Chapter 2

“Congratulations on your new skills and abilities!” The voice was sounded joyous or maybe relieved I was finished. “Time for you to join some others from your old universe in your new one!” Before I could question or object I appeared instantly in tall grass with dozens of people around me. I was wearing the same clothes I had when I was driving to practice and I had my backpack I took to practices. Others around me were in a daze, some were on their cell phones trying to connect. Perhaps from my high mental resilience skill I was not fazed. I kneeled in the grass and took off my backpack. I quickly inventoried it.

In the main compartment: two books, one was *Reviving Ophelia* and the other was *Boys in the Boat*, my old macbook with charger and a crappy audio recorder that had a dead battery were also in the pouch. In another pouch I had a toothbrush and mostly used toothpaste tube and a fresh stick of deodorant, oldspice sport. In the bottom compartment I had old gym clothes in a plastic bag, about four days ripe. With the gym clothes was a mostly empty one liter bottle of Gatorade. The front compartment held two wrapped pieces of pizza from dinner last night and would have been my breakfast after practice. I also found six sticks of gum among the bunches of used wrappers mixed in with 12 pennies, two nickles a quarter, and 4 unused ketchup packets. I found an old blueberry muffin as well in aluminum foil, it was from two or three days ago but still good. A notebook half filled with practice plans and four bic pens finished off my inventory in the second large compartment. My pockets held my wallet, cell phone and house keys. I had a 2.5” folding knife on my keys, my only weapon.

Not much to start a new life on a new world. I stood up and reached into my mind and found the knowledge I had just selected and intuitively knew how to utilize it. I used my psion skill first, fortress mind, and immediately felt the barrier go up in my conscious mind. I then cast my first spell, danger sense. It was like hot and cold moving from my core and being dispersed as the Aether was used. I allocated 50 additional aether to give the spell a seven hour duration. I stopped there to let my Aether recharge and take further stock of the situation.

A few guys were trying to get other people organized. There were maybe 80 people here and a one more appearing every few seconds. It looked like an even split between men and women. No one was what I would consider old and the youngest was probably in their late teens. It looked like everyone was ported here with what they were wearing, I counted myself fortunate I had my backpack which had been slung over the back of my drivers seat in the car. I noticed one unfortunate guy naked and an unfortunate women in a one piece swim suit. I knew I had probably not done the greatest job in selecting my skills and perks but would live with it, not that I had a choice now. My mind focused toward survival. I probably needed to join a group to survive. The largest group had 30 or so people and was being organized by two guys that looked like college jocks. I dismissed this group as I got a bad vibe from the two jocks…maybe from the danger sense skill? Four other smaller groups were forming with about 10 people each. As I was looking for a group with good chemistry my sense psionics skill started going off. One of the jocks was using a psionic power on a women 30 feet from me from what I could ‘feel’. The jock said, “You should come with us. We will protect you.” The jock didn’t sound sincere but the women moved toward him. I inconspicuously moved away from this large group and the psionic using jock. Even with my mind protection I shied away. The group now had a third of the people in the area. I spotted a group of five moving toward a forest edge which was about half a mile away. This direction was probably a good choice since the other direction had mountains in the distance. I raced to catch up with this group figuring they seemed competent and also to get away from the jocks.

The group all looked like younger men in their late teens. They spotted me and went defensive as I approached. After some quick exchanges and a display of my stone bullet spell I was permitted to accompany them, at least until they reached a town. I learned the kids were all gamers. As we walked they all bitched about the poor creation system. Andrew, the apparent leader, had specked for ranged warrior but without gear he was worthless right now. I hadn’t thought about it but guessed I didn’t expect any gear since perks could buy gear but they had all assumed they would start in a town. Casey was an ice mage but had only two low power offensive spells. Vlad was a sword warrior spec and had hand to hand combat skill but also bemoaned about not having a sword. He was hoping to get a club in the forest in the interim. Red was a psionic and could do minor healing and ranged mind attacks. Will had a bunch of stealth oriented skills. So after some discussion Red and I were placed in the rear for our healing and ranged attacks. Personally I was hoping to not get attacked at all but at least I would be the furthest away from danger, unless we were attacked from behind.

Upon reaching the edge of the woods Will started to scout ahead about 40 yards in front of the group. Red wanted to practice his psionics on me while we walked so he could get a feel for his skills and gain experience. I agreed hoping to gain the same benefit. His mind attacks felt like a mild migraine and he never got through my Fortress Mind. The walking lasted 6 hours and all our party had noticed were small animals keeping their distance from our noisy group. Andrew called a halt as the sun was getting low. He directed everyone on how to properly set up camp. He had never camped before but said one of his skills gave him the knowledge. Red noted he had leveled one of his psionic attack abilities and I checked and had leveled both Fortress Mind and Sense Psionics.

After camp was setup I renewed my danger sense spell and summoned a one inch stone slab to sleep on. I shared my two slices of pizza with the group and was instantly the most popular member of the group. Andrew had found a whole bunch of wild carrots that tasted well enough to add to the meal. I used my create water spell to constantly refill my Gatorade bottle to pass around. They were an amiable group. Vlad was from the Ukraine but spoke excellent English. Everyone else was from the states. The conversation had an excited atmosphere about their prospects in this world. Everyone was thrilled to have sheets they could bring up in the air in front of them and look over. The topics revolved around the difficulty of min - maxing with so many stats. They talked about what they had learned so far in regards to the system.

The guys learned the skill system was called PASS, prime advancement skill system. Every time a skill leveled to a prime number you gained a point in the associated stat. When a skill reached level 7, the 5th prime number, then you could select a boon to associate with the skill. The possible boons might be random or based on luck according to Casey. Casey shared some valuable info about spellcraft skill with me. At level 7 there was a boon called spell enhancement. With spell enhancement spells gave a choice every prime level to improve it a little, tailoring the spell improvements and effectiveness! Casey surmised the improvement were randomly generated based on his choices so far, he had one spell at level 3 and one spell at level 2. Once he had two choices, reduce Aether cost or improved range. The second time he had four choices, improved range, reduce casting time, add a light effect, and a add sound effect. The range improvement option was also different in the two instances. To me this just showed what an idiot I was, obviously spellcraft was important to mages as it was the first given skill, Casey had leveled it to 8 with perks already.

The guys talked about reaching level 23, the 10th prime number, in a skill and were hypothesizing if a skills next boon would be greatly improved. Andrew also shared knowledge of his forage skill. When he focused on using it the carrots he had found around the camp site had glowed in his vision making it easy to find them. A discussion erupted about how the effect worked, magic, nanotech in the eyes… I went to sleep early, trusting my new companions to keep watch as they promised since I had provided the water and food at dinner. I cast personal warmth to fight the night chill then double cast fortress mind since it had leveled.

I slept surprisingly well on the hard stone slab. My backpack had made a good pillow or perhaps I was just exhausted. I was sore and had some chaffing from my jeans. However after casting my heal spell the muscle soreness and chaffing vanished. The morning light was just shining through the trees. I sat up, Andrew and Casey were awake and talking quietly. I was famished and scarfed down my stale muffin out of the line of sight of the two. I had already shared the pizza, probably the last pizza I would see for a very long time. I drank water, refilled it and drank again then went to pee. Then I tried the cleanse self and clean clothes spells. It felt like I had just gotten dry out of the shower and put on clean clothes. Magic was awesome.

Soon everyone was up, not quite as chipper as yesterday but ready to move. I held back on healing the others of their aches at their insistence. They wanted me to have as much Aether stores as possible in case of an encounter. Andrew had them heading in a straight line with his land navigation skill in hopes of hitting a road to follow to a town. Red and I took to the back of the procession again. The body odor from the group in front was fairly strong so we drifted a little further back before practicing like yesterday. Red was frustrated now that I had two mental walls and it took him about 5 minutes to get through just the first mind wall. Apparently my Fortress Mind ability was an advanced psionic ability, tier 2, while Red just had just two basic tier 1 attacks. Red said he was leveling quickly though.

I provided water to the group as we walked but around noon hunger was starting to grip them all. The walking wasn’t rough but Andrew simply couldn’t scavenge carrots and berries for everyone. The group started resting every two hours but after over ten hours of walking in the woods they were getting antsy. I finally managed to take down a large creature that appeared to be a raccoon with my *called shot* skill and stone bullet spell. Andrew called a halt while he got a fire going to cook the meat. I handed over my small knife to Andrew to dress the raccoon.

I summoned a nice stone fire pit with a thin piece stone over it to act like a griddle. It had taken some time to work the spell. I first had to imagine what I wanted in my mind and an illusory fire pit appeared to me only then I altered it to what I wanted before casting the actual spell. I found the ‘pattern’ was now stored in my mind though. The unseasoned raccoon meat was terribly tough and the smell of cooking attracted a large cat like monster. It was about the size of husky dog and attacked Casey’s unaware back. To our groups credit they all reacted quickly. It was Reds stunning mind attacks that probably saved Casey from being dragged away. Andrew and Vlad rushed it with their make-shift clubs. I fired stone bullets as fast as I could and while Red kept it subdued with mind attacks. The cat died, pummeled to death. I used my healing spell on Casey and the wounds closed without a scar. After comparing their personal sheets we found everyone had received between 34 and 62 experience. It was my second piece of experience, a whopping 34 on top of the 4 I got for the raccoon. Andrew skinned the cat for the pelt and said it was a level 6 brown forest cat. Apparently Andrew had some type of identification skill for creatures that also gave its level. A skill I noted I should pick up, that is if I decided to adventure.

At a thought I made a large stone bowl with a rough removable lid over the fire and reinforced the slate griddle across the top to support it with my spell. I created water in the pot and directed Andrew to get carrots and anything else that would go in the stew. I spent a whopping 155 aether to create a stone table that was 3 feet by 6 feet and two inches thick. It had 6 stone legs supporting it. I used the table to dice the meat and cut wild carrots and potatoes as Andrew brought them back. On a stick I seared the cubed cat meat directly in the fire before adding it to the boiling water with cut wild carrots and potatoes. Everyone watched with longing as the make shift stew came together. After cooking for two hours I created a rough stone ladle, 7 bowls and 7 spoons. The only problem was no matter how small the volume of stone I created I had to use a minimum of 35 aether each cast. Tasting the stew it was very bland. Thinking I went to my pack and grabbed the ketchup packets and squeezed all four into the stew. Tasting again, it was better but not great. I declared the stew done. I summoned six mushroom shaped stools for the table, using another 122 aether. The cost was worth it as every sat around the table and the meal had a sense of normalcy while we ate the meaty stew. After everyones third serving the stew pot was empty and the conversation switched from rehashing the battle to future planning.

I was a bit uncomfortable. Andrew was talking about forming a guild and completing quests when they got to a town. I liked these guys but wasn’t sure if adventuring was the right track for me. I distanced myself from the conversation. I brought up the skill sheet to check my progress while they talked.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Next Skill Slot at Level 5 | | Unused Skill Points: 0 | | |
|  | ***Skill*** | ***Level*** | ***Tier*** | **Percent Next Lvl** | **Stat** |
|  | *Spellcraft* | *2* | *2* | 19% | *Chan* |
|  | *Spirit Magic* | *2* | *2* | 3% | *Aeth* |
|  | *Mind Shield* | *2* | *2* | 48% | *Int* |
|  | *Sense Psionics* | *2* | *2* | 43% | *Chan* |
|  | *Earth Magic* | *1* | *1* | 3% | *Aeth* |
|  | *Stone Magic* | *1* | *1* | 27% | *Con* |
| 1 | *Marksman* | *7* | *5* | 6% | *Agil* |
| 2 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 3 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 4 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 5 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 6 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 7 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 8 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 9 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 10 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 11 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 12 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 13 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
| 14 |  | *0* | *0* | 0% |  |
|  | *Cooking Skill Available* | | | | |

I had made some progress today with the fight and practice with Red but no advancement. The cooking skill available at the bottom made me mentally click on it.

Add cooking skill Y/N – or dismiss?

I let the group know and they discussed it for a while. The consensus was it was not a good use of a skill slot. Everyone thought if I selected N then I could add the skill later but if I dismissed the prompt it would not be available again. I selected yes, not to spite the group but because I liked cooking.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cooking** | 1 |
| Associated Stat: | Agil |
| Leveling Effect: | Improve speed and taste of food prepared |
| Level 7 Boon: | Not reached |
| Prepare ingredients into food improving palatability and generating effects from consumption | |

Agility stat? Well I had hoped for Int. I was also immediately prompted to promote the skill to primary or secondary status. Crap, I thought, I did have one primary skill and two secondary skills with the mage class. I cleared the cooking description window and promoted Spellcraft to primary and Stone and Spirit Magic to secondary skills. After letting the group know of my brain fart. I learned from them that I could change my secondary skills with a seven day cool down from Vlad who had already attempted it. They guessed the cool down would be longer for a primary skill.

I checked to see the benefits of a primary and secondary skill, to see if they differed from spells. Primaries gained experience 10 times faster and had better options when selecting boons, secondary skills gained experience 3 times faster and added another option when selecting a boon.

I hadn’t been following the conversation but when everyone went quiet I closed my sheets and looked up to where the group was focused. The evening light showed three people jogging towards us. I immediately recognized one, it was the women in the one piece swimming suit. They approached and Andrew took the lead.

The two women were Mindy and Ophelia. The guy was another Will. We talked at a distance to learn their story. They had fled the clearing yesterday when the two jocks tried to force everyone into their group. Apparently the jocks attacked a smaller group that had two swords and a pistol when they wouldn’t surrender the items for the ‘greater good.’ A lot of people scattered in the chaos and at least two people were killed. Ophelia grabbed the two nearest people, Mindy and Will, and fled toward the woods.

I was checking out Ophelia in the bathing suit, she was in rough shape. Swim suits were not made to be run in. She was blonde, young and very muscular. She was also German. I went to my pack and got my dirty gym clothes. They smelled terrible once they came out of the plastic bag. Two socks, black shorts, a white tee shirt, a light gray sweat shirt, a hand towel and a pair of black underwear. I moved off to hide from sight before putting on the clothes over my current ones and cast the cleaning spell. Removing the now clean clothes I returned to the clearing and offered the white tee shirt, socks and shorts to Ophelia. She took them a little suspiciously before going behind the cover of a bush to change. Coming back she looked happy holding her suit and wearing the clean clothes. I asked permission before casting healing on each of the three. This greatly increased trust between the two groups.

We learned Ophelia had chosen skills to be a starship pilot. Mindy was geared toward melee combat. And the guy, the ‘other’ Will, was focused on musical skills. So other than Mindy the group was currently pretty useless. Andrew decided to let them come with us but they would have to help out as much as possible.

I made another stew with more meat from the cat and Andrew foraging a little wider to get more carrots and potatoes. Although I didn’t have any more salty ketchup to flavor the stew I noticed two herbs growing nearby that I ‘felt’ would help probably from my cooking skill. As the stew cooked for the two hours into the night the two groups talked. I was surprised to find Ophelia hovering near me as I cooked. Her German accent was prevalent but her English was excellent. I learned she was swimmer on the national team and a part time student until the Olympic cycle was over. She was ranked #14 in the world in the 200m free before being brought here. Her whole life had been swimming. Now that she was here she felt kind of liberated and thankful. The pressure to win had pushed her but she had become aware that there were just women out there who were bigger and stronger and closing the gap…well time was running out for her swimming career.

After the new additions to our group ate their fill of stew Ophelia thanked me personally with a hug before heading over to sleep next to Mindy for the night. I tried to quip that she could thank me by saving me first if our entire group was drowning. Her response was she was not a lifeguard, but she did say it with a smile.

I lay on my stone dining table but had trouble sleeping. In the light darkness by the dual moons I watched the back of Ophelia. My white tee shirt glowed to me in the night. I realized I was somewhat smitten by her. She was attractive if you liked intelligent, well-muscled, blue eyed blondes with a great smile and laid back demeanor. Eventually I fell asleep.

There was no breakfast the next day since the remaining meat had attracted bugs so we all started moving before the sun even rose at Andrew’s direction. Mindy joined Red and me in the back of the march. She was the rear guard. Red and I focused on practice as we walked. If I had been more observant I would have noticed Ophelia sneaking glances at me. But Red’s attacks were getting better and he could get through my fortress mind layers now. Before long into the march we finally can upon the semblance of a trail. It was about 10 feet wide and appeared not recently used with grass growing freely on it. Andrew assured everyone the road had been used no more than a week ago. Now the question was left or right?

After some debate and finally a coin flip from a nickel in my pocket it was decided left. The group walked for half a day before coming out of forest into a field of grain. It was farmland. So it was surmised we had gone the wrong way. This was probably an outlying farm of a town or city. The group decided to continue on and make contact. The farm was actually four large buildings surrounding a square with a well.