As Fineous walked, he saw Endol.

“Lord Endol, is there a library here?” Fineous asked.

Endol frowned and asked, “Why would someone like you want to go to a library?”

“Did you know libraries have plenty of books filled with pictures of cute girls?” Fineous answered.

“Libraries are not for the likes of you,” Endol said with a sneer.

*‘What an asshole,’* Fineous mused. He wasn’t deterred. “Are you saying humans are forbidden from entering?”

Endol sighed and said, “No one is forbidden from entering. However, reading elfin is impossible for you.”

“So I *am* allowed to go and see the picture books,” Fineous argued.

Endol looked at Fineous as if he was a dog wanting to go to school with his owner.

“Yes. You are allowed. Take that corridor, then the one on the right then left. Past a double-door there is another corridor. Near the end you will see both an elevator and a flight of stairs to the left. Use the steps on the left.

“Good luck reaching floor 290.”

“Much appreciate it,” Fineous said. “And have fun.”

Endol smiled, knowing Fineous would fail.

Fineous jogged through cold and foreboding corridors and finally arrived at the destination.

What greeted Fineous were an elevator and two doors.

Looking at the elevator, he found a strange runic language.

Fineous then turned to the doors to the left. Within were the steps, and he began climbing. The climb was relatively easy, as he had already scaled that 10 story trellis.

On the 10th floor, Fineous found a locked door.

“Asshole,” Fineous muttered as he stared at the locked door with an engraving of a gargoyle with closed eyes.

The gargoyle opened his eyes and asked, “What good are books?”

That was a surprising question. For a moment Fineous hesitated, and then said, “Books are a useful tool for recording and passing onto our descendants our collective wisdom, thereby advancing civilization.”

“That is an adequate answer,” the demon said. “From now on, you will be allowed access to floors up to 19. The elevator will also take you up to floor 19.” The door opened.

“Thank you kindly,” Fineous said and headed up.

Soon enough, he was at the door to the 20th floor. Again there was another gate keeper.

“What is wisdom?” the keeper asked.

“Wisdom is my accumulated knowledge and experience, distilled down,” Fineous said.

“That is an adequate answer,” the keeper said. “You have access up to floor 29.”

“Thank you kindly,” Fineous said and headed up.

The 30th floor boss door asked, “What good is knowledge?”

“Knowledge helps us solve practical problems encountered in everyday life,” Fineous said.

“That is an adequate answer,” the keeper said. “You have access up to floor 39.”

“This is going to be tiring,” Fineous muttered, feeling he was back in University.

“Thank you kindly,” Fineous said and headed up.

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Fineous stepped through the final door, thanking the guardian as he stepped through.

Answering the first few guardians were easy. After all, ‘What is wisdom’ had multiple acceptable answers. After that, it became more and more like an interrogation.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma, the nature of virtue and vice, the value of thoughts that you find evil and immoral, the concept of a highest principle or if there is one, and what is our place in the world, were just five topics explored.

In the end Fineous felt like he was under a microscope, being dissected to see his inner character, searching for any character flaw, any reason to stop him. It was quite frankly exhausting, but also exciting.

Finally the ordeal was over. Fineous had passed the final guardian and had reached the top floor, the floor Endol mentioned.

Inside was a cathedral dedicated to knowledge, art and beauty.

He wandered around the multi-storied atrium, marveling at the architecture.

“The architecture is amazing, isn’t it?” an elfin woman asked. She seemed ancient, although outwardly she looked young like all elves.

“It rivals some of the kingly palaces of Earth, or at least exceeds what I have seen,” Fineous agreed.

“How may I help you?” the librarian Araldar asked.

“I’m looking for some children’s books,” Fineous said.

“Do you wish to learn the elfin language?” Araldar asked.

“Yes, Lady Araldar,” Fineous said with a bow. “Lord Endol confirmed anyone has the right to enter.”

“I suspect he was trying to play a jest on you at your expense. To him rank is everything,” Lady Araldar said with a smile. “But it seems the joke was on him. Very well, you have earned the right to learn.

“I will spend half an hour with you, then you should get some sleep,” Araldar said. “It’s already past 11:00PM. You took over 3 hours climbing the stairs and answering those exhausting questions.

“After that, come anytime you wish. Now please follow me.”

They stopped at a desk. Araldar took out paper and pen and said, “There are actually two languages. The first is Basic Alfin, often just Aflin. The second is High Alfin or Alfheim.

“Each has its own alphabet.

“Both languages are based on Runes. Each Rune is composed of one or more phones. A phone is a distinct sound or gesture. And yes, Runic can be signed, spoken and written.

“Alfin is the easiest to learn and plenty of non-elves can use it.

“Alfheim is a different story.

“Alfheim signs require a great deal of flexibility,” Araldar said and demonstrated by bending the tip of her fingers while keeping the rest of your finger rigid. Her fingers were long like all the elves he had seen.

“Likewise, you will not be able to speak it. That’s because the human vocal cords aren’t good enough.”

Fineous frowned at that and Araldar clarified, “I didn’t mean to insult humans. They are amazing in their own way. Now think of a gorilla’s vocal chords. They can make a great deal of sound but they can’t make vowel sounds.

“As a result, they can’t speak like humans.

“In the same way, humans can’t pronounce voyelles[[1]](#footnote-1). As a result, you don’t have the biological equipment needed to speak in Alfheim.

“However, eventually you should be able to…What do you know about the language you are speaking?”

“I have studied multiple languages in my previous life,” Fineous said. “As a result I believe we are not speaking any Earth language. I’ve doubted myself though, since no one has mentioned this.”

“You are correct,” Araldar said. “Your cohort of arrivals was installed with the universal language used by humans, elves, dwarves, beast folk and several other races.

“Have you noticed that almost no one talks about Earth? Corrections, no one talks about their previous lives. That’s because when a person starts a new life here, their emotional attachments start disappearing. Eventually all of you will view the Earth as a foreign world, and this as your true home.

“All your memories will become impersonal, like a movie you watched years ago, or a country you visited.

“It’s natural and is nothing to worry about.”

“I understand,” Fineous said.

“As I was saying, you will be able to read and write both languages,” Araldar said. She paused and then said, “I would like to gauge your abilities, so I will show you the easiest voyelle. Write it to make sure you understand.”

Araldar wrote the phone and Fineous did as instructed.

“Excellent,” Araldar said. “It’s exactly as I wrote it, maybe too exact.

“This is the hand sign. It’s not important to reproduce, but just recognize.”

Fineous tried and grunted in pain. He tried with both hands, and ended up with two sore hands. Araldar watched in amusement.

“Now for the phone,” Araldar said when Fineous gave up. “As mentioned, this is the easiest of all the voyelles.”

“Can you please say it slowly, at least 10 times with pauses between?” Fineous asked.

“Very well,” Araldar said and pronounced the first phone.

Fineous listened to the phone and realized there were parts of the phone he wasn’t hearing.

Again Araldar spoke the phone. This time Fineous heard more. In his mind he repeated the phone.

Again Araldar spoke and again Fineous heard more.

The fourth time Fineous felt his throat constricting, as he tried to repeat the phone in his mind.

The fifth time and the sixth time sounded the same. One milestone was passed and Fineous internally rejoiced.

In the meantime Fineous’ throat was starting to hurt.

The seventh time, Fineous softly vocalized.

“That’s amazing,” Araldar praised. “Very few humans can do that. Oh I see how you can do it. Amazing!”

Again Araldar repeated the letter. Again Fineous followed.

A few more times and Araldar said happily, “That was perfect. We will need to stop the lesson for today.

“The trial steps and this exercise over-extended your reserves. You also badly damaged your vocal chords and will soon get a fever.

“I’m sorry I can’t…Crap. I should mention. If you keep up this training, you will no longer be considered human. Your Internal Magic ability is changing you, rewriting your energy systems and biology.”

Fineous shrugged and said, “As you may have guessed, I have lived a long life by human standards. 96 years to be precise. My body has been reconstituted. Damn, my throat! I even have Chinese-red hair and sapphire green eyes, impossible colors by Earth standards. I think it’s too late for me. I stopped being strictly human when I died.

“This body doesn’t even have biological parents.”

“You have a good point, although most of your cohort would disagree,” Araldar agreed. “Please follow me to the elevator. I think you have the potential to learn all 108 voyelles. And as I said, this one is the easiest.”

Araldar stopped and said, “I need to give you some warnings. Elves are jealous of magic. Occasionally non-elves get these abilities. They tend to disappear, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand,” Fineous said. “I have a friend with the Spirit Whisperer ability.”

“Yes, that is also an ability that needs to be guarded,” Araldar said and resumed walking.

“I’m sorry I can’t heal your throat. Both your vocal chords and your sinuses are undergoing modifications and mustn’t be interfered with.”

“Lady Araldar, if Lord Endol asks, please tell him I was looking for dirty pictures,” Fineous said with a horse voice.

Araldar laughed and said, “I like you.”

“Don’t fall in love with me,” Fineous said with a grin. “I’m a bad boy.”

Again Araldar laughed. Wiping away tears, she said, “I haven’t laughed like that in centuries.

“Don’t worry. I will keep these training sessions secret for your safety.

“Unfortunately, I need to inform the royal family that you have access to the highest area of the Arcana Dios. Such things are a matter of national security.”

They stopped at the elevator. Araldar pressed a button. A moment later the elevator opened.

“Please tell them I don’t need anything. I just want to have fun with my friends,” Fineous said. “If necessary, I can do tasks for them, as long as it is kept secret.”

“Are you afraid of causing a scandal?” Araldar asked.

“Yes, my lady,” Fineous replied.

“You will be required to compete for the princess’ hand,” Araldar warned.

“That’s okay,” Fineous said with a grin. “I was planning on competing. It sounds like fun, even if I can’t win.”

“Come an hour before you want to retire for the night,” Araldar said. “I don’t require rest and spend my life reading. I’ve lived over a thousand years, and still have only read a fraction of the books in the library. There are always more books.

“Goodnight and have a good rest.”

“Good night Lady Araldar. See you later,” Fineous said and pressed the ground floor button. His throat was in worse condition and he was feeling feverish.

Fineous retraced the corridors he previously used until he came to his apartment elevator and rode up. He then walked down the hall that was entirely too long.

Approaching his dormitory room, Fineous saw the sign for men’s washroom. He entered and peed. Regretting not having a toothbrush, he headed for his dormitory room. He then fell onto his bed and fell asleep.

That night he dreamed he was chased, mauled, had his giblets ripped out and put back together.



Monday, 1/1/384

The intercom called out. “Breakfast will be served in 10 minutes.”

Looking at the door, Fineous spotted a clock. It was 6:50AM.

Fineous checked his throat and found it was fine. He then noticed a note on his chest-of-drawers and a card.

Good morning Fineous. I took the liberty of creating a library card for you. Officially you have the right to reach floor 49.

This will allow you to keep under the radar of everyone you meet. However, talent such as yours will eventually be revealed to the world.

I pray you keep your peaceful life for as long as possible.

The elevator doesn’t require cards since it will recognize you. Remember to ride alone, or take the steps.

Fineous put the note and library card into his space and exited the dormitory.

He headed to the washroom and cursed. He should have bathed before going to the library. He probably stank. Then again he wasn’t expecting to meet anyone.

While showering, Fineous practiced speaking his first phone and also signing it. The sign was doable after that night’s sleep - barely. It still cramped his fingers. He wasn’t worried about being overheard since the shower stalls were private.

Arriving a little late at the meeting point, Fineous found his friends there, including Rose. They headed in.

“So how was shopping?” Fineous asked the ladies.

“Terrible,” Rose grumbled. “It seems that 1 silver roughly corresponds to 1 dollar US.

“Three dollars and some change don’t go very far.”

They arrived at the buffet line.

Fineous looked at Rose and raised an eyebrow.

“I admit the money is great, but adventuring is not for me,” Rose declared.

“As I said before, you don’t need to join,” Fineous said. “Let’s just have fun. Then when we are deployed, you can work at a clinic. And we can hang out after work hours.”

“I guess I can’t object to that,” Rose said and grabbed a plate.

Fineous softly spoke the Alfheim letter to himself while signing.

“What did you say?” Aragon asked as he waited for his turn. “And what are you doing with your fingers?”

“Just some training,” Fineous said. There was no value in telling them where he went or what he was learning. At the very least it seemed pompous to mention it. He wanted to be seen as cocky, but not in that way.

Just then Endol approached. “Did you find the library?”

Fineous looked Endol in the eyes and said, “No sir. But I did find what I was looking for,” he added with a wink and a grin.

Endol looked at Fineous with disgust and walked away.

“What was that all about?” Aragon asked.

“Just having fun,” Fineous said. With plate full and a drink in hand he headed for their table.

Fineous began eating as the group assembled. He looked at his drink and wondered if he could store it. He focused on the contents and pushed. As expected, the liquid vanished and he felt it as a blob in his space. He then reversed the process and the glass refilled.

“That’s impressive,” Rose said.

“Thanks,” Fineous said. “My current rate is pouring liquid out from a straw. I need to increase this a bit if I want to store water for long journeys.”

Fineous emptied the glass and then poured the orange juice directly into his mouth, and almost choked. “Damn. I need practice. Time for another round of stuffing my face,” he added. This time he got glasses of milk, orange juice, water and coffee.

He then made another trip for more.

The experiment worked. Each liquid remained separate and could be called up as needed. Sweet!

“Attention everyone,” Endol said from the stage. “Registration for mandatory training will start after breakfast. Schooling will start tomorrow.

“Training will be as follows. Starting at 8:00AM, you will be learning the history, culture, and laws of this country.

“Lunch is from 12:00 to 1:00.

“Classes will continue until 3:00PM.

“The final class of the day is on the basics of adventuring and is optional.

“After that you are free for the rest of the day. You will have Saturday and Sunday off, as well as statutory holidays. This will continue until spring, when your schooling ends.

“After that you will be shipped to the various towns and cities of the empire for deployment.”

“You are free to check out the various guilds on campus and find out what’s suitable for you.

“Enter those doors when you are ready. Class registration is on the left. On right is booths set up by the guilds. That is all.”

Talking resumed.

“We can all take the same classes,” Rose said.

“Rose, have you figured out how your special ability works?” Fineous asked.

“Not quite,” Rose said.

“Remember when you first came?” Fineous asked. “You were all alone and isolated. When was the first time spirits came to you?”

“When I came to your table,” Rose said.

“And after that?” Fineous asked.

Rose blushed but said nothing.

“The amount of spirits grew as your feelings towards us grew,” Fineous said. “You love people and this love attracts the spirits. It’s as simple as that.”

“Do you think the same is true with monsters?” Aragon asked.

“Probably,” Fineous replied. “But I assume they are powered by hate. I guess that makes them demons.”

“Scary,” Rose said, frightened.

“Don’t worry,” Aragorn said. “We’ll protect you.”

“Well aren’t you the knight in shining armor?” Fineous said with a grin. “I suppose a rogue can’t compete with that level of manliness.”

Blushing, Aragon said, “It’s time to register.”

They headed into the registration room. Fineous followed with his hands in his pockets, pretending to chew gum. This world really needed chewing gum. And pockets.

“Look, groups can register there,” Rose said, pointing.

Fineous looked around the room, exercising his Identification ability. So far the only information he was consistently receiving were names. Classes were mostly there, however that occasionally failed. There was no telling what triggered greater identification.

Slightly annoyed at his lack of ability, he continued to observe.

“Do you want to register for our party?” Aragon asked.

“You can do that,” Fineous said. “Rogues should stay in the background.”

Unsure, Aragon stepped to the desk and registered the group. Members then stepped forward and signed papers. Fineous looked at his schedule and put it away in his space.

“What should we do now?” Demonbane asked.

“Rose, do you want to register with a guild?” Aragon asked.

“I don’t want to leave you guys,” Rose said worriedly.

“Why don’t we collect some spending money now and worry about that later,” Fineous suggested. “Aragon will protect Rose, so there is no problem.”

“Eventually we will need to discuss our abilities,” Aragon said. “Not knowing this will get us into trouble.”

“As you command, our fearless leader,” Fineous said with a salute.

“Aren’t you the leader?” Aragon asked.

“When did that happen? I’m just a guy with roguish good looks,” Fineous asked. He turned around and pointed. “To adventure and then shopping…”

They headed out.

“Can we stop at the arms place? I want to return my borrowed knives. I looted several from the previous hunt,” Fineous said.

“That’s a good idea,” Aragon said. “I want to try a different bow. I no longer need arrows because of those…What were those?”

“They are called ratvargs,” Fineous said. “Biologically speaking, they appear to be giant versions of rats. And yes, I have the Identification ability.”

“I have it too,” Rose said. “I guess I need to practice.”

They step into the armory and Fineous called out, “I would like to return the knives I borrowed.”

“No problem,” Brad said and took the knives.

As they walk out, Aragon asked, “Can we share our stats now?”

“I need to give you all a warning,” Fineous said. “Lord Endol said we only need to share our names and class. I have Identification. And so far I can only use it to identify names and sometimes classes. I’m getting better with classes, and occasionally I get deeper knowledge.

“Abilities are valuable. Take Rose’s special ability. We must never reveal that to anyone, since the world is filled with bad people.”

“What do you mean?” Erza asked.

“I was informed by a reliable person, people like us tend to disappear, if you know what I mean,” Fineous explained, making a neck-slashing gesture.

“Scary,” Rose said, terrified.

“Therefore, I want you all to think about this for the rest of the day. By sharing, we are literally putting our lives on the line. Tomorrow, if you all still agree, we will make a promise to each other and then share. Do you all agree?”

“Are you sure?” Aragon asked.

“We will be going a little further away from the main building,” Fineous said. “However, we will still be on the main campus. I can’t believe we will be in any real danger. After all, this facility is for training. So yes, we can wait for tomorrow if you all agree.”

“I don’t care,” Demonbane said. “I just want to beat up some monsters.”

“True,” Erza said, “Going hunting sounds exciting.”

“Okay,” Rose said.

They headed out.

“Do you remember anything interesting when we were on that terrace yesterday?” Fineous asked.

“I saw some ruins, a lake, and a ravine much further on over there,” Erza said, pointing.

“I saw a fruit grove there,” Aragon said, pointing.

“The last one to the fruit is a rotten banana,” Fineous said and started jogging; making sure Rose wasn’t left behind. The others followed.

Soon they arrived and Fineous examined the fruit. “Don’t touch those. Identification says they are called laxalaves and act as a powerful laxative,” he said as he started harvesting.

“Why would something like that be here?” Erza asked with disgust.

“Because this is a training area,” Fineous replied. “In the wild that could have been poisonous. However, since I’m a rogue I’m collecting some. Wa ha, ha, ha...”

“You really are a clown,” Erza said with a laugh.

“Thank you kindly,” Fineous said. “I really need a hat.”

They headed for the ruins.

The ruins were a decaying mansion. Part of a wall was broken in. Within were stairs going down.

“Should we go down?” Demonbane asked.

“No way,” Rose exclaimed. “That looks scary.”

“Then let’s go to the ravine,” Erza suggested.

They continued walking, passing a glade with wild flowers.

“This place is very pretty,” Rose said.

“Nice place for a picnic,” Fineous agreed.

As they walked the land became more rugged.

“Rose, do you have any fitness abilities?” Fineous asked.

“I have physical fitness,” Rose said.

“I have enhanced physical stats,” Demonbane said. “What’s the difference?”

“Enhances physical stats focus on boosting strength, speed, and endurance. This is perfect for fighters,” Fineous said.

“Physical fitness is not that intense, but much broader in scope. Rose will never compete with Erza for example. However, she can handle more diverse environments such as cold, heat, altitude, etc. More importantly, she will have no problem keeping up with me at least. So let’s pick up the pace. Rose needs the training.”

They resumed travel.

“How do you know so much?” Aragon asked.

“Additional information unlocked when they mentioned their abilities,” Fineous said. “That identification ability is rather useful, although it is still hit or miss.”

“Sometimes I think you’re scary,” Aragon said.

“I agree,” Demonbane said.

Fineous innocently asked, “What’s so scary about me? You’re both handsome.”

Erza laughed and the others joined her.

Unfortunately that laugh attracted a little too much attention.

A pack of rabid badgers surrounded them and then attacked. The screeching was terrifying.

Rose screamed in fright and covered herself. Her reaction was normal. Normal animals don’t screech like banshees.

Even the others were taken aback by the screeches. Never the less, they rallied and fought for their lives and to protect Rose.

Aragon shot the creatures and kicked the ones that came too close. Thankfully kills were giving him an endless supply of arrows.

Erza used flames and a sword. At times the flames would engulf her sword.

Demonbane whacked the monsters with his broad sword.

Fineous fought with his knives. However, having badgers ram against his knives were rather jarring. Each was almost double the weight of the ratvargs.

Unfortunately the creatures seemed endless and Fineous’ arms were burning with fatigue.

“Rose, don’t you hate it when orange juice comes out of your nose?” Fineous asked, forcing a smile.

The frightened Rose looked up and found Fineous half turned towards her. A moment later, orange juice squirted out of his nose and his eyes went cross-eyed. He stuck out his tongue.

Rose looked at Fineous in surprise and then started laughing. Instantly she felt the spirits rallying.

“Trust in your family Rose,” Fineous said. “We will always keep you safe. Aah,” he screamed. A badger had bitten his leg.

“Oh I went down south to see my sal, singing polly wolly doodle all day,” Fineous sang.

The wave diminished and then ended and Rose got up.

“Oh my God, you are all bleeding,” Rose said worriedly. She began healing as the exhausted warriors rested. This time the healing was more effective. However, the injuries were all minor scratches and bites like before.

“Damn, my arms are killing me,” Fineous said. “On the bright side, my strength seems to have increased.”

“I agree,” Demonbane said. “This fighting makes for a great workout. Sweet, I have some leather armor.” He put his new armor on.

The others also got similar armor. Rose got clothes that were less ugly than the rags she was wearing.

“Lunch time in 10 minutes,” the intercom said.

They headed back.

Fineous picked up a rock and said, “My strength has increased. This sized rock feels light now.”

The trip to the main building was uneventful. All about, people mostly socialized.

They entered the dining room and joined a buffet line. The food this time was different than before. That meant Fineous could steal even more diverse foods.

“This fugilaw tastes great,” Fineous said. “You should try it. I wonder if I’ll ever eat any of the food I’m stealing.”

Endol stepped onto the stage and said, “I see some of you have started hunting monsters. Well done.

“For those who have yet to start, what are you waiting for, an invitation? Well here it is. Start hunting. That is all.”

“In case you don’t know, there is a healer on call to the right of the entrance to the training grounds,” Arielle added.

“I’ve played video games all my life,” Demonbane said. “How do you tell if a challenge is too dangerous?”

“I don’t know,” Fineous said. “Training, I suppose, understanding your enemies and the field, understanding your ability set, the bond we share.”

“That makes sense,” Aragon said.

“That sounds like a lot of training,” Erza said.

“And a lot of delicious food,” Fineous said, rubbing his hands. “Speaking of which, do you want to go shopping now or after dinner?”

“Dinner,” Rose said. “Then we can do some real shopping.”

Fineous grinned, knowing Rose was becoming a member of the party.

“I’m sure we have reached F-2 by now, considering how many monsters we have defeated,” Fineous said. “Unfortunately, my Identification is still weak. I have no idea what my individual levels are, although some seem to be approaching some sort of natural limit.”

“Time to hunt,” Demonbane said as he pushed his plate away.

“All you want to do is fight,” Fineous said, laughing. “You really are a barbarian.”

“Damn straight,” Demonbane agreed.

They headed out.

This time they met horned rabbits with red eyes, oversized fangs, and muzzles that looked like snarling wolves.

“Those rabbits are scary,” Rose exclaimed.

“Don’t look away,” Fineous said as a rabbit impaled itself on one of Fineous’ daggers. “This is adventuring. Fighting monsters, exploring dungeons, meeting strange people, eating amazing food, and enjoying ourselves with those we love.”

“I got some rabbit meat,” Aragon said, surprised.

“Great,” Fineous said. “Erza can barbeque it when we have time.”

“I can cook,” Rose said. “Why would that be an ability?”

“Cooking is not just about making food tasty,” Fineous said. “In any RPG, food gives you various temporary buffs. The same is true here. With training, you should be able to give us buffs in strength, agility, rejuvenation, even protection from heat and cold.”

“That’s an amazing ability,” Erza said.

“Indeed,” Demonbane said. “I can’t wait to eat your food and become stronger.”

“And faster,” Aragon added.

“Thank you all,” Rose said tearfully. Again the spirits rallied.

Finally the rabbit wave ended.

They headed forward toward the lake.

As they walked, Fineous spotted mushrooms and carefully plucked them with his knives. The mushrooms disappeared into his space.

“What’s that?” Rose asked.

“Try identifying it,” Fineous said and waited. “Perhaps in the future you could cook it.”

After a while, Rose exclaimed, “That’s Amanita bisporigera, A.K.A. Eastern Destroying Angel. It’s poisonous. Why are you collecting that? I can’t cook that.”

“Because I’m a rogue and rogues always do roguish things. I’m so evil I scare myself. Wa, ha, ha,” Fineous said.

He added, “Remember in medicine, we use poisons to cure people, and cooking can purify foods. So many things would kill us if eaten raw.

“It’s all about increasing your skill level.”

They arrived without incident at the lake. “Who wants to bet there are monsters in the lake?” Demonbane asked.

“No one,” Erza said. “Fineous, what are you doing now?”

With arms stretched out, Fineous said, “Harvesting water. I can only collect water through a preverbal straw now. So I’m practicing.”

“Aren’t you afraid of running out of space,” Aragon asked. “Besides, I can’t do what you are doing.”

“I believe I have a different type of storage,” Fineous said. “I can’t see limits to my space. My limit seems to be the weight of objects and flow for liquids.”

“While you’re doing that, I need to pee,” Demonbane said.

“Same here,” Rose said.

“I’ll keep you company,” Erza suggested and they headed into the woods.

When they came back, Fineous said, “This is a slow process. I’ll practice this after dinner.”

“Half an hour to dinner,” the announcement called.

“It’s almost dinner and it’s still so bright,” Erza mused.

On the way back they were stopped by…

“Are those chickens?” Rose asked. “Why are they purple? Why do they have four legs? And fangs?”

“They are called chickaloons,” Fineous said. “They aren’t very dangerous, but they can give you a nasty scratch.

“Ericka, I found their rank. They are Rank F-1.”

“Why do they come in packs?” Erza asked.

Fineous didn’t say anything. He wanted the others to think for themselves.

After awhile Aragon said, “Probably because bigger monsters are soloists.”

That wasn’t completely true. It all balanced out to make a consistent treat level. But the important thing was his friends were using their brains. Smiling, Fineous continued fighting. “I hope you all like chicken, because I’m collecting quite a bit.”

Finally the wave ended and Rose said, “I’m starting to have fun.” She knew she was contributing.

A moment later everyone started clapping, to Rose’s embarrassment.

“I now have around 127 silver,” Fineous said. “I need new clothes. Mine are almost completely shredded.”

They arrived at the main building without incident and entered.

“I see we aren’t the only ones with shredded clothes,” Demonbane said.

“A surprising number of people have their starter clothes,” Erza said. “And they are undamaged.”

“My clothes are undamaged,” Rose said in embarrassment.

“You’re different,” Erza said. “You’re our healer. Healers are never expected to fight. More importantly, you have new clothes you looted.”

“And your spirits kick ass,” Demonbane added.

“I recently discovered you have pink friends,” Fineous said. “We now have group passive healing.”

“But it’s not much,” Rose objected.

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” Aragon said. “We can do so much more because of you.”

“Speaking of more, I can’t wait to taste your cooking,” Fineous said with a grin.

“Do you think of anything other than eating?” Rose asked with a laugh.

“Food, food, glorious food, mouthwatering dinner,” Fineous sang. “Speaking of which, we need to hurry, or all the food will be gone.”

The group arrived and Fineous loaded up with food.

When they sat down, Aragon asked, “How can you keep track of all that stuff? Mine seems simpler, although rather limited.”

“I don’t need to,” Fineous said. “My space keeps track of everything. It’s like everything is in neat folders that self-organize. I get what I need when I need it.”

“So what’s next?” Aragon asked.

“Let’s finish dinner and then go shopping,” Fineous said. For emphasis, Fineous poked a finger through a hole.

Meal finished, Fineous asked, “By the way, where is the bazaar?”

“This way,” Rose said and grabbed Fineous by the arm.

They travelled down a long corridor and Fineous found himself in a large indoor area set up with boots like a flea market. Each stall in the bazaar was selling something exciting.

Fineous pointed at a clock on the wall and said, “It’s a little past 5:30. Let’s meet here in half an hour.”

“Make that an hour,” Erza said. “Shopping should be enjoyed at leisure.”

“Can I come with you?” Rose asked.

“If you want,” Fineous replied. “I’m just looking at all the booths.”

The first booth sold lady’s clothes. The next was battle knives. Fineous looked at the prices and passed on.

The third was armor. Again the armor was too expensive.

On and on they walked and finally something grabbed Fineous’ attention. It was a household wares shop.

The costs were reasonable so he stepped in. Apparently only adventurer equipment was expensive.

“Rose, I want to buy a set of plates, cutlery, cups, straws and napkins. Plus cleaning stuff,” Fineous said. “I need your help.”

The next purchase was two simple notebooks and a writing instrument.

After that Fineous bought a hat that resembled a fedora.

The final purchase was chewing gum. Fineous spent the last of his silver buying several packs.

With only pocket change left, they just window shopped.

Finally they met and Erza said, “Nice hat.”

“Why thank you my lady,” Fineous said. He took off his hat and waved it in a bow.

“People are staring,” Erza complained, embarrassed.

“Let them stare,” Fineous declared. “They should know of us as a fun-loving group of adventurers. I can’t wait to hunt again. I only have a few coppers.”

“Yes,” Demonbane agreed. “In this world and the previous, a copper is almost completely useless.”

“It’s 6:30PM,” Fineous said. “I need to do some training. We can resume hunting tomorrow.”

“You’ll go weather I come or not, won’t you?” Rose asked.

“We won’t force you,” Aragon said. “You said you didn’t want to be an adventurer.”

“But who will heal you?” Rose demanded angrily.

“We will make do,” Demonbane said stoically. “We are men after all.”

“Speak for yourself,” Erza scolded.

“No,” Rose declared. “I can’t bear to see you get hurt.”

“Sleep on it and tell us your decision when you are ready,” Fineous said.

“Okay,” Rose agreed reluctantly.

“Endol said it will take a month to reach Rank-E. I can’t wait to make him eat his words,” Fineous said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Aragon said with a grin.

“It’s the path of manliness,” Demonbane agreed.

“Womanliness,” Erza corrected.

They broke for the night and Fineous headed out.

Fineous went to the stream and spent quality time stretching his space with rocks and water, interrupted by the occasional monster attack.

As the light started to fade, Fineous realized he had neglected his Shadow Meld ability. How did he activate it? He did it twice before.

Just then a monster approached. Fineous instinctively backed off and found himself against the fog wall. He stepped through.

He was once again in the shadow world. Next to him was the real world, as seen through a murky window.

Fineous decided to walk around, but intentionally kept himself near the fog wall. He felt nervous going deeper. The space was disoriented, like trying to visualize 4 dimensions, except there was more than 4 dimensions.

Walking near the boundary was quite a chore. It was too easy to step back to reality or go too far into the shadows.

As Fineous walked, or more correctly shuffled, he found his skill increasing.

Suddenly he saw his quantified stats:

* Internal magic - F-9
* Mind - F-6
* Personal extra-dimensional space - F-9
* Identification skill - F-5
* Mapping skill - F-3
* Luck - F-5
* Shadow meld - F-3

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Level: F5

“So my ranking is the average of all abilities, rounded down,” Fineous said aloud.

Fineous was then interrupted by an approaching monster. It was an F-4 slime.

How do you fight slimes? One way was fire. The other way was breaking their cores.

Fineous looked but found none. Not sure what to do, Fineous squired the slime with water. That did nothing so he stepped on it.

That did the trick. Unfortunately the stupid slime melted his boot before disintegrating.

Cursing, Fineous looked for a better strategy. Oil… He would buy oil. With a lighter, he could make a flame thrower.

More monsters arrived.

Fineous fought for another 10 minutes, until he discovered he had around 1 gold.

“That’s enough for the night,” Fineous said and returned to reality.

Fineous momentarily marveled at how much more effective hunting was in the Shadow Realm than outside. The last monster was F-8 and in principle he could hunt in his own room. The drawback was there was no big brother there to save his bacon, in case of emergency.

Next stop was the bazaar.

Thankfully the stores were open till 9:00PM. He quickly found a clothes store. Lucky for him, he had enough for 2 pairs of cheap shirts, pants, and boots.

Next stop was his dorm room, where he showered and changed into his new clothes.

Dumping his shredded clothes and boots into the garbage, he headed for the library.

This time Fineous took the door to the right.

Stepping through, Fineous found himself in a bustling library.

“Ass,” Fineous muttered to himself as he realized the books were written in the common language found everywhere on campus.

But where did everyone come from? After a careful search, he found the doors. Stepping out, he found himself in a corridor not far from the dining hall. “Double ass,” he muttered.

Fineous’ mapping sense was great. However it couldn’t show places he never…mapped. He had to explore to clear the so-called ‘Fog of War’ before the map filled out.

Fineous then returned and asked a librarian for a book on abilities. He borrowed the supplied book and headed up.

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

“Hi Lady Araldar,” Fineous said.

“Hi Fineous,” Araldar said. “Did you practice?”

“Yes, my lady,” Fineous said. “I can now do this.”

Fineous showed his fingers and flexed them so only the tips bent, while keeping the other parts rigid.

“Excellent work,” Araldar praised. “Now show me the sound and the glyph.”

Fineous took out his new notebook and wrote the glyph. Then he spoke it.

“Again excellent work,” Araldar said happily. “The next phone is harder. You’ve been hunting, haven’t you?”

“Yes my lady,” Fineous said.

“How much did you earn today?” Araldar asked.

“247 silver,” Fineous said.

“That should be more than enough essence absorbed to learn your next phone,” Araldar said. “I’m guessing, since I’ve never worked with a human with Internal Magic. Unfortunately, the Arcana didn’t supply me with the knowledge. Are you willing to experiment? I need to understand you and your abilities more.”

“Yes my lady,” Fineous said.

Once again Araldar drew the glyph for the phone and Fineous copied it multiple times.

Araldar showed Fineous the new hand sign.

“I don’t believe human fingers can bend that far,” Fineous said.

“That’s okay dear,” Araldar said. “Elves have much longer fingers, muscles and tendons.”

Araldar spoke the phone as before. As before, Fineous felt his throat constricting. This time he felt pressure and burning in his sinuses. It was like eating Wasabi.

Finally, Fineous was able to repeat the phone, but only after Araldar repeated it over 40 times.

“Fineous, what is the level of your Internal Magic?” Araldar asked.

Internal Magic, Level E-3 (Overload)

“Fineous, please pay attention to what I have to say. This is important.

“It is possible to raise the rank of an ability to beyond your overall rank, like what you have just done. However, there are consequences for that.

“First, it literally is ten times harder to level.

“Second, it puts a great deal of stress on your body. This is mitigated by the fact that it is Internal Magic that was overloaded. The good news is, now you can overload other abilities with minimal harm.

“Now listen Fineous, you need to reach E-Rank as soon as possible.

“I also want you to hunt more monsters until you collect at least 20 gold, and ideally 30 or more. I cannot give you any more lessons until you do that. I pushed you too hard today. I apologize,” Araldar said.

“That’s okay, my…,” Fineous began but then fainted.

Back to School

The problem with reincarnating   
is you have to go back to school  
- and homework

Tuesday, 1/2/384

Fineous woke up in bed. Unlike yesterday he was seriously hung over.

Staggering out of bed, Fineous did his thing and headed down to breakfast.

“Oh my god,” Rose exclaimed. “What happened to you?”

“Don’t heal me. I’m not physically injured,” Fineous said groggily. “I’m doing special training and overloaded one of my abilities.”

“That sounds dangerous. Here let me help you,” Demonbane said.

With Demonbane’s help, Fineous walked to the buffet table.

They sat down to eat. Unfortunately, Fineous was too tired to eat. Instead he just closed his eyes and listened to his friends talk.

Fineous then tossed his breakfast into his space when the others were finished, leaving just the plate and cutlery.

Breakfast finished, they headed out of the dining room and down a corridor. Another corridor, an elevator ride and another corridor brought them to the destination.

They entered the lecture hall and Demonbane said, “This place is more confusing than Hogwarts.”

“Not true,” Fineous denied, struggling to speak. “Hogwarts’ corridors move.”

“I don’t know man,” Demonbane said. “These directions they gave us are terrible. Good thing you were here.”

“How are you feeling?” Rose asked.

“Much better,” Fineous rasped. “My manna levels or whatever is no longer at zero. I should be fine in another hour.”

The party took a spot at the back.

“Where is everyone?” Aragon asked.

“Probably lost,” Erza said.

People started coming in. “You made it,” someone named Wrecker said in the front.

“I had to ask for directions,” Wrecker’s friend Thor grumbled.

The lecture began.

“Settle down people,” Professor Harrison said. “Today you will learn the basic geology of this world, since that is the basis of everything.

This universe exists on an infinite plane. And just like your universe, this one is ever expanding.

There is a complex mapping between this world and the mortal world. However, that is not relevant here.

*Does that mean the mapping uses complex numbers?* Fineous wondered.

But not all of it is habitable by human standards. Surrounding the habitable areas are the Onn Mountains. The farther you go, the harsher the environment, and the more oppressive the air. Another factor is the vast scales of the mountains. The next habitable area is so far away that you need special craft to travel to it.

Think of the Earth as an orange peel that has been laid flat. That is what this area or domain resembles. The only difference is that everything is proportionally expanding. Also, the geography is different, so knowledge of your former world is useless. For the record, this domain is called Terrin.

To the unanswered question, yes, it is possible to go to Earth. Eventually you might do so.

Professor Harrison waited for the statement to sink in.

For better or worse, all attachments to your former life will fade and disappear. Eventually the Earth will become foreign to you, and this world will become your home.

Your former lives have ended. Accept it and make new friends and family here.

Harrison waited for that statement to sink in.

This domain is anchored to the bellybutton of Earth, also known as Ayers Rock in Australia. As such the day-night cycle is the same as that location.

There are 12 months in the year, and each month has exactly 30 days. That only accounts for 360 days. The remaining 5 days are special holidays.

First, there is the Emperor’s Day. This is the day emperors are always enthroned.

That’s not surprising since all 7 moons glow brightly and the sky is filled with shooting stars. More importantly, there are no monsters.

The next day is the Emperor’s Night. This day has no sun. However, the dark sky is filled with an aurora that’s so bright that it looks like noon.

And yes, that was day before Yesterday, the day you arrived.

The third and forth days are for the spring and fall equinoxes. No moons shine then.

The final day is winter solstice. Again, no moons shine.

Finally, once every 4 years, we have the Evil Night. This day there is no illumination. Unfortunately, this event is marked by a monster stampede, and unusual rains.

More importantly, you will be seeing the Evil Night on your first year in 6 months from now.

The sun and 7 moons are mirages as are the night stars. The exact details are beyond the scope of this introductory course.

The days of the week are known by which moon is shining.

One final thing regarding the firmament: the rising location of the sun rotates through 365 degrees over the course of the year. That means we always know which day of the year we are in just by tracking the sun.

The Emperor’s Day sunrise location is considered due north, and is used to establish direction.

The first year of an emperor’s rule is called the Jubilee Year, and people celebrate the entire year.

The day before you came marked the 384th anniversary of Emperor Jasmine’s rule. As such, we are now entering year 384 of the Jasmine calendar.

Your cohort is officially called Emperor Jasmine’s 384th Transplant Cohort, or simply Cohort 384.

Here is your new world. We are here. This is the borders of the Elfin Empire Asoral. We will discuss the neighboring countries later.

The blackboard lit up with a map.

<Map of world>

Raw magic flows in from the mountains and precipitates as monsters and spirits. This is both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, it brings abundance to the world. On the other hand, monsters are by nature destructive.

Harrison showed a new map.

Here is the Imperium, the capital building we are now in. It is due north of the city of Araguaia. On Emperor’s Day, the sun rises over the central tower. It’s an amazing sight you will have to wait to see.

I’m sure most of you have noticed this governmental complex is huge. The first 10 stories include an indoor stadium with an artificial sky, the main conference hall seating over 12,000 people and several other huge venues.

Above that are three separate towers. When facing north, the left tower contains the Great Library, the Arcana Dios.

The right tower contains government offices. The bottom floor is open to the public. Above are just offices, as well as residences for the people who work there.

The central tower houses the apartment area, with the royal palace on the top. The apartment tower has 380 floors.

To get a better grasp of the size, as an example, the first 5 floors of the apartment tower contain the dormitories you are currently living in and are currently at 37% capacity. Keep in mind your cohort is 6475 people. In other words, it never gets full.

After that come the single-room and multi-room apartments. There is literally room for 8 times the number of people in your cohort.

This place is so freaking huge, it would take forever to reach any location, if it weren’t for the elevator system…

“If there’s so much space, why do we have to live in those dormitories?” a 27-year-old man name Bob Willis demanded.

That’s because you have to earn the right to move in there.

The only reason you are getting free food, lodging, and training is because you are like newborn babies. Just like children, you are entitled to this.

However, the grace period ends in spring equinox when school officially ends.

Individual apartments start at 3 golds a month, increasing by 3 golds each month. That is an amazing deal you should all take advantage of, since you are just starting your journey.

In addition to individual-room apartments, there are multi-room apartments designed for parties. They start at 30 gold a month and increases by 30 a month.

You get more benefits as you spend more.

Harrison paused to let the class understand what he said.

Sitting on top of the apartment complex is the imperial palace.

The first 12 floors of the palace contain the royal audience chamber and various venues required for diplomatic reasons.

For the record, that place is amazing, especially the emperor’s audience chamber.

The final 50 floors are for the exclusive use of the royal family. Needless to say, most of the rooms are currently empty and some haven’t been used in centuries.

The lecture continued, and then they had a 10 minute break.

“How are you feeling?” Rose asked.

“I’m fine now,” Fineous said with a grin. “I’m ready to flirt with all the cute girls of the world and eat plenty of delicious food.”

As proof, Fineous took out a plate and filled it with food. He started eating.

“Today’s breakfast is excellent,” Fineous said. “Does anyone want to join me? I have plenty of food.”

“That’s okay,” Demonbane said. “I don’t want to lose my 6-pack.”

Fineous quickly ate and put his stuff away.

“When should we share our stats?” Aragon asked.

“Rose, have you made a decision?” Fineous asked.

“I need you and you need a healer,” Rose said. “I’ve decided to become an adventurer.”

“Yippy,” Fineous cheered and brought out 5 pieces of cake on separate cheese plates, along with forks.

The group ate cake and Fineous put the empty plates and forks away.

“Let’s do this during lunch time,” Fineous said. “We can borrow a classroom then.”

The bell rang and the room quieted down.

This time they learnt about the geopolitics of the area.

Fineous leaned back and began reading a book, listening to the lecture with half an ear.

“What are you reading?” Rose asked softly.

“Book of Human abilities for transplants,” Fineous said. “It seems us transplants tend to have different skills than natives. For example, inventories are common for us. But that’s relatively recent, as a result of video games. I borrowed it yesterday.”

Fineous continued reading.

The final class before lunch thought them local laws. Again Fineous read his book.

As they headed for lunch, Demonbane asked, “Will there be tests?”

“I doubt it,” Fineous said. “I don’t think they care. I wouldn’t be surprised if classes lost people and combined. And if we get in trouble because we don’t have the knowledge, that’s our problem.”

“That’s harsh,” Rose said.

“Either way, it’s up to us to make sure we learn all we need to survive,” Fineous said. “We are now in a monarchy. As long as we don’t break any laws, there shouldn’t be a problem.

“Speaking of breaking laws, it’s time to steal more food.”

They arrived at the dining room and waited in line.

“What do you think of that competition for the princess’ hand?” Aragon asked.

“Perhaps it’s one of the ways they invented to keep their system vitalized,” Fineous suggested. “In theory anyone can marry the princess and become a royal. But of course, only the most talented, trained and lucky bachelor will succeed in the end.”

“Would you compete?” Erza asked.

“That sounds like fun,” Fineous said with a grin. “I wonder what challenges I would have to face.”

“But what if you won?” Rose asked worriedly.

“No need to worry,” Fineous said. “Four years is not enough to challenge people training their entire lives. Like I said, this is just for fun.”

They sat down to eat.

“Aragon, Demonbane, would you compete?” Fineous asked.

“No way,” Demonbane said. “I’m no good with puzzles and such.”

“Same here,” Aragon said.

“Too bad the ladies can’t compete,” Fineous said. “But I suppose there will be other competitions where we can all compete together.”

Fineous leaned back and waited for the others to finish eating.

“Finished so soon?” Erza asked.

“There’s plenty of time for that later,” Fineous said. “We only have 1 hour for lunch and we have plenty to discuss.”

The others quickly finished eating and they followed Fineous out the door. Soon they arrived at their classroom.

Upon entry Fineous closed the door.

“Okay everyone,” Fineous said. “Before we begin, we need to promise never to share our secrets with anyone. This applies even if we go our separate ways. This is a matter of life or death. Do you all swear?”

Fineous raised his hand and the others did the same.

“Do you all swear to always protect each other for as long as we are a party, no matter the challenges we face?”

Again everyone swore.

Fineous then placed his hand palm-down between them and then said, “From now on we are family. Even if we join other parties, we will always retain this bond.”

The others put their hands on his hand and agreed.

“To family,” Fineous said and the others echoed.

“That’s so sweet,” Rose said.

“I’m glad you agree. Who wants to share first?” Fineous asked.

“I do,” Demonbane said. Fineous focused on the board and Demonbane’s name appeared.

“How did you do that?” Erza asked.

“The board is thought sensitive,” Fineous said. “Just project your thoughts as images. It knows what to do. What are your abilities Demonbane?”

Eventually everyone’s stats were recorded.

**Demonbane - Barbarian**

1. Enhanced physical stats
   1. Strength
   2. Speed
   3. Endurance
2. Inventory
3. Weapon’s master
4. Enhanced healing
5. Enhanced toughness
6. Equipment repair ability
7. Camping abilities

**Aragon - Ranger**

1. Enhanced physical stats
   1. Strength
   2. Speed
   3. Endurance
2. Dead Eye
3. Archery
4. Projectile Mastery
5. Mapping
6. Tracking
7. Inventory

**Erza - Mage**

1. Enhanced physical stats
   1. Strength
   2. Speed
   3. Endurance
2. Enhanced senses
3. Weapon’s master
4. Fire control
5. Telekinesis
6. Costume management system
7. Inventory

**Rose - Caretaker**

1. Physical Fitness
2. Inventory
3. Identification
4. Spirit Whisperer
5. Healing
6. Cooking
7. Music

**Fineous - Rogue**

1. Internal magic
2. Mind
3. Personal extra-dimensional space
4. Identification
5. Mapping
6. Luck
7. Shadow meld

“Anyone wants to comment?” Fineous asked. “By the way, afterwards I want to share our ages and professions and hobbies from our previous world. That way we can better understand each other.”

“Can we do that now?” Aragon asked.

“Sure,” Fineous said. “Who wants to go first? Don’t mention family. That is forbidden.”

“I am 23 and worked at a Hollywood studio as a technical director. I’ve been crazy about archery since I was a child. I was so good that people were suggesting I try for the Olympics. Unfortunately, an injury killed that plan.

“I always liked fantasy movies such as the Lord of the Rings,” Aragon said. “And yes, I did look 19 when I died.”

“I was a race car driver who loved watching anime and playing video games. I also liked extreme activities like BASE jumping,” Erza said. “I just started my career at 18 when…There was a nasty collision in a race I was in. The driver in front of me lost control and crashed into me. I died in the hospital.”

“I was a highschool student,” Demonbane said. “I got shot when some punk tried to rob a store.”

“I am, I mean was studying to become a doctor, when I was hit by a drunk driver,” Rose said. “Oh, I was 23.”

“Well folks, I am without doubt the oldest person here,” Fineous said.

“No way,” Aragon exclaimed. “Wait a minute, you told me.”

“That’s right,” Fineous said. “I used to be a Dr. Frank Nell Stein, or Dr. Frankenstein as some people called me. And yes, I did research on extending life. It was a failure of course. I died of cancer. Some would say I died of poisoning when I took an unapproved drug I was working on. I was 96 years old.”

“No way,” Rose exclaimed, shocked.

“How come you look and act so young?” Erza asked.

“This is my idealized self-image,” Fineous said. “I even had an anime image on my wall that looked something like this. I am the result of my previous karma, as are all of you and your abilities.”

“That makes sense,” Erza said. “Why would anyone want to become old? Although why so young?”

“Many older people have bad memories of their youth,” Fineous said. “Also, most older people think it’s somehow unnatural. In short, most people either can’t imagine or don’t want to become younger.

“As a child, I loved the number 16 and thought it was the perfect, ideal age. The freedom of learning to drive, no responsibilities, and entering an ever expanding world was amazing. Nothing ever beat that.

“To me, having perfect youth, beauty, and health is natural. Anything else is unnatural.

“As for alcohol, I don’t need it. And I assume natural aging occurs here too since we are human, I think. But elves seem to live forever, so I assume old age is conquerable here.”

Fineous smiled at his shocked companions and then said, “Who wants to discuss our abilities?”

“You do it,” Aragon said. The others agreed.

“I’ll only do this today since we are short on time,” Fineous said. “However, I want all of you to learn, in case I’m forced to become the next emperor.” He smiled and winked at them.

Fineous scanned through his book and then said, “First, you all have an Inventory.

“As an F-Rank ability, it increases by one slot per level. Each slot holds 1 item weighing up to 1kg.

“So at level 5, you have 5 slots holding 5 items per slot weighing a maximum of 5kg. Without additional abilities, knowing what individual items there are in a slot is impossible. So you should always stack the same type in each slot, such as silver.

“At E, each level increases capacity by 10. At D, it increases by 100. At C, it truly becomes useful at 1,000. Also, boxes count as one item, regardless of content. So you can store plenty of stuff.

“Ranking is simple. Just keep your Inventories full and they will automatically improve. The more you use it, the faster it will increase.

“Later on, I recommend using rocks just to exercise your Inventories.

“’Says here there are items to help you organize your Inventories.

“Second, you all have physical abilities, either Physical Fitness or Enhanced physical stats.

“Demonbane is the perfect barbarian. All his stats are considered common affording to this book I borrowed,” he said, showing everyone the book.

“By common, I mean it is common among warriors. However, not all warriors have all abilities, since there are more abilities than ability slots.

“Needless to say, Demonbane’s ability mix is marvelous.

“If he activates Repair while fighting, his equipment will regenerate while fighting, dependent on his level. Later it will work on his companions.

“With Camping, equipment repair and self-healing, he has the abilities to solo dungeons. He is definitely a great asset to our team.”

Then was Rose’s turn…

“Rose, Physical Fitness is perfect for a non-combatant. And you have marvelous support roles.

“Spirit Whisperer is a Mythic ability that normally only elves have. As such it must be kept hidden for your own safety.

“I would wager you might be the only person in our cohort to have that ability. One in 6475 is impressive. I guess my luck really kicked in to have you.

“If people truly understood, they would all try to recruit you.”

Rose blushed at that.

Fineous turned to Aragon.

“Aragon also has abilities in the common category, when it comes to rangers,” Fineous said and opened the book to the relevant pages.

“However, just because a ability is common doesn’t mean it is weak. I see great potential in Aragon. For example, he, Demonbane, and Erza were the only ones to climb the main building on the first day, to my knowledge.”

“You climbed it too,” Aragon pointed out.

“I guess,” Fineous replied.

“Even now, people seem to view that trellis as some sort of decoration and not as the training tool it is.”

“I didn’t climb it, though I did see you climb, when people pointed you out,” Rose said meekly.

“Don’t worry about it,” Demonbane said. “Not everyone has the balls to do that.”

“Excuse me,” Erza said, indigently.

“He meant womanly ovaries,” Fineous clarified with a wink.

“Anyway, Aragon’s abilities are marvelous. For example, he has the archery ability, as well as Explosion Mastery.

“That gives him raw explosive power and shaped charges.

“He sacrifices breath for depth. Combined with Dead Eye, the book said he will be able to make curve and other trick shots, something physically impossible with just Newtonian physics. His shots should have amazing punch, especially when arrows can explode.

“Also, Mapping and Tracking work well together.”

Fineous looked at Erza.

“Erza has that Costume Management System. Combined with her Weapons Mastery, she is one step closer to Fairy Tales’ Erza. Combined with fire and Telekinesis, it’s rather impressive.

“Remember to create as many costumes as possible and swap them as often as possible.

“Telekinesis is a powerful weapon. You should use it to fight, perhaps mixing it with fire.

“I have Luck and Shadow Meld,” Fineous said. “They are considered common among Rogues …”

Erza pointed at the door and mouthed ‘Lord Endol’.

Fineous wiped the board and said aloud, “I can’t wait to start phase one of my rogue training: Stealing the undergarments of 100 women. I wonder if Lord Endol would like to join me.”

The door swung open and Endol marched in. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Is it forbidden to use these rooms outside of classes?” Fineous asked innocently.

“You were contemplating a criminal act,” Endol declared, changing the subject.

“They have to catch me first,” Fineous said with a grin.

Endol shook his head in exasperation and said, “I can’t believe she is interested in you.”

Outside, people stopped to ogle.

“Cool, I have an admirer,” Fineous said happily. “By the way, would you like to train with me?”

“No I don’t want to participate in you unsavory hobbies,” Endol sneered in disgust and stormed out the room.

“I wasn’t able to describe my abilities,” Fineous said. “We’ll do that away from prying eyes.”

Fineous took his seat and began reading his book while practicing his finger exercises.

The remaining classes were informative but hardly exciting.

Finally came the adventurer training.

“Welcome everyone to the basics of adventuring,” Professor Derrick said. “My name is Professor Derrick. It is my job to give you the basic tools needed to become successful adventurers, and more importantly I will teach you how not to die.

“First will be the basics, then how to identify and manage different types of monsters. Finally I will teach you how to handle various dungeons.

“As you can see, this class is designed to help you survive in the wild and prosper.

“I recommend you take your days off to explore the vastness of the campus grounds. The closest boundary is the ravine running diagonally towards the Onn Foothills. The ravine is over 14KM away, showing how great the grounds are. Weather you cross is up to you. But you will need to live with the consequences.

“We shall go to the library. I strongly recommend you spend some quality time there.

“I also recommend you buy some reference books, such as a set of the monster encyclopedia. The books are ordered by rank starting at F-1 monsters. There is a book store in the guild hall.

“I will take you to the library where you can register to borrow books. Then I’ll show you how to form parties. Finally I will show you the guild hall. Please follow me.”

They headed out.

“Are there dragons,” a teen named Mega-Rush asked.

“Yes,” Derrick replied. “There are countless species, ranging from weak C-Rank ones all the way to calamity grade S-Rank ones and beyond.”

Soon they arrived at the library entrance.

“Welcome to the library,” Derrick said. “Everyone has free access to floors from the ground floor to floor 9.

“You will need to pass a test to receive access to go beyond that. “Register with the library on your spare time.”

“What’s beyond floor 9?” Fineous asked.

“More advanced books,” Derrick said. “To get access you need to prove your worth. Reaching floor 49 isn’t that difficult. However, they aren’t relevant to you. The first 10 floors have more than enough information to conquer any dungeon or deal with any situation an adventurer would face.”

“Are there any forbidden books?” a teen named Basher Bones asked.

“Yes,” Derrick replied. “However, they are at the top of the library beyond the 290th floor. Only a handful of elves known as sages are permitted access.

“Please don’t try breaking into those floors. They have the greatest security. Even people with Shadow Meld will be blocked.

“I really recommend you using the library. There is no such thing as too much knowledge. And with millions of unique books available to all of you in the first 10 floors alone, there is plenty to read.”

Fineous was glad he asked Araldar to keep his entry secret. Getting his level of access seemed entirely too pompous. He didn’t want people calling him ‘Sage’. Too bad the royal family had to know. Hopefully they wouldn’t do anything embarrassing.

On the other hand, it was in their interest to keep it quiet. Knowledge of an F-Rank Human becoming a sage would cause a scandal.

“An important part of adventuring is creating a party. You will touch a crystal and swear loyalty to each other while in the party, and to never betray your team members.

“An important part of parties is essence sharing. Another is inter-party communication. Finally, members will see each other’s stats and overall health.

“Everyone, follow me.”

Fineous and the others followed the professor to the second floor. They then entered a conference room. Within was a hall with space for around 200 people.

“Okay everyone; it’s time to register your parties for those who have established them. Those who haven’t can can do this later. However, try doing this as soon as possible,” Derrick said.

“Please line up. When your time comes, all of you should touch the sphere. Once everyone has registered, we will go to the guild hall.”

While waiting, Rose asked. “What should we call our party?”

“How about Sexy Kittens?” Fineous suggested.

“No way,” Demonbane exclaimed. “My entire previous life was spent in the wrong body. I don’t want anything to do with girly things.”

“Are you saying you were a woman?” Aragon asked, surprised.

“What’s wrong with being a woman?” Rose asked.

“To begin, there is the monthly period and cramps,” Demonbane explained. “Then there are stupid clothes and makeup and such, then the incontinence of going to the washroom. Also, women are weak.”

“Women aren’t weak,” Erza said, angrily.

“Arm-wrestle me then,” Demonbane said with a grin.

“Finally you know how society treats women. My greatest treasure is right here, as well as these guns,” Demonbane finished by patting his biceps.

“I don’t think the ladies will like the names ‘mega-studs’, ‘manly men’, or ‘guns and spears,” Fineous noted.

“Next,” Derrick called.

The gang walked up to the globe and placed their hands on it. As before time stopped for the world.

Repeat the oath:

“I, <Name>, swear to be there for my team members, protecting them always, and keeping their secrets. They are what will keep me safe in this harsh world.”

Fineous swore and heard the others do the same.

Who is your Leader?

Everyone chose Fineous. Fineous chose Aragon. Majority won.

What is your party’s name?

After much debate, they choose the traditional name of “Dungeon Divers.”

A moment later time resumed and Fineous removed his hand.

The group went to the side and waited for everyone to finish.

“Okay everyone,” Derrick said. “It’s time to go to the guild hall.”

The class followed Derrick back to the first floor, then out of the library. After a few more twists and turns they arrived at their destination.

“Each guild has its own hall within the city,” Derrick explained. “However, each year at this time they set up booths to advertise their guilds. The guilds are grouped according to their area.

“For example, adventuring guilds are there, cooking is there, entertainment guilds are there, and so on.

“There is great value in joining a guild, including training and quests.

“Remember, you can join multiple guilds, as long as they don’t compete.

“For example, you can be a member of a cooking guild as well as an adventurer guild, but can’t be a member of two adventurer guilds.

“In case you are wondering, the rest of the city of Araguaia is out those doors.

“Class dismissed.”

“I want to see the city,” Rose said.

They headed to the doors and stepped out.

“Holy cow,” Aragon exclaimed. “I was expecting a middle ages city, not a modern – what kind of city is this?”

In front of them was an eclectic assortment of high-rises. They had one thing in common; they were all joined together by sky bridges.

Also present was a massive amount of vegetation. The streets had it. It grew on building planters and even on the sky bridges.

Shops and apartments freely comingled.

People either walked or traveled in various vehicles. The city was certainly bustling with activity.

“This reminds me a lot of Singapore,” Fineous said. “Well this certainly breaks the myth that civilizations with magic are primitive.”

“It’s going to be fun exploring,” Aragon said. “I wonder if there are bars.”

“There’s one there, next to that blacksmith,” Erza said.

“Are we going to register?” Demonbane asked.

“Off course,” Fineous said. “We need to work hard so we can obtain an easy life.”

They headed back in. Looking around, every guild was selling reasons for join them.

“Well this is going to be challenging,” Aragon said. “How do we choose?”

“There’s no need to rush,” Fineous said. “Our journey has just begun. Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to find out which guilds you like best.

“We also need to find an adventurer guild for all of us. Perhaps select the top three. Then we can vote later.”

“What are you looking for?” Rose asked.

“You need cooking and entertainment. Our warriors should focus on weapons mastery. Look for that,” Fineous replied. “I’m looking for ones that focus on puzzle dungeons.”

“Where should we meet?” Erza asked.

“How about here at this statue?” Fineous suggested.

Waving, Fineous headed off to the adventurer’s area.

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After visiting the 27 adventuring guilds, Fineous continued wandering. There was no such thing as too much intel. However, he did find a few guilds that had promise.

Finally the intercom announced dinner.

The party headed for the dining room.

“How did it go?” Fineous asked.

“Not well,” Rose said. “I haven’t decided on which guilds to choose.”

“There’s plenty of time,” Fineous said. “I personally haven’t fully grasped my own abilities. Has anyone put deep thought on your abilities?

“I thought so. We must put thought into our cultivation before we can move on.”

“Is cultivation some sort of Eastern thing?” Demonbane asked.

“No,” Fineous replied. “Cultivation as in ‘cultivate your skills and abilities’. It’s just training.”

They stepped into the dining room.

“Speaking of cultivation, it’s time to cultivate my palate,” Fineous said as he headed for a food line.

Fineous mechanically ate, while thinking deep thoughts. He had an overwhelming amount of training to do.

A messenger approached as Fineous finished eating dessert and gave him a message.

“It seems someone wants to talk to me in the library,” Fineous said. “Hopefully this won’t take long.”

They headed for the library and walked to the elevator.

“The note said to go to floor 49,” Fineous said. “I’ll come down as soon as possible.”

Fineous waited but no one said anything.

“Isn’t anyone going to say anything?” he asked.

“No,” Aragon said. “It is you after all.”

“You are amazing,” Rose said with eyes shining.

“You certainly are,” Erza said.

“You are the manliest man I know,” Demonbane said.

“You are making me blush,” Fineous said. “I feel the need for a group hug.”

Rose gave Fineous a hug and the others followed.

After the hug, Fineous pressed the elevator button. The door opened.

Fineous stepped in and pressed 49. The doors closed and reopened and Fineous stepped out.

Sitting on a chair was a young elfin man reading a book.

Fineous tried to get the name but came up blank. He stepped near and all about them the air shimmered, blocking them from the people in the area.

“Greetings Fineous,” the man said. “You may call me Messenger. Please have a seat.”

Fineous sat down next to the elf.

“Please to meet you Nuntius,” Fineous said. That was wrong. He tried several times and finally got it right - Messenger.

Messenger beamed with happiness and clapped his hands. “That was marvelous. By the way, Messenger means *messenger* in Alfin. This is the glyph and this is the hand sign.”

Messenger waited for Fineous to practice.

“Lady Araldar said you want to remain anonymous,” Messenger said.

“That is correct,” Fineous said. “I agree to perform any task the royal family requires me to perform. However, I don’t believe being known to the world will serve the empire.”

“Don’t you want fame and fortune?” Messenger asked with a smile. “You are entitled to a salary.”

“I don’t need fame, fortune or a salary for just being alive,” Fineous declared.

“Having fun and exploring an infinite world with my friends and family is my greatest treasures. Everything else is ephemeral.”

“But families don’t last forever,” Messenger said. “And your loved ones will eventually hurt you.”

“True,” Fineous replied. “However, I am happy to love, even if they betray me later. People are bound by chains of anger, regret, desire, pride, and countless other things.

“Their betrayal is never personal, but comes about as the result of their slavery.

“Our only true anchor is the Silent One right over here.” Fineous said and tapped his own heart.

“And for you, right over here,” Fineous finished by touching Messenger’s chest with his fist.

“You really are a sage,” Messenger said in wonder.

“Please don’t say that,” Fineous objected with a grimace. “It’s embarrassing. I’m just some guy who just wants to have fun.”

Fineous leaned forward and stared directly into the man’s eyes and gave him his best smile. “That’s why I am a Rogue. All other classes are way too serious.”

Messenger blushed and said, “You will need to compete for the hand of the princess.”

“I plan on it,” Fineous said, smiling.

“Do you think you can win?” Messenger asked.

“How can I win against people who have been training their entire lives? I only have 4 years to train my abilities. The only thing I can promise is that I will do my best,” Fineous said.

“I have it on good authority that the highest rank will be in the early B-Rank range,” Messenger said. “Everyone beyond that is married and so is illegible.

“Also, people don’t always train like mad people. Most people are content to stay at Rank-E, since that allows for all the necessities of life, as well as plenty of entertainment.

“Rank-D allows people to live with fancier clothes and stuff. They also get to look down on lower ranks, as if they are better.

“Elves strive for Rank-C because of pride. However, most are actually stuck at Rank-D. That is not surprising, since the maximum lifespan of an elf’s is around 500 years. Instead, they just focus on their pastimes.

“Combine this with the fact that jumping ranks gets exponentially harder, and you can see B-Rank is the elite class.”

Messenger paused, and then said, “Keep in mind, brute force isn’t the only thing being tested. Intelligence, cunning, and luck all play a part. However, manna capacity is essential, but that comes with rank.

“Which is why I’ll be giving you personal training.”

“Do you really think I can compete with a B-Ranker, even if I trained like a mad man?” Fineous asked.

“If you can reach C-Rank by then, I’ll give you…” Messenger paused, unsure what to offer.

“Are you offering me a kiss as a reward?” Fineous asked with a wicked grin as he stared directly into Messenger’s eyes.

Red faced, Messenger stammered, “No, I mean…”

“Relax,” Fineous said with a laugh. “I’m just teasing you. I don’t require a reward.”

Messenger spent a few moments calming himself down and then said, “I suggest you go to the ravine just outside the campus grounds this Saturday morning. Eat a filling meal and arrive as soon as possible.

“However, before you do, you must stretch your capacity so you can store at least 30kg of weight at a time. Easily carrying 30kg in each hand is also advised.

“Can you get your capacity to 30kg?”

That meant overcharging his Space ability to E-3. That sounded incredibly time-consuming.

“If I must, then I will,” Fineous said.

“One more thing; you will need to go there alone,” Messenger advised. “I took too much time. Your friends are waiting for you.”

Fineous got up and said, “See you around, Messenger.” He stepped into the elevator and was gone.

Messenger rubbed his lips and then transformed. He…corrections, she then declared to the world, “I have chosen. He will succeed, even if I have to babysit him all the way. I want him.”

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“Okay everyone,” Fineous said as he stepped out of the elevator. “Let’s go hunting. I’ll discuss later.”

Stepping out of the main building, they headed towards the mountains.

When they were alone, Fineous said, “I met a Messenger.

“He told me to go to the ravine by myself this Saturday after breakfast. I don’t know why.”

“What is this ravine like?” Demonbane asked.

“We could go there if you want,” Fineous said. “Rose, I want you to race me. I want to see how well I can compete with someone with a physical fitness ability.

“The last one there has to hear Demonbane yodeling.

“And Rose, if you can beat me, I’ll give you a reward…”

Fineous dashed off.

“Wait for me,” Rose yelled and followed.

“Faster,” Fineous prompted.

Rose caught up, and then went faster. The faster Fineous ran the faster Rose ran as well. Eventually Fineous hit a wall and couldn’t go faster. Also, he was getting winded.

Pushing through the pain, Fineous continued. Unfortunately, grit wasn’t enough and Fineous had to admit Rose was just faster.

Finally they arrived at the ravine. Just before the ravine was a shimmering blue line.

Out of breath, Fineous waited as he recovered.

“Damn, I seriously overestimated myself,” Fineous said. “That proves it. Internal Magic gives me the weakest physical fitness abilities.

“It’s time to resume our conversation.

“My personal extra-dimensional space is considered Mythic at 1 in 100,000 for humans. It has unlimited growth potential, and can be augmented with certain devices. The book doesn’t mention the devices.

“My next ability is Mind. At Epic, only 1 in 1,000 people have it, so 5 or 6 people in our cohort should have it. It controls all mental activities such as memory, visualization, organization, and so on.

“My final ability is called **Internal Magic**. Unfortunately the book doesn’t list it. That means this is not considered a normal human ability.

“So far it seems like an inferior version of Physical Fitness, and scratches heal in seconds.

“I will keep you posted as I understand it better.

“On the first day, I asked Endol where the library was. That ass pointed me to the testing steps that allow people to reach the higher floors.

“The joke was on him when I passed the tests.

“Upon arriving, a librarian met me and agreed to teach me the elfin language.

“The reason I was sick this morning was that the very act of learning the language puts a heavy toll on my body. Lady Araldar, who by the way is over 1000 years old, said I need essence if I want to continue learning. I need to collect at least 20 gold and preferably 30 before I can take my next lesson. Gold seems to be a useful way of measuring how much essence a person has collected. I also need to Reach Rank-E.”

“Does that mean it will get worse?” Rose asked worriedly.

“Not if I kill enough monsters, Lady Araldar said,” Fineous replied.

“One more thing,” Fineous said. “The royal family was notified. They agreed to keep my secret, so hopefully this will not interfere with us.

“One final thing; the messenger told me to stretch my capacity to 30kg by Saturday. I should be able to reach that goal if I put in at least 3 hours a day. And if 30 is the minimum, then I must exceed it.

“It’s time for us to hunt. I need to become strong enough to compete for the princess’ hand.”

“Do you have to?” Rose asked. “It sounds dangerous.”

“Unfortunately yes,” Fineous replied. “Both Lady Araldar and the messenger I met today said the same thing. If I had known better, I wouldn’t have challenged those steps. Too late now...”



Saturday, 6/1/384

Saturday arrived and Fineous only collected 23 of the 30 golds he was aiming for. Also, he was still F-Rank. With his busy schedule, he barely had time to hunt.

Also, too much of his time was spent training his Space. Going to 9kg was relatively easy. Then he slammed into a proverbial wall. That wall was the E-Rank wall, where you should only cross if all your abilities are at F-9.

As a result, Fineous was reliving his nightmares of marine training. The only thing that allowed him to continue was his stubbornness.

Fineous did discover something amazing. Training in the Shadow Realm increased all his abilities. The further in he went, the more intense the training.

The multidimensional nature of the Shadow Realm pushed his Mind to comprehend what he was seeing, his Identification to see what surrounded him, his Map to know where he was, Luck to keep him safe, Shadow Meld of course, and Internal Magic when fighting monsters. Even his storage skill was helped.

Classroom time was spent reading.

One useful book was the abridged monster encyclopedia for those with the Identification skill. The basic tenant of the book was forewarned is forearmed. It gave general information about monsters and catalogued them by Rank, examples of their attacks and defenses, and suggestions on how to prepare before encountering them.

Despite being abridged, Fineous was only able to read through F-Rank monsters, barely. And that took over 7 hours of reading.

Finally, the day had arrived. Fineous felt like crap, and despite eating like a pig, he couldn’t satisfy his hunger.

Fineous walked to the edge of the ravine, wishing his abilities weren’t overloaded. If only his other skills followed suite, so he could finally become an E-Ranker.

Fineous looked at the ravine and saw something shining on the ravine floor.

Curious, Fineous stepped out of campus grounds and headed for the ravine.

The ravine walls were rather treacherous and Fineous almost fell a few times.

Finally at floor level, Fineous looked back at the 10m walls and then turned to the shinning object.

The object was a pair of shiny slender rapiers with twin sharp edges. Made entirely from an unknown metal, the rapiers had a hyper-shift color, ranging from red to blue to greens and even purple, depending on the angle. The closet analogy was oil on water.

Fineous grabbed a handle and was startled by the weight. Putting muscle into it, he was able to carry one in each hand.

There a big difference between just picking up a massive weight and using it in battle, especially for something that weighed almost 30kg.

Thankfully the rapiers were balanced. The blades stayed level, the tips neither going up nor down.

“Finders keepers,” Fineous said aloud, even though the rapiers were obviously meant for him.

“What a ridiculous weight,” Fineous muttered as he staggered around.

A standard rapier weighed around 1kg. These were over 30 times heavier. What could be over 30 times heavier than iron? Not even lead or uranium was that heavy, Fineous was certain.

Fineous spent the next half hour just walking around with the weapons. They were too unwieldy as weapons, but great for weight training.

*‘These might be good for Demonbane,’* Fineous mused. *‘Too bad they don’t have scabbards.’*

As Fineous practiced, he heard hoof beats behind him. Turning around, he saw the most amazing unicorn.

The unicorn was various shades of pastel green and the mane and tail was of pastel reds, yellows and blues. The eyes were like an endless blue sky.

The creature was like an assortment of ice creams like cotton candy, strawberry, and pasticcio come alive.

The feminine-looking horse looked at Fineous and Fineous froze in place. He knew the stories. Unicorns were dangerous. They only liked virgins, and he was no virgin. Any man encountered was as good as dead.

Fear decided to take the last of Fineous’ unused essence and pumped it into his muscles. The rapiers in his hand seemed to lose 4kg.

Unfortunately, 26kg rapiers were still useless in battle, especially when pitted against a unicorn with natural jousting abilities.

Two thoughts popped into Fineous’ heard. The first was, *‘I have unused essence, or had. It is probably from the monsters I killed.’*

The second was, *‘How do I escape? Unicorns are not to be trifled with.’*

The unicorn stopped, sensing his fear. It sat down and waited.

Just then Fineous heard a rumbling sound far in the distance. That could only be one thing - A flash flood.

Fineous put his useless rapiers away and turned to run.

The unicorn intercepted him, and with a toss of its head told him to get on.

Fineous hesitated and the unicorn stamped its feet in annoyance.

Having no better options and knowing he couldn’t outrun a flood, Fineous ran to the unicorn.

The sound got louder as Fineous got up on the unicorn.

Immediately the creature began galloping. Looking back, Fineous saw the flood of water, boulders and large uprooted trees.

Suddenly two pairs of wings sprouted from the unicorn, corrections, alicorn. All four pastel-colored wings beat and they took to the sky.

The flood reached their spot moments later.

“You saved my life,” Fineous said as he observed the landscape.

In the meantime the alicorn spiraled into the sky. Then it took off towards the Onn Foothills.

“Now where are you taking me?” Fineous asked nervously. Should he contact his team?

Just then communications stopped. The range was a little more than 2km. That was disturbing. He hoped Rose wouldn’t freak out. She was getting a little too dependent on him.

“Accept what happens and don’t be chained by fear,” Fineous said aloud. “Although I wish you could talk. It’s interesting that I don’t feel any wind. That must be an alicorn thing.”

Fineous sat and watched as the landscape changed and became more rugged.

Most of the landscape was similar to Earth. Then they crossed an impossibly deep chasm with sheer walls spaced over 100m apart and a bottom hidden in shadow. Apparently the ground had split.

At least an hour passed and finally Fineous saw something new. It was a cave entrance from where a small waterfall issued. It fell at least 200m into the valley below.

Moments later they landed on a ledge and Fineous quickly got off. He knew better than to stay on. Plenty of stories showed the hero getting dumped if they dallied.

The alicorn tossed its head towards the cave mouth, which had space for him to walk.

A moment later, the creature took to the air, allowing Fineous to see the underside of the alicorn.

“It’s a girl,” Fineous said to himself as the creature flew away. “I guess that makes sense, since it is pastel in color.”

Fineous looked down the cliff face and knew he couldn’t handle that. Besides, he was days away on foot. He had enough food and water and getting lost was impossible. However, there was that un-crossable chasm they crossed.

Returning by foot was unrealistic. Fineous’ only choice was to enter the cave.

“That’s what I get for trusting strange unicorn girls,” Fineous muttered and headed down the path.

As Fineous walked, the light slowly dimmed. Just then a boar-like creature appeared in front of him. The tusks were huge, backed up by at least 230kg of muscle. There was no way Fineous could fight the creature with just knives. Thankfully the tusks were curled up and only suitable for ramming, not piercing.

*‘Damn, I should have trained with a spear,’* Fineous muttered. It was too late now, so he took out one of his rapiers.

Fineous held the rapier two-handed in front of him and pressed it against his stomach. He could feel the strain on his muscles as he braced for impact.

Could he have thrown knives? No. The hide was too thick.

The boar charged at him and impaled itself on the rapier. Unfortunately that didn’t stop the momentum. The body slammed into Fineous, tossing him over a meter backwards. The only thing that saved him from fractured ribs was his martial arts training in the army and his newly found agility.

Fineous scrambled in terror out of the cave and back on the ledge.

Heart beating like thunder, Fineous contemplated his next move. He then realized he didn’t get any loot, or essence.

“Come on Fineous, being bombed in the trenches is way scarier. Here, I’m in charge.”

Of course, being overloaded didn’t help.

Fineous reentered, with his rapier braced for impact. He didn’t have long to wait. Within moments another boar charged.

Highland Boar  
Rank E-3

Again Fineous got thrown back. Again he rolled with the hit, surviving with only bruises.

And again no loot or essence…

“Why the hell am I fighting E-3 boars? Damn, those guys are sadists.”

No one answered.

After the 12th crash and much experimenting, Fineous finally was able to jump back at the moment of impact and land without falling. The trick was timing when to jump back.

Examining himself, Fineous found he was still at Rank F-9. He was neither getting loot nor advancing. However, his body seemed to be getting stronger and sturdier.

Fineous continued to stand near the entrance and skewered the boars as they came. That was his only strategy, even though the hits were brutal.

“I must be a masochist for doing this,” Fineous muttered.

After boar 30, Fineous found the attacks were less harsh. The Spartan training was bearing fruit. Even so, his rank was stuck.

Fineous stepped back onto the ledge for a break. He took this time to examine his rapier. After a minute of contemplation, he discovered something new…

Mithril Rapier – 17% synchronization

“So, this synchronization thing is also taking essence, I think,” Fineous mused.

Fineous stored the rapier and retrieved his second one, and promptly dropped it. The second one seemed heavier. Closer examination revealed the cause.

Mithril Rapier – 0% synchronization

“What a pain,” Fineous muttered and got ready for a battering ram called a boar.

The boar hit and Fineous went bounding back. Hoping for results, Fineous examined the rapier.

Mithril Rapier – 0.4% synchronization

“Damn it,” Fineous cursed.

Suddenly new information appeared.

When synchronizing a mithril item to its first Rank,   
it is best to fight monsters above your Rank.

When this happens, almost no essence is lost  
to the environment. Instead, essence is almost  
entirely used by the item.

The side-effect is no loot and no progress.

That explained a lot.

With renewed courage, Fineous stepped into battle.

Boar after boar attacked and slowly synchronization increased. Eventually it reached 25% and Fineous swapped rapiers.

When both rapiers passed the 60% mark, Fineous realized the rapiers were getting easier to handle.

Past 70%, Fineous was able to hold both rapiers comfortably in both hands, although they were still rather cumbersome. Never the less, he was finally able to dual-wield the rapiers.

Holding both rapiers in front of him, Fineous braced as another boar attacked.

This time Fineous was only slightly shoved back. That was the good news. The bad news was that he was still stuck at F-9.

Fineous walked forward as confidence grew. He was winning.

Suddenly synchronization completed, startling Fineous.

Synchronization Level-1 complete – Name rapier  
Synchronization Level-1 complete – Name rapier

Fineous paused a moment, wondering what to name the mythical pair of rapiers.

From out of nowhere two names popped up: Norton and Thevenin.

Names accepted:

- Mithril Rapier Norton  
- Mithril Rapier Thevenin

Immediately the rapiers seemed to change. They were happy about the names and now seemed like extensions of Fineous’ body.

Fineous juggled the rapiers and immediately found a difference. Norton preferred the left hand and Thevenin preferred the right.

With greater confidence, Fineous continued forward.

Now that synchronization had completed, Fineous was finally able to collect loot, and essence.

The loot turned out to be leather armor.

“Great,” Fineous muttered. “Now I get it when I don’t need it. Typical.”

Along with the armor came 50 silver.

The next boar gave 30kg of meat.

Now that training was complete it was time to move forward. He didn’t have all day to grind.

The tunnel widened and more boars appeared. The natural light was replaced by light from glowing moss.

Fineous continued forward, constantly fighting boars along the way.

What time was it, Fineous wondered? It was 1:37pm.

It was weird. He was getting stronger even though his level was stuck. It didn’t matter.

Slowly the number of boars increased as Fineous advanced.

Finally at the137th boar, Fineous’ stats stopped increasing. That was okay, since taking down the boars was now relatively easy.

Not sure what else to do, Fineous advanced. It was time to kill the boss and return home. His friends were waiting for him.

Fineous walked forward, fighting boars along the way. As he advanced, the number of boars increased, until they came in waves.

A wave of boars charged.

The fight was exhausting as he jumped and dodged. The stalagmites and boulders became useful jumping off points, as were the backs of the boars.

The wave finally ended and Fineous was able to move on. Of course there was another wave, and then a third wave.

Finally Fineous arrived at what appeared to be the boss room. The room was huge, filled with boulders and throngs of agitated boars. Also present was a boar the size of a rhino.

Highland Boar Boss

Rank E-6

The boars charged Fineous and he took advantage of the boulders by hopping from one to another.

Slowly, Fineous began killing the boars. Unfortunately, the boars seemed endless.

The loot was good, but Fineous needed to get home. Also, the fight was wearing on his nerves. More importantly he was increasingly afraid of making a fatal mistake.

It was time to take out the boss, in principle ending the endless spawning. Otherwise he risked his life. Only his Luck and skills were saving him.

Jumping on the backs of the boars, Fineous headed for the boss. The boars scattered and the boss charged with surprising speed.

Fineous barely avoided the boss and swiped with his rapiers. Unfortunately, the angle was wrong and the boss only got scratched.

Infuriated, the boss charged again. Again Fineous barely dodged, and almost got rammed by a boar.

“Damn boars,” Fineous muttered as he tried to dodge boars and boss at the same time.

Regaining his balance, Fineous went after the boss again. Again he scored a shallow cut.

Adjusting his cadence, Fineous dodged boars again and jumped on a bolder.

Suddenly an opportunity arrived and Fineous jumped on the boss’ back. With two quick stabs, Fineous finished the boss.

The other boars turned to smoke and disappeared. That was exhausting. On the bright side, Fineous was happy with his speed, strength, agility, stamina, and sturdiness. Even his healing ability had increased. He also felt his manna pool had increased.

In front of him appeared a chest.

“Seriously?” Fineous asked in surprise. He put his rapiers away and opened the chest.

Daggers of the Boorish Boar

“Silly name,” Fineous muttered and put the daggers away.

Behind Fineous a horse neighed. Turning around he found the unicorn.

Fineous sighed and said, “I figured you would be here. Here, have an apple.” He held his hand flat and placed the apple on his palm.

The unicorn accepted the apple and tossed her head. It was time to leave.

Fineous got onto the unicorn’s back and they trotted back the way they came from.

At the entrance, the creature extended her wings and they took off. Now that the ordeal was over, Fineous felt exhausted. A gentle breeze kept him from falling asleep.

After what seemed like forever they approached the training grounds.

*‘Hi guys,’* Fineous called out in his chat. *‘Sorry for worrying you.’*

*‘Oh my God, are you okay Fineous?’* Rose asked worriedly.

*‘We couldn’t do anything since Rose was so worried,*’ Aragon said.

“Meet us near the ravine,” Fineous said, speaking both aloud and into his chat.

Off in the distance Fineous spotted them running.

“There they are,” Fineous said and the alicorn adjusted trajectory.

Moments later they landed and Fineous got down.

The alicorn nodded her head and then leaped into the air. Moments later it was gone.

“I thought you had died or something,” Rose wailed. She hugged him as if her life depended on it.

“It seems the royals want me to get special training,” Fineous said. “Apparently, they really want me to win. Either that or the princess is in love with me.”

Fineous kissed Rose’s forehead and said, “I’m sorry for scaring you. You are my baby sister. Although in my previous life, I would have called you my granddaughter.

“Eventually you will find a nice guy and fall in love with him. And I will make sure you find the best.

“I also want you to train hard so you can become independent. More experience is always good for young people.”

“Now you are finally sounding like an old man,” Demonbane said with a laugh.

“So what kind of training did you get?” Erza asked.

“It was an endless wave of boars,” Fineous said with a grin. “Then I fought the boss boar and got a pair of daggers named Daggers of the Boorish Boar.”

“That’s a funny name,” Demonbane said.

“I also got tons of leather armor for everyone, in fact more than we need. I also have literally tons of boar meat.

“And tons of gold.

“Before I started I was given these mithril rapiers.”

Fineous took them out.

“They are pretty,” Rose remarked.

“They were nearly impossible to pick up. However, I was able to synchronize with them enough to fight with them. I named them Norton and Thevenin.”

“Are they the names of famous warriors?” Demonbane asked.

“Actually no,” Fineous replied. “They are the names of two scientists who created rules for describing simple electrical circuits. And no, I don’t know why their names popped into my head.”

Fineous put the rapiers away and said, “Put on the armor and let’s go hunting. I’ll use my new daggers, since I don’t want people knowing I have these swords.”

A pack of horned rabbits attacked and Fineous said, “I’ll let you fight. Remember, leveling up requires essence, but also pushing your limits.”

Fineous waited for the fight to end and then asked, “How was it?”

“Having this armor feels amazing,” Erza said. “I feel confident fighting stronger monsters.”

“Me too,” Rose said.

“That’s great,” Fineous said happily. “Let’s go after bigger game. If I have to, I can protect us with my rapiers, even against E-6 boars.”

Again they continued.

“That reminds me,” Fineous said. “I got tons of bacon, ham, and other cuts. It’s funny how this stuff just appears, even though the monsters aren’t biological.”

Soon enough more monsters were encountered.

“While we were waiting for you, I took the liberty of inquiring about joint accommodations,” Aragon said as he fought.

“Sweet,” Fineous said. “I have tons of gold. Once we finish hunting, we can move.”

“That’s a good idea,” Aragon said. “Let’s hunt a few more monsters.”

“We should head to harder territories,” Fineous said. “Fighting monsters weaker than us is a waste of time. Unfortunately we can’t cross the ravine today. There was a flash flood.”

“Dinner will be served in 20 minutes,” the announcement called.

“Let’s race,” Fineous challenged. “The last one to the buffet gets nothing, for I have eaten everything.”

Upon arriving at the buffet line, Fineous said, “Holy cow. I’m hungry.”

“Why didn’t you eat?” Aragon asked.

“I was so busy that I forgot,” Fineous said. He was also delirious as a result of the attribute overloading. “No matter, a little bit of fasting is good for the appetite.”

Plate loaded with food, they headed for a table.

“Do you think they will give you any more crazy training?” Erza asked.

“Probably,” Fineous said. “Although I wish we could all get stronger together.

“In any case, I urge you all not to depend on me. There’s no telling when I will be called away.

“Those guys have the option of calling me whenever they want.”

“Perhaps you will eventually become…” Aragon began.

“I hope not,” Fineous interrupted. “That sounds like a pain. Anyway, that can’t happen since she’s the youngest.”

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

“Let’s go shopping,” Fineous said. “I want to buy some more clothes and equipment. I have gold coming out the wazoo.

“After that we have to move.”

Dinner finished they headed out.

Soon enough they arrived at the market. As usual the place was busy.

First was selling their unused loot.

Next came clothes.

Finally Fineous bought tents and other camping equipment with Demonbane’s help. Everyone wanted to pay, but of course Fineous had by far the most money.

Finally everyone went to their respective dorm rooms and collected their stuff.

They arrived at the meeting place and headed for the office.

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

“We would like a suite for our party,” Fineous replied. “Also, is a kitchen possible? We would like to do some cooking.”

“Not a problem. Fill out these forms,” the receptionist said. “Then return your old keys.”

Fineous did as instructed and everyone returned their keys.

“Here are the floor plans for the apartments. You wanted a kitchen and you have 5 people.

“The basic plan is 20 gold, with access to the terrace. Rent increases by 20 a month until spring.

“An elite suite starts at 30. Also included is access to a lounge with a music venue and televised events. Rent increases by 30 a month.

“Deluxe suites…”

“Elite is good enough for us,” Fineous said. “Our group will not have time to enjoy all that. Our training schedule is too tight.”

“Of course,” the receptionist agreed. “However, deluxe has medicine baths…”

“We’ll take it,” Fineous said.

The receptionist gave them a virtual tour from his device.

“Would you like to see the place?”

Looking around, Fineous realized everyone was satisfied.

“This is fine,” Fineous said. “Here’s payment for this month.”

“Payment is due the first of each month,” the receptionist said. “Here are your keys.”

Thanking the receptionist, they headed for their apartment.

Within moments they were on their way to the new place.

The suite faced the Onn Mountains.

After deciding on who got which room, they met in the common room.

“Damn, it’s almost 9:00PM,” Fineous said. “I have enough essence to get my next lesson. See you later.”

“Isn’t it late?” Rose asked, concerned.

“I took too many days off,” Fineous said. “I want to learn the alphabet as soon as possible, so I can start learning words, then reading.

“Don’t worry; I have tons of essence right now.”

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“Welcome back,” Araldar said on seeing Fineous. “I have prepared a training schedule for you. We will start with regular vowels and consonants, then words that humans can pronounce.

“Once you master that, we will return to learning voyelles. That is the normal way of learning.

“There are 14 vowels and 137 consonants in elfin. I will only spend 1 hour, since you desperately need rest,” Araldar said. “Tomorrow morning you will get a surprise.”



- Sunday, 1/7/384 -

The vowels and consonants were relatively easy. Fineous was able to go through all of them in the available time. That wasn’t surprising, considering he encountered all of them while studying multiple languages, including German, Latin, Hindi, and Thai, to name a few - all for the sake of finding the secret of eternal life.

The rest of the time was spent practicing. Fineous’ homework was just practice the alphabet.

Upon coming to his new room, he promptly fell asleep.

The next morning he got up and got a surprise.

Fineous Bogg: Rank E-2

Apparently Fineous just needed to sleep in order to consolidate his gains.

After completing his routine, Fineous went to the common room and resumed studying. He considered going into the Shadow Realm to train, but realized he got up too late.

“What are you doing?” Rose asked as she stepped into the common room.

“Just practicing my alphabet,” Fineous said. “Once I master this, Lady Araldar said she will start me on simple words.” He continued practicing speaking and signing.

The others trickled in as Fineous studied.

“Can anyone learn?” Aragon asked.

“Anyone can read and write the language as far as I know,” Fineous said. “I am currently learning the vowels and consonants that humans can pronounce. Then I will learn the words that only use these. After that comes the hard part.

“I’m doing this here because I don’t want anyone outside our party to know I am learning elfin.”

Fineous grinned at his friends and said, “Who wants to eat like a piggy?” He got up and headed out, with the others in toe.

“This is a free day,” Aragon said. “What should we do?”

“Let’s go to the guild hall and get advice,” Fineous suggested. “Then we should spend all day outside. I want everyone to reach E-Rank as soon as possible. Our new armor will keep us safe against F-Rank monsters. And I still have plenty for when it breaks.

“Then Demonbane will set up camp and Rose will cook our meals. We’ll return in the evening.”

“But that means skipping meals at the cafeteria,” Erza said with a grin.

“Can’t be helped,” Fineous said. “Although I admit I will miss it. We will need to explore this world and do personal training. We can’t achieve our true potentials if we always stay together.”

“I don’t know,” Rose said, uncertainly.

“You can team up with Erza until you get more comfortable. Cultivating abilities as diverse as Cooking and Music is going to be time-consuming. We need to take advantage of all the guilds have to offer.”

They arrived at the dining room and Fineous headed for the buffet line.

“Why are people looking at us?” Rose asked.

“You can blame Fineous for that,” Erza said. “He’s been standing out recently.”

“It’s all good,” Fineous said as he waved. “We should all strive to be the life of the party. This is our second life. We should enjoy it.”

They sat at a table and started eating.

“It’s us too,” Aragon said. “I think it’s because of our fancy new leather armor. I noticed that yesterday as well.”

“My bad,” Fineous said as he ate mechanically.

“What are you thinking?” Aragon asks. “You seem distracted.”

“I don’t want to leave you behind,” Fineous said. “Who wants to be second in command?”

“How about Aragon?” Erza asks.

“I don’t mind,” Rose said.

“Better than me,” Demonbane agreed.

“Congratulations Aragon, you’ve been elected,” Fineous said.

Endol stepped onto the stage and said, “Attention everyone.” He waited for the room to quiet and then said, “Fineous Bogg, please stand up.”

Not sure what was going on, Fineous stood.

“Fineous Bogg, where did you get all that fancy armor?” Endol demanded.

“It’s not stealing if you don’t get caught,” Fineous replied with a grin, projecting his voice upwards so he wouldn’t foghorn people around him.

Endol laughed, surprising everyone.

“I told everyone in the room that it would take a month to reach E-Rank. That’s because of the rank barrier you should all be encountering soon. Fineous has just made me eat my words.

“Congratulations Fineous on reaching Rank E-2.”

Fineous’ face turned bright red and he promptly sat down.

“I see you can’t accept a compliment,” Endol said with a laugh.

Endol then became serious.

“I would like to make a few things crystal clear,” Endol scolded. “For those who used to be rich in your past lives, this is not a capitalist society. This is a meritocracy. Rank is the only thing we respect.

“A rich person with low rank is considered suspicious.

“As a society we do not use labor, robots, automation and such to accumulate capital. There are no big money moguls. They are useless for improving our abilities, which are essential for ranking.

“Rise up to E and beyond and become respected members of society.

“That is all.”

Endol exited the stage.

The room erupted in talking.

“Harsh,” Aragon muttered.

“I’m glad I joined your party,” Rose said with a shudder.

“I assure you, we are all glad,” Aragon said.

“We need to rank up,” Fineous said. “I think Rank-F has a nasty name.”

“What kind of name?” Demonbane asked.

“Trash...”

Leveling Up

The problem with the real world  
is there is no way to quantify our current level

The party headed into the training area.

As they travelled they came across the usual horned rabbits.

“I’ll leave them to you,” Fineous said.

After the battle, Demonbane asked, “Why are there so many rabbits? They are just annoying.”

“Probably because they breed like rabbits,” Aragon said.

“I’m the one who’s supposed to be making bad jokes,” Fineous said.

The next group was a pack of rabid badgers.

“They are no longer so scary,” Rose noted. “But I still hate that sound.”

After a short distance, they encountered a new enemy.

“Those are Fanged Goats, Rank F-5,” Fineous said. “They excel in speed and can ram hard.”

“Finally a challenge,” Demonbane exclaimed, excited.

This time Fineous joined the fight. “Holy cow,” Fineous exclaimed. “These daggers seem so unnatural compared to Norton and Thevenin. Then again, Norton and Thevenin are like my hands. But I have to do this to increase my dexterity. That’s the only way to rank up.”

After the battle, Fineous asked, “Everyone, do you want to continue farming here, or head deeper? The goats are one level above you, so it’s worth it. I think.”

“What do you think?” Rose asked.

“Rank isn’t important,” Fineous said. “What matters is how much you push your limits. It’s like exercise or anything else.”

“I vote to go on,” Demonbane said.

“I don’t mind,” Erza said. “These creatures are weak against fire and these fights are becoming easy.”

“Same here,” Aragon said.

“Whatever you say,” Rose said.

“Erza, if fire is too easy, use weapons or telekinesis or all three simultaneously,” Fineous said.

They headed further.

Soon they encountered new prey.

“Those are Stonehead Aardvarks,” Fineous said. “They are F-6. Don’t attack their heads.”

The party engaged the enemy.

“How can you know so much,” Demonbane asked as he slammed his sword on an Aardvarks’ head. As expected, the sword bounced off. He then took aim at the monster’s back and injured it. A second whack finished it.

“That’s because…that’s because,” Fineous began and then stopped. He then exclaimed, “Holy Cow.”

“What’s the matter,” Rose asked worriedly.

“Nothing,” Fineous said. “I just realized that Identification, Mapping, and Mind combined to make something called a Mind Palace. It allows me to group and organize anything I want, and this is improving my memory. I can literally see stuff.

“And it seems all my studying is leveling up my mind palace. I’m close to getting a perfect memory.

“That’s another cheat ability for us.

“Sing my angle of song, sing,” Fineous called out.

“What should I sing?” Rose asked.

“Anything,” Fineous replied. “Hum if you must. Get out your song book.”

Rose did as instructed and began singing.

“You have a beautiful voice,” Demonbane said. “It’s making hunting more exciting.”

Blushing, Rose continued singing.

The battle was long and drawn out, with everyone but Fineous struggling. Slowly, the monsters got whittled away. Eventually the last was killed.

“Damn, that was exhausting,” Demonbane said as he rested on his sword. “Despite Repair, my sword still needs maintaining. These monsters seem to corrode weapons.”

“I agree,” Aragon said. “I have to put more energy in each shot and I’m at my limit.”

“In that case it’s a good idea to have lunch,” Fineous said. “Rose, once Demonbane sets up camp, you can start cooking. Focus on whatever buffs you feel like. They are all good.

“I have books I need to read.”

“How do I add buffs?” Rose asked.

“According to the abilities book, it is a matter of passion, training, and ingredients,” Fineous said. “Just focus on who you are cooking for and put as much love as you can into your cooking. Whatever buffs we get are good enough.”

“What can we do?” Aragon asked.

“I don’t know,” Fineous said. “Do some target practice while doing acrobatics or hanging upside down. Or you can read a book.”

Fineous took out his Monster Encyclopedia and continued his reading. He wanted to finish it as soon as possible. Thankfully, his rank up allowed him to increase both his reading speed and comprehension.

“Lunch is ready,” Rose said and the gang sat down to eat on supplied table and chairs.

“Excellent food, Rose,” Fineous said.

“But I couldn’t get any buffs,” Rose complained.

“This is your first try,” Aragon said. “It is, as Fineous said, excellent.”

“Can’t talk, eating,” Demonbane praised.

“I prefer spicy, but I can’t complain,” Erza said.

After lunch, Demonbane washed up with soap and a stream of water supplied by Fineous.

After putting the supplies away they headed out.



- Monday, 1/8/384 -

Monday morning arrived and Fineous got out of bed.

The previous day they hunted till the evening, stopping only for Demonbane to set up camp and Rose to cook dinner.

Even so, they only reached Rank F-7, even when fighting Rank F-9 monsters.

Fineous had some ideas for the other’s lack of progress. He was continuously forcing his Storage Space and fighting in the Shadow Realm, sacrificing sleep in the process. Also, that language training was rather hard on his body.

There was also the fear factor. Fineous ranked up immediately upon seeing the unicorn, knowing he could die in a blink of an eye.

And of course the number of times he was body-slammed by boars. That battering ram called a boar was terrifying. Then there were the boar waves and final boss battle, demanding extreme acrobatics.

He also saw how fear affected Rose, when faced with terrifying monsters.

Finally the bruising and threat level forced his recovery rate to improve a little.

The others never experienced that intensity.

That was okay. This wasn’t a race but a marathon. And as long as there was unallocated essence, all was good.

Fineous silently ate Rose’s cooking, thinking of last night’s visit to the library. It consisted of reviewing of the basic phones.

The rest of the time was spent on the first lesson in grammar and some words in the alphabet.

On lesson completion, Araldar gave Fineous a few books to keep. One was a Common-Elfin dictionary, with words in both alphabets, and translations in Common.

The others were children’s story books, written in both Elfin and Common.

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As they ate, Fineous said, “We need to enroll in that Adventurer’s guild tonight, and any other useful guild.”

Finishing breakfast, they head for their first class. As they walked, people kept looking at Fineous and whispering. That was confusing. Never the less, he kept smiling and waving.

The first class of the day was more knowledge of the city and surroundings. It was all informative and useful.

In the meantime Fineous read the monster encyclopedia. He tried to study Alfin, but it was impossible surrounded by people.

First period ended and Fineous overheard a group of people talking. “You ask him.” “No, you ask him.”

“I wonder who they are talking about,” Fineous mused and continued reading.

Eventually lunch arrived and they headed for the dining room.

Finally one person got the courage to approach Fineous and asked for help. “Can you please help me get stronger?”

That plea caused dozens of people to ask for help.

“I don’t want these stupid prison clothes,” a post-teen named Samantha whined tearfully. “I don’t want to live in barracks. I want privacy. I want to buy stuff in town and see concerts, and eat delicious food. I heard the food in town makes this food taste like crap.”

True. The food wasn’t that great, just filling.

Taken aback by the storm of questions, Fineous could only stammer, “But you were told exactly how to make money and rank up.”

That didn’t stop people. After all, his group was at the top in terms of strength, although hundreds of people were close by.

The elf Arielle approached and asked Fineous, “Can you please address your cohort? A little advice from a fellow member can go a long way.”

“I don’t know how I can…” Fineous began.

“Your people need your support. No one else is qualified to do what you can do,” Arielle argued.

“Very well,” Fineous said reluctantly.

“I appreciate it,” Arielle said and led Fineous to the stage. “Just step onto the stage and talk to your people. Everyone will hear you.”

Stepping onto the stage, Fineous said, “Excuse me.” He waited for the room to quiet down. He then said, “Hi everyone. I was asked to give you all some encouragement.

“So let’s go through what we were thought.

“To rank up we need plenty of essence, followed by intense training. This is the same as on earth. We get good nutrition and then we exercise…”

“What gives you the right to lecture?” a man in his mid 30s demanded. He was in his starter clothes. “You’re just a kid, barely out of diapers.”

Just then Endol got up with fury on his face. “How dare you speak to your superior like that? You who are still an F-1 piece of trash. Know your place and be silent!”

That outburst took everyone by surprise, cowing quite a few people.

In the silence that followed Fineous spoke with a serious voice. “Let me properly introduce myself. I am Dr. Frank Nell Stein.”

Several people gasped at that name.

“Just after graduating high school, I was drafted into the army. With the urging of my friends, we joined the marines.

“After marine training we went to Vietnam to fight. After many battles I eventually became a major in the marines.

“Unfortunately, a bomb took my legs.

“After that I returned to school and graduated as a medical doctor.

“I then worked as a surgeon. At the same time I thought at a nearby university and did research, eventually becoming the Dr. Frankenstein people eventually knew me as. I then died at the ripe old age of 96.

“Mr. Harry Jones, are my credentials sufficient for you?”

“Ye-yes sir,” Harry Jones stammered.

Endol visibly relaxed, now that order was restored to his world.

Thankfully the distraction allowed Fineous to organize his thoughts.

Momentarily Fineous marveled at his **Mind Palace** and then said, “Many of you are worried because you don’t have combat abilities, preventing you from killing monsters. Those who have combat abilities are afraid of getting hurt or killed.

“I perfectly understand that feeling. I personally had nightmares of boot camp and various battles for decades. I even had one when I turned 95.”

Fineous pulled out a book and showed it to everyone.

“This is a copy of the Encyclopedia of Human abilities for Transplants.

“According to it, all humans have some sort of physical fitness ability.”

Fineous raised his hand and said, “Raise your hand if you have neither **Enhanced Physical Stats** nor **Physical Fitness**.”

Endol looked quizzically at Fineous but said nothing.

Fineous smiled and then said, “As you can see, you all have something to help you survive in the wild.

“My Rose has no combat abilities but just **Physical Fitness**. Instead she has support abilities like cooking and singing. You missed us in the morning because we were enjoying Rose’s cooking. She needed the practice.

“And yes, both can give us buffs that make us better at fighting monsters.

“Now I am going to read a list of support abilities that can improve the success of any adventurer party.”

Fineous quickly read the extensive list.

“Raise your hand if you have none of those abilities.”

No one raised their hands.

“So as you can see every one of you has something to contribute to an adventurer party.

“Do not be afraid. Yes, Rabid Badgers sound like banshees…”

Fineous put his book away and pulled out another book.

“However, according to the Monster Encyclopedia, volume 1; F-Rank monsters are not lethal to physically fit adults with the minimum sense of self preservation. You can always run away. Or someone will rescue you if necessary, provided you are on school grounds.

“You all have what it takes to form amazing parties. Every Ability is amazing and useful. There are no trash abilities.”

“Only trash people,” Endol muttered.

Fineous glanced at Endol and then said, “One piece of advice – take the adventurer’s training. I consider it essential training. Back on earth, some countries have mandatory military service. Think of this as such, but with additional benefits that will last you your entire lives.”

Fineous put the book away and said, “You saw how people treat those with low ranking. That’s nothing compared to what happens in the rest of this country.

“If pride is not enough to motivate you, how about this?”

Fineous raise his hands and coins rained down around him, making a clattering sound that echoed throughout the dining stadium. The coins disappeared after they landed. Again **Mind Palace** came to the rescue, making sure every coin was retrieved.

Fineous couldn’t help but glance at Endol. Endol was duly impressed.

Strangely, Fineous’ speech and demonstration increased his stats. Only Shadow Meld remained constant.

1. Internal magic E-4 -> E-5
2. Mind E-2 -> E-3
3. Personal Space E-3 -> E-4
4. Identification E-2 -> E-3
5. Mapping E-1 -> E-2
6. Luck E-2 -> E-3
7. Shadow meld E-1

Level: E-2 -> E-3

Fineous briefly flashed golden as he leveled up, startling everyone, including Endol.

“Money,” Fineous said. “Money to buy nice clothes, food, entertainment, housing, and anything you want.

“I personally hate prison clothes.”

Fineous bowed and said, “Thank you for your time.” He checked the clock and then headed for the steps. The speech took almost 20 minutes.

“Just a moment, Fineous,” Endol called. “By tradition at the end of the first month, the person with the highest ranking is assigned the role of cohort captain. I don’t need to wait to assign that role to you. Congratulations, Captain Fineous.”

“Thanks a lot,” Fineous said with a frown and a tight-lipped smile.

Endol laughed and said, “Yes I know that is a burden, especially with triple the usual number of immigrants. However, your people need you to help them.”

“In that case, we can...for whoever needs assistance, we can meet after 4:00PM. Where should we meet?” Fineous asked.

“You may use the King Arthur Stadium,” Arielle said.

“Meet you all there,” Fineous said and headed for the steps.

“Immigrants, many of you have not signed up for adventurer training since you were told it was optional,” Endol said to the audience. “However, Captain Fineous has asked all of you to take that course. He considers it essential training and I agree. Therefore, we will have a second round of registrations starting at 3:00PM in the King Arthur Stadium.

“You will be wise to sign up. That is all.”

That last comment sent a chill down Fineous’ spine. If that didn’t get people to sign up, only force would.

After a shocked silence, the room soon buzzed with talking.

Fineous headed for his friends table, then changed his mind. Instead he made a detour to the buffet line.

With plate and drink in hand, Fineous sat at his friends’ table.

“Sorry guys,” Fineous said. “It seems I have work to do.”

“Can we help?” Aragon asked.

“I’m just going to help them organize into groups,” Fineous said. “I realize that I need to step up my training. I can no longer afford to lose my ranking. What a pain.”

“What happens if you do?” Rose asked. “Will you be in trouble?”

“Remember what happened Saturday?” Fineous asked. “That boar dungeon was extreme. Only my military training and plenty of luck allowed me to survive. Either I become my own drill sergeant and force my limits, or they will.

“Speaking of which, we still haven’t chosen an adventurer guild. There are three I like that focus on puzzle-type dungeons.”

Eventually they headed for classes. Fineous couldn’t concentrate on studying, since he was focused on the coming meeting.

Eventually school ended and they headed for the King Arthur Stadium.

The stadium turned out to be the one Fineous took his initiation in for his abilities.

Fineous stood on the stage thinking as people slowly trickled in.

“Thank you for coming everyone,” Fibrous said. “I assume everyone signed up for training. The goal now is to make sure everyone with no combat abilities finds teams to join. With over 6000 people, it’s impossible to do much now. However, I have a suggestion.

“Create individual parties now. Remember you can always move around later. Also, each team can only have a maximum of seven people.

“After that, join one of the adventurer guilds in the guild hall. It’s their responsibility to help you get started.

“Everyone, if you have healing abilities, and don’t currently belong to a party, raise your hand. Parties who need healers will come to you.

“There’s nothing like having extra healing or stat boosts when fighting monsters.”

Fineous waited for all hands to lower. That took around 5 minutes, since healers were popular.

In the meantime Fineous stepped off stage and spoke to his friends. “You should all go hunting. There is no sense wasting your time here.”

“What about you?” Ezra asked.

“I still have Essence left and can hunt later,” Fineous replied. Reluctantly they left.

Fineous returned to the stage and said, “Everyone with musical abilities, raise your hands. Remember your buffs you receive include increased speed, strength, defense, and poison resistance, to name a few things.”

This time it took a little longer and then Fineous went on to the next category.

At 5 minutes to dinner, Fineous said, “Let me tell you a story. On Earth no one has abilities. Yet for thousands of years people took down lions, tigers, bears, elephants, and who knows what else with just spears and swords.

“You will be facing raccoons and other such tiny creatures, and you have something none of them ever had. You have physical fitness abilities.

“Each of you can become stronger than Arnold Schwarzenegger and faster than an Olympian runner.

“You have nothing to fear from raccoons and giant rats. We are on training grounds, not the wilds.

“Can anyone guess what martial arts abilities I have?”

Fineous waited while everyone argued. He then said, “Wrong. I have no martial arts abilities, and yet I took down E-3 boars with just human abilities. Abilities each one of you have.”

Of course he had mithril weapons. On the other hand, they were at first almost useless. So the benefits balanced out. Or not. Mithril weapons were terrifying.

“For homework I want every one of you to take down at least one monster. Borrow weapons from the armory, get together and hunt. Collect at least one silver. Practice on the practice dummies. Then hunt.

“I absolutely believe everyone of you can reach E-Rank by the end of the month. You are surrounded by people who can help. I believe in you.

“We will continue tomorrow after adventurer training. Have a good dinner.”

As Fineous got off the stage, his friends greeted him.

“You sound like Tony Robbins,” Ezra said with a chuckle.

“I thought you went hunting,” Fineous said. “Although I suppose 1 hour is not enough time.”

“We couldn’t do much, so we returned,” Demonbane said.

“Let’s go for dinner,” Fineous said.

As Fineous walked he thought of his speech. “Guys, would it be okay to hunt now and go to dinner later? We need to stop at the armory first.”

“No problem,” Rose said. “That food doesn’t seem that great.” The others agreed.

They headed out.

At the armory Fineous popped his surprise. “Rose, I told everyone that they should all hunt monsters, even those with no combat abilities. I would like you to do that too, so I can prove anyone can do it. I promise you will be safe.”

“Okay, since I trust you,” Rose replied.

“Grab a weapon you feel comfortable using. Then we will practice with it. Then I want you to hunt some rabbits or chickens or some other small thing.”

Rose spent the next 10 minutes trying out various weapons, and then settled on a club that looked like a baseball bat.

After that, she practiced on practice dummies. After that they headed out.

A short distance away they met a creature that looked like a cross between a rat and a raccoon. Screaming in fright Rose swung her bat wildly, finally hitting the creature in the head. That stunned the creature. That gave Rose time to swing her bat several more times.

The monster disappeared and Rose found herself just hitting the ground.

“So how was your first kill?” Demonbane asked.

“It was terrifying, but also exciting,” Rose said excitedly.

“Rose, check your stats,” Fineous said. “You ranked up Physical Fitness.”

“Is it really that easy?” Aragon asked.

“No,” Fineous said. “However, Rose was pushing her boundaries now. Rose, are you ready for your next monster? I asked everyone to collect at least 1 silver. You will need two more F-1 monsters to get there.”

“I’m actually enjoying watching Rose hunt,” Demonbane said.

“I agree,” Erza said. “I think women should be strong and independent.”

“I think Rose should be able to defend herself,” Aragon said. “There’s no telling when something might happen.”

“So it’s unanimous,” Fineous said. “Rose will fight monsters and we will cheer. This will improve all her physical stats, including strength, speed, coordination and stamina.

“Remember to sing.”

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- Tuesday, 1/9/384 -

Lunchtime had arrived and the party sat down to eat.

Fineous waited for the initial crowd to get food and then said to Rose, “Rose, can you please come with me? I need to speak to everyone.”

“Okay Fineous,” Rose said and got up.

Fineous guided Rose to the stage and climbed. Initially he was unsure if he should speak. Then he remembered he was the captain. This was his duty.

“Excuse me everyone,” Fineous said. He waited for the hall to quiet and then said, “Yesterday I asked everyone to hunt monsters, even those who only had Physical Fitness abilities.

“I’m sure plenty of you are saying, ‘Easy for you to say. You’re a war-hardened marine. You don’t need abilities to hunt.’

“To those I would like to introduce Rose Evergreen. She only has support abilities such as Healing, Singing and Cooking, and of course Physical Fitness.

“Yesterday I took her to the armory and got her a weapon. She then practiced on dummies and then went hunting.

“You should have seen her swing her club like a crazy person.” Fineous mimed the action with accompanying screams. That elicited laughter from the audience, causing Rose to blush.

“But finally Rose was able to kill the F-1 ratkoon. And yes, that increased her Physical Fitness level by one.

“Rose, please tell everyone how it felt to kill that monster.”

“It was amazing,” Rose said excitedly, forgetting her embarrassment. “Now I know I can defend myself.”

“And to think how timid Rose was when we first met,” Fineous said. “For the next hour she hunted while we watched.

“Everyone, do you like Rose’s outfit? She bought that in town with the money she collected.

“Rose, how did it feel like to buy that outfit?”

“Amazing,” Rose said excitedly. “Going to town and shopping was so much fun, as was going to that restaurant.”

“Everyone give Rose a hand for that accomplishment.”

Fineous clapped and soon the hall was filled with clapping, embarrassing Rose.

After the applause, Fineous said, “Speak to your teachers if you need help. Don’t forget the guilds.”

Fineous led Rose off the stage. They arrived at their table and Rose said, “That was scary.”

“You did great,” Fineous said. “I think that had the intended result.”

Fineous paused and then said, “I feel I’m back to my university days teaching.

“Does everyone know what to do after school?”

“I’m going to the Restoration Masters Guild to help me level up my equipment restoration and enhancement ability. Then I will go deep into the training area and camp.”

“Good for you,” Fineous praised.

“Isn’t that dangerous by yourself?” Rose asked worriedly.

“Thanks for your concern little lady, but I am a man,” Demonbane replied.

“I don’t think guilds can help me,” Aragon said. “Can Mapping, Tracking, and Dead Eye work together?

“Of course they can,” Aragon said, answering his own question.

“Excellent,” Fineous said. “Try your archery while going through an obstacle course.”

“What about me?” Erza asked.

“Can you make a sword move like it was held by an invisible person? How about two or three? Now imagine the blades covered by fire. Of course shurikens would probably be best for telekinesis.

“The only other thing is creating as many costumes as possible, perhaps reusing items in multiple costumes, and then swapping them as fast as possible. Training on monsters should increase your skills fastest.”

“What about me?” Rose asked.

“You registered with Thalia’s Music Masters and Iron Gut Food Guild. That’s perfect,” Fineous replied. “And of course, leave some food in the fridge for your favorite piggy,” Fineous added with a smile and a wink. “One more thing; try imagining your helpers as being invisible but always about you and those you love. I don’t want anyone seeing them.

“Finally, I want you to continuously heal yourself and pay attention to what happens. Just be careful with this. I don’t know if there are negative effects to excessive healing.”

“What about you?” Rose asked.

“Now that I have leveled up, my skills are much stronger. For instance, each increase in level increases my storage capacity by 10kg. When I hit D-Level, it will increase by 100Kg at a time. I think. Info on this is limited.

“Which is a bit of a pain, since that will make leveling my space harder,” Fineous said. “Fortunately, moving water also works and there is a large river not too far away.

“Second, I will train in the Shadow Realm. I wish I could take you all there, but I’m not confident keeping you safe. It’s too easy to get lost and until now I’ve never wandered more than around 3m from the border.

“Finally I need to study. As my teacher likes saying, there’s always more to learn.”

Eventually lunch ended and they headed for class.

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- Saturday 1/13/384 -

Fineous and friends spent the day grinding. This was necessary since Rose, Erza, Aragon and Demonbane were all stuck at the F-9 Rank barrier.

Fineous’ progress was also slow, as he was still at E-3. That wasn’t surprising.

Even though the number of levels was the same for all ranks, the effort to level up doubled. Also, the challenges needed were also greater.

Each rise required a new insight into a specific ability, as well as sufficient essence. Essence, training and insight worked together.

Fineous glanced at Rose. She was swinging her club with all her might. To an observer, she was just using brute force while singing; although, if you looked more carefully, you would see magical energies around the bat.

Rose’s spirits were inside her body, strengthening her and her bat. At the same time, she was focusing her healing ability on Erza, Aragon, and herself.

Synchronizing abilities was challenging. Focusing on singing, healing, managing spirits, and fighting at the same time was hard.

Demonbane was in the middle of the fight, only attacking and never defending. Instead he was relying on toughness and self-healing to keep him safe. Fortunately for him, those skills were mostly passive. However, they could be boosted with concentration. His repair skill, on the other hand, required focus to work. As added training, he tried his best to focus on his friend’s weapons.

Aragon’s training was likewise harder. On the one side, he could train 6 of the 7 Abilities at the same time. On the other, juggling 6 at the same time was challenging. And of course, he had to be careful with his exploding arrows.

Erza was busy levitating flaming swords she used to fight. She was hyper-aware of her surroundings thanks to her Enhanced Senses.

Finally the wave of wolverines ended.

“It’s dinner time,” Fineous said. He marveled as he watched a scratch on his arm slowly heal. Internal Magic was amazing.

“Oh man this week was exhausting. I’ll set up camp,” Demonbane said and proceeded to work.

Setup complete, Rose began cooking while humming.

Fineous sat on a camp chair and read his book.

“Hi Fineous,” Messenger greeted him as he stepped into view.

“Are you here to give me another task?” Fineous asked. He put his book away and got up. “Everyone, this is Messenger. I mean, this is Messenger. Messenger, this is Rose, Aragon, Erza and Demonbane.”

“Please to meet you all,” Messenger said with a smile.

“Does Fineous really have to compete?” Rose asked worriedly. “He could die.”

“Why did you choose…I mean, why was I chosen? Is it just because I reached the top floor of the Arcana Dios?” Fineous asked.

“You caught my eye on the first day. And no, I’m not here to give you a task. I’m just here to say hi and give you some encouragement,” Messenger said with sparkling eyes. “First, you have no idea how amazing Fineous is.

“I was there in the boar dungeon, ready to help him if his life was in danger.”

Messenger pulled out several bottles and placed them on the table top. “These are strong healing potions which can almost raise the dead. However, they were not needed.

“Fineous could barely lift his rapiers, and yet he withstood an impact of a 1500kg boar. Not only that, but he only got a few bruises. I watched him get stronger. It was amazing.”

“But that was so incredibly dangerous,” Rose scolded angrily.

“Fineous accused me of being a sadist,” Messenger laughed.

“It started on the Emperor’s Night, when you first arrived. I asked Endol to find exceptional people who could make good candidates for the contest.

“Endol said Fineous was the first to use his inventory, which I now know to be a personal inter-dimensional space, and then he Shadow Melded. That was awesome.

“While I was staring at him, he looked directly at me and gave me a wink, even though I was hidden in a corner.”

Messenger was getting more and more excited as he spoke.

“Then I was informed he reached the top floor of the Arcana Dios. Do you have any idea how amazing that is? I personally only have access up to floor 239. After that I only see a blank wall with no guardian present.

“So I decided to talk to him, and he didn’t disappoint. He’s amazing,” Messenger finished with a broad smile.

“Then there was his amazing determination…”

Demonbane got up and asked, “How about his appearance? Is he handsome enough for you?”

Messenger blushed but said nothing.

Demon pumped his fist and called out, “Bromance, bromance, bromance.”

“It isn’t like that,” Messenger denied hastily.

Again Demon pumped his fist and called out, “Bromance, bromance, bromance.”

“I said it isn’t like that,” Messenger shouted.

Again Demon pumped his fist and called out, “Bromance, bromance, bromance.”

“I am a girl, all right?” Messenger screamed. “When I told my dad I wanted to sponsor Fineous, he and my mum insisted I never show Fineous my feminine form until he wins the contest, or during official meetings.”

“So no bromance?” Demonbane asked sadly. “But that can be fun too,” he added with a smile and a wink.

“Forgive Demonbane,” Fineous said, feeling hot under the color. “He sometimes gets wrapped up in his acting.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that unicorn,” Erza asked.

Messenger sighed and said, “That was me. I can only show myself in female gender if I use an animal form.”

“That can be fun too,” Demonbane said with a sinister smile. He raised his hand and wiggled his fingers.

Messenger sighed and said, “I’m surrounded by children.”

Messenger then changed the subject and said, “You will all be pleased to know that I just did a scan on all of you. You should all break into Rank-E after you get a good night’s rest.”

“I’m worried that I will leave my friends behind,” Fineous said.

“Can’t be helped,” Messenger consoled. “You are fundamentally stronger than your entire cohort. You have more potential than most elves. In time you will realize how much elves venerate strength. I’m no exception.

“Please tell me your plans to get stronger so I can help.”

“First, I’m learning Elfin, both Alfin and Alfheim” Fineous said. “Lady Araldar told me the first two voyelles as a test to see my learning potential…”

“You got sick (Bang!)” Rose’s knife came down with a loud bang.

“Someone is angry,” Demonbane said with a chuckle.

“Why should I be angry?” Rose demanded. Bang!

“I’m very happy.” Bang! Bang!!

“It’s okay that Fineous could die.” Bang! Bang!! Bang!!!

“After all, the great and all powerful Princess wants to marry him.” This time the cutting board split in two.

“Have fun marrying a zombie.”

Rose whipped her knife and it passed inches from Messenger’s face. It slammed into an E-3 monster on the other side of Demonbane’s protective barrier. The monster was one-shot killed.

“I’m very happy the great princess has a shiny new toy.” Rose dashed past Messenger.

For the next 5 minutes all everyone heard was a lot of banging and monster sounds.

Rose returned with a smile on her face. “Lunch is almost ready. I’m sorry your highness but we only have 5 plates. I wouldn’t want to insult your divine palate by my crappy food.”

Messenger wasn’t upset. Instead she was amazed.

“Oh my gods, that was amazing,” Messenger exclaimed. “You are now E-3. And you didn’t need to rest. That’s epic.”

“I had no idea such a gentle girl could be so scary,” Erza said. “And yet I don’t want to be left behind.”

“Me neither,” Demonbane said.

“Excuse me, I need a nature break,” Aragon said. He had an unusually serious expression on his face. A moment later he was gone.

Erza and Demonbane left moments later.

In the meantime Rose returned to cooking. “Damn, I hadn’t realized how crappy my cooking was. I will need to redo much of this.”

Sounds of battle could be heard in the distance.

“Did you get any insights?” Fineous asked.

“Yes,” Rose replied and focused on cooking.

Not knowing what else to do, Fineous took out some books and showed them to Messenger.

“I read these books when I was a child,” Messenger said. She looked uncomfortable. “Here is a secret elves don’t like advertising.

“Humans can learn and speak Basic Alfin. It’s only High Alfin or Alfheim that humans can’t learn. That’s because of physiological difference within our throats and sinuses.”

Messenger found she was rambling but couldn’t stop. “Elves have two separate breathing tubes…”

Again there was an awkward silence.

“I have two constellations of abilities,” Fineous said, trying to fill the silence. “The first is my spatial ability. What I really need is a vast field of rocks to experiment on, ranging from 100kg to thousands.

“I would also like to collect a more varied quantity of items. For instance I can create a flame thrower.”

Fineous pulled out a lighter and turned it on. He then projected a stream of oil, creating the flame thrower.

“That’s amazing,” Messenger said. “I can find you places where you can collect resources.”

“I can also train my other skills by going into the Shadow Realm and training. The multi-dimensional aspect of the place exercises all my skills.”

“That’s amazing,” Messenger said. “I’m sorry I can’t give you a return spell or device. You will need to be at least C-Rank for those things to work.”

Again there was silence.

The painful silence ended as the others returned. They all seemed satisfied. That wasn’t surprising. Aragon, Erza and Demonbane were now all E-3.

Messenger looked at the three in astonishment. It wasn’t normal for people to level up like that. She then realized the bond they all shared.

Messenger bowed her head and apologized. “I’m sorry for not taking your feelings into consideration. I realize now that you are all stronger than I gave you credit for.

“Fineous has assembled some truly amazing companions.

“I will do everything in my power to prove I’m worthy of your respect.”

Fineous felt the urge to prevent Messenger from bowing, but resisted and intentionally remained quiet.

Rose stopped her fussing and ran to Messenger and tried to lift her up. “Please don’t bow.”

“I have to,” Messenger said. “I want to be your friends. I want to prove I am worthy of Fineous.”

After struggling a few moments, Rose gave up and said, “Fine. You may stay. However I’m just an amateur cook.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Messenger objected and straightened up. “The food may be simple but it is well prepared. Also, your food has an excellent defensive buff. In a few years you are going to make a name for yourself.”

Demonbane set the table for 6 people and Rose served.

“You all want to get stronger for Fineous, don’t you?” Messenger asked.

“He’s like both a grandpa and a little brother to me,” Rose said.

“Being his warrior is my manly duty,” Demonbane declared. “For that I will get stronger.”

“We want to be with him,” Aragon said. “He’s amazing. And he draws out our skills.”

“I agree,” Erza said.

“I will try to see how I can help you but I don’t know…I will need to consult others,” Messenger said.

“I wish I could take the others into the Shadow Realm, but I’m afraid of losing them,” Fineous said.

“That’s something I can help you with,” Messenger said. “Let’s finish lunch and I’ll explain.”

They ate in silence.

After dinner Messenger said, “There are rings that can bind a party. You will not be able to use most of the functionality since you are all just Rank-E. However, as long as you are all less than 10m away from Fineous, your people should not get lost.”

Messenger took out a tablet and said, “Please tell me your abilities. That way I can best help you train.”

Fineous stepped close and projected his thoughts onto the screen.

“How did you do that?” Messenger asked, startled.

“I was told anyone can use these devices, so I projected my thoughts,” Fineous replied. “It’s just like the boards in school.”

“Normally you require physical contact or a device, which the professors use,” Messenger said. “Oh I see. You have Mind.”

“When I reached E-Rank, Mind, Identification, and Mapping combined to form the Mind Palace,” Fineous explained.

“Mind Palaces are rare even among elves,” Messenger said. “That’s why you can do such crazy things with your storage. You may not be able to yield External Magic, but I saw how well you can fake it.

“I’ll get some equipment for all of you the next time I come,” Messenger said.

“Isn’t that equipment super expensive?” Aragon asked.

“What exactly is Mithril? Can you eat it?” Demonbane asked.

“Eat it?” Messenger asked, confused.

“Demonbane is making a barbarian joke,” Fineous explained.

“Oh I see,” Messenger said.

“Burn,” Demonbane said sadly. “No one appreciates good barbarian humor.”

This time Messenger laughed.

“Mithril…Do you know about how atoms are formed?” Messenger asked.

“Sure,” Fineous said. “Hydrogen, Helium, Lithium, Beryllium, and so on. Each is distinguished by the number of protons.”

“I heard science was able to create one with atomic number 122 or something,” Aragon said. “But they disintegrate after milliseconds.”

“In certain supernova explosions nuclei are smashed together with such force that they combine,” Messenger explained. She scanned through data on her device and started reading.

“If the number of protons exceeds 230 and has a corresponding number of neutrons, then the nucleus compresses.

“As a result we get a new set of stable atoms.

“Mithril has 234 protons and 327 neutrons. Its nucleus is 50% smaller than carbon and has the same number of valence electrons.

“It is highly conductive of manna and regenerates to its original state after synchronization.

“It can also be found in the Onn mountains, when certain beyond-S monsters, err…release it.”

“You mean poop it out,” Demonbane said.

Messenger frowned and said, “Crude but yes.

“The only downsides are its crazy weight and that only Rank-S blacksmiths can work on it, although the raw ore is far more common than people realize.

“The best time to get Mithril is when you are F-Rank. Unfortunately, few people have sponsors who can afford them.

“As a result, it is usually kept as a status symbol and left un-synchronized.

“To use, just pour your manna into it. The more manna used, the stronger and sharper it gets. The user can easily repair it should it get broken. I’ll demonstrate.”

Messenger took out a rapier. The blade bent and twisted into a spiral.

“And below here is my crest. Please show me your crest.”

Messenger put her rapier away.

Fineous took out a rapier and showed the hilt.

<Crest>

The crest had two crossed rapiers. Below was a campfire with a roasting pig. Above was an eye. To the left and right were strange glyphs.

“What is that writing?” Rose asked.

“The left is the rune for shadow,” Messenger said. “The one on the right is for atomic wedgie.

Everyone laughed.

“What does the campfire represent?” Messenger asked.

“Food, family, fun,” Fineous replied.

“I guess I should go,” Messenger said.

“I don’t mind if you come again,” Rose said.

“Thank you for that,” Messenger said. “If I’m with just you ladies then I can show you my feminine form. I have a human form I can take. See you later.”

Messenger got up and disappeared.

A moment later she reappeared.

“I almost forgot one last thing. Normally, a person trains on their skills and this raises their skill level until they run out of essence. Then they are forced to hunt or eat spirit coins.

“However, if you have a fiery determination to advance, a new path opens up. If you stock up with an overwhelming amount of essence, your training will accelerate.

“The essence literally rams itself into your abilities, forcing them accelerate. Don’t get me wrong. You still need training. But this will make you all feel like geniuses.

“I have to warn you. This will give you nightmares and make you feel burned out.

“Unfortunately this means hitting above your level, so the stronger the monsters the betting the results.

“Later, you might want to train deeper in the Onn Mountains.

“I hope that helps, and good luck breaking the D barrier. Just be warned, that barrier will be 10 times greater than the E barrier.

“So don’t feel bad if you take at least two or three months to pass E-9. I know you can if you keep the same pressure you showed me today.”

Messenger disappeared.

Fineous put all the stuff away.

“It’s time to fight even stronger monsters,” Rose said. “I will not be left behind.”

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- Monday, 1/15/384 -

Endol leaned back in his chair and read his book as the dining hall buzzed with conversation.

The people had already taken lunch and were now eating.

Endol noticed Fineous stepping onto the stage.

“Hello everyone,” Fineous called. He waited for the room to quiet down and said, “Friday at lunch I told you that there’s going to be a test. To pass the test you will need to leave the dorm rooms and start renting private rooms.

“Please raise your hands if you have passed this amazing milestone.”

A bunch of people raised their hands, surprising Endol. More people raised their hands than he expected. After all, only two weeks had passed since they arrived.

“Yea,” Fineous shouted and clapped. He projected so much happiness that Endol couldn’t help but smile.

Rogues tended to be either criminals or worked for the secret service, but Fineous broke the mold.

Endol personally had the urge to go out hunting, something he hadn’t done seriously in decades. After all, he was a Rank-B elf.

“By the way, I discovered why this food tastes like crap,” Fineous said. “It turns out it is created by robots specifically programmed to make food nutritious but not tasty, which is why my party is bringing lunch boxes prepared by Rose.

“Lord Endol, what is the possibility of getting some food kiosks set up here? Barely 25% of this space is being used.”

“You are correct Captain Fineous,” Endol said. “The food is designed to be nutritious since you are entitled to that. However, we use robots precisely because they give no buffs. Everything we do is designed to push you out of your comfort zone and become independent as soon as possible.

“Normally we wait for at least 20% of a specific year’s cohort to reach Rank-E, however I am at liberty to start this sooner. Therefore, I shall give the order for the vendors to set up stalls.”

“Isn’t that great?” Fineous shouted, hopping up and down with excitement. “Now we can eat real food while going to school. Hunt, hunt, hunt and collect all the money needed to live a fun life.”

Fineous got down and headed for his seat.

“So what do you think of Fineous now?” Endol’s companion asked.

“His leadership skills are impressive,” Endol said. “He used peer pressure, flattery and rewards to get everyone past F-1.

“He even uses veiled threats to motivate them. Fear of being left out is pushing many.

“He even got the rest of his party to E, and many in his cohort are close.

Endol paused and then asked, “What’s with his voice? I can almost hear elfin undertones in his voice. But that’s impossible. It is my imagination. Despite being exceptional as a human, he is still human.”

“If you can’t see what’s right before your eyes, then you really are stupid,” the shadowy figure said in annoyance.

Endo’s face turned red with rage but he held his tongue.

“Mark my words, one day you will bow to him.”

For a moment no one spoke. Then the hooded figure beckoned to Fineous. Fineous looked up from his book, put it away and came to them.

Fineous sat on a chair next to the figure and asked, “Should we be talking in public?”

“How do you know each other?” Endol asked with an air of superiority.

Fineous looked at Endol and Endol’s stats appeared.

Lord Endol von Del Charte

Rank B-6 ~~69,731~~ <>

Battle Mage

Fineous remembered the rank barrier and wondered how long it took to reach B-6 ~~69,731~~. <>

Fineous was so focused on the rank barrier that he didn’t notice Endol’s face turning pale.

“You have Identification, don’t you?” Endol asked slowly.

Before Fineous could answer, the figure asked, “What were you reading?”

“Annotated book of monsters,” Fineous said.

“Why would you need that?” Endol asked, regaining his composure. “Just kill the monsters.”

“You’re right my lord,” Fineous agreed. “For a mighty battle mage, studying enemies is a waste of time. However, I am a rogue with no offensive abilities. Therefore I must fight in a way only a rogue can fight.

“As an example, green slimes are highly resistant to fire, cutting, and blunt weapons. You can easily smite them with your great strength. My only recourse is salt, which they are weak against.”

“Are you ready for the contest on the 7th?” Messenger asked.

“You’re making my party fight monsters and contestants in the D-1 range, with 3 weeks to train,” Fineous said. ~~, recalling that the D-1 range was between 30 and 39. <>~~

* **~~F-Rank: 0 – 9~~**
* **~~E-Rank: 10-99~~**
* **~~D-Rank: 100-999~~**

“That’s impossible,” Endol declared.

“I have no choice,” Messenger said. “I want to give them Party Unity Bracelets, which they need for training.

“However, I don’t want people accusing me of playing favorites. So I promised I would give it to them if they won first place.

“For the record, I gave Fineous another item. However, I made sure he earned it. I even forced him to overload one of his skills.

“He only had 3 days to train, despite going to school. You should have seen how well he overcame the challenge. It was amazing.

“I hope you can come to the arena. It’s going to be amazing.”

Battle Arena

To a blood-thirsty audience,   
it doesn’t matter who you battle in an arena

- Blood is blood, and more is better

Know your enemy, know your abilities,  
 know your battle field, better than your opponent  
and you will be the victor

The contest was simple. All teams would enter a 10 acre field filled with rock formations, vegetation, and water features. Monsters would then be released.

Points were scored by defeating monsters. In addition, opponents could be taken out by hitting a target above their heads.

Points were given out according to level defeated.

The contest would end after 2 hours, or if only 1 team remained.

There were only a few rules:

* No killing
* No going out of bounds
* The Shadow Realm was considered out of bounds. However, Rogues were allowed to enter for a maximum of 30 seconds at a time. Once they exit, they had to wait for another 30 seconds before they could reenter.

“You really think they have a fighting chance?” Endol asked.

“Fineous has three fighters,” Messenger said. “They all have great combinations of abilities, combined with great determination. Despite being a support, Rose has tricks up her sleeve.”

“Fineous is a rogue,” Endol noted. “Rogues never have offensive abilities and only have Physical Fitness, although some have Super Speed,” Endol said.

Messenger smiled, knowing Fineous didn’t even have Physical Fitness. No one with Internal Magic had it, since Internal Magic was the most general of the three abilities - Enhanced Physical Stats, Physical Fitness, and Internal Magic. Although Super Speed was possible, Fineous didn’t have it. She didn’t mention that.

“Since rogues are fundamentally weak, elves are indoctrinated to hate rogues for being weak and cowardly. Thankfully class selection is the result of our attitudes, desires and aptitudes, although I feel sorry for the 1 in a million elves who do become rogues. They never go beyond E-Rank.

“Which is why I don’t understand your obsession with him,” Endol said. “All his victories are the result of his years of brutal military training, although I will happily congratulate him if he breaks into the D-Rank. But sadly that’s where his advancement will end. Only battle abilities can allow you to harvest sufficient Essence to advance further.”

Messenger thought of her own abilities.

1. Inventory
2. Mind
3. Identification
4. Mapping
5. External Magic
6. Manna Channing
7. Internal Magic

She had four constellations of abilities.

The first was her Inventory. Unlike Fineous’ ability, leveling Inventory was trivial and almost leveled itself.

Then there was Mind, Identification, and Mapping. Together they gave her the Mind Palace, an epic ability. This was a support skill and so didn’t require extra time. All Messenger had to do was use it in conjunction with other abilities. However it required challenges to overcome. It improved fastest with intellectual challenges.

External Magic and Manna Channing were her formidable battle abilities.

External Magic allowed for casting spells. Contrary to popular belief, only 6% of elves had this ability. It was a hard ability to master, requiring years of training and study. Fortunately she had Manna Channing and her Mind Palace. Together it was almost a cheat, which was why she was an A-Ranker at such a young age.

Of course she could have gotten it sooner, if she trained like Fineous.

Internal Magic allowed Messenger to become a polymorph and gain an unlimited lifespan.

Less than 2% of elves had this and so 98% of elves were limited to only 500 years. Although with sufficient resources, this limit could be overcome.

Of course 500 years was a long time, since Messenger was still considered a child by elfin standards.

In four years Messenger would become a young adult by elfin standards, and ready to marry whoever won the contest.

Messenger didn’t want that. She wanted to choose. As a result, she was nervous of her champion’s ability to win her hand.

The obstacles Fineous had to overcome seemed insurmountable.

The starting bell sounded and the barrier disappeared, allowing contestants to enter the field.

The field roughly resembled a gear with 200 teeth. However, there were only 137 teams.

Fineous’ team stepped into the tooth area separating his team from other teams and confronted armadillo-like creatures larger than an elephant. The eledellos charged, determined to crush them.

Boulders started falling in front of the monsters, causing the creatures to stumble. At the same time, Fineous started yelling orders.

Rose sang as she and the fighters attacked. Messenger watched as arrows hit vulnerable eyes and exploded. At the same time, Demonbane slammed his sword into the underside of the beast’s vulnerable necks.

Erza was blasting fireballs from her sword, targeting feet. What was Fineous doing? He was dropping boulders on monsters’ heads.

“I’m impressed,” Endol said. “I had no idea a personal space could be used that way.”

“Normally it can’t,” Messenger said. “However, Fineous has a Mind Palace, allowing him to coordinate his space.”

The two watched as the party ran around the enemy, forcing the eledellos to remain in the rock field.

Then finally the first eledello died with several arrows through its brain. Another died as a result of a cracked skull.

However, Fineous couldn’t give the fight his full attention. He was on the lookout for enemies. That was a good idea, since contestants appeared around the corner.

“Head’s up, we have company,” Fineous called and disappeared.

For a few moments nothing happened and then the target above an opponent’s head broke. He was transported off the field. Within seconds the opponent party joined their colleague.

Fineous reappeared and the battle with the eledellos resumed, and finally the last one fell.

“I’m surprised how much he could do in just 30 seconds,” Endol commented. “Rogues are much more dangerous than I realized.”

Slowly the boulders started disappearing.

114 teams remaining

Endol watched as Fineous’ team entered a wooded area and said, “I wonder how they are going to handle green slimes.”

Sure enough, the Dungeon Divers encountered the green slimes. However, Fineous was prepared with plenty of salt.

“Damn, I forgot,” Endol said. “Fineous did mention the salt trick.”

“Know your enemy, know your abilities, know your battle field, better than your opponent and you will be the victor,” Messenger intoned. “I can’t call that fight with the slimes a real fight.”

“What kind of help did you give him?” Endol asked.

“He just wanted to know where he could find raw materials in bulk, such as iron ore, salt, sulfur, gasoline, and so on,” Messenger replied.

Messenger giggled and added, “Sometimes he acts like a little kid. He was really excited when I mentioned the Garden of Doggy Scents.”

“You shouldn’t fall in love with him,” Endol scolded.

Before Messenger could answer, Endol said, “He just defeated another team - Impressive.”

87 teams remaining

“How would you handle him?” Messenger asked.

“First, this competition limits his Shadow Walking ability.

“I would focus on getting points and eliminating the competition,” Endol said. “Let someone else take him out. Then during the endgame, focus on hitting hard with plenty of AOE attacks, since rogues are rarely physically strong. This is especially true now, because of the rank difference.”

Looking around the field, teams were busy fighting each other. On the other hand, Fineous was playing defensively. That wasn’t surprising. Fighting enemies and monsters over one rank above you was hard. That was why Dungeon Divers stayed within the canyons and out of direct eye sight of the enemy.

The battle continued, and then someone took out Erza’s token. Erza disappeared.

Rose looked furious and grabbed Aragon’s shoulder. Aragon fired.

Endol got up from his seat in surprise. “Did Rose just make that arrow invisible?”

“I believe she did,” Messenger replied, noting Aragon didn’t use his explosions. “I did mention she had tricks. However, Aragon has abilities of his own he has yet to develop fully. Both abilities combined for that.”

46 teams remaining

The battles between teams were heating up. Many teams had stopped hunting monsters, but instead began hunting other players.

“Another team has been taken down,” Endol exclaimed, leaning forward in excitement. “Their skills seem to be improving while in battle.”

24 teams remaining

Suddenly the Dungeon Divers encountered the wrong people. An archer shot arrows that seemed made of light. The remaining four were defeated within seconds.

“What a shame,” Endol sighed. “I was starting to get really excited. Who would have thought they could seriously compete?”

“The real reason I wanted them to compete is because I want Fineous to gain proper combat experience,” Messenger said. “Fighting in an army is vastly different than fighting in these contests, and he hasn’t fought in decades.”

“Are you going to make them compete again?” Endol asked.

“Of course,” Messenger replied. “However, they will only compete once a month until spring. Because of school, they have almost no time to train.

“I was hoping to give them Party Unity Bracelets. That way they could train safely in the Shadow Realm.”

“Go ahead and give it to them,” Endol said. “In my books they have earned it. I haven’t been this entertained in a long time. I can’t wait to see their next battle.”

“I appreciate it,” Messenger said. “If you don’t mind, I’ll call them here.”

“As you wish,” Endol said.

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“Damn, so close,” Demonbane grumbled.

“It’s okay,” Fineous said. “We learnt a great deal.”

Their discussions were interrupted when an elf entered. The elf had that usual expression of disdain for anyone of lower rank and all non-elves.

“Dungeon Divers, Lord Endol commands you join them in the royal booths,” the elf said in a disgusted voice. “And no, I don’t know why he would be interested in Humans.”

“We can go, but we are rather stinky,” Fineous said.

“Of course you are,” the man sneered and said, “Just step in there.”

Entering the specified room, strange energies flowed around them. A moment later they were clean.

“Follow me,” the man said and the group followed.

They stepped into an elevator and the attendant pressed buttons. A moment later they stepped out.

In front of them were Messenger and Endol. They stepped out and the elevator door closed.

Aragon asked, “How did we come here so fast?”

“We travelled through the Shadow Realm,” Fineous explained.

“You did well,” Messenger praised.

“No we didn’t,” the others said, almost in unison.

“I’ve only utilized a fraction of my abilities,” Aragon said. “For instance, I feel Dead Eye, Mapping, and Tracking can combine into something amazing. I now know invisible arrows, fire, light and other projectiles are possible. I really need to train.”

“What about me?” Erza asked, annoyed. “I got taken out first. I could have better protected ourselves using Telekinesis. And I haven’t touched the power of my Costume Management System.”

“Why are you smiling?” Demonbane asked, annoyed.

“Endol acknowledged all of you,” Messenger said. “He said he hasn’t been this excited watching a match in a long time. He even said you have earned the right to the Party Unity Bracelets.”

“Really?” Rose asked, surprised.

“It was Endol’s suggestion,” Messenger said and handed out the devices. She then explained how to use the bracelets.

“I was surprised when Endol suggested it,” Messenger said. “He’s one of the most stuck up people I know. He detests all weak people. However, I can see him starting to like all of you, even little Rose.

“But that has only raised the bar for everyone else.”

Rose blushed at that.

Endol frowned and said, “I am not stuck up. But I won’t deny I hate weak people. But not as much as people who refuse to get stronger. And you are all hitting above your level.”

“Aragon, what did you mean about Dead Eye, Mapping, and Tracking?” Messenger asked.

“Dead Eye can only track one target at a time, although it can find enemy weaknesses. However, during the match I felt I have the possibility of combining it, allowing me to map and track multiple moving targets.

“I now have a clear training path. Unfortunately, this is going to take hundreds of hours of fighting in rather rugged terrain. My weakness is close-quarters, so I need to train speed, agility and endurance. This will be like training for the Olympics.”

Fineous staggered and held his head.

“What’s the matter?” both Rose and Messenger asked at the same time. Both looked worried.

“I felt some sort of shaking in the Shadow Realm like an earthquake,” Fineous said. “It’s filling me with a sense of panic.”

“Is that normal?” Erza asked.

“I don’t know,” Messenger said. “I never bothered to study the Shadow Realm. Most people just ignore it. Only Civil engineers and scientists study it.”

Just then a siren blared, “Attention everyone, in approximately 3 hours, 42 minutes there will be a fracture. The cities of Arin and Zephyr are in the path of the fracture. Please evacuate to a safe city.”

In the meantime, Fineous looked as if he was going to puke. Rose went to him and cast a healing spell.

“Thanks Rose,” Fineous said. “Lady Araldar just contacted me…”

“How the hell do you know Lady Araldar?” Endol demanded.

“Now is not the time,” Messenger said, sternly. “What did Lady Araldar say?”

Fineous took out a tablet.

“Lady Araldar, Lord Endol and Messenger are here,” Fineous said.

“Good day, Lord Endol, Messenger,” Araldar greeted. “Fineous has the ability called Shadow Meld. With this skill, we can influence the formation of the currently forming fracture. I’m sending you a map of your location, as well as the path you should follow to minimize casualties.

“At the start location, halfway merge into the Shadow Realm. This, combined with the imminent fracture, will influence the fracture formation. And yes, Shadow Meld is perfectly safe. This technique only works when there’s an imminent fracture.

“The path is a little over 17km.”

“I can carry him,” Messenger said.

“No you can’t,” Fineous objected.

“Fineous is right,” Lady Araldar said. “He will be engulfed by the fracture and launched who knows how far away.

“Being so small, the fracture might only launch them only a few thousand kilometers, or they could be laughed millions or billions of kilometers away.

“Also, there are dangers out there that can threaten even an A-Ranker.

“If it’s only 17km and we have 3 hours, I could carry him,” Demonbane said.

Messenger went to the elevator and pressed a button.

“But wouldn’t their team be separated?” Endol asked.

“Ideally they would use a boat,” Araldar.

They waited and after what seemed like forever, the door opened.

“Is there a boat in the area?” Fineous asked.

“Answer him,” Endol commanded.

“Yes sir,” the attendant said. “They are used for competitions.”

“Take us there,” Endol said.

Once inside, the attendant pressed buttons. A moment later the door opened.

“Bring one of the boats here,” Endol said. “I will sign for it.”

The attendant did as instructed, then handed a tablet to Endol.

A minute later the attendant brought back a canoe with orbs in front of each seat.

“Too bad there’s no manna battery,” Messenger mused.

“There are a few that were confiscated,” the attendant said.

“Please bring them here and attach them to that boat,” Endol commanded.

“Yes sir,” the attendant said and amended information in the tablet. Endol resigned. The attendant left.

“We have library books,” Fibrous said.

“The Arcana wants you to keep them,” Araldar said. “You’ll need them.”

After awhile the attendant returned with the batteries and attached them to the boat.

“Bring that boat and take us too…,” Endol said.

“There,” Fineous said and pointed.

“The closest exit in that direction,” Endol said.

Moments later the attendant glided the vehicle into the elevator. A few more button clicks later and the doors opened, revealing the outdoors.

Fineous jumped into the front seat and his party got on behind.

“Let me show you how…” Messenger began.

“No need,” Demonbane said, interrupting Messenger.

Fineous placed his hand on the orb and imagined the boat rising up. He then looked at Messenger. The worry on her face surprised him.

“Here, have an apple,” Fineous said. “We can fly together again when we come back.”

An apple materialized in front of Messenger. She grabbed it and watched the Dungeon Divers zoom into the distance.

Endol looked at Messenger and just sighed.

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“Place your hands on the orbs. Imagine pushing your energy into the orbs,” Fineous instructed. “In a few moments I will submerge the boat into the Shadow Realm.”

“How does this thing work?” Aragon asked.

“I haven’t bothered to learn about magic items other than the tablet,” Fineous said. “However I assume you all just supply power, while I steer,” Fineous replied. “Place your hand on the orbs in front of you and imagine your energy flowing into it.”

“I’m feeling a resistance,” Rose said.

“Excellent,” Fineous said. “Keep up the good work.”

Five minutes later they arrived at the start position. They then waited for the appropriate time.

After a tedious 14 minutes, it was time.

Fineous focused on the Shadow Realm that was everywhere and just offset from reality. He tried to push the bottom part of the boat into the Shadow Realm.

At first, Fineous had no luck. After all, he only tried doing this to himself only. It was like pushing a boat filled with people through shallow water. It wasn’t impossible for a normal person, just hard work, especially if the boat is stuck on a sand bank.

Slowly the boat shifted.

Fineous then almost lost control when he ranked up Shadow Meld. He resumed the trip and Shadow Meld leveled up again.

They traced wide arks through the sky as they travelled closer to the Onn Foothills.

“Brace yourselves,” Fineous called.

The world felt as if it was ripping apart. The land below split and zoomed outwards at breakneck speeds.

Mountains exploded upwards around them. A moment later they were in a valley surrounded by mountains. They were fully out of the Shadow Realm.

“Holy cow,” Demonbane exclaimed. The others had similar responses.

Fineous pulled out a book and started skimming.

“Says here just after a fracture, the area affected within the Onn Foothills will experience a short period of manna depletion,” Fineous said. “As a result, there will be no monsters or spirits. After a few hours, the manna levels will slowly start to rise. After a week or two the manna will return to normal.”

“Did we just teleport?” Aragon asked.

“No,” Fineous said. “Think of the world as an orange peel, which has been removed in one piece. Outside and between the cracks are the Onn Foothills. Beyond are the mountains.

“Right now a new crack formed. I was able to direct the crack to avoid the largest populated areas, but stopping it would be like stopping plate tectonics. Hopefully the casualties should be minimal.”

“But where are we?” Erza asked.

“According to my mapping skill, home is over 180 thousand kilometers away in that direction,” Fineous said. “We are still technically in the Onn Foothills.”

“Holy cow,” Demonbane said. “And you said we didn’t teleport.”

“Think of it as space that had expanded, carrying us along,” Fineous said. “As Lady Araldar said, we were lucky. It could have been millions or billions of kilometers. Unfortunately, this is half way to the moon.”

“Can we ever get back home?” Rose asked worriedly.

“Of course, however not today. 180 thousand kilometers will be a challenge for us,” Fineous replied. “The canoe uses more manna than we can supply, and the supplied batteries don’t have enough power.”

“So what should we do?” Rose asked worriedly.

“Let’s find a base,” Fineous said. “There is no point going anywhere until we reach at least D-Rank. The distance is just too great.”

They travelled for almost half an hour, and then Demonbane pointed at a cliff. It appeared as if huge sections of the cliff had been carved off and toppled over onto piles of rubble.

The slabs were roughly square blocks over 20m per side and 10m high.

“Okay,” Fineous replied and landed were indicated.

“How the hell did they form?” Aragon asked.

“I actually saw a similar formation in the States,” Fineous said. “Monument Valley has these carved stone blocks. I don’t think it has a formal name.”

They landed and got out.

Fineous then tried to lift the canoe and discovered it was lighter than expected. He stored it away for later.

“Do you need help Demonbane?” Fineous asked.

“Yes,” Demonbane said, pointing. “Clear these rocks.”

In ten minutes a space under the flattened boulder was created. With direction from Demonbane, several interior rooms formed, extending to areas under adjacent slabs.

After that, Demonbane instructed Fineous to add rocks and mud to strategic locations, enclosing them all in.

Half an hour later the work was complete.

“I created this area as a common area,” Demonbane said. “This area will be for a washroom.

“Rose, is this good enough to start cooking?”

“Yes Demonbane,” Rose said.

“Fineous, when you have time, I need help with a few more thing before the base is complete,” Demonbane said.

“No problem,” Fineous said.

Dinner time came and they ate while discussing the future.

“A few days ago Lady Araldar told me she had a predomination that something bad will happen to us, but didn’t know exactly what,” Fineous said. “As a result she gave me a bunch of books, as well as the communications device she used to contact me.

“Unfortunately, we are out of range for the device.

“The books include surviving in the Onn Mountains, understanding the shadow realm, and theory of how Onn ships operate. We have a base, thanks to Demonbane. We have knowledge thanks to Lady Araldar. We just have to level up a bit and then we will be back home before you know it.

“Tomorrow, manna levels should be high enough for us to start hunting.”

Fineous gave everyone a grin and said, “Think of this as one big camping trip. After all, we are all adventurers, aren’t we?

“And do you know what the best part of this is?”

The others looked at Fineous but couldn’t figure out the answer.

“We get to play hooky, meaning we can skip boring school and…”

The others laughed heartedly.

Fineous took out his book and began reading.

Exile in the Onn Mountains

If you are going to be exiled,  
Use it to become stronger

<+ Day 2 +>

“Fineous, did you sleep?” Rose asked when she saw him reading his book.

“I guess not,” Fineous said. He noticed the others slowly trickling in. “I spent all night reading, ‘*Surviving the Onn Mountains.’* Then I started another book when I realized it was past 5:00AM.

“Manna levels are now in the F range, so there’s still no rush,” Fineous said. He paused and then said slowly. “I do have some bad news.”

“What’s the matter?” Rose asked fearfully.

“We still have school to attend to,” Fineous said, showing the school’s published itinerary.

“You scared me,” Rose scolded and the others laughed.

“I will be lecturing as we work,” Fineous said with a smile. “That way we will all be caught up when we return.”

“Can we really go home?” Aragon asked.

“Of course,” Fineous replied. “Deep within the Shadow Realm is a place where space and time unifies. In such places time slows, giving us more to train. This is why we must reach D-Rank as soon as possible. Who knows? Perhaps we can get close to C by the time we return.

“Okay here’s the plan. Demonbane will set up a cooking station outside. Rose will then cook and sing while we defend her against monsters.”

“That sounds terrifying,” Rose said worriedly. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to cook.”

“The harder the challenge the faster you will grow,” Fineous said. “By being in such a hotbed you will vastly improve your cooking skills. Remember, we all need to push our limits.

“Everyone pack up. We are heading out.”

“What about breakfast?” Rose asked.

“We will have breakfast later,” Fineous said. “I want to maximize our training so we can leave this place soonest.”

Demonbane put away all his cooking stuff and they headed out.

“Demonbane, this looks like a good place to set up camp,” Fineous said. “Rose, start cooking when Demonbane finishes.

“And Rose, try harmonizing around my lectures, with the aim of making my lectures more memorable.”

“How do I do that?” Rose asked.

“Practice,” Fineous said. He paused and then added, “This is not something I can help with. Remember, you are trying to become a world class singer.”

Fineous began lecturing as Demonbane set up a cooking area. Rose hummed in the background.

The first of the monsters attacked. The fight was easy as the monsters were weak.

Demonbane finished his work and Rose began cooking.

“Damn, it’s really hard to cook like this,” Rose cursed.

“You’re doing good,” Fineous said. “Remember, your singing and spirits are helping us all. And when you finish cooking your food will too.”

The fighters fought as Rose’s energies flowed around them.

“I got a level on both Cooking and Music,” Rose said excitedly.

“Good for you,” Fineous said happily. “Remember, we must all find out ways to push ourselves.”

“Breakfast is ready,” Rose said.

One by one the group ate; making sure the camp was defended.

“Okay Rose, start cooking again,” Fineous said and then continued his lecture. Lecturing, fighting and trying to think of new strategies were straining his brain.

“How come you’re not using your rapiers?” Demonbane asked.

“Because they would make these early fights too easy,” Fineous said. “The object is to improve our skills, not just to defeat sheer numbers of monsters. Now who knows the name of the battle Agatha fought with in the rain of Ariel the Wise? It was after that that the royal family moved to the Imperium.”

“Why do we have to know all this?” Demonbane asked.

“Knowledge of the past is important in order to prevent the repeat of mistakes and prevent avoidable pain and suffering,” Fineous said. “This battle, called the Battle for Hastings affected how the elves treated us transplants, and improved our standing in this world.”

“Didn’t you say, they don’t care if we learn?” Aragon asked. “Also, I’m finding it hard to concentrate on this battle, with you forcing you to learn these things.”

“And that is the ultimate reason I’m doing this,” Fineous said. “If we don’t increase our levels fastest over the next day or so, we will quite literally suffocate to death.”

“That’s terrifying,” Rose squeaked.

“Don’t worry,” Fineous said. “We will be fine as long as we give our all in this training. The good news is that pushing ourselves to the limit will counteract much of the pressure we will feel over the next few weeks and months.

“It’s like exercising in the arctic. As long as we exercise we are protected from freezing.

“The bad news is that this will cut into our sleep.

“Rose, you have recipes for counteracting sleep deprivation. I remember seeing them when we were going through the recipes together.”

“But those are all C-Ranked and beyond,” Rose objected. “They are beyond my ability.”

“Then I say that’s perfect,” Fineous said enthusiastically.

“But if I make a mistake, you can all get rather sick,” Rose objected.

“And that is why only Demonbane and I will try it out,” Fineous said.

Rose took out her recipe book and flipped though the contents.

“I don’t have all the ingredients,” Rose said, sounding relieved.

“I have sufficient ingredients for hundreds of tries,” Fineous said and placed the ingredients on the worktable. “Thankfully Messenger took me to places where I could harvest some amazing ingredients.”

“Fine,” Rose said reluctantly. “However, I’m going to throw it out when I finish. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Don’t worry little lady,” Demonbane said as he fought with just gloved hands. Fighting this was challenging, since he couldn’t get any clean kills. “We are men. We can handle a little stomach issues.

“Sweet, I just got knuckle dusters.”

“Why must men be such masochists?” Rose asked the universe. The universe responded by sending in a new wave of F-Ranked monsters.

“It’s our duty to protect the weaker sex,” Demonbane declared.

“I’m not weaker,” Erza objected.

“And that’s what I love about you,” Demonbane said. “Now let’s see who can make the most kills with just our fists.”

“But you have knuckle dusters,” Erza objected.

“And you have flaming, red hot fists, so we’re even,” Demonbane countered.

Fineous let the conversation go, then resumed his lecture, occasionally adding quizzes to keep his students on their toes.

“Damn this recipe is driving me crazy,” Rose screamed. “I can’t make heads or tails of these instructions.”

“But did it do anything for your level?” Fineous asked.

“Actually it did,” Rose said in surprise. “I raised my level to E-6.”

“Marvelous,” Fineous said as he spun around monsters, trying his best to backstab them.

Fineous disappeared from view and reappeared above a hippo-like monster. He crashed down like a rocket with his swords, killing the creature. A moment later he disappeared.

“Rose, you can switch back now for dinner,” Fineous said. “I’m getting seriously hungry, and nutrition is essential for us. Now can anyone name the 16 provinces of Agatha?”

“It’s starting to get dark,” Aragon noted.

“That’s okay,” Fineous said. “Erza can use her fire to give us some illumination. Remember, by concentrating and increasing the temperature you get a whiter light source. Play around with it.”

“Okay,” Erza said.

Balls of flame zoomed overhead as stars started to show.

“Can we use the stars for navigation?” Aragon asked.

“Absolutely,” Fineous said. “That brightest star represents our home. It shows us the direction we need to follow.”

“Oh man this is exhausting,” Demonbane said. “My arms are starting to get numb.”

“Sorry about that,” Rose apologized. “I’m finding it hard to concentrate on cooking, humming and healing at the same time.”

“It’s all good, little lady,” Demonbane said. “Remember what they say. No pain, no gain.”

“Don’t worry about Demonbane,” Fineous said. “He has healing. I’m sure he’s not using it since he wants to increase his training intensity.”

“That’s true,” Demonbane said.

“Dinner is ready,” Rose said.

“Demonbane, set up a safe zone so we can eat,” Fineous said.

“Okay Fineous,” Demonbane said. He stopped fighting and began preparation.

Ten minutes later the barrier was up.

Demonbane grabbed a plate and filled it with food. “Rose, I think your cooking skills have improved. Now I want to fight some more.”

“What’s the matter Fineous?” Rose asked, watching Fineous sulk.

“I don’t know if we should stay the night here or train some more,” Fineous said. “For one thing Rose hasn’t trained her Physical Fitness today.

“Also, none of us are max on our storage spaces. And that should be the easiest to level up.”

“What about this place?” Aragon asked.

“We leave it,” Fineous said. “Then Demonbane sets up a new safe zone at another location. Choosing different locations will improve his skills.”

“If you think we should do it,” Rose said. “I believe in you.”

“You should believe in yourself more,” Fineous said with a sad smile. “Bad things happen when people put their faith in others, instead of themselves.”

“You sound like an old man,” Demonbane said, laughing.

“I *am* an old man,” Fineous said with a smile. “If I had known I would have selected a more mature appearance, perhaps 21. Forever 21 and all that sort of thing,” he added with a smile.

“Okay I’m putting everything away,” Demonbane said. “Okay done.”

“Everyone, please put on your gravity belts,” Fineous said. “Increase the pressure until you can barely keep up to me.”

“Okay Rose, try catching me,” Fineous said and dashed forward, adjusting his gravity belt as he ran.

As Fineous ran he felt as if he was being crushed by gravity, even though the belt was only set at 1.3G.

Next to him Rose ran. Just like him she was also struggling. However, her belt was set to 1.8G. Aragon and Erza were even higher, with Demonbane being the highest at 2.7G.

Half an hour later Fineous tripped and fell on his face.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” Rose asked worriedly and healed Fineous.

“Thanks Rose,” Fineous said weakly. “This is going to be a really long vacation. Let’s go again. I feel I’m close to a breakthrough.”

“Does healing help?” Aragon asked.

“No,” Fineous said. “It interferes with my skill evolution. However I know Rose doesn’t like seeing us suffer.”

Just then a group of raptors charged at them.

Struggling to get up, Fineous dropped rocks on the raptors. At the same time the others started attacking.

However the raptors were surprisingly fast, making them difficult to hit.

“Sorry everyone,” Fineous said, feeling guilty. Fighting exhausting he took out his swords and charged forward, letting the creatures impale themselves.

Suddenly Fineous’ Internal Magic leveled up. Momentarily he felt disoriented as his internals shifted. This caused him to panic since it affected his hailstorm attack.

Suddenly Fineous’ mind upgraded, followed by a cascade of other upgrades.

After a grueling battle, the last raptor died.

“Sorry everyone,” Fineous again apologized.

“Why are you apologizing?” Artemis asked.

“Because I pushed everyone too far, putting everyone in danger,” Fineous said.

“No one’s perfect,” Erza said.

“But some mistakes can be fatal,” Fineous said. “From now on, only one person at a time should push our physical skills to their limit. Tata way the rest of us can properly defend.

“After all, we are no longer at the academy.”

“I saw you light up multiple times,” Demonbane said.

Fineous nodded. “One overloaded skill put a strain on me which overloaded the next skill, causing a cascade.

“The good news is I discovered I can launch stones out of my space with some force. With my mind skills and closer release points, I can better fight agile monsters.”

“Too bad you can’t materialize a stone inside a monster,” Erza said.

“Both living creatures and monsters are multi-dimensional,” Fineous said. “They all extend into other dimensions. They only reason I can attack from a distance is that my aura extends almost 8 meters around me.

“But this is still outside the monsters. I still have to penetrate their defenses, even when attacking from the Shadow Realm. Are attacks that ignore defense possible? I don’t know.”

“Are you saying I’m in your aura?” Aragon asked.

“Yes,” Fineous said. “And I’m in your aura. They are like diffuse clouds but which extend in unique ways, allowing for discrete personal spaces. People with storage just have auras that are adapted to storing items.

“Might as well set up camp for the night.”

“On it,” Demonbane said. He ran around them and rammed down stakes. A dome of energy flickered around them. A moment later Demonbane gave off an upgrade glow.

“Sweet,” Demonbane said happily. “I upgraded Camping.”

“Congratulations Demonbane,” Fineous said and pulled out his own camping tent. “By the way, Demonbane’s safezone is a manifestation of his aura. It will expand as his level increases.”

For a few minutes no one spoke as everyone prepared for sleep.

“You mentioned the energy will increase,” Aragon said.

“Yes,” Fineous said as he sat down on a chair. Yawning, he added, “And I have no idea how high it will go, which is why we need to train hard.

“The good news is the levels aren’t rising too fast. If the levels fill up by diffusion, then Level-E should last at least 2 days, hopefully more.”

“Going to sleep?” Rose asked.

“I guess I should,” Fineous said. “I’m completely zonked. Today was a long day and my upgrades in Internal Magic are getting more tiring.”

“It doesn’t me,” Rose said.

“Me neither,” Erza said.

“Mine just make me better,” Demonbane said.

“I don’t know how your powers work, but mine is rewiring my body. Breathe verses depth and that sort of thing,” Fineous said. “Good night.”

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<+ Day 3 +>

Fineous got out of his tent and put it away. “Sorry everyone,” he said. “I seem to have overslept.”

“That’s okay,” Demonbane said. “I’m the barbarian and you are training harder than me.”

“Hurry up and eat before the food gets cold,” Rose said.

Fineous gobbled down his meal. In the meantime Demonbane put his equipment away.

“I’m ready,” Demonbane said.

“Okay everyone, I need to level up my Shadow Meld skill,” Fineous said and stretched his arms out. “It’s time to test out our new Party Unity Bracelets. Grab on.”

Everyone did as instructed and Fineous pulled on everyone. “Damn, moving people is vastly harder than moving inanimate objects.”

“Can we do anything?” Rose asked.

“No,” Fineous said. “But this too is good training.”

Just then Fineous’ skill level. Unfortunately, that wasn’t enough.

Fineous continued struggling. A minute passed and his skill leveled again.

Feeling like walking through molasses, Fineous finally dragged his party through.

“What a freaky place,” Demonbane said as he looked around.

“And scary,” Rose said timidly.

“Don’t worry,” Aragon said. “We will protect you.”

“Oh Aragon, my hero,” Fineous said in a girly voice.

Aragon blushed and the others laughed.

“So this is why it’s called the Shadow World,” Erza mused.

“That’s not quite true,” Fineous said. “It’s not possible for mere mortals to grasp the Shadow Realm. What we are seeing is colored by our own expectations.

“We will stay near the border of the real world. The good news is my bracelet has fully integrated with my mapping skill, allowing me to track your positions.

“Try not to get more than 10 meters from me. This distance will increase as I level up.”

“What will happen if we go too far?” Rose asked worriedly.

“You will get trapped in a bubble of space and eventually get expelled into a random reality,” Fineous said.

“Scary,” Rose said and hugged Fineous’ arm.

“The Shadow Realm is the space between realities. In its raw state it is the source of absolute chaos and the source of all realities. It is endless. Although universes will pass away, this will not.

“As mentioned before, the magic elevators travel through the Shadow Realm. And just like the elevators, I will eventually be able to Shadow Skip with the same speed.

“Have you noticed that I can Shadow Skip faster than I can run? It’s not much since my skill is so low. My ultimate goal is to break into D-Rank and then travel through the Shadow Realm using our boat.”

“Then we can go home?” Aragon asked.

“I don’t know,” Fineous said. “All I know is that the trip will be considerably speeded up. It’s mind-boggling how much studying I need to do.”

“Why are those monsters disappearing?” Demonbane asked, changing the subject.

“They are crossing into physical realities,” Fineous said. “I asked Lady Araldar why Earth doesn’t have monsters. She said there is an unusually string barrier surrounding Earth’s universe. As a result, the amount of monsters entering is so small that they are rarely if ever seen.”

“Does that mean the Loch Ness Monster, Big Foot and the others could be real?” Erza asked.

“Yes,” Fineous said. “However, they probably disappeared shortly after their initial sighting. As a result, few would believe the reports.”

“My Shadow Meld is now at E-7,” Fineous said. “We can return.”

“Let’s explore more,” Demonbane said. “This place is scary, but also exciting. Are there any treasures here?”

“Of course,” Fineous said. “This realm is controlled by our collective unconscious. Just like the On Mountains, what we get is proportional to the effort we expend.”

“Too bad magic doesn’t exist on Earth,” Erza said.

“It does,” Fineous said. “However, the unusually strong dimensional barrier makes the development of abilities unusually hard. As a result, only a few people have been initiated. Even then, their skills have been weak, forcing the practitioners to keep their abilities hidden.”

“Enough talk,” Demonbane said. “It’s time to hunt.”

“No problem big guy,” Fineous said and ran off, making sure everyone was near him.

Soon imp-like creatures appeared from the mist, cackling like mad demons.

“Did I do that?” Rose asked in a squeaky voice.

Fineous looked at Rose, still clinging to his arm. “You are safe Rose,” Fineous said. “This isn’t some hell.”

Within moments the imps were upon them. Demonbane, Erza and Aragon fought with everything they had.

Noting the battle was fully handled, Fineous turned to Rose. Holding her chin he kissed her gently on the lips and then on the forehead.

Cheeks flushed red, Rose relaxed.

“Trust in your big brother and your family,” Fineous said softly.

Fineous then whispered into Rose’s ear. “I’m a dirty old man, aren’t?”

Rose giggled.

“Sing my angel of song, sing,” Fineous called out and began his attack.

As they fought more and more imps came. Bracing himself Fineous fought by using his rapiers in the correct way – by stabbing his opponents.

20 minutes passed and finally the last monster died.

“Damn,” Demonbane said. “They weren’t that strong. However, their screeches really grated on my nerves.”

“Demonbane, please setup a cooking stand for Rose,” Fineous said. “Hopefully this place will give Rose a brand new challenge.”

“No problem boss,” Demonbane said and began setup. Within moments it was done.

“But we just ate less than an hour ago,” Rose objected.

“Then make this recipe,” Fineous said, passing over a recipe book.

Rose took the book, humming as she read.

In the meantime, Cravens attacked. Looking like the marriage between a buzzard and a raven, the E-4 Cravens attacked by launching feathers.

“Ow,” Demonbane swore as a feather grazed his cheek. He swung his sword, causing a wind that blew the feathers back to the monsters. A moment later the monster was dead, killed by its own feathers.

“Yes, I leveled up weapons mastery,” Demonbane said excitedly.

Fineous used his swords to protect himself from close quarter attacks and his stones for ranged attacks.

“I can’t make this,” Rose complained. “This will make you ill if the agate mushrooms aren’t cooked correctly. I mean really ill.”

“Do your best,” Fineous said and placed the ingredients on the table. “And if it fails, just try again.”

“Okay,” Rose said softly and resumed humming.

Fineous resumed his role as a school professor.

They waited a short while, and then another wave of monsters attacked.

An hour later Rose said, “This recipe is too hard. I ruined it again.”

The dish disappeared from Rose’s frying pan.

“You can’t eat it,” Rose said frantically. “It’s spoiled.”

“Continue cooking,” Fineous said as he fought. “I have plenty of ingredients.”

After another hard battle ended, Fineous said, “Demonbane, are you hungry?”

Demonbane accepted a plate from Fineous.

“I told you, you will get sick,” Rose shouted.

“Don’t worry little lady,” Demonbane said. “We are men.”

“Men,” Rose said in exasperation.

For the next minute nothing happened. Then Demonbane barfed, followed by Fineous.

“Here let me heal you,” Rose said.

“That’s okay,” Fineous said. “On second thought, go ahead. You never did this type of healing before.”

Fineous and Demonbane both flashed as their skills upgraded.

“But why?” Rose asked angrily.

“You can’t improve your cooking if you don’t expect people to eat it,” Fineous said. “Demonbane has Toughness and Healing, while I have Internal Magic. This is good training for the both of us. Unfortunately that doesn’t help your healing skill.”

“Don’t worry little lady, it’s all good,” Demonbane said. “How can I be a barbarian if I can’t handle this much?”

“Aren’t there poisonous monsters out there?” Aragon asked.

“Yes there are,” Fineous said. “Poisonous, venomous, gas breathing, acid spewing, to name a few.”

“Yikes,” Aragon said. “I’m glad we haven’t seen them yet.”

“Should I cook lunch?” Rose asked.

“Sure,” Fineous said. “By the way, how is this place affecting your cooking?”

“I’m finding it harder to cook,” Rose said.

“Excellent,” Fineous said. “That means you’re being trained.”

The next set of monsters was giant scorpions.

“Are they poisonous?” Aragon asked as he fired his arrows.

Fineous materialised a stone, intercepting the strike. The stone shattered, sending dust everywhere.

“Yikes,” Aragon said, echoing everyone’s view.

“Switch to singing Rose,” Fineous commanded as he materialized larger boulders. At the same time he dropped his rapiers on the scorpions’ heads.

Thankfully the rapiers were perfectly balanced. Adding a little bit of momentum, they penetrated the monster’s heads. Unfortunately that didn’t kill the creature. As a result, he had to drop-stab the creature multiple times to get a kill.

“Damn, those bastards have multiple brains and hearts,” Fineous grumbled. Despite knowing about thousands of monster types, this one was of the vastly greater number he never read about.

Thankfully Demonbane was there to act as a meat shield, protecting both Fineous and Rose. Unfortunately there was only one of him and the monsters surrounded them.

Fighting with desperation, the team attacked with all their might.

Soon a stone wall made of boulders surrounded them as Fineous shored up their defenses.

Minutes dragged on as their equipment was poked to shreds. Demonbane repaired his equipment, but that was still rather slow. However, his skill did upgrade as the life-threatening fight forced his skill.

After what seemed like an eternity the fight ended, leaving everyone battered and bruised. Even Rose didn’t escape injuries.

“Demonbane, dismantle your cooking station. We are returning,” Fineous said. “Everyone grab onto me.”

After a few moments Demonbane finished and they returned to the On Foothills.

Rose resumed her healing.

“Demonbane, please set up a safezone,” Fineous said. “I think we all need a break.”

Fineous pulled out a few chairs while Demonbane set up.

“Now I can see why elves like Endol hate Rogues,” Fineous said.

“What are you talking about?” Demonbane asked, surprised. “You’re crazy strong.”

“At higher levels, all monsters have magic attack and defense,” Fineous explained. “Take Aragon, for example. He can shoot magic arrows. There is no enemy he can’t strike down, regardless of weird abilities.

“The same is true of Erza and Demonbane.

“I must use trickery to fight, using deep knowledge of the enemies and preparation.

“Sorry I’m feeling tired.”

Rose hugged Fineous and said, “We believe in you.”

Fineous felt healing wash over him and he closed his eyes, dosing off in the process.

Fineous then woke to the smell of cooking.

Feeling better, Fineous pulled out a thick metal plate and dropped it. He them picked it up and dropped it again. This time it disappeared. The third time it hovered in place.

“I didn’t know you can do magic,” Erza said.

“This isn’t magic,” Fineous said. “The plate is actually resting on the ground in the Shadow Realm.

“I came up with this idea when the scorpions attacked.

“Amazing,” Demonbane said. “How fast will it be?”

“There is no inherit speed limit, just my own mastery of my skills,” Fineous said.

Fineous moved the plate to an empty area and said, “Use your club to smash to plate with all your might.”

Demonbane walked up to the plate and swung. There was a resounding bang but the plate remained in place.

“What Demonbane did was no different than hitting the plate on the ground. I’m just using the plate to transfer the force.

“The next step is to shift the ground in the Shadow Realm, so I can deflect attacks from any angle. After all, the ground in the Shadow Realm is just a manifestation of my subconscious trying to make sense of that realm.

“Even so, it’s proving tricky. On the bright side, this will definitely level up my skill.”

“So you can block any attack,” Demonbane said, impressed.

“Amazing,” Rose agreed.

“Just physical attacks,” Fineous said. “The speed will depend on training. I’m still not used to synchronize my skills like this.

“By the way, the reason I got us all to leave the Shadow Realm was because that place isn’t safe. Did you notice our thoughts were affecting the monsters?

“I will take you all back there so we can all get more comfortable in that non-space.”

“Dinner is ready,” Rose said.

“That’s great news,” Fineous declared, “Because this piggy is hungry.”

Rose giggled and said, “Better eat before it gets cold.”

“You mentioned non physical attacks,” Erza said.

“There are elemental attacks, such as light, fire, dark, gravity, and so on. There are gas attacks and spectral attacks that affect the soul. There are even psychological attacks such as illusion and attacks that control your mind.

“In software development, there is a saying that no piece of software is bug free. The same is true of us. Absolute defense is impossible. The best we can do is face novel challenges and slowly get stronger.”

“You look happy,” Rose said.

“I feel better now,” Fineous said. “When it comes to unknown enemies, everyone is equal.

“Even Lord Endol, with his great strength, is venerable to countless types of monsters because of the types of attacks they can launch.

“But with preparation, every challenge can be faced. After all, we all have opportunity, and every skill is allowed when fighting monsters.”

“Is it time to hunt now?” Demonbane asked.

“Absolutely,” Fineous said. “We need to hit D ASAP.”

Fineous began his lecture and they headed out to find more monsters to fight.

The group travelled forward through the arid landscape, fighting monsters associated with badlands.

“What’s that?” Aragon asked, pointing.

Straining his eyes, Fineous said, “Looks like a cave entrance, or a dungeon.”

Erza swapped out her costume and began firing compressed fireballs at the scorpions while swinging her flaming glaive. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she struggled to unite all her skills.

When Demonbane originally asked Erza why she used a glaive, she said glaives were better suited to bigger monsters because of their greater reach. His response was that nothing was manlier than a great sword or a battle axe.

1. French for vowels [↑](#footnote-ref-1)