Chapter 1 New Lease on Life

It had been a rough year. I lost both of my parents to cancer within two months and my eldest sister to a car accident. My other sister was a bit of an airhead and I had to complete the funerals myself. After the funerals, I had to clean the house and sell it. I had left my job in Pennsylvania and all my possessions were in a 20’ enclosed trailer. After three yard sales and six trips to the Salvation Army I sold the house and loaded a new 24’ trailer with what I wanted from the house.

My sister had just taken all the jewelry my mother had accumulated over 82 years. We split the $524,500 from the sale of the house and $280,000 from the checking and stocks. I got my dad’s new Ram pickup and my sister got mom’s Lexus. I knew my sister would just waste her new wealth. Having left my job to handle everything I was currently unattached. I was 45 years old and decided I wanted to go into a bit of isolation for a year or two. I had now over $600,000 in my bank account, $240k in a 401k, two trucks, and two trailers so getting a job was not imperative. I looked into renting a retreat but quickly found a nice-looking piece of land in southwestern Idaho.

It was 816 acres for just $175k. It was recently harvested for lumber and included the side of a mountain. It was just over a square mile. There were 62 plots of similar size and this one was the cheapest by far. Probably due to most of it being on the mountain. There was a logging road that ran to the property and the property had a decent-looking stream running through it from Google map images. It looked like only about 90 acres or so would be good enough to build on with the rest heading up the slope. The note on the property said I would be able to log it in 30 to 40 years and recover my investment.

I really just wanted a retreat and made sure the logging road was a forestry road and I wouldn’t have to pay additional for access. After getting the affirmative on my inquiry to the road I offered $160k cash for the land. I wasn’t sure I wanted to move across the country and become a mountain man so by offering $15k under asking for the land that was already really cheap I think I was subconsciously hoping for a no. They accepted and I got with a lawyer in Idaho to confirm everything was legit and bought the land.

I drove the 24’ trailer out to the land in early April. I was impressed. The land was beautiful. I climbed my mountain and the view was spectacular. The logging road was 3.4 miles from a paved road and then 35 miles to a small town. I spent a week camping on the mountain and found where I was going to set up my house. It was a quarter of the way up the mountain on a 3-acre plateau. It had an amazing view and was accessible by a rough-cut logging road. I decided rather than build a house I would buy a 24’ flatbed trailer and build a house on wheels that had become popular with the downsize it crowd. My budget of $30k for the trailer house would get me a very nice build.

I sold my old chevy truck for $15k and flew back to get my dad’s truck and the other trailer. During the drive back I set up the order for the house trailer and all the building materials. I dropped the trailer off and went to Portland, OR, and got the trailer then to Lowes and loaded all the materials. I had to stop in depot where I had everything else delivered for the trailer home. It was late April when I was finally ready to build. I found I was a good 2 hours from Boise and moderate civilization. I set up my generator and started building.

It took me three weeks, working 10 hours a day to finish the home. It was pretty nice. I used closed-cell insulation from cans and had a small wood stove inside. It should get me through the winter comfortably.

I had decided to build a two-car garage as well. Unfortunately, no one would come up to pour the slab I wanted so I discarded that idea. It was May and I was hiking the mountain when I saw a cougar. I made a trip to Boise the next day and bought two Remington .30-06 rifles, 500 .30-06 rounds, two Glock 9mm pistols, 2000 9mm rounds, and two plain 10” hunting knives. The rifles had clips of 5 rounds and I had 6 ammo clips. The Glocks had clips of 13 rounds and I had 9 total clips. I got a gun cleaning kit and two holsters for the handguns and always kept them on my person while working outside and hiking. The whole package cost me $7600 which I was assured was a good investment by the salesman.

By late May my driveway was getting muddy and rough and I thought about getting a bulldozer to relevel it but figured I only planned to live here for a year or two. I was just grieving. I did buy a used 20’ steel cargo container for $1500 and the guy who dropped it off wasn’t happy about the road either but oh well. The container was in good shape and I used it for storage, mostly canned goods for the winter. I spent two weeks installing solar panels on top of the container. This gave me electricity in battery form instead of from the generator and helped keep the container cooler in the summer.

I had a large garden going now as well. I spent my days reading, cutting firewood, hiking, shooting rodents in the garden, and weeding the garden. By mid-July the hard work had reduced my weight from 260 to under 200 and I felt the best I had in years.

In late July I was on the far side of my mountain, it was state land. I was harvesting chanterelle and morel mushrooms after a few days of rain. I was coming down a steep slope and caught my ankle twisting it hard. I was maybe three miles from home and knew I had no chance of getting back before dark. I had about a 1500-foot climb to get over the mountain. Shit. I decided I should find shelter, a cave where I could have my back to the wall in case a cat or bear showed up at night. I moved along the ridge with a stick for support.

As it was getting dark I saw a good possibility and climbed 100 feet up through some brush. It was a cave. Relieved I entered the cave. It wasn’t that deep, maybe twenty feet, and had a stream running down the back wall to a hole in the floor. It was too dark to see clearly but there did look like some bones in the back as well. Maybe it was a cougar lair? I moved to the back and sat down. I drank the last half liter of water, refilled it, and drained the whole liter.

Night came it was very clear so the moon gave enough light to keep the entrance lit. I put the knife and pistol in my hands and tried to sleep. I woke a dozen times during the night and was grateful when dawn started to come. My ankle was swollen and messed up badly. I ate my only remaining food, a 2-ounce bag of trail mix. I did have a bag with 15 pounds of mushrooms but they needed to be cooked and I had no way to start a fire. I knew I should have bought the survival knife with a ferro rod in the grip.

As the light increased I could see the bones. The skull looked like a wolf skull. No, not a wolf as I had thought because there was a silver collar in the bones so it was probably a dog that had gotten lost and killed by a wild animal. I picked up the collar and brought it to the entrance to view it in the light.

It was very silvery and had no clasp. It felt warm in my hand. The collar slipped from my grip and around my wrist and shrunk quickly then melted into my skin. I panicked, then I got nauseous and vomited. “What the fuck” was all I could say as I sat light-headed. *Did that just happen?* A very light silver ring was on my skin. It was like someone had used a silver magic marker to draw on it but most of it had been washed off.

After about twenty minutes I felt normal again and got my mind right. I needed to get home. I cut two strips from my shirt and wrapped my ankle with a crude splint and started the long trip home. It took 9 hours and lots of rests to make the crest of the mountain. The good news was I had just a mile descent to my home and I could see it…and a cougar to my right.

I pulled my gun and aimed. It was on a rock some twenty feet to my right with its tail twitching, ready to jump. It had probably stalked me for hours. I aimed and fired two rounds. I hit it in the shoulder and chest and it charged. I fired six more times and I think I hit two times. Firing while panicked usually means you miss but I think I got lucky. The cat stopped three feet from me, dead. Relieved I spent two hours descending toward home.

I was happy to approach the door to the house. I walked up the steps planning to force myself into the shower and then off to sleep. I opened the door and stumbled in to find myself in a square room. I turned around and the shipping container was there with the garden beyond it. I turned back to the room that should have been the mini house’s interior. I closed the door and opened it a few times finding the room still there until I used my right hand. My left hand, which had the silvery ring tattoo led to the extra-dimensional room. Thinking I was delirious I entered my house after using my right hand, showered, ate three cans of cold ravioli, had three ibuprofen, and went to sleep it off.

My ankle was extremely achy as I moved down the stairs from the loft when I woke 12 hours later. I couldn’t put weight on it but I was fairly certain nothing was broken or torn it had just been stretched beyond its limits. I made a 5 egg cheesy omelet with three crushed ibuprofen on top and drank a half gallon of OJ. I finally felt satiated. Leaving the trailer I suddenly found myself in a weird room. I used my left hand to open the door, so that really did happen yesterday. I left the room and closed the door. Using my right hand I went outside.

I breathed deeply and decided to take the plunge. Turning back to the door I used my l left hand.

The room was 30’ by 30’ with a plain ceiling that glowed a soft white light without any visible lights. There were 6 doors on the opposite wall. The right wall had two alcoves; one was painted black, the other white. I went further into the room while making sure the door didn’t close behind me. As I got to the center of the room the lights flashed brightly and I passed out.

When I woke I found myself on the floor. As I stood I saw something new in the room. A wooden desk and chair with a computer on the desk. I walked slowly over and sat down and read the screen.

*System Terminal #29,644,369 Reset*

*Scanning…new Operator Detected…*

*Operator Scanned…Language Uploaded…Translation In Progress…Complete*

*Configuring Operator for Familiar Access*

*Welcome to System Terminal #29,644,369!*

I didn’t know what to do. I typed on the keyboard, “Hello”. The screen cleared and four folders appeared. They were labeled, *Store, Auction, Missions and Operator*. I said aloud “What are these?” The computer started to speak in a slightly feminine but flat voice.

“Welcome Operator to the Terminal Room. From here you can access the 7 universes. The computer on the desk in front of you was determined to be the most ideal device for your comfort in interacting with the Terminal based on memory scans. The four folders in front of you are the most commonly accessed operations in a Terminal. The *Store* allows you to purchase anything in the universes that can be created. The *Auction* folder allows you to purchase items posted by other operators or sell items you have placed in the recycler alcove. The *Missions* folder gives you access to missions that earn you rewards. The *Operator* folder allows you to view yourself and make changes to your stats, abilities, knowledge, and appearance.”

I waited for a good minute but the voice had stopped. I took the mouse and clicked on the *Operator* folder. My naked figure appeared and a table was next to it.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Available Distributable** | **100** |
| **Strength** | **78** |
| **Constitution** | **59** |
| **Stamina** | **61** |
| **Agility** | **56** |
| **Speed** | **48** |
| **Intellect** | **82** |
| **Aether** | **0** |
| **Channeling** | **0** |
| **Charisma** | **39** |

I had just been evaluated numerically. But what did this mean? I asked aloud, “Is this good?” and the voice responded. Human male genetics have an upper limit of 100. The population falls into the following ranges based on your genetic code:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Human Male Stat** | **% of Population** |
| **1-5** | **.01%** |
| **6-10** | **.09%** |
| **11-20** | **1.0%** |
| **21-30** | **6.0%** |
| **31-40** | **10.0%** |
| **41-60** | **66.0%** |
| **61-70** | **10.0%** |
| **71-80** | **6.0%** |
| **81-90** | **1.0%** |
| **91-95** | **.09%** |
| **96-100** | **.01%** |

It was clear I had 100 free points. I hovered the mouse over strength and clicked. My strength increased by 1 and my distributable went to 99. My muscles burned for a few seconds. I clicked on Aether next, and my blood boiled with a wave of heat briefly. Next, I tried channeling and I felt like I had been shocked, all my nerves tingling. I decided this was an easy self-improvement session. When I was done my stats had changed.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Strength** | **80** |
| **Constitution** | **70** |
| **Stamina** | **61** |
| **Agility** | **100** |
| **Speed** | **60** |
| **Intellect** | **82** |
| **Aether** | **10** |
| **Channeling** | **10** |
| **Charisma** | **50** |

I modestly increased my stats and pumped agility. Agility was my fine motor control. I maxed it out figuring it would help with firing my guns. I put points into Aether and Channeling because it seemed like it was related to magic and who didn’t like magic?

Under the figure was a medical icon. I highlighted it and a list overlaid the naked image of me. It listed over twenty-nine ‘ailments’ from high blood pressure, precancerous nodes, various injuries to my ankle, and improperly healed bones from my youth.

Each ailment had a number after it and at the bottom was a *Heal All* button. I clicked that and a wave of nausea and heat rolled through me. After a few minutes of discomfort, all the ailments were gone on the screen and my ankle felt normal.

I stood and jumped. I must have cleared two feet. I was just amazed. What else could this system do? Some clicks later and I found a “*Rejuvenation*” which the voice said reduced my physical age by 1 year for the cost of 500 credits. How many credits did I have? 11,680 had carried over from the previous user the voice replied. I decided to do nine years, bringing my physical age from 45 to 36 for 4500 credits. My body raked in pain. I fell off the chair and I passed out.