Organism 368: a litRPG Acquisition (Draft)

Chapter 1 - Nightmare

Melanie woke in a cold sweat. Something was WRONG. The world felt like it was twisting around her, like an unfathomably large predator was breathing down her neck. She hugged her arms tight around her chest and tried to slow her gasping breath. Just a nightmare. It was just a nightmare. The words brought her no sense of comfort. Every night for the last few months Melanie had woken up like this from the dream, but this time was the worst. It was getting stronger.

She looked around her apartment to center herself. Beige walls, check. Animation artwork everywhere, check. Gary, her beta fish, was slowly swimming in his bowl on her bedside table. The sounds from the city were normal, traffic, horns, no sirens within earshot. She gripped her blankets tightly, trying to feel present. She put her face in her hands. Why was this happening? Why? Her therapist was no help and seemed to think she was working through some kind of past trauma. But he didn't get it. Even now she could feel a knot in her gut and the fear that she was in danger. She shivered. It felt so real.

A sense of floating in darkness, of immeasurable time, and then she was being chased by…something, worlds and people that somehow moved as one. A celestial being so large she couldn't fully understand it. And the aura- it wanted to devour her. To devour everything. She tried to run, to pull herself away, but she just swam in place. And as it reached for her with hands made of stars- she woke up.

She got up and paced around. Maybe Grace would be able to help. It was a bit late but…she video called her best friend with her phone in the stand so her hands were free. It took a few rings but not too long later a disgruntled Grace with brown crimped hair showed up on the screen. Grace moved her hands to sign, "It's three in the morning Melanie." "Yes, I know, I'm sorry, I just- I can't sleep." Grace's tired eyes softened, "The nightmare again?" Melanie sighed in frustration. "Yes, I just don't know why this is happening to me and I don't know what to do. You don't think this is all in my head, do you Grace?" Grace looked at her for a moment and then slowly moved her hands, "I don't know. I mean, you haven't found any evidence that you're in danger, right?" Melanie reluctantly nodded. "Then maybe it is or maybe it isn't. I wish I had an answer for you hun. Want to beat me up about it? We could hit the dojo in the morning. It's been awhile."

Melanie understood why Grace was offering. It usually cheered her up to smack each other with wooden swords for a bit. Maybe the distraction would help? "Okay, um, yeah. Let's meet up in the morning after breakfast. Thank you. You get back to sleep." "What are friends for?" Grace signed while hiding a yawn. "Don't forget you have birthday lunch with Jordan tomorrow so you'll have to save some energy for that. Goodnight and call me if you need me." "Of course. It's not every day that your godson turns 14. Goodnight." Melanie hit the end call button and flopped back onto her bed. She didn't understand why these nightmares were happening but at least she had a great friend to distract her.

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Melanie laughed as Jordan explained the difference between oil and acrylic painting techniques, while making it clear that his classmates should have been more creative with the integration project they had been assigned in school. Melanie enjoyed hearing about his teenage life and trials. It was nice to forget about the nightmares and work stress for a while. He reminded her of the passion that had pushed her to create art. Plus Jordan valued her opinion- and who doesn't love when people actually listen to their advice? She tuned back in and heard Jordan say, “My oil painting clearly meshed with the acrylic painting portions. Saying it was jarring is ridiculous.”

Melanie replied with some mischief, “Well, have you considered everyone else could be right and you could be wrong?” while using her chop sticks to lift some ramen into her mouth. Jordan scowled at her and said, “Can't you be on my side for once? You're supposed to be nice to me on my birthday.” Melanie suppressed the desire to laugh at successfully getting a rise out of him and tried to face him seriously. “You're right, I'm sure they completely misunderstood your genius.” Jordan groaned and pushed his bowl away, “Auntie, I can tell when you're blowing smoke up my ass, you know.”

Melanie shrugged and said, “Well, if you want me to be on your side you're going to have to present a more reasoned argument. And I KNOW it's your birthday, otherwise we wouldn't be at your favorite ramen place now, would we?” Jordan tried to look betrayed, but he clearly didn't just want flattery. “Okay, but-”

The world froze. Jordan's mouth was open mid-sentence and there was a small chunk of noodle wedged between two of his teeth. Melanie looked around at the frozen patrons and workers of the ramen house. She moved as normal but everyone else…at the table next to them a few drops of ramen soup were suspended in the air in front of a frozen laughing face. WTF…she hadn't changed her meds in at least a month so this shouldn't be a hallucination…but then, what was happening? A dream? A nightmare? She started breathing really fast, gulping the suddenly thick air. Her conviction that this was real wavered, and she wondered if she needed to call her therapist. Or maybe just go directly to the psych ward.

A loud voice spoke inside her head: “Welcome to the domain of Organism 368. All sentient life forms in your world will now be assigned values relative to their potential contribution to the undertaking. Good luck!” The world around Melanie started to dissolve. Around her no one was moving, and she could see Jordan’s face starting to distort like a combination of heat wave and melting candle. Panicked, she leapt forward over the table and grabbed his wrist, spilling soup all over in the process.

Everything went black.

She couldn’t tell if she had a body, she couldn’t see, hear, or sense anything. Melanie wondered if she had died. Where was her heartbeat, or…anything? At least she didn't have to worry about air…Suddenly, a blue box with rounded edges and overly cheerful wording greeted her by appearing in front of her face.

Congratulations! You have been acquired by Organism 368!
May you prove useful to the undertaking! Get stronger and conquer your foes!
(Organism? conquer my foes? wtf?)

All existing ailments cured (note that new ailments will not be cured).
(wtf?!)

Assessing value…#$&!...status generated!
(What the actual fuck?!?!?! And why were there symbols?!)

Status Page:

Name: Melanie Anne Snyder
Level: Tin
Value: #Unknown
Race: Human

Attributes

Strength:	7
Intelligence:	13
Dexterity:	10
Vitality:	8
Endurance:	7
Perception:	10
Willpower:	14
Charisma:	11
Luck:	10
Total:	90

Abilities

Sense Weakness

Skills

None

Before she had the chance to ask any questions, or figure out how to do so with no sense of a mouth, she found herself in her body again with her eyes closed. Melanie opened her eyes and immediately fell over from the sitting position she was in with her hand clasped around a scrawny wrist. A similar oof of pain to her own and the sight of Jordan sprawled on grass made Melanie sigh in relief. Jordan was fine, Jordan was here. Deep breath in.

… … …Where was here?

Everything was green; moss types she had never seen before climbed halfway up trees that would have been at home in the redwood forest. Did moss grow that big? Calls from some kind of animal she'd never heard whistled out along with the more familiar bird calls. And somehow her body felt lighter, like she wasn't resting as heavily upon the earth. She couldn't see the sky, but this was definitely not the ramen house. They'd arrived in a shrouded dip of earth with trees all around them. Jordan groaned and started speaking, "Aunt Melanie what happened? Where are we? There was this blackness and-"

She rammed her hand over Jordan's mouth. The animal noises nearby had gone unexpectedly silent and the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up. Suddenly, Melanie felt very exposed in their little glade. Jordan's eyes went wide and once she was sure he would be quiet she took her hand away and looked around. Melanie couldn't see anything, and from Jordan's scared and slightly confused face, he couldn't either. But Melanie knew the forest didn't just go silent like that without a reason. A predator was in the area. Melanie changed her focus and started looking for some kind of weapon or anything besides grass and moss or- As she shifted her body to raise her head above the lip of their glade she pushed too hard and ended up doing a little squatted hop. Not screaming was quite the accomplishment and Melanie settled back to the ground with less force than she usually did. WTF? Gravity was not acting the way it should. She shook her head hard to get the questions out and focused on what she had seen. Just beyond the edge of their glade was a partially collapsed tree. Some of the roots had been torn from the earth and the tree had died. There was a small hole that she could see from here, although she had no idea how deep it was. Jordan would fit in there, could she?

The idea of leaving the safety of their arrival valley scared her, but if a bear or something came along they were in plain sight. The silence was making her nervous and she didn't know what was going on. She needed to get Jordan somewhere safe. They had to risk it. Jordan was looking at her with big eyes from her hop and then he tried to sign furiously at her, *"Why can't I talk?! What's going on? You moved really weird just now. Do you know where-"* She grabbed his hands and he scowled at the extremely rude action. She signed back, "There is danger. An animal. We need to get to a small hole that way under a tree's roots." Jordan's gaze wavered but then steadied. He sighed and signed, "okay." "We need to be very quiet, especially when we go over the hill. I will go first but you **will** stay right behind me. Yes?" "Yes." Jordan didn't look happy but he understood that she was serious. His eyes also started scanning the area around them nervously while flicking back to her every couple of seconds.

Melanie moved very slowly to a crawling position from the seated one they had defaulted to. As she did she noticed how it was a bit easier than usual. Part of her wanted to cling to the earth desperately but she knew they needed to get to some kind of cover. Next to her, Jordan did the same and sucked in a sudden breath of air at the experience. Moving carefully, they half crouched and half crawled to the lip of the glenn. Melanie was really nervous and she eased her head out enough to see beyond the tree currently hiding them. Nothing. Okay. Melanie started to move forward and froze; would Jordan be safer if she went across first, waited, and then had him come over, or if she had Jordan go first and stayed right behind him? Or just had him follow right behind her?

At the thought of not having Jordan within arm's reach she shuddered, remembering the ramen house. Who knows if they would have ended up…wherever they were, together if she hadn't grabbed him. Together then. And she would go first. Creatures lived in holes. Part of her wondered if they should just take advantage of this weird place's gravity and dive for the hole, but she was nervous about fast movements drawing attention. Plus she didn't really trust their ability to move accurately yet.

The next five minutes were some of the most agonizing minutes of her life. She and Jordan did their best to make absolutely no sound, and they froze at the slightest breeze. It was harder to creep there because her balance kept being disturbed when she accidentally applied too much force to the ground. By the time they made it to the hole, sweat was running down Melanie's back. She didn't hesitate and thrust an arm into the hole. Jordan grabbed her shoulder in alarm, but nothing happened. He glared at her but she just signed at him, "You first". He shook his head and started signing stubbornly, "No way! It seems dangerous out here." But she replied, "I could not look your mom in the eyes if anything happened to you. Get in the hole, kid." He looked hesitant, but ultimately seemed to realize that she wasn't going to budge.

Moving forward he cautiously looked into the hole, patted the sides of the wall, and then crawled in face first. Now that they were closer Melanie could see that the hole extended deeper than she had thought and…was that sunlight? Nervous that their new haven wasn't as secure as she'd hoped she wanted to investigate. She quickly army crawled after Jordan and wiggled through the entrance hole. She thought she was going to be able to make it in when her hips caught on the edges of the hole. After a brief bit of panic and a flashback to shopping rage in high school, she turned over and started pushing carefully with her hands while wiggling her hips into the hole. She didn't want to leave a huge trail but she needed to get into the dirt cave and there would naturally be some signs of traffic. It took a bit of maneuvering (and some embarrassing digging by Jordan and herself) but she made it into the crevice.

The hole/cave was only large enough for the two of them to fit while poking each other with knees and elbows. Luckily the light she had seen only came from some small cracks between some of the roots on the right side of the cave, and she tried to focus on determining the safety of their new cave. Behind them the dirt tunnel had turned sharply when it encountered the main bulk of the dead tree's root system and they could no longer see out. They were almost completely sheltered from outside view unless something came to investigate. For the first time since the noodle house, Melanie relaxed a little.

A scream echoed out nearby- and a white-tailed bunny rabbit the size of an Australian Shepherd darted out of a bush they could see across the way through the small root cracks. Melanie took a deep breath as it made it to another bush with nothing happening. Shivering, she kept watching and breathed out slowly. Out of the previous bush a spotted baby deer wandered. Barely larger than usual, it was long limbed and cute as it nosed about and nibbled the grass on the forest floor.

It looked up and made low bleating sounds followed by several waaahhhhhs. A few more bigger deer wandered out from the bushes and trees, and looked around with those big, blank eyes. A quiet rustle came from the flora in the direction of the rabbit. Suddenly, all the deer popped their heads up and focused on the sound. The two deer on the outside of the herd revealed devastating

long sharp teeth as they growled and hissed at their prey. Less than a second later they were bounding after the rabbit en masse. The little white tail had only just passed beyond the nearest trees they could see when they heard another cry from the rabbit- which was suddenly cut off.